



SHATTERED

A medical intern confronts a bio-terrorist

JOHN ANDREW KARR

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PROLOGUE

Raynorr laid the ham hock beside the dog and watched as rheumy eyes gradually focused on the offering. The dog's nostrils flared, cracking the dried mucus around them. Raynorr didn't need the stethoscope in his lab coat pocket to hear the rasp of the animal's lungs as they struggled to inflate with the aroma of fresh meat and bone.

A pale tongue emerged from within a frothy muzzle. Slowly it licked its chops. Doubtless it still harbored vague memories of a time when it had been a healthy carnivore; a time when it would have ripped the meat from the bone, devoured it with ravenous vigor, and with strong jaws laden with sharp white teeth, set to work cracking the bone open for the succulent marrow within.

But now the dog's ears lay flat and its eyes bulged with desperation from their sockets. The animal could barely summon the strength to raise its head from the concrete floor. Panting despite the relative coolness of the shade, the dog turned from the ham hock and stared through the pen's chain-link fence to the surrounding field.

Raynorr jotted observations in his notebook. *Managed a few bites last night, but even that is too much now.*

A familiar chill encircled his wrist. He stopped writing and gazed into the darkest corner of the pen.

With his thoughts, he greeted Death—pointed out the irony of their alliance.

As always, Death remained silent.

Raynorr kneeled.

He'd found the dog in a rusty pen at the county animal control shelter, scheduled to be put down that very day. He did not deny the guilt he felt at saving the grateful beast only to end up destroying it himself, but he had needed one more trial, one more successful experiment, to prove that all his labor—all his pain—had finally paid off.

And as with any war, sacrifices had to be made.

Raynorr stroked the dog's head, little more than patchy fur stretched over a canine skull. The dog leaned into him and moaned.

He produced a hypodermic needle from his lab coat pocket. Expertly, his fingers found a suitable vein in the dog's foreleg. He inserted the needle and pulled back on the stopper. When the tube held five cc's of liquid red, he withdrew the needle. This time the dog didn't growl or snap at him. This time it merely whimpered. Quickly, he produced another needle and injected its contents through the loose skin on the back of the dog's neck.

"This will shield you from the pain," he said, stroking the dog's head after withdrawing the needle. "It'll be over soon, boy. You're the last. I'll be going for the real thing now."

He could hear Cain and Abel, the German shepherds he'd raised from ten-week old pups, barking in the woods beyond the field, probably in hot pursuit of a rabbit or squirrel. He almost smiled.

Unlike people, dogs will not abandon you. Unlike people, dogs do not know how to be cruel.

The muscles in his back went rock-hard. His lip curled into a sneer.

Unlike ...people!

Raynorr tried to suppress the rage but was too late. His bones ignited with it. It burned his skin like flash paper and boiled the blood in his veins.

The dog moaned. Soon the moan became a pitiful wail, as if the animal somehow knew Raynorr's agony.

Crack!

The dog fell silent.

Shaking and gasping for breath, Raynorr looked down. His hand was buried like a claw in the fur on the back of the dog's neck. A pale, flaccid tongue protruded between the dog's parted jaws. Its eyes stared blankly into the nether realm.

He pried his fingers from the dog's neck.

"They've done it again," he whispered.

His hands shook as he closed the dog's eyelids. He stared down at the animal for several minutes, and then carried it to the house to examine in his lab. The hours slipped away.

That night he drove into north Raleigh.

Even with the powerful spotlights pointed up at it, the massive water tower still looked like a huge baton cut in half. The stem was stuck in the ground and rose eight stories until encountering the massive vessel that held the water and was decidedly turnip-shaped.

He turned from Six Forks Road and onto the gravel pathway. A bunch of clumpy rhododendrons provided an excellent screen to park behind. Razor wire gleamed with menace atop the eight-foot fence that surrounded the base of the water tower. No matter. With the rush of passing traffic in his ears, Raynorr picked the lock on the gate. Unhurried, he walked up the caged, metal-mesh stairs that wound around the stem of the tower like a vine, until the traffic noise faded and he reached the top.

There was no enclosed walkway here, only a solitary handrail that led up the slope to the middle of the containment vessel, where the trap door was located. He supposed city workers periodically opened the trap door to take samples of the water from the very highest point in the tower. It took thirty seconds to pick the lock.

Hinges squeaked as he pulled the door open.

Raynorr stretched out. The surface of the water tower was hard and smooth, with enough residual heat from the day to feel through his t-shirt and shorts.

He inhaled the steel mustiness of the small pocket of air inside and aimed his flashlight at the water. The beam blurred at the edges and went on and on before disappearing far within. He reached in and caressed the water's silky surface, then splashed his sweating face and gasped at the refreshing shock of it.

After some time he closed and re-locked the trap door.

One hand on the rail, he stood and stared up at the blazing stars that seemed to hover just beyond his outstretched arm. Fiery suns pulsed in a heavenly Morse code. Celestial power rained down. Absorbed through his porous skin, it energized every molecule of his being. The stars beckoned but he rejected them. Borne upon the winds of war came a rolling thunder. Days of reckoning were *finally* at hand.

Raynorr's lips stretched. After some time he realized he was grinning.

At last, he was ready.

CHAPTER ONE

Monday June 7

“Come on in.”

Bridget Devereaux entered the room to find her next patient upright at the edge of the bed, primping her wig while gazing into a hand-held mirror. The lime-green patient gown with ties at the upper and lower back was a snug but not overly tight fit on her. She glanced over the top of the mirror as Bridget approached. “You’re too late, honey.”

“Oh?”

“Fraid so. They already put clean sheets on the bed. They’re always right on time with the sheets.”

Bridget smiled. “I’ll let housekeeping know you approve of their work, Mrs. Wilson.”

“You’re not here for the sheets?”

“No, ma’am.”

Mrs. Wilson lowered the mirror and squinted at Bridget’s breast pocket. “Your nametag’s all fuzzy and my darned bifocals’re in the bathroom with the latest issue of *People*, but something tells me you’re not a nurse.”

“You’re getting warmer.” Bridget held out her hand. “I’m Bridget Devereaux. I’ll be your—”

“You’re the new doc?” Mrs. Wilson said, shaking Bridget’s hand.

“Close. I have the medical degree but now I’m getting the real-life experience. I’m what the staff doctors call a PGY-One—Post-Graduate Year One—an intern. Ward Seven is my third rotation here at Chambers Hospital.”

“But you’re so young! Or am I just getting old?”

“You’re not old at sixty-one, Mrs. Wilson.” Bridget nudged her wire-rimmed glasses up with the index finger of her left hand. The same hand held a clipboard with Mrs. Wilson’s patient file clamped to it. Bridget silently noted

that Mrs. Wilson's hand felt almost hot despite the relatively cool temperature of the air-conditioned room. "Old is like a hundred and twenty. You're only half way there—still a spring chicken."

"And how was kindergarten today, honey?"

Bridget laughed. She'd overheard the nurses say that Becky Wilson was a hoot.

Mrs. Wilson raised her mirror and resumed the adjustments to her wig. "Well, almost-Doctor Bridget Devereaux, you look like you could be on the cover of *Cosmo*! My goodness, smart and pretty, and you've got curves, too! But I have to tell you, those white lab coats don't exactly flatter you girl docs—they just *don't* reveal enough, if you know what I mean. Then again, with your dark, sassy hair and nice figure, you'd probably look good wrapped in duct tape."

"I doubt that, but it's very kind of you to say."

"One suggestion, hon—lose the glasses. You have such pretty eyes, you shouldn't hide 'em. Contacts are the way to go."

"Contacts would be nice, but glasses are more practical at the moment. Now, Mrs. Wilson, tell me how it's going with your—"

"My son is single again, you know. Perhaps you'd fancy a divorced man?" Mrs. Wilson looked over the mirror at Bridget and raised her eyebrows. The contraction of her forehead muscles caused her wig to tilt slightly backward, revealing the smooth scalp beneath.

Bridget felt her cheeks redden. "Uh, I don't think so."

"Oh, come on! A pretty girl like you ought to have a man. Of course, Jerry prefers a longer haired, and, well, less on-the-ball kind of woman, if you know what I mean. But after his first two wives, a smart one would be a refreshing change—at least for me. Want me to introduce you?"

"I don't think my boyfriend would approve."

"Boyfriend? The last doc told a nurse right here in front of me that he didn't have the time or energy for any relationships. Just between us girls, I think he only wanted the hit and run stuff. It's a wonder you have time for a beau."

Bridget nodded. "We manage to find a little time here and there. Travis has been grumbling a lot lately, but I think it'll all work out once I get a handle on my new rounds."

“Want to see a picture of my Jerry? He’s almost handsome—and I’m not just saying that because I shot him out my birth canal.”

Bridget laughed. “No thanks, really.”

The wig eased down as Mrs. Wilson’s eyebrows relaxed. “Oh, well. Never hurts to try.” She pulled out a small brush and started applying facial powder. “My husband’s coming to visit in an hour. Want to look my best, you know.”

“How are you feeling?”

“Oh, good and bad, I guess. Had to throw up this morning and last night after the chemo. Felt pretty hot for a while there, too. Slept at some point. Didn’t get enough, but it was better than nothing. Can’t seem to stop drinking water, though.”

“Chemotherapy dehydrates most people. Your mouth gets dry?”

“Sahara’s got nothing on me, honey.”

“Keep with some water, but don’t drink so much you feel bloated. Ice chips work pretty well—just let them melt in your mouth. The chemo has adversely affected your saliva glands. They’ll get better as you recover.”

Mrs. Wilson nodded and continued with her touch ups, softly humming.

“You certainly seem to be in good spirits despite the rough treatment here,” Bridget noted.

“My husband’s coming to see me, dear.”

“Okay if I take your B.P. and pulse and listen to your lungs?”

“You go right ahead and do your doctor thing, honey. I’m just going to do my eyes while you’re at it, okay?”

“Deal.”

Bridget set her clipboard down on a small table near the bed and pressed her middle finger to the underside of Mrs. Wilson’s wrist as the older woman held up her mirror. Careful to note each throb of her patient’s pulse, she studied her wristwatch for fifteen seconds. Twenty beats. Multiplied by four and she had eighty beats per minute while the patient was in a state of rest. Eighty was high but not alarming. No doubt the chemo was accountable, plus excitement for her husband.

She took Mrs. Wilson's temperature via digital ear thermometer. After five seconds there was a ding and the readout showed one hundred point five, verifying what Bridget suspected: Mrs. Wilson had developed a low-grade fever since the last time the on-duty nurse had taken her vital signs.

Wrapping a thick Velcro band around Mrs. Wilson's upper arm, Bridget pumped the air ball. The needle in the gauge twitched with each beat of her patient's heart. BP was one-seventy over eighty-four...elevated. As with her temp and pulse rate, it wasn't high enough to send up red flags, but it was elevated nonetheless.

Bridget mentally noted the small beads of perspiration forming on her patient's brow. A few damp strands of her real hair, thin and sparse, had strayed from beneath the wig.

The stethoscope was next. Bridget placed the small drum in the palm of her hand for a few seconds, then moved it inside the rear slit of the gown. She gently placed it at various locations and listened to Mrs. Wilson breathe.

"Thanks for warming it first, honey," Mrs. Wilson said, turning her head slightly over her shoulder in Bridget's direction. "That last doc always put it on me cold. I think he got a kick out of seeing me jump."

Bridget smiled but said nothing. She moved the stethoscope to Mrs. Wilson's chest and listened to her heart. The beat was quick but clean, with no discernible echo. There didn't seem to be a murmur...no backfilling of blood into any of the chambers. And if there were, it probably would have been noted in the patient's chart by the nurses or the other intern. Still, redundancy during examinations was always a good idea for patients undergoing aggressive treatments, and they didn't come much more aggressive than chemo.

One of the first things Bridget had learned as an intern was that it could be just as important to note the non-clinical details as the clinical while making the rounds. The fact that Mrs. Wilson was lucid, sitting upright, optimistic—these were good signs. On the other hand, the low-grade temperature, visible perspiration on Mrs. Wilson's brow, elevated BP, and pulse—in addition to the vomiting and restlessness—meant the chemo was taking its toll.

Bridget straightened and hung the stethoscope around her neck. She picked up the clipboard and wrote her observations on the chart.

“I think you should rest a bit, Mrs. Wilson. Your body’s working hard right now, still trying to cope with yesterday’s chemotherapy.” She laid a consoling hand on her patient’s shoulder and again felt the heat that emanated. “You look fine. Why not lie back for a little while?”

Mrs. Wilson reclined against the bed, the back support of which was angled high. “I—I am feeling a little bushed. My husband can still visit me, can’t he?”

“Of course he can. I just want you to take it easy for a little while, that’s all.”

Mrs. Wilson dabbed at her brows with a tissue. “The last doc said Hodgkin’s disease was an easy cancer.”

Bridget frowned. “Nothing about cancer is easy.”

“You know, he never did shake my hand or anything the way you did. Matter of fact, I don’t think he ever really touched me the whole time he was here. He always let the nurses do all that. Never came in here without a nurse, for that matter. Talked more to the nurses than to me, like I was just some kind of experiment or something. I don’t know.”

“My mother had doctors like that. God, they used to make me and my sister so angry.”

“What did you do?”

“Mama died too quickly for us to do much of anything.”

“Cancer?”

“Ovarian.”

“I’m so sorry, honey.”

“Thanks. It happened a long time ago, when I was still a girl. Listen, why don’t you take off your wig? It’s trapping a lot of your body heat.”

“But I want to look....” Mrs. Wilson trailed off, frowning.

“Tell you what,” Bridget said, tapping the pen lightly against her chin. “I’ll have the nurses notify you through the intercom here when your husband arrives. You slip the wig on then. Sound good?”

Becky Wilson nodded. Bridget helped her off with the wig.

“Whew, that’s better! Like takin’ the lid off a boiling pot. Thanks, honey.”

“The head nurse told me you like to walk in the courtyard with your husband. I suggest you don’t do that until the latter part of his visit, after you’ve had a little more time to rest and—”

The intercom speaker overhead suddenly came to life. “Code Blue. Team One, Code Blue. Room three-oh-three. Repeat. Team One, Code Blue. Room three-oh-three.”

Bridget tensed. The voice was controlled and monotone, but to Bridget the impact was the same as putting her ear to a piercing smoke alarm.

Code Blue...cardiopulmonary distress. A heart had stopped beating; lungs no longer inflated. Death had swung, ready to harvest yet another soul, the latest skirmish in an unwinnable war. Their job was to postpone the inevitable as long as possible.

Mrs. Wilson said something, but Bridget didn’t have time for it at the moment. She tossed the file on the small table next to Mrs. Wilson’s bed and hurried from the room. Bridget wasn’t on the Primary Code Team known as Team One, but as an intern she was expected to help if the code went down in her area.

Room 303 was just at the end of the hallway.

Bridget had seen Margaret Morrison in 303 for the first time just an hour ago. The middle-aged woman had been conscious but unable to speak. Via small electrodes taped to her skin, she was connected to an EKG that constantly monitored her erratic heart rate. She had clear plastic tubes in her nostrils, tendrils from the oxygen machine that pumped enough O₂ into her lungs to make a linebacker for the Charlotte Panthers perform Barishnokovian pirouettes. Mrs. Morrison also had a catheter in her arm. A Levodromoran drip had been set up. Levo was not medicine; Levo was a powerful opiate that shielded patients from pain as they died.

As Bridget sprinted past visitors, nurses, orderlies, and the stray patient well enough to walk the cancer ward, she couldn’t help thinking about something she’d read in Mrs. Morrison’s patient file: Four weeks ago she’d been given a clean bill of health by her personal physician.

At that time Margaret Morrison had shown no signs of the rampant leukemia that now ravaged her body. She’d been in good shape; didn’t have any health-eroding habits except a workaholic’s tendency to work sixty hours a week. Her personal physician had ordered blood work, poked and prodded in all the usual

places, even performed a mammogram on her. Nothing out of the ordinary had shown up.

Four weeks ago she had been perfectly healthy.

Now she was on Levo and had gone Code Blue.

Bridget was one of the first to arrive.

They made a gallant effort to revive Margaret Morrison; CPR, epinephrine shots. Bridget herself worked the defibrillator, shocking the dying woman with seven hundred, one thousand, and finally seventeen hundred volts.

To no avail.

Death had won.

The tension in the room eased away, replaced by quiet resignation. The senior attending wrenched his gloves off and threw them into the hazardous waste bin. The other doctors stood for a moment, then slowly disbursed.

“Time?” the senior asked softly. His hands were on his hips, head bowed. A nurse called out the time.

The senior, in a kind of post adrenalin daze, walked slowly from the room. The others followed.

“Devereaux...toe tag her,” the chief resident said, scribbling notes on a clipboard he held in the flat of his forearm. “Since you jumped in on the team, you get to fill out the death certificate.”

Blake Hensely’s scornful tone would have been evident to a child. Bridget looked at his handsome, arrogant face and then away. What should she have done, stepped back and waited for the others to arrive while Margaret Morrison died right in front of her?

Tell him off, she chastised herself. *Don’t just keep it in.*

Not now. This woman just died.

Come on! He's still pissed that you turned down his offer for an oh-so-romantic screw in the supply room four weeks ago. He's been on your case ever since, and he's going to stay on your case until you—

Not...now!

Bridget walked on pillars of lead out of the room. At the nearest nurse's station she pawed through one stack of forms and then another, unable to find the death certificates. A nurse handed her a clipboard with the necessary paperwork on it, along with the toe tags.

"Thanks," Bridget murmured.

Nurses weren't always so helpful with the necessary paperwork, especially to interns, whom they often deemed inferior. But for one fleeting moment, everyone, except perhaps the chief resident in charge of this year's interns, had been reminded of his or her own mortality.

Later that day, in the Ward Seven break room, Bridget stood before a broad window and cracked open a can of apple juice.

Doesn't make sense, she thought, taking a gulp of the cold juice. Leukemia provides warning signs. It doesn't just explode in the body like a bomb. But that's exactly what it did to Margaret Morrison. And now I find she's not the only one who's had this...this accelerated leuk.

After filling out the death certificate, Bridget had checked the hospital computer for similar cases. She ran a search on all leukemia patients admitted within the past three months. There were a dozen such patients, but of that dozen, ten were either in remission or were still undergoing treatments at the hospital. These followed the normal pattern for the disease. But the other two....

As with Margaret Morrison, the onset of the disease for the other two patients had been sudden and debilitating. And also like Margaret Morrison, both had died within days of being admitted to Chambers.

Bridget stared out the window at the hundreds of parked cars baking in the punishing North Carolina sunshine. *Healthy one day. Dying the next. No time to even say goodbye to loved ones.*

Two nurses entered the break room, chatting with one another. Bridget watched in the window's reflection as one of them opened the refrigerator door and peered inside.

"Breaks my heart just to walk in there," the one said, reaching for a brown bag in the refrigerator.

"She's just a child," the other said.

"My god, eleven years old. My daughter's age."

"They say she was running around just the other day...competed in a swim meet, for God's sake. Now she's bedridden with leukemia? It doesn't make sense."

Bridget turned and stared at the nurses, who were dressed in blue scrubs all the way down to their rubber-soled shoes. The nurses froze as they noticed Bridget for the first time.

"*What did you say?*" Bridget said, as Margaret Morrison's pained, emaciated face suddenly haunted her.

"There's a new admittance with leukemia, doctor."

"Room?"

"Three-twelve."

Bridget flung the can of juice. With a crash, the recycle bin rocked backward. Before it settled she was out of the break room and rushing toward room 312.

CHAPTER TWO

Late May.

Not yet summer but already hot.

Sunlight streamed through the pitted windshield as Raynorr navigated around a fallen oak that had laid in the meadow so long even the termites had forsaken it. He squinted against the glare and felt the lines around his eyes deepen. Raising a hand to shield his eyes, he turned the long Oldsmobile toward the gnarled hickory standing like a colossus to the east. Once the tree's distant form was centered on the hood, he flipped the driver's side visor down and glanced at the burlap bag on the passenger seat next to him.

Raynorr could almost make out the shriveled form inside.

He drove slowly, his foot off the accelerator, partly due to the solemn nature of his undertaking, partly because a boulder or ditch might be lying in wait beneath the chest-high weeds and grasses yielding to the spot-rusted front bumper. It wouldn't take much for the Olds to puncture a tire or get stuck despite the relatively dry ground.

Of course, a four-wheel drive would have been infinitely more appropriate for this sort of undertaking, but that meant either a pick-up or a sport utility vehicle. A full sized pick-up, even with an extended cab, didn't have enough protected interior for his lab equipment should he need to move in a hurry, a valid concern now that he was about to start the war.

As for a sport utility vehicle...weeds and tall grass continued to disappear beneath the hood as Raynorr drove and reflected.

He doubted Helen still had the old Jeep from the early days of their marriage. The gynecologist Helen had latched on to drove a shiny Mercedes. *Must be difficult to fit the Raynorr girls and the new man's offspring into that decadent piece of shit car. But then, the girls probably don't even live with Helen anymore—Jan was the youngest and she'll turn twenty-two this year.*

He frowned as his stomach coiled and knotted. Last time he had seen her, Jan had been twelve.

The Olds suddenly rocked from side to side as it crossed a dry, shallow gully. The shocks squealed in protest.

Fact: Helen hadn't recognized him at the restaurant in Raleigh the other night. She had even given him a flirty look. If she didn't recognize him, no one would.

Gently, Raynorr patted the stiff form beneath the burlap bag, as if the dog were alive and merely resting on the seat next to him.

The car continued to push through his meadow.

The shocks squeaked almost constantly now as he traversed more uneven terrain. He watched, almost mesmerized, as hundreds of grasshoppers the size of his middle finger leapt into the air at the automobile's massive intrusion, their wings beating frantically in an effort to escape harm's way. Many thwacked off the windshield. Some hit the hood on their backs or sides and became seared to the black surface, their long legs jerking and twitching as they went into their death throes.

Raynorr blanched. The acrid whiff of the bugs wasn't nearly as powerful as it had been *back then*, but it was enough...enough to take him back to the battlefields and the mass funeral pyres. A reek that horrid would never fade from memory. All it had needed this time was the burning exoskeletons of these hoppers to resurrect it.

He drove toward the massive hickory in the distance, unconcerned about possible infection from the virus that had served as the catalyst in the dog's death.

On one of the many counters he'd built in his basement laboratory, beneath a heat lamp, was a solitary petri dish with moist mouse tissue inside. This dish contained and restrained the generation of Raynorr Virus that had unlocked death in the dog. Tomorrow he would use more of the same—on a two-legged beast.

Right now he would tend to the dog. The dog was a soldier in a war it could not have begun to understand. It deserved an honorable burial.

A sheen of sweat now covered the lean muscles of his forearms. Sweat also dampened the back of his simple white t-shirt where it met the leather seat.

Inching into the shade of the massive hickory, Raynorr turned the car until it faced in the direction of his house, now almost a mile away. He shifted into park and turned off the ignition.

No sooner had the engine noise died when the chattering of hundreds of cicada began. The vibrating wings of the large, ugly bugs created a pulsating rhythm that rose and fell around him, from the meadow he'd just traversed to the nearby woods to the hundreds of hickory branches above him.

A light breeze drifted over him like a warm caress, in perfect synchronization with the cicadaec symphony. In the distance stood the tiny form of his small house, snugly sheltered from the blazing sun by a cluster of huge oaks that had been there since the Civil War.

From behind the steering wheel he stared at the tire tracks the Olds had laid down through the tall weeds and grasses of the meadow. Many of the stems were bending back up. One rose slowly here, another there...four in a row to the right, three to the left. As he watched, more of them rose and swayed gently in the hot breeze. His eyelids grew heavy. Raynorr's head eased back against the seat. The musical cicadae carried him away.

At some point he became aware of a loud buzz in his ears. His eyes snapped open.

He turned to find a writhing black swarm beside him. Thick-bodied flies crept over his arms, legs, and face. He could see the stiff hairs protruding from their abdomens.

With a cry he lashed out, swatting and striking. He crushed them on his face, his arms, his legs, the seat. Some flew off the bag as he struck it, only to descend upon it again in a growing black army. A few deaths wouldn't deter them. They knew there was a worthy prize within the bag.

With a curse, he kicked the door open and leaped outside.

The buzzing wings, coupled with the oppressive heat that had grown even hotter while he had dozed, took him to a place where the sun blazed even hotter; a place where the humidity was even more stifling; a place where, instead of a dead dog, the winged hordes found the decomposing bodies of men, women, and children.

A wrecked man could find such a place beautiful, even as it drove him insane.

Sucking in air and fighting the urge to vomit, Raynorr stumbled from the car. He crushed a dried stick and caught the flashes of white tails in the distance as deer bounded off into the woods.

After a few moments he flung open the passenger side door, shoed some of the flies away, and hauled the bag out of the car, setting it down some feet away. Returning, he noted the sun was well past its zenith and had begun its descent throughout the western skies.

Workman-like now, he retrieved the shovel and pickaxe from the trunk. At a well-shaded spot beneath the hickory tree he dropped the shovel. The steel head of the pick bit into the ground with a puff of red dust. Thirty minutes later he lowered the dog into the grave.

The putrid winged demons dove into the grave, forming a writhing black mass on the burlap bag. Raynorr spat and let the flies work themselves into a frenzy. Their buzzing reached feverish heights. It drilled into his ears, tunneled through his brain, bored into his soul.

Flies.

He snuffed the greedy little bastards with red Carolina clay.

Classical music stirred Raynorr's mind from its slumber. The radio signal came from a listener-supported public radio station only eight miles away in Wake Forest. Each year he anonymously gave a generous contribution to help keep the station operational.

He reached in the dark. With a single click the lamp beside his bed banished the inky blackness. In the pale yellow ambiance he stared up at the cracked paint on the ceiling and let the music flow throughout every part of his body. When the radio shut itself off ten minutes later, he was completely awake.

And ready to kill.

About the Author

Seeking out the strange and spectacular, John Andrew Karr (also John A. Karr) writes as a daily event and works full time in systems integrations and databases. He has published several novels, novellas and short stories. Married with two grown children. He lives in Wilmington, NC where he and his wife enjoy many sunny days at the beach. He also enjoys fishing, kayaking, exercising, reading and landscaping. After sunset he can often be found with a flight or a pint from a local brewery.

<https://johnandrewkarr.com/>

Other Books by John Andrew Karr (also John A. Karr):

Sword and Sorcery

RHONE

Science Fiction

Detonation Event, Mars Wars Book 1

Rogue Planet, Mars Wars Book 2

Annihilation Event, Mars Wars Book 3

Horror

Death Clause

Paranormal Mystery / Occult Detective

Ghostly Summons

Historical Fiction

Van Gogh, Encore

Weird West

Ujahwek