

*A series of baffling homicides in and around Quai Natia, California, rocks the local community. Can Lt. Rhombus and his team unravel the mystery and capture the evasive Black Bird Killer?*

## **THE BLACK BIRD MURDERS**

By Ray E. Aquitania, M.D.

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# THE BLACK BIRD MURDERS



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**Also by Ray E. Aquitania, M.D.**

*Jock-Docs: World-Class Athletes  
Wearing White Coats*

*Taking the Bull by the Horns*



Published by Booklocker.com  
The Black Bird Murders  
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Library of Congress Control Number: 2021911947  
ISBN: 978-1-64719-675-2  
First printing

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# 1

**The brilliant blue sky is picturesque on this spring** Saturday afternoon, less than a week from St. Patrick's Day.

"I am on fire today!" yells Erik, a local restaurateur, as his ball rattles into the hole on the practice green.

He is talking to his long-time friend Manuel as he rolls one more ball toward the cup before their tee time. Erik misses the target this time, by about three feet.

"Not by the looks of that last putt," jokes Manuel, who is a chemical engineer from the Pacific Northwest.

They join two others, Garry and Mick, on the first tee and say their pleasantries. It is 3 p.m. and sounds of chirping hummingbirds can be heard on this cloudless day. Most of this foursome are regulars at the Olympic Torch Golf Links, and each one now takes out his driver before the order of the upcoming tee shots is determined.

Mick, the sole lefty in the group, is elected to go first, and he hits his Titleist down the center of the fairway. Manuel follows with a grip-it-and-rip-it style, smashing his golf ball just past Mick's. Erik and Garry, a fitness instructor, proceed with their drives, ending up short of Mick's and Manuel's balls.

"A fine March afternoon for a round of golf," remarks Manuel, the tallest and also the longest hitter off the tee. The four chums engage in unpretentious conversation as they stroll down the fairway.



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"I guess it's me," says Erik, whose golf ball is the farthest from the hole. After a practice swing with his 4-iron, he addresses his ball and then sails it toward the green about 180 yards away. It is well-struck, landing just on the putting surface.

"Helluva shot!" shouts his buddy Mick, who is a local neurologist. "I guess you had your Wheaties today!"

None of the others can match Erik's second shot, each landing short of the green, with Manuel having the worst luck, ending up in the deep crescent-shaped bunker. As a squirrel passes in front of them, the weekend warriors lug their golf bags as they walk down the first fairway toward the green.

Erik lays down his bag behind the green, taking out his putter and then walking over to mark his ball. Garry and Mick, still in the fairway, short of the green, drop their bags and take out pitching wedges. They wait for Manuel, who is now the farthest from the first hole's flagstick.

After plucking a sand wedge from his golf bag, Manuel walks into the sand trap, eyeing his ball near the back edge. The golf ball is buried about halfway in the sand, so he knows he must forcefully hit the sand just behind the ball first. This should propel the ball over the lip of the bunker and onto the green. He takes a couple of practice half-swings, careful not to touch the sand.

Once ready, the dark-haired and self-assured sportsman crouches over his ball. He takes a short backswing with his club and then rapidly moves it toward the sand behind the ball. But instead of the gentler sound of sand and then the ball flying into the air, a noticeable thud is heard. He has missed his ball completely.

The other three are amused, all snickering as Manuel blushes in shame. Usually a solid player in hitting out of the bunker, he is surprised at his failed shot and embarrassed at missing his ball altogether.

He again looks at his golf ball and prepares to swing at it once more. Something catches his eye, though.

Behind his ball, peeking through the sand, a black button is noted by the golfer. Not having seen the small disk before his shot,



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he carefully reaches down to pick it up. He is unable to lift the small button off the sand, though, as if something is holding it down.

Manuel decides to get a better grip on the button with all the fingers of his right hand, and he pulls mightily. This time, the button is lifted off the sand ever so slightly, exposing some green fabric that seems to be connected to it. Pulling harder, the now frustrated golfer sees another button connected to the cloth.

“Guys, some prankster buried a shirt in the sand trap.”

The other three smile and slowly walk toward Manuel with their golf clubs, ready to ridicule him for blaming his terrible shot on a shirt in the sand.

Garry takes his pitching wedge and moves away some of the sand in the area of the green cloth and buttons. A polo shirt is exposed.

A chalk-white pallor then comes across the face of the tanned golfer as he suddenly stops what he’s doing.

“Gentlemen, I see some skin next to the shirt! It looks like someone’s neck!”

All four players look on in consternation as an Adam's apple appears next to the collar of the green shirt.

“Well, boys, that’s all the sand I’ll be clearing today,” Garry deadpans.

Both curious and horrified, Mick tells the others to step back. He uses his golf club and both hands to reveal a body buried in the bunker. Soon, all four help him in the gruesome task of uncovering the entire corpse. They see a medium-framed man with light brown hair. He is wearing a forest green polo shirt, shorts, and sneakers.

By this time, the foursome of golfers playing behind Manuel and company is asking about the delay in play and the apparent commotion.

“Uhhh, sorry for the slow play, but I think we found a dead body!” exclaims Erik.

All the players in the group before Manuel’s are silent, eyebrows arched and jaws dropped.







# 3

**Manuel briskly walks back to the clubhouse and tells** the staff about the corpse in the bunker next to the first green. Someone calls 911, and within several minutes, an ambulance and a police car arrive. The area around the first green of the golf course and nearby second tee box is cordoned off with yellow police tape.

Half an hour later, members of the crime scene unit are now at work. The local red-haired lieutenant, Rex Rhombus, in his signature dark blue pants and blazer, is also present. He is discussing matters with his smartly-dressed brunette medical examiner.

“Who might be our victim today, Dr. Paris?”

“His driver’s license identifies him as Jackson Moreau, Lieutenant. Just 25.”

“And how was his body found?”

“Believe it or not, he was discovered buried in a sand trap near the first green! The sand is usually 12 inches deep in a typical bunker, so the murderer had just enough room to completely cover the victim.”

“An unusual location for a body to say the least, Doctor. Have you determined the time of death?” asks Rhombus, staring up at the cobalt sky through his aviators.

“Based on the body’s condition, I would estimate between eight and eleven hours ago. After the autopsy, I can be more precise on the time window.”



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"That puts time of death sometime in the early morning to midmorning. The golf course starter tells me the first foursome today began play around 7 a.m. So the murder likely happened before 7."

"Sounds reasonable, Rex. It would have been quite conspicuous for the killer to bury the body with golfers already on the course."

"Agreed. And how about cause of death, Danica?"

"I can't really say at this point. No bullet wounds or other obvious signs of major injury are seen. But I do detect a bruise in the occiput indicating blunt force injury on this poor soul."

"Could that have killed him?"

"Unlikely, since it is not that large."

"Point taken."

"I did find something else noteworthy, Rex. This item was attached to his shirt."

In a small plastic evidence bag, a lapel pin with the image of a black-colored bird is handed to Lt. Rhombus. There is no inscription or identifying information on the object.

"What do you make of this article, Doctor?"

"Given that the pin was attached to his polo shirt, I do not think it belongs to the deceased. These pins are conventionally placed on a dress shirt or jacket."

"Then it is likely that the killer planted this pin on the victim."

"I would have to concur. It probably holds some significance to the assailant. Perhaps he is an ornithologist."

"That is possible, Danica. Make sure the lab checks the lapel pin for fingerprints. And tell me when you are able to determine the reason he died."

Soon, the body is placed into a white body bag to be transported to the morgue. Samples of the sand in the bunker crime scene are collected.

Rhombus looks for the officer first on the scene.

"Officer Bloom, was this man robbed after he was murdered?"

"There are no indications of a theft, Lieutenant. His wallet contains about \$80 and two credit cards, and his fairly nice Seiko watch wasn't taken."



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“So it appears we don’t have a clear motive at this time.”

“Also, I talked to the golf course operations manager. He states that a golf cart was found near the first tee box when he arrived this morning. Usually, these carts are kept together in the storage/parking area.”

The lieutenant says, “A reasonable conclusion is the killer used the golf cart to move the body to the bunker, which is at least 400 yards from the first tee. Make sure they check that cart for blood and dust it for fingerprints, Officer.”

“Right away, sir.”

Finally, Lt. Rhombus asks Manuel and his three golf buddies about their story.

“Did any of you know the victim?” asks the lieutenant with the caterpillar eyebrows. “And do you have any ideas on how his body got on the golf course?”

“We just met -- I mean discovered -- him in the sand trap this afternoon,” replies Garry. “I don’t think any of us have seen him before. The golf course is not gated, so most anyone can sneak on. Do you know what killed him?”

“That is police business, sir. Do all of you live here in the town of Quai Natia?”

“Yes,” says Mick, the only man wearing a distinctive newsboy cap in the group, “except for Manuel, who is here on business from the state of Washington.”

Rhombus turns toward Manuel and shakes his hand.

“I can tell you’re a good man, Manuel. Like you, I also hail from the Evergreen State. What part?”

“Just east of Yakima, Lieutenant.”

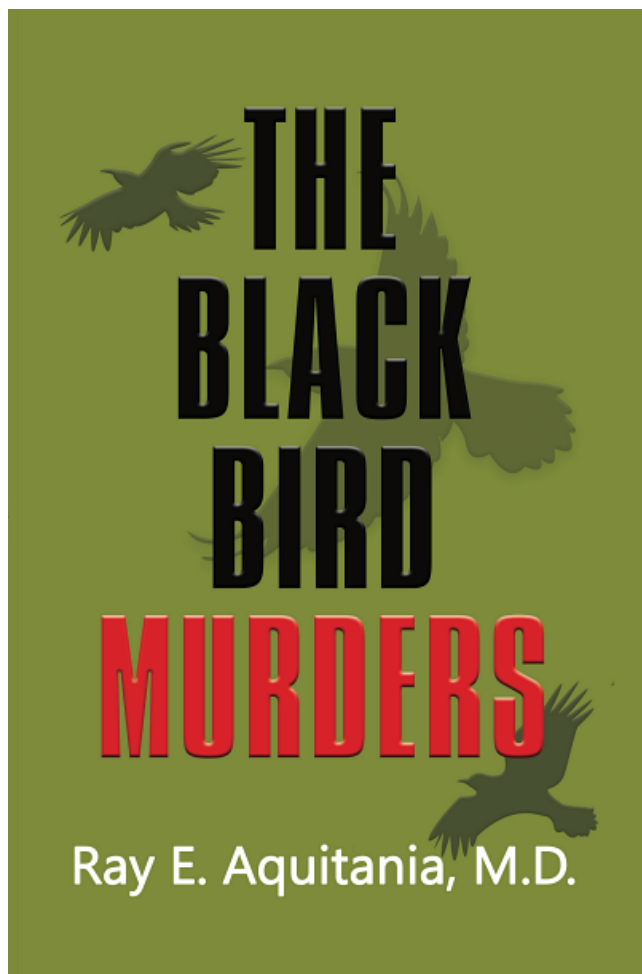
“I know the area well. It has some of the state’s best biking trails.”

“No argument there, sir.”

“Very well. Thank you, gentlemen, for bringing this body to our attention. Please give the officer your cell phone numbers. We’ll call you if we need to. Have a good day.”

They all nod and say their goodbyes.





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