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## **A Conspiracy of Prawns**

By Richard Romano

The excitement had thinned out the crowd of diners. Santos suspected that it was the presence of the police that had caused them to flee. Everyone probably assumed that once the police arrived a body would be discovered shortly, and people would rather not have to deal with that while eating. Well, generally.

He snatched a mint from the bowl near the maître d's station and walked back toward the scene of the crime near the potted plant in the lobby—that is, if "crime" was the right word. At the time, it seemed dubious as to whether or not a crime had in fact been committed.

The owner of the restaurant was only slightly distraught, but not nearly as distraught as Santos, who was preparing to have to deal with yet another murder that occurred in a restaurant. He was used to it, but it had made him averse to going out to eat.

"I'm Captain Bernard Santos," he said to the restaurateur, "from Homicide."

"Captain," said Lieutenant Jordan, "this is the owner of the restaurant, Mr. Osgood Smelt."

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Smelt," said Santos. "It's a shame it couldn't be under more pleasant circumstances."

"I really can't think of any pleasant circumstance that would involve having the police here," said Smelt. "No offense."

"None taken, Mr. Smelt," said Santos, "although the Police Benevolent Society is looking for a site for this year's Policeman's Ball. But, then again, whether that would be a pleasant circumstance is debatable."

"Captain," said Jordan, trying to get the usually discursive Santos back on something approaching the right track, "what do you make of this?" He gestured to the chalk outline on the carpet.

"Funny about that, isn't it?" said Smelt, slightly worried.

Santos mused, "It's quite well done. Our department should produce chalk outlines this good. Look at this...." He bent down and ran a finger just above the outline of the left arm. "Uniform thickness throughout, good detail, quite intricate, especially around the fingers and the hair. There is no mistaking that this is supposed to be a young woman, about twenty-five or so, Caucasian, perhaps unmarried." He stood up and smoothed his slicked-back hair, which in times of stress was in danger of becoming

unfastened and jutting outward at comic angles. "I can't help but wonder, though, if perhaps this would be a little less mysterious if there were a body to go along with it."

Smelt shuddered. "A body?"

"Mm, a body. I've only been in police work for slightly less than a decade, but my experience, fairly consistent in this regard, is that chalk outlines are generally accompanied by bodies. In fact, they're usually drawn around bodies and not from memory, or from the imagination, as the case may be. There's a first time for everything, I suppose."

"Is there a body somewhere in the restaurant?" Jordan asked Smelt.

"Well," said Smelt, "many of them. But none in such a condition that would warrant a chalk outline being drawn. Granted, some suffer from a certain amount of post-prandial sluggishness, and some are just painfully dull people, but nothing this extreme."

Santos still couldn't take his eyes from the outline. "I really would like to find the person that did this. I've been wanting to replace our current outlinist for some time now."

"Replace Jenkins?" said Jordan somewhat incredulously.

"Well, there's no doubt that he's quite talented, but the police department is no place for a cubist. I say let him go back to courtroom renderings and let *them* worry about it." Santos began to pace. "Mr. Smelt, when did you first notice this chalk outline?"

"It was about forty-five minutes ago. Several of the prawns had escaped from the kitchen, and the chef and myself were rounding them up—some had crept out here into the lobby—when I came across it. I was about to call ServiceMaster when you showed up."

"Had anyone else noticed the outline before you found it?"

"Not that I am aware of. Most likely some of the diners had, but they probably assumed it was part of the decor, like the fishtank or Hummel figurines."

"Hm." Santos glanced around the now-empty dining room. "Would you have any way of tracking down any of those diners, such as credit card receipts or personal checks?"

"No. We don't take credit cards or personal checks."

"Really?"

"No, too much of a risk. Some nights we don't even take cash."

"I see. That's reasonable."

"Actually," said Smelt, "you and Sergeant Jordan were dining in the restaurant. If I remember correctly, you came in about an hour ago."

"Yes, that's right," said Santos, "my prawns almondine took rather a long time, from what I recall." He put a hand to his stomach. Smelt looked at him sheepishly.

"Perhaps you saw someone come in with the outline, or watched them draw it," offered Smelt.

"Actually, I was facing away from the lobby. I was able to see out the side window into the lot next door. I remember watching several workmen unclogging a septic tank."

"Corporal Jordan, then you sat across from him."

"No," said Jordan, "the captain and I always sit on the same side of the table. Police regulations."

Santos smoothed out his tweed sports jacket. "Lieutenant, I think we should take this outline down to the lab and have it analyzed. Get Schlickelmeinengrubenbieder on it. He's the best we have."

"Yes, sir."

Santos made his farewells and walked back to his car. "Something about those prawns...."

The following morning, Santos walked into Adolf Schlickelmeinengrubenbieder's lab.

Schlickelmeinengrubenbieder was dreading Santos's usual wisecrack about his name.

"I'll have you know, *Bernard*, that my great-grandfather pioneered the name 'Adolf' in the 1850s. He was a linguistic scientist and, one night in his lab, he was mixing up a batch of chemicals. I think he was trying to come up with a cure for puns. Anyway, he accidentally spilled some alphabet soup in the beaker. There was the usual bubbling, smoking, and pretty colors, but what ultimately emerged truly astounded him—the name 'Adolf.' He felt it was a beautiful name. He patented it, and guarded the formula with his life. All German children born with that name had to pay him a fee. He became rich off that name. My grandfather inherited the patent and continued to prosper right through the turn of the century. He was, as you can imagine, crushed when Adolf Marx changed his name to 'Harpo.' Then, just when he got back on his feet, just when he was beginning his second heyday, 1932 and the rise of Adolf Hitler proved to be the final blow. After the war, he was devastated that such a lovely name could be used for such evil. He gave up the rights to the name and died a broken shell of a man. My father was resolved to put the

past behind him, and he wanted desperately to restore that name to glory. He renewed the patent, and named all his children Adolf, even my sister. And, just when the next generation of Americans refused to learn anything about history, along you come with your wisecracks and your sarcasm. Well—pooh on you. *You're* named after a big dog!"

He was silent for a moment while Santos stared at him.

"Actually," said Santos, "it's your *last* name I make fun of."

"Oh. Well, yes, that's understandable."

Santos looked down at the lab table where Schlickelmeinengrubenbieder had laid out the chalk outline. "What have you come up with?"

"Well, I ran a chemical test on the chalk used. Very fine grade, but my tests indicate it couldn't have been manufactured more than a month ago. As far as the chemical interchange between the particles of chalk and the carpet fibers go, the Bleinman rhodesium carbide test showed that there was only a penetration of 0.02 millimeters, indicating that it couldn't have been drawn more than a half hour before Smelt found it." He paused and reflected. "Osgood," he said with disgust.

"What's a Bleinman rhodesium carbide test?" asked Santos flatly.

"What?"

"A Bleinman rhodesium carbide test. What is it?"

"It's—er—a test I use, on—um—chalk outlines. It measures how far the chalk has, um, penetrated into the, er, carpet fibers."

Santos stared at him. "You made it up, didn't you?"

"Why, no, I— Oh, heck, yes, I did. Well, I watched *CSI: Peoria* last night, and all those forensic pathologists have all those cool-sounding tests they perform. I was jealous."

Santos sighed. "Okay. What else have you come up with?"

"Well," he continued gleefully, "the detail within the chalk lines itself indicates that it was drawn by a left-handed male."

"How do you know it was male?"

"I found several hairs, of the type normally found on the wrist or fingers of a very hairy male. There were no smudges or fingerprints, however. All in all, he was very careful. And talented. I also estimate that the entire drawing probably took about, oh, fifteen minutes, give or take an hour. Quite rapid, considering the detail. He also didn't sign it. It's probably the work of an amateur. Or it's a copy."

"Hm. Anything else?"

"Just one thing. Look into that microscope." Santos did.  
"What do you notice?"

"Just chalk particles. And I think I've found the top quark. Wait, what's that long, thin object?"

"I don't know what it means, but it's an extremely thin strand of crabmeat. Chemical analysis shows that it is coated with a very thin layer of drawn butter."

Santos stood up straight. "Crabmeat?"

"Crabmeat."

Santos paced. "Hm. Good work, Schlickelmeinengrubenbieder. I have no idea what any of it means, but I'm sure it's good work. You seldom disappoint me. Let me know if you come up with anything else, like a way to fit your name on a driver's license." Santos chuckled as he walked to the door.

"Yes, Sergeant," said Schlickelmeinengrubenbieder between clenched teeth.

"That's Captain!"

"Sorry, sir."

Sorry, indeed.

It was midnight when Santos's phone rang. It was Jordan.

"Santos here."

"Sorry to disturb you, sir."

Santos smiled. "It's only midnight. I was just giving my garden gnome a bath."

"Oh," said Jordan noncommittally. It could have been sarcasm on Santos's part, or it could have been the truth. Jordan decided to just let it lay. "Well, anyway, I have good news."

"Oh?" Santos was relieved. Midnight phone calls, no matter what time they occurred, were invariably bad news.

"A young woman has been found dead in her apartment," said Jordan gleefully.

Santos stared into space for a moment. "*This* is good news? Jordan, am I going to have to show you those training films again?"

"Well, I suppose that it's not technically good news, but there is something good about it. A kernel of goodness, if you will."

"I won't. What is it?"

"She fits the chalk outline perfectly."

Santos perked up. "That is good news."

"See?"

"Where are you?"

"Corner of 4th and 12th. Apartment 6L. On the third floor."

"I'll be right over."

Santos walked into the open apartment. Jordan and the forensic examiners were gathered around the body. Conscientious of budget considerations, they had decided not to pay Jenkins overtime and simply use the chalk outline they already had on hand.

"Who found her?" asked Santos.

"Some joe named Michael Bradley. He was her man Friday," said Jordan.

"But this is only Tuesday morning. What was he doing in her apartment?"

A very tall man with very long hair approached Santos. "I'm Mike Bradley. Marnie Rivera was my boss. I was her secretary. I came over here at nine-thirty. I was going to cook her dinner. She insisted on taking every meal in bed. You should see her in a restaurant. When I opened the door, she was dead. Right there on the floor, just as she is now. Well, except for the chalk outline and the circle of cops. But, essentially like she is now."

"What were you going to cook for her? And why are you talking like someone in an episode of *Dragnet*?" asked Santos.

"Oh, sorry. Um, I was planning on cooking shrimp scampi, of course. Why?"

"Just curious."

Jordan, meanwhile, was going through the refrigerator. On the countertop, he had aligned all the condiments—mayonnaise, mustard, relish, tartar sauce, A-1 steak sauce, Worcestershire sauce, soy sauce, WD-40, ketchup, and bearnaise sauce—in alphabetical order.

"Captain Santos!" he called.

Santos walked into the kitchen and stared at the collection of condiments.

"Captain, this is all that was in the refrigerator. Do you know what that means?"

"Yes, I believe I do. Mr. Bradley," he called, "where are the prawns?"

Bradley walked into the kitchen. "The what?"

"The prawns. The shrimp. For the scampi. Where are they?"

"Why, in the fridge, where I put them earlier this evening."

"Mr. Bradley, this collection of containers on the counter is all that was in the refrigerator. There are no shrimp here."

Bradley was losing his composure fast. Santos sensed it, but hypothesized that crustaceans have this effect on people. "But they were there! You have to believe me!"

"We do," said Santos, "up to a point." He paced. "Mr. Bradley, are you familiar with chalk outlines?"

The change of subject appeared to calm Bradley down. "Well, not intimately. I once did a report in Art History class on the interplay of light and chalk dust to contribute a certain chiaroscuro effect to a murder scene. Actually, what few people realize is that Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* was originally done as a chalk outline, but his patrons felt it lacked depth. So he filled it in. I have to admit, though, I was saddened to learn that police departments have been using some kind of white latex tape rather than the traditional chalk. I think that's the downfall of modern criminology."

Santos pondered that, but not for too long. "You're right; actually, most homicide departments do use a kind of tape, but only when the surface that needs to be marked makes chalk impractical. Both murderers and their victims seldom take this into consideration, although you wouldn't think that it's asking much to think about those of us on this end of the murder. Killers are just thoughtless and inconsiderate by nature, I guess. But my question is whether or not you have ever drawn one."

"Oh, good heavens, no. I must admit I'm merely a student of the technique. Historians of the Italian Renaissance

rarely attempt to imitate the art they study. It's the same with me and chalk outlines. I have to admit, though, I haven't studied them in many years. I'm now in the onion detector industry."

"Onion detector industry?"

"Oh, yes. It's based on the principle of the smoke detector or the carbon monoxide detector. There are a great number of people in this country with sensitive stomachs who can't eat onions without grave physiological effects. My device can be passed over a food in which the ingredients are not easily discernible and will register with a series of beeps, whistles, and loud yodeling if the food in question contains onions. It's a burgeoning industry that had revenues in excess of several hundred dollars last year. We're also working on an attachment that will identify chili peppers. So, as fascinated as I have been with chalk outlines, my heart is in onion detection now, I must admit."

"Mr. Bradley, you've admitted quite a lot this evening. Unfortunately, none of it is particularly useful. We may need you for further inquiry, though I can't for the life of me imagine why. So don't skip town. Or breakfast."

"Of course not, Captain."

Bradley wandered out of the apartment. Santos walked over to where Jordan was still staring at the line of condiments.

"Something about those missing prawns, Captain," said Jordan. "It doesn't add up."

"Mm. It doesn't seem likely that a woman would be murdered over a pound or so of fresh prawns. Jordan, how was she killed?"

"That's another puzzle, Captain. We don't know. There really isn't a mark on her, except for that big bloodstain on her throat."

Santos bent down and dipped a finger in the viscous red liquid marking the woman's neck. He tasted it tentatively. He licked his lips and was lost in thought. He dipped his finger in the fluid again and wiped off a bigger dollop. He licked it from his finger. "Hmm. Quite good."

Jordan stared at him. "Um, Captain....We're getting into kind of a weird area here...."

"Jordan...this is cocktail sauce. Quite good cocktail sauce, too." He dipped his finger in the red goo again. He held it up to Jordan. "Here, try this."

Jordan licked the sauce off Santos's finger. "Mmm."

"Does it taste familiar?"

"Yes. Where have I had cocktail sauce like this before?" Santos smiled. Jordan snapped his fingers. "Osgood Smelt's restaurant. What was the name of that waiter we had...."

In unison, they said, "Jean-Luc!"

"Captain, come have a look at this," said Jordan, staring intently at the computer screen.

Santos wandered over. "Oh, you've made it to the fourth level of Tetris."

"No, no. These are the police records from last Sunday, when Marnie Rivera's chalk outline was discovered. Look at this: 1810 hours, delivery truck for Pounds o' Prawns Seafood Supply was reported hijacked by an animal rights group that specialized in setting shellfish free. It's destination before the hijacking: House of Smelt."

"Hmm. That's interesting. There does seem to be a connection between Smelt's restaurant and prawns. I have a hunch...."

"Yes, but you really can't tell when you wear those padded coats."

"Really? Oh, good. Anyway, I have a theory. Go over to Smelt's and check his purchase records."

"Actually, Captain, I can do it from here."

"Really?"

"Oh, yes. You'd be surprised the information you can glean from simple computer work. And is it true that you're five days late in returning that video of *Voluptuous Venusian Vixens*?"

"No, I returned it. Anyway, can you get into Smelt's records from here?"

"I can certainly try." His fingers flew across the keyboard in a blur. Santos was impressed. Finally, Jordan hit "Enter" and some numbers flashed on the screen.

"Look at that, Jordan, he owns property all over the city! I had no idea. But look how in debt he is! It's a wonder he can break even with that restaurant."

"Um, Captain, I'm afraid I accidentally accessed an old game of computer Monopoly I was playing last night. I entered a forward slash instead of a back slash. Damn DOS. Here...." He tapped several more keys. "These are Smelt's purchase records for the past month."

Santos stared at the screen. "Look at that, Jordan. Smelt put in an order for fresh prawns on April 17th—two days before the outline was discovered. And look: the delivery was expected at 6:30 pm on the 19th. A half hour after the prawn truck was hijacked. He never got his shipment of prawns. Scroll back a few days....Look, his last prawn purchase was three weeks earlier."

"But remember what he said when we questioned him? He was chasing live prawns around the restaurant. Doesn't that strike you as odd?"

"Yes, that a man who should have been fresh out of prawns should report chasing them around a restaurant."

Jordan sat up straight. "And I know from investigating Smelt's place that he doesn't have the facilities for storing live prawns for more than three days."

"So where did he get the prawns he was chasing?"

"Unless he lied. But he did serve you prawns almondine."

"Mm, yes. Another puzzle: the mystery of the prawns almondine."

"I'm sorry, Captain, I just don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh, come off it, Smelt," said Santos, his patience wearing thin.

"Actually, Captain," said Jordan, sotto voce, "you were speaking Swahili again. You know how you get when you're upset."

"Yes, true, I do tend to lapse into a native language when I'm perturbed."

"Oh, is Swahili your native language?" asked Smelt, eager to change the line of inquiry.

"No, but it's a native language. Someone's, anyway. Now, Mr. Smelt, correct me if I'm wrong, but you arranged to have a shipment of live prawns delivered on Sunday, correct?"

"That is correct."

"And said prawns did not arrive on Sunday. Correct?"

"No, I hadn't said that. But, sadly, they did not arrive on Sunday."

"And you served me prawns almondine on Sunday. Correct?"

"Well," muttered Smelt, visibly shaken, "no, I didn't."

Santos was surprised. "You didn't? But I distinctly recall consuming prawns almondine."

"Well, that was a slight deception on my part. You see, prawns almondine are our specialty. People travel here specially for that dish. We were out of prawns, so I had to improvise."

"What did you use, if not prawns?" asked Santos, not really too keen on finding out.

"Well, we used shrimp, not prawns. It's a subtle distinction, and I suspect it didn't detract from your enjoyment of the meal."

"Actually, the meal was pretty revolting as it was."

"Well, prawns almondine *is* pretty revolting. I can't stand it myself. I just serve it because the public seems

to like it. I think the career of Bruce Willis proves that the public has no taste anyway."

"I see," said Santos. "Well, that'll be all for now. Thank you once again for your assistance, Mr. Smelt."

He and Jordan took their leave. Outside, in the car park, Santos paced. Jordan watched him, somewhat bemused.

"Captain, something tells me something is bothering you about the Smelt business."

"What, aside from the fact that he's lying through his teeth?"

"What makes you say that?"

"It's a little known but true fact that what restaurants call 'shrimp' actually are prawns."

"*Crangon vulgaris*, or the 'true shrimp', is about two-and-a-half inches long and is commonly used as a food on the west coast," explained Schlickelmeinengrubenbieder.

"Now, Captain, the so-called prawns almondine that you consumed. How large were those so-called 'shrimp'?"

"About four or five inches long."

"That's because what are marketed in the United States as 'shrimp' are actually *Penaeus setiferus*. Prawns. Typically, true shrimp are too small to be of commercial importance.

What you ate, my dear Captain, was a prawn. It seems odd that Smelt didn't know the difference."

"Okay," said Jordan growing frustrated, "we know Smelt was lying about not having any prawns. But what does that mean? How does that relate to the chalk outline? And the death of Marnie Rivera? And how does the fluttering of a butterfly's wings in Beijing affect the weather in New York?"

"Jordan, calm down. Your thoughts are becoming chaotic. What did you turn up in that background check on her?"

Jordan took a deep breath. "Nothing unremarkable. She worked for several years in industrial varnishing. She met Michael Bradley several years ago when she got into onion detection. He had the patent for the device, she had the business acumen and the cash. It was only logical that in a nascent business he should be the secretary and she should be the boss, so Bradley had been working for her up until her death, possibly even longer. She was also in some kind of activism, had a few minor run-ins with the law, but aside from that, nothing horribly unseemly. She went to law school briefly, but that's apparently as low as she ever got."

"Activism, eh? What group?"

"Something called the Tooth and Claw Society. I haven't had a chance to search them out."

Santos snapped his fingers. "The Tooth and Claw Society! That's it! That's the missing link we've been looking for."

"I don't follow you."

Schlickelmeinengrubenbieder groaned. "Oh, yes, the Tooth and Claw Society. That does make sense. They're a militant animal rights group exclusively devoted to the 'rescuing' of crustaceans. They were in the news about eight months ago when they broke into a seafood supply store, captured thirty-seven live lobsters and seven live crabs and set them free on the New York City subway at rush hour."

"What on Earth for?" asked Jordan.

"To raise public awareness of the plight of shellfish. Shortly afterward, they went through crowded shopping centers dousing passersby with drawn butter."

"I see. So it seems likely that she was involved in the hijacking of Smelt's prawn truck."

"That's right," said Schlickelmeinengrubenbieder.

"No," said Santos. "That's not right. There's still one major question. Remember what Mike Bradley had planned to cook for her the night she was murdered?"

Jordan thought. A look of disappointment crossed his face. "Shrimp scampi. And I got the impression it was a ritual of theirs, too."

"So," Santos said, "why would an arch anti-shellfish-eater be consuming shrimp scampi on a regular basis?"

"Perhaps it's time we paid another visit to Mike Bradley."

"I will admit, Marnie had her dark side. We all tend to romanticize a person after they've died, shortly before we tear their lives to shreds. Marnie had her faults. Don't get me wrong, I loved her like a son, but she had her dirty little secrets."

"Like what?" asked Santos.

Bradley looked around embarrassedly.

"Look, Mr. Bradley, nothing you say will leave this room, unless it's really juicy, of course, like she was a jack-booted dominatrix or something. But you're in safe company here. It's only me, Jordan, and about fifty-seven of this city's best policemen. Now, what were some of her dirty little secrets?"

"I can't think of any that would be pertinent to this case," said Bradley.

"You leave that judgment to me. After all, I've had experience with this sort of thing before. Now, Mr. Bradley, what can you tell me?"

"Well...as you've probably found out by now she was a founding member of the Tooth and Claw Society. When I first met her, I thought it was a wonderful thing she was doing. You know, trying to make the world a better place for shellfish. They have rights just like people do. But, as we began to meet more frequently, I discovered her secret life. She...loved shrimp scampi. She hid it real well. Of course, she had to. What would the press say if they found out that the founder and most significant gadfly in the Tooth and Claw Society was a closet seafood lover? So, each Monday evening, I would go over to her place, smuggling in a pound of fresh prawns, and make shrimp scampi for her."

"Where did you get the shrimp?" asked Santos.

"Well, since by that time I was linked socially with Marnie, I couldn't go through the usual seafood channels. But I had a contact who had just done a nickel up at Attica for trout running. He didn't ask questions and he didn't want trouble. He got me the stuff and kept it quiet."

"What was his name?" asked Santos.

"I'm afraid I can't tell you that. As I said, he didn't want trouble. He would have had no reason to kill Marnie; heck, we were his best customers."

"Mr. Bradley, did you or Ms. Rivera know a man named Osgood Smelt?"

"Sure. He owned House of Smelt. He was Marnie's target just before she died."

"Was he aware of who she was?"

"Of course. What seafood restaurant owner wasn't? He was afraid of her. Extremely irritated by her, but afraid nonetheless. She arranged to have his prawn shipment hijacked. They were later set free in the river. Of course, the river was freshwater, and these were saltwater prawns, so they died anyway. But it's the principle that's important."

"Well, I think that's all we need to know. We'll be in touch. Oh, but one more thing, Mr. Bradley. What's the difference between a shrimp and a prawn?"

"I'm afraid I don't know. You see, Captain, I'm in onions. I only dabbled in seafood."

"Thank you, Mr. Bradley. Jordan, let's go."

Outside in the car park—

"Captain, you're pacing again. Look, if it's Marnie Rivera that bugging you, just console yourself with the fact that only the good die young. At least, that's what Billy Joel says."

"Yes, I know, and the bad outlive us all. But most people are morally ambiguous which explains the haphazard death pattern that plagues us all. No, Jordan, it's not that. It's the fact that I sensed that Bradley wasn't telling the truth about not knowing the difference between shrimp and prawns."

"Maybe he really didn't know."

"No, he did. Or he at least knew that there was no difference as far as culinary terminology goes. Did you hear him, both a few minutes ago and when we first interrogated him? He was oscillating between those two terms just like a real pro. No, Jordan, something is horribly wrong here."

"Well, this is the parking lot, and all the painted lines are perpendicular to each other...."

"Jordan, I have a theory. Rivera and Bradley meet for their sordid shrimp trysts every Monday. Then, she plans to hijack Smelt's prawn shipment. Smelt, as you know, can't do without prawns, since he said himself that prawns almondine was his customers' favorite meal, repulsive as it is. The

prawns vanish, Smelt is in trouble. He finds out—somehow—about Rivera's little habit, and threatens to blackmail her unless some kind of reparation is made. Then...."

"But that would only make sense if *Smelt* were found dead," said Jordan.

"Mm."

"A beautiful theory ruined by one nasty, ugly fact."

"Thank you, Thomas Henry Huxley."

"Didn't he write *Brave New World* and that essay that the Doors took their name from?"

"No...but wait!" Santos stopped pacing. "Huxley. That could be the key."

"The key to the doors of perception?" Jordan was confused. "You're not going to take mescaline are you?"

Santos frowned. "No, that was *Aldous* Huxley. Thomas Huxley was Darwin's bulldog."

"Darwin named his dog Thomas Huxley?"

"No, not an actual dog. Huxley did all the fighting and debating on Darwin's behalf after Darwin proposed the idea of natural selection."

"Um, Captain, what exactly does this little lecture on prominent figures in late 19th-century biology have to do with anything?" asked Jordan.

"Oh, nothing really," said Santos. "I thought perhaps there was some kind of overarching theme that could give this whole ugly episode some kind of greater cosmic significance, but I see that there's no way that's going to happen."

"Well, you can't win them all, sir."

"No, Jordan, I don't suppose you can."

"You have something?" Santos asked  
Schlickelmeinengrubenbieder the following morning.

"Yes, as a matter of fact I do. It's called *tinea versicolor*, and is a type of fungus that grows on the human body, usually on the torso. The average person has a species of bacteria living on his or her skin that devours it, but mine are apparently on some kind of hunger strike. I think they really hate that moisturizing lotion I use."

"No, actually, I was referring to what you found out concerning this case. Forensically, or whatever you call what it is you do."

"Oh, right." He walked across the lab to his microscope. "Remember when I first did the analysis of the chalk outline you found at Smelt's?"

"Of course. Ah, those were the days...."

"Right. Anyway, remember I found that tiny strand of crabmeat? Well, I found out that it's not from one of Smelt's crabs."

"How do you know?"

"For the same reason that no two humans have the exact same fingerprint patterns, so it is with crabs."

"What?"

"This strand that was found; it's from the claw meat. Crabs have what could be termed 'fingerprints' just as you and I do. Only they have an exoskeletal claw that grows over them, which is why crustaceans get away with so much, legally speaking. But we do tend to eat them with great delight, so it all works out in the end. Anyway, I had all of the crabs Smelt has in his restaurant printed."

"How the hell did you do that?"

"Very carefully. Fortunately, all this month he's been only serving soft-shelled crabs—of the species known as blue crabs, or *Callinectes sapidus*—which are called soft-shelled because they are selected during molting season, right after they shed their shell, so my job was considerably easier. But the fragment of meat I found embedded in the chalk outline doesn't match any of those he's got. It's from *Cancer magister*, or a type of rock crab."

"Hmm. Then whose crab was it? And why did someone bring their own crab *into* a seafood restaurant?"

"So many mysteries, my dear Captain."

"Yes, so many mysteries, my dear Adolf Schlickelmeinengrubenbieder."

"A crab? Someone brought a crab into a seafood restaurant?" asked Jordan.

"Ours is not to reason why, Lieutenant," said Santos.

"Actually, come to think of it, ours *is* to reason why. Now, why would someone bring a crab into a seafood restaurant?"

"Maybe for the same reason that some people bring their own popcorn and soda into a movie theater. Perhaps it was more expensive at Smelt's, so our mysterious diner thought he could buy a crab elsewhere and still eat out. Therefore, getting the eating-out experience much less expensively."

"No!" said Santos exultantly. "Not less expensively, but less conspicuously. I think I know the whole story now. Get Bradley and meet me at Smelt's in half an hour. I've got a date with a crab."

"Oh, are you still seeing Miriam?"

"Lieutenant...."

"Now, now, just simmer down," Lieutenant Jordan told the slight crowd of people gathered in the dining room of House of Smelt. "Captain Santos will be here shortly."

"I should hope so," said Smelt. "I have a private party arriving in fifteen minutes and they'll want to be seated and waited on and all those other picky little amenities people have come to expect from a five-star restaurant."

"This isn't a five-star restaurant," said Bradley.

"Zagat Survey said this was a five-star restaurant, and they should know."

"No, what they said was that this place was good only if you were a five-star general and had subsisted on a diet of Army food for well over three decades."

"Oh, bite me, Mr. Bradley."

At that point, Santos entered, carrying a live rock crab, grasping it by the pincers to keep from grave injury.

"Mr. Bradley, does this crustacean look familiar?" he asked.

"Only in the sense that it's a crab, a form of shellfish with which I am familiar. But as for that particular crab, I am not acquainted with it personally."

Jordan looked at Santos as if fearing for the Captain's sanity.

"No, I'm sure you don't. But this is a crab that is quite similar to one you brought into this restaurant on April 19th. In fact, this crab was procured from the same place as the one you consumed here on the aforementioned April 19th."

"I don't know what you're talking about, I'm afraid."

Santos sighed perceptibly and tossed the crab to Smelt, who screamed in surprise and wasn't able to fling it into the kitchen before it grabbed his nose with a large pincer. Smelt screamed again, and several waiters had to rush out and wrestle the crustacean off his nose.

"Oh, you have every reason to be afraid, Mr. Bradley, but you do in fact know what I'm talking about. Doesn't he, Mr. Smelt?"

"This is why I devote every other month to strictly soft-shelled crabs." He rubbed his nose. "No, Captain, I don't— Wait a minute. Bradley, you've been nothing but grief and you insulted my restaurant, as correct as you may have been. So why should I perjure myself for you?"

"Because of...you know..." Bradley said threateningly.

"Oh, big deal," said Smelt. "So I wear a propeller beanie in the privacy of my own home. It's who I am. Yes, Captain Santos, Mr. Bradley knows what you're talking about."

"And what would I in fact be talking about?" asked Santos.

"That on the evening of April 19th, Mr. Bradley came in with his own pre-cooked order of crab legs and consumed it here. He left with a jar of my own homemade shrimp cocktail sauce. He didn't say why he wanted it."

"You can't prove that. Smelt has no record that I was here. It's his word against mine. And that crab is long gone."

"Ah, but we do know where it came from. It should have occurred to me sooner, as it was someone I remember from 10 years ago when I was a cop on the beat. Mr. Louie, would please come in here for a moment?"

A very small man, who couldn't have been more than three feet tall, entered.

"I believe you know Big Louie, Mr. Bradley," said Santos.

"'Big Louie'?" asked Jordan.

"Little Louie doesn't get out much if it's windy," said Louie in an amazingly deep and resonant voice.

"Mr. Louie, would you please explain how you know Mr. Bradley?" said Santos.

"Well, Captain, it's like this. I got the fish, he's got the appetite, if you know what I mean. It's the laws of supply and demand. If he's got a secret and has to get his

fish through me, it ain't my business to ask. I got a few secrets of my own, like that feta cheese thing. Anyway, he comes to me every week, I give him a pound of prawns, and he's happy. This one time, he asks me for a crab, so I got him one. What he does with it after that ain't my business."

Bradley was upset. "Louie! What are you doing? I trusted you."

"I wanna go legit. No more sneaking around back alleys, cutting shady deals for squid or halibut. Or prawns. I can't take it anymore. I've tried to go legit for years, but every time I try to get out, they keep pulling me back. I cut a deal with the cops. If I told them about you, they wouldn't ask no questions about my fish."

"So, let's see what we've got," said Santos. "Bradley works for Marnie Rivera, as the secretary to the woman making a lot of money off of his own invention. They have secret trysts every Monday evening involving a pound of fresh prawns. This is all clandestine, as Ms. Rivera was a founding member of the Tooth and Claw Society, which specialized in the protection of shellfish. Then, one evening, Mr. Bradley brings his own crab into Smelt's—a target of Rivera's on many occasions—and leaves with a jar of Smelt's shrimp cocktail sauce, which later turns up on

the dead body of the aforementioned Ms. Rivera. A woman who, by the way, fits a chalk outline found in this restaurant perfectly."

"So, what are you saying?" asked Bradley.

"Rather a lot," grumbled Smelt, checking his watch.

"We just got the autopsy results back on Ms. Rivera. We found a moderate amount of that cocktail sauce along with about half a pound of prawns in Ms. Rivera's alimentary canal."

"So? Giving someone shrimp cocktail is not a crime. At least not in this state."

"But deliberately giving them tainted shrimp cocktail is."

"Tainted?" said Smelt.

"Not the sauce, but the shrimp. With a bacterium that reproduces very quickly, eating away the stomach lining and causing death in a matter of moments. A bacterium that has only been isolated as part of a confidential government investigation. A bacterium code-named 'Andromeda.' Oh, wait, that was another bacterium.... Anyway, a bacterium that has been genetically altered from those normally found living on onions. Mr. Bradley, you experiment on onions regularly, do you not?"

"Of course. And so did Marnie. It was our business to."

"And you were upset that she subjugated you to secretary and shared none of the profits garnered from the onion detector business?"

"What profits? There weren't any yet. We were still in R & D."

"Who told you that?"

"Why, Marnie did."

"So she never told you about the exclusive licensing agreement and the marketing plan. Or the lucrative ulcer-patient market that was making a fortune for the company?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Oh, come now, Mr. Bradley. Your signature is on many of the documents, as well as the one forfeiting any share of the millions of dollars worth of profits and placing you on a fixed hourly wage of \$4.50. My only question is: why did you sign such an agreement?"

"Because I loved her."

"Oh, puke!" said Jordan. "What a lame reason to do anything! I can't believe that! No one does anything that stupid for love! Except maybe get married....."

"Don't mind him," said Santos. "He's in the midst of a bitter divorce."

"Oh, okay, I didn't do it for love. I did it because she insisted that there was no great market for such a device.

She started developing it at a great risk. She even received many market surveys showing the lack of demand for such a device. She always could out-argue me...."

"But you knew they were forged."

"I didn't find that out until last week. It drove me over the edge. I could try blackmailing her, but then she'd only blackmail me. I don't have the cleanest past in the world, what with that 'Captain Wiggly' caper several years ago. So murder seemed the only way out. Yes, I poisoned the shrimp, served them with Smelt's cocktail sauce. She loved Smelt's cocktail sauce, even more than shrimp scampi. After she went off and died I disposed of the rest of the shrimp by running along the roof of a row of attached houses and tossing one shrimp down each chimney until they were gone. It was a little something I got from *The Godfather Part II*. I had planned to bring her body to Smelt's, and everyone would think it was food poisoning. Until quite recently, I still hoped everyone would think that."

"So why the chalk outline?" asked Santos.

"A warning," said Bradley. "I knew she was coming down that night to do something silly at Smelt's, so I thought she would recognize the threat and realize she should be scared of me, not just bemused."

"Well, Mr. Bradley, I'm glad you finally managed to become assertive. But, however, you could always have tried arguing, or writing nasty letters to the editor of a local newspaper. Or paying for your own infomercial on late-night cable television. Or even your own program on public access. Or, if you prefer a different kind of audience, tap into the Internet and present your case on a whole host of electronic bulletin boards. You see, Mr. Bradley, today's 'information highway' provides an almost infinite number of alternatives to murder."

"Well, I've never been very good with computers. I've always been a 'people person'."

"That could be what drove you to murder. Machines are frustrating, but they're logical. People are frustrating, but they're completely illogical. But at least you can kick a computer without any trouble. Think about it, won't you? Thank you. Sergeants, take him away."

The sergeants did the Captain's bidding.

"Christ, what a waste of time," said Smelt.

Waste of time, indeed.

Back at headquarters, Santos, Jordan, and Schlickelmeinengrubenbieder sat around the forensics lab late into the night.

"I still don't understand how you figured out the bit about Big Louie and the crab," said Jordan.

"Well, it wasn't just a guess on my part. Given how much Bradley seemed to dislike the food at Smelt's, it wasn't odd that he would bring his own food in and eat it there. Why Smelt let him is beyond me. What really triggered it was Schlickelmeinen grubenbieder's findings regarding the 'fingerprinting', as it were, of crabs."

Schlickelmeinen grubenbieder smiled. "It was an amazing deduction on your part, Bernard, especially as I made up the bit about crabs' fingerprints." He began to giggle. "I mean, I'm amazed that you actually believed me!" He was in hysterics now. "I mean, crabs having fingerprints! Covered over by an exoskeletal claw! Oh, it's too much." He collapsed to the floor in spasms of laughter.

"To be honest, I didn't believe you. But truth can sometimes be stranger than fiction. So, logically, fiction can sometimes be as prosaic as truth. Which means that fiction and truth could perhaps be interlinked, insofar as one may be a function of the other. So, within a certain fiction, there could be a kernel of truth. I saw no reason why it should not work the other way; that in some larger truth, there could be a fragment of fiction. I call it the interchangeability of experience."

"I call it just plain goofy," said Schlickelmeinengrubnebieder. "Come on, who's up for seafood?"

"House of Smelt?" asked Jordan.

"Sure," said Santos. "Get the prawns almondine. It's dreadful, but you never know what can happen...."