

FATAL GREED

by

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PROLOGUE

Bernie McNiff, shift foreman at Toronto's Plasmalab, a manufacturer of surgical glue, has less than four hours to get fifteen hundred applicator kits assembled, pasteurized, packed and out the door before the shift ends.

His team performed flawlessly throughout the first six months of the year. If they can make target during the current week, each team member will get two weeks extra pay.

The timing is tight because Plasmalab's annual summer shutdown is scheduled to start at 5 p.m.

Bernie is very keen to get away: he has a date at eight sharp with Mavis Herbert, a co-worker and the object of his passion.

A twenty-eight year old Englishman, Bernie loves his job: in charge of thirty-six women on two assembly lines, with another twelve staffing the ancillary equipment and the quality control lab, he has a pool of forty-eight female employees with whom to flirt incessantly – especially Mavis, a beautiful, fun-loving, twenty-five year old hazel-eyed blonde.

Bernie glances anxiously along the assembly line: they are running low on components for applicator kits, each consisting of two vials (one containing Fibrinogen, the other Thrombin) the contents of which, when combined by means of a plunger-equipped spraying device, produce a magic glue used in surgery involving tissue where staples or sutures would shred thin skin.

Recent demand for Plasmalab's patented applicator and magic glue, which is made from bovine blood, has increased dramatically and the company is straining to satisfy its customers: Plasmalab has worked hard to capture market share and cannot afford to surrender any of it through failure to deliver product on time.

"We need at least another three thousand vials – fifteen hundred of each kind," Bernie yells at his assistant, Joe Pelegrini, who jumps into a lift truck and drives off in the direction of the inventory processing area.

Bernie is doubly anxious because of the possible bonus and also because of his date. For two months now he's been pursuing Mavis with cunning single-mindedness, only to have his advances rebuffed on every occasion. Then, two weeks earlier, Mavis agreed to spend a long weekend with him.

Joe is back with the lift-truck, his face pale, eyes flashing with anger. “There’s been a mix-up in the production planning department” he reports. “Instead of producing 5cc vials for us this morning they switched to making 10cc ones.”

Bernie is sweating. “Damn, damn, damn... we can’t use 10cc vials – they won’t fit into the applicators we loaded into the system this morning. And we don’t have larger applicators on hand.”

“Not here we don’t, but I saw some at the Oakville warehouse yesterday when I picked up stock for today’s shifts.”

“How long would it take you to go to Oakville and back?”

“I could do it in an hour, using the back roads.”

The assembly lines’ speeds are set to produce five kits per minute per line, but the equipment could turn out three times that much were it not for the pasteurizing section where the standby unit is under repair. If Bernie could circumvent the pasteurizing problem he could still make his quota and leave the plant by seven thirty.

“Here’s what we do,” he decides. “Take my van and, to be on the safe side, get me two thousand large applicators.” He throws Joe the keys. “Try to be back by four. That’ll give us three hours to produce fifteen hundred units.”

“Less the set-up time,” Joe reminds him.

“We’ll clear the 5cc applicators out of the system while you’re gone and I’ll figure out something with the pasteurizing while you’re away.”

“You’ve forgotten the half hour it will take to load the new units into the system after I get back.”

“OK, OK, so we’ll speed up the line a little.”

Joe is skeptical. “Yeah – with both pasteurizing units working we could do it. But with the standby unit on the fritz...?”

“For Christ’s sake, get the bloody hell out of here and leave the pasteurizing problem for me to solve.”

Bernie waits until the last 5cc vial is used up, then has his staff clear out the applicators remaining in the system.

By four p.m. they are ready for Joe, but he is a half hour late.

Bernie is furious.

Joe forestalls the outburst he knows is coming. “Friday afternoon, what can you expect,” he shouts, “traffic is brutal. So lay off me and let’s do what we can to save the situation.”

It takes Bernie until five to get production rolling again. Mavis sees him struggling and sneaks up to him on her way to the restroom. “We’ll meet an hour later than planned – at nine,” she whispers, “so don’t sweat it.”

“Thanks.”

Bernie reviews what he knows about pasteurizing, which isn’t much. The process is what kills the microorganisms, which ‘spoil’ beer, wine, milk, fruit juice and other kinds of liquids intended for human consumption. To kill them you have to heat the liquid in which they reside to fifty-five degrees Celsius for several minutes. The cavities in each of Plasmalab’s two pasteurizing tunnels, one of which is always kept on standby in case the other failed, measures two meters by one meter and can accommodate only 250 kits at a time. Therefore, since the pasteurizing process requires 30 minutes, including preheating, pasteurizing, cooling and unloading, the pasteurizing installation limits the plant’s capacity to 500 kits per hour.

‘Let’s face it,’ Bernie mutters under his breath ‘I need three hours to produce the fifteen hundred units we need to meet quota, and I have only two. I guess our goose is cooked.’ He laughs out loud. ‘I’ll be damned if it isn’t cooking that this whole problem is all about.’

He takes a deep breath and waves at Joe to join him in his foreman’s cubicle.

“Increase the two assembly lines’ speeds gradually so that by seven,” he glances at the clock, “we have fifteen hundred units ready for pasteurizing.”

“That’s eight units per minute per line...”

“Well within the capabilities of the system.”

“Agreed... and so?”

“We’ll start pasteurizing the first batch of kits an hour from now...”

“Around six.”

“Right.” Bernie gives Joe a wide grin. “We’ll cut down on the cooking time so we can do three batches an hour – not two.”

“How?”

“We’ll increase the temperature...”

“How high?”

“We’ll go as high as 90° Celsius. Have you ever heard of flash pasteurization?”

“Vaguely” Joe is mystified.

“It’s the same as regular pasteurization except at higher temperatures – as high as what we’re going to use: just below 100° Celsius – but only for a very short period of time.”

“How short?” Joe asks.

“Thirty seconds.”

Joe leaves to reset the assembly-line speed controls. Bernie grabs an instruction manual and heads for the rheostat regulating the heat within the tunnel’s cavity and the timer that opens and closes it.

The staff’s work is complete by eight fifteen. Everyone leaves, except for Joe and five others who help extract the last batch of kits, which they box and stack on pallets ready for shipment.

While Joe and his assistants turn off the equipment, Bernie takes a lightening-fast shower, changes into street clothes, then completes the day’s production report, switches off the lights and locks up, but fails to return the temperature controls to their original settings.

In a hurry to meet Mavis, he speeds off on his motorbike in the direction of the Meadowvale Inn and does not see the truck coming around the corner.

The impact of the collision throws Bernie for forty-five feet. He dies instantly.

CHAPTER ONE

Robert Lonsdale, NATO's Deputy Director of Intelligence, knew his Christmas Holidays were going to be special: as of December 1, he would be on six months' leave of absence... with full pay.

He planned to spend most of the month with his friend Niccolo Bianchi's family in Italy, then cross the Atlantic to visit his Israeli-American buddy, Reuven Gal, for a couple of weeks.

Lonsdale had become involved in the intelligence community when the CIA recruited him out of college. He had served first as an idealistic, somewhat naïve, but versatile field agent, then, as a hardened, cynical, embittered senior operative, having somehow survived years of double-dealing and treachery and the death of his wife. 'Survived' was, perhaps, an exaggeration. Although he was alive and in good physical condition for his age, the state of his mental health left a great deal to be desired: the years of stress, insecurity and loneliness imposed on him by his responsibilities had altered his psyche. Before the death of his wife, for which he still blamed himself decades later, he had been gregarious and action-driven. A hard-living raconteur with a busy social life that served to conceal his real activities, he had developed a profile perhaps too high for a man in his profession. But all that changed after he lost his wife. He became reclusive, introspective – and even better at his job, which was to coordinate counter-terrorist activity worldwide from a secret location in Bethesda, near Washington.

And then, in the mid-nineties, with Milosevic making mischief in Belgrade, the West became nervous about what was happening in the Balkans. NATO was asked to intervene and the U.S., NATO's principal member, insisted on direct access to the Alliance's intelligence-gathering capability through one of their own as NATO's Director of Intelligence. But to remove the present incumbent, General Joachim Richter, would have insulted the Germans and this the U.S. did not wish to do.

The next best solution was to get an American appointed as Richter's second-in-command. This meant finding a multilingual, experienced senior intelligence manager with field experience, superior language skills and familiarity with Europe's ways.

The computers at Langley and at the NSA did their dance and came up with Lonsdale: multilingual, born in Europe, naturalized Canadian, granted U.S. citizenship when he was placed in the CIA's employee protection program, an experienced operative and an excellent program administrator with remarkable successes to his credit.

He was senior enough to hold down the job, but not so senior as to make General Richter feel threatened. In the late stages of his career with the Agency and not in line for further promotion, Lonsdale's career was at a dead end: he jumped at the opportunity, moved to Brussels, but kept his apartment in Washington, and focused his energies on monitoring the unmonitorable – the mood of the Balkans.

Richter and Lonsdale found they could work well together and did so for three years, after which Lonsdale became eligible for a six-month leave of absence which he chose to take. His job was beginning to wear him down.

Before collecting his luggage at Venice's Marco Polo International Airport, Lonsdale stepped into the men's room to freshen up; he wanted to make a good impression on his hosts. While washing his hands he glanced into the mirror. Under the circumstances he was not too displeased; he saw an athletic-looking man with rugged features and short sandy hair graying at the temples. The speckled, hazel eyes, though showing fatigue as the result of having taken a very early flight in Brussels after a long, brutal last day at the office, had the piercing look of intelligence. He smiled at his image, his regimen of jogging five miles three times a week was paying off: he looked fit and slim and younger than his years. His deep-seated weariness, which no amount of sleep could cure, was barely noticeable.

Lonsdale had met Niccolo in Budapest some years back while jogging. Guests at the Forum Hotel, they both got up at the crack of dawn to run before the air became fouled by the exhausts of the city's automobiles, most without catalytic converters. By coincidence, they had taken the same route along Akademia Street to Parliament Square.

After two days of running behind each other without saying a word, Lonsdale, forever suspicious, made discrete enquiries about his jogging 'partner' and found that the man was a restaurateur-hotelier from Venice, in town on a five-day equipment buying trip. That evening Lonsdale left word at Reception, suggesting they meet at six, run together rather than behind each other, and then share a light breakfast. When the Italian let slip that, this being his first trip to Budapest, he was looking for a guide to show him the sights in his spare time, Lonsdale – who knew the city well and spoke Hungarian – volunteered his services.

Over the years the two kept in regular contact and Lonsdale, a bachelor with no particular romantic commitments and living alone, was happy to accompany the Bianchis and their six children on their holidays to the seaside where an extra adult, willing to help supervise and amuse the kids, was always welcome.

Lonsdale delighted in being with the Bianchis; they represented a refreshing change from the rigors of his profession.

The family lived in Conegliano, a small town about thirty kilometers northeast of Venice. Four hundred years back, Niccolo's ancestors had acquired a farmhouse capable of accommodating a large family. In the 18th Century, with the arrival of Napoleon, the building was enlarged and converted into a way station for voyagers on their way to Venice.

Niccolo's great-great-grandfather, an outstanding cook, sired three talented assistants. As their reputation spread, and their descendants' skills increased, the restaurant side of the business developed to the point where l'Osteria d'Oro had, by the 1930's, become *the* restaurant of the region.

After World War II, Niccolo's grandfather, perhaps the most famous of the Bianchi chefs, a man with an infectious smile and bursting vitality, sold off most of the land he owned, renovated the building and founded a hotel school whose students were afforded practical experience through working at l'Osteria d'Oro – a modern hotel behind an ancient façade with a world famous restaurant and a popular bar.

By then, the hamlet that had once been Conegliano had grown into a prosperous town of twenty thousand with an international reputation for the fine food of its eateries and the excellent Prosecco wine produced in the surrounding hills.

Lonsdale was glad to see his old friend Niccolo looking healthy and relaxed. Their conversation during the drive from the airport to L'Osteria was, as always, subdued: neither was talkative by nature.

After lunch the kids swarmed Lonsdale who spent the afternoon playing with them and the presents he had brought them. In the evening Niccolo took him and his Chef, Germano DalMolin, to a wine tasting at the Institute of Oenology, founded by Niccolo's great-grandfather.

Busy tasting Prosecco and Grappa, and shaking hands with friends, a very popular Niccolo left Lonsdale in DalMolin's care.

"I have just spent a wonderful six months in America," the Chef confided, "... and I mean all of America."

"Whereabouts?" Lonsdale was on his third glass of Prosecco.

"Mexico, the United States of America and Canada."

"And what, may I ask, were you doing over there for six months?"

"Sampling the cooking and looking for new ideas."

“How long have you and Niccolo known each other?”

“Forever.” DalMolin emptied his glass. “We went to classes together from elementary school onward. When we graduated from gimnasio Niccolo went to Lausanne to learn how to cook and run a hotel and I went to medical school.”

“You what!” Lonsdale looked at DalMolin in amazement, not sure whether the Italian was pulling his leg.

But DalMolin was in earnest. “That’s right, I went to medical school... in Milano, at the university there. I was only twenty years old...”

“And what happened?”

“I was a very good student...”

“You must have been brilliant to have gotten into medical school at twenty...”

DalMolin shrugged. “I guess I must have been.” He sighed and grabbed another glass of Prosecco from a nearby table. “Anyway, it would have been better for me to have waited a little.”

“Why?”

“I was too young and the pressure was too much for me. I was ambitious and immature. I always wanted to be first in my class and I drove myself too hard.” DalMolin looked at Lonsdale as if assessing whether the American could be trusted with a confidence.

Lonsdale, who knew the look, waited and said nothing.

After a minute DalMolin went on. “I was in my final year at med school and Niccolo was in London, working at the St. James Hotel, learning English... that’s when I broke down.”

“What happened?”

“I don’t really know.” DalMolin’s voice was low. “All of a sudden I lost interest... in everything. I stopped studying, didn’t attend classes and did not show for my exams...”

“What did you do?”

“Went for long walks in the spring rain, talked to myself, cried a lot and got so depressed that, in the end, I let everything slide... I stopped going out... even for food... I didn’t eat for days and was contemplating suicide...”

“You had a complete nervous breakdown...”

DalMolin nodded. “My mother showed up after my landlady called her. She took me home and put me to bed. I turned my back to her and lay there for two weeks staring at the wall...”

“What about your father?”

“Dead.”

“Any brothers or sisters?”

DalMolin shook his head. “My mother, who was getting by on a modest widow’s pension, didn’t know what to do. One day she told Niccolo’s mother about me and his mother must have told Niccolo, because a week later Niccolo came to visit. He spent three days in my stinky room and on the fourth, instead of going back to London he took me to a psychiatrist in Treviso who agreed to see me...”

DalMolin stopped. Lonsdale was going to prod him to go on, but Niccolo appeared out of nowhere and the spell was broken.

“Come on you guys,” he shouted, slapping DalMolin on the back, “don’t look so glum. It’s St. Nick’s Day tomorrow and we have work to do. Time to go home.”

CHAPTER TWO

It is the European custom on December 6, St. Nicholas' Feast Day, to have a person dressed as the Bishop St. Nicholas parade through the streets with a bag of candies and small toys over his shoulder, accompanied by a little 'devil's assistant', called a Krampus, wielding a tied bundle of birch with which to spank those children who'd been naughty during the year.

After the procession passed the Osteria, the Bianchi children trooped back into the hotel to decorate the main dining-room for the elaborate private late lunch to celebrate Niccolo's name day.

Attending the meal, in addition to the Bianchis and Lonsdale, were Germano DalMolin's mother, and several of Niccolo's friends – all locals, except for Pietro Biscontin, a handsome, bearded Trevisano, and his American girlfriend Joelle Delatour, a New York literary agent. Biscontin and Delatour were staying at the Osteria d'Oro on their way to the Milan leather show.

There was a third 'outsider', Gerry Sidarenko, an American from Atlanta, a regular at the hotel, whose company manufactured keys in nearby Vittorio Veneto.

Lonsdale was seated between Sidarenko and Delatour, an attractive woman in her mid forties.

"What's with these non-Italian sounding names?" she asked Biscontin across the table." Biscontin, DalMolin..." she waved the menu at her boyfriend. "See, here it is – the Chef's name is DalMolin and the man we met at the gallery across the street this morning was DalCol..." Delatour looked at Lonsdale. "Should these names not end in a vowel?"

Lonsdale could not resist teasing her. "Like Sidarenko, I suppose"

"But I'm of Ukrainian descent," the man protested smiling.

"Pouf... there goes your theory." Lonsdale laughed, but Delatour was not one to give up. "Come on, be serious. Pietro, tell me about these names."

Biscontin finished his soup and wiped his mouth. "These are typical names from the Province of Treviso which is where we happen to be. DalMolin used to be Della Molina 'from the mill', DalCol comes from Della Collina or 'from the hill', while Biscontin is derived from Viscontino, 'little Viscount'..."

"A local affectation you mean...?"

Lonsdale was going to say something about the etymology of names, but the main course was being served to much oohing and aahing and he became distracted. Delatour, seeing a veal chop on her plate, turned to her boyfriend, somewhat embarrassed. “Pietro, I thought you had told our hosts that I am a vegetarian...”

“I did *cara mia*. Rest assured the veal chop on your plate is not a real veal chop.”

“What is it then?”

“It’s a veggie chop,” said a voice behind her. DalMolin, all smiles, and dressed in his full Chef’s regalia explained. “I did not want the Signorina to forego the delicious flavor of my specialty, so I created a special copy in vegetables...”

Loud ‘bravos’ rang out, the guests tucked in and the imbibing began in earnest.

In the early evening Lonsdale, who had drunk little, volunteered to drive the very tired DalMolin and his mother home.

Mrs. DalMolin sat in the back of Niccolo’s Audi, her son next to Lonsdale, giving directions.

“Finish your story,” Lonsdale said after a while.

“What story?”

“The one you started telling me last night – about not being able to afford to continue seeing a psychiatrist...”

“Oh that... DalMolin dismissed the subject with a wave of his hand. “The psychiatrist told me he took on one patient a year free as pro bono work and said that if I were willing to work hard he would choose me as his ‘patient of the year’ as it were.”

“Did you accept?”

“Of course I did.” The Chef smiled, remembering. “It took us six years to put the insides of my head together to the point where I could function stress-free and hold down a job, as long as it did not involve too much responsibility. Niccolo gave me a job washing dishes at the Osteria...”

Lonsdale was a good listener.

“It took me six more years to become the Executive Chef of l’Osteria d’Oro...”

“Well done, Germano.”

As he was getting out of the car, DalMolin turned to Lonsdale. “Niccolo didn’t let on for years that his psychiatrist friend had no pro bono patients...”

“Why then did he make an exception with you?”

“He didn’t. My friend Niccolo Bianchi – a *real* friend - swore my doctor to secrecy and financed my entire rehabilitation out of his own pocket, then gave me a job to start me on the road to self-fulfillment.”

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Germano DalMolin reported back to work on Monday still feeling hung-over, though he had done no drinking on Sunday. When, on Tuesday, he fell down the stairs on his way to the wine cellar for the second time the same day, Niccolo took him to the doctor. Noticing DalMolin’s general disorientation, the baffled physician ordered a battery of neurological tests and sent the patient home.

By Friday, DalMolin was running a high fever and bleeding from the nose. On Sunday he began having difficulty focusing and started to vomit uncontrollably at the Treviso General Hospital, where his frantic mother had arranged to have him taken by ambulance.

He died on Monday night.

The Bianchis and the staff of the Osteria d’Oro went into deep mourning; Lonsdale shared their grief.

On Thursday, while DalMolin’s autopsy was being performed, Pietro Biscontin telephoned Niccolo for the name of a good doctor in Milan: Joelle Delatour was running a high fever and bleeding from her nose... Biscontin had gotten her admitted to the Santa Cabrini Hospital, but the doctors there were charlatans in his opinion – they seemed to be able to do nothing to alleviate the woman’s condition which was deteriorating by the hour.

On Saturday, the day he was supposed to return home for Christmas, Gerry Sidarenko lost his balance in the shower. He managed to get dressed and to pack, but when, briefcase in hand, he tried to walk to the taxi that was to take him to the airport, he fell again and had to be helped to get up. As he was trying to catch his breath, he began to vomit and his nose started to bleed.

He was rushed to the hospital by the police.

On Sunday, December 21, Joelle Delatour died.

The morning of December 24 the Osteria d’Oro and its famous centuries-old restaurant were ordered closed by the Provincial Health Authorities. The autopsies performed on DalMolin

and Delatour had revealed the cause of their demise as being a new and virulent variant of Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease: their brains were riddled with multiple microscopic aggregates encircled by holes, making the brain resemble a sponge – the hallmark of bovine spongyform encephalopathy, or mad cow disease.

The authorities suspected this new variant of CJD to be far more virulent than its predecessors and ordered a thorough inspection of the Osteria's food inventory and installations to determine the extent of the contamination.

At this stage of their work they assumed – in error, as it would turn out later – that what the three victims had in common was having eaten the same meal. They, therefore, began to investigate the origins of the meat the late Germano DalMolin had served his guests on December 6. Two months would go by before their discovery of the true commonality among those who had fallen ill: DalMolin, Delatour and Sidarenko had all undergone surgery in October in different hospitals, in different parts of the world.

After the traditional Christmas Midnight Mass, Lonsdale and Bianchi stayed up until dawn, sipping grappa in the kitchen and reviewing Bianchi's options, one of which was to sell the real estate.

Lonsdale counseled waiting. "Let things settle down. Go skiing with your wife and kids in Cortina and give your head a couple of weeks' rest. Exercise, don't drink too much and force yourself not to think about your business. You'll see - when you come back after Epiphany you'll see things in a more positive light."

"Where will you be?"

"A phone call away..."

"No – seriously: where do you go from here?"

"The day after what we call Boxing Day I'm off to Palm Beach to visit my friend there..."

"One of your special friends from the old days?"

A shadow crossed Lonsdale's face. It still hurt to remember.

"As a matter of fact, yes," he answered, his voice low. "This friend – his name is Reuven – was there when my wife Andrea died."

"Reuven? What kind of a name is that?"

"Israeli..."

"And he is a good friend – no?"

“The best.”

“Then go in peace to see him. And tell him he has a very good friend in you...”

“How would you know that?”

“Because, Roberto, you are a very good friend to me.”

Lonsdale was touched. “You need something, you call me. If I can help, I will. If I can’t, I’ll be able to send you to someone who can.”

They embraced and went into the living room to watch the children open their Christmas presents.

The day after Lonsdale left Italy Gerry Sidarenko died.