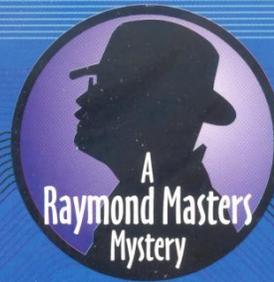


Four Murders, one robbery,
an attempted murder— a
typical Raymond Masters
Vacation!



The Murders at Terrapin Island

by

Garrison Flint



The Murders at Terrapin Island

A Raymond Masters Mystery

BOOK TEN

by
Garrison Flint

The Family of Man Press

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Chapter One

Day one: Saturday Afternoon

Raymond Masters was *not* a sailor at heart. Bathtubs gave him the willies and hot tubs – well just forget them! Although the twenty-two foot cabin cruiser on which he was speeding northeast from Mackinaw City appeared seaworthy, the old detective still felt compelled to consider the possibility of being swamped there in the western end of Lake Huron. He convinced himself that his considerable bulk would provide the necessary buoyancy to keep him and his young companion afloat until a rescue craft could arrive, and briefly envisioned seventeen year old Spence sitting atop his ample abdomen, paddling the two of them toward shore. It was worthy of a chuckle but not an explanation to the young man's curious glance.

Spence - Quentin Xavier Spencer, on his birth certificate - was the grandson of Mary Spencer, the widowed owner of a small hotel, the Lancaster Inn, on *Terrapin Island*. He was the son of her estranged only child, Lawrence, who lived his own quite separate life on a well-appointed house boat moored in a beautiful cove on the eastern edge of the island. Divorced early on, Lawrence lived the single life and spent his time composing. His music was sought by pop stars the world over. He made a very good living and pursued a quiet lifestyle. The how and why of the problem with his mother was not for others to know. His son was his life and they had lived together there since the boy was nine, when his mother died.

Masters retreated to the Lancaster regularly when he felt that the requirements of the real world were becoming more demanding than he wished. He was, after all, retired some seven years and the law enforcement community was just going to have to learn to get along without him.

Spence offered Masters the wheel, but the old gentleman declined, being content to stand along side the youngster and enjoy the breathtaking scenery – shadowless at midday. The breeze ruffled his gray hair and tugged relentlessly at his flowered, orange, Hawaiian print shirt.

Just north of *Mackinac Island* they veered east north east, passing the sizable *Bois Blanc Island* to the south, and headed for open water. *Terrapin Island* – owned by the Spencer's for more than forty years - was no more than half a mile wide and half again as long. It rose high out of the lake, resembling the steep back of a terrapin. Its several prominences resembled feet – two at each end – and a long narrow natural land dock approximating the amphibian's head between the feet to the east – thus its name. The Inn sat atop the ridge, some hundred feet above the lake's surface.

Eleven miles out into the lake from the south edge of Michigan's northern peninsula, the little island had no electricity except for that generated by an ever whirling windmill which Lawrence used exclusively at his boat. Unlike many of the deserted, rock-laden, islands in the area, *Terrapin* had lush, evergreen foliage and an abundance of natural gas, which was used for lighting, heating and refrigeration.

The closest town – north, across the water - was Cedarville - too small to be on most maps yet one of the oldest settlements on that south shore. It provided all the staples the Inn required and twice weekly crossings were made by the Inn's little yacht to obtain the necessities, and pick up the mail and papers. Like Masters, most lodgers were picked up at Mackinaw City – more convenient and far closer for most visitors from the United States than was Cedarville. Communication by cell phones had replaced the old “ham radio” arrangement Mary's husband had used for years.

The *Lancaster Inn* was strictly a retreat – no entertainment other than three wonderful meals a day and a table of assorted goodies available at all times. There were trails to walk if one were so moved and small boats to sail or row if you enjoyed the water. Mostly, it was a quiet, pleasant, haven where the guests respected one another's privacy. With only four, small, (very expensive) suits, it always provided a comfortable, relaxing, quiet, experience.

As the island came into view dead ahead, Spence pointed. “Thar she blows,” he said.

The young man's face lit up. It was clearly a special place to him. Masters had known Spence since he was nine. Although by no means shy, he was a boy of few words – always choice and frequently witty. The two got along well and looked forward to seeing each other. They corresponded irregularly – often after Spence had finished the newest Flint mystery. He would include his suggestions for Masters the next time such and such came up in a case. Masters would thank him by return mail and tuck the ideas away for future reference as they were often not fully inappropriate. His grandmother was his teacher and he always topped the norms on his yearly examinations by the state. He was an excellent musician but his passion – aside from girls who were generally unavailable on Terrapin Island – was to become a naturalist.

Reservations at the Inn were unique – offered only in two week blocks and paid for in advance whether you used all the time or not. Except for two weeks at Christmas, the iced-in *Lancaster* was closed from just after Thanksgiving to Valentine's Day. Masters had booked his customary last two weeks in July – warm days, cool nights, and plenty of sunshine. His plan was to read, commune with nature, enjoy Mary and Spence, and relax (well, he'd undoubtedly also nibble his way through every waking hour!).

After executing a wide circle to enable the boat to approach the island from the east, they pulled into the dock, not far from the houseboat. Lawrence was there to meet them, taking the tie lines and securing them to the posts. He walked with a limp and his right hand was not entirely useful – the remnants of polio as a child according to Spence. He was a good father and was always there (and thankful) when Spence returned with the boat. Spence helped Masters onto the dock and then hugged his father – not a ‘*Hi. See you later hug by requirement,*’ but a warm, lingering, ‘*I love you, Dad, and I'm really glad to see you,*’ sort of hug. It was returned in kind.

“Look what I caught off Mackinac,” Spence said holding his arm out toward Masters. “Took heavy line, I'll tell you, but I think it'll take first prize.”

He and Masters sparred playfully before the old detective shook hands

and spoke with Lawrence.

“Only one year’s passed and the lad has grown a foot.”

It had been a clear exaggeration, but Spence would not ignore the opening.

“And let me tell you it’s pretty damn awkward trying to get around on *three* feet.”

Lawrence raised his eyebrows in response to his son’s profanity.

Spence shrugged his shoulders. “It just seemed necessary to provide the required impact.”

They let it go. Spence re-boarded the boat and handed up the luggage. They then walked the wooden dock toward land and piled the suitcases into the back of a golf cart. As Spence prepared to drive Masters up the narrow trail to the Inn, Lawrence had a final reminder for the boy.

“Still owe yourself an hour’s practice time, remember.”

Spence nodded and the cart moved forward.

“I assume that’s about the guitar,” Masters said.

“Yeah. Still classical. Dad says it’s up to me about practice now that I’m practically grown up but we have this deal. Month by month I sign an agreement with myself about practicing. I decide if I’m still serious about it for just one more month and if I am I agree to an hour a day on the tough stuff – the make progress stuff. I think it’s a good arrangement. And dad never lets me slough off – if I’ve signed it. He’s probably the greatest dad there’s ever been, you know?”

He looked over at Masters. It had been a serious question – one that required positive agreement from Masters and the boy maintained his glance until he received it.

“Yes. You’re so fortunate to have both him and your one of a kind grandmother.”

It garnered a big smile, another fleeting glance toward Masters, and a deliberate nod.

“I hope I can convince you to play for me from time to time while I’m here.”

“I’m always up for a friendly audience. Just say when. My summer days are pretty free. I make the run into Cedarville twice a week – sometimes more often if I’ve been able to scrounge up a date. I pick up new lodgers down at Mackinaw. I help Paddy at the dock when he needs an extra hand and mow and weed when Amos gets behind with the grounds. This has been a great place to grow up. Just wish the help got along a bit better, you know? (That time it did not require a response.)

“They still not on speaking terms?” Masters chuckled.

“I guess they never will be. I can’t understand it. They’ve each always been nice to me – in their own ways. Just can’t stand each other. I suppose they *are* a self-centered and somewhat bitter lot, when it comes right down to it. Could be that’s why they’re each so good at what they do. Sometimes, though, it’s like a pack of little kids, each one afraid that Gram will like one of the others best. I suppose it’s a wonder the place has survived this long. Why Gramps hired them’s a *mystery* – Oh, pardon *that* word. You’re on vacation.”

Masters smiled and tried to move the conversation away from the one

downside of the island paradise.

“So what wonderful things are there to do on a date in beautiful Cedarville, Michigan?”

“Find a private spot and make out. There’s not much in the way of entertainment there if that’s what you mean. Eat supper at Jake’s Restaurant and then go make out. Not complaining, you understand. Kissing girls has become one of the most important things in my life the past few years.”

“As I recall you had a pretty good start on it even at fourteen.”

“Much to the chagrin of my dad and gram, I’m afraid.” He flashed his endearing smile then turned more serious. “Some days it’s just hard to think about anything else.”

It was not a turn in conversation Masters was prone to pursue. He’d try still another tack.

“How is your grandmother, these days?”

“Full of life like always. When she heard from you last month, she immediately redecorated your rooms. Hope I’m still able to do stuff like that when I’m old.”

“Old? Mary is three years *younger* than I am, my boy! What do you mean, Old?”

“Sorry. ‘*Mature*’ is surely the word I was really searching for.”

Mischievously, he crossed his fingers in plain sight on the steering wheel, began to whistle, and in an obvious gesture checked out Masters from the corner of his eye.

They were still chuckling as they came to a stop in front of the beautiful old, three-story, log and stone Inn. The smell of burning wood proclaimed the fireplace within. Masters inhaled through his nose, clearly relishing *the scent of the wild*, as he had been known to call it.

“I laid logs in the fireplace in your sitting room. I remember how much you like fires – even on *hot* July nights.”

“I appreciate your thoughtfulness, but how you can possibly classify fifty degree July nights as hot, is still beyond me, Spence.”

“I guess it’s relative,” he grinned. “Now, those twenty degree below zero nights in January *do* deserve a fire.”

He picked up the suitcases and followed Masters across the porch toward the massive, wood-plank, double doors.

Once inside, Mary hurried toward them, her arms characteristically open but distress written across her face.

“Ray. Dear Ray. I’m so glad you’re here.”

She leaned to one side and kissed Spence on his cheek, immediately returning her attention to Masters.

“There has just been a terrible accident – at least I want to believe it’s an accident. Paddy O’Hara, our dockman, was just found floating - dead - in the south cove.

“Paddy?” Spence asked, stunned, sorrow clear in his question and on his face. “What happened?”

“I have no idea. I’ve called the authorities – the county sheriff provides our

law enforcement – not that we’ve ever needed it. Nothing like this has ever happened out here before.”

“Where is the body?” Masters asked.

“The Ashcroft’s – Blake and Betty – suite two – found him while they were on a walk along the beach about an hour ago – maybe two, now. Blake and William, the butler, moved him to the dock house where Paddy lives – lived. Oh, My!”

“Better get me down there, Spence,” Masters said.

“Yes sir. The cart goes lots faster down the trail than up.”

Just what Masters wanted – a wild ride, plummeting down the hillside with a hormone-distracted, seventeen year old male at the wheel! Being swamped back in the lake suddenly seemed an almost pleasant alternative.

Masters gripped the dash and they were off. Five minutes later they were at the dock house. William, the butler, who had been sitting in a chair on the deck, stood and came to meet them.

“You remember William, Mr. Masters.”

“Yes, certainly. William. Where’s the body?”

“Inside on the bed. Seemed the decent place to put him,” William answered, a hint of unexpected compassion in his voice.

“You may want to stay outside,” Masters cautioned Spence.

“No way! – that’s, no way, Sir!” came his determined and then hastily softened response. Had the circumstances been different it would have seemed humorous.

The three went inside. William stood some distance away. Spence accompanied Masters to the bedside. Masters spent some time looking here and there. He picked up a hand and looked at the skin and fingernails. He felt Paddy’s cheeks and neck. He brushed the hair back revealing a massive bruise covering most of the forehead. He felt the scalp and pulled the hairs apart to get a better look. He nodded to himself. He moved the head back and forth. He felt his way down each arm from shoulder to hand and again nodded.

“He died from a fall of considerable distance – fifty to seventy-five feet I’d say. I don’t recall a bluff anywhere on the island.”

It had been a question and Spence understood.

“There isn’t. The land slopes up from all four sides toward the ridge that runs down the center of the island from east to west. Maybe if he fell off the roof of the Inn to the ground, but that’s thirty-five feet tops and then how would he end up in the cove?”

“Not on his own, I can tell you that much. Both arms and his neck are broken. Undoubtedly massive internal damage. If he couldn’t have fallen into the lake he was somehow put there.”

“How long has he been dead do you think, Sir?” William asked. It seemed a strange inquiry from such a detached sort.

“Some time. How cold is the lake water this time of year?”

“Sixty five, maybe sixty eight degrees,” Spence answered.

“Then I’d say he probably died about midnight last night. I assume no one saw him around and about this morning.”

Spence and William looked at each other and shook their heads. Spence spoke:

“It’s out of the way, down here. The Terrapin’s right front leg conceals this area. It was the old dock before gramps put the new one in to the east. It was actually handier here, but too shallow for the larger yachts and generally has choppiest water. None of us has much reason to come down here anymore except to fuel up. Mostly just guests out for a private walk or to borrow a rowboat. Paddy liked it for all those reasons I guess – secluded, unbothered by the rest of us.”

“He was 61 yesterday, if that is of any consequence,” William offered, no real compassion in his tone.

“Only sixty one? The man looks seventy-five,” was Masters’ response. “Family?” he asked.

Again the other two looked at each other and shrugged their shoulders.

“I really can’t say,” William said. “We weren’t close. In fact, I simply couldn’t stand the man.” That sounded more like the William both Spence and Masters knew.

“I don’t know either. Gram may know,” Spence added, his speech still slowed by the shock of the sight before him.

“Shouldn’t we cover him with a sheet or something?” he added.

“Good idea,” Masters said, not that it really mattered but it would give the boy something constructive to contribute.

“Any enemies you know of? Let me revise that. Anybody you think would want to see him dead?”

The question was met with deliberative silence.

Masters tried again, addressing William: “May I ask how you knew yesterday was his birthday – you two not being close as you say?”

“Last evening - about ten thirty, I’d say - I found him sitting on the side steps of the back porch at the Inn. I was taking out trash. He had clearly been drinking but he didn’t seem intoxicated - at least that didn’t enter my mind at the time. He announced it was his 61st and indicated he was out of drink, by turning a beer bottle upside down. Well, I figured even the worst of men deserved drink on their birthdays, so I slipped up to my quarters and got him what I had - a fifth of vodka. I wished him a happy birthday and returned inside. It was the last I saw of him.”

The sound of a sputtering, backfiring, slowly dying boat broke the air.

“Tommy,” Spence announced. “He’s a deputy - not much of one, but he gets the assignments nobody else will take. He’s a good natured sort - I like him - but he’s a little short in the gray matter department. He fancies himself a boat mechanic and he’s fixed up - well, almost fixed up - that old run-about. It has what you might call a distinctive clatter to it.”

Masters shuttered but was soon resigned to his familiar fate - another ‘nice’, but less than adept cop.

“I’ll go tie him up,” Spence said and left. He was soon back with the stereotypic Barney Fife of copdom. (Seems Masters had encountered his look-alike some years before at another country Inn.*) He was an ever smiling,

nervous little man in his early thirties, thin as a rail, with half his shirt tail out and khaki pants secured high above the bottom of his department issue black tie with a narrow, white, leather belt (clearly *not* department issue!). He removed his crumpled, military style hat and held it to his chest as he extended his hand toward Masters.

“Deputy Tommy Prescott at your service. I understand from Mary on the phone that you are the famous Raymond Masters. Spence here has kept me up to date on all your cases. Be glad to give you a few pointers from my own career when you have time.”

Spence produced an uncontrollable snicker even amid the overriding somberness of the occasion.

“I appreciate the offer, deputy. Our immediate concern is the death of Paddy O’Hara.”

Tommy looked around the room, clearly searching.”

“Under the blanket on the bed,” Spence prompted quietly, shaking his head.

Tommy raised the cover and stared at the shoe-clad foot revealed there. “Certainly seems dead, alright.” He replaced the blanket. “Dead people give me the willies. What’s your take, Mr. Masters? Natural causes? Foul play? Done in by an ex-lover? Poisoned by the butler?”

The man spun absurdities in rapid fire fashion. Perhaps that was his strength – surely he had a strength.

William cleared his throat and assumed an arrogant, erect posture. Spence and Masters smiled at each other.

“My cursory exam suggests a fall from a considerable height. The report is that he may have been intoxicated at the time. That will be easy for he coroner to determine. My problem is that there is no cliff or high building near enough to the water – in which he was found - to have allowed such a fall.”

“I see. A mystery, I guess,” Tommy said. A question overtook his face. “How’d you get here so fast, Mr. Masters? I suppose you’re here to solve all this.”

“Actually, I just arrived to begin a two week vacation. Mary met me at the Inn with the terrible news.”

“Terrible, yes. Terrible. Well, however you got here, consider yourself part of my team. It’s Prescott with two T’s by the way - for when the book comes out.” He laughed a nervous, Erkle-like snort.

“Will the coroner be coming here or will you transport the body to him?” Masters inquired.

“The body and the coroner. Yes. Well, we do need to get them together some way, don’t we? I’ll take it - him - I never know what to call a dead guy - back with me.”

“I suppose, then, you will want to take pictures here before the body is moved again, won’t you.”

It was quite clearly not a question but a firm suggestion.

“Pictures. Yes. Spence will you get the camera from the trunk in my boat?”

Spence was back in short order with the camera.

"I'll ask that you two leave while the pictures are being taken," Masters said, addressing William and Spence. "We need to give Paddy his privacy one last time."

The two left. Masters removed the blanket. Tommy froze. Not particularly surprised, Masters took the camera, checked for power and began taking the pictures. As he undressed the body for the truly important shots, Tommy covered his mouth and ran for the dock. Five minutes later Masters emerged from the little building. He handed the camera to Spence who stashed it back in the trunk.

Paddy had been a rotund man and it required all of them to move the blanket-wrapped, rope-bound, body to the floor of Tommy's boat.

"Must have been something I ate," was Tommy's unsolicited explanation for his earlier, upset stomach. No one commented but eyebrows raised all around.

"Would you like someone to accompany you?" Masters asked.

"That won't be necessary. I'll call ahead and have an ambulance waiting."

"You will see that I get a copy of the autopsy report as soon as it's available?" Masters asked. "And some official permission to join you on the case."

"Right away."

Spence scribbled something on a scrap of paper.

"This is my email address if you want to send it that way - save you a trip?"

"Good thinking. Yes. Email."

After searching and researching pockets, Tommy presently produced a dog-eared business card.

"Here's mine at the station. E me up any time."

He paused as if the cleverness of that phrase deserved some special recognition. It got none but he didn't seem either surprised or disappointed.

After several attempts the boat was started and Tommy sputtered his way directly south.

"He'll soon realize that he's going in the wrong direction. Tommy tends to get lost in the moment," Spence said compassionately, as if needing to take some responsibility for his strange little friend's odd behavior. "The fact that he's survived this long makes me confident that he'll eventually get home."

His tone indicated it was not necessarily a foregone conclusion.

Masters sighed. He had a question. "Email here on non-electrified Terrapin Island?"

"At our houseboat. The windmill and the generator, remember. The wind never stops out here. Dad refuses to live without some modern conveniences. You should see all the stuff he's rigged up. He's pretty clever that way."

"Will you be needing more of my assistance here, Sir?" William asked.

His tone was always condescending. He clearly felt superior to those around him and lost no time establishing that position - more necessary, perhaps, because *he* was the help and the *others* were people of position.

Masters had long suspected that he harbored a significant, gnawing, anger about the station life had visited upon him.

“No. That should be all for now. I appreciate your help.”

“Making sure that a corpse does not leave the scene can hardly qualify as ‘help’, Sir.”

It had not been intended to be amusing. Masters ignored the tone and intention of the remark and smiled at the man, nodding cordially. Spence turned his back on them and muffled a snicker into his hands. It didn’t escape William who turned and left in a mildly dramatic snit.

Back in the golf cart, Spence felt the need to apologize for - or at least explain - the butler’s behavior.

“As a butler, William is the very best. As a human being he leaves a lot to be desired. I’ve always assumed he must have had a very unpleasant childhood.”

“Is he married?”

“William! Married? No way! Can you really imagine any woman being attracted to him?”

“Well, he is a handsome dude, as they say - tall, slender, chiseled features, wavy graying hair and he wears a dark, three piece suit very well – even in the heat of summer.”

“I meant his personality or lack thereof,” Spence explained while not needing to of course.

“Any idea how he came to be hired?”

“No. He’s been here pretty much from the time Gram and Gramp bought the place as I understand it. Gramp did the hiring back then. I know the help gets paid really well and they each get two days off every week. They are all the best at what they do. Annie, well you know what a great chef she is. I’ve often wondered how such delectable tasting and beautiful looking dishes could come from such a crabby, foul mouthed, disheveled looking old lady. She *can* cook though, can’t she?”

“Oh, yes indeed. Always the highlight of my stay here.”

“Gee. And I thought *I* was the highlight of your stay,” Spence joked.

“A very close second, my boy. Learn to cook and who knows!”

“What about the gardener, Amos?” Masters asked.

“Again, been here forever. He has a master’s degree in horticulture from Tuskegee University. He’s a loner. When I was a little kid I’d follow him around and learn everything I could from watching him. He almost never spoke to me but never really discouraged me from being there either. I still help him, like I said earlier, but he’d never ask. I have to notice he’s running behind and then just show up and start working with him. If I ask if he needs help, he’ll say ‘No’ and take it as some kind of put down. He’s an independent sort. Never unpleasant to me or Gram. I’ve heard him and William get it on a few times. In all the time I’ve been here I’ve never ever seen him and Paddy speaking. He often has coffee in the kitchen with Annie about nine, mornings. When I was small I’d show up some times just to see what went on between them. I figured they were boyfriend and girlfriend. That was mostly my fantasy. I never saw

anything remotely romantic between them but then as a little kid I didn't have a hint as to what *romantic* meant. Gramps and Gram never did romantic things - at least not in public - I suppose the existence of dad suggests something else in private. Dad and Mom were divorced before I was old enough to remember them together so . . ." His voice trailed off.

"How long has it been since your mother died?" Masters asked, keeping the topic alive in case he wanted to talk about it – easily closed if he didn't.

"It was on my ninth birthday, of all days – if you can believe that – something over eight years I guess. Half my life with her and half with dad. I hope I know how to be right with a woman, you know. I've just been out here without any models. I worry about it sometimes. My main source of information about man/woman stuff is TV and I hardly ever watch it. Dad has a satellite dish with three hundred channels, if you can imagine that, and neither one of us watches much. I sneak into the naked channel when he's gone. He knows it, I'm sure, but never says anything. I figure he got it for my benefit seeing as he knows all about that stuff."

"I guess that's more than I wanted to know," Masters smiled.

"Probably. Sorry, but I *am* seventeen and girls and bodies and, well, yeah, like you said, more than you wanted to know."

"Got a college picked out?"

"Not really. Gram went to *Vassar* and I doubt if I'll follow in *her* footsteps." He smiled. "Dad went to *Julliard* but I don't think music will be my thing - not professionally, anyway. I'm beginning to collect catalogs from science departments but I still have a year to think it all through. I've never been prone to rush into things – except puberty."

He Laughed.

"Sometimes I think I'd like to just stay here on *Terrapin* and run the Inn. I can't see I'd need a college education to do that. Gram says I could take over right now and do as well as she does."

"So, do you *have* to go to college?" Masters asked.

"I promised Mom the day she died. It was important to her. I'll go somewhere, eventually. Maybe do it through one of the Universities on-line."

Back inside the Inn, Mary wanted an update, which Spence provided, quoting Masters' assessment of the situation almost word for word.

"You think he may have been killed?" She asked, surprised.

"One possibility. It's the fatal fall that has me baffled."

"You'll help us get to the bottom of it, won't you?" She asked.

"I'll do what I can."

"Your stay here, of course, will be on the house," She added.

"You bet your booty it will be," Masters smiled back at her, his tone calm and low key as always.

"William just took your luggage to your suite. Have you had lunch?"

"I have been saving myself for Annie's culinary magic."

"She left the steam table up for you in the dining room."

"Can you join me?" he said turning to Spence. "I assume you're hollow leg

could use a refill.”

“Always!” came his smiling answer, clearly happy to be included in what he imagined would be a discussion of the investigation.

“You two go on ahead and I’ll be right with you,” Mary said.

“We’ll need a pad for notes,” Masters said to Spence.

It was easily procured and plates were soon shamelessly filled to overflowing.

Masters favored the table by the rear window. It looked out across the northern slope of the island with the shore of the northern peninsula just visible across the deep blue water on a clear day. So it was that day.

Mary joined them settling for just a glass of ice tea.

“While you were gone I asked Annie if she had seen Paddy this morning. She hadn’t but said he had come by the kitchen late last night. Her quarters are behind the kitchen and she heard him rummaging around in there. She went in and he said he needed something to drink - that it was his birthday. I have to admit I had forgotten that myself. All she had on hand was cooking brandy but it seemed to satisfy him - I’m afraid Paddy would drink anything once he got started.”

“Do you have an accurate take on what time that was?”

“Just before midnight, she said. She’d apparently been asleep several hours.”

“Three bottles within two hours,” Masters said. “He should have been well stewed by the time he died. Do you know of anyone who would want him dead? It’s an imprecise question but the best one I have.”

“It’s no secret the help doesn’t get along. But that also means they never mingle so I can’t see why any one of them would have reason. In the past their noses have gotten out of joint over whether they are in my will and how much they’re in for. Petty stuff, but I suppose important to them. I know them well enough that if one thought he was getting slighted over the others there would be hell to pay.

“So, in May, I remade my will and at my attorney’s suggestion I set aside a lump sum to be divided equally among the four of them. I set them down and had Lester - the attorney - lay it all out for them and answer any questions without me present so no one would hold back. He said they seemed satisfied. I hoped that would put an end to any speculation and the backbiting that seemed to have been creeping into things around here. It got to the point they were doing things for me as if just to say, ‘See, Mary, I’m better than they are.’ I guess they must think I have one foot in the grave.”

Masters would not have handled it in that manner but what had been done had been done. He moved on.

“Your husband hired all the help that is here now, is that right?”

“Yes, the main four. Harry went for the best in skill but didn’t think much past that, I’m afraid. In truth, he really didn’t have many real, positive people skills. He had a good head for this business and made lucrative investments in real estate. I wouldn’t have to keep working this place. But it’s my life and I can’t imagine being anywhere else. I keep telling Quentin here . . .”

“Grandma, please, not with *The Quentin* while we’re eating,” Spence interrupted – as much serious as not.

“I stand corrected. I keep telling, *Sir Spence*, here, that he can have the place to run as his own if he wants to when he turns twenty-one. He could do it now, except maybe for the bookkeeping.”

Spence nodded in full agreement and looked up at Masters as if to say, ‘See, what did I tell you?’

“So, you have the best chef, the best gardener, the best butler and had the best dockman but . . .”

“Well put,” Mary agreed. “But . . .”

“I suppose the next step - after lunch of course - is to speak with the staff. In the meantime, do either of you have any idea about where Paddy could have fallen from?”

“There just isn’t anything that high,” Mary said looking at Spence. “Could it have happened as he rolled down the hill - you’d roll toward the lake from most anywhere you fell on this island.”

“I wouldn’t think that fits the condition of the body I examined. The bruises and damage are specific to the head, shoulders and arms. In a tumbling roll downhill they would have been general - all over the body.”

“Maybe he was dropped from a helicopter,” Spence said, grasping at straws.

“Is that a real possibility?” Masters asked.

“Not really. I was just pondering possibilities out loud. The Lake Patrol over-flies us at about two thirty every afternoon. Once in a while a stray hovers around - some pleasure and some business I suppose. Copters are so noisy I’m sure we’d have all heard one in the stillness of the night.”

Mary nodded in agreement. “An infinitesimal probability that we would have all missed it.”

Masters smiled at his two companions. “*Pondering possibilities and infinitesimal probability?* I need a thesaurus just to converse with the two of you.”

The two Spencers looked at each other fondly. Mary explained.

“It’s a game we’ve always played - never use a nickel word when there’s a quarter word that will fit the occasion.”

Spence continued.

“It only really comes out when we’re together like this.”

He reached over and patted his grandmother’s hand.

“Then I guess I’ll just have to keep the two of you separated - *disengage your cerebral affiliation*, you might say.”

It drew a chuckle and at least momentarily lightened the gloomy discussion.

Amos passed by the window. Mary motioned him inside. Presently, he joined them. Masters pulled out a chair and he took a seat. Amos was in his mid to late sixties and sported a full, bushy gray beard which, with his equally bushy gray hair encircled his time-worn black face like an elegant oval frame.

Mary spoke first.

“You’ve heard the news about Paddy, I assume,” she said directing her

comment directly at Amos.

“Yes, Ma’am.”

It was short, to the point and emotionless.

“This is Detective Masters. You remember him, I’m, sure. It seems like he’s been here every year since time began.”

“Yes Ma’am – Sir.”

He nodded politely in Masters’ direction.

“He has agreed to look into Paddy’s death and make sure there was no foul play involved.”

It required no response and none was offered.

Masters spoke.

“First, I’m trying to find out the last time each of you saw him alive and under what circumstances.”

“About one o’clock this morning. I had just finished mixing some fertilizer in the green house for some of the shrubs. I often work late like that. The dew doesn’t burn off ‘till mid-morning out here, so I start late and work late. I was walking the ridge trail on my way to my cottage. I saw him sitting on the old, rock, bucket-well to the east of the Inn – the one with the shake shingled roof and crank. He frequently sat up there while he ate lunch. He’d look south out over the lake as if expecting some great ship to come sailing to his rescue.”

It seemed clear that Amos’s conjecture probably reflected the old gardener’s own feelings of imprisonment as much or more than anything about Paddy.

Masters continued.

“Did you speak to him?”

“Not for thirty years.”

“I see. Were you close enough to ascertain his condition?”

“Was he falling down drunk, you mean?”

“Something like that.”

“I’d say he was blotto, Sir. He was singing. His words were so slurred I couldn’t make them out. The melody faintly resembled the Happy Birthday song.”

“Can you think of anyone who would want him dead?” Masters asked.

“Few people liked him as a person. He was a vulgar ruffian. Perhaps the better question would be, ‘Who would want him alive?’”

Masters noted the well-constructed attempt to divert the focus of the conversation. He returned to his original question.

“But would their dislike have been strong enough to cause them to kill him?” Masters pressed.

“I’m sure I couldn’t say. The employees here are not what you would call compatible. I would have no way of assaying their hearts.”

“You speak more like a poet than a horticulturist,” Masters observed.

“A minor in English Literature, Sir.”

His face brightened momentarily and then again fell lifeless. Uncharacteristically, he was moved to add something more.

“There may be less difference in the two fields than immediately meets the

eye.”

“A thought provoking comparison. Well, thanks for your time and assistance. I may need to speak with you again.”

Amos nodded at Masters and then at Mary. He stood and replaced the chair. Then, dispatching a quick glance toward Spence, he turned and left.

“Did Amos actually wink at you?” Masters asked puzzled but clearly pleased.

Spence smiled.

“Like I said, Amos and I have a good relationship - it’s just always been nonverbal, I guess you’d say.”

Masters returned to the basics. “I must plead ignorance as to just what a dockman does.”

Mary answered.

“It’s probably our own unique term. Paddy was responsible for everything related to the boats and docks. That being relatively minimal here, he also did all of the repair work at the Inn and elsewhere on the island. He was quite adept with his hands.”

“Tell me about the well where he would sit. I assume it is no longer the source of water for the Inn.”

Again it was Mary.

“Correct. It hasn’t been used for thirty-five years or more. Harry immediately had a deep well drilled. It came in artisan so it doesn’t even require a pump. It keeps the old wooden water tower out there filled and our supply is gravity fed around the island.”

“It has a great echo,” Spence added, referring to the old well. “Yell into it and your words bounce right back.”

“No doubt the source of many hours of joy when you were a youngster,” Masters said smiling at the boy.

“You got me there. It does better with nickel words than quarter words - short and sweet is what it likes. Wish I could find a girl with those tastes.”

They finished lunch - Spence two plates to Masters’ one.

“I’d like to speak with Annie. Will she be in the kitchen?”

“She’s always in the kitchen, it seems,” Mary said. “Take Spence with you. For some reason she never curses in his presence.”

“I *have* heard ‘bad’ language before, you know,” Masters said amused at her suggestion.

“Dollars to doughnuts not like Annie’s.”

Spence nodded at Masters, eyebrows raised, reinforcing his grandmother’s point.

Soon the two of them had entered the kitchen. Spence made the introductions.

“This is Detective Raymond Masters. You remember him, I imagine.”

“Raspberry tarts with lemon flavored whipped cream. I remember. How ya doin’ big fella?”

Masters extended his hand.

“You wouldn’t want to shake this greasy paw. Rollin’ out pastry dough.”

"Tarts, I hope," Masters said.

"Had the boy pick up fresh raspberries just for the occasion. Don't do that kind a thing for just anybody. Hope you understand that."

"I do appreciate your thoughtfulness."

"Not that. Mary required it. This social or business cuz if it's social, the two of you skedaddle. I got work to do."

"Business," Masters said, trying to hide his amusement. "I'll make it as brief as possible. I understand you encountered Paddy late last night here in the kitchen."

"Yep. Been boozin'. Wanted more. I gave him a new bottle of brandy and pushed him out the door. Was babbling about wanting his birthday present. He gets *feisty when* he drinks, if you know what I mean, so I booted him out and locked the door. A girl's gotta protect herself against the riff-raff."

"That was the last you saw of him?"

"Yep."

"What time was that?"

"A few minutes after midnight. I'd been sawin' logs for a couple a hours. Might not have even heard him but there's a go_... *pesky* old owl that's taken up residence in the tree outside my window and sits there hooting at every g. . . little old critter that passes by. It woke me up and I looked at the clock. That's when I heard Paddy - speakin' of little critters."

"Had you noticed anything different about him the past week or so?"

"I make it my business not to notice. Keep my nose clean of other people's business - that's the best policy."

"Well, thanks for your help. Lunch was wonderful. You do have a gift with food."

She made no attempt to respond to Masters' kind words. He hadn't expected any. The two skedaddled.

"Do you have time to show me this well?" Masters asked.

"All I have is time," Spence said, some sadness showing on his brow above his ever present, if dimmed, smile.

They walked across the great room to the east door and then followed a wide, ancient looking, cobblestone walk to the near-by well. Spence leaned over the low, circular rock enclosure and with great gusto, yelled, "Centerfold girls". His words were echoed back not once but twice.

"If I didn't know better, I'd say that hole was well practiced reflecting that phrase."

Spence grinned and shrugged his shoulders as if a bit embarrassed at his automatic choice of words for the demonstration.

"It appears to have been kept in good repair," Masters said examining the little structure with his eyes.

"Yeah. It was a special place for Paddy. Said it reminded him of home - he was born in Ireland - came to Canada when he was ten, I think he said"

"It goes well with the rustic look of things up here. It's nice that he cared for it. Is there still water in it?"

Spence picked up a fist sized rock and dropped it in. After longer than

Masters would have predicted, they heard the telltale splash.

"This is probably not the rope that was here when the well was being used," Masters said, both thinking aloud and asking a question.

"No. I remember when Paddy replaced it. From the size of the take up reel you can tell it was intended to hold a much longer or thicker rope. This one is just for effect."

"And this one looks to be what, maybe twenty-five feet long?"

"Let's find out," Spence suggested and he took hold of the old cypress bucket to which the rope was attached and began backing away. "More like thirty five, I'd say," was his estimate as it pulled taut from the wheel.

"Lower it into the well and let's see if it hits water," Masters said.

Spence carefully let the bucket down into the hole. When it reached the end of the rope it still swung free and dry.

"What's this about?" Spence asked, as he pulled the bucket out and hand-wound the rope back around the take-up wheel.

"This well seems to be the only place on the island tall enough – deep enough - to account for the fall that I'm sure took Paddy's life. But there is an obvious problem with that isn't there?"

"That someone would have had to retrieve his body from the bottom of the well and then take it down to the cove," Spence asked, really posing the answer.

Then the boy had an idea.

"A long rope could have been tied around his ankles and then he was shoved over the side. After he hit bottom his murderer could have pulled him back up by way of the rope."

"Interesting. What do you suppose Paddy weighed?"

"Yeah. I see the problem. Well over two hundred, I'd say. Even with this oversized wheel and handle that would have been an impossible chore for any one person," Spence said.

"And look at the handle," Masters noted. "It spins free of the axle. Only ornamental at this point. It could not have been used. I guess the *well possibility* will have to remain an unknown for now."

"We do know one thing from all this, though," Spence said as they turned back toward the Inn."

Masters continued the idea. "That if Paddy did die from a fall into in the well, it couldn't have been an accident because once dead he could not have climbed out and deposited himself in the cove."

"Ahead of me, huh?" Spence said.

"Probably simultaneously with you, my boy. That was good detective work on your part. You know what really bothers me though?"

"What's that - that Annie may not make enough Raspberry Tarts?"

Masters playfully slapped at the boy's shoulder.

"No. That a shallow, dug well could actually hit water on such a small island. I'd not think the water table would be above the lake level."

"I hadn't thought of that. Of course aquifers do tend to follow the contour of the land through capillary action, remember."

"Your knowledge surpasses mine in such matters. I have to wonder

though if that would happen within such a high, narrow, rocky, hump of land.”

“Good point. I’ll get back to you on that. One of my geology books should have something to say about it.”

“You read publications without centerfolds?” Masters teased, feigning surprise.

“Geology deals with hills and valleys, Sir, and I’ve always been known for my vivid imagination.”

Spence headed back to the houseboat contemplating visions of hills and valleys. Masters went up to his room nurturing his equally vivid vision of raspberry tarts with lemon flavored whipped cream.

* *A Gathering of Killers* by Garrison Flint

CHAPTER TWO

Day two: Morning

Annie's owl had moved to higher ground, gracing Masters with its irritating presence late into the night – mercifully leaving when a downpour set in just after midnight. The old detective chuckled, thinking how much he had been looking forward to the sounds of the wilderness. Next time he would call ahead and schedule them to cease at eleven p.m. each evening.

Breakfast was available from six until ten. He arrived in the dining room at 6:05. Much to his surprise Spence was already deep into a double portion of Eggs Benedict.

"What kept you?" the boy asked all quite seriously. "Dad and I have already had our morning dip."

"You swim before six in the morning?"

"Five fifteen like clockwork. Better join us tomorrow. Invigorating! Actually, the water is warmer than the air at that time of the day so it seems pretty nice - once you're in up to your neck."

"I have never gotten on well with water in amounts larger than that in a soup bowl. In my whole life I haven't even owned a swimming suit."

"We go in nature's best anyway so that's not an excuse."

Masters passed on any further comment about it.

"Surely you don't swim in the winter," he added.

"Fall and spring we row our two-man boat for half an hour. We drag fish lines and usually catch a good sized breakfast in the process."

"Being from western New York, I doubt if I could get used to fish for breakfast. Perhaps it's best I'm here in July. What about winter? You have my curiosity peaked."

"Ice skating or cross county skiing on the lake. Depends on the snow load. Gotta keep in shape."

"Yes. One of *my* major concerns as well - as you can plainly see."

Spence just shook his head and filled his mouth.

"Your father skis as well, does he? I figured with his leg the way it is that wouldn't be possible."

"Dad doesn't let it handicap him. He can't go fast but he's got the endurance of a Monarch Butterfly - they migrate from the States to South America every year - you know that?"

Masters nodded, though not entirely sure whether he had, in fact, known that before or not. He wanted the conversation to stay on course. Spence continued.

"He was a well-known concert pianist at fourteen, you know. Then from the polio his right hand and leg were left partially paralyzed. He couldn't play the piano anymore so he switched to cello and won a full scholarship to Julliard at eighteen. He's quite a guy."

"He certainly is. I didn't know that about him. Polio you say?"

"Yeah. Just before he turned fifteen."

It struck Masters as odd. Polio had certainly been wiped out before

Lawrence would have been fifteen. The boy clearly believed it, however, so the old detective would not pursue the topic.

“Another wonderful breakfast!” he said, turning the conversation.

“The tarts up to your level of excellence at dinner last evening?” Spence asked, following his lead.

“Oh, my yes. I secreted two of them off to my room with me.”

Spence smiled and nodded - his mouth full.

“How do you eat so much and remain so slender, young man.”

“I’m still a growing boy. Need to add six inches in a hurry - to my height not my belly. I’ve heard that girls like taller guys. I’ve always been short for my age. Gram says dad was, too, and then at 18 he shot up nine inches in twelve months, so I guess there’s still hope for me. In the mean time I eat and pray.”

“Well if there’s a way to transplant nine inches from my waist onto your height I’m a more than willing donor.”

Mary joined them with a coffee pot for Masters and a second large orange juice for Spence.

“May I join the two most handsome men on the island?”

“See, she’s very observant as well as being a smart business lady,” Spence said eyebrows aflutter.

“She is indeed. And yes you may. We will be honored.”

Mary spoke to Spence.

“I’m going to need you to fill in for Paddy until I can work something else out, Quen . . . Spence.”

He nodded. “I figured. I’ll take care of things. I better be on my way. See you later.”

He downed the juice in one continuous guzzle as he got up and headed for the door. Half way across the room he did an about face and started back - unbeknownst to Mary whose back was to him.

She continued talking with Masters. “I can’t understand why he hates the name, *Quentin*, so. I think it’s positively lyrical.”

Spence returned in time to overhear her.

“How would you feel if you’d been named after the most infamous prison in the country?”

It was not a question but a full blown, emotion laden, explanation, clearly long dormant, awaiting an appropriate opportunity to be vented.

“Oh. I had never thought of it like that. I see. I wish you’d have told me years ago.”

“So do I. I feel better, now. How about you?”

“Yes. Much better.”

“Well good, then.”

“Yes, good!”

“Okay.”

It became an intentionally comical exchange which quickly died a well deserved death. Spence then spoke to Masters.

“About that capillary action of the aquifer ...”

“Watch your language, young man. This is your grandmother sitting here,”

she said, teasing, and pulling him close.

Spence acknowledged the horseplay with a grin, and put an arm around her shoulder. He continued.

“Anyway, your point was well taken. Not a chance in h... *in a million* that the well could be less than a hundred feet deep - the height of the ridge.”

“Nice save,” Masters said.

“*Necessary* save, Sir. She’s not above putting the soap to my mouth even at seventeen.”

He leaned down and kissed on her cheek and again was off toward the door.

“What a fine boy you have there,” Masters said, following the lad with his eyes as he disappeared around the corner.

“He got a solid start from his mother and apparently his father has done very well by him since.”

It seemed a distant, detached analysis but gave Masters an opportunity to probe.

“About Lawrence. Spence says his physical problems are due to polio. That just doesn’t fit with the math, Mary.”

Mary sighed and gazed out the window.

“It’s all so sad and I’ve never talked about it. I don’t see how it could possibly have anything to do with Paddy’s death.”

Masters sat, silent.

Mary continued without further prompting.

“Harry was still alive the first few years you came here, I believe.”

Masters nodded.

“You understand he was, by nature, a hard, gruff man. He knew it and that’s why he let me be the front person with the guests here. He stayed in the background. He was more than gruff, Raymond, he was abusive. He was always very hard on Lawrence. We had to get married because of Lawrence and Harry always seemed to hold that against *the boy*. He’d beat him for things that seemed insignificant to me. When he was fourteen, Lawrence began to balk at having to spend eight hours a day practicing the piano - something his father had required of him since he was eight. He started running off and hiding. The last time it happened he was gone for three days. I was sick with worry. Harry wouldn’t go looking for him. Instead he spent the nights in the kitchen, figuring Lawrence would eventually come there for food.

“He did. I heard the screaming and by the time I got there Harry had beaten him unconscious and was kicking him unmercifully in his back as he lay helpless on the floor. I physically attacked Harry with an iron skillet and he left, leaving the island in one of the boats. He was gone for five days. I called in the medi-vac helicopter service and Lawrence was in the university hospital for the next six weeks. Harry never visited him there.

He went for rehab for another year. He and his father never spoke again, never sat at the same table again, but it was the end of the beatings. It’s when Harry began drinking so heavily. Eventually he drank himself to death over it.

“Lawrence always held the beatings against *me*. He thought I should

have been able to make Harry stop. I remember him looking up at me - beating after beating -screaming at me, 'Why won't you help me?' I still have nightmares. I should have done something. It was the worst mistake of my life. I was a terrible mother and I have deserved every moment of silence I've received from Lawrence. I don't fault him for it.

"You can see why I made up the polio story for Spence. I'd rather he'd learn the truth from his father, if Lawrence ever decides to tell him."

"I understand. Rest assured he won't learn about it from me. Spence is a bright young man, though, Mary. Someday he'll figure the math just like I did."

Mary shrugged her shoulders as if abdicating any further responsibility.

"Did Paddy ever have anything to do with the disciplining of Lawrence? I know it must seem like an insensitive question."

"It does but I'm beginning to understand where you're going - covering all the bases so to speak. It's as important to rule things *out* as *in*, I suppose. No, as far as I know, at least, Paddy never had anything to do with Lawrence in that way. For the past twenty five years Lawrence has had virtually nothing to do with any of us. He's here but he isn't. Spence keeps me up to date, although I never ask. His birthday is coming up on Friday and it's all I can do not to send him a gift. I just don't want to risk upsetting things. He might decide to sail the two of them out of my life forever."

"Do you know what reason Spence has been given for the rift between you and Lawrence?"

"Not really. Knowing Lawrence, he may well have just said it was not a topic for discussion and Spence would have honored that. They are as close as Lawrence and Harry were distant. I thank God every night for that."

"How did Lawrence get along with the help and guests when he was a youngster?"

"Not well, really. Lawrence was short tempered - just the opposite from how I understand he is as an adult. He had an odd, unsocialized, angry, side to his personality, but then all Harry allowed him to do was eat, do his studies and practice - he had lots to be angry about. Not the way to develop a well-rounded child. The four of them made no bones about the fact they disliked him. I think they went out of their way to make his life difficult. They delighted in telling Harry on him, knowing full well he'd get a beating whether the news was true or not."

"It is amazing he turned out so well."

"It took the death of Carolyn, his wife, and the full time responsibility for Spence to really turn him around. Sad that it took such a tragedy to make things right."

The desk clerk appeared at the door and beckoned to Mary.

"I guess my vast talents are needed elsewhere. We can continue our talk any time. Just ask."

"Thank you for your candor. I guess my next stop will be the houseboat."

"Take a golf cart from the corral out back. Makes getting around easier for old legs."

"I'm not too proud to admit my old legs appreciate an occasional assist. Thank you."

After a few false starts and stops, jolts and pauses, he was on his way and soon felt quite the cart jockey. From the path, he could see Spence fueling the yacht at the old dock. He waved but the lad was intent on his task – as well he should have been.

Lawrence was sitting on the rear deck, a pad of music paper in his lap. He slid his pencil behind his ear and raised his hand in welcome as Masters pulled to a stop on the dock.

He crossed the permanent gang plank onto the big, white, boxy, boat and was soon approaching Lawrence, who remained seated.

“Good morning, Mr. Masters.”

“It is a good morning and could only be made better in one way.”

“What’s that,” Lawrence asked his head cocked suggesting interest.

“If you would lay off the Mr. and call me Ray.”

“Ray it is then. I’ll do most anything to improve a man’s day.”

“About Paddy, I assume,” he continued as Masters sought out a suitably sized deck chair.

“That and to renew acquaintances, I guess,” he said working himself down into the chair.

Lawrence chose to begin with Paddy.

“He kept to himself mostly – like all the cockeyed help on this island. I really didn’t like him much – vulgar, crass, a mean drunk – not a good model for Spence. He did his work without prompting, I’ll give him that and he did it all very well. He’ll be missed but not mourned, if you know what I mean.”

Masters nodded.

“Can you think of anybody who’d actually have wanted him dead?”

“A murder investigation, huh? I guess my answer to your question will have to be no, but then I can’t say I really know any one of the people on this island well enough to make a reasonable judgment. They have always clearly disliked me and I’ve never been able to stand them. What makes you suspect murder?”

“The condition of the body. It clearly fell a great distance and my first problem is that the only direct drop that is far enough is in the old well up by the Inn.”

“And your second problem?”

“Once down at the bottom and unquestionably dead at that point, how could he possibly end up floating in the cove?”

“What do I get if I can solve both your problems within the next thirty seconds?”

“My everlasting gratitude, for one thing. I might also manage to slip you a raspberry tart from Annie’s kitchen.”

“Fair payment. You’re on. In the mid-seventeen hundreds, the well was hand dug – pick and pry-bar – straight down to about ten feet below lake level at low tide. It’s six feet wide, top to bottom – at least two feet wider than most. The sides were bricked up from the bottom with paving stone. Smugglers used this island as their home port. They dug a tunnel back into the hill from the lake to the bottom of the well. The tunnel is low enough to flood at high tide so they could

use log rafts to float their contraband into the well and then pull it up to the old stockade they had on top. You may have noticed the oversized crank and reel at the top of the well. It, or one like it, was here decades before the present Inn was built.

“I didn’t realize there would be low and high tides on a lake,” Masters said.

“This is a huge body of water, Ray. The difference isn’t more than a few inches but enough to do the job. It was very well engineered for the time. There may even have been a water-tight gate of some kind at the tunnel entrance.”

Lawrence returned to Paddy’s death.

“Quite conceivably, Paddy could have fallen into the well – or have been pushed into it by someone who didn’t know about the tunnel below. Either way, as the tide moved out, so would the body.”

“Two Raspberry tarts minimum,” Masters said. “You know the history of this place pretty well, it seems.”

“A natural hobby for a lonely boy, I suppose. I used to hide in the tunnel. I came across it all by accident. I doubt if anybody else on the island knows it exists. The entrance is grown around with underbrush. When I found it I began researching the history of such things out here.”

“You’ve never told Spence?”

“And give him a place to hide, get hurt, or maybe drown?”

“I see your point. The father doesn’t want the son to act as irresponsibly as he did.”

“Exactly. It’s a father’s duty – as a boy – to make all the truly treacherous mistakes so his son won’t have to.”

“Except . . .” Masters began, letting it drop.

“Except I’m not letting *Spence* make them so someday he can protect *his* son. I know. I didn’t claim it to be rational – just personally comfortable.”

“Mistakes are strange things, aren’t they?”

“What do you mean?” Lawrence asked.

“When *we* make them and learn from them, we can forgive ourselves and move on. But when it’s *someone else’s* mistake, and that someone else learns from them, it’s often hard for us to do the same.”

“Sounds like the making of a Country Song, Ray, and your message really wasn’t lost on me. I’d rather we didn’t pursue it, however.”

“That’s your call, of course. Spence says you’re a gadgeteer of sorts - that you have the boat fixed up with marvelous inventions.”

“He’s not so bad himself. You should see his room. He’s a good boy. Always been my best cheerleader.”

“He is that. He told me you were the finest dad that had ever lived. Not many fathers receive that kind of a compliment from their seventeen year old son, I’ll tell you that.”

“He said that, did he?”

Masters nodded.

The man’s tears had not been anticipated by Masters but Lawrence seemed unbothered by them.

“I suppose he’s about the best son that’s ever lived, too. I guess I need to

let him know that, don't I?"

Masters was not inclined to answer plainly rhetorical questions so he remained silent for a moment and then returned to the business of the day.

"It appears to me that Paddy died between midnight and one a.m. Saturday morning. Were you aware of any unusual activity down here at that time?"

"No. Just Tommy's boat. It sputtered by at a little before midnight. Strange as it may seem these warm nights give my arm and leg fits – the humidity, I suppose. I was up popping aspirin about that time. It's the dark of the moon. You can't see a thing out here after ten thirty during the dark of the moon, but from the sound, I'd say it was his boat."

"Do you remember what kind of relationship Paddy and your father had? Good, bad, close, distant?"

"You had to know my father. No one had a *good* or *close* relationship with him, though I suppose he and Paddy came as close to being friends as either of them had ever known. They came from the same street brawling stock in Toronto."

"During the last few months of my father's life, he and Paddy frequently drank themselves into oblivion together over at the old dock house. It's where he died - *dead drunk* you might say - in fact, you should say."

The man's bitterness was plain and unveiled.

"Ever hear just how your father had gone about obtaining this odd assortment of people to work for him?"

"I overheard him and Paddy raging at each other once when I was - oh, maybe ten. Paddy said something like, 'I'd have been better off being in prison than to have to work for the likes of you for the rest of my life.' I figured it was a metaphor-like statement, I guess. I never took the prison part literally. I really don't know, though. Mother may know. ... *That's* an odd sensation."

Masters wrinkled his brow suggesting a question.

"I just never say, *mother*, anymore. It doesn't come up. It's been *gram* or *grandma* between Spence and me for nearly seventeen years."

"And the *odd* part?" Masters said, intentionally pressing, not so much to extend the conversation but to force some resolution for Lawrence.

"I don't know. It almost felt good. I guess I was just surprised by my reaction. Would you like to look around our home sweet home, here?"

The topic had been effectively dropped.

"A quick tour, perhaps."

It did have all the comforts of home. It was fully electrified, had a full kitchen, a studio with electric piano and other instruments, a living room, three bathrooms and three bedrooms – Spence's looking very much the scene of a teen-wrought disaster. Large decks front, rear, and on top, expanded the living space during the five or six warm months. A satellite dish was in place on the top deck.

As they descended the steps to the lower rear of the boat, the men were distracted by the distant sputtering of Tommy's run-about. It grew louder as it neared the island. It became clear that the deputy was heading for the old boat

house so Masters excused himself and drove west along the shore toward the old dock. The golf cart and boat arrived at about the same time.

Tommy was so eager to speak with Masters that he forgot to tie up at the dock. Spence took care of that for him – as if it weren't the first time.

"Got the coroner's report. Interesting stuff. Very interesting stuff," he said stumbling his way out of the boat and across the dock toward Masters.

He handed over a large, brown, multiply creased envelope. Spence pulled a bench over and Masters took a seat, silently nodding his thanks in the boy's direction as he removed the contents.

"Well let's see, here. Cause of death a blow to the head that occurred only moments *prior* to the end of a significant fall. ... smashed skull ... broken arms crushed neck upper body contusions and abrasions ... dislocated right shoulder ... and a blood alcohol level high enough to kill three men. Nothing fully incompatible with an accident and in his condition he could have easily hit his head on the crank or bucket and fallen into the well."

"Look at the part about his clothing," Tommy prompted.

"Let's see."

Masters ran his finger down the page skimming through the less useful requirements of such a report.

"Here. Humm. I see. He had traces of aluminum sulfate on the back of his jacket collar and the same compound, along with cypress splinters in the abrasion that resulted from what was probably the fatal blow to his forehead. Suddenly, there seems no doubt that it was murder and I'm rather sure I know who the murderer is. Tommy, we'd better get a lab person out here on the double. I'd like to have the bucket at the well gone over with a fine tooth comb."

"I'll have him here in half an hour, Sir. A big case now, huh?"

"A small case, which I hope can be signed sealed and delivered before lunch."

There was a white envelope at the bottom of the larger brown one. It contained a letter giving Masters full deputy powers to pursue "any suspected illegal irregularities that may have recently occurred or will in the near future occur on or about Terrapin Island."

"So, what are you saying?" Spence asked straddling the bench and facing Masters. "You know it was murder and who did it and how the body got from the well into the cove?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying. Let's get back up to the Inn. Tommy, bring your guy up there as soon as he arrives."

"Yes, Sir. I'll just wait right here and . . . wait."

"By the way, Tommy, your boat was heard in the area late last night. Do you make it a practice to patrol out here at that time of day?"

Tommy looked at his feet and took off his hat, nervously crumpling it against his chest. His face turned red.

"No, Sir."

He sniffed and slid his index finger across the bottom of his nose.

"I had what you might call a hot date and we went over to *Pack Island* for a little hanky panky, if you know what I mean."

Spence snorted and Masters wished he hadn't asked.

"Until later then," Masters managed, and the two were on their way back up the hill in the cart - Spence taking the driver's seat as if that were understood.

"Push this horse, son," Masters said.

Spence put the pedal to the floor. He had a comment.

"If Tommy had a date - hot or otherwise - I'll give up my Playboy subscription for a year -no, 'til I'm twenty one," he said, chuckling through his words.

"Any idea why he'd lie about it?"

"Tommy's still a teenager at heart. Teenage boys just lie to be lying."

"Present company excepted, I assume," Masters added.

"Well, my lies are mostly just to girls I guess. They'd probably be to other guys *about* girls but there aren't any other guys in my life - present company excepted. No margin in lying around here."

Masters shook his head.

"What?" Spence asked, a perplexed grin spreading across his face.

"Just something about the sincerity of your honesty as you talked about your *dishonesty* struck me as funny, I guess."

Spence shrugged his shoulders and moved on.

"So are we in hot pursuit of the bad guy, now?"

"I want to wait for the lab report on the bucket."

"It *is* cypress. I took note of that," Spence said. "Why is that important?"

"Let's wait until we get all the data. It's pure supposition at this point.

"If we're not on our way to catch the bad guy, why do you want me to go so fast?"

"Mid-morning snacks, son. It's Sunday and that usually means Annie's delectable little cinnamon rolls."

"You are something else, Sir. You think about food as much as I think about girls."

"There is no doubt that *your* fixation is healthier than mine," Masters joked.

"How old were you when you stopped being *fixated* on females?"

"Who said I stopped? A man's allowed more than one fixation at a time isn't he?"

"Really. Well. I wouldn't have guessed. I suppose that should be reassuring but somehow it's just . . . disgusting. Sorry about that but ... you're old and ... well ... I will now just shut up."

The humorous moment was shattered by the sudden, ominous sound of an explosion. The earth shook. The sky to the East of the Inn was ablaze - a tall, thin, swirling, inferno. Spence whirled the cart in its direction.

"It's Amos's cottage," Spence shouted as they topped the rise.

More precisely it was what *had* been Amos's cottage. Not a wall was left standing. An intense fire raged. Debris was scattered as far the eye could see.

"Sunday is Amos's day off," Spence said, terrified. "He always sleeps in 'til noon. He must have been blown to smithereens?"

Like his father, tears came easy and shamelessly to the boy. They pulled to a stop thirty feet west of the blaze. The heavy, nighttime rain had soaked the

surrounding area so the fire was contained to what had been the cottage.

"Smell that?" Masters said sniffing the air.

"Diesel fuel?" Spence asked and then confirmed with a nod. "Diesel fuel!"

"Lots of diesel fuel, my boy. See that dark smoke. That's not from wood."

Tommy ran up to them puffing. He bent down, hands on his knees, to catch his breath. "What in the juju beans happened here?" he said, looking up.

Masters ignored the question and addressed Spence.

"Do you know where the cut off is for the gas line to the cottage?"

"Yeah. They're all in the gas house, that little cobblestone shack right over there."

"You and Tommy get it turned off. It's bound to be feeding the fire at this point. Be careful!"

The two ran across the yard to attend to the matter. Almost immediately the blaze began to subside. The two returned as William approached, unreeling a fire hose, which ran from the water tower.

"Good thinking William. I'll go get the other one," Spence said, taking off on the run.

They doused the blaze for half an hour before it smoldered to its death.

By then Mary and the other guests had gathered nearby. Mary sobbed uncontrollably in Masters' big arms. Spence and Tommy came over to them - filthy as coal miners coming off shift.

"Great work, fellas," Masters said.

"Yes. Thank you both so much," Mary said, embracing Spence and holding him close. They cried together about Amos - though that was not voiced.

While Tommy tried to find an appropriate place for his hands to light, Masters started toward the rubble. Tommy accompanied him, attempting to meet Masters stride for stride but hitch-step after hitch-step clearly demonstrated that would not be.

"Something else for your lab guy to look at, I guess, Deputy. It was an explosion of diesel fuel - about that I'm quite sure. Probably several large vessels stashed in the crawl space. Not sure how they may have been ignited - a long fuse, electrical plunger, timer? I hope you're guy will find something. I suppose you may want to call in for back up, considering the new chapter in all this."

"Call in back up. Yes, sir. Just what I was about to do. I'll get right on it."

At that point the lab man arrived - lab *men*, actually - a crew of three, which would be sufficient. Masters outlined the situation. One went to the well and the other two began scouting the site of the fire with Masters.

"Should probably call in the Fire Marshal on this one, Sir," one of them suggested.

"I'm sure you're right," Masters agreed. "The sooner the better, you know."

"I'll take care of it immediately."

Within the next several minutes three, five gallon fuel cans - like those used at the dock were found in various stages of disintegration. The remains of

a spring wound device - probably a timing mechanism - were also found, although it could have been one of Amos's clocks. Eventually the body was located, burned beyond recognition.

Masters walked back to the well where the lab man was just closing his bag.

"Aluminum sulfate in the splintered edge of the bucket, I assume," Masters said to the seasoned looking officer.

"That's my best guess. The lab will have to verify it."

He held out his hand to Masters.

"I'm Mike Masters, Sir. Probably no relation but I'd be proud to be if it were the fact."

"Well, thank you. Any traces of blood?"

"Oh yes. Not immediately visible because it's black by now but plenty for a match. Fortunately it was under the well roof during the rain last night. Nothing washed away. This is in relation to the O'Hara death, I assume. Tommy was a little vague - well, a little more vague than usual."

He smiled - not as a put-down but with some hint of compassion.

Spence approached them.

"Better come and see what I found - didn't touch anything." He held his hands up shoulder high as if to verify the fact.

Half way between the well and the cottage, Spence stopped and pointed to the ground.

"Three lids to five gallon fuel cans," he said and then continued. "I figured it was unlikely they would have blown off the cans and all landed here within inches of each other."

"Good observation, young man," the deputy said.

A complement seemed meaningless in light of the situation and Spence didn't acknowledge it. He had a final thought, however.

"I figure somebody opened the cans and dropped the lids here to be rid of the evidence. I didn't touch them because I thought they might hold finger prints. The explosion of three oil cans under a cottage a thousand yards up hill from the dock house where they are kept under lock and key feels like murder to me."

"And to me," Masters agreed, putting his arm around Spence's shoulders. The boy was desperately trying to play the man. Masters had to wonder, briefly, if that was ever a good idea in such circumstances.

The deputy carefully bagged the lids, picking them up with tongs from his equipment wallet. Masters jotted a name on the back of a business card and handed it to him.

"This name may be associated with the prints. It could speed things up."

The deputy nodded and added it to the bag.

"I'll be on my way. Jack will stay to watch over things 'til somebody from the Fire Marshal's office gets here. You'll hear from me the minute I know anything. Just call the Inn, I assume."

"Here, call my cell phone," Spence suggested, offering his own business card. "I'll let Mr. Masters carry it so you can get him right away."

"Thank you. That will help," Masters said, accepting the phone and

marveling at how tiny they had become since his first one, which had required a brief case for transport and worked only within a thirty square block area of New York City.

The deputy left as the coroner's crew arrived.

"Find the corpse yet?" was the first thing out of the young man's mouth, as he stood feet apart, donning rubber gloves, and looking about the scene.

Spence shivered in Masters' arm. Masters attempted to right things.

"The deceased was a good friend of this young man. A bit more respect would seem in order."

"Oh. Sorry. You get pretty callus doing what I do. I really am sorry, kid."

Spence nodded and Masters dropped his arm.

"I better go be with Gram," Spence said.

Masters agreed and the boy left.

Jack, the remaining deputy, called out.

"Over here, Doc. This is what you're after."

The two were soon at the deputy's side.

"This'll be a dental chart ID jobbie for sure. Appears to be a black man about five feet seven or eight. Would that describe the person you'd expect to be here?" he asked Masters.

"Yes. That would be the man, Amos Jackson, the horticulturist for the island. In his mid-sixties, I would guess.

Pictures were taken and the crew removed the body.

"Looks to have been an oil explosion and probably within a few yards of the deceased. If it's any consolation to the young man, you can tell him I'm quite sure the man didn't ever know what happened. No suffering on this one. Instant death."

"Thank you. I'll pass that on at the appropriate time. I do have one request. Make every effort to locate the remnants of any foreign substance on the man's fingers, under his nails, perhaps."

"Doubtful it'll be there to find, but we'll give it our best shot, Mr. Masters. It's an honor to be working a case with you."

Masters walked around to the far eastern side of the ruins - a vantage point he had not yet viewed. There among a stand of young pine trees was Lawrence. He approached the old detective.

"I didn't expect to see you up here," Masters said in greeting.

"I haven't been up here for years but considering the situation I couldn't help from coming to see for myself - mostly to make sure Spence and his grandmother are okay, I suppose. Amos was killed?"

"Instantly, according to the coroner and I'm sure he's correct. Diesel fueled, strangely."

Lawrence winced.

"Another murder, then?"

"Oh, yes! Murder. The first felt like a long-smoldering grudge of some kind. But two? I only hope it isn't the second of many."

"A serial killer on Terrapin Island?" Lawrence asked in disbelief.

"Maybe, but I doubt that - at least not in the strictest sense of the term.

There is something strange - off beat - about it all. I'm going to ask the Sheriff to provide a presence on the island for the next few days."

"Expecting something more, aren't you?"

"I'm a cautious man. Better safe than dead."

"Is Spence in danger?"

"I won't be sure if *anyone* is free from danger until I fit a few more pieces of the puzzle together. In the mean time I wouldn't let him - or you, for that matter - ever be out of plain view of someone else."

"You make it sound scary."

"You'd better believe it's scary, Lawrence. Two murders in two days - that's nearly fifteen percent of the population out here. Yes, I'd say that's scary. I really would prefer that you and Spence stay here at the Inn until all this gets cleared up."

"I'd rather have a cop down at my boat. I'll gladly pay for private security. How do I go about getting such a thing?"

"Call the sheriff's office as a starting place. Use my name. I'll repeat it just once more. I'd feel much better if the two of you remained up here."

"Until I get protection for us, Spence should stay at the Inn - I agree that makes sense. It's just something that I can't do. Please don't worry Spence about my safety."

"He'll do that all by himself - my help won't be needed."

"It's the best I can do."

He turned and disappeared into the woods.

Masters called in his request for protection to the sheriff's department. It was already on its way. Masters was impressed. He then returned to the Inn. The mid-morning snack had gone the way of all good things. Lunch was being served. Spence and Mary were already occupying Masters' table, clearly waiting for him to join them.

"Well, certainly not the morning we had anticipated," Masters said as he took a seat, opening up the obvious topic. "You both have my deepest sympathy, you know."

They nodded. Mary spoke.

"What's going on, Ray? It's really frightening. Should we evacuate the Island?"

"Several deputies are on their way to stay with us and Lawrence is arranging private security at the house boat. I think it's best to stay here so we can get to the bottom of this. Once people leave the probable perpetrator is also gone."

"Deputies to stay here?" Spence said. "Sounds like you expect more trouble. What's going on?"

"I'm not entirely sure though I have a hunch. I just need some time to get it all sorted out. In the meantime, let everyone here know they should not wander off alone. No one will be allowed to leave the island until we understand what's happening."

"I'll see to that," Mary said.

Masters turned to Spence.

"Your father and I have agreed that you should remain here at the Inn for the next several days. I assume there is a place."

"Certainly," Mary said. "He can stay in my quarters."

"Gram. I'm a seventeen year old boy. No offense but sleeping with my grandmother is not my idea of a tolerable solution."

"There's an extra bed in my suite," Masters offered. "I can only use one at a time regardless of how it might appear."

Spence looked at Mary. She nodded and patted his hand.

"That's very kind of you, Raymond. It does sound better, I suppose. I tend to forget you're a young man, now. We did have some good times when you'd sleep over as a little guy, though, didn't we."

Spence grinned.

"Popcorn and salted apple slices in bed. Dad never let me eat in my room. It was always like a mini-vacation."

His face grew serious and he turned to Masters.

"Unless you think I need to stay there for her protection. I hadn't thought of that."

"She'll be just fine. Don't worry - *roomy!*"

The boy relaxed and his smile returned.

"When the deputies arrive we'll have one accompany you back down to the boat and you can pick up some clothes and other necessities, and spend some time with your father."

With those things settled, they got on with lunch. The hubbub had in no way dampened Annie's skill. For Masters, it was toasted ham and cheese on German rye with a mild horseradish dip; a Caesar salad for Mary; and two fist busting cheeseburgers with an endless supply of fries for Spence.

The remainder of the conversation awkwardly tried to avoid the problem at hand.

"I see you prefer vinegar to catsup for your fries," Masters commented to Spence.

"It's a Canadian thing, I guess. Probably picked it up from my mom – she was from Ottawa."

That moved Spence and his grandmother to reminisce about earlier times - occasionally including humorous things related to some of Master's previous visits. It was good to smile and chuckle if only momentarily.

By the time they had finished, six deputies had arrived - actually three deputies and three state policemen. Masters helped them get organized and dispersed. There would be two shifts of six and an over night crew of four. The sheriff seemed to be going all out for some reason. Masters suddenly felt the need to meet the man. Apparently the feeling was mutual. At 1:15 Masters received a call. The sheriff would be arriving by helicopter at two ... *"if that was satisfactory with Detective Masters."*

The small chopper set down on the beach beside the old dock house. Ten minutes later the sheriff and Masters were deep into conversation in the northeast corner of the great room at the Inn.

"I'd forgotten what a beautiful spot this is out here," the sheriff said.

“Some of my friends and I used to row out and play here when I was a boy. That was before the Spensers had completed the development. They’ve done wonders with the place. Just look at this magnificent room.”

The man was plainly impressed.

“I assume you had things on your mind other than childhood memories, Sheriff,” Masters said, trying to move the conversation on to more useful matters without appearing rude.

“You assume correctly, and it’s Walt, Walt Overlander, Mr. Masters.”

“And it’s Ray, if you please.”

He seemed more like a gentleman than a sheriff. In his late fifties, he had nearly thirty years of police work under his belt - a far smaller belt, by the way, than Masters’.

“It’s been an ongoing concern for me but something that remains a private matter from sheriff to sheriff in my county. Forty years ago the sheriff from a neighboring county had what might be called an underground arrangement with the director of a prison in eastern Canada. He would ‘buy’ prisoners from the warden and sell them to private organizations giving them new identities. In return for their freedom they’d work for next to nothing. The set-up was discovered some thirty years ago and several officials in both countries had to pay the piper. I have information that a half dozen of those prisoners - all of them dangerous or violent - ended up in this area. During one of the trials it came out that one of the indicted Canadian officials had been a boyhood friend of Harry Spencer and I always suspected the labor force out here consisted of some of those prisoners. I really have nothing to go on but my hunch, and never had proper reason to investigate or run any of their fingerprints.”

“I see. That could explain some things. It leaves others dangling. Prints from the old dock house should be abundant in relation to Paddy O’Hara. The greenhouse should abound with those of Amos Jackson. I imagine there is nothing baring you from running them, now that they are deceased, is there?”

“Seems legitimate to me. It may give us some insights into those who remain. Who would they be?”

“Annie Chance the chef, well into her sixties, swears like a sailor, and William Price, the butler – a classy, arrogant guy - about the same age,” Masters said.

“You said something about leaving some things dangling?”

“Just personal puzzlements. The four of them are known to be the very best in their individual trades – Amos, reportedly, held a Master’s degree in horticulture, Annie clearly has had years of training, and William speaks with an educated tongue. Those would not appear to be the backgrounds of your typical dangerous felons on the run.”

“Never run in to a degree holding killer?”

“Well, yes. You have a way of cutting to the chase, don’t you? Still, it doesn’t wash. Would Harry have stocked the island with dangerous criminals and allowed them access to his little son and wife and guests? He may have been a distasteful human being but even so, he was clearly not foolish – was he?”

"I see what you mean. Perhaps he used some screening process, which satisfied him that those things would not be problems. It's all academic anyway until we run some prints."

"What about Harry?" Masters asked.

"What are you asking?"

"Any association with less than laudable people or organizations?"

"Organized crime?"

"Or something less. He seems to have amassed a great deal of money. Mary attributes it to his astute real estate dealings. I was just wondering."

"I don't have any information along that line. Let me sniff around a bit and I'll get back to you. I do know they - Harry and Mary - own lots of property in my county - most of it shoreline and all of it worth its weight in gold. I just assumed the Inn had done very well over the years."

"I'm sure it has and that's probably all there is to it." Masters moved on. "Your deputy called in the Fire Marshal I believe."

"He'll be here in the morning. Tied up at a hotel fire in Detroit today. You're sure this was arson, I assume."

"No doubt. I'm even pretty sure I know who and how, but I'd rather keep that to myself for the time being. By the way, I appreciate your quick response to my request to be allowed to work on the case. I didn't expect to be deputized."

"It's called covering my behind. Cross all the t's and dot all the i's. Election is not far off."

"And you put more manpower into this thing than I would have expected."

It was really a question, but Masters would not come right out and ask why.

"Truth is," Walt said, smiling through a chuckle, "When I asked for volunteers and my men heard it was Raymond Masters who was working the case, two thirds of my staff stepped forward. Half of them are *giving* their time for the next three days. My budget wouldn't allow it otherwise."

"I'm not sure how to respond."

"Just help us catch whoever is responsible. We just don't have murders in our county. My men and women are proud that way."

"No pressure then, you say," Masters said, smiling.

"No more than you'd experience in a car crusher, I'm sure. What can I do? I've told my folks to follow your lead."

"Let's print the old dock house on the south shore of the island and the green house - you can look down on the edge of it through the window there. If what I have been led to believe is true, each should be free of the prints of any employee other than the one assigned to the building. Spence's prints - the grandson - will probably be everywhere. He has a way of getting on with everybody."

"That will require the fingerprinting of all the help and guests."

"Why, I believe you're right! How convenient for one of your passions," Masters said meeting smile with smile.

Walt nodded. Masters nodded. They understood each other completely.

"One more thing, I suppose," Masters added. "It would be helpful to obtain

a brief background check on each of the guests. In addition to myself I believe there are just four - a middle aged couple, a writer and I'm not sure about the fourth - a man looking to be in his early forties - a painter maybe. Mary can get you started."

"In this day of computers, such a request is easily accomplished, unlike in the old days when we wore our soles through to our socks knocking on doors."

"I do remember. Progress has a least a few virtues, I suppose."

The two stood and Masters accompanied the sheriff in search of Mary. That accomplished he set out to find Spence. It was easily done. Masters turned around and there he was.

"Spence, just the person I'm looking for."

"Good. I'm rapidly getting bored out of my skull confined to this place. What's up?"

"Come with me back down to the dock house. You've been in and out of there regularly, I assume."

"Yeah. Almost every day since I came to the island, I suppose."

"Good. Let's commandeer a cop and a cart and go down to take a look."

A few minutes later found the two of them on the dock in front of the well weathered, old, clapboard building. Spence sighed a deep and meaningful sigh as he opened the door and entered. Masters followed.

"It'll never be the same coming in here and knowing Paddy won't be growling at me from across the room."

"A good natured growl?"

"Hard to say. I always interpreted it that way so he didn't have much choice. I certainly never let it dissuade me - a quarter word, there. What are we doing here?"

"I want you to just look around. Roam the room. Don't touch anything. See if anything out of the ordinary jumps out at you. Don't force it. Just look around."

Spence took the task seriously and with hands clasped behind his back he began his search. A long ten minutes passed before he approached Masters.

"Okay, now what? I tell you my impressions?"

"Yes, that's a good place to start."

"Well, look over here."

He walked to a wooden crate which served as an end table along side an old, leather sofa. He pointed to the ash tray.

"Paddy *only* smoked cigars - any kind he could get his hands on. But see, here. Cigarette butts. Two kinds. These are the English ones William smokes - they have the hard, shiny, coated filter tips - and these others are domestic. From the bright red of the lipstick stain, I'd say they were Annie's. Gram doesn't smoke or wear lipstick of any color and I never knew Paddy to entertain women - not here on the island, anyway.

"Then, look up here on the mantel. Two things."

Masters followed him. "See this."

"Looks like an origami flower - folded out of newspaper. Beautiful," Masters said.

“Amos is he only one I’ve ever known who did origami and he *always* made flowers. It seems to me all the unlikely people on the island were here in this room not too long ago.”

“Outstanding observations, Spence. You said two things about the mantel?”

“His seven day clock. See this spot where there isn’t any dust. That’s where it sat. It was the only possession Paddy had that seemed to mean anything to him. It played, “*When Irish Eyes are Smiling.*” He had it set so it would play at nine a.m. and nine p.m. every day. It’s gone. In all the time I’ve known Paddy it was never moved from right here on the mantel.”

“The music box could be set to play at various times?”

“To any time he wanted, but it played at that same hour both a.m. and p.m. – every twelve hours in other words. The clock itself only needed to be wound once a week but the music box needed it every day. Winding it was like some sacred ritual to him. He never let anybody else do it. Where do you suppose it is?”

“I have a good idea but we’ll need to wait. You remember if it had a name - like a manufacturer’s name on it?”

“*Opus.* It was at the top of the face in old English lettering.”

“You are a marvel, son. Anything else?”

Spence looked around one more time.

“Well, maybe. Look over here.”

He walked to the gun rack.

“Paddy collected Civil War guns. Only had a few as you can see. Gram hates guns. Won’t allow them to be kept or fired here on the island. She makes this one exception because Grampa had allowed him to have them. She won’t let him fire them here, though.”

“They are in working order, then?”

“Oh, yes. He took better care of them than he did himself.”

“So what caught your attention about them?”

“The powder case. It always hangs with the brass cap to the right – you can see the fade mark on the paneling. But see. Now it’s hanging the opposite way.”

“Sharp eyes. I’m not sure what relevance that has. Perhaps someone other than Paddy re-hung it there. We will keep it in mind. Anything else?”

“No. Nothing jumps out at me.”

Let’s go pick up your clothes then, and see if we can convince your father to join us in the Inn for the next few days.”

“Like *that* will ever happen!”

Spence sounded more disappointed than angry though both emotions were evident. They boarded the cart and were off toward the houseboat.

“Is that something that needs to be talked about?” Masters said, hoping to open a crack in the topic.

“No. Dad just won’t go up to the Inn. It’s something very private and very bad between Dad and Gram. It’s not for the rest of to know about. He *won’t* go up there, though, so don’t waste your time asking.”

“He came up to the Inn this morning to make sure you and your grandmother were safe after he heard the explosion.”

“No kidding!”

“No kidding. He didn’t step out of the woods but I understood from him that was as close to the Inn as he’s been in quite a few years.

“I’d say so,” Spence said, stunned at what he’d heard.

“Surely you’re not surprised at his concern for your wellbeing.”

“Oh, no. Not that. Just seems so strange him being up there like that.”

The rest of the short ride continued in silence.

Masters waited, sitting on the deck while Spence and his father went inside to gather his things. Masters made small talk with the deputy who was accompanying them.

A half hour later the two reappeared with one suitcase, a sack of ‘reading’ material, and Spence’s guitar.

Spence held it up. “Never *fret*. Not even two funerals and a house fire shall keep the young musician from practicing his appointed *rounds*.”

Lawrence ruffled the boy’s curly brown hair and kissed him on the forehead. Spence clearly enjoyed it. Masters shook his head and had one last question for Lawrence.

“Your security people?”

“That’s probably them now,” he said pointing to a boat approaching from the southwest.”

“We’ll wait to make sure, if you don’t mind.”

A few minutes later two, burly, security men were aboard, both armed and both looking the parts of refugees from the World Wrestling Federation.”

The deputy knew one of them and they exchanged a few friendly words before he, Spence, and Masters headed back toward the Inn.

Once there, they got Spence settled into his side of the bedroom – two drawers, half the closet and most of the shelf space in the bathroom. With his guitar cradled in his lap, the boy sat back on his bed, cross-legged and barefoot and began playing a somber, poignant, piece – one Masters didn’t recognize and assumed was being composed as he went along. Masters stretched out on his bed, hoping to catch forty winks. Each was retreating from the recent madness in his own way.

Chapter Three

Day three

Being awakened by a teenager singing his heart out in the shower was an unusual experience for Masters. By six o'clock, however, the two had managed to share what needed to be shared and assisted with that which needed to be assisted with and were descending the stairs anticipating some wondrous culinary delight.

The dining room drapes were still drawn closed. The steam tables were cold and empty. The lights were off. As if on cue the two checked their watches to see if they had, perhaps, arrived an hour early. They hadn't - and they had, of course, known that. Something was very wrong.

"You go get your grandmother. I'll check in the kitchen," Masters said.

Spence bounded up the stairs two at a time. Masters made his way to the kitchen. It, too, was dark and empty.

"Why would she leave?" Masters asked himself aloud, standing and surveying the room. A number of possibilities spun through his head. Perhaps she had murdered her two co-workers and feared she was about to be found out by way of the fingerprinting; or, she was innocent of those crimes but still afraid the investigation would reveal her true identity and send her back to prison; Maybe, she was grief stricken over their deaths and remained in bed. It would be the *unspoken* possibility that proved true.

He entered the room behind the kitchen assuming it was her quarters. It was. Annie lay in her bed - lifeless.

"Another day, another murder," he said to himself, running his hand through his hair in disbelief. It was a sad statement. It was a puzzling question. He called the number he'd been given by the deputies for emergencies. A young State Policeman was soon on the scene. He called ahead as he entered the kitchen - "Mr. Masters? ... Detective Masters?"

"In here, officer! In the back room."

"My God! Not another one!"

"I'm afraid so. There is no pulse. Her skin is cold. Been dead six or eight hours. Put a call in for the coroner and the forensics boys - *again* - if you will, please."

"Yes, Sir. Any idea about the cause of death? If it's obvious, they like to know before they start out. Helps them get prepared, I guess."

"Well let's just take a quick look here. Hmm. Her mouth is wide open - unusual. Looks like there is tremendous swelling in throat and mouth. Flashlight?"

"Yes, Sir. Here."

Masters looked into the mouth.

"Throat is swelled completely shut. Probably death by physiological asphyxiation and that was most likely due to an allergic reaction - see the reddish spotting on her forehead, her neck, and in the palms of her hands."

"You sure we really need the lab guys? Seems like you have it wrapped

up.”

“The lab boy’s findings are all that really count, young man,” the old detective responded, knowing he really had not needed to. “I’ll stick my neck out one more time and say it’s probably a reaction to strawberries.”

“You got all that just from a sixty second external exam?”

“Well, not exactly. It is common knowledge around here that she was extremely allergic to strawberries. Being a good listener is often more of an asset for a detective than a quick mind.”

The young officer smiled and shook his head. Let me make the call, then – unless you want me to pass on the precise dosage.”

He was playing with Masters. It was duly noted and clearly appreciated.

“Any moment, now, Spence – the teenager – will be along with Mrs. Spencer, the owner of the Inn. Would you meet them at the kitchen door and keep them out. Say as little as you can get by with until I join you.”

“Yes, Sir. I was top of my class at saying nothing.”

He turned and left, poking at his phone as he walked away.

Masters began looking around. Beside her bed, on the night stand, was a nearly empty cup of tea.

Rather than setting in the circular groove in the bottom of the saucer, it sat askew. That suggested it had been set down in a hurry or with some difficulty. A small, silver, sugar bowl sat behind it, the handle of a matching silver spoon extended from the small square notch at the edge of the lid. Opening his handkerchief he used it to pick up the bowl and remove the lid. It was nearly empty – less than a teaspoonful left. He smelled it. Nothing unusual. He replaced it onto the table. There were also several books - romances by Bonnie Brewster. She had good taste in authors. There was a hair brush and comb, and a pair of discount store reading glasses.

His concentration was interrupted by the sound of raised voices coming from the kitchen.

“Spence has arrived!” he said to himself out loud. He made his way to handle it.

At the door were Spence and Mary. The boy spoke first, of course.

“What’s the deal? This guy wouldn’t let me come and find you.”

“It was at my instruction.” Masters looked at Mary, wrinkled his brow, and shook his head. She began weeping.

“What?” Spence asked only momentarily perplexed. “Not Annie, too? My God. What’s going on here? It has to be my worst nightmare ever.”

He put his arm around his grandmother and leaned his head into hers. Masters ushered them out of the kitchen and into the dining room.

“Let me put on some coffee,” the officer suggested as they left. “I’ll need to just wait here anyway.”

“A very nice idea,” Masters said. “Make that *lots* of coffee, okay?”

The morning shift of deputies was arriving. Masters met them to deliver the latest news. They had already been alerted.

“It’s a case of three down and who knows how many left to go,” Masters said to them. “The next most likely candidate is the Butler, William Price. His

quarters are above and behind the dining room. This may be his day off. I want him to remain in his room with an officer at his door – no, make that with an officer inside the room with him. Explain the situation to him and tell him I'll be along shortly to answer any questions. One of you please phone this in to Sheriff Overlander. The officer in the kitchen has the details. Also, make certain things are okay down at the houseboat."

Masters returned to the where Spence and Mary had seated themselves in the dining room. Spence had his hands cupped over his grandmother's in front of her on the table. He was patting them – what else was there to do?

"So, who's next?" Spence asked, impatiently. "William? Gram? Me?"

He was agitated and with good reason. At that hour of the morning most seventeen year olds were still fretting into the mirror over newly arrived blemishes but Spence was having to deal with three murders and the likelihood of more.

"How?" Mary asked.

"Looks like an allergic reaction to something."

"Strawberries!" Spence said. "Annie always said she was terribly allergic to strawberries. Those tarts you love so? She told me they were supposed to be strawberry tarts but she had to change the ingredients because of her problem. She couldn't even touch them."

"She *died* from an *allergy*?" Mary pressed.

"Her throat swelled shut."

Mary shuddered.

"It seems doubtful that she would have *accidentally* – unknowingly - come across strawberries of all things?" Spence said, highlighting the absurdity of the event.

"Well, if it were strawberries, you can bet they were somehow disguised," Masters said.

"How do you disguise a *strawberry* for crap sake?"

"Not just by dressing it up and adding a beard, that's for sure. I've stationed an officer with William – he would seem to be next in line if the pattern is what it appears to be."

"It's his day off," Mary offered. "Jason, from a temp service will be here any time now. He's the one who has been filling in for William on Mondays and Wednesdays. We can just keep him on longer if that's needed. I'm sure he can use the extra work."

Masters nodded – it meant he understood the offer – not that it was a foregone conclusion Jason would be needed.

"Do you do the same for Annie on her days off?"

"Yes. I can call her in right away. In fact, I should get on that immediately. I'll be better off working than just sitting here, anyway."

She kissed Spence on the cheek, stood and left for the office. One of the female officers arrived with a pot of coffee.

"And it is the prettiest officer who makes the deliveries," Masters said acknowledging her efforts with a smile. "That duty could be considered sexist, I suppose."

“What it is, is that I’m about the only one of the ‘guys’ who can’t make a decent cup of coffee, so I’m just doing what I *can* do. By the way, everything is fine down at the houseboat. Well, almost fine. The security guy I spoke with was carrying on about having to freeze his buns off in the water at five in the morning. It didn’t really make sense.”

Spence stifled a chuckle and managed a smile – interestingly embarrassed about it in the presence of a lady.

“You really *don’t* want to know, my dear,” Masters explained.

“The choppfer is bringing the lab crew. Had to roust them out of bed, so it may be a half hour or so yet. You a coffee drinker, young man?” she asked.

“No. Don’t want to stunt my growth. I’ll go get some juice from the cooler.”

He excused himself and left.

“He’s a *doll*,” she said to Masters but intentionally loud enough so the boy could hear.

“A very nice gesture,” Masters whispered.

“Well, it’s not a lie, you know. If I were just ten years younger ...”

She winked and left. Spence returned looking several inches taller!

“Where’s Debby?”

“Debby?”

“The deputy. Didn’t you read her name tag?”

“Forgive me. I’m afraid I was looking into her *face*.”

Spence grinned and bounced his head back and forth, as he worked on his juice.

“So,” the boy began at last. “Paddy was hit on the head and shoved down the well. Amos was blown up. Annie was someway fed disguised strawberries. It seems easier to figure the how than the why?”

“That’s pretty much the dilemma at this point.” Masters agreed. “In fact, I’m sure I know who killed who but I’m hard put to find a reasonable motive.”

“You know who killed Annie? Already?”

“One of those 99% sure things, maybe only 98 in this case,” Masters answered.

“And of course you don’t divulge anything until it’s 100% sure.”

“Your understanding that makes life easier for me right now.”

“If I can’t pester you about that, then what *can* I do?”

“Why don’t you go see if officer Dubie needs any help.”

“It’s *Debby* and is that a *direct* order, Sir?”

His face lit up.

“As direct as they come, son. Just be sure to check her name tag frequently to make sure it continues to be the right deputy.”

“You give *all* the right orders, Sir. I’ll play on your team any time.”

He wiped his mouth and pushed at his hair.

“I think she’ll find you quite presentable – *doll*,” Masters said teasing, trying to lighten the young man’s sudden load.

It deserved a shot to the shoulder and Spence delivered it. Masters feigned excruciating pain and Spence walked off in search of ... well, Spence

walked off.

“How many killers does it take to wipe out an entire household staff?” Masters mused to himself out loud.

“I’ll bite. How many?” came an unexpected response from behind. It was an unfamiliar voice.

“Will Watsen from the Fire Marshal’s office,” he said. I can only assume you are Raymond Masters.”

“Is that an assumption based on sheer tonnage?” Masters asked, standing and extending his hand.

“You got me, Sir.”

“Flint?”

“Flint! I must admit to it. Love his books.”

“Coffee?”

“Just had some down at the houseboat. Lawrence, I believe was his name. I came across the lake and pulled in there to dock. A prince of guy and makes a great cup of coffee. One of security guys seemed *really* P O’d about something though.”

Masters chuckled, his big belly shaking uncontrollably.

Will looked puzzled.

“It’s too involved for this time of day. Let me show you to the scene of the fire.”

They left through the east door of the great room and were soon at the site. Will pulled on the high rubber boots he had been carrying and thought out loud for Masters’ benefit.

“Clearly an explosion of some magnitude. Intense after fire – petroleum fueled, I suspect. I’m surprised it was contained just to the building site.”

“The area was drenched with a heavy rain the night before,” Masters explained.

“Fortunate,” Will said nodding. “I’m also surprised the natural gas didn’t fuel it for hours.”

“We got that turned off immediately.”

“Good thinking on somebody’s part.”

Will continued to examine things.

“No hot trails to suggest the fuel had been poured about. Gas can contained, I assume.”

“Found three exploded, five gallon cans from the diesel fuel store at the dock.”

“Those?” Will asked pointing into the rubble.

“Yes.”

He looked about some more.

“They had probably been stashed in the crawl space near the eastern edge of the building. See how the force blew things west.”

“I do now.” Masters was impressed.

“Here’s the culprit.”

“Culprit?”

“See this lighter, discolored line.”

"Yes. Would that be a fuse line?"

"Very good, Ray. It looks to have been a crude black powder deally."

"*Deally?* That's the scientific description, I assume," Masters said chiding the man.

"Found in Chapter Four of every Arson Manual."

The man's quick mind and good humor impressed Masters.

Will picked up a long stick and began carefully searching the surface of the ash near that fuse line.

"I suppose this would be either a bingo a hot digity, Mr. Masters."

Masters moved closer to get a good look.

"I see what you see and yet I see nothing," Masters said.

"The remains of a wooden match."

He picked it up and examined it at close range.

"Look here. The bottom is still wound in string – burnt to a crisp, but string."

"I see it. You're suggesting the match had been tied in place onto something."

"Something that would suddenly move rapidly enough so the match could strike against something rough and ignite."

"Something like a seven day alarm clock with a twelve hour music box?"

"That would pretty much fit the bill. Got one?"

"Out there." Masters pointed at the clock he had noticed the day before.

Will retrieved what was left of it and – all the while examining it - brought it to where Masters was standing.

"Amazingly intact. That's often the case with items closest to the source of an explosion. Look here. It's wonderful. The metal winding key – probably made of soft brass. Under the sudden, intense heat, it immediately bent up and around the match that had been tied onto it. The string burned through, the match dropped out, and the clock went flying."

"So, your saying that the clock's music box began playing as scheduled at nine a.m. As the spring released, it turned the key in rapid fashion. The match, tied to the key, was scratched against some appropriately positioned rough surface and then encountered the fuse, and lit it. The fire burned along the fuse which was draped into one of the diesel containers and bammo!"

"Bammo?"

"Chapter Seven. Perhaps you didn't read that far."

It made for a good chuckle between them.

"The problem with sites like this is that there are never finger prints left," Will said looking around.

"Then mark this day on your calendar. The arsonist – clearly an amateur – left the can lids in a neat little pile thirty feet from the building. My guess is we'll find a half dozen of the finest prints you can imagine."

"So you have it wrapped up, then? You really didn't need me to make this arduous journey across land, air, and sea to get here?"

"You're the final authority, my friend. An old detective's ramblings are meaningless without your expert verification."

"Well, okay then. I need to dig a few samples of the ash, and then I'll be out of your hair. You'll have my report by three this afternoon. Email here?"

"Yes. We can use the boy's. It's here on his business card."

"A boy with a business card?"

"A seventeen year old gifted musician. He gives one man, classical guitar concerts, according to his card. I imagine those affairs with a promised bevy of young ladies get first priority."

"I can *almost* remember that far back," Will said, shaking his head.

"Tell me about it. I certainly thank you for your quick response to this one," Masters said, shaking the man's hand. "I assume that now we can collect the evidence from the site."

"Certainly. I have the photos from the sheriff – good ones, by the way. It's all yours. Nice to have met you. And it's Watsen with an 'e-n' just in case Flint should ever be interested.

Masters returned inside and sat at a table to collect his thoughts.

Tommy entered the room systematically mangling another brown envelope in his ever busy hands.

"More poop from the lab," was his opening volley. He placed the envelope on the table next to where Masters was sitting. "How things going here?"

"You haven't heard?"

"Of course I've heard. Heard what?"

"About the death of the chef, Annie Chance."

"Another death? Another murder?"

Tommy pulled out a chair and sat down, limp, shaking his head.

"That's my Hunch. I think the next activity that needs your supervision is the collection of evidence from the fire site. Three cans, the remains of a clock – now sitting on the foundation – anything else that might be related to the crime. Take another deputy with you."

"I got bags. Maybe not big enough for the cans though."

"Find Spence and he'll get you some big trash bags. Mark each as to their precise location on the site, okay."

"Okay. Yes, Sir. Bag them cans!"

He left in search of Spence.

Masters spent a few moments looking through the several sheets in the envelope and then went directly to William's room. He and the deputy were deep into a chess game.

"Sorry to interrupt such a top level match, gentlemen, but I need to chat with you a bit more, William."

"And I with you. It seems to me that I should be removed from this island at once. My life is clearly in jeopardy!"

"You'd rather be wandering around alone out there on the streets of some unfamiliar town than to be here surrounded by police protection."

"Well. Put that way, I suppose you're right. What do you think is going on?"

"You're about to lose your queen for one thing."

William looked down at the board. The deputy smiled up at Masters.

"I can't concentrate. Do you mind if we call this off for now?" he said to the deputy.

"Not a problem. Coffee Mr. Masters. William makes fantastic coffee."

"Sure. Thanks."

Masters took a seat on the little sofa. William moved to a nearby chair. Masters attempted to address the man's question in a more serious manner.

"I really don't know what's going on. Clearly, three of the staff have died. In each case it looks like murder. In each case I find no trace of a motive. I was hoping you could help me in that respect."

"Motive? I would need to know who the murder suspect was in order to contemplate motive, would I not?"

"Let me rephrase it. Can you conceive of anyone having a motive sufficient to actually kill any one or all three of the victims?"

"No, quite honestly. But then, I really didn't know any of them very well. I've already indicated that to you."

The deputy brought coffee. Williams reached for an ornamental tin container and opened it. "Brownie? One of Annie's final gastronomic delights," he offered.

"Yes, thank you."

It was a fully unexpected act of kindness from the man. Masters took a bite and savored it.

"The lady was certainly gifted in the kitchen," he said.

He then moved on.

"We found several of your cigarettes – the butts, actually – in Paddy's living room down at the dock. It was my impression from our conversation that you and he were not friends."

"We most certainly were *not* friends. He was mere riff-raff."

"And how do you explain the distinctive cigarette butts?"

"Perhaps Spence took them. He is a teenager you know. Undoubtedly both a smoker and light fingered. I also suspected that several brownies were missing when the boy delivered them to me yesterday morning."

"An interesting take on teenagers. There is one problem with your suggestion. The lab reports, here," he held up the envelope, "Found only *your* fingerprints on the helpfully smooth, hard, coating on the filter tips. No one else had smoked them."

"Alright, then. Yes, I was there several nights ago. Paddy had come into some exquisite twenty year old scotch and he offered to share it with me. I dropped in about seven and was gone by seven thirty."

"Any idea why he chose you for the honor?"

"He undoubtedly recognized that of the three of us, I was the only one who could properly appreciate its superb quality."

The man was certainly taken with himself. Perhaps, he also thought quickly on his feet. If he had been there for less than legitimate reasons, he certainly would not have been foolish enough to leave such easily traceable evidence behind. His initial statement had been a denial of his presence. Why? Perhaps to keep him distanced from the lower class – the riff-raff. He would not

want to tarnish his image. It was a reasonable possibility – probably inconsequential in terms of the case.

“Thank you for your explanation. You have helped. I assume you have also, now, agreed to stay here for the time being, in protective custody of a kind?”

“Yes. Yes. For the time being. But does he have to stay right here in the room?”

“Had someone been with Annie, she might now be alive.”

“Alright then, for the time being.”

He closed the lid on the tin and placed it in the drawer of an end table as if to put it out of the deputy’s easy reach. That seemed to be more in line with the William Masters was growing to know.

“May I ask what prompted Annie to send you a tin of Brownies?”

“She mistakenly thought it was my birthday, or so said the note attached. She was white trash but, still, occasionally showed she had a good heart.”

“Did you save the note?”

“Of course not. Burned with the other rubbish the next morning.”

Masters’ attention was drawn to a large old radio in a beautiful, mahogany cabinet. It sat by the window in a far corner and was complete with a dozen dials and knobs. A half dozen well cared for house plants adorned its top.

“You an old ham radio operator, William?”

Masters got up and moved to it.

“Not any more. Back in the days before cell phones, Mr. Spencer had an arrangement with an answering service in town and we relayed calls through that radio. There is – or was – one in his suit as well. Lucky me – I drew all night duty with it. Hasn’t been used in years. It gets its weekly dusting. Don’t know why I keep it here, actually. I should trash it.”

Masters smiled and turned back toward William, handing him his empty coffee cup.

“You do make wonderful coffee, William. Do you share your secret?”

“A tiny pinch of baking soda on top of the grounds. Neutralizes the acid.”

“I will certainly try that. Thank you for your time.”

Masters left the room, carefully closing the door behind him. He headed for the sitting room to spend time with the lab reports Tommy had delivered. Several pieces of evidence had yet to be reported.

The blood on the bucket was of Paddy’s type – DNA reports would take longer. The prints in the green house were primarily those of Amos. Several from Spence were also found – mostly on tools. The one surprise, there, was the presence of William’s prints on several plastic containers of fertilizers. Perhaps for his houseplants.

The dock house was another matter. Recent overprints of William, Annie and Amos were found on the wooden arms of the furniture, on three of four matching glasses in the kitchen sink, and on bathroom fixtures. Interesting to Masters was the fact that few of those prints had been smudged or even partially covered by Paddies’ own. The lipstick on the second set of cigarette butts was a match in color and brand to Annie’s. The prints on the paper flower included

those of William, Amos and Annie. The three of them had been there with Paddy – most likely at the same time and in the very recent past. Spence’s fingerprints were everywhere as Masters expected.

Officer Debby and her recently acquired, five foot five inch, shadow entered the room and walked to where Masters was sitting.

“The forensics guy would like to speak with you in Annie’s room,” she said. “Spence has developed a terrific headache and needs his medicine from the boat. If it’s ok, I’ll take him down to get it.”

“Spence?” Masters asked. “A headache?”

“Migraine. Not often but when they come they are doozies. It’s unusual to have two in less than a week though. Had one *last* Tuesday. They send me out of my mind, sometimes. I really should stay close to dad. He’s the only one who knows how to handle things when I get this way.”

“Okay. Sure. Do what you need to do. Officer, make sure you’re satisfied with security down there. If not put a cop on it as well.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Officer Debbie could stay by my bedside, and hold my hand – apply cold compresses, loosen my clothes, I suppose,” Spence offered, wincing through his attempt at humor.

“Well that proves it, Officer,” Masters said.

“Proves what, Sir,” Debbie asked already smiling as she awaited what was clearly to be an attempt at humor.

“That male teen hormones are stronger than the worst conceivable pain.”

“Hey. I was once a teenage *girl*, Sir. I’ve known that about guys since I was twelve.”

The two adults chuckled. Spence grimaced and bit at his lip.

“Have his father give me reports every so often, if you will.”

“Yes, Sir.”

She put her arm around Spence’s waist and they walked toward the door. He responded by placing his arm around her, also. She quickly moved his hand up to her waist. The lad was a walking *Ode to Testosterone*.

Spence’s ailment was an unexpected, additional problem. Masters made his way to the kitchen. The forensics team was wrapping up their business.

“Mr. Masters. Thought you should see one thing before I bagged it. It’s only one of two things that seem odd, here. The silver sugar bowl has been wiped free of prints except for smudges on the lid handle and one on the underside of the bottom. Seems odd a woman would wipe her own fingerprints off a sugar bowl.”

“On the spoon?”

“Only one set. Hers. On the handle.”

“And the second oddity you found?”

“The contents of the bowl.”

Masters interrupted, “Part sugar and part a foreign, white powdery substance.”

“Why, yes. Exactly.”

“I peeked earlier. The powder will be some sort of a strawberry

compound.”

“Strawberries are red, Sir. This powder is white.”

“Ever look at the inside of a strawberry, Officer?”

“Oh. Yeah. Red on the outside. White on the inside. Somebody had to have gone to a lot of trouble to end up with this much white strawberry powder. That’s a lot of peeling. Probably freeze dried and pulverized.”

“Or, lacking freeze drying equipment, a microwave, perhaps. Or just boiling the meat of the berry into a thick pulp and heating it in an oven or double boiler until solid.”

“You spin possibilities faster than I can take them down, Sir.”

“And they are *just* possibilities, remember that. Any clue as to the identity of the print from the bottom of the sugar bowl?”

“Yes, Sir. It won’t be popular.”

Masters thought it was an odd way to start an answer. The deputy handed the tape-captured-print to Masters and sorted through his stash of print cards, recently acquired from the Island residents, selecting one. Name’s on the back of the card but first, wouldn’t you say it looks like a match?”

“No doubt in my mind,” Masters said.

He turned over the card. ‘Spence Spencer’.

“A number of explanations for this, of course,” Masters said, sounding more like a protective grandfather than a cop. “The boy does have access to every nook and cranny around here and has for almost ten years. His prints are bound to be everywhere. He’s always been the inquisitive type.”

“Yes, Sir. Well, we’ll get the lab to verify points before certifying it. Anything else, before we leave?”

“Yes, actually, there is. Down in the dock house – your department printed it yesterday.”

“Yes, Sir. I did it, myself. Did I miss something?”

“Not really. Remember the old muskets and pistols on the south wall?”

“Yes, Sir. I examined them visually and they seemed to have just been rubbed down with oil so I didn’t bother printing them. I can if you want me to.”

“No. That was a good judgment call. I’m only interested in the powder horn – or pouch, I suppose is a more accurate description – black leather with a brass collar and cap. Go over it real well. It’s been moved recently from its customary position. Have the contents fully analyzed as well.”

“It’ll be my next stop. I love this work, you know?”

“I can tell. It shows in your excellent performance.”

“Thank you, Sir. Thank you.”

He reached for and shook Masters’ hand.

It was as if a complement from Raymond Masters was as important as his college degree. It probably was.

Back in the great room, Tommy had Mary cornered and was regaling her with his recent heroic exploits out at the fire site.

“Probably was attacked by a large, charred, timber,” Masters muttered to himself. He sped (well!) to her rescue.

“Tommy, my man. Hate to interrupt but I think the forensics team may

need your assistance down in the dock house.”

“Okay, Sir. I’m off!”

He turned on his heel and hurried away.

“That was an understatement if I ever heard one,” Mary said.

“What?”

“I’m off!”

They chuckled together, as Masters playfully shook his finger at her. He invited Mary to sit. There were several things the old detective needed to check out.

“Spence got one of his headaches and I sent him to be with his father – with protection. Tell me about them.”

She sighed.

“Well, they began right around his fourteenth birthday. They are dreadful things. He’s been to the best headache clinics on the continent. All diagnosed them as ‘migraine-like’ and prescribed a variety of medications. He even spent some time with a biofeedback device – creating alpha in his brain or some such thing. It’s beyond me. Sometimes they make him batty for two days at a time.”

“Batty?”

“Not the medical term, I guess. He just loses himself in the pain. Talks crazy – out of his head. Lawrence is the only one who can keep him under control. He responds well to music when it’s going on.”

“How often do they occur?”

“Infrequently, actually. Seldom more than three or four times a year, I’d say. To have two of them so close is just unheard of.”

“Would he fake one?”

“Why? I can’t imagine that he would. I doubt if he’d know how, actually. Like I said he goes out of his head. Never remembers what went on. That’s probably a God send in itself. It seems a strange question.”

“All the bases, remember?”

“Yes. Was there something else? I need to make sure the new cook has what she needs for the next few days.”

“Just *one* more thing. Spence seems to believe the help is paid very well. He didn’t say what made him think that. Is it true? Are they paid above scale, so to speak?”

“I don’t know. I understand that must sound very strange. They are paid from a trust fund Harry set up dozens of years ago. Every month they receive their checks in the mail and they cash them in town. It was the arrangement he established. I’ve always known it was odd, but you didn’t question Harry. His dying words were about all that. ‘Don’t ever try to change the pay arrangement for the present staff’. Not, ‘I love you’ or ‘thanks for a wonderful life together’, but instructions about paying the help!”

Her tone was angry, disappointed and sad. Her eyes filled with tears but none fell.

“I’ll need to look into that trust. Who administers it?”

“My lawyer will know. His number is on the wall beside the wall phone at the reception desk – Lester Smythe.”

"I'll find it then. Thank you. I hadn't anticipated my questions would be so hard on you. I'm sorry."

She nodded and left the room dabbing at her eyes with a soft blue handkerchief. Masters sat back in the chair, his head whirling with new information, which needed to be settled into its proper places in the ever changing saga.

His phone rang.

"Masters here."

"Will Overlander, Ray. Just received the lab report on the fuel can lids. Strange stuff. The same three sets of prints on *each* lid – O'Harra's, Lawrence's and the boy's – Spence. Thought you should have that immediately. The report's ready to email."

"Considering this turn in events, can you send them by currier and may I suggest it be Tommy. He needs something important to do."

"I understand. You need a way to keep him out of your hair. I can pull him off the case entirely if you want."

"Oh, no. I'm growing fond of him in a master-to-pet sort of way."

"Okay, then. I'll speak to him right away, if he can remember how to answer his cell phone."

"There has to be a story here I've missed," Masters said.

"You're right of course. Later, perhaps."

Masters returned the phone to his shirt pocket – deep blue and lose fitting with pearl buttons and large, side pockets.

The coroner had come and gone without contacting Masters so he would have to await that report. He was contemplating his next move when the phone rang again.

"Masters here."

"Bill, the forensics guy from earlier. I'm finished down here at the dock house. Two sets of prints – looks like Paddy's and Spence's – just what you'd suppose, I assume. Lots of them smudged as if it had been handled by someone wearing gloves. It hasn't been wiped clean for months. What there are, have accumulated over probably the last four to six months, I'd say. Anything else before I leave?"

"It contained black powder?"

"Yes, Sir. About a quarter full, I'd say – maybe half a pound."

"That should do it, then. Thank you."

"And thank *you* for supplying me with this helpful assistant, **SIR!**"

"I owe you one!"

"Only one, **Sir?**"

"Okay! Four!!"

"More like it. Until later." Masters heard him chuckling as he hung up.

Again the phone was returned to its pocket. Masters did not like the new 'Spence' possibility that had formed over the past several hours. First things first, however. He was starved, so headed for the kitchen to see what was going on.

"This is Samantha, Mr. Masters," Mary said, introducing the middle aged lady, wrist deep in biscuit dough.

“My pleasure, Samantha.”

“Sam. Haven’t been Samantha since the ink was dry on my birth certificate. I assume you’re the one Mary says I need to be sure to keep well fed.”

“How did you guess?”

Mary looked embarrassed and shrugged her shoulders.

“Ham salad in the fridge. Fresh baked bread ready in twenty minutes – store bought available ‘til then. Fruit salad, also in the fridge and broccoli/cheese soup simmering on the stove, here. I started out well behind today but I’ll have the steam tables going by noon. Chicken and dumplings so save some room. They’ll be the best that’s ever crossed your pallet. ‘Til then, you’ll have to help yourself.”

“Although I’m sure you’d never guess by just looking, helping myself to food is one of my better skills.”

“I like this guy – just like you said I would.”

With that, Mary had been redeemed from the previous inference. Masters opted for fruit salad at the kitchen table.

“Haven’t seen any tell-tale traces of mice this morning,” Sam said to Mary as if relieved. “Annie must have got rid of them. That was the only thing I disliked about working here, you know. Hate mice!”

“Yes. I believe you’ve made that point quite clear on more than one occasion.”

“I’ve been told nobody ever has to wonder where I stand on issues. Probably why I’m still single. You married Mr. Masters.”

It was humorous. It was frightening and Masters was soon on his way across the dining room headed for the safety of his suite.

His phone rang and the officer who was posted with William began talking before Masters could speak.

“William tried to leave. I was in the bathroom for sixty seconds – even cops have to do that sometimes, you know. When I reentered the living room, he was crawling out the second floor window. There’s a short drop to the kitchen roof and then a permanent ladder in place from there to the ground – a fire escape of sorts, I assume. What shall I do, nail his shorts – or something in that vicinity - to the floor?”

“An interesting but probably inappropriate suggestion. I’ll be right there. You can manage him ok until then?”

“Oh yes. I am *managing* him just fine.”

When Masters opened the door to the butler’s apartment, he saw the deputy sitting atop William who was spread eagle on the floor.

“Yes, I can see you are managing just fine, deputy. What’s going on, William? Sneaking out to get yourself shot, stabbed, burned, poisoned, bludgeoned, blown to bits or otherwise disposed of?”

“Get this hooligan off my person!” he demanded, ignoring the question.

Masters nodded to the deputy who moved away. William got to his feet and brushed himself off directing a hateful gaze at the officer.

Masters repeated his question – paraphrased. “What in the Sam Hill were

you thinking?"

"I want to leave. I've decided I'm willing to take my chances away from here. I *demand* that you allow me to leave."

Masters met emotion with emotion.

"You're a material witness and until I get a judges signature to that effect it's my duty to protect you. Do we need to handcuff you to your bed?"

"No. That won't be necessary."

Masters addressed the deputy.

"I guess from now on he either accompanies you to the john or you handcuff him to the heaviest object in sight and don't look at me like that. By the way, lunch will soon be ready and I'll have someone come and take your orders. Until then, William, I expect you to behave yourself. Do you understand?"

It didn't call for an answer and got none. Masters started to leave and then turned back toward William.

"About your pay checks, William. I need to know three things. How much, length of the pay period, and on what bank the checks are drawn."

Initially, William remained silent. Then he spoke evading the question.

"You're treating me as though I am a suspect."

"Of course you are a suspect. Everybody who was on the island at the times of the murders is a suspect. Wake up and get on my team if you know what's good for you."

"Okay then. I suppose you have other ways of getting that information, anyway, don't you?"

"I suppose I do!"

It was a high volume act that Masters kept in reserve for special occasions. It seemed to have worked well.

"*Winston Bank of Canada*, twice a month, one hundred dollars."

The deputy did a double take at the small amount but remained silent.

"Has that sum changed over the years since you began working here?"

"Three times. It began at twenty-five dollars and through the years increased to fifty, seventy-five, and four years ago to one hundred."

"I do know how all of that came about, William. I would suggest that you spend some time writing a full description of how you came to be here – of how Harry Spencer purchased you from the Warden in Canada to be more specific."

It had been a long shot but it paid off. William was clearly astonished. The deputy looked puzzled, but impressed.

"I guess I knew this time would come. If I cooperate, what special considerations will I be given?"

"That depends entirely upon how many of your co-workers you may have murdered."

William started to say something but then apparently thought better of it.

"I'll get started right after lunch. I had no breakfast, you know, and this manhandling has been most upsetting. My stomach feels damaged from it all. There may be a suit."

He would put others down to the end. Masters felt sorry for the man.

"You alright, deputy?"

"I'm fine. Somewhat eager for him to try it again, in fact." He pounded a fist into his other palm as if to confirm his intent.

William shrunk back and seated himself on the couch, cozying up to the arm.

As Masters closed the door he reminded the officer, "Keep this door locked. Nobody but me gets in. Give your lunch order through the door. In case of fire you have my permission to spray him with a seltzer bottle but he's not to leave that room."

He chuckled himself back down the stairs, assuming the deputy would be smart enough to ignore that last order should a fire actually break out. Mary was setting up the steam tables.

"Some of the guests are getting pretty nasty about having to remain here," she said, by way of greeting. "Suppose you could speak with them?"

"Certainly. I was hoping to receive some background information on them first. Tell them to assemble in the north east corner of the great room after lunch – say one o'clock."

Mary seemed relieved.

"I could sure use Quentin's help around here, now. I have come to depend on him so much this past year or so."

Masters looked amused and Mary understood.

"Well, it was I who suggested the name, *Quentin* – my grandfather's - and I *shall* continue to call him by it when he's not around to openly abhor it."

"Seems reasonable to me. How can I help here?"

"I have it all pretty well under control. Sam is an excellent cook and much easier to get on with than poor Annie ever was. She's agreed to stay on until I figure what I need to do. I'm feeding the police people. I suppose that's okay isn't it?"

"A very nice gesture, Mary. I'm sure they appreciate it."

"You asked if you could help. If it's not beneath you, perhaps you could bring the pans of food from the kitchen."

"Mary, my dear, rest assured that when it comes to any aspect of handling food, the job cannot possibly be beneath me."

As it turned out, the relief butler, Jason, arrived in time to do those tasks and Masters was free to join the other diners. It was an excellent lunch – plain, good, hearty food - a different sort of menu from Annie's but refreshing, and in a way more fitted to the rustic surroundings. The guests spread themselves out among the small private tables near the windows. The officers gathered together at the large, round table in the center of the dining room. They, of course, ate in shifts. Mary and Masters had delivered trays to William and his newly acquired, eager to be pushed, nemesis. William had been all quite selfishly munching on his private larder of brownies and had lost his appetite. The deputy was pleased to see that the second meal did not go to waste.

After lunch, Masters met with the guests in the great room explaining what had happened and telling them that very soon they would be free to leave if they chose to. He answered what questions he could and had them relaxed and

smiling, if not entirely satisfied, by the time the meeting came to an end.

No sooner had they dispersed than Tommy arrived, tugging at his belt as if he were in imminent danger of losing his trousers. It was another brown envelope – thicker than the others but equally wounded.

“Stuff just keeps coming. Sheriff made me Chief Courier on the case, you know. Important stuff to do.”

“He picked a good man, Tommy. Keep up the good work. By the way, feel free to eat in the dining room. The owner has made it available to all the deputies.”

“That’s really nice, of Mary. I’ll have to tell her. Where’s Spence? I haven’t seen him lately. He’s another nice person. Like grandmother like grandson, I guess.”

He laughed nervously, whether about the way he garbled the saying or something else was not clear. Masters suspected it was just his nervous reaction to life in general. He didn’t await an answer to his question about Spencer’s whereabouts.

The envelope contained the background information on the guests. More than Masters had expected. The sheriff’s computers had apparently worked their little hearts out – or would that be, *infinitesimal chips out?*

Andre Bonaparte, forty one, was a French Canadian – a painter of some local repute in the Toronto area. He had a rap sheet including mostly petty things – robbery of art supply stores, breaking and entering, a few bad checks. No new entries during the past nineteen years. Things had apparently been on the upswing for him. The name had, Masters guessed, been assumed for professional reasons – he had been born Andrew Bonny in Evansville, Indiana, although he had been in Canada since he was eighteen. Early on he had worked as a pharmacist’s assistant to pay for art lessons. Later, he had been employed as assistants to several well-known painters. It was his first visit to *The Lancaster Inn*. In passing, Mary had commented that he was painting sunsets. Masters assumed he must be *quick* with the brush. It was worth a chuckle to himself, though he was sure not to anyone else. One item seemed worth tucking away in his mental recesses – Andre had recently held a large exhibit made up entirely of portraits of older, black men.

Barbara Carson – Just Barb to those on the island – was a frequent visitor coming several times a year. She was a writer and felt walking the trails on *Terrapin Island* provided inspiration for her stories – many about the little known pirates that had once frequented the Great Lakes. She and Spence were good friends. She was three times divorced and typically hard up for money as writers of lesser fiction frequently are. Two of her husbands died unnatural deaths. She was never implicated. One died on a mountain climb in the Canadian Rockies and one was lost at sea in a one man attempt to cross from Iceland to Great Britain. Apparently Barb went for the adventurous types. She had been adopted as a child and had spent considerable time and money trying to find her natural mother – evidently unsuccessfully.

The Ashcrofts – Blake and Betty: He was a wealthy board member of a bank in Ottawa – interestingly the *Winston Bank*, which cared for the trust fund

from which the Inn's help was paid. He had made his money in what the report referred to as *marginally legal endeavors* in eastern Canada. Betty spent her time having affairs with plastic surgeons and tennis pros. Blake either didn't pay attention or didn't care. Both in their late sixties, they looked ten years younger. Again, they were frequent visitors – with every change in season, it seemed. While on the island, Blake jogged, swam and drank. Betty engaged in such fascinating and mentally challenging activities as tanning, worrying about her pedicure and attempting to seduce all available males of legal age. They had no children, contributed to no charities, and lived a lavish, fully self-centered life style.

Aside from the fact they had embraced the old detective's least favorite approach to living, they caught his interest for other reasons. He needed to know more about Blake's early business dealings. He jotted down some notes and delivered them to Tommy, who was sitting alone in the dining room, six plates in front of him - most of them, by then, empty.

"More currier work, Deputy," Master said seriously. "Get this note on its way back to the sheriff as soon as you've finished lunch."

"Yes Sir" (at least that was Masters' interpretation of the muffled response, as it had been rendered through a mouth filled with thick crust, apple pie).

It prompted Masters to visit the dessert bar for a second time. (Okay, the fourth!)

Chapter Four Day Four

Masters anticipated a long, arduous day of interviews and reassessment of the facts. By five a.m. he was up and on his way down to the houseboat. His cart was being driven by an affable, if sleepy-eyed, young State police officer.

At the gangplank the security guard pointed them to the east end of the land dock – the terrapin’s head. They were soon there.

“Hey, Mr. Masters,” came the unexpected, cheery voice of young Spence from twenty yards out in the water. “Come on in. It feels fantastic.”

“I’ll pass,” he called back. “Doesn’t look like the dock is sturdy enough to handle a tidal wave.”

Then in a softer voice he addressed the boy’s father. “Morning Lawrence. Looks like the headache passed.”

Lawrence seemed content to just tread water close to shore while keeping his eye on the boy. The security guard stood a few yards away, smiling - his buns apparently both dry and warm that morning.

“It left about an hour ago. He’ll sleep the clock around once he gets to bed. Exercise seems to help get his system re-regulated – and no, I really don’t know what that means. I just know it works.”

“Well I’m glad to hear the good news. How bad was it?”

“He went through the whole thing – just in rapid sequence. I’ve never seen it work like this before. Hope it’s not a harbinger of things to come.”

“I understand. Looks like you can use some rest as well. I won’t pester you. Perhaps I’ll stop by later in the day.”

“If there are things on your mind, ask away. He’ll be swimming laps for another thirty minutes. I truly can’t remember ever having that much energy myself.”

“Well, perhaps a few things, then. How are the fuel cans handled at the old dock house?”

“I’m not sure what you mean. They’re brought to us twenty at a time from a marina near Cedarville. Paddy called in an order when they were needed – half gasoline and half diesel. We get a delivery like that about every other week I’d say. Spence and I usually help put them into the storage shack – it’s a separate little building just west of the dock house. Five gallon cans are pretty heavy and Paddy was pretty old to be handling them. He had the only key. I have it now – temporarily – if you need it. When we needed fuel, he’d open the door and we’d sign it out, almost always five gallons at a time - more for the yacht, of course. I paid him for what I used. I can’t vouch for the fact that money ever made its way into the Inn’s coffers, however.”

“I see. Was there a reason not to have a pumping station with a storage tank?”

“We actually use very little fuel around here – fifty gallons a week really doesn’t justify such an expense. A unit like that has to meet lots of safety standards so there’s no chance it will leak into the lake – things like that. Mother

just never got around to updating, I suppose.”

“That makes sense. One more thing and I’ll be on my way. Did Paddy ever actually use the Civil War guns he had?”

“Mother wouldn’t let anyone fire a gun on the island. When I was real small, I remember he used to take them over to *Pack Island*, you can see it out there.” He pointed southeast. “I’d hear him firing them. I don’t think he’s done that for years, though.”

He looked up at Masters and his voice became serious. “Nobody’s been shot have they?”

“No. No. Just an old detective’s curiosity.”

“You’re a poor liar, Ray. But I’ll assume it’s not for us peons to know at this point. Anything else?”

“That takes care of everything on my mind for now. You just take good care of your boy – and yourself. I’ll check in later.”

He waved to Spence who submerged and, with his feet in the air, waved back. Masters smiled and shook his head.

“Energy indeed! I’m so glad to see him feeling better. His grandmother has been terribly worried, of course. She’ll be so relieved and happy to hear the good news. Later then.”

Masters and the officer mounted the golf cart.

“Head this contraption for the dock house, officer. I want to check out that fuel storage building.”

Masters walked circles around the small structure looking it up one side and down the other. He thumped on the walls. He inspected the old, rock and mortar, foundation.

He drew the young policeman’s attention to the hinges.

“There is really little reason to lock this place. The hinges are screwed in place from the *outside* of all things. Anybody with a screwdriver could get in.”

“Or a quarter, Sir.”

“A quarter?”

The officer took a quarter from his pocket, inserted it into the groove on a screw and proceeded to turn it out. Masters was impressed.

“I spent more than my share of time in Juvenile Hall before I got my head on straight and joined the good guys,” he explained

Masters nodded and smiled. “A cop, somewhere along the way?”

“The matron at Juvie, actually. She just became the God Mother to my new little daughter – Michelle Annette.”

“It’s great when we human beings actually pause long enough to take good care of each other, isn’t it?”

“For me it was a lifesaver, Mr. Masters.”

After a few more raps here and there and the persistent rattling of the padlock, Masters was satisfied. Minutes later they were back at the Inn. Breakfast was ready and they were the first with plates in hand. Masters led the young man over to ‘his’ table and they chatted as they ate.

Presently Mary joined them, coffee in hand.

“Have a seat my dear. Good news about Sp . . . Quentin. His headache

left early this morning. I talked to him briefly while he and Lawrence were taking their early morning dip. It seems that the next step will be for the boy to just sleep for some time.”

“That’s the way it goes. I’m so glad to hear. I imagine Quentin would have called to tell me later on. He’s good about such things.”

The desk clerk entered the room and brought a cell phone to Mary.”

“Hello. This is Mary. . . . I see. . . . I see. . . . Wonderful! . . . Thank you! . . . Thank you, so much!”

Tears had begun streaming down her face after the first, ‘I see.’

“You’ll never believe this. It was Lawrence calling to tell me Spence was better. Excuse me please.”

She left.

“Seemed like tears of joy,” the young deputy said, clearly interested but not going to pry.

“You’re a good judge of things.” Masters left it at that.

Another deputy entered the dining room, clearly searching for Masters. He hurried toward the table.

“I hope you aren’t in to killing the bearer of bad news, Mr. Masters.”

“William?”

“Yes, Sir. I went up to start my shift at six. Buck had been reading - all night, I guess. He’d had no reason to look closely at him while he slept. Anyway, out of curiosity, I suppose I went over to the bed to get a look at the man I’d be guarding. He didn’t seem to be breathing. I called Buck and we were going to start CPR. We rolled him over onto his back and the man was bleeding from his mouth - I mean really bleeding. He was dead - several hours, I’d guess - his face was cold but his arms, under the blanket, were still slightly warm.”

“That makes it a full house, I believe.” Masters vented his feelings of frustration by repeatedly swiping at his ever-wayward mustache. He sighed deeply and pushed back from the table. “Let’s go take a look.”

He turned to the officer who had been assisting him.

“I appreciate your help and good conversation, Officer. Go get some rest and make a wonderful life for your little daughter.”

“Yes, Sir. Thank you, Sir. That is definitely my plan.”

In William’s bedroom things were just as the deputy had described them.

“You’ve called the coroner?”

“Yes. First thing,” Buck said. “I feel just terrible - him dieing on my watch.”

“Clearly nothing you could have done about it.”

Masters went into the living room and immediately to the drawer where the brownie tin had been stored. It was there - empty except for a few small bits and pieces.

“Bag this for forensics. Make a note for them to look for warfarin, among anything else they may routinely check for.”

“Poison in the brownies? Jimmy, the deputy on day duty told me he’d had one. Should we alert him?”

“Yes, you should. I doubt if there is anything to worry about, but he needs to be checked out. I also had one and I’m fine.”

“But if they were poisoned?”

“This killer of ours isn’t dumb! To the contrary, *very* clever! Let’s just see what the lab finds, first. It would appear as though Annie had some reason to want William dead - that is if Annie is actually the one who made the brownies.”

Masters walked down the hall to his room. He needed to make a call and it was not one he wanted to make.

“Lawrence. Masters here. Thought you should know that William died in his sleep - undoubtedly murder. I have to ask you a very strange question and can’t explain my reason right now. To your knowledge did Spence bake anything during the past several days?”

“Well, yes in fact he did - brownies several days ago - enough to feed an army. The security guys have been nibbling on them ever since they got settled in - and those big guys *can* nibble.”

“Would you be so kind as to save a couple for me?”

“Sure. I’ll zip them into a bag and put them in the fridge with your name on them. You’re peaking my interest, you know.”

“I know. I’ll fill you in just as soon as I can. Latter.”

Clearly the brownies *now* at the houseboat had not been poisoned. It didn’t mean that a part of the batch could not have been. Masters wanted a sample so the lab could compare the recipe that Spence used with the one from which William’s had been made. That should help establish the source of the deadly variety.

Masters went down stairs to break the news to Mary and the Deputy in charge of the day shift. Mary’s wonderful day was suddenly darkened.

“I am putting you under twenty-four hour protection, Mary. Deputy Debbie should be here by now and we’ll begin with her. I want you to stay inside and don’t eat or drink anything that the rest of us are not eating and drinking. Do you take any medicines?”

“I’m almost seventy years old. Of course I take medicine!”

“Don’t take what you have on hand today. I’ll have the sheriff get fresh prescriptions for you in town and fly them out. We’ll bag the ones you now have, and let the lab guys give them a going over.”

Masters took Mary by the hand and they went in search of Debbie. She was just coming in the front door. Masters beckoned to her.

“Morning folks,” came her always cheery greeting. “How’s Spence?”

“Actually he is doing fine. He’s sleeping it off today, but the headache left early this morning.”

“He’s such a sweetheart. I’m glad to hear that. What can I do for you?”

“The butler died in his sleep - probably from a huge dose of a blood thinner. I want you to stick with Mary like glue on flypaper.”

She frowned.

Masters smiled down at Mary.

“A mere child. She’s never heard of fly paper.”

He then turned back to Debbie.

“Just don’t let her out of your sight for a second – and I mean *a second*. She is to eat nothing the rest of us haven’t already eaten. Call Sheriff Overlander

and have new prescriptions filled for her. I'd prefer to have a lab guy watch while the pharmacist does his thing. Get them out here ASAP. Bag her old pills and get them to the lab."

"I'll take care of everything. I suppose this means bringing in two other gals for the other shifts."

"If you will, please."

"Sure. Well, Mary, it looks like we'll be joined at the hip for the next eight hours. I'm not one to sit around so tell me how I can be of help."

"I like this young lady, Ray. Can I keep her?"

"I think Spence already has dibs on her."

"Well," Mary said with a sigh, "Let's begin with breakfast. First I guess I need to call Jason back in to take over for poor William. What a dreadful week this has become."

"Give me the number and I'll make the arrangements," Debbie said.

While that was being done Mary turned to Masters, her hand to her mouth.

"Arrangements! We have to make funeral arrangements. How could I have overlooked that?"

"The bodies won't be released for another five days or more. There will be time for that later."

Debbie returned and gently urged her toward breakfast. Masters turned his attention elsewhere. Mary was plainly in good hands.

Masters apprised the deputy in charge, of the latest murder and the arrangements he had made for Mary.

"I'd also like another two men on the Houseboat if you can possibly scrape some up."

"Not a problem. The sheriff has a list of volunteers coming out his wazoo. I'll have them here in an hour. What else?"

"Just keep everybody on their toes. Our killer - or killers - don't work out in the open so keep an eye for the unexpected, the out of place, anything even slightly odd."

"Not easy orders, Sir."

"It's not an easy case, deputy. I'll be in the great room if I'm needed."

It was time for Masters to get all the ducks in a row. If it had been four different murderers then he needed to approach it as if there were four separate sets of clues. If there were only one murderer - or one team of murderers - the clues should be combined. Not knowing, he would need to examine both possibilities.

It was what his brilliant mind did best - plug in the known data and begin spinning possibilities. Then, find those possibilities that could be supported well enough to become probabilities. Finally, establish the actual motive and method, and reveal the guilty party. He had been through the process hundreds of times before.

If the killings stopped at four, he was quite sure he knew the who, when and how of what had happened. If there were further attempts, all of that could be brought into question.

It was the motive or motives that posed the most puzzling element in the

case. If someone wanted the employee's jobs, Sam and Jason seemed to be the only viable suspects. But that would not explain Paddy and Amos.

If it were a matter of hate or revenge for past misdeeds, the field was open. The four had made no bones about disliking each other but with William's death so died the last suspect among them and William was not the type to kill himself.

They each had a life away from the island - on their days off. Perhaps they had enemies elsewhere. The one person who seemed to have known each of them the best and was therefore most likely to know about that other life, was sleeping the day away. That would have to wait.

In a series of deaths there always looms the possibility that only one was the true mark - the others being distractions for the investigators. That seemed a real possibility.

And then, the most frightening of all, some twisted mind could just be killing for the thrill or pleasure of it or in response to some misconceived attempt to protect somebody.

If someone wanted to put the Inn out of business, what better way than to kill off its staff, and in so doing, dishearten the aging owner. He needed information about possible competitors and any recent offers that had been made for the property. He also needed to snoop around William's quarters. He would wait until the coroner was finished. In the meantime he needed to speak with Mary.

She and Debbie were still in the dining room and he made himself at home at their table.

"A couple of questions have come to mind, Mary. Has anyone made you an offer on this place in last year or so?"

"Blake Ashcroft. He's wanted to buy it for as long as I can remember. It has become like a standing joke. They arrive. He makes me an offer. I refuse and they go about enjoying their two weeks here. There was an offer from a Canadian realtor for an unnamed third party about six months ago. I get those from time to time - I figure it's probably some Japanese or Chinese company trying to buy up that part of the United States they don't already own."

"How about competitors? Any problems that way?"

"No. None that I'm aware of. We're pretty much off the beaten track for tourists. That's more over in the Mackinaw City area. The folks who choose to come here come to be isolated so they don't spend money off the island. I'm rambling and I guess that means I don't have a good answer to your question."

"That's fine. Have you felt any undue pressure to consider any offer that's been made?"

"Some have been persistent but no, I wouldn't say I've been pressured - certainly not threatened if that's what you're implying."

Masters smiled and looked at Debbie.

"Can't slip anything past Mary. She's always one step ahead of you."

Mary had an additional thought.

"There is a long standing, firm offer to purchase the place anytime I decide to retire. It's from our attorney's firm and is the only one I've ever felt I needed, I

suppose. That's probably why I just ignore the rest. When I'm ready to leave all this and retire he'll buy it if Quentin doesn't want it. All pretty straight forward, really."

Masters wondered.

"I need to speak with him about several matters. I just haven't found the time."

"You think these murders are related to things like that - someone trying to get their hands on this place?"

"I'm still considering all the possibilities. Let me switch to another topic. Do you have names on file of next of kin for those recently deceased?"

"No. Oddly, none of them had family. I always thought that would have drawn them together here - like making us their family - but just the opposite seemed to have happened. I can't even remember hearing them speak of other people who were important in their lives. I have the idea women were important in William's life off the island, but I have nothing more than a few phone calls that would come for him from time to time to base that on. Amos seldom left the Island. Annie usually left on one of her two days off."

"Did they stay out here during the down time in the winter months?"

"Yes, strange, I suppose. William would sometimes be gone for a week or so but they mostly just stayed here. I told them they could take time - several weeks if they wanted. There was only minimal duty here without guests, but they chose not to. They got paid regardless. Their bank accounts must be simply bulging. It seems strange looking back on it, but they were a bunch of loners."

"Now for the strangest question of the morning," Masters said. "How are Lawrence and Spence in the kitchen?"

"It *is* strange. Actually they are both pretty good - Lawrence out of necessity, I suppose, having had to take care of himself and then he and his son, and Spence because he seems to really enjoy it. He's been underfoot in the kitchen around here ever since he was a little boy. For all her gruffness, Annie was always quite patient with him. He could get things out of her she'd never consider doing for anybody else. He has always been that way with the others, too, though. He has a very nice way with people. They warm up to him immediately."

"His headaches began when he was fourteen, am I remembering correctly?"

"That's right. I was alone with him here the first time it happened. It was in late November and Lawrence had gone to London on business. I got a doctor to come out and treat him - that's how bad it got. He was raving out of his head. Actually said terrible things."

"Profanity, you mean?"

"No, well, yes, that too, but that's not really what I met. He screamed at me for being so mean to his father - I have no idea what that was about unless he just assumed because Lawrence didn't have anything to do with me that I had in some ways mistreated him as a child. I suppose I had."

"And since then? Has he said those same kinds of things?"

"I've never heard them since, but then Lawrence always deals with his

headaches so I really don't know what goes on."

"Would his father have planted such ideas in his head?"

"Spoken lies about me to Spence? No. Lawrence is a good and honorable man. He may hate me but he wouldn't lie about me. I am certain he would not do that."

Tears began. "I just can't believe that Lawrence called me this morning. It's the best thing that's happened in twenty years."

"I can understand that. Well, I'll leave you ladies to whatever it is you are going to do today. Thanks for your time."

He headed for the front porch to clear his head and take in the beautiful view out across the lake. He had just settled into a suitable seat when Tommy arrived, flapping another big brown envelope shoulder high.

"Chief Currier Tommy Prescott Overlander at your service," he announced, seriously and proudly.

The extended name was a surprise.

"Have a seat, Chief Currier," He said. "I've been meaning to ask you if you and the Sheriff are related."

"Oh, yes sir. He is my uncle, the brother of my father. I usually use my mother's maiden name so people won't get the wrong idea about neptunism, you know."

Suddenly unexplainable things began falling into place.

"So what do you have for me this morning?"

"The poop on all the dead guys and the butler."

"I guess you haven't heard. The butler died during the night."

"My goodness to St. Francis. I had *him* pegged as the bad guy. Now all my suspects have been done in."

Masters opened the envelope.

"Let me look through things here. You look hungry. There's a great spread waiting inside."

"I'll check with you before I leave in case you need things couriered back to the office."

"That's a good plan, deputy."

Annie's true name was Matilda Raye. The record showed she died in a van accident while being transported to prison after her trial which had found her guilty of killing her husband and mother-in-law with a butcher knife. She had previously done time for lesser crimes and it was during those incarcerations that she had learned her trade as a chef.

Paddy was reportedly drowned in a lake during an escape attempt from a near-by prison. He was doing life plus 99 for the murder of three people in a liquor store robbery. He had studied auto mechanics and carpentry while in prison. His name was Wiley O'Riley.

Amos had been an assistant professor at a small college in Ottawa, Canada, at the time he was accused of the serial rape and murder of a half dozen coeds on the campus. While awaiting trial, according to the report, he hung himself in his jail cell. His name was John Jones.

William was, in fact, the butler who did it! He killed his employer,

apparently because he and the employer's wife were in love. He was convicted on circumstantial evidence - lots of it - although neither the body nor any weapon was ever found. Assuming it had been an accurate verdict, William had been a very clever murderer. He escaped from prison in a bread truck, according to the report. Again, from a prison in eastern Canada. He was later reportedly found dead in a field several hundred miles north. His name was Hilton Westcott alias Harold Watson alias Walter Hanson. He seemed to get around. While in prison he had studied electronics and TV repair.

The M.O. of the prison official had become clear. Report an inmate dead, provide a false death certificate, establish a new identity and sell him or her to the highest bidder through some underground organization.

A neatly suited woman in her mid-thirties came across the porch toward him.

"Mr. Masters, I presume. I'm Dot Little, from the coroner's office."

Masters extended his arm offering her a seat.

"Just finished my prelim on the deceased upstairs. Looks like your original call is probably correct - some type of anticoagulant - a massive amount ingested over a six or eight hour period. Probably a crude form. It would have had to have been disguised in a very rich food or drink - most likely food."

"Like inch thick, double fudge brownies covered in delectable, stand up in peaks, chocolate frosting?"

"That would pretty much fit the ticket. Got any leftovers to test?"

"Just bits and pieces, which I already sent to the lab. Contact them I guess for whatever information you need."

"Okay. Well, that's all I have for now. I'll get you a report as soon as I establish things for certain."

"Thanks for stopping by. I do appreciate that. Reports are coming by currier via the sheriff now - no email, please."

She nodded that she understood and left.

The question remained, 'Who would want the four of them dead? Just as interesting and quite clearly the key to the entire sequence of events was 'Why would someone want them dead.'

It was time to give William's room a thorough going over. He waited for Tommy to finish breakfast and the two of them entered the butler's quarters together.

"So what are we looking for?" Tommy asked.

"In a case like this you just never know 'til you find it."

It seemed to have become Master's standard line to those who assisted him on cases. Tommy began picking up objects at random and asking in each case, "Suppose this is it?"

Masters clearly needed to take another tack - perhaps a wild goose chase.

"What I'd like you to look for, Deputy, is a blue and tan western cut shirt. It may be well hidden so no telling where you'll need to look."

Tommy took the task seriously and grew quiet in his quest.

Masters looked through cabinets, dressers, drawers, and closets. Everything appeared very William-like, very butler-like. They were the

possessions of a poor man but had been well maintained and cared for. William had been a reader. There was a bookcase filled with used paperbacks on a wide variety of topics. None jumped out at Masters as suspicious. His electronics interest from prison seemed to have remained. An entire shelf of travel books suggested an unfulfilled wish. There were a few do-it-yourself law books, and one about establishing a new identity - not unexpected considering his background. The rest were quality novels and better known works by 20th century English and American authors.

He patted the large old radio - it reminded him of his boyhood days. His uncle had been an early ham radio operator and amazed young Ray by talking with people in Alaska, Australia, and South Africa. It seemed like magic to him back then – actually, it *still* seemed like magic.

Masters examined the houseplants. It was clearly a good spot - north light from a large window - as they were doing very well; two coleus, several African Violets, and a large Boston fern.

His reverie was broken by Tommy's excited voice.

"I found it, Sir. A blue and brown cowboy shirt with pearl buttons. It was hanging right there in his bedroom closet. I guess he wasn't very good at hiding things. I'm surprised you didn't find it yourself. Always had the sharp eyes myself."

"I guess my old peepers aren't as good as they used to be." Masters chuckled out loud at the absurdity of the event – William in a cowboy shirt?! Tommy took it as a compliment and soon had the shirt stuffed into an evidence bag.

"Well, I guess we found what we came for. If you will leave that here on the chair, I'll get it to the lab boys later."

There was a swagger in the strange little man's walk as the two descended the stairs into the entry hall. Masters spoke.

"I guess I just have this one envelope for you to return to the Sheriff, Tommy. It contains a request for background checks on Samantha and Jason. Thanks for your good help this morning. See you later."

Masters made his way to the dining room and to the Artist's table.

"I'm Raymond Masters," he said introducing himself. "I'm a detective working on the murders. May I sit and ask you a few questions?"

"Sure. Shoot."

"I understand you are working on a series of sunsets."

"Sunsets and sunrises, actually. They are fascinating over water. Just a mild turbulence in the air as the cold of the water plays against the warmth of the air in the evening and just the opposite in the morning. Causes a gentle churning of the clouds. Wonderful, slowly swirling, color variations."

"I see you are also a photographer. That looks like a very expensive digital camera."

"At the precise moment a scene seems perfect I shoot it, so I can work on the painting later in the day. I store the image on the chip but I store the emotion and the movement in my heart."

"Spoken like a true artist - well a true twenty first century artist I suppose.

Things have changed from the old days in art as in many fields, I guess.”

“So you wanted to talk art or murders?”

The old detective had run across many artists in his long career but none had appeared so impatient. It seemed contrary to the more generally, laid back, artistic spirit, except for the likes of Van Gough, perhaps.

Masters smiled.

“Did you know any of the deceased well?”

“Hardly at all. They seemed like an unfriendly bunch, actually. The dock guy grumbled at me when I asked to use a row boat. The butler bit my head off when I complained about the pillow in my room. When I tried to ask the gardener about how he got the hydrangeas to blossom blue instead of their natural white he looked at me over the top of his glasses as if to say he didn’t share such secrets with anybody. Guess I didn’t have any direct dealings with the chef - man could she cook, though.”

“And Mary, the owner?”

“Seems really nice. Goes out of her way to make me comfortable. Offered a golf cart to lug my equipment around in. Really nice, like I said. Can’t say I know her though, if that’s what you’re getting at.”

“The boy or his father down at the houseboat?” Any contact with them?” Masters pressed trying to include all the residents.

“Funny about that. I met Larry a couple of years ago at the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota. His kid was having migraines and was there getting checked out. I have them, too, and finally had enough money to get them looked into. It’s how I found out about this place, actually. The kid and I were in the same biofeedback training group. He’s a sharp young man. We were together there for a week. Never tried to contact them afterward but I plan to make it a point to look them up later in the week.”

“How about the other guests, Ms. Carson or the Ashcroft’s?”

“I’d like to get to know Barb Carson. She’s a knock out if you know what I mean.”

“And the Ashcroft’s?”

“No. I assume that’s the older couple that seldom acts like a couple. Never spoke with him. Both pretty well preserved it seems. She offered me a roll in the sack but I’m not that desperate.”

“Have you ever been in trouble with the law?”

He looked Masters in the eyes.

“Several times when I was younger - the starving artist thing. Nothing since I was a kid, really.”

“I appreciate your honesty,” Masters said.

“You already knew about my record, you mean.”

“I tend to be very thorough. Thank you again and good luck with your artistic undertakings. And, oh, by the way. It’s aluminum sulfite.”

“What?”

“To make the hydrangeas blue. Add aluminum sulfite to the soil.”

“Really. Thanks. You’re ok for a cop.”

Masters figured it had been intended as a sincere compliment so he

accepted it as such.

As he stood to leave, Mary approached him accompanied by a tall, thin, middle aged man (and Deputy Debbie, of course).

“Ray, this is Lester Smythe, our attorney with whom you wanted to talk.”

Masters extended his hand.

“Yes. So glad to meet you.”

“You certainly have this island bottled up,” Lester said. “If Mary hadn’t come to my rescue I’d still be sitting off shore.”

The words were fairly straightforward but the tone was a bit antagonistic.

Masters’ response was also straightforward – hold the antagonism.

“No one in, no one out, unless authorized. We have four murders here and I take security very seriously.”

“Yes. I can appreciate that. I’m just an impatient sort. I should have called ahead.”

“Can we chat?” Masters asked.

“Certainly.”

“Mary you’re welcome to stay if you like,” Masters said.

“Maybe I should. My head is still whirling about all this.”

They took seats on sofas in a windowed corner of the great room.

Masters started.

“As you have been thinking about the situation here, has any motive for all this come to mind?”

“Well, just one, but with the death of the fourth, it probably won’t float.”

“I’ll take anything, at this point” Masters urged.

“Well, although I hadn’t considered that it would be the making of a problem when I proposed it to Mary a few months ago, the will revision could have provided motivation in two ways. First, we set aside one million dollars to be split among the surviving help at the time of Mary’s death.”

“*Surviving?*” Masters asked a whole new possibility surfacing.

“Yes. I suppose you see the possible problem.”

“I suppose I do. If all four were alive they’d each receive 250 thousand. If only three remained that would increase to around 333 thousand and if only one, well, that person would receive the entire million.”

“Right. In the planning stages it seemed the fair way to distribute it. If the money had been put aside, why not make sure it would all eventually be given away. Mary is generous that way.”

“A laudable idea but not when the group was made up of four cutthroats.”

“Which, of course, neither Mary nor I knew at the time.”

“I understand,” Masters said. “The more frightening element of all this is that no one would receive anything until Mary died.”

“That was the second problem,” Lester said.

Debbie squirmed and looked around. Masters nodded in her direction, legitimizing her concern.

Masters spun a theory.

“Assume there was a plan - by whom, is not immediately important - to kill off three of the staff so the fourth would be left to inherit the money. The second

phase would be to kill Mary so the remaining staff member could get his or her hands on the million dollars. To kill Mary immediately and make it look like part of the plan to get rid of the help would seem useful if not essential to the strategy. With all four murdered, now, that approach is not so neat, I understand. But it would be the likely scenario knowing the players involved.”

Lester had a question.

“With the four of them dead, now, wouldn’t it appear that Mary is out of danger?”

“It would appear that way but I wouldn’t count it just yet,” Masters said. “Who are the main beneficiaries of the will?”

“Everything is equally divided between Lawrence and Quentin.”

“And what happens to the million dollars in trust for the help if there is no one to receive it?”

“It reverts to the basic inheritance.”

“So the only people who would benefit from the deaths of the four - and not less than four - would be Lawrence and Spence - Quentin.”

“This is just too much for me,” Mary said. “I want to go to my room.”

“Certainly,” Masters agreed. “Remember, there are also other reasonable explanations, Mary. Try not to fret over the unknown at this point.”

She nodded and patted his hand as she and Debby started to leave. Masters beckoned Debbie back and whispered to her.

“Keep her away from the windows.”

The women left.

“There is another possibility, you know,” Lester said, clearly reluctantly.

Masters supplied the answer.

“That Mary disliked the help so much she didn’t want them to siphon off any inheritance from her son so she killed them all? It would make her generous gesture in the will a ruse.”

“Well, yes. It couldn’t be true of course. She’s the kindest person I’ve ever known,” Lester said.”

“And, unless she knows that she is about to die of something, the timing would be quite poor. Do you know of any health problems?”

“No. And looking at her I certainly wouldn’t suspect anything.”

“Will you look into that possibility for me?” Masters asked.

“Certainly. Her physician is a poker buddy of mine.”

“How about you, Gerald. Any reason for me to suspect your involvement in all of this?”

“You’re serious?”

“Covering all the bases, as I seem to keep repeating on this case.”

“Well, then, sure, I suppose. I have made Mary a firm, standing offer to buy the island and Inn anytime she wants to sell. I doubt if Lawrence would want to run it or haggle over getting it sold, so with Mary dead, I would probably come into it easily.”

Masters changed the focus.

“What are the real chances that Lawrence has a finger in all of this?”

“He hated his father. If he were alive, Lawrence might well be the prime

suspect. Whatever it is between him and Mary, I can't imagine he'd go so far as to do all of this - certainly not kill his mother. His head may be really messed up when it comes to her but he'd not hurt her - physically, I mean.'

"How well do you know Spence? I guess you call him Quentin."

"Not real well. I've spent some time with him but never alone - always either with his father or Mary. A very bright boy. A gifted musician like his father - his grandfather started out as a honky-tonk piano player when he was just a kid. Didn't know if you knew that. The boy seems very lonely to me. I have tried to convince them to send him to school in town but neither seems able to see the positive side of that. I'd say the two adults in his life are far too possessive - overprotective."

"The line of succession in the will if Lawrence is dead would be to Spence?"

"That's right - with me as the trustee until his twentieth birthday."

"And what powers would you have to use his money in that arrangement?"

"Full power - investments, allowance, college - everything."

"So, hypothetically, of course, you could use that money for your own advantage?"

"I suppose so. I wouldn't and Mary knows that or she wouldn't have made me trustee."

"I'm sure you wouldn't. If something happened to you, once you had assumed the trusteeship?"

"My law firm would appoint a replacement - I suppose that has been left a bit nebulous since the possibility is so small."

"How much money are we talking about if all the holdings were liquidated?"

"Ten, maybe fifteen million."

"The help has received their monthly pay from a trust in the *Winston Bank* in Ottawa. Do you know the arrangement or can you find out?"

"I do know. It is not the usual arrangement, I can tell you that for sure. Harry funded a trust and directed that so long as they were employees of the Inn they would receive a given amount each month as a tax prepaid sum. It was given as a gift and not salary so it didn't come under social security or other typical employment based rules and regs. With it administered in Canada and them living in the US, the paper trail was further clouded. I didn't do the legal work but Harry told me about it. Upon the deaths of all four of them the trust reverts to Mary or her surviving heir. It is probably fairly substantial."

"Substantial being . . . ?"

"Oh, something in the neighborhood of \$350,000."

"So, get rid of the four staff members and the million reverts to Mary and the 350 thousand from the trust reverts to Mary. Are there any other hidden pots of gold out there?"

"I believe that's it - other than the sale price of this place when she decides to sell."

"Who knows the full provisions of Mary's will and other financial holdings?"

"Mary, Lawrence, and me."

"Lawrence? I'm surprised.

"So was I. Several years ago Mary had me go through it all with him. Whatever it is between them, she certainly holds nothing but love for the man."

"Anything else you know that I should know?"

"If I think of anything I'll get back to you. Well, one thing - more interesting than important, I suppose. Harry won this island in a big stakes card game. Ruined the family that had owned it. The man committed suicide and the son vowed revenge. He hasn't ever offered any problem as far as I know. He was just a kid at the time. Just dropped out of the picture."

"He'd be how old now, would you think?"

"Oh. I'd imagine forty - forty five, tops."

"Have a record of his name?"

"The son's? The last name would be on the deed. That's all I'd have. I can look it up."

"Please do that. He would have been a US citizen, then?"

"Yes. I'm quite sure of that. From the Midwest as I recall. I remember Harry saying the game had taken place on the riverfront in Cairo, Illinois."

"How did Harry make his money, initially?"

"Not illegally, if that's your *real* question. Immorally, perhaps, but not illegally. He'd buy property in upscale residential areas, rent them to cars-in-the-yard, chicken-keeping trash, drive down the real estate prices, buy up the surrounding homes on dimes to the dollar, evict his renters, and make a killing reselling the property. Most of that was before he was married."

"I am in a quandary about why Mary would get involved with such a despicable character," Masters said.

"He was a wealthy, dashing, handsome young man with quite a line, I imagine. Con men hone their natural opposite when selecting the face they will use. Harry had it down to a science."

"And you took him on as a client, why?"

Lester smiled. For many of the same reasons Mary fell in love with him, I imagine - a successful business man, lots of money to invest, a superior business head, charisma . . . Seemed like the kind of client you pray for."

"And you kept him, why?"

"Like I said, he never did anything blatantly illegal - not through my office at least. I'll admit the trust set-up for his employees was across the line but that all had happened unknown to me before I entered his life."

"I appreciate your time, Lester. You'll look into Mary's health and the name on that deed then."

"First thing when I get back to solid land. I had a dream once that this big old terrapin worked its way loose and dived under the water, taking us all of us with it. Perhaps that's what's happening now."

"I hope not. I never learned to swim."

"I imagine you'd float - no offense."

Masters smiled.

"I would certainly have to count on that. Perhaps I should put on a few extra pounds for good measure."

"Wouldn't be hard to do with the food they serve out here. Well, nice meeting you Detective Masters. One more thing - silly really - would you autograph this copy of *The Cryptogram Murders*? My wife is an absolute Flint nut!"

"I would never disappoint a Flint nut."

The deed done, Lester left and Masters walked to the snack table in the dining room to work on his buoyancy - strictly preventative maintenance.

It had been a busy and eventful morning. He felt the need to check out security in Mary's quarters. A few minutes later, bearing a plate of goodies for the ladies, he knocked on her door.

Debbie opened it a crack, her foot solidly against its base, exercising exactly the kind of caution Masters wanted. Inside he put the plate on the coffee table which divided the sitting area between a comfortable looking couch with its back to the rear window and two matching chairs. The sofa table behind the couch had an antique, brass, gas, lamp with pleated shade near each end and a small bronze statue of an upright grizzly in the center. The room was a mixture of old and new - well reflecting Mary, herself.

For a large room it actually felt cozy. The walls were papered and adorned with a variety of pictures and knick knacks in shadow boxes and on small shelves. The wide plank wooden floor had colorful, braided, throw rugs strategically placed. The large, stone, fireplace covered the east wall except for the door near the rear wall which led into her bedroom.

"I just wanted to snoop in here a bit, Mary. I'm not looking for anything special - just looking."

"Be my guest. Quentin says it looks like a garage sale needing to happen in here."

It produced chuckles all around. Mary continued.

"As soon as we got back up here this morning, Debbie pulled the shades on the back windows - your instructions, no doubt. You expecting a sniper attack?"

Masters looked at Debbie. Can't pull the blinds over Mary's eyes, can we. Masters seemed to be the only one who thought that had been remotely humorous so he just enjoyed it alone as he began walking around the room.

"May I look in the bedroom?"

"Certainly." Mary led the way.

It was a bit more feminine in appearance - a white, four poster bed with frilly comforter; lace curtains at the two windows; two gas lamps on each wall, their smoked glass chimneys decorated with colorful, frolicking, cherubs. Again, an overkill of small pictures on the pink, papered walls."

"A beautifully decorated suite here, Mary, but I'd hate to be the one who had to dust all of this."

"William once asked if I would have decorated in this manner if he had not been available to clean for me. I probably wouldn't have. He was really a gem - every Friday morning he, his cleaning cart, and feather duster arrived right after breakfast. I know he hated doing it but he never complained."

"Not a speck of dust, I'll give him that," Masters said, continuing his open-

ended inspection. "There is a door on the west wall of the living room?"

"The kitchen and dining area. Mostly the source of my evening tea. I've become exceedingly kitchen-lazy the last few years - almost always dining down stairs."

Masters poked around the kitchen area for a few minutes checking the range and gas refrigerator. "Never could understand how a gas flame could keep things cool."

"Quentin once explained it to me but I had no idea what he was saying then and I certainly don't remember now. I just know it works and that's good enough for me."

"This is a strange and nebulous question, Mary, but has anything out of the ordinary taken place in here recently - say during the past two weeks. Objects been moved or missing or added. Appliances not working. Any one come to visit unexpectedly? I'm hard put for examples."

"Well, nothing comes to mind. William spent longer last week on the cleaning than usual but he was developing a summer cold so probably just wasn't up to snuff. I don't have visitors in my quarters except Quentin and he's certainly not a true visitor - he goes through life as though he were the senior partner around here."

She laughed, quietly, and shook her head.

"Any presents or such from anyone?"

"No. I just don't think of anything. If I do, I'll let you know."

"Well, I'll go do my snooping elsewhere. Thanks for putting up with my questions. By the way if you ever decide to part with this wonderful old radio set - or the one like it in William's quarters, let me bid on it. Brings back lots of grand boyhood memories."

"After you solve this case consider them both yours," she said.

"Then have them crated for shipment because, barring something totally unforeseen, I should have it all wrapped up by Friday."

Debbie did a double take. Mary patted his hand. Masters left.

It wasn't that Masters knew for sure who had done what, but he felt confident that he knew all of the possibilities. Now, it was a case of sorting through them and eliminating those with flaws to see which one or one's were left.

He was waiting on background information on the two new employees, another lab report or two, and the answers to the questions he had posed for Lester to look into. He needed to speak with the three remaining guests.

He found Barb Carson in the great room.

"Ms. Carson, good morning."

She looked at her watch.

"For about two minutes yet, and it's Betty or Miss - I'm not into the Ms. thing. Rather let folks know I'm free, available and looking. Pull up a couch."

"You seem to be handling this entire affair pretty well," Masters said, responding to her witty repartee.

"Why not? I'm neither a victim nor the bad guy. I'm just going about my life as if all this were someone else's bad dream."

"You're a writer, is that correct?"

"Short stories and kid's books. Neither has much of a market right now, but I sell steadily enough to keep bread on my table and to spring for an occasional outing such as *Terrapin Island*. I'm beginning a series of books for upper elementary kids about the pirates that used to ply their trade in these parts. I even have an enthusiastic publisher on board. If nothing else it makes this trip a tax write-off."

"How well did you know the staff members who have died?"

"Not real well. I've been here often. Love it here. I guess none of them were really my type - I mean we had nothing in common."

"You ever spend time talking with the gardener?"

"Not really. I admire his work though. It is simply beautiful up here."

"Do you know the other guests?"

"I have a feeling that I *could* get to know the painter - but he comes on too strong. No. I don't know them."

"You know Mary and the guys at the boathouse?"

"Oh, yes. Spence is a sweetheart. Lawrence seems pretty serious but very nice. He doesn't seem interested in pursuing a romantic relationship, if that's part of your question. I tried that in the past. Maybe I'll just wait for Spence."

"Don't give the boy any encouragement or he'll pitch his tent in the hall outside your room."

"I think he'd be an interesting character to write. He's just too sweet and helpful and compassionate for a kid his age. He let me read some of his poetry last year and there's a really subtle anger to it. But that may go with his sex and age. I never had brothers so I can't say I really know about such things. I do know that even the nice boys go for the blood and guts stories. Testosterone, I suspect."

"And Spence seems to have at least his proper share," Masters said smiling. "Be sure and let me know when your pirate books are published. I loved pirates as a boy. At six, I fully expected to grow up into one, in fact. Well, thanks for your time. I'll leave you to your creative endeavors."

Masters went in search of one or both of the Ashcroft's. The sun would be on the front porch so he assumed that was where Mrs. Ashcroft would be. He was correct.

He introduced himself and took a seat nearby. She was stretched out on a chaise, wearing almost less than the law allowed, apparently believing that her deeply tanned, parched, skin could somehow benefit from more hours of solar abuse.

"So, you catch the bad guy yet?" she asked as if putting down Masters' job as clearly trivial.

"No, but closing in fast, as they say. You have any ideas about it all?"

"I always figure it's the butler but poor William seemed to bite the dust right along with all the rest. He was damn good looking specimen for his age; you'll have to admit that. Too pale to my liking, but I figured I could get him out of that suit and into the sun if it seemed worth his while. You married, Masters?"

"To my job, as it has been said," hoping to discourage her from any further overtures in his direction. It didn't of course.

"I imagine you knew the staff pretty well, as often as you've been here," he said, moving on.

"Well enough to know I didn't want to get to know them."

"I understand your husband would like to own this place."

"He wants to own everything he comes across. This would make a quaint summer home, I suppose, but then the potential for male companionship would become nil. It's more to my liking as it is. I will miss William. He was a man of many talents. You come here often, as well, if I recall correctly."

"Most years about this time. Not quite as restful this year as in the past."

"I didn't kill anybody if that's what's on your mind. If I were to set out to do somebody in, it would certainly be Blake - my husband. But all I'd gain would be a life of leisure without him, and I pretty well have that as it is. Hasn't even tried to touch me for thirty years."

It was far more than Masters wanted to know, but not much different from what he had surmised. If sides would have to be taken on that issue, he'd likely go with Blake.

"What time on Saturday did you folks arrive?"

"Sounds like we are suspects. How delightful!"

She turned in his direction, chin on her upraised index finger as if to mock the exchange.

"Well, we sailed our own yacht up Lake Michigan from Chicago arriving here about ten thirty in the morning."

"And your yacht is where now?"

"Paul - he's our yacht driver person - took it back to Mackinaw City for cleaning and things like that. He's probably sailing it around with a bevy of beautiful women on board. He's a sneaky S.O.B. but great for extracurriculars. I doubt if he killed anyone out here."

"You seem to have most aspects of life figured out. Why would you imagine the help would all be killed here?"

"Why does anyone ever get killed - money, power, sex! Not necessarily in that order. Take your pick!"

Masters stood.

"Well this conversation has certainly been one I won't soon forget."

"I've often been told I am unforgettable, darling."

"I'm sure, madam, though I suspect for a very different reason than the one you choose to imagine."

He smiled, bowed slightly, and returned inside, upset with himself that he had allowed her to goad him into being impolite if not outright rude. *Not* upset enough to return and apologize. *Not* upset enough to keep the edges of his mouth from turning up. *Not* upset enough to prevent a trailing chuckle the entire length of the Inn and certainly *not* enough to keep him from sampling everything so beautifully presented on the lunch-time steam tables.

Masters had just finished lunch and was sipping his last sip of lemonade

when Blake Ashcroft approached and took a seat across the table as if no one would dare question that he just had the right to intrude.

"I'm Blake Ashcroft, Masters. Why don't you have this little mess cleaned up yet?"

His tone was demanding, agitated, and all quite disagreeable to Masters' way of thinking.

Masters smiled across the table and prolonged his silence by carefully folding his napkin, replacing it on the table and methodically smoothing the creases back into place. He then looked up at Ashcroft.

"First, hello. I'm glad for the opportunity to talk with you. Second, I do pretty well have things 'cleaned up,' and third, I could never consider the deaths of four, fellow human beings, a *little mess*."

The first round had clearly gone to Masters. Ashcroft ignored the exchange.

"My money's on Mary's son. It's the only motive worth considering."

"And what motive would that be?" Masters asked, folding his hands on the table, ready to listen.

Blake looked genuinely surprised.

"To get his hands on this island."

"The island sounds very important to you."

"A gold mine if run right. I could quadruple the income in six months."

"And why would you possibly want to do that? Are you hard up for money?"

"Of course I'm not. I can buy this place out of my hip pocket."

"Then why would you want to have it and quadruple its income. I'm afraid that makes no immediate sense to me."

"To do it! Just to do it!"

The answer seemed self-evident to Blake. The question seemed absurd. The logic of Masters' question escaped him entirely.

"Have you just voiced your own motive for having perpetrated all of this, Mr. Ashcroft?"

"I suppose I have. You're a sly old fox, Masters. I like that in a man. For the record I suppose I need to say I didn't do it or them or whatever. If I had, you'd never pin it on me. I have a stable of the best lawyers on the continent."

"Lawyers kept in a stable. What an interesting, and not fully upsetting concept. I understand that you pretty well get what you go after. I'm puzzled why you haven't been able to acquire this island."

"I could have, of course, if I'd pressed the issue. I chose not to."

Masters felt sorry for the couple. Neither one of them had the first clue about the true basis for a happy life or what it really meant to live up to one's human potential.

CHAPTER FIVE

Day Five

From the window in his suite, it looked to be a beautiful morning. The owl had apparently moved on to greener pastures – or darker corners, as might be more appropriate to the species. It had been his first truly restful night's sleep since he had arrived. At ten 'til six Masters heard a soft, tentative knock. He turned toward the door to make sure it had really been at his room. The knob turned and the door opened slowly.

"It's me, Spence," the boy said sticking his head inside.

"Didn't know if we were still roomies or not so thought I should knock."

"Come in. Of course we are. You look great. How are you feeling?"

"Fit as a fiddle as Toscanini would have said."

"I don't imagine you can use that phrase just everywhere."

"*This is* my everywhere, Mr. Masters. Spence Spencer, boy genius, forever *The Prisoner of Terrapin Island*. Hey, maybe Miss Carson can use that idea for the title of a story."

"Had your swim, I see," Masters observed.

Spence felt his head. "Wet hair, huh?"

"That and the fact that nothing seems to interfere with your early morning routine."

"Yeah. Except lightening. We're pretty much set in our ways, I guess. So, what's up with the case?"

"Why don't we go enjoy breakfast and I'll fill you in."

Ten minutes later they were well into their omelets, butter milk biscuits, and plate of assorted pastries.

"You heard about William?"

"Yeah. Now, I'm worried about gram. I called her when I woke up yesterday evening and she said you had assigned a police women to stay with her. That was a good idea, I think."

"I'm glad to have your approval."

Spence grinned his wonderful grin, shrugged his shoulders, and started to speak. Whatever he was about to say would not be said. Masters' phone rang.

"Masters here."

"Debbie *here*. I just got to Mary's room to begin my shift. You need to get up here immediately."

"Spence and I are enjoying a wonderful breakfast together just now," he said slowly and deliberately. It was a private message to Debbie who understood.

"Don't let him come along."

"Be there in a minute, then."

He put the phone away.

"There are some pesky details I need to attend to before the shift change. You finish breakfast and I'll be back in a few minutes."

Spence nodded. His easy acceptance of the ruse seemed odd but

Masters would take it. He left and hurried into the entry hall and up the stairs.

The door to Mary's apartment was standing wide open and the overnight policewoman was on her hands and knees in the hall coughing. As he approached the door, Debbie arrived, carrying Mary in her arms.

"A gas leak, I assume. The deputy was in the living room and she was sleeping but still breathing. Mary was in her bed and had stopped breathing. I opened the windows and started CPR and she's breathing on her own now - shallow but breathing. Masters took Mary into his own arms. My room's down here. I'll take her there. Get some help and bring the deputy along, too."

A few minutes later both women were on the beds in Masters' suite.

"Get a physician out here ASAP, Debbie. Stay here and watch over things. Mary still hasn't regained consciousness. I'm going back to her apartment."

Debbie nodded and took out her phone. Masters went back down the hall, placed his folded handkerchief over his nose and mouth, and entered Mary's suite. He opened several more windows. A gas leak in a building sporting dozens of flames was nothing to mess with. There was no odor as is usually associated with natural gas but that was not unexpected. Commercial gas suppliers add an odor producing agent to the naturally odorless gas. The Inn's supply was a private well right there on the island, so that same precaution had evidently not been taken.

Masters went into the bedroom. He stood near the bed and listened for the telltale hiss of a gas leak. The supply lines had been placed inside the walls as part of the original construction. The leak would therefore probably be from one of the eight wall lamps. He moved from lamp to lamp to lamp, listening. It was the one just to the north of the headboard on the bed.

"Way too convenient for an accident," he said out loud. He examined the fixture closely, removing the chimney and placing his finger here and there feeling for the escaping gas. It seemed to be coming from behind the circular brass plate that held it to the wall. He needed Spence's knowledge of the building to locate the appropriate shut off valve, so he started back through the living room to the hall.

Impatient Spence had come in search of him.

"What the hell is going on?" the boy demanded, looking around and moving quickly to the bedroom in search of his grandmother.

"She is okay. We've moved her to my room. There was a gas leak. Right now I need your help in locating the shut off valve for the bedroom. I assume you know how to take care of that."

"They're all lined up and labeled in the basement."

A deputy entered the room.

"What's up. What can I do?"

"Gas leak," Masters said cryptically. "Go with Spence here. Help him turn off the line to this bedroom."

The two of them left on the trot.

The day before, he had seen a toolbox in Mary's kitchen. He took it into the bedroom and began removing the leaking fixture. The pressure behind the

flow soon stopped, signaling that Spence had it turned off. Masters then proceeded to remove the lamp from the wall.

The old, iron, gas line was attached to the back of a small, square, metal box at the base of the unit with a brass coupling. That box appeared to have three functions: connect to the main line, provide off and on flow valve to the lamp, and direct the supply up to the mantle in the ring that carried the glass chimney. On the side of that box was a quarter inch hole. Around the hole's circumference was a hardened resin like substance - some form of glue, Masters surmised. As he removed the fixture from the wall, splinters of glass fell to the floor. He examined the chimney expecting to find its base chipped. It wasn't.

Spence and the deputy reappeared – one of them puffing.

"I suppose that did it, didn't it?" Spence stated more than asked.

"Yes. Thank you.'

"Then I'm going to check on gram. You got a doctor coming?"

"Yes, by copter I assume."

Spence left without another word. The deputy hesitated.

"Go with the boy and bring me back a report on the ladies' conditions. Do you have small evidence bags?"

"No, Sir, but I will find some and be right back."

Masters got to his knees near the wall beside the bed and searched for the glass fragments he had observed falling earlier. With a business card he carefully lifted each one and placed it onto the night stand to await bagging.

He stood and began a more thorough examination of the inside of the brass lamp base. It was shaped much like a brass jar lid might be but larger - about eight inches across with a half inch lip which rested against the wall. There was a rubber gasket around the inside edge - where the threads would be on a lid. Just what purpose that served was not immediately clear. Through the years it had become brittle. He noticed more glass splinters seemingly driven into that gasket.

He moved his attention back to the little hole in the small metal box. Closer examination revealed what Masters had suspected - it had been drilled quite recently. The metal around the inside edge was shiny silver in color. Other raw edges had long carried the red hue of rust. He understood exactly what had happened and how it had to have occurred. He suspected he knew the precise method as well.

The deputy returned with evidence bags in a variety of sizes.

"The women seem to be doing well."

"Very good. Mark the bags *Mary's bedroom lamp* with today's date."

Masters showed him just what he was to place into each bag.

"When the lab is ready to examine it all, have them call me and I will explain what I want them to do."

Masters returned to his room. Spence was sitting back on his knees on the floor beside the bed on which his grandmother lay. He held her hand in his and watched her face.

"She's still not conscious. Isn't there something we can do 'til the doc gets here?"

It was at that moment that the unnerving, low pitched, whir of the helicopter was heard overhead.

"I told them to land up here on the back lawn to speed things up," Debby explained. "I'll go get him."

She hurried down the hall.

"Have you called your father, Spence?"

"No. Gee. I should do that. Yes, I'll do it now. May I use your phone? I came off without mine."

Masters handed it to him, explaining, "This is yours, remember?"

Spence nodded and went into the hall, standing where he could keep an eye on his grandmother. Masters felt Mary's pulse. It was still weak but steadier than before. Her skin was pale. Her respiration remained quite shallow.

The doctor arrived. It was the local physician from Cedarville - Mary's long-time physician. Spence followed him into the room, quietly relaying a blow by blow account to his father on the phone. Debbie followed carrying an oxygen tank and black leather case. The doctor immediately affixed the oxygen mask and after a few more minutes made his first pronouncement.

"She seems stable, actually. The CPR undoubtedly saved her life. Any idea how long she had been inhaling the gas?"

Masters turned to the deputy who had been with her during the night. She was sitting up on the edge of the other bed looking much better.

"Maybe a half hour, I'd say. I was reading and remember noting when it was 5:45 on my watch. The next thing I remember was waking up out in the hall on the floor coughing my head off. During the night I kept the bedroom door just ajar, not all the way open, so I'm sure it took much longer for me to be effected out in the living room."

The doctor turned his attention to her, and soon pronounced her fit but recommended a full day of rest and an hourly regimen of deep breathing exercises. The male deputy escorted her down stairs.

Spence handed the phone back to Masters and asked the doctor: "So, do we keep her here or take her to the hospital?"

"I want to just keep her here for now. As long her heart and respiration remain good, there is nothing a hospital could do that we can't. I'll start a precautionary IV and just stay here with her for a while. I could use some coffee, Spence, if those young legs of yours are up to fetching it for me."

"Sure." He turned and left.

"What's going on out here?" he asked Masters once Spence had been dispatched.

"Four deaths and almost two more. I'm quite sure this was the last attempt there will be. If I'm right, it's such a complex set of goings on that it'll take the average mind a week to comprehend it all. While I have you here alone, what can you quickly tell me about Spence's headaches?"

"Migraine-like, severe, infrequent, they respond very poorly to medication, do somewhat better with biofeedback. No family history. Onset during puberty. Pretty atypical in every respect."

"Psychological?"

"That's my guess."

"Has he had counseling?"

"Minimal, nothing ongoing."

"Why not, for goodness sake?"

"The lad refuses to participate."

"Do you know why?"

"I spoke with him once about it in my office. He said he refused to be treated like a nut case. Bound to be more than that but I'm at a loss."

"Thank you."

"That somehow important for this case?"

"One of those unnerving loose ends."

Spence returned with a coffee pot and three mugs on a small round tray.

"How is your father doing about all this?" Masters asked.

"Hard to know. He's a stoic about such things. He did say to keep him informed. I think I'd like to stay here with gram if you can get along without me."

It was, in a way, humorous, but to Spence, it had been deadly serious.

"This is where you belong. Stay as long as necessary," Masters said patting him on the back. Dr. ... I'm sorry I didn't catch your name in the excitement."

"Leflore."

"Dr. Leflore may need your help getting this and that - food, whatever. Well, you know. I have a couple questions before I move on, though. If someone needed to drill a small hole - say a quarter inch - through eighth inch metal, how would he go about it out here with no electric power tools?"

"Paddy has - had - well, there are several light tools that operate from battery packs in the shop at the dock house. A drill and screwdriver and scroll saw. William helped him rig them so he could recharge them off storage batteries."

"Who has access to those power tools?"

"Anybody who knows they exist I suppose. Paddy never locked his place. He actually kept them in the little lean-to like shop room at the rear of the dock house. Like I said, anybody."

"A fountain of information as usual. Thanks. You two just take good care of Mary, now, and let me know immediately when there is any change."

Spence nodded silently and sat on the bed beside his precious patient. Dr. Leflore took a seat in the chair by the window and poured a mug of coffee.

Masters left the room and headed down the stairs. Tommy was just entering the Inn.

"More stuff here," he announced producing a small, crumpled, brown enveloped from inside the front of his pants.

"What's the chopper all about?"

"An apparent attempt on Mary's life. She survived but isn't really out of the woods yet. Dr. Leflore came in the helicopter."

"Gets mysteriouser and mysteriouser, doesn't it?"

"It's soon to be over deputy. Thanks for the new info here."

Masters proceeded to a corner of the great room. The envelope held the

lab report on the brownies. Straight, unadulterated, rat poison - the kind designed to induce massive internal bleeding. The probable brand was also specified. The two brownie recipes - the lethal one and Spence's - varied significantly enough to be considered different.

Masters made his way to the Kitchen. Sam was busy scrubbing pots, but stopped to see if she could be of assistance.

"From your earlier comments I assume there may be rat poison kept in here someplace?" he asked.

"Rat poison? Sure. In the closet back there. Help yourself - well, to look not to eat."

She giggled herself elbow deep back into the greasy water.

"I'm taking one of the cardboard containers," he said, holding it up so she could see what he had.

She nodded and he left, slipping the triangular little box into his shirt pocket. He mulled over the recent happenings as he made his way back toward his room.

"Bludgeoning, inducing a fatal allergic reaction, a fiery inferno, poison, and exposure to lethal gas. If it were a single killer, he or she certainly did not rely on a repetitive M.O. If more than one person, each approach was probably tied to the individual killers' skills and knowledge."

The two batches of brownies, made from two different recipes, presented the basis for interesting speculation. If they had been the same recipe, Spence could have in some way been involved, knowingly or unknowingly. The fact that they had been found to be different either separated him from the crime or merely suggested that a bright person, such as he was, might well use two recipes - making a big deal out of the non-lethal variety as a distraction. The brownies seemed a wash.

Masters turned on his heels and with a deputy in tow, headed for the dock house. He needed one more piece of evidence to feel comfortable with his solution to one of the deaths.

The carts were powered by small, gasoline engines, there being no easy way on the island to charge the batteries used in the quieter, electric models. One could certainly not mount a sneak attack using a squadron of such noisy vehicles. In some ways their sound resembled the racket Tommy's boat made, which, as Masters determined upon arriving at the dock had, once again, not been tied up and was bobbing ten yards off shore.

Inside the dock house, Masters began searching the drawers. He worked his way from the bedroom, through the living room and into the kitchen. What he wanted was not there. 'In the lean-to,' he thought. There it was in the first drawer under the work table - a mostly used tube of airplane glue - the quick drying variety Masters had used with balsa wood as a boy. It got better; the ball of twine he needed to find - and expected to find - was sitting on the counter. A narrow trail of glue - dried hard - ran the ten foot length of the work bench. Imbedded in it were black specks - traces of black powder, Masters was sure. It had been an ingenious, though straight forward procedure. The string had been covered with a thin coat of glue - probably rubbed into the fibers between

someone's index finger and thumb. Black powder had been sprinkled into the wet glue – as much as would possibly adhere. All three would burn – the string, the glue and the powder.

He called the lab to have them come and collect samples.

The problem of easy access to a ready-made black powder fuse had posed a problem for Masters. Now he had not only found the raw material but in a stroke of good luck, the manufacturing plant as well.

The most likely candidate for the manufacturer would be Paddy, of course. His knowledge of black powder fire arms and then actually finding the raw material and the place it was made in his workshop all pointed in his direction. However, as Spence had indicated, anyone on the island could have used the workshop. The powder horn had been moved. With Paddy's penchant for drinking himself to sleep every night it seemed doubtful that he would have been roused by nocturnal activity back in the shop.

It was his first opportunity to inspect the workshop so he took his time. He found the three power tools Spence had mentioned. The drill had a quarter-inch metal bit in it. The drill itself was small, clearly intended for jobs needing little power. Still, it was far too large to conceal in a pocket.

There were several new car batteries sitting on the floor, still in their cardboard boxes. In the waste basket he found two more identical, empty, boxes. He assumed the batteries were used as electrical sources in boats and perhaps the carts. He called the deputy inside.

"I'm not much up on the electrical systems of car and boats and such, but these are six volt batteries. Aren't most vehicles wired with twelve volt systems these days?"

"Yes, sir. Small inboard boats can be either. I imagine the ignition systems on all the carts around here are six as well. I can find out in about sixty seconds."

He was soon back. "I was right. The carts are six volt systems. And you were right. Six volt car systems haven't been around for years."

"Very helpful," Masters said. "Let me make a quick call."

He placed a second call to the lab and asked that they take prints off the power tools in the lean-to.

"Well, I guess I'm ready for the trip back up the hill."

"We should probably do something about Tommy's boat?" the young man said. "It's drifted another ten yards from shore."

"What do you suggest?"

"I'll row out and see if I can bring it in, if it will start, and with Tommy's boat that is not a given. If I can't get it going I'll just drop its anchor so it doesn't get out into the current and disappear forever."

"Sure. Do what needs to be done. Very considerate of you."

Ten minutes later the anchor had been dropped and the deputy returned to dry land.

"What size battery on a boat like that?" Masters asked.

"Should have twelve. He has two sixes hooked up just backwards. It's a wonder it ever starts."

They got in the cart and began the trip back to the Inn.

"Tommy intrigues me," Masters said, hoping that would be all it might take to have his story laid out by the deputy."

"Tommy was ok 'til he was about nine when he got hit in the head with a flying bat at a family reunion picnic. Ever since then he's had his problems. He's not really a full deputy, you know. He doesn't carry a side arm and can't make arrests. He's more like his Uncle's errand boy. Tommy feels important and he actually does pretty good at what Sheriff Overlander asks of him. We all understand and just work around him. He's one of the nicest, most helpful people you'll ever meet."

It explained what needed to be explained, but Masters had a hunch he couldn't just let pass.

"I'm sure the one who let that bat fly must have felt terrible."

"Oh, Yes. The sheriff's never got over it, really. He feels totally responsible."

Enough said.

They were soon back at the Inn. Masters went directly up to his room to check on Mary. Spence spotted him coming down the hall and rushed to meet him.

"You are never in a million, trillion, zillion years going to guess what happened."

Masters understood that only one event could be considered that monumental. It had to have been the arrival of Lawrence at his mother's bed side, but he would let the lad break the news.

"What are you talking about?"

"Dad came to see gram. He came here. He's right in that room this very minute."

The boy's already tear streaked cheeks were again flooded as he finished the story.

Masters stopped short of the room.

"That is wonderful! Any change in your grandmother?"

"Doc says her heart is strong and her respiration is back to normal. Her blood pressure is fine. We're just waiting for her to wake up."

From the hall they heard it - Mary's faint voice.

"Lawrence! Have we both died and gone to heaven or are you really here at the Inn?"

Lawrence was not heard to say anything. Spence hurried back into the room. Masters moved toward - and stopped at - the door, not wanting to invade the most important, private, family moment of the past twenty years.

Lawrence had leaned down and was cradling his mother in his arms. Spence added his embrace. It was a long, long moment of silent weeping during which words would have been all quite meaningless.

Eventually, they separated and Mary asked the inevitable question. "Why am I in bed with Raymond?" (Well, maybe not *exactly* the inevitable question!) The nervous laughter, which the remark produced, tempered the tension and uncertainty of the previous several hours.

Spence - of course - gave the explanation. Mary's eyes met Masters as he remained in the doorway.

He took one step inside.

I believe it's all over now, Mary. The evil doer has done his final deed."

No one understood but no one pursued it. Doctor Leflore and Masters went into the hall leaving the family alone together. Masters pulled the door closed behind them.

"Will there be any after effects?" Masters asked.

"Brain damage, you mean?"

"I guess that was on my mind."

"Probably some short term memory loss. I doubt if she'll remember going to bed last night, for instance, but that will soon pass. I have every reason to believe she'll be fine. Should be up and around and back to her old self by tomorrow. Just a few more minutes in that room and it could have been all over. It sounds like you suspect it was more foul play."

"Oh, yes. It was a full fledged, ingeniously planned attempt to kill her. But I also feel sure no one else is in danger now."

"Well, that's a relief. I'll check on her one more time and leave her something for the headache I imagine she will be developing within the next hour or so. Then, I'll be heading back to town. You know where I am if you need me."

"Thanks for your quick response and help, doctor."

"De nada."

"A Spanish speaking physician from the upper peninsula of Michigan?"

"Who was born and raised in French speaking Quebec, to make it even more outlandish."

He turned to reenter the room as Masters spoke.

"Tell them she can return to her own quarters whenever they want. Also, if you will, tell Spence to cap the gas line at the lamp that I have removed from wall before he returns gas to the apartment. I'm sure he knows how to do that."

"I'll see that they are told."

Masters paused at the top of the stairway and looked down the expanse of steps that lay before him.

"Seems I've been here before," He chuckled, making reference to a similar set in the *Case of the Cryptogram Murders*. "At least *they* had an elevator back in Chicago."

He descended them into the entry hall. Tommy was talking with one of the security guards from the houseboat - probably the one that had accompanied Lawrence to the Inn. Masters approached them.

"Gentlemen."

He nodded at them both and addressed the guard.

"Lawrence will be here for a while longer and I believe the immediate danger to him is over. Would you mind accompanying Deputy Tommy here down to the dock? I think his boat came loose from the mooring and he may need some help retrieving it."

Tommy snapped his fingers signaling his self-disgust.

"Darn it! Did I forget to tie up again? You'd think I'd begin remembering,

wouldn't you?"

"Be glad to go along. Me and Tommy here is getting on right well - a lot in common, you know."

Masters smiled and struggled not to let the obvious comparison break the surface of his mind. He soon found himself filling a small plate with an assortment of cookies and a large mug with hot, black coffee. He went to his favorite window table and sat down to rest. Half an hour passed.

As Masters was giving serious consideration to pushing back from the table and standing, Spence entered the room. He grabbed a handful of goodies and made his way to Masters. He reversed a chair and straddled it.

"I got the gas pipe capped and the supply turned back on. I checked for a leak, so don't ask if I did. Gram is back in her own bed and doesn't need the IV any more. Doc left and dad says he'll stay with gram for a while. I thought you'd probably need my help by now."

"I do, in fact, and thanks for your assistance in getting things back to normal in her apartment."

Spence nodded and munched.

"So, what's up now?"

"Is there a small battery operated radio we could borrow?"

"Sure. At the reception desk. Going to get down and boogie now that you have everything solved?"

The boy burst into laughter at his little joke. The image was apparently quite humorous. Masters couldn't help laughing as he watched the boy.

"I still *can* get down and boogie – believe it or not. We used to call it cutting a rug."

"Neither one really makes much sense I guess does it?"

"Most idioms don't," Masters pointed out.

"Who you calling an idiom?"

Again the boy was doubled up in laughter. It was good to see him acting like his old self even if fueled by the tension of the past several days.

"Just get the radio, if you will please. And we'll need two large flashlights with relatively fresh batteries."

A few minutes later the two of them were at the old well.

"None of this will make sense to you but just trust me, and do as I say, okay."

"Much of what you say doesn't make sense to me, Sir, but has that ever kept me from tagging along?"

Masters made out as if he hadn't heard and went ahead with his instructions.

"Select your favorite music station and turn it up all the way."

"That maybe the first time in history that an adult has ever given that direction to a teenager, Sir!" Spence said grinning.

"Place the radio into the bucket and lower it into the well the full length of the rope."

Spence soon had the deed accomplished.

"Now - and this is the tricky part at least for my old legs – we are going to

make our way down the hill, due south from here, until we get to the shore.”

“I’ve done it often,” Spence said. “Probably not as difficult as it may look. A gentle slope and lots of brush to hold on to.”

“Let’s select something down there that’s due south of this point so we don’t get off course,” Masters suggested.

“See the five fence posts that form that tight circle there in the ground right about at the water’s edge?”

“Okay,” Masters agreed. “That is our target. Lead the way.”

“Okay, but only if you promise to call ‘timber!’ if you start to fall in my direction.”

“If I fall in your direction, no amount of ‘timbering’ will save your skin. Go! Go!”

Spence had been correct. It was not a difficult descent and Masters found it quite [well, *almost*] enjoyable. Spence maintained a constant monologue about the flora and fauna. He seemed to know most everything about the natural-side of the island. He named the plants and trees. Called the insects by names only college professors understood. Rocks were not rocks but sandstone, shale, granite, slate.

Every so often Masters would have them stop and listen. Then they would be on their way again. After the third such stop Spence had to ask:

“Does senility *usually* come on just all at once like this?”

It was a plain reference to the activity in which he was blindly engaged.

“You’ll understand what I’m after when it happens, and no, unlike puberty, senility sneaks in gradually.”

They had soon made it all the way to the flatland which extended some fifteen feet on out to the shoreline. Masters called another halt.

“Listen!” Spence said. “It’s the da . . . rn music from the well. What the h . . . eck ?”

“I have to ask,” Masters said, ignoring the music. “Your inclination to use profanity intrigues me. I know that neither your grandmother nor father has ever allowed it. How can it be such an apparent automatic reaction for you?”

“I’m alone a lot and I talk to myself. I can talk any . . . darn way I want to, then. I’m all powerful!!”

“And why do you feel the need to swear in those situations?”

Spence remained quiet and thoughtful for a moment. “Just because I can, I suppose. I never really considered it before. That’s some *revelation* as Doc Young would have said – a shrink dad dragged me to a few times. Better hang out your shingle.”

Masters would pursue that conversation later if the opportunity presented itself. Other matters pressed.

“We will find the opening to a tunnel back there somewhere. The music will lead us to it.”

Puzzled, Spence started toward the sound. He disappeared behind a stand of shrubs.

“It’s here. Right here. How have I missed it all these years? What is it? Why is it?”

By then Masters had caught up and began the explanation.

"The tunnel goes back into the hillside and meets up with the base of the well hole."

"That must be close to a quarter of a mile. That's what? A thousand feet or more? You mean that well comes down this far? That's at least a hundred feet. Who? When? How?"

"Your father has all those answers."

"The flashlights in the daytime. Now I see. It may not have entirely been senility after all."

"I prefer the term, sheer brilliance," Masters joked.

"It was that," Spence mumbled softly, strictly for his own benefit. "Now we go inside?"

"That is the plan provided the bracing beams seem sturdy and safe. We'll determine that foot by foot I guess."

Inside they found a well-engineered tunnel. It had a ceiling of square-cut, tar coated, logs running side to side, held in place by sturdy upright supports every few feet. The floor was soft sandstone sheared off even, creating a hard surfaced, durable walkway. As they two proceeded inside the music grew louder and the dank, musty smell grew stronger. Puddles of water tended to bear out Lawrence's earlier explanation of the tide.

"This is like playing pirates," Spence said.

"Not far from the truth, my boy. They used this to transport and hide their ill-gotten booty hundreds of years ago."

"No kidding!" Spence smiled and shook his head. "Who but Raymond Masters would be spouting phrases like, 'Ill-gotten booty,' while exploring a cold, wet, dark tunnel that's barely tall enough for me to stand up in. You doing okay back there, Sir."

He stopped and turned to make sure.

"You can't come close to standing up in here. Will you be okay?"

"Takes less energy than boogieing. Let's keep going."

Spence executed a few fancy dance steps and then moved on.

In less time than they had imagined they saw light ahead.

"Look!" Spence said, pointing. "Light from the well, I suppose. Amazed it gets down that far."

He hurried ahead to examine things. By the time Masters arrived the lad had it all figured out.

"The sides are bricked up with light colored sandstone blocks. They could be mistaken for bricks, they're cut so precisely. Somebody went to a . . . heck of a lot of work to put this . . . thing together."

Spence was clearly amazed as was Masters.

"There should be a water hole here."

"There is. Shining my flashlight into it I'd say it's eight to twelve feet deep. Just as you suspected."

"What is just as I suspected?"

"No capillary action needed."

Masters nodded. "Look around the floor for things you wouldn't expect to

find here," Masters said, shining his flashlight here and there.

"Anything special?"

"Yes, actually. If I could just find Paddy's missing shoe in here our mission would be a grand success. I didn't come for the music, you know."

Spence smiled. "Well, if it's here, Sir, you know where it's likely to be."

"In the water hole," Masters said, nodding in agreement with what the boy had already figured out.

They shined their lights down into the water. The glare from the surface made it difficult to see below.

"They are waterproof, Sir. Put it into the water like this and there won't be that glare."

In that fashion, the two flashlights lit the little well completely.

"Thar she blows!" came Spence's pronouncement. "See, the shoe, there to the right on the bottom."

"I guess we'll need to come back with a fishing line and hook," Masters said, clearly both elated and disappointed at the turn of events.

Spence put his arm down into the water.

"Only about sixty degrees I'd say. That's no obstacle."

He began shedding his clothes.

"Are you sure?" Masters asked. "I couldn't possibly come in to aid you if anything went wrong."

Spence ignored the protestations and was soon over the side and into the water hanging onto the edge at the floor.

"I think it will be easier if you handle both flashlights from up here. Keep them pointed straight down along the right side. I'll dive down on the left so I'm not in the way of the beams. Be back before you can say, 'centerfold girls,' ten times. He smiled, took a few, deliberate, deep breaths and submerged. The boy was a strong swimmer and the task presented no real challenge for him. Moments later he was back at the surface, shoe in hand – well, mouth, actually.

"Had to battle a big old carp for it down there but I kicked his butt," he said lifting himself out of the water. "Maybe it was sixty on the surface but I'll bet it was less than forty five at the bottom."

He was shivering, top to bottom, but quickly dried himself off with his T-shirt and was soon properly clad for public display.

"Nice work. Your father will have my head on a platter for this, you know."

"I'll make you a deal. You let me handle that. Okay?"

Masters agreed before he had considered the offer carefully enough. He immediately regretted it.

"You aren't going to tell him, are you?"

"Certainly, I will. In due time. Perhaps on the occasion of his first grandchild's birth."

"Let's get out of here," Masters said. "And if you die of pneumonia don't come griping to me about it."

It was good for chuckle.

"Oh, and one more thing," Masters said over his shoulder as he led the way back out of the tunnel. "It was twelve."

“Twelve? What twelve?” Spence asked.

“Twelve ‘centerfold girls’ before you surfaced. You’re slowing down in your old age.”

Spence laughed.

“Well, I hadn’t calculated on having to fight off that barracuda down there.”

“By the time we see daylight it’ll have been a great white shark.”

They chuckled there way toward the shore.

Masters stopped just before leaving the opening.

“What’s up?” Spence asked.

“Another old carp out here, son.”

“What?”

Masters moved out followed closely by bare-chested, head dripping, Spence. He looked up, squinting in the daylight.

“My, imagine meeting you here, *father*. Would you believe we fell down the well. ... We got lost chasing a lizard into the cave. ... We thought we heard music in there so we rushed in to rescue the band. I’m sure you’re proud of us.”

“You two beat all.”

Lawrence put his arms around them both giving Spence a big kiss on the side of his still saturated head. Spotting the shoe he asked; “Find what you were searching for?”

“Yes and in the most unlikely of places,” Masters said, his big tummy jiggling with laughter at the humorous turn the whole situation had taken.

Spence finished. “At the bottom of the well in there. I imagine you’ve been in there many times – all alone – and undoubtedly at a much earlier age than seventeen, too.”

He had quashed any future conversation on the matter and all three knew it.

Masters moved on.

“Looks to be Paddy’s missing shoe. Now, I’m satisfied about the route he took to the lake. It’s unlikely that if his body had been dragged to the lake overland, with both shoes in place, that one of them would have come loose and made its way back into the well – possible but so unlikely that I’m satisfied.”

Spence had something he needed to ask his dad.

“I know you’re a father and that fathers just always seem to know when their son’s done something against the rules but how in the name of Hosanna did you find us at the tunnel?”

“From the window at the end of second floor hall at the Inn, I saw you starting down the hill. For some reason it didn’t look like Ray’s likely choice of a pleasure outing. Considering the contents of a previous chat he and I had, I put two safety-foolish children together on a mission and came up with tunnel exploration.”

“See Spence. Your excellent detective inclinations are undoubtedly genetic,” Masters smiled.

“Let’s get Spence into some dry clothes back at the boat, then we can return to the Inn.”

Spence grinned the grin of all grins into his father’s face. He took his

dad's hand and they made their way across the shore toward dry duds. Masters followed wondering how many times, when Spence had been younger, that the two of them had walked that beach hand in hand that way.

It was times such as that, that made the old detective sad he had allowed such an opportunity to slip away in his own life. A solemn Raymond Masters stopped and sighed, looking out across the deep blue lake and beyond, as if searching for time itself.

“Hey, Mr. Masters, hurry up! Or is that an oxymoron?”

The present returned along with his smile and a spirited pace.

CHAPTER SIX: Day Six

Masters had lost his roommate and so was making his way down to breakfast alone. As he descended the stairs he wondered to himself if he needed to make the rounds and complete a head count just to be sure no one else had been dispatched to the great beyond during the night. He felt confident that no one had.

Not entirely to his surprise, he found Mary busying herself in the dining room. She was setting one of the round tables as if for a special gathering. Before he could speak to her, Spence and Lawrence entered from the hall satisfying his curiosity. It would indeed be a *special* gathering.

"Here come the 'wet heads'," she announced to Masters, with a twist of her head in their direction.

Masters chuckled to himself wondering if a boy's cheeks could crack or in other ways sustain permanent damage from holding a full blown grin for too long.

"Hey, Mr. M. My family's having breakfast together. Grab a plate."

Although his final phrase did not necessarily connote family membership, given its context, Masters had to wonder.

"Yes, Raymond," Mary said approaching him and slipping her arm around his, "It's a family time and the circle wouldn't be complete without you."

"I'm honored and so long as I get the sturdy chair, I'll be pleased to join you."

Spence was primed and ready to tell tales out of school - so to speak. He stood closer to Masters than seemed reasonable as they filled their plates.

"You should have been with us at dinner last night, Mr. Masters. Gram and I caught dad making goo goo eyes at Barb - right Gram?" He turned to her nodding as if to encourage her confirmation.

Mary raised her eyebrows and decided not to commit herself verbally in Spence's support.

"And I thought you had Barb reserved for yourself," Masters said, poking a little fun in Spence's direction.

"If I were just six . . . inches taller, I might give it a shot."

The construction of his response had been intended as humorous and it was."

They took their seats. Spence was not finished. The sparkle in his eyes said as much. He addressed his remark as an aside to Masters while looking directly at his grandmother.

"I suppose you noticed how Lester couldn't keep his eyes off Gram the other day. He's had a thing for her ever since I can remember."

He chuckled through a long swig of orange juice, his eyes darting back and forth delighting in the reaction he *didn't* get. Clearly he was trying to introduce romantic relationships into the horizons of the two most important people in his life.

Barb entered the room and came to greet them.

“Morning folks,” she said in her typically upbeat fashion. She stood behind Spence and began innocently massaging his shoulders as the three adults made small talk. Spence sat stiff, his ears reddened - a near match to the color of Barb’s hair. His respiration rose second by second.

“Well, I won’t intrude any longer. Undoubtedly we’ll see each other later on,” she said after a few moments. She ruffled Spence’s hair and moved on. Lawrence watched her walk away. Spence slid down in his chair. Masters smiled at Mary who smiled back.

“Men!” she said shaking her head. “But they *are* mine!”

Spence eventually rejoined the real world and was soon regaling his grandmother about the exploration of the tunnel and his near death battle with *Moby Dick*.

Masters chuckled his way through Spence’s intentionally expanded and overly dramatic rendition of the escapade. Lawrence seemed distracted but managed to smile and nod at all the right places. The conversation continued in a light vein.

Masters had work to do so excused himself, leaving the other three to revel in their new relationship.

He stopped briefly at Barb’s table. Small talk turned serious and she invited him to take a seat.

“I’ve been trying to track down my birth mother. Probably a stupid passion but it’s a closure thing, I guess. I had a wonderful set of parents who raised me and nothing will change that. I blame my obsession for the demise of at least two of my three marriages. I think I was too interested in finding long term security and too little concerned about things like friendship and love. My therapist says I need to get the mother thing resolved before I’ll ever have a stable relationship with anybody – and I *do* want that.

“For a while, I had a detective agency helping me in my search. Their final report was incomplete but made reference to a woman who might have been employed here at one time. I ran out of money and they ran out of information. The search came to an absolute dead end.

“I guess one of the reasons I keep returning here is just to be close to where she might have been once. I know that sounds screwy. Undoubtedly it is. All I know is that I feel warm and comfortable here.”

“Hardly anything screwy about enjoying those kinds of feelings,” Masters said, patting her hand and directing his own always warm and comforting smile into her face. “Your search would seem to have the makings of an interesting book – mystery-like I suppose.”

“Mysteries need a resolution. I have none to offer.”

“Well, consider it, at least. Perhaps you will discover one that can be satisfying even without your mother’s actual presence. Speaking of mysteries needing resolution, I must be on my way. Several more loose ends to tie up on this one. It was nice chatting with you.”

He stood to leave and then turned back toward her.

“Regarding your mother, Barbara. In the course of my investigation, I have come into the employment records here. They date back some forty years.

If I knew your age, I would pursue the mother matter - for whatever it might be worth."

"Thirty-nine. Really, I'm thirty-nine and have only been thirty-nine for the past seven months, I swear."

"I did not doubt it for a minute, my dear."

He turned and headed for the door to the entry hall. There he met the desk clerk - distraught and weeping.

"My goodness, young lady! What's the matter?"

"The safe has been robbed, at least the main compartment."

"Where is the safe?"

"In the office right behind the reception desk."

"You go let Mary know and have her come and meet me there."

The girl left and Masters made his way into the office. The safe door was standing open. He could not be sure if that is how she found it or was of her own doing.

Spence arrived first, followed by Mary, Lawrence and the desk clerk.

"What the hey?" was the boy's reaction to the open safe.

Masters had several questions for the young lady.

"Did you find the door open, as it is now?"

"No," she answered. "I needed to get into the petty cash drawer to give Mrs. Ashcroft change for two one hundred dollar bills – tip money she said. When I bent down to begin working the combination I noticed the door was not completely closed. I had to be that close to notice. I pulled on the handle and it just swung open. That's when I saw the cash box was open and empty."

"When was the last time you were in the safe for any reason, either of you?" Masters asked, including Mary with his glance.

The desk clerk responded first.

"I haven't been in there since first thing Monday morning. It was Mrs. Ashcroft then, too. She tips really well."

Mary added to her answer.

"We use very little petty cash here. Providing tip change is about it. There's nothing our guests have to buy. Everything is included in the basic fee. I haven't been in there since Sunday evening. That's when I bring the box back up to a thousand dollars for the coming week. In fact, to tell the truth, I probably haven't even been in the office more than a few minutes all week."

"Thank you. That helps," Masters said. "Now, we need to make sure something is actually missing. Mary, take a look and see what you can determine. Touch as few things as possible in the process."

"Well the cash box is empty - that wouldn't be much, like I said – it sounds like maybe six hundred dollars. I keep a much larger amount in the security section at the bottom of the safe."

That section had its own combination lock and occupied the lower third of the safe.

"If you will go ahead and open it. We need to determine what, if anything, is missing from inside. Put on this glove first, if you will."

Unlike the outer door, the inner one, if it had been opened, had been

closed and relocked. Mary soon had it open. Her pronouncement was immediate and sad.

"It's all gone. Looks only to be the cash, but that's been cleaned out."

"A sizable sum?" Masters asked, assuming from her reaction that it had been.

"Nearly twenty-five thousand dollars. Harry always insisted we keep that much on hand, for Heaven only knows why, and I've just always continued that way."

"It's an old safe by the looks of it," Masters said, examining it with his eyes.

"It was installed when we first got the place and built the addition. I suppose that makes it at least forty years old. It may not have even been new when we got it. Harry was big on bargains."

"A three digit combination?" Masters asked.

"Yes. Both of them. Each different of course."

"Well, it looks like we need the lab guys one more time. Spence, find Deputy Debbie and have her get them out here. In the meantime the office is strictly off limits, okay."

They all nodded and left the room. Mary did what she could to console the desk clerk and persuade the girl that it had not been her fault.

Minutes later, Spence returned eager to help. Masters obliged.

"Come back in here with me for a minute, Spence."

Inside the office, Masters had a request. He handed the boy a pair of latex gloves. He donned them without question.

"Assume you were about to open the safe. Now, demonstrate for me how you would go about getting into it – assuming you have or know the combination."

Spence didn't hesitate. He got down on one knee in front of the safe and reached out to begin working the tumbler with his right hand. His left hand went to the top edge of the safe as a brace to keep his body and hand steady. Methodically, he spun the tumbler.

"Super, Spence! That's how I would have done it as well. Do you know what you have just done?"

"I must admit I haven't the first clue, Sir."

"Think about this. You have opened the two doors, got the money, re-closed the doors. What do you do next?"

"I wipe my fingerprints off if I wasn't wearing gloves."

"Off from where?"

"From the two dials, and the two handles and then the doorknobs to the room."

"And you just forgot to remove which ones?"

He looked around as if puzzled.

"The ones on the top of the safe where I supported myself."

"And let's hope our robber made the same mistake – provided, as you said, that he wasn't wearing gloves. Do you remember why you placed your hand there?"

“Yeah. The safe is in there at an odd angle behind the desk and you’d fall on your a . . . *posterior* if you didn’t brace against something.”

“You’re a perceptive young man – both in your pursuits as a detective and in your ability to quickly substitute socially acceptable words for your preferred – shall we call it - *slang*.”

Spence smiled, sheepishly.

“I got to thinking about our talk – a lot, I mean – and I decided if I could choose to swear I also had the power to choose not to. Swearing is like really lazy language, you know. When you swear it really means you’re just too lazy or stupid to select a more meaning-filled word – a word that really says what you have on your mind or how you feel.”

“My, you have been thinking.”

“Yeah. Like I said. Thanks for that talk.”

Masters nodded, willing to take far more credit than was due him.

Masters noticed a small, narrow-necked vase overturned on the shelf above the safe. He felt for his handkerchief.

“Do you have a hanky I can borrow, Spence? I seem to have failed to bring one today.”

“Sure, here.”

Masters used it to pick up the vase.

“Seems an odd place for a vase here among file folders,” he said.

“It is. That vase is always here on the corner of the desk. Every morning Amos put a fresh flower in it for the girls.”

“So it’s been moved.”

“It could have been in the way if the robber brought a bag or something for the money. He would have probably put it on the side of the desk right where the vase was.”

“Good observation,” Masters said. He sneezed into the handkerchief.

“Why don’t you just consider that my gift to you, Sir,” Spence said.

“Yes. Thank you. I’ll have it laundered.”

Masters pocketed the hanky and looked around the room, under the desk, under the chair, in the waste paper baskets – all about the floor.

“Where’s the water?” he asked out loud.

“What water is that, Sir?”

“From the vase.”

“I see. Evaporated, maybe?”

“Yes, probably. That would indicate some time has elapsed since the actual robbery.”

He nodded his head as if satisfied and they went to join the others out in the hall.

Mary spoke first.

“Well, I suppose it’s better to have a robbery than another killing. Aren’t things ever going to get back to normal around here?”

“Does this mean the bad guy is still on the loose?” Lawrence asked, clearly upset.

“Well there certainly seems to be **a** bad guy somewhere,” Masters said.

“That this has anything to do with the murders can’t yet be established.”

“A crime of opportunity, I think you called it in another case,” Spence said.

“That’s a real possibility or at least how it was made to appear. There is an additional factor here, however. This robber either had access to the two combinations or he was an experienced – and expert – safe cracker. Neither seems immediately reasonable, given the players in our drama.”

He turned to Mary.

“Anyone other than you have the combinations?”

“Connie, the desk clerk, has the combination to the main safe but not to the security section. No one but me knows that combination. I have it on a card in my lock box at the bank in town.”

“Well, there’s not much more we can do about that until the lab boys arrive. Debbie, my dear, if you’ll come into the office I’ll point out a few things for you to pass on to them. I’d suggest that the rest of you just go on about your business *and* hold onto your wallets.”

It had been meant to be humorous and lighten the moment – it wasn’t and therefore didn’t.

In the office, Masters pointed out the obvious and the not so obvious to the deputy. He also reminded her that they would need to get print samples from Jason and Sam.

“I’d also like a background check run on a man named Paul who drives the Ashcroft’s Yacht. Betty seems to view the investigation as some wonderful spectator sport so I’m sure she will cooperate fully. If he has prints on file anywhere, get them out here. Also, I have a shoe which I want sent back to the lab for a match with the one Paddy was wearing. If you want to hear the biggest fish tale on record, just ask Spence to tell you about how we found it. It will probably begin, “There I was, facing this school of man eating sharks . . .”

Masters went in search of Mary. She was busying herself in the dining room. He took an envelope from his pocket and on the back wrote three sets of double digits separated by hyphens. He showed it to her.

“Recognize this?” He asked.

“You’re good! Magical, perhaps, Raymond. Yes. That’s the combination to the security section of the safe. How in the World? I know you weren’t watching while I opened it.”

“I’ll explain in due time.”

He smiled and left. It was time for a heart to heart with Spence. He found him standing on the porch, watching his father disappear around the bend in the path on his way back to the boat.

“My boy, we need to talk. Brownies, among other things. Pick a favorite trail and let’s walk it together.”

Spence pointed west and they were soon moving along at a leisurely pace.

“So, what’s the big thing on your mind?”

“Let’s begin with brownies.”

“Food. I might have known. Love them, myself, when they aren’t poisoned,” Spence replied, seemingly bewildered by the choice of topic.

“William said you delivered his tin of brownies at Annie’s request.”

“That’s right. I was in the kitchen scrounging a piece of pie. Like usual she carried on about how I was ruining my appetite. I told her that was the whole idea. When I was done, she brought out the tin and said it contained brownies for William - that the next day was his birthday - and asked if I would take them up to him. Then - and now it seems strange - she said, ‘Don’t drop them, don’t open them, and for goodness sake don’t take any of them. They are for William’.”

“Why does that seem strange?”

“She’s known me all my life. I’ve never given her any reason not to trust me. And what would be the big deal about dropping a bunch of brownies. Hers are always moist and resilient. Certainly not going to break.”

“You didn’t think Annie’s birthday generosity was out of character?”

“It crossed my mind but Annie was unpredictable - moody. I guess I was more concerned that I had forgotten William’s birthday. Come to find out, it wasn’t.”

“So, you made the delivery according to her instructions?”

“Yeah. William opened the can there at the door. He squinted and held his head to the side as if he expected spring-loaded snakes to attack him. When he saw it was really brownies he shut the can and closed the door in my face. It was typical, off-duty, William behavior – rude and abrupt.”

“And how did you come to make your own batch of brownies that day?”

Spence stopped dead on the trail and looked the big man in his eyes.

“You’re making it sound like I’m a suspect, Mr. Masters.”

“Just looking at all the angles, Spence. It’s something I have to do. Everyone knows you made brownies that day. Your father is not sure what time that was. There was no trace of brownie making in Annie’s kitchen. William died from poisoned brownies. If you were in my position wouldn’t you be speaking with young Master Spence?”

The boy nodded and moved ahead.

“I can see that. Well, to answer your question, they smelled so good when William opened the can, I wanted some and he didn’t offer me any. Dad and I are both pretty handy in the kitchen and I often make treats when I get the urge for something that’s not available. I went right back to our place and whipped them up. I use mom’s recipe - not as gooey as Annie’s. Made a quadruple sized batch so there’d be plenty to last a while. My eyes are often bigger than my stomach - gram has always said so.”

Masters nodded as if satisfied about the saga of the brownies.

“May I ask, next, what you have used airplane glue for recently?”

“You psychic?”

“No. But the handkerchief you loaned me this morning had a hard substance dried into the fabric. My quick take was that it was glue – what we used to call airplane glue. That kind of glue plays an important in role in part of this case.”

“Glue?”

“Glue!”

“So that’s why you sneezed into it. So you could keep it and have a closer look?”

“You got me!”

“Pretty clever. Sure seemed like a real sneeze. Well - and this will seem pretty juvenile, I suppose - I’ve had a little plaster statue-like thing of Peter Pan. Mom gave it to me for a birthday. Saturday I knocked it off my stereo by accident and his head broke off. I couldn’t find any glue on the boat so I went to the shop at Paddy’s place. I knew he kept glue in a drawer in the work bench. I got it all over my hands in the process so I used my hanky to clean up. I intended to put it in the laundry but just forgot. I have always seemed to be messy around glue, tape and girls. My Christmas packages are things to behold! We won’t even go into my dates!”

“And Peter survived to fly another day, did he?”

Spence smiled.

“Oh yes. Fit as a fiddle as Tosc . . . well you know.”

“Item three,” Masters went on. “Is rat control one of your responsibilities on the boat?”

Spence looked puzzled.

“Your dad gave me a tour of the boat. When I was in your room there were two - apparently empty - rat poison boxes in your wastebasket. I have to be interested in the why of them, considering other recent events.”

“Yeah. I see. Well, no not usually. Dad takes care of things like that on the boat. Like most big boats we do have mice. Last week I found one nibbling on a candy bar on my dresser. I’m what you might call a little impulsive, I suppose. I went to the utility room, found the poison and spread it around my room by the baseboards.”

Masters cleared his throat.

“The instructions say – quite plainly, I might add - to just open a hole in the box and leave the contents inside.”

“I’m not one to read instructions either – except as a last resort. Gram says it’s a *man thing*. Barb seems to agree with her. Dad got on me about it. Lucky that Lucky didn’t get into it.”

“What?”

“Lucky is our cat. He lives on the boat. Not much of a mouser since dad had him fixed. Never could understand why dad did that. There isn’t a female cat anywhere on the island.”

“I’m going to regret saying this,” Masters said, “but perhaps your father was concerned that Lucky might try to mate with a *catfish* and drown.”

“Yes. That is certainly worth regretting, Sir.”

The lad seemed to have all the right answers. They slipped off his tongue without hesitation. Masters was impressed if not convinced.

“Let’s try one more topic,” Masters said as they neared the western shore. “I’m going to just guess at this one and you can correct any errors.”

Again Spence looked puzzled but seemed interested and looked up into his old friend’s face as he spoke.

“From time to time during the past several years you found that your

allowance didn't reach quite far enough. Being the resourceful young man that you are, you discovered your own private bank. You watched your grandmother open the safe - both sections - and committed the combinations to memory. Realizing that the petty cash in the main compartment was regularly counted and that the larger stash was not, you chose to make your withdrawals from the secure section. Knowing you as I do, I am also quite sure that you paid back every cent as you came into some surplus."

He paused.

Spence nodded.

"It's all exactly right but I know that no one could have known that. How . . .?"

"When I had you do the demonstration for me at the safe, you did it just *too* well. You not only turned the dial on the security compartment but out of habit you applied the actual combination."

"You suspected me of the robbery and set me up?"

"Oh, no! It was just the deliberateness of your approach that caught my eye. I remembered the combination you used and later checked it out with your grandmother."

"Busted then! I mean busted for the little withdrawals as you put it. I didn't rob the safe last night. You're not accusing me of that are you?"

"No, but you see the problem that poses for me. Only you and your grandmother know the combination and the one who robbed it did so by using the combination. I need some help here, Spence."

"Yeah. I see. I don't have a clue - so to speak."

"Did you, perhaps, write those combinations down anywhere when you first learned them?"

Spence thought for only a moment. His face brightened and he looked up at Masters.

"Yes, actually. I did, come to think of it. In the upper margin of page twelve in *Twelve Angry Men*."

Masters had to smile and shake his head.

"And why the twelves?" he asked.

"I was twelve at the time. It seemed a good way to remember where it was."

"And that book would be where?"

"In the library for the guests in the great room if it's even around anymore. It was a dog-eared paperback even back then. Lots of books get carried off or misplaced."

It was a reasonable, before the fact, explanation for why that book might not be found.

"Had you read the book?"

"Saw the movie on TV."

"Well," Masters said, ready to close the inquisition, "You have provided very complete explanations on each and every topic. Thank you for your time and for understanding my responsibility regarding it all. Let's get back to the Inn and see if we can find that book."

They started back up the hill.

“There is something I’ve been wondering, Spence – not really related to the case.”

“What’s that?”

“Your headaches – when do they begin? Do you wake up with them or what?”

“All the doctors asked me that same question and none of them seemed to like my answer. It’s like if your symptoms don’t fit their illnesses chart they make it seem like it’s your fault. Anyway, I get a feeling ahead of time that one is going to come. I can’t really describe it. It may be just a few hours or a whole day ahead. They usually begin small when I wake up in the morning and by ten o’clock they’re really bad. It’s when I first sense they’re coming that I’m supposed to do the biofeedback stuff. It’s a small alpha brainwave detector that straps around my head. It has a set of rounded prongs that contact my scalp. I’ve taught myself to produce alpha waves – they’re associated with relaxation and bliss. It prolongs the onset, I think, but hasn’t ever stopped one.”

“I’m so sorry you have to endure that affliction,” Masters said. “Do you ever experience – what can I call them – blackout periods during the time before they begin as full blown headaches?”

“Yes. Just during the past year, though, I’d say. That’s since I’ve been to the headache doctors. It’s like sometimes I’ll find myself walking along or even playing my guitar and I don’t know how I got there. It’s pretty scary. I haven’t told anybody. I suppose I need to do that.”

“It would be a very good idea I think – essential, even.”

Spence nodded as if in agreement.

Masters seemed finished.

“If you’re done with *your* questions, then, can I ask you something?”

“Sure, but you must understand that I retain my rights under the Fifth Amendment.”

It garnered a grin from them both.

“Back to my headaches. The doctor at Mayo’s said he thought they were psychological. I hated him for saying that. It made me think he thought I was crazy. Dad took me to a psychologist but I wouldn’t talk to him so we quit going. I’ve done a lot of reading about psychosomatic stuff since then. If they are psychological, it doesn’t mean I’m off my rocker - I understand that now. I’ve decided I’ll go back and try to work it out. You got any ideas about it? I mean it’s like a mystery, sort of, and nobody’s better at solving mysteries than you are.”

“I wouldn’t pretend to be a therapist, Spence. I must admit several things have crossed my mind. The most basic one would only seem valid if you believe your father’s physical disability is really due to something *other* than polio.”

It was the surprised look of all time that met Masters glance.

“How did you know?”

“I didn’t for sure.”

Spence offered more.

“I listened at the door at the psychologist’s office one morning while he was talking privately with dad. All I could make out was something about a really

terrible beating from gramps that put dad in the hospital for a long time. I figured even the devil wouldn't beat a kid who had polio so it all must have been caused by the beating. I also heard that whatever it was, happened when dad was fourteen and that he and gramps never spoke to each other again after that. There was more but I couldn't catch it."

"And when did *your* headaches begin?"

"When I was about to turn fourteen. My gosh! Some connection there?"

"That will be for you and your doctor to work out. Perhaps it is a starting place. For what it may be worth, I am also going to guess that it was about ten o'clock in the morning when you were listening at that door."

Spence nodded slowly and let his tears flow freely until they neared the clearing at the top of the hill.

"Heck of a time to be without a clean hanky," he said, attempting a smile in Masters' direction.

"Fortunately, I have the World's largest shirt tail, my boy. Dry away."

Spence helped himself and was soon presentable.

Back inside they went directly into the great room and to the bookcases in the North West corner.

"Must be a thousand, here," Spence said. "The guests just put them back anywhere so you can't go by the section titles on the shelves. How about I start here and you work back toward me?"

"Sounds like a good plan," Masters agreed.

He understood that the boy felt most comfortable when he was in charge. Masters, of course, could have cared less.

"Explain again, why we need to find that book, Spence asked."

"There are very few things other than lock combinations that include three sets of double digits separated by hyphens. I assume that's how you recorded them."

Spence nodded.

"It get it. A nefarious type just might well put 2 and 2 and 2 together and try the nearest safe."

"But you've forgotten another *very* important item that's also recorded that way."

Masters stopped to listen, fully expecting some kind of important revelation.

"Female's measurements," came his giggling answer.

Masters shook his head but couldn't just let it go.

"This one would be *some* beauty, my boy. Let's see if I recall: 12 - 45 - 63."

Spence wasn't finished either.

"Most stimulating, I'm sure, for guys with a triangle fetish."

A fifteen minute search revealed not so much as one angry man. Masters got that look on his face. Spence had seen it before in the dock house.

"William's room," he said. "I'm sure I saw a copy of that title on his bookshelves."

"It's now Jason's room, but I'm sure he won't care if we go look."

Masters secured the new butler's permission, although he really did not need it, and they were soon in his apartment with the book in hand. Spence opened it to page twelve and, just as he had indicated there were the two combinations. Masters felt some relief to know the boy's story had not been a well constructed, spur of the moment, prevarication. Masters slipped the book into his pocket and looked around the room addressing Spence in the process.

"If you were going to hide a bundle of cash - say the length of a dollar bill and probably six to eight inches thick depending on the denominations, where would you put it in here?"

"Behind books, under the soil in the flower pots, inside a pillow or sofa cushion or mattress, in the back of the TV or - *best of all* - inside that old radio cabinet. Nobody would ever look in there."

"You spin possibilities like a seasoned felon."

"And if *Lucky* had done that after falling into a salt container, it would have been like . . ."

"Yes, like a *seasoned feline*. I do apologize if that warped sense of humor has rubbed off onto you from me."

"We *could* just blame Flint," Spence suggested, smiling.

Masters smiled back and shrugged his shoulders.

They soon had the heavy old radio pulled away from the wall.

"Need a screwdriver?" Spence asked.

Masters reached into his pocket and pulled out two dimes.

"This is actually fifteen cents shy of the demo model I was shown, but for small screws like this I think they should fill the bill."

He demonstrated, and Spence - though confused by Masters' statement - was soon into the process.

"Touch the cabinet as little as is absolutely necessary," Masters cautioned.

Spence nodded and kept working. Several minutes later the back was sitting on the floor, leaning up against the wall.

"It's a 'Probable Bingo', Sir," Spence said pointing to a small bundle wrapped in newspaper.

Masters chuckled.

"And that may be the first '*probable bingo*' in my history.

Spence smiled acknowledging the absurdity in the phrase he had coined.

"Do we touch it?" he asked.

"Carefully," Masters cautioned.

He reached in with his pencil and pulled it to the edge at the back. The paper had been taped with cellophane tape. Masters disengaged the tape from the paper by rolling the pencil under it. The package fell open revealing a '*definite bingo*'.

"Go find a deputy with an evidence bag. No reason to move it twice. Look here. A big beautiful thumb print on the underneath side of the tape - it may be that the thief did the hard part of our work for us."

The deputy arrived, and the wrapper was bagged to await the lab crew. The money was also bagged and marked as evidence, then returned to the safe to await the sheriff's pleasure on how to handle it.

The print man finished with the safe and entered the butler's quarters.

"Something in here needing my attention," he said looking around.

"This old radio. The cabinet and the slotted back piece sitting on the floor beside it," Masters said. "I'm really only interested in the most recent overprints. They will belong to one of these three people, I imagine."

He handed the deputy a business card with the names scrawled on the back.

"Three?" Spence asked. "I thought Jason was a shoe-in for the honor."

Masters ignored the implied question.

"We'll leave you to your work. Certainly appreciate your willingness to keep coming back out here."

"Hey! Every time I'm here Mrs. Spencer insists on feeding me. I've gained five pounds this week. I'll really miss this place. My wife is convinced that Mrs. Spencer is in cahoots with Jenny Craig."

They shared a polite chuckle and Masters and Spence left him to his business. In the hall Masters asked:

"What's your best guess about where I'll find Jason at this hour of the morning?"

"I can't say I know his schedule like I did William's. Probably dusting in the great room or straightening the chairs on the porch or the deck out back. Shall I find him for you?"

"No, but thanks. I need the exercise."

"Then I'm going to stuff my face and head back to the boat. I have two days of practice to make up. Call me on dad's phone if you need me."

"I'll do that."

Masters headed first for the porch. It had been a good choice. Jason was watering the dozen or so large, rustic, wooden planters that graced the beautiful expanse.

"Jason. I'm Ray Masters," he said stepping over the long green hose.

"Yes, Sir. The larger than life detective, if I'm not mistaken."

"Well, larger than most in this life, at any rate."

It had been delivered with one of Masters' full, warm, smiles.

Jason was, in most ways, a clone of William, except he had a genuine social security number and a wife of thirty four years. He was well spoken and came with impeccable letters of recommendation though he had been without regular employment for the past eleven months. Times were hard for top level butlers. He had no police record in either the US or Canada and was a US citizen, born in Lena, Illinois, a small town near the Wisconsin border.

"May I speak with you for a few minutes? I'll gladly walk along as you take care of the flowers."

"They are beautiful, aren't they?" Jason said nodding his agreement to the conversation. "With Amos gone I inherited this job - took it on myself, actually - someone needed to. Poor Mary has so much on her mind; we all just have to pitch in where we see something needs to be done."

"You are staying out here now?" Masters began.

"Mary has been good about that. I'm not into the schedule we have

worked out yet - with all the problems here you know. Eventually, I will stay out here on Saturday, Sunday, Monday and Tuesday nights, then I will be off on Thursday and Friday so will go home Wednesday after dinner and be at home Wednesday, Thursday and Friday nights. I'll return at seven a.m. on Saturday - Spence or Quentin or whatever his name is will provide me transportation. It is all quite tentative depending upon what Mary decides to do out here."

"You have been working out of a temp service. Is that your preference?"

"Oh, no, Sir. Almost a year without regular income. Between that and the Market's poor performance we're nearly wiped out. But then, that's my problem and I shouldn't be burdening you."

"You said, 'we'?"

"My wife and I. No children, sadly."

"She works also?"

"No. She did for years. A wonderful cook. She fell and broke her hip in four places several years ago. It didn't mend properly and she has a hard time getting around. Can't stand but for a few minutes at a time."

"Is there nothing that can be done?"

"That always elusive, far too expensive operation," he said with a sigh. "We're still paying off her original medical expenses."

"Well, Mary has commented how much she likes your work and you as person. I hope things can work out on a regular basis for you here."

"Thank you, Sir. It is always reassuring to hear such kind words."

"I wanted to forewarn you that a deputy will be coming by to get your fingerprints later. I imagine you have heard about the robbery in Mary's office. We have to rule out the help as a starting place, you can understand."

"Yes, Sir. That won't be a problem. Other employers have done it regularly. The only discomfiting aspect of the process is removing that pesky ink from ones finger tips."

"Rub them first with the inner side of an orange peel. A trick I learned many years ago."

"Well, I will certainly try that. Thank you. May I ask you, Sir? My wife is quite concerned about my safety here on the island, considering the recent problems."

"In my best judgment, Jason, those problems are all in the past."

"That's good to hear. My wife will take your word as Gospel. She's an avid fan - Mr. Flint's books."

In a sudden, somewhat humorous, mental flash, it all became clear to Masters. 'Get rid of Flint and at last he'd be able to retire in peace.'

"Sir?" Jason asked in response to the old detective's obvious moment of reverie.

"Oh, nothing. Just a very pleasant, momentary fantasy. Thank you for your time. It's nice to have you here. And, oh, yes, it's '*Spence*' when the boy is present with or without his grandmother but '*Quentin*' when you are with the grandmother but the boy is *not* present."

"I shall study that later and try to commit it to memory. Thank you."

They exchanged the warm smiles reserved for friends.

Masters retired to a corner of the great room where he could sit, think and look out over the beautiful view to the east. Before he could proceed through a review of the facts and list the still missing information, the print man arrived, notebook in hand.

"Thought you might want some preliminary impressions before I return to the lab."

He took a seat.

"Yes, thank you. What do you have?"

"Good news and bad news, I suppose. On the safe in the office I found five sets of recent prints - Mary, the desk clerk, William, Spence, and Jason. Those on the top edge, where you specified that I look, were a mess - print upon print. All four were intermingled at that spot. I'm afraid that's not going to be much help, but we'll try."

"I wasn't aware you had Jason's prints yet."

"Came with his resume, apparently. Mary had them on file. I can take new ones if you want."

"No. He'll be delighted that he won't have to attack an orange."

The deputy gave him a puzzled look.

"You had to be there. What else?"

"The only prints on the door knobs belonged to the desk clerk - from this morning, I'd say. They had each apparently been wiped clean within the last day or so. I guess once opened in the morning it stands open back against the wall all day."

"And in the butler's quarters?" Masters asked.

"The good news is the prints from the back panel of the radio cabinet were clear as a bell - look to be William's, Jason's, Quentin's and one big beautiful Raymond Masters thumb print."

"And the bad news?"

"That nice, clear print on the scotch tape - it belongs to Spence Spence."

A sudden look of sad disbelief overtook Master's face. He shook his head.

"Anything else?"

"The paperback book is a jumble as you might expect. The best ones seem to be from Spence and you."

"Do what you can to determine if Jason's is present. It would have to be a very recent overprint - maybe on page 12. If it's there it should stick out like a sore thumb - so to speak."

"We'll go over it from stem to stern with the lab equipment. We have a gizmo there that can take somebody's print right off the end of somebody else's fingertip."

"By the way, the glue tube had just two sets of recent prints - The deceased dockman's and Spence's. That boy seems to get around."

"A bundle of energy," Masters said acknowledging the deputies remark while not really answering the implied question.

"Well, I'll be on my way. Mary promised me lunch. Like I said, I'll miss coming out here."

He stood and left.

Lunch sounded good. He postponed his think time and went to the dining room. The print man and another deputy were engaged at a table in the center of the room. Masters went to his favorite spot. It was late and apparently everyone else had already eaten.

Unlike those who had difficulty chewing gum and walking at the same time, Masters could eat and do virtually anything else at the same time. He started through the information.

He wanted to believe that five of the principals had nothing to do with any of the crimes - Mary, Lawrence, Spence, Sam and Jason. Because of that he needed to make certain he explored their possible involvement very closely.

Again, it came down to flimsy motivation. Lawrence didn't want the Inn so to kill off the staff and or Mary in order to get it made little sense. Only if his hatred for his mother had grown out of control would he seem to have a motive. His recent change in behavior toward his mother suggested that was not true. Of course, what better cover than feigning forgiveness?

Mary, although she didn't like her staff members, personally, seemed to have no particular ongoing problem with any of them. They each had done their jobs well and without prodding. If she wanted to rid herself of the responsibility of the Inn there were numerous offers on the table.

Masters had developed an immediate warm spot in his heart for Jason and his plight - an ailing wife, huge bills, the need for an operation, recent unemployment and lost investments. All of that was on the shoulders of what seemed to be a very decent, helpful, compassionate, human being. Even so, there was the possibility of double, perhaps triple, motivation; get rid of William and thereby find permanent, local, employment; and, rob the safe and pay off bills or get his wife the surgery she needed. Number three could involve making room for a new cook after his wife had her operation. Could he have perpetrated the first two or three murders as covers or diversions for his real purpose? The location of his prints suggested that his participation in the robbery was a possibility - on the safe and on the radio cabinet. They might also merely mean he left them while cleaning. It was always a problem in cases involving butlers and maids - their prints were everywhere.

It seemed to be the problem with Spence as well. The first puzzling finding was Spence's fingerprint on the cellophane tape. The second was why, if the boy had taken the money, had he hidden it in the radio of all the possible places on the island - a place to which he actually had limited access? Of course, with the butler gone several nights a week . . .

The ease with which he had spun possible hiding places in the butler's quarters might have reflected less on his intelligence and more on the fact that he had previously gone through that search process for himself. Revealing the hiding place to the detective would have been a reasonable step since he knew - once that close - it would have eventually been found. Having helped locate it would support his innocence if the need occurred.

Masters' train of thought was interrupted when he noticed Chief Currier, Deputy Tommy backing into the room - no clear reason why; he was just backing

into the room. Eventually he spotted Masters. It was a large *white* envelope that time, but Tommy was plainly an equal opportunity mangler - brown or white, it *would* arrive mangled!

"You should hear my boat, Sir," he began, most important things first, of course. "It's purring like a new born puppy. Been running like that ever since that day it drifted off shore down at the dock house. Can't figure it."

Masters smiled, assuming the young deputy who had anchored it had also switched around a few battery connections.

"Miracles never cease!" Masters said, moved to say something but realizing it really made no difference what it was.

Tommy hitched up his pants.

"Anything to currier back to *my* office?"

The vision of *Sheriff Tommy* sent a chill through the old detective's bones.

"Let me see what's here first. Grab a bite and check back before you leave."

The envelope contained a brief and right-to-the-point report on the glass fragments from Mary's lamp. They came from a piece of expensive crystal, probably cut from a super thin goblet. Masters had to read no further on that report. It verified his initial impression.

Likewise, the final autopsy reports on Paddy, Annie, Amos and William also confirmed what he knew had to be found.

The report on Paul, the Ashcroft's 'boat driver' - as Betty had described him - was more interesting. He was a convicted felon - robbery and battery. He had been drummed out of the Navy as incorrigible. His specialty there had been demolition.

Thirty eight year old Paul had been in the Ashcroft's employ for almost ten years. The speculation was that he handled more than Betty's boat. During the past six days his whereabouts could not be specified. Late Saturday afternoon he had left Mackinaw City, alone, in the fully fueled yacht. The marina attendant had been trying to raise him on the radio because water had been discovered in the fuel he had taken on. Masters supposed that a boat so fueled would sputter a bit from time to time. It raised an interesting possibility.

With no *Paul prints* discovered on the island, his involvement seemed unlikely. Of course, as an experienced criminal, he would tend to be more careful about such things than the other, more amateur suspects. His motivation would be that of the Ashcroft's of course. Possessing the island had clearly become an obsession for Blake - a man who seldom in his adult life had not obtained what he wanted, though why he had wanted Betty was perhaps the greatest mystery of all. His value system was clearly not 'humanity friendly' so killing a few people to achieve his personal ends was not out of the question.

Of the two, however, Masters would put his money on Betty. Her innocent, detached, dumb-blond, appearance was clearly a sham. Its purpose was not immediately evident. For her, like her husband, other people's comfort, rights and lives were of little consequence as she pursued her greedy, self-centered life style. A world populated by Blakes and Bettys would soon bring the human race to extinction. Life, to both of them, was like a game of Monopoly,

the sole purpose of which was to crush the competition regardless of the short or long term collateral consequences to others.

The envelope also contained a quickly secured copy of Annie's health history from the Canadian Prison System. It provided an interesting possibility for Barbara. Annie had given birth to a baby girl thirty nine years before. It had been given up for adoption immediately. Annie's beautiful, long, black hair apparently came from a bottle as it was listed in the report as red. All of that would have occurred the same year she had ostensibly killed her husband and mother-in-law and arrived at *Terrapin Island*.

Masters would have to consider the pros and cons before deciding whether to pass on any of that to Barbara.

He put the material back into the envelope and shook his head. Of the fourteen possible suspects in the six cases - four murders, one attempted murder and the robbery - only Sam and Barb seemed unlikely candidates for any part of it, and even they were not completely above suspicion. Sam could have been after Annie's job full time. It was an outside possibility that she and Jason were working as a team.

Barb, of course, might have known more than she let on, having actually located the woman she had determined was her mother - the one who found her so unlovable as to give her away. She could have carried out the serial murders to disguise Annie's murder. Barb's frequent visits to the island certainly would have given her the opportunity to learn the ropes there - especially with Spence as her more than willing informant. A trusted and well liked regular visitor would presumably move way down on the suspect list. An interesting two-some: Barb and Spence? Feminine wiles had lured more than one young man down the path to crime.

So, with every last soul connected to the island a legitimate suspect, Masters needed to lay out his solutions one final time, making sure all the pieces fit in all possible ways. He went to his room where he would be undisturbed for one final, complete run-through of the evidence.

By five o'clock he was fully satisfied with his findings. He called Sheriff Overlander and set a meeting of all the surviving parties for nine the following morning. It would be Lawrence's fortieth birthday. Perhaps those who were not in custody after the get together could celebrate - perhaps not.

Chapter Seven: Day Seven, the morning

By eight forty-five the expected guests had assembled. Tommy and another deputy had arranged the furniture in one corner of the great room so everyone would be in position to hear Mr. Masters' summation of the cases.

Spence sat between Mary and Lawrence on a long, rustic, couch near the center of the grouping. Barb sat alone in a large, overstuffed chair. Blake and Betty, surprisingly, sat together on a smaller couch next to the wall. Samantha and Victor sat at opposite ends of another small couch. Paul, who had been located just hours before in a cove on the south side of *Pack Island* enjoying leisure time activities with three buxom young ladies, had taken a seat next to Tommy at the rear. The sheriff, Deputy Debbie, and the State's Attorney sat together near the front and to the left of the Spencers. Four deputies stood at the rear.

At precisely nine o'clock it was a solemn Raymond Masters who entered from the entry hall, walked to a position in front of the windows in the corner of the room, and turned to face the gathering.

"Although I understand none of you had a choice in the matter, still, I want to thank you for being here. We are all aware of the tragic events that have transpired here on Terrapin Island during the past week. The killing is over. The thievery is over. It is now time to lay out exactly what took place and reveal who took part.

"Let me begin at the beginning. The four, deceased, former members of the staff here at the Inn, never got on well but had no reason to be combative until the terms of Mary's will were changed leaving one million dollars to be divided among those who were still alive at the time of Mary's death. Greed took over. A meeting was called - I imagine by William although we will never know that for certain. It took place in Paddy's dock house early last week. Paddy, Annie, Amos, and William were in attendance. Each was an escaped felon whom Harry had purchased three dozen or more years ago. We can place them all there together recently, although the exact date is uncertain. It was sometime after the tenth because one of the origami flowers Amos left there was from a newspaper bearing that date. The dock house was undoubtedly selected because it was off the beaten path and they would not be seen together there.

"The purpose of the meeting was to plan Mary's death so they could take their inheritance and escape the prison that Harry had established for them here on the island. I can only assume that they may have discussed several possible plans, chose one of them, and in some manner decided who would do the deed. More about that later.

"Those were greedy people. If \$250,000 - their allotted share - looked good, then \$333,333 or \$500,000 or the whole Million looked even better. To position themselves for a larger portion of the pie, someone else or several someone elses among them had to die. That, of course, was not discussed at their meeting.

Here is how it happened.

“From an empty bottle of Amos’s favorite scotch - the only one on the island who purchased it - found open and still moist inside in Paddy’s bedroom - it is clear that Amos began the liquoring up of Paddy quite intentionally early in the evening on the night of his death. Then, with more liquor added by William and later Annie - not a part of Amos’s plan, just a helpful happenstance - Paddy was intoxicated out of his mind by the time he made his way to his very favorite place, the old crank well. Amos counted on that - the odds being overwhelmingly in his favor. Amos planned to bash Paddy unconscious with the bucket - so he would not scream during the fall, I assume - and push him into the well, thereby being rid of him forever. Amos didn’t know, of course, that there was a tunnel at the bottom through which his body might make its way into the lake at ebb tide. Paddy put up more of a struggle than Amos expected and at some point in the scuffle he grabbed Paddy by the back of his collar leaving traces there of the fertilizer additive, aluminum sulfate, from his hands. The state’s excellent crime lab was able to find traces of that chemical still in place under Amos’s fingernails even after he had been consumed by the fire. Amos related that he had seen Paddy sitting on the well, some twenty yards from the path he was walking, but hadn’t spoken with him. It was the dark of the moon. Seeing anyone at the well would have been impossible.

“Paddy could hold his liquor; that no one who knew him would deny. Early in the evening he had put in place his own plan to reduce the number of heirs by one - Amos. He stowed the fuel under the gardener’s cottage, removed the caps from the cans, draped the fuse that he had made earlier on the workbench at the dock, and placed the timer - an ingenious devise actually which required a good deal of work and skill. The remainder of his evening I have just recounted.

“In the meantime, Amos had brewed up a surprise for Annie. Clinging to the inside of the drain from the sink in his kitchen, the lab found strawberry particles. He had carefully peeled away all traces of red, smashed the white meat of the berry and boiled it down until nearly dry. The drying was finished in his microwave. It was then pulverized into powder with a hammer from his toolbox. Traces of strawberries were found on the hammer and in one aluminum pan in his cupboard. He gained access to Annie’s bedroom and mixed his deadly compound with sufficient sugar so as to not be noticeable. That mixture he put at the bottom of her silver sugar bowl by her bed, filling it back up with unadulterated sugar. He wiped his prints clean. It would take several cups of tea for her to get down to the deadly potion. On the evening that occurred, it killed her immediately, swelling her throat and nasal passages so she could not breathe.

“Prior to her death, of course, Amos had been killed by Paddy. In a plan not unlike Amos’s, Annie laced William’s brownies - only those on the lower level, however - with warferin readily available in the rat poison she kept in her kitchen. He would suffer no ill effects until he got to the bottom of the tin. Knowing William and his selfish ways, she felt sure no one else would be harmed. The fact is, I had one, as did one of the deputies, and we are both still here to tell the tale.

“So, Amos killed Paddy. Interestingly he was the only killer alive at the time his murderous act took place. Amos died at the hands of Paddy one day after Paddy had died. Annie died at the hands of Amos one day after Amos had died. William died at the hands of Annie one day after Annie had died.

“Now, back to the attempt on Mary’s life. The gas light beside her bed had been modified to perform the deadly deed. A hole had been drilled into the box that distributed the gas in the lamp - like a mini manifold you might say. Over that hole had been glued - with a Super glue type product - a small square of crystal cut from one of Mary’s own goblets. The gas pressure is very low in this system so the patch was completely secure. Mary turned the lamp off at night before going to bed - the way she always did. Her caution in that regard was well known among the staff.

“Now, let’s examine the truly ingenious part of the plan. There are two old, ham radio sets on the premises - one in William’s room and one in Mary’s apartment. Each was powered by a six volt storage battery - the kind now used in boats and the golf carts here on the island. Each radio had a new battery in place inside it. The radio in William’s apartment was set to transmit; the one in Mary’s to receive. William, with his background in electronics, knew that quality crystal would shatter when bombarded with sounds at a proper high pitch. He experimented until he determined the pitch necessary to break the crystal from Mary’s goblet. There was a small, digital, battery operated, timer wired into his radio, set to turn it on at about five o’clock on Wednesday morning – a morning he had planned to be away from the Island in order to establish his alibi. It was rigged to transmit that pitch to Mary’s receiver - also turned on at the appropriate time by a similar device. Once the transmission was over, both sets turned off leaving no clue about their use.

“With the transmitter turned on and transmitting, the receiver amplified the very brief high pitched sound which was almost above the range of human hearing so the police woman would not have been aware of it. The crystal patch on the lamp shattered, more or less silently, and the gas began pouring into the room.

“So once again, the attempted murder had been perpetrated by someone who had died the day before. Oddly, Sheriff, all four have been caught but none will go to prison.

“Finally, the robbery - and it actually caused me more consternation than any of the rest of this. There was only one person, besides Mary who knew the combination to the secure compartment in the safe and it was his finger print that was found on the cellophane tape that had been used to secure the newspaper wrapping around the bills found in the back of the radio in William’s room. Furthermore, this same person’s fingerprints were found on some of the bills on the top of that pile.”

Spence began to squirm.

“There were other sets of prints on the bills as well. Prints alone were not going to clinch the robbery, however. It was the paper in which the bills had been wrapped that would provide the essential clue. Again, the lab analysis provided the answer for us. That paper was impregnated with tiny, fully invisible,

traces of shattered crystal. William had placed sample pieces of crystal inside a thick, folded newspaper during his experiments to find the proper pitch. The piece used to wrap the money had probably been the fifth or seventh or tenth layer away from the inside sheet on which William had placed the samples of the crystal that shattered there. Once that phase was finished, William had destroyed the several clearly damaged sheets but refolded the remainder for future use. Then, when the time came to wrap the stolen bills, he carelessly chose a sheet of that paper. The remaining paper in William's room also contained the crystal splinters.

"To explain the prints of the other person I needed not only his help but that of the desk clerk - a very attractive young lady named Connie. The prints on the bills and tape were Spence's. He confirmed for me how his prints would have appeared on the stolen money and he now only has to explain that to his grandmother. As to his print on the tape, it seems that Spence - a young man with normal interests for his age - spends a good deal of time in the vicinity of Connie - as I said, a most attractive young lady. While standing at her desk conversing with her and fidgeting as boys are prone to do, she reports he plays with the tape dispenser, pulling out a length and then rewinding it onto the roll. In that process he leaves his prints. I had the first two feet of that roll of tape checked for prints and his abound.

"The thief was William and my best guess is that the robbery took place during the early a.m. hours of Monday. I am led to that conclusion because each morning Amos placed a fresh flower in the vase on Connie's desk. He died on Sunday morning before he had left his cottage. Connie put the wilted flower from Saturday into the trash on Sunday evening but revealed that she had left the water in the vase because she was in a hurry to leave and would have had to take it down the hall to the restroom to get rid of it. She doesn't remember seeing the vase again after that. Considering the upsetting events around here, that seems understandable. The thief had probably knocked it to the floor during his robbery, picked it up, and placed it - empty - on the shelf over the safe. Papers left on the desk by Connie were not water marked nor were the contents of the wastepaper basket beside the desk. The water, therefore, probably spilled onto the wooden floor. It could have well gone unnoticed by the thief, assuming dim illumination from a flashlight. The robbery was discovered on Thursday. If it had occurred the night before it was discovered - late Wednesday or early Thursday - the floor would have still been wet that next morning. It was not.

"So, three of the greedy staff members - Amos, Annie and Paddy - each hoped to increase his own inheritance by eliminating one or two of the fellow employees. Amos appears to have been the greediest - planning the demise of both Paddy and Annie. William stuck to the plan and only did his assigned part to speed up the inheritance process by setting out to kill Mary. William was a bright man, and, knowing the others, he probably had a hunch that, before all was said and done, at least one of them would be killed by another. William felt safe because he could not be that victim. The others knew he had to remain alive to kill Mary, which was the ultimately essential step if the plan were to work.

Each of our killers made at least one mistake. Annie miscalculated. She knew that William took pride in his slender physique. Based on that and his basically greedy manner, she felt sure it would take him the better part of a week to work his way down to the poisoned brownies. He would have killed Mary by then. Providing them to him that far in advance removed them from the immediate time line surrounding his murder. However, the anxiety produced by the multiple killings gave William a huge case of the munchies, and the treats were devoured well ahead of schedule. His death would have been *too soon* had William not already rigged the Mary-killing-device to operate on a timer. He had planned to be elsewhere at the time of her death.

Amos, for all his intelligence made several errors. One was allowing the chemical to remain on his hands and then using those hands to manhandle Paddy. The second was his failure to properly research the old dug well, determining just how deep it would have to be and the history of the area. Then, using his drain to dispose of the strawberry evidence was also a mistake. Could those traces of strawberries have been legitimate - from berries he had fixed for himself? Yes, provided he was given to peeling and discarding just the red portion from them, since only the red pigmented scraps of the berries were found in the drain - an unlikely occurrence.

Paddy just wasn't very bright when it came to criminal activities. *He* was the one with easiest access to the fuel and the black powder. It was *his* treasured clock used as the triggering mechanism. He had not even thought ahead well enough to make the fuel building appear to have been broken into. In the early stages of his drunken stupor he failed to go back and retrieve the three fuel can lids, which, although they also contained the prints of both Lawrence and Spence, had Paddy's as the only overprints - the last to have handled them. The others had been made as the two helped Paddy move the cans from the dock into the fuel house at the time of delivery. Checking for tight lids was an important part of that process.

William had the only near perfect scheme. He would be in town when the robbery seemed to have taken place and when the attempt on Mary's life happened. It would be Paddy who had access to the drill. The glass plug would be shattered and therefore never found. The glue was from Paddy's workshop. After the hubbub quieted down, William would have returned the batteries to the dock house and removed the other paraphernalia from the two radios. All of the evidence pointing to him and the method of murder would be gone.

In fact, he felt so confident that his use of the radios would not be discovered that he chose to hide the money he stole inside one of them. Now, folks, butlers *do* know *everything* that goes on within the households for which they work; through the years I have discovered that may well be the only indisputable truth of the universe. William knew of Spence's periodic withdrawals from the safe. He knew of the lad's fingerprints on the cellophane tape. He assumed those same fingerprints would have to be present on the safe, which he purposefully had not dusted for several weeks. When the robbery was discovered - again, remember, having taken place at a time when he was not to have been on the island - he would feel it his moral obligation to reveal what he

knew about Spence's previous dealings in the safe. Had that occurred, the boy's prints would have been located inside the security compartment and on some of the bills, therefore making him a shoe-in for the thief.

Six crimes. Five clearly established perpetrators. Yet, no one to cart off to jail. If *I* were to name this case it would be, *I'll Kill You After I'm Dead*. However, for reasons of suspense, Mr. Flint will undoubtedly call it, *The Case of the Murders on Terrapin Island*.

Epilogue

On January fifth, following his visit to the *Lancaster Inn*, Mr. Masters received the following letter from Spence.

January 1st, the wee hours of the morning

Dear Mr. Masters,

Many interesting and wonderful things have happened on and about Terrapin Island since you left us. I figured that to bring you up to date would be a good way for me to start the new year.

Gram probably said it best. During the time you were here she kept saying she wondered when things would finally get back to normal. Not long ago she said, "Isn't it wonderful that things never got back to normal." She meant that things are so much better now, that she'd never want them to go back to how they used to be.

The funerals were hard on all of us. In what I think was a really nice gesture, Barb paid for Annie's. It seemed very important to her. She's a wonderful lady.

I turned eighteen in December and have just finished my first semester as a senior at the local public high school. It was quite an adjustment but, all things considered, it is really great. I'm on the swim team and except for those pesky swim suits, I really enjoy it. There is only one kid who can beat me in the free style. I really admire him. I'm creeping up on his time, though, so who knows what may happen. We've come in first and second at all our meets!

Get this! I have grown three inches since summer. Maybe my delayed Spencer-growth-gene-thing is finally kicking in. Being short wasn't the problem I thought it would be. Most of the girls are shorter than I am so none of them even seem to notice. And yes, there are lots of girls in my life - warm, soft, wonderful, sweet-smelling, girls. It's like a dream. No, it's much better than a dream.

I've been in counseling for almost five months now. Doc says I'm about done. You were right about how the headaches started. Some irrational part of me was so afraid that when I reached fourteen, my father would disown me - like dad's father had done to him - that my mind gave me this terrible ailment so he'd have to stick by me and take care of me. I haven't had one in over five months (a headache, that is; I still have a great father! Ha! Ha!).

I've been accepted at three universities into their Natural Science Departments - botany, zoology, geology. Not sure yet where I'll go. I'm going to minor in business and plan to come back here someday with the love of my life - whoever that may turn out to be - and run this place. It will be a wonderful place to raise a passel of kids.

Dad and Barb have been seeing more and more of each other. It looks to me like I'll soon be having a new mother. My first true love becomes my mother! Perhaps I'd better stay in therapy just a bit longer!!!

Gram and Lester have developed what seems like a very comfortable relationship. He's out here a lot. I'm happy for them both. It's reassuring to know romance doesn't stop at fifty, you know - well, yes, I assume you do know.

Sam and Jason are here full time. Jason's wife had her operation and is doing well. Some anonymous, good Samaritan with a rural New York State postmark sent them a cashier's check to cover all her medical expenses. You wouldn't know anything about that, of course.

I've started playing my guitar for the guests at dinner here at the Inn three nights a week. I get huge tips. (Guess that means gram's safe is safe. That WAS a joke, you know!) I really enjoy it. I've stopped the monthly practice contracts with myself. Music is not going to be my life and that's okay now with both me and dad.

Lucky continues to yawn and act bored as mice saunter by. Not long ago a guest brought her female cat along. Lucky ran and hid – much like you tend to do by the way. Is there something you want to tell me!!!!

I need to clear up one thing. Tommy does have a girlfriend. I shouldn't have laughed at the possibility like I did. They are fully and totally in love. He takes such good care of her it's wonderful to see them together. I'm going to play at their wedding on Valentine's Day. How romantic can it get!

Well, I guess that's about it. Thanks for all your help - both with the cases out here and for all you did for me personally and my family. (Haven't cussed in months.) I'll never forget you and look forward to your next visit.

With love and best wishes

Your friend forever

Spence

Masters refolded the letter and placed it on top of his recently acquired, antique, mahogany radio, asking, out loud, "Where's that World's largest shirt tail when I need it?"