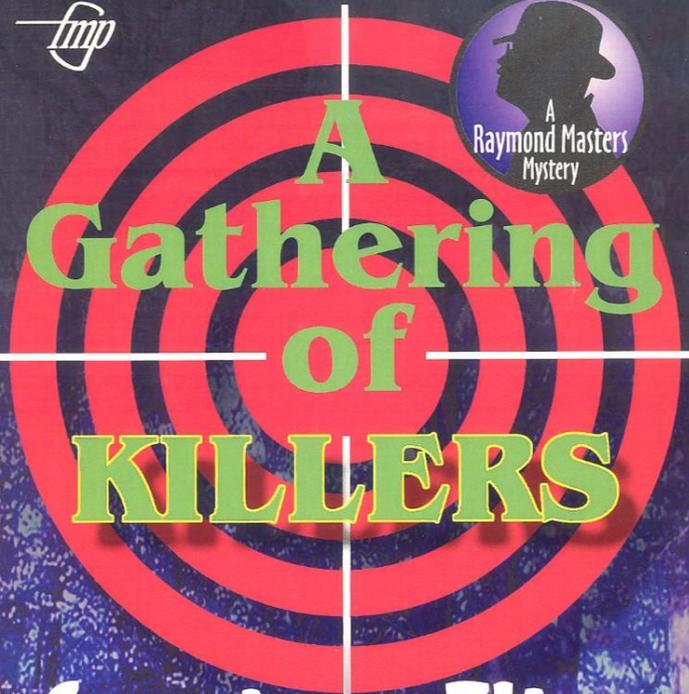
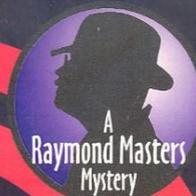




FMP



A
Gathering
of
KILLERS

Garrison Flint

With four dozen weapons experts gathered for their annual competition, there is no dearth of suspects.

Another Family Friendly Book from the Family of Man Press

A Gathering of Killers

A Raymond Masters Mystery

Book Four

By
Garrison Flint

The Family of Man Press

© 2003, 2017

///

CHAPTER ONE

Day One: The Dark of the Moon

It was a simply beautiful, awe inspiring trip by car, made all the more beautiful and awe inspiring by the leisurely pace at which Raymond Masters chose to drive it. Once each year, during the second week in June, the retired police detective wound his way from his home in Rossville, through the low, rolling, hills and valleys of western New York to Whispering Pines Lodge, some eighty miles southwest, for the annual Gathering of Marksmen.

Unusual, perhaps, among policemen, Masters had a curious distaste for weapons of all kinds, yet, year after year, he agreed to serve as a judge for the competition. It was a grand excuse to spend a relaxing week amid the pines and oaks and walk the quiet woodlands of the magnificent countryside. (Being an all-expense paid gig didn't detract from its appeal, of course!) Although he was not a fisherman, himself, he enjoyed being near the water and watching the others delight in the activity. Why they enjoyed yanking sharply barbed hooks into the cheeks of helpless, unsuspecting, beautiful little fish escaped him. It was nothing he cared to partake of. Masters hated the idea of killing anything and chose to believe that the steaks and pork chops, which he so loved, simply hatched full-blown in 'steak and chop coops' somewhere out West.

He had recently returned from a three-week stay in Mexico City where he had been engaged as a consultant on a serial killer case. Between the heat, the hot food and the

strange bed, he arrived home wearied from the undertaking. (Who'd have guessed? It actually had been the butler!) A week of relaxation among a group of old friends - only ever seen during that interlude at the Lodge - sounded a lot like heaven to him. He had shed his familiar suit, vest and bulky silk tie for slacks, wide suspenders and sport shirt (triple extra-large to fit his ample frame). At the lodge, he was always treated just like one of the boys – a refreshing and treasured state of affairs quite different from the uncomfortable celebrity status typically conferred on him.

He had set out soon after breakfast that Sunday morning, and - with numerous stops to enjoy the natural beauty as well as a pastry here and a slice of pie there – he would pull into the Lodge just in time for lunch. As he drove along the narrow, winding road, he was taken by the many shades of greens, browns and blacks that blended together producing the deceptive image that the hills were in truth a unified color. He chuckled to himself remembering how his mother had admonished him never to wear blue and green together as they would clash. Yet, there ahead, perfectly compatible, lay a horizon capped by a powder blue sky above the lush green hills all grounded by the deep blue water of the mirror still lake. The blue and green shirt he had donned that morning fit his scheme of color coordination perfectly. If others scoffed that would have to be their problem – their dissociation from the context of nature.

At a few minutes before noon, Masters pulled to a stop atop the hill, which overlooked the deep valley that was home to Whispering Pines Lodge. It sat fifty yards back from the fiord-like lake and slightly above the floor of the valley where it was nestled into a dimple in the side of the hill. The lodge had been a C.C.C. project during the Roosevelt era and, with but an occasional minor renovation, stood just as it had for three-quarters of a century. Indoor plumbing and air conditioning had been added for the comfort of the guests and a modern kitchen had been tacked onto the back (for the comfort of Masters

Those adjustments aside, it still stood as a grand, log edifice three stories tall, supported by hand-hewn, twelve-inch

beams in every dimension. Its steep peaks sported a shake-shingled roof that boasted a dozen dormers on each side. From Master's position, the tiny panes of glass in the array of large windows reflected the darker, burnished blue of the lake. From the ground, they reflected the lighter, softer blue of the sky. The building was an inseparable part of the landscape. Just viewing the area brought a sense of repose to the old detective. He chuckled again, realizing that he suddenly felt 'a sense of urgency' to get to the place where 'a sense of urgency' was always left at the gate.

At precisely twelve, o'clock Masters pulled into the parking space reserved for room 300. One could not say it was his favorite room; it was just the only room he had ever occupied there. Situated behind a sharply peaked dormer, it was spacious, quiet, and uncommonly comfortable. Two massive windows overlooked the neatly kept grounds below and offered an unchecked view of the narrow, ragged lake, which spread serenely toward the horizon, weaving in and out among the stubby fingers of the gently sloping hills. With a key to the freight elevator - furtively provided each year by Amy, the operator of the gift shop – Masters' climb to the third floor posed no problem whatsoever. Riding the elevator was always an adventure. Sometimes it stopped where it had been directed to stop and other times it chose to ignore such commands and would miss its mark by a floor in either direction.

At the precise moment the elevator doors slid apart revealing the familiar wainscoted hallway and the distinctive pungency of the old building, the high pitched voice of Adam, Amy's son, resounded from the stairway to Master's left.

"Mr. M! Mr. M! I've been waiting all morning for you! Why are you so slow this year?"

His slender frame, topped by an unkempt mop of sandy hair and punctuated with his trademark grin, bounded up the final steps as he called out. Masters turned to greet his young friend, dropping his bags and opening his big arms in preparation for their usual hug of all hugs. Unexpectedly, Adam stopped short of the arms.

"What? No hug for your old hiking buddy?" Masters

asked, a bit puzzled by the lad's hesitation.

"Well, I am ten now, Mr. M. I'm no little kid anymore. What will people think?"

Masters shaded his eyes with his right hand and playfully gazed around the deserted hall, as if an Indian, scouting from a hillside.

"I don't see anyone here that would seem to be bothered by that at all, do you, Kimo Sabe?"

Adam broke into another grin and lunged into Masters' embrace. He had known Adam since the day the boy had been born – ten years and one week, to be precise. Masters reached for his bags. Adam insisted on toting the larger one – after all, he was no longer a little kid, for goodness sake. They made their way to the room and were soon inside, immediately engaged in the kind of easy conversation that always flowed when they found themselves together. It was as if no time at all had elapsed between visits. Adam was full of things to relate to his old friend and eager to hear about Masters' most recent exploits.

The first part of their ritual was for Adam to stand with his back against the closet door where Masters carefully marked his height with a pencil line. They then compared it with the previous years and remembered together some of the good times they had experienced together there at Whispering Pines Lodge.

"Remember when you were five, and we . . ."

"Remember the time when I was eight and you . . ."

This year the growth spurt had been significant.

"Looks like three, almost four inches this year. What has your mom been feeding you, boy?"

Adam shrugged his shoulders and grinned, proud of his accomplishment, unaware that he had no reason to be taking credit for it.

Next, Masters unzipped the big bags and with practiced deliberation, assigned each piece of clothing to one of the dresser drawers or to a hanger in the closet. It was his role in the game to make believe that he had forgotten Adam's

birthday present. Adam hinted and giggled vying for a glance in the bags as the old inspector scooted him away pretending not to grasp the situation. Then, with total bewilderment, Masters came upon a brightly wrapped package at the bottom of the bag.

“My goodness. What do you suppose this could be?”

A short game of keep away ensued before the gift was lovingly stuffed into Adam’s stomach like the ball passing between quarterback and halfback.

The paper no longer sported the balloons or fire trucks of years past - after all a ten-year-old deserved a manlier wrap in tans and greens with stately trees and a majestic pheasant providing a suitable splash of color. Adam noted the difference and gave Masters a knowing glance and nod as he examined it with his eyes before carefully unwrapping the package (well, as carefully as a ten-year-old boy does anything!). Inside was a new fishing reel – far fancier and more expensive than was indeed appropriate for a youngster but Adam was like the grandson Masters would never have and nothing could ever be too fancy or expensive for a grandchild.

“Wow! This is awesome! It’s as good as any I’ve ever seen. Thanks Mr. M. Thanks a lot.”

It deserved and got another hug, that time with none of the ‘who might be watching hesitation’. Masters noted that Adam was torn between staying to talk and rushing off to give his new reel the initiation it deserved.

“Be gone!” Masters said with a flourish. “Wet some line. We have a whole week to talk.”

It was less permission and more the mutual recognition of a boy’s proper priorities. Adam paused at the door.

“The Judge and Grace came in last night - they’re in 202 like usual. John and Evy just beat you here by an hour. They’re in 205 like usual. We got a new handyman, Dave. I’ll introduce you to him after lunch. He’s really cool. We do lots of stuff together. You’ll like him a lot. Well, see you about two, then, okay?”

“Okay. Have fun. Don’t fall in. Do you need gas

money for that contraption?”

Adam shook his head in dismay over the way his old friend pretended to be dull-witted about all matters pertaining to fishing. As briskly as he had appeared, he was gone.

Masters spent a few minutes putting the furnishings in proper order – one that met his personal preferences. The oversized upholstered chair was soon occupying a spot close to and facing a big window. The small round table and two matching chairs were positioned under the hanging lamp for evening games of checkers provided Adam didn't, in fact, fall in. The couch – his noontime haven for forty winks – stayed put against the wall opposite the king-sized bed. Giving the place a satisfied final glance, he let himself sink into the big chair and enjoy a few moments with the beautiful view. He saw Adam below, making a beeline for the long, gray, plank dock, which extended some forty feet out into the lake. Adam estimated the water was about ten feet deep off the end. Masters had never ventured in for a swim, joking that he didn't want to flood the dining room. It continued to garner chuckles so he continued to say it. As he watched the now barefoot, barebacked lad perching himself on the side of the dock, the old inspector marveled at what a fine young man he was becoming.

Adam's mother, Amy, had never married. The boy's father remained nameless. She was a good mother and after more than a dozen years at the lodge had become a welcome – indispensable, even - fixture there. Most of the visitors knew her as the cheerful, helpful face they could turn to whenever they had a question or an unresolved problem with the facilities. She was petite in every direction with short dark hair and blue eyes, and displayed paler skin than one would expect gracing someone who enjoyed being outdoors as much as she did.

At ten, Adam was nearly his mother's match in height – a trait most clearly contributed from his father's gene pool. Along with that had also come his flashing brown eyes and perennially tanned skin. In many ways, Adam found himself in a favorable setting. The lodge played host to hundreds of men each year, many of whom made it an annual stop for

their week of fishing, hunting or relaxation. Male role models – though perhaps a tad on the macho side – were not lacking in his life.

Fred Featherston, the manager of the lodge, was a former contractor who, after suffering a back injury, retreated to the less strenuous life at Whispering Pines. Behind the gruff, no-nonsense exterior of the recently graying, burly, middle-aged man lay a teddy bear – unsuccessfully disguised though never admitted. He hired Amy a few years after taking over the reins and, together, they gave the lodge a comfortable, uniquely attractive character. Fred's influence in Adam's life was both positive and obvious.

Fred was the outspoken type. He could be counted on to open his mouth long before he began thinking about the appropriateness of what he was saying. His language remained construction-site-colorful – though never in Adam's presence. Fred had always handled the repairs and upkeep himself. Evidently, that was changing with the addition of Dave the handyman.

Masters wondered if the job was getting too hard – physically – for Fred or if he had suddenly realized there was more to life than work. He hoped it was the latter although if it had been forced upon him by the former, that would not be all bad either. (If Raymond Masters was anything, he was an optimist – another trait seldom found among seasoned law enforcement officers.)

His reverie was interrupted by an unmistakable, tentative, knock. With no little effort, he extracted his considerable bulk from the comfort of the big chair and moved to answer the door. With open arms, followed by a certified bear hug, he eagerly greeted Cathy, one of the longtime maids at the lodge. Stout and ever smiling she was a middle-aged, rosy-cheeked, unending fountain of information – especially about the guests. Her expertise did not merely stop with third and fourth hand gossip, although that could be considered her specialty. It was as if she kept books on everyone who entered the front door. She could tell you where they came from, where they were going, why they were at the lodge, how often and when they had been there before

and as much about the seamy side of their personal life as she deemed decent to acquire. Her narrative about the state of things at the lodge and its guests would be delivered whether you asked for it or not. In fact, it would continue in spite of pleas to the contrary. Cathy lived in one of the several large rooms in the attic above the third floor – efficiency apartments, actually - which were reserved for some of the old-time, year ‘round help. She had been married once though no one seemed to know the particulars. Since she chose not to speak of it, Masters considered it a closed topic.

“What’s cookin’ honey?” Masters asked, planting a quick, juicy kiss on her pudgy cheek.

“Some present you got for Master Adam. He’s too highfalutin’ to speak to us commoners anymore.”

Masters chuckled.

“And you. How has the past year treated you?” he asked with genuine interest.

“Well, no handsome hunk of manhood has proposed if that’s what you mean, but, other than that, it’s been a really fine year. I’m not so sure about this coming week though. Not so sure at all.”

Her face became suddenly serious and she shook her head dramatically. Cathy’s theatrics were well known to Masters but he played along.

“How so?” he asked as if sincerely concerned by her observation.

“The Gathering of Marksman. It’s a disagreeable lot if you ask me. I always expect the worst in June, Mr. Masters. Mark my word. This year it comes during the dark of the moon and that’s sure to unleash their unruly passions.”

“I’ve never noticed ‘unruly passions,’ Cathy, and how long have I been coming to these affairs? Besides, I thought it was the full moon that affected the lunatics in our midst.”

“Lunatics, yes. But it’s the dark of the moon that unleashes the savage beast in our souls.”

“And the marksman who come for the Gathering are savages?”

“Well, just think about it. Four dozen men and women whose main interest in life is mastering the use of pistols, knives and the bow and arrow. They aren’t satisfied with just one despicable weapon. No! They have to become experts with three. Can’t be more than a bunch of bloodthirsty barbarians under that high-class skin of theirs. Just can’t be.”

“Surely you don’t think of Judge Geiger and his wife as a barbarians, now, do you? Or John and Evy Eagan? Come now.”

“None of the four of them is a saint, Mr. Masters.” She waggled her index finger in his face. “Don’t be fooled by their fancy talk and lovey-dovey ways.”

“By the way, Cathy, the new maid – I think she said her name was Milly. She introduced herself to me as I checked in and called me by name. Any idea how she might have known who I was?”

“No Sir. I just know she ain’t the usual summer maid. Tight lipped, that one. Don’t talk much about herself and always asking personal questions about everybody else. Probably, just found out about you from one of the guests. She’s a social climber, I’d say. She’s always hobnobbing with the important folks.”

“She’d classify me as one of the important folks?”

“Oh, yes Sir – a famous detective with books written about his cases. That’s all she’d know so she’d be impressed. Me, now, I know you’re really just one of us commoners so I’m not impressed.”

She winked her playful wink. Then, as if to prove her point, she transferred the clean towels from her arms into his, turned, and made her way down the hall.

Masters smiled, discounting Cathy’s ominous remarks as merely the melodramatic Cathy making her grand entrance into his life for another week. She had caught his attention, however. It was, perhaps, somewhat odd for people to spend the greater part of their lives becoming proficient with all three of those weapons so they could come and compete in some relatively obscure, three event, competition that brought them no distinction or particular respect beyond that single week in

that small, out of the way region of western New York.

Enough of that! It was well past time for lunch. Masters hoped their cook's delicious meat loaf was on the menu. His mouth had been salivating for it ever since he finished the peach pie more than two hours earlier. He closed the door behind him and headed down the hall. Cathy's comments wouldn't let him go. Why call it Bow and Arrow competition rather than archery, he wondered as he inserted the key at the elevator door? Archery had such a gentle tone to it. Bow and Arrow did seem to suggest the more aggressive, belligerent, even primitive side of the activity. And rather than Knife Throwing, it was referred too simply as Knifing – it was even a sinister looking word! And, finally, the pistol shooting competition – other places called marksmanship – was referred to as Gunning in the local event.

Masters shivered and drew up his shoulders in an attempt to shake off the bothersome thoughts. The elevator arrived and he stepped in. Somewhere between the third and first floors those concerns faded.

The lobby was a huge, rustic room, perhaps forty feet wide and eighty feet long with a fifteen-foot-high wood plank ceiling crisscrossed with beams of roughhewn logs. The back wall consisted entirely of floor to ceiling windows broken only by the periodic, foot thick timbers necessary to support the considerable weight of the floors above. Two glass doors opened onto a wide deck. From there, one could enjoy the magnificent view beyond. A small, sparsely wooded meadow stretched toward the base of a steeply inclined hill which reached high above the lodge protecting it from the cold northwest winds of the winter and offering a cooling, deep, early, shadow on hot summer afternoons. A number of deer and ground squirrels made the meadow their home year 'round.

The gift shop was on the side of the lobby opposite the deck and to the right of the entrance as one faced it from inside. Amy offered a variety of items. There were those always forgotten necessities of life – toothpaste, batteries, aspirin, shoestrings, stationery and the like, as well as a

variety of treats for the sweet tooth. There were Tee shirts and jackets; the usual selection of functionless, dust-catching, knickknacks, such as the never-popular black bear with the clock in its stomach; and a wall of paperbacks for those who preferred reading to strolling the hills. A case of knives for the hunter and fisherman always attracted the boys (young and old).

To the left of the entrance was the front desk and beyond that, the door to the dining room.

The length of the huge lobby was broken into to fairly equal sections by a massive, double-sided stone fireplace. Each side boasted a twelve-foot mantle, hand carved from single logs. Across one end of the fireplace were shelves containing hundreds of jigsaw puzzles and children's games. The other end had become a miniature gallery with wood-framed pictures of every size and shape, depicting the beautiful, picturesque area immediately surrounding The Whispering Pines Lodge.

Dozens upon dozens of rustic, wood and cushion arm chairs and sofas were arranged around the room into several cozy groupings, which continually transformed themselves in configuration and size according to the needs of the guests. Tables in a variety of sizes were placed around the room in strategic locations. Massive, wheel-like, wooden chandeliers hung from the ceiling by chains. They provided more than adequate lighting for an evening of cards or reading or pleasant conversation. Missing was a television set, though none but the youngest children ever realized that. (Hope Barney and Big Bird wouldn't get too lonesome.)

On his way to the dining room, Masters stopped by the gift shop to chat with Amy.

"That son of yours will soon be towering over you, my dear. I can't believe how he's shot up these past twelve months."

"Just ask him. He'll gladly tell you he's no longer a little boy."

"He already made that point with me, in fact."

"That was a wonderful gift you brought for him. I hope

he'll take care of it the way it deserves to be cared for."

"Did you ever mistreat your favorite, doll, Amy?"

"I see what you mean. I guess I can cross that off my worry list."

"That list growing, is it?" Masters said, leaving it open for her to pursue if she chose to.

"Oh, you know. If it's not one thing it's another."

Masters noticed she was more uneasy than usual, but he wouldn't tread further into territory she clearly wanted to avoid. Perhaps later.

"Oh, my goodness," Masters said as if he had forgotten something. He reached into his pocket.

"I figured the mother of a ten-year-old boy probably deserved a gift on his birthday more than the lad himself."

He handed her a long, flat, narrow package, wrapped in pink and garnished with a silk rose.

"Mr. M! You are the sweetest thing, you know! You shouldn't have . . . but I'm glad you did."

With far less effort than her son had expended, she soon had the box unwrapped and the paper saved in one piece, neatly folded for future use. 'It must be a woman thing,' he thought to himself. The present was a necklace composed of a dozen dark-wood, free-form, disks, hand painted with flowers native to western New York, threaded together – top and bottom - with a double leather thong.

Amy's eyes teared as she reached across the counter and gave the old gentleman a kiss on his cheek.

"It's beautiful. Thank you so much! Without a doubt, it's the best gift I ever got on Adam's birthday – other than Adam, of course."

"Of course. No gift will ever compare with Adam," Masters agreed.

"Some days I wonder," she said and then hastened to add, "Well, not really. It's just that recently he's developed such a mind of his own – you know – doesn't like my rules, forgets to get home on time, says his homework's done when it isn't."

“Sounds a lot like a pretty typical ten-year-old boy to me, Amy.”

“You think so? I’ve been really concerned, actually. It seems that ever since Dave started working here, Adam doesn’t want to do anything but be with him. I was afraid he was being a bad influence.”

“Is this Dave that dreadful a human being?”

“No. Really, he’s a very nice young man. Haven’t you met him yet?”

“No. Adam said he’d introduce me after lunch. How old is he?”

“Twenty-five or so. I’m not sure, exactly. He just drifted in one day and the next thing we knew Fred had hired him. It seemed strange at the time. Now, it’s hard to remember how we got along without him.”

“He’s good help, then, is he?”

“Oh, yes. He’s not afraid of work. He never seems bothered when you ask for his help and, in fact, takes the initiative to fix things well before he’s asked to. He’s polite and upbeat, and he’s really patient with Adam. He even helps him with his math - not my thing if you’ll remember.”

“Sure sounds like a scoundrel to me. I can see why you’re afraid he’s being a bad influence on the boy.”

They laughed together and Amy blushed as if embarrassed to have even harbored such thoughts.

“So, he’s just being a ten-year-old boy, you say?”

“Sure sounds that way to me. I have a friend who’s a child psychologist and I remember him saying once that a typical ten-year-old boy sees absolutely no need for a home or parents so long as he has his friends.”

“That’s my boy. Thanks for saying that. You don’t know what a relief it is. Sometimes I do wish there were more kids his age around during the summer. It’s hard to get him with his school friends when I have to work ten hours a day, seven days a week, you know.”

“I’m sure it is. I doubt if that’s damaging him, however. He seems to be a happy, secure boy to me. Well, I’d best be

getting on to lunch. I'd hate to have to notch up my belt for lack of sustenance. Woops! That's right it's suspenders week."

He gave them a snap, Amy a peck on the cheek, and went on his way.

As he entered the dining room, he met Fred coming out. They greeted each other like long lost brothers.

"Got time to come and sit a minute while I order?" Masters asked, his arm still on Fred's shoulder.

"Sure. What the hay! I'm the boss around here, you know."

They headed for a window table in the corner – Masters' favorite spot. The waiter – a young man from the nearby college, working at the lodge for his third summer – approached them immediately, extending a hand of friendship and welcoming Masters back. (Like most people, he liked the old detective and would have acted the very same way even if he hadn't been known to be the best tipper of the summer.)

"No need to order, Sir," the waiter began. "Cathy already told the cook you were here and he saved you the biggest portion of meatloaf I've ever seen. That's with a baked potato and creamed corn, after a tossed salad with vinegar and oil, correct?"

"Donny, you are a marvel. Yes, that is correct. Thank Cookie for me."

"Yes, Sir. Coffee or lemonade?"

"Lemonade, thank you."

The young man turned and left.

"So, my friend, what's this I hear about you being so old and decrepit that you needed to hire a handyman?"

"The day I'm old and decrepit you'll have been long in your grave – your extra-large grave at that."

Fred became serious and continued.

"It was strange how that happened. Dave just wandered in here one day, back in December, and said he was looking for work. I told him I didn't have any. Next thing I knew I found him out chopping the brush back by the deck. I

told him there wasn't any money in it for him but he just grinned. Later that afternoon he was up a ladder cleaning and reattaching the guttering to the front porch roof. Before supper time he had the front walk weeded and had re-planked a rotting section of the dock. I couldn't make him stop. I gave him supper and told him again that I wasn't in the market for any help. You know what he had the nerve to say? He said, 'Well, it seems obvious to me that you should be.' And he was right, of course, but until that moment, I hadn't seen it. Things had got out of hand around here. Before he'd finished his third piece of pie, we'd struck a deal. That was strange, too. He agreed to work for room and board and a hundred a week. That's like slave labor. After a month, I gave him a good raise. Nice kid. Smart as a whip. Just can't understand him being here. Never talks much about himself. Strange!"

"Sounds like a good thing fell into your lap. Why question it?" Masters said.

"Yeah, you're probably right. It gives me time for my latest love, underwater photography. I'll have to show you my equipment. Some of my better pictures are up in the gallery on the fireplace. Take a look and tell me what you think. You always had a good eye for such things. This winter I hope to go to Florida and do some saltwater picture snapping. It'll be a good excuse to get away from here for a week or so. Well, I gotta get going. Still have some preparations for the Gathering. Looks like there'll be over four dozen entrants this year. Seems to only grow by one or two a year, but after a while that adds up. Oh, by the way, Dave wants to give it a try this year. He's pretty good with a bow and a knife. I've never seen him shoot with a pistol, though I've heard him practicing. He's saved up the two-hundred-dollar entry fee so I suppose there's nothing to keep him out, is there?"

"Nothing I can see. I guess John Eagan has the final say. He's the association president this year, isn't he?"

"Yeah. That's what I told Dave. I'll run it by him. Glad Judge Geiger's term is over. Don't think I could work with him anymore."

"Oh. George Geiger? Something happen between you two?"

“It’s nothing I can talk about, but I’ll tell you this much. Somebody ought to bash him up beside the head with a ball bat and send him to an early grave.”

“Whoa, there. What on Earth is going on, Fred? That’s pretty severe talk even for you – especially when you’ve clearly been thinking about it.”

“Like I said, it’s nothing I can talk about. Shouldn’t have even brought it up. Better be on my way before I say too much. I’ll see you later.”

Fred left just as the salad arrived. For Masters, eating was a celebration and he entered into the process with all of the joy and unqualified abandon that implied. Fred’s remark, however, had put somewhat of a damper on that particular meal. Oh, he’d enjoy it, but without his usual flair.

The baked potato was perfect and the meatloaf suburb. In all honesty, he could not be sure if it was the meatloaf itself or the marvelous, house-doctored catsup that made it such a delectable dish. The combination, however, was delicious.

“Key Lime pie?” the waiter asked as he removed the dishes and refilled the lemonade.

“You read my mind, Donny.”

“With black coffee?”

“With black coffee. Thank you.”

Amy entered the dining room looking for Masters. Spotting him, she made her way to his table.

“Got a light, sailor,” she asked, striking a bent leg, siren-like pose, softening her serious mission with a moment of feigned levity.

“Well, no actually, but for such a pretty face, I’ll gladly rub two toothpicks together,” came his quick replay. “Have a seat.”

He sensed her distress.

“Something’s on your mind, my dear. How can I help?”

She took a seat opposite him, across the small round table. She wrung her hands as she searched for the words.

“You know about Adam’s father – I mean that we never

married. Well, it was just a one-week fling, actually. He swept me off my feet and I lost my head. Understand that I don't regret it since Adam's the wonderful result of it all. His father took his responsibility – financial, that is - right from the start. I can't fault him for that. Every month he has sent me five hundred dollars. It's never been less than that. At birthdays and Christmas, it's more. It's never been so much as a day late."

She paused, as if that had been the easy part of the story. Masters reached across the table and silently put his big hand atop hers. She continued.

"Last night he came to me and said that instead of monthly payments from now on, he had established a trust fund for Adam and that when he turned eighteen there would plenty of money for his college education with some left over for me. He said I'd be receiving the particulars from his lawyer in a few days."

"And that's bad news?" Masters asked.

"Yes and no. To have the money for a college education is like a Godsend. I could never provide that for him. The problem is short term. I don't know how I'm going to make it without that money coming in every month. I tried to explain it to him but he said the change had been made and that was that. He seemed totally unreasonable about it as if he suddenly only cared about himself. For the first time, really, I'm just furious with him and don't know where to turn. If I'd had a gun, I'd have shot him on the spot. I'm glad I didn't have one. I just had to talk with somebody, Mr. M. I shouldn't be burdening you with my problem. It wasn't a good idea. I'd better just go."

"What you'd better do is just sit, young lady. This is not the end of your world. I'll tell you what, later on in the week we'll go over your budget and see just exactly what your needs are going to be. We'll look at things down the road over the next few years. That's the starting place. Then we'll be in a position to begin searching for alternatives. We'll work things out. You've always worked things out, my dear. Buck up, okay?"

She smiled through her tears and nodded, appearing more like a frightened little girl than the competent mother of a ten-year-old. She stood, kissed him on his forehead and left without another word.

Masters shook his head. What was going on? Fred – the resident teddy bear - was ready to kill the Judge. Amy – as near a saint as walked the earth - was ready to kill Adam's father. Perhaps Maid Cathy was onto something. All Masters could recall about the dark of the moon was that the almanac swore it was the ideal time to plant potatoes, or onions or something. Just which month that was, also escaped him.

Perhaps the pie would bring him to his senses.

* * *

Two o'clock found Masters seated in the lobby going over the schedule for the events in which he would be involved. His responsibilities were fairly simple. See that the proper stance and distance from the target were maintained, see that the correct number of attempts-to-target were made, and verify each contestant's total score for each session. Each entrant performed a series of 48 attempts-to-target on each of the four days of competition with each of the three weapons. The number 48 had been established according to the six-shooters that were still used in the gunning competition – eight reloads per session. For purposes of comparison among the three areas, the same number became the standard for the other two weapons as well.

On Friday night at the Awards Banquet, prizes would be presented and officers for the upcoming year elected. Miner awards were given in each weapon category but the main attention focused on the top combined score. During the time Masters had been associated with the event, the Judge and John Eagan – an investment banker from Buffalo – had been the ones who usually vied for top honors. It began as a friendly rivalry, but in recent years had taken on a more fiercely competitive tone.

There were three other judges so Masters actually had

a good deal of free time. He opted for the eight a.m. to noon sessions. That gave him the better part of the day for relaxation, long walks and time with Adam, Fred and Amy.

As he was fumbling, trying to place the folder into his briefcase, Adam arrived with Dave in tow.

“Mr. M, this is my friend Dave. I’m trying to get him and mom hitched.”

Amused at the lad’s forthrightness, Masters stood and offered Dave his hand.

“Glad to meet you. Heard lots of good things about you.”

Adam looked puzzled so Masters explained.

“Adam’s mom says they don’t know how they got along around here before you arrived on the scene.”

“She’s very kind, Sir. Actually, it’s been more the other way around. I love this place and they’ve all been really swell to me.”

Masters was certain he hadn’t heard the word ‘swell’ come out of the mouth of a twenty-five-year-old since 1955. If not sincere, Dave certainly knew the words to say and the buttons to push. There was, of course, no reason to doubt his earnestness.

“Well, Adam vouches for you, and that’s good enough for me,” Masters replied.

Dave ruffled Adam’s hair. It was met with a grin and he inched himself closer to the man.

“So, I understand you’re an internationally known detective or some such thing,” Dave said.

Masters leaned in as if to become confidential.

“We try to just keep that under our hats around here. It’s hard to have a relaxing vacation otherwise.”

“I understand.” He zipped his lips shut. “No one will hear it from me. I sure would like to hear about some of your cases though. I grew up thinking I’d like to be a cop. Things changed along the way, but a kid’s dream, you know - it’s hard to just lay aside.”

“Oh yes. Mine was to become a carpenter. I still may someday. Perhaps you can share some tips with me.”

“Anytime.”

“Your language pattern suggests Alabama. Am I close?” Masters asked.

Dave seemed a bit upset at the observation but answered.

“Yes, Sir. Alabama born and bred.”

“Long way from home then. Ever get back to visit your family?”

“No family. Just me and now I’m here so I guess this is home.”

“I see. Well, I didn’t mean to pry. It’s just the nosey old cop showing through, I suppose,” Masters said after having caught exactly the fish for which he had been casting.

“Dave and me are going up to the look-out tower behind the lodge. Somebody said there’s a broken step. We need to check it out. I don’t suppose you want to come along.”

His tone didn’t leave the impression that the old man wasn’t welcome, just that the likelihood of such a climb to the top of the hill and then the additional scaling of the fifty-foot tower would not be high on Masters’ agenda. The boy was right.

“I think I’ll leave that sort of undertaking to you youngsters. Looks like you might get in a little target practice along the way. That’s a beautiful bow, Dave. Do you mind if I look at it?”

“No. Please do.”

He handed it to Masters. A special aspect of the bow competition was that the bow and the arrows had to be made by hand, by the archer. Dave’s was a five-foot bow of hickory with a leather wrapped grip.

“A great bow, huh, Mr. M?” Adam said, clearly proud of his friend’s fine craftsmanship.

“I’ll say so. How did you come by this skill?”

"I've always enjoyed working with wood. Made bows from the time I was old enough to tie two ends of a string to a stick. I just gradually got better at it. Never really studied it, just picked it up along the way."

"Well, you could teach the old-timers around here a thing or two, I'll tell you that."

"Dave said he's going to make one for me, right Dave?"

"Right. Summer's the shooting time. Winter's the making time. Come winter we'll work on it together."

"Dave's got several but they're all too tall for me. Sometimes he lets me stand on a stump and practice, that way it don't touch the ground."

"I hesitate to let him do it that way. He's learning a bad stance pattern. But you know Adam. He has a way of getting what he wants."

"What I want next is a great knife like Dave's but Mom says I'm too young. Maybe you can talk to her for me. I'm ten now, ya know."

Adam slipped the knife from Dave's sheath and showed it to Masters.

"I know that you're ten and I also know your mother and I'm not about to get into the middle of that one. It is a beauty, though, isn't it. Get that around here?"

"Yes, actually I got it right out of the case in the gift shop. Amy found a great deal. They are perfectly balanced. Great for throwing. It's the one I'll use in the competition if they let me in."

"I'm sure that can be arranged. That reminds me, I still haven't seen hide nor hair of the Geigers or the Eagans. Have you run into them this afternoon?"

"No. I can't say that I have," Adam answered looking up at Dave.

"No, Sir. Amy introduced me to them when they arrived but I haven't seen them since. Oh, I believe Grace Geiger ate in her room this noon. I'm pretty sure Donny just delivered for one, though. I haven't seen the Eagans since I met them at about eleven."

“Well, I’ll have to snoop around, I guess. You fellows have a good time. Maybe we can eat together this evening.”

“Sounds fine, Sir. Until this evening, then.”

Dave seemed too good to be true and yet something about him told Masters that was the genuine article. No family and a move to New York State – neither of which he chose to try and explain. Not the usual course of a get acquainted conversation. Perhaps the young man was just the private sort. Perhaps he had something to hide. It was a puzzlement but one that Masters would not pursue further unless good reason arose.

As he stood there contemplating the best way in which to pick up his briefcase which had fallen flat to the floor, John Eagan walked up to him.

“That’s what one too many pieces of Cookies Key Lime pie does to you. Here, let me grab that for you.”

“John! Thank you. I was about to come looking for you. How you doing?”

“Well enough. And you?”

“Fat and sassy. How’s Evy?”

“Okay, I’d say. Ready for the big event?”

Masters noted the man’s willingness to sidestep the issue of his wife’s condition but chose not to mention it.

“Certainly. I have so much preparation, you know,” he joked, looking to see John’s reaction.

John had done well for himself financially and could have been retired at fifty, though he seemed to enjoy his work and continued to be willing to maintain the necessary long hours. He had retained his strong, athletic appearance although to hear him tell it, he seldom worked out. His good looks and sharp mind were obvious advantages in his line of work. Weaponry had been an interest of his since boyhood and he had been a part of the Gathering organization for more than thirty years. The bow was his long suit, but he was certainly no slouch in the other events. In his younger years, his wife, Evy, actually let him do the William Tell thing with an apple on her head. They hadn’t demonstrated that feat for

several years. Masters was relieved. He'd rather get his adrenaline rushes from contemplating a pot roast.

Since his disquieting noon-hour encounter with Cathy, Masters had found it difficult not to review a number of things about his Gathering acquaintances. John and Evy's relationship was among them. It occurred to him that he had not seen them expressing affection to one another in several years – five or even more, perhaps. Earlier they had been like newlyweds – holding hands, moonlight strolls, a quick kiss when they met or parted. Not recently, however. A sad tingle pricked at his being as his memory confirmed the fact.

John's reaction to Masters' attempt at humor was polite but less than genuine. It was as if the encounter had been manufactured to get the obligatory meeting out of the way. John excused himself and disappeared through the front door. It had been a most uncharacteristic conversation. Add John to the growing 'Dark of the Moon List'.

Masters began making his way back to his room. At the elevator, he finally ran into Grace Geiger, the judge's wife.

"Gracie, my dear. I've been concerned that I haven't seen you. Hiding out, are you?"

Grace's reaction blended genuine pleasure at seeing her old friend again with an uneasy, lip biting, haste to be on her way. She was carrying an overnight bag. When she realized Masters had noticed it, she felt moved to explain.

"You remember Marge Mason from in town. She used to work here in the dining room – years ago. Well, she and I have kept up a correspondence and she invited me to come in and spend the night. She's expecting me mid-afternoon. Looks like I'll be late."

"Here, let me carry your bag. I'll walk you out to your car."

Again, her reaction telegraphed unrest, but she hesitantly handed it over to him.

"Sure, that would be nice."

The smile that broke across her face suggested at last that she was truly happy to be with him.

“How have things been?” Masters asked.

“Up and down. Actually, George has been pretty blue the past few months. He did perk up at coming down here, though. I’m not sure you knew that he was diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease three years ago. He’s on medication but his hands still shake and grow numb. In general, I’m afraid, he’s going downhill.”

“No. I didn’t know. I was aware of his cataracts. Did he have surgery on them?”

“No. He’s afraid he’ll lose what vision he has.”

It seems to me that he’s very lucky to have an old R.N. like yourself around to help.”

She smiled a poignant smile. It hinted at something more - a disinterest and perhaps, even, an antipathy toward the man. Masters didn’t intrude further. He shifted to small talk until they came upon the car. He had ascertained from her that the judge had left the lodge on foot early that morning and it appeared that she didn’t know when to expect him back. More, that she didn’t care.

Seeing the car, Masters was moved to comment.

“I see you got rid of the van, did you?”

“Oh, no. George drove that down. I followed in the car. When we leave here, I’m going on to visit friends in Albany and George has to get right back to work.”

He waved her on her way as she drove out the lane. He was amused at her bumper sticker which may or may not have been intended as humorous – ‘God Bless Lawyer’s Wives’. She was both a devoutly religious woman and one who, generally, had a wonderful sense of humor.

“Cathy, Cathy, Cathy. You seem to have a line on things,” he muttered as he turned and walked back toward the long front porch, stopping for a moment to contemplate the thirteen steps he would have to ascend to reach it.

So far, his relaxing, worry free week at Whispering Pines was not off to its usual comfortable, cordial, start.

“It’s more like a Gathering of Troubled Souls,” he said aloud to himself.

He felt a chill. He felt a sadness. He was used to unraveling chaos in the lives of others, but for that to invade his own treasured week of repose, suddenly seemed all quite unfair. (And the body hadn't even been found, yet!)

///

CHAPTER TWO

Day Two: Death by what!

One of the highlights of the old detective's stay at the lodge was sitting in his comfortable, big chair and watching the sunrise break over the lake. At least that would be the same, he thought as he positioned himself that morning with a cup of instant, lukewarm, tap water coffee. Not even his bewildering, distraught, old friends of The Gathering could manipulate Mother Nature. Perhaps not, but as he was soon to find out, they could manipulate his being able to enjoy her first creation of the day.

As the first rays of sunlight penetrated the dependably foggy, early morning view, Masters noticed a commotion on the dock below. Well it was a commotion if just two people could cause one. At about the same moment there was a knock on his door.

"Come on in, Cathy. It's open," he called back over his shoulder.

The door opened.

"It's Fred," came the halting, unexpected deep voice from behind him.

Masters got up and turned to see Fred standing there in the doorway, a ghastly expression on his face.

"What is it, Fred?"

"Two fishermen just found a body off the front of the dock."

"Whose?"

“Don’t know yet. It’s dark. The body seems to be stuck to something on the bottom. All we can see is one hand. I’m on my way with the underwater floodlights I use to take pictures. I’ve called the sheriff and Deputy Hobbs is on his way.”

“Better grab your camera, as well. If the body’s caught on something, we’ll need pictures of it as it’s situated there in the water.”

Masters grabbed his jacket from the end of the bed, slurped one final, fully disgusting swig of coffee, and joined Fred. Masters went on ahead toward the dock with the lights while Fred swung by his apartment for the camera and scuba gear. When Masters arrived, the hubbub had calmed and the two fishermen were standing quietly looking down into the blackness of the water. The three of them recognized each another as familiar faces. The men began talking about their find.

One hand – the left - had broken the water and floated there - white and lifeless. Masters let the bank of three lights down into the water by its rope and cord and turned them on. The blackness of the water departed in a rush of yellow-green radiance dispatching the minnows in all directions and presently convincing a stubborn large catfish to move on as well. He lowered the lights a few feet deeper. It was a fully clothed man, his legs seemingly wired to cement blocks. The right arm was caught at his side in a second wire that appeared to have come partially loose from around his neck. The body, facing upward, floated there at a forty-five-degree angle from the bottom. Although the face could not be identified through the water, a hunting knife could be seen protruding from the lower abdomen. The obvious first impression was that the victim had been stabbed and then wired to the blocks and dropped into the lake. It made no sense, of course. Why would a killer leave the knife in the victim? If wanting to hide the body by submerging it in the lake, why do so just off the dock, where it was bound to be found almost immediately?

Masters raised the lights to a level near the man’s face.

“My God! It’s Judge Geiger!” he said out loud.

Concurrent with that discovery, Masters what looked to be a badly scraped, open abrasion on the victim's forehead.

"Stabbed and bludgeoned," he said. It was making less and less sense.

"Have you gentlemen moved or touched anything here at the end of the dock?"

They looked around and then at each other.

"No Sir. Not really," the taller of the two answered. "We just got here and were getting ready to sit down and start fishing. Jake, here, was starting to pour us each a cup of coffee from the thermos when I spied that hand. At first, I thought it was a belly-up dead fish. I shined my flashlight on it and realized what it was. I stayed here to keep tabs on it and Jake ran up to the lodge to tell Fred. Then he came back and about five minutes later you arrived. You're that detective they write books about, aren't you?"

"Guilty as charged, I'm afraid," Masters said, confirming what seemed more like an accusation or an implied challenge of some kind than a compliment. He figured that what little anonymity he had left in those parts was soon to be blown anyway. Fred arrived, camera in hand.

The red, flashing light in the distance unmistakably signaled the approach of Deputy Harry Hobbs. Who but the perennially twelve-year-old Harry would engage the red light and siren on his way to inspect a long dead corpse at dawn? Twelve not only characterized his social maturity it came close to describing his height.

From time to time Harry had taken part in the Gathering. He was very good with a pistol but was just as likely to cut himself on the knife as hit the target with it. His bowmanship was perhaps not as bad as it appeared because his bow making skill left a great deal to be desired. His constant nervous laugh and incessant, transparent, sucking up left Masters cold, even before the young man had arrived.

All of that aside, however, one couldn't help but like and be amused by Harry Hobbs. He walked like a duck and sounded like Barney Fife. His shirt never stayed tucked in and his badge was as likely as not to be upside down. When he

remembered his holster, he forgot his gun. When he remembered his gun . . . well, you have the picture. In an earlier era, he might well have been a successful court jester - one possessing no concept, however, as to why he was such a hit.

And how had he become a deputy? His uncle was the long-time sheriff. Harry was his only nephew. It was a rural area where, typically, five-mile-an-hour-over-the-limit-speeders were the very worst of the villains. Even his uncle realized Harry was incompetent though felt him to be generally harmless. It wasn't that Harry was dumb. He was just in a constant state of befuddlement. Had Charlie Chaplin known Harry, he would have most certainly modeled a silent screen character after him.

Masters turned toward the lodge anticipating its imminent illumination, room by room, as the screaming squad car imposed itself onto the peaceful morning. He was not disappointed!

"Mr. Raymond Masters, as I live and breathe. What an unexpected pleasure this is. I hope the department can count on your expert assistance with this one, Sir. Sticky business. Sticky Business." (And all of that before he knew what had transpired.)

"I'll be glad to help in any way that I can."

An unexpected silence followed.

"Would you like to see the victim, Deputy?" Masters asked at last, snapping Hobbs out of a reverie - his attention having been momentarily snatched by the rising sun.

"Yes, Sir. That's why I'm here. To see the victim."

Masters escorted him to the end of the dock and turned on the lights.

"I figured you would order underwater photos to be taken before the body was moved, so I asked Fred Featherston to bring his underwater camera."

"Oh yes. Good thinking, Masters. Let's get at it."

Fred had donned his bathing suit and scuba gear, and was awaiting the nod. He entered the water well away from

the body so as not to chance dislodging it. He secured the light-bank to his camera and sunk beneath the water.

By that time, a crowd of murmuring, bathrobe attired, guests was moving toward the lake. Masters asked the two fishermen to go to the dock entrance and keep them back. They immediately obliged, plainly pleased to be an official part of the matter.

Shortly, pockets of gasps were heard moving through the crowd as the news spread. Gradually, quiet overtook them and they just stood watching, though there was nothing specifically to be seen from their distant vantage-point.

In general, the judge had been well liked – perhaps more by the women than the men. His reputation as a lady's man and tippler - warranted or not – stuck to him. He had been a good looking, charming man in his early sixties with a ready wit not expected from a judge. His white hair, angular features and six-foot-three frame contributed to a majestic bearing that undoubtedly served him well in the courtroom. At the lodge, however, it made him appear unapproachable to many – an image he did not choose to diminish.

Five minutes passed. The light below the surface moved from place to place, pausing momentarily as Fred would snap a new view. At last, he surfaced.

“That's twelve angles. Think that's enough?”

“Did you get one from the bottom shooting up at his back?” Masters asked.

“Sure did.”

“That should be sufficient then, don't you think, Hobbs?”

“Yes, Sir. Good work, Featherston.”

“I'm sure there are other divers in the crowd, back there. We will need their help to raise the body,” Masters said trying to move the process along by prompting the deputy as to his next step.

“I'll see to it,” Hobbs said and he strode with some sense of increased importance back toward the shore.

Fred handed his camera to Masters.

“It appears the wires holding him down are just wound around both legs and his neck. Should I remove them from the body or from the blocks?”

“Better try for the blocks. Leave everything attached to the body just as it is. Try not to break the wire. You can never tell where our best information may come from.”

Fred adjusted his mask and re-submerged. Morning had arrived rapidly as it did there in that open-ended valley and it was soon light enough to function under water without the artificial illumination. Masters watched with interest as Fred worked below. In another five minutes the body was free – both arms floating toward the surface. Several men joined Fred in the water and the Judges body was lifted up onto the dock. They then worked to bring up the blocks – no small task moving dead weight ten feet to the surface. Through it all, the knife had remained in place. That was somewhat surprising since it had only penetrated about a third of the blade length – not at all typical for an abdominal stabbing unless administered by a very weak assailant. Visual examination revealed the serial numbers. They were not the one’s Masters had hoped to see – 99019. They were the numbers from the knife Dave had with him the previous afternoon. Masters remembered specifically because he had seen them upside down and in that position, they read ‘blobb’.

He then looked at the wound to the head. It appeared to be one of those infamous blows from a blunt object. From the depth of the damage, Masters’ figured it had been done either with a fairly heavy object or with great force. Neither of those possibilities coincided well with the idea that a weak person had thrust the knife. From the appearance of the body, Masters’ estimated it had been dead for six or eight hours. The coroner would pinpoint that more accurately.

A quick look at the eyes suggested strangulation. That, at least, seemed to be in agreement with the electrical wire that was wrapped around the neck.

“Perhaps this is just a bad dream,” Masters told himself. “Bad dreams don’t have to make sense and this certainly doesn’t make sense. Too much rich food yesterday. Yes, this has to be a rich food induced bad dream.”

Masters removed his jacket and covered the bad dream's head and shoulders.

Fred surfaced again.

"Better have the camera back," he announced. "There's a pistol down here not five feet from where the body was. Oddly, it's resting on top of an old gunny sack – a brown burlap sack."

"Okay. That's good thinking. Get a couple of pictures of the gun and the sack. Then pick up the pistol with a stick or some such thing. May not be any prints left but we should try to preserve whatever is there. When you bring up the sack, make sure nothing falls out of it."

Masters went back to the body. No bullet holes on the front side. He rolled it onto its side. There, about half way down the spine and three inches to the left of center was a bloody hole in the shirt. Underneath was the telltale tear in the flesh.

As the body had been rolled onto its side, water poured from its mouth. That, of course, indicated death by drowning.

"Let's see," Masters said to himself. "So far this looks like death by stabbing, shooting, bludgeoning, strangulation and drowning. I wonder if there is a category for such things in the Guinness Book of World Records."

He repositioned the body onto its back and again covered his old friend's face.

Masters continued talking to himself.

"Oh, yes. This most certainly is a bad dream. Perhaps dreams also become more maniacal during the dark of the moon. I'll have to consult our resident expert on such matters."

More seriously, he wondered what kind of sick soul would commit a murder in such a fashion. He looked at the faces in the crowd. There were Dave, Amy and Adam; Cookie and Donny; John and Evy; and dozens of other nameless faces. Most had come for the Gathering – either as competitors or spectators. They had all known the Judge. Only a few were passing through.

The gun was recovered and bagged. It was a competition model pistol. The gunnysack had been weighted with a rock, apparently to keep it submerged. It was wet through but not thoroughly soggy. Jute, from which it was made, resists water absorption. Masters figured that alone suggested it had only been in the water a matter of hours. That it was below the gun confirmed it had been dropped into the lake prior to the shooting – if the pistol turned out to be the weapon involved. It remained bright and well oiled. Masters was satisfied that it was the weapon.

* * *

By seven, the coroner had arrived and removed the body. The crowd was gone – except for a forlorn looking Adam – sitting, legs dangling off the front of the dock. With considerable effort, which Masters would not expend for just anyone, he sat down beside the boy on the wood planks.

“Quite a morning,” Masters said, opening the conversation for whatever turn it might take.

“Yeah. Never saw a dead person I really knew, before.”

“That must be rough. How well did you know the judge?”

“Sort of well and sort of not well. I mean, during this Gathering thing he always took me out for breakfast at I-Hop in town on Friday morning. I don’t remember how it started. It’s just something we always did. He seemed really interested in how my year had gone, how school was – stuff like that. It’s about the only time he ever spoke to me. I’ll sort of miss that. He was kind of like a Grampa for one hour a year, I guess.”

“It was always just you and the Judge – never your Mother?”

“Nope. Just the Judge and me. Made me feel pretty special once I learned what a judge was.”

“Any questions about it all?” Masters asked pointedly, referring to the death.

“Not really. Dead is dead, I suppose. I saw my grandmother at her funeral a couple of years ago, but I really didn’t know her. I touched her arm in the casket. She didn’t feel real, ya know? I’d only ever seen her one other time, but I felt like I knew her ‘cause Mom talked about her a lot. She got mad at Mom when I was born and they hardly ever spoke or wrote or anything. I was always sorry I came between them like that.”

“Well, it wasn’t as if you planned it, you know. It certainly wasn’t your fault.”

“That’s what Mom says.”

A period of silence followed. Then Adam spoke again.

“When Mom dies, I’ll be all alone – no Dad, you know.”

“Well, from the looks of your fit-as-a-fiddle Mom, there’s not much chance of that happening very soon.”

“I suppose not. Dave’s parents were killed in a car accident though. Did you know that?”

“No. Dave doesn’t seem to talk much about himself.”

“He talks to me. I guess he’s just the quiet type around grownups.”

“How old was Dave when he lost his parents, do you know?”

“Yeah. He was fifteen.”

“Ten years ago.”

“I guess so. Yeah. That would be right. They’d been up to Buffalo. His Dad had interviewed for a job and got it. They had just started the trip back to Alabama to pack up and move when it happened. Dave still feels bad that he bitched at ‘em the whole trip. He didn’t want to leave his friends at school in Scottsboro – that was the name of the town where he lived. Since I heard that, I try not to bitch at Mom. Sometimes that’s hard.”

“What a sad thing to have happened to Dave.”

“Yeah. He lived with an aunt. She was mostly sick, I think. She died on him, too – sometime last year, I think – maybe two years ago. He’d been taking care of her. That’s when he moved up here.”

“Any idea why he left Scottsboro?”

“He never said.”

“Do you know how he happened on to Whispering Pines?”

“He was up in Buffalo first. He worked for a private eye for a while. I guess he didn’t like that. He really never said. Somehow, he heard about this place and so he came down. That’s about all I know.”

“Seems lucky for you folks that he wandered in.”

“Oh, yeah! It really was! Dave’s a great guy. I tell everybody I want him and Mom to get married. I’m not making much headway, though. I don’t think they’ve even kissed yet. Mom says I’m the only man she needs in her life. Dave says he’s probably not going to be around here forever. I think he’s a scared of having kids in case anything would ever happen to him. That’s why I think he’s not interested in getting married.”

“You have it all figured out, do you?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. I just make up stories in my head about stuff like that. Like about my Dad – my dad that got Mom pregnant with me. Mom said he is really smart and really handsome and that I look a lot like him. I think he’s a lawyer. I know he sends money every month – I heard Mom and Fred talking about it not long ago. The first of every month she gets a letter from a lawyer’s office in Buffalo. For some reason, she seems really mad at him right now. I’m not sure why. I think it’s pretty nice of him to send us money.”

“Adam, it sounds like you have the makings of a pretty good detective, yourself.”

He grinned and looked up at his old friend for the first time during the lengthy conversation.

“That’s what Fred says. He says what Cathy doesn’t know about the guests, I do. I guess we’re kind of like his secret agents, you could say.”

He sighed a huge sigh as his gaze returned to the horizon. He continued.

“I always hated my Dad, you know.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. I think he ruined my Mom’s life. She’s really smart and wanted to be a nurse. She has a whole shelf of medical books. She still studies them. Sometimes I sneak looks at some of the pictures. Anyway, I think he ruined her life by getting her pregnant.”

“Have you ever told her that?”

“No, not really.”

“Well, I think you should. I also think you’ll be pleasantly surprised by what she has to say about that. Don’t just sit around wondering about something that big. Ask her and then you’ll know for sure.”

“Think so, huh.”

“Yes, I do.”

More silence.

“I used to make up ways I’d kill him if I ever found out who he was. I had some pretty good plans – booby traps, mostly - but now, that all seems sort of . . . I don’t know what word . . . ugly, I guess.”

“Now?”

“Yeah. Now, after seeing the Judge dead. I guess nobody oughta be killed.”

“You’re probably right.”

There was another sigh from the young man and then:

“Well, how’s about we go chow down. I’m starved. Mom won’t be hungry – she never is when she’s upset and this week she was upset even before all this dead Judge stuff. And Dave, he said he had some things he had to take care of right away. For not really knowing the Judge, Dave sure got all bent out of shape. I never saw him like that before. It was the only time I ever heard him cuss.”

“Cuss?”

“Yeah. I gave him the news and he turned white as a sheet and just said, ‘That bastard’. Pardon my language but that’s what he said. Then Mom came up to us and we all came out here.”

“Well, since all your other cohorts are elsewhere, it

looks like you and I are paired for the morning. So, if you can just figure out a way to help me get to my feet, I'll buy breakfast – how's that?"

"I eat free around here – you know that. I'll still help you get up, though."

Finally, there was a glimmer of the old Adam returning to his tone and manner. Masters' ensuing, all quite comical, struggle to regain an upright position even brought smiles and rails of laughter from the lad. Masters conclude that, alone, made it well worth playing the fool.

It had been a good chat and it had been a disturbing chat. Adam's life-long hatred for his father and Dave's great sadness at the loss of his parents, were tragic revelations. It was understandable why the young handyman didn't choose to speak of his past.

And then there were the odd reactions of Amy and Dave to the current situation. The usually stable, Rock-of-Gibraltar, Amy, apparently was falling apart and Dave, the usually detached newcomer, reacted to a total stranger's death in a most peculiar, personal, manner. On top of everything, it was entirely uncharacteristic of either one of them to just selfishly abandon young Adam at a time like that.

The word that had come from Dave's mouth – bastard – was less than clear in meaning. Dave, of course, was a suspect – his knife having been found in the victim. But why not say, 'Oh, how terrible' or even 'Good riddance,' instead of 'that bastard'? The reaction made no sense to Masters, but then, what was there about the entire situation that did make sense?

Having said all of that, there was still something else – something about Adam that bothered the old detective. He couldn't put his finger on it, but it was there - the way he chewed at his upper lip, the way he could not or would not maintain eye contact, the way he over-reacted with nervous laughter to Masters' difficulty getting to his feet.

Unbelievably, the participants in the Gathering of Marksmen wanted to go ahead with the competition. Master's bowed out. His attention and energy would be needed to

solve the crime. The one good thing that might come of continuing was that it would keep the largest group of potential suspects right there at Whispering Pines.

* * *

As Adam and Masters were finishing an unusually quiet breakfast, Fred approached their table.

“So, there you are, Adam. I’ve been looking for you. Your Mom was worried. She’s not feeling very well today. I thought that maybe you’d like to ride into town with me. I need some supplies.”

Adam perked up.

“Sure, if it’s all right with you, Mr. M.”

“Sounds like a fine idea. You two have a good time.”

“It is okay then, if I leave – the murder and all,” Fred asked.

“I’m sure that’ll be fine. Just don’t head for Mexico – the chili down there is even hotter than Cookie’s.”

“Thanks for breakfast, even though you really didn’t.”

“Scoot you trouble maker!” Masters interrupted. “I’ll see you when you get back. Let me know when that is, okay?”

“Sure.”

Masters was enjoying his fourth (or seventh) cup of coffee, trying to sort out the necessary first steps in the investigation. He took out his notepad and began scribbling notes.

To whom was the gun registered?

Whose prints were on it (if any)?

Whose prints were on the knife (if any)?

Where could the cement blocks and wire have come from? Could they have been from there at the lodge?

Did Dave have an alibi for the time in question? Unlikely, since it was the time most sane folks were in bed, sound asleep.

Would Dave have a motive no one seemed to know

about?

Who else, among the dozens of guests at the lodge, would want the Judge dead and why?

The big question awaited the autopsy – the cause of death. Only one of the several possibilities could have been the actual cause of death. Masters' hunch was strangulation, but he couldn't account for the water in the lungs, which certainly supported drowning. Perhaps the photographs would help there. The Sheriff's office was having them developed and they should be ready very soon.

Deputy Hobbs entered the dining room scanning it for Masters. At about the same moment, Dave came up to Masters from the other direction, arriving first.

"Mr. Masters, I've been robbed. Somebody took my new knife and my competition bow."

"Was that all that was taken?"

"I don't really know. I didn't spot anything else, but I really didn't look."

Hobbs arrived in time to overhear the conversation.

"Convenient, I'd say," Hobbs said.

"What?" Dave asked. "Who are you?"

Masters hastened to the introductions.

"Dave Doogan, meet Sheriff Deputy Harry Hobbs."

Dave turned his attention to Hobbs.

"Maybe you're the one I need to be talking to, then. I've been robbed and I'm scheduled to compete with my bow at eleven and the knife at one. The knife I can replace but not the bow. It's the best one I've ever made. Who'd want me out of the competition? Nobody here even knows if I'm any good or not."

Masters intervened before Hobbs could make a complete ass of himself.

"I'm sure the good Deputy will be happy to take your report. There is, however, a more pressing investigation under way, you understand."

"The drowning?"

“It looks like it may be more than a drowning,” Masters explained.

“Looks like homicide,” Hobbs added clearly pleased to be the one delivering the grizzly news.

“Homicide? I thought he drowned. Wow! Yeah. Well, I see what you mean. I really didn’t give a tinker’s whether I competed or not. I’ll just withdraw,” Dave said.

“Write down a description of the pieces – any identifying marks, serial numbers, things like that,” Masters suggested. “It won’t be ignored.”

The fact that there had been a knife in the body was still not general knowledge. Fred and the volunteer divers had been asked not to talk about anything they had seen.

“Dave, as long as you’re here, why don’t you have a seat. Deputy Hobbs and his officers need to get a statement from everyone who was here during the past twenty-four hours.”

“Sure, Okay. What kind of a statement? What about?”

Dave and Hobbs both sat down. Masters nodded at Hobbs who took out his pad with an amusing, cartoon-like, flourish.

“Where were you between ten last night and five this morning?”

“Where was I?” Dave asked, appearing to think it an absurd question. “I was in my room, asleep. I went to bed shortly after nine. I wanted to get a good night’s rest before the competition. I set my alarm for 4:45 and that’s when I got up.”

“Who can verify that?” Hobbs asked, insisting on pursuing a dead-end trail.

“Nobody. Like I said, I was sleeping, by myself, in my bed.”

Masters jumped in hoping to move the questioning to more fertile ground.

“When did you first notice the knife was missing?”

“After I went back to my room from the lake this morning after the ambulance left. When I heard John Eagan

say that the competition would go on, I decided to go ahead and get in some last minute practice. The knife is my weakest event.”

“And when was the last time you remember having seen the knife in your room?”

“Well, let’s see. I took it off my belt when Adam and I got back from fixing the step at the Tower. That would have been about five or so yesterday afternoon.”

“And the bow?”

“Same for it. I had taken it along. I’d promised Adam he could practice up on the hill. We probably spent about twenty minutes up there shooting. When we got back to my room, he hung it up in my equipment closet. I also had him put the knife in my top drawer while I put away my tool belt.”

Hobbs began again.

“Anybody see you leave your room this morning?”

“Yeah. Adam. He came running into my room, saying somebody had drowned off the dock. I finished dressing and went down to the lake with him and Amy.”

“Well, I suppose that’s enough for now, don’t you, Deputy?”

“Yes. For now. Just don’t leave the grounds without asking first.”

“I’m a suspect? You’re treating me like I’m a suspect!”

Masters responded.

“Dave, this isn’t easy to say, but your knife was found plunged into the Judge’s body.”

A strange, fully out of place quick grin flashed across Dave’s face, immediately replaced with a deeply furrowed frown.

“So, I am a suspect, then.”

“Until we can establish that your knife was, in fact stolen, yes, you’re a suspect.”

Hobbs was moved to add, “Our only suspect!”

“How can you be so sure it was my knife? Amy must have sold two dozen just like it.”

“It bears the serial number of yours. I noticed it yesterday when you showed it to me.”

“What should I do? Am I under arrest? Should I get a lawyer?”

“You’re not under arrest. If you want to get a lawyer, go ahead,” Masters said. “If I were you, I’d just sit tight until Hobbs and I get a better handle on things. Right now, we aren’t even sure of the cause of death. Don’t talk to anyone about any of this until one of us gets back to you, okay.”

“Sure, Okay. Whatever you say. Geez!”

Dave got up and left. He appeared genuinely dazed about the sudden turn of events.

“Well, Harry, I suppose we should begin with the Judge’s room. His wife, Grace, was in town last night with a friend and I doubt if she’s back this early. As far as I know, no one has contacted her yet. She told me who she was going to see but I don’t recall.”

“Poor woman. This will be so hard on her,” Hobbs added in a rare moment of compassion.

They procured a passkey from the front desk and proceeded to room 202. To Masters’ surprise, the door was not locked. He pushed it open a few inches and called, “Grace. Are you in here? Grace.” There was no response so they entered. The bathroom door was closed. Hobbs knocked on it and repeated her name. “Grace. Grace. Are you in there?” Still, no response. He pulled the door open.

Z I N G !! T H W A P !!

An arrow sped through the door and inserted itself head deep into the log wall across the room. Hobbs wet his pants. Masters cautiously pulled the door completely open. A bow had been rigged to be tripped by a cord when the door was opened. The arrow’s position would have been at shoulder height to Masters, which translated to just over the head of Hobbs and Grace, and heart high to the Judge.

“Not much question as to whom it was meant for,” Masters said.

“Not much,” Hobbs agreed, clearly more interested at

that moment in securing his jacket around his waist.

“Seems the good Judge was less well liked than I ever suspected,” Masters said, examining the bow. “And, Deputy, you won’t need to work that stolen property report from Dave. This is his bow.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“It’s the way he loops the string to secure it. Dave never had any formal bow-making training. He just began making them as a kid. I guess he developed his own style somewhere along the way. I’ve never seen it used anywhere else.”

Hobbs examined the loops.

“I see what you mean. Well I suppose I should arrest him, then.”

“I’ll agree it looks bad right now, but how about holding off until after we get prints and a cause of death?”

Hobbs nodded as if he agreed that would be a good idea.

“Can you get a forensics team out here right away?”

“Already on the premises. I have them working the dock area. Never tell what they might turn up.”

Masters was impressed, although he felt certain it had originally been someone else’s idea. Nevertheless, he complemented the man.

“Good thinking, Harry.”

Harry preened and put in a call to the crew on the dock. Masters continued examining the ingenious bow and arrow arrangement. The showers in the old building had been added to the lodge well after the bathtubs had been installed. Not fitting neatly between a standard sized wall opening as modern built-in showers do, the curtain was hung from an expandable rod that held itself in place with a friction fit, internal spring, arrangement.

The curtain, which had been removed, was draped carelessly into the tub. The rod had been removed from its intended location, re-sized by screwing it together a foot or so, and then placed vertically between the top flat outside edge of

the tub and the ceiling. The friction fit held it in place in a remarkably firm manner.

The five-foot bow was duct-taped in a vertical position to the rod so the top of bow was up and the bottom down - string to the rear. One of the curtain rings had been taped in place as a rest for the front of the arrow leaving sufficient room for the arrow to pass through and yet hold it at a precise angle. A piece of three-eighths inch round wooden doweling had been fitted between the wood of the bow and the extended string, bending the bow and holding the string back in firing position. The arrow was placed in position on top of the doweling, between the ring, at the bow's shaft, with the slot in its other end slipped in place against the string. The whole arrangement had been carefully aimed at the required spot in the door opening. A cord had been rigged from the front of the doweling - near the bow - down and around the drainpipe beneath the open based sink and then across to the doorknob. When the door was pulled open enough to allow a person to enter, the slack cord became taut and dislodged the doweling, pulling it down and out of the way of the string. The arrow was released both accurately and with tremendous force.

Masters examined the piece of dowel that had fallen to the floor. It was about thirty inches long - six inches shorter than the standard lumberyard variety. Rather than having been sawed to proper length, it had been whittled with a knife and then blunted at the precise length required. A shallow notch had been cut into that end to cradle the string.

Masters then moved from the bathroom and across the bedroom to examine the arrow. It was hickory like the bow and looked to be Dave's - at that point, not an unexpected finding. Its smooth, metal, target tip was embedded into the log about an inch, give or take a quarter. The old detective would add this to his growing list of things that didn't make sense about the case. Dave was too smart to use his own, easily identifiable equipment if he were going to kill somebody. On the other hand, he might have been just smart enough to use his own things after reporting them stolen. The robbery report was pretty weak, however - there being no way to

corroborate his side of the story. Perhaps he was being set up.

Upon closer examination, the point of impact into the log revealed what appeared to be a white substance on the metal tip of the arrow. It would be sent to the lab along with the rest of the evidence.

Towels in her arms, Cathy arrived at the open door.

“Cathy, my dear. Just the person I need to speak with,” Masters began. “We found the door to this room unlocked just now. Have you already been in here this morning?”

“No, Sir. Just now getting to it. Mrs. Geiger said they were going away for the night and wouldn’t be back until noon. So, I put it off ‘til last. Didn’t expect there would be much that needed doing.”

“Would you happen to know exactly where she said she was going last night?”

“Marge Mason’s – the picket fence at Madison Street and Lake Drive.”

“You are a gem, Cathy. Lunch is on me today. We are making this room off limits as part of the investigation of George Geiger’s death. Is there another room available that we can move Grace’s things in to?”

“201 right across the way. It was an early morning check out and isn’t reserved for tonight. Milly, the new maid, already made it up.”

“Hobbs, would you mind calling the desk and working out the change?”

“Right away. Consider it done. Fine idea, by the way.”

“Since I don’t have to make up the room, I have time to move her things if you want me to,” Cathy offered.

“That will be a great help. Go right ahead. On second thought, Deputy Hobbs spilled something on his pants. Would you mind seeing if he could borrow a pair of jeans from Adam?”

“Sure. No problem. I saw a pair in the laundry room. Just take a minute.”

When Hobbs finished his call, Masters looked up the

number for Marge Mason and dialed. He introduced himself, informed Marge of the tragedy and asked if she would break the news to Grace, then accompany her back to the lodge.

The phone book contained more than the number. A single, folded, sheet of paper had been inserted into the book at the page on which Marge's number was listed. It protruded just enough to be easily detected.

"Hobbs. This may or may not be something important," Masters said, motioning the deputy to his side.

Masters unfolded the sheet, carefully avoiding touching its flat surfaces. It was a typed, 'To whom it may concern' note, with the Judge's name typed at the bottom. Masters read it aloud.

"To Whom It May Concern: Between the guilt from my life of indiscretions and my rapidly deteriorating health, I have decided to end my life in this cowardly but peaceful manner. I apologize to those I have hurt in the past and to those who I will hurt by this act. George Allan Geiger."

It bore the date of the previous day.

"So, I guess that changes the whole complexion of things, doesn't it," Hobbs sighed.

"Perhaps. Perhaps not."

"How so?" Hobbs asked, puzzled at Masters peculiar response.

"Think about it Deputy. How often does someone commit suicide by stabbing himself in the stomach, shooting himself in the back, clubbing himself on the forehead and then strangling himself just before jumping into the water, wired to four cement blocks and drowning?"

"Yes. I see. That does pose a problem, I suppose."

His response was offered as if he were actually still thinking the victim might have found a way to do it in just the manner Masters had described. He then offered his absurd solution.

"He plainly had an accomplice."

Anything more difficult than managing a speed trap (once it had been set up) was obviously beyond Harry Hobbs, and Masters had his doubts about that. Masters wondered why he had been cursed by the gods. It seemed he always became teamed with the dregs of the local departments when he wandered in to such cases.

The dry pants arrived and Harry gratefully accepted them, nodding his appreciation to Masters for the tactful, if not entirely truthful, way in which he had handled what could have been a most embarrassing situation.

While the deputy changed, Masters carefully bagged the letter. He scribbled a note on the outside to look for the machine on which it had been typed or printed on which it had been printed. Masters was bothered by just about everything in that letter. The phrase, 'in this cowardly but peaceful manner,' did not fit the circumstances. No one would characterize either strangulation or drowning while wired to blocks as a peaceful way to die. It could be, of course, that something had gone wrong or perhaps his plans had changed after he had written the note.

An additional problem was the whole authenticity aspect of the note. Almost always, suicide notes are handwritten. For such a personal message, it seemed unlikely that the Judge would have typed it. Perhaps, with his advancing Parkinson's a legible hand may have no longer been possible. Even so, Masters thought there was virtually no chance that a man with his experience in legal matters would have typed his name, rather than hand signing it.

Masters turned his attention to the medicine chest in the bathroom. He found a pillbox. It was plastic with seven, cube-shaped sections each having its own lid. The design allowed one to place daily doses of pills into separate compartments, thereby providing a full week's supply without having to open all of the individual bottles each day. The first compartment was empty. Each of the others contained what appeared to be four each of three different drugs. Two were aspirin size tablets – one was white and one was gray. The third was a capsule.

Again, Masters had to wonder. Why would the Judge

have taken the time to fill the box with a week's worth of medicine if he were about to end his life? Perhaps so his wife would not become alarmed. Perhaps Grace, a former RN, took care of that for him and she, of course, would not have been privy to his intentions.

"Better bag this too," Masters said to Hobbs as he brought it out into the bedroom. "I think we need to know for sure what kind of drugs they are. It might give us some clue as to George's frame of mind last night."

With a nod, Hobbs slipped it into a bag and placed it with the other things in his briefcase.

As he poked around the closet, Masters' thoughts returned to the note. He wondered what indiscretions were being referred to. Had the Judge finally owned up to the rumors of womanizing and over indulging in drink? To even have to ask about the intention of the document caused a problem. The George Geiger who Masters had known would not leave things hanging. He would have carefully and methodically spelled things out in detail. If it were not authentic, then, who had written it, and why? He thought those would be more fruitful questions for him to begin pursuing.

Hobbs left so he could pass things along to the lab. Masters walked to the window to see if he could find some inspiration in the natural beauty just beyond. His attention was drawn to an array of clearly visible fingerprints on the outside of one of the panes. Closer examination showed the pane had only recently been installed. The putty was white compared with the older yellowing putty elsewhere. It was the lower quarter of glass on the tall window – about two feet high and nearly three feet wide. The prints had been left visible, by the putty residue, which was left on the fingers of whomever had done the work.

"I'd bet the farm that they belong to Dave," he said aloud but to himself.

"I've finished moving her things, Sir. Will there be anything else?" Cathy asked.

"Could you remind the folks at the desk to make sure Grace knows to go to the new room?"

“Already done, Mr. M.”

“Thank you. That’s all for now then I guess. Oh, just a moment. I was wondering if anyone might have asked to use your pass key to get into their room during the past twenty-four hours.”

“Well, yes. There was John Eagan. That would have been about four, yesterday afternoon. I remember the time because I was cleaning up a spill down in 210. He found me there and said his wife had his key and she had gone out to the bow range to get in some practice time before tomorrow – well, that would be today. I just gave it to him, him being such an upstanding sort, you know, and about two minutes later – maybe less in fact - he brought it back. That wasn’t as strange as the spill, if you ask me.”

“Oh? What about the spill?”

“It was a chocolate shake, like from the concession stand. But it was spilled all over the outside of the door and then along the bottom from side to side almost like somebody did it on purpose. Something else, when I knocked to answer the clean up call, the people in the room didn’t know anything about it. I don’t know who called – maybe somebody who passed by and saw it. I don’t know. The whole thing just seemed strange.”

“I can see what you’re saying. Was there anyone else who asked for your key?”

“Not from me and not on this floor, but Milly told me she had loaned hers out up on three. It was to Mrs. Eagan. She said John had the key and she needed to get into their room down on two. Those Eagans and their keys – I declare.”

“And Mrs. Eagan returned the key right away.”

“I’m sure she did.”

“About when would that have taken place?”

“Well, let’s see - probably between four and four-thirty. You’ll have to ask Milly to be sure.”

“Since you’re on such a roll, my dear, one other thing comes to mind. The window in here looks like it was broken and recently replaced. Any information about that?”

“No, Sir. I’m afraid not. I haven’t noticed any glass when I vacuumed.”

“Okay, well, thanks again, Cathy. I won’t keep you any longer.”

Cathy turned to leave, calling back over her shoulder: “Don’t forget about lunch. I feel like a Porterhouse – a nice, big, expensive Porterhouse.”

She giggled, smiled and turned into the hall.

The forensics team arrived and got right to work. Masters pointed out the new prints he had discovered on the window. Hobbs made a note.

Masters needed to think. He thought best when on a walk but that seemed far too arduous at the moment. His second-best thinking place was lying on a bed counting the pin holes in the ceiling tile. As the others went about their business he sat on the bed and poked the pillow with his fist preparing it to properly cradle the back of his head. There was a crinkling noise. He pulled back the bedspread. Pinned to the pillow was a sheet of paper. On the paper was another note. Masters pointed it out to Hobbs before unpinning it. Again, he read it aloud.

Dear Grace:

My plan is to shoot myself this evening. You will find my body at the back of the meadow under the bluff. I’m sorry, Grace, but I just can’t live with myself any longer. I have cheated on you our entire married life and I deserve to die. My guilt is overwhelming. George A. Geiger.

Hobbs again made the mistake of opening his mouth.

“Why would the Judge have left two notes?”

Masters ignored the comment. In most ways this one was even more obviously a fake than the first one – yet in one way it was far more genuine. George never called his wife ‘Grace’. It was always ‘Gracie’. He never signed his name with an ‘A’ in the middle – it was always ‘Allen’. Again, it had not been hand signed. Then there was the omission of his

deteriorating health. Perhaps the writer of the note was not aware of that. The most bewildering aspect of the note, however, was the impression the type made on the paper. Masters had received enough personal letters from George over the years to recognize his typewriter – the one he kept in his office. It was old as the hills and had probably gone to college with him. The ‘y’ typed heavy, leaving a darker impression than the other letters. This unequivocal forgery had indeed been typed on George’s personal typewriter.

Grace would have been the only person in the lodge who would have had easy access to George’s typewriter, but Grace was not a suspect – not up to that point, at least. Still, Grace would not have made the two most apparent errors – the middle initial and referring to herself as ‘Grace’. She would not have made those errors unless she was trying to implicate someone else. Just who that might be was not at all clear.

Masters’ head spun. The whole case, which had made no sense from the beginning, was suddenly making even less sense. He needed something to snap him into another direction - a cup of coffee and something very sweet. He headed for the dining room.

In the lobby, he met Dave who was at work replacing light bulbs in the huge chandeliers.

“How you holding up, Dave?” was Masters’ opening line.

“Honestly? Not very well. What can I do for you?”

“That pane of glass of glass that you replaced yesterday – which room was it in?”

Masters, of course, had no knowledge of Dave having fixed a broken window. He was fishing.

“202. Does that implicate me further?”

“Well, I’m afraid it doesn’t help, but we aren’t even close to having this thing sorted out yet. How did you find out it needed to be fixed?”

“Mrs. Geiger called me herself.”

“When would that have been?”

“Just about the time Adam and I got back from the tower.”

“Five or so, then?”

“Yeah. A little after.”

“Are you sure it was Mrs. Geiger?”

“She said she was. I only met her the one time when they checked in. I’m not even sure she said anything at the time, come to think of it?”

“So, you identified her by who she said she was.”

“Right. There’s nothing unusual about that. It happens every day around here.”

“Where did you get the call?”

“In my room downstairs. Adam was there when it came in. In fact, I left to fix it right away and Adam stayed in my room looking through my new fisherman’s catalog.”

“Do you usually get your calls there?”

“Not usually – at least not from guests. Usually they call the front desk and they relay the message to me. If I’m not here, my machine picks up. Fred installed the answering machine almost first thing after he hired me. He joked about it, saying he didn’t want me to miss out on a single chance to fix something.”

“This antiquated phone system requires a guest to call the desk to get an outside line, right?”

“Right.”

“And incoming calls go through the desk first, also?”

“Yes. The desk operator rings the room and connects the phone. Like you say, it’s an old-fashioned phone system.”

“Would you know if the call came from inside the lodge or from outside?” Masters asked.

“No, I wouldn’t, but the desk would. They keep records of all incoming and outgoing calls.”

“About what time were you finished with the window repair?”

“It would have been about six. It doesn’t take long. Almost all of the windows in this old place take the same size

panes. That was good planning on somebody's part. I keep a dozen or so cut ahead in the shop. I have a gunnysack sling I use to carry them. They get pretty heavy."

"What had happened to the window, did Mrs. Geiger say or could you tell?"

"She said a chair tipped over and hit it. That didn't seem right, though"

"Oh. Why not?"

"Whatever hit it, hit it about four feet off the floor. No chair in that room has a back that high. Fred says just to accept what they say and don't dispute their word – not to their face, that is. Gotta keep them happy, I suppose."

"How did you enter the room?"

"I went up on the roof. There's a narrow walkway that connects all the dormers. It's the only way to get access to them. The roof is too steep to climb and with the wide overhang, you'd have a ladder extended back half way to the lake to get it at the right angle."

"Did you enter the room?"

"No. No reason to. There were a couple of pieces of glass on the floor inside and I just reached in and picked them up. I figured Cathy or Milly would get any splinters when they vacuumed. It was late. I was in a hurry. I still have to go back up and wash the window."

"Thanks for your help, Dave. I'll keep you posted. Oh, by the way, Deputy Hobbs found your bow. I'm afraid we'll have to keep it as evidence for a while at least."

"Evidence? Somebody shot him with my bow?"

Dave looked bewildered.

"No. There can't be a murder charge associated with your bow. I'll fill you in later. I'm sorry things have taken such a bad turn for you. By the way, how is Amy? I haven't seen her since early this morning."

"She said she was going to her apartment upstairs and rest. This whole judge thing seemed to really hit her hard. It's not every day somebody gets bumped off around here."

"I'll see you later. Thanks again."

Masters strolled over to the front desk and asked to speak with the phone operator. He was directed to come through the door at the side and into the back.

"I need to know if David Doogan received a call from an outside line sometime between five and five-thirty yesterday afternoon. Can you help me with that?"

"Sure," came the cheery reply of the elderly lady sitting in front of the equally elderly phone board with its switches, holes, electrical cords and flashing lights. She took a clipboard from its square-headed nail on the nearby wall and flipped back one page. Running her finger down the rows of entries, she shook her head. "No, Sir. Nothing incoming to Dave all day yesterday, in fact."

Masters thanked her and turned to leave.

"There is one thing about Dave and his phone calls yesterday, though. Someone called from one of the rooms and asked for his phone number."

"Any way of determining what room that call came from?"

"Well, if you'll take the memory of an octogenarian, there is."

"My dear, I'll count on your memory any day of the week."

"It came from 205."

"And if I were to ask you if you were certain that it didn't come from 202 would I confuse that memory of yours in anyway?"

"None whatsoever, young man. There's not much chance it could have been from 202. Grace called and told me to take messages for their room because she and the judge were going to be gone all night. When I take messages, I throw this switch here under the room's plug hole and that sends all the calls to me here at my main switchboard."

"How do you keep all of that straight? I'd be befuddled for days trying to figure it out."

"Well, if you can keep a secret, so was I, that first morning sixty-two years ago."

She tittered as if it had been a boisterously entertaining comment. In many ways, it had been. As he left, Masters had to wonder how many hundreds – perhaps thousands – of miles of phone cords she had pulled into place during her tenure in that seat.

As he arrived at his window table in the dining room, Donny met him with a pot of coffee and cheese Danish.

“You do good work, Donny. You must have ESP. How’s college going?”

“Great. One more year than grad school.”

“What’s your major?”

“Parapsychology.”

“You’re kidding!”

“Would a kidder, kid a kidder, Mr. M?”

Although he figured he’d just been bested, he would find a way to verify the young man’s major. In the meantime, a cheese Danish required his attention.

Chapter Three

Day Two: The Afternoon

During the rest of the morning, Masters walked and thought. He went back out to the dock to look over the crime scene or suicide scene or whatever kind of a scene it would eventually turn out to be. He convinced Hobbs they needed search warrants for several of the rooms there at the lodge. Hobbs dispatched an officer to try and obtain them. There seemed some irony in trying to convince a judge to issue search warrants to help in the solution of another judge's death. (Well, perhaps just a tiny bit of irony!)

Fred and Adam returned at 11:45. They met Masters on the front porch and Fred handed him an envelope from the Sheriff's office.

"Sheriff asked me to give this to you. He said he'd called ahead and alerted you to expect it."

"Yes. I was expecting something. Thanks. How was the trip?"

Adam responded in a fifth grader's singsong, teasing rhythm. "Freddie's got a girlfriend. She works at the Dairy Queen. He won't admit it but I still think so."

Fred and Masters exchanged relatively meaningless glances, though the old detective did raise his eyebrows a few times to join in the tease.

"We already ate," Adam continued – at the Dairy Queen, of course. I better get up and see how Mom's doing. You talk to her this morning?"

“No. Dave says she’s in your apartment.”

Adam left on a trot. Adam always left on a trot! Fred excused himself. Masters took a seat in one of the big wooden chairs on the porch and opened the envelope.

The preliminary coroner’s report was included among several other sheets. The precise cause of death had not yet been determined but there was a scribbled note saying ‘most likely by strangulation’. The knife had punctured the liver and severed an artery – it could have been lethal. The blow to the head fractured the skull – it could have been lethal. There were wood splinters in the head wound suggesting a club of some sort. The gunshot wound, however, was another story. The bullet had entered in the small of the back at an acute angle. It traveled directly upward in the body just under the skin and lodged in the shoulder. It could not have been the cause of death. At first glance it appeared the victim had been shot from the ground, the gun pointed upward as if, perhaps there had been a struggle and the gunman had fallen before firing. With no blood on the planks at the dock, it would seem he had to have been shot elsewhere and then brought to the dock later.

The final note from the coroner made Masters want to re-invoke his bad dream theory. In the Judge’s stomach, the lab had found enough barbiturates to kill a cow. Only a small portion had entered the blood stream suggesting he had died soon after he had taken them. There was also enough alcohol in his bloodstream to certify him as legally too drunk to drive. The time of death had been set at two a.m. give or take thirty minutes.

Before going further, Masters laid the papers in his lap and considered what he knew. ‘The overdose of barbiturates might explain the reference in the first note to dying in a peaceful manner. That would make sense (and he shuddered at the thought that anything about this case might make sense) if the Judge had taken the drug himself or if the author of the note had slipped him the drug, anticipating that he would die from it.’

He went on to the second sheet. Not surprisingly, the prints on the window were Dave’s. There were no prints on

the bow, shower rod, or arrow. The gun was clean on the outside. Two prints had been lifted from cartridges in the cylinder. They were unknown. The knife had two sets of prints. One appeared much smaller than the other – perhaps a woman's. The gun, however, was registered to George Geiger – the judge himself.

He reviewed the growing list of suspects. Dave was at the top of the list because of the manner in which his weapons had been used. Opportunity was up for grabs. He could not prove that he wasn't with the Judge at two a.m. nor could the police prove that he was. Motive was the sticky issue – well, one of several sticky issues. He hadn't met the Judge until the morning before his death. Perhaps that was not true. There was only Dave's word on that.

Fred was still a suspect because of his threat to hit the Judge up the side of his head. It was a weak connection perhaps, but it remained an open possibility. Blunt, wooden instruments abounded in a wooded area such as Whispering Pines.

The barbiturates suggested the possibility of another unknown assailant. Grace, his wife, had knowledge of drugs, opportunity to administer them (perhaps) and maybe even motive - if she knew about any verifiable affairs George had been party to. Rejected wives killed their husbands on all too regular a basis.

Then there was the 'nurse wannabe', Amy. Masters wondered how much she had really learned from the nursing books that Adam referred to earlier. But why the Judge?

"Then there was the shooter - another unknown person at that moment. Unless the prints on the bullets pointed to someone with a motive, that might be a dead end. The shooters in the competition frequently borrowed bullets back and forth.

In his mind, Masters had discounted the likelihood of Dave's involvement. It was too pat a set of evidence. Dave was too smart to use his own easily traceable knife and bow. His suspicion was that Dave had been set up. It was only a suspicion, however.

Cathy approached him.

"You were asking about Milly, so I thought this might be important. Yesterday at 4:45 I met her coming out of 202 – the Judge's room. She seemed bothered that I saw her and she explained she had just taken more soap – that Evy had requested it. She had no reason to explain herself so it made me start wondering and since I am her supervisor, I went into the bathroom. A full stock of soap for a party of two is six bars. There were only three. If Milly had restocked the soap, she would have made sure there were six in all. She hadn't taken soap to the room. I thought you might want to know."

"Have you said anything to Milly about it?"

"No, Sir. I figured I'd tell you first."

"You did the right thing. For the time being, don't confront her about it, okay?"

"Whatever you say. I'm just part of the background in all this."

"Cathy, with your radiant smile, you could never be just background in any situation."

Cathy blushed and giggled her way back inside.

Masters turned his gaze toward the lake. He spotted Grace and another woman, who he presumed was Marge, coming up the walk. He rose to greet them. Grace collapsed into his open arms and began sobbing. Masters attempted to console her. They sat and he brought her up to date on the investigation – just the overview, none of the gory details. She appeared to be surprised at the complexity of his narrative, although Masters thought he might have been reading things into a distraught widow's attempt to cope with the moment.

"Before you go inside, there is one question I need to ask. Do you know of any connection between Dave Doogan - the handyman here - and the Judge?"

She thought for a moment and then shook her head, repeating Dave's name.

"Doogan. Dave Doogan. No. I don't, but then if he were someone George had dealt with through the court I wouldn't know. Sorry, I can't be of any help there."

“It’s not a problem. Again, you have my deepest sympathy. Let me know how I can help. Oh, did you call for additional soap to be delivered to your room before you left for town yesterday?”

“Soap. No. I made no such call.”

She appeared rightfully puzzled by the question.

“Thank you. I won’t keep you.”

The two women entered the Lodge and just as quickly, Grace returned alone, reseating herself on the edge of the chair beside Masters as if to indicate it would be a brief, perhaps hurried, conversation.

“Doogan does ring a bell. You may or may not know about the accident that George was involved in ten or twelve years ago. He was driving drunk - as he did frequently, I’m afraid - and he ran into another car, killing a man and woman and injuring their little boy. George’s lawyer got him off on a technicality and it never even went to trial. I don’t know what happened to the child or what his first name was, but I do remember that their last name was Doogan. I don’t know if that will be of any help.”

“Thanks, Grace. I’ll look into it. You go on in and rest now. I’ll want to talk with you further a little later. And, oh yes, we have moved your things into room 201. You understand.”

She rose and left as if surprised that there would be any need to talk with her again.

Masters dug further into the envelope and removed the photos that Fred had taken earlier. It became apparent that the cement blocks had been wired close against the victim’s ankles. The wire, which was looped around the neck, however, was a good six feet long from the neck to the blocks. One end of the long wire had come loose from one those blocks.

As Masters replayed a possible scenario in his mind, he saw the body dumped into the water after having been strangled with the longer wire. It appeared the neck wire had been looped around the neck with the victim standing - otherwise, why such a long wire? Dead from strangulation, the body was then submerged. The blocks on the feet sent

them to the bottom while the longer wire allowed the upper-body to float in a virtually upright position. The final autopsy report, of course, would eventually set the actual cause of death.

Suicide looked less and less likely, though, as things were transpiring, it probably wasn't an impossibility.

Lunch would have to wait. He needed to speak with Amy. In a matter of minutes, he was at her apartment door. Adam answered and asked him in.

"Is your Mom awake, Adam?"

"Yeah. She's in the kitchen. You come for lunch?"

"No. That wasn't my intention."

"She's fixing baloney sandwiches – my favorite."

"That you, Mr. M?" Amy called around the corner.

As was his style, Adam answered for Masters.

"Yeah, but he didn't come for lunch."

"Adam!" she said as if scolding.

"What? What!" he answered, arms raised as if to say, 'Mothers! Who understands them?'"

Amy came into the Living Room, wiping her hands on a towel.

"How you doing, Amy?" Masters asked. "I've been concerned."

She accepted his embrace.

"I'll be fine," she insisted as she continued drying her already well-dried hands.

"Adam, why don't you take your sandwich outside," she directed more than asked.

"I know when I'm not wanted," he said cheerfully, clearly happy to escape further adult conversation. With one in his mouth and another in his hand, he headed toward the door.

"By the way, Adam," Masters said, "What time did you leave Dave's room yesterday afternoon?"

"About 5:30 – a little before. Mom and I eat at 5:30."

“Did you lock his door when you left?”

“No. He never locks it.”

“And the bow and knife were both still there when you left?”

“Sure. Why wouldn’t they have been?”

“No special reason. Thanks. Enjoy your favorite sandwich - er, sandwiches.”

“What’s up?” Amy asked offering him a sandwich from the plate. He declined with his hand.

“Well, for one thing I wondered if I might take a quick look at your pharmacology book. I need some information about a drug.”

“Sure. I have several, actually. They’re in the bedroom.”

She beckoned him to follow her.

“What lovely flowers,” Masters commented as they passed a vase of long stemmed roses.

“Aren’t they lovely? Grace brought them by yesterday. Poor Grace. She’s always so thoughtful.”

“I didn’t realize you and Grace were so close.”

“We aren’t, really. A few years ago, I had several conversations with her about becoming a nurse. She was very supportive, encouraged me to keep studying on my own and seemed happy to answer all my questions. But I haven’t done more than pass the time of day with her at the shop since then. Actually, I was sort of shocked when she arrived here with the flowers for apparently no reason at all. What I meant was that everyone talked about her like she was just that sort of thoughtful person.”

“Did it appear that she had dropped by to chat?”

“She only stayed a few minutes. Right away, she pointed out that the flowers were beginning to droop and that I needed to get them into water immediately. I took them into the kitchen and arranged them. I brought them out here and we talked for maybe two minutes and she left.”

“Did she give you any reason for bringing them?”

“She just said she saw them in the shop and they reminded her of me. What gal questions being compared with a rose?”

“Well, for whatever reason, that was nice of her,” Masters said. They continued on into the bedroom.

“Here’s the library from hell – absolutely no organization at all, except for the medial books. They’re right in this area.”

She ran her fingers along a foot-wide section of books.

Masters inspected the titles pulling out the volume, which he thought would most likely contain drug dosages with pictures. Unexpectedly, the book opened to a book-marked page – barbiturates.

“This would be your bookmark, I take it,” he said, puzzled and suddenly saddened.

Amy inspected it.

“Well, no, actually, it isn’t. In fact, I’ve never seen it before. I use the free ones with Pines’ advertising that we give away at the gift shop. Look. She removed several other books at random – each holding several of the kind she had just described.

Closer inspection revealed the odd bookmark had the prayer of St. Frances on one side and the name and address of a Bible bookstore in Buffalo on the other.

“May I keep this?” Masters asked.

“Certainly. I can’t understand it. I haven’t even loaned that book to anybody. I’d say it might have been put there by Adam – he’s a regular scavenger - but then he’s only interested in the anatomy book – female section, you understand.”

Masters nodded and smiled.

“They do grow up, don’t they?”

“So fast.” She paused and then continued. “What’s this really all about, Mr. M?”

“The autopsy revealed an overdose of a certain drug and I wanted to check out its lethal dosage.”

“And let me guess. That drug was a barbiturate, one of those on the marked page.”

“That’s correct but please don’t pass that information on to anyone, okay.”

“Sure. Come on, now, Mr. M. Don’t try and snow me. We’ve been friends too long. Am I now a suspect, somehow, in all of this?”

“I wouldn’t say you’re a suspect, Amy. We will, however, need to explain how this bookmark got into your book at that particular page. The marker alone, for someone like you with no motive to kill the Judge will hardly put you into the suspect category.”

“Come into the living room and sit down. We need to talk. It’ll probably all come out now, anyway.”

Although Masters felt sure he knew what was coming, he let her tell her story. She began with a gently quivering sigh. Amy was not one to beat around the bush.

“George was Adam’s father. We only had the one short . . . fling . . . I guess you’d call it. In September, eleven years ago, he came to the Pines by himself and stayed a week. I had just started working here. I didn’t know he was married and I didn’t ask. What can I say? He swept me off my feet. I was barely eighteen and a well-known judge was interested in me. When he came back for the Gathering he saw that I had a new baby. We had one short conversation and I told him that he was the father. He said he would support the child and he has, I’ll give him that.

“Then when he came this week he changed everything, like I told you. I’ve been livid ever since. When I learned that he committed suicide, I thought I understood why he had changed our arrangement. I went straight from being enraged to depressed. Now that you say it may not have been suicide, I’m all confused all over again. I didn’t kill him if that’s what you’re wondering.”

“Did you tell anyone else – other than me – about the change in the financial arrangements and how you felt about it?”

“Yes. I told both Fred and Dave. Fred’s like a father to

me. He's the only other person who has known who Adam's father was. Dave – well, he's like a protective big brother, I suppose. We're close but not romantically. He strays away from that kind of involvement."

"You sound as though you could be interested if he were."

"Maybe. I'm only five years older – not quite five, in fact. He's a fine person and I know he loves Adam. He'd be a great father. It could work for me but he hasn't expressed any interest in that direction."

Another long, slow sigh came from Amy.

"I suppose you'll have to tell all of this to the sheriff."

"Maybe later. Not just now. We'll cross that bridge when the time comes. Until then, it will remain our secret."

"You'll let me know in plenty of time so I can tell Adam. I don't want him finding out from anyone but me."

"Of course. You'll have all the time you need. Is there anything I can do for you right now?"

"No. I don't know what it would be. I just need to get my act together and get back out to the shop. Cathy and Milly have been covering for me. I'll be okay, now, I think. I feel some better already, just talking with you about it. It's been a huge burden to bear all these years."

"I'm sure I can't even begin to imagine how difficult it has been. You know that I admire you for the fine way you've raised the lad. Well, I'll get out of your hair, then."

"You, know," Amy said, thoughtfully, "There may be someone else who knows about my conversation with the Judge. After he turned to leave, I noticed Milly standing close by – plenty close enough to have overheard if she were trying to."

Masters acknowledged her information with a nod. He peeked one more time at the page in the book and made a mental note of the lethal dosage. He handed the book back to Amy as he stood to leave. With another hug and a gentle kiss to her forehead, he was on his way.

He dropped off the envelope at his room and then

started downstairs for lunch. On his way, Manuel, the groundskeeper came up to him as he waited for the elevator.

“I was coming to find you. I may have seen something that is important.”

“Go on.”

“I came back to the Pines late last night – about one a.m. A date, you know. A really good date! Anyway, I saw the Judge at his van. He was standing at the side with the sliding door open. It seemed pretty strange. His legs seemed wobbly – like he’d been celebrating – you know.”

“Did you speak to him?”

“Oh, no. Me and him, we’re in different leagues. I’ve never spoke to him. But there is something else, too. I live in the cabin back in the meadow, you know. On my way there, I’m sure I saw Adam running across the clearing. I started to call out to him but then figured it was none of my business. Amy keeps close tabs on him so I figured she knew where he was. Those two things just seemed out of place, ya know, and I thought maybe they’d help some way.”

“And they just may help. Thanks for taking the time to come and find me. I really appreciate that. By the way, Manuel, the grounds are more beautiful this year than I’ve ever seen them.”

Manuel nodded appreciatively and moved on toward the stairs.

Masters rode to the first floor and proceeded to the dining room. Once seated he began reviewing his latest findings. Amy may have had the motive to kill the Judge, but only in a fit of rage. Killing him by the administration of a drug would not qualify as a fit of rage. She had no means for administering the drugs – none Masters was aware of at least – and probably no means for obtaining them.

It made the most sense to postulate that the drug had either been taken by George in a suicide attempt or administered by Grace. She could have slipped it into a drink or even into the Judge’s pillbox. The problem with the later theory was that the pictures in the drug manual showed that although the barbiturate tablets were the same color as his

largest pill, the barbiturates were significantly larger. Even with failing eyesight, it seemed evident that he would have been able to immediately tell the difference.

Masters also had to wonder about the game of 'find the key' that Evy and John had played the previous afternoon. It certainly had given them opportunity to enter the Judge's room. That might even explain why the door was unlocked the next morning. One of them could have borrowed the key, unlocked the door, returned the key immediately and then returned to the room later to do whatever it was they had done there – plant the drug, perhaps. Just how either one would have known about his pillbox and the size of his pills, Masters could not be certain.

While he waited for his lunch to arrive, he began jotting down a time-line.

Dave and Adam leave for tower	2:15 p.m.
John borrows key	4:00 p.m.
Evy borrows key	4:15 p.m.
Grace leaves for town	4:30 p.m.
Dave and Adam return from tower	5:00 p.m.
Dave gets call to fix the window	5:10 p.m.
Adam alone in Dave's room	5:15 to 5:25 p.m.
Dave repairs window	5:15 to 6:00 p.m.
Judge last seen at his car	1:00 a.m.
Judge dies	1:30 to 2:30 a.m.
Manuel thinks he sees Adam	1:05 a.m.
Body found	5:30 a.m.
Grace returns to the Lodge	12:00 noon

In and around his jottings, Masters managed to enjoy a Salisbury steak with all the trimmings. When it was time for dessert, Adam showed up at the table. How the boy knew it was dessert time, Masters had not figured, but, like clockwork, Adam was usually there.

"So, did you and Mom get all your old folks talking

done?”

“We did. Thanks for your cooperation on that.”

Masters got Donny’s attention across the room, raising two fingers and pointed to Adam. Dessert would not be far behind.

“Were you talking about me?”

“Some.”

“Was it bad?”

“No, it had nothing to do with your behavior.”

“That’s good.”

“Adam, I do need an honest answer from you about something that is very important.”

“Okay,” Adam replied his tone dropping as if he had just been caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

“Manuel thinks he might have seen you back in the meadow last night – well, early this morning would be more accurate.”

Adam squirmed, taking his eyes off Masters and looking out the window toward the meadow.

“He saw me, huh?”

“Seems that way.”

“Yeah. I was out there.”

“May I ask why? It was one, o’clock in the morning!”

“Mr. M, I got something I need to get off my chest. You’re going to hate me for this. Mom’s going to hate me, too, and most of all, Dave’ll probably never speak to me again. It’s what I was afraid you were talking to Mom about.”

“Sounds serious, but you have to remember, we all love you, Adam. Whatever you have on your mind couldn’t possibly be that bad.”

Adam looked directly into his old friend’s eyes.

“I’m the one who borrowed – well, stole - Dave’s knife. Mom wouldn’t let me have one. I knew I shouldn’t do it even while I was doing it but I wanted it so bad, I just couldn’t control myself. I hid it in my bottom dresser drawer. That’s when I realized I couldn’t ever really use it where anybody

could see it. So, I decided to sneak out last night and practice throwing it awhile. It was so dark that I couldn't see good enough to do much.

"I went up to the deck and laid down on a bench to think about what I should do. I guess I must have fell asleep. When I woke up, I decided to throw it away. I couldn't just sneak it back because if Dave already knew it was missing, it would seem too strange having it just reappear like that. I figured I'd pay him back. Every week I'd put some of my allowance under the cushion on his big chair till it was all paid. He's always looking under there for change.

"Anyway, I went out to the end of the dock and threw it into the lake. I threw it as hard as I could so it would stick into the bottom. I'm really sorry. I'll go out and dive for it. I'm sure I can find it. I think it's stainless steel so it won't be rusted or anything yet."

The peach pie arrived along with coffee for Masters and milk for Adam. Adam pushed his away. He had suddenly lost his appetite. Masters spoke:

"The divers already found the knife when they were recovering the body."

"Oh, good! That's kind of a relief. Does Dave know it was found?"

"Yes. But we aren't talking about it yet because it was so close to the body – part of the crime scene. You understand?"

Adam nodded.

"So, I shouldn't say anything about it?"

"Not until I tell you it's alright, okay?"

"Okay!"

With his sudden reprieve from having to face Dave, Adam's appetite returned. Through a mouthful of pie, he asked, "So, you really don't hate me for stealing the knife?"

"No. I don't hate you, Adam, but like you have indicated that you are, I'm also disappointed in you."

"Yeah. I'm disappointed in myself, all right. I guess I better tell Mom. Is it okay to tell her?"

“I think you probably need to do that. The sooner the better, I suppose, don’t you? Go ahead and finish your pie first, though. You’ll need the sustenance.”

Adam wasn’t sure what ‘sustenance’ meant, but he figured it was one of Mr. M’s fancy words for pie and at that moment it was only that piece of pie that stood between him and facing his mother. In the entire history of mankind, no ten-year-old boy had ever taken so long to finish his dessert!

As Adam got up to leave – his plate, by then, so clean it didn’t need washing – Masters reminded him one last time. “Remember, only your mother – nobody else.”

Dave appeared at the table as Adam was leaving. The boy hurried on his way without so much as recognizing Dave’s presence.

“What was that about?” Dave asked as he took a seat across the table.

“Boys! Who knows what goes on in their minds?” Masters said attempting to write it off as a whim of the moment.

“Yeah, I suppose. Anyway, I need to go into town and get light bulbs. Thought I better make sure that was okay – me being the big suspect and all.”

He was sarcastic but also genuinely cooperative.

“Sure. Just check in with Hobbs or me when you return. By the way, you seem to be off the hook for the stabbing. I can’t tell you more than that and you’re still not to talk about it, but I felt you should know.”

Dave perked up noticeably.

“That is good news.”

“There is another thing that may not be in your favor, however.”

“What’s that?”

“It appears that you knew the Judge – or at least knew about him – more than you have let on.”

Dave’s sudden smile hardened. His brow furrowed. The veins in his hands stood out, as he clinched them into white-knuckled fists.

“You may want a lawyer before you discuss it.”

“No. A lawyer won’t change the facts. I’ll trust you to stop me if I begin saying things I shouldn’t. Where should I begin?”

“Wherever it seems right.”

“Well, you seem to know about the accident. After that, I went to live with my Aunt. Eighteen months ago, she died and I was finally free to set out on my own. Over the years, I had developed a terrible hatred for the Judge. I knew I needed to get some kind of . . . closure . . . I suppose is the word. So, I went to Buffalo to look into things. Like I told you, I always wanted to be a cop so I got a job assisting a private detective. I mostly did the gofer stuff for him. As I had time, I used the opportunities that the PI’s office gave me to dig into the Judge’s past. I have a file on him two inches thick. It’s in my room. You can see it if you want to.

“I found out that he led two lives. In his public life, he was a respected public figure and from all I could find out, he seemed to be one of the best judges ever. He was fair and honest and appeared to really try to do the right thing. He sponsored a charity that took care of kids whose parents had been killed during crimes. I wondered if that was because of me. Anyway, every noon, he went to a shooting club. I thought that was a strange hobby for a Judge. Sometimes he’d take a bow and quiver inside. Other times he’d take a case – I figured it was a gun case.”

“His other - hidden - life, was quite different – scary, really. I kept tabs on him for two months. Almost every night, he’d leave the house about seven, dressed like Blue Color Joe. He’d go to a different bar every night and sit in a corner drinking, waiting to be picked up by a hooker. He didn’t seem to be particular who she was or what she looked like. He’d buy her a drink and then they’d leave and go to a motel or hotel - again a different one every night. He always had the woman get the room and then he joined her – all secret-like. By eleven or so, he’d be back home. Sometimes he was falling down drunk by the time he got there. He had vodka hidden everywhere.

“The next morning he’d leave the house at seven sharp, looking fresh and commanding, just like a judge. During that two months, my hate gradually turned to pity. And his poor wife, Grace, I really felt sorry for her. She went to church every morning, noon and night. I felt like I should help her but I didn’t know what to do. I even went into church behind her sometimes thinking I’d get up the courage to talk to her, but I never did.

“I found out about the Gathering of Marksmen at the shooting club. I got a brochure about Whispering Pines Lodge from a travel agency and – don’t ask me why – it seemed like that was where I was supposed to go. That’s about it. I just showed up here one day, made myself seem to be indispensable, and Fred hired me.”

“It wasn’t your intention to be here so you could kill Judge Geiger?”

“No. I won’t say that I hadn’t spent a lot of time in my life figuring out ways to do just that. I could write a book on clever ways to set up booby traps.”

“I think you just crossed that line. I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that last statement.”

Dave acted as though he were bewildered by Masters’ remark.

“You may be asked to repeat that story for Hobbs or one of the other deputies. By the way, have you seen him in the past several hours? I’ve lost track of him.”

“Yeah. About an hour ago, he and another deputy were going through the storage sheds out back.”

“Thank you for your time and for filling me in on your story, Dave. When you’re in town would you mind running a little errand for me?”

“Not at all.”

“There’s a candy store down on Main Street that has the most luscious raspberry twisters in the universe. I’d appreciate a couple of pounds of them. I get here so infrequently, you understand.”

Masters reached for his billfold.

Dave motioned it back into his pocket.

"This time they're on me, Mr. Masters. Two pounds of raspberry twisters."

Either Dave was sincere in his story or he was a very good actor. If he had been acting it had been well prepared, but then he had had ten years to prepare his story just as he had had ten years to prepare a killing. The employment by the private detective could be checked out, of course, though it seemed to have no bearing on the case.

The parade to Masters' table continued. Hobbs arrived. Masters motioned for more coffee.

"Found some interesting stuff," were Hobbs' first words. He left it hang, waiting to be urged on. Masters played his game.

"And just what interesting stuff did you find?"

"A bloody 2 X 4 for one thing."

"Really!" Playing the game seemed to have been worth it.

"It was in Fred's private garage under the kitchen. It was hidden behind a stack of wood."

"How long?"

"Six feet. Just right for swinging at somebody's head, I'd say."

"You've sent it to the lab for blood analysis, I presume."

"It's on its way as we speak. Two other things. A stack of cement blocks and several boxes of new electrical wire - same gauge as the wire wrapped around the judge. One was open with most of the wire still in the box. A deputy is measuring it now so we can determine if it's missing the same amount as was used to wire up the judge."

"Good work, Hobbs! Find out if it's the same manufacturer."

"Yes, Sir. It gets still better, though."

Here we go again, Masters thought to himself.

"And how does it get better, Deputy?"

"Rick, the grounds keeper's helper says he saw Fred

and the Judge arguing yesterday afternoon. He's not sure of the time and he wasn't close enough to hear what they were saying but he heard the yelling. That's what directed his attention to them. They were at the back of meadow and Rick was at the shed by Manuel's cabin. He said Fred appeared really agitated – tossing his arms up in the air, pacing around while he talked. It was a full-fledged argument. Fred seemed to be the one doing the most of it."

"Rick was close enough to be sure who the people were?"

"Yes Sir. I even had him go to where he saw them and I stood by the shed where he had been. I could tell it was Rick with no trouble."

"That was a good piece of police work, Hobbs. Have you talked with Fred about the 2 X 4 yet?"

"No Sir. I figured you might handle that better than I would. I tend to just go in with both guns blazing, you know?"

He wiped at his nose with the back of his hand as if that in some way made him appear the macho cop.

Although his self-characterization seemed ego serving, it wasn't far from the truth. Perhaps Hobbs had some self-awareness about him after all.

They found Fred in his office just to the left of the front desk.

"May we take a few minutes of your time?" Masters asked, rapping on the frame of the open door.

"Sure. Come on in."

Hobbs closed the door behind them.

"Closed door. That looks serious," Fred added.

"It may be," Masters said.

The two men took seats in front of the desk.

"A possible weapon in the Judge's death has been found in your garage."

"Weapon? In my garage?"

"Deputy Hobbs ran across a 2 X 4 with blood stains on one end – the kind of wooden, blunt instrument that appears

to have made the abrasion on the Judge's forehead."

"About six feet long, old wood, roughhewn?" Fred asked.

Masters looked at Hobbs to verify the part about old, roughhewn, wood. Hobbs nodded.

"Apparently so."

"That's my coonin' club."

"Coonin' club?" Masters asked never having heard the term before.

"Every so often a coon or two will show up and try to get into the pantry just above my garage. They can smell the flour, dried beans – things like that. I keep that club handy to chase them away. Sometimes I get too close and give one a whack. It gets bloody. I'm not out to hurt them, understand, just to scare them away."

"Thanks for clearing that up. I'm sure the blood analysis will show that it's not human blood," Masters said. "There is one other thing. You were seen arguing with the Judge at the back of the meadow sometime yesterday. You seemed quite animated from the report. Can you tell us what that's all about?"

"I'd rather not. It involves a third and fourth party and I don't want to get their story entangled in all of this."

"Amy and Adam?"

Fred looked startled. He looked at Masters and then at Hobbs – suddenly uncomfortable about Hobbs' presence.

"I know about the connection," Masters said. "Are you saying that's what it was about – the . . . remuneration?" Masters figured Fred would know the word but was fairly certain Hobbs would not.

Fred seemed to understand the game they were playing.

"Yes. It was the old remuneration thing. I let off my steam at him and that was the end of it."

"Well, thank you for your time, Fred. By the way, who's leading in the competition?"

“Over-all, I’m not sure. In the gunning it’s a new entrant this year. A Dr. Barton – Barry Barton.”

“Doctor as in M.D. doctor?”

“Yes. He’s an internist, as I understand it.”

“Where’s he from?”

“A suburb of Buffalo, I believe.”

“Not many doctors in this competition, are there?”

“He’s the first since I’ve known about the Gathering. Most doctors seem to hate weapons.”

Masters mused to himself that perhaps he should have become a doctor, following the path his mother had wanted.

“Any idea why he got involved in this competition?”

I talked with him a bit last evening. Seems that he took it up soon after he left his wife last year. I never thought of weapons as a substitute for sex.”

“I take it you’ve never read Freud,” Masters added.

The comment seemed to go over Fred’s head. (Hobbs thought Freud is what you did to eggs in the skillet!)

“Well, we’ll see you later on. Thanks for clearing up those things.”

Hobbs and Masters returned to the lobby. The word game was not entirely finished for Masters.

“That old remuneration thing will get them every time won’t it, Harry?”

“Yes Sir. Every time. I declare it will!”

The imp inside Masters chuckled. The outer Masters coughed to disguise it. Both enjoyed the diversion.

With a definitive pointing of his hand, Masters headed them in the direction of the gift shop. Amy was back behind the counter. Before the inspector could speak, Amy did.

“Cathy was just looking for you. I sent her into the dining room. She seemed upset and Cathy’s never upset.”

“Thanks. We’ll go find her. Good to see you back at it, by the way.”

It had been another cryptic conversation that escaped

Hobbs. They met Cathy coming out as they were going in.

“Mr. M. I’ve been looking for you. I’m not sure what to do.”

“Do about what, Cathy?” Masters said in his deep, reassuring voice.

“I was ready to do 201, Grace Geiger’s new room. I knocked at the door and there was no answer so I opened it with my key and went in. I called out again like I always do, and nobody answered so I just assumed nobody was there. I barged right into the bathroom to begin cleaning and there was Mrs. Geiger emptying some white powder into the stool out of a zip shut plastic bag. She seemed surprised – even angry – to see me. I said I was sorry and that I had called out and got no answer. She flushed the stool and stuck the plastic bag into her purse. She said, ‘Be quick about it. I’ll be on the porch. Tell me when you’re finished.’ I never saw her like that before. She was always so kind. At first, I just wrote it off to her grieving, but then I decided with the powder and her reaction and all, I’d better let you in on it.”

“You did the right thing. Let’s go take a look.”

In a few minutes, they were in the room. The two men examined the stool. Although most of the powder had flushed, some remained around the upper edge. Masters carefully collected it with a tissue and placed it into the open evidence bag Hobbs had made ready.

“It may be nothing more than face powder, you know,” Masters said, “But then again, it may well be important. It was good work, Cathy. Add breakfast to what I already owe you.”

Cathy had calmed down.

“Go ahead and finish up and then go get Grace just like nothing had happened. Can you do that?”

“I’m a darn good actress, Mr. M. Just ask Dave. He and I belong to the little theater in town. We both got parts in Our Town. Too bad you won’t be around to come see it.”

The men headed for the hall. Cathy called them back.

“Here’s one more thing for you super sleuths,” she said as she moved a few steps in their direction.

On the edge of the door, where Grace had pushed to leave the bathroom, was a fingerprint clear as could be, apparently imprinted in the powder they had just found.

"This will come close to proving the powder was Grace's, if we should ever need that," Masters said.

Hobbs took out a strip of tape and captured the print. It, too, got bagged and the men again headed for the door. Masters hesitated and looked back at Cathy.

"We'll be on our way now unless Sherlock Cathy has anything further to bring to our attention."

"You're dismissed," she said with a flick of her hand and an ear-to-ear grin.

"Cocaine, I suppose," Hobbs said as they headed for the elevator.

"We'll just have to wait and see what the lab boys have to say," Masters replied quite certain of what he had just found. "The sooner the better on this one, I think, Deputy."

"I'll run it in myself right now," Hobbs said.

Two birds with one stone, Masters thought. The evidence would get to the lab with dispatch and he would be rid of Harry Hobbs for the rest of the afternoon.

Back down in the lobby, the desk clerk hailed him.

"A letter for you, Mr. Masters. I just got the mail sorted."

With a gracious 'thank you' and a dollar pressed into the young man's palm, Masters found a chair by the wall of windows. For some time, he just sat looking out at the beautiful scene, contemplating the intricacies of nature. At last, he turned his attention to the envelope. The return address captured his attention like flashing lights and sirens. It was from Judge Geiger. The envelope bore a local cancellation date of the day before. Inside, he found the third suicide note. This one seemed authentic in every way.

*To Detective Raymond Masters, Retired
% Whispering Pines Lodge*

Raymond:

I am sorry to burden you with this distasteful epistle, but you are one I have always been able to trust. Please see that the proper authorities receive this. Good-bye old friend.

First: I hereby acknowledge that I am the biological father of Amy Anderson's eleven-year-old son, Adam Allen Anderson.

Second: I have become everything that I abhor in a man: a hopeless alcoholic, a philanderer, physically incapacitated, and the reckless killer of a young boy's parents. My addictions to sex and alcohol have come to be the only driving forces in my life. I am sober so seldom any more that I can no longer adequately serve the bench. I can no longer see well enough to shoot, and my physical maladies will not allow me to enjoy the bow and knife. Sadly, I suppose, engaging in play with those weapons, was my only recreational interest.

Third: Separate, private letters are being sent to those individuals to whom I must apologize directly.

Fourth: It is with this explanation that I choose to end my life. My body will be easily located.

George Allen Geiger

The contents of the letter did not surprise Masters, although it saddened him terribly. He continued sitting there for some time, limp and somber.

Eventually, his thoughts returned to the case. George's letter did little other than to explain the Judge's frame of mind. Had he planned to shoot himself, drug himself, or drown himself? Regardless of his plan, it appeared that it had not come off as he had envisioned it. He had no way of knowing, of course, that it would not appear to be a straight forward suicide so he would have felt no need to go into the specific

details as to how it would occur. That in itself tended to authenticate the note.

From the beginning, the fact that the body had not been better hidden had been one of the major stumbling blocks for Masters. The explanation in the letter would have handled that aspect quite neatly - if it had not appeared to be murder rather than suicide. At that moment, the suicide note seemed to be of little help in solving the crime.

Masters went looking for Evy and John Eagan.

Eventually he located them on the practice firing range. He asked them to step aside and answer a few questions. They took seats in an adjoining gazebo.

"How's the competition going?" he asked, partly out of interest and partly to break the ice."

John responded. "Evy's leading the pack with bow and arrow. I'm second in gunning behind Barton. He's new to the Gathering this year. It's not the same without the Judge, but then, things do change, don't they?"

"Things do change," Masters agreed. "Where were the planning meetings held this year? I didn't get an announcement." (He never got an announcement but the phrase got his foot in the door!)

"I guess that was my oversight. Sorry." John said. "With the Judge's failing health, we scheduled the meeting at his office to make it easier for him."

"How thoughtful. I'm sure he appreciated that."

"He seemed to," John said.

"I need to ask you some questions relative to the Judge's death. I hope you won't take offense."

"No. Of course, not. We're happy to help any way we can, aren't we, Evy?"

"Certainly," she agreed.

"Well, then let's get the obvious one out of the way first. I need for you to account for your whereabouts between four yesterday afternoon and two this morning."

The large time span involved in the question seemed to surprise them. They looked at each other. Again, it was John

who responded.

“Well, let’s see. Help me here Evy. We got back to our room about three thirty or three forty-five, wouldn’t you say?”

“Yes. Closer to a quarter ‘til I’d say. Then we cleaned up. John laid down for a while and I read. Then about five, we went down for dinner. After dinner, from about six thirty to seven thirty we walked the trail along the south side of the lake. Then we came back and got involved in a game of canasta with Bill and Barbara West. You know, this is probably the only place left on the face of the earth where you can still find people who play canasta. We played ‘til about what, ten?”

“Yeah. About ten. We got back to the room shortly after that and went to bed. We were awaked this morning by that demented Deputy and his screeching siren. Like most everybody else we went down to the lake to see what it was all about.”

As they spoke, Masters’ wheels were turning. They began with blatant lies about their activities between four and five. There had been no mention of the passkeys. It seemed they were attempting to make sure they remained each other’s best alibis. And then, their story went on far beyond the timeline Masters had set. Providing too much information, always lead the old detective to become suspicious. Masters waded right in.

“You seem to have forgotten about the misplaced room key between four and four-thirty.”

They looked at each other as if something were wrong. Masters got the idea neither had told the other of their key incident. Masters continued.

“Evy, I’m told you asked for a passkey at four because John had yours. Is that accurate?”

“Oh, yes. It just slipped my mind. I did get one and I returned it immediately.”

Again, too much information.

“And John, at four-fifteen you made the same request of different maid, isn’t that right?”

“Well, I’m not sure of the time, but yes I did ask for one sometime in there.”

“I don’t understand. Who had the key?”

They looked at one another and finally Evy spoke.

“It was just one of those mix-ups. I forgot that I had taken it because John usually carries it. So, I’m afraid I asked before I even looked in my bag.”

“I see,” Masters said nodding. “Well, I’m glad to get that cleared up. There is one more thing.” (Masters began a fishing trip with nothing more than a hunch and a very big noose.) “That chocolate shake you bought at the concession stand a few minutes before four, John – the maid doesn’t remember you having it in your hands when you approached her for the key.”

“Why no I didn’t.” There was a pause. “I left it on the floor by the door to our room when I went looking for a key.”

“And when you came up to your room from the concession stand, which route did you take?”

“I came up the stairs off the lobby and right to the room.”

“I see. Well then, there is just one thing that still puzzles me, I guess. It’s that call you made to the front desk to report the spill at the door of room 210 – the one the desk says you made from the phone in your room. How was it you knew about the spill if you hadn’t come by it and how was it you were able to make that call without having a key?”

“The maid must be confused about the time. Now I remember, I did come up the back stairs. I was all sweaty and looked so grungy that I didn’t want to go through the lobby. I saw the mess as I passed.”

“Well that would explain that. I’m always fascinated by coincidences, though, aren’t you?” He didn’t wait for them the respond. “The spill you reported was the very same kind of shake you had just purchased and then went on to set on the floor beside the door to your room. Fascinating!”

Masters didn’t believe either of their stories and they knew it. He enjoyed watching suspects scramble to cover up

their lies and wondered just how inventive they would become. The fact that their stated time-line between three and five had just been dashed to pieces was not even important enough to pursue. He thanked them for their, time and left.

The wily old detective smiled to himself thinking, 'Well if they hadn't been suspects before, they certainly are now'. He wished that he could be a mouse in a corner of their room for the conversation that was about to take place. Would they lie to each other about their own whereabouts or come clean, thereby involving the other one in the crime – whatever aspect or aspects of it they may have been a party to? He made a note to check with the canasta players about their arrival and departure times. He also noted that from four-fifteen until seven-thirty or so they were each other's only alibis. Dinner. He needed to establish the time they had eaten dinner.

Chapter Four

Day Two: The Evening

After an early diner, Masters entered the lobby and seated himself in a corner from where he would be able to study the Gathering participants as they came and went during the evening.

Earlier, he had obtained a full list of the Gatherers from Fred. For no good reason, other than his own curiosity, he took some time to categorize them.

Judges	1
Bankers	1
Ministers	2
Physicians	1
Nurses	1
Construction workers	12
Business owners	11
Professors	3
Teachers	2
Martial arts Instructors	1
Law enforcement	10
Housewives	3
Total	48

It was a diverse group. The Judge, of course, was

gone. The banker was John, the nurse Grace and one of those who listed themselves as a housewife was Evy. Adding Dave, Fred and Amy, the list of possible suspects numbered 51 with six of them serious suspects. Make that seven if the judge himself were to be included. Some quick calculations showed Masters that almost 13% of the pool were possibilities. In a city of one million people, that would be 130,000 folks to check out. Put into that perspective, a mere seven suspects suddenly seemed like a piece of cake.

Dave and his constant shadow approached Masters.

“Had dessert yet?” Adam asked.

“As a matter of fact, I have, Adam, but if you’ll be available around nine, I’m sure we could work in another.”

“Deal,” Adam said, patting Masters on his stomach. “Got to keep this guy healthy,” he added, looking up at Dave.

Masters, too, looked at Dave. “I understand you and Cathy are budding actors.”

“Oh. The Little Theater? I suppose so. It’s lots of fun. I was in all the plays in high school. Cathy’s the one who’s really great, though.”

“I wish I were going to be here to see your production,” Masters said.

“Well, if I’m not in jail or on death row or something, why don’t you come back? Spend the weekend out here. I’ll even pop for your ticket.”

“That’s a tempting offer. I’ll just have to see what materializes between now and then.”

Masters changed the subject without commenting on Dave’s self-references to being the killer.

“What do you know about Milly, Dave?”

“Milly? For one thing, I think we should recruit her for Little Theater. She always seems to be acting. I’m not sure why, but I don’t really trust her. There is something that just doesn’t seem genuine about her.”

“I’ve noticed that she spends a lot of time mingling with the guests. None of you other lodge employees seem to do that.”

"I guess we all have lives of our own. Milly doesn't seem to."

"Where's she from? Do you know?"

"New York City, I think."

"And she's been here how long?"

"Maybe a month or a little less."

Adam pressed himself into the conversation.

"She sure doesn't talk like any maid we've ever had around here before."

"What do you mean?" Masters asked, intrigued by his observation.

"She talks like you and Donny – big words and stuff. You'll just have to listen to her."

"He's right," Dave added. "I hadn't thought about it but it's like she's a well-educated person. That really is strange. She's too old to be a college student here for summer employment, you know."

"Come on, Dave," Adam pleaded at last, tugging at his arm. "We got fish to clean."

"See you later, then, I guess?" Masters asked.

"Nine sharp." Adam said confirming the dessert date.

Milly had been eyeing Masters, waiting for an opportunity to approach him. When Dave and Adam left, she moved in.

"Mr. Masters. Good evening. I'm Milly one of the maids here. We met when you arrived."

Yes, Milly, I remember. Have a seat."

"How fortunate that you are here during all of this mayhem and madness."

"How so?" Masters asked.

"Well, Deputy Hobbs appears to be grossly inept. I'm certain he would bungle the investigation if left to his own devices. So, what is your current theory? Suicide or homicide?"

"The facts aren't all in yet. Until then, I keep my theories to myself."

“It must be difficult to hone in on anyone in particular with this place teeming, as it is, with a multitude of combative, hostile people.”

“They seem pretty laid back to me. By the way, I don’t believe I caught your last name, Milly.”

“Monroe. Millicent Monroe.”

“What a beautiful name.”

“Thank you. Pretty old fashioned, but then one has to make the best of what one has.”

“While I’m thinking of it, Milly, were you here for canasta Sunday evening?”

“Yes, I was.”

“Can you remember about when John and Evy Eagan arrived and left?”

“I’d say 7:15 or 7:30 to 10:00. Yes, it was ten when they left, because that’s when I left, also. They suspects, are they?”

“Just have to check out all the players, you know.”

“Of course.”

She sat back, as if settling in for the evening.

“So, Milly, do you have any theories on who the bad guy might be in all of this? You seem to spend a lot of time with the guests. Any of them appear to be likely candidates?”

She was caught off guard.

“It may come down to Barton or Doogan – that is, if it weren’t suicide.”

She suddenly seemed uncomfortable with the direction Masters had turned the conversation. She excused herself and left.

Adam was right, Masters thought. That was not the language pattern of the typical maid. Milly seemed to know way too much about Dave – things not generally known at the lodge. She also seemed to know something about Dr. Barton that Masters didn’t. Perhaps it was time to meet the good doctor.

Masters walked to the other side of the fireplace where

he had seen Dr. Barton earlier. He was sitting alone, reading. Masters introduced himself.

“Dr. Barton, isn’t it? I’m Raymond Masters.”

“Yes, I know. I’ve been expecting a visit from you,” he said cordially, motioning for Masters to take a seat. He continued:

“How’s the investigation going?”

“Much like searching for the cause of an unknown malady, I suppose. The result is obvious. Its origin is elusive.”

“There’s one thing about all of this that puzzles me,” Barton offered.

“And what would that be?”

“As beloved as the Judge seemed to be to all these people, none of them seems to show any evidence of grieving – none whatsoever. It’s as if he just decided not to come this year. Nobody even talks about him.”

“I guess I wasn’t aware of that. Perhaps he wasn’t as revered as one might have suspected.”

“Seems not. Personally, I have a great deal to thank him for.”

“You? I wasn’t aware you even knew him.”

“Two years ago, when my son was sixteen, he was arrested for trafficking in drugs. I take the blame for that, but that’s an entirely different story. The short version is that Judge Geiger saw the young man’s potential and put him into a special rehabilitation program – he had become a heavy user as well. Now he is drug-free, in college, and madly in love for the tenth time in as many months.”

“I’m glad to hear that things turned out so well.”

“So am I. The Judge took a personal interest in our family. In fact, he’s the one who got me started in this competition.”

“I wondered about that. All of this seems rather contrary to the mission of a physician.”

“I suppose so. It’s become a good way to relax.”

“How is it going for you so far?”

“I’m well into the lower half, over all, I’m afraid, but like I said, I do it more for the relaxation than the winning. I have been amazed that most of the participants are absolutely avid about this thing. It seems to be a strange, cutthroat competition for many of them with animosities going back decades. There’s no such thing as gentlemanly competition here. It’s really turned out to be quite distasteful to me. I doubt if I’ll come back again.”

“Well, you gave it a shot, so to speak.”

“So to speak,” Barton smiled, appreciating the lame pun.

“Thanks for the chat, Doctor, and best of luck – or perhaps, just have fun would be more appropriate.”

That was met with another appreciative nod.

Dave was standing near the gift shop. He motioned Masters to join him.

“Dave, I thought you were elbow deep in fish entrails.”

“Adam actually enjoys doing that. He’s a strange dude. I excused myself. I needed to speak with you without him around.”

“Sounds serious.”

“It may be. That Dr. Barton you were just speaking to – I finally placed him this afternoon. I was sure I knew him but couldn’t make a connection.”

“And?” Masters said, encouraging him to continue.

“The PI I worked for had him as a client when I started. Barton thought his wife was cheating on him and we were hired to do surveillance – that’s a nice term for taking as many dirty pictures as you can find to take. Anyway, the case was all but closed when I began but Joe showed me the file. You’ll never guess who Barton’s wife was fooling around with.”

Masters would let Dave tell him that it had been the Judge. Why ruin the young man’s attempt to be helpful?

“Who?” Masters asked with great anticipation in his tone. (Masters wasn’t such a poor actor, himself.)

“Judge Geiger.”

“My! That throws another fish into the kettle, doesn't it? And you're quite sure it is this same Dr. Barton?”

“Yes, Sir. Not doubt. We met on two occasions.”

“Have you spoken with him since he's been here?”

“No. There was an awkward moment while he was checking in. We came face to face. I couldn't place him at that moment, like I said, but he got pale as a sheet and turned away. Since then, he seems to go out of his way to avoid me. I get the idea, though, that he's decided I don't remember him.”

“Interesting. Anything else?”

“No. That's about all. I just thought it might be helpful. And oh, there is one more thing, I guess. Here's Joe Young's card – he was the PI – in case you want to verify my story. I understand that I'm not to be considered the most reliable source just now.”

“Thanks for your help, Dave. We'll just have to see where this all leads.”

Dave shrugged his shoulders and turned to leave.

“Oh. Here's your candy, Sir. I have to admit I pilfered one. They really are good.”

“Since you bought them for me, I suppose that actually couldn't be considered pilfering, now could it?”

Dave smiled and left.

As Masters turned to head for the front porch, Hobbs and several deputies entered the room.

“Mr. Hobbs. You look most official this evening,” Masters said intentionally padding he man's fragile ego.

“Always official, Sir. Always official.”

“What's up?”

“Sheriff wants fingerprints of all the guests – Gatherers or not. Those who won't give them voluntarily will get a court order in the morning. This is my print team.”

“I'm sure Fred will arrange for you to use the speaker system to announce what you're doing.”

“Good idea.” Hobbs turned to another deputy. “Burt, that’s Fred’s office. See to the announcement.”

“May I suggest you include the staff as well? I’m particularly interested in a maid named Milly Monroe.”

“Consider it done, detective.”

“Anything more from the lab?”

“Oh, yes and very interesting, too.”

Hobbs unfolded a sheet of paper and handed it to Masters.

“So, there were traces of barbiturates in the empty compartment of the Judge’s pill box.”

“It gets better,” Hobbs added as if in control of the candy on Halloween.

Masters read on. The powder sample from Grace’s bathroom stool and that of the fingerprint on the bathroom door were identical to the traces in the pillbox.

Masters thought out loud.

“Powder. You wouldn’t put a powder form of a drug in a pillbox compartment. It makes no sense.”

“No sense. That’s for darn sure,” Hobbs agreed suddenly bewildered by what he thought was going to be a great lead.

“Unless”

Masters kept the rest to himself.

“Carry on, Hobbs. I have some snooping to do.”

Masters entered the dining room, that time looking for Donny rather than food – perhaps a first for the old detective. Taking the young man aside, he asked: “When did the Judge usually eat dinner in the evening?”

“Not usually – always! You could set your watch. He came at six and left at seven.”

“What about John and Evy?”

“Earlier. Not as regular but usually between five and six.”

“Do you remember Sunday evening?”

“Yeah. Strange. They got here a little after five and John left about five-thirty. Evy stayed another fifteen minutes or so.”

“What part of that was strange?”

“Two things, really. They always leave together and they didn’t leave a tip. Next to you, Sir, they’re the best tippers in the group. They both appeared uptight – not at each other – just uptight or preoccupied. Perhaps that’s why they forgot the tip.”

“Thanks for your help. Better get back to earning whatever tips are actually being left this evening.”

“Yes, Sir. No tips, no tuition money.”

Masters stopped at Fred’s office.

“Got a moment, Fred?”

“Sure. I hate doing these dailys anyway.”

“Dailys?”

“Daily receipts – accounting’s never been my passion, I’m afraid. What can I do you for?”

“Milly – when did you hire her?”

“About the first of June. That’s when I take on summer help.”

“Did she have references?”

“One letter, as I recall. A hotel in New York City, I believe.”

“Did you check it out?”

“No. I seldom check references on domestics and groundskeepers. Her appearance and first impression was great. I hired her on the first interview.”

“She stays here?”

“No. Funny thing. Most summer help is here to save money for college or some such thing. They’re grateful even for the tiny staff rooms in the attic. Milly, though, turned one down. Said she’d prefer to have a place of her own in town. She sure can’t save much that way.”

“What kind of a car does she drive?”

“New yellow sports job. I can’t keep all the makes and

models straight anymore. You can see it out the window here. She always parks in the same spot.”

He pointed as Masters moved to the window to look.

“Not inexpensive, Id’ say,” Masters said.

“I’d agree. I know it doesn’t fit the usual pattern for maids. If you want something else that doesn’t fit, during her off-hours she behaves more like a guest than a staffer. Most staffers are gone five minutes after their shifts end. Not Milly. She’s a min gler. Conversation, puzzles, cards – you name it – way into the night sometimes. Can’t fault her work, however, and that’s my main interest. Never a complaint about her work.”

“Thanks for your help, Fred.”

“Always welcome. Say. Any word from the lab on that bloody 2 X 4?”

“Actually, not. I’ll ask Hobbs and get back to you.”

Masters went to find the dapper deputy all decked out in a fresh uniform. He was so enjoying his role as the important guy in the fingerprinting process that Masters almost hated to take him away (almost!).

“Deputy, may I see you a moment, please?”

Hobbs obliged and they talked away from the crowd.

“What about the 2 X 4? There was nothing about it in the report.”

“It’s confusing the lab boys. They’re still working on it. Like Fred said, there’s possum blood on it. But there was also a small amount of human blood – type A – same as the Judges.”

“And the same as a good many others in this Gathering, I imagine,” Masters added.

“It’s been sent to Albany for a DNA match.”

“Thanks. I better let you get back to running the show here, Hobbs.”

Hobbs preened like a peacock on the prowl and returned to his self-appointed post beside the table. Masters returned to Fred’s office.

“One more question, if I may, Fred.”

“Shoot.”

“What is your blood type?”

“ ‘A’. Why?”

“Just being nosy. If it’s of any significance, I’ll let you know.”

There were things to think through. Masters began the trek back to his room. As he got off the elevator, Milly was coming out of his room. He walked over and confronted her as she locked the door, facing away from him.

“Milly. May I help you?”

She turned toward him, obviously startled.

“No, Mr. Masters. I’m in the wrong place. 200 just called for towels and I told the desk I’d bring them up – everybody else was either busy or on break. You know that elevator. It seems to have a mind of its own. I’m sure I pressed two. Anyway, I just stepped off and didn’t even read the number on the door I guess – all the 00 rooms being directly across from the elevator like they are. In fact, I didn’t notice the mistake until you walked up just now.”

“I’ll grant you that the old elevator does have a mind of its own. Have a good evening.”

“Yes, Sir. You, too.”

“Oh, Milly,” he called after her. “Do you want to get the extra towels and take them down to 200?”

“No. I’ll get a set from the linen closet on two. I’ve been a big enough bother to you already.”

Masters went inside. Although he had not counted his towels, there were usually four and that’s exactly how many he found. It had been a strange encounter. He looked around the room. The three books on the table by his window chair had been reordered. The one he was reading was in the middle of the stack. The papers in the envelope were also out of order. “It appears Miss Milly has been snooping,” he said out loud. He noted the time. Four minutes after the hour. He called the desk and identified himself, though that was actually not necessary.

“Has 200 called for towels in the past half hour?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Do you have any way of knowing what time that call came in?”

“Sure. I just got off the phone with her as you called.”

“Thank you so much.” He hung up and continued his conversation with himself.

“She’s a pretty shrewd cookie. She knew I’d call to check, so she made a cover call. She just didn’t anticipate that I’d ask for the time.”

He called Fred’s office.

“Fred, can you find the name of that hotel Milly gave as a reference?”

“I have it here. You made me uneasy about her. I plan to call and check her out in the morning.”

“Is there a phone number?”

“Yes.”

He passed it on to Masters.

“Thanks, again. I think I’ll make that call for you right now.”

He hung up and dialed.

“Personnel office, please.”

“This is personnel.”

“This is Police Detective Raymond Masters. I have the name of someone who gave your hotel as her work reference. She’s applying for a domestic position. I just need to verify employment with you.”

“Sure. What’s the name?”

“Millicent Monroe.”

“Milly Monroe?”

“Yes.”

“You must be kidding. Milly’s here a lot but not as a maid. She stays here as a guest several times a month.”

“I see.” Masters was momentarily perplexed. “Perhaps I have the wrong name, then. Your Milly Monroe - do you

know what she does for a living?”

“I thought everybody knew. She writes for Gossip World, the newspaper all celebrities hate.”

“Certainly. That clears it up, then. Thanks for your help.”

“A reporter!” Masters said, again out loud. “What could she be up to way out here in the boonies where there wasn’t a celebrity for miles around? It seems it has something to do with the case – or with me. Now there’s an interesting twist!”

There was a knock on Masters’ door. It was Amy and Adam.

“What an unexpected pleasure – two of my most favorite people on the planet. Come in.”

“Sorry to interrupt your evening,” Amy began.

“It’s not an interruption. Come in and have a seat.”

“Mom says I should tell you about something that just happened with Mr. Eagan.”

“Oh? Well, go ahead then,” Masters said wondering what additional new twist the case was about to take.”

“I was on my way up to our place and I met Mr. Eagan. He was sitting on the back stairs, almost like he was waiting around for somebody. Anyway, when he saw me, he stood up and began talking. He never does that with me. He asked me stuff like how I was doing, how school had gone last year, what grade I’ll be in next year - the kind of stuff grownups say when they’re trying to get a kid to like them.”

Masters and Amy passed an amused glance.

“Then he said, ‘I noticed how grown up you looked yesterday afternoon when we passed each other here on the stairs.’”

“I told him we didn’t pass on the stairs. He tried to convince me that we did and he kept mentioning ‘A little after four’. I was getting a tad upset about it all when he took two twenty-dollar bills out of his shirt pocket and showed them to me. ‘I’ll bet this will help you remember,’ he said. ‘It’ll just be our little secret. There’s another twenty every day this week if you can remember that you saw me here’.”

“Well, I took the money and said, ‘I’ll remember!’ I figured since I didn’t tell him what I’d remember that it wasn’t like lying. Mom says that’s not the way it is, though.”

“So, you told your mother about it right away?”

“No. I really hadn’t planned on telling her at all. I knew it was too good to be true so I figured something was wrong about it. Anyway, I took some of the money and bought Mom a bracelet she was always admiring in the gift shop. I figured that might help her get to feeling better. I didn’t think ahead, ya know? She asked how I could afford it and that’s when I told her. Mom and I have a pact never to lie to each other.”

“I wasn’t sure how to proceed,” Amy added. “So, I decided we should come up here and check it out with you first.”

“I’m glad you did. You did the right thing. Adam, I want you to keep taking John’s money. Play along, but I’m not asking you to lie to him. What you do with the money is up to your mother. I need some time to figure out what John’s up to. The three of us will keep this our secret. Don’t even tell Dave or Fred, okay?”

“Okay,” Adam agreed. “It’s like I’m your Jr. Detective, huh?”

“Absolutely. I’ve always needed a good Jr. Detective.”

“Well, then, there’s something else I know that you might be able to use on our case,” Adam continued, becoming quite business like in manner and confidential in tone.

“Oh? What’s that?”

Adam leaned forward and hushed his voice.

“Well, Sunday morning when I was playing on the outcrop at the back of the meadow, I ran onto the Judge and Milly. I crouched down so they couldn’t see me.”

“Why did you do that? Why not just greet them? They were your friends, weren’t they?” Masters added a bit puzzled about the disclosure.

“They were talking in loud, unhappy voices – fighting, I figured – and I didn’t want to be any part of that. Fred says don’t buy trouble.”

“Usually a good admonition,” Masters agreed.

Adam looked perplexed.

“Advice. Good advice,” Masters explained.

Adam nodded his understanding and continued.

“Well, they stopped right there and kept talking. Milly said something like, ‘Pay by Monday or I’ll plaster it all over the pulp sheets’. Then the Judge said something like, ‘Get out your trowel, honey. You won’t get a cent from me’.”

Milly turned red in the face and stomped off back toward the lodge. The Judge took a big breath and looked up toward the sky. The way he was, made me feel bad for him. I’m not sure why. Then he walked off – really slow like – sort of slumped over – from the back it hardly even looked like the Judge, ya know?”

“My boy, you are one excellent Jr. Detective,” Masters said.

He stood up, took out his money clip and slipped out a five-dollar bill.

“I believe the going rate for Jr. Detectives is five dollars a day,” he said, handing it to Adam.

Adam’s widening eyes showed his delight. He and his mother walked to the door. Holding the bill tightly between his outstretched hands, Adam turned toward Masters.

“Are you getting paid to solve this case?”

“Well, no, actually, I’m not.”

With a sigh, Adam returned the bill to Masters.

“Then neither am I. We’ll give Hobbs a freebee, this time.”

“I’m sure the Sheriff will appreciate your generosity,” Masters said, winking at his mother. “This is a fine young man you’re raising, Amy. Thanks again, for stopping by.”

“You run along, Adam. I need to speak with Mr. Masters alone for a minute.”

“Oh. More old folks talk,” Adam said relieved again that he was being spared the tedium.

The boy turned back.

“By the way, Mr. M, we got a pie date in less than an hour you know.”

“I’ll be there.”

Adam left and Amy closed the door after him.

“What’s up, Amy?”

“I got this letter in the mail this afternoon. It’s from the Judge. In it, he says he knows he will be dead by the time I receive the letter. Then he went on and explained that Adam is the beneficiary of his life insurance policy and that it should more than take the place of the money he had been sending every month.”

“How large a policy?”

“I have no way of knowing. He said his lawyer would contact me immediately, so I’m just waiting.”

“You had no idea about the insurance before?”

“No. It hadn’t even entered my mind. I feel so guilty about all the bad things I’ve thought and said about him since he came to me about changing our financial arrangement. I acted so unkind toward him at that moment.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear you will be provided for. That sounds more like the John Geiger we both knew, now, doesn’t it?”

“Yes it does. I just have to wonder why he didn’t tell me about the policy to my face on Sunday. Why did he wait and do it like this?”

“Knowing the Judge, he didn’t want to have to accept your thanks.”

“I suppose that would explain it. Well, that was all I wanted to tell you. I’d better be on my way – I still have my crumby daily’s to do.”

She left.

“I’m certainly glad I don’t have ‘dailys’,” Masters said out loud. “They must be absolutely dreadful undertakings.”

In one sense, Masters was relieved knowing that Amy and Adam were being so well cared for. In another, he was sad because insurance beneficiaries always moved toward

the top of the suspect list in murder cases.

He took a seat in his comfortable chair by the window. The evening sky was doing its best to encroach upon the last inky blue remnants of the day just past. It was clear and cool. Faint, hesitant, twinkles, dotted the darkening canopy, giving promise of the spectacular stellar display to follow.

Again, he mulled the case over in his mind. All of the prime suspects had opportunity to have killed the Judge early Monday morning. Opportunity, therefore, was not going to discriminate among the probables and the not so probables. No one had an airtight alibi, and most had none at all. That reminded Masters that his list had suddenly grown from seven to nine with the addition of Dr. Barton and Milly.

That left means and motive as the bases for the solution. Motives seemed to abound. Amy had two possible motives. At first, she could have done him in because she thought he had cut off her monthly support payments. Now, it appears that if she had, in fact, known about the insurance policy, she had an even better motive. Amy had knowledge of drugs and it would not have been difficult for her to have obtained a pass key so she could deposit them in the pillbox or steal the Judge's gun. Using the same pass key, she could have stolen the drugs from Dr. Barton's bag. He would have to ask the doctor to take inventory.

Dave wasn't out of the woods. It was his bow and arrow in the booby trap. It was his knife in the body. Would young Adam lie about his own role in the case in order to protect the man he wanted to become his father? Dave had access through the broken window to set up the bow arrangement. Only he had knowledge of the actual contents of the call he says was about fixing the window. That could have been a cover. Whether or not Dave would have used his own bow was open to speculation. Using it probably cast suspicion away from him since no one would use such an obvious choice of weapon when so many others, including the Judge's, were easily available. He could have stolen the gun at the same time of course, and also have planted the barbiturate – though the likelihood of his knowing about the pillbox was slim, unless he was conspiring with someone else.

He could have a double motive. His own, relating to the death of his parents and the fact that the Judge was apparently cutting off support from Adam – if he had somehow come to know about all of that. The way people seemed to listen in on each other's conversations around there made that a real possibility. Dave obviously loved the boy and although he might not have realized it yet, Masters felt sure he also loved Amy.

Fred's motive would have revolved around the changes in the financial arrangement. It seemed weak, but then, he did see himself as Amy's protector – almost a father-like protector. Back problems aside, Fred was still strong enough to have delivered the blow to the head and then engineered the dumping of the body.

Assuming Grace knew about her husband's extramarital activities – and Masters had no doubt that she did - she could have been moved to put a stop to it once and for all. She had access to the room and the pillbox. She could have easily taken the gun. She had knowledge of drugs and could have easily replaced the prescription drug with the barbiturates. Since she was in town at the time of the Judge's death, her use of the gun or otherwise being present at the death seemed unlikely. That left the drugs as her possible link to the death.

Dr. Barton had motive, if Dave's information had been accurate. It appeared he had divorced his wife over the affair with the Judge. Perhaps the next step was punishing the man. As a physician, he certainly had knowledge of and easy access to barbiturates. In fact, of all the suspects, he was the only one with easy, legal access. Could he have been the one who had broken in through the window? How would he have known about the pillbox? It was certainly a possible topic of conversation between a doctor and the Judge.

Masters had to wonder why Milly had pointed to Barton as a prime suspect. She had to have known something – a lot, actually. She also fingered Dave. Why? Milly, herself, seemed to have been trying to blackmail the Judge – would his total rebuff of her bid to do so have driven her to kill him rather than carry through on the blackmail threat? It hardly

gave her much time to plan. She had access to the room and gun and, like everyone else, she had opportunity. Perhaps she also had means and motive. Her true reason for being there at the lodge remained a mystery. Was she there to do a story or had she come specifically to extort the Judge? If it were a story, what story? The most obvious subject matter was the Gathering of Marksmen. It could make an interesting story, Masters imagined, but hardly fodder for the gossip sheet for which she wrote. Most certainly, he didn't trust her any further than he could throw her.

Then there were John and Evy. Their suspicious activities with the keys, which gave them opportunity to access the Judge's room, hardly proved motive. As Dr. Barton had aptly noted, the competition was cutthroat, but would John and Evy have done in the Judge just to win? John had seen the Judge several months earlier at the Gathering board meeting. Surely, he could tell the Judge's rapid physical deterioration would not allow him to be a serious contender anymore. There seemed to be no other obvious motive.

There was no doubt in Masters' mind that it had been the Judge's intention to commit suicide while at the lodge. Ironically, the apparent multitude of his eager killers may have just kept getting in his way.

At five before nine, Adam knocked at Masters' door.

"Come in, Master Adam."

"How'd you know it was me?" Adam asked, grinning as he crossed the room toward the window.

"First, it was a light rap and second it's time for pie. Who else would it be?"

On the way down to the dining room, Adam related that he and his mother had decided the money from John would be given to the United Fund. He seemed pleased that some of it would go to help kids in need. Thanks to his family there at the lodge, Adam had grown to feel thoroughly fortunate about his own life.

Once the pie was gone, so was Adam. Masters went in search of Milly. He found her among the Canasta players. At the conclusion of a hand, he motioned her to him. With some

reluctance and obvious uneasiness, she met him in the corner and took a seat across a low, round, magazine ridden table from the inspector.

“Milly, my dear, it’s time you begin playing things straight with me.”

“What do you mean, straight?”

“Milly, Milly, Milly. Let’s not play cat and mouse. Just level with me about who you are and why you’re here.”

“I’m sure I have no idea what you’re driving at.”

“How about blackmail and intent to commit murder, for beginners. Then there are the smaller matters of lying about your work reference, impersonating guests on the phone, and riffling my room.”

Milly sat frozen. The color left her face. She swallowed.

“I don’t know how you got on the wrong track but I assure you, your information is incorrect.”

“Milly, I called personnel at the hotel you gave as a work reference. I know you are a reporter for Gossip World. A third party overheard your conversation with the Judge on Sunday at the back of the meadow in which you threatened to expose him in your paper. I’m sure your prints will be on the books and the envelope in my room. You’re busted, Milly. I am suggesting that you tell me all you know about this case before the sheriff gets wind of it.”

Milly slumped back in her chair. A single tear dribbled across her light blue eye shadow and down her tastefully painted cheeks.

All right. I am a reporter. I came to do a story on the Gathering – an expose on the entire sick lot of hostile, aggressive, repressed people, which they are. I’ve been researching it for almost a year. I could have blackmailed any of a dozen of them. They are a despicable lot.”

“Unlike yourself, of course,” Masters added, editorially.

It provoked a sad, distant smile as Milly continued.

“The bottom line first. I didn’t kill the Judge, though heaven knows he needed killing. He cheated on his wife

almost every night for the past fifteen years but more importantly, he had an affair with Dr. Barton's wife two years ago. That's why Barton divorced her. But that's not even the juiciest bit, here. For ten years, the Judge and Evy have had an on again off again affair. The Judge promised Evy he'd leave Grace and marry her.

"A few months ago, he told her he had decided to stay with Grace. It made Evy furious. She went to Grace and told her all about it. John knew about it also, but chose not to mention it to Evy."

"So, that's why you included Barton in your list of suspects that first time we spoke."

"Right. You caught me off guard. It was a slip."

"But why Dave and not Evy or John?"

"I wanted Evy and John for myself. I knew about the Judge and Dave's parents. I figured that would provide a distraction for you."

"If what you're telling me is true, you're quite the investigator. Too bad you choose to use your skill to ruin lives rather than help them."

Evy moved uncomfortably in her chair, choosing to ignore the latter comment.

"It's true. I have it all well documented."

"It was my impression that Gossip World didn't require such iron-clad documentation."

"It doesn't. I was going after a story one of the big, legitimate papers would buy. You think I want to spend my life writing gossip for the country's sixth grade mentality? I'm good at what I do. I deserve better."

"If I may ask, how did you end up at Gossip World?" Masters asked, having agreed in essence with most of what she had just recounted about herself."

"Easy money. I sold out for easy money. Now, Mr. Masters, may I ask you something?"

"Seems only fair."

"How did you come to suspect me? Was it catching me leaving your room?"

“No. Actually, Adam had you figured out long before I arrived.”

“Adam! Amy’s little Adam? How?”

“Your educated tongue, Milly.”

“A very observant boy,” Milly said clearly impressed and somewhat ashamed of her oversight.

“Back to you, Milly. Your attempted blackmailing of the Judge was in regard to which of his several indiscretions?”

“Evy. What else would be that important?”

Masters was relieved. He had been fishing to find out if she knew about the relationship between the Judge, Amy and Adam. Apparently, that aspect of the Judge’s life had not come to her attention.

“In your opinion, Milly, what was Grace’s reaction to the Judge’s cheating?”

“She had known about it in a general way for a long time. I think she decided the money and position that came with being a Judge’s wife was worth more than pursuing the infidelity, so she looked the other way.”

“You don’t think she was angry about it?”

“Of course, she was angry. What wife wouldn’t be angry in that situation? She kicked him out of the bedroom years ago. I suppose that exacted some measure of retribution.”

“So, honestly, now, Milly, who do you think killed the Judge?”

“Honestly?” She thought for a moment. “Honestly, all I’m sure of is that it wasn’t me. He was hated by Evy, Grace, Dave, and Barton, and who knows how many other jilted lovers and their husbands.”

“That’s quite a line-up,” Masters said. “Makes my job rather difficult.”

“I suppose. If it had been the other way around, it would have been a far easier case.”

“The other way around?” Masters asked. “What do you mean?”

“If the Judge was about to kill someone and you had to determine who it was going to be.”

“I’m still not following you, Milly.”

“If the Judge were to have been planning to kill someone, it would have been Donny, the waiter.”

“Donny?”

“I overheard them talking on the deck Sunday afternoon. The Judge handed him an envelope and said it would be the last payment he’d be able to make. Donny looked disappointed – scared, even, I suppose. He raised his voice, though I didn’t catch what he said. He didn’t really express any anger but he turned pale and marched off toward the kitchen.”

“Was that all that was said?”

“One more thing, now that I look back on it. The Judge said, ‘If this isn’t enough, you and John will just have to do whatever you need to do, I guess.’”

“What do you think that means?” Masters asked.

“Not sure. It could mean that John and Donny had been blackmailing the Judge and the Judge had suddenly decided not to pay anymore.”

“Yes, that is certainly one way it could appear. Have you uncovered any relationship between John and Dave?”

“No. But then I hadn’t had any reason to be looking until that moment.”

“I suppose not.” Masters said thoughtfully, repeatedly smoothing his mustache with the fingers of his left hand.

“Is there anything else?” Milly asked.

“Not for the moment. Just don’t leave the county, you understand.”

Milly went directly to the front door and left. Masters sat back and reflected on the new information. He didn’t doubt the accuracy of Milly’s accusations. She was obviously both bright and thorough, and seemed genuine in her drive to lift herself out of the mire of her present employment.

Interesting, he thought, that she had not denied her

attempt to blackmail the Judge or ask who had overheard the conversation. Her pass key could have allowed her access to any room at virtually any time. She could have stolen Dave's bow, the Judge's gun and rigged the booby trap. She certainly had the guts to face down the Judge, but did she have the capacity to kill? Would she risk losing the story of her life to take meaningless revenge? Who knew?

And now there appeared to be Donny. Aside from Adam, he had been Masters least likely candidate for the murderer. The idea of a conspiracy between Donny and John was mind-boggling. Masters made another list.

Suspect	Motive
Grace	Years of stored up anger
Evyn to the Judge	Deceived about the possibility of marriage
Barton	Revenge for breaking up his marriage
Dave	For killing his parents
Amy	For cutting off payments and/or insurance
Milly blackmail	For not paying her the requested
John	The Judges affair with his wife, Evyn.
Fred Adam (and Dave if he had somehow found out about Dave's parents and the Judge.)	Self-appointed protector of Amy and
Donny	Motive still unclear unless the Judge had terminated a blackmail arrangement.
The Butler attention!)	(Just checking to make sure you're paying
Judge	If it had been suicide
Others sentenced	One of hundreds of felons the Judge had
	One of hundreds of jilted women and their husbands

That constituted a gathering of ten legitimate suspects

known to be present at the Lodge and who knew how many there might be in the 'others' category. Each had motive, means and opportunity.

Could it have been a conspiracy? John and Donnie? John and Evy? Dave and John? Dave and Fred? Dave and Amy? Fred and Amy? Evy and Grace (now there's an interesting possibility!) Milly and anybody? Dave, of course, had been in a position with the private detective to have learned more than he had revealed. He might have used that information to form some kind of alliance.

"Deputy Hobbs," Masters said, addressing the man from ten feet away as he approached the fingerprinting desk.

"Yes Sir, Detective. What's up?"

"Do you have a warrant to search the room of John and Evy Eagan?"

"Yes, Sir. Neatly folded and ready to serve."

"Let's serve it right now. I see they are at the canasta table."

Within minutes, the four of them and a print man were in the Eagans' room. While Hobbs attempted to look both official and knowledgeable in the bedroom, Masters headed directly to the bathroom. In a few minutes, he reappeared, motioning for the print man. Five minutes later they returned to the bedroom. Curiously, Masters made the rounds of the potted plants eventually finding something in the soil of one. With his back to the others, he bagged it and announced that he was ready to leave.

Hobbs seemed dumbfounded (an excellent, all-encompassing, genetic, description of the man) but left on cue behind the old detective. The Eagans remained in the room.

In the light at the end of the hall, Masters stopped and asked Burt, the print man, to make his best unofficial judgment about the prints. Using his recently completed print cards for comparison, he offered the obvious – "Looks like Milly, Cathy, Evy and one unknown. It could be one of the new one's we picked up this evening. I can't say."

"Do you have the Judges prints with you?" Masters asked.

“Yes, Sir.”

“Dollars to doughnuts, the unknown belongs to the Judge,” Masters said.

After the briefest comparison, Burt agreed.

Hobbs spoke: “Why would the Judge have taken a shower in the Eagan’s bathroom?”

It was not the question that needed to be asked, of course, but then, it had come from Hobbs.

“More importantly, Hobbs, how did the Judge’s prints get onto the shower curtain rod in the Eagan’s room?” Masters said, thinking out loud.

Hobbs, of course, thought he had just asked that question. Burt recognized the difference, but could formulate no better answer in light of it.

Masters had noticed a round rust spot on the ceiling over the tub. It was about the size of a half-dollar. There was a nearly identical mark in size and placement in the Judge’s bathroom.

“Deputy, grab some flashlights. We need to search the Judge’s van.”

After a brief stop at the patrol car for the flashlights and a new supply of evidence bags, Hobbs and Masters proceeded to the van, which was still under yellow-strip, police quarantine in the parking lot. Masters opened the side door – the spot where the Judge had last been seen alive. It reeked of alcohol and an empty bottle fell to the pavement as the door slid back. Hobbs flicked on the dome lights – a possibility Masters had overlooked.

“Looks more like a construction worker’s van than a Judge’s,” Hobbs noted, his second astute move in sixty-seconds. (Perhaps that was his quota for the day – case?)

The floor was sprinkled with chips of concrete. There was one sizable piece – the corner of a cement block.

“We’ll need to see if this chunk matches any of the blocks found with the body,” Masters said, feeling the need to point out the obvious to Hobbs.

Hobbs carefully bagged it. There was also a flat, foot

square box of electrical wire, its fresh appearance suggesting it had been recently purchased. Wire cutters lay on the floor beside it.

“Bag the wire cutters and have the remaining wire measured. Add to that figure the exact length of wire found with the body.”

“Yes, Sir! We’re really cookin’ now, aren’t we, Ray?”

Masters assumed it had been rhetorical.

“Check the wire cutters and box for prints especially the inside of the round cut-out where such boxes are often carried. Also, make a note to ask the lab boys what they found under the Judges fingernails.”

Hobbs made copious notes.

“Then, check that gunny sack for anything that might have been embedded in the fabric.”

“Were your lab boys able to identify the prints on the bullets in the gun?”

“I haven’t heard. We’ll have to ask Burt up at the lodge.”

The two men closed the van and went back inside. Burt was packing up his equipment. Hobbs asked the question. Burt searched through a file folder.

“Here’s a copy of the print but it wasn’t the Judges. That’s all we had to go on until we took all of these new prints this evening. We’ll need to just start making comparisons with all of them, I suppose.”

“Would you make a quick eyeball comparison of that print with those of John and Evy Eagan.”

Burt thumbed through his card file, pulling out the two sets of prints Masters had suggested. He dismissed the first set immediately. “Too small.” The second maintained his attention. He rotated the card. After a minute of careful consideration, he said, “I’ll bet your famous ‘dollars to doughnuts’ that these are the same, Mr. Masters.”

“John?” Masters asked, just to verify the obvious.

“Yes, Sir, John Eagan.

“Thank you, Gentlemen. You better go home and get some sleep. I think we can wrap this thing up tomorrow.”

Masters approached Fred’s office just as he was leaving for the day.

“Fred. I have one more, quick question for you.”

“Sure.”

“The shower curtain rods – are they ever moved from room to room?”

Fred seemed surprised by the question but offered a ready answer.

“Not since I’ve been here. Well, when I first arrived I had the idea to paint each one to match the color of the bathroom tile. Some of them had become rust pitted down through the years. They looked great for a year or so but then the paint gradually peeled off. That would have been the only time they have been removed from the rooms.

“Thanks, again, Fred. See you tomorrow.”

There was but one major piece of the puzzle missing. Masters felt confident that with the light of day he would be able to find it. In order to clear up one discordant detail, which nagged at him, Masters went to the dining room – again, in search of Donny. It was nearly closing time and the young man was dutifully refilling the salt and pepper shakers. Masters followed him from table to table as they talked, sipping on the coffee Donny had poured as he saw his old friend approaching.

“Donny. There’s one element in this case that doesn’t seem to fit for me and you seem to be the only one who can clear it up.”

“Me? Help you? Sure, if you think I can.”

“You were seen receiving an envelope from the Judge on Sunday afternoon. Part of that conversation seemed to be something about that being the ‘final payment’ and you and John Eagan – or at least someone named ‘John’ - were linked somehow. Can you fill me in on all that? If you were less the good guy and more the villain, it could seem suspicious to some.”

“Donny grinned as if relieved to hear what Masters had on his mind. That was quickly replaced by a serious, genuinely sad expression.

“Yes, I guess I can see how that might have looked and sounded. The first summer I worked here, the Judge found out that I was in pre-law and sort of adopted me. We really hit it off. It’s like we were good friends right from the start. He didn’t have any kids and I think he was at a point in his life where that was eating at him.

“Anyway, at the end of that summer – that was three years ago – he gave me an envelope with a sizable check in it. He insisted I keep it and set it aside for graduate school. Every summer since then, he’s done the same thing. It was an unusual arrangement. I’d earn my way through undergraduate school and he’d pay for my law degree.

“Sunday, he took me aside and pulled out an envelope. That was strange. I knew what it was, but always before he had come back down to the lodge in August to give it to me. He said pretty much what you reported. He said that something had come up and he was not going to be able to help me financially after this check. I tried to get him to let me help him – whatever was wrong. He wouldn’t say. I tried to give it back, saying if he needed the money he should keep it. I’d be fine.

“He looked at me in that commanding way he had about him. He just smiled back at me, patted me on the shoulder and left. It was the last time I spoke with him.”

“May I ask if it was a personal check?” Masters inquired.

“Yes. It always was.”

Donny took out his wallet and removed the check to show Masters. The Inspector raised his eyebrows.

“Wow! Twenty thousand dollars?”

“Yeah. Wow! The others had been ten.”

“And you’re carrying it around in your wallet? Wouldn’t it be wiser to put it in the safe in Fred’s office?”

“I suppose so. To be quite truthful, I haven’t thought

about it since the Judge died. It seems such a waste. I'm trying hard not to show it, but this whole thing has me really torn up inside."

"I can understand why. I had no idea you and he had been so close. Was Grace aware of the financial arrangement?"

"I really can't say. She always acted cold toward me but then I only ever saw her here in the dining room with the Judge and she always acted cold toward him, also."

"How does John Eagan fit into all of this, if it is John Eagan?"

"Yeah. It's John Eagan. The Judge introduced me to him that first summer. He's an investment banker and he has been managing my money for me. He's done so well with it, that I really don't need this twenty thousand for school. I've been thinking of maybe setting it aside for Adam's education. By the time, he's ready for it, John will have turned it into a fortune for him."

"Thanks for clearing that up. I think you'll find that Adam's education is already provided for. There are lots of other kids who need help, though. I'm sure you'll find one if you look. And, Donny, if I were you, I'd deposit that check in your account immediately. Who knows how Grace may react at a time like this. She may put a hold on all of the Judge's accounts."

"Okay. If that's what you think, I'll take care of it tomorrow in town. I keep a local checking account. Folks around here are leery about checks that originate more than twenty-five miles away."

"Oh. One more thing, Donny, then I'll quit bugging you."

"What's that?"

Donny looked puzzled.

"During your three summers here, how many salt and pepper shakers do you figure you've filled?"

It brought a smile to Donny's face - perhaps the first genuine smile since the Judge's death.

Masters reached for his wallet to pay for the coffee. Donny waved it off. He flashed the folded check as he prepared to place it back into his wallet.

“Let’s say this cup’s on the Judge. He’d have liked that.”

Masters raised his cup in toast.

“To our friend the judge.”

Donny drew his lips tight against their quivering and offered a quick, staccato, nod.

“To our friend the Judge.”

Masters solution of the case depended upon one final piece of evidence and he knew he’d not sleep until he was sure it was going to be available. Adam was poking at the dying embers in the fireplace – a task he seemed to have accepted as his nightly obligation.

“Adam,” Masters called, greeting the lad. “Is my Jr. Detective up to some important investigating tonight?”

The boy’s face beamed.

“Sure thing, Mr. M. What’s up?”

“We need to take another look at the dock. Can you rustle up a couple of really good flashlights?”

“Sure. Be back in a sec.”

He handed the poker to Masters and left. The old detective shrugged his shoulders and carried on with Adam’s nightly ritual. He found the activity surprisingly relaxing. Perhaps Adam had stumbled onto an excellent pre-bedtime activity.

Adam returned with two six-volt lanterns and they were off for the dock.

“What we lookin’ for, Mr. M?”

“It’s one of those times when I’m not sure how it will appear, but I’ll know it when I find it.”

Less secure lads might have feigned understanding so as to not appear dumb. Not Adam.

“I don’t understand but then I am just a Jr. Detective.”

He was quite serious so Masters contained his

amusement.

They arrived at the end of the dock. The skyline was still aglow with the lingering dusk, characteristic of that latitude at that time of year. Masters began examining the posts that extended three feet above the plank deck – one every four-feet around the perimeter. He illuminated every inch, leaning close as if authenticating some master painter’s canvas. Adam was soon similarly engaged.

“Here’s a cicada skin,” Adam offered. “I don’t suppose that’s what we’re after, though.”

“Close but no cigar,” Masters answered.

“Well, how about this, then?”

Masters moved to Adam’s side to examine his finding. It was on the corner pole near the top on the inside. The spot was freshly splintered and discolored from its usual, well-weathered, creosote black to rusty brown.

“Adam, my boy, you just earned a promotion to ‘Special Agent’.” Adam wasn’t sure what he had found or why it was significant, but the promotion was readily accepted. Master took out his pocketknife.

“Keep your light right on this area,” Masters said, as he carefully cut a single sliver from the pole. After carefully wrapping it in his handkerchief, they made their way back toward the lodge.

“So, that’s important stuff I found, huh?” Adam asked.

“Very important, if my hunch is right. We’ll know for sure after the lab boys have a go at it.”

They met Hobbs and the other deputies in the parking lot, making ready to leave for the day.

“Deputy Hobbs. I have one final piece of evidence here that I want your lab boys to analyze.”

“What should they look for?”

“Let’s let them just surprise us.”

Hobbs had no idea what Masters meant by that, but, unlike Adam, he pretended to understand.

“Oh. I see. Certainly. I’ll get it to them first thing in the

morning.”

Adam and Masters returned to the fireplace, each manning a poker until the last ember twinkled itself to sleep. It had been a quiet time together. Adam contemplated the possible ramifications of his new status as Special Agent. He felt the addition of a magnifying glass to his rear pocket was probably appropriate and perhaps a handkerchief for collecting evidence.

Masters relaxed in the satisfaction that he now knew who had killed the Judge and exactly what roles each of the other suspects had played. The next day would prove to be most interesting – it would be a sad occasion but it would bring the case to an end.

///

Chapter Five

Day Three: The Gathering of Killers

At precisely one o'clock, Donny, the last of the invited guests, arrived in the small meeting room off the South end of the lobby. Hobbs closed the French doors, pulling the shade its length in order to add some measure of privacy to the gathering.

The guests were seated in a double semi-circle of chairs facing a large wooden table. The usually warm room, tastefully decorated with American Indian artifacts and colorful wall hangings, suddenly took on a stark, ominous appearance.

The group easily divided into two demeanors – one eager, talkative, and relatively relaxed. The second was tense, quiet, and agitated. Amy, Fred and Dave sat on the front row next to the widows. The DA sat next to Dave on the isle. Dr. Barton, John, Evy, and Milly occupied the remainder of the front row. On the back row, Donny and Cathy sat together on one side with Grace the lone occupant of the other. Masters sat facing the group in a chair beside the Table. Adam had been intentionally spared the grizzly revelations of the get-together.

Deputy Hobbs strode from the door to the front of the room as if he were King of the Munchkins. He was wearing his dress blue uniform – coat too long, trousers too baggy, tie showing beneath his coat. (The highly-polished brass buttons were dazzling, however!) He placed his right hand into his jacket, Napoleon style, and gazed around the room as if preparing to launch an old-time, three hour, Sunday afternoon

oratory.

“Detective Raymond Masters will now present our findings in the case of the death of Judge George Geiger.”

Masters rose and Hobbs seated himself, mentally congratulating himself on his fine opening remarks, entirely pleased with how well they had been received.

“Thank you all for coming. I believe we know each other except perhaps for Martin Bates the District Attorney.”

He nodded toward Mr. Bates who raised one hand as if answering roll call.

“You have been asked here this afternoon to hear the resolution of the matter in which each one of us in this room has a significant interest – the death of George Geiger. While only one is responsible for the Judge’s death, there will be other charges filed. There are those among us who will be charged with theft, unlawful entry, extortion, bribery, interfering with a police investigation, public endangerment with the intent to murder, and two will be charged with attempted murder.

“There are several ways to reconstruct the events in this case. I have chosen to do so suspect by suspect. First, let me set the scene. Saturday afternoon the Judge and Grace arrived at Whispering Pines Lodge in two vehicles – their car driven by Grace and their van driven by George. John and Evy Eagan arrived at eleven a.m. Saturday morning followed by Dr. Barton at eleven-thirty. I arrived at noon. The rest were already here. Milly and Donny had begun work in early June as summer help and the others are permanent staff members.

“As Dave pointed out to me early on, George Geiger led two very different lives. One was as the respected, competent judge, social reformer, and compassionate human being. We will hear much about this admirable side of his character. The other, was that of an immoral, despondent being who had succumbed to alcoholism and had fallen into an adulterous life style. That was a kind of human being George abhorred. During the past year his downward spiral accelerated, propelled, I imagine, by his reaction to his failing health.

“He arrived here on Sunday with the full intention of killing himself but some of you, who apparently harbored hate in your hearts for him, kept getting in his way. He had several pieces of last minute business to attend to, first. He arranged a trust fund for Adam to insure the lad a college education and provided a substantial sum for him and his mother to live on. He established a similar arrangement for Donny and law school. To the end, George Geiger had not forsaken the good and benevolent side of his character. He fostered no ill will toward anyone – other than himself – and yet, through the years, he had provoked the legitimate anger and hostility of many people – the very ones he so wanted to have love and respect him.

“Let me begin with David Doogan. Twelve years ago George had killed Dave’s parents in a car accident. George had been intoxicated but the case was never brought to trial. That would seem to have given Dave motive. That fact that he appeared here at this time tended to give credence to that scenario. His knife was found in the body and one of his bows and one of his arrows were used to construct a booby trap designed to kill the judge. I will show how one of you, using that knowledge of Dave’s past, stole the bow and arrow and attempted to frame him for the murder.

“The matter of the knife in the body was an unfortunate coincidence. Adam had borrowed the knife from Dave without permission and later, in a fit of guilt, had thrown it away – into the lake – just after the Judge’s body had been deposited there. It severed an artery that could have been the cause the death had George not already been dead. This is a fact we must bring out. It is also a fact I hope none of you will ever be crass enough to pass along to Adam. Dave and Adam are innocent of any wrongdoing in this matter.

“Milly came here on a legitimate mission. She is a reporter and has been working on a story about the psychological make-up of the Gatherers, hoping to sell it to a major paper and move up the ranks to a more dignified place in the world of journalism. She found, however, that after all of her work, the piece was not salable. Most major papers had turned her down. She then took steps, which she thought

would at least turn it into a financially rewarding project. She attempted to blackmail the Judge about one or more of his past indiscretions. She had no way of knowing he was planning to end his life, so that her attempt would be meaningless to him.

“Milly, you are a talented investigative reporter. Unfortunately, along the way you crossed the line into the illegal arena. You are being charged with unlawful entry into a private domicile, attempted extortion and interfering with a police investigation. Perhaps the notoriety that will inevitably follow your arrest will be a boost to your career. If not, I am told you are a top-notch maid, so at least you won’t have to go hungry.

“Fred. The next time you go coonin’ and prick your finger on the club, just burn it, okay? You’ll save us all a lot of trouble. And, oh yes. When you choose to threaten a man’s life, have the good sense not to do it the presence of a policeman.”

Fred nodded. Amy squeezed his hand and smiled up into his face.

“The actual source of the suspected bludgeoning will be revealed momentarily.”

“Evy Eagan. It was actually an ingenious plan you had. You knew about the relationship between Dave and the Judge. You worked out both the conspiracy against Dave and the technical aspects of the booby trap with the cunning and expertise of a pro. Your motive, of course, was that the Judge told you he was ending his long-running affair with you. It enraged you. Not only did you want George, but you wanted to hurt Grace – your long-time rival here at the Gathering who so frequently managed to best you.

“You called Dave to fix the window you broke in 202 thereby assuring his fingerprints at a probable point of entry into the room. You stole his bow and arrow just after Adam left Dave’s room between five thirty and six. Using the shower rod from your own bathroom, you constructed the trap in your room while John was out for his walk, and took it down the hall to 205 at about six-fifteen. Earlier, you had opened that door

with the borrowed pass key and left it open. Grace's friend tells me it was you who suggested to her last month that she phone Grace and arrange for the overnight in town. This had been well planned, well in advance. You knew the height necessary for the arrow's trajectory to be heart-high when the judge opened the bathroom door. The cyanide on the tip of the arrow would have assured George's immediate death even if the arrow had missed his heart. You had arranged to procure the poison through one of your husband's clients, the owner of a pharmaceutical firm, in return for certain, - shall we say - intimate favors. He has stipulated to that.

"The rust spot on the ceiling in your bathroom was from the rusted end of your shower rod. You set it up there in order to construct it. Although you had wiped it clean of prints, you failed to wipe the one you brought back from 205 – it still had the Judge's prints on it. There is one interesting additional piece of evidence relative to the shower rod. The one from your room still had traces of aqua paint on it – matching the tile in your bathroom. The one from the Geiger's room had yellow – matching theirs.

"The clincher, I suppose, if one were really needed, was the end of the dowel rod that had been used as part of the booby trap. I wondered where it might have been hidden. It was too large to flush down the stool. It might have been found if thrown away in the waste basket. It wasn't something you wanted to have found on your person so you couldn't risk pocketing it and tossing it away in the woods. Assuming it hadn't left your room, I searched for a hiding place. I found it stuck into the soil of one of the potted plants. Anyone might have planted it there, so to speak, but it did have your prints all over it, Evy.

"You will be charged with conspiring to damage the good name and innocence of David Doogan, endangering the life of a police officer and with public endangerment with the intent to commit murder."

"Grace Geiger. Your involvement is perhaps the saddest for me to have to relate. Having reached your emotional limit with George, you decided to kill him. An overdose of barbiturates was your choice of weapon.

Somehow you procured them – we are investigating your last visit as a volunteer at the hospital. It happens to coincide with the date that barbiturates were found missing from their pharmacy. The suicide note you wrote was the only one of the three that mentioned a cowardly but peaceful manner of ending his life. The only peaceful attempt on his life had been the drugs. That seems to tie that note to Grace.

“To cast the burden of guilt away from yourself, you visited Amy – someone you knew also had knowledge of drugs. While she was in the kitchen arranging the flowers at your insistence, you slipped a bookmark into her pharmacology book at the barbiturate page. Knowing me to be a thorough investigator, you felt sure her library would not go unexamined.

“The barbiturate pills were the correct color to substitute for one of George’s medicines but they were considerably too big around. So, with a knife, you pared them down around the edge, catching the powder residue from the process in a plastic bag. Some of that powder clung to the pills and later was deposited in the compartment of the pillbox. It was the same residue you were flushing in your bathroom when Cathy walked in on you and the same from the fingerprint you left on the bathroom door as you stormed out. You chose a medium acting form of the drug so it wouldn’t put him into a coma immediately. You wanted him far away from the room when he collapsed and died. Knowing his evening ritual of walking the hills from seven until ten, you felt certain he would collapse in the woods and be found there.

“Grace, you will be charged with conspiring to damage the good name and innocence of Amy Anderson and with the attempted murder of George Geiger. He died before the drug had time to take effect.”

John Eagan stood up.

“Okay. I admit it. I shot him and I’m not sorry. I did us all a favor. The Judge was a scoundrel. We all wanted him dead. Many of us, apparently tried to kill him. I succeeded and I’m not sorry.”

Masters spoke.

“John, please take your seat. It is at this point that the plot becomes a bizarre entanglement of intention, miscalculation, and coincidence. I have no doubt that you intended to kill the Judge. I have no doubt that you have been carefully planning the murder for many months. You typed one of the three suicide notes on his typewriter when you were at his office for the meeting of the Gathering planning committee. It was technically perfect but personally flawed. Among other things, the Judge never called his wife ‘Grace’. It was always ‘Gracie’. He never signed his name with an ‘A’ in the middle – it was always ‘Allen’. It failed to deal with his deteriorating health. The note was an obvious fake. Since John and Grace were probably the only two who had access to the typewriter and since Grace would never have made the errors in that note, it had to have been the work of John.

“On Saturday afternoon, John bought a chocolate shake and poured it outside the door of the room at the end of the hall. He then called for the maid to clean it up and went to borrow the key, feeling sure she would just give it to him while she worked to clean up the spill. He let himself into the Judge’s room, took the gun, re-locked the door and returned the key to Cathy.

“At some point, he loaded the gun with his own bullets – his prints being the only ones on them. Had the judge – or anyone else – loaded the gun using bullets borrowed from John, either their prints would have been on them or all prints would have been wiped clean. So, John, even without your admission, you were the only suspect in the shooting.

“When you tried to bribe Adam into saying you had gone up the back stairs - the path you needed to prove you had taken in order to substantiate the story you told me about noticing the spill at room 210 – you only cast more suspicion onto yourself.

“I now need to backtrack just a bit. The Judge had been roaming the hills he so loved most of the day. Sometime between one and two, Monday morning, the Judge was finally ready to kill himself. He took his daily dose of pills in order to steady his hands. He had carried them with him in an envelope and downed them with the better part of a fifth of

vodka. He had brought the cement blocks and wire with him from his home and had carefully planned just how to make it work. One at a time, he carried the blocks from his van to the end of the dock in the gunnysack. The pieces of the cement blocks embedded in the sack and under his nails tend to verify that. He had pre-cut the wire into three, carefully measured pieces and carried them to the dock on his final trip. He weighted the sack with a stone and tossed it into the lake. Why, we probably will never know for sure. Perhaps just to get rid of the sack so as not to attract the attention of anyone. Who knows?

“There at the end of the dock, in the dark of the moon, he methodically tied one cement block securely to each ankle. Then, he secured one end of the longer piece to each of the remaining two blocks. Forming a loose loop at the center of that length of wire he placed it around his neck. He shoved the four blocks near the front edge of the dock about four feet to the left of the right-most wooden post.

“It was at that time that John approached him. You had probably been searching for him for some time, John, and spotted him on the dock by chance, I assume. George was facing toward the lake ready to take his final plunge when you announced yourself and your intention to kill him. You brandished the gun. George was not about to be beaten out of this suicide which he had planned and which he felt he deserved and was, therefore, obliged to carry out. The Judge was still, in his own way, a man of honor.

“He bent over at the waist preparing to lunge into the water. It was then – just as George bent over - that John pulled the trigger. The bullet entered George’s back and the trajectory followed a straight path up toward his shoulder. The pain caused George to lunge to one side, hitting his head on the post and causing the abrasion with wood splinters on his forehead. His momentum then pulled the blocks with him into the water. The wire drew tight around his neck strangling him. A few minutes later, when the poorly attached wire on the final block came loose, it released its strangle hold on his neck and allowed the air in his lungs to be released and water to flow inside them. I assume it was the final wire that he had

secured poorly, since, by that time the combination of the barbiturate and alcohol would have been severely impairing his coordination and strength.

“John, you will be charged with impeding the investigation of a crime, bribery, conspiring to involve a minor in a crime, and attempted murder.”

“The official cause of death, then, was suicide by strangulation.”

///

Epilogue

With the accused parties removed from the premises, the competition finished. It would never be quite the same. A newcomer won. No one remembers his name. The Judge was buried in a nearby cemetery close to the place he had loved so much. The Little Theater production went off without a hitch and Masters was there to enjoy it with his friends.

Dr. Barton returned to his practice in Buffalo and the folks at the lodge never heard from him again. It was rumored that Milly, who was given probation, became a reporter for a small-town paper in New Mexico. Her new byline reads Cathy Masters – not a bad choice of names if she's truly trying to rebuild her life. Grace, Evy and John were all convicted and sentenced to varying lengths of time behind bars.

Fred still hasn't learned how to think before he speaks but hasn't been heard to threaten anyone in public for some time. Just before giving Amy away at a recent wedding, however, he was heard to tell Dave – goodheartedly, of course – that if he ever gave his bride cause for sorrow, he'd break every bone in the young man's body. Dave's ever smiling new son, Adam, seconded that admonition.

Adam asked to know the identity of his natural father and seemed pleased at what he learned. He regularly visits the Judge's grave and keeps him up to date on his activities and dreams for the future- a lot like what went on between them at I-hop.

Donny is in law school and still returns summers to

Whispering Pines Lodge. It is the place where his best friends make their home. He hopes to set up practice in the nearby village when he graduates. (After all, he already has a checking account there!) He and Dave have been appointed co-executors of the Judge George Geiger Trust Fund For Crime-Orphaned Children.

Raymond Masters now returns several times a year when he is not otherwise involved in new and mystifying cases. He came close to actually going fishing once but opted for a piece of banana cream pie instead. On the occasion of each dark of the moon, he is reminded of Cathy and has to wonder if there will ever be another case with so much bewildering evidence as there was in *The Gathering of Killers*.

The End