

NEW FROM GARRISON FLINT

**THE CASE OF THE
CONFOUNDING CODE**

**AND FIVE OTHER SHORT
RAYMOND MASTERS
DETECTIVE MYSTERIES**

Story One: The Case of the Confounding Code

Story Two: The case of the Diabolical Darts

Story Three: Henry Will Die

Story Four: Case of the Gargoyle Murder

Story Five: And Then There Were None

Story Six: The Case at 1313 Harbor Pier Road

**The Case of the
Confounding Code**
and *five* other short
Raymond Masters Detective Mysteries

BOOK FIFTEEN

by

Garrison Flint

The Family of Man Press

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THE STORIES

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**Story One:
The Case of the Confounding Code
A Short Raymond Masters Mystery
By Garrison Flint**

On a comfort scale from one to ten, flying easily came in at a minus 37 for Raymond Masters. Having his considerable bulk cooped up in an executive jet for a ten-hour flight with a motley group of relatively mute strangers ranked no higher. He looked around.

“I’m just too old for this,” he said under his breath.

At any rate, there he was, settling into what turned out to be fairly comfortable and roomy seat with a book manuscript on his lap – one in which his good friend Gary Flint had just finished recounting one of the old detective’s recent cases. Masters allowed him to write about them so long as he retained veto power over the man’s tendency toward flamboyance and embellishment.

He had taken a seat toward the rear of the cabin to project the reassuring illusion of a more spacious enclosure than was actually the case. Resting his eyes, he removed his reading glasses and glanced from occupant to occupant.

There was Frankie Arteri, renowned as a safe cracker in safe cracking circles – service for hire, now in his mid-seventies, slight of build, nervous in appearance, spoke in a high, raspy voice, hence his nick name, Squeaky.

Wilton James, disbarred judge, with alleged – though never proved – ties to organized crime. Many a mob boss walked out of his courtroom a free man. He continued to live very well on Long Island.

Oren Smith, bespectacled, rotund, CPA. Though never convicted, he had been accused of misdoings on more than one occasion. Reportedly, he could – can – cook books so it is impossible to discover irregularities. He lived in a spacious condo overlooking Central Park.

Tommy Davis, defense attorney of local note in the New Jersey area. He was not particular about whom he defended so long as they could pony up his exorbitant fees ahead of time. A money back guarantee was implied but had never been used.

Gerald Cranston, successful, if controversial, banker, recently took what was reportedly a 250-million-dollar golden parachute offered for the undisguised purpose of getting him and his marginal reputation out of the bank's hair. He amassed a half billion-dollar personal fortune from salary, bonuses, options, and investments. He recently moved from NYC to Miami Beach.

Their host for the flight – though not present on board – was Neville Nash, a self-made Internet billionaire, living in Southern California. His rapidly expanding on-line healthcare product company was a rising star in business circles. His most recent diet book topped two million in sales – copies, that was. Far more in dollars. He had summoned each of the men on board to an allegedly important meeting – touted to be “a matter of life and death’ – his exact words.

It was interesting, Masters thought, that he could remember even that much about his fellow passengers – a group of supposed strangers. He had to wonder about the connections – each one with the others and each one with Neville Nash. Neville had arranged transportation for each to Atlanta where they boarded his private plane for the cross-country flight together to his sprawling villa. Each had been promised a substantial sum of money for his participation.

It was clear the man had good information about Masters – lured to the meeting by the prepayment of one hundred thousand dollars to one of the old detective's favorite children's charities. Virtually nothing else – particularly money for himself – could have coaxed him away from his retirement cabin in Rossville, New York – well a seven-course dinner at the Ritz, perhaps, or an invitation to the 4th birthday party of

his godson. Masters had never met Neville and only after the fact had he researched the man. Why he had been included in this poorly defined romp across the country remained a mystery.

The flight attendant, a young man answering only to Charles, kept food and drink (specifically, non-alcoholic) available. He had announced that there were to be three meals as well.

Masters donned his glasses and returned to his reading.

One hour into the flight Charles wheeled a cloth-draped food cart to the center of the cabin and returned to Masters with an envelope.

“From your host, Sir,” he announced in his New York City contaminated English accent. “It is to be opened at this juncture in the flight, if you will.”

Charles was in his late twenties. The brief interchanges Masters had enjoyed with him suggested an educated young man – more than expected of someone occupying that particular position there on the plane.

Masters opened the sealed, legal length, envelope, which bore only his name on the outside. He removed a single sheet. At the top were listed the names of the passengers, including, oddly Masters thought, the two pilots and Charles.

Sirs:

This is to inform you of your pending doom. In precisely seven hours and ten minutes, when the plane will be over the desert, an on-board bomb – examine the food cart – will explode. It may explode sooner, of course, if you misstep in your attempts at disarming it. I am nothing if not a good sport. One clue is provided that could save your lives. Brilliant as you each are in your own field, I’d speculate that you have about a one in one thousand chance of surviving. Talk among yourselves if you are interested in why I have selected the lot of you for this high-altitude execution.

“Get the attention of the others, please,” Masters requested of Charles. “Then help me out of this seat.”

Those things done, Masters explained the arrival of the note and read it aloud. There were furrowed brows. Heads turned as each looked to take stock of the others. Masters made his way to the cart where he and Charles carefully removed the cloth covering.

There sat a black, metal, box – 12 by 12 inches in the horizontal dimensions and 8 in the vertical. Masters understood that if filled with even a low-grade plastic explosive it was enough to instantly make dust of the small plane. Curiously, there was a large, brass, dial, on the box – one that might be expected on a heavy duty, high quality, office safe. Since the box was welded shut along all seams, the dial clearly had some purpose other than opening it. Initially, it seemed, nothing was going to be left to the imagination. On a small metal plate was an arrow pointing at the dial. It was a label of sort: Turn dial appropriately to disarm. There were two additional attachments on the box. One was a mercury switch in a clear, glass, vial, which, if the box were to change position even to a minor degree from the way it sat, an electrical connection would be made, which would most likely detonate the bomb. Masters thought the second appeared to be an altimeter. He would have the pilots confirm that. Its purpose would be to set off the bomb once the plane descended to some specific altitude – say 20,000 or 10,000 feet. It was probably also what activated the triggering mechanism that turned it all on once the plane had reached a certain height. Inside it, out of sight and out of reach, would be a timer of some sort – probably digital since Masters had detected no ticking when he placed his ear to the casing. That would be the pre-set trigger if the plane were to make it as far as the desert.

A second envelope was taped to the top of the box. Inside was a second sheet of paper. It contained a hand-written limerick-like verse:

There once was a fellow, Mike Romeo,
Who weighed 2-3-5 just a day ago,
 In years, 7-2,
 7-1 height will do.
It's two-two-one, Bravo, Mike Romeo.

Masters explained the contents and read it aloud.

“Does any of that make sense to anybody?”

Heads shook as puzzled; agitated, looks washed across the sea of faces. Masters made his way to the cockpit and briefed the pilots on the situation. They understood the mechanics of the circumstances but the written clues made no sense to either of them. One accompanied Masters back to the cabin and examined the box confirming that the second gadget was an altimeter. He theorized that it was most likely linked via a radio transmission system to a detector on the outside of the plane. The constant level of air pressure maintained inside the cabin would render a strictly mechanical device inaccurate. It had been placed there more as a warning that the plane dared not be landed in an attempt to allow the occupants to disembark safely prior to the announced time of detonation.

Clearly there was only one way out – deactivate the bomb using the clues Neville had provided.

“Any of you know Neville well?”

Shoulders shrugged and again heads shook.

“Do any of you have a good idea why you have been invited on this execution excursion?”

There were more of the same reactions. Some tugged at their collars and others squirmed in their seats.

“Anyone think of even a remote connection you may have to Neville or his business?”

Oren Smith, the CPA, raised his hand as if in a grade school classroom. Masters nodded, not allowing time to enjoy his amusement.

“He’s a web-based diet and health company, correct?”

“That’s what I understand. Anybody have additional information about that?”

No response. Oren continued.

“Four years ago, I completed what might be called a ‘creative audit’ of a similar company. My ‘work’ kept it alive long enough to shore up its place in the health product industry. Otherwise it would have surely failed.”

“And its failure would have given Neville a significantly larger share of the market?”

“Oh, my yes! The company I helped now has a six percent share of that market, nationally. That may seem insignificant but it grossed nearly three hundred million dollars last year. Not an insignificant inroad into what could have been Neville’s, I suppose.”

“That would seem sufficient to put you on his black list and on the plane manifest for such a flight as this. Perhaps that’s what this is all about. Think, men. For what reasons might each of you also be included on such a hit-list?”

The defense attorney, Tommy Davis, spoke, directing an odd glance toward Wilton James, the ex-judge.

“Five years ago, I defended a man with alleged Mafia connections. It was alleged that he ran an illegal, US targeted, internet, pharmacy out of Uzbekistan, a former Russian state. I’m sure such a business would also provide extraordinary competition for Neville.”

The judge continued the line of thought.

“The case was heard in my court. A bench trial. He was acquitted over what the Justice Department called a massive amount of evidence suggesting his guilt. My verdict was, of course, based on the perfect defense Mr. Davis and his colleagues presented, although some of my personal distractors believed I had orchestrated a miscarriage of justice for personal gain. I suppose that could have put both of us on such a list.”

“Indeed, it could have. Does that man’s business continue?”

“You mean the man’s alleged business, don’t you, Mr. Masters,” Davis said.

“With less than eight hours to live if we don’t get this thing solved, it appears to me, Mr. Davis, that none of us has the luxury of playing word games. Yes or no, please?”

“Yes.”

“Three connections down and six to go if we include the pilots and Charles,” Masters said consulting his pocket watch at arm’s length. “Charles. How do you come to be here?”

“I’m a PhD candidate in bio-research at Columbia. I’ve worked as a waiter in upscale restaurants since I came to the US as a teenager to support my college education, here. A good waiter can make four times as much as a lab assistant or

TA makes. I'm registered with a catering service for extra gigs. Last week I got a call about this one. Pays five thousand dollars for less than one full day of easy work. I jumped at it."

"What is your academic specialty?"

"The immune system – specifically, ways to genetically bolster it. I work with Dr. Balaka Fornesti, the world's leading researcher in the area. Unfortunately, he has cancer and only months to live."

"Who is heir apparent to continue his research?"

"I guess that will be I once the dissertation is finished and published."

"And bolstering the immune system will result in what – in twenty or fewer very simple words?"

"Dozens of medicines and herbal supplements now being sold will no longer be needed – sought - purchased. I see, now. I suppose that's why I've been invited to this affair – my demise will significantly set back that research. Geez! Suddenly five grand seems so unimportant."

Masters turned to Frankie Arteri, the safe cracker.

"Mr. Arteri. Any connections come to mind for you?"

"I've provided significant services for so many marginally legitimate employers during my career that I can't begin to find a place to start."

His response may have reflected the facts but it smelled like fear for his life to Masters.

"The past five years. That seems to be the general time-line that is evolving, here. Give! Now!"

"Okay. I did a major job for Mr. Nash several years back. I hope this is off the record in case we live, you know?"

"My memory is absolutely terrible, Frankie," Masters said and I just imagine the same goes for the rest."

Everybody nodded. Several agreed out loud, urging him on. Frankie proceeded.

"It involves, you, Mr. Cranston."

"Cranston straightened and cocked his head, leaning forward to listen."

"I got few details beyond my specific assignment, but the bottom line is that my take was a tidy sum for liftin' about twenty pounds of securities and bearer bonds from a account

– my interest in which included several safe deposit boxes – which was under the supervision of Mr. Cranston. They was worth several hundred mil. It took me three months to work out the set up but I got ‘em.”

Cranston swallowed hard and added more information confirming the story.

“Those securities were to be used to purchase a significant share in Proto Pharmaceuticals for one of my bank’s larger clients. Even though its long-term prospects were bright, Proto was going under and needed the capital infusion to hold on just long enough. Rather than allowing the bank to be embarrassed about the breach in security or undergo a federal investigation, I covered the loss from several sources, including some from my personal account. The new stock issue was purchased according to plan and nothing was ever made public about the theft.”

“What happened to the securities,” Masters asked, turning toward Frankie?”

“The bearer bonds among the take have made for a grand retirement fund, Mr. Masters.”

“Did Neville understand what had happened,” Masters asked?

“Actually, no. I assured him, with samples, that I had procured the merchandise but since the aforementioned financial transaction went ahead as scheduled and the theft was never reported, he wasn’t convinced.”

“It sounds like you may know Neville better than any of us. Can you think of anything else about him that could help here?”

“My meetin’ with him to conclude our initial arrangement was in Atlantic City. He was doing quite well on that day in some National Cryptogram Contest or Tournament or some such thing. I believe he may have even won in the end. I really don’t know nothin’ more.”

“So, he is a dyed-in-the-wool puzzle fanatic. Combine that with his obviously competitive personality, and apparent penchant for revenge, and this is what we get – a personally constructed, life or death, puzzle for us to solve, or not, at 30,000 feet.”

“He came in second, actually,” came a comment from

the cockpit. The father of my partner up here won that year.”

Masters finger-combed his oversized mustache.

“Your father still alive, Sir,” he asked, raising his voice to make sure he was heard through the door that had been intentionally left open.”

“Yes, he is. At 75 he no longer competes but he doesn’t miss a day decoding something. As his only child, I visit him several times a week, work permitting.”

“So, you may be here as a sacrificial lamb to tear your father’s life apart – the most horrific sort of act of revenge. What about the other pilot? Any connection with puzzling, Sir?”

“Not really,” came the other man’s reply. Jeff and I work as a team for hire – only as a team. That’s most likely why I’m along.”

“Sorry, pal.”

“Who could have known?”

It had been a private exchange in the cockpit but was overhead by everyone.

Masters brain had been at work.

“We could characterize the lot of us as puzzle solvers – Frankie solving the combinations, Wilton and Tommy sorting truth from fiction in court rooms, Oren solving the mysteries of accounting, Gerald – well, banking is clearly a mystery to most of us, Charles unraveling the puzzles deep within our DNA, and me a solver of criminal mysteries – usually murder mysteries. In this case, I suppose, that must involve solving the mystery prior to the occurrence of our murders, here. He has us loaded in here on two counts – we done him wrong and we pose a challenge to him – a contest of wits.”

“What’s your wrongdoing toward him,” Charles asked?

“I’ve been scratching my grey matter. I still don’t know. I put a man named Nash away for murder back in the old days when I was still a neophyte on the force. A relative, maybe? It’s all I have. Charles, I imagine you are a whiz at doing web-based research. Whose laptop may he borrow? Let’s see if he can find information about that old Nash case. It may or may not be important but we can’t know that without looking into it.”

Tommy had the best set up – direct paths into all things

legal. He and Charles got to work at a table up front.

Masters addressed the others.

“Put your thinking hats on, gentlemen. We have a puzzle to solve. In the first place, he chose to deliver the clue as a Limerick – generally considered a lower form of poetry and at best, whimsical, rather than serious, in nature. Truth be told, this one is structurally flawed in numerous ways. Clearly the specific content is more important than being true to the poetic form. It’s as if he’s putting us down right from the beginning – demeaning us and lessening our importance. That probably fits his ego-driven, have to win, personality type.”

“Perhaps a ploy to intimidate us – make us tense, defensive, and mentally inefficient,” the judge suggested.

They had been points well taken. Masters nodded his agreement and took a seat, center cabin, then perused the limerick, thinking out loud as he went.

“The hyphens between the digits appear to be more for the sake of maintaining poetic meter than anything else. 2-3-5 condenses two hundred and thirty-five down from seven syllables to three – a great convenience in verse. If that is so, the 2-3-5 becomes 235; age 7-2 becomes 72; and, 7-1 becomes a height of 71 – seventy-one whats? Inches perhaps, certainly not feet. As it is written, 7-1 could refer to someone who is seven feet one inch tall, a fairly appropriate and svelte match to the weight of 235 pounds, I imagine. But I’m quite sure that once a convention was set – needing for us to remove the hyphens – he would stick with it. A good puzzler recognizes the necessity for internal consistency. The final set of numbers he spells out – two, two, one. That seems to set them aside as different in some way from the others – perhaps telling us they must be dealt with in a special manner or they have a different base of reference. Think on that one, men.”

He continued.

“So, what do we have using those assumptions? A man, he refers to as Mike Romeo who, yesterday – or sometime in the past – weighed 235 pounds and was either seven feet one inch tall or 71 inches tall – that would be five feet eleven inches. For what it may be worth, those were my

weight and height as of yesterday. It misses my age by seven years – I'm flattered but because of that inconsistency I doubt if there is any connection with my personal stats. He would have had access to my exact age if it were important, you can count on that. It is possible, of course, that my actual age would have in some way messed up the essence of the puzzle or its solution. Hmm.

"Does anybody have a starting point for working on that last line: It's two, two, one, Bravo, Mike Romeo. The structure set up by the sequence of the words and punctuation suggests that Mike Romeo is getting kudos – the Bravo – regarding the two, two, one thing."

"The second 'two' would be spelled wrong but it could be a score; 2 to 1 and Mike was the winner, therefore the Bravo," Oren suggested.

"Interesting. Probably not a spelling error Neville would make unless it served some purpose. Perhaps he is suggesting oral over visual clues. Let's move away from that. Over-think is not going to be our friend this day."

"It seems to me that the combination of weight, height, and age, must be significant or there would have been no need to specify those were the things the numbers referred to."

That had been the judge's observation.

"Excellent, point," Masters said. "Where could that take us?"

There was silence all around. Presently Charles had some news.

"Doug Nash, someday to be the uncle of still unborn Neville Nash. You collared him for a bank robbery and the murder of two guards and a policeman during his get-a-way attempt. No wonder you didn't have a connection tucked away in those legendary synapses of yours. Neville didn't yet exist. And here's even a clincher, maybe. Doug's middle name was Neville – A namesake tends to make blood run thick – an old English proverb I just made up."

Masters appreciated the boy's attempt at humor even though it seemed to pass over the heads of the others. A wink telegraphed his reaction.

"Okay, then. We've apparently, all been included here

for the same general reasons. Now, let's get this thing solved."

Again silence. One of the pilots broke it.

"You know, and this may be out in left field, but the international distress alphabet uses those three names: Bravo for B, Mike for M, and Romeo for R."

"I thought Baker stood for B and Roger for R," Masters questioned."

"They used to – back in the old days prior to the mid-1950s, Sir. It has been upgraded since then for more clarity and less possible confusion."

"I and my generation stand corrected and good thinking, by the way. Let's brainstorm on the three letters: B, M, R."

It was the banker.

"Two things pop right into an investors mind: BioMed Reality Trust, a New York Stock Exchange, real estate company, and then a smaller firm – BMR Fabrication, Inc. They make carbon fiber drive shafts and such. I'm not sure what the BMR stands for in the latter case – owner's initials, perhaps."

"I'm sure Neville is probably an investor but where do either of those lead us? How can they seem helpful?"

More silence.

Masters moved his fingers to his mustache. It was an automatic response when his brain began rapidly congealing bits and pieces of evidence or information into useful possibilities. He started nodding, slowly.

"I may just have a part of all this although I don't know where to go it with it for the final solution. Hear me out. Neville is in the health products business and has, himself written at least two books about dieting. What is the new, basic, standard for all dieting programs?"

Again, shoulders shrugged, and brows furrowed.

"The Basal Metabolic Rate and it is figured using a person's weight, height, and age. Charles, Google us the formula for figuring it."

Responding to the unexpectedly up-to-date 'Google' reference, the others turned and looked at Masters in surprise.

"What? I'm ancient not uninformed."

The old detective smiled and leaned back in his seat closing his eyes.

"I believe it goes: $BMR = 66 + (6.23 \times \text{weight}) + (12.7 \times \text{height}) - (6.8 \times \text{age})$. Better check it out for sure."

It was only a moment later.

"Right on Mr. Masters. You nailed it, Sir," Charles said clearly impressed. "So, now that we have it what do we do with it?"

"Figure the BMR from the information supplied in the limerick."

Oren, the accountant, beat the rest of the field by five lengths.

"The weight component comes to 1480.5. The height component is 901.7. The age component is 4892.6. Combining them according to the formula we get 1892.6."

"So, what in the bad word, bad word, do we do with it now that we have it," Charles asked?

The young man's demeanor was no longer that of the calm, well bred, English gentleman presented earlier.

"We look at it in some unique way that will save our hides," Masters said.

"We still haven't factored in the two-two-one information," the judge pointed out.

"I have a thought – info, really – for whatever it may be worth," Frankie offered. "That dial on the box uses a three tumbler, three number combination – some number to the right, then left past the first number stopping at a second number, and then back right. If the BMR answer contains the numbers we need, then there are two, too, many single digits."

"Well, gentlemen, let's see if anybody has a better idea than this," Masters began. "We have, as Frankie pointed out, five numerals. We need some method of splitting 18926 up into three combination numbers: It could be 1 right, 89 left, 26 right, or 18, 9, 26 and so on if we clump the digits into groups – far too large a number of possibilities for us to chance the odds by just rolling the dice. Here may be where the two-two-one comes into play. He may be telling us that the first combination number is made up of the first Two numerals – that would be 18 to the right. The second set of Two numerals would be 92 left. That leaves the last One numeral by itself as

6 right. The combination would therefore become R 18, L 92, R 6.”

Earlier, one of the pilots had passed through the cabin and entered the tail section, which housed the rest room and bunk area. He returned.

“I just checked the parachutes. They had been in place fifteen minutes before you all came on-board – I checked them myself – but now they are gone. I had figured we could jump, even though from this height we could count on some possibly severe injuries among such amateurs. Still, it would have offered better odds than staying on board when the bomb exploded. That’s no longer an option.”

“Could we speed the plane up to its maximum and then toss the bomb out the door and be away from it before it explodes,” Gerald asked?

“Not a chance,” Masters said. “Well, maybe that one in a thousand Neville gives us. Most likely the mercury switch would be triggered on the way to the door. If not on the way, then it would certainly occur there in the terrible turbulence experienced at an open door at this speed and height. It’s just not an option.”

“So, I guess we go with the BMR thing,” the pilot said.

The others looked at each other and then, as if by plan, all heads turned toward Frankie, the safe cracker. Masters voiced the unspoken general consensus.

“Frankie, you’re the one among us with the steady fingers on a dial such as this. I believe we just elected you to do the honors.”

“I’m going to make a suggestion at this point,” Masters went on. “If you have loved ones, take a few minutes and give them a call or email or whatever right now. I assume the pilot’s communications are all being monitored by Neville so somebody needs to alert the authorities by some other means about the situation and about Neville’s obvious involvement.”

The judge took that responsibility. Ten minutes later the time had come. There were so many points along the way where the theory could fall apart. Masters had taken the time to revisit each step and still believed they had formulated the best solution given the information and the situation. Neville was a serious puzzle person. He would have set up a series

of invariable parameters within which he would have worked. Nothing would be random or chance. The kinds of data fit into the formula – one with which he was undoubtedly intimately familiar and clearly believed his guests would not be. If there were a misstep it would have been in the use of the ‘two-two-one’ in the last line of the limerick. He mulled over the several other possibilities.

Instead of the twos representing pairs of adjacent numerals they could mean every second – every other – numeral. Would it begin with the first or skip immediately to the second? In that case the first combination number might be 19 but then where to begin the second. Continuing in sequence the 2 would be skipped and the 6 would be selected. With the initial 1 already used it would leave the 8. No! That reeked of uncertainties and was far too complicated and convoluted. Neville was used to writing for the masses so he would have utilized a simple, to the point, relatively obvious approach. At least that’s what the old detective was betting their lives on.

“It’s time my good fellow,” Masters said hand to Frankie’s shoulder.

Frankie nodded and stood. He moved to the box, rubbing the fingertips of his right hand against the rough surface of his sweater – as if right out of an old black and white, B movie from the 1940s; who knew?

“I need to be held completely immobile. I must not move. Two of you better find ways of securing me so the effects of the plane’s slightest buffeting won’t cause my fingers to falter.”

The lawyer and the judge were immediately on their feet and worked for several minutes devising what seemed like the most stable support arrangement. Presently the two established their positions and nodded that they were ready.

Masters called forward to the pilots.

“We’re about to do it. Keep this old ship to a steady course, guys.”

Everyone held their breath. Most closed their eyes. With the care and precision of the master he was, Frankie reached out and gently placed the long, slender, fingers of his aging hand on the dial.

* * *

By the time they landed in California, Neville Nash was in federal custody on terrorism charges, among others. Masters turned down the free plane ride home offered by the FAA opting instead to return to Rossville by way of the train – wide seats, room to stretch and walk, and an ever-changing, interesting, view no more than twenty horizontal yards away. It was plainly a far more civilized way to travel, one in which other passengers were clearly eager to talk with him about life's truly crucial topics – the weather, Aunt Jane's niece's birthday party, and the upcoming annual quilting bee at the old, white, country, church just outside Odessa, Kansas.

Story Two
Case of the Diabolical Darts:
A Raymond Masters Short Mystery
By Garrison Flint

Death had been his obsession and at age sixty-two, Bradford Coventry was no longer among the living. Near midnight on the Wednesday just past, while sitting alone in the living room of the family mansion, a slender, needle sized, dart inexplicably punctured his abdomen delivering an all quite lethal dose of some potent, exotic, poison, which he, himself, had acquired on one of his numerous trips to study far off primitive cultures. Those who had known him fully expected he would die some horrendous death at the hands of one of those tribes, but regardless, most would not note his passing with any degree of sorrow.

He had spent his life seeking out and mingling with the few remaining tribes on Earth that were still relatively untouched by civilization. He was particularly taken with their richly diverse, innovative methods for taking life – hunting, celebrating victories over enemies, and punishing their own who had transgressed against their rules or beliefs.

Brad disliked the term, ‘primitive culture’. He contended that his years among them had convinced him their simple and direct approaches to life, death, success, failure, crime and justice were in most ways superior to those societies that found it necessary to insulate themselves from the abject failure of their own social institutions by invoking and flaunting the label, ‘civilized’. He particularly admired those that offered swift justice. There were many possible

crimes; there was but one simple act of tribal retribution – usually swift and painless but fully effective. Break a law; be put to death. From the time a youngster could walk he understood the consequences of both acceptable and prohibited behavior – love and inclusiveness or death.

Bradford's younger brother, Marshal, was in many ways his mirror image. He was far less the adventurer and more the homebody. He had lived most of his life at Devonshire House, the family, Tudor style, mansion, which sat on a hill overlooking a small, New England, town. He spent his days writing generally socially positive pieces – short stories and novels – and offered manuscript after manuscript to publishers with only occasional success. On the surface, at least, that was of no great importance because it was the acts of creating and writing that were his passions.

Both parents had experienced lingering illnesses and Marshal cared for them with compassion, never offering a complaint and seldom receiving a thank you. While Bradford had been living with an untouched tribe in central Africa, Marshal graduated from Princeton with honors in writing and American Literature. While Bradford had been ferreting out the sources of the Amazon and mingling with the little-known tribes along its banks, Marshal buried their father. While Bradford had been cutting his way with a machete across never before visited islands in and around the Philippines, Marshal laid their mother to rest.

In February, at the time of his mother's death and two months before his own, Bradford had come home to claim the family fortune, which, as all members of the household seemed to understand, had been the legitimate intent of the parents' Will. Control of those many millions went to the eldest son living at the time the Will was read. It would be read on the upcoming Saturday. Marshal was to receive the income from a trust fund – substantial but a pittance considering the extent of the estate. Worst of all for Marshal, Bradford had directed him to be out of 'his' Devonshire House before the end of the month. Marshal refused to leave which had infuriated his older brother and established an uneasy standoff.

There was a single sentence in the Will which referred

to the resolution of disagreements. It required arbitration by the Senior Covington's longtime friend, Raymond Masters. At their attorneys' insistence, the call was made to the old detective who, up until that moment, had no knowledge of the clause and even less inclination to fulfill it. Murder, however, made it a different matter.

So, it was, that the sprightly, stout, old, detective found himself and his two bags waiting at the front door of the beautiful, old, three story, house. The white stucco walls were framed in wide brown planks that outlined, crossed and crisscrossed, lifted, and in every way highlighted the massiveness of the structure. The second floor overhung the first; the third overhung the second. A row of dormers graced the front of the steeply sloping roof, their windows mingling reflections of the blue sky and new spring greens of the grasses and trees.

In response to his deliberate knock, the door was opened revealing two women. One was plainly a servant – Jane, Masters would learn. She was in her mid-sixties. The other was unmistakably Sarah, the youngest child in the family – late fifties, perhaps. With her bright red fingernails and matching lipstick, she would have looked right at home playing alongside Rosalyn Russell in some 1950s Technicolor® extravaganza. Time had beautifully matured the little girl that had once sat upon Masters' lap and combed his over-sized mustache. As he recalled she was less than careful and delighted when he winced as she tugged just too hard. He would employ a diversion and it would be over. Masters hadn't seen her since his retirement party almost fifteen years earlier.

As the little sister in a very competitive household, Sarah learned early on that she not only had to hold her own with her brothers but had to best them if she were to receive even faint recognition from her father. She had graduated at nineteen from MIT with a BS in engineering. She later added a Master's degree. At that time, in a letter to her Uncle Ray, as she called him, she joked that she had now been officially recognized as having Mastered BS. It had been his opinion that she had done that well prior to her tenth birthday.

Sarah was the only one of the children who possessed

a sense of humor although it often surfaced solely to veil her darker side. She administered a lingering hug.

"Come in. It's so good to see you, Uncle Ray. Jane, get James to see to his bags."

Inside, she helped the portly old gentleman out of his windbreaker and took his hat.

"I am so sorry about your recent loss – losses," he said, initially referring to her mother and then amending it to include her brother. "Is Marshal here, as well?"

The SOB's in the living room – that stands for Sadistic Older Brother, you understand."

"I do now."

He smiled hoping to demonstrate neither approval nor disapproval of her comment and characterization. It had long been his observation that there was not an angel among the lot of them.

They moved into the oversized, generally unappealing, living room, which sat front and center in the house. The massive furniture required such a grand expanse. Or was it the other way around – such a grand expanse required the massive furniture? Either way, there it sat. The boy's bedrooms opened off the east side – the right as one entered from the front door – and a smaller sitting room, the dining room, and kitchen off the west with the entry hall to the front. A hall leading to the servant's quarters in the rear and the back stairwell entered from the center of the north wall.

Marshal was reading, sitting beside a huge grandfather clock near one of the large windows that graced the front of the house. For their considerable size, they let in surprisingly little light, guarded as they were by the wide extensions of the floors above. He stood and offered his hand, breaking a short-lived smile – his full version of warmth and hospitality. He took a folded sheet of paper from his shirt pocket and handed it to Masters.

"The Sheriff – William Laramie – wants you to contact him immediately. Says he knows you from back when."

"Oh, yes. I forgot he was up here. He always hated the name William. Didn't like Bill any better. Asked to be called Larry."

Marshal was not one for small talk.

"We have lots going on, Ray. Brad's murder and the inheritance – terribly complicated now by his death."

Masters noted the general lack of concern about the death and the emphasis on the estate and how Brad's dying confounded it. One could have interpreted it as blaming Brad for the inconvenience caused by his murder.

"Let's take one aspect at a time," Masters said indicating the sitting area in the center of the room.

Long, burgundy and brown sofas faced each other across a twelve by twelve-foot Persian rug – an unpleasant, fingernails to the blackboard, contrast in color and style to the furniture. Sets of matching overstuffed chairs with lamps on tables sitting between them occupied each of the other sides. A large, shiny, dark wood, coffee table made from two by eight-inch planking sat in the center, looking fully capable of acting the part of referee when necessary. The area was lit from a chandelier – appointed in crystal, dark wood, and brass.

The three of them took seats.

"Talk to me about the Will – the inheritance."

Marshal began, addressing Masters as if Sarah weren't in the room.

"The overwhelming bulk of the estate goes to Brad as the eldest son – it was a thing my father had about continuing the Coventry line in style. Sarah and I each receive a small trust fund. As you know I've lived here virtually all my life but Brad gave me an ultimatum saying I have to be out by May first. Because of his death, that is now up in the air according to my lawyer, as is the entire financial side of things.

"In the event Brad was not alive to receive the estate, it was to be split among several charities instead of going to Sarah and me. There is something in the Will stating the transfer of the inheritance does not officially take place until the Will has had its official public reading, which won't be until Saturday. It's taken this long to get things in order. My lawyer is contesting the legality of that clause through the court. If the money is already legally Brad's, then Sarah and I will inherit it as his next of kin. If it isn't his, it goes to the charities."

"You're saying that a judge will have to determine if

Brad had in fact inherited the estate before he died or if he died before he inherited it."

"Right. Brad left no will. In light of that and his single status, the estate will come to Sarah and me if it is ruled that it actually became Brad's immediately upon mother's death."

"I see. Yes. Complicated. What about Brad's death?"

"He was killed by a poisoned dart – one of his own. Wonderfully ironic, don't you think?"

Masters made no comment, instead offered a question.

"What were the circumstances?"

Again, it was Marshal.

"It was nearly midnight – or perhaps just after. He was sitting in that big, old, swivel rocker – only swivels when it has a mind to – facing the door to his room there. A dart was fired into his abdomen. It was propelled with such power that it seated deeply and the wound was not discovered until the autopsy. Death was instantaneous. It was the way he would have wanted it. If you've read his books on primitive societies you'll understand how he appreciated swift, painless, justice."

"I've not read his books. You refer to it as justice."

"He was an SOB in both the traditional and Sarah's usage."

Masters nodded, not in agreement but, again, in understanding.

"Have the authorities determined the dart's trajectory – where it came from?"

"Oddly it seems to have come from the doorway of his own room. Somebody in there apparently got a blowgun, dipped a dart into some poison and shot him. The door would have been just slightly cracked open, I assume."

"Suspects?"

"None accused, yet. I'm sure Sarah and I must top the list. Brad bragged that he left a string of half-breed kids in his wake around the world, but it seems unlikely that any of those outraged aborigines would have tracked him to this New England hillside, you know."

"Did either of you kill him?"

Sarah smiled.

"Always the direct approach. I like that, Uncle Ray. I can't speak for Marshal, but I, for one, didn't kill him. I'd have

gone for a slow, tortuous, death had I set out to do him in."

Masters turned to Marshal. He put his hands up, palms out, in front of his shoulders.

"Not I, said the little red hen – chicken, that is. Can you imagine nerdy, compulsively clean, weak stomached me carrying out such a deed? I can't even write that kind of a scenario without getting nauseous. I have to say that I'm in no way unhappy about it, but no, I didn't kill him."

"How about the help – could it have been the fabled butler?" Masters asked smiling.

It was not returned in kind.

Sarah spoke first.

"I really don't know the help. All new since I lived here – existed here, survived here, failed to succumb to the undeservedly horrendous life that was thrust upon me here."

Marshal responded, fully ignoring his sister's histrionics.

"At this point, their lives go on pretty much as they have for years. The house is still here and needs caring for. They continue to draw their salaries and have their quarters and meals. They each will receive a nice bit in the Will."

"Nice bit?"

"Two hundred and fifty thousand dollars each."

"And they are still here?"

"Yes, you see it's to be paid out in equal installments over a ten-year period. There is something like a twenty-five percent bonus if they stick it out that long. I hope they do. They are good people."

"Motives among them other than money?"

"They were never treated badly by our parents," Marshal began. "Never really well, I suppose, but never badly. Our parents didn't interact with others on an emotional level – and that included us children. They were always paid above local scale but were clearly never considered a part of the extended family the way I understand long term help is in some homes."

Masters nodded.

"I will probably have more questions later. I suppose I should check in with the Sheriff, now. Will you direct me to a phone, please?"

"Sarah handed him her cell phone."

"I keep forgetting that these things exist."

"How lucky you are," Sarah said, a tired sadness in her tone.

* * *

The Sheriff arrived at 10:30 and after a brief recounting of stories from the old days – some of them even true – they got to work. Marshal and Sarah stayed close, watching and listening.

"The chair was positioned as it sits there, now," the Sheriff said. "The trajectory suggests that the dart had to have been shot from near the very top of that doorway – the one opening into Bradford's room."

"The top, you say?"

Masters moved to examine the oversized door.

"Yes. The murderer had to have been standing on a chair because the blow gun had to have been right up against the top of the frame to achieve the line of entry into the stomach area."

Masters wondered to himself, how, from such a position, the person providing the lung power could have managed to take aim. His or her eyes would have been above the door frame and therefor blocked.

"Is there another entrance into that room?"

"No. Another puzzler," the sheriff said. "How could the murderer have gained access to it with the victim sitting right there facing the only door?"

"I'd like to snoop around the room," Masters said pushing open the heavy door and flipping on the light. "I assume the room was fingerprinted."

"Yes. No surprises. Prints of everybody who lives and works here – everybody but Sarah, that is. That seems reasonable since she is more like a house guest. Arrived Monday, I'm told."

Masters nodded, moving to the collection of primitive artifacts on the outer wall and under glass in a long narrow display case beside the window.

"The dart was a precisely crafted sliver of wood the size of a three-inch needle, exactly like these," the Sheriff said, pointing to a section of the case. "They are shot from blowguns like that one."

"Anawani?" Masters asked referring to a small tribe in the far reaches of the upper Amazon.

"Why yes. That's what the expert at the university said. Anawani."

"Curare, then?"

"Yes. Killed by a very potent form of curare. You know of the people, then."

"I ran into some of their handiwork a few years back."

Masters pointed into the glass topped case.

"It appears several darts may be missing – the way they are spaced there."

"Our lab guy made the same observation. I guess we know where one of them ended up. All the blow guns seem to be here, however it's really hard to tell."

Masters nodded and moved back through the door.

"Any chance the swivel chair out there was moved or repositioned before the body was found?"

"It is an antique version of a swivel rocker. Its size suggests that it may, in fact, have been handcrafted just for this room. Its swiveling mechanism is stuck in the position in which it sits. Its sheer bulk makes it doubtful that it could have been moved with the body in it. Certainly, not by one person."

"Pictures?" Masters asked.

"Yes. Here in this envelope. Sorry. Meant to offer them immediately."

Masters donned his reading glasses.

"This one, taken front-on of the body in the chair. I suppose you've noted the odd position of the legs – extending diagonally to the right rather than squarely in front?"

"We did. The Coroner said the man probably cringed in pain for a second and attempted to move his body maybe attempting to get down on the floor and crawl."

"Could be, Masters said, a healthy skepticism showing through his tone. "Strange, though. Let's move the rocker to one side."

Even considering Masters' bulk, the task was accomplished with no little effort. With great effort, he knelt and examined the carpet on which it had been sitting.

"The impression made by the edges of the square base

is deep and substantial. The nap is broken away from the backing. The chair has clearly been sitting in this spot for years and apparently not moved even for vacuuming. Did your lab guys vacuum here, under the chair, and examine the contents?"

"No. I must say that didn't occur to any of us. I'll get them on it at once if you think that's important."

Masters nodded.

The Sheriff would follow his old friend's suggestion but really could see no reason for it. They replaced the chair exactly as it had been. Masters sat in it, approving of the way it handled his form. He tried to swivel. It wouldn't budge from side to side though did rock in the expected, even pleasing, fashion. The Sheriff placed a call to the lab.

Masters addressed Sarah and Marshal.

"A strange question perhaps, but do you recall if Brad rocked as he sat in this chair."

Sarah shrugged offering no information. Marshal responded, though offered little more.

"I can't say either. He was reading and I don't know many people who rock while they read. Not saying he didn't. It would give me motion sickness."

"As it would me," Masters said with a smile.

"Who found the body?"

"Jane, the housekeeper," Marshal said. "At a little after six a.m."

"And he had been dead how long?" Masters asked addressing the Sheriff.

"Between six and six and a half hours."

"Eleven thirty to midnight then. A bad time of day for substantiating alibis of the others in the house – each in bed, alone."

He stood and surveyed the room, turning a three-sixty before he stopped.

"I'd like to look outside near the window in Brad's bedroom."

The Sheriff led the way.

"We examined the ground and the window. No disturbance we could find at ground level, of course it is covered with a thick stand of grass."

They arrived. The window was a good six feet above the ground.

"Help me bring that wooden lawn chair over here under the window," Masters said. "Then, if you're ready to risk life and limb, you can help me up so I can stand on its seat."

The Sheriff chuckled. Masters actually balanced himself quite well – not Barishnokoff-like form, but superior to many. The Sheriff asked no questions. With his pocket knife, the old detective poked here and there at the wood – at the paint, actually.

A few minutes later, the knife safely stowed in a pocket he made a pronouncement.

"Stand back, I'm coming down. The earth may tremble."

He passed on his findings.

"The window hasn't been opened since it was painted shut years ago. The cracks are all paint plastered four coats thick. Nobody entered Brad's room through this window."

They walked around the side of the house on their way to the front door.

"Any suspects? Any evidence?" Masters asked.

"Not a smidgeon of evidence, I'm afraid. Nobody saw what happened. As you said nobody has an alibi. We're blind alley stumped, Ray."

They went back inside. Masters returned to Bradford's bedroom. He began looking through the books. On one shelf were copies of the books Brad had authored. There were seven in all, each relatively short with beautiful, full color photos printed on thick shiny paper in the tradition of the nineteen thirties. They were quality, hardback, volumes from a London publisher, unknown to Masters. Several dealt with specific tribes. Several more presented and explored the weaponry such tribes had invented and used.

One book, Poisons and Their Uses Among the Aborigines, drew his attention. He sat the spine in his palm and let it fall open. Books printed on thick paper will often open to the last page that was examined.

"My, my! Sheriff, look here."

He held out the book and pointed. It had opened within a chapter titled: The production of curare and its use in the

blowguns of the Anawani of the Upper Amazon Basin.

"Seems somebody had a recent interest in the delivery of Curare through blow guns," the Sheriff noted.

Masters remembered that the man had a long-standing propensity for stating the obvious.

"Let's get this book to the lab for finger printing. Hopefully, this hard finish, shiny, paper will have grabbed some beauties, for us."

They returned to the living room. Again, Masters looked around, that time scanning the walls at the eight-foot mark. Several large paintings hung from that level. There were a half dozen window valences somewhat above that. The top of the Grandfather clock also towered at about that height. There were five other doors the size and height of the one to Bradford's room.

Satisfied that he knew the options, Masters asked to interview the housekeeper and the Butler.

Jane, he had met. She was a plain looking woman, thin, graying hair twirled into a bun on the back of her long, narrow head. She used no makeup and wore a black dress and white apron, both of which hung well below her knees. She and Masters took seats across a coffee table from each other in a small sitting area in one corner of the living room. There was no such thing as cozy in that house but the smaller, confined area was more comfortable – intimate – and would hopefully be conducive to friendly conversation.

"When did you last see Bradford alive?"

"The evening he died. I tidy up this room at night before I retire. Mr. Covington, Senior, always came here early in the morning to have his coffee with the paper before breakfast. I liked to have it neaten up for him and old habits are hard to break. Bradford was sitting on the couch in the center of the room, reading. Marshal was in the swivel chair – he always read in that chair from just after dinner at nine to about half-past midnight. He always faced the clock, I suppose so he could look up and easily note the time. He is a fanatic about time and schedules."

"But Brad, not Marshal, was apparently in that chair when he was killed sometime between eleven thirty and midnight."

"I can't explain that. Like I said, when I was in here at ten, things were the way I described them."

"And you found him the next morning?"

"Yes. In the swivel rocker like you said. It was pointed at his door. The direction surprised me. He was hunched over forward, his hands overlapping on his stomach. I knew he was dead. I went right to Marshal's room and woke him up. I told him about it and he came out and looked. He cautioned me not to touch anything. He tried to locate a pulse in his brother's neck. Then he called 911."

"A change of topic. How did the brothers get along?"

"How did the brothers not get along, would be the correct question, Mr. Masters."

"Not loving, supporting siblings, you're telling me."

"They almost never spoke to one another and when they did it was often in fits of rage."

"Ever hear either of them threaten the other?"

"Just about every time they opened their mouths in the other one's presence. I have to tell you that I really like Marshal. He has always treated me better than anybody else in this house. I mean he speaks to me when I'm in the room and asks about my days off. Things like that. But, he has an awful temper – not a match to Bradford's, of course, but I've seen him sling books before."

"Do you have a guess about who killed Brad?"

"I just assumed it was an open and closed case – Marshal."

"What about Sarah?"

"Sarah! A murderer? I can't see that. Never heard her threaten anybody but then she's almost never here – twice in the past month but that's a record. I feel like I know her a little better than I did Brad. Maybe that's a girl thing between us. He was always off gallivanting here and there – far off dangerous places the way I hear it. He wrote books on strange topics. I've peeked inside them. Pictures of naked, dark skinned, people. Sends shivers up my spine thinking about it."

"You said you thought it was Marshal. Anything specific? Anything recent?"

She shook her head.

"Not really, I guess. The two of them just always went at it so, and now with the inheritance thing and Brad getting most everything even though Marshal was the one who stayed here and took care of their parents, I guess we all just figured Marshal was the one with all the motives. Sarah left as a teenager, the way I understand it, so she can make no claim she deserves anything more the way Marshal can."

Masters smiled.

"No secrets in a household like this I guess are there."

"If you want to know the dirt, just talk to the maid who cleans it up – that's the way I've always heard it said."

"Thank you for your time and help. Where will I find the Butler? What's his name?"

"You won't believe this but his name is Butler – James Butler. You'll find him listening to our every word, right behind that swinging door into the dining room. Still has pretty good hearing for a man of his advanced years."

"And his age would be?"

"Sixty-two," Butler said, bursting through the swinging door, putting on a grand, and calculated, genteel, entrance. "Three years Jane's junior if anybody's counting."

Jane pretended a snit, stood, and left, retracing his steps.

"I'm Ray. Is it James or Butler?" Masters asked as the two sat.

"I answer to both or either."

"I'll choose Either, then."

It produced a smile and chuckle.

James wore a black suit, white shirt, and dark blue tie. His hair was gray and his face suitably wrinkled for a man of his 'advanced years'.

"I'm here, as I suppose you knew even before I arrived, to investigate Bradford's death."

"Yes, Sir. And before that the original call to you was for arbitration between the two greedy, spoiled brats on the matter of Marshal being ordered to leave."

"An interesting characterization."

"Bradford was just plain greedy letting his parents support him on his globetrotting all those years and then expecting to come back here and take all the spoils. Marshal,

the one we all thought was the good and caring son, as it now appears, at least, may have only stuck around so he'd be well rewarded for his service once the elders left this world."

"I see. Interesting. Do you have a favorite suspect?"

"Have to be Marshal. Doesn't seem to have the killer instinct of the other two but, looking at the motives, it has to be Marshal."

"How do you think his killing Brad would change anything in his favor?"

"May not. You've heard of revenge, I imagine."

Masters raised his eyebrows and waited for more.

"The stories I've heard about the way Brad tortured and beat on Marshal when they were boys make me want to kill him, myself."

"Him being Brad?"

"Yes."

"See or hear anything suspicious or revealing the night of the murder?"

"Wish I had. I'd love to be the star witness in all this, but really, I have nothing to offer. Well, maybe one thing. Sometime after ten – can't be sure of the time – Marshal came into the kitchen where I was having my nightly cup of hot chocolate. He complained he wasn't feeling well and was going to turn in early. He took a seltzer and left. Marshall is not robust but I've seldom heard him complain like that. He's virtually never ill. It may mean nothing. I'll tell you one thing. He must have been really sick to interrupt his routine. He lives and breathes his routine. Up at 8:00, bath – never shower – at 8:10, breakfast at 8:30, takes his walk at 9:00, and so on throughout his day. It drives me nuts but at least I always know exactly where he is and when he'll need my services. Hope some of that may be helpful."

"Bits and pieces, James. I gather bits and pieces and then find ways of configuring them into something useful. Thank you for your time. If you think of anything else please let me know."

James nodded, stood, and left the way he had entered. The playful prattle between him and Jane took up even before the door swung shut behind him.

The Sheriff returned from the entry hall with a

technician from the forensics lab. Masters supervised the vacuuming, which he had requested, and made sure the young man understood about fingerprinting the book. The Sheriff and his lab guy then returned to the station.

That left Masters alone in the living room. A small, frail, thickly bespectacled, little man, Masters' peer in age, approached, hesitantly, from the entryway.

"Mr. Masters, I assume," he said tentatively.

Everything about him was tentative from the way he fidgeted his hat over his heart to the stop and go pace he set across the room.

"Yes. You have me at a disadvantage, Sir."

"Preston Enna, the family attorney."

Masters offered to shake, having to provide the full portion of energy required to power it.

"May I help you or are you here to help me?" Masters asked offering a smile.

The question seemed to befuddle the man so Masters tried again.

"It's good to meet you. I understand things have become quite messy, legally speaking."

That Preston seemed to understand and met it with a long sigh and deliberate set of nods, which, taken together, appeared to imply exhaustion.

"May we sit?" he asked.

"Of course."

Preston chose the less inviting central sitting area apparently feeling more at ease when some expanse existed between him and others.

"I understand you will be reading the Will – officially – on Saturday morning. From what I've heard it won't really be a surprise to anybody. Apparently, Covington, Senior, as he's called here, made no secret of the provisions."

"Deception, pure and simple, Mr. Masters. The Will he touted was a sham – eighty-three pages of sham. The real Will takes less than a page. Lots of heads will turn, I'll tell you that."

"Why the deception?"

"To test the integrity of his children, I imagine. He never said."

"I won't dwell on that then. There is one thing. Do I understand correctly that in the original – the sham as you characterized it – it provided both Sarah and Marshal a trust fund and it stipulated that when either died, his or her fund would be transferred to the other?"

"Yes. That's an accurate assessment of its intent. Like a stick of old TNT sitting way too close to the fireplace if you ask me. I told Senior that and he nodded and chuckled like he wanted it that way. There was just a touch of the sadist in him, Mr. Masters. May be genetic. The kids all got it from somewhere."

"Do you have a take on the murder of Bradford?" Masters asked moving on, figuring he'd just wait and hear the new Will with the others.

"Everybody says Marshal. He doesn't seem a killer to me. None of them do – well, I wouldn't have bet against Brad. He had no conscience. Fully self-centered. He liked living on the edge of danger as if he wanted something to happen to him or at least he didn't really care if it did. If there was a way he could have killed himself and blamed his brother or sister, I think he would have just for the delight of thinking about it."

"None of the siblings ever married is that correct?"

"That's correct. Bradford once boasted to me that he had a dozen kids in each of a dozen tribes. He presented himself as being some sort of god to those people so they allowed him to take his pleasure when and with whom he pleased. He justified his fornication by saying the tribes needed an infusion of new genes or they would soon turn into races of inbred, blithering idiots. I've heard it called lots of thing, Ray, but never infusion!"

"So, your choices would be Marshal and Brad, himself?"

"My choice would be Bradford. My best guess is Marshal."

"How about Sarah?"

"I really don't know her very well, anymore. She is so successful in her own right she can't possibly need the inheritance. Could be a matter of pride or vengeance, I suppose. Rich people have certainly been known to kill for less."

"The staff – Jane and James?"

"They seem way too involved in covering up their, none so clandestine romance, to have time to plan and execute a murder. Putting their inheritances together they can live like kings – in their eyes – for the rest of their lives; that part of the original Will stands very much like it was. What I'm saying is there is no financial benefit accorded to them from Bradford's death."

"Thank you for the information, Preston. Is there some way I can be of help to you?"

"Just get this murder solved and behind us. It would help if that could be done by Saturday."

It had been a serious request. Masters smiled, tickled at the suggested timetable. Preston seemed to assume that engaging a detective was akin to hiring a painter on a schedule leading up to an open house.

"I'll be in the study on the third floor, center front, should you need me."

They stood and Preston left through the rear hall. Masters went in search of James and a step ladder. Both were found in the kitchen beyond the dining room. The bonus was Jane and fresh pastry just accepting a layer of thick, creamy, icing.

"Come. Sit. Fresh apricot swirls and coffee," Jane said.

"Actually, I came in search of James and a step ladder. Perhaps I could snitch a plate and make it a to-go treat."

"Certainly. James needs to watch his waistline anyway."

"As do I, every time I try to find my feet," Masters said smiling.

It provided chuckles all around.

Jane looked down at Masters' pant leg.

"Got at snare there half way up the calf in back. Bring them to me later and I'll fix it up for you."

"How kind. Thank you."

James led, ladder in tow. Masters followed, a goodie plate in hand – lighter, one goodie's worth, by the time they arrived at the big old clock beside the window at the front of the living room.

"I want to get a look behind the face of this thing."

"Related to the murder or merely a clock-work fetish, Sir?"

Masters smiled but didn't comment. James continued.

"It is a seven-day clock – I wind it every Sunday morning. The glass door covering the face opens, exposing it for setting and key winding. To see behind it we will need to remove the side panel to the right up there. I've never had reason to do more than dust it but this screwdriver should do the trick. You or me, Sir?"

"How about if you remove and then I snoop?"

"As I expected, Sir."

James was soon handing the panel down to Masters. It was a foot front to back and eighteen-inches, top to bottom. He sat it against the wall as James returned to the floor. James was clearly both easily moved to comment and forthright in content.

"I'm a mystery buff, myself, Ray. As such I couldn't help but notice something just now."

He arranged the screws in the palm of his hand.

"Do you see something odd?"

"Considering your steady hand and skill while you were removing them, yes, I do. The scratch marks all over the painted surfaces beside the grooves."

"Correct, and as you indicated, they were there before I so skillfully removed them. To my knowledge this panel has not been taken off in the thirty years I've been here."

"So, you're suggesting the scratches are fresh – somebody has been in there recently."

"Yes. Certainly weren't there at the last dusting. Somebody with poor screw driving skills. We make a good team. Call on me any time you get stuck!"

They exchanged smiles. Masters eyed the distance up the ladder. He shook his arms at his sides as if preparing to perform on the high trapeze. Three steps should do it.

James offered some reassurance.

"It tests at three hundred pounds. It should just about handle you, I'd say."

"Just about because you think I'm lighter or just about because you think I'm heavier?"

"A good butler always presents the positive spin on things."

Masters smiled again and made the climb. It held. He peeked inside then looked down at James who was already reaching a flashlight up to him.

"And a mind reader as well."

"Just part of the butler thing."

"You place a key in one of these holes on the face to wind it, correct?"

"Yes. Actually, it takes two windings, one for the time keeping mechanism and one for the bong-bong mechanism. The holes for the keys are aligned vertically. I don't pretend to know how they work. I imagine the key fits into a gear box, which is in some way attached to the spring winding mechanism. They take an eternity to wind."

Masters continued his examination of the space, finding just what he felt certain he would find. A bit more, in fact, which he welcomed because it answered two other questions he had on his mind – the position of the chair and the catch in his pants.

Finished, he descended to the safety of the floor. Another step higher and he would have feared vertigo. James negotiated the ladder with no hesitation and soon had the panel securely back in place.

"We need to keep this operation just between us detectives," Masters said addressing James, deliberately face to face.

James nodded, clearly buoyed up to be included on the team even though he understood it had been offered as a mere courtesy. Masters thanked him for his assistance and moved back to the area of the swivel rocker.

James left with the ladder and pulled in his stomach, clinging to the hope Jane would allow him at least one apricot swirl.

Masters sipped coffee and munched his treat while he eyed the chair from all angles. He felt along its lower front, wincing at one point as he pricked his finger. He slipped into his reading glasses and knelt in front of the chair, bending over to examine the source of his discomfort.

The rear end of a dart was sticking out no more than a

quarter of an inch hidden in the nap of the fabric below the seat. The upholstery had also been tampered with – re-tacked by an inept amateur. Using his pocket knife, he loosened that small section of fabric and pulled it back up onto the seat. The dart had pierced a piece of cardboard that had been tacked in place between the cloth and the wooden frame. There was a second, empty, hole the size of a dart. It sat not a quarter of an inch above the dart, which was lodged there.

He began removing the tacks, which held the small piece of cardboard in place.

Masters mused to himself as he worked.

"Well, I'm still alive, so the dart must not have been laced with poison. I did approach it in an incautious manner. Surely that can't be attributable to old age. I suppose the fact that I have reached old age suggests I have, in fact, been appropriately cautious on most occasions during my lifetime."

That conversation with himself seemed somehow reassuring – complimentary, in fact.

He removed the cardboard with the dart still in it. It covered a hole, three inches high and two wide, which had recently been chiseled through the wooden frame allowing access to the vacant, enclosed, area between the bottom of the seat and the floor. Behind it was a gizmo of some kind.

"This is going to be a BINGO," he said out loud.

Bingos pronounced in capitals were sure things, for Masters. Lower case emphasis referred to merely pretty sure things.

He sat back on his legs and with some effort lifted the chair, positioning it over on its back. He nodded, satisfied with what he found – again, it was what he knew had to be there even though he could not have drawn it out in all of its specifications.

He righted the chair aligning it precisely along the four-sided, square impression the base had made in the carpet. He struggled himself back onto his feet putting his hands on his waist and nodded. He now knew the how. He still had to prove the who.

He found a phone and called the Sheriff.

"Larry. Masters here. I pretty well have this murder

wrapped up. What have you found – prints, vacuum stuff?"

"No useful prints on that book, other than yours. Some smudges were left indicating a clear attempt to wipe the book clean. Nothing useful. Not sure what you'll make of the 'stuff' – as you call it – from under the chair. We have it separated and bagged. I was about ready to head your way with it."

"Bring along your print guy and your print file of the household members here. I need him to do some on the spot stuff."

"You're just full of stuff, today, Ray."

"And I plan to be fuller in a few minutes. It's bound to be lunch time."

"A half hour, then?"

"Fine."

* * *

Comfortably full, Masters returned from the dining room accompanied by Marshal.

"I'd like to read some of your things if they are available," Masters said.

"I have published two novels and dozens of short stories – women's magazines mostly. A few mysteries. That's my weakest genre. It seems unjust but then that's been my lot."

"I don't understand your reference."

"That Brad got his puerile gore published immediately, all done up beautifully – after major editing, I'm sure. He doesn't – didn't – speak the King's English let alone write it. And I turn out quality pieces and find no interest in them. It makes no sense that his books found immediate acceptance with a publisher."

Masters wouldn't venture a comment but did see an opening.

"Has Sarah published?"

"Some in professional journals. Can't say I've ever really examined them. One about stress factors in lightweight concrete – the stuff of the comatose as far as I'm concerned."

"Probably important to you every time you cross a bridge or pass under a viaduct."

Marshal nodded and raised an eyebrow.

"She hates me, you know. I mean really hates me. As

a teenager, she made terrible choices in boyfriends and I ran most of them off. Every one of them would have caused her terrible sorrow but she couldn't see it then and doesn't or won't let herself to this day. I'm sure she blames me for her maidenhood – probably not a Webster's word but you get the idea."

"One more good deed gone unappreciated, you say," Masters said.

"I've had a life full of them, Ray."

Masters redirected the conversation.

"I have a problem about the position of the rocker."

He really didn't, but wanted to see how Marshal configured the problem.

"Perhaps you can shed some light on it for me. From what I've surmised you were sitting in the rocker facing the clock earlier on Wednesday evening."

"That's right. I always read after dinner. I always face the clock. One of my compulsive idiosyncrasies, I suppose. They give me security when nothing else in my life does. Plus, the chair has been stuck in that position for months and months."

"But when the body was found it was facing the door to Brad's room – a good fifty-five to sixty-five degrees to the left. How can that be explained?"

"I think I mentioned that the chair has a mind of its own. Brad was a very restless sort. It seems likely that his twisting and twitching in the seat did whatever needed to be done for it to release and turn a bit. It is really not so odd. It works on a strictly willy-nilly basis never turning far when it does turn."

Masters nodded and let it be.

The sheriff and his lab man arrived. Marshal went to his room off the living room at the front of the house. Sarah entered through the swinging doors at the rear.

"I'm going down into town, Uncle Ray. Broke a heel on my red shoes. Can't function without them. Need to find somebody to repair it. Can I get anything for you – Slim Fast, a lady of the evening, raspberry twisters, anything?"

"Thanks for remembering my penchant for twisters. That would be nice. No more than a half dozen packs. I'm trying to lose fifty pounds this afternoon."

"And that represents another of your penchants – your appreciation of the absurd."

"You found me out. Absurdity is often the only thing with enough substance for me to hide behind."

Sarah left. James returned with the ladder Masters had requested at lunch.

"Same site?"

"Yes, please."

"Next time I'm just going to head it in this direction, toss a screwdriver into the room, and tell it to go fetch."

The ladder was set in place to a trio of chuckles.

"Thanks. We'll handle it from here."

"The flashlight and screwdriver," James said extracting one from each front pants pocket. It had been done up with great flair. Masters was finding that James overflowed with flair.

He turned his attention to the Sheriff and his assistant.

"There is a panel at the top up there."

He pointed.

"We need it removed and printed."

The young man, wearing latex gloves, was quickly up the ladder and had it off for later inspection.

"There is a wooden base just below the face that separates the upper area from the pendulum area. On that base, you will find the gear mechanism into which the keys are inserted through the face plate. It was recently removed from its proper place to make room for that gizmo you see in there. Remove the loose mechanism carefully. The top, fresh, prints are crucial. Any others may be a century old."

The gear mechanism was extracted with care. The young man was clearly feeling the excitement present in the moment.

He then moved with it to the large coffee table under the bright light of the chandelier and began the search for prints. The Sheriff brought the wooden panel.

"Just like you said. Lots of old ones," the young man said. "I assume they may belong to the workers who installed it in the clock originally. Set in hardened oil that coated the metal surface. A dozen fresh ones – many overlapping themselves. All appear to be similar in design. I suspect the

person who removed it was not adept at mechanical things. Very erratic finger placements. The screw heads are also scratched suggesting that screwdriver competency was not one of his strong suits."

"You hire excellent help, Larry."

"Yes, I do!"

The young man looked up and grinned, appreciating the double compliment.

As he worked to find a print match, Masters examined the contents of the bags taken from the rug beneath the chair. One small bag caught his attention and he held it up to the light examining it through his glasses held in his other hand in the manner of a magnifying glass. He raised his eyebrows and looked up, a sudden sadness spreading across his face.

He picked up the stack of print cards from the coffee table, shuffled through them, and plucked one from the deck. He handed it to the technician.

"The prints will be a match to these."

He turned to the Sheriff.

"I'm ready to wrap this up. Let's gather the principals and put this one to rest. Invite anybody else you feel needs to be present.

* * *

The Grandfather clock struck two. James, Jane, and Sarah sat on one couch. Opposite them were the Sheriff and his assistant. Marshal sat alone in a chair across the area from Masters. A deputy and representative from the State's Attorney's office arrived filling the two remaining chairs. Preston Enna, the attorney, was the last to arrive. He took a seat on the couch beside the Sheriff.

Masters began.

"It is always sad when someone close to us dies. It is doubly sad when it happens in a violent manner. If it brings any solace, Bradford's death was quick and painless.

Nobody really seemed moved one way or the other.

"Few things about this murder are as they seemed at first glance. Only two things remained as they appeared. It was one of Brad's darts that penetrated his body. It was Brad's curare that killed him.

"The murderer was clever. Two, gadgets, for lack of a

better term, were involved. They were expertly designed yet ineptly installed. Let me begin by describing how the dart was delivered. Two, were actually required to commit the crime. I'll deal with the lethal dart first.

"A device, powered by a powerful compressed air cartridge, was installed behind the face of the Grandfather clock. It was triggered by electrical contacts made when both metal hands were pointing at twelve. A simple, small, battery powered, solenoid, released the compressed air, which started the two darts on their way with amazing force through tubes inside the clock. They exited through the two holes into which the key is inserted to wind the clock and the chime. The gear mechanisms had been removed and set aside so those openings could be used.

"The tubes were precisely aimed – one for the area of a man's abdomen while sitting in the swivel rocker when it was facing the clock – the way it had apparently been sitting for months. As all members of the household know, it sticks and only periodically allows itself to be swiveled a few inches one way or the other. The murderer used that to his advantage.

"The second tube was pointed directly at a small area below the front of the left arm of the rocker about six inches from the bottom. A control panel of sorts had been installed there behind a piece of thin cardboard which covered a hole in the frame that had been made for the purpose of this murder. Behind the cardboard was a plate – a lever. When the dart pierced the fabric and cardboard, its force triggered the lever. The lever released a spring-loaded device that was designed to twirl the chair about seventy degrees to the occupant's left. In so doing, it dragged Brad's legs into an awkward position to his right. All quite intentionally, that positioned the chair so it faced the door to Brad's bedroom focusing all suspicion in that direction. A second hole in the cardboard suggests a test firing had been made to assure its accuracy. It had been a gradually loosening, long, screw under the seat that caused the chair to stick and swivel in the noted, erratic, manner. Once removed by the murderer it worked fine – well, it would have, had the spring-loaded gizmo not been in place.

"To install the gadget in the chair, it had to be moved – tipped onto its back so the work could be completed

underneath. In doing so the murderer left telling and conclusive personal evidence in the carpet.

"In general, the murderer had been careful, wiping fingerprints from the book used to find or verify information about the use of the poison, from the various devices, from the face of the clock, and even the clock cabinet. Not so, from the temporarily removed gear mechanisms, which had been removed and set aside inside the clock. I assume they were left there to make the reinstall go faster later on at the time the dart shooting mechanism was to be removed.

"Most surprising of all, perhaps, is that the wrong man was killed. Everybody knew the swivel rocker was Marshal's chair – the place he invariably sat after dinner reading there, facing the clock, until he retired shortly after midnight. Even Brad had not tried to invade that place at that time. It should have been Marshal sitting there at midnight last Wednesday, you see. But Marshal became ill and retired early. Brad, either because he liked the chair or just because he could, moved to sit in it and complete his own reading for the evening.

"From scratches and the position of prints it is clear that whoever did the removal and installation inside the clock was not well practiced in the use of tools. The same is evidenced underneath the chair. That person designed ingenious, perfectly functional, instruments but fumbled during their placement – attachment.

"That combination of skills and ineptitude belongs to just one of the principals here – the engineer, Sarah Covington. A tiny chip of her fingernail, bearing her trademark, bright red polish was found beneath the chair – a chair so heavy and cumbersome that it was never moved.

"I can only guess at her motive. It undoubtedly involved her lifelong hatred of Marshal, fueled, I imagine, by her belief it is his fault she still remains unmarried. She seems content to place blame elsewhere for that circumstance rather than looking at her own acrid, self-centered, hurtful personality. The fact she would receive his trust fund may have also played a part – quite secondary, I imagine. Her plan was to take advantage of the bickering between her brothers, setting it up to make it appear Brad killed Marshal

from the doorway of his room. In reality, that would have been a most unlikely scenario.

Sarah offered a faint smile, just barely this side of a sneer, but mounted no defense. The deputy moved to stand behind her. Masters continued.

"Mr. Enna has consented to go ahead and read the Will at this time so all matters can be immediately concluded. Preston."

Preston stood, trembling. He was not comfortable performing in front of groups, especially when he was to be the bearer of information contradictory to what was anticipated.

"I have two items on the agenda."

He mopped his brow with a still folded, white, handkerchief.

"First, the Will that has been touted about this household during the past fifty years was never intended to be the final Will."

As he had predicted, that did turn some heads.

"Second, I shall read the actual Will. It is written in Mr. Covington, Senior's, own hand, dated five years ago the fifth of August and was witnessed by me. It fills less than one page – there are supporting documents, of course.

"I'll skip the initial bla, bla, blas. . . . Here!"

'James and Jane are to each receive \$250,000 and the right to remain here for as long as they desire. Should they marry – each other – and we all believe they should, there will be an additional \$250,000 for them. The remainder of my estate is to be equally divided among my children – those still living and those not incarcerated. The sole exception is that Devonshire House becomes the property of our dear, compassionate, long suffering, son, Marshal. He loves the house and it loves him. His mother's and my appreciation go to him for his steadfast dedication to our well-being and comfort during our declining years.'

Preston turned to Marshall, addressing him.

"As a Post Script, your father added a piece of praise and advice directed just to you."

"Marshal: What you write is wonderful. I suggest that you take a lesson from your older brother. After just about

every publisher in the world turned him down, he started his own company and hired a circulation firm to distribute his books."

Marshal wept.

James kissed Jane on her lips – with flair!

Sarah was escorted away.

The old detective had but one quandary remaining. Should he first finish the plate of apricot pastries or open a fresh pack of raspberry twisters?

///

Story Three
HENRY WILL DIE!
A short Raymond Masters Mystery
by
Garrison Flint

During his years of retirement there in his cozy cabin in Rossville, New York, Detective Masters had become accustomed to his full eight hours of sleep each night. No more working double and triple shifts. No more middle of the night phone calls. It was a part of his new life that he had come to treasure. And so it was, that the once familiar night time clanging of his phone had become an unfamiliar event – a relic of his past.

RING! . . . RING! . . . RING!

He opened his eyes and looked at the clock on the nightstand beside his bed: 3:34 a.m.

His initial inclination was to ignore the phone in the hope the caller would realize they had dialed a wrong number and hang up. Not so. He reached out and put it to his ear.

“Hello?”

There was a question implied in his tone. The voice that addressed him was male, old, distraught, and not immediately familiar.

“My life has been threatened, Ray. I need your help.”

“And I am speaking with whom?”

It was clearly someone who knew him on a first name basis, yet he couldn’t place the voice through the tension and anxiety it displayed.

“Henry. Henry Foster. Your uniformed driver back in your big city detective days.”

“Henry. Yes. My goodness it’s been a long time—way too long. Considering your opening remark I suppose I shouldn’t ask how things are going.”

“My life has been threatened, I think, maybe, it seems at least.”

“Your degree of absolute certainty overwhelms me.”

Masters moved himself into a sitting position on the side of the bed as he continued to listen.

“It’s hard to explain. Will you come immediately?”

“Of course. You know I will. Where?”

“I retired back to Syracuse; it’s my home town. I’ll meet you whenever and wherever you say.”

“I’ll have my young friend, Taco, come and get me in his plane. You remember him from The Case of the Twisted Twins a decade ago there in Syracuse?”

“I remember about him. Read Flint’s book about it. Never met, however.”

“I’ll have him call you with the rendezvous information. Should be there in time for you to buy me breakfast. Will you be safe until then?”

“I think so. The police chief has been good enough to assign an officer to stay with me. The chief’s my second cousin once removed or some such thing.”

“Okay, then. Give me the phone number where you can be reached.”

That done, Masters opened the drawer in the nightstand and consulted his address book. A short phone call later he had the arrangements set with Taco – Gary Tarasenko, actually, but that’s another story.

Rossville had only an unofficial airstrip, the level, grassy, area behind the senior center at the north edge of town. It handled the small, private planes well enough. The area could be marginally lit by several strings of ground lights and boasted a brand new, fully illuminated, wind sock on an abandoned, thirty foot, telephone pole nearby. It was within easy walking distance from Masters’ place. Of course, everything in Rossville was within easy walking distance of Masters’ place.

The chilling breeze of the mid-October night nipped at his face. His breath frosted his glasses as they perched there on his nose, embraced by the wide, upturned, collar of his long, heavy coat. It was on such occasions that his oversized mustache served its only socially redeeming function—keeping his face warm and protected from the elements. Some men's mustaches spread to the sides. Some stand at attention. Masters' more resembled one planned and arranged by a committee of antagonists. Still, the old detective admired mustaches and was determined to sport one. He chose to characterize his as eccentrically unique rather than in any way unattractive. No one enjoyed his own foibles more than Raymond Masters.

He walked directly to the pole and flipped the switch that lit all the lights. They were on a timer and would turn off in thirty minutes.

He rubbed his gloved hands together and scanned the sky toward the northeast. Soon the anticipated blinking speck of light appeared. It grew in size and gently lowered itself toward the ground. Masters had only three concerns about flying. Getting up safely, getting down safely, and being able to fit his super-sized frame into the seat - safely. He walked out to greet his young friend as the small plane turned into a stop.

“Taco, my man. Good to see you and thanks so much for your assistance this morning.”

“Hey. I owe you more than I'll ever be able to repay—not that you require anything, I know. Good to see you, too. What's up, if I can be privy to that info?”

“You know about as much as I at this point. Henry was my driver for many years back when I was on the force. When I retired so did he. We've been out of touch for a number of years. That's a gentle way of disguising a decade and a half of laxity on both our parts. He apparently thinks his life has been threatened.”

“Thinks? Apparently?”

“I know. I don't understand either. It will soon all be cleared up, I assume.”

Masters worked himself into the seat. The fit was actually quite comfortable. The belt secured him in place. The

plane got up. The plane got down. To the old detective's way of thinking it had therefore been a completely successful sojourn. Henry was there to meet them.

"If you need anything else, I'm only a phone call away, Mr. Masters—ah . . . Ray," Taco said somewhat sheepishly. "It's still hard to call you Ray, Sir."

"I'll be glad to begin calling you 'Mr. Tarasenko, Sir' now that you are the CEO of a multi-state tutoring business, if that kind of formality seems easier."

"No. Taco and Ray will be just fine."

He taxied into the night and was soon airborne.

Henry held the car door for Masters and then entered the driver's side.

"Like old times," Masters said. "You behind the wheel and me sitting over here testing the metal of the seat springs. Now, what's going on?"

Henry took a sheet of paper from his pocket and handed it to Masters.

"A computer printout," he explained.

HENRY'S DEATH

Jrmtu eo;; for/ zpv/ 33

YouWonWithAStupidMove.

IShouldHaveBeenTheFirst.

You'llGetYoursWhenTheTimelsright.Tom

"I received an old fashioned floppy disk in the mailbox at my home. It contained a single Word file. This is all that was on it. I figure the second line is in code and probably gives details about what seems to be a threat on the first."

"Yes. More like a formal announcement. Henry's Death. Is this the first indication you've had about all this?"

"Yes, it is. Out of the blue. I don't even have a computer. All my acquaintances know that. Had to engage Kyle, my grandson, next door to help. If the person knows me, why would he send it to me on a disk? It doesn't make sense."

"It doesn't seem to, does it? One question would then become why someone who doesn't know you would be announcing your death. Another would be why that particular

technology might be preferred or perhaps necessary—the disk and computer capabilities I mean – rather than a printed note.”

“I hadn’t configured it in those ways. I knew I needed you. Where do we begin?”

“At your grandson’s computer.”

Ten minutes and four stale Danishes later the two men were in Kyle’s room. They pulled chairs close to the young teenager and watched as he re-opened the file from the disk. Masters already had a theory.

“I think the coded line is merely a position shift on the keyboard—a World War I spy code and not really very effective. Either the letters were typed with the fingers on a different row— up one or down one—or the finger placement was shifted one space right or left. I’ll bet on a finger shift from proper hand position. The simplest is moving the fingers a single space to the right because that way each finger has a key on which to rest. Retype the coded line using the keys that are just to the left of each letter or figure. ‘J’ would become ‘H’, ‘R’ would become ‘E’, and so on.”

It was soon completed: Henry will die. Oct. 22

“Not much to go on,” Henry said worrying with his hands.

“But it does confirm and specify the threat,” Masters added. “Does that date have any special meaning to you— birthday, anniversary, anything?”

“Nothing comes to mind.”

“Do you have anything special planned for this October 22nd?”

“Let’s see; it’s a Monday. It’s tomorrow, in fact, isn’t it? I am to play in a local chess tournament but that has no historical significance. It’s the first annual.”

“How about characterizing it as the third Monday in October. Does that ring a bell?”

“Nothing. I’m sorry.”

“Anything related to computers? Any computer enemies? I’m not even sure what I’m asking,” Masters said suggesting some initial frustration with the matter.

“Well, I beat CHESSIAC, one of the first man vs. computer, chess computers, back in the dark ages. I doubt if it is coming after me, Ray. Probably scrapped for metal forty

years ago.”

“That’s right. You were the first to beat it as I recall. I was there to witness your victory.”

Henry nodded and managed a faint smile.

“My fifteen minutes of fame.”

“What I can’t understand,” Kyle said, “Is why this message is on a floppy instead of a CD or flash drive. Floppies are nearly extinct.”

“Interesting,” Masters said. “It may reflect the age or at least the generation of the person who sent it.”

“Older rather than younger, you mean?” Kyle asked seeking clarification. “Like he is still more comfortable with the old technology.”

“That’s right.”

“Maybe his computer is old as well and has no CD capability.”

The old detective nodded and turned to Henry with a new possible direction.

“Of course, you and I made some significant enemies back in the old days.”

“We did, but I figure it would take lots of doing to locate me back here in Syracuse.”

“You’re saying this is likely somebody with a major score to settle and had the dogged determination to stick with the search until he located you.”

“Could be. I suppose that makes it even more frightening.”

“Could it just be a bluff, something to scare grandpa?”

“That’s always a possibility but not one I’m willing to just assume and let go,” Masters said.

Kyle nodded and bit at his lower lip, flashing a quick, private, glance toward his grandfather.

“I don’t get it. Why warn, grandpa? Why not just ambush him and be done with it?”

The boy’s adolescent impatience was showing.

“Again, interesting questions, Kyle,” Masters said. “I can think of several reasons. One might be to make him squirm—make him sweat. That suggests a mind-game player, I suppose.”

“But there’s only one day left? That isn’t very long. If

he wanted to make him squirm wouldn't he have stretched it out over lots more time?"

"Another good point, Kyle."

Henry had a thought.

"Perhaps time is somehow important or limited."

"And how might that be?" Kyle asked.

Masters answered.

"It could be a matter of scheduling. Perhaps the bad guy only recently found Henry and he could only be here tomorrow for some reason. That might indicate a person whose life is heavily scheduled like a professional person or an athlete. It could also have to do with making sure Henry doesn't have time to call in assistance."

"Like getting you here, for instance," Henry said. "That would suggest it might be somebody who knows about our connection—our relationship. That means somebody from fifteen or more years ago."

Masters pushed his chair back a bit from the others.

"So, what do we have at this point," Masters asked, really thinking out loud. "We have somebody, probably from long ago, who holds a grudge against or thinks he has a score to settle with Henry. Somebody who is knowledgeable about computers though may not have progressed with the times. He or she is at least somewhat familiar with the Word software program. He's a game player, using code as he did. He may be in an occupation that calls for tight, long-term schedules. And somebody who probably knows about our association."

He paused and turned to Kyle.

"Is there any way to know in which revision of 'Word' this floppy file was created? I'm not sure that was the proper terminology."

"Edition not revision but that's minor. The answer is yes. It was created in the edition just before the latest one. Not fully up to date but close. Lots of folks run two or three behind."

"Show me some things that can be done with Word—ways to set and manipulate the entries," Masters said.

Kyle put the software through its paces as Masters watched and learned. He got the crash course on fonts and font sizes, styles, alignment, spacing, bullets, numbering,

borders, shading, use of color, italics, underline, bold or regular, spreading and condensing of letters, and the percent of increase and decrease in font presentation on the screen.

“One thing puzzles me,” Masters said. “Why would he use the keyboard code, which is so simple to decipher, when all those other techno-alternatives are available? It required very little creativity on his part and presented no challenge at all for us. It must have been a message he needed to have Henry decode immediately. We’re back to the time line. I suppose one that was easy to crack would therefore be better than hard to crack. But then why resort to the use of a code at all? Unless, it was a signal of some kind. A single that there was more code or more gamesmanship of some kind to come. You’re sure there is nothing else on that floppy?”

“Well there will be the invisible code that will tell exactly what computer it was composed on,” Kyle said, “But that takes software not generally available. Law enforcement and government agencies would have it. And, oh yes, I can tell you when it was composed or last modified.”

He right clicked on the file name in the log.

“October 9th of this year at 11:48 p.m. – just before midnight.”

“Relatively recently then, but long ago enough to indicate there has been some substantial planning. Perhaps the doings of a night owl. Good work, Kyle. Henry, let’s get this disk to your friend at the police department. See if their computer guys can tell us anything else. First, though Kyle, can you make a copy?”

“Already have it saved to my desk top. Need it on a floppy?”

“No. That will be sufficient.”

Henry made a call and the disk was soon picked up and on its way to the police lab.

“How did it arrive? Mail did you say?” Masters asked.

“About two a.m. this morning somebody pounded on my front door. By the time I arrived, nobody was there but the lid to my mailbox was propped open with a wooden match. I found the disk in an envelope inside the box. It was not addressed, stamped or canceled. It had just been placed in there by somebody.”

“Seems somebody wanted to make sure you didn't miss it – propped open like that,” Kyle said.

“Somebody who wants to kill you and who has recently been on your front porch,” Masters added.

“The actual bad guy might have had somebody else deliver it,” Kyle suggested.

“I doubt if a would-be killer would risk that, Kyle. I'm betting he was here in person.”

“There is one more thing, Ray,” Henry said. “As I look back on it I do believe the door was already unlocked when I went to open it after the knock. Yes. I'm sure of it. The dead bolt latch was in the vertical, open, position rather than the horizontal, locked, position. I'd never go to bed without locking and bolting it.”

“So, somebody found a way to gain access to your house and probably left it open when they left – either an oversight or a message. They had been inside prior to the knock on your door. What would they have been doing in there?”

They fell silent. It was Masters who eventually spoke first.

“Let's take a look at that message again, Kyle. Bring it up on the screen. It is all he sent and yet it is obviously incomplete. Where is the rest of the game? Where is the tease?”

The image appeared and the three of them perused it for some time.

“What happens if you manipulate the word DEATH with some moves on the keyboard?” Masters asked.

“Let's see. One space to the right and it becomes ffrsyj. One to the left and it becomes swRG. Up one row it's e3q5y. Down one it's cdzgn. Doesn't seem to hold much promise.”

He continued to play with other alternatives, clearly intrigued with the new-found possibilities. None seemed in any way helpful, although it did show some promise for sending notes to his girlfriend at school.

Masters pushed his chair back, again. His face brightened.

“I'm betting that we've been looking right at it all the

time,” he said. “If I’m right we are dealing with an arrogant foe who truly believes his brilliance surpasses ours. That kind of mentality has an insatiable need to prove its superiority. Game players enjoy the risk involved and continually put their reputation—even their well-being—on the line. Where is the risk here? Where is the challenge that he believes Henry won’t be up to? I’m hoping those needs led him to be carelessly over-confident. In fact, once again I’ll bet on it.”

“You have me thoroughly confused,” Kyle said.

Henry managed a faint smile through his own confusion.

“When you rub shoulders with Raymond Masters you have to get used to that, son.”

Masters proceeded according to his hunch.

“Those three, short, horizontal, lines at the bottom of the message. They seem fuzzy, odd, strange, don’t they?”

“The lines?” Kyle said. “Yes, I guess so. I dismissed them as some kind of garbage. Lines shouldn’t be fuzzy. I really hadn’t paid any attention to them. They certainly weren’t made with the underline key.”

“Precisely according to the author’s plan. Like I said, he thinks of us—everybody, probably—as being inferior to him. What size font is the message?”

“Twelve point. That’s pretty much typical.”

“And the lines?”

Kyle moved the cursor over the lines and pointed with his hand to the indicator window.

“Two! A font size of two? I don’t understand. A line at two would be nearly invisible. Those lines aren’t lines, sir. Why two when the rest is in twelve?”

“Increase them to twelve like the rest of the words and I think you will have your answer.”

The lines were highlighted and the size changed. It was like magic. Kyle gulped and glanced back and forth between the two men.

“Good news / bad news, huh?” he said.

Henry’s brow furrowed, clearly asking for clarification. Kyle obliged.

“The good news is that Mr. Masters very likely just solved the case. The bad news is that the guy is clearly mad.

I don't know about you two, but I'm pants wettin' scared."

"Read us what the lines say," Masters asked leaning forward and fumbling to position his trifocals.

"First line: You won with a stupid move. Second line: I should have been the first. Third line: You'll get yours when the time is right. Then its signed, TOM. Who's TOM, grandpa?"

Henry shrugged and shook his head. Before he could speak Masters interjected a thought.

"Tom is written in capital letters; the other words follow the more usual lower case pattern. I imagine the T-O-M represents the man's initials or a company name or some such thing. Does that take you anywhere, Henry?"

"My, does it! Terrance Otto Miller. He is an old chess nemesis. That monogram was on his jackets. Actually, he has always outranked me so what reason would he have for holding a grudge?"

"Think about the first two lines: You won with a stupid move. I should have been the first. What could that have been about? Some special match you and he had? Is he chastising you for having made some inept, but lucky move?"

"Ah! Yes! I see. It could have been way back at the CHESSIAC competition. Four of the top players in the state were invited to match our skills against the new computer. We drew straws to determine the order in which we would play. By dumb luck I got first try. He could be saying that he believes he should have gone first—probably because of our relative ranks."

"And the second line?"

"Hmm. Ah! Fascinating, in fact. I had forgotten. During the course of the match I determined that the computer adjusted its moves according to the history of my moves. So, at one point, I had several alternative moves that would have made good sense. Instead, I chose to make the move of a rank amateur. I could see there was no way for me to beat it legitimately at that point. It bit and became confused, I suppose you could say. It reconfigured its strategy based on that inconsistent move. That quickly set in motion a situation of queen vulnerably and I had it in checkmate in just two more moves. What I figured was a brilliant move, Terrance must

have assumed was a stupid move that should have gotten me nowhere, but instead allowed me to beat the machine. I'm astonished he hasn't seen through my strategy."

"With his ego, he may have needed to reference that as proof of your stupidity so he never let himself look for the brilliant possibility," Masters suggested.

"Guys. If you don't mind, I'm more concerned about the third line," Kyle said with some urgency and impatience.

"When will the time be right? What is he referring to?"

"I need to walk through your house, Henry," Masters said, standing.

"Through the house?" Henry asked. "Certainly. You may wander at your pleasure."

They were soon across the yard and back at Henry's home. Kyle and his grandfather followed the big man on his leisurely, hands behind his back trek – puzzled but intrigued. As Kyle would open his mouth to speak, his grandfather would hush him with a finger to his own lips.

"The Grandfather clock," Masters said pointing.

It was six feet tall, mahogany, with beautifully hand carved ornamentation. The long, brass, pendulum swung a wide arc. The smallest hand jerked along its way one second of time with each swing.

"It's almost five minutes behind," Kyle noted. "I've never seen it behind in all my life."

"That's true," Henry agreed.

Masters opened the long, narrow, etched glass, door at the bottom. He stopped the pendulum and bent to look inside. He felt it up and down, then focused his investigation near the top where it was hard to see.

"I will need a mirror, if you please."

"On my dresser," Henry said directing it to Kyle.

The lad was soon back and handed it to Masters.

"There appears to be some sort of plastic explosive molded to the back of the pendulum. Its position and weight is slowing the swing ever so slightly."

He stood and opened the door to the clock face above.

"As I suspected."

He pointed.

"Electrical contact points have been installed. One at

five past the hour – at the ONE – set at a distance so only the minute hand would brush against it. The other at straight-up twelve o'clock more toward the center of the face in the position where the hour hand sweeps a smaller circle. The undersides of the tips of the metal hands appear to have been sanded so they will make excellent electrical conductors when they slide across the contact points. There is undoubtedly a battery in place, also.”

Kyle couldn't contain himself any longer.

“So, when the clock hands show five after twelve the place will go kaboom! But that will be at noon today, not on the 22nd like the coded part of the message says.”

Master took out his pocket knife and carefully pried loose the hour hand.

“Ingenious! Look here! See this plastic tab covering the contact area out near the end. Notice its 'L' shape with the back-pointing leg trailing close to the face as the hand moves clockwise. During the first pass, the hand would be insulated by that tab so a circuit would not be completed. As it clicks past the raised contact, however, that backward dragging leg—barely stuck in place—would catch on the raised contact and be pulled off leaving the contact clear for the next pass.”

“I'd say ingenious,” Kyle said. His forehead then furrowed. “But why go to all that trouble? Why not just wait and install it tonight instead of last night?”

“Two reasons, I imagine,” Masters went on. “First, Terrance wanted to minimize the possibility he would be seen at the crime scene. Doing it all—tampering with the clock and delivering the envelope—in one stop had the best chance of accomplishing that. Second, with the tiny loose insulator tab blown to bits along with the rest of the cabinet, he figured it could never be connected to the deed. He would arrange an unshakable alibi for the period between 12:05 this noon and the time of the explosion a little after midnight since it is within that time frame that the contacts would seem to have had to have been installed, assuming a single pass—without the ingenious use of the tabs, that is. With a substantial alibi, he knew he could not become a viable suspect.”

“But how could the face survive the blast and reveal what you have found – the contacts and all?” Kyle asked.

“Look here.”

Masters pointed to the underside of the wooden piece that divided the upper face section from the lower pendulum section.

“An iron plate of some kind. Maybe a half inch thick.”

“That would have afforded significant protection to the face above from the blast.”

“But why would the TOM guy do that. Wouldn't he want the face blown to smithereens?”

“He is a game player. He needed to have it preserved for analysis in order for his alibi to protect him. The clock would be found to be set to explode at 12:05 and his alibi would make it impossible for him to have been here at the necessary time to rig the clock.”

“So, the clock had to explode in order to prove he was not the one who set it to explode,” Kyle said offering his take on it. “I'd say ingenious.”

“But the message on the disk is like a full confession, right,” Kyle went on after a moment. “He signed it with his initials and the tracer will indicate his computer.”

“Several possibilities. Even if the disk weren't destroyed in the explosion, who would have any reason to search an old fashioned floppy disk for clues in a bombing? Those clues were solely his game between him and Henry. Also, I believe he felt rather certain that Henry wouldn't be able to decode his message in its entirety—especially given the very short time period that was allowed. But, even if Henry had decoded it, Terrance believed he would be unable to solve the riddle referencing time – the clock – that was implied in the third line. And, with Henry dead, who would be left to link his life with Terrance's?”

“A multilevel game,” Henry pointed out.

Kyle had one more observation.

“This TOM guy is clearly brilliant. I'm betting he purposefully used the outdated floppy technology so if it was found later nobody would even consider it had played any part in anything so recent.”

“An excellent observation, Kyle – one I must admit I had not considered,” Masters said.

“So how do we find TOM – Terrance?” Kyle asked.

“The question is where can he be right now that is not far from here? Someplace where he will be clearly visible to many reliable witnesses.”

“I think I can answer that,” Henry said. “He will be at the Central New York Chess Tournament that is being held today and tomorrow at a hotel out by the lake. I mentioned I was to play in it. There is a high-profile series of media events all day long.”

“That also probably explains the time-line—the date he chose was one that coincided with the very public local event where he would undoubtedly be center stage. Call your police contact and have Terrance picked up the moment he arrives for the competition.”

“I can’t thank you enough, old friend,” Henry said putting his hand on Masters’ shoulder.”

“Yes. Thanks. It was awesome watching you work, Sir. Grampa has told me so many stories about your cases. Is that it, then?”

“Not by a long shot, son. Somebody here still owes me breakfast!”

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Story Four
The Gargoyle Murder:
A Short Raymond Masters Mystery
By Garrison Flint

[Note: This story contains more graphic violence than is typically found in Raymond Masters stories.]

Raymond Masters – tall, portly, up-side septuagenarian – exited a cab across the street from the three story, Gothic, home of Lester Bristol. He finger-combed his overly ambitious, gray, mustache, a match in hue and texture to his short, thinning, hair – seldom combed but never really untidy. He adjusted his hat and buttoned his full length, brown tweed, overcoat against the biting, late afternoon, November, breeze.

Masters reveled in the gently rolling, open, hills of western New York State, which contrasted most favorably in his mind with the flat, crowded streets of the big city on the coast where he had spent most of his life as a police detective of international note. The nippy winter winds left something to be desired, but in light of the multitude of delights presented by the area he maintained some flexibility on that issue.

Years before, he had retired to Rossville, a lazy, friendly, small town some forty-five minutes to the southeast of Hornell – the city in which he found himself. His goal had been a quiet retirement. His reality was one 'little' case after another – some for friends, some emerging around him, a few for pocket change.

This outing was for a friend – the grandfather of the ten-year-old boy, whose face Masters figured, was the one

peeking down at him from an attic window. He tipped his hat in the lad's direction. The face disappeared and the curtain swung back, shivering for a moment there in the window, obscuring the view.

Five years earlier the boy's mother had died in a car accident. The boy, riding with her and securely strapped into the back seat, had experienced only minor abrasions. After her death, the grandfather's visiting privileges had been unceremoniously suspended by the father – his son-in-law.

During a recent, two week, period the newly retired grandfather had kept a careful, surreptitious, watch on the house. He found that the boy appeared outside infrequently and then only on the sidewalk to and from the limo that transported him to and from school. His observation was that the boy spent a great deal of time at the attic windows. He was worried, in that helpless, troubled sort of way that gnaws at one's soul and won't allow sleep to come easily at night.

Masters crossed the street and walked the gently curving, cobblestone, path to the oversized, front door. It was a gray stone structure with black painted, wide, wooden trim. The front stoop was cement with a wooden, bonnet-like, flat roof. Small, ugly, busts carved from stone – gargoyles – jutted out along the roof line and at odd, fully unpredictable, spots along the walls.

A network of massive trellises all but hid the stone face of the house and was entwined with heavy, ancient looking vines several inches thick at their base. Their shiny green leaves, clinging with an obvious tenacity to the thick, dark woody stems, presented a stark contrast to the bare, black, silhouettes of oak trees looming tall, guarding the premises like gaunt giants in search of one, last, warm, quaff before the snow settled in around them. The use of vines was an age-old architectural ploy from central Europe for keeping buildings cooler in the summer and warmer in the winter.

Masters rang the bell – at least he assumed he had rung it. A weathered rope set with an iron ring at the bottom hung in place beside the door. When pulled, it slid out through a curved pipe from inside and then reset itself to await the next tug.

The door was opened by Lester, himself. Considering

the evident opulence, Masters had expected a servant. Lester was flirting with forty but at first glance looked younger. If his temples allowed gray hairs, they had been disguised or plucked. His summer tan – or the tanning bed equivalent – continued to grace his face and hands. He was built like an athlete and his presence gave the unmistakable impression that he was.

"My name is Raymond Masters, Mr. Bristol. I am a detective and have been engaged to follow up on some new evidence surrounding the accident that took your wife's life a few years ago. I have several questions. It won't take long."

"New evidence? What new evidence? I have been told of no new evidence."

"May I come in?"

Clearly irritated at the intrusion, Lester hesitated but then moved aside. Masters entered into a large, bleak, high ceiling, hallway. He removed his coat expecting Lester to take it. He didn't, so Masters hung it across his arm and followed the man into the substantial sitting room which lay beyond an archway to their right. Masters took a seat without it really having been offered. Reluctantly, Lester followed his lead.

It was a fully unappealing room, with dark walls, dark trim, and an embossed, black, tin, ceiling floating some twelve feet above them. Its dark color made it appear even higher – invisible if one didn't pay strictest attention. The gray, marble, fireplace laid cold – white glove clean – with no trace of logs or kindling.

"You were saying . . ." Lester said really prodding.

"I need to verify some things about the final moments before the accident. I understand your son was in the car and hope he can shed light on several aspects from those final moments."

"My son must be kept out of this. He's never recovered from his mother's death. He harbors the belief that someday she will come back to him. Still has to take medication to sleep at night."

Masters smiled into Lester's face. He responded in his patented, calm, soft spoken, manner.

"Either I speak with him here in the comfort of your home or the police will undoubtedly request that you take him

to the station."

Lester sighed, making no attempt to hide his growing exasperation.

"He's in his room. Let me go get him."

With another massive sigh, Lester left the sitting room and turned right. Masters heard the hard leather soles of his shoes meeting the bare, marble, steps of the wide, arcing, stairway at the end of the entry hall. Each step resonated through the house. One landing. Two landings. Three landings. It confirmed, unnecessarily, Master's surmise that it had been the boy at the window in the attic.

Presently, the sounds returned, a distant, echoing, cacophony of unmatched footsteps descending the stairs. They entered the room. The boy – a match to a gangly ten-year-old from a Norman Rockwell painting – was still struggling into a blazer. Masters stood and offered him his hand – a gesture clearly not common to the lad. He offered a quick smile up into the big man's face and shook an unpracticed, exaggerated, handshake. He seemed at once uncomfortable and yet buoyed up and impressed by the offering.

"This is Mr. Masters. Mr. Masters, Blair."

"Blair! Your grandfather's last name as I recall."

Blair looked up at his father. Receiving no signal, he nodded at the old detective.

"Have you seen him recently? I imagine he must be an important part of your life now that your mother is gone."

Again, he looked up at his father who provided a response.

"Mr. Blair doesn't come around anymore, I'm afraid."

"I see. Well, Blair, let's sit and chat for a few minutes. You must be into sports – the bruise there just above your right wrist."

The boy tugged down his coat sleeve as he took a seat beside his father on a long sofa across from Masters.

"I fell down the stairs. I'm more the artist than the athlete."

It was clearly a well-practiced response, just laying in wait to be delivered on cue as such observations unfolded.

"An artist? I dabble myself – clay sculpture mostly. I'm

not really very good but I enjoy wrestling the clay into some form that at least faintly resembles my intention. When it doesn't, I just lie about my intention."

The boy's generally somber expression brightened.

"Clay. That's my favorite. I also draw and paint. I like to work in bright colors."

"The business!" Lester said intruding with a glare in Master's direction.

"Ah, yes. I do hate to put you through this all again, Blair, but there are several lingering questions about the accident."

"The one that killed my mother?"

"Yes. That accident."

"It's okay. I miss her terribly but I can talk about it."

His response – in words, tone, and demeanor – was different in kind and strength from what Masters expected in light of Lester's earlier comment.

"As I understand it, you were traveling down the steep hill from camp on a winding road."

"Yes. Late afternoon. It was storming. Mother hated to drive but Father had something come up and couldn't come after me. I'd been there four days – the longest I'd ever been away from home."

His eyes brightened then faded.

"I believe the report you gave police at that time was that instead of turning with the road, the car just went straight ahead over the high embankment and into the ravine below."

"I don't recall what I said. The way I remember it is that a few minutes after we started down the road Mother began pumping the brake pedal. I could see her leg moving. The car kept gaining speed. At a sharp curve the car made a 360-degree spin on the wet road and then headed off over the cliff. I remember lightning flashing and Mother screaming. I remember seeing tree limbs brushing by the windows. I felt the car turn upside down. Mother flew out of her seat. I was strapped into mine. I reached out trying to help her. That's the last thing I remember."

"Just before the accident – do you have a sense of whether the car was skidding – as if the wheels were locked – or if they were turning?"

Blair grew silent giving the question some thought. He picked up a throw pillow and leaned hard against it in his lap. He sat back.

"I don't know. The memory fades in and out. Like I said we just kept picking up speed. Would a car do that if the brakes were on – wheels locked up like you said?"

"Probably not. You appear to be a bright young man, thinking it through that way."

"I'm in the most advanced program at school."

His tone gave no hint of pride nor was he bragging – just a matter of fact statement offered to substantiate the old detective's supposition.

Masters couldn't help but notice the contrast as Blair sat there beside his father. Lester was large boned, well-muscled, looking the picture of health. The boy was thin and pale, with narrow shoulders and darkened areas around his brown eyes; his father's were blue.

Masters looked around the room.

"I see no pictures of family."

He let it fall where it would, hoping for an instructive bounce.

"I got pictures in my wallet," Blair said reaching to his hip pocket, then hesitating, casting a look up into his father's face.

Again, with no obvious signal, he continued and was soon showing them to Masters. He moved to sit on the rounded, upholstered arm of the big chair in which the old detective sat. He began pointing.

"Me, last year's school picture. Jerry, my best guy friend. Angie, my best girlfriend. Not girlfriend, just a friend who's a girl. This is Mother and Grandfather and me at my fifth birthday party. This is Mother by herself. I painted a portrait of her from this picture. My art teacher says it's very good – that I captured the joy of her spirit."

"Were you able to match that beautiful blue of her eyes? I'd love to see it."

Blair looked quickly at his Father.

"If there are no more questions about the accident then Blair needs to get back to his homework."

"I have it all . . ."

The boy stopped in mid-sentence. It was apparent that he did not contradict his father even when truth was being compromised.

Blair removed his school picture from his wallet.

“Got a pen?” He said remaining close to Masters. “I’ll autograph this and you can have it.”

He didn’t look to his father for permission. Masters provided the pen and accepted the picture.

“Someday when you’re a famous artist I will be able to show my friends this picture and tell them I knew you back when.”

Rather than extracting another of the boy’s rare and guarded smiles as Masters had expected, he became agitated and stood, speaking mechanically.

“Nice to have met you Mr. Masters. I hope my answers helped you. I do need to get back to my room now.”

The boy left for the stairs. Lester stood signaling the meeting had come to an end. With some effort, Masters extricated himself from the overstuffed chair, patiently coxed his coat onto his large frame, and followed Lester to the door.

“A fine son you have there, Lester. Thank you for your time. If you wouldn’t mind calling a cab for me, please. The age of the cell phone has not yet invaded my comfort zone. I’ll wait outside.”

Masters was soon down the cobblestones to await his transportation at the street. When Blair handed him the picture it was accompanied by a very private, very quick, wink. It was a not so subtle indication that there was something going on beyond the obvious.

Masters looked at the picture. It was signed with just a first name – hardly an autograph. Perhaps he had misinterpreted the wink. He flipped it over. There was what appeared to be a cryptic note.

“Gazebo 12”

Masters pocketed the picture. The boy had tried to set up a clandestine meeting. The gazebo would undoubtedly be found at the rear of the acreage. Unless there were twelve gargoyles, the number probably indicated a time – midnight, quite obviously. Masters noted and shrugged off the ethical consideration of meeting with a minor without parental

permission. He had spent his life enforcing laws but he understood they were intended to handle normal, usual, typical situations; this, clearly, qualified as none of those.

"I need a room for the night, maybe several nights," he said to the young cabby. "I'll go with your suggestion."

"Motel or hotel?"

"Hotel."

"High class to match that coat or slum city to match that hat."

Masters chuckled out loud, caught off guard by the young man's forthright commentary.

"Something in between – leaning well away from slum city I suppose."

"The Sinclair. The old standard in this city. If you need female comfort, ask Eddie at the front desk. He can get you whatever you need."

Masters filed the information with a private smile but without comment. He supposed he remembered something about female comfort – way back when. It was good for a second, lingering, smile.

"Can you be back at the hotel to drive me at eleven thirty tonight?"

"Sure. Here's my card. Marty. Marty Martin. Always at the other end of that cell number. Right here at eleven thirty."

He pulled to a stop at the curb. Not having anticipated an overnight, Masters had no luggage.

At the door to his room, Masters tossed the key gently into the air, appreciating the feel of it slapping back against his open palm.

"A real, brass, key," he said out loud, smiling his approval, contrasting it in his mind with the flimsy, plastic, cards being used more and more frequently in recent years.

The room was small but comfortable – far more ornate than seemed necessary. It would have felt larger without the oppressive, dark green, flocked, paper on the walls and the ubiquitous frilly these things and the garish those things.

He removed his overcoat, slipped out of his loafers, and dialed the boy's grandfather.

"Tom. Masters here. I met briefly with Lester and Blair.

He is a fine lad. Smart. Quick thinker. I smell something untoward – can't put my finger on it. I'm staying overnight. Several things I want to look into. I'll keep you posted."

"You're on my clock, you know, Raymond. Keep track of your expenses."

"That pleasure will be all mine, Tom. Will one copy suffice or do you require triplicate?"

They chuckled as old friends will.

"Tell me more about Lester."

He took a seat by the window in a really not large enough, really not comfortable enough, narrow-armed, Victorian, sitting room chair.

"Lester. Where to begin?" Tom said. "He is the son of one of the last really successful ranchers in the state – a hard, no nonsense, some say severe, sort. Lester was born wealthy and remains wealthy. A good business man – at least he surrounds himself with top flight assistants. Took his inheritance and started a chain of tire stores – places that sell and install tires. Has well over four dozen now, I understand.

"There has to have been something loveable about him for my daughter to have fallen in love and married him. That was twelve years ago. His wealth certainly would not have been the reason. She knew she didn't need his money considering my financial situation. Whatever his charms they were never displayed in my presence. My impression was and is that Lester Bristol is a fully self-centered, odd ball whose emotions often teeter on that line between sanity and quivering jello. I know for a fact he sees a psychoanalyst – nobody sees analysts anymore. Perhaps it feeds his need to be the absolute center of attention. I've seen him take pills before dinner. No idea what they may be or why he's taking them.

"My daughter never once complained to me. She opened her home to me on a drop-in anytime basis. My presence there annoyed Lester and he made no secret of it. She just ignored his simmering snits and we usually managed to make a good time of it.

"Blair had just begun coming to stay the occasional weekend with me about six months before the accident. On several occasions, he offered the idea he'd like to come and

live with me – I never administered whippings. I didn't follow up on the comment, figuring most boys receive the occasional adult palm to their buttocks.

"He always insisted on privacy for his baths – odd, I thought at his age though not a problem, of course. One evening, however, after a particularly wonderful afternoon of fishing, hot dogs, and ice cream, he was still full of chatter at bath time. He stripped with no apparent modesty about it as we talked in his bedroom. It was when I winced at the bruises and scrapes that covered his body that he realized he had made a mistake. He was quick to offer an awkwardly spiraling explanation."

"I took quite a tumble down the hill behind our house the other afternoon. Fell out of a tree – onto some rocks – and then head over heels right down into the ravine. I'm doing fine, now, really."

"That was our last time together before the accident – well, our last time together, period. I confronted my daughter about it when I took Blair home. She made some comment about how clumsy the boy was and cut eye contact with me. She was a terrible liar and she understood I didn't believe her. I pursued it no further. Now I have to wonder if Lester was beating her as well."

"After the funeral I confronted Lester. He was ready for me. 'Boys Blair's age drown every summer. I hope unforeseen circumstances don't force that upon your grandson.' It was a blatant warning that if I took any steps relative to his disciplinary measures the boy would be hurt – killed. It was a private threat that I could never prove, of course. I've lived in a silent anguish these past five years. I don't want the boy put in jeopardy but I – we – have to do something, don't you see?"

"What I see is that this represents a whole lot more than you revealed to me at the outset."

"I apologize for any deceit, Raymond, but you have to understand . . ."

"You know there is no problem. We will get this cleared up. As I said, I'll keep you posted."

"Thank you, Ray. You are a friend indeed."

Later then.

Masters hung up. It was dinner time. He opted for the restaurant in the hotel.

* * *

His willingness to offer a few hours to assist his old friend in a seemingly standard inquiry to clear up some apparent irregularities in a boy's routine, had become a deeply serious, immediately pressing, undertaking.

The steak was beautiful – well done but not dry, gently browned and not blackened – but the horrific images that entered and lodged in his mind reduced its essence to pan-fried Spam. He pushed it away well before it was finished – something the big man may have never done before in his life.

He returned to his room and worked his way into the chair by the window to think. He took sheets of hotel stationery from the round table holding the lamp and began making notes.

'If Blair was being so mistreated why had he not told someone – a teacher, a counselor, the cop on the street, his grandfather that evening when the bruises were discovered? The answer had to involve the threat of something even worse. Had Lester threatened the boy's life? Had he threatened his mother's life? The power of that, of course, had passed. Perhaps the grandfather's wellbeing! Why had his mother allowed it to go on? Afraid for herself? Doubtful – mothers protect their children. Another hash mark in favor of bashing the grandfather, perhaps. How long would the boy allow the beatings to go on before he retaliated? If they were as severe and regular as it appeared, why had this super bright youngster not already launched his retribution?

'Why was he relegated to the attic in a house of twenty plus rooms? Was he locked in there? Clearly, he had some means of escape if he were serious about the midnight rendezvous. Was that high or low risk? Most certainly low risk. He had no assurance that help or protection would follow from the meeting. The threat, whatever it was, would remain.'

Masters moved to the bed, set the alarm on his watch, and lay back to catch a few winks before attending the late-night rendezvous.

* * *

Always smiling Marty was there waving away a

potential fare as Masters appeared at the bottom of the wide steps between the hotel and the curb. The young cabby was out his door and had the rear right open before the old detective had navigated the wide, aggregate, sidewalk.

"Thank you for your promptness," Masters offered as he mounted the rear seat with no little difficulty.

Marty waited patiently as his fare adjusted and readjusted his bulk into the cab.

"Not a problem. Next time, however, I will bring a shoe horn if you think that would help."

Masters liked the young man's frankness and sense of humor.

"Fine with me but do they make those gadgets for use with size triple Z?"

Marty closed the door, smiling. He liked the old man. He would take good care of him.

"Same location from which you picked me up, if you please."

"A 'from which' and a 'if you please' in the same sentence. Tells me you really fit the cut of that overcoat more than the hat. The hat does suggest your whimsical side, however."

"A philosopher in cabby's clothing."

He nodded – a slight nod, in every way secondary to the all-consuming attention he focused over his shoulder and on his mirrors as he carefully and skillfully wove his way out into the surprisingly heavy, late night, traffic.

"Stop a block this side of the house. Will a hundred-dollar bill keep you waiting? I have no idea if I'm talking ten minutes or two hours. Keep the meter running of course."

"I'll wait. Need a few Z's. Doing back to back shifts today. Keep your money in your wallet – for the time being, that is."

Marty caught the old gentleman's broad smile and raised eyebrow in the mirror. Again, he just nodded.

The driver's initial caution – very un-cabby-like in Masters' experience – prompted him to observe the driving process more closely than usual. Masters did not drive. It was, unmistakably, a fantastically complex activity – well, to do it properly. The young man's eyes darted from front to side

and between the rear-view mirrors inside and out. He adjusted the distance between him and the car ahead depending on speed and congestion. He never honked but exhibited sensible patience.

The difference with this young man, Masters decided, was his driving philosophy. Foremost in his mind was a safe ride guided by prudent, well-practiced, moves. Far down his list came speed and with it the capacity to work in one or two additional fares per shift. He demonstrated no tendency toward anger or even irritation with those on the streets, many – perhaps the majority – of whom were far less cautious than he. Masters imagined he would be a wonderful father.

"Married?" he asked.

"Oh, yes, Sir. Way too young, but love and good fortune has been ours. Five years now. Two sons. We're considering number three but it is so expensive to raise a child properly these days. It becomes a huge decision, you know. You married?"

"Never. Probably the one regret with which I'll leave this earth."

"Hey. I drive lots of little old ladies – some of them classy enough for you I'm sure. Never say it's too late, my friend. I'd think even one year in a wonder-filled marriage would be all it would take to add tons of happiness to your life."

"You are an exception young man. You like driving cabs?"

"Yes. Wouldn't do it if I didn't. My plan is to start a taxi company of my own in a few years. The city is growing fast. I own this rig. Got enough saved back to buy two more. I figure it will take at least six with me driving one of them to get a firm foothold in the business. Only use credit as a last resort."

"I wish you the very best. I have no doubt you will achieve your goal."

The ride continued in silence. For Marty, the conversation had triggered exciting thoughts of things yet to come. For Masters, it was a fleeting reverie about the chances of finding a late-in-life partner.

"This be a good place to stop?" Marty asked slowing

and moving the cab close to the curb. The street was deserted.

"It will be fine. Like I said, I have no idea how long."

"Wake me gently when you get back. I tend to fight that returning-to-the-realm-of-the-living thing."

He opened the door and provided Masters a hand up.

Masters stood, buttoned his coat, and took time to do some reconnoitering. He was standing in front of the only other house on the long block. It was set further back than the Bristol place. There was a stone wall perhaps eight feet high that separated the lots. On the far side of Lester's house was a grove of trees twenty yards wide, a mixture of pine and oak like those in the woods across the street. It ran the depth of the lot. He needed to access the back yard without being seen.

Masters opted for the trees. He crossed the street where shadows and shrubbery provided cover not available on the open sidewalk that ran in front of the houses. He crossed back just beyond the grove and began weaving his way to the rear of the property.

Once there, he stopped, surveying the back forty, as it were. It was a huge expanse of neatly cropped grass, tennis and basketball courts, and a glass enclosed swimming pool looking much like a greenhouse there in the moonlight. A deep stand of trees marked its rear border.

The Gazebo was white, loosely enclosed in traditional latticework, retaining the openness of a deck or porch with four wide archways, each three steps above the lawn. It had two levels; a narrow, centered, spiral staircase led to the second floor. The structure was octagonal, twenty-five feet from side to side. In a setting of any less size it would have seemed huge and oppressive. Where it sat, it was beautiful and precisely proportioned for the area. He wondered if it were ever really used or if it were merely a massive trinket in some way important to Lester.

Masters waited in the shadows of the trees, keeping watch on the rear of the house – the attic in particular. It was eleven fifty-seven when he noticed a shifting reflection at an attic window. It soon ceased. The figure of the boy emerged from the opening and began a well-practiced, rapid descent

down the sturdy trellis.

He was soon into a hunkered down run across the lawn toward the Gazebo. Masters moved into the moonlight and walked to meet him.

Blair smiled silently as they met. A hitch of his head signaled Masters to follow him inside. They arrived on the second floor a few seconds later.

"Safer up here, Sir. It's all shadows. Can't easily be seen from the house."

"Let's drop the 'Sir' if you will. My name is Ray."

Blair nodded and allowed a quick, short lived, smile. They took seats in surprisingly comfortable, wooden, deck chairs – also white.

"So, what's this all about?" Masters said encouraging the story, or whatever, to unfold.

"First of all, Ray, I have to know this conversation will be private between just the two of us – detective-client privilege I think it's called. I can pay for your services if that's necessary to put the privilege in play."

"Unless you tell me things that make me believe you are going to hurt someone, you have my word on private."

Blair nodded thoughtfully and began.

"There is no good place to begin, Sir . . . Ray. So, I'm just going to begin. You ask questions if you want to. My mother used to say that my words sometimes get ahead of my ideas.

"Mother was killed when I was five. I'm ten now. I believe Father – well that's complicated. Let me use first names. I believe Lester killed her and tried to kill me by tampering with some tubing underneath the car. I'll come back to that. I want to get the whole, big picture out here at the beginning.

"Lester beats me. He always has. He told me that he told mother he would kill me if she ever said anything about it. That was all before the accident of course. He told me and often reminds me that if I run away or say anything to anybody he will have two of my classmates killed. He says he has arranged to have that done automatically if he is contacted about it from anybody. I'm not sure how that can work but I know him well enough to know that if says something, it is so.

"He also says that if he is killed I will not get any of his inheritance – as if I'd take it. He seems to think that protects him. He thinks everybody worships money first, the way he does.

"One thing about the beatings – well, two things. They never have anything to do with my misbehavior – well, almost never. They just happen. I hear him coming up the stairs shortly after dinner and I know I'm in for it. The other thing is that he is like another person while he's hitting me. He calls me Lester and tells me what an evil person I am and how these beatings are the only way to cleanse my soul. It's crazy talk – like he's doing me some kind of big hairy favor by hurting me. It's never really changed from as far back as I can remember. They sometimes last fifteen or twenty minutes – once in a while a half hour. It's not a constant twenty-minute beating. It alternates between fits of yelling and the beating. It's mostly the beating, though."

"I'm so sorry. We will work a way out of this, I assure you. You should know that it is your Grandfather Blair who asked me to help. He sensed something was very wrong but didn't know what to do."

"He's okay, then?"

"He's just fine."

"What about that new evidence you talked about?"

"A sham, I'm afraid. You understand, 'sham'?"

"Fake. I get it. A way for you to get your foot in our door. . . . Clever! . . . Thanks, you know."

"I know. Now about that complicated 'father' thing you mentioned. Explain."

"Lester isn't my real father. Mother told me that not long before she died. I didn't understand how such things worked then but I've been putting one and one together since. Mother made me by having sex with a man named Carl Miller. I have only recently met him. I like him so much. Mother had written things down and put them in my baby book. I guess she knew Lester wouldn't ever look in it but that I would. It makes me wonder if she thought her life was in danger. I keep it hidden in a secret place. I ran across the note when I was eight – almost nine.

"About two months ago I got up the courage to call him

– Carl."

"Your . . . Lester allows you to make private phone calls?"

"No. I've tapped into the fax line so I can call out from my room. That way he can't tell I'm calling."

"You rascal!"

"I remember Mother calling me that."

"How did you locate him – Carl?"

"In the phone book. There were only five Carl or C Millers listed. I had thought it through for a long time – what I was going to say, I mean. Each time I'd ask for him by name and then say, 'I have something Mary Bristol made for you.' If the person said he didn't know a Mary Bristol, I went on to the next. On number three I hit the jackpot – Carl D. Miller – the D is for David. I first asked some questions telling him I had to be certain he was the right Miller because I didn't want to be giving a dead person's stuff to the wrong guy. He didn't question that. I asked when he had known her, where she lived, how old she was, and the color of her eyes."

"Very resourceful, I must say."

"Once he passed the test I sprung the news on him. What she had made for him was me, Blair, age ten and male in case the register in which my voice fell might lead him to think I was a girl; I'm nowhere near the puberty voice change thing yet, and Blair is often a girl's name."

"How did he respond?"

"Not in any of the ways I'd prepared myself for, I'll tell you that. He said he knew me from a distance, that he'd been at my mother's funeral, and that since then he had kept close tabs on me, sitting behind us at church, watching me on the playground at school sometimes – things like that."

"Did he say why he hadn't tried to make direct contact with you?"

"Not then but later, yes. He said he didn't know if I knew about him and he wouldn't have wanted to spring that on me. He said that he could never provide for me the way Lester can so he had decided to stay out of my life. I thought those were admirable things he'd decided."

"Yes. I agree. You say you spoke with him later?"

"Lots of times. We meet out here every Wednesday at

midnight. We talk. He likes to hear about what I'm doing at school and my art projects. I bring him small paintings and clay figures sometimes. I like to hear about what he does. He's an EMT – Emergency Medical Technician – rides in ambulances to save people's lives. He's not married. I think he never fell out of love with my mother. She broke it off. She told him it was for his safety. That Lester became a madman when he got angry. My time with him is the most precious thing in my life, Ray. We hug and kiss when we meet and we hug and kiss when we have to leave each other."

"I'm so glad you have found him and have that relationship. I assume you have not told him about the severe treatment you receive."

"I didn't. I figured the way he loves me so much, he might try to help by calling in the authorities and then kids would die. That needs a footnote. I didn't tell him until this week. Lester beat me something terrible right after dinner on Wednesday. I could hardly move and for the first time ever he hit me in the face. He never did that. I guess that's so there won't be any marks showing to cause suspicion. He makes me wear long sleeves.

"I couldn't hide the marks from Dad – that's what we've decided I can call Carl – even though I tried to stay in the shadows and I wore a stocking cap pulled down low. I finally told him the truth about how I got the marks and then went right on to explain why he didn't dare try to help me. He agreed not to go off halfcocked. He said we would work something out. Since he said that, the need to work something out has been boiling up inside me so strong I can taste it. It's like I feel it in every breath and with every heartbeat. It's what told me I had to meet you and see if you would help. I knew you would. You have compassionate eyes. I could tell you have a soft spot for kids the way you talked to me and how you offered to shake."

"You are amazing. Your ideas, your vocabulary, your bravery, and your ultimate concern for your classmates' well-being."

Blair shrugged, embarrassed at Masters' description.

"So, what can we do, Ray?"

"As much as I hate to have you return to that house I

see no way around it tonight. How often do the beatings take place?”

“Never know. Sometimes only once a week. Sometimes every night for a week. I should say this. When he saw my face on Thursday morning he . . . what’s the word . . . winced, made a quick, greatly bothered, expression, and reached out to touch my cheek and jaw. His touch was so gentle. I’d never felt gentle from him before. His eyes got moist and he turned away. He said he was going to call me in sick for the remainder of the week. I haven’t been to school since. I think I look pretty good, now, don’t you? I want to get back to school you know.”

“I think you’ll pass inspection. You seem to be quick with the explanations when that becomes necessary.”

“Yeah. It seems like I’ve had to spend my whole life protecting the very man I’d like to kill.”

“Strong words. Wanting to and doing so are two very different things. You do understand that, don’t you?”

“Yeah. I understand. Now that you are helping maybe I can let go of that. I have to admit I’ve made up a hundred wonderful ways to do it – kill him.”

He abruptly changed the topic.

“I made this for you this evening. It’s self-hardening clay so it isn’t really dry yet of course.”

He turned and pointed toward the window from which he had exited the house.

“See the gargoyle sitting on the ledge there. I made it. First, I made a paper-mâché, life sized, model. It stands nearly three feet tall. Then, I plastered it with cement about an inch thick. I did the plastering out on the ledge because I knew I couldn’t move it once it was made. I painted it shades of green – mostly dark green. It has four red eyes and twenty-six red, knobby, spines sticking out some six inches all over its body. This is a miniature replica you might say. I’ll have to paint it later after it dries.”

“May I ask why twenty-six?”

“My mother was twenty-six when she died.”

Masters accepted the small statue and eyed it from several angles. Blair reached over and demonstrated how each of the spines could be removed revealing a slender

stiletto seated into the body – those, made from round toothpicks painted silver.

“In the real one I used ice picks. Sent for them over the internet. Really hard to find these days. They are just the right size.”

“Why did you make them removable?”

“In the stories I make up about him – The Green Gargoyle – he roams the streets at night killing off the bad guys. He reaches up and removes an ice pick then throws it at them or thrusts it into their guts.”

“Seems pretty gory to me.”

Masters put on a shiver and quick frown to emphasize his point.

“Weren’t you ever ten, Ray? Ten-year-old boys live and breathe gory. I think it’s referred to as a normal developmental stage. I ran across that term – and the stages – while I was searching the web for sex information. That’s also normal, you understand.”

Masters playfully spread his fingers on both sides of his head as if receiving a vision.

“It’s taking a while but suddenly the year I was ten is drifting back upon me.”

Blair smiled and tucked a leg underneath him eager to see what the old gentleman was up to.

“That Halloween I went Trick-or-Treating as the kid who kept vomiting – a mixture of catsup, guacamole, and very runny raspberry Jello kept in a large squeeze bottle for quick intake into my mouth just before the doors would open.”

“That’s the coolest Halloween thing ever! Yea, Ray!”

“As I recall I was the hero of my fifth-grade classroom the next day. I was also restricted to my room at home for the next week. Apparently, I had done damage to some shoes and rugs.”

“But it was worth it, right?”

“Oh, yes! It was worth it.”

They shared a smile and a quiet moment as fellow, gore obsessed, ten-year-old boys.

“I’m quite impressed with the artistic skill exhibited in this piece – the lines, the form, the unforgettable, sad, expression on the face.”

“I had some practice earlier. I made one like it for Dad, Carl.”

“How can I contact you?” Masters asked.

“I’ll watch the Gazebo every midnight. If you are here, I’ll come and meet you. How can I contact you?”

“Room 551 at the Sinclair Hotel. It has a phone of course.”

The yard lights burst on, transforming the area into the bright of day.

“Down, Ray! He’ll never spot us if we keep down.”

They knelt – no easy task for the old detective with the size forty-five waist. Lester, wearing a robe, appeared at one of the back doors and surveyed the yard. He looked the gazebo up and down, then turned and went back inside. Moments later the area was thrust back into darkness.

“Did he see us?” Masters asked.

“No. He just does that sometimes. He’s a very jumpy person. He probably thought he heard an animal or something. Let’s just sit on the floor for a few minutes to make sure he isn’t watching from a dark window.”

“Lester said you have to take sleeping medicine at night.”

“I think he feels safer when he knows I’m doped up. Every night he brings me two pills and a glass of water and watches me take them. Then he closes the door and seals me in for the night. It’s been a ritual at my door for as long as I can remember.”

“But you don’t seem the least inclined to sleep now.”

“I don’t swallow them. With my tongue, I slip them between my teeth and my lower lip. When he opens my mouth to make sure they’re gone, he can’t see them there. Later, I spit them out. I have a gallon jug almost full of them.”

“Clever.”

“I have to be.”

“I’m sorry about that, you know.”

“Yes, I know.”

“You said something about loose tubing on your mother’s car.”

“Oh, yeah. A day or so before he drove me to that little kid’s art camp he took me out to the garage – it’s a four-car

garage on the east side of the house. His car and Mother's car were kept there. Then there was the old car – the one Mother used to come and pick me up – the one that went over the cliff. He took me out to that car and we rolled underneath it on those low profile, mechanics' roller in and outer things. He showed me how to use a screwdriver. He was quite patient the way I remember it. I removed probably a half dozen little screws that held that metal tubing to the underside of the car.

"I thought he was being really friendly and thought maybe he was trying to be a good guy with me. I really hoped it was a signal he had changed! I didn't have reason to tell anybody about that after the accident. I was five. I would never have made the connection between a hand full of screws and the accident. Now, I'm sure it was the brake fluid tubing that he had me loosen."

Masters took the idea to its conclusion.

"And as she drove the car on that rough, winding, gravel, road, the tubing swayed up and down, eventually loosening or splitting so she had no control as you came down the hill."

"That's how I see it, now. It was like he had me fix things so me and Mother would be killed."

"You do understand that you did not kill your mother."

"I do now. Dad helped me think it through. He said I was nothing more than like a power screwdriver that Lester was using."

"Your Dad seems to be a wise man."

Blair nodded.

"Do you know why your mother didn't take her car, that night?"

"No. Not really. I have recently decided that Lester probably tampered with it so it wouldn't start. He was away with his car so the old one was all she had."

"I assume you may be correct in that. Anything else? I don't want you to be away too long."

"He never comes up to my room after he gives me my pills at nine. Beatings happen soon after dinner. But, I think that covers it. If I think of anything else, I'll call you."

Masters nodded and struggled to his feet. He opened

his arms and Blair melted into them holding a long embrace. The boy eased away first. Masters sniffled.

“When we have all this behind us I’m going to paint your portrait, Ray.”

“Think you can find a large enough canvas?”

Masters chuckled at his little joke.

“I like your philosophy of life,” Blair said nodding all quite deliberately.

“And just what do you see that to be?”

“You care about other people, you try to make things go better for the people you know, and you never seem to take yourself too seriously.”

“I didn’t realize I was that transparent.”

“To be a good model I believe you have to be transparent – let others see you for the good person you are trying to be.”

“Have I told you that you amaze me, young man?”

“A few times. I must admit that sometimes I amaze myself and that is always the coolest thing ever, you know!”

Masters nodded and smiled down at the boy.

“You better scoot. I’ll be on my way as well.”

“Later, then. Thank you. Love you. Thank you.”

He leaned down and trotted off toward the house. Masters crossed the west lawn into the shadows of the trees, then stopped and turned watching the boy safely up the trellis and into his room. He waited for the light to go on. It didn’t.

‘Right into bed,’ he thought.

Masters turned and made his way back to the taxi and the log-sawing, Marty Martin.

* * *

It had been a fitful night with waking visions of the helpless little boy and sleep-time horror tales of green gargoyles throwing ice picks at the bad guys in dark alleys. The hunched, green, figures looked like Blair. The bad guys all wore the face and iridescent blue eyes of Lester Bristol.

At a few minutes after four, the phone rang, awakening him.

“Masters here.”

It was a voice unfamiliar to him. Male, adult, tense.

“Lester Bristol has been murdered in his bed.”

The click from the other end signaled an abrupt termination of the conversation.

Masters sat up on the edge of the bed. He fumbled through his pants pockets for Marty's card with his cell phone number.

He dialed.

"Marty. Sorry to bother you at this hour. This is Ray Masters. I need transportation – quick!"

"I'm out front."

"Give me five minutes. Who is the Police Chief here?"

"John Ball. His step sister is married to my wife's second cousin."

"I won't pretend I followed that. You know him, then?"

"Yes. Went to his daughter's wedding last month."

"Raise him for me. Tell him Detective Raymond Masters requests his presence at 13942 West McArthur Drive. There has been a murder."

"Oh, my. Yes. Right away. He will know you by name?"

"We'll soon see, I suppose."

The cab and the squad car carrying the Chief arrived at the house within seconds of each other.

"Raymond Masters. As I live and breathe. What a pleasure – to meet you, I mean, not referring to the circumstances you understand."

They shook hands.

"What's this about murder? Marty said something about a murder."

"I received a call about twenty minutes ago. Male. Anonymous. Said Lester Bristol, the owner of this place, has been murdered."

"I know the place. I know the man. Never liked him but that doesn't mean I wish him dead. How are you involved? Why the call to you?"

"Long story, which I'll get to. I suggest we go inside and see what's up."

"Yes. Yes."

They hurried up the walk – Masters, the Chief, and two patrolmen. Marty lingered behind, leaning, arms crossed, back against the front fender of the cab. Masters rang the bell

then realized if Lester were dead he couldn't let them in. He tried the door. Oddly, it was unlocked. They entered. A patrolman found the light switch. The Chief gave the stark surroundings a visual once over and shivered.

"Is this a home or a mausoleum? Sorry. Poor choice of words. I suppose we just start searching the place unless you have specific information."

Masters shook his head.

"I don't. The voice mentioned Lester's bedroom. There is a ten-year-old boy who lives here with Lester. His room is up in the attic."

"The attic?"

"Part of that long story I promised you."

The Chief assigned floors to his men.

"Let's see what we have here before we bother the boy," Masters suggested.

The Chief nodded making sure the patrolmen understood. They nodded back and then spread out through the huge house.

Masters and the Chief took the second floor. It was behind the third door that their short-lived search came to an end. Lester lay there in bed on his stomach, the covers pulled down over the foot board and draped onto the floor. He wore an old-fashioned night cap and sleeping gown – loose and white – pulled taut down to his knees, not in the rumpled manner one would expect on a sleeping body. It seemed a scene out of a Dickens' novel.

The two men approached the bed. Masters felt for a pulse in his neck. He shook his head.

"Better get the Coroner here ASAP," he said to the Chief without more than a quick glance in his direction.

"On her way. Our standard procedure in calls like this."

"Mind if I snoop a bit?" Masters asked.

"I welcome your snooping anytime, anyplace on my beat, Detective."

Noticing a small blood spot on the upper left area of the gown Masters rolled it up to the nape of the neck.

"What do you make of that?" the Chief asked.

"What I see is a two inch, circular, skin colored, adhesive bandage just behind the heart. What I make of it

remains to be seen. Could be from having a mole removed for all we know."

A sturdy looking woman in her early sixties appeared at the door. Her graying hair was closely cropped. She wore tight jeans – over a remarkably well preserved figure – and a man's white dress shirt, cuffs rolled up, open at the collar, and tied around her waist. She carried a black, leather, bag in each hand.

"Betty," the Chief said moving toward her. "Got a dead one here."

"You better have, waking me at this hour."

"Betty Carter, I'd like you to meet the famous detective, Raymond Masters."

She strode across the room and greeted him with a forceful handshake though did not display the Chief's open sense of awe.

Masters began speaking.

"Dead about an hour – no more than two. No signs of a struggle. Get a picture here if you will. I want to get a look under that bandage."

Pictures were taken from several angles, near and far. Masters proceeded to lift the bandage with the blade of his pocket knife. He laid it back half way.

"A small hole in the flesh right behind the heart. No tearing of the skin. Clean and tiny like from a stiletto. Oddly, there was virtually no bleeding."

He proceeded to pull the bandage back until it was free from the skin. The Coroner put it in a small evidence bag and marked it.

"Two for the price of one," Masters said, pointing. "A second hole, an inch to the left of the other. Another picture – close-up – please."

That done, "Long narrow tweezers," he requested, holding out his hand.

He began to probe the second hole – the second hole in order of discovery, at least.

"Thought I'd seen everything. Never this."

He pulled a short, slender, rounded, piece of wood from the hole and held it up for examination in the light. They all gathered to see what he had found.

"Looks like the end of an artist's brush – a very small handle, shaft, whatever they're called," the Chief said. "Could that have killed him?"

"Merely a very clever plug, I'd say."

All the obvious, unthinkable, ideas began whirling in Masters' head. He described the deadly event.

"The stiletto was inserted, then withdrawn. The hole was immediately plugged with the stick, the area wiped clean of blood, and the bandage applied to seal the skin. Probably followed by a period of applying pressure until the blood stopped flowing. The murderer then fixed the night gown and left."

"But there are two holes," the Coroner pointed out. "Why would the man just lay there and let himself be stabbed in the first place? I mean few people sleep on their stomach like that – arms spread out alongside their head. Then the gown had to be raised. The exact position for insertion had to be determined. The stiletto had to be set and then plunged with some force into the body – twice, it seems. It would have taken someone with great practice to be that accurate, that quickly. It certainly could not have taken place with a struggling victim."

Masters walked to the nightstand and pointed to the glass. He pulled the tasseled chord on the Tiffany lamp to light it. The others joined him.

"White sediment dried to the sides and still floating in the dampness of the bottom."

"Somebody doped him up so he wouldn't know what was going on!" The Chief said, suggesting the obvious.

"It would appear so."

The narrow drawer was partially open.

"Several pill vials in there. I'm not up to date on such things, Betty. What we got here?"

"Both low level anti-psychotic drugs. Certainly should not be used together. Each from a different physician. G Goldman. Could be Gary Goldman the psychiatrist. Compton I don't recognize – could be an on-line prescription, I suppose."

Masters began thinking out loud.

"So, if he regularly took his pills before bedtime and if

someone had been able to place the knockout powder in the glass he used for the water, he could have been unconscious when the murderer came back to complete the act. There is a problem with that. So far as I can tell, no one has access to this place."

"Maybe the cleaning staff," the Coroner said. "Surely he had to have a cleaning staff to look after this huge place. It's grotesque but it's also spotless."

"Exact time of death seems crucial," Masters said looking at Betty.

"Body temperature coincides with your estimate. I can only narrow that range a bit. I'd say more toward two hours than one. Say one hundred minutes give or take ten."

"What do you make of the lack of blood, Doc?" Masters asked returning his attention to the wounds.

"It's a puzzle. I may find an answer during the autopsy. Stiletto wounds typically bleed less than those from wider blades. He was a well-muscled dude. Tight muscle tends to inhibit blood seepage from deep wounds like this – these."

Masters nodded. Those had been his thoughts as well.

"Suspects?" the Chief asked directing it at Masters.

"Clearly the voice in the phone call. I'm guessing it belongs to one Carl David Miller. You'll find him in the phone book."

"You know the guy?"

"Never met him."

"Then how . . . ?"

"Another part of that long story."

The Chief placed a call to have Miller picked up for questioning. Masters continued.

"It is with the greatest sadness that I offer a second suspect. Blair Bristol, the young boy I mentioned earlier. We need to go to him now. I'd prefer making first contact alone if you can allow that?"

"Certainly. In the attic, you say. Let me at least accompany you up the stairs."

Masters addressed the Coroner.

"Betty, do as you will with the body but please stick around. If my suspicion is correct your old fashioned medical skills and best bedside manner are going to be required."

Clearly puzzled she shrugged, accepting it without question, however.

With a short breather at each landing, the men soon arrived at the attic door – an opening with no actual door to swing there. They entered into a massive, nearly dark, unfinished area that ran the length and breadth of the building. The Chief broke out his flashlight. A sizable portion of the north side had been partitioned off. In the center of the wall was a door. It opened out. There were two, 2 X 4s, spanning the door. They were slipped in place inside metal brackets attached into the wall at either side of the door. There was no key hole – no lock of any kind. Suddenly, Blair's phrase, 'sealing me in,' became clear.

"The boy's room," Master said as they removed the boards and set them aside. Masters knocked.

"Blair! It's Ray. Ray Masters. May I come in?"

There was no answer. He turned the knob, pulled the door open and entered. The room was dark. He fumbled for a switch and flicked it. The light, though from a single hanging bulb, was at first over powering. As his eyes adjusted he saw Blair.

The boy lay naked on his bed, dozens of soft-hardened streams and streaks of blood covering his frail body. The blood spots on his face had been washed clean in places by his still flowing tears. He didn't acknowledge Masters' presence although it was clear he knew he was there. The boy just lay there, sobbing, clutching his stomach, his eyes fixed on the ceiling.

Masters went to the sink and wet a wash rag then returned with it and a hand towel. He sat on the edge of the bed covering the boy's midsection with the towel.

"We'll take care of all this. You know we will."

He sponged Blair's face and neck with the gentleness of a parent many times over. He turned his head and quietly addressed the Chief.

"You need to take a quick look at this, John."

The Chief entered. His whole body recoiled at first sight. He opened his mouth to speak. Master put his finger to his lips asking for continued silence. The Chief nodded, indicating he had officially witnessed the situation then turned

to leave them alone as had been the plan.

At the door, he hesitated and uttered a single, hushed, one word question.

"Doc?"

Masters nodded and turned back to Blair.

"When you are ready, I need to hear about what happened."

He continued cleaning the boy's face and neck. Masters had seen that kind of beating before. With each blow the perpetrator twisted his fist, abrading the skin. The man had clearly been mad.

Still, Blair offered no words.

"The beating took place before you went down stairs to Lester's room, correct?"

The boy nodded but kept his gaze on the ceiling.

"The worst by far that he ever gave you, I'm sure."

Again, Blair nodded, a long, shivering, sigh, interrupting the rhythm of his sobs. He turned his head slightly so he could look into Masters' face.

"He kept saying it had to last me a lifetime and just kept hitting me."

"I am so sorry. If we had any idea this would happen you know I wouldn't have allowed you to return."

Blair nodded – a slight, pained, sincere acknowledgment of the old man's comment.

"I killed him, you know."

"I don't know that for sure. There was another wound as well."

"Another? I don't understand."

"How many times did you stab him?"

"Once. I had it planned. I studied about it. I always thought if I did kill him I'd use one of my worst methods so he'd have to suffer terribly for hours before he died. But last night I just wanted to be free of him. I didn't feel any hate while I did it. It was just a way to finally get free – like getting to go back to camp forever."

"I assume you put sleeping pills in his water."

Blair looked surprised, then nodded.

"Yeah. He gives me two so I figured as big as he is he'd need four. After the beating I got the pills out of my jug

and climbed down the trellis. I thought I was going to pass out, it hurt so bad. I stopped to rest a couple of times. He always stood in his shower for a long time after he beat me so I knew I'd have time.

"I ground the pills up using the butt of my pocket knife and dissolved them in the glass of water he kept by the side of his bed. He always took two pills of some kind before bedtime. I had experimented about dissolving them in my room – before. Four remained invisible in the water. Anymore and it started getting cloudy."

"Why did you not just come back up the stars? I assume you climbed the trellis?"

"I hadn't decided if I was going to confess yet. Being locked in here seemed like a very good alibi. Then I remembered you knew about my trellis thing. At the time I was with you I wasn't planning to kill him. Honest."

"I understand."

My stomach really hurts, Ray."

"There is a doctor in the house, now. I think we should let her take a look at you. Is that okay?"

"Yeah. How'd you manage that?"

"She came to examine the body."

He nodded – no emotion showing on his face.

The doctor arrived. Even her years of experiences as Coroner had not prepared her for what she saw. A sudden look of revulsion washed across her face. She recovered quickly and immediately spread a broad smile as she approached the boy.

Masters gave her his place on the bed.

"Looks like we have some fixing up to take care of here," she said, softly, moving a finger back and forth in front of the boy's face.

"This is Doctor Carter and this is my good friend Blair. He says his lower abdomen hurts severely."

"How many fingers did you see?"

"One."

"Have you spit up any blood?" she asked pushing back his hair to examine his forehead and then each ear canal.

"No, Ma'am."

"I'll need a container of warm water and several clean

wash cloths, Ray. Pull that chair over here for my bag if you will."

Masters carried out her requests.

The boy was soon bathed front and back. The pan of water ran red, a match to the sheet upon which he lay.

"I'm going to let you air-dry. Don't want to tempt infection from a towel. When you're dry, we'll spray you with a disinfectant. Then I'll bandage a half dozen spots that need protecting."

Masters brought clean sheets from the dresser and together they changed the linen.

"Can I, may I, sleep? I've heard you shouldn't sleep after you've been hurt."

"That only applies to severe head injuries. From what I can tell you lucked out up there. You didn't lose consciousness, did you?"

"No, Ma'am."

"Then you just sleep to your heart's content. It will be good for you."

"Thank you for your help."

"You're as welcome as the birds in May."

"My Mother used to say that."

He flashed a quick, faint, smile, closed his eyes, and was immediately asleep.

"Excuse me while I go throw up," Betty said, low, to Masters. "I'll be right back."

The Chief stuck his head into the room – it was tentative as if to ask if his presence would be a bother.

"Come in," Masters said. "Better yet, let me come out. The boy's asleep."

"We have Miller in custody and he has confessed to the murder."

"Presents a quandary," Masters said.

"How's that?"

"The boy also admitted to the murder."

"My. I'd say a quandary."

* * *

Two mornings later Masters had the principals gather in the sitting room. He had remained at the Bristol mansion with Blair, asking that Social Services not take immediate custody

of the boy. He wanted all the autopsy and lab work to be completed before such decisions were contemplated.

Blair had been opting to wear only socks and his painting smock. It flowed freely and didn't bind against his abrasions and bruises. Marty had located a change of clothes for Masters – baggy brown pants – double extra comfortable – and a gold cardigan – triple extra-large. The fact that they came from a thrift shop tickled the old detective. He figured at those prices he needed to seek one out back in Rossville.

He and Blair were in the sitting room waiting when the Chief, the Coroner, a man from the forensics lab, and Carl arrived. Carl was in handcuffs and wore an orange jumpsuit.

Blair ran to him, administering an awkward hug, made so by the large, metal, cuffs chained to his ankles.

"Certainly, we can remove the cuffs," Masters said. "A father can't properly greet his son wearing those things."

He was released. The subsequent embrace went much better.

The Chief handed Masters several folders. Masters set them aside without opening them.

"Let me begin, this morning, by telling you what I think all this information is going to show us. If I start going astray, I ask you specialists to get me back on the right path, okay?"

The others nodded, their interest visibly mounting.

"Please, take seats."

Blair sat curled onto Carl's lap, touching his face and holding his hand.

Masters remained standing in front of the fireplace, fresh ashes in evidence from a wiener roast the night before. One well charred, obviously deceased, marshmallow stuck to an andiron.

Masters began.

"Lester had seen Blair and me in the Gazebo shortly after midnight. I'm sure he panicked, his mind racing through a list of possibilities – all of them promising dire consequences for him.

"Shortly after Blair returned to his room from meeting with me – up the trellis and inside through a window – Lester went to the attic and delivered the beating – the most severe of many hundreds over the lad's lifetime. From comments

made, Lester understood it was the final one he would administer. Immediately afterward, Blair called his most trusted adult friend in the world – Carl Miller – and reported what had happened. He also gave him my hotel and room number in case he wanted or needed to contact me.

"I will omit one step in the sequence here and come back to it. Blair knew that after the beatings Lester always took a long shower – maybe to wash away the memory or guilt. I don't pretend to understand his twisted psyche. At that time, Blair removed one of the twenty-six ice picks used as decorations on the gargoyle he had created – the one that sits just outside his window as if protecting him from a World of bad guys. He climbed down the trellis. If not being propelled by the most powerful of emotions he certainly could not have endured the pain such an endeavor must have produced. He pulverized four of his own sleeping tablets and stirred them into the glass of water, which Lester would use to take his own medicine. He then hid in a downstairs closet allowing several hours to pass.

"At approximately two a.m. he re-entered Lester's room making sure he was sound asleep – doped. He reports that he noted the slow, heavy, breathing and the man's lack of response to being jostled on his shoulder. He drew the covers down out of the way and raised the sleeping gown up to the man's neck. He climbed onto the bed and straddled Lester's body. Carefully locating the exact spot, he had determined from medical charts found on the internet, he placed the ice pick against Lester's back, directly behind his heart – above it in this case. Leaning forward, he used all of his weight, methodically forcing it deep it into the body.

"Blair had come prepared – years of planning had gone into this. From his pocket, he removed a large, round, adhesive bandage and the wooden end of a paintbrush. He withdrew the pick from the body and quickly inserted the piece of wood to plug the hole figuring that would reduce the bleeding. Next, he bandaged the wound. He pulled the gown back in place and returned to his room from outside – not wanting to remove the bars from his door, thereby blowing his alibi of being securely locked inside. He returned the ice pick to its proper place in the gargoyle, removed his uncomfortable

cloths, and lay back on his bed exhausted.

"Shortly after Blair returned to his room, Carl arrived. Knowing of the ice picks in the gargoyles, he climbed the trellis and withdrew one, figuring it was a perfect weapon that would never be found. He returned to the ground. The front door had been left open by Blair who had entered using a key his mother had provided for him years before.

"Carl proceeded to look for Lester's room, probably anticipating – relishing – an all-out fight with the man. Instead, he found him asleep. He wanted to do more than kill him. He wanted to rant and rave at him and tell him what a terrible person he was. He wanted the man to know that he was about to die and why – all at the hands of Blair's real, loving, father.

"Those things were not to be. The man would not awaken. He saw the empty glass and the medicine vials in the open drawer of the bedside table and figured he was under the influence of powerful sleeping pills. As an EMT he had seen it often.

"Carl had his own knowledge of the human body and was bright enough to figure just how to use an ice pick efficiently in the termination of a life. He pulled up the night gown and noticed the round bandage at the exact spot where he needed to insert the pick. He pulled it half way back from its right edge. He plunged the pick into the body, removed it, and folded the bandage back, pressing it into place. He probably applied pressure to the spot for several minutes to minimize any bleeding. He then rearranged the nightgown, more neatly than was realistic, and left. He replaced the pick in the Gargoyle and went home, not wanting to contact Blair and risk forcing the boy to later confirm that he had been at the house around the time of the murder. He then reported the murder to me.

"So, which pick killed Lester? The autopsy will show that Blair's pick actually missed the heart taking a downward diagonal path as the boy leaned forward. No major blood vessel was hit. That wound was not life threatening.

"Interestingly, neither was Carl's although it most certainly did puncture the heart. Unstable Lester, knowing he was soon to be found out and apprehended, and being the

only one who knew that he had not, in fact, ordered hits on Blair's classmates as described in his threats, saw but one way out. The toxicology report will show that Lester Bristol died by his own hand from a massive overdose of his own prescription medicines. Sometime between Blair's attempt at murder – and it was an attempt at murder to which he will have to be accountable – and the time of Carl's attempt, Lester had died. Carl had been so focused on the task at hand that he failed to notice the man was not breathing – he had no reason to suspect that he wasn't.

"I believe, considering the life-long, gruesome, circumstances under which Blair struggled to survive, the boy's age, and the paternal relationship involved, the court will, in its wisdom, surely show leniency, and that Blair and Carl will one day soon become the family they have so long deserved to be."

The experts nodded their agreement with Masters' presentation, and sat in silence, suddenly understanding why he was held in such esteem. Blair and his dad clung to each other and kissed, reveling in each other's' very presence. There was no doubt but that a wonderful life awaited them.

Masters adjusted his new sweater and flared his new puffy pants, feeling as spiffy as any portly older gentleman had ever felt spiffy. With that realization, he figured that when he returned to Rossville he just might drop in on the Thursday night mixer at the Senior Center! It should be teeming with those classy, little old ladies Marty had mentioned. Who knew what might transpire! Now if he could just remember that thing about female comfort! Hmmm?

Story Five
And Then There Were None
A Raymond Masters Short Mystery
by
Garrison Flint

Much to the old detective's dismay, his phone remembered how to ring at any hour of the day. If only he could infect the device with some of his own, gradually growing, forgetfulness. He chuckled at the absurdity of the thought.

"Masters here and who in his right mind would be calling me at two a.m.? Let me amend that. Gary Flint! Is that you?"

"How did you guess and it's only one a.m. here in the gently rolling hills of the Ozarks."

"Well here in the gently rolling hills of western New York it's two. Good to hear from you at any rate. What's up?"

"How would you like to spend a couple of weeks down here at my place?"

"You know I'd like that. I assume there is your usual ulterior motive to extract information about one of my cases for a new novel – the way you've done some, what, fifteen times before?"

"Well, yes, I figured that went without saying. But in all honesty . . ."

"Here it comes," Masters said smiling into the darkness.

"The ulterior motive sort of has an ulterior motive."

"It's the middle of the night, old friend! At my age, I have enough trouble sorting out information delivered in plain

English during the light of day. Simplify, please."

"Really too complicated to go into over the phone. The essence is that a retired professor friend of mine is having a reunion of sorts with four former students and he wants a presence there to help maintain proper decorum."

"Proper decorum as in keeping everybody alive until the friendly little get together is over?"

"You have a way of cutting to the chase. Your reputation always precedes you. He's counting on that. It's only two days and just up the road from my place at a small retreat center the Professor and his wife run now. Two days there. Twelve days here. A sizable stipend for your time there. Transportation provided, of course."

"When is this luxurious, carefree, outing to begin?"

"Five a.m. your time, this morning. A car will be by for you to take you to the airport. You'll be in Fayetteville by seven. I'll pick you up there."

"Confident that you could lure me into this, weren't you?"

"You know there's nowhere you'd rather be in Autumn than Northwest Arkansas—the magnificent colors of the Maples and Oaks, the gentleness of the endlessly cascading hills, the sunny warm days and the clear, cool nights."

"When you start talking like you write I can never resist. You're really working this one, aren't you?"

"Like I said, the Professor and his wife are good friends and he's really worried about bad blood boiling over."

* * *

The flight was uneventful, well, except for the chuckle raised when a four-year-old gave Masters the once over and announced that her mama was going to have a baby, also.

"Masters! So good to see you again."

"Same here, old friend. Where are those magnificent colors and gentle hills you promised? None seem immediately visible from here at NWX."

"In thirty minutes, we'll be winding our way south on the famous Pig Trail. Slow going but beautiful."

"Slow going fits my style just fine. Fill me in on the situation I'm about to face."

The promised colors and seventy-degree temperature

were both to Masters' liking.

"So, as I understand what you've just told me," Masters said summarizing twenty minutes into the drive, "Fifteen years ago, the professor, a social psychologist, gathered a small group of apparently hate-driven college students into a study/therapeutic group. They were paid well for the eight hours they spent together every Saturday over a period of three years. The purpose was ostensibly to explore the basis of hate—how it develops and manifests itself at various ages. The ultimate ringer was that fifteen years after graduation—this year—a large trust fund was to be split equally among those who remained alive, were not incarcerated, and showed up for this two-day event."

"That's it. There were originally six in the group. They had to file reports on their lives every six months in order to remain eligible for the ultimate payoff. In the interim, two died leaving the four."

"What sum of money are we speaking of?" Masters asked.

"With the interest accumulated it comes to just over one hundred thousand dollars, which is twenty-five thousand each as it now stands."

"Not a great amount but already over eight thousand dollars more each than if all six had been alive to share in it."

"Do the rules stipulate anything about natural vs. unnatural causes of death?"

"No. That, I believe, was an intentionally, insidious, exclusion. Like I said, Ethan is a good friend, however, we often disagree on specific matters of ethics. He's a means justifies the ends kind of guy. You and I have always been uncomfortable with that approach. I often find that it's Mary, his wife, and I against him in such discussions. She's as kind hearted as he is tough minded. Ethan has had a lot to overcome. His grandfather and father were big KKK supporters. Having been taught to hate virtually since birth, I'd say he's done a remarkable job of turning himself around."

"What's the name of the young police officer in the village up the road from your place? I worked with him on The Case of the Clairvoyant Kid, as I recall you later named it."

"Willy Rakes. Still here. Quite the family man. I

mentioned you'd be coming in. He was delighted at the prospect of seeing you again."

"You really were pretty sure of yourself on this, weren't you, Gary?"

"Have you ever not accepted an invitation to my place?"

"I suppose not. I'd like Willy to see what he can dig up about the deaths of those other two students who were members of the original group."

"I'll get him right on it. Ten minutes to my place. Coming up on some of the most gorgeous Autumn colors in the Universe."

"You don't think small, I'll give you that! I do have to wonder if the term Autumn is truly a relevant concept anywhere else in the universe—away from the mid and upper latitudes of Planet Earth, I mean."

Masters stowed the bulk of his belongings at Flint's house and packed a small overnight case to take to the Retreat Center. With the help of a maid, he was soon settled into one of the twelve small, one room, stone and wood cabins that encircled the main pavilion. The Center was nestled in among a sweet-smelling forest boasting magnificent, fifty-year-old, long needled, pine trees. A small, clear, creek trickled past no more than ten yards to the south of Masters' cabin. He was told that a quarter of a mile upstream there was a narrow waterfall dropping fifty feet from a stone bluff into a swimming hole below. He smiled thinking that if he were to enter it a flood of monumental proportions would probably devastate the valley below.

Just as he finished buttoning his favorite, bright orange, Hawaiian print shirt, there was a knock on his door.

"Detective Masters. I'm Ethan Rowland. I appreciate your willingness to be here with us. Flint speaks highly of you. You're the last to arrive. I have prepared a short summary file on each of the participants."

He handed a large, white envelope to Masters, who wasn't at all certain why he would need such information.

"Just what are you expecting to happen?"

"I have no idea. So far, so good, but they really haven't

had time together yet. These are four, volatile, hate-filled, people. During our sessions back at the university, the frequent outbreaks of verbal abuse often boiled over into physical violence. They really didn't like each other. Actually, each one hated multiple aspects of the others. It was a basis for inclusion in the group—a study of the hows and whys of the development and expression of hate in our society. They each represent several characteristics that are often the basis for hate: A black, an Hispanic, two whites, a catholic, a Jew, a Muslim, a religious protestant right, a religious left, two republicans, a democrat, a nonpolitical, one rich kid, two middle class, one economically disadvantaged, a genius, a homosexual, and then, of course, males and females. "

"A group ripe for wonderful intellectual and philosophic, growth producing, discussions," Masters said.

"Or, six individuals each trailing numerous fuses ready to be lit by anybody who managed to smuggle in a match."

"Check the fire at the door, was it?"

"Not really. The purpose was to study the interactions among, and the justifications presented by, hate driven young adults. It necessitated genuinely intense give and take."

"Were attitudes or positions changed as a result of the interaction?"

"Not for the better, if that's what you're asking."

"Were they encouraged to change for the better?"

"That was not a purpose of the study."

Masters assumed that meant no.

"They were more like baiting sessions, you mean."

Ethan raised his eyebrows and chose not to respond to the comment.

"The trust fund will be distributed tomorrow at eight p.m. In the meantime, the study will continue, watching how they interact and noting changes from fifteen years ago. They all know you will be here."

"And specifically, what am I expected to do? I'm not a bouncer, you understand."

"Just be here. Make your presence obvious. Stay out in the open all the time. Mingle if you like."

"Sort of like a badge flashing, off duty, cop hired to maintain order at a frat party?"

"Something like that, yes. Only you are no run of the mill off duty cop, Mr. Masters. Due to Flint's books, you are known far and wide. Two weeks ago, each participant was furnished with several of the novels built around your cases."

"Well, my presence is hard to hide, that's for sure." Masters said smiling and patting his less than petite stomach. "It would seem that in that way, at least, I am a natural fit for your needs. You will please anonymously direct the check for my services to the Children's Charities Fund on this card."

"Oh. I see. I wasn't aware . . . Yes. Certainly. As you wish, I suppose."

"For a professor, you seem to have unexpected inarticulate spells," Masters said, teasing just a bit, hoping to gently goad him into responding to the suddenly apparent philosophic issue between them.

"I just can't understand why you would not keep the fee."

"And I can't understand why I would keep it when I don't need it and so many children do. So I guess we both have come across something interesting about which to cogitate."

"I need to go into town and pick up a few things," Ethan said dodging the issue.

"Before you go, tell me when each of the others arrived here?"

"Andy arrived early, the day before yesterday about noon. We really weren't expecting anyone that early. The others came in yesterday afternoon—Beth about three, Sonja about four, and Dave close to six. There is an interesting aspect to that. They all chose to drive rather than fly. Probably means nothing."

"Thank you for the information. Have a safe trip."

Ethan left. Masters walked the grounds, smiling, making his presence known, and feeling the part of a fool. One by one the former students approached and engaged him in private conversation. It was as if he were holding court there in the shade of the small, rustic, redwood, gazebo.

"I'm Andy. We never used last names in this group. I'm comfy that way considering my years in AA—more accurately in and out and in and out of AA. I'm sober this week. I understand you're a hotshot detective from the east

coast. A little old and large for that, aren't you? Never met a cop I liked but then I never met a cop who liked me either. I'm babbling. Jump in any time."

"I'm Ray Masters. I do use my last name. Left the force a dozen plus years ago. Hope you feel friendlier toward retired cops. I'm here at the professor's request."

"I know. To keep us from killing each other off, I assume. Doubt if that's going to be possible. Prof saw to it we all came to hate each other in the worst of all possible ways. He also hates me because I had a brief affair with his wife way back when. She's so sweet and he's so . . . not. I guess I was able to meet needs for her that he never could."

"May I ask what you do for a living?"

"Optician. I suppose I don't need to tell you that means I make lenses. Most folks think I'm a doctor. Letting that assumption run has got lots of ladies into bed I'll tell you. Not much of that kind of action around here it would seem. What do you know about Purdy Crossing, the town up the hill—loose women-wise, I mean?"

"Nada, I'm afraid."

Masters smiled.

"Well, I think I'll venture up the hill and take a look. Ethan gave me an address. There was never much the Prof wouldn't do to degrade our morals and self-respect. A hike up a country road to Hicksville will be a first for me. I've lived my whole life in Chicago. Should be invigorating. By the way, on first take you really don't seem so bad, old man."

"Am I to take that as a compliment?"

"You're the one taking; it's up to you to characterize it, I suppose."

"I agree. Interesting—this time together," Master said not going to pass judgment one way or the other. "What part of Chicago are you from, if you don't mind my asking?"

"South side. Grew up in a foster home. A black dude killed my mother in a mugging when I was little. In one of its more brilliant and carefully studied moves, Social Services placed lily white little me in a black foster home in the center of a black neighborhood."

"I assume you must have thrived there, getting into college and all."

"I did well enough despite the environment, I'd say. Got a scholarship for being poor. There is an irony to it. My senior year I lost it to a middle class black girl under a new racial quota system the school board initiated. Que sara, sara, I guess."

On that, Andy left, glancing at his watch as if needing to hurry on to an appointment.

Beth arrived waiting only a few moments from Andy's departure. She was short and slender. She wore shorts and a halter of a hue that was nearly a match to Masters' shirt. It did more to set off her beautiful black skin than it did for Master's pasty white exterior. She introduced herself through a forced smile, handing Masters a flower.

"Picked it down by the creek. From what I've been able to gather you are a man who wouldn't object to receiving a flower. You seem far too gentle to be such a highly-touted detective."

"I will happily accept the flower and blush at your characterization."

She took a seat nodding and again forcing a quick smile. It was clearly not small talk that had brought her there.

"So, you think we're safe here? I almost didn't come not knowing. It's a bunch of odd balls—dangerous oddballs."

"Are you excluding yourself from that description?"

Beth smiled up into Masters' face.

"I suppose not. A summa cum laude BA in liberal arts and I'm far less than happy working an assembly line in a scale company—digital and spring for your weighing pleasure. I suppose that comment in and of itself places me in the odd-ball category, doesn't it? I lost my teaching job last year in a putrescent faculty cutting spree by the school board."

Again, Masters just smiled, not committing himself to agree or disagree inside a topic to which he had not agreed to discuss.

"And what important facet of the process do you handle?"

"I calibrate the finished product. Put on a weight, adjust and lock the scales to that measurement, and move on to the next fascinating challenge rolling toward me down the big, black, belt."

"Actually, speaking as an end product user, your job seems quite important. What good is an inaccurately calibrated scale?"

"What good is a thirty-seven-year-old spinster, or is that spinsteress? I refuse to use the term old maid—not yet anyway. I suppose I wouldn't marry me either considering my temper and sharp tongue and negative take on most everything."

"Self-awareness but no willingness to change?"

"Something like that. Let's just say I'm waiting for a guy to come along who likes to be controlled and put down and lives to be humiliated and used. If you find one like that send him my way."

"If I find one like that I'll send him to a therapist."

"Touché! You're okay for a cop."

"I have to ask," Masters said. "Your eyes have been tearing since you arrived here with me."

"The flower. I'm allergic to them. Never should have picked it. They are just so beautiful out here in the wild."

"Well, then, I thank you doubly for your gift."

"I'll see you at dinner I guess. I'm counting on that reputation of yours to keep me safe, you know."

Masters nodded. Beth stood and left. Sonja approached.

"You must be Sonja," Masters said, motioning for her to sit if she liked.

"What gave me away?"

"Well, I've met Beth and Andy and you don't really look like a Dave."

She nodded her head and forced a fleeting smile. Smiles just didn't come easily to these folks.

"So, you're the big gun the Professor brought in?"

Masters pointed to himself and wrinkled his brow, humorously feigning his innocence. Sonja nodded and broke another brief smile.

"Well, I qualify on the big part at least," he said. "May I ask about your profession?"

"Believe it or not I inherited my grandfather's gravel pit and I run it."

"So, you're saying your job's the pits."

"Just like the underarm electrolysis specialist."

"You were ready for me."

"A gal has to always be on her guard."

"I guess I didn't realize that. I'm sorry."

"I get your point. Overly defensive. I have a generally hateful attitude toward others. Men in particular. No offense."

Masters offered a single nod then spoke.

"So, tell me about gravel pitting or whatever the process might be called."

"Probably never that before. You're much like Mr. Flint presents you. I like that. I have a hundred acres of gravel laid in 400 feet thick by a glacier. We plant an explosive to loosen it and then scoop it out into trucks. Probably doesn't require a college degree."

"Which was in . . .?"

"Psychology. Figured I might find out what made me tick."

"And?"

"Most likely a personality disorder. Maybe sociopathic. At least asocial, not to be confused with anti-social. Never liked people much. I guess I don't value them. Certainly, never shed a tear over the death of one. Now, I ask you, what guy wouldn't be overjoyed to have a gal like me?"

"I'm going to assume that was rhetorical."

"You'll find I seldom ask a question that isn't. Part of my sarcastic charm. Keep the other guy feeling stupid and you're always in control."

"Or, keep the other guy feeling good about himself thereby building positive self-concepts and significantly bettering your chances for improved interpersonal relationships."

Sonja shrugged and stood.

"I need to go harass the others for a while. It's mostly why I came. I don't need the pittance from the trust fund."

She left. Dave had soon taken a seat beside Masters.

"So, you expecting fireworks?" sounding hopeful at the prospect. "I'm Dave, by the way."

"I have no expectations and I'm Ray, by the way. Apparently, Ethan does or I wouldn't be here. How about you?"

"I make it fifty to one somebody gets whacked before all of this is over."

"And what would the motivation be—money, hate, something else?"

"All of the above. We really don't like each other and yet I sense a bond of a kind."

"Bond?"

"Like siblings. I can beat him 'til he bleeds but nobody else better try."

"Interesting. Do you sense the others feel the same?"

"Can't be sure. I suppose there is another aspect to it that undoubtedly supersedes that. We all grew to hate the Professor. It was the only thing we ever agreed on, I suppose. Well, that and that each of us knows we are right and perfect and the others are all wrong and imperfect."

He smiled and shrugged suggesting that he understood the absurdity of his statement.

"Nice to have some certainties in this life, I suppose," Masters said, offering a smile only to document that it had been an attempt at humor.

He then moved on.

"What line of work do you pursue?"

"My degree was in art. I work as an assistant to Gemini. He's a world-famous sculptor. Chicago and Paris. I pour and finish the final metal castings meaning I'm the guy who really makes him look good."

"Do you sculpt on your own? I dabble in clay, myself."

"Really? Yes. I've sold quite a few pieces. A penny on the dollar to what Gemini receives. Probably less, actually."

"You sculpt for money or pleasure?"

"For money. I don't let myself enjoy things. It only leads to grief in the end. I'm the pessimist's pessimist at least that's what each of my male friends told me just before he left. I'm gay if that matters."

"It doesn't, if that matters."

Dave managed a sincere appearing smile and nodded.

"I've been admiring your hatband and belt," Masters said. "Exquisite work!"

"Thanks. I dabble in leather. Gives me a simplistic outlet for my artistic bent and fills time when I'm alone. I

brought some tools along. Believe it or not, Sonja asked me to make a hatband for her. Can I do one for you while I'm at it?"

"That would be very kind."

"Initial? Squirrel? Swastika? Nude?"

"A little critter of some kind would be great."

"A fox, then. That fits what I know about you."

"Fine."

Dave changed the subject.

"I'm going up to the waterfall for a skinny dip. Want to come along?"

"I appreciate the invitation but I promised Ethan I'd stick around the grounds here."

"Okay. Later, then."

Masters looked at his big pocket watch. 2:25. He walked to the Professor's cottage, which sat beyond the pavilion at the far northern edge of the grounds near the entry lane. Mary, his wife, was watering a flower bed.

"Mary?" he asked approaching her, his tone suggesting only the hint of a genuine question.

"Yes. Mr. Masters. How good to meet you. I was about to come down and say Hi."

"I can't imagine how you knew it was me."

"The twinkle in your eyes, of course. It's been written about, you know."

"How kind. Just as you have been advertised."

"Really. That's nice, I suppose. Ethan had to run up to Fayetteville to pick up some last-minute supplies. He'll be back by three or so."

"I've never seen that particular shade of mum," Masters said leaning over to get a closer look.

"Old Gold. I love it. I've been told it isn't northern hardy. I'm glad you're here, Ray; may I call you Ray? It's how Gary refers to you."

"Of course. It's what I prefer. You sound like you're expecting trouble."

"You know about male Beta Fish; alone they swim calmly, flaunting their colorful plumage, but put two together and they fight to the death."

"You're suggesting four Betas?"

"I'm actually fearing for Ethan's life as well. The way he baited them all those years I can't see how they could feel anything but hate for him. That feeling usually doesn't dissipate over time in my experience. I suppose it is that fear and my haranguing at him that is responsible for your presence here."

"The proverbial powder keg, you say?"

"Powder barrel would be more like it."

A police car entered the grounds and stopped a few yards away. A familiar figure emerged.

"Willy Rakes as I live and breathe," Masters said approaching him with a full smile and extended hand. "How good to see you! How is that teenager, Hans, you adopted a few years back?"

"The joy of my life, but right now I have serious stuff, Ray. A man, Andrew Wirth according to his wallet, was hit by a car as he was walking the road up toward town. He's a stranger to these parts, a Chicago address, so I figured he must be from the Center, here."

"He is from here," Masters said.

"How serious?" Mary asked.

Taking a small step toward her, Willy removed his hat and held it to his chest.

"The biggest serious, Ma'am. I'm afraid he's dead."

He turned back toward Masters and continued.

"It gets mysterious. It happened at the turn there at the cliff. The county recently widened the road in that area; cut eight feet back into the hillside. In the light of day no sober driver would have hit a person walking there. It was either an intentional hit and run, or the guy jumped or was pushed in front of the car. This week there's lots of traffic to and from the rodeo just on west of town."

"How long ago did it happen?"

"Fifteen minutes maybe a half hour. It was phoned in to 911 anonymously from an untraceable cell phone."

Masters began thinking out loud.

"If it was foul play, the first suspect that comes to mind is Dave Parker. He left the grounds during that period. Said he was going up to the swimming hole by the falls."

"That's were Hans and his buddies are," Willy said.

"Let me give him a ring."

It was determined that Dave was there and had been there for fifteen or twenty minutes. It really did nothing for his alibi one way or another.

"I suppose finding the car will be like the needle and haystack thing," Masters said, still more thinking aloud than asking.

Willy nodded.

"Probably four hundred cars up and down that road today."

"The women need to be told, Mary," Masters said. "Will you inform them? Tell them to remain in their cabins until we can formulate a plan."

Mary hurried off across the campground.

"I'd suggest you make another call to your son, Willy, and have him tell Dave to get back here immediately for his own safety."

The second call was made.

"I'll walk up the creek trail and meet him," Willy said. "I'll give him whatever protection I can."

Masters nodded and returned to the gazebo to think. Willy crossed the area and started up the trail.

Fifteen minutes later he returned with Dave. They made their way directly to Masters and took seats.

At the moment Masters began to question Dave, there was an explosion. It was Beth's cabin. The roof and two walls were blown into splinters. The men rushed to investigate. Masters' 'rush' garnered him a distant third place.

'Two killed in less than an hour,' he thought, suddenly awash with the seriousness of the situation.

Sonja came to her door and spent a moment looking things over. Then, true to her self-description, she returned inside without expressing further interest.

"I assume you called the coroner for Andy."

Willy nodded.

"I'll let him know we have a second body."

Masters poked around in the rubble removing several items and examining the west wall which was still standing. It and the rear wall were laid up in native stone. The other two had been frame. He then went outside and walked the area

immediately south and west of what had been the cottage. He picked up several pieces of window glass, turning them one way and then another.

"Finding things?" Willy asked, watching.

"Perhaps. Odd pieces of glass. Look at this one."

Willy took it.

"Globs of wax. Purple wax. Like maybe from a large, decorative candle?"

"That's my guess. There isn't such a candle in my cottage, however. We need to ask Mary about what was in there."

At three thirty Ethan returned from the city with supplies. By the time Masters and Willy arrived at the cottage, Mary had already told him of the events.

Ethan's first comment was, "Two down!"

Willy frowned.

Mary dabbed at her tearing eyes.

Masters spoke.

"Not a whole lot of compassion there, Ethan," he said.

"Oh, I didn't intend it that way. Of course, I'm sorry about it. Realistically, though, there are now two big winners. Sonja and Dave. Fifty thousand apiece."

Masters addressed Mary.

"Tell me how Beth's cabin was appointed. Specifically, did it have a large purple candle or any other purple wax figure in it?"

"No. It was generally identical to yours; youth width bunk beds, desk, sitting chairs, microwave, small fridge, then the throw rugs and drapes. Each cabin has a few pictures here and there, a central light fixture, and table lamps on the desk and nightstand beside the beds. Nothing wax, although each cabin does have a plant."

"Yes, mine has a substantial potted plant on a stand between the windows on the south," Masters said. "Green, spotted, foliage, probably from the ubiquitous philodendron family. It has a small, brass, plate on the pot asking the resident to add a cup of water every evening."

"Each cabin has a plant similar to that," Mary explained. "The watering is our way of helping to make it seem more like-home. Set some little care-based routine for the occupant."

What information did these guests have about this place before they arrived?" Masters asked.

"Our usual packet of information and a sheet indicating the four cabin assignments."

"I'll need to see one of those. Does it include pictures of the inside of the cabins?"

"Yes. Several angles. And the outside."

"Were you aware Beth had a prescription for allergies?" Masters asked holding up the remains of a partially melted, brown, plastic, vial he found in the debris.

It was Ethan who answered.

"Actually, I did. She had a terrible problem back in school. Took them several times a day. Used to be at nine, noon, three, and six. I can't believe I remember that after all these years but then during our sessions everything had to stop at those hours so she could go take her pills. Beth was compulsive. It had to be virtually to the second. She also had a thing about taking them in private. That may have been because of her irrational fear of swallowing pills. She was afraid she'd choke on them. Not uncharacteristically it would take her fifteen minutes to down one."

"How could that be important to this," Mary asked.

"Just data, Mary. I just keep collecting it until pieces begin falling into place."

Masters walked Willy to his car.

"These two are ASAPs for the forensics guys, Willy. I want to hear about anything found on Andy's body or clothes that might hook it up to a vehicle."

By five thirty the team from the Sheriff's Department had finished with Beth's cabin. They verified it was candle wax some of which contained traces of what appeared to be TNT. The lab would need to confirm it. Masters had searched the other cabins and come up empty.

Willy returned with information from the Coroner.

"Andy was hit from behind as he was walking up the road. During the process one wheel ran over him. But, get this, he was run over a second time after he was dead. There are marks from a wide tire across his back. Looks like the vehicle probably turned around just up the hill and then came

back and ran him over once more for good measure. Markings from the same tire in both directions."

"Where would a car turn around?" Masters asked.

"Unless it went all the way up into town there's only one place wide enough. It's about fifty yards on up the hill, off to the south, a shallow gully set back into the hill."

"Snoop around up there. Look for fresh tire tracks. Tracks that suggest a vehicle with wide tires turned around and headed back down the hill. Make castings of anything you find, especially unique tread sections."

"I'm on it. And, I got reports on the folks from the Prof's group that died a few years back. Seems somebody tossed a stick of TNT into the front seat of Jeffery Levin's vehicle as it was waiting for a light to change at a rural crossroad. Not a natural death by a long shot. There were no leads to follow. Never solved.

"The second one was Theresa Adams. Another murder, for sure. There was a burning rag seen trailing from her car's open gas cap as she drove off for work one morning. It had to have been lit by somebody just about the moment she started the car. So little of the vehicle was left that not much could be determined. An onlooker noticed the flaming rags, or not even that much would have been known."

"Do you have the name of the onlooker?"

"Yes, I saw it here somewhere. Let's see. Here. Andrew Steven."

"Not Stevens with an 's' at the end?"

"Not according to this report. Might be a typo."

"Andy's middle name was Steven – Andrew Steven Wirth. If it were Andy, it seems he wanted it to be known beyond any doubt that it had been intentional. Murder, I mean. We'll never know why, I suppose."

Willy shook his head fully unable to comprehend how one person could intentionally set out to take the life of another.

"Good work," Masters said, patting him on his back. "Keep me informed."

Masters walked back toward Ethan and Mary's cottage. Mary stepped out onto the patio and called to him.

"Come in and eat. I fixed sandwiches, potato salad,

finger foods."

"Thank you. That sounds very good."

"How about the others?"

"Sonja says she isn't hungry. Dave took a plate back to his cabin. Said he wanted to get started on some project. A head band I think he said."

A sandwich, chips, salad, and a big glass of lemonade later, Masters was ready to leave the cottage. There was a second explosion.

"It's Sonja's cabin," Masters said. "Mary, please call Willy! Ethan, come with me!"

Dave joined them as they approached the area.

"I'm out of here first thing in the morning," Dave said.

"No amount of money is worth dying for."

Death had again been instantaneous. Masters did a cursory examination of the rubble. It showed a very dissimilar pattern from Beth's cottage. Most of the four walls remained standing. The roof was blown off. One feature from the room remained pretty well intact—a heavy, cast iron, floor-sitting, pedestal with a thick walled, urn molded into its top to hold a potted plant. The plant and its pot seemed to have been blown out the top as if shot from a cannon.

"I suspect an explosive in the bottom of the urn," Masters said sniffing it. "Just what it was, how it got there, or how it was triggered remains a mystery."

Mary arrived.

"Willy's on his way."

"Thanks for taking care of that. Tell me about this pedestal. The urn seems very deep to hold a plant."

"It is. Was designed to hold a small, ornamental tree, I'm told. I cut a circle of Styrofoam to fit in the bottom and lift the pot up to the right height. There was a good ten inches left empty in the bottom. There's a problem, though."

"Oh? What," Masters asked.

"This urn is supposed to be in Beth's cabin, not this one."

Willy arrived and he and Masters examined the area.

Willy walked over to Masters, carrying something he had taken from the cabinet under the sink in the relatively intact bathroom.

"That could be the foam from the urn," Mary said.

"Somebody removed it, then," Willy said. "This was in a metal trash can behind closed doors inside the cabinet. No way it could have been blown there during the explosion."

Masters added it to a pile of things and requested a trash bag. Ethan went into an unoccupied cabin nearby and returned with one. Masters placed the collection of items inside it; a scarf, a spring, shards of a clay pot, a scorched metal dial, a small battery, and other odds and ends.

"That leaves you with the entire trust fund," Ethan said to Dave. "One hundred and four thousand plus some change."

"Come morning I'm out of here," Dave said. "I'll take it now."

"The trust is very specific. The distribution has to take place on September eighth at my residence. You'll have to stay to receive it."

Dave grunted and walked toward his cabin.

Masters turned to Ethan.

"Our killer seems to have a preference for explosives. Does that ring any bells for you?"

"Not really. There was a running joke, of a sort, among the group members that if emotions ever really did get out of control in a session the conflagration would be worse than that from a ton of TNT. I can't pinpoint the origin to any one of them, though."

"I think it would be a wise thing if Dave moved to another cabin. The other two were clearly set up well ahead of time. If Dave is also to be a target his place has most likely already been booby trapped."

Masters shared his concern about Dave with Willy.

"Let me go take care of moving him while you finish nosing around here," Willy said. "The Sheriff's guys will be along any minute."

An hour later everything that looked like evidence had been bagged and was headed with the deputies back to the lab. It was nearly dark. Dave had been moved and Willy and Masters had gone over both his previous cabin and the new one in search of an explosive device. They found nothing.

"Does this make Dave our prime suspect?" Willy asked

as they walked toward the gazebo.

“It would certainly seem to. He’s clearly the only one left. He’s the only one with a blank in his time line that would have allowed him to be on the road with Andy. Somehow it just feels all wrong, however.”

“Motive, opportunity, and survival, seem like they are the biggies here, Ray. What seems wrong?”

“Andy having been hit twice by the same vehicle, for one. It makes some sense, perhaps, that Dave might have shoved Andy into the path of the car but how can we account for the second assault by the car when Andy was on foot?”

“I see the problem.”

“Are you up to some phone work, Willy?”

“Always. Got my pad. Shoot!”

“Find out what brand of TNT and other explosives they use at Sonja’s gravel operation. Find out about the guts of the scales Beth worked on. Determine the exact make of tire from the tread marks on Andy’s back and at the turn around spot. And, see if that tire comes standard on any particular vehicle. If my suspicions are correct there has been a convoluted set of circumstances leading up to all of this.”

“Got it. On it. I love this kind of stuff you know?”

“I remember. And you are good at it. You have the nose of a Blue Tick Hound.”

“No better compliment for a l’il ol’ boy from the Ozark Mountains. I’ll be on my way. Oh, here’s a cell phone. Push 111 for me. I assume you want the info the minute I find it.”

“Absolutely. Won’t be much sleep around here tonight.”

Over the course of the next few hours Masters received a dozen calls from Willy. Things were beginning to come together. His concern for Dave’s safety grew. Masters had dozed off in the recliner in his cabin. It could have been the light of dawn streaming onto his face from the east window that awakened him. More likely it was the sound of the explosion. He only hesitated those mandatory seconds, which allow one’s mind to reassemble and meaningfully address the real world. He then proceeded to open the door and move outside. It was the cabin into which Dave had moved for the night. That stressed Masters’ theory that the murders had been set up well in advance. He called Willy and hurried to

the cabin. As he approached it, Masters saw that it had been far less of an explosion than the previous two. The front window and door had been blown out and the east wall had sustained minor damage. In the hope of finding Dave alive, Masters entered; the air was still thick with dust. He held his handkerchief over his mouth and nose. His hope was immediately dashed. It had been a near-point explosion. Dave had been killed on impact.

Ethan arrived.

"I don't understand. We moved him. Who's left to have done such a thing?"

"In this case, it wasn't the cabin that was booby trapped," Masters said, pointing. "It was his leather-working case. When we moved him, we unknowingly took the explosive device with him. There's enough of this one left to get a good handle on how it was rigged."

Willy arrived and Masters explained the situation to him. A half hour later the Sheriff and Coroner pulled in. All three had envelopes of information for Masters. He hurriedly scanned the contents.

Mary arrived with coffee.

"Do you know where Ethan is?" Masters asked her, looking around.

"He came back to the house and went upstairs to his study."

"We need to examine the tires on his SUV."

"Certainly. Whatever you need. I don't understand why."

"The tread marks left on Andy's body are from tires like those Ethan special ordered for his new vehicle and show a distinct indentation, damage from a sharp rock most likely. We need to make sure it is not a match so Ethan can be ruled out in that hit and run."

One of the Sheriff's deputies soon had the front right wheel jacked up and was turning it slowly, looking for a specific, damaged section of tire tread.

"Better look at this," he announced pointing back and forth from the tire to the photo of Andy's back.

They took a look.

Masters looked at the Sheriff and then at Willy. They

nodded. Masters addressed Mary.

“We will need to get a statement from your husband and locate witnesses that can place him somewhere other than on that road at the time of Andy’s death. This tire is a perfect match to the one on the vehicle that ran over Andy.”

The officer who had been examining the tire stood and offered more.

“Ethan saw me looking at the tires when we first arrived. It just hit me then, you know. The tire, the SUV, the proximity to the crime. I just stopped and squatted down to give it a once over. He got a strange look on his face and went into the house.”

“Does Ethan own a gun?” Masters asked.

“Four. Upstairs in his den. He’s an avid hunter. He begins every morning either hunting or shooting mark down by the creek.”

A deputy, his holster unsnapped, led the way up the stairs to the study door. He knocked. There was no answer. He tried the knob. It turned. Slowly, cautiously, he pushed it open. The room was empty. An outside door, his private entrance, was open. It led out onto a small balcony. There was a wooden, outside, stairway off the north end.

“Are you familiar enough with his guns to know if any are missing?” Masters asked.

Mary opened a closet door and looked at the gun rack. She answered without hesitation.

“Two. His favorite rifle and the only pistol he owns.”

“Where does he go for target practice?”

“East. Downstream. About a quarter of a mile.”

One deputy remained behind with Mary. The others made their way down the stairs and across the compound to the creek beyond. As they started walking the trail an explosion echoed up the valley from downstream. They hurried on. Its source was soon obvious. The rifle had exploded as it was being fired. Ethan was dead.

Masters picked up what was left of the gun and gave it a once over.

“The barrel has been blocked with a metal plug eight inches or so into the rear of the chamber opening. From the massive fracture in the near end of the barrel I assume it was

packed with explosive. When the cartridge was fired the force of the explosion was directed backward into Ethan's head and upper chest."

"Look here," Willy said showing Masters the pistol. "It hasn't been fired but it only has one round in it. It's just settin' there in the chamber ready to be fired. I find no ammo for it anywhere on him."

One deputy stayed behind to wait for the Coroner as the others returned to the cottage. Willy, who knew Mary best, took her into another room and delivered the news.

At eight o'clock that evening the principals—well, the remaining principals—gathered in the living room of Mary's cottage. The group consisted of the Sheriff, the Coroner, the States Attorney, a forensics tech from the State Police lab, Willy, and Masters. Mary insisted on being present even though under the circumstances it was not required. Masters was ready to summarize the bizarre happenings of the past thirty-six hours.

"Five murders. Five murderers, each one an effective killer and each one either fully inept at covering his tracks or didn't care if he were caught. Let's examine them in the order they happened.

"Perhaps the clearest case is the one involving Andy. Ethan entered Fayetteville in his new SUV fifteen minutes later than the time which would seem reasonable if he had gone directly there. We know when he left here. We know from a time-stamped receipt in the car the exact time he filled up with gas as he entered south Fayetteville. He had every reason to hurry in order to be back at the Retreat Center to study the subjects of his experiment. In fact, to have planned so poorly in terms of supplies was not at all like the well-organized Professor Rowland. That trip had clearly been launched as his alibi plan. The car was in his possession at the time of Andy's death. It had been at his suggestion that Andy walk up the road to the village and looking back on it I have the idea he had given Andy a very specific time-line to follow. That is verified by the hand-written address and time found on the back of one of Ethan's business cards, tucked into the front pocket of Andy's jeans. The address does not exist nor does

the mythical, Marlene, he was to meet. The tire prints are an exact match. Ethan killed Andy. I have to assume it was related to an indiscretion between Andy and Mary years ago.

“Professionals often pursue or study that which presents some special challenge or inner problem for them, some genuine or assumed personality defect, which plagues them. For example, Sonja studied psychology, she said, to find out what was wrong with her. Those were not her exact words but I imagine it was her meaning. Ethan was aware of his quickness to hate and inability to resolve it, to turn it off, so he set out to study the phenomenon, to find a solution to his soul wrenching problem. He found ways of controlling his own urges by manipulating those he disliked, and through hunting, was apparently able to alleviate some of his rage through the wanton killing of helpless, small, animals. There was one rage he had not been able to control, his hatred for Andy.

“Ethan, quite obviously, will not be prosecuted or brought to justice.”

“In discussing the death of Beth, let me begin by laying out pieces of the evidence. First, was her predictable, lengthy, private, medication-taking, ritual, well known to all the group members? Her death occurred at one of those inflexible moments; three p.m. The killer had come prepared to murder her. Her routine was essential to the plan. An oversized candle was smuggled into her room after the cabin had been made ready but before Beth arrived. It was a specially made candle, the wick in reality the waxed fuse from a stick of TNT around which the candle had been molded. The would-be murderer knew Beth was allergic to the kinds of perfumes mixed into candle wax so was sure she would not light it. Although if she had, the end result would seem to have been the same. Not so for this killer who had to prove itself smarter than the hated genius of the group. Beth. That motivated the truly ingenious part of the plan.

A precisely designed and ground convex lens, similar to those used in large magnifying glasses, was positioned on, and secured to, the west window of her cabin. It was set so the sun entering it at three o'clock would focus the most intense part of its ray onto the candle wick. When that occurred, the wick burst into flame setting off the explosion.

Having placed the candle on the counter top next to the sink in the bathroom the killer assured that Beth would be close to the explosion while taking her pills. From past experience, he knew he had a ten to fifteen-minute time frame. That killer arrived a day early to determine the exact positioning of the candle. Glue residue found on a piece of the bottom of the jar in which the candle had been cast suggests it had been affixed to the counter so she could not have easily moved it.

“Since the early arrival had been necessary to set things up and since expertise with lenses was required to size one to exactly focus the sun’s rays properly, the only good candidate for Beth’s murderer is Andy, an optician with an intense dislike for smart people and black people. He didn’t live to see his ingenious plan come to fruition.”

“Sonja’s murder involved another creative device. Again, it had been planned and constructed ahead of time and brought with the killer into the Retreat Center. Taking a cue from the brochures received about the Center, this killer focused on the plant watering activity associated with every cabin. The process employed could have been carried out in several ways. The ultimate choice became the large, cast iron, urn. I’m surmising here, but am certain the device had to have been constructed in a way very similar to this.

“In the bottom of the urn were the explosive and a simple triggering mechanism. Very thin, small gauge, wire with high resistance value was wound around the fuse. There was also a small, six-volt battery. Wedged into place above all that was a small spring scale on which the potted plant sat. The scale was designed with a contact point from the battery. When the top plate of the scale lowered just enough, an electrical contact was made. The wire heated rapidly and ignited the fuse. When would the spring on the scale be lowered? Initially when the plant was placed on top of it, of course. That, however, lowered the top of the scale to a point, which had been calibrated to remain barely, though safely, above the electrical contact. As Sonja poured the requested cup of water into the plant that evening—about four ounces—the additional weight of the water lowered the plant enough to make the deadly contact.

“The killer designed a subtle way of dramatizing to me

that she was extremely allergic to flowers. It was her attempt to direct suspicion away from her in case I figured out how it had been done. I was to conclude that someone so allergic to flowers would never consider using them in the commission of a crime. She depended on my observational skills being as good as advertised in Flint's books. All of that required a bright, forward looking, person. Sonja's murderer was Beth the summa cum laude, allergic, scale calibrating, member of the group."

"The motivation is like a multiple-choice question; any one of a half dozen possibilities or, perhaps, all of the above."

"As to the death of Dave. One of the compartment doors in his leather working kit was rigged to ignite a small charge of TNT when it was opened. It was the section containing the liquid coating that he brushed on last for protection and luster. In the compartment, along with the explosive and the volatile liquid, was a handful of tiny, sharp, stones. Shrapnel, if you will. This set up was more professional than the others. The amount of explosive was measured to just do the job. The triggering mechanism was expensive, top of the line, electronics.

"Taken together these things all point to Sonja, familiar with the precision use of explosives, a wide variety of triggering mechanisms, and financially able to afford the expensive device used in this set up. Enough of it survived to be traced and I'm sure the trail will make its way to Sonja. Early on, in this reunion, she asked Dave to make her a hatband, apparently to assure he would open the rigged compartment in his tool case. Again, the perpetrator cannot be charged with the crime.

"It leaves us with Professor Ethan Rowland. All of the students expressed enough hatred toward him to have killed him. Why they all didn't target him I can't be sure. Perhaps they each thought requiring him to live with the knowledge that a member of the group had died because of his 'experiment' would haunt him for the rest of his life. That may have been as much or more the motivation for each of the killings than the murderers' hatred of the person they killed. That is just educated speculation, of course. One of them clearly didn't adhere to that belief.

"Examination of the rifle revealed a three-inch metal plug had been poured, molten, into the barrel and allowed to harden. It had been poured in against an eight-inch removable plug inserted from the rear of the barrel. Once the metal had cooled and expanded into place, that temporary plug was removed, gun powder was poured in from the rear and held in place by a small piece of black felt packing material. It had been positioned far enough inside to have not been visible when the cartridge was loaded into the chamber. When the trigger was pulled, the explosion was forced back toward Ethan.

"One of the students was an expert in the art of metal casting. A suitcase hidden in the trunk of his car contained a portable, super-heating, oven, and other casting paraphernalia. Even without that find, Dave would have been the primary suspect. The door to Ethan's study was never locked; this is the Ozarks, after all. There were several opportunities for Dave to make the modifications. In the brochures, there were four pictures of Ethan and a rifle. It was the same in each one, making it simple for Dave to make his selection. Even if that particular one hadn't been used during the reunion it would have been eventually.

"As to the hand gun found in Ethan's jacket pocket: Oddly, it contained only one round and he had brought no extra ammunition for it. My speculation is that after seeing the deputy examining his tire, he realized his part in Andy's death was soon to be discovered. Early in Ethan's life, he had been taught the necessity of always being in control. He would not allow himself to go to prison and live totally under the thumb of the others. His ego could not endure the humiliation of a trial. The one round in the pistol was intended to end his own life.

"Why only one cartridge? What difference would that make? Again, educated speculation. We must not lose sight of the fact that in spite of his several faults, Ethan was basically a good person. He knew that children regularly played up and down the creek. He would not leave a loaded gun behind that could bring harm or death to any one of them."

We now understand why all the participants chose to drive here. The paraphernalia they needed would never have

passed airport security.

"Interesting, in a macabre sort of twist, I suppose, is that with the exception of Andy, each victim was killed after his murderer was already dead. What a waste. The group began as a widely divergent assortment of bright, young, students with so much to share and learn from each other. Sadly, none of them ever approached their grand potential. Seething hatred took its toll on each of them, ruining each life from within well before it became the vehicle for their deaths at the hands of others. Where there had been six precious lives, now there are none."

Story Six
The Case at 1313 Harbor Pier Road
A Raymond Masters Mystery
by Garrison Flint

The gentle description of the Harbor Pier Hotel might be that it had seen better days. In truth, it probably never really had. Nothing about its clapboard siding or warped oak window sills suggested it had ever been painted. The wavy, bluish tinted, glass panes suggested most of them were original with the building, making them nearly a century old. Its corrugated metal roof had been put down over layer upon layer of shingles and tar paper many years before. Those grayed, galvanized, sheets had warped, and their edges rusted. Nails had worked their way loose, allowing sections to flap in the wind as the breeze blew in – damp and cold – off the ocean at night. A metal fire escape clung to the sides of the structure – entrance and exit through windows. The old building's three floors housed fourteen rooms and one small, rear of the first floor, suite for the building manager, Rose – nobody could recall her last name. She'd been there through more presidents than she could remember and more suitors than she wanted to remember.

About half the residents were long timers. The Harbor had been their home for many years and they all expected to be hauled to their graves through the double doors at the rear. The rest were – well, short timers; there for a week or a month but seldom longer. The occupants would not be characterized as a close-knit group. Those who cared enough about the others called them by their room number – 202, 305, 400 and

so on. The building, itself, had long been known just as 1313 by those who lived and worked there along the deteriorating waterfront.

“Detective Colton,” came the call over his inter-com as he sat at his desk in the squad room, “1313 on the line again – 305 this time.”

Colton offered a mild profanity under his breath and reached for the phone.

“Detective Colton, 44th division. How can I help you?”

His preference would have been to say, “I probably can't help you so stop calling,” but, however true that might have been, it was not said. He even managed a slight smile as if hoping that might help coax a friendlier attitude out of his tired old bones.

“This is William Jones again. I tell you, Claude in 202 is at it again tonight. He's trying to kill me. This time it's Recluse Spiders between my sheets. I've counted ten but there are more – lots more – you know how they scatter in the light. He's out to kill me. I demand you arrest him.”

“Were you able to catch any of the spiders? Evidence in an attempted murder is always a nice touch.”

“I have several in a pint jar. I'll undoubtedly find more as I take my bedding apart to get rid of them.”

“Leave the bed as it is. Keep the lights on. Make sure you're wearing shoes, Mr. Jones. I'll be right over.”

“Bring some spider spray and an entomologist.”

“I know a Recluse when I see one. I'll do what I can about the spray.”

As he hung up he turned to his old friend, Raymond Masters, who had just arrived in the area for some seaside R and R.

“You hear that?”

“No need for a speaker phone for that caller. I assume that's the reclusive character you were talking about on the phone when I called yesterday.”

“The same.”

“Is there not some irony in the fact that a recluse may be done in my a Recluse?”

“He has become such a hassle that irony escapes me, I guess. Want to run over there with me, just for old times?”

“Why not? All I have waiting for me in my \$250 dollar a night suite back at my sea-side hotel is a nice warm bath, room service, and a briefcase full of books I've been looking forward to reading most of my life.”

“Glad you're not committed to anything else. We'll run by 1313 and then I'll treat you a meal, how about that?”

“Like old times, back in the City – a hundred years ago – well, I guess it was Dutch treat in those days.”

“We did handle some fascinating cases together, didn't we, Ray?”

“Fascinating, intriguing, sensational, disturbing – mostly very tiring as I recall.”

The old friends shared a chuckle.

1313 was ten blocks west from the station. Calls to that troubled section of the waterfront required two officers. They picked up officer Adams as they crossed the Detective's room. Adams was a rookie who already had a dozen black marks on his sheet. Colton liked him – he reminded him of himself that first year in the blue uniform when Masters had taken him under his wing. Colton had taken to calling the young man Squirt for no particular reason.

“On your horse, Squirt. Need you to ride shotgun tonight.”

“305 at 1313. I heard.”

“Sharp ears.”

“Just call me Spock.”

They exchanged distressed faces and groaned. That was more than enough to encourage Adams to try for another one later.

“Adams, this is my old friend, Raymond Masters.”

“I heard you were coming. Hoped I'd get to meet you. I've read the Flint books about your cases.”

“Glad to be here and to meet you,” Masters said, smiling and nodding, and extending his big hand.

He never knew how to respond to such references so he chose not to.

Adams rambled on as they exited the building onto the parking lot.

“Last week it was 202 accusing 305 of putting a rattle snake in his shower stall.”

Colton continued the saga as they entered the unmarked squad car. Colton drove.

“And the week before that, it was 305 insisting that 400 tried to poison him by putting the peanuts back in his trail mix – peanut allergy, I guess.”

“So, what do you make of it?” Masters asked. “Are the attempts real or for some kind of effect?”

“It's an odd sort of dispute,” Colton went on. “None of them is accusing the one who is accusing them. No back and forth. You'd think there'd be some revenge element here but it's not the case.”

Adams took out a pad and pencil.

“Let me get it straight,” he said. “William Jones in 305 accuses Claude Smith in 202. Carter Jackson in 400 accuses William Jones in 305 and Claude Smith in 202 accuses Carter Jackson in 400?”

“Was that a question?” Colton asked.

Adams chuckled and scratched his head.

“More a statement of confusion, I suppose. You got any ideas, Mr. Masters?”

“Three lonely old men bored into paranoia, is my guess.”

“Speaking from personal experience on that?” Colton asked, looking over his shoulder to make sure his old friend was belted in and hopefully to get a glimpse of his reaction.

Adams followed up, returning to the complaints.

“But, in each case the results could have been deadly.”

“You're right, of course. I suppose a little paranoia may be a good thing in this case.”

“In the beginning, I wrote the 1313 thing off as just a series of nuisance calls,” Colton explained. “Not really a case. Now it seems we have to take it a bit more seriously.”

“So,” Adams asked, “How we gonna proceed?”

Colton answered.

“First, we stop at the Quick Mart and pick up some spider spray. Then, we proceed with caution once we enter William's room.”

It began sounding like work to Masters. He figured just that one ride-along and then he'd be on his way out of his old friend's hair and into a deck chair continually bathed in warm

breezes.

They were soon at the store. Masters remained in the squad car. Adams remained just outside the front door, comically alert to the surroundings, as Colton picked up the spray and approached the counter.

The purchase was paid for and they made their way back to the car. A few minutes later they were parked on the street in front of the hotel. Colton pointed to the front window on the third floor.

"305. William's room. Lights on. You been here before, Squirt?"

"Yes, sir. Came with Costello last week on your day off. No elevator you know."

"Yes, I know. And you point that out because of the easy life you young squirts have lived – expecting the comfort of a ride upstairs?"

"No, sir. Just concerned about your – well, your less than youthful legs and Mr Masters' . . . I will stop talking now."

It was good for a smile from the two old friends. Adams clearly felt some relief. Colton was still some ten years from retirement but he remembered how ancient 55 had seemed to him when he entered the force.

"How we gonna do this?" Adams asked, again, clearly in need of a game plan.

Colton took a subdued, serious, tone, and lowered his voice, leaning toward the ear of his young colleague.

"I figured we'd climb the stairs and knock on his door. Got a better plan?"

"No, sir. Sorry, sir. I feel a bit sheepish."

"Baa-d, rookie," Colton said, grinning. "That makes us even for the Spock thing."

Of course, it hadn't. The game was officially afoot!

Masters enjoyed the bye-play.

Colton knocked on the door.

Jones answered.

Colton introduced the other two.

William Jones (305) was average in most ways – height, weight, breadth. He spoke with the hint of an English accent and wore his graying hair slicked straight back. Small, octagonal, all glass, spectacles graced the bridge of his nose,

and he wore his button down the front, long sleeved, white shirt tucked in, belted tightly and buttoned up against his throat. Earlier he had reported that he made his living by tutoring the many newly arrived foreigners in the area. It was said that he spoke several languages.

Jones invited them in and proceeded directly to show them the spiders he had captured in the jar, and the bed with its top sheet pulled down and over the foot rail. No more spiders were evident, but, granted, the Brown Recluse was a tiny little fellow more comfortable in the inner recesses of some dark, damp, corner.

“How did you spot them?” Colton asked, looking over the specimens in the jar. “They can't be more than a half inch long at most?”

“I have very sharp eyes for a man my age.”

The statement wasn't supported by his obvious need for glasses but Colton let it go. Jones handed Colton a magnifying glass from his night stand and went on.

“*Loxosceles Reclusa*. $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ inch long with a violin shaped mark on its back and three sets of eyes – most spiders have four sets you know. The specific aspect of all this that points most directly at attempted murder is that the little fellows live in the south-central part of the United States and have never been reported here on the north-eastern coast of the country. They had to have been imported just for the purpose of killing me, you see. The venom from one of them has been known to kill a person. The bites from a dozen would certainly be fatal.”

Adams took several pictures of the specimens and the bed.

“We'll help you move the bed out from the wall so you can spray the heck out of this place, sir,” the young man said.

The bed was moved. William began spraying. Wearing gloves, Colton and Adams removed the sheets and pillowcases and stuffed them into a plastic bag, sealed with a twist-tie. They would be taken in for evidence along with the jar of specimens.

“What is it that makes you believe it was Claude Smith (202) who did this?” Colton asked.

“He works two nights a week at the Quick Mart. He's a

sneaky devil. On several occasions, he has tried to cheat me – short change me. Finally, I told him the next time it happened I would make a complaint to his supervisor. It happened again last week but the owner has been out of town so I'm still waiting. He needs that job. They are hard to come by down here by the docks.”

“And you think he would kill you over a complaint?” Masters interjected after having just stood by taking it all in.

“Oh, yes. He is a vengeful little man – a mean hearted man. Everybody here at 1313 will vouch for that fact.”

“Everybody?”

“Well, it's so, regardless.”

“And you suspect he has a way to get into your apartment when you are not here,” Masters went on.

“Like I said, he's a sneaky devil.”

“That is no answer to my question, you understand.”

Jones grew quiet and resumed spraying.

Colton spoke.

“You realize that your suspicion is barely enough for me to interview the man, let alone accuse him of anything? How could he have obtained such rare spiders in such a short amount of time?”

“I'm not entirely sure but he is the only suspect. I am generally revered down here. I translate for these people and I tutor the new arrivals, you know – many of them for free.”

“And you do that so . . . ?” Masters asked.

“So, the men and women can pass the citizenship tests in English and American Government and the kids so they can succeed in school.”

“So, if they become citizens what does that mean to the older workers who have been here for many years?” Masters asked as a follow up.

“I'm not sure what you mean.”

“Could it be that some of the old guard resent what you're doing because once the new, younger, stronger, folks are documented they will be competing against them for their jobs.”

“I hadn't considered that. I believe you are on the wrong track with that, however. You investigate Claude. That's where the guilty party will be revealed.”

"We'll be in touch," Colton said.

The three men made their way back down the stairs, each thinking to himself that the case would be positively affected if one of those little *Loxosceles Reclusa* had lingered around and . . . well, no. None of the three would genuinely entertain such a distasteful thought.

They stopped on the second floor and knocked on 202, the room of Claude Smith. There was no answer. Colton scribbled a note on the back of his card asking Claude to call him. He forced it between the door and casing so it would be easily seen.

Back in the car – Colton again driving – Adams had a question, of sorts.

"Smith, Jones, and Jackson – the three most popular names in the country. Does it seem odd all of those names should be involved in this thing?"

"Like you said, they are the most popular names," Masters pointed out, hoping to expand his perspective.

The young man shrugged.

"Still?"

"I understand what you're saying," Colton said. "It's a good pick-up. May not lead anywhere, but who knows."

Masters shared thoughts that had been spawned by Adams' comment.

"The first names aren't exactly what I'd choose if I were trying to hide my real identity, though – Claude and Carter for sure aren't ones that just fade into the masses. William should be Bill if that were the purpose of using it."

"You suspect the three of them are on the lam, so to speak?" Mr. Masters.

"Maybe not running from the law, but maybe just wanting to remain anonymous for some reason."

Colton added to the thought.

"The Hotel has a history of harboring folks who choose to remain on the edge of society."

"Any ideas how that would be relevant to this game of round robin roulette the three seem to be playing with each other?" Masters asked.

"Not a clue," Colton said.

"Neither do I, Sir," Adams added, as if the question had

also been addressed to him. “And I've always had a runaway imagination – both mom and grandma will vouch for that.”

“And I've always said such a thing is a very good trait for a detective,” Masters said.

Adams nodded there in the dark, bouncing his head from side to side, happy to accept what he had decided to take as a compliment. He knew he was still years from making detective but he would gladly take any advantage.

Masters changed the direction of the conversation.

“We need to find out more about that species of spider. Bound to be some expert in one of your city's universities.”

“I can get on that when we get back to the station,” Adam said. “I've always been kind of a science bug myself.”

“Pun intended?”

“Oh. No. Not really. Should have claimed it, I suppose.”

“Make sure the Recluse is really not native to this area, for one thing.” Masters said.

“And the actual seriousness of its bite for another,” Colton added.

“And, see if there are places a guy could purchase them by mail,” Adams suggested.

Colton nodded.

“Yes. Very good. You think more like a detective than just a black and white jockey.”

Masters had a question for Adams.

“If I may ask, why are you assigned to the detective's room, by the way?”

“My regular assignment is sort of in limbo, you could say. Seems I shot my first partner in the foot and the fenders of the squad cars I've been driving seem to have an affinity for light poles, truck bumpers, stone walls . . .”

Colton turned to Masters.

“And that's why I'm behind the wheel tonight and Squirt will do all the work.”

“That really sounds great . . . if you were being serious,” Adams said offering a fading smile.

“Would I kid you?”

It didn't answer the young man's question but he didn't press.

There was a message awaiting Detective Colton when they returned to the station. His wife had been in an automobile accident some two hundred miles to the south and had been hospitalized.

Colton turned to Masters.

"I have to go. Doc says it's quite serious. If you'll agree to take over while I'm gone I'm sure I can get the captain's approval."

"Of course. Go be with your wife."

Colton made the call, secured the permission, and left.

Masters loosened his tie. Adams made fresh coffee.

By nine that night, Adams had information.

"Got stuff," he said approaching Colton's desk, which Masters had commandeered for the interim.

The old detective swiveled in the young policeman's direction.

"The Recluse is not native here – can't winter in the cold. The venom can be deadly, no doubt about that. What we have in the jar are for sure Recluses . . . Reclusi . . . members of the Recluse family. Also, found a bug expert at City College – Dr. C. W. Carter. I called him. He can still see us tonight at his home over on Mt. Olive, about a ten-minute drive."

"Let's roll, Officer. And, good work. Who's handling your reassignment, by the way?"

"Captain Benjamin Malik."

"If you need a good word, let me know."

"Thanks. Very kind of you. Probably need to have spent more than a day or two with me before making such a bold offer, however. I once set my own birthday cake on fire and drove a spike through that web of skin between my thumb and first finger while building a tree house. I'm really a walking disaster. Who drives?"

"Not I," Masters replied. "I thought you'd read the Flint books."

"Oh. Yes, sir. I should have remembered. Sorry. So should I drive?"

"Unless you're suggesting we walk."

Fifteen minutes later they were riding the elevator to the 9th floor in the professor's apartment building. The door was

ajar. Adams reached toward his sidearm as they approached at a suddenly slowed pace.

“Come in, officers,” came a raspy voice from inside. “I left the door open to help you find me.”

Still cautious, Adams eased the door open as he stood aside. A man in an expensive looking robe, pajamas and slippers came forward to greet them. He offered his hand. Masters shook.

“I’m detective Masters, subbing for Detective Colton who was called away on a family matter. This is Officer Adams.”

“I can read.”

He indicated the name tag on the young man's shirt.

The professor was distinguished looking – graying hair, black rimmed glasses, holding an ebony pipe, which at that moment might or might not have actually been lit.

“Excuse my speech. Have a sore throat and just sprayed. It cuts the pain immediately but also tends to put my tongue to sleep.”

“We can understand you just fine,” Masters said.

“I understand you have a collection of *Loxosceles Reclusa* for me to examine.”

Adams removed the jar from the sack he was carrying. The professor took it and moved under a light. He nodded.

“Vicious and sneaky little devils. The Brown Recluse for sure. Not really very healthy looking specimens. Makes them all the more dangerous. When their vital systems weaken, their supply of venom increases. Good old Mother Nature protecting her own.”

“Any idea where they are from – originally, I mean?” Masters asked. “I understand they don't live around here.”

“No, they don't and yes, in fact, I do. These little guys are from southern Missouri and northern Arkansas. About as far north as they can survive the winters.”

“If not from here, then how might a dozen or so have been found together here in the city?”

“Lots of supply houses on line sell them. Goodness knows, you can buy most any kind of species on line these days. If they came through the mail it could account for their poor condition – too long away from their natural habitat.”

“Would there be a local source – a bug store or such?” Adams asked.

The professor managed a slight smile at the reference.

“Illegal to sell them, but I imagine a half dozen of the colleges and universities here probably keep a supply for lab study.”

“City College?”

“Yes. I believe we have some along with ants, crickets, butterflies, moths and grasshoppers from all over the world.”

“Would you have any way of knowing if any are missing?”

“I wouldn't, personally. Inventory control is the purview of one of the teaching assistants.”

“His or her name?”

“Couldn't tell you. I'm just part time these days. Easing into retirement, you understand. Professor Wendt is the department head. He would be the one with whom to speak.”

“Thank you for your time. Sorry about the late hour.”

“My pleasure. It feels good to be needed once in a while. By the way, there is an anti-venom in case anyone was bitten. It would have to be flown in from the CDC in Atlanta since it's never needed up here.”

“No bites to our knowledge. Thanks again.”

They left. The door behind them remained open. Most apartments in the city were double and triple dead bolted.

'Odd,' Masters thought.

“We need a background check on our professor – C. W. Carter, is it?”

“Yes, sir. Just a criminal record check?” Adams said taking his small pad from his shirt pocket.

“Make it one with all the condiments.”

“I believe I get it, sir. Give it the works.”

Masters nodded, appreciating the young man's quickness of mind.

“And untangle those initials. Never trusted a man who hid behind initials.”

“Enough for tonight,” Masters said. Can you drop me by my hotel?”

“Yes, sir. The Sea View did you say?”

“I did say that to Detective Colton but I thought that was

before you joined us.”

“I got great ears, Sir. Like radar. Seldom miss any part of a conversation if it's within ear shot.”

Master smiled at the convoluted logic of the statement.

* * *

Masters treated himself to a fine, late, meal at the 24 hour restaurant in the hotel, enjoyed the hot tub in his room and slept like a baby – a baby what, he never revealed! He was determined to manage at least some vacation time and spent the morning walking the beach and sitting under a huge, colorful umbrella watching the waves and people. He noted that the movement of the water was more reliably predictable than that of the people. He read and napped awaiting his participation in third shift.

That afternoon when he arrived at the station an hour ahead of time, Adams was waiting for him with new information.

“Detective Costello answered a call over at 1313 this morning at 10:32. Mr. Jackson in 400 reported that his cat died while having his morning bowl of milk. He insisted the milk smelled funny and he suspects 305 – that's William Jones – of lacing it with cyanide. The lab boys are giving it a look. Should have that info momentarily.”

“Give them a ring down there. See if they have the results. If Jackson is correct, this 1313 thing, as you called it, is really getting out of hand. We need to bring the three old codgers in here together and get to the bottom of all this once and for all.”

“Costello left this note for you.”

Adams pointed to a sheet of paper on the desk.

“Says as soon as he left Jackson he went looking for the other two but they were out. They seem to be in and out a lot over there.”

Masters removed the file folder from the top, right drawer and slid into the chair at the desk. Adams watched over his shoulder as he opened it and donned his half lens reading glasses. He spoke to Adams.

“Any word from Detective Colton?”

“Things aren't good but not as bad as he figured. He'll keep us up to date.”

They returned to the folder.

“Claude Smith (302) works two nights a week at the Quick Mart where we got the spray. Carter Jackson (400) does two overnights as a janitor in the Gladway Office Building a block west of the hotel. And, as we know, William Jones (305) tutors. I wonder if his students come to him or if he goes to them.”

He put down the folder and looked up at Adams.

“By the way, you're here early for third shift.”

“I could say the same for you, Sir. Couldn't sleep. I got a little more stuff on the Professor. Two years ago, his wife was killed in a hit and run down on Broadway. The motorist was never located. He went into a deep depression according to the scuttlebutt around the Biology Department. In fact, word is – all hush hush – that he tried to kill himself. Took some pills but went right to the ER and had his stomach pumped. Either a coward or he came to his senses. No good SB about that.”

“SB?” Masters asked.

“Scuttlebutt, Sir.”

Masters nodded and Adams continued.

Then, six months later he reduced his load to part time at the University. More stuff coming.”

“Good work.”

“Thanks, but I forget why you wanted that background on him.”

“Can't put my finger on it but something just didn't ring true about him. Unfortunately, nothing you uncovered helped clear it up.”

“Sorry.”

“Never be sorry for finding information. You never can know if it's going to be useful or not.”

The phone on Colton's desk rang. It was the lab.

“Cyanide, just as William suspected.”

Adams looked perplexed.

“How would William know that from just the smell? I mean, he's an English teacher for gosh sakes.”

“Maybe we need to ask him, that.”

He returned the folder to the drawer.

“I sense more flights of stairs in our near future,”

Masters said with sigh equal to his circumference.

“That’s why we cops always need a good night’s sleep, Sir.”

* * *

William (305) wasn’t home. They went on up to the fourth floor to talk with Carter Jackson (400).

The knock was immediately answered.

“Mr. Jackson. I’m detective . . .”

“Detective Masters and Officer Adams. I know. I know. Word gets around. Did you hear about the cat down in 305? Terrible thing.”

Jackson was roughly the same age as the other two. His hair was back and parted in the middle. His skin was brown – light brown with Caucasian features – mulatto, Masters figured.

“Seen Mr. Jones this morning?” Masters asked.

“No. But I just got in from my job. I push a broom all night up at the Gladway Building. Stopped for breakfast at Charlie’s Diner. Best scrambled eggs in the universe – butter and cream, I suspect. I feel really badly about Socrates.”

“Socrates?” Adams asked.

“The cat – Socrates was his name.”

“How long have you known Claude in 202 and William in 305?” Masters asked.

“Well, let’s see. We all arrived the same time – about eighteen months ago, give or take. I was here first, then Claude and finally William. Never really liked either one of them. Unfriendly sorts. Stick to themselves types. Rose can give you exact dates if that’s important.”

“Probably not. Thank you for your assistance.”

Assuming that meant good-bye, Carter closed the door. Masters hesitated, his ear cocked toward the door.

“What’s with these people – none of them lock their doors.”

They made their way down the stairs.

“Let’s see if Rose is available,” Masters suggested.

They walked to the rear of the deep, wide, entry hall. To characterize it as merely gloomy would be an ingenuous compliment. Adams knocked and quickly stepped aside as if expecting to be met with a shotgun blast through the door.

A frail, old, lady answered, her hair in curlers and a dark shawl over her tattered, pink, robe.

“Full up. Sorry,” she said without really looking up at them while making an effort to close the door.

That she could have missed Adams' uniform seemed unlikely. That she didn't want to get involved with cops seemed more likely. Masters placed his foot in the doorway and held the door with his hand.

“Just a couple of questions, please. Won't take but a minute.”

“Don't know nothin' 'bout any a the tenants. If they pays their rent every Monday that's all I care and if they're still here they does pays their rent every Monday.”

“Three men – Smith, Jones, and Jackson. I assume they're good tenants?”

“Pays every Monday.”

“They seem to be quiet men,” Masters went on, fishing.

“Couldn't rightly say. Once this door's closed I turn off my hearing aid – save the battery, you know.”

“I guess then there is nothing odd about them?”

Rose seemed to perk up at the word 'odd'.

“They been here goin' on two years but I never seen any two a them together at the same time. I take that ta mean they don't socialize, ya know. Never really see any of 'em around. They all work a couple a days a week. Not sure what they does the rest a the time. You got it though!”

“I got what, ma'am?”

“Odd. Oddest collection of ducks I seen in a long time. Odd!”

“What makes them seem odd?”

“Don't ya know odd when ya sees it? Just odd, strange, scary, spooky.”

Clearly Rose knew more than she had let on.

“How do they pay their rent?”

“Cash like everybody. I only takes cash. Hate the new bills, don't you? Red, blue. Not like no U.S. Money oughta be, I say.”

She put on a shiver.

“How much is a room here a week?”

“Fifty bucks. Two twenties and a ten. That's all I take –

two twenties and a ten.”

Masters pressed his luck offering another question.

“Recently, the three of them seem to have started having trouble among themselves. Any ideas about how that came to be?”

“Two twenties and a ten every Monday – that's all I know about 'em.”

She moved to close the door again. Masters allowed it.

“Thank you for your time, ma'am.”

The door was closed and triple locked before he had finished.

“Talk about 'odd',” Adams said.

“She's a well-organized old gal, I'll say that. Two twenties and a ten every Monday and keeps her door locked and her hearing aid off. Makes for a fairly simple and dependable life.”

“You think she knows more than she's telling us?”

“Of course – not that we'll ever really find that out.”

They exited the hotel and got into the car – unmarked, although the city government plates allowed no secrets.

“Oh. There is one other thing I found this morning, sir. Smith, Jones, and Jackson have no history before they showed up at the Harbor Pier Hotel.”

“Really?”

“No DMV records. No phone records. No personal taxes paid. And no social security history.”

“So, your initial hunch was right. They're hiding something or from something. Good work, again, Adams – or do you prefer, Squirt, wasn't that what Colton called you? At the rate you're going, here, we may need to promote you to Gusher, before he returns.”

“Squirt seems potentially less devastating, Sir. I'll stick with that if I have any choice in it.”

Masters nodded as if to acknowledge he had full say in it – at least until Colton returned.

“Did you get the idea the Professor went to a counselor of any kind during his depression or after his supposed suicide attempt?”

“No data. Could we get hold of the ER report the night he had his stomach pumped. It might contain notes from the

staff that would help in some way. And, a question, sir. Do you often work two cases at once like this – the 'round-robin-roulette' at 1313 and the 'something's not right with the depressed professor' cases?"

Masters smiled but offered no real response.

"How about a piece of pie at that Charlie's Diner we heard about?"

"Been past it but never inside, sir. But sure, if you're buying. I'm flat busted."

"I've never been accused of being 'flat' anything. It's on me."

They drove toward Charlie's.

"You think Charlie will know something?" Adams asked.

"That's what we're going to try and find out. Not sure how to describe our players to him. I assume they may be on a first name basis. That may give us a starting point."

"I think I can help with that, sir. I've taken pictures of the ones I've encountered – with my phone. It's a habit I have, thinking I need to document most everything in case it turns into a disaster for me."

Masters chuckled.

"Excellent – the pictures not the apparently vast number of possible disasters in your life. Can you get them up so they'll be handy? You got one of the professor as well?"

"Yes, sir – front and side views."

"I don't get it, Adams. A person as well organized as you, getting into scrape after scrape."

"Actually, it came about in the opposite way from that – getting into scrape after scrape forced me to become organized for my own survival."

Masters chuckled. Adams had not intended it to be humorous but let it be.

Just like in all cop movies, there was a parking place right where they needed it in front of the diner. They entered.

Between the names and the pictures, Charlie remembered all three of the men from the hotel.

"Do they ever come in together?" Masters asked.

Charlie thought for a moment and then shook his head.

"Nope. As often as they are in here they've never been here together, but then that ain't really so odd."

“No? Why?”

“I never seen three guys who hated each other's guts as much as them. No way they'd ever hang out together.”

“They talk about it?”

“Constantly – like it's the only thing going on in their lives.”

“Pull up the Professor's picture, Officer.”

“Here. Every see him in here?”

“Oh. The Bug Guy. Yeah. Used to come in a lot. Not the past couple of years. I figured he moved or croaked. Even thought that maybe he got bit by one a his 'little darlings'.

“Little darlings?”

“It's what he called his special friends.”

“Special?”

“The poisonous ones – spiders, snakes, plants. He was kinda a poison nut I always thought.”

“Interesting. Thank you.”

“Great peanut butter pie, by the way,” Adams said, toasting Charlie with his raised cup of coffee.”

“What did the Professor usually get here?” Masters asked.

“Breakfast whatever. Nearly always came in early in the morning.”

“So never any pie?”

“Sometimes when he got here a little late – apple, cherry, berry.”

“I'd say he missed a real treat not trying this peanut butter pie,” Adams added.

“I guess he was more into fruit.”

“What about the other three?” Colton asked.

“Always breakfast. Can't remember them ever being in for anything else. Once a week. Carter on Monday, William on Wednesday, and Claude on Friday. Carter was in this morning, right on schedule.”

Charlie went back to the kitchen. The men finished their pie, paid the cashier, and left.

“So, did we learn anything worthwhile?” Adams asked.

“You tell me.”

Adams understood, nodded his head, and began.

“Well, the Prof stopped going to the Diner once the

other three started. That was, of course, about the same time as his emotional aftermath from his wife's death so hardly seems like a significant correlation of any kind. The other three come in but it seems odd that they would always miss each other – like they had worked out a schedule – agreed to never be there at the same time. That would have required some sort of positive communication – something we've not been given to understand ever happens among them.”

“Or their work schedules dictate when they can be there,” Masters added.

“Is it important that they all three come in only for breakfast?” Adams asked.

“All four of them, historically, at least. I guess lots of men eat breakfast in cafes. I do. You?” Masters asked.

“My grandma fixes me breakfast. I stop by her place every day to make sure she's okay. She's old but quite independent minded. We'll never get her to move out of her house.”

“You're a good grandson.”

“I try to be. So, what did I miss back there?”

“You caught it all pretty well, I think.”

“I can tell you think there's some connection between the three hotel rats and the bug man.”

“Let's say I'm just leaving that open. I was hoping we could look into any possible relationship between – among – them, especially the professor and William Jones. Thought we might find some reason the professor would go after Jones with the spiders. That trail may have ended before it began back when the three hotel rats, as you so colorfully put it, magically appeared out of nowhere.”

“Could Jones have been involved in the Professor's wife's death?”

“Interesting. We may need to take a look at those old records and see if we can make that connection. A very good learning experience for a rookie cop, I'd say.”

“Yes, sir. I'll get on it later.”

Back at the precinct, Masters had Adams make some calls in an attempt to get a peek at the Professor's medical records.

“Use Colton's name. See if that give us some muscle.”

Some part of that seemed to work and they were soon at the ER.

“Dr. Winston, I am Raymond Masters, filling in for Detective Colton this week. This is Officer Adams – my sidekick, these days.”

“Hi doc,” Adams said turning to Masters. “Doc here has taken three slugs out me during the past eighteen months – two self-inflicted. We're all but on a first name basis.”

“And,” the doctor went on, “Your detective Colton saved me from a vicious beating a few years back when I was lured into an alley being told a man needed medical attention. They rolled me – I think that's the term – and were about to choke the life out of me when the Lone Ranger rode up in his black and white and saved the day.”

The doctor handed Masters a file folder.

“Page 5. Leave it here on the counter when you're finished. I haven't seen you today.”

They soon had what they needed and were back in the car.

“So, Colton's the Lone Ranger, huh?” Adams said basking a bit in the man's glory.

“I suppose if you insist on pressing it, that makes you Tonto. That how you want it?”

“As I recall, Tonto means, Loyal Companion. That would be just fine with me but Squirt has such a nice ring to it, now that I think about it.”

“The medical file certainly puts an interesting light on things,” Masters said getting back to the case at hand.

“How's that?”

“Notes from the attending nurse say that when the Professor came into the ER he admitted taking the pills with the intention of killing himself, but he became frightened about dying and asked to have his stomach pumped. Once the procedure was begun, he asked that it be stopped. In this state, there is a law that requires hospitals to do what they can to prevent death in the case of known suicide attempts so they continued. After the procedure was finished he broke down and went on about how he hated himself for being such a coward. He said that he shouldn't have come to the ER in the first place. His self-hate over his inability to take his own life

was apparently repeated many, many times. He was admitted overnight to the psych ward, but was released at his own request the next morning – another allowed legal maneuver in this state.”

“The psychological report, based on minimal data, of course, confirmed a growing self-hatred and suggested other similar attempts would probably be made. It also said he was only marginally in touch with reality and recommended hospitalization. He disregarded the recommendation.”

“I don't get where all this is going.”

“Well, since he found he was unable to kill himself, he may have hired somebody else to do it for him. Later, he could have changed his mind about that. If one of our three odd balls is the person he hired he may now be trying to stop them – to kill them. The snake. The spiders. And, the poison, in that scenario, might have been meant for the man and not for the cat.”

“Do we even have anything solid that connects the Professor to the men in the hotel?”

It had been a good question from Adams.

“No. We need to follow the trail of the spiders. Who purchased them, or procured them if they were stolen?”

“I'm still a bit confused, Sir.”

“How about this? William got the spiders to use in the killing of the Prof. There may have been some intended irony there – the Professor done in by the very stuff of his profession. But, William let them get loose in his bed through carelessness.”

They drove on in silence for several blocks.

“Idea!” Adams said. “In my research, I found out it is unlawful to possess poisonous insects and animals like the Recluse without a permit. All we really know is that William possessed them. Maybe when they got loose he needed to cover his own behind so he called the cops and accused somebody else of evil intentions.”

“You are a genius, Adams. Possession of a deadly insect just might get us a warrant to search his room. Pull over and call the City Attorney's Office.”

Within two hours they had the search warrant in hand and, along with several other officers, were at the door – 305.

Masters knocked. There was no response. Adams opened the door – it was not locked. He announced the search warrant and they entered and began their search.

“Here's another pint jar with a few more spiders,” Adams said, pointing to the night stand. “Some look damaged as if maybe they are ones William hurt as he was trapping them to gather them up. They could be part of an original shipment, I suppose.”

“Probably not in a pint jar. I imagine they would be shipped in some more substantial and sophisticated container,” Masters said.

“Maybe not, though, if some third party stole them from the lab and passed them on to William.”

“Good point, officer. Get that jar printed and tell the lab boys to do the same with the first one we dropped off for them – inside, outside, bottom, lid.”

“I'm on it. Transportation?”

“Take the car. I'm going to snoop here for a bit longer. I'll catch a ride with another officer.”

Adams turned to leave. Masters had one more instruction.

“Heckle the lab guys to get us those prints ASAP'er.”

“ASAP'er, sir?”

“Faster than ASAP.”

“Gotcha!”

Adams left.

“This is odd, Mr. Masters,” a female officer said motioning to him.

“What's up?”

“A make-up kit and hair dye here in the top dresser drawer.”

“Odd, indeed,” Masters replied. “William Jones is as pale as milk. What would he be doing with make up? And his hair is gray. What color is the dye?”

“Black as coal, sir.”

“And the make-up?”

“One very large jar – caramel color, I'd call it. One more thing, sir. Both the dye and the make-up are water based and therefore water soluble.”

“What am I missing?” Masters said, puzzled, and

assuming it was a male thing.

“Only made to last a short time and allow easy, fast, clean up with soap and water. Like for going to a party or something.”

He'd been right – a male thing.

The search went on for some time.

As they were ready to wrap it up, the officer's phone rang.

“For you, Sir,” she said handing it to the big man.

“Adams, here. A puzzle, really. That first jar had my prints, your prints, and the Professor's prints. There weren't any others. There should have been another set – those of William Jones. Did you see him wipe them clean before he handed it to you?”

“No. That is odd. The professor's prints seem to cinch a connection with Jones. What about the second jar?”

“This will really make your head spin – just mine and, wait for it, the Professor's. Just doesn't make any sense.”

“Two things, Adams. Let's get this 1313 trio fingerprinted – yesterday! Find them at work if necessary. Then, call the police department's psychiatrist. Get us in to see her immediately. I'll meet you there.”

“Fortunately, or unfortunately, I'm known to the psychiatrist, Dr. Criss. I'm sure I can get us in to see her PDQ – that's slang for ASAP in case . . .”

“I know the acronym, Adams.”

Masters hitched a ride back to the precinct building. He went straight up to the 6th floor where he was told he would find the psychiatrist. Adams was already there. They were escorted into the doctor's office. She was waiting.

“Dr. Criss, this is Detective Raymond Masters.”

It had been Adams making the introductions. They took seats. The conversation went on for nearly a half hour. At the end they stood and shook hands.

In the hall, Masters spoke to Adams.

“Place calls to the three hotel rats and to the professor. One of them should be home. Tell that person we are on our way to see him. Then call that person's address back here to Dr. Criss so she can meet us there. We need to stop by the detective's room and make copies of those picture you have of

the Professor and the three hotel rats.”

That finished, they were soon in the car headed for 1313 and room 400 to chat with Carter Jackson. Adams knocked. There was no answer. He knocked again. Still no answer. Masters pushed the door open. They saw Carter ducking into the room through the rear window that led to and from the fire escape.

“Mr Jackson,” Masters began. “Please, come in and join us. Outside working on a tan were you – oh, no, that’s right, you have a beautiful natural tan, don’t you?”

Jackson looked puzzled but managed a smile.

“Since I was a little bitty baby, as the song goes. Now, how may I help you?”

He appeared to become more comfortable as the seconds passed.

“We have invited Mr Jones and Mr Smith to meet us here. Expect them along any minute.”

Jackson nodded and motioned for them to take seats.

“It may take Smith a while to get here,” Jackson said. “His legs give him trouble. Perhaps we should go down to his room.”

It was more information and compassion than Masters expected to hear, since Smith in 202 was the one who had been accusing Jackson of trying to kill him.

“Here will be fine, because the other two will not actually be coming, you know.”

“I really don’t understand,” Jackson said.

His puzzlement was genuine even though he began breathing more rapidly and the vein on his temple stood out suggesting an increased heart rate. He looked genuinely surprised at the sudden onset of the symptoms feeling the side of his head with his hand.

“I am suddenly not feeling well, Detective.”

Jackson moved his hand to his forehead.

“I understand, Mr. Smith.”

“No. I’m Jackson.”

“Oh, that’s right, Mr. Jones.”

“No. I’m Jackson. You know that.”

“Yes. I know that Professor Carter.”

Dr. Criss stepped into the room from the hall where she

had been observing. Masters motioned her to the forefront of the conversation.

“Professor Carter. My name is Dr. Criss. I am a psychiatrist. Detective Masters and Officer Adams have been concerned about you and asked me to look into your situation.”

“Why are you calling me Professor Carter? I am Carter Jackson. I don't even know a Professor Carter.”

Dr. Criss put her arm around the man's waist.

“Professor C. W. Carter – Dr. Claude William Carter. We have lots of work to do. Come with me and we'll be on our way to the hospital.”

The man moved with her without resistance.

* * *

In the car on the way back to the station, Adams had questions.

“So, you are saying that back when Dr. Carter realized he was too cowardly to kill himself and fell into a depression, his subconscious mind invented three alter egos – personalities – all capable of killing, and each one set up to kill one of the others, thereby assuring that he – the Professor – would indeed soon be dead.”

“That's what I'm saying. Since he couldn't kill himself – Professor Carter – his mind set it up so it would appear to be somebody else who was the target. Which one was killed didn't matter, you see. Making it appear to be somebody else made it acceptable.”

“What were the clues? I've seen everything you saw but I didn't get it.”

First, none of the four of them was ever seen with any of the others, and three of them lived under the same roof – very unlikely their paths would not cross. They even scheduled, regular, different days at the Diner so they wouldn't be expected to show up there together. Also, at the Diner none of them ever, in almost two years, tried the peanut butter pie – Charlie's specialty. It made me wonder about the peanut allergy they may have shared. Both William and the Professor referred to the spiders as 'sneaky little devils' and William – apparently, a liberal art major, knew the scientific name of the spider and more about its habits than seemed reasonable.

And, is it extremely unlikely that the tiny amount of cyanide in the milk would have produced any odor. Somehow, he had to have been aware at some level that it was there. Then, a really close comparison of their pictures suggested the exact same facial characteristics – shape, nose, ears, hairline – each adorned significantly differently. Carter Jackson changed his hair in color and part, and his skin color to make the most dramatic transformation. William Jones carried his education with him as a tutor but hid behind thick, frameless, glasses, slicked back hair, and a slight English accent. Claude Smith presented himself somewhere in between. They dressed differently enough that, never being seen together, nobody had reason to ever suspect they could be the same man. The professor went so far as to disguise his voice the night we went to visit him using the tongue numbing effects of the so-called throat spray. Rose, clearly never looks anybody in the face so long as they have two twenties and a ten so she would never have suspected.

“And the failure to lock their doors made me wonder. Here in the city it would be difficult to find four people on any given block who didn't lock their doors religiously. Yet, none of these four ever did. It suggested maybe one person instead of four – one person who subconsciously needed to make it easy for the assassin to gain entry.

“At one point, Jackson, in his role of an uneducated janitor, appropriately used the adverb 'badly' in a spot where only an educated person would have used it in such an automatic fashion. When he put his hand to his forehead in his room just now, his sweaty hand rubbed a small spot white. The caramel colored make up and black hair dye cinched it.”

“But that stuff was found in the room of William Jones, not Jackson.”

“I imagine, since none of the four personalities were aware that they were also the other three, it would have raised unanswerable questions for Carter Jackson to find his make up there in his own room – he believed he was Mulatto. When he needed to make the transformation, he would enter William's room, apply the makeup and use the fire escape to make his way back up to the Jackson room. During that trip, he was probably in limbo – knowing nothing about who he was

during those few moments. The puzzled look on his face when he came through the window suggested that.”

“But I reached him on the phone in his room.”

“I imagine he was about to 'transform' himself into one of the others at the moment he got the call so he had to quickly make himself presentable as Carter Jackson – all subconsciously, of course.

“Wow. The mind is a really scary thing,” Adams said.

“Can be, but it can also be wonder-filled – don't you think, rookie cop who hasn't come close to having a mishap of any kind during the past 24 hours while he has been out of the judgmental sight of other members of his department.”

“Oh. What do you know? Well, I'll be. My goodness!”

They pulled to a stop in the parking lot at the precinct and left the car as they moved toward the building. Just inside they were met by detective Colton. He and Masters exchanged the expected small talk. They learned that his wife was doing well and that after a few more days in the hospital she would be able to go home.

Colton turned to Adams.

“Officer Adams. You and Ray get along well, did you?”

“Just fine, Sir. He is a very comfortable person to be with.”

“And, Adams, have you received your new assignment yet?”

“No, Sir. Still floating around here. Like I said, been with Detective Masters mostly.”

“That's what he told me when we spoke by phone earlier.”

“Sounds like some of the old Detective rubbed off on you, Adams.”

“Hadn't thought about it, Sir. I suppose that would be good. Not really even sure what you mean, I guess, Sir.”

A knowing glance passed between the two detectives.

Adams spoke, directing it to Colton.

“Sir. May I ask you something?”

“Can't remember you ever asking permission to ask a question before, Adams. Sure. What?”

“I've noticed you haven't referred to me as, Squirt, this evening. Just wondering why.”

“You miss it?”

“Well, sort of maybe, no not really. Got used to Adams with Mr. Masters. Just wondered why.”

“It just doesn’t seem appropriate that my new driver and assistant would have a name like, Squirt, now, does it?”

“Wow! Really!”

The young man turned to Masters.

“I know this was all your doing wasn't it, Mr. Masters.”

“My doing? I'm not the one who earned the assignment. I figure it was all your doing. You did a great job this week.”

“Maybe I have two personalities – Squirt and Adams – and neither is aware of the other.”

It was good for a long chuckle among them and may not have been entirely untrue.