



THE CASE OF
THE MURDERS AT
FAIRFIELD HEIGHTS

Garrison Flint

Victims seen *alive and well*,
after the coroner
certified them *dead*?



The Case of
The Murders at Fairfield Heights:
A Raymond Masters Mystery

BOOK ONE IN THE SERIES

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CHAPTER ONE
DAY ONE: THE AFTERNOON
Johnny on the Spot

As century-old, brownstone mansions go, Fairfield Heights was unquestionably drearier than most. From the small town in the valley below, it appeared quaintly majestic with its multiple chimneys, oddly shaped dormers and steeply pointed roof. Up close, however, years of neglect were obvious. The rock and glass were smudged and streaked. The wood trim was bare and soft. Of the dozens of huge, old, oak trees dotting the grounds, half had seen no green, springtime sprigs for a decade or more.

The inside, though meticulously cleaned each week, appeared drab at best and dingy at worst. That was due in part to the multitude of missing bulbs in the high chandeliers; in part to the dark, wide plank, floors; and in part to the sheer vastness of the space needing to be illuminated in each of the thirty-plus, over-sized rooms. The high, gray metal ceilings had given up their paint so long ago that no one recalled their original colors. Dull, dark, mahogany panels clung valiantly to the walls in most rooms.

Two generations before, heavy, dark, over-stuffed furniture had been set in place on the still unworn Persian rugs - testaments both to their quality and to the generally dispirited nature of those who had dwelled there.

Viewed from below on a moonlit night, Fairfield Heights defined the stereotypical, shadowy setting for a tale of terror and multiple murders.

Murder, however, was not what had brought Raymond

Masters to the Finger Lakes region of Western New York on that blustery Friday afternoon in early January. He had been invited to the mansion for the reading of the last will and testament of the not yet deceased head of the Fairfield family and longtime Lord of the Manor.

Jasper Fairfield had summoned those he was remembering so he could be present when his final wishes were made known by his attorney. He realized that his passing would not be grieved - more likely it would be celebrated. He had made few attempts to be likeable during his 92 years. The others on the exclusive list were relatives - his children, two grandchildren and a great grandson. Masters, the only outsider, was a casual acquaintance of the family from a case involving Jasper many years before. Why he had been included in the Will was a mystery to him.

Jasper's father had built the Heights with a tiny portion of the fortune he made in the steel industry during the first quarter of the twentieth century. Jasper, an only child, enjoyed neither money nor the process of acquiring it so he sold fifty one percent of the business immediately after his father's death some fifty years before. He and his 88-year-old wife, Abigail, had three children - none of them apparently any more motivated than their father when it came to making a living. They each still received a sizable allowance each month.

Farley, age 62, was the eldest. He had neither married nor left the Heights to live on his own. Eccentric Hermit had been used to describe him. Few people even knew he existed. In his suite on the east end of the first floor, he spent his life reading, grumbling, and keeping journals. Books on current affairs and twelve newspapers from various parts of the country arrived at his door daily. Most days he spent some time calling and writing letters to public officials blaming them for the sad condition of the World, truly believing that his sage counsel would be taken seriously by the decision makers. In his own twisted way, he believed he commanded the World from there in his fortress - Fairfield Heights.

Son number two was Chester, age 57. His wife left him only months after their late in life marriage. There had been no divorce, just a never formalized separation. Chester lived

in Rochester, less than half a day's drive north. If he and his father had ever exchanged a civil word, no one witnessed it.

Then there was Winston, the youngest who married and moved out early. He and his wife had both been dead for some six years. Winston was, in a unique way, the black sheep of the family - normal in every way, happily married for twenty-five years, reluctantly active in the management of his stock portfolio, eagerly involved in charitable work, and father of two children.

Winston's eldest was a daughter, Bernice - 38. She was unmarried, aloof, difficult in disposition, and openly unhappy that her parents had adopted a little brother - Clifford, three years her junior. At five she took him door to door trying to give him away. At nine she ran an ad offering him for sale. The rest of her life had been spent doing what she could to make his life unpleasant. Her campaign proved futile and she seethed at his successes and contentment.

Bernice had become a professional student - not because she valued learning but to prove, through a litany of degrees, that she was clearly superior to the rest - the males. She had competed with boys and men all her life, insisting on taking shop in high school and playing little league long before such things were considered proper. Much to her displeasure, the other family members all bypassed her preferred name and referred to her as DeeBee.

Like his father, Cliff was happy, generous and well adjusted - the father of a fine fifteen-year-old son - Jonathon Jasper Fairfield, known to one and all as, Johnny, the smiling sweetheart. Cliff and Johnny were close, perhaps more so than most fathers and teenagers, due to the loss of the woman in their lives when Johnny was four. They lived a middle-class life style - purposefully planned for his son by Cliff to offset the inherent problems wealth seemed to have brought to others in his family.

Johnny was athletic, good looking, bright and witty. From his father's perspective, none of that held a candle to the fact that Johnny was in every way, and on every day, a fine human being. When parenting was required there was no doubt who was in charge. Most of the time, however, the two were good friends and devoted companions.

The aging staff at Fairfield Heights included Sarah the Cook, Dora the maid, Fritz the Butler/chauffeur, and Zeke the handyman/grounds keeper. It wasn't that as a group they were in any way incapable of keeping the place in showcase condition, it was that Jasper was a tightwad. The purchase of new light bulbs or vacuum bags was to him on a par with buying a new automobile - not to be undertaken until there was absolutely no alternative. If he could see to make his way through the living room, there was certainly no reason to replace bulbs.

The youngster on the staff and the most recently employed was Mary, age 40, the live-in nurse. As the senior Fairfields' health began to fail, she was hired to attend to their medical needs.

At three o'clock on Friday afternoon, Masters exited his cab and stood surveying the huge, old edifice. He was the last of the principals to arrive. He had little idea what to expect other than by reputation the family would probably not be in evidence. Jasper and Abigail kept mostly to their separate suites on opposite ends of the second floor. Farley, a permanent fixture there, seldom exited his suite except to eat and attend to his mail. Chester had come in on Thursday evening as had Bernice. They squabbled over who would have the largest guest quarters, a suite, center front on the second floor - FDR had spent the occasional weekend there while governor of New York. Bernice won. Bernice always won. Chester could have cared less but delighted in being a thorn in his niece's side.

Cliff and Johnny had arrived only hours ahead of Masters. Looking down from the dormer in his third-floor room Johnny spotted the stately, old gentleman standing beside his suitcases on the walk below and fiddling with his generous mustache. With fifteen plus bedrooms, Johnny always opted for his own private hideaway when visiting there. He leaped his way down the three flights of stairs, ran through the entry hall and out the front door to be of assistance. New faces were rare to the Heights and this one promised some relief from the habitual boredom he experienced there. Also, he liked helping people and Masters was certainly not above being helped.

The lad extended his hand.

"I'm Johnny Fairfield. Poorest rich brat you'll ever meet."

He smiled at his little inside joke, not considering the fact that Masters was an outsider. Masters smiled politely and shook hands.

"I'm Ray Masters, the heaviest thin man you'll ever meet."

Johnny's smile broadened.

"Let me get these two big ones for you, okay?"

"Thank you. Very kind."

"You're in the room beside mine - third dormer to the left."

He pointed up at the window.

"Walls are so thick you'll never even hear my wild, nightly orgies with the girls from the town in the valley."

"You mean, I'm not invited?" Masters quipped feigning a hurt expression and comically thrusting his hands onto his hips.

"You're good. Quick. We're going to get on great. Aside from Dad, the people here are dreadfully, stodgy."

"Stodgy, the lad says. Hardly a word expected to flow from the mouth of a teenager - about fifteen, I'd guess."

"Sixteen next fourth of July. I enjoy words. Figured you'd know what I meant and if you didn't you'd be the kind to ask."

He picked up the bags and led the way. Masters hoisted the smallest and followed. Johnny offered a guided tour as they walked.

"Welcome to Fairfield Heights, undoubtedly the dreariest palace you've ever been in. Living room's off to the right, there - huge and always cold and gloomy. Farley's suite is beyond that - never been in it, myself - four rooms, I understand. Dining room to the left - seats two dozen around an antique cherry table that shines like the mirror in the Mt. Palomar telescope. The kitchen is behind it - somehow figured that might be of interest to you."

Johnny chuckled and smiled back at Masters who returned the response in kind. Perhaps it had been a test. The boy continued.

"There are a couple of sitting rooms beyond the dining room along the outside wall. If anybody ever actually sat in one of them you'd probably hear the old place give up a sigh of surprise. Eleven rooms on the second floor and fourteen on the third - five of them servant's quarters across the back. I hate that term, 'servant's quarters', but if you don't use it around here nobody'll know what you're talking about."

It was a non-stop monologue that continued right up the stairs and down the third-floor hall. Masters enjoyed the boy's helpfulness, enthusiasm, and interesting take on the place and its people.

They arrived at Masters' room.

"No keys in this place. There's a vault by the elevator at the back end of the entry hall if you have valuables. Farley seems to be in charge of that."

"Elevator?? Masters asked, puffing along behind the youngster.

"Yeah. Never use it myself. Takes way too much time."

Johnny opened the door and hesitated politely. Masters motioned him in first. The room was as large as the entire first floor of Masters' cottage back in Rossville, a two-hour drive to the southwest. Because of its size, the twelve foot ceilings felt comfortable. There were two double beds, two dressers, two sofas, a half dozen chairs and a library table which was cozied under the front window within the dormer. Two large, colorful, Persian rugs divided the room into sleeping and living areas. They had clearly been purchased for reasons other than beauty. The large closet and bathroom, which extended out from one corner, represented a tasteful 1950s modernization.

"I think we share a hot water heater," Johnny continued. "It's in my bathroom just across the wall there. I shower at night but can change that if that's not to your liking. I use lots of hot water."

"In fact, I prefer the morning so that will work out just fine. You mentioned the kitchen before. I assume there is a cook?"

"Sarah. She's been here forever, probably in her mid-sixties. Divorced. Redheaded and pretty independent

minded. Great cook. Good with conversation. I like to sit in the kitchen and talk with her when I'm forced to be here like this."

"You're like a spigot," Masters chuckled opening one of the bags Johnny had swung up onto a bed.

"What do you mean?"

"Just turn you on and you run and run and run."

Johnny looked a bit sheepish. "Too much, huh?"

"Oh, no. I didn't mean that. Just that you're apparently a never-ending supply of fascinating information. If I were here on a case, I'd probably come to depend on that."

Johnny nodded that he understood.

"Like I said, I'm really into words. Maybe become a writer or a speaker or an engineer. I love math. I get good grades in English - well, I get good grades in everything, not to brag, understand. Mom was a pediatrician. I think she'd be proud of my grades. Thought about medicine but sick people give me the Willies. . . . You're a detective, I understand."

"Was. Keep trying to be retired and then little things pop up to distract me."

"Little things like murders, the way I hear it."

"Yes. Usually that kind of little thing."

"I understand you got my Great Grandfather off the hook for a murder back in the old days. Sorry, I mean back a few years ago."

"Seems like a lifetime ago, Johnny. I'm eager to see him again."

"That's an absolute first, I'm sure of it."

"What?"

"That anybody other than me, maybe, has ever been eager to see Jasper Fairfield."

Masters smiled but chose not to explain or otherwise pursue the comment. That allowed a short pause, so Johnny resumed his prattle, not feeling the need to keep to any topic.

"My dad was adopted into this ghastly clan. I get great satisfaction knowing that. Satisfaction and hope, I guess you could say. The Fairfield genes are unquestionably unbecoming to the human race."

Masters smiled and nodded as he began putting his clothes away. It was intended to mean, 'I hear what you are

saying, 'not, "I agree with your assessment.' Johnny assumed as much.

"I understand this Will-reading is a two-day affair," Masters said, hoping to turn things into a two-way conversation.

"Yup. Great Grampa wants us all to be together and renew our friendship or something like that. Then, after a day of meaningful camaraderie, hear the terms of the Will and proclaim that the war is on."

"War? What?" Masters said, turning to look straight on at the boy, clearly puzzled.

"Dad says we'll be lucky to get through all this with anything less than the tearing of hearts out of chests."

"Over the money?"

"Yup."

"I had no idea there was that much involved, that much left."

"It just keeps growing. That much is somewhere around a cool billion, the way Dad figures it."

"Seems like plenty to go around," Masters said trying to lighten things while finishing up in the closet.

"You'd think. But money can do terrible things to people. It's why Dad's raising me poor. I think it's a good idea. I have to work and account for my spending. When I want some big item, I have to plan out how I'm going to raise the money. I think Dad's been pretty wise in that way. Just please don't tell him I said that. I'm a teenager and I'm supposed to harangue at him about that kind of stuff."

"You keep me smiling, Johnny. You've made several references to being poor, which I guess I don't understand."

"I have a trust fund worth about seven million dollars. Dad manages it and it just keeps growing. From that I get a whoppin' twenty-five bucks a week allowance. All my being-a-kid expenses above that I have to earn."

"And that's poor? Twenty-five dollars a week?"

"Well, poor is a relative concept, I suppose. Poor in relation to what I'll have six years from now."

"When you're 21?"

"That's when the vault opens. None of my friends have any idea about it. That way I know my friends are just that,

and not fortune hunters. Especially the girls, you know?"

"I think I do, yes. I imagine there are girls."

"Oh yes. I matured early and girls have been important for a long time. How about you?"

"How about me what? Maturation rate or girls?"

Johnny smiled.

"Girls! Well, women - older women, I suppose."

"There have been a number of wonderful women in my life. I never married. It's probably my only real regret - not having a wife and children."

"I'm sorry - not for the women friends but for the other, you know?"

"Yes. Thank you. This conversation has grown far too serious and on a growling stomach. What time is supper or dinner or whatever it's called here?"

"Strictly dinner and not until eight at night if you can believe that. I'm always starved by five."

"Then, why don't we make our way to the kitchen and you can introduce me to . . . Sarah, did you say? She good for snacks, is she?"

"Oh, yes, Sir. Any hour of the day. I'll show you where she stashes stuff for late at night just in case you ever feel the need."

"Want to see my room?" the boy asked as they stepped out into the hall.

"Sure. After all we do share some kinship though our common water heater."

In its normal state, it would have been a clone of Masters' room. It, however, had succumbed to the male, teenage touch. The bed frames had been disassembled and stashed against the back wall, covered with a sheet. The mattresses were piled on top of each other on the floor next to the wall he shared with Masters. The four goose down pillows were rowed up against that wall. The dressers had been moved back to back, separated by two feet - apparently, some sort of make shift deep push up exercise apparatus. Johnny demonstrated as he proceeded with the tour. The contents of his suitcases had been dumped in a corner. Posters of lovely, scantily clad young ladies adorned the walls. Those wearing less than the law allowed were relegated to the inside of the

closet doors, though they were - all quite shamelessly - included in Masters' grand tour.

"Except for the pillows, I love this room. I always stay in it when I'm here. Dora - she's the maid - leaves it set up for me like this. She's great, a bit of a prude when it comes to my posters but she never says anything. It's why I keep those certain ones out of her way in the closets. She's about Sarah's age. Never married. Not sure why. Maybe it was her compulsive need to clean - great for a maid but would probably drive a husband batty."

"Yes, batty, would be the proper psychological term, I suppose," Masters joked. The boy grinned his appreciation for the playful remark and continued.

"Fritz, the butler, is the oldest and he's a bit stuffy but I have the idea he comes in here when I'm gone and ogles my ladies. I have extra posters if you want some for your room."

"Johnny, I saw my seventy fifth birthday a number of years ago. I'm only allowed one ogle per week, now."

It was worth a nod and a chuckle as they returned to the hall and headed for the stairs. Masters tried to remember how it was at fifteen. Johnny wondered if such things would really be different at seventy plus.

"This is Dad's room, right next door to mine. He naps a lot during the day when we're out here. Pure, unadulterated, retreat from the relatives. Then he can't sleep at night so he stays up and reads. He's eager to meet you. Reads the Flint books. I have to admit I've never ventured inside one. Maybe now I will."

"What's your objection to the pillows?"

"Down filled. Too soft. Your head sinks so far down into them - no pun intended - that a guy could suffocate, you know?"

Masters smiled. They descended the stairs and entered the kitchen through a door at the rear of the entry hall.

"Sarah, I'd like you to meet my friend Raymond Masters. He lets me to call him Ray so I assume he'll do the same for you."

Johnny turned his head toward Masters for verification. Masters nodded and extended his hand.

"Yes. It's Ray. I've heard great things about you and

the delicious morsels that come out of this kitchen.”

She took his hand.

“It’s Sarah with an ‘h’ on the end - the way God intended it to be spelled. Watch out for young Johnny here. He can charm you right out of your socks.”

She raised her eyebrows and nodded deliberately, only allowing a smile once she felt her point had been made.

“Goodies for two starving men!” Johnny commanded, playfully.

At Johnny’s direction, the two were soon seated across from each other at the sizable, round table.

“Got ham salad for sandwiches and chips by the keg - that be okay?”

“Sounds great to me,” Masters said.

“Cocoa?”

“Yes. That would certainly hit the spot on a chilly afternoon like this one.”

He rubbed his hands together.

“Eighteen degrees at noon,” Sarah said as if confirming his contention.

“Wind chill so low you don’t even want to hear,” she continued, the faintest hint of a smile breaking across her aging, though still attractive, dark brown face.

She moved to a counter and began preparing the food. Johnny addressed Masters.

“So, how did you get dragged into this family slug-fest?”

“You are determined to make this into something horrific, aren’t you, young man?”

Johnny waited for a response to his original question. Masters obliged.

“I can only surmise it is in some way related to that time our paths crossed on that case some thirty years ago. It has been my only contact with Mr. Fairfield. Beyond that, I haven’t a clue.”

“Great Grandpa is not known to be generous. I imagine he has some ulterior motive.”

“You are a suspicious youngster.”

“Just one who considers all the options and then goes with the most logical. You want my take on all of this?”

“Why not?”

Masters folded his hands on the table and became clearly attentive.

“Well, I think he got us here so he could look us all in the eyes and see our reactions when he tells us that none of us is going to get a dime - that he left it all to his cat or a barmaid or maybe that he buried it all somewhere in the Yukon and the one who finds it first gets it.”

“I guess those might be options,” Masters said. “What makes you think he would want to punish his family like that? Have you all behaved that badly toward him?”

“No. Not that I know of, really. Whenever he says jump everybody jumps. We come when he wants us here - a half dozen times a year too often,” Johnny said intending to imply a total of six times. “He seldom spends any time with us except during dinner but he seems to like knowing we’re here. I guess nobody would ever show up if he didn’t require it. That’s probably not very nice of us, is it?”

Masters didn’t respond. Sarah with an ‘h’ arrived bearing a tray stacked high, and the two were soon enjoying their late afternoon snack and warm drink.

“Actually, he seems to like me, I think,” Johnny said after a period of quiet reflection. “Whenever I’m here he makes time for just the two of us to be together. Usually over lunch up in his office. He and Great Grandma don’t seem to have much of a relationship. I often wonder how they managed to spawn three kids together. I shouldn’t have said that - it wasn’t very nice. The rampant, lascivious, male adolescent, mentality, you understand.”

Masters pretended astonishment and became momentarily playful with the boy.

“I wasn’t expecting such a succession of ostentatious, meticulously precise, effortlessly summoned verbiage.

His effort was rewarded with a quick grin.

“Anyway, mostly he just listens to me talk and watches me eat. He’s not a word guy like Dad and I are. You really can’t get to know the silent type very well. He’s hard to read.

“Once, the first time we were here after Mom died, he let me sit in his lap and play with the buttons on his smoking jacket. They were big and brass and I guess I must have seemed fascinated with them. About a week after we

returned home I got a tiny box from him through the mail. It had all six of his brass buttons in it. No note, just the buttons. I still have them. It's sad to say but that's the only act of kindness I've ever heard connected with his name. I made a thank you card for him out of a piece of a paper I cut from a brown grocery bag and colored it with crayons.

"After that I always made him a card for his birthday and Christmas - still do. Never got any from him, but I figured he was too busy counting his money."

Johnny took time out to thoughtfully dip his sandwich into the cocoa and suck it dry. The full mouth that followed didn't slow his presentation.

"Great Grandma drinks a lot. She calls it her tonic bottle but I've known better ever since I was seven when I snuck a few big swigs and staggered around plastered for the next six hours. It seems like her life has been very sad. I can't see how she could have lived as long as she has with Great Grampa and allowed herself to just be so totally ignored. At least that's how it seems to me - to all of us, really. It's like she's a nobody. She has no responsibilities and has no control over anything - not even her house. It's just sad and I don't know what else to say."

"Tell me about your Uncles and Aunt."

"I don't really know them very well. They never choose to get together. I probably know Uncle Chester the best - really a great-uncle I suppose or an uncle once removed or a great uncle once removed - never could figure that relationship stuff out. It's not blood relationship any way you slice it. He has a car dealership up in Rochester - huge - carries a half dozen brands. Makes his own commercials - Crazy Chester. Pretty corny but then corny is what seems to sell cars. Was married for just a few months a few years ago. She left him right away. I had sort of a run-in with her once. Don't really know their story. He lives alone in a huge house on a private lake. Has like a dozen cats. He loves to fish and play golf. Has a twenty-thousand-dollar golf cart if you can believe that - probably enough for a needy family to live on for a whole year. He smiles a lot and has a million stories to tell but you really never get a feel for what's going on inside him, you know? Sort of hides behind his humor."

Masters nodded.

“Then Farley. I probably know him the least well of any of them. He’s always scared me. Really strange - paranoid with mild delusions of grandeur I’d say. Carries on entire conversations just with himself at the dinner table. It’s like the rest of us aren’t even there or if we are, we’re too insignificant for him to pay attention to. It’s a good thing he never married; the human species doesn’t need his genes proliferating within it.”

Master chuckled out loud, his massive stomach shaking for some moments. Johnny smiled and bounced his head around, acknowledging his new friend’s unspoken pleasure at his irrepressible goings on - and he did go on!

“My Grandfather was Winston. He and Grandma died in a car accident when I was nine. I liked them both. The rest of the clan seemed to hold their happiness against them like they do with Dad and me. I’ve never been able to figure out how both my Dad and Bernice could have come out of the same family. Has to be the genes, I guess. I never liked her and she never liked me. She’s overly competitive in a neurotic way. She’s never happy about anything. Her first name is Darleen but will she use it? No! She insists on being called by her middle name. I suppose her nick name hasn’t helped her self-confidence much. Everybody in the family calls her DeeBee. I was even taught to call her Aunt DeeBee well before I knew there was an alternative.”

“Dee from Darlene and Bee from Bernice, I assume,” Masters offered as his best guess, puzzled at why it would be so objectionable.

“Not even close. Dee for dumb and Bee for blond. When she was just a little girl they started calling her the dumb blond and through the years it got shortened to DeeBee. Maybe she’s the way she is partly to compensate for that debasing image.”

“You are quite the psychologist, Johnny. Paranoid. Delusions of grandeur. Neurotic. Compensation. Dr. Freud would be proud of you.”

“Actually, I’m really more of a phenomenologist than a psychoanalytic type guy.”

“It was a joke, Johnny. A joke!” Masters said poking a

little fun at the suddenly serious youngster.

The boy shrugged his shoulders and stuffed the remaining quarter of a sandwich into his mouth. He had downed three to Masters' one and was reaching for a fourth. 'Oh, to be fifteen again,' the old detective thought.

"So, what's your understanding about how things will proceed around here over the next two days?" Masters asked as Sarah refilled the cocoa mugs. He nodded his thanks.

"We'll all have dinner together this evening - coat and tie required here, by the way. No one hardly ever speaks during dinner so it will be dreadfully boring. Afterward, everybody except Great Grandpa and Grandma will go into the living room for coffee. Seems to be a required ritual though I've never seen the written rule. Chester will sit in the recliner nearest the fireplace and light up a cigar with great drama. Bernice will launch a tirade against him about him polluting her air. He'll sit and smile at her as she goes on and on and on. After a while he'll fall asleep in the chair and Fritz will remove the cigar from his mouth and put it out.

"Dad and I will try to make small talk with everybody but no one will participate. We'll break out the chess set and occupy ourselves for the next hour or so. Farley will pull up a chair and watch us - shifting his eyes in quick movements and shaking his head after every move as if to tell us he could have done better. He'll never play so I have no idea if he's making experience based judgments or not. I tend to think or not. At exactly ten thirty - there's a huge grandfather clock in there that chimes the hour and half hour from six a.m. to eleven p.m. - everybody will go their separate ways. Not sure why but it's like attendance is required in the living room until ten thirty. Then Fritz will nudge Chester and he'll wake up long enough to go to his room. Aunt DeeBee - Bernice - will announce that she is going up to the Roosevelt Suite. Everyone will ignore her and she'll take it as a sign we're all jealous.

"Dad will go into his room and read. I'll go to mine and work out for an hour and shower. Then, I'll listen to music or watch TV - satellite out here with three hundred uncensored channels. That's not all bad.

"Saturday morning we'll all drag in for breakfast at

different times. I'm an early bird - pestering Sarah by six, before her apron strings are even tied. Dad's a ten o'clock scholar. Bernice will jog for an hour and then flaunt the fact at us for the rest of the morning. Then there'll be lunch - I'll probably eat with Great Grandpa - followed by a boring afternoon, dinner, and then it all begins over again in the living room.

"Sunday morning at ten we are to have the Will reading in the living room. Great Grandpa's lawyer, William somebody, will be here to do the honors and I assume will answer questions if Great Grandpa allows any. After that, it'll all be up for grabs."

"You seem to be relatively unconcerned about your share."

"I already got seven, going on ten million, Ray. Why would I ever want any more?"

It was a fully serious and sincere question in the lad's mind - though clearly intended as rhetorical at that moment. It was a wise position to have taken. Masters was eager to meet the man who had raised this lad. He was undoubtedly a very special person.

"You and Jasper ever talk money? That's probably none of my business. I keep forgetting I'm not working a case. The snooper in me just surfaces without prior notice sometimes."

"No. It's okay. Occasionally we've talked about money. I've let him know how I stand on it. I even asked to be left out of his Will and explained why. He nodded but I don't know if that meant that he just understood or if he was agreeing to it. I figure if I do get stuck with some, Dad and I can find charities that will put it to good use. What you going to do with yours, if I may ask?"

"I have no reason to think I will receive anything. I have some backup charities, also, if it comes to that."

Johnny smiled. He really liked this man. If he could choose his relatives, he'd choose Uncle Ray. He might even lower himself and read a few mystery novels.

Masters stood, ready to excuse himself and get in a short nap before dinner. Fritz entered the kitchen. Johnny pointed to him with his sandwich.

“This is Fritz, Ray. Ray, this is Fritz the Butler. About as good as they come, I’d say, but then he is the only butler I’ve ever known.”

Fritz smiled a practiced condescending smile in the boy’s direction and turned his attention to Masters.

“Mr. Fairfield senior requests your presence in his study on the second floor.”

Masters knew very little about the man in recent years and yet those words sent a brief shiver through his body - the kind he remembered from childhood when called into the principal’s office after a playground skirmish.

Masters thanked Sarah and told Johnny he would see him later. In the hall, Fritz asked:

“Stairs or elevator, Sir?”

Masters patted the front of his generous figure.

“Need you ask, Fritz? And it’s Ray, if you will, please.”

“As you wish, Ray. The elevator is behind the vault. Follow me please.”

It looked like a hotel ‘lift’ from an old, black and white, European spy movie. As Fritz effortlessly lifted the top half of an ornately etched, amber, glass door, the bottom section receded into the floor allowing entry. A tug on a gold-tasseled, silken rope reset both. At the second floor the process was repeated from the inside. They stepped into a wide hall and Masters followed Fritz to the east end. The butler knocked and entered without waiting for a response from within.

Mr. Fairfield was seated in an old fashioned, cane-backed, wooden wheel chair behind a large, mahogany desk. There was a dark brown afghan haphazardly draped from his lap down over his legs. His appearance was that of a very frail old man. Fritz left and closed the door without speaking.

“Have a seat please, Ray. It’s good to see you again. You’ve been well?”

“Yes, very well. And you?”

“Pretty good for ninety-two, I suppose. Good becomes a relative term somewhere after seventy, you know.”

“Oh, yes. I know.”

Masters took a seat. No opportunity to shake hands had been presented. Masters recognized the niceties just rendered were well practiced and that there would be no

more.

“About why I asked you to be here, Ray - you must be wondering.”

“Yes, I am that.”

“Sunday morning I am going to give away my fortune to my relatives - a motley horde of mostly incompetent, selfish, gluttons. There are two exceptions.”

“Clifford and his son Johnny?” Masters asked, seeking clarification.

Fairfield responded with a single nod.

“Except for the boy, the other five - including my wife - will split equally with me what I am offering. It is a lump sum arrangement with no further income from the trusts and stock. The boy won't receive a share as it is his desire. But, he will receive all of the income from the stock, beginning on Sunday, for the rest of his life. It's a tidy sum, currently about a hundred and fifty million dollars a year. Clifford will be in charge until he feels the boy is ready to handle it - that's strictly Clifford's call. He's a good man and a fine father, something I clearly failed at.”

“And I am here, why, then?” Masters asked more puzzled than before the explanation began.

“Oh, yes. Well, I fully expect the four of them - Abigail, Farley, Chester and Bernice - to try and kill each other off in an effort to get it all. I'll make it clear that the boy's share will never be available to them even if he should die. That should protect him. I'm afraid Clifford will have to fend for himself. Don't know how to protect him - well, other than to have brought you into things, you see. I have a retainer here - an even million dollars, which I expect will be sufficient even for the now famous Raymond Masters. You will take the assignment?”

“I can make no promise to be able to protect anyone. If murder is on someone's mind it will have been well planned long before arriving here. I will do what I can, of course, but there can be no assurances. You understand?”

“Yes. I'd have doubted your integrity if you'd have said anything else. Then there is the other side of the assignment. If anyone is killed I will expect you to bring the villain in the matter to justice.”

“At least that’s something at which I’m more proficient,” Masters said, nodding. Suddenly none of it was to his liking.

Jasper changed the subject.

“You’ve met the boy, I understand. What do you think of him?”

“He’s a gem in most every way as far as I can tell. He is certainly fond and protective of you.”

The old man’s lower lip trembled and his eyes welled up with tears. He nodded, turned his chair, and looked out the big window behind his desk.

“He hates this place and I don’t blame him. Keeping it up hasn’t been high in my priorities the past sixty years. I dislike having carpenters banging and painters peering in my windows. I have set aside a substantial sum to renovate it and keep it up. The Heights goes to the boy after Abigail and I are gone. I hope he’ll keep it in the family.”

He turned back toward Masters, the hint of a smile on his damp old face. “If the pictures in his room indicate what I assume they indicate, I guess I’m assured of a passel of great-great grandchildren.”

The old man chuckled. It seemed totally out of character to Masters and even seemed to surprise Jasper.

“What about your safety?” Masters asked.

“My safety is of little concern. I die today. I die tomorrow or next week. It doesn’t matter. I know they don’t like me but I doubt if they hate me. They’re getting my money on Sunday. Why kill me? I’ve never known how to be a likeable person, Ray, and I suppose I’ve never tried to learn. I’m certainly not going to start now.”

“You make it sound as though your death is imminent.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. I started having seizures a few months ago. Mary, my nurse, got me some high-powered medicine to control them but who knows. She’s always getting me new medicine. I’m sick of new medicine! Life’s never been any fun. I’ve never contributed anything of value to the World. Raised a bunch of despicable children. Been a terrible husband. I could just never figure out what in the hell to do with the woman once I brought her home. Didn’t understand how she thought about anything. Didn’t enjoy what she enjoyed. She wanted to talk every little thing into the

ground. She was always willing to get lovey dovey - I'll give her that - but then wasn't ever keen about moving on from lovey to lovin' - if you understand my drift. Of all the people who've ever deserved to see their ninety second birthday, I should probably be the last one on the list."

"You paint a very sad picture of thoroughgoing personal disappointment. I'm sorry. What can I say?"

"Not your place or duty to say anything. I assume you have taken the assignment. I guess that's all. I will be down for dinner at eight. You will keep our conversation strictly between us I hope. I want to be the one who tells the boy about the arrangements myself, tomorrow over lunch. Lunches with him have become the highlight of my life. Thank you for telling me how he thinks about me. He talks so much I could never really figure out how he felt about things."

"Of course. Our discussion will go no further," Masters said.

He stood and left the room, sad for the old man and not at all sure how Johnny would react to the news about his inheritance.

CHAPTER TWO
DAY ONE: EVENING
One down . . .

As it turned out, dinner was far different from what Johnny had predicted. That was only partially true. Dinner at the far end of the table opposite Jasper was every bit as dismal and boring as the boy had suggested it would be. The seating arrangement had been changed at Jasper's request. Cliff sat to his left and Johnny to his right. Masters was to Johnny's right and Abigail to Cliff's right. It formed a potentially congenial semicircle. The other three had been relegated to the far end - clearly not included in Jasper's preferred company that evening. Aside from an occasional grumble, it was generally quiet to the South. Farley, of course, mumbled continually to himself about current happenings and the impending demise of the human species.

The Northern contingent, however, managed a flow of good conversation. Jasper asked Johnny about school and the lad held forth for the next twenty minutes. Cliff was a nature photographer and described the filming of his recent documentary on the Monarch butterfly. Jasper happily - and unexpectedly - recalled a few childhood experiences as a Boy Ranger - apparently, a precursor to the Boy Scouts. Abigail tried to participate but could find little to offer. She complimented Johnny on his haircut and tie. Johnny responded with attentive and appropriate responses. Great Grandma was clearly pleased, unused to positive social participation.

Masters, always a well of questions, saw that lulls were

quickly filled. It was a good time. By the end of the meal, Jasper was sitting erect and could have passed for a youthful 85. The old man's face didn't take well to smiles though from time to time one would fight its way toward the surface. Abigail's rouge laden cheeks, on the other hand, offered a permanently forced, tight, smile which often failed to reflect the tone of the conversation. She had made fewer than usual trips to her tonic bottle.

Sarah and Fritz made their required periodic appearances and were clearly amazed at the lack of silence, momentarily wondering if they were in the right dining room.

Dessert was lemon pound cake with raspberry sauce and two raspberry twisters on the side. Someone in the kitchen had been sneaking peeks inside those Flint books. Masters caught Sarah's eye and silently toasted her with one of the twisters. She nodded appreciatively.

The usual thirty-minute meal stretched on to well over an hour, much to the obvious dismay of those sitting in exile at the far end. As he folded his napkin Johnny summed things up.

"This has been the best mealtime we've ever had since I've been old enough to sit at this table."

Jasper nodded his agreement. Abigail cried. Bernice sighed. In anticipation of things to come, Chester ran his nose the length of a fresh, long overdue, cigar. Farley mumbled to himself - or perhaps among 'himselves'. Masters smiled, wondering if the experience would ever be repeated. Fritz moved into position behind Jasper preparing to take him up to his suite. The old man looked up at Fritz and waved him off.

"Boy," he said looking at Johnny, "You think you can drive this chair of mine for me?"

"Sure. That would be great."

Fritz moved back. "I'll go on ahead and prepare your bath, Sir."

Johnny edged the chair back from the table and stopped to rearrange the afghan more symmetrically over Jasper's lap and legs. Jasper was clearly pleased at the young man's added consideration. Then they moved off toward the elevator.

"Sure you don't want to join us for a while in the living room," Johnny asked once into the entry hall.

"Why on earth would I want to spend another minute of my life with that depressing group of misfits? I'd rather spend some more time with you. I have things to tell you and tonight feels like the right time."

Johnny chose to wait in Jasper's den while he bathed. It was the first time he had been allowed in there alone. The room was as messy as the rest of the mansion was neat. That felt comfortable to Johnny, himself not known as the most orderly sort. There were piles of magazines three feet tall. File folders and other business related documents were strewn across a mammoth coffee table. Cardboard boxes sat here and there on the floor; he had to move one from a chair to find a seat.

* * *

The eventual conversation followed the lines Jasper had previously suggested to Masters. Although Johnny really didn't want any part of stocks and such, he could tell how much it meant to his great grampa so he agreed, figuring he could hire people to handle it all for him. Together they decided to begin the mansion's renovation in the Spring. Johnny didn't promise to live there but did say it would always be an important part of his life. That was really all Jasper wanted to hear.

It was ten twenty-five when Johnny arrived back downstairs in the main living room. Masters and Cliff were deep into a chess game. Farley was there, silently - though dutifully - indicating his displeasure at every move. The others were chomping at the bit for the clock to chime their freedom. Eventually it did. The chess board was left in place to resume another time. Johnny looked it over, clearly impressed by what he saw. Everyone retired to their rooms.

At 11:35, there was a knock - a loud and persistent knock - on Master's door. He struggled out of bed, into a robe and slippers, and opened it. There stood Fritz. I'm afraid I have very sad news to report, Sir - Ray. I just found the senior Mr. Fairfield dead in his bed. Mary is with him now. I haven't told anyone else. This kind of thing is your domain. I have no idea how to proceed."

"Let me go speak with Mary first. No need to bother the others just yet."

Johnny's door opened. He was dripping wet and struggling to get a towel to stay in place around his waist.

"What's the deal, out here?" he said, walking toward the men.

Masters sighed. The two men exchanged glances. Masters spoke.

"Fritz has just given me some sad news, Johnny."

"Great Grampa?"

Masters nodded. "I assume he died in his sleep."

Tears burst from the boy's eyes though his expression did not change.

"I need to tell Dad."

"Yes. You do that. I'm going down to Jasper's suite and speak with Mary. Once I know more, I'll come back up and let you know what I've learned. It is probably best if you remain up here, okay?"

Johnny nodded. They followed Fritz toward the elevator. Johnny left them at the door to his Father's room. Within minutes Masters was in Jasper's bedroom.

"Mary, I assume," he began, offering his hand. "I'm Ray Masters, an old acquaintance of Jasper's, I guess you could say."

Fritz added what he felt was the necessary explanation.

"Mr. Masters is a famous detective who Mr. Fairfield has - had - engaged to keep this whole three ring circus under control."

Masters was surprised that Fritz was privy to that information. He had also been taken by his initial wording of the problem which made it appear the man felt foul play had been involved - the 'your domain' comment.

"You have any idea as to the cause of death?" Masters asked Mary.

"I can only conjecture. It seems a good bet, however. He has been having seizures. He takes medication once a day to control them. It appears he had a seizure, turned his head into the pillow and suffocated."

"One of the down filled pillows?"

"Yes. Seems to be all there are in this place."

"Time of death?"

"Less than a half hour ago."

"Ten forty-five?" Masters asked just to clarify it.

"That would seem about right."

"Can you tell if he took his medicine?"

Mary searched through the drawer in the night stand. She counted pills in two containers.

"Odd, actually. He didn't take his seizure medicine but seems to have taken a half dozen of the other."

"The other being . . . ?" Masters asked.

"A muscle relaxant. Sitting all day in one position was causing spasms."

"Could he have become confused about the doses?"

"Perhaps though I doubt it. He was very ill but his mind remained quite sharp."

"Yes. That was my impression as well. Would that dose of the relaxant have been fatal?"

"Goodness no. Just weaken him even more, probably. If he wanted to do himself in he could have downed this bottle of pain pills - I have warned him about taking too many. He was in a great deal of pain the past six months."

Masters nodded thoughtfully.

"Considering the circumstances the coroner will need to be called."

"I can take care of that," Mary offered. "I know her."

"Sooner the better. Who should inform Abigail?"

Mary deferred to Fritz.

"She and Miss Dora are the closest, here" he said. "I will go inform Dora and accompany her to Mrs. Fairfield's suite. I assume Mrs. should be told before the coroner arrives."

"Yes. Certainly. Thank you," Masters said. He turned to Mary.

"I see he has been moved from how you found him."

"Yes. I tried CPR for several minutes. Fritz assisted me."

"I assume from the position of the pillow that his head was tilted into it to his left?"

"That's correct."

Masters walked around to the other side of the bed. He

examined the second pillow.

"And this pillow was where when you arrived?"

"Right where you see it now. I haven't touched it."

"It's wet. See. Here, right in the middle."

Masters put the pillow to his nose.

"Smells of whiskey."

"Mr. Fairfield always had a shot of whiskey just before he got into bed. Interesting, Fritz told me that he had two this evening. Seldom does that from what I understand."

"Would you please verify the odor on the pillow," Masters asked. "I'll need your written statements to the fact. It was no seizure. I'm quite certain that Jasper Fairfield was murdered, suffocated with this second pillow. Was it general knowledge that Jasper had developed seizures?"

"It was no secret, I suppose," she said, thinking as she spoke. "The staff all knew. I really can't say if the relatives did or not."

"Okay, then. Mary, call the coroner. I'll go up and talk with Cliff and Johnny. Oh, the attorney should be in on all of this. Where will I find his number?"

"Probably in the Rolodex on Mister's desk in the den," she said. "I believe his name is William Milburn."

Masters nodded. "I'll take care of that."

Mary left.

Masters wanted to snoop a bit more. He pulled down the sheet Mary had put in place over Jasper's head. He examined the left arm and hand. He reached across and did the same for the right. The right hand was closed in the often-described death grip. Masters peeled back each finger revealing a green, oval, gemstone some inch and a half long. He examined it.

"Most likely from a bracelet," he said to himself. "One might think, 'find the bracelet, find the killer,' but that's never a lock. Could have been planted."

He put it into one of his ever-present, small evidence bags and zipped it shut, slipping it into his pocket for safe keeping.

He stopped at the study and removed the card from the directory before climbing the stairs back to the third floor. Johnny, less wet than before, was waiting in the hall outside

his father's open door. Masters went inside and took a seat. He related what he knew.

"Murdered?" Cliff said, clearly taken aback.

"It makes me feel like throwing up," Johnny said. "In fact, if you'll excuse me."

He ran to the bathroom.

Masters addressed Cliff.

"Would you have a suspect list?"

"No. I mean, why? He's already determined who gets what; that's generally understood by all of us. How could killing him advance anybody's position?"

"My question, exactly," Masters said stroking his mustache.

Johnny returned.

"Sorry guys. I've never been a part of anything like this. I just can't believe it. It means there's a killer right here in this house. This house without door keys, by the way."

Masters continued his conversation with Cliff.

"Do you know the attorney, William Milburn?"

"Yes. I mean I've met him. An older gentleman. Must be competent or Jasper wouldn't have put up with him. I suppose he needs to be notified, doesn't he?"

"I have his number here. It might be better coming from you if you don't mind."

"No. I don't mind. I can take care of that right now."

"Thank you. Mary is contacting the coroner, and Fritz has gone to get Dora to help break the news to Abigail. I think I'll go get presentable for the coroner - I understand it is a woman."

He turned to Johnny.

"May I walk you back to your room?"

"Not on your life! I'm not staying in there alone with a maniac on the loose."

"At least go get some pants on, okay, son," Cliff said.

"Oh. Yeah. Probably a good idea. Maybe I will take you up on that stroll down the hall, then."

"I shouldn't be scared. I'm going on sixteen."

"Being scared of scary things is probably the sign of wisdom not cowardice," Masters said as they entered the hall.

"I'll wait for you out here."

"No. Come on in. I'm not modest and I'd feel better with you close by."

Within a few minutes, Johnny had been safely redelivered to his father's room and Masters was back in his own. A few minutes after that, he judged himself presentable in slacks, shirt and cardigan. He stopped by Cliff's room to check on the call to the attorney. Apparently, Jasper's death would change nothing in terms of the Will. He would modify the final estate paper work but unless really needed would not come out until ten o'clock on Sunday morning as originally scheduled. Master's was to feel free to call him at any time. The old detective proceeded back down the stairs to Abigail's suite.

The door was open. He knocked on the frame and stuck his head inside. Fritz appeared.

"Yes. Come in. Dora just went in to wake her. I suppose we might as well make ourselves comfortable here in the sitting room. Mary stopped by to say the coroner is on the way."

Just as they had each settled into a comfortable chair, Dora appeared, her face ghostly white. Fritz was immediately on his feet.

"What is it?"

He put his arm around her in a most un-butler-like fashion. She looked up into his face.

"I can't wake her. She's not breathing. How can this be?" She began sobbing uncontrollably.

Masters got up and hurried past them into the bedroom. Dora was right. Abigail was dead. Her skin was still warm and her lips still moist. Masters estimated it had happened within the past few minutes. It had been cyanide. He'd seen it so many times in his career he didn't need a lab report - the lips, the eyes, the tongue, the odor.

He pulled the sheet up over her face. The case, and it was a case, had quickly become more serious and complex than he could have imagined only hours before. His eyes followed the stain on the sheet down toward the floor. Beneath it was her brandy glass.

"Fritz!" he called out into the sitting room. "Will you come in here, please?!"

Fritz arrived.

"Yes, Sir."

"The brandy glass there. A drink at bedtime was her habit?"

"Yes. It was."

His brow furrowed and his expression became pained.

"There is something more?" Masters asked.

"Yes. No. I really don't know. It probably has nothing to do with it all."

"Let me be the judge of that, okay? So far I have two murders and nothing to go on."

"Murder, Sir? Miss Abigail was also murdered?"

"Without a doubt. Now, what were you thinking?"

"Well, I'm not sure what to call it. It seemed like a game I suppose. Each night when Mr. Fairfield went to bed he had me take her a carafe of fresh brandy, poured from his own fine stock. Well it wasn't actually taken to her. She bathed from eleven thirty to midnight. Mr. Fairfield retired at eleven thirty. Their schedules hadn't varied in the past twenty-five years. While she was in the bath, I would replace her carafe of brandy with the new one. I thought it a sweet gesture on his part. In the morning, while she was at breakfast I would switch them back. It was all according to Mr. Fairfield's standing directive. The strangest part though, perhaps, was that he directed that on the day he died, I was to stop making the substitution. With the late conclusion to dinner this evening - last evening, now - their schedules were set back a bit. It was when I went to get her brandy from Mr. Fairfield's room that I discovered him . . . dead. So, again following his wishes, I did not take the new brandy to her. By my not being in her suite as usual, I suppose it would have given someone the opportunity to slip in and out unnoticed."

Masters had to wonder if Fritz was just trying to be helpful or if he was providing too much information. Who could have known that he would not be going into her room that night? Someone who knew of Jasper's directive about the no-brand-exchange-on-the-day-he-died and the fact that Jasper was dead. Without such knowledge - and Abigail's bathing schedule - the murderer ran the risk of having Fritz walk in on the person spiking the brandy. The most obvious

candidate would have to be Fritz. The second just might be Dora, with whom Fritz seemed to have more than a professional relationship. And then, of course, the larger question: was there, in fact, such a ritual or had Fritz concocted it for the occasion.

It could, of course, just have been a fortunate coincidence; someone not aware of the ritual entered and poisoned the brandy and due to the special directive was therefore not seen by Fritz as they would have been on other occasions.

Probably even more basically, why the Brandy ritual in the first place, if it had actually been a ritual? To lovingly assure her the best quality Brandy? If so, why? To make up for his ineptitude as a husband? It might have been begun to protect her against some feared plot to kill her - a plot Jasper had reason to think would involve the delivery of poison. It seemed a bit farfetched but then Masters had made a career from the farfetched. If, for whatever reason, the ritual had taken place, why did Jasper not carry it out by himself - why enlist Fritz's help all those many years? There would be a reason. For all of Jason's self-proclaimed contempt for conducting business, it was clear that he had been a shrewd and well organized man.

There would also be a reason if, in truth, the story were reversed and the ritual was merely Fritz's fabrication. Why? What purpose served?

"Fascinating," Masters said to himself.

"What, Sir?"

"Oh. Nothing. I sometimes just mumble. Thinking out loud. Why don't you attend to Dora? It seems to have been a terrible shock. I'll need to enlist help from both of you in the morning."

Dora and Fritz moved to the door. Masters had one more question.

"What law enforcement agency serves this area - the Heights, here?"

"That would be the sheriff. Jeff Davis is his name. Fine man so far as I can tell. Been elected more times than one can count. Shall I get him on the line?"

"No. I'm sure the coroner will handle that. Thanks for

all your help."

They both nodded and left. Masters made his way back up the stairs to report the latest to Cliff and Johnny. They were still awake apparently talking about the kinds of questions death demands.

"More unhappy news, I'm afraid," Masters began, taking a seat in a chair across from the sofa on which the others were sitting.

"I've never found an easy way to say it. Abigail was just found dead in her bed."

"Murder? Was it murder?" Johnny asked insistently, springing to his feet.

"She died of poison, I'm at least certain of that. It would indicate either murder or suicide."

Cliff shook his head.

"Not suicide. She wiggled out over getting her finger nails clipped."

Johnny sat down and slumped back into the sofa shaking his head. Again, the tears began to flow.

"I really never gave her the time of day, you know? After my talk with Great Grandpa I decided to do better at that but I guess I won't get the chance now. . . . There's a quote from somebody that goes something like, 'You can never do a kindness too soon because you can never know how soon it will be too late.' I think I'll make a copy of that and put it over my desk at home - like a reminder to think about others."

"It's from Emerson, I believe," Masters said. "Not a bad philosophy to live by."

Cliff put his arm around his son and drew him close.

"Of all the people I've ever known, Johnny, none of them has been more considerate and helpful than you."

Johnny looked into his father's face and nodded. It was not so much to indicate agreement as it was just an acknowledgment - a thank you.

"I'm going down stairs to wait for the Coroner," Masters said. "She should be here any time now. There's really nothing more you two can do so maybe try and get some sleep."

"I'm going to move a dresser in front of the door," Johnny said. "So, if you want to come in, knock three times

followed by two more."

"Or," Masters added, "I could just say, 'This is Ray. May I come in?'"

"Oh, yeah. I tend to get carried away when I'm nervous."

Masters made his way down stairs. Sarah was coming out of the dining room. Her hair was in curlers and she wore a lilac robe and slippers.

"Dora just told me about the . . . situations."

She shook her head. Masters could see that she had been crying. He moved to her side and put his big arm around her.

"Yes. It's a sad time. I'm sorry."

"I just put coffee on," she said. "Figured we'd be needing lots of it tonight."

"Very nice. Yes. I am expecting the coroner any minute and I assume someone from the sheriff as well."

"I'll set up a coffee urn and mugs in the living room."

"Fine. Thank you."

Sarah patted Masters' hand and returned to the kitchen.

He walked to the front door. A van was parking and a Sheriff's car was turning into the driveway. He opened the door and stepped out onto the porch as an attractive, middle aged woman climbed the steps.

"Thanks for coming so promptly," he said, extending his hand. "I'm Ray Masters and I assume you are the Coroner."

"Fran Flagg," she said accepting his hand. "Coroner for twenty years though at this hour of the morning I always tend to forget why."

It was offered in good humor and with a naturally blossoming smile.

"Mary said it may have been foul play, if I may use my 'B' movie vocabulary."

"Yes, it may have been and yes you may. Looks like suffocation administered by some external force. Were you also alerted to Abigail's death?"

"Mrs. Fairfield? No. When?"

"Found shortly after Jasper was discovered. I think you'll find she died of cyanide poisoning."

They went inside and stood in the relative warmth of

the entry hall awaiting the deputy. Fran's brow furrowed and she asked:

"And your association with all of this is . . . ?"

"Sorry. I'm a private detective who Jasper retained to . . . well that's difficult to fully explain in a few minutes."

"Raymond Masters. Certainly! Flint's books about your cases. The Case of the Twisted Twins and The Gathering of Killers. It's so good to meet you."

Before Masters could respond a deputy knocked and, at Masters' motion, let himself in.

"Deputy Bassett, Sir, and yes that does make me Deputy Dog, so let's get the giggles over right here and now."

Masters offered his hand and the deputy shook it with youthful vigor.

"I'm Ray Masters, a private detective and I assume you know Ms. Flagg."

Bassett addressed the Coroner.

"What's up, Frannie?"

"Looks like two deaths, very likely both murders. I assume you'll want to get your forensics guys out here ASAP."

"Who died?"

"Jasper and Abigail. Let's go take a look."

Masters led them up the stairs and into Jasper's bedroom. On the way, Bassett called for the lab techs. The old detective explained his findings, and offered his hypothesis as to how the murder had taken place. The deputy jotted random notes. Fran donned gloves and did a cursory examination of the eyes, lips and fingernails.

"Not much doubt - suffocation."

She noticed the medicine vials Mary had left on the night stand and picked one up.

"Seizure medication?"

"Mary can give you the details but as I understand it he's had some recent seizures and has been on the medicine several months."

Fran popped off the lid and looked inside. She sniffed the contents and poured a sample into her palm.

"Well, one thing's for sure. The pills in his vial are not what the label indicates should be in there. I can't imagine Mary ever being that careless though they are similar in

shape."

Masters frowned. Fran lifted her hand so Masters could sniff them as well.

"Aspirin?"

"Very good. Without the medication, he certainly could have suffered a seizure, you know."

"Yes. That certainly does complicate things but contrived complications often tend to help trap the perpetrator."

"Got help on the way - pulled them out of bed so they're coming up in their own vehicles. We'll take the body to the morgue and complete an autopsy."

Masters directed his next comment to the Deputy.

"Both pillows will need lab analysis. I've drawn a circle around a central spot on this one. I'm sure it was forced over Jasper's face during the murder. It's still slightly damp but won't be for long. Within that area, the lab will find traces of Jason's saliva and some remnants of whiskey - his nightcap for the past fifty or so years. Print the medicine vials, of course."

Bassett took copious notes.

"On to victim number two?" Fran said, suggesting a callousness that seemed foreign to her gentle disposition.

"This way."

A new set of gloves but basically the same examination - eyes, lips, nails, mouth odor.

"I have to agree, Ray. Cyanide. At least it was fast. From the vapors arising out of her mouth I assume she was intoxicated at the time of her death. Probably had no idea anything was even going wrong."

"The carafe of brandy will contain the poison," Masters said to Bassett. "Once pictures have been taken, print both the container and the glass there on the floor. Make sure the stain on the sheet matches the brandy in the carafe - and I mean matches - not just the color."

Again, Bassett took notes.

"Hello!" Came a man's voice, calling tentatively from the hall. "Fran, you here somewhere?"

"In here, Tommy," she called back. "My assistant, Tommy Boothe."

Tommy made his way into the room and Fran outlined what needed to be done. They would wait to remove the bodies until after forensics had released them.

"Don't suppose there's coffee at this time of night," Fran asked.

"Actually, there is, thanks to the very thoughtful cook, here. Down in the living room. I'd deliver you via the elevator but I have no idea how to operate it."

"I can use the exercise and from the looks of it so can you."

She smiled. Masters shrugged no contest, and the two of them descended the stairs. A second coroner's assistant had already located the coffee.

"This is Jim. Best nose for coffee and donuts on my staff. A darn good assistant as well. Second floor. Tommy's already up here. You'll need two gurneys. Jasper and Abigail."

Jim winced, clearly distressed by the news.

"I'm Jim," he said offering his hand to Masters. "Frannie is sometimes short on introductions."

"Sorry. Yes," she said. "Raymond Masters, the detective, formerly of the City and now . . . where?"

"Rossville. Southwest a couple of hours. Retired, well, I keep fantasizing that I'm retired."

Another van arrived. It was the forensics team. Basset met them and read to them from his notes as they proceeded up the stairs.

A half hour later the bustle was over; they had all left; the bodies had been removed. Masters was sitting alone in the dimly lit living room. Sarah arrived with a small tray.

"Cocoa and egg salad sandwiches, Ray. Too much coffee will soften your brain and too little food will dull it."

She sat the tray on the coffee table. Masters motioned for her to sit down. Clearly, she was not used to such an invitation but nodded, smoothing the shiny, flowered, fabric on both sides of her as she eased herself onto a century old love seat.

"You must be hungry as well. Please join me and thank you. Very thoughtful."

"This is so strange," she said, looking around, gradually

letting herself relax back into her seat.

"Strange?"

"I've never sat down in this room before. Double strange, I suppose."

Masters frowned, not understanding.

"So far as I can recall, nobody's ever ate in here either."

"Then I'm glad it's you who's helping me break those old ways. I have a feeling things are going to be very different from here on out."

She didn't inquire further but picked up half a sandwich.

"You are a nice man, Ray. I'm glad I'm getting to know you."

Masters never handled complements very well so just did what he did best: asked a question.

"Your earlier comments make me wonder how the help has been treated here at Fairfield Heights."

"Treated? Fine, really. There were rules - we were expected to know our place and keep to it. But we have always been treated well. The pay is surprisingly good given Mr. Fairfield's reputation as a . . . well, I was going to say skinflint so I might just as well say it. We each get two days off a week and three weeks' vacation a year. We have spacious quarters and neither Mr. or Mrs. ever raises . . . raised . . . their voice at us. It's been a very good place to work. What do you think will happen to all of us now?"

"I have the idea your employment will continue, if that's your concern."

"Yes. I guess that was on my mind. Selfish, I suppose, at a time like this."

"I'd say the term would be 'understandable'," Masters replied.

She nodded. He savored his sandwich and smacked his lips appreciatively.

"Oregano?"

"Just as dash. My secret ingredient. Well, I thought it was my secret."

She smiled. Masters smiled back.

"The Will reading?" she asked.

"It will go on as scheduled, Sunday morning. You and the other help are invited, are you?"

"Yes. It's been the source for lots of speculation, I can tell you that. Mr. was so unpredictable. He'd ration the light bulbs but then out of the blue he'd refurnish our rooms for us. You just come to expect the unexpected around here."

"I haven't seen Zeke the handyman yet."

"He's been on vacation. Due back Saturday. Interesting now that you mention it. I think I saw his car pulling into the garage about sundown. I was busy fixing dinner. Just a glance out the back window. Maybe that wasn't today. Something about this old head that has trouble keeping one day straight from another."

"He's been here quite a while?"

"Came the same year I came. Suddenly it seems like a lifetime."

"Single?"

"Sort of."

She giggled.

"Sort of single?" Masters said, smiling and cocking his head awaiting clarification.

Sarah explained.

"He and his wife divorced years ago but he still spends his days off at her place - it was their place. They seem to get on much better, good even, since the divorce. Sure didn't happen that way for me. Glad for him, though."

"So, things didn't work out so well for you?"

"Abusive drunk. Took me five years to get smart enough to leave the Well, a lady don't use such words in the presence of a gentleman."

"Things are better now, I hope."

"Oh, yes. Like I said. The Heights has been very good to me. I got a boyfriend - if you can use that term at our ages. Lives in town. Delivers papers all over the county early every morning. He's also a locksmith. That and his social security is more than he needs. We'll never get married but I think we'll always be . . . together."

"How nice. It sounds very comfortable."

"Yes. Comfortable and loving. Them's the foundation for a good relationship, I've decided."

They finished their snacks and cocoa.

"Better try to get some sleep now, Sarah. I'm sure your

day begins early."

"Oh yes. If the flapjacks ain't flappin' by six Master Johnny is in there messin' up my kitchen all by himself. He thinks he's helping, bless his heart. He's the sweetest kid I've ever known. His daddy's a prize, too. Not the typical Fairfields."

"Til about six then," Masters said, standing.

Sarah left with the tray. As Masters turned to follow, Bernice entered the living room. She was wearing a short, lime green, silk robe over matching pajamas and slippers. Not a hair was out of place and she was still in full makeup. She headed straight for Masters.

"What the hell is going on around here? Cop cars. Vans. Noise in the halls. How's a girl to sleep?"

"I guess it falls to me to inform you that both Jasper and Abigail have died."

"You're kidding, of course."

"I've never kidded where life and death is concerned."

"Who did it?"

"You seem to be assuming they were killed."

"Of course. They're both too stubborn to just die on their own."

Masters had no response.

"How, then?" she asked, modifying her original question and quieting her tone.

"Both deaths look suspicious, I suppose one could say. The coroner will make her determination and get back to us - probably by mid-morning."

"I suppose this changes the Will."

"I have no reason to suspect that it does. Why would you?"

"I don't know. Dying before its contents have been made known? Waiting to find out which one of them did him in before divvying up the take. Adding what they'd saved for themselves into the kitty for the rest of us."

"So cynical," Masters said, frowning.

"If you had been forced to live my life you'd be cynical, too."

"Let's see, as I understand it five university degrees, more money coming in than is necessary to support any ten

people in fine fashion, a bright future in one of a half dozen professions. That sounds like a pretty good life to me."

"You just can't understand. It's a terrible family. Everybody else is nuts. They've put me down my whole life."

"Cliff, too?"

"He's subtler in his derision and hides his craziness better than the rest of them."

"By them, I assume you are excluding yourself from the crazies."

"Certainly. What are you doing here, anyway?"

"Jasper engaged my services to handle any untoward events that might come up during the next few days or weeks. It appears his foresight was justified - two have already occurred."

"Engaged what kind of services?"

"I'm a private detective."

"I see. I didn't know. Jasper suspected something, then."

"Expected might be a more accurate phrase. Given what he saw as the selfish, greedy, uncaring mentality of most of his family members, yes, he expected the worst, I'm afraid."

"He was crazy himself, you know. Not stupid - but certifiably crazy like the rest."

"That was not my impression, but then you've known him more intimately and longer than I."

"Nobody knew Jasper intimately. He was pathologically asocial."

"I assume one of those degrees must be in psychology?"

"Clinical. PhD. Stopped short of doing the internship. Mostly gibberish. The psychotherapeutic process is just a huge fabricated fantasy established to make a select few wealthy."

"And it took you three years to make that assessment?"

"I finish what I start."

"I see."

Masters waited.

"So, who do you think killed off the Pater and Mater of this clan?" she asked.

"I'll let you know as soon as I am sure and not before,"

he replied smiling, establishing his ground rules.

"If it happened after ten-thirty I don't have an alibi. I was in the Roosevelt Suite, in bed, alone, but then I guess nobody will have an alibi will they - except maybe Cliff and Jonathon - they'll be each other's. Does that count?"

"I would believe them. You wouldn't?"

She chose not to answer.

"The Will will be read as scheduled then, you say?"

"Sunday at ten a.m., right here in the living room."

"What are we supposed to do in the meantime?"

Jasper hoped you'd all use the time to become better friends."

"Fat chance of that!"

With no attempt to bring the conversation to a civil close she turned and left the room. Several minutes later he heard the familiar dinging from the back of the hall signaling the elevator was on its way upstairs.

During the time she had been there, Masters noticed the door to Farley's room had inched open just a crack. He stood and took several steps toward it.

"Is there something I can do for you, Farley?"

The door closed and then quickly opened again. Farley appeared in a red and white striped, floor length, sleeping gown - military boots showing below. He said nothing but moved in quick, short steps to within a few feet of Masters and waited silently, head cocked, as if expecting him to maintain the conversation.

"I suppose you heard. Your mother and father passed away tonight."

"It was their time," he said mounting a prolonged series of intentionally well-defined nods.

"I'm not sure I understand what you mean," Masters said hoping to encourage conversation.

"Bad old people, it was their time. Someday it will be my time. Someday it will be your time. Everybody has their time. Time. Time. Time."

That was clearly leading nowhere.

"I understand you read a lot," Masters said trying again.

"History, politics, and current events. Read twelve newspapers cover to cover every day. You into politics?"

Farley suddenly seemed lucid.

"Probably not to the extent you seem to be. Were Jasper and Abigail readers?"

"Mother was more a drinker. It is the one thing she did well. Father read, some - business and financial journals. He mostly fretted over money, though, as far as I could ever tell. He never told me about the birds and bees. Can you believe that? Not a good father. Not good at all. And you know he knew. You know he knew."

"It appears they may have been killed by somebody," Masters said, searching for Farley's reaction.

"Yes. Probably so. I often considered doing it myself but I've never been much good around blood, you know."

He shivered.

"If not you, then who, do you suppose?"

"Fritz."

"Oh. What brings you to that conclusion?"

"Fritz spent more time in mother's bed than he did in his own."

"And you know that for a fact?"

"For a fact. Yes. Fact. Fact. Fact."

He had slipped away again. Still, Masters needed to pursue the point. He returned to reading; it seemed to be Farley's anchor in reality.

"Is Fritz a reader?"

"Actually, yes. A well-educated person - English Literature, I believe. Can't imagine why he'd ever take a job being a nanny to two old farts."

"He was younger than your mother."

"By eighteen years, three months, eighteen days and eleven hours."

"You've done your homework."

"Raymond Masters, age seventy-eight, eleven months, six days and fifteen hours. Fannie Flagg. Fifty-two, three months, nineteen days and twenty-two hours. Sarah . . ."

"That is quite a skill," Masters said hoping to interrupt the litany before the entire phone book was presented.

"Beethoven, Straus, Anka. I can do them all. It's a gift."

"Was your father aware of the relationship you suggest

existed between your mother and Fritz?"

"Aware. Aware. Aware. I must get my sleep. The papers will arrive in four hours, ten minutes. Minutes. Minutes. Minutes. Birds and bees. Fresh red blood. Sleep. Sleep. Sleep. Wonderful murders."

He turned and disappeared into his room. The closed door was immediately reopened a crack. For just a moment Masters wondered if perhaps he had dozed off and it had all been a strange dream. He hadn't. It hadn't. The door closed again. Either Farley was - as Bernice had indicted - certifiable, or he had an agenda that was served well by the appearance of insanity.

Exhausted, Masters made his way back up the two flights of stairs to his room more determined than ever to learn how to operate that elevator!

CHAPTER THREE
DAY TWO: MORNING
Getting Acquainted

There was no flappin' going on as Masters entered the still darkened kitchen at five minutes before six Saturday morning. As he was finishing putting on the coffee Sarah arrived. Still no Johnny.

"Never knew the boy not to be here gummin' at me by this time," she said.

"He was awake late into the wee hours. Teenagers need their sleep," Masters said in response.

Sarah shook her head not buying it but unwilling to voice her opinion further. Zeke arrived. Sarah pruned the introductions.

"Ray Masters, Zeke Piotrowski. Zeke, Ray. I guess you've heard about the horrible goings on up here."

"Fritz filled me in a few minutes ago. Terrible! Terrible!" Zeke said, shaking Master's hand. "How are you doin', Sarah?"

"Not real well, quite honestly. So sudden. So awful. You know."

Zeke nodded and looked around.

"Where's the boy. He's supposed to be out here this weekend ain't he?"

"Not up yet, I guess."

Zeke joined Masters at the table. Sarah brought coffee.

"I understand you're a detective."

"That's right."

"So, who done it?"

"Way too early to say. You got back here when?"

"About five this mornin' - maybe an hour ago. Been on vacation. Put in new kitchen cabinets for my," Zeke paused looking sullen and distracted, ". ex, I suppose you'd call her. Hardly a vacation but it was a good week. She took off too."

"Notice anything out of the ordinary upon your return?"

"No. Like what?"

"I'm searching the unknown, Zeke. Trying to find a starting point. Strange cars? Unfamiliar people on the road? Things out of place? I don't know."

"Sorry. Nothin' comes to mind. If it does, I'll let you know."

Fritz entered the kitchen and looked around.

"Where's Master Jonathon? He's always here by this hour."

"The theory is that he's sleeping in," Sarah answered making it clear in her tone that she wasn't convinced of the fact.

"That boy never sleeps in." Fritz said clearly puzzled. "Perhaps I should go check on him."

Not waiting for anyone to offer their appraisal of the idea, he turned and left.

"Seems like a big event," Masters said, "Johnny not showing up with the roosters."

The other two raised their eyebrows, nodded and sipped at their mugs. Masters also began to grow uneasy.

"Seemed hot in here all night," Sarah said, directing the remark to Zeke. "That new automatic boiler timer on the blink?"

"I'll check it out. It's been working like a charm, though."

"Sounds like a new handyman toy," Masters said fishing for more information.

"Got a boiler system here that's older than you are steam heat and radiators. Got a new timer that automatically runs everything cooler overnight. Used to have an old coal stoker and I had to fiddle with the air intake all night long. Got gas now. The new gadget uses a thermostat and does all that for me. I'm just beginnin' to get used to getting' a full

night's sleep during the winter months."

"I can see how that would certainly make your life easier."

"It does that. I'll take a look at it in a few minutes. Got to start my day with a cup of Sarah's good coffee first. By the way, Sarah, this is really great this mornin'. Try somethin' different?"

She raised her eyebrows in Masters' direction. He shrugged his shoulders.

"It could be that I've just finally 'Mastered' the art of brewing."

She winked at Masters. He nodded, acknowledging the private pun. This lady was quick and bright.

Zeke let it pass.

The kitchen phone rang. Sarah answered.

"Oh, my goodness! Yes. . . Yes. . . Yes. . . Right away."

She hung up.

"That was Fritz. There's a problem up in Cliff's room. Johnny's not in his room and Fritz can't raise anybody in Cliff's. He couldn't even force the door open."

Masters and Zeke got to their feet simultaneously and headed for the elevator. Soon on the second floor, they approached Fritz still trying to force the door with his slender, light weight frame. Masters explained what he knew.

"Johnny intended to spend the night in here with Cliff, which probably explains his absence from his room. The boy's plan was to move a dresser in front of the door so no bad guy could gain access during the night. Apparently, his plan worked pretty well. Let me get my two-seventy-five up against it."

Gradually the door yielded just enough for the two more slender men to enter and pull the dresser back making way for Masters.

Zeke sniffed. Carbon monoxide, I'd say.

"Open the windows," Masters said as he went to where Johnny lay. He put his hand to the boy's nose.

"Johnny's still breathing. Get him out into the hall."

Zeke picked him up and left the room. Masters and Fritz moved to Cliff. He was also breathing, though barely.

The two men draped his arms over their shoulders and dragged the unconscious man into the hall with his son.

"I'll get the oxygen bottles and masks. Both the Fairfield's kept some in their rooms," Fritz said turning to leave.

"Cliff is struggling here," Zeke reported.

"Lay him flat on his stomach. Left ear on his hands folded under his face. I know it's not the preferred method any more but the old lifeguard technique will move lots of fresh air in and out of his lungs in a hurry."

"I can do that. Life-guarded a few summers myself as a lad," Zeke said and was soon pressing on the man's back and raising the elbows in a slow steady rhythm.

Johnny opened his eyes; his mind was foggy.

"What the?" he managed, looking around and coughing.

"Seems to have been a carbon monoxide leak into your father's room." Masters explained. "Begin taking deep breaths. Blow it all out and then take in a lung full and hold it for five seconds."

"Daddy?" Johnny managed between breaths as he looked over at his father.

"Zeke has things under control there. You just take care of yourself."

Fritz arrived. The oxygen was soon set up and operating for both. As Johnny stopped coughing, Cliff began.

"A good sign," Masters said, patting Johnny on the shoulder. "Sit him up, Zeke."

Within a few minutes, they were both were breathing normally. Masters spoke:

"I'd suggest you two go to Johnny's room and rest until your heads clear. Fritz, we need to have Mary take a look at them."

Fritz nodded, went to the opposite end of the hall, and knocked on Mary's door.

Once Cliff and Johnny were seated in the boy's room Masters returned to the hall.

"Zeke, we need to figure out what happened in there. Got any ideas?"

The two of them re-entered Cliff's room, which was by then virtually clear of the noxious fumes. Zeke knelt in front of

the fireplace and looked up inside.

"No mystery here, Mr. Detective."

He pointed and Masters got to his knees to also take a look, commenting on what he saw.

"A pillow stuffed up the flue and two bricks removed from the back of the fire box. You understand what that means, I take it, Zeke."

"The flue from the boiler runs up to the roof between the flue for this fireplace and the one in the room just east of here. Look through the hole where the bricks are gone and you can see a crack of light comin' from that room. Not sure of the gadget but we'll find out how it worked over there."

"Let's take a look then."

Zeke helped the old detective to his feet and they were soon in the unoccupied room next door to the east. Again, they knelt.

"I'm really too old for this kind of thing, you know," Masters said as he craned his neck to look up inside.

Zeke raised an eyebrow thinking that sheer bulk as well as age just might have had something to do with it but made no comment.

"There she be," he said, joining Masters.

The detective soon understood. Three bricks had been removed from the back of the fireplace forming a horizontal slit some two feet wide near the top of the fire box. A piece of plywood, meticulously cut to fit, had been slid in through the opening and across to the opposite wall, cutting off most of the upward air flow of fumes in the boiler's chimney. Once the plywood had been put in place the remaining portion of the slit had been stuffed with wet towels from the bathroom. The fumes from the fire were thereby re-routed into Cliff's room through the hole in the back of his fireplace. The fumes from the gas furnace, though deadly, would have been colorless and initially, at least, essentially odorless. Zeke slid out the piece of plywood to allow the fumes to pass up the flu.

"Can you stuff something in the holes here to contain the fumes? The Sheriff's staff will need to get photos and go over it all before you make permanent repairs."

"Not a problem. Give me twenty minutes. Actually, the wet towels are probably as good as anything. I'll do that for

now and then go down and check the timer."

Zeke started to work

Masters eased into a chair to think.

Timing would have been important. The obstructing of the chimney would have to have been done late enough so there would have been no effects until Cliff was in bed. Considering the problems of the night before, bedtime routines had not adhered to any schedule. The perpetrator would have needed to have been aware of what was transpiring in Cliff's room as it happened, clearly the work of an insider.

Masters had felt no ill effects during the time he was in the room just prior to leaving to meet Fran, so things had been set into motion after that, after 11:45. The exact timeline for the evening was fuzzy in his head; many things had occurred in such a short period.

Questions raced through the old detective's mind. Who had easy access to the unoccupied room? Everybody, not much help. Chester had the room opposite Mary's at the far front east end of the second floor. That would not only provide quick access but a good cover for him if seen in the hall by anyone. Bernice was in the suite directly above the empty second floor room. Either the elevator or stairs would make it a mere sixty second trip for her. The staff rooms were right there on the second floor across the back of the building. Access would clearly not play a helpful role in tracking down the culprit.

So, what about motive? Most obviously, it would be in some way related to the Will and inheritance. Farley, Bernice, Cliff and any of the household staff. Seven suspects all with possible motive and easy access.

How about knowledge of the building design and the skill needed to perform the necessary modifications in the brickwork? Suddenly Zeke moved to the top of the list. He had gone directly to the fireplace when Masters asked him to help find the source of the fumes. In fact, it was Zeke who had first labeled it as carbon monoxide. Of course, the fireplace was the only likely source in that room. Fritz? He was the one who went in search of Johnny. He may not have known the boy had stayed in his father's room that night. Either way, he could have calculated that sufficient time had passed for

the deadly deed to have taken place and feigned interest in the boy's welfare so he would be the one to discover Cliff, diverting suspicion from him.

Mary would have certainly known about the deadly potential of carbon monoxide but her knowledge of the chimney design and skill to make the modifications was questionable, to say the least. It made her only a marginal suspect, unless she was in league with someone else.

Farley? Who knew? Masters had many questions still unanswered about him. Having lived in the mansion his entire life one could assume he knew of the chimney design. In essence the same could be said for Chester. He had grown up there as well. Bernice? She was clearly bright enough to figure out anything she set her mind to. Both Chester and Bernice had been there since Thursday, which would have provided sufficient time to make the structural modifications.

"That should take care of this side," Zeke said at last. "What should I do with the plywood?"

"Just leave it there beside the fireplace. Any idea where it came from?"

Zeke looked it over.

"Run of the mill B-D exterior. Could have even come from my shop, I suppose. Always scraps down there. The boy used to all but live there when he'd come out. He'd build the darndest things. Pretty handy for a kid, you know. I'll get Cliff's fireplace plugged up now. Anything else, then, before I go downstairs?"

"Nothing I can think of. How handy is Farley?"

Zeke smiled.

"The man can't hang a picture when the nail's already in the wall. That answer it?"

"Yes. I suppose so. How about Chester?"

"Chester's a whole nother story. The way I hear it he did lots of the work on his home up in Rochester all by himself. I suppose that means he's handy. Never seen much of it myself. The tree house out back was his handwork, I'm told. Johnny's remodeled it but the basic structure was well planned."

"Thanks for your help and your ear."

"Not a problem."

He left. Masters went to check on Cliff and Johnny.

"How are the sleepy heads?" Masters said entering through the open door.

"Not funny, Mr. M." Johnny said. He was doing pushups between the dressers.

"Apparently, the young man is feeling back to normal. How about you, Cliff?" Masters asked taking a seat.

"Except for a headache, I'm doing well. Mary said we could expect to feel nauseated for a while. She left some pills."

"Do you usually stay in that same room when you're here?"

"Always, I guess. Johnny's in here and I'm next door. It's become our rut I suppose. Why do you ask? You must have found something suspicious over there."

"I'm afraid so."

Johnny stopped his workout and took a seat beside his father.

"SOOO?" he said impatiently twirling his right hand as if that might speed things up.

"It looks like someone purposely plugged the chimney, clearly an attempt on your life, Cliff."

"But we didn't have a fire," Johnny pointed out with confusion. "There was no wood in either of our rooms to build one with."

"It's more complicated than that. Someone had to have knowledge about the structure of the venting systems here. It has been cleverly modified."

"Zeke?" Cliff asked frowning.

"He was the first that came to my mind, too. But he was on vacation last week and didn't return until this morning. The changes had to have been made sometime before you arrived yesterday afternoon and by someone who knew you'd be using this room."

"That would only be everybody, of course!" Johnny pointed out his delivery suggesting exasperation.

"Should we leave?" Cliff asked.

"That has to be your call. That attempt was well planned, should have been foolproof. I doubt if the would-be-

killer would have felt the need to have a backup plan."

"So, we're safe, then?" Johnny asked, nodding his head.

"I can't guarantee that. It's just my best assessment of situations like this. Once the Will has been read, your safety should be assured, Johnny. I can't guess about Cliff's."

Cliff looked at Johnny, a question on his face. Johnny looked at Masters.

"I haven't shared Great Grandpa's deal to me with Dad yet. That's how he asked me to keep it "til the Will was read."

"I think any promises you made to him have now been cancelled. Your father needs to know what to expect."

Johnny nodded and outlined the arrangement on which he and Jasper had settled.

"I'm stunned," Cliff began. "Can't say I'm surprised upon reflection, however. He loved you more than anything else in his life. This is really going to complicate our life, you know."

Johnny sighed his distinctive sigh.

"Complicate, yes. Change, not necessarily. I figure that two bright guys like we are can muddle our way through this thing."

"Certainly, we can. We will," Cliff responded with a determined, jaw set and noted, "It does pose a very interesting new question for me, though."

"What?" Johnny asked buying into the implied seriousness of the upcoming comment.

Cliff sighed dramatically, imitating a Johnny-like sigh, which brought brief smiles to their faces.

"It looks like now I'll be the one pestering you for an increase in my allowance."

They could both laugh at that. Masters smiled. He silently agreed with Johnny. They would manage to find some way to cope with his new found, pesky billion dollars.

Cliff spoke.

"I think I will feel better if we arrange body guards for the next few days. How do I go about that?"

"Probably begin with a call to Sheriff Davis. I have the number here on a card Deputy Basset handed me last evening." After a brief thumb through his wallet, Masters

handed the card to Cliff.

"In the meantime, either or both of you are welcome to tag with me. I'm never armed but there may be safety in numbers."

"I'm with you," Johnny agreed standing and moving to Masters' side.

"Let me make the call," Cliff said. "Then, we should probably get something to eat. I assume we can somehow cajole you into accompanying us to the kitchen, Mr. M."

"Come to think of it, I'm running on a mere half cup of coffee myself. Johnny, perhaps you will teach me how to operate the elevator." Masters said, leading out into the hallway.

"I'm a good teacher, I think. I'll have you zipping up and down in no time."

"I was thinking more like just leisurely slipping from floor to floor."

Johnny bobbed his head in the way boys do to indicate "whatever". Masters understood.

By the time Cliff had arranged for the body guards, Masters was smugly navigating from floor to floor.

"It dings at every floor. I wonder why," he asked.

"Actually, it dings once as you pass a floor and twice whenever the door is opened. I think it's a safety precaution," Johnny suggested.

They arrived at the first floor. Masters nodded opening and closing the door several times as if to verify the double ding. They were soon in the kitchen. It was going on ten o'clock.

Cliff and Johnny each received an extended hug from a genuinely relieved Sarah.

"I've been so worried. Things are going from bad to worse. You better stay right here with me. None of these Farifields got gumption enough to go up against me."

There was fire in her delivery and sincerity in her tone. The frying pan held high lent some additional authority to her contention.

"Well, I for one feel safer already." Masters joked.

"Dad hired us some muscle," Johnny said, hoping to alleviate Sarah's concern.

"Muscle?"

"Body guards."

Sarah nodded. That seemed to provide some reassurance.

"You three must be famished. How about flapjacks all around?"

They each nodded; they probably would have also nodded had she suggested stale bread; they were famished she was still wielding the frying pan.

"You up to making a fresh pot of my new and improved coffee?" Sarah asked, addressing the detective.

"Certainly. And by the way it's the dash of cocoa on top that makes the difference. Think of that as my trade for your oregano."

The other two were plainly confused and from the intentional lack of explanation, recognized they were going to stay that way. A bell rang and Masters looked to find its source.

"The bell from the dining room," Sarah explained. "It's bound to be Bernice. She won't lower herself to come into the kitchen. Excuse me a minute and I'll go take her order, as if it'll be any big surprise."

She handed the flapjack spatula to Johnny who eagerly took command of the griddle. Breakfast was soon ready and served. Sarah returned eyebrows raised.

"Eggs Benedict, raisin toast with cream cheese, green tea with milk, and a bowl of mixed fruit - no pineapple."

"And we're in here settling for flapjacks?" Johnny joked.

"Or less if you don't mind your manners," she said, playfully slapping at his cheek with the back of her hand.

"Actually, it is her regular after jogging brunch. Always the same. Like her lunch is always a lettuce and tomato salad with Italian dressing on the side, a large orange juice, and two pieces of French bread with real butter. Unlike you guys, she's an easy feed."

From there, breakfast settled into a conversation of questions related mostly to the deaths, the attempt on Cliff and Johnny, and the upcoming reading of the Will.

At eleven o'clock, two off duty deputies arrived to begin the first shift of round-the-clock protection for Cliff and his son.

Masters filled them in on what he felt they needed to know. Their instructions were simple. Never be more than ten feet away from their charges and never allow them out of sight. They were to remain armed.

Masters felt sure no attempt would be made out in the open - it didn't seem to fit the killer's MO. Of course, there could well be more than one bad guy. Cliff privately agreed with Masters but had opted to go with the protection for his son's peace of mind.

Masters went in search of Chester. He found him alone in one of the sitting rooms that Johnny had characterized as never being used.

"Chester. Got time for some conversation?" Masters said approaching him in his typical hand out smiling fashion.

"Sure. Got to warn you though, I'll likely have you signing on the dotted line for a brand-new automobile before you leave the room."

"Gave up my license several birthdays ago. No intention of getting behind the wheel again. If I purchased one, it would be purely for decoration."

"You'll be a tough sell but I've always liked a good challenge. What's on your mind? The murders? The Will? Why I killed my parents?"

"Yes. Things like that, and who else might be worthy of investigation."

"I'd go with Farley. He's always been the brightest of any of us boys. Crazy, but not dumb. He knows what's going on. Just paranoid enough to want to get the rest of us out of his hair."

"What's your take on Bernice?"

"DeeBee? She's a witch. That's probably the kinder of the possibly appropriate rhyming words. Always been completely self-absorbed. She's the smartest of the whole lot of us. Always has been. It's why we started calling her DeeBee, in fact."

"That, I don't understand."

"To call someone with an IQ above 140 a dumb blond is clearly an absurdity. It was our backhanded way of complimenting her - of admitting she had the brainpower over the rest of us. She never caught on. How such a bright

person could have missed it escapes me. I suppose that made it all the more fun."

"I see. Yes, it certainly does seem to have escaped her. Is she a killer?"

"Could she be a killer? Yes. Doubt if she has a conscious. Sure, never saw a trace of one if it's there. Is she the killer? Really can't say. She's power oriented - wants to be known as the reigning queen of everything competitive. How would killing her grandparents play into any of that - especially when no one could know it was she who did it? She'd have done it to get credit for it, to lord it over the rest of us. Couldn't happen, you see.

"She always hated her brother, Cliff. If she was planning to do him in at some point this would seem like a good time - spreading his share around among the rest of us would add a nice bonus to her revenge."

"Are they openly antagonistic toward each other?"

"She to him? Always has been. Hated him from the day he arrived. He to her? Never - well, not in public at least. Always just took her abuse with a smile. He may be the only one of us who really understands her, maybe even feels some compassion for her."

"How handy is she, like with making repairs and such?"

"Sorry, no idea. She was a Tomboy 'til she reached puberty - that came late for her as I recall. Went right from being one of the guys to being a World class tease. She spent a good deal of time out here as a little kid. I got the idea her parents needed lots of vacations from her. From time to time Cliff has spoken of the difficulties she has had with boys and men. Not sure what that was all about. She is a flirt and a tease, I'm sure of that."

"She seems to have more than held her own in college."

"Yes and no. As I understand it, she flunked the psycho test and they wouldn't let her into an internship - apparently required for getting certified as a shrink."

"Interesting. You seem to know a lot about the family members. Nobody else seems to care enough to keep up with things like that."

"Always noseey I guess. It's not that I really care about

them; well, Cliff and his boy are okay. I like them. In fact, Johnny came and stayed with me for almost a week two summers ago. We had a great time. At least I thought we did at the outset."

"You are or were married?"

"Am. We no longer live together. Separation. About three days into our marriage I found out I couldn't stand her and she found she couldn't stand me. So, we split up. Nothing unfriendly about it. Still friends but really don't see each other often."

"And you married, why, then?"

"We thought we were in love, or I did at least. Whirlwind affair."

"Any chance she married you for your money?"

"Of course, she did. I knew it. Didn't seem to matter since I loved her, you see."

"Yes, I suppose I do see. How will she fit into the Will?"

"Like everything else, she gets half of whatever I receive. I throw in a new car every year just for the heck of it."

"And when you pass on?"

"You cut right to the quick, don't you? When I die, she gets everything."

"Boyfriends?"

"She or me?"

"She."

"I think so. If she marries she gets nothing from me, however, and I don't think she'd ever give all that up."

"But once you die she's free to marry and retain her inheritance?"

"Yes. I suppose so. I'd never really strolled down that path. You have just made me very uncomfortable."

"A change of topic then. I understand you did much of the work on your home yourself."

"A carpenter at heart, I guess. I'm thinking of starting a new one. Maybe cutting back at the agency and playing with my tools again."

"Masonry."

"Fraternal or bricks?"

"Bricks." Masters smiled.

"Laid the whole cement block foundation by myself. I

assume this is leading somewhere.”

“Bricks were expertly loosened and removed to set up the attempt on Cliff’s life.”

“You mean attempt on Cliff and Johnny’s lives.”

“I believe it was just set up to get Cliff. There was no way for the killer to know Johnny would be in there also. He always stays in a room by himself next door.”

“Yes. Of course. I see. Then, like me, the boy’s neck is still up for grabs.”

“Like you?” Masters asked, merely wanting confirmation of what he suspected he would hear.

“Somebody seems to be trying to kill off the heirs. Taken to its logical conclusion the one of us who’s left standing in the end is the killer.”

“A grizzly thought. Jasper and Abigail were hardly heirs, were they?”

“In a way. As I see it, anybody receiving or holding onto any money from the estate - even this grisly old place, itself - could be considered the enemy to a greedy, self-centered, money-grabbing, amoral heir apparent.”

“I see. Not a pleasant commentary on one of the heirs.”

“Nope. Truth’s often not pleasant.”

“For the record, what is your wife’s name?”

“Cynthia. Goes by her maiden name - Cynthia Halbert. Lives just north of Rochester. My place is just south. You really don’t suspect her?”

“In this kind of goings on, everybody and their priest is a suspect. She does away with the other heirs; you inherit it all; she does away with you; she gets it all.”

“Now who’s up with the unpleasant commentary, Mr. Masters?”

“It’s my business to stretch scenarios to their limits. Cliff got private body guards for his son and him. I can give you a number if you want to do the same.”

“No. I’ll just take my chances. This old place was never friendly but it’s always been safe. I’ll pass, I guess.”

“Okay, then. Thanks for your time. I may need to talk again.”

“I’ll be around. Usually either here or in my room

upstairs. Nobody ever comes in here so I feel safe from all the crazies.”

It seemed Johnny may have been right in his initial description of the sitting rooms, after all.

Masters entered the living room as the clock struck eleven thirty. Fritz was straightening pillows and such.

“I need to speak with both Mary and Dora. Have a suggestion about where I may find them?”

“Let me scour the premises for you. I’ll bring them here. One at a time, I assume.”

“Yes. Thank you. No particular order.”

He sank into a comfortable chair facing the fireplace and closed his eyes to think. Too many suspects. Too little evidence. The motivation seemed clear, perhaps way too clear. He needed to find alternative motives - things well away from the inheritance. He also needed to speak with the attorney right away.

Fritz returned with Mary. Masters asked Fritz to contact the attorney and ask him to come as soon as possible. Mary took a seat in a matching chair.

“Thanks for coming. We really haven’t had an opportunity to talk. You have any ideas about all of this?”

The question was intentionally nebulous and open ended. Masters liked to see where such beginnings led.

“Other than it is absolutely awful, I’m afraid not. I’m the rookie out here, been here just ten years. Sounds like a long time when I listen to myself say it.”

“No most likely suspect?”

“No. The staff here is made up of fine people. I really don’t know most of the relatives very well.”

“Farley?”

“Well, yes. I suppose as well as anybody knows him. He’s like two people. It’s like one of them is putting us on. I’m just not sure if it’s the sane Farley putting us on with the crazy Farley or vice versa. He’s a smart man but very strange - or at least wants us all to think he’s very strange.”

“A killer, you think?”

“I have no idea, Mr. Masters. He’s the only one left here for me to take care of now and I’m not at all sure I want to do that. I don’t fear him but he gives be the heebie jeebies,

if you know what I mean.”

“I’ve met him. Yes, I understand about the ol’ HJ’s.” They smiled at each other and Masters continued his questioning. “Will you tell me a little about yourself?”

“Widowed eleven years. Two sons, both married too young but they seem happy. I married too early also, and things worked out fine for me. Been a nurse all my adult life. Worked hospitals, doctor’s offices, nursing homes. When Fran told me that this had come up I jumped at it. All things considered, it’s been a pretty good gig, I guess.”

Then as needed to explain she added: “One of my sons is a musician, you see.”

Masters nodded and smiled.

“Well, my gig seems to be getting nowhere fast. Any long-term tensions out here?”

“Fritz and Zeke would like you to think they don’t approve of each other - Fritz with his college degrees and Zeke an eighth-grade dropout - but I think they’re actually very fond of each other. Sarah talks a rough and ready game - the kind she learned in Harlem where she grew up - but she’s got a heart of butter - do anything for anybody. Dora’s more a loner. She and Fritz are very fond of each other. I don’t mean to imply romance but I couldn’t really rule it out. Everybody loves Johnny. He isn’t really here that often but he sure makes an impact on you when he is. So much energy and enthusiasm, so much savvy and brains. If I were a mere twenty-five years younger my head would be turned, I’ll tell you that.”

“And Cliff?”

“Cliff. I can’t say I know him very well. I’d like to.”

She smiled, a pink glow overtaking her face.

“When he’s here he distances himself from everybody except his son. He’s always napping or out photographing things day and night. Sometimes I get the feeling he’s really hurting inside. He lost his biological mother and father when he was just two, then his wife when Johnny was still small and his adoptive parents a few years ago. They all met tragic deaths. It’s no wonder he doesn’t seem interested in looking for a new woman in his life. He’s probably scared he’ll just lose her too.”

"Is that Cliff or is that Mary, speaking?"

"Interesting. Both, I imagine, now that you've pointed it out."

"My husband was a trucker. Died when his rig didn't make a turn while coming down a Colorado mountain in winter. I suppose part of me is reluctant to get involved again but if the right man would give me the time of day, who knows."

Masters nodded and changed the subject.

"What was the status of the senior Fairfields' health?"

"Jasper had begun failing. About this time last year, he got to the point where he was confined to the wheelchair. Severe arthritic pain. That seemed to mark the moment when he lost the will to live. The seizures began several months ago. He only ever had two, actually. The medicine seemed to keep them under control. He hated the idea of needing to take it. Except the few times Johnny and Cliff were here, I'd say he was generally depressed this entire past year. Those two always brightened him up. I can see why. Both are upbeat and attentive."

"Jasper's depression. How did it manifest itself?"

"Preferred to sit alone and look out the window in his den, down onto the back yard. I assume reliving better times though he never said. He was irritable, especially at Abigail, which was unlike him. I walked in on the two of them about a month ago, I guess it was and he was reading her the riot act about something. I did overhear him say he had a mind to cut her out his will entirely and let her rot a bag lady on the streets of Rochester. He never would have done that so it's hard to see why he'd say it. Irritable, like I said."

"And Abigail?"

"Out here everyone called her Mrs. Her liver should have disintegrated and floated away years ago. Never heard her complain of an ache or pain but then I never saw her completely sober either. She barely weighed a hundred pounds. Ate like a bird. Seemed to me she had been depressed all her life, at least since landing here at the Heights. Mr. admitted to me once she was pregnant when they got married - why they got married. Things just seemed to go downhill for her from there. No major health problems

though. Good heart and lung function. Surprisingly alert considering the way she'd pickled her brain for the past sixty years. She was the only person I've ever known who did absolutely nothing all day long, day after day after day."

"When the children were small she didn't care for them?"

"As I understand it there were a series of nannies who had complete responsibility for them."

"Chester?" Masters asked.

"An enigma. Publicly, he comes across like a good ol' boy who'd have to remove his shoes if a problem moved beyond ten digits. Privately he's very astute. He's put together one of the largest auto agencies in the state. He, too, had wife problems. Studied architecture but never put it to use professionally. I understand he designed a fantastic home for himself. He tells me he has another one on the drawing board. Says he stopped drinking recently, though he still has his cigar every evening. Very private on the personal side. I don't feel like I really know him very well.

"He and Bernice have an openly antagonistic relationship. Actually, they appear to out and out hate each other. Something she said once has bothered me. We were talking about her uncles. What was it? Something like, 'If he'd done to you what he did to me, you'd hate him, too.' Sarah thinks it refers to the way he got everybody to begin calling her DeeBee. I have to wonder if it was something else."

"Molestation?"

"I've wondered that. It was never said."

"What do you recall about Winston and his wife - Cliff's parents?"

"In a line-up, you'd have never picked them out as Fairfields. Kind, generous, thoughtful, helpful, loving. Can't understand how Bernice emerged from that family to be the way she is."

"Interesting. Johnny made the very same comment," Masters noted.

"Winston really didn't follow a profession. He mostly just managed his money and turned his allowance into a substantial sum, the way Fritz tells it at least. He was Jasper's favorite son and Mr. made no bones about it. I think Winston

was close to Cliff like Cliff is with Johnny. Bernice may have felt left out. She makes everything into a battle between males and females. Her parents chose to adopt a boy therefore they valued males more than females - things like that."

"Winston's wife?"

"Hardly knew her. A strong, attractive, easy to get along with type. Kept busy with charity work - regional symphony association, on the library board - that sort of thing. You could always feel the love when she, Winston and Cliff were together. Add Bernice and things suddenly became strained, the relationships disintegrated."

"You are a fountain of information."

"My first job was with a nearly retired general practitioner. He always said that to properly treat a patient you had to know the patient. I've always tried to follow that advice, plus I'm basically an unabashed busybody."

"If the murderer were one of the staff, who would be your best guess?"

"Me, I suppose."

"Not what I expected," Masters said, clearly surprised. Can you explain?"

"There is no retirement plan here, though word is the nanny's each received a sizeable sum when they left. I've been talking about leaving. I'd like to open a gift shop - mid-life crisis, perhaps. It will take more to get going than I can raise. If I would have just resigned and taken the pittance they offered me, I might have had enough - no way to know. If, they died, however, I'd be remembered in their will and chances are that would be a whole lot more than severance pay. Also, I'm the one out here that knows the most about things such as medications, poisons, carbon monoxide. I'd make a pretty fair suspect."

"Except for one thing."

"What's that?" She asked, suddenly puzzled.

"You're in love with Cliff."

"Oh, that. You noticed!" The pink blush returned. "Well, add some scorned lover scenario, then, and I'll still be number one."

"If not you, who?"

"Probably none of the staff. Beyond that I don't no. They say that in mystery novels it's often the least likely character - I guess that would make it either Johnny or the paperboy - Sarah's friend."

"What do you know about him?"

"Not much. Sarah's pretty private about that relationship. I've seen him and I can tell he's flat out gorgeous - redefines the old saying about tall, dark, and handsome. Delivers Farley's papers up here. Never really spoke with him much. Heard rumblings down in town there's some black mark in his past. No idea beyond that."

Masters nodded. "Thanks for your time. If anything else comes to mind, please let me know."

Mary rose and nodded. She left the living room. Fritz, who had been checking in from time to time left and was soon back with Dora. She appeared nervous.

"Please have a seat. I need all the help I can get on this one and in my experience the very best help is always the staff."

His explanation had been intended to set her at ease. It seemed to do that.

"I'll certainly do what I can but I don't know what that could be."

"Begin with yourself. I like to know the people I work with."

"I'm an old maid, sixty, Catholic, play bingo Friday nights at the church, love my work and I'm grieving terribly over the loss of Mr. and Mrs. - they weren't Christians, you know."

"You felt close to them, then."

"Yes. I mean they seldom spoke to me, but it was for them that I kept everything neat and clean. I have a philosophy about being a maid."

"I'd like to hear it." He smiled at her and folded his hands attentively. She continued.

"Well, you see, it's not what your employer sees that counts. It's what he doesn't see that counts. If he enters a clean neat room it is just what he expects so everything is fine - nothing out of the ordinary to complain about. But, if he sees a mess or dust or an unmade bed, then he has reason to be

upset. So it's more making sure he doesn't have anything to see.."

"I had never thought of it in that way. It makes full sense, however. Apparently that philosophy has stood you in good stead around here. You've been at the Heights how long?"

"Forty-two years. Can you believe that? I wonder how many times I've dusted that bowl there beside you or cleaned the silk lampshades in this room. Forty-two years is a long time."

"Yes, it is and in your case, clearly a very successful forty-two years."

Dora blushed and looked into her lap. She was proud of what she did and obviously gained a sense of great satisfaction from it.

"You're aware of what's happened out here during the past day and a half. Do you have any ideas about any of it?"

"Well, I have what you might call a fantasy about it."

She looked for permission to proceed. Masters nodded.

"Most folks didn't think Mr. and Mrs. had a good relationship, but I always chose to think that was just the public image they showed. I think they loved each other as much as any couple ever loved. When Mr. became so ill and got so depressed over living that way, I think that as a final act of love, Mrs. held the pillow over his face to relieve him of his discomfort and the humiliation he felt being tied to the wheelchair. Then, like in Romeo and Juliet, she went back to her room and poisoned herself. That's the way I think it all come about."

"A fascinating story and, I have to admit, one I have also considered. It doesn't account for the attempt on Cliff's life, however."

"Maybe somebody else - the others are a greedy lot. It could be any one of them. They don't have a clue one about the real sources of true happiness."

"Do you have a favorite person out of all these folks? One you like the best?"

"Johnny, of course. He's everybody's favorite. He always kisses me hello when he arrives and goodbye when he

leaves. He's kept his daddy waiting more than once while he hunted me down at the end of his stay."

She put her fingers to her cheek. It was clearly an act that held a degree of importance to her that went well beyond anything the boy could have imagined.

"May I ask if there is romance in your life?"

Again, she diverted her eyes to her lap.

"Yes. Yes, there is but it's not something I speak of."

"I certainly won't pry then. I'm glad you have someone special. What can you tell me about Sarah?"

"I wouldn't say nothing to get her into trouble and you should know that right up front."

With that she was looking him squarely in the eyes.

"I understand loyalty between friends," he said in return.

"She's fiery on the outside and a sweetheart on the inside. I imagine it's all connected with her red hair. She's a wonderful cook and a good friend. She's been divorced for a long, long time. She's a Baptist, but she's still a good person. We don't talk religion. We both enjoy romance novels. Can you believe that - two old ladies giggling over Bonnie Brewster romance novels?"

She giggled and shook her head, smiling.

"I'm glad you share an interest," Masters said. "What about Zeke?"

"Kind and gentle. Can fix anything. Works hard. You can call on him any hour of the day or night and he never complains. He likes what he does the way I like what I do. He has a girlfriend in town and I have the idea they live together in sin on the weekends. I don't like that but they were married once so maybe they'll be forgiven."

She crossed herself.

"He's not a potential suspect in the killings, then?"

"Zeke? Goodness no. He's a pussycat. Makes more money here than he ever could anyplace else. Handymaning is his only skill. Sometimes I go along with Sarah to the grocery and Zeke always drives us. He carries the bags. A real gentleman."

"Fritz?"

"A well-educated gentleman. Efficient. Not as stand-

offish as he first appears. He enjoys what he does, too. Likes a job where he knows exactly what's expected so he doesn't have to make lots of on the spot decisions. Not that he couldn't, mind you, but he prefers not to. Has a teaching degree but only used it one semester before he realized that life wasn't for him. Came here the year before I did. He turns seventy this month but you'd never know it to look at him would you?"

"Probably not. No." Masters said agreeing with the actual fact.

"He really loved both Mr. and Mrs. He'd have done anything for them. Loyal. He always says a Butler's first duty is to be loyal to his employer. We're all wondering what's going to happen to us now. Fritz draws social security and with free room and board does very well. I'm not sure what the rest of us will do if we have to leave here."

"I have the idea you don't need to worry about that."

"Really. You probably know something the rest of us don't. Thank you for saying that. It has been a real worry, you know."

Masters nodded. He removed the green gemstone from his pocket and held it out in his palm.

"Do you recognize this?"

"Yes. I believe so. It looks like the stone from one of Mrs.' bracelets. It's one she always hated - an ugly, heavy, metal piece that was way too big for her tiny wrist. Something Mr. got for her years ago. He had terrible taste in such things. It looks like it's come out of its setting."

"Yes. I found it, you could say. I'll see that it is properly returned when I'm finished with it. Wanted you to know I had it in case you ran across the damaged bracelet."

Dora smiled suggesting a feeling of importance that he had entrusted her with knowledge of his find.

"Is there one of this clan you're the most uncomfortable around?" he asked.

"Well, Farley's crazy but harmless. Certainly not Cliff or Johnny. Chester used to be . . . how can a lady say this . . . grabby, if you get my meaning. I learned to stay my distance from him so it ain't no big deal anymore. Bernice just thinks she's better than the rest of us. Not really uncomfortable. She

does make fun of me for wearing my white gloves to church. Says Ladies should show off their hands with pride. Hers ain't worked as long and hard as mine."

"Is there anything else you think might help me in the investigation?"

"Not off hand. If I think of something I'll let you know. Fritz is better at seeing things like that than I am."

She stood and left. Masters sighed and gently rapped his fist against the arm of the chair. It indicated frustration. The clock struck noon. He was hungry.

Johnny and his body guard entered. The boy was clearly searching for Masters.

"Mr. Masters, Sir, Ray - it took a while but I got there."

The lad grinned.

"I noticed," the old detective said returning the smile.

"This is my guy - Donny. Donny, meet Raymond Masters, the detective working this case."

"Don't stand. Glad to meet you, Sir," Donny said offering his hand.

"Johnny leading you a merry chase, is he?"

"There does seem to be a never-ending reserve of energy in there."

Johnny smiled up into the tall deputy's face.

"Donny played semi-pro basketball a few years back. We're gonna get up a game out back after lunch. You're invited. Let's eat so we can get a jump on things. He leaves at two and somebody named Benny takes over 'til ten this evening. Dad got it all worked out for us."

"A game, outside, in fifteen-degree weather?" Masters turned to Donny. "I'd certainly ask for combat pay, young man, especially if it's shirts and skins."

It provided a chuckle all around.

"You seem to have relaxed," Masters said, addressing Johnny. "I'm glad."

"Can you imagine anybody getting by Donny? I don't think so. Yeah. I'm feeling a lot better. You got this thing solved yet?"

Donny rolled his eyes at Masters and received the old detective's raised eyebrows in response.

"Wish I could say yes but I can't. I'm still waiting on the

reports from the crime lab and the coroner.

"I can call in on my two-way and determine the progress, if you want," Donny offered.

"Yes. That would ease my old head about it all. Thank you."

The call was made. The reports were already on their way being hand delivered by the Sheriff himself. With that news, and the prospect of sustenance a mere twenty or so paces to the west, Masters extricated himself from his comfortable chair and the three headed for the dining room.

CHAPTER FOUR
Day two: The Afternoon
A 'Shot' to remember

As it turned out Donny had a fine sense of humor and regaled Johnny and the others at lunch with story after story about his semi-pro basketball career. Cliff's bodyguard, Ron, provided a quiet balance with a wry take on life. Lunch had been a good time, but at that moment, the game was clearly the all-important event of the century in Johnny's eyes.

After the plates were cleared and the coffee finished, it was time to bundle up and venture out to the court behind the green house. Masters had to wonder how such a fragile, glass edifice had survived the horseplay of three boys, a grandson and energetic young Johnny. Yet, it had.

Street clothes and jackets were the uniform of the day. In the end, it became a two on two affair - Johnny and Cliff against Donny and Ron. After having made a mind boggling one handed over the head shot from thirty feet out that swished the net, Masters retired to the sideline. It had been one of his several claims to fame in high school. In his mind the shot had been a fantastic piece of luck, but in his manner, it was a piece of cake, a walk in the park, strictly business as usual. The others were impressed but no one was more astonished than Masters.

After a grueling thirty minutes the bodyguards squeaked out a 122 to 16 victory. Donny had failed to mention that Ron had been his teammate when he played for the Eagles. The score was fully unimportant to Johnny. For him it was the process. He loved playing. He loved most

everything he did. Masters felt sure the boy was going to handle well, whatever the future had in store for him.

At 12:45 Fritz hurried out the back door and took Masters aside.

“Bernice’s orange juice seems to have been poisoned - at least that’s what she is claiming. You better come at once.”

“She is alright, then.”

“As alright as Bernice ever is. I shouldn’t have said that. It was just too good an opening to pass up.”

“You rascal,” Masters said. “There is a real person behind that austere manner after all.”

Masters received the briefest of smiles and a gentle dip of the head. Masters excused himself and the two headed inside. As they entered the dining room where Mary was attending to Bernice who sat with her head in her arms on the table. The doorbell rang and Fritz moved off to answer it.

“What’s this I hear?” Masters asked as he approached the table. “Something about poison?”

“Yes. In the juice, apparently,” Mary explained. “Bernice took a sip and became violently ill. She apparently had difficulty breathing - according to her and those who witnessed it - Chester and Sarah.”

Masters leaned down and smelled the container.

“An odd smell but I don’t place it, do you, Mary?”

“This will sound wacko, but it smells a lot like my Azalea fertilizer.”

Masters sniffed again. He nodded.

“Could be. The warning labels on that stuff are not to be taken lightly. Does she need her stomach pumped or any kind of further medical attention?”

“She swallowed very little and actually seems to be fine physically. The inside of her mouth and her tongue appear to be slightly, I’m not sure how to describe it, burned. It is more the fright that she’s reacting to now.”

“I’ll say it’s the fright,” Bernice said as she sat up and leaned back in her chair. She ran her spread fingers through her hair and sighed. “I thought you were here to protect us,” she said turning her head toward Masters who ignored the fully sarcastic remark.

“You didn’t notice anything until you swallowed the

juice?" he asked.

"That's right. Orange juice has a strong aroma. I always drink it first, before the rest of my lunch. I enjoy the bouquet. It sets the tone for the salad."

Mary raised her eyebrows as if to say, 'La de dah; isn't she just too good for the rest of us.'

Fritz returned and approached Masters.

"Mr. Jeff Davis, the Sheriff, is in the living room. I stashed him there until you provided some direction."

Masters smiled at the man's whimsical choice of words and noted that such phrases were only ever delivered in private.

"Actually, show him in here if you will. Perhaps we can use his expertise."

A moment later Fritz was back escorting a deeply tanned, rugged looking, middle aged man who appeared oddly out of place in his white shirt, maroon tie and blue blazer.

"Sheriff Davis. I'm Ray Masters, a detective working the cases here."

"Yes, I know. Jeff Davis." He offered his hand. "I have some reports for you and thought I'd bring them by myself so I could meet you."

"I appreciate your assistance. We have another problem at the moment, however. This is Bernice Fairfield. It seems there has just been an attempt on her life - her orange juice was poisoned. Perhaps if you would smell the glass you'd recognize the odor."

The Sheriff leaned down and sniffed.

"Sorry, smells a lot like orange juice to me. The lab guys will track it down though. Was the original container also poisoned?"

"I haven't got that far yet. It all just came up. We'll need some snug-fitting kitchen wrap to contain the liquid in the glass. Let's take it into the kitchen."

Masters turned to Mary as he reached for his handkerchief.

"You seem to have things under control here, right?"

Mary nodded. Masters and the Sheriff went into the kitchen with the glass.

"Sarah. You heard about Bernice and her orange juice,

of course.”

“Yes. I can’t understand it. We all had juice from that container this morning with the flapjacks.”

“May we see it? Better yet just direct us to it. We’ll need to have it finger printed. We need some way of wrapping this glass so the juice will remain inside and not spill.”

Sarah opened the refrigerator and pointed out the bottle. She then offered a box of cling wrap.

“And a small box, perhaps, to put these things in for Sheriff Davis.”

Everything was soon packed into the box and transferred into the Sheriff’s care. Masters received the envelope containing the reports and walked him back to the front door. They stood talking.

“As far as my office is concerned you’re the lead investigator on these cases, Masters. I’ll offer you any help you want. I have a couple detectives with homicide experience but I’ve seen too many cases go to pot because there were too many cooks in the kitchen.”

“Yes, and I appreciate that. I won’t hesitate to call on you. That juice is an ASAP, of course.”

“Of course, I understand. I suppose we’ll need to get prints of all the possibles out here.”

“Sooner the better,” Masters agreed. “There are likely already prints on file for the staff.”

Sarah nodded supporting Masters’ suggestion.

“I’ll call in for a print guy now and he can be here in fifteen minutes. Will we need a warrant or will everybody cooperate voluntarily?”

“I assume they will cooperate. If any of them are going to put up a fuss it’ll be Bernice and Farley but I imagine I can handle that. I’m guessing that Bernice will demand a bodyguard of her own, now. Any female deputies you can spare?”

“Gert. One of the best deputies I’ve ever had, she’s on duty now. I suppose my office should be supplying them as a matter of course. Just let me know and I’ll spring her for you.”

“Thank you, Sheriff. By the way, I’m guessing you’re from Virginia.”

The man smiled and asked, "Name or accent?"

"Both, actually."

"Virginia, it was 'til I moved up here as a teenager."

He turned and made his way across the porch and down the steps.

Masters started back down the hall toward the living room door. It was Johnny who came running up to him.

"Ray! Ray! It's Farley. Zeke just found him dead in the elevator! It's in the basement. Donny said not to move it."

"Donny was correct. Show me to the stairs."

The basement wasn't a pleasant place, having the unfinished, stone foundation for walls and the original, badly cracked and pitted century old, concrete floor to walk on. It was well heated and dry. Masters felt for a pulse. There was none. He felt the skin and looked at the two bodyguards. Did you estimate a time of death from the skin temperature?"

"About four to five hours ago, I'd say," Ron offered.

"I agree," Masters said. "Eight to eight thirty this morning."

"Well, I ain't no expert but I can tell you it wasn't no eight o'clock this morning," Zeke said.

"How's that?" Masters asked.

"I was in his suite with him at nine thirty unplugging the drain in his bathroom sink."

Masters felt the skin again that time on the chest and ankles. He frowned, looking up at the two bodyguards. They all three shook their heads.

"And he was for sure alive and you are certain of the time?"

"Oh, yes. That damn clock in the living room, just outside his door, struck both nine and nine-thirty before I finished. He'd poured some excess plaster of Paris down the drain. Hard as a rock in the trap. Can't get replacement parts for these old fixtures so I had no choice but to drill it out. Took forever and he complained the whole time. Everything I did was wrong. Never a suggestion, mind you, but everything I did was wrong. I shouldn't be speaking ill of the dead, I suppose, but the man always drove me nuts."

"It's giving me the willies," Johnny said, moving close to his bodyguard. "Died at eight and still complaining at nine-

thirty. Twilight Zone time, guys. I'll be leaving now, if you can spare Donny, that is."

"Sure. Go. Cliff, you and Ron, also. Will one of you please call in for the coroner and lab guys again? You'll both need to fill out a time of death form . . . Strange . . . Zeke, you have something we can cover him with?"

At that moment, Fritz arrived, blanket in hand.

"I overhead up in the hall. I determined a covering would probably be in order."

"Yes. Thank you, Fritz." Masters said. He and Zeke spread it over the body. "I'll remain here until the coroner arrives," Masters said.

Fritz nodded and returned to the first floor. Masters addressed Zeke again.

"Why was Farley using Plaster of Paris?"

"Why did Farley do anythin'? I haven't the foggiest."

"Tell me about the basement."

"Not much to tell. Only under the northwest quarter of the building. Has the inside stairs and a outside set goin' up to ground level from the shop area at the back. The elevator is almost never used. I'm usually filthy and Dora doesn't take kindly to me messing it up so I use the stairs. The boiler room is over there and the old coal bin room is walled off at the far end there. Like I told you we used coal for the old stoker here for years before converting to gas."

"Why would Farley have come down here? Was it his habit to come here?"

"In all my years here, I've never seen him in the basement. He often roams the place in the wee hours of the mornin' so I can't say for sure that he's never down here."

"Anybody besides you down here much?"

"Just Johnny. He comes down to work in the shop and just to talk sometimes. He says he is innately incompatible with most of the folks here."

Masters smiled.

"Seems like a good interpretation to me. By the way, what did you find out about the timer or thermostat or whatever the new gadget is?"

"Darndest thing. It runs off an electrical set-back thermostat up in the entry hall next to the door into the living

room. It turns the setting back to sixty-five degrees at ten thirty in the evening and then back up to seventy-four at five forty-five in the morning. Mr. liked it warm. When I looked at it after breakfast, after all the stuff with Cliff and Johnny, I found one of the wires had been unscrewed from the inside. The little screw was laying on the bottom of the plastic case. But, and this is really strange, the wire had sprung back up into place and was making contact anyway - even without the screw - so it continued to operate just fine. But the double-darndest thing of all was that by the time I got back up there from the shop with the right size little Phillips screwdriver, somebody had already fixed it - put the screw through the wire loop and screwed it into the contact hole. Maybe Johnny's right."

"I don't understand."

"Twilight Zone." He made the appropriate, sing-songy, do, do, do, do sounds.

"I see. I'm quite sure none of this is other worldly. Follow me on this, now. If that wire had really been separated from the contact, the set-back device would not have worked so the fire in the boiler would have remained on high all night, right?"

"Right."

"And with that fire on high it would have produced lots more carbon monoxide needing to vent up the chimney?"

"Right again. Where you goin' with this?"

"If you wanted to make sure that as much of the deadly fumes as possible got into Cliff's room, you'd run the boiler on high. That means you wouldn't want the set-back device to work all night while he was asleep. But you'd also not want whoever was investigating Cliff's death to discover the tampering, so at the first opportunity you'd return and rewire the thermostat."

"Guess that's why you make the big bucks, Masters. I'd say all that makes perfect sense. And because it went ahead and set itself back, the boiler didn't make enough fumes to kill them. Talk about luck!"

"That's my best hypothesis at this time. Let's just keep that between us, though, okay? Don't want to tip our hand to the bad guy."

“Oh, you can count on me. Nobody’ll hear it from my lips.”

Fran, the coroner arrived and initially agreed with Masters and the bodyguards on the time of death.

“Well, it can’t have been at eight o’clock,” Masters said.

“It had to have been after nine-thirty, probably closer to ten this morning. When you take your look-see inside this one, you have to somehow account for that discrepancy,” Fran said frowning.

She looked here and there - eyes, lips, fingers and nails.

“Look here. The back of his hands are dirty.”

Masters took a look. He then picked up the head and examined the hair on the back above the neck. He did the same for the heels of the shoes. He nodded. Ingenious, really. I understand now. Go ahead and do your thing, Fran. I won’t say anything to prejudice your examination. How much would you estimate he weighs?”

“He was a slight man. Maybe 125 or so. I’ll get an exact weight, of course.”

“Zeke?”

“I’d agree. Always just a little man. About five seven and thin. Maybe even a little less than that.”

The body was removed and Fran left. Masters had one more question for Zeke.

“Johnny pointed out there was no fireplace wood in either his room or Cliff’s when they arrived. He implied that was unusual.”

“It was unusual. In fact, I put extra in both before I left for my week in town. The two of them can burn more wood than any six of the rest of us. I can’t explain them not havin’ any - well, I can. Somebody removed it. No idea who, though.”

“When was the last time Cliff’s room was used?”

“Last time he was out here - Thanksgiving weekend.”

“Okay, then. Thank you.”

The forensics team arrived and Masters gave them instructions. He then returned to the living room by way of the stairs. He wanted to examine the reports on Jasper and Abigail.

He met a female deputy just entering the hall from the dining room.

"I've been here fifteen seconds and I'm already lost," she said smiling and extending her hand.

"You have to be Deputy . . . Gert is all I know, I guess."

"Gert is all you need to know, Mr. Masters."

"If it's Gert for you, it's Ray for me. Fair enough?"

"No less than I expected - the Flint books."

"I see. They do get around. You're looking for Bernice. Did the Sheriff fill you in?"

"Yes. Attempted poison. Rude. Demanding. Ungrateful. That Bernice?"

"Bingo, you might say. Jeff says if anybody can handle her you can. He has great respect for you."

"That's nice to hear. He's not much of one for giving out compliments."

Masters looked behind her into the dining room and then across the hall into the living room where he found what he was after.

"Fritz," he called, beckoning him. "This is Gert. She's here to look out for Bernice's safety."

Fritz bowed ever so slightly.

"You have my deepest sympathy, in advance, Ma'am."

His eyes twinkled. Masters shook his head. Gert liked everything she had seen. Fritz escorted her to meet Bernice. Masters continued on into the living room and sat in his favorite chair by the fireplace. He took the envelope from his coat pocket and began reading the reports. There was nothing new and nothing unexpected.

Jasper had indeed been suffocated, almost certainly with the pillow containing his saliva and the remnants of his last shots of whiskey. Abigail had died of cyanide poisoning. Traces were found in the glass and in the stain on the sheet. The carafe of brandy contained enough 'to kill a horse' or so read the report. The only prints on the carafe belonged to Abigail and Fritz. The interesting point was that while there were dozens of prints from Fritz, there was only one set from Abigail. Apparently, she really did only drink from her bedroom flask at bedtime.

Masters nodded, knowingly and put down the report.

The attorney, William Milburn, arrived and located Masters by the fire. He took a seat and after a few phrases of small talk Masters got down to business.”

“Did Jasper confide personal matters to you?”

“I suppose some. We had known each other from a long time. Like what?”

“Did he ever suspect Abigail of having an affair with anybody here on the staff?”

“It’s interesting that you are already onto that. Yes. It was probably irrational but he suspected Abigail and Fritz. My word has it that it is really Fritz and Dora. Our own little Peyton Place up here.”

“That reference probably dates you, William.”

“And you, since you understood it, Ray.”

It was worth a mutual chuckle.

“You have no way of knowing, but Farley was found dead early this afternoon. I’m betting the cause of death will be a broken neck - the way marine recruits are taught to do it. We’ll know shortly.”

“William shook his head. He was my only suspect in all of this. Shows you how well I really know these folks.”

He showed no emotion over the news. Perhaps that was the attorney in him. Perhaps it was something else.

“Assuming everyone who is going to be murdered has been murdered, what does all of this do to the inheritance?” Masters asked.

“It’s a simple Will. The survivors divvy up the estate.”

“So as each one dies, there is more for those who remain.”

“Right. No one knew that aspect of it, of course. It was a part of a very private Will, but I assume some may have suspected as much.”

“What about the staff up here? I assume they were remembered.”

“Again, a very simple formula and one that doesn’t change with any of their deaths. Each receives a cool million dollars in cash and the right to remain here for as long as Johnny keeps the Heights in the family. Are you aware of Johnny’s position in all of it?”

“Yes. Jasper told me. He also told Johnny, and I

assume that was a part of the plan to which you were privy.”

William nodded.

“Well, let’s do a quick head count, here,” Masters said. “Among the family, there remain only Chester, Bernice and Cliff according to my score card. That now represents a three-way split. With attempts on both Cliff and Bernice it would appear that Chester has worked his way to the top of the suspect list - if we are considering the killer is a family member.”

“I don’t know Chester very well. I see him on his car commercials and get a kick out of them. He can’t be the hick he makes himself out to be and run such a successful business. Chester asked me to contact his attorney to work out the splitting of his inheritance with his estranged wife.”

“And?”

“She gets half - right down the center according to Chester.”

“Ever meet her?” Masters asked.

“No. Like I said, I don’t know Chester that well. I do have some cold, hard facts about her in my possession. She was a Las Vegas show girl. Busted numerous times for prostitution and contributing to the delinquency of minors. None of those charges ever stuck back in the days when she was out there. More recently she taught dancing in Buffalo. Apparently, Chester met her through a mutual friend over there. She’s thirteen years younger than he.”

“I suppose the reading of the Will can still go on as planned Sunday morning,” Masters said.

“No reason not to. Since none of the deceased had children, things are quite straightforward. I’ll just have to divide by three instead of six.”

“Six?”

“Jasper retained an equal portion for each himself and Abigail. Three down, leaves three in the running.”

“I assume you’re talking a vast amount of money.”

“You do the math, Ray. Roughly a billion cut three ways. Every time somebody drops, hundreds of millions get added to the kitty.”

“You’d think a sixth of a billion should have been as good as a third,” Masters said shaking his head.

“Greed knows neither logic nor compassion. My mentor in these matters said that to me when I was still a student. Sadly, it seems to keep being true over and over and over again. I’ve added my own axiom. Greed will arise in direct proportion to the size of the estate.”

Masters nodded.

“Do you have any questions of me?” he said again addressing William.

“I’d like to ask when you think all of the killing and such will end, but I know you have no way of answering that.”

“Chester had an interesting point,” Masters said by way of response. “After it’s all run its course the only one left to show up at the Will reading should be the killer.”

“Not the way you want to solve it, I’m sure.”

“For sure. I assume you have access to a good private detective that you use here locally.”

“Yes. Buck Banks. What do you need?”

“Background on Zeke’s girlfriend - actually his ex-wife I guess. She lives in town. Then there is someone Sarah sees - he delivers the papers in the rural area around here. Fritz can get you names and addresses. Then, see what he can dig up on the deaths of Cliff’s wife and his parents. Apparently, they all met with tragic deaths. I feel better going into cases with all the old laundry clean and neatly folded in the linen closet.”

“As I recall that all happened over near Cliff’s home just northwest of Geneseo. His wife was part of a pediatric practice in Rochester, just to the north; she drove back and forth. I have some contacts in law enforcement over there - a long time detective on the Rochester force and the States Attorney for Livingston County. Anything special?”

“Accident reports. Coroner’s reports. Investigating officers’ notes. Unanswered questions. The usual, I guess.”

“Okay. Let me get several folks on it. I realize that everything is ASAP at this point. I’ll be on my way then. It’s been good meeting you even though the circumstances are gruesome.”

Masters walked William to the front door and then headed for the kitchen.

“Sarah. I’d like to reconstruct the trip Bernice’s juice

took on its way to her.”

“What? Oh. Like who handled it?”

“Right.”

“It is sort of interesting now that you mention it. I had Chester’s soufflé in the oven and couldn’t leave it, so I poured the juice and sat it in the freezer - she requires two minutes in the freezer so the glass is frosty. When Dora came in to fix her own lunch, she always fixes her own lunch, I asked her if she’d mind taking it in to Bernice. Of course, she said yes and asked if it was okay to spill it down her bra. That Dora can be quite the card. There’s a lot of in-jokes with the help in a place like this, Ray.”

Ray nodded. “I’m sure there must be.”

“Dora got it out of the freezer just as Fritz came in from the dining room. Bernice thought the butter was too soft so he brought it back and Dora put the juice down on the counter and took out a fresh quarter of butter for me - seeing I was fretting over the soufflé. With the butter exchanged she handed it to Fritz and he offered to take the juice in as well. So I guess that juice had quite a trip. Me to Dora to Fritz to Bernice. I suppose you’re looking for the time when the poison got dumped in it.”

“That’s right. Thanks. You’ve been a big help. Oh, by the way.”

“Yes,” Sarah answered, expectantly.

“How did the soufflé turn out?”

“Chester said the best he’d ever had. He has a chrome tongue, though.”

“I’m not familiar with the phrase, I guess.”

“Well, some folks speak with a silver tongue - pretty words and basically genuine - sincere. Chester uses pretty words, too, but they’re just for show - not really even intended to be sincere - chrome - a cheap substitution for the real thing, you see.”

Masters shook his head in wonderment.

“Who was in the dining room at the time the poison was discovered? Just Bernice and Chester?”

“Yes. Just the two of them. At opposite ends of the table. Would have needed binoculars to see the colors of each other’s eyes.”

She giggled and shook her head, clearly pleased with her humorous little bit. Masters walked toward the dining room door.

“By the way,” Sarah asked, “How did the big basketball game turn out?”

“You’ll have to get the details from Johnny - which, I’m sure you’ll get whether you want them or not. I can report, however, that I shot one hundred percent from outside the three-point line.”

Sarah raised her eyebrows.

He feigned an arrogant stance, turned, and left the room, nose in the air.

He was soon in the ‘never used sitting room’ where Chester was sitting by a window smelling a cigar.

“You’ll wear it out before evening,” Masters joked.

Chester nodded.

“Something special prompting this invasion of my hide-a-way?” he said, smiling, and motioning for Masters to take a seat.

“What do you remember about lunch after the arrival of Bernice’s juice?”

“Well, let’s see. It was Fritz who brought it in from the kitchen. She had complained about the butter - something, I don’t remember. Fritz arranged both the butter and juice for her and then left. Bernice asked me if I’d close the drapes. The sun was in her eyes. I said something unkind like why don’t you just sit where you usually sit and you wouldn’t need to have the drapes closed. She made her favorite, lewd, hand gesture in my direction. I figured if I’d been able to rile her that much it was worth doing the drapes so I got up and closed them.

“Maybe two or three minutes later Fritz returned with her salad and bread and my soufflé. Sarah makes world class soufflés. It was only a few seconds after that when she started gasping and rolling her eyes. Fritz had left. I got up and went right to her, clearly a knee jerk reaction on my part. She pointed at the juice and just sat there taking forced, deep, gasping breaths. Her eyes were red and watering and she looked terrified. I offered her water and she drank a few sips and then gulped down the entire glass. It must have helped.

I called Mary on the house phone from there in the dining room. She was there within two minutes, I'd say. She looked at Bernice's eyes and inside her mouth. She had her drink another glass of water, swishing each mouthful around in her mouth. Then she had her put her head down in her arms on the table.

"At that point I went looking for you but found Fritz in the kitchen and he said he'd look outback if I'd look inside. I guess he found you and within a couple of minutes you were here. That's about all I can remember."

"An excellent memory for details, Chester."

"Goes with being a good salesman. Have to notice all the body language of your customers. I always let the body language lead my pitch."

"I am going to advise you to take the Sheriff up on his offer of a bodyguard, Chester. Things have quickly moved from serious to dangerously grave around here."

"No thanks. I was the youngest black belt my Karate Master had ever taught. I can still hold my own, I think."

"Against poisoned juice and brandy?"

"Probably not. Good point, but a body guard would offer no help in those situations either, would he?"

"I suppose not. Karate?"

"I was deep into martial arts as a teenager. Studied all of them, my passion back then, I guess you could say. It's the one thing Bernice, Johnny, and I all have in common. It's sometimes called the gentle killer mentality - folks who present a tender exterior but who are really seething inside. Come to think of it that probably only applies to Johnny and me. Bernice does all her seething right out in the open."

"I hadn't pegged Johnny as having a hidden violent potential."

"The week he stayed with me, my wife - Cynthia - dropped by to dig up some shrub starts for her place. Johnny offered to help her. A half hour later I heard her screaming. When I arrived at the scene in the greenhouse, Johnny had his foot on her throat and fire in his eyes. I brought him back to the house and she left.

"His story is she slipped her hand into his pants and wouldn't remove it when he asked her to so he snapped and

soon had her in position to crush her throat.

“His reaction really bothered him, I know that. It was also a part of himself he’d never seen before. I called Cliff and he came up and got the boy. My wife admitted to me later that she had been teasing around with him - hadn’t intended to make him angry. In her experience when a teenage boy said stop he really meant full speed ahead.

“Johnny’s always held it against me. He raged at me about it at the time and then wrote me a ten-page letter about it after he got home. But that was not a story you wanted to hear. I do go on sometimes.”

“Johnny’s how far along in his Karate training?”

“I’m not sure but I think he and Cliff decided he should stop classes for a while after that. I don’t really know if he ever started again. Not a black belt if that’s where you headed but maybe two thirds or three quarters of the way there.”

“Well, thanks again. I’ll leave you and your cigar to complete your tryst.”

“Too big a word for this ol’ boy, Ray.”

“I’m sorry. I keep forgetting that, Mr. Summa Cum Laude from Northwestern University, is just too slow in the head.”

“Touché, Ray!”

Masters went back into the dining room to look around. He examined the draped windows and turned over the chairs so he could look underneath the seats. He crawled around under the table, inspecting its underside. He picked up a small, bronze, wastebasket and dumped its contents onto the table. Among the few things he found was a small envelope - the kind that might be included with a gift to announce the giver. It had been torn open indicating that it had been sealed at some point.

An odd piece to find in a household where gift giving is unheard of, he thought. He looked inside and found remnants of course, green powder. The envelope was soon sealed inside a small evidence bag and resting in the safety of his jacket pocket. He replaced the remaining trash in the can and reset it in its spot beside the hall door.

In the hall, Johnny arrived with his new ‘guy’ - Benny.

“Can we talk a while,” Masters asked after the

introductions.

“Sure.”

He turned to Benny.

“Why don’t you go to the kitchen and tell Sarah I said to feed your sweet tooth. This time of day the pastries are ready to come out of her oven.”

Masters silently wished it had been he who had been dispatched to the kitchen.

“In the living room, Okay?” Masters suggested.

“Sure. What’s up?”

“I’d like to hear your version of what happened at Chester’s between you and his wife - Cynthia.”

Johnny sat back and slumped his shoulders. His typical vitality drained away.

“It wasn’t my finest hour, I can tell you that.”

He momentarily caught Masters’ glance and then diverted his eyes to the floor.

“I was still thirteen - almost fourteen. She came on to me - sexually - I mean. It was out of the blue. I hadn’t a clue that women her age did stuff like that with boys. I panicked, I guess. Dad and I have always talked about sex whenever I had questions and I promised him that there were certain things I wouldn’t do with girls - not until I was older, at least. Anyway, what she was doing with me - well, with one important part of me - didn’t fit that deal with Dad. I wiggled out and used things I had learned in Karate to stop her. If Chester hadn’t pulled me off I’m afraid I might have done something terrible to her.

“I’ve always blamed Chester for leaving me alone with her when, come to find out later, he knew she used to take money from boys Las Vegas to do that same kind of thing with them. After that, Dad and I decided I should take a vacation from classes for a while. I’ve never gone back. I need closure, perhaps. I know I’ll have to someday.”

“Talk to me about anger in general.”

Johnny became philosophical.

“I think of it as being on a continuum from mildly mad to viciously angry. I get mildly mad lots of times. I don’t know a kid my age that doesn’t. Dad says that’s normal so I’m okay with it. I seem to get the maddest when I see somebody else

being taken advantage of - like helpless older people or little kids. When I read about child abuse in the paper I do get really ticked off - probably more than half way up the continuum. But, I've never approached the rage I felt against Cynthia since that one time."

"No other adults have ever tried anything with you like Cynthia did that day?"

"No. I probably don't allow myself to get into such private situations - with older women I mean. Cynthia and I were alone in the greenhouse. Chester was clear up in the house. There wasn't anybody else around for a mile in any direction. But to answer what I assume your real question is, Bernice hasn't ever tried anything with me and I sure the hell haven't ever tried anything with her."

"Interesting you bring up Bernice."

"Well, her almost being poisoned and all. I figured this was your subtle way of interrogating me about it."

"You're always one step ahead of folks, aren't you?"

"It's the only safe way to live."

"You live in fear?"

"Not really. I mean it's not always on my mind. But my Mother died in a car accident and my grandparents died in a car accident and I have to admit I've spent some sleepless nights worrying about losing my Dad. I'm nervous when he's out driving alone. And now with my Great Grands gone, I'd be pretty well left out in the cold."

"Not what a lad your age should have to be concerned about."

"Yeah. . . It makes all this money seem totally unimportant, you know? It makes any amount of money seem unimportant. Family and friends and helping to make their lives better. That's what should be important in life."

Masters nodded, not having any promises of reassurance to offer.

"You and Jasper were always close, I understand."

"Yeah. Before he was confined to his wheelchair we'd spend hours together out in his greenhouse. Great Grandpa wasn't much for talking unless something really needed to be said - unlike me, I'm told."

It garnered the first faint smile from the boy since the

conversation began.

“Anyway, yeah, we spent lots of time together. I’d come and stay alone up here for weeks at a time in the summers. It was usually mostly just him and me - well, and Zeke when he Great Grandpa had business he had to attend to.”

“I have to assume you learned a lot about raising and caring for plants.”

“Yes. He was a good teacher. He’d let me try things, not just tell me how to do something.”

“Fertilizers?”

“He mixed his own. I’d help. He was cautious about it with me. Some of the ingredients are poisonous to people. As a little kid I wondered at that - healthful for plants and deadly for humans. It didn’t make sense. Always had to wash my hands with Borax when we finished out there. I have missed those times this past year. I’ve really been too busy to be here much anyway, with swimming and baseball and girls but still, I missed it.”

“In that order?” Masters asked, eyes twinkling.

“Sir?”

“Swimming, baseball, girls?”

“Oh. I see. Priorities have really gotten all screwed up since girls entered the picture. Probably not that order anymore.”

His wonderful, full smile finally broke across his face. Masters returned his own.

“Want me to walk you to the kitchen,” Masters asked?

“I hate being scared more than anything I can think of. It doesn’t seem manly, regardless of your words yesterday or whenever - I seem to be in a time warp here. Yeah. I’d feel better if you’d come with me. And there is an upside to it.”

“An upside,” Masters asked, intrigued.

“Fresh, aromatic, hot from the oven, pastry at the other end.”

“Then all I can say is eat my dust, shorty.”

Benny and Zeke were talking as the other two pushed and shoved their way into the kitchen. Masters stopped and inhaled, enjoying the grand aroma.

“Took you two long enough to find the goodies this

afternoon,” Sarah teased ignoring the antics that accompanied their arrival.

They took seats.

“Been wantin’ to catch up with you, Ray,” Zeke said. “That missin’ fire wood? I found it. Darndest place. It was stashed under one of the beds in the room east of Cliff’s - the one where we found the chimney damage I guess you’d call it.”

“So, someone moved it out of the other two rooms, I suppose,” Masters concluded out loud.

Zeke had clearly been thinking about that.

“I can’t figure why the wood was also taken out of the boy’s room, if the bad guy just wanted to make sure no fire was started in Cliff’s. I got that Cliff’s room part figured. No fire in there because the chimney had been plugged up and if that had been discovered with the building of a fire, Cliff would have become suspicious and the carbon monoxide plan wouldn’t have worked.”

It had been circuitous explanation but Masters agreed.

“Where would have been the only easy access for more firewood for Cliff’s room?” Masters asked.

“I see,” Zeke said. “The boy’s room. Yes, this killer feller is a pretty shrewd character.”

“Shrewd and knowledgeable about the people here. You told me you always over stocked the wood in those two rooms, so, there would have been plenty for fires in both rooms that night. Our would-be killer undoubtedly knew that as well.”

Sarah placed a plate of freshly iced pastry on the table and brought coffee for Masters and cocoa for Johnny. Fritz arrived.

“Phone for you Ray. You may take it here by the door.”

Fritz pushed a button and handed the hand set to Masters.

It was the Sheriff. Farley had indeed been killed by a quick snap of his neck. The glass of orange juice was laced with houseplant fertilizer. A strange combination not usually available commercially. None was found in the original container taken from the refrigerator.

“What color would that combination of ingredients be?”

Masters asked then listened to the answer from the other end.

“As I suspected. Thank you. I’ll await the written reports.”

He jotted some notes in his small pocket pad and sat back down at the table. He pushed the pad across to Johnny.

“Would these ingredients be available in the greenhouse, here?”

Johnny picked it up and studied the note.

“Yes, Sir. In fact, that’s Great Grandpa’s secret formula. I’ve never told anybody and he said I was the only one he’d ever told. Woops! That didn’t score one for my side, did it?”

Benny spoke.

“Is the young man a suspect?”

“Everybody with ties to this old mansion is a suspect, Benny. Don’t be alarmed.”

Apparently, Benny took the old detective at his word. He buttered another pastry and held up his mug for a refill.

Johnny had a question that fizzled out in its formulation.

“You knew the color of the fertilizer - green, I’d guess. You couldn’t have known that from looking into the orange juice and a little green probably only made the juice appear slightly darker in color. You have to have found a stash of the stuff somewhere.”

“Again, you are on top of things, young man and that will be all I’ll have to say on the matter.”

“Oh, that’s plenty. Since I know I don’t have any of the fertilizer I’m feeling close to being off the hook. It calls for another mug of cocoa, Sarah - brown, not green, please.”

It broke the tension that had crept into things at the table.

“Where’s your father?” Masters asked. “I need to speak with him.”

“Probably napping. I’ll go with you if you want me to. I need to get onto some homework that’s due on Wednesday, anyway.”

He turned to Benny.

“You any good with quadratic equations?”

“Not unless that’s something I can use for target practice.”

They finished their goodies and headed up to the third floor. Masters proudly demonstrated his prowess at navigating the elevator. It was humorous to everyone, especially to the old detective.

Masters dispatched Johnny and Benny to the other room so he could talk privately with Cliff.

"You know Chester better than anybody, I suppose, Cliff. Among the family members he seems to be surfacing as the main suspect. I just wanted to get your take on that possibility."

"Uncle Chester. It's always been hard to know what goes on inside his head. He waited until late in life to marry and then took up with a bimbo who apparently turned out to be an incompatible fortune seeker. He's bright and successful. I think he looks down on the rest of us. Not sure why. Maybe because he insists on making his own money the old-fashioned way - working for it as they used to say on that TV ad. I suppose I admire him for that. I mean I work, too, but it's not that I'm above using my allowance, also. If you're asking me if I think he's capable of killing off the rest of us, I really don't have a clue. He seemed to be genuinely sorry about the escapade between his wife and Johnny. I assume you've run across that by now. It's probably the only instance of conscience I've had the opportunity to witness where he's concerned, though."

"Yes, I'm aware of it. On to Johnny's emotions - fears, anger and such."

"By that you really just mean fear and anger."

"I suppose. Yes."

"He has reason to be fearful. I imagine he's filled you in about his problems over the deaths in the family - I mean the ones before this horrendous weekend."

"Yes. He seems like an honest and open lad largely thanks to the relationship you've forged with him."

"As to his anger, some of that may stem from the same source - angry that life has thrown him one curve after another that way. Angry that he can't do anything about it. Angry that he is helpless to protect me from a similar fate. Angry that he now has to begin coping with all this money. He just wants to be a regular kid with a regular mother and father and

grandparents to visit on holidays. He has every right to those things.”

“You’ll get no argument from me on anything you’ve suggested. The bottom line, here, isn’t pleasant, Cliff. Do you think his anger could get so out of control that he would kill people he thought were doing you wrong?”

“Johnny? Absolutely not! He’s a sweetheart. Everybody loves him.”

“Could he also be angry that he has to be that very kind of loveable person? That he has been predefined to be like that?”

“I never considered it,” Cliff said thoughtfully, a distance filling up his eyes. “I’m at a loss.”

“Have you tried to establish new relationships with women since your wife died?”

“No. I figured I needed to be there for Johnny. What are you saying?”

“It may seem like a pretty big responsibility for the boy to be the only recipient of his father’s attention and love. He may feel he has to be there doing double duty for you. And you. You have only one source for the same things. I just want to make sure the two of you aren’t unintentionally sucking each other dry, emotionally.”

“Maybe we need to talk this over with a professional, just to get all this sorted out. It’s strange how I started down one path that seemed reasonable and then never considered alternatives. Regardless of anything you’ve said I can’t believe that Johnny has had a part in any of this.”

“Okay, then. You have answered my questions and I appreciate your considering all these difficult topics. You are missing out on an assortment of wonderful pastries in Sarah’s kitchen by napping your afternoons away up here, you know. And, probably some potentially enjoyable attention from a nurse who has more than a passing interest in you.”

“Mary. Me? Really? Interest? You sure?”

“Not the responses I would have expected from a confirmed bachelor.”

Masters winked and left for his room. As he opened the door to enter, he watched Cliff heading for the elevator, comb in hand. He smiled and went inside to take a nap.

CHAPTER FIVE
Day two: The Evening
Four down, three to go

The coroner's preliminary report on Farley Fairfield was brief, handwritten, and to the point.

Ray - Farley Fairfield died of a broken neck, most likely by a quick, snapping, twist from behind. Not an accident. Although surface body temperature suggests death at eight a.m. the morbidity rate found deep within the internal organs suggests ten a.m. Saturday. There was a small slit behind the right ear. It contained a hard, dark green, foreign substance yet to be identified. More in the morning. Fran Flagg, MD./ME.

Masters nodded to himself as he sat in a chair in his room, waiting for Johnny and Cliff to pick him up for dinner.

“ Good. I have that one wrapped up, then. I also know who killed Abigail and Jasper. It leaves the attempts on Bernice and Cliff. All I have to do is prove my hunch on those two. I may be home by Sunday evening, after all.

Unlike the evening before, Sarah had arranged all the places around one end of the huge table. At Johnny's suggestion, the help joined them. It made a sizable, mostly friendly, group that came to thirteen in all. Oddly, everyone thought, Bernice and Chester sat together at one end of the gathering and she made over him like a mother hen.

Sarah opted for family style serving so large bowls of mashed potatoes, green beans, creamed corn and candied

yams accompanied the platter of freshly sliced ham and baskets of warm dinner rolls. Tossed salads had been made ahead of time and one punctuated each place setting. Even so, she and Fritz were up and down a dozen times during the meal attending to this and that and keeping drinks filled.

Conversation flowed surprisingly easily. The obvious topics were avoided. Bernice and Chester, though uncommonly civil toward each other, still weren't heard to utter more than a dozen words between them. The bodyguards were understandably quiet – spoke, when spoken to, but had little to offer otherwise. They would not intrude into the family time.

After cinnamon-apple pie with candy cane ice cream the group retired to the living room out of habit. No one mentioned that it was no longer required. It became an unspoken tribute to Jasper.

During the afternoon, Cliff and Johnny - under Fritz's careful supervision had replaced dozens of bulbs in the chandeliers and the huge room had come ablaze with an almost cheerful appearance - probably not experienced there for decades.

The chess game between Cliff and Johnny seemed less meaningful without Farley kibitzing. The general tone of the evening was pleasant and cordial without Bernice's customary complaints and put downs. She read although it did take several trips to the bookcase beside Farley's door before finding something to her liking. Masters made notes. The two male bodyguards played checkers and Gert wrote letters at a library table. As was his habit, Chester settled into the recliner by the fireplace, lighting his cigar with fewer flourishes than usual and was soon asleep. As was the custom, Fritz removed the cigar from Chester's mouth, put it out in the nearby ash tray and left the room.

The tranquility of the unusually comfortable setting was disrupted at 9:42 when Chester fell from his chair onto the floor. The bodyguards immediately moved to stand with their charges. Bernice was the first on the scene, closely followed by Masters. He felt for a pulse. There was none. He felt the forehead and neck.

"It appears that Chester just died. Perhaps a heart

attack but that's pure conjecture. Did anyone hear or see anything out of the ordinary?"

Hearing the commotion, Fritz had returned. He was the only one to offer an observation.

"He seemed to be fine when I removed the cigar. His breathing seemed normal. I noticed nothing unusual. Well, now that I think about it he was sweating. His brow was wet. I assumed it was due to the roaring fireplace fire Master Johnny set for the evening. But, perhaps it was precursor to the heart attack."

"Anybody else?" Masters asked getting to his feet and looking about.

There were quiet shrugs all around.

Fritz brought an afghan and the two of them covered the body.

"I guess that brings this evening in the living room to an end," Masters announced. "Mary, if you will please call Fran - again."

"Certainly."

Cliff accompanied her to the phone that sat on a stand beside the hall door. Johnny watched with interest his father's unexpected move. He looked at Masters. Masters raised his eyebrows - repeatedly. Johnny smiled and nodded and walked to where Masters had taken a seat on a couch. His body guard followed but stood at a discrete distance.

The others left the room. The boy's face drained gray as he took a seat beside the old detective.

"That just leaves Aunt DeeBee, Dad and me, you know. I'm the only one who's not been killed or tried to have been killed - assuming as you say the thing in Dad's room was aimed at him and not me. You going to arrest me?"

"No. What I am going to do is to ask you to accompany me to the kitchen and graze for something wonderful from Sarah's hidden stashes - those late-night goodies you told me about."

"To the kitchen, then, Benny, and don't spare the horses," the boy said to his bodyguard in a clearly forced and halfhearted attempt to lighten the growing gloom. His face remained somber.

"You have to understand that I still have a file full of

non-family suspects," Masters offered, putting his arm around Johnny's shoulders as they walked. "Just try to relax about it now."

Johnny nodded and sighed his patented sigh.

When they reached the entry hall, Fritz was taking coats from three strangers - the overnight contingent of bodyguards.

"You must be Raymond Masters," the woman said approaching him and holding out several large, manila envelopes.

"Tell me that it was my mustache that made you think I was Masters," the old detective joked.

"If that's what you want to hear then consider it said. It is a doozie, by the way. These are reports Sheriff Davis asked me to deliver - coroner, the lab and something from an attorney. He said he'd be at home tonight and you should feel free to call him if you need anything."

"Thank you my dear."

With the changing of the guard completed, Johnny, his new 'guy', and Masters set out for the kitchen. Fritz saw that the other two deputies were delivered to Bernice and Cliff.

In the kitchen, Johnny opened an old, brightly painted, metal, bread box on a shelf above the mop sink. In it were sandwiches, pastries, bananas, cheese and crackers.

"More than usual, but then I guess she took you two into account. Sarah's a pretty special friend."

He proceeded to spread it all out onto the table.

"Drinks?" he asked. "Looks like a fresh pot of coffee and a pan of cocoa ready to heat up. I'm having cocoa."

They were soon munching and learning about the new 'guy'.

"You saw Dad take off after Mary this evening, right?" Johnny asked looking across the table into Masters' face.

"I saw him walk with her to the phone, if that's what you're referring to."

"I think maybe he's interested in her."

"And you would react to that, how?" Masters asked in his most practiced, matter of fact manner.

"Mary's really nice. I like her a lot. I get the hugest case of the willies when I think of them kissing, though."

"My! Your fantasy has really fast forwarded right past the handshakes and small talk, hasn't it?"

"They've had that for years. Mary's had a thing for him for a long time. Everybody but Dad seems to know it. I talked with Great Grandpa about it not long ago - wondering if I should point that out to him. He said no. That I should let it take its natural course. I really never thought he'd come around without a nudge. Guess I was wrong."

Masters cleared his throat (the way professional nudgers will do on occasion).

"I got the idea your father thought you'd be bothered by such a relationship," Masters added, opening the topic just a crack further.

"I got that idea too. And a few years ago, I would have, but now I guess I understand better how men and women need each other's companionship. Girls talk about stuff in different ways - offer a guy new perspectives."

Cliff and Mary arrived as the others were making ready to leave. Initially, it seemed awkward. Neither group was expecting the other.

Johnny took the initiative, putting on an accepting, unruffled front.

"Still fresh coffee in the pot and probably two small cups of cocoa left on the stove. Cookies in the jar," Johnny said as he got up to leave with Masters and the new guy. Cliff gave him a hug and kissed his temple, clearly a well-practiced routine which Johnny readily accepted.

"In the morning, then," Cliff said as the others left.

Johnny couldn't resist one final comment - Johnny could seldom resist one final comment. He peaked back around the door into the kitchen from the hallway.

"You kids have fun, but I expect Cliffie home by midnight."

Whether from the actual humor of his remark or merely the release of nervous tension, he giggled uncontrollably most of the way to the third floor. They stopped at Johnny's door. Masters addressed them both but looked at Johnny.

"You know, I don't believe you've ever officially introduced me to this gentleman, Johnny."

Again, the boy giggled.

"You mean my Guy?"

"Yes, I see no one else in the vicinity."

Johnny bent over in laughter. The man extended his hand and introduced himself.

"Deputy Hammond - Guy Hammond, Sir."

"The lad's hysterical histrionics suddenly becomes clear. I'm Ray, if you will, please. You two have a good evening, and, Guy, my best wishes go with you."

Johnny's reactions had been understandably exaggerated all evening - just on the verge of too much, even for him. Masters wondered if that was merely a normal reaction to the terrors of the past two days or something else.

It was ten minutes later when Fritz knocked at his door.

"The coroner and lab people are here. They apologize for having taken so long but there was a nasty accident south of town."

Masters, who had shed his suit coat, donned a sweater, and the two returned to the living room. Fran was examining the body.

"Appears to have been dead about half an hour," she began. The back of his shirt and the seat of his pants are soaking wet. Any ideas why?"

Masters felt the shirt and frowned. He felt the back and seat of the chair.

"Wet here, too, and hot."

He examined the chair further.

"Aha!" he said, lifting an electrical cord and tracing it from the chair to a wall outlet. "Undoubtedly has a heating unit in it."

He returned to the chair and found the control dials on the outside of the right arm.

"Heat and vibrator," he read, positioning his trifocals with his right hand.

He turned them both to high.

"Odd," he said, scrutinizing the back of the chair. He sat in it remaining there for only a moment. "Take a seat and give me your reaction, Fran."

She sat.

"Not like any vibrating chair I've ever experienced. Downright uncomfortable, in fact."

She got up.

Masters, lost in thought, strummed at his mustache with his fingers. Presently, he nodded and addressed Fran's young assistant.

"Tommy, would you be so kind as to take a seat?"

He sat.

"Now, take several deep breaths and then let it all out and just sit there without breathing for a few moments."

"Ingenious!" Fran said, watching as it appeared the non-breathing man was still breathing.

"But how, why?"

Masters turned off the dials and Tommy stood.

"The vibrator has obviously been modified in some way from its original configuration so it presses in an exaggerated but slower fashion to give the illusion of breathing. I imagine you will find that he died shortly after nine from some kind of poisonous fumes inhaled from his cigar. It's the one here in the tray. Will you get it to lab for me?"

Fran nodded and her assistant carefully bagged it along with all the ashes.

Masters summed things up.

"The heating unit was on high to keep the body warm, which would give the initial illusion that he had just died - at whatever time it was discovered. I bought into it and so did you. With a quick diagnosis of heart attack there would have been no reason to question the time of death. We all would have sworn he was alive in the chair right up to the moment he fell to the floor. The vibrator must have gradually nudged the body into falling - probably not in the plan but a nice touch. The MO suggests to me that the killer of Chester is the same person who murdered Farley."

"Why go to all that trouble?" the assistant asked, looking at Masters.

"Very likely to provide the killer with an alibi in case the true cause of death was found. I, for instance, would have an ironclad alibi. I was right here with a room full of witnesses the whole time and I didn't go close to the man all evening. The rest have similar alibis."

"We'll get right on this one. Should have a report to you by breakfast. What more tragedies can happen out here?"

"None, I hope," Masters said. "I'm assuming the killer or killers will not try a second time to harm Bernice or Cliff, especially now that bodyguards have been brought in. Although it's clear a bodyguard could not have prevented Chester's death."

"Once the Will is read, the danger should be over - a clause Jasper included disallows the passing of any portion of the inheritance from one family member to another for any reason."

"And the Will will be read when?"

"Ten o'clock tomorrow morning."

"I can see it won't be a pleasant night for you either," Fran said closing her bag.

The body was removed and they left. Their work was just beginning.

Masters took a seat in what had become his chair. The fire was burning low and due to Zeke's new gadget, the room had grown chilly. Fritz arrived with a pot of coffee and cups on a matching silver tray.

"Thought I might find you here, Sir. I imagine it will be a long night."

"Yes. How thoughtful. Thank you."

"Let me work some magic on that fire and bring an afghan. I imagine your room will be a good deal warmer than this cavern."

"I think better in open spaces. I'll be fine. I have some built-in insulation you seem to be lacking."

The fire was soon roaring and the Afghan placed within easy reach.

"I'll be in my quarters if you need anything," Fritz said. "Please, don't hesitate."

"Thanks again. I won't."

In the quiet of the night he heard the elevator faithfully ding twice as Fritz opened the door to enter, then once as it passed the second floor and twice at the third as Fritz opened the door to exit. It raised a nebulous question in Masters' mind. He couldn't bring it into focus. About that bell? He let it go, hoping whatever it was would bubble to the surface on its own.

He needed time to play out the possible scenarios in

his mind. He began, however, with the attorney's reports from the private detective.

Sarah's boyfriend was Bobby Liphart, mid-fifties, locksmith by trade and early morning paper carrier for the five years since he arrived in the area. He lived alone in town, worked out of his home, and had never been married. There were no financial problems to be found. As a teen he had spent time in juvenile hall on theft and battery charges. He had once been called to the Heights to open Bernice's car door when she locked her keys inside. He and Zeke played poker with several other local bachelors on Saturday nights. Apparently, Zeke introduced Sarah and Bobby. It made a three-way association with the Heights - Zeke, Sarah, and Bobby.

What margin any or all of them would find in cutting down the Fairfield competition was still not clear. If they were involved there would have to be some other, less obvious motivation. He would also let that work its way through his gray matter.

The report on the accident in which Cliff's wife died immediately raised a red flag for the old detective. The brake line had sprung a leak apparently at a spot where it had been rubbing against a piece of metal after coming loose from a clamp. The brakes failed as she came down a steep hill east of Geneseo. She was returning home after completing rounds at one of the few local hospitals left in the area. An astute police detective had gone back to the parking lot and determined that the fluid had actually all drained onto the blacktop lot where her car had been parked - in her reserved spot. His notes suggested that it looked suspicious since there was no trickle of fluid either following the car into the parking space or leaving it. Apparently, there was no follow up, however. Several sets of prints were lifted from the line indicating it had been treated as possibly something other than an accident. It also noted that a young man in a mechanics uniform was seen hanging around the parking lot a few hours before she left for the day. That too, was noted as suspicious. The initial effort to locate him failed and was not pursued. His light green, coverall, uniform was unfamiliar to the garages in the area. Masters noted the detective's name

in his pad and moved on to the reports on Cliff's parents' accident.

"Well, my, oh, my! Isn't this an unlikely coincidence?" he said out loud. He read on. A belt on the power steering mechanism had shredded and broken as the couple was returning to Geneseo from a weekend in Buffalo. Again, a car carrying Cliff's relatives had plummeted off a winding road coming down a high hill. The car had plunged into a lake. Again, a worn part was the apparent culprit.

"As Masters would do, he thought out loud.

"Wealthy people with expensive cars developing problems that could have only naturally occurred over an extended period of time. In cars that were undoubtedly regularly serviced. Hmmm?"

The officer's notes stated that the belt had been put into evidence pending an investigation. No report of that investigation had been included.

"Motive?" he asked himself, again out loud. Cliff's parents' deaths occurred six years before and his wife's almost ten. Ten? That's how long Mary had worked at the Heights. Certainly no connection there. He needed to find out about what things were going on in Cliff's life on and about those occasions. It would probably need to wait until morning. Then again, maybe not.

Cliff and his bodyguard entered the living room and approached Masters.

"My chaperone for the evening, Percy Silverman," Cliff said, attempting a humorous introduction. Percy nodded and stood back.

"You're up late," Cliff observed.

"If I'm not asleep by nine, my temperature rises and I'm rearing to go 'til two," Masters explained with a smile. "Got a few minutes? Looks like you have about fifteen until Johnny does his midnight bed check."

"And he will!" Cliff said nodding and smiling. "Sure. What's up?"

"Painful memories, perhaps, but I need some information about what was going on in your life at the times of the deaths of your parents and wife."

"Yes. Painful, indeed. But, if it will help somehow.

Let's see. It would have been nearly six years ago, when mom and dad died. They were on their way home from a weekend in Buffalo - they'd been to one of Bernice's many graduations. The four of us had just been through a difficult time - another of my sister's, 'you love Cliff more than you love me' spells - so my folks thought we should all show up to support her. I really hated her guts at that time and refused to go. I guess it infuriated DeeBee. She'd worked two years to get a master's degree just so she could rub it in my nose and then I wouldn't agree to show up to receive the humiliation. I expected some sort of retribution but it never came. I've always attributed that to the tragedy. Even DeeBee seems to have compassion at some deep-down level. I've tried to treat her better since then."

"Did your father or mother have any enemies that knew of?"

"Like enemies that would kill them? No! Never! Everybody loved them. It was an accident, Ray. Don't try to read more into it than's there."

"Okay on that one, then. How about the other?"

"Johnny had just had his sixth birthday when his mother died, so that makes it almost ten years ago. My wife had agreed to spend three afternoons a week in a small area hospital that had no pediatric service. It was her second week there on a Friday afternoon. The brake line on her car sprang a leak and she flew off a hillside at something in excess of ninety miles an hour according to the state police."

"Other than the change in her professional time allotment, what else was going on in your life?"

"Well, let's see. I had just received my MBA at our local campus of the state university. Johnny had just won a state swim championship for six-year-olds. I was presented with the Man of the Year award from the County Jaycee's. The three of us had finished the paperwork to set up a charitable trust for homeless children in our part of the state. Looking back, it was a pretty special time in our lives. I suppose the tragedy has worked to cloud all those good memories for me. Thank you for the question."

"I would say it had been a good time. What about recently - the past several months?"

"Life is usually fine for Johnny and me. He is doing well in school and has what seems to be a positive and fulfilling social life. He's into virtually every sport that comes along - the small school is a good spot for him and since it's associated with the college, there are lots of advantages - cultural and academic. He enjoys girls and dating but doesn't care to have a steady, which I must admit is a relief to me. He and I get along fine, most hours of most days. He's a teenager and I'm his father so I won't try to paint a picture that everything is always smooth. He's a good kid and that's more important to both of us than anything else.

"My life is full and active. Kiwanis, Arts Council, Junior Achievement, and managing my - our - portfolios. I haven't been seeing any women though it now appears as though that would not be the problem for Johnny I thought it might be. Or maybe I thought it would be a problem for me."

He smiled sheepishly.

"It is a fascinating time in life when your child becomes, in some ways, wiser than you are."

Masters nodded but couldn't fully understand the meaning.

"Aside from this money thing, nothing much has changed for us during the past several months, I guess."

"May I ask if, relative to the problem Johnny had at Chester's, any charges were ever filed?"

"Goodness no! She was fully in the wrong but both Chester and I should have been more on top of it than we were. She'd shown too much interest in him before - we both saw that as we reflected on it. I should have been more protective of him."

"I guess I was surprised to hear he was allowed to stay with Chester for a week in the first place. Seemed you and your uncle were not all that close."

"That was a case where the child prevailed over the parent's better judgment. Chester is . . . was . . . an antique car buff. He rebuilt them from the bottom up. His collection is worth many, many millions. Johnny loves cars. For the past several years, he's earned extra spending money helping around a local garage there in town. I hoped that he and Chester might be able to build a good relationship around that

interest. Sorry other things interfered. Chester wasn't bad, he just always had very poor judgment where women were concerned. For a long time, I figured he was gay. Who knows, maybe his was. It doesn't matter, I guess."

"Would Cynthia have had reason to do something like she did to intentionally break things off between you, Johnny and Chester?"

"Molest my son so I'd forbid him from seeing his uncle?"

"That said it more succinctly than how I put it."

"I had never thought of that. Chester had indicated he might leave the car collection to Johnny. Then, after the incident, I don't think that was ever pursued. Cynthia was only after Chester's money - it was no secret - even Chester had to have known that. If she saw Johnny as a threat to that - even some of that - yes, I can see how she might have set it all up."

"Another topic," Masters said. "It seems generally agreed that Bernice has a screw loose - that's the technical term, I believe. Do you think she would go so far as to try and kill you or any of the other family members?"

"DeeBee! A killer! Well, I'd certainly never considered it. No, at least not where I'm concerned, she just enjoys tormenting me too much. If I were dead she couldn't do that. She's lived her whole life to get back at me for being her brother. She'd have no purpose in life if I were out of the picture. It's about the only service I've ever been allowed to render DeeBee - to be her target for hatred."

It seemed like a more involved and repetitive response than was necessary.

"One final question and I'll let you go. Is it possible that either you or Johnny have enemies - outside of the family, I mean - who would want you dead?"

"Wow! I hope not. It's not how we try to approach living, you know. It's no secret in our town that I'm financially comfortable though I doubt if anybody realizes how much money is involved, and they certainly don't know about Johnny's finances. I can't see how we'd draw any enemies over any of that."

"Okay, then, I'll let you go. Thanks for your help. Hope you can sleep. Tomorrow will be tense at best, I suppose."

Cliff stood to leave, then paused, addressing an afterthought to Masters.

"This evening Mary said an odd thing to me. It probably doesn't relate to any of this, though, but she said, 'You know that by tomorrow at this time, you'll be the wealthiest man in western New York'."

"How did you respond?"

"I said something like, 'Will that bother you?' And she said, 'I'm not sure. Trouble follows money'. I haven't figured out how to take that."

"Perhaps you need to ask her what she meant?"

"The direct route?" Cliff smiled. "That should help me sleep. Thank you. Yes. Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

Masters shook his head, thinking, 'Farley was crazy, Bernice is borderline, Chester had severe problems with women, Abigail was a hapless drunk, Jasper was a depressed, non-communicative recluse. Can it be that Cliff and Johnny actually escaped the insanity?'

The question really implied that if they hadn't, how was it being manifested? It was not a question he wanted to ponder, but he often had to consider the unthinkable.

Although it would have required a tinge of aberration, and desperation, Cliff could have set up the carbon monoxide incident for effect. Just what effect was up for grabs. To put him above suspicion in the other murders? To win sympathy from someone for some purpose? Would he have risked his son's life? He could have called it off at any time if he were in fact awake through it all so neither would have actually been in mortal danger.

All those same elements could have been assigned to Johnny, of course. For all of his loving and loveable qualities, the boy clearly had some personal problems in the areas of anger and fear. But murder?

They both had reason to harbor bitter feelings toward Chester and Bernice. Motives against the others were not as obvious. Could it be Cliff knew things related to the deaths of his parents and/or wife that he had not revealed - things that may have required him to take his revenge prior to the spreading of the family wealth?

Cliff had rushed in to caution Masters about even considering the possibility that his parent's deaths had been anything but accidental. Would that be typical for a child if reason to suspect foul play surfaced or was suspected? And then what about the possible father and son team of Cliff and Johnny?

Other, more random thoughts began to flow through Masters' mind. Chester knew cars which meant he would have known how to modify brake lines and belts to help paint the picture of accident by mechanical failure. He had grown up at the Heights and was an architect by training so most likely understood the structure of the flues in the mansion. He was mechanically savvy so could have modified the set-back thermostat. What his motivation would have been, however, was not at all clear.

That reminded Masters that he needed to take a look inside the recliner. He pushed it over from the back so he could see underneath. That showed only part of the picture. He pulled at the fabric on the back. It had clearly been removed and refastened - the upholstery tacks were missing and it was being held in place by common office staples.

With a series of gentle tugs the fabric was soon free and draped back over the top so he could examine the mechanical device there. It seemed clear that the vibrator had been removed entirely and replaced by a motor and rotating block - on a cam. He turned it. As the block rotated to the front it pushed out the padding. As it completed its circle away from the padding it returned to its original position. A small gear box, like from a child's erector set, slowed the rotation and provided the necessary power.

Either Chester did not use the vibrator or the mechanism had been replaced sometime after he left the living room on Friday night and before he took his seat again on Saturday. The question remained - how did it get turned on? Bernice had been in the area as had Fritz. Johnny passed close to the baseboard outlet when he went to get the chess set. The outlet was within easy reach of Farley's door. Masters needed to explore those quarters and see about alternative entrances that some unknown party could have used.

He turned the chair back into its upright position and the fabric fell into place down across the back, appearing to be fastened in place. Masters entered Farley's apartment. The interior defined the phrase, organized clutter. Newspapers and books were everywhere - all stacked in neat piles, some seven feet high. How Dora managed to clean around it all baffled him.

The first room was the sitting room. To the right was a large bedroom and bath area. To the left an office, and bedroom, separated by a hall that lead to his kitchenette and storeroom. There was an outside door into the kitchen area. The windows had been painted black and covered with sheets of cardboard; there were no curtains or drapes. The office contained a computer with printers, a scanner, and such. The walls in there were covered with maps - world maps, airline maps, state and national maps and many places fully unrecognizable to Masters. In a wastebasket, he found partially charred pictures of Abigail and Jasper in their younger years. Closer examination suggested they may have been burned months or even years before. He bagged them, nonetheless.

Thumb tacked to the bathroom door was a list titled, Hate Mongers that must be destroyed. On it were several organizations Masters recognized - the KKK, the Federal Reserve, and several Pentecostal groups. Most he had never heard of. In a stand-up file on the desk in the office were a series of nine spiral notebooks each titled Things to do immediately. He paged through several of them. All entries were just one line in length making them appear equal in importance. "Fix zipper on gray pants" looked to be as crucial as "Bring down the North American Fair Trade Agreement". The final entry in the most recent notebook, Volume Nine, was numbered 39,461 - "Call Donald Trump about simplifying his lifestyle". It seemed sadly humorous, though perhaps not entirely a bad idea. The entry just prior to that was, "Send the mother of the boy on the old red bike ten thousand dollars for his college fund."

"That's a lot of things that needed to be done immediately during his lifetime," Masters said, replacing the notebooks in the file.

Among the papers was a copy of a recent phone bill, twenty-six pages long, detailing over one thousand long distance calls during the month. That would have been nearly thirty-five calls a day. He may have been crazy but he seemed to care deeply about what he saw as the rapidly deteriorating human condition and was clearly upset that people with power and money, who could help right things, chose instead to pursue their own, personal, extravagant pleasures.

After a final look around, Masters returned to the living room, thinking it was time he turned in. First, he made a call and left a message on William's answering machine. He wanted to examine the power steering belt from Cliff's parent's accident if it was still being held as evidence somewhere. He also wanted copies of the Wills of all the family members. Also, how had the estates of Cliff's parents and wife been handled?

He stopped by the kitchen just in case some wonderful morsel there seemed upset it had been overlooked. He calmed the distress of three cheese Danishes and was compassionately considering a forth good deed when Johnny and Guy entered.

"Growing boys should be sawing logs at this time of night," Masters said by way of greeting. He nodded at Guy.

"Can't sleep. Excited about the reading of the Will - bothered by it may be a better way to say it. I just want to get it over and get back to my life as a regular kid with my regular friends. This weekend is going to put a humongous crimp in my finances."

Masters had to smile. Johnny went on as he poured two glasses of milk.

"The Winter Dance is on the 23rd and I'm still short about thirty bucks - flowers, dinner, stuff like that. I should have been working at the station this weekend. Dad's not big on advancing allowances."

Masters' big tummy jiggled uncontrollably.

"What? This is serious stuff," Johnny said, clearly not understanding the humor Masters found in his situation.

"You're wonderful, Johnny. I'm not sure how you and your father have accomplished it, but if there ever was a

regular kid, you've managed to grow into one. Here you are on the eve of becoming the wealthiest fifteen-year-old in the United States, and you're worrying about how you're going to raise thirty dollars for a corsage."

"I see where you're coming from. I suppose it is sort of humorous when you say it like that. BUT, the problem remains. I still have to find a way to get that money."

"I've been known to make short term loans to credit worthy friends, but only if you're unable to work out something else."

"Oh, I'd be good for it. I'll be back on my regular work schedule come Monday - if all this gets cleaned up by then. Do you think it will be all cleared up?"

"Can't say just when, but soon. I think I have a pretty good picture of how things happened. Now I just have to prove it. You're willing to help me, I assume."

"Sure, shoot!" He took a seat beside Guy, across the table from Masters, downing a long drink of milk during the process.

"Tell me all about Fritz."

"Gentle. Kind. Not as aloof as he appears at first. But you already know all that. He was my Great Grandma's favorite person out here I think. She was close with Dora but you could tell that she liked Fritz best. He really took care of her but he made it seem like she was taking care of him. I don't think she ever had anybody to take care of. It sounds dumb but I think that's how it was. He'd say the arthritis in his fingers was acting up and ask if he could massage her shoulders to give his hands a work out. She'd think she was helping him. He'd bring a breakfast tray to her and then she'd invite him to join her and he'd thank her for her kindness. Things like that."

"I can't say for sure that he enjoyed doing it that way, but if he didn't, she never knew. Great Grandpa was jealous of how well they got along, I think. Sometimes he'd ask me if I'd seen the two of them together. I had the idea that it bothered him a lot more than he let on to me.

"Fritz was a teacher before coming here. Found out that he couldn't stand kids, the way he tells it. Scuttlebutt was that he did some unsavory things with a couple of boys at the

school where he taught. I guess I've avoided him because of that. He's never really been unfriendly to me but I've avoided letting him see me naked."

"Any idea what he thought of Jasper and Farley?"

"I think he saw Farley as a source of entertainment and amusement. He'd go into Farley's place and move something - just one thing. Apparently, that drove Farley into conniptions. Fritz would just stand back and listen to the man go on about it.

"With Great Grandpa, he seemed to just do the minimum that was necessary. That might have been because Grandpa hated to have to be taken care of. I really don't know. Maybe he sensed Grandpa didn't like him. I'd have thought if he didn't like him he'd have fired him. He didn't but I guess that's obvious."

"How about you and Bernice?"

"There really isn't any me and Bernice. She hates me as much or more than she hates dad. Dad was the son and I now I'm the grandson. I think her biggest disappointment in life is that she's female. I don't mean she's not straight because I'm very sure she is, she has boyfriends and sex; I mean you have to have had sex to need an abortion."

"Abortion?"

"In high school. I overheard people talking long before I knew what the term meant. I figured it was bad, with all the hush, hush about it. Now, I understand, of course."

"Do you two talk?"

"Almost never. I've never heard her refer to me by my name - it's always, the boy. I suppose that works okay. I am the only boy - only child - in the entire clan this generation - hence my big money problem and we get right back to why I'm down here - sleepless - at this time of night."

"One more question and then I'll leave you to your milk, though it may not help you sleep."

"The milk or the question?"

"The question. Can you think of anyone, from any part of your life or your father's life or your mother's life that would want to see your father, or you and your father, dead?"

"That's actually more than one question, you've just disguised them."

"You're probably right."

Johnny had his own question, first.

"Do you know what happens to my Will deal if I'm dead?"

"An interesting question but the answer doesn't seem to help. Your father would receive your 'deal' as you put it and is there any chance he'd do you in for it?"

"Of course not. So, there's probably nobody out to eliminate me - not for money at least."

It conjured a possibility in Masters' mind that would remain unspoken. There was no one out to get him unless someone intended to worm her way into Cliff's fortune.

"Do you know who your father's beneficiary is - in addition to you?"

"I'm not his beneficiary. I won't need anything. It all goes to a charitable trust we set up as a family back before Mom died. That's my only beneficiary, too, at this point. When I get married, I have the right to change that."

"How about enemies not related to money?" Masters asked wishing he didn't need to pursue such a gruesome topic with the lad.

"I've won my division in the State Swim Championships every year since I was six so I've probably made lots of swimmers and their parents and coaches unhappy but nobody'd want kill me over that. I've never stolen anybody's girlfriend or treated a girl badly. I've broken up with a few but they were okay with it."

"Do you know how your mother and father met?"

Johnny Smiled.

"Get this. Dad was her lab experiment in college. She was five years older than him, already in her first year of med school when he was a freshman. He volunteered to be a subject in order to raise his grade in biology. I don't know what the experiment was but that's what started it all. He hadn't dated much in high school and fell head over heels for her as the saying goes. They waited to get married until dad finished his bachelor's degree."

"I suppose you wouldn't have any way of knowing if she had enemies."

"No, not really. I can't imagine it though. She was

popular and talented - the chief resident and that's about the highest honor a beginning doctor can get, the way I understand it. She worked with a group of doctors up in Rochester and had just started part time at the hospital over at Centeron when she had her accident. Boy, that was a terrible night. It was the only time Aunt DeeBee ever came to our house. I remember she put me to bed that night and read me a story. She let me use bubble bath. It's funny what you remember. The best time she and I ever had was on the worst night in my life."

"It looks like we've worn the topic out," Masters said disappointed it had not produced more useful new leads but again pleased to see that the boy's life was so normal. "I appreciate you're talking with me about all these things."

"Sure. Did I help you solve it all?"

"Let's say you supported my most important hunches. I know what evidence I need and I believe I know how to go about getting it. I'll leave you two now. See you bright and early, I suppose."

"With the roosters," Johnny said.

CHAPTER SIX

Day Three: Morning The Gathering

For the second day in a row morning came way too soon. Regardless, at 5:58 Masters entered the kitchen. Not surprisingly, Johnny was mixing batter, Guy was reading a paper with his coffee and Sarah had not yet arrived.

"Hey, Ray. Good morning."

Ignoring the boy, Ray addressed Guy.

"Did the lad sleep at all last night?"

"Actually, yes. From about ten seconds after his head hit the pillow to fifteen minutes ago. Oh, to be fifteen again."

"Ah, yes. You holding up okay?"

"Yes, Sir. Thank you. Came here off eight hours of sleep prepared to be awake all night. Read one of your cases during the night in fact. That guy Flint writes pretty good stuff."

"Flint? He tends to stretch the truth here and there for effect."

"Regardless, it was some case."

"Which one?"

"Clairvoyant Kid."

"I heard from that boy not long ago, actually. He's doing fine. Attending the University of Arkansas."

"Maybe that's one I should read," Johnny said, wanting in on the conversation. "About a kid, is it?"

"Primarily, I guess you could say."

"Platter size flapjacks this morning with banana rounds in them. It's a first for me but can't see why it won't be delicious. Coffee in the pot - like you make it. So, did you sleep okay?"

"Like a baby."

"Must have been one humongous crib."

The boy broke into rails of laughter, brought to his senses only as smoke began to rise from the griddle.

"You ordered yours well done, I hope." Again laughter. He was understandably nervous. The day represented a big event that he wanted to put behind him. He needed to see how Bernice was going to react. He wondered if it would feel any different being a billionaire, different from being a mere millionaire who still hadn't raised the thirty bucks he needed for the dance.

Cliff and Sarah arrived at the same time.

"Smells like Johnny's cooking in here," she said waving her hand as if to make her way through an imaginary, smoky fog. "Where's the fire extinguisher?"

Everybody laughed - well, Johnny only managed a quick smile as he attended to the busy griddle. Sarah glanced at his flapjacks and nodded, patting him on the back. They were soon transferred to a platter and then to the table. Cliff delivered plates and silverware. Sarah added a bowl of mixed fruit and a pitcher of orange juice. She topped off the coffees.

"So. Ten o'clock's the big moment, I guess," Sarah said, opening the obvious topic of the day.

Fritz and Dora entered together. They sat at one end of the table and settled for coffee. Zeke dropped in just long enough to fill his mug. He was cutting firewood in the timber on the slope behind the mansion.

"Don't forget to be here at ten," Sarah reminded.

"I'll be here." He left.

Fritz verbalized the question on the other's minds.

"Well, do you suppose this will be our last breakfast as poor folks?"

Johnny glanced at both Masters and his father. The three of them remained quiet.

"I'll be happy if I can just continue living like I do, Dora said. "It's long term security I'm hoping for, I guess."

"It will be what it will be," Fritz said.

"So, between then and now I guess we go on as usual?" Dora said. It sounded like a question."

"That's my plan," Sarah said. "I figure there will be lots

of hungry folks around here come noon."

"I thought I'd get the living room straightened up," Dora said.

"I'll arrange the seats so we can have a comfortable setting for the gathering," Fritz added.

"I'm gonna run the legs off of Donny as soon as he gets here," Johnny said. "Where is he anyway?"

"He called. Be here in five minutes," Guy explained. "Seems he was up with his new baby all night so you might want to go easy on him."

"I can't imagine that big guy with a little baby. It probably fits in the palm of his big hand. That's great, isn't it?"

Johnny suddenly saw the man in a new light.

"While we're speaking of calls, Guy, could you call in a request for a lab team to come out here. I got a gadget I need dusted for prints and gone over thoroughly for everything else in their book."

"Sure. I'll take care of it right now," He said, walking to the corner of the room where the phone was housed.

"Guy showed me some great exercise routines. His muscles have muscles," Johnny said in the brief silence. "He was a wrestler. Still keeps in shape. I really like him, probably won't ever see him after all this is over. That's sort of sad."

"Friends is for the day," Dora said. "That's what my daddy used to tell me. Enjoy your friends as you have them. Friendship lasts way beyond the friend."

"That's pretty good," Johnny said repeating the essence of the saying. "Friendship lasts well beyond the friend."

Donny entered, yawning.

"Hey, your baby okay?" Johnny asked clearly concerned.

"Sleeps all day and exercises his lung power all night. Doc says that'll all get turned around in a few months. Hope we can survive that long."

"Coffee?" Sarah asked as he took a seat.

"Yes, please. Just set up and turn the I.V. on high."

There were smiles all around.

"I'll be on my way then, Guy said, making it a point to put his arm around Johnny. See you again about ten tonight unless I hear otherwise."

"Yeah. At ten," Johnny said looking up into the man's face.

"Oh, by the way," Donny said. "Reports in this envelope that Sheriff Davis asked me to deliver."

He handed them across the table. Masters accepted them with a nod, opening the top and pulling the sheets out just far enough so he could quickly thumb through them to see what he had. He then closed it and laid it aside.

"Great pancakes," Donny said, looking at Sarah. "Never had banana pancakes before. Good idea."

Johnny beamed, quietly. Sarah exaggerated a sigh.

"Well, big guy, I have to admit the boy, here, made them this morning. And, as much as I hate to admit it they are pretty good, for an amateur."

Donny turned to Johnny and nodded his approval. Johnny nodded back with a reserved grin - a guy's way of acknowledging such things.

Dora and Fritz soon left to work on the living room. Johnny enticed Donny into, "Just one short game of one on one," which left just Sarah, Cliff and Masters in the kitchen. Masters spoke.

"I need to take you two into my confidence. I have questions that I don't want others to know I have asked."

They both nodded their agreement and Sarah took a seat, bringing the coffee pot with her.

From his suit coat pocket, he removed an envelope and from the envelope copies of the charred picture of Abigail and Jason he had found in Farley's room. He had the half bearing Jason's picture covered with a folded sheet of paper so only Abigail's face showed.

"Do you recognize this person," he asked as it was laid on the table between them.

"Well if it isn't Dora it's a dead ringer for her. The hair is all wrong but the features are unmistakable," Cliff answered after examining the photograph.

Sarah nodded, puzzled by what she saw. "Yes, but the clothing is too old in style and like you say, the hair, Dora's wore a Paige Boy ever since she's been here."

Masters slid the entire picture out into view.

"This, you see, presents me with a problem. How old

would you say Jasper was in this picture?

"Thirty or so, maybe thirty-five," Cliff said after a moment.

Sarah sat back.

"I wondered if you would discover the family skeleton," Sarah said as she readjusted herself. "Dora is Abigail's child from an affair she had the year after Farley was born. Apparently, Mr. and Mrs. had not been having man-wife relations for some time so she had to explain to Jasper. I think she hoped he would accept it and raise it as his own. He refused. She went away during the last two months of the pregnancy and had the baby. It was raised by Abigail's sister as her own. Abigail apparently insisted she be hired here when she was old enough but so far as I know Dora doesn't know about the relationship to this day."

"And you know how?"

"It's when Mrs. started drinking. One night, after she'd had way more than usual, she confessed it all to me. I tried to stop her - considering her condition - but she'd not hear to it. I'm sure she didn't remember having done it and I've never told a soul."

"The father?"

"A handsome, teenage, delivery boy who used to bring the groceries up from town. I got the idea he never knew about the pregnancy or the baby."

"Well, Dora needs to know but this is not the time," Masters said, "So, I am assuming I have your word that this will be kept private among us for now."

Again, they nodded.

Masters returned the photo to the envelope and it to his pocket. He picked up the new reports and left for the sitting room - wanting a place to himself for a while.

He found a seat near the still darkened windows and removed the sheets of paper.

The first was a lab report on the cigar and ashes. It had contained strands of artificial fibers, like those used in some carpeting that gave off deadly fumes when burned. They had been threaded end to end through the cigar, probably with the use of a long upholstery needle. As the cigar burned, the strands turned to gas; Chester inhaled it and

was killed instantly. When Fritz removed it from his mouth he was undoubtedly already dead. As was his habit, Fritz put it out in the ash tray beside the chair and the fumes caused no more problems.

Several lengths of fiber remained and had been analyzed and traced not only to the manufacturer but to the brands of carpets in which it was used. Masters jotted a note to William's private detective and moved on to the next report.

It was a more extensive report on the orange juice poison. None had been found in the container so it had to have been added to the juice on its trip from the kitchen to the dining table. That involved Sarah, Dora, Fritz and finally Bernice. The ingredients were readily available in the green house right there on the property. Jasper and Johnny were the fertilizer experts in the group and Jasper was already dead. Where had Johnny been?

Another sheet verified that Bernice had indeed had an abortion in Denmark when she was seventeen. Masters had to wonder why neither Bernice nor Cliff had mentioned it.

Fritz arrived.

"A marvelous place to hide, Ray. Haven't come in here looking for anybody in twenty years. The Lab team is here. 'Forensics guys' I believe they called themselves."

"Yes. Thanks. Should have told you where I'd be."

He accompanied Fritz through the dining room and into the entry hall. It was the same group that had been there before. Masters led the way to the chair. He demonstrated how it worked and gave specific instructions as to what he wanted - mainly prints and sources for the parts used to construct it. They surveyed the situation and suggested that they take the whole chair with them back to the lab. Masters agreed and they were soon gone. He also sent the charred pictures with them for analysis.

On his way back across the hall to the sitting room, Masters came across Donny and his young charge just in from out back.

"I can hardly wait until my son has this much energy - during the daytime, that is!" Donny said, grinning and wiping his face with his T-shirt. It brought a huge smile to the man's face. Johnny wasn't sure he understood but smiled politely

without comment.

"Can I talk with you, Ray," Johnny asked.

"Sure. Come into my private office."

They were soon seated in the slowly brightening sitting room.

"It's a tough question to put into words. . . . How can I know when a person really likes me?"

"You and not your money, you mean?"

"Partly, yeah, but more like with Great Grandpa. I have to wonder if he liked me for who I am or just because I was his great grandson - the role, you know. If he'd have liked any great grandson just the same as me. I'm not saying it very well. Maybe he felt some obligation to act nice toward me. Like Donny and his baby - he loves him but that has to be just because it's his baby - a week old kid doesn't have a personality, to like or not like. They're just flat out demanding. I get more confused the more I think about it."

"I hear two questions: First, are you a person - aside from everything else - that other people can really like - a lot. Second, are there obligations that make others act as though they love you when maybe they really don't?"

"Yes. That's what I've been trying to ask."

"You seem particularly concerned about Jasper's motivation where you are concerned."

"Yes. Especially since our talk about my 'deal'."

"Have you ever been in your Great Grandfather's living room?"

"No. Only his office."

"You need to visit it then. Let's do that right now."

Several minutes later Masters opened the door and motioned Johnny inside ahead of him. Johnny looked around and slowly walked from place to place touching the furniture, pictures and books.

"The back wall between the windows," Masters directed at last.

Johnny turned and moved to the wall which held his cards.

"My gosh! Look at this. It's every card I ever made him. Dozens of them and he kept them all. And look here. Tacks already in place for his next birthday card - one I guess he'll

never get."

He turned back toward Masters.

"Thanks. This seems to answer my question completely. I probably never loved him as much as he seems to have loved me."

"Leave it to Johnny to find something new to worry about," Masters said, ruffling the lad's hair."

"I'll have to decide what to do with them, you know," Johnny said turning back to the wall. "I have lots of time to think about that. Maybe the best place for them is right here where Great Grandpa wanted them."

He sighed his sigh. Masters addressed him.

"I need to find your father. Any idea where he might be?"

"No, but I can call his cell phone and find out."

Without waiting for approval of the idea he made the call. Cliff would join Masters in the sitting room in a few minutes. Johnny led Donny off toward some great adventure in the attic - apparently, the boy's private realm for the past eleven or so years.

* * *

"Cliff. I understand that something big happened in your family the year Bernice was seventeen."

"Seventeen. Yes. She went to study for a semester in Denmark. Something Dad arranged. It was the greatest six months of my early life, I can tell you that. No DeeBee! When she returned, it was as if some judge had decided to rescind my stay of execution."

"You would have been how old?"

"I had my fifteenth birthday while she was away. No card from her, of course, but what could I expect from a sixteen-year-old- even it was DeeBee?"

"Was there another reason she was away - sent away, perhaps?" Masters asked.

"It was never said, so what I'm going to relate is mostly just the fantasy of a fifteen-year-old boy. I constructed it from bits and pieces. DeeBee will be the only one who can verify or deny it at this point."

"My bedroom was on the third floor and hers was directly under mine on the second. I had fixed three peek

holes in my floor that corresponded with easily disguised openings in the light fixtures on her ceiling. Guys would pay me ten dollars a half hour to look through the holes at her. Entrepreneurial, if not proper. I made lots and lots of money.

"Anyway, a couple of weeks before she left, and she got the appointment to Denmark only weeks ahead of her departure, one of the guys commented she was getting fat and he wanted his money back. I looked and he was right.

"About that same time, Mom and Dad had it out with Uncle Chester over the phone. I was told that I was never to speak with him again. It was totally out of character for my parents so I knew it was something really big.

"I added one and one and got two. Then I added one more and got what I figured was the answer. Three months before all of that, DeeBee had spent ten days with Uncle Chester - they took a cruise around the Caribbean. I wasn't invited. I figured it was about making DeeBee feel important, since she clearly didn't, so I didn't put up a fuss or even play every sibling's favorite, unfair card."

"My fantasy was that Chester got her pregnant and she had been sent away to either have the baby or an abortion - it was a period in her life when DeeBee was Catholic. She's been most everything from time to time - Buddhist currently, I believe."

"I only know she came back slim and trim and even sadder and harder to get along with than before. The following September she left for college and I got my life back again - lost a good source of revenue but it was worth it."

"I appreciate your candor and assistance. Somehow you survived Bernice. I'm glad you found the strength to do that."

"I'm not saying I didn't do my share of things to make her unhappy. I was her little brother, that's a given, I suppose."

"You're speaking to an only child and a bachelor. I probably can't truly relate to that at anything other than an academic level."

"Too bad, you'd have been a great father. Johnny can't stop talking about you. He'll never forget that one handed over the head shot."

"Frankly, neither will I," Masters said, hand beside his mouth affecting a confidential tone.

"One last thing," Masters said as Cliff stood to leave. "Chester. To your knowledge, was it his habit to use the vibrator or heater in the recliner?"

"The vibrator hasn't worked for ages. Johnny wore it out years ago. The heater I'm not sure of. I'd doubt it, but I really don't know."

"Thank you."

"If that's all, then, I'll be on my way."

"An envelope from William Milburn, the attorney, was just delivered for you." Fritz said as he stepped out of the way, politely, allowing Cliff to leave first. He handed the envelope to Masters.

"Thanks. By the way what do you know about Chester's cigars?"

"Expensive. Short," He stepped closer into the room, becoming reflective. "Kept in a small humidor in his room. Smoked just one a day -in the evening. Seldom burned less than an inch of it before he fell asleep. I'd remove it from his mouth and put it out in the ashtray. I can only wonder why he hasn't burned his house down at home - if he truly lives alone."

"That humidor kept locked?"

"Not to my knowledge. I've never had reason to check it out. I'm not a smoker."

"Thanks. You have the living room set up?"

"Yes, Sir. Ready and waiting for the big event. Do you know when to expect the Mr. Milburn?"

"Well, he is a lawyer. The meeting is to begin at ten so I would expect him at ten fifteen."

"Yes, Sir. Your estimate is somewhat more generous than mine." He smiled and left the room.

Masters pulled out his pocket watch.

"Eight thirty. I should be able to get through William's material well before the meeting."

He opened the envelope. There was a copy of Abigail's Will. He began reading. It was relatively simple. Her assets were split equally between Dora and someone named Patrick Callahan complete with a social security number but no

current address. Masters assumed he was Dora's father. That wasn't stated and how that could be proved he wasn't sure. It would make him about Masters' age. She did name Dora as her daughter and offered names and addresses of the relevant hospital, doctor, and an adoptive agency. A note attached from William said he had initiated a search for Callahan.

The second was Chester's will. Unlike the inference made to Masters and William, he had arranged a fifty-fifty split between Cynthia Halbert, his wife, and Bernice Fairfield. It was a surprise to Masters. He wondered if Bernice knew about it. He decided there would be only one way to determine that, to suggest it all went to Cynthia and see how Bernice reacted. He would arrange that with William.

Farley's will, was seventy-four pages long, and detailed dollar by dollar who would receive what and under what conditions. It appeared to be a legal nightmare. Masters was glad William was in charge of that. Several of the paragraphs jumped out. "Cliff's boy will receive the cost of a top of the line J. C. Higgins bicycle." He wondered if the company was even still in existence. "Bernice will receive one new set of tires for her car provided she pays back my estate for writing supplies she borrowed over the years." (An itemized list was supplied with a total of \$7.23). "My mother and father will receive a set of Encyclopedia Britannica - the latest edition. They must agree to share it. If one or both are dead give it to the seventh-grade English teacher in town. If they are not dead give that teacher nine hundred eleven dollars and sixty-six cents."

There were numerous entries bequeathing large sums of money to local children for college and to numerous charities. There were some interesting possible matching proposals - \$100,000 to a local church if its parishioners raised \$3,938.66 within one year of his death. There was no explanation as to how that matching amount had been established. Another was fifteen million dollars to the state university's liberal arts scholarship fund providing the Roosevelt family would match it. There was little that seemed relevant to the present situation.

Nothing that would benefit any of the other heirs, dead

or alive, unless Johnny might think he could sell the bike to raise the funds he needs to take his date to the dance. The thought made Masters chuckle to himself.

There was one nagging element of the case that Masters had to consider. The only Fairfield heirs left to receive direct gifts in the Will were brother and sister. On the surface - and well beneath the surface, purportedly - they disliked each other. Dislike was too gentle a term - detest, despise, abhor might come closer. Cliff disliked Bernice because she had always treated him badly and she had always treated him badly because he was the adopted son. Whether it was more the adopted element or the son element that disturbed her had probably not been determined. At any rate it had become a life-long, closed loop, antagonism.

What if that had, through maturation or just for purely business reasons, been put aside? What if the two most unlikely allies had become just that? If so, how could the attempts on their lives be accounted for? A third party or second thoughts on each of their parts once their grand plan had been set in motion - Bernice trying to get rid of Cliff and Cliff, Bernice. Bernice's instability had apparently been affirmed when she was disapproved for her internship. What about Cliff? Could he really have grown up in that environment and come through it with an unscathed psyche?

And then there was Dora. She had quietly inched her way up on the suspect list as well. If she, in fact, knew of her parentage, and if she thought she could prove it - say at the last moment - then she should be in for a sizable cut of the take. In addition to improving the pot for herself, killing Jasper could have been in retaliation for his refusing to accept her, and killing Abigail for never having admitted it to her or for giving her away or any one of the other often occurring adoptive fantasies. It would follow that the real children - Farley and Chester - might also come within her cross-hairs as would those remaining in Winston's line. If she knew of Abigail's Will, it would be her father (Callahan) who would be her logical target.

Much to Masters' amazement William arrived at a little after nine. He kidded him about his promptness and promised not to report it to the Bar Association. They cloistered

themselves in the sitting room - by then a bright and cheery, sun drenched area. Why it had not been a more popular spot through the years Masters could not understand.

"Abigail's Will seems to put an interesting twist on the distribution of the inheritance," Master said, really asking for clarification.

"Indeed, it does. In terms of bloodline, Dora is more a family member than either Cliff or Johnny. However, since Jasper knew of her existence - even if not that Dora was she, specifically - and he chose to ignore her, the Will stands on solid grounds as it is. She will receive many millions from Abigail's Will and double that if her father cannot be found. I imagine she will be okay with that. If not it will have to end up in the courts."

"Should Dora hear her mother's Will before the reading of Jasper's?" Masters asked.

"I had the same question for you. Legally it doesn't matter. In terms of the humanity of the process it would probably be a good idea."

"My thought exactly," Masters said nodding.

"Let me go find her then," William said. He returned a moment later.

"Fritz is going to 'fetch her,' - his words."

They smiled.

"What do you know of Fritz and Dora's relationship?" Masters asked.

"I think they consider themselves a couple, if that's what you're asking. Neither will admit it openly. Jasper made it clear there was to be no hanky-panky between staffers or they would be dismissed."

"I suppose Johnny will change that," Masters speculated.

"Oh, yes. Johnny will certainly change it. He has the biggest heart of any kid I've ever known. I hope this inheritance doesn't change that. Money so often does, you know."

Masters nodded. Fritz and Dora entered and walked to where the men were sitting. Masters stood and motioned her to sit. Then, he spoke.

"Dora. You were remembered in Abigail's Will and

William and I think it's well if you hear about that before our scheduled meeting. Please feel free to have Fritz stay if you want. Your relationship no longer jeopardizes your employment here."

She reached out and took Fritz's hand, looking up into his face. It was Fritz, still standing, who spoke.

"I've spent twenty years trying to explain to her that I'm too old and too set in my ways for this relationship but she is so persistent."

Clearly having taken Masters at his word he leaned down and gave her forehead a gently kiss.

"Please sit down, then," William said.

Masters handed William his copy of the one page Will and it was soon read.

Dora sighed and patted Fritz's hand.

"I've known all along. My mother - my adoptive mother - my aunt, actually - told me as a teenager. Mrs. never mentioned it, but we always felt our special bond, I think. I've never told anyone, not even Fritz. On special occasions - holidays, birthdays and such - Mrs. always gave me a card with a large money gift in it - sometimes several thousand dollars. I never told anyone. I suppose it was like we each knew that the other knew and yet it was never spoke of. We were good and close friends and I suppose that is just how parents hope it will turn out with their child - being good friends as grownups."

"I'll need to get some information from you," William said, "Bank accounts and such for the transfer of funds and stock. We can do that anytime within the next few weeks. "

"If there's nothing else then," Dora said, "We really need to go help Sarah prepare the refreshments for the main event."

"But I just informed you that you're a multimillionaire," William said confused.

"Yes. Thank you. But I still have my work to do, Sir."

William shook his head as the two stood and left together.

"What do you think?" William asked.

"She didn't seem surprised she had been included in Abigail's will. She didn't ask about her father nor did she

mention anything to us about him. Does she know about him as well?"

Before they could contemplate the situation further, Sheriff Davis entered and walked to where they were sitting.

"An interesting development, William," he said taking a tentative seat toward the front of a chair. "That Callahan fellow you asked us to track down - we located him a few hours ago, over in Clay Hills. Still worked as a mechanic part time there. Seventy-five years old. Dead as the proverbial door nail when the detective went to talk with him. Gone about eight hours according to Fran's initial impression. Looked like he'd fallen off a step ladder while trying to change a light bulb in his house. Neck snapped clean as a whistle. In light of his possible involvement in things over here, it smells like murder to Fran."

"And to me," Masters said. "The time of death would have been somewhere around midnight, then?"

"Yes, right. That's what she thinks. Maybe a little later than that."

Masters tilted his head and screwed up his face, deep in thought for a few moments.

"By the way," the Sheriff said reaching into his coat pocket. "I got that power steering belt out of evidence. A miracle it was still around. But it's here in the bag. I'll need you to sign for it if you want to keep it."

"If I may just look at it."

"Sure. Look away."

Masters spoke as he examined it.

"It's a rubberized woven belt - top of the line. Look here and here. It's worn all wrong. Just in one place along this four-inch stretch across the width - not lengthwise. Belts wear more or less evenly - lengthwise - and then finally just give out in one place. This one has been intentionally tampered with. It's as if it was rubbed with a rasp or file or some such tool to wear it down to just a few final strands that would soon break under the demands of normal driving. We need a lab analysis, here, Jeff. Stem to stern. Every test in the book. You got a good lab staff. Give them their heads on this one. ASAP, please. Among other things, have them look for oils and oil bases that should not be there."

He slipped it back into the plastic bag.

"You're onto something, aren't you," the Sheriff said.

"If what I suspect should be there, still is there after all these years, we'll have a killer on the platter before sunset." The sheriff put the bag back in his pocket as Masters continued, "any word on the brake line I bugged you about?"

"The line itself is no longer around but there are pictures and a lengthy report being emailed to me. Get me an address here and I'll just forward them to you."

"Need to see Johnny about that, I imagine," Masters said.

William nodded adding "We'll have Johnny email you his address and we can receive things on Farley's set up here."

"Here's the prelim on the chair," the Sheriff said handing over an envelope.

Masters opened it and scanned through the handwritten note.

"Good going lab guys," Masters said plainly pleased with what he saw. He handed it to William.

"They've pinpointed the model of the gear mechanism and the chain of toy stores that sells it. There is one outlet in Buffalo and one in Rochester. Get your private detective on it. Find out if anybody who is even remotely involved in this case purchased one recently."

Masters took a handwritten list from his pocket and circled three.

"Here's the list of names. Have him check these three, first. I imagine it will save time."

"I'll call it in now. He's from Rochester and I'm sure has a contact in Buffalo."

William stood and moved away to make the call. The Sheriff spoke:

"I figured all those prints the lab found would have clinched it. The boy's prints are all over the inside of the chair."

"So, I see, Sheriff. So I see."

"Need anything else from my guys?" the Sheriff asked.

"Not at the moment. Are you sticking around for Jasper's Will?"

"No. Believe it or not I do have other cases. Doubt if I'll be remembered in it."

The two smiled at each other and both stood. Masters walked him to the hall. It was a quarter of ten.

Masters was at an important crossroad: he could check out the arrangements in the living room, or go in search of a snack.

Sarah was sitting having a cup of coffee. She had donned a new, frilly, white apron over her simple, apricot colored dress and had worked a trailing white ribbon into her hair.

"How fetching, you look," Masters said, meeting her smile for smile.

"Thank you, kind Sir. I haven't been called 'fetching' since back when the word was actually in general use."

"You're saying my language is dated?"

"Mostly I was saying thank you."

"Then mostly I'll accept it that way. You're welcome."

"Coffee?"

"I'll get my own. I was hoping to also keep company with some small, sweet, morsel - in addition to you, of course."

"It's getting pretty thick in here, Ray. Cinnamon Twists in the bread box, if there are any left. Johnny and his guy just passed through here like a whirlwind chasing a tornado."

Masters was soon seated across from Sarah, enjoying the leavings.

"I'm nervous, Ray. Not sure why. It's like when I was a girl waiting to get that call from the boy I hoped would ask me to the dance."

"Consider it done, then."

"What?"

"The call. The dance. I'll take you. Ten minutes in the living room."

"I accept and I never accepted on the first call." She batted her eyes playfully. "You think the killing is all over, I hope?"

"I think so. There is one last possibility but I don't expect it. The bodyguards should have it covered. You, I'm sure, are in no danger."

"I figured that all along. The help didn't seem to be

targets. I'm wondering if that means we're not getting enough to make it worth anybody's time. I suppose anything will be better than nothing. Mr. was always fair with us. I'm blabbering."

"I also always blabbered on a first date. May I escort you to the dance?" Masters said at last, standing and offering her his crooked arm.

"Why, thank you, Sir. "

She stood and curtsied, walking around the table to meet him. They were soon in the living room. Sarah patted his big arm and went to sit with Dora who was already there. Cliff and Johnny had also arrived with their 'guys'. William was going through his briefcase. Fritz was adjusting the drapes to the rear of where William would sit. At 9:55 Bernice, her bodyguard, and Zeke entered the room from the hall. Whether their simultaneous arrival was coincidental or otherwise, Masters could not be sure. He made a mental note as he took a seat at the rear.

William read the roll and asked for each to say present. That over he opened a folder and began.

"Johnny, your Great Grandfather directed that once it strikes the hour for the reading of this Will, he wanted you to stop the pendulum on the grandfather clock and that it never be restarted. Will you carry out his request?"

"Sure."

All eyes followed the boy as he went to the clock and waited for it to strike. When it finished, he opened the long, narrow, glass door and stopped the pendulum. He closed the door and returned to his seat beside his father. It had been a touching moment. Sarah and Dora dabbed at their eyes.

"It is a relatively simple Will in its intent. Implementing it will just be a matter of legal busy work. The asset transfers should be completed within a month. The Will was written by Jasper and remains in his words though it is perfectly legal and binding to his estate.

"Let me then begin the reading of the Last Will and Testament of Jasper Jonathan Fairfield, the second.

"I hope to be alive when this is read but if not, at least you're alive. I can't be sure how many of you will survive to this point but if you're hearing this you did. I won't say

congratulations because you may only be there because you were more dastardly conniving than the rest. Regardless here are my wishes.

"First to my loyal staff - Sarah, Zeke, Dora, Cliff and Mary. You will each receive a lump sum settlement large enough to leave you one million dollars after taxes and fees. Your future at Fairfield Heights will be in the hands of my beloved, great grandson, Jasper Jonathan Fairfield the third (Johnny). Of all my relatives, I know he will treat you fairly and with love and compassion. Fairfield Heights along with a fund for its upkeep is hereby transferred to him.

"The remainder of my assets, except the stock in Fairfield Steel, is to be divided equally among my surviving relatives, except Johnny as per his wishes, with the proviso that none is to be paid to anyone convicted of any crime connected with the distribution of this inheritance.

"All of the Fairfield Steel stock, and those stocks as subsequently redefined or renamed, go to Johnny. Until he reaches age twenty-one his inheritance in all of its forms, will be administered by his father, Clifford Jasper Fairfield - as fine a man as has ever lived - or in his absence by William Milburn.

Once this will has been read, none of any heir's inheritance can be transferred to or inherited by any other heir as named herein. Know that Abigail and I both loved you all." With that William took off his reading glasses and addressed the group. "I will answer any questions."

"So, how much is my share, after all the legal mumbo jumbo clears?" Bernice asked.

"Approximately two hundred eighty million dollars. Had the six of you survived - Abigail, Jasper, Farley, Chester, Cliff and Bernice, it would have totaled somewhere between ninety and ninety-five million each."

"And how much is all this worth to the kid?" she added caustically.

"I can't see how that is any of your business, Bernice."

"It's okay, if I have any say so in it," Johnny said. "I'd rather get it out in the open now than to have her huffing and puffing about it forever."

William looked at Cliff for direction. Cliff nodded.

"Depending on the economy, somewhere between one

hundred fifty million and three hundred million dollars a year."

Bernice stood, and strode toward the hall door.

Masters rose and announced, "No one is to leave the Mansion until Sheriff Davis gives his permission. We still have seven murders to clear up."

Bernice spun around, clearly annoyed yet puzzled.

"Seven murders?" she asked.

"Yes. Seven. Chester, Farley, Abigail, Jasper, Winston and his wife, and Cliff's wife, Johnny's mother."

Looks of amazement passed among those gathered. William frowned. Bernice turned and left for her suite. Zeke also departed. The others sat for some moments before they left.

Johnny was on Masters like chocolate on a Klondike Bar. "You nuts? I told you nobody would have wanted to kill my Mom."

Cliff joined them.

"Murder? I assume you are absolutely sure - all three? I really don't want to have to relive any of that."

"I'm sorry. They deserve to have this truth determined, wouldn't you agree?"

He nodded his head and put his arm around Johnny, pulling him close.

"Mr. Masters is right on this one, Son. If that's how it happened, then the truth needs to be known."

Johnny began to cry and turned his face into his father's shoulder. Masters attempted to help by suggesting a diversion. He addressed Johnny.

"I know it's a tough time right now, but I really need your help. I have to retrieve an important set of pictures coming by email from the Sheriff's office. Can you help me accomplish that?"

Johnny nodded and wiped his face with his shirt tail.

"From what I've been told, Farley has the best computer set up out here," Johnny suggested.

"Let's go see what we can find in there, then."

Johnny was soon online and had contacted the Sheriff's office. Within another few minutes the pictures had been received, and printed on the color printer. Masters explained what they were looking at. Johnny became interested and

spoke.

"So, it's the brake line on Mom's car. What do you see?"

"Look here and contrast it with here," Masters directed.

"Dull here and then shiny there, you mean?"

"Right. Copper tubing shines when it's buffed or scraped but soon dulls due to rapid oxidation. Here, at the point where the hole rubbed through letting the brake fluid out, it would be expected to be bright and it is. But it's also bright back two inches on either side of the hole. Why? How would that have come about? Find the picture that shows how the tube sat on the frame."

Johnny sorted through the sheets.

"There, that one," Masters said, pointing. "Where on the frame could it have rubbed?"

"I see, just where the hole is. But not back along the sides. How come?"

"Yes. How come? Since it is obvious that it couldn't have happened through normal wear and tear, how else could it have happened?"

"Somebody with a file or sandpaper?"

"Bingo, Son. Now, look here; what do you see?"

"A hole in the frame about two inches to the left of the clip that held the tubing in place - the clip that came loose."

"And what purpose does it serve?"

"None that I can see."

"Compare it in size and features with the hole into which the clip holding the tube was bolted."

"Look identical, except . . ."

Masters waited to hear the boy's complete observation.

". . . except that the second one is shiny inside and the first one isn't."

"And that might indicate what - shiny versus dull."

"I don't know."

"That the shiny hole was newly drilled - a hole put there in order to move the tubing close to the angle iron over here."

"So, it was close enough to rub against the angle iron, which is the only thing in the area it could rub against."

"Or appear that it did that. Look at the spot on the angle iron where it supposedly rubbed."

"Here?"

"Yes. What do you see?"

"A strip where the grease and gook have been rubbed off - looks to be a quarter of an inch wide and maybe three inches long.

"Right. Now, what's the configuration of the tube at the point where it would have rubbed the angle iron?"

"I see where you're going. The tube had to be bent into a sharp curve to be moved that far to the right so just the very tip of the arc could rub against the iron. It couldn't have rubbed the gook off the angle iron except right in that one tiny spot where they butt up against each other. Somebody tinkered with it."

"In my game, we call it tampering and there is no doubt about it."

"But the cover note said the tube is gone. How can you trap the bad guy without it? All that's left seems to be some strands of hair they found under there."

"The investigating officer had just made detective and he was struggling not to start out with a black mark on his record. He printed and photographed everything that could be printed or photographed and he analyzed scrapings from dozens of spots. Considering the possibility of making DNA comparisons he preserved the hairs. Once we have that full report in our possession we'll have the bad guy."

"You sound like you're looking for something you already know will be there."

"Indeed I am. Email the Sheriff in my name and have him get us a copy of the full report ASAP. Email or . . . isn't this a fax machine?"

He pointed to another piece of office machinery.

"It's a fax alright. I'll take care of it. This is exciting."

"I'll say," Donny added, looking over their shoulders. "When all this is over can I just follow you around for a week," he said addressing the old detective.

"Well, if all goes as planned [and life never does for Masters!] this will be my last case. I'm retired, you know."

Donny nodded without further comment.

Within ten minutes the fifteen-page report had arrived by fax and Masters and Johnny were studying it side by side

on a couch in the living room. As Masters finished a page he handed it on to Johnny who then handed it across the coffee table to Donny.

Finished, at last, Masters removed his reading glasses and slipped them into his inside suit coat pocket.

"Well?" he asked the other two.

"Probably the fingerprints?" Johnny said, his tone rising, twisting his initial impression into a question as it was offered.

"Perhaps but I doubt it. This person considers himself too clever to be caught. Probably wouldn't have left fingerprints behind. I'm more interested in the three strands of hair caught in the exhaust duct, just to the left of where our tamperer would have been working, very likely bumping the back of his head against the muffler."

"But, Sir," Donny began. "Hair under a car could have been picked up anywhere on the road over hundreds and hundreds of miles."

"Right. But, what if the hair happens to belong to someone who is also my prime suspect and who had no reason to have ever been anywhere near the car?"

"I see. Very clever. By itself it doesn't prove anything and yet in context it proves everything."

"That is my hope. Johnny, back to the email. Tell Sheriff Davis I need a DNA done on that hair ASAP - all three strands. I'll send physical samples for matching along directly."

The email was sent. Johnny and his tall shadow returned to where Masters was sitting. Masters took an envelope from his pocket and handed it to Donny.

"This contains four physical samples, body cells from four suspects, each in a small evidence bag inside. I have them numbered without names. Have them begin with number one because I'm quite sure that will be our match. Johnny, you can stay here with me or accompany Donny to the Sheriff's office. I need this done immediately."

Donny nodded and stood.

"You driving a squad car?" Johnny asked.

"I sure am."

"I'll go with Donny if it's no bother, Donny."

"It's what I'm making the big, off duty, bucks for. Besides, you've turned out to be a great friend. Back in half an hour, Sir."

"Does that time-line include a stop at Sonic?" Johnny asked.

Masters peeled a ten from his money clip. "Be my guests. I won't call out the Mounties for an hour but keep in touch."

Johnny willingly accepted the bill and the two headed for the back door.

"I expect change!" Masters called after them, joking. Johnny suddenly became deaf. Masters suddenly became hungry!

CHAPTER SEVEN
Day three: Afternoon
Tying up loose ends

Johnny was still stuffing fries into his mouth as he and Donny arrived in the dining room for lunch. Sarah had arranged a cold cut buffet complete with a variety of home baked breads. Masters was on his third helping, as Johnny bounced up to him.

“Donny’s a lot less fun as a driver than he is as a bodyguard. Wouldn’t turn on the lights or siren and stayed the speed limit the whole way. What’s the fun of driving a squad car if you have to drive like everybody else?” Donny smiled and raised his eye brows.

“Food. Great!” the boy continued, taking a plate and surveying the offering. Apparently, the disappointments of the immediate past had just been exchanged for the prospect of something delectable in the present.

“A hollow leg?” Masters joked to Donny.

“I’d guess two!” he answered.

“By the way, Johnny, change?” Masters asked holding out his open palm.

“Yes, Sir. I changed your ten into two number threes, which left an almost reasonable tip for the waitress.”

He grinned and moved on toward the desserts not waiting for Masters’ response. Donny followed him. Masters returned to the table beside William who opened with a question.

“Are we going to present Chester’s Will to Bernice? If so, I’d like to get it done. I need to head home.”

“I think we need to do that.”

Masters got up and walked to the other end of the table where Bernice was sitting alone, nursing her orange juice and picking at her salad.”

“If I may interrupt for just a moment, Bernice. William has Chester’s Will in his possession and would like to go over it with you if you can make time.”

“Make time? What else is there to do in this hell hole? But I don’t understand. Why me?”

“Apparently, there is a token remembrance included to you.”

“Token?”

She seemed surprised, although, over all, her reaction told Masters nothing. Clearly Bernice would think she was worth more than a token whether she was privy to its contents or not.

“How about 12:30 then in the west sitting room?”

“Sure.” She returned to picking at her salad, torturing it with a bit more ferocity than before.

“I told her she had been given a token remembrance in the Will.” Masters said to William as he returned to his seat. “Let’s approach it as if it may not be the final draft but in it she was bequeathed the sum of one hundred dollars and see what happens.”

“Pretty sneaky,” William said in response. “And only marginally ethical.”

“I’ll make the presentation, then,” Masters said. “After all, retired detectives can hardly be held to ethical standards.”

The plan was set.

Bernice was waiting as the two men entered the sitting room. They took seats opposite the sofa where she sat, her legs crossed and arms spread out across its back. Masters began.

“It appears that the copy of the Will I have here, may not be the final version, but William will find out and clarify that with you in a few days. It is a simple document. Chester split his entire estate between you and his wife, Cynthia. You are to receive one hundred dollars and the rest goes to Cynthia.”

She sat stoically, a faint smile slowly blossomed.

“He always was an S.O.B. No different in death. Whatever. Anything else?”

“Not unless you have questions.”

“No questions. I assume that as the attorney, William, you’ll take thirty percent of that hundred dollars.” Not waiting for his response, she stood and marched out of the room.

“Well that got us absolutely nowhere, wouldn’t you say?” William said offering his impression.

“Wish she’d been hooked up to a GSR gadget,” Masters answered.

“Galvanic Skin Response?”

“I think it would have burst its little dials. She was seething. Can’t say why, of course, but something helpful still may come of this. What will her actual take be from Chester’s Will?”

“Ten or twelve million I’d guess. Little of it’s liquid so it’s hard to estimate. At any rate, it’s a pittance next to what she received this morning.”

Masters nodded. “Yes, I suppose she will be able to make ends meet, won’t she?” He had another question.

“Any word from your detective on either the toy stores or the carpet?”

“Oh, yes. I think I may have overlooked passing on something about the carpet.”

He began patting his pockets to find the report.

“It was imported from England. A blend with wool. Sold in only a few outlets here in the States. That particular fiber was taken off the market a few years back after some Duke or somebody died from the fumes in a house fire in London. That narrows the time-line to a span of only three years. Buck said he was closing in on that in a hurry. Here’s the report.”

“Clearly all of the carpeting in this place is decades older than that,” Master said.

“I’m sure your right there. I’ll give you a ring the moment I hear anything on either front. I better be on my way now. Wives get upset when your work week begins on Sunday.”

He left. Masters remained, looking out the window up into the beautiful, cloudless, blue sky. He began jotting down

a list on his note pad.

Loose Ends

Gear box

Carpet fibers

O. J. poison source

Visit Jasper's study

Callahan's death

Final report on the belt

Final report on the brake line

Report on the hairs

Bernice returned. Masters removed his glasses and glanced up at her.

"Is there something I can do for you?" he asked surprised at her reappearance.

"I really just came back to apologize to William for my remark to him. It was out of line. I can only imagine what a nightmare this whole estate thing must be."

"I'm afraid you missed him. He left soon after you did."

Interesting to Masters, Bernice went ahead and took a seat. There must have been more on her agenda than just William.

"How long will we all be stuck out here, do you think?" she began, her tone uncharacteristically pleasant.

"A day, two at the most, I'd estimate."

"You're that close to solving it all?"

"Getting closer every hour it seems."

He smiled, offering nothing else.

"I'm intrigued with your statement about the deaths of my Grandfather and Grandmother - Winston and Vera, and Cliff's wife. If they were murdered, how did the authorities miss that at the times of the accidents?"

"Your guess is as good as mine."

"You have new evidence, then?"

"No. Just new interpretations of the old evidence. There is no doubt about my assertions, however. It will all come together within the next twenty-four hours." "Lots of bad guys, then, I suppose," she said.

"If I'm correct just three."

"Oh, three. I see. Anyway, that I can be of help?"

“Depends on your areas of expertise, I suppose.”

“Well, we spoke of my degree in psychology. Before that there were others in chemistry, biology, physical education, and business.”

“I suppose a number of senior papers and theses along the way.”

“More than I care to remember. Still tinkering with one in biochemistry - cosmetics to be specific. I’ve developed my own product line and will begin marketing it in the spring.”

“In some way superior to the others, I assume.”

“I’ve developed a base from seed oils - naturally high in vitamin E and readily absorbed by the skin. Been working on it off and on over the past ten years.”

“The lotion I have seen you putting on your hands and arms. Is that one of yours?”

“Yes it is. Here. Smell.”

She took a small flat jar from her purse applied some to her hands offering them so Masters could sniff the aroma.

“No added perfumes or artificial colors. Just pure product. I think it’s time has come. Received a patent on it, in fact.”

“Well, I wish you the best. Seed oils, you say? Flax, Sunflower, things like that?”

“That’s right. I’ve found the oil from sunflowers to be an almost universally acceptable base for my line.”

“If I need a chemist, then, I’ll know who to call on.”

Bernice took the hint and the conversation drew to a rapid close. Masters stood and offered his hand. They shook and she left.

With his handkerchief, Masters wiped his hands clean of the still sticky lotion that had transferred between them. That feeling would not be to his liking but then he was obviously not her target audience. Perhaps there was some tweaking left to do before the products hit the shelves.

Johnny stuck his head in the door.

“We’ll be in the attic in case Benny can’t find us at two.”

“How about you be with me for the next half hour in the greenhouse out back?” Masters returned.

The boy stepped out into full view and swaggered, thumbs in belt, toward the old detective.

“So, once again you need Dr. Watson’s help, huh, Sherlock?” Johnny joked in an atrocious English accent.

“My hope is that you will be of more help to me than Watson ever seemed to be to Holmes. Never could understand why he kept the good doctor around.”

“Probably made Holmes feel superior,” Donny suggested.

“Ah. More of a mystery buff than you let on,” Masters said, getting to his feet.

“I have to plead guilty. Got hooked on them in fifth grade and haven’t been beyond easy reach of one since.”

“I’ll call you on that one,” Johnny said looking around the room. “None to be seen in here.”

Donny lifted his sweatshirt and reached into his back pocket producing a paperback.

“Got ya!” he said leaning down so he could flaunt the book in the boy’s face.

“What is it?”

“The Case of the Cryptogram Murders.”

“Sherlock?”

“Masters!”

Johnny looked from one to the other, wrenching the book from Donny’s big hands.

“Is there a kid in this one, too?”

“As I recall it was the butler and I who behaved like juveniles in that one.”

“Where did this case take place?” He asked, thumbing through the pages.

“Chicago, I believe.”

“You believe? You don’t remember?”

“Look at me, boy. I’m old and senile. What do you expect?”

“Yeah. I only hope I’m that senile when I’m eighty-five.”

“Me too, actually,” Masters said amused at the dozen years that had just been added to his age.

“To the greenhouse, then?”

The book was slipped back into its pocket and the three headed down the entry hall toward the back door behind the vault. The building was sizable, 15 X 30, Masters estimated. The steeply sloping roof contained tier upon tier of small

windows. The row nearest the peak opened. Inside, three rows of wooden tables stretched the length of the building. The floor was concrete, sloped slightly toward the center where regularly spaced drain openings kept the walkways dry.

“Why such a steep roof,” Donny asked.

“Snow,” Johnny explained. “Has to be steep enough so the snow slides right off. The roof of the mansion is designed the same way. Sometimes we pick up three feet of lake effect snow overnight. All that weight sticking to a roof would collapse it.”

“Makes sense.”

Johnny looked at Masters, “The fertilizer, I assume.”

“You assume correctly, Watson.”

“The ingredients are in metal bins under the center table at the far end. I doubt if there will be much there anymore. Great Grandpa hasn’t been in here for several years.”

“I’m amazed at how well kept it seems, then. Windows washed, no cobwebs, floor clean.”

“Fritz. He takes care of it just like Great Grandpa was going to pop in at any moment. Don’t know why. I don’t think he has a green thumb. It may just be his way of getting away from the gaggle of women inside.”

The old detective shook his head and chuckled to himself. “It wasn’t locked,” he commented.

“Never has been, that I know of. Up here on the top of this hill they don’t get any prowlers, you know. He never grew anything that was worth anything - no big secret hybrids being developed or stuff like that. He said he just liked to get his hands dirty. He did, too. We’d both have to head for the shower the minute we left this place.”

Masters walked the length of the room and took samples from each of the six bins. He put the small sacks into a larger one and zipped it closed.

“So, it was mostly just you and Jasper out here, then?”

“Mostly. A few times Dad came out and sometimes when Bernice was feeling extra threatened by my existence she’d tag along so as to keep her countenance blatantly posted in front of Great Grandpa.”

Donny smiled at Masters.

“Sometimes the boy talks like a dictionary, you notice that?”

“On occasion, I’ve even slipped and called him Daniel.”

“Funny, funny, guys. Daniel Webster was a researcher and writer and everybody knows they can’t talk worth a darn.” Johnny said and he made his way to the north side of the building and pointed across the lawn. “See the lilac bush out there. It was our project together. We grafted different colors all onto one bush. I wanted to make it look like an American flag surrounded by shades of pink but he pointed out that as it grew it would change shape.” He looked thoughtfully at the bush a moment then turned and walked to a closet beside the door through which they had entered.

“There’s a lock box in here. It’s where he kept his old diaries. He told me after he died I could have them - that I should read them. That they held all of his secrets. He said I wouldn’t like everything that was in them but that if I really wanted to know him, I’d need to read them. I’m not sure I’ll ever want to do that. I think I’d rather keep him in my head just the way I have him now. I only mentioned it because I thought it might contain something that would be of value in solving all this stuff. Want them?”

“Let’s get them out,” Masters said. “Later, you can decide if you want me to look through them.”

Johnny opened the door and took a small key from his wallet. The box was soon open and the seven volumes handed over to Masters.

“I’ve already decided. I want you to look. It may be the only way Great Grandpa can help us now. I’ll trust you not to reveal anything that’s not absolutely necessary. I’m sure he wasn’t a saint but I don’t want to prove that to myself. Do you understand?”

“Yes. I certainly understand.”

Donny offered to help carry the books and they returned inside.

Masters asked that the books be dropped off in his closet for safe keeping. They left and Masters went looking for a change of scenery in the living room. Zeke was unloading a fresh supply of firewood from his old wooden cart. Masters approached him and took a seat nearby.

"I see you're still working as though you really needed to," Masters said, trying to open up a conversation on a light note.

"I'd miss it if I didn't. When do you suppose, Johnny will tell us about our fate out here?"

"Your fate?"

"Whether we get to stay or have to leave. I got a place in town but the others here don't. I'm concerned about them."

"Well, I haven't spoken with him specifically about it but I'm sure everyone will be welcome to stay. You may have to move into the larger rooms so your help can have places to live."

Masters attempt at humor was lost on the longtime butler.

"See that's the problem. We've been talkin' and we don't want help to come in. We want to go on like we have, takin' care of each other. I mean we almost never saw Mr. or Mrs. It's always been like the place really belonged to the rest of us."

"I see. Well, I'll speak with the lad and urge him to get together with you right away."

"Thank you. We'll all appreciate that a lot."

"I've seen you and Bernice together several times the past two days. Friends, are you?"

Zeke flashed a strange glance at Masters.

"She always has lists of things for me to do when she's here. Wash her car. Trim the branches outside her window. Carry bags. Rearrange this and that. Will we have to have her back once all this gets settled?"

"Probably not. She seems to hate the place as much as you apparently, dislike having her here."

Zeke nodded plainly receiving that as good news. "It seems the heating system is back to running well."

"Oh yes. As long the gas keeps comin' we'll keep cozy up here. I remember one winter years ago, when the lane was buried under six feet of snow for three weeks. We run plumb out of coal for the old stoker. The trucks couldn't get through to make deliveries so Mr. arranged for a dozen snowmobiles to pull gunny sacks of coal up for us. They made runs six hours a day for weeks. It took a quarter of a

ton a day in cold weather to keep this place warm. Gas is better in lots of ways.”

“What do you know about the chair that Chester seemed to like so well?”

“The one that used to set right here?” Zeke indicated the spot.

“That’s the one, yes.”

“Not sure what you mean, I guess. Been here as long as I have. Chester’s the only one who ever used it. Well, young Johnny wore it out when he was little tike. He loved that vibrator. He’d sit in it and sing songs. He liked the way it jiggled his voice when he sang. He’d just sit there a singin’ and a sweatin’. Seemed to assume if one was on the other should be too, I guess. I’d almost forgot about that. He’s the one, in fact, who fixed the heater in it. Said he planned to get the vibrator goin’ again, too. He’s quite the lad.”

“When did he fix the heater?”

“Over Thanksgivin’. Lots of snow. Cold as blazes. Guess that sayin’ don’t make any sense but you know my meanin’. He tinkered around most of one afternoon. Said he was doin’ it for ‘old times’.”

“I see. Pretty handy, is he?”

“Oh, yes, he’s handy. Not much at singin’ though. “Used to follow me around when I was workin’. Always had ideas about doin’ this or that - ways he figured was better than mine. Could that kid ever babble! Still can, I suppose. He don’t stick with me much anymore. Reads and plays games on those little hand gadgets.”

“Did he ever use the heater after he fixed it?”

“Don’t rightly know. I suppose he probably tried it out. I really don’t know. He can tell you. He don’t forget nothin’. You gonna need more wood up in your room, by the way. This morning I noticed none of it had been used.”

“It’s fine. I just enjoy the fire down here. My room stays plenty warm at night. Laying a fire requires bending over and as you may have noticed that’s not one of my better skills.”

Zeke smiled and nodded. He then assumed a confidential tone and spoke.

“You’re a detective. Did you hear about the old man

who got murdered over in Clay Hills?”

“Murdered?”

“Yes, Sir. His name was Jeb Callahan. Used to live down in town. Poor as a church mouse. Can’t see why anybody would go into his place and kill him. Tried to make it look like a accident, I hear. Somethin’ really funny there. He was a loner over here. Worked at the grocery for years and years - part time at the gas station, too. Hard fella to get to know. Story is that he had a love affair that went sour when he was just a boy and he never recovered from it. She must have been some girl.”

“Who is calling it a murder?”

“The city cops over there, I guess. It’s all over. We don’t never have no murders out here away from the cities. Well, I guess that ain’t true no more either, now, is it?” He shook his head and prepared to leave. “Nice talkin’ with you. You prod young Johnny, now. Don’t forget.”

“I’ll do it immediately.”

Zeke rolled the empty cart out into the hall and turned right toward the back door. He seemed older than his years and tired.

Masters pulled out his pocket watch. It was nearly two - time for the changing of the bodyguards. He felt confident that everyone was safe, but thought it prudent to continue the protection through the night. He saw Donny and Benny talking in the hall and joined them.

“Donny. I see you’ve survived another shift. I hope the afternoon in uniform goes easy on you.”

“You and me. This place has an attic the size of Madison Square Garden. Johnny has a half court B-ball court up there. It’s freezing cold but that doesn’t seem to slow him down. I’ll be glad to get back to work so I can rest up.”

Masters nodded. “Where is he, by the way?”

“Stopped by the kitchen. Said he’d be right along. I shouldn’t have left him alone, should I?” Donny asked as Johnny came ambling down the hall, milk in one hand and a sandwich in the other.

“No harm, no foul on that one, I suppose.” Masters said, continuing his conversation. “Here, if you will, drop this off at the lab. It’s the samples from greenhouse and one other

item for the lab to go over. I put instructions inside the envelope.”

“Sure. No problem. I’ll be on my way then. See you for flapjacks in the morning?”

It had been a question relating to his duties.

“Only if you’re hungry. We’ll stop the protection after Guy’s shift tonight.”

Johnny was clearly saddened by that news.

“I’ll walk you out to your car, Big Don. To the least exciting police car in existence, I may add.”

Masters and Benny walked after them, stopping at the door where they could keep an eye on the lad. There was a hug at the car and Johnny watched it move around the curve and down the hill out of sight. He was soon bounding back up the steps ready to wear out the next contestant in the ‘Try to keep up with Jasper Jonathon Fairfield the third’ marathon.

“The help here is concerned about their future.” Masters said as he topped the stairs. “I suppose it would be prudent for you and your father to talk it over and then give them some direction. The sooner the better, actually.”

“I should have thought of that. Sure. I know what I want to do but like the Will says, Dad’s the big cheese ‘til I turn twenty-one. That seems like an eternity from now. He’s probably in his room napping. I love having legitimate reasons to wake him up. Let’s go. Today I think it’ll be a flying leap off the dresser.”

He and Benny were suddenly off to the races. Cliff’s bodyguard arrived as the elevator dinged its way toward the second floor. Masters informed him of Cliff’s probable location and the young man opted for the stairs. That sandwich that Johnny had been toying with looked pretty good.

* * *

Halfway through a BLT on dark rye, with sides of chips and potato salad, Masters was joined in the kitchen by Cliff, Johnny, and their entourage.

“We need to speak to the staff when it’s convenient,” Cliff said, addressing Sarah.

“Sounds serious,” she said.

“Oh, it’s serious good, not serious bad,” Johnny said jumping in to alleviate her concern.

“Everybody will be here at three for coffee. Every day, everybody’s here at three for coffee. That soon enough?”

“Sure.”

It was Johnny’s response made without consultation. Cliff shrugged indicating that would be fine. Johnny went about the process of pouring drinks for himself and their ‘guys’ while his father and Masters talked.

“Sorry I hadn’t anticipated this,” Cliff began. “I should have. All of a sudden, this whole thing feels overwhelming. I don’t know how Grandpa handled it all those years. I really want to have this terrible time behind us and get back to our happy haven in Geneseo.”

“I suppose I can understand that. By this time tomorrow you should be free to do just that.”

“You’re that close to having this all wrapped up?” Cliff asked surprised.

“I had it wrapped last evening. Just didn’t have all the pieces officially in place. Still a few that need to be clarified but the essence of the picture is all there.”

“My! I had no idea. That’s really a relief. I just may have one of those sandwiches and what’s that, potato salad?”

Sarah smiled. She loved to see people eat. She figured it meant they were well and happy. A sandwich was soon prepared and delivered along with all the trimmings.

By two forty-five the help had gathered in the kitchen. Cliff delivered the message to them.

“Johnny and I want you to know how much we both appreciate the good work you have done here together for so many years. Clearly Jasper and Abigail appreciated it as well. It’s our wish that you continue living here for as long as you want Fairfield Heights to be your home. If and when you want or require help, we will provide it for you. I’m not sure what else to say. Perhaps you have questions.”

Dora was the first to speak.

“Can you help us find somebody to take all this new money off our hands?”

Everybody snickered.

“I think what she means,” Fritz said trying to clarify, “Is that we need someone to manage our finances and none of us has any idea where to turn.”

“Consider it taken care of,” Cliff said.

“I’m going to be the one with the least to do around here - surrounded by all these healthy specimens as I am. Will it be alright if I volunteer at the clinic or some such place?” Mary asked.

“This is your life, now. You can make whatever plans you want,” Cliff tried to explain.

“There is one thing I’d like you to all to agree not to bother,” Johnny stood and said all quite seriously. The others looked at him expectantly. “My basketball court up in the attic.”

“You have a basketball court up in the attic?” Zeke asked in obvious amazement.

“Oops. I suppose I may have failed to mention that during these past ten years since I put it together.”

It was cause for laughter and head shaking. Fritz responded.

“Well, if you insist, we’ll do our best not to disturb it. But in return it only seems fair that you agree to continue to return here and celebrate at least some of the holidays with us.”

“That’s the idea about the attic – for me and my someday son to use when we’re here. Dad and I have already decided that you guys are about the only family we have left, so you can depend on us to be pestering you every time there’s a red date on the calendar.” He looked at his father and then at Mary and continued. “I somehow get the idea that Dad will find other reasons to visit up here a lot more often than that. What’s that saying? In search of some ‘Mary’ old times.”

Mary blushed and the others clapped. Cliff playfully pounded his son’s shoulder who then feigned great pain as he continued.

“There is one more thing about such stuff. I vote that we do away with the dress code for dinner and that we move the time up to something reasonable like six.”

Cliff responded.

“Your guardian-until-you’re-twenty-one will take that under advisement. But this evening, coat and tie at eight.”

* * *

At five the phone rang. It was William for Masters. He took the call in the sitting room. Reports were in from his detective regarding the gear box and the carpet. The gear mechanism was part of a construction set and was powered from a step-down transformer as are many low voltage electronic devices. Two toys had been purchased in the Buffalo outlet. One taken with the customer, who paid cash, and one shipped to someone. The address was simply Occupant, 345 Haven, Geneseo, NY.

“Dollars to donuts that’s Cliff’s place,” he said, thinking out loud. “Would it have been meant for Cliff or Johnny? Would it have been purchased by one of them? Which? Why to ‘occupant’? There seems to be no description of the customer available. Who else might have had it shipped? For what purpose?”

He asked William to arrange for and execute two search warrants. It would be taken care of immediately.

At five fifteen Sheriff Davis called. The analysis of the belt from the power steering mechanism in Cliff’s parents’ car was complete. It would be faxed immediately along with preliminary findings on the fertilizer samples and the site report on Callahan’s death. The DNA testing on the hair and such was to be done in Syracuse and the samples had already been flown there. They seemed to have received the Ray Masters rush to the head of the line treatment, and preliminary comparison with his chief suspect would be ready in the morning.

Johnny brought the faxes to Masters.

“I didn’t read them but I really, really wanted to,” the boy reported taking a seat as if hoping his honesty on the matter might have earned him a quick look.

“Thanks for doing the leg work. I’m glad you didn’t take a peek. You don’t need that added responsibility on your shoulders. By the way what is your street address?”

“In Geneseo? 345 Haven. Coming for a visit or maybe, as Baby Faced Ray - the second story cat burglar - you’re planning a robbery?”

Masters playfully motioned him away with repeated flips of the back of his hand.

“Go, boy! Shoo! Run Benny up and down the stairs or

something. I need time alone.”

Masters received, the sigh, but Johnny got to his feet, dramatically unhurriedly, and ambled out of the room. Masters had just been disciplined!

By five thirty Masters had digested the report regarding the belt. It was just as he had suspected. He called William back and had one of the warrants amended to look for an additional item. William chuckled at the other end of the line.

“What?” Masters asked, smiling to himself.

“I have to assume that, except for the proof, you’ve had this thing wrapped up since yesterday.”

“Guilty, I’m afraid. It seems like it’s always that waiting around for the pesky evidence that slows me down. Let’s set up a meeting out here with all the principals for ten tomorrow morning. No, better make it noon. I may not have the DNA report by ten. I’ll be ready to lay it all out. There are three killers involved. Bring deputies and cuffs.”

The conversation was soon over and Masters closed his eyes to think. The report on the Callahan murder painted a confusing picture. The burned-out bulb that the old man had presumably removed from the ceiling fixture bore Cliff’s finger prints. A glass in the sink, there, recently used for milk, bore Johnny’s prints. There were also fresh tire tracks in the dirt driveway - freshly dampened from what appeared to have been Callahan’s window washing earlier in the day. Callahan didn’t own a car so the case might catch a break there. If they matched the tires on Cliff’s car, the State’s Attorney was ready to make arrests.

Masters called the Sheriff.

“Jeff. I really need to eye ball the evidence from the Callahan crime scene - the glass, the bulb, and the cast of the tire tracks. How can that be accomplished in the shortest amount of time?”

“Actually, they are all in a lock box right here on my desk. I’ll run them up the hill myself. Ten minutes?”

“Thanks. I owe you.”

“Probably not, really.”

Masters hung up. He needed to speak with the three, over-night body guards. He tried redial but got a recorded operator cheerfully making suggestions about things he could

do to make a call correctly. He punched in the Sheriff's number again. He got the secretary.

"Ray Masters here. I need to speak with Guy and the other two officers who worked overnight bodyguard detail up here at Fairfield Heights last night."

"All off duty now. I can contact them and have them call you."

"If you will, please. Apologize for me about the intrusion, but it is urgent."

Within the next ten minutes he had completed all three conversations.

"Guy reported that except for the time Johnny was in the shower, from about eleven thirty to a little after midnight, he had him in sight the entire shift. Cliff's man reported an identical scenario for Cliff. The coincidence of timing seemed a bit odd to the old detective, though conceivable. Bernice's bodyguard reported that she, the bodyguard, stayed in the small sitting room off the bedroom - Bernice preferred that her protection remain between her and the door. So, she hadn't actually seen Bernice most of the night although her radio was playing and upon questioning she remembered that it had changed stations several times during the eleven to one a.m. period. There was but one door to the suite and Bernice had not exited it all night."

Johnny and Benny returned.

"Just popped in to say I'm sorry about leaving in such a snit - Great Grandma's word so I figured you understand it. I'm just bummed out about everything and it was when I was with you that my smile finally just wore out. That ever happen for you?"

"Oh yes. This old smile has worn out many a time. The good news is that it always bounces back."

It was then Masters noticed their matching T-shirts.

"What's with the big 'FP' on the tee's?" he asked, then suggested, "Funny People? Fancy Pants? Funky Poultry?"

"No, Fairfield Panthers, see. Black shirts with white letters. I monogrammed 'em myself."

"And a fine little seamstress you seem to be," Masters said examining the hand stitched letters on the boy's shirt.

"Benny's a pretty good B-ball player, you know. I gave

him a no cut contract.”

“So, you were the seamstress?”

“Yeah.”

“Big stitches. Manly, I suppose,” Masters said.

“Big because the only needle I could find was humongous.” He indicated a length of some six inches with his hands. Masters’ interest was piqued.

“And you came by that dainty little instrument, how?”

“Found it in Dad’s sock drawer. A whole little box of them. I selected one with a gentle curve. Didn’t even know they made curved needles. Makes a lot of sense, actually.”

“And that box is where, now?”

“You need your socks darned?” The boy giggled before moving on from his playfulness. “I left it in Dad’s drawer. Haven’t the foggiest idea why he has them - needles not socks. I’ve never seen them before. But you like the shirts, right?”

“They are magnificent! Feel free to go and do whatever it is that good panthers do in new T-shirts.”

“We’ll be up in the ‘JJH’ arena, then.”

Masters would not ask. They left. He went in search of Cliff who was paging through one of Farley’s newspapers in the living room.

“Cliff. Got a quandary I hope you can clarify for me.”

“Sure.”

He put the paper aside. Masters remained standing.

“Strange as this may sound it involves your sock drawer. May we go have a look together.”

“You’re right. It sounds strange. I know argyles aren’t in, but I’ve always favored them.” It was an attempt at humor, and received an appreciative smile from Masters.

In his room, Masters asked Cliff to open it. Masters poked around, moving a half dozen pairs of balled socks this way and that. Presently he pointed to a small, flat, wooden, box.

“That would be what interests me, Cliff. Can you tell me about it?”

“No. I mean I’ve never seen it before. What is it? Why is it there?”

With his handkerchief, Masters carefully removed the box and set it on top of the dresser. He opened it. Inside, as advertised, were a half dozen upholstery needles, each one sitting in its own, felt-lined, groove.

"Fancy," Cliff said with a shrug again demonstrating his ignorance.

"Yes. Old - antique, even I imagine," Master said.

"They are somehow important?"

"Perhaps," Masters said.

"How did you know you'd find it here?"

"Johnny needed a needle and for some unexplainable reason he felt your sock drawer might provide one."

"At home I keep a few sewing things in my top dresser drawer. I imagine that's what led him here."

Masters nodded and slid the box into a plastic evidence bag taken from his jacket pocket.

"Okay, then. I appreciate your help. You can get back to your paper."

"A nap sounds better. You go on."

Masters left. He met the Sheriff in the hall at the bottom of the stairs.

"Let's take that stuff into the dining room. We can use the table in there," Masters suggested.

The metal box the sheriff had brought was unlocked and the contents removed. In turn, Masters lifted each item and examined it.

"I assume you haven't yet identified the car from which these tread marks came."

"Right. We have no place to start."

"You do now. I'd bet my afternoon snack they'll match tires from Cliff Fairfield's Chrysler."

"He's a part of this?"

"At least his car is, I imagine. If it is a match, go over the car from stem to stern." Masters returned the bulb and the glass to the box. "Here, Jeff. I have one more piece of evidence I need your lab guys to go over," he said as he handed over the needle case. "It's probably reaching too far to assume there will be prints. Johnny's are expected. There may be something useful though. Just let them have at it, okay?"

“They love it when you say that. Makes them feel like they have your stamp of approval, I think.”

“Well, they do that. They’ve been extraordinary up to this point.”

“I’ll tell them that - after they finish.”

“After?”

“If I told them before hand, their heads would become so swelled that they wouldn’t be able to see through their microscopes.”

The Sheriff left to arrange for a tire print match. Masters headed for the kitchen where he joined Johnny and Benny across the table from a platter of freshly deep fried cake donuts sporting raspberry icing.

“Coffee, milk, tea?” Sarah asked.

“I’ll take my cue from the guys here and go with milk on this one.”

“I thought you two would be up shivering the timbers in the attic,” he said making small talk.

“Shivering is the operative word up there,” Benny said intending it only partly as a joke.

“Gotta carb-up first. Need lots of quick energy.” Johnny said ignoring his bodyguard’s remark.

The three adults chuckled.

“What?” Johnny asked looking around the circle of smiling faces.

“You just never seem to be lacking energy, quick or otherwise,” Benny explained.

“That’s good, right. I’m fifteen. Supposed to be that way, huh?”

The others nodded and the boy seemed satisfied.

“I have a more serious question to ask you, Johnny,” Masters said.

“Shoot.”

Johnny seemed interested as he stuffed the second half of a doughnut into his mouth.

“It’s a yes or no answer that I’m looking for.”

“Okay.” He appeared intrigued and set his milk down, looking directly into Masters’ face.

“Did you remain inside this building the entire time Guy was here last night?”

“Yes.”

The answer was delivered with firm sincerity and force rather than with the tone of a question Masters had expected.

“Okay then. A less serious question. If you needed to - how shall I word this - sneak out of this place at night, how could it be done?”

Johnny smiled sheepishly.

“You know something or are you fishing?”

“Neither. My question is genuine.”

The boy nodded.

“Can this just stay among the four of us?”

“Unless it presents some clear and present danger to you or someone else,” Masters said.

The others nodded.

“That stipulation may be up for interpretation but okay. Ever since I was a little kid I’ve been going out through a window in my bedroom and climbing down the trellis. I thought you were referring to Thanksgiving when I . . . OOPS!”

“Just tell me this,” Masters asked, his eyes twinkling. “Was she pretty?”

“Oh, gosh yes? Shoot!! Double oops on that I guess. You are very sneaky for a man of your generation, you know.”

“I sneaked down - and up - a few trellises in my day as well.”

“Were they pretty?”

“Oh, gosh yes!” Masters’ big tummy jiggled uncontrollably. Sarah poured another round of milk. Some things don’t change much from generation to generation.

CHAPTER EIGHT
Day Three: Noonish
The Bad Guys Get Theirs

The tire treads matched Cliff's Chrysler. In addition to that, a small bag of fertilizer was found in the car's glove compartment - the kind containing the poison that showed up in Bernice's orange juice. The DNA reports had arrived and confirmed Masters' suspicions. The stage was set.

By 11:45 most of the principals in the cases had congregated in the living room. Fritz had arranged seats in three rows facing the draped windows to the south. A library table had been moved there for Masters' use.

Cliff and Johnny sat to the right side of the front row. It was strange seeing them without bodyguards. Sheriff Davis and William Milburn sat next to them. The States Attorney and an assistant sat at the other end of the front row.

In the second row were Dora and Fritz, Zeke, Sarah, and Mary who opted to sit with her longtime friends. Behind them sat several deputies including Donny who had asked permission to be there.

Bernice arrived last, waltzing her way to a seat in the second row opposite the help. Her theatrical manner was clearly an attempt to play down the significance of the meeting.

At noon, Masters entered from the hall and strode to stand beside the table in front of the drapes. He looked out across those gathered and smiled, acknowledging with a short nod those with whom he was acquainted. Johnny beamed. Cliff fidgeted. Bernice filed her nails and yawned. Sarah

twisted the ribbon dangling from her hair. Fritz patted Dora's hand. Donny prepared to take notes.

"We are here to consider a number of tragic deaths - murders - some recent and some many years past. Some of the perpetrators were themselves killed. Others are here with us today.

"Yesterday I mentioned too many of you that there were seven murders that I would be addressing here. It now appears there are eight and I will begin with that final murder. A man by the name of Jeb Callahan was found dead in his home yesterday morning. He was Dora's biological father, and I extend my sincere condolences to you, Dora."

She acknowledged his remark with a nod and faint smile.

"He was killed by a swift twist to his neck from behind. The murder was essentially senseless because the killer had no grudge against the man, and nothing to gain personally from his death. It was carried out as a last-minute attempt at distraction - to implicate Cliff and Johnny thereby suggesting their likely involvement in other crimes.

"A light bulb with Cliff's prints and a glass with Johnny's were planted. As spur of the moment, cover-up, crimes so often are, blatant errors were made. The burned-out bulb, taken from here at the Heights after Cliff had changed out many of them the other morning, was one that had not been manufactured for several years. It had been imported from France to fit the chandelier here in this room - a metric base size that could not have come from the light fixture in Callahan's house. The drinking glass was one from a set here also. It may have looked generic, but the imprint on the bottom certifies it as being from a one of kind set made for the Heights by one of Jasper's business associates years ago. It could not have been from Callahan's kitchen.

"The tread impressions in the damp dirt of the driveway were from Cliff's car. But again, it was a scam. On the night of the crime the car was parked outside here at the top of the hill. The killer took the car, silently rolled it down the steep lane, jump started it at the bottom of the hill, and drove to Callahan's apartment. The driveway was watered down with the hose so tire tread impressions would be left behind. After

the crime, the car was returned here. With its lights out and traveling at a quiet snail's pace, it re-entered the grounds at approximately one a.m. Although the inside of the car had been meticulously wiped clean of prints - always a suspicious red flag - the area in which the jump start had been performed yielded several clear prints. The murderer also left a tell-tale, very personal signature behind and I will detail that and identify the person in a few minutes.

"Three of the other deaths occurred in automobile accidents. In the case of Winston and Vera Fairfield, the parents of Bernice and Cliff, the belt from the power steering assembly had been filed thin just before the car would be traversing a series of steep, winding hills. The belt broke on cue and the car plummeted into a lake killing both passengers. Again, that same telltale, personal signature was left behind on the belt. There can be no doubt about that killer's identity.

"The car that Cliff's wife, Johnny's mother, was driving at the time of her accident had its brake fluid line punctured. It was made to appear as though it had just gradually worn away as it rubbed against a nearby part of the undercarriage. Pictures of the copper tubing and the adjacent area prove beyond any doubt that it had been tampered with for the specific purpose of causing the car to careen out of control down the long, steep, hill between Centerton and Geneseo. The plan worked well - the brilliant physician, loving wife, and mother was killed. It is a second kind of evidence that links that killer to that crime. Three strands of hair were left behind. The DNA matches that of the person I will shortly accuse. Could the hair have not gotten there by chance? That chance would be so small as to not even leave the reasonable doubt defense open for consideration. I will name that killer and speak of motivation shortly.

"Dear old Farley. He was undoubtedly deranged but having had the opportunity to read through his journals and his Will, I've also come to know him as a loving, compassionate, deeply caring human being. Every day he did something he hoped would make the World a better place. Bless you Farley Fairfield. He was killed for one purpose, I believe - to shorten the list of Jasper's heirs. It was an appalling act of shameless greed. The killer was clever, brilliantly clever in fact, but had

counted on that rather than on an adequate knowledge of police procedure to get away with the crime. Farley was found at the bottom of the elevator shaft at a little after one o'clock. The condition of the body at that time made it appear it had been dead four to five hours, which would have made the time of death between eight and eight thirty. It was a time the killer had arranged to be seen elsewhere by numerous people. What had happened, however, was that Farley had been somehow lured into the basement and killed - again with a quick snap of the neck from behind - and the body dragged into the old coal bin - a storage room at the west end. Unheated and with the coal shoot door most likely propped open it was twelve degrees in there. That effectively lowered the surface temperature of the body to make it appear he had been dead for a longer time than had, in fact, been the case. The killer's lack of knowledge about a coroner's usual practice in such cases spoiled the plan. The coal dust on the underside of his person gave the operation away. But none of that identifies the murderer. Farley's killer left a piece of physical evidence behind. A small piece of broken fingernail was lodged behind Farley's ear in the process of struggling to grasp his head. We have a DNA match that conclusively identifies that murderer.

"Chester was apparently the real prize in the killer's grand plan. His death served multiple purposes. Most obviously, it reduced the number of heirs by one. But the aspect of his death that was savored the most by this killer was revenge and that will become clear in a moment.

"There are two clues to the killer's identity. The device, which had been installed in the back of Chester's chair, depended on a small, step-down gear box - one that provided tremendous power and a very low axle rotation speed. It was found to be from a child's construction set, imported from Taiwan and sold in the States by only one small, toy store chain. The murderer, this time planning ahead for the possibility that the source of that mechanism might be discovered, paid cash for two sets. One was taken by the killer and the other was sent to Cliff's home address. The cash payment made that transaction untraceable but cleverly implicated Cliff and Johnny.

"This provides an investigator with several interesting possibilities. Did Cliff and/or Johnny arrange it that way to make it appear they were being set up or did the killer actually arrange it for the purpose of establishing a frame? A recent warrant-based search of Cliff's home found one construction set in Johnny's room, complete with the gear mechanism. That, of course proves nothing by itself.

"The motor that operates the gear box is powered by a six-volt transformer which was not included in the set. Most households have extras from calculators, CD players and so on. The killer, however, unwisely returned to the toy store to complain about having to purchase it separately and then did so, paying for it with a credit card - either not thinking clearly in the heat of anger or assuming it could not be connected with the plan. It was the fuss that made that customer memorable to the store clerk and manager. A search of that person's home uncovered a construction set less the motor and gearbox, not conclusive proof, of course. If the set had been intact, however, it would have worked in that person's favor. It was the credit card receipt from the second purchase, complete with the serial number of the transformer that cinched the case. It was the transformer found in Chester's chair.

"The murder itself was committed by implanting his cigar with a half dozen fibers from a carpet - fibers that gave off poisonous fumes when burned. It was a rare carpet here in the states and very expensive. Of all the possible suspects, none currently has it in their homes, however one had it removed several years ago, after it was pulled from the market because of the danger it presented. A small remnant remained in a closet in that house.

"Just after Chester lit his cigar the killer was seen to pass his chair. That provided the opportunity to press the buttons that turned on the modified vibrator, which made it appear he was breathing, and the heating unit, which kept his body temperature high so it would appear he had just died whenever his body might be discovered. That was supposed to have been at the time Fritz usually awoke him and pointed him toward his room for the night but occurred sooner, due to the body's unplanned fall from the chair. In the commotion

surrounding the event, the killer switched off the electricity to the chair.

"That credit card, the hairs from underneath Winston's car, the fingerprints from Cliff's ignition, the fingernail in Farley's neck, the carpet fibers in Chester's cigar, and an as yet commercially unavailable, patented, seed-oil based lotion left at each of the crime scenes, all belong to the brilliant though thoroughly inept killer - Bernice Fairfield. The fact she thought gloves were unfeminine seems to have contributed to her downfall."

Bernice shrugged. "I gave it a shot. What the hell?"

Two deputies cuffed her and led her away.

Masters paused to let the buzz among those present, run its course. He then began again.

"Now to the deaths of Abigail and Jasper Fairfield. The clues to Abigail's murderer are clear. Those to Jasper's, though I was sure I understood, were less apparent until I read the final entry in his diary. I was directed to that diary by the odd wording of his Will - a document that remained in his words and handwriting. At the end of it, he referred to both himself and Abigail in the past tense. The stated purpose for the Will reading at this time had been to allow Jasper to be present with his heirs as his wishes were declared to them. That was merely a ruse. What exact purpose it served in his mind we will probably never fully understand.

"I will explain. Let me begin with Abigail's death. It was Jasper's habit to have Fritz deliver fresh brandy to her room every evening as she bathed, with the stipulation to Fritz that on the day of his death - Jasper's - the practice be stopped. Every evening Fritz faithfully exchanged the new carafe for the old and switched them back the following morning. At the time the practice began - some ten years ago, as well as I can determine - Jasper poisoned the brandy in Abigail's carafe - the one that remained in her room during the day. If not replaced, she would drink it and die. That, Jasper had determined would happen at the time of his own death. We know the carafe had contained poison for a long time because the lab found that through the years, the poison had etched itself into the inner surface of the carafe.

"The motivation became clear in his diary. He had

believed for many years that Abigail and Fritz were having an affair. He assumed that once he was dead they would feel free to make it public and even, perhaps, marry. That, to the thinking of a man raised in the era in which he grew up, would be the ultimate slap in the face. Why not just kill her then and get it over with? He saw how miserable she was and figured living in that state provided a more severe sort of punishment than death. Also, he was unsure how to go about killing her and not be found out. He was clever with money but in few other ways. Unlike Bernice, he understood that.

"So, on the night of Jasper's death, Fritz did not exchange the carafes and Abigail drank the poison. In Jasper's mind, there was a wonderful irony in having Fritz, the supposed rogue, be the one who allowed his lover to die. Making him live on after her death knowing of the part he played in his beloved's death was to be the man's eternal punishment. Of course, none of that, as it turned out, was the actual case.

"Finally, let me deal with Jasper's death. Forensics established that he was suffocated with one of his goose down pillows, between 10:45 and 11:15. The act was akin to suicide. Jasper had but a few months to live. He was weak and in terrible pain. He was depressed and ready to die. On the night of his death, he took a multiple dose of muscle relaxants - so much that his already weakened strength was additionally reduced. He did not want to be able to resist his attacker. He called Abigail to his room, instructed her as to how to proceed. She held the pillow over his face until he was dead. She then went back to her room, eventually drinking the poisoned brandy as already explained.

"Why would he require that final act from Abigail rather than just drinking poison himself? Probably to prove one last time, to her and to him, that he had absolute power over her - at least when she was in his presence.

"Why would she follow such directions? Several reasons, I assume, though again we will probably never fully understand. Abigail existed without an identity. By that I mean Jasper had removed all purpose from her life. He controlled what she did, when she did it and what she was not allowed to do. At some point, he may have even thought he

was doing her a kindness by removing the kinds of responsibilities from her life that he so despised in his own. She sipped her tonic all day long, remaining inebriated most of the time. She despised Jasper for the life he had orchestrated for her. It was some mix of all those elements fortified by her drink-clouded state, that led her to blindly, and on a moment's notice, follow his instructions. The plan was outlined in Jasper's journal. The large gem stone had been removed from her bracelet by Jasper some months ago. He held it tightly in his hand as she killed him, as a symbol connecting his death with her. I imagine that by implicating Abigail in that way, he was really trying to protect all of you innocent folks who might otherwise have been suspected in his murder.

"Jasper had substituted aspirin for his seizure medicine, I assume for the purpose of speeding his death.

"So, Abigail killed Jasper at his own insistence and Jasper arranged Abigail's subsequent death."

"That still leaves us with a few loose ends."

"Bernice has apparently been mentally ill for many years. She needed to be the center of the universe, which she had been until Cliff arrived in her home. That event not only led her to despise him but also her parents. She had always believed they had wished she had been a male. Once a son arrived she felt her position in the family slipping away, displacing her with what she just assumed was the male they wished she had been.

"Later, she became pregnant by Chester. Who knows why. As an attempt to find some adult male who would accept her as she was, perhaps. If so, the pregnancy spoiled that plan and her hatred for men burgeoned. Her grand revenge - spanning at least the last ten years - included killing her parents for the reasons previously outlined; killing Cliff's wife, which she saw as the ultimate punishment for her brother; killing Chester, which served two purposes - revenge for the pregnancy and subsequent rejection, and to increase her share of the inheritance; killing Farley merely to reduce the number of heirs; and attempting to kill Cliff with the carbon monoxide - where she again left behind her tell-tale lotion on the new thermostat and the pillow in Cliff's chimney.

"A nebulous impression about the bell on the elevator

had been tormenting me. I had difficulty placing it. Eventually it added credence to my assumption that it had been Bernice who tried to kill Cliff. When Bernice left me from our talk here in the living room on the night of that attempt, she took the elevator upstairs - supposedly to her suit on the second floor. The bell rang only once at the second floor meaning it had not stopped and the door had not opened there. Presently, it rang again - once - and then twice as it opened on the third floor. Several minutes passed. That was the period in which - from the unoccupied room - she slid the previously prepared plywood into place in the chimney and began directing the fumes into Cliff's room. The bell eventually rang again, signaling her exiting of the elevator back down on the second floor. I remember also noting that it took her several minutes to enter the elevator after she left me - a thirty second walk at the most from where we had been speaking. It was during that time that she attempted to tamper with the setback thermostat in the hall.

"I have to assume it was her intention to leave Johnny unharmed to set him up as an alternative suspect and, as the original plan was scripted, to punish him for being the sole male heir, by making him an orphan. She thought in twisted ways.

"Bernice was an athletic woman, even holding a bachelor's degree in physical education. On the night of Callahan's death, she slipped out a window and descended the trellis while her bodyguard sat watch at the door to her suite - the trellis was covered with traces of her lotion. She had recorded several hours of late night radio on a tape player and ingeniously changed from station to station to make it appear she was surely in the room the whole time.

"The attempt on her life was a hoax designed by Bernice to take her off the suspect list and to again implicate either or both Cliff and Johnny. Once the drink arrived at the table, she asked Chester to get up and pull the drapes to keep the sun out of her eyes. She had taken that unusual seat for that express purpose - a place where the sun shone into the eyes of the person seated there. With Chester as the only other person in the room and having arranged for him to turn his back on her, she dumped the poison into her glass, later

disposing of the small envelope in the wastebasket by the door. Later, she planted a small sack of the poisonous fertilizer compound in Cliff's car.

"It can be pointed out that she also planted the antique, upholstery, needles in Cliff's dresser drawer. The box fit perfectly into a metal casing which was found among her possessions. She first used one of the needles, threaded with the carpet fibers, to insert them into one of Chester's cigars - one which she kept. During her uncharacteristic playfulness with him at dinner that night, she exchanged that cigar for the one he had brought in his shirt pocket.

"After shaking hands with her, I came to expect that if she were the killer, she would have left a trail of that horrendously sticky hand lotion she invented. I cleaned my hand with my hanky and sent it to the lab to establish a basis for comparison.

"I have to suspect that she had plans for killing Abigail and Jasper as well, but Jasper beat her to it. That probably both infuriated her and disturbed her, wondering who was horning in on her plan of revenge and greed - the plan that would make her the undisputed, reigning, Grand Dame of the Fairfield Family. I'm sure she believed that the respect, which she had spent her lifetime pursuing, would automatically follow.

Cliff and Johnny sat crying, a father's loving arm around his son, their heads together. Dora comforted Fritz. Sarah wept openly, her face buried in her frilly apron. Zeke blinked repeatedly, looking from object to object around the room. Mary approached Cliff, sitting beside him and taking his hand in hers - being there for him but not intruding.

Masters concluded.

"It is a sad day, of course, but also a happy - triumphant - one, I believe. There is no doubt in my mind that the new era in the Fairfield history - the Cliff and Johnny era - will be as wonderful and exciting and life affirming as Jasper's era was miserable, hurtful, and depressing."

Tears were dried and heads began to nod. Smiles gradually transformed their cheerless faces, and optimistic conversation promised wonder-filled and satisfying new tomorrows at Fairfield Heights.

Only one truly important question remained: How was Johnny going to come up with that thirty bucks?