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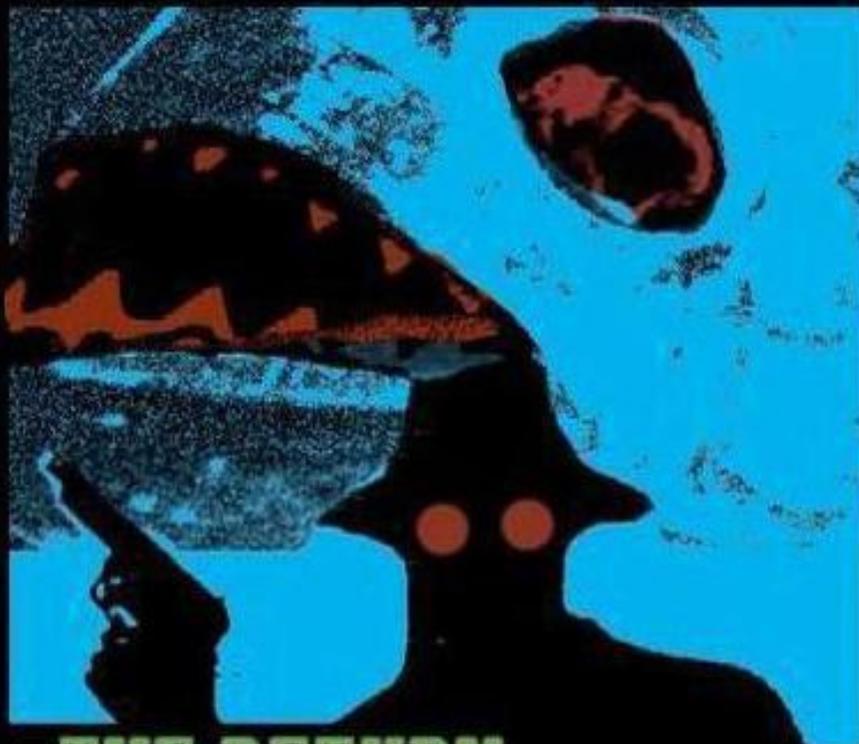


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BLOOD OF THE CENTIPEDE



**THE RETURN
OF DOCTOR
PIRANHA**

by **CHUCK MILLER**



THE RETURN OF DOCTOR PIRANHA

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My name is not Janie Marie Colson, but that's what I'll go by in this memoir. It is not at all prudent for me to use my real name, for several reasons-- the main one being my father, who is a well-known writer of true crime books. He also had a sort of "secret" career before that, and he and I are the only living people in the world who know all about it. I will merely say that, for a few years, my dad serendipitously-- and reluctantly-- specialized in dealing with certain deviant individuals who, for one reason or another, were beyond the reach of ordinary law enforcement. You may imagine what you will.

At the time I'm writing about, I had just had a Very Bad Experience. It involved my father and his past, which was not merely checkered, but striped and polka-dotted too. It ended up involving me in a very unexpected way. I'll reserve the details because a.) they're none of your business, and b.) you'd never believe it anyhow. And it

involves things I'd rather not go into-- drama, murder, lost love... the works. Once I made sure Dad was going to be okay, all I wanted was to be far away from everything and everybody I had ever known. I went as far south as I could without veering off into Florida or Mexico, and landed in Mobile, Alabama. I had no idea what I wanted to do, other than wallow in my misery. I didn't plan on doing it forever, but I felt I had earned a few months, at any rate. I had all my college credits transferred and enrolled in the university there, as an excuse for being where I was, in case Dad got nosy.

I had either discovered or developed a great fondness for alcohol. It didn't make me forget anything, and it really didn't make me feel any better. But it was... different. I liked feeling a way that I had never felt before. At times I could almost grasp this illusion that I was a new creature living in a new world, and believe that it was true.

I started hanging around in a crummy bar called Poor King Solomon's. The name was a humorous oxymoron, since King Solomon was reputed to be quite well-to-do. It was a horrible dive, very close to the university. You never got cut off or thrown out of there, no matter how drunk or obnoxious you were, and I was generally both. It catered to

people on the very edge of respectable society. It was cheap, it was dark, it was noisy, and it was open 24 hours a day. I fell in love with it.

On weekends, they had bands, motley outfits that would not be welcome anywhere civilized. My favorite was a truly awful trio called Church of the Chainsaw. They were incredibly loud and crude, and whatever they lacked in musical talent-- which was just about everything-- they made up for with raw chutzpah. The singer was a redheaded nut job who was liable to do or say anything on stage.

Well after midnight on one of an endless string of endless nights, I was sitting at a table with the nut job. The band had done two or three very haphazard sets, and he was too sloppy drunk to pick up his guitar so he decided to have a go at me. It was amusing, in an icky sort of way.

I was letting my attention wander, which was okay, because my companion was so intent on his monologue about how great he was that he was paying me no mind. My eyes fastened on a sad old guy in a black overcoat who was sitting by himself tossing down one drink after another. He was kind of elderly-looking. Not the sort one expected to see in a place like this. After a while, he got up and

started making his way to the bathroom. My table happened to be directly between him and it. He tried to negotiate the space between the back of my chair and the wall, and made a total hash of it. He slipped and practically landed on top of me. His hands had hit a strategic spot. If I'd had any appreciable tits to grope, he'd have been doing so, but Nature short-sheeted me there. Not that I mind much, considering all the trouble that seems to gravitate toward more buxom gals.

I swatted the old man on the head and cussed up such a storm I think I even embarrassed the singer, who was one of the vilest human beings I'd ever encountered. The old man kind of shrunk in on himself, made a stammered apology, and continued on his way.

"Who the hell was that lecherous old goon?" I asked.

"I don't know," said the singer, "but he comes in here all the time. Guy that age, you'd think he'd have something better to do."

I sighed. It occurred to me that you'd think the same thing about a girl my age, or any age. The singer had some ideas about better things that he and I might find to do together, and he made a pitch.

That was enough for me for one night. I gave a him a

look that shut him up, a string of invective that sewed him up, stumbled out of the bar, and headed back to my dorm.

Or so I thought.

**

After a while, I realized I had no idea where I was. I had evidently set off in exactly the wrong direction, and ended up crashing through some foliage and finding myself in an old cemetery. It was vexing. I sat down on a tombstone in hopes that my head would clear sufficiently for my sense of direction to assert itself.

Before that could happen, I became aware that I was not alone among the dead. Two other warm bodies were present, and they seemed to have taken an unhealthy interest in me.

They were a couple of hoodlums from central casting, the kind of guys who show up in a movie to mug some poor girl, and end up getting their asses stomped by a superhero. But this wasn't Gotham City, nor was it a movie. I sighed.

"Hey, little bitch," one of them said, displaying the wit for which his kind is famous. "You got anything for us?"

"No I don't," I said. "And if I were you, I'd just..."

"Shut up! You ain't us! What you are is in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Great, I thought, exactly the kind of thing I live for. Mugged and probably raped in a graveyard. Well, I was not prepared to go gently into that bad night. I was bummed and disaffected, but a long way from suicidal. I wasn't really scared. First, I was shitfaced. Second, I know how to take care of myself and then some, and I was prepared to teach my attackers a lesson they'd never forget.

Things didn't go that way. My confidence in myself would not have been misplaced had I been at all sober. But the kind of self-defense that allows a woman just a shade over five feet tall to overpower two six-foot-plus men requires more concentration and coordination than I was capable of just then. I made my move. I went down. Fists and feet started bouncing off of me. I was trying to decide whether I should make my peace with God, or tell Him once and for all where He could stick it. It was, I thought, a pretty ignoble demise for someone as noble as me.

Then things got quiet. I had my eyes closed, and was waiting patiently for the death blow, but it kept on not

coming. I hissed in annoyance. "Come ON, goddammit!" I said. I didn't want to die, but if it was unavoidable, I didn't care to wait around half the night.

After a few more seconds, I realized I was hearing the sounds of a struggle, one that did not involve me. I opened my eyes and looked around.

About ten feet to my right, my two erstwhile assailants appeared to have found someone they liked better. They had someone backed up against a twelve-foot marble gravestone and were applying their fists and feet with great vigor and industry. I hauled myself to my feet.

"If you two have had enough," the new guy wheezed, in a voice that was naggingly familiar, "we can end it here and you can go home. I don't want to kill you boys, and if you assure me you have seen the error of your ways, I'll let you walk away, lesson learned."

The two assholes laughed heartily at this and redoubled their efforts. Their victim had managed to drag a pistol out from somewhere inside the heavy black overcoat he wore, but one of the attackers slapped it out of his hand-- sending it flying in my direction. I picked it up as its owner repeated his generous offer to the two guys who were about to beat him to death. He didn't beg or even

politely ask for mercy-- he just kept prattling on as though he had the upper hand and was just being indulgent.

I admired that, and expressed my admiration by aiming at the back of one of the attacker's knees and pulling the trigger.

It made a wet, popping sound, and the guy yelped and fell to the ground. By the time the other one realized what was happening, I had clubbed Wounded Knee into unconsciousness and turned the weapon on him. I had found a means of defense that required no finesse at all. Asshole's eyes were filled with terror as I thumbed back the hammer. I gave him a nasty grin and said, "Who's the bitch now, eh?"

He just stood there gawking.

"You need to answer when I ask you something, boy," I said. I pulled the trigger. Asshole flinched at the shot, but I had deliberately missed him, and the bullet whanged off of a large tombstone a few feet behind him.

When he looked down and saw that he didn't have any more holes in him than what he'd come there with, he tried to say something. A bunch of noises tumbled out of his mouth, but they didn't add up to anything sensible. I had spent all of my bloodlust on Wounded Knee, so I decided

to just throw a scare into Asshole. It had occurred to me that shots had been fired, and the police might become involved at any moment. I wasn't drunk enough not to care about that, and I figured one more shot wouldn't hurt, if it brought things to a swift conclusion and allowed me to go elsewhere with great haste. I aimed slightly away from his head and pulled the trigger.

There was a click and nothing more. The goddamn gun was empty. Asshole seemed pleased, figuring that he had literally dodged a bullet. He smiled and started walking toward me. But adrenaline had sharpened my reflexes, and when he got close enough, I swung and broke his nose with the barrel of the gun.

By this time, Wounded Knee had managed to get vertical, and was hopping on his good leg. I suggested that Asshole render aid and comfort to his friend, and that both of them get the hell out of there before I did something else nasty to them. Asshole meekly complied.

So off they went, and good riddance. I then turned to the man I had rescued from death or worse.

"C'mon, get up," I said, grabbing a black-gloved hand.

"Mmm, yes, thanks," he drawled. His voice was familiar, but muffled by a black mask or hood which

covered his entire head and face. I didn't think I cared much for that. When I had him on his feet, I took a cautious step backward. He glanced around, saw what he was looking for, and picked it up. It was a soggy, black, wide-brimmed hat, and he plopped it on top of his head.

"Are you all right, miss?" he asked solicitously. "Quite fortunate that I happened along," he continued. His voice was thick and he was slurring his words a little.

"You have a mask on," I remarked. I generally avoid stating the obvious, but this was an unusual situation.

"Indeed I do, young lady. In my line of work, I find it advantageous to keep my true identity concealed. Ah... Could I have my gun back, please?"

"Just a second," I said. "I gotta figure you out first. Are you like a cop or something?"

"No, not exactly. I need that gun back." He made a grab for it, and almost pitched over onto the ground. When I grabbed his arm, I got a telltale whiff.

"You're drunk," I said.

"So are you," he shot back.

"Granted," I said. "But I'm not wearing a mask and waving a gun."

"You *are* waving a gun."

He was right.

"Touche," I acknowledged, handing him back his firearm. "What the hell, it's not loaded anyhow."

He stuffed it into a jacket pocket and said, "I must say, I would expect more gratitude from someone whose life I just saved. Your generation has no respect for common courtesy."

"First, I don't have anything to do with my generation, and second, it looked to me like *I* was the one that saved *your* life. Those two were about to cave your goddamn skull in!"

"It might have appeared that way," he said haughtily, "but they would have learned the folly of tangling with the Bay Phantom."

"Who the hell is the Bay Phantom?"

"*I* am! You couldn't glean that from the context?"

"Okay, but what does it mean?"

"You've never heard of me?"

"Obviously."

He glanced around. "We should get out of here," he said. "Thanks to your gunplay, we may find ourselves the objects of unwanted attention."

"Thanks to my gunplay, you may have avoided

finding yourself an object of attention in the county morgue," I pointed out.

"We'd better get indoors," said my strange companion. "I think I hear sirens. Come on, I live just over there."

My uncertainty about the Bay Phantom was overpowered by my certainty that I didn't want to get picked up by the cops for something that might turn out to be a felony. Besides, something about him was pushing my "trust him" button. Later on, I realized it was because he reminded me of my dad.

I went with him to his apartment. The little complex was just over a small rise from the cemetery. The place was obviously cheap, but not quite shabby, yet another in the endless string of properties owned by CarterRents, which must have been one of the biggest real estate outfits on the Gulf Coast, since the name was everywhere you looked. I gathered that the tenants here were mainly students. The Phantom had a ground-floor apartment in a two-story block of four. He pulled out a ring of keys, unlocked about fifty locks, and we went in.

The place was unimpressive. It looked worse than the lair of an average college student. The man's housekeeping skills were apparently nil. I flopped down onto a ratty sofa.

My "rescuer" went into the little kitchenette and got a big bottle of cheap whiskey. Then he deposited himself in an armchair and removed his hat and mask.

"Hey!" I said, "you're the old guy that tried to grope me back at the bar!"

He shot me a look. "Don't flatter yourself, " he snapped. "I was trying to get to the can. You were planted right smack in my way."

"Who the hell *are* you, anyhow?"

"I'm the Bay Phantom! I thought we'd been over that. I am... Well, I was a crimefighter. A very long time ago." He had become wistful, bittersweet and melancholy, all at once. I softened up a bit.

"You were a superhero?" I asked.

He made a sour face. "I despise that term," he said. "I was a *masked adventurer*, or a *mystery man*. 'Superhero' is a trite vulgarism."

"I have never, ever heard of you."

"Well, I haven't been very active for the past few years."

"How many years?"

He sighed deeply. "Ah... forty or so. I'm sort of semi-retired. Mostly... Ah, mostly I drink. No family. Friends-- and enemies-- all dead. But I do the occasional good deed, like I

did just now. I'm always ready. Never leave home without the mask and gun in my pocket."

"Uh-huh. What did you do back before you were semi-retired?"

"What do you think? I fought crime and evil."

"Did you just go door-to-door, or what?"

"Good grief, you certainly are impertinent."

"Is that what it's called? Listen, I'm just asking questions. I'm unfamiliar with the whole masked mystery schtick, okay?"

He seemed a bit mollified by this. "Well, basically I would wait around until some fiendish criminal mastermind or other would rear his head, then I'd slap him down. I never had long to wait. They were coming out of the woodwork in those days."

He fell silent, probably overwhelmed by the pageant of glorious memories our conversation had called up.

"You had lots of enemies?" I pressed.

"Oh, they were legion, dear girl. One right after another, all through the 30s. Seemingly endless. No sooner would I see one of them in prison or six feet under than another would pop up. Captain Demonicus, The Black Embalmer, Little Miss Sunburn, The Bloody Brain,

Professor Necrosis, the diabolical Legion of the Silent...
And on and on and on." He sighed and poured more
whiskey. "They're all, dead now, of course. Just like I ought
to be."

"I get it that you feel sorry for yourself," I said. "You
don't have to keep piling it on. I'm too young and vibrant to
have to listen to that maudlin crap. From now on, every
time you say something, I'll just mentally tack on that you
ought to be dead, okay?"

He scowled at me. "You, young woman, are nothing
but a smartass."

"Oh, I'm much more than that, though I'll admit it is
one of my main attractions. I think it's absolutely goddamn
charming."

"I'm glad you do," he said sourly. "It would be a
shame if you loathed yourself as much as everyone else
must."

I pooh-poohed that and snatched the whiskey bottle
from him, over his rather feeble protest. Rather than hunt
for a clean tumbler in his disaster area of a kitchenette, I
took a slug right from the bottle, then handed it back.

"Which one was the worst?" I asked, as he primly
wiped the neck of the bottle with his sleeve. "Of all those

old enemies, I mean."

He was silent for a few moments, staring at the wall. He had an odd look in his eye, and I knew he was gazing at something a long way off in both space and time.

"Doctor Piranha," he finally said, with a visible shudder. "Doctor Piranha. Janie, he was the worst of the worst."

"What did he do?"

"I... don't want to talk about it."

"You don't remember, do you?"

"Of course I remember!" he snapped indignantly. "I may be 94 years old, but I assure you my mind is just as sharp as it ever was. I'm not suffering from... ah... that disease that makes you forget things."

"That's good. So, what did your Doctor Pinata do?"

"It's *Piranha*, and he wasn't mine, and he was guilty of... atrocities. Lots and lots of really... atrocious... atrocities."

"Drink some more whiskey," I suggested. "Maybe it'll shake something loose."

He shook his head. "Nothing needs loosening. I assure you, I remember it all, in great detail. I just prefer to keep it to myself."

"Well... you must have had a lot of other adventures besides that," I said. "You ever thought about writing your memoirs?"

"Memoirs?"

"Yes. You think back over your life and write down shit that seems important. Then you put it in a book and sell it to people and you get rich."

"Oh, it's as simple as that, is it?"

"More or less, yeah. I might have left out one or two minor steps, but, essentially, yeah."

"If that were true, everyone would do it."

"No. For one thing, everyone is too incredibly boring to have enough interesting shit to fill a postcard, much less a book. For another, everyone does not have a father who is a very respected best-selling author with publishing connections out the ass. But I do."

Ah. That created a ripple. He shifted in his seat and looked interested for the first time. "Has he written anything I'd have heard of?" I named three or four of Dad's books, and the Phantom had heard of every one of them. He'd even read a couple. I had him hooked. We hashed out a tentative agreement and notarized it with the rest of the fifth.

I started going over to the Phantom's apartment every afternoon. He always had a fifth ready, and we drank that while he dictated and I took notes on my laptop.

The Bay Phantom had been a millionaire at one time, but had pissed away his entire fortune fighting weird criminals. His name was Joseph Perrone. He became a crimefighter because of what happened to his family, who had owned a successful commercial fishery down in Bayou La Batre. They all died—father, mother and older brother—as the result of a burglary attempt that had turned into a house fire. But he sat on the details and could not be budged. That and Doctor Piranha were off-limits. I fantasized about dislodging the information from his skull with a heavy frying pan.

“Do you know anything about the history of Mobile?” he asked me out of the blue one evening.

“Not really.”

“Well, it wasn't always what you charmingly refer to as a podunk village. There was a time when it was a

large, cosmopolitan city. In terms of acreage and population, it rivaled Chicago.”

“Okay, this is BS,” I said. “I would have been aware of something like that.”

“No. You don’t know this town. The people here—the old families—suffer from a very strange and diabolical strain of pride. Anything they don’t like is expunged from the record. This is what happened with Doctor Piranha’s reign of terror.”

“Tell me the whole thing,” I demanded. “I’m sick of you pussyfooting around. I want the whole story.”

“You think you can give me orders?”

“I know I can, and I’ll tell you why. It’s psychological. You’ll do anything I tell you to because I’m the daughter you never had. I have tapped into some latent paternal instinct.”

He sat for a moment with a look of horror on his face. This gave way to incredulity, then resigned acceptance. He made no comment on my psychological assessment, but the fact that he ended up by trying on a tentative smile was confirmation enough.

He opened the bag.

“Doctor Piranha was the worst of criminals—the

kind with no discernible motive. With most of them, the motive was glaringly obvious—profit. But Piranha? He just wanted to destroy. He didn't benefit financially from any of it. It was his only apparent purpose in life.

“I hadn't been fighting crime for very long. I had spent time in a boarding school until I came of age. Of course, I had been educating myself secretly, learning things I thought I would need to know. Detective work, you know, forensics. And various exotic fighting styles.”

“Of course,” I said. “But why did you go that route? I mean, why not just be a cop or something?”

His face went blank. “I... Well, I wanted to catch criminals the police couldn't, you see. Like Doctor Piranha!”

“Yeah, but you didn't know from any Doctor Piranha at that point. Your family was killed by thugs, you said. Police catch people like that all the time.”

He scowled. “May I just tell my story, Janie? If you question my motives every three minutes, this will take longer than I have left to live.

“I had just begun to really establish myself,” he continued. “Solved a couple of high profile cases. I had sufficient income from the fishery, or so it seemed. I even got some very sweet offers to purchase the business. The movers

and shakers in Mobile, you know, looking to expand south. But I held onto it. It was a boom time. Prosperity seemed to attract... unusual criminals. I had noticed them becoming more... colorful. Oh, I had some grand adventures! But... The market crashed in 1929. People in general became more desperate and more aggressive. I was kept very busy for a few months. Piranha started his campaign in April, as I say, but I was too busy to devote a lot of attention to him. He specialized in blowing things up-- banks, railroad bridges, shipyards. But this was the Depression. Everyone was angry at the "haves." Piranha didn't stand out.

"But, in the summer of 1930..."

"The Piranha dropped," I offered.

"Yes. He dropped on Mobile like several kilotons of pure nightmare. In June, he stepped up the pace, blew up more buildings, hijacked radio broadcast signals to gloat over what he had done. And the chilling thing was... he made no demands.

"And I bet he... paused for effect... all the time," I said.

The Phantom knew enough by now to ignore me.

"He just destroyed things. He left no fingerprints—literal or figurative—on anything. What did he

want? Nobody knew. What was he leading up to? Nobody knew. Nobody could have guessed. I spent most of my resources tracking him down. Even so, I was too late to prevent his final act.

“One day in August, he announced that he had planted massive caches of explosives all over the city. I suppose his sick ego couldn't resist, and there was time for a general evacuation. There, at least, his sick ego ironically prevented a massive body count. And early on the fatal day, he kidnapped Abelard Carter and his son, Jeremiah. Abelard was a grand old man, the unofficial mayor of Mobile. A businessman, a landowner. Kidnapping him was a resounding slap in the face to this city.

“Well, I didn't even attempt to find the explosives. It was hopeless, really. I assisted in the evacuation. When Piranha came on the air to announce the abduction and execution of Abelard Carter, I used a device I had created to trace the location from which he was hijacking the broadcast signals.

“I caught up with him, but I was too late. I was just in time to witness the murder of Abelard Carter, and too late to stop the explosives from being detonated. This was fifteen years before Hiroshima, but the destruction was just as complete. Only the center of the city escaped. I captured Piranha and handed

him over to the authorities, but it was a hollow victory. Piranha had stretched me to the limit, financially. I ended up selling the fishery after all. It was Jeremiah Carter that bought it, actually. Gave me an excellent price, along with a limited profit-sharing plan. That kept me going for several more years. But Mobile was never the same again, and neither was I.

“It all sort of blurs together after that. I did things, helped people. But it gradually bottomed out. I bottomed out. I got old, everyone I knew died. And that’s where I’ve been for... the last little while.”

There, finally, was the true source of the Phantom’s pain. I sat with him and held his hand until he fell asleep on the sofa.

After that, the process got easier. And I realized that, for the first time in a long time, I was having fun.

It is a law of nature that once you recognize and articulate a thing like that, it is doomed.

The first crack appeared on a Friday night. I was at the Phantom’s pad—which I had cleaned up to the point where it was just a hellish mess and not a lethal toxic waste dump—going over some of my notes on the laptop. There were

a couple of things I wanted to check out, so I went online.

“Janie,” the Phantom said, “I don’t know that I’m entirely comfortable with you stealing this, ah, Wi-Fi service from my neighbors.”

“Funny you should say that,” I replied, “because I don’t know that I entirely give a shit whether or not you’re comfortable with it.”

He sighed and shook his head. “Were you raised by wolves?”

“I was raised by a newspaper crime reporter.”

“Ah.”

“Yes, and if you could just be quiet so I can confirm the dates for the trial and sentencing of Doctor Piranha, I can stop stealing for a while. If my thievery bugs you so much, why don’t you kick my ass and have me locked up?”

“Don’t think for one minute that I haven’t...”

At that moment, I had to interrupt him. I had just discovered something that warranted an outburst:

“Oh, godDAMN! Oh, god-freaking-DOUBLE-damn!!!”

“Janie,” snapped the Phantom, “is it necessary for you to curse like that all the time? In my day, young

girls didn't..."

"I don't care what young girls didn't do a million years ago, and yes, it is absolutely goddamn necessary. Your abominable Doctor Piranha is not only still alive, he was released from prison four months ago! This is what you get for being totally out of touch with everything."

I had been right. He cursed, and kept on cursing for about five or six minutes. There were some words in there that I had never heard before, and just about all of the ones I had, in interesting new combinations.

It soon became clear that a siege mentality had taken hold of him.

"He swore revenge," the Phantom said over and over. "He said he'd get me back no matter how long it took."

"Yeah," I said, trying to sound reassuring, "but people say stuff like that all the time. It's been almost 70 years! He's 98 years old! One foot in the grave!"

"I'm 94!"

"Right. Your point?"

Hissing in annoyance, he jumped out of his chair, dashed over to the front door, and started checking the locks. I had to admit, he was in really good shape for a man of 94, or even 64, and maybe even 34. I doubted that

the same held true for Doctor Piranha, but then who the hell knew?

I had no luck tracking down Piranha. There was no parole officer because he wasn't on parole. He had served his time, minus a few decades for exemplary behavior, and had been released with no strings attached.

“How could they do that?” the Phantom grouched one evening. “He’s a madman! A rotten, diabolical madman! They never change their stripes.”

I started to say something, but I was interrupted by the front doorbell. The Phantom jumped a foot into the air and whipped out one of the five pistols he had taken to carrying at all times.

“Settle down,” I said. “I’ve never heard of an assassin ringing the doorbell, have you?”

I went to the front door and squinted through the peephole.

What I saw filled me with mild puzzlement, tempered by deep indifference. On the street was an old Volkswagen with a gaudy placard affixed to the passenger side door, and on the

front step was a pizza delivery “boy,” who was forty years old if he was a day. He looked a bit winded, which was understandable since he was schlepping a stack of pizza boxes almost as tall as he was.

I opened the door and gave the man a cold eye.

“What?” I said.

“Hi,” he replied brightly, peeping around the monolith he was carrying. “You having a party?”

“No.”

“Oh. I thought it might be a party. Do you always order fourteen pizzas?”

“We didn’t order fourteen pizzas. We didn’t order one pizza. Who the hell would order fourteen goddamn pizzas?”

He frowned. “Apparently, you goddamn would.”

“Nope. We didn’t order them. Sorry.”

“Well, what am I supposed to do with them?”

“I dunno. How limber are you?”

He stared at me for a few seconds, considered saying or doing something shitty, sensed the coiled viper in my bosom, and backed off. I am short and not at all intimidating physically, but I can radiate menace with the worst of them. He slunk back to his vehicle, dumped the pizzas on the back seat, and drove off into the sunset.

The mighty Bay Phantom was crouched behind the sofa with a gun in each hand. I walked around and stood, arms folded across my chest, taking advantage of a rare opportunity to loom over somebody. “You can put the hardware away. I took care of the diabolical pizza delivery man all by my little self.”

He stuck the guns back inside his jacket and groped around. He had pulled his mask on while I was at the door, and it was slightly askew; the eyeholes weren’t lined up with his eyes. I snatched the silly thing off his head and helped him to his feet.

“What was that all about?” he asked, settling back in his armchair and reaching for the whiskey.

“I don’t know,” I replied. “He got an order messed up or something.”

“That’s what’s wrong with this country,” he grumped. “People don’t pay any attention to what they’re doing. This is across the board, from a pizza delivery boy all the way to the President of the United States! Why, in my day, a person...”

I rolled my eyes. My mandate as his biographer did not include listening to his endless diatribes about how crappy the modern world is compared to the glory days of the Depression and World War Two, when people were so smart and so wonderful that the ones who didn’t starve to death killed

each other by the millions. I let my mind wander for a while, until I was pulled out of my reverie by the ringing of the telephone.

The Phantom was holding forth on what was wrong with young people these days, and didn't notice it. I walked over and picked up the phone.

“Hello?”

A strange, tinny voice said, “Hello, I'm with the electric company. Can you please tell me, is your refrigerator running?”

“What?” I said. “No, it's sitting in one place, jerkoff.” I hung up.

The phone rang again. I picked up the receiver and said hello again.

“Uh, hey,” came the same voice as before. “Ah, do you have Prince Albert in a can?”

I said, “This isn't a store, you stupid ass, it's a private residence,” and hung up again.

The phone rang again. I yanked the cord out of the wall.

**

The next few days were a cornucopia of pointless annoyances. The Phantom received a total of 18 unsolicited pizza deliveries, 26 unwanted taxi cabs, four unordered magazine subscriptions, and an endless string of stupid prank phone calls.

I had my suspicions about who was doing it. The best candidate, I thought, was that loony singer from Church of the Chainsaw, the one I had so thoroughly rebuffed the night all this began. I decided to look him up and give him what for.

I was trying to track down his address and phone number online when I heard somebody at the front door, fiddling with the knob. I glanced at the Phantom, who was deep in the arms of Morpheus. I was in a waiting-for-the-last-straw mood, and here it was. I was gonna send this goddamn taxi driver or pizza boy or call girl away with a whole bunch of fleas in his or her ear. I flung the door open without looking through the peephole.

It was the only time I had ever done that, and wouldn't you just know it, this time it actually was some jerk with a gun.

He pointed it at me and said, "You're that girl, right?"

"You astonish me, Holmes," I said. "However did

you deduce it?”

“Huh?”

“Nothing. What the hell do you want?”

“Um, I’m supposed to kill you. Nothing personal, but my... Uh, that is to say, Doctor Piranha has sent me to... ah... extract revenge on the Bay Phantom.”

“Doctor Piranha,” I said. “Well, this is actually something of a relief. We’ve just been sitting here waiting. I think you mean *exact* revenge, don’t you?”

“Whatever.”

I rolled my eyes. “Then you ought to shoot him, genius.”

“Naw, the Doc said to kill you, not him. I’m especially not supposed to kill him, or even hurt him. Honestly, I never heard of the dude. But my great... uh, my great criminal boss is making a major deal out of it.”

The guy was a total idiot. He was about my age, neither handsome nor ugly, and he had one of those goddamn Justin Bieber haircuts. On top of that, he was wearing a pair of those dumb earrings that look like washers that you jam into your earlobe and stretch it all out of shape. For some reason, that pissed me off more than the gun, and I did something I’ve always wanted to do to someone with that kind of earring. I

jabbed my index finger through the hole, got a grip on the earring, and jerked down as hard as I could. The result was exactly what you would imagine, and then some.

He clapped one hand to what was left of the ear, and I plucked the pistol from the fingers of his other hand, which had gone all rubbery. He was cursing as though I had torn off something way more important than an ear, but he stayed on his feet. I applied the toe of my shoe to a very sensitive area hard enough to put him on his knees. A kick in the ribs sent him all the way down, and I felt pretty good about that. I pushed the door shut.

“You little bitch,” he snarled.

“Shut up, Van Gogh,” I snapped back. I jiggled the pistol to emphasize my position of power. “You’re on the wrong side of this gun to be calling anybody a bitch.”

He saw the sense in what I was saying. I stepped on his neck, just in case, and snatched his wallet out of his back pocket. I made a vague remark about putting a bullet in his head if he didn’t start behaving, and he stopped thrashing and squawking and lay there breathing heavily and bleeding gently.

I thumbed through his wallet until I found his driver’s license with his name and address. I got a chuckle out of his first name, --which was an ironic one under the circumstances—and

a big WTF out of his surname. I wasn't sure what it meant, but I knew it meant something. I had planned on interrogating him, but didn't think it would be necessary now. I memorized the address.

“Stay put,” I told him.

I grabbed a dish towel and wet it with hot water. Then I buzzed into the bathroom for a bottle of rubbing alcohol. Next, I ministered to my battered miscreant. Handing him the towel, I opened the bottle of alcohol and poured about half of it over the ear I had so cruelly used. He yelled. I clapped a hand over his mouth, and the dishtowel to his ear.

“Be quiet,” I said. “These walls are thin as paper. You don't want the cops in here any more than I do, I'm sure.”

He thrashed around again for a couple seconds—during which time I unobtrusively slipped his wallet back where it came from—but gamely bit back any further caterwauling, and pressed the towel to the side of his head. There was blood all over, but his life was not in danger.

I went back to the bathroom for some gauze and antibiotic ointment. Van Gogh had become very meek by this point, and offered no resistance as I dressed his tattered ear. I hadn't actually torn it off. But his earlobe was shredded. I got it squared away, more or less. When I finished, he sat up and eyed

me sullenly.

“Now what?” he said. There was fear in his voice.

“Now get out of here.”

“Huh? You’re not gonna hold me for the cops?”

“I’m not gonna call the cops.”

“Why not?”

“None of your business.”

“Um. Can I have my gun back?”

I said nothing, because the look I was giving him spoke volumes.

Quickly and silently he got to his feet and made his exit, unaware that I now knew who he was and where he lived. I needed time to ponder and make sense of what I had learned.

While the Phantom slumbered, I stole more of his neighbors’ Wi-Fi, and ran up a hellacious phone bill to boot. I had dug deep, and when I reached the limit of my hacking abilities, I called an expert—an old friend of my father’s, who had best remain nameless here. I’ll simply call him the Ghoul. For many years, he had been a morgue attendant in Chicago when Dad was a reporter there. Dad fed him a steady diet of bribes in return for inside info on unusual murder cases. The Ghoul’s coffers eventually swelled to the point where he was able to invest in a couple of interesting companies at the

beginning of the home computer revolution. He quit the morgue business and became a computer guru. He was there for the dawn of the Internet, and his inquisitive—and acquisitive—nature led him to become the unsung king of hackers. If there was anything he couldn't find out, it wasn't there.

I called a local private eye and tossed him a couple hours' worth of work checking on a few things. Between his ability to find and my ability to connect dots, I soon had everything I needed. I had learned and surmised a huge number of hugely interesting facts, and by the time the Bay Phantom was awake, I was ready to tie a ribbon around the case of the Pathetic Return of Doctor Piranha.

I thought about trying to sober the Phantom up, but decided things might go better if he was sozzled. So I fed him whiskey as he gave voice to paranoid imaginings.

“Is that blood on the floor, Janie?”

“No, it's nail polish. I was painting my nails and I spilled it. Drink your breakfast.”

“You never paint your nails. There's no paint on them now.”

“Because I spilled it! Aren't you paying attention?”

Just empty your glass, please, then I've got a surprise for you."

He grumbled, but complied. If nothing else, he had learned the folly of defying me. He drained his glass, slammed it down, fixed me with a glare, and said, "What now?"

"Now, old sport, we settle this once and for all. Get your hat, we're going for a ride."

We climbed into my car, and set off for Bayou La Batre. I had memorized a set of directions I'd obtained online, and had no problem going straight to where the end of this bizarre saga would be found. I hoped what I was doing wasn't as stupid as it probably was, but I have great faith in my instincts, and this is what they were telling me.

We drove south, leaving Mobile behind. After a stretch of nondescript semi-countryside, we entered the little town of Bayou La Batre, a place made famous by a popular book and movie about an idiot. We wound down through the main drag, and its miasma of sea odors, past the lines of fishing boats and on to a heavily-wooded area.

We proceeded down a dirt road, under a canopy of overhanging tree branches. This rutted lane, believe it or not, had once been a fashionable address. About 75 years ago.

The house at the end of the road had once been imposing and elegant. Now it was imposing and depressing. The

elegance had decomposed into a very unappetizing Tennessee Williams and Addams Family combo. It was badly in need of a new coat of paint, though a wrecking ball would have been more to the point.

The Bay Phantom just sat there gawking. He made a couple tries at saying something, but all he could come up with was, “That’s... That’s...”

“Yep... yep,” I said. “It is. Been a while, huh? Welcome back to Gulf Bay Manor, ancestral home of the Perrone family.”

The Phantom looked as though someone had clubbed him in the guts with a spiked mace.

“C’mon,” I said, grabbing him by the hand and dragging him up onto the porch. “Gimme one of your guns for a minute. This could be kinda hairy at first.”

He complied, in a stunned and distant fashion, handing me a wicked .45 automatic that weighed almost as much as I did. Weapon at the ready, I boldly knocked on the door.

It opened, and I found myself face-to-face with my old adversary, Van Gogh. His jaw dropped. I have never in my life kicked a dog, but if I had, this guy acted the same way the dog would have the next time he saw me.

“Well, well,” I said. “How’s your evening going, young Master Vincent Perrone?”

He gawked at me. “How the hell did you know my name?”

“I know everything. I’m what they call omniscient. Now, quit trying to figure me out and take us to your leader.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You know what I’m talking about.” I pointed the gun at him. “Hey, I bet I could shoot your other ear off.”

“Okay!” he said, putting his hands up. “God, Jesus, you’re crazy... Okay, okay!”

He led us through the ancient, dusty house. It was poorly-lit and filled with old furniture, musty and in disrepair. We proceeded up a stairway at the rear of the house to a plain wooden door, which looked brand-new. Vincent pushed it open.

"Ah, Great-grand... Um, Doctor Piranha... You're not gonna like this, I know, but..."

"What is this?" came a voice from the far corner of a very strange room. "Oh, for... Well, come on in then,"

Following Vincent inside, we found ourselves in what looked like a Frankenstein lab from an old movie. There were bizarre gadgets stacked everywhere. Very film noir, but I got the impression that these were not decorations. Whoever

lived in this place was just being himself.

Behind a large, heavy desk sat a man. When I first caught sight of him, in profile, he reminded me powerfully of the man at my side, though he was older, thinner, and... I'm sure you know who it is, so I won't draw it out.

"Bay Phantom," I said, "I presume you recognize your old adversary. Say hello to Doctor Piranha."

"Vincent," said the arch-fiend sourly, "it isn't enough that you fail to kill this girl and let her remove part of your ear. You have to compound it by leading her directly to my home."

I spoke up in Vincent's defense.

"You can't blame him, sir. He's a total idiot, and you must have known that."

The fiend gave me an icy smile. "Well... You don't seem to be an idiot. I may have made a miscalculation." He shifted his eyes to the Bay Phantom. "I say, old foe, you wouldn't be interested in trading proteges by any chance?"

Vincent was sputtering indignantly. The Phantom, on the other hand, had been rendered speechless, and just gaped at his old enemy.

"No, he wouldn't," I said. "You have to play the hand you're dealt, Doctor. Why don't you tell him who you really are and what you've been up to? Everything." I had the gun trained

in the criminal mastermind's general direction, but I was sure he wasn't at all intimidated.

"You figured it out?"

I nodded.

"All of it?"

I nodded again.

"Magnificent. And you haven't told him?"

"Not my place, sir."

The arch-criminal nodded.

The Bay Phantom finally found his voice and said, "You mean... That was you? The... pranks? The pizzas? The taxis?"

"Of course. Killing the girl was to be the icing on the cake. When I started my campaign, I had no idea you had taken on a junior partner. Those relatively minor annoyances were really all I had at my disposal, you see. Vincent actually suggested them. Seemed rather brilliant at the time. My honor as a super-criminal mastermind demanded that I take some kind of revenge, you see. Forgoing it once you've sworn it is simply not the done thing. So there I was. What was I supposed to do? Kill you?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact. I mean, it's what I was expecting. I put you in jail for 70 years! From your warped

perspective, I robbed you of almost three-quarters of your life! I was expecting to be killed, or at least dismembered. Are you or are you not an evil mad scientist?”

“An oversimplification, but I won’t split hairs. For the sake of argument, yes, I am an evil mad scientist.”

“And you kill people. Without remorse. Right?”

Doctor Piranha nodded.

“Then why aren’t you killing me?”

Piranha tilted his head, like a curious dog. “Some atavistic instinct, I imagine. One does not murder members of one’s own tribe. Or of one’s own family.”

The Bay Phantom shook his head. “I don’t understand. A leopard does not change his stripes. I just...”

I dug the Phantom in the ribs, hard.

“What!” He whirled on me. “Janie! Please...”

I shushed him. “First,” I whispered, “leopards don’t have stripes, they have spots. Second, did you hear what he just said?”

“Well, I wasn’t...”

“He said ‘One does not murder members of one’s own family!’”

“Well, of course one doesn’t! I... Oh. I... OH!”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “OH! In caps and italics.” I stepped

back.

The somewhat decrepit hero turned away from me to gaze upon the superannuated fiend with fresh eyes.

“Are you saying... That is, do you mean to tell me that... You and I...”

“I’m your big brother, Joe. I’m Anthony Perrone.”

I was glad there was someone in the family who didn’t mind cutting to the chase, even if he was a murderous diabolical monster. The Bay Phantom’s constant dithering could be trying.

“Well, that isn’t...” he dithered. “I mean to say, you can’t... Anthony... You were... you know...”

“Joseph, when did you lose your ability to speak in complete sentences? Vincent, make yourself somewhat useful and bring in some chairs. We have much to discuss, and your great-uncle and his young friend won’t want to stand up all evening.”

Once we were settled, Doctor Piranha began his tale of crime and retribution.

“You were too young to know the things I knew back then, Joe. The political machine in Mobile... They had their

claws into everything. They wanted to continue expanding the city limits indefinitely, into some kind of a... mega city. They had wormed their way south, and were attempting a forced annexation of Bayou La Batre. The ringleaders were the despicable Carter family. Do you remember the old man, Abelard Carter? I'm one of the most twisted, evil criminals ever to walk the earth, and he made me sick. He was the kind that gives sociopaths a bad name.

“Our father refused to be intimidated. The fishery was wonderfully prosperous, and it employed a great many locals. All of them would be out of work if Carter got his talons into the business. Dad stood in their way. You were a bit too young to be aware. I was not. Carter and his thugs threatened Dad, and when that didn't work, there were... incidents. Mysterious fires. Near misses in the automobile.

“Then came the night they burned our summer house. They tried to kill us all, Joe! It was played off as a burglary attempt turned tragic. I just barely got out alive! I was presumed dead, but you were unharmed. They couldn't do anything about the fishery then, since ownership was tied up in probate until you turned 21. A trustee was appointed to oversee operations, and that was that for the next few years. But they were waiting.

“I didn't feel inclined to. I wanted to give them

something else to worry about. So I forced the issue. After my apparent demise, I traveled for a while, learned things. I was a genius, let's not mince words. You may remember, I always wanted to be a scientist. What you didn't know is that I was what they used to call a 'bad seed.' The word they use now is 'sociopath.'

"Nope," I said. "Long out of psychological vogue. It's Anti-social Personality Disorder."

"Either way," Piranha continued, shooting me an anti-social look, "the trauma of our parents' murder didn't make me what I am. I already was. The Carter organization had simply picked the wrong family to fuck with.

"They had destroyed my family. I resolved to destroy everything they had—the city of Mobile. I wanted to obliterate it utterly. And I almost did. I would have, had it not been for you. I had no idea you would react to the destruction of our family as you did. For a while, I had no idea you were the mysterious Bay Phantom. I'm afraid I did not keep up with you, Joe. I let you think I was dead, because I knew you'd never approve of the course I had decided upon."

"Of course I wouldn't," the Phantom said. "I mean, killing people and destroying property... It's not the sort of thing our father would have encouraged."

“No. Our father was an honorable man, and our mother was an honorable woman. That’s what led them to defy Carter and his machine. And that is what got them killed. I loved them as much as you did, Joe. And I knew that honor and fair play would only be liabilities in dealing with the scum who destroyed them. So I discarded it, though not entirely. Didn’t you think my body count was astonishingly low for a bloodthirsty madman? Abelard Carter, the hired thugs who killed our parents—though you couldn’t have known that, of course—and sundry other Carter employees and associates.”

“Some of those people were innocent of any wrongdoing!”

Piranha sighed. “I never said I wasn’t evil, Joe. Merely that I was not a total barbarian.”

“Just a few hours ago, you were prepared to murder an innocent girl.”

Doctor Piranha chuckled. “Not really. I just wanted to throw in a final scare. Miss Colson made an excellent point earlier—I am quite aware of my great-grandson’s limitations. I was sure he’d never actually pull it off.”

I stuck my tongue out at Vincent, and he gave me the finger. I leaned toward him, and said, in a stage whisper, "The gun was loaded with blanks, by the way."

The hapless Vincent gave his great-grandfather a hurt look. Piranha gave me a similar look, for spoiling his bloodthirsty image.

“Well,” said the Phantom. “I suppose you’ve paid for the distant past. You were tried, convicted and served your time. However, these recent incidents... the harassment... I can’t just let it go. You broke the law, Anthony. You threatened Janie, even if you didn’t really intend her any harm, and a threat like that is a felonious assault, even if it isn’t carried out. You do what you do because of what you are. So do I. I can’t let you just get away with all this.”

The brothers glared at one another for several minutes. When I couldn’t stand any more of that, I spoke up.

“This is an interesting situation,” I observed. “The clash of two inane codes of honor. The only thing Doctor Piranha could be charged with is harassing communications. That’s a misdemeanor. You’ll both look stupid, and the DA will throw out the case.”

“But his great-grandson held a gun on you, Janie,” the Phantom reminded me.

“For about two seconds. But that was me, not you, and I don’t intend to press charges. I plan to forget the whole thing.”

“I wish I could,” Vincent said miserably, putting a hand to his bandaged head. Some time back, he had stopped giving me the stink eye and started giving me a different kind of eye, which I didn’t think I liked any better.

“Aw, poor baby,” I said sarcastically. Incredibly, he seemed to take this as a sign of encouragement, judging by his expression. What the hell is it with guys, anyhow? Tear their ears off, and they still want to get you into bed.

I dismissed Vincent from my mind. I had the germ of an idea, and it was growing rapidly into a plan. I just had to draw out the conversation until it matured.

“You’re 94 years old, Phantom, and Piranha is 98. Granted, neither of you looks a day over 89. It’s as if you’d discovered the fountain of youth. But you’re both within spitting distance of 100.

“Now listen. I’m going to tell you what all of this is really about. Because you have your heads so far up one another’s asses, you can’t see the forest *or* the goddamn trees. Phantom, you wanted to avenge your family by fighting crime. You never knew who killed them, so you declared war on crime in general. This is a psychological phenomenon called transference. You did some good, but you could never satisfy yourself.

“Doctor Piranha, you also wanted to avenge your family. You DID know who was to blame, but you went overboard and took it out on the whole city. You got locked up, Jeremiah Carter got the fishery. Though his original plans were scotched by you, he still made out like a bandit and lived high on the hog, and he and his heirs are still up there. And there’s something you didn’t know. Old Abelard Carter, the arch-fiend you’re so proud of having killed? He was a half-wit. It was the son, Jeremiah, who pulled all the strings. When you killed Abelard, you actually did Jeremiah a huge favor! I gathered enough facts to deduce this in less than an hour!”

Piranha actually looked a little stunned. “My God, girl,” he said, “you are pure gold! Would you at least consider becoming an evil criminal apprentice?”

I ignored that and said, “Jeremiah, it will interest you to know, is also still alive, and only a few years’ your junior. So, gentlemen, you are just a couple of sad old failures. You’re all but forgotten, the both of you. But you’re on the verge of reminding the world that you exist.”

They stared at each other. Then they stared at me.

“It’s your choice how you do it. You can continue your feud over this petty shit that’s going on now, and go down in history as a pair of absurd clowns from a bygone age, and go

to your graves without having fulfilled what amounts to your only real purposes in life. Or...” I dragged out the word, then fell silent in a wonderfully dramatic way, letting it hang there. A timer had gone off in my head, and it was time to pull the plan out of the oven. Three or four seconds crept by, and then:

“Or what?” the brothers said in unison.

I gave them a dazzling smile. “Or... you can listen to my idea.”

They listened.

**

High noon. Government Street, Mobile, Alabama. A tense drama unfolds.

In the spacious lobby of Carter Tower, on this day of days, a madman holds sway. The diabolical Doctor Piranha, who held the city in a grip of terror almost three quarters of a century ago, has returned. Neither time nor incarceration has mellowed this arch-fiend.

Just before five o’clock on the previous evening, Doctor Piranha had entered the lobby, carrying two large suitcases. He was dressed in a long, white lab jacket, his hands covered with thick rubber gloves. Upon his head he wore the ghastly mask he had first donned in 1930, a few months before he unleashed his holocaust on the city of Mobile—a ghastly

green fish head with blood-red eyes and a mouthful of razor-sharp teeth.

He strode into the Carter Trust Bank and threw the suitcases down onto the tiled floor, then drew from within his roomy jacket a strange, wicked-looking weapon. It was Piranha's deadly electrostatic rifle, a death-dealing nightmare. When trained upon human flesh, the gun does things too horrifying to describe. After demonstrating the weapon by reducing to slag the door of the bank's main vault, the madman kicked open the suitcases, both of which were packed, so he said, with solid blocks of a super-explosive of his own invention, XXX-1313.

At first, the Doctor made no demands. Police surrounded the Tower. Nobody dared rush the fiend while he had his rifle and his explosives.

At eight o'clock that night, having established his beachhead in the lobby, Piranha allowed the Tower to be evacuated, with twenty exceptions. These were the officers of the bank and the directors and executive officers of the Carter Corporation, including four members of the Carter family.

Older residents of the Port City dredged up ancient memories of the insidious Doctor. The TV stations dredged up old newsreel films. News outlets around the country and around

the world—TV, print, and internet—dug out the dusty facts about Doctor Piranha and his arch-nemesis, the all-but-forgotten Bay Phantom. Doctor Piranha literally became an overnight sensation in the modern world, as did his virtuous foe.

Dawn came, and with it came the first demand. He wanted to speak, on a secure telephone line, with Jeremiah Carter. This was hastily arranged. Exactly what the Doctor and the billionaire said to one another is not known. But a little over an hour later, Carter's attorney released a statement. Jeremiah Carter had dictated and signed a confession. He admitted that he had, back in 1924, ordered the murders of the Perrone family of Bayou La Batre. Carter had also been persuaded to turn over records and other items that constituted hard evidence of the long-ago conspiracy.

The house of Carter seemed poised to collapse, figuratively speaking.

But there was more.

The diabolical Doctor had yet another score to settle. The big one.

He wanted the Bay Phantom.

When he made the announcement, panic set in. If his arch-nemesis did not present himself at the Carter Tower by noon, all hell would be unleashed. The Bay Phantom? Very few

people remembered him at all. Those that did felt certain he was no longer alive. The last confirmed public sighting of the crimefighter had been in 1968, and he was over the hill then. A collective cry of despair went up. Piranha's demand was impossible. Paranoid speculation ran riot. Nobody believed that the rifle and the explosives were the only tricks he had up his sleeve.

The Bay Phantom was surely long dead. What would the arch-criminal do when noon arrived and his nemesis did not? The DA's office moved swiftly on the Carter revelations and promised a thorough investigation and aggressive prosecution, in the hope that this would appease the madman, but he was intractable. A SWAT team was assembled for what everyone feared was a desperate, last-ditch effort—one which seemed certain to end in tragedy.

Nerves were stretched to the breaking point as a church bell began to toll the noon hour. A hush descended over the city. Sweaty fingers twitched on triggers. The crowd around the Carter Tower was herded to a safer distance. But how could anyone's safety be guaranteed? By now, everyone knew what Piranha had done to Mobile in 1930. What was he capable of today?

Then... as the bell rang for the twelfth time, a rapt

audience around the world held its collective breath. As the echo of the final chime faded, a new sound was heard: a powerful automobile engine. The crowd turned as one in the direction from which the sound came, and saw, as one, a most miraculous sight. A sleek, black vintage roadster came around a corner and moved slowly toward the Carter Tower, through the crowd that parted to let it pass. It stopped just short of the police line. The door swung open and out stepped an impossible vision.

A man in a black overcoat, a black mask and a black hat!

The Bay Phantom had returned! The world raised a cheer.

The black-clad avenger raised a thoroughly modern megaphone to his masked lips and said, “Piranha! This has gone far enough!”

A mad cackling issued from the large speakers someone had set up in front of the building

“So,” came the voice of the master criminal, “the hero arrives for our final showdown! At last!”

The Bay Phantom was silent. He lowered the megaphone and scratched his black hat.

Doctor Piranha’s sinister tones issued from the speakers once again. “I suppose you want me to release my

hostages?”

“Oh! Yeah! Uh, yes, you foul fiend. Release those innocent people, you diabolical creep, and, ah... um...”

“I suppose you think I’m a coward for threatening these innocent citizens, and that I should face you alone, if I have the guts! Right?”

“Yeah! That’s it exactly. Release those foul hostages, you innocent fiend, and face me...ah...”

“Alone, right?”

“Yes! If I have the guts!”

“Ha! Acting like a complete moron is a clever ploy, but I know you too well, old foe! Don’t bother saying anything else, do you hear? Don’t talk anymore. I shall release my hostages, and face you alone. At last, the score between us will be settled!”

The Bay Phantom nodded vigorously. Soon, a small knot of people emerged from the front doors of the besieged tower, rushing into the arms of waiting police and medical personnel.

Once everyone was clear, the ebon form of the Bay Phantom moved purposefully toward the building. He withdrew a gleaming .45 automatic from within his overcoat as he strode boldly through the darkened doorway and into the building.

Silence.

A minute crept by. Then two...

“Ha-ha-ha!” came the diabolical doctor’s shrill voice, through the speakers. “I have planted huge caches of my explosive all over this hated city! No one could ever find them, for they are miles beneath the earth. But they are planted along strategic fault lines. When I press this detonator, everything for a hundred miles around will be leveled! Mobile will be obliterated! Hahahahahahahahahahaha!!!”

Panic in the streets. The few brave or foolish souls who had remained near the Carter Tower began to flee. Police and fire crews pulled back.

“No,” came the voice of the hero. “I can’t reach you in time, but I can stop you! Though it means my own life, I will detonate the suitcase explosives you brought here! You’ll be vaporized before you can press the button! I only regret that I only have... ah...only...”

“Only one life to give, I suppose you’ll say!” The voice of the criminal mastermind betrayed great exasperation at this point, no doubt because his nefarious scheme was about to be so thoroughly foiled.

“Hell, yeah!”

Silence again. Then two gunshots. Silence again.

Three seconds ticked agonizingly by... four seconds...

And then the House of Carter literally collapsed, in a deafening explosion and a cloud of smoke and dust. The structure collapsed in on itself, leaving its surroundings virtually undamaged.

In a very old, very forgotten tunnel beneath the rubble of the Carter Tower, a figure stirred from an alcove in which it been crouching for half an hour. Cautiously, the white-coated shape moved into the tunnel. Instead of a human face, this apparition had the bulbous green head of a predatory fish, with blood-red eyes and rows of wicked teeth.

From a similar alcove in the opposite wall, there emerged a specter in a black cloak, black mask, and black, wide-brimmed hat.

The two faced each other in silence for a few moments. Then the one in black began to giggle. The monster in the lab coat reached up and gripped its awful green head in its rubber-gloved hands and lifted...

“Goddamn!” I exclaimed with unfettered relief. “This thing stinks!” I tossed it onto the floor of the tunnel and kicked it

away.

“Hey!” said the man in black. “That’ll be worth a fortune on eBay! It’s the actual one great-granddad wore back in the day!”

“You idiot,” I countered, “you can’t sell that. How would you explain how you got it? I swear, you are the absolute dullest knife in the drawer. And the all rest of them are butter knives. Plastic ones.”

Vincent Perrone scampered over to pick up the fish face.

“I swear, if that thing shows up online, I’m gonna relieve you of your other ear. You’re on thin ice as it is over your shitty performance as the Phantom. If I hadn’t had the wit and cool-headedness to cover for your inane gaffes, the whole thing would have been a disaster.”

“I don’t see why I had to be the Bay Phantom, anyhow,” he whined. “He’s your friend. I should have been my great-grandfather.”

“That would have been worse. Villains are harder to play than heroes. They have to be smarter, because everything is stacked against them. They are complex and layered. You’ve never seen Richard the Third?”

“I never even saw the first two.”

“You couldn’t have pulled the performance off. Not for almost 24 hours, like I did.”

His brilliant response to this was, “Ah, pfffffft!”

We walked through the tunnel in silence for 20 minutes, headed for the secret egress—discovered by a combination of the Ghoul’s talent and my genius—several blocks from the former site of Carter Tower.

Once the dust had settled and the official version of the truth had been decided upon, Bay Phantom was virtually canonized. The despicable Doctor Piranha was assured of his place in history as one of the most diabolical criminal madmen who ever lived. In the years to come, books would be written and movies-- and my career-- would be made.

No one would ever discover the truth—that these two polar opposites were brothers, and their over-the-top alter egos were two products of the same defining tragedy. The Bay Phantom would be publicly revealed as Joseph Perrone, while the true identity of Doctor Piranha would remain a mystery.

In his last will and testament, which was “discovered” a few days after Joe Perrone’s heroic “demise,” he named a young friend, one Janie Marie Colson, daughter of celebrated true-crime author So-and-so, as his heir and executor

of his estate. Though Perrone had been living on Social Security when he died, the book and movie deals—including the Bay Phantom’s memoirs, which we had completed by the end of the summer—produced a healthy cash flow, all of which yours truly, the civic-minded Miss Colson, plowed into the newly-formed Bay Phantom Foundation. Among other things, the Foundation administered a trust fund for victims of the Carters’ shady dealings.

The federal government launched an in-depth investigation into the business practices of the Carter family, discovering a pattern of corruption and felonious conduct stretching back to the dawn of the Twentieth Century. The United States Attorney General’s office aggressively prosecuted everything that was not excluded by the statute of limitations. Which was quite a bit.

Some of the Bay Phantom windfall was devoted to the renovation of Gulf Bay Manor, which was now the semi-happy and very anonymous home of the “late” Joseph and Anthony Perrone, two brothers who had finally managed to lay some of their ancient ghosts to rest. Officially, the house belonged to Vincent Perrone, boy genius, just as it always had, and we cooked up a story about how he got the money to renovate the place. He was a “distant relative” of the Bay

Phantom, and had benefited modestly from the old man's heroic demise.

One day in late autumn, I paid them a visit. My summer of discontent had run its course, and—thanks in part to the Perrone brothers and their ancient feud—I had put some ghosts away, too. I had gone ahead and completed an entire quarter at the university and was preparing to bid Mobile farewell and go back home to Dad.

I couldn't leave, though, without dropping in one more time on my "Two and a Half Men," Joseph, Anthony and Vincent Perrone.

Vincent, whose ear was looking pretty good, thanks to the plastic surgery I had paid for, led me through the house and out the back door, to a shiny new gazebo, under which the elder Perrones were at it again, engaged in a heated battle of wits from opposite sides of a checkerboard.

I heard the Phantom accuse Piranha of cheating, and Piranha threaten to vaporize the Phantom with his electrostatic rifle.

"Good luck with that," I piped up. "I tore the guts out of that thing. You didn't think I'd hand a lethal weapon back to a madman, did you?"

The hero and the villain both smiled at me and stood

up. The Bay Phantom gave me a warm hug, Doctor Piranha a dry handshake—which was pretty good for him, and about all I wanted anyhow. He made me uncomfortable, though I was genuinely fond of him, in the abstract way some people are fond of snakes or tarantulas.

“You’re leaving us, Janie?” the Phantom said in his patented bittersweet fashion.

“Yes, life goes on. I’ve managed to set you two old goats straight, and I am needed elsewhere. Sort of like Mary Poppins.”

“Typhoid Mary Poppins,” quipped the ever-so-witty Doctor Piranha. “Are you absolutely sure you wouldn’t like to be my pupil? Your potential is staggering. I know I can help you nurture your inner sociopath.”

“If I ever totally flip my lid, I’ll let you know. I’m resilient, but everyone has a breaking point. Just keep your fingers crossed.”

The Phantom chuckled. “God forbid,” he said. “You’d be unbeatable—unlike my brother.”

Piranha snarled. “You got lucky. Had circumstances been even slightly different, I’d have handed you your head back in 1930.”

“You think so?” countered the Phantom. “On your

best day you could never outwit me. And your best days are far behind you.”

Piranha turned to me. “Janie,” he said, “surely you have the wit to perceive the truth. In a fair fight between me and Joseph, which of us do you think would win? Me, correct?”

I shook my head. “Let me point something out to you masterminds. You spent your lives trying to do something you couldn’t do. Once I was apprised of the situation, I solved 80 years’ worth of problems in three days, including a couple you didn’t even know you had.

“So, to answer your question, it doesn’t matter which one of you would win, because I could kick *both* your asses.”

The Bay Phantom laughed. Doctor Piranha said, “That isn’t an answer, it’s a non sequitur.” But he was smiling.

We made our emotional farewells, and I promised to visit them first chance I got. I’d be busy through the coming winter promoting our book, and would swing through Mobile in May.

Vincent to escorted me back through the house and out the front door, to where my cab was waiting to take me to the airport.

As the cab rolled away from Gulf Bay Manor, I turned my laptop on and opened a heavily-encrypted file. Its

contents were known only to me, and they were proof of the perfidy of one of the major players in the events of the last few days. I saw nothing to be gained by exposing this person's deception.

Who was this purveyor of falsehood?

That would be me.

I had told the Perrone brothers one lie, and withheld one bit of devastating information.

Abelard Carter had not been a half-wit. That was the lie. He was just as evil as Doctor Piranha had believed him to be. And his son, Jeremiah, was worse.

The younger Carter had been plotting for some time to unseat the old man. In 1924, his plans came to fruition, thanks to an unlikely ally: Francesco "Frank" Perrone, father of Joseph and Anthony.

I had deduced some of this from stray bits of incongruous data, and confirmed it when I had spoken to Jeremiah on the phone as Doctor Piranha. Frank Perrone wanted out of the fishery, but felt trapped by his wife, Margaret, who was a bit of a tyrant, it seemed. She controlled the Perrone pursestrings. Frank had been a poor but dishonest fishing boat captain when he married the boss' daughter, and eventually took over the business. Frank was the boss, in every way except on

paper. As in paper money.

The fire at the summer house was planned by Frank and Jeremiah. The elder Perrone would get rid of his hated wife and sons, collect the insurance, and inherit the fishery, which he would then sell to Jeremiah. This would give young Carter leverage against his father.

What Frank didn't know was that he had crawled into bed with a bigger snake than he was. Jeremiah saw to it that Frank, too, was incinerated. Carter had forged a "new will" for Frank Perrone, one naming himself heir and executor. But when Joe Perrone survived, he hadn't dared use it. Jeremiah bided his time, as did Anthony Perrone. When 1930 rolled around, Piranha did Jeremiah's work for him.

That was the truth. And it was, at this late date, a truth that would have imprisoned the Perrone brothers in a hell worse than the one they were already in.

So I gave them a lie that set them free. In my mad doctor persona, I had issued such extravagant threats to Jeremiah Carter that his silence was guaranteed. My father, the journalist, might have disapproved. It was fortunate, then, that he would never know. I'm afraid my scruples are badly contaminated with compassion.

I closed the file and highlighted the icon that

represented it. There lay the truth I had seen fit to withhold. One further act, and my depravity would be complete.

I pressed "delete."

FIN