

# The Search for Paneta's Crown



A Ben Bones Genealogical Mystery  
**By Michael F. Havelin**

*The Search for Paneta's Crown*

**A Benjamin Bones Adventure**

*Approx 58,600 words*

*by*  
***Michael F. Havelin***  
***Copyright 2011***

## *Table of Contents*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	4
<b>PROLOGUE .....</b>	<b>5</b>
THE CALL TO ARMS .....	5
<b>THE FIRST DAY .....</b>	<b>16</b>
OPENING MOVES .....	16
BASIC RESEARCH .....	25
AUDIENCE WITH THE QUEEN .....	30
BELLA .....	35
DINNER ON A CHESSBOARD .....	41
THE FAIR INQUISITOR .....	53
TROLLING FOR DATUMS .....	59
<b>THE SECOND DAY.....</b>	<b>68</b>
PAWN AMONG SHARKS .....	68
CANELO'S GAMBIT.....	77
FABBRICA MOSCHETTO .....	81
GEORGIA ITALIANA .....	96
A SPICY MEAT-A-BALL .....	105
<b>THE THIRD DAY .....</b>	<b>115</b>
OUT FOR A BITE.....	115
WOMAN WITH A GUN .....	130
A MORE INTIMATE DINNER .....	136
<b>THE FOURTH DAY .....</b>	<b>141</b>
A PRINCE INTERRED .....	141
QUEEN'S KNIGHT TAKEN .....	147
MIDDLEGAME.....	152
<b>THE FIFTH DAY .....</b>	<b>159</b>
COPS COME A'CALLING .....	159
LUCREZIA EN PRISE.....	166
THE CROWN ITSELF .....	175
<b>THE SIXTH DAY.....</b>	<b>183</b>
ENDGAME.....	183
HOME AGAIN, HOME AGAIN.....	191
<b>APPENDICES.....</b>	<b>192</b>
APPENDIX I.....	192
<i>Last Will and Testament of Benito Emilio Moschetto .....</i>	<i>192</i>
APPENDIX II.....	198
<i>Moschetto Family Genealogy.....</i>	<i>198</i>
APPENDIX III .....	199
<i>Ancestors of Jefferson Davis Gibson.....</i>	<i>199</i>
APPENDIX IV .....	200
<i>Codicil to the Last Will and Testament of Benito Emilio Moschetto .....</i>	<i>200</i>

# Acknowledgements

Thanks to:

- The WNC Mysterians Writers' Critique Group of Asheville, North Carolina, (wncmysterians.org) without whose analysis and encouragement, this Ben Bones adventure might still be in a desk drawer.

## **Prologue**

### **The Call to Arms**

The pain, oh, the pain. I'd done it again: drank myself into unconsciousness again last night. This morning was pay day, the day I paid for my over-indulgence with hangover agonies that were all too familiar. Why do I do it to myself? I know better. I've learned by experience. And I learn the lesson again every time. Pretty damn dumb for a bright fellow like me, Benjamin S. Bones, Genealogical Consultant.

I rolled out of bed and fell to the floor. My head clanged inside, a cathedral peal to Bacchus, my favorite mythical god judging by my performance.

Unlike most of the unsolicited stuff that arrives by U.S. Post Office snail mail, the cover letter in the white 9x12 Tyvek corporate envelope was laser-printed on a high quality water-marked paper, almost a parchment, and it was engraved with a multi-colored heraldic crest in the upper left corner. The crest had large letters M and F, a crossed musket and lance, and several other interesting elements that piqued my genealogical curiosity about the family's origins. I hoped that the crest wasn't just a clipart conceit or some unlettered American freshman designer's idea of what every blue-blood should have.

My head hurt and it was tough focusing, but the crest on the letter was impressive enough to do the job with someone like me who had more than an inkling of heraldic marks. In genealogy, you see people going to extremes to impress occasionally, but fewer folks went to such lengths these days. The real stuff is from previous centuries and its authenticity is pretty easy to spot. If this were real, as it could well be, it would be interesting simply for its existence and current use.

The letter was simple and straightforward in approach, and its statement of purpose was unambiguous. People who aren't used to communicating tend to get into rambling discourses before finally arriving at their ultimate purpose, if they ever do. This letter had been written by someone used to being concise. Above the typed name, it was signed in black ink that obviously wasn't from a ballpoint pen, by Canelo Moschetto.

Accompanying the letter was a copy of the Last Will and Testament of one Benito Emilio Moschetto. The phrase "Paneta's Crown" had been highlighted with a yellow marker in several paragraphs. The Crown had been bequeathed to the oldest son Canelo, the person who'd signed my letter. If he predeceased, it went to the next son, one Abel Emilio Moschetto, then, and only in the event that the bequests to the male heirs failed, to the daughter, Lucrezia.

The problem as stated in the letter was that no one knew what "The Crown" was, or for that matter, where it was. Could I, as a highly recommended genealogist and researcher, come to Savannah, Georgia, to search family documents and records for clues to its whereabouts? Hey, no problemo. That's what I do; I search in other people's dust. Just call me an intellectual dumpster diver.

Where had I seen that name before? Moschetto. It was unique enough to be memorable.

But where? After some thought I remembered that Moschetto was a respected maker of handguns, right up there with Smith & Wesson, Beretta or Colt. In fact, I'd recently read that they'd signed some big contract with the U.S. Army to supply them with American-made small arms instead of the foreign handguns they'd been using for several years. Too much griping from American companies through their Congressional lobbyists, I guessed. So, it looked like I was going to work for the makers of Death Itself. Compunctions on my part? Hardly. At least I knew that they'd have the money for my research fee and expenses, no matter how outrageous I wanted to be. I had finally arrived; I had myself a well-heeled client.

My general attitude toward guns was fairly anti. They made too much noise for a hangover headache. I hadn't grown up in a gun-toting family, hadn't been on a shooting team in Cub Scouts or at university. Until the event that wrecked my life, I didn't give much thought to guns, gun ownership, or Fourth Amendment issues. But I also didn't support the uncontrolled spread of firearms in the world, and I still don't believe that the way to world peace is through multi-billion dollar sales of killing technologies between "friendly" governments. That just doesn't make any sense at all.

Anyway, this definitely promised to be an interesting trip. To start with, Savannah was a beautiful historic town, and the job was not the usual tedious genealogical search through musty records for relatives long gone. This time it would be a tedious search through musty records for a missing family heirloom. I was going to do some contemporary detective work for a change. I was going on a treasure hunt.

The last item in the envelope was a map of downtown Savannah, Georgia, with a route to "The Castle" highlighted in yellow marker. A blaze orange, hang-from-the-rearview-mirror

neighborhood parking permit was paper-clipped to the map. The permit expired at the end of the month. They had presumed I had the free time to do their research within the current month. Well, I did, but it was still a bit presumptuous of them to think I did. I've got a life, lean as it is. I like to think I do anyway. Suppose I didn't have the time right away? Then what? Rich folks. They all think the world revolves around them. I was a mere factotum, a cog in their life machinery.

So what was the simple request that the letter detailed? A family heirloom, referred to as "Paneta's Crown," had been specifically bequeathed in the accompanying last will, but even after a full year of exhaustive searching it couldn't be located. The family home had been ransacked, their business locations thoroughly gone through, and all safes, safe-deposit boxes, mausoleums, and any other likely, or unlikely, hiding places had also been searched. Nothing. Not a trace nor a mention of The Crown, except in the will and in family lore as mentioned to the kids as they had grown up, but without any details. The family members, representing the deceased father's estate, now felt that a thorough examination of family papers by a proper researcher (read: genealogist) might reveal the treasure's hiding place. I'd been recommended by a little old lady client I occasionally did some digging for in the U.S. Archives near my home in Atlanta. I'd never even met the woman face to face, all our contact being through phone, email, and the mails. I learned later that the Moschettos had checked me out and decided I was legit enough to poke around in their family affairs. My reputation, however little I might think of it when I was in a slump, was solid enough to snag me an occasional client.

It seemed a simple enough research request. But, y'know, they always start out that way. Like the army's job in WWII: defeat Hitler and free Europe. Or like NASA's mission: put a man

on the moon. Simple, right? But damnation is hidden in the details. Damnation, obsession, insanity, terror, and sometimes death. And so it would prove to be with this job. Simple . . . at least in concept.

Deciding I had gotten all I could from the letter, I called the Savannah phone number on the letterhead to talk to this Canelo Moschetto.

The phone was answered by a young, perky, and thoroughly Southern female voice, "Fabbrica Moschetto. This is Marika. How may I help you?"

"Hi, this is Benjamin Bones. I'd like to speak with Canelo Moschetto."

"Yes, Mr. Bones. Mr. Moschetto is expecting your call. Please hold." And she was instantly gone, leaving me listening to a recorded male voice enthusiastically telling about the high quality of Moschetto manufactured products and the company's focus on responsible gun ownership and firearm safety.

Firearm safety. Wasn't that an oxymoron, a self-contradictory phrase? How could any firearm be safe? Intrinsicly they couldn't be. They were invented to do terminal damage to living things. The history of firearms development was aimed at more efficient killing from increasing distances, not safety. Safety would be in taking them all off the market and out of circulation and melting them all back to slag. Not in our nature to do that it seemed, firearms being so handy for asserting the individual or national will.

"Mr. Bones? Good of you to call so soon. You received my package all right then?" The voice was deep, strong, and mellifluous, the tone confident and experienced. There was only a touch of a Southern accent. I wanted to meet this man face to face. I could learn from him.

"Yes, I did. Today. When did you want me to come to Savannah?"

"As soon as you can. This little family mystery has us all quite upset. We simply cannot find The Crown. We want to settle the estate as soon as we can and this is a major loose end." He paused, not for breathe, but to let the import of the quest set in my mind before he went on to other topics. "When can you come?"

Having checked my date book before calling, I knew there was nothing specific scheduled for several weeks. I was free to go as soon as I hung up the phone, but it was never good to let a client know that.

"I could rearrange a few things and come down in a couple of days."

"That would be fine. You'll stay with us at The Castle, of course. Just bring your personal items. We'll provide any research materials you'll need: paper, pencils, Internet hook-up, and the like. You can fax a list to us beforehand. The fax number is on our letterhead. Send it to my attention."

"That sounds all right. Do you want to discuss my fee?"

"I don't think that's necessary. Just submit a fair invoice when your work is done and you'll be paid. We've no issue there. This is important enough to us that we recognize the need for outside professional expertise."

"Sounds good to me. I'll see you in a couple of days."

"Fine. Savannah is famous for its St. Patrick's Day celebration. Corned beef and cabbage, green beer. . . You'll be here for that, you know. Plan to lift a few with us."

An invitation to disaster: an excuse to drink. I'd have to be very careful. The temptation was going to be extreme.

"Sounds good," I said once again.

"Just follow the directions on the map you received. It'll carry you directly to The Castle. If you want a tour of our factory while you're here it'll be arranged. Are you a shooter, Mr. Bones?"

"Shooter?" I was perplexed.

"Do you shoot guns? Are you familiar with firearms? Does the smell of burned cordite enflame your masculine principle? That's what we manufacture here, you know, and if you want to test any of our products, we can plan for that too. We have our own test range here at the factory, of course."

"It's not something I've ever been involved with." Except for a major life disaster. I was understating my position.

"Well, we'll have to figure out some kind of an entertainment for you while you're with us. I'm sure you'll enjoy your stay in Savannah." What did I hear in his voice? Enjoying my obvious surprise at his question . . . or perhaps something else? "We'll see you in a few days then?"

"Right. I can be there in two days. Monday."

"That will be just fine. We'll be looking for you." Click. He was gone.

So that was Canelo Moschetto, the man who ran one of the biggest legitimate handgun manufacturers in the world. He was pleasant enough, but ultimately businesslike and not a time waster. Good. I liked dealing with straight-forward people. This sounded like it would be a pretty simple research job. Finally. Something without entanglements. A working vacation in a pleasant Georgia town, without bodies piling up all over the place as happened on several hair-raising jobs in the past. A genealogist's life can be fraught with danger, a fact that few people are

aware of, including myself until I was in the middle of it all.

I hadn't been to Savannah for quite a while. It seemed like years, but how long had it actually been? Maybe it had been a full calendar year after all, so this was a chance to combine some pleasure with business. Might even get over to the Georgia Historical Society headquarters and poke around in their library for a few hours. This was going to be all right. And then the sadness hit me.

It comes when I least expect it, sometimes like now, when things are looking up, prospects are good, there's money in the bank, and interesting and remunerative work ahead. So why do I suddenly plummet from exuberant heights into these numbing depressions? It was time for a drink. Or two. Or twenty.

\*\*\*

I'm Benjamin S. Bones, Consulting Genealogist and Articulator of Family Skeletons. That's what it says on my business card. Clever, eh? An intellectual joke, right? Some people even understand it, but not too many. I thought it was clever though, and since I live to please only myself these days, it's on the card. I earn my living by being nosy, by digging into family histories for curious folks who either don't have the research skills or determination to do it themselves, or for genealogy hobbyists who've finally come to a dead end with their own investigations.

How'd I get into this line of work? History had always been interesting for me through my school days, but I never gave much thought to it as a livelihood. My parents were practical sorts, and they encouraged me to go for a profession. Medicine didn't interest me. I mean, it was interesting in a way, but the thought of cutting through a living person's skin on purpose

appalled me. And I was put off by hospital aromas. Law seemed to be deadly dull, at least the lawyers I'd met were, and I doubted that I was devious enough, so I decided against either of those trades. I wasn't good with my hands, but I was pretty good in math, so I chose accounting. A few years later I was a junior accountant working in a minuscule Dilbert cubicle in a mega-corporation that didn't believe in windows. I'd become a professional bean counter. I had a job with benefits, a 401k, and paid vacations. All things considered, life wasn't too bad even though the job was a bit boring. I had an occasional genealogical research job on the side, which made life just that much more interesting.

After several years of this, I saw the job would take me nowhere except to one windowless cubicle after another. I decided to quit. Working up the nerve I did, planning to earn my way with genealogy. I advertised my research services in genealogical magazines and journals and jobs, small at first, started coming in. I had changed my life from tedious to exciting, if you think dusty old libraries are exciting. I did, and still do.

On a job in Rome, Georgia, a car wreck put me in the emergency room of a local hospital. I was treated by Julia Jenner, the ER doctor on duty that night. A year later we were married. My life changed again. I had a mortgage, a wife I loved, and I was about to become a father.

And then . . . disaster hit. Life, no matter how well planned, is out of our control. That's a hard lesson for some of us to learn, particularly the control freaks in the crowd. Sometimes it's learned slowly, incrementally over time. Sometimes, it comes with a rush in one cataclysmic life event. That was the one for me.

My wife, Dr. Julia Jenner, was five months pregnant when it happened. She'd had

ultrasound checks to see if everything was progressing smoothly, but we'd decided to not learn beforehand what sex the baby was. The doctors said that everything was good, but we had to tell them again and again to hold back the boy-or-girl info.

One Friday, our regular weekly date night, we'd gone out for a movie. I forget the title, but it wasn't as violent as real life turned out to be. As we left the theater and were walking to the parking lot, a dark car swooped by, a gun muzzle came out the window, and a second later, my wife, my baby, and my world were all dead on the pavement. I was untouched, at least physically.

Why had it happened? The cops eventually decided it was a random gang shooting by some young tough who had been sent out to make his bones. Simple as that. No one was ever caught, charged, tried, or hanged. The car had been stolen from across town and was found later, abandoned miles away. No fingerprints, no shell casings, no nothing. Nothing except for my dead wife lying in the parking lot, my unborn child still within, also neatly perforated by a 9mm slug.

I went into a slide after that. I let the bills go unpaid. I quit my corporate job. And I gave up social drinking and started drinking professionally. I cut myself off from family and friends. That went on for about six months, until my money started to run out. At that point, I saw where I was headed and pulled myself back together, at least a bit. I got it together enough to not drink some days, and to make a few calls to get some genealogical work from prior contacts.

“So, what have you been doing?” they wanted to know.

“Not much. Just going through a life crisis of cosmic proportions. Don't ask.”

My life had been irrevocably wrecked by a jerk's random act, and years later, it's still a

regular agony. I don't want to relive the trauma any more than I have to, even though I do so every minute of every day. I began to learn that the pain of the loss never really goes away. Somehow though, it seems to lessen over time to a livable level and a person can start to function again. Something terrible had happened, just when my life was getting going on a pleasant and predictable path. The cavemen had done me a real favor when they discovered fermentation, one of mankind's great inventions besides fire, the wheel, and that versatile civilization builder, the wire coat hanger.

# The First Day

## Opening Moves

The four and a half hour drive to Savannah from my home base in Atlanta wasn't too bad. The usual flat, boring Georgia countryside flashed by at 70-75 miles per. The only interesting part was watching the character of the traffic change as I moved south from metro to country. For the first 40 or so miles, while still in the Atlanta area, I was running slowly even at 75. Trucks, vans, even the occasional suicidal teen female Miata driver, all whizzed by me trying to catch up with the state troopers who zipped past at 90 plus. They never did.

I always wonder what the cops are really looking for out there on the highways. Certainly not speeders. They couldn't begin to carry enough citations for all the lead-foot drivers. No, it must be something else that drives them (get it?). Maybe it's the "hellhounds" on their trails. Speaking of which, I usually travel with a stack of audio tapes of old acoustic blues to play for entertainment. Never seem to get around to having that CD player installed. Maybe I just never have the extra cash to commit. Anyway, this trip was no exception, and Robert Johnson's handful of startling recordings from the 1930's started me off. By the time I reached Macon in the middle of the state, Robert had given over to Peetie Wheatstraw, the self-proclaimed "Devil's Son-in-Law." He held my attention as the traffic finally thinned out to merely a handful of Georgia farm trucks on I-16. Once in a while, a car packed with Poppa Fat, Momma Fat, and all the little Baby Fats dragged its heavily loaded tail end by on the way back home to a singlewide somewhere in Central Florida. Oops, I'm stereotyping again. Still. . .

The Piedmont Plateau isn't one of my favorite geological features on this great planet of ours. It stretches flat and humid from the mountains of Virginia and North Carolina east to the

Atlantic and half way down the length of Florida. The scenery is generally lousy, the weather is terrible at all times of the year, and the people's attitudes tend to echo the climate. Sure that's a gross generalization, but have you ever lived on the plateau for any length of time? You'd know exactly what I mean.

My life plan, such as it was, involved getting out of central Georgia as soon as I could afford it. And, of course, as soon as I found a place I wanted to go. Just now, in this semi-featureless period of my life, I was generally without goals. My genealogical work had been increasing, though not from any strong promotion efforts on my parts. The growth was all by word of mouth; Hanna told Sadie and Sadie told Edith, who in turn told her bridge club. And the work flowed back in. I wasn't getting rich, but I was doing interesting work at decent enough rates so that my bills were paid almost every month. If I'd continued with corporate accounting, I'd probably be managing the department by now, pulling down 90 thousand or better plus perks. But I'd made my choice years ago after my pregnant wife's death. That pretty well finished off my plans for the future. Pretty well finished off my ambition generally and killed any positive attitude about life I'd had.

Why did I have to think about that? It comes up at the most inconvenient times. Now, I'm not going to use that as an excuse for my drinking, but I did feel like getting off the interstate, heading for the nearest crossroads, and grabbing a few beers. Probably couldn't find anything stronger out here in the middle of rural Georgia anyway. I didn't know where the local "white lightnin'" could be found. It certainly wasn't my booze of choice. Mine was that lovely Scotch syrup, Drambouie, that does the job on me so thoroughly. Better to keep on driving. Hell, I know what's good for me and what's not. The problem is that my will isn't strong enough to won't. Put

it on the bar in front of me and I'll order the next round with my next breathe, and "Hurry it up, Mr. Bartender, I'm a'gettin' a li'l dry."

The traffic picked up a bit about fifteen miles outside of Savannah, but not too badly. Another few minutes and I could see maybe ten cars at the same time. Then I hit downtown and it was time to check out Moschetto's map and directions.

They were good. They were exact. They warned of where I'd hit crowds of tourists crossing against the lights. How did he know that? Guess I'll just have to chalk it up to intimate home town knowledge.

Downtown Savannah is a fascinating mix of architectural style and old Southern charm. Immense live oak trees hung with Spanish moss convert broad avenues into canopied tunnels. Grand houses of various Victorian and revival periods are everywhere, some having slid into disrepair while others had been rehabilitated or maintained to be true jewels of architectural art. They range from the plain to the gothic, the simple to the ornate. The city was so picturesque that Sherman "gave" it to Lincoln for a Christmas gift after cutting his way south through Georgia during "The Recent Unpleasantness."

The Castle was a massive, grey, carved stone megalith of Italian Revival style, bejeweled with windows everywhere. Peaks and spires rose where any two surfaces met from anything that could support them. It was a European chateau plunked down in the middle of a post-Sherman Victorian architectural park. But it didn't look out of place, just monumental. The rest of the town was so eclectic with its mix of wood, shingles, stone, and vinyl that garishness didn't really matter.

I drove under the arching stone portico, looked around to see if this was the place to leave

my car, and got out. I levered my suitcase out of the back seat, grabbed my laptop bag and briefcase from the passenger seat, and turned to face the building's ornate wrought iron door with its huge frosted glass panels. One story above the door was a large stained glass window, probably the usual saints and scripture. I couldn't tell from outside with the sunlight falling on it.

To my left was a garden. Roses. All different colors. And beds of ivies, herbs, and other flowering plants. Working there on his knees with his back toward me was a rail-thin, light caramel-colored man in a khaki shirt and Farmer John coveralls, a backwards baseball cap emblazoned with an embroidered knight chess piece on his head. I called to him. "Hey, is this the Moschetto house? Is this The Castle?"

No answer. Southern hospitality? Southern hostility? Was I into that stupid black-white hostility thing again? Hold the paranoia, please. Maybe the guy just hadn't noticed me drive in. I set my bags down on the cobbles under the arch and headed toward him.

"Hey, how're you doing, buddy? Nice roses. Did you grow them?"

No response. He kept his back toward me and continued digging at the base of a bush with a four-fingered garden tool. I reached out and tapped him on the shoulder.

The guy was up in a flash, alert and cornered-looking, though he was out in the open, and the multi-taloned digger was held upright in his hand ready to whip into my face if necessary. I tried to smile, but it probably didn't look all that convincing, more a grimace of my own surprise and terror at his answering threat. I put both hands up in a palms-out peace gesture, one that could ward off an attack if it came.

"Look, I didn't mean to startle you. I just wanted to . . ." Something was wrong. The guy cocked his head toward me, like a dog might when first hearing a new voice. Then I noticed it: a

hearing aid, flesh-colored, in his left ear. Well, my flesh-colored anyway, certainly not his. It was really pretty obvious if you happened to be looking for it. I hadn't been. Maybe the guy had a hearing problem.

Suddenly a smile softened the thin man's craggy facial planes. Something had caught his attention over my shoulder. A woman's voice behind me, rich with black genetics and hoarse with years of cigarettes, called out, "Jefferson! Everythin' be jes' fine now, y'ear? Stop your foolishness and give me a hand with these groceries."

Jefferson whacked the digging implement against his thigh to knock off the clinging dirt, then stuffed it into the front chest pocket of his Farmer Johns. He ducked his head in my direction subserviently and scuttled around me to grab the handle of the grocery trolley the woman gripped. With the trolley in hand, he headed back through the garden to where I supposed was a rear entrance. Weird guy, but then, I hadn't had much experience with deaf people.

I turned toward the woman. "I'm Ben Bones. I'm a genealogist. Mr. Moschetto . . ." She cut me off with a raw laugh that was just short of a cough.

"I know all 'bout you, Mista' Bones" she said with a huge smile full of square white teeth. "You be staying with us for a few days, I 'spect. I'm Bella, Bella Louise Gibson, the housekeeper an' cook." She nodded after the disappearing gardener. "An' that's my son Jefferson. He be deaf as a post. He be born like that. Color blind too, jes' like his daddy, but can see in a dark room pretty good. He a won'ful gardner.. an' chess champ'yon, too. The Lord made him ver' special in some ways." She hesitated. "He's gon' die a rich man, but I don't quite see how that'll happen. But something's gon' happen. I knows it. Been knowin' it since he be born."

She was a tall woman, her caramel skin full of soft wrinkles like crumpled paper pulled from a waste bin and flattened out again for scratch. She had been beautiful in her youth. It was still there, though worn. Her eyes were extremely alive and interested, her sensuality barely contained in the aging shell. And, of course, she'd undoubtedly put some weight on, too. It jiggled around her obvious personality like an aura.

I put my hand out toward her. She took it in a strong grip lightly applied. "Well, I'm happy to meet you. So I did find the right place after all. The directions were explicit enough."

She sort of dragged me around with her in the direction of the front door before letting go of my hand. "C'mon inside and we'll get you settled in, Mista' Bones. Mista' Moschetto, that's Canelo the oldest, he be at the fact'ry jes' now, but he be along presently. I 'spect the others too, seeing as we have a special gues' with us." Her accent was South Georgia to be sure, but there was a trace of something else in it, too. Maybe The Islands, maybe some Gullah.

As we approached the heavy front door, it swung smoothly open before us. There stood a 1920's movie butler complete with thin gray hair swept straight back over The Crown of his head, a black waistcoat, gray trousers with white pinstripes, and mirror-bright black Oxford shoes. Man! This place was really something. And I hadn't even gotten in the door yet. His British accent completed an already crisp personal image.

"Good day, sir. We've been expecting you. Good afternoon, Ms. Gibson. Did the marketing go well today?" His manicured hand took my soft suitcase from me. I'm not used to personal service, but I let him take it without a fuss. I suspected his intentions were honorable, but I hung onto my laptop and briefcase anyway.

The Castle's entry hall was startling, with a marble grand staircase that was rooted in the

lobby in front of us as we entered and swooped around over our heads to reach the second and third stories above. I spun to follow its sweeping climb. As I made my 180, I again spotted the stained glass window directly above the door. From outside, with the sun's light falling on it, it had been unremarkable: stained glass, yes, but just another dull window in the gray stone facade. Inside however, with the sun's rays enlivening the window's multicolored translucency, it was an exquisite visual event.

I'd been wrong about its subject matter. This wasn't your typical stained glass window. It wasn't what you'd find in a church, for example, with a biblical scene of some sort. Nor was it a new age view of a Peter Max rainbow over a hillside of too green grass with romping deer romping. This was like a medieval illuminated manuscript, with text down the center, floral designs around the leading letters, and a filigree border. The quality of it was striking, not just the glasswork, but the artistic balance of the piece as a whole. Though I couldn't read the language of the text, I stood and gaped until Jeeves got my attention with a discrete harrumph.

"Oh yeah, I'm sorry. That's quite a window. Do you know what it says?"

"It's Italian, sir, and I believe it's a poem that was a favorite of Emilio Stefano Moschetto's, the gentleman who built The Castle in 1924. That would be the current master's great-grandfather."

"I'd like to hear more about him sometime."

"I'm afraid you'll have to speak with the family members to obtain additional information. I am not at liberty to divulge facts I might have acquired in the course of my employment." He was truly a professional. It wasn't just veneer. He was "old country," as opposed to just "country."

"I understand perfectly." Then, banally, "You're not from around here are you?"

"No, sir, I was born, educated, and brought to maturity in England. It's a foreign country. Perhaps you've heard of it." All said with the flattest of expression and intonation.

That was out of character though, I thought. "You underestimate me, Jeeves. I'm not from around here either." I winked. He remained stone-faced. "But how do you happen to be here in Savannah?"

"Qualified domestic help is hard to find in the United States these days, sir. I was recruited, so to say, by Benito Moschetto." And then, with a totally un-insulted and un-American propriety, "My name, sir, is Swift. 'Jeeves' is a fictional character's name from the literary work of P. G. Wodehouse, a British author who lived from 1881 to 1975. Although I do enjoy Wodehouse' humorous approach, I don't particularly care for his Jeeves character. It's become something of a stereotype, I'm afraid."

I nodded blankly, "Yeah, thanks for the info," which I thought was a bit didactic. I looked around the lobby. Bella seemed to have disappeared. This place was just a little weird. "Where's Bella . . . Mrs. Gibson?"

"That's Ms Gibson, sir," he emphasized, "and she's probably gone to the kitchen to prepare dinner. We usually dine at 6:30 when everyone is back at home. Canelo and Lucrezia will have returned from the manufactory by then, and Abel may join us as well if he doesn't have dinner with friends downtown. Dress is informal. May I show you to your room?"

"Before we go, that was her son, right? Jefferson was his name? The deaf man?"

"Hearing impaired, sir, is the correct appellation. And yes, he is her biological son." And with that professional if somewhat curt but politically correct response, he turned and started up

the circular stone staircase toward my second story guest room, my battered suitcase in his scrupulously clean and manicured hand. I scurried along to keep up.

The upstairs hallway was filled with what you'd expect in a castle. I'd seen plenty of those old black-and-white movies, so I knew exactly what to expect, and this place fit the image perfectly. There were animal heads mounted on dark plaques, several suits of armor, and 6-foot long tarpon mounted in mid leap, but with a large hemispheric bite taken out of its underside. What a tale that must be to hear. Undoubtedly a shark attacked as the fish was being reeled in. I didn't know it then, but that humongous bite might just as well have been taken by one of the siblings I'd contracted to work for.

## Basic Research

"You'll be able to work privately in the library, sir." The butler swung the door wide and waved me and my aging tan Samsonite briefcase in. "I believe you'll find everything you need right here. Just ring this bell if we've forgotten anything, or if you'd like some refreshment." He pointed to a bell button next to the doorjamb and left, closing the door quietly behind him. I hoped there were no secret wall panels like in the old comic horror movies, or hidden traps that dropped a screaming Rochester or Ben Bones down a shoot into the Savannah River. This place was spooky enough in just its physical aspects. Jeeves, or rather Swift, wasn't helping. But I had nothing to worry about, did I? After all, this was just a simple research job.

It was a real library all right, complete with a rolling oak ladder on a track that circled inside the four walls of books. A microfilm reader stood in one corner, facing so the light didn't fall on it from a modest stained glass clerestory window above the shelves on one wall. A dark mahogany conference table dominated the center of the large Bakara carpet, the table's carved animal legs heavy, but nonetheless looking ready to spring and run.

An unexceptional shallow gray steel vault box sat on the table, its top open. Next to the box was a large roll of paper which, when rolled out flat, proved to be The Castle's architectural plan.

I walked to the table and peered down into the box. It was packed with file folders and loose papers, perhaps four inches deep. This would take a while. Then the thought hit me, "Suppose the early stuff is written in Italian?" I could be in trouble here, intellectual trouble, of course. I might be able to sort through some of it with my high school Spanish. They were both Romance languages, right? Or I could hire a translator. The court system surely maintained a list.

Or the local genealogy groups would know who to call. It seemed that running over budget wasn't going to be a problem on this job. They expected to pay me, pay all expenses, and the word "reasonable" hadn't come up in either context. There probably wasn't a budget limit anyway. After all, they wanted to locate the family treasure, Paneta's Crown. Okay, no problem.

A copy of Benito Moschetto's will, legal sheets bound in blue backing paper and the same as the copy that had already been sent to me, topped the boxed stack. Clipped to it was a newspaper article detailing the accidental death of this pillar of the Savannah merchantile community, this Great Patriot, this Great Manufacturer and Merchandiser of Death. He had been skewered numerous times by one of his son Abel's massive metal sculptures, strangely enough entitled "Man's Reach for the Heavens." Somewhat ironic. It had fallen on him (how?) in his son's warehouse studio on the Moschetto factory grounds. Grisly. The inquest had determined it to be accidental, even though questions remained about the sculpture's basal stability. No one was blamed.

Benito's Last Will and Testament was obviously a document of primary relevance, the most immediate because it controlled the current relationship among the surviving family members. As one would expect, there were clear bequests as to family property and responsibility. Most important for my purposes though were the references to Paneta's Crown. Allow me to quote the first, in which he bequeaths The Crown to Canelo:

*To my eldest son, Canelo Emilio Moschetto, I bequeath two fifths of any estate assets composed of real estate, cash, securities, bonds, mortgages, or notes, along with Fabbrica Moschetto, and, if he survives me, Paneta's Crown, which, by right of primogeniture as the oldest of my male children, he must hold in trust for his children and future Moschetto generations, passing it on in his turn to his eldest male child.*

So, basically, the oldest son, by traditional right of primogenitor, was the recipient of, not just The Crown itself, but the responsibility of safeguarding The Crown for the general benefit of the family, and was to pass it on in his turn to his oldest son in the natural course of events following the tradition of primogeniture. If the eldest son didn't survive the father, then the responsibility passed on down the line of male siblings in the immediate family until someone ended up with it. The legalities of it all sounded straightforward enough. The problem then was the practical problem of finding the blasted thing. The will held no clue to its whereabouts.

Time to start sorting papers. I hauled out my portable CD player, slipped in a Slim Harpo disk, and slid the earphones down over my ears. Swell. Life was good.

I started sorting through the remaining four inches of documents, first laying them out in chronological order on the tabletop, thinking that the best place to start looking would be preceding wills that had also passed The Crown down through the generations to Benito.

After half an hour of great music, the documents were neatly arrayed in a temporal procession across the conference table. They fell into a sensible order, and most everything was in English except for a couple of the very earliest pieces. They comprised business agreements, receipts from years past for machine tools and equipment, deeds, an architectural contract that

seemed to be for The Castle, and several wills.

Forty minutes later I'd read all the paragraphs in preceding wills that had accomplished the same legal end of passing The Crown via primogeniture with the goal of protecting it for the family. It was really a sequential custody situation, a trust, if you will. With variations in language from antique to more modern, they pretty well echoed one another. None of them mentioned a location, even in the most veiled terms. The language was strictly about birthright and entitlement, not placement, disguise, or physical possession. Nowhere was there a description of The Crown or even an appraisal of its cash value.

Since I was in a metaphorical if not true "castle" of gray stone built in the early 1920s, how about secret hiding places? Wasn't that a style of the time? Or was I just thinking in old movie mode again? Exactly when had the place been built? I unrolled the architectural plans and took a good long look.

Architectural plans were something new for me. I had no idea what to look for. How do you read a basic blueprint anyway? I'd had a mechanical drawing class years ago in high school, but we'd been limited to simple isometric projections of rectangular boxes, maybe a box with a corner cutout, maybe a screw thread. Building plans were an entirely different game. And having no construction experience, I was at somewhat of a loss.

I had to look though; did I have a choice? I was a professional researcher, right? And I found something right off the bat. In the lower left corner of the first sheet was a box with the architect's name, scale data, and the year 1923. Hey, this was simple. It's always good to start out with a success, no matter how pitifully small it might be.

I then began at the upper left corner of the first sheet and scanned my way systematically

across it in bands several inches wide, working my way to the bottom. I was looking for any cubbyhole that could hide something as small as a crown. There were several spots where it looked like a hiding place could have been built under a staircase or between two walls, but the material notations referred to stone with wood panel facing. For the moment, I assumed the staircases were built on solid stone bases. How else could they support their own weight?

There was nothing in the plans that jumped out at me. On first inspection, nothing in the plans or the other documents gave me anything that could be construed as a clue. Perhaps more in-depth study would show me the right direction. It would probably be a good idea to find a consulting architect to decipher the plans. That would be the most efficient way to go, even if the most expensive.

One ornately decorated hand-written older document on heavy vellum, in Latin or Italian, perplexed me. It didn't fit what I would have expected of legal writing. Instead, it lay on the parchment looking more like a poem, illuminated in the style of a medieval manuscript. An image of a balding monk with quill in hand and sitting on a high stool came unbidden to my mind. Trite, Bones. Let's be more imaginative, eh? This would have to be translated to learn its true significance, if there were any. I'd have to find a local Italian-American connection for that. There had to be a club or something. Maybe I could find them through one of the Catholic churches. I added that to my growing research task list. This was getting interesting.

## Audience with the Queen

The door to the dimly-lit library swung open and a pinto-patterned Harlequin Great Dane stepped briskly into the room. With no hesitation, it strode to where I sat and stuck its huge square head out on its muscled neck. It checked me over, slowly and carefully. The creature's nostrils worked opening and closing, saliva dripped, but teeth were discretely hidden away within the hefty muzzle. The dog had grabbed my attention, but a scraping sound had followed the creature into the library. I looked up.

Working her way towards me using a dully-finished metal crutch for support was a lean, long-haired woman clad in a knee-length black velvet dress. Clearly an Elvira-type. Extreme Goth. Her left foot was misshapen, the leg shorter than her right, and the most obvious reason for the crutch. Perhaps there were spinal issues as well.

In an awkward attempt at civility, I jumped to my feet, knocking the heavy library chair over behind me. The beast growled, deep within its barrel chest.

A rich and liquid voice came from her. "Mr. Bones, our genealogist. I'm Lucrezia Moschetto. Welcome to our happy little home." She'd reached me by then and, putting her weight on the crutch in her left hand, she extended a long, olive-complected hand toward me in greeting.

I took her hand in mine. It was a real human hand all right, but it felt like a bundle of brass rods held loosely together in a wrapping of warmed chamois skin. It wasn't an unpleasant feeling, but certainly novel. I was a bit startled by the strange contact, but I nonetheless tried to speak.

"It's a pleasure to be here, Miss. . ."

She cut me off with a gracious smile. "Please call me Lucrezia. It's as long as Ms. Moschetto, but I prefer the informality of first names. May I call you Ben?"

"Oh, yeah, sure. No problem. . . I mean, of course. Yes." I was flustered. Close up like this, she was exquisite. A thin gold band held thick black hair back from her angular face. The face itself was perfect, not a mark, not a wrinkle, not a flaw anywhere, perfectly proportioned, with almond-shaped eyes, almost Oriental, their deep centers black and unfathomable with no evident pupil in the ebon iris. Her mouth was wide and cleanly-formed, the lips dark even against the olive color of her skin. She wore little, if any, makeup. She didn't need commercial help.

"Damn, but you're beautiful." The words tumbled out. "I mean. . ." This was worse than my usual hoof-in-mouth. I was in trouble now.

She laughed, easily and not at all self-consciously. "That's really gracious of you, but you needn't condescend to me, Ben. I'm really Beauty and The Beast combined." She'd been through this sort of thing before and had a prepared patter.

The dog turned its massive head from me and nuzzled up to her. She took her gaunt hand from mine and scratched the dog behind its ear. The ear was above table height. Most dogs I've met, even big ones, were runts in comparison.

She nodded toward the papers spread out across the table. "Find anything interesting so far?" Her tone was conversational, but there was an anxiousness hidden within its apparent calm.

I pulled myself back behind a professional demeanor for propriety. "Well, it's a bit early yet." She watched me closely, making me somewhat uncomfortable. I went on, "But it's an interesting history. I'll wait to report to everyone until I have some details and a chronology

worked out."

"I was referring specifically to The Crown," she said with sudden steel in her previously melodious voice, "and telling *me* what you've uncovered. What have you found?" She slammed her hand down on the paper-strewn library table. Her crutch dropped from her hand, banged off the table and fell to the floor, hitting heavily. It didn't clatter like a standard aluminum crutch might. Instead, it hit with a resounding thud like a dead-blow hammer, and didn't bounce around at all.

"Nothing yet, really." My antennae were up now. Something was very weird here. This beauty before me had reptilian qualities within, and not too far within either. Best be careful, Bones. I bent to pick up the crutch. Grasping it, I discovered it wasn't aluminum at all, but some much denser material. Strange. She wasn't heavy enough herself to need the extra support, was she?

"Leave it lie." I set it back where it had fallen. "Cerberus, stick!" And the giant canine obeyed, picking the crutch up gently from the floor and lifting it to where she could receive it from his drooling jaw. "Give!" He let it drop into her open hand.

She turned back to me. "Ben," the voice sweetness again, languid, pregnant with enticement, "I think we need to understand one another better." She edged closer along the table's edge. "Both of my brothers are ready to fight for The Crown. As you see, I wouldn't do well in a stand-up fight. But I have my ways nonetheless."

I nodded dumbly, my eyes hypnotically pinned to hers. I floundered in a sea of glue, a viscous home-brewed psychological slime.

"I want The Crown myself." Steel first, and then, in a whine, "It's simply not fair that the

boys get everything all the time. I have to win sometimes, don't I?" I could smell her now: lemony, tart and honey at the same time, her pheromones saturated the stale library air in thick, cloying clouds. Sweat dripped under my arms. The floor was missing. I wiped my palm across my forehead. It came away wet.

"They're not to have it." A clear enough statement. "Understand?" Steel again. Penetrating steel, a poniard of argument, short on reasoning, but with plenty of carbon. "You'll tell *me* what you discover, but you will not tell *them*." Another pause. Several decades passed. "Do you understand me?"

I was still nodding. She smiled; it was brilliant, a blaze of light at the end of Mesmer's dark tunnel. I started back upward toward the surface, toward the light, toward fresh air, toward Life itself.

"I think I understand."

"There are rewards if you help me. I virtually run the company now. Canelo is so. . . so concerned with being a macho-man. I can make things happen for you." She paused, then added to make her point, "I can make good things happen if I want. And if I want other things to happen. . . well, other things can happen too. All sorts of things. We are a powerful family, and we each have our ways."

"Right," I said, feebly holding up my end of this strange conversation. "Right, I get you," I muttered as I backed up several steps.

This was bad news. What had I waltzed into this time? I hoped she was the only problem, but somehow I didn't think so. Something about blood running true. I'd encountered it too many times in my digging through families up and down the countryside. Veneers are notoriously thin,

and not just on modern chipboard furniture. The vaunted veneer of civilization itself is perhaps the thinnest and most readily punctured. A line from one of my favorite bluesmen, Lightnin' Hopkins, jumped into my mind, "You got to watch it, all the time."

"I'm so glad I caught you before you got too far along in your work." She smiled at the corners of her mouth and scorched the paper-covered table with those empty eyes. "It's always good to have a clear idea of your goals. . . and your rewards. Don't you think so?" Sweetness and grace again. It came and it went, turned on and turned off by a reptile switching mechanism deep in her.

Gripping her crutch, she lurched around and propelled herself toward the door. Her canine minion Cerberus, a guard dog truly from Hades, attended her. She left the room without another word, leaving the door open behind her. A trail of sounds, strong and vibrant from the one, painfully awkward yet rhythmic, followed them down The Castle's hallway.

And so I met Lucrezia Moschetto. Lucrezia . . . named after the infamous poisoner, no doubt, and just as much the viper, too.

## Bella

As I sat there in the mahogany paneled room swabbing the sweat from my forehead and considering the recently implied threats to life and limb and the stalled state of my researches. The heavy library door swung open a bit more from where Lucrezia had left it. Bella Gibson, the self-described housekeeper and cook, came in bearing a large tray. Somewhat blearily, I looked at my watch. I'd been shuffling papers for three hours. Time for a break, eh Bella?

By way of explanation, she said, "Since you 'rived after lunch, I thought you might care for some 'freshment. Dinner won't be until 6:30." She placed the tray on a small table to the side of the door. "Coffee or tea, Mista Bones? I brought both."

I leaned back in my chair and stretched my arms out to all possible horizons. My right scapula popped; it felt good. "Thanks, that's very thoughtful."

She looked over the orderly document stacks on the table and shook her head back and forth. "In all my life I never did un'erstand how scraps of paper could be so 'portant t' people. I always knew that people were of more cons'quence than paper. That make good sense, don't it?" Her very human smile was broad and genuine, a total opposite to Lucrezia's smiles of devious purpose.

It didn't take much thinking to agree with her. "Yes, it does. But there's history here, too. The family's story is here, if I can piece it together." I gestured toward the papers. "And I'm only looking for information, not at the people themselves."

She returned to her mission, lifting a cup and saucer off the tray with her right hand and picking up the silver coffee pot with her left. "I'm sure you are. That's why they brung you down here all the way from 'Lanta, ain't it? Coffee, Mista Bones, or tea?"

“Yes, coffee will be fine. Black.” I shifted gears. “Mrs. Gibson, can I ask how long you’ve been with the family?”

You could see the blush in her caramel skin. It was a sensual coloring, like a golden sunset seen through light cloud cover. She knew it was happening, too. But why should she blush from such an innocent question?

“Bella, that’s me, jes’ Bella, the cook, an’ it seems like I been here fo’ever, maybe even longer. Been here through good times an’ bad, both.” A gaze into the past, and then she finished the pouring and placed the cup on the table in front of me. “I brought ya’ some of these here cookies, too. In case you be hungry.”

I was. I grabbed one, dunked it, popped it into my mouth. I hadn’t realized how hungry I was. I stuffed in another, chewed for a minute, washed the mess down with a swig of hot black coffee. She watched me choke it down.

“Mista Bones, how come you ain’t got no girlfrien’?”

I was startled at that. How could she know about my bachelor status, or how long I’d been by myself? “Well. . .”

“A young man like yo’self should ‘least have a girlfrien’, if not a wife and some chul’en.” She paused then, her eyes closed. They popped open. “Oh, I’m sorry, Mista Bones, about the loss of your wife. I un’erstan’ better now.” She nodded her head sagely. “Uh huh.”

How could she know about my wife Julia and baby’s deaths? Who was this Bella? Had the family been investigating me? And why would they share any such information they’d obtained with the cook?

“How did you know about that?” I was spooked. I hate it when people do that.

She performed a Holmesian analysis. “You’re missing a button off’n yo’ shirt, an’ you got stains. Nobody be takin’ proper care of you, Mista Bones.” She wagged her finger playfully.

“Yeah, that’s right. That’s very good, Bella, very observant.”

She nodded her head, almost mockingly. “Why, thank you, sir. I certainly do try to notice what’s put right in front of me.”

“Is there anything you can tell me that might help me find what I’m looking for? Do you know what The Crown is?”

She looked at me with something of a cross between a quizzical and knowing eye. “You be seeking a treasure here, ‘mongst all these papers.” She indicated my research. “It’s probably there somewhere or other. But I ain’t seen it laying ‘round the house, if that’s what you mean. An’ I clean e’rywhere. I’d know a treasure if I found it, wouldn’t I?” Her tone turned cagey. “What’s it s’posed t’ look like?”

“It’s a crown. They call it Paneta’s Crown, and it’s been passed down through the family for generations. Seems that no one knows where it is now that Benito’s de. . . passed on.”

“That Benito. He sure was somethin’. He was a sweet man, a’right. Knew how to keep his chul’en in line, too. Now they be gettin’ just a little bit frantic, a bit too independent. They’re a strange bunch, I guess. But everyone’s a little strange if you look close enough at ‘em.” She knew these people too well.

“How do you mean strange?” She had me now.

“They got their habits, their pers’nal fancies, y’know. They don’t tell me much that’s private, but you learn lots working close ‘round people fo’ a long time. I knows lots. . . an’ lots more than I see with jus’ my eyes too. Jes’ now, they all be wantin’ the same thing. I s’pect it’s

that crown thing. An' they all wants it real bad. It means more to them than jus' what they might could get fo' it."

"How do you know all this if they don't share their personal lives with you? Do they leave notes lying around or what?"

"I gots the sight, got a kinda sense 'bout people. I can see into them, sometimes into their minds to know what they be thinkin' 'bout, sometimes right into their hearts to see the blackness or goodness within. It he'ps me 'casionally, but it's a problem, too. It's hard to make friends when you know 'em too well after meetin' 'em for the first few minutes. Lotsa times I just can't be bothered with all their junk. I got my own life t' live, if you take my meaning."

This was something I hadn't expected to run into. But Georgia was an odd state, a mix of the most modern technologies and the most ancient beliefs. Ancient African cultures hung on in many places, the scents and religions of old Africa not forgotten, all mixed in with a strong Christianity and faith in a better life that never seemed to come.

She went on. "Some people are easy to read, like you. You not a bad person at all. You just confused. That's why I likes ya'. Others be harder. I do mo' better with strangers. It seems the longer I know someone, the harder it is to know things 'bout 'em without them actually telling me. I don't know what it is. Been that way all my life. It's a blessin' from the Lord."

She was making me a little nervous. I looked at my watch. Almost five o'clock. "Well, it's getting a bit late. Hadn't you better tend to dinner?"

"Yes, I'd better do jes' that. I'll leave this here tray fo' you. I think you be safe here by yo'se'f fo' a while." She winked, turned, and left the room.

I had a few more cookies, and looked at the papers a bit more, but without real

motivation or care. Lucrezia had unsettled me and Bella, though trying to relax me and make me feel at home, had only added to my unease. Psychics were hard to figure. I've never been sensitive in that way myself, but I've known people who had certain, ah, "talents," you might say. People who could find lost items, or opened the door as you were about the knock, stuff like that.

And there was my buddy Phil's girlfriend. He worked for the post office as a substitute mail carrier. Everyday was an adventure for him because he never knew where he'd be working until he arrived at the sorting facility and they told him to go here, go there. Well, his girlfriend always showed up with his lunch, wherever he happened to be. It went on for some months and then he dumped her. Said it made him nervous her showing up like that. I can see how it would. But the fact is that she could do it, and that's the point I'm trying to make. She told me where I'd lost a ring one time, and I went back there and found it. But I don't know if I could handle her being around all the time either. He certainly couldn't.

So who was I to doubt this Bella? Was she merely insane? Doubtful. She could probably do what she said. She wasn't hiding it, that's for sure. It was right out there for the world to see. "A blessing from the Lord," she'd called it. Still . . .

And, "He was a sweet man." Is that something you say about your dead boss? Or was there something else in that offhand remark? I'd have to chat with her some more.

I turned back to the piles of papers. As intriguing as Bella Gibson might be, after Lucrezia, anything else was anticlimactic. World War II would have been a footnoted afterthought. How do I get to meet these crazy women all the time? I hadn't run into a sane one in so long I was beginning to think they were an extinct subspecies.

But then, the men in sibling contests were pretty difficult too, and this looked like it was going to shape up into a real power game, all right. I didn't know which was more dangerous: physically powerful males, or the weaker sex, represented by the insidious, club-footed, web-weaving femme. This one hadn't shown her teeth, but she'd growled, from deep down inside and with an air of having had lots of practice. I wondered where they buried the bones. And not the Ben Bones, I hoped.

I don't know how long I sat there ruminating on my situation. My reverie was interrupted by an attention-getting cough at the library door. I looked over and saw Swift, standing discretely in his swallow-tailed coat like the major-domo of some fancy uptown restaurant that I'd never have reason to visit, let alone money enough.

"If you'd care to join us, sir, dinner will be served in fifteen minutes. Dress is informal."

"Yeah, thanks. Look, I've sorted through these papers and don't want to disturb the order. Can I leave them as is?"

"No one will bother your work here, sir. All the family members are anxiously waiting for your results." He turned away and went down the hall.

I left everything just as it was and followed him out, hoping I wasn't going to be dinner's main course: Bones a la Moschetto. What a thought! Where'd that come from?

## Dinner on a Chessboard

I've lived in two-bedroom apartments with less floor space than The Castle's dining room. This place had been built by big illegal Volstead Act money in the 1920's. But I wouldn't find that back story out until a bit later in the hunt. It was a style thing, a studied ostentation meant to impress other folks of the same scale of pocketbook, not to mention the proletariat. The owners probably used the same architects and decorators, all late Victorian and mock-Gothic thinkers. But for the style of our modern, form-follows-function times, it was a bit overdone.

Remember the old *Topper* movies with Cary Grant, Roland Young, and the big old mausoleums they floundered around in? I always mixed them up with Rochester movies with all their crashing through secret passages behind bookcases, and the trick chair that kept dumping Rochester down a chute into the bay. I hoped these folks weren't as playful, or at least that their long-dead architects weren't.

At first glance, they seemed a normal and pleasant enough lot. If it hadn't been for her mid-afternoon midnight creep, her club foot and her monstrous canine companion, I wouldn't have even given Lucrezia a second thought except to mark her exceptional Mediterranean beauty. As I entered the dining room, she was standing at one of the three credenzas that lined the walls, long stemmed martini glass in hand. She was chatting affably with a taller, curly-haired, lean and dark-complected fellow similarly equipped with a pre-dinner libation held familiarly in a long-fingered hand. She still wore her black velvet dress; he wore a bright green polo shirt, crisply-ironed designer jeans, and python skin boots. The Great Dane Cerberus, legendary guard dog of Hades, lay curled quietly in a corner, eyes open, no doubt malevolently calculating the correct angle and instant to strike when the release command at long last came

from his mistress.

Lucrezia turned from her companion toward me. “Canelo, let me introduce our house guest.” They both moved in my direction, he smoothly, she somewhat more awkwardly because of her crutch. “This is Ben Bones, your genealogist from Atlanta.” She came to my side, switched her drink to her left hand and slid her right into the crook of my left arm. No escape now; I was caught, hooked and reeled in like a trout flopping on a stream bank.

I stuck out my right hand out toward Canelo. “How do you do, Mr. Moschetto? This place is incredible. The architecture...”

He accepted the formal form of address without correction. “Yes, most everyone thinks so the first time they stop by.”

His hand was long and strong, and seemed capable of bone-crushing pressure, his handshake firm but casually restrained. Why damage a fresh guest for no reason at all? Just for sport? He continued, deep and mellifluous, “You’ve met my baby sister already.” Lucrezia’s hand stiffened on my arm. I felt the skeleton beneath her flesh. “She’s seems to have taken a shine to you. What did you say to turn her head?” Was that a smirk in his tone?

He had me on that one. I couldn’t remember saying anything in particular. If I remembered correctly, she did most of the talking, and it had scared the hell out of me for tone if not for content. “I . . . I . . .”

Canelo laughed, the flat, angular planes of his face breaking into a cubist caricature. “Don’t let her get to you.” His eyes stabbed her, then returned to meet mine a bit more benignly. “She has that effect on just about everyone.”

Returning to host mode, he gestured us toward a credenza. “Let’s eat. Bella’s got a

seafood chowder we shouldn't allow to cool. She'd be insulted. Abel's late, as is his style in most everything." He smiled, but his eyes remained ebon and bottomless like his sister's. It seemed to run in the family.

I disengaged from the arachnid sister, and moved toward Bella's repast.

At the credenza, Canelo dished a steaming ladle of chowder out into a bowl and handed it to me. He filled another for himself and gestured me toward the table. Lucrezia was left to get her own. I thought I saw a shadow of . . . irritation, perhaps, maybe even overt hatred, as it crossed her face, then disappeared.

There were nine substantial carved oak chairs about the rectangular oak table with its lion legs and claw feet: four chairs along each side, and one somewhat larger and less comfortable-looking throne affair at the head. We only used the chairs nearest the head, leaving the throne empty. I assumed that to have been father Benito's, left empty in respect for the deceased king. Canelo, as oldest son, sat at the throne's right, and I sat to his right. The chair to the left of the head throne was empty, though the place had been set. That was probably for Abel, the second son. Lucrezia, the youngest sibling, and female too, sat directly across from me. Cerberus uncurled from his corner, plodded to Lucrezia's side, and sat attentively to her left watching her eat. The Hellhound was seeking a handout. Bones, perhaps?

No one bothered to say grace. Canelo waited for me to get myself and my chowder bowl placed, then tore a chunk from a loaf of French bread on the table, ignoring the bread knife provided, and dug in with enthusiasm. I waited for Lucrezia, who had taken a bit more time to get herself, her crutch, and her bowl to the table. Neither Canelo nor I made any move to assist her. His neglect was habitual, brotherly. Mine? Well, I didn't have any warm feelings for her.

That was certain. In fact, her nearness seemed to produce a polar chill.

As we worked on Bella's incredible seafood and vegetable chowder, perhaps a Brunswick stew variant, a short dark man swept into the room, heading directly for the chowder on the credenza. Brother Abel, I presumed.

"What's for dinner tonight? Anything good?" He sloshed a ladle load into a bowl, spilling some onto the credenza, crossed to the table, and sat down across from Canelo. With his mouth full of chowder, he waved his spoon at me and garbled, "Is this our researcher?" Then to me, "I'm Abel . . . the second son."

"Abel's our family's creative member. He does metal sculpture, massive metal sculpture," Canelo added. There was more than just information in the comment. Looking to my left, I saw Canelo looking hard at his brother, his unblinking eyes spiking his younger sibling. Abel seemed unaware and continued shoveling chowder. He grabbed the bread loaf, tore himself a hunk and plunged it into his bowl, then into his mouth.

Lucrezia dove in too, through gritted teeth. "Father was killed in Abel's studio, you know. An accident. Or so it was determined." Her animosity toward Abel was clear. No veil there.

Abel's response was a quick, "That's right, sister dear. Officially determined to be an accident." He thrust another loaded spoon into his mouth, followed it with a torn bite of French bread. He chewed the mass with his mouth open.

I sat and watched, my spoon held just short of my mouth, chowder dripping back into my bowl. There was a lot of emotion just below the surface . . . surface tension. Ha! Very apt, but not too funny. These people all had more than a little bit of an edge to them. Even Abel, who

seemed fairly glib at first appearance, had more going on behind his jutting brows than was immediately evident. He had shoveled in a couple of mouthfuls of chowder, and now sat with his spoon empty and dangling, his mouth full. He swallowed, not in fear or angst, but just to clear his speakers.

Abel was shorter than his two siblings, and there was an obvious physical density to him a classic “fireplug” physique. A mesomorph. Metal sculptor, eh? I wasn’t familiar with his work. Did he do ashtrays or monuments? The newspaper article said that Benito had been killed by a sculpture, but there hadn’t been a description except that it had lots of sharp points. I’d have to look Abel Moshetto up on the Internet. He had the money behind him to make himself well known.

Abel spoke again. “Haven’t we been over this quite enough?” Restrained anger, not the petulance of a subservient sibling. “We all have the same problem: finding The Crown. Let’s just do it without all the bullshit.”

Lucrezia smiled at me with one side of her mouth. Her speech was slow, the words well-formed for absolute clarity. “As you can see, we’re all still on edge here since our dear father’s death. It came as such a shock.” Her glance at me transformed into an icy glare at Abel.

“Sho’ was a shock, a man in his prime health like that. An’ that ter’ble accident. Ter’ble thing,” Bella Gibson joined in as she arrived from the kitchen carrying a large silver platter with racks of lamb ribs piled on it. This was a carnivorous family. Perhaps they liked to nibble on the defenseless ones in their midst. She placed the platter on the sideboard and started dishing portions out onto large plates.

Bella’s son Jefferson arrived carrying two silver servers loaded with vegetables. As he

scuttled wide of Abel, I noticed there was rib sauce around his smiling mouth. He'd already been nibbling at our dinner, exercising his kitchen privileges as the cook's son. Abel suspended his Neanderthal shoveling and studied the deaf man's progress across the room.

Further conversation, if you'd call it that, waited until Bella had laid loaded plates in front of us all. Cerberus became even more attentive, almost an impossibility given his natural alertness around food. Jefferson scratched the huge dog behind his ears and left the room, casting a wary glance at Abel on his way out. Bella followed with "I'll check in on y'all later, see if you be want'n some coffee."

Lucrezia enlightened me. "He's the only other person Cerberus will tolerate. In fact, they talk sign language. A flick of Jeff's finger and you're a dead man. Cerberus will protect Jefferson just like he protects me." She paused to let that sink in. "But that boy's heart is too soft to use the power he has. Loves his plants, loves his animals. Set for life, he is." She stopped, then added, "You don't need much to survive in life: just a few rich friends." Her explanation ended on a sour tone. Surely she wasn't jealous of a deaf gardener. She tossed a quarter-sized piece of meat to her beast. Jaws snapped in the air and it was gone.

Canelo took over again. "So, Ben, have you found everything you need?"

"Oh, yeah, sure. Library's great. Jeeves . . . I mean, Swift is great. Bella's great. Everything's just dandy." I was trying to reassure myself more than my employer. "I can't promise when I'll figure out what and where The Crown is, or if I ever will, but I'm working on it. Been through all the papers in the box once. Got 'em sorted out chronologically and figured out subject-wise. There are a couple of old pieces I might need help with. Do you know anyone who reads Italian?"

A growl came from the middle sibling. “In this family? Ha!” Abel didn’t have much faith in the strength of his heritage. He broke a rib from the rack, applied teeth vigorously. There was something Viking about his approach. He wolfed a chunk down doglike and tore at the rib again, then tossed it with a clatter back to his plate and snatched up another.

Canelo broke in. “I think I know the piece you mean. That old parchment, right? You’ll have to find someone yourself, I’m afraid. Just keep track of the expense involved and tell whoever you find to bill the estate through Steve Moschetto. He’s our cousin and the lawyer for the estate. If they live here in Savannah, they’ll know about Benito’s death and that the estate is still not fully settled. It’s been a big local interest item all along. Vultures circling the corpse, y’know?”

“Yeah, Savannah’s been big on death since ‘The Book’ came out. *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*. Everyone got hot on voodoo and all that crap,” Abel denigrated. “Our family mausoleum’s in that same cemetery: Bonaventure.” He finished with a snort and poured himself a water glass full of red wine from the decanter on the table without offering it around, then slugged half of it down.

I continued with my problems. “Well, I’ll go over to the Georgia Historical Society tomorrow and try to find a translator. There are some other things I want to find on Italian immigration to Georgia, too. I remember reading something about it somewhere. Might prove useful, as well as intellectually interesting.”

Canelo jumped in. “We can fill you in on what family history we know. There’s undoubtedly a great deal more that we don’t know. It’s not the most savory history, at least at the beginning. Granddad Emilio made a bundle running liquor during Prohibition. We’ve gone legit

since.” He chuckled, then continued.

“Great-grandfather Emilio came here from Italy in 1882. He’d been the oldest son in his immediate family, so he received Paneta’s Crown when his father died. Primogeniture. Do you know what that’s about?” Abel snorted. Canelo ignored him. I nodded affirmatively. “Emilio had four sons and one daughter. The first boy died on the boat to America and was buried at sea. The second son, Vincenzo, took The Crown when his father died. Vincenzo died in 1951, and his first son was Benito, our dad. The Crown descended to him in ‘51. He must’ve put it somewhere to keep it safe.”

I fetched a ball point from my pocket and started scribbling in my pocket notebook. “I’d like to work up a genealogy for the family, just to see how things lay historically. I’ve already started making some notes from the papers in the library.”

“That’s fine. Maybe it’ll help. More information is always better, eh?” Canelo was trying to be personable and helpful. It seemed natural enough. “There’s a brochure on the family’s history out at the factory. I’ll make sure you get a copy.”

Ignorance is bliss, it’s said, but I was already tired of being so blissfully happy. I asked the obvious question. “Is there anything anywhere that you know of that describes The Crown? It might help if we knew what we were looking for. What does it look like?”

Lucrezia answered that one. “Nothing that we know of. It might be right in front of us and we wouldn’t know it. We’ve heard about it all our lives, but no one’s ever said anything specific about it.”

“Do you know how old this thing is? Who was Paneta? An Italian king? Or is ‘paneta’ just an Italian adjective?” I had to ask, didn’t I?

Canelo seemed perplexed at my questions. “We don’t know. As Lu said,” she gave him a black look, “no one’s ever said anything much. In fact, it almost seems that The Crown was a secret passed down the line through the oldest son via primogeniture and not shared with other family members . . . even though it’s supposed to be for the benefit of the entire family. Kinda strange, but that’s how it was set up in the old country long ago. How long ago? We don’t even know that. The trail peters out before great-grandfather Emilio. The documents you looked through are all since the family’s been in the United States. All except for the parchment, that is.”

I was on the trail. “Well, the Georgia Historical Society might have some leads. From there I can find a local Italian genealogical group. And a translator. Then I’ll be able to get into that parchment. It might be the key . . . or nothing at all.”

Canelo looked pleased with my plan. “But you’re our guest too, y’know. So I’ve planned a few diversions for you. Tomorrow morning we’re going to do some shark fishing.” Lucrezia, sitting across from me, rolled her eyes and grunted.

“No,” I demurred. “I really have things to do on The Crown problem. Besides, I’m not much of a fisherman.” To tell the truth, I wasn’t comfortable in boats at all. I’d had some SCUBA diving experience, and strangely enough, I was more comfortable and at ease under the water than floating on top. Boats just seemed too vulnerable. They sank.

“Nonsense.” Canelo was insistent. “Lu can handle things at the factory. She knows almost as much about operations as I do. I’ll come by your room tomorrow and get you about 4am. Got to get an early start so we can find them at feeding time. We can have you back at work by noon.”

“Four o’clock! But. . .”

“Then it’s settled. I’d also like you to come out to Fabbrica Moschetto for a tour of the manufacturing floor. Ever been in a gun factory before?” He seemed almost gleeful.

“Can’t say that I have, but like I said, I really need to be working on finding The Crown. Genealogical research is very time-consuming, y’know.” How was I going to get out of this stuff? What did I care about sharks or the manufacturing of guns?

“What if I told you there were company archives there which might help your search? Would that be bait enough?” Canelo was canny, all right. He thought he’d hit on something, and he had.

“I’d forgotten about those archives. There’s actually quite a bit there to go through,” Lucrezia added thoughtfully. Cerberus pushed her elbow with his muzzle and huffed.

“Plan to come out to the factory tomorrow afternoon. I’ll send a car to the house to get you at about 2pm. That should give you enough time to clean up, have a bite to eat, and make a few phone calls if you need to.” Canelo had settled my itinerary for the day. But there was more.

“I’d rather drive myself there if you’ll just give directions. That way, I’ll be free to go to my next stop as I please.”

“That’ll be fine, too.” Canelo’s eyes quickly glanced from side to side. If I weren’t slightly paranoid, I would’ve missed it completely. Something about me wriggling out of his grasp? He continued. “There’s an annual family outing on Wednesday. We go out to the Claxton Rattlesnake Roundup every year. I’ve become quite involved with it over time. Started as a snake catcher; now I sit on the board. You’ll love it.”

“You’re joking.” I was incredulous. “A rattlesnake roundup?”

Abel's turn. "One of Canelo's more macho affectations. He's been out to prove his manhood since we were kids. Still a bachelor though, eh brother Canelo? Guns, sharks, snakes. Where are the women, eh Canelo? Some macho-man." His tone became more strident as he challenged his brother's manhood.

Canelo sat quietly while his brother taunted him. His hands gripped his silverware tightly, clutching knife and fork like the weapons they could easily become. His body was still, but Canelo looked poised for action, a great cat ready to spring. His voice was coarse, like rough canvas, yet even and controlled. "Shut up, Abel. You have much to answer for yet yourself. Be careful where you point your finger."

Abel clattered his knife and fork onto his plate, stood abruptly, and headed toward the door. Cerberus growled but only swiveled his head to track Abel's departure. Lucrezia smirked and laughed under her breath as she patted the dog's massive head with one hand and passed a piece of sauce-slathered meat to him with the other. It disappeared instantly.

Near the door, Abel suddenly stopped his rushed escape and turned to face Lucrezia. "And you, you mutant!" he roared, "You killed our mother with your own scratching for life. And you've been the same grasping bitch ever since!"

Bella had entered with a tray of cookies and an apple pie. The pie smelled great. Obviously freshly baked. Jefferson followed with a heavier tray laden with a large coffee urn and some cups. The weight didn't seem to bother him. He sidestepped abruptly as Abel continued his escape, avoiding any contact with the angry little sculptor, then watching him wide-eyed as he passed.

"That Abel. He jes' too 'citable, tha's what. Always have been." One of Bella's

editorials. “Now who wants some of this here lovely pie I jes’ took out’n the oven?” She brought everything back to normalcy.

Then why did I feel like I was in an Edgar Allen Poe story brought to life by surrealist filmmakers?

## The Fair Inquisitor

After Abel left and Bella's remarkable dessert had been finished, I went back to the library for more organizing. There was plenty of paper to shuffle.

I'd been there about an hour when Swift came to the door. He caught my attention with a very British harrumph.

"There's a lady to see you, sir. A police detective." He rolled smoothly aside and stood with his back to the open door as she entered.

A business-suited young woman entered the room. I stood up as she approached. She marched to the conference table, set her trim black leather attaché at her feet, flipped open a black leather badge folder, and introduced herself.

"I'm Zera Angelina, Special Agent with the Georgia Bureau of Investigation." A soft voice with a southern accent, maybe from South Carolina, pleasant, somewhat disarming, not off-putting, not sounding like a hick at all. "I've been working the Moschetto case and had a few questions for the family members. I know it's late, but I'd had an appointment with Mr. Moschetto . . . Canelo. Since you're here poking around in the family too, I thought it might be a good idea if we met."

She was shorter than my own height, five foot eight or so, lean but curvy, fit and not wimpy-looking in the slightest, with auburn hair pulled back into a loose bun. A few hairs straggled freely, as if she'd been in a rush putting it up or it had been a long and difficult day. Her eyes were dark but lively, skin a light olive color, her neck smooth and partly obscured by a tan scarf that was tucked down into the neck of her blouse. Her suit was a dark grey, pin-striped with a green that accented her skin tone. She looked thoroughly believable. The badge was her

bona fides, of course, but I was prepared to believe anything she said anyway.

“I . . . er . . . I didn’t know there was a Moschetto case,” I stammered out. Then I remembered my manners. “I’m Ben Bones, by the way.”

She chuckled. “Yes, I know. I’ve actually wanted to meet you for some time. I’ve done some genealogical digging into my own family history and have read several of your articles in *Everton’s Genealogical Helper* and other publications. Very informative and helpful. It’ll be a pleasure to actually work with you.”

She was very alive, if you get my drift: informed, enthusiastic, motivated. And female, too. This could work out great. I put on my best self, or what was left of me.

“Um . . . well . . . er . . . Yeah, glad to have helped you out. Wish I’d known about it earlier. Could’ve helped even more.” She liked my work. Oh, boy. But a detective? Surely she wouldn’t be an easy mark for a predatory bachelor. Then the puzzle appeared to my befuddled mind. “What do you mean by work with me? And what exactly do you need from me?”

She pulled a chair out and sat down, making herself at home.

I joined her. “I’m listening.”

“I’m fourth generation Italian-American. My great-grandfather came to America with a wave of Italian stone masons after the Civil War. There was lots of work rebuilding and few skilled workers to do it. Have you heard about that?” I shook my head. “People he trained probably built this place.” She waved her hand vaguely at the room. I assumed she meant the outside stonework of Castle Moschetto.

She seemed perfectly at ease. And then she asked her first cop question, “Are you here because of Benito Moschetto’s death?” We were finally getting to the real business.

Since I had nothing to hide and wanted to make as many points with her as possible, I decided to cooperate. “The family is looking for an artifact that seems to have been misplaced, perhaps even hidden. They called me in to look through archived family material for clues to its whereabouts.” I rolled my eyes, blew air out my whistle-formed lips, and indicated the various stacks of documents on the table. “So far I’ve been unable to locate it, but I’ve only been here a few hours. We’ll see what I come up with after some more detailed study.” As an afterthought, I added, “They each want it badly for themselves and to the exclusion of the others.”

She was interested and intrigued by the facts, but leaned toward me when I mentioned their sibling rivalry over *The Crown*. I got a whiff of some light scent she was wearing. “What exactly are they looking for?” she queried.

“Before we get into that, two things. First, I consider the work I do for my genealogical clients as mostly confidential. The Moschetto would have to give me permission to share my findings with you.”

That didn’t faze her. “I can take care of that. They’re cooperating with the Bureau fully. What else?”

“Second, what ‘Moschetto case’ are you working on, anyway? His death was accidental, wasn’t it?”

She thought for a second; I think she was deciding what to share. Her answer was cagey, but it was my own fault, too. “Well, I’m not supposed to share our findings in an open case either . . . but I’ll show you mine if you show me yours,” she said wryly. We both laughed. I liked her manner. She was a pro, but not inflexible. “At least to a degree, anyway. Benito Moschetto was an arms manufacturer. He not only sold guns to GBI and the U.S. government,

but to governments around the world, too. All with the U.S. government's approval, of course. The GBI has been watching the company for a long time just as a matter of course because of the nature of the business. Suddenly, the man is killed in questionable circumstances. The inquest determined that it was an accident," she paused, "but you've met the family..." A cocked head and a lifted eyebrow.

"Yes, well . . . they are a rather intense bunch. So what do you want from me? What exactly are you here for, Ms Angelina?"

"You can call me Zera, or just plain Z." A little smile, then back to business. "The truth is, the Bureau isn't so sure it was an accident. I mean, he was a significant figure in the arms world, not only a manufacturer, but he served on arms trade committees, advised governments, lobbied in Washington and elsewhere. Benito was no slouch. And as a result of his various involvements, he had enemies both at home and abroad."

I could see she was a good interviewer. Her manner was friendly and reassuring, not at all intimidating. I mean, I was as intimidated as I usual was with a good-looking woman who seemed interested in me, in my work, whatever . . . But she was also personable, not just a robotic cop. I wondered where she hid her pistol.

She went on, "This is an investigation, though sort of unofficially as yet, so I'm a bit freer to share what I know with you than if GBI was actively trying to make a criminal case. Right now we're just curious enough to continue looking things over in a detailed manner. The family knows, and they're being cooperative. Benito was always cooperative with law enforcement agencies, too. He simply couldn't afford not to be. Not just to help his sales, but because he believed in what we do. I was hoping that you might give us, me in particular,

anything that related. Y’know, just between professionals.” Both eyebrows went up this time as she sat back in her chair and folded her arms across her chest.

What could I tell her without breaking confidentiality? Come to think of it, none of the Moschettos seemed concerned with confidentiality. I mean, Lucrezia had threatened me, in an implied way, and I did have to protect myself. Canelo hadn’t said a thing about his wants or needs yet, and Abel? Well, Abel had hardly spoken to me at all. Okay, I felt I could cooperate with her with a clear conscience. Besides . . . who knew what else might develop? I’d like to see her again during my stay in Savannah, at least professionally if not socially.

I dove in. “I’m here looking for a family treasure they call Paneta’s Crown. Ever hear of it?” She shook her head negatively. “Well, it’s something that’s supposedly been in the family for several hundred years, though how the family got it in the first place is sort of vague to me right now. It seems to have been given to them in old Italy and it’s been passed down to the eldest son of each succeeding generation ever since by tradition under a legal theory known as ‘primogeniture.’ Look it up. It’s an interesting wrinkle in the laws of inheritance. It’s where all of, or at least the best of, dad’s stuff passes to the eldest male heir as a matter of right. Other siblings might receive specific bequests, or they might get nothing at all. But none of these folks seem to know where the treasure is. Or what it is, for that matter. That’s the strangest part. And that’s why I’m here. I’m supposed to identify it first, and then find it, if I can.”

“Interesting indeed. A lost family treasure.” I could almost hear the investigative gears meshing in her skull. “Well, I don’t see any connection with Benito’s death right off, but I’d like to hear more about this as your work progresses. Think that might be possible?”

This was too good to be true. Opportunity was knocking. “Sure. I don’t know how this

could tie in with your investigation, but how can I contact you?"

"Here's my card." It came out of a flat pocket in her fitted suit jacket. Where could that gun be? "It's got my office number, my cell phone, and my email. I'm easy to reach."

"I sure hope so," I blurted out.

We both laughed, she a bit shyly. I was embarrassed as well, but not too much. I fished my own card out of my beaten Samsonite briefcase and handed it to her in return. "Here's my contact info. Just give a holler. I keep my cell phone with me all the time."

She stood up. "I've got to get going. Got some other stops to make before I head home to bed. A detective's day is usually a long one. See you 'round." And with that, she gathered herself and her stuff and headed for the door. She turned around just before she left the room. "Do call me."

## Trolling for Datums

My guest bedroom was in an octagonal turret on The Castle's second floor. It overlooked the street in front of the house and the entrance portico. In keeping with the general flavor of the house, it was styled in the Victorian Gothic with lots of tasseled drapes and decorations, little tables and sitting areas in every corner and alcove. The bed was a huge canopied affair suitable for the Marquis de Sade and three or four of his reported licentious companions. The head and footboards were of a dark, dense wood, maybe mahogany, heavily carved with flowery wreaths from which peered satyr faces, with myriad cherubs cavorting at the higher altitudes. A true period extravaganza.

Don't get me wrong on this. Although definitely of an antiquated era and style, everything was thoroughly up-to-date. There was no musty old cloth smell, no mold, no dust anywhere. The place had been well kept, with new fabrics, and wiring and light switches up to current local code. Not a ghost to be seen anywhere, at least not yet. Well, maybe Benito's, but that was all, and he wasn't an active type of ghost who lurked in the shadows. I hadn't checked the closets for skeletons yet. I was pretty sure there'd be some though, and that I'd uncover them after some more digging into the family history. That had gotten me into trouble on previous assignments. Oh, well. A genealogist's life is fraught with danger.

There was a push-button phone too, so I traced the line back to the RJ-11 plug box, and opened my laptop computer for some on-line research. I hadn't expected a wireless network and had come prepared with a bag of miscellaneous cabling, so there wouldn't be problem. I booted up the laptop and discovered that my cables weren't needed after all; the house was rigged for wireless. While the computer came alive and made the connection, I reflected on what little I'd

learned so far.

It had been a full day. I'd had a four and a half hour drive down the essentially featureless length of rural Georgia, seen some of the incredible Southern splendor of downtown Savannah, done some preliminary research on this new and possibly lucrative job, and met yet another bunch of maniacs. There were "normal" folk too, like Swift, however out of cultural context he might be, and the Gibsons, Bella and Jefferson, but primarily there were my temporary clients the Moschettos, and they were some really interesting cases.

It's always great to meet the principals in a genealogical investigation. People are so varied and it's always enlightening to see their interactions. This bunch was as nuts as any I'd met. Clearly there was a great deal going on behind their masks of civility, lots of history and sibling resentment that I would never be privy to. But to this outside observer, even at first meeting, the tension and animosity was obvious.

Canelo was in charge, but not by much. He was the eldest son, nominal head of the family and, by the family's traditional right of primogeniture, he was named to be the holder of The Crown, whatever it might be, and would serve as its "protector." This was not just for his own benefit. He was to keep The Crown for the benefit of the entire family, passing it on in his turn to his oldest male child. Okay. But he was a bachelor so far in life, and there might be a problem with that later.

Canelo also ran the family business, Fabbrica Moschetto, a world famous small arms manufacturing operation. The business, which Canelo wanted me to see the next day, sold high quality guns to the military of all nations, including the U.S., to state and local police forces, and to municipalities all over the world. I suspected it was totally legit, all done with the appropriate

U.S. government permissions, permits, registrations, lobbying, and all the hoopla that goes with such dealing. And, if you'll pardon the obvious pun, the arms business was booming. Peace through strength, eh? Nonsense, in my somewhat opinionated opinion, but that was the way of the world.

Canelo was in his 40's, suave, self-assured, and with a Georgia cracker macho streak judging by such activities as shark fishing in the wee hours of tomorrow morning and rounding up rattlesnakes every year for the big show down at Claxton. Was he trying to prove something? If so, to whom? Or was it just normal male interest in such things? Hey, I was a normal male and I couldn't have cared less about them. So who's to say?

He was unaccompanied at dinner. There was no woman in evidence, nor was any mentioned, though younger brother Abel had slammed him on the topic. Had he ever been married? Divorced? Was this just a formal dinner with the family and honored guest-slash-hired-hand (that would be me), and away from the wife and kids for the evening? No, because Swift had said that they all three lived at The Castle. Was Canelo gay? If not, where had his brother's taunt come from? Was that the reason for the outward display of hard-core male pursuits? Did it matter at all to my investigation? Not a bit. What mattered was his determination to locate The Crown and his willingness to write a suitably appreciative check for my time and effort in that direction, and maybe a nice fat bonus when I'd found it . . . if I found it.

Jumping out of birth sequence, I thought about the third sibling, Lucrezia. Though the others had been born whole, physically at least, she was a bit deformed. At first glance, she was a true Italian beauty, dark and finely featured, smoldering-eyed and sensual. Seeing her move around gave it away though: she was club-footed and seemed to have some spinal issues as well.

She was in her mid to late 30's, and was also without a partner. Maybe traditional Italians just married late, though I doubted that. Or did her club foot sideline her from the prospect of marital bliss? Perhaps people were more enlightened these days. Probably on the surface, but not much deeper than that. Still, she was a member of a substantial family, had property, a steady job, plenty of money, and that should be bait enough for some.

She was obviously competent enough to help run the family business's manufacturing plant. I didn't know anything about her education, whether she had an engineering degree, an MBA from the Wharton School, or if she was just a high school dropout whose daddy happened to own an international firearms company. She wasn't stupid, that was certain. But there was a demonic streak there too, and a talent for the use of it. She'd shown me that clearly enough. I was shaken again just by the thought of our earlier library encounter. And that beast she traveled with . . . her familiar?

What I did know about her was that she was a grasping harpy who didn't accept the idea of primogeniture where it concerned what she considered to be her right of succession. True, Canelo was functional head of the company, but it appeared she was his right-hand woman, so to say. Between them, the business was chugging along well, and the death of the father and former CEO didn't seem to affect things negatively. The world's thirst for high quality killing machinery seemed to be unquenchable. And they were there to serve, yes?

And what about the second son, Abel? I detected a good bit of animosity both aimed at and emanating from him? Just a little. How perceptive I was. There was lots going on with him. What was the root of it? Could it be simply childhood rivalries that carried on into adulthood? What had Canelo meant at dinner by accusing Abel of having much to answer for? Who could I

ask to find out? Zera of the GBI? Swift? Bella Gibson? Not Jefferson, though he seemed to have his own issues with Abel. Beyond a little fingerspelling, I didn't speak his language. There's was plenty to do meanwhile.

I logged onto the Internet and started a search on the sculptor brother, Abel Moschetto. Bingo. He seemed to be a well-known guy. Awards for this piece and that, one-man shows in cities across the United States, and even shows in Brescia, Lovorno and Rome back in Italy. This guy was hot. In fact, he was considered important in the present development of large metal sculpture in the world of Art, with a capital "A." I guess he had a right to be arrogant and obnoxious, rights he quite clearly practiced and exercised with some skill.

One Internet article particularly struck me. It was a critic's concern that the death of the sculptor's father by being crushed and punctured under a monumental piece in progress would kill the creative urge in the son. Interesting. I didn't have that detail before. And there was a link that took me to the *Savannah Morning News* article on the death, the same article I'd found in the library clipped to a copy of Benito's will. I clicked the link and reread:

*The tragic death of one of Savannah's leading industrialists was discovered yesterday evening by a maintenance man at the Fabbrica Moschetto manufacturing facility located just outside Savannah. Benito Emilio Moschetto, President and CEO of the company his father established in 1935, was found crushed beneath a large metal sculpture constructed by his son, the noted metal artist Abel Moschetto in the artist's studio attached to the manufacturing plant.*

*Terming the accident "suspicious," Savannah police have begun an in-depth investigation of the incident. Said Chatham County Sheriff's Detective Kevin Branigan,*

*“This could well be merely a tragic accident, but we’re obligated to investigate any death that occurs in an industrial facility. Several facts have come to light which make us question just how accidental this incident actually was. I can’t say more about the investigation at this time.”*

*Benito Moschetto is survived by his three adult children, Canelo, Abel and Lucrezia Moschetto. Mr. Moschetto will be interred in the family crypt at Bonaventure Cemetery in Savannah. Funeral arrangements will be announced at a later time. Canelo and Lucrezia will continue to run the business and no disruption in production or delivery is expected.*

Well, now, that was something. Could it be that this arguing about primogeniture and the descent of Paneta’s Crown had become more than merely an intellectual argument? This Abel character seemed like he could be formidable if set into physical action. And working with large chunks of metal had to have developed some physical strength in him, too.

He had to have what the pundits called an “artistic temperament” to be an artist, didn’t he? I wondered exactly what that meant. If it meant arrogant and obnoxious, he certainly had that covered. How about high-strung and paranoiac? I’d met him only at dinner for a few minutes, so that was still a question. How about quick to anger? He flared at Canelo, but that could’ve just been one of their habitual sibling patterns. How about prone to violence?

While online, it might not be a bad idea to check out Fabbrica Moschetto again. I kicked myself, metaphorically of course. I should’ve done a more intensive investigation at home in Atlanta before coming down to Savannah? Alcoholic haze? I was all right when on a job, but in between times I tend to let things slide and booze becomes a problem again. Damn. Motivation

seemed key. If I could only maintain a sense of forward motion, I would be okay. But when I'm treading water, look out!

A knock at the bedroom door brought me out of my reverie.

"Who's there?"

The door swung open and Swift came in bearing a silver tray with a bottle of Drambuie, and bowl of ice and one glass.

"Mr. Moschetto thought you might like a nightcap, sir. You'd mentioned a taste for Drambuie." He set the tray down on the desk next to my laptop. "Shall I pour?"

"Sure. But just a short one, okay?" This could easily turn into a long evening.

"As you wish. Ice?" I nodded and he dropped two ice cubes into the glass, popped the cork out of the bottle, and filled the glass with the rich amber Scotch syrup, my drug of choice.

"If there's nothing else, sir, I'll wish you a good night." He corked the bottle and set it back on the tray.

"Thanks, Swift. You're a true gentleman."

"Not I, sir. I'm a gentleman's gentleman," he said with a coy smile, and then he left, leaving the tray and bottle behind.

I sipped my drink. Lovely. I took a bigger slug.

I don't know what makes me buy the stuff. If I didn't buy it and bring it home, I wouldn't drink it, right? Hell, I never went to bars. I rarely hung out with people in drinking situations. I was a solo boozier. That was cool though. It meant I never got into fights, never abused anyone verbally or physically, would never be arrested for drunk driving, and wouldn't run over any old ladies, kids on their bicycles, or their puppies.

But I tend to be alone most of the time anyway. A genealogist's life can be fairly isolating. I need to get more people in my life. Yeah, and not drinkers either. Sane people, if I could find any. Most everyone I met on these research jobs was a bit off one way or another. Is everyone in the world nuts? I guess some people just manage to control their insanity better than other folks. Another sad comment on our species.

Okay, time to concentrate on business. Enough musing on my own difficulties for the moment. I turned back to the computer, did a quick online search for Fabbrica Moschetto, and came up with, guess what? They had their very own website. Naturally. Lots of pages dedicated to the solid quality and reliability of their murderous product, a list of professional organizations they supported or were members of, including hot links, a reference section of technical material like ballistics tables, even high-paying job opportunities for skilled workers. It was a real business, all right. There wasn't much about who they sold to. . . wait, there it was just a click away: a lengthy list of satisfied clients. There were countries from every continent, most of the states in the U.S., and lots of municipalities in the various states.

And there was also some gun safety stuff. Gun safety. Now, there's an oxymoron. There's a joke that gun nuts like to say that gun control means aiming your pistol by holding it with both hands. Har, har. Let's face it; the paper target came late in the history of the gun. Guns were invented to kill living things, both animals and men. So where's the safety in them? I guess it's in being able to kill the other guy before he kills you.

Still, there's a certain beauty in a finely made mechanism. Perhaps I should use the word "craftsmanship" instead. Man's ability to work to specific dimensions, to make intricate and detailed parts, and to make the whole thing work together smoothly to a single result, whatever

that result. Yes, we're rather talented monkeys after all.

I poured another Drambouie and sat back on the bed to think.

My thoughts were interrupted by the soft padding of feet going by my bedroom door. Actually, they seemed to come to my door, then stop. I heard a snuffling, like a giant carnivorous beast hunting around for a scent, silence for a few seconds, then the clickety-click of doggy nails on the tile of the hallway's edges as the creature headed down the hall. It seemed that the dog had free run of the place at night. No one had mentioned that to me.

Cerberus was faithfully guarding the gates of Hades.

## **The Second Day**

### **Pawn Among Sharks**

As far as I was concerned, it was still night time when I was awakened by a thunderous knocking on my bedroom door. But "night" wasn't the exact word for the lack of light. Perhaps "Stygian Darkness" would have been better. There was no chiaroscuro effect: the air around me, with my eyes fully open and struggling to see, was pitch black. More pounding. A dog barked somewhere off in the house, a big dog, chesty and ominous. I groped for the light at the head of the bed. My brain hurt from too much dinner wine and Drambuie after that. It was too damn early to be up and about.

"Let's go. We need to find those bad boys when they're hungry." Canelo's bellows ripped through the oak door as if it were gauze. Bang, bang, bang. My head reverberated with each hammered blow.

"I'm awake," I moaned. "Let me brush my teeth." I kicked the covers off and wrestled myself into a sitting position, then to a wobbling stand.

"Meet me in the portico out front," came Canelo's direction. "And hurry it up!" His boots echoed down the hall away from my door.

I roused myself, somehow found my way to the little bathroom attached to the guest bedroom, splashed cold water at myself, and brushed my teeth. Jeans and a rough shirt comprised the uniform of the day. And off I went, down the hall, down the circular stair, and out to the portico where Canelo waited in a growling white Hummer.

How did I get talked into this? I was supposed to be on a research trip, not a fishing vacation. Still, the invitation had been specific. I was there as a researcher who was going to

solve their biggest problem of the moment, finding Paneta's Crown, but while at The Castle I was to be treated as a guest, and it seemed that included plenty of redneck entertainments. Shark fishing. A rattlesnake round-up. Blasting away on the Fabbrica Moschetto gun range. What other adventures were they cooking up for me?

\*\*\*

The drive out the Islands Expressway toward Tybee Island was uneventful, and I dozed off and on as we scooted along the two-lane through the pre-dawn darkness. Each time I awoke, the smells of the sea and beach-stranded flotsam were stronger and stronger. Thankfully, Canelo didn't try to engage me in conversation. He was fixed on getting to the boat, although he did stop to buy a couple of coffees and a bag of deep-fried sugared dough balls, probably a local delicacy. I didn't drink the coffee. After all, I was still sleeping.

The road was good and mostly straight, so Canelo drove the Hummer at speed. Sharky's Marina sat on the Bull River right where the Expressway crosses over a small bridge. We stopped on the landward side. I wasn't destined to see the fabled Tybee Island resorts that lay on the seaward side. He pulled into the restricted parking lot of the Bull River Yacht Club, parked at an odd angle, and jumped out of the vehicle.

"Come on." He was merciless. "The sky is starting to lighten up. It's fishing time." And with that, he started down the long boardwalk out to the marina carrying nothing except a windbreaker and what remained of his bag of dough balls. Scrambling to keep up, I guessed that everything we needed was already on the boat. I was right.

At the boat, a real beauty aptly enough named "Toothy Grin," I was introduced to the other members of the party. They weren't exactly sportsmen. They were the crew. The party

consisted of myself as the official novice, Canelo, Captain Pete, and a mate called “Hooks.” Hooks was a roguish-looking fellow of about 25 or so who sported a dark walrus mustache that hid his mouth completely, and a black and red tattoo of a shark that wound around his neck, its “toothy grin” mouth opening just below the right side of his own jawbone. He looked fit enough, tanned and well-muscled, but there was something about him that made me want to keep my hand on my wallet. He was the regular crew though, and Captain Pete seemed to put a lot of faith in him, as did Canelo. Among Hooks’ jobs were spreading chum across the ocean and handling the lines. That’s what real sailors call ropes. I learned a great deal on this trip. And class was just beginning.

The boat was a 35-foot Henriques Maine Coaster with a 12-foot beam at the aft end and an impressive flying bridge above from which to scan the sea for potential victims and to monitor what was happening on board. About 15 feet of the after portion of the deck was open to the elements. That’s where we would be fishing from. The forward section of the vessel was enclosed in a very comfortable cabin that looked like it could accommodate six or eight people overnight, if they were very friendly sorts. There was a galley (that’s the kitchen), a head (the bathroom), and tiered bunks in the bow. Teak was everywhere. It was a rich man’s toy and Canelo was very proud of it. He told me all those details: about the twin diesels down below, about his full-time crew of two, about the range of the boat.

As soon as we were aboard, Captain Pete ordered the lines loosed and cranked up the twin diesels. We chugged on down river toward the sea. I could smell diesel occasionally, but our speed and the morning breeze wafted it away quickly. By the time the sun peeked over the eastern horizon, we were heading out into the ocean for the promised he-man shark fishing

adventure. We were the predators today, or so I thought as we started out.

It took us about forty-five minutes to get out to the fishing grounds. Captain Pete ran the boat as expected, while Hooks busied himself in the stern with several white plastic buckets that he informed me were filled with frozen chum, basically fish offal that the marina collected from other fishing boats and froze for Canelo. He seemed to have minions everywhere. The offal was ground up, mixed with menhaden oil, and frozen in 5-gallon buckets. As we headed out of Bull River into the ocean, Hooks tossed two of the buckets overboard on lines that dragged behind the boat. The buckets were full of holes, and as the offal thawed, it would send out a long trace that foraging sharks could find and follow right to us. It left a hell of a messy trail, an oily slick with bits of fish everywhere, but was a good system for attracting the beasts, and it worked beautifully as planned.

In spite of the hour, I was enjoying the fresh sea air that came with the new day. The sky above seemed clear, but I noticed the dark mass of a storm out east over the sea. Occasionally, a black tube descended from the cloud, danced across the ocean, then rose again into the cloud. I pointed it out to the others.

“Hey, what about that? Is that a tornado?”

Captain Pete ignored me and kept the boat headed due east. Hooks looked up as the funnel again hit the water. “Just a waterspout. As long as it’s out that’a ways, won’t bother us none.”

He didn’t seem the least apprehensive about it. On land, a twister like that would’ve sent everyone scurrying for the cellars. Out here, totally exposed to its potential ravages, no one was concerned. More macho stuff?

Hooks cut a barracuda carcass into chunks and laced them onto serious-looking 8-inch long fish hooks made of 1/4-inch steel. They looked like they'd hold a whale, but when I said that, Hooks reached down into his tackle locker and produced one that a shark had straightened out just two days previously.

“That was a big ‘un,” he said with a mustachioed smirk. “Ended up shooting at ‘im with the .270 as he swam off. Saw some blood, but . . . Guess the other sharks got ‘im. I know we di’n’t.”

Eventually, we slowed down and started running in a big circle. I didn't see any difference in the ocean with its uniformly rolling swells, but everyone else, that would be Captain Pete, Hooks and Canelo himself, seemed to think that it would be a hot spot for sharks. My stomach rolled with the swells, and I started to feel a bit queasy. I smelled, as well as saw, the greasy-looking trail of offal and menhaden oil we'd left in our wake, and that didn't help. But didn't see any sharks.

“You look a little green, Bones. Feelin' seasick?” Canelo asked. I nodded.

He grabbed a fishing rod with a huge reel from a rack and handed it to me, pulling some line and the attached hook loose. He handed the hook to Hooks with a wink. “Bait this for him, will ya'? It'll keep his mind off his tummy.”

The baited hook was tossed into the water and I sat there holding the rod and seeing nothing happen. After about half an hour of just hanging out, the first fin appeared, cutting back and forth across the oil trail as the creature tracked the chum's source. They were finally coming.

Hooks pointed toward it with a billy club, tracking it as it tacked back and forth, closer and closer. He looked gleeful lurking there behind his mustachio. It didn't take too long before

the action got started.

By then there were three to five small sharks to be seen snaking their way back and forth in the chum stream. Occasionally, one would take a bite out of the half barracuda that Hooks had hanging on a rope just touching the water. A shark's head would breach the surface and he'd grab hold of the carcass, wiggle about vigorously for a second or two, and leave with a chunk of 'cuda in its mouth. Sometimes another shark would follow it off. Most of the time, they just paid attention to their own individual business. It was fascinating in a macabre sort of way, a predatory water ballet. Standing in the open work area of the boat's stern, I wished I'd brought a camera along. This would've been great to show my friends back home . . . if I'd had any.

Canelo watched the sharks, occasionally checking in visually with Captain Pete on the flying bridge. The three of them worked like a team; they'd done this all before and knew the routine. Each had a job, an area of responsibility.

Suddenly an errant swell lifted the bow of the boat. I was standing in the stern watching the shark show, but the swell transferred enough energy to me through the hull to pop me over the gunwale and into the water. Splash! And I was amongst the foraging sharks.

I flailed to the surface. The water wasn't even cold enough to be uncomfortable. But the pack of hungry predators that we'd been chumming for an hour to attract made me feel completely unwelcome. I mean, suddenly I was breakfast, or at least I was on the menu. Bones Tartar de Jour.

"Whoa! Help! Get me out of here!" I sputtered. I was a pretty good swimmer, had even done some SCUBA diving, even night diving, but this was different. To my now wide-awake mind this was big-time trouble. "Come on! Gemme outa here!" I made for the safety of the boat,

tried to grab hold of something, anything, to pull myself aboard. The dive ladder, yes, that was it. I reached for it.

Captain Pete continued to keep the boat aimed into the oncoming swells, but Hooks and Canelo were at the stern watching me flail around in the sea. Yes, I said “watching” me! Hooks sort of lounged in the stern with a 10-foot aluminum pole with a big hook on the end. He used this to fend off a couple of sharks while Canelo, holding a coil of rope, merely watched me down in the water with the sharks. I thought they’d just fish me out, but they had another agenda.

Canelo nodded his head at Hooks. As I reached for the ladder that hung there so appealingly, Hooks used his pole hook to push me back off as I got close.

“Come on, you guys, quite messing around and get me out of here,” I was yelling, not whimpering. That would probably come later.

Canelo looked down at me.

Something bumped my leg.

Something bumped my other leg.

“While we have this opportunity, let’s chat about your work here in Savannah.” Canelo was cool. I recognized the calculation in his eye for what it was. He had me in a position to agree to anything. Opportunity indeed.

“Just get me out of here!” My head kept turning this way and that as I tried to keep track of the fins in the water with me. I’d spot one occasionally, but most of the sharks seemed to have submerged. I couldn’t spot them. I kept reaching for the ladder, but Hooks kept pushing me off with his pole. Every time I tried to grab the pole, he’d just twist it out of my hand. It was obvious he was enjoying himself.

Canelo leaned over the gunwale. "I want you to understand that you're working for me -- Canelo." He pumped an index finger at his chest. "I want that clear. I don't care what Lu said to you, or what Abel might try, you're working for me. Anything you find is mine. Is that understood?" He was about as serious as I'd ever seen anyone be.

"As soon as we're in agreement on this, Hooks will fish you out. Now what do you say?"

Hooks didn't look like he wanted to fish me out. Between pushing me off with the pole and whacking a shark on the head with it once in a while, he was having a grand time. And he was getting paid for it, too.

This wasn't the time to argue with a pair of obvious maniacs. I took the easy way out of my predicament. "Yeah, I get it." Something brushed along my leg, something hard and rough. "Just get me out of here!" This trip was over for me.

Canelo looked at me for what seemed like an hour with a dead cold eye, then nodded to Hooks. "All right, fish him out."

I'll say one thing for Hooks: he was skilled at his job. The hooked point on the business end of that pole could have skewered me neatly. That's how they dragged their sharks out of the sea once they got them close enough to the boat. But he just slid that thing between my arm and my torso and dragged me to the boat by my armpit. Not a hole in me anywhere. If I'd been in any sort of a rational mind at that moment, I would've noticed it right then, but I wasn't. I was just short of panic.

And then I was lying on the deck, drenched in sea water, stinking of chum, and very pissed off. Hooks stood at the far side of the boat, too far away for me to take a poke at him. Canelo stood a safe few feet off, too. Behind and above him, the black storm cloud loomed

closer and darker.

How'd I get into this mess in the first place? Just another simple research job, right? In a pig's eye.

## Canelo's Gambit

A few minutes later, Canelo and I were sitting in the teak-trimmed cabin. I was wrapped in a blanket and he'd put a big bourbon in my hand.

"This'll warm you up. Drink it down." He sat on the bunk opposite and eyed me cannily. "That truly was an accident, you know, but I'm not one to let an opportunity pass. And it was pretty funny, too."

"Glad you thought so. You should've been where I was." I was still pissed off, but the bourbon helped. "Is this how you treat all your guests? A thrill every minute, eh?"

Canelo sat back and sipped his own drink, even though it was only eight o'clock in the morning. "Look, you're here to find that damned Crown, and everyone wants it. What for? I don't know. None of us need the money we'd get selling it. There's plenty of money directly from the company to do whatever we want. That's not it."

"Then what is it? Why did your sister try to scare the hell out of me yesterday?" I took another slug of bourbon. "And you're a bit insane yourself, y'know?"

He chuckled and shrugged. "Well, if that's the way you see it. I see it differently. I get The Crown by right. That's the family tradition. And Pop said it pretty clearly in his will too. I get The Crown. Period. So when you find it and give it to me, you'll only be doing what's required by both family tradition and by law. What's your problem, Bones?"

"It's how you people state your case. You're all nuts, at least the two of you who've threatened my life."

He smiled wryly. "Oh, I'm sure you misunderstood Lucrezia. She can be somewhat . . . 'oblique' at times. She's funny that way."

“No, I understood her clearly enough. She told me to get her The Crown or else. And now you tried to feed me to the sharks to make a point that could’ve been made in polite conversation. I’m leaving as soon as we get back on dry land. You all can go to Hell.”

Canelo leaned back against the padded leather seat. The bourbon was warming me, maybe even refueling my anger. The boat rocked easily in the swells that rolled under her, the swells that had tossed me into a shark-rich hostile sea. The morning sun burned in through the cabin windows. He looked at me for a few seconds, then played the money card.

“I’ll tell you what. When we first spoke on the phone, I told you that your fair invoice would be honored. I expect that you have a day rate of some sort, and we’ll be happy to pay that whether you find The Crown or not. But if you can find The Crown, I’ll make sure you get a nice bonus on top of your fee, say an additional \$5,000.” He leaned toward me conspiratorially. “But if you find The Crown and I end up with it, as I’m supposed to in the first place anyway, I’ll add another ten grand to your paycheck.” He leaned back again. “How’s that sound to you? Fair enough?”

His proposed bribe was indeed tempting. But I’d been threatened by this joker, almost drowned, tasted by sharks, fished out of the sea on a hook. What about my dignity? I had so little left that I couldn’t afford to lose any more. Still . . .

I was reluctant, but bribable. “Okay. The money sounds great, of course. But this bullshit treatment has to end. Now! I won’t have any more of it. Warn Lucrezia off. And I don’t want any crap from Abel, or any more from you. I’ll do my job, but leave me the hell alone.” My anger pot was still cooking, but at a simmer instead of a rolling boil.

Canelo was pleased with himself. He felt he’d gotten his way. But there was more

coming, something I hadn't seen.

Canelo sat quietly for a minute thinking. He seemed to be deciding whether to proceed or not. Finally he said, "Pop was killed by one of Abel's infernal constructions. You know that, right?"

I nodded. "Yeah. That was what the newspaper article said. That's what was decided at the coroner's inquest, right?"

"Well, I have my suspicions. Abel has never accepted the family's tradition of primogeniture. He wants more than he's been left in the will. Even though he'll never want for anything in his life, never be short of funds for his sculptures, he still wants more. And the symbol of it all for him is Paneta's Crown. We've all known about it since we were kids, but Pop never showed it to any of us, never said where he kept it. It's been a mystery all along. Anyway, Abel's got one hell of a temper, and I think that Pop's death might not have been accidental at all."

He let the implications sink in.

"So you're telling me you think Abel killed your father?" This was hard to believe. Patricide? The second son killing the father over a missing artifact? A piece of antique junk? It wasn't that at all. It was a sibling thing that had been percolating between them for their entire lives. All three of them. And it ran a lot deeper than The Crown.

"Okay. Consider me warned," I said. "Keep him away from me, all right?"

Canelo didn't respond.

I continued. "As for your kind offer, I'm still considering it. After all, I won't be doing anything that's illegal or against your father's wishes. You only want what it says in the will." I

decided. “Okay. I’ll stay a few more days and see what I can come up with.” I’d been successfully bribed, and I might stay bribed, just like the proverbial honest politician.

At that moment, Hooks stuck his head into the cabin. “You gonna spend all morning with ‘Shark Bait’ here,” he nodded toward me, “Or are you gonna come up an’ do some fishin’?”

Canelo looked at Hooks, looked at me, considered, then turned back to Hooks. “Cut the chum buckets loose and put up all the gear. Tell Pete to head back in. We’re done for today.”

Hooks took on a sullen look, but dutifully returned to his tasks. And with that, we headed back to port. Our little morning boat ride was over.

## **Fabbrica Moschetto**

The afternoon's activities were somewhat more civilized, even though consisting of a tour of a factory that manufactured some of the world's best death-dealing implements. I've wondered about this business and its implications ever since. It was mechanisms like these that changed my life so abruptly when my pregnant wife was murdered in a drive-by shooting we never learned the reason for. My life of that time was wrecked, and my world paradigm catastrophically shifted. But that's a horror story for another time, isn't it? It just seems to keep coming up, even all these years later.

But that's not why I loved the blues. That affair had been going on since my teens when I took a chance and bought an album by a couple of guys I'd never heard of. Few people had heard of them. So this afternoon, on my drive out to Fabbrica Moschetto, I was listening again to Sidney Maiden blowing harp and singing with his pal and long-time accompanist K.C. Douglas on guitar. Lively stuff indeed.

People think that the blues is "down" music, music that'll drag you into the gutter where you can wallow in your misery. Quite the contrary. It doesn't matter how you feel when you put these guys on the player; your mood improves. They may be singing about bad relationships, being broke, losing the only job you ever had, but they do it with such a feeling for life, and such pleasant music, that it's impossible to wallow. It was a nice background to my thoughts.

Savannah sits on the flat coastal plain of the southern United States, and Fabbrica Moschetto is a series of flat roofed cinder block and metal industrial buildings painted flat beige sitting on a flat spot on the otherwise flat plain. All singularly insignificant, except for what they did here. They enabled man's most basic urge to be realized in style and with great mechanical

precision, at reasonable prices of course, highest bidder preferred. As my college roommate observed, “The paper target came late in the history of the gun.”

I drove through the gate in the outer chain link fence and stopped at a double yellow line painted across the plant entry road.

The guard who stepped from the gatehouse was lean, but not at all that alcoholic and psychotic-looking type so often seen standing around outside of convenience stores with an empty holster. This one’s eyes were bright and active and scanning quickly, determining what was of concern and what wasn’t. They ran thoroughly around the inside of my Honda and settled on my face. He moved smoothly and with obvious agility, his sky-blue uniform shirt crisp and clean, buttons polished. He looked like a pro.

“Benjamin Bones? Yes, sir. Mr. Moschetto wants you brought directly to his office when you arrive. If you’ll just sign in here.” That soft south Georgia accent again. A native. He thrust a clipboard with a ball point pen on a steel lamp pull chain attached and a single sheet of lined paper clamped on it into my car window, “And please wear this badge at all times while you’re inside the facility.” A plastic badge followed the clipboard, “VISITOR” in large red letters on it. Number 10. I’d always wanted to be a 10. Most times I felt like a 4 or 5.

He turned back to the guard shack and called a subordinate. “Billy! Carry Mr. Bones to Mr. Moschetto’s office. And mind your manners, y’ear?”

Then back to me. “If you’ll just leave your car in that spot over there,” he indicated exactly where with an arthritic (previously broken?) finger, “Billy will take you on in.”

“Thanks, officer. Hope you’re having a nice quiet day.” I was trying to be friendly.

He gave me a hard look, adding, “We’re not here for a vacation, Mr. Bones. We work for

a livin' at Moschetto. Firearms is serious bi'nness."

"I didn't mean anything by it," I said quickly. Someday my clever remarks will get me hurt. People too often perceive me as a wise-ass. And they're correct, too.

He simply nodded and indicated the briefcase on the passenger seat. "Will you be taking that in? I'll have to have a look inside."

"Sure, go right ahead." I opened the briefcase and held it up toward the window. He pushed the few papers around, opened my laptop, then closed it and the briefcase. Cocking his head, his eyes pointed out the parking slot again as he waggled his crooked index finger at it.

In the rearview mirror, I watched him watching me as I parked. Didn't he have a report to write? I guess that seriousness and a touch of paranoia is good in a security guard, right? This guy should get a gold star.

Billy was a different sort altogether. Young, skinny, maybe a high school graduate, maybe not, a wad of snuff in his lower lip, a sparse, stained mustache. His shirt wasn't as crisp or clean as his coworker's, his shoulders just a bit rounded, his demeanor nowhere near as military. His feet didn't quite leave the ground when he walked. He'd be the one who'd end up outside a convenience store someday. I was sure of it. I noticed he wasn't wearing a holster, empty or loaded. Somehow, I felt reassured by that.

"Folla' me." He was the proverbial soul of discretion. I wasn't going to get anything out of him. Thought I'd try anyway.

"A lot of changes around here since the boss died?"

He shuffled on. "Not much. Same ol', same ol'. Ol' Canelo not too bad fo' a boss. Jes' wants it done raht the fust time. Typical. Know wadda mean?" Shuffle, shuffle.

I tried again. “Been with Moschetto long?”

“‘Bout six month now. Just finished my probation, y’know? Think they might send me to guard school. Up’t ‘Lanta? A whole month. Should be a goooood time, know wadda mean? They pay fo’ er’ythin’” He ducked his head on the last few words, like he had confided a semi-secret, along with his intention to take as much advantage of the company as possible as long as he could. This was obviously his dream job: steady pay check, benefits, lots of guns.

We passed three flagpoles in front of the main cinder block building. The USA and Georgia gusted together in the light breeze. The third flag, just as large as the other two, wore the same crest that had been on the invitation stationary: Fabbrica Moschetto.

At the squawk box, Billy turned to me. “You name Bones, raht? Like reg’lar ol’ bones? Soup bones? Dog bones?” He couldn’t quite believe it. I nodded. He punched the button and smirked into the speaker, “Mr. Bones fo’ Mr. Moschetto.”

The door lock buzzed and Billy walked in and held it open for me. I followed him into a comfortable reception area. The Moschetto crest dominated the facing far wall. On the other walls hung numerous framed certificates and awards. A glass case to one side held trophies, probably from shooting competitions as evidenced by the stances of the guys and gals on the tops of the cups. A quick count, five shelves with six trophies at most on each, told me there were about thirty of them. Back toward the far wall, under the watchful Big Brother eyes of a pair of Mediterranean looking alpha male portraits and the Moschetto crest, several women sat at desks shuffling papers, this pile to that pile, a quick look at a computer screen, a quick check mark with a mechanical pencil. It looked very efficient.

One of the women stood and approached. Tall, heavily made-up, hair torqued up into a

blond beehive, no real hair left in her very surprised eyebrows. Her high heels made no noise in the plush tan carpet. “Thank you, Billy. I’ve got him now.”

Billy turned and left. He seemed used to taking orders without argument.

“If you’ll come this way, Mr. Bones,” she lilted. “I know Mr. Moschetto is expecting you. He said to bring you right on back. Do you need any coffee? A soft drink? Something a bit stronger?” Without waiting for an answer, she swiveled her heel in the carpet without getting tangled up, swiveled the rest of her slim self around, then continued to swivel her way across the reception area, through an open door and down an office corridor. Doors on either side were open and people sat within at desks, on the phone or at computers doing the business of the business. Swivel, swivel, swivel. She had it down.

“Thank you, Miss Savage.” Canelo rose from a large mahogany conference table. Miss Savage stood just inside the door, poised for further action, poised for new orders from The Man. Canelo was forced to respond to her canine attention, had to shut this Sorcerer’s Apprentice down. “That’ll be all for now, Miss Savage. Thank you.”

Miss Savage exercised her swivel option again, this time to make a spectacular exit. We all watched.

Three business-suited men at the conference table had remained seated, their suits, faces, mustachios and expressions hardly distinguishable one from the other. Anonymous businessmen. I guessed they were all from the same place and on the same mission. The fourth, a short one in an undecorated military uniform stood quickly, then sat down again just as quickly, but looking somewhat annoyed. They all had black mustachios and slicked-down black hair and all looked somehow “south-of-the-border-ish,” to turn a phrase.

“Gentlemen, this is my genealogist, Mr. Benjamin Bones. He’s in town doing a little work for the family. If you’ll excuse me, this’ll just take a second.” Everyone nodded their heads toward me cursorily, but once on me, their eyes never left. They sat without talking, even though I’d obviously walked in on an intense discussion. Something strange about this? No, I was just being paranoid. I didn’t know them, didn’t know the nature of Moschetto’s dealings with them, though I thought I could guess, didn’t know which third world country they were from, whether they were buying arms for fomenting a revolution or putting one down, whether they represented dictators or patriots, or both. I didn’t know a thing. So what’s with the paranoia, Bones? Not going to believe that gut feeling that gets you into so much trouble, are you? No, why do that? You’re a genealogist, not a United Nations arms inspector. Just relax, Bones! Relax! It’s none of your damn business anyway.

I nodded back at them, then tore my eyes away from theirs. I did note, however, that Canelo didn’t give me their names.

He guided me toward the conference room door and back out into the hallway. Two doors down we turned into another room, this one more like an archive with file cabinets against one wall, and with a large mahogany conference table in the center.

“You can work here,” he gestured broadly to encompass the room and then the row of files. “Might find something in there to point the way to The Crown. I’ll have one of the shift supervisors take you for a plant tour later and I’ll join you if I can.” He checked his watch. “Perhaps as long as another hour. Might be a bit longer.” And he left, returning I supposed to his deal making with the serious and unidentified swarthy types down the hall. Death and destruction, murder and mayhem, family intrigues and in-fighting . . . it didn’t matter at Fabbrica

Moschetto. Business went on as usual.

Alone again, this time in a conference room paneled in that faux dark pine so fashionable much too long ago and smelling slightly of disuse and cleaning solution, I took a good look around. Was this included in the tour agenda he'd proposed? The guy needed to communicate more than just threats. Maybe even some real information or a clear direction. Well, I knew what to do. That was why they hired me.

I dropped my briefcase on the table and walked over to look at the file cabinets. Many were locked, their drawers labeled with purely numeric codes, clearly years on the top line, incomprehensibility below. Nothing I could divine from that just yet. Did I need to? They were obviously proprietary business files. At least, that's how I might have protected my own if the need existed. Of course, I could try my incipient lock picking skills out on them. I'd been practicing on my off days back at home. Nah! Why make another paranoid feel even more paranoid? Not a good idea.

One cabinet at the end of the row was labeled simply "Moschetto" and it wasn't locked. I dug in enthusiastically. Maybe there was a clue buried here.

But as it turned out, there wasn't much in the way of family archives. It was business stuff too, though not the secret stuff: several old contracts, detailed work drawings, notes from meetings, research the company had done on other arms manufacturers around the world. It was all interesting enough in its own right, but digging through files here at the factory was a waste of my time and energy. It quickly became clear that the answer to the riddle of Paneta's Crown wasn't going to be found at Fabbrica Moschetto. Old Benito had hidden the clues somewhere else. After an hour's fruitless poking around, I gave it up and tossed my yellow legal tablet back

into my open briefcase.

At least I could sharpen some pencils. There was an old-fashioned crank pencil sharpener on the far wall. I was glad it wasn't one of those electric sharpeners that I think are an absolute waste of materials and electricity and such a symptom of society's general malaise. Pencils in hand, I walked the length of the conference table. On the way, I looked around at the framed plaques and testimonials on the walls above the file cabinets and on every other wall. Interesting. A Presidential citation for efforts on behalf of national security. Awards from groups like Kiwanis and the Elks, the Boy Scouts of America. A thank you certificate from the Flowers of Confederate Womanhood. Awards for firearm design innovation from the Firearms Manufacturers Association. A poster illustrating various bullet calibers with life-sized photos of the front end of gun barrels and the bullets themselves all the way from .22 through .45. A marksmanship award to . . . Now, there was a surprise: Lucrezia Emily Moschetto, for use of non-traditional weaponry. What could that have been presented for? Anyway, the display was an eclectic and enlightening mix!

Ah, here was something I'd missed in my first circuit of the room. Atop one of the file cabinets was a short stack brochures detailing a history of the company: *The Fabbrica Moschetto Story*. Harrumph! How predictably corporate. I looked for a copyright or publication date. Nothing. It was strictly a promotional piece. Still, it was pretty interesting. I stood there leafing through the 20 or so tall narrow pages, checking out the pictures of the plant being built, the cousins Vincenzo and Alonzo, the company's founders, standing proudly in front of a display case full of their weaponry. And the text filled me in on the history pretty well. The booklet was obviously professionally written and produced, not just an in-house attempt by inept and semi-

literate secretarial school graduates.

Here was the story of Vincenzo's 1934 offer to family members still in Italy to pay their way to the USA. His first cousin, Alonzo, trained as a gunsmith by the Italian army and after WWI a machinist for Beretta, accepted the offer. Once in the USA, the cousins bought machinery and started Fabbrica Moschetto. As a new business, they started making small runs of semi-automatic pistols based on Beretta and Browning designs. Their work was precise and their marketing even better, and their reputation spread quickly. As businessmen, they quickly realized that selling handguns to individuals was nice, but it wasn't where the action was. They went after gun clubs, municipalities, and police forces, buyers who would buy dozens at a time. They soon enough moved up to national governments. Administratively, all laws were complied with, all government registrations, taxes; everything was done by the book. The American branch of the family had gone legit.

I tossed one of the booklets copy back at the conference table where it landed neatly in my open briefcase. Cool. I reveled in my precision.

Arriving at the pencil sharpener, I started cranking. On the wall just above and to the left was a framed sheet that looked like an illuminated manuscript on parchment. It looked familiar, and then I recognized it. I'd seen it in the library at The Castle when I first began this gig. Come to think of it, I'd also seen it in the stained glass window above the Castle's vestibule. Looking more closely, I could see abundant scrollwork surrounding the central text. Lots of detail there. Didn't need to understand Latin or Italian for that. It was just artwork, right? Just Italian baroquery. And I hadn't really noticed all that before back at The Castle. Hmm . . . It would probably be a good idea to get that thing translated, just in the name of thoroughness. Where was

I going to find an Italian translator? I had far more questions than answers or even leads, but that was normal in the opening stages of an investigation.

Oops. I'd ground one of my pencils down to a stub. Wasn't paying attention to what I was doing. Good thing it wasn't a table saw. Fingers would've gone flying.

"You Ben Bones?"

Startled, I whipped around toward the door. A rotund black man with a droopy handlebar mustache and shaved head was coming my way. No uniform, just farmer's denim coveralls over a Mail Pouch Tobacco t-shirt.

"Yes, that's me. Is it tour time?"

He smiled, broadly and openly. "Mr. Moschetto ask me show you 'round. Maybe shoot a bit out t' range. You up fo' it?" His voice was clear, soft and somehow almost musical to the ear. Very pleasant. He stuck his hand out. "Jes' call me Toby. That's what they all calls me 'round here. I run shippin' out'n 'ere. We send produc' all over t' world, y'know? It's my job make sure it be packed up good and all go t' the right place."

"Glad to meet you, Toby. Just call me Ben."

He wasn't tall, mostly round and not very fit looking. His best feature was that incredibly rich growth on his upper lip, a mustachio worthy of the appellation. His handshake was firm, but not overpowering. At first meeting, he seemed a very friendly and likeable fellow.

"Boss man want you see er'ythin'. You ready t' go? Lots to see."

And off we went into the milieu of Fabbrica Moschetto, arms maker to the world.

\*\*\*

After threading our way through the cubicles of the purchasing and accounting

departments, our first stop was the manufacturing floor, a football field sized space where rows of computer controlled machines cut and ground castings into the proper shape of guns. Men and women pushed carts this way and that among the robots, bringing raw castings to be worked and collecting parts headed out to be finished and assembled.

In another area, rows of clean hospital green benches were peopled by assemblers. Each seemed to be building a handgun from start to finish. More cart pushers. They were everywhere, bringing and taking, here to there and back again, parts and completed weapons. If someone needed something, they punched a button at their station and a light flashed on a pole above them. A runner came almost immediately, took their order and scurried off. No one sat idle.

“Tha’s right, Ben. Every ‘sembler got to have pride in what they be makin’. Ol’ Benito set it up that way. Wanted his people to have a clear view o’ what they be doin’.” Toby seemed proud himself. “Y’see, if a man works jes’ one piece, tha’s all he know. Can’t do nothin’ else, ain’t no good to no one if’n the man next t’im out sick or gone t’dentist, sum’t’in like dat. So Benito, he seen what had t’ be done: give a man the whole job t’do. That way, he can take his skill to a’ other job if needs be, and he be proud to do what he can do, y’see? That Benito . . . he un’stood people, all right. We was all so sorry when he got his se’f kilt.”

“Interesting approach, and a pretty enlightened view of factory work, if you ask me.” I studied a workbench, then asked, “Can you tell me about these different color bins? Is that a code of some kind?”

“Oh, yeah. You pretty sharp. But that not something’ Benito thought up. You see, he be color-blind. One our engineers set all that up for dif’reen’ models, dif’reen’ color bins for dif’reen’ parts. Y’know, keep e’rythin’ organized good. People confuse too easy these days. You notice

that, too?”

I laughed. “I guess I do. Say, can I see where it happened? Where the accident happened?”

“Mr. Moschetto, that’s Canelo now, want you see er’ythin’, so I guess tha’s included. Le’s go.” He led me down the rows of assemblers and to a door in the far end of the building. We went outside into the south Georgia afternoon humidity and heat, crossed a truck passage between massive buildings, and entered another large metal shed.

“This here is Mr. Abel’s workshop. He a sculpt’r, y’know? Makes them big art things you see in fron’ o’ buildings downtown here and there. He be pretty famous. Benito set ‘im up right here. Look ‘round.”

Sure enough, I was in a steel sculpture gallery. Here were some of Abel’s pieces that I’d seen on the web. Pictures on the walls showed other monuments and sculptures in place in front of public buildings and in corporate lobbies. This was the real stuff all right, and Abel was the real thing.

“So this is where it happened.” We wandered through the forest of metal.

Turning a corner, Toby pointed towards the middle of the room where I could see yellow crime scene tape marking off a small area. More tape was draped over a gleaming stainless steel structure with points sticking in every direction. A printed sign read: “Evidence. Do Not Remove!” Some of the points had a dried brown substance over their sharp ends. I guessed I was looking at Benito’s life blood.

“This be the very spot! Ter’ble bi’ness. Ter’ble. Er’ybody loved that old man. He take good care’n his people. Not like the new boss. He don’t have the same kind heart his daddy. The

new Mr. Moschetto want the money, same'n his daddy, bi'ness bein' bi'ness, but tha's all he want. Seems like he don't like nobody, don't like people. We je's more machines for makin' guns far he concern'" He suddenly caught himself and looked abashed. "I shouldn't be talk' like this. A job's a job, ain't it? An' I 'preciate what I got, and I got it from the Moschetos. 'Course, it come from the father, not his chil'ren. An' tha's the hard, straight-up truth o' the matter."

"Well, Toby, I appreciate your honesty. I'm in Savannah working for them on a specific job, but having met them, I don't care for them much myself. If I met them socially, I believe I'd turn around and walk the other way. They're a hard bunch and not much fun to be around."

We stood there looking each other over, two men being honest with one another, two men with the same understanding of a situation, though very different aspects of it, I'm sure. The moment passed and life returned to normal.

\*\*\*

The shooting range wasn't in the main building. We had to go back through the assembly and finishing building, hop into an electric golf cart bearing the Moschetto crest, and travel a few minutes across the Georgia flatness in the Georgia heat toward an isolated concrete block building.

On the way we passed another bunker-like building that seemed more than half buried in the Georgia clay. A sign to the side of a steel door said "SWDL – Authorized Visitors."

"What's that? I asked Toby.

He kept on driving past. "That be the Special Weapons Lab. Kinda secret, y'know? No one get to see what in there. Like gov'mint or sup'in."

The range building wasn't as big as the factory, just big enough to get a few dozen yards

of shooting distance between shooter and target, and solid enough to keep all the projectiles inside. We were met at the door by a serious looking guard. He greeted Toby familiarly.

“Hi, Toby. This our boy?” His accent was heavy. I’d thought at first glance that he was just one more Georgia redneck, big, beefy and White with a capital W, but he was obviously from someplace in central Europe.

“This be him, Vlad. Boss said to let ‘im shoot some. Get the feel o’ our produc’.” There was a pride in his voice. “What chu got today?”

“Come on inside. It’s cooler and he can pick something out for himself.”

Toby turned to me and said, “I gon’ leave you here. Vlad take good care o’ you and I be back ‘round an hour or so an’ bring you back out. See you later.” He waved and drove off in the golf cart.

And that was how I spent the rest of the afternoon. We were left to introduce ourselves, which we did, and I must have shot nine or ten handguns of different types and calibers during the hour. Moschetto was famous for its semi-auto pistols, but there was one revolver that they still produced too, a somewhat obsolete weapon that they continued with in homage to their founder. All the guns worked smoothly and effortlessly. The high quality of the materials and precision workmanship was easy to see even by a tyro like myself, but that revolver was my favorite. It was a six-gun with a cylinder, not a cowboy type, but slicker looking, more modern in its lines, and it was a fine example of the machinist’s craft and art. It “shot good,” as they say.

Vlad was the Range Master. It was his job to keep the place tidy, collect all the used brass, keep track of the weapons that came and went, and control the range so that no one had a gun-related mishap. He did his job well, with military thoroughness and aplomb. He was a pro,

perhaps a veteran of Kosovo or the defunct Russian army, now living the good life in America, and still earning his way with the trade he learned back home: murder and mayhem, though in more controlled circumstances and with no one shooting back. He was a nice enough guy, very helpful to me, who he spotted right off didn't know much about what I was there to do. We got on just fine, the soldier and the novice, shooting guns until I got a bit bored with the whole thing. Just bang, bang, bang, punching holes in paper targets. Canelo never did show up.

With nothing to lose, I tried to engage Vlad on the subject of the Moschetto clan. He didn't have much to say. Maybe it was a matter of personality too, that he was simply more close-mouthed than Toby. More like Swift, the factotum back at The Castle, only even more so. So we just shot guns. It was fun, and I didn't do too badly either. He gave me my targets when we were done: human silhouettes printed on heavy paper. There was no hiding the truth about a gun's true purpose out here at the shooting range.

## Georgia Italia

Driving back to Savannah and The Castle, I had a few minutes by myself to think the situation over. I had to get away from these crazy people for a while. They were making me plenty nervous. The Moschettos were a feisty bunch, each ready to tear the others apart to get The Crown for themselves, and pity to any poor innocent slob who happened to stand in the line of fire. That slob, unfortunately, was me, little old Ben Bones, genealogist extraordinaire.

Since the time of my arrival in Savannah, I'd been threatened by a determined witch and her huge canine familiar Cerberus, thrown into an ocean full of hungry sharks, threatened and then bribed by the head of one of the world's biggest small arms manufacturers. The middle sibling, Abel, had been strangely quiet so far. It seemed uncharacteristic of the clan as a whole. What was he planning for me? Probably just hadn't had an opportunity to corner me yet. How long before some calamitous confrontation with him?

So far, my researches . . . okay, let's call it shuffling their papers around, had produced nothing that would lead me to The Crown. No clues, nothing. I'd been here almost two days, counting today, and besides going through lots of documents, had had a number of hair-raising experiences. This was an eventful trip. I was basically getting paid by the hour, and that on a 24-hour basis too. All I had to do was live through it all and submit a bill for my services and bingo, a big paycheck that would see me through several months of loafing. Of course, I'd love to find this mysterious Crown . . .

Instead of heading directly back into the maelstrom of The Castle, I decided to have a look around downtown and then grab a bite to eat at some interesting-looking restaurant.

It wasn't late enough to warrant dinner, so I just drove around looking at the Savannah of

legend. I had a map that I tried to follow, but traffic didn't allow for much more than a glance at it draped over my steering wheel before I was honked along by another tourist or maybe some local hot dog. I parked, deciding that a walking tour would give me more time to look at things.

I parked at the northwest corner of Forsyth Park at Gaston and Whitaker Streets, got out and took a look around. Wow! I'd hit the jackpot by accident. I was right in front of W.B. Hodgson Hall, the home of the Georgia Historical Society. It was one of the oldest historical societies in the country, established in 1839, and it was on my all time "must see" list, so naturally, I headed up the steps. Besides being a legendary place, I had some research to do here. Maybe they could even help me find an Italian translator.

As I reached for the front door, it swung open and two little women came briskly out. They looked like the types I ran into in many genealogical archives: rounded, grey-haired and focused, enthused about digging out their family histories, even though the younger folks in the family couldn't have cared less about it. Crazy old Aunt Evelyn. Still, it had to be done, and these ladies were relentless in their research. When they died, the boxes of documents and the loose-leaf notebooks full of charts and stories would be tossed into someone's attic or basement. There they would molder until another generation had aged to the point of curiosity about their forebears and the nefarious doings that had brought the family to its present woeful state. It was an easily recognizable cycle.

Entering the building, I picked up a brochure from the rack in the lobby. This really was the mother lode. Hodgson Hall was the original Georgia Historical Society building, and dated from 1876. It had received much care and rehab over the years, but the members had tried to keep as much of the original work as possible. Original brass work abounded, including the

doors' brass hinges and the brass rails around the mezzanine. Eventually, the Society's collection of millions of manuscripts, hundreds of thousands photographs, tens of thousands of architectural drawings, and myriad books overwhelmed the space, and a modern annex was built in 1970. But this was the home ground, and I was finally here.

I continued on into the main Reading Room. The feeling was of open space, even though it was completely enclosed. The ceiling rose about 35 feet above me. A pair of tiered galleries ringed the walls, which were topped by huge arched windows that lit the place with natural light. Impressive. And quiet too. I had the feeling of not just a library or research room, but of a throne room or temple, a hall where one just didn't raise one's voice for fear of offending the gods who were served here. I wandered over to the research desk to talk to the middle-aged gent with the polka-dot bowtie.

"Hi. I wonder if you could help me." A standard opening. I'm not as cute as a vapid high school cheerleader, but seeming relatively ignorant and hopeful usually stirs the heart of most research file guardians.

He looked up from the paperwork on his desk and smiled. He was clean, oh, so clean, and this late in the day, too. He still looked freshly pressed, his black hair slicked across the balding top of his head, his red-on-blue dotted bowtie perfectly parallel to the desktop, his teeth almost glinting in the slanting late afternoon sunlight. The nameplate on the desk said, "Orville R. Twitchell, Director of Local Historical Services."

"That's what we're here for, after all. What are you looking for, young man?" That soft Georgia lilt again.

I plunged on. "Is there any info on Italians in Georgia? You know . . . historical

population numbers, peak immigration years, current populations, immigrant organizations, anything at all? I'm also looking for someone who could translate some documents from what I suspect to be an older Italian dialect for me."

He folded his hands in front of himself on the desk, closed his eyes, pursed his lips and seemed to ponder in recall, then said, "I believe we have one monograph on Italian immigration." He pronounced "Italian" with one of those extremely tall "I" sounds. "Let me ponder where it might could be." He closed his eyes and pondered again, then stood abruptly and briskly crossed the floor to a file bank in an alcove on the far side of the reading room. He pulled a thin manila folder from a drawer and handed it to me.

"I'm afraid there's not very much, but what we have might be interesting nonetheless. Why don't you look through this while I check my card file for a translator." And off he twitched. His name suited him.

The folder contained a bound treatise by a Rev. Raffaele Manzi, published by Means, Inc. of Hackensack, New Jersey in 1994. Entitled *Italian-American Experience in Georgia*, it looked like it might have been written as an extended college assignment. Well, even if it wasn't much, at least it seemed relevant. I started skimming through it.

I knew the first Moschetto had arrived soon after the Civil War, so anything before that didn't matter much to my research. It might be interesting historically though, since it would give me an idea of the immigrant world in which that Moschetto had landed. But why had old Emilio S. come to Georgia in the first place instead of the teeming Lower East Side tenements of Manhattan, like so many others? Come to think of it, maybe the time frame had more to do with it than I thought. Immediately after the Civil War, there weren't that many Italians going to New

York. That happened somewhat later, just after Italian unification and before WWI. I turned back to the manuscript.

Whoever had written this thesis, or whatever it started out as, had done a good bit of digging. I learned that most of the earliest Italian immigrants to the Southern United States were laborers recruited to replace the freed slaves in the period just after the Civil War. And they were treated rather badly by the white land owners. At one point, skilled stone masons were recruited to rebuild various government buildings and banks, and the dam that created Lake Olmstead at Augusta. It was during the latter part of that post Civil War Reconstruction period, 1882 to be exact, that Emilio Stefano Moschetto arrived in Savannah.

In addition to the monograph, there were a modest number of newspaper clippings that documented the Italian community of Savannah, the rise of the Savannah Italian Club, and the accomplishments of its individual members. One extensive article detailed the Moschetto family history, essentially the life story of Emilio Moschetto, the young adventurer who decided to build a better life for himself and his progeny in the New World. From that article and subsequent articles, it was easy to piece a Moschetto family chronology together.

In the old country, the family had lived along Italy's central western coast, and their traditional work had been supplying seafood to the local markets. Emilio had been a young fisherman, but he was a fisherman whose horizons were not limited by the dense coastal fogs or the more distant meeting of sea and sky. The process of Italy's unification during the 1800s caused a good deal of turmoil throughout the various provinces, and many Italians chose to leave that turmoil behind altogether. This was when the first wave of Italian immigrants hit American shores. Emilio had decided to find his future in the land of golden streets, too.

But instead of New York City, Emilio headed for the southeastern U.S. coast, landing in Savannah in July of 1882. Not understanding English, his work options were limited. He worked as a laborer at first, and eventually ended up on the docks and then on the shrimp boats that plied the coastal shoals. He was a skilled seaman and though he may have been uneducated, he wasn't a fool. Through this deal and that, he finally got his own boat, then several more. This was the high point of his career as a fisherman. And that's when history intervened.

In 1920, the Volstead Act, the 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the US Constitution, came into effect, beginning the era of Prohibition. Since Emilio had his own boats, this was a golden opportunity for him. He and his sons had already been carrying occasional cargoes of moonshine whiskey for his entrepreneurial neighbors, but now he dove whole-heartedly into the sea of alcohol that was being bootlegged along the coast. America truly was a land of opportunism. With his sons working beside him or in command of his other boats, he made a fortune running bootleg booze, bringing cargoes in from ships that stayed out beyond the 3-mile limit, and making local deliveries among the many river estuaries which he had learned as a coastal fisherman. Anyone who had connections knew him as the source for the life-enhancing alcohols that oiled the wheels of American commerce through the period. In 1924, he had The Castle built in downtown Savannah, paying cash to do it. Unfortunately, he died in 1925, passing Paneta's Crown and his fleet of six boats on to his son Vincenzo, who continued the family liquor business.

By December 1933 when Prohibition was repealed, Emilio was long gone. Vincenzo survived as a man of property, respected by many and known as a man who kept his word, even though the source of his wealth might initially have been suspect.

And Vincenzo, thoroughly Americanized and a commercial product of the Prohibition

era, hadn't forgotten his Italian origins. A man of principle and family loyalty, he made an offer to his relatives who remained in Italy. He volunteered to pay the passage of any family member who wanted to emigrate to the U.S. This was a turning point for the family, the point at which the family went "legit."

Alonzo Moschetto, Vincenzo's first cousin, had been trained as a gunsmith for the Italian army during World War I. After the war, he went to work for Fabbrica d'Armi Pietro Beretta in Gardone Val Trompia, near Brescia in northern Italy. He earned a good living at a skilled trade as a Beretta machinist. But going to America? It perhaps had never occurred to him. When Vincenzo's surprise offer arrived, he decided to accept, and in due course he arrived in the U.S.A. in 1934.

The young men immediately established Fabbrica Moschetto following Beretta's template, bought several metalworking machines, and began manufacturing small runs of semi-automatic hand guns. Alonzo handled the technical side of the operation, and Vincenzo set out to find customers. Neither of them suspected that over time they would build an armaments empire. By the time WWII began in Europe, the business was a smoothly functioning and very legal entity. Business boomed.

Approaching Mr. Twichell at his desk, I asked if there was a computer I could use to do some Internet research. He cocked his head, pursed his lips and blinked three times in quick succession. "Yes, there is. Are you a member of The Society?"

I admitted I wasn't.

His head jerked back upright on his shoulders. "I'm sorry, then. It's strictly for the use of our paid members." It was official.

“If I join The Society,” I tried to say it the same way he had, with capital letters, “can I use the computer today?”

“Certainly, dear boy. Annual dues are \$50. How will you be paying?” He whipped a printed receipt book out of his desk drawer. “And who might you be?”

I fished in my wallet and handed him a credit card and a business card, hoping for some legitimacy in his eyes when he saw that I was a fellow professional. He took the cards and wiggled a bit in his chair as he ran the credit and copied my name and address into his little book. “May I keep your business card? I’m always building my resource files. We have calls from time to time and I might be able to send some genealogical work your way.”

“That would be great,” I responded. “Always looking for more work. You know how it is for us freelancers.”

“No, actually I don’t, but I’ll take your word for it. I have a regular job, you see, with benefits. But you look like an honest fellow. You’ll receive your membership card in about a week, but I can let you use the Internet computer today. It’s right over there.” With a carefully manicured finger and an overly dramatic flourish, he raised his arm high and pointed to a small alcove. I looked. No one was using the computer. I thanked him and headed in that direction. The world is full of characters.

Paneta. Why hadn’t I checked out Paneta before? It was the most obvious place to begin, wasn’t it? I mean, I had Benito’s Last Will, but we all knew where The Crown was supposed to go. We needed to know its location. And even before that, we needed to know what the thing was. So, I needed to start at the beginning. I typed “Paneta” into my favorite search engine. Paneta . . . only three hits. Hardly any. That was certainly unusual.

I clicked on one of the links. An Italian language site. No good for me. I don't habla italiano. I backed up and tried again.

I clicked the second link. Pay dirt. Paneta, it turned out, was a minor Italian poet of the early 1800s. He lived his entire life in and around Livorno on the west coast of Italy and was involved in the arts of the day, literature and sculpture in particular. Besides writing poetry, he was reported to be involved in local political intrigues and had several close scrapes with the authorities, but always seemed to rise to the top again in spite of pissing important people off. There was no mention of The Crown on either of the English language websites.

Back to my search engine, this time for "Paneta's Crown." Again, there wasn't much. There was one interesting quote:

*According to legend, Paneta's Crown was a 19th century Italian artist's greatest achievement, but little is know about it. Soon after its creation, Paneta was reportedly murdered by political rivals, his villa and its contents burned, and The Crown itself disappeared. It has never surfaced again. There has been much speculation about The Crown's nature and value, its political and/or artistic significance, but in the absence of the artist's note or drawings, it remains a mystery.*

I'd had enough by then, so I returned to Mr. Twitchell and collected the name and contact info of an Italian translator he recommended, one Sandia Escoretta, Ph.D, a Professor of Italian in Georgia State University's language department. I made some copies, and left the building.

I wondered if this was how Elvis felt when he left the building: tired-eyed and hungry. It was time to find a restaurant, and a cold beer or two. Maybe three. Enough to cool my researcher's ardor.

## A Spicy Meat-a-Ball

Back out on the street, the sun hadn't gone down yet, but it was considerably lower in the sky and the slanting rays cut through the massive live oaks that so characteristically lined the streets of Savannah. It gave the town an eerie quality, too, more I supposed in the later twilight, but even during the daylight hours there was a sense of mystery in the air. It reminded me of movies where the gruesome murder happens in bright daylight and everything is beautifully illuminated and crisp to the eye, and incredibly violent. Bloody murder nonetheless. Somehow it seems less terrifying when it happens in a deep shadow and the details are obscured. Never mind. I'd had a relatively good research day, so why was I heading down this oddly morose thought-path? A restaurant. Yes, that was what I needed. And a cold beer. No dark liquor today.

I checked the parking meter and added a couple of coins to bring me to the end of the city's official parking day. Dropping my briefcase in the trunk, I turned toward downtown for a leisurely walk, off to find an interesting looking foodery. I felt pretty good. Needed to call the translator, one Sandia Escoretta, Ph.D, about doing some work. I thought I should find out the cost and report to the siblings before authorizing him or her to proceed.

As I walked and mused on today's events and discoveries, I started to fit pieces of my puzzle into place. I now had a pretty good history of the family's activities in America, even that crafty old Emilio's nefarious whiskey dealings during Prohibition. It was funny in an odd way, how the family seemed absolutely proud of his criminal activities. Of course, it was a long time ago and times were different then. It wasn't just the Capones and Moschetos of the time who flaunted the liquor laws. Why, if there hadn't have been a market for the stuff among the general

“law abiding” citizenry, those guys couldn’t have made a dime. But there was a market, a gluttonous market, and those characters all prospered, Capone and his type through their greed and brutality, and Emilio Moschetto through the hard work of his own hands and his understanding of business opportunities and how to grab them when they came waltzing by. You had to respect the man for his enterprise. And once Prohibition was over, his sons quit what they had been doing. They weren’t criminals by nature. They were just businessmen.

But it was all part of the family history, so they wrote it up and showed how that illiterate immigrant old country gentleman, with limited command of English I’m sure, eased the way for his family in the New World, enabling later generations to live well and be respected in the world at large. Sure, their current family business was making killing machines, but they sold to governments primarily, local, regional, and national, and that gave them legitimacy. Governments bought guns to “serve and protect,” right? And to defend themselves and their people, and only occasionally to do mayhem on other groups of people or nations. So it was all okay now.

My thoughts were interrupted at that point because I thought I spotted a familiar shape ahead of me. A tall black woman, a bit overweight, stood looking into a shop window. Still half a block away, she turned and looked directly at me, her friendly smile gleaming in recognition. I closed the distance. Sure enough, it was Bella Gibson, the cook from The Castle.

“Wahl, if it ain’t Mista Bones. I knew I’d run into you. What chu’ all doin’ out wandrin’ ‘bout? I be headin’ back to fix supper soon now, hear? You don’t wan’ be late. Gumbo tonight. I’m just pickin’ up a few little extra things. Jefferson grow some herb fo’ me, but he don’ grow e’ry’thin’ I needs.” She gestured toward the shop, a botanica.

A botanica? She wasn't there for foodstuffs, that's for sure. Botanicas were where you bought black candles, belladonna, eye of frog, voodoo and Santeria supplies. What was she getting? She'd said she had "the sight," but she hadn't told me she was into this kind of thing. I was a bit surprised.

"Nice to see you, too." I nodded toward the shop. "This wouldn't be for dinner at The Castle, would it?"

She chuckled, her extra self jiggling just a bit. "Oh, no, Mista' Bones. This be for my spir'ts. Got t' keep 'em sat'sfied, too. Not er'ythin' be right thea in fron' o' you, y'know." It wasn't a question. She was stating her beliefs. And she'd taken on a more serious air, too, like when you try to teach a kid something they need to know about the world for their survival. It was a bit weird, standing there on a tourist town street in the late afternoon daylight, in front of a weirdness store, getting a little tidbit of voodoooness from a woman who "sees th'ins" in her mind's eye. I have no doubt that she did.

I edged away from the strange discussion. "I won't be eating with the family tonight, anyways. Thought I'd find a place downtown. Just wander around a bit. See the town."

"You gon' by the chess club? My boy be playin' there t'night. He be a champ'yun, Mista' Bones. He be a chess champ'yun. Bet you din' know dat." And with that comment, she was just a proud mother now.

"A chess champion? Jefferson?"

She nodded her head proudly in answer.

"How'd that happen? I mean, where did he learn chess? And a champion, you say?"

She smiled slowly and let me in on something. "Mr. Moschetto taught him years ago.

Benito. He took a real int'res' in the boy. An' he turn out to be good. Real good! S'prise e'rybody. He a savant, they tol' me. That mean he don't hafta work at it, like Mr. Canelo. Mr. Canelo, he struggle wiv' it all his life. Jefferson . . . he jes' win all the time." A shrug. "It jes' in him to do dat way."

"That's neat. It would be great to see. Where does the club meet? And what time do they start?"

She filled me in with the details and directions, then went into the botanica to finish her arcane acquisitions. I continued on my quest for food.

I walked down this street and up that, all the while trying to keep some idea of the direction I'd left my car. Maybe I should've driven around looking. But then I wouldn't have had that strange little exchange with Bella. I wondered what supplies she might be buying, and for what particular ritual? What was she up to?

"Hi, there."

I whipped around. There was no one on the sidewalk with me, but a little gray car was parked with the window rolled down, and inside . . . ah, my favorite detective from the Georgia Bureau of Investigation, Zera Angelina.

"Yeah, hi. I was just looking for a place to eat. Want to join me?" It wasn't often that a chance like this fell in my path.

She didn't hesitate. "Sure. Jump in. I know a nice spot."

Trying to look casual, I whipped the door open and got into the front passenger seat. Nothing cop-like about the car. It was your basic government motor pool transportation. The scent of her was present there though, not just the auto's own sterile authoritarian aromas. She

rolled smoothly away from the curb, took a couple of turns, then pulled into what looked like, and turned out to be, an old bus station. We were at a hip little restaurant called The Metropole.

The place was an open-air waiting room that had been transformed into a restaurant and bar. Nothing fancy about it. Decoration was a bunch of abstract or angst-filled paintings which I assumed were done by young local artists since we were just across the street from the Savannah College of Art and Design. There were young hippie-looking folks scattered around the tables in small groups, some puffing cigarettes that smelled a bit funny. An older guy in a tweedy hat and sport coat drew on his pipe and talked quietly and seriously over heavy white porcelain cups with several gypsy-looking ingénues with big eyes and big shoulder bags at their feet. Problems of human nature, global warming, genital warts and birth control issues hung in the air. All in all though, a comfortable and relaxed atmosphere.

We grabbed a table that the cigarette and pipe smoke didn't seem to be drifting to and settled ourselves. Zera reached up and pulled something at the back of her head, then shook it to let her hair fall from the bun to her shoulders. Nice. Girls look so much better to me than guys. And Zera was very attractive. Intelligent, too. Decorative is nice, but having a functional brain is always a major plus.

“Are you off duty now? Want a drink?”

“I'm always on call. It's in the nature of what I do,” she answered as she checked her watch. It was a heavy man's watch, one of those Seiko dive watches with lots of numbers on the twistable bezel. “But I'll have a white wine. Just one. It is after formal work hours.” She waved a young waiter over.

He took her drink order, then turned to me. “And for you, sir?” He was young and

innocent, pimpled, probably an art or design student with no scholarship, somehow juggling tuition, room and board, and recreational drug money in an incessant dance.

“Do you have Peroni beer?” A nice Italian beer. Not too dangerous, I thought.

“Yes sir, coming right up. Peroni draft.” He paused. “Sure you don’t want some green beer? St. Patty’s Day is this coming weekend, y’know?” I didn’t bite his green bait. He produced a pair of menus from where he’d tucked them into the back of his trousers and dropped them on the table between us. “I’ll be right back.”

We looked the menus over, decided on this and that. It was typical middle-end restaurant fare of Reuben sandwiches, soup de jour (tomato basil today), and your choice of any two sides. Price was reasonable, too. Student level.

“So what have you discovered so far?” she inquired. It began to look like this would be a business dinner. At least it would be deductible.

“I found out how granddad Emilio made his money during Prohibition.”

“Oh, I could’ve told you that. He’s something of local legend, you know? Immigrant who made it big running booze, then went legit after Volstead was repealed. It dovetails nicely with the local anti-government redneck moonshiner mindset.” She shivered as a stiff little breeze whipped through the open air eatery, blowing a few leaves past our table.

“Yeah well, I found a Moschetto-published booklet all about that period during my factory tour today. They seem proud of it all. Didn’t the Feds chase him back then?”

“From what I heard, he was a wily bootlegger. And he had been a fisherman before getting involved in the booze, so he knew the marshes and estuaries, and it was all done by boat. They never could find him. It’s not like today with our satellites and helicopters. Then, you had

to chase them down on the ground . . . or on the water. Had to actually catch people in the act.”

I nodded, then went on with my list of exciting discoveries. “Besides that, I just came from the Georgia Historical Society. Found out some of the general history of Italian immigration to Georgia. And I found a translator too. There’s one particular Moschetto document I can’t read but that I’m curious about.” I shrugged. “I don’t know Italian. Solamenta un poquito Español.”

My command of language didn’t impress her. She stuck to the business at hand. “You have my number if anything interesting comes up.” She reminded me.

I patted my shirt pocket. “Close to my heart, just in case.” How coy I was.

She laughed. “Don’t get any ideas, buddy. This is a professional relationship.”

Here I go again, I thought. “Oh, yeah, right. Are you seeing someone? Are you married, engaged, Lesbian?” I queried.

She gave me a hard look. “Not that it’s any of your business, right?” Unfolding and refolding her cloth napkin, she considered, seemed to consider again, and then softened. “No, I’m not involved just now. But being a government investigator is sort of like being a nun. The work takes a total commitment and too much of my life. I don’t even have a cat. I have a fish tank, but it’s just got plants in it now. The fish died of neglect and loneliness, I guess.”

“Yeah, well . . . I understand. Still, can’t I fantasize?”

She laughed. “Knock yourself out, if that’s what it takes.” And we both laughed. Maybe it was just a professional relationship, but it was pleasant enough all the same. And life wasn’t over yet.

We ate and drank, chatted some about the world situation, local politics, and football

standings, which she was very knowledgeable about, but nothing of a more personal nature. I had a second Peroni, but she stuck with her one wine. The waiter came by again and gave us one of those faux leather folders with our bill inside. I grabbed for it as it hit the table. She put her hand over mine and shook her head seriously. "I'm on an expense account . . . and this was about the Moschetto investigation. I've got it." It had been a pleasant enough little dinner, so why cause any upheaval at this point? I let her take it. An attractive, available woman with an expense account and a gun. And a career commitment.

As we left the restaurant, she said, "Come on, I'll drop you at your car. Where are you parked? Near the Historical Society, I'll bet." She really was a detective. She paid attention to conversational details.

"I thought I'd go by the chess club for a while. Bella, you know, the Moschetto's housekeeper, told me that her son is a chess champ, so I thought I'd take a look. I've never seen a deaf savant in action before."

She raised an eyebrow, "Really? I might just go with you. For a few minutes anyway. Tomorrow's going to be another long day. Where are they playing?"

I gave her the address Bella had given me.

"That's on the next block over from the Historical Society. Let's go." She checked her watch. "They've been at it for a while already."

And so we went around a few corners in her nondescript government car, parked down the block, and then took a short stroll to a small brick hotel and up a flight of canopied steps from the street.

The hotel's lobby used to be some nameless Victorian's front sitting room. There was a

typical but tiny hotel service counter set at the deep end, and potted plants placed about here and there. I could detect a background scent of potpourri, and that was mixed with the rich smell of the coffee in white foam cups held by some of the aficionados in attendance. A dozen small chessboard-topped folding tables had been set up, and a dozen games were in progress.

As a small crowd watched from the sidelines, Jefferson Davis Gibson, the deaf Moschetto gardener, was going from one table to the other, moving pieces with no hesitation. One by one, his opponents threw down their kings or just gave up in disgust. One actually stood up cursing and rushed from the room and out to the street. Of course, Jefferson didn't hear the invective, but he could read the guy's attitude in his actions. Eventually, he was the last man standing, as they say. He'd beaten all his opponents quickly and efficiently. Canelo still sat at one of the tables, defeated and shaking his head from side to side.

Jefferson, in denim coveralls like he'd been wearing when I first met him, went and stood to one side of the room, his eyes scanning back and forth, missing nothing. I guessed he was waiting for the next round of play to begin, and that proved to be the case. Communication was an issue for him, since he was deaf. But as people passed by him on their way in or out, escaping the melee or on their way to certain defeat at the tables, they acknowledged his expertise with a nod, a thumbs up gesture, or a pat on the arm or shoulder. He took it all in without much response. He wasn't smug, nor did he seem the least bit wired. He knew, and they knew, and it was all just dealing with the facts of his chess life and theirs. He won at chess, and when they played him, they lost. It was a simple life equation. And yet they came.

The previous victims all defeated and the battlefield cleared of the dead, it was time for another round of play. Even though the outcome was assured, more players had made their way

to the tables. Jefferson quietly stood and watched from the sidelines as the soon to be vanquished headed toward their collective fate.

Canelo spotted Zera and me in the doorway. He stood up and came over.

“Well, well. What brings you two here? Chess fans?”

Zera jumped in with, “This is strictly unofficial, Mr. Moschetto. I just happened to run into Ben here, and he invited me along to watch a savant at work. Very interesting, though I’m not much of a chess player myself.”

Canelo shook his head again and harrumphed. “I’ll tell you something. I’ve known that guy all my life, and he can grow some nice flowers. But plants have their own agendas, and the weather kills them sometimes, or bugs and such, so it’s not always as successful as he’d like. But I’ve never seen him lose a chess game. Not ever.” He paused. “I don’t know how it’s done. And to think of the time and struggle I’ve put in over the years to learn the subtleties . . . He just plays as if he doesn’t even care, and nobody beats him. Never! My father was like that to a degree, but when he showed Jefferson how to play, it was all over for him, too. He never beat the boy after that very first lesson. It’s very frustrating.” Another pause. “He’s illiterate, you know.”

Zera and I laughed, but Canelo just stood there with a perplexed look on his face. He wasn’t used to defeat, but he’d been whipped soundly by his illiterate deaf gardener, again. It happened without fail every time they played, and they had played often through the years.

Canelo went on, “Well, I’m heading back to The Castle. Big day tomorrow.” He turned to me. “We’re going out to Claxton for the rattlesnake roundup. That’s Abel, Lu and myself. Bones, you’ll be our guest, of course.” Then to Zera, “You’ll be sure to get him home before he turns into a pumpkin?” He winked at her.

Canelo could be engaging and charming when he wanted to be. We all laughed.

“To be sure,” she answered while nodding her head, and giving me a meaningful look.

## **The Third Day**

### **Out for a Bite**

The next day began early on that tragic morning, as I had been warned. The siblings all knew about it because it was an annual family outing and had been on their calendars for months. We were going to a rattlesnake roundup in the Georgia countryside, the famous Claxton Rattlesnake Roundup. Great. Not that I didn't have other things to do, like my research and solving the family's inheritance conundrum. Nothing like that. But Canelo was insistent that I go as an honored guest, and Abel was almost as insistent. Lucrezia? Her name might have been Morticia. She was less than enthusiastic, but dark and brooding, she went along anyway. Family tradition? I would've thought that a hefty dose of rattlesnake venom might appeal to her more refined instincts. Why bother with the roundup?

Abel seemed enthusiastic through our 6 a.m. breakfast, impatient to get going. A rattlesnake round-up was just the thing to appeal to his macho side just as much as Canelo's. I mused that testosterone and rattlesnake venom made an intriguing cocktail. And Canelo himself? Cool as the proverbial cuke. This was one of his civic service projects. Not a benign hospital visit or ribbon cutting mind you, but a public appearance nonetheless by an heir to a major Savannah industry, employer of hundreds and patriotic savior of numerous governments, for a price, whatever their social or economic philosophies.

Bella was sanguine about the whole adventure while serving up piles of pancakes, bacon, grits and biscuits. Her only comment, with a cocking of her head toward Lucrezia, was, “Boys

will be boys, I s'pose.”

As usual, her deaf son Jefferson helped with the carrying back and forth, quietly and unobtrusively, but always alertly. His eyes were everywhere, like a small bird's, always on the watch for unexpected dangers. In particular, he seemed to avoid any proximity to Abel. There was no subtlety to it. Jefferson stayed on the opposite side of the table from him. If he had to go to Abel's side for any reason, he swung wide around Abel's position, watching all the while. An intriguing choreography, indeed.

Lucrezia sat quietly swathed in ebon black and deep red, played with her food a bit, saying nothing but shooting sharp looks at her brothers, first one, then the other. It was unsettling to see, definitely un-familial. No, that can't be right. I guessed that was all too familial, a buried hatred born of years of sibling insults and petty degradations, the fact of Canelo's supremacy at Fabbrica Moschetto, her absolute lack of right to take The Crown because of her gender, and the inescapable reality that she was the youngest of the three, even had she been a man. As she probably saw it, she was in a hopeless situation regarding The Crown, and it had rankled and festered within for her entire life, ever since she first heard of the family's treasure. By this time, in her thirties, she must've been quite insane on the topic, but she held it in check. It only poured forth when released on purpose, like at me in the library. A definitely scary woman: competent in her own right, with a Shakespearean evil simmering below. Would she destroy herself in her quest? It was a question I didn't feel qualified to answer, though I was beginning to have my suspicions.

Canelo finished his third empty coffee cup and checked his watch. “Let's get going.” He turned to me. “Claxton's only an hour from Savannah, but I have to be there to oversee the

annual rituals, you understand.”

“Got to have your nose in the middle of things all the time, don’t you, Canelo?” Brother Abel was a bit sour that morning too, even after Bella’s superb breakfast and though he’d been looking forward to the junket. “It used to be about the snakes. Now it’s all about your image. You don’t see what you’ve become.”

Canelo set his fists down on the table and leaned forward toward his brother. “Cool it, little brother. We do what we must. It’s become an ‘official’ Moschetto Arms appearance. We’re expected to participate.”

“Only because you’ve made it so over the years. Evolution of the fittest, eh?”

“You don’t have to attend, Abel,” Canelo spat out. “You pull this every year.”

“Oh, I’ll go. But I like the snakes, not the pitiful small town pageantry, not the smell of the crowd when the Moschetos face them. That’s all yours, brother.” A second’s heated silence, then, “I’ll meet you at the Hummer.”

Abel stood abruptly and headed out of the dining room door, just as Jefferson was coming in with another plate of biscuits. Abel bumped him, dropping his shoulder to hit a bit harder than necessary to clear a path. The biscuits flew in every direction, the plate clattered to the floor, and Jefferson flattened himself wide-eyed against the wall to allow Abel passage.

I heard a low growl. The beast Cerberus had been lying quietly at Lucrezia’s feet. It hadn’t come from him, but when he heard it, he became instantly alert and emitted his own growl in answer. The first had been Abel’s. His hiking boots echoed down the hallway.

That was the brothers. I looked at Lucrezia. She sat quietly, a smirk unconcealed, the Hound of Hades now attentive at her side. She was enjoying the flood of brotherly animosity.

Canelo stood and walked to the door, then turned to me. “Meet us in front of The Castle in five minutes.” And out he stalked.

Lucrezia finally spoke as she fought herself to her feet, crutch on the one side, Cerberus on the other. “They’re likable boys, and very talented, just a bit overwrought.”

She organized herself for locomotion, “Come along, Benny.” Stump, slide, stump, slide, stump, slide . . . she left the room, Cerberus at her side. I followed, suspecting it would be a long and difficult day. Little did I know . . .

The Hummer was big, black, and bore the Moschetto crest on either side. A legitimate, and substantial, business expense. Canelo was at the wheel, while brother Abel rode shotgun. The beautiful and devious Lucrezia clambered in behind the driver with help from neither of her sibs. Once she was settled and reaching out to wrest it from where she’d leaned it against the vehicle, I handed her crutch in to her. She didn’t smile or thank me, just took the heavy tube and whipped it out of my hand, almost protectively. I sat behind Abel, and the dog, the Hound from Hades, sat behind us all, alternately nuzzling Lucrezia and sniffing me. Occasional drops of slobber hit my hand, or my neck, or just dropped onto my shirt. As we left The Castle and drove east on Interstate 16, I hoped the slobber wasn’t too acidic.

After 20 miles or so, we swung south onto US-280, which we followed through fairly featureless Georgia farm country all the way into Claxton. In short, an uneventful and uninteresting ride. Lucrezia was silent for most of the trip, except when murmuring incantations or endearments to Cerberus. Abel was also strangely quiet.

Canelo, while not garrulous, pointed out various roadside attractions, for my benefit, I assume. I saw my first pecan orchard, my second pecan orchard, and my third pecan orchard. I

was bored stiff, put upon and slobbered upon, and thinking that I should have been working on the research so I could complete my task, go home, and leave these people and their issues behind me. Boring though the ride was, the scene changed dramatically when we finally arrived in the booming country town of Claxton, self-proclaimed “Fruit Cake Capital of the World.” It also boasted an elevation of 188 feet above sea level and a population of about 2400.

Claxton is famous for two things: their strictly seasonal but ubiquitous Christmas fruit cakes and the annual rattlesnake roundup. Hot, humid and dusty, it’s laid out in classic Georgia small town fashion. A rail line runs through rural Georgia, and Claxton, site of an annual tobacco auction, had sprung up straddling the track. People have to live somewhere, I guess, even if it’s in the middle of nowhere. Main Street and Railroad Street were on either side of the tracks, with other short streets that ran perpendicular, mostly lined with feed stores, farm implement and hardware stores, and the like. To the western side of town on one of those perpendicular streets, South Claxton Avenue, was where the sprawling tin tobacco warehouses are located, but on this day, they would be full of wire mesh rattlesnake pens, rattlesnake judges, vendors of all sorts of rattlesnake memorabilia from belt buckles to pickled rattler steaks, and thousands of gawking rubes. First would come the parade, of course, but not for a while yet.

We parked behind the warehouse for Lucrezia’s convenience, and Canelo went off to be official. Abel and I walked up the three short blocks to “downtown” Claxton to wait for the parade to begin.

We were early, so things hadn’t quite gotten started, but at the far west end of Main Street, you could see the parade forming up and hear the random blares of trumpets and the tuning up boom of the bass drums.

By 10 o'clock the street was lined with smiling kids and their accompanying adults. Some adults wore smiles, some looked benign, some were wearing put-upon snarls. The parade opened the festivities. It was true small town Americana.

First came the Claxton Police chief in a white cruiser, simple yet tasteful, this year's model and without any dents, followed by the entire fire department: all three trucks. Oh yeah, and a Dalmatian. The Third Infantry Division's marching band followed the fire trucks, alternately marching with trumpets at rest and pounding out a military march I didn't recognize. Probably Souza, but how would I know, not being a veteran. The band was accompanied by rank after rank of rifle-toting GIs hoofing along in a fast march shuffle. Their desert camo fatigues contrasted smartly with the float decked out in white and green crepe paper that followed them bearing a big sign lettered "RATTLESNAKE ROUNDUP QUEEN CONTESTANTS." Aboard were eight young women, none of whom looked the type to go into the scrub brush armed only with heavy boots, a 3-foot snake hook, and a burlap sack. But there they were.

My thoughts of the moment? Hey, there's Smokey the Bear standing in the bed of that white pick-up truck. Cool. I wonder if I can get his autograph. Should've brought a camera. No one back in Atlanta's going to believe this.

Next came the Claxton High School marching band in their fancy dress white and black uniforms, including a group of 16 flag girls - the white girls in front and the black girls at the rear of the formation. Why, this could be 1950! I stole a look around to see if Christopher Lloyd was here. No luck. But the parade had only started. Abel was still with me, looking a bit bored. He'd seen it all before. His eyes swept the young ladies on the float, then the young ladies in the crowd. But he behaved like a Moschetto and kept his lascivious thoughts to himself.

A contingent of Confederate soldiers marched by bearing a huge Confederate flag and period weapons. They didn't seem to know their right shoulders from their lefts, but these fellows all looked pretty committed, nonetheless. A few southern belles followed these ersatz rebel warriors, in mid-1800 puffy skirts with lots of layers below. The South was still rising!

White and green again, the approved float color theme for this year, I supposed. The sign on the side of this flatbed trailer advertised "ROMANS PIZZA" without an apostrophe. A young boy, an older brother perhaps, and grand momma with every hair piled high and sprayed in place rode proudly.

And of course the Shriners followed. They seemed to be everywhere in their little cars and tricked-out motorcycles, their clown make-up already beginning to run a bit from sweat generated by the spring Georgia heat. They wove in and out among the more orderly parade vehicles, providing the perfect note of anarchy to set off their more straight-laced companions.

The Moorish Temple was represented by about twenty portly men swathed in flowing Middle Eastern robes, but all so highly colored and patterned as to be downright blasphemous in that part of the world. They smiled and cavorted, but maintained their loose ranks nonetheless.

And finally came the highlight of the parade, I'm sure. A hefty Ford L-450 Super Duty pick-up pulled another flatbed trailer in white and green, one young lady enthroned thereon, her hand waving to either side of the street. This was last year's Rattlesnake Roundup Queen. I heard a lady next to me say to her emaciated 3-foot tall daughter, "Someday you'll be up there too, honey." Like I said, true Americana. It's good to have goals, however lofty.

The parade went on and on, replete with beauty queens perched in open auto sun roofs, more high school bands, a band and drill team from Fort Stewart, eight Shetland ponies and their

little girl handlers, the Coast Ballet Company float (a gaggle of little girls in tutus and wrapped in blankets), Cub Scout Pack 399 from Daisy, GA, for a total progression length of 1.5 hours. It looked like a true extravaganza for Claxton.

I stayed and watched it all, fascinated not only by the organized displays, but by the crowd around me: the mothers and Rattlesnake Queen aspirant daughters, the young men from the surrounding countryside, some of whom undoubtedly were snake catchers themselves, some of whom were there for the extravaganza, the hawkers and promoters, all scaled down to size appropriate for a small Georgia town.

And then it was time to head to the tobacco warehouses for the main event: the rattlesnake judging. I wondered what criteria they awarded for? Longest snake, heaviest snake, greatest girth. the most rattles, most snakes brought by a hunter, most virulent venom? It would be interesting, to be sure, and something totally new to my insular world of dusty tomes and quests for family truths (but don't expose any secrets).

As the crowd of parade gawkers began moving eastward, I looked around for brother Abel. I hadn't seen or heard from him for a long time. I'd been focused on the parade. He wasn't the tallest person around, so I figured it would be nearly impossible to spot him in the mob. Rather than frustrate myself, I immediately gave up the idea. I'd see him at the snake judging. All I had to do was go to the judges' bench and the Moschettos would probably be gathered together there. If not, some official would know where they all were. No problem.

There were young boys on the streets handing out flyers, and I collected one as I passed. It turned out to be a capsule history of the Claxton roundup.

It seems that back in 1967, David Wiggins, a local boy out innocently picking vegetables,

had been bitten by an Eastern Diamondback Rattlesnake. Twelve months later, he was much better, but he would have physical problems for the rest of his life as a result of the experience. The town rallied, and in 1968, the Claxton Rattlesnake Roundup was born. The townsfolk had decided to clear the menace from the region once and for all, claiming also the need to educate the general public about the snakes. Traditionally, not just in southern Georgia, but throughout the South, the prevailing attitude toward any snake was to immediately kill it. No thought was given to the fact that snakes, even rattlers, kept the rodent and rabbit populations down to reasonable levels. I thought it was hatred born of ignorance. Not only that, but the Bible had a snake in it too, and one that caused us all “a mite o’ trouble.” It was always time to even that score.

The event rapidly became famous, the result being that the Eastern Diamondback population in southern Georgia was decimated. Rodent populations began to rise. Neighboring South Carolina hunters started bringing snakes to the roundup, all with the stated high sounding goal of preventing other human bite encounters. After a few years, snake hunters seeking prizes and notoriety arrived from far and wide with their catches. Mississauga Rattlers from the Great Lakes and Canada began appearing, and rattler populations up and down the east coast were threatened. Just another example of man subduing nature with no thought for the ultimate consequences.

I arrived at the large tin warehouse and went inside. The outside air had been warm and slightly moist. It was a bit cooler inside, being out of the direct sunlight, and the aroma of tobacco assaulted my senses. I’m not a smoker, though I find the scent of tobacco rich and homey. This was a raw smell, of fields, manure and perspiration, but somehow mingled in a way

that unmistakably said “tobacco.” I felt assaulted by the strength of it, yes, but at home too, comforted in the way of personal libraries and private offices, sweaty back room deals. A bit unsettling at first, but not bad at all after a few minutes.

The noise was cacophonous, and it was hard to distinguish individual sounds. Country music blasted from wall speakers, and the occasional announcement was a garbled incomprehensibility of south Georgia accent and local idioms that everyone but me seemed to have grown up with, a tobacco plug tucked in the announcer’s cheek, and bass echoes, all mixed with the background “peas and carrots” mumble that hundreds of people make in an enclosed spaced. I didn’t benefit much.

Deep within the expanse of the warehouse, I could see a raised platform with a banner on the wall above it. “Claxton Rattlesnake Roundup.” That was the judges’ stand, all right. And seated with a handful of others was Canelo. Lucrezia and the Hound of Hades were there, and Abel was just climbing the stairs. It was a veritable family reunion. I wondered if sparks would fly in public view, or whether animosities would be submerged beneath a united Moschetto veneer of loving kinship and community service. I headed toward the platform, bumping through the crowd of rattlesnake fans as I went.

On the way to the platform, I passed rows of 4x8-foot pens made of 2x4 lumber with fine wire mesh for the walls. Each had a bed of sand and in each were dozens of snakes of all sizes. I’d never seen such a display in my life, and couldn’t have imagined such a thing. It was primordial in a way, and a herpetologist’s heaven. The creatures writhed and rattled, wriggling back and forth, perhaps seeking a way out of the pen, perhaps just excited by all the warm-blooded prey they could sense around them through their facial heat-sensing pits. It’s hard to

figure out what a snake is thinking exactly.

There were milking stands between the pens, and pairs of men were collecting venom at each. One would reach into a pen with a metal snake hook to lift a snake out, and as it was lifted and off balance with no way to gain leverage for a strike, the other guy would grab it. Sometimes they had one of those grip gadgets you see in mom-and-pop groceries for snatching items off of high shelves, and the snake wrangler would use it to grab the snake as close behind the head as possible. Sometimes they would just use their naked or gloved hands. Gloveless hands gave greater control, so . . . you guessed it. And it was more macho, too. Once they had a snake under “control,” they would let it bite through a rubber cap stretched over the edge of a glass laboratory beaker and we’d watch the yellowish venom run down the sides to collect in a measured pool at the bottom. No one wore face shields or masks, just jeans and maybe cowboy boots. These were “jes’ plain country folks,” and they were used to handing these critters.

The milking was supposed to be for research and making anti-venom, but I later learned that not much of it is actually used for those purposes. Most of it is simply thrown away after the show. The end results of all this were threatened snake populations across vast regions of the country, fun and a testosterone rush for the hunters, little if any anti-venom or venom for research, and a huge influx of cash into the local Claxton community.

I was about 30 feet away from the judges’ platform when I heard Lucrezia’s dog barking and snarling. He seemed completely wound up. I’ll bet he was on edge from the snakes, the crowd, and all the noise. I know I was. As I watched, the beast lunged at Abel, who had just topped the stairs. Abel lost his footing, then seemed to get it back. Lucrezia jerked the dog’s chain, pulling him back toward her. I saw it. I’m sure that’s what happened. Abel had gotten his

balance back, but Canelo was on his feet too, headed for Abel with arms outstretched to . . . to what? To save his brother from a fall, of course . . . I think, or at least I thought at the time. But Canelo didn't stop, and as his out-stretched arms seemed to contact Abel's chest, the smaller man toppled sideways. Someone grabbed Canelo's shirt from behind and stopped his forward motion, but Abel was going over. He fell heavily, thud, right into one of the snake pens.

The snakes went nuts, of course. There must have been at least twenty of them in there, and Abel started yelling first, then screaming as the snakes struck him again and again, whack, whack, whack. Snake handlers from nearby pens rushed over to get the snakes away from him, but it was already too late. He lay there bleeding from numerous punctures, the blood oozing through his shirt and jeans. His hands, arms and legs had been hit, his torso too, and there was at least one bite on his neck. He was in deep trouble.

Within seconds, though they seemed geologically slow seconds, the snakes were all maneuvered to one side of the pen and Abel was hauled out of the other end writhing in pain, eyes wide in panic, his legs and arms starting to swell. That neck wound looked pretty bad. A sheriff's deputy and two EMTs showed up inside of a minute and he was shot with several hits of anti-venom, and whisked off on a stretcher to a medical area. Canelo followed, leaving Lucrezia to make her own difficult way down the stairs from the platform. Not knowing what else to do, I followed Lucrezia back to the screened-off medical area off in a corner of the warehouse.

They were working on Abel when Lucrezia and I got there, but he was a mess. He was gasping for breath and looked terrible, all black and blue and green around the bite sites, of which there were many. His clothes had been cut away and the bites exposed. He shuddered

repeatedly. His neck was swollen out of shape and I guess he couldn't get air in and out because of that. They had tried to put an airway down his throat, but it lay on the cot next to Abel's head. After a few minutes, the EMTs backed off. One sat with him, but there wasn't anything more that could be done.

And yet, he was trying to say something.

"Sorry," he choked out. It took a lot of effort.

"Fa . . . fa . . . father . . . so sorry. Killed . . . killed . . ." and with that, the last air came out of him and it was over. Brother Abel was dead.

At that instant, a doctor rushed in. "Where is he?"

One of the EMTs pointed to the stretcher. "You're too late, doc. He's gone." It was said matter-of-factly. This guy was accustomed to the broken and maimed, to death and the dying.

The doctor took a look anyway, felt for a pulse, looked at Abel's eyes, put a stethoscope to his chest. "Okay, I'll sign the certificate. Death by misadventure: snakebite. That bite in the throat probably did it, that and overwhelming his system. Autopsy will tell us more. What's his name? Is the family here?"

Canelo stepped forward calmly. "I'm his brother, Canelo Moschetto. That's my brother Abel." He didn't seem upset at all. He was just taking care of more family business. Lucrezia watched, her dog sitting at her feet, his neck extended upwards, his nostrils opening and closing assessing the nearby death.

The sheriff's deputy said respectfully, "We've got to make a report on this, Mr. Moschetto. And we'll have to do the autopsy here in Evans County where death occurred. I'll see that you get all the paperwork on it if you tell me where to send it." I looked at the deputy's

sidearm. It was a Moschetto semi-auto.

“Thank you, deputy. I’d appreciate that.” Still calm, still all business. He handed the deputy a business card, then turned to Lucrezia. “Well, Lu, it’s just us now.”

Her eyes blazed at him, more beautiful in her anger. Great personal power there. “I saw what happened, Canelo. You won’t get away with this.” She turned and stumped out, jerking the dog’s chain to move him with her. He took the lead.

The deputy turned to me. “Who are you?”

Canelo answered, “He’s a family employee. He’s here with us.”

“Please let him answer for himself, Mr. Moschetto.” Again to me, “Who are you?”

“Ben Bones. I’m working for the Moschetto family.”

“Did you see anything? What happened?” The deputy reached into his shirt pocket for a small notepad and pencil.

“Well . . . I don’t know . . . I think so. Abel was going up the stairs and the dog jumped him. He seemed okay, but lost his balance again and Canelo tried to grab him. Then he fell in . . . in with the snakes. That was pretty much it.” But I wasn’t quite sure. What had I really seen? Had I seen an accident or an opportunistic murder? It was hard to sort out. I didn’t know at that point.

“How can we reach you if we need your testimony? There may be an inquest.”

I dug through my wallet and handed him my card. “I’m staying in Savannah for a few days with the Moschettos. You can reach me through them.”

The deputy glanced at the card. “Genealogist, eh? My wife’s done traced both our families back to before the war . . . The War Between the States, that is. We had people on both

sides.”

An EMT snorted.

“She ain’t done yet. Lots more to go. Our people go way back. Interesting work, I’ll bet. Thanks for the card. We’ll be in touch” He put it into his notebook along with Canelo’s.

I decided to head back out into the warehouse, despite all that had happened. As I turned to leave the medical tent, the formerly friendly deputy put his arm across my chest to stop me.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

“I was going out to the roundup. What’s the problem?”

“I was told to keep an eye on you, and I’m not going anywhere, so neither are you.”

“Am I under arrest? You can’t keep me here.”

“Actually, I can. You’re a material witness to a suspicious death. People want to interview you. Why don’t you sit down and relax for a while?”

It looked like I was stuck. I sat down and considered what I’d say to my next questioner.

What had I actually seen? Had Canelo tried to save his brother from a fall? Or had he taken a serendipitous opportunity and pushed his brother into the snake pen? I played it back over and over in my mind, but the more I reviewed it, the more unsure I became. What had I seen? What had I imagined?

## Woman with a Gun

Need I say that any semblance of fun was gone from the annual Moschetto family outing? What had begun as an inconvenient but potentially interesting excursion had become the stuff of low budget horror movies. Abel was dead, no longer a player in the family jostling to take The Crown from the other siblings. His part was over.

But how had it happened? I'd seen it, all of it, but I wasn't completely sure. Yes, I'd seen it all right, but there was conflicting testimony even within this one witness. What had other people seen anyway?

We sat in the medical tent for about half an hour, waiting for something to happen, for someone to show up, for what exactly I really didn't know. It might have been that the local sheriff just wanted to keep us all where they could find us easily. Who knows what's in the "official" mind?

The EMTs had gone back out to keep an eye on the crowd. The doctor had determined there was nothing to do for Abel but fill out a death certificate. An autopsy was required and would probably be done at the local hospital later that day. Abel wasn't going anywhere. He lay there covered by a sheet, becoming aromatic.

Lucrezia had been brought back in by a deputy and Canelo and Lucrezia sat for a while glaring at each other, the beast at her feet as usual. The dog was edgy and kept sniffing the air and trying to stand and move toward the fresh corpse. Lucrezia jerked his collar repeatedly to bring him back to a sit, but he tried it again and again. The smell of death was too elemental and interfered with his conditioning.

After about ten minutes, Canelo got to his feet and paced. A sheriff's deputy waited with

us, used to waiting and impassive as a Sphinx. In the end Canelo decided he had to go.

“I’ve got to get back to the judging. That’s where I’ll be if you need me.” The deputy’s eyebrows went up, but he acknowledged Canelo’s leaving with a perfunctory nod. Canelo strode off to fulfill his public role as pillar of the community. No doubt it would be noted that he “took care of business,” even immediately after the tragic death of his dear younger brother. A cold fish? Shut down emotionally? I watched him go, then glanced over at Lucrezia. She watched him go too, and her eyes said it all: she hated the man.

A half hour passed. I was getting restless myself. “What’s the holdup? Why can’t we go back outside?”

The deputy looked at me with blank eyes, then replied, “Sher’f wanted you folks to stay here ‘til he got back. Had some bi’ness take care of.”

He did get back, eventually. And with a pleasant surprise, at least for me. GBI detective Zera Angelina was with him.

“Zera! I sure am glad to see you.” Someone I knew had arrived.

The sheriff turned to her. “You know this man? Says he’s working for the family.”

“That’s right, Sheriff. We met in Savannah. You said he’s an eye witness?”

“Yep, I saw the whole thing,” I blurted. “Problem is . . .” She held up her hand to stop me.

“I will be talking to you about it, Ben, but for right now, please don’t say anything. We’ll interview all the witnesses individually.” It seemed she was taking charge now. The sheriff didn’t object, even though we were on his county turf.

Lucrezia worked herself to a standing position, her metal crutch clutched in her left hand.

“I’m tired of sitting around. Let me go back to the roundup.” Her tone was imperious and a bit whiney at the same time. She knew what she wanted but she knew she had no authority in the situation. The state cops had arrived.

Zera looked at her for a second, thinking. “All right, you can go. But don’t leave the warehouse until we’ve talked.”

Lucrezia stumped out, Cerberus, after a final neck-stretching sniff of the air, at her heels.

The sheriff jerked his head at the deputy and they both left the medical tent.

Zera went to the body and pulled back the sheet. As used as she was to death and destruction in its various forms, I saw her wince at the sight. Abel was dead, but he was one hell of a mess. The wounds were dripping fluids, venom and blood I guessed, maybe lots of lymph to propel it, too. They had him on a rubber sheet and there were pools of fluids here and there under him. She dropped the sheet back over him and turned to face me. We were alone in the tent.

“You saw it?”

I nodded.

“What happened?”

I had to process what happened some way or another, to get the story out and make sure it made sense. In my head, it didn’t. It had gotten all jumbled up: the dog, the noise, the music, the crowd, Abel losing his balance, Lucrezia and Canelo. Yes, Canelo. He was the key, wasn’t he? The last person to touch Abel. I needed to tell someone what had happened so I could get some feedback on the reality of it. It seemed too surreal, like a low budget horror film. Zera was the perfect audience for my musings. She’d pulled out a small notebook and was ready to write.

I began, slowly, picking my way through the tangle in my mind. “Canelo and Lucrezia

were on the platform. I'd come into the building and saw them on the judge's stand as soon as my eyes adjusted to the light. So I decided to head over that way, y'know, rejoin my hosts, so to say. I started walking through the crowd. This is a weird event, y'know what I mean? The whole thing is a bit strange, humans over-reacting again to a one-off incident, that kid who got bit. Anyway, I was almost at the platform when the dog started going nuts."

"Whose dog? Lucrezia's?"

"Who else? Yeah, Cerberus, the Hound from Hades. You know about him? You know the myth?"

"No, I don't. How does it relate to him?" She nodded at the draped form.

"It doesn't. Anyway, Abel was climbing the stairs onto the platform. He's a Moschetto, was a Moschetto. I guess he still is, isn't he? Anyway, he was almost up, last step or so, when the dog lunged at him. Lucrezia, well, she's not as quick on her feet as most, and I'd thought that dog was pretty tightly under her control, but he got loose just enough to get his paws up onto Abel. And that dog's pretty hefty. What do you think? Over a hundred pounds easily. So the dog hit Abel before she gave him a wrench back to her. And Canelo was on his feet too. So were a couple of the other judges. It all happened pretty fast."

I went on. "Abel seemed okay then. I mean, he was surprised all right, but it had happened before, I guess. The dog knew him," I explained. "Abel wasn't a stranger attacking his mistress or anything like that. The dog knew him. Maybe it was just an enthusiastic greeting. I don't know. How do you know what a dog's thinking?"

"Did he fall then? In with the snakes?"

"No, not exactly. I think," I added hesitatingly. "He seemed to get his balance back. But

Canelo had jumped up and reached for Abel, like to help steady him. I saw him make contact. Someone grabbed Canelo from behind just then, but Abel was already toppling at that point. And he fell into the . . . what do you call it? The snake pit, pen, something? Anyway, he was down. And once he was in there . . . man! Those snakes just kept hitting him and he was screaming. It was bad. And fast. And then the handlers got the snakes to the other end of the pen and they pulled a corner open and dragged him out. But . . . that was it for him.”

I shut my mouth and sat there. That’s what I thought I saw, but what had I really seen? Canelo. He was the key player. Yes, the dog had set things in motion, but Canelo was the last to have actual contact with Abel. Had Canelo tried to save his brother? Or had he reached out to throw him further off balance? I knew Canelo had a mean streak with more than a touch of evil to it. Hell, he’d thrown me into the ocean with all those sharks he’d chummed to the boat. I didn’t trust him. But now I didn’t trust myself and what I’d seen either. And I didn’t want to give him the benefit of my doubts.

Zera finished her notes, then sat looking them over. “I shouldn’t ask your opinion on this. My role it to just gather the facts and let them speak for themselves, but do you find anything odd about Canelo’s actions? How clear was it that Abel was in danger? I mean, before Canelo’s final contact?”

“It was hard to tell. It all happened so fast.”

Zera waited for more.

“Canelo was already on the move. He was up the second the dog hit Abel, so maybe it was hard for him to stop. I don’t know. It was all so fast. But it sure was weird, too.” I thought for a second. It’s strange the thoughts that come up when you’re not particularly searching for

them. “I’ve seen people die in accidents, and had people I’d been close to die, but I never thought I’d witness an actual murder.” I thought for a second longer. “I hope I didn’t.”

She eyed me quietly, looked at her notes, then back at me. “Well, thanks, Ben. She stood up and picked up her purse. Her jacket flapped open and I saw the pistol in the quick-draw holster at her belt. A Moschetto. Naturally. The weapon of choice for today’s professional. A local, American-made, high quality product of proven reliability and accuracy. “Anything else you can recall? If there’s anything, just let me know.” She turned to go, then turned back to face me. “I’ve got to go talk to a few more people. If you don’t feel comfortable with those Moschetto folks, you can ride back to town with me.” And then she was gone.

Riding back to Savannah with her was a good idea on several levels. At that moment I didn’t want to have anything to do with the Moschettos. This easy research job had become too involved, too tangled, too downright dangerous to me personally. How do I get myself into these situations? I want a nice quiet life as a bookworm genealogist. And look what happens to me, every time. The long dead are much easier to deal with than the still breathing troublemakers I seemed to encounter on all my genealogical research trips. Give me a nice quiet dead person every time. The deader the better. I glanced over at Abel. Him excepted, I thought. Too recent a demise. As far as I was concerned, the longer they were dead, the better I liked it.

So a couple of hours later, I found myself in an official GBI vehicle, roaring down the road back toward Savannah with Zera Angelina at the wheel. Not exactly a romantic drive in the country though. Too bad. She was single, unattached, intelligent, good looking, had a solid state job with benefits, an expense account, a government car, and carried a gun. Why do I always meet women who are so focused on their work?

## A More Intimate Dinner

The mood at dinner in The Castle that night was more somber than usual, not to say that other meal times had been all fun and games. Canelo and his lovely, insidious sister Lucrezia didn't have much to say to one another. Bella moved around the table putting out platters and picking up remains. Cerberus got his handouts, as usual. Canelo seemed to focus on his food, but Lucrezia's black eyes stung him from time to time, darting in for a look, then turning back to her plate, her dog, and me. Once again, I had that feeling of being in someone else's "B" movie, a low budget Vincent Price failed attempt at horror at that.

"I'm thinking of heading back to Atlanta," I finally said when I couldn't take the heated silence any longer. "I don't know what I can do for you here and things seem to be way out of control. I'm out of my depth."

"You're not going anywhere, Bones. You're here to find The Crown." Canelo's face was dark, his tone angry, his manner threatening.

"Look, I came here at your invitation to function as a researcher, not a witness to a m-- . . . ." Oops, now I'd done it. I tried to recover. ". . . or an accident, or whatever happened out there today." Too late. I'd said it.

Canelo said nothing in return. He just looked at me. And looked at me.

Lucrezia said nothing. She just looked at me. And looked at me.

Cerberus said nothing. He just looked at Lucrezia, and then looked at me.

Bella looked at everyone in turn, said "Uh, oh," and left for the kitchen.

"You got a lot of nerve, boy." Canelo's charming personality had completely evaporated.

The civilizing veneer had been completely peeled away. What was left was pure animal.

Lucrezia twirled her fork. And looked at me.

Canelo had barely started. “You got a lot of damn nerve, boy. Who the hell do you think you are, a guest in my house, saying something like that? He was my brother. We had some differences, but he was my blood. I got a good mind to . . . ” He didn’t know what he had a good mind to do, but was worked up, puffed up, and a bit red in the face. He sure wanted to do something, to me. He started from his chair.

“Calm down, brother,” Lucrezia interjected. “I’m sure Mr. Bones didn’t mean anything by it. Just a slip of the proverbial tongue.” She turned toward me. “You didn’t mean anything by that, did you, Ben?” Her tone dripped, but not with honey. There was something Stygian in it, something dark and viscous, something primordial and slimy, something of tombs and eternity . . . There aren’t words to describe it exactly, except to say that I’d never felt a chill like that before, even during our pointed encounter days ago in the library.

I stood up and tossed my napkin onto the table. I wasn’t going to put up with them any longer. These people were dangerous. “I’m out of here.” I turned and headed for the door. They didn’t say anything to me as I left the dining room and headed up the stairs to pack.

I didn’t understand the words I heard behind me, but the rising volume of their arguing was unmistakable. They were really getting into it. The only distinguishable words came from Canelo, a fragment, “. . . deserved it, dammit . . . ”

I kept going. I didn’t care any longer. A big research fee? Forget it. The promise of a bonus? Forget it. The fear engendered by each of them in their turn? Especially forget that. Enough was enough. They really were crazy. Let them figure the puzzle out for themselves. This researcher was done digging. I’d send them a bill for the time I’d already put in. Maybe they’d

pay it, maybe not. I just wanted to get loose from them and this haunted castle.

Back in my room, I pulled my suitcase from under the bed and my clothes from the closet. It didn't much matter if they went into the suitcase in a bachelor's ball or neatly folded. I was in something of a rush to get out of there.

But as I gathered my things and threw them together, I also thought about *The Crown*. My curiosity was aroused. Oh, baby, was it ever. And I felt like I was starting to see something coming through the fog. Maybe it was just that I understood the family better now that I had some history. These people were crazy, all right. There was no doubt on that score. But the fact was that a family heirloom was missing, and it really was a pretty cool mystery. I sat down on the edge of the bed to think it all through.

There was a knock at the bedroom door. "Don't bother me," I yelled. "I'm packing." I felt my voice shaking.

Canelo opened the door and stuck his head in, sheepishly, not arrogantly as I would have expected. "Give me a minute." He held up his hand in a stop gesture as he came into the room. "I'd like to apologize for my outburst. It's been a rather hectic and unprecedented day. Lu and I would like you to stay and finish the job. It's as simple as that."

I just looked at him. He seemed sincere, but a sociopath can become anything, chameleon-like. This guy could be a cold businessman, but he was an emotional changeling. I knew I couldn't trust him. Or that sister of his either. There were only the two of them now. The competition for *The Crown* would probably intensify. They'd both threatened me unambiguously. I was in personal danger, wasn't I? It was time for me to go.

Canelo played his trump card: money. "Your base fee is \$500 per day, right? We'll

guarantee you \$1,000 per day, plus a \$10,000 bonus if you find The Crown. Will that help change your mind?" He still hadn't resumed his arrogant mental position.

I thought about it. A nice lot of change that would be. I needed the money. I think I hesitated too long. He saw I was wavering and upped the ante.

"Make it \$2,000 per day, plus the bonus. You've been here three days now. We'll give you \$6,000 in cash right now. What do you say, Ben? We need your help." Not exactly pleading. More like . . . a bribe. I took it.

"Well . . . I'll give it two more days. But I'm definitely leaving Friday evening, whether I've found The Crown or not. That's it. I don't want any more of this. And you and your sister have got to stay off my back. You can fight about it after I'm gone, but I'm not on either side in your little family feud. Is that clear?"

Lucrezia answered from the doorway, "Perfectly clear, dear boy. Perfectly clear. If those are your terms, I'm sure my surviving brother and I can abide them. We do want you to help us. You've made such a good start already. It would be such a shame to have wasted your time." She stumped into the room and plunked six one thousand dollar bills down on the bed next to me. Cerberus sat in the doorway, blocking any escape attempt I might have considered.

"Friday, and that's it. Two more days." I tried to sound adamant. I was shaking inside. I really wanted out, but the money was too great an incentive. Grover Cleveland smirked at me through his mustache from the portrait on the top bill. I picked up the six grand, looked at it, folded it and put it into my pocket.

Canelo smiled. It was a strange smile, not of joy or happiness, not of triumph, not sardonic. But it was clearly a mask. "I'm glad we could come to terms," he said smoothly. "Will

you join us for coffee downstairs and tell us where you are in your researches to date?"

Against my better judgment, but being freshly bribed, I answered, "I'll be down in a couple of minutes. Let me grab my notes."

They left, leaving a pool of doggy slobber by the door to mark the visitation.

I thought about it for a minute before grabbing my notes from my briefcase. How much more of this could I handle? What danger was I actually in here? It seemed that the danger was real enough.

I headed down to join them, not in a hurry, but off to take care of business, to report my findings to my employers. In my opinion, the six thousand in cash in my pocket had been well earned. Not with my blood, but with someone else's. Blood, nonetheless.

# The Fourth Day

## A Prince Interred

The day began with a funeral. The family's tradition, counter to ordinary Italian Catholic wake and Mass practices, required that he be interred as soon as possible. Maybe they were secret Jews or Moslems. Maybe they were just terminally pragmatic.

For the Moschettos, death was as privileged as life had been. They were famous, they were good-looking, and they were rich, so they got better service. Abel was examined, slit, dismembered, weighed, and analyzed the evening of the day he died.

Abel had died yesterday, whether at his sibling's hand or by simple misadventure. We ordinary mortals would have to wait in line for our autopsies, milling around in Purgatory's anterooms while masked, clipboard-wielding technicians in white lab coats raced back and forth consulting the actuaries about who was next on Hell's officially inscribed invitation list.

This funereal day hardly dawned at all. Instead of the typical blue Savannah sky decorated with an occasional white cumulous cloud, a low pressure system had come in from the Atlantic during the early morning hours bringing a mottled but complete cloud cover. The sun never fully came up. The nighttime darkness became a little less dark, then a little more less dark, lumen by stingy lumen, until the sky was a dull gray, and that's how it remained, at least for the funeral. Abel's final day's fete was memorable in not being memorable at all.

I didn't want to attend. Why would I? I hardly knew the man. We'd never even had what I could identify as a real conversation. All I'd ever had from him were a few surly or hostile glares. I think he perceived me as a threat of some kind, though my intentions were entirely

professional, designed to benefit the family as a whole, and largely irrelevant toward him.

And yet, the morning of that oddly colorless day, I found myself amidst a small group of mildly grieving strangers, heading to a funeral in one of America's most famous, or perhaps notorious, cemeteries. Those Moschettos sure knew how show a fellow a grand time.

A pair of limos waited beneath The Castle's front portico at 8 a.m. that morning. Canelo tried to lend me a tie and jacket, but he was bigger than I was and I was rarely that formal a dresser. And I never wore a tie anyway. That was too much a reminder of my former life in a cubicle world. I ended up in black jeans and a dark maroon turtleneck, very much the color of congealing blood. No one said anything about it, at least to my face.

Canelo and Lucrezia rode in the first limo. Lucrezia's slobbering familiar, the Hound of the Moschettos, had been left at The Castle. I'm glad I didn't have to listen to the diatribes brought on by their heartfelt grief and festering sibling animosity. Luckily, I didn't have to.

A second limo took the staff: Swift, Bella, her son Jefferson, and myself. I'm sure our limited conversation was far more civil. Swift looked like himself, although his usual formal working togs had been replaced by a dark blue suit with fine green pinstripes. Bella wore a black dress and a black lace mantilla, but Jefferson wore his habitual coveralls.

"Tha' was a ter'ble way to go, all tha' po'son. But I knew he'd end hard. I seen it. I knew it fo' a long time." Bella was at her portentous best. "And there still be lot o' po'son in what left o' this fam'ly. Venom. Yes, there's more venom t' come."

I sat quietly, still trying to sort out what I had seen . . . or didn't see, but maybe had seen, or maybe I composited the entire incident from too many old movies. I'd seen the dog leap all right. Everyone had. And I saw it hit Abel and knock him off balance a bit. But was it enough to

tumble him? Lucrezia had yanked the dog's chain and I thought Abel had gotten control back.

Then Canelo was in motion. Or had he already been in motion? When had he started moving? If he started toward Abel after the dog first hit him, well, that would have been an attempt to save his brother from an unnecessary fall. But if he saw Abel lose it, and then moved, his move could almost be seen to be an opportunistic attack. It had all happened too quickly. I couldn't sort the sequence. I wasn't really paying attention. It just happened in front of me. I began to understand why eye witness testimony, a foundational pillar of our judicial system, was considered so suspect.

And I was only one witness. I wondered how many different versions the cops had ended up with by the time they were done interviewing. The Evans County coroner had decided it had been "death by misadventure." Maybe. Maybe not.

The sibs acted as if they each had a lot at stake. I mean, they really hadn't. They'd all been generously provided for in their father Benito's will. They wouldn't want for anything. Not to mention that Fabbrica Moschetto was a going concern. Even if he hadn't left them enough to keep them all fat and happy, they could easily have supported themselves. Canelo had already been doing much of the company management, and Lucrezia had been in the slot below him. True, their old country traditions gave Canelo the first shot at control through primogeniture, but Lucrezia was in there solidly, too.

Abel? He had been on his own road, and respected in his own right as a metal sculptor. No problem there. He'd been well known to serious art aficionados all around the world. His pieces sold for big money and he'd had as many commissions as he could handle, or so I'd been told.

The big issue for the siblings seems to have been simple possession of The Crown, the elusive Crown. Where was it? What was it? What was its significance?

Well, that was why I was in Savannah after all. And I had until Friday, only a day and a half left after losing the morning to this bizarre interment ritual, to solve the mystery and put it in . . . in whose hands? Obviously, it would go to Canelo. According to the specific terms of Benito's Last Will and Testament, Canelo was supposed to receive The Crown by right of primogeniture, to hold in trust for the benefit of the family, and to pass it on in turn to his eldest son. There was no son yet, no wife yet, and no girlfriend, at least that I knew of. What was his story anyway?

Abel was now out of contention, but there was still Lucrezia, the mobility-challenged witchy woman. The field of three contenders had been reduced by one. Would they fight harder now? Or might they calm down a bit and come to their senses? At this rate, the family wasn't going to last much longer. How had the Moschetto family survived this long? How had they achieved anything of significance with this level of angst seething within?

\*\*\*

The Moschetto family had a crypt in Bonaventure Cemetery, site of one of the weirder scenes in the John Berendt's book and the subsequent movie, *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*. The natives of Savannah refer to the book as "The Book" naturally enough, but as if it had made Savannah, a city that certainly had enough history and caché to be famous in its own right.

Bonaventure Cemetery sits on what's ironically referred to as a "bluff" overlooking the Wilmington River to the east of Savannah proper. It's not a true bluff, not any sort of a

recognizable geological feature. It's a stretch where the river's bank is a bit higher than elsewhere. Originally part of a 600-acre plantation owned by John Mullryne way back in the late 1700s, the land was sold several times until, in 1907, the City of Savannah bought it and turned it into a public cemetery. It's a spooky spot on a bright Southern day. On the day of brother Abel's memorial celebration, if you want to call it that, it was a positively eerie venue.

Entering the cemetery proper, the cortege, composed of a hearse with Abel's over-killed and mutilated remains in a sealed casket, two limos and several private autos, wound its way along Bonaventure's pathways toward the Moschetto crypt. Spanish moss hung from impressive old live oaks, the same as it did elsewhere throughout Savannah, but a cemetery has a different ambiance than downtown city streets. Downtown, it's picturesque; here . . . well, Clint Eastwood chose to shoot his voodoo scenes here for *In the Garden of Good and Evil*. That should say enough.

Between the mist that had risen off the river, the gray sky which made me feel like I was trapped beneath a Tupperware bowl, the tombstones, crypts and shrouding vegetation, it was difficult to see much of any distance. We slowly rolled to a stop before a marble edifice that echoed The Castle for Victorian Gothic flavor. Old Emilio had provided well for his descendants.

Once we were there, without a priest to ramble on, the whole thing didn't take long. The family, that is, the remaining siblings Canelo and Lucrezia, Bella, Jefferson, and a few local friends, arranged themselves along both sides of the granite walkway leading to the crypt. I hung back by the road. After all, I was merely a hired hand.

Someone said in a loud whisper that there was an art critic from New York there. A half-

drunk friend of Abel's snorted at that, receiving an elbow in the ribs for his gaff. This was going to be interesting, I thought.

But it wasn't. It was off-putting. It was boring. It was tedious, even though short. It was a closed casket funeral. Once the crypt had been opened and a place dusted off, paid handlers brought the sealed mahogany box up the walk and placed it inside. They turned and left, walking unconcernedly back to the hearse. A catholic priest mumbled something about ashes, flicked some holy water around, probably to protect himself more than anything else, turned and left. The mourners stood in their double ranks, probably wondering what to do next, then the drunk harrumphed and turned to leave, almost losing his balance in the process. It was over.

Sheep-like, we went back to the cars and returned to real life, or what was left of it. Abel had joined the other famous Bonaventure residents, people like poet Conrad Aiken and lyricist Johnny Mercer. Let the never-ending party begin yet again.

## Queen's Knight Taken

It was almost 11:30 when we got back to The Castle. The day was still bleak and gray, making the gray stone of the Victorian Gothic castle look even more sinister. But it was merely a home, after all, wasn't it? A home with a spare bedroom now.

Across the street, I recognized a GBI car; it looked exactly like the car I'd ridden in the previous day. In it sat Zera Angelina and another agent. She looked like herself: alert and voguish yet businesslike. He sat behind the wheel, a rather large 50-ish gent in a featureless gray suit. They didn't exit the car. They sat and watched as our two limos pulled to a stop in the port cochere.

Canelo stretched as he got out of the leading limo. He had a look on his face that was difficult to sort out. I didn't see grief there. In fact, he'd been perfectly composed through the entire morning's events. As his sister struggled to get out of the limo with her crutch, he said, "I'm going to work." He seemed hardly moved by the events of yesterday and today. I guess he wasn't all that close to Abel, but they happened to be brothers. He started walking around to the side of The Castle; I assumed he was going to get his black Hummer.

Lucrezia finally got out of the car and pulled herself up to her full height and dignity. Her look was a good bit different. She was pissed off. Whether at Canelo for not giving her a hand, or for the fact of Abel's death, or for Canelo's emotionlessly going back to work . . . it was impossible to know. Even when she was open, she was closed up tight. Who knew what made her tick?

My limo, the hired hands ride, emptied, too. I needed to get back to work and so did the others. Swift and Bella headed for the front door, Swift with house key in hand. A deftly applied

twist of the wrist and the door swung open, revealing the front vestibule. There in the geometric center of the floor, in a splash of pastel color that oozed flatly through The Castle's stained glass window, lay Cerberus unmoving in a pool of urine, foam at his muzzle, his eyes open and glazed a fatal gray color to match the day. The Guardian of the Gates of Hades had been slain.

I'd never seen anyone with a crutch run before, but that's exactly what Lucrezia did. She race-hobbled to the side of the beast, then fell to her knees and cradled the dog's head. It was as big as a two year old child. A wail came from her, something I would have expected from her grieving dog rather than from a human throat: a long howling, visceral and elemental, a pure tone that began deep inside her and flowed outward in a spreading wave of agony. She was showing more grief for the damn dog than she had for her deceased older brother who had been killed by rattlers in questionable circumstances, chopped up and weighed piece by piece, and freshly interred.

Swift stood just inside the door, Bella beside him. Jefferson peered around her bulk trying to see what was going on inside. Even without hearing the sound, he knew something was seriously wrong. Canelo came around the corner of the house to check things out, too. The wail continued. Where in her frail frame did she store all that air?

I heard running footsteps. Zera and her partner came in through the open door, the big man shouldering Bella's mass aside, gently but without permission.

"Wha's a problem here?" Branigan demanded, his New York accent discordant in the open hall.

Canelo responded hotly, "Who the hell are you?" Then he caught sight of Zera and knew they were from the Bureau.

Zera's jacket was pushed to the side and her hand rested on the butt of her holstered Moschetto.

Canelo continued, "Oh, it's you. What do you want this time?"

Lucrezia's wail wound down to a stop as she ran out of air. She clutched the dog's head, got another breathe and spat at Canelo, "You bastard! You did this. What did you give him, you son of a bitch?"

Canelo snorted. It came out like a cynical laugh that didn't need further explanation.

Lucrezia's accusation became threat. "You'll be sorry for this, brother. I'll fix you!"

Zera watched and heard, then, attempting to neutralize Lucrezia's murderous mood she announced, "We were here about Abel's autopsy, but it seems we've come upon a murder scene."

"Killing a damn dog isn't murder. This dog killed my brother," Canelo snapped back.

"Actually, no. And that's why we're here," Zera countered. "The dog may have contributed, but . . ."

"What the hell are you talking about? Come out with it. Was something wrong with the autopsy?" Canelo now stood with his fists on his hips, confronting the GBI agents. Faced by his bulk, Zera seemed a bit smaller, even wielding the authority of the state.

The beefy partner responded throatily. "His blood chemistry was off. There was traces of digitalis in him. He might'a been set up. The digitalis could'a messed up his balance, slowed his responses." He looked around at all our faces. He had everyone's full attention now.

"Digitalis? What's that?"

"It's a heart stimulant. They used to use it in small doses to manage irregular heartbeat,

but not much any more. People died from taking too much of it. Now where do you suppose that came from?"

"What are you talking about?" Canelo was angry and seemed about to blow. I thought he seemed confused, frustrated. What had happened to his normal day-to-day life?

Bella broke in. "Mr. Abel been takin' that fo' a while now. He like those herbal med'cine, y'know, not all that new-fangle fancy stuff. I made it fo' him. Jefferson here," she gestured toward her son, "he be growin' that foxglove in the garden, wi' my otha herbs, y'know. Mr. Abel take it e'ry day . . . in the mo'nin'."

"Are you a doctor, lady? Or are you practicing medicine without a license? Who are you, anyway?" It was Mr. Detective again.

Zera filled him in. "That's Bella Gibson, the housekeeper. I told you about her. She's the one who . . ."

"Oh, yeah," he remembered. "She's the voodoo queen."

Bella denied the title. And she was very serious. "I don't do no voodoo, mista. I jes' like my herbs. Use 'em fo' cookin' an' all such as that."

"And poisoning your boss too, eh?"

But Zera was on Bella's side. "Wait a minute, Branigan. Lots of people take herbs. You take that Echinacea stuff when you feel a sniffle coming on, don't you?"

"Well . . . yeah. So? But that guy was dead. Echinacea don't kill me." Branigan was a little bit defensive.

Zera went on. "Well, the digitalis didn't kill him either. There wasn't enough," She turned to the gathered family and staff and added, "There was probably enough though to affect

his balance. That may be why he fell on the stairs. We came here to tell you that and to find out where he got it. I guess we know now.”

She looked down at the unbelieving Lucrezia, still on the floor with the dog’s head in her lap. “We’ll want to examine the dog. The lab can find out why he died.”

They called for a “meat wagon,” which arrived in minutes. Two white-coated attendants bagged the dog, loaded it into their van, and drove off with orders to have the lab perform a “tox screen.” That would reveal the method. All of us had had the opportunity. But what was the motive?

The day improved somewhat after the cops left, though an air of gloom continued to hang over everyone at the Gothic manse: Swift, Bella, Jefferson, and me. Maybe Lucrezia went back to work, too. That’s where Canelo had gone, or so he’d said. Maybe Lucrezia went into mourning and hid somewhere.

I went back to work too. I planned to start with a call to Sandia Escoretta, Ph.D, Professor of Italian at Georgia State University.

## Middlegame

Things were going from bad to worse for the Moschetto clan. The rivalries were right out there for everyone to see. No subterfuge any longer, if there ever was any. Tempers were flaring. If Lucrezia was right in her assumption and accusation, they were going for each other's throats . . . and not at all figuratively.

Of course, there was still the open question of Abel's "accident" among the rattlesnakes. I still wasn't sure what I'd seen, but if the dog's demise was any barometer of the situation and the tensions in it, I'd have to lean in the direction of Canelo's helping his brother to fall into the snake pit, not trying to save him. The Crown was that important? Or was The Crown just the final straw in an otherwise perfectly dysfunctional family's emotional morass?

From what I'd learned, the dead father, Benito Moschetto, had been a respected and generally appreciated man, a member of civic organizations, a community leader, head of a highly successful international business.

And what about the death that precipitated all of this? Zera had said that the Georgia Bureau of Investigation had felt that his death wasn't an accident, but they hadn't proven it. The case was sensitive because of the international implications in such a finding. If Benito had been murdered, who did it? A business rival? Had it been an international hit? Or was the murderer much closer to home, perhaps a cuckoo in the very nest that nurtured it? Yikes! I was still hanging out in the nest, too.

There was too much in this for me. I'd gotten into genealogical consulting because I wanted a nice quiet life in the library. I've never been a man of action. I didn't need that kind of excitement. After my family was taken from me by some gang asshole's random violence, I'd

pretty much given up on my fellow man, at least as far as interacting with him. I decided to bury myself in research, in an intellectual life of old family papers and academic histories. It was much safer than dealing with people directly, and a great deal less hassle. Just let me poke around in those dusty corners and I'll send you my bill when I'm done. No muss, no fuss.

I thought about other people I've met over the years. Man, it was enough to turn a person cynical. Everyone I met seemed crazy in one way or another. It was just that some people controlled it better, or perhaps they merely hid it better. Love that superego. But everyone was "out there" somewhere, creating mayhem of all types in the world and making believe by common consent that it was civilization. Oh, well. There wasn't anything I could do about it. I wanted to just take care of my own business and stay out of the way of the bulldozers.

\*\*\*

I felt I was done digging in the home and factory libraries. I'd completed all the organizing and digging I could there, finding nothing helpful amongst the piles of old papers, the contracts and whatever else had been provided. The next step?

My curiosity about the parchment and stained glass window continued nibbling at me. I had a feeling about it, that it might be important, maybe not key, but at least a lead worth following. And it was the only thing left. It was time to call in another professional.

In all the confusion, I hadn't had an opportunity to ask Canelo for permission to spend his money on a translation of the window or parchment. At this point, I didn't even want to ask. I wanted nothing more to do with these maniacs. But I'd given my word that I'd stay, so I would, if only for another day and a half. And rather than sit around wondering about things it looked like I'd never solve, I went back to the library where I had my notes and the name and phone

number of the translator, Sandia Escoretta, Ph.D.

In the library, I found the index card that Twitchell had given me, and I dialed the number.

Sandia Escoretta, Ph.D. turned out to be a woman, a heavy smoker by the rasp in her throat. She had to break off our conversation a couple of times to cough up a lung. I could hear the pain in her hacking. I'll bet she was fun in class too, the kind of teacher the students had all sorts of pet names for, and little scenarios they used to first mock and then exaggerate her various ways.

I explained the problem to her. There was a stained glass window, and there was a framed parchment, and no, they weren't at the same location, and no, I didn't have a picture of either but I could get her one, and yes, I could drop it off at her department office at the university this afternoon, or I could email it if she want, and when could I pick up the translation, and how much would it cost, and did she charge per word or by the line or for the whole job, and no, it wasn't very long, just about eight lines, like a short poem . . . "No problem. I'll email a shot of it to you in a few minutes, Professor." Click.

Well, that was straight-forward enough. Why hadn't I called her before? But now I had, so all was well with the world . . . oops, not exactly. There'd been two possible human murders and a dead dog to show for the family's efforts to identify and locate The Crown. And I'd been threatened rather thoroughly by two of the scariest people I'd ever met, and that includes Crazy Eddie, the West Coast Hell's Angel who decided he wanted to be my friend years ago and kept showing up at my apartment and climbing in through the windows at odd hours. Eddie was just a good time guy who occasionally flew off the handle after a few days of heavy drinking and

smoking dope. The Moschettos had no handles; they were just flying free.

It was time to shoot a picture of the window. I went down the hall to my bedroom and got my digital camera, then headed for The Castle's vestibule.

Standing at the top of the staircase, I was faced the window directly. Luckily, that seemed to be the best vantage point. The morning's clouds had cleared and the window now sparkled with Georgia sunlight. The glass glowed in all its various colors, contrast was good, and the details were crisp in my viewfinder.

I'd always been interested in photography, had done a bit of black-and-white darkroom work over the years, and even won a prize or two in local photo competitions. I've never been paid for a picture, but that wasn't what I was after. I just enjoyed it.

When the digital thing finally took off, I went out and bought a decent digital camera that I could make subtle adjustments on to control my exposures, and I'd been having fun with it ever since. This was going to be easy. I braced the camera on the balustrade, framed and focused carefully, then made several exposures, varying the settings as I went. I'd evaluate which was clearest and email that one to the professor.

Back at my laptop computer, I transferred the images, ran them through my photo manipulation software to make a few final adjustments, and picked one image that seemed to be the clearest. It showed the entire window, complete with all the fancy gothic text, the rich colors, the flourishes and little filigree decorations down the sides, all the way to the stone casements. I shot it down the line to Sandia Escoretta, Ph.D. It would be a while before I had a response. Everything else seemed at a dead end, if you'll pardon the expression.

\*\*\*

There I was, just sitting in the library an hour later going through papers looking for anything I might have previously missed while I waited for an email back from my academic translator when I heard that all too familiar stomp, slide, stomp, slide coming down the hall. I hoped that Moschetto woman wasn't coming to the library on another terrifying social call. Unfortunately, she was.

I sat facing the door, which was ajar. I watched Lucrezia as she bumped the door fully open with her hip and stumped in, coming directly across to the table where I sat. She didn't smile. Her expression was determined, focused on her single purpose, which as it turned out, was to intimidate me further. At this stage, it wouldn't require much effort on her part. Her chamois gloves were coming off, and the brass of her bones was showing. As she neared the table, she suddenly raised her crutch and slammed it down on the surface. It hit with considerable mass and a loud thwack, quite a bit louder than I'd expected. A small hole in the center of the crutch's base faced me directly. I could see the twists in it; it was rifled. I thought back to the caliber comparison poster in the conference room at Fabbrica Moschetto. Maybe .22 caliber. I thought of her marksmanship award back in the conference room at Fabbrica Moschetto and knew without a doubt that this was a "non-traditional" crutch.

There was no repartee this time, no nonsense, no skirting around the issues. "You know where I stand, and you know what I want. Are you going to give it to me?" Was this the final confrontation?

It was a direct enough question, and it demanded an equally direct answer. I'd had enough of their intrigues and games, and I decided in that split second to let her know it.

"Frankly, I don't care who gets what. I haven't been able to find The Crown so far

anyway, so your demand is really quite useless. Besides, I'm going home."

She hadn't expected that sort of response. She had expected abject groveling at her feet. She was a woman of superlatives, including her exquisite Mediterranean beauty, and most men, including me a couple of days earlier, were totally flummoxed by her. She was scary, but I felt that I was beyond her insidious influence by then. After all, I had seen the inner Lucrezia, the one of the black heart, the woman not to be trusted, the woman you should never turn your back to, the woman from whose hand you should never accept an edible tidbit. Truly, she was capable of anything her Borgia namesake had been capable of in that lawless and vindictive time so long ago in Renaissance Italy.

But she was tenacious, even if not effective. Another ploy was forming in her medieval mind. A coy look flitted across her face, her eyes dipped to the floor, then came back up to my face, burning with their intensity as she stood there, her misshapen body supported by both hands on the table in front of her. Her face became a lovely but uninformative mask, unreadable: no defeat, no conniving, no pleading, no triumph, no glee. Flat.

"Bones, there's no reason for us to be antagonistic. There isn't, really. And to make it up to you in some small degree for the trouble and upset we seem to have put you through, I'd like you to take a little drive with me. I've something to show you that might open your eyes a bit."

I was curious at this change of tack. What was she up to this time?

She went on, "I'd like you to drive me out to Fabbrica Moschetto. I think you'll be fascinated."

But I'd had about enough of her and her clan. I stuffed some of the scattered papers into another file box that lay open on the table. "What is it? What's the mystery? Why not just tell

me?” I was frustrated, as well as exasperated with her bobbing and weaving, her game playing. The subtle scent of her was still noticeable, but it failed to have the cloying effect of our first meeting.

“There are things you need to see out at the factory. They’ve been kept from you . . . by Canelo, that S.O.B.” she spat. “But I can’t just tell you outright. I think you need to see this for yourself.”

I didn’t trust her, but her proposition was intriguing. And don’t you know, she’d hit a nerve. I was incurably curious. That’s what made me an effective researcher. Perhaps I’d actually learn something useful about this vexed tribe.

“I’m not done here yet. Maybe later. Maybe tomorrow. How about that?”

She considered. I saw indecision in her face, then decision. “Yes, tomorrow morning would be good. Yes, tomorrow morning would be excellent. That gives me time to prepare things exactly. Nine o’clock then, after breakfast?”

Lucrezia snatched up her crutch, lurched about, and worked her way out the library door, muttering, “Tomorrow’s the day . . . yes, tomorrow.”

And so I had a date with the Queen of the Moschettos, a date that would change my attitude toward life itself. But I didn’t know that at the time, of course. I didn’t have a clue.

# **The Fifth Day**

## **Cops Come A'calling**

I awakened that morning with a premonition of disaster. As a general rule, I'm not sensitive to that sort of thing, although I don't doubt that other people are. And I never doubted that Bella had "the sight," as she called it. Why not? Some people's realities are just different from other people's.

This morning I had a feeling, and because I'm not generally psychically aware, I tend to give those feelings more credence when I do get them. In the past, I've had "gut feelings" about this and that, and when I ignored them, I invariably got into trouble. If I acted on what the feeling told me to do, I usually got into trouble too, but I always felt relief that I was doing the best thing in the circumstances, and the trouble I got into was more an inconvenience than a full-blown disaster.

On this particular morning my guts were telling me something. I needed to pay attention.

I hadn't set an alarm and no one came to awaken me. I slept in, until 7 a.m. That was late for me.

The windows in my room faced east, so the sun was bright when I finally pulled the covers off my head and stretched. I stayed in bed a bit longer that morning because of my premonition. It might have been a dream, one of those dreams you have just before waking, but which you wake from not knowing if it was a dream at all. And then it takes a minute before you realize that it means nothing in the real world. This felt different. It stayed with me as I showered, dressed, and headed down to breakfast.

\*\*\*

There didn't seem to be anyone else around, at least not until I met Bella in the dining room. Jefferson, munching on a sausage biscuit and clutching another, left the room when he saw me come in. I was the only one eating in at The Castle that morning, but Bella couldn't have been more accommodating.

“Mo'nin', Mista Bones. It's a lovely day, considerin'. Y'doin' all right this mo'nin'?”

“Good morning, Bella. Yes, I think I'm fine. Got a feeling though. Something's going to happen today. Something important.” I edged into one of the high-backed throne chairs.

She eyed me with one eyebrow arched. “Now, I have that ver' same feelin' this mo'nin', Mista Bones. Ain't that som'thin'?”

Her eyes and mine connected. I didn't quite understand what flashed between us, but there was something to it more than just a glance or a “good morning” greeting. In any event, reality had to be served.

“So what's for breakfast, Bella? Anything special?”

“I made some nice biscuits this mo'nin'. From scratch, y'know. Tha's the on'iest way. They be nice with some o' Jefferson's honey. He rob the bees, don' chu' know?” She smiled all over.

“That would be fine. Thanks for the suggestion.” I didn't want to seem ungracious, but I took a shot anyway. “Can I get some eggs and ham, too?” I was ravenous. Despite my earlier premonition, this might turn out to be a very nice day after all. I had Bella, her kitchen, and Jefferson's honey all to myself.

“Why certain'y, Mista Bones. You be the on'y one this mo'nin'. Miss Lucrezia di'n'

come home 'til late las' night. She up to som'thin' all right. That girl's a caution."

That was hardly news.

So I sat quietly and had a wonderful southern breakfast, replete with the best biscuits I'd ever had in my life. I could get used to this, if it weren't for all the free-floating angst that flooded this family mansion. After greeting me and taking my breakfast request, Bella didn't hang around chatting. She had other duties and took them seriously, but she didn't leave the room, instead choosing to linger half through the doorway where she could listen to what was developing.

As I was finishing my second cup of freshly brewed coffee, Swift came into the dining room with Zera and her partner Branigan in tow. "Detectives Angelina and Branigan are here, sir. I hope I'm not interrupting your breakfast, sir, but they insisted that I bring them in directly." And then to the two GBI detectives, "Would you care for some coffee?"

Branigan answered for the team as they entered the room, "That would be great. Thanks." His eyes swept around the room, scooping up details: the dark wood paneling, the heavy mahogany table, the twelve chairs arranged five facing five, a head and foot, the ornately carved mahogany credenza that usually held myriad good things from Bella's kitchen, though not this morning. It was personal service today, not buffet style.

Swift turned to Bella, who had retreated quietly into the kitchen doorway. "Bella, would you please take care of our new guests?"

She hesitated, curious to hear why they were visiting so early, then turned around and headed back into her realm.

I tried to exchange morning greetings, but the cops were on a mission. No time for mere

pleasantries. And I'd been feeling so relaxed until then, except for the feeling that my little academic world was going to end, or at least change in some shattering way.

Branigan was direct. "The dog was poisoned. He died of an overdose of digitalis, the same drug that was found in Abel's system." He was a blunt brute, the perfect announcer for bad news. Was that his training, or his true personality? Or maybe it was just years of bad news delivered in, to him, the least burdensome manner. He'd become the consummate professional bearer of bad tidings, the messenger we'd all love to kill.

I didn't know what to say. Why were they telling me, anyway? I wasn't a member of the family, or a party to any of their shenanigans. I was an innocent bystander, a mere factotum hired to dig through their family history for something that might never be found, something that might not even exist. I had my doubts at this point.

Zera answered my unspoken question. "We thought you might have some answers for us, maybe an understanding of why someone would want the dog dead. These people seem to have lots of issues, and we don't want the situation to escalate. Someone might get hurt."

I thought about that for a second. It seemed a bit late for caution. "Well, I've been thinking about what happened in Claxton, Abel's death. I'm just not convinced it was a pure accident."

Branigan looked me over with unblinking eyes. "We're not convinced either. We weren't convinced then, and particularly not after the lab geeks found digitalis in his system. Someone around here's been playing with herbal poisons."

I went on. "Well . . . I can't exactly sort out what happened, but I think Canelo might have killed dear brother Abel. Things get involved pretty fast with them. And, of course there's

The Crown.”

Bella swept into the room with a big silver tray. “Here’s yo’ coffee. An’ I brang some biscuit’ an’ honey, too.”

How long had she been standing just outside the door? How much had she heard? Did it matter? I doubted it. The cops didn’t seem to care. Branigan continued to watch me as Bella set the tray down on the sideboard and carried filled cups to the table for the cops, followed by a plate of biscuits, butter, and a pot of honey.

Branigan picked up a steaming coffee and squinted at me through the rising vapors. “What is this ‘crown’ thing? What’s that got to do with anything?”

“It’s why I came to Savannah in the first place. I’m a genealogist, a researcher. Canelo had contacted me to find it for the family. It’s a heirloom of some kind that’s been in the family for generations and now seems to have gone missing. They all want it pretty badly. Those of them who are still around to claim it anyway.”

“You think it’s worth enough for them to kill for it?” Branigan was hot on the trail. Here was something tangible for his investigative canines to tear into.

“Well, the deal was, and this is a bit complicated . . . The deal was that The Crown was passed down through the family via primogeniture...”

Branigan’s eyebrows shot up. “Primo what?” Legal history didn’t seem to be his forte. He was a street cop. Give him a nice simple murder and he was in his element. Colonel Mustard in the dining room with the candlestick. Legal theory? Not so much.

“Primogeniture. It’s a legal theory that the Moschettos brought from the old country. It says that the eldest son gets everything and the other siblings get nothing. That is, unless the

eldest son doesn't survive to take the bequest. Daughters can forget it altogether, unless there's no one else in line before them. You can look it up in any law dictionary," I explained. "And the bequest to Canelo is specifically stated in Benito's will. I've got a copy of the will up in the library if you want to see it. Right now, it looks like Canelo's going to get it, if it's found at all."

Branigan nodded, his mouth twisted to one side in thought, one eye shut. He tapped the table with one finger, his trigger finger. I could see that he was warming to the whole idea. I guess he thought a motive had surfaced. He didn't need much if the blank space in his mental picture began to fill in. Here was an ancient crown, a missing family heirloom of unknown value, a dead father to start the ball rolling, and a sister who couldn't inherit it.

"You think Lucrezia would kill her brother for it?" Now that he had something on the hook, Branigan continued to reel in his line.

"Why ask me? I can't say. There's more going on in the family than simple competition for an artifact of some kind. They hate each other. And that's not something new. I came here expecting another straight-forward research job. Since arriving, I've been threatened, thrown into the ocean with sharks, threatened again, and then, after deciding to leave Savannah for my health, offered lots of money to stay. Canelo and Lucrezia are hotly vying for it. Abel was killed before he could make any trouble for me. If Lucrezia pulls anything, she'll probably have a credible insanity defense."

"Why didn't you tell me all this?" Zera inquired, a honeyed biscuit in her hand. She was miffed that I hadn't confided in her.

I tried to defend myself. "It just didn't come up. Besides, you seemed to have your own agenda with these people."

Branigan stood. “Well, that’s it for me. You got any more for him, Z?”

Zera looked a bit disappointed. “No, I guess not.” She looked back at me and asked, “So you’ll be leaving Savannah soon? Today? Tomorrow?”

What was this? A woman was interested in me? Or was I just a material witness?

“Probably tomorrow. I’m waiting for a translation that may tell me more about The Crown. Who knows? It’s a loose end that I want to tie up before leaving.”

“I’ll call you tomorrow morning,” she said. They left then, leaving me with a feeling that my part of this whole thing wasn’t quite finished. I still had to make it through the rest of this day first.

## Lucrezia En Prise

When I stepped out of The Castle at 9 a.m. into a clear Savannah morning, the sky was an undecorated blazing blue, the air smelled of Jefferson's extravagant flower gardens on both sides of the port cochere. A stroll around Savannah's historic downtown would have given me time to think, perhaps to find an angle I was missing. Maybe there was a clue that I needed to look at from a different perspective. Maybe I just needed a break from the tension and gloom of that haunted Gothic stone building looming behind me.

But I had a date with the queen, and true to her word, Lucrezia's little black Miata convertible was there to meet me as I stepped out into the sunlight. She stood next to it on the passenger side, crutch in hand, her black hair glistening, her black eyes burning, her black dress tight on her lithe but distorted frame.

"I hope you won't mind driving us out to the plant. I try not to drive if I don't absolutely have to." It wasn't said exactly as a pleasantry. It was just a fact, a dry fact.

"No problem," I said as I clambered over the driver's door to climb aboard. "I've always wanted to drive one of these."

Unfortunately for me, it was an automatic, undoubtedly for convenience because of her club foot. I would have preferred a stick shift for the fun of it, but you can't have everything. While I familiarized myself with the controls, she opened the passenger door and awkwardly slid in. Once buckled, she said, "Do you remember how to get there?"

"Yep. I have a pretty good directional memory. Hang on." And off we went to the next act in the search for Paneta's vaunted Crown, through the live-oak overhung streets of downtown Savannah, out of the city into the Georgia flatness, and thence to Fabbrica Moschetto, where the

next act was about to be played out.

En route, I tried to make conversation, mostly about how great the little car handled, but Lucrezia wasn't having any. After the non-existing morning "pleasantries" back at The Castle, she had tightened up completely, all prickly like a Jimson weed seed pod. As we drove along, and I failed to understand how this could happen in an open-topped car, the atmosphere became thicker, colder, more unfriendly. She was working herself into a snit. By the time we arrived at the plant's gate, she was in a cold fury, stamping her crutch on the floorboard between her legs and muttering to herself.

Spotting Lucrezia and her familiar sports car, the guard on gate duty waved us in past the checkpoint without a stop. We swept into a reserved space by the office door where "Ms M" was stenciled in white paint on the pavement. I killed the engine.

"Here we are. Safe and sound." I tried to lighten the mood, but Lucrezia just worked her seatbelt loose without a response and wrestled herself out of the car, then headed for the front door. I tried to get there to open the door for her, but even though hobbled at birth as she was, she was too quick for me. She jerked the door open with such force that it slammed back against the building on its outward swing and she plowed on in: stump, slide, stump, slide . . . relentlessly.

The women in the front reception room all looked up as Lucrezia swept in, like prairie dogs alerted at the same instant to approaching danger.

Miss Savage stood up beside her desk, bedecked in her most austere administrative pomposity, her blond beehive hairdo rising above her like a lighthouse blazing through the fog.

"Ah, Miss Lucrezia." She noticed me trying to keep up. "And Mr. Bones." And then

back on duty, “I’m sorry, but Mr. Moschetto left strict instructions that he wasn’t to be disturbed.”

Lucrezia popped one of Miss Savage’s stilettoed feet with the bottom end of her heavy crutch. “Out of my way, bitch. I’ve had it with you, too!”

Miss Savage howled and started hopping around on her remaining good foot. Oh, boy. This was going to be good, but I didn’t know just how good. I continued to follow her down the corridor as she headed for Canelo’s office. I wanted to see this.

I was amazed at how fast she was going. I had to hustle just to keep her in sight. When she was on a mission, her handicap was no handicap at all. She flung Canelo’s office door open and charged in.

“What the hell is this?” Canelo roared as he started up from his desk. “What is it this time?”

As I turned into the office doorway, she slammed her crutch down on Canelo’s broad desk. Startled, he flopped back down, his rolling desk chair jumped back a foot. He eyed the crutch as if it were a snake coiling for a strike. I ducked back behind the doorjamb and stuck my head around enough to watch.

“Hey, be careful with that thing. It might just go off.”

Something was going on here, but I wasn’t sure what this strange woman was up to. It seemed like she was going to have it out with Canelo. Her claws were showing.

“If it goes off, it’ll be my doing,” Lucrezia snapped back. “And you know the reason, too.”

Canelo started up from his chair again. “What is this, Lu?”

Lucrezia lifted her crutch with both hands, like a rifle. There was a resounding pop. A framed certificate on the wall behind Canelo shattered. Glass fell to the carpet.

Trying to become a smaller target, I dropped into a crouch.

“Dammit, Lu. I told you to be careful with that thing!”

“Sit down, brother dear.” She leveled the crutch-gun at his chest. Canelo lowered himself slowly back into the seat of Moschetto power.

“And you,” she gestured with her crutch-gun at me where I crouched in the doorway.

“Me?”

“Yeah, you! Sit yourself down over there where I can see you.” She wagged the gun toward a chair at the side of the room, away from the door. I should have run, but I was charmed by this armed snake. I went to the chair and sat. I never argue with a woman holding a gun. A crutch? Maybe. But not a crutch-gun.

Miss Savage stuck her head into the room. “What’s going on? I heard...”

Lucrezia wheeled and put a bullet into the wall by the door. The wood splintered and Miss Savage ducked out. Her stilettos clack-clacked quickly back down the corridor. There were excited voices from the typing pool.

Lucrezia turned back to face her brother.

“You killed my damn dog, didn’t you?” She was pissed. “But that’s not all, is it? You killed Abel, too. You killed him. Right in front of hundreds of witnesses. But that didn’t matter, did it? And I’ll bet you killed daddy, too!”

Canelo studied his baby sister alertly. She was on the edge, actually a good ways over, but he remained cool. “Abel killed dad. You’ve got to know that. He told me to my face. And he

got just what was coming to him. I did it for us!” His cool had become colder, implacable, an ice wall. “He wanted The Crown and he killed dad to get it. But it didn’t work, did it? The will still gives it to me.” He nodded in my direction. “If this jerk ever finds it.”

The crutch-gun fired again. Canelo winced as another frame shattered on the wall behind him. More glass tumbled.

“Cut that out! You’re going to hurt someone!”

“That’s right,” she spat back. “I’m going to hurt someone.”

Another shot, this time into Canelo’s left bicep. He yelped. They were small caliber bullets, perhaps .22s. I guessed they probably couldn’t do too much damage. But what did I know? And how many rounds were in that crutch anyway? “Non-traditional” was what the certificate on the conference room wall said. Indeed.

Canelo lunged at his desk, grabbed a drawer pull, and wrenched the drawer out. It came flying out of the desk, clattering to the floor, its contents spilling: pens, pencils, paper clips, and a gleaming stainless steel Moschetto semi-auto pistol. He reached down for it.

Bang. She fired another shot, into the desk top this time, ruining the slick mahogany top. “Oh, no you don’t. I’ll shoot the guns today.” Lucrezia was determined to have her way. She knew she’d crossed the line. She was committed.

I was stuck there in the chair. She stood between me and the door.

Canelo stood, squeezing his left bicep, wincing. “All right, Lu. What do you want?”

She answered in a shrill wail. “What do I want? What have I always wanted? To be treated like a full member of this damn family, to get what’s mine, to . . . to...” Another shot, this time grazing Canelo’s side. He spun part way around, then dropped back into his chair. He

was panting.

“What are you doing, Lu? Are you going to kill me? I always took care of my baby sister, didn’t I?”

I could hear sirens in the distance. The cops were coming. More than one siren, too. They were coming in force. Good old Miss Savage, the perfect office manager.

Lucrezia had tears running down her face, but she wasn’t exactly crying. It was more like onion tears than emotional upset. “I’m done, brother dear,” she said, “and so are you. Who gets Fabbrica Moschetto now? Who gets The Crown now?”

Her seventh shot, a killing shot, caught Canelo in the throat. His eyes bulged out with surprise first, then with the realization that his baby sister was snuffing him out. Blood gushed. He gurgled.

She was really quite the expert shooter with her little toy. Her father, the innovative firearm manufacturer, had undoubtedly designed it especially for her self-protection. But he couldn’t possibly have imagined this scenario playing out.

Another shot, a head shot just to be sure, and Canelo slumped to the floor. Only one Moschetto left. She was going to get The Crown after all, primogeniture be damned. Everything be damned. I’d have more respect for small caliber bullets from then on.

The crutch-gun swung in my direction. A cold sweat broke out all over me. In a split second, I knew I was going to die, too. It all came clearly to me, and instantly, too. But . . . what about my work? I had letters to write, contracts. Who’d pay the rent on my apartment? My car payments? Oh, no. Not that I’d be missed personally. Time didn’t exactly slow down. So that’s what happens when you know you’re going to die.

The crutch-gun clicked. She'd shot it empty on Canelo.

She went for Canelo's gun on the floor. I leaped for the door, diving through into the corridor and rolling. A cop dressed in black from head to toe leaped over me as I rolled away. He slid to a stop on the far side of the door. Another cop, right behind him, stopped on the near side of the door frame. More cops were coming down the corridor, all dressed in the height of ninja chic: black on black.

The first cop yelled, "Drop the gun, lady! Put it down now!"

Another shot came from the office, a heavier caliber this time, more forceful. A hole appeared in the corridor wall. She'd gotten hold of Canelo's gun. A second shot: a second hole. One of the cops fired a single surgical round. Pop!

Lucrezia screamed and I heard her pistol drop to the floor. Whatever had happened in there, it was over. I didn't know if he'd killed her or what.

There were lots of cops coming and going after that. EMTs entered Canelo's office and brought Lucrezia out strapped to a gurney. There was lots of blood, but she was angry and feisty, so it was safe to assume she'd been shot but only wounded. The SWAT team had regrouped outside the building. There were official people from the medical examiner's office, local homicide investigators, and plenty of questions for Miss Savage, and me, and the girls from the front room. Head were swiveling as questions and answers flashed around the room.

"Tell us the whole story again, from the beginning."

"Did you know the shooter?"

"Was she an excitable type?"

"Did she have a weapon when she came in?"

And, pointing to me, “Who is this guy? Is he the boyfriend?”

Eventually, Zera and Branigan arrived. I knew they would. They had to because there had been another violent death at Fabbrica Moschetto, arms supplier to the world. And I needed to see a friendly face for a change instead of hostile Savannah detectives who thought I had somehow helped Lucrezia kill her brother.

Branigan went to confer with the evidence team in the office, but Zera came to where I sat up against a wall in the typing pool. Though there was concern on her face when she came in, when she saw that I hadn't been shot, she became all business.

“What happened, Ben? Start at the beginning.”

Off I went again. I told her about Lucrezia's invitation the day before to see something special at the plant today. No, she hadn't told me what it was, just that I needed to see it for myself. It looked like she'd planned to kill him for a while, at least since the previous day.

And then there was the ride to the plant and how she'd bulldozed her way past Miss Savage, who was herself being interviewed by homicide detectives across the room, and how she'd then confronted her brother Canelo with her accusations.

The whole thing was pretty surreal. I mean, I had witnessed a murder. No doubt about it this time. Perhaps I'd even been an unwitting accomplice by driving her out to the plant, but it didn't look like I'd be charged with anything. Hell, the SWAT cops had had to avoid me as I tumbled from the room in a panic when they went in. And even though I'd thought I was going to die there for a second, the aftermath was like an out-of-body experience. As I was interviewed, questioned and re-questioned by everyone, I felt like I was watching the proceedings from a distance too, like I wasn't exactly there in the moment, but watching it

unfold on the big screen. It's hard to explain, but if I were an alien and kept a journal, this would be a featured episode from my life on earth.

Eventually, another gurney was wheeled into Canelo's office. After a while, two EMTs brought it back out with a body in a black bag strapped to it. Canelo's earthly remains: blood, bone, meat, and plenty of testosterone. The king was dead. Long live the . . . Who?

\*\*\*

It had been a long and thrilling day for me. Zera dropped me off at The Castle at 2 p.m. All I wanted to do was pack my things and leave town. The police didn't seem to have anything for me to do any longer. They'd had my statement several times out at the plant.

But there was a loose end. I still hadn't found Paneta's Crown. I went upstairs to pack and check my email.

## The Crown Itself

I was fed up. I wanted to go home to Atlanta. I'd had enough of the lovely city of Savannah. Hadn't even had the chance to do more than an hour of sightseeing. Grasping crazies seemed to abound here. Granted, I was dealing with only a tiny sliver of the population of 130,000, not including the surrounding county area, but I'd wager that the ones I'd met were the craziest of the lot. This experience had changed my mind about Savannah, the self-proclaimed "Hostess City of the South."

Back in my Victorian bedroom, I threw my suitcase onto the bed and started slinging my clothes into it. Clean or dirty didn't matter. I was leaving. I had some cash in my pocket, but the bait of a bigger paycheck wasn't bait enough to hold me.

Still, there was one problem that rankled. I had come here to find Paneta's Crown and if I left now, I would have failed to find it.

And there was the loose thread of my professor of Italian language and culture to tie off. The final ligature?

By the time I checked my email on the laptop, it was 2:30 in the afternoon. Sure enough, there was a message from Sandia Escoretta, Ph.D. I dug right into it.

First off, she asked me to meet her at her office about 3:30. That would work for me. It seemed that besides the raw information she'd found about Paneta, there were subtleties in the window image I'd sent her that she wanted to point out to me herself.

I decided to call her to learn what I could before heading out to the university. She might have something that would help me decide whether to leave town or not. If I was close to solving the riddle, it would make sense to stay another day or so. If the mystery only deepened, I was

gone.

The phone was answered by Sandia Escoretta, Ph.D. herself. “Yeah. Who are you and what do you want?”

“It’s Ben Bones. I sent you that photo of . . .”

“Yeah, yeah. I know who you are. Hold on a second.” On the other end of the line, I heard some swishing sounds, followed by a loud crash. “Damn!” She coughed a few times, cleared her throat, then spit.

“Are you all right?” I didn’t want my historical source to expire before I got my info.

“Yeah, yeah,” she answered in a mutter, half to me and half to herself. “There’s just no place to stack anything anymore. Too much paper. Damn students!”

“Well, have you found anything useful for me?”

“Hold your horses,” she rasped. “Yeah, I found plenty. It’s what I expected. You got a couple of minutes?”

“Of course,” I answered. This was important, and I had as much time for her as needed to get it all.

She ground on. “As it turned out, Paneta was a rather devious fellow. The translation was very interesting indeed, and I’m glad you brought this to me. I’m exactly the right person to ask about this.”

She turned out to be, if not exactly a gushing fountain of information, at least a thin hose producing a very focused data stream.

“Paneta was a political intriguer, a player at king-making in the Western Italian port town of Livorno in the early part of the 19th century. At that time, three families were vying for

political control of the province, control of local olive oil production, and control of the local fishing industry.”

“But what about ‘The Crown?’” I interrupted.

She leaned back in her creaky wooden desk chair. “Hold your horses. You got to hear the set-up before I get to the punch line. This is my big moment of revelation. You got to wait ‘til I’m good and ready.”

If I was a smoker, this would be the time to light up, but I wasn’t. I tapped out a rhythm on the tabletop as she relaunched her narrative.

“Now, Livorno wasn’t in Sicily, so the intrigue wasn’t one of those ‘black hand’ sort of things. Nonetheless, those coastal folks were a feisty bunch, as political types fighting for control can be. These people were really into it, too. The city had been divided amongst the three families for years, but the infighting came to a head during Paneta’s lifetime, and he was in it up to his eyebrows.

“In the end, Paneta wound up on the wrong side of the power struggle, and very dead for his trouble. His villa was burned, and his lands and property were taken over by the winning family, who were by then the local power people, so who was going to complain?”

“Paneta was a noted poet and philosopher of his time. And an avowed atheist, which was a dangerous position to take in those strongly Catholic days. He traveled widely, was rather inventive, and was interested in everything from astronomy to biology, from engineering to the arts of sculpture, poetry and philosophy.”

“Sounds like a real character,” I interjected.

“Yeah. He was probably pretty hard to take in person. He had an inflated view of his

place in the world and the mark he would leave on it. He named his artistic products grandly. He sculpted a granite horse and named it 'Not For a Mere God.' Another example of his egotism was a primitive painting of the Crucifixion he named 'The Gift.' People either loved him for his outrageous approach or blew him off as a poser, braggart, and even a heretic."

"So . . ." I wished she'd get to the important part. Why was I even here?

"But that's all just background. Not exactly what you wanted, is it? Hang on. Here comes the kicker. Paneta's Crown was, in fact, what Paneta himself believed to be his most valuable and lasting output. According to him, it was a distillation of his life philosophy, and following its simple precepts would grant any mere human a satisfying and comfortable life of inner peace. In other words, Paneta was an arrogant didact. This guy was probably very difficult to deal with personally, and impossible to be around for any length of time. No wonder they killed him."

"But what about the translation?"

"I sent you that in my email. Didn't you read it?" she demanded.

"Yes, I did. But I don't get it." I looked at the computer screen in front of me. The original text, in both the framed parchment and the stained glass window, read:

*Si entra in questa vita con niente  
Si lascia la vita con niente  
Mentre su terra,  
Ama sempre la vostra famiglia  
Fa' la cosa giusta  
Rispetta altri ugualmente  
E la vostra vita varra' la pena di vivere  
E di valore all'umanita'.*

The translation . . . well, it was simple. Here's what it said:

*You come into this life with nothing,  
You leave life with nothing,*

*While on earth, always  
Love your family,  
Do the right thing,  
Respect others equally,  
And your life will be worth living  
And of value to humanity.*

She coughed out a curt laugh. “That’s it. That’s what you’re looking for. That’s Paneta’s Crown.”

“You’re kidding! A poem? That’s the entire thing? So what’s the big deal about it? It’s like ‘The Golden Rule’ that we all learned as kids.”

It looked like the search for Paneta’s Crown was finally over, and decidedly anticlimactic. Too bad the family had been destroyed over such a simple litany for compassion and right living. The irony was too obvious. Even I could see it.

“Yeah, you get it. That’s exactly what it is.” I heard another crash at her end of the line. “Damn! So, are you coming to see me? I want to show you something.”

“Do I really have to make the trip? It seems I have what I need. I was packing to leave town.”

“I’ll see you around 3:30,” she said, and Sandia Escoretta, Ph.D. hung up on me.

She was a bit short on social skills, I decided, but she had come through for me after all. Shutting down my laptop, I headed out.

\*\*\*

The university campus was out in Thunderbolt, about six miles from The Castle. The trip took all of fifteen minutes through the mid-afternoon traffic. Once on campus, it was easy enough to find the humanities building, and once inside, the building’s glass-faced and brass-

framed directory told me exactly where to find Sandia Escoretta, Ph.D. Innocently, I knocked on her slightly open office door.

“Come on in. What are you waiting for?” The voice was the same smoker’s rasp as on the phone, but there was more irritation in it.

Cracking the door open, I peeked in, expecting a neat, bookcase-lined professor’s lair.

“Come on in. Don’t be bashful,” she demanded hoarsely.

Across from the door and catty-corner to the window was a large wooden desk, piled several feet high with what I assumed to be student papers. The rest of the room was piled high too, with books and papers from floor almost to ceiling, pile upon pile, barely leaving room enough to get from the door to her old-fashioned wooden desk chair. It was a hoarder’s room, a room that could never be cleaned out simply because there was no place to begin.

Sandia Escoretta, Ph.D. was a rotund, style-free woman with frizzled gray hair that stuck out from her head like an electrocuted Einstein. Instead of the elegant European cigarette-in-a-holder type I’d imagined, I was faced with an academic gnome, complete with hair halo and a cigarette hanging from under her upper lip in disregard of the university’s state-mandated smoke-free policy.

“Hi, I’m Ben Bones. I . . . ”

“Yeah, yeah, I know who you are. Get over here and stand behind me so you can see my screen.” She beckoned with the bony, nicotine-stained fingers of her right hand. I suddenly had the mental image of Hansel being kicked into the oven by the wicked witch. Nonetheless, I dutifully worked my way through the piled intellectual flotsam to stand behind her. Her cigarette smoke, blinding even to her, wafted up into my face, choking me and making me squint. The

room stank of smoke. She did too. So much for elegance.

A flat computer screen sat on her desk, but I didn't see the computer's CPU case anywhere. It undoubtedly lay buried on the floor somewhere, destined to be uncovered by archeologists in some far away future. The screen was the only modern artifact in the room. Filling the screen was my image of the stained glass window in The Castle.

"Y'know, I'd heard about this years ago," she confided, "that we had this here in Savannah, but I never bothered to go looking for it. Too much damn work to do here." She gestured at the piles of papers on her desk and around the room. "The state requires that we have the students write papers, and then we're supposed to read them. What a load of drivel. I just give them all Bs unless someone wants to argue about it, and then I give 'em an A for standing up for themselves. Most of 'em never catch on to that's how it works with me."

She wasn't actually smoking the cigarette that hung from her lip. It was more like a talisman, and she seemed to constantly be trying to keep the smoke out of her eyes. I wondered why she didn't quit. The room was a fire hazard. I didn't see an ashtray or a fire extinguisher anywhere, but where would she have put them?

"Look here." She worked her mouse atop an Italian movie magazine atop a short stack of papers, moving the screen image so that we were looking at the lowest right-hand corner of the window.

"Look at that," she ordered. "You see that?"

I looked but didn't see anything significant. It just looked like medieval illumination edge decoration to me. "What are you showing me?"

"Use your eyes. What'd you come here for? You're as bad as my freshmen." She pointed

to one specific area with a nicotine-stained forefinger. “Look here. This is Paneta’s unique signature. He used it on all his artistic works and this is it for sure. This is the real thing. That’s what I wanted to show you.”

“That’s it? That’s all? Nothing else?” I was wasting my time with this woman.

“Look, buddy, you came to me with this. I’m telling you that this is the real thing. And I know Paneta wasn’t around when this window was made, so it has to be a copy.” Her eyes narrowed at me. “Is this window an exact copy? Is there an original around somewhere? Maybe on vellum?”

I thought about the document amongst the family papers still sitting on the library table back at The Castle and the framed parchment hanging at Fabbrica Moschetto, perhaps another copy. “Yes, there’s an old vellum in the family documents that I can believe the window was copied from. And there’s a copy on a conference room wall at the factory, too.”

“Well, as shallow and insignificant a thinker as that conniver Paneta was, the original manuscript is probably worth a fortune to collectors, historians, museums . . . cranks like me. I thought you might want to know.” She sat back in her chair and turned to look at me triumphantly through the smoke.

## The Sixth Day

### Endgame

The job was over. My research was completed, and in the end, I had found Paneta's Crown. It had been in front of all of us from the beginning, but I hadn't seen it until the end, and only then with a prod from an irascible academic. The case was resolved, at least my part, but who was I supposed to report my findings to now? Canelo and Abel were both dead, and Lucrezia? She wouldn't be seeing much of the outside world for the rest of her life, if she didn't get the final lethal injection for the thoroughly witnessed killing of her elder brother.

A crutch-gun gun. Wow! Innovative firearms technology, eh? That's what the certificate on the wall at Fabbrica Moschetto had lauded the company for. Sure enough. I'd suspected after a while that her crutch was more than mere support, but I hadn't been sure. It was for self-defense, too. And for offense, as she ultimately used the technology. Clever folks, those Moschettos.

I'd packed and was ready to leave. Returning to the library, I put the family papers back into their ordered folders and boxes, and stacked everything toward one end of the library's conference table. Swift appeared at the door.

"Mr. Bones. The family lawyer, Stefano Moschetto, a cousin, will be arriving in a few minutes, and I've been asked to gather certain people together here in the library for a meeting."

"Tell me, Swift, would he be the person I should report to now that the three siblings are no longer viable parties?"

"Well, sir, he does represent the elder Mr. Moschetto's estate, and probably the deceased brothers' as well. And he'll probably be involved in Miss Lucrezia's defense, weak though it is."

Ah ha! The butler had finally editorialized. “Who else will be at this meeting?”

As if on cue, Bella entered the library accompanied by her son Jefferson. “Mo’ nin’, Mista Bones.” They entered the room and stood somewhat awkwardly. This wasn’t their habitual environment, and certainly not their usual type of event.

A bell rang somewhere. Swift turned and left, returning a few minutes later with Zera Angelina and her partner, Detective Kevin Branigan. Directly following them was another odd pairing: a tall skeletal man dressed all in black, and a short, squishy-looking fellow wearing a pale green sport coat and bright red-on-white polka dot tie.

The “tie” came right to me, dropped a briefcase on the table and stuck out his right hand. “I’m Steve Moschetto, the family attorney. I’m also a cousin, if you hadn’t guessed. I know everyone else,” he nodded around the table, “so you must be Bones, right?”

“Nice to meet you,” I said, not knowing what else to say or where this all was headed. “What’s going on?”

“Sit down and we’ll get right to it,” said the lawyer. He turned to the man in black. “Find a spot and do your thing.” The guy was a sign language interpreter, there for Jefferson’s benefit. He started waving his hands in front of him and kept it up for the entire meeting, occasionally getting some communication back from his deaf client. It would probably look somewhat psychotic to the uninformed, but it gave Jefferson complete clarity about what was happening.

We took seats around the table. Steve Moschetto, Esq. took charge of the meeting, and what a meeting it would be. It was going to be packed with surprises. I couldn’t wait to present my report on The Crown.

“I’ve asked you all here because of recent events, events which Benito prepared for but

never truly expected would come to pass. Life sometimes interferes with living at times, and the best plans go awry because of the smallest wrinkles.” Stefano “Steve” Moschetto was obviously a pro from the way he immediately took control of things, regardless of the fact that he dressed like a clown.

“You’re all aware, except perhaps for Mr. Bones here,” he nodded in my direction, “that Benito’s will has been on hold in the probate process because of the missing Crown. In the judge’s opinion, that seemed key in the identification of estate assets. Canelo was to be the big beneficiary under the will, followed by Abel, and then Lucrezia, with various other bequests to specific individuals who are also here in this room.” The little round lawyer was used to public speaking. His voice was mellow and his style practiced, but his accent was more Brooklyn than Georgian.

“We’re here today because there’s a codicil to Benito’s will, prepared in case his original testamentary plan was defeated, and that codicil has now been triggered, if you’ll pardon the expression. Canelo and Abel are out of the picture, and Lucrezia will undoubtedly be disqualified from receiving her bequest because of her recent activity, to wit, killing Canelo at the factory in front of a witness.” He acknowledged me with a nod of his head. “There’s a legal theory called ‘unjust enrichment’ which comes into play here.” He turned to Zera. “Detective, would you care to address that issue?”

Zera was also a pro, and ready with her comments.

“Sure, Steve.” They obviously knew one another. “Before getting into the law of murder and how it applies to this situation, here’s one of those interesting little wrinkles you mentioned. Chemical analysis on the dog showed that it had consumed a massive amount of digitalis. That’s

the same drug that was found in Abel's system. In our inventory of Canelo's office, we found a vial of the herb foxglove in his desk." Bella sat up straight in surprise. "It looks like Canelo poisoned the dog, although there's only circumstantial evidence to support that conclusion. In any event, the dog's death might have been the last straw for Lucrezia, the thing that finally sent her over the edge."

Bella's eyes were big as she said, "So that's where it wen'. I been lookin' all ovah fo' dat."

Zera pulled a book from her briefcase and laid it open on the table in front of her. "Under Georgia statute Title 16, Chapter 5, Section 1, and I quote here, '(a) a person commits the offense of murder when he unlawfully and with malice aforethought, either express or implied, causes the death of another human being,' and, '(b) express malice is that deliberate intention unlawfully to take the life of another human being which is manifested by external circumstances capable of proof. Malice shall be implied where no considerable provocation appears and where all the circumstances of the killing show an abandoned and malignant heart.'

"Lucrezia killed Canelo at Fabbrica Moschetto in full view of an eye witness." She nodded at me. "The state will prove that the killing was premeditated, and done with 'an abandoned and malignant heart,' the exact language of the statute. Once convicted, she'll either serve a life sentence or be executed. In either case, as Steve said, the legal theory of 'unjust enrichment' applies. That theory simply says that a person will not be allowed to profit from their crime. It looks like Lucrezia's motive for killing Canelo was to become the major beneficiary under Benito's will and take the factory, real estate, everything that goes with it, and this Crown thing as well. Greed being the motive for the murder, Lucrezia is disqualified from

her goal. And that's the story on her."

From the head of the mahogany conference table, Steve took over again. "I hate to see this within my own family, but we all knew there were simmering animosities amongst my cousins for years, and it looks like this business about Paneta's Crown brought it all to a head. Bones?" It was my turn, though I hadn't been warned that I'd be presenting.

I stumbled into it. "Ah, yes, The Crown. Well, that's what I was asked to come down here for, and I have to say that it's been an interesting week."

I reached across the table to where I'd stacked all the family papers in chronological and subject order. I took the original vellum, penned by Paneta himself, and pulled it to the middle of the table. "This is Paneta's Crown."

Zera, Branigan, Bella and Steve stood up in their places and craned to look at the old document. Swift, who had been standing quietly next to the library door, edged closer for a better view. "Why, that's the same as the stained glass vestibule window," he said. "Well, well, well."

"Right," I agreed. "It was in front of you all the time." I went on for a bit about who Paneta actually was, Sandia Escoretta, Ph.D., the translation I'd obtained, and what the translation said.

Steve, as a Moschetto as well as the family lawyer handling Benito's estate, was very interested. "You know, we'd all heard about The Crown since we were kids, but no one ever explained it to us. It was sort of a family legend, a story that was told again and again, but not completely. Very interesting."

"One more thing," I added. "My translator was something of a historian, and she said that

this original here was probably worth a good bit in cash too, just because it's an original document by Paneta himself and of such vintage. I'd suggest getting it into one of those sealed nitrogen document frames like the Declaration of Independence is in. You might even want to place it with a museum for safe keeping."

"Well, I thank you, Mr. Bones, for your excellent work. Now, even though Canelo called you to Savannah on this, as I understand, I do believe that you've actually been working for the estate to identify and locate this particular estate asset. Send me your bill and I'll see that it's paid."

"Canelo changed the terms of our arrangement a couple of days ago. He mentioned \$1000 per day and a \$10,000 bonus if I actually found The Crown. I've been paid for the earlier part of the week, but I'm due another \$12,000," I blurted out. I didn't bother to mention the six grand in cash that was warming my jeans pocket.

Steve was nonplussed. "Just send me your invoice. If that was the arrangement, the estate will honor it. You have my word on it." And he made a note on a yellow legal pad that he pulled from his briefcase.

Cool, I thought. I'm going on vacation for the next couple of months. Even with all the hassle this week had been, it was working out just fine. Working for dead clients was a good thing.

"And now, the codicil." Steve reached into his briefcase again and took out a sealed manila envelope, which he then slit open with his folding Rambo pocket knife. He took one of those tri-folded legal documents with a blue cover out and smoothed it on the table in front of him. "Now, there are some real surprises in this, but let me finish reading it before taking your

comments and questions.” And he started to read. The sign language interpreter was hard at work, and Jefferson paid close attention to him.

Blah, blah, blah, the party of the first part . . .

Not really, but it started out with the usual legal boilerplate about amending the existing will, followed by the reason for the codicil. It stated, “This Codicil is to be opened, and only comes into effect, if I die without surviving legitimate and acknowledged issue, or if there are legal impediments to my surviving legitimate and acknowledged issue taking under the Will referenced herein.”

“Legal impediments,” as Steve paused to explain, “means anything that defeats Benito’s bequests, such as Lucrezia’s unjust enrichment as a result of her murdering her brother, the primary beneficiary.”

That was something, but the first blockbuster surprise came in the third section which said, “I wish to acknowledge the fact of my long-term relationship with Bella Louise Gibson.”

We all looked over at Bella. She was beaming, and seemed a bit flushed. “Oh, that Benito. He was such a sweet man,” she said affectionately. Oh, that Bella.

Well, why not? A man and a woman living together? It was common enough these days. That hadn’t been their problem. Their problem was that of a white man and a black woman living together as man and wife in Savannah, Georgia. It may have been a wide open city in many respects, but it was still the Deep South, and opinions were strongly held here, especially opinions about sin, race, and the mixing of the two.

Benito’s prominent place in the Savannah community was a big problem, not to mention the international nature of his arms business. There were plenty of issues that prevented their

living together openly. So Bella had continued in the role of cook and housekeeper, which probably suited Benito's old world values anyway. But according to the codicil, ". . . we lived separately in the house during the day but as husband and wife at night."

But the next paragraph floored us all. Bella had borne Benito's bastard son, Jefferson Davis Gibson, the deaf gardener. Wow! "Be it hereby known to the world that Jefferson Davis Gibson is my illegitimate son by Bella Louise Gibson." Now that was a real kicker.

And that wasn't the final surprise either. There was one more, and it was a beauty. Because of the deaths of Canelo and Abel, and the "legal impediment" that defeated Benito's original testamentary intentions, he left everything to guess who? Right. Bella Louise Gibson and Jefferson Davis Gibson.

Even Bella was floored by that. Benito may have been "a sweet man," but beyond that, in the end he was a *mensch* and did the right thing for his paramour.

Bella shook her head in amazement. Swift's mouth, as he stood there by the door, was agape. Zera was smiling broadly. Branigan just shook his head in disbelief.

"Ah seen it when he were born. Ah knew he be rich one day, but ah din' see how that would come t'pass. An' now, here it is, reveal' at las', The Lord work in myster'us way." This was Bella's greatest moment.

The sign language interpreter continued flailing away at the air and a look of incomprehension came over Jefferson's face. He leaned forward toward the interpreter, his brow furrowed, and his mouth screwed over to one side. He looked over at his mother, who continued to smile as she rocked back and forth in her chair. She mouthed the word "Later" to him. He continued to be puzzled, but at least he was reassured that everything was all right.

## Home Again, Home Again

I was headed home from one of the strangest research jobs I'd ever been out on. What a bunch of weirdos. Fighting to the death for . . . for what? For an Italian version of "The Golden Rule." Amazing.

And I'd even get paid for my efforts. I had the six thousand cash from Canelo, and had been promised a good deal more. He was dead, so I'd be submitting a bill to Benito's estate, but on what basis? Our oral agreement? "An oral contract is worth the paper it's written," it's been said, but we did have a written . . . wait a minute, no we didn't. Canelo and I had discussed it, but I'd never had him fill out one of my standard research contracts. Damn. And I didn't have a written contract for our initial agreement either. That's what I got for trusting a rich guy. Oh, well. If that isn't the story of my financial life.

Well, I'd send them a bill anyway. Steve Moschetto, a cousin and the family attorney, had said I'd be paid. The estate could certainly afford it. I wasn't too worried.

I had a nice pixel-dense copy of Paneta's Crown in my digital camera. Maybe that was the biggest payoff of all. It encapsulated the distillation of a man's philosophy after a life of political intrigue. Or maybe it was just another vapid expression of good intentions in an insane world.

If anyone back home asked where I'd been the past week, I'd simply say I had a rather interesting few days in Savannah, Georgia, one of my favorite towns. Or what had been one of my favorites. I'd think about it differently from now on.

Another job well done. Well . . . done, anyway. Whew! Maybe I'll go back to accounting and a less adventurous life. Nah.

# Appendices

## Appendix I

### Last Will and Testament of Benito Emilio Moschetto

#### I

I, Benito Emilio Moschetto, residing at Savannah, Georgia, being of sound and disposing mind, memory, and understanding, do hereby make, publish, and declare this instrument to be my Last Will and Testament, hereby expressly revoking all prior wills and codicils by me heretofore made.

#### II - Executor

I hereby nominate, constitute, and appoint my second cousin, Stefano Emilio Moschetto, Esq. of Savannah, Georgia, the Executor of this my Last Will and Testament, and hereby authorize and empower my said Executor to sell, convey, mortgage, or lease the whole or any part of the real and personal property of which I shall die seized or possessed whenever he shall deem it advisable to do so, and upon such terms and conditions as, in his discretion, shall seem advantageous at the time, granting unto him full power and authority to execute, acknowledge and deliver all proper writings, contracts of sale, deeds and conveyances, mortgages, leases, and transfers thereof.

In the event my said Executor does not qualify as such for any reason whatsoever, or should cease to act as my Executor, then in such event only, I hereby nominate, constitute, and

appoint his sister Emily Moschetto of Savannah, Georgia, to serve as my Alternate Executor, granting her all the powers and authority hereinbefore enumerated.

I hereby direct that my Executor shall not be required to furnish a bond for either of their faithful performance. I expressly desire and direct that no compensation shall be paid to the Executor of my estate, regardless of whether or not he or she is a beneficiary thereof. The Executor shall be entitled to reimbursement for moneys reasonably expended in the administration of my estate, including but not limited to travel expenses.

In either case, I direct my Executor to pay all just debts, funeral expenses, and the expenses of my last illness as soon after my demise as practicable.

### III - Disposition of Remains

I direct that the disposition of my remains be as follows:

My earthly remains shall be interred in the Moschetto Family Mausoleum at Bonaventure Cemetery in Savannah, Georgia.

I am not an organ donor.

### IV – Beneficiaries

The following persons are named beneficiaries of this will:

My eldest son, Canelo Emilio Moschetto.

My middle child, Abel Emilio Moschetto.

My daughter Lucrezia Emily Moschetto.

My faithful cook, Bella Louise Gibson.

My cook's deaf son, Jefferson Davis Gibson.

## V - Tangible Personal Property

I give all the tangible personal property owned by me at the time of my death as follows:

A. To my eldest son, Canelo Emilio Moschetto, I bequeath two fifths of any estate assets composed of real estate, cash, securities, bonds, mortgages, or notes, along with Fabbrica Moschetto, and, if he survives me, Paneta's Crown, which, by right of primogeniture as the oldest of my male children, he must hold in trust for his children and future Moschetto generations, passing it on in his turn to his eldest male child.

B. To my middle child, Abel Emilio Moschetto, I bequeath one fifth of any estate assets composed of real estate, cash, securities, bonds, mortgages, or notes, along with Fabbrica Moschetto, and, if he survives his older brother Canelo, Paneta's Crown, which he must hold in trust for his children and future Moschetto generations.

C. To my youngest child, my daughter Lucrezia Emily Moschetto, I bequeath one fifth of any estate assets composed of real estate, cash, securities, bonds, mortgages, or notes, along with Fabbrica Moschetto, and, if she survives her two older brothers, Paneta's Crown, which she must hold in trust for her children and future Moschetto generations.

D. To my faithful cook, Bella Louise Gibson, or to her issue, Jefferson Davis Gibson, if she does not survive me, I bequeath one fifth of any estate assets composed of real estate, cash, securities, bonds, mortgages, or notes, along with Fabbrica Moschetto. This one fifth is to be placed in a trust, the principle of which is to be preserved, and a monthly stipend, to be determined by the trustees of said trust, is to be paid to Bella Louise Gibson, or to her issue, Jefferson Davis Gibson, until neither of them shall be living. At that time, and not before, the

trust is to be liquidated and distributed in proper proportion to my other named heirs or their descendants in accordance with Georgia law.

If none of my immediate family beneficiaries survives me, I give all the rest and residue of my estate to their heirs by blood or marriage.

If none of my children survive me, or if they die without issue or if their issue has predeceased me, and if there are no direct lineal descendants in my following Moschetto line, then I bequeath the rest and residue of any estate assets composed of real estate, cash, securities, bonds, mortgages, or notes, along with Fabbrica Moschetto, to my faithful cook, Bella Louise Gibson, or to her issue, Jefferson Davis Gibson, if she does not survive me, exclusive of the trust established for their benefit.

If none of my designated beneficiaries nor their heirs survives me, I give all the rest and residue of my estate to any surviving Moschetto relatives living in Georgia, in the United States of America, as determined by the laws of the State of Georgia, relating to descent and distribution.

## VI – Paneta’s Crown

I feel it necessary to add a few words about the Moschetto family treasure: Paneta’s Crown.

The importance of The Crown cannot be overestimated. It has been in the Moschetto family since we first acquired it in the year 1852, when it was first given to Santoro Emilio Moschetto by the hand of Paneta Himself. At that time, Giovanni Paneta was a philosopher in the court of Rodolfo Gianetta, in the port city of Livorno. Our family was living in that city,

although the details have been obscured by time. Life and position being tenuous in those difficult days, Santoro Emilio Moschetto performed a service for Paneta which perhaps saved one or both: his life or fortune. In return, Paneta presented The Crown to us as Trustees of what he considered a Historic Treasure and The Crowning Achievement of his life's work.

At the time of the transfer, a stipulation was made and agreed to by all parties that The Crown would pass down through the generations by the Rule of Primogeniture, that is, the eldest son of the next generation would receive The Crown in trust for the succeeding generation of his issue, ad infinitum. This was the agreement and covenant, and this tradition has been maintained in the Moschetto family since that time. This tradition is to continue.

I herewith affix my signature to this will on this the \_\_\_\_\_ day of \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_ at Savannah, Georgia, in the presence of the following witnesses, who witnessed and subscribed this will at my request, and in my presence.  
\_\_\_\_\_ Benito Emilio Moschetto

ATTESTATION CLAUSE

On the date above written, Benito Emilio Moschetto, well known to us declared to us, and in our presence, that this instrument is his last will and testament, and Benito Emilio Moschetto, then signed this instrument in our presence, and at Benito Emilio Moschetto's request we now sign this will as witnesses in each other's presence. Further that Benito Emilio Moschetto, appeared to us to be of sound mind and lawful age, and under no undue influence or constraints.

Witness: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Witness: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

STATE of GEORGIA  
COUNTY OF CHATHAM

Before me, the undersigned authority authorized to take acknowledgments and administer oaths, personally appeared:

Benito Emilio Moschetto

\_\_\_\_\_

who after being having duly sworn or affirmed to tell the truth, stated:

1. That Benito Emilio Moschetto declared this instrument to be his last will and testament to the witnesses.
2. That Benito Emilio Moschetto signed this instrument in their presence.
3. That the witnesses signed as witnesses in the presence of Benito Emilio Moschetto and each other.
4. That Benito Emilio Moschetto is well known to the witnesses, and the witnesses believe Benito Emilio Moschetto to be of lawful age, of sound mind and under no undue influence or constraint.

Officer: \_\_\_\_\_

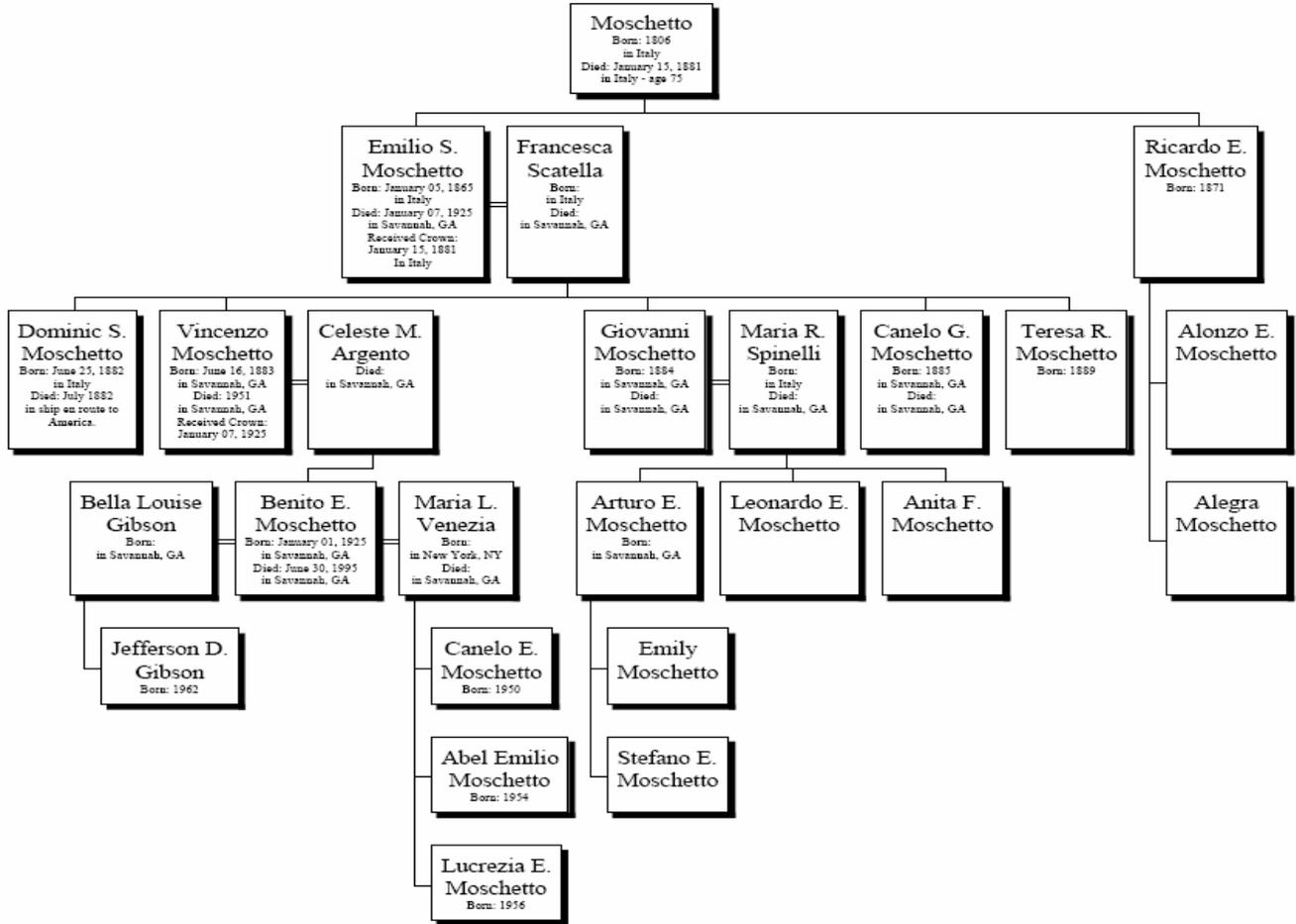
Title of Officer: \_\_\_\_\_

My Commission Expires: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix II

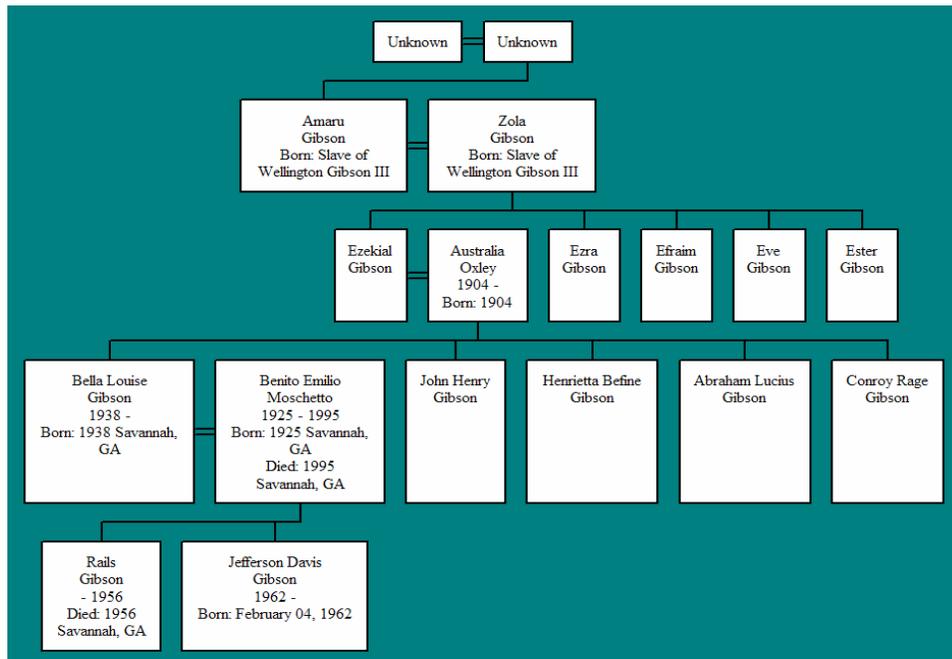
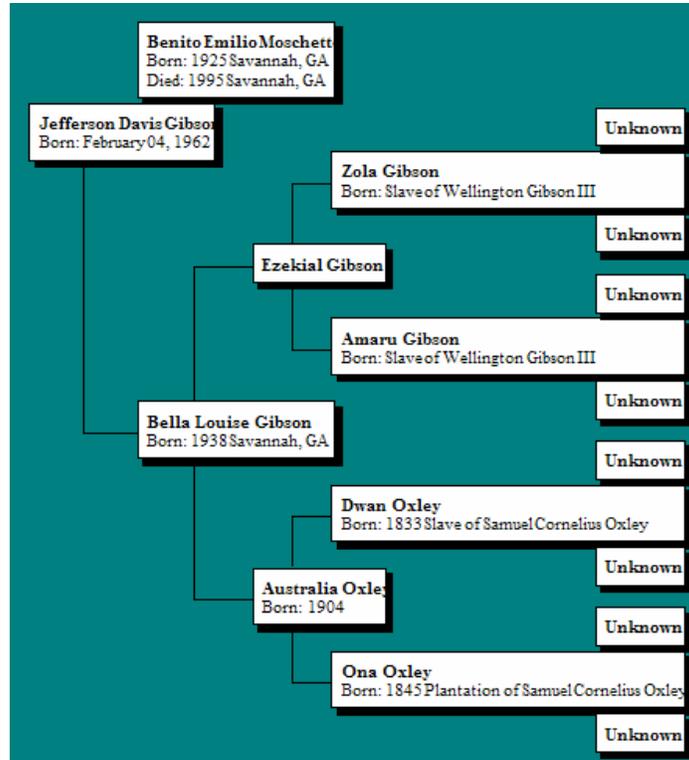
### Moschetto Family Genealogy

#### *Descendants of Moschetto*



# Appendix III

## Ancestors of Jefferson Davis Gibson



**Appendix IV**  
**Codicil to the Last Will and Testament**  
**of**  
**Benito Emilio Moschetto**

I

I, Benito Emilio Moschetto, residing at Savannah, Georgia, declare this to be a Codicil to my Last Will and Testament dated \_\_\_\_\_. This Codicil amends and supplements my Will only as provided herein. Except as amended or supplemented, my Will referenced herein shall remain in full force and effect.

II

The contents of this Codicil is known only to my attorney and myself, but to no one else. This Codicil is to be opened, and only comes into effect, if I die without surviving legitimate and acknowledged issue, or if there are legal impediments to my surviving legitimate and acknowledged issue taking under the Will referenced herein.

III

I wish to acknowledge the fact of my long-term relationship with Bella Louise Gibson. After the death of my beloved wife, Maria Louisa, in 1959, because of my deep love for her and my grief, it was several years before I was able to again seek the company of women. I met several eligible women, but found that my faithful housekeeper and cook, Bella Louise Gibson, was my most natural and comfortable companion. We never married, primarily because of the social pressures in Savannah during those years, and we lived separately in the house during the day but as husband and wife at night.

IV

I wish to acknowledge the fact that Bella Louise Gibson, my paramour for years, bore me a son, Jefferson Davis Gibson, who does not bear my name. Perhaps it is the justice of God for our sin that he was born deaf. I have always tried to treat him fairly and with respect as a human being and as my son, though I have never acknowledged the fact of my paternity until now, and now, after my death and due to other circumstances that have come to pass if this Codicil has come to light, only by necessity. Be it hereby known to the world that Jefferson Davis Gibson is my illegitimate son by Bella Louise Gibson.

V

In the sad event that my named beneficiaries Canelo Emilio Moschetto, Abel Emilio Moschetto, and/or Lucrezia Emily Moschetto, do not survive me, or my named beneficiaries' heirs do not survive me, or if my named beneficiaries die without issue, or if my named beneficiaries are unable to inherit under the terms of my Will due to some seen or unforeseen legal impediment, then, and only then, I bequeath the rest and residue of any estate assets composed of real estate, cash, securities, bonds, mortgages, or notes, along with Fabbrica Moschetto, to my faithful companion of many years, Bella Louise Gibson, and to our issue, my deaf illegitimate son Jefferson Davis Gibson, exclusive of the trust established for their benefit.

I herewith affix my signature to this will on this the \_\_\_\_\_ day of \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_ at Savannah, Georgia, in the presence of the following witnesses, who witnessed and subscribed this will at my request, and in my presence.

\_\_\_\_\_ Benito Emilio Moschetto

ATTESTATION CLAUSE

On the date above written, Benito Emilio Moschetto, well known to us declared to us, and in our presence, that this instrument is his Codicil to his last will and testament, and Benito Emilio Moschetto, then signed this instrument in our presence, and at Benito Emilio Moschetto's request we now sign this will as witnesses in each other's presence. Further that Benito Emilio Moschetto, appeared to us to be of sound mind and lawful age, and under no undue influence or constraints.

Witness: \_\_\_\_\_  
Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Witness: \_\_\_\_\_  
Address: \_\_\_\_\_

STATE of GEORGIA  
COUNTY OF CHATHAM

Before me, the undersigned authority authorized to take acknowledgments and administer oaths, personally appeared:

Benito Emilio Moschetto  
\_\_\_\_\_

who after being having duly sworn or affirmed to tell the truth, stated:

1. That Benito Emilio Moschetto declared this instrument to be a Codicil to his last will and testament to the witnesses.
2. That Benito Emilio Moschetto signed this instrument in their presence.
3. That the witnesses signed as witnesses in the presence of Benito Emilio Moschetto and each other.

4. That Benito Emilio Moschetto is well known to the witnesses, and the witnesses believe Benito Emilio Moschetto to be of lawful age, of sound mind and under no undue influence or constraint.

Officer: \_\_\_\_\_

Title of Officer: \_\_\_\_\_

My Commission Expires: \_\_\_\_\_