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Security Public Library's Mini Mystery #3

HEIR TO MURDER

By Barbara Fox

The sons and daughter of Jeremy Hastings, who had just passed away at age 94, flew to Miami for the reading of their late father's last will and testament. They went directly from the airport offices of Harrison, Tuttle, and Lane, Attorneys-at-Law, where were ushered into the conference room. They were offered ice, coffee, and pastries while they waited for the lawyer to appear. They were not a happy group. Colonel Martin, the eldest son, was suffering from a summer cold and kept sneezing and blowing his nose, Caroline, the daughter, had a backache from the discomfort of flying coach; and Douglas, the youngest son, was upset about leaving his studio in Paris and his collection of half-finished paintings.

Jeremy Hastings' death was sudden and unexpected; he actually died in his sleep in his condo on millionaire's row, and his body was discovered by his housekeeper when she went to wake him for breakfast. Jeremy was born in Washington, D.C., and lived there all his life until, at age 92, he decided (despite great opposition from his sons and daughter) to move to Miami Beach and live the remainder of his life in warmth and sunshine.

Hastings had been prominent and active in many charities and foundations, so the press was eager to learn and report the details of the will. Reporters gathered outside the law offices. Roberta Reed from Questions newspaper actually climbed up on a window ledge to try to hear what was being said. She reported that she could see perfectly, and she even managed to snap a few pictures. Arthur Harrison, the senior partner in the law firm, entered the room with great dignity, introduced himself, shook hands all around, cleared his throat, took out the will, and began reading.

"I, Jeremy Hastings, widower, being of sound mind and body, etc., etc., etc. . . do hereby declare that my sons, Colonel Martin Hastings and Douglas Hastings, and my daughter, Caroline Hastings Bentley, have disgraced, disappointed, and deceived me; they do not deserve to inherit my fortune. I therefore leave to them the sum total of fifty thousand dollars each. I leave and bequeath the rest of my worldly possessions (stocks, bonds, shares in Hastings Industries, houses) to my trusted friend and advisor, Madame Zelda." The lawyer paused for a minute, and three angry people began talking.

"What was that? What was that?" Colonel Hastings cupped his hand to his ear. "Did I mis-hear you, sir? Let me see that." He held out his hand, and the lawyer handed him a copy of the will "My father would never disinherit me. I'm the eldest son, I worked with him in the business after I retired from the Army."

"Well, he certainly wouldn't disinherit me," sobbed Caroline. "Daddy loved me. I've lived with him since my poor husband, Michael, died. I was the hostess at all of his parties. He said he couldn't manage without me."

"Listen," said Douglas. "Dad was proud of me, proud that I was living in Paris studying painting. He offered me money. I wouldn't take it, and he'd say that I'd get it all someday anyway. He'd never cut me off with a measly fifty thousand. Who is this Madame Zelda anyway?"

"She was your father's psychic advisor," said Arthur Harrison. "I assure you that the will is genuine; I drew it up myself. I confess that I was surprised at the terms. I'll even confess that I tried to dissuade him, but he was determined. Madame Zelda is the legitimate heir to the Hastings fortune."

Colonel Martin, Caroline, and Douglas grumbled and complained and threatened to sue and find a way to break the will. The lawyer, who was fast losing patience, told them they were welcome to try, but that the will was airtight. They left the office and actually called their lawyer in Washington, but in the end had to accept the fact that their father had, to all intents and purposes, cut them out of the will.

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The next night, the police were summoned to Madame Zelda's salon on Ocean Drive because some neighbors reported a loud argument. The door of the salon was open, and they found Madame Zelda slumped over her desk, dead. She was lying on pieces of glass from a broken crystal ball, and pieces of paper which turned out to be Jeremy Hastings' will, ripped into pieces. Madame Zelda had been stabbed through the heart with a piece of the broken crystal.

Roberta Reed was assigned to write a story about the murder. "Give me ten minutes to talk to the police before I write it," she told her editor. "I saw something yesterday when the will was being read. I think I might know who stabbed Madame Zelda."

What did Roberta see?

Who stabbed Madame Zelda?