

DICK GOES TO THE BANK

RICHARD AVERY

A DICK AVERY ADVENTURE STORY

FOREWORD

I've spent forty years or so in the investigative biz and I'm still amazed by the over-the-top avarice of some people. I'm not particularly self-righteous or a saint by any means, but I do admit that some of the scams I come across really go beyond the pale. Sometimes a person's hunger for the illicit buck, Euro, or whatever, knows no bounds. This is one of those cases. Even friends and neighbors were not immune from the blood suckers greediness.

In this story, I'm thrown a bone by Jersey Briggs, my old friend and colleague at the State Department's Diplomatic Security Service. The bone actually had some meat left on it for a change and I don't mind playing fetch when my pockets and gas tank are empty. Money had always been a problem since I retired from the Service because I never had enough to support my many vices and few virtues.

By the way, the bone was a cushy gig with the World Bank. It needed someone to investigate mysterious illnesses and deaths in Romania, specifically in rural Transylvania. Jersey recommended me for the job, describing it as a routine matter, a no-brainer, as he

called it. It turned out that I was the one without any gray matter for accepting the assignment. No amount of money was worth risking limb and life if you can't live long enough to spend it. I would have a bone to pick with him later over his sense of largesse and choice of words.

My whining aside, I had no idea that I would be facing one of the most bizarre and puzzling cases in my long career. The stakes were high since people were dying almost every day and no one had a clue why. Spooky, inexplicable things were going bump in the night. My task was to find out what was happening and put a stop to it.

I had to be careful not to underestimate the ruthlessness and cunningness of the adversaries I would face. I almost died trying to solve this mystery. As you can imagine, I have absolutely no sense of humor when it comes to such matters. No matter though. I lived long enough to tell you this tale. However, please keep the nightlight on when you go to bed tonight because there are creepy creatures lurking about to haunt your dreams.

Please join me as I travel the world on behalf of the Diplomatic Security Service and uphold truth, justice and the American way!

Richard Avery

(Special Agent, Diplomatic Security Service, Ret.)

BREAKING INTO THE BANK

I had just landed feet-first in tall cotton and long green. The combination of cash crops didn't get much better in my field. It was finally harvest time so I hoped to reap bumper profits. My employer of last resort, the Diplomatic Security Service, U.S. Department of State, had arranged for a cushy assignment for me; for a change. My fortunes really seemed to be changing for the better and maybe my stars were finally aligning, but my suspicions still abounded. The gut feelings and hairs on the back of my neck had always served me well in the past. Maybe it was simply a case of indigestion and poor grooming on my part. I couldn't be sure, but I didn't feel all that well or confident at the moment.

That was because my good friend, Jersey Briggs, DS's Director of Investigations and Counterintelligence, had referred my name for an assignment at the World Bank Group headquarters in Washington, DC. He said the bank needed someone with my experience and particular skills to investigate some minor matter of institutional defalcation, quickly and quietly. That meant they couldn't find anyone else to take the job on short notice. My skepticism and anxiety just jumped a couple of more notches.

Jersey's artful statement translated into a job offer that no one else would touch with a 10 foot pole at full extension. It would

likely be dangerous, certainly not something career and/or life enhancing in any respect. That was the way things worked around here. Tar babies could only be cuddled by others who were expendable to the organization and down on their luck. It was an axiomatic and immutable thing practiced to a high form in the federal bureaucracy. So, it now looked like I would be stuck with the job.

There was something amiss and afoot that I didn't understand then. It was all too simple and straightforward, I thought. I suspected that I would learn the truth much later, the old fashioned, hard way, by getting my life threatened and ego and body bruised. Looking back, the assignment almost killed me and that was too much to pay for someone's petty misdoings as Jersey Briggs disingenuously suggested. The only act of fraud I could see was the one being perpetrated on me.

No matter, I was like a penniless whore with no prospects for honest employment or a sympathetic John on payday. I was desperate for money and what better institution to work for? I wondered. It went against my personal grain, but I probably should have thanked Jersey for his small bit of generosity. Maybe I would wait until I finished the job just to make sure that I properly thanked him in direct proportion and kind. By the way, such thoughtful acts of kindness were never forgotten in DS. Payback was never a bitch, it was always a Dick, as I like to remind.

I met my John early the following morning at 1818 H Street in the District. The Metro Orange Line dropped me about two blocks from the bank's Main Complex building, as they called it, a massive structure taking up a whole city block of prime Washington real estate with its prominent footprint. It was one of several bank leased or owned buildings clustered downtown near the White House, the International Monetary Fund, and other recognizable institutions and appealing terrorist targets.

I stood in line, just inside the building's entrance, waiting to be registered, felt-up, and fondled. I didn't mind the security precautions since it was the only sex I was getting these days.

John Murray shook my hand as I entered his office. He had a manly, firm grip and I responded in kind. The office was posh and far exceeded the digs afforded the typical Foreign Service officer assigned to Main State. It had plush carpeting, draperies, and an exterior window with a good view of 18th street. I liked the dollar-sign decor and I hoped the trappings suggested big dollars, Euros, or whatever form of hard currency for me. There were no doubts about my financial straits and personal circumstances. I was broke and about to be broken in by the bank. I had already decided to accept the assignment but I would play hard to get, but not for too long.

John was an American citizen who had been the World Bank's Chief of Security for the past four years since retiring from the

U.S. Secret Service. He was a senior special agent with that outfit for twenty-eight years and a long-time, personal bud of Jersey Briggs and that was why I was here. It was timeless old-boy stuff at work again. However, I still felt uncomfortable. If what he had in mind for me was such a slam-dunk, sweetheart deal why didn't he offer it to one of his Secret Service buddies? I wondered. Why consider an outsider, and often, rival federal law enforcement agent? I found out much later when it was too late to reconsider my decision and apply for more term life insurance. In hindsight, my two sons would have appreciated my prescient thoughtfulness. However, I wouldn't have cared in the slightest. I didn't fully trust Jersey to act in my best interests, but we'd gotten along fairly well over the years. I had occupied his position in DS before retiring eight years ago. The position required a certain amount of guile and cunning to survive the byzantine politics and furtive stabs in the back. While I had survived its hurtful slings and arrows, I was still recovering from my old war wounds. My licking them from time-to-time hadn't helped the healing process one bit, I mused.

“Avery thanks for accepting the assignment. Jersey speaks very highly of your talents and experience in the overseas arena. I think you're perfect for the job. Welcome aboard my friend.”

I hadn't even formally accepted the job and now I was John's new, best friend. I'd better take things slowly to make sure I understood what I was getting myself into. Money was an

important factor, but I wanted to live to spend it later.

“Thanks John, but I really need some more information before I accept the assignment. Jersey gave me little or no information on what the investigation might entail and I want to make sure I’m a good fit for the bank.” That self-serving statement meant I needed to know how much the job paid. It wouldn’t have made any difference, but I had to at least go through the motions of showing some professional pride.

“I apologize. I thought Jersey had given you a full briefing on the matter and that you had tentatively agreed to participate in the inquiry. I’m sorry I jumped the old gun.” Jumping guns was not something that especially appealed to me, but I kept quiet.

“It really is a pretty straightforward investigation as best we can tell from here,” he continued. “Let me fill you in on the details and then you can decide if you’re interested in helping us out.

“Avery, are you familiar with the bank’s history and its mission? That’s important information for context and perspective before we get down to the specifics of the case,” he added.

“I don’t know much about the organization and didn’t have time to do any real homework. I do know you guys are a huge player on the world stage and have more mega-bucks than Scrooge Mc Duck tucked away in the vaults in the basement. Croesus would look like a piker compared to the bank,” I added for comic relief and historical context.

I was trying my best to keep the conversation light and upbeat so he wouldn't readily detect my desperation. Regardless, I couldn't help looking around his office for the bags of gold, but didn't see any. They must be damn security conscious around here, I thought.

John chuckled at my comments. I was being fairly serious so I wondered why he found what I said humorous. I smiled back at him to continue the mystery. I could be so damn clever and inane at the same time, at times and without even knowing it. That took a special, innate talent that others, less-gifted lacked. In other words, I was being a true dick.

"The World Bank Group is a global development organization and part of the United Nations," he patiently explained.

"The big bucks are located across the street with our sister organization—the International Monetary Fund. Our proper name is the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development. The bank was created on the heels of World War II and our mission then was to help nations rebuild and recover from the ravages of war. That meant lending countries money to rebuild their national infrastructure—bridges, dams, roads, communications networks, public health structures, and energy/power distribution systems—things like that. Of course, our focus has greatly expanded since then. We now assist developing countries with critical development projects of virtually all shades and stripes. You name

it and we'll probably fund it."

Perhaps the Dick Avery Living Memorial Trust? I silently wondered.

"We get our money from our well-heeled membership or what we call the donor nations. The wealthy, industrialized countries of the world chip in each year with big bucks to replenish our coffers. Another source of revenue comes from the borrower nations which repay the loans with interest over the years. Our own bank balance sheet is very healthy, by the way. We have billions of dollars on the books in reserves. Our strong financial position lets us operate very independently, almost autonomously—which probably annoys the hell out of the other United Nations agencies. Moreover, we don't receive or require any financial support from our putative home office, the UN General Secretariat in New York.

"There are over 100 member countries represented at the bank. You can see the diversity in the workforce by walking down any of the halls and looking at the nameplates on the doors. We are very much a diverse, international organization: ethnically, religiously, culturally, and, most certainly, politically. That makes working here interesting, to put it politely. We have about 6,200 employees worldwide and an untold number of consultants and advisors under contract working in one capacity or another.

"Let's get some lunch and I'll fill you in with the rest of the stuff you'll need to know to make a decision," he said.

I readily agreed and wondered if I could sneak outside for a quick smoke afterwards.

We walked through the building's huge, soaring glass ceiling atrium. It resembled the I.M. Pei Louvre Pyramid in some respects. It was a spectacular, modern work of design and art. It was intended to impress people and make a statement about the organization. It certainly did in my mind—the takeaway message I got was the bank spent a lot of money on its own comforts. I wondered how much of the institution's largesse trickled down to the poor, third-world (sorry, developing) countries.

There was a small mezzanine with a coffee bar surrounded by café tables off to one side. Artwork, mostly paintings and statuary from various countries, adorned the walls and floor. Everything was exquisitely coordinated and organized for maximum visual effect. The atrium was a piece of modern artwork in itself. In a very real sense, it represented a vivid juxtaposition of power and wealth where the rich nations of the world paid well-intentioned lip service to its poorer neighbors.

We walked down a flight of stairs to the ground level to the bank's cafeteria. Cafeteria was a bit of a misnomer in this instance. The word didn't quite adequately describe the spread and selection before us. The room's layout and design were planned for employees to help themselves, but that was where the resemblance

to an ordinary cafeteria ended. In all other respects, it was a gourmet feast that catered to the varied and demanding tastes of the staff. Sure, you could get a burger or sandwich from the short-order bar, but you could also order hot entrees from the steam tables. The salad and bread bar resembled those you would find in upscale restaurants. Its selections and varieties of food were overwhelming. Wine was offered as well and I was tempted since there was my favorite, white Zinfandel. I thought I'd better pass on the wine since I didn't want to give John the impression I was overly fond of the beverage, although Jersey had probably already told him I was a borderline wino. But which side of the border was still a question mark.

I took a cold bottle of Starbucks mocha coffee instead, just to play it safe. I chose the grilled trout almandine and parsley potatoes. I collected a crème Brule for dessert. John insisted on picking up the tab and I didn't argue. I took the courteous act as an encouraging sign of things to come. Both of our meals came to less than \$13. The bank generously subsidized the cafeteria, just one of many perquisites for the workforce, I guessed. Moreover, as an international organization, there was no sales tax imposed on the meals. Everything appeared to be self-served here. I just hoped some of same treatment rubbed off on me.

“Avery, with the amount of money on the development table, there is a certain amount of corruption, as you can imagine,” John

began. “It’s a serious, sensitive problem around here and one the bank has had to contend with since its beginning. The temptation to skim off the top, bottom or middle is very strong. The money’s ripe for the taking in the developing and underdeveloped countries. The leaders of the borrower nations sometimes have their hands in the bank’s cookie jar. It’s simply the cost of doing business in many of these countries.

“However, the corruption doesn’t stop at the top. Everyone who has a hand in the development project is also a potential thief. The contractors and service providers working on the project often have to kickback monies to the higher-ups to get a contract or a piece of the action. Costs and fees are inflated to cover much of the bribery and graft. Shoddy work or no work and the use of cheap, substandard materials are other ways the contractors cover the bribes to their masters while lining their own pockets. It’s the old sticky fingers, trickle-down economic theory at play. Sometimes it’s more than a trickle though. The term cost overrun is a popular one in this building and codeword for outright corruption.

“We certainly do our best to prevent and deter malfeasance and other fraud, but frankly the deck is stacked against us in most cases. Our accountants and auditors regularly detect or suspect financial and contracting irregularities, but there’s little they can do to stop them—even when they are blatant. Who do we report them to for follow-up investigation and possible criminal prosecution?

So, maybe the local authorities? Not likely, since these are usually the same people who are ripping us off. The bank cajoles, coerces, and politely threatens the countries by cutting off additional funds and disapproving new projects. It's often a hollow threat and the bad guys know it."

I properly closed my plate with my knife and fork along the ten and four o'clock position to show John that I wasn't one of the bad guys; at least when it came to etiquette.

"Here's the irony," he continued. "Many of these countries are so indebted to the bank through years and years of borrowing that they can't hope to pay back the loans. The bank is elated when these deadbeat nations are able to pay a portion of the interest on the loans, forget about the repayment of the principle. Loans are often restructured and extended to keep them afloat and from going into default. There's a lot of bureaucratic smoke and mirrors to keep the financial statements balanced and rational. In dire situations, loans are forgiven outright because the bank knows the debtor nations could never repay them."

"In essence, the bank is now largely at the mercy of its own borrowers. The outstanding debt is humongous. If our clients decided to default en masse, the World Bank Group might as well fold its tent and slip quietly into the night since it would be out of business. That would be a terrible loss because of the good works it promotes—projects that make lives of the world's poor

marginally better and more comfortable: the building of rural hospitals, the delivery of health care services, the provision of reliable, potable water supplies, and many other essential services.”

John continued to give me a concise primer of the bank’s history and current operations around the world. The projects and programs all sounded very impressive, altruistic, and expensive. He still hadn’t disclosed why I was here and what role I was expected play in this drama. I badly needed a cigarette but I’d have to wait since he was the client and paying the bills.

Sometimes those who protect and serve must have the patience of Job when they desperately needed a job.

THE TELLER'S WINDOW OPENS

John finally got around to telling me about the assignment. I was relaxed and looked forward to hearing why I was here. After lunch, I hit the John and grabbed a quick smoke outside before getting the real scoop. (I like to use strong action words to describe my addictions and bodily functions.) With all the employee creature comforts and amenities, I was about to ask John why there wasn't a designated smoking lounge inside the building. I thought better of it and kept my mouth shut.

That practice had always worked for me when I was employed by the department. Discretion was the better part of valor, as I recalled from my days in DS—open mouth and insert foot was another aphorism I remembered too. In any case, it must be the bank's warped perception that smoking wasn't good for one's health. Some of my assignments for the Diplomatic Security Service over the years could be described the same way. Blowing smoke and taking risks were just expected and perfunctory parts of the job. Regardless, it all came down to smoke and mirrors in the end, I reflected. However, spin was always preferred to substance in my topsy-turvy biz.

“We have a serious situation that needs immediate attention by someone with your overseas experience and investigative skills,”

John asserted in a straightforward, matter-of-fact manner, awakening me from my self-induced reverie.

“Time is critical at this point. We need to know what’s going on and put a stop to it. People are dying almost every day and we don’t have a clue what’s happening.”

I scratched my head and wondered when he would get to the bottom line of his spiel. I didn’t say a word though since I was on the clock. He could take all the time he wanted. I was in no hurry except for the money. I’d make sure to ask a lot of questions at the end.

“It started a couple of weeks ago in rural Romania and involves one of our smaller projects there. Farmers and peasants are dying of a mysterious disease. The symptoms come on quickly and death can follow in a short time. Fortunately, while many people have become sick, only a few have died from the disease so far—twelve people by our best count, adults and children alike. We have reports that upwards of fifty-four people have been affected by the outbreak of whatever this thing is.

“The illnesses, the outbreak, epidemic, or whatever you want to call it, are confined to the Transylvania region of the country. It’s an extremely poor, desolate, backward part of Romania. The residents are much ingrown in their beliefs and lifestyle and typically shun outsiders. Clannishness doesn’t quite describe the nature and way of life of these people—they have chosen to

remain isolated and self-sufficient for generations. Part of the reason is ethnicity, part religion, and the rest ingrained custom. It's been the way they have lived for generations. They are a closed society and a stubborn bunch when it comes right down to it.

“They barely recognize or acknowledge the authority of the central government in Bucharest. That's why it's been so damn difficult for us to get information and a handle on the situation. The locals simply aren't particularly forthcoming and cooperative with those who they consider outsiders. That's about anyone and everyone born or living elsewhere in the country. The people claim the disease is a plague visited on them by God and it's His will for them to suffer for their sins and misdeeds and they certainly are by all accounts.”

I interrupted John at this point. “Look, as you know, I'm neither a doctor nor an epidemiologist, I can't even spell the word—and I meant doctor. I had no skills or insight into such things and certainly can't bring anything to the table professionally. I'm a government trained dick who has spent a lot of years investigating various security related incidents and crimes abroad for Uncle Sam,” I proudly asserted. It was a clumsy and feeble reference to my career with my former employer: the Diplomatic Security Service.

I always enjoyed stating the obvious in these situations. It confirmed my credentials, established performance expectations,

and made my transparency clear to others. Sometimes those who protect and serve need to flash their DS shield—not the AMA caduceus.

“Thanks for the clarification Avery,” John sarcastically quipped in response to my explanation of my bona fides. I quickly recalled the open mouth, insert foot saying and stayed mute in front of my meal ticket. I’d now have to rely on my body language for frank and pointed expression. Sticking out my tongue was not an option though.

“Okay, here’s the deal,” John continued. “The bank issued an agricultural grant of approximately four million dollars to the Romanian government some months ago. The declared purpose of the grant was for the government to purchase seed stock for planting wheat, maize, rye, and barley.

“Several years of drought followed by a particularly wet growing season this year have decimated the indigenous crops in the region. Wheat, and other grain production, was down about 60 percent this past season compared to the yields of normal growing years. These crops are essential food sources for people and fodder for their livestock. As a result, people have been suffering and now there’s this outbreak on top of things. I guess when it rains, it pours, except when it rains in Romania, it inundates the cereal crops and halves the harvests.”

“The Romanian government has pumped in some money for

farmers to buy seed for the upcoming season, but it's been grossly inadequate to meet the region's needs. The Romanians turned to the bank for help. In this instance, the bank decided on issuing a grant rather than a loan given the humanitarian and political nature of the problem. Also, the money was small potatoes for the bank, no pun intended. There's much more than that at stake here. To a large extent, the bank's credibility and reputation are on the line."

I broke my oath of silence and John's monologue. "Why is the bank's reputation on the line? I don't see any particular connection between the bank and the outbreak of these illnesses you've mentioned. Where's the nexus?" I not-so-politely inquired.

"That's a fair and obvious question. If you had let me finish, I would have told you. God, you DS guys are an impatient bunch," he added for good measure. He was right though. Patience was never one of my virtues, along with celibacy and sobriety.

"The bank is very much in the forefront of the issue. The locals know that the bank provided the money to buy the seed grain. The tons of wheat, barley and other cereal grain showing up in their villages are each marked with the words: Le Banc Mondial—French for The World Bank. They may be backward in many ways, but they are not totally stupid. They sense some sort of connection between the seed shipments and the illnesses and deaths they are experiencing. We believe it is all nonsense, but they don't. They have threatened our country office personnel

visiting the region to periodically check on the status of the project. Our local staffers in Bucharest now refuse to visit the valley fearing for their personal safety."

"Many of these people question the bank's motives and have made some absurd claims about the wealthy, industrialized nations intentionally poisoning the poor of the world by providing unsafe or dangerous or inferior or outdated products to them. It's the old argument about the third-world being the dumping ground for the multinational companies of the developed world. I'm sure you've heard similar conspiracy theories in your career. The so-called anti-globalists love this sort of stuff and have already started propagandizing the incident. We need to put a stop to the rumors by finding the cause of this plague."

"There are also those religious extremists in the local communities who oppose the grant believing the people should not have to rely on any outside assistance to cope with the crop failures; again, the God's will and divine purpose sort of thinking that I've already mentioned. They've been stirring up trouble with the people. Last night, nearly a ton of bagged grain awaiting distribution was destroyed in a municipal barn. Also, a Molotov cocktail was thrown at the window of our country office in Bucharest causing some minor damage. Fortunately, no one was hurt in either incident, but the anger and tensions are rising. The natives are restless, Avery."

I finished my bottle of Starbucks and waited for the punch line to the story which would be my little role in this matter—the witless whack-a-mole for the bank, I suspected. I'd better keep my head down.

“Avery, we want you go to Romania and find out what’s going on and report back to us. It’s nothing dangerous or risky; just a straightforward fact-finding mission. We need to know what we’re dealing with on the ground. You’ll be our eyes and ears so to speak. Our Bucharest country office certainly has insights into the situation, but they are neither neutral nor unbiased when it comes to the matter. That perception alone is sufficient reason to have someone else investigate. It’s been their project to manage and their interests are potentially too self-serving. That’s not to suggest we don’t trust our own people there, but they’re much too close to the situation in our opinion.

“If you accept the assignment, you have to leave tonight on the flight out of Dulles to Munich to connect with an onward flight to Bucharest. You’ll be met at the airport by one of our staff upon arrival. A visa isn’t a problem since we can arrange for one to be issued at the airport. Unfortunately, as a consultant, we can’t grant you diplomatic immunity or issue you a United Nations Carnet de Voyage.

“However, we will prepare a very official looking letter on our fancy stationary stating you are working on behalf of the World

Bank Group; a parastatal organ of the United Nations. It will include the standard, customary, bullshit, diplomatic language about according you all courtesies, etc, etc. It's good eyewash that might come in handy at some point. However, keep in mind that if you get into serious trouble with the authorities, the letter and \$3.49 will only buy you a Starbucks' Cappuccino, if you can find one in a Romanian jail."

The takeaway message from John was that I would be going to Romania completely naked: no diplomatic passport or visa, no UN carnet, no gun, no nothing, except my experience and skills to keep me out of trouble with the local authorities. I was now worried about my prospects and proclivities. Sometimes those who protect and serve were nothing more than jaybird exhibitionists.

"The job pays \$875 a day plus all expenses. The bank staff flies first-class when available and stays at the top hotels. You will receive the same perks, if you accept the assignment. I've already contacted the bank's travel office to prepare your tickets. They've already booked you into the Intercontinental hotel in Bucharest. As I mentioned earlier, I thought you had already accepted the job so I went ahead with the travel arrangements.

"Here's a copy of the Letter of Engagement I drafted to cover the scope and terms of the assignment. It's the standard bank pap and wording. Read it and let me know what you think. Avery, I need a quick decision from you. If you aren't willing to take this

thing on, I need to find someone else who will—soonest.”

I read the LOE and John was right. It contained the standard legalese you would find in similar personal services contracts. Two good things caught my attention though. The first was the fact I would be covered for a medical emergency abroad through the bank’s contract with International SOS, a reputable, world-wide service provider. The second thing, as a U.S. citizen, I would be covered by the U.S. workman’s comp laws while abroad. That was an interesting, unexpected, and welcomed benefit.

Although I received a government pension and continued with health insurance from my former employer, these other bennies would fill in any gaps if I got into serious medical trouble requiring hospitalization or medical evacuation. The workman’s comp would also cover any disabling accidents or illnesses I might suffer overseas. I didn’t want to think about the death benefit provisos at this point.

“Where do I sign John?” I politely asked. I didn’t make an X, as usual, to purposely annoy people.

“On the bottom line,” John smiled and laughed. “Oh, and by the way, you won’t be working alone in Romania. Our Deputy Medical Director, Julienne Boundary, will be working with you on the medical and health issues involved in the case. Her particular specialty is infectious diseases.” (Too bad I didn’t have any of those. An STD or two could have served as an icebreaker for polite

conversation, I aimlessly thought.)

"She left for Bucharest last night on the same flight you'll be taking. She's booked at the Intercontinental as well. I expect you to keep an eye on her and make sure she's safe."

"For the record, keeping an eye on her is as far as you can go. Julie is my girlfriend, significant other, main squeeze, or whatever such relationships are called these days. Avery, Jersey warned me about your reputation with the ladies and your penchant for wine. Let me put it this way—don't touch her and don't get her drunk. Do you understand me my friend?" John added for good measure. He obviously wanted to be my buddy, I thought. That was a good sign.

"You may survive your trip to Romania, but you'll pay a heavy price with me if you try to screw around with Julie.

"Go down to the cashier's window and draw cash against your expenses," John instructed. "I suggest getting Euros since they will give you a stronger buying position. I'll call ahead to authorize it. Come back when you finish and I'll have the letter ready. Lastly, I want you to keep in regular contact with me. I need to know what you're learning so I can report some progress to the big suits upstairs. They're going to be on my ass until this thing is resolved."

I had heard his message—loud and clear. I would be in big trouble with the boss man if I didn't keep him informed of

developments or played with his girlfriend. Therefore, I would have to be damn circumspect in choosing my disclosures and playmates. You don't want to spit or shit where you eat, as the crude remark sort of goes. However, on occasion, things were better left unsaid, undone or undressed. I had learned that loose lips and random actions can often sink ships and careers in my profession. However, I didn't have a career anymore or plan to run into any icebergs.

Sometimes those who protect and serve could be tight-lipped, icy-nerved, constipated dicks when circumstances required.

ROMANIAN RHAPSODIZING

I was in a rush and barely made my flight to Munich. I remembered to at least pack the essentials: a five liter box of white Zinfandel, a couple of cartons of Marlboro reds, and an eight pack of Viagra. That assemblage suggested I was an addicted, limp wino at heart and maybe the world's biggest optimist too. Other than the ED pills, most of the supplies wouldn't last me the whole trip, but they'd be a good starter kit. I packed my Leather Man tool in my checked luggage to avoid the hassle of the boarding search. I brought some melatonin pills to help me with the effects of jet lag. I now was all set. I also was all apprehensive and all wondering what I had gotten all myself into, and all at the same time. But it was much too late for any second thoughts or regrets. I was now gainfully employed for a change, a sharp departure from temping for the State Department.

As promised, I was met upon arrival in Bucharest by the country office driver. He held up a large placard with my name on it as he waited just outside of customs and immigration. I probably should have felt a little bit important being received this way except he badly misspelled my name—both my first and last. I had to ask if he really was from the World Bank and meeting a Mr. Dickie Avie, a.k.a. Mr. Exhausted Dick Avery. He assured me he

was. He introduced himself as Igor Tugurlan, but everyone, except his mother, called him Iggie. I told him my given name was r. Dick—with no *I* and *E* at the end, thank you. But he could address me as Mr. Dick Avery for short. I mentioned that my mother always called me the same thing when I was growing up. Sometimes those who protect and serve must set the record, and the spelling, straight for less fluent foreigners with thick accents.

“Mr. Avery, may I collect your luggage?” he correctly asked. I didn’t argue with the offer and handed him my tags. As Iggie fetched my luggage at baggage claim, I walked outside the terminal building and smoked four cigarettes in quick succession. I felt better and more alert. I felt lightheaded too. It must have been the altitude in Bucharest.

We left the airport for the short ride to the Intercon hotel. Iggie and I only conversed in English since my Romanian was a bit rusty. Well truthfully, Bucharest, Intercon, and Nadia Comaneci were the only Romanian words I knew by heart. I couldn’t even pronounce Ceausescu. However, technically speaking, I believe someone can claim fluency in a given language even if one’s entire vocabulary only consists of a few words—*si senior!* I always struggled with English though.

After a few hours of much needed sleep, Iggie drove me to the bank’s country office. It was located in a modest, midrise building in the center of the city. I entered the conference room and

introduced myself to Lance Trumbull, the country manager for Romania. Lance was a New Zealander who had been in Romania about three years. His assignment was theoretically open-ended, but most managers normally served about four to five years before rotating to another job. Lance didn't have much of an accent after having spent eight years in Washington at bank headquarters. Thankfully, no interpreter was required for our meeting.

The two of us shook hands. Lance gave me a typical limp-wrist, European handshake. I purposely squeezed his hand to show him a true, macho-man grip. His eyes didn't water, but it was obvious from his facial expression that Uncle Sam's finest had handily made an impression on this foreigner. Lance was well-turned out in a charcoal gray suit with matching vest. He wore a cream colored shirt with French cuffs and his cufflinks were replicas of the United Nations seal. His overall appearance and mannerisms suggested that he was gay. His pronounced lisp didn't dissuade me in my judgment.

His hair had been carefully coiffed and his fingernails meticulously manicured and lacquered with clear nail polish. "Spit and polish" didn't go far enough to accurately describe his dress and demeanor. He was downright effeminate—and probably damn proud of the fact. I didn't particularly care about his genteel sexual orientation or lifestyle, but this Kiwi was most definitely a queer bird and ripe fruit. In terms of image alone, he could be the ideal

poster boy for the State Department's Foreign Service recruiters.

Lance introduced me to Julianne Boudary. I now understood why John Murray was so uptight and apprehensive about my reputation for liking the ladies. She was a gorgeous woman who oozed sensuality from every pore of her lithe body. Fortunately, she was only slightly more masculine than Lance. Her beautiful smile lit up the room and my ardor; well, perhaps something else since alien, English words were always hard.

Two members of Lance's staff were present, but he didn't bother to introduce them. He might have been a spiffy dresser and bon vivant, but he was sorely deficient in practicing basic, social graces. His superiors should seriously dress him down for his gaffe. However, I remained silent because I didn't want to alienate him. He and his Romanian aides might come in handy at some point in my investigation. Sometimes those who protect and serve must accept professional courtesies from those who were infinitely light in their Gucci loafers.

After a short while, one of Lance's staffers delivered pots of coffee and tea along with a plate of biscuits. All the earthenware was off-white, bone china and the white paper doilies added a nice touch. But I still couldn't abide the word biscuits. Why not call them cookies or crackers, like in the good, old US of A? Biscuits reminded me of doggie treats; I couldn't help it. In any case, the refreshments suggested this would be a long meeting, and

unfortunately I didn't notice any No Doze on the tray.

“Welcome to Romania, Mr. Dick, Lance began. I've prepared a short briefing of the situation for you and Ms. Boudary. Headquarters has outlined your respective portfolios and we stand ready to assist you both in all ways possible. This is a terrible black eye for the bank, as we are being blamed by some for what is happening in Transylvania. It's all nonsense, of course, but we can't seem to dissuade the natives that the grain stocks we funded aren't the cause of the illnesses or deaths. The notion is absurd and we need to put a stop to the rumors and innuendos before they affect other bank programs in the country. Even some of the Romanian government officials are starting to believe them.

“Things have gotten so far out of hand that my staff refuses to travel to the region, fearing for their safety. Things have gotten nasty. You may have noticed the shattered, charred window when you entered our building. It was a not-so-subtle message of the locals' displeasure with the bank.”

“We must find the cause of this plague, as the locals refer to it, and put an end to it before we lose all credibility with the populace. Other, important bank programs and projects are at stake.”

Lance didn't mention his job and career might also be at stake too. He took a breather and sipped his tea. I did the same with my black coffee, but intentionally avoided the biscuits. Julie sat quietly, looking exhausted from her flight.

“Here’s what we know so far about this so-called plague,” Lance continued. “It’s largely confined to the area around a small farming village called Alba Iulia. It’s a subsistence farming region that is also densely forested. The trees are the real moneymaker since they support logging and lumber production. The village is situated in a large valley encircled by the Transylvania Alps and the Carpathian Mountains. It’s a poor, isolated, and backward region of the country, even by Romanian standards. The locals pride themselves on their self-sufficiency and stubborn, old world culture. Outsiders are certainly not welcome and much less so these days. It is almost impossible to get them to talk about the plague so specific information is hard to come by. They tend to be solely reliant on themselves and their kinsmen to live their lives. They simply don’t trust foreigners—meaning anyone from outside the region. That’s why it’s been so damned difficult to get a good sense of what is going on there. The authorities from Bucharest are treated in much the same manner or worse since they’re still viewed as repressive commissars.”

“Do you have any reliable sources or other resources in the area that could help with our inquiries?” I asked.

“Unfortunately, no,” Lance answered. “The district officials are not helpful. In fact, they treat us with as much disdain and mistrust as the farmers and villagers.”

Julie spoke for the first time. “What medical resources are

available to treat these illnesses?” She inquired. “Who’s tending to the health needs of these people?”

“There’s a hospital in Sibiu, about a thirty-five minute drive from Alba Iulia, if the one road is open and the weather is good. Remember, this is a mountainous area and getting to certain places is difficult at best. Also, many of the locals distrust hospitals or can’t afford to pay for treatment. Only a couple of admissions to the hospital by the stricken have been reported so far. Most of them stay home to die or get better—God’s will, as they would say. Outside medical practitioners are about as welcome as the plague itself. That alone gives you a good idea of what we’re up against with these people.

“As best we can determine, fourteen to twenty people have died so far. The total number of people stricken is anybody’s guess. There seems to be no rhyme or reason to its cause or who it afflicts. It’s all too sketchy and random. One family contracts it and the next door neighbors don’t. It doesn’t appear to be infectious so the conventional wisdom points to an environmental origin.

“The Romanian government has requested the assistance of the World Health Organization. The Romanians simply don’t have the resources or expertise to solve this mystery. A team of technicians and scientists from the WHO should arrive in Alba Iulia in the next couple of days to begin their investigation. They aren’t likely to

receive a warm reception by the locals, but they need to be close to the site of the disease or plague or whatever you want to call the thing. I'm sure that they'll have their hands full."

"I've arranged accommodations for you, Julie, and my driver, Igor Tugurlan at a lovely old inn in Sibiu. The city will serve as your base of operations. I don't mean to tell you where or how to go about your investigation, but Sibiu is the only city in the region that is suitable for living. It's an old, historically rich city and has most of the amenities you would expect in Bucharest. My partner and I have stayed at the inn several times and absolutely enjoy its old world charm. You won't be disappointed, Mr. Dick."

"Please call me Avery," I interrupted. "My mom always did when I was growing up." Being a patriot, I always tried to introduce motherhood into a conversation. "So Iggie is to be part of our little team?"

"Yes, he will be invaluable to your investigation. He was born and raised in Transylvania and speaks the local dialect. He'll be treated as one of their own. He still has a few relatives in the region, as I understand. These people could be very useful in your inquiries.

"Speaking of inquiries, I assume you'll keep me posted on all developments," Lance stated more as a matter-of-fact rather than a question. "It's important that I stay in the loop so I can deal with the Bucharest bureaucrats."

“Certainly,” I assured him. Certainly not, you fruit loop, I assured myself while keeping my fingers crossed behind my back. Lance was a typical bureaucrat trying to cover his ass as best he could under the circumstances. My loyalty and reporting chain went directly to John Murray and no one else. I clearly understood who was paying the freight.

The meeting was finished when Lance handed me two airline tickets to Sibiu; one for Iggy and one for me. Julie would stay behind in Bucharest for a day or so and then join us. She needed to make the rounds of the Ministry of Health and Welfare and friendly embassies in the city to try to learn more about conditions in Alba Iulia.

As we left, Lance gallantly bent at the waist and kissed Miss Julie’s hand. God, this guy was as pretentious, phony, and fruity as it gets. Fortunately, he didn’t try the same thing with me. In fact, he refused to shake my hand. It was obvious that I’d just made another favorable impression and friend for Uncle Sam. Sometimes those who protect and serve found that clenched palmistry was necessary for those suffering from slightness of hand.

Julie and I had dinner together at the Intercon restaurant that evening. It was our first opportunity to get to know each other. The food was extremely edible and so was Julie. *I’d better be damn*

careful about ordering from room service though, I mused.

“Avery, John warned me about you,” Julie laughingly mentioned. He says you’re an incurable lecher and lush. However, he also said you were a first-rate investigator—a bulldog with lockjaw in solving the tough cases, as he described you.”

“Guilty on all counts, ma’am,” I replied with a hangdog look. “Sounds like my vices and only virtue follow me wherever I go,” I quipped.

“By the way, you should know that I take my women like my coffee; sweet and white. Zinfandel is my favorite wine and I smoke Marlboro reds before, during, and after sex—and drinking,” I joked.

Julie laughed at my foolishness. She had a good sense of humor and we would get along well. With her brains and my flatfeet we would make a good team.

“You seem to know much about me Miss Julie, but how about you? Where do you hail from? How did you end up working for the World Bank? Do you like older, white American gentlemen?” I quickly rattled off.

“Okay, fair enough,” she laughed. “I’m a French Canadian born and raised in Montreal. I received my medical degree from McGill University and I’m board certified in epidemiology. Job opportunities for those in my specialty are usually limited to government organizations. The World Bank had an opening in my

field and I jumped at the chance to work for the organization. I've been with the bank for a little over three years and thoroughly love my job. And, no, I'm not attracted to rude, sexist jerks wearing safari suits. Anything else you want to know?"

I was terribly offended by her remark, it was called a leisure suit, damn it!

"Well, speaking of love, how long have you been hooked up with John?" I asked. "He mentioned the two of you were an item and he wanted me to look after you here."

"Typical male ego and arrogance," she answered. "First, my relationship with John is none of your business. Second, I'm pretty independent and can look after myself, thank you very much. Men!" she exclaimed. She was obviously a bit miffed. She couldn't be pissed because that was strictly a masculine term.

While we sparred back-and-forth, the waiter took our orders. Julie had the horse fillet, cooked bleu or extremely rare, as the French say. She also ordered a side of pommes frites. Why wasn't I surprised? Actually, I was thoroughly disgusted by her meal choice, but kept quiet. I could only envision that old Nell, the milkman's draft horse, had just ended up on tonight's menu. I ordered beefsteak tartar with a dollop of Hollandaise sauce as my entree. I didn't share the same sentiments about old Bessie, the milkman's bovine cash cow.

I could tell that I went too far teasing Julie and decided to

change the subject to a less sensitive subject—politics.

“So Julie, where do you stand on the separatist issue for Quebec?” I innocently asked. “It seems to me that the issue has taken a major turn in the past few years with the tremendous influx of Muslims to the province. They’re aggressively seeking Sharia law and governance for their people; essentially demanding independence and autonomy. A huge Islamic wave is sweeping across the province. Simply look at the demographics and population projections. I don’t think that’s what the original French speaking separatists had in mind for the province.”

“Avery, you can be so insensitive and rude at times,” she chided. “I suspect you already know that about yourself. You intentionally like to stir the pot, don’t you?”

She was right about that point. It was a bad habit that I couldn’t (and didn’t want to) break. The truth was that I enjoyed riling up people. Sometimes the nasty trait was actually useful in my business.

“Yes, the separatist matter is still a hot button topic in Canada, especially Quebec, and everyone has an opinion whether it would be a good or bad thing for the province,” she continued. “I’m not sure about the Muslim issue, but everyone is certain about one thing: Quebec shouldn’t be a suburb of New York. Good fences and Canucks really do make good neighbors, my new Yankee friend. There’s no disagreement about that fact in my country.”

Touché, Mon ami, I mused. Uncle Sam had just taken one squarely on the chin by a neighbor to the north. Unfortunately, I didn't know Julie well enough to take her over my knee and give her a good spanking for what she had just said. I know I would have enjoyed the experience. Rather, I would have to bide my time and mind my P's and Q's instead.

But more importantly, I now believed Julie had enough grit and fortitude to see her through any difficulties we might face. That would be important to our success. I simply couldn't envision this woman chewing on her significant other's Mukluks to soften them. After all, she was one tough biscuit.

I picked up the check for us, leaving an overly generous gratuity considering the World Bank was ultimately paying the tab. Like the bank, it was my humble way of contributing to the local economy. I felt terribly proud when I could make the world a better place for those less fortunate. Julie and I said our goodnights. I had another glass of wine before leaving and told the waiter to put it on Julie's tab. I gave him her room number to make sure everything was in proper order. I was feeling thoroughly relaxed, mellow, and cheap. I was now willing to tell my life's story to anyone in the restaurant who would listen, but only for a fee since I was still a self-employed consultant after all.

Sometimes those who protect and serve could be such self-effacing, self-serving, and smug tippers and tipplers, all at self-

opportune times.

STUMBLING THROUGH STEEPED HISTORY

The drive to Alba Iulia was uneventful, but the passing landscape was magnificent. The weather was clear and sunny and we were able to easily see the mountain slopes that surrounded us. The land was heavily forested, but small farms and tiny villages occasionally appeared to break the routine, serving as ersatz firebreaks in the dense evergreens. The ubiquitous McDonald's and Wendy signs, and similar outdoor eyesores, were fortunately missing from the scenery. However, it shouldn't be too long before such Americana would likely make their way to this beautiful, remote part of Romania to spruce the place up a bit. The iconic shaving cream company might even have a shot at resurrecting its roadside billboards:

Dracula covertly lurks__Human prey his bloody perks__Protect your stubble throats__Away from his castle moats__BURMA SHAVE.

Julie had stayed behind in Bucharest to gather more information from the country office and Romanian health officials. She would fly to Sibiu later in the day and meet us at the inn. Her investigation as to the cause or causes of the mysterious illness

would be crucial in helping mine. We needed to establish a close rapport and that's certainly what I had in mind from our first meeting. Right, professional collaboration on the task was important if we were to solve the case and end up in bed together, I fantasized. Sometimes those who protect and serve have overactive imaginations, libidos, and delusions of sexual prowess—sometimes they get lucky too!

We drove around Alba Iulia to check out the village and get our bearings—that took all of two minutes. The town—the village, the bump in the road—consisted of about forty or so private dwellings, a few shops and taverns, a modest city hall, and a large, impressive Eastern Orthodox church in its central square. Its large, blue dome had a cross on top, perhaps serving as a beacon of hope for its downtrodden parishioners. Horse drawn wagons outnumbered the cars on the streets. The official census suggested about 200 residents, but the count must have included the chickens and pigs as well. The whole place appeared rundown, dreary, and overwhelmingly depressing. Thank God that what happened in Alba Iulia stayed in Alba Iulia. The village seemed to be totally cut-off from the rest of Romania and the world. We had just stepped back in time and place. I now had a good sense of how stubborn, irrational superstitions were able to survive and thrive in isolation, ignorance, and dysfunctional social structures.

The best analogy to the United States would be a small town

located in one of the remote hollows of Appalachia. The townspeople would be interrelated by marriage or blood or incest, perhaps all the foregoing. The local coal mine would have petered-out some years before and people now lived a hardscrabble life relying on government welfare and the handouts from slightly better-off relatives. Their wagons were always tightly circled with their No Trespassing signs prominently posted for all outliers to see and fear. Yeah, it was West Virginia, Wild and Wonderful, as I recalled. Alba Iulia was much the same down home, down-and-out scene.

The faces of the visiting farmers and villagers all looked drawn and dour, but perhaps, down-and-out would be a more apt description. The illness or plague or whatever had obviously taken a toll on them, both emotionally and psychically. Most often they averted their eyes when we walked past them. Clannish might be too mild a word to describe their demeanor; sullen would certainly be a better one. I would add damn rude to the mix as well because I never saw a smile or nod or any sort of polite recognition of the presence of the visitors in their midst. We were clearly recognized as strangers by the locals, yet otherwise wholly invisible for all intents and purposes. Iggy had warned me to expect this treatment, but I thought he was exaggerating, but he certainly wasn't; our reception was much more frigid than I could have imagined.

We entered a tavern, cum boardinghouse, and sat at one of the

few unoccupied tables. The room was dead silent as we sat down, but after a few long minutes, low-spoken conversations resumed. My Romanian was a little rusty so to speak. The language was Romance based, unlike the Slavic languages spoken in the countries bordering Romania. It was Latin in origin and akin to Italian or French in that regard. That didn't help either since my Latin was a bit rusty too. My English was also rust encrusted from time-to-time and that's why I often struggled grammatically, dramatically, and problematically during much of my Foreign Service career.

The waitress, a homely woman who was likely the proprietor's wife, gruffly asked what we wanted to eat and drink. I was disappointed that there were no menus to sharpen my pronunciation of Romanian culinary delights. Therefore, Iggy ordered for both of us; maybe he'd pick up the tab for both of us as well. In any case, we (he) asked for sausages, bread, and red cabbage; one of two entrees available. We both ordered beers since it was unlikely any white Zinfandel was available by the glass.

The waitress lightened-up somewhat when Iggy spoke. His accent was regional so he wasn't so much a foreign invader in her eyes. However, I still remained a confirmed, enemy combatant. She actually attempted to smile at him, but two of her lower front teeth were missing which didn't make looking at her any easier. I really couldn't complain about her appearance though since I was a

bit long-in-the-tooth myself these days. Maybe our dental affinity would help to close the gap between us. She and Iggie exchanged pleasantries; I think or, at least, hoped.

After a minute or so of back-and-forth, incomprehensible banter, she left us to tend to her duties. Iggie leaned over and mentioned that the waitress had visited his home village once many years before to attend the funeral of a distant relative. He said it was an important icebreaker as these things go—they were now kinsmen, of sorts. In the States, we break the ice by talking sports. Apparently, Romanians talk about dead cousins. I guess it was all about keeping score in the end. We were served our food and drink and Iggie continued to chat-up the waitress. The tavern seemed to have returned to its normal level of sounds and activities. I guessed we were now quasi acceptable lepers.

The tavern had thinned out by the time we finished our meal. The waitress presented us with the check—it was written on the palm of her hand. She and Iggie conversed for a solid ten minutes and I was very curious about what was being said. Iggie knew what we were looking for; some inside information as to what was happening in the area. We definitely needed a solid starting point for our investigation. I offered to pay the bill with my Sears debit card because I didn't have any local currency with me. Not surprisingly, Iggie picked up the tab for both of us. Of course, I

promised to pay him back with little interest. Sometimes those who protect and serve were overly frugal when it comes to their own money—plastic or paper.

Iggie gave me a rundown of his conversation with the waitress. After the customary exchange of domain and lineage, the waitress mentioned the strange happenings in the area. Everyone was talking about the illnesses and deaths caused by the plague—that's what the locals called it—the plague. No one knew what caused these things, but everyone believed it was an evil visited on the people by a wrathful God. The people must have sinned in God's eyes and now they were being punished. Church attendance was virtually 100 percent these days. Some people prayed once or more each day to deliver them from the curse.

Nearly everyone had suffered from the evil, either directly or indirectly. The area had not seen so many funerals in such a short span of time since World War II and the communist invasion of the country. Instead of normal interment, bodies were now burned and the deceased's ashes placed in the grave. Generally, this practice was considered contrary to their religion, but everyone understood the ravages of the plagues that swept across Europe in the middle ages. They weren't taking any chances of the dead infecting the living since contagion could be contagious.

Fear of contracting the dreaded disease was rampant to the point of triggering mass hysteria. Farmers and townsfolk alike

were now locking their doors believing they could keep out the plague by doing so. Rumors abounded and people were trying to figure out how to appease God and rid them of this abomination. Reports of the afflicted writhing in pain and speaking in tongues didn't help to dispel the panic—the miseries of Hell were being visited upon them. Recently, talk had turned to Magda the Gypsy witch—an old woman living at the edge of town who practiced midwifery, homeopathy, and holistic healing. Perhaps she practiced much more than charitable healing with her foul tasting potions and herbal remedies; clear evidence of witches brews, according to many of the less enlightened. She seemed to be a convenient lightning rod for the madness that now gripped the countryside.

Magda had been a reviled and feared fixture in the area for decades. But she was tolerated not only for her skills as a midwife, but also for her absolute discretion as an abortionist for the many farmers' daughters who became pregnant out of wedlock. While she was sometimes a useful resource, Magda was also a ready scapegoat for an ignorant, frightened, and superstitious people. Some folks were even talking about burning her at the stake to end what they believed to be a spell or curse she had purportedly placed on them. I couldn't believe what I was hearing—being backward was one thing, but seeking salvation by murdering an old woman was something else altogether. It wasn't very Wiccan

or Christian in my opinion. This place was turning out to be Salem in the late 17th century—less the puritanical trappings and funny costumes. Magda sounded like someone we should meet—and very soon, while we still could. In fact, we would make her acquaintance today.

Magda's home was a ramshackle hovel—a squalid cottage set in squalor to put it more accurately and less politely. Her house was a single story, wood structure with an old weather vane atop its wood-shingled, peaked roof—without question, Hansel and Gretel would have passed on this dump. Its few windows were fully draped and the place looked deserted apart from the pigs and poultry aimlessly wandering the property. I noticed a rundown outhouse, listing about 20 degrees to port, about 25 yards away from the side of the house. A hand-operated water pump was located adjacent to the covered stoop of the home's front entrance. The door was an ancient wood one that was carved with incomprehensible signs and symbols. Its lintel contained a large, poorly painted eyeball similar to the one on the dollar bill.

It wasn't that cold but I felt a chill run down my spine and back up again. This place was downright spooky and I now understood why the locals might think that Magda, the Gypsy was really Magda, the Wicked Witch. Abandon hope, all ye who enter here, I thought, as Iggie tentatively knocked on the door. The saying was

the same one some prankster at the State Department's Diplomatic Security Service Training Academy had scribbled over the classroom door on my first day of instruction as a newly-hired special agent. My classmates and I thought it was a funny joke at the time. It certainly was, but it turned out later that the joke was on us. My interminable, hopeless Foreign Service career can attest to the humorous fact and effect.

The door was opened by an ancient, wizened, hunchbacked woman. She had a cane in one hand that supported her bent frame. Her boney, gnarled fingers showed the ravages of advanced arthritis and unkempt, white hair fell well below her shoulders. She was wearing what might be called a house dress, something very simple and plain, but spotless. However, her most remarkable features were her bright, piercing blue eyes that reflected a sharp intelligence trapped within a desiccated body. Her physical resemblance to a fairytale Witch contributed to her mystique and tended to validate the townsfolk fear and loathing of her. She couldn't win for losing, as they say in these parts—in Romanian slang, of course.

Two things struck me as I glanced around her one room shanty, the large number of books lining the walls and a huge worktable at the back containing all sorts of dried plants and many bottles containing indescribable contents. Magda was obviously well-read and my hunch about her intelligence was confirmed by what I saw.

I believed her to be a highly self-educated and shrewd woman. There was a large crucifix hanging above the potbellied stove and I recognized the book next to her armchair as a bible. I had seen such a thing before while rummaging through hotel room night stands searching for my packs of Marlboros. She was obviously a religious person—in addition to purportedly being a witch. Those things didn't jibe and I wondered what and who this person really was. Simply staying alive to her unknown age suggested she was wise and maybe lucky—the religious trappings suggested piety.

Iggie did the introductions and explained why we wanted to speak with her. Instead of the cold shoulder we had experienced in the village, Magda was delighted to talk to us. It was apparent that she didn't have too many patients or other visitors these days. She appeared to be open and honest—she also possessed a sharp mind and wit. We sincerely asked for her help in understanding what was going on with the purported plague and the reactions of the locals to it. We fibbed a bit by telling her we were part of the World Health Organization team that was now in town investigating the matter. I'm not sure if she believed us, but she began to speak and we quietly and politely listened to what she said.

“I am Romany and come from a long line of proud people who have lived in Transylvania for almost two millennia,” she began. “My people's history has been one of many invasions by

foreigners—one with much blood spilled on our lands. We have been ruled for generations by other peoples and cultures that kept us in servitude through fear and cruelty—Romans, Huns and the Ottomans, to name a few. Many of my people were forced off their lands and had to flee elsewhere for safety and a better life. They are still reviled to this day by others who call them gypsy or much worse. They are often threatened, harassed, and then forced to uproot their families and move on to another place. It is a black curse and a never ending cycle of misery.

“However, we have had good times in Transylvania as well. Many years ago, we had a fine, strong leader of our principality—Vlad Tepes who you foreigners disparagingly call Vlad the Impaler or Dracula. The prince was a hero to my people and defender against the heathen invaders who wanted to conquer, plunder, and subordinate us to their cultures and wills. I have seen your movies and read your books about Dracula—what foolishness! You foreigners seem to be obsessed with the blood drinking creature as much as my stupid, superstitious neighbors.

“The communists were our most recent masters who invaded our land at the end of World War II. They placed their surrogates in power and ruled with an iron hand for decades. For awhile, life was a little better—factories were built and electricity came to the cities and some large towns. But after a time, the corruption of the successive regimes became apparent and pervasive. The

communist bosses raped Romania of its natural resources by selling its timber and minerals to other nations and depositing the money into their foreign bank accounts.

“If you’re looking for vampires, look no further than that bastard Ceausescu and his greedy wife Elena—they and their cronies sucked the lifeblood out of my country for years. Without adequate funds, the quality and availability of basic health care greatly declined for the average citizen and access to medicines and services had to be bought by bribe. Many people couldn’t afford the costs and went without care. That’s why my homeopathic and midwife practices have continued to survive over the years—there isn’t a doctor with 70 kilometers of here. Even if they could get to the doctor, many people couldn’t afford to pay.”

I interrupted her monologue and asked how she learned her trades—she didn’t openly object to my rudeness and curiosity.

“I learned midwifery as a young girl from my father who was a respected veterinarian in the region. I helped him deliver many calves, kids, and children before he died. I continued his practice of delivering babies. The homeopathy came a little later. I read all I could on the subject and applied my knowledge to common medical conditions and problems. Look at all of the books in this room,” she said, waving a scrawny arm across the vista.

“I’ve read each one at least twice—others many more times to perfect my skills and knowledge. My garden supplies many of the

medicinal ingredients I need but, occasionally, I buy some items in town. The herbal and other medicines I make help people who can only afford to pay a little money. My clients also pay with chickens and vegetables so I get by,” she confidently added.

“Most of the people in this valley are uneducated, illiterate, and backward by most standards. They are simple people who lead simple lives. I not only give them remedies, but also knowledge about their bodies and how to prevent illness and disease. Commonsense is often the best remedy for many of their ailments.”

It was getting late and I didn’t want to be on the road after dark if I could help it. I asked the big question.

“Magda, what’s the likely cause of the illness—the plague, as people are calling it?”

She thought for a couple of long minutes before she spoke. “I don’t know. I’ve never seen anything like what’s happening before. It is totally strange and the symptoms are very odd. In its later stages, people seem like they’re possessed by the Devil himself. They twist and contort their bodies in pain, they tremble and shake and experience muscle spasms. Many hallucinate and some seem to be fully delusional, sometimes speaking in unknown tongues.

“It’s terrible to see such suffering, knowing I can do nothing for them except to try to make them as comfortable as possible. I

give them strong analgesics to relieve some of the pain, but often they do no good. In each case, the patient complains of devils occupying their bodies. I pray for each to quickly recover; some do and some don't. The outcomes are unpredictable.

“I know the farmers and townspeople claim it's all God's doing, punishing the people of Transylvania for past misdeeds and sins. Of course, that's nonsense, but I can't convince them otherwise. There has to be a logical explanation for what is happening in the region. There has to be something in the air, water or food supply that's causing this plague. A number of families have not been infected—why? Others with the illness seem to be random victims. There seems to be no common origin for the disease. It makes no sense to me. Maybe your organization can find the answer before more people die.”

“Who knows,” I replied with a shrug.

“I am worried about becoming a victim too, but not from the plague itself,” Magda continued without acknowledging my clever pun.

“I hear what people are saying about me. The old witch Magda has an evil hand in this plague. She's the devil's consort and all of that stupid talk.

“They say ‘She has brought this misery and death upon us with her black magic and, therefore, she must die for what she done—only then will God's curse be lifted.’ The people are scared and

frightened people do frightening things,” she added.

“What are the local authorities doing to stop the rumor mongering,” I asked.

Magda gave a hearty laugh to my question; fortunately, it wasn’t a cackle.

“The senior local official is the district prefect, Dragos Blaga. He’s one of the people talking against me and fostering the hysteria among my neighbors. He does so because he needs to deflect criticism from himself and his cronies for not being able to do anything to bring an end to the plague. He also does so because there is a long-standing vendetta between us—I cannot speak of it. The reason is unimportant, only the fact that it exists and personal honor still must be avenged.

“Dragos is a brutal bully who has controlled this part of Transylvania with an iron grip for many years. He replaced his father upon his retirement from the position—both are unrepentant communists at heart. Dragos remains in power the same way his father did—through intimidation and fear. The people despise and fear him—then they reelect him to office. It’s another example of our ignorant ways—the devil you know principle at work.

“Devil is a good description of Dragos. He is a vicious, corrupt official who bribes and connives with his government superiors and others to get what he wants. A large portion of every government-issued shipment of foodstuffs, fertilizer, and medical

supplies delivered to this region is skimmed by him and sold on the black market. The people know what he does but are afraid to speak out against him.

“There’s one other thing you should know about Dragos: he’s taken on the persona of Vlad the Impaler to burnish his brutish image with the people—nothing too overt, just enough to frighten them and keep them in line. His dacha is adorned with portraits of the prince and the entrance hall bears the Tepes clan coat-of-arms. He suggests that he is a direct descendent of the feared and revered historical figure. All of these things add to his mystique as an omnipotent person with supernatural powers who should not be challenged—no one does. To directly answer your question, I can’t go to the authorities for protection—Dragos is the authority here. I would like to live the remaining few years in peace in my own home and homeland.” Tears welled-up in her eyes as she spoke these final words.

I felt sorry for Magda. She was in a dangerous situation with little hope of help. We said our goodbyes and warmly thanked her for her information. I thought we now had found a valuable friend and ally. Her stories were fascinating because they gave color and context to the goings-on in and around Alba Iulia. There also was a certain pathos and irony when juxtaposing these two over-the-top characters: Magda the Witch and Dragos the Vampire. She was an intelligent, compassionate, pious, and gentle woman who cared for

the sick. He was a corrupt brute who terrorized the citizenry in order to maintain power. Life sucked at times, especially in Romania.

But it was time to leave since the sun was close to setting. I didn't want to be caught on the road after dark. I also didn't want to confront any nasty things that might go bump in the night in rural Transylvania.

MIDDAY MOURNING

Nicoleta Dobos was only twelve when she finally succumbed to the dreaded plague that ravaged the countryside. Her viewing and funeral were scheduled to begin at noon at her parents' home in a remote hamlet of small farms about a two hour drive north of Alba Iulia. Iggie had heard of her death and suggested we attend the services to gather information, but we had to act fast. He explained that people were buried quickly here since there was no embalming or other preservation of the remains. This was largely due to the lack of adequate facilities and not for religious reasons.

He was right, but I wasn't so sure I would be allowed to view her body or to talk to anyone given our earlier reception by the townsfolk. However, Iggie was more confident. The farm was no more than three kilometers from where he was born and had grown up. He would be among his many close relatives and former neighbors again. Iggie looked forward to returning home. I was less enthused by the prospect of being shunned again.

It was a grueling drive over a single, rutted, pot-holed dirt and gravel road. Much of it was one lane and we had to dodge the occasional oncoming lorry or cart. The car's speedometer never bumped above 35 miles per hour during the entire trip. The few people we saw walking alongside the road kept their chins to their

chests and plodded onward without once glancing at us. The whole scene looked disheartening and depressing. We arrived in the farm hamlet just before noon. It consisted of a small collection of shops and houses, no more than a dozen by my quick count. According to Iggie, it didn't even have a proper name—everybody simply referred to it as the town. It made Alba Iulia look like a large, thriving metropolis.

After stretching our legs and taking a leak, we drove the short distance to the Dobos farm. By the look of things, many neighbors were already there to pay their respects and offer condolences. The farmhouse was modest—the best and most polite word I can use to describe it. It was a fairly sizable, single-story wood structure with a small barn at the rear. Several trees—fruit trees, I suspected—lined the pathway to the front door. I stayed in the car while Iggie went inside. He returned in about twenty minutes and said the family had no objections to my visit—not necessarily welcome, but at least tolerated, I thought. In either case, that was enough for me. I wanted to find out what in the hell was going on here and this visit would kick-start my investigation.

I was greeted at the door by Peter Dobos, the family patriarch and Nicoleta's grandfather. He was wearing an ill-fitting jacket and a pair of trousers that didn't match. I wore a conservative leisure suit out of deference to the family and circumstances. He tried his best to be a gracious host, but I couldn't understand a word of what

he said. Regardless, I was motioned inside to stand with the others assembled in the living room. There was little conversation and what there was spoken in hushed tones out of respect for Nicoleta and her mother who was lying in a back bedroom in the throes of the plague herself.

Nicoleta's corpse was displayed in front of us on a long dining table. There was no coffin or casket holding her young body. She was dressed in a plain, white dress and her best black shoes. Her hair had been carefully combed back, and to the sides, revealing her once lovely face. What had been a fair and comely visage was now a drawn and pockmarked death mask caused by plague. She had a ghoulish appearance and I initially looked away in disgust. I hoped no one had noticed my inadvertent faux pas. Regardless, Nicoleta must have put up a fierce fight for life before losing the battle with death. I felt sorry for her and her family.

She was holding an Eastern Orthodox tri-bar cross in her hands, looking at least peaceful if not pretty. More than two dozen lighted candles formed a semi-circle around her body. They illuminated her body and gave-off the strong, cloying scent of frankincense to mask the smell of putrefaction that had already set in. The effects of livor mortis were clearly evident on her discolored arms and legs. The stench of decomposition, coupled with the candles overwhelming odor, made me sick to my stomach. However, I had to tough it out though because what I was about to

do was important to our case—I needed to collect forensic evidence.

I whispered to Iggie what I needed him to do. Like an Italian, he shrugged his shoulders and opened his hands indicating he would reluctantly go along with my plan. We then approached Nicoleta. Iggie stood directly behind me to block the on-lookers views while I piously knelt close to her head. I actually hovered directly over her body while clasping my hands in prayer.

As I mumbled the few words of the Lord’s Prayer I had remembered, I pulled a couple of Nicoleta’s auburn hairs by their roots and covertly moved them to the piece of double-faced tape that I had secreted in the palm of my left hand. With a Q-tip, I gently lifted one of her eyelids and swabbed for mucous. I placed the Q-tip on the tape as well.

I dutifully crossed myself while standing. I hoped my act of respect and piety worked because Julie would need these specimens for her research. Getting permission from Nicoleta’s parents was out of the question. Moreover, I didn’t notice her father in attendance and her mother was in no condition to grant it. By his stern demeanor, her grandfather would have strung me up—even if I had the temerity to ask.

The wake was over and Nicoleta’s body was gently carried to a horse-drawn wagon waiting outside. We slowly followed the ersatz cortege to the local church located only a kilometer away. A priest,

carrying a large cross with colorful banners, led the procession. He was followed by a deacon swinging a censer as he went the church was a humble structure unlike the one in Alba Iulia. Once inside, the service began. Nicoleta was placed in the center of its small nave. Four candle stands were placed around her body, forming a cross. It was an eerie experience.

At one point, I asked Iggy what was in the dish with the candle on the stand next to the body. He explained it was kolyva made of wheat. It was symbolic of grain falling to the ground and dying but later bringing forth much fruit, as told in the bible. Death and resurrection, I supposed.

With the help of Iggy's running commentary, we witnessed the remainder of the service. The priest led the Divine Liturgy for the departed and people held lighted candles and chanted prayers for Nicoleta's speedy deliverance to heaven. Since she had not reached puberty, she was considered a child in the eyes of God and the church. Children were not held to be morally responsible for any sins so the usual penitential elements or prayers for forgiveness were dispensed with. I wondered if the same rule would apply to me if I joined the church. I was certainly childish most of the time and I was still waiting for my voice to change and my balls to finally drop into place. I couldn't afford to hire a sin-eater so maybe this would work instead. Perhaps that would salve or solve my problem. However, did I want to belong to a church that would

have me as a member? That was the real question to ponder.

The ceremonies lasted another 45 minutes. At that point, everyone was asked to leave the church—the service was over. Iggie mentioned that this was a highly unusual departure from the norm since the burial service was an important part of the ritual as well. However, given the concern about contagion, the archdiocese in Bucharest had granted special dispensation to cremate the bodies of plague victims. Nicoleta's remains would be burned and her ashes buried in a plot in hallowed ground next to the church. A deacon would carry out this duty and no one would witness the gruesome spectacle. I was glad we got to skip the last act of this religious drama.

The men headed directly to the only tavern in the tiny hamlet while the women and children returned to the Dobos house to prepare a meal. Both groups would engage in the same speculation as to what was causing the plague. That was what Iggie and I had waited for, a chance to listen to the local gossip. We tagged along behind a group of men and walked the short distance to the local watering hole. My presence went unremarked and largely unnoticed.

As we entered the establishment, I immediately noticed a man sitting alone in a corner. He was disheveled and likely drunk. Peter Dobos strode directly to him and slapped him hard across the face,

breaking his lethargy—and maybe his jaw. The other men silently looked on. The man turned out to be Peter’s son, Victor.

“How could you have done that you selfish coward? You missed your own child’s funeral, you drunken swine!” he screamed. “What you did today was unforgivable. How could you do that to your only daughter? Why you aren’t home tending to your poor, sick wife? I have borne a weak, disrespectful son,” he spoke to the room. “I regret sowing my own seed for this worthless boy.”

Victor was sobbing and having difficulty holding up his head in his drunken state.

“I couldn’t face the death of my beloved Nicoleta,” he finally bumbled. “Damn God and this plague,” he swore. “Damn Him for taking my little girl. Damn Him for making my wife sick. I know I will soon lose her too for my sins.”

“It is you who should be damned by your own blasphemies,” Peter angrily replied. He was about to strike his son again but held himself in check. He then sat down next to Victor and held him in his arms. His rage was largely expended and now he consoled his distraught, grieving son.

After a long pause, others in the room ordered beer, the house’s only spirit. Iggie and I ordered ones as well. It seemed that the proprietor was having a banner day. Obviously, funerals, baptisms, and weddings were good for business.

Following the obligatory condolences and toasts to Nicoleta and her family, the men settled down to gossip about the funeral, life, death, farming, and, of course, the cause of their miseries—the plague.

Iggie continued to interpret the conversations while I sipped my strong beer. Both were strong, local brews.

“It’s the Devil’s work,” someone commented.

“The only devil around here is Dragos Blaga,” another responded. Everyone laughed.

“No, I’m serious,” the first said. “How do you explain such things? The sick are speaking in foreign tongues and contorting their bodies as if possessed. They yell out bizarre things as if someone was speaking through them. You have seen these things for yourself so don’t say I’m crazy for thinking of the Devil. How else can you explain what’s happening?”

“There has to be another explanation,” the other replied. “These things should not be happening among us. We are pious people who obey the church’s and God’s laws. We are not unrepentant sinners, my friend.”

“Well, there is talk in the other villages that someone is poisoning us,” a voice at the back of the room spoke. “Maybe someone is putting things in our well water. Those foreigners from the internationalist organization may also be responsible,” he continued. “They are the people who sent the seed grain to the

valley. Dragos is in charge of distributing it, although there are rumors he's selling it to the highest bidders on the black market. We starve and he profits, like always here. Could the grain somehow be making us sick? Remember, we did not have this cursed disease before it arrived. Maybe it is cursed as well. My family and I will not touch the seed no matter how hungry we are. It is a gift from Hell!"

"Dragos, perhaps," someone else said. "But why would he do that? Yes, he is a corrupt, greedy, and despicable man, but he wouldn't poison us. Where else would he get his blood money from our taxes and fees? Who would pay his bribes? No, it's not Dragos. He already has bled us, but we still have value in filling his dirty pockets."

"What about the witch in Alba Iulia? People are saying she has cursed the valley because of the many years we have shunned her. She's also an abortionist who uses the dead infant's blood to prepare elixirs and potions. It is the truth. What she does is an abomination. She's a very wicked one, I hear."

"Yes, that's possible," another said. "I'm told that she uses her black magic to heal those foolish enough to visit her. Those evil arts have served her well over the years. Perhaps, it's time to deal with her wickedness once and for all."

I had heard enough. These people were simply backward, ignorant folk who had no better sense of what was going on than I

did. However, they gave me an idea—one that might flush out the truth. At least it wouldn't do any harm to try. Irrational fear, bordering on hysteria, had already taken hold in the valley—a little more shouldn't hurt. Maybe I would shake the tree, and the peoples' collective psyche, and see what falls out.

Sometimes those who protect and serve must put aside their reason and rationality to embrace the folklore and superstition of the truly, fucking ignorant of this world.

BLOODLETTING IN THE BOONDOCKS

My idea might get us arrested and kicked out of the country—or maybe worse. Being declared *persona non grata* by the Romanians was the least of my worries at the moment. I had learned early on that being a PNG was far more preferable to being DOA in my line of work. It would be a risky gambit, but one that had to be taken in order to stir the people into action. My guess was that some people had a good sense of what was happening, but were either afraid to speak up or were criminally involved in the matter. Either way, I wanted to turn up the heat in the cauldron and see what bubbled to the top. I enlisted Iggie in my endeavor. His hands would no longer be clean after tonight. No matter, mine were always dirty from the nicotine stains on my fingers.

It was about 8 pm and the sun had gone down much earlier. It was still late winter and darkness came in the afternoon. There were no street lights and few homes had electricity in the region. Generators were much too expensive so kerosene lanterns, oil lamps, and candles were still used to light the sparsely scattered dwellings. Most of the houses were simple, wood-framed structures—we might describe the living conditions as primitive and impoverished. The locals would describe the same conditions as secure and comfortable—living much like their forefathers and

not knowing or expecting anything more in life.

It was a simple existence and one that largely revolved around church, family, forestry, and farming. People went to bed early here, although a few flickering lights could occasionally be seen through the windows of the farmhouses—Romanian party animals, I guessed. Most others were up before dawn to work the fields or tend their livestock. The night sky was almost pitch black with a waning moon—a witch’s moon and a good thing for what we had in mind and what we planned to do.

Earlier in the day, I had asked Julie to get me two large diameter syringes. As a doctor, it would be an easy task for her. She asked me why I needed them, but I refused to tell her because I wanted to keep her in the dark about what Iggie and I planned to do. I wouldn’t lie to her (this time), but the less she knew the better, just in case things turned sour. I promised John that I would protect her and this was part of my promise. By keeping her in the dark, she could truthfully claim she didn’t know what we were doing and avoid some of the backlash from the bank and Romanian authorities if we were discovered and arrested during our little adventure in the countryside. Sometimes gallantry and honesty could be unpleasant and awkward things for those who protect and serve.

The farm was about a 45 minute drive from our hotel. It was located just outside the village of Alba Iulia, in the foothills of the

Carpathian Mountains. Iggie had scouted the area earlier and had drawn maps to make sure we could find our way at night. Thank God he did because road signs were few and far between, and later nonexistent, along the dirt back roads we traveled. We simply couldn't stop at a local 7-11 to ask for directions. The terrain became increasingly hilly as we drove to our destination. The roads were very narrow and we had to be especially careful driving. Fortunately, there was little traffic and we didn't have any mishaps or even close calls with the few Lorries, ox carts, and horse-drawn wagons we encountered on the road.

We parked our car in a copse of woods about 300 yards from the farmhouse. It was highly unlikely it would be spotted by the police or nosey neighbors. The whole area seemed to be asleep and there was heavy ground fog—again, bits of good luck for our mission. We chose the farm more-or-less at random. Our only criteria were that it was easily accessible by road and located within a few miles of Alba Iulia. We crept to the cattle pen behind the house and began our work. The crude, wooden stockade held 14 head of cattle—a significant number by local standards. This farmer was well-to-do by this measure.

Iggie and I easily breached the pen's perimeter and entered the corral. The cows were a bit startled by our presence but made little noise—we didn't want to create any rustling sounds—the consequences of getting caught red-handed were too great. We

simply couldn't afford any confrontations with the home's occupants who might not share our sense of adventure and humor.

We chose a calf heifer as our first target. It was relatively small and would be more manageable than the full grown cows. Iggie did the tough work by deftly placing a noose over the heifer's neck and pulling it taut. The animal's jugular vein quickly became engorged with blood and bulged at its throat. I took the makeshift tool I had earlier fashioned and carefully plunged its sharp prongs into the neck of the beast. The act took only a couple of seconds to complete. After an initial spurt, rivulets of blood flowed freely from the two small puncture wounds down its neck and onto its chest.

However, the animal wasn't seriously hurt. The Masai tribesmen of East Africa used a similar technique to draw blood from their cattle. They would shoot a thin arrow, using a loosely strung bow, to pierce the jugular to drain cattle blood which they drank mixed with milk as part of their regular diet.

Like the Masai, we gathered dirt and dung to make a plaster and applied it to our heifer's wound to effectively stanch its bleeding. The paste-like mixture would soon dry and flake off revealing the two, distinct, circular marks. It was little different than someone giving blood and then applying a bandage afterwards to the needle puncture. Unlike the Masai, I used the two syringes with large diameter hypodermic needles that Julie

obtained for me and attached them to a broom handle. I secured them with duct tape and added my penlight to the device—a necessary light source to accomplish our task.

The heifer now had two perfectly round puncture wounds—about three inches apart—at its throat and caked blood covering its neck and chest. The entire scene looked much worse than simply a superficial wound to the animal—and that was our intent. It was all about effect and drama and we hoped our efforts worked as intended.

We performed the same procedure on three other milk cows. One was a bit rambunctious and kicked Iggie smack on his right buttocks. He was knocked to the ground and covered with mud and dung. Fortunately, only his pride was injured—although he would have one serious bruise. I told him that turnabout was fair play—the cow had branded him! However, Iggie wasn't amused one bit. I shouldn't have laughed at his mishap but I couldn't help it. It was comical and the whole episode looked as though it was right out of a kid's cartoon.

We quickly covered our tracks by sweeping the ground using the traditional end of the broom. Any footprints we might have missed would be obliterated by the cows hooves in short order. We were now finished with our little caper and would await its results. We drove from the farm without our headlights turned on until we were a safe distance away. The fog was now as thick as pea soup

on the nearly moonless night—we had to drive slowly to avoid running off the road. Our windows were rolled down all the way to air the stench from Iggie’s unintended pratfall.

I chain smoked to help cover up the smell—but the combination of cigarette smoke and cow dung made Iggie nauseous. He lost it about halfway back from the farm—it must have been more than his weak, Romanian constitution could tolerate. The odor of vomit now added its own aroma to the noxious stew of stench in the car.

The little, green Christmas tree air freshener hanging from the rear view mirror did little or nothing to alleviate the pungent smell—it was a very long and memorable drive back to our hotel. During the trip, I swore-off the overpowering odor of dung and vomit forever—the cigs were another matter though. Sometimes those who protect and serve must shed a little blood and have the stomach to bring about a favorable investigative outcome.

I slept in the next morning—I was totally exhausted from our pastoral antics. I reluctantly dragged myself out of bed while smoking a cigarette about noon and headed to the hotel coffee shop to get a cup of its namesake to wake me up and give me a reasonable buzz—a couple of more cigarettes would help with my resurrection. I’d shower and shave later when I wasn’t so comatose. Given my BO, I didn’t believe I would have any trouble

finding an empty seat at the counter.

We'd spend the day at the hotel going over our investigative strategy and weigh the likely consequences of what we had already done and ruminate about our episode with the cows the night before. We had to be very cautious since we couldn't predict, with any certainty, the likely outcome of our efforts so far. In other words, we didn't have a clue about what we were doing.

It was late afternoon and I'd had enough of the brainstorming stuff with my colleague—our interminable talk gave me a huge headache and pain in the ass from sitting in one place too long. I decided to take a stroll around the town to clear my head and shake off my lethargy.

Central Sibiu was a magnificent collection of old government and commercial buildings that had been lovingly restored and maintained over the years—some dated back to medieval times. Townhouses and shops were squeezed between one another and the whole mix worked well. Small pocket parks dotted the area and a number of people could be seen walking their children and/or dogs. The many side streets and alleyways were paved with cobble stones. These narrow avenues wound through the city center in every direction and it was easy for a newcomer to get lost. Sibiu was an old-world, European city—if you squinted at the buildings facades, you could easily imagine you had stepped back a 150 years, or more, in time.

Some restaurants and cafes had placed tables on the sidewalks for the more hearty tourists and residents who enjoyed the al fresco experience. It was late winter and a bit too early for most patrons to be sitting outdoors. However, I noticed a few people braving the chilly weather with a mug of hot tea or coffee. The whole scene was picture postcard perfect—except for one shop that sold trinkets and knickknacks to the tourist trade.

The shop's display window and front sidewalk were chock-a-block with vampire memorabilia: coffee mugs, flags, T-shirts, balloons, stuffed animals, and many other examples of hokey airport art. I certainly wasn't shocked or surprised. This was Dracula territory since the city was located in the heart of Transylvania, with the Carpathian Mountains visible in the distance. His purported ancestral castle was located about 40 miles away—at least by my count. Dracula, Vlad the Impaler, Nosferatu, and a host of other names were associated over the centuries with a real prince of the 15th century and a Hollywood icon—a seductive, blood sucking fiend who preyed on the local populace by night and moviegoers wallets by day.

Who in the world would buy such crap? I wondered. I soon had my answer—me. I bought gifts for my two sons. One was a cleverly constructed toy that had Dracula reposed in a coffin. It had a tiny, light-sensitive photocell and battery that operated the gizmo. When dark, the coffin lid would automatically spring open

and out would pop His Nibs in full vampire regalia—pale white face, ruby-red lips with protruding fangs, long fingernails, and flowing cape. At daylight, the Dracula figure would moan and groan until someone closed the toy's lid. The second item was less sophisticated, but still amusing. It was a whirligig with a flying vampire bat affixed atop of its ground spike. The wind would catch the creature's wings creating a loud flapping sound. It would be a perfect addition to the front lawn of my older son's townhouse.

It was incredibly odd that some people would let their imaginations and belief systems go haywire under certain circumstances and actually believe the vampire mythology had any substance or credibility. Simple, primal superstition, I suspected. I bought a strand of fresh garlic cloves before I left the store. I loved the stuff sprinkled on my pasta and pretentiousness.

At dinner, Julie, Iggie and I discussed the next day's agenda. Julie would conduct liaison with her medical counterparts from the United Nation's World Health Organization who had encamped in Alba Iulia to study the outbreak. Iggie would work the town's shops and taverns to pick-up on the latest gossip. Hopefully, our little escapade last night at the farm would be on everyone's tongues—news travels quickly by foot, horse cart, and word-of-mouth in these parts.

I would stay at the hotel and relax. I would contact John Murray to give him a status report on our findings and

observations so far. I'd be sure to leave out the more trivial, mundane things like roping and mutilating cattle in the middle of the night on behalf of the World Bank since international calls were damn expensive these days!

Sometimes those who protect and serve deserved to rest on their laurels and lariats.

BYZANTINE ORTHODOXY

It was only 7 pm, a full half-hour before the meeting's starting time, and the church was already packed with the fearful, curious, and faithful. This town hall gathering was probably the largest turnout of people for a single event in years. Small children played in the aisles and mothers tightly clutched the babes in their arms. There was little conversation and most folks dully stared into space as if in a state of shock. Fear was palpable and pervasive. These abject people were scared to death of the plague ravaging their families and those of their neighbors. Each expected consoling reassurance or divine intervention from their secular and religious leaders—speedy riddance or deliverance from the horror that stalked their lands and nightmares

Julie, Iggie and I stood in the narthex near the front entrance with our backs leaning against the wall since all the rough, wooden chairs were spoken for. By custom, non-orthodox visitors were not permitted to enter the nave where most of the parishioners were now seated. Had this been a religious service, men would have stood to one side and the women on the other. Out of habit, the women still wore head coverings as a sign of respect and modesty. I instructed Iggie to remove his John Deere cap.

Even though the weather was cold, the double doors to the

church were propped open so those standing outside could see and hear the goings-on. It was a packed house and I was surprised that Dragos hadn't charged admission. Beautiful icons of Christ, Mother Mary, and archangels adorned the church's walls. Eventually, I spotted Magda sitting front and center. She really had a lot of chutzpah by attending the meeting considering her present standing and circumstances in the community.

The meeting was originally scheduled to be held in the small municipal building until someone realized it wouldn't be large enough to hold everyone. Moreover, the church was the only building in the village with a generator to provide electric lighting. So, this house of God became the meeting hall and sanctuary to discuss things most civil and religious—church and state had merged in a small village in Transylvania.

The master-of-ceremonies, Dragos Blaga, stood behind a small dais and opened the meeting by asking everyone to bow their heads and say a prayer for those who had died and suffered from the plague: a sanctimonious hypocrite, if I ever saw one. A couple of his goons hung close by their boss for moral and physical support. People dutifully did what he ordered and after a minute or so he began his spiel. *This should be an interesting bit of self-serving legerdemain, I thought.*

“Many have suffered, and continue to suffer, from this cursed disease—this plague—that has brought so much death and

suffering to our beloved land,” opening his carefully crafted speech.

“Loved ones and far distant neighbors alike have succumbed to the terrible ravages of body and soul. It is a curse and blight on our valley. However, I want you to know that I have put the full resources of the district government behind finding the cause of this disease and assure you that we are doing everything possible to bring it to an end. You need to trust in your leaders to see all of us through these trying times.” No one dared snicker at his outrageous fibs.

Iggie whispered in my ear that the district government consisted of no more than 12 employees and one old pick-up truck. Most of the employees were ghosts who paid Dragos a stipend to stay on the government payroll. I smiled as Dragos continued his fairytale.

“As soon as the outbreak started I realized we had a serious problem on our hands. I immediately contacted Bucharest for assistance. The central administration then contacted the World Health Organization in Switzerland and it has sent a team of medical advisors to Alba Iulia to find the origin of the plague. To my right is Dr. Hans Beckner who is leading the WHO team in the investigation. Dr. Beckner is....”

“You are responsible for many of our problems!” someone shouted from outside the church’s entrance.

“Dragos Blaga is a greedy, corrupt official who has bled this district dry for years. Everyone knows this to be true. He steals the meager supplies sent from Bucharest and sells them to the highest bidders on the black market. He is a filthy, lying thief,” the man loudly exclaimed.

Dragos’ goons quickly strode to the entrance and disappeared into the night. I hoped the man safely escaped to speak another day. The emperor’s clothes just became a little more transparent, I mused.

The impromptu coitus interruptus didn’t last long—the people already knew they were being repeatedly screwed by Dragos without getting a happy ending. He barely broke stride giving his speech and made no mention of the incident. The tirade made little difference to him since no one would dare to seriously challenge his position. He was one confident, self-assured despot.

“As I was saying, Dr. Beckner is an expert in infectious and environmental diseases. He and his team will be working here until they determine the cause of the plague—I have his personal assurance on that,” he added.

That was Dr. Beckner’s cue to take the dais. He was a distinguished looking gentleman about 60 years old who had a shock of silver hair. He sported a pair of reading glasses strung around his neck and thoroughly looked the role of medical expert and father figure combined. Dr. Beckner had the bearing of a man

who knew what he was doing. I certainly hoped for the sake of these poor people.

“My sincere condolences to the families who have suffered the loss of a loved one,” he began.

“I understand that this is a difficult time for everyone. As the senior representative for the WHO, I can reassure you that we will do our best to discover the cause of these illnesses.

“I’ve heard the word plague used by many people since my team and I arrived yesterday evening. That may not be a proper medical term for what you are experiencing but we understand why it’s used. The reported symptoms do have some similarities to the bubonic plagues of past centuries—but several key indicators do not resemble those outbreaks. I won’t go into any detail now since we are just beginning our investigation. We will tell you more when things are clearer to us and we can make a reasonable diagnosis for these illnesses,” he continued.

“As a starting point in our inquiries, we will be testing for possible environmental factors as to the origin of the disease. We will need your help and cooperation in this regard. Well water, soil, foodstuffs, and indoor air samples must be collected to determine the presence of any pathogens or toxins. For example, pesticides, if ingested or inhaled in certain quantities, can cause some of the symptoms experienced. Please let me make it clear that I’m not suggesting that such is the cause for the sicknesses,

only mentioning one of many possibilities.”

Fortunately, he didn't mention that he also planned to exhume the bodies of their deceased relatives and conduct intrusive autopsies on their remains. That would have been way too much for these trusting people. Moreover, most bodies had already been cremated before burial and any forensic value would be negligible to nil; much like trying to tease useful information from a Kingsford charcoal briquette.

“Members of my team will be visiting each of the houses and farms where the illness has occurred. We will collect samples wearing a protective suit like this one.”

He held up an orange biological jumpsuit with face mask and respirator for all to see. The people gasped and immediately began furiously talking to their seat mates. What was intended to explain a routine precaution for his staff, triggered more confusion and fear for these poor people. Dr. Beckner had badly misjudged the reaction of his skittish audience—vampires, witches, and now orange creatures from outer space—it didn't get any scarier for the ignorant and superstitious. That statement turned out to be premature—there was still more drama to come.

Dr. Beckner's pitch and ill-advised dog and pony show were preempted by a man who stood on his chair and introduced himself as Teodor Dimir. Things were now really getting interesting, I mused.

“Most of you know me to be an honest, humble man who speaks the truth. I am not well- educated, but I know about farming. I have seen much in my years, but nothing like I saw two days ago with my own eyes at my cattle pen. Stanislav Serban and Dimitri Vulpes can tell you the same—honorable men who do not lie. They too saw what happened to my cattle.”

“Yes, it’s true,” someone called out.

I looked at Iggie and winked. Here we go, I thought.

“I went to milk my cows as I do each morning. What I saw shocked and frightened me. So much so that I immediately went to my neighbors farms and told them to come and look at what I had found.” Teodor took a breather and wiped his face with his handkerchief. He was nervous and not accustomed to speaking to a group this size, other than his milk cows.

Teodor continued his monologue. “Several of my cattle had been attacked and mutilated in the night. God protect us,” he said as he crossed himself. I noticed others doing the same.

“The throats of some of my cows were bloodied. When we examined them closely, we noticed two puncture wounds at their jugular veins. There was much blood on the ground from their injuries. There were no signs of trespassers and nothing was disturbed, except my cows.”

“Vampyra!” somebody yelled. “Vampyra attacked his animals and drank their blood. The Devil is at work again,” he yelled.

Someone else stood up and said that must be the cause of the plague. The vampire's blood sucking had transferred noxious toxins to the animals' milk. People drank the milk and became sick—simple as that, he asserted. Teodor Dimir had just heard the value of his stock plummet through the church's floor—the local bull market had crashed hard.

People began furiously talking and shouting at the same time and the church quickly devolved into pandemonium. Mass hysteria was quickly taking hold.

It was total chaos for a few minutes until we heard a loud rapping from the front of the church. It was Magda banging her cane against the back of her chair; a not-so-subtle call for order and sanity. People finally quieted and sat down again. She wasn't well-liked, but was still a commanding figure and someone to be reckoned with in these parts—especially if one's daughter had missed her period two months in a row.

When the volume returned to a more-or-less normal level, Magda spoke. She stood with some difficulty and faced her neighbors. She was one brave lady in my book.

“I have lived in Transylvania for more years than anybody else in this church. I have seen much in my time. I have ministered to you and your relatives more times than I can count. While I am a proud Romanian and a longtime resident of this district, I must tell you that I am ashamed at times to admit I'm part of this

community. This is one of those times.” The room was hushed at this point.

“The very notion that vampirism caused this disease, this plague is absurd nonsense. Why, because vampires only exist in your minds and imaginations. The stories you were told as children growing up are patently untrue. Vampires do not exist except in your primitive subconscious and your hysteria. Everything that seems foreign or strange to you has a basis in science and logic, not superstition. Listen to doctor Beckner and look to him for answers. Do not let your fears control your thoughts and actions.”

Before Magda could finish admonishing her people, a man stood up and interrupted her.

“Death to the witch!” he screamed. “Death to Magda, the evil sorceress! Death to the one who makes potions and casts spells! Death to this wicked woman! She has caused this plague and its misery to be visited upon us by a wrathful god. She must die before God is appeased. Only then will our land be rid of this cursed disease. We all know how to deal with witches. They must be burned at the stake to cleanse our sins.”

That outcry promoted many to shake their fingers at Magda and curse her for her putative wickedness and witchery. A couple of hymnals were thrown in her direction and all hell was starting to break loose in God’s house. People were moving towards her and I feared for her life. I told Julie to immediately leave and meet us at

the car. Iggie and I quickly moved to Magda's aid. That was when the lights went out. Either the generator had run dry or someone had intentionally cut the power—I mentally voted for the latter scenario.

I used my penlight to guide us to Magda. We jostled our way through the crowded madhouse and reached her about the same time as a couple of other men. By the looks on their faces, their intentions didn't appear to be honorable. As we literally lifted Magda off her feet, one of the thugs made the mistake of trying to block our exit by stiff arming us. He received a quick kick to the groin followed by a painful elbow to the ribs for his ineffectual efforts. Our path was now clear and we hastily left the church.

We ungraciously took Magda out the front door in a fireman's carry and into our car. All of us were silent during the ride to her house. We would stay with her through the night to make sure she had no unwanted, vengeful visitors. By our actions, we had just been added to Dragos Blaga's vendetta list of interfering outsiders—three of his top ten most wanted, I suspected. Iggie would sleep in Magda's house and I would sleep with Julie in the car. This could be the consummate opportunity to finally bond with her. However, sometimes the decidedly unorthodox desires of those who protect and serve were sorely dashed on the car's dashboard by sleeping alone in the front seat.

Julie and I drove back to our hotel in Sibiu early the next morning. Iggie would stay in Alba Iulia to snoop around and keep a close eye on Magda. The people were riled up and we continued to worry about Magda's safety. Before we left, Julie met with the World Health officials to introduce herself and offer her assistance. With her impressive medical credentials and World Bank affiliation, her offer was readily accepted by Dr. Beckner—he could use all the help he could get since he realized the difficulty of the situation. Julie was now seconded to the team. It looked like we would be daily commuters to Alba Iulia.

About 10 kilometers outside the village, a large, dilapidated lumber truck pulled behind us. The driver blasted us with his air horn a couple of times indicating he wanted to pass. I slowed down a bit and the truck safely passed us. There were about a dozen large logs sitting atop the vehicle's long flatbed. Logging and timber production accounted for much of the area's income. Most of the region's raw wood products would be shipped abroad to earn critical foreign currency. It was a serious income producer for the country.

Two workers were sitting on the logs next to the truck's cab. I guessed they were watching for any shifts in the load or other problems and they would bang on the cab's roof to alert the driver to stop. We kept our distance, lagging about 75 meters behind the vehicle. At one point, the truck driver began weaving back and

forth across the narrow road. I thought he might have a flat tire or was warning us not to pass on the upcoming curve. It was a suicidal maneuver in any event. As we took the long, uphill curve, I noticed one of the workers crawl to the center of the logs and unhook the single restraining strap. At the same time, his partner was using a pry bar to roll the logs off the sides of the truck bed. They must be lightening the load to save on fuel, I darkly mused.

Within seconds, huge logs were heading in our direction. They wildly toppled to the tarmac like straws in the game of pick-up sticks. I hit the brakes and our car sharply veered to the right. One log flew by narrowly missing us. A second one, rolling like a barrel, headed directly towards us. It struck the front of the vehicle and we went airborne, landing wheels down on the far side of the road. We had narrowly escaped being killed. It turned out that the truck driver wasn't the least suicidal—merely homicidal. Log rolling must have been a popular sport here.

The center and side-curtain air bags of our Saab 9-3 deployed as designed, they had likely saved our lives. I immediately unhooked my seatbelt and went to Julie's door and pulled her to the side of the road. She was conscious, but in shock. Regrettably, she didn't require mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. I placed my jacket over her and tightly held her in my arms to keep us warm. In about 20 minutes, she had mostly recovered from the effects of the shock. We had both suffered abrasions and bruises, but otherwise

we were fine. Julie might have a mild concussion, but would quickly and fully recover from the ordeal.

Eventually, we flagged down a passing pick-up truck that took us to the next large town. From there, we caught a bus to Sibiu. Our totaled car was left for the rental company to worry about—logging accidents were common here. However, I worried about our personal safety since we almost ended up as Romanian road kill. I knew who to blame for this little prank—Dragos Blaga and his band of merry men. He would pay dearly for this most rude attempt on our lives.

Sometimes those who protect and serve politely vowed to castrate their enemies with dull pocket knives and hang their fuzzy dice from their next car's rearview mirror.

BEWITCHED, BOTHERED & BEWILDERED

Lance had been right about one thing: Iggy was a valuable asset to our team—actually, he was indispensable. His knowledge of the region and its peoples, language skills, and cultural sensitivities worked wonders and made my job much easier. In fact, I couldn't have gotten this far in the investigation without his help. Of course, I'd never admit that to John Murray—or anyone else for that matter. I would be sure to mention him in my will though. I only hoped its reading would be far off. Truthfully, I would give Iggy and Julie fair credit for what they accomplished. They both made me look like I knew what I was doing. That alone was enough for me to sing their praises to the higher-ups in the bank—even doing it *a cappella*.

I tasked Iggy to visit the local farmers markets and buy varieties of seed grain. Julie needed comparative samples for her research. Moreover, I wanted to know if any of the seeds came from the World Bank stocks. Due to widespread corruption in the third-world (sorry, less developed) countries, the bank had started using taggants to mark their disbursements of bulk food, mature cereal grains, and seed products. It wasn't a unique or new technology by any means. It had been successfully used by others before.

The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms had used taggants to mark and track explosives in the 1980s. The taggants were microscopic particles that were mixed into the raw chemicals producing explosives. Manufacturers were required to use them and they served as effective tools in identifying specific batches of commercial explosives. By recovering the taggants after a bombing, the investigators could easily identify the manufacturer, the batch number, lot number, the shipment date, and initial buyer. Subsequent investigation through wholesalers and distributors could determine the identities of the retailer and ultimate purchaser.

In its day, the program was successful in solving several highly publicized acts of domestic terrorism and crime. Unfortunately, the NRA and its lobbyists were able to shutdown the program after a few years. Switzerland was now the only country in the world requiring taggants in explosives manufacturing.

The reason for the taggant ban in the U.S. was simple politics. The BATF was the most vilified federal law enforcement agency due to its enforcement role in controlling the sale of firearms and gunpowder, an explosive. It had few friends and many foes on the Hill where campaign contributions got the biggest bang for the buck. The NRA could take most of the blame or credit for creating the perception of a dangerous organization running amok and over our second amendment rights. In 1995, the president of the NRA

referred to BATF (and FBI) agents as “jack-booted thugs.” *Thank goodness I wore only Bostonian wingtips, I mused.*

The taggants used by the bank were less sophisticated, but just as accurate in determining whether a particular shipment or food product or seed batch was funded by the World Bank under a loan or grant. John had mentioned this bit of important information to me during my briefing at headquarters. The program was a closely guarded secret in the bank. The Romanian country office was not aware of its existence, nor was Julie, according to John. I’d have to confide in Julie at some point since she would be conducting the examinations for the presence of the taggants.

Corrupt government officials and their middlemen were savvy enough not to sell the stolen products in their original bags, cartons, or containers. The words Banc Mundial, Oxfam, United Nations Food Program, the U.S. Agency for International Development, Red Cross, and many others, were sure giveaways that the items had been illegally siphoned off and being sold on the black market.

The bad guys would repackage the products and move them down the black market food chain. The products would ultimately end up at local markets, food stalls, and retail shops to be sold to those who often could ill-afford them. The goods typically would stay within the country of destination because shipping costs were too onerous to move the product elsewhere. The desperate and

hungry ended up paying the price for the greed of their public officials and countrymen.

Iggie would collect random samples of wheat, barley, rye, and other seed grains from the markets and bring them to Julie for examination. Julie's marching orders included conducting a thorough analysis of the seed. The bank was anxious to dispel the rumors that the seed was somehow tainted and responsible for the plague. That in itself was puzzling since no seed had been distributed so far—at least as far as we knew. Distribution throughout the region was still about 10 days off, coinciding with the beginning of the planting season.

If the seeds hadn't been distributed, how could people get sick from them? I wondered. Moreover, the seeds were only for planting and not eating. Could people be infected by simply handling them? Jesus, this was turning out to be Jack and the Beanstalk fairytale stuff—magic beans, along with witches, vampires, and who knows what else. Brother was it ever getting grim!

The only obvious answer was that someone was skimming the seed stocks and selling them to their friends and neighbors, not realizing they might be deadly. Reportedly, all seed sacks were being stored under lock and key at four warehouses—barns in the area. Not so coincidentally, the district prefect was responsible for safeguarding and equitably distributing them per a formula

developed by the Ministry of Agriculture in Bucharest. Of course, that official was none other than my good friend—Dragos Blaga, a.k.a. Count Dracula. The seedy plot had just turned against the bloody grain. Sometimes those Americans who protect and serve couldn't see the spacious skies for the amber waves of grain.

“Lance, I need your help.” The words almost stuck in my mouth. I detested relying on anyone for anything—too old and too stubborn, I suspected. Maybe too vain too. I called him from my hotel room and the connection was excellent.

“How can I help, Avery,” he lisped. I guessed he kept a handkerchief close by to dab the spittle after he spoke. Ok, I wouldn't bust his chops now since I needed his assistance.

“I need you to contact your counterparts in the Romanian government and have them contact Dragos Blaga, the district prefect in Alba Iulia,” I informed him.

“They need to tell him that I will be conducting an inspection of the World Bank seed shipments. I plan to do an inventory of what's being stored and what the bank contracted for. I expect the customary courtesies and cooperation afforded to an important official from Washington. I think you'll know how to spin the message,” I added.

“Lance, this is important to our inquiries and your tenure. Don't tell them anything more. Emphasize that it's simply a

routine matter given the circumstances.”

Lance was silent for a bit, likely taken aback by what I had just said. Obviously, he was a sensitive, mild, and gentle creature who regularly enjoyed taking it up the Hershey highway. To each his own just desserts—brownies, I guessed in Lance’s case.

“Okay, I’ll get busy and contact the officials that can make it happen. By the way Avery, is there anything new to report?” he genuinely asked.

“No, nothing yet, but you’ll be the first to know,” I disingenuously promised the phone. “We are just getting our feet planted on the ground, so to speak. I’ll let you know of any developments—soonest,” I added. Reassurance and bullshit go a long way in these situations. I wasn’t ready to fully trust Lance because I didn’t know if he had any involvement in the matter, even inadvertently or tangentially.

I knew Lance would do the right thing and I would be received by Dragos as an important official from the World Bank in Washington. Dragos would resent my visit and interference, but so what? The real point of my inspection visits to the warehouses was to show Dragos that I hadn’t been intimidated by his attempt on my and Julie’s life. Bullies hated to be challenged and that was exactly what I was doing. I was intentionally pushing his buttons so he would make a serious misstep and mistake in judgment. That mistake could be fatal for one of us. You can correctly guess that I

hoped for a favorable outcome. Transylvania was not someplace I would like to prematurely and permanently retire to since being one of the living dead simply didn't appeal to me. The thought really sucked— big time, in my opinion.

I easily found Drago's office. He shared it with the part-time mayor of Alba Iulia in the village's tiny municipal building. He was dressed in jeans and a flannel shirt—he must save his tux and cape for more special occasions. I had brought a clipboard and manila folder filled with blank paper for props. I wanted to look official or officious or whatever when I met him.

We shook hands but I didn't give him the old, American squeeze routine like I'd done with Lance. If I did, I would be the one ending up on the wrong side of the grip. Dragos was a large, heavysset man who could probably do several successive bench presses with me and not work up a sweat. I hadn't fully appreciated his size while he stood behind the dais at the church the other night. I guessed he was in his early fifties with a salt and pepper mullet cut on his large head. He was a formidable looking man and I could now better understand why the people were intimidated by this imposing figure: a modern day Paul Bunyan on steroids.

"I've been expecting you Mr. Dick," he spoke in heavily accented English. "My masters in Bucharest told me to respectfully

receive a very important visitor from the World Bank. That must be you.” Sure you fucking bastard, you expected Julie and I to be dead by now, I thought.

“I’m not sure how special I am but I am from the World Bank and here to help you.” He either ignored or didn’t understand my bit of government levity. Being a wise-ass at heart, I couldn’t help it. Dragos would understand my sense of humor later, I vowed to myself.

“Mr. Blaga, since the outbreak of the plague, the bank and your government are most anxious to determine its origin—you know this better than I. The World Health Organization is camped a short distance from here and looking at possible environmental causes for the disease. My job is to inventory the seed stocks funded by the World Bank and determine that all shipments are accounted for and securely stored. It’s simply a routine matter given the rumors that the seed may be the cause of the outbreak....”

“That’s nonsense!” he blared while interrupting me. “These rumors are being spread by the malicious and ignorant among my people. They are frightened and anything unusual in this valley is a topic of speculation and rumor. We have never received such seed shipments before and the foolish people are erroneously linking the two things together—disease equals seed shipment in some of their superstitious minds. It is only coincidence and nothing more I can assure you.”

“Regardless, I need to satisfy my superiors that all is well with the grain we purchased. It must be properly accounted for in order to satisfy the pencil pushers in Washington.” I had no clue if he understood pencil pushers, but what the hell. Maybe I should have said lazy, self-serving communist party apparatchiks.

“You’re wasting your time, but go ahead and do what you must do, Mr. Dick. Of course, I will help you in your efforts. We Romanians are renowned for our hospitality to foreigners,” he smirked. Yeah, right, I thought, like lepers seeking shelter from the Black Death.

I smiled and continued my canned spiel. “Where is the seed grain stored and what sort of security measures have you instituted to protect our investment?” I blandly, but bluntly, asked. I was playing the character of an overly officious bureaucrat—a role I had perfected during my career with the State Department.

Dragos chuckled at my question. “Mr. Dick, the grain is stored in four barns in the general vicinity of Alba Iulia. As far as security precautions, in Romania we close and lock our barn doors at night—even when there are no horses. I can assure you that no one would dare disturb the seed.”

“What about the incident about ten days ago? Someone broke into one of the storage barns stole a number of seed bags. The seed was dumped on the ground near the barn and left to spoil. Sounds like you have at least one disturbed person who believes in the

rumors,” I countered.

This time, Dragos gave a hearty belly laugh. I couldn’t wait for the punch line to my little joke. This guy seemed to be a most affable thug and unabashed killer.

“Is that what you heard in Washington? If so, it’s an intelligence failure on your part. The incident that you refer to was an accident. One of my workers was off-loading the grain sacks from the lorry and a bag fell to the ground, breaking open and spilling the contents. There is nothing more to the matter, but it shows how things get distorted around here in the retelling. Welcome to Transylvania Mr. Dick.”

I didn’t bothering arguing the facts so I let it go. I didn’t know what or who to believe at this point, but I certainly wouldn’t trust Dragos Blaga if my life depended on it or him. Actually, it had, but we escaped largely unharmed.

“You may probe, pry, count to your heart’s content. We will not hinder your work, but remember that I am in charge of this project and have a duty to make sure the seed is distributed on time to my people. Don’t stand in my way Mr. Dick or you will regret it. We have our own ways of doing things here and dealing with outsiders who interfere.”

I’d already had a taste of Transylvania payback and didn’t want to repeat the experience, thank you very much. Dragos’ threat wasn’t veiled or subtle; it was a zinger aimed directly between my

eyes and I got the message loud and clear. Sometimes those who protect and serve must bide *their times and tempers to fight another day*—on *their own* terms.

The first barn was a fairly short walk from Dragos' office. One of his goons accompanied me and unlocked the door. The barn was a large one, about 100 by 200 feet by my rough guesstimate. Its ceiling looked to be about 50 feet high and the whole place was stacked with bags of seed. They were neatly piled in rows, one atop another. Only a narrow center aisle allowed me access.

Each muslin bag weighed 20 kilos according to the markings. The words Banc Mundial and the official seal of Romania were prominently displayed for all to see. The rest of the words were in Romanian so I couldn't decipher them. I did a rough tally by counting the columns and rows and multiplying them. I couldn't really get an accurate count since the bags were stacked to the roof of the barn and tight against its walls. I also couldn't determine if there were any large voids in the stacks.

I punctured one of the sacks and let some grain flow into a paper bag I had brought with me. Finally, I took some photos with my digital camera to document my diligence—I hoped they didn't turn out grainy, I cleverly joked to myself. Jesus, I could be such wit at the most inopportune times. Moreover, I refused to pick a nit on the point.

Next on my inspection tour was a barn located about five miles outside of the village. Dragos said one of his people would drive me since it was difficult to find, especially for a nosey outlander. My minder motioned me to an old, beat-up pickup parked by the municipal building. It must have been the one mentioned by Iggy that belonged to the district government.

Dragos was right—the road’s twists and turns through the countryside would have been almost impossible for me to navigate on my own. The five miles felt more like fifty and it took us almost forty minutes over bad roads to reach our destination. We turned off a large dirt road onto a narrow, rutted path just wide enough to allow us passage through the dense trees. The storage barn could be seen in a clearing up ahead and I was glad we had finally arrived. My butt sorely ached from all of the bumps and grinds.

My driver opened the two large doors to the barn revealing bags of seed blocking the entire entrance. It looked as though this storage depot was fully occupied and I wondered how I would conduct my putative inventory. The goon gestured in his best Romanian sign and body language that he had other duties to attend to but would return in about an hour to drive me back to the village. I didn’t like that one bit but couldn’t do a damn thing about it. I felt alone and naked. If I had actually undressed, it would be a wholly accurate characterization of my feelings and circumstances at the moment—a denuded dick lost in the wilderness.

I didn't plan to dig through piles of seed grain to try to come up with a number for my inventory exercise. However, I wondered why they didn't leave a walkway through the sacks like in the first barn; maybe to hide something from visiting Bucharest officials? I walked the perimeter of the barn a couple of times to see if there was any other entrance. There was none and I was out of luck by the looks of it. However, the barn was prefabricated, one with galvanized sheet metal for its outer skin. Fortunately, I remembered to bring my can opener.

I took my Leather Man tool and started removing the rivets and bolts from a large panel at the rear of the barn. It took me about 30 minutes, but I was able to loosen and finally remove it. The opening was just large enough to let me squeeze through. Thank God, I had been watching my figure, but only in the bathroom vanity, of course.

With my penlight in hand, I walked the length and width of the barn. It was easy since the only sacks of seed were the three rows stacked in front blocking the entrance. They would be just enough to dissuade someone—like myself—from entering and discovering that the place was virtually empty. Gotcha Dragos, my ghoulish friend and fiend.

After taking several photos, I exited my through my bolt hole and started putting the panel back in place. Maybe no one would notice my handiwork. As I stood up and turned around, I was

confronted by a person wearing a black balaclava and wielding a pitchfork. He immediately thrust the fork at my throat and pinned me against the wall of the barn with it. Its two sharp tines held my neck tightly wedged between them. If its wooden handle were about six inches higher, I would have resembled Pinocchio playing Liar's Poker.

"So you have discovered our little secret Mr. Dick," the masked man said in broken English. It wasn't Dragos because this guy was of much smaller stature. However, he stood pretty tall in my eyes at the moment.

"You were warned, but now you must pay the price for being a stubborn, unreasonable, and disagreeable person." I was offended by the disagreeable part but couldn't clear my throat to voice a rebuttal. In any case, my life and larynx were being threatened by the man in the mask.

Reflexively, I quickly dipped my hand into my jacket pocket and withdrew my gravity knife. It easily flicked open and I sent its blade directly and forcibly to my attacker's mid-section, ripping it upward as I did. The thug had mistakenly left his winter coat wide open. The knife's sharp point made a neat, vertical incision from his bellybutton to his sternum. I didn't have the time or inclination to carve my initials as a thoughtful remembrance. The wound wouldn't be fatal, but my attacker would certainly have a serious bellyache for awhile.

He screamed something in Romanian and loosened his grip on the fork's handle. It suggested that he was in excruciating pain and I was delighted by the sound. That was enough for me to grab the handle and turn it on him. I stuck him hard across the face and he was stunned for a moment. So was I—my aim was usually terrible. He quickly regained his composure and ran to his car parked in front of the barn. I watched it as drive down the pathway until it was out of sight. That call was much too close for me and I wouldn't be so careless next time. Surprisingly, I had never been forked before.

Ok Dragos, the score is now two to zero—your advantage for the moment, but not for long. I was pissed, piqued, and a tad upset over my treatment by these ungracious crooks. It will be your turn next time we meet and it won't be pretty since I was now out for blood, I vowed. If Dragos thought Dracula was a thirsty critter, he hadn't seen Avery Dick quench his anger.

Now I was stranded in the boonies of Transylvania and couldn't hail a taxi. I looked around the property and spotted an ancient tractor sitting in the nearby field. I checked it over and thought it just might start if I was lucky and my arm didn't give out on the magneto's crank. I pulled and pushed on the choke cable a couple of times to prime the pump. I also crossed my fingers a couple of times as well for luck.

I made sure the contraption was set in neutral gear and I started

cranking. I continued cranking—and cranked some more. I fully understood and empathized with its current condition. Such indignities made me especially cranky in my old age too. Fortunately, the engine of the infernal machine finally began to sputter to life. I jumped in the seat and started my drive back to Alba Iulia. I had forgotten to drop bread crumbs on my way here so the journey should be interesting—and long, but certainly not a crummy ride.

My humble chariot could only do about ten miles an hour so I had plenty of time to think about my investigation and how to bring it to a successful conclusion. I mulled over what I had already learned the hard way. Dragos Blaga was the mastermind behind the diversion of the seed stocks. He must be selling a sizable portion of it on the black markets throughout the principality. Hundreds of thousands of dollars must be going into his dirty pockets. However, I didn't know if the seed had anything to do with the plague. It may simply be an unrelated coincidence. The WHO team and Julie would soon sort the wheat from the chafe in the medical mystery.

The barn in Alba Iulia was simply window dressing and eyewash for the naive, gullible officials who visited to inspect the seed distribution project. The two other storage barns that I hadn't checked were likely empty as well. More importantly, Dragos had attempted to kill me twice and Julie once. There was a lot of

money at stake in this illicit enterprise and he wanted to protect his financial interests (and ass) at all costs. If his shenanigans became public knowledge, the ignorant, superstitious, and outraged farmers and townspeople would string Dragos up for his lies and misdeeds—Dracula or no Dracula. Even his corrupt buddies in Bucharest wouldn't be able to save him.

I continued to rumble on thinking about my next move. I passed several farmers along the road who gawked in disbelief. Hadn't they ever seen someone dressed in a dark blue leisure suit and black wingtips driving a farm tractor before? God, these people really were frumpy dressers and backward peasants, I thought. I hit the tractor's Wolf Whistle a couple of times while passing some attractive ladies to show that I was a real American hipster.

Sometimes those who protect and serve defied their doctors and pharmacists orders when operating farm machinery while on their many medications.

GOING AGAINST THE GRAIN

Our whispering campaign was starting to pay some big dividends. It was a classic psychological operation, using the people's superstitions, ignorance, and hysteria against Dragos Blaga. It was Iggy's idea and it was a good one. We were turning the tables on Dragos and his cronies. The same innuendos and rumors used against Magda were now being directed towards Mr. Dracula. Sooner or later the people would shake off their fear, lethargy and temerity and go after Dragos; at least that was my sincere hope. Then again, I was always a wishful thinking Pollyanna.

Iggy had enlisted the assistance of trusted relatives in the region to jumpstart our plan. They were instructed to not-so-subtly insinuate that Dragos was responsible for the illnesses and deaths plaguing the area. The gossip would catch-on like wildfire through word-of-mouth telling to friends and neighbors. Our propaganda would soon be on everyone's lips and minds. The ploy would be as effective as taking out a front page ad in the local newspaper, if the region had one and people could read. Hopefully, Magda would now be much safer by our efforts. Our script went something like this:

Look what happened to Teodor Dimir's cattle the other night—clear evidence of vampirism afoot. Right, who bleeds our people

dry by imposing unfair taxes? Who seizes our crops if we can't pay them? Who lives among us as Count Dracula? Who controls everything in this district, including the shipments of the cursed seed? Dragos Blaga is the answer!

What about Magda the Witch? She must be involved with Dragos in this matter.

Ah, my friend, you are forgetting the blood feud and vendetta that exists between them. There is no power in this world or the next that could force the two to be in the same room, much less work, together. You know that to be true. No, Magda is not the cause of our miseries—only Dragos, the bloodsucker.

The next step in our little charade was creating the picture posters of Dragos. Iggie secured several of his old, political leaflets from the last election. By cropping the verbiage, we were left with the smiling face of the prefect. Fangs, dripping with blood, were added to the pictures for desired effect. Several hundred photocopies of Dragos' face were then distributed throughout the district. They now adorned the many road signs and fence posts in the valley. Dragos was now a most despised and ridiculed man in his own patch.

As expected, Dragos's henchmen would rip them down almost as soon as they were posted, but that didn't make any difference. They had been seen and were now the talk of the farmers and townspeople alike. They had well-served their purpose and our

end. We were simply reinforcing Dragos Blaga's self-created persona of a feared, omnipotent, historical figure. Good deeds should always be rewarded, I opined in my highly opinionated style. Dragos would be royally rewarded by my hand—there would be no waiting for heaven. I had another idea to further hype his bloodthirsty image and stir the rumor pot some more. However, I would bide my sweet time before ramping-up the tension a couple of more notches.

Iggie and I arrived at the Sibiu General Hospital for our meeting with Julie. She had taken up residency in one of its modest labs. Her medical equipment from bank headquarters had arrived yesterday and she was already into her research. I scanned the room, admiring her many assets. There were microscopes, Petrie dishes, test tubes, beakers, a centrifuge, a couple of Bunsen burners, and a whole array of chemical bottles. There were other pieces of equipment I couldn't name. Her laptop computer sat in one corner of the lab. It appeared that Julie had done well in setting up her home away from home. I was impressed and told her so.

Julie laughed at my pronouncement. "Avery, this is pretty much standard, college-level equipment. The real toys—the gas chromatography devices, a DNA sequencer, the high-powered analytical computers and synthesizers—are missing. My research here will be limited, but should suffice for the most part. I plan to

send samples of any relevant findings to the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta for further, and confirming, analysis, if necessary.”

“Julie, where are the WHO folks and the Romanian officials at in terms of their investigations?” I asked.

“Dr. Beckner and his team have begun looking at possible environmental causes for the outbreak,” she related. “The Romanian health officials are assisting him. They are betting that the origin of the plague is related to the soil, air, or food in the region—they may be correct, by the way. It’s a logical place to start in any case since the disease does not appear to be contagious. That would suggest an environmental causation. By the way, I turned the samples you obtained from Nicoleta over to the team for study. They have the resources to do a more thorough examination of them. Besides, I’m focusing on the grain.

“Given certain, specific features of the victims’ symptoms; they’re also looking at such pathogens and opportunistic infections like listeria, SARS, Avian Flu, EV-71, and many others. Your samples will help in the effort. So far, the aggregate symptoms don’t directly correspond to any of these diseases. The WHO has already ruled out bubonic and pneumonic plague, but all of us still refer to this thing as plague for lack of a better word. It’s what the locals use to describe it, so why not us?” she said and shrugged.

I sagely nodded my head suggesting that I knew what the hell

she was talking about. God, how I loved it when she talked dirty, I mused.

“Dr. Beckner’s team has already commenced its field work. It’s not going too well as you can imagine. The farmers are frightened and reluctant to cooperate. They distrust government officials much more than the run-of-the-mill outsider. Part of their attitude stems from the communist days, but much is simply fear and ignorance. It doesn’t help matters that the team’s orange jump suits scare the hell out of them and their livestock. They’ve been run off at gunpoint and pitchfork from what I hear. Only a few people have cooperated and allowed samples to be collected from the survivors.”

“Speaking of samples, here’s one I collected from the bank’s seed shipment,” I said while handing my paper sack to Julie.

“Here’s my take from several local markets as well,” Iggy added, turning over about a dozen small pouches that he had marked with the dates and places of purchase.

“That’s great guys,” Julie responded with a big smile. “These are extremely important to my analysis.” I felt like I had just been patted on the head and wished for more caresses. Fortunately, Julie didn’t notice my tongue and tail wagging—I didn’t plan to beg though. Well, just maybe.

I related my story of meeting with Dragos and inspecting the two barns. I purposely left out my brush with death and

humiliating tractor ride back to Alba Iulia. That was way too much information at the moment. I told them that Dragos was behind a major scam by stealing much of the grain and selling it on the local economy. I swore both of them to strict secrecy. I didn't want them to prematurely and inadvertently reveal the information to anyone because it would hinder our investigation. But I'd better inform John Murray before Julie did, I thought. I was still waiting for my first paycheck and I badly needed the money.

I also briefed them on the bank's taggant program and what Julie should find when putting my sample under the microscope—both thought it was a brilliant idea. Of course, I casually mentioned that John was a bright, clever fellow who really knew his business. I had no clue who came up with the novel idea, but didn't want to miss an opportunity to suck-up with my boss through Julie's many telephone conversations with her significant other.

"Julie, with the WHO team looking at potential environmental and opportunistic, infectious diseases, what will you be focusing on? You've already mentioned you'll be analyzing the seed, but what specifically are you looking for?" I inquired.

"Fair question," she replied. "I'll be searching for any abnormalities in the seed samples you and Iggie just gave me. That will include the presence of any pesticides or fungicides and at what levels. I'll be looking for any contaminants—things that shouldn't be present in the grain. There are always some

contaminants present, but I want to learn if any are any that may be harmful to humans. In general, I'm searching for any toxins that could cause the illnesses and deaths. I'll also be examining the grade or quality of the seed stocks against what the bank specified and paid for. And now, I'll be looking for the presence of taggants as well from what you just mentioned. They should be fairly easy to identify, like separating the wheat from the chaff," she poorly punned.

I didn't laugh because I had already used that line and highly resented her plagiarism. God, I could be so easily offended these days. Actually, I was downright pissed because she foolishly wouldn't put out for me, I thought.

"I needed Iggie's market samples to do comparative analyses against the bank seeds," Julie commented. "All of this is very tedious and time consuming, but also important to dispel the rumors the bank inadvertently or intentionally funded toxin-laden seed stocks for the poor people of Romania. This mindless paranoia must be put to rest through solid, scientific research. More importantly, we need to find the cause of this thing to save people's lives. It's a basic humanitarian issue and duty for the World Bank and the World Health Organization to solve this mystery," she emotionally spoke with flushed cheeks.

I almost stood up and saluted her noble response to my earlier question. She was a highly dedicated, disciplined professional and

a compassionate human being—a rare combination of virtues in my government experience. She wholeheartedly believed in the cause and I admired her determination and style, if not her choice in men.

We agreed to regularly regroup to share our respective findings. The sharing of even the slightest bits of information was critical at this stage of the investigation. We had become a tight knit team who respected each other's roles and responsibilities in getting this job done quickly and right since lives were at stake and we all understood the dire consequences if we didn't come through.

Before leaving, I asked Julie if she could help me obtain a couple of medical items. She agreed and didn't ask any questions. However, I could tell she badly wanted to know what I planned to do with a bottle of chloroform, gauze pads, and a small vial of type O blood. She probably still wondered about the earlier syringes, I suspected. I think she literally had to bite her tongue, but understood it was sometimes better not to know certain things. Regardless, I didn't need to mention the rat traps because I could easily buy them on my own.

Sometimes silence, secrecy, and outright lies were the better parts of valor for those who protect and serve.

TURNABOUT IS FOWL PLAY

Dragos' Dacha was located just outside the village in a secluded, wooded area. Neighbors were few and far away. Those things, and a moonless night, gave us some advantage. What we had in mind for Mr. Dragos Dracula would count this night. Hopefully, His Nibs would be scared witless and shitless. Regardless, it would shake his sense of invincibility and safety. Despite his bravado and bullying, Dragos was born and raised in Transylvania and susceptible to its myths, mystiques, and bloody history like everyone else. This native son was about to get back what he deserved, but it would only be a little taste of things to come. I had more payback in mind for him.

Iggie and I had scouted Dragos' place several times over the past few days to get our bearings and to visually rehearse our plan. This night, we watched as he stumbled out of the local tavern, drunk and loud, as usual. We watched his car weave home and bided our time. We had learned from Magda and others that Dragos was a widower with no children, living alone with his Dracula memorabilia and his ill-gotten gains; small comforts for him. He had an insatiable appetite for money and power, I believed.

After a couple of hours of idly waiting, we drove to Dragos'

house and parked a distance away. As we crept through the trees to his property, both Iggie and I knew what needed to be done to pull this prank off without getting caught. I rubbed my St. Homer's medal for dumb luck and Iggie crossed himself. To each his own talisman or karma, I mused.

The dacha was large, built with hand-hewn timbers that Dragos probably stole from government preserves. My entry to the house would be relatively easy. Crossing the hundred yards or so of open ground between it and our hiding spot at the tree line would be much more difficult. Geese—miserable, nasty, aggressive geese were standing guard. I hated them with a passion. A mature pair of males served as sentinels to guard against intruders. There was no better, low-cost security alarm system in the world. Dragos was safety conscious and clever. Avery Dick could be creative and clever too—but only when I worked on my expense reports.

These creatures were effectively used in many third world countries as early warning systems of trouble—and meals for high holidays. They were extremely territorial and would loudly honk and squawk if someone or something stepped over the invisible boundary they had created. Their sounds were loud enough to wake up the dead—and living dead. These birds were also fierce fighters who didn't back down when confronted. If the noise didn't scare someone off, they would launch an attack with their wings and bills, nipping and pecking at their targets. Forget about

watchdogs and traditional home alarms. Those things could be easily compromised with a bit of ground beef or a piece of jump wire. As fearsome as these birds were, Iggie and I vowed to take them down.

I had actually recommended using geese on several occasions while serving abroad as a State Department special agent. Not only did I detest them, I also respected them for their ferocity. I had been bitten more than once and usually kept them at a safe distance. The geese were not only good at sounding alarms, they kept the snake and rodent populations on large residential properties to a minimum. They were low maintenance critters and their droppings fertilized the grass. I guess they had their place and utility, but not with me. I couldn't even stand to eat them. However, tonight they were on our menu and we would get our appetizers—foie gras, in this instance.

As we watched the geese patrol the property, Iggie and I set the rat traps about ten yards forward of our position. These large, steel and wood contraptions had powerful, spring activated jaws to hold their prey tight. They were large enough to easily ensnare a fox or dog foot. The traps were commonly used in the region to keep down the Norwegian rat population—the same rodent that carried the fleas causing the bubonic plagues of times past. We would now use them to rid the world of another pest—two loathsome, white geese.

We disguised the traps as best possible by covering them with ground litter. 50 test pound monofilament fishing line was attached to each one with the other ends tied securely to saplings near our hiding spot. The dozen traps formed a rough semicircle around our position. We were now ready to sing our swan song.

Iggie put the wooden whistle to his lips and blew into it. The sound wasn't loud enough to disturb Dragos. The dacha's windows were closed and probably locked tight—Dragos was likely tight too, I suspected. The goose call immediately caught the creatures' attentions. Both looked in our direction and waddled our way. They didn't honk or squawk because they were both mesmerized by the female mating call. I could relate to that condition, especially after a couple glasses of wine, I thought.

Things happened quickly. Both geese hit the traps about the same time and we furiously reeled in our catches to shut them up—permanently. It only took a few seconds to wrestle them to the ground and wring their miserable necks with our gloved hands. Iggie placed them in a large burlap bag. The noxious geese would now be house guests of the Tugurlan family. They would end up on the dining table and in throw pillows. Maybe they would be comforters for the long, cold winter nights. Each of us then took a gander to make sure the short-lived commotion didn't wake Dragos from his booze-induced slumber. Fortunately, it hadn't.

I took a circuitous route to a ground floor window while Iggie

cleaned up our handiwork. He would act as a lookout in the unlikely event someone came onto the property. He would sound the goose call at full force to alert me of danger. I would quickly duck-out of the dacha if I heard the call.

The window I selected was secured by a simple latch and I easily and quietly shimmed the lock open with my gravity knife and entered. Like an aging Ninja, I crept through the foyer and living room. With the beam of my penlight, I could see portraits of Prince Vlad hanging from the walls. I shivered a bit—he was a spooky looking guy who had no fashion sense whatsoever by the looks of them.

I could hear Dragos loudly snoring from the open loft above. Before climbing the stairs, I prepared the chloroform by soaking a couple of gauze pads and placing them into a large, plastic bag. I quickly took the stairs and moved to the side of Drago's bed. Fortunately, he wasn't hanging from one of the ceiling beams. His back was facing me and it appeared he was out for the count. I took the plastic bag and securely placed it over his head. He struggled a bit but then fell off into a deep, chemically-induced sleep. He wouldn't remember what had happened. He could rationalize that it was all a bad dream when he woke up, but he would still have nagging, haunting thoughts. Moreover, the physical evidence would be as plain as the nose on his face.

I then placed the two nubs of the stun gun directly against his

jugular, just below and to the right of his jaw line. It was a Cheetah Hurricane that delivered one million volts of electric shock. I hit the trigger and held it for a full five seconds. That jolt would immediately and totally incapacitate someone by causing an interruption between the brain's signals and the body's muscles, if one were conscious. His body spasms lasted only a few seconds before diminishing. The Cheetah was a direct contact device that left two perfectly round burn marks about three inches apart. Since Dragos was a huge guy, I decided to shock him a second time for good measure—and self-gratification. I was attempted to apply the device to his scrotum as well, but thought better—potent, family joules were hard to come by.

I drizzled about an ounce of blood over the burn wound and saw it tickle down Dragos' neck onto the pillow. I then opened two of the bedroom's windows to air the place out. After a few minutes, I secured the windows and departed Count Dracula's lair the same way I had entered. Iggie and I left the property without notice or incident. We couldn't wait to find out how our prank worked on Dragos. Sometimes those who protect and serve goosed their opponents into rash actions without giving them the bird.

The next day I visited Magda. She was reading her bible when I knocked on the door. If it was possible, she looked more haggard than the last time I saw her. The incident at the church and her

warmongering neighbors must be taking a toll on her health. However, I needed her help in pumping up our disinformation campaign against Dragos. I didn't mention my visit to Dragos' dacha last night or the bloodletting at the farm a week ago. The less she knew about those things the better. I certainly didn't report my near death experience at the barn with the masked avenger either.

I didn't waste any time with pleasantries. "Magda, I'm convinced that Dragos is behind thefts of the seed stocks funded by the World Bank," I said. "He needs to be stopped and brought to justice."

"Stopped? Perhaps, but justice is more difficult to come by in Transylvania. There will be no justice until Dragos Blaga is dead," she emotionally added. By the sound of her voice and content of her words, she was adamant that Dragos must die. I wondered why all the vehemence.

"What is this blood feud between the two of you?" I hesitantly ventured. "Why do you feel so strongly about Dragos and him towards you? I understand he's a bully and a crook, but your feelings seem to go well beyond normal disdain and dislike for the man."

Magda sat back in her chair and stared into space for a few moments. She was debating whether or not to confide in me.

"I have never spoken of this thing before because I am terribly

saddened and ashamed about what happened many years ago,” she began. “I had little role in what transpired, but I still feel responsible for not doing more to protect the poor woman.

“In my midwifery practice, I’m sometimes asked to perform abortions. I always refuse, except in cases of incest or rape. In those instances, I have reluctantly brought fetuses from girls’ wombs. I’m sure God will not understand why I do this so I look forward to eternal damnation for my acts—my soul is lost, I’m afraid.” Her eyes watered during the telling and I felt sorry for her spiritual and emotional pain.

“About 30 years ago, Dragos brought his young, pretty wife Reveca to me for an abortion. Reveca was a free spirit who brought joy to everyone who came into contact with. She was a simple, pious, kind, generous and loving soul. Everyone loved her and cherished her friendship.

“Reveca was long into her second trimester. Even if I had no qualms, I wouldn’t have done it because she was much too far along in her pregnancy. The pig Dragos ordered me to abort her even after I told him of my medical and health concerns for Reveca. I offered to deliver the baby when it was time, but he refused. He simply wouldn’t listen to my pleas and stormed out of my house with Reveca in tow.

“Reveca badly wanted the child, but Dragos did not. He was madly in love with her, but I believe he was jealous of the baby

and worried that Reveca's attentions would be showered on the child and no longer on him. Dragos would have to compete for Reveca's love and that was too much for him to bear. The fetus had to be aborted in his twisted, stubborn mind.

"The next night, Dragos dragged Raveca to a disreputable abortionist in the region. She was inexperienced and little more than a butcher. Not surprisingly, Raveca and her baby died on the woman's kitchen table later that evening. Since that time, Dragos has blamed me for his wife's death because I didn't do the abortion and I blame him for her tragic death in return.

"We have not spoken to each other since. So now he lives like a recluse in his fancy dacha and continues to mourn her death. I think rage and thoughts of revenge drive much of his behavior. He has turned into a monster. Not coincidentally, the abortionist was murdered several months following Reveca's death. People here point the finger at Dragos. He's been reluctant to come after me because the people would know who was responsible for my death. The vendetta is common knowledge, but its origin is not. By calling me a witch and turning my neighbors against me, he hopes they will do his dirty work."

Magda had just shared her darkest secret with me. We had bonded and I needed to share some things with her.

"Magda, I orchestrated the rumor campaign against Dragos. Maybe you have seen one the posters we put up around the district.

In any event, Dragos is now my enemy too. He tried to kill me twice already and my guess is he won't stop until he succeeds," I told her.

She laughed and said she definitely was aware of the rumors and the posters, but it never occurred to her that I was involved. She jokingly wagged a finger at me as though I were a naughty boy. I laughed at her admonishment.

"I must thank you then, Mr. Dick. These things have done much to quiet my neighbors' anger towards me and perhaps may have saved my life as well" she said. "Dragos must be beside himself with rage. He is not accustomed to being challenged in his own district."

"I certainly hope so because that was my intent. I want to push and prod him into making a mistake that will bring his corrupt business dealings and criminal organization to the light of day. We need to be careful though. He knows that I'm investigating him. Consequently, I'm trying to keep a very low profile when visiting Alba Iulia so I may not be able to visit with you as often as I'd like. But it's important that we work together to bring Dragos and his cronies to justice—sooner, rather than later.

"Here's where I need your help, Magda. I want you to tell people that Dragos is stealing the seed stocks and selling them on the black market. That is a true statement. Secondly, I want you to tell the people that the WHO has determined that the seeds are the

cause of the illnesses and deaths in the region. Dragos is killing his own people through his avarice and greed. We don't know if that is true since testing on the grain has not been completed.

“Lastly, tell them that you've heard the World Bank has directed the Romanian government to recall all of the seed. Trucks from Bucharest will be arriving soon to remove all of the grain. That's what will happen if the grain turns out to be tainted.

“These things might cause Dragos to try to cover-up what he's been doing. I want to panic him so he takes desperate actions to protect his involvement in all of this. The lies and half-truths might cause the middlemen and retailers to stop buying seed from Dragos fearing the grain has been contaminated and that they will be blamed for the deaths.”

Magda readily agreed to take on the role of town crier. She really was a super trooper, besides being a good witch.

Sometimes those who protect and serve germinated lies in order to plant kernels of truth.

THINGS GO AWRY

Before entering Julie's lab, I pulled Iggy aside. I wanted to make sure he didn't slip and mention anything to Julie about our visit to Dragos' dacha. To emphasize my point, I pursed my lips and, with a pinched thumb and forefinger, ran them over my lips. I then made the motion of turning a key in a lock. I finished my little demonstration by dramatically throwing away the imaginary key. Iggy nodded, indicating he understood. Either my Romanian sign language skills had greatly improved or Iggy had just found out that I'd given up smoking again. Regardless, *mum* was now the mute word of the day.

Julie looked lovely, as usual. I couldn't help staring at her and fantasizing. However, she obviously was in no mood to flirt. She had a serious look on her face and her body language suggested our meeting was all about business. She was playing the consummate professional today. Oh well, maybe some other time; like in my dreams, I thought.

After a bit of friendly chitchat, Doctor Julie began her lecture. What she had discovered and suspected would turn our investigation on its head—anal-cranial inversion, as we referred to the condition in my DS days. Not surprisingly, we had our heads up our ass most of the time. I always kept mine firmly tucked up

inside in order to find some peace of mind in its senseless bureaucracy.

“I’ve completed a cursory analysis of the seed samples you guys brought me and I’ve found some interesting things already. Avery, take a look in the microscope over there and tell me what you see.”

I did as instructed and placed my eye against the instrument’s eyepiece. I immediately jumped back and yelled “Jesus Christ, there’s an eyeball staring back at me!”

I couldn’t help myself. Punning, pimping, prating, and self-deprecating humor had always been my stock in trade. That was one reason why my government career had thrived—it was all a joke. The other was the fact that my employer couldn’t easily fire me.

“Very funny, Avery,” Julie chided. “Please put your eye firmly against the lens piece, smart-ass.”

That little joke had always gone over well in high school biology class. (I didn’t have any black shoe polish with me to coat the lens opening.) I could tell that Julie was in no mood for sophomoric levity. I probably had to graduate to something more sophisticated to please her. However, I got a good laugh out of Iggie. Since I’d be approving all of his expense reports, his better damn well laugh or the joke would be on him.

“Ok, I’m looking, but what should I be seeing?” I inquired.

“With the present magnification, you should see large conical structures—plain, old rye seeds. Now let me increase the power. Now the rye seeds should blur into large blobs surrounded by other, much smaller things. Do you see them?” She asked.

“All I see is a Jackson Pollack painting in shades of blacks and whites. Ok, I see tiny rods, cones, spheres, and other shapes in various sizes and configurations,” I admitted.

“Very good Avery,” she pronounced.

“Thank you teacher, but again, what am I supposed to be seeing?” I replied.

“You're looking at dross or waste—impure materials mixed with the seed. You're also seeing some roughage or indigestible plant matter—in a sense, more dross, but not necessarily unhealthy. Both of these things are fairly common detritus found in shipments of seed and generally not considered serious contaminants. Normal seed processing and bagging operations will result in some levels of these so-called impurities. I fully expected to find such particulate mixed in with the seed.”

“So why are you showing this stuff to me? What's the takeaway message Ms. Sherlock Holmes?” I smartly challenged.

“I'm pointing these things out to you Avery because they indicate the seed quality doesn't meet the standards that the bank specified and which the Romanian government supposedly purchased with bank money. This is seriously inferior stuff.

“Look, there are internationally recognized standards governing seed quality and the amounts of certain particulate that can be co-mingled with pure seed. Typically, seed is certified as 99.90% pure, .04% other crop, .05% inert substances, and .01% weed. Now that’s good quality seed stock.

“The sample you just saw contains roughly 50% pure seed, 25% noxious weed, 10% other crop, and 15% inert substances. In other, less polite, words it’s adulterated crap.

“In addition to everyone getting ripped off by the purchase of substandard seed, there are other problems with it. Certain species and quantities of noxious weed are prohibited, banned from commercially produced grains—and for good reason. I’ve already identified the presence of several in each of the samples. Specifically, I found quantities of bindweed, Russian knapweed, musk thistle, hemp, and hoary cress.

“If the farmers plant the seed, they’ll also be planting these noxious weeds. The weeds eventually could strangle crops and make the land useless. These opportunistic weeds are extremely difficult to control or eradicate once they take root. The Transylvania valley could turn into a wasteland in a few years without massive, expensive applications of fungicides.”

“Are you saying both Iggie’s samples and mine are inferior and contaminated?”

“Yes, exactly, the seed being sold on the local market and your

sample from the barn are likely from the same batch. I can't be certain because I've not completed my analysis, but I have examined all the rye samples, along with their levels and types of contaminants, and they look similar. It seems Dragos is supplying the whole region with seed that could eventually ruin farms and lives.

"I've sent off the rye samples to the CDC for confirmation of my findings and to conduct additional testing that I can't perform here with my limited equipment.

"By the way, Avery, none of the contaminants consisted of your taggants. They're missing from these samples. There's absolutely no evidence so far to indicate they ever were added to the grain shipments."

"Let me think this thing through with you," I said. "Ok, first, the grain is not what the bank or doctor ordered. The bad guys didn't purchase the seed from one of the reputable granaries recommended by the bank where the taggants would have been automatically added to any shipments. The actors thought no one would notice the switch. That may have been true except for the illnesses and deaths—in one, ironic sense, they were simply unlucky.

"The bank donated 4.2 million dollars to the government of Romania in order to purchase the seed. What the crooks bought probably cost them less than half that sum with the rest of the

money going into their pockets. Someone then ordered Dragos to sell the grain on the local economy for even more illicit profit. Who could the farmers complain to when Dragos failed to deliver the grain: the district prefect or his corrupt buddies in the Ministry of Agriculture? Nobody is the answer. Moreover, with the illnesses and deaths being blamed on the World Bank grain, what farmer in his right mind would ever accept it? Blaming the plague on the World Bank turned out to be a brilliant idea.

“So who are the bad guys in this little drama?” I rhetorically asked. “Clearly Dragos and his local thugs are directly involved at this end of the fraud. However, they had no role in arranging the purchase and shipment of the seed stocks to Romania. That tells me one or more high-ranking officials in the agricultural ministry and, just perhaps, elsewhere in the central government are in cahoots with Dragos. My best guesstimate is the crooks will net about three million dollars from this scam. That’s a lot of Romanian Leu or loot.

“Anybody disagree, so far?” I asked my colleagues. No one said anything to rebut my theory of the crime. “But there is still the medical mystery to solve. What’s causing the plague? Could it be the contaminants you mentioned earlier?”

“No, not likely, Julie replied. “While farmers may have been buying the contaminated seed from the local markets, it’s still not planting season. Simple human contact with the grain would not

make them sick. They would have to ingest it, but that's highly improbable and really out of the question."

"No, it isn't," Iggie spoke. We both turned to him. "I remember several times growing up when my father took seed grain to the mill to grind it into flour to feed our family. Those were bad times when crops had failed or the yields too small to sell at market. In those circumstances, farmers would take the stocks of seed grain they were saving for spring planting and turn them into food for their hungry children. People were starving and they had no other choice. Milk cows were sometimes slaughtered as well in difficult times. God would provide for us in the spring, we prayed—seed stock would fill our bellies in the winter. It's a common practice among my people in order to survive. This winter is an especially harsh one and people are suffering from hunger throughout the valley."

Julie looked stunned by what Iggie had just disclosed. "My God, she said, I never even considered that possibility. People are eating the seed instead of planting it. Yes, of course! They could be contracting the illness by ingesting the contaminated seed via their bread. That's the likely vector or pathway," she exclaimed.

Julie started pacing the room lost in thought. She finally spoke. "It makes sense; absolute, perfect sense. If my hunch is correct, I think we just solved this medical mystery. I need to immediately contact the CDC and ask for specific testing on the samples. Oh,

Iggie, I love you,” she said, blowing him a kiss to show her appreciation. Jesus, Iggie now had a much better chance of scoring with Julie than I did. Sometimes life wasn’t fair to those who protect and serve.

“Not to rain on your parade and theory, but would the noxious weeds you ticked-off earlier cause the illnesses?” I asked while pouting.

“No, they’re probably not responsible,” she responded. “The symptoms simply don’t jibe. Sure, they might experience some gastrointestinal problems, but little else, I suspect.”

“So Sherlock, you believe you just broke the case wide-open?” I asked.

“Yes, it was all alimentary, my dear Watson,” she chuckled.

“Well, are you going to tell us what’s on your mind and agenda or do we have to swallow more of your puns?” I retorted.

“No way Avery, you have your secrets and I have mine—at least until I get confirmation from the CDC. You’ll have to wait a couple of more days to get the results, but I definitely think we’re onto something,” she smirked while giving me the finger.

I guess getting something was better than nothing for those who protect and serve—and lust.

A TOUGH ROW TO HOE

Planting season was getting close and we had to resolve this mystery before more people became sick and died. Time was running out and we needed to take some drastic measures to protect the people. With what Julie discovered about the contaminated grain, I didn't think John Murray or his seniors would object to what I had in mind. It was simply a prudent precaution in my opinion. However, my opinion wasn't always counted for much in my sketchy career. I hoped for a better outcome this time.

The Jack was mostly out of his box at this point anyway so we had little to lose and a lot to gain by the Romanian government confiscating the remaining grain stocks located in the showcase barn and local markets. The seed was a bonafide public health hazard and not fit for human consumption. It couldn't be used as fodder for farm animals either since they would suffer the same fate as their human masters. Dragos would be enraged by the central government stepping onto his turf and interfering with his business enterprise, but so what? It would be one more nail in his coffin. Someone needed to bring a stake to permanently finish him off. I'd gladly volunteer my services—I was good with a sledgehammer.

I bounced my suggestion off John and he readily agreed. It might cost the bank another quarter of a million dollars or so to reimburse the Romanians for the operating costs, but that was chump change for the bank. Its reputation was on the line and it had to quickly do the right thing. Doing the right thing in my situation was largely moot since I didn't have a reputation worth saving. I was vulnerable and expendable and I knew it. My pride had gone before the fall many years ago. Thank God it was still spring here.

A convoy of trucks assembled in Sibiu to collect the grain and store it at government warehouses there before safely disposing of it. It would be a three day exercise given the driving distances and poor road conditions. The days were getting longer but our time shorter.

The first stop for the convoy was Dragos' barn in Alba Iulia. It was half-empty by the time the authorities arrived. Dragos had been busily moving the seed grain to market. Someone had tipped him off. He disingenuously explained that he had begun distributing the grain to the farmers in the region. He claimed the people were clamoring for the seeds so they could get an early start on the spring planting. He gave the names of a few friends and cronies to substantiate his claim. The authorities were skeptical, but said nothing. Dragos had a fierce reputation and demeanor and everyone was leery about confronting him. They also knew he was

politically connected with the powers in Bucharest. No one was willing to cast the first stone or sow any seeds of discontent.

I couldn't directly challenge Dragos to refute his dishonest claims, at least not yet. I had Iggy loosely tail the convoy as it made its way through Transylvania. The principality had never seen anything like this before and rumors were abuzz. The central government was actually taking action to help the people—supposedly. What's next they asked, free and fair elections? It was all too amazing and frightening to the simple people. Their world had been turned upside down with the plague and now this. What more bad news was to come they wondered among themselves; perhaps the second coming of Christ? However, it wasn't Christ, but Avery Dick, who would bring them salvation.

Iggy watched as many merchants shrugged their shoulders and told the authorities they had already sold all of their grain. Business had been brisk given the paucity of last year's crops. Farmers were anxious to plant and recoup their losses. These merchants were the lucky ones who had been tipped by Dragos about the confiscation program. They had secreted their grain for future sale. Others weren't as fortunate. Those not aware looked on as the authorities loaded sack after sack of grain onto the trucks. Fights even broke out in several instances. These people knew they wouldn't be compensated for the losses. That was not the way things were done in Romania. They would lose several months

revenue and result in more government interference and oppression in their view. In other words, it was more business as usual. It was all too familiar, the government takes and takes. God meant for them to suffer for their misdeeds and sins and there was nothing they could do about their circumstances in this life. Maybe the next would be better, they hoped.

The farmers who purchased the grain were confused with the government's action. What was wrong with the seed grain they asked each other in bewilderment? Can I safely plant my crops? Will my family starve once again because I couldn't provide for them? Where is God to protect us? The answers would soon be revealed but not before Dragos and his coconspirators received their just rewards.

Perhaps a quarter of the allotted grain had been recovered through these efforts. The remainder was either being hidden from the authorities or already sold to the unsuspecting farmers in the region. As the trucks returned to Sibiu with their loads of contaminated grain, they were abruptly stopped at a military roadblock. Soldiers armed with AK-47 assault rifles ordered the drivers out of the trucks and marched single-file into the woods. There, they were executed without remorse or mercy by Dragos' goons who had disguised themselves as Romanian military.

Iggie had witnessed the cold-blooded event from a safe distance. He later had difficulty relating what he had seen. The

inhumanity was too much for him to bear and he asked to go home. I dissuaded him by saying that he could help avenge the deaths and other terrible acts committed by Dragos if he stayed awhile longer. I promised him that Dragos would pay for his crimes. He reluctantly agreed and the immediate emotional storm passed. However, the graphic memories would remain for the rest of his life.

It seemed Dragos still wasn't about to give up his self-proclaimed property without a fight. The stolen grain would likely be trucked to the towns and villages along the Moldova and Hungarian borders. Illegal cross-border trade in those areas was active and highly lucrative for those willing to break customs and excise tax laws. Dragos was well beyond those concerns. He was either a vicious capitalist or ruthless communist, maybe both. I couldn't be sure at this point, but it didn't matter. To me, he was still a miserable, bloodsucking vampire who must die.

Sometimes those who protect and serve must put aside their kinder, gentler ways to beat the crap out of the bad guy.

Dragos & Avery Ponder Their Predicaments

Dragos Blaga paced his small office. He was agitated and in a foul mood trying to figure out a plan, a strategy, to counter that American dick's moves against him and his profitable enterprise. The miserable bastard had luckily avoided Dragos' attempts to kill him. The man had more lives than a new born kitten, he mused. Dick's inquiries were getting too close to the truth and discovery of the scheme at this point would be disastrous. Dragos desperately needed more time to milk more profit from his cash cow. There was still much cream to be skimmed off the top as he stayed with the curdled theme running through his mind. Once he accomplished his goal, he would fold his tent and forever disappear into the night. That artful statement meant he would get out of the shit-burg he'd called home for his entire life, once and for all. 'Good riddance to bad rubbish,' as the Americans quaintly quipped. Leaving the place with full pockets was his sole mission; and he was so close to doing so. Just a little more time was needed to make that dream come true. And then a new chapter in his life would begin. He couldn't wait, but he had to be patient awhile longer.

Dragos had had enough of pastoral scenery, animal husbandry, timber producing, and most of all, simpleminded folks to last a lifetime. Those things were highly overrated in his

opinion. He had no real friends, only the sycophants who worked for him and they didn't count for much. The love of his life, his wife Reveca, had been dead for many years and he had no children that he knew of. The only thing that kept him here other than money was power. He was the man in these parts and he enjoyed lording over his subjects. That gave him a rush almost as much as the money. But that rush had dissipated over the past few years. Fortunately, the money still held a strong desire and interest for him. That alone was enough to satisfy his ego and bank account.

Dragos' comrades in Bucharest were telling him that uncomfortable questions about the grain shipments were being raised in the ministries; nothing too detailed or pointed, but just enough to worry about. As always, prominent butts needed to be covered and protected at all costs. Otherwise, his protectors in the government bureaus might feign amnesia about their roles in this little drama and lay everything off on him. Each, most likely, had already secreted their ill gotten gains in untraceable, off-shore, banking accounts. No one would be able to follow the money if they'd done their homework and covered their base bases. Regardless, that would spell disaster for all concerned. Moreover, a very lucrative operation would cease to exist for all of them and that simply didn't make good business sense. No, his cronies would hold the line as long as there was money to be made. Dragos was certain on that point. Good, avaricious Communists never

gave up a buck or Euro without a fight. That character trait was too ingrained in their collective psyches. Dragos chuckled to himself at his inadvertent pun. It was to be his only laugh of the day. Things were quickly going downhill for him and his business associates and he quickly needed to institute a damage control plan or all would be lost. Not only money, but his freedom was at stake.

So, what to do? Perhaps a bribe was in order. That might just work or it might badly backfire depending on the outcome. If he personally approached Dick and offered a bribe, it would be tantamount to a confession of his culpability. No, that was too risky. No, something more indirect and subtle was needed to distance himself from self-incrimination. He had an idea that might just work if he were really lucky. Yes, something that might cause Mr. Dick to step on his own name and buy Dragos more time. And that something wouldn't cost too much since he planned to stiff the prick in the end. The guy was sticking it to him so why not turn the tables? Maybe his stars, pecuniary desires, and schemes would perfectly align after all.

Avery woke up late from his wine induced slumber. He'd stayed up late to discuss the progress of the investigation or lack of it. Julie and Iggie were pleased with the way things were going, but Avery less so. He worried that if Dragos felt cornered, he might do something desperate. And that something might be something of a

fatal nature involving one or all of them. He couldn't expect Julie and Iggie to risk their lives for the World Bank. They were innocents in this ersatz docudrama. But he knew he was expendable and that was simply part of the biz. He readily accepted his fate whatever it might be. He had done so for many years in his career and wasn't about to change. He fully understood that stubborn bullheadedness was one of his strong, endearing traits; even when the two words were run together in his thoughts. In truth, he was a bulldog with lockjaw; one that just wouldn't or simply couldn't let go.

Dragos had already tried to kill him and Julie and would probably make another attempt or two until he was successful. So far they'd been very lucky. But luck could only go so far in protecting them. Eventually, it and their mortality would run their courses. Better operational security measures had to be ratcheted up a couple of notches if they were to survive. Therefore, Avery had instructed both Julie and Iggie to keep low profiles and limit their movements to the maximum extent possible. He urged them to use situational awareness and explained what that concept entailed. He suggested they travel together when possible and watch each other's backsides. Avery would have really enjoyed the latter task if it involved tailing Julie, but Iggie much less so. Lastly, he urged them to consider leaving. There was no shame or disgrace in doing so. But both adamantly refused his offer. Both were real

troopers, colleagues, and now friends. He would have greatly missed them if they had left. He needed their moral support. He also needed their respective experience and expertise to solve the mystery.

As Avery padded about his hotel room, he noticed a piece of paper, an envelope, pushed under his door. He examined it closely for any obvious signs or hints it might be a letter bomb. He wouldn't put it past Dragos to try such a stunt. He was now running scared. That was a good start to the race, but Avery wanted him to be soon running for his life. Despite the absence of a return address, lack of postage, and absence of the word BOMB in large, red letters, he thought it was safe to open. Inside there was a single sheet of white paper with pasted, cut-out letters from an English language newspaper. The assembled letters read:

Check your PayPal account, pal. It now contains 10,000 American dollars. This is a down payment if you immediately stop your investigation. For each week you delay your snooping, another 10,000 will be deposited. If you don't, you, Ms. Julie, and your Romanian butt-boy will come to tragic and unnecessary ends. That does not need to happen if you accept the money and back-off with your interfering sleuthing. Make sure you make the right decision my friend because your life and those of your colleagues hang in the balance.

The letter was unsigned, but he had a good hunch as to who wrote and delivered the missive. His strong intuition and equally sharp Occam's razor suggested the identity of the culprit. The keen forensic analysis of the envelope and letter confirmed his suspicion. Without doubt, it was written by a semiliterate foreigner. And Avery thought for a few seconds about who that person might be. It was an easy solve for someone with his investigative experience.

Damn, it was Julie! Avery would confront her later after a few glasses of wine. The letter was intended as an obvious pimp and joke on her part. Perhaps it was also just a bit of black humor to lighten up their moods. Who knew? Maybe it was payback for his earlier comments about French Canadians. Julie was, after all, a foreigner who probably had limited English grammatical skills like most Quebecois. ESL is what he believed people called such an abbreviated deficiency. He really didn't know for sure and didn't care. Regardless, it wouldn't go unchallenged. She needed to remember that payback was never a bitch. It was always a stiff Dick. And now she would most assuredly get his generous point. He would not-so-gently point her in the right direction. That would be horizontally, but only if she were so inclined. Of course, that would only be in his dreams. But he guessed that still counted for some lasciviousness at his age. Every little bit helped his limp id

while asleep. On rare occasions, such things even turned out to be seminal experiences for him.

Then again, maybe, just maybe, it wasn't Julie who sent the letter. He could've been mistaken despite his keen insights as to the identity of the sender. He'd have to wait and see. His hindsight always proved to have been 20-20, so upon reflection, he would learn that slice of trivia later. But now he needed to buy a small, hand mirror to make that happen. Maybe he could also ask the mirror who was the fairest of them all. Sorry Miss Julie, but you wouldn't have even made the cut. Vanity, thy name was Avery Dick!

Sometimes those who serve and protect were merely reflected panes in the glass.

ST. ANTHONY'S FIRE BRIGADE

Julie was beside herself with excitement and couldn't sit still when we walked into her lab. She was acting like a little kid on Christmas morning. I had wondered if she had really missed my company over the past couple of days, but this greeting was way over-the-top. Regardless, I sometimes had this effect on women and was glad to know that my mojo and animal magnetism were still strong. But it turned out I had misjudged the source of her enthusiasm—my self-impotence soared accordingly.

“Eureka, eureka, and more eureka,” she exultantly shouted. I honestly believed only drab, geek scientists with thick glasses ever used that word. *It must be a Canadian, sorry, I mean Canadien, thing, I thought.* Iggy appeared to be speechless watching Julie's prancing while listening to her utterances. He probably wondered why someone as intelligent as Julie got so excited by a vacuum cleaner—even well-off Romanians owned them. He must have thought like the rest of us that Canadiens were really weird people.

Then again, maybe he believed Julie was glad to see him. In any event, Julie settled down after a minute or so and caught her breath. It turned out she had just received the CDC results. It had confirmed her hunch about the origin of the so-called plague and she was absolutely ecstatic with the findings. In other, more

masculine words, she had just hit a game winning, grand slam homer over the centerfield wall.

“Had too much coffee this morning, Julie?” I sarcastically teased. She shot me a dirty look.

“I’ll ignore your question Avery, if you don’t mind. Your little pimps and silliness won’t bring me down today. I’m flying with the angels,” she said. “Take a seat guys, this story will take a little time to tell. Maybe it will even enlighten you Avery, but I doubt it,” she smugly added. What a hot bitch, I mused. I’d better be damn careful not to burn my fingers—or bridges.

“The solution to this riddle is St. Anthony’s Fire,” she proudly announced, grinning while she spoke the words.

Iggie and I looked at each other and shrugged. I was a run-of-the-mill detective and not an arson investigator so I had no idea what she was talking about. Iggie was a chauffeur and probably couldn’t steer himself clear of the meaning. So where’s the fire? I wondered.

“Yes, it’s definitely ergot poisoning, as confirmed by the CDC,” she continued.

“What in the hell is ergot poisoning,” I earnestly asked.

“Avery, you first have to understand what ergot is before the poisoning part. I’ll go slow and use small words for your benefit,” she quipped. It was my turn to shoot a dirty look.

“Ergot is a fungus, *Claviceps purpurea* to be precise. It infects

cereal by attaching itself to the seed stalk and actually replaces some of the rye grains. For unknown reasons, rye is the ideal host for the parasite rather than other cereal grains. Although the appearance of the fungus is far different than the true grain, it was so common that for hundreds of years people believed it was a natural part of the rye plant.

“It was until the mid-1800s that the true nature of ergot was understood. Part of the difficulty was the fact that there are over forty different types of *Claviceps* to differentiate and identify. Ergotism is the common term we use to indicate ergot poisoning in rye—ergotism, not egotism, Avery. You’re already infected with the latter disease,” she quipped in spite. I slumped in my chair and kept quiet, but only for the moment.

“Here’s where it gets interesting,” she continued. “The ergot contains a storehouse of various chemical compounds that have been useful in pharmaceutical drugs as well as alkaloids and mycotoxins that are poisonous and can be fatal if consumed. The proportion of the compounds produced by ergot will vary with the species. In other words, some species are more deadly than others,” she said, while taking a sip of coffee. She didn’t need it since she was already wired and wound tightly. However, she was also just getting started on her soapbox speech.

“Now it’s time for a little history. It will give you some perspective on the often disastrous effects of ergotism through

time.”

I interrupted Julie at that point and asked for a short timeout. In badly needed to smoke and pee, and in that order. As I satisfied my oral fixation, I thought about what Julie had just told us. We now had a fix on what was causing the illnesses and deaths. She had really moved our investigation forward with her discovery. The bank wasn't responsible for these things. Yes, it had funded the grain shipments and specified the seed quality, but it had done its due diligence from what I could tell.

Its Romanian counterparts were to blame; those corrupt, avaricious officials in Bucharest who were knowingly or unknowingly killing their countrymen. Dragos was just a small player compared to them. However, they should all hang for what they had done; being a good American, I'd be happy to yank on the ropes.

School was back in session and Mistress Julie was anxious to tell us more. “Ok, here's the history lesson I mentioned before recess. I stayed up late last night to research the topic,” she began.

I didn't ask if there would be a quiz at the end or whether I should take notes. I was still a bit piqued at her earlier comments; actually I was pissed, although I probably deserved the slams given my prior teasing.

“In 857 A.D., the first serious outbreak of ergotism was recorded in Europe's Rhine Valley that reportedly killed thousands

of people in the region. It was called Holy Fire because of the burning sensations in the victim's extremities from gangrenous ergotism. Its victims suffered from swollen blisters, rotting flesh, and loss of limbs. A couple of hundred years later, an outbreak of ergotism in France caused a wealthy nobleman to build a hospital to treat its victims. It was dedicated to St. Anthony and over the next decades 370 hospitals were built in memory of the saint to care for victims of Holy Fire; hence St. Anthony's Fire, the name we commonly use today."

"Here's something else. Rye was the bread of the lower classes in Europe because it was considered too coarse and dark compared to wheat. It was something only fit for the poor and largely disdained by those who could afford better. Ironically, the well-to-do mostly escaped the outbreaks because they didn't eat rye bread. Simple as that," she wryly noted.

"Ergotism continued to be a serious problem until the 1850s when someone confirmed that the mature buds, or what farmers called cockspurs, of the fungus were not a natural part of the rye plant and were the origin of St. Anthony's Fire. This discovery led to effective methods for soaking and washing the rye to remove the ergot before planting and after harvest. However, there have been a number of outbreaks around the world in the 20th century."

"The last well-documented incident occurred in France in 1951. Two hundred people were poisoned resulting in thirty-two

cases of insanity and four deaths. A farmer, miller, and baker were subsequently arrested and charged with various crimes. They had knowingly conspired to process and sell ergot contaminated rye bread to the public—more avarice and greed at play."

"We need to find out if Dragos and his buddies are aware of the presence of ergot in the bank grain. If so, they should be damned for their actions," she said. I thought hanging was more appropriate than damning, but whatever puts them permanently out of business and life was okay by me.

"Now let's move on to our situation," she continued. "I earlier mentioned gangrenous ergotism. That's a horrible condition, but that's not what is affecting the people here. There's a second type of St. Anthony's Fire called convulsive ergotism. That's the type we're dealing with. It's equally devastating and lethal, but the symptoms are different. Convulsive ergotism is characterized by nervous dysfunction where the victims twist and contort their bodies in pain; they tremble and shake and experience muscle spasms; and suffer confusions, delusions, and hallucinations, as well as a myriad of other symptoms. In short, the victim appears to be convulsing while experiencing psychotic episodes. The presence of LSD alkaloids in the ergot clearly account for the mental impairments. In short, the victim's central nervous system, from head to foot, is affected and it's a terrible affliction."

"Research into the witch trials in Europe and Salem has

strongly implicated ergot poisoning as the underlying cause of the hysteria and strange behaviors, specifically delusions and hallucinations. The nexus between witchcraft claims and ergotism appears to be reasonably solid. It would explain the bizarre symptoms reported at the time. Unfortunately, we'll never be certain."

"Julie, thank you. You've done a great job of unraveling the medical mystery," I sincerely told her. "Bottom line, if people don't eat the contaminated rye seed they won't get sick, right?" I stated more than asking.

"Right Avery, but hold on, there's more bad news. The CDC caught something else with the seed samples that I missed. The seed was treated with methyl mercury, a common fungicide. Fungicides are important to protect seed against ergot and other invasive fungi. The mercury leaches into the ground after seed planting, but the concentrations are minuscule at that point and don't represent a health hazard. The prophylactic practice is commonly used throughout the world to treat seed."

My ears pricked up when I heard that word; Mercury, like the one I owned as a teenager. We all practiced safe sex in its large backseat then through the practices of early withdrawal and crossed-fingers because prophylactics were too damn expensive and difficult to come by.

"However, if seeds coated with methyl mercury are ingested,

mercury poisoning occurs,” Julie continued. “It’s highly toxic in the concentrations we’re talking about here. By the way, there have been several mass poisonings of this nature—Iran in the early 1970s where several hundred people died by eating bread containing the fungicide. Guatemala in 1965 is another example. In fact, such mercury poisonings are sometimes mistaken for ergot events.”

“But wouldn’t the fungicide counteract the ergot, sort of neutralizing it?” I asked.

“Yes, it would, but only if the seeds were sown and reaped as mature plants at harvest. The mercury would have fully dissipated from the plant by then. However, people directly ingesting seeds or milled flour laced with both ergot and methyl mercury suffered a double whammy by being poisoned twice. I’m surprised there haven’t been more deaths.”

I had a thought and downloaded the photos I’d taken in the first, showcase barn onto Julie’s computer. I zoomed in on one of the seed sacks and asked Iggie to read what was stenciled on its muslin covering in Romanian. Iggie rattled off the promotional pap about the grain being a gift from the Romanian government and World Bank.

Then he read what I thought should have been on the bags; a warning not to ingest the seed due to being treated with a fungicide. It should only be used for planting. There were no skull

and crossbones. Of course, such markings would have scared-off the farmers from planting it. Regardless, the message was clear that the seed was treated with mercury and could be extremely toxic if eaten.

“Why would people ignore the clear warning?” I asked the room.

“Two reasons I can think of,” Iggy replied. “The first is the likelihood that the bags sold by Dragos through his black market supply chain had been replaced with other containers without the warnings. Secondly, if Dragos were really brazen, he didn’t bother switching the bags and sold them with all the markings and warnings intact, just like the one we saw in your photo. Avery, most people here are illiterate. They simply can’t read or comprehend the warnings.”

Oh my God, I thought. Dragos probably didn’t have a clue as to what he’d done. His ignorance, driven by his ego and greed, had caused many deaths and many more illnesses in the valley.

Goddamn it, Avery will get you for that Dragos, I silently swore. You’re going to die by my hand, you miserable bastard! I will avenge your wife’s death, your killing of innocent people, and sucking your own countrymen dry through your perverted, corruptive ways. Lastly, I’ll kill you out of sheer pleasure for attempting to murder Julie and me. There’s now a bloody vendetta between us that needs to be satisfied.

Sometimes those who protect and serve got seriously exercised or exorcized when anticipating killing the bad guys and impiously taking the Lord's name in vain.

Julie Reminisces

Julie just couldn't put her finger on it; that thing being the enigmatic Mr. Dick Avery. Not that she would ever stoop to put a finger on him, but there was something she found both fascinating and mysterious about the man. A something she couldn't quite define. Frankly, she had never encountered anyone quite like him. Actually, she'd never met anyone close. His bumbling mannerisms and unorthodox style of investigation intrigued her. While not sexually attracted to him in the slightest, there was an admiration of sorts of how he carried himself and how his mind worked. Of course physically, he wasn't particularly attractive. He wasn't overly masculine, although not in the least effeminate. His sexist remarks and sexual innuendos were fairly harmless and somewhat pathetic. They might be a result of his career as a senior special agent with the State Department's Diplomatic Security Service where such machismo talk was expected and accepted.

Avery stood about five and a half feet tall in his shoes and wore those god awful safari suits that had gone out of vogue decades ago. His black wingtip shoes didn't add anything to his appearance or stature. On the contrary, they looked out of place and must be uncomfortable to wear, but he kept them spotless. He probably spit-shined them every morning; an act Julie really didn't want to contemplate. Then again, maybe he suffered from short

man syndrome and always needed to prove to himself and others that he had the right stuff; perhaps overcompensating for deep seated feelings of inadequacy. Yes, that might be a clue to his sketchy personality.

His comical comb-over barely disguised his bald head. He'd do much better if he shaved it completely and didn't worry so much about the few strands of hair he had left. Yes, a clean pate would serve him much better. But then he'd resemble a cue ball with bushy eyebrows. Truthfully, she thought that screwball was a much better descriptor of Avery.

But worst of all was his chain smoking Marlboro Reds. It was a nasty, unhealthy habit that not only affected him, but those around him. He would sometimes pinch off the end of the cigarette and smoke it sans filter. When someone asked if he'd tried to quit, he'd reply that he had briefly stopped a couple of times before taking up the noxious habit again. He had explained that he tried the patches, but couldn't inhale after rolling them and sticking them in his mouth. Moreover, he said he worried about getting a hernia by vigorously sucking on them. He also mentioned that he tried going cold turkey, but carrying around a twenty-five pound frozen Butter Ball was just too damn difficult, not to mention cold. Those corny responses suggested that he didn't plan to stop smoking anytime soon. Maybe when he died, he would quip. That unequivocal comment was probably the only truth spoken.

No doubt that Avery was a unique and fatalistic antihero. Perhaps he was simply a man and character stuck in a different time and place. But what was it that Julie saw in him? Maybe there were a few redeeming qualities. Yes, there were some. And maybe those things were nagging at the back of her mind. He was tenacious to the point of recklessness. He simply wouldn't stop until he solved the case, even after the attempts to kill him. He had an inquiring, quirky mind and a very active imagination. The things he thought up to thwart Dragos were really over the top, but proved to be effective. His sense of humor was definitely low brow and tended to be focused on the dark side of life. Perhaps just black humor given what he saw and did during his long career dealing with the worst of the human condition. But still he had a soft spot for his two sons. He was a proud, loving father when he spoke of them on rare occasions. Yes, Avery did have some redeeming attributes despite being a complete dick in many respects. He had risked his life to save hers. For that heroic act alone, she would always be grateful and think of him fondly. She also wondered if he was lonely after divorcing his wife and now his work had become a full-time mistress. That might explain some things about him. He was certainly good at what he'd done so far, but he was still a man of many contradictions.

Julie then decided to put aside her reveries and focus on the problem at hand; the illnesses and deaths plaguing the countryside.

There had to be a logical, scientific explanation for the outbreak and she was determined to discover it. Avery had his particular area of expertise and she did too. They'd made a good team so far and with a little luck and a lot of skill they could bring this mystery to a swift conclusion. Of course, that was if they didn't get killed first. She got goose bumps on her arms at that frightening thought. She really wondered if Avery could save the day solely through strong determination and sheer power of will. She certainly hoped so for everyone's sake. She truly believed Avery's actions would make or break the case. Despite being an optimist, she wasn't sure which outcome would win out over the other. It was a coin toss at best, but she didn't like the odds one bit.

BRINGING IN ONE OF THE SHEAVES

Dragos Blaga had a sore throat, at least that's what he was telling everyone who asked about the turtleneck sweater positioned snugly under his chin. He could hide but he couldn't run. He was worried about his illicit gain business and the rumors filtering back to him that he was a crook and murderer selling tainted seed to his hungry neighbors. The people were beginning to complain and grumble among themselves about Dragos. Some townspeople who wouldn't have dared to disrespect Dragos before now openly shunned him on the street. Our campaign to bring him down was working thanks to Magda's skillful manipulation of the local grapevine and our earlier disinformation efforts. The count's castle was beginning to crumble before his eyes. However, there was more demolition to come and Dragos soon would be groveling before my feet. I'd really get a kick out of that.

Timor Stanescu had suffered an accident with a handsaw in the forest. At least that's what he mistakenly claimed when he went to Magda for help. She sutured a ten inch gash in the center of his chest and treated his facial abrasions. She had treated many accidents caused by farm implements and wood cutting tools over the many years. She knew that Timor's injuries were not caused by any of these things and a sharp-pointed knife was the likely culprit.

She also knew another thing about Mr. Stanescu—he was one of Drago’s top lieutenants. He must have been terribly desperate and in a great deal of pain to go to Magda. Perhaps my knife had cut a little too deep. Oh well, maybe he could later brag that his wound was a fencing scar, if he lived long enough to tell the tall tale. That wasn’t likely because I planned to foil his normal life expectancy. Less politely, that meant I was going to kill the fucker without regret or mercy.

With Iggie’s help, I identified Timor just outside the municipal building. He was slowly moving to his car that was parked nearby. It was obvious he was in a great deal of pain. I chuckled watching his stiff gait as he shuffled along. Surprise, surprise, he was also one of the woodsmen on the back of the truck rolling logs in our direction the other day. It was now my chance to take him out behind Uncle Sam’s woodshed to administer some old-fashioned American frontier justice. The only bright spot he could look forward to was the fact that he wouldn’t have to worry about going to prison for his crimes.

I tailed Timor to a farm about two miles from the village. I kept a safe distance to avoid detection. My guess was that Dragos and his crew were so arrogant that Timor wouldn’t even bother checking his rearview mirror. They had been in control of the people for so many years they thought they were invincible and above the law and justice. That was probably true about the law,

but justice was about to pay him a visit; maybe retribution was a more apt word. Regardless, the result would be the same.

It was dusk and night was falling quickly. I easily spotted Timor's car and the district-owned pickup truck outside a barn on the property. Two men were loading sacks of grain into the bed of the truck. This was another of Dragos storehouses and three little pigs were taking more grain to market—or getting rid of evidence. Six of one—it didn't matter now. Timor stood by and only observed the work. He didn't do any of the heavy lifting due to his injuries and, more likely, because of his high position in Dragos' organization. He was merely a sidewalk supervisor who shouted a couple of orders to the men. Otherwise, he silently smoked a couple of cigarettes and waited for them to finish. By his pacing and fidgeting, he seemed anxious to leave this place. I was anxious to accommodate his wish.

As the pickup left the property, Timor began to lock the barn doors. However, before he could finish, I approached him from behind and called his name.

“Timor, remember me, my friend?” I asked. He was initially surprised but quickly regained his composure and bravado.

“Well, well, if it isn't Mr. Dick. I thought by now you would have left Romania with your tail tucked between your legs,” he quipped. Actually, I paraphrased his reply for the sake of propriety.

Without another word, I pushed him into the barn. He tried to

punch me a couple of times but they were ineffectual, feeble attempts given his condition. He couldn't put up a good fight if his life depended on it; and it did, of course. I jabbed him once in the stomach to get his undivided attention and may have broken some of his stitches. A right to his jaw sealed the deal. My brass knuckles helped make the point. I then pinned him tightly against the barn wall. He didn't try to resist.

“Do I have your attention now?” He nodded since it was difficult to talk with a mouthful of blood. He spat some of it out, fortunately on the ground, and not on me. He may be a thug but he did have a sense of decorum knowing I would have beaten the crap out of him if he had.

“Ok, my friend, now it's show and tell time as we say in my country. Tell me everything you know about the grain scam that you and Dragos are running. If I like your answers, I'll show you mercy; otherwise I'll show you just how wrathful I can be. It's your decision,” I said through clenched teeth.

“Go fuck yourself asshole,” he replied. His English was pretty good. Good, but rude and crude, I thought. I then administered a memory jog to his groin with the electric cattle prod that I had purchased in Sibiu. He slumped to his knees after the shock and remained quiet.

“Cat got your tongue,” I cattily taunted. I don't think he any idea what that meant, but no matter. I asked the question again, but

he still remained silent—this guy was no pussy. I turned up the prod another notch and applied it to his chest wound. His body twisted and contorted and fell forward to the ground.

Before I gave him one more chance to confess his culpability and sins, he spoke, but didn't give me what I wanted to hear.

“You'll have to kill me Mr. Dick because I won't say anything against Dragos. He is my boss and friend. You can keep prodding me all night, but I will not say a word,” he spoke with great difficulty. “You'll have to kill me first.” It was obvious that Timor was more frightened of Dragos than me. That would turn out to be a mistake on his part.

He was right, of course. He wasn't going to talk so I took him up on his suggestion. I grabbed a large handful of seed grain lying on the floor and shoved it down his throat. He gagged and struggled, but I kept my hand firmly over his mouth until he lost consciousness and died. It seemed that Timor had no more aspirations left in this life.

I dragged his body to the center of the empty barn and posed it. I placed him on his back and spread his arms out straight from his body. I then pushed his legs together. He now resembled a Christ figure splayed on a dirty, gray concrete backdrop. What I had done was more or less what the Romans did to common criminals. Romans, Romanians, Romany; it made some historical sense. However, I didn't have time for the perfunctory trial. It didn't

matter because the outcome had been preordained by me. Timor had just been crucified with extreme prejudice.

I hoped my act might freak Dragos a bit by believing there was a crazed, avenging angel about. Of course, he would guess it was my handiwork. That was okay, since I wanted him to harbor no doubts as to who was responsible for the death of one of his henchmen. I decided to leave a final calling card for Mr. Blaga so I drove a piece of white, picket fence through Timor's chest, piercing his heart. I hammered the spike home with the heavy end of the cattle prod. Bright red blood spurted from the wound, covering his entire torso. The chest wound really sucked. One bloodsucker down, but more to go, I mused. I flipped his dead body off as I walked away; so much for respect for one who had already fallen. He hadn't even bothered to salute.

I felt absolutely no remorse for what I had just done because Timor got what he richly deserved. Truthfully, I had most probably saved his life, come to think about it. The seed was heavily contaminated with ergot and mercury. He most likely would have died a prolonged, agonizing death by swallowing the grain. I was surprised by my own benevolence. Sometimes good deeds and thoughts did serve as their own rewards for those who protect and serve.

Dragos would certainly get my message, loud and clear. Our vendetta was now out in the open. He wouldn't report the killing

for fear of disclosing his illicit operation. Moreover, Dragos was someone who would personally come after me for what I had done to one of his buddies. He likely wanted me to die by his own hand in some sort of nasty, rude, and terribly painful manner. Ok, bring it on, my friend. Call me out and let's get this thing over with, I thought with insecure bravado.

I briefed Julie and Iggy about my discovery of another grain storehouse, but left everything else out in my telling. I didn't want them to have any knowledge or involvement in Timor's killing in the event I was arrested. Julie could probably weather the storm with her World Bank grant of immunity, but Iggy would be prosecuted to the fullest extent by the Romanian authorities.

That couldn't happen. He had been risking his neck for us and our cause. He was just as upset and angry about what was happening to his people as we were, but he was vulnerable if we made a misstep. He had already assisted me in some questionable activities like milking the blood of cows and necking with Dragos the Dracula. He was also instrumental in orchestrating the disinformation campaign against Dragos. None of these things were capital offenses, but he still could end up doing a couple years at hard labor in a local jail. I was determined to protect him at all costs.

I phoned John Murray. I needed to give him an update on the investigation and ask him for a favor or two. Undoubtedly, Julie

had already informed him of her discoveries about the ergot and mercury in the seed. That was fine, but my concern was that John would precipitously take actions that could jeopardize what we were doing here. There were still some important loose ends to tie up. Specifically, who in Bucharest was involved in the scam? Who was Dragos conspiring with? Who placed the phony grain orders and pocketed the money from the deal? I was starting to sound like an owl by my questions. Frankly, I didn't give a hoot because I was close to wrapping this thing up and going home to the land of the free and the brave.

I woke John up at home given the time difference between the two of us. He was a little groggy given the hour and I was a little punchy after my long day at my workplace as it had been a real killer. But before I could begin my spiel, John spoke.

“Avery, you’ve done a fantastic job! I couldn’t have expected a better outcome. You, Julie, and someone called Icky, have solved the mystery in record time. I’m thoroughly impressed with what you guys have accomplished. I’ve already arranged for a little bit of thanks by getting the bank to pay you a bonus for what you’ve done,” he gushed. John was now excited and pumped. That was much better than being grumpy and pissed when it came to employee relations.

“It’s Iggie,” I corrected. “Our Romanian team member is called

Iggie.”

“Whatever,” John shot back. “He’ll be seeing an increase in his paycheck too.” By the way, Julie sings your praises as a top-flight detective. However, she also damns you for being a sexist dick.”

“Well, one out of two isn’t a bad thing, I guess,” I replied. “Look John, I appreciate the kudos, and all, but that’s not why I called. There are still important things to accomplish before we can close the case.”

“I was ready to pull you out and bring you home,” he replied. “I have a meeting tomorrow morning with my masters to brief them on the investigation. I was going to ask the Romanian authorities to issue warning notices to the population about the contaminated grain. I’ll direct Lance Trumbull to look into the matter of the grain purchases to find out where our internal controls broke down. What else is there Avery?”

“John, please cancel your meeting with your bosses and don’t act on the things you just mentioned, at least not yet. The people are no longer at risk because no one is buying rye seed grain from any source at the moment. We successfully put an end to that. I’ll brief you later on that aspect of our actions here.

“Most importantly, don’t contact the Romanian authorities and ask for the notices to be issued. I’m convinced there are some very bad actors in the Romanian government who are big players in this scam. Please hold off for a couple more days before doing

anything. Give us some more time to sort things out here. The people aren't at serious risk any longer. Not only are they not buying the crap, they're not eating it. The word is out that it's extremely toxic—if ingested.”

“Well, okay Avery, you've come through for us so far so I'll give you two more days, but then all bets are off. I'm still under a lot of pressure from the higher-ups to clean this thing up—pronto,” John said.

“Fair enough,” I responded. “Oh, John, could you do me another favor while you're in a magnanimous mood?”

“Sure, what is it?” he asked.

“Could you check with the disbursement folks and find out when I might get my first payment? I haven't seen any deposits to my checking account and my rent's overdue.”

“No problem Avery,” he chuckled as he said goodbye. “The check's in the mail even though you're in Romania,” he bravely tried to pun. He meant to say the Czech's in the male, an old, European postal service joke. Obviously, he'd frankly never heard of that particular deviation before. Regardless, I felt like I was taking it up the ass again from the petty bureaucrats in Washington. I simply hate being the butt of a tasteless joke.

“Don't worry about a thing, my friend. I won't let you twist in the wind with the bean counters.” I had heard that one before as well. He was laughing when he hung up the phone. That was how

collegial bonding worked between federal government retirees from sometimes competing agencies.

Perhaps that was reassuring, I thought. John had a pretty good sense of humor for a retired Secret Service agent. However, I sincerely hoped that the check wouldn't bounce; otherwise I would be bounced out of my apartment and I worried since I wasn't all that resilient anymore.

Sometimes those who protect and serve didn't have overdraft protection and risked being bounced like an old, abused rubber ball into the middle of a busy street.

DACHA GOTCHA!

The rumor mongers had succeeded in turning the people against Dragos. Years of pent-up anger from his bullying and corruption were boiling over. The grain scam was simply the tipping point. The farmers and townspeople had finally shaken-off their stoicism, temerity, fear, and lethargy. They were also putting aside their religiosity because what they had planned for him, while certainly spirited, was not very Christian. They were now taking the law into their own hands by permanently removing Dragos from office the old fashioned, Transylvania way—by murdering him. Magda had tipped us to what the people had in mind to payback the count and it wouldn't be a pretty sight. I was a bit disappointed because I couldn't do the job myself, in my own time and special way.

It was a surreal, eerie sight that greeted Julie, Iggie, and I at Dragos' dacha that evening. Seventy or so people were milling around the house. Most held lighted torches—the ones with tightly-bound corn silk soaked in paraffin sitting atop wooden handles. The crowd was loud and agitated. People were shouting for Dragos to come outside, otherwise they would burn down his house with him inside it. It seemed that Dragos' options were few to none by the look of the long, hemp rope with a noose at one end hanging over a tree branch. Actually, it was a given, lose-lose

proposition for him. Being burned alive or hanged dead were his only choices by the look of things.

We noticed Magda at the front of the crowd and moved to her. She was sitting on a tree stump and had found a front row seat for tonight's entertainment.

"This is the moment for the people's revenge," Magda grimly spoke. "Dragos has gone too far this time and everyone wants his blood. There is no one who will come to his aid. There is no one who will lift a finger for him; not even his old cronies. He now knows what it means to be terrified. He will be sent to Hell tonight for what he has done. I will meet him there and we will satisfy our vendetta once and for all time."

People were now walking around the dacha, stopping occasionally to yell unkind epithets in Dragos' direction. The natives were restless and continued to demand that he come outside to face them. I didn't believe that was likely under the circumstances. Dragos might be a little crazy, but he wasn't stupid or suicidal.

"Magda, you need to tell the people to wait. I understand their anger and have no qualms about what they have in mind to end his bloody life. I would even like to help them, but not just yet. We still don't know who has been helping Dragos in Bucharest. Those people are perhaps more responsible than Dragos for what has happened in the valley. They are murders too and I want them very

badly.”

This was my opportunity to identify the other conspirators. Timor wouldn't talk, but maybe Dragos would, given his dire situation. Regardless, it wouldn't hurt to try. If he didn't disclose their names, he would die by the consequence of his decision.

Magda agreed to help. She understood the importance of identifying the rest of the bad guys. She and Iggy would work the crowd by telling the people to be patient and bide their time. Dragos wasn't going anywhere—except down to Hell. I gave her about twenty minutes to work her magic.

When people started to settle down, Julie and I approached the house and knocked on the door. We waited a couple of minutes and at one point I saw Dragos peeking through a window to see who was on his doorstep.

He slowly opened the door, motioned us inside with the barrel of an old shotgun, and ordered us to sit down. He was sweating profusely and was visibly shaken by what was transpiring outside. I guessed he never could have imagined the people rising up against him. They were ignorant sheep in his view and he had always been the Judas goat leading them to one form of slaughter or another. It now seemed the sheep had grown sharp teeth and pointed hooves.

“Congratulations Mr. Avery, you have done well in turning my neighbors against me. But what you did to poor Timor was terrible.

He deserved much better treatment,” Dragos first spoke. But his guilt shtick wouldn’t work with me. I slept soundly by counting ruthless sheep, thank you very much.

Julie shot me a puzzling look, but kept silent.

“Yes, it was a terrible farm accident that could have been avoided if he had told me what I wanted to know,” I responded.

“And what did you want to know from my friend Timor?” he asked. “What was so important that he had to die that way?”

“It’s the same information that I now want from you Dragos. Who are your coconspirators in Bucharest? Who arranged for the phony grain purchases and who’s protecting you?”

Dragos sat back in his chair and thought for awhile. He was between that proverbial rock and hard place and he damn well knew it. He was trying to buy some time and mentally preparing his defense plea while we waited. It didn’t take him long to deliver it.

“It’s the way it’s always been here,” Mr. Dick, he cryptically sighed. “I am no different than others before me. I am like my father and others before him who took from the government. The communist bosses taught us well by raising vice and corruption to an art. It may be difficult for you to understand not having lived under communism.

“Forget the patriotic pronouncements of the old leaders. Their platitudes and promises of a better life based on the teachings of

Lenin and Marx were all hollow; a sham perpetrated on the so-called proletariat. There was no real equality and fraternity under the communist yoke. Only the apparatchiks—the party hacks—thrived under the system. All others suffered to one degree or another during the Ceausescu regime and its predecessors. People did what they had to do to survive in a society that was largely dysfunctional and rarely worked for the benefit of the people. It was our way of life for many years.

“Corruption was so rife in our society that even the most ordinary, routine transactions involved a bribe or kickback or returned favor. It became an accepted, normal existence for us. Everyone knew the system was rotten back then. It was so bad that people actually wished for less governance. The central government’s endless, inane, five-year plans were an open joke among the people.”

Julie interrupted by saying that Ceausescu and the communist regimes were long gone. What did Dragos’ bedtime story for the gullible have to do with what was happening today in Romania?

“Oh, it has everything to do with how things are still done under capitalism. I’m trying to explain what was—and still is, here,” he replied.

He was also trying to downplay what he had done, I thought. I’d save my crocodile tears for later while celebrating our investigation with a glass of wine. But for now, I patiently listened

since it was his revisionist history lesson and I was all ears.

“When the last communist regime fell, the whole country eagerly embraced the concepts of democracy and capitalism. Those things promised a better standard of living, a better life for everyone. What is your expression, ‘high water lifts all boats?’”

“‘A rising tide lifts all boats,’” I interjected. “You were close, but no cigar.” I hoped he wouldn’t ask me about the cigar bit because I didn’t have a clue to its meaning.

“Ah, yes, ‘tide,’ thank you. Things have gotten better since Ceausescu and his wife were executed, but old habits and behaviors die hard here. The tricks we learned to manipulate the system have carried over to this day. There are still many diehard communists in the current government; not everyone hated communism, by the way. Those on the inside, like me, personally benefitted from the systemic incompetence and graft around us. We were, in a sense, early entrepreneurs who used the system to our own ends.”

Jesus, I was going to barf given Dragos gratuitous spins and self-justifications for what he had done. His core argument was that everyone was doing it, so it must be okay. He was simply following orders and being a good capitalist and really nothing more. He was wasting our time and I was getting impatient. There was going to be a bonfire or lynching tonight and I didn’t want to miss either event for all of the diehard vampires or communists in

Transylvania.

“Where are going with your story Dragos? You still haven’t told us what we want to hear. Who else is involved in the seed scam?” I bluntly asked. A blunt, as in a type of cigar, was something I understood.

“Why should I tell you? What do I have to lose by not telling you? What do I have to gain by telling you? Nothing is the answer to those questions. Look outside my door and tell me that I will live to see another day. I don’t think so. No, I will keep my lips sealed and go to my grave with the information. It serves me no purpose to tell you.”

“Maybe not,” I said. “Maybe I can save your miserable skin if you reveal the identities of your contacts in Bucharest.”

“How can you guarantee that?” he asked, sitting upright in his chair.

“I can’t guarantee anything, but I promise to do my best to get you out of this situation alive, but only if you agree to do certain things.”

“And those things are?” he inquired. I now had his attention.

“First, you must give up the names of your coconspirators in the seed scam. Second, I want you to turn yourself into the authorities and admit what you’ve done. Maybe they won’t hang you for murdering innocent people, but that’s your problem.”

“What do you mean by murder? I had no knowledge the seed

was contaminated,” he vigorously asserted. “I didn’t know there was a problem until I heard the rumors like everyone else. When I did, I immediately ordered my men to dump it in the woods so no one else would get sick. I may be many things, but I’m not a murderer. I wouldn’t knowingly kill my neighbors. Why would I kill off the very people who keep me in office and money? It makes no sense. I swear on my dear wife’s grave that what I’m telling you is true.”

I didn’t mention his role in the death of his wife, it wasn’t important now. I purposely didn’t point out the murders of the truckers or attempts on our lives. If he wanted to try to distance himself from those crimes, so be it. Of course, it was pure nonsense, but I didn’t want to confront him right now. Those things would come later. And he would pay dearly for those crimes in court, heaven or wherever. As to dumping the seed, I tended to believe him. He likely wouldn’t bite the hands that were feeding his greed.

“I agree to the arrangement since I have no choice. I’ll take your word on it and we have a witness, the lady here,” pointing to Julie. “I’m willing to take my chances with the authorities rather than the mob outside. So what do we do now?” he asked.

“What you do is to make phone calls to your cronies in Bucharest. I want them to implicate themselves during the conversations that I’ll record. I’ll coach you on what to tell them. If

you say anything to alert them, the deal's off and you can walk outside to meet your neighbors or stay home in front of the fire. It's your choice, Hobson," I said.

"But I don't have a phone and there are none in Alba Iulia," Dragos protested. He had totally ignored my badly mispronouncing his name.

"No problem," I said while pulling a tape recorder and satellite phone from my knapsack. I then went over the spiel with Dragos and showed him how to operate the phone. He pulled his wallet from his back pocket and retrieved a slip of paper. On it was written the telephone number of one of his corrupt buddies.

"Julie, please get Iggie. I need him to monitor the call because the conversation will likely be in Romanian," I politely ordered.

"That won't be necessary," Dragos replied. "My buddy or contact, as you say, speaks passable English so an interpreter won't be necessary. By the way, there is only one person in Bucharest involved in this enterprise as far as I know and he's the one I'm calling now."

I attached the recorder's induction cup to the phone's earpiece and hit the start button. I forced Dragos to share the phone with me so I could listen to the conversation in real time. He dialed the number and we waited.

After the third ring, our call was answered. "Hello, this is Lance Trumbull," the voice on the other end of the phone said. I

nearly wet my pants in excitement.

“Lance, my good friend, this is Dragos. We have some serious problems here and I need to know what I should do?”

“What’s up Dragos? You said you could handle any problems with Dick and Boudary. “What’s so important you have to call me? Are you in Sibiu using a phone there? The connection sounds like you’re calling from outer space.”

I chuckled to myself at Lance’s prescient comment.

“They’re not the problem,” Dragos continued, ignoring Lance’s question about the local phone service. “It’s the farmers and townspeople who are upset, believing the grain is contaminated and they’re blaming me. I have to tell you that I’m afraid to leave my house at the moment.”

“So what if it’s contaminated,” Lance snapped back. “They’re not eating the crap so why the worry? Any problems won’t show up for several months, well after the stuff is planted. I don’t plan to be living in Romania at that point. You can play dumb about any contaminants and lay everything off on others.

“If push comes to shove, the Romanian government and the World Bank are to be blamed for everything, just remember that. After all, they arranged for the grant in the first place. The people will buy that explanation. That’s a cover story and a plausible denial at their very best; two large bureaucracies not communicating and screwing things up. Those things routinely

happen every day around the world. This is not a big money issue for the bank and they'll soon lose interest in their pathetic investigation. Once that happens, the Romanians will drop this thing like a hot potato.

“Dragos, you’ve got nothing to worry about. Just tough it out and let the whole thing blow over with time. I’ll speak to one of my close friends at the Agriculture Ministry to make sure things are covered at that end. He’s being well paid and will do what he’s told. Look, we’re all making a lot of money off this deal, so let’s not screw it up at the twelfth hour. Keep selling the grain until the supplies are exhausted. That’s when we’ll be finished, but not before. There’s still more money on the table and I want to make sure it ends up in our pockets. And if Dick and Boudary get too rambunctious, get rid of them. Just make sure it looks like another unfortunate accident. Three’s a charm, but you have screwed-up these things up before so don’t let it happen again. We’re running out of time and I’m running out of patience with you.”

“But Lance, I’m worried that I’ll be found out and go to prison.”

“Stop it Dragos, you’re not going to prison and neither am I. You seem to have forgotten the circumstances of our first meeting. You were the one who proposed ripping off the World Bank loans and grants in the first place. You pointed out that I had no choice but to cooperate with you. What a laugh, you idiot. You couldn’t

pull these scams off on your own if your life depended on it. I'm the one who made these things work and made us rich. Have you forgotten my friend? Listen, grow some balls and move on with your life and work. You fully agreed to this scam and now you're having second thoughts for some reason. I don't understand your reluctance to finish this thing. Regardless, it's time to earn your keep."

Lance's lisp was a dead giveaway and an especially effeminate characteristic that couldn't be missed by anyone listening to the tape. Speaking in slippery shibboleths was not one of his strong suits. He was more of a Giorgio Armani kind of guy.

Lance abruptly hung up on Dragos. No worries, we had more incriminating information against him than necessary. Lance had just screwed himself and maybe not for the first time. I chuckled at the twisted, contorted thought.

Dragos failed to mention that he had already disposed of the remaining seed stocks. Now I wasn't so sure that he really had. He might be scamming Lance by double-crossing him and selling the seed on his own. More profit for Dragos and less for Lance? What do they say about honor among thieves? Moreover, destroying the tainted seed could be misconstrued as a humanitarian act on his part. I didn't believe that Dragos had a single ounce of humanity left in him.

With the recorded phone call, I had enough evidence to bring

Lance to justice. Not only had his career with the bank just tanked, but probably his freedom as well, time would tell. Dragos had done his part, now it was time to do mine. I left Julie with Dragos. She would be safe; he wouldn't harm her given the circumstances. I left the house and immediately smoked a cigarette. I had already lit up one fag and another wouldn't hurt me, I believed.

I huddled with Magda and Iggie for a few minutes. I told them we had to save Dragos's life, at least for awhile. They both looked at me in amazement. Maybe it was astonishment or incredulity, I really couldn't tell the difference by the expressions on their faces. Regardless, I explained that I had to keep him alive because I promised him I would do so—no matter how much it killed me.

Dragos had just provided crucial information regarding the people in Bucharest who were involved in the scam. I didn't give the two any details about what Julie and I had just learned. They had no need to know as we said in the security biz. Old habits die hard for those anal retentive people who protected and served by the book. Then again, what's a secret if you can't tell a friend? I wondered.

Iggie and Magda reluctantly agreed to do what I asked. They didn't think it would work, but said they would go along with my questionable plan to save Dragos from the wrath of his neighbors. Speaking of which, the people had settled down a bit. Maybe their anger had dissipated through their chorus of rants and raves against

Dragos; cathartic, talk-therapy, Romanian style. Yeah, sure, maybe when vampires flew, I thought. Sorry, that was not quite what I meant to say.

We still needed something or someone more powerful than us to placate the people and get them to return to their homes without pulling a hair on Count Dracula's chinny chin chin. That meant we had to turn to God for deliverance. While Magda and Iggie left the property on their errand, I returned to the house where there were still a few more bats in Dragos's filthy belfry to deal with. The guano had piled up over the years and it was now time to clean house.

"Dragos, Lance suggested you and he have done business together for some time. What other scams involving World Bank projects have the two of you been pulling off?" I asked.

Dragos laughed at my question. "You must be joking Mr. Dick. We have an agreement, a deal, as you Americans say. And that only requires my cooperation with your seedy inquiries. Do you want me to put more spikes in my coffin? I will tell you nothing about my other dealings with Mr. Trumbull. However, you must keep your word, as promised."

I didn't expect him to tell me anything but I thought it was worth a shot. The authorities would eventually get the information from him, one way or another and another would not be a pleasant experience.

“Ok, we still have a deal but tell me about your first meeting with Lance that he mentioned during the conversation. That disclosure certainly shouldn’t be a breach of confidence between thieves, I mean businessmen,” I quickly corrected myself.

“Ah, that is something I will gladly tell you because the story is so ironic that only a true communist or quirky American like you would appreciate it. It’s a tale best told over a glass of chilled vodka. Would you and the lady like one?” he graciously offered.

Julie and I declined the offer. I also declined on Dragos’ behalf and told him to move along with his telling: people were waiting.

“I have several, old friends in the central government, good communists who survived the regime change. No, Mr. Dick, I will not give you their names, so save your breath. They are no longer important and do not matter. You must understand that Bucharest is a small town in many ways. Everyone knows everyone else’s business. However, one of my friends, an officer in the government’s security service, knew everyone and everything happening in the city. That was his job and he was especially conscientious in conducting surveillance of the foreign missions, including the World Bank office and its staff.

“It didn’t take long for my friend to determine that Lance was a homosexual who had a Romanian boyfriend. By the way, is that how you describe someone who engages in sexual relations with another man?”

“Gay,” I politically corrected him. “It also could be an act between women,” I added for the sake of gender equality. God, I really tried my damndest to be hip by staying current with this lingo, I thought.

“Yes, gay. I had forgotten. I don’t know why you apply that term to people who often feel self-loathing, but no matter. The act of gaiety or gayness was a serious crime under communism. It is still a crime in our now democratic country. A felony offense I believe you in the West call it. Of course, everyone understands that such behavior between adults occurs and no law enforcement authority, including those in the central government, would go out of their way to identify and arrest such people. Only in cases of rape or notorious conduct would the authorities prosecute this sort of crime.”

I didn’t correct Dragos’ grammar this time, but he was essentially correct about the illegality of homosexuality in many countries. In 1980, the State Department’s Office of Security, the precursor to the Diplomatic Security Service, conducted a world-wide survey of the issue. Its interest really was an attempt to bolster its position in denying security clearances to homosexuals. In those days, gays were ineligible for Foreign Service employment because they couldn’t be granted a security clearance—a catch 22 situation.

Homosexuality was considered a mental aberration and illness

according to the bible—in this instance, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. Another reason was the belief that homosexuals were more susceptible to blackmail than heterosexuals; ergo gays were considered greater security risks than their heterosexual brethren. Any applicant for employment who acknowledged he or she was homosexual was automatically excluded from being hired. If they asked why they were denied employment, the pat, disingenuous answer was always the same—BQA, a better qualified applicant had been selected for the position.

The mental disorder and security risk arguments worked for many years, but the tide was turning and the department was on the defensive to justify its stance on hiring homosexuals. The DSM had eventually eliminated homosexuality as a mental disorder and the security risk argument was not statistically supportable—there were many more instances of espionage committed by heterosexuals than homosexuals during the Cold War.

There was one more card the department tried to play and that was a particular provision in the Foreign Service Act. The proviso specified that all Foreign Service candidates must be available for worldwide service. If a number of countries considered homosexuality a crime, the applicant wasn't available ipso facto for worldwide duty. In fact, the survey did identify many countries where homosexuality was a crime, a serious one to boot.

Moreover, several countries didn't have any laws on the books making such sexual activity illegal. The subject was considered too aberrant and abhorrent—too taboo to codify into law.

In any event, the department's official attitude and treatment eventually changed and homosexuals were now routinely hired for Foreign Service positions. There was even an officially sanctioned gay organization in the department. I gave up my mental reminiscing and tuned back into what Dragos was saying.

“My friend told me about Lance and his sexual orientation and proclivities. I saw him as a tremendous opportunity to make serious money off the World Bank's projects in my district. But I needed his cooperation and complicity to do it. I had to somehow coerce and co-opt him to my goal. I thought that would be fairly easy. Oh, but I was so wrong! This is where my naiveté and arrogance brought me to my present circumstances. Had I not done what I did, we would not be sitting here tonight with a mob outside demanding my life. Life plays tricks on us at times. Doesn't it Mr. Dick?” Sometimes those who protect and serve have no good (or smart-ass) answers to such cosmic or comic questions.

“Lance and his friend loved to visit Sibiu and the surrounding area, especially in the spring and fall when the weather is cool and clear. They would stay at the same inn as you and the lady. At my request and generous payment, my security friend from Bucharest arranged to wire and film Lance's room. I'll spare you the details,

but I will tell you that the audio and visual production values were very good—terribly disgusting, but very effective for my purpose.”

I winced when I heard that bit of information, wondering if Dragos had done the same thing to our rooms at the inn. I flashed back on my conduct in my room. Had I done or said anything that might be embarrassing or incriminating? I didn't think so, but you could never be sure.

Then I remembered that I had watched the BBC Evening News several times on the satellite-feed TV. Jesus, I might be in big trouble with my former employer—the State Department's Diplomatic Security Service—if that security violation were to be revealed. I started to worry and chain-smoked a couple of cigs.

I still looked forward to more assignments from my former employer, but the BBC thing might block any chances for future work. It was still the best assisted living employer I knew of. Damn, damn, and double damn! I thought. I had been sloppy with my trade-craft. How could I explain watching foreign news broadcast without prior authorization? Such willful acts were frowned upon in my biz. My security clearance was now at risk. I needed to come up with some sort of plausible explanation for my conduct. Maybe I could convince the powers that I watched the program solely as an educational exercise to hone my professional skills. Yes, maybe that might fly with the suits. It was merely a propaganda lesson and nothing more. I believed they might buy it.

However, only time, and perhaps Dragos, would tell.

“I had planned to entrap Lance in a compromising situation,” Dragos continued. “I believed I could co-opt and use him to my ends—blackmail him, as you say. However, when I later confronted him with proof of his perverted behavior, he simply laughed in my face. Then he asked me for a copy of the videotape, saying he wanted it for his collection. I had badly misjudged him and the situation.

“Lance told me that he was so far out of the water closet that he could no longer see it. I didn’t know what that meant so he explained that he was openly homosexual or gay, as you corrected me. His employer was aware of his sexual orientation and there was no stigma attached to it. As to the Romanian authorities, he pointed out that he held diplomatic immunity and couldn’t be arrested. The worst that could happen would be expulsion from the country and that was highly unlikely since the World Bank would raise an outcry and threaten to cut off future loans to the government. I had no leverage with him and I realized it at that point. However, someone was compromised during our meeting that day—me.

“Keep in mind that Lance is a shrewd businessman who has an insatiable appetite for money. His greed knows few bounds. He would have made a good communist party boss. His goal is to make enough money to retire to New Zealand and open a gay

nightclub in Auckland or maybe run for public office on the Liberal Party ticket—who knows about such things other than Lance. What I do know is that he is a very clever, thoroughly corrupt individual—my sins pale by comparison.

I started to interrupt with a question but Dragos quickly cut me off.

“Please let me finish my story, but I believe you already know the ending. Instead of Lance working for me, I now work for him. He threatened to report my blackmail attempt to the authorities unless I agreed to help him. He saw many financial opportunities through our mutual cooperation, but he would be the one calling the shots. With the influence of the World Bank behind him, he could have succeeded in getting me removed from office, and maybe worse, despite my old friends in Bucharest. Regardless, I ended up being the rabbit in the snare.”

He slumped in his chair and rested his chin on his chest, looking emotionally spent and dejected. If nothing else, Dragos was a proud man who had just confessed that his plot to co-opt Lance had been queered by a twink. I suspected that it didn't get any worse for a Romanian bully. I gingerly removed the shotgun from his lap so he wouldn't accidentally hurt himself.

We heard a great deal of commotion outside and Julie and I went to the window to look. My plan just might be working, I thought. As we looked on, the mob suddenly became hushed and

parted to allow the visitor to pass. Some people crossed themselves and a few knelt to the ground in his presence. It was Father Alexandru, the parish priest. He was an older gentleman who had a full gray beard and clothed in his robes of office, appearing like Eastern Orthodox religiosity personified. Charlton Heston would have been envious of his imposing stature. Magda had convinced him to put in an appearance at our jamboree.

The good father strode directly to the front steps of the dacha and turned to the crowd. He was holding a large tri-bar cross in his right hand. A boy of about twelve was carrying a censer, holding it from its three chains. Smoke from its burning fir resin and other fragrances filled the air. The aromas were pleasant and soothing and its swinging movements mesmerizing. Maybe the censer's smells and motions would quell the ire of the murder-minded mob. Not likely, I sniffed.

"My children," the priest spoke in a loud, commanding voice. "What you are about to do is wrong, a sin in God's eyes. You must leave here before you go too far and be damned for all eternity. Your very souls are in jeopardy tonight and I beseech you to leave now before it's too late. We know of Dragos's misdeeds and he will be punished, I promise each of you. He will not escape justice this time for his corruptive behavior. He has agreed to immediately vacate his office and turn himself into the authorities to confess his crimes. I have been assured that if does not, others of power and

influence will force him to do so. Go to your homes and leave this man in peace. The central government and God will see to his punishments. There will finally be justice for all of us.”

Some of the people initially objected and tried to urge others to stay and carry out Dragos’ execution. But eventually everybody quietly left the property. Father Alexandru stayed awhile to enjoy a couple of vodkas before departing. It seemed he enjoyed his spirits as much as the rest of us.

I later asked Magda how she had convinced the priest to come to our aid. She said she had known Father Alexandru for many years; he was an old friend. He was a good man, perhaps a bit timid at times, but very pious and honorable. He couldn’t condone the killing of Dragos; doing nothing to save him would have been a sin of omission on his conscious and immortal soul. Moreover, she mentioned the good father was very fond of her Elderberry wine and she now owed him big-time for his courageous act.

Sometimes those who protect and serve shamelessly used the servants of the Lord to their own dispirited and desperate ends.

DRAGOS TURNS HIS COAT INSIDE OUT

The son-of-a-bitch had gone back on his word. I believed I could trust Dragos, at least as far as I could throw him—about zero feet. However, he had delivered up Lance and I thought there was a good chance that he would turn himself over to the Bucharest authorities. I strongly suspected that Dragos believed he could beat the system through a combination of bribes and help from his former communist buddies still working in the criminal justice system. In his mind, maybe he would only get a couple of years in prison. Then again, he might walk free if he were really lucky or especially generous. Regardless of what he believed, those things weren't about to happen. Dragos could try to play the system, but all of his finagling wouldn't help him. I had anticipated this scenario and planned to trump his plans.

He was facing charges of fraud, theft, criminal negligence, and conspiracy for starters. Homicide, or at least involuntary manslaughter, was another distinct possibility. No, Mr. Blaga wouldn't get off the hook so easily. I would make sure the World Bank exerted its considerable influence to pressure the Romanian government to pay particular attention to his prosecution. I had no doubt that John Murray would back my play. If Dragos were somehow able to manipulate the justice system and avoid prison,

he still wouldn't be home scot free.

The United States was one of the largest donor nations to the World Bank. The U.S. government could assert jurisdiction over the crimes because Uncle Sam had been defrauded. Dragos could be extradited to the States to face American justice. If he were to flee Romania before extradition, Interpol would issue a red notice warrant for his apprehension and detention. He could run, but not hide for long before he was caught. That was when the real fun would begin.

Any U.S. Attorney's office would jump at the chance to prosecute the case. It had all of the makings of a best-selling book and movie. Depending on the prosecutor's strategy, the deaths of almost twenty people might not be directly introduced into evidence, but they would be insinuated during the trial by a sharp assistant U.S. Attorney. Regardless, Mr. Dragos Blaga would likely be spending many years in a federal prison—not a Club Fed, but a maximum security facility where inmates were only let out of their cages for one hour a day. On many days, he would wish he had died by a Romania firing squad rather than wasting away in a cell surrounded by crazy and violent offenders. It would be a living hell for him. Lance Trumbull would face a worse fate, if I had anything to say about it.

My guess was that Dragos was hiding out with relatives in the region, mulling over his situation and options. He very well might

surrender himself, but for now he was nowhere to be found. That pissed me off to no end. I didn't like the idea that he was still a free man. I scoured the countryside without success trying to spot his BMW. Iggie searched the village with the same result. Count Dracula had taken flight and our soon-to-be jailbird was on the wing or lam, if you prefer. Regardless, I would track him down and bring him to justice one way or another. I couldn't wait for that to happen. It would be payback time for Dragos and I expected to collect in full.

I dropped Julie and Iggie at the WHO encampment to compare notes with Dr. Beckner and his team. I mentioned that I'd pick them up in a couple of hours and we'd head back to the hotel. We had to do a conference call with John in Washington to bring him up to speed on our investigation and last night's revelations. I was generally pleased with what we all had accomplished, but there was still more to do. High on my list was finding Dragos. The next item would be confronting Lance Trumbull. I was heading to Magda's place to talk to her.

The first thing Magda did was to give me a good tongue lashing. I guessed I deserved it, but the fact that Dragos had escaped mob justice didn't particularly bother me. He would get his comeuppance in due course and time.

"Avery, the people are furious with you for letting Dragos live," she began. "They're upset with me for convincing Father

Alexandru to intervene in their revenge. We both need to watch our backs. Someone might decide to harm us for what we did.”

I patiently explained to Magda what I had in mind for Dragos. He wouldn't escape justice, one way or another he would be punished for his crimes. That seemed to mollify her somewhat. I knew she would spread the information among her neighbors and they would settle down and accept what was in store for Dragos. As I explained Dragos' possible fates, there was a loud knock on the door. Magda opened it.

“Hello Florin, what brings you to my door?” Magda kindly inquired.

“Magda, Dragos gave me something to deliver to your foreign visitor,” he breathlessly said. “He has gone mad, a madman who ordered me and my men to immediately leave my slaughterhouse. He threatened to kill us if we didn't. He said he had two head of livestock that must be butchered and he wanted us gone. I was terribly frightened because Dragos is not right in the head.”

Florin had doffed his dark gray, wool cap and was now holding it tightly between his two large, meaty hands. It was a sign of respect and simple, old-world courtesy meant for Magda. I said howdy partner in return to even the gesture and make him feel welcome. He smiled and bowed his head. Fortunately, he couldn't speak a word of English.

Florin then reached into his work pants and pulled out a piece

of butcher's paper. Magda took it and handed it to me to read:

Mr. Dick, I hope my note finds you in good health, the writer sarcastically began. Unfortunately, your two colleagues and friends are not feeling so well at the moment. How do you say it? Under the water, perhaps? No matter, they won't be suffering much longer. I will make sure of that. You have underestimated me. Alba Iulia is my home and I will not leave it under any circumstances. I am in charge here; these people are my charges, my property and what I say and do is above ordinary law. I am a feared god to these people. Only by your actions did they turn against me. For the most part, they are easily controlled and manipulated sheep as I well know. You and your friends went too far and will now pay for your treacherous acts against me. I am now getting my revenge and I can assure you it will be sweet and satisfying.

It was elegantly signed: "The Honorable Dragos Blaga, District Prefect, Principality of Transylvania, and Republic of Romania." He really had lost his frigging mind, I now believed. Egomaniacal was the word for his delusional behavior and thinking. A full-blown nutcase might be a better word though. Last night's activities must have pushed him over the edge. I should have let the bastard burn or hang when I had the chance. No good deed goes unpunished, I mused.

The message was painfully clear. Julie and Iggie had been

kidnapped. The note was an open invitation to meet Dragos at the slaughterhouse. I planned to promptly RSVP and accept his challenge. Politeness and protocol should always be observed, no matter the occasion, I thought.

Through Magda's voice, I spent the next hour or so quizzing Florin about his slaughterhouse, the location, dimensions, entrances, surrounding features, etc. I had him draw a sketch of the building and its interior and exterior structures. I wanted to know every detail about the site before I visited it.

It turned out to be a simple, rectangular building with two entrances—one for people and the other for the livestock penned outside. It was located within walking distance of Magda's house in a small clearing just on the far edge of the village. The building was constructed of ordinary, cinder blocks, one of the few buildings not made of wood. The roof was made of corrugated sheet metal. The exterior structures were few, consisting of livestock pens, an outhouse, well pump, woodshed, and large holding bin for the byproducts of Florin's trade; mostly bone, fat, and gristle that would be collected and later ground into fertilizer. Little went to waste in this poor part of the country.

I was fairly confident that Dragos wouldn't kill Julie and Iggie before I arrived. He was crazed and egotistical enough to want to dispatch them in front of me. It was his show and his script and he didn't want to spoil the final act. It turned out that he was one

twisted drama queen.

Sometimes those who protect and serve must act as the deus ex machina in life's little performances.

THE ARABESQUE AT THE ABATTOIR

With Magda's directions, I easily found the entrance to the path close to the church. My half mile walk would take me to the mouth of the clearing. However, before that point, I would make a slight detour into the woods and locate a good spot to observe the slaughterhouse. *I didn't expect to be ambushed, but why take any chances?* I thought. I made my way through the woods until I found a place that would afford me a good view. With my field glasses, I scanned the property, finally focusing on the rear of the building. I settled in to see what I could see. I didn't want to precipitously move against Dragos knowing that he was waiting for me. I needed as much advantage over the situation as possible, but I didn't have much by the looks of it.

Florin's description and sketch of his property were surprisingly accurate. I shouldn't have been surprised since he had owned the slaughterhouse for over thirty years. He probably knew where every unwanted carcass or body was buried on the premises. He had been one of Dragos' confidants according to Magda, but now he was scared to death of the man. Apparently, friendship and personal loyalty abruptly end when insanity takes hold in rural Transylvania.

I had an unobstructed, direct view of the livestock entrance. I

could easily see through its wide, open doors into the building. I suspected Dragos had purposely left them open hoping I would enter there. No one was in sight, but then again I could only see a small portion of the interior. The corral outside held several head of cattle and two horses awaiting slaughter. All of the animals looked scrawny and rather pathetic as they milled about. Maybe they had a sense of their fate.

I understood the process that would result in their deaths and renderings by working one college summer in a meat packing plant on the Southside of Chicago. That operation was a highly mechanized one compared to what I saw through my glasses. There, it was a tightly choreographed ballet that consisted of moving the livestock through chutes where the cattle were either shocked with a high-voltage prod or shot with a bolt pistol to stun them into unconsciousness. The bolt was always shot into the cow's skull so the prime meat wouldn't be affected. From there, a conveyer belt moved the carcasses inside the plant. The animals were then hung upside down and their main arteries severed. They died by exsanguinations with their blood running off into open channels cut in the concrete floors.

The next step was to remove the animal's internal organs. The viscera and other waste products were separated and sent to subcontractors to be rendered into tallow and lard. All-in-all, it was a very efficient process and one that left a lasting impression on

me. In fact, I still sometimes have nightmares from the experience. I was surprised I wasn't a vegan.

I continued to scan the property and something caught my eye. It was a well-camouflaged deer blind high-up in a large tree. I had missed it on my first sweep of the area. I must be losing my edge, nearsightedness and old age, I speculated. My position likely had been compromised as soon as I had found it. I watched for a full five minutes before I saw any movement from the blind. Obviously, Dragos' lookout was an experienced, patient hunter. His job was to somehow signal Dragos of my arrival. No, that wasn't it. This goon was going to ambush me when I approached the building. I would soon give him an opportunity to do his job—and Dragos' nasty bidding.

I sat up and briskly strode the 75 yards or so to the far side of the building. My hunter could easily see me until I disappeared around a corner. I only had a couple of minutes to find a hiding place. I briefly considered the outhouse and woodshed, but I would only entrap myself in those places. I then decided to hide inside the open top, refuse container used to hold unwanted bone, flesh, and God knows what else, of rendered carcasses. The workers would toss largely valueless waste over the bin's concrete walls. It wouldn't be a pleasant experience, but it would be the last place my pursuer would search. The smell alone would keep him away, at least for awhile.

I scaled the bin's seven foot wall and jumped into its yucky contents. I was immediately encapsulated up to my thighs in the most vile, disgusting things imaginable. Decomposing flesh and bones of many animals met me at the bottom of the bin. Rainwater had mixed with the remains and remnants of the creatures to produce a noxious stew. The smell was overwhelming and I gagged a few times, but held my own. It was just plain offal, I joked to myself although it wasn't particularly funny at the moment. I barely could move about and really didn't want to. Instead, I took a position next to the small metal door that I supposed was used to periodically clean out the slop. The tiny crack at the hinge gave me a pretty good peephole to view the surrounds.

The goon finally came into view. He didn't appear to be all that big, but he had a great equalizer in his right hand, a large-frame revolver. He was cautiously skulking about searching for me. He probably had already checked the outhouse and woodshed for any signs of life. As he turned the far corner of the building, I made my move. I pulled myself out of the bin with some difficulty and quickly closed the distance between us.

I now had the element of surprise on my side. I crept upon him and before he could turn around, looped my leather belt around his neck. That took some of the wind out of sails and air out of lungs. The gun fell from his hand to the ground. I pushed him hard

against the building's wall while pulling tight with my belt. I placed a foot against the small of his back and pulled hard on the belt with both hands. I was glad that I gave up wearing suspenders some years ago. Besides, they weren't particularly de rigueur with my leisure suits.

The would-be assassin's tongue popped out of his mouth and his eyes bulged. He also was literally turning blue in the face. I'd never seen this phenomenon before and I was fascinated. He suffered a final indignity by having an involuntary bowel movement. The goon's body finally went limp and fell to the ground—stone-cold dead.

I glanced around to see if anyone was watching. Nobody was and things were quiet. Thank God that no one had seen me because I would have been terribly embarrassed. My pants were now hanging below my knees and my red boxer shorts with the little white hearts were in full view. I retrieved my belt and, before putting it on, carved another notch on it with my knife. Who said that those who protect and serve couldn't count?

I would wait a little longer before entering the slaughterhouse. The coming darkness would help my plan and dramatic entry to the building. There were only two ways in and out. I only hoped I'd live to experience the out part.

I took off my windbreaker and stuffed it with dry grasses and leaves. I zipped it shut after fully filling it. I found a long stick and

attached it to my jacket. I then crept around to the far side of the pens and climbed over one of its fences. I ignited the bag of stuffing with my lighter and moved toward the animals. They immediately panicked and began furiously running around the corral. Their fear of fire was intense and palpable. They ran crazily in all directions, except one—toward the fire ball. They bellowed and whinnied, colliding with one another trying to flee to safety.

I maneuvered the livestock into the long chute leading into the building. The animals were so spooked that the lead steer easily broke through the wood drop bar separating the pens from the building. The others blindly followed the leader. It was total pandemonium as the animals ran amok through the abattoir. Work benches were upended and thrown about. I followed the steered animals into the building and closed the doors behind me. I was now locked up with a bunch of crazed animals, including one Dragos Blaga.

I kept my back to the closest wall and slowly inched my way around the building's many nooks and crannies, hoping to locate Julie and Iggie—alive. The place looked and smelled of death. Blood and scraps of bone and flesh were everywhere. As I turned a corner, I met the vampire face to face.

“Welcome Mr. Dick. I've been expecting you,” Dragos said while placing the business end of his shotgun against my head.

“Please sit, we need to talk before I kill you.”

I closely examined Dragos face. It was a contorted mask of madness and rage. His state of mind made him that more unpredictable and dangerous. It had a fixed, twisted smile and drool ran down one corner of his mouth. His controlled composure of last night was gone. He was now an over-the-top, bona fide madman.

“Where’s Julie and Iggie,” I demanded. “They better be safe or you will pay a very big price. You’ll wish you were killed by the mob after I finish with you, you miserable fucker.”

Dragos laughed at my show of bravado. He probably would have applauded my little outburst if his hands weren’t occupied at the moment. He was beyond reason, sanity, and control.

“Oh, your friends are quite safe—no worries.” He moved to a nearby door while keeping the shotgun leveled in my direction. “Here they are. They’ve been cooling their heels waiting for you, as you Americans say.” The door opened into a large meat locker and Julie and Iggie had their backs against the far wall.

Dragos had them trussed them up like sides of beef. They were gagged and blindfolded with their hands and feet tied together. Both were hanging from large meat hooks with the balls of their feet barely touching the floor. Obviously, they were also on tenterhooks and must be in a lot of pain. I felt guilty for not having arrived sooner, I silently chided myself. Each had squirmed a bit

when hearing our voices. They were alive, but not exactly kicking. Thank God for big favors.

“Ok, Dragos, let me hear what you have to say. I’m sure it will be more of the self-serving drivel that we heard last night. ‘I’m really a decent person, the communists made me do it, my people really respect and adore me, I didn’t know about the contaminated grain, blah, blah, blah.’” I sarcastically taunted.

“Oh no, Mr. Dick, you misunderstand what I have to tell you. The things you mention are past and done. I have no life left because I’ve lost my lovely wife, my office, my credibility with my people, and now I face prison or worse, thanks to you and your colleagues. No, what I have to say is about what I plan to do to the three of you to avenge what you’ve done to me.”

Dragos’s speech was now more forceful and rapid. He was quickly losing what little sanity he had left, but couldn’t wait to tell me what he had in mind for us. I really didn’t want to know, but couldn’t afford not to listen.

“Do you see the saw on the long table over there?” he rhetorically asked. “It is a reciprocating saw used for cutting sides of beef and other animals. Its sharp teeth cleanly rip through a carcass within a short time.”

I looked at the setup. Since there was no electricity, a bicycle had been adapted with a series of pulleys to move the saw blade up and down. It was actually a rather ingenious device. Someone

would pedal the contraption while others fed the carcass to the blade. It was a nasty looking thing and I didn't like what I saw.

"I will start with the person you call Iggie," Dragos continued. "I will secure him to the table with his feet facing the blade. The blade will move slowly towards his groin before it takes its first bite. He will be alive, but not for long. Once the blade strikes his femoral artery, he will bleed out slowly and painfully, I pray."

"I will continue cutting and dismembering his body until I'm finished. The bone cutters and rib pullers on the table will help me complete my work. Your friend Miss Julie will be next. She will suffer the same fate. All the while you will be watching and remembering what you have done to me—you will go last. You will regret your interference and meddling in my business, Mr. Dick."

"Dragos, you're out of your freaking mind. The authorities will discover what you've done and hang you," I weakly interjected.

He laughed grotesquely in my face and continued his grisly description of how we would die at his hands.

"After all of you are dead, I will bone your flesh and feed the meat into the grinder behind you. Each of you will end up as minced meat that I'll package and donate to the poor of my district. Fresh meat is scarce and expensive in the valley. There will be no leftovers, I can assure you."

I admit to having naughty thoughts of boning and eating Julie,

but this wasn't quite what I had in mind.

“My generous gifts to the miserable peasants who turned against me will be sweet irony,” he continued talking to no one in particular, laughing as he spoke the words.

“After I'm finished here, I will pay a visit to my friend, Magda the Witch. The old bitch will dearly suffer for what she did to my wife many years ago. She will not go unpunished for her treachery. Burning her alive will be a fitting and pleasurable experience.”

Dragos' body was now shaking with rage. He began waving the shotgun back and forth in front of my face. In his agitated state, it might accidentally go off in my direction. A twelve gauge blast with #4 buck tends to smart at close range.

The living livestock had calmed down and were now milling aimlessly about the abattoir. I wondered if they could smell the stench of death and somehow innately sensed what this place was and what was ultimately in store for them. The horses, in particular, appeared to be visibly cowed by the experience.

It was now or never. When Dragos briefly moved his shotgun away from my face, I made my move. I grabbed its barrel as he pulled the trigger. Maybe my sudden action caused him to do so. Regardless, the noise was deafening and both of us were momentarily stunned by the blast. My ears rang with Notre Dame sized bells. Since it was a single shot weapon, Dragos had expended his only load and the playing field had just been leveled.

I ran to one of the boning tables and grabbed a cleaver to defend myself. Dragos followed on my heels. He was one side of the table and me on the other. We momentarily stared at each other realizing one of us was about to die. Dragos simply didn't care about the outcome, but I most certainly did—I planned for more adventures and debaucheries before I kicked the bucket.

I pulled out a small can of pepper spray from my pants pocket and shot two blasts directly into Dragos' upper chest and face. It didn't faze him in the slightest. He came around the table to engage me. Dragos was a giant of a man and a formidable foe and he wouldn't be easy to kill.

We circled each other waiting for an opportunity to attack. I pulled a heavy chain off the nearby wall and swung it at Dragos. It struck him on the face, knocking him backwards. He did a pirouette and fell forward to the concrete floor. I waited for him to get up and come after me since the blow wasn't strong enough to kill him. However, he didn't move. I carefully poked and prodded his body to see if he were playing possum. He wasn't. The blood coming from his mouth suggested he had been mortally wounded. I turned him over and saw the cause of his bleeding. It was a large piece of jagged bone that had pierced his heart. I couldn't tell if it came from a porterhouse or T-bone steak. Regardless, the bloodsucking vampire was dead, impaled as it were on his own petard.

I ran to the freezer and cut Iggie and Julie down. Both were thoroughly exhausted by their ordeal and sat on the floor to regain their strength. They didn't care that they were sitting in congealed blood. Later, Iggie and I dragged Dragos body out to the refuse bin. We watched as it slowly disappeared into the muck. We then did the same with the goon. The bodies wouldn't be discovered for some time. I planned to be back in the States sipping a glass of white Zinfandel by then. Come to think of it, the deaths might not even be reported given Florin's new found fear and dislike of Dragos. The people here tend to take care of their own, in their own, primitive ways.

We stopped by Magda's house to say goodbye. It was time to leave her and Alba Iulia behind us. She presented me a small bottle of her Elderberry wine as a gift. I gave her a buss on the cheek and a light hug in return. There was no doubt that I got the better of the deal.

TWEAKING THE TWERP

We made our hasty getaway from Alba Iulia and Sibiu without incident. The Intercon in Bucharest was a pleasant change from our previous accommodations. Julie and I slept in—Iggie had already rejoined his family. We were all exhausted from our adventures. I roused about one in the afternoon and headed to lunch downstairs. I was hungry and my rare, juicy hamburger slathered in ketchup went down easily. I had sorely missed good, old American cuisine.

After lunch, I phoned John Murray. I would likely catch him in the office even though it was a bit early on his end. We had much to discuss and do and I got John on the second ring.

“Hi John, Avery here,” I said. We went through the brief and obligatory exchange of cordialities and then got down to business.

“John, Dragos Blaga is dead,” I informed him. “He accidentally died when I was rescuing Julie and Iggie. He had kidnapped them and planned to kill them. John, he was totally crazy, out of his freaking mind,” I added for good measure.

“What the hell is going on there?” John demanded.

My guess was that Julie’s image had just flashed through his mind and he was concerned about her well-being. He had never seen Iggie so he couldn’t visualize his countenance. I simply didn’t

count. No worries, I was being paid well and didn't need his compassion or sympathy—only his money.

I went on to describe the incident at the slaughterhouse in some detail. It was important that he get a clear sense of how bold and brave I was under the circumstances. Another bonus check, maybe? I forgot to mention the accidental death of Dragos' goon. Sometimes the bank didn't have much of a sense of irony—or humor, for that matter.

“Jesus, Avery is everybody (meaning Julie) okay?” he asked.

“Everyone is fine, a little exhausted and stressed but otherwise okay,” I assured him.

“There's another matter I need to mention—Lance Trumbull. Dragos told us he's the mastermind behind the grain scam and others involving World Bank projects here. He's a total slime ball. I recorded a telephone conversation between him and Dragos and there's no doubt as to his culpability. He needs to be taken down hard to pay for his sins,” I said.

“Why that son-of-a-bitch!” John exclaimed. “I almost tasked him to investigate the grain purchases. The fox would have been in the henhouse or swine in the granary, in this instance. Thanks for waving me off that idea, Avery. I owe you one. I'll fire the bastard before the day is out.” I was hoping for more than just one, but kept silent.

“Hold off again John. He deserves much more punishment than

simply being fired. He's responsible for many deaths here and shouldn't escape justice."

"What do you have in mind for him?" John inquired.

"While we have him firmly nailed on the grain scam, he's also been up to other frauds involving bank funds. I know it's not my business to tell you how to suck eggs, but you may want to download his bank computer files, especially his emails. He might have been careless or foolish or arrogant enough to have kept incriminating information there. It's worth a shot and you can do that from Washington without his knowledge through the main server."

"Good thought, I'll get the techies working on that right away. What else, Avery?"

"Two other things," I replied. I then related the things I wanted from John. He was silent for a few seconds, but then spoke.

"Your first request is easy; no problem, although I'm not sure about the second one. It has never been done by the bank, at least to my knowledge. You already have a good sense of how skittish the World Bank might be about such a thing. It must have been the same at the State Department. However, I'll give it a strong pitch to my bosses. The circumstances more than justify the action, but I'm not sure they'll agree. I certainly do, the miserable fuck deserves all he gets—and then some."

Before hanging up, I asked John to fax me the paperwork I

would need to put Lance in his place—hopefully forever.

My appointment with Hal O'Brien wasn't until 3:30 so I clandestinely turned on the BBC channel and watched the world news. I made sure that the curtains were fully drawn and double-locked my door. Hal was the senior regional security officer assigned to the U.S. embassy in Bucharest. He was much younger, but we had crossed paths several times during our careers. We got along well and I expected a favorable reception since we were still members of the same old boys club. I hadn't used its secret handshake in years, but he would likely overlook any clumsiness on my part.

I passed through the chancery screening and was met by Hal in the lobby. Jersey Briggs had given him a heads-up on my visit to Romania and that I would be working on his turf for the World Bank. Regardless, Hal would have extended professional courtesies. He welcomed me like a long lost brother and we exchanged gossip and war stories before I explained why I was there.

"Hal, I've been working an investigation in the north, in Transylvania," I began my spiel.

"The outbreak of the so-called plague, perhaps?" he correctly guessed.

"Yes, exactly. I've largely wrapped things up, but there's one

more bad actor that needs an attitude adjustment and a hanging.”

I then outlined the investigation and its prosecutorial merits, leaving out certain extraneous details for the sake of brevity—the ones that could land me in a Romanian prison or worse.

“Sounds like a slam-dunk to me, Avery. How can I help?” he asked.

“I need an introduction to the prosecutor’s office in the Ministry of Justice,” I replied. “Can you facilitate that? I want to lay out my case just as I’ve done with you and determine if they’ll take it on. Are there any honest prosecutors that I can talk to?”

Hal laughed. “Believe it or not, there are many honest people working in the Romanian government these days. And I just happen to employ a great facilitator—Janos, my senior FSN investigator. He retired as one of the top investigators in that ministry a couple of years ago. We were lucky to pick him up.”

Hal was absolutely correct. The Foreign Service national investigators hired by our embassies around the world were worth their weights in gold—and then some. They came to the embassies from host government security, counterintelligence, and investigative agencies. They were thoroughly wired and extremely effective in performing good works on behalf of Uncle Sam.

“I’ll have Janos set up a meeting for early tomorrow morning with his old employer. He’ll accompany you to grease the skids. There’s no need for me to tag along—Janos is the one with the

serious clout,” Hal added.

I thanked Hal for his assistance and left the embassy feeling pretty good. Things were coming to a close and I’d get to go home very soon. I only hoped that John had been able to unscrew my pay issue. The thought of sleeping in the local park didn’t appeal to me. I detested squirrels as well as geese.

I dressed to the nines for my confrontation with Lance by putting on my best leisure suit—the Black Watch plaid one that I kept for special occasions. I buffed my black wingtips to a high gloss and looked at myself in the mirror. I was ready to meet Lance to dress him down— rather than the other way around. I left my pack of cigarettes on the counter because I didn’t want the crushproof box to create an unseemly bulge in my jacket pocket. I wanted to look sharp in front of Mr. *GQ*. I clipped a few errant nose hairs and I was now set for our meeting at high noon in his office. However, Lance didn’t realize that I had an appointment.

I breezed directly past Lance’s watchdog sitting outside his office. I remembered her name as Marta, his secretary, a.k.a. administrative assistant. She didn’t have time to say anything or to warn Lance before I slammed his door closed. He had been leaning back into his chair with his feet propped on a corner of his large desk. Lance was startled, but quickly regained his composure. As expected, he was meticulously clothed in a double-breasted, solid

navy blue suit, probably purchased at one of the high-end Saville Row tailor shops. It likely cost more than what I made in two weeks and his local staff made in six months. No matter, he'd soon be wearing prison garb, if I had my way.

Marta was now furiously knocking on the door.

"Tell her to get lost," I ordered. "We need our privacy," pronouncing the word in the British manner to annoy Lance. Lance told his secretary to go pound the pavement instead of the door.

"Well, my, my, why do I have the honor of your presence, Mr. Avery, especially without an appointment?"

He was a thoroughly cocky prick, I thought. That attitude would suit him well in prison with others who had the same proclivities and inclinations.

"I'm here to bring in the last sheave, so to speak—to tie up some loose ends," I replied.

"What might those be?" he indifferently asked while sanding his fingernails. He was really annoying me, but I would now get my turn to thoroughly piss him off.

"Just a little matter of fraud, corruption, deceit, and murder," I responded with equal disdain.

"What in the hell are you talking about Avery?" He had dropped the nail file on his desk and looked directly at me for the first time.

"I'm talking about the deaths of nearly twenty people in

Transylvania. I'm talking about how you and Dragos arranged for the purchase and shipment of substandard, tainted grain. I'm talking about how you and your cronies pocketed the difference between what the bank funded and what you purchased the phony grain for on the open market. I'm talking about how you and Dragos then sold the grain to the hungry people of the region to fatten your wallets. Is that enough?"

"Those are slanderous lies!" Lance blurted. "I'll have your scalp and job for saying such things. You're history, Mr. Dick. Get out of my office—now," he screamed.

I pulled the tape recorder out of my pocket and hit the play button. Lance listened for less than a minute before telling me to shut it off. Obviously, he had heard enough.

He slumped in his chair and began to mumble to himself out loud.

"They can fire me but can't do much more," he spoke to no one in particular. "I've made enough to comfortably retire. I've done very well and it's now time to fold my tent," he muttered.

I interrupted his reverie and tossed a piece of paper on his desk—his termination letter from headquarters that John had earlier faxed me. He took a quick look at it and threw it in the trash.

"So what, it's time for me to leave anyway," he spoke. "The authorities can't touch me since I have full, diplomatic immunity.

Go screw yourself.”

“No you don’t, not anymore,” I said, tossing another piece of paper on his desk. “The bank gave you up. It has withdrawn both your accreditation and immunity. That’s a letter from the bank’s attorneys to the Foreign Ministry. You’re no longer a protected species in Romania. Lance, you’re now naked and on your own.”

I knew what was now going through his disturbed mind. He was thinking that he had just been stripped of his protection against prosecution and vulnerable to arrest. And guess what, he was right!

Before I knew it, Lance had come around his desk holding the metal nail file. He made a feeble thrust with the weapon; aiming for my stomach, but missing. I popped him hard on the nose in return. Blood freely flowed from his injury down the front of his beautiful, custom-made suit. While being gay might be a crime in Romania, but gay bashing most certainly wasn’t, I mused.

I threw one last paper in front of him. It was his arrest order issued by the Ministry of Justice. I opened the door and admitted the two plainclothes policemen standing outside. No doubt that Lance would probably enjoy being body searched and cavity probed by the gentlemen. He went quietly, as they say, but must have been horribly chagrined about his unkempt appearance during his perp walk.

Sometimes those who protect and serve were dapper clotheshorses and obsessive bloodhounds.

AFTERWORD

Things have mostly returned to normal in rural Transylvania—as normal as things go there. The local people are now talking less of vampires and witches and more of the anticipated crop yields after a late spring planting. The mysterious illnesses and deaths have stopped. Generally, the farmers and townsfolk have accepted the fact the plague was caused by tainted grain and not supernatural causes. Everyone now knew the story of Dragos and the grain. They stoically accepted it as another morality tale of corruption and greed by a government official—nothing new or remarkable in their experience.

However, they continued to curse his name when it was mentioned in not-so-polite conversation. As a result of our investigation, the World Bank has regained most of its prestige and credibility in Romania despite the populace's innate distrust of centralized government and well-intentioned international organizations. The people were proud, stubborn, self-reliant people that had endured hundreds of years of rule and repression by outsiders. A little plague wouldn't speed-up or disrupt their way of life one iota.

An interim prefect had been appointed pending the upcoming election of a respected and trusted resident of Alba Iulia. Everyone

was so pleased with the choice that Father Alexandru went so far as to bless him and the municipal building. Actually, the ceremony at the building was more of an exorcism rite than a blessing in the eyes of the people. Something evil and repulsive had finally been purged from their midst. Speaking of Dragos Blaga, no one had seen hide or hair of the loathsome creature. The gossip suggested he had fled the region, taking his moneybags—along with two of his cronies. They speculated he was probably living high-off-the-hog in Hungary or Croatia. Florin, the village butcher, simply smiled to himself when he heard these fanciful stories.

Lance Trumbull was awaiting trial in Bucharest for his crimes. He was facing murder charges—among others. He temporarily occupied a cellblock reserved for prominent criminals like Ceausescu and his wife. It wasn't a Club Med or Fed experience by any stretch of the imagination. In fact, Lance couldn't wait to be admitted to the general prison population. He was a social animal after all and had the urge to mix and mingle. He also was broke and couldn't afford an attorney after we froze his bank accounts. Pro bono had been added to the body of his jailhouse vocabulary. Many obscene tattoos would be added later—sweet stud bitch was a popular one these days—probably scratched into his flesh with rusty razors or sharpened bedsprings by his new cell mates.

However, the New Zealand consulate ultimately hired an attorney for his defense. It did so because of the enormous political

pressure exerted by the gay community back home. It seemed that Lance had become somewhat of a cause célèbre and cult figure there. However, the only colors in Lance's rainbow would be the black and white ones on his prison uniform. He did one right thing though by ratting on his kindred spirit conspirators in the Ministry of Agriculture. Like Lance, they enjoyed going down, but usually not in such a rude, crude and violent manner.

John and Julie have announced their engagement. I was happy for them and hoped to be invited to their wedding. I only regretted not getting to know Julie better in Romania. She had stayed behind for a couple of weeks to work with the WHO team to wrap up its inquiries. Her discovery of ergot and mercury in the seed grain was a tremendous accomplishment. By the way, I never received a thanks or gratuity for saving her life. Oh well, I'm sure I'll get mine in heaven or wherever unrepentant dicks end-up nowadays.

I heard that Iggie had been rewarded as well, but not quite in the same way. He had been promoted by the bank's new country manager and now overseeing bank loans and grants for the agricultural projects in the country. He deserved that, as well as the bonus he received, for risking his life for our cause.

Magda was doing well, continuing to live out her life in the same way she always had done. Her neighbors now were friendly and regularly came by to check on her. She still mixed potions and lotions for the people she had always treated with great respect and

humanity.

The lock on my apartment door hadn't been changed since I had been gone. That was a good thing. Apparently, my rent check hadn't bounced after all and I could still hold my head high with my neighbors. Speaking of heads, I planned to decapitate my good friend Jersey Briggs who had referred me to the World Bank. Yeah, I know, with friends like this...?

I met with him shortly after returning home to give him a piece of my mind. Jersey had already heard of my trials and tribulations and was laughing his ass off when I entered his office. He thought the whole episode was hilarious. I didn't mention my close calls with the grim reaper. That would have been poor form and farming and incriminating. Instead, I pitched him for another assignment because I still had little money and no pride; a persistent whore without morals, as Jersey might say.

Sometimes those who protect and serve were always reaching for the next brass ring on life's dizzying, out-of-control carousel.