



Garrison Flint

Case of
The Twisted Twins Murders



**"The perfect Crime?
Has Masters met
his match?"**

**Case of the
Twisted Twins Murders**
A Raymond Masters Mystery

BOOK THIRTEEN

By

Garrison Flint

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Chapter One
Day One: Saturday
Faces from the past

Raymond Masters was known to be unflappable but in light of the events just past even he felt an unmistakable, if only momentary, quiver that undulated his 'flap' from one end to the other.

It had begun the previous morning. During his usual, dawn-greeting, walk around the little of town of Rossville, in western New York, Masters made his usual stop at the Post Office and picked up his usual assortment of mail – a few actual letters interspersed among the pile of junk offerings – then stopped for his usual breakfast at the only cafe usually open at that early hour.

While awaiting his oatmeal and toast, he sorted through the mail. There were four offers for credit cards, three sets of assorted coupons (the one from the new Pizza Palace caught his eye!), two offering to reduce the size of his mortgage, and one offering to increase the size of his ... [well, this is a “family friendly” book, so we’ll leave it at that].

At the bottom of the heap were two envelopes, unmistakably first class in appearance yet neither had earned a return address. One bore a postmark from Syracuse and the other New York City, Master’s home base during the many, pre-retirement, years where he had worked as a police detective. They looked identical and he assumed they were duplicate copies of yet another ‘opportunity’ to contribute to the world’s most worthy cause or to make his fortune within the next ten days by contacting just six friends. Setting aside

his initial inclination to pass them by, he opened the one on top. It was an act born more out of momentary boredom than genuine curiosity.

It was an offer – fully unexpected and unlike any he had ever received. It was short and to the point:

“Detective Masters: I’m sure you don’t remember me. You sent my father to prison twenty-four years ago, for the murder of a scumbag named Mickey Malenkov. Dad should have received a medal, instead. But enough about the past and how you deprived my twin brother and me of a father all those years we were little children. I understand your record is perfect - in fifty odd years never failed to solve any case you were given. I’m sure you’re proud of that but kiss it goodbye, old man. Here’s the deal. At the upcoming National Twins Convention, I am going to kill one of the participants and you will be unable to either stop me or to convict me. I’ve had twenty-four years to work this out and even if my 140 IQ may not match yours, you have no chance on this one. See you there. PS. There is, of course, no way to prove who might have written this letter. As the writer, I may just be trying to implicate someone else to cover my own dastardly, though fantastically ingenious, deed.”

The post script, which highlighted the obvious conundrum, was unnecessary, of course. It was an unsigned letter and had been printed from a computer on standard white paper and mailed in a generic, number ten, self-sealing, white envelope from the busiest post office in Manhattan.

The writer was correct in that the document would prove nothing even though it clearly delineated the motivation and general plan. Masters did remember the case – John Watkins, a lawyer who was eventually convicted of killing the man who had extorted his wife relative to the time she had been a prostitute as a runaway teenager. He even remembered the boys’ names - Jerome and Terrance, more commonly, Jerry and Terry. He could see their handsome, blond, pre-school age faces – those images that had frequently troubled his sleep in the weeks following the conviction. It was that case more than any other that so clearly demonstrated to Masters that Justice is seldom really ‘Justice for all.’

As that memory worked to twist his stomach into knots, he opened the second envelope. He was by then curious as to why there would be a matching piece of mail bearing a Syracuse postmark. Again, there was a note. Again, it was brief – less eloquent – but just as chilling.

“Masters: When my brother and I were small you took our father from us. Now I am going to take your perfect crime fighting record from you. At the upcoming Twin Convention, I will kill one of the contestants and you will never be able to pin it on me. Since I’m acting alone in this, it will just be you against me. I wish you the most humiliating experience of your life.”

‘What a fascinating scenario,’ Masters thought to himself. ‘Horrendous, but fascinating.’

Clearly the twin envelopes contained letters from different writers – one from each of the boys – young men, by then, in their late twenties. The letters were ingeniously designed and clear in purpose: to imply collusion while effectively denying any conspiracy to commit a crime together. That the act of murder would be attempted and probably committed was clear. What was not clear – probably by intent – was whether they would work together to kill one person or that there were to be two victims.

‘I could request that the convention be canceled but that would not put an end to all this,’ Masters concluded. ‘They have obsessed over getting back at me for all these years. If this opportunity is taken away they will just modify the plan. It is not about the victims. It is all about me and their twisted conception of equity.’

The sudden, newly developing, situation called for a major and immediate deviation in his plans. Masters changed his order to a Denver Omelet, with sides of hash browns and biscuit with sausage gravy. Sustenance! Planning always called for sustenance. He was momentarily convinced that a significant dose of cholesterol surging through his blood stream was just what his considerable bulk needed to help him think through the impending challenge.

He could have felt guilty about the wonderful rush that filled his being each time a new case was thrust upon him - knowing, as he did, the terrible events that lay ahead.

Masters, however, chose never to feel guilty. He lived his life in the best, responsibly studied, way he knew how and then accepted the results. In this case the tragedy ahead was not of his making - and make no mistake, there was to be tragedy ahead. Preventing it would not be a possibility. Solving it would be a necessity.

He would contact the convention organizers and inform them of the threats so they could take whatever action they thought would be prudent. As a minimum, Masters hoped they would specifically caution the participants ahead of time. He would alert the authorities who had local jurisdiction, but he understood that none of that would slow the wheels that had already been so thoughtfully set in motion.

There were a multitude of logical positions and arguments that could be put forth in support of the father's conviction. There were even particulars available that would paint a positive picture of Masters' involvement relative to the boys, but the twins were clearly well beyond logic.

Undoubtedly, their plan had long ago taken on a life of its own, all quite separate from the original purpose and thereby rendered impervious to rational discussion. That is so often how the disturbed mind operates – fully logically once beyond an inherently illogical premise.

Masters spent the day reviewing his files about the boys and their mother, and making numerous calls to update his information. It is amazing what folks are willing to share with a total stranger over the phone when approached in the well-practiced, laid back, Raymond Masters, manner.

Jerry was the eldest by twelve minutes and in all of the usual ways fulfilled the role of older brother. That was perhaps partly due to some inherent leadership bent, but had been made all the more necessary after Terry recovered from encephalitis at age four. The associated high fever had diminished his mental capacities – not nearly to the point of a handicap but significantly below the superior level at which he and Jerry had entered the world. The condition also caused him to lose his hair which eventually grew back pure white and was the only characteristic that truly distinguished the two during the investigation and trial. Later pictures showed that condition had been transitory and by age seven they were

again the proverbial two blond peas in a pod. How Masters came by those pictures will become clear later on.

Masters surmised that the first letter he had opened was the work of the more capable, Jerry, and the second, the independent work of Terry – another ingenious way of keeping their involvement separate, should one or the other actually be convicted. Clearly that was a possibility neither, seriously, considered.

Terry owned and operated a small photography business – more or less successfully. He had never married and lived in a well-appointed apartment that Jerry had constructed for him on the third floor of the large old Victorian home, which he and his wife of five years occupied in Syracuse.

Jerry was a successful realtor and had invested wisely, already owning several apartment buildings and the controlling interest in a new, upscale, resort hotel – the hotel at which the Twin Convention was to be held. His wife enjoyed the social side of life – especially the young pros at the tennis and golf clubs. That was no secret and Jerry appeared relieved she had ways of occupying her time. He was a busy man. They had no children and no plans for any.

The two brothers remained close – too close most would say, considering their age. Being identical twins had always been important to them. As children, they dressed alike out of personal preference rather than parental mandate and continued to do so into the present. Jerry remained the leader though not the boss.

They were first entered into the National Twin Competition by their mother when they were six, winning in the ‘most identical’ category virtually every year since. Winning was important to them. They worked out equally and identically so that neither one’s physique would develop differently from the other. They played tennis, golf, and handball, usually together but again always equally often.

Masters had never worked a case in which the likenesses and differences of twins played an important role and he wondered just how that would play out in this one. Prints and DNA would be virtually identical – most likely too identical to tell them apart. Mug shots and the traditional line-

up would be of no use even with the most reliable eye witnesses. Each could alibi for the other by being seen miles away from the scene of any crime with no one being able to tell them apart provided the set up was carefully planned – and, clearly, it would be.

Masters wasn't sure about voice prints and made a note to call Dr. Preston, an authority in that area and a personal friend of many years. With minimal care on their parts, voice identification would not even become a factor. Masters was sure Jerry already knew more than he did about such matters so the nature of his immediate homework was clear. The playing field was not yet level and Masters was well aware that it was he who stood at the bottom of the slope.

Masters knew something about the Twin Competition. It was an annual event sponsored by an organization known as ITCONA – clearly an acronym but he could only guess at the words from which it was derived. “T” for twins and “C” for contest or competition, most likely.

The following morning – Saturday – found him searching the internet for additional information – well, the work was actually being performed by, Brandon*, a teenage friend who had become Masters' computer guru during the past year. He continued to marvel at how the lad had ways of finding anything the old detective required. He also marveled at how no matter what it was, the search always seemed to require a path which led through one or more sites boasting buxom young ladies in their birthday suits. It made him smile (at the persistent, adolescent, male's, obsession, not at the young ladies – well, that may not be entirely accurate! As Masters has been heard to say, I'm old but I'm not dead!!).

A few minutes (and many blonds) later, a website was located, which contained all you ever wanted to know about the organization. The name was to the point: Identical Twin Competition of North America. Brandon, had several names he thought would have been more appropriate, including T.W.I.N.S. standing for Twins With Identical Nucleic Strands (of DNA, Masters supposed).

Membership requirements, which were the prerequisites for entering the competition, included DNA matching and a participation fee equal to one percent of their

adjusted gross annual income. The current membership was listed at six hundred twenty-nine sets. Masters made some quick calculations.

“That would suggest 1258 individuals and if they had an average income of only forty thousand dollars – one percent of which would be \$400.00 - that would approximate a gross income for ITCONA of about \$500,000.”

It was not a huge sum but large enough to keep in mind. Throw in a half-dozen millionaires and that amount could easily triple or more.

The competition was to be held during the following week at a resort hotel near Bernhard’s Bay on Oneida Lake northeast of Syracuse, New York. With that many participants, Masters felt certain that room reservations would be impossible to come by at such a late date. Brandon’s search of the Hotel’s website confirmed that suspicion. Masters thanked his young helper and the boy was on his way slightly better off financially than when he arrived.

Ever optimistic, Masters called the hotel’s reservation desk. At worst, they would give him the name and number of some nearby accommodations.

“Yes. Hello. My name is Raymond Masters and I was calling to see if by chance you had a room still open for next week.”

“Mr. Masters. Humm! Raymond Masters. Well, I show you have been booked into 1400 – the Roosevelt Suite – from Sunday through Saturday. It is marked prepaid. Is there some problem about that?”

“No. It seems I have already been well provided for. Thank you. Check in time is ...?”

“Anytime Sunday, Sir. The unrestricted hold memo bears the hotel manager’s initials.”

“Thank you. You’ve been very helpful.”

“Is there anything we can have arranged for you in your suite ahead of time? Books, movies, masseuse?”

It was sounding better and better. He’d take a shot.

“Just one thing. A never-ending supply of raspberry twisters would be wonderful.”

“I see that’s already on the Courtesy List, Sir. Anything else?”

“No. I can see someone is anticipating my needs quite well.”

“That is our specialty, Sir. I will be eager to meet you when you arrive. We have a constant parade of celebrities through here but never a famous detective since I’ve come to work at least.”

“I see. Well, I suppose ‘famous’ is in the eye of the beholder, isn’t it?”

“You are the detective, right?”

“Guilty, I’m afraid.”

“May I be so bold as to ask if you bring copies of the Flint books with you – to sign for folks, I mean?”

“Give me your name and I’ll have one autographed copy dispatched immediately from Flint’s home in the Ozarks.”

He chuckled thinking it had been a diabolical way to switch the burden onto his old friend. He would hear about it.

“Martin, Martin Waterson, is my name. Maybe he could make it out to Marty. And thank you so much.”

“There is one more thing, Marty. The name and room number of the person heading up the Twin Competition.”

“Bill Lawrence in room 1402.”

“Thank you. I look forward to meeting you.”

It had been a curious conversation in all respects. The Watkins twins had seen to his lodging, which further suggested they had done their homework well and understood he would not be able to ignore their challenge. It also suggested they knew more about his habits than he would have imagined – the twisters and the fourteenth floor. Masters often requested that floor as his quiet demonstration against superstition. Hotels usually skip the thirteenth floor in the numbering system because so many people won’t stay there. So, it becomes floor number fourteen instead. It represented one of Masters’ very private little personal pleasures and the Watkins’ boys somehow knew about it. It was clear that Masters’ had much to learn about them – and to do so within very few hours. Unlike them, he didn’t have a dozen or so quasi-biographical books to fall back on. It was obvious to him that his had been thoroughly studied but that would be to Masters’ advantage as well. The twin’s crimes would most certainly follow different paths from those already solved and

chronicled.

He poured a mug of coffee and took it and the printout from the ITCONA site onto the deck at the rear of his rustic, plank and rock cottage. The organization was almost fifty years old and had been run by its current director – Bill Lawrence – for the past decade and a half. As he began perusing the material one strong, uncomfortable, feeling began gnawing at him. Masters hated competitions such as that one – pitting people against each other in situations where virtually everybody had to lose and only one, or in this case two, could win. He felt it certainly couldn't be good for the participant's self-esteem and held the potential for becoming the basis of fully unnecessary animosity – a commodity the World seemed to have way too much of in Masters' experience. Why foster it needlessly?

But, what was, was, and Masters would deal with it. The competition was held annually, and had convened at Bernhard's Bay for the past two years. Twins were rated over a three-day period by judges who observed them as they went about their normal, daily, activities at the hotel. Looks accounted for eighty percent, voice sound and speech pattern ten percent, and similarity in mannerisms, the final ten. There was one overall winning set but there were also several other categories, each with its own winners. There were male and female winners in each of six age categories: 5 to 10; 11 to 14; 15 to 21; 22 to 42; 43 to 65; and 66 plus. Each also had an overall winner. Winners received certificates – surprisingly little, Masters thought considering the substantial entry fees they paid and the amount of money taken in by the organization. But, he had not been a twin so realized he had no basis for comprehending the importance that such an event must hold for them. He did have to wonder how all that revenue was spent and by whom.

The list of past winners indicated that Jerry and Terry had won in their age category every year since they began attending – twenty-some years before. During the vast majority of those years they also won the over-all competition title – The Perfect Pair – and presently had a string of nine years on the line.

Again, Masters chuckled, looking over his physique and

thinking he would be a shoe-in if it had been The Perfect Pear. It received more of a prolonged chuckle than it deserved by any sort of measure.

The sets typically vying for second best included Tim and Tom Adams from Seattle, Joe and Jack Blair from Nashville, and Marla and Carla Carter from Rochester. It was Masters' feeling that the victims of choice for the Watkins twins would not include the old and more feeble, nor the very young and helpless. That left those in the categories between 22 and 65 as the likely candidates – representing about half the participants. It would take a small army to guard such a group. The best he could do, he imagined, was to deliver a warning and let the individuals act on it as they would.

Questions began popping into his mind. Would the Watkins twins use this opportunity to rid themselves of their close competition – the Adams, Blairs or Carters – or would they choose from the 'also ran' candidates which would be less likely to implicate them? Would they choose to murder a pair of twins or one from two sets? Would it take place early on or would they wait, hoping to tease or exasperate the old detective?

He wondered if they would contact him upon his arrival or play the more distant, innocent, role. Would they choose to make the deeds appear like obvious murders or disguise them as accidental or death from natural causes?

He smiled as he realized all those things were plainly the very things they wanted him to be considering – stewing over, agonizing over, would, perhaps, be more appropriate ways of describing it. Twenty-four years for preparation would seem to have put the boys in the driver's seat but Masters knew such things seldom played out according to plan. It would be, he assumed, the first time they had committed murder. It would certainly not be the first time Masters had been called upon to find a murderer. He had put well-trained, hired, professional, assassins behind bars, so he was certain that novices such as the Watkins brothers would be no match for him. That was not his concern. His lingering nightmares would be bred by the fact that two crazed men were going to murder one or more likely two innocent people on his behalf, and that there was little if anything he could do to prevent it.

He decided that spending any more time there in Rossville would be a waste of effort. He called Brandon, who often drove Masters from place to place.

“Brandon – friend, buddy, comrade – what’s the chance you can transport me to Syracuse and stay the rest of the day with me?”

“Starting when?”

“Ten minutes ago!”

“Sure. I need to shower, eat, gas up, and I’ll be over. I’ll need twenty minutes.”

“Make sure you have your parent’s approval.”

“Sure. No problem. They suffer under the delusion that you are a good influence on me.”

Brandon laughed himself off the phone. Masters shook his head and chuckled out loud. He was an old hand at packing and was ready and waiting on the front porch when his young friend arrived. With his two suitcases stowed in the trunk, Masters slapped a hundred-dollar bill into Brandon’s palm with the admonition:

“Get me through this day in one piece and there will be another one waiting at the other end.”

Brandon smiled and nodded, and, considering the significant recent improvement in his financial situation, was moved to open the rider-side door for his usually implacably independent old friend. He received the look, and clearly delighted in it.

It was Masters’ intention to snoop around Syracuse, the Watkins’ home town, and see what tidbits he might be able to gather. He had the address of their home so that is where they began. They parked a block away and Masters got out to walk the area, alone.

The huge old house had been beautifully restored – clearly by someone who appreciated fine architecture. The lawn man was at the front curb loading a mower into the back of an old pickup. Masters approached the old gentleman.

“That’s some house,” Masters said, hoping to open a conversation.

“Sure is that,” the man answered, turning to survey it.

“I’m Ray,” Masters said, extending his hand.

It was taken with no hesitation.

“I’m Sam.”

“You keep a fine lawn, Sam,” Masters went on.

“Thank you. Raised it from a pup, you might say. Been five years now. I planted every seed and I’ve cut every blade since.”

“It’s the Watkins place, isn’t it?”

“That’s right. Jerry owns it and his brother, Terry, has the third floor. Nice guys both of them.”

A woman dressed in a white tennis outfit, appeared on the porch, descended the steps and made her way to a sports car waiting in the circular driveway.

“That’s Beth, Jerry’s wife,” the man said, a tell-tale smile just barely cracking his cheeks.

“You know more than you say,” Masters said, smiling, waiting.

“Shouldn’t talk out of turn.”

“Some things are just too good to be kept, though, aren’t they?” Masters continued, subtly urging him on.

“I guess it’s no secret, really. The saying up and down this street is that she’s Jerry’s wife and Terry’s girlfriend. Not very flattering, I’m afraid.”

“But true from your personal knowledge, I’m sure,” Masters said, going for the clincher.

“That’s for sure. When Jerry’s gone, they don’t try to hide it. Don’t know how she tells them apart anyway. Maybe they are like interchangeable as far as she is concerned. She was an actress before she married on out here. Lots a them actor people seem to have low morals, you know. I probably shouldn’t have talked so much.”

“You do lots of lawns around the neighborhood, do you?” Masters said changing the subject before the man could feel any more uncomfortable.

“I keep to a full schedule in the summers – lawns and pools. Shovel snow all winter. Vacation in Florida April and September. It’s a good life.”

“Sounds like it. The Watkins men; are they here today?”

“No. Off to that Twins thing out at the lake. Jerry owns that hotel out there you know. He’s made lots a money in a real short time – can’t be even thirty yet.”

“Real Estate, I understand.”

“Yup. I think I like Terry the best. Not as rich and less airs, you know. More down to earth. Not so many big words. I don’t approve of his hanky-panky you understand, but it’s always more comfortable dealing with him.”

“He’s the photographer,” Masters said, realizing he only needed to open a topic and the details began flowing.

“And a good one. Did a portrait of my wife and me on our 35th wedding anniversary. He made me look right handsome. Carol, my wife, would come out looking great no matter what he did.”

“Is his studio down on ...?”

“Claiborne, yes Sir, right across from the old Cranston Department Store.”

Masters nodded.

“I was thinking their mother lived here with them.”

It was an outright fabrication but again designed to elaborate on facts he had been able to unearth earlier.

“Poor Mary. She drowned in the pool shortly after moving in with them about four years back now. I found her myself one Sunday morning. They was all devastated, I’ll tell you that. Sometimes it seemed like the boys and her were triplets, you know. From a distance, the way the boys wear their hair down to their shoulders, you’d a thought it was triplets. Did everything together. Beth just seemed like extra baggage if you know what I mean.”

“I didn’t know about her death. I’m sorry.”

Masters had all and more that he had come for and excused himself.

Fifteen minutes later Brandon’s car was parked within easy walking distance of Terry’s Photo Shop. Masters entered and was greeted by an attractive middle aged woman.

“How may I help you?” came the predictable, opening, question.

“Need some 35-millimeter film. I’m pretty dumb about all this. It’s for my nephew. He said something about a fast speed. I’ve graduated to an electronic camera myself, but he likes to develop and such.”

Masters had learned long ago that by making himself appear inept, others would rush to be of service and Masters

was an expert at extending that well beyond the initial problem. The clerk continued.

“This is what you need but I’ll let you in on something. If he uses very much he should buy it at the discount place on South Street. They can sell it for less than we have to pay for it. Film is getting harder and harder to find these days – your reference to electronic cameras.”

“That’s very kind of you.”

“It’s Terry’s policy – he’s an exceedingly honest and kind man.”

“By the way is Terry around? I knew him years ago. Thought I’d say hi if he were here.”

“Oh, no. He’s gone for the week. He’ll be so sorry he missed you. If you’ll leave your name and number, I’ll see that he calls. It won’t be until after Friday though. Strict orders not to bother him til then. It’s the Twin Convention out on Oneida. A yearly event at his brother’s hotel, now.”

Masters handed her his card, seeing no problem since he fully intended to have Terry behind bars by Friday for a murder the man had yet to commit.

“Did old Terry ever get married?” he asked.

“No. There used to be lots of young ladies in his life but not so many recently. He doesn’t speak of it and I’d never ask.”

“You have been with him for some time?”

“Since he opened here about five years ago. He did his apprenticeship over at the Westover Studio. I had worked there about a month when he left. He asked me to come with him and I said sure. He’s such a nice young man. A pleasure to work for.”

“He was always such a fitness buff,” Masters said.

“Still is,” she said, taking the bait. “Works out at Harry’s Gym four times a week. He and his brother. You know he’s a twin, I guess.”

Masters nodded. “Harry’s. Harry’s? I should ...”

“Two blocks East on the corner of Livingston.”

“Certainly. Some days this old head of mine, you know.”

“Oh yes. I visit that same black hole regularly, myself.”

“I guess that should take care of my needs for today.”

He paid her and left, hoping Brandon could use the film. Masters was generous but frugal, believing that things should not be wasted.

They made their way to the gym. Brandon asked if he could come along – the request coming on the heels of seeing three attractive young ladies enter the building.

“Sure. Just don’t slobber as you pant.”

Brandon looked at Masters unsure of his meaning. Masters chose to ignore it and they were soon inside the century old, stone faced building. He approached the desk as Brandon wandered off in search of things more to his liking.

“You’ll have to sign a medical waver,” the attendant announced, reaching for the form. “Too old and too heavy, you understand.”

“Yes, I do understand both of those things, but I’m not here to join. I was hoping to find my young friends Jerry and Terry Watkins. Are they here today?”

“Nope. Sunday, Monday, Wednesday, and Friday and they won’t be in at all this coming week. Gone on vacation or some such thing. Seems like they do everything together.”

“Four times a week. That’s commitment,” Masters said.

“Sort of a strange pair. Do exactly the same routines every time. They look alike right down to their skin, you know?”

Masters nodded.

“In good shape, then?”

“Great shape. The joke is that half the women members come just so they can watch the two of them flex and sweat.”

“Nice guys, aren’t they?”

“The best. Handsome. Rich. Big tippers, too. Well, Jerry always does the tipping for both of them. I get the idea he’s the leader. They pretty well do what old Jer wants. He even gave me a pass to the pool at the Hillshire – the motel he owns north of town.”

“Generous. Always been generous.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“They into Karate or some other martial art? Masters asked.”

“We don’t do Karate here. I never heard them say. I

doubt it. They're just more into keeping fit and trim. Too mild mannered for that 'kick 'em in their face' stuff. I admire them, I'll tell you that."

"Well, if you remember, tell them Ray said hi."

"Sure thing. Nice talking with you. Hope you didn't take that old man thing too personal. Just policy, you know. Can't have old guys hitting the floor dead."

He probably should have stopped while he was ahead but Masters didn't flinch.

"Not a problem. Your observations were both accurate. Thanks for your time."

He looked around for Brandon who was nowhere to be seen so he turned back to the attendant.

"The women's locker room is where?"

He pointed to a far corner, not asking the question that had to be on his mind. Masters made his way across the huge room and found the lad deeply engrossed in conversation with three, scantily clad, young ladies.

"So, is this the famous detective you assist?" one asked as Masters approached.

Brandon looked sheepish. Masters came to his rescue, pretending not to have heard.

"If you ladies will allow it, I really need the assistance of my right-hand man, here. You'll excuse us."

He turned and began walking back toward the door. Brandon soon followed.

"Thanks. I guess I sort of ..."

"Sort of acted like a normal seventeen-year-old male?"

They smiled at each other and Brandon nodded, understanding nothing more needed to be said.

"A motel," Masters said.

"Well, if you insist, but I barely know them," Brandon replied, the imp showing through his grin.

Masters shook his head.

"Jerry Watkins owns a motel north of town – the Wilshire. That will be our next stop. Let's find a phone book to get the address."

That done, they were soon pulling into the parking lot at the motel. Masters' plan was that he would check in and stay the night, then take a cab out to the lake early Sunday

morning.

“First things first; you must be starved,” Masters said, realizing it was mid-afternoon. “If not you, then me. Let’s find the restaurant.”

An hour and a pile of cheeseburgers later, Masters was checked in and his luggage had been deposited in his room. He greased Brandon’s palm with the promised second installment and the boy was on his way. Masters donned his favorite, orange, Hawaiian print shirt, and made his way to the lobby. He stopped at the desk, business card at the ready.

“Would Jerry Watkins be available?” he said smiling, making it appear that he expected to be escorted directly into the man’s office.

“Mr. Watkins is the owner but he is seldom here – he doesn’t have an office here,” came the response from the smiling young lady. “Miss Cummings is the Motel Manager. Would you like to speak with her?”

No thank you. Old friends – Jerry and I – you understand. Not much contact lately. Thought I’d take a chance he might be here.”

“I’ll see that he gets your card, if you want. We send him a big brown envelop most every day.”

“Yes. Thanks. That would be great. Let me just put a short note on the back.”

He wrote a generic, ‘Sorry I missed you,’ phrase for effect and handed it to the young lady.

“Somehow I thought he had planned to be at his hotel this weekend. My mistake, I guess.”

“Oh, he is at his Hotel. This is his motel. He’s out at Bernhard’s Bay – a big convention I think. I can call and have him paged if it’s important.”

“I wouldn’t want to interrupt him. Thanks anyway.”

On the surface, at least, it had appeared to have been a fruitless conversation. He started across the room toward the pool, planning to enjoy a few hours of fresh air. At the door – and certainly unexpectedly – he was met by Brandon, smiling ear-to-ear and stripped to the waist with a well-tanned, bikini clad, young woman on each arm.

“Uncle . . . Ray,” he said stumbling through a greeting. “I was wondering if I could have the key to our room.”

“Strike two, Nephew,” Masters said in playful reference to that having been the second time he had been drawn into one of the boy’s fabrications.

Masters smiled as he continued, looking at his watch.

“Have you forgotten your weekly appointment with the juvenile probation officer? It’s in less than half an hour. Better shake a leg young man.”

Masters moved on outside, delighting in his own, impish, little fabrication. He took a seat in the shade well back from the pool, making ready to enjoy what was left of the beautiful afternoon.

No sooner had he closed his eyes in the hope of a short nap than he heard his name being paged. A young man with a phone approached, apparently not needing Masters to identify himself.

“The Manager wishes to speak with you, Sir.”

Masters struggled to dislodge a bill from his pocket. He exchanged it for the phone.

“Masters here.”

“A limo has been arranged to take you to the Hotel at Bernhard’s Bay in the morning. What time would you like it to arrive?”

“Eight will be fine. Thank you.”

“A bellman will meet you at your room at eight, then.”

Masters hung up and returned the phone to the young man who had been patiently waiting a well-practiced, discrete distance away.

‘So,’ Masters thought. ‘I’m not only being expected, but my movements are being tracked. They watch me and I watch them. What an interesting contest this will be.’

He closed his eyes at last but there would be no nap. His mind began the process of sorting through what he had learned.

The Watkins brothers were well liked and respected in every venue Masters had examined. Jerry was, indeed, the leader, but Terry had established and was running a successful business on his own. The portraits on the walls of his studio suggested he possessed skill that was well above average. Financially, Jerry was more successful, clearly on his way to amassing a fortune.

Three things stood out to trouble Masters. First, that two such nice men could be plotting such a heinous crime. Second, that their mother had died an unnatural death. Third, that they seemed to share the same woman. He had to wonder if that was with or without Jerry's blessing.

There was the fourth problem, of course. It had been gnawing at the old detective from the outset. Was it, in fact, the twins who were involved in the plot? There was no proof one way or the other. The disclaimer at the end of the first note could have been something other than the unnecessary stating of the obvious. It may have laid out the actual situation – as a further taunt to Masters, perhaps – that someone else was setting them up. To put him on the Watkins' trail would keep him distracted from the others - one or two of whom just might be the true perpetrators. Having his accommodations provided gratis in Jerry's lodges might support that suggestion by falsely implicating him.

Again, he searched his memory for other cases involving twins. None came to mind. It could, of course, be a non-twin – somebody more tangentially involved in the competition. It could be someone not even remotely connected with the contest, but using it as a cover or as a vehicle to accomplish some act of revenge.

And, the revenge might not even be directed against Masters. It could be that Masters had been lured into the game for some other purpose. What purpose? Whose purpose?

It would be an interesting twenty-four hours that lay ahead. Would more leads surface to implicate Jerry and Terry and if so to what end would they be strewn in Masters' path? So far, it seemed that he merely had to show up and everything he needed conveniently fell into his lap.

"Luckily, I have this enormous lap," he chuckled aloud to himself.

A nap was finally in order. He needed to be fully rested to take on the considerable challenge that awaited him at the up-coming seven course dinner about which he would fantasize for the next hour or so. He assumed it, too, would be on somebody else's tab.

*Brandon: The boy Masters got off the hook in, The Case of the Smiling Corpse

Chapter Two
Day Two: Sunday Morning
“And two by two they boarded the Ark.”

At, The Ark, as the hotel was called, the ‘twin-theme’ was carried out from the huge, ornate, double doors that greeted you out front to the dual, meandering, swimming pools which graced the look-alike courtyards between the two identical towers of the grand, new building. There were few single rooms – mostly two and four room suites. The Roosevelt Suite was on the southeast corner of the top floor and boasted four rooms, two baths, two balconies, and more sets of everything than seemed reasonable to Masters.

Hiring preference, he soon learned, was given to twins and nearly half the staff came in look-alike pairs. The front desk was always manned by at least one pair of twins, which though quaint, must have been thoroughly confusing for the guests.

Masters’ suite boasted two spacious bedrooms and two sitting rooms. He called the desk to obtain the number of the room the Watkins twins were occupying.

“We’re not allowed to . . . Oh wait! You’re Detective Masters aren’t you, well yes, then, Mr. Jerry is in his permanent suite 1418 at the opposite end of the East hall from where you are. Mr. Terry is in 880 this week. I’m not sure why but that is certainly where it says he is. Should I ring either of them for you, Sir?”

“No. That won’t be necessary. Thank you.”

“Anything else, then?”

“Well, yes, actually. Which of the two restaurants

would you recommend for breakfast?”

“I can’t afford either one myself, Sir, but I’m told by those who can that TW’s has a great buffet until eleven – ‘til two actually on Sundays.”

“Thanks. By the way, I left home in such a hurry that I have clothes in need of laundering. Is there someone who could take care of that for me?”

“Certainly. Right away, Sir. I’ll send your bellman up immediately. Let’s see, yours will be . . . ‘Taco’ this week. Give him five minutes.”

Masters noted that being given the name of the bellman who would serve him was a very comfortable, thoughtful, gesture. He wondered from the phrasing of the interchange if it meant he would have the same bellman throughout his stay – that, too, would be a nice touch he had never before experienced. ‘Perhaps it will turn out to be interchangeable twins, each on twelve hour shifts’. The thought had been worth a smile if not a full-blown chuckle.

He filled the laundry bag – universally present in top, left, hotel dresser drawers – and was proceeding with it toward the door as the bell rang. Masters was surprised and a bit disappointed with himself as he opened the door and surveyed the young man standing there. He had expected an older, Hispanic bellman. What he saw was a well-tanned but definitely not Hispanic teenage bellboy.

“Taco at your service. Something about an adventure with your dirty duds I believe.”

Masters chuckled out loud at the youngster’s enthusiastic, down-to-earth approach in his greeting.

“What?” the young man asked, his grin spreading even further across his good-looking face.

With a twist of his head, the still chuckling Masters motioned the lad inside.

“Is there something wrong, Sir?”

“No. Nothing. It’s all me, not you, Son. I am ashamed to say that merely based on your name I was expecting a different sort of man.”

Taco looked puzzled.

“Well, I am male and suppose I could prove that if necessary.”

Masters' considerable bulk again jiggled on his sturdy, old, frame. The young man soon joined him in laughter even though he hadn't the slightest idea what they were enjoying together.

Masters explained as the boy shut the door behind him.

"From the name, I was given over the phone, I mistakenly expected an older, Mexican-American gentleman. I do apologize to you and Hispanics everywhere."

"I get that all the time. You heard 'Taco' but it's actually 'Tako' - well, I suppose re-hearing it that way really doesn't help much does it. Let's start over."

He took a step backward, removed his shiny-billed cap, and extended his hand for a shake.

"Gary Allen Tarasenko at your service, Sir. Early in life my very Russian last name was shortened by my very Hispanic neighbors to Tako – the first two and last two letters in my family name. I suppose you could say it's like a homonymic, cross cultural thing, or something."

Again, Masters chuckled. "Homonymic?"

He placed his big hand on Tako's shoulder, urging the boy to accompany him into the sitting room.

Tako followed and Masters continued.

"Well, I thank you for that succinct explanation and for your good-natured response to my error. I assume you are mine for the duration?"

Tako looked puzzled but only for a moment.

"For your stay here. 24/7. Me and you. Yes, Sir. For the duration."

He smiled and nodded.

"Well, then, Tako with a K of very Russian descent, it seems I have an iced bottle of sparkling, white, grape juice awaiting some occasion in here."

"If you prefer wine, Sir, I'll have some brought right up for you. I can't do that myself – I'm only eighteen."

"No. I'm a non-alcohol sort myself and someone here seems to know that. I was just going to ask if you would join me in some refreshment while you fill me in on everything I could possibly ever want to know about this place."

"It would be considered quite irregular for an employee to drink – anything – with a guest, Sir."

“Is it not true that your job is to attend to my every wish and whim, young man?”

“Well, yes. Almost every, at least. I am . . .” he swallowed . . . “promised to a wonderful girl, Sir.”

Again, Masters laughed.

“Have a seat – w a y over there if you’ll feel more comfortable.”

He pointed to the chair across from the sofa on which Masters had seated himself.

“I didn’t mean . . . well, yes, I did, I guess. I’m . . .”

“Would it be prudent to just change the topic?” Masters suggested as he began pouring the juice.

“Yes, Sir. Prudent. That’s a very good word. I’m going to be a famous writer someday and I collect good words.”

“A writer. How nice. Perhaps someday I can introduce to a friend of mine who does a little of what some folks consider fairly good writing.

“Mr. Flint, you mean, of course. I’ve read everything he’s ever written – not just the books about your cases – no offense. He’s sort of an idol of mine, you might say.”

Tako continued.

“I have to admit, it cost me a bundle to be your man this week, but I just had to meet you. I hope that’s not being too forward. My Ma says I’m given to being way too forward and that I just say whatever comes to mind without filtering it. She’s probably right. Tina, my . . . girlfriend, says that’s one of the things she likes best about me. I guess when it comes to Ma’s or . . . girlfriends, the girlfriend wins, huh?”

“Been that way pretty much forever, I imagine. Tina and Tako. Tako and Tina. Has a nice ring to it,” Masters said somewhat philosophically as he bent forward and handed a glass across the coffee table to the boy.

“Thank you. Yeah. Like it was written in the stars, or something,” Tako agreed with a series of exaggerated nods.

He was clearly in love right up to his thick, dark, wavy, eyelashes. Seeing young people in love always pleased the old detective who only had lost opportunities to look back on, himself.

“So, have you and Tina known each other long?” Masters asked, casually, hoping to help the young man

become more comfortable.

“Since we were twelve. We fought like banty roosters 'til our fifteenth birthdays – both born on the same day if you can believe that. From then on we started kissing and it's just never stopped. Kissing is much better than fighting, and . . .”

He paused. There was something else his impulsive nature had wanted to add but he stopped short of it. His mother would have probably been proud.

Masters would not press.

“And where is Tina this summer?”

“She's here. She got me the job. Her aunt's in charge of the maid services here – they call it Housekeeping. Tina's working as a maid up here and down on twelve hundred. Twelve and fourteen are where the best tippers always stay. Rich people like it up high for some reason. For sure better than the second subbasement where we live this summer.”

“Staff quarters?” Masters asked, seeking clarification.

“Yup. Twelve by twelves with a bath, single bed, a few sticks of furniture, a microwave and fridge. Can't complain, really. They're free. Our room . . . rooms are comfortable and we get an unrestricted pool pass. Mr. Watkins takes very good care of us. He's a great man.”

‘Ouch?’ thought Masters. There it is again – the ‘nice guy card.’ But why not? Except for that one time, his father had been an exceptionally nice guy, too. He turned his attention back to his new acquaintance.

“So, that's how you came by the job.”

“Yup. I seem to be really good at it. Tommy and I make tons in tips.”

He broke into laughter – his own private reason that time. Masters smiled, waiting, a puzzled look on his face.

“I guess I can tell you.”

He leaned forward becoming confidential in tone.

“See, there are so many twins hired out here that I started pretending I have one named Tommy. Right after I do something for somebody, Tommy shows up to do the same thing – he tends to always be just a little late and lovingly inept. That way he usually gets at least a little pity tip just for having shown up.”

“You are a certified – though ingenious – rascal, Tako/ Tommy! And what are those tons of tips earmarked for, a car?”

“Oh no, Sir. Tina and I are entering college over at Geneseo in September. It’s a state school but even that’s expensive these days.”

Masters raised his eyebrows and nodded, signaling that he understood.

“I know that campus – beautiful there on the hillside. In fact I lectured on that campus years ago. So, what will you two be studying?”

“Majors in education – me secondary-English and Tina early childhood. I figure that if I write one great novel a year while I’m there, I won’t ever have to actually teach. After four blockbusters, I should have my reputation made, you know.”

Masters smiled to himself. He would never burst a young person’s bubble. And who knew . . . ?”

“About this Twin Convention. What can you tell me?”

“I wondered when you’d get around to that. You’re not a twin, are you?”

“No. I suppose there would be plenty of me to make twins but all of this is just one old, retired detective.”

He patted his expansive stomach and smiled, asking:

“You and Tommy entered, by the way?”

They exchanged smiles as Tako sat back and relaxed, and began trying to supply the information Masters had requested.

“Seven hundred rooms here and about five hundred are occupied by contestants – lots of cancellations this morning for some reason, I hear. There are twenty-five judges but nobody’s supposed to know who they are. I guess they do their judging undercover.”

He burst into laughter.

“Well, rumor is that at least some of the judging is done under the covers.”

He laughed again.

Masters enjoyed the boy’s sense of humor and his natural, unfettered reaction to things. Tako recovered and tried again.

“Like I said, the rich ones stay high and the poor ones

low. Cheapest suites here go for a thousand a week. This one's about five grand, I'd guess.

"The twin thing has been held here for a few years – two or three, I think. Mr. Watkins and his twin, Mr. Watkins," he snickered at his little joke, "Seem to always win. I don't think it's underhanded or rigged – they really do look and sound identical. And, anyway, they'd never do anything against the rules. When Mr. T – that's what we staffers call Terry – was out here earlier in the season he stayed over in 1418. I understand that's where he always stays even when Mr. J's wife, Beth is here. Two bedrooms, like here, you understand. I don't know why Mr. T's down in 880 this week. Anyway, what I was getting at was that I was his man for a week. He's quiet and sort of distant, I guess you could say – a lot more distant than you are, for sure. But, he was kind and thoughtful and left me a killer tip at the end of his stay."

"Sure, that was for you and not Tommy!"

Tako smiled.

"Tommy never showed up for Mr. T. Might have jeopardized Tako's employment, if you get my drift."

Masters nodded.

"What was that about it costing you to become my 'man'?"

"Oh. Well, we grunts – the new or temporary bell guys – usually get assigned to the lower floors or out front with the exhaust fumes. I traded my week's tips to Oliver, the old timer who was originally assigned to you."

"So, just hypothetically, if Tako were to receive some tips after a forgetful guest checked out at the end of the week, he could keep them?"

"I hadn't thought about it, but that would seem to be within the arrangement as I understand it, Sir."

"Then don't expect a dime from me this week, Grunt!"

Tako grinned his wonderful grin.

"If that's your final decision, Sir, I'll do my best to live with it."

He feigned a sad face and extended his lower lip.

"Bill Lawrence. You know him?" Masters asked.

"Sure. Right next door to the north of you. Drives a top of the line BMW. Single. No lady friends that I know of. Never

made a pass at me, though. I assume he's just very busy with the preparations for the contest – sorry, the competition. Mr. J. winces at the term contest. Not sure what the difference is, but there certainly is in his mind.”

“Ever read the book by S. I. Hiakawa on general semantics – Language and Thought In Action, I believe it's called. Probably out of print. I had it for a course in college. May have been the most important thing I ever read. I'll try to scrounge up a copy for you. It discusses the subtleties of idiosyncratic word meanings and things just like that. It will help you grow as a writer. By the way, I'd love to see something you've written, if you allow old snoops that privilege.”

The boy smiled.

“Is there really any of that you want me to respond to, Sir?”

“You got me! I ramble sometimes. I've solved some of my toughest cases by way of a long evening of pure old unadulterated rambling.”

“The question remains, Sir,” Tako laughed into his hand.

“Two things. I'd love to read a sample of your writing and please call me Ray.”

“Sure, on the read my stuff. Not sure I can call a legend by its first name, Sir. . . . Nope! I just tried and it wouldn't work. I might be able to manage a Mr. R, if that would make you feel any better.”

“Much! Thank you. But if I don't respond, nudge me. I've been called many things in my time, but never Mr. R.”

“If that's all, I should be getting your laundry down stairs.”

He stood and approached Masters.

“Here's my card. That's my private voice mail if you can't get me any other way. I just have five rooms this week – all upper levels – so I should never be more than a few minutes away.”

He stood and placed his glass back on the tray beside the bowl of ice containing the bottle.

“Thanks. That's really good stuff. I guess it pays to stay up high.”

He reached in his pocket and with some difficulty and much accompanying gyration extracted a cell phone.

“Darn, tight, uniform, pants! Great for showing off my butt, but in all other ways they’re barely functional. Here’s a courtesy phone for use during your stay. Press pound, then, one and you’ll have a direct line to me. Pound, then, two is room service.”

He giggled.

“That was my idea. And, oh yes. Aggy – Agatha Davenport, the Hotel Manager – told me to remind you that all your expenses are being picked up by an anonymous benefactor. Sounds very . . . mysterious. . . . Is it . . . mysterious?”

“I have the feeling you will be the first to know . . . if it is . . . mysterious . . . that is!”

Tako understood that was all he would learn – for the time being, at least.

Masters stood and walked Tako to the entry hall. The young man hefted the bag to his shoulder and opened the door.

“It’s been great meeting you, Sir, Mr. R., detective man possibly on some mysterious assignment guy.”

“Same for you, Tako Tommy Tarasenko, the something or other of Tina somebody or other.”

Tako cocked his head, looking back into Masters’ face, fully serious for the first time.

“The something or other of Tina?” he asked.

Masters lowered his voice in a playfully confidential manner.

“It appears to the old detective that there just may be more than one mystery going on about us.”

He winked at the boy. Tako nodded and smiled – slightly – neither admitting or denying anything.

“He’ll be fun to have around,” Masters said to himself as the door closed behind him.

“He’ll be fun to have around,” Tako said to himself as the door closed behind him.

Masters entered the second of the sitting rooms, appointed less formally than the other and much more to his liking. Someone else had apparently suspected that was how

it would be. There, looking quite out of place in a tall, etched crystal, glass, on the table beside a hefty-size recliner, were several dozen red, raspberry twisters.

As Masters took a seat and reached for a treat, he spied a note extending from beneath the glass.

“More in the fridge in your bedroom – T.”

Except for the terrible circumstances that had brought him there, it could have been a most enjoyable vacation. He had to wonder about the “T” signature, however. Tako? Tina? Terry? . . . ‘Trouble’, perhaps!

He took out the new phone and dialed 1402, Bill Lawrence’s room.

“Yes. Bill. Speak!” came the crisp, agitated answer.

“Raymond Masters, here, Bill.”

“Thank God. What is going on? We’ve had over a hundred cancellations thanks to your earlier call.”

“So soon?”

“One of the wonders of Facebook and bulk email – in thirty seconds six hundred members in fifty states and two countries got the word. We need to talk.”

It amused Masters. He thought they were talking. But, he answered, anyway.

“Your place or mine?”

“Mine, if you will?”

“When?”

“Now, if you can?”

“Give me five minutes. I believe I am right next door to you.”

Click. Apparently, that had ended the conversation. Masters slipped the phone into his large, lower, shirt pocket, then lingered over three more twisters before making his way to the suite just down the hall. The door was open in anticipation of his arrival. He was surprised to be greeted by a woman.

“Mr. Masters. I’m June Evans an ITCONA board member. Bill said you were on your way. Come on into our make-shift office.”

Bill stood and walked toward them as they entered the room. He extended his hand to Masters and shook it vigorously. He was thin and gaunt in appearance. His wire

framed half-glasses had slipped dangerously near the end of his nose. He pushed them back into place and slipped his drooping suspenders up over his shoulders. Reaching for his jacket, unceremoniously draped over the back of a chair, he motioned Masters to take a seat.

“Don’t get all gussied up on my account,” Masters said, flapping his gaudy, free flowing shirt.

“Good, then.”

He left the jacket alone.

“Let’s get right to it.”

He and June sat on the couch across from Masters.

“Coffee, wine, water?” June asked.

“No. Thank you, though,” Masters said. “I’m intrigued as to just what a board member does,” he continued, plainly directing his comment at June.

It was Bill who answered, however.

“She lurks around looking for ways to steal my job, mostly.”

Masters smiled though it soon became obvious that it had not been intended as humorous.

“Cancellations?” he then asked, trying to begin a more useful dialog.

“One hundred and nine.”

“An odd number? Seems strange for a twin thing,” Masters noted.

“The match undoubtedly just hasn’t been received yet. I’m sure there will be more.”

“You want them to come even though they may be in danger?” Masters said, making it a clear question to clarify the man’s position.

Bill sighed.

“Well, no. Of course, not. It’s just such a shock. I’m not sure how to proceed. Should we call the whole thing off?”

“If my information is correct, that would not change one thing. If my information is incorrect, everyone is safe, anyway.”

“Do you know who’s making the threats?” June asked.

Masters paused before delivering his response.

“Not entirely and since that is the case I will not be naming names.”

“But can’t we just have the main suspects locked up ’til

all of this is over,” Bill asked.

“This is America, Bill. We don’t operate that way – well, at least usually we’re above that sort of thing.”

“Okay. What’s your suggestion, then?”

“Proceed according to schedule. All your participants have been forewarned, I assume.”

“Yes. All of them. Those who have shown up have not necessarily done so out of personal bravery. This is a really big event for them – worth a little risk, I suppose you could say.”

“Yes, I would say,” Masters agreed.

“Well, how can we help?” June asked.

On that the two seemed to agree.

“We have a list of participants with room numbers and a short bio prepared for you – all standard stuff, I’m afraid,” Bill said handing over a large, thick, envelope.

“Good. This may prove to be helpful.”

“Helpful? Just helpful?” Bill said, back to being agitated. “How are you going to prevent the murders? That’s what June and I need to know so we can begin reassuring the members.”

“I will not be able to prevent the murders. The best we can hope for is that they are botched so the victims somehow survive the attempts.”

“Not a very hopeful outlook,” June said standing and beginning to pace.

“I agree. Not hopeful at all.”

“Maybe if you would just leave, the killer would decide against going ahead with his plan,” Bill suggested. “If you aren’t here to pursue him, then maybe it wouldn’t be any fun for him.”

June raised her eyebrows as if to indicate the absurdity of the comment and more than that, to underscore the supposed incompetence of its author. She tried to play the more responsible role.

“Do you have any idea when the attempts may be made? Soon? Later? Day? Night? Any idea who the most likely victims may be?”

“Well, as I said when I spoke by phone with Bill yesterday morning, I don’t expect this person – or these

people – to strike out at the children and teens or at the elderly. My best guess is that those between twenty-one and sixty-five are the most likely targets.”

“Ninety percent of the children have already been withdrawn,” June explained. “And, many of the older members also called it quits. Most of what we are going to end up with here, fall into your ‘most likely’ age bracket, I’m afraid.”

“We will just have to use asterisks and footnotes in the historical record of this year’s competition,” Bill said shaking his head. It was not at all clear to Masters what he meant and Bill was so deep into his own thoughts he missed that fact. June explained.

“What he means is that since so many of the best competitors will not be here, the history of the winners this year will need to have that noted in some way.”

Masters shook his head.

“Here we are about to face two murders and you are concerned with where the asterisks will go in your record of the event? I am dumfounded by your lack of concern for the real people involved in all of this.”

He rose as if to leave, exaggerating his displeasure to make a point and guide their focus back to what was important.

“Okay! Okay! You made your point. We’re both ashamed of ourselves. What can we do?” Bill said all quite unconvincingly.

“Like I said earlier, keep to your schedule. Advise your participants to stay in groups and stay out of the shadows. No one should answer the door unless he knows the person on the other side – and that includes knowing the staff. If they can’t identify themselves satisfactorily, they must not be admitted and security should be called.”

“But what if it’s one of our own?” June asked. “We all know each other. It’s like a tight knit family. How can we possibly know which of our friends not to trust?”

“A point well taken. The would-be perpetrators may well be counting on that friendship factor as the lead-in for their criminal acts. There is no good way to protect yourself from your friends, is there?”

“Just don’t have any!” Bill said grumbling under his

breath.

“Like you?” June came back, clearly hurtful in intent.

Clearly the two of them detested each other. Masters tried to move things out of that repetitive rut.

“Tell me about the finances of the organization. How is the income used?”

Bill chose to answer.

“It’s only an organization in the loosest sense of the word. We have no chapters and no club-like activities – no meetings. Our sole focus is this annual competition. Our funds go primarily to supporting this event, the staff, and an occasional newsletter.”

“And the business income this year is . . .?”

“Close to a million dollars,” Bill said.

“And how much of that will be used for this event?”

Bill swallowed and remained silent. June provided the information.

“I don’t know exactly but somewhere between fifty and seventy-five thousand dollars.”

“And the rest is spent how?”

Again, it was June.

“There is fifty thousand allocated to run the central office in Denver. Ten percent of what is left goes into a contingency account. The remainder becomes the Director’s salary.”

It was Masters turn to swallow hard. He turned to Bill.

“You are paid some eight hundred thousand dollars a year to put on this four-day dog and pony show? I’ve long known that preying on people’s vanity has made many a millionaire, but it just makes no sense to me that even the vainest would be willing to chip in that much for the opportunity to come here year after year, and lose.”

“You just don’t understand,” Bill said.

“That may be the first thing you have understood from all of this. I don’t understand! At any rate, here’s my deal. You go on with this activity just as it’s planned, but stay out of my way and for goodness sake, don’t either of you try to help me!”

Masters moved to the door. Bill left in a snit to another room. June accompanied the old detective to the hall. She

had a question that not even the pointed interchange just past could quell.

“May I ask who is paying your fee, Mr. Masters?”

“If my wits are still intact, my dear, I believe you just did ask. Good day.”

It had been a grand performance he thought, deserving of the very best breakfast available. He approached the elevator, pushed the button and was soon hovering over the finest breakfast buffet he had ever encountered. He looked at his watch. Nine thirty-three – perhaps he could be finished by two o’clock when the buffet closed. He chuckled.

He was hardly into his Eggs Benedict when a woman approached his table.

“Aggy – Agatha Davenport, the hotel manager, Mr. Masters. I just wanted to welcome you in person and let you know our security team is at your disposal. James Marvel is the captain of our force and he is expecting to hear from you. He understands the situation. Dial 22 on your phone.”

“Sit, if you like,” Masters said a grin breaking across his face. “Marvel? Captain Marvel is the head of your security?” He chuckled uncontrollably.

Aggy looked baffled as she took a seat opposite him.

“You are too young, my dear, but Captain Marvel was the comic book super-hero of my generation.”

“I see. I didn’t know. I suppose that would explain both the cape I found in his closet and the convulsive reaction I often receive when I introduce him to older patrons.”

Masters liked this Aggy. They would get on just fine. She continued to speak as he continued to savor his meal.

“I hope you weren’t offended by having young Tako appear as your bellman. He has a way about him that often produces the unexpected. I’ll have him replaced immediately if you want.”

“Goodness no, my dear. I figured you had arranged him as a special gift for me. We got on fine. He is just what an old man needs to have around.”

“A smart-mouthed adolescent?” she asked, plainly puzzled.

“An eager, forthright, dependable, lad in love,” Masters explained.

“Oh. Yes. Tina. Probably should have thought twice about taking him on, but what’s done is done. He is well liked by staff and guests, and I’ve never had a complaint about his work – or Tommy’s,” she said, a grin crossing her face.

“You know about Tommy then?”

“Oh yes! Our patrons love him. They go out of their way to let me know.”

Masters shook his head, while he continued to listen and savor the delicacies on his plate.

“Tako’s so enthusiastic and he has such charisma. I just don’t have the courage to be the one who destroys his creative little clone. And, I know he really needs the money. I hear his mother’s so poor the Church Mice give her handouts.”

It received a pleasant snort from Masters.

“That I didn’t know. His father?”

“Never had one – well, you know what I mean.”

“I see. Well, I can understand how the lad came to be so resourceful then. Few situations are all bad, you know.”

“You do have an interesting take on life. I was forewarned by Marty – a huge fan of some book or something.”

Masters smiled. “Or something!”

He continued.

“I assume you have been in contact with the local police agency.”

“Just off the phone with them before I came in search of you. I took the liberty of setting a meeting for you in about an hour in my office. The Chief of Detectives, an Officer Fredricks, will be here. Hope that’s okay.”

“It is fine. I appreciate your initiative. We need to do whatever we can to nip things in the bud. I’ll be there. By the way can you reveal the name of my benefactor for all of this?”

“No idea. Your reservation was made two months ago. Arrived with a cashier’s check to cover the Platinum Package – best suite and all services included. I just assumed you would know.”

“Afraid not but I never look a gift horse in the mouth. Will you join me for some luscious tidbit here? My tab! My Platinum Tab, it would seem.”

He pushed back from the table, signaling he was on his

way for more.

“No. Got to watch my girlish figure. I’ll walk with you though. I’m due for another meeting in a few minutes. Do you suspect that the benefactor and the one making the murder threats are the same person?”

“Oh, yes. I’m convinced of that. You don’t happen to remember the bank on which that check was drawn, do you?”

“Yes, strange as that may seem, I do. Van Ert’s in Syracuse. I remember because its a small bank that Mr. J – that’s what we call Jerry Watkins to keep him straight from his twin – and some conglomerate he put together made an offer on it a few months ago. I haven’t heard if it went through. Well, I really must run. I’ll see you in about an hour, then.”

Masters nodded mechanically for he was suddenly deep in thought. Not so deep in thought that he missed the raspberry cream Danish or the huge California strawberries stuffed with cream cheese. But, deep in thought, nonetheless.

He returned to his table wondering if there may have been some special reason that the check had been drawn on that particular bank. A third party could have done it to implicate Jerry. It would have had to have been someone knowledgeable about his private business affairs. Jerry might have done it, bypassing his usual bank in an attempt to conceal himself as the one who arranged it. Or, he could have used that bank to subtly indicate to Masters that it was indeed he who was the adversary. Another taunt.

That aspect of the case bothered Masters. Taunts had never rattled him. If anything, he looked upon them as sources for important clues – often carelessly strewn clues. Anyone who had studied the Flint books should have been aware of that. It posed an interesting quandary.

As Masters lingered over his coffee he spotted Tako near the door, searching the room with his eyes. Masters raised his hand. Spotting him, the young man moved in his direction.

“Hi, Mr. R. Breakfast satisfactory?”

“Wonderful in every respect. I assume that is not what you really have on your quick, young, mind, however.”

The boy grinned.

“That transparent, huh? No, Sir, er, Mr. R. I just

thought that if you were about to leave I could escort you, and on the way you could meet my . . . Tina. She's on break for the next twenty minutes."

"I would be delighted to meet your . . . Tina," Masters said, replicating Tako's pause with a wink.

He stood, slipped a generous tip under a plate, and followed the young man into the expansive hallway.

"In the break room – straight ahead," he said, pointing, clearly eager to make the introduction.

At the door, Masters paused, pointing.

"The sign says, Employees only."

"Well, employees and their relatives. I'll adopt you as my Grampa for the next few minutes, okay?"

Within twenty-four hours Masters had become an Uncle and a Grandfather. Not bad for an unmarried, only child, he chuckled to himself.

"Mr. Raymond Masters, this is Tina . . . Valdez. Tina, Mr. Masters."

She was a petite, Hispanic, beauty with long black hair and dancing brown eyes.

"It is my pleasure, young lady. My grandson, here, has had simply wonderful things to say about you."

She looked up at Tako and blushed, taking her young man's hand and pulling herself close to his side.

"I've heard about you for years, Sir. I feel like I know you. Some boys read their girls poetry. Tako reads to me from the mystery books."

The beaming boy shrugged and leaned down, planting a loving, simple, peck on her forehead.

"If this is being too forward, just tell me. My feelings don't get hurt very easily," Tako began, looking at Masters. "Tina and I wondered if . . . well, there is a great little secluded park about five minutes from here, and we wondered if you'd be up for a picnic later on this afternoon. We're off at two. I can get a friend to take call for me 'til we get back."

"What a delightful offer. I would love to accompany you. Very thoughtful and may I add that is just the kind of forwardness I appreciate the most – where both friendship and food are offered."

"See. What did I tell, you," Tako said turning to Tina.

He looked back at Masters. "About four then?"

"Sounds fine. Nice to have met you, young lady. I look forward to getting to know you better."

Tako beamed. One more, quick, kiss and he and Masters were again in the hall.

"Stay with her for your break, lad. I'm fine."

"Oh, Bellmen don't have scheduled breaks. We take them when we can."

"What was that about finding someone to take call for you?" Masters asked, suddenly resigned to having a shadow.

"Bellmen work a six-hour general shift. That means we not only take care of the rooms assigned to us but help out with desk generations – luggage, limos, lost kids, cranky old ladies, misplaced spouses, things like that. Then, during the other eighteen hours we are just on call from our assigned rooms – I have five this week, like I said. If any one of them needs a massage at three a.m. they call me and I arrange it for them. Hot cocoa at midnight, I deliver it."

"Sounds like a pretty demanding schedule."

"It's only for three months every summer. Wouldn't want to have to do it for the rest of my life, like old Oliver, I'll tell you that."

His cell phone beeped and he looked to see who was calling.

"Marla Carter in 1408. Great tips though I have the idea she's expecting more than I'm going to be willing to offer, if you get my drift. Gotta go. See you at four if not before. Call me for stuff. That's why I'm here."

Masters nodded as Tako took off on the trot toward the nearest elevator.

It was time for his meeting in Aggy's office. He realized he had no idea where that was so he approached the main desk and was personally escorted around the corner and through several sets of swinging doors. It was a meeting that would not take place.

As Aggy opened the door, Masters' phone beeped. He fumbled to rescue it from the depths of the side pocket of his expansive shirt. He had not expected there would be incoming calls.

"Masters, here."

“Tako, here. I called Captain Marvel and he said to call and alert you. It’s Tom Adams. Ms. Carter just got back from breakfast and found him drowned in her hot tub.”

“What room was that?”

“1408. It’s a suite just down the hall from yours.”

“I’ll be right there. Keep everybody out of the room and don’t let anybody touch or remove anything from the suite.”

The game was afoot!

Chapter Three

Sunday Noon

One down and counting

Masters looked up at Aggy who was standing in the open door to her office.

“Tom Adams. Dead in the Carter sister’s hot tub. Fourteenth floor. Perhaps you should accompany me.”

“Certainly.”

She turned to the attendant.

“Bring Detective Fredricks to 1408 the minute he arrives.”

Then back to Masters.

“This way to the service elevator. There’s less likelihood of having to stop at every floor.”

She had been right. The ride in the stark, wood paneled, box was many times faster. They were soon at the open door of 1408. Tako stood in the doorway like a nervous young sentry posted at some dangerous outpost.

“Am I glad to see you two. I’ve never seen dead before and Ms Marla won’t stop crying and when Carla got here she wanted to drag poor Mr. Tom out of the water and boy, am I glad to see you.”

“Get writing paper,” Masters said giving the boy something specific to do. “I prefer yellow pads.”

“My office,” Aggy said. “The left door on the credenza behind my desk. Bring several.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

Masters and Aggy entered the room and Carla approached them – well, she approached Aggy actually,

looking askance at the substantial stranger beside her.

“This is Raymond Masters, a detective. Mr. Masters, Carla Carter. That is her sister Marla on the couch. Mr. Masters will be in charge of this. The police should be here any minute.”

“It was Marla who found the man?” Masters asked.

Carla nodded and looked over at her still sobbing sister.

“Were they well acquainted?”

“Tom had been her brother-in-law while she was married to his twin, Tim. She and Tim went through a horrendous divorce several years ago.”

“Has Tim been notified?”

“Nobody but Captain Marvel and you two, I guess. The Captain is in the bathroom. He got here within a minute or two of Tako’s call. I arrived a few minutes after that, I guess. My sister and I had just finished breakfast down stairs. I stopped in the lobby to get a paper and Marla came on ahead. She called Tako to take our gowns for cleaning. That’s why he was here. Marla was apparently just coming back out of the bathroom when he arrived.”

“When Tako returns have him find Tim and escort him here.” Masters was speaking to Aggy.

The old detective was presented with a quandary. He wanted to speak with Marla immediately yet his experience with security people was less than positive and he didn’t want the scene to be contaminated in any way. He moved into the bathroom, leaving Marla in the hands of the women.

The hot tub was gold-veined, green marble, recessed into the floor, with a matching surround. The nude body was floating face down. Marvel was standing well back, hands on hips, shaking his head.

“I’m Ray Masters. I assume you are Captain Marvel.”

“Yes, Sir. Glad you’re here. I’ve had some old folks kick the bucket while they were here, but never someone so young and healthy looking.”

“Do you have his age?”

“Carla says thirty-two. She and her sister are thirty, by the way. I’m forty-four and my wife’s forty-three. I think the husband should be older, you know.”

It was Masters first inkling he may have once again

crossed paths with a bumble headed cop.

Ignoring the philosophic foray into marital perspectives, Masters continued.

“Anyone bother the body?”

“Nope. Carla wanted to pull him out but I said, ‘Now Carla, this is the scene of a suspicious death and at the scene of a suspicious death nobody touches or pulls on anything,’ and I told her to wait out in the other room.”

“Nice work, Captain. You made sure he was dead, of course.”

“Oh, yes, Sir. Certified paramedic as well – five years now – graduated seventeenth in a class of twenty. Anyway, I went right for the neck and there wasn’t a trace of a pulse. I tried his wrist too. Nada, zip, zilch, nothing.”

“Very good.”

Masters felt the shoulders and back of the neck which floated just above the water line. He poked into the flesh with his finger.

“Dead probably an hour, I’d say. We’ll wait for the local police to secure the scene and remove the body. Don’t let anybody drain the tub or mop the floor, okay.”

“Okay. Yes sir. Clues, I suppose. You guessing foul play, Ray?”

“Never can be too careful at the scene of a suspicious death,” he said, using the Captain’s own words. “See if you can find a thermometer. I want to know the temperature of the water. Jot it down with the time you took it.”

Masters returned to the bedroom. Tako had just entered with a half dozen yellow pads and a box of ballpoint pens.

“Hope this will work,” he said, putting them on the coffee table. “I just grabbed what was there.”

Aggy delivered the message about going to find Tim, and the young man turned and left, apparently happy not to be required to remain in the vicinity of dead.

Masters took a seat in the chair across the coffee table from the sofa on which the Carter twins were sitting.

“First, I’m so sorry about all of this. I understand the shock. The bellman has gone to find Tim. He needs to be here. I hope that won’t be too uncomfortable for you.”

Carla sighed and looked up at Masters.

“No. I understand. I just can’t imagine the how or why of this. People just don’t drown in hot tubs and he had no reason to be in mine. How could he have gotten in here? None of it makes any sense, Mr. Masters.”

“The sense of it will emerge as we go along. His clothing? It’s bound to be here somewhere.”

Carla pointed to the bedroom. “It was all folded neatly in a pile on the bed in there.”

“That’s strange, too,” Marla added. “The Adams boys are two of the messiest males on the face of this planet. Tom would never have folded his clothes and never have put them in such a neat pile.”

“You are sure it is Tom in the tub, then?”

“Yes,” Marla nodded. “When I first saw him there I lifted up his head, by his hair. I felt for a pulse in his neck. I don’t really remember what I did after that. I had left the door to the hall open so Tako could come in and get our gowns. The next thing I remember was him holding me in his arms and asking what was wrong. I remember pointing to the bathroom and he went in for just a few seconds. As he returned he was on his phone to Captain Marvel. Marvel got here almost immediately – like he must have been right out in the hall. Then I guess he called you – yes, he called you because he was talking to you when Carla came in. I’ll never be able to get into that hot tub you know. This is just so terrible.”

Masters could imagine the scenario – or part of it. In some way, the killer, most likely one of the Watkins twins, lured Tom to the Carter’s room just after the women had left for breakfast. While that twin was killing Tom, the other was making an obvious appearance as his brother. In fact, in some ingenious way, they would have probably arranged it so both of them were well alibied during that hour.

A very policeman-looking man entered the room – tall, graying hair, suit and tie. He announced himself.

“I’m Detective Fredricks.”

He held up his shield.

Aggy went to meet him.

“I’m Aggy Davenport the hotel manager.”

She pointed to Masters.

“This is Raymond Masters. You know about him and why he’s here I believe.”

Fredricks took several steps toward Masters, extending his hand.

“Yes. Attended one of your seminars years ago, when I was at the academy. Glad you’re here. I’ll need to be filled in. I came expecting to talk about preventing murders. Now I understand we need to solve one.”

“It’s likely murder though that hasn’t been established. I wanted the coroner and forensics to look it all over before we moved much further,” Masters said, shaking the man’s hand.

“I called them on the way up. Probably be ten minutes – put a rush on it. The body?”

“In the hot tub. Through that door. Security Officer Marvel is in there. I should begin getting statements out here.”

Fredricks nodded and went into the bathroom. Masters returned to the big chair he had been occupying.

“Let’s establish the timeline. Marla, you arrived back here from breakfast when?”

“Between ten forty-five and eleven.”

“Closer to eleven,” Carla suggested. “The weather channel in the lobby was doing the local forecast while I was getting the paper. That happens on the eights – ten fifty-eight in this case.”

Interestingly precise, Masters thought to himself.

“And you arrived with the paper at . . .?”

“No more than five minutes later – I’d say five after eleven.”

“And the bellman arrived somewhere in between?”

“That’s right,” Marla said nodding. “I paged him while I was coming down the hall toward our door. Tako is very dependable. If he can’t come immediately he calls to let us know. Very dependable. Sweet kid.”

It was more than seemed necessary.

“And Captain Marvel entered this room a few minutes after you returned, Carla?”

“Right. He was here by six or seven minutes after eleven at the latest.”

“And Aggy and I arrived at eleven ten. It’s eleven

twenty-two now so we'll say Detective Fredericks got here at eleven twenty. I need you two to make a list of everyone who has been here in this suite since you settled in – especially those who touched things. When did you check in, by the way?’

“We checked in around three yesterday afternoon,” Marla said looking at Carla and receiving her nod of confirmation.

“Work on the list and establish times in and out as closely as possible. I assume neither of you has lost your key.”

They each produced one – magnetic cards.

Tako came through the door with Tim at his heels.

“What the hell is this all about, Marla?” Tim said, as if anticipating some kind of hassle from her. “The bellman said there had been an accident. You okay?”

Masters stood to deliver the news.

“There is never an easy way to say this, Mr. Adams, but your brother was found dead here in the hot tub. I’m very sorry.”

“Dead! Tommy? My God! Where?”

He looked at the bathroom door and started toward it.

“It is really best if you don’t go in there,” Masters said, physically restraining him. Tako moved to a position in the bathroom door as if to provide back up for his new friend. Tom shrugged himself free and Masters indicated the chair. He sat and tears began to roll down his face. Marla went to stand by him and pulled his head close to her. It seemed a gracious gesture considering the animosity that supposedly lingered since their divorce.

Masters turned to Carla. When was the tub last cleaned by housekeeping?’

“First thing this morning – about seven or so, I’d say. I forget her name. Darling little Mexican beauty. Quiet.”

“Tina,” Tako offered, straining to look out from behind Masters.

“Oh, yes. That’s right. Very efficient and sweet,” Carla said, nodding.

“And have you used it since then?”

“No.”

“Would you find Tina and bring her as soon as she can be free?” Masters asked Tako. The boy left, again clearly relieved to be going elsewhere.

The rap on the door frame announced the coroner’s crew, closely followed by a two person forensics team. Fredricks re-entered the room. He provided the initial instructions.

“In there. Pictures first – body, all four walls, ceiling and floor. Then let’s get a preliminary cause of death. We’ll go from there when the time comes. What else, Mr. Masters?”

“Take a sample of the water in the tub and then strain all of it carefully as it’s drained. I want every speck of dust, every hair and every freckle that may be in that water. Go over the man’s clothing in great detail – it’s on the bed. I want to hear about anything that would be considered foreign to him and his body.”

Fredricks nodded, providing his stamp of approval. He motioned Masters into a far corner.

“You will head up this investigation, won’t you?”

“I have no choice but to be a part of it. It seems the death – if related to the threat as I suppose it’s safe to assume – was for my benefit. I’ll help in any way I can.”

“Then consider yourself lead detective. The paperwork’s already on file.”

“By the way,” Masters asked, “What was that seminar of mine about?”

“Effective use of auxiliary personnel, I believe, Sir. I suppose that’s a ‘gottcha!’”

“I suppose. Sorry you missed the next one titled, ‘Regardless who you have helping, in the end, the proper pursuit of a case is always the responsibility of the Chief of Detectives’.”

“Touché, as they say . . . somewhere.”

They shook hands as if to seal the arrangement and acknowledge a new friendship.

Presently Tako returned with Tina. She had clearly been filled in on all the details. She was upset but willing to help.

“Tina,” Masters said, putting his big arm around her

shoulders. "I understand you cleaned the hot tub here this morning."

"Yes, Sir. Everything in the bathroom, actually."

"So, when you left the suite, would you say all foreign substances had been removed from the tub?"

"Like scum and hair, you mean? Oh yes. It was clean. Mrs. Ramirez can vouch for that if you need her to. She is my supervisor and this morning she made a spot check on my work. She examined the whole suite right after I finished. I got an A+ rating."

She looked up into Tako's face. He beamed back at her.

"When did you begin and finish?"

"I have it on my chart in my cart if you need it to the minute. I got here about seven and was finished by seven forty-five. We're allowed an hour for a suite this size but these ladies are so neat it didn't take that long. I'm sure I was done by seven forty-five."

"Just for the record you cleaned all the sinks in the suite and emptied all the trash as well."

"Yes, Sir. Like I said, they are really neat and tidy. The sinks was clean. I swished them out with a cloth but a thorough scrubbing didn't seem necessary. The trash was really just a few tissues, as I recall. No, actually, there was also a little wooden box, like gift wine comes in."

"Thank you, my dear. That will be all for now. Tako, if you'll see her back to wherever she needs to be. And, it would appear a rain check may be in order for later this afternoon. Sorry."

The two-young people nodded and left.

"Aggy, I see no reason for you to stick around unless you want to. I'm sure you have the rest of this hotel to run as well."

"Yes. I should get back to it. Keep me informed and if you need anything just let me know. Consider Tako your personal runner if you need one."

"Thank you. That will be helpful."

Aggy left. The coroner entered the room. Masters ushered him into the bedroom out of earshot of the others. Marvel and Fredrick's followed.

“Nothing natural about this death,” he said in a lowered voice as he removed his latex gloves. “I’d say it happened a little over an hour ago, and went probably something like this. First, he was drugged into unconsciousness, then undressed and put into the tub, then his face held under water until he drowned. Heavy bruise marks across the back of the neck and shoulders suggest there may have been some struggle after he was put into the tub – like he wasn’t fully knocked out by the drug. I’ll have the specifics for you in the morning.”

“By five this afternoon?” Fredericks asked though it was a clear and pointed request.

“By five if at all possible,” Sir.

The body left in a bag with the coroner and his crew. Masters dismissed Marvel.

“If you will write out a complete report for me on what you did and saw after you arrived I will appreciate it,” Masters said, closing the door after him.

Masters and Fredericks went into the other sitting room for a short strategy session.

“We need a quick solution to this one,” Masters said, or there will be another. There may be anyway. Twisted minds are not easily dissuaded once they have put their plan in motion.”

“You say they,” Fredericks said, asking the question, really.

Masters laid out the sequence of events from the original notes he had received in the mail, through his time looking around Syracuse.

“Want me to put tails on the Watkins guys?”

“Probably not. I have a feeling they are counting on that. Nothing better than to have a police tail as your iron clad alibi for being elsewhere at the time of a crime. “

“You are good, Sir. That hadn’t entered my head.”

“It may just be a case of twisted needing twisted to catch them,” Masters joked, shrugging off the compliment.

The head of the forensics team entered the room.

“Got the tub drained and strained. Not much. A few hairs. That’s about all. What else?”

Masters was ready for the question.

“Three more things. There is an empty champagne

bottle in the waist can in the bathroom. Complete lab analysis inside and out. Second, remove the drain trap from the sink and catch all its contents. I want to know every chemical and every tidbit that's in that water. Third, siphon out the water from the base and trap of the stool. If you find the Tidy Bowl Man in there, check his DNA."

"Yes, Sir."

"And, the clothing of course. Go over it with your finest toothed comb. We can bet that somebody other than the deceased folded it and piled it there on the bed. Find me some trace of hair or dead skin that will point toward that somebody. We need this all in a hurry. By the way, all the participants in this twin contest have DNA profiles on file with the sponsoring organization – suite 1402. DNA anything you find that's DNAable."

Fredericks smiled.

"DNAable? I do believe you have just coined a new term."

"Probably reflects my ignorance of current procedures more than my ability to turn a new phrase. So long as it communicates, I guess."

"It does that. You seem to know something that has escaped me."

"Let's just wait and see what your guys turn up. I still have a few questions for the Carters."

They moved back into the other room. There was a new man in the room speaking with Tim. Masters knew immediately, perhaps more by instinct than direct knowledge, that it was one of the Watkins twins – probably Jerry. He approached him.

"Jerry Watkins, I assume. I'm Ray Masters."

"Mr. Masters. Yes. I heard you were here. Terrible thing, this Adams thing. I thought I'd take Tim back to my place if it's alright – get him out of here. He'll be there if you need him. Just come by."

"Sounds like a fine idea. I just have a couple of questions for him first."

"Okay. Sure," Tim said.

"Do you have any idea why Tom would have come to this suite this morning?"

“None at all. He hadn’t said anything. In fact, we had talked about ways we could both avoid Carla and Marla this year – it would be so uncomfortable we thought.”

“When was the last time you saw him?”

“About ten this morning – no it would have been a little before that actually. I left to take a swim and he was just getting out of the shower. He planned to go down and get something to eat. I’m the early riser. Tom’s the sleepy head – was. . . . Terry Watkins can vouch for the fact I was in the pool, if that’s what you’re looking for.”

“You’re not a suspect, if that was your reference,” Masters explained. “Had he been drinking?”

“Drinking? No. He seldom drinks. Special occasions is about all.”

“That should do it for now. You go ahead. Detective Fredricks will assign an officer to stay with you until we figure out if you are also in danger. I’ll stop by later.”

Masters turned to Fredericks.

“We need to find out if there were calls to or from Tom, who was involved, if he was seen by anyone outside his room between say ten and eleven. Have his room searched for any invitation – formal or otherwise.”

“I’m on it.”

“I didn’t mean to imply you should do it, Chief.”

“Hey. This is back to the real world for me, Ray. It’s been way too long since I’ve been on the action side of my desk.”

“Okay, then. Go get ‘em, Detective!”

“Freddy. My friends call me Freddy.”

He left as the forensics team prepared to leave.

“Got the bottle. Got the clothes. Got the water from the sink trap and everything we could scrape from the pipe. Got the strainer. Got the water from the stool. Anything special we’re looking for?”

“Yes. The champagne will have been laced with a fast-acting barbiturate but that may only be found to remain in one of the two water traps since I suppose the champagne bottle will have been washed clean – not the usual condition of a recently emptied and immediately trashed bottle. If not in the trap water, then perhaps in the stool water. Did you find the

cork, by the way?”

“Got it.”

“Give it the once over also – make that the twice over. Inside for the drug in case the cork was put back in the top after the water was added to aid in the agitation for cleaning out the traces of the drug. Outside, check for traces of skin, teeth marks, and fingernails – you know the routine better than I do.”

After they left it was just Masters and the Carter sisters.

“There are several more questions I need to ask,” Masters said.

He took a seat.

“How did the champagne bottle come to be in the wastebasket in the bathroom?”

They looked at each other, plainly puzzled. Carla answered.

“We don’t know why it was here. Neither of us ever drink – we are both diabetic. It would kill us. It arrived at about eight last evening. Tako delivered it. It came with a note in a sealed envelope. I can get it for it. It said something like, ‘To two, toolicious, twins. Save this for when I come to sweep you off your feet.’ It wasn’t signed and neither of us have any idea who might have sent it. The handwriting was absolutely beautiful, like from an artist or something.”

“Did you ask Tako about its source?”

“No. I guess not. He brought it in and sat it on the table there by the door and handed Marla the envelope. I tipped him and he left. We read the note, unboxed the bottle, and put it in the fridge.”

Marla broke in.

“My first thought was that it might have actually been from Tako. He seems to have a thing for me. I guess I dismissed that idea as fast as it came. We really have no idea who sent it.”

Carla continued.

“How it got emptied and into the wastebasket we don’t know. It wasn’t there this morning or the maid would have found it.”

“I am not an authority on such things,” Masters began, “but I do know that was an expensive bottle – in the four to

five-hundred-dollar category. Do you remember anyone with such expensive tastes and the willingness to spend that much on you?"

The women looked at each and sighed in unison. Carla answered.

"Well, yes, one man. Jack Blair. You'll find out eventually anyway. I was married to him for three and half years. We were divorced nine months ago."

"He is a connoisseur of good champagne?" Masters asked, seeking clarification.

"He is a connoisseur of everything good and expensive. He went through my share of our inheritance in less than a year. A well-meaning, disorganized, live-in-the-present, sort of good oaf. I loved him dearly – may still, in fact – but couldn't stand him, if you get the difference. He tries to reignite things between us from time to time. Saddest of all, probably is the effect he's had on his dear sweet mother. She's given her whole life to them. She was born deaf but still, she's the one who has to take care of him – constantly comes to his rescue. You'd think they'd finally grow up and want to turn that around and do for her, now. Poor, sweet, Sarah."

Marla nodded indicating her agreement and tried to get the conversation back on track.

"The bottle seemed to be meant for both of us, though."

Masters took out his phone and pressed one. There was an immediate knock on the door. Carla answered. It was Tako.

"My goodness young man, you must have been waiting for my call."

Tako grinned.

"Yes, Sir. I decided that between my duty calls I would just stick close to you in case you needed something fast."

"Very considerate. Thank you. I need you to check out something for me with the wine steward."

Masters printed the name of the champagne on a piece of paper and handed it to the boy.

"First, does the hotel stock it? If so, second, does he remember who ordered it sent to this room late yesterday afternoon? You remember delivering it, I assume – in a

wooden box.”

“Oh, yes Sir. Frankie said it would cost me a week’s wages if I broke it so, yes, I remember.”

“Frankie?”

“The wine steward.”

“If Frankie doesn’t remember, tell him I need to know who was billed for it.”

“Yes, Sir, er Mr. R, Grampa.”

Tako grinned. He bowed ever so slightly to the women, turned and left.

“Boy if he was only ten years older,” Marla said, confirming for Masters that Tako’s impression about her intentions may have been fully accurate.

“I need to know if either of you has any romantic relationship at the current time.”

Again, it was Carla. She seemed to be the general spokesperson for the set.

“I’ve been dating Brian Becker for about four months. He’s from Rochester – we recently moved there. Nobody steady before that. Marla dates but nobody steady. She’s still gun shy, I think, after the mess with Tim.”

Marla neither agreed nor disagreed. Apparently what Carla said was to be taken as her true position on things as well.

“Do you know the Watkins brothers well?”

“Jer and Ter? Sure, I guess you’d say well. We’ve all done this twin competition since we were kids. I suppose we’ve known them for twenty years or more.”

Carla looked at Marla as if for permission. She received a nod and continued.

“About six years ago, the two of them tried to, how shall I say it, get close with us. They were in their early twenties and we were, well, several years older. We just weren’t interested in younger guys then. Now, that wouldn’t seem to make so much difference I guess. We gave them one pity date and then ended it. It was during a competition. The scuttlebutt was that they were upset with us for cutting things off like that. We each got a few calls and flowers over the next few months but then it stopped.”

“You dated as a gaggle of four or in pairs?” Masters

smiled.

“Jerry and me, Terry and Marla.”

The smile was returned.

“I guess Terry is still single, is that right?”

The question produced the first genuine smile and chuckle from the two of them.

“Well, this is really not a very nice thing to repeat, but again, you’ll hear it on your own. The joke among those of us in ITCONA is that ‘Jerry and Terry married Beth’. Like I said not a very flattering piece of gossip.”

“Believable?” Masters asked.

Again, Carla checked with Marla. Some sign must have passed between them though it was not obvious to Masters.

“It is believable. Those two were way too close to their mother in a sick sort of way. It was like they were triplets, right down to the shoulder length blond hair. They did everything together. If I had been Beth, I’d have been furious. Then, after their mother died, I guess Beth inherited the mother role for both of them – well, mother, wife and lover.”

“I appreciate your candid answers, Ladies. Will you be staying? I suppose it’s too soon to have thought about that, isn’t it.”

“Oh, we’ll stay. It’s what we do, Mr. Masters,” Carla said.

Marla nodded.

He stood and walked toward the door.

“Well, thanks again. I will likely want to speak with you later.”

He closed the door behind him and started toward Jerry’s suite. The elevator opened and Tako stepped out.

“Got the poop on the champagne. Do you have any idea how expensive that stuff is? Can you imagine all the hungry kids you could feed from what somebody spent on that one little bottle of booze? Immoral, I’d say.”

Masters smiled.

“You’ll get no disagreement from me. What about the bottle?”

“It was ordered from a house phone at seven fourteen last evening and billed to 618 – that’s the Blair Twins room –

Joe and Jack, age thirty-eight, from San Francisco.”

“A fountain of information. The Card. How did that come into your possession?”

“That was funny, actually – funny strange, I mean. At a little before seven, I was paged to the front desk. A brown envelope with my name on it had been found on the counter. Nobody seemed to know how it got there. Inside was the envelope you mention. There was also a note on a post-it kind of thing that said something like, ‘You’ll be paged to deliver a gift to room 1408. Deliver this envelope with it.’ There was a fifty-dollar bill enclosed in the big envelope.”

“I thought you were not allowed to deliver alcohol.”

“Not plain bottles. This one was in a fancy wooden box. For some reason that transforms it into a gift rather than alcohol.”

“Good work. Now, a quick lesson in how these electronic key cards work.”

“Like a credit card. You know. You slide it into the slot beside the door and it unlocks it.”

“What about the pass keys?”

“Each floor has a different pass key. It works the same way but just for the doors on that floor.”

“Can the occupant prevent the pass key from working?”

“Sure. I can see you haven’t read the instructions posted beside the door in your room. It’s all there. Press the button on the wall to the left of door inside the room and a red light appears on the little panel telling you that pass key access has been deactivated. Press it again and the green light tells you the pass key will work. Every time the door is opened, the red automatically changes to green.”

“So, if no one is in the room, there is no way to prevent entrance using a pass key.”

“Right. Otherwise the maids would never be able to get finished.”

“The pass keys. Do the maids each have their own set?”

“No. Every morning they check one out from housekeeping. There’s a chip in each one that records which rooms were opened and the times of day. It’s more sophisticated than most.”

“I’ll say! So, somewhere there will be a pass key that recorded the time at which someone entered the Carter Sisters’ room prior to the killing.”

“Yes, well, probably, maybe.”

“That’s what I like a simple, unqualified, straightforward, answer.”

“Well, I’ve been thinking about that. I’m told there are three pass keys that allow access to all doors in this place whether the privacy button is on or not – like for if somebody dies inside and has the pass key blocked. Aggy has one, Captain Marvel has one, and Mr. J has one. Whether they have the time and place recording feature I don’t know. One other problem I thought of. Every suite has six keys – for families, you know. So, if the Carters are only using two keys there are four left in the room file at the front desk. If one of those was borrowed and put back it would have the record. If it was stolen and destroyed there will be no record.”

“Good detective work. Who is in charge of the master keys?”

“The Bell Captain – Willy Young. He and Captain Marvel share that responsibility in some way. I’m not sure just how.”

“If you will, please, find Detective Fredricks and tell him I’d like a complete rundown on the keys. See if THE key that was used to gain access just prior to the killing can be located. Were any room keys stolen? Check the use history of each remaining key to 1408 and to all the fourteenth-floor pass keys.”

“I’m on it.”

Masters proceeded down the hall toward Jerry’s suite.

Jerry, with the officer assigned to Tim at his side, answered the door.

“Come in. What have you learned?”

“I’m gaining ground. You might say I have it narrowed down to one of two suspects and I’m quite certain which one it was. Just a little matter of proving it and I don’t expect that will be very taxing. The perpetrator was clearly a rank amateur. Left evidence everywhere.”

He smiled smugly into Jerry’s suddenly ashen face – Masters’ confidence was unmistakable. They moved on into

the second sitting room where Tim was reclining on the couch.

“Are you up to a few more questions,” Masters asked.

“As good now as I will be later, I suppose.”

He sat up as Masters took a seat in a chair. Jerry sat beside Tim.

“Do you have any ideas about who might have wanted to kill your brother?”

“None. I’ve gone over it and over it in my mind. He didn’t owe anybody a cent. No ex to support. He wasn’t seriously involved with a woman. He’s a librarian, for God’s sakes. How does a Librarian make enemies who’d want to kill him – by shushing them once too often? If one of us was going to end up dead in their room everybody would have bet on me. Marla and I didn’t part friends, I’m afraid. It’s a love-hate thing, I guess. I love her and she hates me.”

“You could actually envision her trying to kill you?”

“Marla?”

He mellowed.

“Probably not, really. She’s more the kind that would try and get back at me - make me squirm or suffer in some terrible way.”

“Like killing your twin brother?”

Tom looked up, directly into Masters’ face.

“You think? I’d have never guessed that. I don’t know. I can’t see it. She’s angry not crazy. If I were you I’d be looking for somebody who’s out and out crazy, Mr. Masters.”

The old detective looked across at Jerry.

“Oh, that’s exactly what I’m looking for, Tim. I guess that’s all for now. You will need to stick around for several more days until we get this all wrapped up. An officer will stick with you for the time being.”

“I understand. I think I’ll go on back to my own suite now.”

He stood, turning toward Jerry, his back to Masters.

“Thanks for all your help, Jer. You’re a good friend.”

Jerry stood and accepted Tom’s embrace, having to look Masters in the face during the process. Masters smiled. Jerry didn’t flinch. Tim and the officer left. Masters lingered near the door waiting to speak with Jerry in private. As the doors on the elevator closed with the two other men inside,

Masters turned back toward Jerry.

“Just a couple of routine questions for you if I may.”

“Certainly.”

“Where were you this morning between ten and eleven?”

He smiled.

“Ten and eleven? I was in my office downstairs. It connects with Aggy’s. I was on the phone most of that time – in and out of Aggy’s office several times during that hour I imagine – not sure. You can ask her if you need to verify that. Our new communication system keeps track of calls received, somehow. See Captain Marvel if you need to verify that.”

“Yes, I certainly will. I suppose that record is much like a certified letter though, isn’t it?”

Jerry frowned, not understanding the analogy.

“You can prove it was sent but not what was in it.”

Jerry raised his eyebrows, smart enough not to engage the old detective with a comeback.

“And Terry. I haven’t seen him today. Is he at the hotel?”

“Yes. Been here since early yesterday, in fact. He’s staying down in 880. I’m sure he’ll be happy to speak with you.”

“There seems to be some question among your staff as to why he is down there since he’s usually up here, as I understand it.”

“Beth is coming – Beth is my wife – and she and I want our privacy. It’s our fifth wedding anniversary tomorrow. Terry’s idea to leave the love birds alone for their second honeymoon. He’s always been thoughtful that way.”

“I see. How nice. Any idea where he was during the time period in question?”

“I believe he said he was going swimming about that time. I’m not sure though, you will need to check with him.”

“I’ll do that. And, oh, yes. Enjoy your second honeymoon. It is going to be your last.”

Without waiting for a reaction, he turned and moved down the hall toward his suite. He heard the door slam behind him. That alone put a new spring into the old detective’s step. Tako was on station outside his door. He stood as Masters

approached.

“Holding the base of my wall up there, I see,” Masters joked. “I appreciate that. What do you know?”

“Well, I delivered your message to Detective Fredricks and he’s on it. He’s a really nice guy, by the way. He’s like the father I wished I’d have had. He makes me feel like I’m part of his team, you know – important?”

“He impressed me as well. I’m glad you find him congenial. Nothing specific about his findings yet?”

“No. He said he’d be in touch with you. What next?”

“I’m going to take you into my confidence, Son. This is between you and me. Not even Tina or Tommy must hear about it.”

Tako grinned his wonderful grin but seemed to understand the seriousness of the pact.

“Sure. I can do that. Cross my heart.”

He went through the motions.

“I need you to find out exactly where both Jerry and Terry Watkins were between ten and eleven this morning. You must use such discretion that no one will ever suspect what you are really trying to find out. Sly as a fox, silent as a cat, you understand.”

“I understand what I’m to do and how I’m to do it. I can’t imagine why, however.”

“Trust me on this one, okay?”

“Oh, sure, I trust you implicitly – a new word from my great word collection. Implicitly. I love to say that.”

Masters chuckled.

“Here’s another for your list, then. Betimes!”

“Betimes? That is a new one.”

“Actually, it’s probably listed as archaic in the dictionary but it means ‘immediately if not sooner’. It’s one I love to say to those who are assisting me.”

“Thank you for the word. It possesses an inherent problem however. Nobody will ever know what I’m talking about when I use it.”

“You’re right, of course. Uncommon words should be used sparingly. They tend to come off as either put-you-downs or build-me-ups. It all goes back to education, my boy. Educate those around you to its meaning and then use it when

you're among them. The more words one has available to use the more thoroughly and precisely he can think about things – and precise thought leads to the best possible solutions to life's problems."

"That Hiakawa guy again, huh?"

"Probably."

"It's like talking to a cross between a cheerleader and an encyclopedia when you're around. This is great – er, that would be 'monumentally extraordinary'."

Masters ruffled his hair as if playing with a five-year-old. Tako clearly loved the touch and interchange. His glance said, "Thanks, Grampa." His words said, "I'll get right on it. Any suggestions about a starting point?"

"It will appear that Jerry was in his office and that Terry was in the pool. It will appear that way but I don't believe it for a moment. Take nothing at face value."

"Wow. This is fantastic! I'm off, betimes."

"Remember, mum's the word – subtlety, cunning, like a shadow," Masters called after him in an exaggerated whisper.

Masters entered his suite just long enough to pick up a yellow pad. He then headed toward the second restaurant, JW's, for an early afternoon snack – a post meridian repast, in Tako terms

'Snack at one. Dinner at five. That should work just fine,' Masters told himself.

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Chapter Four
Day Two: Sunday Afternoon
A sudden twist of fate

By 1:30 Masters had worked his way through what was billed as the largest peach cobbler ala mode on the face of the planet and was enjoying a third cup of coffee while he made notes. His phone beeped. It was Tako.

“Something new. You better get up to Mr. J’s apartment immediately. Looks a lot like somebody just tried to kill him.”

“Is he alright?”

“Seems to be.”

“Okay. I’ll be right there. I’m at JW’s.”

“Peach cobbler, by chance?”

“How did you guess? No, we won’t go into that right now.”

He hurried to the bottom of his coffee cup, dabbed at the edges of his mouth, administered a vigorous, two-handed, finger brushing to his oversized moustache, and left the restaurant. It was an interesting if not troubling twist in the case. Brother against brother or more than one set of perpetrators, perhaps?

At 1:40 he stepped off the elevator on the fourteenth floor.

“What’s with these people and open doors during emergencies?” he mumbled to himself as he approached Jerry’s suite. Tako was again on door duty and hurried down the hall to meet him.

“Here’s the deal as I understand it,” Tako reported.

The explanation seemed to require much hand motion.

“Mr. J was stepping into his bathtub shortly after you left him. His is humongous and has a hand-held shower thingy on a hose to do hair and who knows what else. At any rate, his left foot was in the water when he reached over to take the thingy from its bracket on the wall. Apparently, his right foot was still on the tile floor. When he touched the thingy, he got the shock of his life – almost the last one ever, the way it sounds. Somebody apparently rigged it up to electricity. He says it knocked him out for a few seconds and he fell back onto the floor. If he had fallen in the other direction he’d have been fried to death. He’s really shook up. I called you first, but his brother got here just before you came out of the elevator.”

“Jerry’s wife, Beth?”

“I haven’t seen her. Is she here this weekend?”

“She may not have arrived yet. Probably best that way. Thank you. You can get back to other things. Oh, why do you suppose Jerry called you?”

“I asked him that. He said he woke up there on the bathroom floor really confused. He just started hitting numbers on his phone. I’m nine on his speed dial since I’m working this floor. I guess he hit nine first and it dialed me. Probably took me three minutes to get here. I was out by the pool snooping. I came up the service elevator. Always faster. I’ll get back down there. I may be getting close to something.”

“One more thing. Contact Fredricks and Marvel and ask them to come up here ASAP.”

“Sure thing. Later.”

Masters took a deep breath and proceeded through the open door.

“Masters. Thank goodness,” one of the twins said as he entered. Masters truly could not be sure if it were Jerry or Terry as they stood their side by side. One had his hair pulled back into a pony tail. Since he was the one wearing only a towel, Masters took a shot.

“I’m going to guess, Jerry,” Masters said in response.

“Yes. Somebody tried to kill me. I want to hire you to find the culprit. I have a check here for your usual retainer.”

Masters smiled. It was indeed the strangest situation in

which he had ever found himself. He was about to be hired to protect the person he was working to prove was – as a minimum – an accomplice to the murder he was trying to solve.

“My usual fee will certainly not come close to handling this kind of thing,” Masters smiled, looking from one to the other, standing patiently, hands behind his back. “You see before I leave here I intend to not only have arrested the one who made this attempt on your life, but to also have three young villains behind bars each charged with a separate count of murder.”

A strange look passed between the twins. The proper question was not asked, however. Masters was not surprised. Jerry swallowed.

“Name your price, then. I have to have protection,” he said taking his checkbook from the desk drawer.

Masters’ grasped the front of his colorful, Hawaiian print, shirt, his fingers drumming on his chest. He paced and muttered out loud, looking toward the ceiling as if deep in thought.

“Let’s see, twelve thousand times four is forty-eight thousand, times two is ninety-six thousand, plus twenty percent is about one hundred and fifteen thousand. Yes, one hundred and fifteen thousand dollars should be sufficient and of course if I fail and somebody does kill you, you should feel no obligation to honor your commitment.”

“That’s outrageous. It’s more than twice your usual fee.”

“Probably. But that’s the only deal. The offer’s good for another ten seconds.”

The old detective’s smile was met with a sneer. The new check was soon in his pocket.

“Let’s see the scene of the incident,” he said.

“In there, in the bathroom,” Jerry said. “Calling it an incident makes it sound like you’re not taking it seriously.”

Masters entered and began his inspection as the doorbell rang. It was Captain Marvel who was soon by his side.

“Pretty straight forward,” Masters said to him, pointing to the portable shower. “Chrome, flexible, tubing with an electrical wire wound around its base – from a white extension

cord. The other wire has been peeled back and was dangled into the tub and hidden under the towel draped over the rim. The opposite end of the cord is run under the door and out into the bedroom and plugged into a socket near the floor.”

“Why not into the plug right here?” Marvel asked, clearly puzzled.

“Ground fault interrupter. All bathrooms’ electrical are outfitted with them. At the first moment of a short, they kick off the current. In order to keep delivering electricity, it had to be run from elsewhere, you see.”

“Clever,” Marvel said, tracing the wire back into the other room.

Moments later Fredricks entered the bathroom, having been briefed by Marvel just outside.

“Classic amateur?” he asked more than stated.

“I’d say so, or someone wanting it to appear that way. The bad guy had to know something of Jerry’s habits – that he used the hand-held unit regularly. I doubt if that would be general knowledge. See if he can give us a list of such folks, if you will, please. He’s the one in the towel.”

Masters donned one of the latex gloves, ever present on his person during an investigation. He took a tissue and leaned down, wiping a sample of what appeared to be fresh blood from the tile floor where Jerry would have hit his head. He dropped it into a plastic bag, disposed of the glove and returned to the sitting room.

“Your head?” Masters said, addressing Jerry. “Was it bleeding?”

“I really don’t know,” came the response as he reached up to feel the back of his head. He winced. Terry moved behind his brother and looked, spreading the hair.

“Yes, Sir. His hair is soaked. Scalp is cut fairly deep, I’d say. More smashed than cut, really.”

Masters passed the bag to Fredricks.

“Need this matched to Jerry’s blood, ASAP of course. Better get forensics back out here and print the bathroom and area along which the wire was strung. Print the wire too, I guess. It will probably be an exercise in futility but needs to be done. Get pictures of Jerry’s wounds.”

May I see your hands, Jerry?” Masters asked

Jerry held them out.

“The palms and finger tips.”

He turned them over.

“Which hand was on the shower head?”

“My left. I had just turned off the water with my right hand and as I was stepping into the tub I reached across to the back wall to get the shower. I like to wet my hair and lather it up first. The built-in conditioner takes some time to work. By the time I’m done bathing, it’s finished doing its thing. I stand up and rinse my hair as the water drains out of the tub. Like I told the other detective, I’ve done it that way since I was a kid. Dozens of people could know.”

The finger tips on his left hand showed burn marks. It had been a well-executed plan – well, almost executed!

“I assume you were in a hurry for some reason – to finish the bath, that is.”

“Well, yes, actually. What makes you think that?”

“I have to assume that you usually don’t reach for the shower head until after both feet are in the water.”

“I suppose that’s right. I see. If I hadn’t been trying to hurry it all up I would have had both feet in the water and you’d be consoling Terry right now instead of speaking to me.”

Masters merely nodded, feeling nothing more needed to be said on that topic.

“I’m interested in why you would be taking a bath at this hour of the day.”

“I often take several baths a day. I like feeling fresh. Is that a problem?”

“Not a problem. Time consuming, I would think, for a man as busy as you must be.”

He let it drop and went on.

“When was the last time you used the tub?”

“About eleven this morning – a little before, actually.”

“So, the wiring had to have taken place after you finished at what, eleven fifteen, eleven twenty?”

“Yes; about then. I dressed and was here until eleven thirty, I’d say. I stopped by the front desk to check on a few things on my way to lunch when the Tarasenko kid – Tako – called me about Tom’s death. I came right back up and went to the Carter girls’ suite.”

“Do you lunch at the same time every day?”

“Yes. When I’m here. I see where you going with that. The person who tried to kill me not only knew my bathing habits but also my schedule.”

“So, does that narrow it down, any – in terms of suspects who would be onboard here in the hotel?”

“Well, there are three I can think of. Terry, my wife, and Tako. Beth isn’t here yet though. She plans to come in later in the day.”

“Tako would know about your bathing routine?”

“Yes. He’s drawn my bath for me several times. He gives the best back rub I’ve ever had. Unusual for a kid his age. So, yes, he’d know, sure. I suppose he could have told somebody. You don’t suspect him, do you?”

“No one and everyone, at this stage of an investigation.”

“Everyone? Terry?”

“Everyone! Terry and even Jerry, Jerry.”

“You think I set this thing up for some reason?”

“It is a possibility that I either have to rule in or rule out. For the money you’re paying me, you can bet I’ll leave no stone unturned. One more thing. You and Tim got back here from the Carter’s suite at about eleven fifty five, would you say?”

“Yes. Something like that I guess. I assume you know so why even ask?”

“That gives the one who wired your shower from eleven thirty when you went down stairs to eleven fifty-five when you and Tim returned. Does that sound about right?”

“Yes. I guess.”

“You locked the door?”

“Yes. Of course! I see. That means someone had access to a pass key.”

“Or had a copy of the room key,” Masters added. “I assume those would be in the hands of only Terry and Beth?”

“Yes. Just the two.”

Masters nodded and turned to Fredricks.

“If you or Marvel will stay here ‘til forensics is finished I’ll move on to other things. I want to speak with Beth as soon as she arrives. Once again, draw a sample of the bath water

for analysis. I'll tell them what I want them to look for later. When they print the electrical cord make sure they don't miss the prongs on the plug. They often have to be pushed together or pulled apart to slide into the outlet. That's a one plug outlet. The plug from the bedside lamp had to be removed from the wall outlet in order to plug in the extension cord. That lamp plug will probably have prints. See if they are foreign. It's a long shot but let's not overlook anything."

Fredricks nodded.

Masters closed the door behind him expecting to page Tako once in the hall.

"Hey, Mr. R." came the young man's cheery greeting from where he had been sitting on the floor. He sprang to attention. Masters wondered how long it had been since he could actually get himself off the floor without some kind of assistance. He let the question go.

"Tako my man. Just who I needed. Two things. Let me make a note for you here."

He jotted something on his pad and tore it free, handing it to Tako. Check the maids to see if any things resembling this are regularly removed from Terry's trash. Again, do it in such a way that nobody knows what you're really about."

"Got it. Casper invisible! That's me. Woooooo! And, second?"

"Walk with me down to my suite and tell me about your highly-touted skill as a masseuse."

The young man smiled as he began his answer.

"Since I was twelve or so I've been working out at a gym in my neighborhood. I never could afford a membership so Matt, the owner, let me work it out. Somehow I just started giving backrubs. I guess I must be pretty good because everybody wants me to do it. The first week I was working here, Mr. J hurt his back lifting something. He found out through Tina that I might be able to help, so I've been doing it for him and Mr. T ever since. Fifteen minutes every evening puts another twenty bucks into my college fund."

"You must have very strong hands."

"Yup. My whole arms in fact. I'm seldom beat at arm wrestling – well, in my weight class anyway. Wiry but mighty, mom says."

“About your family – any brothers or sisters?”

“Nope. Always just mom and me. We’ve had a great life. She’s a fantastic person.”

Masters felt he had to ask in order to get a sense of things.

“Your father?”

“I’m a bastard, Sir. Never knew who he was. I’m very thankful that he was my father though.”

It seemed a very strange take on the situation. Masters’ expression evidently suggested his question.

“I mean his great genes. I have a great body, I’m nice looking, have super hair, I’m smart and constitutionally prone to neither anger nor depression.”

Masters had to chuckle out loud.

“What?” Tako said, appearing puzzled?

“I just admire the way you approach yourself and life, son. Lots of kids would be bitter.”

“Not if they had my mom. Bitter, sad, excuses – none of that was ever allowed to fly in my home. I was what I was and I was supposed to do the very best I could with it. Like I said, mom is one in a million. I told her that someday I’d buy her a big new house and you know what she said. She said, ‘Why on Earth would I want that? I have everything right here that I could ever need’.”

“She sounds like a wonderful person. I’m sure she must miss you.”

“I see her a couple of times a week. We live on the far north side of Syracuse. Just a hop, skip and a jump from here. Next year will be the hard time for her. I know I won’t be able to afford to get home very often. I’m trying to make enough extra this summer to get her a wireless email outfit so we can talk every day. That should help. She has lots of friends from the church. She’ll just need to get adjusted to things. It’s not like she didn’t realize this time would come, you know.”

They had been standing at Masters’ door for most of that conversation. Masters searched his pockets, clearly looking for his key-card. Tako flashed his and the door soon clicked open.

“Thank you, my boy. Keep me informed on your

progress. And, thanks for the chat. I feel that I suddenly know you much better.”

“Sure. Next time it’ll be your turn.”

“My turn?” Masters brow furrowed.

“Your turn to fill me on your life. I figure that should only take about two months.”

He chuckled and grinned.

“I imagine I can dredge up a short version. Sorry about the picnic today, by the way.”

“There’ll be another time. Later.”

Masters was just about to make himself comfortable on the balcony and enjoy the beautiful view across the lake to the southeast when the doorbell rang. It was Fredricks. The two were soon seated outside in the fresh air.

“I got a couple of things. You know how the pieces arrive willy-nilly,” Fredricks began. “Tom Adams’ cause of death was drowning, although there was enough barbiturate in his blood to have killed him within another half hour. There is some skin missing from the back of his neck and shoulders – probably lodged under the killer’s fingernails and by now, long gone, I’m sure. Several long, blond hairs – two in the tub water and one on the clothing. Tom’s hair was coal black and medium length. A half dozen like that, presumably his, were also retrieved. I noted, as you did, too, I assume, that the Carter twins’ hair is red.”

Masters nodded. Fredricks continued.

“As to the water samples and the bottle. No immediately identifiable prints – no surprise. Like you suspected, though, the inside of the cork was well impregnated with the drug laced rinse water – a match to the variety in the victim’s blood. More of it, mixed with the champagne was found diluted in the sink trap. Nothing of use from the stool sample. The card and envelope are available in the gift shop here as well as in dozens of other area outlets. With all the blonds in this competition, it could take six weeks to sort it all out.”

“Let’s use our short cut. The hairs belong to either Terry or Jerry Watkins. The DNA from the two will be identical of course, but do the match anyway. I think we’re going to get lucky in another way.”

Fredricks made a note and Masters continued.

“You said no immediately identifiable fingerprints?”

“There are two finger prints on the bottom of the bottle but they don’t belong to any of the principles. Still looking.”

“You have the employee print records?”

“Just starting through them. I imagine you’ve already checked for the Watkins men’s alibis,” Fredricks said.

“Solid, but that doesn’t concern me. A solid alibi is only as good as the ground it’s built on and I sense shaky ground – well, perhaps shakable ground would be more accurate.”

“I have no idea what you have up your sleeve but I’ll be patient.”

Fredricks smiled. He had one more item to relate.

“About the electrical cord. The officer who came to pick it up, spot checked it for prints and feels pretty sure it was wiped clean. He’ll dust it all of course to be sure. He ran a quick test on the water sample too. Strangely acidic – not much but a little. This is a soft water building. Because of that he collected the towels and wash cloths from the hamper for the lab to look at as well.”

“Sounds like a real expert you have there. I have another long shot for you. Tell him to look for lemon juice. If it is, I know for sure which brother killed Adams. Just have to find a way to prove it.”

“Oh, to spend a day inside your brain, Ray.”

“What I am, I am,” Masters said with a shrug. “That’s a paraphrased quote from a new young friend of mine. Which reminds me. Tako. We probably need to run a juvie check on him. I want to make sure . . . well, let’s just get the check run – school, courts, probation, church, neighborhood, Matt’s gym. Make sure he is, in fact, enrolled over at Geneseo for the fall semester. Probably go ahead and do the same for his girlfriend, Tina Alvarez.”

“Suspects?”

“Hopefully not. It’s as important to rule out as to rule in you understand. They would both be easy set-ups if somebody started feeling trapped and needed patsy’s.”

“By the way,” Fredricks added, “I tried to post an officer with Jerry, in light of the attack, but he declined. Pretty strange for somebody who seemed so frightened about the

attempt on his life.”

“Either frightened or an excellent actor,” Masters added. “If he’s about to do-in number two in his long-planned scenario, he won’t want an officer poking around.”

“It really is an ingenious plan. Let you know in a way that can’t be traced back to them exactly what they were going to do. Do it and leave physical evidence – DNAable, I believe you called it – and it can’t point just to the ONE of them who was present. You must have a back door up your sleeve.”

“Two, in fact.”

Masters smiled and, changing the subject, he indicated the view with a sweep of his arm.

“A beautiful evening isn’t it.”

“Well, for some of us at least.” Fredricks agreed. “It’ll rain before it’s over if only for a few minutes. It’s that time of year.”

Masters nodded.

His phone rang.

His doorbell rang.

“Those will be Tako I assume” he said, shaking his head and fumbling for his phone.

“Masters here.”

“Tako here. I’m at the door. May I come in?”

“Please. Detective Fredricks and I are out on the south balcony.”

Tako arrived.

“Bring out a chair and join us if you have time,” Master suggested.

“The floor’s fine.”

He slid his back down the glass door and took a seat there between the two men.

“I got some interesting poop. Sir, er, Sirs.”

He looked back and forth between the two men.

“It seems that both Tim Adams and Terry Watkins were seen swimming laps this morning between ten and eleven.”

“How were your sources sure they were not their twin doubles?”

“One man heard them calling each other by name. Oliver said at one point there was a call for Mr. T and he took him a phone at the edge of the pool. And, the one who was

apparently Tim couldn't have been Tom if Tom had been killed at ten."

"You're right there," Masters agreed. "And Terry couldn't have been upstairs committing murder if he was seen swimming in the pool."

"So far I've struck out on Mr. J. No one saw him between ten and eleven. The desk attendant saw him enter the office area about ten 'til ten she thinks, and then leave, maybe a few minutes before eleven – can't be exact. There is a private entrance to his office but the bell guys working the curb don't remember seeing him come or go. They could have missed him I suppose. One more thing. Somebody who looked a lot like Mrs. J – Beth – was seen leaving a service door about noon. Then she arrived back in a limo about ten minutes ago, with bags for the week. I don't get that but thought it might be important."

"Interesting," Masters said. "That re-arrival would have been when, then, about 2:45?"

"Right. About then, give or take just a few minutes, I'd say."

Masters rubbed his mustache, thoughtfully.

"Are there surveillance cameras that might have picked up her exit?"

"Sure. Every exit and entrance is photographed 24/7. So are the entrances into the two restaurants, the front desk, the gift shop, lobbies, the pools, and every corridor."

"The pools. Interesting! I want to see the tape of the pool from ten to eleven this morning and the one that would have included Beth leaving earlier in the day. I'll call Marvel and tell him you are to bring them back here. Then I want you to watch them with me."

"Okay. That sort of leads me into a . . . something . . . a . . . I guess like favor I need to ask," He stammered, looking at the floor.

"Sounds ominous," Masters said, turning his full attention to the seated lad.

He sighed deeply and cocked his head, looking Masters directly in the face.

"Well there is something I have to tell you that I sort of haven't been truthful with you about."

“A pretty big something?” Masters asked.

“V e r y big!”

“Does it involve the fact that you and Tina are married?”

“How in blazes could you have possibly known that?”

“Raymond Masters knows all,” Fredricks said, clearly delighted though fully confused himself.

“Let’s just say it was the way you hemmed and hawed around as you were trying to remember what you could and couldn’t call Tina the first time we met . . . plus the wonder-filled way you look at each other.”

“Well, okay then. We got married on our eighteenth birthdays. Her parents would hit the ceiling and my mom wouldn’t be very pleased. They both think we’re too young. I won’t even argue that point. More important, I guess is that I’m a good Methodist. She’s a good Catholic. I’m White and she’s Hispanic. Those things seem to represent three of God’s most persistently heartbreaking inventions – youth, race and religion.

“The immediate problem is that Tina’s mother and sister dropped by unexpectedly to visit her and they expect to stay the night in her room – our room, you see. Tina and I have been staying in hers and I have rented mine out to another bellman for his girlfriend – another \$250 a week for the bank account. There’s nothing in my contract that says I can’t do that, though I must admit I know it is not appropriate. But, as it is I now have no place to stay tonight. I can hang out in the break room for a while but my supervisor will soon figure out something is fishy. I was wondering if I could just catch a couple hours sleep on your sofa later on and then shower and clean up in the morning.”

“I declare, Son. At this rate, you will be able to buy your mom four houses by the time you’re twenty one.”

“I don’t understand.”

“We’ll go into it later. Sure. I have two bedrooms in this overgrown labyrinth, for goodness sake. Make yourself at home in number two for as long as necessary. If I remember correctly, you already have a key, so come and go as you like. Now, those tapes if you please?”

“Yes, Sir, Mr. R, Sir. Thank you so very, very, very, much. I’d kiss you if you were just a little prettier.”

He laughed. Masters and Fredricks laughed.

“I’ll be back before you can say . . .

“Matrimony?” Masters said, filling the pause.

Tako smiled.

“I’m glad you know. It’s wonderful. I love her so much. We know it’s not going to be easy but of course we have no way to know just how hard it may be. You’re the only ones that know. I hope it doesn’t have to be made public.”

“Made public?” Masters asked playfully, looking at Fredricks. “What’s this made public stuff?”

“I certainly have no idea what the lad’s blabbering about,” the detective came back. “Perhaps we should take his temperature. He may be delusional – the pressure of his first big case and all – I’ve seen it happen to rookie’s year after year.”

“Thanks guys, er, Sirs.”

He scrambled to his feet and was off on his mission. Masters phoned Captain Marvel.

“I still chuckle every time I have to call him, Captain Marvel,” Masters said.

“I remember him, and Billy Baston and the lightning bolt when he said, Shazam! From my much older brother’s, well warn comics, you understand.”

The two enjoyed the exchange and then sat in silence for a few minutes.

“Eighteen is way too young to be married, you know,” Fredricks said, finally, breaking the silence.

“Babies!” Masters said in agreement.

“Babies with hormones,” Fredricks added, upping the ante.

Masters became philosophical.

“Well, he is about the most level headed eighteen-year-old I’ve ever come across. All we can do is wish them the best, I suppose.”

“And assume they know how to go about keeping it a happy family of just two for quite a few years yet.”

Masters raised an eyebrow and nodded.

* * *

Tako was soon back with the surveillance tapes and a

special VCR that Marvel had supplied. The men moved inside and within a few minutes Tako had the tapes up and running. The machine had professional Zoom and frame by frame enhancement features, as well as a variety of other specialized operations – the immediate use of which seemed to pose no problem for Tako.

“Stop and enlarge that, if you can. Get to the face. Is that Beth Watkins?”

“No doubt about it,” Tako said, “Unless she, also, has a twin.”

“She doesn’t,” Masters said. “And that time and date stamp is, correct?”

“Correct.”

“Okay. Let’s move on to the pool.”

It was soon running. The quality of surveillance tapes is poor at best. That was further complicated by the fact they were trying to establish the certain identities of identical twins from a distance.

“You’ve given both Terry and Jerry rub downs, correct?” Masters asked.

“Sure have. Twenty bucks a whack, like I said. Wish I had muscles like they do.”

“Notice anything unique about their bodies that might give some clue as to which one this really is?”

“I don’t know what it would be. They must do exactly the same workout routines. As far as I can tell their bodies are interchangeable. Terry tends to be more ticklish and Jerry’s a lot more sensitive to pain, but we won’t see that on a surveillance tape. I’m sorry. I just don’t have anything for you.”

“Oliver was certain it was Terry?”

“I guess he had no reason to doubt it. The caller asked for Terry to be paged in the pool and when the announcement was made over the intercom, Terry – or whoever – swam to the side to take the call. Oliver had no reason to run any kind of close inspection or anything.”

“I can understand that. Well, as you have time, re-run that whole hour of pool surveillance and see if anything jumps out at you, okay.”

“Sure. It seems I’m not going to have much else to do

tonight. And though watching nearly naked men cavort around in a pool is not high on my night time wish list, it should certainly take my mind off other lost possibilities.”

It was not offered as humorous.

“I better go check the board and see if I’m needed for anything. I’ll keep thinking about the tapes.”

Soon after that Fredricks was also on his way. Masters sat in front of the fireplace, doing his part to keep the world safe from the potential dangers of reneged raspberry twisters. He needed to draw the bits and pieces together.

He had not yet met the Blair twins. It was to their room that the bottle of drugged champagne had been charged. That, by itself, presented several possibilities. One or both of the Blairs could have had the bottle sent. Someone else could have found out about it and used it during the murder sequence. In the end, it seemed unlikely that either of the Blairs would have sent alcohol to the Carters to drink since they undoubtedly knew of their diabetic condition. It would not be a way to win back the heart of a lost love although it would assure that the bottle remained untouched through the night.

That posed an interesting alternative. The killer had the bottle sent – knowing the women would not drink it, otherwise, it would not have been available for use as part of the murder plan the following morning. That would mean the killer also wanted to implicate the Blairs in the murder. Did the killer or killers have some special grudge to settle in this way with the Blairs or was it just a convenient way to throw suspicion in someone else’s direction? Another possibility: By making it appear that Carla or Marla killed Tom, the Blairs could have been taking revenge against the Carter sisters. The Carter twins could have sent it to themselves to implicate the Blairs and cover their own act of revenge.

So, what about the Carter sisters? A woman, smaller of stature and having less strength than a man, might well administer a drug to make her potential victim more easily handled. But why not just stop with the drug? Why take the next, apparently unnecessary step and drown the person? Perhaps, to make the semi-conscious victim suffer through his last few minutes of life. Perhaps, merely to complicate the case. It might have some less obvious, personally symbolic

meaning.

Why choose the Carter's suite if it had been, as Masters really believed, a Watkins Twin? To implicate them. Kill off Tom, put the Carters and/or Blairs in jail and reduce the Watkins brother's competition? Sick but plausible.

It had been a well thought out scenario, teeming with possible motives. The drug was probably placed into the drink in the room at the last minute. It is unlikely it had been drugged ahead of time by an accomplice in the wine cellar – never involve more in a plot than is absolutely necessary. Trying to trace the acquisition of the barbiturates would probably be futile.

So, the most likely story line would be that the killer sent the champagne the night before the scheduled murder and, if not the Blairs, implicated them by charging it to their room. The bottle and the card got together only as Tako made the delivery. Sunday morning, Tom was lured to the Carter's suite at a time when the killer knew the women would not be there. The killer was not an obvious adversary of Tom Adams since the two of them probably sat and had a friendly drink while ostensibly waiting for the return of the women. There may be some evidence of the communication between the killer and Tom – a note, a phone call, even a visitation at the Adams' suite. Masters made a note to review the searches made of the rooms and phone records. Also, the fact that the killer would have a key to the Carter's room and permission to enter had to have seemed reasonable to Tom.

He turned his attention to the attempt on Jerry Watkins – an unanticipated twist for sure. It was clear that physical well-being was important to him. He was strong and fit. That did not seem to imply that he was also brave in the face of pain – at least according to Tako. Would Jerry then, put himself in jeopardy by being burned on the hands and feet in a set up to make it appear that an attempt had been made on his life? Only if he were feeling desperate, and Masters, of course, had been doing his best to nudge the Watkins men in that direction. It certainly appeared that he did have a close brush with death and that he had most likely been shocked into unconsciousness – the severity of the burns, the cut on the head, and his blood on the tile floor.

Taken together these things led Masters to believe the attempt had legitimately been made by someone else. Jerry had limited the candidates to his wife, his brother and his young masseuse – Tako. Masters did not know enough about the twins' true relationship to guess about the possibility of Terry's involvement. It is a well-established fact that one twin virtually never kills the other. If it were a romantic triangle among Beth, Jerry, and Terry, however, then Terry could rapidly shed his twin status and become a top contender – as could Beth. Men are more likely to opt for electrocution than women. Women lean more toward poison and drugs.

If Tako were involved it could be at any one of several levels. He could have – knowingly or unwittingly – given relevant information about Jerry's bath time routine to some third party. Or it could have quite innocently traveled from Tako, through Tina to some fourth party – employees do like to talk about their employers.

Could Tako have been hired as an assassin? He was in need of money. He was bright and creative. To have devised the plan would have been well within his capabilities. Gyms have been known to provide contacts with undesirables. Boys that age are often driven to do such things for love or for romantic favors. Masters was sure he could cross off those last two motivations. Tako was completely in love with and fully committed just to Tina. He was a nice human being. His intentional involvement seemed to be the most remote of the possibilities. Masters needed that background check on the boy. Information was coming to him far too slowly.

Another possibility popped into his mind. Suppose Tim believed that Jerry – or Terry, for that matter – had killed his brother Tom. Tim would then become the prime suspect in the attack on Jerry. He had not acted that way while in Jerry's presence earlier in the day, but then Jerry had not acted like a suspect either. It was a quick and simple electrical hook-up that could have been cobbled together in a matter of minutes. All it required was the acquisition of one extension cord and knowledge – or even just a logical assumption – about Jerry's bathing habits. Masters needed to spend more time with Terry. In fact, there was no time like the present.

He phoned Terry's room. There was no answer. He

phoned Jerry's suite. No answer. He phoned Tako. The answer was immediate and cheerful.

"Hey! Tako here. What's up?"

"I need to locate Terry. Any ideas?"

"I have him in view as we speak. Am I good or what?"

"Where?"

"I'm near the front desk. Jerry, Beth and Terry are just coming out of JW's restaurant. My gosh! I just figured that out. How dumb can I be?"

"I give up. How dumb can you be?"

"JW's stands for Jerry Watkins'. TW's, the other restaurant, stands for Terry Watkins'."

"You see. My sleuthing skills are rubbing off on you," Masters joked. "Could you let Terry know that I would like to see him at his earliest convenience? I'll meet him where ever he suggests."

"Sure thing. Just hold on. I'm fifteen feet from target."

Masters big abdomen jiggled as he chuckled at Tako's "B" movie monologue. He could hear the conversation at the other end."

"Sir! Mr. Terry! Detective Masters requests a meeting at your earliest convenience. May I relay to him as to when and where?"

"Certainly. Now is fine. His place or mine?"

"You heard the question, Sir?" Tako asked into the phone.

"His place. Fifteen minutes. I'll need to brush the tell-tale 'twister-red' from my teeth. Thank you. By the way, you seem to be in much better spirits than you were earlier."

"Yes, Sir. How can I put this? Tina and I just finished some quality linen closet time together."

"Remind me never to ask again," Masters said and he clicked the phone off in mock disgust.

Exactly fifteen minutes had elapsed as Masters approached the open door at 880.

"Again, an open door. I must be missing something," he muttered to himself. He rapped on the door frame rather than using the bell.

"Masters. Come in. Champaign? Lemonade? Grape juice? Coffee?"

“Actually, the coffee sounds good.”

“I’m a lemonade addict, myself,” Terry said.

He made a quick call and within minutes Tako arrived with a cart sporting a coffee urn, lemonade and chips. He left without comment.

“So, Detective Masters, how can I be of help? You have the attempt on Jerry’s life figured out yet?”

“Second question first,” Masters said. “Let’s say I’m pretty sure I know who the perpetrator was but I lack the proper the evidence. It will come. As to the first, I just figured I needed to spend some time with you and get caught up to speed on how life has been these last – what has it been – twenty-four, years.”

“Twenty-four. Yes. Very good. One might think you had that figured out ahead of time.”

“I wonder why that might have been.” Masters asked not waiting for an answer. “Shall I begin with the easy questions or the hard ones?”

“Let’s work up to the hard ones.”

“That would have been my choice, also,” Masters said nodding, cordiality dripped between them like dark honey. Terry seemed as cool and relaxed as Jerry had seemed tense and agitated, but then no one had just tried to kill Terry.

Masters sipped his coffee. Terry had a chip and winced. He felt the need to explain.

“Bit the inside of my cheek I guess. That salt stings a little bit.”

Masters nodded, interested enough to pursue it.

“The lemonade probably won’t feel that great either.”

“I’ll switch to coffee. I enjoy most anything that’s wet – well except that terrible tasting health drink Jerry seems to be addicted to.”

It seemed to go nowhere so Masters moved back to the issues at hand.

“Your whereabouts this morning between nine forty-five and eleven fifteen. Be as specific as you can and provide the names of people who can vouch for each change of location.”

“That’s the easy one?”

Masters chose not to answer. He sat silently, sipping his coffee, pad and pen ready. Terry began.

“9:45 I was in the shower – I’m afraid I do that alone so no references for you. 9:55 out of the shower and into a swimming suit – it’s on the tub if you want to examine it. I left the suite and went down the hall to the left, into the elevator, and took a right at the lobby and straight on out to the west pool. As to references there was a young maid at the doorway of 883 across the hall. I’m quite sure she saw me leaving.

“Once I got to the pool area there were dozens of people who saw me. Tim Adams was one. We swam laps together for a while. Oliver, the old bellman, brought me the phone at about ten thirty, I’d say. He can verify the exact time. It was Jerry’s wife, Beth. I had left some papers back in my apartment and I had asked her to bring them out for me. I tend to give terrible directions and she couldn’t find them so called for help. It was one of those right and left things. I’ve always had trouble that way. Then I went back to swimming ‘til about eleven. A cabana girl brought me a towel and robe. She will probably remember the time when I left the area. I got back here a few minutes after eleven. Not sure if anybody saw me enter my suite or not.”

The answers had been every bit as precise as Masters had expected. He continued making notes for more than a minute after Terry stopped talking.

“And where did you take the call?”

“In the pool, like I said.”

“I mean where in the pool? North side, south side? Did you sit up on the side or stay in the water? Did you face out into the pool or toward the building?”

“How could any of that possibly be of any importance?”

“North, south? In, out?” Masters said parsing his questions and ignoring Terry’s protest.

“I believe I stayed in the pool and turned around and faced the water. I’m really not sure. I didn’t know I was going to be tested over it.”

Masters nodded and changed the topic.

“Tell me about your mother’s death.”

It, too – all quite intentionally – came out of the blue and Terry was not prepared. His phrases were no longer crisp and concise. He stammered.

"I can't see how these questions have anything to do with any of this."

"Oh, really? I certainly do. Again, tell me about your mother's death."

"She was found drowned in the pool behind our house. The pool guy found her – I think his name is Sam. He dragged her out and called 911. Jerry and I were in Wisconsin at the time. Poor Beth had to deal with it alone until we could get back."

"Was your mother a poor swimmer?"

"No. Excellent, in fact."

"So, the fact that she drowned must have seemed strange to you."

"Yes. I guess. No. I mean the fact was that she had drowned. The coroner established that. I guess I just took it at face value. I have had no reason to question it. Why are you? What are you getting at?"

Masters ignored the question.

"How did your mother get along in the new house – with the staff, Beth?"

"Fine as far I can remember. Sam had a good-looking assistant about her age and he tried to get friendly. I believe they even had a date or two. Jerry and I disapproved. He was a low life. So, she gave him the old heave ho! He was pretty mad as I recall and refused to work for us anymore."

"Maids?"

"No problems that I recollect. We just have the one. She works from ten to two Monday through Friday."

"Beth?"

"Like sisters as far as I could tell. They really didn't have much in common so didn't hang out together very often, but they got along fine."

Once more Masters prolonged his note making, allowing some squirm time, if Terry were prone to squirm. Then the big one.

"Is Jerry aware of your romantic involvement with his wife, Beth?"

Terry swallowed and put his coffee cup back on the table.

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

“Well, neighbors and nosey hotel employees often do get the wrong idea about things, I suppose. I would have thought that you would have at least heard the rumor – the one that goes, ‘Jerry and Terry married Beth’ or ‘Beth is Jerry’s wife and Terry’s girlfriend.’”

Terry’s galvanic reaction was classic – beads of sweat, flushed face, agitated movements of the hands, fingers, feet and legs. The dilation of his eyes was so pronounced, Masters easily observed it from ten feet away.”

“Well, I suppose that’s all for this evening,” Masters said getting to his feet. “Thank you for the coffee. Very thoughtful. Oh, by the way, have you come up with any suspects related to the attack on Jerry?”

“I suspect it was some hired killer. The administrative staff at a bank my brother is about to buy is very angry about it all. They know their days there are numbered. We believe it may be associated with that. It’s our best guess, anyway. But isn’t that what he’s paying you some outrageous sum to find out? Shouldn’t you be spending your time solving the case you’re being paid for?”

“It is an outrageous sum, I’ll give you that. I have to wonder why you think I’m not being paid to solve the murder of Mr. Adams.”

He allowed no time for a response.

“Well, again, thanks for your time. I’m sure I’ll see you tomorrow. Oh, one more thing – just for the record. May I see that swimming suit you mentioned?”

“Certainly. In there.”

He pointed to a door. The two of them entered the bathroom. Masters lifted the still damp, neatly folded suit to his nose and sniffed, then replaced it on the tub. He shook his head as if disturbed by what he found.

“Do you make it a habit to swim laps every morning when you’re up here at the hotel?”

“Not every. Often though.”

“And Jerry?”

“About as often as I do. We try to keep our physiques fairly equal. Winning the competition necessitates it.”

“Winning appears to be very important to you and your brother.”

“And it isn’t to you, Detective?”

“If you’re referring to this contest between us, I am winning. And thank you for the help you’ve given me during these past few minutes.”

Masters left, pleased with both the evidence he had procured and the pressure he had been able to apply. ‘Where was murder number two,’ he wondered? ‘Had he really rattled them enough so they would stop at one? In their minds, that would undoubtedly equate to losing. No; there would be another attempt.’

Chapter Five: Sunday Evening Number two and right on schedule

After freshening up in his suite, Masters went in search of an early dinner in a restaurant that would not require a coat and tie. He was used to eating between five and six. He liked to be in bed by nine-thirty as he typically awoke with the roosters.

He would try TW's first. The sign on the placard read "Coat and tie after eight." Things seemed to be going his way. It would be nice to have some time alone to relax and enjoy a good, thick steak – well done – with all the trimmings.

As it turned out, it was one of those restaurants in which the waiters hovered about like tight, binding, heavily starched, collars on a hot summer day. He tried to ignore them – a difficult task since they felt moved to refill his water and coffee every time he took a sip. Masters extracted two, twenty dollar bills from his money clip and motioned the two young men to his side.

"Here's the deal, guys. You stand well back from the table and don't make a move in its direction unless I raise my right hand like this. Do you understand?"

They both nodded. He gave each a bill.

"I'll match that one with another when I'm finished if you have followed my instructions."

They immediately stepped back. Masters relaxed. It was a fine meal, almost too much even for Masters. He had to chuckle. As he was awaiting the arrival of his dessert, some sixty minutes later, he noticed other patrons were, from time to time, raising their right hands as well. Perhaps he had

started a new trend for fine dining rooms.

By the time he had finished his cheesecake, and drained the coffee pot, it was a few minutes after six. Just to test the system he raised both hands. Immediately, his napkin was removed by one, and his chair slid back by the other. He seemed quite satisfied and made good on his promise to the young men, one of whom quipped, "We will be pleased not to wait on you this way any time you want to return, Sir. I'm Paul and this is Kip. Please ask for us."

"I must say you didn't wait on me better than I've not been waited on in months and months."

They did insist on whisking off his shirt and walking him to the door. That he would allow. He hesitated in the hall contemplating just how he should use the next several hours. It would not be his decision. Tako approached him at a quick pace.

"More bad news, Mr. R. One of the Blair twins, 618, was just found on the pavement east of your building. Captain Marvel says it looks like he fell to his death from the balcony of his room – he landed exactly below it."

"Has Fredricks been called?"

"Yes, Sir. I took the liberty on my way here. I had to come all the way from Mr. J's suite so it took a while. Your phone doesn't seem to be answering."

"I always turn phones off when I'm in a restaurant. Seems rude to me to let them ring and disrupt things for others."

"I guess I hadn't ever thought about that."

"Accompany me if you will," Masters said, hurrying on. I want to get a look at the body. I may need you to procure things for me."

"Not my idea of a nice evening walk, but, sure, if you say so," was Tako's take on the request.

"Fetch a blanket and meet me there. Point me in the right direction."

"I can get the blanket on our way. I happen to be on a first name basis with a certain linen closet right over there."

He pointed. With blanket in hand, they made their way outside and around the corner to the east. Marvel was there. He had placed his own jacket over the upper body and was

effectively keeping onlookers away. The pavement was wet, indicating a short shower just past.

“Number two, I’d say,” Marvel said, pointing up to the balconies above. “His is up seven floors. The first floor isn’t numbered – A, B, those kinds of designations on ground level. I never could figure out why that was done that way but it’s that way at lots of Hotels. Once I was at . . .”

Masters interrupted.

“You are sure it is one of the Blair Twins?”

“Oh, yes, Sir. Joe locked himself out of his car this morning and I had to go take care of it for him. Got into it in no more than twelve seconds. That’s probably close to a record on these new cars with them theft-proof bars built into the doors, you know.”

“Thank you for that, Captain,” Masters said. “You know them?” he asked, turning to Tako.

“Oh, yes! Nothing is ever quite right for them. They always need some little thing changed or tweaked. You can count on them to still be complaining while they’re putting a tip in your hand. I don’t mean to be speaking ill of the dead.”

The distance-blunted wail of sirens suddenly emerged off to the East.

“Several vehicles,” Masters said. “Fredricks probably called in the whole crew.”

He finished his once over of the body. Tako chose to take no more than a fleeting peek.

“Cover it, if you will.”

Tako and Marvel shook out the blanket and gentled it over the body.

Marvel shuddered.

“You know, I jog ten miles every morning on the beach out there to keep in shape but being in shape won’t help you none if you fall off a building.”

He shook his head as if it had been some major revelation.

“Any eye witnesses?” Masters asked the Captain.

“The lady in the red dress over there says she was walking out to her car when, splat, he fell right beside her. Liked to make her faint.”

“Why don’t you go get a complete statement from her?”

Fix the time if you can. Tako, how's your trigonometry?"

"Trig. Fair, I suppose. It was one of the harder A's I got in school."

"Walk north about fifty yards and look back. Calculate the angle of the fall. Figure about how long it would take an object to reach the ground from that height?"

"I'm on it. I'll be glad to be fifty yards away, you know?"

A man in his early thirties approached Masters.

"You in charge here?"

"Temporarily, at least. You know something about all this?"

"I'm Randy West from 528. A photographer for the Twin Competition. I was doing a time-lapse sequence from my balcony aimed out at the highway that runs along the lake – great reflections this time of day. On my own time, you understand. The body fell right in front of the camera. What a turn of the wheel that was. I have it all on a digital card, here."

"Would that be time stamped?"

"Yes, I suppose it is, actually."

"The authorities will want that, what did you call it?"

"Card, a digital card."

"Here, I brought it. Got a dozen. I would like to get it back – hundred bucks a pop, you know."

"Give me your business card. I'll get you a receipt when the city detectives arrive. Help me here," Masters said looking up the building.

"If you are in 528 and the man fell from 618 how could he have fallen in front of a camera pointed south from your balcony. I thought the 18 numbered suites were all on the northeast corner."

"The fifth floor is for us crapped out poor guys, mostly single or double rooms along this eastern side. 528 happens to be on the end – right under 618."

"I see. Thank you."

Fredricks pulled up in his own car. He put his shield on his shirt and approached Masters.

"Number two?"

Masters nodded.

"Apparently one of the Blair Twins from the sixth floor, which I am informed is actually the seventh floor which means

all the times I have thought I was staying on the thirteenth floor by checking into a fourteenth-floor room it actually put me on the fifteenth. I'm beginning to sound like Captain Marvel."

"Indeed! But, worse than that, I think I understood. To actually be on the thirteenth you should have been checking into a room on the twelfth."

"My intentions were honorable. We seem to be losing it together. All that's just between the two of us, of course?"

"Oh yes. I hear departmental sanity hearings can get really crazy."

"Tell me you didn't say that."

"Sorry. . . . Check for ID yet?" Fredricks asked looking down at the body.

"Didn't touch anything 'til you arrived. He clearly wasn't going anywhere."

Fredricks donned a pair of gloves, pulled back the blanket and coat, and removed the billfold.

"Joseph Blair, age 38 from Rochester, New York."

"So it's Joe, then. Marla Carter was once married to his brother Jack, if you will recall the earlier conversation."

"Yes. Beginning to make those two redheads look like suspects, you know."

Masters nodded.

"We have something interesting here, though it may not really have any bearing on things. A photographer just happened to be taking some time-lapse shots off his balcony as the body plummeted by."

"Really? What are the chances of that?" Fredricks said raising his eyebrows.

"Here is the photographer's business card and that chippy, digital, thing from his digital camera. He'd like it back or replaced."

Fredricks held an evidence bag open and Masters deposited the items inside.

The woman in red over there was walking by as the body hit the pavement. Marvel should have her statement by now."

Marvel returned as if on cue.

"Becky Bloom. Age fifty-nine. On her way to her car. Felt a whish of air to her left – the building side – and heard a

thump. It all happened at once. There was the body on the sidewalk. She didn't hear him screaming or anything on the way down. That seems odd. I'll bet I'd be yelling my lungs out if it was me."

"Nice job, Captain," Masters said, genuinely impressed.

"Got high marks in interviewing at security school."

Marvel smiled and hitched his pants up, clearly pleased to have received a complement.

Fredricks interrupted before any more of his security school exploits could be rendered.

"Look here, Ray. Mouth stuffed with a wash rag and taped shut. No wonder the woman didn't hear screaming."

Masters stood back and surveyed the body from one end to the other.

"What's wrong with this picture?" he said, partly to himself and partly to the other two.

They also stood back. Fredricks nodded.

"I see, I think. His arms?"

"Exactly!" Masters said. "After a fall from such a height the arms are always spread out. These are tight against his chest. More than that. Look where his hands are."

"Yes, I see. He has them tucked into the opposite armpits – left in right and right in left like you might do if you were freezing cold."

"Let's get pictures first; then we can try to determine how that may have come about."

The first set of pictures was completed in a few minutes. They rolled the body onto its back for more. The hands were then loosened one at a time."

"Odd!" Fredricks said. "The right one is like a fist with the little finger extended. The left has the first three fingers extended. Not like any gang signature I've seen. Any significance there that you see?"

"Perhaps," Masters answered. "Look at the back of the fingers. Badly bruised. Just from the second knuckle to the ends. Very strange. Had to have happened prior to the fall. They were too well protected when he landed. Have this one gone over from stem to stern and back again. Especially the clothing and the gag. Have them speculate on how the fingers got mashed. Search the wounds for bits and pieces of

anything.”

Fredricks spent a few minutes with his crew then moved back to where Masters stood, deep in thought.

“Inside now?” Fredricks asked.

“In a minute. Let’s see what our young mathematician has for us.”

They walked to meet Tako who was already approaching them.

“I’d estimate no more than two and probably only one degree out from the edge of the balcony. I can’t see how that could be if he jumped or was pushed off. The force would surely send a body out four, maybe even six degrees.”

“Excellent work. Freddy will have his team check it with instruments but I’ll bet you’re right-on, my boy. Come with us. We’re going to his room. We’ll need to get a pass key.”

Tako nodded.

“The desk will furnish you a room key. That’ll be quicker than finding a pass key.”

As they walked, Masters had a question for Tako.

“You said when you found me in the hall outside the restaurant that you had been with Jerry.”

“Yes. He had just called for me and I was still just outside his door, actually. I had been waiting about a minute – that was unusual. I knocked and he called, ‘Just a minute.’ Usually he says come on in and I let myself in. I had my card out and was beginning to do that, in fact, but stopped of course. Then about a minute later he called again. ‘Come on in.’ I got my card back out and opened the door. Mr. J was fastening his robe. His hair was wet like he had just got out of the shower. I expected he was going to request a back rub. He’s never been robe-modest like that around me before. I can’t figure the delay. I can’t figure several things. Had he called me while he was in the shower? Why was his robe dry and his hair wet? Why the curtain pulled across the door to the balcony? I’ve never seen it pulled before – like somebody’s going to be peeking into a 14th floor window?

“Anyway, at that point, my phone rang. It was Captain Marvel asking me to find you. I excused myself from Mr. J and you know the rest, I guess. When your phone wouldn’t answer I came looking for you.”

“And for some fully unknown reason you thought I might be at a restaurant at six in the evening.”

“When you didn’t answer, I checked in your room – me being your roomie tonight. You weren’t there but your orange shirt was on the back of the couch. A washcloth was wet at the sink in your bathroom. I figured you had freshened up and changed and why would you freshen up and change at that time of day? To go eat.”

“Sure you won’t change your major to law enforcement, young man,” Fredricks asked, more sincerely than in humor.

“I came down the service elevator. Over this way and we can take it back up.”

Masters procured the key from the desk and they were soon at the door. Masters knocked, in case Jack was inside. He wasn’t, so they entered.

The sliding, glass door to the balcony was open. There were two spots of blood about six inches apart on the top of the iron railing. The wooden, balcony, deck was wet from the rain. Aside from the door having been left open during the short rain storm and the blood, nothing else appeared to be out of the ordinary.

Fredricks was the first to comment.

“Blood about where the victim might have been holding on as he clung to the outside of the railing before dropping to the pavement.”

“It certainly looks that way,” Masters agreed. “Better tape a bag over it ‘til your lab guys can take pictures and samples. Surprised that short downpour didn’t wash it away”

Masters turned to go back inside. He stopped, looking down at the carpet just inside the door. He leaned down and ran his fingers across it.

The men re-entered the room. The cameraman – in this case, camerawoman – arrived and Fredricks accompanied her to the balcony. The forensics team followed in a few minutes. Masters had immediate instructions for them.

“I want a very careful analysis of the prints on the door handle – over and unders. I’m expecting moderate smudging over the top of the Blair men’s prints. Cut samples from the carpet nap at the edge of the door and seal them in a tiny bag.

I want a moisture content analysis run immediately. The blood on the railing out on the balcony will belong to one of the Blair twins but we need to have that confirmed. Get it all and search every molecule of it for foreign matter especially paper fibers. As soon as you're done here take identical carpet samples from the rooms on both sides of this one as well as the three just above and below. Find out from the occupants if the doors were open or closed during the shower that just passed. Compare moisture content."

Jerry entered through the open door.

"I just heard that one of the Blair brothers fell off his balcony. Is that right?"

"It appears that way," Masters said.

"What can I do? How can I help?" Jerry asked, appearing genuinely concerned.

"Do you know where Jack Blair might be at this time?"

"No idea. It was Joe, then?"

"It seems so."

Masters turned to Tako.

"I'm on it Sir. The whereabouts of Jack Blair during the past hour."

Masters nodded and the boy left the room.

"Let's get out of here, okay?" Masters said to Jerry. "Could we go up to your place? Maybe you can help me sort this all out."

"Sure."

A few minutes later they were in the Watkins suite on the north-east corner of the building. White walls and carpet provided a sharp, almost harsh contrast to the black leather furniture and the black, lava-rock fireplace wall. Perhaps Jerry saw most things as either black or white. In that case, it was probably comfortable for him.

Masters spoke.

"May I use your balcony to check on how things are progressing down in the parking lot?"

"Certainly."

Jerry opened the glass sliding door. Masters made conversation over his shoulder as he looked down from the balcony. Jerry remained inside.

"Quite a strange shower we had there."

“Late afternoons and evenings we often get ‘quickies’ like that in this part of the state. Usually gone as fast as they come up.”

Masters returned to the sitting room and dried his hands over the gas log fire in the fireplace.

“Pretty warm for a fire, isn’t it?” he asked, casually.

“Probably. I enjoy a fire. Been known to crank up the air conditioning just so I can have one.”

Beth entered from the hall. Jerry rushed to introduce her.

“Mr. Masters this is my wife, Beth. Beth, this is the detective I have been talking about.”

“Good to meet you,” Masters said.

Ignoring both the formalities and Masters, Beth turned to Jerry.

“Is something wrong? Why is he here?”

“I’m afraid there’s been another death – Joe Blair.”

She sighed, turned, and walked briskly into the bedroom.

“Beth doesn’t do emergencies really well,” Jerry explained. “It took months for her to recover from my mother’s death. Perhaps I should go be with her.”

“Certainly. You do that. I’ll let myself out.”

Jerry left the room. Masters took out his penknife and cut a sample of the carpet fibers by the balcony door. He got down on hands and knees and scraped the ash remains of something from the fireplace floor. With his findings secured in sacks, he left the apartment.

Tako was sitting on the floor across the hallway.

“Jack’s car was stolen about two hours ago, and then reportedly showed up in North Syracuse an hour later. A hotel shuttle driver has taken him to pick it up. He should be back within the next few minutes, if there aren’t a lot of legal hassles to get it back.”

“Nice work, my boy.”

“You were talking with Jerry. Meet his wife, Beth?”

“Yes, to both. Do you know where she’s been the past hour?”

“She and the lady who hangs with Bill Lawrence were having coffee in TR’s. Mr. Lawrence needed her and she

wouldn't answer her phone, so he asked me to give her his message."

"The ubiquitous Tako."

"I know that one, Sir. 'The everywhere present Tako.' I like it! I've always been that way I guess. Mom called me her whirlwind, when I was little. I made the rounds of the neighborhood many times a day, I guess. I happily kept everybody up to date on everybody else's business. What next?"

"Well, I need to check with Detective Fredricks to see what prelims his team found. I also need a way to get Jerry and Beth out of their suite for about a half hour. First, let me give Fredricks a call."

Tako punched a set of numbers on his phone and handed it to Masters.

"I memorize phone numbers easily, for some reason."

"Freddy. Masters here. Question. We do have a general search warrant for all parts of this hotel, don't we?"

"Sure do. Judge Hearcumda. Signed, sealed and delivered."

"You're kidding. Here come da Judge?"

Fredricks laughed. "I hadn't ever thought of it that way. We are showing our years with that one you understand."

"And why not? I've earned every one of them. Where are you? I want to hear what your forensics guys think they have."

"Actually, we are just finishing up down on six hundred."

"Then come to 14 and meet me at my place if you will?"

"Five minutes," Fredricks said.

Masters returned the phone to Tako who spoke.

"Since Mr. J didn't swim this morning, he'll swim this evening – any time now, in fact. When Beth is here, she usually goes along. I like to watch her swim – and not just for the obvious reasons. She can swim the length of the pool and back twice underwater on one breath. I can't do half that. Earned more than a few bucks betting new guests on it. Anyway, I can hang around and let you know when they leave."

"Excellent. Excellent."

"Get me Freddy again, if you will, please."

“Freddy. Keep at least one lab guy here. I’m trying to arrange one final pick up for him.”

He turned back to Tako.

“Go snoop. Let me know the minute they reach the pool – or elsewhere if they decide on some other destination.”

Tako left on the trot. Masters made his way back to his suite. Fredricks was just getting off the second elevator. They were soon inside seated next to the raspberry twisters. They nibbled as Fredricks spoke.

“The washcloth used for the gag appears to be standard issue here in the hotel. The duct tape used to keep his mouth closed over the washcloth is the brand they use here in maintenance. That may or may not help. No marks on the body that suggest a struggle, but then it was in pretty bad shape after the fall. The coroner thinks it’s a lot of damage for such a short fall – unless he hit a railing or two on the way down – can’t be sure. The abrasions on the back of the fingers are a puzzle. They appear to have first been slit with a blade of some kind and then smashed with a heavy, blunt, object. Cause of death will probably be the fall – or the abrupt end of it, as it were. Once they get a look inside the body they can tell us a lot more.”

He changed the topic.

“Now, what’s this about saving back a man for some clandestine-sounding mission?”

“Once Jerry and Beth exit their suite I have two specific places I want swabbed for traces of blood – the railing on the balcony and the underside of a large rock sitting on the deck.”

“The blunt object?” Fredricks asked.

“I’d bet on it.”

“So, it would have been a longer fall, then.”

“I’d bet on that, too. The whole thing had to be precisely orchestrated – perhaps more than is really possible. We certainly need one big break, here.”

“Like?”

“I haven’t the slightest idea!”

Masters phone rang.

“Tako here, Sir. The fish are in the ocean,” he said slowly and distinctly.

Masters belly shook. Fredricks chuckled at the sight.

“Call back if they leave,” Masters instructed and returned his phone to his pocket still amused.

Fredricks looked puzzled.

“The fish are in the ocean,” Masters repeated.

It did nothing to alleviate Fredricks’ puzzlement.

“Get your guy up here – 1418. Let’s go.”

Fredricks made the call. Within a few minutes, they were gathered and the evidence secured. Masters was quite specific as to where he wanted the railing swabbed.

“Well, I can tell you one thing for sure at this point,” the technician said. “There has recently been blood spilled here, if that’s what you’re looking for. It’s been washed off but it was here within the last hour or so. I’d bet chlorine based bleach was used. I’ve taken some paint chips for analysis.”

“Good going Forensics Guy,” Masters said.

It called for the shortest of jigs and received one.”

“Hey,” Fredricks said. “Pretty light on your feet.”

“The balloon effect. Heartburn and gas.”

All three initialed the evidence bags.

Masters felt certain that the fish in the ocean was destined for the frying pan.

Fredrick’s phone rang. He was soon finished and speaking again with Masters.

“Something. Maybe,” he began looking at Masters. “One of the officers just picked up a Saturday Night Special in the parking lot. Registration numbers filed clean. He made an interesting comment. He said it looked like it hit the blacktop with lots of force – it left a small indentation and then a scoot mark – his phrase – for about twelve feet to the east. A full chamber and doesn’t appear to have been fired recently.”

“Let forensics have a go at it, I guess,” Masters said. “Hard to see how it might fit into any of this – or is it? Hey! That just might make sense out of things that don’t. Yes, by all means have the lab do a complete check on that piece.”

Fredricks forwarded that request to the officer who had called in the information. He then left the hotel. Tako went to put in an appearance as ‘boyfriend’ among the relatives gathered in Tina’s room. Masters theories about this case – these cases, actually – hung or fell on a precise timeline of events. He decided it was time to construct that time-line from

his scattered notes. He emptied his pockets of the pen-marked scraps of papers and placed them beside his pad on the desk. He donned his reading glasses and took a seat there. He arranged them in order and then made notes.

TIMELINE

Saturday:

8:00 am Terry arrives at hotel (Jerry there since sometime Friday)

3:00 pm Carter sisters check into hotel

6:55 pm Tako is given envelope containing card to go with champagne – at front desk.

7:14 pm Champagne is ordered by phone in lobby and charged to Blair's suite

8:00 pm Champagne delivered by Tako to Carter suite

Sunday:

7:00 to 7:45 Tina cleans Carter's rooms and Hot tub

8:30 Masters arrives at Hotel and checks in

9:00 to 9:20 Masters meets with Bill Lawrence and

June

9:30 Masters has breakfast

9:45 Tom into shower in his suite – says Tim

Tim goes to pool to swim – says Tim

9:55 Terry goes to pool to swim

10:00 to 11:00 Someone lures Tom to Carter suite, drugs him

and drowns him

Jerry in his office (according to Jerry)

Terry swimming in pool (according to Jerry, Terry and

Tim)

Tim swimming in pool

Carla and Marla at restaurant

First meeting between Masters and Fredricks scheduled to take place

10:30 Terry gets phone call via Oliver at pool

10:58 Tako called by Marla to her suite to pick up gowns for the cleaners

11:00 Jerry says he took a bath/shower in his tub

11:02 Marla Carter enters her suite and finds Tom

Dead in hot tub

- 11:03 Tako arrives at and enters Carter suite
- 11:04 Tako calls Marvel and Masters
- 11:05 Carla arrives at Carter's suite
- 11:06 Marvel arrives at Carter suite
- 11:10 Masters and Aggy arrive at Carter suite
- 11:20 Fredricks arrives at Carter suite
- 11:25 Tako brings Tim to the Carter suite
- 11:30 Coroner and forensics arrive at Carter suite
- 11:30 to 11:55 Electrical Hook-up on shower had to

have been made in Jerry's suite

- 11:40 Tina and Aggy leave Carter's suite
- 11:45 Coroner, body and Marvel leave Carter's suite
- 11:50 Jerry arrives at Carter suite
- 11:55 Jerry, Tim and Officer go to Jerry's suite
- 11:59 Beth caught on tape leaving the Hotel side

entrance

- 12:00 noon Fredricks leaves Carter suite
- 12:01 pm Forensics team leaves Carter suite
- 12:02 Masters leaves Carters and meets Tako in the

hall

- 12:05 Masters enters Jerry's suite
- 12:10 Tim leaves Jerry's suite with officer
- 12:15 Masters leaves Jerry's suit
- 1:20 Jerry is shocked in his tub
- 1:40 Masters is back at Jerry's suite after murder

attempt

- 1:50 Marvel arrives at Jerry's suite
- 1:55 Fredricks arrives Jerry's suite
- 2:30 Fredricks arrives at Masters' suite (after M and

Tako talk in hall)

- 2:45 Beth "re-arrives" at the hotel – official arrival with

luggage

- 2:55 Tako back at Masters' suite and joins M and

Freddy on balcony

- 3:05 Tako leaves to get surveillance tapes from

Marvel

- 4:00 Masters, Tako and Fredricks finish viewing tapes

(first time)

- 4:30 Masters meets with Terry in Terry's suite - 880

- 5:30 Jack leaves to pick up stolen car (gone 2 hours)
- 6:18 Tako called by Jerry to his suite
- 6:24 Tako arrives at Jerry's suite – still out in hall
- 6:25 Tako enters Jerry's suite – Jerry inside in robe
 - Photographer taking time lapse shot
 - Joe Blair's body lands on pavement
- 6:29 Marvel arrives at Blair's body outside
- 6:30 Marvel calls Tako to get Masters
- 6:30 Masters finishes dinner
- 6:35 Tako informs Masters of Joe Blair's murder
- 6:40 Masters and Tako arrive at Blair's body
- 6:45 Photographer arrives to speak with Masters
- 6:50 Fredricks arrives in his car at murder scene
- 6:51 Other police and coroner arrive
- 6:58 Masters, Fredricks and Tako confer about the angle of descent of the body.
- 7:05 Masters, Fredricks and Tako in Blair's Suite
- 7:15 Masters in Jerry's suite with Jerry
- 7:25 Masters and Tako in hall – Masters called Fredricks
- 7:30 Masters and Fredricks in Masters' Suite
- 7:50 Jerry and Beth to the pool with Tako in surveillance
- 7:55 Jack Blair returns with his car
- 8:00 Evidence gathered from Jerry's suite
- 8:15 Masters back in his room to work on time-line
- 8:45 Masters finishes time-line (well, almost!)
- 8:55 Tako returns for the night to Masters' suit.

"Nothing complex about this case," Masters said out loud.

He moved to the more comfortable chair that sat guarding his twisters. 'It is a case of interesting alibis,' he thought to himself. 'During Tom's murder Tim and Terry were in the pool. Jerry was in his office taking calls, which I still need to verify.'

He made a note.

'Lawrence and June need to be accounted for. They will probably be each other's alibis and that won't work. Carla and Marla were at breakfast – easily verifiable.'

Still, he made another note to substantiate that.

'Aggy appeared to be in her office; at least she was there when she opened the door for our meeting at a few minutes after eleven. Marvel arrived at the Carter's suite immediately upon being called after Tom's body was discovered. Where was he during the previous hour? And Tako; where was he between ten and eleven?'

Another note.

'It seems such a waste of time to establish all these alibis when I know who the three culprits are. But, it is necessary to rule out the others – see that they are protected from suspicion. There are of course hundreds of others here who could be investigated. I will assume at this point it has all taken place within the little group – the little sub-culture – that I have come to know if not love.'

He shifted gears to the death of Joe Blair.

'Jerry has the most ingenious alibi. He was talking to Tako through the door at the exact moment Joe fell to his death – presumably from his own balcony down on six hundred.

'Jerry had apparently just got out of a shower as he told Tako to enter. It seems ironclad. An eye witness – well, an ear witness and that is some different. The precise time of the fall can be established by the digital pictures taken by the photographer, which also gives the photographer an alibi – not perfect but pretty tight. Interestingly, Tako is Jerry's alibi and Jerry is Tako's alibi. Tina would have her family to account for her. That leaves Terry, Beth, Marvel, Bill Lawrence and June, needing to have their whereabouts confirmed.'

'As to the time of the set-up for Jerry's tub, where were all the folks? That would have had to have been between 11:30 and 11:55 since the suite was occupied except for that short period after Jerry's 11:00 bath. Those in the Carter's suite at that time would include Marla and Carla, Tina, Aggy, Marvel and Tako – off and on. Tim was also there from about 11:25 until 11:55 at which time he and Jerry went to Jerry's suite. That leaves Beth and the photographer unaccounted for. Well, Beth was on the hotel premises during some of that time as revealed in the surveillance tape. There seems to be a time between 12:15, when I left his suite, and 1:20 when

Jerry was alone in his rooms and although he could have rigged up the electrical wire during that time no outsider could have. If it turns out he was elsewhere, then an additional time window opens up.

“This is too complicated for an old man’s mind. The day was, when I could have kept all this in my head with no need for written notes. Youth, where are you when I need you?”

“I’m back,” Tako said as he entered, stripping his tie, removing his jacket, and opening his shirt.

Masters chuckled, in light of his own, just previous, question to himself.

“Looks like you’re packing it in for the night,” Masters said, smiling a greeting in the boy’s direction.

“Until I get a call at least. Seems like it’s been a big day. I’m tired. I’m seldom tired. Strangest day of my life, I’d say.”

“Soft drinks in the fridge. If you’re hungry order up from room service. It’s on my tab – my free tab.”

“Really. I’ve never had from room service. This could be a hoot. Yeah, I guess I haven’t eaten since ten or so this morning. Well, I managed to munch down a half dozen peanut butter cookies Tina’s mom brought along.”

Five minutes later the order was placed.

“This is a double hoot,” Tako said as he hung up. “You know who they’ll call to deliver it up here on fourteen hundred?”

He hurried back into his outfit.

He was right. Ten minutes later his phone beeped. In another ten he was back at the suite bearing a spaghetti dinner for three with all the trimmings. Masters agreed – without a whole lot of encouragement – to join him, “Just to be sociable, you understand. But why dinner for three?”

Tako smiled as he again shed the nonessentials.

“I’m young and hungry and you’re old and shall we say stout. One and a half dinners apiece seemed reasonable.”

It was worth a chuckle between them.

“Look at this bill!” Tako said, plainly shocked. “\$98.55! I’ll have to cough up thirty bucks to cover my tip to myself.”

That clearly seemed more hilarious to Tako than Masters though the big man enjoyed the youngster’s reaction.

As they ate they talked about the case.

"I was thinking about that Beth tape," Tako said. "I'm going to put it in, okay?"

"Sure. What's on your mind about it?"

"Before she comes out of the shadow and into enough light where we can first make her out, she was standing still and talking to somebody, I think. Here. Let me back it up. There! Let me go back just a little further. We didn't look back here because we were just trying to identify her face. Now that we know it's her we can track her backwards. There. See. She's talking with an old guy. Go back further and . . . she's still talking with that old guy."

Masters smiled.

"That old guy is a good ten years younger than I am," he said, trying to poke a little fun Tako's way.

"Right! Tako said.

"I said old, not ancient. I was correct. See. Look at that. The man is handing something to her – like an envelope. She puts it in that huge over the shoulder purse she's carrying. Then she turns and comes out into the light and we've seen all that."

"Nice job, son. Back it up and let's do the same for the man – trace him back and see if we can get a good look at his face."

Tako poked buttons on the remote for some time and finally froze a frame. There. It's one of the Potter Twins. About sixty years old. They are in the suite next to Mr. J's. Filthy rich and great tippers. Usually come in somewhere in the top three or four in the over-all competition the way I hear it. Always win their age division. I know this sounds like a bad cliché out of an old black and white movie but they made tons and tons of money from a gold mine in Utah – the way I hear it, at least."

Masters had pulled out the list of participants that Lawrence had given him earlier.

"Lyle and Kyle Potter. Age sixty. Home state Utah. Both married. Get this, they each paid over fifty thousand dollars in membership fees to ITCONA this year. That suggests something over five million dollars in income each."

"And get this," Tako said, drawing Masters' attention

back to the screen. He rewound the tape even further. They watched Beth and the Potter man come through the door together. Beth removed a long blond wig and put it into her purse. Watkins looked around and then gave her a quick kiss on her cheek. It was then that he took the envelope from the inside pocket of his jacket and handed it to her. She donned dark glasses and walked out of camera range toward the north parking lot.

"It would sure be nice to find the surveillance tapes from the parking lot that would tell us where she went after this," Masters said.

"Call Marvel's office. Let them do some of the legwork," Tako said. "I'll bet they can find it for us."

Tako clearly had begun thinking of himself as part of the investigation team. Masters made the suggested call. It might take some time but they would call when they found it.

"Wait 'til morning to call back unless you find something within the next half hour. It's past my bedtime."

"Is it really?" Tako asked.

"Nine thirty sharp," Masters answered.

"It can wait until morning, then. You're already fifteen minutes late."

"It? You will tease me with an IT?" Masters said, playfully.

Tako smiled.

"It's just one little thing but it's been bugging me. Half an hour ago, or so I was passing the pool and saw Terry swimming. Why would he be swimming a second time today? I mean maybe he would be, but I don't recall him ever doing laps twice in one day before. Mr. J and Beth sometime swim together in the evening or late afternoon but it's mostly just playing around – not laps – but Mr. T was swimming laps again."

"How could you be sure it was Terry?"

"Terry never puts his hair back in a ponytail. Mr. J does it a lot and always when he swims."

"You're sure of that?"

"Oh, yes. It isn't general knowledge but Mr. T got his ear chewed up by a dog when he was a kid. I suppose it's the only thing that really distinguishes him and his brother apart."

I'd guess that's the reason for the long hair – to hide the difference. Probably couldn't win if that were known."

"You have personal knowledge of the ear thing?"

"Sure. I give them birthday-suit rubdowns, remember. I've seen the ear many times."

"Has Terry ever mentioned it – told you not to mention it?"

"No. I've never said anything and neither has he."

"And how did you learn of this dog thing?"

"I overheard Mr. T explaining it to a girl – woman – who was in his suite a few weeks ago. They were on the couch. I had just set up his massage table in the bedroom and came out to tell him I was ready. He had undressed getting ready and it was really awkward seeing him sitting there on the couch stark naked beside a fully clothed woman, so I hesitated – just long enough to hear. I pretended I hadn't heard anything and then called to him from back inside the bedroom."

"You have just put the final nail in the coffin of murderer number one, my friend. Here's fifty bucks. Go buy your Tina a dozen roses."

"Gee. Thanks. I will, but in the morning if it's okay with you. I don't understand what I did."

"You will in time. You will in time. I'm going to turn in. If the new tape arrives accept it. We'll go over it in the morning."

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Chapter Six

Monday Morning

A Matter of Timing

Masters had arranged to meet Fredricks for breakfast at seven. The news he brought with him from forensics was troubling.

“You’re not going to like what I have this morning,” Fredricks said.

He paused, taking a sip of his coffee and then continued.

“It’s the Tako kid. My handwriting gal says she’s 99% sure the note that accompanied the champagne to the Carter’s suite was written by Tako. Aggy provided samples from the employees.

Masters nodded, motioning him to continue.

“The bottle had one set of prints on the bottom – Tako’s third and fourth fingers of his right hand.”

Apparently unruffled, Masters buttered a slice of toast. Fredricks continued.

“The lamp cord in Watkins’ suite – the one that had to have been unplugged in order to plug in the extension cord from the shower. Tako’s right thumb and index fingers – one on each side.”

“A triple ouch. Too early in the morning for triple ouches, Freddy.”

“There’s more, I’m afraid. It’ll probably make it a quadruple! The wine glasses on the shelf above the mini-fridge in the Carter’s suite. Traces of the drug left in both – hadn’t even been washed – just dumped, apparently. And

Tako's prints were all over both of them."

Masters sighed.

"Now, if you can just follow that up with an unfavorable Juvie report on the boy you will have certainly made my day."

"That's a good news / bad news report. The good news is he doesn't have a record – never even been close to being in trouble. Church and Sunday school every week. Volunteers at an old folks' home Saturday mornings. Held various, age appropriate, jobs since he was nine. Employers say he is as reliable and hard working as they come. He carried an A minus average all through high school. Salutatorian at graduation.

"That little scum bag," Masters said trying to lighten the moment. "And the bad?"

"At the gym, he was befriended by Ivan Stalinski."

"Of the Russian mob?"

"Right – alleged mob family. He's in his late twenties – youngest son. Tako gives him rub downs after his workouts at the gym. On several occasions neighbors report that a "family" limo has come to pick him up and take him to the family compound in the country. Several hours later he would be returned home."

"The Stalinski family have anything to do with this twin contest?" Masters asked?"

"Nothing obvious but then it never is with them," Fredricks said.

"This hotel?"

"Not that we can find."

"So," Masters began to summarize, "We have a bright, angelic, hardworking, mother loving, choir boy who we are to believe killed Tom and tried to electrocute Jerry. I suppose we should search for a Stalinski connection, just in case."

"Let's change paths, here," Masters went on. Mary Watkins' death – the mother of Jerry and Terry. Anything on that case that looks suspicious?"

"Maybe. Maybe not."

"Sounds like a less than helpful beginning," Masters smiled.

"It seems there was in interdepartmental snafu. The lab report on her blood wasn't actually completed until after

the coroner's inquest had been held and established that the cause of death was drowning. She was found face down at the bottom of a pool. There were no marks on the body to indicate foul play. Her lungs were filled with water. Looked like a simple case of swimming alone and drowning.

"But?" Masters asked, realizing there was more.

"But, the lab report showed there was a very high concentration of chlorine gas in her blood. The second finding was the expected I suppose – water filled both lungs. One other thing, the upper end of her trachea was badly bruised or something inside her throat. Never explained as far as I can see from the file. The Medical Examiner made a note indicating it could have been caused by something like choking on a peach pit."

"What was the chlorine level of the water in her lungs?"

"Let's see. It says .001 parts per million."

"Fredricks you are a gem!"

"Will you put that in writing for my wife? Tomorrow's our anniversary and I'm probably going to be tied up all day right here."

"You got it. I even happen to know someone who apparently has beautiful handwriting that can inscribe it."

"May I ask why you think I am a gem? I mean, I've realized it all my life but I'm interested in your take."

It was, of course, just a friendly con to get Masters to share his thinking.

"You just proved that Mary Watkins was murdered. More than that, how it was done. Now we just have to prove who did it. I have several suspects in mind. We will need to find the young man who helps Sam, the lawn care guy at the Watkins residence.

"Damn, I'm good!" Fredricks joked, having no idea what Masters was talking about.

"I should re-open that one, then?"

"By all means. I'll need copies of all the reports – lab, coroner, site investigation, statements from family, employees, neighbors. Also, have samples of the tap water from the house analyzed for chemical content."

Masters pushed back from the table and patted his stomach.

“Upon further consideration of your two reports this morning, I now see they were both positive.”

“Tako’s?”

“Especially, Tako’s!”

“You can’t possibly believe the boy is involved, can you?” Fredricks asked.

“Tako? Kill or try to kill somebody? Never!”

“Then how can it be good news?”

“Find the one or one’s who set him up and we’ve drawn the noose just that much tighter around the actual killer’s neck.”

“Clever. I see. A backdoor to the killers, so to speak.”

“Right. It was overkill on their part. Way too much misleading evidence. Amateurs can never leave well enough alone.”

“Thank goodness, huh?” Fredricks said.

Masters raised his eyebrows and nodded.

“What else?” Masters asked.

“The photographer’s pictures proved interesting, I suppose. The time stamp suggests the body plummeted by his fifth floor balcony at 6:24:16.”

Masters nodded.

“That was the exact moment Tako can alibi Jerry as being in his suite and Jerry can alibi Tako as being in the hall right outside his door.”

“Confusing, in light of other findings,” Fredricks said.

“Go on then,” Masters urged.

“The long blond hairs found in the Carter’s hot tub after Tom’s death, the hair on his folded clothes and a blond hair found in the dead Joe Blair’s dark hair, all are apparent matches for the Watkins twins. DNA will follow. This much has been established: Same shampoo and conditioner on all of them. That’s not ironclad but it is a brand that has to be imported from France. That would seem to make it fairly rare here in Bernard’s Bay.

“Joe’s fingers had been cut on top fairly deep – one slice along three of them. That was done before the fingers were mashed by the blunt object, which could be the rock from Jerry’s balcony though there was no blood found on it. The fingers probably bled quite a bit first. A lot more than could be

accounted for from what was found on the railing at the Blair's balcony. With the rain and all, it will be hard to use that."

He opened another folder and continued.

"Like you suggested, the blood on the Blair's railing contained numerous paper fibers. I won't even ask how you suspected that. He was alive until he hit the pavement. Dead in seconds after impact. The damage to the skin, bones and internal organs suggest he either fell a greater distance than from his balcony or he careened off several railings on the way down. The lab agrees with Tako's take on the angle. The body seems to have plummeted straight down. Not what they would expect if he jumped or was pushed or if he had hit other railings on the way to the pavement."

"The ashes you sent along in the little evidence bag were primarily paper – paper toweling to be exact. There was some blood. Type A."

"Blair's blood type was . . .?"

"A."

The blood on Jerry's railing?"

"A"

"The blood on the Blair's railing?"

"A. But that's not an uncommon type. We'll have to await the DNA match."

Masters was writing on his yellow pad while Fredricks talked. He removed a sheet, folded it and handed it across the table.

"Is Judge Bates still on the bench up here?" Masters asked.

"Sure is. You know him, I take it."

"Several cases, years ago. See that he gets that note and ask him to issue a general search warrant for the Watkins house and grounds in Syracuse. By the time you get that, I'll have a specific set of things I want examined there."

They finished their coffee. Masters spoke.

"The twin competition begins in earnest today. I imagine they'll be preening around here like pairs of peacocks. By the way, there is one set by the name of Potter – very wealthy old men – well, old to you and spring chickens to me. I need to find some link between them and Beth Watkins – recent or way back. I haven't the slightest idea what I'm

asking for. Have I asked for a background check on Bill Lawrence and his nemesis, June Davenport?”

“I’ve initiated backgrounds on all the majors in this thing. They’re included. Should have most of them in hand by noon. Expecting any more?”

“Murders?”

“Yes.”

“I’m quite sure no more were originally planned but as plots like this one begin to unravel, who knows what may happen.”

“There is the reasonable evidence thing against Tako – strong, reasonable evidence! Under any other circumstances, I’d be obliged to take him in if not put him under arrest.”

“Assign him to my custody. Draw it up formally. I need him here to see if anybody will try to further implicate him. If he’s locked up, we lose that opportunity.”

“Consider it done. Anything else?”

“Speed up that DNAing and take care of the warrant. Those are the biggies today – well, for the time being anyway.”

“I need to corner Tako and reconstruct how he was lured into providing all this evidence against him. I should have a witness. Can you spare an officer?”

“Sure. Mattie – as in Matilda but I forewarn you not to call her that.”

Mattie wore an ever-present, broad, warm, smile on her beautiful black face. It lit up the world wherever she went.

“My suite, if that’s not a problem,” Masters suggested.

“If it’s got a comfortable chair to rest my aching dogs, it’s going to be just fine, honey.”

Masters phoned Tako as they rode the elevator to the fourteenth floor. By the time Mattie had found a suitable place to rest her weary feet, Tako came through the door.

“Hi, Roomie – Ma’am?” he said, showing undisguised surprise at the officer’s presence.

He closed the door behind him and walked into the room.

“What’s up? More sleuthing stuff?”

“In a way, yes. Have a seat.”

“Sounds ominous – that’s my word for the day. Seems

appropriate seeing as there is all this ominous stuff going down.”

“This may not so much be ominous as it is intrigue-laden. Perhaps you can save that one for tomorrow.”

Tako sprawled out on the couch across the coffee table from the others who had comforted themselves into the matching, overstuffed, bulk-friendly, chairs.

“Here’s what has developed,” Masters began. “Somebody, or several somebodys, have tried to set you up as the bad guy in all of this.”

“Me! I don’t understand. Why me?”

“Handy, trusting, outspoken about your need for money, willing to go out of your way to be helpful – things like that I imagine. Anyway, we need to have you help us understand how this evidence was contrived.”

“Sure. Okay. Of course.”

He sat up, clearly anxious.

“First, have you had any dealings with table lamps in the past several days?”

Tako smiled, at first thinking it was some kind of put-on. Masters remained serious and the boy understood.

“Table lamps. Hey! Yes, actually. Old Mrs. Darling down in 444. When I was helping her Friday evening she asked me to move the lamp by her bed from the table on one side to the one on the other. Is that the kind of dealing you were referring to.”

“Exactly. Describe it for us.”

He became thoughtful and quiet.

“A white ceramic-like base, white cord, lemon yellow fabric covered lampshade with a three way bulb. How’s that?”

“As good as it gets,” Masters said. “Next question. The same for a green bottle, the kind wine comes in.”

“Same place. Same evening. And then later the one up here, that first time I was in your suite.”

Mattie raised her eyebrows. Tako realized how it must have sounded. He turned to her and explained.

“Sparkling, white, grape juice. Mr. Masters doesn’t drink anything harder.”

“Back to the bottle in Darling’s room,” Masters suggested.

“Mrs. Darling had just arrived that afternoon. She is ancient, even compared to you, Sir.”

Mattie snorted quietly. Tako continued.

“The desk asked if I’d take a newspaper to her. So, I got one and went to her room. That was funny, thinking back on it. Marty at the desk said, ‘Mrs. Darling in 444 wants you to bring her a paper.’ I didn’t know she existed until that moment. Why would she have asked for me? Maybe she hadn’t. Maybe it was just how Marty said it that made me think she had.”

“Anyway, you took her the paper. When was that?”

“About eight, give or take a few minutes.”

“Proceed. What next?”

“I got the pass key from Marty and then the paper. I took the service elevator, then knocked, and announced myself. I expected her to tell me to let myself in – that’s how it’s usually done – but she came to the door and let me in herself. Just how old people would do it, I thought to myself. I held the paper out to her but she said to put it on the table, which I did. She shut the door – an odd thing I thought if I was going to leave immediately. It was then she asked me to do the lamp thing. After that she asked me to join her for some refreshment. I gave her my standard response – like I gave you – but she insisted I have some pop at least. She had me get a can from the fridge and asked me to sit a moment – something about keeping a lonely old lady company for a few minutes. We made small talk. She was just staying the night. Her grandson was picking her up Saturday morning and they were going on to Buffalo for a family reunion. I thought this was a strange place to be making a connection with someone. There are lots of less expensive places to stay that are much closer to the airport. Then she asked me to write a note for her to go with a present she was taking to her nieces. Her hands really shook so I said sure. She dictated and I wrote on a card she had in her purse.”

“Do you remember the essence of the note?”

“Essence – good word. Actually, I remember it word for word because it was pretty odd: ‘To two, toolicious, twins. Save this for when I come to sweep you off your feet’.”

“Anyway, after I finished the drink I stood and said that I

really had to get back on duty. She said she understood and asked if I'd do just one more thing – put some ice in the silver urn and put a bottle of champagne in it for her. I fixed the ice from the fridge. There was just one bottle in there so I iced it down like she had asked. I took it to the table beside where she was sitting. I asked if she wanted me to open it. She said no. She'd wait until she was ready for bed. She asked that I bring two wine glasses from the shelf above the refrigerator. I did that, then she gave me a twenty-dollar tip and I left. Never heard from her again."

"Two glasses?"

"Yup. I thought it was strange, too, but then everything about that experience had been strange."

"Do you remember the name or anything on the label of the bottle," Masters asked.

"No. I'm not into that stuff and I really wouldn't know one from another. I was just happy there was only one bottle to choose from for fear I'd make a fool of myself not knowing which one she wanted."

"And the pop?"

"Some kind of orange. It was all she had. I'm sure it was some cheap off brand brought into the hotel – not the good orange like you have in here. It was a fresh six pack. I removed the first one. It wasn't really cold but I didn't let on."

"What else was in the fridge?"

"Actually, nothing. But then she was just staying overnight."

Masters turned to Mattie.

"If I may, my dear, I need to get you back on your feet. Find that can that held the orange pop from room 444. It would have been removed when, Tako?"

"Sunday morning. The Maid Service can tell you which girl cleaned the room."

"Try to preserve whatever prints may be left," Masters added. "That's what I need. Tako's prints."

"Yes, Sir. "I'm on it then."

She left.

"I need to speak with that Marty person. He works evenings?"

"Just fill in. He's usually a day guy. I can get him on

the horn for you.”

Masters nodded and was soon speaking with him.

“Marty. Ray Masters here. I need your help. Put on your thinking cap. Friday night about eight you got a call from 444 – a woman asking for a newspaper. Do you remember?”

“Yes, Sir. It was strange all the way around.”

“How’s that – strange?”

“Well, she asked for Tako first off and he wasn’t working her floor so I can’t figure out how she knew him. But when he came through the lobby I got him on it. He’s always happy to do anything that needs doing.”

“Was there anything else that seemed strange?”

“Yes. I remember my desk records didn’t have anybody registered for 444. I called the room right back when I discovered that, but nobody answered. I figured either I’d made a mistake or the guest had made a mistake – the voice sounded old. I expected to see Tako return any minute and tell me nobody was there. He didn’t and I guess I got busy; that’s crunch time at the desk – everybody returning from dinner and wanting their keys and turning in wake-up calls.”

“So, what’s the bottom line on the woman who was, in fact, in 444 when Tako got there with the paper?”

“444 was not rented that day. It should not have been occupied. I don’t understand.”

“Check for me and see if a key is missing.”

“I’m looking as we speak. No, Sir. They are all here. That room remains empty.”

“I want those keys. Don’t let them out of your sight until Marvel picks them up.”

Masters hung up and turned to Tako.

“Get me Marvel.”

“Here. It’s ringing.”

“Captain. Masters here. Marty, at the front desk, has a set of key cards I need to have examined ASAP. Same for the pass keys to the four hundred floor. I want to know the complete history of their use since Friday afternoon. How do we proceed?”

“Meet me at my office in five minutes. That’s where the card reader is – an electronic gizmo.”

“Be there in five then. Thanks.”

Masters addressed Tako.

“Need to meet Marvel at his office. You need to stick close to me. I’ve checked you out for the duration of this thing.”

“Checked me out?”

“From the cops. It’s either me or a cell until we can clear up this evidence we were just talking about.”

“I guess I must have somehow missed the incriminating particulars about that.”

“So, you did. I’m sorry. Here’s the short version. Your prints were found on the plug on the lamp in Jerry’s suite – the one that had to be unplugged in order to plug in the extension cord. Your prints were also found on the bottle of champagne used to drug Tom before he was killed. They were also on the wine glasses in the Carter’s suite – complete with remnants from the drugged wine inside. Then, the ‘toolicious’ note that accompanied the bottle of Champagne that you delivered to Carters. It was in your handwriting.”

“Geeze! I’d arrest me, too. I can’t believe this. Who’d want to do this to me? Why.”

“I’m fairly sure it’s nothing personal. Like I said, handy, willing and vulnerable.”

They entered the elevator.

“What did Mrs. Darling look like?”

“Old. Really old. Long gray hair – sort of straggly you could say; a long black dress with a high, button-in-front, collar – couldn’t really even see her neck; gold, wire framed glasses – with pinkish tinted lenses; gobs of make up like plastered on with a trowel. I doubt if any of her visible face was really skin, you know?”

“Eye color?”

“Couldn’t tell through the glasses. I’d guess blue or brown.”

“Big help, smart-aleck! When did you return the pass key.”

“Immediately after I left – but to one of the Archer twins, not Marty. That’s policy. If it’s not your floor it goes back immediately. You get demerits if you don’t.”

“Demerits?”

“Bellmen accumulate merit points and demerits

depending on the comments the guests make, how well you do your job, and abide by the rules. Weekly bonus if you're overall total is the highest."

"Would you recognize her if you saw her again – Mrs. Darling?"

"Sure. Oh, she had a wart on her nose and her purse was big with a shoulder strap. It didn't seem to go with her, though. She was all in black and whites – dress, hair, shoes. The bag was tan, woven leather-looking. Had a big, I don't know what you'd call it, a leather medallion like thing with flowers painted on it – yellow and green – on the front."

"You have seen that since then, do you remember when?"

"What? I don't think I've seen it. What do you mean?"

"I'll let your young mind work on that while we talk with Marvel but you have seen it."

The elevator opened onto G for ground.

"Over to the right and behind the area where the front desk is. That door."

Tako pointed and led the way. They were soon inside the security office. Banks of TV monitors and recorders occupied one wall. Several officers were keeping close watch.

"Masters," Marvel said as they entered. "Over here. I'll show you how this gadget works. These gadgets are the greatest. I love gadgets. These are the room keys, er, cards. I never know what to call them. Anywho, put it in the slot, like this; press history, and type in the dates or times and it all reads out on the screen. You can print it out, too, for a hard copy."

"We need to see if any were used at the room – that's 444 – on Friday between say noon and ten PM."

One by one he checked them. None showed that they had been used.

"The floor pass key then," Masters said.

"Again, no access was made with any of the floor pass keys during those hours."

"There is no gentle way of asking this, Captain, but it's for your protection as much as anything. Let's see your master pass key scanned for that time period."

"No problem. I understand."

Again, no results.

“Thank you. One question. You just scanned all six room keys. One of them showed no action at all as if it had never been used. I don’t understand.”

“Probably a new key. Guests often take the key with them by mistake, especially if they check out over the phone rather than here at the desk. It’s easier that way. If they use a credit card it takes about ten seconds. We just change the entrance code on those keys that are left and make a replacement card when we find one is missing.”

“Can you tell me when that newest keys for 444 were made?”

“Sure. Press a few magic keys and . . . there it is. Interesting. Saturday morning a new one was made for 444.”

“And yet no one had been in that room for how long?”

“Let’s see. 444 was unoccupied for the past seven days. It sits right over the backup generator and some of the noise and vibration rises up into it when that big gadget turns on. The room’s on the ‘rent last’ list for that reason.”

“How often are the keys accounted for at the desk? What I’m getting at is how long could a room go with fewer than the six keys each one is allotted?”

“The midnight shift does that every day. Each room begins every morning with a full deck – that’s what we call the keys since they are really cards. Just a little security room humor you know.”

Masters smiled and nodded.

“You have been very helpful, Sir. Lock those keys in a secure place. They are now a police exhibit.”

“Yes, Sir. By the way, one of the guys lucked onto a tape that shows Mrs. J getting into her sports car in the parking lot about a minute after she showed up on that other tape at noon.”

“Good work. Keep it as evidence, of course.”

As Masters and his young charge re-entered the hall, Masters had a question:

“How would one procure a twenty foot, white extension cord out here?”

“I doubt if housekeeping has any – mostly those thick orange ones. Probably not here in the hotel. I can’t imagine

our classy gift shop carrying designer extension cords. There's a hardware store in a little strip mall not far from here."

"How about duct tape?"

"I'm sure maintenance has cases of it. I'm finding that behind the scenes places like this are held together by that stuff."

"Lead me to the maintenance place, then."

Most of the first sub-basement was occupied by that department. Masters was amazed by all it took to keep the building up and running. There were painters painting things, carpenters building things, trucks backing in and being loaded and unloaded.

"We probably need Teddy," Tako said. "He's in charge of inventory."

Indeed, it was he who they needed. He was of little help regarding who might have access to the duct tape. It was the real stuff, anyway. They managed to borrow a partial role for an experiment Masters proposed to undertake later on.

"Four things," Masters said to Tako as they rode the elevator back upstairs. "Go to that hardware, purchase a 20-foot white extension cord, and if they carry Acme Metallic Coated Tape – it's a cheap, off brand – get a role."

Tako smiled.

"You said four things, Mr. R."

"Number four is just our mutual understanding that you won't try to leave the country once you're out of my sight."

"No Sir. Or Yes Sir. Or whatever. It won't be that easy to get me out of your hair."

"Need transportation? Shuttle is on my tab."

"I got Mrs. Tannenbaum. She'll do fine."

"Mrs. Tannenbaum?"

"My old Chevy."

"There has to be a story."

Tako grinned.

"There is this lady at my church, Mrs. Tannenbaum. She's always talking and you can never get her to stop. You can even walk from her and she'll just keep on talking. My Chevy's like that. You turn the key off and she keeps on going. Hence . . ."

"Hence, Mrs. Tannenbaum. I've met many of her in my

day.”

“Here’s a fifty. I expect change.”

Tako smiled and tucked the bill into his top, jacket pocket.

“Probably take a half hour. Don’t sic the troopers on me for at least that long.”

“Just call me when you get back. I don’t know where I’ll be.”

“Let’s see. Mid-morning. Raymond Masters. My educated guess would be JW’s somewhere close to the pastry table,” Tako said with a grin.

“Okay, then. Near the pastry table, but understand this, every ounce I may gain while waiting on you will be on your conscious.”

“I can handle that. See you in thirty.”

Masters looked around the lobby getting his bearings. Mattie approached him.

“Mr. Masters,” she said hailing him as he turned to step off in the direction of the restaurant.

“Mattie. Hello. Yes. What?”

She carried a large evidence bag in her arms.

“Got some things of interest here.”

Masters pointed to the sitting area and they were soon there, the bag on the chair between them.

“Seemed like a wild goose chase,” she began, but then I guess I got lucky.”

She opened the big bag and rolled it down from the top. She removed a smaller bag and held it up.

“Exhibit one. A genuine, empty, off brand, orange pop container.”

She sat it on the chair and reached in again.

“One genuine, and matching, almost six pack of off brand, orange pop cans. One can missing.”

“Where and so fast?”

“I’m just good, Mr. Masters. There’s no getting around it, Doll.”

She laughed her wonderful, full-bodied laugh and patted his hand.

“Actually, here’s how it went down. I found the dudette in charge of the maids, Mrs. Ramirez. We went to her three-

ring computer. There was no maid service for 444 on Saturday because the room had not been occupied – supposedly – the night before. Looks like a dead end, yes?”

Masters nodded, a seeming requirement before Mattie would proceed.

“Not so my big dude – no offense.”

“None taken – my big Mattie.”

“Touché! Anyway, some maid named James overheard us talking – and it’s hard for me to think of a James as a maid, but then I suppose it’s hard for lots of folks to think of a Matilda as a cop.”

“Matilda – what a beautiful name. Go on, please.”

Mattie blushed – well, she went through the motions that usually accompany a blush even if her beautiful bronze skin didn’t actually redden.

“Thank you. Back to James. When he heard me mention orange pop, he said he had heard another maid – Tina – telling a story about orange pop two days before – Saturday. So, Mrs. R called in Tina. She’s a real beauty, I’ll tell you. She said she had found a six pack – less one can – of an off-brand orange pop in the trash basket of 1416. It was wrapped up in a black trash bag and pushed into the basket.

“Suspicious items wrapped like that are to be carefully eyeballed by the maids who find them to make sure they aren’t bombs or some such thing. She unrolled the black bag and found the pop just like you see it here.”

“And the empty can?”

“Also, Tina. She discovered it when she emptied a waste basket from 1418 – the big bosses’ suite, as I hear it.”

“She found both of these things on Saturday morning?” Masters asked, needing to be sure.

“That’s what she said.”

“Probably a mess of prints by now.”

“Maybe not. Maids wear gloves in this hotel.”

“And how did they come to be preserved? I’d have thought they would have been compacted and trucked to the land fill by now.”

“Good luck for us. Bad luck for Tina. I guess she’s really watching her pennies this summer. When she found the pop unopened like that, she took it to her room for her

boyfriend to drink. She also kept the empty can – her boyfriend sells them at a recycling place. It was still waiting to be crushed by his mighty heal when she took me to it a few minutes ago.”

“And she will be in trouble for taking the pop?”

“It’s against the rules to take trash for personal use. It’s really for the employees protection – no telling what the left behinds might be infected with, you know.”

“I’ll see if I can’t get her off the hook. She’s the special lady in Tako’s life and she did help us solve this case.”

“She did? Solved? Well, good for us!”

“You’ll personally see those things get finger printed and that I receive the report immediately.”

“Yes, Sir. You’re a nice man, Sir. I’m glad I got to work with you.”

“The feeling is mutual, Matilda. You really should begin using that pretty name, you know.”

Masters made his way to the restaurant. It was a difficult choice. Coffee and pastry or pastry and coffee. He settled on the latter as he continued making notes.

Before long, Tako returned, brown paper bag in tow. He was wearing street cloths. Masters had to ask.

“You seem to be out of uniform and not in the linen closet sense of the term.”

“The young man grinned. As I was leaving, Aggy called me and said I was on paid vacation for as long as you needed me to assist you. She asked that I change clothes so I wouldn’t confuse the guests. So, this is the real me you’re seeing and a darn sight better than that orange jumpsuit down at city jail, I’ll tell you that.”

“You were able to procure the items?”

“Both, in fact, and a third bit of information I believe you will find germane to the investigation.”

“Germane. Good word. And what would it be that just might be germane?”

Tako unfolded a piece of paper taken from his shirt pocket. He pressed it flat and handed it across the table.

“Somebody’s quite the artist,” Masters said, clearly impressed. “Old Mrs. Darling, I assume.”

“Right on. It must be good. Anyway, I drew it in the

parking lot before I went in, thinking it would be good to know if she was the one who bought any of this stuff – my neck being on the line as it is. I showed it to the clerks. None of them recognized her, but the gal in the gardening section recognized the hand bag in the picture. Said a much younger woman with long blond hair and dark glasses had been in late last week. She took the picture and showed it to the guy who runs check out and before long he remembered her too. Guess what she bought?”

“A white extension cord and duct tape, perhaps?”

“No. A dozen bolts and washers. . . . I’m just kidding. Yes, the cord and tape. Yahoo! Huh?”

“Yes, I’d say a double Yahoo!!”

“Let’s try for a triple. What do you suppose they had stacked in a pyramid on the sidewalk out front?”

“I’ll guess six packs of off brand orange pop.”

“You take all the fun out of it, Mr. R.”

“Didn’t mean to. Actually, all of that was great detective work. Go fill a plate with goodies and get something to drink. Oh, but first, my change, please.”

“Oh, gosh, yes. I hope you didn’t think that . . .”

Masters held out his big hand, palm up.

“Me the money. You the Danish. Then shut up and eat,” he teased.

Tako returned with a leaning tower of pastries a foot high.

“Here! They’re for you, too. Laurie’s bringing you a fresh pot of coffee. Letting the girls think I’m single seems to provide a plethora of perks.”

“Probably profusely profane of you, puckish prankster.”

“You are good. This is a hoot as it often says in those Flint books.

“So, what’s next, boss?”

Masters chuckled at what was apparently a newly established employer/employee relationship.

“Next. Yes. Tell me about your gorgeous . . .”

“Tina?” Tako said, jumping into Masters well-baited trap.

“Handwriting,” Masters said, finishing his sentence, clearly pleased with his deception.

“Oh. Really? Well, when I was eleven, I got mono – I know. Way too early to be kissing the girls but somehow, I got it – and I was confined to bed and quiet activities for six weeks. I had a tutor who came to the house for a couple of hours a day. She taught me how to do the fancy writing. I can do calligraphy as well. It was no big deal at eleven but by thirteen when I realized the girls thought it was cool, I started writing that way all the time.”

“An interesting and apparently useful skill for a lad,” Masters said. “I have a job for you later in the day. Tuesday is Detective Fredricks’ wedding anniversary.”

“I hope he wasn’t dumb enough to get married on his birthday like we did.”

“Dumb?”

“Yeah. We only get to have one celebration a year instead of the three we deserve!”

“I hadn’t thought of that. May I suggest that you then consider celebrating the perennially under-celebrated birthdays of William H Harrison and Bartholomew P. Hammerschmidt? That would put two more wonderful holidays into your lives.”

Tako smiled.

“The Harrison dude was a short-lived president, I know that, but who was Hammerschmidt?”

“You’re telling me that you have never heard of Bartholomew P Hammerschmidt?”

“That’s what I’m telling you. Sorry. Who was he?”

“My imaginary playmate when I was five. He’ll be five again – for the seventy first time – on August 27th. Feel free to throw him a bash! He prefers strawberry short cake to ice cream and if you must serve pie make sure it isn’t either cherry or pecan. He’s allergic.”

If nothing else, Tako was a marvelous audience for Masters’ little absurdities. He bent over in convulsive laughter.

“I needed that, Mr. R, Sir,” he said wiping his eyes with his napkin. “Ridiculous or not, this pile of evidence against me has me on edge. I’ve never even been suspected of chewing gum in class. This is really pretty bothersome.”

“Then let’s get to work debunking it all.”

“Debunking. That would be like jumping off a two-tiered

bed set.”

“To the woodshed, my boy!”

Finished with their snack, they, along with Tako’s recent purchases, were soon in Masters’ suite. Tako dumped the contents of the bag onto the sofa.

“You remember how the wire was hooked up to Jerry’s chrome shower hose?”

“Not for sure.”

“Okay, I’ll take you through it step by step. Then I want you to reconstruct it exactly as it was. I’m going to time you to see how long it takes. I doubt if the perpetrator actually practiced the hook up, though he or she certainly knew exactly what was to be done. Come into my bathroom with me.”

“Mama told me never to . . .”

“Shut your prattle and hop to.”

Masters playfully cuffed the lad on the back of his head.

“My set up is much like Jerry’s although my shower hose is plastic rather than chrome. The distances are equal and that’s the important thing. The end of one of the wires was bared back about eight inches and duct taped to the metallic shower hose – at the bottom where it comes through the wall. The two wires were split from each other along the middle crease and the second was bared up about a foot and draped down into the tub – all the way to the bottom. That was all hidden by the partially closed privacy curtain and a towel. Then the wire was taped at the top of the tub, run down the front edge to the floor – taped again – run across the floor next to the wall, under the door, along the bedroom wall and up into the lamp outlet behind the table. The excess wire was coiled under the lamp table. The white wire was barely visible against the white wall and carpet.”

“Got it. Do you suppose the outlet was probably already cut off the end of the cord and the wires made bare before the bad guy entered the room?”

“I am assuming so – and good thinking, by the way – but I’m going to time how long it takes to perform those two tasks as well. Then we will have a time for that and a time for the whole shebang. We can do some subtraction if necessary. Okay?”

“Shebang?”

“Pertains to a Native American’s description of Annie Oakley shooting in an old western, I assume. Now, let’s get serious and do this thing.”

“That was really bad, Mr. R.”

Tako rippled his fingers like a safe cracker before approaching the tumblers.

“Ready, Sir! Not ready, Sir!”

“What now?”

“I imagine some sort of knife or scissors would be helpful. I could use my teeth but Mom paid a mint to get them all straight and nice like this.”

“Just testing you, you understand,” Masters said, smiling sheepishly. “It deserves some thought. Let’s opt for a knife – a pen knife – that’s old man’s talk for a pocket knife. Have one?”

“Yes, Sir. Hotel issue. No bellman shall be without one.”

“Okay, then. Begin at your pleasure.”

“Don’t I get a ready, set, go?”

“Just do it!! And no comments about expensive sneakers.”

Tako went to work, all quite seriously and meticulously. It took him a little under two minutes to remove the outlet and to separate and strip the two wires. It seemed faster than Masters had imagined though as Tako had suggested it would almost certainly have been done ahead of time anyway. It was at that point that the important time element began.

If Masters’ gut hadn’t known better, he would have suspected that this was not the first time the boy had done this. The rest of the task was completed in less than two minutes – far faster than Masters had done it during his mental run through.

“Excellent,” Masters said. “It demonstrates that even taking twice that long, the time window involved presents no obstacle at all.”

“May I draw you a bath, Mr. Masters, Sir?” Tako joked.

“I have always insisted that my guests bathe first,” came the old detective’s retort.”

“For an ancient sort, you remain very quick, Sir, and that is not intended humorously.”

“Then, I will accept it as a serious compliment . . . and wait for the other shoe to drop.”

“No other shoe, or even sneaker, this time.”

“Shocking!” Masters said.

“Electrifying, even,” came the lad’s quick response.

He unplugged the extension cord.

“All is safe again, Sir, Mr. R.”

They moved to the sitting room and Masters offered his young ‘partner’ a twister – he took four instead, and made himself comfortable on the floor, his back against the sofa. Masters smiled.

“So, when will Tina’s family be leaving?” he asked.

“H e a v e n o n l y k n o w s!” Tako said, exasperation showing in his tone. “I love them. Don’t get me wrong, but I love my wife, too, and geeze, you know?”

“Probably not, although I have great compassion for your plight. She takes her break when?”

“In about ten minutes.”

Masters looked at his watch.

“My goodness, it seems I just remembered an appointment or something that I’m surely almost late for probably. I’ll be gone from the suite for say . . . forty-five minutes. I would prefer that you stay here while I’m gone. Some special friend is always welcome to join you, of course.”

Tako’s initial look of puzzlement immediately changed to elation. He was instantly on his feet. Masters followed suit – well, not instantly. The old detective was soon at the door. The young husband was soon on his phone.

Chapter Seven
Late Morning
Morning sickness

Masters figured that he could put the time to good use as well! He went down the hall to Jerry's suite, hoping to check in on his high dollar client. As it turned out, Jerry was there by himself.

"Come in, Masters. Got the bad guy yet?"

"I assume you have to mean the one who's after you. If I had got the other one, you would have been the first to know, of course."

Jerry lifted the large glass he was carrying as if making a half-hearted toast. It was filled with a revolting looking, thick, green, slimy, drink which he sipped. The accompanying expression suggested it may have tasted every bit as bad as it appeared.

"Odd color, that shake," Masters said, fishing.

"This? Not a shake – a power drink. Lots of veggies, raw eggs and protein powder. Good for muscle growth and firm skin. I have one every morning at this time. A creature of habit."

"I see. Wish I could say it looked delicious."

"It's not. Terry won't touch it. I guess it really is awful, but one does what one has to do."

"Yes, I suppose so."

Jerry downed the rest of the drink in a series of large, consecutive, gulps, shivering at the conclusion. He rinsed out the glass in the small sink adjacent to the refrigerator and had a long water chaser.

“I must be on my way soon. Terry and I have to be out and about – available for the judges to ogle, you know. Anything special on your mind?”

“Just checking in to make sure you hadn’t checked out, you might say.”

“Clever. I’ve heard that about you. Quick with the witty repartee.”

Before Masters could muster one of those droll comebacks, for which he was apparently famous, Jerry doubled over in obvious pain. He lifted his head toward Masters and opened his mouth as if to speak but collapsed onto the floor before he could say anything. Masters called Marvel and told him to send the Hotel Physician on the double. Then he was to call the paramedics and finally, find Fredricks.

Suspecting shock, Masters raised Jerry’s feet and covered him with a bedspread hastily dragged from the nearest bedroom. Jerry’s breathing became shallow and his pulse grew weaker and weaker.

It was in that state that the physician found him.

“I’m guessing poison,” she said. “You’ve called 911?”

“Captain Marvel is summoning the paramedics.”

She continued to listen to his heart and check his pupils.

“Any idea what he took?” she asked.

“None. Well, he just finished what he called a power drink. He said it contained vegetables, eggs and some protein powder. Apparently, nothing new to his system.”

“This may not be what the text books say to do in cases of poisoning from unknown substances, but whatever is in there is potent. Let’s induce vomiting. Crack any eggs that are left in the refrigerator. We’ll force feed them. This won’t be pretty.”

“I’m not squeamish.”

The eggs were cracked. While the doctor held Jerry’s nose closed, Masters poured small amounts of the quickly blended eggs into his mouth. In short order, it did just what the doctor ordered.

“Something got into his bloodstream in a hurry, if it was from that drink,” she said.

“That’s right – if. It could have been a reaction from something he had eaten earlier.”

“I’ll ride with him to the hospital,” Masters said.

Marvel and Fredricks arrived. Masters explained what had happened.

“His brother needs to be notified.”

“I’m on it,” Marvel said and he left.

The paramedic team arrived as Masters was examining the carefully handkerchief-wrapped container of protein mix.

“I was going to accompany him to the hospital, but perhaps you will do that, Freddy. I suddenly smell a gardener.”

A blank look passed between the doctor and Fredricks.

“Sure, I’ll go along,” Fredricks said. “Do you want forensics out here? I can give them a ring.”

“No. I’ll collect a few things and retrace his eating and drinking activities during the past twenty-four hours. I’ll send Matilda to the lab with anything I need to have analyzed.”

“Here’s that warrant for the house in town,” Fredricks said. “You want it?”

“Yes. Thank you and a couple of squad cars with a female officer on board.”

“You got it. Give them ten minutes.”

They left with Jerry. Masters turned to the doctor.

“I’m Ray Masters, by the way.”

“Yes, I know. I’m Virginia Thompson. Good to meet you at last.”

“Got a best guess about what it was?” Masters asked.

“No, but I assume you do.”

Masters opened the protein mix container.

“Take a sniff.”

“Smells awful. That’s all I get, I’m afraid.”

Masters sniffed again.

“Rose fertilizer. The type that also keeps the bugs away – works from the roots up – systemic, I think they call it. Used in place of spraying. Deadly to human-kind and bug-kind alike.”

“Someone mixed it in with the powder? Wouldn’t he have tasted it?”

“From the smell of that concoction and the look on his

face as he forced it down, I sincerely doubt if he would have detected any change in flavor.”

“Who?”

“One of four or five – the only ones with access to this suite.”

“Couldn’t it have been laced before it was brought here? I mean it had to come from somewhere else, right?”

“That’s right but look at the directions. It says to add four tablespoons of mix to any sixteen-ounce drink – stir thoroughly before consuming. See how much has been used. At least three times a single portion. That means, he had used it twice before without any ill effects. Though not a sure thing, it would appear that someone added the poison between his last two drinks. He said he has one every morning at the same time. There are no unopened containers in the cupboard. That suggests to me that it was tampered with sometime during the last 24 hours.”

Marvel returned.

“Terry is following the ambulance to the hospital. He’s pretty shook up but wouldn’t hear to letting me take him.”

“Keys to this suite?” Masters asked. “Who can get in here?”

“Mr. J had a few things changed after the attempt . . . well, after the first attempt on his life. We recoded it so now there are only 5 keys that work: Mr. J’s, Mrs. J’s, Mr. Ts, mine and the bellman’s. He took off housekeeping and maintenance and the spare he always kept at the desk. If they want in now, either Mr. J. or I have to be here with them.”

“Why keep the bellman’s active would you suppose?”

“No idea. Didn’t ask. You don’t ask Mr. J. You just do as you’re told.”

Masters looked at his watch. He had been gone some forty-seven minutes. He walked down the hall to his suit, let himself in, and called, “Honey, I’m home!”

It had been more a playful warning of his return than a greeting.

He was met by a grinning Tako.

“Someday, I’m going to have a place where I can say that when I come in. So, what’s next – and thank you, by the way.”

Masters nodded.

“There was just another attempt on Jerry’s life. It looks like poisoning. He is in pretty bad shape. Taken to the hospital. Fredricks is with him so I expect he’ll keep us informed – probably a blow by blow.”

“Somebody isn’t giving up, is he? You must have some idea who it is.”

“Yes, I know who it is and every time there is a new attempt more clues are left that point to the same guilty party. I assume you will be implicated somehow. Is Mrs. Tannenbaum up to a trip to Syracuse?”

“Sure. She’s probably still idling restlessly from her outing to the hardware. Now?”

“Now! Well, as soon as you put on a shirt, sox and shoes.”

It was the first truly embarrassed expression Masters had seen on the face of his young friend.

In the lobby, they met Mattie who was speaking with another officer.

“Mattie. Several things. Room 1418. There is a container of Power Powder drink in an evidence bag. It needs to go to the lab. Contains poison. Probably the same kind used in the combination fertilizer and bug killer for roses. Print the box. Then, and I’m truly sorry this falls to you, but get a sample of the regurgitation on the floor by the sink. It’s the green liquid not the eggs that we need. I promise there will be some wonderful gift involved when I return.”

“Hope it’s got Dr. Scholl’s on the label,” she said smiling. “By the way, this is officer Zimmer – Larry Zimmer. Says he’s here to whisk you off to serve a warrant.”

“Zimmer. I’m Ray Masters. This is my driver, Tako. Good to meet you.”

“Yes, Sir. Same here.”

“This is my plan. Tako and I will go ahead in his car with the warrant – here, you should at least eyeball it to know it’s legitimate. I want you guys to arrive five minutes after us. Silent, dark, approach. I don’t want to get anybody excited. At that point we’ll complete a search of the premises. Here’s a list of what we’re looking for. Questions?”

“No, Sir. Seems pretty straight forward. Any special

rules of engagement?”

“Just one. Nobody gets hurt. Force is the last resort and only for self-protection. I’d rather let somebody get away. They won’t get far. I expect no problems – no guns, no resistance.”

“Sounds exactly like the kind of assignment my wife prays for me to get.”

It was a sobering response. Masters nodded.

Tako took Masters aside.

“There may be just one little problem, here. I could get cited for a faulty muffler and pollution control, Sir. Mrs. Tannenbaum isn’t exactly up to regs. I wasn’t expecting to be tailed by cars crawling with cops when I agreed to this.”

Masters turned back to the officer.

“We will be driving an older vehicle, specially selected to look harmless – run of the mill.”

The young officer who had not really been out of earshot nodded seriously at Masters and then winked at Tako.

It was a forty-minute drive. Tako was an excellent driver – no surprise. Along the way, there were several updates from Fredricks. The bottom line was that Jerry would recover and only had to stay overnight in the hospital. He seemed far less concerned about the threat to his life than about the fact he and Terry would miss a full day of opportunities with the judges. He was demanding that Masters come and stand watch over him.

It was nearly noon when Mrs. Tannenbaum pulled onto the circular drive and stopped (well, sort of!) in front of the ornate, sprawling, wraparound, porch. Tako was instructed to stay outside.

Masters climbed the steps and knocked on the door. A maid answered.

“Is Mrs. Watkins here, please?”

“No, Sir. She’s gone for the day.”

Masters took out the warrant and his temporary paper credentials.

“I have a search warrant. You are obliged to let us enter. This is the copy for Mr. and Mrs. Watkins. You may read it at your leisure.”

He opened the screen door and placed it in her hand.

“You may call Beth if you wish and tell her we’re here. Please do not leave until we have finished. Is anyone else here in the house or on the grounds?”

“Sam, the lawn and pool man is working out back. He may have left for lunch.”

“Will you take me to Beth’s room – the bedroom, I suppose.”

“This is a his and hers household. Two bedrooms,” she reported.

The door was open. On the bed was the shoulder-slung purse which had been so well illustrated in Tako’s drawing and caught on the surveillance tape. He looked inside. Virtually everything on his list was there. He picked it up and left the room without looking further. The maid tittered, seeing the big man struggling to adjust the purse strap across his shoulder.

“I have a very strong feminine side,” he said, attempting a joke. It seemed to escape her.

“Where are the lawn and pool supplies and such kept?”

“In the garden shed behind the pool, out back.”

“Thank you.”

He left through the kitchen door. Only momentarily surprised, he spotted Tako and Sam speaking near the shed. The boy was loquacious – Mr. R’s word for the day. He walked across the lawn to where they were standing.

“Nice look,” Tako said, kidding, in reference to the purse. “This is Sam their all-round outside guy.”

“Yes, we’ve met.”

Masters extended his hand.

“He knows about the warrant,” Tako announced.

The boy’s mouth had clearly been busy.

“The maid has the warrant if you want to see it,” Masters explained further.

“No need. I figured I’d see you back here. Didn’t know just why, but I knew you’d be back.”

“Salesman or thief?” Masters asked interested in Sam’s assessment.

“Oh, not a thief. Guess that leaves salesman if those are the choices.”

“I need to ask you some questions and to look inside

the shed. Perhaps we can do both at the same time.”

“Sure. The door’s open.”

They entered and Sam turned on the lights.

“What we looking for, boss?” Tako asked ready to help.

“I’ll know it when I see it, and not before.”

“I have to assume I won’t be of much help in here, then.”

“Not at this moment. Go intercept the black and whites, if you will. Just have them sit tight in the drive.”

Masters poked around, opening cupboards and boxes and picking up this and that.

“It’s a chlorinated pool?” he asked.

“Yup.”

“Liquid or pellet?”

“Gas injector, actually. The system is in the east room of this shed if you want to examine it.”

“Maybe later. Is the house water filtered?”

“Yup. Mr. Jerry is quite particular about that. No chlorine, fluoride or heavy metals in any of the water they use in there. Calls ‘em poison. I’ve done some reading and now I agree. Nasty stuff. Terrible on a guy’s insides, you know.”

“So, it probably takes a big system for a setup like this.”

“In the basement. A top of the line CuZn, double tank unit. Don’t get no better, you know.”

“Yes, actually, I do know. I’ve even visited their plant in Northwest Arkansas when I was vacationing there.”

Masters continued to move things around and sort through the junk in boxes.

“Do you keep track of the chlorine level in the house water?”

“Yup. Less than one part per hundred thousand. About as good as it gets. The feed line level – what we get from the city – varies between one and three parts per million.”

He shuddered.

“And the pool?”

“The chlorine level, you mean? Two parts per million. Too high I’d say, but it’s the suburb’s regulation. He’s about to switch to some new non-chlorinated system –from that same filter company. Swim safely in chemical-free water the brochure says.”

“You do all the pool maintenance?”

“Mostly. Mrs. Watkins likes to tinker around outside. She can change a chlorine tank if it needs to be done when I’m not here. She’s a pretty handy person. Pretty and handy, you could say.”

He snickered to himself, quite obviously fantasizing things that could never be.

“Look here,” Masters said, picking up a huge toy water gun fashioned to resemble a 1940’s Tommy Gun. “I’ll bet this can soak somebody from forty paces. There aren’t any kids here, though, are there?”

“No, Sir. No kids. Let’s see that. Nope. I’ve never seen it before.”

“It was on the floor covered by all those old newspapers, up against the west wall.”

“I’m taking it with me. Make a note if you like. It’ll be at the station and will be returned if it turns out to be something other than what I’m quite certain it is

“Sometimes you talk in riddles.”

“Just cop talk. You have to forgive me.”

“No problem”.

“On second thought, I’ll grab one of these papers as well. Don’t mention any of this please.”

Sam nodded.

“Now, how about a peek at that pool filtration system, now?”

“Sure. Door’s around the corner on the outside.”

Masters looked and sniffed.

“Chlorine gas is deadly stuff, but I’m sure you know all about that. I’m surprised it’s used in home applications.”

“Mr. Jerry gets pretty much what he wants around here. Gotta be careful, for sure. One whiff and it’s curtains, if you get my drift. I keep a gas mask in the other side so if anything goes wrong in here, I’ll have some way to get in and fix it – turn it off, at least.”

“Ever have a leak?”

“Nope. I run a tight ship, you could say.”

“I see it’s set up with quick connect fittings – John Guest, I assume.”

“Very good for a salesman. Saves a lot of hassle when

changing tanks. Click, click and it's all taken care of. No wrenches needed."

"Well, thanks for the tour."

They went back outside.

"Where was the mother, Mary, when you found her that morning of her accident?"

"Right there on the bottom, face down about five feet from the ladder."

"Here, in the shallow end?"

"Yes, Sir. Right there."

"It's how deep?"

"Thirty inches."

"And you did what after you spotted her?"

"I called 911 and then climbed right down into the water and pulled her out. I didn't know CPR back then – I do now, I'll tell you that for sure – so all I knew to do was turn her over on her stomach and press on her back to try and get the water out – like I'd seen 'em do in movies. It didn't work. The coroner figured she'd been dead for an hour before I got here, so I guess I'm off the guilt-hook."

"And no one else was home?"

"Nope. The men were off on a trip to Wisconsin and Beth had gone somewhere to meet somebody for breakfast – or something like that."

"So, it was just you. That helper I've heard about wasn't with you? Nope. I don't recall why not. I let him go a few years back. It wasn't that he wasn't a good enough worker but I just got tired of always having to bail him out a jail for this and that – battery, drunk and disorderly – one thing after another. One a those that thought he should be able to get through life on his looks, you know? Like life owed him."

"Thanks again for all your help. And it's a relief to know I didn't fit into the thief category."

"Thieves in this neighborhood tend to be second story guys. Somehow you didn't make the cut on that one."

Sam smiled and turned back to the shed. Masters chuckled to himself as he made his way across the lawn to the house. He informed the maid that he was leaving. Tako was sitting, cross-legged, on the hood of his car talking with the four policemen.

“Hey!” he said sliding to the ground as he spotted Masters. “What’s that yellow sub-machine gun you got there? Looks like an old KR-1000. Wow! What I wouldn’t have given for one of those when I was fourteen or so.”

“That’s was when they came out, four years ago?” Masters asked.

The youngest looking of the policemen jumped into the discussion.

“Yes, Sir. I got one for my little brother on his tenth birthday. He was fourteen last month. Those are powerful little guys, I’ll tell you that. Hydraulic! Replaced a few months later by the KR-2000 of course.”

Masters thanked the officers and requested that one car follow them back to the parking lot at the hotel – a ticket prevention measure! He also asked for the name of a competent mechanic who could tweak Mrs. Tannenbaum enough so she would meet the state standards. Several names were enthusiastically offered (accompanied by much animated discussion as to which was best). Suddenly the old car’s future seemed assured. A garage was contacted and arrangements made – all on Masters’ tab, of course.

“A belated wedding present,” Masters whispered to the young man in an effort to quell his protests.

“Well,” Tako said getting in the adolescent’s customary last word, “I just want you to understand that, like you, I too can carry my own weight.”

He laughed hysterically at his little joke. Masters waited patiently for the moment to pass.

“Now that we have that settled, do you have something you can do for an hour while I go to the hospital and torment – that is visit – Mr. J?”

“If I can sneak my suit out of our room I could force myself to go swimming. Actually, though, I’m starved. I better take care of that first.”

“Actually, that’s a very good idea. May I join you – on my tab of course?”

Tako grinned, finally realizing how much pleasure it gave his old friend to do things for others.

“Sure. I’ve decided that tab of yours is like the eighth Wonder of the World.”

As they ate, Masters spoke.

“Between ten and eleven on Sunday – where were you? We need to reconstruct that minute by minute. The first entry I have in the time line for you is when you arrived at the Carter suite at 11:03. We need to do the same for the eleven thirty to eleven fifty-five slot. I have you placed bringing Tim to the Carter suit at 11:25 then nothing again until a few minutes after noon when I met you out in the hall. Work on that while you swim. I should be back by two o’clock. Don’t leave the hotel!”

Masters arranged transportation through Marvel and was soon at the hospital. It was 1:10 when he arrived. He figured five minutes to reach Jerry’s room, another five for Jerry to rant and rave at him, five more to get a few answers from the man about the powder and who had access to it. Then, if he lucked out and Beth was there he had another ten minutes of questions for her. He nodded; he should be back at the hotel by two.

Fredricks had posted an officer at Jerry’s hospital door. He moved to delay Masters at the door, but only for a few seconds.

“I assume you are Detective Masters?” he asked.

Masters was ready and handed the officer his credentials.

“Yes, Sir. Sorry, Sir. Go right on in, Sir.”

“You did your job well. Not one thing to apologize for.”

The young officer visibly relaxed and nodded.

“Jerry, my man!” Masters said, offering a playful and intentionally less than sincere greeting but not his hand. “I’d have never figured you for morning sickness.”

“Very funny, old man. I don’t seem to be getting my money’s worth out of you.”

Masters ignored the comment.

“I assume you have been told that the powder in that drink had been poisoned.”

“That’s what I hear.”

“And you unsealed it for the first time on Saturday and then used powder from that same container on both Saturday morning and Sunday morning, correct.”

“Yes. How? Very good.”

He seemed genuinely impressed.

“So, the poison was added sometime between mid-morning on Sunday and the time you fixed the drink this morning.”

“Yes, I suppose so.”

“Who had access to it during that time?”

“Well, let’s see.”

He became serious and thoughtful.

“There were Terry and Beth, but they wouldn’t be suspects. Then housekeeping this morning – that pretty little Mexican gal – but I was here the whole time she was. I went for a swim early – seven to eight – with Terry. The only other ones with keyed access during that time would have been Marvel and the bellman. That’s it. It has to be one of them.”

“Do you know of any reasons they would want you dead? I hear from Tako that you are a major source of revenue for his college fund. I can’t see why he’d want to cut that off. Marvel? Any old grudges lying around between him and you?”

“Not that I know of but either one could have been hired to do it.”

“Either you’re becoming out and out paranoid or there is something you haven’t told me.”

Jerry looked Masters directly in the eyes.

“Several of us have been trying to buy the Van Ert Bank. Some other group seems to be bidding against us. We can’t find out who but I suspect it’s the Staliniski Family. If I knew that for sure, I’d probably withdraw. They are really bad news. However, it’s just been brought to my attention that the Potter Twins may also be after it. They’ve bought up several small banks around the country in the past few years. They could be going after this one just to keep me from getting it. They have far more resources than I have at this point.”

“And the Potter’s motive would be?”

“Revenge. Terry and I always beat them out in the over-all. It’s been eating at their souls ever we began back when we were kids. I guess it had always been their prize before Terry and I began coming.”

“You crossed both Terry and Beth off your list before even considering them. Are you sure there is no chance

there?”

“Certainly. Terry’s my identical twin – we are the same flesh for God’s sake. And Beth, well, she may not love me anymore, but she loves my money and she’d never do anything to blow that.”

“It seems to me that with you out of the way, and with her being your heir, she’d be sitting pretty.”

“You have to understand two things, Masters. Beth is no business woman and she knows it – she hates business things, in fact. Second, she knows I’m going to be a billionaire before I’m fifty and she wouldn’t miss that ride for anything.”

“I see. Well, you do seem to have that figured out. Tell me about your brother’s business sense. He seems to be doing fairly well.”

“Terry’s a brilliant business man – he just doesn’t have the drive I do. He’s satisfied to just make a hundred thousand dollars a year and play away his spare time.”

“And there is something wrong with that?” Masters asked, genuinely interested in what Jerry’s response would be.

“Of course, there is. M-o-n-e-y! Masters. Money is power and power is success.”

“I take it then that neither Albert Schweitzer nor Mahatma Gandhi were successes in life according to your view of things.”

“The only thing that’s important in life is number one. They were both do-gooders, just out to make themselves look better than anybody else.”

“Your logic escapes me, and I am genuinely troubled you have grown to embrace such a humanity-destructive philosophy, but we are presently involved in other more mundane matters aren’t we. I am glad to see you are feeling better. I understand you will be released in the morning.”

“I will release myself within the hour. And, I demand police protection, twenty-four hours a day until this whole thing is solved.”

“I thought that was offered and you rejected it.”

“I changed my mind. Arrange it?”

Masters nodded.

“Beth around?”

“Cafeteria, I think. Said she was hungry and left just before you came in.”

“Thank you. If I were you I’d stay the night. Your system has suffered a terrible shock.”

“Humph!”

Masters smiled, turned, and left in search of the cafeteria. At the end of the hall, he spotted Beth relaxing in a sitting area. He approached her.

“Mrs. Watkins – Beth, I’m so sorry about Jerry. How are you doing?”

“I’ll pull through. I really hate hospitals. You know who did it?”

“Yes, I certainly do know that.”

“Well, why haven’t you had him picked up?”

“You seem to be so sure that I haven’t.”

“I’m not going to play mind games with you, Masters . . . You know they don’t have a single place in this whole hospital where you can smoke. What’s the world coming to?”

“A smoke free, healthier, place, perhaps?”

“And being a fat old man gives you privilege to put my addiction down?”

“You’re right; I am probably on a collision course with a coronary. Of course, in my case that affects virtually no one but me, unlike the smoke you spew into the air to infect the rest of us.”

She tossed her dark brown hair and turned to look out the window.

“There are several things I need to have cleared up and I hope you can help,” Masters said, changing the subject.

“Like what?”

“I understand you are quite the gardener.”

“I enjoy flowers – things like that. How can that be relevant to any of this?”

“Sam says you can handle things at pool so well, he really isn’t needed.”

“That’s nice of him to say. Sure, I could, but who’d want to?”

“The morning Jerry’s mother died I understand you were away meeting a friend.”

“That can’t possibly be relevant to any of this.”

"I can subpoena you if you would rather talk down at the station."

She gave him the glance of death.

"I was to have breakfast with a friend at The Breakfast Place an old café in the neighborhood."

"You were to have breakfast. What does that mean?"

"She never showed up. I waited around for an hour and then finally ate alone – then I left."

"The name of the friend?"

"Betty Korsinski – a friend from college."

"Can you describe her for me?"

"This is really getting ridiculous!"

"Can you describe her for me?"

"About five six, long platinum blond hair, way too much makeup, dresses in western clothes, fancies herself a country singer."

"And how can I contact Ms. Korsinski?"

"I have no idea. That was four years ago. I never heard from her again. She's probably bedding some record producer in Nashville by now. Who knows?"

"Did she have a stage name?"

"Kitty Holliday, I think she said. Is that about all? Like I said, hospitals bum me out. I need a cigarette."

"Just two more things. Sam, the lawn man, used to have a helper. I need to locate him. Would you know how I might be able to do that?"

"Certainly not. Ask Sam. I suppose he'll know. And the second – the last – thing?"

"Yes. Tell me, if you were going to buy a present for a kid, say a twelve-year-old boy, and say, oh, I don't know you wanted to get him a super powerful water gun of some kind, what store you go to?"

Beth stood and Masters followed her lead. She answered.

"Fortunately, there are no twelve-year-old brats in my life so I will never have to make that trip."

She turned and walked to the elevator, apparently going to leave without speaking again with her husband.

Once again, Masters was completely pleased with his performance. 'Keep the suspects edgy.' It had always been

his best ally in such investigations.

He waited for another elevator and was soon on his way back to the hotel. He now had one more long shot he needed to play. Handsome, young, single-looking Tako might be of service.

At two o'clock he walked through the hotel lobby and into the courtyard looking for the boy in or about the pool. They spotted each other at the same moment. Tako pulled himself up and out of the pool onto the deck. A cabana girl was quick to offer him a towel which he graciously accepted.

"So," Masters said in greeting. "Beautiful girls, a warm sunny day by the pool, big soft colorful towels to wrap yourself in – what better life could there be?"

"It's great for an hour at a time and I know you're being pleasantly sarcastic. What's up?"

"I need your assistance. We're off to find a café."

"We just ate. You can't be . . ."

Masters interrupted.

"Undercover work, my boy. Go get dressed. Spiffy up. I want the young waitresses to be willing to grant your every wish."

"Spiffy up! What era did you dredge that expression up from – and that was a double preposition at the end of a sentence. That takes real talent."

"My generation, you doofus."

"I got duds up at your place. Tina's mom seems to have settled in for the next few days. I moved some of my stuff up while they were at lunch. Hope that's okay."

"Certainly."

Forty five minutes later found them adequately spiffied up – 'dapper,' almost! – and at The Breakfast Place. Tako had been briefed. They were on a mission that involved long term memory and had about one chance in a billion of succeeding. Masters slipped a twenty into Tako's shirt pocket so he could pay his own tab. The young man would take one booth and Masters another across the room. While Tako was working the younger waitresses, Masters would smooth talk those who were, shall we say, more mature.

As it turned out, there were only three waitresses on duty. Masters hopes dropped, but they went ahead with the

plan. Tako had dubbed it Operation Spiffy.

Although Masters did not draw the waitresses as quickly as Tako, he was soon approached by exactly what he had hoped for.

He was greeted in a long-practiced monotone. "I'm Marge. I'll be your server," she said, her intonation suggesting how clearly embarrassed she was by having to say the inane phrase. What would a customer assume – that she was going to be his surgeon? Band Director? Garbage man?"

Marge had seen both sixty and far too much sun. Her dark, deeply wrinkled face, wore a sadness that even her well-practiced, work-a-day smile couldn't disguise.

"Need a menu?" she asked

"Yes, thank you, and lemonade, if you have it."

"It would seem logical for a café to have lemonade on a hot summer day but we're a breakfast place. Orange juice is as close as I can come."

"Orange juice will be just fine, then."

She was soon back with the drink and the menu.

Masters smiled up at her.

"How many patrons must you wait on every day – every year, he asked rhetorically?"

"Too many to count," came her predictable reply.

"A good place to work?" he continued, working up to the point of his visit.

"Yes, actually it's not bad. Been here through the last three presidents. I suppose that says things is okay here."

"I have probably the strangest question to ask that you've been asked in all that time," he said.

She looked interested.

"Mind if I slide in over here for this? My dogs are killing me."

It both amused Masters and reminded him he still owed Mattie something wonderful.

"No. Please, have a seat. I promise not to keep you but a minute. One morning about four years ago, there was an attractive young lady in here by herself waiting to meet somebody who never showed up."

"Honey, if I had a nickel for everyone a those I've seen."

“Yes. I’m sure but may I keep trying?”

“Your nickel – well more than that I hope!”

She giggled. It was an unexpected reaction that pleased the old detective.

“She had medium length, dark brown hair, probably smoked, may have been difficult to deal with.”

Marge interrupted.

“You may not believe this but I do remember her. Crabbed the whole time about having to be here. Let’s see what was the reason she gave? Something about, yes sir, I got it. At first, she said she was a waitress and singer at what was a line dancing bar down on Southern. Somebody gave her the outfit to wear – really expensive for breakfast, I’ll tell you – and paid her something in advance – a hundred bucks I think she said – to come in here at some exact time. I remember that it was early morning but she’d already downed a few, if you know what I mean. A well-oiled tongue. She said she was to just sit in here for an hour without ordering. Then she was supposed to get up and leave. Like I said, she was one of those chatty girls who just had to tell all, you know the type. She swore me to secrecy about what she’d said. This may seem unkind, but she just wasn’t very smart. You don’t soon forget tales like that one.”

“No, I suppose you don’t. I don’t imagine there is one chance in Pocatella that you got her name.”

“No, I’m terrible with names anyway. Sorry on that one, Honey.”

“Anything else about it you remember?”

She sat in silence and looked out the window for a long moment then began a slow, repetitive nod.

“There was something sort of strange. After she left that first time she came back in wearing wraparound dark glasses and ordered breakfast. I supposed she went out to her car to get the glasses – maybe prescription so she could read the menu, you know. It was strange enough to remember, I’ll tell you that. Some other girl waited on her when she came back in. She took a booth that was way across the room from where she had been first.”

“That’s unusual, is it?”

“Yeah. Usually folks come right back to the same

place.”

“Well, I certainly thank you.”

“Wait, there’s something else. You asked about her name. When she left – the second time – she gave the cashier her business card and said if her friend came asking for her she should be given the card.”

“And that card would be lost forever, I assume.”

“You kiddin’? Once a card gets tossed into the box under the register it never leaves this place. Some in there from 1942 I imagine.”

She giggled.

“Let me get the box for you.”

Three hundred and eleven cards later – and probably still some five hundred from the bottom – a distinctive, “Bingo”, reverberated throughout the café. There it was. Beth Watkins, Interior Designer and on the back a dated note reading, “7:40 a.m., Kitty – We must have got our signals crossed. Call me. Beth W.”

Several things about the card seemed odd. First, the fact that she put the time and date on the note and then, that she signed it Beth W. Would her friend not know that the person she was to have met would have been the Beth whose last name began with W? And, it was printed on the other side.

Masters spoke.

“Marge, if this weren’t a public place with young folks around I’d reach across this table and plant big kiss on your cheek.”

“Heck, friend, those kids you’re worried about do that and more all the time. Pucker up.”

She pointed to her cheek and Masters delivered. He also tucked a hundred-dollar bill under the bib of her apron and threw five more on the table to cover his bill.

He stood, and motioned to Tako with a flick of his head. The lad was clearly enjoying himself, apparently regaling the young ladies in aprons with tales of his own. They were soon back in the car on the way to the hotel. It would be three thirty or so by the time they arrived.

“Well, were you successful?” Masters asked.

“That would certainly depend on one’s definition of the

term, Mr. R.”

“Operation Spiffy! Remember?”

“Well, no Sir to that, but yes to four phone numbers and an invitation to a party next Saturday night.”

“Sounds like a husbandly session you had there?”

It had been delivered as a question.

“Oh! Well, you said I was playing a part and I just tried to really put myself into it.”

“Yes, I see.”

“And a good phone number will go for ten bucks and the address of a party should be worth at least twenty-five.”

His face broke into a smile.

“Your bank account must make mine look like a piggy bank, young man.”

“I doubt that, especially if the rumor about what Mr. J’s paying you is true.”

“There’s a rumor is there?”

“The hotel staff draws its energy from rumors. Without rumors, many of them would have no life at all – poor souls. Story is that it’s enough to put Tina and me both through college. I’d say your piggy bank wins, hands down.”

“Masters’ eyes twinkled. You don’t say? Two? Through college!”

Fredricks was waiting in the lobby when they returned. Tako disappeared into the woodwork. The two men talked in one of the seating areas.

“Got a couple of things,” Fredricks began. “Turns out fifty percent of the twins here use that same French shampoo that the Watkins men use. Great luster and body the source ingredients for which you don’t even want to know.”

Masters smiled.

“Fortunately, our case doesn’t turn on that evidence.”

“I assumed it did. Glad to know that,” Fredricks said feigning displeasure. “That old lady Tako mentioned. She was apparently spotted by one of the off-duty maids that night – about five minutes after Tako says he left 444. She was exiting the elevator on 1400 carrying a large black trash bag. It was tied on top. From the description, it could have contained a box or some such thing – several feet tall. Her hands were supporting it from underneath. It seemed to be

bulky but not particularly heavy. The description of the woman fits Tako's Mrs. Darling to a T."

"Did the witness say where she went?"

"She didn't see that. She entered the other elevator going down at about the same time the woman started walking north in the hall."

"Get forensics up to the Potter's suite – 1416 I think. I want the sink trap taken from that room and siphon whatever water's left from the shower trap. Better yet, siphon the shower trap, then pour a quart of boiling water into it. After about five minutes, siphon that back out also."

"Pardon my saying so, Masters, but you seem to have a plumbing trap fetish."

"That of course would be my own private business. You, however just missed a major boo-boo on my part."

"And might that be that forensics can't actually siphon from a shower drain – that they will have to extract it with a suction device?"

"That might be it. I apologize. Very good my friend."

"I have to admit it wasn't original with me," Fredricks said. "You made the same request for 1418 and the guys gleefully informed me of the problem at that time. To get one up on the famous Raymond Masters was taken by them as quite a feather in their caps."

"I do my best to build self-esteem in the younger generation," Masters kidded with a smile. "Anything else?"

"Just the biggie we've been waiting for!"

"The DNA on the blond hairs?"

"That's it." He handed the folder to Masters.

"Give me the bottom line. I'll go over the details later."

"The hairs belong to the Watkins. Their DNA is indistinguishable. Looks like we know which two committed the two murders but no way to pin either one on either one of them. It seems like things are playing out just like they had it planned all along."

"Don't despair, old man," Masters said patting him on the knee. "I've had those two murders wrapped up since the moment they happened. I still have a few wonders left about the attempts on Jerry and the murder of his mother – oh, I know who did them and how – just a few pesky details to clear

up.”

“You wouldn’t be interested then in what the glue on the ‘foolicious’ envelope contained.

Masters’ eyes twinkled.

“You mean Terry Watkins blood?”

“How in blazes, to quote a mutual young friend of ours. At least they have established that it’s Watkins’ blood.”

“With traces of lemonade in the saliva used to seal the flap.”

“Well, yes. Clearly you really don’t need me around, Ray. I think I’ll go take my wife out for that anniversary dinner.”

“Funny you should mention that,” Masters said reaching into his shirt pocket. “As promised – in the card – is certification to your wife that you are in fact a gem, and on the post-it on the back you’ll find the time and place of your prepaid dinner reservation. Don’t be late. And by the way, some detective named Patterson is taking your calls beginning, let’s see (he took out his pocket watch) in about five minutes. Go! Shoo! Be a husband. Give her my love.”

“But you don’t even know her.”

“At my age, I can’t be particular.”

They parted and Masters started back to his suite. His stomach growled. He turned on a dime and went in search of his afternoon snack.

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Chapter Eight
Late afternoon
Arsenic and Old Lace?

“Marvel, don’t you ever sleep,” Masters said as he entered the security office.”

“Off and on, when I can. What can I do for you?”

“Question: I want to know the recent door opening history for one of the rooms. How can we go about getting that?”

“Simple. Get the keycard and examine it.”

“And how could we do that without raising suspicion?”

“Well, I could say the room code is being routinely changed for the guest’s protection and I need him to swap his old card for a new one.”

“Sounds like you’ve done this before.”

“One of the tricks of the trade. Actually, these cards with memory chips are so new, I have seldom had reason to do that. What room and I’ll see to it immediately.”

“528. It’s occupied by the photographer for the Twin Competition – Randy West.”

“Randy. Sure, I know him. He’s new this year. The nephew of June Evans the ITCONA board member who’s a pain in everybody’s behind.”

“I didn’t realize that about her. Met her once and she seemed okay.”

“Nothing is ever right for her. Change this, change that, move this, paint that, fix this, fire him! She just goes on and on and on. The funny part of it all is that she really has terrible suggestions. If it wasn’t for Bill what’s-his-name – Lawrence –

coming along behind and fixing things the whole affair would fall apart.”

“Almost like she wants things to go wrong?” Masters asked.

“Well, yes, now that you put it that way. I was just thinking she was an incompetent. I’ll go get that card and we can decode it. It shouldn’t take me more than ten minutes if I can find him.”

“That will give me time to go up to my suite and change shirts. Been outside in this heat way too long today. I better freshen up before I begin setting off the smoke detectors.”

Tako was sitting at the desk writing in a yellow pad.

“Hey Mr. R.” he said in cheery greeting, turning in his chair as Masters entered the sitting room. “I’m using some of the facilities here. Hope that’s okay.”

“Certainly. May I ask what has moved you to such an effort?”

“I’m making some notes on the case that I figured you might want to pass on to Mr. Flint for when he writes about it.”

“I am sure he will be absolutely delighted to receive your ideas.”

“What’s going on?” Tako asked. “This can wait ‘til latter.”

“Actually, I came to change shirts and freshen up a bit. I smell like a gym – no offense to your former profession.”

“None taken. Sometimes I sort of miss that aroma. But then I remember I traded it for the way Tina smells and I soon get over it. That reminds me. Tina’s family is taking Tina and me out for dinner tonight. I didn’t know if my leash was that long or not?”

“Sure. Consider Tina your guardian for the evening.”

Masters selected a shirt and went into the bathroom, soon back, freshly shaved and smelling of old spice.

“I’ll put your shirt with my uniform jacket. I have it here for laundry to pick up. Needs to be cleaned.”

“Lipstick?” Masters joked.

“Well, you’re actually not so far off. That Mrs. Darling character insisted on giving me a kiss on my cheek before I left that evening. She left a trail of makeup all over my collar. I’m just getting around to dealing with it.”

“Really. May I see that?”

“Sure. Just girly smelling makeup. You have a thing for that?” He giggled.

“Do you have, or can you get, another jacket? I need this one for evidence.”

“Sure. Hotel issue. No problem. Evidence?”

“This is the only physical evidence we have that there even is a Mrs. Darling. The missing link, so to speak.”

“Well, she really wasn’t that bad!”

He giggled himself into hysterics. Masters plodded on.

“If it pans out the way I think it will, you have just caught us a would-be murderer.”

“That old lady, a murderer? She was a sweetheart. Like my granny.”

“Ever read Arsenic and Old Lace?”

“Sure. Junior literature. Oh, I see. Old granny types are not always the sweeties they appear to be.”

“In the case of Mrs. Darling she wasn’t even an old granny type under all that makeup. Another question: What has been the nature of your dealings with June Evans?”

“Dealings?” Well, she’s sweet, too, at least to me. Marvel thinks she’s a pain. Good tips. She and Mr. Lawrence always seem to be going at it.” He grinned. “Verbally and not romantically, I mean.”

“Who, besides Lawrence, have you seen her with?”

“Lots of folks. She’s one of the really big wigs of this whole Twin thing. She had dinner with one of the Potters last evening. She spends a lot of time around Randy, the photographer.”

“He’s her nephew, I believe?”

“She’s not treating him like any Aunt I ever had!”

“Oh.”

“Sometime yesterday, I walked in on them – into an elevator – and they were, shall I say smooching – isn’t that your term for it?”

“No kidding? That is interesting. They see you?”

“Sure. I mean I rode down four flights with them. They acted very uncomfortable. If they had just continued kissing I wouldn’t have thought twice about it. Elevators are frequently used for passionate, floor-to-floor, trysts.”

“Passionate trysts. Be sure to include that phrase for Flint. He’ll love it.”

“That reminds me. I have a list of where I was during the Adams murder and that 11:30 period – whatever that was.”

“The only period during which Jerry’s shower could have been rigged.”

“Oh! Twenty-five minutes. Plenty of time then, huh?”

“I’m due back down at Security. What time will you be leaving for dinner?”

“It’s early. Tina’s family isn’t what you’d call the ritzy socialites. They’re in bed before those types even begin eating dinner. I’m to meet them at our room – Tina’s room – at six. I need to shower and get ready but that won’t take twenty minutes if you need me first.”

“You go ahead with your writing. I’ll let you know if I need anything.”

“By the way,” Tako added, “those items I secured at the Breakfast Place? I auctioned them off in the men’s dressing room. They brought in an even hundred bucks. Phone numbers seem to be at a premium this week. By the time I sell them another half dozen times I’ll have a tidy sum, wouldn’t you say?”

Masters threw his shirt at the boy and turned to leave, shaking his head.

“No starch, honey!” he called back over his shoulder.”

Marvel had already run the card and was printing out a hard copy for Masters as he arrived.

“Can’t see what this can tell you but here it is.”

“I’m looking for a broken pattern, Captain, and here it is, right where it needs to be.”

“I need surveillance tapes on cars leaving the East parking area on Sunday afternoon between, say, four and four thirty. I’m looking for Jack Blair’s vehicle, in particular, and I want a close up on the driver.”

“That’s a big order. There are two exits, one for cars turning north and one for those turning south.”

“South I suppose. Whichever one you’d take to get to Syracuse by the shortest route.”

“Yup. That would be south.”

“I’ll find his make and model in the registration records and then we’ll get going on it. But you know it wasn’t Blair’s key we just looked at.”

“Yes, Sir, I do. I appreciate all your extra help.”

Masters left in search of Mattie – Matilda. He had two more pieces of evidence for the lab.

“Matilda, my dear. Three things. In security, there is a black trash bag containing a large toy water gun. I want it examined thoroughly, with particular care just inside and around the end of the barrel. Here’s what I expect to them to find.”

He handed her a scrap of paper.

“Second, in my suite, Tako’s jacket on a hook in the entry hall. It has makeup on the collar.”

“OOOO! A young lover, huh!” she kidded, repeatedly raising her eyebrows.

“More than you probably imagine, but that’s beside the point. I want to know everything they can tell me about that makeup – type, name, manufacturer, color, where it can be purchased – the whole shebang!”

Mattie nodded.

“And three?” she asked.

“Three, yes.”

He removed an envelope from his pocket.

“One genuine gift certificate from the Shoe Palace on Second Avenue. If you can’t find shoes to bring blessed relief to your feet there, you won’t find them anywhere.”

She looked at the certificate.

“Two hundred bucks! Mr. Masters. That’ll buy shoes for my whole family.”

“Or, it will buy just the perfect shoes for one beautiful, caring, more than helpful cop I happen to think deserves them.”

“You’re right! It’s time I just took care of myself! Let me at ‘em and thank you so much.”

She planted a quick kiss on the old detective’s cheek and headed for the Security office. Masters figured there was about a one in a hundred chance she’d spend it all on herself, but then even a hundred bucks should get something fairly comfortable. He smiled.

As he was looking around deciding where to be off to next, another young officer approached him envelope in hand. All young officers looked about fourteen to Masters.

“Detective Masters?” he asked tentatively.

“If you were given my description I imagine you feel fairly certain that this is Detective Masters.”

“Hello. Yes. I’m Paul.”

“What can I do for you?”

“Important poop from central. They said you’d know about it. Will there be a replay, Sir?”

“Let me take a quick peek at your important poop, here, Paul. He put on his reading glasses and paged through the documents.

“No. There will be no reply. Thanks so much. I appreciate the efficiency I see in your department. Lots of really good young offices like yourself.”

“Yes, Sir. Thank you, Sir.”

He turned and walked off feeling a full foot taller than when he arrived.

Masters found a big chair in a secluded corner of the lobby and paged through the material. It was background reports on several of the hotel guests. Among the interesting revelations was the fact that the Potters had changed their name forty years before from Potrochenko.

‘Polish or Russian,’ Masters thought to himself. ‘I’ll go with Russian. It became even more interesting. The original co-signer on their gold mine purchase was Illiad Stalinski, brother of the reigning head of the local Stalinski family.

‘Stalinski, to Potrochenko, to Stalinski, to Tarasenko.’

He pulled another file. ‘Ruth Tarasenko, mother of Gary (Tako) Tarasenko, daughter of Tara and Rudolf Tarasenko, political refugees from Stalingrad some fifty years before. Tara’s maiden name, Stalinski. The ‘pot’ thickened and it reeked of borscht.

The next folder contained information on William Lawrence and was complete with off shore bank accounts and deeds to vast acreages in Oklahoma and Texas adjacent to working oil fields. There seemed to be nothing illegal about any of it but Masters’ nose always twitched when ‘off shore accounts’ surfaced.

Then, June Evans. Widow of a wealthy oil man. He had been an identical twin. The twin had died under strange circumstances which were eventually called accidental. June's husband had plunged to his death while climbing some nondescript mountain in Nevada. He had been accompanied on that trip by his sister's son, Randy West.

On a loose sheet was a lab report on the box that held the Protein Powder. Not good news. Two sets of prints – Jerry's over and under Tako's.

Masters put everything back into the envelope and looked skyward. 'Just one straight forward case before I go. Would that be too much to ask?'

Marvel spotted him from across the room and hurried toward him.

"We just got lucky. 4:02. Blair's car and a beautiful shot of the driver – not Blair but I'm guessing you already figured that. Come in and take a look. That car was reported stolen you know. That's a strange story, I'll tell you, that."

"Strange? How?" Masters asked as they entered Marvel's office.

"Well, about 5:15 we got a call from the local police saying they had just received a call-in report that Jack Blair's car was missing from the parking lot here at the hotel. The police had called to say that Jack would need to file a report. The caller, who they figured had been Jack, had hung up before he could be told that.

"So, I contacted Blair and he acted like he didn't know anything about it. He looked out his window while we were talking and confirmed it was gone. I passed on the message from the police. Then, I'd say twenty minutes later, we got a call here saying the car had been found parked on a side street in an unsavory neighborhood of North Syracuse. The caller identified himself as being from the police department but caller ID said it was a payphone a few miles south of here. I notified Blair and he took a taxi to go get it – hoping it wouldn't be stripped by the time he arrived. That was about 5:30, I'd say."

Masters nodded.

"And the driver of the car as it left the lot here was Randy West, I assume?"

“Why, yes, that’s right. You’re way ahead of us I guess.”

“It always helps when you know what you’re looking for. Now, one more thing. Your surveillance cameras cover taxi arrivals out front, I assume.”

“Oh, yes, Sir.”

“Find me a shot of West getting out of a cab about 5:45 or so, and your dinners on me tonight.”

“We’ll get right on it. Was that a dinner for two, by the way?”

“Absolutely! And take the kids.”

“I need the taxi company and cab number if at all possible. Then, find out where the fare was picked up and when. Did they stop for anything? Where? When?”

“This is so much fun! Maybe I’ll have to change lines of work.”

“You’ll need to put on some weight first. We private guys tend to be stout – Cannon, Nero Wolfe – you know?”

It was worth a mutual chuckle.

“Tell me about phones and phone records. Especially these little cell phones you hand out to guests.”

“Throw aways. Buy them by the thousands. El cheapos, if you know what I mean. Only work in and about the hotel. A relay gizmo on the roof handles all calls – sort of like a roof-based satellite you could say. Any call going further than that gets retransmitted – forwarded – on a regular line. They’re just for the guest’s convenience – to call up services, check messages, call other guests, things like that.”

“No record of calls then?”

“Oh, yes. Every one’s recorded. I can bring up calls by a particular phone, in or out, all calls at a certain time of day. They can be sorted lots of ways.”

“Pretty sophisticated,” Masters said.

“That’s what guests at the Ark pay the big money for – all the little comforts.”

“Seems a tad illegal to me – right to privacy and all.”

“There’s a small print disclaimer in the room contract.”

“That phone that Oliver took to the pool for Terry – can we find out where the call came from?”

“Sure. When was that?”

“10:30 according to Oliver.”

“If it came from outside it would have been made to a desk phone and transferred to Oliver’s. Let’s go see what we can find.”

A few minutes later the two were seated before a large computer monitor. Marvel zapped in a few commands and screen after screen of notations appeared. He did a find on the time, then a secondary find on Oliver’s phone.

“Interesting,” Marvel said. “Look here. The call came from the Carter’s suite and it registers on Oliver’s phone at 10:28 and was put on hold until 10:31. I assume that was the time when Mr. T took the phone. But here – that call was terminated immediately and another placed on it to that number there.” He pointed. “That’s Mr. J’s office number. Then, it was terminated almost immediately – one, two rings at the most. That was followed by this call, here, to Aggy’s office number. Conversation lasted eleven seconds. Then nothing for another seventeen minutes. Now that just seems really odd to me!”

“Were there any other calls from the Carters’ suite between ten and eleven?”

“Let’s see. Four in all. One of those was the one we just found. Interesting. They were all made to Mr. J’s office and all lasted no more than three seconds – 10:06, 10:14, the one at 10:28 and the one at 10:50. Screwy it seems to me.

“On the contrary, Marvel, my man, that seems really incriminating to me. Can I get a hard copy of all that sometime soon?”

“Give the printer five seconds, Mr. Masters.”

“Amazing!” Masters said, shaking his head.

With the copy in hand, he was off to find Aggy. She was in her office.

“Aggy, my dear. Time for a few very quick questions?” he asked.

“Always time for you. What’s on your mind?”

“Between ten and eleven on Sunday morning you were here in this office, is that right?”

“Right. This twin thing means extra-long hours. In fact, you, Fredricks and I had an 11:00 meeting scheduled here.”

“And during that hour Jerry was in his office, which is

just through that door, correct?”

“Correct.”

“Can you vouch for the fact that he was in there during that hour?”

“Sure. In several ways.”

“I’m all ears.”

“Well, I heard his phone ring numerous times. It would ring just once. He is a stickler about all of us never letting a phone ring more than once before answering it. At about ten thirty, I suppose, he called me and asked me to send a set of folders up to his suite with Tako. He was going to work on them up there over lunch. Then he said he was going to catch forty winks and was not to be disturbed. He does that several times a day. I guess that’s how he gets by on only five or six hours of sleep a night.”

“So, you actually didn’t see him during that hour.”

“No, but that’s not unusual. He’s a phone guy. On it most of every day. I speak to him more by phone than in person.”

“The files? Tako came and got them?”

“Oh yes. Thirty seconds and he was here. How he manages to be everywhere at once sometimes makes me wonder if perhaps there really may be a Twin Tommy out there somewhere.”

“Okay then. Thanks for your time.”

“Can’t see how I helped but you’re entirely welcome.”

“Perhaps one more thing. Would you be able to tell Jerry and Terry apart on the phone?”

“Certainly!”

“That surprises me. They sound identical to me. How?”

“It’s in their delivery, I suppose you’d say. Jerry is all business and intense and it comes through that way in his conversation. Terry is laid back, takes his time, and always makes small talk before he gets to the point of his calls. He tends to use smaller words.”

“And there is no doubt in your mind that it was Jerry you were talking to about Tako and the files?”

“No, Sir. On-a-stack-of-Bibles sure.”

Masters turned to leave.

“Thanks again. Until later, then.”

Masters went back to the Security Office with an additional question on his mind.

“Captain, work your magic one more time for me. Can you tell me if Tom Adams received any calls between 9:30 and say 10:15 Sunday morning?”

“Let’s take a look. If they took place on our phone system, I’ll have ‘em. If made on personal cell phones, I won’t.”

A minute later he had the information.

“9:48 a.m. Sunday. A call to his room phone – not the cell – from an outside phone. That phone had its number blocked at its source. Lasted forty-one seconds. No more activity on that unit – ever!”

“Do the Watkins brothers carry their own cell phones – separate from the hotel issues, I mean?”

“Oh yes. Global service on both!”

“If you will please, call Fredricks. You’ll get Paterson but that’s okay. Tell him I want to subpoena a copy of the private cell phone call records of both Jerry and Terry – make it for all day Sunday. Judge Bates will take care of it for us.”

“Consider it done.”

Masters’ next stop was at housekeeping. Mrs. Ramirez turned out to be an efficient, detail oriented supervisor. She was admired but neither really liked nor disliked by those who worked under her. Reflecting Jerry, perhaps, she was all business. Everyone called her Mrs. Ramirez.

“I’m Ray Masters.”

“Yes, I know. Do you need something?”

“Information. It will probably require records of your maids’ activities.”

“Which one? When? Where?”

“The first two are my questions. One of the maids was called to room 883 at about 9:45 a.m. on Sunday. I would like to talk with her at her earliest convenience.”

Mrs. Ramirez flipped through the pages of a three-ring notebook. Masters was surprised she hadn’t made a beeline for her computer the way everyone else seemed to do there at the hotel. He suddenly understood Mattie’s earlier reference to her three-ring computer.

“It was Marsha Cox. She’s off duty now. I’ll page her for you.”

That done, Masters arranged to meet her in the northeast sitting area of the lobby.

“Marsha. I’m Ray Masters, a detective working the recent deaths here. I’ll only need a minute of your time. Please have a seat.”

She was quiet and clearly anxious about the meeting. She sat far forward on the chair with her hands clasped, white-knuckled, in her lap.

“Sunday morning at 9:45 you were called to a room on 800, I believe.”

“Yes. 883. I remember because it wasn’t on my schedule to clean but nobody else was free I guess. It hadn’t been occupied Saturday night according to my schedule sheet.”

“And you did what when you arrived?”

“I knocked and waited. I tried my pass key and found the privacy lock was off so I entered and called out. No one was there so I left. I checked every room. It’s policy in cases of no answer.”

“Out in the hall. Did you see anyone you knew?”

“Just Mr. T coming out of his suite to go to the pool. In fact I followed him to the elevator. I used the service elevator to go on back down to housekeeping.”

“Do you remember what he was wearing?”

“Sure a blue swimming suit under an open, white, terry, hotel robe.”

“How he was wearing his hair?”

“His hair? Mr. T always wears it down. He was wearing it down.”

“And you are certain it was Mr. T and not Mr. J – I mean Jerry could have stopped off to see his brother and was just leaving you know.”

“Well, I guess I just assumed because he came out of that room. No, I guess I couldn’t swear it was him.”

“Thank you. That will be all. I appreciate your help.”

Masters took out his phone and gave “0” a deliberate, single, punch, hoping that was the front desk. He could have stood up and walked the sixty feet to ask his question in

person, but that, of course, would have involved standing up and walking sixty feet.

“Marty at the front desk. How may I help you?”

“Masters here, Marty. I didn’t expect to get you this late in the day.”

“Pulled a double today. Midge called in sick. By the way I got the book, express mail, from Mr. Flint this morning. The Butler Did It*. I sure do want to thank you. I was wondering if you would stop by and sign it as well.”

“Sure. Just corner me when you see me. I called because I need to speak with Oliver the bellman.”

“Right Away. Where?”

“Far Northeast corner of the lobby.”

Five minutes later Oliver was standing next to Masters.

“Thank you for your time, Oliver.”

“I have no time, Sir. Only the guest’s time.”

Masters smiled but decided against pursuing the fully depressing basis of the old man’s statement.

Sunday morning you took the phone to the pool for one of the Watkins men. You remember?”

“Yes. Sir. Approximately 10:30, I’d say. It was Mr. Terry Watkins.”

“Did you get a sense of who the call was from?”

“Bellmen aren’t to listen or pry, Sir.”

“Never kid a kidder, Oliver, especially one who’s known all the same presidents that you have.”

The old gentleman smiled.

“No, Sir. I suppose that’s so. It appeared he was speaking with Mr. Jerry’s wife, Beth.”

“And it appeared that way, why?”

“Because he answered, ‘Hey! Hi Beth. What’s up?’”

“That would seem to be a lock, alright.”

“I’m not one to volunteer, Sir, but there was one thing.”

“Oh?”

“It seemed to me that Mr. Terry spoke extremely loud. Like he wanted to be heard.”

“I see. Well, thank you for volunteering that. I consider it a very important piece of information. While I have your ear – Tako? What can you tell me about him?”

“Good worker – excellent, in fact. Working here to pay

for college. Nice kid. Trustworthy. Has a thing for a maid named Tina. I like him; he treats me well and with respect.”

“I understand that you and he have a financial arrangement relative to where he’s working this week.”

The old man’s eyes twinkled. “I’d never touch a cent of the boy’s earnings. Just testing his resolve, so to speak.”

“You rascal, you!”

“That’s what the ladies used to say!”

It is interesting how good friendships can spring to life in a matter of just sixty seconds.

Oliver left and Masters made a short list of notes to himself.

“Hey! Mr. R.” came Tako’s always cheerful greeting. “Couldn’t reach you on your phone and got worried about you.”

“Or you got bored and were afraid you might be missing some of the action.”

Tako grinned, sheepishly.

“Or that!”

“I must have turned it off by mistake after I called the desk. Question: Have you recently touched anything out of the ordinary in the Watkins’ suite.”

“She’s never made a pass at me; I swear.”

He grinned and then realized Masters was all quite serious.

“Sorry. I’m sort of giddy I guess. Anything unusual?”

“Yes. Out of the ordinary. Something you have never touched before.”

“Okay. Yeah. Sunday morning. A little after seven. I got a call to go up there. It was odd because Jerry was usually swimming laps at that hour. When I got there, I let myself in and Jerry was already on the table on his stomach with a towel around his neck. He said he had been having leg cramps since he got up and wanted me to work on them. I went to work. I didn’t feel any cramps or even much stiffness, but that’s how they work sometimes. That wasn’t what I don’t usually touch, however. He finally said that was enough and asked if I’d get his box of Protein Powder off of the shelf above his sink. I went over and eyeballed the stuff up there until I found the box. I picked it up and put it on the edge of the sink.

I glanced at the directions and asked him if he wanted me to make it up. He said yes, but then he changed his mind. He thanked me and sent me on my way. That's funny. He didn't tip me and hasn't since. That's just not like him."

"I believe that once again you have quenched my thirst for information."

"Good! I'm glad. What's next?"

It seems I need to pester Captain Marvel again. Why don't you accompany me?"

"If you insist."

Another grin.

As they walked together, Masters had a question.

"How did you find me, just now? I thought I was well secluded back there behind the pillars and bushes."

"Palms. Those are not bushes but very expensive miniature palms."

"I stand corrected. Still, you found me."

"I figured two possibilities. Eating or sitting. I got lucky and chose sitting first. The possibilities are limited."

"There is a detective inside your head, my boy."

Tako opened the door to the Security Office and motioned Masters in ahead of him.

"I'm sorry to bother you again, but I'm just beginning to get my head around all the possibilities your technology allows. Another phone call. One to Joe Blair somewhere about six or six fifteen Sunday evening. I'm interested in where it originated."

Again, Marvel went to work at the keyboard.

"Okay. Here we are. Yes. 6:12. This won't be of much help. It was placed from a hall phone."

"A hall phone?" Masters asked.

Tako answered.

"You've seen them at the end of every hall – those little shelves with the sign above them saying 'Courtesy Hall Phone'."

"A smart-Alec in every crowd," Masters said, directing the comment to Marvel, who chose to ignore it.

"It came from 1200 northeast. That really doesn't pin point anything, I'm afraid."

"Perhaps it does. The service elevators. Tako, I've

seen you slide your master key card into the slot beside the doors when we used the service elevators.”

“That’s the only way they can be accessed. Otherwise guests would be using them and they’d never be available for the staff.”

“So, your card carries a memory of when you used it for those elevators?”

It was Marvel’s turn to jump in.

“Yes, it does, but not only that, an entry is made directly into the computer as to the time and card, as well. Helps us locate staff in a pinch. We always know who is carrying which card.”

“So, you could find out whose card took a ride say from 1400 to 1200 and then back to 1400 Sunday evening between six and six twenty?”

“Done as you spoke. Here comes your print out.”

Masters read it, folded it and put it in his pocket.

“This chip thing is astounding. Jerry’s idea, I imagine.”

“Probably not. Jerry is a designator. He tells his folks what he wants and then lets them do it without interference. He probably told the architect to give this place a state of the art security system and that’s what he got. Mr. J really isn’t much into technology. He’s into the real estate and financial side of things.”

Masters thanked Marvel for his help and the two of them left.

“Take me to a service elevator,” he requested.

“The one to 1400 east?”

“East? What’s this east thing?”

“Your suite is in the East tower. There’s an identical West tower, you know.”

“Oh, Yes. 1400 East.”

They were soon facing the closed door of the elevator.

“Tell me everything there is to know about these contraptions in one minute or less.”

“The keycard gives you access. Once you’ve poked the button for the floor you want to go to, it goes directly there. It doesn’t stop for anybody who may have keyed in at another floor and is waiting. When you get out, then it returns to the next requested floor. They run three times as fast as the

guest elevators.”

“I see. So, if I wanted to go from 1400 to 1200, there would never be anyone else on that elevator when it opened.”

“Not unless somebody was coming to 1400 at that moment. Depends on the time of the day. Maids come and go mornings and early afternoon. Bellmen whenever but not constantly. The green light pad alongside the door here on the wall tells you where it’s headed for. The amber pad shows which floors are keyed in and waiting. In case too many are ahead of you, that lets you go to the other end of the hall and try the one there.”

“So, if I didn’t want anybody to know I was using the elevator, I could look at the light pads and wait for a time when no one was coming to my floor and no one was waiting at the floor I wanted to go to.”

“Right. Oliver says it’s the most staff-friendly system in the World. Even reduces the number of staff necessary by some small percent.”

“Thanks for the lesson. To 1400 please and don’t spare the horses!”

“Yes, Sir. After you. Giddyup!”

They were soon at 1400.

“I need to catch Lawrence and June and I imagine it’s getting close to shower-before-dinner-time for you, isn’t it?”

“My gosh! Yes, I lost track of time. Thanks. Later. We’re going to Jose’s Mexican Restaurant at 4th and Wilson in case you need to log me in and out. I’ll be out of the cell phone area, but call the restaurant if you need me. Should I check in or anything?”

“That won’t be necessary. Just wear the orange jumpsuit I got for you. It’s in your closet.”

Tako did a double take and stood speechless.

“Just kidding. Go. Smell nice. Look spiffy. Have a wonderful evening. Let me know when you return.”

Masters stopped at the door to 1402 and watched the boy trot down the hall toward his suite.

“I’m going to miss that lad when all of this is over,” he said quietly to himself.

“Tako opened the door, shot a lingering look back down the hall at Masters, then entered.

“I’m going to miss that old man when all of this is over.”

* The Butler Did It!

Chapter Nine
Evening
Dancing Naked in a Waterfall

Masters knocked and June let him in.

“We need to chat, you and Bill and I,” he announced.

“Sure. Come on in. . . . Bill! It’s Detective Masters.”

They were soon seated and joined by Lawrence.

“What can we do for you?” Lawrence asked taking a seat and checking his watch as if to emphasize that it was a major imposition.

“This feud between the two of you – how did it come about?”

“Feud?” Lawrence asked as if biding for time.

Masters turned to June.

“Perhaps I should ask a different question. June, how serious are you about ruining the Twin Competition this year.”

“I have no idea what you mean.”

“Of course, you do. Ten minutes with the staff and I’ve gathered enough examples of your subterfuge to fill a tome.”

Lawrence turned to her.

“Ruin the competition. Why? I know you hate my guts but I truly believed you were dedicated to ITCONA.”

“You’ve had your run. It’s my turn. I’m not getting any younger. . . . Okay. I need the money. I’m broke. A few bad investments wiped me out. I figured if you screwed up this year, the board would can you and hire me.”

“Now, I believe we’re finally getting somewhere,” Masters smiled.

“Next question. Did either of you have anything to do

with the murders of Tom Adams or Joe Blair or the two attempts on Jerry Watkins' life."

"Jerry? I didn't know about that," Lawrence said, seemingly surprised.

"No. Me either," June said.

It was unconvincing on her part but Masters went on.

"I need a detailed list from each of you outlining your whereabouts during the past thirty-six hours. Provide people who can verify every move, every moment."

"There's no time for that," Lawrence said. "We're in the middle of the competition."

"In my hands by nine o'clock this evening or you'll be doing your writing in a cell at police headquarters. Have I made myself clear?"

They both nodded.

"Next item," Masters said, looking at his pad.

"Randy West. Your nephew, I believe, June. He's clearly not a professional photographer. Why was he hired?"

"The credentials I saw looked excellent," Lawrence said rushing to cover his own behind.

"He's the only family I have left," June said. "I just tried to help him out. He's had a rough life. Anybody can take pictures. Take enough and some are bound to be good enough to use in our yearbook. Nobody ever looks at it anyway. A foolish waste of the organization's money."

"With the Adams twins and the Blair twins out of the running, I assume that leaves the Watkins brothers and Carter sisters as the top contenders."

"Yes. That's right."

"And the Potter's," June added.

Lawrence nodded, "And maybe the new ten year olds – the Franklin boys."

"What is the relationship between the Carters and the Potters? I understand two of them had dinner together the other evening."

"I have no idea," Lawrence said.

"Me either," she said with a believable shrug.

"Okay, then. Thank you for your time. By nine tonight, remember. I'll show myself out."

He walked the twenty-one steps to his own door and let

himself in. The shower was running. Tako was singing. Clearly, he wasn't going to college on a music scholarship. The bathroom door was open. Masters stuck his head inside.

"Tako. If I could interrupt your fine interpretation of whatever it is your singing."

"Sure. Hi! Hope you don't mind that I borrowed the master shower. This is the greatest shower I've ever been in. It's big enough for a half dozen people. The water sprays from six directions. It's like dancing naked in a waterfall."

Masters had to chuckle.

"What'd'ya need?"

"Which of Terry's ears is disfigured?"

"Left. Just his earlobe."

"Thank you. Don't drown. Have fun with your family – at dinner, not in the shower!"

Masters ran the surveillance tape from the pool one more time. He nodded, clearly satisfied with what he saw. He left the suite and took the elevator down to 528 to find Randy West.

"Come in. It's humble but it's free. What can I do for you?"

"Several things, perhaps. My investigation has led me to the death of your uncle, June's husband. It has also presented me with two questions. First, what role did you play in his murder and second did you also murder the real Randy West and take his place. I think you did, you see, and that leads me to all these other questions about your romantic involvement with June and your big losses at the casinos, and June now facing bankruptcy. It's just more than I want to hassle with, you see, so here's the deal. I'll put all that on the back burner for the foreseeable future in return for one solid piece of evidence."

Randy stood dumbfounded.

"I take your silence as your acceptance of my offer. I need to know who had you stationed on your balcony Sunday night with instructions to begin taking your pictures at some specified time."

"I can't tell you."

"Can't or won't?"

"Can't, I swear. I got back to my room after lunch on

Sunday and I found an envelope taped to my door. Inside was a note and ten, one-hundred dollar bills. The note said where to set the camera and where to point it. It provided the cover story about time lapse stuff I told you. It said to make sure that you got the pictures. It said to destroy the note and the envelope and that if I didn't follow the directions to the letter I'd be fired immediately. I need this money. I'm desperate. I didn't see any harm in it so I did just as I was instructed. When I realized I'd probably been set up to photograph the body, I began worrying. I hadn't bargained for anything like that, you understand. That's all the honest to God truth, Mr. Masters."

"Write that out for me and get it to me by nine o'clock tonight."

"I didn't kill either of them on that mountain," Randy protested. The guide saw the accident and he can vouch for me on that. I did take West's identity after he died and June found out and well, we got involved, I guess is the polite way of saying it. She had always disliked the real Randy."

"I'm going to take your word for all that right now. But only if I get that statement."

"You'll have it. Does Lawrence know? He's the one who pays me, you know."

"I have not told him. That's all I know."

"I figured it had to be either June or Lawrence who paid me to take the pictures. They'd be the only ones who could fire me."

"But not the only ones who could threaten to fire you."

"I hadn't thought about that possibility. I figured it had to be Lawrence, but I can see now that it could be anybody – somebody bluffing like."

"Not quite. I assume you destroyed the note and envelope as you were instructed to do."

"Yes, to the note and no to the envelope. I figured the note could incriminate me but the envelope might be able to incriminate the one who left it. Why else would he have said to destroy it?"

"You're not dumb; I'll say that for you."

"You want that envelope, I assume."

"Yes."

“It’s right here in the drawer.”

“Sign it on the inside of the flap and put today’s date. I’ll do the same. That way there will be no doubt when you testify against the murderer that it is the same envelope.”

“Now onto item number two,” Masters said. “I have on surveillance tapes from the parking lot, pictures of you driving Jack Blair’s car away and then returning by cab two hours later. So, you see, we have you on charges of grand theft auto. Cooperate once more and I’ll do what I can to get you some sort of special relief in that case. Who hired you to do that?”

“Again, I just don’t know. It was a call on the room phone. It was before the envelope arrived. A man’s voice. There was like static on the line if you know what I mean. The voice wasn’t one I recognized. He promised to expose my real identity if I didn’t do as I was told.”

“Do you think you’d recognize it if you heard it again?”

“Maybe. Probably. It had a NYC twang to it. Sounded stressed out, if you know what I mean?”

“It goes without saying, I suppose,” Masters said as he approached the door, “but you are not to leave this hotel without my personal authority.”

“Yes, Sir. That’s clear, Sir.”

Masters left and took the elevator up to 1400. As he stepped into the hall he noticed a maid with towels at Jerry’s door. He hailed her.

“Ma’am. If I may just have a moment of your time.”

He walked toward her and recognized Marsha, the young maid he had spoken with in the lobby earlier in the afternoon.

“Didn’t expect to see you here this late.”

“You must be Mr. Masters. You think I’m Marsha but I’m her twin, Trisha. Tina usually takes late calls – extra money and she needs it for college. I took her calls tonight so she could go out for dinner with her Mom and sister. Is there something you need?”

“I am just curious. Why would Mr. Watkins be receiving towels and such at this time of day? Aren’t those usually exchanged during the morning maid service?”

“Mr. J. is referred to as Mr. Clean in Housekeeping.

Morning, noon and night he gets a complete set for his bathroom.”

Masters eyeballed the stack in her arms.

“They look brand new.”

“Oh. They are. He demands new towels and washcloths every time.”

Masters took a washcloth from the top of the sack. He felt it and sniffed it.

“How often are new towels and such exchanged for the guest rooms?”

“First Monday of every fourth month, beginning in December, if that makes sense. It’s easier to do them all at once, I guess. They really aren’t worn out in four months but they lose their fluff and at these prices I guess the guests expect fluff.”

“That makes a lot of cleaning rags,” Masters joked, fishing.

“The old stuff goes to the children’s homes and the homeless shelters in the state. Mr. J is very generous that way. Each employee gets to take up to two dozen pieces on each change day if they want them. Marsha and I always do. We have seven brothers and sisters and all but the two of us have their own families now.”

Masters refolded the washcloth and put it back on her stack.

“The last exchange day would have been when?”

“April first. We’re getting close the next one first of the month.”

“Thank you for your time. Hope I didn’t put you behind schedule.”

She shook her head and turned back to the door. Masters did an about face and walked the length of the hall to his suite where he went right into the bathroom to examine the towels. He stopped and chuckled to himself counting the seven towels, which had apparently been necessary for Tako to complete one simple shower. ‘Perhaps he found those five others to dance with him in there,’ he smiled to himself.

It was obvious that the linens in his suite had considerably less fluff than the new one he had just examined. His also harbored the distinctive smell of bleach, which was

not present in the new ones. It deserved a note on the pad in which he was outlining his case summary. He took a seat and continued writing for some time.

Eventually he called the desk for messages.

“Yes, Sir. A big brown envelope from the police.”

“Would you have someone bring it up for me, please?”

“Right away. Actually, Tako just came into the lobby. I’ll hand it right to him.”

“Thank you. I haven’t forgotten about that signature.”

“I won’t let you, Sir.”

A few minutes later Tako and the envelope arrived.

“Copy from the cops,” he said clearly pleased with his alliteration. “I’m starved. Anything around here to eat.”

“Didn’t her family let you eat with them?”

Tako smiled.

“Since they were paying I just ordered something cheap.”

“Unless pop and twisters will fill you, I’d suggest room service. I haven’t eaten at all so make a selection for me as well. I don’t care what.”

While Tako studied the menu and placed the order, Masters went over the contents of the envelope. It contained several reports he was eager to read. Two had to do with water samples. The pool and tap water from the Watkins house showed the exact chlorine levels that Sam said were present. The toy water gun showed no chlorine residue, which it would have even if only filled once from that pool water. Chlorine combines with the plastic to form an unmistakable trace. The inside of the end of the barrel showed traces of human tissue. The DNA on that would be ready in the morning. The water sample taken from Jerry’s tub trap at the time of the investigation of the attempted electrocution showed traces of lemon juice. The towels removed from his suite at the time “reeked of lemon juice” according to the report.

It was all just the way Masters knew it had to be.

The shower drain at the Potter’s suite showed traces of the same makeup Mrs. Darling had left on Tako’s uniform collar. It was an inexpensive brand from a company called Body Best Makeup and was distributed almost exclusively to

theatrical companies that did stage plays.

An odd possibility occurred to Masters and brought a smile to his face; one of the Potter men playing the role of old Mrs. Darling. Masters sat and thought.

Presently Tako was back with dinner. He arranged the plates on the coffee table and took a seat on the sofa beside his new, old friend.

Twenty-four-ounce sirloin steaks, baked potatoes, and green beans with double chocolate cake for dessert – a whole, double chocolate cake!

“This tab thing is awesome, you know!” Tako said.

“Enjoy it tonight, son. Tonight and breakfast will be the last freebees from this establishment.”

“No kidding? You got it all wrapped up?”

“I will have by mid-morning.”

Masters then guided the conversation to Tako’s family.

“Do you know your grandmother’s maiden name?”

“Yeah. Stalinski, just like Ivan but probably not close relation he says.”

“Regarding Ivan. Everything you know about him?”

“Everything? Well, he’s been very kind and generous to me. He lives in a huge house on a huge estate north of town with his parents, Grandmother, and two married brothers – he’s the youngest. He’s still single but quite straight – always trying to fix me up with what calls ‘a very willing woman.’ He’s rich. He had some disease as a kid and his left side is not as well developed as the right – the muscles. His left leg is an inch shorter than his right. Because of that his muscles are always strained and cramp up very easy, even with his built-up shoe.”

“What’s the reputation of his family around here?”

“You mean that they are part of the Russian Mafia?”

“Yes, I suppose that’s what I would mean.”

“Yeah. I’ve heard it. Ivan even talked about it once. He said I just shouldn’t worry about that because it didn’t concern me in any way. I have worried about it, of course, but I’ve never seen anything to make me suspicious. I’ve met his parents and they seem really nice. They love my nickname – the way the Hispanics fixed it up for me. His grandmother bakes the best dark rye bread I’ve ever eaten. When I go out

there with Ivan she always sends some loaves home with me. They may be the scum of the Earth but they've always treated me great and that's all I'm personally sure of."

"While there, did you ever hear any references to the name Potter?"

"Actually, I did. This is great. You're onto something?"

"Potter?"

"Oh, yeah! The last time I was out there I was just starting to work on Ivan's back and their butler came into the gym with the phone and just said that one word. 'Potter.' Ivan said he'd call back in two hours. That's the only time."

"No first name?"

"Nope, just Potter."

"This is difficult to ask but I have to. Do you know the last name of your biological father?"

"Maybe. My birth certificate lists him as John Smith. I have never gone into it with mom because it always makes her sad – embarrassed, you know. It could just be something Mom made up. If it's essential I will ask her outright."

"Probably not necessary. What did your grandfather do for a living?"

"In the old country, he taught history at a university. The best he could do here was car salesman. I get the idea they barely eked out a living. Four kids and all. Mom's always worked to help support them. Seems like it was a really happy, loving, family, though. Neither Grampa nor Grandma spoke English very well – he better than she, I suppose. Grandma taught me some Russian when I was little. She died when I was five or so. I barely remember her. Gramps went a few years later. He and I were never very close. I think my presence here on Earth was a big embarrassment to him. I can understand that."

"Have a good evening with Tina's family?"

"Yeah. Really nice. They are fun to be with. Her aunt, Mrs. Ramirez, went with us. Once you get her out of this place she's really not half bad. Jokes! Even has a first name – Tanya. You could have fooled me."

"At one point her mom actually asked if we thought wedding bells were in our future. Tina answered, 'Very likely'. I snorted iced tea out my nose when she said that. Thank

goodness for large, linen, napkins. Her mom didn't go off the deep end or anything. She said she was sure we had thought ahead about the difficulties the religious thing would present for us and suggested we go talk with a priest about it. I think she's taking the calm, supportive, route so we won't be pushed into doing anything drastic or spur of the moment. To late Mama, dear!"

"Have they said when they will be leaving?"

"Tomorrow, early. Her sister has a dance recital to get ready for. It'll be great to have things back to normal."

"I'm sure it will be."

"This whole separation thing has been good for me, I think. I realize now that I love her whether I'm with her or not. I know that probably sounds dumb but we've never really been apart since we realized we loved each other back when we were kids."

"That must be a wonderful revelation."

"It is. It really is!"

They finished eating.

"I'd like you to look at that tape of Terry in the pool one more time. I think you'll have another revelation if you really think about it."

The tape was started.

"Freeze it when I say to," Masters said. "Right after he finishes with the phone and hands it back up to Oliver. Right . . . now!"

"Okay. So, what do I see?" Tako asked.

"Look away from the picture for a few seconds. . . . Now look back. Who do you see?"

"Mr. J. My gosh! That ear! It's Mr. J and not Mr. T. Boy! That tends to put a different light on things, doesn't it? How long have you known?"

"Since about three minutes after I arrived at the scene of Tom's death."

"Really. How?"

"I'll fill you in tomorrow morning. Don't want to put the pressure of keeping a secret on you tonight. I need to call Fredricks now and set a meeting for ten o'clock tomorrow morning for all the principals in this thing. Where will we find a room that size?"

“For about a dozen or so?”

“Figure on eighteen to twenty and a few extra for officers and representatives from the States Attorney’s office.”

“Let’s see, then, I’d suggest G-9. It’s just off the lobby to the North, kind of behind where you were when I found you hiding behind the bushes.”

He grinned and giggled.”

“Will you please arrange that?”

“Sure. A piece of cake – which reminds me, double chocolate is waiting. We really need milk for that, though you know.”

“The boy may just have to tough it out,” Masters said, feigning a long face to chide his young friend.

“I’ll reserve the room.”

“I’ll call Fredricks.”

“I’ll get milk.”

“I’m not surprised.”

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Chapter Ten
Day Four: Ten A.M.
The Gathering

The room could have easily held three times the number but that seemed fine. Those gathered appeared to like their space. Three rows of chairs faced a speaker's stand.

Tako, Tina, Mrs. Ramirez and Aggy sat front and center. That had clearly been Tako's idea. To their far right were the Potter Twins. To Tako's left – and several seats away – sat an attractive, professional appearing, woman in her mid-sixties. Only three of the others knew who she was.

Terry, Jerry and Beth sat together at the end of the middle row of chairs with Fredricks, Marvel and the States Attorney on the other. Tim and Jack sat with a chair between them on one end of the back row. Carla, Marla, Lawrence and June sat toward the center and Sam sat at the other end with his former assistant, Pablo. Four officers stood at the rear near the door.

It was an uncommonly quiet group – frequently the sign of many guilty consciences.

At precisely the appointed moment, Masters entered through the door in the rear. He was dressed for the occasion in his trademark, medium brown, three-piece suit, and a wide, burnt orange silk tie. He strode to the front of the gathering and stood beside the speakers stand. He carried a large flashlight which he placed on the stand.

“We are here to conclude the matter of the murders of Tom Adams and Joe Blair, the attempted murder of Jerry Watkins, and the murder of Mary Watkins?”

A buzz rolled across the room at the mention of the men's mother.

"Much of the evidence follows convoluted and twisted paths, but I shall endeavor to present it in a clear and concise manner."

He turned to Detective Fredricks.

"I ask that those who I will show committed these crimes remain here until I have finished."

Fredricks and the States Attorney both nodded.

"Let us begin with the most distant of the crimes – the murder of Mary Watkins the mother of Jerry and Terry. Although it was originally declared to have been an accidental death by drowning, I will demonstrate that it was a carefully planned, premeditated murder.

"The murderer had every move planned perfectly. Mary was extremely fit and strong. She worked out. Her physique and health were very important to her – two admirable traits that she passed on to her sons.

"Knowing of her strength, the murderer realized Mary would need to be rendered helpless before being drowned, and drowning seemed the logical way to make the death appear accidental. Prior to the attack, the murderer purchased a large water gun with a full gallon reservoir. It was filled with water ahead of time and was waiting in the filter room in the back yard by the pool. That part of the careful planning would be the murderer's undoing.

"Mary was somehow lured by the murderer into the pool's mechanical room on the East end of the shed – perhaps on the pretense of needing help with something.

"While there, the murderer quickly disconnected the line from the chlorine tank and sprayed the gas at Mary. Chlorine has an immobilizing effect on the breathing apparatus, so neither exhaling the gas nor inhaling fresh air is immediately possible. Without fresh oxygen intake, unconsciousness soon follows. Large lung capacity allowed the murderer to refrain from breathing until back outside.

"Once Mary collapsed she was pulled onto the deck beside the pool. The murderer then shoved the barrel of the waiting water gun into Mary's mouth, inserting it forcefully back against the opening of the wind pipe, rendering the flap

that usually covers it useless. The hydraulic trigger was then pulled repeatedly until the gun was empty and Mary had drowned.

“The body was pulled into the pool. With her lungs already filled with water, Mary’s body immediately settled to the bottom where it was found several hours later by Sam the pool man. A coroner’s inquest examined the obvious facts – lungs filled with water, swimming along, no marks on the body to indicate foul play and concluded accidental death. The routine tests on the blood and on the water in the lungs, which had been conducted by another department, were not made available for consideration.

“If they had been, two significant factors would have become clear. The blood was inappropriately loaded with chlorine gas and the water in the lungs was chlorine free. The chlorine molecule is tiny and therefore readily absorbed into the body, especially in the lungs which are designed for rapid absorption of gas. Under the pressure produced by the forced water entry, the gas was absorbed into the receptive lining of the lungs and into the blood stream, rather than into the less penetrable and more stable water molecules.

“Since the water from the lungs was virtually chlorine-free, and since the pool water is carefully maintained at two parts per million, she could not have drowned in the pool water. The house water is chlorine-free due to the filtering system used there. The water gun had been filled at the house ahead of time.

“During the past twenty-four hours, the local police lab analyzed the human tissue recently discovered inside the gun barrel and found it to be a match to Mary Watkins.

“So, we now know she was murdered and that her murder was premeditated and carefully timed to occur when her sons were out of town and at a time of day when she would be found quickly by Sam. Why that was necessary will become evident.

“What suspects do we have? Terry’s and Jerry’s whereabouts a thousand miles away have been verified. Sam was at the airport helping his daughter catch an early morning flight. Coming directly to the Watkins’ house from the airport would have placed him at the pool at the exact time he has

specified – the time he called 911. His exit ticket from the airport parking lot verifies the time of his departure.

“Pablo Sanchez, Sam’s helper, whose romantic overtures had been rejected by Mary some months earlier, could be considered a possible suspect – spurned lovers are frequently driven to such twisted acts of revenge and his history is spotted with violent behavior. We find, however, that he was in Mexico visiting his family at the time.

“Ruling out some random act of violence by some passer-by, because such a person could not have prepared in the manner this murderer did, we are left with one suspect – Beth Watkins.

“Her dislike – obvious hatred, it has been called – for Mary is well established. Beth probably felt Jerry’s mother was pushing her away from her husband or worse yet, had never let her really get close to him. Mary also held all the cards where her son’s will was concerned. Beth must have concluded that the only sure path to both her husband’s love and attention and to the growing family fortune was to kill Mary.

“This theory presents us with several problems. I cannot prove she purchased the water gun or, in fact, that she took any of the steps that I have just outlined. She even has an alibi for the exact time Mary died.

“Beth was to meet a friend at a local café for breakfast. Eye witnesses at the café say she waited for nearly an hour but the friend didn’t show up. Beth then ordered breakfast, paid with her credit card, and left her dated business card behind to prove where she was and when she had been there.

“The problem is, you see, that it was not Beth who waited at the café but a near look alike. She had obviously spent many days – months, perhaps – scouring the area to find a suitable double. That is the person who sat the hour out at the café – the hour during which Mary was killed. Beth then arrived at the café, waited outside for her double to leave, donned her wrap-around sunglasses for some modest degree of appearance protection, and entered the café herself. She intentionally sat in a different section so she would have a different waitress with whom to interact, guarding against any suspicion about appearance or voice.

“I know all of that to be true and have the double’s affidavit to those facts but it still does not place Beth at the scene of the murder – just at the café.

“The water gun, one only sold for a brief time four years ago, replaced in a planned obsolescence marketing program three months later by a bigger and badder model, was hidden by the murderer in the shed in the back yard. It was carefully stashed away under a pile of old newspapers – most dated the week of the murder – and four tiers of boxes containing nothing of consequence so they would never be moved – never, until I began snooping around. I found the water gun. Why would it not have been destroyed? Perhaps, there was a plan to use it again.”

“I assumed that such a careful killer would have left no finger prints on it – later, that was found to be true – so I had to find another way to entice the murderer to reveal herself. I had the newspapers sprinkled with a phosphorescent powder. The boxes were then restacked just as they had been. I made sure that Beth and only Beth of all the suspects heard that I suspected the use of a water gun in the murder and was searching for it.

“I have to assume that she went to the shed to retrieve and destroy the gun so I wouldn’t be able to find it. During her unsuccessful search of the spot where she had hidden it, Beth’s hands were exposed to the phosphorescent powder – powder that seeps into the skin and remains for weeks, surviving the most meticulous scrubbing.

He took the flashlight into his hands and began moving toward Beth.

“When skin bearing these phosphorescent traces, is illuminated from a special light, it will glow with a combination of three randomly selected colors impossible to have been acquired anywhere else.

Beth stood – defiant – grasping the back of the chair in front of her.

“She was a possessive, mean hearted, old witch. It was always and only the three of them, and Jerry just let it go on and on and on. She offered to pay me to leave. I pleaded with him to send her away. I became his woman of pleasure while his mother saw to it that she remained his one true love.

It was sick the way the three of them needed each other, clung to each other, dealt me out. I'm not sorry for what I did to her."

She turned and looked down into Jerry's face.

"I laughed uncontrollably while I watched the life drain from her wretched old body. I looked her in her eyes and she knew, during those last seconds, that in the end, I had won!"

Masters returned to the front of the group replacing the unused light on the stand. A female officer went to sit beside Beth, leaving her in the room according to Masters' earlier instructions.

Let me move on to the attempts on the life of Jerry Watkins. Had the perpetrators just done the deeds – wired the tub and laced the Protein Powder – they just might have gotten off Scott free. But, simple wasn't enough. They had to set up a fall-guy. Or, could it have been that supposed fall-guy set himself up to, in that way, cover the murder attempts he had actually carried out? Both possibilities had to be investigated.

"In both failed attempts the evidence points to Gary Tarasenko – better known to most of us as Tako. His prints were on the lamp plug that had to be unplugged in order to plug in the electrical cord which was attached to the shower. It was his prints that were found on the poisoned power drink container on Jerry's shelf.

"Tako contends he handled the lamp on Friday night in room 444 helping Old Mrs. Darling, an apparently non-existent hotel guest. The inventory number on the lamp found in Jerry's bedroom after the first attempt on his life belonged to the lamp assigned to room 444. The one in 444 was assigned to Jerry's suite. Tako's story, therefore, seems supported. The lamp which ended up in 444 holds many prints of Jerry and Beth, which would seem reasonable except wouldn't you think someone trying to hide such a switch would have cleaned the prints off? Over confidence, perhaps. Also, interesting, is that unlike most guests, Mrs. Darling did not take the easy route and allow Tako to key himself into 444, thereby cleverly preventing any keycard record – any verification – that he had ever been there.

"Tako relates that he was called to Jerry's suite early

Monday morning at about seven o'clock, to give Jerry a quick massage – a leg rub actually. During his time there, Jerry supposedly asked Tako to fix his powered drink. Tako reports that he took the box from the shelf and sat it beside the sink preparing to mix it. At that point, he says Jerry – always decisive, Jerry – changed his mind and asked him to leave. Jerry vehemently denies the entire story, saying he went for an early morning jog along the beach. The police were not able to find any witness to verify that.

“Was it then, Jerry, who faked the attempts on his own life? No. I believe Jerry had no knowledge of them. Jerry has been a master of alibis in all of this. There was a window between 12:15 and 1:20 Sunday during which someone could have entered his suite and made the electrical connection. He offered no alibi for himself during that time, satisfied to say he was alone in his room. If it had been he who was involved, you can be sure that he would not have missed the opportunity to have established an alibi for himself. But, I must at this point digress back to Friday evening.

“Someone playing the part of an old woman in 444 was also involved. The traces of make-up she left on Tako's collar implicate Beth as the person tricking him into leaving his prints on the lamp plug. Traces of the same, unusual, stage make-up were found in her shoulder purse. Her exact whereabouts are also unaccounted for during the short time period in which the electrical hook-up could have been made. Someone carrying her purse purchased an extension cord and the off-brand duct tape just prior to the attempted electrocution. As handy as she seems to be around the grounds of her home, such a hook up would be relatively easy for her. She certainly had easy access to the room and there are surveillance tapes placing her leaving the hotel just after the time the wiring had to have taken place. Oh, and I must not forget the orange pop can with Tako's fingerprints on it which she had obtained to use as old Mrs. Darling. It had been planted to further indicate his presence in 1618. Jerry and Beth would swear the boy had never in their presence had a pop in their suite.

“Why would she want Jerry dead? One can only speculate, although two possibilities readily come to mind. It seems to be common knowledge that Jerry pays little attention

to Beth. It also seems common knowledge that Terry is more than happy to fill that void. Get rid of Jerry who ignores her, get Terry who seems to love her, acquire Jerry's wealth and, using her feminine wiles, guide Terry to use his good business sense to manage it.

"There is another possibility. Use Terry in her plot to kill Jerry and then throw him over, or eventually kill him as well, for a far wealthier eager suitor – Kyle Potter, who recently withdrew \$100,000.00 from his account on the same day as Beth deposited that same amount in cash into her private savings account upstate. There is another link between Beth and the Potters. We extracted water from the shower trap in the Potter's suite. It had traces of the same stage make-up old Mrs. Darling had been wearing. I imagine that after the Tako sequence in 444, Beth brought the lamp and unopened pop cans in a black trash bag to Potter's room. There she showered off the make-up before proceeding next door with the lamp. The original 618 lamp probably spent time in the Potter's suite before being taken back down to 444 in the wee hours of the morning when the guests – most of them participants in the twins competition – would have been carefully getting their beauty sleep.

"Would Potter's interest be strictly romantic? Probably not and once Beth had served her purpose – killing Jerry, Potter's only rival in a bank acquisition – she would most likely be tossed aside as well. There are shameless people users everywhere we look in this case.

"But, I said Beth used Terry and I should indicate how. That morning when Tako visited Jerry for the leg rub, Jerry was out for a jog, just as he insists and also, just as he insists, he never asked the boy to come to his suite or to fix him a drink – that always happens later in the morning – the same time, day after day. Mr. J. is a very precise, creature of habit. That was one of my first clues it was not Jerry there that morning. The other choice, by default, is obvious. It had to be Terry. But Tako is familiar with both men. How could Terry have tricked him? I had to ask why just a leg rub as long as the boy was there. Jerry loves Tako's back rubs. The answer, of course, was to keep Tako away from the Watkins' man's head and Terry's deformed ear, which the young man would have

surely seen if he had worked on the back and neck. Oh, and I believe that I failed to mention that although the police were unable to turn up any witnesses to Jerry's beach run, the hotel's own, fine, chief of security, was able to do that. It seems that he, too, runs that beach every morning and the two stopped to chat for about thirty seconds on that particular morning. Jerry's hair was pulled back in a ponytail. Marvel assures us that the two ears he saw were perfect in every way. So, at least in this case, Jerry's ears get him off the hook.

"Where does this leave us? Terry and Beth conspired to kill Jerry and implicate Tako. The brand of pest controlling rose fertilizer found in the drink powder was the one Beth uses in her flower gardens. It is both expensive and mail-ordered. An opened can of it was found in the trunk of Terry's car and it bore the prints of both Terry and Beth.

"Why would Terry have agreed to such a plan? I can speculate. I imagine that upon the death of their mother, Mary – who had continued to be the boys' undisputed leader into their adulthood – Jerry, with his more forceful personality and quicker intellect, commandeered that role. Terry may have resented that arrangement but found he was unable to match wits with his brother and therefore could do nothing about it. He may have succumbed to Beth's charms and promises. It was probably some combination of those factors but for whatever reason, it was the team of Terry and Beth – Beth and Terry more appropriately – who attempted to kill Jerry on both occasions. There appears to be evidence of a Potter connection, as well."

"Would a jury convict any of them on just the collection of circumstantial evidence I have presented? I don't know. I've seen convictions with less and I've seen acquittals with more. It will probably never have to come to trial, however.

"Let me now address the murder of Tom Adams. Again, Tako was implicated either by his own actions or by someone else framing him. His fingerprints are on the drugged champagne bottle and the wine glasses, and the note accompanying the gift box which he delivered was written by him. Could it have been planned by Marla – who has indicated some interest in the lad, and may have had lingering

hard feelings toward Tom's brother, Tim, her former husband? Kill Tom and hurt Tim for the rest of his life. Use the boy and let all the evidence point to him hoping he will be convicted in place of her.

"Though plausible, it doesn't fit the facts. Again, old Mrs. Darling – that is, Beth in disguise – plays a part. She obtained Tako's prints and his handwritten note. But is that the extent of her involvement? Did she know why she had been asked to do that? Could it have been done in complete innocence? And then there is the matter of the key to 444. Beth, well known to the staff, has pretty free rein around here, I imagine. She could have easily procured a key from behind the desk and then discarded it when she had finished with it.

"And what about the fact that the bottle seemed to have been sent by one or both of the Blair twins? Another inept attempt at diversion. By the time these killers implicated everybody else, they were about the only ones left not on the short suspect list. Over kill. Amateurish over kill.

"Here are the facts. Tom was lured to the Carter's suite a little before ten' o'clock Sunday morning by a phone call from someone he trusted. The exact nature of the pretext is only conjecture – perhaps romance was promised. The perpetrator had legitimate access to the rooms and made it seem plausible that the two should have a drink while they waited for the women to return. The champagne was drugged and served to them both from the bottle. To have not done it in that way might have seemed suspicious. Tom drank up, very likely having several refills. The other person played with his drink – carefully holding it only by the stem – and never actually consumed any of it.

"The bottle was undoubtedly carefully wrapped in a napkin so as to not disrupt Tako's fingerprints. We may never know whether the bottle that was eventually poisoned was the same one that arrived in the wooden box. A switch could have been made just prior to Tom's arrival and the original secreted away when the murderer left the suite. Why the empty poisoned bottle was left in the suite is clear – to implicate both the Blairs and Tako. Once again, the perpetrators operated under the false illusion that the more viable suspects there were, the merrier.

“Tom soon slipped into unconsciousness. He was stripped and placed into the hot tub. His head was held under water until he drowned. The slight struggle he was able to manage was easily countered by his far stronger adversary. The clothing was folded and placed on a bed. Why that was done, remains in the realm of speculation, but was probably out of a neatness habit on the part of the murderer. The bottle was washed out in the sink and then placed in the wastebasket in the bathroom. The glasses were merely emptied and then replaced on the shelf. To wash the glasses might have masked or removed the fingerprints that Beth had so carefully gathered. During the course of that hour, the murderer made several phone calls. More about them later.

“That murderer was either Terry or Jerry and he had committed the crime to fulfill a promise made to me earlier – revenge for the part I played in sending their father to jail. They felt they had plotted the perfect crime that I could not possibly solve. Sorry boys, it will not play out according to your long held, twisted, dream. At first I wondered why the Watkins men were staying in separate suites. I now understand that it was to make it more difficult for me to keep them under surveillance. Unfortunately, that was all for naught since I decided early on not to put tails on them.

“There were three, long, blond, hairs found at the scene of Tom’s death – one surely planted there to taunt me. Identical twins have identical DNA so although the hairs fully implicated one of the two brothers, it should have been impossible for me to determine which one. Sometimes a criminal mind short circuits and misses the obvious.

“When Terry was still a preschooler he had encephalitis, a disease marked by a very high fever in the area of the head and brain. As a result, his hair lost its pigment and turned white. Looking at later pictures of the two it appeared that condition had righted itself, as it sometimes does, and returned to its natural color. That, in fact, had not been the case. Unbeknownst to Jerry, their mother began dying Terry’s hair, just a little at first, gradually returning it to its original color. It was a secret between them that was never shared with Jerry.

“The three hairs found at the scene of Tom Adams’

death are dyed hairs. Watkins' DNA but Terry's dye. Terry is, therefore, the murderer of Tom Adams.

"But, wasn't he swimming in the pool during the time of the murder? No. He was impersonated, very well, actually, by Jerry. There is such a mountain of evidence to support this that I will only cover the highlights.

"Terry, while still in the Carter's suite, placed several calls – three one ring calls – to Jerry's office and one to Jerry at the pool. As soon as Jerry answered, Terry hung up and got on with the business of killing Tom. Jerry continued to make conversation into the phone, making it appear that Beth was on the line. He then immediately called his own office, let it ring but once and hung up, making it appear to Aggy, who would have heard the ringing, that Jerry was in his office and had answered it, a similar effect simulated by those Terry had placed earlier. A minute later Jerry called Aggie, as if from his office, and in, I am sure, very quiet tones, made a request of her, again, just to make it appear he was in his office. At about ten fifty-five he exited the pool, made his way to the west service walk and entered his office from the outside, carefully waiting until none of the bellmen were looking his way. He then dried and combed his hair, dressed, and left his office through the inside door, making sure that time that he was seen.

"The surveillance camera on the pool caught, in a single frame, the left ear of the Watkins man who was in the pool. For just a split second his hair was still pulled back after removing the phone from his ear. It was the perfect left ear of Jerry.

"The call to Aggie was made from Bellman Oliver's phone and Aggie will swear it was Jerry, not Terry to whom she was speaking. So, it was Jerry in the pool – that only left Terry available to leave the Watkins DNA behind at the scene of Tom's death. The swimming suit Terry claimed to have worn in the pool that morning was new – though wet – but when I examined it, it bore no scent of the chlorine that would have been there had it been worn for an hour in that highly chlorinated pool. Jerry, in order to rid himself of the incriminating chlorine smell, bathed in lemon juice water at the first opportunity. It is a well-known neutralizer of chlorine.

Many people squeeze lemon into restaurant water or fountain drinks for the same purpose – so they don't have to drink the dangerous chlorine. There is more, but that will all be presented at Terry's trial. It was a conspiracy among Terry, Jerry, and Beth and all three will be charged with the murder of Thomas Adams.

"Murder number two: Joseph Blair. It was by far the more ingenious of the two but again just way overdone. Since it will be no surprise that the murderer in this instance was Jerry Watkins I won't attempt to disguise that as I make my presentation.

"Jack Blair was lured from his suite by the stolen car scenario, which left Joe all alone during the commission of his murder. Jerry paid Randy West to take the car. Randy is charged with grand theft auto and Jerry will be charged as an accomplice shortly. Again, over confidence did Jerry in. He place ten, one hundred bills in an envelope as payment for Jerry's services. He licked it to seal it. And why not? He had the identical DNA thing working in his favor. The test on the saliva revealed another tell-tale substance – the Protein Powder that only Jerry uses.

"Jerry also arranged to have Randy's camera rolling at the precise second Joe's body plummeted past his balcony, but I am getting several steps ahead of the sequence."

"This is the truly ingenious part of it all. At about 6:15 Jerry called Joe – from the hall phone on the 1200 floor – to come up to his suite. Joe obliged him and was soon there. At 6:18 Jerry called Tako to his suite. During the six minutes between that call and 6:24 when Tako arrived at Jerry's door, Jerry – using a pistol to control his intended victim – stuffed Joe's mouth with a washcloth from the bathroom, put tape across his mouth so the gag could not be forced out with his tongue, and forced Joe to hang off his balcony railing. We know the gag came from Jerry's bathroom since his is the only suite that always receives new linens and that washcloth – sporting the Ark's logo – was brand new. He cut Joe's fingers as they gripped the railing, and he absorbed a great amount of the blood into paper towels which he probably put into a plastic sack of some kind. The 90 second downpour began – unplanned of course – and Jerry's hair got wet as he stood out

on the balcony. While he began talking to Tako through the door, Jerry covered Joe's fingers with some plastic sheeting, lifted the huge rock from the floor of his balcony and smashed it down against Joe's fingers. They released their grip of course and Joe fell straight down to his death. Jerry wouldn't try to pry them off and risk getting Joe's tell-tale blood anywhere on his person. He collected the rest of the blood on another paper towel and deposited it into the bag for safe keeping. He hurled the hand gun as far as he could and it landed some distance away in the parking lot. The plastic sheet was probably disposed of in a similar way.

"He then closed the curtain across the door to his balcony and told Tako to come in. Tako opened the door and saw Jerry in his robe with a wet head apparently ready for a rub down. Uncharacteristically, Jerry was wearing his robe rather than just his birthday suite which had been more typical on the previous occasions. The robe was to cover the clothing Jerry had on underneath – clothes he would need to be wearing during the next rapid phase of the operation.

"Almost immediately Tako got a call from Marvel on the street outside asking him to find me. Tako left immediately in search of me – my phone was turned off while I was eating. You can bet that if that call had not come in, Jerry had some other plan devised for getting rid of Tako.

"As soon as Tako left, Jerry shed his robe, rolled down his pants legs and donned some footwear. He made his way to the service elevator which is directly across the hall from his door. He traveled to the 600 floor and directly across the hall to the Blair's suite using the key he had taken from Joe to gain entrance. He smeared the blood from the paper towels onto the railing. It had stopped raining by then so the blood stayed in place. He intentionally left the sliding door open for effect. However, having been opened after the downpour, which had occurred as Joe was falling, the carpet just inside the door was not wet as it would have been had the door been open before the rain. By contrast, the carpet in the Watkins' suite was damp.

"Then, Jerry made his way back to his suite via the service elevator. He burned the bloody paper towels in his fireplace and washed his railing with a chlorine water solution

he had ready ahead of time thinking that would bleach away all traces of the red blood. Blood in any other color is still blood.

“The evidence, as Jerry had prepared it, would make it appear that Joe had fallen from his own balcony at the exact time Jerry and Taco were speaking with each other through Jerry’s door. The time recorded in Tako’s keycard, as well as the time stamp on the time lapse picture, would verify that. It was to have been the perfect, airtight alibi – Jerry, with a witness placing him in his own room, six floors above the scene at the time of the crime.

“What evidence do I offer as proof of Jerry’s guilt? The blood in the ashes I found in Jerry’s fireplace belonged to Joe Blair. The traces of blood found on Jerry’s railing belonged to Joe Blair. Perhaps the most convincing evidence of all had been supplied by Joe himself. Hanging there during those several minutes he surely knew he was soon to fall to death, he formulated a plan. When his body was found, his hands were tightly tucked into his armpits. Each hand had its fingers configured in a different way. As is well known among the contestants here, the Blair Twins mother, Sarah, is deaf. Joe had formed his hands into sign language symbols and placed them where he hoped they would remain as his body crashed onto the pavement below – the right was J and the left was W – Jerry Watkins.

“The lone killer of Joseph Blair was Jerry Watkins.

“Those to be charged will remain here for a short time longer: the Watkins twins, Beth, the Potter twins, and Randy West. Also, if Dr. Medford, Detective Fredricks, the States Attorney, the officers and Tako and Tina will remain, please. I want to thank the rest of you for coming and for your help with these cases. I now ask that you leave the rest of us alone.

The room cleared amid much chatter and the rear door was soon closed again. Once those charged with crimes had been given their rights, Masters addressed them.

“Are there comments to be heard at this time?”

Beth stood looking strangely distant – detached. She spoke slowly and deliberately holding out her hands, her brow wrinkled, expressing deepest concern.

“The powder on my hands. Will it damage my skin?”

Even Jerry says that I have wonderful skin.”

Masters looked her in the eyes.

“What powder, Beth?”

She tried to hide her hands and sat down, understanding even through her growing depression that she had allowed the old detective to dupe her into a confession.

Jerry stood and addressed Masters.

“Okay. We lose you win. I guess that contest only played out in our fantasies. I do have one question that has been driving me crazy. How did you arrive at the outrageous figure you quoted to me for your fee? You walked around the room looking at the ceiling and mumbling like some senile old street person.”

Masters smiled and walked to where Tako and Tina were, pulling them up onto their feet. He stepped between them and put his arms on their shoulders.

“Figure it this way, Jerry. Think about the university at Geneseo. About twelve thousand dollars per year in tuition per student, times four years equals forty-eight thousand, times two students – he looked each of the young people in their face – equals ninety-six thousand, plus twenty percent for living expenses – rounded off – comes to roughly the hundred and fifteen thousand I extracted from you. I figured somebody needed to make sure your money would be put to good use.”

He smiled broadly and Jerry sat down, clearly puzzled about the old man’s motive. Masters then turned back toward the rest. The attractive stranger stood and approached Mr. Masters, taking his arm in hers.

“Most of you have no idea who I am. I’m Dr. Alice Medford, a clinical psychologist who counseled Terry and Jerry for several years after the conviction of their father.”

She turned directly toward the two of them.

“I truly thought we had cleared up the problems your father’s behavior had caused you. It appears that I was wrong and that either I terminated your treatment too soon or I should have taken more care in helping your mother work through her own infectious hatred. In either event I am here to apologize to you boys for that, and to Mr. Masters, here, who suggested counseling for you in the first place and who so generously paid for it out of his own pocket all those years. I

am so very sorry that those loveable little boys with their wonderful smiles and bright futures were, for whatever reason, allowed to get mired in that always destructive cycle of hate and revenge, and to become the sad and troubling focus in this Case of the Twisted Twins Murders.”

THE END