



The Case of the
**Despicable Duo
Murders**

GARRISON FLINT

"Two murders, or was it
four? Masters will get
things straightened out."



**The Case of the
Despicable Duo Murders**

A Raymond Masters Mystery

BOOK TWELVE

by
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CHAPTER ONE

DAY ONE: THE MORNING

It was an altogether pleasant morning as the airport limo carrying Detective Raymond Masters wound its way across the gently rolling, pine populated, countryside, traveling southwest from Bloomington. It was Masters' first visit to southern Indiana and it felt comfortable, homey, easy going. All of that was in stark contrast to the multiple murders which had summoned him to the area.

He had been engaged by George Rockefeller - no relation to the political family, though vast sums of money would play a part in it all. At least that was the contention of the local prosecuting attorney. As Masters understood things, George had been accused of killing his wealthy brother, Tom, and his nephew, Stephen, in an alleged plot to grab the family fortune.

It was a family plagued by tragedy. Alicia, Tom's wife - Stephen's mother - had drowned in a boating accident when her son was four. At eighteen, Stephen had been involved in a hit and run accident in which another boy was killed. The jury, expertly manipulated by Tom's high profile defense attorneys, acquitted Stephen of negligence, though no one other than, perhaps, the jurors seemed to believe it.

Stephen had been dead a full month before Masters was brought into the case. No question of accidental death could be raised there. The handsome, though generally disliked, twenty-nine-year-old had died a slow and excruciating death - clearly at the hands of someone bent on the most passionate variety of retribution.

More recently, Tom (Stephen's father) had been shot - cleanly and swiftly, through a window - by a high-powered rifle as he stood in his study on the third floor of his lakefront mansion. That had taken place three days before and forty-eight hours later George was the chief suspect in his brother's murder. He had not been officially charged in the case because the evidence was strictly circumstantial. Masters would meet with him later in the morning.

The two had become acquainted several years before at the prestigious Gathering of Marksman - a pistol, bow, and knife competition in southern New York state where Masters was a regular judge.* George had placed second over-all, a success which would certainly be turned against him by the prosecutor.

George owned five percent of Tom's manufacturing company. It provided a comfortable living for a man who openly disdained the flaunting of wealth and the accumulation of useless and unnecessary trappings - a life-long point of contention between the brothers.

George - forty-nine and never married - lived across a small lake from his brother's mansion, in what was reported to be a relatively simple, six room cabin. He owned a small lake-sized yacht and drove a mid-size Chrysler. He lived a simple life and several local charities regularly benefited from his generosity.

Masters knew killers. He felt certain George didn't qualify. And so, it was that he arrived at the family mansion that Thursday morning.

Set between the base of a gently sloping hill in back and a small lake in front, it was a gaudy, ostentatious, three story structure, of brown stone and red brick. Its mid-twentieth century style was reflected in towers and cupolas, dormers, and strangely set, ornate, stained glass windows. The money spent on the handmade, dark green, tile roof alone - imported from Mexico - would have surely supported a family of four in fine style for ten years with an adequate surplus to see the children through college. A six-car garage was nestled into the hillside, uniquely, beneath a lavish, kidney shaped swimming pool. The pool was surrounded by weathered, wooden decks that cascaded onto several levels - according

to no apparent plan - down the slope toward the circular drive.

The house faced the lake across a wide, perfectly cropped lawn. It was at the front steps of the long, narrow, two-story, front porch, that Masters exited the limousine. The driver deposited the suitcase on the walk, tipped his hat and drove away. Masters turned toward the lake - gently rippling, azure blue, and inviting.

"Simply beautiful," he said out loud, hands on hips, and nodding as if to emphasize the growing accuracy of his assessment. It was perhaps a mile long and half as wide, appearing to be the work of Mother Nature with only minimal meddling by mortal hands.

"It deserves a beautiful name," he said, again out loud.

"Didn't get one," came a young, male voice from behind him. "Well, not unless you would consider Lake Rockefeller, beautiful."

Masters turned to see a boy and girl moving toward him from around the east side of the mansion. His initial estimate was early high school age. The boy extended his hand in a very un-boy-like fashion.

"We're Les and Pat, twins, fraternal obviously, unique in most every way."

Masters smiled his warm, broad, smile and accepted the boy's hand, tickled by the unusual introduction.

"Good to meet you, Les. I'm Ray, Ray Masters.

"Oh, I'm not Les. That's my sister, here - Leslie Suzan to be specific. I'm Pat - Patrick William. Good to really be meeting you, too, Sir."

"I stand corrected, I guess."

"No problem. We get that all the time. Before we were born, Mom decided the first one would be Leslie - a name that works for either sex - Mom's Grampa's name. The second would be Pat - Patricia if a girl, Patrick if a boy. Her brother's name. So, now you know a whole lot more about us than you ever wanted to, I'm sure."

"Not at all. Always interested in finding out about my new friends."

The twins looked at each other and smiled, clearly pleased to be acknowledged as friends.

"We could have predicted that," Les said, nodding

thoughtfully and extending her hand. "We're big fans of the Flint books."

"I see. Well, just keep in mind that Flint has no compunction about playing loose with the facts to make my typically mundane cases into something salable."

They nodded and chuckled, not buying for one second that the Raymond Masters Mysteries were not authentic right down to the raspberry twisters he was said to consume by the pound.

"I assume that Leslie Suzan and Patrick William have a last name."

It was a question.

The two looked at each other and giggled.

"Another unique attribute about to be revealed, I assume," Masters said, interpreting their response aloud.

"My sister is Les Jones. I'm Pat Smith."

"You're pulling my leg, of course," Masters said, brow furrowed above his broad, smiling cheeks.

"Afraid not. If you want the whole story perhaps we should sit in the gazebo over there."

They walked toward the two story, open structure. It was octagonal, twelve feet in diameter with white posts and lattice-work. Evergreen ivy wove its way from place to place, softening its stark lines and lending color to its otherwise bland appearance. Comfortable patio chairs were arranged for easy conversation. Masters and his two new young acquaintances were soon seated.

"Okay. Give! You've whetted the old detective's curiosity."

Pat began.

"We are probably the most unusual twins you'll ever meet."

"It will be hard to beat the pair I just had to deal with in The Case of the Twisted Twins Murders**," Masters said, offering a friendly challenge.

"Got them beat by a country mile," Les said, smiling.

Pat continued.

"We were born on two different days, in two different months and in two different years."

"I'm up to that," Masters said, staring off into space as if

deep in thought. "Les was born at 11:45 pm or so on December 31st and Pat, you made your entrance shortly after midnight on January 1st."

"Very good, Sir," Pat said, clapping his hands slowly and deliberately, as if to emphasize how impressed he was with Masters' quick grasp of their unusual circumstances.

"The part about your last names escapes me, I'm afraid," Masters admitted, clearly eager to hear the explanation.

Les began. "Not as complicated . . ."

Pat interrupted, glowering at his sister.

"I started the answer so it's my place to finish it!"

"Who gave you jurisdiction over our life story?" Les came back, crossing her arms and mounting a pout. She sat back.

Pat ignored her remark and continued.

"Not as complicated as it appears. Mom was in the process of getting a divorce from our father - a man we never met. It became official on January first - that was also when she officially went back to her unmarried name. So, Les's birth certificate has Mom's married last name and mine has her maiden name."

"But Smith and Jones?" Master asked.

It was a question!

"That's just a freakish accident, I guess," Les said, forcefully intruding herself into the explanation. "No fascinating story about it, I'm afraid."

Pat was not to be outdone.

"Actually, we both go by Mom's and my name, Smith. I always thought Jones had more class but it makes life as a family easier this way."

"One might guess you two were brother and sister," Masters said.

"We do look alike, don't we?" Les said.

"Well, yes, no doubt about that, but I was referring to the way you relate - the banter. Perhaps, bicker, is a better term."

"Pat shrugged.

"What can I say? It's what we do!"

The two of them put their heads together, exaggerating

smiles and feigning a pose for the portrait of loving siblings.

Masters shook his head in delight.

"I must admit your story tops any twins' tale I've ever heard. I assume you live around here."

"Two, hideous, gothic, architectural disasters to the east," Pat said as Les pointed and nodded.

Masters turned in his seat to take a look.

"Gothic disasters indeed."

He shuddered through a wrinkled face to playfully emphasize his agreement.

"Yeah. Every night is Halloween-scary around here," Pat added.

His delivery suggested it was not meant to be entirely humorous. Masters took note without comment.

"Shows of opulence," Les added as if to both clarify and underscore that she joined her brother in his displeasure.

"You two sport quite a vocabulary for - what are you - fourteen year olds?"

"Very good. Yes. Almost fourteen and a half actually - ninth graders," Les explained.

"We plan to be co-valedictorians when we graduate," Pat added, feeling the need to respond to the initial question Masters had implied.

The two of them had a penchant for precision. It intrigued Masters but again he opted not to pursue it.

"Well," he said, struggling his bulk onto its feet and consulting his big pocket watch at arm's length, "I am supposed to meet George Rockefeller here just about now, so I suppose I should move back toward the house."

He surveyed the mansion as the youngsters also stood.

"How many rooms must it have?"

He had not expected an answer. He would soon learn that few questions would go without response when the twins were present.

"Twenty-two, not counting the garage and the pool house which has three," Pat offered.

"Ours has a measly fourteen - that's four and two thirds a piece," Les added sarcastically, her eyebrows raised.

"No brothers or sisters, then?" Masters asked.

"Nope. Two seem more than sufficient for Mom."

It came from Pat and was dropped without the usual clarification. The boy turned back toward the lake.

"That's George now," he said, pointing to the approaching boat. "His place is directly across there."

"We hope you can get him out of this mess," Les said.

"Extricate would have been a better word," Pat said.

Les ignored her brother.

"George is the only one of the Rockefeller clan that's worth saving. We like him lot. So, does most everybody else around here. I think that always irked Tom."

"Irked! Now that was a good word," Pat said nodding his approval.

Apparently, their mutual critiques did include positive strokes when appropriate. That pleased the old man.

The two of them began waving at the boat as they ran toward the dock. Their gesture was returned in kind by George.

The man was tall and slender, well built in a tennis player sort of way. He was gray only at the temples and sported a deep tan, which contrasted pleasantly against his light blue shirt and walking shorts. Les and Pat helped him tie up. It was clearly a well-practiced operation. The three of them - arm in arm in arm - then approached Masters who had waited on shore.

The two men shook hands - firm and brisk with pats to the shoulders as would be expected between friends.

"Good to see you again, old man," George said, then attempted to temper it. "Old man, as in good and wise friend, of course."

"Of course," Masters said, smiling back. "It appears you know my two, new, young friends, here,"

"Oh, yes. Two of the nicest, smartest kids you'll ever meet. I'd gladly claim them as my own but that would involve still another last name and, well . . ."

He let it trail off, enough having been said to provide chuckles all around.

"Yes. They've given me the explanation and your characterization certainly coincides with my own first impression."

"We better be on our way," Pat said clearly pleased at

the kind words.

“You are staying where, Sir, if we may ask?” Les questioned.

Masters looked at George for some guidance on the matter.

“Here, if you don’t mind. Polly’s got things ready for you - she’s the maid, cook, and ersatz head of the place.”

Pat had to comment. “Ersatz is probably not the best descriptor - self-proclaimed would be more appropriate.”

George ruffled Pat’s hair and turned to Masters.

“Sometimes having them around is fully exhausting, you know.”

“And that probably should have been exasperating,” Pat continued, intentionally impish in his delivery. It was his way of underscoring and conceding George’s point.

“Go home, now,” George said, playfully, pointing toward the east.

The twins grinned and moved off across the lawn.

“Don’t be strangers,” Masters called after them.

Continuing on their way, Pat raised his hand high, indicating that he understood.

“Two super kids,” George said. “Lots of love between them. Not sure where it comes from, knowing their mother. I shouldn’t have said that.”

He sighed.

“Where do we go from here?” he asked, turning the conversation back to Masters.

“First, what’s the story about the beautiful, azure, tint to the lake?”

“Copper. One theory is that the depression was made by a meteor thousands of years ago, and that it contained high copper content. Pat’s theory, on the other hand, is that the James gang hid a million pennies in a cave down there - not traceable like currency and easier to spend than gold. He religiously searches for the depository in his scuba gear. Either theory works fine for me. Something sure made it a beautiful lake.”

Masters nodded and smiled, the topic laid to rest.

“Let’s get me settled in. You can fill me in on the whole story as we go.”

“Whole would require a difficult, half-century long, journey back in time.”

“Then let’s begin with a shorter version. You can add pertinent details from the long picture as seem appropriate.”

George picked up the large, single suitcase and opened the door ahead of Masters.

Polly met them in the entry hall and George made the introductions.

“A pleasure to meet you, Polly,” Masters said. “I understand you run this place.”

Polly looked at George and smiled, assuming he had been the source for the compliment.

“I do my best, Sir. Your room is here on the first floor - the steps you know,” she offered. “Follow me.”

Her logic - clearly tied to Masters’ size - both amused and pleased him.

The room, though not large, was pleasant, offering a wide view of the lake. It was appointed with king sized bed, and comfortable looking, upholstered chairs arranged around a small, oval, writing table in front of the window.

“If you need anything at all, dial seven - that’s ‘P’ for Polly - my idea. Lunch is usually at noon and dinner at six, but since it’s only you, just give me a half hour notice and I’ll fix you whatever you want - anytime.”

“You’re very kind, Polly. Thank you. Actually, I’m a fair hand in a kitchen myself. Perhaps I can just fend for myself.”

“As you like, but I really need things to do. Haven’t been earning my keep around here since the tragedies.”

The word was powerful but its delivery was devoid of appropriate emotion.

“In that case, I’ll do my best to keep you constructively occupied.”

He leaned toward her and whispered, “My real weakness is pastry.”

He patted his stomach.

She leaned back.

“One of my specialties. We’re going to get on just fine.”

She turned to leave then came back, reaching into the wide pocket along the bottom of her white apron.

“The Smith kids - down the road - left these and said to

be sure you got them as soon as you arrived.”

It was a pack of raspberry twisters.

“They are Flint fans” Masters said turning and raising the package toward the window as if in a gesture of thanks to the now departed youngsters.

Polly left. Masters began hanging his clothes in the closet and arranging things in the dresser. George took a seat by the window and began his story.

“It’s no secret that I never liked my older brother - nor he me. He was a pompous ass with not a strand of moral fiber in his being. It was the same between Steve and me. I found nothing likeable about the boy once he got old enough to talk. Often thought they’d have done better to have sent the boy back and kept the stork. That’s probably a terrible thing to say but I figure honesty is the best way to go here. Steve was the kind of person who took pleasure in other beings’ pain and if they had none, he gladly inflicted some - ants, fish, dogs, people - all the same to Stephen.

“As much as I disliked them both, I would never have harmed a hair on their heads - cliché, I know, but it’s the truth as well.”

“Are you suspected in both deaths?”

“Just Tom’s - at least at this point.”

“And the evidence against you?”

“Like I told you on the phone, Tom was shot once through the forehead as he stood looking out the window of his study on the third floor, here. A single shot from a hunting rifle. The angle of the shot apparently establishes that it came from an open window on the second floor of my cabin. My place is on higher ground than this one, half a mile across the lake. Since the accusation, I’ve scoped it out and yes, it could well have come from there. It couldn’t have come from the dock or a boat - wrong angles. Same with the houses to the east or west of mine.

“It’s particularly bad for me because of my skill with guns. I’d guess that only one in a thousand good marksmen could make that shot and I’m one who could.”

“I take it you have no alibi for the time of the shooting?”

“I was walking - hiking - around the lake. I was on the western shore when the shot was fired. No homes over there

and at 9:17 at night there was no one around to see me.”

“Hiking at night?”

“I often do that. Love to watch the moonlight reflect off the lake - like dancing moonbeams. Lots of folks can vouch for the fact that I’m out and around at strange hours.”

“The rifle?”

“Most likely German made, they say. I don’t own one that could pull that off. Apparently, that doesn’t matter to the prosecutor’s office. They’ve been searching the lake bottom to find it. Fat chance I’d have dumped it in the family lake. Not sure how he expects to tie it to me even if one is found.”

“So, the case is based on three facts: Your open dislike for your brother, the apparent origin of the shot, and your expertise with a rifle.”

“Right. Plus, the fact that I just lost a bundle in a bad investment. All my life I’ve wanted to distance myself from Tom’s company. An opportunity finally came along and I jumped at it. It was to have provided me with nearly as much income as my five percent in TR Manufacturing. Once that happened, I was going to sell my TR stock back to the company and finally cut the cord - be free of family ties.

“But, the plan went belly up. The financial reports had been tampered with - expertly, I’ll tell you that. My own accountants had looked over every penny that had supposedly come in and gone out over the past ten years. They were fooled completely. So, I now have virtually no savings, my few real estate holdings are mortgaged beyond what they’re worth, and I’m in danger of losing my TR stock to cover what I owe. It’s not the loss of money that bugs me. I can deal with that. It’s how it makes me look desperate in the eyes of those folks who just assume everybody’s bottom line is always money.”

“Like the prosecuting Attorney?” Masters asked.

“Like him.”

Masters walked to the window and squinted, looking toward the far shore. He nodded and turned back to George.

“Well, I’ve known of men who were hanged on the bases of no more circumstantial evidence than they seem to have against you, and it appears that we may not be able to counter any of it. So, we need a different tack. Who else

might want the two of them dead?”

“The short list would number in the hundreds. Like I said, they were not the kind who gave people reason to like them.”

“If we assume - for the time being, at least - that the two murders are connected, perhaps we can cut that number down. I'd like you to take that on as your first task in all of this. Pare down the short list to those who had reason to want them both dead.”

“Okay. It's hard to know where to begin, but I'll give it a shot - poor choice of words, I'm afraid.”

“What about neighbors? It might be as simple as some long-held grudge. Either or both of them do any of these folks wrong? I assume the family sold off the lots to them.”

“Right, we did, and at prices far beyond what they were worth.”

“Why buyers, then?”

“As hard as it is for me to comprehend, it seemed many people thought it was worth getting gouged just to be able to say they had built close to the Rockefeller's Mansion. Absurd but true. For some folks, their address seems to be everything.”

“Any grudges there?”

“None that I ever knew about, but I've always tried hard to keep some distance between me and that kind of scuttlebutt.”

“What's the possibility some enemy of yours is trying to get you in trouble - get you out of the way or punish you for something?”

“I hadn't considered that. I have no personal enemies that I know of.”

“Interesting choice of word - personal.”

“I intended for it to separate myself as a person, from the enemies of the company - of which I could be considered a part.”

“I see. A point well taken, I'm sure. No ex-girlfriends or angry boyfriends or husbands of the women in your life?”

“Again, not that I know of. There have always been women so I assume that's a possibility, although the chance is pretty slim, actually. The women in my life have always been

high class, if you can understand what I mean. I never promised either love or permanence. I can't imagine that any one of them would be inclined to consider something like this. I strive to always part friends. No love children, I'm quite sure of that."

"How about Tom or Stephen in that department?"

"Kids? Well, not from Tom for sure. When we were kids, our dog once had a litter of seven pups. Tom drowned the four females the very night they were born. He always hated women and made no secret of it. Married Alicia for appearances only. Had Stephen for the same reason - it was playing the expected and necessary role that he felt went with his position. His bottom line was always money. He certainly felt more comfortable in the role of the bereaved husband than he had maintaining the image of a devoted spouse.

"But Stephen is an entirely different story. I know for sure of several kids and probably a dozen terminated pregnancies. Now there's a thought in regard to the neighbors. Steve slept with every woman on the lake - well, most of them at least. Married, unmarried, high school girls. He was a pleasure driven, power motivated, degenerate. His downfall could have easily been related to something like that."

"Names and dates - as best as you can reconstruct them," Masters said. Then as an afterthought asked, "The twin's mother?"

"Oh, yes. Off and on from the time he reached puberty."

"Polly?"

"Goodness no! Polly was like one of his mothers."

"Again, an intriguing choice of words - 'one of his mothers'."

"Steve didn't really remember his mother, Alicia. I spoke with him about that on several occasions. He asked questions about her and I tried to answer them the best I could. Apparently, his father wouldn't. From the moment he was born, he had a nanny - Hazel. She cared for him 'til he became a teenager. Tom let her go when the boy was about fourteen. I imagine it was at Steve's insistence. She probably cramped his love life. So, after that Polly was the only mother-

figure he had. I suppose she loved him in a detached sort of way.”

“Do you know where Hazel is now?”

“In town with a new family. I see her from time to time. She’s always friendly and makes time to talk and reminisce.”

“I’ll want to speak with her.”

“Sure. Not a problem. Just say when.”

“What has been the relationship between the Prosecutor and your brother?”

“Relationship? I’m not sure there was a relationship. Tom may have contributed to his campaigns - I’m not sure. I certainly didn’t - another thing that probably isn’t helping my cause right now.”

“Problems with him?”

“Not really.”

“He own any TR stock?”

“No. It’s a closed company - only family members have stock.”

“Just what does family include?”

“Now, just me - not a good thing let me tell you. Our parents are dead - long ago. Neither one of them had brothers or sisters. Steve was the only child and Alicia the only spouse.”

“So, you are suddenly worth . . .?”

“Many millions - hundreds of millions I suppose, provided you can get me off the hook for the murders. I haven’t had reason to look into it. The company is running itself - Tom had an excellent management team. I met with them the day after Tom’s death. Then, once I became the chief suspect I felt it best to just stay away until all of this gets straightened out.”

“A wise strategy. I’m starved. How about you?”

“Not much of an appetite lately you understand. I have some errands to run. Brought you a cell phone - understand you don’t have one.”

He handed it to Masters.

“Probably a good idea. Thanks. May I assume that if I speed dial something I’ll get you?”

“4-7”

“G-R. You and Polly in cahoots?”

“Actually, I did take the idea from her.”

“And I press this button to answer and this one to make a call?”

“Right.”

“Better be. One says ‘CALL’ and the other ‘ANSWER’.”

They chuckled. Masters dialed 7 on the house phone.

“Polly, my dear. Just wanted to alert you that I’m making my way toward the kitchen. Perhaps a sandwich of some kind. Keep it easy.”

The two men left the room together. George pointed Masters in the direction of the kitchen.

“That hallway, fourth door on the right.”

He headed for the front door, promising to check back later in the day.

Masters’ immediate mission had two goals: sustenance and information. The help always knows everything. He understood that from long years of experience. It was where he preferred to begin each new case.

After a brief, errant, stop in a linen closet, he recounted the doors in the hallway and was soon entering the kitchen. It was bright and pleasant - spic and span would be the appropriate term. The cooking and baking area was at the far end with a large, oval, table and chairs near the door. An outside entrance was just to the west of the table.

“Take a load off,” Polly said, pointing to the dining area. “Understand you’re a Reuben Man.”

It was in no way a question. She cut fresh slices of dark rye bread from a still warm, home-made loaf, smothered them in sauce, layered on the corned beef, and ladled up a generous portion of well drained sauerkraut snuggled in between slices of the meat.

Masters watched with interest. Polly commented on her style.

“Never let the kraut touch the bread – that makes for a soggy sandwich.”

Masters nodded.

“Chips okay?” she asked

“Chips will be fine.”

“Pickle? One slice or two?”

“Let’s go whole hog.

The plate was delivered. The chips turned out to be homemade like the bread. The first bite proved its worth.

“Polly! This is magnificent. Please, sit and join me.”

She poured two coffees and took a seat across the table.

“Thank you, Sir. The twins said you’d be a real person.”

“Real?”

“Not fake with a air of over-importance like most everybody here on Rocky.”

“Rocky?”

“It’s what the lake is called - Lake Rockefeller, officially I guess. Like I said, he named it after himself - over-importance if you see what I mean.”

“And George? Does he fit your description?”

“George? Oh, no, Sir. George is as kind and down to earth as they come. Always figured that as a baby he’d been delivered to the wrong house. Since Hazel left, he’s been one of the few comfortable people out here.”

“You know I’m here to investigate the two deaths.”

“Yes, Sir. George filled me in.”

“Over the years, I have learned that cooks, maids and butlers are my very best sources of reliable information. Will you help me?”

“Of course, but I should tell you one thing up-front.”

“And that would be?”

“I ain’t doin’ it for Mr. Tom or Stevie. It’s for George.”

“As long as you relate things honestly, I can’t see how that should be a problem, can you?”

“No, Sir. I’m an honest sort. George will vouch for that.”

The fact that having George vouch for the voracity of his chief character witness presented problems, obviously had not occurred to her.

“Are you the only help here in this huge place?”

“Just about, now that Hazel’s gone. There is Al - Al Donner - the handyman. He works for eight or ten places here on the lake. Keeps him pretty busy - repairs, lawns, snow. Kind of a loner. Good looking for a man our age - fifty, I’d guess - but he never gives me a tumble. Sort of wish he

would, if you know what I mean. From certain angles, he looks a lot like George. Handsome - see what I mean?"

Masters raised his eyebrows.

Enough said.

She nodded.

"How long has he worked here?"

"Almost a year. It was right after Benny died. Benny had the job before Al. He was in his late sixties and the way I hear it just woke up dead one morning."

Masters chuckled at the turn of her phrase.

"He lived here?"

"No, Sir. There's a little cabin at the west end of the lake. It was Benny's and now it's Al's. Not sure how it changed hands. Never thought about that before, but you can't miss it. The smallest place on the lake by a long shot."

"You knew him well - Benny?"

"Both of us came about the same time - me a few months after him, I guess. Benny was a lot friendlier than Al. Yeah. I knew him pretty well. He'd drop by a couple times a week for pie and coffee. I let him use the washer here. Never used the dryer - liked his duds to flap in the breeze, he used to say. He hung 'em on a line at his place, I guess. Never was down there, myself. I miss him. Guess that says we were pretty good friends."

"It sounds like it."

Polly wasn't finished.

"Al's not neat, I'll admit that, but he sure is a doll - from a distance at least. Benny was always presentable, I guess you could say. He always smelled just a little of coal oil - his cabin has a coal oil heater in it. I used to kid him about it - coal oil scented after shave, I'd say and he'd always laugh."

"And you? You live here in the mansion, I assume."

"Third floor. The west dormer in the rear. I have a great view of the woods on the top of the hill. It's not very big but it's all I've ever needed. Private bath. Can't imagine living anywhere else."

"How long have you been here?"

"Came straight out of high school. Took all the Homemaking courses they offered. Been the only housekeeper Tom ever had here. It'll be thirty years come

June. Hard to believe. Time flies like they say.”

“So, you were here before Tom married?”

“That’s right, but there was never no hanky panky between us. I was really surprised when he took a wife. Everybody was.”

“You and Alicia get on okay?”

“Never close but, yes, you could say okay. Never any harsh words between us.”

“And you and Stephen?”

“A selfish brat. Demanding. He considered me his slave and his daddy let him treat me like one. Never liked him. Always felt sorry for the boy. His father provided no guidance for him. After Hazel left he had no limits. He ran wild. It became his way of life.”

“Did he ever get physical with you?”

“Hit me?”

“Yes. Anything like that?”

“No, Sir. Never. He was known to be . . . how can I say this like a lady? He was known to be a rough lover.”

Seemed an oxymoron to Masters - rough and lover - but he understood. Lover was such an inaccurate term for that kind of relationship.

“What are your plans, now?”

“I really don’t know. George talks likes he’s going to keep this place going. Why, I don’t know. Can’t see him moving into this big old monstrosity. He always hated it. Maybe for business meetings or something. I doubt if he has it all figured out yet himself. If not, Hazel has some contacts for me in town. Says I won’t have any problem finding a job since I was Tom Rockefellers’ housekeeper. Didn’t realize I’d gained such status, you know? I’d hate to leave here. It’s my home.”

Masters wiped the corners of his mouth with his napkin.

“Well, Polly, if this plate represents your usual work, I’ll guarantee you won’t be looking long. It is absolutely wonderful!”

Polly lowered her head, clearly not used to receiving compliments.

“Thank you, Sir. That’s very kind.”

“Back to the recent events,” Masters began, changing

gears.

“You can call them the murders, Sir. It may seem hard hearted of me but I don’t miss either one of them. They were not nice people. Can’t remember either one of them ever saying thank you to me. Lots of complaints but no compliments.”

“And you stayed, why, then?”

“Two days off a week and two weeks with pay every summer. Best salary in the area. Lets me live out here in this beautiful area. A nice place to call my own. And, back when Hazel was here, I was always close to my best friend. Leaving never really entered my mind. My daddy taught me not to take bad things people said to me too personally. It’s all been just pretty darn good out here.”

“I see. That’s wonderful. You do seem like a happy person.

“Daddy said there was no margin in being any other way.”

“You had a wise daddy.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“About that ‘Sir’ stuff. I’d feel more comfortable if you would call me Ray. Think you can do that?”

“I’ll give it a try. May slip after thirty years of Sir-ing everybody, in sight, but I’ll give it a try.”

“Back to business,” Masters said as Polly refilled his coffee mug. “Who’s on your list of suspects? Begin with Tom’s murder.”

“Alicia was engaged to her high school sweetheart. The wedding date was even set. Then suddenly one Monday morning she and Tom showed up here married - a wedding certificate from Las Vegas. I nearly swallowed my teeth when he introduced her as his new wife. That was the first thing he said that morning. The second was, ‘Fix the northeast room on the second floor for her.’ Hardly the thing I’d expect a young man would be thinking about the day after he was married.”

She giggled, averting her face - then continued.

“The boyfriend was really upset - went through quite a depression as I recall. His daddy was furious and tried to get the marriage annulled. It could be one of them. Some folks hold grudges for generations, you know. The longer they stew

about it the more the hate grows.”

“Anybody else?”

“Well, if he treated his business associates and customers like he treated the people out here, he had lots and lots of enemies. I never knew much about his business life.”

“What else can you tell me about Alicia?”

“She was always a sad lady - cried a lot. It was a strange marriage. Separate bedrooms. Seldom ate together. Only went out as a couple when business was involved. It was like they really didn't like each other very much. She had all the money to spend that she ever wanted. When she was carrying Stevie, she perked up a bit, but once he was born it didn't last. I guess what I'm saying is that Alicia never really made herself available for my friendship. I think she was jealous of Hazel. Tom made no bones about the fact that he didn't think his wife was capable of caring for the boy so she just slunk into the background. Sometimes I wouldn't see her out of her room for days at a time.”

“What about her death?”

“A boating accident. She was sailing out on the lake by herself at twilight. She did that a lot. She was a pretty good sailor, I'm told. Never been in a boat myself. Can't say I'd ever want to be.”

“What went wrong?”

“Well, now, I don't know the facts but I can tell you what I think. I think she ended her own life. Her existence around here was . . . well, it was like she didn't exist - didn't have any important part to play in anything. She was married but didn't have a husband. She was a mother but didn't have a child. It was like Tom had disowned her and banned her from her baby. Once she gave Tom a son, it was like her usefulness - her purpose - was over. She'd been real down - depressed - that week before her death.”

“Were there other women in Tom's life?”

“While Alicia was alive you mean?”

“Let's start there, yes.”

“Not to my knowledge. He never had anybody here, I'm sure of that. Don't even recall any scuttlebutt about it, and there would have been scuttlebutt if it had been going on.

“And after her death?”

"There were a few women at first - like dates to business get-togethers - but then none. Probably none out here since Stevie was six or so."

"That brings us to Stephen. What's your take on his murder?"

"This will sound terrible but he was one of those people who everybody hated. His so-called friends - male and female - were just along for whatever free ride he'd provide for them. Weren't a one of them at his funeral. It was like associating with the big Stephen Rockefeller was a feather in your hat, you know? Like some of his power or whatever rubbed off on you if you hung out with him. He had a parade of women in here from the time his upper lip got dark, if you know what I mean."

"And his father's reaction to that?"

"He thought it was humorous. He even encouraged it - provided transportation and liquor from the time the boy was thirteen. It was the only thing I ever heard the two of them talking about together. Sick, I thought, a young boy speaking about such activities with his daddy."

"Do you have any likely suspects?"

"Yes and no. It could have been any husband here on the lake, I suppose - that's the reputation the boy had. It was like some kind of status thing for the women. I assume they kept score at tea parties. That was catty. I shouldn't have said it. . . . He was a handsome, well-built specimen, I'll give him that, but none of that was really his doing. Mother Nature just put him together that way. He apparently took full credit for it, though."

"You describe a despicable human being!"

"If despicable means dirty, low down rat with no conscience, then, yes. Same goes for his daddy."

"Did he hurt or take advantage of people in other aspects of his life?"

"There was only one aspect in Stevie's life as far as I could tell and it never strayed far from a bed."

"Do you recall any threats made against either one of them?"

"Threats. Hmm. No. I can't say so. Maybe Alicia's boyfriend or somebody in his family way back, but that would

have been decades ago.”

“Let me shift gears again,” Masters said. “I met the twins from a few houses down the lake. They live there with their mother, I believe.”

Masters felt sure that mentioning the topic would open the gate to a substantial flow of information.

“Yes, Sir, er, Ray. Pie? Got Pecan ala mode.”

“You’ve either been well tutored by someone or you’ve been peeking inside a few books.”

“Both, I must confess. The twins dissect every new book word by word and I get the blow by blow over breakfast.”

She went about the business of cutting, scooping and serving.

“The Smith’s. How can I begin? I have no idea what she does for a living - she doesn’t seem to work outside the house and it is an expensive house. Taxes on it probably come to five years’ salary for me. She spends a lot of time tanning on their deck - and I’m not sure she’s always fully clothed out there. Not a good thing with teenagers around, I’ll tell you. I like the twins. They drop in almost every day. I always get to see their report cards - straight A’s since first grade. They seem to compete for how many pluses they each get after the A’s. Seem like pretty normal kids aside from that. They squabble constantly but they’d defend each other to the death, if you know what I mean?”

Masters nodded, silently, his mouth filled with the delectable dessert.

“They don’t seem real close with their mom. Like they live under the same roof but lead separate lives. They’ve sort of adopted George as their . . . I don’t know what you’d call him. Father figure I suppose. He loves them as much as I do. Sometimes I think they spend too much time with each other - Les and Pat, I mean. Seems to me they should each have their own circle of friends. Maybe that will come once they can drive. It’s fairly isolated out here and for all the houses, very few kids. Mostly middle-aged and older residents.”

“How many houses are there around the lake would you guess?”

“No guess. Twenty one. Arranged like a semi-circle - north, east and south shores. George insisted on keeping the

woods along the western shore - where the handyman's cabin is. That may be the only time he ever won in a difference of opinion with Tom. Tom was five years older than George - just fifty-five when he died. The two never seemed to have much in common - actually they were different as night and day."

"Their family life as kids?"

"Don't know much about it. Their mom was a bank teller and their dad ran a small lathe mill. Not even sure what that is but Tom took it over and turned it into about a billion-dollar business. It's the main employer around here. The parents died soon after I arrived. One more thing. Rumor has it that it was the fourth marriage for their mom - pretty unusual back then. Not sure what that might mean. I got the idea she was strict and very harsh with them - severe beatings even for little things. That's what I heard, anyway."

Masters nodded again, savoring the final tidbit of pie.

"Well, I thank you for the meal, the information, and the friendly conversation. I think I'll walk the neighborhood and look it over for myself."

Polly went to a cabinet and produced a spray can.

"Spray your feet and ankles, shoes and sox. Chiggers by the trillion out here. Not a pleasant experience."

"Thank you. A kind warning. I'll see you later in the day, then."

"I understand you like to eat early. How about pot roast at five?"

"It's a date. Sounds wonderful. You'll join me, of course."

"As you wish. Yes. That will be very nice."

Masters made his way back to his room, that time unmolested by stray linen closets. He sprayed as per Polly's instructions, and exchanged his suit for slacks and his favorite, flowered, orange, hang out, shirt, which he had been heard to refer to as his Halloween tent. It was straight up twelve noon. He hesitated for a moment, tempted by the huge, inviting, bed but decided a nap could wait. He had slept on the plane ride from New York.

* A Gathering of Killers: A Raymond Mastery Mystery,
by Garrison Flint

**The Case of the Twisted Twins Murders: A Raymond
Mastery Mystery, by Garrison Flint

CHAPTER TWO

DAY ONE: THE AFTERNOON

Standing in the circular drive in front of the mansion, Masters looked west. It was the location of Al's cabin and Al seemed to be the only other employee. He strode off along a well-worn, root rippled, uneven, clay path.

Polly had been right. It was a beautiful area. Pines, oaks, and maples provided the backdrop for the shorter wild plum, dogwood, and a variety of berry bushes. Rabbits hopped and squirrels scampered while chipmunks preferred to stand in the relative safety of their holes, filling their cheeks and chattering to one another in their grating, soprano tones. Columns of ants were relocating their eggs to higher ground after the spring rains had begun flooding their cozy winter digs. An occasional spider waited patiently for lunch at the center of his intricately spun web.

The trek proved long and the path difficult. By 12:20 Masters had the cabin in sight. Five minutes later he was crossing the clearing toward the front door. It appeared to be a one room structure. Clapboard above a stone and mortar foundation, supported a flat roof that slanted toward the rear. There was one, small, open-out, wood framed, window in the center of each wall. Traces of paint and empty flower boxes provided evidence that it had once been a treasured and well cared for home. More recently it had fallen into disrepair. That, in itself, provided Masters with several hypotheses.

Before he could knock, the door opened. A man in his late forties or early fifties appeared. His deeply tanned skin glistened from the oil accumulated between infrequent baths.

His hair was uncombed. His smile . . . well, he was smiling.

“Al, I assume,” Masters said, extending his hand.

“Masters, I assume,” the man drawled, ignoring the hand and spitting tobacco juice into the weed-laden flower bed to the left of the steps.

“Yes. I guess my arrival is no secret around here. I’d like to speak with you about the murders of the Rockefeller men.”

“Thought them was all tied up. George done ‘em in. Seems plain to me.”

“Many of the other folks can’t see George as a killer, but you can?”

“You’ll have to speak up. A little hard of hearing right now. Ear infection. Comes and goes.”

Masters repeated - louder that time.

“Many of the other folks can’t see George as a killer, but you can?”

“Any man can be a killer when that much money is involved.”

“That’s not been my experience with people. Sorry it’s been yours.”

“You’re a strange old duck, Masters.”

“I’ve been called worse and certainly don’t deny the ‘strange’ tag.”

“Coffee?” Al asked, pointing to the metal pot on a stone by the hot embers inside a small, rock, fire circle in the yard.

“It would only be to be sociable, Al. I just finished lunch.”

“I like an honest man. I’ll drink alone then. No problem.”

They walked toward the fire and Al poured the thick, black liquid into his long-scorched tin cup.

“You have something special on your mind?”

“Nothing specific. Just beginning. Looking for ideas. Alternatives to George, you understand.”

“Never had dealings with George. Rides around in his expensive little boat like he owns the lake.”

“I guess I thought he did - own the lake.”

“You know what I mean. Too good for the rest of us.”

“And you came to that conclusion without ever meeting

the man?"

"Some you don't have to meet. I know their kind."

"Their kind meaning Tom and Stephen?"

"Yup."

"I suppose that makes life easier," Masters bated.

"Easier?"

"Yes. Not having to base your opinions on the gathering of actual facts."

"What is it you want from me?"

"Any other candidates for either of the two murders?"

"About twenty husbands out there," he said pointing, completing the circuit of the lake shore.

"For Stephen's death, you mean?"

"Yup."

"May I ask how you and the Rockefellers got along?"

"Nope!"

Masters wasn't certain if the man was pulling his leg so he waited. Al continued, a smile breaking across his face.

"I got on with both okay, I guess. I done my work well and stayed the hell away from them. They paid me on time. No complaints there. Tom was the impatient type. By the time he said 'hop', he expected it to already be done. Steve was laid back. Nothing seemed important to him - well, women, of course. Didn't really know them well enough to have any helpful ideas for you. Still think it was George."

Al's quiet, slow, delivery presented an interesting contrast to the way his cup trembled as he spoke of the men. He set it down and slid his hands into the rear pockets of his grimy jeans.

"You've been here about a year, I understand."

"Yup."

"This cabin belonged to the former handyman, I hear."

"That's what I hear, too."

"And you came by it how?"

"Just moved in. Nobody ever told me to get out."

"Real estate taxes?"

He shrugged in response.

"Rent?"

Again, he shrugged. He took a pipe - expensive looking - from his shirt pocket and struck it against the heel of

his boot.

"I like a good smoke after meals. You?" Al asked, appearing to already know the answer.

"Detest the smell of tobacco, myself," Masters said, smiling. "I'll be on my way now anyway, so it shouldn't cause either one of us any distress - well, your heart and lungs of course, but not my nose at least." He renewed his smile.

It had been an interesting meeting - confrontation - stare-down, really, in the old, high noon, Dodge City, sense of the term. It was nearly one o'clock as Masters began his return trip. He concluded that Polly's stated interest in Al, verified that she had never been close enough to experience a prolonged whiff. Some dreams may best be played out from a distance.

As he rounded the first bend he was met by the twins.

"Hey, Mr. M.," Pat called, waving. "Polly said you'd gone for a walk. Since you hadn't come past our place we figured we'd find you down here. Been to interrogate Al, have you?"

"It's good to you two again, also," Masters said, chiding them for their brusque approach.

"Oh, yeah, well, we tend to skip over the niceties with our friends."

"In that case, thanks for including me. Thanks for the twisters, by the way. What's up?"

The conversational rotation was handed to Les.

"We've been thinking and decided we need to alert you to something before you are apprised of it from some other source."

"Don't you two ever talk like kids?" Masters asked more serious than not.

The twins managed small smiles but ignored the comment in all other ways.

"Okay, then," Masters continued. "What's on your mind?"

The three of them started back toward the mansion.

"Us as suspects in Stephen's murder," Pat said all quite unemotionally.

"That would qualify as important information, I suppose. Go ahead. Lay it out for me - unless you feel you need an

attorney present.”

“We trust you,” Les answered.

“Plus, we’re innocent,” Pat added.

“So is George, if my instincts are correct but look at the quagmire in which he finds himself.”

“Quagmire. Excellent choice of words,” Pat said.

“That would be singular - choice of word not words,” Les corrected.

Pat donned a sheepish grin and nodded his admission that she was right. He then recovered, stating, “I believe idiomatic usage would make it plural.” He seemed smugly satisfied.

“And that exchange about English grammar is more important than your information in what way or ways,” Masters asked, intentionally including both singular and plural to make his point with them.

“Point noted,” Pat said. Les began the explanation.

“It’s a sordid story, but I guess you’re up to that considering all the cases you’ve worked on.”

Masters kept his amusement to himself.

“Our mother is not what you might call a virtuous woman.”

“She has affairs by the septillion,” Pat added, plainly feeling his sister’s sugar coating was uncalled for.

Les went on, apparently accepting the essence of her brother’s interruption. “Yes. The important point here is that she and Stephen had an ongoing . . .”

“Off and ongoing,” Pat inserted.

“ . . .off and ongoing relationship.”

“Bed-based relationship,” Pat added looking at his sister and saying: “What’s wrong with you? We agreed to lay it all out in a completely honest fashion.”

“It was easier when Mr. Masters wasn’t listening.”

“Okay then. Let me tell the story; man to man, may be easier.”

Les nodded. Pat continued.

“We knew about it from the time we were tiny - didn’t fully understand it at first but we knew about it. We decided that part of her life was her own business. We tried to remain ignorant of it all, in fact. But then about nine weeks ago, Steve

beat mom so badly we had to get her to the hospital. We knew he played rough but never anything like that before. He broke her jaw, two of her ribs, and dislocated her shoulder. I heard the commotion in her room and charged in not knowing what I'd find. He was sitting on top of her hitting her in the face with his fists. About then Les came in and we both jumped him. He'd been drinking so it wasn't all that hard for us to pull him off. We just kept pulling and dragged him right out the back door. We locked the door and he got up and staggered home.

"I was so mad that after the paramedics left for the hospital with Mom - Les rode along - I went over to his place and just barged in without knocking. He had apparently collapsed in the back hall. His dad was there and so was Polly. George arrived about the same time that I began leveling my tirade. I said we were going to kill him for what he'd done and he could be sure it wasn't going to be a swift and painless death."

"We, meaning you and Les, I assume," Masters said clarifying.

"Right. I tend to speak for her too often. She and Mom have always gotten on me about that."

"It was one time when it was alright, though," Les added. "I wanted to blind him with hot pokers."

"Remind me not to cross the two of you," Masters said trying to lighten the moment. "I assume the Prosecuting Attorney is aware of all this."

"Tom told him," Pat said.

"Mr. Prince came out and interviewed us about it the next day," Les explained further. "Spent all of six minutes with us."

"Mr. Prince?"

"From the P A's office," Pat answered. "Didn't much like him - the tone he took with Les."

"And your mother?"

"She was out of commission for a while and had to drink her meals through a straw for three weeks, but she's pretty much back to normal, now."

"Were charges filed against Stephen?" Masters asked.

"No," Les answered. "Pat and I thought she should but

she refused to even talk about it. His Dad's lawyers would have just got him off again so it probably wouldn't have been worth the expense."

"I suppose I should meet her - your mother."

"Sure. She's always home these days. Give us a little warning so we can make sure she's decent," Pat said.

"I guess I haven't heard what she does for a living," Masters asked not entirely sure what kind of response to expect.

The twins looked at each other. Pat spoke.

"She says she got a sizeable inheritance when Grampa died. That was almost sixteen years ago. It's why our father married her, she says."

"You have no contact with your father?"

"None," Les said. "It's how we think it needs to be."

"For right now at least," Pat added qualifying the premise implied in his sister's statement. "Someday I might want to meet him. Mom says she'll give me the necessary information after I'm eighteen if I decide to follow through on that."

"Do you know if they parted friends?"

"No idea," Pat said looking at his sister. "We did find several letters he wrote to her after the divorce, saying how much he loved her and he was sorry for what he had done."

"What had he done?"

"We don't know and never thought it right to ask," Les said. "She doesn't know we got into her letters. Sort of a sticky situation there."

"She gets a huge box of candy and a dozen roses from somebody every year on her birthday. She never says who. Les and I think they are from him."

"One more question, if I may, about your threat, Pat. May I assume that what you said is generally known around here?"

"Hard to say. It didn't make the papers if that helps answer the question."

"What are you getting at?" Les asked.

"Well, from the little I know of the details, it seems Stephen was indeed killed in a fashion that followed the implications in your threat. It could be coincidence or it could

have been done in that manner to implicate you and divert attention from the killer. You two have any enemies I should know about?"

"Kyle Foster's miffed because I stole his girlfriend but I doubt if that would qualify. No. We're just kids. Can't see how we could have that kind of an enemy."

"And neither can I," Masters agreed. "A girl friend, huh?"

Pat beamed. "Yes. Megan Peters. Beautiful. Nice. Smart. We're going to the Spring Dance together next week."

"And how about you, Les?"

"Jimmy Adkins. He's a sophomore. Plays basketball and runs track. Cute. Nice. Smart."

"The dance?"

"Oh, yes. New dress. Hair. The whole thing."

"Double dating?"

Pat gave Masters a look.

"Goodness no. I don't want my sister watching me make out with my girlfriend and I sure don't want to watch her. Besides, we see way too much of each other around here."

Les smiled at Masters and rolled her eyes as if to say, "Brothers!"

Pat went on.

"The date reminds me of vehicles which reminds me that we have a pretty nice run-about - that's a little boat, inboard - and we'll be happy to take you places around the lake when you need transportation."

"That's a very generous offer. I'm sure I will take you up on it. If I can just get your phone number."

Masters took out his pad.

Pat shook his head.

"You're still living in the dark ages, Sir. Here, give me your phone. I'll put the numbers on speed dial for you. We each have a cell."

Looking over Pat's shoulder, Masters copied the numbers down anyway, uncertain that he would be able to retrieve them from the tiny, very complicated looking, gadget.

"Tell me about you," Masters said. "For all our talking I still don't feel like I know much about the two of you."

Les began. "Well, we're ninth graders but you know

that. We ride the bus to and from school - half hour each way. I'm a reporter on the school paper and plan to be editor my senior year. Pat's on student council and plans to be class president the next three years."

"I'm a tennis player," Pat continued. "Not the best but I have the number seven spot which is not all that bad for a first-year guy. I'm president of the computer club - that's sort of nerdy I guess, but I never really cared much about what other kids thought about me."

"That was two abouts in one sentence," Les pointed out.

Pat shrugged and went on.

"We both like to swim - for fun - not competitively though Les is really fast for a girl. She could make the team if she chose to. We are both pretty popular, I guess you could say. We treat people well and don't belong to any cliques - you understand cliques?"

"Yes, I understand - small, snobbish, in-groups," Masters said, amused at the little test.

"What else do you want to know?"

"Any plans for the far future?"

"I want to teach journalism in a university after I get my PhD," Les said.

"I'm not really sure yet," Pat said. "I like to write, too. Leaning toward a life that combines several things, I guess. Maybe writing mysteries like Flint and developing software and coaching tennis. I want to have lots of kids. I love little kids and I have the idea I'll really enjoy the process of making them."

He grinned. Les blushed and turned her head as if to remove herself from the conversation.

As an afterthought, Pat asked, "Is Flint anywhere near ready to retire, you think?"

Masters smiled.

"Flint's the kind who will be telling Saint Peter that eternity will just have to wait until he puts the finishing touches on his last novel. No, I don't see him ever retiring."

"That's okay. I'd really rather make up my own mysteries, anyway - no offence intended to either you or Mr. Flint. I have a pile of short stories. Maybe you'd read one or

two before you leave.”

“I’d be pleased to. Bring them over.”

Rounding the final turn, they were back at the Rockefeller mansion. Masters was tired and decided that the prospect of a nap looked pretty good. The twins continued on toward their house and Masters went inside. Polly met him.

“Several phone messages for you,” she announced, handing him several slips of paper. “Got strudel ready to pop into the oven. Ready in about an hour.”

“Strudel! Wonderful. Apple?”

“Is there any other kind?” she asked, teasing.

“I’ll have my mid-day nap and then join you in the kitchen.”

“Okay. See you then.”

Masters entered his room and read through the notes. One was from the Prosecuting Attorney - apparently responding to a call from George, which had relayed the message that Masters wanted to speak with him. Another was from Ann Smith, the twin’s mother. It was to the point, ‘We need to talk immediately.’ The third was from Frank Rhodes, the young Chief of Security for the lake-side community, making himself available to help Masters - again apparently at George’s suggestion. The last was from George, himself, indicating he would be dropping back at about three - strudel time - and suggesting that Masters check his phone - apparently, it was turned off. It was. He fixed it and then took his nap.

* * *

The strudel was everything strudel should be. He and George continued talking at the table in the kitchen.

“What do you really know about AI?” Masters asked.

“Seems to be a hard worker. Never had him do anything for me directly, but look at this place - the lawn’s immaculate, nothing needs repairing, never heard a complaint from Tom about him - perhaps the best recommendation of all.”

“What about the previous handyman? Know anything specific about the cause of his death?”

“I don’t but I can find out. He was old - in his early seventies I believe.”

Masters cleared his throat, calling attention to the fact that he, too, was in his seventies and still going strong.”

“Well, yes. Anyway, I guess we all just figured he died of - pardon the expression - old age.”

“Had he been ill?”

“I have no idea. Polly! Do you know what the state of Benny’s health was before his death?”

“Always seemed healthy to me,” she began. “Worked ten hour days without complaining. Loved what he did. I’d say he was in good health.”

“Relatives?” Masters asked.

Polly continued.

“A daughter in New Mexico, I believe. She took care of the burial. The funeral home should have information on that, I suppose.”

“Polly, I do believe there is some detective in you,” Masters said.

Polly blushed.

George’s phone rang. It was Frank the security guard. He was outside, wondering if he was needed. George directed him to the kitchen door and went on to set the stage for Masters.

“He’s a bit of an eager beaver, but well-meaning and takes his job seriously. Everybody likes Frank. If it happened out here, Frank knows about it. If it didn’t, he’ll still have an opinion about it.”

Polly let Frank in. They clearly knew each other well.

“Raymond Masters, Frank Rhodes,” George said by way of a simple introduction.

“Join us here at the table,” Masters said, indicating a chair.

“Got strudel,” Polly announced, bringing Frank a mug of coffee.

“Sounds dilly-ishious,” he answered smiling up at her.

“So, Frank,” Masters began, “George here says you’ll be my go-to man on this case.”

Frank sat taller in his chair.

“Here to protect and serve, Sir. Whatever I can do, you just ask. Time is no object. Used to long hours. Single with few outside responsibilities.”

"Sounds like just the man I can use. For starters, I need background information on Al, the handyman."

"Consider it done. He's a loner, I can tell you that. Good worker but tends to be short with folks - not disliked but not really liked if you know what I mean. Maybe a bit depressed. Untidy about himself but keeps the places where he works slick as a whistle. Strange combination. Last time I spoke with him he was talking like he might be getting ready to move on."

"I'd say that's a pretty good, initial run down, Frank. Now we need to find out where he came from, how he came to end up here, what kind of work he's done and where, family, things like that."

Frank made notes.

"Also, about the disposition of the cabin he lives in. Who really owns it?"

"The former handyman owned it," George offered. "It was one of the few kind things Tom ever did - built it for him with the understanding he had lifetime use of it and the three acres it sits on. Not sure how Al came by it, now that you mention it. It's just always been the handyman's place. I guess no one questioned it."

Frank continued making notes. Masters spoke again.

"Then, I will need your best ideas about suspects in each murder."

Frank put down his pencil, and scratched his head.

"That presents a real problem. They both drew enemies like spilled milk draws flies. I mean I can list close to two dozen husbands who'd have reason to have done in Stephen, although I doubt if his old man was throttled by anybody out here. Tom was a lot like Al in a way. Nobody on the lake really liked him but few had actual reason to dislike him."

"You make it sound like everybody knew about Stephen's extracurricular activities with the ladies, but no one did anything about it."

"Yes, Sir. That seems to be the situation."

"Where was Stephen killed?"

"In the woods at the top of the hill north of here about a hundred and fifty yards."

“Who found him?”

“Two boys playing cowboys and Indians. Ten year olds, I think. Terrible thing for them to have stumbled onto.”

“I’m sure it was. Had he been reported missing?”

“No, Sir. He was ‘missing’ most of the time. I mean to say he came and went on whims. No schedule in his life. No way to tell if he was missing or not. Tom said he saw him for the last time two days before he was found. Coroner said he’d been dead about eight hours when the kids found him - set seven a.m. as the time of death.”

“Who found Tom?”

“Polly. She took it real good. Stayed real calm. Called George first and George called the police. That’s how it was, right?” he asked looking about at the other two. They nodded.

“You seem to stay on top of things around here, Frank. I can see you will be my best right hand man.”

“Thank you, Sir. I will do my best.” He straightened his tie.

“I’ll want to see the police reports on both murders.”

“Right here in this envelope. I was sure you’d want to look at them. The coroner’s reports and the kid’s statements are in here as well.”

Frank finished his strudel.

“Mighty fine,” he said, addressing Polly. “If that’s it for now, I’ll get started on my list.”

He stood and picked up his tan, police-style hat.

“That should do it for starters” Masters answered. “Of course, it would be helpful to have alibis for the times of both deaths. Make the rounds of the husbands, I suppose, and get what you can. Verify each one.”

Frank nodded, eager to begin his job. He left. Masters turned the conversation back to George.

“The focus seems to be on the husbands in Stephen’s death. How about the women themselves? If he was abusive with them like he appeared to be with Ann Smith, perhaps one - or more - of them played some part in it.”

“Seems a likely possibility, I suppose. I have to say I wasn’t aware of his reputation of being abusive. Can’t see why the women would continue to associate with him if he had been that way, can you? Almost seems fishy, to me.”

"I see what you mean and yet the twins tell it like it was a well-known fact. Are you suggesting somebody other than Stephen hurt Ann?"

"Hadn't come to mind until this moment. I can't say."

"Too many suspects," Masters said. "Too little evidence. I failed to ask Frank if there was any evidence found at the scene of Stephen's death."

"If there was, you can bet he put a report about it in your envelope. Frank has never been accused of being anything less than thorough. That would probably be the only complaint you'd ever hear about him from the folks out here. Frank just can't let things go. Tends to beat a dead horse, you could say."

"Talk to me about the weapon and ammo used in Tom's death. Common, uncommon, availability, things like that."

George became uneasy. "Not something I like to think about."

"I really need your help, here."

"A top of the line rifle. Widely available for a number of years. Long distance ammo. Probably used a laser guided sight - also top of the line. Undoubtedly it was secured in a clamp, maybe on a tripod. Maybe on a wooden fence or window sill or the back of a chair - like a kitchen chair. It had to have been absolutely stable. Hair trigger so as to not cause any movement in the weapon when it was fired. Not sure where all of that might be available around here. I can find out. I'm more into handguns, you know."

"Air turbulence over the water?"

"Interesting point. I'll check on the water/air temperature differential that night. There was no wind; I'm quite sure of that. This time of year, the temperatures of the air and water should be quite similar by that time of the evening. It happened just after nine p.m. An interesting point. A high differential would cause significant air turbulence over the lake. Hadn't considered that. If I were looking to be accurate to within an inch or so over a half mile, I sure as hell would make sure the air was calm as an August day in Alabama. I'll get on it. Anything else?"

"Suspects, George! I need to weed out the least likely

suspects.”

“I’m working on that. I’ll have a list for you by morning.”

“I want to spend time with the reports now, so there’s no need for you to stick around here if you have other things to do.”

“I’ll be on my way, then. This place gives me the willies. Always has.”

He stood, gave Polly a loving peck on the cheek, and left.

“So, Polly. I wasn’t aware it was you who found Tom. That must have been just terrible.”

“Yes. It was terrible. Should have been sad. If I was really a good person it should have been sad. It wasn’t. You know my first thought? I wondered where in the World I’d ever find another job. Is that selfish or is that selfish?”

She shook her head slowly. Her eyes teared.

“I can talk about it if you have questions. Even a man like him deserves to have his murder solved.”

She cleared away the dishes and took them to the sink.

“The body was in what position when you found it?”

“Flat on his back - head pointed toward the door - feet about a yard from the window.”

“Was his body lying straight out from the window?”

She thought for a moment before answering.

“No. Actually it was angled toward his right - to the west - not much but, yes, enough to notice.”

“Go on with your story,” Masters said.

Didn’t see any glass anywhere. They said the bullet made like a clean little hole in the window. I didn’t even see it - just the hole in the man’s forehead. I knew he was dead. I didn’t even touch him. I just picked up the phone and called George on his cell phone. He’s hard to reach on his home phone. Always out doing things, that one. He answered right away. I told him what had happened and he said for me to leave the study, close the door and wait for him down in the living room. That’s just what I did. It was about ten minutes later when he got here. He’d ran all the way. George stays in good shape. Jogs every morning.

“He went right up to the study. Told me to stay down stairs but I wasn’t about to be alone one more minute so I

started to follow him. It was right then that the Sheriff's deputies arrived. I let them in and showed them up to the den. They asked George and me to wait out in the hall. I guess George was feeling for a pulse when they entered the room. They got all upset about that and there was a loud exchange between them over it. George came out to the hall and said, "Idiots!" He was understandably upset. You'd a thought the deputies would have understood that. They was young. Maybe that's why.

"Well, within a half hour the house was swarming with police and medical people. Then they all left as quick as they'd came. They took the body with them. One really nice young female officer took my statement - Amy - I don't remember her last name. I told her everything just like it happened."

"What led you to go up to Tom's study in the first place?"

"I was on my way to my room for the night. As I passed the door to the study I heard a thud. It wasn't much of a thud. I just shrugged my shoulders and went on. Then I got to thinking about it so I called the study and got no answer. I called his room and got no answer so I went back to the study and knocked. There was no answer so I opened the door. I have a key but it wasn't locked. I found him there. George says he was probably shot right when I passed the room. Pretty scary now that I look back on it."

"I can imagine. Yes. Well, I appreciate your help. Oh, one more thing. Did George go home that night?"

"Yes. He offered to stay here with me but I really didn't need that so I told him to go on. He was gone before midnight, I'm sure."

"Do you remember how he got home?"

"Yes. He drove one of the cars in the garage since he didn't have his boat. Took a key from the rack there by the back door. He'd been out for a hike or a jog - I forget what he said. He's a night owl. Known him to swim across the lake at midnight. Has a house key. Comes in and grazes for goodies in my fridge. I keep things he likes. When he's done he swims back. I tell him he should wait two hours after eating but he just smiles and pats me on my head. I worry about him

sometimes. He acts like a teenager and he ain't no teenager, Ray."

Masters nodded as he stood to leave. He had gathered lots of information in a short time. He needed to make notes, digest it, and begin going through the reports.

"How do I get out onto the deck by the pool?"

"French doors on the east wall of the living room. Can't miss it."

Before long Masters had settled into a comfortable chair under a spreading umbrella and began the task of reading through the various reports.

Tom had indeed been killed by a single bullet from a German hunting rifle - a bullet specially designed for long range accuracy. The slug remained lodged in the back of his skull making identification easy and irrefutable. The rifle, itself, had not been located.

It was the coroner's estimate that Stephen had been tortured for approximately ninety minutes before he died of blood loss. His hands were tied together and he was suspended by that rope from a tree limb, his feet dangled eighteen inches off the ground. There was no obvious evidence of a struggle - no broken twigs and the leaf cover on the ground had not been disturbed. Because of that ground cover there were no foot prints. The rope was old fashioned, cotton, clothesline rope. Masters hadn't seen it in stores for years. Apparently, no lab tests had been run on it. Masters made a note that he wanted to examine it. No mention was made of its age or condition. Raw places on Stephen's cheeks suggested he had been gagged and his mouth taped shut - the tape then torn off after he had stopped calling out. It was not found at the scene. Masters hoped that would prove helpful in the long run.

The two lads who had come across the body were ten-year-old fifth graders who lived in Elm Grove, a middle-dollar development a mile and a half to the north. Their report of the discovery had been delayed several hours while they discussed what to do. Their parents had forbidden them from playing in the woods so they knew they would be in trouble. In the end, they apparently decided their find was more important than a few weeks of grounding. They might even be

considered heroes and to ten year olds, becoming heroes was worth a little risk. They told one of the fathers who, in turn, contacted the sheriff's department. The boys then led a deputy to the spot - a small, secluded, clearing in the center of the twenty acre woods. Masters wanted to visit the spot and would arrange that with Frank later.

Stephen's clothes were also missing. Masters often preferred missing evidence to on-hand, run of the mill evidence, because if and when it was found, possibilities abounded for finding additional clues pointing toward new directions for the investigation.

Masters searched his pockets for Frank's card finding it at the bottom of the deep side pocket in his shirt. He dialed the number.

"Lake Rockefeller Security. Frank Rhodes, chief officer, at your service."

"Frank. Ray Masters here. I'd like you to take me to the spot Stephen's body was found. Can we arrange that yet this afternoon?"

"Give me ten minutes and I'll pick you up in the jeep. Not fancy but can handle the rocky terrain leading up to the woods better than a car."

"Do you know how thoroughly the Sheriff's department went over the area?"

"I was with them every minute. They looked things over - searching for foot prints and the like. Wouldn't say it was thorough, though. What's on your mind?"

"Do you have access to a metal detector - like one of those treasure-searching, hand held, things I see folks using in parks and at the beach?"

"Hey. I'm one of those guys, Sir. Have a top of the line unit in my garage. Want it?"

"Yes. If it's not too much trouble."

"Not at all. Make that fifteen minutes then so I can swing around and pick it up."

"I'll be waiting out front and thanks."

Masters took the reports back to his room, re-sprayed his ankles - it had apparently worked flawlessly earlier in the day. He noticed a deposit of ashes on the heel of his right shoe, so removed it with a washcloth. He assumed it was a

remnant from his walk to Al's. He went out front. It was going on four o'clock when Frank appeared in the jeep. With the rider's seat pushed back as far as it would go and a little help (make that lots of help!) from Frank, Masters eventually managed to arrange himself into the far too narrow space.

"Got in mind some clue we're after?" Frank asked, clearly excited about it all.

"Not really. The report said the ground was covered with fallen leaves – a years' worth, on the floor of a wooded area, I imagine. Easy for things to slip out of site under those conditions. Hard to find once covered. Just my penchant for being thorough, I suppose."

The trip took several minutes and proved to be more than a little uncomfortable. They drove up a slight incline from the rear of the mansion traversing what had, from a distance, appeared to be an inviting, grassy slope. In reality it was unfriendly, rocky terrain, overgrown by foot-high rye grass.

The woods - not as dense as it had appeared from the lake front - was a well-managed area with fifty-year-old trees rising out of low under brush, ideal for small wild animals and a variety of birds. Frank parked the jeep at the periphery and helped Masters to the ground. They followed a path that meandered in a generally northerly direction, eventually taking them deep into the center of the woods. Frank, who was leading the way, turned off the path and continued thirty yards west where they came upon a small clearing.

"Here we are," he announced. "That's the tree he was hanging from."

"And the rope was tied to which branch?" Masters asked looking up.

Frank took several steps toward the massive old oak and pointed. "That'n there. Not really tied, though. Looped over and once around it and then tied around the trunk down about here."

"Think you can get up there and examine that branch for me?"

"Sure. Give me a minute."

He was soon in place, straddling the limb. "Now what?"

"What do you see where the rope would have been snugged around it?"

“Nothing, actually. Sorry. Just a smooth old limb I’m afraid.”

“That’s fine. Come on down.”

Masters turned his attention to the ground.

“If you will, use your gadget and do a systematic sweep of the entire clearing. I’m not really looking for anything special and yet for everything you might find.”

Frank began a methodical examination of the area. Masters had more questions.

“This spot used by folks often would you guess?”

“Teenage couples looking for some privacy, mostly, I suppose. The kids who found Stephen said they play around here sometimes. The woods was left here more for looks and as a chigger preserve, than for human use, I guess you could say.”

He chuckled at his own little joke and continued.

“Like you could tell from the way the trail was overgrown in some spots, it’s not used a lot. The folks who live out here aren’t much into nature, really. It’s a shame. All this beauty and it’s seldom really appreciated.”

“Frank, I do believe you have the soul of a poet.”

The young officer didn’t respond but noted his possible agreement with a bob of his head.

“Got something here,” he said. “Treat it like evidence, I assume.”

“Yes. Like evidence.” Masters said walking over to where Frank knelt.

The young officer carefully cleared away the decaying leaves, layer by layer until he revealed a quarter - a bright, shiny, brand new quarter.”

“This’n’s not been here long, Sir. Arkansas. Not been out for more than a couple of months as I recall.”

Masters produced a small plastic evidence bag from his hip pocket. Careful to handle it only by its edge, Frank dropped it in. The rest of the sweep revealed nothing else, supporting Frank’s suggestion that the area was not often used.

“No slugs. Odd,” Masters said. He paused and then continued.

“If you wanted to leave some sizeable object behind out

here and not have it found, in which direction would you probably drop it off?" Masters asked looking around.

Frank didn't hesitate. Due west. No trails in that direction from here to the outer edge of the woods. Probably an eighth of a mile from here to there. Sizeable? How sizeable?"

"The report suggested that Stephen's feet were a foot and a half off the ground as he hung here. It stands to reason that he had been forced to stand up on something. The lack of fresh scaring of the bark where the rope wrapped around the branch suggests that he hadn't been pulled up that high. Anyway, it's doubtful one person could have pulled a 185-pound man that high by himself - especially with the rope wrapped once around the limb before being tied off. Of course, there could have been more than one person involved but given the total picture it's more likely to have been just one. Probably brought him here at gunpoint, forced him to strip, tied the rope around his wrists, had him stand on something, tossed the rope over the branch twice and tied the other end around the tree trunk. At some point in the process the platform - whatever it was - was removed and Stephen hung there with his arms over his head."

"I see where you're going. So we need to find something about eighteen inches high?"

"Eighteen inches high and ten by twelve in the other dimension."

"Ten by twelve?"

"Look here right under where the body was found. See where I pulled the leaves back. What do you see in the soil underneath?"

"An impression of some kind - about ten by twelve inches, like the base of whatever it was he'd been standing on. Good work, Sir. I'm sure the sheriff's team didn't find that. Want pictures?"

"You have a camera?"

"Always. Digital. Shirt pocket small. Flash even."

"Yes. Yes. Good thinking. Clear the leaves for a complete shot."

The pictures were taken and then the area was piled high with leaves to protect the physical evidence.

“Let me take a quick look out a few yards to the west,” Frank said. “Lots of underbrush over there. Hard to get through.”

Masters nodded his approval of the plan content to stay behind.

“Got something here,” came Frank’s excited call a few minutes later.

Masters made his way toward Frank’s voice.

“Not sure it’s what we’re looking for.”

There was the end of a slat - a lath like piece of wood - protruding from the leaves.

“Pull back the covering,” Masters said, clearly interested. “See here, how it appears they have been recently turned over, the top of the leaves are darker as if they were further into the process of decay. Maybe pictures first and then others as you proceed.”

The pictures were taken.

“Now let’s see what we have,” Masters said.

“Doesn’t look like a box or stool, I’m afraid. Just pieces of wood,” Frank reported.

“Pull them all out. I’ll bet they’ll assemble into just what we need.”

Masters was right [big surprise!]. It had clearly been a wooden crate. There were two, three quarter inch, solid, end pieces - same dimensions as the imprint under the tree. There were nine slats, twenty-four inches tall by two inches across and a quarter of an inch thick. Assembled it would resemble a crate in which fruit was shipped, less the top. Satisfied the nail holes would line up from slats to end pieces, Masters and Frank carried them back to the jeep.

“No nails, Sir?” Frank commented. It was in part a question.

“We have to make that work in our favor, Frank. They are somewhere. Hopefully they are residing with someone who will become a legitimate suspect.”

“But why not bury the nails with the lumber?”

“I can only speculate. Wood will decay in time and nails would take years longer - perhaps a decade or more. A metal detector could locate them - in case authorities decided to scan the area for some reason. Perhaps the person is

frugal and didn't want to waste them. The wood may have absorbed some blood that couldn't be washed off. Nails could be cleaned up. There could well be other reasons, I suppose."

"Why not just burn the wood and be done with it?" Frank asked.

"The killer may have wanted to keep it for a while in case it was needed to implicate - frame - someone else. I imagine that's why the wood had been merely covered in leaves and not buried in the ground."

"You're saying this was pretty well thought out."

"Yes, I am. I'd bet the crate was brought to the woods in pieces, probably wrapped in some way so it would not be seen if the murderer met anyone. Then it was assembled and stashed, awaiting the time of the murder. There is nothing spur of the moment about either of these murders. The place, the time, and probably the sequence - which may well be the cincher in this case."

"Cincher?" Frank asked as he started the jeep.

"Clincher. Something that will eventually tie it all up - help put it all into perspective. Stephen first, then an interval of time, then Tom. In a plot this well planned, you can bet all of those things will be meaningful - had a specific purpose."

"You sort of have to think like the murderer, then I guess."

"Exactly. You have the makings of a detective. Snoop around town and see what stores receive fruit or vegetables in crates like this. Find out how they dispose of them. Learn everything you can about them."

"I can think of at least a dozen groceries in the area. I'll get right on it. By the way, Hazel wondered if this evening at the Rockefeller mansion would work out for your meeting."

"Certainly. How about seven? If that's not good for her give me a call."

Back at the mansion, Frank helped Masters carry the wood to his room, then left. Polly soon appeared.

"Dinner any time you're ready, Sir. Pot roast just gets better with time, of course, but wanted to let you know."

"Give me fifteen minutes to clean up. Your spray seems to have worked wonders against the chiggers. Hardly a sign of any so far."

“Oh. Almost forgot. The twins dropped by about an hour ago. Said they didn’t have anything special on their mind - just checking in to see if they could be of any help. Gems, them two. Nice kids. Always remember my birthdays and Christmas. Gems!”

“I meant to ask them why they weren’t in school. This is Thursday, right?” Masters said.

“Parent-teacher conferences I imagine,” Polly explained. “They have parent-teacher conferences almost as often as PBS has pledge drives. Off on Thursday, you can be they’re off on Friday as well.”

“In a few minutes, then,” Masters said, his mouth already moistening at the thought of Polly’s delectable offerings.

CHAPTER THREE DAY ONE: EVENING

Masters was finishing dinner as Frank escorted Hazel into the kitchen.

“Did I time this right for dessert?” Frank asked, smiling.

Polly administered a long, warm, hug to her pleasantly plump, grey-haired, old friend and then introduced her to Masters.

He stood and indicated that the two of them should take seats and join him. Polly brought coffee and spoke.

“Apricot roll-ups with spice sauce,” she announced as if trying to tempt the new arrivals. She had already learned that such a ploy was not necessary with Masters. The two newcomers nodded in unison.

“I’m sure this is difficult for you, Hazel,” Masters began, “but I need as much information about Tom and Stephen as I can get. I’m told that you and Polly knew them better than anybody.”

“I’ll do what I can. Ask whatever you want,” Hazel answered.

“Did you hear from either of them after you left here?”

“Stephen always sent me a canister of cashews at Christmas. He knew they were my favorite treat. He did that every single year - very unlike him.”

“Unlike him?” Masters asked.

“Yes. Usually, he couldn’t even remember what day it was. I can’t imagine how - or why - he remembered me at Christmas. He treated me like sewage while I was out here caring for him. He’d say terrible things to me.”

“Has that been the extent of your contact?”

“Tom always sent me a check on my birthday - worth a month’s salary. I think he felt guilty about letting me go. Well, guilty is probably the wrong word, considering it’s Tom we’re speaking of, but it was something like that. They never came to see me or called if that’s what you mean.”

“Were you aware of any enemies Tom had made out here or any threats that had been made against him?”

She took time to think about her answer.

“Not really. Several fathers out here were pretty upset about Stevie’s - shall we say - romantic activities with their daughters back when he was in his early teens. His hormones started flowing way too early, poor kid.”

“Did he ever make such advances toward you?”

“Once. He was twelve. It stunned me and I slapped his face so hard it knocked him clean across the room. It never happened again, though I left soon after that.”

“How about Tom?”

“Advances? Tom? Goodness no. Tom seemed to be afraid of women. It came off like he hated them but I think that was just his way to protect himself from having contact with them”.

“Back to Stephen,” Masters said. “What sort of little boy was he - the pre-hormone Stephen if you will?”

“Always a loner. Didn’t get along with kids. Too selfish, I suppose. Never wanted to share anything. Seemed to take pleasure in making them feel bad - hurting them, even. Never saw him cry. Strange, now that I think about it. His father had problems with women and Stevie had problems with boys. It was like he’d do things just to make sure boys would stay away from him.”

“Any idea why?”

“Not really. He never cared for sports. Maybe he didn’t have interests in common with them. I don’t know. Something else. He was always what you could call a happy go lucky type - never considered the consequences before he’d do something. But he almost never really smiled. Not what you’d expect from that type, you know.”

“Was he the kind to threaten others?”

“Not really. He’d just strike out with no warning. No. I

don't think you could say he used threats, just impulsive striking out would describe him better - never give the other guy a chance to prepare."

"How did he and Tom get along?"

"They seldom interacted. Tom was away a lot, and when he was here he often came home from the office after Stevie was in bed. Can't think of a single thing they had in common."

"How about Stephen and his mother?"

"That whole thing was messy from the moment of conception."

Masters had to smile at her forceful, all inclusive, take on it. She went on.

"He was just a tot while she was alive. Later on he hardly remembered her but as a little tike he always wanted his mother. Tom all but forbade it. Stevie, of course, never knew about that part of it all so he figured his mother didn't like him. She was the only person I ever knew who Stevie tried to please. Everything between the three of them was sick. Alicia was just a beautiful object Tom could show off at parties and business meetings. Stevie was Tom's proof that he was a man so he could play the husband and father role. The boy's behavior was always so bad that few of his business associates ever actually met him. Just having them know that his son existed I guess had to become good enough for Tom."

"Anything else you think might help me gain some insights into this case?"

"There is one but it's only rumor - well, I suppose a pretty well founded rumor since every nanny in the county believes it and nannies are pretty good judges of things like this."

Masters nodded, urging her to continue.

"The story is that Stevie got Amy Anderson pregnant last year just before she disappeared. They're Catholic. We all assumed she went away to have the baby and put it up for adoption, but it's been thirteen months and no baby I ever heard of took that long to make its arrival. At first the rumor was she was missing. Then, like to counter act that, her parents claimed she was taking care of a sick aunt out west. There ain't no missing person thing out for her as far as I know

so the parents must not consider her missing in the usual way.”

Masters looked at Frank, to see what additional light he might shed on the situation.

“I don’t know much more than that. I have in my notes to share with you. It does add an interesting twist to the case, though. Amy’s father is Ralph Anderson, the Prosecuting Attorney.”

“Oh, yes, I’d say that certainly qualifies as an interesting twist.”

Dessert was finished and Polly offered to drive Hazel back to town so Frank and Masters could get back to work.

“Before you go, Polly,” Masters asked, “Is there a computer here we may use?”

“Three - in Mr. R’s study, in Stevie’s room, and in the west guest room on the second floor. I imagine the best one is in the study.”

Frank and Masters picked up a disk from Masters’ room. It had been included with the coroner’s report and contained the pictures of Stephen’s body.

“You don’t have to be a part of this if you don’t want to, Frank. It will, I am sure, not be pretty. Just get me set up on the computer and you can leave if you want.”

“No, Sir. Guttled my first squirrel when I was five. I can handle most anything. I was there when the boys led the deputies to the body.”

The disk contained over two dozen files. One by one the two of them examined each picture. Frank’s familiarity with the graphics and photo manipulation features of the software made the process relatively simple.

“Wait, Masters said at one point. “Go back to file three. Can you enlarge the left hand in that picture?”

“Sure. Give me a minute. . . . That large?”

“Larger!”

“Like this?”

“That’s good. Tell me what you see.”

“Well, it’s not the first picture - that was the one of the full body hanging from the tree. It’s one from the center of the chest up to the tree limb.”

“Look at the fingers. See, here?” Masters said,

prompting him. Can you just enlarge the hands?"

Frank tinkered some more.

"That white stripe around that finger, you mean."

"Yes. And what would make such a white stripe, as you call it?"

"A ring. Yes. Stephen always wore a ring - large solitaire diamond in a platinum setting. It's not there."

"And, there is nothing in any of the reports about it," Masters added.

"You think the murderer copped it? It must be worth twenty-five - maybe fifty thousand dollars," Frank said, thinking aloud.

"Maybe, but as well planned as this murder was I can't see the murderer risk getting caught with that kind of absolutely incriminating evidence."

"Pawn shops?"

"It's a place to start. Again, this murderer, if he did take it, would be too smart to pawn it locally. It's all we have though so I guess make the rounds in the morning if you will."

"I'll be on it first thing."

Frank looked around the room.

"What?" Masters asked, intrigued.

"Looking for a picture of Stephen wearing the ring so we can scan it in, blow it up. That way I can have a likeness of it to show around."

"Of course. Good thinking. I forget about the wonderful possibilities these new gadgets allow. There's bound to be one somewhere in this house."

It was located in Stephen's high school yearbook - a chin on folded hands pose. The enlargement was made and Frank prepared to leave for the night.

"Oh, one more thing," Masters said. "The feathers. Here. I picked them up in the clearing."

He produced the small evidence bag.

"See what the lab can tell us about these. ASAP on that, by the way. I'm fairly sure I understand what part they played but verification is always helpful."

"I'll drop them off when I leave here. Jenny, she's the chief tech there, says just mark them RM and they'll get priority treatment. You do carry a lot of weight, just like the

books say you do.”

The double meaning was noted by both but neither considered it worth exploring further. Frank left and Masters moved down to the living room. He needed to sit and think. Solitude would have to wait, however. The grandfather clock struck ten. His phone rang. The front doorbell chimed. Polly went to the door. Masters answered the phone.

“Masters, here.”

“Les here - Les Jones/Smith.”

“Yes. Hello. What can I do for you at this hour?”

“Pat just came in from being with his girlfriend and Mom began yelling at him - I was up in my room and couldn’t make it out. By the time I got down stairs, I saw her pulling him out the front door by his shirt. Just heard her say, ‘What do you suppose your Raymond Masters will have to say about this?’ I’m calling to alert you to their imminent arrival.”

“Thanks. I believe they are here.”

Polly escorted them into the living room. Masters stood.

“Ann Smith I assume,” he began, extending his hand.

Pat remained uncharacteristically quiet, though his eyes stayed glued to the old detective’s face. Ann spoke in a loud voice, skipping right to the crux of her visit. She handed Masters a plastic shopping bag. Its contents were heavy. Masters looked inside. It contained a handgun.

“And this means what?” Masters asked, smiling back at her.

“I found it stashed under Patrick William’s mattress this evening.”

“While you were making his bed?”

“While I was snooping around his room.”

It answered the question on Masters’ mind; one he had been reluctant to ask.

“I see. You do that regularly?”

“Of course, I do. Drugs, booze and sex you understand. A parent has to be her toes all the time.”

Masters was privately amused. Did she expect to find naked girls and six packs under his mattress? He turned to Pat, more interested for the moment in the search than in the find.

“You know she does this regularly?”

Pat nodded. “Since we turned ten. A couple times a week. Never spoke of it but she’s either not very good at being sneaky or she doesn’t try to hide the fact.”

Masters turned back to Ann.

“And you have brought me this gun for what reason?”

“It fits the description of the one that was used in Stevie - er - Stephen Rockefeller’s murder. Pat said he was going to kill him and it looks like he did.”

Masters frowned, looking back and forth between the two of them. Pat looked at the floor. The scenario was nearly unbelievable.

“Sit, if you like,” he said at last, taking a seat himself. They followed his lead. Ann pulled Pat down beside her on a couch as he was trying for a more distant chair.

“Pat?” Masters said, giving the boy an open-ended lead to explain.

“It’s the first time I’ve seen the gun - god’s honest truth.”

Masters turned back to Ann. “When was the last time you looked under your son’s mattress?”

“Monday morning.”

“And it wasn’t there, then?”

“No, Sir.”

She began to calm down.

“Did you handle it?”

“Well. Yes. I was surprised! Shocked! Yes, I picked it up.”

“Perhaps the best place to begin is with the forensics lab - see if it matches the murderer’s weapon. Check out the fingerprints. Things like that. I assume you have reason not to trust your son or you wouldn’t be so diligent in your searching for things or so quick to assume he is guilty, here.”

“Well, no, other than that he’s a teenage boy with a temper and you know how teenagers are?”

“Never having had the honor of being a parent I suppose I don’t know - not fully, anyway. Perhaps you can fill me in.” He smiled, warmly. The first hint of a grin broke, briefly, across Pat’s face. He looked away to hide it from his mother.

Ann tossed her head, considering it a rhetorical

question. Masters turned back to Pat.

“How could the gun have gotten under your mattress?”

“Obviously, somebody put it there - somebody other than me, Mom!” He looked directly into her face.

“Why might they have done that?” Masters asked.

“We’ll have to await the lab test to fully answer that, I suppose,” Pat began thoughtfully. “If it was involved in the murder, then perhaps to implicate me. If not, maybe just to hide it. Maybe a friend - Jeremy was out this week. So was Mike. Les had a friend at the house also. It’s hard to know where to go until we see what the lab says. I only know that I had nothing to do with its getting there. I doubt if it was there last night or I would have felt it when I went to bed.”

“Who’s been at your place today then?” It was directed at them both.

Ann began.

“The maid is there every Thursday. Al worked on the lawn but I never invite him in - the man’s a walking pig sty. A delivery man brought something Leslie had ordered - came in a small padded envelope. That’s it as far as I can remember.”

Pat shrugged.

“Nobody else I know about. I was outside most of the day, seldom more than a few yards away from my sister - she’s got to get a life.”

He shook his head.

“It appears to me that Pat has a pretty good handle on it,” Masters said. “I’ll get the gun to the lab first thing in the morning. Once they look it over we will be in a better position to move on to some next step. I suggest that you leave the gun with me and that you also write and sign a note to that effect.”

Ann nodded. Masters handed her a yellow pad. Pat reached into his inside jacket pocket. Masters raised his hands in mock fright.

“Should I feel threatened?” Masters said, joking with the boy in reference to the motion.

The boy managed a second, short-lived smile.

“I brought you a copy of a short story you need to read. It’s so much like the murder - well, what I hear about it anyway - that it really makes things look bad for me. There is one very

strange thing about it all, however. I had to get this copy from my girlfriend tonight because the original has been missing for a long time.”

“Long time?”

“Four to six weeks or so. I’m not really sure. Haven’t had reason to look at it recently.”

“Missing?”

“I keep my stories in a brown, expansion, folder in my desk drawer. Probably have two dozen in there - six or eight pages each and each one with its pages stapled together. The morning after I threatened Stephen I reread the story thinking maybe I should destroy it. It was the only story in which somebody got tortured. I wasn’t sure so I left it there while I thought about it. The next night I went to get it. I decided it would be best if I burned it. It wasn’t there and that was just twenty-four hours after I had last seen it there. I erased the disk it was on. I was scared. I couldn’t explain it. I even asked Mom if she’d seen it.”

Ann nodded to the truth of her son’s statement but added, “You probably misplaced it. Your room’s a disaster area.”

“So, one thing seems to have been taken from your room and another added; is that what you’re saying?”

“That’s it.”

“Who, besides the folks you’ve mentioned, have access to the house?”

Ann and Pat looked at each other for the first time without anger - as if thinking together, cooperatively.

“Nobody, really,” Pat said.

“Well, nobody since Stephen’s death. He had a key,” Ann added, clearly uncomfortable to be admitting it in the presence of her son.

“I guess we can agree that he is not the one who put the gun there today. Why would he have been looking through Pat’s stories?”

“I really doubt if he would have. He hated to read. He disliked Patrick. He’s not a credible suspect in any way,” she said.

Masters looked into Pat’s face.

“Did you have Stephen in mind when you wrote the

story?”

“No. It isn’t about anybody. I got the idea for the story from Flint’s book about the butlers on that little, rocky, island.”

“So much for the wholesome influence of his books,” Masters said, attempting to lighten the moment. “You’ll leave the story for me to read?”

“Yes. Here. I don’t really ever want to see it again.”

Masters accepted it across the coffee table.

“If you destroyed the disk and your copy was missing, how did you come by this?” Masters asked the question repeated on his furrowed brow.

“My girlfriend. That’s really why I went over to see her tonight. She had the only other copy.”

Masters nodded, accepting the explanation at face value.

“I need to speak with your mother for a few minutes, so unless you have something to add, why don’t you go on home. I imagine Les is worried.”

“She’s always worried, but no, I can’t think of anything else right now.” He stood. “Well, there is one thing. Will I be arrested?”

“Don’t worry about that at this point. We’ll see how things work out tomorrow, okay?”

Pat nodded and left through the front door.

“Several things, Ann. The first may be trivial. I am told that Stephen wore a diamond ring.”

“Yes, I never saw him without it on. He had it made from a diamond pendant that had belonged to his mother. Probably the only sentimental thing he ever did in his life.”

“And he always wore it?” Masters asked. “Slept with it on? Showered with it on? Swam with it on?”

“And made love with it on. Like I said, I never knew him to take it off.”

She seemed irritated. Masters moved on.

“The twin’s father - does he live nearby?”

She sighed and sank back into the couch for the first time.

“In Bloomington - about thirty minutes away.”

“Do you have contact with him?”

“Occasionally.”

“How have you arranged to so effectively keep him out of the twin’s lives?”

Another sigh.

“A long story.”

“Short version, if you will, please,” Masters said.

“Adam was very bright but always wild - handsome, romantic, persistent, but wild. He was always on the edge of trouble. I did love him. Maybe I still do. When my father died, I received a considerable inheritance. Soon after that I found myself pregnant. Adam had substituted something for my birth control pills. It was without my knowledge, of course - his way to my money, I always thought. He gallantly offered to marry me. We were married. A month later he was arrested for a crime he and three acquaintances had committed six months earlier - it involved a death during a robbery. He had not shot the man but he got six years. Under those circumstances, he agreed to the divorce and not to be a part of the child’s life. Then, ‘the child’ turned out to be twins. He’s never asked for money since he got out. He works at a garage - he learned carpentry and auto mechanics in prison. He’s still a brawler and drinks himself into oblivion on weekends, I’m told - well in all honesty I suppose I’m just assuming that.”

“You keep up with him, how?”

“I pay his parole officer for regular updates. It sounds like he still is important to me, doesn’t it?”

It was Masters’ turn to assume a rhetorical question.

“Suppose for a moment that he found out about the beating you took from Stephen. How would he have reacted?”

“He’d have become angry, but if you mean would he have killed him, I can’t say. I have wondered. I can’t say.”

“What prompted Stephen to beat you?”

“Stevie got abusive when he drank and he’d been drinking. But, that probably wasn’t the main reason. I hinted that I thought we should break off our relationship. He said we didn’t have a relationship. That made me feel bad - hurt - angry, I suppose. I began crying. Stevie couldn’t handle a woman’s tears.”

“What prompted you the want to break things off after what I understand has been a very long time?”

“Something Pat said not to long age when we were

yelling at each other. He called me a whore. It seemed like he was too close to being right and it made me furious with him - with me really, I imagine. At any rate, it set me thinking and I see that I really haven't been a very good model for the two of them. If they did what I do, I'd probably send them off to boot camp or some such thing."

"I see. You seemed quick to assume Pat's guilt, this evening."

"Teenagers just drive me crazy, Mr. Masters. I don't trust them. I always expect the worse. When they're good I suspect it's just to hide some evil deed. When they're bad it just proves my point. I can't seem to get that out of my system. A reflection of my own youth, I'm sure. What I said was terrible but that's how I always am with him. I didn't want one baby - let alone two - and I guess I've always held that against him. Dumb, I know, but it's how it is."

"You don't mention Leslie in all of this. You feel better toward her?"

"She's not a male. I've never had a male in my life that I could be comfortable around. My uncle molested me when I was nine and my father knew of it but didn't do anything. The men in my life have all given me grief. I guess I just expect it from Pat."

"You realize that if the gun turns out to be the weapon used in the murder, it moves you - as well as Pat - up a few notches on the suspect list."

"Me?"

She seemed genuinely surprised.

"I didn't kill Stephen."

"But you see how it looks. He nearly killed you with his bare hands and soon thereafter he is murdered. The two best suspects right now are you and the son who makes you so uncomfortable - the son who just may have killed a man to defend the honor of the mother he loves so much."

Ann broke down, sobbing uncontrollably. Masters could deal with being shot at and threatened but he wasn't good with a woman's tears, either. He dialed 7. Polly arrived.

"Polly, would you be so kind as to help Ann back to her house - and stay with her if she wants. This whole ordeal seems to be taking its toll on her."

“Sure. You just come with me, Annie. I’ll get you home and fix you some nice warm tea. We’ll have you feeling better in no time.”

Ann nodded. She reached across the coffee table and patted Master’s hand. The two women left. Masters dialed Les.

“Your mother isn’t taking all of this very well. Polly is bringing her home. Perhaps you can be of help. Pat needs to just stay in the background for the time being. I know how much he wants to help but it’s just not the time. Give him that message from me, okay?”

“Yes, Sir. I assume you will fill us in later.”

“Certainly. Tomorrow. Good night.”

They hung up. Masters went back to his room and settled into one of the comfortable chairs by the table. He donned his reading glasses and searched through the reports for the one from the crime scene in the woods.

He was bothered by the fact that although there were eight bullet wounds in the body, none remained lodged there and only one had been located at the scene - in the tree trunk.

The slug dug from the tree had no traces of flesh or blood on it. How could the murderer have missed at such close range? Something was wrong. Why would he or she have left the bullet in the tree when the rest of them had been so carefully collected? How could they have been collected there among the leaves, the weeds and the trees? It would have taken someone with a metal detector - a top of the line model.

Perhaps the shooting took place elsewhere and the body was brought to the woods to be found. But why go to the trouble of hanging it if that were the case? No attempt had been made to dispose of the body so it would seem the murderer wanted it to be found. Why?

If the gun found in Pat’s room turned out to be the one involved in the murder why would it have been put there? If Ann were the murderer would she try to implicate her son? If Pat were the murderer would he put the gun in a place he knew his mother regularly searched? How about Les? She seemed to love Pat too much to have planted evidence against him. No doubt she was smart enough to have carried

it out.

Then, there was the ring. If the murderer was indeed as smart as he seemed to be, he would not risk letting the sale of the ring lead back to him. So, why would he have taken it? It was another piece of the puzzle that just didn't fit. Perhaps it was done to provide a wild goose chase for the investigators. Perhaps it would still turn up to implicate a stooge in it all. It seemed Pat may have been selected to play that role. Why Pat? To hurt him? That seemed unlikely. As a decoy to protect the murderer? That was the best possibility. How about to hurt Ann, Pat's mother? There would be no better way to hurt a parent than to harm her child. But who?

Masters put down the report and removed his glasses. The two murders seemed antithetical. Stephen's had involved great complexity in both planning and execution. Tom's was simple and straight forward. Stephen's was designed to inflict great pain over a prolonged period. Tom's was swift; he never even knew he'd been shot. In terms of similarities, both had obviously been well researched, planned and carried out. There was insider information involved - the ring, location of Tom's study, Stephen's involvement with Ann, Pat's threat and story, George's expertise as a marksman, his poor relationship with Tom and his recent financial problems.

George had estimated that only one in a thousand good marksmen could make that shot and the murderer accomplished it, cleanly, expertly. Neither Pat nor Ann appeared to have that skill. In fact, none of Masters' actual suspects did. Perhaps an outside assassin had been employed - paid well by one of them. Professional hits were expensive, again well out of the range of at least most of the current suspects.

An interesting, though farfetched explanation crossed the old detective's mind. What if Tom, despondent after his son's cruel death, decided he could not go on living and hired a hit man to kill him - Tom - and implicate the brother he disliked so intensely?

"Off the wall," Masters said aloud, shaking his head, though not dismissing it.

Masters started a list. 1- Had there been a large sum

withdrawn from any of the suspect's bank accounts that could have gone to a hired gun? 2- Pat's alibi for the time of Stephen's death. 3- The forensics report on the hand gun. 4- What efforts could be made to find the rifle or its source? 5- He needed much better background information on Anderson - the prosecuting attorney - Al, and also, Jerry, the twin's father. 6- He needed to meet Anderson. 7- He needed to see the coroner's report relating to Benny's death (the former handyman). 8- The matter of the air and water temperatures on the night of Tom's murder. 9- As much factual information about Stephen's ongoing relationships with women as he could uncover. 10- He needed to verify the shooting skills of all the possible suspects.

Once beyond the immediate circle of suspects, the possibilities seemed overwhelming. Masters would proceed on the assumption that it was a name he knew and that both murders had been committed by the same person. He would be open to other options, of course, but his nose told him to keep sniffing close to home.

He opened the report on Tom's death. He had to ask himself why the P. A. would be so quick to accuse George on such inferior evidence. In the end, Masters knew it would all come down to the position of Tom's head at the moment the bullet impacted him. If he had his head tilted up or down or to one side or the other the angle of entry would be entirely different. A clean hole through the window pane would have provided the best directional clue. But holes in glass were tricky. They often tended to look like they came straight in regardless of the angle.

Masters took the report up to the study. The window had small panes - each six by eight-inches. The pane in question had been removed by forensics and replaced with a new one - presumably by Al. Masters carefully transferred the measurements from the report to the glass to help him visualize the entry point. It measured five feet nine and a quarter inches from the wooden floor. Tom had been six feet tall and had been standing some three feet inside the window, so it did indeed appear that it had traveled in a straight line from somewhere.

"Interesting," Masters mumbled as he opened the

window to look outside. "No screen."

He investigated the other windows. They each had screens in place - galvanized metal screen, a rarity in this day of plastic everything. He mumbled to himself.

"Al probably removed it when he replaced the glass. He may have left it off in order to replace the screen. There was no mention of the screen in the report. Either a rooky mistake or an intentional oversight."

Comparing the point of entry on the two layers - the glass and the screen - an angle of entry could be established. Masters needed to locate the screen.

Polly returned and called into the room.

"I'm back. Need anything?"

"If you're offering cocoa and conversation, I'm certainly up to it."

"That sounds good to me, too. I'll fill you in on my evening at the Smiths."

"By the way," Masters said, leaving the room to accompany Polly to the kitchen, "Do you have any idea where the screen is for the window in the den. I assume that either the forensics team took it as evidence or Al removed it for repairs."

"I have no idea. Al has a small shop in the basement. Come. I'll show you how to get down there. The only door is from out back. No access from it into the house."

While Polly prepared the drink, Masters entered the shop. It was perhaps no more than six by ten feet in size with a sturdy counter and cabinets along the inside wall. There was no screen to be seen. He opened doors under the counter. He opened the doors above the counter. He looked around.

Dropped a foot or so from the ceiling, was a wide, open, rack, which carried longer pieces of wood and pipe. He pulled a step stool into place and climbed to a point where he could examine its contents. There on top was the screen. With some difficulty, he removed it and stood it up against the counter. It had not been repaired. It seemed to be an odd place to keep an item needing immediate attention - as difficult to place up there as it had been to remove.

Masters took measurements so he could specify

exactly where the hole was. He examined it carefully. The broken, metal strands of the screen surrounding the hole were positioned at a clean, ninety-degree angle to the surface, indicating that indeed the bullet had come straight across the lake. He replaced the screen onto the rack, put the stool back where he had found it, and made his way back around the house to the kitchen.

“Paper?” he asked, having come without a pad.

“In the drawer, there.” Polly pointed.

Masters sat and began making three dimensional sketches. He’d no sooner complete one than he would mark it out and begin another. After his fourth attempt. he put down the pencil and sat back.

“I assume there are other houses east and west of George’s place across the lake.”

“Yes.” She closed her eyes and drew it out in the air. “I’d say there are five houses between his and the east bend in the lake and three to the west.”

“The terrain? What’s it like over there?”

“There’s a hill that goes up behind the shore - about like it does over here. The lake’s in a basin. The shore line is steeper over there. I imagine all those places sit up higher than these over here. Can’t be sure but that’s my guess.”

“Yes. George indicated that as well. I guess I have some traveling on my agenda for in the morning.”

“Well, this cocoa should help you sleep like a baby tonight. That’s about all the help I can provide, I’m afraid.”

Masters nodded his appreciation as she delivered his mug. She sat across from him with her own.

“You had something to tell me about your time over at the Smith place.”

He added some tiny marshmallows from a bag Polly had placed between them on the table.

“That is not a happy family,” she began. “Those kids are as different as night and day - there from here, I mean. The three of them yelled at each other from the moment we walked through the door. Ten minutes after I got there all of them were crying. Not out of sadness. It was out of anger. Terrible anger, Mr. Masters - Ray.”

“Anything physical?”

“You mean hitting or slapping? No. Seemed they’d have liked to - especially Pat - but, no, nothing like that. Finally, Pat left - went to his room I suppose. Then Les left a little bit later. Ann finally calmed down and thanked me for going home with her. She didn’t really apologize for their behavior but she said something like, ‘Well, now you’ve officially met our happy family’. It was sarcastic in meaning, of course.”

“George indicated to me that things weren’t all that good over there,” Masters added.

“Pretty sad, I’d say. Pretty sad.”

Polly wiped away a tear with her apron.

“You are very fond of the twins, I can see that.”

Polly nodded.

“Yes, Sir. Sort of like my grandkids, you know? They used to come to me with their cuts and bruises. I’d fix them up. They still stop in to let me know what they’re up to; they let me see their grade cards, things like that. They bring me things - little gifts - from time to time. Never before saw that terrible rage like it flashed in their eyes tonight, though. Never ever! Hard to believe. The kids will be ashamed that I seen it. They’ll be over to apologize and set things right.”

Masters changed the subject.

“Do you happen to know either of the boys who found Stephen’s body up in the woods?”

“No. The Rock Lake folks don’t mix much with the Elm Grove bunch. The people down here think they’re too good for them and they think we’re all snobs. The kids from up there aren’t welcome here. The teen boys sneak down here to swim at night in the summer. Frank’s supposed to run them off. I have the idea he usually gives them a chance to have some fun first. Sort of a bind for him - between the rules here, and being a decent human being, you know.”

“Frank seems like a nice guy,” Masters said, agreeing with Polly’s suggestion about him.

“He is that. Sometimes he lets his badge go to his head - at least that’s what I’ve heard some people think. He’s a ‘letter-of-the-law’ sort of guy. Speeding, parking, noise, weeds. He’s a stickler for the rules - at least the reasonable rules. Makes him unpopular with some - mostly those who

choose not to follow the regulations I suppose. Hates things that are unjust, you know?"

"Who hires him?"

"The Lake Rockefeller Association Board. Three home owners elected at the annual New Year's Eve party - the only social event held as a group. I get the idea many still don't recognize each other after living out here twenty years or more."

"If you won't consider it rude, Polly, I think I'll take my drink back to my room. It's late and I still have some things I need to read. Any idea how early the twins get going mornings?"

"They'll be here for flapjacks by 6:30 if they're coming. Never know. Just arrive. Almost always together."

She topped off his cocoa and Masters left, detouring to Stephen's room on the way to his own. It was large with a private bath, which included a sauna. The cabinets were filled with supplements, vitamins, and drugs. He seemed to have never discarded his old prescriptions. Model planes, which he had undoubtedly made as a child hung from the ceiling - none of them particularly well made. An abandoned aquarium sat on a stand in one corner - the skeletons of its former tiny inhabitants littering the once colorful gravel bottom. Clearly, it had been neglected and the water had been allowed to evaporate with no concern for the fish.

Masters shuffled through some papers next to the computer, picking up a few pages that had apparently been printed from emails. One immediately drew his attention. It was short and to the point. "Benny got your mother pregnant shortly before she died. Benny killed her and made it look like an accident. He couldn't take the chance he'd lose his job. I have incontestable proof, which I will get to you later." It was unsigned.

Could it be, Masters wondered, that impulsive Stephen had received that email and acted upon it, killing Benny in a fit of rage? Why would he have kept the letter around for so long and why out in the open? He had grown up knowing Benny and all of his idiosyncrasies. Masters needed to look further into Benny's death.

Satisfied with his look through Stephen's things,

Masters soon found himself and his cocoa back in his own room. He pulled the drapes and made himself comfortable in one of the big chairs at the table. He took Pat's story from his pocket, unfolded it and began to read - squinting at arm's length.

To say the man had any personally redeeming characteristics would be stretching the truth - no - it would be an outright prevarication. No one liked him - no one could stand him - those who knew him, in even the most casual way, hated him.

Masters was intrigued. It was a first class opening paragraph. He donned his reading glasses, settled back, and continued.

That he had been brutally and systematically murdered surprised no one - well, no one but the victim himself, perhaps. Sonny had gone through most of his thirty years believing he was God's gift to women everywhere. His death was not a cause for sadness; it was a reason for private jubilation. I say private because his wealthy father would certainly have the death investigated - solved - and no one wanted to appear in the least way guilty.

Suspects abounded - every woman he had mistreated - every husband whose wife he had tainted. The murderer - knight in shining armor to most - left no clues except for the common hank of rope used to string the man up by his wrists while painful and despicable things were done to the man's naked body. He was cut, he was shot - but never in life threatening places. It was a slow, agonizing death, perfectly designed to extract the revenge long smoldering within the heart of the young, single-minded, assassin.

Masters laid the story on the table, removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes. Even if no more words had been written - and there were seven additional pages - Pat would have moved to the top of a one-person list of suspects. After a few moments contemplating the deep hole into which the story placed the young author, he picked up the sheets and turned to the final paragraph.

Perhaps it was fortunate for the young man that no top-notch detective had been brought into the case. Even so, the odds were even that he still would have gotten off Scott free.

He felt no guilt - only relief and satisfaction that he had freed the World of one more loathsome human being. In the morning, he would begin drafting his plan for eradication number two.

The old detective shivered at the words. It sounded like the birth of a comic book super hero - a dark, brooding, revenge driven, amoral, super hero. A new breed of vigilante. Masters had to wonder if such a piece could have possibly been written by an author who did not possess the genuine, hate-kindled, motivation so graphically and expertly depicted in the story. It would be well to spend more time with the young man - to see if there were indications of a darker side away from the pen. Polly had just indicated that she had witnessed a hostile, incongruous personality, which surfaced at home.

If Pat were guilty, why would he have presented the story to Masters? Was he so naive as to believe he could match wits with a seasoned detective? His last paragraph indicated as much. He and his sister had indicated that they had full confidence in their own intellect and personal power. Motivation? His mother's honor? Something else, not yet known? Would he have acted alone or with the advice and assistance of his sister - they often appeared to be two arms of one body.

A sadness grew within the old man. It would take more than hot cocoa to induce sleep that night.

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CHAPTER FOUR

DAY TWO: MORNING

By seven o'clock Masters and the twins had enjoyed generous portions of flapjacks, and unexpectedly light conversation. Neither Pat nor Les made mention of the night before. Masters didn't press. Polly wanted to but knew it wasn't her place.

"Once more on coffee, if I may?" Masters asked.

Polly poured.

"Don't see how you can stand that stuff," Pat offered.

"Neither could I at fourteen," Masters replied. "For some reason, we grow less wise in that department as we get older."

Pat smiled, understanding Masters was politely making small talk.

"I need to take you up on your offer to chauffeur me here and there in your boat, if it and you are available, this morning," Masters said.

"Available, ready and eager," Pat said.

"Searching for clues?" Les asked.

"No, he wants us to take him on a joy ride," Pat came back sarcastically. "Of course, he's looking for clues, right Mr. Masters?"

"Perhaps some of both."

He smiled at each youngster in turn, then patted his expansive tummy.

"Polly, you make first class flapjacks, I'll tell you that for sure."

He finished his coffee.

“They are the best,” Pat said nodding as if needing to emphasize the fact.

He stood and took his plate and glass to the sink - clearly a long-established routine. On the way back, he administered an affectionate peck to Polly’s cheek. Les finished her juice and followed suit.

Masters stood, ready to do the same. Polly took the plate and mug saying: “You’re still company - may not be by this evening, but for now, I’ll look after these things.”

“Better take advantage of her good nature while it lasts,” Pat joked.

“That’s right,” Les added. “Once she decides you’re family, she can get downright demanding.”

It was good natured teasing. Plainly, the three of them had a loving relationship. He noted the reference to family.

“Back before noon, I imagine,” Masters said for Polly’s benefit. “If it looks like it’s going to be later I’ll give you a call.”

“You three kids be careful out there,” she said. “Human beings were never meant to be on the water.”

“Better on than in,” Masters joked.

It drew smiles from the others and a decided nod of agreement from Polly.

As they walked to the dock Masters outlined his needs for the morning.

“I want to circle the lake so I can get in mind where the houses are. Then I want to spend some time walking in the area of the homes just to the east and west of George’s place.”

The boat was not small by Masters’ standards. The nose was closed in. He assumed that was where the motor was. Stationary seats encircled the open rear area and there were two swivel chairs close to the wheel near the front. Pat appeared to be in charge where the boat was concerned and Les seemed fine with that. Masters sat in the center of the seat which spanned the rear. Les chose to sit in the chair beside her brother. Both wore Indianapolis Colts’ hats which made them indistinguishable from the rear.

As they passed houses, Pat announced who lived there and Les provided a commentary about the size of the family and what they did for a livelihood. They frequently disagreed

about the general nature of people, spawning a flurry of comments which seldom resulted in a consensus.

Half an hour later they pulled up to the dock in front of George's place. Log cabin hardly described it, although, indeed, it was made of logs. It was a two-story structure with a porch across the front and a deck encircling it on the second floor. Three dormers suggested three upstairs rooms. Floor to ceiling windows wrapped around the great room on the east. Across the west end were the kitchen and laundry.

With the boat tied securely, the twins helped Masters up onto the dock. He surveyed the area and pointed toward the east.

"I want to walk in that direction."

They set off, one jabbering youngster on each side. The path there was wide, even, and well maintained. It's white, chat, surface was held in place by slightly entrenched four by fours laid end to end along each side making it a far easier hike than the one Masters had encountered the day before.

From time to time he would stop, turn toward the mansion on the northern shore and extend his arm, sighting toward the window of Tom's study. Then, they would move on.

Sighting number three produced a "Bingo," from the old detective. He turned his attention to the house behind them. It sat on a wide terrace; its foundation was a good fifteen feet above the surface of the water. It was a rambling, two story structure with a low-pitch, shake shingled, roof and vertical, brown painted, wide planking for siding. A brown, stone, chimney emerged from the center of the roof, just behind the peak.

"Jake and Janice Winston's place," Pat offered.

"He owns an accounting firm and she mostly just plays bridge."

Masters assumed that reflected a one income family, unless, of course, the stakes at the card games were substantial.

"What's so special about this place?" Les asked at last.

"Just between you two and me?" Masters asked, solemnly, awaiting their thoughtful agreement.

The twins looked at each other and then nodded in unison. Pat crossed his heart - a habit left over from his younger years, no doubt.

"The shot that killed Tom Rockefeller could not have come from further east than here - at least that is my working hypothesis. Further away would have meant an impossible angle for the marksman. The same will be true to the west."

The twins looked puzzled.

"But the cops say it came from George's place," Les said.

"The cops are wrong in this case. Now, I merely have two problems; first to determine how the shot was made to appear like it came from George's place and then to prove it. How congenial is Mrs. Winston?"

"She's pretty nice, actually. Always friendly. When we were kids and we'd hike over here, she'd give us dishes of orange sherbet. Still happens sometimes. Seems to like children though they've never had any as far as we can tell."

"Perhaps you would make the introductions, then," Masters said indicating with a sweep of his arm that he intended for the three of them to approach the front door.

Pat knocked without any reservation. The lad exuded self-confidence. Janice opened the door. She was an attractive, sixty-ish woman, wearing red slacks and a jacket-like button-up top with wide, flat, embroidered, silk, lapels.

"Hey. Mrs. W! Got a friend here who wants to meet you - Mr. Raymond Masters the famous detective from New York City, recently retired to the lazy little village of Rosseville in the western hills of that state."

Masters extended his hand.

"My recent history in one succinct sentence."

He smiled.

She returned it, saying, "Who but Patrick William could pull that off? What can I do for you?" She stepped out onto the porch rather than inviting them inside.

Pat started to speak but Les shushed at him.

"Mr. Masters is capable of speaking for himself."

Pat nodded, acknowledging her counsel with a sheepish grin.

"I'm here in the area at George Rockefeller's request -

to investigate the deaths of his brother and nephew. In relation to that, I would like permission to snoop around the premises, here. It relates to the possible placement of the marksman who fired the shot that killed Tom. My calculations suggest it could have come from somewhere on your property.”

“Are you accusing my husband or me?”

“Oh no, nothing like that.”

His warm, friendly, smile reassured her.

“I feel certain the area would have been used without your knowledge - it was shortly after nine at night.”

She thought for a moment.

“Yes. I read that. Neither my husband nor I were here that evening. He had his regular, weekly, business meeting in Indianapolis and I always stay with friends in town when he’s gone.”

“May I ask if anyone has access to your house?”

“A key, you mean?”

She didn’t wait for an answer.

“The maid, of course, but no one else - well our attorney but that’s just in case of unthinkable emergencies.”

“May I have your maid’s name and address?”

“Jane Stare - 100 Mission in town.”

“And your attorney?”

“Ed Anderson.”

“Any relation to the Prosecuting Attorney?”

“Why yes. His older brother. You know Ralph?”

“Not yet but it looks more and more like I’m going to. About looking around? Will that be okay?”

“Certainly. I guess. Inside or out?”

“I’d like a quick peek at the rooms on the second-floor front, if you don’t mind.”

“That will be fine. You go ahead. I’ll fix the children some orange sherbet.”

“I would prefer to have you accompany me, but will be glad to wait until the goodies are served.”

“Actually, you two know where everything is. Just help yourselves, alright?”

“We can do that and thanks. It’s been a while since our last treat in your kitchen,” Les said.

The twins left for the kitchen and Janice escorted Masters upstairs. There were four, spacious, pine paneled rooms facing the lake - two bedrooms, a study and a game room. Masters went right to the windows examining the sills and looking across the lake. He took note of the furniture and inspected the backs of the chairs.

"These windows do open I assume," he said at one point.

"Every one," she answered maintaining an appearance of quiet disinterest. "Almost never are open, however. When it's a choice between air conditioner and insects, I always opt for the AC."

"No screens," Masters observed.

"And that's why."

Satisfied at last, Masters thanked her and they returned to the first floor. The twins had finished their cool treat and were waiting in the living room.

"I certainly thank you for your patience with me," Masters said. "We'll nose around outside a few more minutes and then get out of your hair. By the way, has anyone from a law enforcement agency looked the place over in regard to all this?"

"No. You're the first contact we've had about the case - I guess you call them cases, right?"

"That's what we call them. Thanks again."

The three left the way they had entered. Masters wanted to examine the hillside behind the house so they rounded the west side and moved fifteen yards beyond the rear deck. Janice kept track of them from behind the curtains.

It was clear that the top of the hill was below the ridge of the roof. The gunman could not have shot over the house unless he had been up a tree. The woods there was all new growth - no more than ten or so years old. None of the trees would have served the marksman's purpose.

"I need to examine that chimney," he said, as much talking to himself as to the youngsters.

"I can scamper up there without any trouble at all," Pat offered. "Just tell me what you want."

"I'm sure you could but as one of the prime suspects in all of this I doubt if it would look real good for me to give you

the opportunity to tamper with possible evidence.”

“I figured, as much.” he said.

His tone was suddenly subdued and his expression strained.

“What kind of evidence?” Les asked, clearly at a loss as to what purpose would be served.

“The top of that chimney would make an ideal spot to clamp a rifle. It’s at an acceptable angle. It would approximate the height of the third-floor window on the Rockefeller Mansion.”

“We have a height-above-sea-level instrument in the boat. Will that help?” Les asked.

“An interesting suggestion. Yes, depending on how precisely it measures.”

“To the quarter foot.”

“Just what we need. Whatever possessed you to obtain such a gadget?” Masters asked.

“A Birthday present from Frank several years ago,” Pat explained. “He loves gadgets.”

“Speaking of Frank, I could use him about now. Let me give him a ring while you fetch that altimeter or whatever.”

Pat headed for the boat on the run. Masters made the call. Frank was no more than three miles away and arrived at about the same time Pat returned.

“Frank. I need to get up on that roof - all the way up to the chimney. Got some idea short of a block and tackle that can get me up there?”

“Not a steep slope. I’m sure there must be a ladder in the garage. Let me ask Janice.”

Ten minutes later the ladder was in place. Frank preceded Masters onto the roof so he would be able to lend the big man a hand at the top. The twins held the ladder and prayed! The plan worked remarkably well. Masters was soon at the chimney.

“Sometimes it’s just too easy,” he said to Frank with a sigh, pointing to the limestone rim that capped the chimney.

“What is it that’s too easy, Sir?”

Masters pointed to the center of the rear portion of the cap.

“What do these marks look like to you?”

Frank moved closer and examined the area indicated by Masters. It was a little less than chest high at that point. He bent down and looked inside and out. He ran his finger over the chipped surface of the soft stone.

"I'd say some type of clamp or vice-grip had recently been attached to it. Stone's chipped and faint grooves have been pressed into the outside, here."

"Bingo! That's how it appears to me as well. Can you get pictures? Too many will be better than too few. Then we need to secure plastic over the area until the forensic team can get out here. Will you please call them?"

"Got it all covered. Anything else?"

"A question. I see three divisions inside the chimney. I assume they represent three different heaters of some kind. Is that how you see it?"

"Yes, Sir. Probably the gas furnace and a couple of fireplaces."

"One more job for you then. With Janice's permission, of course, search the contents of the area where the chimney opens into each of those heaters. I want everything you find there bagged and labeled. Have a witness on hand every step of the way - preferably Janice, I suppose. We can get a search warrant if she balks."

"I'm not sure I understand."

"Evidence. We need evidence and we have no evidence," Masters said.

"Yes, Sir. I'm aware of that but what kind of evidence do you expect to find down a chimney hole?"

"Won't know 'til we find it," Masters said, smiling.

"I'm still not sure where all this is coming from," Frank said lifting his hat as if to aid his thinking.

Masters explained.

"Assuming this is the place from which the assassin shot Tom and assuming he probably had to hang around here for some time before Tom arrived and was properly positioned in front of the window in the den, he had time on his hands, right?"

"Right?"

"What do folks do when they have time to kill?"

"I don't know. Smoke. Chew gum. Read, maybe."

“And, say he did smoke or chew gum, where might he toss the butt or the wrapper in order to keep it out of sight?”

“I see now. Down into the chimney where it would be burned up. Very good, Sir. I’ll get on it. Pictures. Forensics. Ash and the like from the heaters downstairs.”

He patted his pockets.

“I’ll need bags.”

Masters produced a half dozen, seal-top, plastic sacks and Frank stuffed them into his rear pants pocket.

“Now, if you can keep me from breaking my neck as I descend this shake mountain I will forever be in your debt.”

The deed was done and Masters was grateful to be back on the grassy slope. He walked back toward the boat with the twins. George arrived puffing from his morning jog.

“What brings the three musketeers to my side of the World?” he asked.

“Les and Pat are familiarizing me with the lake and homes and such.”

“You have splinters in the knees of your pants,” George pointed out.

He reached down pulling one out and smelled it.

“If I were a detective I’d suspect you’d been crawling around some roof with cedar shingles. Since four out of five houses have them out here - including mine - I haven’t a clue as to which one.”

“Just look for the one that suddenly has a sagging ridge line,” Masters joked, not wishing to pursue the topic. George understood.

“Coffee? Pop? George asked.

“Coffee sounds good,” Masters said. “Pop, kids?”

They nodded and the four of them walked up the twenty steps from the dock to the front porch. At Masters’ request the twins returned to the boat with their beverages so the old detective could have a few minutes alone with George.

“I failed to ask you about Tom’s reaction to Stephen’s death,” Masters asked.

They took seats at a table on the porch.

“Devastated. Depressed. Angry. Vengeful. All of those things I suppose. He stayed away from his office for several weeks. Polly says he hardly ate and that he roamed

the house at night unable to sleep.”

“You spent time with him?”

“Some. He preferred to be alone and had always preferred to be somewhere other than where I was. Not much help to him, I’m afraid.”

“Was there anyone else in his life? I’m not even sure what I’m asking, I guess.”

“No one new. No one from the company came around - I assume that was by his own order. Most things went on as usual. Al and his helper spent lots of time there those first several weeks. He was resealing the decks by the pool. It’s a huge job. I thought he’d done it last fall. Oh, well, time flies. What I was getting at was that Al might be a better source of information about Tom during that time than I am.”

“I’ll certainly ask him. I assume Stephen had shares in the company?”

“Twenty-five percent and never had to lift a finger.”

“Do you know to whom they went upon his death?”

“Tom, I’m quite sure. I guess I really don’t know that for a fact. It is my educated assumption. The comptroller at his office will know. His name escapes me, I’m afraid.”

“Could Pat have killed Stephen - in your opinion?”

George was surprised by the question. It made him uncomfortable.

“Could he, or did he?”

“Both, I suppose. Take them in any order you please.”

“Could he, meaning was he angry enough? Yes. Was he smart enough to plan it? Yes. Was he capable of carrying it out? Yes. Is he a killer at heart? No. Did he kill Stephen? I doubt it. I wish I could say there is no way Pat did it but all I can say truthfully is that I doubt it - strongly doubt it if that’s of any help.”

“Why do you suppose Anderson hasn’t preferred charges against the boy?” Masters asked.

“Absolutely no evidence, I suppose. As far as I can tell he hasn’t even really investigated the possibility.”

“But without evidence he is willing to come after you.”

“Years of animosity between Tom and me may weigh heavier in his view than a one-time, hot-headed, threat from a fourteen-year-old. I bankrolled another candidate for his office

last November. That may have something to do with it. He won, obviously, but barely. No one has been charged in Stephen's death."

"I assume he has had your home searched."

"Top to bottom and inside out."

"Did they remove anything?"

"Not so much as a hair from my comb. He has subpoenaed my financial records going back ten years. My accountant is preparing them now."

"Your record is clear in terms of purchasing high powered rifles?"

"Absolutely!"

"You seem to know a considerable amount about them?"

"I had a prolonged association with a woman a few years back. She and her ex-husband were both experts with rifles. She had a half dozen, I suppose. I must admit I got hooked on them while we were together. There are witnesses who can swear they saw me consistently hit three inch bulls-eyes from a thousand yards - just about the distance from here to the study window across the lake."

"Have you ever been up on the Winston's roof, two houses east of here?"

"What a strange question. No. In fact, I haven't been up on anybody's roof including my own. Clearly, you're onto something."

"And I'll pass it on as soon as it seems prudent."

Masters stood.

"Thanks for the coffee and information. Oh, do you know anything about the relationship between Anderson and his older brother - another attorney, I believe?"

"Relationship? Close. Very close, I suppose you'd say. Had a law practice together before Ralph was elected P. A. and I imagine he'll return to it when he leaves office."

"What kind of reputation does the firm have?"

"No nonsense, heavy-handed, powerful - you get the idea?"

"Whatever it takes to win?" Masters said as if summarizing.

"That could be their motto," George agreed.

Masters smiled and shook George's hand.

"Wish I could say it's all falling into place," Masters said, "but it isn't. Doesn't mean it won't, so don't lose heart."

He turned and made his way down the steps to the boat. Les was laying on the deck reading. Pat had stripped to his boxers and was swimming laps between George's dock and the one fifty yards to the west.

"I'd think the lad would freeze right in place out there," Masters said, hands on hips, shaking his head.

"The water can't be over fifty degrees yet, can it?"

His question had more or less been addressed to Les who stood up to greet him.

"Even if it were fifty, he'd still be out there. He was into being macho long before the macho hormones were into him. Truth is, however, there's a hot spring about twenty feet off this deck to the west. Keeps the water in this little area a good thirty degrees warmer than the rest of the lake. Probably close to eighty in there today. It's why George chose to build right here - year-round swimming."

Masters turned back toward the shore and nodded.

"That makes it all the more reasonable. Suppose we can convince your brother to rejoin us?"

Les put her little fingers to the corners of her mouth and whistled three short blasts. Pat stopped in his tracks and turned back toward them. He raised his hand and waved, smiling. In a matter of minutes, he was out of the water, dried, and back into his clothes.

Masters winked at Les.

"So, Pat," he began, "You a member of the Polar Bear Club - valiantly defying the frigid, fifty-degree water of Lake Rockefeller at this time of year?"

"Always been able to hold my own against the elements," he answered intentionally allowing Masters think he had handled the icy cold water.

Masters smiled and Les laughed.

"What?" Pat asked, looking back and forth between them. "Oh. I get it. You set me up. Leslie Suzan narked on me, huh?"

"I'm afraid so," Masters said. "Isn't that the sworn duty of every sister?"

Pat could chuckle at that. He nodded.

"Pretty nice in there. It's just in this one area between the docks. Starts getting cold fast out about twenty yards from shore."

They helped Masters into the boat.

"Where to?" Pat asked, starting the engine and revving it far louder than was either necessary or pleasant to his sister. That had been intentional of course. (Brothers are sworn to do such things!)

"Back to the Rockefeller place. I do appreciate all your help this morning."

Les brought in the lines and Pat carefully pulled out into the lake.

"Donuts?" Pat asked. Masters couldn't see the smirk on the young man's face.

"Sure. You have donuts here in the boat?"

Pat began bringing the speeding boat into one tight circle after another. Masters - hoping his breakfast would stay in place braced himself and immediately understood. Not the kind of donut he had envisioned but he remained good-natured about having been hoodwinked.

After they slowed and set a straight course for home base, Pat spoke to Masters.

"So, you say I'm still the number one suspect in Stephen's murder?"

"Got somebody better in mind?"

"I wasn't going there. Why haven't the cops come to get me, then? They had some girl deputy take a statement from me and I haven't heard anything since."

"You saying you want them to come?"

"No. Just can't figure out what they're thinking."

"Did you give them an alibi for the time of the murder?"

"They didn't ask. I didn't offer."

"Good plan. Do you have an alibi?"

"I do, but it may not hold water, so to speak. I was swimming across the lake to George's place. He does it every day. I do it on weekends - usually with him - more often during the summer."

"Witnesses?"

"Not sure. There were some boats out on the lake but

not sure whose. Usually kids making out that time of day. Probably wouldn't have paid any attention to me. Had no idea I'd need an alibi, of course."

"Did you find George on the other side?"

"Wasn't home so I swam back."

"Don't you freeze swimming this time of year? And this time I am serious."

"Wet suits. Insulated, rubber, wet suits."

"I see. That explains it then, I guess."

"You guess? You don't believe me?"

"A detective has to maintain a healthy skepticism about everything he hears."

"I suppose so - especially from the main suspect."

"Prime suspect - prime would have been a better word,"

Les suggested.

"What do they do with kids my age?"

It sounded like a genuine question to Masters. If he weren't guilty, why would he have asked?

"Some sort of juvenile facility," Masters said, trying to be matter of fact in his answer.

"Usually until the youngster is twenty-one - sometimes longer. Often transferred to an adult prison at 18."

Neither Pat nor his sister responded. The remainder of the crossing took place in silence.

They were soon rocking to a stop alongside the dock at the Rockefeller Mansion.

Pat spoke, devoid of his usual enthusiasm.

"Sorry about the donuts. Not sure what gets into me sometimes."

"Well, if in fact, it scared me out of a year's growth - which I suspect it did - I figure I should have lost about fifteen pounds and for that I am grateful."

The twins' smiles - and there were smiles - were faint and without genuine commitment to the old man's attempt at humor. They helped Masters onto the dock and then returned to the boat. Masters watched the boat make one, large, lazy arc, which nestled it perfectly into the slip in front of the twin's house. He waved. They seemed otherwise occupied and did not respond.

Masters' interest had most certainly been peaked. Had

the boy just acknowledged his guilt? If so, was he in fact guilty or was he covering for someone else? Who might that be? His mother would be the most likely candidate. In that case, did he know for sure that she had committed the murder or did he only suspect it? Les? If Stephen had attempted anything with her, Pat would have most certainly come to her defense or found a way to defend her honor. Could Les have carried out the murder? Like her brother, she was clever enough and probably resourceful enough. Would Pat be covering for her? And then there was always the possibility that the two of them conspired together - or, even the three of them. Interesting!

It had been a troubling trip back across the lake. Questions were good, however. Without questions, answers could never be found. He climbed the half dozen steps to the porch. His phone rang. It was Frank.

“Got nine bits and pieces of stuff from the two fireplaces and the inside of the furnace. There are a few more things but Janice can account for them. Bagged them all. Suppose the next step is to get them to you?”

“Let’s start there, yes. If it looks like we need lab work we’ll do that later. Did you think to ask Janice how often they have used the furnace and fireplaces during the past week?”

“Yes, I did. Not at all. It’s been very warm this spring and the furnace hasn’t been on. I saw she had it turned down to forty degrees when I peaked at the thermostat. All of that’s lucky for us, I assume”

“Lucky indeed. Good. I’m back at the mansion. You coming now?”

“On my way as we speak. Fifteen or twenty minutes out. I’m going to stop by the office for the mail, check my email and fax. Might have some answers to the inquiries that I sent out about this and that.”

“See you then.”

There was a car parked in the drive. It turned out to belong to Ralph Anderson, the Prosecuting Attorney. Polly intercepted Masters in the entry hall and indicated he was waiting in the living room. Masters entered.

“Mr. Anderson, I understand,” Masters said smiling and extending his hand.

Anderson stood and accepted it stoically. They both sat.

"I've been planning to call you," Masters said. "Still busy getting familiar with the cases."

"Who hired you?"

"George."

"I wish you hadn't got involved."

It seemed a strange comment. Masters would not defend his presence so waited silently for an explanation. It didn't happen. Anderson continued.

"Since you are a part of it, my office will cooperate with you. Most anybody else and I'd file an injunction against them. Don't like outsiders sticking their noses into our local business."

His tone was intentionally short and irritating. He had made his point. Masters was unwelcome but his reputation made it impossible for Anderson to exclude him from the case. Cooperation from his office would be minimal.

"I assume you are attempting to find suspects other than your client?" Anderson went on.

"A proper assumption."

Masters could be short and to the point as well.

"Waste of time. He has motive, opportunity, and the necessary skill - at least in his brother's death."

"From what I have been able to reconstruct so far, Mr. Anderson, George has never been heard to make any threats against Tom. He had recently taken steps to remove himself from the family business entirely, and was a good mile away from where the shooter had to have been. Plus, he hired me to find the real killer - me who - at least according to the books about my cases - has never failed to find the guilty party. Do you believe George to be so stupid that he would bring me into the case if he were guilty?"

Anderson squirmed ever so slightly and raised his left eyebrow.

"The shot came from his house."

"No. The shot did not come from his house and I can't imagine how your investigators could have overlooked the obvious clues that substantiate that."

"I'll take you down for withholding information,"

Anderson snapped.

"The information, as you call it, has been here all the time. Hard to make a case for anything other than inept police work, if you ask me. I will, of course, turn over to you everything I discover."

He smiled and cocked his head as if to ask, 'Is there anything more on your mind?'"

"Suspects? I'd like your list," Anderson answered.

"Certainly. In Tom's death, there seems to be only George - although he's as innocent as I am. In the case of Stephen's death, the front runner appears to be Pat Smith, a fourteen-year-old who I understand you have not even seriously questioned. Perhaps his sister, Leslie. Definitely his mother, Ann Smith. And finally - at this point, at least - Ralph Anderson, angry father of the girl Stephen got pregnant a little over a year ago."

"Stephen? How dare you?"

Anderson stood, looking puzzled, and stormed out of the house. Masters smiled to himself. Seemed he'd hit a chord of some kind. Not sure just what kind - yet.

Frank entered the room from the north door. His path and Anderson's had not crossed.

"Saw the P A's car out front so came in through the kitchen," he began. "What's up?"

"I've just been told to butt out, so to speak."

"Odd. I'd think he'd welcome free help. Almost sounds like he doesn't want the case to be solved - correctly, I mean."

Frank took a seat beside Masters on the long sofa and laid several envelopes on the coffee table in front of them.

"First, I got the report on the hand gun - .22 caliber. No doubt it's the one that fired the slug found in the tree trunk. Looks bad for Pat or somebody at the Smith's house."

"Interesting observation," Masters said, impressed.

"Interesting?"

"The idea that the gun could have been under Pat's mattress for reasons other than that he was hiding a weapon, which he had used. He could have found it in his mother's room or his sister's room and put it there with the idea of getting rid of it later. His sister or mother could have put it there to divert suspicion from them. Of course, there is always

the possibility that some outsider could have gained entrance and planted it there.”

“Prints?” Masters asked at last.

“Clean except for Ann’s - the ones it acquired when she found it and picked it up.”

“Where were the prints, do you know?”

Frank picked up a large brown envelope and pulled out several sheets of paper.

“Here’s the lab’s drawings of where they were.”

He handed them to Masters.

“Humm? If you had discovered a handgun how would you have picked it up to examine it?”

Frank made a series of motions with his hands.

“Probably used two hands - picked it up with one and laid it in my other palm to take a look at it.”

“Right. It’s been done wrong in B movies for years. So the prints would be where?”

Again, the hand motions.

“Could be several places but one thing’s sure. In order to pick it up there would have been a thumb print on one side and an index print exactly on the opposite side. Couldn’t have picked it up otherwise.”

“And these prints?”

“I see where you’re going. This gun was handled in firing position - a thumb print on the top, left side of the grip, three where they would have wrapped around it, and a partial index on the trigger. Odd!”

“Have the prints been verified as being Ann’s?”

“Report doesn’t say. I guess the lab just assumed . . . shouldn’t have. I’ll check back with them on that.”

Frank made a note on his pad.

“What else do you have?” Masters asked.

“I went ahead and had them run a background check on Al - him being the only actual newcomer to the area. They messed up the search somehow and are rerunning it. They apologize for the delay.”

“Messed it up? How?”

“Look here. Came back saying he was a nine-year-old boy born in Pocatello, Idaho.”

Masters took the report and read it carefully. He made

a note in his own pad and turned back to Frank.

"Looks to be one more report there," Masters said.

"The feathers."

"Let me guess," Masters interrupted. "Goose down - the kind used in very expensive pillows. Perhaps traces of linen and/or silk. Blood that matches Stephen's."

"How did you know? That's exactly what they found - silk, by the way."

Masters explained:

"The bullets were nowhere to be found. To have collected them all - had they been just fired through Stephen as he hung there - would have fallen to the ground in numerous places. It would have taken a metal detector and a good deal of time to locate them. Assuming the quarter you found, had been dropped by the killer - a slight stretch, but maybe not - it would have been located and removed along with the slugs. Since the quarter was left behind, I am going to work on the assumption the area was not scanned. Therefore, the bullets had to have been collected in some other fashion. A down-filled pillow, placed opposite the entry point would easily catch the .22 shorts that were used in the crime. The strips of skinned areas on the body will, I am sure, be found to coincide with where duct tape would have been applied in order to hold the pillow in place."

"Why would the killer go to all that trouble if he intended to have the gun found - it showed up at the Smith's house?" Frank asked.

"Excellent question. Eventually, we'll find the answer to that one and it may help lead us to the killer. I'm more and more impressed with the intelligence of this murderer."

"How so?"

"Well, he left no slugs in the body as direct evidence to tie the gun to the actual murder but it appears he purposefully fired one shot into the tree trunk for the specific purpose of identifying that weapon - providing circumstantial evidence of a sort, you see."

"What you're saying again is that there was nothing spur of the moment about Stephen's murder."

"That's what I'm saying. It also appears the perpetrator had at least some knowledge of police procedures."

“Most anybody could have picked that up from the cop shows on TV, you know.”

“You may be right. I’m not a fan. Programs about violence give me the Willies. Hate them with a passion.”

Frank smiled.

“What?” Masters asked, clearly interested in the young man’s reaction.

“You’ve spent your whole life around real violence and yet when it’s depicted on TV it gives you the Willies?”

“Fortunately for me, in most of my cases the violence had occurred prior to my arrival on the scene - like in this one - or these, as he case or cases may be.”

Frank shook his head, indicating his amazement at the old Detective’s take on it.

“On to the next phase, then,” Masters said indicating he wanted the reports put back into the envelopes.

“And what will that be?”

“Need to locate the missing ring if possible. The coroner’s report we received appears to be a summary. See if there is a more complete report. If not, hook me up with whomever did the autopsy. I need to see his notes.”

Frank took it all down.

“Also, in the shop, downstairs in this house, you will find the screen that fits the window in the den. It’s on top of the suspended shelf. Have a deputy come over and pick it up for the lab. Don’t touch it. Have it dusted for prints. The most recent additions should be Al’s made when he removed it to fix the broken window. Have those run. We need a positive ID on them. Include both the law enforcement and military data bases.”

“By the way,” Masters added, “Have you had time to find the coroner’s report on Benny’s death - or did I even ask you get that for me?”

“I’ll call ahead and go pick it up this afternoon. I need to begin making the rounds of the pawn shops.”

“If that blow up of the ring is handy, I’d like a copy.”

“It’s in the Jeep. There’s a color copier in the den. Give me five minutes and you’ll have your copy.”

“Amazing!”

“What?”

“Today’s technology. Color copies of a picture blown up to 8 x 12 from a half inch section in a wallet size snapshot. Which reminds me, I assume the computer in the den is attached - or whatever - to the internet?”

“Yes. It is. I noticed the icon on its desktop. Need help navigating somewhere?”

“Not at the moment. Thought I might enlist the help of Pat after lunch. I need to spend some quality time with the lad anyway and he seems to know computers inside and out.”

“Okay then. If that’s it I’ll be on my way. As I came through the kitchen I couldn’t help but notice that Polly’s fixing something wonderful for lunch. I may try for an early sample before I leave. I’ll bring in that picture first.”

Something wonderful! In the kitchen! Sounded good to Masters as well but he had something more immediately pressing on his mind.

As Masters dialed Pat’s number, Frank returned with the picture. The copy was churned out ten seconds later and Frank left.

“Pat. Talk!” came the boy’s terse response.

“Masters. Okay. I will. Could use your help. ASAP. Here.”

“Oh, Hi Mr. M. Sorry. I tend to be pretty business like on the phone - at least I’ve been told that. Okay. Give me five minutes.”

“Meet me up in Tom’s study. Polly can show . . .”

Pat interrupted:

“I know that house as well as my own. Regularly helped Polly clean the place when I was a preschooler. She would let me ride on the vacuum cleaner.”

Five minutes it was.

“Hey, Mr. M. What’s up?”

“You seem to be in better spirits than you were a half hour ago.”

“Yeah. My moods go in spurts - spurts of hormones, I assume. How can I be of assistance?”

“I am just going to assume that you know how to make this computer to do everything I need done with it.”

Pat smiled.

“I imagine that’s a pretty safe bet, actually.”

He sat down at the console and began pushing buttons. He looked up at Masters expectantly.

“So? What?” he asked.

“I understand there are sites that specialize in selling items for folks.”

“Yup. Some huge ones. Some smaller ones. Different sites for different things. What do you want to sell or buy?”

“The ring in this picture. I want to know if it’s for sale on line.”

“That’s Stephen’s ring, isn’t it? Why would it be for sale?”

“It was missing from his finger when his body was found. Since it would not be prudent to try to sell or pawn it locally, I figured somebody might use the internet.”

“I guess that’s why you make the big bucks and I have to struggle along on a hundred-buck allowance.”

“A hundred a month?” Masters asked, surprised, thinking back to the fifty cents a week he received when he was fourteen.

“A week,” came Pat’s matter of fact correction. “Here’s the biggest auction site. What would you call this type of ring?”

“Try diamond solitaire, for starters.”

Pat typed in the phrase and page after page of possibilities popped into view.

“How can we limit the search?” Pat asked. “Like how many carats you think it is?”

Masters took the picture in hand and held it at arm’s length.

“Larger than two. Probably under four.”

Pat worked the keyboard.

“That did the trick. Only four listed, now. Just three have pictures.”

Masters leaned close to view the screen.

As Pat moved on to picture number three he said, “I believe that would be a certified Bingo, Sir, if I may borrow your phrase.”

“Certified in deed. What’s the price?”

“One hundred thousand dollars. Seems way overpriced, wouldn’t you say?”

Pat seemed to have some knowledge of such things.

“Yes. As if the one advertising it has no idea of its actual worth.”

“So, Stephen probably wasn’t killed just for the ring then. If he had been, the killer would certainly have known what it was worth.”

“Good detective thinking, Pat. “Or . . .”

Masters stroked his huge mustache.

“Or?” Pat asked, turning in the chair to look up at the old man.

“Or the one possessing the ring purposefully overpriced it so it would remain there for us to find.”

“You’ve lost me - and that’s not easy to do, I might add.”

“If the killer took the ring in order to use it as a false clue, he would want the investigators to find it, right,” Masters explained.

“Right. Similar to the way he planted the gun in my room.”

It was an interesting, apparently spontaneous, analogy. Pat’s place in the case became more difficult to figure every time Masters spoke with him.

“Yes, like that, provided the handgun was planted, of course.”

Pat looked at Masters, his brow creased. He seemed hurt by the statement. Masters went on.

“How do we make a bid on it or whatever you do to buy it?”

“Here’s a hot link to the seller’s email. We just write him saying we’re interested and make a bid. Actually, this is an all or nothing price - it says nothing about bids.”

“Can you tell from the link what the email address is?”

“It’s a blind link. Oh, there’s an address or it couldn’t be sent but no one’s name if that’s what you mean.”

“Yes, it was. And no way to know where that person is?”

“No. Could be anywhere in the World, actually. It’s one of the wonderful things about the net - geographic distance no longer hampers or delays communication. But, wait! We may have drawn a bit of luck. See the part after the @ sign?”

"The s-ind.net?"

"Yeah. That's a tiny little ISP out of Bloomington - can't have more than five or six thousand customers."

"Five or six thousand is tiny?"

"Extremely compared to AOL and the other big players."

"And that helps how?"

"It would be somebody right here in southern Indiana," Pat explained.

"I see. That's almost too convenient, but we'll take every advantage we can get. Here's what you do. Write him and say we want to buy the ring and find out how we go about paying for it.

"Probably credit card. That's almost universal on the net. This will go out under Tom's email address unless you have another one in mind."

"Tom's won't do. This gets complicated. Mine should work, though."

"You have email, Sir?"

Pat was clearly surprised.

"I may be old but I'm not completely out of it. I often receive as many as four Viagra ads a day."

I garnered a chuckle from the boy.

"Using terms like 'out of it' probably does make you appear to be 'out of it,' Sir. But I get your meaning. I didn't intend it as a put down."

"The only way to validate a putdown is to accept it and I never do - never let myself begin believing them."

"Eleanor Roosevelt said something like that."

"And he is a well-read lad as well," Masters said. "Yes she did, and it is to her that I footnote that bit of wisdom."

"Your address?" Pat asked, impatient to get on with things.

"I can never remember it. Here, it's on my business card."

The address was entered and the mail was sent.

"Show me how to check for an answer," Masters said.

"I'll leave it set up on your email homepage. You just enter your username and password in these two boxes and your inbox will appear. This is a great set-up by the way -

color printer, top of the line scanner, instant internet access. The CPU is fantastically fast.”

The boy stroked the monitor.

“I’m happy for the two of you, but I need to get on to something else and it wouldn’t be prudent for you to know what we find. Hope that’s not impossible. I need to both protect the information and you from having to keep it a secret.”

“Sure. I can probably fix it that way. Where should we go?”

“I want to see if we can find personal, legal, information for Al Donner - birth certificate, marriage license, death certificates. Probably in Idaho.”

Again, Pat turned in his chair. He looked dumbfounded.

“I haven’t gone bonkers, son. Just tell me if you can do it.”

“Sure. It may cost your credit card a few bucks. Just about anything is available on line if you’re willing to pay for it. I need his full name, and date of birth as minimal information. If you know it, the Social Security number will cinch it.”

“Let’s begin without the number. Then we’ll follow that up with a search that includes the number.”

“Whatever you say.”

The information was entered along with Master’s credit card number.

Pat stood up, giving the seat to Masters who sat down.

“Just click on the execute button at the bottom of the page. A screen of information will come up - give it ten or fifteen seconds to do its thing. If it says ‘Data Not Found’, it won’t charge your card. If it says, ‘Here is the data you requested’, place the cursor over the printer icon up here on top and the report will print out. Then, click down here to leave the site.

“Amazing!” Masters said. “In less than a minute you’ve located pieces of data half a continent away. I’m sure it doesn’t seem nearly as magical to you as it does to folks from my generation. If you will, go look out the window.”

The data was available and the report printed. Masters clicked the information away and had Pat return to repeat the

process using the Social Security number. That combination produced no data. Masters nodded, satisfied that he understood about Al.

“Frank said Polly had something wonderful on tap in the Kitchen for lunch. Will you join me?”

“I’ve seldom turned down a free meal - especially Polly’s. Don’t forget to check your email right after lunch. Things move fast on those for-sale sites.”

Masters nodded. The two left the room and headed for the stairs. Pat opted to mount the banister and slide his way to the bottom - sidesaddle. Masters hesitated, considering the prospect but decided to forgo the childhood pleasure in the interest of maintaining structural integrity – of himself as well as the railing.

CHAPTER FIVE

DAY TWO: AFTERNOON

The lunch fare consisted of ham salad sandwiches, homemade minestrone soup, and cream puffs with raspberry filling. It brought a personal oversight to mind for Masters and he addressed Pat who was sitting across the table next to Polly.

"I believe I failed to thank you and your sister for the generous offering of raspberry twisters. I am portioning them out to make them last."

"Actually, you did - thank us, that is - yesterday on the way back from Al's," Pat said turning to Polly.

"How many packs did you give him?"

"Packs? Plural? With an 's'?" Masters said smiling, sensing Polly had been withholding goodies.

"Okay. Only one pack to begin with. It was my intention to give you one each day. Just forgot this morning. I'll get them."

"Oh. One a day sounds like a fine idea," Masters said. "Perhaps two on days when I've been a particularly good boy."

"You really do talk like that, don't you," Pat noted, looking across the table at his new friend. "I often wondered if Flint just added that to spice things up."

Masters shook his head, tickled at Pat's on-going commentary. A question came to mind.

"I am curious though," Masters began, looking at Polly. "If you allocate me one pack per day, just how many days will this stash last?"

"Would you believe, twenty-four?" Polly answered

looking at Pat over the top of her glasses.

Masters also looked at the boy. The question remained unspoken.

“They come twenty-four packs to a case.”

He shrugged. It seemed a simple thing to him.

“Very considerate, of course, but I fully intend to have these murder cases wrapped up in no more than four days.”

Polly looked surprised. Pat nodded, slurping in the last of his soup.

“Three chapters per day over three days plus the next-morning zinger at the end. About what I figured.”

“Is that how Flint constructs them?” Masters asked.

It was Pat’s turn to look surprised.

“You don’t read them?”

“Why on earth would I want to do that? I lived them - remember!”

Another shrug, this one accompanied by a series of short, thoughtful, bouncy, nods. Apparently, the big man’s response made sense.

“I am being forgetful today,” Masters said. “I didn’t call Frank to inform him that we found Stephen’s ring on the internet.”

“I’ll take care of that if you want,” Pat offered. “I have to call him anyway. He borrowed my scuba tanks and I need them back. For some reason, I seem to do my best thinking when I’m twenty feet below the surface.”

“Sure. Thank you. So, you’re a scuba guy, are you?”

“Yeah. A couple of years now. If that gun had really been mine, I’d have buried it three feet deep in the clay on the bottom of the lake. Not even the great Raymond Masters would have been able to locate it there.”

“He gazed into Masters’ face.

It could have been a look of challenge. It could have just been matter of fact. Masters withheld judgment.”

“Somebody clearly wanted the authorities to find the gun, Pat. If that was not you, then it was someone who has easy access to your room. Any ideas along that line?”

“Mother and Les are the obvious answers to your question, of course. It wouldn’t have been either of them, though.”

“And your reasoning . . . ?”

“They love me. They’d never try to implicate me. I’d be a better suspect in it than either of them.”

“And how, you?”

“To make it appear that somebody planted it there in order to make me look guilty - when, in fact, I was guilty.”

“Any second-level suspects?” Masters continued.

“Al’s been around a lot lately though not as much as he was right after Stephen was killed. Seemed like he and that short-lived helper of his were in this area all the time for weeks afterward. He doesn’t have a key, but then we never lock the place.”

He looked at Polly.

“Probably best not to spread that around, you understand.”

Polly nodded, maintaining a serious face through the remark, which struck her as humorous. He had trusted her with his most intimate secrets ever since he could talk. Why such an admonition at this point?

Polly spoke.

“The question was not for me, but Al did have a helper here while he was sealing the decks. What was his name, Pat?”

“Shell or Shull - I think he called him Shell.”

“Yes. Shell,” Polly agreed. “He appeared a few days before Stephen’s death as I recall and remained for about a week, maybe two, afterward - somebody Al had met at the Bar and Grill.”

Pat nodded his unsolicited confirmation and was moved to comment.

“Sneaky. Shifty eyes. Seemed to be extremely klutzy for a handyman’s helper. Saw him spill a gallon of sealer once out on the decks, here. Couldn’t figure why Al would use such a dunce.”

“How well do you know Al, Pat?”

“Not well, really. He seems to be uncomfortable around kids. Ignored my initial attempts at conversation with him so I gave up. Probably shouldn’t admit this but Les and I snuck into his cabin a couple of times to snoop around. He’s really let it run down. Benny used to take great care of the place. He

liked having us around. I miss Benny a lot. He taught me how to fish - bait hooks, adjust the sinkers - things like that. I used to help him sink the Christmas trees in January. That makes great fish sanctuaries, you know. Mostly down near his place on the west end of the lake. Wired a cement block half way up each tree then dropped it over the side of his boat. I like to scuba down there. Thousands of little fish grow up in among the brush. It's sad, really."

"Sad?" Masters thought it an odd turn in what had begun as a very positive story.

"Yeah. They hatch, swim around a while, and as soon as they leave the safety of the branches down there some bigger fish devours them."

"Some seem to survive."

"They do. I always figured the ones that made it into adulthood were the toughest, meanest of the lot. That way it doesn't bother me so much to catch and eat them."

He smiled - well, nearly smiled.

"Anything else stand out in your memory about the cabin since Al has taken it over?"

"Yes, actually. Contradictions."

"Explain."

"Well, this guy that never gives anybody the time of day and smells like a sewer, had a bunch of thank-you cards set up across his mantel - a dozen, maybe even two. Cards he had received from folks. Didn't take time to read them but they were unmistakably thank-you cards. Then, there were two, small, wire, cages in there. One contained a rabbit that was bandaged up around its neck - like it had been cut or something and Al was caring for it. There was a tube of tri-antibiotic cream on top of that cage. The other contained a black bird with gauze wrapped around it as if to hold the wings stable - keep them quiet like maybe to mend a broken wing. See, contradictions - kind and compassionate with animals but distant with people."

Masters changed the subject. It was time to get on with his day.

"I will appreciate it if you will make that call to Frank. He turned to Polly.

"This was a magnificent lunch. I assume the soup

recipe is a family secret.”

“Been in my family since - oh, I don’t know - last Wednesday, I guess. Found it in the newspaper.”

She giggled, enjoying her little joke well beyond what it seemed to deserve. The other two, amused by her reaction, exchanged glances and laughed with her.

They each cleared away their own dishes. Polly didn’t interfere and Masters took that as a sign he had been accepted as family. Pat planted a quick peck on Polly’s cheek and left, returning immediately.

“There’s a sheriff’s car out back - and Frank’s,” he reported seemingly disturbed by the development.

“Yes, I asked Frank to bring a deputy by to collect some evidence I found down in the shop.”

“Okay then,” Pat said, obviously relieved that the purpose of the visit had been established. He left again.

“The boy’s been jumpy for weeks,” Polly noted. “You don’t really believe he killed Stevie, do you? I shouldn’t have asked. Didn’t mean to butt in. I know you can’t reveal things like that.”

Masters nodded, acknowledging her take on it.

“You seem to be convinced that Pat couldn’t have done it. What kind of relationship did he and Stephen have?”

“Not much, really. You have to understand that Stevie really didn’t have relationships, as you put it. He was as self-absorbed a person as ever lived. No time for anyone but Stevie, if you know what I mean. He did have Pat come over and work on his computer a couple of times. I don’t know what they did. That’s about it.”

“When was that - the computer thing?”

“Three, four, five months ago. Hard to remember.”

“On another subject,” Masters said. “Pillows. Are all the pillows in the house goose down filled?”

“Yes, they are. You could tell, then. They do make wonderful sleeping, don’t they?”

“Are many of them silk covered?”

“No. Actually, most of them have linen casings - like the ones in your room. Stevie insisted on silk. Just the ones in his room and two of the second-floor guest rooms have the silk.”

“Would you be so kind as to make an inventory of them for me?”

“Count them, you mean?”

“Yes.”

“Sure. Should be four in Stevie’s room and two in each of the guest rooms - eight. I can do that right now, if sooner is better.”

“It is and I will appreciate your help.”

Polly removed her kitchen apron and hung it on a peg by the door. She donned what Masters assumed was her maid’s apron taken from a second peg. She left. He was amused that she felt the need to maintain proper uniform even with just the two of them in the house. He walked with her up the stairs to the second-floor landing and then continued alone up to the third floor to check the email.

There it was. The reply. His offer to purchase the ring had been accepted. The requested method of payment was new, hundred dollar bills to be mailed in a small box to a dormitory post office box at Indiana University in Bloomington. It sounded more like a payoff drop for a kidnapping than the straight forward purchase of a legitimate piece of goods. Masters went to the house phone and in a few minutes, was speaking to Brian Cox, the Chief of Detectives with the Bloomington Police Department.

Masters continued to be amazed at how the mere introduction of himself as Raymond Masters cleared away all barriers to the official in charge. He quickly filled in the detective on the essentials of the case and requested an immediate search of that dorm room. Masters would fax a picture of the ring within minutes.

The picture was faxed and in less than a half hour Cox was back on the line to Masters.

“University officials are cooperating. No warrant required. The detectives are on the scene as we speak. They report a freshman boy - Larry Evans - had the ring in his desk drawer and has admitted to having offered it for sale on the internet. Now what?”

“Where’s he from?”

“Let’s see. Elm Grove. According to my map that puts it about a mile or so north of your location.”

“Brian, you are a gem. I’ll need parent’s names and address, if you can email those to me as soon as you get them. What’s the boy’s story?”

“Says he came by the ring from his younger brother. They planned to split the profit.”

“Are you charging him - Larry, I mean?” Masters asked.

“That’s on hold for the time being. Considering possession of stolen property if that pans out - unless you say differently.”

“That seems reasonable. I suppose he says he didn’t know it was stolen.”

“Right. Said his brother told him he found it in a woods close to their home.”

“That’s undoubtedly true. I just need to ascertain from that younger brother whether he found it on the ground or on the finger of a corpse hanging from a tree. I’ll be back in touch. Thanks for your quick work. I’m in your debt.”

“A couple of packs of raspberry twisters should make us even,” Brian said, chuckling.

“Has everybody in the World read those books?”

It had not been a question that needed answering. Brian hung up, tickled that he had been able to get a rise out of the unflappable Raymond Masters.

Masters’ cell phone rang. It was Frank.

“The screen is at the lab - I’m there now. I made sure the deputy handled it properly. Put it in a brand new plastic leaf bag I found in the shop. Told him you wanted prints identified and an analysis made of the angle of entry of the bullet through the wire screening. If you’re after anything else you better give them a ring yourself.”

“Did you suggest they search for a print match with Al Donner - the handyman? It should be there unless somebody wiped it clean.”

“Oh, yes Sir. It did that. Sorry I forgot to say so.”

“Not a problem, and thanks for your good help. Now, I need to interview those two boys who found Stephen’s body. I assume Pat informed you that we located the ring.”

“Actually, no he didn’t but I haven’t had a chance to start visiting pawn shop’s anyway. Had a big fender-bender I had to handle on the East shore. Found it where, if I may

ask?"

"For sale on the internet."

"Well, what do you know? I should have thought of that possibility myself. Done by anybody who's a suspect in either case?"

"Not at this point. A college kid. Brother of the Evans boy who found the body."

"I see. It comes together for me now. Where do you want the boys?"

"Bring them here. Probably should get a deputy to assist you. I promised Anderson we'd keep him informed of our activities."

"I'm on it. Oh, by the way I have a copy of the report on Benny's death. You'll be interested in it. I'll fax it over right now. Jenny, here, is very generous with her facilities. Well, please don't take that the wrong way, Sir. Platonic. Our relationship is strictly platonic."

Masters smiled and shook his head. Frank continued.

"I'll give you a ring when I know when we can get the kids there."

"Thanks again. The boy's parents should come as well, of course."

"I understand."

"Oh, one more thing while you're there. See if you can arrange for me to see the report on Mrs. Rockefeller's death - Alicia - the boating accident. Should be both a police report and a coroner's I imagine."

"Jenny's down right magical when it comes to dredging up stuff like that. I'll see what she can find."

The fax beeped and began churning out the six-page report. That was followed immediately by the Coroner's personal notes from his examination of Stephen's body. Masters began with that one. He took a seat by the window in the den.

He had been correct. The strip-like abrasions on the chest, abdomen, and upper legs evidenced traces of glue - the kind used on most brands of duct tape. The pillows had most likely been taped to the back of the body prior to the shots. None of the bullets had entered vital organs so none of them could be established as the cause of death. That also

allowed the through and through of the bullets – in the front with an unobstructed path out the back. Stephen had eventually just bled to death. It had been a horrendous crime. The motivation was clearly vengeance in the most passionate degree.

That by itself tended to rule out none of the suspects - well, George, but he had never been a suspect in Master's judgment. Ann, Pat, even Les would qualify for that type of crime. It was obvious that the perpetrator knew more about the human body than the average man on the street. Eventually that would surely help.

"I need more good suspects," Masters said out loud as he put the report on the table beside him.

He picked up the report on Benny - Benito Angalini to be specific. He had died from an allergic reaction to penicillin. That raised a red flag. Surely by the time a man was into his late sixties he would know whether or not he was allergic to an antibiotic.

"I need the name of his doctor."

He started to make a note and then thinking better of it, dialed his go-to man, Frank.

"Frank. I need to speak with Benny's physician. Any idea how we could go about discovering who that was?"

"Yes. He had a contract with the association - like I do. Our personal data sheets list things like that, along with next of kin, who to notify in case of emergency and so on."

"Can you get me a copy of that?"

"Certainly. I happen to be the one who keeps them on file. I'll need to get back to my office. First, though, I got a deputy to call the boys' parents, and the mother's will have them at the mansion at two. Jenny suggested we should have a child welfare rep present - it's required according to Indiana law, I guess - so a Maxine Miller will arrive about then as well."

"The kids' names?"

"Billy Evans and Sammy Spade."

"Sam Spade? Really?"

"Really."

"Okay. I'll be ready at two, then. We'll use the living room. You do know where the Front door is, don't you," Masters joked.

“Can’t say I’ve ever used it, but yes, I imagine I can locate it.”

* * *

Maxine turned out to be middle-aged, compassionate, and reasonable. She seemed to have no special ax to grind - just there to protect the children’s interests. She remained quiet throughout the proceedings.

The gathering also included the boy’s mothers, a female deputy prepared to take notes, and Frank. Masters began as soon as they had assembled.

“We are here to discuss the missing ring.”

The boys looked at each other and squirmed. Their mothers looked at each other clearly surprised and confused by Masters’ opening statement.

“The ring that Stephen Rockefeller was wearing at the time he was killed has just been found in the possession of Larry Evans in his dorm room. He says he obtained it from Billy. Is that right, Billy, or is Larry not telling the truth?”

Billy looked up at his mother who was sitting next to him on a sofa.

“Yeah. That’s right. Me and Sammy found it . . . in the woods.”

Sammy continued to squirm and looked at the floor. It seemed plain to Masters that young Sam would be the weaker link. Masters addressed him directly.

“Sammy. Do you support what Billy has just said?”

His voice was low. “Yes, Sir.” He didn’t look up.

“How would you explain traces of blood on it, then - if you found it on the ground in the woods?”

The boy had been set up. He shrugged and tears began dropping into his lap.

“Probably time to come clean, guys,” Masters said sitting back in his chair, waiting.

Billy was the spokesman for the pair and he began the story.

“Sammy didn’t like the idea from the start. It was my idea to take the ring off the dead guy’s finger. I climbed the tree and reached down. His fingers were all swelled up and it was hard to pull off. Larry was home for the weekend. I showed it to him - just told him that me and Sammy found it in

the woods. Honest, he don't know any different than that. He looked at it and said it was worth a bundle. We took pictures of it with our digital camera and he emailed them to himself at college. He said he knew how to sell it there so he took it with him. That was weeks and weeks ago. He said it was hard to sell. I told him to lower the price. He said to just be patient - there'd be a sucker come along pretty soon."

"At what time would you say you removed the ring?"

"We went to the woods after lunch. It takes about five minutes on our bikes. We played cowboys and Indians for a while. Climbed some trees for a while. We were gonna sneak down to the lake and skip stones. That's where we were headed when we ran across . . . the body. Scared the piss out us, I'll tell you that. Blood and guts everywhere. We just stood there looking at it for a long time. First dead guy we'd ever saw. We knew he was dead right off, I guess. Sammy spied the ring and I went closer to get a better look. I figured he wouldn't need it anymore so - like I said, I climbed the tree, went out on the branch, reached down and slid it off his finger.

"It was like finders-keepers I thought, once a guy was dead, you know. We looked at it a little bit and then I put it in my pocket. We went right back to my place. Sammy said we had to call the cops about the dead guy. I said somebody else would find him. I knew we'd be in big trouble if our parents found out we'd been in the woods - it's off limits if you don't live at the lake. Then Sammy said he was going to tell his dad whether I liked it or not. I really didn't want to be left out of finding a dead guy - you know - so I went along with it. We went over to his place and told his dad."

"I had asked about the time of day that you removed the ring."

"Oh, yeah. I got sidetracked. He looked at Sammy as he began thinking out loud. We got back to my place at four - I know because Sponge Bob was just starting on TV. I took the ring maybe half a hour before that. I'd say about three thirty, then."

"While you were in the clearing is there a chance either one of you lost some change out of your pocket?"

"Never carry none. Just lose it, like you say," Billy answered.

Sam shook his head.

"Never carry none neither," came his quiet response.

"Anything else you boys need to tell us?" Masters asked.

"I got a question," Sammy said, solemnly, looking up at the old detective for the first time.

"And that is?"

The answer was slow and deliberate.

"When are you going to take us to jail?"

Masters looked at Maxine, deferring to her expertise with children.

"No one wants to send you to jail," she began. "Most of what you did was exactly right - you went to an adult for help. Taking the ring was wrong - taking anything that doesn't belong to you is wrong. I will want to talk with you and your parents a bit more about it all, but, no one has any intention of putting you in jail."

Masters nodded his approval. Maxine understood. Mrs. Evans had a question.

"What about my son, Larry? What will happen with him?"

"It appears to me that Billy just got him off the hook. I'll recommend that no charges be filed but you will undoubtedly want to speak with him about trying to find the owners of lost items before he just assumes possession of them.

Although the get-together seemed to provide closure about the missing ring, it had not helped move the case on toward its resolution. Presently, it was just Masters and Frank in the living room.

"I played a hunch on the way down here," Frank said.

"Oh?"

"I called Doc Cranston - my doctor - thinking he might have been Benny's, too. I know Suzy - his receptionist - pretty well."

"Seems you know lots of young ladies."

Frank grinned but didn't comment.

"Anyway, Benny was Cranston's patient. I told Suzy what was going on and she told Doc and he said for you to call him anytime. He'd be happy to help. I jotted his number down for you."

He handed Masters a page carefully torn from his small spiral note pad. Masters dialed the number.

“Raymond Masters, here, returning a call to Dr. Cranston.”

He was put on hold. The music was Lawrence Welk and it made Masters feel comfortable and compatible with the doctor even before they spoke.

“Doc Cranston,” came the low, easy, voice.

“Ray Masters. Frank spoke with your receptionist, I believe.”

“Yes. About the death of Benny Angalini. That was strange from the git-go. He knew he couldn’t tolerate penicillin. There’s no good reason why he took it - well, there could be but he’s Catholic so that probably rules it out. He had just found out he had pancreatic cancer. Had maybe a year, maybe six months to live. It’s possible, but unlikely like I said, that he took it to end his own life. He’d just come back from a trip to see relatives in Texas or New Mexico, as I recall. I imagine he became ill down there and obtained the prescription. One thing for sure, Benny knew it would be life threatening. By the way - don’t know if it’s important but the type of penicillin the coroner found in his system is always administered orally. He was a good man. I’m sorry he’s gone. Anything else?”

“You have anticipated my every question. Thanks for your time and assistance.”

“Not a problem.”

“Was Doc helpful?” Frank asked as Masters searched for the ‘off’ button on the phone.

“Yes and no. It appears to me that Benny may have been killed and by someone who knew about his problem with penicillin.”

“Killed? Benny didn’t have a enemy in the World - well, if he was killed I suppose he did - but you know what I mean.”

After a moment of silence, Frank continued.

“You must have suspected as much or you wouldn’t have requested his autopsy report.”

Masters did not respond to the comment. Instead he moved on. Now, I need to look at that report on Mrs. Rockefeller’s death.”

The fax beeped and began groaning as if on cue. The report in question started printing out - three, short pages.

"Hit in the back of the head, apparently by the pivoting, wooden, boom - the support at the bottom of the sail - knocked out, and fell overboard. Death by drowning."

It was the summary paragraph that Masters had read first.

"Let's see if there is a weather report available for that day. I want to know wind conditions at the time of her accident. Unless the wind was high and unpredictable, I can't imagine a seasoned sailor allowing that to happen. The word I have is that she was a good sailor, correct?"

"Correct; at least that's what I've heard. I was a mere child at the time," Frank said in response. "I can probably have Betty dig that out at the TV station - been secretary in the meteorology department there forever. Lots of little lakes in the area so wind conditions are always important. You smell foul play in her death as well?"

"Just being thorough, Frank. Can't afford to leave a rock-efeller unturned, so to speak."

Frank smiled. Had the topic been less gruesome it would have deserved a full-blown laugh - well, at least a prolonged groan.

"I understand you are a scuba guy," Masters said to him.

"For years. It's part of the reason I came to this job. Use of the lake. Clearest water within a hundred miles. Solid clay bottom - a dozen feet thick. Never riles up. Virtually no silt."

"You recently borrowed Pat Smith's gear, I understand."

"Just his tanks. Mine began losing pressure recently. I could have had a really bad time last Saturday if I'd been swimming the bottom rather than near the surface. Went bad just like that. All the air gone in a matter of seconds. A faulty fitting. Can't understand it. But that's more than you wanted to know. Yes, I borrowed Pat's tank on Monday. The Boyer's dock became unstable and I wanted to go down and take a look at the support poles - some thirty feet long, secured in the bottom with concrete. They do things up right out here even if it's expensive - perhaps, especially when it's expensive would

better describe the philosophy.”

“You scuba alone?”

“Mostly. I know it’s a no-no but I do. Pat and I swim together sometimes but we’re both basically loners, I guess you could say. Mr. Rockefeller - Tom - talked about starting a scuba club out here but didn’t get very far with it. All that was just before Stephen’s death.”

“Tom was a scuba guy?”

“Navy frog man, the way I hear it. Three years in the service before college. He was good, I can verify that much. I swam with him several times - nothing planned, would just meet him underwater.”

“Who else out here?”

“Janice and her husband every Sunday morning at seven - like clockwork. Sometimes during the week she and a friend swim. Jake’s pretty jealous of her so I stay away. Don’t need any more wacko husbands on my case.”

The word, anymore, raised questions that Masters would not pursue at the moment.

“New subject,” Masters announced. “Have you spent any time at Al’s place recently?”

“Not really. Well, I take that back. One of the resident’s granddaughters was here visiting last week and her Chihuahua got loose. I finally chased it down in Al’s front yard. It was digging up the ground in his - what do you call it - his outdoor fire making place - that circle of rocks. He never seems happy to see me but he sure wasn’t that morning. I tried to explain the dog wasn’t mine and about the little girl but he just shook his fist and told me to git. I got as soon as I could.

“Other than that, I really haven’t been down there. I dive around the fish reserve out front of his place sometimes. So does Pat, by the way. I guess we both enjoy watching the little fellas swim in and out. Like a ballet, I suppose, you could say. It’s like they are teasing you. They swim out toward you and then before you can move toward them they dash back into the safety of the brush. I doubt if Al would have any way of knowing I’m there, though.”

“What day were you Chihuahua chasing?”

“Friday.”

Masters made some notes.

“What time is it now?” Masters asked fumbling for his pocket watch but hoping Frank would provide the answer before he found it.

“Going on three thirty. I got stuff to do if we’re finished here for the time being.”

“Yes. That should do it for now. Thanks again for all your help.”

“You’re certainly welcome. This is a rush - working a big murder case with you. Once is probably enough but once is great. Give me a ring if you need anything. I’ll get right on the weather report.”

Polly entered with a tray of cinnamon rolls as Frank made ready to leave. She paused so he could take one (which, as it turned out, was three). He left mumbling his good-bye through a mouthful of delicious pastry.

“If you have a minute, please take a seat, Polly,” Masters said, accepting the mug of coffee and small plate onto which he promptly placed a roll. Polly put the tray on the coffee table and took a seat opposite Masters.

“At the time of Mrs. Rockefeller’s death - Alicia - were there any rumblings or rumors about possible foul play?”

“Just the usual off the wall things from the have nots in the area.”

“Have nots?”

“Rich folks is always being bad mouthed by poor folks; that’s what I mean. Some said Tom probably did her in because she’d been unfaithful to him. Some said that some lover of Tom’s got rid of her so she could move in, so to speak. Just that sort of malicious gossip. Nothing that was supported so far as I know.”

“Any of those accusations possible?”

“Maybe. Tom really wasn’t in to women - oh I don’t mean he was . . . funny - what do they call it these days - gay? He just seemed to have a low sex drive.”

Masters chuckled to himself. She stumbled over the term, gay, but used, sex drive, as if it were a part of her daily vocabulary.

She continued without prompting as if to justify her claim.

“When Tom was in high school he was a good athlete - baseball and football. He was no sissy you see.”

“Yes, I see. Any scuttlebutt prior to her death about her being, as you said, unfaithful?”

“I’m not one to deal in gossip, but that doesn’t mean I don’t hear it.”

An interesting disclaimer, Masters thought. He smiled back, waiting.

“This is going to sound real smutty, Mr. Ray, but you asked the question.”

Masters nodded as if to accept full responsibility. He continued munching on a roll.

“Several months after the wedding, I overheard the two of them - Mr. and Mrs. - arguing late one night. I didn’t hear it all because they were coming up the stairs and ended up in his room on the third floor - opposite end of the hall from my place. I did hear him say to her (Polly crossed herself), ‘If I ever even suspect you’ve been with John again, I’ll kill you both. I can be every bit as good a lover as any man.’ The door closed behind them and I didn’t hear any more. I can tell you, though, that it was nine months later that Stevie was born.”

“John?”

“The only John around here is John Boyer. He and his wife, Mary, live up on the east shore. They never had any kids.”

“Any scuttlebutt about Stevie and either Mary Boyer or Janice Winston?”

“There was scuttlebutt about Stevie and every woman within thirty miles. Those that had him bragged about it and those that didn’t lied about it.”

Masters nodded and sipped from the mug.

“Thanks again for both the information and the wonderful pastry.”

“You’re welcome. It sounds like these murders are getting more and more complicated,” she said, standing.

“This morning I had too few suspects. Now they seem to be arriving in droves.”

Polly left, shaking her head. Masters put on his reading glasses and returned to the reports on Mrs. Rockefeller’s

death (distracted only momentarily as he selected a third cinnamon roll).

He went to the police report first. It was short and to the point and read more like a news story.

The body of Alicia Rockefeller, nee Anderson, wife of wealthy local business man Thomas Rockefeller, was located on the bottom of Lake Rockefeller one hundred fifty-five yards directly in front of her residence. The fifteen foot, single sail, boat in which she had been sailing alone was found adrift near the Southeast shore. Its presence there, reported by Janice Winston, gave rise to the search. Mrs. Rockefeller was considered a fine sailor and had logged hundreds of hours in the craft. An autopsy is pending and foul play is not suspected.

He turned back to the Coroner's Report. Death was by drowning. There didn't seem to be any doubt about that. The description of the blow to the back of the head caught Masters' attention.

A surface abrasion, six centimeters wide and ten centimeters from top to bottom, laid open the flesh along the hair line on the back of the neck. The blow, delivered with a blunt instrument, is consistent with that of a blow from the wooden boom on the sailboat.

Masters thought aloud.

"That would have been about two and a third inches wide and some four inches, top to bottom. He drew a box that size on his pad and read on.

The hair and the wood splinters - ash - found embedded in the abrasion, tend to support this conclusion. It would appear she was struck on the head, knocked out, fell overboard and drowned in the lake water.

It appeared he could rule out suicide but he was not at all convinced it had been an accident. He dialed seven on the house phone.

"Yes, Sir. Need more coffee?"

"Well, yes, actually, that would be nice, but it's not the reason for the call. Do you know of any photographs of Alicia in her sailboat?"

"There's one on the mantel in her room. Mr. Rockefeller insisted that I clean her room once a week all

these years - like he expected her to return. Shall I get it?"

"I'd rather meet you in her room. Perhaps looking it over will help me get to know her."

A few minutes later Polly was unlocking the door.

"Guess there's no reason to keep it locked anymore, is there," she commented as she opened the door and entered. Masters followed.

Polly went directly to the mantel and pointed out the picture. It was a black and white snapshot framed under glass. Masters picked it up and studied it. Alicia was sitting at the tiller in the rear of the boat, smiling at the camera."

"Where do you suppose this picture was snapped?" Masters asked.

"Out front, I imagine."

She moved in and took a closer look.

"No. I never noticed before. See the metal bric-a-brac on the end of the dock - just a bit of it shows here in the corner."

She pointed.

Masters nodded, wondering if ever before a dock had been identified by its bric-a-brac.

"That's over at the Winston's," she explained.

"And where would the person taking the picture have been standing?"

She took the frame in her hands and studied the picture.

"Probably on the shore between the Winston's dock and George's. Yes, that's where they would have had to be. She looks really happy, doesn't she?"

Polly smiled.

"I didn't often see that kind of a smile on her face, you know."

She brushed away a tear and handed it back to Masters. He changed the subject.

"Her family still in the area?"

"No. Not sure where they went. Moved, I know that much. Came into some money the way I heard it and just picked up and went somewhere. Not much help on that one, I guess."

"Her maiden name was Alicia Anderson," Masters said.

“Any relation to Ralph and his brother?”

“Don’t know. Don’t think so. Distant if at all, I’d sa, but that’s just a guess,” Polly answered with a rush of disclaimers.

“From her yearbook here, I see she was homecoming queen. Tom’s picture doesn’t appear.”

“Tom graduated two or three years ahead of her.”

“I see.”

He took another picture from the mantel – in color.

“This is Stephen as a toddler, I assume.”

“Yes. You can see the devil in his eyes even way back then.”

She sighed and shook her head.

It had been a most un-Polly-like comment. Masters didn’t follow up. Something else caught his attention.

“The boy’s eyes look brown in this picture. The other pictures of him that I have seen show blue eyes.”

“It wasn’t generally known but Stevie was born with very poor vision. Mr. Rockefeller had him put in contacts when he was still tiny. I didn’t think they did that with little kids but they did with him. I guess if Thomas R said he wanted contacts he got them. They made the boy’s eyes look blue - I suppose they were tinted someway. Most folks thought his beautiful blues were his best feature. I never let on any different.”

“This has been most educational, Polly. So much so that I’m ready, now, to look at Tom’s room.”

“Upstairs right above this one,” Polly said. “I can see that putting you down on the first floor really didn’t save you the stairs, did it?”

“No, but it was a very considerate gesture on your part.”

Polly seemed embarrassed. She curtsied and led the way to the third-floor room. It was unlocked. She opened it and stood aside so Masters could enter.

“Will you need me anymore?” she asked.

“If you don’t mind. I may have questions about things in here.”

“Certainly.” She followed him inside.

It gave the appearance of being the room of a man’s man. A beautifully mounted, large mouthed bass kept watch over the room from its place of honor on the rock chimney

above the mantel. The head of a mountain goat - similarly preserved - hung on the wall over a mahogany, roll-top desk between the windows on the north. The opposite - inside - wall was a virtual gallery of pictures - most chronicling Tom's high school and college athletic careers. There were baseball teams, football teams, and one with Tom breaking the ribbon well ahead of the pack at a track meet. Several service medals and framed letters of commendation were also present.

Of interest to Masters, there were no pictures of other family members - none of parents, none of Stephen, none from his boyhood years with George. One would have thought that his life had begun in high school and stopped after college.

Under glass in a long narrow display table under the gallery were other sports memorabilia - a first baseman's glove, a baseball, a bat, a football, his track shoes and a tennis racket. Appearing out of place was a long since dried boutonniere carefully centered on a card which read simply, "To the love of my life, Jane."

"Polly. What do you know of the Jane who signed the card here?"

"Nothing much. He dated her in high school - his senior year, I believe. They seemed really serious according to all reports - everybody thought they'd get married. He was Catholic and she was Methodist. The families were both against it. Right after graduation her family moved away. I don't know anything after that. They never got together."

"This is quite a collection of sports things in the table," Masters said assuming that lead would produce additional commentary from Polly. It did.

"Those are . . . were, his most prized things you could say."

"And you got to dust them, I assume."

Masters had intended it as a joke. Apparently, it wasn't.

"Nobody touched them - his orders. I had to plug the tube into the back of the vacuum cleaner and blow off the dust if you can believe that. I think they call that eccentric."

"Some might even call it crazy," Masters said, smiling.

“It’s been my thought for years but I never voiced it, you understand.”

“Yes, I understand.”

Masters looked here and there about the room for a few more minutes.

“I assume the deputies or someone from Anderson’s office has gone over this place for clues,” he said, feeling he knew the answer in advance.

“No, Sir. No one come to look in here.”

Masters sighed, nodding, wishing he had been wrong. Why would there have been such shoddy investigative work on this case? Was the sheriff fully inept? Was the P.A. afraid he might find some clue that would cast doubt on the guilt of his preferred - and only - suspect? So many things did not make sense. Was there some kind of cover-up going on, or was it, as Polly had so astutely observed, a case the have-nots taking their final revenge against those who had-lots?

He had seen enough for the time being. A nap was in order before dinner. He would dream of fish-flavored pastry - not at all appetizing and yet, interestingly, a stimulant to his appetite.

CHAPTER SIX

DAY TWO: EVENING

Before dinner Masters made two calls, one asking George to drop by that evening and the other to Frank asking for a report on Stephen's hit and run accident and the ensuing hearing. Both men managed to arrive in time for Polly's Swiss steak with all the trimmings.

"I'd like to hear from each of you about the accident in which Stephen killed the boy," Masters said, glancing from one to another around the table.

George began.

"Stevie was eighteen. Had a car that was too expensive, too fast, and too well known in the area. His problems with traffic tickets are legend around here. It was late at night and Stevie had been drinking - not much but drinking. He and a girl were in his car heading back out here from town. The boy was hitchhiking in the same direction that the car was traveling. He was thought to be about nineteen by the coroner as I recall."

Frank nodded. George continued.

"The boy was dressed in dark blue jeans and a black leather jacket. It was an overcast night. Stevie hit him going well over eighty miles an hour. Three occupants of a car coming from the other direction witnessed the accident. They all swore at the trial that the boy moved - as if on purpose - out into the path of Stevie's car just before impact. That was new information that came out at the trial - initially they had just said they saw Stevie's car hit him at a high rate of speed. Stevie drove on without stopping. The kids in the other car

took the boy to the little hospital in town where he died an hour later.”

“I take it the boy wasn’t from around here - you said he was hitchhiking?”

It was Frank’s turn.

“That’s right. He had no legal ID on him - just a library card from somewhere out west. As far as I know his next of kin were never found. Remains more or less anonymous to this day.

“Polly, how did Stephen react to it?”

“How did he react to everything? Mostly, he just griped because his all-nighter with a beautiful college girl was interrupted when the deputies came to ask about his involvement in the accident.”

“He came back here, then?”

“That’s right. Stevie wouldn’t have let a little thing like hitting somebody with his car interfere with his night with a lady - well, probably not a lady if you understand my meaning.”

“Did you ever hear him express any remorse over the incident?”

“I think that’s called a oxen-moron. Stevie and remorse?” She shook her head, sadly.

Masters nodded. Frank took a large envelope from his briefcase.

“The reports you wanted. Jenny worked over-time finding them. We owe her on this one.”

“I’ll take care of her.”

Masters skimmed the reports.

“The coroner’s inquest ruled it suicide?”

He put the pages in his lap. A look of disbelief possessed his face.

“That was the ruling,” Frank said and then attempted an explanation of sorts.

“It wasn’t your run of the mill coroner’s inquest. Held in the main hearing room in the court house. The P A wanted Stephen’s scalp; that was apparently quite clear. The P A’s not usually so personally involved in that kind of inquest. Tom pulled in some heavy legal minds from New York City. It dragged on for eight days. In the end, that was the inquest

finding - suicide. There were five locals sitting on the panel according to the report. Jenny says three of them had new jobs at Rockefeller Industries within the year - management level, do nothing, jobs. The coroner resigned. The three eye witnesses were soon all driving expensive new cars."

"Nobody believed Stevie was innocent of manslaughter," George said, "And I'm sure that included all five members of the inquest panel."

"The boy was buried around here, then, I assume."

"In the community cemetery behind the Methodist church at the north end of town. No rosary so he was assumed to be protestant."

"I will want to visit the grave early tomorrow morning."

"I'll pick you up at seven, then," Frank said.

"New topic," Masters announced, looking at George. "What was Tom's basic temperament?"

"He was highly - singularly - motivated to make the business successful, if that's what you mean."

"Personally? How did he come off as a person?"

"Self-centered. Disliked having his routine interrupted. Had few if any good friends and seemed to prefer it that way. Couldn't stand two things: somebody not carrying out one of his orders and ineptitude."

"How would he react in the presence of those things?"

"Fly off the handle. Rant and rave. Summarily fire all those involved," George answered.

"He must have had an interesting set of thoughts about his generally inept, disobedient, son, then," Masters said.

He moved on before the others could respond.

"Did he carry a grudge?"

"Can't be sure. As a kid, once something was over it was over. He never looked back, never brought things up again. I have no reason to think he was different as an adult."

"Polly. How was he around here?"

"Not kind or unkind to me, really. Avoided all of us. He'd come home and eat and then go right up to his study 'til ten. After that he went to his room for the night. Up at six. Breakfast at six-thirty. Off to work at seven. Same routine seven days a week. He didn't want to be bothered with details. I ran the house. Hazel raised the boy. Benny - then

Al - took care of the grounds and repairs. Never flew off the handle around here once Alicia passed on. In truth, the two of them hardly ever had words; he just didn't talk to her."

"And Stephen? It would appear he was fairly laid back."

Polly answered. "Laid back, selfish, inconsiderate, over-sexed."

The two men shrugged and nodded. Apparently, Polly had covered the topic.

Masters turned back to George.

"Alicia's sail boating? She was competent to handle the boat by herself?"

"Oh, yes. She'd been around boats all her life. Her father ran the marina at Willow Lake, north of town. Covers three hundred acres. She was handling small sail boats on her own from the time she was twelve."

"And the one she was in at the time of her accident - she was familiar with it?"

"She'd had it ever since she arrived here."

"Is it still around?"

"Tom put it in storage when she died. I can find out where, if you want me to," George said.

Polly spoke.

"It's right here in the garage. Tom had Benny build a big box for it - like a coffin. It sits against the East wall. Never been touched since it was closed - Tom's order."

"I want to examine it. Is it possible for you gentlemen to assist me after dinner?"

They looked at each other and nodded. Frank spoke.

"Sure. I've heard about it but never saw it. Understand it's all wood - not fiberglass like most are today."

"Is that good - wood, I mean?" Masters asked.

"Tends to be heavier and ride more stable in the water. Requires a lot more upkeep - yearly caulking and painting."

"You seem to know about such things."

"Have the scout's Boating Certificate. Got it my junior year in high school. Had first aid, lifesaving, and water safety instructor certificates so thought I should go for the fourth."

"Impressive. I feel safer already - being here so near the water, I mean," Masters said only partly in jest.

“Several more general questions while I have the three of you all in the same place,” Masters continued. “What do you know about the marksmanship skills of Ann, Les, Pat and Al?”

Frank spoke.

“The three Smith’s hate guns. I doubt if any one of them could hit a barn at ten paces. Pat won’t even go hunting with me. He told me he was in Al’s place and saw several guns hanging on the wall. I believe he said two rifles and two hand guns. You’ll have to check with him to make sure. If Al has guns, he probably knows how to use them. How good he is, I have no idea.”

“I know the twins hate guns, alright,” Polly added confirming Frank’s contention.

“I have no real information about any of them,” George said.

“How about any of the others out here?” Masters asked.

George answered.

“Several are members of the county shooting club that I belong to. The Hardys, the Winstons, the Boyers. All of them excellent shots. Shoot skeet mostly so I guess the shotgun and moving targets would be their choice. Jake Winston’s won long rifle contests in Kentucky, I do know that. He has some nice guns.”

“The type needed for the shot that killed Tom?”

“No. Not that I’ve seen. And, laser sights aren’t allowed at the club - virtually removes the human factor you understand.”

“Frank. I have to ask about your skills.”

“I understand, Mr. Masters. I hunt with a .22 rifle, small game mostly. Only gun I own. Don’t carry a sidearm on this job. Never been a need to. Nobody can get through the security gate without swiping their pass card or calling on the gate phone for entry permission. High school kids climb the fence at the top of the hill sometimes to use the lake and the woods in warm weather. Nothing I’d ever need a gun to control.”

“You are a good shot, I imagine,” Masters said.

“Yes, Sir. Bulls-eyes at a hundred yards. Got the

Scouting marksmanship badge when I was fourteen.”

“How did Al get the job here?”

Again, Frank offered the explanation.

“He had befriended Benny a month or so before Benny died. He had helped out some. Helped put new chat on the paths on the east and south shores. As I recall the two of them met at a bar out at the crossroads south of here - Antonio’s Bar and Grill. Benny’s social life seemed to start and end there. Then, when Benny died, the committee asked Al if he wanted the job and he said yes and that’s pretty much that.”

“The committee didn’t ask for references?”

“Not that I know of. He had been working here and was doing a good job so I suppose there wouldn’t have been any questions about his competence.”

George added, “The committee can be counted on to take the easy route in all matters. None of them want to do the work - they only take the job because of the status involved. They’d gladly hire a known serial killer if he seemed to know how to clean out gutters.”

“I thought Al just worked for a half dozen or so households?” Masters said.

“Not everybody wants a regular handyman,” George explained. “He’s hired by the Lake Association to do the general upkeep in the area, but only those who use his services at their homes chip in extra on his salary.”

“From what I have been hearing Al has spent a lot of time around this place recently.”

Polly nodded her head.

“He has. The decks, the lawn. He washed the front windows a few days ago. Hasn’t been back to finish the rest of them yet.”

“Windows. How did he reach the second and third floors?”

“Two extension ladders with a walk board between them - can’t remember what it’s called.”

“A hanging scaffold,” Frank added, helpfully.

“Which day was that?” Masters asked.

Polly thought a moment.

“The day of Mr. Tom’s death. That’s probably why he

hasn't been back to finish them. Hasn't wanted to bother us so soon afterwards."

Masters nodded.

"George, just for the record, have you had recent contact with the woman you used to shoot the high-powered rifles with?"

"Recent, like this past month?"

"Yes, the last month or two."

"No. It's been over a year, actually. She and her ex-husband have been trying reconciliation. I've stayed out of the picture."

"Did you have any contact with that ex, personally?"

"Only once toward the end of my relationship with Kate. He wasn't a very nice man - rough, hot-headed. I advised her to be very careful about getting back with him. Understandably, he showed no fondness for me."

"Where do they live?"

"On a farm, south of Bloomington - about forty-five minutes from here."

"Is he on your list of suspects - the one I asked you to draw up?"

"No. I was focusing on people I thought had it in for both Tom and Stevie. In terms of someone wanting to get me out of the way, he might be on the list. I've given him no reason to feel that way since he and Kate got back together."

"How's that list coming?" Masters asked.

"Tom fired John Boyer years ago when he caught John in bed with his wife, Alicia. It was during the first year of Tom's marriage. Tom had him blackballed in the industry but John eventually got a good, but far less glamorous job with a shipping company in Seymour. I'd say he deserved a spot on the list."

"Sounds like it? Others?"

George handed Masters a folded sheet of paper taken from his shirt pocket. Fewer than a dozen."

"That's considerable paring from the hundreds you mentioned at the outset."

Masters glanced at the paper.

"I see you've added some comments about possible motives - good. Good job."

He handed the list across the table to Frank.

"Take down these names. We need to have each of them establish alibis for the times of the murders."

Frank looked at the names, saying:

"That reminds me, Sir. I heard a rumor that Amy Anderson, Ralph's daughter, the one involved with Stevie, was back in town last week. First anybody's really heard of her since she left here. I'm working to confirm that for us. I assume she would be a possible suspect in Stephen's death."

"I assume she would be, if it can be established she was actually pregnant. That one will be difficult, I imagine. She is how old?"

"Stevie's age. For years she worked in the local high school as a teacher's aide."

"What's the family's story about her absence?"

"Went to help a sick aunt in Wyoming. The reason seems fuzzy. It's her father's older sister. Like Amy, the Aunt never married the way I understand it. She has an interesting name - I dug it out of the school yearbook. Melva. Beautiful, isn't it. M e l v a. Seems to be a combination of her parents' names - Melton and Vanna. None of that may be helpful."

"On the contrary," Masters said. "That was good detective work. How many Melva's can there be in Wyoming? I have some contacts out there. We'll need to make a call and see if we can locate her."

The compliment moved Frank to reveal more of his activities. "I'm trying to get several positive ID's on her - here, this past five weeks, I mean."

"Yes. Good idea. That will be helpful."

"One other thing, also," Frank said, taking another envelope from his brief case. "The weather report on the evening of Alicia's accident. Wind out of the northwest at six knots. No gusts. Just about right for a lazy sail around the lake."

"Six miles an hour," Masters began, thinking out loud. "That wouldn't raise waves, would it?"

"No, Sir. No waves. Barely a ripple, actually," Frank answered.

"The police report states that the bottom of the boat, on the inside, was quite wet - the floor or whatever you might call

it. Would that be expected under such conditions?"

"Maybe. Probably not though, unless she had been swimming and then crawled back in dripping. It wouldn't take much water to look like a lot in that narrow little boat."

Polly spoke up.

"Alicia didn't swim out here. Something about how the water affected her skin. I'd bet a year's salary she hadn't gone swimming."

"The report says she was dressed in slacks and a light jacket," Masters added. "Those aren't clothes for swimming. I tend to agree with Polly."

"Cherry cobbler ala mode," Polly announced as they finished dinner.

The conversation turned to lighter matters as they repeatedly paid their respects to Polly for the delicious meal. With dinner behind them, the men moved on to the garage.

Frank and George, wielding crowbars and claw hammers soon had one side of the huge wooden box open. The little, pink, sailboat sat inside on its low trailer. The spar and all its fittings had been removed and laid inside the craft.

"Now that's Pink!" Masters said, smiling.

"Alicia's choice. It had just been re-caulked and painted,"

George explained.

"I assume this is the boom that reportedly hit Alicia?" Masters asked, pointing as he peered over the side.

George nodded. Masters continued.

"We really need to assemble this thing outside. Will that be very difficult?"

"It'll take a little time and a few strong backs but there is nothing difficult about it," Frank said. "They're made for easy set up."

The end panel facing the garage door was removed and the boat in its trailer was carefully rolled out onto the driveway.

Having spotted the activity from his window, Pat soon arrived to see what was going on.

"Just in time to lend us some muscle," Masters said in greeting.

With the boy's help the craft was soon back to looking

ship-shape - so to speak - the spar was up, the boom was out and the main, triangular, sail in place.

“The sides aren’t very high,” Masters observed.

“It’s a single person craft - not intended to carry much weight. It can list some thirty degrees before water would begin coming in. Even three quarters full of water, this one would continue to float.”

“Pat, will you climb in and sit back at the tiller?” Masters requested. “I imagine you are close to the size Alicia would have been.”

George nodded, verifying the old detective’s assumption. Pat mounted the boat and took his place.

“Now, Frank, if you will, move the boom back and forth, left and right.”

Masters watched then spoke.

“What’s wrong with that picture, gentlemen?”

George and Frank frowned, not understanding where Masters was going. Pat responded.

“The scuttlebutt is that she was hit on the back of the head by the boom but as it swings there, it doesn’t come within a foot of my head as I’m sitting down her on the back seat by the tiller.”

“Give that boy a cigar - well, a handful of twisters, considering his age,” Masters joked. “Now, help me here. Under what circumstances would the person at the tiller move into a position so she could be struck on the head by that boom - in the back of the head?”

They thought. They moved here and there to get various perspectives. Frank eventually spoke.

“The boom floats only six inches above the sides of the boat. Pat’s head is a good twenty to twenty-four inches above the sides. The person would have to be sitting on the floor, I suppose.”

Again, it was Masters to Pat.

“Would you please sit on the floor?”

Pat moved to the floor. The boom would have hit him in the middle of his upper arm.

“Scrunch down until the boom would strike you in the proper place.”

“It just doesn’t work, Sir. I’d fall over backwards to get

that low.”

“Try it on your knees, then.”

“Hey! That works. See!” he said.

“Yes, it would work, except - the boom could not hit the back of your head if you were facing either front or back. Can you get on your knees cross-wise in there with your head facing left?”

With some difficulty, Pat moved into that position.

“Like this?” he asked, at last.

“Yes.”

“Terribly uncomfortable. A person might be like this to reach over into the water or look at something close-up floating on the surface,” Pat said grasping at straws to produce a reason.

“Look down like that then. Frank, move the boom toward him.”

“It’ll hit him smack in the back of the neck in that position, Sir,” Frank said.

“But, if it were to hit him there, how would the wound appear? I mean where would the abrasion begin? Where would the skin be laid open first? In what direction would the skin be moved?”

“At the bottom of the neck. Pushed up toward the head.”

“But the coroner’s report shows just the opposite. The wound was inflicted in a downward motion. Okay, Pat. You can jump down.”

“May, Sir. I may jump down. We all know that I can, you see, but you were implying permission. That would be, may.”

Masters shook his head and smiled.

“If you will look closely, this is not your sister standing here. I figured it was just with her that you went on like that.”

Pat raised his eyebrows and smiled, sheepishly, but made no response.

“I’m finished with the boat. You MAY now disassemble it so we CAN roll it back into the garage.”

Masters’ choice of words produced a round of chuckles. The boat was soon back inside and the door closed. Frank and George left.

Masters turned to Pat.

"I'd like to spend a few minutes with you, Pat. I have several things on my mind."

"Sure. The gazebo?" the boy suggested, extending his arm toward the lake. They walked the ten yards across the lawn and took seats.

"What's on your mind?" Pat asked, appearing somewhat uncomfortable in the situation.

"I've been wondering who, besides the folks in your house, could have known about your stories."

"Sounds like you're looking beyond me as a suspect," Pat said.

"It looks that way," Masters said with a smile.

"Well, my girlfriend - I guess that would be girlfriends. I don't stick with one very long. My need for precision seems to turn them off. Les says if I'd concentrate on kissing rather than conversation I'd be better off. Don't get me wrong, I really like kissing, but I like talking, too. How did I get talking about this? Oh, yes. Who knew about my stories? Lots of folks, really. My English teacher, Mr. Black, saw all of them, I suppose - and Miss Anderson and Mrs. Milner his aids. I've had Mr. Black for English since the seventh grade. Last year several of them were published in the school paper - short-short stories, a thousand words or so."

"Were those as macabre in nature as the one you showed me - the one outlining Stephen's murder?"

"Most were probably not quite so graphic. I do tend to write gore, if that's what you mean. My shrink encourages it. She says it has to do with my hatred of my father and mother. Maybe so. Maybe no. For some reason though, it sure flows naturally."

Masters let the shrink comment go for the moment.

"Do you ever write more uplifting pieces?"

"I write love poems. They tend to become too explicit to ever really give to a girl. I don't intend them to be that way when I begin but somewhere along the way the old hormones take command. Sometimes I wonder if I'm oversexed like Stephen and Mom. I suppose I shouldn't have said that. It's how I feel about her but still, it wasn't very respectful. I tend to just blurt out what's on my mind, but I suppose you're well

aware of that by now.”

“It has come to my attention, you might say.”

Pat began relaxing. He returned Masters’ smile and sat back.

“What about George, Frank, Janice or the Boyers. Have they had specific access to them?”

“Are you implying they are all suspects, because if you are, I’m a way better suspect than any of them?”

“I’m just looking for a route by which knowledge of that particular story could have moved from the privacy of your room out into the World.”

“Oh. Sorry for jumping at you that way. Not George for sure. I’ve tried out some story ideas on Frank and Polly. I’m important to Janice so she might keep up with the stories that have been published. I really don’t know the Boyers except to wave at them occasionally. They don’t have kids my age. Scuttlebutt is Stephen had a thing going with Mrs, but I don’t know that for sure. He had something going with all the females out here. I probably shouldn’t admit this, but I sort of admired him for his - what’s the term - sexual prowess, I guess, up until the time he hurt Mom. My admiration turned to hate in about two seconds. That’s an amazing and frightening characteristic of us human beings - how rapidly our feelings can change when somebody crosses us. It’s the one thing about me that really scares the hell out of me. I have a great need to be in control - everybody including my shrink says so.”

“Are you sure you are really just fourteen, Pat?”

The boy smiled.

“In chronological age only, I’m afraid. It’s hard being so many different ages all inside this one body. My vocabulary is like a college kid’s; my mental age is years ahead. In stature, I’m more like a thirteen-year-old, but I’ve been hormonally interested in girls since I was eleven. It’s really hard.”

“You do write very well, you know. Better than many published authors. I hope you will keep writing in your plans.”

“Thanks. I really appreciate that. . . . So, you think I have a future, then? That’s reassuring.”

“New subject. You and guns?”

“Hate them. Frank has asked me to go hunting with him but I refused. Hate the idea of killing or maiming. I know,

looking at my stories, that's probably hard to believe. I'll never own one, I can tell you that for sure. Mom and Les feel the same way."

"Who do you think killed Stephen?"

Pat became serious - philosophic.

"Clearly somebody who hated him in the most intense way. Somebody he had hurt terribly. Somebody who wanted to watch him suffer. That murderer just doesn't fit anybody I know. Lots of folks hated him in a mild sort of way but not in the full blown passionate way his killer did. I really don't believe we've met that person yet."

"Patrick, you are amazing. Thank you for sharing these things with me this evening. Is there anything I can do for you at this point?"

"Just find the killer or killers. Lots of us out here need to get on with our lives, you know."

"That is certainly my intention. By the way, I'm sure there's some cherry cobbler left in the kitchen if you're interested."

"Talking with you always makes me hungry," Mr. M. "Thanks. I'll go check it out."

He stood and began walking toward the house, then turned and said, "Thank you for being here, Sir." He continued on his way.

If the boy's remark hadn't been sincere, it was one of the best con jobs Masters had ever experienced.

The old detective returned to his room. A new package of twisters was waiting for him on his pillow. That always presented a challenge. Plastic wrapped anything would not receive his vote. He attempted to pull the two sides apart; he chewed at the top hoping for a lucky penetration with an incisor; finally, he poked holes in it with his pen even then needing the strength of Hercules to finally gain entrance. Eventually the little treats were freed from their airtight prison. He dangled one from his mouth like a limp cigar and put the others on the table.

He turned his attention to the crate, laying the pieces side by side on the bed. Then, methodically lining up the holes from slat to end pieces he secured them in place - temporarily - by inserting wooden matches rather than nails.

Each piece took its place in the puzzle - just as he knew it had to. He still needed Frank's report on its possible origin, locally.

He set the crate aside and gingerly lowered his mass into one of the comfortable chairs at the table. After pausing briefly to contemplate the brilliance of the person who invented the chair (and selecting another twister), he reached for the house phone and dialed seven.

"Polly's phone. Patrick William Smith at your service," came the unexpected, breaking voice.

"Well, Patrick William, I trust the cobbler is or was delicious."

"Yes, Sir. Thanks again for the heads up on that one. I assume you wanted Polly and not me. Otherwise you would have dialed . . . Oh well; here she is."

"Yes, Sir. What can I do for you?"

"I found the twisters. Thank you. Also, I have failed to hook up with you on your pillow count. What did you find?"

"One pillow is missing from Stevie's room. I can't understand it. I remember making up his bed the day before he died. There were two pillows there then. The bed hadn't been slept in the night before he was found . . . up in the woods. I suppose I haven't had any reason to check in there since then."

"What outsiders were in the house that day - the day before he was found?"

"George was here. Tom, of course. Pat and Les came for breakfast. I can't think of anybody else."

"Okay, then, I'll let you get back to Pat and the dirty dishes."

"Oh, Pat's already helped me get them done up. So few, we hand washed them. Pat's always good help."

Masters heard a muffled, "Yeah, Patrick!" in the background.

"Tell the lad it's past his bed time," Masters joked.

He hung up before his contention could be challenged by the loquacious young man.

At that point he had the crate upon which Stephen was forced to stand and he had accounted for the pillow used to catch the slugs. The rope was in the possession of the authorities. He needed to have a look at that. It went on his

list for the following morning.

Then there were the matters of locating Stephen's clothing, the pillow itself, and the duct tape which had been torn from his flesh after the shooting was over. It was all probably carried from the scene in a large plastic sack - a leaf sack, perhaps - to keep the pillow from losing feathers and slugs. Finding the slugs would be a nice addition to the evidence as well. Masters held out only faint hope for that, however.

His cell rang. It was Frank.

"When I got back here to my office there were a couple of reports waiting for me. The hand gun was traced by registration number to a sale made in Wyoming over a year ago. Bought by someone named Shelby Trotter. He reported it stolen a few months later and the police have no trace of it since then."

"Purchased where in Wyoming?" Masters asked.

"Cheyenne. At a gun dealer's, just north of the city. It was sold as new."

"Have the dealer's name?"

"Yes, Sir."

Masters thought aloud.

"Not sure if we'll need to contact him. A year is a long time to remember a customer."

"Unless he's a regular," Frank added.

"Yes. Good thought. Give it a try, then. What else?"

"The weather report for the night Tom was shot. Air temperature at the time was forty-three degrees - one of those unseasonably cool, May nights. Water temperature was forty-seven. Very little difference. Guy, the weather man, said that differential would have caused minimal air turbulence. Insignificant for the purposes of this investigation."

"Get him on the line and ask him for his expert opinion about the amount of air turbulence there would have been if the water had been in the low eighties instead? I am particularly interested in how that might affect the sighting of, and the accurate shooting of, a powerful, laser-sighted, rifle over a thousand-yard trajectory."

"You got something up your sleeve, I can tell."

"I'll explain in the morning. Anything else?"

"I looked up that Melva Anderson in Wyoming. Used the white pages directory on the internet. Like you expected there's only one. Lives in Wheatland on the eastern side of the state - just north of Cheyenne. Population a little under five thousand."

"Once again, good work, Frank. I'll see you bright and early in the morning."

Masters hung up and immediately redialed.

"Would Brain Cox happen to be available? This is Ray Masters."

"I can connect you with his mobile. He said to put you through any time, Sir."

"Cox. Speak!"

"Ray Masters, Brian. Sorry to bother you at this hour but I need a favor and in a weak moment you said I could call."

"Certainly. What?"

"I need driver's license checks on a couple of folks."

"Sure. Let me dig out my pad and pencil. Shoot!"

Al Donner. Most recently of Indiana, I suspect. I need as complete a history on his licenses as you can find. Also, Amy Anderson. Her original license would be Indiana. I'm wondering if she more recently has one from Wyoming. Complete license history on her too. The Sheriff's office down here can provide the necessary additional identifying data. I sure appreciate your help."

"Glad to be a part of it. By the way, I'm still waiting for those twisters."

Again, he chuckled himself off the line.

Masters reviewed his note pad.

"Time for that right now," he said aloud to himself, and headed for the kitchen.

"I thought I told Polly to send you home," Masters said, seeing that Pat was still there.

"What are you two up to - shining the silver at this time of night?"

It was Pat who responded.

"Polly and I decided that once you have these cases wrapped up we should celebrate with a big bash - that was what you called a raucous celebration with food and drink

back in your time, wasn't it?"

"If there is food involved you may call it anything you want to."

"You're never going to let that can and may thing go, are you, Sir."

"Not until I've milked it for every ounce of satisfaction I can get."

Polly looked puzzled. Again, Pat had the comment.

"I'll explain later."

"Since you are still here, and if Polly can spare you for a little while, I could use your help down in the shop."

"Sure. Okay, Polly?"

"Go. Be helpful somewhere else for a while," she kidded.

In the shop, Masters explained what they were looking for - well, sort of.

"I'm looking for a something-or-other that is lightweight and could be used as a temporary but stable brace. It will be six to ten inches in one of its dimensions."

"Not much to go on. Can you be any more specific?"

"Not without supplying information that I'd rather spare you from at this moment."

"Okay, then. Six to ten inches in one dimension and lightweight. What kind of maximums and minimums in the other two dimensions?"

"Can't be sure. No longer than six feet or probably shorter than five. I assume it will have one or more small holes in it - an eighth of an inch or so - probably toward the edges of the shortest dimension - the width."

They began a systematic search. Masters directed Pat to start with the suspended shelf near the ceiling while he revisited the shelves inside the cabinets. Five minutes passed, then Pat handed a long, narrow, aluminum framed screen down to Masters.

"It's six inches wide, nearly six feet long, and a half inch thick. Screening is some kind of plastic."

His commentary pointed out the obvious as Masters received and examined it but, still, he continued as he descended the ladder.

"No holes but look here and here and here and here -

four small hooks, like the brass cup hooks under the dish shelves up in the kitchen, but these have been bent closed to make open circles. That what you're after, Sir?"

Masters held it at arm's length and tilted it one way and then another. There were two hooks on each of long sides. They were placed opposite each other six inches from the ends. Eventually he nodded.

"Ingenious. Simply ingenious."

"I assume I will not be privy to why it's ingenious."

"Later, my boy. Later. Now, we need to find a fairly heavy rod of some kind that would slide easily inside those closed hook openings. Maybe brass or iron with a hole drilled across the circumference near one end - a hole you could feed string through. If you locate it, don't get your fingerprints on it."

Masters could almost see the light bulb forming above the boy's head. Pat ascended the ladder, removing his handkerchief from his rear pocket as he climbed. Seconds later he returned to the floor.

"Like this, perhaps - an eighth inch brass rod, five feet long with a hole drilled through the circumference an inch from one end."

"Place it on the counter. Yes. Nice work. Now, we need to locate the supply of cup hooks - probably in a box."

"More likely in a small, see through, cylindrical, plastic bottle with a hang top. Boxes for such things went out with Sputnik, Sir."

"Find that, then!" Masters said, tickled at the pertinent, era labeling, observation.

"The fingerprint caution remains in effect, I assume," Pat said seriously.

"Absolutely," the old detective replied in a tone intended to support the boy's dedication to the task.

Six drawers later the small plastic bottle with hang top was located. Masters placed his handkerchief on the counter and dumped the hooks onto it.

"Hmm!"

"Hmm?" Pat asked, intrigued by the process.

"What is different about these two?" he asked, trying to help the boy discover his own answer. He separated them

from the others.

"I see. This one, in fact most of them the way it looks, are new - unused. But this one and let's see - three more have what appears to be saw dust embedded in the threads."

"Give the lad an A; make that an A+," Masters said.

He took two small plastic zip-close bags from his pocket and soon had the hooks in separate containers according to saw dust or not. The rod was wrapped in paper toweling and the screen placed in a leaf bag.

"Any idea where a long, narrow screen like that would come from," he asked Pat.

"Most of the houses out here have aluminum screens like that. The mansion may be the only one with wooden ones. It was built decades before the others."

"I see. Next question, then. Do you recall a house or houses that have such long narrow windows that would require screens?"

"I do, but I wish I didn't."

He sighed and sat back on a step of the ladder.

"Your place, I assume," Masters said.

Pat nodded. "It gets worse," he added.

"Your room?" Masters asked.

"Bingo, I'm afraid, Sir."

"Any missing?"

"Not that I'm aware of, but the way my luck's been going in all of this I'd bet it's mine."

"We'll check when you go home. Now, I need your help up in the study. You up to just a bit more sleuthing this evening?"

"Sure. Anything I can do to help clear my family members."

In the kitchen, they picked up a flashlight and then climbed the stairs to the third floor - well, Masters climbed, somewhat laboriously, while Pat took them two at a time sitting impishly on the top step, waiting for his portly old friend. Masters walked straight to the window in the den through which the lethal bullet had passed. He opened it.

"Amazing!" Masters said stepping back.

"What?"

"That a window in a house this age actually opens with

such ease.”

He began examining the outside frame.

“As it had to be,” he pronounced.

“Would you help me here? See this small hole. There should be a similarly placed hole near the top of the frame as well. My torso doesn’t seem to twist in that direction anymore.”

“Sure, let me at it. I’ll need the flashlight.”

Pat positioned himself in a sitting position with his legs on the inside.

“Yes, Sir. As you suspected or I guess that would be expected, wouldn’t it?”

Masters took a ruler from the desk and handed it through the opening to Pat.

“How far down from the top - from the spot inside the frame where the top of the screen would fit?”

“Six inches - exactly. I assume these holes coincide with the holes on the narrow screen I found downstairs.”

“I assume so, also. Now, I need one more thing and we may need to get a ladder and do this in the light of day. At the top of the window frame there should be metal fittings of some kind, over which fittings on the screen can be secured to hold the screen in place.”

“I see them. I can touch them with the ruler. One of them is loose - the one on my right - your left. There are holes for two screws. The screw on my far right seems to be out about half an inch and the one to the left of that is out an inch or more.”

“And the other fitting? The one to your left.”

“Snug as a bug in a rug, Sir. Flat against the wood. Both screws completely in.”

“One final thing. Somewhere near the top of the board on the outside of the frame to your far left, there should be another small hole.”

“I think what you’re asking about is two inches from the top on the stop piece, but the hole has one of those remade cup hooks in it.”

“That, my boy, is a certified, Bingo! Excellent! Come on in, now, before I get accused of child endangerment.”

All quite effortlessly, Pat slithered in under the window.

Masters closed it and drew the heavy drapes.

“So, I assume that all of this adds up to case solving clues you will spring on us at the get together where you wrap everything up.”

Masters smiled at the boy’s comment.

“Your assumptions tend to be right on the mark.”

Pressing his luck, Pat continued.

“I further assume it all has to do with the angle of the bullet.”

“Why else would we be interested in things about this window,” Masters replied side-stepping the more precise answer the boy had hoped to squeeze out of the old detective.

“You’re cagey, Sir. Thought I had a shot there.”

“I hope you won’t stop trying. You make things very interesting.”

Pat grinned.

“Not a chance I’ll give up. Anything else for which you need my expertise or youthful nimbleness this evening?”

“That should do it and I thank you, youthful, nimble one. Haven’t seen Les recently. She okay?”

“Yeah. She went to a student writer’s workshop up in Indianapolis. Be back tomorrow afternoon sometime. Bet you were beginning to think we never went our separate ways.”

“Something like that. I’ll probably see you tomorrow, then. Good night.”

“Good night.”

Pat left.

Masters made his way back to his room. He had one more thing to do that evening. On the table, he arranged the small evidence bags that Frank had filled from the heaters at the Winston’s. There were three Juicy Fruit wrappers from the main fireplace; the end of a cigar - the part clipped or bitten off before lighting - from the furnace; and an extra-long, burned, wooden match found on the ashes of the fireplace in the Master bedroom. He smelled it. He assumed it had not been one of the Winston’s or Janice would have accounted for it. Masters would have the lab run the items for prints but assumed the rifleman had worn gloves.

The cigar told him one thing for sure. The match

suggested a probable. The wrappers provided him with a studied maybe. They would all be important in the end. He returned them to the bigger bag and set them on the table.

It had been a good day. He could now prove the exact position of the rifle that killed Tom. He felt certain that he understood the connection between the two murders. There did remain the pesky little detail of discovering who had, in fact, been the perpetrator or perpetrators, but he felt sure he was honing in on that. Saturday should wrap thing up.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

DAY THREE: THE MORNING

Pat was helping Polly set the table when Masters arrived just after six. George followed on his footsteps and Frank came through the back door just as the first hotcakes arrived at the table. Polly was in her element. The breakfast table was filled with hungry people. It would be a three batch, flapjack morning for her large griddle.

Small talk soon turned to the more serious business of the day. Frank would take Masters to the cemetery to see the hit and run victim's grave. Then they would stop at the sheriff's office to look at the rope and to drop off the crate and the items Frank had located at the Winston's. Pat had, upon his own initiative, located a half dozen web sites that offered high powered rifles. With obvious interest, George took possession of the boy's notes and said he would follow up on the information later in the morning.

"I think I've found the source of that crate, Sir," Frank said. "Miller's Produce on 9th street. They still get oranges from a small operator in Florida that uses wooden crates. Just about every other place receives goods in cardboard boxes or big mesh sacks."

"How do they dispose of the crates?"

"Recycle them. The delivery truck that brings the fruit - it's owned by the supplier - also picks up the empties on the next trip."

"Is there any way to know if they've been missing any?"

"Yes, there is, and, in fact, they are. Any that aren't returned have to be paid for - at fifteen bucks apiece. They

had two missing about six weeks ago.”

“Who buys from them?”

“Mostly restaurants and a few smaller, independent groceries. They just deal in what they call gourmet fruit.”

“So, none of our suspects would make purchases from them?”

“I doubt it. One thing, though. They do take special orders from individuals for parties and fundraisers - things like that.”

“They do,” Pat said as if to verify the fact. “At school, we have a project called, April Showers. Each class sells fruit and candy to raise money to protect the wet lands in the state. This year Les was co-chairman. We raised twenty-six hundred dollars. The point of all this is that Millers got the oranges and apples for us. Sold them to us at cost.”

“Crates?” Masters asked.

“The oranges came to us in crates and we repackaged them in plastic sacks - six and twelve to a bag.”

“And the crates?” Masters said, repeating his question.

“I guess we got them all back. I don’t really know.”

“Millers delivered and picked up, I assume,” Masters said.

“No. They were going to make us pay for delivery. Les somehow talked Al into doing that free of charge with his old red pickup.”

“Well, at least we have the probable source, even if it does appear to be a blind alley right now, Masters said.”

“What’s with the crate anyway?” Pat asked.

“Yes,” George said, joining Pat in his question. “How do crates play a part in any of this?”

Frank took it upon himself to fill them in while Polly served more sausage and bacon.

“By the way, Sir,” Frank asked. “How did you know there was blood on the ring? You hadn’t seen it and first I heard of it was in this report that came in just before I left the office this morning.”

“You mean the blood I mentioned to the boys who took the ring?”

“Yes.”

“If you will remember I said, ‘How would you explain

blood on the ring if you found it in the grass,' or some such wording. I didn't say there was blood on it. I had no information about the presence of blood, but felt a little encouragement was needed to help the boys come clean."

"You old fox, Sir."

"But the report says there actually was blood?" Masters asked, following Frank's lead.

"Just a trace between the diamond and the metal."

"Have they run it for type and such?"

"AB negative. Not Stevie's. The only suspect with that type is Ann Smith, I'm afraid."

"Pat frowned, obviously pained at hearing the news."

Masters addressed the boy in an attempt to turn his attention elsewhere.

"Since our conversation last evening have you thought of anybody else who has shown particular interest in reading your stories - anybody out of the ordinary?"

"I've been giving it a lot of thought, I can tell you that. There's Les, of course, not sure I mentioned her - guess I thought that went without saying. Mom really never shows any interest in it - or much of anything else I do for that matter. Polly here, but I shield her from all my gory stuff. There really just isn't anybody else, anymore."

"Anymore?" Masters asked thinking it an odd addendum.

"When Benny was alive he loved to read my stuff. I'd even try out ideas on him before I'd start putting them down on paper. But he hasn't been around for a year now."

"Had he read the hang-the-guy-from-the-tree murder story?"

"Yes. He said it scared him to have me writing things like that."

"So, you wrote that story when?"

"Just about this time last year, I suppose. Maybe in April or March."

"Did you ever share your stories with Janice or Jake? You said Janice might have been interested."

"No. Not after they were written, at least. Sometimes Les and I would make up stories for her while we were downing her sherbet. Those were mostly silly things designed

to worm a second bowl out of her.”

“New topic,” Masters said. “You and your sister have been inside Al’s place, I understand.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“And you saw some guns there.”

“Yes, Sir. Two rifles and two pistols. One rifle was a .3030 with a scope and the other was actually an over and under - twenty-two over a twelve-gauge shotgun. One handgun looked to be a .22 six shooter with an open, revolving chamber and the other took a clip - not sure about it - magnum maybe.”

“Your knowledge of guns amazes me - you hating them so much.”

“Have to know your enemy, Sir.”

Pat smiled. Masters smiled in return thinking the response had been oddly inappropriate.

“Anything else stand out in your memory from your visits there?”

“It was dirty - messy. Unlike the way Benny had kept the place. One thing, though. Lots of books. Benny wasn’t really a reader but Al has lots and lots of books.”

“Topics?”

“Sorry, I didn’t take notice. I can go back if you like.”

“No. Definitely do not go back. You - well you and your mother, now - are still my only credible suspects in Stephen’s death, and the information I’ve learned here this morning only supplies a few more nails for your coffins.”

“Like . . .?” Pat said palms up, waiting.

“Like you having had access to a crate and the likelihood it is your mother’s blood on Stephen’s ring.”

“Oh. I see. Yes, that really hasn’t helped our cause any has it?”

“There is one more piece of detective work I’ll let you do,” Masters said. “Visit the local bookstores until you find one that remembers Al. Make up some story about wanting to get him a book and try to find out what kind he buys.”

“I can do that. Shall I wear dark glasses and a trench coat?”

“Only if you to be suspected as a serial ‘flasher’.”

It had been a joke, and only Frank seemed to have

missed that.

Polly went to a cupboard and returned with two packs of twisters handing them to Masters.

“Sounds like this is going to be a two-pack day, Ray.”

There were chuckles all around.

“Do you have an attic or a basement, George?” Masters asked.

“Yes. The area over the kitchen and utility room. I seldom use it. Have a few things stored up there - Christmas tree, some old picture frames. Nothing of any significance.”

“I’ll want to take a look, and suggest we do that first thing. Frank, you have that camera?”

“Oh, yes, Sir. Never without it.”

“Let us be on our way then.”

“I’ll make the rounds of the bookstores as soon as they open,” Pat announced as if not wanting to be left out. “Only three unless you count the groceries with book racks. Should have something by noon. What’s for lunch, by the way?”

“Ham with yams and green beans.” Polly answered. “Apple pie for dessert. Does that meet with the young Prince’s approval?”

Pat turned to Masters raising his eyebrows.

“She calls me the Young Prince when I’m becoming too demanding. She likes it though, don’t you, sweetie?”

He planted a long, juicy, kiss on her cheek.

Polly, feigning disinterest, put her nose in the air and turned, taking a stack of plates to the sink.

“If the young prince would do one more thing for me,” Masters added. “Get hold of Les and make sure no crates were missing after the Spring Downpour.”

“April Showers, Sir. Sure thing. Right away.”

Frank and George both had cars. Masters rode with George and Frank followed. The ride took five minutes by way of the east shore. Masters made a note of that. It sparked a question for George.

“On the night of Tom’s death, did you notice anything out of the ordinary as you approached the mansion?”

“Out of the ordinary? I’m not sure what it would have been. Now that you ask, though, I did think I saw something in the shrubs on the west end of the house - at the end of the

porch. Maybe a dog, something bigger than the little critters that live around here. Maybe a possum. I don't know. That wasn't what was on my mind at that moment, you understand."

"Yes, I understand. At the end of the porch, you say. What would be above that area?"

"The dining room on the first floor, two guest rooms on the second and the den on the third."

Masters took out his phone and dialed Frank. "Make a note that we need to check for foot prints in the ground just west of the porch at the mansion."

"Yes, Sir. Footprints. Got it."

* * *

The entrance to the attic area was a set of pull down steps in the utility room ceiling.

"If you don't mind, I'd like Frank to go up first and look around. Wouldn't want to give the impression to the authorities that I allowed you time to hide anything."

"Not a problem."

Frank climbed the steps.

"Light's on a pull chain right in front of the stairs," George called up after him.

Masters followed. He remained standing on the steps with his head and shoulders up inside the attic.

"I'm looking for what, Sir?" Frank said.

"If you were the killer of Stephen, and or Tom, and you wanted to implicate George, what would you hide here - something we haven't found yet."

"The rifle? The scope? The pillow? Bingo on the pillow, Sir - well, maybe. Look back here behind the pictures."

Masters advanced one step so he could see more clearly. It was a pillow in a shimmering casing. I'd say bingo. Holes and blood?"

"Yes, Sir. Holes and blood and masking tape still around the back."

"Get some pictures then bring it down."

"A sack, Sir?"

"George," Masters called. "Would you have a large trash bag, please?"

The bag was passed up to Masters and then to Frank.

The pillow was soon secured and handed back down stairs. Frank continued to search the area for several more minutes, finding nothing else of significance.

“Get some shots of the floor under where the pillow was sitting. Need to verify if there is blood there or not. I’m betting not.”

“You’d win that bet, Sir. Not a speck.”

“Get a picture or two anyway then come on down.”

“That would seem to tie me to Stephen’s murder, wouldn’t it, Ray?” George said appearing downhearted for the first time since Masters had arrived.

“It would seem to. Far too convenient and far too stupid a hiding place, of course,” Masters said in a matter of fact tone. “When were you up there last?”

“Not long ago, actually. I got two new paintings for the South wall of the Great Room. Treated myself on my birthday - May fifteenth. I think I see where you’re going. I am sure the pillow was not up there at that time. In fact, the way you describe its location, it had to have been put behind the pictures I just stored up there.”

Frank joined them and they went into the great room and took seats.

“Let’s get this time line down in black and white,” Masters said, taking out his pad. “Stephen was found on the morning of April 14th. Your birthday was on May 15th. Tom was killed on the evening of May 16th. You called me on the 18th and I arrived on Thursday the 20th. Today is May 23rd.”

Frank had been following Masters with great interest.

“That means the pillow had to have been stashed up there sometime after the fifteenth, when George was up there last.”

“Right. The pillow would have had to have been kept elsewhere - for how long?” Masters asked, doing some quick calculations on his fingers before answering himself. “For a minimum of 31 days. No wonder there were no blood stains in the attic. The trash. How is it dealt with out here?”

George responded.

“Each house has a small dumpster out back along the rear access road - you’ve seen it, gravel, narrow, mainly used for trash pick-up and yard work. The Association contracts

with a private land fill. Pick-ups twice a week - Monday and Thursday. Why the interest in the trash?"

"Frank and I believe the pillow was taken from the murder scene in a plastic bag. It would have blood stains on the inside so it would need to be disposed of. What better place to hide it than in among thousands of other black trash bags in a land fill?"

"I see," George said, nodding.

"But if it was used to carry the pillow here," Frank began, "And it had to have been brought here inside of something or it would have strewn feathers everywhere, then that bag wasn't disposed of until the 16th or after."

"Why would the killer have waited so long to plant the evidence?" George asked.

"I imagine it wasn't planted until the killer felt it was needed," Masters said. "That time seems to have coincided with my arrival here and means the sack had to have gone into the trash sometime after Thursday's pickup. Frank, call our discovery into the Sheriff and ask for manpower to help search every dumpster on the lake. Make that an ASAP from me, if it will help."

Frank placed the call.

"I am beginning to see why you command such a hefty fee," George said to Masters, smiling.

"Hefty, is not my favorite word, George," Masters said patting his stomach, hoping to divert the discussion from finances.

Frank spoke: "Sheriff says he can spare four officers. They will be here within the hour. I described what they should be looking for and suggested gloves. That's five dumpsters each. I imagine they'll be done well before noon."

"Sounds like you have some pull in that office," Masters said smiling.

"Apparently, Sir, Anderson told the Sheriff he was to make any of your requests his top priority. I'd say somehow the P A got the idea he needed to shape up in this investigation."

"Hefty?" George said, smiling and nodding.

Masters chuckled. Frank looked confused but remained quiet.

“To the cemetery, then, I guess, Frank,” Masters said feeling it was time to move on down his list for the day.

It was a pleasant drive north along winding back roads up, down, and along the low, hills which boasted some of the last, small, family farms in the country - cows, pigs, chickens, ducks. The land was neat - well cared for - suggesting personal pride of a kind Masters had seldom seen in the cities where he had spent most of his life.

The cemetery was behind a small, white, Methodist church which had stood there on the north edge of town for generations.

“Ouch!” Masters said as he got out of the car.

“Ouch, Sir?” Frank said looking to see what could have pained the big man.

“I forgot to use Polly’s magical anti-chigger spray this morning. I assume that may lead to ‘ouch upon ouch’ before the day’s over.

“It’s well cared for here. Short grass. Doubt if you will be attacked, Sir.”

It seemed humorous to Frank who grinned his wonderful, broad, grin.

“Lead the way then,” Masters said, resigned to whatever fate the chigger-gods had in store for him.

They walked toward the back of the huge lot. After several minutes, Frank stopped, removed his hat, and scratched his head.

“I would have sworn it was right here, but it’s unmarked except for a large white, flat, stone the church provided to mark the grave.”

He looked around, confused.

Masters also looked about, and then spoke:

“I’m guessing it’s this one, Frank. Looks like a relatively new headstone set on an old grave site.”

Frank took a look.

“Yes, Sir. I think you’re right. I don’t understand, but I think you’re right. The church custodian keeps a map of all the graves. We can check with him to be sure.”

Checking was to be easier than either expected. An old man approached them from the rear as they talked.

“Can I help you, Frank?” came his tired, old, voice.

They turned to investigate.

“William,” Frank said, offering his hand and shaking. “William, I’d like for you to meet my friend, Raymond Masters. Mr. Masters, this is William Rush, the caretaker out here. Known him since I was first old enough to remember knowing anybody.”

“Good to meet you, Sir,” Masters said.

Frank continued.

“We’re looking for the grave of the young man who died in the accident involving Stephen Rockefeller, some years ago.”

“You’re lookin’ at it.”

“When was the headstone erected? Who put it up? How did they get the name?”

William cackled a high pitch giggle and shook his head, addressing Masters. “This boy’s always had more questions per square inch than any kid I’ve ever knowd.”

He turned back to Frank.

“Can’t answer most of those questions. I was mowing one afternoon and when I got here, the stone was set, just like you see it now. It had to have been placed there sometime within that week. I mow every Saturday afternoon whether it needs it or not. All these souls deserve a neat place to rest.”

The new, white, granite, headstone was the low, hug the ground, style - twelve by eighteen inches by perhaps six inches high. It had been properly set into a concrete base. The words were inscribed on the flat, top surface and read: Shelby Allen Trotter. Died too young. Rest in peace, Son.

“There are no life-span dates,” Frank noted. “Why would someone go to all that trouble and leave off the dates?”

“Why would someone erect the stone in the first place and who?” Masters added. He turned back to William. “We need to pinpoint the date this appeared - as closely as possible. Do you have some way of helping us do that?”

“I noted it on the gravesite map in my shop. I’ll have to look. Don’t remember things like that as well as I used to.”

“Where would such a stone be purchased around here?”

“Several places. Any funeral home - two in town. There are some headstone stores in the area - maybe three or

four within fifty miles.”

Masters turned to Frank who was already writing in his note pad.

“I’ll get on it, Sir. That date will really help me, William.”

They walked with the old man back to the church and into his basement shop. The map was on the wall. Each plot was labeled with the name of the deceased and the date of burial. On the plot in question, something had been erased before the name and date had been printed there in pencil.

“Looks like something was erased,” Masters said, feeling the spot with his finger.

“It used to say, ‘Occupant unknown,’ with the burial date. I cleared the space and started over when the stone arrived.”

Frank took down the date and noted the inclusive dates of the week in which the stone had made its appearance.

“About nine months ago,” he said making the calculations in his head.”

Masters addressed William.

“Do you recall any inquiries about that plot back then? Anything at all?”

“Nobody ever asked me. You can ask Reverend Shull. He may have some information.”

“I certainly appreciate all your help, William,” Masters said ready to move on.

“This have something to do with the Rockefeller Murders?” the old man asked.

“Perhaps. I am here investigating them,” Masters said, thinking the man was due some explanation.

They walked back to Frank’s car. The two got in. Frank stared the engine. William rapped on Masters’ window. He rolled it down.

“Don’t know if this has anything to do with it all, but back in September my shop was broke into. Nothing was stole that I could see so I didn’t report it or nothing. I did mention it to the Reverend. That would have been about that same time. The door is locked by a padlock. The hasp had been cut clean through with a hacksaw. Lots of trouble to get into a place and then not take nothing, I thought.”

Masters smiled.

“That just may be very helpful, William. If anything else comes to mind, please give Frank a call.”

They drove back to town and pulled to a stop in front of the Sheriff’s office. It sat across from the court house at the north end of Main Street. The street was narrow and the building old - mostly wood-frame structures. They made the few that had been modernized with metal or stone fronts seem painfully out of place - as if embarrassed about how they had been mutilated.

Sheriff Thompson seemed to know Masters by sight - but then, not many men as portly as he walked through that door, and Masters was known for his ample silhouette.

“Ben Thompson,” the slender, middle-aged man offered.

“Ray Masters,” he replied in kind. They shook hands.

“Ralph suddenly says to cooperate in every way so whatever resources I have are at your disposal.”

“You’re very kind. I do appreciate your quick response this morning to help with the dumpsters.”

Ben acknowledged it with a nod. Masters continued.

“We brought several bags of things that may turn out to be evidence and I’d like to leave them for safe keeping and lab analysis. Fingerprints, perhaps a bite print from the end of a cigar, whatever the lab guys think might be appropriate.”

Frank handed over a small brown sack that contained the three plastic bags.

“Then, we found a pillow that clearly played an important part in the murder of Stephen.”

“A pillow?”

Frank put the trash bag on his desk.

“I’ve included my notes on its function in an envelope inside. It also outlines what lab tests I’d like to have run. It will be Stephen’s blood and will contain slugs from the gun that was used in his torture. I imagine they will match the gun, which was ostensibly found in Pat Smith’s room by his mother and the slug dug out of the tree from which the body was hung. The duct tape will contain skin, ripped from Steven’s body as it was removed after the shots had been fired into him.”

“Your reputation seems well deserved,” Ben said,

impressed.

Masters went on without acknowledging the comment.

"I'd like to examine the rope by which Stephen was strung up."

"Certainly."

Ben picked up the phone, punched one of the buttons set across the bottom and made the request. Within minutes the rope was brought to the office.

"I assume the lab is finished and I may handle it?"

"That's right."

Masters donned latex gloves and undertook his examination - end to end and side to side.

"I don't recall reading about the discolorations, on the rope," Masters said.

Ben pulled a file from his desk drawer and began leafing through the several sheets inside.

"Dye. Red dye," he said. "Like used in dying clothes. Seems to have been there for years. The rope is old - perhaps fifteen or twenty years old. Cotton. Tightly braided the way clothesline rope was made way back then."

"Way back then when I was a kid," Masters added, hoping it would be taken humorously. It was.

"Any report of finding something here in the flattened section - the part that had probably spent years tied around a pole or tree?"

"Yes. Oak bark. The bark had begun to grow into the fibers. I suppose that indicates it had been tied in one place for many years, like you said."

"Thank you, Sheriff," Masters said preparing to leave. "By the way, are there plans underway to question the Smith family members in relation to Stephen's murder?"

"Yes. In fact, Ralph mentioned that a staff person was doing that this morning. You suspect them, I assume."

"So far, they are almost all I have."

"Almost?" Ben asked.

"Almost," Masters repeated offering no clarification.

Ben didn't press. Masters and Frank left.

"What's next?" Frank asked as they entered the car.

"Footprints."

"Back to the mansion, then?"

"Right. We will need some plaster of Paris or patch plaster if we find what I suspect we will."

"We can stop at the hardware - two blocks south."

"Good. Let's do that. We'll need about this much." Masters used hand gestures to suggest the size of the bag.

The plaster was purchased and they were soon back at the mansion. It was nearly ten o'clock.

Masters sniffed the air as he closed the car door.

"Smell that?"

Frank sniffed.

"Not for sure, Sir. What?"

"Fruit tarts - most likely raspberry. We should probably pay Polly a visit - just so her efforts will not go unrewarded you understand."

Frank smiled. He was learning that nothing interfered with Masters' pursuit of a case - nothing except the prospect of something delicious to eat, the consumption of which was always undertaken for the sole purpose of making the cook feel good about herself. He smiled again and followed his large, new, friend around the side of the house to the kitchen door.

Masters nose was right on target. The three sat at the table and talked.

"Tell me about the weather the past three or four days," Masters asked.

"It's been a pretty average Spring around here," Frank explained. "About one good rain a week. This soil gets boot-leather hard between rains. Saturday evening was the last rain. It wasn't a real soaker, but it washed the dust off things. Seems like maybe it had been more than a week before that since there had been a really good one. April was wet, though."

Polly nodded her agreement on all counts and had news from another front.

"Talked to Hazel on the phone this morning and she said she saw Amy Anderson, Ralph's daughter, in town yesterday. She told Hazel that her aunt out west was doing well enough to be on her own again, so she came back here. Got her old job back. Apparently been in town a while. Was out there just about a year. Says it's real pretty territory and

wants to go back some day."

Masters noted the information with interest. Another suspect - maybe - who was in the area at the time of Stephen's murder - maybe - and who had a solid motive - maybe! Way too many maybes to be helpful. He and Frank thanked Polly and went back outside.

"What I'm after is a fresh shoe print - one that would have been made on the night Tom died. With the dry spell before that day, any prints should be fresh. I assume there is little reason for anyone to be back behind the shrubs next to the house."

"What makes you suspect prints here?" Frank asked.

"George saw something in this area as he approached the mansion after Polly called him that night. May have just been a possum or large dog, but I really need it to have been a person."

"Looks like imported soil - black loam in there," Masters observed.

"You're right about that. Not the native sandy clay. Undoubtedly imported. Al might know something more if you think that's important. Tom Rockefeller always went first class. If he needed imported soil to have the best shrubs on the lake than he'd certainly have done it."

Frank began pushing the shrubs this way and that to get a clear look at the ground next to the foundation. The shrubs were trimmed to stand a foot away from the wall. They were tight against one another - side to side. Frank was soon on his knees.

"Only way to really see the ground," he explained to Masters.

"Anything?" the old detective asked.

"Squirrel and rabbit tracks. Let me look closer to the porch."

"Yes, Sir! This just might be your 'anything'. I think you will be able to see them looking down from the porch."

Masters made his way up the steps and into position over the west porch rail.

"Sneakers, I'd say from the imprint," Masters said.

"Probably not new ones, but, yes, I'd say sneakers," Frank agreed.

"Not new?"

"Look here. No sharp definition along the - what would you call it - the treads. New, I'd think, would be sharp - unworn."

"Good observation. How many prints?"

"Let me follow them back. They come in right along the porch here. Both left and right. One, two, three, four . . . seven that are fairly clear. The person left the same way he entered so most of them are badly messed up - double prints. There is one right here under the window that's still about perfect. That the one we're going to cast?"

"Looks good. I want pictures first, before we damage the imprint with plaster. I'll get a mixing bowl and water from the kitchen while you get the shots and plaster," Masters said.

He entered the house through the front door and was soon back with Polly at his heels, helping carry the material. She then returned inside.

Frank went about the process like a pro. Masters was interested.

"It appears you've made casts before, Frank."

"Animal prints. Once did a whole series of them on the small, wild creatures that live in this county."

"Let me guess. For a scouting badge."

"Bingo, Sir - if I may borrow your phrase."

"That would be, 'if I may borrow your word, not phrase,' came Pat's voice from behind them. "What's going on, guys?"

"Making a plaster cast of a shoe print," Frank explained.

Pat got down on all fours and moved closer so he could see.

"Cheap shoes," he said looking over the prints.

"Cheap?" Masters asked.

"Yup. See. Hardly any design. Designer brands each have their own flamboyant patterns - usually in several colors even. These don't show that kind of design. Just a ho-hum pattern intended to merely keep the user from slipping."

He backed out from under the shrubs, stood, and picked up a foot to show Masters his shoes.

"See what I mean. These cuties cost almost two hundred bucks. Three color soles. Intricate pattern. Deep,

sharp, crevices. You pay for that. Really different from the ones that made those prints."

Frank had more observations.

"Pat's undoubtedly right. See here! The size is even imprinted on the sole, just to the front of the heel. No self-respecting two-hundred-dollar variety would have that."

Pat agreed with a nod. Masters addressed a remark to the boy.

"Best that this activity is not mentioned around. Wouldn't want any shoes to be destroyed before we can locate them, you understand?"

"Yes, Sir. I suppose you will want to examine all of the shoes at my house immediately to assure that I don't do just that."

"That was going to be my next suggestion," Masters said, smiling. "Frank, if you will guard the casting while it dries, I'll accompany Pat to his place. When it's ready, remove it and take it to my room. Then cover all the prints with plastic bags and call Ben to see if he wants to take a look."

"Yes, Sir. Consider those things done."

Masters took time to sketch the sole design on his pad and then accompanied Pat back to his house. The boy had a thought.

"Oh. I almost forgot. Contacted Les and there were two crates missing. Had to pay for them out of the profits. I suppose two missing out of twenty-four is really not so bad considering how many kids we had working on the project. Probably shelves in somebody's bedroom by now."

The home was neat - way too neat Masters thought, considering there were two teenagers living there. He commented on the fact and Pat responded.

"Mom's a neatnick. Goes into a tizzy when things are out of place. I can remember as a little kid getting my butt spanked for just unwrapping a stick of gum in the living room. Living room! An oxymoron if ever there was one at this house. Where do you want to start? My room, okay?"

"That'll be fine. Is your mother here?"

"Beauty salon. Every Saturday morning. Four hours. Can't begin to imagine how it could take four hours but then

I'm sure I don't know what all goes into being a beautiful woman - and my mother is a beautiful woman."

It was said in such a way that required agreement.

"That she is," Masters said, nodding.

Pat was clearly proud of his mother's appearance.

Thirty-five minutes later all the usual shoe-keeping places in the house had been searched. Masters knew from the outset that it would probably be an exercise in futility - each of the three was bright enough to have realized shoes leave telltale prints and to have disposed of any evidence immediately. The significance of the prints was still open for discussion, though Masters felt sure he knew how they had come to be there and the role they played in Tom's murder. He just had not yet discovered who left them. He would not search the attic and basement. His obligatory examination had been completed.

"I'm off to town to do the bookstore thing," Pat announced as he walked Masters to the front door."

"How will you get there?"

"Ye olde bicycle is still my main source of transportation. I like riding. It energizes me."

Masters walked back to the mansion briefly wondering if a bicycle in his life might energize him. He shook his head and moved on. A sheriff's car was parked in front and Frank was conversing with a female deputy.

"Looks like they found the trash bag, Sir," he said pointing to the back seat. "It's the sack in the sack - that sounds like a Dr. Seuss book." He chuckled.

"This is Amy, a deputy sheriff. She's been in charge of the dumpster brigade this morning."

Masters offered her his hand.

"I certainly appreciate your prompt response. What did you find? My I take a peek?"

"Ben says it's yours for as long as you want it," She said, opening the door and removing a large, clear plastic evidence bag. She continued her explanation. "A high quality green leaf bag, probably six mil and fifty gallon capacity. Inside is laced with dried blood which has some kind small feathers stuck to it. Seems to be exactly what you said we should be looking for."

"You found it where?"

"In the dumpster behind number 13 - property belonging to Jake and Janice Winston.

"Where in the dumpster?"

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

"Top, bottom, middle?"

"Bottom right against the side."

"I will leave it in your custody," Masters said. "Have the lab try for a blood match with Stephen Rockefeller. Of course, look for finger prints. Doubt if you find any but cover every square millimeter. Tell the lab guys to follow any whim they may have. This may be our most important piece of evidence. And one more thing. They shouldn't assume that all the blood is from the same person. Identify every drop."

Amy made notes in her pad. It evoked an off the wall observation from Frank.

"I notice you use a little spiral pad. I do to. I prefer the spiral on top but I see yours has it on the side. Mr. Masters' isn't spiral at all. He uses the little yellow, glued and perforated, lined type. Wonder what our preferences might say about our personalities?"

Masters smiled. It was certainly something he had never considered. Amy frowned. It was certainly something she seemed to think was just plain weird. Frank seemed pleased he had noted that aspect of life and would give it more thought at a later time. Masters began understanding why Frank was still single.

Amy left. Frank had already delivered the new cast to Masters' room. He left to take care of other business. Masters returned to the kitchen. Polly poured as the big man took a seat at the table.

"You told me that Benny did his wash here but preferred to dry it outside at his place. Am I remembering that correctly?"

"Yes. That's how it was all those years."

"Let me offer a guess about something. Benny had a preference for thick, red sox."

"My goodness, Mr. M. How on earth could you have known that? He washed everything together and his white things always came out pink."

"So, I can assume he shopped at the less expensive stores."

"I loved the man but he was the biggest cheap skate God ever breathed breath into. Oh, not where other people was concerned - he had a heart as big as that lake out there. But when it came to buying things for himself - I told him he could spend twice as much on things and they'd last four times longer but he just never could bring himself to do it. It was like he had a gambling problem."

"A gambling problem?" Masters said. "You've lost me, I'm afraid."

"Yes. A gambling problem. Every time he went shopping he figured this time when he got a bargain, that it would really be a bargain you know - win big with a tiny investment."

Masters realized there was probably some logical connection to a gambling problem there if he searched for it, but was not inclined to take the time to unravel it just then. He moved on to a new subject.

"Al does his laundry elsewhere, I assume."

"If he does it at all," Polly chuckled. Then more seriously added, "He doesn't do it here if that's what you're asking."

"That was what I meant. You and he really don't talk much then is that correct?"

"Right. He doesn't seem to like to talk with people. He's hard of hearing for one thing - that may be part of it. I know he often has cotton in one ear, like for an earache. Must be chronic. I really don't know much about him, I guess."

Masters' phone rang.

"Masters here."

"This is Frank. Got more on that hand gun purchase in Wyoming. Made by a man named - get this - Shelby Trotter."

"The name on the grave was Shelby Trotter," Masters said thinking into the phone.

"Right. The gun shop owner didn't know the man - not a regular. Couldn't remember anything about him. Has his driver's license number, though. I'll bring it all over - hard copy - after lunch. By the way, smell anything special in the kitchen?"

"Looks like cold cuts and soup. My nose tells me cheese and broccoli."

"Guess I'll see you AFTER lunch then. I parted ways with broccoli the minute I learned how to say no. At least George Bush senior and I agree on one thing."

The man's general knowledge continued to amaze the old detective. His phone rang again.

"Masters here."

"Brian Cox, here. Good morning."

"Yes. It is. Lots of things are beginning to fall into place. Hope you have some more pieces of the puzzle for me."

"I have info from the Driver's License checks. The Anderson woman had one in Indiana for most of her life - got her first one here - then last year obtained one in Wyoming - now a new one back here as of last month. The Dorner guy has one out of Utah. Got it a year ago, last April. His first, as far as the records show. That's about it, I guess. Anything else?"

"Since you asked," Masters chuckled.

"I'll learn not to ask," Cox chuckled in return. "A slow learner, I guess."

"Check out two social security numbers for me. Are they valid? If so, are they active? Last source of W2s on each of them. Then on another matter, see what you can dig up on a Shelby Trotter. He died as a John Doe here some years ago - the Stephen Rockefeller hit and run. Maybe a driver's license, a birth certificate, anything that might lead me to his relatives."

Masters located the numbers in his pad (the little yellow, glued and perforated, lined pad!) and passed them on. The conversation was over.

Frank called again.

"Sir. Just received a sheet about the alibis of the various suspects and non-suspects for the times of each of the murders. Sheriff apparently also had his staff working on it. Want a quick rundown or wait for the hard copy?"

"Let's have the quick version."

"Okay. Let's see here. Jake Winston was indeed in Indianapolis at the time of Tom's murder. The problem is, I

think, it says he returned to his room with an upset stomach at about seven. It would be possible to fly from there to here in time to have fired the shot. Not likely, but I throw that in for whatever it may be worth to you. Janice was in town at the Bock's home. Stayed the night. Never left somebody's sight until after the murder. In terms of Stephen's death, the two of them are each other's only alibis. At home alone all night and until about ten in the morning on the day he was found.

"Anderson was speaking at a meeting in Bloomington until nine on the night of Tom's death but again, it's just him and his wife to alibi each other during Stephen's murder. Their daughter, Amy, arrived back in the area two days before Stephen's murder. She stayed with relatives in Bloomington until last week when she moved back home. During the time of Stephen's murder, her whereabouts were not alibied - went to bed the night before and no one actually saw her again until eleven the next morning. Her alibi is tight for the time of Tom's murder - at a get together with a half dozen of her old girl friends at her parents' home.

"George has no one to alibi him during either murder - so far at least. Do you suppose he really could be the one? I won't ask for an answer. Just thinking out loud you understand.

"I was at the Boyer's at about the time of Tom's death. They called me on the office phone at a little after nine to say someone had sideswiped their car that was parked overnight out on the street. We have rules against parking there and now I suppose they understand why. The road around the lake in front of the homes is narrow - intentionally, so as to not distract from the lawns and such. Cars can pass but barely.

"I'm one of those without an alibi for the time of Stephen's murder. Several regulars at the bar south of town where Al hangs out can alibi him for the times of both murders. I don't know if I'd tend to believe anybody that frequents that spot, however. It's a rough place. Serve great pizza, though, I'll give them that."

"Sounds like we may need to tack down Al's alibis a bit more, then, is that what you're saying?"

"It would be a good thing to do. Most of them would turn in their own mother if they could make a buck doing it."

"Perhaps this evening you and I can venture out together for pizza, then."

"Sounds interesting. Sure. Six, or will that be too soon after dinner?"

"Is it ever too soon after dinner for great Pizza, Frank?"

Frank chuckled.

"Six it will be then. I'll drop things off after lunch. Anything else right now?"

"That should do it. I need some thinking time."

He put the phone into his pocket as Polly served lunch.

"Seems empty around here this noon," she said, taking a seat across the table. "How's the cases coming, if you can say?"

"Well, let me put it this way. I'm ninety-five percent sure I know who committed each of the four murders. I merely have to prove it."

"Four? What do you mean, four?"

"Stephen, Tom, Benny and Alicia."

"Really? Benny and Alicia were murdered, too?"

"Oh, yes, and theirs will be the easiest to prove. This soup is divine, Polly. Another newspaper clipping?"

"No, Sir. This one actually is a family hand me down except that now I use a blender to liquefy the broccoli before adding it to the cheese and milk base. Frank thinks he hates broccoli but he wouldn't even recognize it. I think kids hate the way it feels to eat broccoli - not really the taste."

There was clearly a third philosopher in the group: Frank regarding writing pads: the twins regarding everything grammatical: and now Polly on the topic of vegetable textures. He smiled and built himself a ham and cheese on rye. (Well, to be more accurate, it was a ham and ham and ham, and cheese and cheese and cheese, on rye and rye - with butter, never mayo or mustard.)

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CHAPTER EIGHT

DAY THREE: AFTERNOON

There would be no nap for Masters that afternoon. He had far too many details to clear up. Pat arrived back from town at 12:30. He had two pieces of news.

"When I got back from town somebody from the Prosecuting Attorney's office was at my place questioning my mom. He's still there. Told me to leave. It steamed me. I think they really believe she killed Stevie. I guess I can see why. She had motive - the way he had treated her - and one other thing I guess I failed to mention."

"Failed to mention?" Masters said.

The two of them sat down on the porch steps while he waited for Frank.

"Stevie put a move on my sister about six weeks ago. It happened after dinner one evening. She was out on the dock reading and he came up and started talking. Then he took his shirt off and sat down close to her. He started doing what we guys do when we're thinking from our crotch and she slapped him. He grabbed her and they stood up. She kneed him where it counts most and he fell into the water. She came right inside and told me. We decided against telling mom, but I have reason to think she overheard us talking. When Les opened my door to leave, mom was there in the hall. She didn't say anything but mom's a snoop - she even admitted that to you. She doesn't trust males of any age. I suppose she heard a girl's voice coming from my room and listened to see if anything sordid was transpiring. Unfortunately, nothing even remotely sordid ever transpires in my room."

"You were listing the evidence against your mother," Masters said, accepting the new information without comment.

"Okay, yeah. He'd hurt her, he'd tried to make out with Les, her blood was on his ring - though may I point out it could have gotten there during the fight they had the night Les and I pulled him off her. She had access to my story. Her fingerprints are on the hand gun used during Stevie's murder and it was found by her inside her house. She has no alibi for the period during which Stevie was being murdered. It looks like a tight case."

"And do you believe she's guilty?"

"Of course, not."

It had not been delivered with conviction.

Pat became quiet - pensive - for a long moment.

"If somebody else were to confess, would that get Mom off the hook?"

"Depends if an iron clad case could be built against the one who confessed. What do you have in mind?"

Pat ignored the question but continued.

"If I confessed, would they leave Mom alone about it?"

"Well, certainly most of the things you listed that tend to make her look guilty also make you look guilty - the fight, the advances toward your sister, the story, the gun, lack of alibi. I suppose if you could pass a lie detector test to verify your guilt that would get her off the hook, yes."

"Lie detector test, huh?"

"Oh, yes. A confession without that kind of verification would be useless in court."

Masters was stretching a point, of course - pushing Pat's suggestion to the limit.

"I've heard that bright, unemotional, people can beat the polygraph."

It had been a question asked as a statement the way teens frequently ask their really important questions.

"No doubt you're bright, Pat. I think you'd flunk the unemotional requirement, however."

Pat nodded. Masters continued.

"Confessing to save your mother makes me think you have your own doubts about her innocence."

"I don't want to talk further about it," Pat said.

"Well, I have to ask just one more question," Masters said. "How do you know the hand gun found in your room was indeed the gun involved in the murder? I certainly haven't revealed that to you."

"Like I said. I don't want to talk about it anymore, but I do have a report for you on Al's book purchases."

"Okay, let's have that, then, but you're not off the hook."

Pat continued as if that part of the conversation had not taken place.

"On Wednesday, Al went to the Brookstreet Bookstore – try to say that quickly ten times in a row - and bought the six most recent Raymond Masters Mystery books. He also bought a book on Mexico and a Spanish Language program on tapes."

"When did word get out that I was coming to help George?"

"I first heard about it from Polly on Tuesday evening. I guess George told her that he'd contacted you that morning and that you'd agreed to come. How can I say this . . . ? Polly doesn't spread gossip, but she's an easy source for factual tidbits. The word about you spread from her kitchen like a West Texas wildfire in August."

"Do you know if other folks bought copies of Flint's books at that time?"

"Yeah, they did. I knew you'd ask that, but nobody bought as many as Al. The bookstore sold out. It has more arriving today by special courier. Mrs. Brookstreet would really like to meet you - if you can work it into your schedule."

"Mrs. Brookstreet. Interesting. I just assumed the Brookstreet Bookstore was . . ."

". . . on Brookstreet, I know. It's like her private joke - the Brookstreet Bookstore on Main Street. Confuses the hell out of people - woops, sorry about that. I usually just cuss when I'm with my guy friends."

Masters ignored the slip and the apology. Frank drove up. Masters stood and looked down at Pat.

"I don't usually give advice when it hasn't been asked for but I am about to make an exception to that. Don't confess to anything, for any reason - at least until tomorrow morning. May I have your word on that?"

"Okay. Why tomorrow morning?"

"Because I should have all this wrapped up by then and if I need your confession I'll ask for it at that time."

Masters smiled. Pat looked puzzled.

By the time Masters reached the car, Frank had the door open.

"So where to, first, this afternoon, Sir?"

"Back to George's place. I've called to alert him we are on our way."

"Still looking for something, I take it."

"Two items that we still have missing in the case of Stevie's death and one that will tie up Tom's."

Frank recited the list.

"The nails, the tape that was used to cover his mouth, and something else that I guess I've missed. But why George's place. You actually suspect him?"

"One piece of evidence was planted there, so somebody wants him to look guilty. Now, if you were trying to frame someone and there were several other pieces of evidence that would help clinch it, where would you put them?"

"I see. At George's, of course. You do realize, though, that the more things we find at his house the guiltier your friend looks."

"I do. That's why they have to fit into the big picture - help complete the puzzle."

"Guess I'm lost but I'm eager to be along."

George was waiting for them on his porch. They went inside. Masters spoke.

"Twine or fish line?"

George understood that it had been a question.

"Both. In the utility room. I'll show you."

Once there, George pointed to one of the wall cabinets above a counter that ran the length of the outside, south, wall. Masters slipped into a pair of latex gloves and opened it. He picked up and moved the top two spools of fishing line and began examining the one on the bottom."

"Strong line. Expecting to catch a whale in this little lake?" he joked.

The implied question was answered.

"Got it for a deep-sea trip I had to cancel after all this came up."

"New, yet on the bottom of the stack?"

"I can't explain that. I'm quite sure I would have just placed it on top. Why did you go for the bottom one first? I've been wondering."

"If you were trying to make it appear you wanted to hide something where would you put it?"

"I see. Clever. Both the bad guy and you, Ray. But I guess I missed how fishing line plays a part in any of this."

"It's been a private hunch. If I'm right, it will help establish that the rifle was not fired from your house."

"I'm still confused. You found some line somewhere that you need to match to mine?"

"No. No line's been found. I'm looking for it. I believe it's been hidden."

"Hidden here?" George said, clearly going from confused to more confused.

"Where better to hide something than back where you got it?"

Masters examined the spool of line and pointed out what he found.

"Line has been rewound onto this reel. See how it overlaps itself - how it is not neatly rolled."

The others nodded.

"Okay then, I believe there are two loose lengths wound back onto this spool and that each will be some forty feet long - need to be thirty-five to forty feet long."

He pulled the end and handed it to Frank.

"Pull it off and then we'll measure it."

George opened a drawer and took out a metal tape measure. He marked a ten-foot section on the counter top. The line came to an end, just as Masters had predicted. Frank and George worked out the measuring procedure and Frank made the pronouncement.

"About thirty-eight feet, Sir. And look here. The last three feet of this end is filthy. Odd."

"The gods are smiling on us today," Masters said. "Bag it if you will, please, Frank. Do the same with the second length."

He turned to George.

"Now, duct tape, George? Every house in the country has its requisite roll of duct tape."

"As does mine. That drawer right there. Probably about a third used."

Masters pulled it open and removed a roll of tape. Then he removed a second.

"Two?" he asked holding one up in each hand and turning toward George.

"I'd have sworn only one. But, it looks like two, doesn't it? I must have been mistaken."

Masters sniffed them both and then put one back into the drawer. He held the remaining one up and looked at it, first from one side and then the other.

"Even smart criminals like the one - or ones - we're dealing with, can always be expected to act dumb at least once. You don't use the same method over and over again. Hide the line on the original line spool. That's smart. But then, also hide the tape on the tape spool, that's dumb. Well, it would have been dumb except in this case we have been set up to find it."

"To find what?" Frank asked, clearly puzzled.

"I'm assuming it will be the tape that was secured across Stephen's mouth during his period of torture. See. It has clearly been rewound onto this spool. The other, probably the only one that was actually yours, was still rolled as it came packaged."

Using the edge of his pocket knife, Masters peeled back the end of the tape and then carefully pulled it off. There were two short lengths - each about ten inches long.

"We must handle these with extreme care," Masters said looking around. "I don't suppose you would have any old fashioned, waxed paper, would you, George."

"I actually do. One of my lady friends is a baker and uses it all the time."

He left and returned with a box. Masters tore several lengths and carefully placed the tape between them before putting them into an evidence bag.

"Frank, we need to get this to the lab ASAP. I expect to find skin partials that match Stephen's DNA. Have them

use their most powerful techniques for raising finger prints. It is crucial evidence."

Masters then put the roll of tape into another bag.

"Have this one checked for prints as well. I'm counting on at least one stray to set up the killer. There is also an odor. Have them pin point it."

"As for the fishing line," Masters said, beginning to write on his pad, "This is what the lab is to look for - determine what the soiling is on the dirty end, and any remnants of paint that may be on it anywhere. A full work up on it if it's found."

He handed the note to Frank who slipped it inside the bag with the line.

"That pretty well winds things up here," Masters said looking around as he removed his gloves. "I've set up a one o'clock appointment with the Boyers. George, if you will drop me off there, then Frank can get this new evidence right to the lab."

"Sure. You seem to finally have some direction - I mean something more than just snooping, now."

"That I do. If things go as I expect, I'll be home in time to have dinner at my favorite cafe in Rossville on Monday evening."

"Really. That close. I'm impressed."

"Me, too," Masters said. "I never fail to amaze me!"

It had been intended to be humorous and garnered the obligatory chuckles from Frank and George.

"I guess I'll have to depend on you to take me to the Boyers," Masters said directing his comment to George.

"I'll be happy to. I'm even a legally licensed driver again."

"What?" Masters said, realizing there must be more to the story.

"I'm always misplacing things. A few months back I misplaced my driver's license. I went through all the rigmarole of getting a duplicate and the next week my old one showed up in the drawer of my kitchen table. I've never been accused of being overly organized."

Frank left with the evidence and George chauffeured Masters to the Boyer's home which sat in the middle of the East shore. It was a sprawling, white brick, house, the central

area two stories high with single floor, lower wings, extending at a forward angle to the sides. Masters guessed it to have a dozen rooms. As was the case with most of the homes on the lake it had a circular drive in front - this one paved in white brick.

Mr. Boyer - John - met him at the front door and ushered him into the living room where Mary was sitting at one end of a sleek-lined, lime green sofa.

"I appreciate your taking the time to see me, today," Masters began taking a seat in a matching chair.

"Probably had no choice in the matter, actually," John said. "Talk with you or talk with the Sheriff. Ralph Anderson has been insistent about it."

"I see, well, regardless, I appreciate it. Tell me why you had reason to kill either or both of the Rockefeller men."

"What?" Mary asked.

"I like to get the basics out of the way before we get to your story. For instance, John, I understand Tom fired you after an alleged incident between you and his wife, Alicia. Things like that."

"Well, yes there was that, which I suppose places me on the suspect list," he said sitting down beside his wife.

She put her hand on his knee and he covered it with his own. It was a tender exchange.

"In retrospect, it was no more than I deserved."

"It appears you two have worked that through."

"Yes," Mary answered. "It was so long ago. We don't even speak of it anymore."

"Did you kill either of them?" Masters asked, smiling from one to the other.

"Would I risk all that I've built up since leaving TR Industries?" John asked. No! I learned well from my first mistake."

"And you, Mary?"

"Kill them, you mean? No. Certainly not. I wouldn't know the first thing about how to kill somebody. And why should I? My life is wonderful."

"This is an unpleasant topic, but one I have to bring up."

Mary spoke.

"I assume you're referring to Stephen's parentage."

It was the topic on Masters' mind but her comment took him by surprise.

"Yes. That would be it," Masters said. "Alicia and Tom both had blue eyes. Genetically, he could not have been Stephen's father. The boy's eyes were brown, like yours, John. Since it is reasonable to assume Alicia was not having relations with other men - Tom kept such a tight rein on her - and since Stephen was born nine months after her time with you, it makes you the logical choice."

"I have no problem with that. In all likelihood, I was his father. Do your DNA tests if you like. I would have never said anything to hurt either the boy or Tom. I'm not a cruel person."

"It raises another interesting motive, however," Masters said. "Could it be that the father's wife had such problems about it that she was eventually driven to kill the boy?"

"I didn't. I've said that. Do you have evidence to the contrary?" Mary said indignantly straightening her back.

Masters chose to change the subject.

"You are both expert marksmen as I understand it."

"I suppose you would call us that. Won't deny it," John said looking at his wife.

"Do you have or have you had a rifle of a make and model that could have delivered the deadly shot into Tom's forehead from across the lake?"

"We don't have one and never have had one. As you probably already know, there are such guns available at the shooting club we belong to. They can't be removed from the club premises, however. Neither of us has ever used one of them. You can check that out with the club - although I assume you may have already done that."

Masters hadn't known about those guns and had to wonder why George had failed to mention it.

"Do the two of you have children?" he asked.

"No. That never happened for us."

"Some might consider that - along with your knowledge of Stephen's parentage - motivation for killing Alicia," Masters said, continuing to press hard.

It was John who responded.

"Alicia? She died in a boating accident - hit by the

boom I believe the coroner said."

"Yes, that is what the coroner said. He was wrong, however, and I will eventually demonstrate how it actually happened."

John looked at Mary. She looked away, wearing a pained expression. It could have been a reaction to the unpleasant news. It could have been out of fear that times were catching up with her.

"One final question. I understand your car was sideswiped out front on the evening of Tom Rockefeller's murder. What time would that have taken place?"

"Just after nine, according to our neighbor. We didn't hear it, I'm afraid."

"And the car has been repaired, I assume."

"Yes, Sir. I can't be seen driving a car that looks like that," John said.

"The work was done where?"

John picked up a business card from the coffee table and handed it to him.

"Ask for Alex. He does all my body work."

Masters nodded and tucked the card into his shirt pocket.

"Is there anything you folks want to ask me?" Masters said, poised to stand.

"Nothing, now, I guess," John said. "Any idea when you will have all of this cleared up?"

"Oh, I have it all cleared up. Just making the rounds to confirm certain things at this point. Please be at the Rockefeller Mansion at ten tomorrow morning and I will be ready to explain all four murders."

"Four?"

"Yes. Add both Alicia and Benny Angalini to the list."

He smiled and stood.

"I will see myself out. Thank you for your time and for putting up with what I am sure has appeared to have been an overly meddlesome and callous interrogation."

Masters returned to the driveway where George was waiting in his car. There was a message.

"Frank called me, not wanting to disturb your meeting with the Boyers. Said he had good luck at his first stop about

the headstone. Not sure what that means but he needs to speak with you."

Masters eased himself into the car and dialed Frank.

"What's up? George said you called."

"Got another bingo, Sir. At the Granite Works. They made and sold the headstone during the same week William said it arrived on the gravesite. Strange transaction, but then I suppose that's understandable. It was ordered by mail with cash - seven, one hundred dollar bills to cover the \$675.00 price tag. The instructions with the order said to drop it off at the gate - west side - of St. Francis Cemetery on a Monday morning. That was not the cemetery where it ended up, of course - it's forty miles southeast."

"Interesting. Well planned to avoid any personal contact. Was there some cover story as to why it was being done in this fashion?"

"I've told you everything they can tell us."

"Do they happen to still have the letter on which it was ordered?"

"Yes, Sir. But not the envelope. I looked at it. Stapled to the invoice. It's strictly a pre-computer operation."

"Caution them against touching that letter anymore and get a deputy out there to pick it up as evidence. Prints, Frank. Have them run it for prints - smudges, partials, everything that shows up. Have them get print samples from those who would have handled it there at the business to rule out those known to the situation."

"I'm on it. Getting pretty interesting, isn't it?"

"Yes. Fascinating. Things are moving fast. ASAP on everything, now, you understand."

"Yes, Sir."

Masters hung up and turned to George.

"I need to look over Al's place. I'll call for a deputy - doubt if you're in a position to be a credible witness for what I'm going after. Drop me back at the Mansion. I'll put a call in for a deputy."

* * *

"By the way, in regard to the ownership of the handyman's cabin," George said as they pulled up in front of the Mansion, "I had my attorney research the deed. It actually

remained Tom's property and the general search warrant that was issued for you to snoop around Tom's property extends to that cabin and property."

"Helpful. Very helpful. I won't have to tip-toe on this one and as you can imagine, tip-toeing is not one of my finer skills."

George chuckled, continuing to be amazed at how easily and genuinely Masters enjoyed his own foibles. Defensive was not a term that could be legitimately attached to the man.

A car from the sheriff's office arrived. Ben had sent two deputies to assist Masters and they were soon at Al's cabin. Masters had arranged with Polly to keep Al occupied for an hour so the investigation could be handled without having him underfoot.

"I have two interests here," he said as the squad car pulled to a stop. "I suspect that the rope used to hang Stephen from the tree had been the clothesline that was here for many years. Since Al appears not to use it, it would seem reasonable that he might not have even missed it. I believe it is behind the cabin. I want to find the trees between which it had been stretched. Let's begin there and then we can get on with item number two."

The trees were easily located. Deep scars were visible like open wounds recently unbandaged. No rope remained.

"Our task, then, is to examine both scars for any traces of the clothesline. Scrape and bag whatever you find. Then take some samples of the wood exposed in the scars and of the bark that had begun to encapsulate the rope."

The deputies got to work.

"A fairly significant length of what appears to be the cotton covering from the clothesline is still here on this tree," the taller of the two deputies called to Masters. He went over to take a look.

"Good find. Remove it carefully. The lab guys will want it in tact if possible."

It was carefully peeled from its resting spot and bagged. Wood scrapings and bark samples were then secured. Masters rummaged through the dumpster, dragging out one sturdy, cardboard box. He read from it.

"Norseman Supply Company. Either of you know what that is or where it is?"

Again, it was the taller deputy who responded.

"I believe it's a mail order house that supplies our office with things like paper, printer ink, and vacuum bags - general office stuff."

Masters nodded. He sniffed the box.

"Take it as evidence. Just a hunch but I don't want it destroyed just in case."

It was placed in the trunk with a post-it note attached identifying it.

"Was that your second interest, here, Sir?" the second deputy asked.

Masters smiled.

"Just an added extra. See the ring of stones over here." He walked to it. "See the substantial trace of ash from inside it here in the grass just to the north?"

The deputies nodded.

"It appears the ash has been removed and placed onto the grass. Then replaced into the circle."

They nodded again.

"Why might that have been done?"

"To bury something?" the second deputy asked by way of answering.

"Bingo, deputy. I assume you have large evidence bags. If not, I'm sure there are trash bags in the cabin. Dig down as far as the earth is still loose. I want all of that dirt and ash and anything else taken to the lab for analysis."

"Yes, Sir. Everything," the tall deputy repeated affirming his understanding.

"If one of you would take care of that while the other returns me to the Mansion I will be in your debt."

A coin was flipped - clearly a well-practiced method for making such decisions between them. It pleased Masters to discover he was apparently the prize - the deputy who won became his driver.

Back at the mansion, Masters had the deputy bring a large evidence bag and accompany him to Tom's bedroom. He placed several items - the keepsakes - from the table into the bag along with a note outlining what he wanted from the

lab in relation to each. The deputy was soon gone. Now he just had to wait for the results.

Masters hated waiting to have his hunches confirmed. Seemed like an utter waste of time. He knew what he knew but he also realized corroboration was essential. So he prepared to wait and where better than Polly's kitchen.

"Polly, my dear," he said. "Any chance that wonderful aroma heralds some delectable specialty of yours?"

"Sometimes I don't understand your words but I always know your meaning - the smell suggests good stuff - yes, Sir. Apricot-raspberry filled long-johns. Just took them out of the oven. Take me two minutes to frost them. I assume you'd prefer frosting?"

"Frosting is always good."

Masters snoopervised near her elbow, managing to have his finger slip into the frosting on several occasions. When she was finished, she put the essentially empty frosting bowl into the refrigerator.

"That I don't understand," he said, carrying the plate of goodies over to the table.

Polly brought mugs and the coffee pot.

"Pat and Les like to lick my bowls. Anything sweet - pudding, frosting, cookie batter. I just always save it for them."

"You really love them, don't you?"

He took a seat and she joined him across the table.

"Like the grandchildren, I wish I'd had. They are a constant delight to me. Brightened my life more than I can express - especially Patrick. I love them both but for some reason he's just special. He pampers me, I guess. He worries about me. He gives me orders - the kind of things he thinks will be good for me. Yes. They are special to me."

"I suppose you'd do most anything for them, wouldn't you?"

"In the blink of an eye, Ray."

She looked at him full face and continued.

"If I really thought he'd done in Stevie, I'd confess to it, you know."

"I do believe you would. I suppose some do wonder whether you would have taken revenge for Les and/or her mother."

"I wondered when you would be getting around to that. I guess I don't have anything to say on the matter."

Masters didn't press the topic.

"Thanks for keeping Al busy for me. Just made things easier down at his place."

"Happy to help."

What had previously been easy conversation suddenly became strained and artificial. Masters hurried through his treat and excused himself. As he neared the door, Polly spoke.

"Patrick didn't kill the man."

Masters turned and acknowledged her statement with a brief nod before leaving.

He returned to Tom's den and began going through papers on and in his desk. In a bottom drawer was a brown envelope. It bore the return address of a bio-lab in Syracuse, New York - one of the finest bio-chemical labs in the World. He opened it and began reading. It contained a report about a DNA matching procedure done several months before. The conclusion was unquestionable - Stephen was not Tom's biological son. The match was closer than Masters would have suspected, considering that Tom and John Boyer were not related. Of course, he didn't know that for sure.

He called the Boyer residence.

"John, Ray Masters. I'm sorry to bother you again but I have one very quick question. Were you and Tom Rockefeller related?"

"Third cousins, actually. Never considered each other family, if that's what you're getting at. Didn't even know it at the time I went to work for him. I doubt if Tom ever knew. Mary discovered it much later while she was researching my family tree."

"Thank you. I hope not to bother you again."

Masters sighed. He returned his attention to the two-page report. At the bottom of the second page the word 'George!' was scrawled in large letters. Under it a phrase had been added: "That son-of-a-bitch!!" The work of Tom Rockefeller.

Masters tried to reconstruct a possible series of events. Tom obviously suspected that Stephen was not his son.

Anyone who had taken high school biology might have suspected that on the basis of the eye color alone. It was evident that Tom knew, since he had taken steps to disguise the fact through the use of blue tinted contact lenses. For some reason, it had recently become an important enough issue that he had the DNA test run. With results different from his, but yet so similar, Tom apparently had blamed the only adult male he figured could have produced a child with that DNA - George - his brown-eyed brother.

For a proud man like Tom, such a revelation would have most certainly produced an inner rage. His own brother bedding his wife. Would it have been reason enough for Tom to plot to implicate George as a murderer? Oh, yes! Would it have been cause for him to have killed the boy himself? Perhaps, in the service of some twisted sense of justice. Would the combination of events have perhaps caused Tom to sink so deeply into depression that he would have actually hired a hit man to kill him (Tom), and make it look like his brother was the guilty one?

That possibility had crossed Masters' mind earlier. To tie up the new loose ends he needed recent banking histories for several of the principals - the Boyers, Tom, George, and he'd throw in Polly, Al and Ann for good measure.

He made the call to Ben who began the process of obtaining warrants and then the information. The conversation prompted Ben to fax Masters several reports that had accumulated on his desk. One relative to the name on the grave and others dealing with driver's licenses, and other legal certificates.

Masters was always surprised - though pleased - when all the information began fitting snugly into place in support of his hunches.

The Trotter boy had been born in Wyoming in the year that would have made him nineteen at the time he was killed in the accident. A next of kin had not yet been located. His mother had apparently committed suicide years before and his father could not be found.

Amy Anderson had received a driver's license in Wyoming and the address given at that time was her Aunt Melva's. There was also a 'boy Anderson' born in the local

hospital eight months after she arrived there. The mother's name was Amy Anderson and the father was listed as 'unknown'. The child had been given up for adoption immediately upon birth. A new Indiana license had been issued to Amy during the week prior to Tom's death. That placed her in the area at the time of Stephen's murder. Nothing else seemed to connect her to the crime, in an obvious way.

Amy's Aunt was the librarian at the small, local library in Wheatland. Amy went to work there immediately upon arrival and doubled as the children's librarian and the research assistant.

That time it lit a light bulb above Masters head. He called Ben.

"Ben. If there had been an inquiry about a case you handled - say by a research librarian from out of state - there would be some kind of notation in the case file, wouldn't there?"

"Well, there should be. That's procedure. What you got percolating in that gray head of yours?"

"Take a peek inside the unknown victim of that hit and run involving Stephen Rockefeller a few years back. See if any such notation exists."

"I'm twenty steps from the file room. Want to hold?"

"Yes."

No more than a minute passed and Ben was back on the line.

"I just have to ask. Hunch or solid information?"

"I'll have to plead hunch in this case. You found something, then."

"Yes. Very interesting. You want to tell me what I found or will you humor me and let me relate it to you?"

"You're stalling, Ben. Give!"

"March 20th of last year, there was an inquiry by Amy Anderson, who represented herself as being a research librarian from Wheatland, Wyoming. She asked us to fax her everything we could about the case. It was done the same day. It did go to a library number - the deputy verified that before sending it."

"Thank you, Sheriff."

"Sheriff, is it, now. Don't you want to share something with me?"

"I wouldn't want to be accused of passing on mere speculation to the Sheriff, you understand. Let me sort through a few things first, okay?"

"Sure. Just let me know if I can do anything."

"Actually, you can, Ben. Two things. Tell me about Frank Rhodes - the brief run down."

"A bright kid all through school. Very much into scouting - my wife had him in cub scouts. He'd end up with every badge possible. Always a good worker. Dependable. Lived with his mother and grandmother. He never knew his father, the way I understand it. Never dated much - never any homo scuttlebutt - didn't mean to imply that. He could have most any of the single young ladies in town if he wanted. Very popular. It's a wonder. As a little kid he had the worst temper I've ever seen. Once saw him light into four boys - all twice his size - for calling him his mommy's little bastard. He'd have choked the life out of one of them if the others hadn't been there to pull him off. Big change since then. A good change. Still lives at his mother's. Grandma passed on a few years back. Any specific questions?"

"He has a marksmanship badge from years ago. Any chance he could hit a three-inch target from a thousand yards?"

"When he applied for deputy here with me he got the highest shot-to-bulls eye score I've ever seen - 97 out of 100 from various distances with four different weapons."

"He applied but wasn't accepted?"

"Oh, I offered him a position. He decided he was too much the loner to work as a part of a team. He was probably right. I think he has found just the right niche out at the lake. Never heard a reasonable complaint against him. A bit gung-ho in his early years but then, what cop isn't?"

"No animosity between him and the Rockefeller's that you know of?"

"No. Nothing. Tom is the one who hired him - on my recommendation in fact."

"Any chance he leads a dual life as a hit man?"

"You're joshing, of course!"

"I suppose that answered any kernel of an actual question I had in that query. Okay, then. Thanks for the information. Now, the second thing I need for you to attend to. Will you see that all the principals in the case are at the Rockefeller Mansion tomorrow morning at ten? I'll be ready to wrap up the cases at that time."

"Really! I had no idea. And by principals you mean . . . ?

"Ann, Leslie and Patrick Smith, John and Mary Boyer, George Rockefeller, Al Donner, Polly Potter, Ann's ex-husband - Adam Jones, Ralph Anderson and his brother and daughter, Amy. Also, that Shell fellow - apparently, a drifter - works as a handyman sometimes. You, of course and a couple of deputies for good measure."

"Expecting trouble?"

"Never expecting. Always prepared."

"Probably a good motto. May I use it?"

"No footnote required. Also, at that time, I will need the evidence taken from Tom Rockefeller's room and whatever the lab finds in the ash and dirt from the outdoor fireplace. Then if you'd have somebody bring out the screen and rod this afternoon I can prepare for tomorrow. We will meet up in Tom's study on the third floor. Oh, there is one more thing. I request that no one wear boots in the morning. Thanks again."

"Til ten o'clock, then. So long."

The phones hung up simultaneously. Masters moved back to the window in the den and looked out across the quiet, deep blue, lake. He would miss the people there after he left. He called Frank.

"I need to speak with the twin's father. In Bloomington. Works in a garage on Maple Street. How do I get there and back quickest way?"

"With permission, we could take Tom Rockefeller's four passenger Cessna. I'm a pilot. So is George."

"Good! Arrange something for me with George? Either or both of you. Get back to me."

He walked back down stairs to the living room and placed another call.

"PWS here. Talk!"

"P-W-S is it, now, Pat?" Masters chuckled.

"I'm fourteen. I try out lots of stuff. What's up?"

"I am hoping that you will be able to assist me after dinner this evening. I need a set of strong legs supporting a quick mind to scamper up a ladder and help me set up a display for tomorrow morning."

"Tomorrow morning?"

"Ten, here in the study, everybody involved in the case."

"Finished the first nine chapters and moving on to the mop up scene, huh?"

"Probably about one more chapter to live through before tomorrow morning. Can you help me?"

"Sure. Perhaps I should come for dinner so as to make certain I am not late for the activity."

"I'm sure Polly would like that. She really loves you, you know."

Pat chose not to respond so Masters terminated the conversation.

"At dinner, then."

He hung up.

His phone rang immediately.

"This is Frank. George is coming by for you. I'm heading out to our little landing strip to make the plane ready. Should be in the air in fifteen minutes. Have you contacted the guy you're going to see?"

"Don't want to give him the chance not to be there."

"I see. Okay. What about transportation once we get to Bloomington?"

"I'll call a friend in the police department and arrange for an unmarked."

"Okay then. See you in a few."

He hung up and immediately dialed.

"Yes, Mr. Masters. Brian Cox. What can I do for you?"

"Something that I'm sure is not in your budget."

"I'll just dip into my slush fund, then. What?"

"I'll be arriving by small plane in a few minutes and need an unmarked car for an hour or so. What's the chance?"

"I just happen to drive an unmarked myself. Call me at this number when you arrive and tell me where you are. I'll

come out on the tarmac and pick you up at the plane."

"Now that's service."

"With a smile, in fact," Brian said, chuckling. "It will be good to meet you - tummy to tummy, so to speak."

"You too?" Masters asked.

"Oh yes. One scale for each foot."

He chuckled and hung up.

George arrived. The plane ride took fifteen minutes. As promised, Brian was there waiting, and as also promised, he was a portly match to Masters. George and Frank waited in the airport cafe.

"You really think it's fair to make this car tote the two of us?" Masters joked.

"It wheezes just with me sometimes. We can only hope. What's up?"

"Need to eyeball someone who might be considered a suspect, Adam Jones. An ex-con who was married to Ann Smith and is the father of her fourteen-year-old twins who know of him but don't know him. One of the Rockefeller victims beat up Ann. Adam reportedly still loves her, has a terrible temper, and has been a party to killing before. He may still have some protective feelings."

"Sounds like a first class suspect to me," Brian said. "What's that address on Maple Street?"

Masters held out his pad so the address could be read. They were soon there.

"If my badge will help, I'll be glad to come along," Brian said.

"It just might. Yes. If you don't mind."

Brian arranged his badge - hanging from his top, jacket pocket. They entered the garage.

Brian made the first contact with the man who appeared to be in charge.

"Brian Cox, BPD. Need to speak briefly with one of your employees - Jones."

He deferred to Masters for the first name.

"Adam. Adam Jones."

The man pointed to a work station near the back.

"Blond guy working on the Mustang. Best employee I've had in years. Super bright guy. Can't imagine how he

ended up in a dead-end job like this. I know he's been in prison, if that makes this conversation any easier."

Masters had a few brief questions.

"What time does he report here for work in the morning?"

"Seven. I've arranged overlapping shifts so we can be open before and after most folks work hours. He's here from seven to four with an hour for lunch. He usually goes to Kate's diner down the street to eat - all three meals as I understand it."

"Any absences the past two months?"

"No. He did come in late one morning about a month ago, but he had arranged it ahead of time. A doctor's appointment, I think he said."

"You can give us that date?"

"Sure. Have to look on his time sheet, but I can get it."

"When we leave then. Thank you."

The two detectives walked to where Adam was standing under the sleek, green car on the rack. Brian flashed his shield and Masters spoke.

"Adam, I'm Raymond Masters and this is Detective Brian Cox. I am investigating some murders over at Lake Rockefeller where your former wife, Ann, and your twins live."

"I'm aware of your presence in the area and that both Ann and Patrick may be under suspicion for one of the nefarious acts. How may I be of service?"

It was neither the vocabulary nor the grammar usually spoken by someone changing oil.

"An educated man, I assume?"

"BS in pre-med, Indiana University. Graduated from prison a while back. Certified carpenter and mechanic - not too different from the surgeon I had planned on becoming, I suppose."

He hadn't smiled at what seemed to have been his attempt at humor.

"I'm here to tie up some loose ends. It seems to be the general impression that you are still in love with Ann and that if you felt she had been wronged you might charge to her rescue."

"That is certainly a correct impression, Sir."

“And Patrick? I assume the same would apply for him?”

“Yes, Sir. It hurts so that I don’t know them, you know?”

“I can imagine. You are aware of Ann’s problem with Stephen Rockefeller?”

“Yes, Sir. She wouldn’t want it known, but we communicate regularly. I agreed to stay out of my children’s lives when I went to prison but she graciously agreed to keep me informed and up to date. Sends me school pictures, samples of their work, things like that.”

“He wiped his greasy hands on his coveralls and dug out his wallet. He opened to the photos. “Leslie and Patrick,” he said pointing. I have all their school pictures clear back to kindergarten.

“You know of Stephen’s death and later, that of his father, Tom?”

“Yes. I read the paper and Ann has spoken to me about it all.”

“Can you establish alibis for the times of the two murders?”

“Probably not.”

He didn’t elaborate.

“I need more,” Masters pressed.

“I’m a loner. A one-woman man. I come to work, I go home - an upstairs apartment two blocks east. No friends. Private outside entrance. Don’t own a car.”

“I assume you make a good living and yet you don’t seem to be spending it?”

“That’s right. Everything goes into a college fund for the twins.”

“I guess I assumed Ann would be able to handle that,” Masters said. “She seems to have more than enough to live on.”

“She does and she could, but I’m going to help out as much as I can. She’s agreed to it. We have a surprisingly amicable relationship for ex’s.”

“And apparently, all quite secret from the children.”

“Yes. That was our agreement.”

“I’ve been told you have a temper.”

“Just about as bad as a temper can get. Another reason I prefer to stay away from other people. I can’t maim folks if I’m not around them and if I maim folks I can’t take care of my kids.”

“It sounds like a sad life.”

“It has purpose. My children. That can’t be sad.”

“A positive outlook, for sure. Are you a pilot - small planes, I mean?”

“No, Sir.”

“The doctor’s appointment you had a month or so ago. That can be verified, I assume.”

Adam was clearly taken aback by the question. He hesitated and fumbled with the oil plug.

“No. That will not be verifiable. Unless it’s essential, I would prefer not to discuss it further.”

“You will need to be at the Rockefeller Mansion tomorrow morning at ten,” Masters said, concluding the conversation. “You will come anonymously, of course. I have no intention of interfering with the arrangement you and your wife have made. Ann and the twins will be there. They are all considered suspects in Stephen’s death.”

“I’ll be there. I know where it is. They didn’t kill the man.”

It was essentially the same exit line Polly had given after a similar discussion with Masters. Had Adam’s also been a veiled confession or perhaps the promise of one, should any of his family members need it from him?

CHAPTER NINE

DAY THREE: THE EVENING

After dinner, Frank took Masters to Benny's former hangout - Antonio's Bar and Grill. The unkempt clientele was a good match to the less than tidy surroundings. It was, as its name implied, a bar and grill. The menu was scrawled on a black board behind the bar. The bartender - a miniature Masters in size and shape - apparently doubled as waiter. The orders were placed with him at the left end of the long, ancient, maple, counter. When they arrived he bellowed and they were picked up.

"Hey, Frank," the big man said in greeting. "Long time since we seen your hide in here."

"Busy elsewhere, I guess, Tiny. Good to see you. This is my friend Ray. We're trying to locate Dirk and Blacky."

"In the corner with the lady."

He pointed.

"Fix us a large with everything - to go."

Tiny nodded.

Frank led the way through the hazy maze of initial-laden, round, wooden, tables and assortment of mismatched, time-worn captain's chairs. He whispered back to Masters.

"Dirk is the one on the right. About as smart as an armadillo. He usually does the talking. The two of them swear Al was here at the time of both murders."

It was an out of character, ol' boy, greeting that Frank laid out.

"Dirk, my man. Blacky. Looks like you struck gold this evening. Do we get an introduction?"

“Candy Sue, this is Frank, a wannabe cop. Don’t know the fat guy.”

Masters helped.

“Ray. Big Ray, I guess to Frank’s friends.”

“What’s up?” Dirk asked.

Blacky was deeply involved in exploring the back of Candy Sue’s lower neck with his mouth and seemed oblivious to the exchange.

“Big Ray, here, is looking for info about Al - his whereabouts on the nights of the two murders.”

It got Dirk’s attention. He spat toward a brass spittoon, almost hitting it.

“That’s a cash transaction, I believe,” he said looking up at Masters and flashing a toothless grin.

Masters removed a hundred-dollar bill from his money clip and laid it on the table.

“That seems like cash alright. Worth one honest answer.”

“Why do you suppose that you two are able to remember that Al was here on those two occasions when most of the others here don’t seem to be quite so sure?”

“I always had a great memory. Just ask my mommy. Oh, that’s right; she passed on some twenty-five years back. Guess you’ll just have to take my word for it then.”

“How about your friend, here - Blacky is it?”

“He sees what I see. Strange phenonomin. Always has, ever since we was little tykes.”

“How much to change your story?”

Frank looked surprised and took one, deliberate, step to the left as if separating himself from the negotiation.

“You askin’ us to perjure ourselves, Big Ray? Al was here. That could get us into a lot a trouble you know.”

He looked around and leaned close to Masters.

“How much you offerin’?”

Dirk was, in fact, as dumb as his billing. Masters turned and walked back to the bar and engaged Tiny in conversation while peeling off a twenty to pay for the pizza.

“You probably know Al a bit better than I do, Tiny. I just can’t imagine him being an MP in the service though. Nothing spit and polish about him, you know?”

“MP? He told me he was in the medical core. Decorated for valor, he said. I suppose that’s just as hard to believe, thinking about it now.”

“Married five times, though, that I can believe,” Masters continued, baiting one imaginary hook after another to see what he might catch.

“He told me married only once - same woman twenty years. She died, the way he tells it to me.”

“And three girls?” Masters continued, shaking his head and smiling. “Can’t you just imagine Al braiding their hair before school?”

“No. I’m pretty sure he said he had boys. Why’d he make up stories like that, do you suppose?”

“Some guys just like to keep the rest of us going, I guess.” Masters’ phrase had made no sense but, still, it seemed to satisfy Tiny. Frank picked up the big, square, box.

“Need to be our way. See you later.”

Masters turned and walked toward the door. Frank followed.

On the way back to the mansion Masters received a call from Ben.

“My news may not make your day, Ray. It’s about the bank withdrawals. Only one that was really large - it was for one hundred thousand dollars. Made exactly one week before Tom was killed - by George Rockefeller.”

“Thanks for the call and all the legwork it took to get the information. You have just supported my hypothesis on the subject of a hit man. See you in the morning.”

Frank turned to him.

“Did I hear you just say that George hired a hit man?”

“Is that what I just said?”

Masters chuckled and looked out the window, changing the subject.

“Shell - the man Al hired about the time of Stephen’s death. You have any information about him - scuttlebutt - anything?”

“I’ve seen him around town from time to time during the past year. Apparently, a drifter. Probably went further south to a warmer climate during the cold months and then came back here about the time Al hired him. Did odd jobs. A loner.

He was the kind you couldn't start up a conversation with so you soon learned not to try. He stays in a shack by the railroad tracks north of town. Probably railroad property but since the trains stopped running it's up for grabs I suppose. Want to go find him? Actually, haven't seen him around for a week or so."

"No, that won't be necessary. I'm sure Ben can bring him to us when we need him. If you have another half hour or so I need your help to set up a demonstration for tomorrow morning. Pat said he'd help as well. Let me give him a ring."

The arrangements were made. Dusk was settling in so Masters felt some urgency, since much of the work needed to be done outside. Pat and Frank brought an extension ladder from the garage to where Masters stood on the front lawn, just to the west of the porch."

"Need a ladder to climb up the treads in those footprints?" Pat joked, really asking what they were to be about.

"Set it to the left of the window in the study. Frank, I'll need you up there on the outside. Pat, you come inside with me and we will work from the inside. Oh, the fishing line, Frank. You got it back from the lab, I assume?"

"In the car. With the brass rod, just as Ben said you requested."

Pat and Frank showed their growing excitement and continuing puzzlement. From inside the room, Masters directed Pat to attach the long narrow screen section to the window frame according to his specifications using the fresh holes and home-made eyelets they had located earlier. Frank steadied things from outside. Then it was Frank's turn. Masters led him through an intricate threading of the line here and there, in and out of the small brass, cup hooks. Eventually, the full screen was set in place, using the loose screen hanger as support on the right. Finally, the short end of the line was attached to the brass rod which had been inserted into four of the eyelets. The end of the line was left dangling outside, on the ground, behind the shrubs.

Speaking to his willing, though still confused helpers, Masters asked, "The roof. How does one get up to the chimneys?"

Pat had the answer.

"The attic has an opening out onto the roof - on the back side of the house."

"Frank, if you'll come in and join us, please and bring your camera."

They met in the hall outside the study door.

"I know I have been short on the explanations, guys, and appreciate every second of your assistance this evening. The next step is, frankly, a long shot. But, given the predilections of our killer or killers . . ."

"Predilections - a good word, Sir," came Pat's more or less expected approval.

Masters nodded and continued.

"Given those predilections, we have to ask where would he be most likely to hide the rifle."

Pat took it as an actual question rather than a lead-in to an explanation.

"Well, Sir, he or she or they put the fishing line and the duct tape back on the spools from which they had been taken in the first place. And hid the pillow in the attic of one of the prime suspects. It seems like he or she or they tends or tend to put things in the most unlikely places."

Frank nodded saying:

"Yes, I see what you're saying. But how does that involve the roof of the mansion?"

"Like I said, it's a long shot. But thinking like our bad guy, or guys," he added, borrowing from Pat's precise rhetoric, "Could it not be that he or she or they, might have also hidden the rifle right under our noses?"

"The attic in the house where the victim was killed, Sir?" Frank asked.

"That's a possibility, and if my first hunch doesn't pan out we will certainly tear the attic apart. There is a whimsical side to our adversary, however. It leads me to first try one other place. Pat, lead us to the roof if you will."

"It's the chimney, isn't it, Sir?" Pat stated more than asked.

"It would have been in your best interests not to have guessed that, my boy."

"Oops, I see what you mean. Don't suppose we can

just scratch that?"

"Don't suppose," came Masters' reply.

They climbed the stairs to the attic and Pat led them to the roof door. It was not an area Masters chose to traverse. He provided each of his eager helpers with latex gloves.

"If you will - the two of you - get up to the chimney and tell me what you see. Don't touch anything. I repeat. Don't touch anything. Just look."

"I suppose I should point out that if one or the other of you is the bad guy, the one who isn't could be in great danger up there."

Pat and Frank smiled at each other, acting as though neither of them believed that could be true of their friend. Masters stood in the small alcove at the base of the roof watching the two make their way to the top. The discovery was delivered in stereo.

"Bingo, Sir."

Frank continued.

"Hung by more fishing line with the barrel facing up."

"Don't touch it yet. Be careful. Get pictures. Got a flashlight?"

"Always, Sir," Frank answered.

Pat held the light as Frank took shots from several angles.

"Now what?" he asked.

"Using your flashlight try to make out if the trigger is rigged to be set off when the line is pulled. Again, don't touch anything."

"Yes, Sir. It sure is," Frank answered. "Double string. One attached to the barrel and one wound about so if it's pulled it will pull the trigger.

"What is it hung from at the top of the chimney? Something metal and shiny I believe."

"Right again, Sir. An aluminum pipe spanning the opening. How did you know?"

"The day we were up in the woods I noticed the sun reflecting off something up there as we drove down the hill. It's what set me to wondering. Here's my suggestion and execute it carefully. Each of you take that pipe by one end - as close to the end as possible and still maintain a steady grip. You

will first pull on it gently. That will probably fire the gun so keep your heads back. Then try the same move a second time. It may be set for multiple shots.”

The pipe was lifted. The shot was fired. It was lifted a second time - a third and a fourth before Masters was convinced it was safe to pull it out.

“Okay. Still keeping your heads back, go ahead and pull it out.”

Soon the rifle was safely in Masters’ hands and the three had returned inside and down into the third-floor hall. In the light, there, they examined their find.

“Exactly what it has to be,” Frank said, looking to Masters for verification.

“Exactly!” Good work gentlemen. “Frank, can I impose on you one more time to get this to the lab for fingerprinting.”

“Not a problem. Ben said anything, anytime, right?”

“Little did he know what he was getting himself in for, I’m afraid.”

Masters chuckled, remembering all those weekend nights he had also given up through the years.

Frank left and Masters commandeered Pat for a few more minutes. They went down to Stephen’s room. Masters folded the copy of the email about Benny so that the message itself was out of sight.

“Any way of knowing when and by whom this was sent?”

“Sure. Let’s see. It’s old. April seventeenth of last year. That’s more than a year ago.”

“And what was its source?”

“Very strange, Sir. Look here. It was sent from Stephen’s email address number one to Stephen’s email address number two. There’s a slim chance I might be able to find it in his Old Mail on the computer.”

“Go. Look. You are a gem, just like Polly says.”

Pat gave him a fleeting look and quick smile, and returned to work.

“Here it is,” came his finding after several minutes. “Want to read it. I assume from the way you have the paper folded you don’t want me to.”

“Correct. Let me see. Well, I guess you may as well

look because it doesn't contain the same message. Sure you found the same email?"

"Yes, Sir. I'd swear to it. Look at the matches - here, here, here."

Masters took several pieces of paper from the tray on the printer and addressed Pat again.

"Do these seem like a match to the folded paper?"

"No, Sir. The folded sheet is 24 pound and that from the printer is 20. Another thing, the folded one is at least 100 brightness and the stuff in the printer can't be more than 85."

"But if this happened a year ago, we can't be sure what paper Stephen would have had in the printer at that time, can we," Masters said, really asking.

"Probably can. This is a relatively cheap, black and white, laser printer. Pretty similar to mine at home. It works best with lighter weight paper - tends to jam with the heavier stuff."

"Okay, I'm going to trust you not to disclose the contents of the folded sheet. Look at it and tell me if you see anything odd."

"Thank you for trusting me, Sir. Odd, you say. Odd how?"

"Just look," Masters encouraged.

"Aha! Yes. I see. Up here and down here. The faintest indication of a straight line across the page. That won't happen on an email. The contents of the email have been pasted in place over the original message. Probably then copied at a copy center that uses better quality paper - I'd guess Kinkos - at least it used to be called that. There's a mom and pop copy place in town also, but they cut corners at every turn. 'Cut corners at every turn,' that's pretty clever wording. Maybe Flint can use that.

Masters shook his head.

Pat continued.

"Always cut in curved lines when you paste up hard copy. It fools the brain of the copy machines into thinking that there's no shadow."

"I will remember. Now, you better scoot on home before your mother calls out the Mounties to look for you."

"Fat chance she even has any idea that I'm not in my

room. But, I know when I'm not wanted."

He smiled indicating it had been a lighthearted comment and left. He liked Masters. He was comfortable to be around. The old man made Pat like himself. That was not the way things were at home.

As Masters made his way upstairs to the den, he called Ben and requested that his deputies visit several places with warrants and look for a specific list of items.

"Get my fax this evening?" Ben asked.

"I haven't checked since the middle of the afternoon. I'm on my way to the room that houses the fax now. Give me one more moment. . . . Yes. Looks like several reports. I'll go over them right away."

"So, you really have this one put away, do you?"

"Tight as a bug in a rug. Will be a bit cleaner if your deputies can locate those several items on the list I just gave you, but we're okay without them."

"See you in the morning, then," Ben said and hung up.

Masters gathered the pages from the tray in the machine and took them back to his room. His phone rang. It was Polly ready to deliver hot cocoa if he was ready. He was.

He read the report on what had been recovered from under the fire circle. It was better than he had hoped and yet he still hadn't found the one set of items that would put the nail - nails, actually - in one of the murderer's coffins.

The find had been Stephen's clothing, or at least the parts of his clothing that wouldn't easily burn – shoes, belt, billfold. It was in no way a straight forward, incriminating find. Not in that case. The murderer had made a point of planting evidence in several, odd, places. The fire ring was a new spot, but was it one where he or she could have reasonably thought Masters would look? If yes, then it was a diversion. If no, then it was a bingo.

He had been led to the spot by the ashes on the heel of his shoe that first afternoon. Why would those dirty, pesky ashes be strewn onto the lawn, he wondered. They wouldn't under normal circumstances. However, to dig a hole under the ash, it would have first had to have been removed. Logically it would have been piled beside the fire circle waiting to be replaced. Once the clothing had been buried and re-

covered with the dirt, the ash would have been put back in place. Some of it remained in the grass and some of that, attached itself to Masters' shoe as he stood there speaking with Al.

Masters toyed with his mustache and moved on to the next report. It concerned Tom's precious bat - the Louisville Slugger - the one with which he had hit the wining run in the league championship his senior year in high school. No one was allowed to touch it and yet the report suggested otherwise. It verified Masters' Hunch.

The Lab report was filled with various findings. A clean print had been found inside the fishing line spool. The source for the duct tape had been located which, though not a clincher, weighed in heavily on the side of guilt for one of the suspects. The rifle was clean of prints but as it turned out that would not be as crucial as Masters had originally thought. Although its registration number had been filed off, the lab had raised enough of it to make an identification. It, too, had been sold by the Wyoming gun dealer from whom the hand gun had been purchased. Most disturbing of all, the dealer's records showed it had been purchased by George Rockefeller three months before

Polly arrived with the cocoa.

"Thank you. Have a seat. Several little things I need to get sorted out. Maybe you can help."

"I'll sure try," she said taking the chair Masters had pulled out for her. He returned to his own.

"Did either Tom or Stephen leave town for any reason about three months ago?"

"Can't say about Stevie. He came and went willy-nilly. Tom seldom left town. I think he was afraid of flying and thought going places by car was a huge waste of time. He had assistants that went places for him."

"He seldom took vacations, then?" Masters asked.

"Twice a year he went scuba diving in the Keys. Other than that, only once or twice in all the years I've been here. Well, I suppose he could have left town during the weeks I've been on vacation."

"I suppose that varies from year to year."

"No Sir. Same every year. The two weeks after

Christmas I go up to the Inn at McCormick's Creek State Park. I let them cater to me hand and foot for two full weeks. They are wonderful folks and I come back renewed and raring to get back at it."

"How about George? Did he leave for a few days several months ago?"

"He's as bad that way as Stevie. I really couldn't say. Some weeks I don't see him at all and others he's underfoot all the time."

"One more thing and I'll let you turn in. I think I've been keeping you up past your usual bed time since I've been here. Do you recall George saying anything about having lost his billfold or driver's license during or before February of this year?"

She thought for a long moment.

"I can't say. If he had, he probably wouldn't have shared it with me, anyway. Sorry on that one."

Polly stood and left.

Masters' phone rang.

"Masters here."

"This is Ben, Ray. You'll never believe this new twist in the case."

"If you say I won't, then I'll take your word for it. What?"

"Patrick Smith just arrived at my home on his bike. He has confessed to killing Stephen Rockefeller. Got any suggestions? Does it fit with your explanation for all this?"

"Pat seems bound and determined to do time for this murder. Can you hold him over night - no special treatment - then bring him along out here in the morning? Let him write out a statement if he wants to, but make certain that he doesn't sign it. Can you agree to that?"

"Considering you're doing all my work on this one, I imagine I can handle that much. We'll play it that way, then. We use the juvenile facility over in Bloomington but can legally keep him in an adult jail for twenty-four hours if he's completely separate from the other prisoners. I'll keep him here in town tonight."

"Fine. I assume you've contacted his mother."

"I will as soon as I hang up. Wasn't sure how you wanted to play it."

"Tell her that you and I talked, and I said I'd be in contact with her in the morning. Assure her that her boy will be well taken care of. Can't put up with a weepy woman tonight."

"Will do."

"Along a different line, Ben. Something's been gnawing at me. Ralph Anderson seems to have done a one-eighty on my involvement in the case. Initially he all but told me to leave his county, but during the past 48 hours he's been encouraging - even demanding - cooperation from the various parties and agencies involved. Any idea why?"

"Off the record, okay, Ray?"

"Sure, if it's not germane to the case."

"As I understand it - and this is not from the horse's mouth, you understand - Amy had originally led her parents to believe it was George who got her pregnant. Apparently, she wanted to leave the door open for her and Stephen - who knows why. For years, the story has been that Ralph forbade her to see Stephen - way back in high school even - from the time of the hit and run. When she returned and realized her father was going after George more for revenge than justice, she set the record straight admitting it had been Stephen. I can only assume that Ralph realized what he'd been doing and tried to rectify it. He'll never admit to that, of course."

Masters nodded to himself. It was pretty much the scenario he had imagined.

"Thanks, Ben. It puts several things into perspective."

They hung up. Sleep came easily that night. It always did once a case was solved.

CHAPTER TEN

DAY FOUR: MORNING

It was an odd assortment of seats awaiting the guests in Tom's den. Les had come over early and helped Polly arrange the room. The chairs - brought in from several other rooms - were set in three rows facing the window - the spot where Masters would stand.

Ben and Frank had also arrived early - Ben bringing the final lab reports and the findings related to the last-minute search warrants, and Frank mostly because he just didn't want to miss out on anything. The drapes had been removed from the window to allow an easier view of the demonstration, which Masters would carry out with Pat's assistance.

Earlier in the morning the sheriff had brought Pat to the mansion to meet with Masters and his mother. It seemed that Pat had become convinced that it was his mother who had killed Stephen and he confessed to keep her from going to prison. It had been both an act of love on his part and a call for love reaching out toward his mother.

Her response had been, "That has to be the stupidest thing you've ever done."

Pat's expression sank and his shoulders slumped. Tears poured and his sobbing became uncontrollable. Clueless Ann threw up her hands and shook her head, clearly bewildered.

Masters looked Ann in the face offering his frown and deeply furrowed brow. She missed the point that time just as she had most of her life where her children were concerned. Pat would survive his disappointment. He had many times

before.

By 9:55 those whose attendance had been required were all seated. Pat sat just to the right of the door with Les, his mother and Polly. Opposite them were the Winstons and Adam Jones, the twins' father in the far corner. In the middle row sat the Boyers, Al Donner, Al's former helper Shell, Frank, and Brian Cox who, like Frank, was mostly there just to be there. In front of them were Ralph Anderson and his daughter Amy, the sheriff, George, and Maxine Miller, the child welfare worker. Just outside the door in the hallway stood three sheriff's deputies - two male and one female.

It was a quiet, somber, gathering - not that they were mourning the deceased - only George seemed to have faint twinges of grief for them. They were sad because someone they knew - perhaps several someones - would be required to pay a high price for having freed the World of two wretched human beings. On the one hand, there had to be laws against such acts or society would disintegrate. On the other . . .

At ten o'clock Raymond Masters entered the room, transformed - by his sober demeanor and the addition of his dark brown, three-piece suit and wide, burnt orange, silk tie - from regular guy into the more imposing, legendary detective. He stood looking out the window across the lake for a long moment before turning to face the group.

"Thank you for coming. We are here to consider the solutions to four murders.

Heads turned and brows furrowed, surprised at the number four rather than the two most had anticipated.

"For some we will hear confessions of guilt. For others, there will be no such declarations. Let me begin with the death of Alicia Rockefeller."

Again, there were turned heads and shrugged shoulders.

"It has been presented as an accidental death, however, given the circumstances, the design of the boat and Alicia's stature, it could not have been accidental. With the help of several of you in this room, we recreated the possible circumstances necessary for an accident. That had to be ruled out. The boom could not have hit her in the head - given her size and the position of the boom - unless she was

kneeling unnaturally on the floor of the boat. And even then, her wound did not match the appearance it would have taken. The flesh on the back of her head was opened from the top and pushed down toward her neck. The boom would have done just the opposite. The boom was examined at the time of the accident and found to contain her blood - her blood but no skin. To have produced a blow sufficiently powerful to have caused that wound, skin particles would have most certainly been embedded in the wood - which is Oak, by the way. The wood fragments, tiny as they were, that were found in Alicia's skin were ash. The boom, you see, could not have delivered the fatal blow.

"The pulley mechanism, through which the rope that secured the boom was threaded, was attached to the top of the left side of the hull near the rear of the boat. During the original investigation, it was found to have come loose, ostensibly a contributing factor in the erratic behavior of the boom. My examination of the hole made by the eyelet, which held the pulley in place, suggests that it had been systematically unscrewed, rather than having gradually worked itself away. Had it come off through use, the hole would have been made wide as it rocked back and forth, gradually working an opening so wide that its threads would no longer hold it in place. The hole I examined was in perfect shape. Someone had deliberately unscrewed it. When would that have taken place? After the murder - certainly not before, assuming Alicia sailed to the place she was killed. She could not have sailed with the pulley being inoperative.

"The original report noted water standing in the bottom of the boat. I'm told that is unusual in such a boat under such calm wind, no wave, circumstances. Along with the water was a strand of seaweed. The lab analysis of that seaweed this week has revealed that it was a saltwater variety - not one that grows in fresh water lakes such as Lake Rockefeller. Hold that information for a moment. The lab also examined a blunt instrument this week that came up positive on four interesting counts. First, it is ash, like the fragments found in Alicia's gash. Second, it showed traces of a copper salt. Third, it had remnants of the pink caulking used on Alicia's freshly painted wooden boat, and fourth, it contained tiny traces of her blood

preserved underneath the calking.

"The killer had donned a wet suit that had recently been used in salt water, swam out to Alicia's boat and climbed in over the side, thereby dripping a substantial amount of water into the boat. Most likely it would have been someone Alicia knew since there were no signs of a struggle - no attempt to keep the person out. None of Alicia's clothing had been torn or even disarranged. The killer had dragged the blunt instrument along in the water - water containing a high concentration of copper. The blow was struck to Alicia's head from above - the direction the torn flesh requires. Once unconscious, a portion of her blood was smeared onto the boom and she was dumped overboard to drown. The pulley was unscrewed; the killer reentered the water with the weapon and left the scene. Sometime during the process, the fragment of seaweed that had been embedded somewhere in the wet suit became dislodged and remained behind in the boat. The killer had just returned from a scuba vacation in the Keys where that variety grows.

"That killer, of course, was Tom Rockefeller, Alicia's husband. The blunt instrument was his prized bat, the one no has been allowed to touch for years. It would have called for some extraordinary circumstances for Tom to allow that precious bat to become water soaked. Any discussion about motive would be pure speculation. We will have no confession in the murder of Alicia Rockefeller.

"We will move on to the murder of Tom Rockefeller. Someone was content to just see Tom dead, compared with the death of Stephen where seeing the man suffer clearly played the major role. From the beginning, George was systematically set up as the murderer - or, of course, he may have done all of this to make it appear someone else had set him up - but we will deal with all of that shortly.

"The surest way to incriminate George would be to prove the shot that killed Tom had to have come from a window in George's house. The killer knew a great deal about shooting over long distances - not enough, though, and that will be part of his undoing. The plan was ingenious. To make it appear that the bullet came straight across the lake from George's cabin the bullet had to enter the screen roughly

perpendicular to the screen's surface. When the metal screen wires were broken by the bullet and bent in, they should, therefore, bend in at ninety degree angles to the surface. That is, in fact, just how they were bent. Searching no further, would suggest that the shot had to have been fired from George's place.

"It couldn't have been fired from there however - well couldn't may be too strong a term. Let's say no one who knew what they were doing would have attempted a single shot murder from that location. The warm spring in front of George's cabin creates air turbulence. On the night of the murder the temperature differential between the air and the water in front of George's cabin was very large which caused tremendous turbulence. We have all experienced what we refer to as heat waves coming up from hot surfaces like pavement in the summer and have seen how it distorts our view of things beyond. To aim through such turbulence would prevent an accurate shot. Add to that the slight deflection such a strong turbulence would cause in the flight path of a bullet and no expert marksman would attempt such an important shot at such a small target.

"And yet, looking at the screen it appears that was what had to have happened. Pat will assist me now in a short demonstration that will show exactly how this deception was accomplished."

Masters nodded at Pat and he left the room, taking up his station on the ground, under the window, outside. Masters began his explanation.

If the screen, instead of being in place, were to have been tilted out at an angle on one side, and the shot lined up so it pierced the screen straight on it would appear the shot had been fired from directly across the lake."

Masters moved to the window and began pointing here and there as he spoke.

"That is exactly what Tom's murderer did. See, this narrow screen on your right has been placed so as to hold the right side of the original screen six inches out, away from the window frame. That greatly changes the angle from which the shot would have had to have come. The screen hook at your top left was loosened to allow it to swing out that far and the

screen was not attached to the right hook at all. Two cup hooks bent into ninety degree hooks were screwed into the wooden window frame with the hook facing up. Other cup hoods, bent into closed eyelets were screwed into the wooden screen frame six inches from each end. The same was done on both edges of the narrow screen. The eyelets on the narrow screen were slid down over the upward prongs on the hooks set into the window frame supporting it against the house. The set of eyelets on the narrow frame overlapped those on the large frame and a narrow brass rod was slid through them thereby securing the narrow frame to the larger one.

“Now the most ingenious part. One length of fishing line was strung from the hole in the top of the rod to an eyelet in the siding, six feet above the window frame and then back down to the ground behind the bushes below. A second line was attached to the top of the light weight, narrow screen and run through an eyelet on the top of the window frame. In that way when line one was pulled from below, it slipped the rod up and out of the eyelets freeing the narrow frame from the large one. A pull on the second raised the narrow screen up and out of the hooks so it could be lowered to the ground. The weight of the brass rod lowered it to the ground as well. The person down below then pulled the rest of the lines free and they were gone as pieces of evidence.

“The weight of the large screen frame then closed it more or less back into its normal position against the house. Watch and see how it took place.”

Masters signaled Pat. The rod was raised free of the eyelets and then lowered to the ground followed by the rest of its line. Then the narrow screen was raised the necessary half inch and its weight also lowered it to the ground along with the line. The screen swung back into place. Even if the screen had fallen that could have been attributed to the impact of the bullet.

“So, the shot was made from the chimney of the Winston’s house just a few degrees east of George’s cabin.

“That fact is also supported by the position of the body on the floor. Had the bullet come directly across the lake it would have driven the body straight back but he was

positioned at a slight angle - his upper body off center to the right of his feet. The impact, having come from the left, propelled the body slightly to the west - Tom's right.

'Immediately, the killer drove to within a block of the mansion, walked to the bushes below the window, performed the tricks with the fish line you have just witnessed and the deed was done. The tiny, eyelets were removed from the frame later after the deputies left - a task that can be completed in less than a minute and could have been done by any one of a half dozen people who are regularly in and out of this house.

"The deputies removed the glass pane by using a circular glass cutter - all done from the inside. All they needed was the part with the hole. The next morning Al, the handyman climbed a ladder, removed the screen and installed a new pane of glass. The screen, seen to have a hole in it, was taken to the workshop to be repaired. Why it wasn't taken as evidence the night of the crime I'm not sure."

"I will provide motive and evidence against the killer a little later. Now on to the murder of Stephen Rockefeller.

"Though far more gruesome in nature than Tom's murder, it was in most ways very straight forward. Stephen was accosted as he returned home in the middle of the night - probably at the garage. He was forced at gunpoint - the hand gun found at the Smith's residence - to walk to the woods above the mansion. That specific night had been selected because there was no moon, virtually assuring that the trip up the hill would not be witnessed at three or four in the morning. A wooden crate was already in place under the limb. The rope was already draped over it. Stephen was ordered to strip. His hands were tied with one end of the rope. His mouth was taped with two, ten inch, pieces of duct tape to prevent his eventual screams of pain from being heard. A pillow was taped to his back. He was helped up onto the crate where he stood hands above his head as the rope was drawn tight and secured around the trunk of the tree. The crate was removed and Stephen dangled there. The murderer systematically disassembled the crate at that time and buried it in a pre-dug shallow grave some thirty yards to the west.

Returning to the clearing, after have allowed sufficient

time for Stephen to be in great pain from hanging as he was, the murder then proceeded to fire one shot from the hand gun into the tree trunk - providing a link to the gun but no link to Stephen - no blood. The murderer then took his time shooting Stephen eight times in non-vital areas of his body, probably waiting long periods between shots to enjoy his pain. We can only imagine the taunting that went on by the hate-driven perpetrator. From deep in the woods the sounds would not be heard in the outside world. The down filled pillow caught the bullets so all the evidence could be quickly removed from the scene. Eventually Stephen lost sufficient blood, lapsed into unconsciousness, and bled to death.

“The ring was left on Stephen’s finger to signify, I imagine, that the killing was not about money, but about revenge - that even great wealth, signified by that ring, could not protect him from being punished for his bad deeds. The killer was smart. He kept select pieces of evidence so he could implicate others if that became necessary.

“The pillow was removed from the scene in a large plastic trash bag and hidden somewhere well away from the area that would be searched for evidence. The tape, removed from Stephen’s mouth, was also stashed somewhere for safekeeping. The rope was taken as evidence of course - rope stained by the red dye from Benny’s sox.

“I imagine the plan was to feed just enough evidence to the authorities to incriminate others. No more than necessary was a smart approach. But in the end, the killer got nervous and abandoned that method. The gun was planted in Pat’s room - a good way to incriminate any member of that household. The authorities could use it against anyone there whom they suspected. Access to that house was not a problem.

“The lengths of fishing line, tape, and pillow were hidden in George’s cabin. The killer would have had a better chance of evading detection if he or she had not done that. Panic, I suppose. The lines were rewound onto the spool of heavy duty line from which they had been taken originally. The killer was very patient and had done his or her snooping well. It appears to have been an attempt to hide evidence in the most unlikely place - the very source from which it came.

It may have been an attempt to plant incriminating evidence. Perhaps, both.

“The lines had soil embedded in one end - a match to the high grade, black, loam imported exclusively for the shrubs and trees here at the mansion. The ends of the lines left dangling to the ground had been trampled into the soil during the process of recovering the narrow screen and brass rod. The tape had been rewound also, but that time onto the spool from which it had been cut - not the brand George had. In fact, it was not a brand available locally but had been purchased out of the area. Planting that spool at George’s was an amateurish mistake - apparently, an attempt to set up George for both murders. But splitting evidence only weakened the case. Having been a used roll of tape to begin with, it bears an old, telltale, fingerprint inside the cardboard spool. The slugs, left in the pillow match the hand gun.

“More about how all of that is now linked to the killer in a few minutes.

“One of the questions I have had to face was whether there was one, or more than one, murderer involved in the deaths of the Rockefeller men. Another was whether or not that murderer - or those murderers - had an accomplice. Let’s review the possible motives.

“The deceased were not nice men. There were droves of people who had reason to want to take retribution against them. From the outset, I was convinced the murders were connected - that they had been masterminded by one person. I had to ask myself why the two very different methods of murder - one utilizing horrific torture and the other being so swift and painless. One possible answer was to make it appear that two murderers with two MO’s had been involved. I also had to ask what significance the time period between the deaths might have had - what purpose it may have served. The answer that dealt best with both questions came in three parts; somebody had reason to exact revenge from Stephen; someone wanted to see his father, Tom, suffer over his son’s agonizing death; someone then had reason to want Tom dead as well.

“One scenario moved rapidly to the top of my list, and let me briefly recreate it for you. A nineteen-year-old John

Doe was killed by Stephen in a hit and run accident eleven years ago. The boy's parents were never located so had no idea what had happened to him. The mother, unable to cope with the loss, committed suicide. The father continued searching, telling his story to all that would listen. He knew the boy had started out on a cross country hitchhiking tour - alone - from Utah to New York City. The young man had called his parents on several occasions, the last contact having been from Decatur, Illinois. He had just been robbed of his belongings - wallet, etc. So, it was his plan to get to Bloomington, Indiana and stay over with a friend just long enough to earn some money. When he got a mailing address he would apply for a duplicate driver's license.

Much of that is educated speculation on my part but it explains his lack of billfold and ID and why he was headed toward Bloomington by a back road late at night, rather than having stopped in a motel - for which he would have had no money.

"Later, his father retraced the possible routes, talked with law enforcement officials and hospitals along the way. He returned home without a clue but he kept telling his story. He moved to a small town in Wyoming two years ago. A young lady from Indiana started working in the library, which the man frequented. They became friends. She told him about the hit and run accident. She described the boy - she had been in the car of young people who had taken him to the hospital. The man was convinced it was his son. The young lady was a trove of information about the community and the parties involved - the unsavory reputation of Stephen, the spoiled brat; the generally despised wealthy father who bought a decision in favor of his son; and other gossip about family relationships, geography, and so on.

"The man came to this area. He familiarized himself with the situation here. He befriended Benny at the bar and grill that he frequented and learned more of the specifics about the residents of Lake Rockefeller. This was a bright man. For years, he had been a physician's assistant in rural Utah recently relocating to a practice outside of Wheatland, Wyoming. He had served in the Navy as a medic. He received the highest marksmanship rating the Navy bestows

and was courted by the Seals to join their branch of the service. He did not reenlist but returned home, finished his education and became associated with a rural medical clinic.

“Once here, his plan quickly took shape. In his eyes, both Stephen and Tom were guilty in his son’s death. Having experienced the pain only a parent can feel upon the death of a child, the man became determined to inflict that same agony on Tom. That explains the month-long period between killings. The man wanted to watch and, in a perverted way, enjoy Tom’s anguish. I am sure the torturing of Stephen seemed just and reasonable punishment in the man’s eyes. I can only imagine his disappointment when the loss of blood caused Stephen to lose consciousness, thereby becoming oblivious to additional pain.

“This man knew that he had to set up his plan so someone other than he would be suspected. He probably felt rather sure that with all the obvious and avowed enemies the two men had, locally, an outsider such as himself would not be among the viable suspects. To carry out the plan, he had to establish ready access to the homes.

“He determined the best possible position for him would be handyman. That meant removing Benny. First, he established himself as an excellent handyman’s assistant so when Benny was no longer here, he would be the logical choice to succeed him.

“I assume the man first tried non-violent ways to get Benny to leave on his own. For example, in Benny’s belongings there is a long expired, one way ticket to New Mexico, where Benny’s family lives. It has been traced and was paid for by a credit card account in the killer’s name. Apparently, Benny wouldn’t be dissuaded from remaining here.

“The man had learned of Benny’s severe allergic reaction to penicillin and simply mixed a huge dose into some food he knew Benny would eat. With his medical background, it was a simple task to change the label on the medicine vial so it appeared to be Benny’s prescription obtained on a recent visit out of state. More recently he planted a similarly false vial in among the many drugs in Stephen’s medicine chest - leaving in it one pill identical to the kind that killed Benny. He

manufactured an old email from an unknown source that would appear to have given Stephen motive to kill Benny. The killer then placed it where I would be sure to find it - find it too easily, I'm afraid. There was motive from the contents of the email and there was means in his medicine chest. Opportunity went without saying.

"There are two solid links to Benny's murderer. First, the top of the wooden handle of one of the murder's old screwdrivers was used to pulverize the penicillin tablets and enough of it remained in the grain of the handle for the lab to locate last evening. Second, although all prints had been wiped from the medicine bottle after the false label had been attached - a fact that made it immediately suspicious - one print remained - under the label. It matches the print found on the spool of duct tape and the pipe from which the rifle had been suspended in the chimney of the mansion."

"There is one more aspect to these cases - touching, really. The man, who was the father of the young John Doe, purchased and set a headstone on his son's grave. It was the final clue that connected all the dots for me. The boy's name, carved in granite for the ages, was Shelby Allen Trotter.

"It was the same name that had purchased the handgun used in the murder of Stephen. The registration number had been filed away, but not expertly enough to fool our forensics team. That purchase had been made years after Shelby Allen Trotter - the John Doe - had died. The simplest explanation was that the boy in the grave was a Jr. His father was still alive and able to make those purchases. It was his father we needed to locate. That man - the father - also borrowed George's driver's license for a single weekend, returned to Wyoming and purchased the rifle in George's name.

"I had routine background checks run on all the principle suspects in this case. Interestingly, one of those living here turned out to be a boy who had died in a hiking fall several years ago, in Utah. Someone here had stolen and was using that false identity. That would require further scrutiny because by itself it did not necessarily connect that person with the crimes.

"As most of you have discerned by now, it is my belief

that the killer of Benny Angalini was Al Dormer. He periodically takes prescribed oral penicillin for his chronic ear aches. That prescription was found in his cabin. Just prior to Benny's death, it was refilled twice within the normal dosage period. Al's fingerprints tell us that his real name is Shelby Allen Trotter, Sr. He is tied to the death of Stephen by his penchant for hiding things in places so obvious that they would usually be overlooked. The missing nails from the crate were found last night by the lab. They had been driven - as extra nails - into an identical crate Al had made into a book case in his cabin - thus accounting for the two missing orange crates from the "April Showers" charity event at the local high school. Just enough of Stephen's blood was found on one of the nails to help connect it to his murder.

"There was some speculation that Tom's killer was a hired professional hit man. Several things led me to discount that. In the first place, none of the primary suspects had paid out a large enough sum of money recently to have bankrolled such an expensive operation. Well, there was one exception to that statement. George had withdrawn a large sum. Knowing George is not a killer I must admit I became interested in the reason for the withdrawal. As it turned out, a local youth organization was the beneficiary of George's generous gift - a gift he wanted to make sure was delivered before any actions could be taken against his accounts in case he fell into bankruptcy.

"Perhaps the main reason it was clearly not a professional hit had to do with the scraps of this and that, which the gunman tossed into the chimney while waiting. First, no professional would leave that kind of personal evidence behind. Second, upon smelling several of the items - gum wrappers and the long match used to light the cigar - it became clear they came from Al's cabin. They reeked of kerosene - I believe it is called coal oil locally. It is an obnoxious, penetrating odor. Al's cabin is heated by a very old coal oil stove which requires long matches.

"Amy Anderson provided a great deal of information to the sheriff last evening. She filled us in on Al's stay in Wheatland and about his intense interest in the case."

Masters addressed Amy directly.

"Amy. Is the man we know here as Al Dormer the same man you met in Wheatland?"

"Yes, Sir. There is no doubt about that."

"And the name he used there was . . .?"

"S. Allen Trotter. I saw it almost daily on his library card. He preferred to be called Al."

Masters nodded his thanks to Amy. He then continued.

"Al went out of his way to disguise himself - his unkempt appearance, his use of tobacco, his poor English usage. He knew that by keeping to himself he stood the best chance of not letting things slip that would give him away. His tongue apparently loosened somewhat after a few beers at the Bar and Grill and Tiny became privy to some of his history. He bought his alibis there, probably for no more than a few hundred dollars.

"There is one final piece of evidence against Al in the case of Tom's death. I specifically asked that no one wear boots of any kind to this get together this morning and I see you have all complied with that request. It will be found, I am sure, that the tread print from the shoes Al is wearing today will match the print cast taken from below this window - a print, which due to the pattern of rain lately - could only have been made on the night of Tom's murder."

Al stood, relaxed, his face more sober than smiling, and yet . . .

"May I speak, Sir?" he asked.

Masters nodded. "Please."

"Mr. Masters, you have everything correct. I applaud you, Sir, for that. When George was questioned as the main suspect, I thought things were working perfectly. Then you arrived. I needed to know what I was up against so I read about many of your cases, and tried to modify things so they wouldn't resemble anything you had seen before.

"I have no regrets about any of the three deaths. Benny was in the first stages of pancreatic cancer. It is a terrible death to wait on, so I spared him that. It worked out well for both of us, you see. I'm sure you won't understand but I've seen far too much pain and suffering that only death can relieve.

"As to the Rockefellers - I'm glad I freed the World of

them. Many would give me a medal. I understand that is not what I will receive, however. And yes, Mr. Masters, I relished every cry, every painful scream and whimper, every agonizing twist of Stephen's body as he hung there."

He paused and looked around at those present - at Ann and Pat and Les; at George; at the Winstons and the Boyers.

"I'm an avid reader. I found Pat's story in among Benny's possessions. It was perfect for my purposes - torture the man who took my son's life and provide an unbeatable suspect, especially in light of how things played out with the attack on his mother and the boy's subsequent unveiled threat. I couldn't have anticipated just how well all of that would go. But Pat, you must believe that your story is not responsible for the killing of Stephen Rockefeller. I would have devised some other excruciating method myself.

"The Winston's roof was my choice because they kept to a fairly regular schedule. I could pick a time I knew they would be gone for the night. George was not a man of schedule. His coming and going was willy-nilly. I knew I had to implicate him and yet I knew I could not chance using his cabin, so the plan with the screens developed. I wish I could say I had done that to compensate for the air turbulence over the heated water, but in fact I had no knowledge of any of that. Clearly if I had, I would not have set things up so he would have had to make the impossible shot. One aspect of killing Tom that you probably ascertained but failed to mention, Mr. Masters, was that I used the laser beam from the sight to attract Tom's attention so he would turn his head toward the angle from which the bullet would come, also making it appear that the shot had been fired straight on from George's place.

"It was my plan to confuse the evidence against you people in such a way that it would not be possible to convict you - the reasonable doubt thing. I don't believe I would have let any of you hang for my crime if it had come down to that. Regardless of how this makes it seem, I am really not a bad man. I have spent my entire life helping to ease other's pain. It's odd, you know. None of that - not all of it combined or any one grand instance of it - can be used to offset what I have done here. Even such a huge bank account of good works can never be called in to balance out a single bad deed. So,

why work an entire lifetime to build up such an account? It's not for the personal glory of the good deed doer, you see. It's simply that each good deed makes the World a better place. It has to be left at that. That has to be the full and sufficient reason for living a good life - to make the World a better place.

“The law will say that what I have done is wrong. Those who truly understand, however, will thank me for having liberated the World from this undeniably despicable duo.”

EPILOGUE

Brian Cox received a case of raspberry twisters - no card was attached. None was needed.

Les admitted to having taken Pat's story from his room and burned it, realizing how incriminating it would have been.

Pat and Les immediately ascertained the identity of Adam - the only outsider at the Sunday morning gathering. Upon the recommendation of Masters and Brian Cox he was given an opportunity to take over as handyman at the lake. Although they would not grow back together as a family, the twins had a father within easy reach and Adam had Patrick and Leslie as an enriching and ever expanding part of his life. Ann grew to accept the arrangement - it relieved her of many parenting duties and freed her to pursue her tan and other more self-centered interests.

George put TR Industries under the management of an able vice president and it took care of itself. He turned the mansion into a retreat center to be used, free of charge, by non-profit organizations. Polly and Hazel were delighted to have been reunited to run the operation.

The Boyers and the Winstons went about their lives in much the same fashion as before. They seemed to have profited very little by the events, continuing to chase after wealth, power, and personal possessions as if they were truly meaningful.

Frank began spending much of his free time with Jenny, the laboratory technician, and rumor has it there will be wedding bells in the near future.

Al received life without parole. Masters arranged for

him to be assigned to assist the medical staff at the prison. Al acknowledged his appreciation for the gesture and continued his life of good deeds behind bars.

Masters returned to Rossville, communicating for a short time by e-mail with the twins. As they grew closer to their father they grew apart from Masters - just as it should have been.

In his kitchen, Masters tried repeatedly to match Polly's delectable apricot roll-ups and spice sauce. It was a bad news - good news endeavor: He had to admit he just wasn't as good around the oven as Polly, yet, he did thoroughly enjoy disposing of each and every failure.

The End