

FOSGATE'S GAME



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AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF HORROR AND SUSPENSE

By David C. Cassidy

The Dark

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Velvet Rain

Fosgate's Game

Never Too Late

Gateway

1944

Dark Shapes, Dark Shadows Series

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Must not all things at the last be swallowed up in death?
- Plato

~ 1

Given the choice, he shouldn't have played Fosgate's Game.
Given the choice ... he should have taken death.

~

"The devil's hand," Chadwick Harlow whispered.

He stood at the tall windows overlooking the east lawn. He was anxious. His gastric ulcer had been acting up, and was certain to grow worse should things regress outdoors. Storms had a way of upsetting him, and by the grim sound of the rising thunder, he'd be racing for the lavatory by night's end.

He checked his flap pocket and produced a small container of antacids. Upon considering one, he slipped them back and patted them reassuringly. Five left. They would have to be enough.

His eyes bolted to the southwest window. A lasting burst of lightning lit up the expansive study, illuminating an impressive library and an equally impressive array of rifles and pistols in glass cabinets. Above the weapons, mounted and morbid, lay eternal testaments to their lethal hand: heads of Canadian elk and grizzly; trophies of lion and buffalo from the Luangwa Valley in Zambia; fifty-five pound tusks from an elephant hunt in the Matesti area of Zimbabwe; a leopard from South Africa. It mattered little that he had seen them countless times. In this stark late-evening light they were even more grisly than in the comfort of the day. A peaceful sort, he had never understood how anyone, least of all educated men, could muster the will to take an animal's life. Hunting for food he could appreciate. But for sport? It was criminal.

"Don't lose your bottle," Fosgate Harrod grumbled. He looked quite comfortable in his black leather chair by the glowing hearth. Sadly overweight but still fit despite his years, he could likely wrestle a tiger to the ground. Certainly he possessed the demeanor.

Fosgate's fat fingers hugged the bowl of his long-stemmed pipe. "You're sixty-six, old boy. You'd think by now you'd be over such boyhood nonsense." As he drew on the curved stem, his fleshy jowls stirred. His olive right eye, a dark thing that had always frightened Chadwick even as a child, twitched behind a thin monocle. The eyepiece was more affectation than utilitarian, an admission of which Fosgate would never submit.

Chadwick shifted along the window and made an effort not to get too close. Thunder and lightning were unpredictable beasts that terrified him, so much so he would purposely switch channels during weather reports on television, or pop in a compact disc in his Mercedes' sound system should the need arise. If there was anything more unsettling than actually being caught in a thunderstorm, it was the unnerving strain of the impending event. Another flash of lightning sent him quickly to his chair.

He turned to his host. "I don't believe my father, God rest him, would appreciate your lack of respect for nature's power. If he were here—"

"We'd share a fine laugh at your expense," Fosgate snapped.

Chadwick kept silent. Rebuttal was fruitless, for it wasn't the first time they'd sparred over his phobias. Surely it would not be the last.

Fosgate rose and drew heavily on his pipe. Chadwick studied him. The man held that spark in his eye, the one he had seen—and feared—in innumerable get-togethers: the cold stark stare of the hunter. Still, it seemed fitting, given the tack the evening had taken. The old bugger had been positively mad. He had chalked it up to the cognac, but a part of him still wondered if this bizarre chatter was serious.

Fosgate exhaled, the robust aroma of his English blend overpowering the immediate vicinity. Chadwick detested the foul smell.

"Do you disagree?" Fosgate baited, getting back to this strangest of conversations. "Come, now. Admit it. You're positively seething beneath that dry exterior."

Chadwick hesitated, as his constitution dictated. He checked the clock on the mantel. How he longed to leave this nonsense behind. "Do you take me the fool, Fosgate? This strains the absurd."

"Hear me out. There are men of this Earth ... *naive* men ... who would have us believe we're all playing on the same pitch. That we're all bloody equal. Do you truly subscribe to that?"

Chadwick sipped his cognac. The conversation had taken its eventual bad turn. It was now just a matter of course that Fosgate would work himself into a mild frenzy over the Muslim and Jew.

Fosgate turned to Willoughby, his faithful manservant of thirty-four years. "Leave us." He motioned with his pipe. "And be sure to lock the front doors on your way. Missed them last night, eh?"

The valet freshened their drinks, capped the cognac and returned it to an attractive cabinet of teak and glass. He rolled his eyes and promptly turned away.

“... Good night, Willoughby,” Chadwick said after him.

Fosgate waited for the subtle click of the study’s French doors. “Sniggering fool. Perhaps I’ll be done with him come Monday.” He met Chadwick squarely. “Why do you pander to them?”

“It’s a sickness,” Chadwick quipped. “I pray you don’t catch it.”

At this Fosgate grumbled, but like Fosgate, waved it off. “You’re beginning to sound more like Katherine every year.”

“How is she, by the way? Any news?”

“None, I’m afraid,” Fosgate said, with more than a hint of irritation. “I’m beginning to believe she *prefers* the company of savages. It’s one thing to finance a hospital—quite another to actually live on that dreadful continent. I’ve given up talking sense to her. The South Africans can have her, for the entire eighteen months.”

Chadwick started to reply, but Fosgate, as usual led by some internal compass, steered them back on track.

“I don’t believe in pure chance,” he said. “Events do not occur because—what do the Americans say?—oh, the eloquence! Because *shit* happens. While the likes of Willoughby drift along some despairing river of hope, *men* ... men such as you and I, Chadwick ... determine our destiny. Lesser men have fought and died for choice since the apple and the serpent. We, on the other hand, control choice.”

Chadwick nodded in compulsory deference. A fair trade for his soul, he supposed, being Executive Vice President to Fosgate Harvard Harrod the Third, President of the House of Sandringham (as Chadwick jokingly labeled it), the ninth-ranked tabloid publisher in England. The circulations of *The Sun* and *The Daily Mail* so outnumbered *The Eye Opener* that one could think of Fosgate’s financially troubled rag as little more than ambient noise. His closest competitor was *The London Looker*, a dark reflection of Fosgate’s paper. *The Looker* featured black, go-for-the-jugular content, tasking *The Mirror* to see who could dig up the shittiest dirt on the dirtiest shit. Its style held wild fancy for Fosgate; he liked its bite. But above all, he liked its numbers. Adding them to his own would spell a major coup, propelling him quite likely—and quite rightly, he would say—to perhaps the number six position. And from there, who knew what prey might fall to the hunt?

Fosgate moved to the hearth. He took up a rather threatening iron poker and stoked the shimmering coals. This set off a crackling fireworks of yellows and reds, the flames casting a macabre shadow of him across a large tapestry on the

north wall.

A furious thunderclap struck, and Chadwick whipped around, startled. “Storm’s close,” he said, swallowing.

“Have a pill and be done with it,” Fosgate groaned. “Go on. We’ll finish this when you return.”

Without further discussion and much less second thought, Chadwick nodded. Trembling, he set his cognac on the coaster beside him and disappeared from the study without a word. He should have left with Willoughby.

~ 2

“You look the devil,” Fosgate said as Chadwick returned.

Drawn and gray, Chadwick paused beside his chair. He glanced across the columns of windows that were at once protecting him and holding him prisoner to his fear. Rain had come, harsh and unwelcome, and with it, another flash of light that sent his skin crawling. “I’ll be fine. I’ll finish my drink and be off.”

Fosgate stood at the hearth, his right arm propped stiffly upon the mantel. Above and behind him, a portrait of his grandfather, smoking the very same pipe at the very same hearth, held vigil over the affairs of the empire. The likeness was uncanny, and Chadwick once asked in jest if Fosgate’s father had schooled him on how to be a Harrod. It seemed their natural stance, and the posture often struck Chadwick as a rather rude caricature of Father Christmas, one who’d decided that freezing his nuggets off hauling toys and goodies on his sleigh wasn’t nearly as rewarding as chestnuts roasting on an open fire, pipe in lips, cognac in hand.

Fosgate’s father, Harrod the Second, had passed these eleven years, and though he had never endured the presence of the First, Chadwick knew these men: each Fosgate Harvard Harrod, each tyrannical, each ruthless. The First—as the unofficial story went—had had his partner, Emerson Gold Sandringham, murdered in a bloody coup in 1933. Forty years later, to the day, *he* succumbed to an apparent suicide, to a drink laced with hemlock. The Second had hung himself—according to the family’s lawyer—but Chadwick had always wondered. And for an instant now, found himself wondering about his cognac.

“It is getting on,” Fosgate said. “Nevertheless, we do need to discuss a matter of import. As I alluded, you and I are powerful individuals. Yet it’s shamefully unthinkable we could possibly be satisfied with our positions.”

Chadwick regarded him quizzically.

Fosgate puffed long on the pipe. “Let’s cut to the chase, eh? I’m fed up playing second fiddle to that prattling fool. It’s time to put an end to this.”

Chadwick had heard it all before, year upon fiscal year. Yet on this night, Fosgate held a sharper edge. Perhaps the years of lagging behind Arthur Frost’s paper—*The Looker*—had finally twisted this twisted mind so tight it might snap. There seemed no other explanation, for the man had been rambling in riddle all evening.

Fosgate baited him with a glare.

Chadwick sipped. He was in no mood for games. “Have you learned nothing, Fosgate? Arthur isn’t a pushover. He won’t surrender control to anyone ... especially you.”

From Fosgate came not the usual reply, a quick retort, but rather the sickly fowl of secondhand smoke. Chadwick, his ulcer quite unsettled, feared his insides might make an appearance. It was all he could do to stem the churning in his stomach.

“*Especially,*” Fosgate agreed, oblivious to Chadwick’s discomfort. “But I’ve—pardon me, *we’ve*—plenty of friends on Frost’s Board.”

Chadwick could not argue the point. They were in with several of Frost’s key directors. Even *after* that nasty takeover bid had failed. His father, a shark of a businessman but a man of integrity, would not have approved.

“Fosgate,” he said, and almost stopped there. “Let it go. I want no part in whatever scheme you’ve dreamt up this time.” He said it with feeling, mostly in fear of the repercussions should they attempt something foolish. The takeover attempt *had* been nasty, what with the embarrassing press and the call for not only Fosgate’s head, but the entire Board, himself included. Still, part of his objection was pure defiance, a flying fist in Fosgate’s fat face. Perhaps the old bastard *had* put something in the cognac.

A thunderclap startled him, and a splash of his drink spattered the hardwood. “Damn.” He drew a handkerchief from his breast pocket and knelt down to tamp at the mess.

Fosgate grimaced. “You’re such a klutz, man. Listen to me. What would you say if I told you we could be running the show at A.F. within weeks?”

Chadwick nearly spilled the rest when lightning struck again. A savage wind rattled the windows, and only when it passed did he look up, with all the fright of a child. “I ... I’d say it was the cognac,” he said weakly, exchanging narrowed glances between the hunter, and the cold rain that battered the glass. “Or rather, I think, you’ve gone completely mad.”

The antacids weren't working; Chadwick's ulcer was growing worse. It was far later than he'd planned to stay, but more troubling, the beast outside was growing into a monster.

He rose slowly from his knee, and watched with fascination as Fosgate moved to the southwest window. The man's eyes had widened at the sudden illumination of the thick forest and sprawling hills of the estate. Chadwick's Mercedes looked ghostly in the ceaseless rain, as if abandoned by an unsuspecting traveler caught in the tempest.

Fosgate took some cognac. "We've *taken* control, Chadwick. Already, the game's afoot."

Chadwick's brow rose. It was that snap in the man's voice that worried him. "Eh?"

"Arthur is formidable," Fosgate admitted. "But should the unthinkable happen, how do you rate our chances if that thorn stopped being such a prick?"

Chadwick was about to sip, but drew the glass from his lips. He regarded Fosgate's icy reflection in the windowpane with a grim, vacant stare.

"Don't play the fool, Chadwick."

"I'll be leaving now," Chadwick said stiffly. He set his glass down. "It's more than a tad late. And truth be told, I'm weary of this game."

The wind howled at the towering windows. Chadwick glanced past his host, who had been so obliging, having had Willoughby draw every curtain wide. His stomach turned in tight knots, while a cold finger ran his spine. "Perhaps ... perhaps I'll wait a spell." He would have sworn he saw a sliver of a grin cross Fosgate's reflection.

"Certainly," Fosgate said. "It may pass quickly." He turned and raised his glass. "Another?"

Though it numbed his sense to his discomfort, more alcohol would not bode well, Chadwick knew. Nor would venturing out in that maelstrom. "Another. Thank you. But I'm afraid that's my absolute limit." He glanced at the clock. Time seemed to be slowing. And racing.

Fosgate freshened their drinks, then sat in the rouge Victorian chair adjacent to Chadwick. A small table separated them. The menacing reflection of the fire in his eyes, magnified in that detestable monocle, made Chadwick stir.

“I don’t consider murder healthy competition,” Chadwick said. He could scarcely believe he’d said it.

Fosgate laughed mildly. “Always jumping to conclusions, you are. You’ve not even heard my proposal.”

“What exactly *is* your proposal?” Chadwick’s mind was spinning. He produced his handkerchief, dabbed his brow, and returned it to his pocket. He turned to the hearth. “It’s rather warm in here.”

Fosgate sipped. He seemed to draw on a deep, black thought. “Think of it. Should Arthur meet an untimely demise—purely by accident, certainly—it would take little more than a push to convince their board to ... do pardon the pun ... come on board.”

“You *are* mad,” Chadwick said emphatically. After all, they were talking about *that*, were they not? The ghastly idea of murder?

“As a hatter,” Fosgate chuckled, clearly finding this all quite amusing.

“You can’t tell me they approve of—of *this*?”

Again, Fosgate laughed. “They hold no love for the man, I assure you.”

“Still—”

“Don’t be obtuse.”

Of course, Chadwick thought. *They have no idea. No idea what a madman they’d be drawing into their lair.*

His eyes narrowed. He finished his drink, too quickly, yet as he rose, the rush he felt seemed to furnish him some much-needed courage. “I’ll have none of it,” he said, and could not recall the last time he’d said no to this man. Not so fervently. He started to say more, yet reconsidered.

“Come now, Chadwick. No secrets among thieves.”

Chadwick straightened. “Very well. You won’t get away with murder. Arthur Frost is certainly no saint—Lord knows none of us are—but he’s a human being. You’re not God.”

Fosgate clapped in mock applause. “Ohhh, bra-vohhh,” he said, his false expression mimicking grand approval after watching a stunning performance.

Chadwick was about to lash out when Fosgate ripped into him.

“Sit down,” Fosgate demanded. “Sit down before you fall to the floor in a drunken stupor. You’ll have all of it. Or you’ll be next.”

Chadwick should have been stunned. Yet somehow, he wasn’t. How well he knew the man’s wrath; it held the cut of a rapier, the thrust of unyielding will. He wanted to tear a strip from him, but swimming from drink (and knowing full well he hadn’t the pluck, never had, never would), he checked himself and eased

into his chair. “Are you threatening me? You can’t be serious.”

Fosgate sat utterly still. His stark countenance was all too telling. Chadwick wanted to snatch the man’s monocle and cram it down his filthy throat, chuckle at what he imagined to be quite a humorous sight as Fosgate’s jowls wriggled as he struggled fruitlessly to cough it up.

“I’m not a murderer, Fosgate. I’ll not be party to this.”

Fosgate held that unsettling calm—a skill sharpened from years behind desk and rifle. “Before you go off at half-cock, don’t hang the accused until you’ve heard the facts.”

Chadwick paused. He’d already said plenty. Perhaps too much. “Go on.”

Fosgate raised a chin to his trophies as the lightning lasted. “A hunter is not necessarily a killer. Killing is such ... dirty work. It’s for the common criminal. The common man. I dare say—”

“We’re above the common man?”

“Touché, old friend. Touché. But I do believe you’ve caught the spirit of this.”

Fosgate turned to the hearth, seemingly hypnotized by the flames. The eye behind the monocle flickered in the vibrant glow from the fire. “No need to get *our* hands dirty. Eh?”

Chadwick stirred. He eyed the windows with mounting dread.

“Shall I go on?” Fosgate teased.

“If you must.”

Fosgate rose and went to his writing desk. He switched on a small lamp, revealing a mildly cluttered workspace of papers, cup and calculator, writing instruments and shears, as well as the large safe that stood beside the desk. Drawing a key from his pocket, he unlocked not the safe (it held an imposing combination lock) but the desk drawer. He removed something quite large, a dark case of some sort, and returned to his chair with it.

Chadwick sat forward, keenly interested. For the moment, he had forgotten all about the storm. “What on Earth is that?”

The hunter grinned.

~ 4

“Unusual,” Chadwick muttered. Curiously, he found himself admiring, yet abhorring, the case’s deeply stained wood. The color of wine, it had fine, winding grain, but held a musty odor, like a dank cellar. Clearly, painstaking craftsmanship had gone into its manufacture, yet save the small iron hinges and rather simple lock mechanism, it bore little semblance to anything of this age.

Old, he thought. Not ancient, but *old*.

The foul smell was not the primary source of his revulsion. Sculpted around the case were nightmarish creatures—vile, fanged things that, alive and creeping, might drip bile and blood. Despite his better judgment, curiosity bested him, and he found the tips of his fingers teasing one of the carvings. Inexplicably, it felt leathery, like something that had once held life. A sudden horror struck him, and he drew his hand away, as if he’d been wandering in the dark and had touched the hard cold skin of the dead. “Pine,” he said, and that was all.

“The hardiest from Eastern Europe,” Fosgate boasted. “From the Carpathian mountains, I believe.”

“Carpathians,” Chadwick said with a laugh. “That’s quite the leg from the villa.”

“It’s had ... quite the journey.”

“You bought this last month? In Germany, of all places?”

“Surprisingly enough,” Fosgate said. “I happened upon its purchase during a stroll about the countryside. I submit, the air there is wondrously refreshing. A great help for the circulation. Magnificent scenery ... splendid views of rolling hills speckled with farms and vineyards. And the *Weinproben!* Delicious wine for the asking. When Katherine returns, you really must come. She’s remodeled the entire place. And of course, she’s incessant with her hounding.”

“You know I detest flying.”

“Bah. You’ve too many phobias. The *Friedrichsbad* in Baden-Baden—the spa’s healing qualities could likely cure your ulce—”

Chadwick’s disapproving grimace put the subject back on course.

“Quite right,” Fosgate said, almost sounding sincere. “I discovered this exceptional shop in this delightful village near the foot of the mountains. Charming area. Brimming with very down-to-earth sorts.”

“You were in the company of commoners?” Chadwick quipped.

Fosgate slipped a hand into his pocket, then proceeded to unlock the case with a black key; it appeared not metal, but stone. “Taunt me if you will. But this precious gem cost me more than half a plum.”

Chadwick was taken aback. But then, in due consideration, he came close to bellowing with laughter. Plainly a joke had been played upon him. This whole business was purely a prank.

Yet Fosgate didn't flinch.

Chadwick examined the case closely. Were it so, Fosgate had spent over fifty thousand pounds on something that, while admittedly interesting, was undoubtedly nothing more than a horrible oddity. Whatever the hell the man had cooped up in there, he was certain it wasn't worth a bob. “You've been rooked,” he said smugly. Still, he shrunk in his seat, guardedly curious.

“A fine choice of words,” Fosgate said, propping the cover at the menacing toll of a thunderclap.

~ 5

Chadwick sat up. That foul odor from the case cut deeper—the rank of time. Again that odd sensation crept over him. Of where life had once flourished, and now but rot remained.

He turned away, drawing fresh breath behind his sleeve. But like the case itself, he found himself drawn by its contents, as if he held no will. As if something unseen were forcing his hand.

The chessmen were repulsive things. Things unspeakable, things no light should stir. The creatures (*Yes, he told himself, that's what they are, creatures*) lay recessed in the wood in opposing rows, and he studied them with a nauseating mixture of curiosity and disgust.

The row nearest held figures of alabaster, the first of which was the King. It was viler than the horrible beasts which adorned the case, an uglier sister to an ugly sister. Five inches tall, perhaps two in width at its extremes, its constitution had been roughly sculpted to a vague human form. Body armor protected the torso, arms, and legs. Misshapen fingers on the left hand (which possessed only three) clenched a silvered, sharpened dagger, perched high, as if ready to be buried in a victim's heart. Its head was more monster than human, a gross interpretation by the sculptor; perhaps the work of a blind artist, he mused. It had teeth, by God, few, but apparently roughened to appear vicious. Its piercing eyes, deeply rooted in blackened sockets, were frightfully hypnotic.

Like the King, the Queen was of malformed composition, its harrowing head a mass of roughly gouged eyes and razor-like teeth. Its right arm was raised, cocked to thrust what appeared to be the stone equivalent of a raging ball of fire.

What one would call a Bishop, or rather, two Bishops—although he had to force himself to imagine that the horrors beside the Queen were even chessmen—bore that same disturbing misshapeness. Their fierceness seemed subdued compared to the others, that was, until he regarded their weapons. Each held a staff of silver tipped with a savage blade.

Hulking bodies, half man-thing, half horse-thing, lay in wait, silent Knights of terror. They were hideous mutants with huge horse legs and bulging human arms. Forged armor fitted their chests. Their deformed heads were masked with simple helmets that appeared more like stony blobs of petrified feces than protective headgear. One could imagine the dim yellow of their eyes, creeping in

the hollows behind the masks. Unlike the Bishops, the Knights differed in that each bore its own unique weapon: one slew its opponent with an oversized broadsword, curved slightly upwards at the tip; the other wrought hell upon its victim by the sling of a flesh-gouging mace.

The Rooks were filthy and repugnant—nightmarish golems. Brick-like in construction, they were far larger than the others. Despite the fact that they harbored no weapons, no doubt they could crush their victims and devour the remains with their oversized and hungering mouths.

Eight smaller creatures, the Pawns, of course—rounded out the white side. These were simpler affairs, little killing machines, no more than disfigured blobs bearing arrow and bow. Still, they settled in the soul like lurking demons.

He examined the dark pieces with equal fascination. No less obscene, they were far more frightening than their counterparts. Although he could not put his finger on it, there was something about them which terrified him. He supposed it was the light, or lack of it, which made them seem more menacing. Or was his mind playing tricks? He clasped his hands together for fear of touching one of them. Yet the temptation to look closer, to pick one up, very nearly overwhelmed him.

He felt a cold stir. The mace of the black Knight—
It changed hands, he thought. It did.

He sought Fosgate for confirmation. But when the man simply grinned the way he did, his gaze fell back to the case. The mace was back where it was. “Close it,” he whispered.

Fosgate did no such thing. “Something the matter, old boy? I’ll grant the odor is somewhat offensive.”

Chadwick found it impossible to look away. “... They’re ... extraordinary.”
“Aren’t they.”

Fosgate motioned with the set, prodded really, and before Chadwick found the sense to reconsider, found himself reaching for a white Pawn.

No bloody way I’m touching those black things.

His fingers trembled as he took it up. As sound as marble, it was cold to the touch. And yet, it felt vibrant at an indescribable level. But how could that possibly be?

“Detestable.” Still, he marveled at the bow of stone, the arrow of silver. He ran a finger along the tip, and in a sharp reflex, drew his hand back in pain.

“Careful,” Fosgate warned. He took the piece and set it back. “They’re quite realistic.”

“I see that,” Chadwick said, his lips wrapped around his pricked index finger.

Another thunderclap rattled him. He steadied himself and sipped from his glass. The alcohol had begun to catch up with him, and despite the need he remain sober for the long drive home, he was grateful for its calming hand.

He noticed a pair of vacant spots inside the case that sat between the opposing sides. Triangular in shape, they were no more than two inches wide at their base. He had wanted to ask, but more pressing matters concerned him. “Fosgate, what’s this all about?”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. Perhaps a little background first?”

Chadwick considered and conceded with a nod.

Fosgate placed the set on the table. He produced a small tobacco pouch, tapped the spent ashes from the pipe into a tall brass collector beside his chair, then refilled the chamber with fresh tobacco. He struck a match and lit up, then worked the long stem with quick puffs. Chadwick stiffened against that malodorous smoke.

Fosgate slipped the bit from his lips. “It has a rather nasty legacy, I’m afraid.”

“Indeed,” Chadwick said, raising a brow.

“I see you’re dry. One more?”

Damn you, old man. I’ve got to leave before I can’t.

Yet he felt as if he had to stay. Fosgate had sold him quite the bill of goods, had certainly piqued his interest if nothing more. At that he offered his glass, which his host took most readily. He’d have but one more, allow the man to indulge himself. Storm be damned.

Fosgate returned with two filled glasses and made himself comfortable in his chair. He drew up his pipe and sat back, and with a sly, reverent glance to his grandfather, told the tale.

“As I’d mentioned,” Fosgate began, “I was strolling about this rather obscure hamlet along the *Weinstrasse*. I can’t recall the name of the place, for it was a rather strict German-sounding thing, like Krichstein or Strickensmautz or something or other; you know how cold that language is. Katherine keeps on about how simple it is to pick up. I’ve tried, but keep failing, I’m afraid. Were it not for her relatives and the clean air, I’d just as soon stay in London. At least I can read the bloody signs.

“Katherine had joined her aunt in Freiburg for the weekend. Yes, in pursuit of yet another cuckoo clock. Apparently it’s still an art over there, and quite the cottage industry. Well ... left alone I had little else to do, and thus a walk seemed to suffice. I hadn’t been along more than forty-five minutes when I chanced upon this quaint little establishment at the foothills of a rather mountainous area. More a cross between an old-style bakery and a tuck shop. Although that’s not right, somehow. No. It was more like ... like something out of a child’s fantasy. Like a home of gingerbread!

“It had a plain sign above the entrance. Naturally it was German, and I hadn’t the foggiest, but I do remember what it said: *Buchhandlung*. When Katherine returned she translated for me. ‘Bookstore.’ Needless to say, I was quite embarrassed. But she was right, I assure you. A simple name, but an apt description of the interior.

“When I entered, it seemed abandoned. The only light came from two smallish windows. The smells affirmed my estimation of the place as some sort of bake shop. The thick aroma of pastries filled the air, and true enough, the far end of the shop offered a variety. Cream cakes, fruit flans, breads. I hadn’t had breakfast that morning and the walk had made me ravenous; perhaps that was why the aroma was so overwhelming. I can almost smell the freshly baked muffins as I’m talking to you now.

“The rest of the place was no less remarkable. The left side brimmed with rows of bookshelves, each of them stuffed with wonderful titles. I was quite in awe, and quite envious. Dare I say I discovered several first editions, perfectly preserved! A good deal were in German, yet there were volumes in French, Italian, Spanish, and English. Works of Nabokov and Tolstoy. Shakespeare and Homer. *Hitler*.

“As it was, I browsed for no more than five minutes when this curious little fellow startled me. Strange ... now that I think of him, I don’t recall hearing his footsteps. A rather odd individual, I assure you.

“Yet that’s neither here nor there. The most unusual section was reserved for an area near the back. There, upon magnificent hand-crafted tables arranged in tidy rows, were a selection of the oddest assortment of items. Knick-knacks, Christmas ornaments, bibles, small reading lamps, pottery ... other whatnot. It tasked me, taking it all in. Each article seemed to scream for my attention. I recall a rush of gooseflesh running my arms all the way to my neck. I’ve no idea why these things instilled such a start, yet they did.

“The proprietor? There all the while. He could see the ... no, that’s incorrect, I’ve not given him credit here ... he could *sense* the feeling I’d received from these curious items. He took me by the hand—I had to stop him, for I’d had a copy of *Mein Kampf* pulled half way from its resting place—and he led me to the tables.

“‘*Kommen sie,*’ he directed me. A smile escaped me, and he smiled back. It was completely engaging. I suddenly felt very at ease with him. I commented on his fine collections, and he simply nodded. My stomach growled just then, and he mumbled something in German. He left me momentarily, only to return with the most delicious slice of Black Forest cake. He pulled up a wooden stool and sat upon it in a very delicate manner. I thanked him for the offering, and ate while he spoke. His words ... sharp and cutting ... due certainly to that language. Clearly he knew English, but he struggled with it. Yet at the same time, he was quite hypnotic.

“‘*Dreams,*’ he told me, raising the oldest finger to his lips. I’d no idea at the time what he was on about. He slipped off his stool and moved slowly about the tables. He seemed quite fragile, yet graceful in his way. He mumbled. German gibberish. It was then that I’d realized he was seeking something very particular. Occasionally he’d pause upon a certain item; lean close to it and put a hand to his ear. Do you recall the sensation I’d experienced earlier, as if the wares had screamed at me? It was truer than I’d imagined. Certainly you could discard it out of hand. I mean, here was this odd-looking Aryan listening to ... to *things*.

“How odd-looking? Odd. He bore an ancient face. As old as the hills, eh? His crisp white hair was striking against the drab clothing he wore. Silky. Angelic. Yet what I recall most vividly are his shoes—old, supple leather—if only because he made no sound as he stepped. He seemed out of sync with the world ... out of time, if you will.

“Perhaps I’m overplaying his appearance, but I can see him as clearly as I see you now, Chadwick. He had this vividness about him. Spirited, yet down to earth. Very sensible ...

“Yes. Sorry. Where was I? The tables, thank you. Did I mention that he stopped and *listened* to some of the items? I did. Good. Well then, you have a fine sense of his oddness then. As I consumed my cake, he persisted a solid ten minutes in his search. Finally, he stopped at the table furthest from me and began moving items to and fro. One item in particular—heh, heh, I’m certain it was a fake, although still I can’t be certain—was a golden chalice. The man was extraordinarily cautious with it, trembling as he moved it from the table to a small shelf. As if God Himself should strike him dead should he drop it. The cup of a carpenter? I learned soon enough not to dismiss it.

“Security? I’ve no idea how he safeguards these things. Surely some of the texts are invaluable. And his recipe for Black Forest cake is positively priceless. But most of the articles in that shop—if not every last urn and chalice—must be counterfeit.

“Say no more, Chadwick. Has he taken this old Englishman for a fool? Perhaps. But then, perhaps not.

“The history! Ahhhh, yes. Let’s get to that, eh? Let me refresh you first. I think you’ll need it. How’s your condition? Good. Perhaps the storm will pass. There you are. A toast! To the past. To the *future*.”

“I suppose I’ll start at the beginning,” Fosgate said. “The proprietor had finally settled upon a large, rather nondescript chest. Oak, if I recall. He pondered a moment, and just when I had figured this was not what he’d been looking for, he produced a set of keys and unlocked it. Curiously, he raised the cover ever so gently so as not to disturb what was hidden inside. Like the chalice, he seemed in awe of it ... respectful. And utterly fearful.

“Of course it was the extraordinary case you see here. My first impression was similar to your own. A rather disturbing affair, but one that offered a story begging to be told. Honestly, Chadwick, when he brought it to me I thought it might harbor nothing more than cutlery ... perhaps some worthless treasure maps or trinkets.

“He removed the case from the chest and insisted I take it, and at first I protested. He slipped a key from his key ring—this one, yes—and handed it to me. I nearly dropped the whole mess I was so nervous, yet I’ve no idea why. But something swept through me, practically flooding my senses with want. The need to *know*. Whatever the facts, I was completely taken. It was as if a spell had been cast upon me by this strangest of magicians.

“He egged me on, and I opened it. What I saw made my skin crawl. Like you, I’d not wanted to be anywhere near these pieces, much less touch them. But they held this attraction, this power ... I mumbled something or other, and the old man laughed.

“Curious ... his laugh didn’t suit him. Nothing like I would have imagined it to be. Counterfeit. Like the rest of his collection.

“At any rate, the cards were stacked against me. Of all the curiosities strewn about the place, the old man had settled upon *this*. Yes, I’m certain. He *knew*. Knew no matter what the ask, I’d pay. You see, it wasn’t a question of price. It was a question of desire. Far more than you can imagine. The damned thing had a hold on me that was entirely intoxicating.

“Still, not really wanting to—you can understand how stupid I must have felt—I could hardly believe it when I informed him I’d take it. Without so much as asking the price! He laughed, clearly satisfied. Perhaps a part of him was relieved ... to see it go, eh? Truth be told, the nape of my neck tingled at that laugh, and it still vexes me that I can’t reconcile that face with the laughter. It

was of little consequence, however, for I'd been hooked—or rooked—as you'd so eloquently put it.

“Yet I digress. The set itself is hundreds of years old. It dates to the fifteenth century from what the German told me, but I suspect it is far older. He spoke of a Dark Prince, a brutal tyrant who held no soul. A man so sinister that to maim and to kill seemed like sport. Men, women, children ... tortured ... raped. Forced to eat their own excrement. Pregnant women slashed open, their unborn devoured by this demon. His bloodlust knew no bounds. I must admit, my own lust for the device had quickly soured.

“Yes, *device*. That's what the man had called it. As if it contained gears and switches. I myself had questioned him on that choice of word, and at that, he told me of the witch.

“The Prince held deep ties to the occult, and according to legend—as relayed to me by this curious individual—his witch had presented this to her lord as a means of raging war against his greatest enemy at the time—*Christianity*. It had spread across Europe, and ... well ... you see his problem. The kingdom was in jeopardy. How well we understand.”

Chadwick sipped.

“What he told me next stirs anger and disgust,” Fosgate went on. “The Prince, having placed his faith in the device, used it that very night ... to kill fifteen children.”

Chadwick stiffened. Close by, thunder threatened.

Drawing his pipe, Fosgate continued. “Upon this madman's death, the set disappeared for almost half a millennium. Now, if you know your history, you'll know that what were once the principalities of Moldavia and Walachia now constitute most of present-day Romania—yes, Transylvania. But this isn't a vampire story, although it certainly holds root. You see, Walachia was ruled by several Princes—Vlad the Third, to be more precise—Vlad Tepes. Correct, Chadwick: Tepes ... ‘The Impaler.’ Of course, Stoker based an entire novel upon him. And yes, Tepes ruled Walachia in the mid-fifteenth century. History tells us he killed thousands ... perhaps *twenty* thousand.”

“Fosgate—”

“How many fell to the hand of this device?”

Chadwick chuckled nervously. Surely this was rubbish, after all. Yet in all his years, he had never known Fosgate to tell such a grand tale. Still, he had to admit that at some level he was truly enjoying this; it was as if they were two school chums camped around a fire, hanging on the very thread of a frightful ghost

story.

“It was when the proprietor spoke of the Nazis that I started to believe,” Fosgate said. “The Fascists under Ion Antonescu controlled Romania. My father actually met him, of all places, in a café in Brussels in 1937. At some point, the set was discovered and fell into Antonescu’s possession. In 1941 he sided with the Axis, and to score points with the Germans—no doubt keenly aware of Hitler’s fascination with the occult—presented him with the set when they met in Bucharest.”

“That may be,” Chadwick conceded. “But it doesn’t prove the set was owned by Tepes.”

“Did you know that what is now Bucharest was originally a medieval fortress? And was itself the residence of the Princes of Walachia?”

Chadwick said nothing.

“Surely Hitler was intrigued,” Fosgate said. “Here was another toy to play with—another slice of his Final Solution pie. Almost immediately, he began experiments at Auschwitz.”

Chadwick sat forward, astonished by Fosgate's assertion that this bizarre chess set had been used at the death camp of Auschwitz. "Rubbish. You're not suggesting—"

"A million perished there," Fosgate cut in. "Mostly the Jew. Most from starvation and extermination. How many fell prey to gruesome medical experiments? Further, I submit that some of the experiments went beyond science. I've become somewhat of an expert on the war, as you know. I've done some digging. There are several documented cases where prisoners were used in bizarre occult experiments. In one scenario, a captive would be brought into a room offering no more than the cold comfort of a wooden stool, whereupon they were instructed to sit and wait until further notice. After some length—the duration varied unpredictably, from hours to mere minutes—some of these poor devils would begin to shriek in terror. Without fail, they would claw at the door, pleading to be set free. Only when the screaming stopped—often *much* later, for fear of what lay beyond—would the soldiers open the door. Signed witness accounts testify to this.

"A good deal died in that room. The fortunate few who survived were completely mystified over the entire experience. Nothing at all had happened to them. They were shot, naturally, so as not to arouse undue suspicion. One could suppose that luck *had* smiled upon them, eh? Considering the madness that had taken the others. Still, it's unclear why they'd been unaffected by the experiment.

"Indeed, Chadwick! *Yes*. I've asked myself that very thing. Why *wasn't* the device used against the Allies? Perhaps it was. But consider: even a rigged game of chess takes several moves from opening to checkmate. Utterly inefficient. No. This is an insidious device, for more ... shall we say ... *personal* use. Hitler may have tried to eliminate Churchill or Stalin with it—I'm certain of that—but perhaps distance is a factor here. Whatever its power, its range may be limited.

"One other thing. Look at this. No. Here. On the inside of the case cover. Do you see?"

"Forgery? That was my assessment as well.

"I engaged three independent handwriting experts to authenticate—or disprove—the signature. Each compared it against known, legitimate signatures. A perfect match."

Chadwick met Fosgate with suspicious eyes.

Fosgate could only grin. “Even if the story is nothing more than a wild sales pitch, I’m guilty of succumbing to its charm. Yet of this I am certain: this is Hitler’s signature. That alone makes this discovery invaluable.

“Make no mistake, Chadwick. This is the genuine article. Take a look beneath the black Queen. Please ... indulge me. She won’t bite.

“Intriguing, wouldn’t you say? Now examine the others.

“Quite right. Conspicuously absent from both Kings. Yet all others bear the mark.”

Still holding a white Pawn, Chadwick considered the inscribed pentagram at its base. He set the piece back and was glad to be rid of it. “Perhaps it’s due to the fact that a King can’t be used to defeat the other King.”

“Excellent,” Fosgate said. “Rules are rules, even in magic. As for the other pieces? What I now believe—as certain as that signature—is that the mark represents an instrument of death.”

“Preposterous,” Chadwick said, yet found himself doubting his disbelief. “Do you hear what you’re saying? To suggest—to *entertain*—that this is some sort of hocus pocus, to be used to slay one’s enemies ... are you even listening to me?”

Fosgate seemed adrift in his own thoughts. He slipped the pipe from his lips and sipped some cognac. His monocle flickered in the sudden lightning. “I have photographs ... but I’m aware of your delicate constitution. You see, those captives at Auschwitz—those in the experiments—I failed to mention a rather disturbing fact regarding their demise. Each victim died under different circumstances. Some gutted with a large knife or sword. Others hacked to death. Others beheaded. Shall I fetch the photos? No? I thought not.

“What tasks me is that all of this had gone on while they were isolated in a locked room. Yet there are no accounts of what actually transpired behind that door.”

“Nothing?” Chadwick said. “That’s hard to imagine, given the Nazis notoriety for keeping records.”

“Precisely. If there are records, they’ve eluded me. But ever the hunter, I did manage to track down an old film reel—and paid a fair price to have it restored. The film was quite damaged, but a short segment was saved.”

“And?”

No reply was forthcoming.

“Fosgate?”

“It shows ... *something*.”

“Something?”

“I can’t explain it,” Fosgate said, after some deliberation. “It lasts no more than a few seconds. But it is the most terrifying breaths one could endure. Would you care to see it?”

“Not in the least. What do you *think* you saw?”

Again, Fosgate considered. “I can’t say, exactly. And I couldn’t speculate.”

“I see,” Chadwick said, nodding. “... Fosgate ... there’s something else.”

“Yes. The ... *survivors*, if you will.”

“Why weren’t they harmed?”

“I do hold a theory. Should a match end in stalemate, would not the target be spared?”

“Seems a reasonable assumption,” Chadwick said, although humoring Fosgate seemed the worst thing he could do. “Tell me ... what exactly *did* you pay for this ... *thing*.” He paused, his eyes tracing every sculpted line, every shadow, among the pieces. “Admit it. You didn’t really spend what you told me.”

“‘*Der preis?*’ I’d finally asked,” Fosgate said. “‘*Sehr gut,*’ the proprietor told me. ‘*Und sehr teuer.*’ ‘Very good. And very expensive,’ Katherine later warned me. I admit: I’d fallen for the set. Cost mattered nothing.”

Chadwick’s silence said it all.

“Agreed,” Fosgate granted. “I should have been on my way right then and there. But I suppose I may have led you astray on the price. Expensive, certainly—and very likely worth much more due to that signature—but not nearly as much as I’ve let on. I’m afraid I was never good at currency conversion, but in my estimation it was closer to fourteen hundred pounds. Cash only, you understand.

“Clearly, I had no funds of that sort about me. But being a man of means ... suffice to say, the German’s old eyes lit up with what I’d offered in barter. Hard to imagine, isn’t it? This curious fellow driving about the mountains of Baden-Württemberg in my BMW. I can only assume, naturally. I left the keys, but he would have had to make quite the trek to fetch the motorcar.”

“The Coupe? Are you insane?”

“The Cabriolet, I’m afraid.”

Chadwick barely mustered a chuckle. The storm tempered him.

“Do you see?” Fosgate said. “The little Shylock knew only too well I’d wanted the set. As I said, of the countless items available, he offered this. As if it had called to him, begging to be proffered. Perhaps that’s the way it is in that strangest of shops; perhaps each item merely bides its time, year upon year, until

their time has come. Until that fateful moment when its rightful owner returns.”

“Rightful?”

“Happenstance?” Fosgate retorted. “I think not. The odds against are incalculable.”

And then, before Chadwick could respond: “The man spoke of dreams ... *my* dreams. This is not founded on the whims of chance. There is something at work here. Something far larger than ourselves.”

Chadwick shook his head. “An interesting tale. But there’s one detail you’ve overlooked. And quite frankly, I’m surprised. You’ve no idea this even works.”

Fosgate puffed. Sat back. “Indeed. Let’s have at it, shall we?”

Chadwick started at some deafening thunder. Harsh wind and rain slammed against the windows. A chill rippled through him, further stirring the black ill in his gut. "Enough, Fosgate. Enough of this nonsense. I really must be off."

Fosgate, who had moved to the hearth, stoked the fire. Hunched the way he was, his long shadow on the wall cast a ghoulish sight. "You'll do as I deem. By God man, you will."

"I beg your pardon."

The hunter turned to Chadwick, poker in hand. "What are you afraid of?"

Chadwick plunked his drink on the table. "I've had quite enough of this," he said, rising. "Thank you for a wonderful evening."

He turned his back to the hearth, certain that Fosgate would never bring himself to strike. The man's admission of distaste for such a deed notwithstanding, the very notion seemed unfathomable. Fosgate harbored a black temper to be sure, but to kill him?

He stepped softly to the doors, and as he reached them, Fosgate's sharp tongue slapped him.

"I wouldn't, Chadwick."

Chadwick held a moment. He closed his eyes, imagining the long drive home in the battering rain. If only he'd left earlier; if only the damned storm had let up.

He turned. His head was spinning from the alcohol, but he held enough of his faculties to parry with Fosgate. "I'm not afraid to go to the police."

Fosgate set the poker in its stand. The lights flickered. "And what exactly might you say?"

Again, the lights faltered. Lightning flashed at the windows.

Fosgate grinned. "I think it best you stay the night, old boy. The storm's not letting up. And besides, you've had much too much."

"Damn you!" Chadwick said. "You've no moral ground. You've been plying me with alcohol all night. You had no intention of allowing me to leave."

He seethed. It would take at least an hour on a mild evening to reach home, but on a night like this? He reeled at the vivid recollection of a slippery roadway, an overturned lorry ... and what remained of the guardrail where his drunken father's motorcar shot through on its way to the bottom of the Thames.

He regarded the chess set with disdain. "This won't work. It *won't*."

“Are you so certain I’m mad?”

Chadwick did not respond; instead, he glanced at the clock. He excused himself momentarily, made a call to his wife on his cell—almost asked her to call the police, thought not to worry her—and returned to the study. “I’ll stay the night,” he said anxiously, reacting to the furious wind. “But I’m not playing that game.”

“Indulge me. Let’s put that Chadwick skepticism to the test.”

“And should I win?”

Fosgate laughed heartily. “That’s the spirit! You are the better player, after all.”

Chadwick’s eyes narrowed.

“Ah, all business,” Fosgate said. “But I suppose all’s fair in chess and war, eh? I defer, then. Should you prevail, the set is yours. Do with it what you will.”

“And should I lose?”

Fosgate laughed. “Should you lose ... then this old hunter has found new prey.”

This is madness, Chadwick thought. Still, it was all too clear that Fosgate’s desire far exceeded his ability to resist. The man would badger him until the storm passed, which held no sign of abating. And yet, he rather fancied the chance of winning the bloody thing and tossing it into the Thames. To wipe that smirk off that arrogant face would be priceless.

He took up his drink and finished it. “Fetch us another,” he said stiffly. And at that moment, beyond the windows, beyond this Earth, the gods thundered.

Along the west wall sat two wingback chairs. Each faced the other across an Italian marble table, which doubled as a chessboard. Brass British soldiers led by the Duke of Wellington stood at arms, readied for the pewter French commanded by Napoleon.

“Do we have to play right here?” Chadwick said. “I can’t sit next to this window.”

Fosgate drew the drapes. “Satisfied?”

“Not at all.”

With a huff, Fosgate indulged him. It was massive to be sure, yet after some effort, they managed to reposition the board to their seats near the hearth. Fosgate freshened their drinks as Chadwick replaced the chessmen. It was unsettling work, and upon removing it from the case, the black King had nearly slipped from his grasp. If only it had smashed into pieces.

He took up a seat on the white side. *The lesser of two evils*, he thought.

Fosgate returned with their glasses and smiled at the seating arrangement. “Of course, Chadwick. I suspected as much.” He went to take his seat, but stopped. “My word ... in all this excitement, I nearly forgot.”

Fosgate went to his writing desk and opened the side drawer. From it he produced a thick book, and he lumbered back to Chadwick and handed it to him. The Greater London telephone directory.

Taking it, Chadwick looked up, positively puzzled.

“Would you rather we choose someone dear to you?” Fosgate snapped.

Chadwick reeled. Until now, his quite logical mind had disputed all of this as folly. But as he felt the heaviness of the directory in his hands, the reality of what they were about to do struck him with both barrels. And yet, something clicked inside of him. A duality consumed him. Fear, certainly ... and morbid curiosity.

He thrust the directory back to Fosgate, who snatched it easily. Ever alert, ever the hunter.

“Oh, come now,” Fosgate snarled. “Empirical research requires established constants and variables. The constants are obvious, set by the rules of chess. The variables—”

“Then why not *Frost*?”

“All in good time. Now, as I was saying—”

“This has gone far enough. I’ll play you for the damn set. But not for someone’s life.”

Fosgate cleared his throat. He spoke as he did in the boardroom, in that cutting, calculating manner. “The variables ... are the unfortunate souls not bright enough to have unlisted numbers.” He flung the book back.

Chadwick nearly fumbled it as he caught it. He steadied himself. His gaze fell upon the dark King, which held all the grotesquerie of a burn victim. Its eyes seemed to pierce his soul like a knife.

He rose. He had every intention of leaving, but Fosgate shoved him solidly at the chest, driving him back into his seat. Stunned, his eyes widened at the distinct cock of a pistol. He looked up, disbelieving, a deadly barrel bearing down on him.

He spied the glass case from where the weapon had come. Empty.

He fetched it while I made the call.

He held no doubt it was loaded. Who knew how long the man had been planning this. He’d even waited for the perfect storm.

Fosgate was grinning. “I could finish you right here and now,” he said matter-of-factly. “But where’s the sport? You know how so I love a challenge. The hunt. Chess is tea for two. A *tango*.”

“Please,” Chadwick said, his voice trailing off. He flipped open the directory, telling himself this was all a bad dream. Telling himself it wouldn’t work anyway. Heaven help them if it did.

“No peeking,” Fosgate ribbed. The lights failed a moment as the wind wailed.

Dismayed, Chadwick closed his eyes. He took second and even third thoughts, then plunked a finger down on the page. He opened his eyes. Lightning lit up the room. “Stanley, D ... 48 Ashwood,” he whispered.

A pair of scissors—no doubt these, too, lifted during those scant few minutes of his call—beckoned when he looked up. His eyes said, *Now what?*

“Cut out the name,” Fosgate instructed.

Chadwick received the shears. As they passed from Fosgate’s hand to his, the thought of taking them and driving them through the man’s heart stirred him.

“Can’t we just write it?”

“Cut,” Fosgate commanded.

Chadwick deferred. He cut along the page between the first and second columns and cut out the name with delicate precision. Fosgate then handed him a pen and instructed him to strike out the name on the flip side of the snippet, which he did, but not before catching a glimpse of the name there: Stewart,

Alfred. He wondered if it would be enough, this name-scratching business. Dare they think such folly would protect the man?

Fosgate prodded with the pistol, and Chadwick, grasping only too well, nodded. Setting the first clipping aside, he flipped to another random page, and with but a few careful snips and a scribbling of the pen, offered one Gordon Cooper as a lamb. He presented this one to Fosgate, who took it eagerly, and set the directory on the floor. He mused how fitting it would be if he'd drawn *their* names—not that they would have proceeded—but of course they weren't listed. Chances were, none of their circle were.

"The pen ... and the shears," Fosgate said. He took them and set them aside.

Chadwick spied the poker—imagined himself reaching for it—and froze. He cursed his indecision.

Fosgate drew a drawer from the side of the table and produced a pair of small, pyramid-shaped items. One was white, one charcoal, the constitution of which Chadwick could only speculate. They struck him as aged things, yet they bore no symbols or script. Closer inspection of the white one revealed a scarcely visible line separating its peak from the base, indicating a cap, and on further consideration, two thoughts struck him: it would fit snugly into the case in one of those vacant spots ... and its diabolical purpose.

Fosgate handed him the white pyramid. It was surprisingly weighty, a pound if an ounce. Curious but cautious, Chadwick tried to open the top to no avail. He turned it clockwise, felt no give, and only a counter-clockwise move did the trick. It clicked loose and he removed the top, revealing nothing save an empty vessel.

He looked to Fosgate, and watched with trepidation as the man placed his clipping inside the black receptacle. Fosgate stuffed it in with his left index finger, careful not to set off the pistol's trigger with his right hand. Chadwick followed suit and capped his container with a click. The rather innocent sound seemed to echo deep inside his brain.

"Part and parcel," Fosgate explained, capping his. "The old man's instructions were clear. Simply insert something to identify the ... *target*, if you will. A lock of hair ... a ring, perhaps."

"Or just a name."

Fosgate nodded. "Apparently that's all it needs."

"Apparently all *you* need," Chadwick said.

Chadwick launched the experiment—an experiment he prayed was doomed to fail—by leading his Queen’s Knight. As he set the piece down, a small, lonely voice inside his head tasked him: *Don’t do this*. A grueling forty-five minutes later at the strike of one, he moved his surviving Knight into position, his hand trembling. His ulcer threatened to double him over, and he faltered as he muttered that single, deadly word. “Checkmate.”

Fosgate met him squarely—his eyes seemed to blacken—and offered no more than a mischievous grin. He had lost the match, but the real game was about to begin.

~

Silence slipped between them, and for the longest time the only sounds were of driving rain and crackling fire. When thunder struck like a resounding cannon, Chadwick shivered with terror; his gaze whipped to the west window. Impatient with him during one of his longer moves, Fosgate had opened the drapes there, the storm blowing more fiercely from that direction, knowing full well it would put him off his game.

“May I draw those?” he asked, getting up with his drink. At the window, he drew one panel and then the other. He moved quickly to the southern side with the intent on closing the drapes there too, but as he did, lightning lit up the estate, illuminating it for several seconds. He held short, a sharp cold rippling through him. His Mercedes beckoned in the roundabout driveway.

He held his back to Fosgate. “And now?”

“We’re in the news game,” Fosgate said dryly, as if they were discussing possible headlines for the outcome of a dreary economic summit. “We wait.”

~

A dim glow from a bedside lamp kept Chadwick calm until four; they had retired at two. The storm ended, mercifully, and he, feverish and terrified, slipped into a drunken darkness. He did not dream.

At breakfast (which was hot black coffee for the listless Chadwick, a hearty meal of poached eggs, potatoes, and various muffins for Fosgate, the weekend

help dismissed for the duration afterward), they waited wordlessly for the report at the top of the hour. The breakfast room boasted a large plasma television, and even Fosgate rippled with gooseflesh when the crawl at the bottom of the screen flashed the headline.

THREE LONDONERS BEHEADED

“God help us,” Chadwick gasped. His ulcer bled.

~ 12

Still dressed in yesterday's best, Chadwick did not wait for the details in the news report. He ignored the pain and fled the breakfast room, hurrying to the study.

Wrapped in a thick gold bathrobe over silk pajamas, Fosgate followed. "What? What is it, man?"

Chadwick stood at the chessboard, fearful. The receptacles lay amid the vanquished pieces at the side of the board. His heart raced. He almost turned and ran. Only guilt forced his hand. He snatched up the dark receptacle and removed its cap. He peered inside.

A sliver of paper. A life spared.

"Chadwick—"

Chadwick shushed Fosgate angrily. He swallowed something thick as he took up the white container. A part of him stood cold in disbelief. The other part, a darker one, spoke softly, spoke only the truth. The truth he already knew.

This is real.

Slowly, he turned the top of the receptacle, and it clicked open. The sound resonated inside of him as if he'd drawn a stone door to an ancient tomb. He removed the top, and his heart sank.

He turned to Fosgate—neither said a word—and slowly dumped the contents onto the board.

Ashes.

Chadwick's eyes glistened as they grew. He found the directory and began flipping through it like a man possessed. Fosgate told him to get a hold of himself, but he heard none of it. At last, he stopped at the listing where *Stanley, D*, had been.

"What, man? *What?*" Fosgate said.

Chadwick whirled around. "There were three, you bastard. *Three—*"

His voice choked off, and he had to gather himself. Without a word, he moved to the south window. His Mercedes called for him in the warm morning sunshine, as it had called to him during the storm. If only he'd listened; if only he'd risked the drive home. Even if he hadn't made it.

He turned and faced the hunter. "Do you see, Fosgate? Do you see what you've wrought?"

“Chadwick—”

“Don’t Chadwick *me*, you bastard. Don’t you understand?”

“Certainly. I’m not stupid.”

“No. You’re not. You *knew* this would happen.”

“I knew nothing of the sort. But I admit, I had considered the possibility. A variable in our little experiment.”

“A *variable*? A *VARIABLE*?” Chadwick snatched up the directory, offering it like a game show host teasing with a handful of cash. “What do you say, Fosgate? There are three *pages* of Stanleys. Why not just leave off the *D*?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“*Why not cut out every last fucking name?*”

“Chadwick, your ulcer—”

The big book struck the floor as Chadwick doubled over. The agony brought him to his knees, and when Fosgate approached, he struck a defiant hand. Fosgate hurried from the study, and when he returned with a cold glass of water, Chadwick took it quickly with a pair of antacids. Fosgate helped him to his seat.

“You’ve murdered three innocent people,” Chadwick said feebly. “Their families—”

He looked up, to a face of cold stone.

“Rubbish,” Fosgate said plainly, clearly more concerned with retrieving the directory. “But I’d think twice about what you’re thinking. The fact is, even if the police did believe you, you’re as guilty as I.”

Chadwick was ill-equipped for rebuttal. Things were happening too fast. He felt dizzy. His hands fell cold, and his head ached with a hangover. He held his tongue.

“That’s a good lad,” Fosgate said. “Cheer up. We’ve no need for concern. It’s not as if the police could ever connect us with ... what the devil?”

Chadwick followed Fosgate’s gaze, which had fallen upon the Knight that Chadwick had used to best him. Blood spattered the broadsword.

Fosgate drew a handkerchief from his pocket and ran the Knight’s sword across the silk. Carefully, he slid the tip of his finger along the glistening blade.

“Be careful, Fosgate—”

“Remarkable,” Fosgate said, under his breath.

“*Remarkable*? Is that what you think?”

Already, Fosgate was going for the radio on his desk. The report offered little details on the murders, the police even less. He lowered the volume as the next story began, about a two-bus collision near Trafalgar Square.

Chadwick's insides were knotting, like worms in a bait box. Suddenly, the name Albert Stewart leapt into his head, the name he'd blacked out with ink. The report made no mention of him. Perhaps his body hadn't yet been discovered. Or—and he prayed to God he was right—the man *had* been spared from the dark force they'd unleashed. “We've got to stop this. *Now.*”

“To the victor go the spoils,” Fosgate agreed. “Our wager was clear.”

“I've no intention of keeping *that*,” Chadwick bellowed, pointing to the set as if it were some kind of rabid animal. “It's cursed.”

Fosgate laughed. “Listen to yourself. Now who's mad?”

Rising slowly, Chadwick mustered: “Fine. I'll drown it in the Thames. I'll see to it on my way.”

But the sly hunter soured. Fosgate slipped the pistol from the deep pocket of his robe. “I think not.”

“We agreed. Fosgate ... *please.*”

“Shall we?” Fosgate said, drawing a seat at the table. When Chadwick resisted, he motioned with the pistol.

“I'd rather a bullet,” Chadwick said, though his game face was wanting.

“You would indeed. There *are* worse ways to go.”

Chadwick's attention slipped to the chessboard. To the Knight's blade. “You wouldn't. Fosgate. You wouldn't.”

Fosgate slipped the pistol in his pocket. “Perhaps not,” he said, making himself comfortable. “But I expect your best efforts. No deception. We play to win.” He blew the ashes from the board, and then his eyes narrowed. “I trust you *do* understand, eh?”

“Fosgate—”

Fosgate ran a hand above the board as he scanned the pieces, finally settling on a menacing Rook. The black thing looked as if it could crush a person's skull with a glance. “Dreadful, isn't it,” he said, more statement than question. “I can't imagine what such a beast might do to your dear Eydie.”

Chadwick felt as if a blade had pierced his heart. “Bloody Christ,” he said, and sat.

Fosgate decreed that further experiments were needed. This time, however, they had been careful to select “targets” unique in their listing. As a further precaution—to narrow the variables, eh, Fosgate had quipped—for each name, they included the address and the telephone number. Three grueling matches drew long into the afternoon, and Chadwick, despite his failing spirit, had become quite efficient with his Knight, having twice dispatched Fosgate with some deft strategy. The third and final victory—if one could call murder victory—came with his Rook, and after a rather subdued tea in the breakfast room, he followed Fosgate to the study. Cognac in hand, he sat at the south window fearful of the growing cloud cover, while Fosgate tuned to the BBC. Chadwick prayed for a miracle, not really believing one would come to pass.

Anchored by a woman bearing a thick European accent, the radio report began with an update on the so-called “Phonebook Phantom,” what one quick-witted newshound had dubbed the serial killer who had beheaded three victims, all unrelated other than by last name and first initial. Police were baffled, admitting they possessed not a single lead, yet were hopeful that London’s latest murder, that of nineteen-year-old Thomas Crowley, an employee of a filling station in Romford, would turn out as the break they were seeking. Crowley had been crossing in front of a parked vehicle when, according to one witness, was attacked—the anchor paused for effect—*by the air*. The young man had scrambled about the lot screaming as if chased, and to the shock and horror of onlookers, was suddenly beheaded.

The anchor went on. Just a few kilometers away, in Chigwell Row, the body of an elderly woman was discovered in her home by her niece. Elizabeth Brighton, aged 87, had also been beheaded, fueling outrage toward officials.

The report continued. In yet another bizarre and unrelated incident, a jogger had come upon the crushed remains of a man in Hyde Park. The brutal crushing of the man’s upper body, particularly the head, would make identification “extremely difficult, if not impossible,” according to PC Colin Murphy.

Chadwick was ashen. He felt weak, as if he’d run a marathon. There had been no mention of any others—the individuals he had “inked out” on the reverse side of their clippings—and he was thankful for small miracles. Still, what did it matter now? The hounds of hell were already circling.

Fosgate, unable to bottle his excitement any longer—his grin had grown more sinister with each report—roared. He clapped his hands and stood up, beaming. “Cod from Billingsgate, Chadwick! We’ll sup into the evening. We’ll dine like kings.”

~ 14

It was precisely 9:37 that evening when Esther Frost heard her husband talking to himself in the ensuite bathroom. She looked up from the king-sized four-poster bed, beyond the rim of her reading glasses, and lent an ear. At first she believed it a prank, yet in their forty-three years of marriage she had never known him to do anything remotely humorous. She asked if he was all right, but what came in reply was a discordant sound. A staccato crackle, like scurrying rats in the walls. Arthur called out to her, shouting, and as she sat up, paralyzed at his frenzied voice, she heard the definitive shriek of breaking glass.

The mirror.

Despite her years, she sprang from the bed, upsetting the solid gold lamp on her night stand. Fear gripped her as she scrambled barefoot across the marble floor to the door. She stopped cold at the guttural sounds beyond; it was as if some monolithic creature pounded step by step along the floor.

And thus began his screaming.

Her heart pounded as she thrust fist upon fist at the door. She tried the latch, but Arthur had locked it; he always did. The sliver of light beneath the door dimmed as a thick river of blood flowed to her feet. A child-like plea slipped from her husband's lips, and a resounding thunder, a sound eerily similar to that of a bowling ball dropped to a hardwood floor, silenced him.

And thus began her screaming.

When detectives from the Yard forced the door, a smashed, blood-spattered mirror offered a hundred reflections of Arthur Frost's bludgeoned remains. His limp body was curled beside the expansive marble tub. Blood ran from several deep wounds along his arms, the result of blocking blows; it was as if someone had struck him again and again with a spike. His face had caved under the assault, his nose and teeth lodged deeply within his skull. Beside him, an intriguing rounded cavity had been carved into the marble, several inches across. Later, upon due investigation, the coroner would log that the deceased had perished from severe trauma, a result of sustained blows from "a mace-like" weapon.

~

Within three weeks of Arthur Frost's death, the Board of Directors at A. F.

Enterprises initiated preliminary merger proceedings with Sandringham Publishing, amid unbridled rumor and speculation. Frost's best friend and confidant, one Jameson Argyle, sought legal action to block the merger, but the attempt failed. After five grueling weeks of legal wrangling, lawyers on both sides, utterly ecstatic over the prospect of lining their pockets over the next several months, prompted both sides to come together and consummate the marriage in a semi-official announcement on New Year's Eve, at a party hosted by none other than Fosgate Harvard Harrod the Third, President of Sandringham Publishing, suddenly the number six tabloid publisher in all England.

~ 15

On New Year's Eve, after the last of the help and the guests departed—Fosgate's newest enemy, Jameson Argyle, the very last—Chadwick had wanted to follow. He had had quite enough of Fosgate and his growing arrogance. Still, he couldn't leave. He had once again exceeded his limit, which had ballooned from two to eight drinks in only eight harrowing weeks. Eydie had left long before the countdown, using a headache as an excuse. She held no love for Fosgate as it was, and if she had only known him as he truly was, would have despised him. He could see her now, curled up in their bed, her lovely silvers curled around her face, her tiny smile as teasing as a sweet dream. How he wanted to hold her again. How he loved her.

He could only pray that his plan would work. It had to. Not for his sake. For hers.

Fosgate joined him in the study. The weather outside was frightful, as the song went, and his ulcer had begun to act up. His head throbbed. His tired eyes were bloodshot. A rabid wind off the North Sea threatened to slip through every cranny of the ancient estate, and he was, with each passing minute, becoming more certain that the gods were conspiring to undo him.

He shivered as he cupped his cognac. It was uncomfortably chilly this night, and he nodded silent approval as Fosgate lay some kindling in the hearth. Minutes later, as the flames began to work their magic, he managed a small smile, for the first time in months.

"You're in better spirits," Fosgate observed, lighting his pipe.

Chadwick said nothing. He seemed to shrink in his chair. Never a large man, he had lost twenty-two pounds since that first match, a match that now seemed a lifetime past. When the nightmares came, he would start in his bed, mind racing, heart pounding, fearing the shadows. Terrified of some vile creature riding horse, slinging blade.

He was beginning to believe he was losing his mind. *Madness begets madness.*

Like his dear wife who would hold him in those dark hours, his doctor had told him to slow down.

Slow down. He could laugh at the thought. They were hardly slowing down. Fosgate took up his familiar stance at the hearth, arm upon mantel. He

regarded the south window with a small rise of his loose and ample chin. “I so loathe that man.” Sleet crackled against the glass.

“Argyle? He’ll come round.”

“Don’t patronize me. You know I detest that.”

“You’ve got control, Fosgate. Need it be total?”

But it had to be, Chadwick knew.

He had found prayer, but prayer held no substance; just fleeting faith. He had tried to believe that as it went on, he would wake in his bed to the sweet sounds of the dawn, the nightmare ended. But the killing had gone on and on, page upon page of faceless souls, carved and crushed by God-knew-what as Fosgate forced him to pick and to cut and to cap, name upon name, in an obsessive hunt to eliminate the one man who had opposed him during the merger—the one man who still opposed him at every turn. Argyle.

To be sure, he had suggested that Fosgate do it himself. But as the hunter maintained, where was the sport? It was a ridiculous notion, the killer with a conscience, yet there it was, in all its maddening glory.

To date, he had managed a stalemate in just three matches. Three out of seventeen.

The others? He had bested Fosgate in all fourteen, the last nine in a row. He didn’t dare reveal he’d attended each funeral. Nor did he reveal he had sent tidy, yet quite anonymous, sums, to each of the victim’s families. Meanwhile, the Phonebooth Phantom remained at large, gripping the populace.

With every move he had fought the desire to throw each match, have Argyle dispatched. But at what cost? His dear Eydie. He had had no recourse but to struggle for stalemate in every game; with all his heart he had given his all. He had let slip clear chances for advancement when Fosgate stumbled, his only luck that Fosgate, being the lesser player, had not discovered his deception. The matches had given him fits, straining mind and soul, for there seemed no end to this madness. No end to this checkered killing field.

The only saving grace was that they met only on Thursdays.

He drank. Let his mind drift. In the warmth of the hearth’s glow, he saw his lover, his true love. Were it not for her, he might well have taken his *own* life; might have taken that bullet, after all.

~

They spoke of little import for a spell, and when the time came, Fosgate

shifted from the hearth to the safe. He glanced once over his shoulder, then worked the lock. In apparent reverence, with great care he removed the case, which he now held under strict lock. Paranoia had snared the man in its web, and Chadwick knew its spindly fingers would clench around *his* throat soon enough. It was only a matter of time before Fosgate defeated him and moved on to his next victim. A politician, perhaps. One of the Royals.

Madness begets madness.

It was all part of Fosgate's Game.

They set the pieces, Chadwick white, Fosgate black. Fosgate handed Chadwick the directory, the shears, and the pen. They had murder down to a science. *An art.*

"I do think the book feels a tad lighter," Fosgate quipped.

Chadwick saw no humor in this, and he flipped the book open roughly three-quarters through. He snipped a name and address, and Fosgate, puffing his pipe and eyeing the fire, reminded him of the telephone number.

Chadwick capped his receptacle, sealing the name—and fate—of this unsuspecting soul. Admittedly there was always a chance at a stalemate, or even a Fosgate victory, but in an ironic twist, his chess-playing skills had sharpened to their finest edge. He'd joked that perhaps *he* should play for Argyle's head, but Fosgate, never one to abandon the hunt, had not laughed in the least.

The wind whipped at the windows, and he shuddered. Some cognac settled him, but he stiffened as his ulcer burned. He led his Queen's Knight, as he often did, and the hunter countered with the same move. They glanced into each other's eyes, neither trusting the other.

Neither spoke until Chadwick's final move.

Chadwick slipped back in his chair. His nerves were shot. He glanced around the study, pausing at that unsettling shrine of trophies. He stifled a laugh. It came to him that Fosgate, in his infinite madness, had all along seen the head of Jameson Argyle hanging proudly among his conquests. A fine joke, indeed.

Fosgate, defeated yet again, cast him a raised brow.

Chadwick smiled weakly. He turned away to those damnable windows, the wind and the snow driving like the devil. The gods were closing.

He listened.

And waited.

“I’ll have another if you don’t mind,” he said finally.

Fosgate took his glass with mock surprise. “Another? The Band of Hope will be knocking at your door, old b—”

At the very edge of hearing came a soft rustling sound, as if rats had scurried in the ceiling. Yet it had snaked itself around them from all directions. Their eyes fixed on each other. Both heard it. Both tried to deny it.

It’s not rats, Chadwick thought as it came again.

“What the devil *is* that?” Fosgate said sharply. He wavered.

The stone lamp beside them went flying, shattering against the base of the hearth. Only the muted glow of the coals illuminated them. Chadwick froze, the beat of his heart nearly driving him to scream.

It’s come.

Fosgate whirled in half circles, left, then right, then left again. He stopped to listen. Trapped in the gloom, he fumbled away from his guest and cursed as he stubbed a knee against a table. He hurried to his writing desk and reached for the lamp, his outstretched hand guiding him like a blind man.

Chadwick felt something whisk past him. Something cold. Something *old*. He leapt from his seat into the darkness, too late to see a black specter coming for him. It struck him, slamming him back. He tumbled to the hardwood floor, the massive thing falling onto him.

He groaned, winded. Whatever pinned him rolled off, and when he rolled the other way, he realized it was Fosgate.

The hunter was on all fours, breathless. “*Chadwick—*”

Fosgate raised his head to speak, but suddenly his body jerked back. His

monocle popped free. Chadwick sensed by sound it had hit the floor, bobbed twice, and was now swinging from its chain.

Fosgate fumbled for it, his hand sweeping at nothingness. Cursing, his weight shifted, and he grunted as his ample mass slammed to the floor.

Chadwick shivered in his next breath; the room had fallen frighteningly cold. He caught movement from the corner of his eye and whirled right. *Something* had struck Fosgate, something *big*.

Paintings, books, Fosgate's trophies—seemed to slither along the walls. Chadwick rubbed his eyes trying to refute the lies they were surely telling. The objects appeared as a flowing, living force, rippling the way they were. Clearly it was madness, just a trick of the forbidding light.

But no. Not a trick.

Not the light.

The *darkness*.

It moved swiftly. Deftly. Like a mercenary.

Another sound came, piercing his heart. Cold steel, raging against colder steel. As if someone had drawn a sword.

The darkness moved on Fosgate again. Three pounding footfalls, dreadful and heavy. The stalking of giants.

Still breathless, Fosgate managed to raise his head. A groan escaped him, a slick wheezing sound that made Chadwick wince. "*Help meeeeeee, Chadwick—*"

There was silence then, a lasting one, and at that moment Chadwick believed he might wake from this terrifying dream, screaming, unable to stop, unable to breathe. But then came a stirring rush of air, silenced by a bottomless *whoooooomp*.

Time seemed to still, but in reality only a second had passed before Fosgate spoke. It came, *My Gott*—Germanic in tone and inflection, as the peculiar man who had sold him this nightmare might have uttered it—but it wasn't really a phrase, not exactly. It was more a choking sound one might make had their vocal cords been severed in a breath.

Fosgate held still in a sound state of preservation, an overstuffed pheasant of a man. He blinked at Chadwick.

One last time.

Chadwick stifled a scream the moment Fosgate's head came undone and slipped to the floor. The man's body slumped in a heap. In the gloom, he heard the head as it rolled along the hardwood, ear upon ear, toward the foot of the hearth. With each revolution came a sharp *clink* amid a thin metallic sound ...

the monocle and its chain. Then the rolling stopped.

Chadwick's heart skipped two beats. Surely he was next. A part of him prayed for it.

But then, there it was, a rippling of the darkness, shifting as it sheathed its weapon. For an instant the light stilled, and Chadwick, disbelieving, saw the horror, saw the madness, and before his heart began to beat again, the thing was gone, scurrying into the black depths from which it had come. All he heard was the slightest rustling in the ceiling ... and then nothing.

~

Chadwick held on all fours. His chest ached. His stomach was in knots, threatening to come. The storm had ebbed, the wind dying, yet a crackle from the hearth startled him. He was certain that whatever dark demon they had conjured lay lurking, waiting to slay him.

He turned to the body, turned away in disgust, only to find himself face to face with Fosgate. The chain had caught in his thinning hair, curling over his ear and draping along his cheek. The monocle lay on the floor, drowned in dark, pooling blood. The man's weak eye was shut, the other wide, the hunter ever stalking.

Chadwick groaned as his ulcer tasked him. He steeled against the pain. He crept to the hearth and curled up, trembling. For the next three hours he lay still, his soul lost. Of itself the darkness bared nothing, yet if it had, he firmly believed he would have fallen insane.

~ 17

Chadwick stirred awake. He had finally drifted off, and now, with dawn beckoning, he supposed he should be on with it. In the faint light, he saw the grim shape of Fosgate's head and the thick crimson pool around it. He kept his wits about him, holding back the simmering ill in his gut. He struggled to sit up.

His gaze fell to the chessboard. To the white Knight that had finished Fosgate. A thin splatter of dried blood lay at its feet, the spatter just below the tip of the bloodied blade.

Quickly, he gathered the chessmen into the case and slipped the receptacles into his pockets. He set the original pieces on the board, haphazardly enough to make it appear as if a match had been played.

At the study doors, he stopped and turned. He drew a long last look at the remains, shame and anger sweeping through him. Twenty minutes and two antacids later, he was driving along the Thames in his Mercedes.

As the sun came up, he reached the Thames Estuary and chartered a vessel. Two miles from the mainland, he killed the engine. The icy sea rolled gently, a fine mist glowing along the horizon.

He moved from the cabin to the rear of the boat. The January cold made him shiver, yet it served to invigorate him. As far as his weary eyes could take him, they told him what he needed to know. He was alone.

He took up the case and fought the urge to toss it overboard. As he opened it, he reeled at the grim odor. The vile stench of death.

He removed the white King. Hideous. How he loathed it.

He flung it as far as he was able, grinning at the splash. He did this with every piece.

The case sank quickly.

He drew the receptacle from his left pocket. The dark one. He removed the top and drew out the slip, the name printed there unmistakably of Fosgate's hand. He chuckled, and it felt oddly good.

You're a lucky man, Argyle.

He tossed the container and its cap, relieved to see them gone. The paper fluttered free as he released it to the frosty wind.

He drew the white receptacle and removed the cap.

The sea swallowed the ashes.

Swallowed the receptacle.

A rush of relief swept him. He looked down at the seat beside him, at the Greater London telephone directory. Save the single patch of blood splattered on the binding, it could have passed for new. For the real thing, quite rightly, a duplicate of the original that lay beside it. And so it should.

Computers. They'd revolutionized the publishing industry. It was amazing what one could accomplish these days, even if—*especially* if—you had to do it yourself. It was just as easy printing a telephone directory—even one as unique as this—as printing some trashy tabloid.

He picked up the directory. It had been easy, swapping it for the old one. If only he'd done it sooner. If only.

He had come to the estate the day after Christmas, around three. Fosgate was in the country all week, making merry with old friends, and Willoughby had been most accommodating. After a pleasant chat under the pretense he had papers for Fosgate to sign, he had let himself into the study, his valise stuffed. He had left with just as heavy a burden.

He flipped the big book open, somewhere in the middle. The wind turned a few pages.

Despite his guilt, despite the insanity of it all, he managed a small smile at the names. Page upon page.

All *Fosgate Harvard Harrod* ... and naturally, the phone number and address.
To narrow the variables.

The variables. There seemed a great many now, yet he told himself he'd not worry about the police. They'd question him, certainly. Let them. The facts, as far as he was concerned, were clear. He'd overindulged at the party, had retired around two after some spirited chess, and as much as he knew, Fosgate had been fast asleep in his bed when he left at the dawn. He was just as shocked as they were.

He looked far across the sprawling sea, for answers he knew would never come. He wanted to believe he was no more "Phonebook Phantom" than Fosgate, that in the end, they themselves were merely pawns. It was a good lie.

He played his last move. The directories sank quickly.

Trembling, he fought the guilt that threatened to consume him. A deep breath calmed him as he let the fat globe of the sun warm his soul.

His heart ached. He would see his dear Eydie soon; slip into bed and spoon. He might falter, might yet surrender his days to the darkness, but he would spend what he owned with her.

A cold tear slid down his cheek. The game finally won, he headed for home.

INFO

~ a final word

Thank you. I hope you enjoyed this little diversion. A short road trip into madness.

Fosgate's Game was inspired by my earlier days of playing chess, and my constantly wandering mind. During a particularly slow game against one of my brothers, I had become quite bored waiting my turn, and as luck would have it, I imagined a darker version of the game we were playing. He ended up winning that game. Lucky for him.

Until next time, my friend. Be well.

David

April, 2013

~ *dedication*

For Tina—and some hot chocolate by the fire.

~ acknowledgments

Cover design by David C. Cassidy (Illustrator)

eBook prepared by David C. Cassidy

Author photograph courtesy Tina Forgét

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~ about the author

Award-winning author David C. Cassidy is the twisted mind behind several chilling books of horror and suspense. An author, photographer, and graphic designer—and a half-decent juggler—he spends his writing life creating tales of terror where Bad Things Happen To Good People. Raised by wolves, he grew up with a love of nature, music, science, and history, with thrillers and horror novels feeding the dark side of his seriously disturbed imagination. He talks to his characters, talks often, and most times they listen. But the real fun starts when they tell him to take a hike, and they Open That Door anyway. Idiots.

David lives in Ontario, Canada. From Mozart to Vivaldi, classic jazz to classic rock, he feels naked without his iPod. Suffering from MAD—Multiple Activity Disorder—he divides his time between writing and photography, reading and rollerblading. An avid amateur astronomer, he loves the night sky, chasing the stars with his telescope. Sometimes he eats.

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