



Garrison Flint's Revenge of the Restless Crossbow



**A murderous,
gypsy, crossbow
with a mind of its
own? Inspector
Raymond Masters
doesn't think so!**

Another Family Friendly Book from The Family of Man Press

Revenge of the Restless Crossbow

**A Raymond Masters Mystery
BOOK SIX**

**By
Garrison Flint**

Family of Man Press

Revised and © 2013, 2017

///

DAY ONE: THE MORNING

Oops! Zing! Ugh! Clunk!

Oops! Zing! Ugh! Clunk! It had happened just about that quickly. The dozen or so people gathered there that June morning in the sprawling, mahogany paneled great room of author Winston Rafferty's rustic, log mansion, were on their feet - stunned, bewildered, amazed.

It was to have been a publisher's launch party for three new mystery novels. In attendance were the publisher, the authors, several book critics, the owner of a chain of bookstores, and assorted others. Raymond Masters, noted, retired police Detective had just stood to address the group, which was seated in comfortable looking, high back, brown leather chairs, arranged in two rows, arched in front of the huge stone fireplace.

At that moment, Margo White (she would have never spelled her name the usual way), the generally disliked, snippy, author of a nationally syndicated book review column, slumped forward from her chair – dead – an arrow plunged into her chest.

Margo had been the last guest to take her seat. She had been experiencing foot problems and was still finding it cumbersome to navigate on crutches. In a rare gesture of pleasantness between them, the publisher, Robert Hill, rose, giving her his place on the aisle and assisting her into the chair. He then took the seat beside her and they turned their attention toward Mr. Masters. The clock had chimed ten o'clock just minutes before Margo gasped her final breath.

As she fell to the floor, an antique crossbow, a long

time decorative feature, hanging high on the wall beside the fireplace, fell to the floor beside Masters. There would be little doubt that it was the weapon responsible for Margo's injury.

The immediate questions racing through Masters' mind were; Had it discharged accidentally? If not, how had it been aimed and triggered? Why? Was it a random act or had it been meant for Margo? Or for someone else, perhaps? Who had planned the deed? There were more, of course.

Under other circumstances, Masters next thought would have brought a smile to his generous cheeks. 'If it indeed had been murder, every person in that room was the ironclad alibi for every other person in that room. How convenient. How tidy. How ingenious.' Masters quickly scanned the audience, taking note of where each person had been. He quickly, though carefully, sketched that setting in his ever-present notepad.

Winston Rafferty, a life-long friend who had often used Masters' cases as the basis for his widely-read novels, was the first to approach the Old Detective.

"This is terrible, Raymond. Now what?"

"Well, first, everyone must remain in this room. Second, we must inform the authorities."

Winston beckoned to his assistant, Frank Barstow, who had remained at the back of the gathering. Frank was, more accurately, Winston's temporary assistant, filling in while his long-time 'Gal-Friday' was away on vacation. Frank was in his late twenties. He was short, slender, blond and had a face, which from profile, appeared handsome but from other angles, quite ordinary. He was the son of one of Winston's oldest friends.

"Yes, Sir?" Frank said, a question in his tone as he approached the two men.

"Call the Sheriff's office. Explain the situation. Use one of the phones in this room. See that no one leaves."

Frank nodded and began spreading the word as he worked his way among the guests and across the gleaming wood plank floor to the phone beside the French doors on the east end of the room.

"Better call Jane in the kitchen and have her bring more coffee," Masters suggested. "It's going to be a long morning."

And have the photographer make duplicates for us of every picture she's taken today."

Winston nodded and left to see to see to it.

At Masters' urging, the guests gradually moved away from the fireplace and to the sitting area along the south wall. The undraped, floor-to-ceiling windows gave them a least partial access to the warm, summer morning outside – a welcome relief from the stark, cold, scene inside. As they spoke quietly among themselves, Masters reviewed what he knew about them.

Winston Rafferty had been a successful – one might say outstandingly successful – mystery writer for nearly forty years. His palatial home had been the scene of many such publicity parties down through the decades. Winston's wife had died many years earlier. Ten years ago, a climbing accident had claimed the lives of his only son and daughter-in-law. Since then, his grandson, Winston Rafferty the fourth – now twelve – had lived with him there on his spacious, rolling country estate in the Ozark Mountains of Northwest Arkansas. The 'Manor' as Winston referred to his 24 room, three-story, log lodge, was a happy place, filled with love and friendship and seldom wanting for fascinating guests.

The Manor had become home to dozens and dozens of precious gifts, presented by those visitors. There were clocks, paintings, wall hangings, sun catchers, spears, drums, books, assorted lamps and more. The crossbow was one such piece. Several hundred years old, it had been the gift of a Gypsy Prince Winston had befriended while on a trip to Eastern Europe decades before. The accompanying lore stated that when hung on the wall, cocked, and pointed toward the hearth, the house in which it resided would be eternally protected from harm. Except for an occasional dusting, it had hung, unmolested, high on the wall beside the fireplace for the better part of thirty years. Masters grasped the irony that such a symbol of safe haven would become a vehicle of death.

Masters had arrived the previous Thursday for a short period of R & R after completing a case in Florida. He used some of the time to prepare his remarks for the Book Launch Party and some to just enjoy being with his old friend.

The new assistant, Frank Barstow, was there by pure

chance. Miss Adams, Winston's personal secretary for the past 28 years, won a cruise to the Bahamas. At some urging from Winston, she accepted the free ten-day vacation, though continued to insist that she had not entered the contest, even as she was seated in the taxi, leaving for the airport. Prim, proper and efficient, Miss Adams wanted it unmistakably understood that entering contests was far beneath her dignity. Those who knew and understood her just smiled and nodded.

Frank was the late in life son of one of Winston's college friends, James Barstow, also a writer though never very successful. James had spent a good deal of time at Rafferty Manor. Several years before, he had fallen into a deep depression and hanged himself. That caused great sadness for Winston and devastated his son, Frank.

Frank, a wannabe author, had drifted among jobs, working just enough to support himself, so he could write. In college, his major had been journalism and his minor chemistry. His only successful publishing to date had been rewrites of scientific pieces for ubiquitous, semi-literate university professors. For that, he seemed to have genuine talent but little interest.

At about the time Miss Adams won her trip, Frank had been in contact with Winston regarding some research he was doing in the hope of completing a manuscript, which his father had left unfinished. It was a fortuitous coincidence and within a week, Frank had taken up temporary residence at the Manor as Winston's fill-in assistant. He was efficient, a pretty good writer, and a welcome breath of youthful fresh air for Winston's grandson, Stony, with whom he quickly established a bond.

Robert Hill was tall, handsome, and a fine physical specimen for a man in his early sixties. From looking at him, one would never have suspected his heart condition. He was suave and quick-witted. Winston once told Masters that Hill thought quicker on his feet than anyone he had ever met. He was a publishing powerhouse with a stable of a dozen top-flight mystery writers. It was his goal to produce two dozen new mysteries each year and what RH wanted, RH got! He counted on Winston and several other seasoned writers to each produce one substantial novel a year, worthy of a hardback edition though, mostly, he published the less

expensive paperbacks for the mass market. He was known both as a publishing genius and a moral degenerate. Though married to the same woman for thirty years, his failed, and often costly, extra-marital romantic entanglements were legendary. Still and all, where business was concerned, Robert Hill was a dependable man of his word. When he took a young writer under his wing, success was assured.

One of those young writers was Kip Karter (Anatoli Gallapidous, by birth). To be a successful “rack” author (supermarkets and warehouse bookstores) a writer needed a personal gimmick to set him apart from the others. Kip’s was gadgets. The crimes were always perpetrated with the aid of an elaborate gizmo of some kind. They were so cleverly woven into his plots that his readership had grown rapidly and steadily during his two years and five books with Hill Publications.

Masters knew little more about Kip, though he had heard that Hill had become his model for personal success. That undoubtedly included both people using and ruthlessness when necessary to attain his goals. ‘What a shame,’ Masters thought.

Brent Barry had been with Hill for nearly ten years. His highly successful mystery stories were set in the outdoors and Hill fondly referred to him as the Jack London of the mystery genre. He was a passionate sportsman – hunting and fishing from one end of the continent to the other. His expertise in those activities and his knowledge of the associated weaponry became easily translated as essential elements within his plots. He was faithfully married, had two daughters, and lived in Wyoming. The book being touted at the launch party was his first in three years and the rumor mill had it that Hill was upset about that, and on the verge of turning him out to pasture. This latest book would sell well, of course – Brent had a huge following – but it needed to be great in substance to convince Hill he should contract for Brent’s next story.

Masters noticed that Brent was sitting alone at the opposite end of the room from the others, apparently surveying the rolling green hills beyond the rustic, split-rail fence that separated the lawn and civilization from the back woods, razorback, wilds.

Jane, the ever-smiling, ample, cook and housekeeper, arrived with coffee, bringing Masters a fresh mug and one of her famous (to Masters, at least) cherry-cheese Danishes.

“Jane, you spoil me rotten from morning to night and I love every minute of it.”

He leaned his substantial frame down toward her and dramatically planted a kiss on her rouge-caked cheek. She giggled, blushed, and bustled off toward the others.

Jane had seen fifty-five, though how long ago was hard to determine. She lived in town with her older sister. Neither of them had ever married. Jane was a hardworking, goodhearted soul who had been at the Manor for more than thirty years. She loved children and played the very protective if not possessive mother hen toward Winston’s grandson. She arrived at six a.m. and left at six p.m. Mondays through Saturdays, except for Wednesdays, when she left right after lunch. She drove the only living Studebaker in the county and the locals willingly yielded the right of way to her since she seemed oblivious to such things as stop signs, turn signals and driving only in the right-hand lane. Actually, for someone who could barely see over the steering wheel, she probably did pretty well. Jane had never known a stranger and her tiny hometown was a kinder, happier place because she had lived there. (Even so, all nine-year-old boys in the community knew that her unfriendly, aloof, and humorless sister was, in fact, a witch who kept bats as pets and made stew from little boys who dared to enter her big brown house on Weeping Willow Road!)

Sally Stone, the flamboyant, chain smoking owner of fifty plus bookstores came to such affairs more to be noticed than to pay attention. She and Robert Hill had been on the outs recently. Three years earlier in a tantrum (over what, no one ever seemed to know) she removed all Hill Publications from her stores. Word was that Hill had been pressuring other publishers to shun her in a show of solidarity. Though Sally was reportedly enraged, one would never have suspected that to watch her as she ‘darlinged’ and pawed her way among the other guests. Her demeanor was more that of a cabaret singer working the crowd for tips than of a businesswoman. It was generally assumed that Hill had invited her as a final

attempt to win back her support. A few were repeating rumors about some deal they had struck since both were in deteriorating financial predicaments. Either way, she was there, struggling to be the main attraction. She was probably cursing Margo, under her breath, for having died and thereby stolen the spotlight.

Margo White, the victim, wrote a biting book review column. She only critiqued books she disliked. Her attacks were venomous and unrelenting. Hers was one blacklist everyone in the business worked hard to avoid. After a romantic falling out with Hill, several years before, she began panning all of his publications. Perhaps the “B” word describes her best, though if there is a more despicable term, most who knew her would agree it fit.

Currently, she had been gnawing on Kip’s ear – or was it the other way around? Either way it became Godzilla in bed with King Kong- a match made in . . . oh well, that’s probably their business.

Who had reason to want to see her silenced? Virtually every writer, publisher and literary agent in the country. Fortunately for Masters, not all of them had the necessary opportunity.

Within a few minutes, Deputy Tommy Melon and his assistant arrived. As Masters would soon discover, the deputy’s last name was unbelievably descriptive both of the man’s shape and IQ.

Melon entered through the French doors and stopped, standing with his hands on his hips (or where they should have been) surveying the scene as if he were king of the realm. Masters and Winston, approaching him from opposite sides of the room, arrived at the same moment.

“Officer Melon,” Winston managed, silently wishing any other officer in the universe had been assigned to the case.

“Rafferty,” Melon replied cordially, nodding and extending his hand.

Winston continued. “I’d like you to meet an old friend of mine, Raymond Masters.”

“Masters. Yes. Of course. I should have recognized you from the back covers of Rafferty’s books. I got ‘em all you know. Glad you’re here. This is Click.”

He rolled his head in the general direction of the gaunt, short deputy just behind him. Continuing to stare at the floor, Click nodded his head shyly and tentatively while searching for a suitable place to situate his hands.

To Masters, Click looked about twelve, but at his age anyone under thirty, looked twelve to Masters.

“So, what’s all the fuss about?” Melon asked.

Winston rolled his eyes at Masters. Masters restrained a chuckle.

“There’s been a death, possibly a murder, Deputy,” Masters explained.

“Oh, my! We haven’t had a murder in these parts for ten years.” He turned to Click. “Maybe twelve? No, I think it was thirteen. I remember. It was that derelict in the boxcar over at the old lumber mill siding. Remember Click?”

“Yes, Sir. It happened on my tenth birthday. That would make it thirteen years ago, alright.” (‘Okay, so he’s twenty-three – not twelve,’ Masters thought.)

Appearing proud that they had been able to pinpoint the event, they then turned their attention back to the room.

“No one should leave until we’ve interrogated them. Has anyone left?” Melon went on.

“Everyone is still here,” Winston assured.

“Good. Very good! Where’s the dead, deceased victim?”

Winston pointed in the direction of the fireplace and led the way. Masters followed the other three, silently asking the gods above why it always seemed his lot to draw the Deputy Melons of the World.

Melon immediately began dictating, with Click dutifully recording every word in his notebook.

“The female victim appears to be a woman. The instrument of the alleged death seems to be an arrow sunk into her forty-year-old chest.”

He paused and addressed Masters.

“Someday I’m going to write a book about my cases, so you’ll notice that I keep rather detailed and articulate notes.”

Masters cleared his throat and nodded. “Her name was Margo White,” Masters interjected, taking advantage of the lull. “She was a book reviewer from New York City. I’m not

sure if she has family.”

He looked at Winston for more information.

“I really have no idea about family. I can get you her address and phone number – things like that. I’m sure Robert and Kip know all the essential details.”

“Did anyone see who shot her?” Melon continued, seemingly oblivious to the exchange between the other men.

Winston pointed toward the fallen crossbow.

“It appears to have been fired from that crossbow as it fell from its place on the wall up there.”

“An accident, then, and not a murder at all I suspect,” Melon concluded, delighted that he had solved the case in such a short time. Click shook his head in admiration.

“And it may well have been an accident,” agreed Masters, “But if it was in fact murder, just cleverly disguised, it will certainly make one memorable chapter in your book, won’t it Deputy Melon?”

“One memorable chapter,” Melon repeated, staring off in momentary reverie. “We will, of course, investigate every last shred of evidence.”

Melon then fell silent, plainly clueless about what next step to take.

“I’m sure you want to take statements from all of us and get the coroner out here right away,” Masters said, hoping to give some direction to the momentarily floundering investigation.

“That will certainly be our starting point,” Melon said as if confirming that Masters had just read his mind. “Click, let’s get the forensics guys out here and call Doc Patton.”

“Forensic guys?” Click asked, clearly without a clue.

“Jones and Purdy.”

“Oh, those forensic guys. Yes, Sir!”

Click left with dispatch, the feeling of importance evident in his twelve-year-old’s swagger. (His body may well have been twenty-three but his swagger was definitely twelve!)

Jane arrived with a blanket.

“I thought we ought to cover the poor soul,” she said.

Masters took the blanket and thanked her for her thoughtfulness.

“We have a photographer here, Deputy,” Masters said. “Shall we have her take shots of the scene?”

“Shots. Yes. She should take shots. Lots of shots. Lots of angles, you know.”

Masters gestured to Winston who left to enlist the help of the photographer.

“So, Masters – I understand you prefer to be called Masters?” Melon began.

“That makes it easy,” Masters said, affirming the Deputy’s assumption.

“Good then. You have a take on all this yet?”

“Well, my first impression is that the odds it was an accident are pretty slim, but then, considering the mechanics involved, so are the odds that it could have possibly been murder. Once your men have searched the scene for prints, we need to examine the spot on the wall where the crossbow was hanging. What we find there should give us some direction. While we wait for your forensics team, we could begin interviewing the guests.”

“My thought exactly. Who first?”

Masters mused to himself that if there had ever been two totally incompatible statements flow, back to back, from a single mouth, those two certainly headed the list. Even so, Masters had just dealt himself into the game and Deputy Melon had made him dealer.

“How about splitting them up? I’ll take the six at the west end, and you and Deputy Click can divide those at the east end.”

“East end. Fine idea.”

Masters approached Kip Karter. They moved to the privacy of a round, wooden, game table by the west windows.

“You were seated directly behind Margo, I believe,” Masters began.

“Yes, Sir. Actually, I’d been the first one to take my seat. I’m not much of a mixer, I’m afraid. I was pretty nervous. Dumb, I guess. All I had to do was read a few passages and field a few questions, but Mr. Hill has done so much for me that I wanted everything to go just right, you know?”

“Yes. I understand.”

Either the young man's reputation as a cunning, people user and self-promoter was inaccurate, or he was a first-class con-artist as well. Masters reserved judgment.

"What did you notice as you were sitting there?"

"Notice?"

"Yes. You were there for some time apparently. What do you remember about what was taking place?"

"Well, gradually the others found their seats. No one dared be late for the start of a Robert Hill affair, you know!"

"Do I sense a trace of resentment in your tone?"

"Resentment? I suppose. He always wins. His writers always lose. It was no different with him and me although lots of folks might not believe that."

"I thought you said you were appreciative of all Hill had done for you."

"Oh, I am. It's one of those 'six of one – half dozen of the other' things, I guess."

"Explain."

"A contract with Hill Publishing is pro-Hill and anti-author and it's always take-it or leave-it – no negotiating. It's well known. He pays the lowest royalties in the business."

"Then why go with him?"

"Volume, pure and simple. He moves five times the copies as anybody else and five times a little per copy turns out to be substantially better than one times a lot more per copy."

"You're bitter?"

"Bitter is a relative term, Mr. Masters. My level of bitterness toward his approach is well offset by my appreciation for his large quarterly checks."

A broad, endearing grin broke across the young man's face. Masters couldn't help but feel that exchange had been carefully scripted ahead of time. His questioning continued.

"Tell me about when Robert Hill took his seat."

"Okay. Well, I was on the right aisle seat in the second row. Robert approached from the front, moving from my left to right. He stopped in front of me and extended his hand. I stood up and shook it. We made small talk for, oh, I guess about thirty seconds maybe – his usual bull crap. Barry came along. Robert turned toward him and they began chatting as

they both sat down. Hill was on the aisle and there was one empty seat between them. During the next few minutes, the others all gathered and then you and Winston took your seats up front at the opposite end of the first row. There was only the one vacant seat left – between Barry and Hill. The coo-coo clock had just struck ten o'clock. I turned and looked around for Margo. She had just entered the room on crutches and was headed for the empty chair. As she arrived, Robert turned and seemed surprised – I suppose because he hadn't known she was on crutches. In what appeared to be a rare moment of compassion, he stood and helped her into his aisle seat. He made over her more than seemed appropriate, if you ask me. He then took the seat next to Barry. At two minutes past ten, Margo slumped forward."

"What did you mean – Hill made over her more than seemed appropriate?"

"Well, in the first place they hated each other's guts so I was surprised when Hill offered any help at all. But then, he went on to arrange her jacket – she had it around her shoulders like a shawl – he snugged it up around her neck and freed her long hair from under it. He did all the intimate kinds of things you'd do on a date but would hardly do for your mortal enemy."

"Perhaps a show for the rest of us?" Masters asked.

"Hill didn't put on airs. That just wouldn't fit his personality. Nobody who knew him would have fallen for it. Like I say, I can't understand it."

"Did you see anything connected with the actual shooting of the arrow?"

"No. Well, at the same instant she fell forward, I heard the crossbow hit the floor at the base of the wall in front of me next to the fireplace. I looked up to see what it was. It registered in my mind but I just ignored it and got up to see about Margo. I felt her neck for a pulse but couldn't find one. I've never actually done that before. I've written about it and seen it on TV, you know. I may not have felt in the right place."

"You seem to be quite certain of the time. What made you look at the clock at the moment she was hit?"

"Actually, it was the other way around. I was looking at

the clock when she got hit. Robert Hill is a stickler for timetables. If the ceremony was to begin at ten a.m. then that's when it should have started. I glanced up at the clock out of interest, I suppose. I figured Hill would begin throwing one of his famous fits any moment if things didn't get underway."

"Anything else stand out?" Masters asked, bringing the interview to an end.

"Nothing I recall."

"Let me know if anything comes to mind. You're staying at the Motor Inn at the edge of town, aren't you?"

"That's right. It's the only place within thirty miles of here."

"You may return there if you like. Just don't leave the area until the authorities give you the okay."

Kip nodded his understanding, rose, and walked directly to the French doors and into the entry hall beyond. As Masters finished his notes, Brent Barry approached the table.

"Me next, okay?" he said. "I'd like to get it over with so I can get away from this creepy congregation of nut cases."

"Sure. Have a seat. Nut cases, you say?"

"They all give me the creeps – except maybe Winston Rafferty. He seems to have it together. A gentleman's, gentleman, in fact."

"And me?" Masters asked playfully.

"Oh. I didn't mean to include you in the dregs, Sir. You're intimidating as hell – bigger than life – you know, a legend."

"Well, I am bigger than Doc wants me to be, that's for sure, but once you get to know me you'll find I'm really a pussy cat."

Brent smiled, relaxed a bit, and eased back into the chair.

"So, what can you tell me about all this? What did you see?"

"Actually, I was talking with Sally Stone who was seated on my left, so I was turned away from Margo and Mr. Hill. I heard a clunk and a clink almost simultaneously. I turned to my right to check it out and saw Margo had fallen to the floor – I assume that had been the clunk – the deeper

sound. Now, I guess the higher pitched sound was probably the crossbow hitting the floor, though I couldn't place the source at the time. Mr. Hill was leaving his chair and then knelt down beside her. Kip was feeling her neck – for a pulse, I assume. I got down in front of her and cradled her head. It just seemed the thing to do. Then you came over and also checked for a pulse. I heard you say, "She's dead," all kind of under your breath as you straightened up and looked back over the room.

"Then, like everybody else, I just stood and gawked until you motioned us to the other side of the room. Come to think of it, the clink might have been Mr. Hill's big ring hitting against Margo's aluminum crutches. Probably not. It was somehow heavier sounding and not so metallic.

"Did you notice the arrow in Margo?"

"Not at first, actually. Then, when I stood up and could see over Mr. Hill's back, I spotted it. What an unlikely occurrence – shot by an arrow inside. I did look around for a source but still was unaware that the crossbow even existed. Sally filled me in on its story after we moved over to the sitting area by the windows. 'The Mystery of the Vengeful Crossbow' – what a great title for a novel! You do figure it was an accident, don't you?"

"Hard to tell until we've had an opportunity to examine the scene more closely. You're betting on an accident, are you?"

"Well, sure! I mean, I know everybody hated Margo White, but surely nobody would murder her – not in such a public place at any rate."

Like Kip, Brent had said all the right things. Could he really be so naive as to think no one would try to murder someone as despicable as she was? Perhaps he was intentionally implying his naivete. Masters dismissed him with the routine admonition not to leave the area.

"By the way," Masters added, standing as Brent turned to leave, "I may need to call on you for your expertise with crossbows and such, once we see what we're dealing with here."

"Certainly. If I can help I'll be glad to. I'll be at the Podunk Ritz, in town."

He, too, chose to leave the Manor immediately.

Robert Hill's recounting of the events was essentially a rubber stamp of the others. Masters moved on to the more personal side of things.

"The other guests seem surprised at the affable way in which you approached Margo when she came to take a seat."

"Really? Well, this was supposed to be a celebration you know. I didn't want to let anything dampen the spirit of the occasion. Margo was a bitch but it seldom hurts to treat a bitch well. Also, I guess I was a bit taken aback to see her on crutches.

That seemed straightforward enough. Hill's reputation was that of a ruthless cad, but a charming, ruthless cad nonetheless. 'Do well unto others until they're no longer useful,' had been his life-long credo. Perhaps he had not yet given up on Margo or on securing some of the tremendous power she wielded with her readers.

Hill made one interesting new observation. He mentioned that Brent had also, briefly, felt Margo's head before Masters had arrived. It hadn't been so much searching for a pulse, as he described it, as just running his hand through her hair. He made a note to confirm that with Kip. Masters took note that Hill was not wearing a ring, as Brent had indicated but decided to pursue that at a later time.

Sensing – or deciding – that the interview was concluded, Hill stood and offered his hand.

"Do whatever it takes to solve this murder, Mr. Masters. Consider yourself on my payroll. You have my blank check at your disposal."

Not waiting for a response, he turned and went to join Winston at the coffee table near the back of the room.

'Interesting,' Masters thought. 'Everyone but Brent seems convinced that it was murder. They don't even allow that it could have been an accident.'

The forensics unit, such as it was, arrived – two middle aged deputies, each carrying a timeworn briefcase. Melon followed, toting a small airport trunk on wheels. That scene raised the momentary question as to whether Melon was in charge of the case or just the gofer. Masters approached them as they were removing the blanket from the body.

Deputy Melon was quick with the introductions – one thing he seemed to do well. The two deputies seemed pleased that Masters was on hand. Ignoring Melon, they began discussing procedure with Masters.

“Anything other than the routine stuff?” deputy Jones asked.

Sensing the uncomfortable position in which all of this had left Melon, Masters responded, “Well, with Deputy Melon’s permission, I do have several suggestions.”

Melon swelled to fill his full five-foot-six-inch frame and nodded. “Please, go on.”

“We’ll need every square centimeter of that crossbow and the arrow dusted for prints. You should probably wait until the doctor has a chance to see the arrow placement and gives his okay before removing it.”

“His okay would be her okay,” came a lovely female voice from behind Masters. He turned.

Melon stepped forward. “Doc Patton, Detective Raymond Masters. He is assisting me on the case.”

“How do you do, Sir. Polly Patton. I’m part time everything medical in this county,” she said pleasantly, extending her hand and her wonderfully easy smile. The smile quickly turned to a grimace as she saw the body. “Ouch! Gruesome! An arrow? In here?”

“You’ve just pretty well summed it up,” Masters said. “As you’re aware, I’m sure, we’ll need to keep the arrow uncontaminated for prints.”

“I appreciate the reminder. It’s my first murder scene since residency. Our county’s a pretty quiet, law abiding place.”

“How fortunate,” Masters said.

“Yes. It’s one of the factors that attracted my husband and me to these parts. Low crime, fresh air, and miles of beautiful wilderness to explore. A great place to raise our three kids.”

She donned her latex gloves, opened a long, narrow, plastic bag and secured it around the shaft of the arrow for protection. “Not really much I need to do here on sight, I suppose. I assume you can provide the time of death.”

“10:02 a.m. exactly.”

She continued a cursory examination of the arms, hands, head and neck.

“I can tell you one thing. From the appearance of the bruise on her forehead, I’d say she was still alive when she hit the floor. Probably for only an instant, though.”

“She was on crutches,” Masters added. “Can you give us any preliminary guess as to why she needed them?”

The doctor focused her examination on the legs and feet.

“Nothing obvious. I’ll have to get back to you on that one.”

Jane, standing a few yards away, cleared her throat, getting Masters’ attention.

“Jane. You have something for us!”

“Well, it may not be none of my business, you know. I’m not a butinski or nothin’ but Miss White told me she was recovering from foot surgery.”

“Thank you, Jane. We need all the information we can get.”

Jane tweaked her shoulders as if thrilled she had been of help, curtsied (well, almost) and left to tend to the coffee table.

“Polly?” Masters asked, in obvious reference to Jane’s revelation.

“There’s been no recent foot surgery on this body.” She shrugged her shoulders. “I’ll have a preliminary report by five today. Toxicology will take longer depending on what I find. Let’s get the body to the hospital. Anything special I should look for?”

“Better make this one more complete than might seem necessary. Thanks for all your help. We’ll be eager to hear from you.”

Masters then turned his attention back to Deputy Jones who was finishing up with the crossbow.

“Goose egg, Sir,” he reported, shaking his head. “Wiped clean. There’s not even a speck of dust. Pretty unusual I’d say.”

“What about the string?” Masters asked.

“The string?”

“Yes. Any chance of recovering a partial print from the

center of the string – where you'd put your fingers to draw the string back into firing position?"

"Didn't even think of that. We probably ought to let the experts in Little Rock try for that one. Afraid we might mess it up. We're not really trained to do that kind of thing."

"Good thinking." Melon inserted himself into the conversation, which had quite plainly been ignoring him. "Sack it and ship it."

"We need that information just as soon as possible, Deputy. Could the State Police deliver it for us, do you suppose?" Masters asked.

"Better than that, I'll have Click drive it down himself right now. I'll call ahead and arrange things."

'Not bad thinking for a melon,' Masters mused to himself.

As the deputies carefully prepared the bow for transport, Sally Store, the owner of the "Book STORE" chain (rather cleverly named in her own honor) moved to Masters' side.

"Well, aren't you going to arrest him?" she snapped as if once the obvious had been done she could be on her way back to civilization.

"About whom are you speaking, Miss Store?" Masters asked, bearing both a furrowed brow and his usual broad, warm smile.

"Robert, of course. We all know he did it. She only came here to legitimize her next devastating blow to his latest triple play."

'She speaks in riddles,' Masters thought. "Triple play? I'm afraid I don't understand."

"I suppose I can spell it out for you, then. Hill is counting on the success of these three novels he's launching – or was launching – today. His finances aren't all they may seem to be."

"And you know this how?"

"He came to me two months ago, trying to get me to shoulder the expenses for the book signing tour in my 53 stores – soon to be well over one hundred, by the way. He wanted a hundred thousand dollars up front before he'd release his books to me. Nothing suggests financial problems

like a grown man in a three-piece suit begging for money. Some gal, I considering I had just agreed to carry his books again.

“May I ask how you resolved that issue?”

“We split it 50-50. Back in the PM days, I wouldn’t have hesitated. One hundred thousand would have been a guaranteed great investment.”

“PM days?”

“Pre-Margo. She’s been bragging for months how she was planning to sink these three before they even slipped out of dry dock.”

Assuming he understood her strange metaphor, he went on.

“Robert seemed to be treating her quite cordially according to the other guests.”

“The sacrificial lamb is always treated well right up to moment its heart is cut - still beating - from its heaving chest.”

Attempting to turn the conversation back to the facts of the case, Masters said, “I’m a bit surprised you were willing to take the books at all, in light of your rumored previous problems with Mr. Hill.”

“Don’t try to spare my feelings, Mr. Masters. That wasn’t a rumor. My change of heart just served my purposes. I’m a businesswoman. The deal will make me lots of money and it will – well, it would have made it more difficult for Margo to have succeeded. That alone would have been worth it.”

“As long as we’re chatting, can you tell me if you saw anything concrete to tie Mr. Hill to the crossbow?”

“No, of course not. Robert’s an ass but he’s not a stupid ass. He undoubtedly had help.”

“An accomplice?” Masters asked.

“Sure. Any one of his writers knew they had a great deal to gain from Margo’s permanent silence.”

At least there was no doubt about where Sally stood on the issue. Masters hoped she might be as open about herself. He was not to be disappointed.

“And you and Margo? What kind of a relationship did you have?”

“Let me spell it out all quite clearly, Detective. If I had thought I could get away with it, I’d have shot that arrow

myself. When she hurts the sales of any book, she hurts my bottom line. Margo was born to hurt. Does that let you know what kind of relationship she and I had?"

"Yes. I'd say you've left little doubt about your position on the late Margo White."

"That all? I'm famished. You know you have to drive all the way up to Fayetteville to get a decent meal around here. How long will I have to remain in this boorish place?"

"A day or so, I imagine. Thanks for your time and several suggestions."

Not certain if she had just been flattered or put down, she flashed a faint smile and left – working the crowd, as was her style, as she crossed the room.

The mention of a meal reminded Masters it was noon. He headed for Jane's kitchen. She had promised poke greens and ham, and he had every reason to expect peach cobbler with thick, sweetened cream for dessert. He needed time to devise a way to get his sizable form up that wall to the spot on which the crossbow had been hanging. 'A crane would be best,' he quipped to himself, 'but a substantial step ladder will probably have to suffice!'

DAY ONE: THE AFTERNOON

The 'Boring' Details

With Kenny Smith, the handyman, and Officer Melon steadying the sturdy ten-foot, wooden, step ladder, Masters cautiously made his way toward the crossbow's previous resting place high on the paneled wall beside the fireplace.

"If you hear me call 'Timber,' scatter to the wind," Masters joked as he neared the top.

Several things were immediately obvious. Through years of hanging in the same place, the crossbow had protected the paneling under it from fading. Its silhouette was faint, yet still quite clear. They're appeared to be three small holes forming a vertical line. The first was just above and about seven inches to the right of the center of the curved bow. With a plastic toothpick retrieved from his jacket pocket, Masters probed the hole. It went through both the paneling and the sheeting in back of it, providing a clear path into the cavity, behind.

The second was on a horizontal line with the end of the butt of the stock but again seven inches to the right. Upon closer examination, Masters found that it was merely an indentation, wider than the others were, and carved about a half inch back into the wood surface. The third was considerably higher, perhaps as much as thirty-six inches directly above the second hole. Masters risked climbing up one more step to examine it more closely. It was, in fact, another hole, which penetrated all the way through the wall. The inside of those tiny channels into the darkness behind, seemed to have been partially coated with some clear, hard

substance – especially along the bottom. Masters thought he recognized it but would wait for verification from the lab boys.

The silhouette spanned thirty inches - horizontally - between bow tips, and thirty inches – vertically – along the shaft of the arrow. There were two small brass hooks that had cradled the bow, holding the weapon in place on the wall. Curiously, they had each been turned 90 degrees to the side so the hooks would not have contained the bow within their crooks. Rather, the bow would have merely rested upon them.

Even more curious were two small holes on a line with and seven inches to the left of each hook. His toothpick went into them only three-quarters of an inch and stopped. ‘About the depth of the hook screw-ends,’ he thought to himself.

Masters gingerly searched his suit for his penlight. Finding it in his left jacket pocket, he used it to peer into the two deep holes.

“Black as Dracula’s heart,” he announced. “Really can’t see a thing in there. No insulation to be seen, however.”

After a few more minutes aloft - touching this and patting that - he was satisfied he had seen enough.

“Well, pray if you got ‘em. I’m coming down,” he called as he began his cautious descent.

Once safely back on the floor, (and having seriously considered kissing it) he sketched what he had seen.

“Well? . . . Well?” Melon asked more expectantly than impatiently. “What do you think?”

Masters responded all quite solemnly.

“Margo White was murdered - no doubt about that. Now, it’s just a matter of assembling all the related pieces.”

“What next, then?” Melon asked.

“Jones, we will need close up photos of that spot up there, and I mean really magnified photos of each of the holes. Then, take scrapings from each hole. I want to know everything there is to know about what may have been inserted or dragged through each of them. Be sure to get a sample of the clear, hard substance coating the bottom of each hole.”

Jones nodded his understanding and the two deputies got to work.

Masters knelt beside the baseboard, surveying the area directly under the spot where the crossbow had hung.

“Let’s get vacuum samples from down here. With his finger, he outlined an area running three feet up the wall and five feet wide in all directions on the floor.

“Kenny, while the deputies do their thing here, let’s you and me go visit your shop.”

“Sure. It’s in the basement. Need some tools? I’ve got most everything imaginable.”

“No. I just need to examine your drill bits.”

Accepting the request without question, he said, “I got ‘em by the dozen.”

Kenny was probably in his early sixties, but appeared older. He would never say but the question always brought a twinkle to his eyes and a smile to his well-tanned, leathery, old face. It had been years since he had actually put forth more than superficial effort to comb the few remaining wisps of white hair that frizzed about his head.

“What size do you need?”

“Small, very small.”

The shop, as it turned out, was a large, cement-walled, rather dingy and damp, windowless room at the east end of the basement. There were several neatly arranged wooden workbenches, numerous cabinets and a collection of spare parts that dazzled the imagination. There were clock works, engine parts, old door locks, legs and backs for chairs, broken toys, wheels, gears, belts, chains, lengths of rope and wire and cable – and who knew what else probably lurked beneath all of that.

Kenny saw Masters eying the collection.

“You just never know when you might need something. I’m a pack rat. Never throw nothin’ away.”

“I’d say you’re well prepared for most any contingency. About your bits. May I take a look at them?”

“Sure. Over here.”

Kenny opened one of the overhead cabinets. On the inside of the double doors were row upon row of drill bits, each sitting in its own hole which had been drilled into a 2 X 2 slat. He began pointing.

“I got your metal bits. I got your wood bits. I got your

plastic and pegboard bits. I got snub nose and self-setting bits. I got long bits and short bits, thin bits and fat bits.”

Masters soon got the idea, but Kenny seemed to need to finish so he waited patiently, feigning interest. The old man was clearly proud of his collection. Masters would come to learn that Kenny was proud of everything that bore his mark. Eventually there was a lull.

“Which ones could have been used to drill the holes I found in the paneling?”

Without hesitation, Kenny selected two.

“This here one’s the best bet. This’n could have made em’ too, but it’s probably so long nobody would have chose it.”

Masters examined each. “Anybody borrow these lately – during the last week, say?”

“Not with my permission. Can’t say they wasn’t used though. I never lock the place in case somebody needs something when I’m away. Stony loves to mess around down here. He gets filthy, of course, and then wonders how Jane knows he was here.”

Kenny snickered. Masters nodded, acknowledging the humor in the picture and looked further.

“What are these? They seem to be about the same size.”

“Them is metal bits. They’d work for wood okay but you ought to save them for metal. Wood dulls ‘em, believe it or not.”

Masters removed one from the rack.

“Looks like this is about the same size. It seems to have been used recently and, I’d guess, not by you.”

“Not by me? What makes you think that?” Kenny moved in, flipping his glasses up onto his forehead so he could take a closer look.

“It hasn’t been cleaned. See the shavings here in the grooves. I sincerely doubt if you’ve ever put a tool away dirty in your entire life.”

“Well, you’re right on both counts. I don’t rightly know who borrowed it. ‘Twouldn’t of been Stoney. He’s real good about cleanin’ up – the tools, that is.” Another snicker. “He knows I’ll tell Jane and there won’t be no dessert that night. She’s a pistol, that Jane. Wasn’t Winston, neither. No offense

you see, but he can't even open a new bottle of catchup. He hain't been down here in . . . well, probably never. If Jane had needed something fixed, she'd of collared either me or Stoney. Just don't know who it could have been. Here let me clean that one up."

"I'd rather you didn't. I need this one as it is. It may be important evidence. Look up here."

Masters took out his reading glasses to examine the bit still more closely.

"What do these leavings look like to you? See. There appear to be three distinct colors of material."

Kenny looked closely. He sniffed each section.

"Well the material on top, furthest from the sharp end, is mahogany. The center stuff is pine and there at the end is metal of some kind. Looks like plain old cast iron to me."

Kenny, you are a genius. Thank you. In which drill would somebody use this bit?

"Most any of them. I'd use the rechargeable. Here. No need to mess with a cord and it's got plenty of power for small jobs. Lightweight, small, easy to handle."

"I can see why that would be your choice. I'll need to take that along as well. Buy another one and put it on my bill. By the way, being the pack rat that you are, do you suppose you could locate the original blueprints for this house?"

"They're in the attic. I'll find them and bring them to you."

"Let's do it this way. When you're ready to look for them you come and get me and I'll go along."

"You don't trust me?" He looked bothered.

"Oh, Kenny. It's not that at all. I just want to see if we can determine if they have been used or moved recently before we pick them up."

"I see. Never thought I'd end up being a detective's helper, Sir."

"You're turning out to be a great one."

Kenny produced lock-top, plastic bags in several sizes. Masters sacked his finds, thanked the man and started toward the door.

"Probably best not to share these findings with anybody else, okay?"

“Whatever you say. Mum’s the word. Consider my lips closed, sealed and zipped.”

“Thanks. Hope all that doesn’t hurt them.”

Kenny enjoyed Masters’ little joke and was shaking his head and repeating it to himself as Masters left. “Hope that doesn’t hurt them! My goodness! Hope that doesn’t hurt.”

Masters headed back to the great room – thinking, as he went, of course. Kenny was an interesting man. He was a seventh grade drop out with all the educational limitations that implies, but still a very clever person – quick-witted, even. Winston had said the man could fix anything, devise anything, and build anything. He was also knowledgeable about plants and gardening and clearly had a keen eye for landscaping.

Kenny kept the place running smoothly and was devoted to Winston and Stony. He lived in a room directly above his shop. It had been his home for four decades. The Manor and the people in it were his life – his family. For years, he had kept pigeons up on the roof, training them as homing pigeons. Since Stony had arrived, they had gradually become the boy’s first love and responsibility.

Indeed, Kenny was an interesting, if somewhat enigmatic, old gentleman. Upon entering the great room, Masters was met by Robert Hill who was plainly upset.

“Have you been to your room this noon?” he asked Masters.

“No. What’s up?”

“I just came from mine, and it’s been rifled. My bag was open on my bed. My brief case had been pried open. I can’t understand it.”

“Was anything taken?”

“No. That’s what’s so strange. My laptop’s there. My dress watch, my medicine, even an envelope containing some cash.”

“I notice you’re not wearing the ring you were seen wearing this morning. Is that in your room?” Masters asked, taking advantage of the unfortunate situation to fish for information.

“Ring?” he responded as if taken off guard. Oh. Yes! Well, come to think of it I didn’t see it there. Perhaps that’s what they were after.” His voice trailed off.

“And you’re quite sure that’s where you left it.”

“Yes. I’m quite sure.”

“When did you leave it there? About what time?”

“When? When? Right after you and I talked about Margo’s death.”

“Close to eleven, then?”

“Yes. I suppose. I’ve lost all track of time.”

“And after that what did you do?”

“I made some phone calls from the library and then found a place on the deck out back to get some sun.”

Masters motioned for Deputy Melon who approached them at a comically rapid, penguin-like pace.

“Mr. Hill’s room was entered and his things rifled. I assume you’ll want to go with him and take a look – perhaps file a report. Apparently, a ring was taken. I’d suggest dusting the suitcase and briefcase. It may somehow be tied in to all of this. Then, it seems we also need the prints of everyone who was on the grounds this morning. The guests that aren’t staying here are at the Motor Inn near town. If anyone refuses, you’ll need to contact the States Attorney to get a warrant.”

“Will do. Lead the way, Mr. Hill.”

Hill, distinctly perturbed at having been handed the second banana to look into his problem, reluctantly left the room. Officer Jones and his assistant were closing their cases as Masters approached them.

“Anything stand out in what you found?” Masters asked.

“Hard to know what we’re looking for. We did find some scraping of wood on the floor and baseboard. One other thing. There were, like iron filings, all within three or four inches of each other on the floor close to the wall.”

“Anything special strike you when you were working on that highest hole? Masters asked.

The two deputies looked at each other. The assistant’s face brightened. “One thing, maybe. I took the sample scraping from up there. It’s the darndest thing. I’d swear I got a whiff of gas.”

Masters’ brow furrowed, then brightened.

“Thank you. That is a strange thing, isn’t it? Before you leave, I believe Deputy Melon needs you upstairs – first

door on the right after you enter the hall. We need some more things dusted for prints.”

They left the room. Masters found himself alone for the first time since leaving his room early that morning. He settled himself into a large, comfortable chair facing the windows in the sitting area on the south side of the room. He needed time to review what he knew and to determine what he still needed to find out.

His solitude was short lived.

“Hey, Ray,” came the familiar, cheerful, breaking voice of a twelve-year-old boy from behind him. Masters raised his hand high in the air – an easier move than attempting to turn around and greet the lad face to face. Stony arrived on the trot.

“Grampa says a lady got murdered in here this morning and that you’re going to solve it. Need some help?”

“Well, it now does appear that Miss White was murdered. Whether or not I will solve it remains to be seen, but, of course, I can always use your assistance.”

Stony grinned – well, Stony grinned more than usual. No one could remember a time when the boy was not grinning.

“So, what can I do? You’ve always said I was the best snoop you ever met.”

“Help? Well, let’s see. Perhaps you could fill me in on what you know about the permanent folks here at the Manor.”

“Permanent, like Kenny and Jane and Frank and Miss Adams and Gramps and me?”

“Yes. Those will be good to start with. You may omit your grandfather and yourself for the time being. I believe I’ve grown to know you two pretty well through the years.”

Masters had not been considering Miss Adams because she had been gone since Friday, but now that Stony brought it up, he’d put her into the mix.

Stony sprawled out on the large, Southwestern looking sofa across from Masters.

“Do you just want the verifiable facts or do you want the dirt, too?”

“Let’s have both. Just be sure you label them clearly.”

Stony was short for his age, slender, with long sandy

hair which sported a natural wave on those rare occasions it was combed. His entire summer wardrobe consisted of blue jean cutoffs - ragged and ripped, as if fresh from a dog fight. No shirt. No shoes or socks. Just cutoffs. His skin, naturally dark, was already well bronzed from the last days of spring. Like his grandfather and father, Stony was brilliant, outgoing, verbal and dangerously creative (or so said his teachers!). His energy level was – well, just listening to the lad recount his escapades sent Masters for a nap.

“How about beginning with Miss Adams?”

“Her first name is Eleanor but I’ve never heard anybody call her that – it’s always just Miss Adams – even Grampa. She’s been Grampa’s assistant since when my Dad was a baby. Grampa says she’s a magician with a rough draft – that’s a complement, I think. She types, files, keeps the books, edits and frowns a lot. I think that’s partly due to the way her muscles are placed around her mouth. Still, I believe she’s a very sad lady.”

“What might she be so sad about?”

Stony sat up, cross-legged on the sofa and leaned forward. His tone became quite confidential.

“Well, I’ve overheard stuff, you know, just bits and pieces, but I put it all together this way. When she was in college, I think she got pregnant somehow, and had the baby adopted out. About two years ago, she started writing to a private eye in Kansas. She got a couple of letters back. I never actually opened them you understand, but when one of them was held up to the light just right, a person could make out the name Brent somebody. Her checkbook said she paid the private dick \$2,500.

“Then,” he went on, “there’s one more thing. Miss Adams, believe it or not, writes romance novels - I just happened across a pile of manuscripts up in her room one afternoon when I was searching for my hamster – Socrates – never did find him. There must have been six manuscripts in tan folders and inside each folder, on top of the manuscripts, were tons of rejection slips. I know a rejection slip when I see one. Grampa has some framed on his wall to remind him of his earlier days.”

“You wouldn’t just happen to remember which

publishers they came from, would you?”

“No. There were so many – well, except for Hill Publications – that’s Grampa’s publisher so I remembered those. Anyway, I was about ten at the time and I started reading one of her books. It was filled with mush and bedroom stuff. I thought I’d throw up! So, I just left. Now, I’d sort of like to read them again, you know?”

“Yes. I know. Believe it or not I was twelve going on puberty once, myself.”

Stony smiled, sheepishly, and looked beyond Masters – through the windows.

“Anything else you want to know about Miss Adams?”

“Well, one thing, perhaps. Hmm.”

Masters hesitated, searching for the right choice of words.

Stony eased the situation.

“What you’re trying to ask is if Miss Adams and my Grampa are romantically involved. No. I’m quite sure about that! Now Jane and Kenny – there’s another story.”

“Oh, really?”

“Oh, yes! They’d deny it, but they have a thing for each other – have for as long as I’ve been here – longer, really. I walked in on them in Kenny’s room one night when I was real little. I had no idea then what it was all about, but it’s all pretty clear now.”

“And you are quite sure they are still involved? Most folks around here seem to think that was over when they were teenagers.”

“That’s how they want it to seem. Let me put it this way. If Jane’s sister – the Bat Queen, as we kids call her – found out that Jane had a boyfriend, she’d tear his heart out – I’m serious about that, Ray. She’s an evil person. I can’t see why Jane stays with her. Grampa and I have both tried to talk her into moving out here. We have plenty of room.”

“Do Jane and Kenny know that you know?”

“Sure, they know. We’ve never talked about it but they know I’d never say anything – not even to Grampa. We all love each other. We’re family. You don’t snitch on family.”

“And yet you just spilled the beans to me.”

“Ya, but you’re not a real person – I mean, Grampa

says you're bigger than life. He says he'd trust you with his life or mine in a second. That makes it all okay for me to help you like this, you see."

Masters, seldom at a loss for words during his seventy-plus years, sat silent. Stony continued.

"Jane and Kenny are honest as the day is long – except about their 'thing'. They're like my aunt and uncle. I can talk to Jane about my problems and she takes care of me when I'm sick. Kenny's taught me everything he knows about fixing things and gardening. We keep pigeons together up on the roof. They used to be just his. He taught me all about them. We train them as homing pigeons. That's just for fun. There isn't much market for secret message carriers anymore."

He smiled and returned to a reclining position – that time, his head at the other end of the couch.

"I'd like to hear more about your pigeons later. I raised some myself, as a boy."

Stony turned his head and nodded as if to say, 'Hmm. This guy may possess some mere mortal qualities after all.'

Masters continued. "Anything interesting about Frank?"

"I really like Frank. He takes me to town. We go bowling. Once we went to the mall clear up at Fayetteville. Sometimes he goes up with me while I tend to the pigeons in the evening. I usually sit beside him at meals. He's a late riser though. For the first breakfast of the morning, it's just me, Kenny and the Rooster down the road."

"The first breakfast?"

"Yeah. Coffee and donuts a little before five every morning. It's sort of like a fake breakfast. Then when Jane has things ready about six fifteen, we eat the real breakfast."

"What do you know about Frank's life before he came here?"

"Well, he was working at a prison in Illinois – that's where he'll go back to when he has to leave us. He's been there a couple of years I think. He seems to move around a lot. He really wants to be a writer – well, he is a writer – just hasn't got anything big published yet. He says he's at the prison to do research for a novel he's planning to write. He says he thinks that it will be his big break. I hope it is."

"I just can't see Frank as a prison guard," Masters said,

fishing for more than Stony's agreement.

"Oh, he's not a guard – That is a funny picture. He's the assistant to the pharmacist. He does the ordering and bookkeeping and I guess he fills prescriptions. They have a whole hospital there – they do surgery and everything. I get the idea he has a pretty important job – responsible, you know."

"Your grandfather says he's a pretty good writer. Any idea why he's had trouble getting published?"

"Well, he sort of has a chip on his shoulder about that. I've told him to let it go. Let's see. How can I say this? He's got sort of a self-defeating attitude, I think."

"Self-defeating?"

"Yeah. He has this idea that he has to get Hill to publish him. No other publisher will do. It's like a compulsion."

"I believe the word is 'compulsion', Masters said, trying to clarify.

"Compulsion. Yeah. Anyway, I think he actually hates Mr. Hill for it all. It may even have something to do with Hill and Frank's dad. I'm not really sure about that."

"Stony, you certainly are a fountain of helpful information. Thanks for your assistance."

"Hey, anytime! I like this detective stuff. I'm going to be a neurosurgeon but I think I'll be a detective on the side, like in that TV series that has Laura Petre's old husband in it."

"I imagine that you will be fantastic at both pursuits."

Stony grinned and nodded in agreement. If Winston Rafferty the fourth was anything, he was self-confident.

"May I ask for help one more time, Stony?"

"Sure. Shoot."

He sat up enthusiastically.

"We will need a ball of twine long enough to reach from the fireplace all the way back to the French doors."

"Kite string! I got a new roll in my room. Be right back."

He hurdled the back of the couch and sped off through the doors. By the time Masters had extricated himself from his large, low-slung, chair and crossed the room, Stony was back, twine in hand.

"So, now what?" the young neurosurgeon/detective-in-

the-making asked.

Masters pointed at the wall above the ladder.

“Take this book and the loose end of the twine up the ladder.”

It seemed like an odd request but Stony carried it out without hesitation.

“See the hole that’s really just a little gouge – it doesn’t go clear through the wall?”

Stony examined the area.

“Yup. I see it. About a half inch indentation. From the light color inside, it looks like it was made quite recently.”

“Very good, Detective Stony! Now, I need you to place the top of the book against the wall just under that hole so the spine protrudes away from the wall and the open edge of the book points down.”

“Like a ‘T’ square.”

“That’s it exactly.”

“Okay. Got it.”

Masters decided to skip the nuts and bolts and just explain the concept. Clearly, Stony would be able to improvise.

“What we are going to do is use the twine to project a line away from the wall, simulating all possible trajectories the arrow could have taken depending on how high the crossbow was raised away from the wall.”

“Gotcha. So we can see what other things it would have hit if it had been at a different angle.”

“Stony, my lad, I think you just skipped the first two years of Detective School.”

Stony grinned but was quickly refocused. Masters, holding the ball of twine began backing up from the base of the ladder. “Your job is to watch the twine against the spine of the book and keep me on a straight course.”

Masters first came to the aisle chair in which Margo had been seated. The line proceeded between the first two chairs of the second row so there could have been no intended target there. Beyond that, was a large open space. Then the large wooden dining table, accommodating twelve chairs. The line of flight would have hit the occupant in the chair at the far end. It was Winston’s traditional place at dinner.

Masters then moved on unobstructed to the French doors. He tied the twine to the doorknob.

“Still straight?” he called to Stony.

“Yup. You could say it’s straight as an arrow.”

The string reacted to Stony’s self-serving, chest-heaving, giggles with course after course of waves up and down its length. Eventually it was again still. Masters just shook his head as his eyes met Stony’s.

“Whenever you’re ready, Detective.”

“Sorry about that. I just can’t ever resist such a good opening.”

Masters began retracing the route. He looked straight up from the string to see what things would have been possible targets if the arrow had flown higher. The sole object in the path was a large, hanging, oil lamp. It was another gift with another story, which had slipped Masters’ mind.

“Okay, Stony. You may come down.”

The boy jumped the eight feet to the floor.

“So. Grampa’s chair and the tear drop lamp, huh?” Stony said.

“What can you tell me about that lamp?”

“It was a gift from a Tiffany wannabe.”

Masters chuckled aloud at Stony’s characterization. Stony continued.

“It’s from England. It’s another one of those, ‘keep your home safe from harm’ charms. What a crock that turned out to be with the crossbow, huh!”

“It would seem so. Refresh my memory about the lamp’s story?”

“The short version is this. You keep it lit forever and your home will be protected forever. It runs on clear oil that’s held in that large, amber colored, glass teardrop. It holds ten gallons of oil. That lasts about a month. Kenny and me fill it the first Sunday Morning of every month. I’m not sure why Grampa wants to keep it lit. He’s not a superstitious man, you know.”

“Perhaps it is done out of respect for the person who presented it to him.”

“I hadn’t thought about it that way. That’s probably right. It sounds like Grampa.”

“To hold ten gallons of oil the glass must be quite thick,” Masters said, more to himself than to the boy.

“Actually not. Kenny explained it to me. See, the six black iron rods that are bent around it from the base to the top?”

“Yes, I see them.”

“They are leaded right against the glass. If it wasn’t for them, Kenny says the glass would break after about three or four gallons were poured in.”

“I see. So, it might be possible that the glass is fragile enough that the arrow from that crossbow could shatter it?”

“Easily, I think. It’s on a rope that lets us take it up and down. If you want a closer look we can reel it down from the crank in the closet over there.”

“Stony, you have proved to be such a fine observer that I will take your word on this one.”

Stony was clearly pleased.

“Let’s rewind this twine and go raid Jane’s refrigerator,” Masters suggested.

“Stony agreed.

“I saw her making double chocolate cheesecake earlier. She’d slap my hand if I went for it but I’ll bet you can charm her out of some without the danger of physical harm.”

As Masters wound the twine, Stony had some questions.

“Do you think someone was trying to kill Grampa?”

“Well, not unless the bow went off at the wrong time of day.”

“Why would somebody want to take out the oil lamp? That just seems dumb.” He answered his own question. “If that was broke, the oil would fall all over the floor and start a fire.”

“Good thinking,” Masters said. “Disruptive, but probably not deadly unless it had been planned for a time when the room would have normally been vacant for a fairly long period.”

“Like at night!” Stony added. “But I still don’t see how that crossbow could be set to shoot off at some special time.”

“You are asking the single most crucial question in the investigation.”

“Good for me, I guess, but it doesn’t tell me how it could happen.”

“Asking the right question is the most important part of detective work. It’s just like in life in general. Without the right question, you won’t be seeking the proper answer.”

Stony finished the sequence. “So, without the proper question you’ll never find the truth.”

“Bingo!” Masters added. “I would expand the question in this case a bit like this; “How was the crossbow aimed and fired?”

“Oh. Ya. The aiming part is really important. We just proved that with the string.”

Their conversation was interrupted when Jones and his assistant reentered the room.

“We’ve taken care of everything you wanted, I believe. Unfortunately, the drill had been wiped clean. It only had fresh prints from the handyman and you – made today, I imagine. Not really any help there,” Jones said. “I guess we’ll get it all back to the lab and see what they can turn up.”

“I’ll be eager to hear what they find,” Masters said.

“Me too,” added Stony, now feeling like a legitimate and important part of the team.

Jones ruffled the boy’s hair and the two deputies left.

“So, let me ask you this, my young assistant. What does it mean when the drill had no prints on it?” They finished rolling up the twine.

“That somebody had touched it and didn’t want anyone else to be able to find that out?”

“That’s one possibility, but there is another.”

Stony thought but without success. “I give.”

“Let me ask you this, then. If you were the one who regularly used the tool, would you need to remove your prints after your illicit use?”

“No, of course not. So, you’re saying it tells us that Kenny isn’t the bad guy.”

“Probably.”

“Probably?”

Stony’s brow furrowed.

“If, let’s say for the sake of an example, Kenny had used it to commit a crime, but wanted to implicate someone

else, he'd want to allow for the possibility that some other person had used the drill, right?"

Nodding his understanding, Stony took over.

"And the only way to do that would be to have no prints at all so just maybe that other guy's had been on it and he wiped them off."

Again, their conversation was interrupted as Kenny entered the room, clearly happy to see Stony, who approached him immediately.

"I'm sort of Ray's assistant on this case now. I think we're making good progress, don't you Ray?"

Kenny looked Stony in the eye.

"Shouldn't you be calling your friend, Mr. Masters?" I believe that would be the respectful way."

Stony smiled up at Masters and turned back to Kenny explaining: "I figure that anybody who changed my diapers for me when I was a baby, I can call by their first name."

Kenny looked at Masters. Masters nodded and returned an agreeable glance, saying, "Kenny, we need your help again."

"Anything you need."

"We need a mock up – a working substitute – of that crossbow. Can you make one for us? It doesn't need to be very substantial but it must be the exact dimensions and close to the actual weight of the original."

"If I had the measurements, I could."

"I'll get them for you," Stony said. He pointed up at the wall. "It left its outline up on the wall - the sun, fading, that kind of stuff. I'll just go up and get the measurements off the paneling."

Kenny unclipped a tape measure from his belt and handed it to Stony. While the boy climbed back up the ladder, Masters prepared a sketch on a sheet from his pad. As Stony called out the numbers, Masters added them to the drawing.

Kenny studied the diagram. "This should be a piece of cake, Sir. I'll have it done by dinner time."

"Speaking of cake," Masters said, looking at Stony who was picking himself up off the floor after an unfortunate landing.

As was the boy's habit, Stony commandeered the

conversation while looking at Kenny.

“What he’s hinting at is a piece of Jane’s cheesecake. Suppose you might have any pull with her?”

Stony winked. Kenny winked back. Masters watched with interest.

“I’ve never had no pull with her in the past but I’m willin’ to give it a try.”

As the coo-coo clock struck four, the three of them feasted on double portions of double chocolate cheesecake – all the while fending off Jane’s good-natured protestations about spoiling their supper.

DAY ONE: THE EVENING

Fuzzy. Fuzzier. Fuzziest.

Dinner was served at six. Once it was on the table, Jane left for the day. It was Stony's job to clear the table afterward and do the dishes. He usually managed to con either Kenny or Frank into helping him. On this evening, Kenny offered. Winston excused himself to make a phone call. That left Masters and Frank at the table alone together.

"It's been so hectic around here, I really haven't had a chance to speak with you, Frank," Masters began.

"No, Sir. I mean Yes, Sir it has been hectic and No, Sir we haven't had much of a chance to talk. What do you think is going on?"

"Hard to say at this point. You have any ideas?"

"Not really. Poor Margo. It was a terrible thing."

Masters noted considerably more compassion for Margo's plight in Frank's tone than had been evident in anyone else's.

"Was she a special friend of yours?"

"Oh, no. It just seems so awful. That's what I meant."

"You were sitting on the back row at the opposite end from Margo, I believe."

"That's right. Hill sat me in the corner, so to speak."

"Hill? I'm not sure I understand."

"Mr. Hill made out the seating plan. He had me make little cards – like place cards – to put on each seat telling folks where to sit."

"Is there a copy of that plan I can examine?"

"Sure, in the office. Oh, wait, it may still be in my

Jacket pocket. Yes. Here it is.”

He handed it across the table to Masters who put on reading glasses – small, rectangular, gold rimmed, half lens, reading glasses that were dwarfed by the pleasantly plump bulk of his face.

“It appears everyone found their appointed spot,” Masters said.

“No surprise! What R H wants, R H gets. All the invited guests received a copy.”

“May I keep this?” Masters asked.

“Sure. I have no need for it.”

“Tell me about yourself, Frank. I hear that like your father you’re also a writer.”

“Off and on. I wish it were more on but I’ve had trouble getting that first break.”

“Winston tells me you are an accomplished science writer.”

“That’s nice of him to say, but it’s not what I want to do. I want to write novels – exposes – really. I want to have something of substance to leave behind.”

“A laudable goal. So, are you working on anything now?”

“I’m researching a prison piece. There’s been a lot written about the life of the prisoner but I want to tell the story of the employees – the guards, medical staff, administration. They live in a unique subculture as well and it’s often every bit as frightening as the prisoners’.”

“What a fascinating perspective. I wish you well. How are things going here?”

“Here? Oh, this is a lot like heaven, actually – nice people, work I love, a chance to pick the brain of a great writer almost every day, free critiques of every sentence I write. I’m really going to hate having to give it up. Miss Adams will be back a week from today.”

“You’ll go back to working at the prison?”

“Yes. They seem to like me there. They were very willing to give me the time off if I’d agree to come back.”

“Just what is it you do there?”

“I run the pharmacy. Every morning a part time registered pharmacist comes in and charts the daily

prescriptions and medications. Then he leaves and I see that his orders are carried out.”

“I imagine your chemistry background comes in very handy.”

“You know about that, do you?”

“I’m a detective. Knowing about things is what I do.”

Frank smiled and nodded but shifted uneasily in his chair. Masters continued.

“From your tone, earlier, I got the impression that Mr. Hill is not one of your favorite people.”

Frank shifted again.

“I really don’t know him personally. He treated my Dad shabbily and won’t give my work the time of day. I guess you’d say I’ve just never been given any reason to see him in a positive light.”

They sat in silence for a long moment, then Frank continued.

“It’s funny, you know?”

“Funny?”

“Well, strange would be a better word. Margo and Mr. Hill are a lot alike – neither one has many socially redeeming personal attributes, but when Margo gets killed nobody cares – most even seem glad. But, if Hill had been killed, all the crying towels would have come out.”

“And why do you think that would be?”

“Because Hill had the power to make you into something great. At best, Margo could just leave you alone, but never really could – or would - help you. It’s a strange bottom line that’s been adopted in this business.”

Masters was impressed with the depth of Frank’s philosophic sortie. Clearly, he had given the issue a good deal of thought.

“Success, power and money,” Masters offered. “The big three paths to moral disintegration.”

Frank brightened at those remarks.

“Yes. You’d be surprised how most folks just don’t get that. The prisons are full of guys who missed it. Maybe Congress as well.”

He smiled and shrugged his shoulders signaling it had been an attempt at humor.

As much as Masters delighted in the exchange of philosophic points of view, he had a more pressing obligation.

“Any idea who would have wanted to kill Margo?” Masters asked.

“Take pot luck. Seems everybody here hated her.”

“That seems to be the general consensus,” Masters said. “Did you see anything this morning that might shed light on what happened?”

“I suppose not, though I do have to wonder if it might have just been an accident. As legitimate a target as Margo was, it still could have just been an accident. It’s almost as if everybody wants it to have been murder – like that gives them some kind of twisted satisfaction – some sense of justice or revenge.”

“Perhaps you should try writing social philosophy, Frank.”

“That’s really what writing a quality novel is all about, isn’t it?”

Masters nodded, impressed well beyond his expectations at both Frank’s intelligence and sensitivity.

“And you, Frank, did you also want to see Margo dead?”

“She has never affected my life one way or another. I wish she had – at least that would have indicated that I had been published. But goodness no, I did not want to see her dead.”

Stony arrived on the trot, wiping his red, wrinkled, dishpan hands on his cutoffs – or what were left of them.

“Time to feed the pigeons, guys. Who gets to help?”

He made it sound like a privilege. Tom Sawyer had nothing on Winston Rafferty the fourth.

“I’ll have to beg off this evening,” Frank said, getting up. “Today’s put me well behind schedule.”

“Well, Ray, that makes you the lucky winner, I guess.”

“I’m up for it, but how do we reach them? Earlier you said you kept them on the roof.”

“I usually climb the trellis on the north side.”

He chuckled into his palm as he dramatically surveyed Masters from stem to stern. Guess that probably won’t work, will it?”

Masters playfully pointed a stern finger in the boy’s

direction.

Stony continued.

“Actually, a bunch of poison ivy has taken a liking to it anyway so I can’t use it till we burn that off. So, I guess we’ll just have to use the door out onto the roof from the storeroom on the third floor.”

As they made their way up the stairs (Stony running – Masters puffing), Stony proceeded to give Masters the short course in pigeon care and breeding. The lad always had something to say – typically punctuated with strong opinions. Masters surmised his teachers had their hands full.

In the hall, they arrived at the door to the storeroom. “Got a quarter?” Stony asked.

“A quarter?” Masters asked. “You charge people to help you feed your pigeons?”

“No.” He giggled. “See these two screw heads on the wall beside the door?”

“Yes.”

“This is one of me and Kenny’s inventions. Now the door is locked. Go ahead, try it.”

Masters complied.

“It is locked, alright.”

“It’s all electrical. When you complete the circuit across those screws, a solenoid is activated inside and unlocks the door.”

“Very clever. That’s certainly worth a quarter.”

Masters searched his pockets and handed over the coin. The door was opened and the two proceeded through the storeroom to the outside wall.

“I suppose you’ll need a half-dollar to open this one,” Masters teased.

Again, came Stony’s wonderful giggle, but not to be out done he answered, “No, not until you try to get back inside.”

The area set aside for the pigeons was a deck of sorts, built of 2 x 4’s to protect the flat, tar and chat roof on which it sat. The cage was metal and ancient and in need of paint job. There were just four pigeons - fewer than Masters had expected. Stony proceeded to point at and name each one.

“That’s Eenie. That’s Meenie. That’s Minie and that’s George.”

Taken off guard, Masters asked, "George? Why George?"

Unable to contain himself, Stony doubled over in rails of laughter.

"Because," he began, wiping the tears from his cheek, "I decided I already had enough. I didn't want no Mo."

His hysteria began all over again.

Masters considerable bulk shook in laughter also – as much from enjoying Stony's reaction as from the vaudevillian humor involved.

Eventually the real names came out - Hemingway, Gardner, Miss Alcott and Elizabeth Barrett Browning – EBB for short. He continued the introductions.

"Hemingway's the fastest. Miss Alcott is the slowest. Wait a minute!"

He reached in through the open door and carefully removed Hemingway, gentling him to his chest.

"He's got a cut or something on his chest. See!"

Stony pulled the down back and sure enough there was a narrow, scratch across the bird on the front of his neck.

"I've never seen anything like that before," Stony said, gently stroking Hemingway's head.

"May I take a closer look?" Masters asked.

Stony held him up for Masters' scrutiny.

"Doesn't seem deep. More like a straight-line abrasion. When were they flying last?"

"This morning. They flew back from Old Man – I mean – Jake Rakes' place down the road. His son, Les, was taking pictures of them. He paid me ten bucks to take them over there."

The look on Masters face called for more information.

"It's all kind of complicated," Stony began.

"Fortunately, I have the whole evening to listen," Masters answered.

Stony began replenishing the grain, and cleaning and refilling the water bowl.

"Well, let me see if I can get it all just right. Some dude – I don't know who – hired Les – he's a photographer – to take some flying dove pictures for a magazine. He had a very special need, I guess, because he demanded that the photos

be taken into the sun, exactly between 10:00 and 10:02 on this very morning. I released one every ten seconds beginning at 10:00 and Les clicked away. He thinks he got some pretty great shots.”

“So it was you, Les and his father at the shoot,” Masters said trying to clarify the participants in his mind.

“Jake was there to begin with but before we got into the picture taking he got a call on his cell phone and had to go round up some cows that had got out and were stopping traffic on the road that runs along the other side of their property.”

“I see. So it was you, Les and the birds. What did the pigeons – pardon me, the doves for the day – do, once they were airborne?”

“They flew back here. They’re homing pigeons so they never get lost. Kenny let Gardner out just this side of Russelville a few months ago, and he beat Kenny home by a good hour.”

“They sound like strong, well trained birds,” Masters said. “Shouldn’t we attend to that wound?”

“I’ll just wash it out. Like you said, it’s not deep – more like a scratch. Kenny says it’s usually best to let animals take care of their own wounds. They have like some magical self-healing thing.”

As Stony lovingly swabbed the scratch, Masters had some questions.

“Do you always leave the cage door open? I noticed it was open when we arrived.”

“During the day, they are free to come and go. Mostly they just sit or strut around cooing at each other. Miss Alcott likes Gardner but he won’t give her the time of day. I close it at night in case a coon happens by. The door is more for the birds’ protection than it is to hold them inside. They know where their food and water are. They’d be plain-out stupid to want to go anywhere else.”

“Seems to be quite a bit of rust on the cage,” Masters commented, running his finger along the top.”

“Yeah. Kenny says we got to take a steel brush to it and give it a coat of aluminum paint before the fourth of July.”

“The fourth of July?”

“That’s always Kenny’s dead-line for anything he needs

to get done during the summer. It's more like wishful thinking if you ask me. I told him he should change that to the fourth of November – that's more how it goes around here.”

“A pretty relaxed sort of place here, is it?”

Stony nodded. “Yeah. Pretty relaxed for most things.”

“But not all?” Masters pressed.

“Well, I'm a Rafferty and Grampa says Raffertys are special people.”

“Special?”

Yeah. We're kind and helpful and loving – we go out of our way to be good people. Sometimes there's some real pressure there – maybe not pressure – maybe challenge would be better.”

“It appears you are living up to the Rafferty philosophy quite well, Stony.”

“Thanks, Ray. I sure do try. It's hard sometimes having no parents to talk to about stuff and a legend for a Grandfather.”

“I'm sure it must be, but you certainly seem to be handling it.”

The pigeon was returned to the cage and the door was closed for the night. Masters leaned forward, taking note of something on the wire rods on each side of the door.

“What?” Stony asked, putting his hands on his knees to take a closer look, himself.

“See there. Little rings where the rust seems to have been worn away – about in the middle of the door opening.”

“Oh. Yeah. I've never seen them before.”

“Any idea how they could have gotten there?”

“Not really. Miss Alcott likes to hang around up there, sometimes. Maybe it's a mark from where she was holding on.”

Masters straightened up, taking a step backwards. He bumped into a vent pipe and knocked off the hood. Stony scrambled to retrieve it and set it back on top of the pipe.

“Can't understand that,” Stony said. “Two of the three set screws that hold it in place are missing. No wonder it fell off so easily. Maybe Kenny is working on it.”

Though left unsaid, Masters also discovered a thin, rust colored line crossing the near edge of the top of the pipe from

which the cap had been displaced.

“Yeah. Looks like lots of work to do up here before the 4th,” Stony said. They returned to the house. Masters was pleasantly surprised to find re-entry was actually free. Stony said goodnight at the door to his bedroom and disappeared inside. Masters went in search of a quiet place to sit and think. He soon found himself occupying a comfortable deck chair on the red brick patio that stretched across the back of the house. Twilight was a good time for thinking.

Opportunity seemed up for grabs in this case. It was unlikely that anyone in the room had manipulated the crossbow at the moment of the murder. That would have been seen. Therefore, it seemed reasonable to conclude it was someone who was not present. That would have included Kenny and Jane along with a billion or so other people on the planet. Opportunity would have to wait.

Motive flowed freely – one might say, literally gushed, from the guests. But, Masters sensed that linking motive and means would be the key. Ever since Frank had mentioned a seating plan, Masters had been bothered. He took the plan from his pocket and scanned it again. ‘Interesting,’ he thought. ‘Margo ended up in the seat intended for Robert Hill. If it had been a precisely, preplanned murder, and if somehow the crossbow could have been accurately aimed and fired on schedule (all of which was beginning to seem more and more likely) then it would have been Hill, not Margo, who had been the intended target. What a different light that shed on things! As Frank had so skillfully pointed out, few, if any, people had anything to gain and everything to lose from Hill’s death. Even Margo seemed to be making a living putting down his books.

Suddenly, establishing motive was on an equal par with ‘know-how’. Brent was in danger of losing his contract, but a good showing from his newest book would put that to rest. Hill remained Brent’s lunch ticket. Kip was Hill’s fair-haired boy. It seemed he could do no wrong in the publisher’s eyes. Things could only keep getting better for Kip as long as Hill was alive.

Sally and her radical expansion plans seemed to need Hill as much as Hill needed her. Frank disliked the man but had nothing to gain from his death. Add to that, that he was only there by a twist of fate and he moved toward the bottom

of the list with Kenny, Jane and Stony. Winston was not even in running as far as Masters was concerned.

Masters could see that motive was going to be elusive until he had unearthed a great deal more information about the players. Perhaps the place to begin was with the mechanics of the murder itself.

He began sketching the crossbow as it hung on the wall. He drew it at one angle and then another. He added the holes in the walls. He tapped the paper with his pencil. He drummed the arm of the chair with his fingers. He turned the page this way and that. Suddenly a light went on. He crumpled the first picture and started over.

“Ah ha!” he said out loud. “That would work. Ingenious!”

His elation dulled somewhat because although his configuration could have fired the arrow with the necessary accuracy, he still had no idea how or by whom it could have been triggered. Without that, even the most ingenious device would remain impotent. Who among the possible candidates had the creativity – the skill?

Kenny certainly seemed to possess those skills and he was not in the room at the time of the murder, but he had no apparent motive. Kip’s novels all depended on mechanical gizmos. He certainly had the mind for devising such a device, but again, no obvious motive and, he was in the room at the time of the murder. Brent had the crossbow knowledge but not necessarily the mechanical know-how. Masters made note to investigate that further.

Frank was a question mark. Masters would need more information. Sally, though unskilled in the necessary mechanical areas, was certainly a bright enough and wealthy enough person to have hired it done. But how would a hired outsider gain entrance and have enough time to set it all up? Jane, bless her heart, who only managed to get to and from town by pointing her car in a general direction and praying, just did not possess the necessary mechanical inclination and, most likely could not have afforded outside help.

Thinking gave Masters an appetite. (Face it, *breathing* gave Masters an appetite!) With the kitchen unguarded at that time of day, he figured there were a variety of savory snacks

in his immediate future. He entered the house through the back door, which led into the hall, which ran the width of the residence to the front entry area. Deputy Melon was wandering, somewhat aimlessly, down the hall as Masters approached the door to the kitchen.

“Deputy,” Masters called. “I didn’t expect to see you back out here this evening.”

“I got Doc’s preliminary report and thought you should see it right away.”

“I was just heading for the fridge. Won’t you join me? We can discuss it over pie and ice cream.”

The two men were soon seated at a table in the kitchen, enjoying the fruits of Jane’s labors.

“So, the report?” Masters asked.

“Oh, yes. Here. Troubling, I’m afraid. Very troubling!”

Masters began reading. “I see.” . . . “Oh, my!” . . . “My goodness!” . . .

Polly’s findings were fascinating, although they only seemed to muddy the already murky waters. It had not been the arrow that caused Margo’s death. She had been killed instantly from a dose of concentrated curare introduced into her system through a pinprick in her scalp. The report went on to say that because of the location of the arrow, high in her chest – just below her shoulder – that it would not have caused her death, anyway.

The report also stated, almost as if by afterthought, that Margo’s legs and feet were in perfect order. The crutches had been a ruse. But why? What purpose could that have served for her? Some folks might take to crutches for sympathy. That didn’t seem to be Margo’s style. There had been some other reason. Like the murderer, had she had something devious up her sleeve as well? That, Masters feared, he would probably never learn.

He turned his attention back to the curare. Although a deadly poison even in small doses, in substantially diluted forms it was sometimes used as muscle relaxant during surgery. Who would have easy access to the substance? Hill’s wife was a surgeon. Brent’s wife was a nurse. Frank worked in a pharmacy. Opportunities seemed to abound.

Masters addressed Melon. “What do you hear form

your lab boys?”

“Oh, yes. I was so astonished at Doc Patton’s findings that I forgot about Jonesy’s sheet.”

He handed it to Masters.

The holes in the wall contained traces of both mahogany and pine and – not to Masters’ surprise – iron filings. The more important finding was tiny cotton fibers – dark brown in color – in both holes.

“Hot diggity!” Masters said, slapping the table. “Brown fibers like from thread. I knew it. It all supports my theory. I’ll go over it with you in the morning. What about the slick surface on the bottom of the holes?”

“Regular old airplane glue. Why would someone take time to coat the holes with airplane glue?”

“To make it into a hard, slick surface,” Masters explained, moving on before Melon could ask a follow up. “Anything back from Little Rock, yet?”

“Nothing yet. Click’s back. He said they thought we’d hear from them before noon tomorrow.

“We all looked at that crossbow and we all missed something that just has to be there,” Masters said, sounding more than a little disappointed in himself.

“What’s that?”

“At the base of the rear of the stock, there has to be a small protrusion about the size of a finishing nail and it must stick out about a half inch. How could we have missed that?”

Melon responded in a moment of rare astuteness. “Perhaps it had been disguised – painted maybe, to match the stock. None of us are really very familiar with crossbows. Seems to me it would have been easy to miss.”

“You’ve made a good point, Deputy. I’ll sleep better tonight because of it.”

As Melon got up to leave, Winston arrived.

“I might have known I’d find you two in the kitchen,” he joked.

The deputy said goodnight and left. Winston sat down and picked up an oatmeal cookie.

“Jane makes these with raisins,” Masters pointed out. “Oats for the old cholesterol and raisins for iron. Why these are a veritable health food.” He helped himself to another.

Then his tone became serious.

“Who among this gathering, might have access to curare?”

“Curare? My God! How did curare get involved in all this? On the tip of the arrow, I suppose.”

“Actually, not, but I’ll explain all that later.”

Winston thought. “Well, as a medicinal product there would be Hills wife – she’s a surgeon. Brent’s wife is or was a nurse. Frank, I suppose, working in a pharmacy connected with a hospital. Kip just returned from a trip up the Amazon. I understand that his next book is set down there. He was getting ideas and background I suppose. That is the source of raw curare, isn’t it?”

“Sure is. And the Kipper makes four. This case just gets fuzzier and fuzzier. A dozen people who hated Margo and none of them make any bones about the fact they think the World’s a better place without her. There are at least three people on the premises skilled enough to rig the crossbow, which, interestingly, is no longer the murder weapon. I’m not even convinced the arrow was intended for Margo. It was, in all likelihood meant for Hill. And, now, four who have a pipeline to curare.”

“I can fuzzy it up even a bit more,” Winston announced.

“How’s that?”

“Well, it probably doesn’t really qualify as a lead since it has to do with the victim, but Margo’s current, live-in, love interest – no let me rephrase that – romantic interest - owns a pharmaceutical company in New Jersey.”

“Are you suggesting a spurned lover?”

“No, not so far as I know. Last I heard, it was a major relationship. I’m just adding information to the pot.”

Masters fell silent. Then, “You have notified the family, I assume.”

“Yes, the live-in and an aunt who is the only actual relative. Must not be a very close family. When I spoke to her she asked, ‘Margo who?’ After I explained her only comment was, ‘I suppose cremation would be the cheapest way out. Can you just do it and send me the bill?’”

“I see. Definitely not a 7th Heaven kind of family.” Masters moved on. “What can you tell me about the Rakes

clan down the road?”

Winston seemed surprised at the question.

“Jake’s the Father. Les is the son – late thirties, I suppose. Jake really wanted this property when I bought it 35 years ago. It had been his grandfather’s place. I just out bid him. Didn’t even know it was he I was bidding against. All done through a realtor. He was pretty hateful about it. Spread rumors about the wealthy snob from New York with mob connections who was coming to the area. Said that wherever I went drugs in the schools were sure to follow. I ignored him and it all just went away. I have lots of good friends around here, now. A good deal more than Jake, I’m afraid.”

“Stony tells me Les is a photographer. Is that his profession?”

“I’m not sure. Les is a ne’er-do-well, but he represents himself as a photographer. He has had some things published. Maybe I’m being too hard on him. He’s been really nice to Stony, in fact, he was over there with his pigeons for some sort of picture taking thing just this morning.”

“Yes, I know. He told me about it. Seemed to have had a good time. He’s sure proud of those pigeons.”

“Why are you interested in Jake and Les? Certainly, there’s no connection with Margo’s murder is there?”

“Just covering all the bases, Win. Do you think Jake still has it in for you?”

“He does little pesky things sometimes but it’s more childishness than anything. But, no, I’ve no reason to think he would do anything drastic. You make it seem like I was the victim instead of Margo.”

Masters filled him in on the discoveries he and Stony had made with the twine. “It’s probably nothing to be concerned about. Time will tell.” Then, shifting the conversation, “What’s the story on Melon?”

“Oh. My. Well, Billy’s the black sheep son of a former county judge who still wields considerable political influence around here. After Billy failed at a half dozen business ventures, the Judge got him a position with the Sheriff’s department. He’s not really as inept as he appears. It’s just that nobody ever gives him a chance. I guess he was the fat, klutzy, slow kid in school and reps tend to stick forever around

here. I see him more as a late bloomer. I'll give him a lot of credit. He finished the two-year law enforcement program at the community college. Sheriff Hampton had a heart attack last month so things are a bit topsy-turvy in that department right now. Melon is more used to handling local cattle on the loose and teenage beer parties down by the river than major cases. I'm not sure how he drew this one."

"And his personal life?" Masters asked.

"He's happily married to his high school sweetheart. She's about as big around as a pencil. They have five daughters – the oldest started college this year and the middle one is Stony's age. He's a nice guy and a great family man. He still takes a lot of ribbing but I've never known him to blow his top. I'm not sure what else to say."

"That helps. From a couple of comments he's made, I got the impression there was more there than met the eye. Well, let me rephrase that. There is more inside his head than meets the eye."

They chuckled.

"So, when will Miss Adams return?"

"A week from today."

"How is Frank working out?"

"Surprisingly well, actually. He's super-efficient and a tireless worker. Stony loves him. He has Jane wrapped around his little finger. I find him very easy to work with. He knows his writing craft very well and takes criticism better than most. I will really hate to see him go."

"He sounds like a treasure. Would there be room for two on your staff?" Masters asked.

"Miss Adams and Frank?" Winston chuckled. "They'd eat each other alive before the first week had passed."

"Both a bit strong minded, I gather."

"Herculean!"

"How was it again that Frank come to be here?"

"Talk about a fortunate coincidence. He called, wondering if he could come down and interview me for an article he was thinking about. It was one his father had suggested that he had wanted to do. It was an interesting angle – a mini-biography of me as reflected in all the gifts I've received through the years. I wasn't much taken with the idea

of a biographic piece about me, but apparently, the Mystery Writer's Magazine was going to have somebody do something about me so, I said sure. I hadn't seen him since he was in high school and thought it would be fun. We chatted about what he was doing. He has several other interesting writing projects underway. He really impressed me. We must have talked for over an hour.

"The next day Miss Adams received a call saying she had won an all-expense paid cruise to the Bahamas – fourteen days of sun and fresh air. I almost had to threaten her to get her to take it. She insisted she hadn't entered any such contest. It wasn't her style, that's for sure, but regardless, she won and we finally got her on her way.

"One of her major concerns was leaving me with no help. Actually, I'm in between projects so, as much to placate her as anything, I called Frank back and explained the situation and he agreed to come. He could get the information he needed for his article and help me around here at the same time. It all happened within a matter of a couple of days. Everything just fell into place like it was supposed to be."

"He seems like a nice young man," Masters said hoping to guide the conversation in a more personal direction.

"Yes, he does. He was devastated by his father's death – we all were. It seems he's bounced back, however."

"Do you know the particulars behind his father's death?"

"He apparently became terribly depressed after a publisher pulled the contract on a book he had been working on for several years. He understood it had been sold – just needing a little touching up. When the final version was rejected, he just couldn't take it, I guess. He had always been an up and down sort – I'd say he was given to periods of depression most of his life. Such a sad thing. He wanted so much to make his mark in the literary world."

"That publisher wouldn't happen to have been Robert Hill, would it?" Masters asked.

"Well, yes, actually, it was. Is that important?"

"It might have been if Hill had been the murder victim."

"Frank, you mean?" Winston asked.

"Well, it wouldn't be the first time a son has taken

revenge for his wronged father. And there is now some question as to whether the arrow was not, perhaps, meant for Hill rather than Margo.”

Winston just shook his head. Masters continued by changing the subject again.

“What about Kenny?”

“Dear old Kenny. Well, let’s see. Honest, loyal, smart, loves being a handyman, a hard worker, great with Stony, nothing he wouldn’t do for you if he liked you.”

“How fortunate to have found him,” Masters said.

“Actually, he came with the place. He’d been here several years when I bought it. He came with high praise from the former owner and Jake Rakes hated him – the two best recommendations I could think of. Kenny knows the place inside out. I just leave it in his hands. When the outside needs sealing, he sees to it. When it need roofing he sees to it. Lawn, garden, shrubs – he can do it all. We’d be lost without him around here.”

“He never married I guess?” Masters asked.

“He’s never talked to me about it. Jane says he married at sixteen and his wife died due to complications of her first pregnancy. He’s remained single ever since.”

“Stony indicates that Kenny and Jane might have more of a relationship than just being co-workers around here.”

“I wouldn’t doubt it for it a minute, though I have no first hand knowledge about that. It’s hard to keep a secret from Stony the Snoop, however. If it’s there to know, he’ll know it.”

“How did Margo treat your books?” Masters asked at last.

“I figured you’d get around to that eventually. I understand. Actually, I don’t know whether to be flattered or insulted because she never chose to even mention anything I wrote one way or the other. I may be speaking too soon, however?”

“Too soon?” Masters looked puzzled.

“Word has it that in her column to be published this coming Sunday, she takes all three of us apart – organ by organ. Brent, Kip and me, that is. Now, we may never see it. Her syndicator has been trying to find a way to get out of his contract with her. I’m sure he’ll pull the plug on that column

now that Margo's gone."

"You're not helping to clear things up, you know," Masters chuckled.

"Not only that," Winston added, "I believe I've just placed myself squarely on the list of possible suspects."

"Hmm."

Masters flipped through his note pad, clearly not going to respond to his old friend's last statement.

"One last brief bio, if you will? – Jane."

"Jane thinks she's my mother and Stony's her grandson – the fact that I'm twenty years her senior notwithstanding. Jane is to the day-to-day running of this place what Kenny is to its care and preservation. She cooks, cleans, washes, feeds us vitamins and cares for us when we are ill. Hasn't missed a day since she started. She's off Wednesdays from noon on, and all day Sundays. I've tried to add another day off but she refuses. Says the place would fall apart. She does take a two-week vacation every August. She leaves town – alone. Never speaks of where she goes or what she does. She's trained a woman to take over while she's gone. She loves us and we love her. Like Kenny, she's in my will for a sizable remembrance. Just part of the family."

"What about her sister? There seems to be considerable local lore built up around her."

"Abigail. Well, she's a certifiable nut case though all quite harmless. Jane supports and takes care of her. The story is she snapped when their parents died in a house fire when she was eleven or twelve. She never got it back together. Always dresses in black and sings hymns in their back yard at all hours of the night. Matters aren't helped any by the fact that our local boys seem to feel it their sacred obligation to torment her in all possible ways. I get the idea that recently she's deteriorated quite a bit. Jane's hired a lady to stay with her days. I know she's considering putting her in a home."

"Sounds expensive."

"It would be. I've offered to help. Jane refused to speak about it. Everything will be fine, you know. Jane is the original Pollyanna."

"Oh, yes, I have ascertained that."

Both Masters' questions and the oatmeal cookies ran out at the same time. A good night's rest should refresh the old synapses.

///

DAY TWO: THE MORNING (part one)

A Killer on The Prowl

As was his custom, Masters was up and dressed by five a.m. When he drew back the drapes from the glass door, which led onto the small balcony outside his second-floor room, there was Stony, precariously perched on the railing, sketchpad steadied against his raised knees. Masters opened the door.

“Hey, Hi!” Stony said, almost too perky for that hour of the day. “I thought you got up early.”

Smiling, Masters stepped outside and stretched his lungs full of the fresh morning air.

“You’ve been sketching. May I see?”

“Sure. I like to draw in the morning. It gives me a chance to get my head set for the day.”

“Charcoal, I see.”

“Ya. I really prefer colored pencils but this way I don’t have to cart around a whole box – just one.”

“Very nice work.”

“Thanks. My art teacher at school says I have real talent.”

“Well then, perhaps one day you’ll be a crime fighting, neurosurgeon/artist,” Masters suggested.

“I can see that,” the boy responded, all quite seriously, to what Masters had intended as a lighter exchange.

“Kenny finished the crossbow mock-up you asked him to make. Took a little longer than he thought it would. It’s on the dining table downstairs. He says he can make any changes you need. He’s gone on his morning walk in the woods. He goes every day – rain or shine. He usually goes

alone. Grampa says it's his special private time - like my drawing, I guess. Once in a while, he invites me along. I never ask to go, though. That would be like intruding, I think."

"Stony, you are wise-beyond your years."

"Don't you mean 'wise between my ears'?" It was obviously hilarious to Stony who giggled wildly as he followed Masters inside.

"I assume you climbed up the outside of the house earlier," Masters said, mostly asking.

"Yeah. Kenny's put a trellis up for me at most of the strategic locations."

"Let's go take a look at that crossbow," Masters suggested, as he slipped into a tan sweater, opting to forgo his trademark three-piece suit and wide silk tie. He stretched his arms out to his sides. "Well, for a tent, how does this thing look on me?"

"Sen-tent-tional," came Stony's quick, tittering, reply. His brain may have been that of an 18-year-old, but his sense of humor was still a perfect fit to his 12-year-old body. 'How nice,' Masters thought. Stony assumed that when Masters chuckled at his jokes, it was because they were so funny. In truth, it was because the lad's giggling was irresistibly infectious.

Upon entering the great room, Masters glanced up at the clock beside the fireplace. Stony noticed. "It'll be forty-five minutes 'til Jane serves breakfast," he commented, feeling certain he had read the old gentleman's mind. He had, though that would never be admitted.

Kenny's piece of work seemed perfect. It had the string drawn back into firing position - just what Masters wanted.

"We need a spool of strong thread and several small, finishing nails," Masters announced as he carried the crossbow toward the stepladder, still standing its vigil beside the fireplace.

"Thirty seconds, tops. Time me," Stony called, running from the room.

Moments later he returned.

"Thirty-one, son," Masters said looking at his large pocket watch. "Guess you're slowing down in your old age."

"The cat got in my way. I slowed down to be humanely

considerate.”

Again, they shared a chuckle. Masters shook his head. ‘When will it end?’ he asked himself. He answered his own question – ‘When he turns 14.’

“Something for a hammer?” Masters asked.

Stony provided a metal paperweight. Masters pounded one nail into the lower rear edge of the stock, leaving it protruding a half-inch. He then took roughly 8 feet of thread and attached a nail to each end. Leaving 24 inches free on one end, he wrapped it once around the left end of the bow – drew it across to the right end – wrapped it there one time, which left about three feet dangling from the right end. Each trailing end stretched downward, taught under the weight of the nails.

“I will now climb this confounded ladder. You may steady it for me or, more sanely, you may stand back at a safe distance. It held me yesterday, but who knows about today.”

Stony smiled and walked right up to hold the ladder.

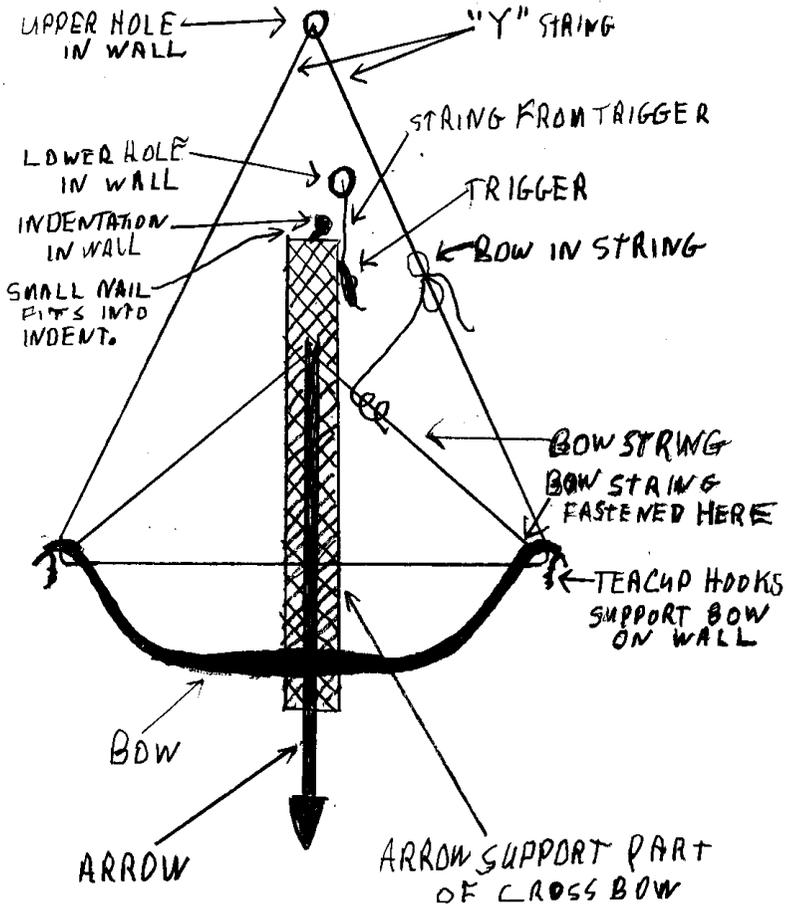
“Twelve year olds tend to like living dangerously. I’ll catch you if you fall,” he joked.

Once at the top – carrying the bow – Masters positioned the thread in the middle of each nail and then, one at a time, fed both nails through the top hole in the wall. Once inside, they were caught and would not back out. He inserted the head of the nail, which he had sunk into the butt of the stock, into the partial hole – the tiny gouged out area a short distance below the upper hole. He then lowered the bow until it hung there by the threads at what approximated a 45-degree angle from the wall. The threads formed an inverted V between the small, upper hole and the two ends of the bow.

Apparently satisfied with his progress he cut the longer end of the thread (right side) and then tied the two new ends together using a bow-knot. He left one of the dangling ends of the knot long enough so he could wrap it snugly, but untied, around the string, right next to the butt end of the arrow at the wall.

When the crossbow fired, the string would not only propel the arrow, but would also pull the thread, untying the bow-knot, leaving those two thread ends on free. The crossbow would fall free from the threads and the weight

MASTERS' SKETCH OF HOW THE CROSSBOW WAS RIGGED



inside the wall (vent pipe) would pull both strands of thread into the wall cavity and out of sight.

The triggering mechanism was similar, though far simpler. Masters again attached one end of a 12-inch piece of thread to a nail and fed it through the lower hole. He wrapped the other end around the trigger, snugging it in place, but not tying it. When the crossbow was raised into firing position (just how, was yet to be determined) the thread would become

taut and pull the hair-trigger. Again, as the crossbow fell, the loose end of the thread wrapped around the trigger would be pulled free and the weight inside the wall (in his demonstration, the nail) would pull it inside the wall. (This demonstration worked fine even though the actual mechanism was discovered to be somewhat different and will be seen later.)

Leaving it all in place, Masters made his way to the safety of the floor. He took a long cane-pole from a decorative arrangement beside the fireplace.

“Let’s move the ladder out of the way.”

Once that had been accomplished the two stood back.

“Watch what happens as I push the bow up into firing position. Imagine that the threads that are now holding it are somehow pulling it up.”

It all proceeded like clockwork. As the crossbow reached the 45-degree angle, the shorter string pulled the trigger. The bow-knot came undone, the crossbow fell to the floor. The weight of the nails inside the wall cavity pulled the threads in through the holes and out of view.

“Wow! Neat!” Stony exclaimed. “You got it.”

“Only partly.”

“Yeah. What raised it into position to make it fire, huh?”

“Right. Help me out here, Stony. What’s on the other side of this wall – behind where these holes are!”

“Well, the great room is two floors tall so on the bottom of the other side is Kenny’s room and above it is the bedroom Frank is using. It’s usually just a spare.”

“So, opposite those holes up there would be Frank’s room?”

“Yup, but you don’t think Frank killed the lady do you? Frank’s too nice a guy.”

“I’m not ready to accuse anyone of committing the murder. I’m just trying to figure out the rest of this ingenious, Rube Goldberg, contraption. Will Frank be up and around yet?”

Stony looked at the clock. “5:40. Ya. He’s up at 5:30 every morning. Me and him always eat breakfast together as soon as Jane gets here. By the way, the coffee should be brewed and smelling wonderful by now. I set the timer so it

would start at 5:30.”

“Sounds wonderful. We can stop there on the way up to Frank’s room.”

Stony clearly did not like the current path Masters’ investigation was taking. As they walked, Stony had a question.

“What’s a Rube Goldberg contraption?”

Masters smiled.

“It’s an overly complicated gadget, designed to do some simple task in a complex manner. For example, take the coffeepot. Instead of just setting a timer on a pot, Rube’s procedure might have included an alarm clock which wound a piece of string around its turning wind up key as it went off. The other end of that string might open a shoot that released a billiard ball that rolled down a slide and freed a gas filled balloon, which soared toward the ceiling. It might carry a string that was attached to an electrical switch, which would be pulled up into the ‘on’ position and the coffee maker would start brewing.”

Rather than appearing fascinated, like Masters expected, Stony suddenly appeared sad.

“Well, I hate doing this – I mean I really hate doing this, but I guess I have to tell you.”

“What is it, Stony? What’s come over you?”

“I was looking through Frank’s High School yearbook – he brought it with him by mistake. It was in a box of books he needed to bring for his research. Anyway, I was reading under his picture where it listed all the stuff he’d been into during high school – like he was in the band and he was the photographer for the yearbook, valedictorian – stuff like that. Well, it said he had been president of the Rube Goldberg Club.”

“I see.” Masters said. “Well, guilt by association won’t hold water in one of my investigations and so far, there is not a thread of evidence to connect Frank and Margo.”

Stony smiled – not so much at the reassurance contained in the message but at what he perceived as a wonderful pun – ‘thread of evidence’.

Coffee in hand, they proceeded up the stairs, meeting Frank on the landing at the top. They exchanged greetings

and Stony handed over a mug of coffee to his new friend.

“Two lumps and a jigger of cream,” he announced.

“Oh. Thanks, sport. What service. I may just never leave,” Frank responded, warmly.

Masters broached the subject at hand. “Frank, if I may, I need to examine the wall that your room shares with the great room.”

Frank looked genuinely puzzled.

“The wall? Sure. Come on. What’s on your mind?”

“It’s just something that’s bugging me about this case,” Masters said, avoiding a direct answer.

As was the case with all the bedrooms, Frank’s had its own bathroom. It was in the far-left corner, up against the shared wall.

“Is the back wall, here, the outside wall like in the great room?” Masters asked.

“Yes, it is,” Stony replied.

“And are the ceiling heights at the same levels in both rooms?”

“Yup they sure are. The roof goes straight across both parts of the house.”

Stony took a seat, cross-legged, on the floor, taking it all in. Frank stuck close to Masters.

“The crossbow hung about four feet down from the ceiling and about ten feet from the back wall where the fireplace starts,” Masters said more to himself than to the others. He determined that intersection would occur smack dab in the middle of the shower. It was a tan, plastic tub surround, built in one piece and certainly had been added years after the house was built.

Masters knocked on the wall in a variety of places. He pulled at the molding. He ran his hand over the surface and bent close to examine the surface through his reading glasses.

“I guess that’s that, gentlemen,” he said at last. “Thank you for allowing me to snoop, Frank.”

“No problem, Sir. Just let me know if there are any ways I can be of help in all of this. I find the whole thing extremely depressing.”

“Now, can we go get breakfast?” Stony asked,

appearing relieved and less downhearted than earlier.

Masters patted his expansive midriff. "Breakfast sounds great to me."

Halfway down the hall toward the stairs they met Jane. She was flushed. There were tears streaming down her face, eroding gullies through her makeup.

"It's Mr. Hill," she said. "I think he's dead!"

She turned and beckoned them to follow. Hill's room was at the end of the hall. Jane explained as she hurried along ahead of them. "Mr. Hill asked me to wake him as soon as I got here in the morning. His doctor said the shock of an alarm clock – something about an adrenaline rush – was dangerous, considering his heart condition. So, he asked if I'd just come in and wake him gently. When I opened his door a minute ago, I saw him lying on the floor in the bathroom doorway. I don't know about taking pulses but I went over and could tell he wasn't breathing."

At the door, Masters whispered to Stony, "You take care of Jane for me. Okay? Take her back down to the kitchen."

Stony nodded and escorted Jane on down the hallway. For Masters, it served the double purpose of looking after Jane and keeping the boy away from another dead body.

"Don't touch anything, Frank," Masters cautioned as he knelt beside Hill and felt his neck for the pulse he was sure he would not find. He didn't.

"He's dead."

Initially, Frank looked more puzzled than distressed.

"Please call Deputy Melon and have him bring the coroner," Masters said.

Frank left. Masters surveyed the scene. Hill was dressed, indicating, in the least, that he arose without being awakened and, probably, that he was feeling fine. If not, he surely would have called for assistance rather than dressing. Upon closer examination of the body, Masters noticed Hill's hands for the first time. They were small for a man of his stature and were rough – more like those of a laborer than a pencil pusher.

On the floor of the bathroom was a small brown plastic prescription bottle – it lay open with four sizable capsules in it.

Turning it over with his pen, Masters read the label and recognized it as a common heart medicine. The directions read, 'Take one upon awakening each morning'. The refill date had been five days before. Masters counted on his fingers.

"Four taken prior to today, one taken today and four left. Nine pills in a full prescription! I don't think so," he said aloud, as he continued to look around.

Nothing seemed out of place but an outsider could never really determine that. Two things seemed certain. Hill was dead and there were a considerable number of capsules missing from his pill bottle. If Polly determined it had been a heart attack, the case would probably be closed. Masters' gut feeling was that it had not been a heart attack. There was a killer on the prowl at Rafferty Manner.

He took a seat by the window to await the arrival of Deputy Melon and Polly. There was a rap on the open door.

"Mr. Masters?"

It was Kenny. He entered and took a seat, sitting far forward as if the visit would be short and to the point.

"I just heard down stairs. There's something I need to tell you, I think. I hate to, but I know I have to."

"There seems to be a lot of that going around this morning. What's on your mind?"

"Well, yesterday morning, early, I overheard part of a conversation between Winston – Mr. Rafferty – and Mr. Hill. Mr. Hill said – and I'm pretty sure these was his exact words – "I'm going to pull the plug on you."

"And how did Winston react to that?"

"I don't know. I hadn't intended on hearing that much. I was just passing the study at the moment it was said. I went on down the hall. I've been worrying about it ever since."

"Thanks for letting me know, Kenny. We need all the information we can get on this one - well on these, I suppose I should say, now. You did the right thing."

"There is one more thing. It may not mean nothing but Saturday morning, when I was coming back from a walk in the woods – I like to start my days out there – I saw Les Rakes leaving out across the front yard. It was probably five fifteen or so. I know he's an early bird like me. I seen him out at the

creek at the east end of the timber a time or two when I was walking. I just never seen him around the grounds here before. Like I said, I don't know if that means something."

"Well, I don't either at this point, but like I said, we need all the bits and pieces we can gather right now."

Kenny left, choosing not to look again in the direction of the body. Masters heard Stony's unmistakable young voice speaking to Kenny in the Hall. A moment later the boy entered the room.

"Yuck! I thought you covered dead bodies," he said, clearly both interested and yet disgusted. "I brought you some pastry and a new mug of coffee. Didn't want you to waste away, you know."

On other occasions, the remark would have produced laughter or at least an exchange of chuckles. That day it didn't.

"I didn't mean for you to see Mr. Hill, Stony, I'll cover him up."

"That's okay. I just won't look. I figured that's why you sent me packin' with Jane."

"How is she?" Masters asked.

"Pretty shaky. One good thing though."

"What might that be?" Masters was puzzled about what could possibly be a good thing about Hill's death.

"When Jane gets upset, she bakes. I'll guarantee that by noon they'll be more pies, cakes and cookies around here than even you can put away – well, sorry about that. I guess you know what I mean, though."

"No need to apologize. My shape is a walking advertisement for my appetite. More importantly, Stony, how are you? All of this must be quite a shock."

"Yeah, I guess. I really didn't know either of them, you know, but I never saw a dead person before and now two in two days. Are we in danger - staying here?"

His face expressed a kind of deep and genuine concern Masters could not remember ever having seen on him before. It had been, however, an excellent question that required an honest, though artful answer.

"I understand your concern but I'm quite sure you and the other regulars here at the Manor are in no danger. I'll ask

Deputy Melon to post a 24-hour police presence here for a few days. Will that make you feel better?"

"Not really. So far, a police presence wouldn't have prevented either murder as far as I can see," Stony observed astutely.

After a brief silence, he continued.

"I got one more thing about it."

"Thing?"

"Ya. When Miss White was arriving yesterday morning out front, I was just leaving to cart my pigeons over to the Rakes place in my wagon. She made quite a fuss about the steps. She made a bigger deal than she needed to about having trouble getting up the four steps to the front porch. If you ask me, she hadn't ever used crutches before – not much anyway. Everything about it was awkward and clumsy. When she put her weight on her feet she put it all on them – no hesitation – no signs of pain or anything like that."

"A very useful set of observation, Stony. Doc's report showed exactly what you just surmised. Although she had foot surgery- probably six months ago – she had healed completely and appeared to have no need, whatsoever, for the crutches. The important question is why she wanted it to appear that she did need them."

"Seems clear to me," Stony offered.

Initially Masters was amused, but then the boy had been on target with his other observations.

"And what would that be?"

"She wanted everybody to think she couldn't climb stairs."

"That would seem to be a fair and straight forward assumption. Now we just need to figure out how that would serve any purpose for her."

"Maybe she was just a spoiled brat and wanted to steal the spotlight – get more attention than Mr. Hill or the writers or you."

Masters understood that kind of logic made perfect sense to a 12-year-old, who just might opt to do the same thing in such a situation. He also realized that many adults never move much beyond that level. Perhaps that group included Margo. Perhaps not.

Stony stayed and made small talk with Masters until the Deputy and Coroner arrived.

“Another body?” were Melon’s first words.

“I’m afraid so,” Masters confirmed with a sigh.

Polly spent a few minutes with the body.

“About all I can tell you for sure is that he’s dead and apparently not from external causes. I’ll be able to tell you lots more by noon. I’m getting faster with all this practice.”

Her tone was not lighthearted, as the words might have suggested.

Photos were taken. Masters then had an opportunity to more closely examine the medicine and the bottle. He sniffed it. Donning a glove, he put a capsule end to end between his thumb and index finger. He shook it next to his ear. He held it close to the light, trying to ascertain what was inside.

“Polly. This is the correct capsule for this medicine, isn’t it?”

She read the label and looked at the capsules. “Sure is.”

“Look here at this end.”

Masters laid it on the counter in the bathroom.

“What do you see?”

“I see something that most certainly should not be there – it’s as if a pin or needle has been stuck into it. When removed, the plasticity of the gelatin capsule tended to self-seal.”

“The contents should be in powder form if memory serves me correctly,” Masters continued.”

“Yes, that’s right,” Polly confirmed.

“I’ll bet my next Danish it’s been injected with liquid – some deadly liquid, no doubt.”

Polly hefted the capsule.

“Can’t be sure. It’s so lightweight, but I’d say it’s a good deal heavier than it should be. It sure could contain extra liquid.”

Masters bagged the capsules and the bottle, and handed it all to Melon.

“We’ll be more interested in the contents than anything else. It’s unlikely there will be any useful prints, but go ahead and look.”

The body was removed. Melon and Polly followed. Winston appeared at the door.

“Raymond, what is going on around here? Things are so out of control!”

“Have a seat.”

Masters motioned him to a chair. They both sat.

“Little by little, I’m forming a pretty good picture of what has happened here. I tend to believe the murdering is over. I do need you to clarify something for me, however.”

“Certainly. What?”

“Part of an alleged conversation between you and Mr. Hill was overheard and reported to me. It went something like this – Hill said to you – ‘I’m going to pull the plug on you!’”

“Yes. Actually, I suppose someone could have overheard that. Robert was in my study at the time. Several days earlier, he had a phone confrontation with Margo. He was quoting to me what she had said to him – ‘I’m going to pull the plug on you.’ I believe those were the exact words.”

“Hill’s reaction?” Masters asked.

“He was both furious and frightened. Margo was ruthless. He hadn’t interpreted it to mean she intended to kill him – just to somehow ruin his company. Oh, my. Do you suppose it really was a death threat?”

“If it were, it’s going to be difficult to prove now that she’s dead. And, what motive would she have? She’s made a fortune panning Hill’s books. She seemed to be the bad guy in all of that but she also seemed to have the upper hand. She could write whatever she pleased and Hill had no recourse. Her written opinions were just that. Motive is the problem, here.”

“There could be one pretty hefty motive if Margo had found out about it,” Winston said.

“And that would be . . . ?”

“Robert told me had had ‘arranged’ with the president of Margo’s syndication company, to drop her. I assume Hill paid him off, though rumor was they wanted to get rid of her anyway. If that’s as much of it as she heard, it might be a motive.”

“If that’s as much of it as she heard? I’m not sure what that means.”

“Come to find out, the president was soon to be put out to pasture buy the Board of Directors and a young, gung-ho, angry young man type was to be moved in to replace him. Margo would have stayed under the new regime.”

“There seem to be complications at every turn in this case. That’s all helpful – well, at least it’s important to know.” Masters changed the course of the conversation.

“I just looked at Robert’s hands. They are rough, callused even. Not at all what I expected.”

“His hobby was woodworking. He was passionate about it and very good at it. He often joked that when he retired he was going to become a furniture builder. Maybe it wasn’t a joke. He certainly could have made a go of it.”

“Thanks for stopping in. I’ll see you later,” Masters said as Winston stood.

Melon returned as Winston left.

“We dusted the pill jar. You won’t like what we found.”

“So, what’s new, Deputy? What’s new?”

“Only two sets of prints – unusual in itself. The top prints are Mr. Hill’s. The bottom prints - the ones partially covered by Hill’s - belong to Winston Rafferty.”

Masters sighed the sigh of all sighs.

“I got more.” Melon went on.

“Let me have it.”

“The boys in Little Rock used a special laser and orange lens technique and raised prints on the crossbow we couldn’t find. Turns out they were a full left hand set from Frank Barstow.”

Masters tried to sort it out.

“So, sometime after Frank handled the crossbow, it was wiped to clean away the prints. It could have been Frank doing the cleaning or someone who handled it at a later time.”

“Why would Frank have ever handled it, if not to rig it? It wasn’t as if you could just walk by and touch it,” Melon argued more than asked.

“That’s the crucial question, Deputy. You get a gold star!”

Melon swelled with pride (not necessarily a pretty sight!).

Masters looked at his watch.

“I’m famished, Deputy. Join me for some breakfast before we talk with Frank and Winston about these latest developments.”

“Consider me your Breakfast Buddy,” Melon joked, patting his stomach.

On the way down stairs, Masters asked that Hill’s room be thoroughly searched – “Leave no doily unturned,” he said. “Also, I want the contents of the trap in the bathroom sink analyzed. If that doesn’t produce what I need, we’ll go after the shower drain. Also, examine every piece of trash in every waste basket and garbage can on the premises.”

Melon detoured to find Click. Masters proceeded directly to the kitchen. The wonderful aroma of Jane’s baking, wafting down the hall to greet him confirmed Stony’s previous prediction.

Winston was finishing breakfast and Masters joined him. Jane came to the table, hands on her waist.

“Same as yesterday?” she asked, pleasantly.

“Plus some of whatever that is that smells so marvelous. Deputy Melon will be along shortly. I promised him the best breakfast he’s ever experienced,” Masters said, flashing a school boy smile in Jane’s direction.

“Oh, you do go on so, Mr. Masters.”

She returned, blushing, to the stove, where she began adding bananas and cinnamon to the pancake batter.

“Another day another murder, hmm, Ray?” Winston observed.

“As I said, I believe we’ve seen the last of all that,” Masters reminded him.

“So, you’ve cracked it already, have you? I could hardly get 50,000 words out of this case. Surely you can prolong it to at least 90,000 for an old friend, can’t you?”

It had been the writer in Winston attempting to ease the situation.

“It’s sort of like a woman getting dressed for an evening out,” Masters explained. “After three hours of preparation, she will announce she’s finally all dressed except for her clothes. I’m pretty sure I know what happened. It’s just a matter of proving it – of finding and tying up all the bits and pieces.”

Jane arrived with coffee, topping off their drinks.

“Winston, I have one more question for you. Have you handled anyone’s brown, medicine container – prescription bottle, you know – during the past 24 hours?”

“Not that I can recall. No. Well, that’s not entirely correct. Margo called me into the den just after she made her grand entrance up the porch steps yesterday morning – about nine, I suppose. She asked me some questions – which now seem pretty lame, I guess – about just how pleased I was with my last book. During the course of our chat, as she opened her purse to get a tissue, a vial dropped to the floor – pain tablets she said for her feet. She being on crutches, I picked it up for her. But it wasn’t brown. It was clear.”

“You’re sure about the color?”

“Oh yes. I remember because it had no label on it like a prescription bottle usually does and I could see the tablets inside. They looked like plain old aspirin to me.”

“And she just took it back from you when you handed it to her?”

“Well, no, now that you mention it. She had me drop it back into her open purse. The whole thing was quite awkward – holding the purse open while trying to manipulate the crutches. I felt sorry for her, actually.”

Melon entered, interrupting the conversation. He sat down, loosened his tie and unbuttoned his color button – apparently, part of his usual mealtime ritual.

“Click and Stephens are on it,” he said in obvious cryptic fashion, confirming to Masters that the searches had begun.

Masters nodded and returned to his conversation with Winston. Any idea how Frank’s fingerprints might have got onto the crossbow?”

“Sure. That’s an easy one. He’s been examining lots of the gifts I’ve received – research for the article he’s doing about me for the Mystery Writers Annual. You’ll undoubtedly find them on the oil lamp, the leather-bound Vita, and most every other out of place looking piece in the entry hall, the den, and the great room.”

“Deputy, I’d like all those things dusted, too.”

Winston added, “Frank can get you a list of all those things.”

"I'd rather he not know we're doing it. No need to concern him at this point," Masters cautioned.

"No need to alert him, is what you're saying, Ray. I feel you're barking up the wrong tree on that one."

"I certainly hope you are right, Win," Masters said.

Winston excused himself and left. Masters and Melon talked.

"Do you have a list of the contents of Margo's purse?" Masters asked.

"Sure do."

After making the rounds of his pockets, he produced it.

"There was a note from Hill asking Margo to meet him out back after the ceremony. It was written to make it sound very urgent. I have a copy for you."

He handed it to Masters and continued.

"Some funny stuff, too, but then I guess you never know what a woman may have in her bag, do you?"

"Funny?"

"Yes, Sir." He pointed to several items. "Like this little washcloth – has a W.R. monogram on it – Winston Rafferty, I assume. Why'd she steal a washcloth? She wasn't even staying here. And this – an eight inch, flat blade, screw driver. Several little scraps of flexible plastic squares. You see. Funny stuff, like I said.

The other contents appeared pretty run of the mill – comb, aspirin in a brown bottle, tissues, wallet - things like that. There was copy of the seating plan folded over and over again, into a smaller parcel than one might expect.

"Find out from Frank if all the guests received a seating plan. I was under the impression that they did not," Masters said.

Melon made a note.

Jane removed the men's empty plates and presented them each with a cream puff – overflowing with a delicious looking chocolate/banana swirl filling.

"My, how grand these look," Masters said, taking Jane's hand and looking up into her still troubled face. "If you eat your own cooking, my dear, I can't understand how you manage to keep your girlish figure."

"Mr. Masters. This figure ain't been girlish since I was

four years old.”

She giggled and returned to her baking.

Masters again addressed Melon.

“What about Margo’s crutches? Do they appear to have been well used – are the rubber caps on the bottom worn? Is there anything special about them at all?”

A sheepish look crept over Melon’s reddening face.

“As far as I know, the crutches have not been examined. I’m not even sure where they are.”

“In the hall closet,” Jane added without missing a beat with her whisk.

The men turned toward her, and she toward them.

“I found them up against the wall beside the French doors in the entry hall so I put them out of the way in the closet. Hope I didn’t do nothing wrong.”

“Nothing wrong at all, Jane. In fact, you probably did the investigation a big favor.”

Melon looked puzzled. Masters explained.

“Fewer opportunities to receive additional, extraneous prints.”

Melon nodded as if he had just received some insider trading information.

“I’ll get Click right on it.”

Masters began wondering how many hours Click must put in each day in order to carry out all of Melon’s assignments.

Upon scraping the last tasty morsels from their plates, they thanked Jane. Melon was off to find Click. Masters approached Jane and planted a kiss on her forehead. I continue to be amazed at how you keep everything running so smoothly amid all this hubbub, Jane. Are you doing okay?”

Making light of it, she answered, “I’m doing a sight better than either of the corpses or this here drain. It’s one thing that ain’t running smooth at all. Slowed down all of a sudden right after the shindig in the great room and it’s just gone downhill since. If you see Kenny, tell him I need him and his monkey wrench in here, ASAP.”

Masters acknowledged her request and was then off in search of some solitude. He settled on a big chair in the southwest corner of the great room, across from the fireplace.

The sun was well up into the sky, gilding the still dew-damp, lush green view, with sparkling, golden highlights. He took out his pad and thumbed back through his notes. He tried to reconstruct the last moment before Margo fell from her chair. Masters had been seated at the opposite end of the first row of chairs. At exactly ten o'clock, he had begun to stand and take his place, but then saw Margo making her dramatic, late entrance. He waited until she was seated and then stood and faced the gathering. Frank was just taking his seat directly behind Masters' chair. It was at that moment that Margo fell forward and the crossbow hit the floor. As he recalled, Hill was immediately on one knee beside her, followed quickly by Kip and then Brent – all before Masters, himself, had time to cross the fifteen feet and feel for her pulse. His observations were all after that fact – after the fact of the arrow plunging into her chest and after the fact of the curare injection into her scalp.

Who had access to her head? Hill, of course, as he arranged her jacket and hair, and then Kip and Brent as they quickly hovered over the scene. There was some small chance it could have been administered just prior to her entering the room. With the concentration of the dosage, which she had received, that seemed unlikely, though not impossible. It might, however, help account for some of her clumsiness with the crutches – clumsiness Masters had previously attributed to an act she was playing out for some as yet undiscovered end. She and Frank had evidently been the last two together in the entry. Hill, Brent, Kip, Frank – four of the big five (Winston being the other) - were also those who seemed to have the most to gain from Margo's death.

According to Jane, it was Kenny who had been helping Margo in the entry hall just prior to her grand entrance. What motive might he have? If he had actually heard more of the 'threat' conversation between Winston and Hill than he revealed, it is possible that he might have misinterpreted it to have meant that Margo was planning to harm Winston. Without a doubt, Kenny would give his all to prevent that from happening. It seemed fully improbable, however, that he would have a source for curare. On the other hand, if Hill had brought some with him in his luggage, Kenny had the

opportunity to pry it open and obtain it. The more Masters followed that path, the more unlikely it seemed. Kenny, if a suspect at all, would be a far more likely candidate for having rigged the crossbow.

The method of injection still posed a problem. Though highly concentrated, it would have taken more than the amount of curare from a pinprick to have killed her. A small syringe would have been too large to conceal during the moments surrounding her being shot. As theatrical as it sounded, some kind of injection ring appeared the best possibility. The last time Masters had run across such a device was years before while he was working a case in Brazil. The rings are hollow with a sharp barb that delivers poison when the ring setting is depressed – forcing the liquid from a small reservoir through the hollow barb and into the flesh of the victim.

It then occurred to him. Winston had used that case as a model for one of his novels and Masters had presented him with such a ring - ordered from Brazil – as a gift.

Brent had indicated that Hill had been wearing a large ring at the ceremony and Hill almost immediately claimed it had been stolen. But, if rings were to be the essential clue, the path would have many branches because Kip, Brent, Winston and Sally had also worn large rings. Strangely, Masters thought, Hill actually had not reported the ring stolen until Masters had pressed him about it. It was as if the theft of the ring had been an afterthought – a cover up of some kind.

Footsteps approached Masters from the rear. It was Deputy Click.

“Sir, we have completed searching the room occupied by the deceased – well, the second deceased, I guess. Aside from some coins and paperclips under the cushions on the big chairs, and two stamps on the dresser, there really was nothing there at all outside of what was in his suitcase and briefcase. He apparently traveled pretty light.”

“No gold ring by chance.”

“Ring? No sir, not even around the bathtub.”

Masters was pleased to see there was a less serious side to Deputy Click.

“Let me ask you this, then, Deputy. When you

fingerprinted Mr. Barry and Mr. Karter, can you remember if they were wearing ring?”

“Yes, Sir, I can remember. When a person has a tight ring on, I always have them remove it. It can swell a finger just enough to make a poor - faint – impression. No. Neither of those gentlemen were wearing a ring. Now Miss Story – that’s another thing. She must have been wearing six or eight dandies. I got the idea that any one of them would pay off my mortgage and put all three kids through college.”

“What about the trap in the drain line. Get it off to the lab?”

“Yes, Sir. If you were looking for little drug capsules, we got ‘em for you!”

“Deputy, you are a most efficient young man. Let me know the moment the contents of those capsules have been identified.”

“Yes, Sir.” He smiled and nodded appreciatively. He turned and left.

So, Masters was left with a case of disappearing rings and reappearing capsules. Men typically have one ring, which they just put on and wear – two, perhaps, if they are married. Why would all three of these suspects – they were all still on Masters ‘long-list’ – suddenly and simultaneously ditch their rings? Perhaps it was a coincidence. Masters' experience suggested that coincidence frequently masqueraded as ostensibly obvious clues.

A good brisk walk seemed in order. He headed down the narrow gravel road toward the Rakes’ Ranch.

DAY TWO: THE MORNING (part two)

Ground squirrels, toadstools and poison ivy

Masters' brisk pace soon slowed to a leisurely stroll. It was a beautiful day – far too nice to just rush through it. The coolness of the night had warmed to the sun's smile. For as far as Masters could see there was just the green of the grass and trees, and the clear blue of the cloudless sky.

A gently rolling wall of underbrush in which the bushes seemed joyously interwoven flanked the narrow gravel road. Behind them were trees – large, old oaks, mostly. There would be an occasional Maple or Pine. A few scruffy cedars appeared to wonder if their struggle had been worth it. Masters, at least, appreciated their effort.

A low, mottled, carpet of early summer wild flowers crept from the brush, filling in the irregular edges of the little traveled road. It was an idyllic scene and Masters took it all in, even stooping once (no small undertaking) to pick a flower for the top button hole on his light golden brown sweater. (Many would call it tan – others beige – but Masters felt those names lacked pizzazz, so he chose to think of it as light golden brown.)

The first indication that he was nearing the Rakes place was the mailbox, set at the end of the lane (or perhaps, the beginning – Masters would ponder that on the return trip.). He believed you could tell a lot about people from the condition of their mailboxes. This one was freshly painted – shiny black – with a bright red metal flag on its side to signal the mail carrier there was a letter for him to retrieve and dispatch.

It stood atop a white, 4 X 4 post within easy reach of

the road. 'These folks care about their place,' Masters thought. It had an extra feature that intrigued and amused him. Alongside stood a 12-foot pole made of galvanized pipe, also painted black. It was in reality a flagpole. There was a red, triangular, cloth banner patiently waiting at the bottom. Masters surmised that when mail was placed into the box, the carrier raised the flag, which could be seen from the house just over the low rise to the East.

"Another gadgeteer," he observed, that time out loud.

He turned up the lane and soon had the house in full view. It was one story and rambled with some degree of uncertainty from north to south. It was faced with flat, native rock in a variety of brown and tan tones. The imposing lawn was closely trimmed. Huge, ancient trees shaded the house from every angle. In the background were barns, stables and a maze of white board fences. There were horses playing in the pasture to the South and a handful of cattle grazing to the North. It was a picture postcard panorama, all the better for not being of the scratch and sniff variety.

Half way up the lane, Masters came upon a man – the rear end of a man - on his knees, elbows on the ground. Upon closer inspection, Masters figured it was Les. There was a complicated set of devises, including a camera, set up on the ground several yards away from of him.

Masters greeted the man.

"Good morning. Photographing dirt today, are we?"

Startled, the young man looked back over his shoulder.

"Oh. Hi! A ground squirrel, actually, if he'll ever come out of his hole and pose for me."

He did not stand but returned his attention to his project.

Masters continued.

"I'm Ray Masters. I'm staying down at the Rafferty place."

Eyes glued to one end of a twelve-foot tube that lay out to his left, the man introduced himself.

"I'm Less Rakes. Hear there's been a death – even murder, maybe – up there."

"It looks that way," Masters said, responding in a non-committal fashion, hoping to get the man's take on it all.

“Don’t surprise me none. These fancy city folks is always problems.”

“Really?”

“Yup.” Then silence.

Masters tried to rekindle a conversation.

“Looks like a complicated operation you have underway there.”

“Not really. The tubes a periscope – mirrors on a slant at each end so I can look in up here and see the hole in the ground behind the rock at the other end. The camera down there is on a trip switch that I can activate from here. When the squirrel ventures out, I’ll be able to see him but he won’t be able to see me. I can click away to my heart’s content.”

“Inventive. I’ll give you that.”

More silence.

“Stony tells me you are a friend of his.”

“Stony? Yeah. He’s a good kid. He comes over sometimes. We got a stocked pond up yonder. He likes to fish and swim – sometimes both at the same time.”

“And talk,” Masters added.

That brought Les to his feet with a smile.

“And talk, that’s for sure.”

He extended his hand and Masters shook it warmly.

“Is there something I can do for you – Ray, did you say?”

“Ray. Yes,” Masters reassured him. “Well, I’m mostly just out for a walk. Stony said you were a photographer – a ‘great’ photographer I believe were his exact words.”

“I don’t know how great, but I get by.”

Les unmistakably felt flattered by the remark, however.

“He said you were photographing his pigeons yesterday. Sounds fascinating and unusual.”

“Yah, on both counts!”

Les obviously liked to talk about his work.

“They turned out pretty dog-gone good. The idea for the setting wasn’t mine – it was a commissioned assignment – but it was more than a slight bit inventive. This guy needed shots of doves – well, they’re pigeons around these parts – taking flight against the sun. I understand they’re for illustrations in a magazine article. He was quite particular

about what he wanted – to the point of being irritating, actually. The birds had to be doves, and there had to be both the horizon and the sun in the background. He knew what he was doing. He specified ten a.m. sharp and sure enough, the sun was exactly at the right height from the horizon. I shot 36 pictures in about 72 seconds. More than a dozen are keepers. I think he'll be darn happy with them."

"Someone you've worked for before, I take it," Masters said, fishing.

"No, actually. It just came out of the blue." Les scratched the back of his hand and continued. "I got a phone call on Friday. He mapped out what he needed. I thought of Stony and his pigeons right away, of course."

"A fortunate situation," Masters added, "Having the pigeons so close at hand, and a kid who's always looking for a way to make a buck."

"Plain, dumb luck, I'd say."

"May I ask what a shoot like that goes for?"

"Goes for? Oh, you mean how much I got paid?"

"Yes. I just have no idea what such a set of photographs would cost a magazine."

"Truth be told," Les said, getting a bit confidential, "He offered me \$1,000 – way too much, but I managed to say yes anyway." He smiled and again rubbed his hand. "Dang poison ivy. Got into it last week shooting some toadstools on a log. Should have known better. I've lived in these parts all my life. Just dumb. The pictures came out great though. Want to see 'em?"

"Certainly," Masters said, more and more interested in the freely unfolding saga. The pictures were, indeed, excellent and there was indeed, ivy dutifully recorded in them. His explanation for his rash seemed reasonable, though perhaps uncalled for. Masters held in reserve, however, the possibility of some connection with the ivy on the trellis to the roof, back at the Manor.

A folded sheet of paper had fallen to the ground from Les's equipment bag as he rummaged for the pictures. As Les returned his attention to the squirrel, Masters picked it up and quickly examined it. On the back, it had the time and day of the pigeon shoot – 10:00 A.M. MONDAY. It was scrawled

in large block letters. Turning it over, Masters discovered it was a copy of the seating plan for the Launch Party. He slipped it into his pocket.

“Are most of your assignments arranged by phone? Is that how you photographers operate?”

“Sometimes. Usually there’s a written contract but not always – like in a rush case the way this one was.”

“So, you get paid when you deliver the goods, I suppose.”

“It depends.”

Les raised up on his knees and sat back on his legs while he continued.

“Like in this case, half in advance and half when delivered. He left half for me in hundred dollar bills in my mailbox.”

Les pulled out an envelope, implying it had been the conveyor of the cash, and waved it back and forth before dropping it to the ground beside his camera bag.

“I’ve already mailed the pictures to an address he gave me. He said he’d put a check in the mail the day they arrived.”

“You are a trusting soul, Les, I’ll say that.”

“Ya. Dad says way too much that way.”

Les again crouched forward, his eye on the scope.

“He’s just the opposite – sort of paranoid. He doesn’t understand me and I don’t understand him. I guess that’s the way fathers and sons are.”

“Doesn’t it seem strange that if the person who contracted with you for the pictures lives close enough to drop off the money in your mailbox that he didn’t just come out and talk with you in person in the first place?”

“It takes all kind. Some like dealing on the phone. Me, I like dealing eyeball to eyeball. You can get a better feel for things. A thousand bucks is a thousand bucks, anyway it arrives. Even if he stiffs me for the rest I’ll make more than it was really worth.”

With Les’s back to him, Masters managed to retrieve the money envelop.

“Well, it’s been nice talking with you, Les. I’ve certainly learned a lot about the life of a photographer. Good luck with that ground squirrel. I’d better be getting back.”

“Here,” Les said, straightening up. “I got copies of the dove shoot for Stony. He loves those birds so, I thought he’d like to have the pictures that just may make them famous. Do you mind delivering them?”

“Happy to.”

Masters took the envelope. It had Stony’s name printed on it in large letters. “This is so thoughtful. I’m sure Stony will treasure them.”

Masters turned and began the trek back to the Manor. The earlier, pleasantly warm sun was fast becoming disagreeably hot. Once past the mailbox and headed north, he took the folded sheet from his pocket to compare the printed message on it with the printing on the envelope containing the pictures. Even an amateur could have rightly concluded that different people had written the two. Although Masters was in need of loose ends that tied neatly together, he knew that it was also important to find those that did not.

Les seemed like a pleasant young man. His photos were certainly above average. Perhaps it was that he chose to photograph ground squirrels and toadstools rather than fashion models that had kept him from getting his break.

As Masters reviewed the conversation, he could not help but wonder if he had been set up. Les was almost too available - as if waiting there for him. All the right answers were presented – many of them before the questions had even been asked. Under the ‘just-out-for-a-stroll’ pretense, which Master had used, he had not been in a position to ask Les the address to which the photos had been sent and that information had not been offered.

There was, of course, nothing more than an old grudge by Les’s father to even remotely connect the Rakes clan to the recent happenings at the Manor. Even so, the timing of the whole thing gnawed away inside the Old Detective.

Long before he arrived at the front steps, Masters had shed his sweater and slung it over his shoulder.

“Hey, you look like a regular person,” came Stony’s distinctive voice as the boy rounded the corner of the house on the trot.

“A regular person, huh? I’ll take that as a complement.”

Stony made no attempt to retract or remodel his

statement, even though he realized it had not, perhaps, been worded in an entirely proper fashion. Instead, he spoke about what had been on his mind.

“You’ve been gone almost an hour and a half.”

“You’re keeping track of my comings and goings?” Masters asked.

“No. Well, yes, I guess,” Stony admitted shrugging his shoulders – his grin slightly on the sheepish side of legitimate. “Anyway, Kenny found something in Jane’s drain” – he giggled – “Well, not in Jane’s drain, but in her sink’s drain. It’s a ring – a really big ring – large enough to have been slowing down the water flow all by itself but with all the gunk it gathered, it’s a wonder it ran at all.”

“Where is it now?”

“In the kitchen – not too far from a Danish and coffee.”

He giggled again, patting his own, non-existent, well-tanned, paunch.

Masters hung his sweater on the coat tree in the entry and they hurried toward the Kitchen. (Well, Stony ran and Masters managed what might best be called a brisk saunter.)

“Smells like pot roast,” Masters said, sniffing the air as they entered the room.

“Good nose, Sir,” Jane said. “With baby carrots, celery and new potatoes. It’s supper and there will be no samples.”

Stony went directly to the counter where the ring lay on a dishtowel. “Nobody’s touched it – well not with their finger prints I mean. Kenny was wearing rubber gloves when he found it.”

Using his pen, Masters held it up for examination. It was large. It was gold. It was definitely an injection ring. Setting it back down, Masters went to the drain opening.

“I see there is no grill-work or strainer in the drain. Isn’t that a problem?” he asked, turning to Jane.

“I use it mostly for washing vegetables. When there’s junk in the water, I use this removable metal strainer. It catches everything and then I can easily remove it and scrape it out into the garbage. I usually leave it in place in the drain. I’m not sure how it got put up on the shelf.”

“Have you used that insert since you found it on the shelf?”

“No, Sir, I haven’t.”

“Please don’t. I want to bag it for fingerprints.”

That done, he and Stony each pilfered a Danish, and went out to the patio to await Jane’s call to lunch.

“So,” Masters began, “You and Frank have become pretty close in a short amount of time, haven’t you?”

“Yeah. He’s real easy to be around. He’s interested in the stuff I do and the things I like to talk about. He asks me questions and then – not like a lot of grown-ups – he actually listens to my answers. Like when I brought up my pigeons, he had lots of questions. He made me feel like an expert, you know. That really makes me feel good.”

“What kinds of things interested him?” Masters asked, playing Frank’s game.

“Oh. What I fed them? Why I didn’t close the door on their cage? How fast they could fly? Which one was my favorite? Things like that.”

“I can see that you two get along pretty well.”

“Sure do. I’ll miss him when he leaves.”

As they continued chatting, several butterflies flitted about. One flew into a wire supporting a trellis, damaging its wing. It fell to the ground in a spiral of marbled colors.

In that moment, Masters understood, in essence, at least, how the crossbow had been aimed, fired and timed so perfectly. Tying down the perpetrator might prove more of a challenge.

Stony pressed the issue of the ring.

“So, whose ring is that? Why is it so important?”

“It’s a special kind of ring.”

Masters took out his pad and began sketching. Stony moved to his side, arm on his old friend’s shoulder, and watched.

“This curved part that encircles the finger is hollow and connects to a small reservoir masquerading as a setting on the top end and into this barb at the bottom of the ring. The reservoir was filled with poison in liquid form. When the palm of the hand pressed against Margo’s scalp, the barb penetrated her skin. The killer then pressed on the top of the setting, which forced the poison through the hollow tube, out of the opening in the barb, and into her flesh.”

“Awesome!” was Stony’s first reaction, quickly followed by, “Well, gruesome, really, I guess.” With an expression reflecting the taste of raw rhubarb, he returned to his seat.

“How do we find out who it belongs to?”

“I hope it still contains partial prints, though that may be too much to hope for. Our next best bet, come to think of it, will probably be the photos taken as the guests were mixing prior the ceremony, yesterday.”

The photographer dropped them off this morning. I’ll get them. Forty seconds – tops! Time me,” and he was off.

They began sorting through dozens of 4 X 6 pictures. One showed Kip and Brent standing together, talking and sipping coffee. Each appeared to be wearing a ring.

“We’ll need to get this one blown up. Can’t tell much more than that they both are wearing rings.”

Stony set it aside.

There were also pictures showing the eight rings Sally Store had been wearing – one seemed large enough and gold, so that was also saved for the lab. Additional photos showed that both Hill and Winston also wore rings. They were added to the pile.

“You don’t suspect Grampa, now, do you?” Stony asked, concern showing in his tone.

“No. And, I’ll bet my reputation on that, but these pictures should help prove the innocence of all but one – providing the ring from the drain turns up on one of the.”

Kenny arrived, phone in hand.

“A call for you, Sir. Billy Melon.”

“Thank you, Kenny. . . . Hello.”

“Mr. Masters. I’m about to leave for the Manor but just got word from the lab on those capsules. You said you wanted to know right away. They all had each been injected with enough liquid curare to kill an elephant. Looks like our killer wasn’t very creative.”

“Why do you say that, Deputy?”

“Well, he used the same poison on both of his victims. If he’d been smart, he’d have used different methods so we’d think it was two different killers.”

“An interesting point. Anything else?”

“The pill bottle only had the two sets of prints we found

– Mr. Rafferty’s underneath and Mr. Hill’s over the top. They tried to raise others, but no luck. Doesn’t look good, does it?”

“Looks can be deceiving, Deputy, and in this case I’m sure they are. Anything else?”

“Yes. The label had apparently been stuck somewhere else before being stuck to the bottle. They say almost a third of the adhesive was missing.”

“Good work. I’ll see you in a little while. I have a new envelope I need your guys to go over for prints.”

Masters handed the phone back to Kenny and addressed him.

“We still need those blueprints. Suppose we could look for them, now?”

“Sure. Now’s fine.”

A few minutes later, they entered the attic. Kenny went right to a large old footlocker and pointed. They’re in here. Masters looked it over, searching for marks in the dust that might suggest that it had been recently opened. No such disturbances were to be seen.

“Let’s take a look, then.”

Kenny and Stony opened the heavy lid. The blueprints were rolled up inside a cardboard tube. Masters carefully removed them and unrolled them on an old desk.

“Help me, here, Kenny. I’m looking for the wall on which the crossbow hung.”

With little trouble, Kenny thumbed through the pages until he found what Masters needed.

“B-I-N-G-O!!!” Masters said, spelling out the exclamation for even more emphasis. “Exactly as I suspected.” Kenny and Stony exchanged blank expressions. “Now, find me the South wall of your workshop.”

Again, it was quickly located.

“Hot Diggity!” (Now, Bingo signified a truly excellent clue, but Hot Diggity was reserved for case-solving evidence.)

“To your workshop, Kenny, and don’t spare the horses.”

Stony ran ahead, hoping he might be able to discover on his own what Masters apparently already knew. Masters moved immediately to the sink’s black vent pipe in the corner. He rapped on it with his knuckles. It was metal.

“Kenny, I need for you to cut this pipe here and here.”

He had pointed to spots on both ends of the elbow that represented the lowest point in the plumbing vent system.

Kenny fitted his large, reciprocating saw with a new metal cutting blade.

“It’s the original cast iron pipe. This may take a while.”

“Believe me, Kenny, it will be well worth every minute.”

Finally, Stony could contain himself no longer.

“So, what are we about to find here?” he managed, forcing a calm voice, the tone of which belied his excitement.

“Just wait and see.”

“You sound like Grampa. It must be a generational thing.”

Kenny had been right. It took some time but at last, the elbow section came free. Kenny picked it up and carried it to the workbench across the room.

“This is like looking for secret treasure,” Stony said, hopping his posterior up onto the workbench at a spot near the pipe.

“Be careful, Mr. Masters,” Kenny warned. “Those edges where I cut will be hot.”

Masters reached inside and began pulling out yard after yard of heavy, black thread. In the process, he found the three sections of brown thread, which had dropped into the pipe during the crossbow demonstration, which he and Stony had performed earlier. Then, he explained.

“The weighted threads did not fall back into the cavity of the wall, but into this vent pipe for the plumbing system. The iron filings were actually from this pipe and not a metal plate used to protect electrical wiring, as I had first supposed.

The longer threads were weighted with a chain of many, lead, fishing sinkers. Masters hefted them and estimated that together they weighed close to five pounds. Attached to the opposite ends of the threads were sections of very thin, loosely woven hemp twine – so fragile that it could be easily broken if stressed. The two sections had originally been one piece - before something had severed it.

They bagged the evidence.

“Do you guys have any lead sinkers missing?” Masters asked, as an afterthought.

Stony jumped down and went to a cabinet by the door.

He opened the drawer as Kenny joined him. They nodded as one. “Ya. A bunch are missing.”

Kenny agreed and added, “That black thread, as you called it, is fishing line. There’s a roll of that missing, too.”

Looking into the drawer, Masters asked, “May I borrow still another roll of line and a dozen more sinkers to substantiate my theory?”

“Sure, here,” Stony offered, looking at Kenny for final approval.

The man nodded and soon an old shoebox was loaded with Masters’ requirements and a cloth sack to hold the sinkers.

“To the roof, then, gentlemen,” Masters said.

He paused at the bottom of the stairs thinking he hadn’t had this much exercise all at once in years. Rather than look upon it in a negative, stressful sense, he chose to use it as justification for the extra calories from his most recent Danish.

At the door to the storeroom, Masters searched his pocket, fully prepared to cough up another quarter to Stony, but Kenny used the blade of his pocketknife instead. Masters frowned, playfully, at Stony who grinned, shrugged, and pushed the door open.

Outside, Masters stopped and surveyed the positions of the cage, its door, and the vent pipe. He removed the vent cap – more carefully that time, hoping to preserve any foreign prints that might remain. The metal pipe cap looked much like a small silo with a cone-shaped roof and cylindrical sides. The sides in the cap, near the top of the pipe, were perforated with dozens of quarter-inch, round holes to let out the rising gas from the septic system. The conical roof kept out the rain.

The perpetrator would have needed to remove the cap in order to feed a large weight down into the pipe at the end of a strong string or line – it would not have fit through the quarter inch holes. The end of the string that encircled the cage was fed through a vent hole and tied to the main string, which had previously been set up inside the pipe. The cap was replaced. In the process, two of the set-screws that were used to secure the cap to the pipe, had dropped and been lost. That’s how it had come to fall off when Masters backed into to it. The string, as it rubbed against the outside of the old

pipe, had worn away the rust there, forming the fine, rust free line Masters had noticed on his first (and more expensive!) trip to the roof.

“I still don’t get it,” Stony offered, trying hard to be patient – a skill innately foreign to 12-year old boys.

“Here’s the short version,” Masters began. “Inside this pipe was a strong string, weighted so when it was cut loose up here, it would fall into the pipe and eventually into the basement elbow where we found it. Two strings had been tied to that main string.

One, I will call it “R” because it was used to raise the crossbow into position, was made with a ‘Y’ of two threads on the bottom, which were somehow located within the wall and pulled out into the great room through the top hole in the paneling – I imagine a thin, bent wire hook was used to fish for them inside. Each leg of the ‘Y’ was connected to an end of the crossbow in the manner I demonstrated yesterday.”

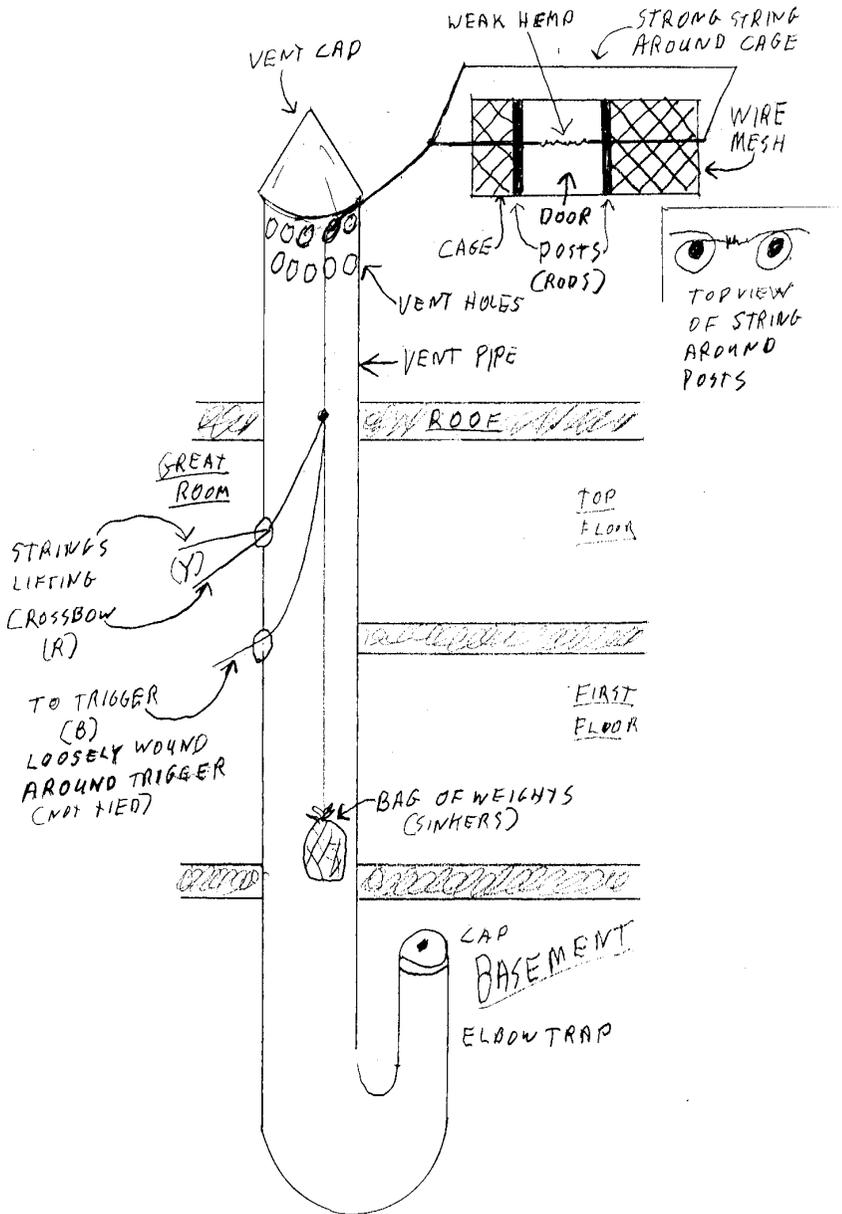
Masters took several minutes to fashion the main string with the sack of weights at the bottom, and two additional strings tied to it at specific places along its length. He fed it inside the pipe and then looped the top of the string around the pipe to secure it for his demonstration. (He had previously calculated those lengths precisely.)

“Up here it was wound around the four sides of the pigeon cage and brought back to the pipe. However, see these small metal rods (posts) that form the left and right sides of the open-door area?”

The other two nodded.

“On its way around the cage the thread was wrapped once around the near rod, drawn across the door opening, and then wrapped once around the far rod before completing the loop around the cage. The loose end was then tied to the main weighted string which had been fed from the inside of the pipe through one of the ¼ inch holes in the side of the vent. The string across the door was cut and a small section of hemp string was tied to each end so the string that crossed the door was the flimsy, easily broken, hemp. The main string with its weights and two extra strings were lowered into the pipe where they hung harmlessly until the string around the cage was released (broken by the bird) and pulled into the

MASTERS' SKETCH OF THE WEIGHT AND STRINGS SYSTEM INSIDE THE VENT PIPE IN THE WALL



pipe out of sight. With the pipe out of sight. With the pipe string attached to each end of the fragile hemp, which spanned the door, both ends of the broken hemp were also pulled out of view into the pipe leaving no residual hemp on either side of the cage door. It had not previously broken under the pull of the weights, however, because of the friction caused by wrapping the thread once around the two poles beside the door. When the hemp broke, the strings and hemp were all pulled down into the pipe.

Because of the shorter 'Y' string holding the crossbow, it was raised first. The longer string to the trigger therefore tugged on the trigger a split second later: 1- Hemp is broken by pigeon. 2- Weight begins pulling strings inside as weight falls. 3- Short strings (Y) which hold the crossbow are pulled by the weight and raise bow into firing position. 4- Long string to trigger is pulled a split second later and arrow is released. 5- As the weight falls inside the vent toward the basement, it pulls the loose ends of the strings (R and B) inside the pipe and everything (including the strings around the cage) fall down into the trap in the basement.

Stony's face lit up and he took a stab at finishing the set-up.

"So, when Hemingway tried to fly back into the cage, he hit the hemp string and broke it. That freed the ends of the threads and set everything else in motion. That's how Hemingway got the scratch on his chest – from the hemp thread."

"Very good, Son. A+."

Kenny shook his head. Masters asked him, "Don't you follow it?"

"Oh, yes, sir. Following it's not the problem. I just don't see how you put it all together."

"Detective work is usually a matter of first finding the pieces and then figuring all possible ways in which they can fit together. From there, it's just a matter of finding that one way that fits neatly with all of the other evidence. In this case, the rings worn in the rust around the poles on each side of the cage door meant something had been wrapped around them. The lines in the rust on the vent pipe meant some narrow, thread-like article had rubbed across it. The fact that the

Crossbow's position had been shifted to the right on the wall in the great room meant that it must have had to have been moved for some reason. What reason? So, it was in proper relationship to the vent pipe inside the wall. The blueprints verified that. The cotton filaments found in those holes and the matching ones found on the crossbow told us that thread or string had been employed somehow.

"The narrow scratch on Hemingway tied it all together. It tied Hemingway to the thread, which linked the cage to the crossbow. The pipe linked the roof to the wall behind the crossbow. It all came together when I saw a butterfly run into a wire, earlier. I thought to myself that if that wire had just been more fragile, the butterfly might have broken it and just flown on, but then the trellis would have fallen over.

Stony's face saddened. "So, it was really Hemingway that killed Miss White."

"Not by a long shot, Stony," Masters began. "Don't believe that for even one minute. The killer was the person who devised this ingenious gizmo and set up the photo shoot."

"The photo shoot. That's right," Stony said. "Without the precise timing of the photo shoot none of this would have worked."

He seemed immediately relieved.

"So, who do you believe did all of this?" Kenny asked, shaking his head in wonder.

"Somebody who had the mechanical know-how, had access to the various parts needed to build this thing, had foreknowledge about the crossbow, and knew exactly when and where Mr. Hill was going to be seated."

"Mr. Hill?" Stony asked, brow furrowed.

"Yes. Mr. Hill was scheduled to sit in the aisle seat, which, by pure chance, Margo had occupied at the last moment. It had been Hill, not Margo who was the intended target."

"But, what about the poison?" Kenny asked.

"Makes it interesting, doesn't it?" Masters said. "It appears that Margo was someone else's target all along and that it all happened coincidentally at the same moment. I have a few more pieces to fit together before I'm ready make my final accusations."

The three then reconstructed the network of threads and weights and eventually re-rigged Kenny's crossbow on the wall in the great room. With Deputies Melon and Click, and Winston joining them for the demonstration, Stony set Hemingway free at the window (this time wearing a protective collar, thanks to Jane's handiwork).

Within a minute, the crossbow raised on the wall as if by magic, the trigger was engaged, the bowstring released, the bow-knot untied, and the evidence all neatly slipped behind the wall as the crossbow fell to the floor.

"What led you to think it was in the pipe and not in the wall?" Winston asked.

"The single hole at the top. If the wall cavity had been used, there probably would have been two holes, spread fairly widely apart to add stability when the bow was raised. That bothered me from the moment I began formulating this theory. 'Why one hole and not two?' Then things began coming together. The chairs could have been arranged anywhere so the bow had been moved to the right for some reason other than trajectory. Then Click thought he got a whiff of gas – it was sewer gas - when he first climbed the ladder. The vent pipe on the roof, the markings in the rust - things just suddenly fit neatly together."

Frank, entering the house through the front entrance, saw the gathering and went into the great room to investigate.

"Frank. Just the person I need to see at this very moment. Good timing," Masters said, walking to meet him as he approached the back row of chairs. "Who set up the chairs for the party?"

"I did. Sunday night after dinner. Why?"

"Look at them now very carefully. Are they exactly where you placed them?"

Frank seemed puzzled but he went ahead and looked over the situation.

"I suppose so. I guess it's hard to say for sure. I certainly set them up here in this general area. Why would anyone have moved them? Why is that important? Why are you asking me that?"

"I can't say just yet, but thanks for your help."

Bewildered, Frank turned and left. Masters approached

Winston.

“Who set the time for the party?”

“Robert Hill, of course. It was his affair. He said mid-morning and I passed that on to Frank. He made the invitation calls.”

“Who made out the seating plan?”

“Again, it was Hill. He faxed it to me late last week. He was a stickler for details such as that. I gave it to Frank and he took it from there. Frank’s a very dependable and thorough young man.”

“So the seating plan and the time had been set by about when would you say?”

Winston thought.

“Probably by noon on Thursday, I’d say. Anything else? I have several things I need to take care of.”

“Just one question. Have you noticed any change in Frank during the past thirty-six hours?”

“Change? Well, actually, yes. I even mentioned it to Jane over lunch – which you and your sidekicks missed, by the way. Frank seems to be growing more distant – you might even say blue. I can’t put my finger on it. Probably just all this turmoil.”

“Probably. Thanks for your help,” Masters said. “I’ll see you after while and believe me, lunch is still in my immediate future.”

Stony and Kenny excused themselves and headed to con Jane out of lunch. Melon and Click approached Masters. Melon spoke.

“The capsules in the bathroom drain were Hills, all right, but they hadn’t been injected with the poison. Like you figured, there weren’t any prints on the capsules in his pill bottle.”

“Polly set Hill’s cause of death as curare poisoning, did she?”

“Yes, Sir. Didn’t I mention that? Sorry. She also found something curious somewhere on his right hand – traces of epoxy worn into his skin. Her report will give more specific details. Well, we better get these new packages of evidence back to the lab. Those guys haven’t worked this hard since the outbreak of salmonella at the VFW chili supper

a few years back.”

He and Click chuckled as if some private joke may have been involved.

“Before you go, I believe we need a background check on several of the players,” Masters said.

Melon took out his pad.

“Get what routine information you can on Frank, Brent, Kip, Sally and Eleanor Adams. Also, let’s look into the bank accounts of Jane, Eleanor, Kenny, and Jake and Les Rakes.”

“Will do. Our computer guy should have it all in a few hours.” Melon said. He tore out the page and turned it over to Click. In the process, he bumped the chair Margo had occupied. Even under his considerable weight, the chair didn’t move. He and Click stood dumbfounded. Masters attempted to pick it up. It would not budge.

Click was on his knees immediately, examining the situation.

“Looks as though the legs are seated in something – really thick glue, maybe. Shall I take some scrapings?”

“Good idea,” Masters agreed. “So, the chair was secured in place so it couldn’t be moved from the line of flight. Ingenious, really. It tells us that the person who was the intended occupant of that specific seat was, indeed, the intended victim. It also tells us the perpetrator was a bright, inventive person with an eye to the finest detail.”

Click stood up, a number of small pieces of the material in his open palm. He showed the others.

“Green,” Melon noted, expressing the obvious.

“Not only green, but probably epoxy,” Masters noted.

It was bagged and placed into Click’s briefcase along with the money envelope, which Masters had retrieved from Les Rakes.

Masters walked with the deputies to the front porch and watched as their car moved off down the road in a cloud of dust. Masters then headed for the kitchen.

Kenny and Stony were giggling about something as they finished the last few bites of their barbecue sandwiches.

“I declare, Mr. Masters, these two are as silly as squirrels in Spring.” The remark only kindled more laughter – Stony’s, all quite uncontrollable.

“I won’t even ask,” Masters said as he took a seat at the table. “Anything left for a tardy, old diner?” he asked, wearing his best, sad-eyed, puppy dog look as he glanced across the kitchen at Jane

“For you, there’s always something in my kitchen,” Jane replied. “Just take me a minute.”

Masters asked Kenny, “You ever use epoxy – the type that comes in yellow and blue strips that you knead together?”

“Not often, but I think I have some if you need it. It’s probably six months old. Never been opened though, so it ought to still be good.”

“I don’t really need to use it, but after lunch I’d like to see it. If it happens to be open, please don’t get your prints on it.”

“More evidence, huh?” Stony said. “A break in our case, is it?”

“The chair Margo was killed in appears to have been fastened in place so it wouldn’t accidentally be moved even slightly.”

“Kenny sighed deeply.

Stony nodded, suggesting he understood and appreciated the ingenuity involved. “Pretty clever,” he added, through a final mouthful of sandwich.

The two excused themselves and Stony carried their dishes to the sink. As they left, Kenny said, “I’ll be in the shop when you’re ready.”

Jane brought Masters his lunch – a green salad with honey mustard dressing, carrot strips, and two of largest barbecue sandwiches ever before constructed.

“I’d think you were trying to fatten me for market if it hadn’t already been done,” he joked. “Can you join me here while I eat? We really haven’t had much chance to chat.”

Jane poured herself a cup of coffee and got comfortable across the table. “My turn for the third degree?” she asked, only partly joking.

“Never! Just the opposite, in fact. What can you tell me about Miss Adams? Not the usual stuff, you know. The spicy stuff.” His soap opera tone defined his deeper meaning.

“Well, there isn’t much spice in her life, I’m afraid. She leads a pretty dull existence, if you ask me.” Her brow

furrowed. “There might be one thing – really out of character for her, you know?”

“And what’s that?”

“Every morning she walks through that door at 10:01. Hasn’t varied in twenty years – or more, probably. She’d say it was because she’s such an organized person. I’d say it’s because she’s been a rut far too long – but then that’s just my take on it, you understand. Anyway, it’s sort of become our time together over coffee, you see. We just pass the time of day – usually don’t speak of anything worthwhile. She likes to hear what I’ve been up to away from here. Stuff like that. I suppose I do most of the talking. She’s not real good at making small talk.

“Anyway, a couple of months ago, it was, I suppose, she came in just steaming one morning. She talked more that day than she usually did in a month. Overstayed her usual twenty minutes by a good deal – maybe forty-five. Seems she got wind that Mr. Hill – rest his soul – wasn’t going to buy Brent Barry’s next book. I’ll tell you, Mr. M, she was furious! I just sat and listened. She went on and on and on like it was her that was gettin’ cut off. Afterward she apologized. Said she didn’t know what had come over her. It was eerie, I’ll tell you that.”

“Has she talked of it since?”

“No, never.”

“Had she ever talked with you about Brent before?”

“Well, I suppose she has – a few times. She seems to know a lot about him. I figured that maybe she was attracted to him – a summer- autumn romance kind of thing. I know her eyes dance when she speaks of him. It wasn’t often, though, really. I don’t even think they’ve ever met, come to think of it. Not here, at least. I’m probably making too much of it.”

“You just never know what little tidbits may turn out to be important in a case like this,” Masters said, reaching across the table and patting her hand.

“Well, then, as long I’m being the gossip, I guess I should tell you this.” She settled in as if suddenly quite comfortable with her new role. “I intended to earlier, but then with Mr. Hill and the drain and all, I didn’t get around to it.”

“And what is that?”

“Yesterday morning, just before she went into the meeting – or party or whatever you call it – I saw Miss White – Margo – walking down the back stairs. It was really strange. She was carrying her crutches and really hurrying to get down. Then, at the bottom, she took a deep breath, put them in place under her arms and walked out toward the front entry hall. Kenny can back me up on the time because he was coming back here from out front and he held the swinging door open for her – the one just outside the kitchen, there. Kenny’s such a gentleman. He saw her collar was up in back, I guess, because he took a moment to straighten it for her. Then she just continued on her way and the door swung shut.”

“Did she know you had seen her on the stairs?”

“No. I’m sure she didn’t. I was standing back here in the kitchen. I’ve seen lots of things from in here that nobody knows I seen. But there was one more thing, Mr. M. Right after Kenny came into the kitchen, Frank came down the stairs. He was putting a white envelope – a letter, maybe – into his inside coat pocket. He’d just put on his coat.”

“How do you know that?”

“His collar was up in back and he was straightening it by shaking at the lapels like men do, you know.”

“Seems like there was lots of last minute traffic on the back stairs that morning,” Masters said.

“Lots more than usual, and that doesn’t even count the time, earlier, when young Mr. Karter went up and down. He went up with a large brown envelope but he didn’t have it when he come down just a minute or so later.”

Masters began wondering how Jane managed to get any of her work done.

“Do you know if Mr. Hill was still upstairs when Kip went up?”

“I’m pretty sure he wasn’t. He came down for breakfast about eight and I don’t remember him going back up. I guess that’s about it.”

“Thank you, Jane. You’ve been most helpful.”

Jane winced at her final sip of coffee – cold, old, burned - got up and went back to work at the counter. Masters finished his lunch in silence, wondering the kinds of wonders great detectives are prone to wonder.

'Just how involved was Miss Adams with Brent? To what extremes would she go to protect him or avenge some wrongdoing perpetrated against him? Had Margo met Frank upstairs? Why? What was in Frank's envelope, and why was he pocketing it on the way down stairs? Could it have been a pay-off from Margo? Was it, perhaps, an empty envelope that might have previously contained a payoff for Margo? Perhaps it was merely the seating plan that he would later hand over to Masters. Why had he had his suit coat off? Why did Margo want people to believe that she could not climb the stairs? Obviously to hide the fact that she had done just that, but still, why? And why crutches and not a wheel chair or a cane? She seemed more the wheelchair type to Masters. What had been in Kip's envelope? Where had he deposited it? Apparently, only Frank was upstairs to receive things. There were four bedrooms along that upper hall - Frank's at the far end, then an empty room, then Master's and at the near end, Hill's. It was a home, not a motel, so no one had keys, therefore all those doors would have been unlocked. Kip's package could have been left in any of the rooms or given to Frank. Intriguing but not incriminating. The stairs to the attic and the storeroom with access to the rooftop were up there as well, at the North end of the roomy landing.'

The afternoon would be spent tying up loose ends.

///

DAY TWO: THE AFTERNOON

Rings and Things

It was nearly 1:30 when Melon and Masters pulled into the Motor Inn's parking lot. They were there to speak individually, again, with Kip, Brent and Sally. Click had gone ahead and arranged a small meeting room for their use.

Kip was summoned first.

"How much longer are you going to keep me a prisoner, here?" were his words of greeting as he entered the room.

"I hope to have all innocent parties on their way home by noon, tomorrow," Masters said, overlooking Kip's belligerent tone and posturing. "Please take a seat. We have just a few things we need to clear up."

"Few? That sounds like good news. Like what?"

He turned the low back desk chair around and sat with his arms resting on its back. It was as if he had set a protective wall between himself and his inquisitors.

"You were wearing a large gold ring yesterday morning. I see that you aren't today. May I ask where it is," Masters began.

"In my room." He extended his hand. "Brent and I went for a hike in the woods behind Rafferty's place after we left you yesterday morning. I managed to get into poison ivy - or something like it - on my hand. You can see it here and here. I took my ring off so I could soak it in a concoction Brent swears by."

"Concoction?"

"Ya - green tealeaves and chewing tobacco in warm water. You'd be amazed. The ivy's nearly gone. You

should have seen it early this morning. Old Brent's a legitimate outdoors man. No wonder he writes about it so well."

"I guess I didn't realize you and Brent were such good friends," Masters said.

"We're not, really. Just two guys thrown together by circumstances. We're too different to ever really be friends."

"Different? How?"

"Brent's a quiet, kind, gentle sort. I'm an obnoxious asshole."

"That would seem to define a certain gulf, I suppose?" Master said, an uncontrolled, spontaneous, chuckle in his voice.

Kip smiled for the first time.

"Actually, we get along surprisingly well. I probably act better in his presence and he loosens up a bit in mine. We rented a car together, eat together, things like that. This afternoon we're planning on running up to a state park – Lake Wedington, I believe. Brent's been there before. We talk shop, kid about stealing each other's ideas. It's better than you might guess."

"When did you arrive here?"

"I came in early Saturday morning. I had a meeting with Mr. Hill Saturday at noon. I just finished one book for him and he is – was – already pressing me for the next. I showed him my plot plan and character sketches. He made a few suggestions – meaning required changes – and asked me to have him a final version of the synopsis by Monday morning. He and I were too much alike, I guess. I admired him but I hated him – woops! Not the most appropriate thing I could have said during his murder investigation, was it?"

"I'd have thought you could have done better," Masters said, writing it off with a smile. "Just for the record, why did you hate him?"

"He treated us writers like fruit trees. He'd take care of us for a little while but then he'd demand a huge harvest – always triple-A quality. He's really been unfair to Brent. He as good as told him he wasn't going to offer him a contract for his next book. That really stinks. Brent's wife is dying of cancer, you know, and Hill demanded he spend his time writing instead of being with her."

“Hill knew about Brent’s wife?”

“Sure. Not many did, but Hill did. Brent was up-front him when he asked for his first extension. Hill reportedly said something like, ‘She’s going to die whether you spend time with her or not. Keep the book on schedule.’ I mean, I’m an insensitive S.O.B. but Hill – he was a piece of the devil’s own work.”

“And so,” Masters asked in his usual straight forward manner, “Did you and/or Brent kill him?”

“I wish I had – now that I’ve got to know Brent – but no, it wasn’t to be my pleasure, I’m afraid.”

“Did you remain here in the Inn both Sunday night and Saturday night?” Masters asked.

“Sunday night. Yes. Saturday night Brent and I drove up to Fayetteville for dinner at a fantastic restaurant, J.D. China. They fussed over us like we were long lost relatives. They’ll vouch for our presence there, I’m sure. We got back about eight. I was here from then until we left Monday morning about 8:45.”

“You ate early then, getting back here by eight?”

“I’m diabetic. I have to eat on a regular schedule.”

“I didn’t realize that. You seem to be the picture of health – must have coped with it pretty well.”

“You cope or you die. I want to stick around a while longer. It’s one of the simpler decisions a guy’s faced with.”

“To your knowledge did Brent remain here after you arrived back from dinner?”

Kip hesitated. He looked away from Masters.

“Well, after we got back from Fayetteville, he said he still needed to unwind so he dropped me here and then drove off. In truth, I don’t know when he returned.”

“And Margo. What was your relationship with her?”

“Ah, Margo! We knew each other - in the Biblical sense of the word - for a few months last year. She was another lousy human being. I seem to draw them to me. Wish I believed it was case of opposites attract. . . . One night we were together and the next day in her column she tore my book apart, adjective by adjective. The affair was strictly a defensive maneuver on my part. I guess she realized what was going on. That probably gave her even more pleasure

while she ripped me to shreds.”

“Rip you or your book?”

“Unfortunately, there’s no difference. All I am is what I write. Pretty shallow, huh?”

“Hold a grudge?” Masters asked.

“Hell yes, but nothing I could do about it short of slitting her throat.”

His eyes flashed directly at Masters and certified emotion pervaded the response. For the first time, he shifted uneasily in his chair.

“Well, you know what I mean,” he said without any further attempt at explaining away his outburst.

“The gadget that shot Margo could have come right out of the pages of one of your novels,” Masters suggested, getting more to the point.

“The crossbow? Yeah. It was great, really! I have to ask, was it triggered by a string attached to the chime spring on the back of the coo-coo clock?”

“No, but that would have been an interesting twist,” Masters replied wishing Stony had been there to appreciate the pun. More and more, Masters was struck by the complete lack of compassion this young man had for either of the deceased.

“Darn! I thought I had it nailed,” Kip replied, affirming that he was more upset by his error than by Margo’s death.

“Is there anything you know that might help us?”

“No, I guess not, but I would like my synopsis back, if that’s possible. Don’t want it falling into some other writer’s hands, you know.”

“Synopsis back?”

“Ya. I delivered it to Hill’s room Monday morning. He wasn’t there so I left it on the top of his suitcase on the rack at the bottom of his bed. Figured he find it there for sure. It’s in a big brown envelope.”

“We’ll make an effort to retrieve it for you,” Masters assured and then asked, “How did you locate the room Mr. Hill was occupying?”

“I asked the old man in the entry hall. I think he’s the grounds keeper or something.”

Masters nodded and flashed a quick, faint smile.

“I guess that will be all for now. We would like to examine your ring, however. Deputy Click can go with you back to your room and get it for us if you like.”

“Sure. Whatever.”

Kip replaced the chair to its position at the desk and left followed by Click, who returned shortly, ring in hand.

“Seems to be a run of the mill gold ring, Sir,” Click reported, handing it to Masters. After a cursory examination by Masters and Melon, they agreed and the ring was returned.

Brent would be next. With the new revelation about his wife’s health and the second indication that his next book was not to have been purchased by Hill, Masters quickly modified his train of questioning.

Brent arrived in jeans, boots and an oversized, University of Wyoming sweatshirt. He still managed the squeaky clean, neat, All-American boy look - an aura apparently never visited upon Kip who looked like trouble, even in a three-piece suit. He appeared as nervous as Kip had been cool. Without waiting to be invited, he slipped into a chair facing Masters. Elbows on the armrests, he folded his hands in front of himself, and bent slightly forward – the defining picture of taut.

Masters wondered if he should take time to try and set the young man at ease or get right to the point. He decided the sooner begun the sooner over and that would undoubtedly suit Brent best.

“I see you’re not wearing your ring today?” Masters began – an innocuous opening unless the young man had something to hide.

“My ring – sure here.”

He held out his ring finger and displayed his wedding band.

“Sorry, I didn’t make myself clear. I meant the larger gold ring you were seen wearing yesterday morning.”

Brent immediately looked sheepish – not guilty – sheepish.

“Oh, that. Let me tell you, that was a big mistake!”

“Mistake?”

“You won’t believe this – well, actually I hope you will, of course – but I can hardly believe it myself. May I back up?”

“Certainly. Take your time. Start anywhere you like.”

“A couple of months ago, I had a confrontation with Mr. Hill in his office in New York. He called me out there to inform me that I was ‘being dropped from his stable’ as he put it, because I took too long to complete my last book. For him to be willing to continue spending his good money promoting my work, I had to produce far more frequently than I had demonstrated I could. I tried to explain the circumstances – again – but he wouldn’t listen. I thought he was unreasonable and I suppose he thought I was. We ended up in a shouting match. I knocked some books off his desk and then stomped out.

“It isn’t that I won’t be able to hook up with another publisher – I had offers before I got home. It was mostly his insensitivity – his ‘Robert Hill is the center of the Universe’ attitude.

“Well, that’s the long lead-in to a short story. In a moment of adolescent vengefulness, I purchased a squirt ring out at the Motel Gift Shop. I filled it with ink and my full intention was to squirt Hill with it – but not until after he’d announced the publication of my last book – I knew he’d never retract a public declaration like that. The way things materialized yesterday morning, my moment of retribution never took place.”

“And, where is that ring, now?” Masters asked.

“After we finished talking with you that morning, Kip and I went for a walk in the woods to clear our heads. Somewhere out there, I threw the ring into the underbrush. Why is that ring so important, anyway?”

“A ring seems to have played a part in Margo’s death,” Masters explained.

“Margo? I thought we were talking about Hill.”

“I guess we need to cover both bases,” Masters continued. “What was your relationship with Margo?”

“I had no relationship with her. For some reason, she’d left my last book alone – that was three years ago. I had no bone to pick with her, personally, other than in a general way – she seemed determined to undermine Hill Publications and that company had been my meal ticket. Still is, of course. The royalties for the last five books and this new one will continue

to roll in forever, I hope.”

Masters moved on.

“Do you know a woman by the name of Eleanor Adams?”

“I don’t think so – not well enough to remember her by name at least.”

“One more thing then. Is Brent Barry your birth name?”

“That’s a strange way to word that particular question, Mr. Masters. I assume you’re asking me to confirm that I was adopted as an infant. I have no idea what my birth name was. I’ve never had any interest in finding out. My parents gave me a wonderful home, a proper upbringing and a fine education. They are my family – period.”

“How grand it is that things have turned out so well for you,” Masters said, sincerity obvious in his tone. “So, you haven’t had any contact from your birth mother? Nothing out of the ordinary has occurred that might point in her direction.”

“No, Sir! . . . Well . . .”

“Well? Masters asked.”

“We have had one unexplained thing happen, but I hadn’t connected it with her. I’m sure you’ll find out anyway, if you haven’t already. About two months ago, we – my wife and I – received notice from our bank that college trust funds had been established by an anonymous benefactor in the names of our daughters – to the tune of \$25,000 each. I don’t rub shoulders with the rich and famous, Mr. Masters. The only person I could think of was Robert Hill – this all happened just after my blow up in his office. It really doesn’t make any sense that it would be him – he wasn’t given to guilt or reparation you know. Neither my parents nor my wife’s, could float a gift such as that. I don’t know – perhaps this provides another possible explanation. It’s creepy to think she might be out there knowing about me but I don’t know about her.”

“I can only imagine.”

“I don’t see how that can be related to any of these murders, though.”

“It probably isn’t. Just covering the bases, you understand.”

Brent shook his head and shrugged his shoulders. Masters’ explanation was fully unsatisfactory but he would not

press it.

“Your wife is a nurse, I understand,” Masters continued.

Yes. She loves that work. O.R. She’s worked for the same surgeon for ten years. Since she’s been ill, she’s had to keep cutting back and now just works one day a week but it’s great therapy for her. It tires her but she doesn’t want to give it up.”

“Her medical bills must be staggering.”

“They are! Fortunately for us, every penny has been covered by her insurance through Dr. Davis.”

“What a relief that must be?”

“You said it!”

“Is there anything else you can think of that might be useful to us in this case.”

“Not really. Well, again – you’ll find out about this, too, so I should be the one to tell you. At that blow-up with Hill, I’m afraid my parting shot – with the door open for all to hear – was, ‘You may just find yourself the focal point of my next book!’”

“Yes, I do believe it’s better to have heard that from you,” Masters agreed.

“My life’s crumbling, Sir. I’m watching my wife die a little more every day. I haven’t been able to write. I’ve lost my publisher. I’m looking ahead at the frightening prospect of having to be both father and mother to my two children. I just came unglued. It’s the first time I’ve so much as raised my voice since I was a teenager.”

Masters nodded. “I can certainly understand the desperation of your situation. There is just one more thing I need to ask. I understand that Saturday evening after dinner, you went for a drive alone, is that correct?”

“Yes, that’s right. I needed to unwind. The Saturday afternoon meeting with Hill – it was about the book signing tour – hadn’t gone well. I didn’t want to be away so long at one stretch and asked to break it up into four shorter stints. He refused, of course. My contract put him in the driver’s seat on such issues. Then, just being here and away from home, you know, things like that. I drove out into the country and parked at the top of a hill where I could just look out into space. I suppose I stayed there a couple of hours – maybe a

little longer. I'm not sure when I got back to my room. I left a wakeup call on my way in. The night clerk might remember when I returned."

Thank you for your cooperation, Brent."

Brent took his cue and rose to leave. He turned at the door.

"What about the trust money and my natural mother? Should I pursue that, do you think, and if I were to do that, do you have information that could help me?"

"Sleep on it," Masters suggested. "If you decide you want to look into it, I'll gladly assist you. I might know something that would be of help."

"Thanks. That's a good plan. I need some time."

He left.

Melon spoke. "50,000 simolies! That could be the up-front money on a hit, you know. Disguising it as a trust fund would be a pretty clever way to launder it."

Masters nodded without comment. Melon's point was well taken, but only if examined outside the context of Brent's personality and history. Of course, people do change – snap even – and the pressures on the young husband and father had been enormous. In addition, he had admitted to having a minor 'snap' with the squirt-ring escapade and a more major one in Hill's office.

* * *

As was her style, Sally arrived late, making it known to all that she felt humiliated to be put upon like a common criminal.

"You darlings don't mind if I smoke, do you," she began.

"Actually, I would prefer that you didn't," Masters replied.

Ignoring the request, she lit up – a long slender cigarette in an even longer, pearl cigarette holder. The matching pearl lighter, bedecked with dozens of tiny diamonds seemed a gaudy monument to the slow death she was inviting inside herself.

Masters disregarded the childlike rudeness.

"Describe your recent relationship with Robert Hill."

"Business. Pure and simple business. We needed

each other. I suppose he needed me more that I needed him – I'll carry the company's book regardless of who's at the helm. I didn't kill him. I don't know who did. I'm not surprised somebody did it, however. He was a pig. Will that be all?"

"Not quite," Masters said pleasantly – his gentle tone and demeanor such an obvious contrast to hers that even Sally seemed to take note. She extinguished her cigarette. Masters continued.

"You probably know all the players in this situation as well as anyone. If you had to venture a guess, who'd top your list?"

"Rosalind," she snapped, without a moment's hesitation.

"Rosalind? Who is Rosalind?"

"Robert's wife – the woman he was married to, anyway."

"And what would make her your prime suspect?"

"He cheated on her his whole married life – even flaunted it openly. He never gave her the time of day. She threatened to divorce him about ten years ago but he enlisted the help of the entire East Coast Priesthood to quell any such thought on her part. Rosalind was too good – too nice – for Robert. He'd have been better off with me. We fought but we were also really good together. I never loved him. I'm not particularly sorry he's dead, but we could have done great things together. With him gone, Rosalind inherits Robert's 51% of Hill Publications. She'll undoubtedly sell it. Maybe I'll buy it. Wouldn't that be the tail wagging the dog? I suppose that suggests a conspiracy between Rosalind and me. Isn't this exciting?"

Her natural sarcasm had returned.

"Would you have a second suspect?" Masters asked.

"Sure – anybody who's ever had any dealings with him – except perhaps Winston Rafferty and Kip Karter. They were his pets. I'm sure he took very good care of them."

"And Margo. Who'd top your list there?"

"Margo!" She paused for the first time – quite unlike her other rapid-fire responses. "In general, any writer whose career she's put in shambles along with their publishers. Specifically, my first choice would have been Hill. My second

choice would be the poor lout she's living with. I'm sure she has her claws into him so tight he can't get away – not 'til she decides to push him off her famous cliff."

"Cliff?" I don't understand.

"There was a article about her a few years ago – by a foolish old writer named Barstow. He said she used men until they'd served her purposes and then pushed them off a cliff, neatly making way for the next. Never saw his name in print again, you can bet on that!"

"And if you were to choose which one you'd kill, which would it have been?"

"Margo, of course. She ruined both sales and handsome young playboys."

Her quick responses and snappy retorts were back. Her playful smile cast doubt on the veracity of her comment.

"Life is like the food chain, Mr. Masters. You spend your time devouring everything smaller and more helpless than you are, knowing full well that one day something bigger and meaner will arrive to devour you."

"How sad you see life in that way," Masters said with true compassion. "That will be all for now."

Taken aback by Masters' editorial comment, she gave him a puzzled glance and made her exit. Melon turned to Masters.

"She seemed protective of Kip. Suppose that's significant?"

"Deputy, that lady would blow the circuitry in the finest lie detector. I have to wonder if she's ever said anything that wasn't fashioned to either advance herself or cause harm to others."

"She did seem to hate Margo," Melon pointed out, as if defending Sally's integrity (or his interpretation of it). "Maybe she and Kip were in it together."

"There are still too many possibilities. It could have just as easily been that she paid Brent – via the trust funds – to kill them both – one fund apiece," Masters added, taking it to an extreme.

"What about Les Rakes and his Dad?" Melon asked? "Jake hated Winston. I can vouch for that. He's certainly clever enough to have rigged the crossbow. If all he wanted

to do was discredit Winston, he wouldn't have cared who the arrow hit."

"A fascinating take on things, Melon. You know, I hadn't really considered that."

Melon didn't know if he had just been praised for a good idea or put in his place for suggesting one that didn't deserve mention.

Melon held the door as they left the room. Masters continued.

"We'll probably never locate the ring Brent says he threw away. Even if we did, it would prove nothing unless it turned out to be another injector. The whole story could have just been something to sidetrack us. I think we need to study the pictures from the mixer before the ceremony. And, Deputy Click, would you get the ring sizes for both Kip and Brent? Middle finger, both hands. Also, dig up that night clerk and try to pin down the time Brent returned here Sunday night. And while you're at the front desk, see if they really do sell squirt rings."

"Yes, Sir. I'll meet you back at Rafferty's."

On the drive back to the Manor, Melon reported on the various bank accounts. There was only one large – and perhaps suspicious – transaction. Miss Adams had withdrawn many thousands of dollars from her savings account several months earlier. There seemed to be no paper trail to follow.

"Pay off money you think?" was Melon's question.

"Hard to say. To whom? For what? Why?"

* * *

It turned out that there were 141 photographs to examine. Those, which showed the ring fingers, had previously been pulled and examined. Melon and Masters began spreading the photos out on the large dining table in the great room.

"First," Masters explained, "Let's locate all those that show a clock in them. With the dozen or so gift clocks in this room, I imagine that will be quite a few."

There were 79 photos, which had captured easily readable clock faces. A few others showed promise if enlarged and enhanced.

"Now, let's sort them by time of day - to the minute."

Soon they were arranged in order – the earliest having been taken at 9:03 and the last - that Masters was interested in at that moment - at 10:02.

“Now, it’s just a matter of determining at what times each person was here in this room,” Masters went on.

“And who wasn’t, I assume,” Melon added, not really as a question.

“Right.”

“One thing seems clear,” Melon observed. “Except for Winston, Hill and Sally, the rest of our suspects arrived fairly late.”

A timetable was sketched. Hill and Winston were already there in the first pictures at 9:03 and continued to appear right up to 10:02. Frank was present in a 9:05 shot, putting out the name tags on the chairs. He didn’t appear again until the final 10:02 picture when he was shown taking his seat. Brent was first captured at 9:32 and Kip at 9:38. Kenny was seen at the French doors behind Kip at 9:38. Most of the others were reporters and they arrived between 9:25 and 9:35. Jane was in and out from time to time as would be expected. Masters, who despised such mixers, showed up at 9:44. Margo made her final flamboyant entrance at 10:01.

Masters sat back in his chair, surveying the layout on the table in front of him.

“Stony left with the pigeons at 9:00 which is the time Margo arrived out front. She was with Winston from about 9:10 to 9:20 – that’s just approximate. Where was she from then until ten?”

“Upstairs somewhere, according to Jane’s report,” Melon answered, unnecessarily.

“That’s a lot of territory in this house,” Masters noted. “She could have been on the roof arranging the threads on the pigeon coop. That had to be done sometime after Stony left with the birds. She could have been in Hill’s room, injecting his pills, but we have no evidence linking her to that.”

“Kip said he dropped off an envelope in Hill’s room when he arrived – somewhere around 9:35. He and Brent came together and Brent is on film as of 9:32. That gave Kip from then until 9:38 – only six or so minutes – to go upstairs, drop off the envelope and get back down stairs. He didn’t run

into anyone in Hill's room, which means the pills were injected before or after that time. Not much help."

"Unless Kip injected them while he was there," Melon added.

"He would have had three minutes at the most alone in the room. He would have had to pry open the suitcase in which Hill kept them, take them out of the bottle, remove the stopper in the sink and dump all but a few into the drain, run the water trying to wash them down the pipe and out of the trap, replace the stopper, individually inject five capsules, stuff the bottom of the bottle full of cotton, and replace them in the suitcase. Seems like just too much to do within that time frame – unless – unless he had duplicate capsules pre-injected, got rid of all of Hill's original pills and replaced them with the poisoned ones."

"Brilliant," Melon said, delivering a single, overly exuberant clap.

The men thought in silence for a few moments. Melon spoke.

"We still have to account for how Winston's prints came to be on the prescription bottle."

Masters nodded.

"One thing seems certain," he said, "Whoever doctored or replaced the capsules did so after Hill took his Monday morning dose. That could mean that either the murderer wanted him alive at least through the ceremony where the three books were to be announced, or that he simply was unable to gain access to them before Monday morning."

"Or," Melon added in an uncommon burst of brilliance, "He wanted it to appear that the murderer was someone who had not had access to the pills before Monday morning."

"Very good, Deputy! Your insights always seem to complicate the case. Whose side are you on, anyway?"

Melon beamed, by now beginning to understand when the Old Detective was kidding.

Masters thought aloud.

"It would seem that the killer – if a party guest - was a very busy and well organized person between nine and ten. He had to fix the pills, rig the pigeon coop, and prepare the curare ring. However, if the killer as not a party guest, then

the pills could have been poisoned anytime between 6:30 Sunday morning – after Hill had taken his medicine – and 6:00 Monday morning – just before he took one for the last time. That would just have left the coop to be attended to between nine a.m. and the time Margo was killed.”

Melon frowned.

“I don’t understand why the killer would arrange to kill her twice – crossbow and poison.” He answered his own question. “Unless it was an elaborate plan to make us think two killers were involved.”

“That could be one possibility,” Masters answered, and then continued along his own line of thought. “Whoever did the crossbow rigging had to be able to gain access to the great room, the roof, and the halls and stairs that connect them, at a time of day when no one was around. That means night. There is no way to know how long it has been rigged and ready. I’d guess fairly recently so as to not risk detection – the new holes, the threads (even though they blended almost indistinguishably into the grain of the paneling) and the slight shifting of the crossbow’s position on the wall. My guess would be Sunday night. Let’s round up some alibis from nine p.m. Sunday until six a.m. Monday. Have Click verify the whereabouts of Kenny, Winston, Frank, Robert Hill – if anyone can report seeing him - and the two misters Rakes. Chances are it will produce El Zippo – all those people sleep alone.”

Melon looked at his watch.

“I brought the crossbow, the ring and the pill bottle like you asked. They’re in my trunk. Do you want them now?”

“Just the pill bottle. That just may be the key to all this.”

“I also brought the crutches and Margo’s purse, just in case.”

“Good. Let’s take a look at them. I haven’t personally examined either.”

* * *

Masters removed the contents of the purse one item at a time, placing each on the table. He then examined the empty purse, itself. The lining was loose at the bottom as purse linings often are. He pulled it out, bottom first. The discovery was obvious to him but had somehow escaped the

lab. "What do these white fibers look like to you, Deputy?"

Melon leaned close.

"Cotton?"

"That's what I'd say."

He then re-examined several of the things that were in the purse; the pen, small plastic squares, the wallet, keys, and lipstick. He pulled the pen apart thinking it might have held the curare or some tiny syringe. Nothing there. He did the same with the lipstick. Still nothing. There were four credit cards, a little over three hundred dollars in cash, a car rental receipt, and the usual name and address card. The 'Notify in case of accident' line had been changed so often it was nearly illegible. He picked up the monogrammed washcloth, looking at both sides. He smelled it. He held it up to the light examining the gray streak across its surface. A broad smile broke across his face and he nodded, knowingly.

Moving on, he said: "Let's have a look at the bottle."

Melon produced it from his briefcase. Masters removed the cotton from the bottom and held it up to the light.

"Look here! A brown-sided pill bottle with a clear bottom. Ever see such a thing before?"

Melon took it and looked it all around.

"No, Sir. Maybe it was specially made."

"You got it there, Deputy. I think we have this case just about wrapped up. Look at these pictures taken after Margo's death. All the pictures taken between 10:02 – the time of death - and 10:18 show Mr. Hill. Those taken between 10:19 and 10:25 show no Mr. Hill. From 10:26 on, he is back in the scenes."

"How do you suppose the photographer missed him?" Melon asked, slipping easily into his less profound mode.

"How indeed! We need to get Winston's permission to search Miss Adam's office."

That quickly secured, as Winston looked on, Masters began at the desk and Melon at the filing cabinet.

"We are looking for an envelope or letter from a Private Detective out of Kansas," Masters instructed.

Minutes passed. Drawer after drawer was carefully searched. File folder after file folder was methodically examined. Fifteen minutes had come and gone when

Masters, at last, uttered his patented expression:

“B-I-N-G-O!”

It was a large manila envelope at the bottom of the bottom right desk drawer covered by boxes of office supplies. On the front, in Miss Adam’s unmistakable, Palmer perfect hand, were the initials BAB – “Brent Allen Barry,” Masters mumbled as he straightened the brass clasp and opened the unsealed flap. It provided more than Masters had expected – the letter from the Private Detective that Stony had examined and a timeworn birth certificate bearing the somber, truncated name, Boy Adams. Suddenly Masters was saddened. He spoke his feelings.

“Poor Miss Adams. Such sorrow she has been enduring all these years.”

There was also a copy of a recent letter addressed to Brent. It warned of Hill’s plan to drop him. It was dated nearly three months earlier. Finally, there were the legal papers, which set up the trust funds for Brent’s children.

“Either Brent or this letter is lying to us,” Masters said. “Get Brent out here ASAP!”

Visible from under the calendar pad on her desk was the end of a white envelope. Masters pulled it out. It was unsealed and addressed to Winston. Masters handed it to him. He opened it and revealed its contents. Inside was a single sheet on which she had outlined her cruise itinerary and how to contact her if necessary. The company that had awarded the prize was FAB Enterprises, from Romeoville, Illinois. Masters handed the sheet to Melon.

“Let’s check out this company. We need it yesterday!”

“How do you think the cruise is involved in all of this?” Melon asked.

“Several possibilities. She could have booked it herself to provide an alibi for the time that Hill and/or Margo was killed – that is if she had a part in planning any of it. Or, she might have just not wanted to be here when Brent was here – thought she’d be uncomfortable, perhaps. And then there is the chance someone else booked it to make sure she was not here this week. I’m quite sure I know which of those alternatives is correct and your investigation of FAB Enterprises should clinch it.”

Melon left in search of Click. One had to wonder if Melon had used all of the time he spent looking for Click in actually doing police work himself, would he have even needed Click in the first place?

Masters excused himself and made his way to Hill's room. He located Hill's appointment book and turned to Saturday, the day both Brent and Kip said they had meetings with him. That was, they said, their reason for arriving a day early. Saturday's pages were blank, as were Sunday's. For such a meticulously organized man, that seemed odd – unless he wanted the meetings kept secret. He had met the men at their rooms rather than having had them come out to the Manor. That, too, seemed un-Hill-like. His return trip plane ticket was slipped between the two Tuesday pages. His departure time, arrival time and flight numbers were entered there. Oddly, the date and time on the ticket was Wednesday at noon. Masters turned to Wednesday. Sure enough, a flight had been entered there also – Wednesday at ten a.m. on American. That data matched the ticket. The Wednesday flight was direct to New York City. The Tuesday flight, however, appeared to be routed with plane changes at Dallas and Atlanta. Masters flipped back to Tuesday. There was a note: "Pick up at United counter." Had he booked a flight for someone else? Was he trying to disguise its destination by first flying southwest to Dallas? It presented a new and perplexing set of information.

In the pocket of the lid in Hill's brief case were several file folders. In one, were copies of several dozen of Margo's column. Seven of them were marked with a red "X" in the upper right hand corner. Masters quickly perused them, ascertaining that the highlighted passages in each of them were blatantly libelous. There was a copy of a letter from Hill's attorney to Margo, informing her of a proposed libel suit. In the letter of response from Margo's attorney, it was argued that since those statements had been clearly offered as the opinions of a reviewer, the libel allegation would not stand judicial scrutiny.

In the main section of the briefcase was, among other things, a manuscript titled, *The Secret Life of Margo White*. A brief scan revealed it to be an intentionally unflattering and

damaging treatise. Masters wondered if she had known about it.

He then opened the suitcase. Resting on top of the other things was a large manila envelope. He inspected the contents and found it to be the synopsis for Kip's next novel. It appeared that Kip had been telling the truth - at least about his delivery to Hill's room. Nothing in the contents of the suitcase seemed out of the ordinary.

Masters went down stairs, hoping to find Stony, his faithful fount of fascinating facts. He tried the kitchen first. In case his young associate was not there, he had visions of a short "sweet" break. As the gods would have it, both were to be. Stony and Kenny were attacking the largest bowls of chocolate swirl ice cream Masters had ever beheld.

"Wondered when you'd show yourself," Stony said, pushing out a chair with his foot. "Your ear been itchin'? We've been talking about you."

The boy giggled and Kenny raised his eyebrows in Masters' direction.

Jane explained.

"They've been conspiring to get you and Miss Adams together, if you know what I mean."

She made her point with an exaggerated wink and nod.

Masters sat down licking his lips in mock anticipation as he leaned in, beholding the delicious looking contents of Stony's bowl.

"Need I ask?" he said in Jane's direction.

"Coming up. Want a banana sliced up over yours?"

"You spoil him rotten, you know?" Stony said, beginning his protest. "You didn't ask us if we wanted bananas."

"If you'll recall, you two buffoons got your own ice cream."

He covered his mouth with both hands. The folly of his statement tickled him into rills of gyrating laughter. Masters watched, wearing both smile and frown, momentarily regretful that he had not known the continuous joy of watching a son grow up.

"Yes, to the banana," Masters said at last, knowing full well Jane had probably already begun slicing one. Then he turned to Stony who was gradually reacquiring his right mind.

“I need to pick your brain.”

“Better my brain than my nose.”

Again, a full body, roaring, palpitation.

Masters waited patiently as the lad regained his composure. Kenny shook his head and smiled. He and Masters exchanged a knowing glance. The ice cream with bananas was served.

Masters began again.

“Think back to Saturday. I need to know if you saw Mr. Hill drive away from here at any time.”

“Ya. He left about ten and got back about two-thirty. I was working on my tree house in the oak on the east lawn. I’d just come back out from having coffee with you and Kenny, remember?”

“I remember. That would have been about ten, I guess.”

“You doubt this brilliant brain of mine?”

“No. Just checking up on my own.”

“He pulled in just after I started up again mid-afternoon after I’d come in here for a snack. Sounds like all I do is eat. You sure I’m not related to you, Uncle Ray?”

Jane verified that Hill was not there for lunch on Saturday and Kenny agreed that he had seen him come back sometime between two and three o’clock. So, he could have kept the appointments that Brent and Kip referred to. Or he could have had a meeting with the Rakes men just down the road. Since Sally and Margo had not arrived until Sunday evening, he would not have seen either of them.

Masters pulled the seating plan from his pocket – the one he had retrieved from Les Rakes’ bag. He smoothed it out on the table so that Stony and Kenny could see it.

“Have either of you ever seen this before?”

Kenny leaned near to take a close look.

“Not me, Sir.”

Stony was more helpful.

“Sure. It’s the paper I used to write down the time for the photo shoot. It was all I could find on the phone stand when Les called the other day. That’s my impressive penmanship. When I write for others, I use cursive. When I write something I’m going to have read later, I print. You’d think my teachers would wise up and let me print for them.

Guess they'd just rather complain at me about my writing. Teachers!"

"Thanks for clearing that up for me – the writing of the note, not the treatise on teachers."

Stony smiled appreciatively at their private joke.

"By the way, Stony, have you seen Les Rakes here on the grounds lately?"

"Ya. Saturday morning, in fact. It was really early – around five o'clock or maybe just a bit after. He was headed out our driveway toward the road. I was coming in from the quarry south of here. I'd been sketching in the moonlight out there. I called to him. He seemed startled. When I got to him he said he'd come by to find Kenny – he knew Kenny got up early. He wanted to see about using the pigeons in the photo shoot. I told him I was sort of in charge of the pigeons these days. So, we talked. He said he'd get back to me. Then later on, he called, like I told you. That morning it almost seemed he had something else on his mind but he didn't say and I didn't ask. He looked pretty tired to be an early riser."

"Thanks again. I am, indeed, in your debt."

"A debt like that would be easily paid off by a trip up to the mall when all this stuff is over," Stony added, the imp fully revealed.

"It's a date," Masters confirmed.

"I really prefer younger, blond, females, but in a pinch, I suppose I could date you." Stony giggled. The two men shook their heads. Jane, hands on hips, shook her finger in the boy's direction.

Ice cream finished, the three men (Stony insisted he was one and with little encouragement would offer a single armpit hair as proof) went their separate ways. Masters walked toward the front of the house to await Brent's arrival. He was pulling in as the Old Detective closed the screen door behind him. Soon seated on the porch, hidden from the afternoon sun in a cooling shadow, Masters took out the folded copy of the letter to Brent from Miss Adams. He handed it to the young man.

"Do you recognize this?"

Brent took it and read it through.

"No, Sir. This is the first time I have seen this letter.

What's this all about, and who is this Adams woman that keeps popping up?"

"First things first. You say you did not receive the original of this letter. It could have been sent any time after the middle of April, I suppose."

"No. Like I said. I've never seen this letter. I've never heard of an Eleanor Adams."

Masters sighed, deeper than usual. What he was about to do – had to do – was going to turn Brent's world upside down at the worst possible time for him.

"There is only one way to approach all of this. Head on," Masters began.

"I have two other documents here that you need to know about – you may not want to know about them, but considering the total situation here, I think you must see them."

First, he handed Brent the birth certificate.

"By itself, of course, this only proves a relationship between you and her if the foot prints match – and it will be up to you whether or not you have that evaluated. The same goes for this lock of hair she kept from her newborn baby. DNA tests could determine with certainty if the hair is – was - yours."

Brent swallowed hard and looked up. Masters handed him the second set of papers – the trust funds. Brent scanned them, pausing over the relevant sections.

"This does represent the details of the trusts we received," he said, shaking his head in disbelief. "Why couldn't she just have stayed the hell out of my life?"

Tears rolled down his cheeks. His appearance was suddenly transformed into that of a helpless, frightened little boy. He lowered his face into his hands and cried, convulsively. The tears, of course, represented much more than the sudden appearance of his mother.

Consoling grown men was not one of Masters' long suits, so he sat in silence, offering whatever comfort his continued presence might provide. He thought to himself. 'If, in fact, the letter had never been sent – or had not arrived, for some reason – then there would be no connection as far as Brent was concerned.' He tended to believe Brent on the

matter. That would rule out any conspiracy between Brent and Adams toward Hill – or Margo, for that matter. So, if either Brent or Miss Adams were involved, they were involved as separate individuals carrying out separate deeds. How intriguing it would be if they had each, on his and her own, decided to destroy the same person. Even if not true, it would suggest a plot worthy of Winston Rafferty's authorship. Masters would pass it along.

Kip pulled up in a cab and stormed onto the porch.

"What in the hell's going on, Brent? You charge into my room, take the car keys and light out like a bat out of hell – all without so much as a word."

By mid-sentence, Kip sensed Brent's condition and his words trailed off, becoming less confrontational and more inquisitive. Kip looked at Masters for an explanation. Masters stood and spoke.

"In his own time, it will be up to Brent to decide whether this is something he wants to share with you."

"He's not under arrest, then?" Kip asked, relief clearly evident in his tone.

"No. He is not under arrest."

Kip, with far less experience at offering consolation - of any variety - than Masters, struggled with his options. He settled, in silence, for a hand on Brent's shoulder, which gradually developed into slow, circular, strokes across his upper back.

"Brent," Masters offered at last, "If you would rather stay out here tonight, there is plenty of room. Kip can stay, too, if you want."

Brent regained control of himself and looked up.

"Thank you – both of you. I think I'd just like to get back to my room and begin sorting things out. Maybe I'll call Mary - my wife. How much longer will I have to stay here?"

"Just tonight. I want both of you here at nine in the morning. All of the principals will gather in the great room at that time. I will present the evidence, clarify the several aspects of the case and announce its resolution."

"You have it solved?" Kip asked, clearly skeptical of Masters' proclamation.

"Lock, stock and barrel," Masters replied. "I will see

you then. In the meantime, Brent, if you need anything, just call. I know how to answer my phone 24 hours a day.”

DAY THREE: THE MORNING
Will the real killer please stand up!

From the restive deportment and animated mood, it appeared that no one at the gathering was particularly apprehensive about what was soon to transpire. There was, in fact, much general conversation about things quite unrelated to the case. Perhaps they were unreservedly innocent. Perhaps they were smugly overconfident. Perhaps they were merely trying to keep the inevitable at arm's length for just a little while longer.

Masters had decided a return to the scene of the first crime was an appropriate venue for his exposition. At his request, the chairs remained as they had been the morning Margo had died there.

Brent and Kip had arrived first and sat together in the center of the back row. Kenny and Jane took seats on the far-left end of the back row. Winston and Stony – at the boy's obvious urging, sat in the middle of the front row – Stony, of course, wanted the best seat in the house. Sally arrived, making an atypically subdued entrance, sitting alone on the right aisle of the back row. Less and Jake Rakes hesitated, surveying the seating arrangement and then chose to sit just to the left of Sally.

The States Attorney, Melon and Click sat to the right of Winston and Stony on the front row. That left only one of the three chairs on the right end of the front row for the late arriving Frank to choose from. He avoided the two aisle seats – formerly those of Hill and Margo – and sat next to Stony who was obviously glad to have him there and undoubtedly felt it

had been Frank's first choice.

A few moments later, Masters appeared through the French doors and made an intentionally dramatic entrance. The group hushed as the Old Detective's imposing figure – dressed in his more familiar three-piece suit and silk tie – stopped near the fireplace, turned, and looked out over the gathering. He made eye contact with each one, individually, sustaining it just long enough to let them know he acknowledged their presence. It seemed to some that his probing stare was scrutinizing the very depths of their souls. To others, it clearly demonstrated a warm gesture between friends. Perhaps the heart does define one's reality.

Without notes, relying only on his powerful mind, Detective Masters began.

"We are here to conclude this ghastly chapter in the days of Rafferty Manor. Two people have died. There were three attempts set in motion to accomplish that end. Were these crimes perpetrated by one or by more than one person? We will see that it was more than one. Were the victims the intended victims? Yes, they were and no they were not. Will the murders go to jail for their heinous crimes? No they will not."

Turning heads and furrowed-brow glances rippled through the gathering.

"There were two attempts on Robert Hill's life. The arrow from the crossbow had been carefully set to aim directly at his heart while he sat in the aisle seat of the first row. Who knew he would be seated there? All of you, if you glanced at the seating chart, which was provided to you in your invitation. The arrow that pierced Margo's torso had not been meant for her – unless, of course, Mr. Hill had rigged the bow and had plotted to intentionally change seats with her in order to throw suspicion away from himself. I will pursue the Crossbow aspect of the case later.

"Margo fell dead, seconds after being shot just under her shoulder – in itself, a non-lethal wound. She died of curare injected into her scalp by way of this ring."

He produced the ring from his coat pocket and showed it - in a slow, right to left arc - for all to see.

"Who had access to Margo during that crucial time.

Kenny, was the last person to touch her about her head before she entered the great room. He held the door in the hall outside and reportedly straightened her collar for her. As it turns out, that was the final true act of kindness shown toward Margo during her life. The form of curare found in her system was so potent that it would have caused instantaneous death. It could not, therefore, have been administered a full minute earlier by Kenny.

“Three other hands, each wearing a large gold ring, touched Margo’s scalp in the final seconds of her life – those of Kip Karter, Brent Barry and Robert Hill. Motives? Brent seemed to have less of a motive than most any other writer or publisher in the country. Anyway, his anger – as we shall see – was focused on someone else.

“Mr. Hill had the most to lose from Margo’s continued existence, but, in Margo’s purse was a note from Hill, asking her to meet him on the patio, out back, immediately after the ceremony. It was to discuss the terms necessary for Hill not to publish a most unfavorable tell-all book about Margo. Would he make such a request if he were planning to kill her prior to that time?

“Kip, it would seem, is the only choice left. The facts, however, don’t support that on two fronts. The ring, though large enough in size to fit Kip’s finger, had been downsized by the addition of a layer of material inside the ring. It would no longer have fit him. Also, Kip’s whereabouts after the murder are documented in photographs well after the ring had been placed in the kitchen sink and Jane had discovered that the drain was plugged. Brent’s post-murder itinerary is similarly accounted for.

“The sizing strip was made of epoxy – it bonds to virtually any surface. Traces of epoxy were found on the middle finger of Hill’s right hand. Mr. Hill is absent from the photo sequence just prior to the drain stoppage and his right thumbprint appears on the outside of the drain strainer in the kitchen. Earlier this morning, police in New York City questioned Hill’s wife about having procured the curare from a hospital where she performs surgery. She has confessed to that.

“The note remained bothersome until something

Winston said to me came to mind. 'Nobody ever thought more quickly on his feet than Robert Hill.'

"When he saw the arrow in Margo's chest he realized an opportunity to not only make sure she died, but to lay the blame directly on the other perpetrator whomever that might be. He quickly administered the curare - the deed, which he had planned to carry out during the private patio meeting later. Perhaps he intended to invite her for a walk in the woods. About that, we cannot be sure. So, he poisoned her, remained at the scene until the room was in a hubbub, left to get rid of the ring, and returned without being seen. Why poison her if the threat of publishing the book would have silenced her? Upon clear-minded deliberation, Hill probably realized it would have been a bad reflection on his well-respected publishing company to promote such a sleazy book.

"Shortly after Margo's death, Hill had to have realized that the arrow had been meant for him. Just what went on in his mind after that we cannot know. He chose to move up his departure time by a full day, even though it meant taking a circuitous route from here through Dallas and Atlanta in order to get back home to New York City. I think it is safe to assume that action was intended to get himself out of harm's way as soon as possible.

"Robert Hill was the killer of Margo White."

"In the case of the death of Robert Hill, we must consider two paths – one, the crossbow and the second the poisoned heart medication. Let us first explore the second.

"That Mr. Hill had a heart condition seemed to be no secret. Anyone wanting to discover the type of medicine he took certainly could have. Motives? With Hill gone, Sally could buy the company and control sales from writer to consumer. Using the publishing company as collateral, she could more easily fund the huge expansion of her book store chain. She cannot, however, be placed anywhere near Hill's medicine bottle since the time of her arrival. Was there an accomplice? Perhaps. Let's see.

"Frank Barstow may have had reason – revenge for the shabby treatment he felt Mr. Hill gave his father – treatment that Frank believes led to his father's suicide. Frank did have ample opportunity, living here in the Manor and having been

upstairs between nine and ten Monday morning when he knew Hill would be out of his room. Also, he works as a pharmacist's assistant with access to all kinds of drugs. The prison hospital with which he is connected, however, does not use curare and the records show that none has been purchased by that pharmacy during the past ten years. This may not rule Frank out, but it certainly does not rule him in.

Many would see Brent as the prime suspect. Hill dropped him as a writer, had treated him and his wife very badly during the past several years and was currently making unreasonable and less than compassionate demands on Brent's time for the book signing tour. Brent's wife is an operating room nurse – trusted and admired, she could have easily procured the curare, the syringe, and provided the know-how. But, again, Brent appears to have no access to Hill's medicine. He was missing without an alibi for some time Sunday night, but Hill's medicine could not have been tampered with until after he had taken his early morning dose at about 6:15 Monday morning.

"Kip, a diabetic, had the syringe, the know-how and the opportunity – well, sort of. He was, by his own admission, in Hill's room Monday morning, but the time line we have established through the photos gives him only two to three minutes at the maximum in that room. He could have brought a substitute supply of capsules, already injected and just switched them for Hill's regular supply. There would have been time for that. The problem presented in that theory lies in the number of capsules found in the bottle.

"The ideal approach would have been to inject every one of the capsules in Hill's bottle so he would have no reason to suspect anything was wrong – that none were missing. If it had been done ahead of time, it would seem that is how it would have been done – exchanging poisoned for original in a like number. As it was, the bottom two thirds of the jar was stuffed with cotton, apparently in the hope Hill wouldn't really look inside but just, from habit, open the lid, tap one capsule out into his hand and put the lid back in place. That way only a half dozen pills at the most would have needed to have been injected, suggesting the killer knew that his or her time in the room was going to be severely limited.

“There is something else about the container. It was not Mr. Hill’s original brown container. The one we found in Hill’s room was clear, made to look brown by placing pieces of brown, translucent plastic sheeting inside, held tightly against the outside with the cotton. Why go to all that trouble when the original would have obviously been less suspect? The killer’s plan also required removing the stick-on label from Hill’s bottle and reapplying it to the substituted container. More about all of this in a moment.

“Kip would not have had time to do the injecting, the bottle substitution and the label changing so would have relied on the total replacement method, which, at most would have required getting rid of the original capsules and replacing them with the doctored ones.

“Whoever did this, required a minimum of eight to ten minutes alone in the room. There were only three people on the premises who had that kind of opportunity – Jane, Kenny and Margo. Aside from the problem of procuring the curare, Jane and Kenny seem to be absolved by one other finding – again, in a moment.

“There is one other puzzling piece of evidence, which, on the surface, seemed to peg the killer, clear and sure. Winston’s fingerprints were on the pill jar. Not only were they on the jar but they were the only ones other than Hill’s, whose were layered over the top of Winston’s. It would appear that Winston had wiped the jar clean of Hill’s previous prints, then accidentally left a set of his own which were eventually partially covered by Hill’s when he opened the bottle on Tuesday morning. Aside from the total lack of motive, would a seasoned writer of mystery novels, allow himself to slip and leave a clear set of prints on the very bottle he had just wiped clean. I doubt that and I ‘m sure you do also. So how did they come to be there?”

“Monday morning, soon after Margo arrived, she spoke with Winston – at her specific request - in his den which is off the entry hall, opposite the great room. He reports that during their discussion – which, upon reflection seemed to be mostly about nothing – Margo dropped what she called her pain pill bottle from her purse onto the floor. Winston picked it up for her, she being on crutches. It was, however, a clear bottle –

clear until Margo later slipped the brown, plastic, sheets inside and added the cotton. She had cleverly maneuvered Winston into putting his incriminating prints on it. She had him drop it into her bag so that she did not need to touch it. Being clear and not brown became an added extra – it would be the wrong color to be suspect.

“Why begin with a clear bottle? Ninety-nine percent of all pill containers come in one of two varieties – clear or brown. Not knowing which Hill had, it was necessary to begin with a clear one on which to get the prints. Had Hill’s bottle been, clear, no brown plastic sheets would have been necessary. This way, all bases were covered ahead of time.

“After her meeting with Winston, she proceeded to Hill’s room, donned latex gloves and opened Hill’s suitcase and brief case with her screwdriver looking for the pills. Then she dumped most of the capsules down the drain, injected those that were left and put them into the new bottle. She switched the stick-on-labels and put the jar back into Hill’s suitcase. She had nearly twenty minutes according to the time line Deputy Melon and I developed.”

Melon smiled and nodded to both sides as if proudly accepting some high accolade. Masters acknowledged his assistance with a nod of his own.

“Several of the disposed of capsules were found in the drain trap of Hill’s bathroom sink, their sticky gelatin makeup having attached them to the pipe so they had not been flushed away with the others. Why not use the stool? Probably because of the noise it would have made and the attention it might have therefore attracted.

“The final missing links are fairly crucial pieces of evidence – the curare, the syringe and the latex gloves – none of which were found in Hill’s room, on Margo’s person or in her purse. In fact, up to this very moment their whereabouts remain unverified.”

Melon and Click nodded their agreement.

Several in the audience noted that odd word – ‘unverified’ rather than ‘not found’ or ‘still missing’. The Old Detective paused, moving to Deputy Click, who had brought Margo’s crutches at Masters’ request. Masters hefted the two crutches and picked one. He turned it upside down and

removed the rubber cap from the bottom. Taking a hooked wire from his inside coat pocket, Masters fished inside the hollow aluminum tube. First to appear, was a latex glove. Then, the syringe, still partially filled, and finally the second glove. Masters returned the crutch to Click and continued.

“With the syringe held tightly between the two gloves, it did not rattle or move inside the crutch and together the three items weighed so little that there was no obviously detectable difference in the weight of the two.”

Masters looked closely at the needle on the syringe.

“I’m sure the lab will verify my observation that there are traces of capsule gelatin on this needle.”

Click and Melon appeared dumbfounded by the disclosure.

“Now we know why Margo chose aluminum crutches over other more Margo-like alternatives. She obtained the curare through her current live-in boyfriend – the owner of a pharmaceutical company. He is already in custody and has admitted his participation.

“Finally, the monogrammed wash cloth in Margo’s purse. After she had sequestered the syringe and gloves inside the crutch, she needed something with which to remove her prints from the doorknobs and from the lower end of the crutch. On the one hand, that was an incredibly brilliant thing to do. In case we became suspicious of her and examined the crutch, we might well have ignored the inside, but if we had found her prints around the bottom – where they had no reason to be – we might have been prompted to think about looking inside. On the other hand, it led me directly to her hiding place. Aluminum oxidizes continually, leaving a gray-colored residue on its surface. When she rubbed the crutch to remove the prints, the washcloth absorbed some of that gray residue. It was a short trip from seeing the oxidation on the cloth to wondering why she would have wiped her own crutches. The rest followed quickly.”

“What was her motive? There were probably three. Margo could not be sure that Hill would not, at some time, reveal the contents of the uncomplimentary manuscript he had prepared. He was also suing her on several counts of libel and had conspired to get her column dropped by her current

syndicator. Together, those things would have effectively blackballed her within the industry and ruined her career. Murder is most often motivated either by passion or desperation. It seems both were driving forces for Margo.

“And, oh yes, the original pill bottle - the one from which she removed the label so it could be attached to the substitute bottle - where did she stash it? It was in her purse, cleverly filled with aspirin, ostensibly for her foot pain. A label had been removed from it and several impressions of Mr. Hill’s thumbprints were layered on the underside of the white plastic cap. Margo White murdered Robert Hill and, like Mr. Hill, she will not go to prison.

“And now, if I may indulge your patience for just a few moments. I need the assistance of Kip, Brent, Frank, Winston and Kenny. One at a time, when I point to you, I need you to stand, face the fireplace and say the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag.”

Again, heads turned and a hushed murmur passed among the guests. Masters signaled to Jake and Les who stood and turned toward the French doors, so they could not see who was speaking. In turn, each of the five men complied, and then, again, took his seat. At the conclusion, Jake and Les each gave a hand signal to Masters. They sat down and the Old Detective continued.

“Thank you, gentlemen. I will explain that deceptively patriotic side trip in a few moments. Now to the matter of the crossbow and the attempted murder of Robert Hill, which in reality became the non-lethal attempted murder of Margo White. Margo, Hill’s killer, had neither the skill nor opportunity to rig the crossbow and had a more certain and easier method in mind. Therefore, it had to be still a third party.

“You will recall that the arrow hit Margo in the shoulder. Such a meticulous person, if bent on her murder would have planned the trajectory to enter her body six inches lower, penetrating her heart. Since it seems reasonable to assume that the heart was the target, it gives even more credence to the idea that the arrow was meant for the taller, Robert Hill. In fact, our measurements suggest it would have hit Mr. Hill squarely in his heart. The perpetrator therefore either knew Hill well, or at least had sufficient access to him to accurately

estimate the necessary measurement.

“Several of you in our group of players possess the creative ability and technical skills needed to devise and rig the crossbow. Kip might be the first to come to mind since it is just such gadgets that take center stage in his novels. If it were Kip, it would suggest he was either flaunting his ability to elude detection – since he would have had to know he would be high on the initial list of suspects – or, was depending on the fact that no one would think him foolish enough to use his own trademark gimmick to commit the crime.

“However, it appears that Kip had no motive. In fact, it was in his best interest to keep Robert Hill – and his checkbook - alive and well for a long, long time. Second, Kip’s whereabouts have been easily traceable and he was just never near the Manor at a time when he could have arranged the set-up. It also seems unlikely that he even knew about the existence of the crossbow prior to entering the great room for the Book Launching event.

“Kenny had the skill and the opportunity but was low on motivation. Still, most of the paraphernalia used to rig the bow and the epoxy used to secure the chair to the floor were from Kenny’s workshop. Although he thought he had heard Hill threatening Winston, and it is probably true that Kenny’s loyalty to his employer and longtime friend is great, the facts soon to be revealed do not implicate him. Even more salient than the upcoming facts, Kenny is a fine human being who would have never included young Stony or his precious pigeons in such a heinous undertaking.

Masters looked directly at his old friend, Winston. “Winston, bless his heart, is all thumbs. Although he certainly could have devised the plan and had ample opportunity to arrange it, he could never have carried out such a precise set of manual maneuvers. He could have employed his good and trusted friend, Kenny, who had the necessary skills, but Winston, like Kenny would never have involved his friends or beloved grandson in such a plot. He certainly would never have jeopardized the security and happiness of Stony’s future by involving himself – Stony’s only family - in such a risky undertaking. Then there is also the matter of motivation.

“Hill and Winston had a long and mutually beneficial

relationship. Though to say they were friends would be stretching the point absurdly, they certainly carried no personal animosity toward one another.

“As I indicated earlier, Brent had, perhaps, as much personal reason to hate Hill as anyone here. He is brilliant, clever, and knowledgeable about such things as crossbows. He had opportunity – as noted before – on Sunday night. Like Kip, however, he had no previous knowledge of the crossbow’s existence.

“This appears to leave us with the Rakes men and Frank – all of whom had the necessary know-how, knowledge of the crossbow, opportunity, and varying degrees of motivation. To this day, Jake readily voices his intense dislike of Winston and on several occasions, has done things in attempts to discredit him and harm his property. A murder at the Manor would certainly continue that established tradition. It was Les Rakes who contacted Stony for the use of the pigeons and set the time for the shoot. He insists that some mysterious stranger, whom he never met so cannot describe, gave that time to him over the phone. Dedicated fishermen, the two of them certainly had the paraphernalia used to rig the weapon. Les, in fact, was seen leaving the Manor early on Saturday morning, placing him where he would have had to have been in order to carry out the preparations.

“The fact that Jake says he was called away to deal with straying cattle at the time of the shoot, poses a problem. Rather than giving him the firm alibi for the time of the murder, which he would have had if he had remained in the presence of Les and Stony, he lost it, by leaving. Some other person, wanting to cast Jake as a suspect might well have had him called away just to eliminate any such alibi. The fact remains, however, that Jake has no alibi for the exact and only possible time that the final rigging of the coop on the roof had to have been carried out. I shall return to the Rakes men momentarily.

“Then there is Frank – mild-mannered, efficient, likeable, Frank, who just dropped in by coincidence and suddenly found himself in the middle of a double murder scene. Did he have sufficient motivation? Probably. Passionate revenge against the man he thinks was responsible for his father’s final personal torment and death.

Know-how? Most certainly – a gadgeteer since Jr. High school, he had the skill and creativity. Intelligence? According to his yearbook, Frank was Valedictorian of his high school class. Knowledge of the crossbow? Yes, in fact the reason he had given for contacting Winston in the first place was to write a piece involving all of the gifts here. Opportunity? Once he arrived, there were several days and nights available for him to plan the arrangement and to rig the weapon.

“There are several problems involved in establishing Frank as the attempted murderer. First and foremost is the fact of the coincidence - that up until Miss Adams left on the cruise that she won, Frank had no possibility of being here during this get together.

“Let me explore the cruise. One possibility is that Miss Adams won it outright as she explained. Initially, no one had reason to doubt that. Another is that she had reason to want Frank here – perhaps she and someone else had planned the murder attempt and needed a scapegoat with both the skill and motive. So, she took advantage of Frank’s original phone call and orchestrated his appearance to take her place while she arranged for her own cruise. Winning it as a ‘prize’ would tend to make her look blameless in the whole affair. Initially it appeared that she just might have used fifty thousand dollars from her savings to pay an accomplice. Although it was determined that the money actually went elsewhere, that fact did not let her off the hook. The fear that she would be caught and go to prison might have motivated her to dole out her funds when she did. As intriguing as that scenario is, it was not the way things happened.

“The true scenario of events happened in this way. The perpetrator rigged the bow during the night on Sunday. I had admired it from the floor on Sunday afternoon and had taken note of the small, brass hooks holding it in place, thinking that for as many decades as it had hung there, those hooks were most likely real brass and not modern day, plated aluminum, substitutes. They were at that time still in the original upward position.

“Sunday night, up on the roof, the upper ends of the threads were dropped down behind the vent pipe – out of the

line of traffic. That same evening the chair was secured in place after the firing trajectory was precisely measured and set. The other chairs were then arranged using that key position as the starting point.

“After Stony left with the pigeons on Monday morning the threads which had been pre-fitted the night before were quickly put in place around cage. The parade of guests up and down the stairs and in and around the second-floor hallway probably kept the perpetrator in the attic longer than had been intended – that person not wanting to be seen, in case we actually figured out the clever procedure. My guess is that person was quite certain we would not figure it out. Otherwise, more caution would have been exercised in clearing fingerprints from the sinkers, the fishing line spool and the package of epoxy. I have to believe the perpetrator planned to go back Monday night and fill in the holes and return the hooks to their original positions thereby confusing any investigation of them. Unfortunately, we investigated them immediately.

“Earlier, during this get together, I had Jake and Les Rakes listen to the voices of our several possible suspects to see if they could identify the one that had made the phone calls relating to the photo shoot and the stray cattle. Without seeing who was speaking they were able to agree on the same voice and they each, independently, indicated that to me with a hand signal.

“Finally, back to Miss Adam’s free cruise. It was a phony contest and, just as she had insisted all along, she had not entered it. It had been devised to take her away from Rafferty Manor at this crucial time. The company that paid for the cruise was FAB Enterprises. Ironically, the two actual killers will serve no time in prison. Tragically, however, the crossbow rigger, attempted murderer, and sole proprietor of FAB Enterprises – Frank Allen Barstow, will.

///

EPILOGUE

Forever after

Robert Hill's wife, Rosalind, and Margo White's lover, each received three years for aiding and abetting the commission of a murder. Frank received 12 years for attempted murder. (He would serve five.)

Kip and Brent kept in touch, and Kip was there for his new friend during those hours of personal anguish following his grievous loss. (They both benefited from Kip's presence.)

Sally purchased Hill Publications and offered lucrative, long-term contracts to Kip, Brent, and Winston. She also added a mysterious new, and immediately successful, romance writer, 'Eleanor Manor'. Sally undoubtedly had no idea what she was in for when she patted Stony on his head and blithely agreed to read and consider his first manuscript. (I believe his parting remark was, "Give me three weeks!")

Young Stony's sad disillusionment with his new friend, Frank, was cushioned, somewhat, by his grandfather's explanation that occasionally even good people do bad things, sometimes because forces, which they cannot control, misguide them. Most things about Frank were good and positive. Stony would eventually become content to remember him for those traits and would write to him faithfully every Sunday evening. (After all, that was the kind of thing a Rafferty did.)

Winston and Jake began passing the time of day in a civil manner as they encountered each other. Nothing implying friendship would develop but the outward animosity dimmed.

Jane's sister was soon moved into Happy Hollow, a long-term care facility for fickle females. She had a very pleasant, very safe and very well padded room, where she seemed quite content, singing her hymns at night while watching the fluttering bats through the large skylight in the ceiling. (We should all have it that good!)

On September first, Jane and Kenny exchanged wedding vows at the fireplace in the great room of Rafferty Manor. Winston, Stony, Miss Adams, and Masters attended.

Kenny and Stony filled the holes in the wall and re-hung the beautiful old work of Gypsy craftsmanship. Stony was overheard consoling the crossbow, saying, "Sometimes even good crossbows do bad things because of forces beyond their control."

Eventually, Brent approached Miss Adams. Their first, tentative, chilling, handshake would grow into decades of warm and loving, hugs and kisses.

And so concludes The Revenge of the Restless Crossbow. (However, if you have evil in your heart, you might be well advised to steer clear of seats on right-hand aisles.)

THE END