



## PEST CONTROL

By Jacob Graysol

Brett voted in the elementary school gym, then followed the lilliputian hallway to the cafeteria for the volunteer recognition breakfast.

Principal Newman always honored Brett last. “Many are surprised that Georgia’s most dedicated volunteer isn’t a parent. But I saw it coming: his third-grade essay was *Robin Hood Belongs in Heaven*. Now, he captivates the kids with his nature presentations, concealing that his expertise comes from being an exterminator.”

Brett laughed at the bad joke with the crowd. Deception wasn’t the worst skill he’d honed.

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“No! No! No!” Brett yelled at the *Restaurant For Sale* sign in front of *Seymour’s*, smacking his steering wheel. *Never should’ve counted on that slacker to go the distance*, he thought. *Only opens for four dinners a week ...*

He fumed until he reached Possum Hill, then calmed down and plotted. He returned to the restaurant at three and rang the service-door bell.

“Congratulations, Seymour! Retiring young?”

Seymour chuckled. “Semi-retiring. This place sucks most of my time, but internet sleuthing for the banks earns me more—all those white-collar crimes—so I figured, just work seaside.”

“I’m jealous. How about one last deal, a free inspection if you’ll recommend me to the next owner? Freezing nights bring mice.”

“Sorry, I’m swamped, and you marked me critter-free at the quarterly check. That’ll do to close the sale.”

“Come on, Seymour. I’ll be done inside before the ovens get warm, and won’t bother anyone from the crawl space.”

Seymour huffed. “Shouldn’t refuse free.”

Brett went to the pantry and was finishing behind the shelves when KISS started blaring. He found Seymour trimming zucchini, shouted his name, and gave a thumbs-up.

Seymour nodded back.

Brett went out to the front of the restaurant and donned goat-leather gloves. The crawl space was long but narrow, closed in with cedar-stained latticework and buffered from the parking lot by a strip of myrtle and a central stairway.

Brett opened hinged panels on the side. With four feet of clearance and a checkerboard of sunlight shining through the lattice, he could crawl in without waiting for his eyes to adjust. But the silty soil sloped up gradually from the front, leaving the back shallow and dim. Bass tones throbbed through the floor.

When he got behind the steps, he crept right, concrete closing in from above. He pulled out his flashlight and scanned the slab's underside for his yellow blotch, then took the hand spade off his tool belt and began digging. He soon yanked up a clear plastic bag and removed five velvet pouches. Even gloved, he could identify the pieces of jewelry by touch, remember when he stole each one, whose house, which room. His only regret now was greed, burying the larger jewels for years instead of fencing them hot, for less.

Suddenly, the pouches brightened and he was casting a shadow. He turned and blinked against the glare from a cell phone recording a video. "Shut that off!"

"I knew it was you," Seymour said.

Brett shaded his eyes. "What was me?"

"Cut the crap." Seymour turned off the light. "I helped my cousin cater the Atlanta Opera Gala, and when we came out to restock the flambé trolleys, I spotted you at the high-bidder table with Anna Netrebko. Made no sense, exterminator gushing money, so I pulled your credit report: no mortgage, no delinquencies, yet your credit cards come from those rip-off companies that cater to deadbeats. You're hiding income. Lots. Dug deeper, and found the pattern of a thief."

"Nonsense! Your bank job has you imagining crooks."

Seymour waved his phone. "It's undeniable now. You know, before you insisted on reinspecting here today, I'd thought you'd pay ten percent to keep me from sending that credit research to the cops. That was really how I could afford to move."

"Through extortion?"

"I suppose. But recording you retrieving your stash, at my restaurant—that makes me a fifty-fifty partner. I'm going beachfront!"

"You expect me to accept half?"

"Hey, if I were a killer, or worried you were, you'd be *accepting* a cleaver in the back."

"I've done all the work!"

"Oops! Almost uploaded the file!"

"OK! OK! Just give me a minute."

"What for?"

"Uh ..." Brett swept the higher ground with his flashlight. "There are two more." Brett tucked the pouches into his chest pocket, kept the bag in his right hand, and held his light in his mouth. He crawled farther in, angling to conceal the excavations from his blackmailer. When he finished, he twisted the bag closed. "Let's go."

Brett crawled quickly, closing the gap to eight feet as Seymour neared the opening. "Wait!" Brett called. Seymour turned, and Brett kept approaching. "I handpicked you."

"I had the largest crawl space?"

"I needed the right person."

"You chose poorly. And stay there, I'm leaving first."

Brett stopped, momentarily, then edged closer as he talked. "I needed someone who wouldn't stumble upon the jewelry." He pulled out a twelve-carat ruby ring and made it gleam in a

sunbeam. “Someone who’d confided in his exterminator.” Brett pocketed the gem and planted his left hand on the ground. “Someone afraid of snakes!” He thrust the plastic bag three feet from Seymour’s eyes, an eastern garter and foot-long Dekay’s writhing, freshly extracted from their winter burrows.

“Aah! Take those away!” Seymour turned, but Brett lunged and grabbed his ankle.

“Drop the phone, Seymour!”

“Let go!” Seymour kicked, but couldn’t break free.

“Ten percent to keep mum, and you’re safe.”

“No!”

“The copperhead’s slithering between your legs!”

“OK! OK!” Seymour tossed his phone. “Get rid of them!”

Brett released his victim and smashed the phone. When he reached daylight, Seymour was shuddering.

“Y-you nearly killed me! I should call the police.”

“Just scared you. And apparently can’t trust you.... The new deal is ten grand a year, which’ll reach ten percent eventually, if you don’t rat me out.”

Seymour shook his finger at Brett. “If I find one snake—”

Brett held up his hands. “No more snakes.”

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