



# The Case of The Gypsy Curse

Not even Knights, Castles  
and a Gypsy curse - all in  
central Wyoming - can baffle  
Inspector Masters!

## GARRISON FLINT

# **The Case of the Gypsy Curse**

**A Raymond Masters Mystery**

By  
**Garrison Flint**

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**CHAPTER ONE:  
DAY ONE: Evening  
The Gypsy Curse**

It was a large, cold, foreboding, gray stone building, sitting alone on the hill – as if by choice – among dozens of century old Oak Trees. It would have been as comfortable – perhaps more so – on a stark knoll adjacent to King Arthur’s castle in the days of mail-clad knights and bleached-skin damsels.

That impenetrable, castle-like, impression had, of course, been the intention of its amateur architect, William Parker Allen III, when it was built almost one hundred years earlier. The town which it overlooked, Allentown, boasting 5,000 hardy, Wyoming, residents, had been named after the architect’s father, and for most of its history, an Allen had sat as mayor.

Constructed as home for the World’s only chapter of the Grand Order of Knights, the structure continued to serve that purpose to the present day.

‘The Knights’, as their organization was known to the towns people, was limited to thirty-six members, each of whom had to have showed himself to be a man of “heroic and courageous, caliber”. (Just how one small settlement could, generation after generation, legitimately boast that number of authentic heroes would never be openly addressed!) The members were mostly war heroes with an occasional, token ‘civilian’ added to dispel its lingering image as being little more than a snobbish, secretive, VFW. Although not mentioned one way or the other in the bylaws, no female had ever been

approached for membership. Its members just seemed to assume that no female could ever possibly qualify.

Most of the Knights were on the downhill side of seventy and new members were added only as old ones dropped out due to poor health or passed on to that big, grassy Camelot in the sky. During the past ten years, that Camelot of the Elysian Fields had grown far too rapidly. Eight of the ten men who had held the position, Knight of Knights (the head Knight) had each met with an untimely and mysterious demise. Even more puzzling, each had died on the day of the Knight's Celebration of Life, which always coincided with the local moment of the Spring Equinox.

Joel Nevin, the youngest and newest Knight, at forty-four, was editor of the local newspaper – a family business for generations. He had recently convinced the order it was time that they, themselves, investigated the deaths, separate from the gone-nowhere police probes. Joel's father had met Raymond Masters many years before while covering a case on the East Coast. Since then, the Nevin family had counted the portly old Detective as a beloved friend though infrequent visitor. Masters had agreed to leave his cozy, retirement nest in Rossville, New York, and come and lend his expertise.

So it was that Masters found himself, on that mid-March evening, enjoying good conversation over a home cooked, roast beef dinner in the home of Joel and his wife, Gina (lovingly shortened by Joel from Regina).

Joel soon moved from the obligatory catching up stories to the problem at hand.

"The Celebration of Life takes place in less than a week so time is precious," he began. "It's hard to know where to start."

"Just start," Masters suggested. "We'll see where it goes."

Joel began.

"The Knights are basically a bunch of old snobs who get together once a week to relive their moment of glory and replenish their delusions that they are superior to the rest of Allentown's citizens."

Masters brow furrowed.

"You describe them in those derisive terms and yet you

became a member?"

It had been a clear question.

"I'll get to that. It has more to do with Gina's dad than me. Anyway, the Allen family formed the Knights early in the last century. Old man Allen (the first) wrote the bylaws, manufacturing fact, lore and traditions as he went. Not a word has been changed since. In essence it celebrates the siring of life by superior men – Knights – and thereby the renewing and rejuvenation of the quality of mankind. Spring, as Nature's symbol of renewal, became a focal point.

"Each member has to have performed some outstanding feat of courage and bravery – something that is considered well beyond typical heroism. The whole document is pretty loose and muddy conceptually, but it survives without contest or revision."

"May I ask what your heroic deed was?" Masters inquired.

Gina provided the answer.

"Joel leads and explorer scout troop. A few years ago on a trip to the Rockies, four of the six boys fell into a deep chasm that suddenly opened up in the snow where they were cross-country skiing. As it continued to widen, and with snow and debris pouring into it, Joel lowered himself by rope to the bottom, set broken bones, tended to the unconscious and, one by one, brought them to the surface. Minutes later, the sides collapsed into the hole. It was both the dumbest and most wonderful thing I can imagine."

She took Joel's hand and placed a gentle kiss on his cheek.

"Sounds to be of super-hero quality to me," Masters said, clearly impressed. "Go on with your account."

"Actually, the Knights have developed a powerful, planet-friendly stance over the past few years and now spend huge amounts of money on such causes – saving the rainforests, pollution control, wetland preservation, solar energy, things like that. I have to give them their due for it."

"Largely due to your incessant badgering," Gina added, more than a little pride peeking through her tone.

"I guess I do have some of my Father's tenacity in me. But, on to the problem. As you'll see when you visit the castle

in the morning, the centerpiece of the meeting room is a huge wooden table. It weighs over a ton and seats 36 people, hence the membership limitation. It had been built in the seventeenth-hundreds for a castle in Germany or somewhere in Eastern Europe – that’s now a bit fuzzy. Old man Allen the first came across it while on vacation in Europe. It sparked the whole knight organization thing. He had to have the table and what he had to have, he got. Allen was the territory’s largest and most successful rancher. Money was no object, as they say. He offered a price the financially strapped Baron couldn’t refuse and the table was dismantled and shipped here. During the twelve-months all of that took, Allen had our castle built, primarily to accommodate that table.”

“It is a beautiful piece of work. Eight-inch thick planks form the ten-foot wide, thirty-foot long top. It stands on twenty legs. The top has ornate, round, indentations carved into it, which accept the specially designed pewter plates and goblets. Allen bought them as well.”

“About ten years ago, a traveling group of Gypsy musicians came to town as part of the Fine Arts Council’s Concert Series. As you can imagine, visitors are immediately intrigued by the castle. It seems so out of place way out here. The Gypsies were no exception and were given the grand tour. When they saw the table, they became enraged, saying it was from their ancestral home in Europe and had been illegally sold and exported. They demanded its immediate return, which was, of course, denied. One of the older Gypsy women then responded rather dramatically by putting a curse on those who possessed it. The essence of the curse is that the leaders of the group that perpetrated this despicable deed will come to an untimely grave until the table is again in the hands of its rightful owners.”

“That year, the Knight of Knights – the leader of the Order – died on the day of the Celebration of Life. Since then, all but two of the Knight of Knights – seven in all – have died on that same day, within hours after the banquet.”

“The weapons?” Masters asked.

“No weapons.”

“Poison, then?” Masters tried again.

“Not a trace according to the medical examiners.”

“Seems that trend should be enough to put a stop to the celebration,” Masters said, thoughtfully.

“Not for these guys – gung-ho, do or die, all for one, never back down, proud to a fault, charge of the light brigade type men. It’s a totally engrained, virulent philosophy that permeates the Knights down to the last one – well, except for me, I guess. To back off would admit they are something less than super-human, and that would blow the precious, and most basic, delusion they hold about themselves.”

Gina turned toward Masters.

“It couldn’t really be the curse, could it?” she asked, hardly believing she had let the question pass her lips.

“In my experience,” Masters answered, “A curse can kill, but only when the victim is thoroughly convinced of the power it commands over his life. That would not seem to be the case here.”

Masters addressed Joel.

“You said not all of the leaders had died?”

“Right. If we listed them in order by number – to keep it simple – it would be numbers five and eight who survived. Number eight is James Carter – everybody calls him Doc – the town’s now retired physician. Number five is Ralph Waterson. His family has operated the drugstore on Main Street for three generations. Ralph was the pharmacist there for forty years.”

“Are they still alive?” Masters asked.

“Yes. Doc Carter’s at a nursing home west of here and Waterson lives with his daughter on a ranch south of town.”

“How about your involvement in the Knights? Is it time for me to hear about that yet?” Masters asked.

“Sure. Just the right time, in fact. I have to begin a dozen or so years ago. Gina’s father, Gerald Miller, had been born and raised here in Allentown. As a young man he obtained a degree in engineering and soon thereafter joined the Army. In the Army’s infinite wisdom, it did assign him to the corps of engineers but as a pharmacist’s assistant – he had a minor in chemistry. He remained in the service for . . .”

Joel looked at Gina.

“Thirty years,” she answered.

“Thirty years,” Joel repeated. “On one assignment, his



unit was sent to somewhere in Malaysia to carve an airstrip out of the jungle. He was part of the advance party that went in to set up camp. A local tribe – there are still some pretty primitive groups over there – was quite unfriendly toward that encroachment into their territory. One night their warriors attacked the camp killing several and taking a half dozen hostages as bargaining pawns. Gerald, alone, remained alive at the campsite and he set out to rescue his comrades. He set dynamite charges around the tribal community and attached spare trident lenses in such a way so that as the sun rose and filtered through the lenses, the fuses would be ignited – somewhat randomly – setting off the charges on all sides of the village. During the ensuing chaos, Gerald freed the captors and fled to safety. He did all that, by the way, with an arrow in his lower back and a broken right forearm.

“Later he was honored with the highest military awards. When he retired and returned here, he was immediately nominated for membership in the Knights but at the election, he was blackballed – amazingly – by a single member.

“The tradition of the Knights was important to the man – it had been since childhood and the rejection devastated him, though that was never shown outside his family. In fact, while he was trying to find work, the secretary of the Knights – Rick Distlemier – feeling guilty, we suppose – offered him the job of handyman at the castle. Gerald took the job. It was a few months later that the curse was made. He had worked there for about four months when the first Knight of Knights died from the curse – well, died for whatever reason.

“That really affected Gerald. He became deeply depressed and a few weeks later he . . .” Joel glanced at his wife. “...he took his own life.”

“I didn’t know. I’m so sorry,” Masters said, addressing his condolence to Gina.

Her eyes teared but she smiled and nodded her thanks. She began clearing the table. The men moved into the living room. Masters continued.

“It all started about ten years ago, then?”

“Yes, well, it will be ten in about a week.”

“I assume the police reports will be readily available,” Masters said.

“I beat you to it. I have copies on all seven deaths in my den. I’ll get them to you before I take you back to the hotel. I still wish you’d have agreed to stay here with us. God knows we have way too much room here for just the two of us.”

“I appreciate your offer but I find that hotels and cafes and walks from place to place are indispensable sources of information.”

“I’ll concede to the reporter in me who knows you’re right.”

Gina entered bearing a tray of coffee and frozen lemon dessert. Between oo’s and ah’s, and more m-m-m’s than can be imagined, Masters managed to ask about possible motives.

Joel and Gina laughed quietly. Joel explained.

“We were speaking of that earlier today. We ran out of fingers trying to count possible motives – that’s ten of mine and ten of hers.”

“In a quiet, friendly little town like Allenville?” Masters questioned, play-acting only a bit.

“Historically this place was pretty isolated. Both the people and their grudges have become pretty well inbred – passed from generation to generation, I’m afraid.”

Gina attempted to explain further.

“We are a civil community. Animositities, some of them generations old, are seldom spoken of. The rich folks have and know their place. Same with the poor folks. The rest just fill in the gap left between.”

Masters wasn’t sure he understood, but he let it pass.

“I must assume you think we’re talking murder or I wouldn’t be here, yet I gather there is no substantiated evidence of that.”

“That’s right. Like I said, more and more folks simply refer to it all as the Gypsy’s death curse. The Spring Equinox is eerier around her than Halloween!”

“I can imagine. Have there been any viable suspects through the years?”

“Not really. Lots of speculation but small towns seem to rely on speculation as their life force.”

Masters had to chuckle at Joel’s take on small towns. He seemed to have an off-beat perspective on lots of things.

“To my recollection, I still haven’t pinned you down as to why you chose to become a member of the Knights.”

“It’s not been intentional. Let me get to it. It was more for Gina’s Dad – Gerald – than for me. He wanted it so much that I would have felt like a traitor to him if I had refused when it was offered.”

“He came close to doing just that – refusing,” Gina said continuing the story. “Since Dad had been the first and only nominee to ever be blackballed, Joel thought for a time that perhaps if he would become the first nominee ever to refuse membership; maybe that would exact some degree of justice for Dad. Good old Joel, though. In the end, he had to take the high road. He’s been good for the Knights. He’s become like their conscience, I think.”

Joel hesitated a moment, looking at Gina. Then he spoke.

“I suppose this would be the time to show Mr. Masters your Dad’s note that he left at the time . . . he died.”

She nodded silently, biting her bottom lip. She went to the desk, retrieving a manila envelope from its drawer. She handed it to Masters.

Joel offered an explanation. “We found this on the table beside his body. It was typed on his old typewriter.”

Masters removed the single, double spaced, typed sheet of plain white paper and read it silently.

The knights will keep dying until they see the light. Fortunately, I have a daughter, so she will be spared the temptation to join the vial group. Had she been a son, I would certainly have had to reevaluate my thinking. Perhaps the knights properly dampened my egotism. For that, I suppose, I should be appreciative. I can’t be, however. My admonition to all is this: never let your dark side seize control of your thinking. It becomes a one-way trip that consumes your very being. Gerald

Masters looked across at his two friends.

“It’s more a note written at the time of his suicide than it is a typical suicide note.”

“That’s how we interpreted it, too, I guess,” Joel answered. “It seems like a summary of his final concerns. There isn’t a direct statement tying his suicide to any one

thing. All in all, it's not very helpful. It's more a collection of ramblings."

Masters began picking out phrases. "The Knights will keep dying until they see the light. Is that a threat or a statement of the situation? Does it imply that he accepted the curse as a reality or suggest that he knew something else? His preoccupation with the Knight's - or his own - dark side, doesn't seem to fit with anything else unless he's using the term to refer to his depression rather than the more usual use which indicates some wicked intent. And, as you pointed out, he gave no direct reason for ending his life. Fully unsatisfying for you, I'm sure. It is a self-serving document and not an explanatory one. It either represents the incoherent ramblings of a despairing man or some esoteric message he intended for you to decode. We must not dismiss either possibility."

Joel attempted to apply some closure.

"Taken as a whole – just the impression it leaves – it does present the picture of a depressed, despairing, distraught person. Perhaps that was the essence of the intent."

"Perhaps." Masters' brow furrowed again. "There is no evidence to suggest anything other than suicide is there?" he asked.

"He OD'ed – in a massive way – on barbiturates stolen from the pharmacy earlier in the evening. His prints were on the glass case he broke into in order to obtain them," Joel answered. "I guess the authorities never considered it could have been anything else."

"What about you two? Did you consider that it might be something else?"

"Dad, had been depressed since the blackballing, there is no arguing with that," Gina said. "But, he had decided to move back to Brisbane where all his real friends were. He had been stationed there for the last seven years before retiring. Without the Knights, he had nothing here – well me, but I have my own life now. His chance to father me passed years back. Once he had made the decision to move and had our blessing, his depression had lifted. Joel and I were relieved. It may have been the calm we read about that enters a person once they decide to end their life. It's hard to know.

He had just begun packing his things.”

She choked up.

Joel continued.

“He died on his birthday. That night we had a family birthday party for him right here. Gina forced us to wear silly hats. There was a cake, candles – the whole deal. He seemed fine to us. He left with his gifts about nine. While we were cleaning up the discarded paper and boxes, I found the scarf that Gina had knitted for him, so I took it out to him. That’s when I found him – dead on the floor.”

“On the floor?”

“Yes. It looked like he had fallen. We suppose the huge amount drugs he took worked more rapidly than he had expected.”

“On what, did you say, the note had been written?”

“On his old, beat up, portable, typewriter. It had traveled the World with him. He never got the hang of computers.”

“Was it dusted for prints at the time – the keyboard, that is?”

“I have no idea, but I doubt it. There would have been no reason to, you see.”

“His gifts. What were they, if I may ask?”

“Well the scarf,” Gina began. “A belt, a home-made card, a pair of Aussie shorts, one of those ‘World’s Greatest Dad’ mugs, and a Swiss Army pocket knife.”

“And a plate of cookies – chocolate chip, his favorite,” Joel added.

Gina nodded. Joel continued.

“I still can’t believe that even if he had decided to take his life that he would have done it on his birthday, for God sake. He was too compassionate a person to have left that terrible memory for Gina to have to relive every birthday for the rest of her life.”

“Did he have any enemies as far as you know?”

“Gerald? No! He was well liked. A quiet, unassuming sort of guy,” Joel said. “Do you suspect it wasn’t suicide?”

“Just covering all the bases. In a long-gone-stale investigation such as this one, I never accept anything at face value – especially the obvious. One more thing about the

note. I see what appears to be an oil or grease stain here in the left margin. Was that there at the time it was found or has it happened since?"

"It was like that when we found it. I guess we all just supposed that in his depressed state he wasn't particular about the appearance of the sheet of paper he chose to type on."

"Yes, well that could certainly explain it. Do you have some way of making a copy of the note for me? I'd like to study it in more detail."

"Sure. Just take a minute. We have a printer here that does everything but feed the cat."

The time had come for Masters to say thank you and take leave for the evening. Joel got the police reports and put them into a small box. Gina added an extra-large slab of dessert, carefully nestled into a plastic-ware container. The ride took only a few minutes. Had it not been for the box, Masters would have enjoyed walking the half dozen or so blocks. Above and beyond the topic, it had been a nice evening with old friends.

At the hotel, Masters found a comfortable looking corner in the reception area of the lobby and settled in to begin making his way through the reports. He eyed the stack – a good three inches tall. 'At 300 sheets per inch, that's 900 pages,' he thought.

It was not that the reason he had given Joel and Gina for wanting to stay at the hotel wasn't true, but more than that, Masters did not want to suggest bias in his investigation. After all, Joel and Gina could well be seen as major players, themselves.

He looked around the large, open room. It resembled a hundred others in which he had sat and yet, like those others, it bore its own twists on the theme. Although a rather plain, four story, red brick edifice on the outside, the lobby, with its roughhewn beams, twenty-foot ceiling, and wood planked walls, suggested the old west of the eighteen hundreds. The six large ceiling fans were dropped ten feet on long, aging, slender, black pipes. Each swayed gently as if to its own rhythm, looking pleasantly surprised when, occasionally – and then only for a moment – they moved together as if to a single

chorus.

A huge gray-stone fireplace stretched itself north and south along the edge of the plush red carpet, separating the spacious sitting area from that housing the desk, stairs and elevator. The furnishings were a less than well-coordinated collection of colonial, Western and overstuffed relics from the long since put to rest living rooms of the 1940's. It was into such an ample chair, however, that Masters eased himself. For whatever reason, they worked well together.

With the box on a lamp table beside him, he donned his reading glasses, brushed his large, ever-wayward mustache into submission, and took out the first report. He eyed the dessert. 'It would be a shame to let it melt,' he thought. Looking around, he caught the eye of a young hotel employee. He was perhaps sixteen and looked ever so uncomfortable in his gray, porter-like uniform, white shirt and red tie. The lad seemed happy to have been sidetracked from whatever it was he had been doing. He approached, smiling, his youthful stride, however, seriously flawed by a discomfiting limp that saddened Masters at first sight.

"Yes, Sir, Mr. Masters. I'm, B. L. at your service. What can I do for you, Sir?"

Masters was accustomed to being recognized but was amused by the young man's enthusiastic style.

"B. L., I have this rather serious problem, you see," Masters began in a feigned, confidential tone. "I am in possession of this huge piece of delicious frozen lemon dessert, but without plates and forks."

Initially, the boy looked puzzled but quickly recovered as he recognized the old man was putting him on.

"Plates and forks, Sir? Those were both plural?"

"Well, I assumed you'd rather not share mine," he said, eyes twinkling.

"That could be considered unsanitary, I suppose," the boy snapped back. "Give me two minutes, Sir."

In less time than he had requested, B. L. returned with plates, forks, napkins and two black coffees all on an oversized, round, wooden, tray.

"Overkill on the tray, I'm afraid, but it was the only one immediately handy," he announced. "You do take yours black,

as I recall,” he said, the barest hint of a question in his voice and clearly enjoying his turn at the put on.

“As you recall?” Masters' phrase had been a stop and stare, taken aback, unadulterated, question.

B. L. grinned.

“I’ve read all about you and your cases. I got all the Garrison Flint books and a scrap book of clippings.”

“My, I’m honored.”

With his good leg, B. L. nimbly repositioned a large ottoman in front of Masters, placed the tray on it and pulled up a nearby straight back chair for himself. He kept talking.

“I’m known as something of a sleuth around these parts, myself. When something gets lost, folks say, ‘Call B. L. He’ll find it for you’.”

“Well, I’m always pleased to meet a fellow ‘sleuth’,” Masters said, growing more and more intrigued by his new acquaintance.

He reached his hand toward the young man. The tentativeness of his response suggested it was a clearly unpracticed activity, but the lad eventually fashioned a respectable shake.

B. L. then took over. He sliced the dessert and placed a piece on each plate. He offered Masters a napkin and took one himself, spreading it across his lap as if preparing for a feast. At first taste his reaction was undisguised.

“This is won-der-ful!” he said, closing his eyes and moving his head from side to side as if in ecstasy.

Masters couldn’t resist.

“You do get right into the spirit of things, don’t you, B. L.”

The boy grinned again.

“Always have, I’m told.”

In silence, the two enjoyed Gina’s handiwork.

“You’ve probably noticed my gimpy leg,” B. L. offered at last. “Got hit by a car when I was just a kid. I hate it sometimes, you know, but really, it’s like my trademark. I’ve learned to live with it. Abby – that’s my girl – she doesn’t care. Pop says those who do, aren’t worth knowing anyway. Maybe he’s right.”

It was more of a dissertation than Masters expected.



“You seem to have adjusted pretty well. Can nothing be done about it?”

“Doc says there’s an operation, but Pop and I can’t afford anything like that. Pop and I have the junkyard east of town – Roman’s Recycling. Pop named it that a few years ago. A junkyard’s a junkyard, no matter what the sign says but it gives Pop some kind of a lift, you know – calling it a recycling center.”

More dessert. More silence. More moans of great pleasure from the lad.

The boy needed no prompting to lay out his life story.

“Mom died when I was a pup, so it’s just Pop and me. He’s a great guy but a lousy cook. I hope you can meet him, but it won’t be over supper like you had at Joel and Gina’s.”

“I’ll make every effort to meet him,” Masters said, suddenly realizing there would be no secrets while he was there in Allenville.

“Pop can fix anything if it’s mechanical,” B. L. continued. “He’s some kind of genius that way. I’m not too shabby myself but nothing like him. I’m more into people and words than Pop is. That’s one reason I work here evenings. I like to meet people. On Saturdays I work for Joel at the paper – well, in the print shop, really. I package orders – letterhead, envelopes, fliers, things folks have ordered – then I deliver them in my truck. If you need transportation, it’s always available. I used to continually misplace the key so I soldered it into the ignition permanently. Feel free to use it.”

“I haven’t driven in forty years. I’m afraid if my weight didn’t sink it, my poor skills would surely ditch it within a block.”

“I’m your chauffeur, then.”

He searched his several pockets.

“Here’s my card and cell phone number. Call me anytime.”

A business card and cell phone at sixteen. Times were changing, Masters assumed.

“Aren’t you in school during the day?” Masters inquired.

“Well, sort of,” he replied uneasily. “I’m on work study. That means I take a few classes in the morning and then I work with Pop afternoons. I don’t mean to be bragging you

understand, but I'm pretty smart. I've had my whole year's schoolwork finished for two months. So, the principal pretty well let's me come and go as I please. I suppose it's not what you'd call your typical arrangement."

"I suppose not." Masters shook his head and smiled. "You're a most interesting young man, B. L. Roman. I'm glad I'm having this chance to get to know you."

B. L. blushed a full blown, red-faced, eyes averted, blush.

It had not been Masters' intention to make the lad uncomfortable so he moved on quickly.

"How about a few words on the people of this fair city?"

B. L. jumped at the change of direction.

"You'll find, Sir, that it's seldom that I only have a 'few' words on any topic, but I'll endeavor to truncate my discourse."

He paused long enough for Masters to deliver a pained expression, punctuated with a deliberate, "Ouch!"

B L grinned his endearing grin.

"There aren't many folks around here I can use my dollar words with. You get much above a quarter – even a dime – word and folks around her think your being snooty. I figured you being a Harvard man, I could slip a few into the conversation."

"I see. Well, then, I'll endeavor to suppress my innate inclination to express disapproving exclamations when inundated with your ebullitions of ostentatious verbiage."

B. L. rocked back in his seat and clapped.

"This is going to be a hoot, Sir."

The glance that passed between them confirmed their comfortable, new friendship.

"Back to the people in thirty words or less," the boy began, buying time to organize his thoughts. "By fifth grade, you're pegged either as a Nak or a Pak."

"You've moved from ostentatious to esoteric," Master said, smiling.

"Yeah, well, I had intended an explanation."

It was a playful exchange that further welded the relationship.

"Nak – an acronym for Never A Knight. Pak – Possibly

A Knight.”

“I see. The town’s organized socially around knighthood, so to speak.”

“Potential knighthood, really. Only about one in a hundred Paks ever really make it. It causes more strain and tension within the Paks than between the Paks and the Naks.”

“And you are ...?” Masters asked.

“I’m a C-nak.”

“A C-nak?”

“I’ve subdivided the Naks into a, b and c varieties. A’s are guys who are obvious Naks but they are angry about it – thus the ‘a’.”

“Yes, I caught that. I’m a Harvard man, remember.

Neither the comment nor his own smile slowed the boy.

“B stands for beautiful – that includes all females because they don’t have a shot from the moment of conception. And then the C’s, like me. It stands for ‘content’ – to be a Nak.”

“A most interesting conceptual structure,” Masters said. “And what’s the percentage split?”

“B’s make up about 50%, of course. I’d say 40 to 45% are C’s and only about 5% to 10% are A’s”.

“And your Father?”

B. L. sighed deeply and looked Masters directly in the eyes.

“Sadly, he’s an A. Now, it’s more because of my status than his. Pop’s always been into fair and unfair. The unfair side of life tends to consume him I’m afraid.”

“Where do you stand on the fairness thing?”

“Soon after my accident, I realized that dwelling on the idea of unfair would just eat me alive, so I chose to ignore the concept. What is, is. You work to change what you can. What you can’t, you just live around. Some Saint said that, I think.”

“It’s a philosophy that seems to work for you, does it?”

“Yeah. Most of the time. I’d be lying if I said that I never felt upset that I have to limp through life because of a drunken old man without the sense to stay away from the driver’s seat. But, when I realize I’m feeling sorry for myself, I just count all my blessings – like the song says – and shake it off. I’d like to

play sports, you know. I think I'd have been pretty good – Pop was – but my lot's 'N double A."

Masters thought out loud. "N double A. Never An Athlete?"

"You are good, Sir! Anyway, it was worse back before Abby."

"Double B, A?" Masters joked.

"Double B, A." Oh, Back Before Abby! Yes. She'll enjoy that one."

"Do you mind talking about the accident?"

"Not with you, Sir. What do you want to know: Who, what, where, when like Mr. Nevin always asks?"

"That should provide a good start."

"Well, I was four. Bobby Franklin – he was seventeen then – had brought me down town for ice cream. Bobby's a longtime friend of the family – He's a policeman now. Anyway, he stopped to talk with a couple of girls – we were on the sidewalk in front of the drug store. I spotted something shiny in the street and wandered out to investigate. That's when Donny Treadway came barreling down the street, ran the town's only stoplight and hit me. His car ran over me – ran right up my left leg and across my pelvis. He didn't even stop, but there were lots of eyewitnesses. My tibia and fibula were broken and the right side of my pelvis was crushed."

Masters shook his head.

"I am so sorry. Treadway? Any relation to William Treadway on the list of the Knights who died a few years ago?"

"Yes, Sir. His son. Donny also died three years ago. I feel so bad for Maude – wife and mother of the two."

"How did your father react?"

"I guess he went a little nuts. He went over to their place with a shotgun and threatened to kill Donny. He thought better of it, I guess, and eventually left. It's Bobby who's never got over it, though."

"Bobby?"

"Bobby Franklin. He still feels guilty. He thinks his negligence caused it. I can't convince him to just let it go. You'll meet him. He's been assigned to help you. I'm surprised he hasn't already introduced himself. He's been

beside himself ever since he heard you were coming. He was a fan way before I was. He got me my first Raymond Mastery Mystery – The Murder No One Committed. He gave me his scrapbook of clippings on my thirteenth birthday.”

“I’ll be pleased to meet him.”

“How can I say this?” B. L. paused. “Bobby is a really nice guy, but I’m not sure he’s police caliber. His grandfather was an Allen so he pretty much had his pick of city jobs. That’s just the way it is here.”

“Caliber?” Masters asked.

“Bobby’s a little slow and he tends to be impulsive. He grew up on candy bars, Ritalin, and Mountain Dew. He wears me out just watching his intensity – his go-go-go approach to life. He does provide a lot of laughs around here though.”

Just what Masters needed – another befuddled policeman to assist him on a case. It seemed his lot. Perhaps he just needed to accept B. L.’s philosophy: ‘Change what you can and live with the rest.’

Masters had one final question.

“May I ask why you go by the initials, B. L.?”

“Sure, you may ask. My standard answer is that I have no actual names – just initials. You are free to believe that or not.”

“And you’re less than standard answer?”

“Only the woman who bears my children will ever know.”

“I’ll probably not qualify, then,” Masters smiled.

“That would appear doubtful, Sir.”

Masters’ smile was readily returned.

The dessert finished, B. L. gathered up the utensils, plates and plastic box. Although nothing had been mentioned about the source of the treat, B. L. seemed to know.

“I’ll get these things washed up and take the Tupper Ware back to Gina. She’s probably the best cook in these parts, you know.”

It didn’t call for an answer, so he continued.

“If you need anything just let me know.”

He stood and prepared to leave.

“If it’s available, I can get it for you – that goes for information as well as stuff.”

He winked, picked up the tray and was soon out of sight through a set of swinging doors and down a hallway.

What a shame for such an apparently fine and handsome young man to be so afflicted, Masters thought. His big heart saddened.

Again, he took the top report from the box of papers. Again, he donned his glasses. Again, he was interrupted. This time by an attractive young lady.

"I'm Abby Gale, B. L.'s girlfriend. I assume that if you've been here a minimum of five minutes, you've met him. Ever since he heard you were coming here he's been beside himself – so eager to meet you. You're really his number one hero, Mr. Masters."

"I'm flattered. Won't you sit down?"

"Thanks, but no. I came to meet B. L. - and you, I guess, to be totally truthful. He gets off at nine."

"Well, the last time I saw him he was headed down that hallway – on his way to the kitchen, I assume."

"That boy! He eats all the time and never gains an ounce. Me, I just smell food and I feel my hips inflate. Well, thanks. Nice meeting you. I work the breakfast shift at Mama's Café, across the street. Maybe I'll see you in the morning."

"You can count on it," Masters said with a smile

As she left, a small, frail looking older gentleman entered through the front door. Spotting Masters, he walked toward him with military precision. Extending his hand, he announced,

"My name is Rick Distlemier, Mr. Masters. I'm the secretary of the Grand Order of Knights. We have corresponded."

"Certainly. Glad to meet you at last. Have a seat."

"No, I don't want to bother you. I just dropped in to see when you'd be coming by the castle tomorrow."

"I'm here at your pleasure. You set the hour," Masters said cordially.

"Let's say nine, then. Do you need transportation?"

Masters hesitated.

"No. No. Thank you. I have made other arrangements."

"Well, alright, then. I'll see you at nine. Is there

anything I should prepare?”

“No. I prefer to shoot from the hip.”

Rick clearly missed the point. Masters clarified.

“I like to play it by ear my first day on a new case. I’ll want to look around the castle, hear about the members, and learn about the deceased Knights.”

Rick nodded his understanding and left. He seemed a nervous little man, overly tidy and compulsively conscientious – the hallmarks of an excellent administrator and a maddening husband!

Masters returned to the reports, pausing to glance around the room in search of some potential interruption before becoming serious about the paper work. Had he not been eager to meet anyone who would lend him an ear, he would have retired to the privacy of his room, so it was with some let down that he began reading. Joel had arranged the reports in chronological order – earliest on top. It made the first one that of Colonel Robert Allen, grandson of the Knight’s fonder. He had been 79 at the time of his death. A retired army officer, he had outlived three wives but had no children. Interestingly, under the heading Known Enemies, was simply the hand-written note, ‘Everyone who had ever known him.’ Elsewhere it referred to his position in the Knights as the “Blight of Knights rather than Knight of Knights.”

He had not been a well-liked man.

At the bottom of the page, under comments, it read:

“Seems out of place to pursue his death as a murder. If it was, we should throw the culprit a party!”

The death certificate showed heart failure as the cause of death. There had been a blood work-up but it revealed nothing to confirm or contradict that conclusion. It seemed strange to Masters that the report would have even mentioned the possibility of murder. And why a police report at all? Masters began jotting down his list of questions.

To simplify his mental bookkeeping, Masters decided to number the ten most recent Knights of Knights, with the Colonel being D-10 – the D indicating deceased. It would be arranged like a countdown to the current Knight.

He began reading the report on D-9. He had apparently been a generally likable chap who had owned the

dry goods store. The report suggested nothing remarkable other than he, too, had died of heart failure several hours after the Knight's Ceremonial meal on the morning of the Celebration of Life. Perhaps the strain of preparing the celebration was just too much for the octogenarian hearts, Masters wondered to himself. His answer was quick in coming. Two, perhaps. Seven, unlikely!

S-8 (The S for Survived) was Doc Carter. He had accused numbers D-7, D-6 and D-4 of swindling him out of a considerable profit on a farm he sold them – an acreage, which had been subsequently purchased by the state for an airport. According to Joel's summary, Doc remained bitter about it to the present day. He was alive and active, living at a nursing home west of town. D-7 died in a fashion similar to 10 and 9 – heart failure several hours after the Celebration of Life banquet. The reports were becoming monotonous. Masters began just skimming the summaries.

D-6 was a duplicate of the first two.

Number S-5, having lived through the ceremonial day, had no police report. Joel had, however, included a one-page bio. His name was Ralph Waterson, age 80 at the time of his 'reign' as Knight of Knights. He had been the town's pharmacist. Joel noted that his son, Jim, had been a small-time contractor who went bankrupt after the city council canceled a large contract it had awarded him for the town's new waste water treatment plant. He had purchased the necessary new equipment on the strength of the contract. Without the contract, he couldn't meet the payments. He died three years later – perhaps another suicide. His father went into seclusion at his daughter's home and is rarely seen about town anymore

D-4, D-3, and D-2 were carbon copies of the other deaths. All happened on the day of the celebration and each report from the medical examiners stated heart failure due to natural causes with times of death all within a thirty-one minute time span after the beginning of the Banquet. The last three deaths had thick police reports, suggesting the department had begun taking seriously the possibility of foul play.

In each case, both Doc and Waterson had been re-



investigated. In each case, there was neither opportunity nor means found for either man. B. L.'s father had also been treated as a suspect in the Treadways' deaths. There were references to supposed threats he had made against the Knights in general when they refused his application for a grant to purchase trees to be planted as a living fence around the periphery of his recycling center. Several of the Knights who were then sitting on the County Planning Commission retaliated by requiring him to build a ten-foot high wooden, privacy fence on three sides of his property. The powerful ruled in those parts. Not a doubt about that!

Tired after his long day of plane rides, airports, and conversation, Masters gathered the papers into the box and prepared to retire to his room. A tall, thin, young man entered the lobby. He stopped and surveyed the room, telegraphing an exaggerated air of self-importance. His eyes flitted from side to side. He chewed the stem of an unlit pipe. His fingers drummed against his thighs. His left heel tapped restlessly. Masters assumed it was Bobby Franklin. He was right!

Though a man in his late twenties, he retained the features of a fifteen-year-old – upturned nose still a bit large for his face and dark fuzz gracing his upper lip. He walked – no strode – toward Masters, never looking directly at him, giving the impression that he had not missed a single other feature of the room. He stopped six feet away, still averting his glance.

“Raymond Masters, I presume,” he said as if one secret agent to another on a fog engulfed, London, waterfront.

“Officer Franklin,” I assume,” Masters replied, tickled at being drawn into a scenario right out of a 1940's ‘B’ movie. It would not have surprised him if the room had suddenly faded to black and white.

Then at last Bobby turned to look the old detective in the face.

“At your service, Sir,” came Bobby's heel clicking response.

“I'm pleased to meet you, Officer. B. L. said you'd be around. He is certainly fond of you. Please, have a seat.”

Apparently satisfied that he had orchestrated an adequately professional impression, Bobby sat, able to put his

affectations aside.

“Chief says I am to assist you in any way you wish,” he began. “I know this case like the back of my hand. The principles are an open book to me. I’m your fountain of information.”

Masters wondered if he had just witnessed a Guinness record for the largest number of clichés stuffed into a single conversation.

“Well, I will certainly appreciate your assistance. Between you and B. L., I imagine there isn’t much about this community that has gone unnoticed during the past ten years.”

“You can take that to the bank, Sir.”

(The man continued to break his own record.)

“I do have one question,” Bobby continued.

Finally, he’s getting down to business, Masters thought.

“Do you think I should wear my uniform or stay in plain clothes for this one. I’m leaning toward plain, myself.”

Getting down to business was clearly going to have to wait.

“Plain clothes seem most appropriate,” Masters agreed.

“So, what’s first on the agenda?” Bobby asked.

“Tomorrow I’m meeting with Rick at the castle. I thought that would be a good place to begin.”

“Henrik Distlemier,” Bobby said, delivered in a terrible German accent.

“Oh. It’s Henrik, is it?” Masters said.

“Yes, Sir. His folks came over from Eastern Europe when he was a baby, as I understand it. I hear his father was a Baron or something. They left out for here after the war, I guess.”

“He’s been here a long time?”

“Came about thirty years ago. Had some in with the Allen clan. Went right to work for the Knights.”

“Married?”

“Never as far as I know. He lives alone in a room over the drug store. Seems a nice chap – Kind of quiet – No sense of humor – Doesn’t drive – Never see him about town – He’s a Lutheran – Goes out to church on Sunday – Early service.”

“Friends?”

“Not sure. He used to be on the Concert Series Board

– He plays the violin in the pit bands for all the local plays. He may have some friends in that artsy crowd.”

“Do you remember just when he was on the concert board?”

“Roughly ten to 12 years ago. I was still in school. I’ll find out exactly first thing in the morning if that’s soon enough.”

“In the morning, will be fine.”

“Anything else this evening, Sir?”

“Since we’re going to be associates on this case, why not drop the Sir and call me Ray.”

“Oh. I don’t think I could do that . . . Sir. Thank you though.”

“Well, maybe you can keep working at it. Oh, there is one other thing. I’ve been going through the police reports on the deceased Knights. I was somewhat puzzled as to why there was a police report on Colonial Allen – the first one to die. The medical examiner apparently ruled the death as heart failure. How did the police come to be involved?”

“I’ll ask the Chief and have an answer for you in morning. If that’s all then, I’ll be on my way. Just wanted to welcome you and tell you what an honor it is to be working with you.”

“I’m sure we’ll make a great team,” Masters said, pushing himself to his feet – no easy task with crossed fingers!.

Bobby extended his hand and they shook.

“By the way, Sir, I had the drug store lay in a special supply of Raspberry Twisters. I know they are your favorite.”

“Bobby. You are a gem! I’ll make it an early stop in the morning.”

Bobby left and Masters made his way to his fourth-floor room. Before closing the drapes, he surveyed the sprawling little town before him. It was a peaceful scene, the lights appearing as a thousand stars come to Earth in anticipation of some grand event. He hoped it was not the expiration of another Knight of Knights.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **Day Two: Morning**

### **Castle with a “K”**

As was his custom, Masters arose on his own at five a.m. and was soon ready to meet the day. There was something particularly invigorating about the first full day on a new case. After making a few notes, he left his room. He paused at the top of the stairs, contemplating the calories he would expend if he walked down to the lobby. He decided that, instead, he would just push the elevator’s down-button with an extra-vigorous, calorie-burning, jolt of energy. Masters had long ago given up any serious attempt at dieting, but some personally meaningful purpose seemed to be served by playing at it from time to time.

Once on the sidewalk in front of the hotel, he stopped and looked up and down the still darkened, light lit, street to get his bearings. The café, which was his immediate destination, sat directly across the wide, brick paved street. Though looking all quite out of place there in cowboy-built Wyoming, the area seemed a peaceful, quaint, relic of a long ago time when Model “A’s”, dapper gentlemen and ladies with parasols graced the town’s center. Each brick undoubtedly had a story to tell.

To the east of the café were several stores boasting fronts which had been faithfully restored to a rustically frontier appearance. There was the Dollar Store, the pharmacy, the drugstore and a leather shop. To the west was a recently remodeled metal and glass front building, fully out of place and looking somewhat embarrassed about its appearance.

The bank stood to the west of the hotel, while its east side was flanked by a small bookstore, set some thirty feet back from the sidewalk with a brick patio, round tables and coffee house atmosphere. The cold March temperature suggested it would be some time yet until that feature was fully utilized.

In all, the entire main drag spanned just one short, compact block. Masters assumed that there must be ample shopping areas on the outskirts of town – probably along the highway to the south.

The castle, which was to be the center of his interest that morning, sat on a low hill a half mile or so behind the hotel. He crossed to the café, stopping briefly to view his top-coat-over-three-piece-suit reflection in the window. He had a momentary vision of himself dressed in jeans, wide belt, boots and a flannel shirt. The image produced a chuckle. As out of place as his eastern garb might be, the local version would look downright repulsive. He entered to a cheery greeting, in chorus, from Abby and B. L. Several men sitting at the counter turned their heads and tipped their hats, immediately returning to their quiet exchange of the morning's gossip.

B. L. motioned Masters to a table in the rear, thereby sparing the old gentleman the experience of being unable to slip his bulk into one of the ranch-hand-narrow booth seats. Abby arrived with a menu in hand but pointed to the blackboard above the counter.

“That’s really what we have this morning.”

A brief perusal suggested that the Ranch Hand Special would be sufficient to last the morning. That became the order.

“I assume the orange pick-up out front is yours,” Masters said, addressing his remark across the table to B. L.

“Yeah! Awesome or what?” he said, pausing.

It was clearly not a rhetorical question. The boy awaited a response.

“Awesome – in its generic meaning – probably pretty well sums it up,” Masters said.

“Awe as in fear producing, you mean,” B. L. came back more quickly than Masters had expected.

“I see you’re at your game-best even early in the

morning,” Masters said, smiling. “Actually, I like the color. It brings a feeling of warmth to these deceptively cold early hours of the day.”

“Yeah. I suppose Wyoming springs are probably a bit cooler than you’re used to.”

“A bit,” Masters said. “The bright sun fools one.”

B. L. directed a brief, proud, glance in the direction of his vehicle and then continued.

So, what’s on the agenda today, Sir?”

“I’m due at the castle – is that really what you call it?”

“Yup – the castle – they spell it with a capital “K” – supposed to reflect a Germanic connection, I think.”

“I see. Well, then, I’m due at the Kastle with a capital “K” at nine. I thought I’d walk the neighborhoods first. I like to get a feel for a community from ground level.”

“Sounds good,” B. L. said. “I figured as much, really. That seems to be your MO. Alone, I suppose?”

“Alone works best for me. You can surprise your principal and show up at school for a change.”

B. L. grinned.

“Actually, it’s Spring Break. I need to help Pop with a few projects, though, so I’ll be constructively occupied.”

“Have you thought of anymore tidbits I should know about your community?” Masters asked, shifting the conversation to a more potentially productive topic.

“Well, you could say we have a long, proud, frontier history here that no one except the Knights seem to give a rat’s ear about.”

“An interesting opening volley,” Masters said, clearly amused.

“I just meant they are all really old guys. The young folks look to the future. The Knights only do so begrudgingly.”

“Really old, huh? I suppose, then, that some may even be as ancient as I am?” Masters said, eyes twinkling, as B. L. struggled to extract his foot.

“Well, I meant they act old. They revel in their own past. Until a few years ago, they were more into planting monuments than trees. Joel’s moved them on to a more planet friendly perspective. They’ve planted thousands of trees – each, of course, sporting an ugly little plaque

proclaiming the Knight's benevolent philanthropy. That's not old like you are . . . old . . . Sir . . . you see. Shall I just stop now before I choke on my heel?"

"I certainly wouldn't want that. Good boots are so hard to come by."

Before the boy was required to respond, Abby arrived with plate after plate of breakfast. Ranch hands apparently had hardy appetites. How did they manage to stay so slim? Assuming the answer involved dawn to dusk physical activity, Masters chose to let it go. Abby slid in beside B. L. to listen. He gave her a sweet, simple peck on her cheek. She put her arm through his and drew close. Their relationship appeared to be an easy, solid, comfortable one.

"So, what else about your town?" Masters asked, rekindling the original topic.

"Mostly really nice, hardworking people. It's the ranches that keep us going economically – feed mill, equipment, auction barn. A few state jobs out at the highway department. Our schools bring in kids from an hour and a half away. A few even further. Lots of the kids from really far off stay at Marge's rooming house during the week and go home on the weekends. Not good, but could be worse. Marge is great. She's the Postmistress, as well. The post office is actually built right onto her front porch. Everybody loves Marge."

"The school's small – lots of retired folks in these parts so few kids. The athletic teams have to travel half a day in order to get to another school. That makes us rather isolated by eastern standards, I suppose.

"When Doc Carter retired a few years ago, we lost our physician – the only one most of us had ever known. He brought most of us into the world. Now, a rotating staff from Casper mans the clinic. Seems you never get to see the same doctor twice. I don't like that, although there is one knock down beautiful doctor I won't complain about."

Abby elbowed him playfully. It called for another quick kiss, which she accepted, but with mock reluctance. B. L. continued.

"The Knights have been trying to lure a young family practice guy with a hundred-thousand-dollars' bonus. That's

chicken feed, these days. Needs to be five times that if you ask me, and, of course, nobody does,” he added with a shrug and an uncharacteristically weak, one cheek smile.”

Abby nodded in agreement. Her support seemed to have been important to B. L. and he took time to acknowledge it with an appreciative glance in her direction. What a nice gesture, Masters thought. The boy moved on.

“The big event around here is in July, Frontier Days – a week-long, rootin’ tootin’ cowboy affair – parades, rodeo, carnival, circus – the whole shootin’ match, you might say. Folks come from hundreds of miles. Just about everybody in town rents out their bedrooms. The football field becomes a regular RV park. Pop and I make a mint just doing little repairs and odd jobs. Main Street’s blocked off and turned into a mall and food court. It’s lots of fun. Some of the old – that is, more mature, retired, wisdom-filled folks – wish it would go away. It disturbs their routine. I guess I can kind of understand that.”

Masters smiled at B.L’s playful misstatement and correction.

“Where’s the money in this town?” Masters asked.

“The Knights pretty well control things – auction barn, bank’s board of directors, the feed mill, a dozen big ranchers, Real Estate Company, the hotel, auto dealerships, most everything that smells of green. Those Knights who aren’t still hauling it in are sitting back counting it.”

“And Joel? Does he fit that characterization?”

“Well, sort of I guess. His family owned a dozen little newspapers, some radio stations here and there, and a TV station down in Cheyenne. Joel sold them off so he could concentrate on the Defender – that’s our little paper here in Allenville. I guess it’s more like a full-time hobby for him. It wins awards every year. He certainly wouldn’t have to work.”

“Who’s killing off the Knights?” Masters asked without warning.

“If we knew we’d be getting your fee – it’s sizable, I understand. Kidding aside, we knew you’d ask,” B. L. said turning to look Abby in the eyes. “Quite honestly, no one suspect fits the bill.”

“Explain,” Masters asked, as he artistically spread



grape jelly on a steaming hot, golden brown, homemade buttermilk biscuit.

“Well, when the Colonel – the first one to go – died, we all wondered if it might have been Gerald Miller – Gina Nevin’s dad. There’s no such thing as a secret in Allentown, Mr. Masters. Everybody knew it was the Colonel who blackballed him and even though Gerald acted like he could have cared less, we all knew it was eating him alive. When Gerald . . . died, we assumed it was all over. Then it just kept happening, so it couldn’t have been Gerald. There are lots of grudges that go back four or more generations around here – way back to range wars and squatters vs. ranchers. Family pride may be both our greatest asset and our greatest weakness. We don’t have a clue – really – how to answer your question. No good gossip. No recurring whispering. Maybe the only reasonable answer is that every death was caused by someone different – taking advantage of the situation to camouflage their involvement. Settling old scores, you know.”

“So, we may be looking for one culprit or seven, is that what you’re saying?”

“That’s it.”

Abby interjected another possibility.

“Or, it could be that the ‘natural causes’ diagnosis was accurate in some or all of the cases.”

“Or the curse?” B. L. asked half-heartedly.

“My favorite kind of case,” Masters said. “A multitude of possibilities.”

“One thing’s certain,” Abby said.

“And that is . . .?” Masters asked, eager to add any element of certainty to the case.

“It wasn’t the butler. You won’t find a butler for a hundred miles in any direction.”

It had been a reference to one of Master’s recent cases and lightened the mood evoking a round of chuckles.

“Did Gerald have any close friends – anyone who might be considered accomplice material?”

“I don’t know.”

B. L. looked at Abby who shrugged her shoulders and shook her head.

“I had never considered that angle,” the boy continued.

“We were really both too little to have been aware of that kind of thing, I guess.”

“That’s one advantage of being an outsider – new to the events,” Masters said.

“I can see that. No constraints from the conventional wisdom,” B. L. added, thoughtfully.

Masters turned directly and obviously to Abby.

“Does he talk like that all the time?”

“Often enough that I’d miss it if he stopped,” she answered, squeezing the boy close to her and resting her head against his shoulder. It was a touching demonstration of affection.

As he sopped up the last vestiges of sausage gravy with his biscuit, Masters asked, “By the way, what time does the drug store open?”

“Eight,” Abby answered. “The café at five. The drug store at eight. Most everything else at nine.”

B. L. offered a further bit of time-related trivia.

“The town runs on bank-clock time. It’s like no other time zone in the world. Some days it’s a few minutes fast. Some days a few slow. To be on time around here, though, you reset your watch with the bank every morning.”

Amused, Masters nodded, folded his napkin and searched for the check.

“No check,” Abby explained, sensing what he was doing. “The Knights are picking up all your expenses. The word is out. You’ll find your money’s no good here on Main Street.”

An interesting interpretation of the ‘all expenses paid’ clause. At least it did away with that pesky paperwork. He wondered if that really extended to raspberry twisters. He’d find out at eight. Between then and eight he’d take an extended walk. As well prepared as the town seemed to be for his time there, he had to assume that few of his observations would be of the truly natural state of affairs.

B. L. helped him on with his overcoat and the two of them were soon on the sidewalk. The bank clock struck twelve.

“Twelve?” Masters commented out loud, checking his big gold pocket watch. I thought you said a few minutes off.”

“Oh, ya. I forgot to mention that its been stuck for twenty years and it strikes twelve every hour – 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. In that way it’s actually pretty dependable.”

He grinned.

“One would think it could be fixed or replaced,” Masters said, clearly bewildered.

“I’m sure it could, but then it wouldn’t be the Allentown clock anymore,” B. L. pointed out, as if it should have been obvious to the Old Detective.

There was no arguing with that logic – well, at least there was no good reason to argue with it. B. L. patted the hood of his truck. “Meet Ol’ Cit,” he said fondly.

“Should I ask?” Masters asked.

“Cit? It’s short for citrus, which somehow evolved from orange. It’s one of those unplanned, progressive things that just happens over time.”

“I see. Well, hello Ol’ Cit. I’m Ray,” Masters said playfully attempting to duplicate the pats administered by the young man.

“It’s one of a kind, Sir,” B. L. offered. “Pop and I put it together ourselves. It’s the only FORGE in existence, I suppose.”

“FORGE?”

“It’s part Ford and part Dodge – FORGE. Someday I’m going to make an emblem for its hood that spells that out.

“I’m going to have to keep notes on your B-L-eze. You use a language all of your own.”

B. L. grinned and nodded.

“I better let you get on with your walk,” he said, opening the truck’s door. “Don’t forget you can call me any time. Here in Allenville, I can’t ever be more than five minutes away.”

“Thanks. I do remember. I’ll see you later at the hotel if not before.”

Ol’ Cit coughed herself to life, shaking for a long moment as if to get her circulation going. Masters felt a sudden kinship!

The truck moved east. Masters moved west. He fastened the top button on his coat against the cold Wyoming morning. The homes were mostly older, two-story, modest in size and frills, all set on large, well-cared for lots. Ample

sidewalks accompanied the tree-lined streets. There were few stop signs. Masters observed that there appeared to be generally accepted conventions as to which were the through streets and which yielded the right of way. He pictured a traffic cop's nightmare during Frontier Days with all the out-of-town drivers.

The chill in the air – if twenty-eight degrees qualified as merely a chill – belied the fact that it was soon to be Spring. Coat clad youngsters were riding bikes and playing as children do everywhere, apparently oblivious to the temperature. They were friendly and many called to him by name – an unexpected though not unpleasant turn of events. They had questions for him:

“Are you really a detective?”

“Do you have kids?”

“Are you going to send somebody to jail?”

His favorite came from a chubby, four-year-old girl.

“Do you really weigh a ton, Mister?”

The rumor of his bulk had obviously preceded him.

The adults – only a few were visible – seemed a good deal more reluctant to initiate conversation. Was there, perhaps, a secret they felt compelled to guard or at least reluctant to be the one who would divulge it? They smiled and returned Masters' waves, but made no overtures that might encourage a next step.

The school buildings were ancient but well kept. The two-story, gray stone high school was on the north-east corner of a large, grassy, square block. The grade school sat at the opposite corner. Between them, were playgrounds, shaded by tall, old trees, presumably beautifully lush once they blossomed with their summer greenery. Across the street to the south was a spacious park, complete with stone fireplaces, tennis courts, a swimming pool, ball fields and open sided pavilions.

During his ninety-minute walk, Masters encountered a half dozen churches – all mainstream in name, at least. It appeared to be a community that treasured its people, its privacy and its independence.

Masters turned back toward Main Street, intent on savoring at least one twister before arriving at the

castle/Kastle.

That attended to – and again on the Knight's tab – Masters approached the huge, overbearing building. It appeared no less cold and foreboding close up than it had from blocks away. The sizable piles of lingering, dirty, snow undoubtedly contributed to that impression.

There were two, huge, wooden doors side by side at the entry. One bore a sign that read Knights. The other, Public. That seemed to further confirm the impression of separate and certainly not equal that Masters had gleaned from both Joel and B. L.

He chose the Public door and soon found himself in a wide, rather dismal, reception hall. He was amused when he realized that both the doors provided entry to the very same area inside.

Rick appeared almost immediately, still the bespectacled, nervous, insecure little man Masters had met the night before.

"Right in here, Sir. It's my office. May I take your coat?"

"Yes, thank you."

Masters surveyed the surprisingly cozy, though windowless room. It had pale yellow painted walls, burgundy carpet, copies of classical art on the walls and a substantial library in a massive bookcase across the rear. The heavy, large, wooden desk and the bulky, leather-covered chairs appeared to have been original, though not unattractive, appointments in the century old edifice. Not unexpectedly, the office was immaculately tidy, adding to the over-all impression that visitors were probably seldom welcomed and ordinarily considered intruders.

Rick was dwarfed behind the desk. Even so, he suddenly assumed an air of confidence. It was his bailiwick and he seemed to feel in control. He motioned Masters to sit and then did so himself.

"In this pile, I have a folder on each Knight. It includes a bio, family history, activity history as a Knight, and newspaper clippings pertaining to his social contributions. Here I have organized my notes on the activities on the days each Knight died. I have a copy of a recent series of articles that

summarize the history of the organization. You said you wanted a tour of the building. Shall we begin with that, then?"

"I appreciate all the work you've gone to here. It will certainly speed my investigation. Before we look around, could you tell me about the Celebration of Life ceremony – when, where, exactly how it proceeds?"

"Certainly. It might be more easily accomplished over in the Main Hall, however."

"Let's start there, then," Masters said getting to his feet with surprisingly little effort.

The large, old chair handled his dimensions with ease and discretion. It deserved a loving pat and received one.

The entrance to the Main Hall was directly across the wide hallway from the office. The huge door squeaked open on large iron hinges.

"I once oiled them," Rick said. "It was a mistake. The Knights think the squeak adds an air of authenticity."

In harmony with everything about the building, the meeting room was very large. In its center, as promised, was "the" table, oval in shape, and surrounded by thirty-six heavy, wooden, uncomfortable looking chairs.

The floor was of wide, bare wood planking. Three recently electrified chandeliers each made of metal and crystal were suspended over the table – slightly off center to the west. Each one hung on the end of a ten-foot black iron pipe putting them midway between the twenty-foot high ceiling and the floor

The upper ten feet of the east wall was splintered by a parade of thirty-six narrow windows each perhaps eight inches wide and eight feet tall. The light cast strangely striped shadows, which crossed the floor, mounted the table and then fell again to the floor before climbing a few feet – as with some uncertainty – up the uneven rock wall on the West. The irregular, century old glass panes, delivered the sun into the room as faintly colorful, rainbow-like bands. It was the single cheerful element in the room. In the center of the west wall – opposite the windows – stood a ten-foot high Grandfather clock. It was out of place on the time-line yet fitted well in terms of its dark wood, and massive, ornate appearance.

Several questions arose as Masters took it all in.

“The wood in the floor looks considerably newer than the rest of the wood in the building.”

“It is, Sir. About ten years ago a new layer was added to provide needed support to a sagging floor. The original design had not been made by an engineer and several modifications had to be made at that time to maintain the structural integrity of the building.”

“Several?”

“Yes. Four new support pillars were installed in the community room below to shore up this floor. The table, itself, had to be moved a foot or so in order for the beams below to properly bear its weight.”

“I notice the clock sits on a riser of sorts.”

“Yes. That was added to spread its weight between the floor beams. It’s a very heavy piece.”

“From the discoloration on the wall beside it, the clock seems to have been moved slightly to the north, also.”

“Yes, when the platform was made to spread its weight, Gerald moved it north a few inches so it would properly span the beams below.”

Masters moved to examine the clock.

“It appears that this crystal piece above the face is of a different style than the rest,” Masters said.

“You have a good eye. The original piece was broken during the move. What you see was specially made as a substitute. I can show you pictures of the original if you want.”

“Perhaps later. It’s mostly just idle curiosity, you know.”

Masters strode the room, his gaze coming to rest on the three chandeliers.

“So, much of this renovation occurred while Gerald Miller worked here?”

“Yes, Sir. All of it, in fact. He was an engineer. I suppose you know that. Probably the best educated handyman a place ever had. He saw right away what needed to be done. It took several months and was not inexpensive.”

“I can imagine. The chandeliers – I would have expected them to be hanging from heavy black chains to better match the decor.”

“They were, originally. While all the remodeling was being done, they decided to add air conditioning. I thought it

was just an extravagance but the VFW got it so, of course, the Knights had to get it. Well, the airflow from the inlet – up there – caused the chandeliers to swing and turn. It was a dangerous situation, so Gerald designed this way to make them rigid. They don't move so much as a quarter of an inch anymore. Gerald did lots of good things around here. I'm not sure why. Most men would have wanted to destroy the place after the way the Knights treated him."

Rick stammered and looked embarrassed.

"I really shouldn't have said that. I've never said anything against the Order, you understand. It's become my life – running things here."

"No need to apologize. Apparently, most of the Knights share your view – after all, except for one, they voted for Gerald, as I understand it. And, they did allow you to hire him."

"Thank you for that, Sir. It does put it all into a more palatable perspective."

Masters had more questions.

"There is an attic above this room?"

"A crawl space about four feet high – dusty, musty, and disagreeable."

"And below?"

"The Community Room. It's used pretty regularly for get-togethers, receptions, dances, and parties – those kinds of things. It's provided free for any approved activity. The VFW charges \$100 so the Knights decided to do the free thing to make themselves look more noble."

"Sounds like there is more than a little competition between the two groups."

"It's harmless but it is serious."

Masters was ready to move things along.

"There are other rooms, you say?"

"A work room downstairs in back – shop, I suppose you'd call it – and the Knight of Knights office just north of mine. Two other small rooms off the same hall. We use them for storage."

"May I try out one of these chairs?" Masters asked, not wanting to inadvertently tread on some sacred rule.

"Sure, but I must warn you, they seemed to have been



designed more to torture than comfort those sitting in them.”

Masters soon agreed. With some effort, he managed to pull himself and the chair up to the table. He examined the indentations for the plates and goblets in the table’s surface. Hand carved centuries before. “Beautiful!”

Rick beamed as if he had somehow been personally responsible for it all.

“Lots of legs on the table,” Masters commented as he pushed back and stood up.

“Twenty. It weighs nearly a ton, I’m told. It took thirty-five men to lift it when it was repositioned.”

“I can imagine it did.”

Gerald didn’t make many friends that day.”

“Oh.”

“No, Sir. He had made marks on the floor and every single leg had to fit exactly into its own little square before he would let the men go. It took well over an hour. He was a stickler for details like that. I guess I was the only one who admired him for it.”

Masters could understand that Rick would admire that in another.

“Now, Rick, you promised you’d run through the Celebration of Life ceremony for me.”

“Yes. Well, it takes place here in this room, of course, beginning exactly at the precise moment of the local Vernal Equinox – for many years now on March 22nd. The founder established that time. He apparently hired a geo-physicist to determine the exact moment of the equinox in this area for a period of 200 years. I wouldn’t have thought such a thing existed way back then. It varies by a few minutes from year to year but generally happens between 9:00 and 10:00 in the morning, Mountain Daylight Time.”

Masters felt the need to clarify.

“That’s the Spring Equinox, when the sun is directly above the equator, correct?”

“Correct.”

Masters nodded. Rick continued.

“The Knights file in from the hall and take their places. Each place is assigned according to age – the Knight of Knights takes his place at the head of the table – the next

oldest is to his right and then on around the table so the youngest member is at the Knight of Knights left.

“The men remain standing. The champagne-bearers – high school boys – bring in unopened bottles. One bottle is split between pairs of Knights – 18 pairs in all. The bearers leave. The younger man in each pair of Knights opens the bottle and fills the two goblets, which remain on the table. The Knight to the right of the Knight of Knights opens and pours their champagne and then similarly on around the table. The Knight of Knights then reads a lengthy passage from the bylaws confirming the purposes of the order. Once that is finished, they pick up their goblets in a gulp-the-goblet-dry toast. They then seat themselves and the bearer boys bring in large serving dishes of food that are passed among the members – who help themselves – and the banquet has begun. By 10:30 or 11:00 it’s all over. The plates are removed, cigars and pipes are lit, and the celebration moves to the community room where wives and family members are gathered. There is a band, dancing for those who want it, and lots of conversation. By 2:00 the building has pretty well emptied out.”

“Which is the head of the table?” Masters asked.

“The north end, here, closest to the door,” Rick said moving into position there. It was as if a sacred moment for him to stand there – obvious and undisguised. He drew a deep breath.

“The communal aspects of the drinking and eating routines would seem to rule out pre-poisoned food or champagne, would it?” Masters said, changing his original statement into a question.

“Yes, Sir. It is all shared with at least one other person – the food with many others.”

“Tell me about the goblets, plates and utensils. How are they handled prior to the meal?”

“It has become my tradition to wash and dry them myself, between seven and eight on the morning of the celebration. I then place them on a cart and bring them immediately here to the Hall where I set the table. I remain in the room to open the door when the procession begins. No one but me has access to anything on the table prior to the

banquet.”

Silence set in as Masters walked around the room again. Rick spoke.

“You bring up poison, but none of the medical reports have ever indicated poison.”

It seemed a question born of genuine bewilderment.

“I know,” Masters said. “But if it is not a weapon, and it is murder, what’s left?”

“Yes. What’s left? Well, the curse, if you’re so inclined,” Rick said thoughtfully.

Masters had to wonder whether the curse was his legitimate consideration or an attempt to cloud the investigation. Rick was becoming an interesting piece of the puzzle.

“May I see the Community Room?” Masters asked letting Rick’s comment pass.

“Certainly. This way.”

It was like entering a different world. The walls were plastered and painted. The floor was tiled. It was well lit and modern in every sense. There were murals on two walls depicting, Masters assumed, views of the town from the Kastle hill at various periods in its history. There was a small, curtained stage at one end.

Twelve-inch square wooden beams set five feet apart supported the ceiling. The planking from the floor above, painted powder blue, formed a light ceiling and added to the comfortable presence of the large room.

“Are those the heads of giant size bolts, I see up there?”

“Yes, Sir. Each leg of the table is secured from below with an eight-incher, screwed up through both layers of flooring. Gerald gave some reason why it was necessary. I forget, I’m afraid.”

“I would have thought a one ton table would pretty much stay in place by its self,” Masters said thinking out loud.

“Like I said, I forget his reason,” Rick added as if Masters’ comment had required some justification.

The tour over, they returned to Rick’s office.

“Tell me about the current Knight of Knights,” Masters began.

“David Allen Thomas, age 79. He’s been a Knight since he was 55. Heroism in the Korean War gained him entry. He’s a retired banker – vice president – Allen’s bank of course. His mother was an Allen. Married for fifty years. Had a son and a daughter. The boy was killed in Vietnam. The girl ran off with a hippie and hasn’t been heard from since. I think he’s a sad man, but too proud to admit it. In a way, he seems to be facing the possibility of death with some degree of . . . relief – perhaps that’s not the best word.”

“Enemies?”

“I’m not sure I can answer that. He has an abruptness about him that has never made him well liked, but I understand he was known as an easy touch for loans when he was with the bank. It got him in hot water from time to time with the Board, I hear. But, out and out enemies? No, Sir. I wouldn’t think so. If he’s in any danger, I’d think it would be more likely to be from some fanatic who just has it in for the Knights in general.”

“You’ve given all this a good deal of thought, I see,” Masters said.

“Yes, Sir. I have – for ten years now. Even so, I just can’t make things fit together. I guess nobody can. We’re counting on you.”

“I’m certainly going to give it my best effort,” Masters said. “Let’s jump back to Colonel Allen – the first Knight to die or be killed.”

As Masters had discovered, just drop a topic and Rick was ready to run with it. This one was to be no exception.

“I hesitate to speak ill of the dead but he was a despicable man. I suppose you know he’s the one who blackballed Gerald.”

“I’ve heard that rumor but assumed that the truth of it was lost as privileged information.”

“It should have been but word gets out in Allenville.”

“Any ideas why he did that?” Masters asked.

“I overheard him speaking with some others before the vote – politicking really, I suppose. He said that a non-combatant soldier had no right to receive the highest awards for valor. It really steamed him. You could say he ranted about it. I assume that’s why.”

“So, assuming Gerald knew that, it might make him a suspect in the Colonel’s death.”

“That’s what everybody thought. Well, let me back track. When the Colonel died, we all just assumed it was due to a combination of old age and stress – he was 84. But then, after the next one died of the same cause on the same day of the year and almost to the minute of the Colonel’s death, we started wondering. That’s actually when Gerald’s name popped up, but since he was already dead himself, that ruled him out just as quickly. It’s when a lot of folks began taking the Gypsy Curse seriously.”

The curse again, Masters noted to himself.

“How about Gerald’s daughter, Gina Nevin, or her husband, Joel?”

Rick looked surprised that Masters would be asking such a question about his friends.

“Well, yes, the question crossed a few lips, I suppose. They’re such a nice couple that it just couldn’t stick. Then, when Joel agreed to become a Knight himself, all those kinds of thoughts just vanished. When the next one, Doc Carter, didn’t die, most of us tended to write it all off to coincidence. There were, and still are, I suppose, a few who believe it has something to do with the curse.”

“And you?”

Rick sat back in his chair and folded his hands across his lap.

“I’m from the old country, Mr. Masters. My father was the last of a long line of Barons Distlemier. As a lad, my parents told me the folk tales of my land. Gypsy’s and curses were a part of it. It’s hard to shed such early teaching. My head says to dismiss it but my heart won’t let go.”

Masters nodded his understanding, then had a question.

“There is one point I’m confused about. It’s a procedural matter, I suppose. I understood that the eldest Knight assumes the position of Knight of Knights and serves for life. Doctor Carter and Ralph Waterson, the two who survived during these past ten years are still alive but neither continues to serve.”

“It’s been a strange few years. Doc Carter resigned

after his first year in office for personal reasons, he said. The same for Mr. Waterson. All these problems – the strain and pressures hanging over their heads – it's dampened the spirits of many members. There just isn't the unwavering loyalty and dedication anymore like there was twenty years ago. It's a different mentality."

"Tell me about that mentality."

"Years ago, to be a Knight was the dream of every boy in Allentown. Only a few, of course, ever made it, so there became a great number of disappointed men. Those who failed often took a sour grapes attitude – at least on the outside. They made out like they were somehow better off remaining on the outside. Those that made it soon found they were expected to become somebody important around here so they pushed and shoved their ways into prominence. Lots of toes have been stepped on – lots of dirty deals have been consummated by Knights as they sought to climb the status ladder."

"I assume that makes enemies along the way?" Masters asked.

"Lots of enemies. It's all turned out just backwards from the Founder's intentions, I believe."

"Backwards?" Masters repeated, his inflection asking for clarification.

"It was supposed to be a group that recognized and celebrated deeds of heroic proportions. Plain and simply that was it. Gradually, it has gained the reputation of a group of old snobs – ruthless old snobs, even, I suppose. A man has to be special to obtain membership but then, he has to continue to prove how special – powerful, really – he is for the rest of his life."

"I am somewhat surprised at your forthrightness about this," Masters said.

"Perhaps it's my Germanic heritage. Perhaps I just want to bring this terrible cycle of death to end. I've lost some good friends, Mr. Masters, and there seem to be more on the hit list."

"Do you believe the Knights have been killed for personal reasons or just because they were Knights?" Masters asked.

“I have asked myself that question many times. The obvious reason is because they are Knights and somebody simply has it in for the organization for one reason or another – the curse or something else.”

“You imply there may be a less obvious reason?”

“I have wondered if it it’s like copycat crimes where someone other than the original perpetrator seizes the opportunity for his own ends, hoping it will just be assumed to have been done by the first criminal.”

“Is there that much animosity about the Knights?”

“I have to think there may be.”

“From outside or inside the Order?” Masters asked.

“Could well be from either or both.”

The phone rang and Rick excused himself, turning away to tend to it. It gave Masters an opportunity to collect his thoughts. Rick’s easy, if not eager, portrayal of the Knights darker side seemed out of place for the loyal, long time administrator of the organization. If Rick were not to be believed, what would be his motive for intentionally misdirecting the investigation? A personal grudge? Protecting someone else? Several someone else’s, perhaps? Himself, even? Were his own Germanic roots somehow connected to the Gypsies, the curse, and the attempt to have the table returned to its homeland?

If, on the other hand, his impressions could be taken in good faith, the multiple killer theory seemed plausible – likely even – provided certain other aspects of the case would support it.

Rick finished his business and turned again toward Masters who spoke.

“What motivation within the order – other than social or business animosities – might there be for the murders?”

“Becoming Top Dog,” was first through his lips.

“The Knight of Knights?”

“Right.”

“That is so important, is it?”

“Sure, it is. The Knight of Knights runs the show, makes the rules, sets up the requirements for the members. The bylaws give the whims of the Knight of Knights pretty free reign on things. Also, once in the Order, it’s the only

achievement – goal – left to attain. These men are old, Mr. Masters. They know they don't have time to dawdle around. If the Knight of Knights ahead of him doesn't die or resign soon, the member next in line may well not be around himself when his turn comes. It's a life-long dream seen slipping away."

"It's a concept gone sadly awry then, is it?" Masters asked, attempting to summarize Rick's position.

"Well said, Sir."

"May I be blunt, Rick?"

"Certainly."

"What do you have to gain from all or some or any one of these deaths?"

Rick paused, clearly surprised by, though not unprepared for, the question.

"If I am the killer, Mr. Masters, I will not, of course, answer your question truthfully, will I?"

Masters smiled. An interesting opening move in a new game of chess. Rick Continued.

"The destruction of the Knights would put me out of work. I doubt if my job is in jeopardy from any of the current Knights. I run the organization well and efficiently. They really don't want to be bothered by the day-to-day side of things. They pay their dues and expect to be well taken care of. I do that for them and they pay me very well. You won't uncover any grudges I hold toward any of the Knights."

Masters noted but decided not to comment on Rick's use of the phrase 'from any of the current Knights'. His last statement sounded like a challenge. Masters knew that a challenge could, of course, be offered in support of the truth. It can also be offered as a smokescreen to cloud the truth.

"I understand you have an artistic side," Masters said, moving away from a confrontation.

"I play the viola, if that's what you're referring to."

"I had heard violin."

"I'm afraid they are all the same to lots of the folks around here. They are both just fiddles to most."

"I understand. And you have served on the Concert Series Board?"

"Yes. I served six years – two terms."

"When was that?"



"I've been off the board for eight years now. I must admit that I miss it. There is a two-term limit."

"You can fill me in, then, on how the Gypsy Troupe came to be booked?"

"Certainly. The Council is financed from memberships and a few grants. Each year we – the council that is – examine a number of possible performers and eventually decide on four or five for the season. The money available has to equal the expenses. There is usually one large, more expensive group, like a boys' choir or an orchestra, and then several less expensive soloists and small groups. The year the Gypsies came, they were an unexpected addition – a free sixth offering, in fact."

"Free?"

"In January, we received an anonymous cashier's check for \$5,000 with the stipulation it be used to secure this particular troupe – full information was included. They were contacted and scheduled for mid-February. They put on what could be called a rip-roaring performance – dance, music, stories, skits. It was the highest energy performance we've ever had. It was very well received."

"And that was the February before Colonel Allen died at the Celebration of Life."

"Yes. He died a month to the day after the Curse was delivered."

"And did you ever determine who the anonymous donor was?"

"No, Sir. It was drawn on a Casper bank as I recall. It came in a plain white envelope. The note was written on plain white paper. It bore a Casper postmark."

Masters drummed at his mustache.

"It is likely then, that someone was willing to spend \$5,000 to get the Gypsies and the curse in Allenville at that specific time."

"I had not considered that connection," Rick said. "To my knowledge, no one has."

"It may present us with a new path but to uncover the motive, opportunity, and means will likely take us on quite a hike," Masters admitted.

"Is there anyway of re-contacting the Gypsies?"

“I doubt it. They wouldn’t play the same town twice – one of their superstitions. I can get you whatever information we had on them, though. It’s in my file at home.”

“I will appreciate that.”

Rick pursued what he apparently thought was the obvious implication of Masters questions.

“Do you think you have the answer, Sir?”

“No. It’s far too early for that. I have a hunch, but hunches can be dangerous things – they tend to prevent a full-blown search for the facts. At this point, an investigation goes best if it’s strictly clue directed. I think of it this way. Imagine having the pieces of three or four jig saw puzzles mixed together and you have no pictures to indicate how any of them should look. The first job is to attempt to find which pieces probably go to which puzzles. Only after you have the pieces properly sorted, should you try to put them together.”

“That sounds like something Charlie Chan would have said to his over-eager number one son.”

“Ah so!” Masters touched his palms together and bowed his head slightly, mimicking oriental tradition. The attempt at humor only seemed to confuse Rick. Masters, therefore, forged ahead.

“May we look around outside?”

“Outside?” Rick seemed surprised. “Sure. Let’s get our coats.”

Snow remained on the ground in the shaded areas under the trees behind the Kastle. Spring in Wyoming was certainly not a poet’s rendering of daffodils and butterflies. As they rounded to the east side, Masters pointed to a stump. Before he could ask about it, Rick offered an explanation.

“Vandalism. One morning I arrived to find it cut through and laying on the ground.”

Masters surveyed the setting. It fell away from the building then.”

“Yes, Sir. In fact, it had been notched like lumbermen do, to direct its fall to the East. It even missed the flowerbeds and the fishpond. Landed smack dab between them.”

“You’re saying the vandal planned things so nothing would be damaged except the tree?”

“That’s certainly the way it appeared. Sounds strange

now that I say it. There was a police report.”

Masters looked at the stump.

“A sizable tree.”

“Nearly a hundred years old.” Rick said as if to explain why it had been so large.

“Do you remember when it happened?”

“Oh, yes, Sir. Just before the Colonels’ death. I remember because after Gerald cut it up, he stacked the wood beside the back door and it had to be moved for the Colonel’s funeral – Knights are buried from here and the back door is handier for moving caskets in and out.”

“Had there been threats of any kind that preceded the vandalism?”

“No. No threats.”

“Is vandalism a common thing around here?”

“No. In all the time I’ve been here, it was the only act like that that I recall. We have good families and good kids.”

“What kind of tree was it?”

“It was the only Chestnut tree we had. An odd tree for these parts. There just aren’t any left around here anymore. You don’t think that’s connected to the Colonel’s death, do you?”

“Puzzle pieces, Rick. Puzzle pieces,” Masters said, avoiding a direct answer.

The sun was high in the sky and the warmth of its direct rays was a welcome relief from the still chilled air.

“When do Spring-like temperatures arrive around here?” Masters asked, blowing into his cupped hand.

“These are Spring-like temperatures, Mr. Masters. If you mean warm – shirt sleeve days – you’ll need to stick around for two months or so.”

“The Spring days are typically sunny like this?” Masters asked.

“Yes. It’s rare we don’t have sunshine this time of year. Of course, we can still expect a good snow – maybe even two.”

“You really like all this cold weather, Rick?” Masters asked.

“I love the clean, fresh air and the natural beauty. I’ll put up with the temperatures in order to have them.”

“I think I can understand that. It is a beautiful place and the promise of bright sunny days like this could make a convert.”

Rick smiled. It was a real smile. The first one Masters thought he had seen from the man.

“If those folders on your desk are for me to take with me, I think I’ll get them and be on my way.”

They were.

He did.

He was.

It was somewhere near eleven o’clock as the bank clock struck twelve. It brought a smile to Masters’ face. He considered comparing Allenville time with that of his own pocket watch, but since that meant a fishing trip through three layers of clothing, he decided to pass. It was, in fact, a pleasant realization that his life did not need to be lived according to the unrelenting march of minutes and seconds.

He wanted to check in at the police station and meet the Chief, but halfway down the hill, realized he had no idea where it was. So, he headed back for Main Street. A few blocks into his walk, Bobby pulled alongside in a squad car.

“Morning, Mr. Masters. I figured you’d be about done up at the Kastle. Rick said you’d just left. Need a lift?”

“Well, I would like to meet your Chief.”

Rick got out, quickly rounded the front of the car and opened the door for Masters.

“If this police thing doesn’t work out for you, you’ll certainly make someone a first-class chauffeur,” Masters joked, settling himself into the seat.

“Oh, it’s police work for me all the way,” Bobby said seriously, missing or ignoring Masters’ attempt at humor. There seemed to have been a lot of that on that particular morning. It could have led a less self-confident individual into serious self-doubt.

The station was five blocks west of the hotel on Main – just a block beyond Masters’ early morning exploration. One might well have expected Matt Dillon, himself, to emerge from the door of the ancient wooden structure, complete with covered plank porch and hitching rail. The inside sported a 1950s remodel and seemed quite functional. Apparently,

there was very little police work needed in Allenville. The force consisted of Chief Ryan, Bobby, a second full time officer, and three part timers – a few more during Frontier Days. There were four squad cars – all brand new and far more powerful than seemed necessary.

The Chief, like everyone else Masters had encountered there, was Slim-Jim slender. He was a good-looking man in his early fifties and sported a graying, closely trimmed beard. His deep voice, hearty handshake and wonderful smile seemed to characterize the modern-day frontier spirit.

Bobby offered Masters a chair and coffee and the three sat and sipped.

“Glad to have your help on this thing Detective,” Chief Ryan began. “It’s been baffling right from the start.”

“Speaking of the start, Chief, I was wondering what prompted the police investigation of Colonel Allen’s death,” Masters asked.

“Politics, mostly,” the Chief answered. “He was the most influential man in town – a contemptible man but influential. That and the concern over the curse made it seem the prudent thing to do.”

“No evidence of foul play, I assume,” Masters asked.

“None,” the Chief said, sorting through a stack of folders on his desk. “We were convinced it was a natural death.”

“Was anyone questioned?”

“As a suspect, you mean?” the Chief asked.

“Yes, as a suspect.”

“No. Not really. Not then. Where would we have begun? We had roughly 3,500 adults in Allenville at the time. Probably half of them openly hated the man.”

“Gerald Miller wasn’t a suspect then?”

“Gerald’s an interesting aspect in all this. He certainly would have become my prime suspect after the second Knight died. Problem was, he’d been dead almost a year by then. It just looked like the old boy died of old age – the Colonel, that is. No real reason to suspect anybody of anything.”

“How about Gerald’s family after the second death?”

“There’s just Regina – Gina. I must admit I thought about it but she had no access to either of the victims – if they

were victims. And anyway, the medical examiners were still finding no evidence of anything other than natural causes. Never have, actually. Then when Doc Carter was skipped – so to speak – the next year, I breathed a welcome sigh of relief, thinking it was all over. I figured the curse thing would just die its own natural death. But then the following year those hopes went out the window.”

“In your opinion are we looking at seven murders, Chief?”

“I have two answers. The one based in facts says no. The one from my gut says yes. It’s the evidence – there just isn’t a shred of it. If it’s murder, we are dealing with the shrewdest killer I’ve ever heard of.”

“There are poisons that dissipate rapidly and are virtually undetectable, you know,” Masters pointed out.

“I know. I’ve even read up on them. The medical examiners know, too. The State Police lab knows. If it’s undetectable, it’s undetectable. Where do you go from there?”

“Wherever it is, you go carefully and systematically,” Masters answered thoughtfully.

“One other thing this morning, Chief,” Masters said. “Remember when the tree was cut down up at the Kastle?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Rick said there was a police report?”

“Yes, I suppose there was. Bobby, look in the inactive file under vandalism – that starts with a ‘V’.”

The young officer soon returned, file in hand. Uncertain to whom he should hand it, he hesitantly laid it on the desk. The Chief pushed it toward Masters. The open folder revealed several pages and three photos – one of the entire scene with the tree on its side, one close-up of the stump, and one of the v-cut made in the trunk, which had directed its fall.

The report was merely descriptive – when and where, mostly. There were no suspects and no witnesses.

As Masters studied the photos he asked, “Do you remember the condition of the stump?”

The Chief shook his head.

“Not really.”

Bobby jumped in.

“I do, Sir. I came upon it on my paper route that

morning. I examined it – before the police came, actually. I ran my hand across the top of the stump. It smelled wonderful, I remember. Different from the Pine and Oak, you know. Anyway, I got a humongous splinter in my palm. The cut across the stump had been rough.”

“That’s how it looks in the pictures,” Masters said. “You gentlemen undoubtedly know more about such things than I. What kind of a saw would leave it so rough?”

“A big toothed, two-man, crosscut, but probably a one man operation. A long saw vibrates – jumps – when operated by just one man across such a wide expanse,” the Chief said.

Bobby nodded his agreement.

“Not a chainsaw, then?” Masters asked.

“No. It would have been smooth as a baby’s bottom if it had been done that way,” the Chief said. “And, they’re noisy. Someone probably would have heard it as well. Why this interest in the tree?”

“Just collecting all the odd events on or about the times of each death.”

“Well, that one sure qualifies then,” the Chief said. “It’s the only tree-cutting vandalism I can recall in the fifty two years I’ve lived here.”

“While we’re on the topic, gentlemen, do any other odd events come to mind near those times?”

The two officers looked at each other in silence. The Chief shook his head slowly. Bobby shrugged his shoulders. As he did so, his furrowed brow smoothed.

“Well, remember when it was Docs day, we had that big snowstorm? I guess that’s not really odd around here this time of year, though. We almost always have snow through the end of March.”

The Chief confirmed Bobby’s information.

That was a big one, though, Boo.”

Masters did a double take. Bobby explained.

“Chief’s always called me Boo. My grandma tacked it on me. Guess I wore her out wanting to play peeky-boo. Better Boo than Peeky I suppose.”

Masters’ puzzlement satisfied, he questioned them about the blizzard.

“Such a storm would not postpone the Celebration, I

assume.”

“You assume correctly,” the Chief said raising his eyebrows. “Nothing man or nature could produce would stop the Celebration. The Second Coming, itself, wouldn’t stop the Celebration!”

“There is just something verging on the absurd to celebrate the arrival of spring during an all-out snow storm,” Masters said, clearly amused and admittedly baffled.

“Rationality is not one of the Knights’ mainstays,” the Chief explained.

The wording of the remark passed a foot above Bobby’s head so he assumed an overly engaged look, nodding in an attempt to stay in the conversation.

The Chief continued.

“Could that be significant?”

Masters began thinking out loud.

“Well, Dr. Carter did not die. One has to ask if the snow could have prevented that – perhaps prevented someone from traveling here to do whatever he or she did or is doing.”

“I certainly hadn’t considered that angle,” the Chief said. “Roads were closed but not for long – not the main roads. We’re well prepared for such things in these parts.”

“Was there a similar natural calamity on Mr. Waterson’s day?”

“Not that I recall. You, Boo?”

“Nothing comes to mind. I could call Ron the TV weather guy. I suppose he has records.”

“Fine idea,” Masters said, intentionally enthusiastically.

Bobby, at that point feeling ten feet tall, left to make the call. The Chief jotted something on a post-it and tore it off, holding it at his shoulder as if waiting. Bobby returned far too soon.

“When was that, Chief?”

The Chief stuck the post it onto Bobby’s palm. It contained the date. Bobby left again.

“He’s a good kid – likeable, honest, hardworking – but dumb as a post sometimes.”

The assessment had been matter of fact – imbued more with compassion than disdain. In a few minutes, Bobby returned – the post it still attached to his hand.



“Ron says it was unseasonably cloudy that day, but no snow. No rain, even. Just cloud cover all daylong.”

“Thank you, Bobby,” Masters said. “I doubt if even three feet of mostly cloudy would keep a killer away.”

Bobby’s face saddened and he apologized as if he had failed in his assignment. The other two chose to ignore it.

Masters, however, addressed Bobby.

“Would you be so kind as to get a full weather report for each of the other celebration days, beginning with the Colonel’s?”

“Certainly. Ron and me are getting to be regular pals over this.”

“Call Rick at the Kastle and get the exact dates,” the Chief instructed.

“Back to Gerald’s suicide note,” Master said, almost as an afterthought. “There is some kind of oily stain in the margin. Did you have any lab work done on that?”

“Yes, as I recall we did.”

In a moment, he had the folder in hand.

“Thin viscosity oil, high in graphite content. The kind used to lubricate locks, I suppose. It didn’t seem to be significant at the time. We just assumed it was the only sheet of paper he had available when he decided to type the note.”

“Sounds reasonable.”

Masters stood to leave.

“Oh, there is one more thing. I assume there is a police report on the break-in at the pharmacy at the time of Gerald Miller’s death – the barbiturate theft.”

“Yes. I can get it for you, if you like.”

“Please.”

The report was soon in the old detective’s hands. He scanned it.

“Strange!”

“What’s that?” the Chief asked, looking over the big man’s shoulder at the folder as if expecting something to suddenly pop out at him as well.

“Several things, actually. The outside of the glass case that was broken had been wiped clean of fingerprints – not unusual in itself. But, it seems Gerald’s prints were found only on the broken pieces of glass – the pieces that broke

away when the case was hit with a hammer or some such object. Why would he have had reason to touch the glass, which he was about to break? That's out of place in such a theft and, according to the report, his prints are all over both sides of the broken glass. Second, why would the largest pieces of the broken glass be found on the floor instead of inside the cabinet? One breaks the glass – pushing the broken glass inside – reaches in, takes the drugs and leaves. Even if a piece of glass had fallen over the bottle he wanted, it would have been pushed aside. A thief is in a hurry. And, third, if Gerald was going directly home to take the barbiturates and kill himself, why would he even be concerned with his prints. Even Bobby would be able to put that two and two together – Gerald dead of an overdose and those same drugs had just been stolen from the pharmacy. 'My, I wonder who took them?' You see, protecting himself by wiping off the fingerprints would not really even enter into the equation."

"It's a series of points I hadn't ever considered," the Chief said, scratching his head.

"Could Gerald have got from his place to the pharmacy and back to his place within a half hour time-frame – between about nine and nine-thirty that night?"

"It would be possible?"

Masters nodded and continued.

"I don't suppose there is any chance you still have the pieces of broken glass, is there?"

"Doubtful, but there might be. Evidence like that is usually kept for twelve years in case anything is contested. Since there was no trial, however, it may not have been considered evidence needing to be retained. All of that is kept in the basement of the bank building. As you can see, we don't have room in this little place. I'll send Bobby over to search for it. On second thought, I'll go look for it myself."

"I appreciate that. May I obtain a copy of the report on Gerald's death?"

"Certainly. I'll have it dropped off at the hotel for you, if that's okay."

"That will be excellent."

Masters thanked them for their help and took his leave, deciding to walk the several blocks back to the café. There

are apparently three kinds of March days – sunny and cold, cloudy and cold, and snowy and cold. He felt privileged he was there during the first of those. The sun felt good, as he set a brisk pace east on Main.

Upon hearing the clock strike twelve, Masters smiled to himself – apparently, the only time it would be accurate all day– well, reasonably accurate. It occurred to him that the arrangement even had some merit. Seldom, during a day, would anyone not know what the upcoming hour was going to be. So, to merely have the clock strike – anything – should be sufficient to keep folks moving through their days pretty effectively. He decided that two or three strikes would seem to be preferable to the current, thunderous, twelve, however.

His philosophic musing ended as he approached the café. He had spied 'Ol Cit from three blocks away, so figured his eager, young chauffeur would be available for the afternoon. A trip to meet Doc Carter seemed in order.

**CHAPTER THREE**  
**DAY TWO: Afternoon**  
**The Survivors**

B. L., seated in the rear of the café at the same table as earlier, was caressing a straw riding high above the largest chocolate shake Masters had ever seen. The boy had his nose in a book and didn't immediately see the Old Detective approaching.

"Lady Chatterley's Lover?" Masters quipped, immediately reasoning that the younger generation would have no idea to what he was referring.

B. L. looked up, clearly happy to see his new friend.

"Lady Chatterley's way too tame for guys my age, Sir. I'm more into really racy things like this."

He closed the book and held it out toward Masters, who took it and held it at arm's length to get a read from the spine.

"The Time-Space Continuum – an exercise in theoretical physics."

"Shame on you," Masters teased. "I will have to tell your father, you know."

B. L. grinned his endearing grin. Masters sat down returning the book, but still not finished with his friendly agitation.

"You must get your mind out of the gutter, young man."

"Hey, I'm sixteen. It takes lots and lots of books like this to keep my mind out of the gutter."

"B. L. noticed Masters eying his shake.

"Thought I'd just have a little something to take the

edge off while I waited for you. Allenville's known for two things. Frontier Days and the World's Largest Milk Shakes right here at Mama's Cafe."

"I believe it," Masters said. "What's particularly scrumptious for lunch?"

"It's meatloaf special today. I never miss meatloaf special day."

"Well, you haven't led me astray yet. Let's make it two. I'll even see if I can slip both onto the Knights tab – you being my chauffeur slash assistant and all."

B. L. knew it was only fun, but still, it made him feel important. He was learning that Mr. Masters was pretty good at making people feel good. He caught the eye of the waitress from across the room and held up two fingers. Then he got up and prepared two cups of coffee from the hot drink station just behind them.

"Black, right?" he said when he returned.

"Right, and thank you. You make a lovely waitress."

B. L. curtsied – well, sort of – and sat down.

"So, how did your Kastleing go this morning?"

"Interesting and useful. This whole Knight thing stands alone from anything else I've ever come across."

B. L. raised one eyebrow and nodded his head in silence.

Masters continued.

"I met your Police Chief – Ryan. He seems like a fine man."

"He is. His daughter lives with him and his wife. She has a son – Gregory – he's five. Abby and I baby sit him sometimes. It's a really nice family."

And with that, B. L. was done with the frivolous chitchat.

"Well, are you closing in on the villain slash villains, yet?"

It was only partly in jest.

"Still fact finding, B. L. This afternoon I'd like to go out and visit Doc Carter. Suppose you and Ol' Cit could oblige an ancient hitchhiker?"

"Certainly!"

He took out his cell phone.

"I can call ahead, if you want."

“You know Doc’s phone number?”

B. L. smiled.

“It’s like a hobby. I was really bored in 8th grade so I memorized the phone book.”

“You never cease to amaze me, young man.”

“That’s what Pop says – well, sort of. He phrases it a bit differently.”

“Oh?”

“Ya. He says, “Stop that before your brain busts! Then he ruffles my hair.”

It was an interesting interpretation. The boy certainly had a way of viewing life in a positive way.

“Yes, it probably would be a good idea to give him a call. I’ll do it if you want,” Masters said.

“Oh, no. I’ll do it. Doc and I are pretty good buddies. It’ll sort of be like I’m vouching for you.”

The concept of needing a sixteen-year-old to vouch for him caused Masters to smile, but only on the inside. He would not want it to appear that he was putting the lad down. The call was made and a 1:30 appointment set. Lunch arrived and it was every bit as delicious as B. L. had promised. Masters longed for a chocolate shake but thought better of it, convincing himself that he needed to save something for a mid-afternoon snack.

The nursing home – Frontier Village – turned out to be a multi-level care facility. Doc Carter had a small suite of rooms over the lobby of the main building. His were the only second floor rooms in any of the six, otherwise low, sprawling, rustic, wood and stone structures.

The ride in Ol’ Cit had been surprisingly comfortable – the seat having been scavenged from a Lincoln and the suspension system from a Mercedes. That was about all Masters remembered from the long litany of parts and sources B. L. had listed as the ride progressed. Suffice it to say, the boy – as all boys – loved his first vehicle with all of his heart and soul. Undoubtedly, there were times when even Abby had to be content playing second fiddle. Understanding the inevitability of that single scenario would most certainly avoid rivers of tears and mountains of heartaches for adolescent girls the World over.

There had been other conversation. B. L. summarized the story of how Doc had sold a sizable family ranch and used the money to build Frontier Village – thus his special, second floor digs from which he could look out over his beloved, gently rolling, Wyoming hills.

“That’s Doc pushing the wheelbarrow,” B. L. said, pointing, as they pulled in and parked. “For an old guy – a really, really, old guy, you understand – he sure keeps active,” the boy explained, his initial smirk uncontrollably breaking into an all-out smile.

It proved to be more of a chore to exit the vehicle than it had been to enter. With B. L.’s steady and surprisingly strong arm to lean on, the process was completed.

“I have to help Abby, too,” the boy said, in an attempt to play down Masters’ obvious difficulty

The attempt was noted and appreciated.

“Doc, I’d like you to meet my friend, Raymond Masters, the famous Detective. Mr. Masters, I’d like you to meet my friend Doctor Carter, the famous physician and gardener.”

Doc and the boy embraced, signaling a closer relationship than Masters had grasped from B. L.’s earlier characterization.

“The lad’s an Imp you know,” Doc said, extending his hand toward Masters. “I’m sure glad you’re here, Detective – for more than one reason.”

He winked at B. L.

“Multiple reasons, are there?” Masters said, interested in the by-play, yet puzzled.

“Well, we need your help in the worst way so we’re all grateful you agreed to come. And, now that you’re here, perhaps B. here, will stop quizzing me on those damn Garrison Flint books he’s been force feeding me!”

It deserved a smile and it got one – three, actually. Masters turned to B. L. “So, it’s ‘B’ is it?”

B. L. shrugged and smiled at Masters.

“It’s Doc’s nickname for me. You see, he’s basically a pretty lazy sort. Saying my full name – B. L. – is just toooooo taxing.”

Masters shook his head and turned his attention to the contents of the wheelbarrow.

“Bark, Doctor?”

“Yup. Didn’t get all the new trees properly mulched last fall. If I don’t get it done soon, the weeds will take over, grow too close to the fragile little trunks, which will get skinned alive as our lawn mowing genius, here, gets carelessly close.”

In a playful attempt of defensive, one-upmanship, B. L. put his arm around Doc’s shoulder.

“Doc here’s not fast, Mr. Masters, but he sure is slow.”

Doc struck a soft blow to the boy’s shoulder. B. L. feigned great pain.

“He’s a pansy, Detective – a plain and simple pansy.”

It was clear the two of them had a special relationship. That was comforting to Masters, who had feared the boy’s intellectual gifts were, perhaps, not being properly nurtured.

“Let’s go inside. I have tea ordered for 1:45,” Doc said, slipping his gloves into the back pocket of his coveralls.

They were soon in Doc’s private elevator on their way to his apartment. It opened into a single, large, well windowed room with a kitchenette, bath and bedroom to the rear. The view was spectacular.

No sooner were they seated, than a young lady arrived – again, from the elevator – with a cart bearing tea, cookies and a large orange slush – the latter, apparently, B. L.’s standing order. The conversation soon settled on the matter at hand.

“What’s your impression of all this, Doctor?” Masters asked.

“It’s Doc, please. Doctor carries too many lofty expectations.”

“Doc, it is, then and I’m Ray.”

“My take?” Doc said slowly, getting his bearings. “Well, I do believe the seven Knights had their lives taken by someone. And your next question will be, ‘Why not Waterson and me?’ My answer is that I have no answer. I’d like to think whoever it was, felt the two of us were worth saving and allowed us to live. I have nothing to support that or anything else, for that matter.”

“The method used?” Masters asked.

“Some slow acting, rapidly dissipating poison. Probably exotic since it has evaded our medical examiners and the



State Police lab.”

“My initial conclusion, also,” Masters said.

“Gee, I was holding out for the curse!” B. L. joked, trying to remain a part of the deliberation.

“Curses can work in a variety of ways,” Doc pointed out. “Don’t write off some combination, here.”

It was an interesting though oddly stated comment, which Masters chose not to pursue, but did tuck away for future reference.

“Suspects?” Again, Masters’ question was short and to the point.

“Eight – all of them dead.”

“Eight?”

“The seven deceased Knights and Gerald Miller. They all had motives to kill off at least one of the others.”

“What a loving little community, Allenville,” Masters said.

“It is, really. It’s just this Knight thing that’s ruining the place.”

“Competition, animosities, old family grudges – things like that, you mean,” Masters said.

“You’re doing your homework well, Ray.”

“I have good help,” he replied, glancing in the direction of B. L. who beamed silently.

The boy had slipped out of his boots and assumed an obviously well practiced reclining position on the sofa, head raised just high enough by pillows so he could easily navigate his slush and maintain eye contact with the others.

“Ask the BIG question. Let’s get it dealt with,” Doc said.

Masters nodded, thoughtfully.

“Okay, then, if we are talking poison, and if the two survivors are a physician and a pharmacist, why would they not become the runaway nominees as suspects in all of this?”

“Well stated, by the way,” Doc said, clearly impressed and, perhaps, a bit amused at the ease with which it had been delivered.

B. L. put his slush on the floor and turned on his side to listen and watch.

“Logically, we should top the list. We’re both innocent, but we should top the list. Chief Ryan has interviewed us on

several occasions. It was clearly an embarrassment to him and he is too kind and proper to come out and say we were suspects, but his questions were pointed.”

“May I ask about your relationship with Ralph Waterson?”

“We grew up together out at the ranch. His dad was my dad’s foreman. He ran the place. My father inherited it from his father. Dad had an MD from Yale but never practiced – he never did much of anything, actually, but that’s another story.

“Ralph and I even went to undergraduate school together – Ames in Iowa – then I entered medical school and we parted ways for a few years. We both returned here after graduation and we’ve been here since. Still best friends.”

“Motives?” Masters asked.

“Sure, both of us, if we were put together as vengeful beings, but we’re not. Three of the dead Knights swindled me – well, I think of it as swindled. It’s really more hoodwinked, I suppose. They came to me a few years ago, and offered to buy my ranch. I have no children so as a family ranch the line stops with me. It made sense. For years, I had dreamed of building a place like this. It all seemed to come together so I sold. Three months later the three of them turned around and sold a large part of the land to the government for an airport. They tripled their investment. They called it good business. I called it out and out deceit. The things I could have done for folks with all that money!”

Suddenly the man appeared old and tired, and very sad. The moment passed quickly and Masters spoke.

“Which of the Knights were they?”

“Steven Crain, Elmer Innis, Marcus Smith.”

Masters made a note on his pad.

“And Ralph Waterson. What motive did he have?”

“His son, Jimmy, was a small contractor who had obtained the lucrative contract to build the town’s new waste water treatment plant. On the basis of the contract from the City Council, he took out huge loans to purchase the heavy equipment he would need. A month before ground breaking, the Council rescinded his contract, citing a right-to-withdraw-clause, and the young man went bankrupt. He couldn’t handle it and killed himself. It’s been a terrible pain for Ralph and

Mary. A terrible pain for a lot of us.”

“And which Knights were involved in that? – City Council Members, I assume.”

“Yes. It was Steven Crain and Marcus Smith.”

“So, you shared those two on your imaginary ‘hit lists’.”

“Yes. You could say that.”

Masters flipped back in his notebook, searching. B. L. spoke, supplying the information he assumed Masters was trying to locate.

“Smith was number four, Crain number six and Innis number seven. Doc was eight. Watterson five – that gives us four, five, six, seven and eight in order.”

Masters looked at B. L. appreciatively.

“It’s that long-term genius malady that I contracted at conception, I presume,” the boy said, trying to make light of it.

“Genius and psychic.” Masters replied.

“Genius, psychic and Impish,” Doc added.

B. L. clearly basked in the attention.

“It brings us to the first two, numbers nine and ten – William Treadway and the Colonel,” Masters said.

“The Colonel was my patient.” Doc offered. “He was healthy as a horse, even at 80 plus years old. Folks like to think it was the combined stress of the Celebration and old age. Hell, the only stress he ever knew was the incessant stress he inflicted on others. He was a hateful human being and he was in good enough condition to go on being hateful for another ten or fifteen years.”

“Treadway was another bull of a man. He was 83 I believe – maybe 82.

“Doc looked at B. L. as if to give him permission to help.

“Eighty-three. Right the first time.”

Doc became confidential with Masters.

“Even Imps are good for something, sometimes. Anyway, Treadway . . .”

B. L. interrupted.

“He’s mine, actually. Mine and Pop’s. If anybody were a suspect in his death, it would be us. It was his son, Donny, who ran me down.”

“Yes, I remember,” Masters said, “But that was Donny not William.”

“William was a lawyer – Pop calls him a shyster lawyer. He and some of his big city attorney cronies stretched and distorted the law so Pop and I didn’t get a cent to cover my medical expenses. I still owe Doc thousands, even if he never did send a bill. Pop still puts a check in the mail every month to the hospital in Iowa City – that’s where the surgery and rehab was done. I told you Pop threatened the Treadways with a shotgun. We’re your best suspects for that one.”

“So, you’re telling me a junk man and his seven-year-old son discovered, obtained and slipped an exotic poison to the elder Treadway during a closed ceremony at the Kastle.”

B. L. shrugged his shoulders.

“I’m just saying it would make more sense to suspect us than Doc in that case. Don’t short sell my dad. He’s a bright man.”

Masters had a private vision. It was that of Doc on a private crusade to purge Allenville of its despicable people. He began with the most hated, the Colonel, moved on to avenge B. L. – the boy he obviously loved very much – and then proceeded to clean out both his and his best friend’s enemies along the way. It was a short-lived flash – quite contrary to the picture he was forming of the genial, old country doctor.

Masters had one question left over. He addressed it to Doc.

“Is it known why the City Council reversed its original decision to grant the contract to young Waterson?”

“Seems plain, now. Councilman Smith – who had been out of town at the time of the original contract letting – had a son, who, a few months later, married the daughter of the contractor who was given the contract. He does business out of the Green River/Rock Springs area considerably southwest of Allenville. Apparently, unbeknown to most of us around here, the couple had been going together for some time at college.”

Masters decided that it was time to make the acquaintance of Ralph and Pop.

“Before we leave, I have to ask how you manage to grow such a magnificent Rubber Plant clear over there away from the windows?” Masters asked, pointing to rear corner of

the big room.

“It’s all thanks to one of Ralph’s inventions,” Doc explained.

“Inventions?”

“Yes, he’s always had a tinkerer’s streak in him.”

B. L. stood up. The plant suddenly fell into complete darkness. He moved to one side and it was again bathed in sunlight. Doc explained.

“Ralph rigged a concave mirror outside the front windows. It’s connected to a series of electric eyes and a small motor. As the sun moves across the row of electric eyes, the motor changes the focus of the mirror so the rays from it are always on the rubber plant.”

“Ingenious!” Masters said, walking to the window and waving his hand as if to prove the beam of light truly existed.

“Very clever, indeed, this Ralph Waterson.”

“You should see his place,” B. L. said. “Doc says it’s full of stuff he’s invented.”

“Perhaps I will see it. I’d like to arrange a meeting with him.”

“For this afternoon?” B. L. asked.

“If possible,” Masters said.

B. L. dialed his phone and handed it to Doc. Doc soon had a time arranged – 3:00. They would need to move with dispatch.

A few minutes later, Ol’ Cit was putting due south along a single lane blacktop. Waterson lived with his daughter on a ranch not far away – not far in Wyoming terms – an hour according to B. L.’s calculations.

The ride was accompanied by B. L.’s non-stop monologue about Abby. Her father worked at the hardware store and her mother taught third grade. She was an only child, a Pisces, and had dreams of becoming a clinical psychologist. She made straight A’s and wanted to have three children. B. L.’s offering jumped unevenly as thoughts appeared. He clearly cared deeply for her and was in that phase of young love where he couldn’t find enough ways to tell and show her how much he loved her. Masters remembered the feelings and the frustrations and just quietly enjoyed reliving the moments through the wonderfully open

and expressive words and phrases of this remarkable young man. Masters would soon know a good deal more than he probably would have wanted to know.

"I think I'm a one girl guy," B. L. said at one point. "It's not that I don't enjoy – really, really enjoy – my Playboys, but that's all impersonal, you know. Abby and I agreed we wouldn't have sex until we were married. We want to be sure we like each other for the right – the long term – reasons, you know. It seems a long way away sometimes – well, most of the time to be truthful. But, we'll make out some way – I guess those weren't the best words to use in trying to convey that thought of abstinence, were they?"

His slip – if that's what it had been – sent the boy into wet-cheeked laughter. That, in itself, gave Masters reason for a good, tummy shaking laugh, himself. It was a good time.

Fifteen minutes into their ride they came upon a large sign spanning the road, which read: Lazy Bar V Ranch.

"Here so soon?" Masters asked. "I thought you said an hour."

"This is just their property line. It takes a while to get to the center of a 10,000-acre ranch."

And it did! Forty-five minutes later a beautiful big home arose before them. It was encircled by row upon row of tall trees looking like an oasis in the middle of an oasis. White board fences divided the area. There were white barns and out buildings, a huge pond and several tall windmills – for electrical generation, Masters assumed.

It was not a place that could be crept up on undetected. An attractive, middle aged woman was waiting in the swing on the high-ceilinged, square pillared porch.

"That's the daughter – Betty Ann. Waterson's wife passed on way back before I was born. This is Betty's husband's family ranch. For all their money, they're pretty down to earth folks. I'll tell you one thing, though. It's hard for me to imagine why anyone would think they need a house this large."

Although Masters agreed, there was not time for discussion. Once on the porch, Betty Ann showed them inside, took their wraps and motioned them into the library.

"I'll tell Dad you're here. Excuse me."

She left. As if by design, they both began perusing the books.

“Wow! Could I spend a productive semester in here, Mr. Masters. Just look at these books!”

It was an impressive, wide-ranging collection.

Within minutes, Ralph entered the room, greeting them with handshakes and kind words.

“Good to see you again, B and so nice to meet you, Mr. Masters. Please, make yourselves comfortable. You’re here about the Knight’s deaths. I’m not sure what I can tell you, but I’ll certainly try. It is a terrible thing. Where can I begin?”

“Let’s get the disagreeable questions out of the way first, okay?” Masters suggested.

“Why I should be a number one suspect, you mean?”

“Perceptive!” Masters answered.

“I’m old, not dumb,” he chuckled. “Well, I suppose you know about my son’s bankruptcy and the events leading up to it.”

“Yes, but I’d like to hear your version of why the Council withdrew the contract.”

“They never said, you know. Most of them were Knights and they didn’t have the gumption to stand up and give their reasons. Several things seem obvious, however. The job was awarded to a company out of Green River. They were experienced in the type of construction, but their initial bid was a full 20% above my son’s. Even worse, by the time it was completed, the overruns tacked on another 25%. It was a financial disaster for the little Allenville tax base. They’re still paying it off. Heck, B’s kids will still be paying it off.

“Well, to simplify a complex tale, a few months later the son of Marcus Smith married the daughter of that Contractor. Smith sat on the City Council. He’d been a wheeler dealer from the time we entered kindergarten. He was talking little girls into showing him their ‘who whos’ before I even knew little girls had ‘who whos’.”

B. L. laughed out loud.

Masters had to chuckle both at the revelation and the terminology.

“Apparently, the bank was unforgiving of your son’s situation?” Masters asked.

“You could put it that way. He tried to work something out – return the machinery and pay off the difference over time. It seems the bank Board had disapproved of the loan from the start. Somehow, David Thomas – he’s the current Knight of Knights and back then was the Chief loan officer at the bank – had approved it. I must admit even I was surprised when it was okayed.”

My son had to declare bankruptcy and just never got things back together. He died in an auto/train collision a few years later. Some say it was suicide. I don’t want to believe that.”

“I’m so sorry. It must be hard?” Mastered offered.

Ralph nodded and glanced out a window.

“You believe it was an accident, then?” Masters continued.

“An accident or outright murder.”

“Murder?”

Both Masters and B. L. perked up.

“I’d rather believe it was an accident, you know. But the fact is that his situation was becoming quite an embarrassment to lots of folks in this town – the Council, the bank, the equipment company, the Knights by association and, after the wedding, to the Smith family. I believe they all felt guilty or at least understood they were contributing causes of his deteriorating financial situation. Getting him out of the way – out of sight, I suppose – might have been seen as the only way to move away from it.

“If I were a vengeful man, Mr. Masters, I’d be a perfect suspect – grudges against Smith and Crain, and many of the other dead Knights. I’m a pharmacist with access to the entire array of possible no-find poisons. I could have slipped it into their medicine or their toothpaste. I’m a perfect suspect.”

“And if we team you with Doc, we have an even more perfect set of suspects.”

“Yes, I suppose so,” Ralph said. “Of course, you understand that because of our lifelong friendship, neither he nor I would have killed the other had we been acting alone. I suppose that just muddies the waters. Well, either we didn’t do it, or we have pulled off a set of perfect crimes, or you’ll prove one or both of us guilty and slap us in the slammer.”



He didn't appear to really care which alternative came to be.

"Or, I'll prove someone else guilty," Masters added, more than a little interested that Ralph had omitted that possibility.

"How well did you know Gerald Miller?" Masters asked, moving on.

"Gerald? We never called him Jerry, you know. There was just something too classy about him, even as a kid. I knew him. That's about all. He was quite a bit younger than I. I did try to hire him to help at the pharmacy when he retired. He was a pharmacist's assistant, or mate, or something in the service. I really could have used him, but he declined my offer."

Masters' impression from Gina and Joel had been that he had trouble getting a job at that time. It led to another question.

"Did he say why – give you any reason?"

"No, not really. As I recall, he said he wanted to try something different for a while – something like that."

"Was your offer made before or after the blackballing incident?"

"Ralph thought for a long moment.

"It would have been after – just after, in fact. I thought he'd been an engineer all those years – that was his degree. I was feeling bad about the blackballing incident – all of us were – well, except the implacable Colonel. One day some of us were talking and it came up he'd been in pharmacy. It seemed a natural. I remember Rick saying he could use a handy man – Burt, the old one, passed on. I was pleased when Gerald showed up on the Knight's payroll. I felt a little less guilty, I suppose. I never pursued it again. He really seemed to be interested in his work at the Kastle. He was very conscientious. He examined the structure, made recommendations, and supervised the remodeling. He really seemed to have it together. Then, a few months after the Colonel's death, he killed himself. We all seemed to miss seeing that one coming. It's a terrible thing when an entire community misses the warning signs on something like that. There must have been signs, you know."

Masters nodded, wondering if he was witnessing the genuine story of a guilt-ridden old man or an academy award winning performance.

"I understand you are quite the inventor. I saw your plant mirror thing-a-ma-jig at Doc's."

"Yes. I dabble. Always have." He chuckled. "In high school, I rigged the clocks to gradually speed up so we'd get out twenty minutes early every afternoon. I'd reset them back - before my paper route - every morning. It lasted about a week before I got busted. It was one hell of a week though! I was the undisputed hero of the younger set. Could have probably got into the Knights on that act alone."

"Here's one of my more recent gizmos."

He pointed to the light switch by the door.

"It's a light-undim实施."

"Un-dimmer?" B. L. asked, fascinated at the concept.

"Yes. It works on electric eyes. As the sun goes down and the natural light dims, this gadget senses the change and compensates by engaging a motor that turns a rheostat that provides just enough electrical lighting to compensate. The illumination level remains constant throughout the day and evening."

"Wonderful idea!" B. L. said. Masters agreed.

"May I pose one more question?" the Old Detective asked.

"Certainly."

"What prompted you to leave the Knights?"

"A good question."

He stood and began pacing.

"Several things, I suppose. I'd had my day - so to speak - being the Knight of Knights. Others wanted it more than I, so rather than make them wait 'til I croaked, I resigned."

"You mentioned there were several things," Masters said.

"Frankly, I'd been sick of the Knights for a long time - the bickering, back-stabbing. A Knight was supposed to be someone special - a cut above the rest. We were just a pack of wolves waiting our chance to climb over somebody on our way to the top.

"Since I've retired out here, life has suddenly gone from

hectic and guilt ridden to productive and serene. I see Doc two or three times a week. I ride whenever I want to. I work with inanimate objects now – far easier than people and often more rewarding.”

He moved toward the bookcase.

“Here’s another of my favorite contraptions. Let’s say you want a book from one of the three unreachable top shelves. See the three buttons on the column between the shelves.”

“Yes, Sir,” B. L. said, eager to see what was coming.

“Push the top one.”

Immediately the entire top shelf moved forward and lowered itself on a track to eye level.

“Amazing,” Masters said.

“Awesome!” B. L. added. “And when your baby sitting you could give the kids rides.”

“Leave it to young Master B to get the better of me,” Ralph smiled.

After a few minutes of less significant conversation, they took their leave, but not before B. L. had managed to finagle an open-ended invitation to use the library.

On the road again, Masters opened his pocket watch.

“It will be nearly five by the time we get back to town,” he said, thinking out loud. “Will that be too late to meet your father?”

“It will be good timing, actually. He’ll be winding down his day. I’m eager for you to get to know him. You’re a lot alike, you’ll see.”

As much as Masters wanted to ask, ‘Alike, how?’ he let it go. Clearly, B. L. felt the similarities would be obvious.

“We got a great place to live. You’re going to love it.”

Masters was sure it would be an interesting time.

With the sunset at their back, they pulled into the lot and stopped in front of a large, long, round-topped metal building. Masters was finally getting the hang of disembarking from the orange monster. B. L. pulled a rope, which hung beside the door. A bell rang from high above.

“It’s the way Pop and I communicate. Two-rings means that I’m home. Three means I have a friend along so arrive looking decent. He always hurries in. He likes to hear about

my day.”

They walked through an office area which, Masters thought, looked pretty much like a junkyard’s (recycling center’s) office should look. B. L. opened a door at the rear and motioned Masters to go ahead. They entered the living quarters – Paneled walls, a high, domed ceiling, carpeted floor, ceiling fans, potted plants, overstuffed furniture, a huge fireplace and a six-foot aquarium. It was neat, in good taste and certainly lived up to B. L.’s billing as a wonderful place to call home.

“Probably not what you’d expect inside a World War II Quonset hut, huh?”

“Probably not!” Masters agreed. “It is a great place, B. L.”

The boy beamed and pointed to a loft at the rear of the great room. “That’s my pad up there. If you’re up to climbing the rope, you’re welcome to take a look.”

Masters raised his eyebrows.

B. L. burst into laughter.

“Actually, there are stairs around back.”

He took Masters’ coat and carefully hung it up, while tossing his own onto a nearby chair. The absurdity of the two events seemed to escape the boy – but not the old detective who enjoyed it all immensely.

“We had a real house in town when Mom was alive. Without her, this was easier. Out here, I could be with Pop all the time. It’s worked out great.”

There was a noticeable chill in the air. B. L. picked up what appeared to be the TV remote.

“Watch the fireplace!”

He clicked instructions into the device and presently a fire roared to life in and among the gas logs.

“Your magic wand?” Masters joked, examining the gadget with his eyes.

“Actually, yes, I suppose. I push here and I can control the ceiling fans.”

He demonstrated.

“Here for the lights.”

They went from dim to bright and then back to comfortable.

B. L. continued to proudly point out feature after feature. Masters understood why he viewed it as a father and son paradise.

Presently, four bells rang out front.

“Pop! Four-bells means, ‘Here I come so if you’re in a compromising position with a girl, it’s time to get proper. We added that one on my fourteenth birthday. His idea, really. I get the idea his hormones were indulged far more often than mine have been.”

The door opened and B. L. immediately moved toward his father.

“Pop, this is Mr. Masters. Mr. Masters, my Pop.”

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

“Everybody calls me, Pop.”

“Glad to meet you, Pop. I feel like I already know you.”

Masters flicked his head toward B. L.

“Tell me about it,” Pop said. “We’ve all but had a final exam around here on your cases – all of your cases.”

“I’m flattered.” Masters showed he was amused.

“So,” Pop began, motioning them toward the sitting area by the fireplace, “Is this business or pleasure?”

“Both, I suppose.” Masters said.

“Well then, let’s dispense of the business first, if that’s okay,” Pop suggested.

The two men took seats, which would allow easy conversation.

“Coffee?” B. L. asked.

“Sounds wonderful,” Masters said.

B. L. exited to the kitchen.

Pop took advantage of the boy’s absence to get right to the point.

“I suppose I’m a suspect in all this. I understand that. I won’t deny that I once hated the Treadways enough to have killed them on Main Street in front of God and a hundred witnesses. You’ve seen what they did to my boy.”

His eyes teared. So did Masters’.

“Your son certainly has a wonderful attitude about life. You must be proud that you’ve helped him achieve that.”

“That’s mostly him, Sir. He’s so much like his mother. It must be in the genes because he hardly knew her. She was

too good for me but I never questioned it. It's been hard, you know, raising the boy without her."

"But worth it, obviously," Masters pointed out.

"Oh, yes! Worth every minute of it. B. L.'s my joy and reason for living. But, back to the basics. Did I kill Treadway? No, Sir, I did not."

"Or the others?" Masters added.

Pop seemed genuinely surprised.

"The others? You mean the Knights? No, Sir. Why would I have killed them? I'd never risk what I have with my son."

"As I understand it, you had an unpleasant experience when you applied for a Knight's grant for trees and then again when the County Planning Commission required the fence."

"I see. Yes, well, there is all of that. As a kid, I was known as a hot head – I got into more than my share of trouble. That's all on the record. I still blow off sometimes, but I've never set out to hurt anybody – not since I married at least."

"In my experience, there is nothing more savage than a parent who feels his child has been wronged," Masters said baiting the man.

"And rightly so, if you're an animal. Oh, I've felt the urge. I've cried for my boy's pain. But, I haven't killed."

"Who has, then? Any ideas?"

"Put all the Knights' names on a target and toss a dart."

"You think they're all capable of these terrible deeds?"

"I really don't know them anymore. We travel in different circles - so to speak. I just know I'd not willingly deal with any of them – Well, Joel Nevin is the exception. He's a prince. I can't see him as a Knight. I really don't understand how he could lower himself to join."

What an interesting characterization – 'lower himself'. It seemed the general population didn't hold the Knights in the same high esteem, as did the Knights themselves.

B. L. returned with three mugs, steaming hot.

"So, any blows struck yet?" he joked, wanting to know about what had been going on but understanding he'd probably not be told. As was his style, he reclined, in stocking feet, on the sofa.

“You grew up here, then, did you?” Masters asked Pop.

“Born and raised as they say. Well, almost born – moved here with my mother when I was an infant. Divorce. My father taught at the University. I only remember seeing him a half dozen times. Too smart, too smug, and too self-absorbed – that’s how Ma described him. Guess B. L. here just got his good, smart, genes. I’m thankful for that.”

“How did you get into this business?”

“I just fell into it. Barney, the original owner, hired me on as help when I was in high school. I liked it. Really wanted to go on to college but I knew Ma could never afford that – she was a teacher – and I’d messed around in school so my grades weren’t scholarship caliber. Coach urged me to go for a football scholarship. Maybe I should have – wide receiver. I decided I didn’t want that life. This became available and Barney worked me out a deal I really couldn’t refuse. So, here we are. We’ve done pretty well. B. L. has been great help.”

“I have to assume that fence out there set you back a pretty penny.”

“Yes, Sir. I came close to closing down over it – more because I was angry I guess than anything else. B. L. convinced me to use part of his college fund. He said we’d find some way to repay it. That fund was too small to begin with but, right or wrong, that’s where we got the money.”

“I assume B. L. can get a scholarship?” Masters said.

It had been an open-ended question.

“I guess that’s what we’re counting on now, isn’t it Son?”

“I keep telling Pop it’s not for him to worry about. It’ll all take care of itself.”

“He’s got his mother’s optimism, too, Ray. Sometimes I think it’s B. L. who’s raising me.”

“Well,” Masters said, not wanting to explore that proposition, “It certainly seems you two have worked out a great relationship. I’m sure you must be the envy of most fathers and sons in the area.”

B. L. nodded energetically. Seeing that, Pop smiled, fighting back tears.

Masters changed the topic.

“What do you remember about Gerald Miller?” He

addressed it to Pop.

“Gerald. A fine person. He was gone from here most of his adult life. He was ahead of me in school. Bright, as I recall. I think the rejection by the Knights is really what killed him. Hard to understand that, but I do believe it.”

“Hard to understand what part of it?”

“That anybody could value the Knights that much. You’d have had to worn blinders all your life.”

“Did you have much contact with him after he retired and moved back here?”

“Some. He’d come out here for this and that from time to time, especially after he began working up at the Kastle.”

“This and that? Can you be more specific?”

“Well, let’s see. I got him the pipe sections for the chandeliers. He was pretty picky about size. Had to be inch and a half, black steel. I had a 3/8-inch diameter section here that he also needed. I ended up going up to Casper to find the larger pieces for him.”

“He was also after a foot-long piece of curved crystal or mirrored glass. That was actually the first thing he came out here about – the first week he went to work as I recall. I put him in touch with a glass specialty firm in Cheyenne. I don’t know if he found what he wanted or not.”

B. L. spoke.

“That may have been something he needed for one of his telescopes. He was an amateur astronomer – always tinkering and improving what he had. Joel and Gina gave me one of his best telescopes after he died. It’s up in my room.”

Pop continued.

“He bought some photoelectric cells off an old set of supermarket doors and a couple of car window motors. Some solenoids from an old pinball machine. Just odd stuff like that. Like B. L. said, he was a tinkerer. I can’t remember what else. I could look through my records if you want.”

“I don’t think that will be necessary. I’m just an overly snoopy kind of guy. Some would say I’m grasping at straws, I suppose.”

“No good leads, then?” Pop asked, surprised at Masters last comment.

“I never know if a lead’s a good one until it falls into



place. Let's just say there are a lot of those places still needing to be filled."

B. L. had been quietly enjoying listening and watching the interchanges between the two men he admired most in the world. He finally spoke.

"Isn't it frustrating when things don't fit together?"

"More fascinating than frustrating – at least for me," Masters said. "The satisfaction I get from solving a case is directly proportional to how difficult it was. I have the idea this one will very, very satisfying."

"I can understand that, I guess," B. L. said. "It's like calculus – the easy problems are really no fun at all."

Pop smiled.

"You two with your big cases and calculus. My biggest challenge of the day was to locate a carburetor for a 56 Ford."

"Quadrant C, section F, row 9, car 13," B. L. droned, eyes closed.

"He's right, you know, Ray. That's exactly where it was. He has our entire stock tucked away in that precious brain of his. I thank God that wasn't taken from him in the accident."

The brief glance between them told of pity from the father and courage from the son. Masters changed the subject once again.

"Do you know Rick Distlemier?"

"Rick? Sure! We were on the Arts Council together."

Masters did a double take.

"Ya. The junk man on the Arts Council. What a hoot, huh?" Pop said.

Before Masters had to explain or apologize or whatever might have been appropriate, B. L. jumped in.

"Pop's an oboe player. He sat in with one of the orchestras that performed here when they got hit by the flu. The conductor offered him a job on the spot – that's how great Pop is."

Pop shrugged and, attempting to direct the spotlight from himself said, "Well, son, you're not too shabby on the flute, yourself, you know."

The boy shrugged in Pop-like fashion, a bit more sheepishly, perhaps.

“I don’t usually mention it. The flute’s not a real manly instrument, you know.”

“Gender? I wasn’t aware that instruments had gender. I learn something new every time I’m around you, young man.”

It called for no more than another smile and another shrug from the lad.

“Back to Rick,” Pop said. “He’s a quiet, competent sort. He plays the viola, himself. Very good. His fingernails are always clean. I guess nobody but a junk man would mention something like that. My own haven’t been completely clean since I was ten. I think he’s a lonely man. He doesn’t socialize much beyond band practices and his work.”

“Never married?” Masters asked.

“No. I think that’s a sad chapter in his life. He fell in love some twenty years back – Trudy Gage – the daughter of Major Gage. The Major forbade her from marrying Rick – he not having been born on American soil. Trudy always did as her father said and she broke it off. Now, they’re both alone and miserable.”

“He was one of the Knights who died?” Masters asked.

“Number two.” B. L. supplied the information.

“Let’s see,” Masters said, thinking back. “That was just last year, then. And now that the Major’s gone she still refuses Rick?”

“Some parents never die, you know. They’ve become such a powerful, controlling influence that their child can never shed them.”

This is not your typical junk man speaking, Masters thought before responding.

“Yes. I understand how that can be. Suppose that was motive enough for Rick to kill the man?”

“Love has toppled empires, Ray. It could be, I suppose.”

B. L. sat up.

“He has motive, opportunity and means,” the boy said becoming more enthusiastic as he spoke.

“Motive and opportunity, I understand,” Masters said. “But means?”

B. L. leaned forward, eager to lay out his theory.

“Means is only inferred, I suppose, but in his library,

you'll find a half dozen books on drug interactions and poisons. I assume knowledge is at least half of establishing means."

"A perceptive observation, young man. You've used his library?"

"Not really, but I've always been drawn toward books. I was in his office once, making a delivery from the print shop. I took note of the titles as he was writing out the check. Mostly music, art and history – a few stuffy sounding business titles. None of your cases, I'm sad to report."

"Well that omission by itself is certainly enough to hang the low life," Masters quipped.

Pop felt moved to explain or brag – it came out the same.

"B. L. had taught himself to read by watching public TV before he was four. By the time he was nine, he'd pretty well devoured everything in our little local library. He had all my auto manuals memorized by the time he was ten. School's been a pretty boring place for him, I'm afraid."

"A fascinating pair – you two," Masters said, sighing deeply and shaking his head.

B. L. beamed at his father. It was readily and easily returned.

Masters returned to Rick as a topic.

"If we are talking poison, Rick would need a source."

"Probably mail order," B. L. suggested.

"Or on a trip. Is Rick a traveler?" Masters asked.

"He went to Europe a while back – to visit his roots, I suppose," Pop said.

"Can you pinpoint the year?"

"Well, yes, in fact, I can. It was during the first year of his second term on the Arts Council. It was my first year and he missed the first meeting because he was gone. That was ten years ago – ten and a half, is probably more accurate. Yes. That would be right because that whole thing with Gerald took place as soon as he got back."

"If Rick is the killer, it means he was willing to murder six innocent men in order to get to his real target," Masters thought out loud.

"I understand that many sociopaths appear perfectly

normal in other areas of their life,” B. L. said, apparently willing to snug the noose a bit tighter around Rick’s neck.

Masters had more questions about Rick, but he needed to consult other sources so he changed the focus.

“What’s the current take around here on the curse?”

Pop spoke.

“Few really believe in it, but few fully dismiss it either – I mean, way back in the recesses of their minds. Does that make any sense?”

“Oh, yes! It makes sense. It’s like religion for lots of folks. Some of its explanations about life and death don’t really make sense but they can’t find anything more satisfying, so they hold onto them.”

“Deep!” B. L. said, returning to a reclining position.

“Let me ask it this way,” Masters continued. “Does the Curse Theory have any particularly vocal supporters or proponents?”

Silence. Then B. L. spoke.

“Mostly girls under the age of twelve, I’d say,” he replied quite seriously.

Pop added, “I have heard Rick indicate his support – never forcefully but never half-heartedly, either.”

“Yes, he admitted as much to me this morning – ‘suggested’ to me, is perhaps a better characterization,” Masters said.

“I heard Donny Treadway carrying on about it once over at the paper office,” B. L. said, clearly searching his memory for any tidbit that might be helpful.

“Donny Treadway was a moronic, drunken, bum, son. I’d not put stock in anything he had to say.”

It had been a voice-raising, red-faced, throbbing-vein in the forehead comment, out of place and out of character. Pop seemed immediately embarrassed. B. L. looked away as if that might erase the outburst. Masters noted it, of course, but chose not to comment. The uncomfortable moment was broken by a six-bell volley out front.

B. L. hurried to his feet and his characteristic radiance returned.

“Sit here, guys. I – well, we – well, you’ll see. It’s a surprise.”

The surprise turned out to be Marge, the Postmistress, bearing supper.

“Like I told you, Pop and I are terrible cooks, but Marge, here, is a culinary magician.”

“The boy only says that because it’s God’s own truth,” Marge said.

The initial, fleeting glance that passed between Pop and Marge attested to something more than casual friendship. B. L. sensed Masters’ interest.

“It’s one of the less well kept secrets around here, Mr. Masters. Pop and Marge have a thing for each other but, try as I will, I can’t move it along nearly fast enough.”

He beamed, looking from fact to face. The scene seemed a bit awkward to everyone except B. L.

“Well, give her a kiss – cheek, not to wet, will do fine – so we can get on with the grub,” B. L. went on.

Masters greeted Marge warmly.

“So, there seems to be a formidable cupid at work here.”

“That boy. I do love him, but he can be relentless. It’s good to meet you, Mr. Masters.”

“Ray. He prefers, Ray, Marge,” Pop explained.

“Well, Ray, I hope you’re up to Cesar salad and Frontier Stew.”

“What a ‘timeless’ menu! It sounds wonderful.”

And it was!

B. L. made ice cream sundaes for dessert – no choice, the boy decided who would enjoy which flavor. He was right.

It had been an unexpectedly pleasant and fruitful evening. Masters arranged to talk further with Marge the following morning. B. L. made no attempt to disguise the fact that he wanted to take Masters back to the hotel so Pop and Marge could have some time alone. B. L.’s parting remark was, “I’ll give it six rings and wait in the office when I return.”

His giggling still hadn’t stopped as he fumbled in the dark to start the truck.

“So, you seem to be working overtime at getting this romance off the ground,” Masters said, opening the topic that was clearly on the boy’s mind.

“Yes, Sir. When Mom died, Pop got the idea that he

needed to give up that part of his life and just be there for me. I must admit that I thought it was great, until my own sexuality thundered onto the scene when I was thirteen. It took that before I could realize how much Pop was giving up for me. So, I hatched this scheme to get him hooked up with some great lady. I watched him closely whenever we were around possible targets.”

“Targets?”

“I wasn’t sure what else to call them. Anyway, it soon became clear he was attracted to Marge. Actually, I ascertained that Marge was attracted to him first. From there, I figured it would be a cakewalk. Well, the old man continued to resist everything I threw at him. On my fourteenth-birthday, he sat me down for installment number four in our ongoing sex talk. When he was finished, I told him it was my turn and I let him have it. I assured him I had no problem about him with women – in fact, I thought it was great. Well, like I say, I laid it all out. He seemed relieved – surprised but relieved – you know? Since then, he and Marge have been close. He’s moving way too slowly for me but then I suppose an old guys’ flow of hormones probably slows up a bit.”

Masters chuckled out loud.

“What?” B. L. asked.

“My boy, they broke the mold after you arrived!”

B. L. took it as a compliment though he wasn’t entirely sure what Masters had meant.

They parked in front of the hotel. B. L. walked Masters into the lobby, continuing his monologue about parents, the proper role of romance and how – although he really appreciated what his hormones had done for him – they certainly had complicated his life.

Abby, deeply engrossed in a book, was curled up in a big chair close to the fireplace. B. L. greeted her with his usual gentle peck – that time to her lips. She began gathering her things together. He helped her on with her coat.

After a few moments of three-way conversation, Masters excused himself. All that talk about hormones and romance had made the old man – well – hungry!! With unbridled visions of irresistible raspberry twisters, he entered the elevator and disappeared behind the sliding, silver doors.



**CHAPTER FOUR**  
**DAY THREE: Morning**  
**Odds and Ends**

After breakfast, Masters returned to the hotel and settled into a corner chair in the lobby. The night before he had made several appointments: Trudy, Rick's former love interest, agreed to come by the hotel at eight; He would call on Marge at the post office at nine; Rick at ten; and David Allen Thomas, the current Knight of Knights at ten thirty. It would be a full morning. With an hour on his hands, (and four twisters protruding from his coat pocket) Masters settled in to review the material supplied by Rick. It was neat, orderly and thorough – What a surprise!

A careful reading revealed little that Masters did not already know. The fact that it didn't contradict anything lent tacit confirmation to what he had learned to date. The Knights, for all the unwholesome things he had heard, had contributed in many fine ways to Allenville and, in fact to the planet as a whole. They had purchased and were preserving 12,000 acres of endangered wet lands in the northwest and had pledged to pay for the re-planting of 1,000 acres of tropical rainforest every year. Masters saw Joel's find hand in that.

He sat back to summarize what he thought he knew for sure and what he felt had to be. He was certain that the deaths had to be the result of poison. Since that substance remained undetectable in the victims and therefore unidentified, Masters had three paths he could follow. One, he thought, was the least likely to be helpful – locating a quantity



of the probable poison in someone's possession. The other two held more potential. Discover the delivery system or cleanly tie someone into the source of such a deadly agent.

Although motives ran rampant and could conceivably account for seven, eight, or even nine separate murderers (including young Waterson) – each perpetrated by a different individual – Masters dismissed that theory. He was looking for one, or perhaps a set of co-conspirators. His reasoning was that the likelihood of seven local residents, each independently, discovering an exotic poison and devising a successful delivery system was next to nil. The case would rise or fall on source, means, and opportunity. Rick appeared to be the only one having obvious opportunity – if, in fact, the poison was introduced during the banquet. He had clearly set himself up in that position as he had described his procedures prior to the banquet. Would he have done that if he were guilty? Would he have done that to feign naiveté and innocence? Perhaps, since he had to know that Masters would eventually discover his routine anyway, he thought it best to present the information himself immediately when the opportunity first arose. Eastern Europe was well known as an easy and unlimited source of drugs and exotic potions. Rick had been there.

The Gypsies, themselves, could have brought and supplied someone with the poison once the table had been discovered and the curse leveled. Would they have routinely carried such a substance with them? It would not necessarily be out of character. Masters' previous dealings with that group of people had taught him that the few rotten apples among them were ruthless, clever and unforgiving. Gypsy involvement would probably require a local accomplice. Rick? Gerald? Doc? Waterson? Pop? Even that list was incomplete.

Masters was confident that he would discover the probable source and local recipient long before he would be able to demonstrate the method of delivery.

Then there were his nagging concerns about how the Gypsies just happened to come to Allenville, how they just happened to hold claim to that particular table, how the deaths just happened to begin soon after they left. The curse was a

nice touch. Masters had to give them that. Taken as a package, it appeared to Masters that it had been the mastermind of the murderer who had engaged – and paid for – the Gypsy troupe. Coincidences happen, but seldom play a major role in the solution of a murder – especially a case that had been so cleverly conceived and expertly executed as that one. Had B. L. been only ten years older, it certainly would have been within his powers. That, of course, seemed absurd but the murderer would be found to be very bright, or to be in league with someone who is or was.

Motives, of course, would have to follow all the rest. That was backwards from the way most cases were worked, but to begin from motives here, would only bog things down. Find the one with source, opportunity and means and the motive would become obvious.

The Knight murders were not his only interest, as it turned out. The death of Jim Waterson weighed on his mind. He had called to have Joel send over copies of the newspaper articles, which had covered various aspects of the events. He had also asked for background material on the all the principle players.

Trudy appeared on time – to the minute. Masters rose to greet her. She had an old-fashioned air about her. Her medium brown hair was pulled back into a bun. Gold rimmed, half-lens glasses adorned her makeup-free face. She wore a plain, tailored, business suit in gray or green or gray/brown – Masters was never certain when it came to such subtleties of hue. The skirt fell well below her knees. Her smile, at greeting, was forced and her face soon returned to a solemn, ashen appearance. They sat and Trudy, sitting up straight and forward on her chair, spoke first.

“I suppose we’re here about my father’s death last year. It will sound perfectly terrible, Sir, but the World is better without him.”

With that she eased back a bit.

“It does seem a bit harsh, I suppose,” Masters said.

Trudy continued.

“He was a demanding man. There was only one right way – his. He drove my mother to an early grave – him and his damnable Knights.”

She crossed herself. Masters looked puzzled. He had seen no Catholic Church in town. She saw his confusion and answered without his asking.

"I converted to Catholicism when mother died. I did it merely to spite my father's Lutheran soul. A dreadful reason, I know. I don't practice. I don't go to any church, now."

"Who would have wanted him dead?" Masters asked.

"Besides me, you mean? Well, who wouldn't have wanted him dead?"

She grew silent.

"I understand that you and Rick Distlemier were romantically involved some years ago."

The topic took her by surprise and for a moment, a smile of sorts broke across her face.

"I would think that comes under the heading of private business," she said, kindly but firmly.

"I understand you might feel that way but since Rick has to be considered a prime suspect in the killings it has become my business."

"Rick? As a suspect? Why ever for?"

"So far, it appears that he is the only one who consistently had the opportunity to poison the Knights."

"Poison? I hadn't heard anything about poison."

She adjusted her skirt and tugged at the jacket.

"And you suspect Rick in my father's death?"

Her look suggested some degree of pleasure gleaned from the brief moment spent in considering that prospect.

"It is a possibility we are investigating," Masters answered.

"Well, then, yes, Rick and I had a brief relationship over twenty years ago. I'm not sure if it qualified as romantic. It takes more than hand holding to be romantic if you ask me. We went out several times. Father didn't approve and required me to break it off. Rick did not give up easily and he made several more attempts to see me. Father encountered him on the grounds of our home one evening and threatened to have him fired. He beat Rick unmercifully. I watched it from my upstairs window. It was the last I ever heard from Rick. I suppose I just assumed that keeping his job was more important to him than our relationship. Maybe the encounter

with Father just humiliated him too much for him to be able to face me again. I suppose I prefer the latter.”

“Has Rick contacted you since your father’s death?”

“He sent a sweet note at the time. He left things open to get back together. I had grown to hate him for not coming to my rescue and taking me away from my prison. I guess I just couldn’t overcome that, so I did not respond. But now ...”

Her voice trailed off. Her look became momentarily distant. Masters waited. Presently she continued.

“Is there anything else, Mr. Masters?”

“Just that I have been admiring your ring – opal I believe.”

“Yes. It is the only thing I kept from my time with Rick. He had it specially made for me. The opal is an heirloom from his family. He had it set locally. It was a birthday gift.”

“The setting was done by a local artisan, then?” Masters asked adjusting his glasses for a closer look.

“Pooshka.”

“Pooshka?”

“He makes and resets jewelry. He’s lived in the same little place on the edge of town since he moved here years ago.”

“And he can make a living doing that in a small town like this?”

“Apparently. He lives a pretty simple life. He comes downtown on Thursday mornings. That’s the only time he’s seen around. He mostly keeps to himself.”

“And on Thursdays?”

“He’s pretty predictable – Post Office at 8:00, drug store at 8:30, bank at 9:00, groceries at 9:30.”

“You are currently a teller at the bank?”

“A teller forever, I suppose. Pooshka always comes to my window. He and I both lead pretty predictable – pretty boring – lives, I guess. Maybe he senses that.”

“I’m not sure I understand.”

“We both stick to our routines – ruts, maybe. He makes his deposit, always the same – a \$125.00 cashier’s check every week. I guess he lives on the cash he takes in. He seldom withdraws anything. He always examines my ring to make sure it’s okay. We always talk about the weather. We

could record our conversation and just play it over week after week. I guess it's like that with most of the regulars at my window, though."

"It sounds like you're both lonely folks. I'm sorry."

"It's ironic in a way."

"Ironic?"

"Rick was the best friend I ever had and now we're apart. And, Pooshka and Rick were really close for a few years and now they seldom speak anymore. It's Pooshka and me that talk now that I've pushed Rick away."

"What drew Pooshka and Rick together?" Masters asked.

"I'm not sure. They arrived here in town at about the same time. Maybe it was just newcomers finding each other."

"They hadn't known each other before?"

"I don't think so. I guess I never asked."

"Pooshka. Pooshka." Masters repeated. "What nationality is that, do you know?"

"Hungarian. I'm pretty sure I recall that it is Hungarian."

"Hungarian Gypsy?"

Trudy seemed taken aback.

"I hadn't considered that. I have no idea, really."

"I suppose you couldn't reveal what bank his checks are written on, could you, my Dear."

She hesitated, clearly contemplating the ethics of the request. Her face relaxed. She smiled as she responded.

"I suppose it would be a breach of trust to reveal that it's the Casper State Band, so perhaps you shouldn't ask."

Her playfulness was unexpected.

"No, No! Of course. I'd never come right out and ask, you understand," Masters said playing along.

There was a bond, unspoken but unmistakable.

"I have one last question, Trudy. You may, of course, choose not to answer."

His phrase seemed to pique her interest. She cocked her head, silently waiting.

"In a word, what do you think of the Knights?"

There was no hesitation.

"Vile, wretched, contemptible. Three words for the price of one, Mr. Masters."

Masters shook his furrowed brow, compassionately.

“You must have been hurt terribly, Trudy.”

“The Knights came to consume my father. He had to be the best. If I wasn’t the best, if my mother wasn’t the best, he took it as a bad reflection on his own worth. It seemed that mother and I were a constant source of embarrassment to him – because we were imperfect. He sucked my spine from my being. He replaced my soul with an empty, black abyss.”

Those were strangely crafted phrases as if practiced for years just waiting for their moment of liberation. It was an interesting scenario that washed its way across Masters’ mind – Rick and Pooshka with Eastern European roots, comrades in arms, in league with the Gypsy Troupe, and with Trudy as their angry, vengeful, local point-man. Sufficient motives? Perhaps, though still a stretch at that point. Opportunity, source, and means? Not outside the realm of possibility.

Masters thanked Trudy for her time and assistance and saw her to the door. He left his reports with the desk clerk and crossed to Mama’s for a cup of coffee. Abby was just hanging up her apron and preparing to leave as Masters entered. They were soon engaged in small talk at the back table. The conversation turned to B. L.

“You two seem to have a very comfortable relationship,” Masters said, fishing for whatever might swim by.

“Yes, it is. Sometimes I wonder if we’re really just best friends masquerading as this ideal couple. But, then when we’re alone and he kisses me, I know it’s something far more special than just friendship. And that’s undoubtedly more than you wanted to know, isn’t it?”

She looked a bit sheepish.

“I’m always open to hearing about love. I’ve heard that lasting love must be based on genuine friendship. Seems your relationship defines that.”

“He is very special,” she said, nodding. “He’s a good blend of his mother and father, I think.”

“Oh?”

“I understand his mother was optimistic, kind and compassionate, well organized and displayed good common sense. B. L.’s like that. His Father is – what word would B. L.

use – tenacious! He never gives up. He’s generous to a fault. Pop’s a wonderful father – probably would have been too permissive for most kids but B. L. is always looking at the big picture out ahead. He’d seldom risk his long-term welfare – or anybody’s – for some momentary pleasure or thrill. Thankfully, he didn’t inherit Pop’s temper.”

“Temper. Still? I understood that was pretty much a thing of the past for him.”

“Oh, it is. He still gets steamed up over things, though – that’s what I meant, really. I know he hurts terribly about B. L.’s hip. Sometimes B. L. makes light of it and I can tell it hurts Pop. Like when we left for the Winter Formal this year, B. L. said, ‘Well, I guess we’re off to trip the light fantastic – and I mean that in the most literal sense.’ Pops eyes teared up and he looked away. B. L. felt bad he’d said it. He gave his dad the bear hug of all bear hugs. They hug a lot. I like that in a family. We’re a bit more reserved about that at my place – except when B. L.’s there of course. He just wades in and hugs everybody. My I do go on when I’m talking about B. L.”

She seemed a bit embarrassed.

“I’m glad you go on. It’s nice hearing about him and Pop.”

Encouraged by Masters’ reassurance, she continued.

“His time is running out for his operation, you know.”

“No, I didn’t. Operation?”

“The doctors said he needed to have his hip rebuilt as soon as he achieved his full growth. At five feet eleven and with a father under five seven, I assume he’s pretty close to his full height. He won’t talk about it. He just says there isn’t money. They still owe over \$50,000 from his original bills. His college fund is still under \$20,000, though he’ll never need that, I’m sure. Colleges are already after him, offering big scholarships.”

“Any idea what this hip surgery will cost?”

“I asked Doc last year. He said between seventy-five and a hundred and fifty thousand dollars by the time all was said and done. Doc feels bad he can’t help with it, but he has all his money tied up in Frontier Village. I think he feels guilty about it – like it was a stupid oversight on his part. Doc would sell his own liver to help B. L. He’s like a grandfather.”

“Yes, I sensed that yesterday. They seem to have a very close relationship.”

“You won’t find anybody in town who doesn’t like B. L. Sometimes I think he tries too hard to be liked.”

“Since you’re on a roll, here, may I ask how B. L. feels about the Treadways – the late Treadways that is? Donny in particular, I guess.”

“B. L. doesn’t hold grudges. I’ve seldom even seen him angry – he believes anger eats away your essence – I’m not entirely sure what he means by that. He took all the unfairness surrounding his accident a lot better than Pop. There were a lot of people outraged about it, actually.”

“Like?”

“Well, Doc and Mr. Waterson for two. The Police Chief – Mr. Ryan – Joel wrote a whole series of scathing editorials about the failure of the local legal system. Just ask anybody you meet on the street. They’ll still get worked up about it right on the spot.”

“What happened to Donny? I only know that he died some years ago.”

“He came up missing one Monday morning. He was known for his drunken weekend binges. The Sheriff’s department conducted a search and found him in a stream at the bottom of a forty-foot cliff out north of town. I don’t know any more about it.”

“When was that?”

“It was the summer that I was between my freshman and sophomore years. I guess that would have been about two and a half years ago.”

“And that would have been about nine years after B. L.’s accident?”

“Yes. I guess that would be about right. Do you suspect that they are connected – Donny’s death and the accident?”

“I’ve never heard anyone speak about it that way. Actually, once he died, there wasn’t much said at all. It was like all the adults took a vow of silence about it.”

“All I’m certain about right now, Abby, is that this has been a delightful and very helpful cup of coffee. I must be getting up the street to Marge’s place.”



“She’s a gem, Marge. Everybody loves her. She and B. L. could own the town if they’d run for office.”

On the sidewalk, Abby turned West and Masters East. The walk to the Post Office was leisurely and exactly one twister long.

The Post Office building protruded uneasily from the front of Marge’s large, three story almost Victorian house. The three floors and dozens of windows suggested two dozen rooms. Its bright yellow exterior lent a cheery presence to the block on which it sat.

Inside, the walls were lined with mailboxes. There was a counter in the rear adorned with the usual scales, charts and Post Office paraphernalia. No one seemed to be minding the store as Masters looked around. Presently, the front of a mailbox popped open and Marge’s pleasant voice rang out. “Be with you in a jiffy, Ray. Just a handful of letters left to sort. Enjoy the wanted posters.”

She chuckled.

A few minutes later they were seated in a small room that fully satisfied the requirements of kitchenette, office and storeroom.

“I’m a green tea person,” Marge said. “That be okay for you?”

“That would be wonderful. I’m coffeed out. Mama’s is hot, stout and plentiful, but really bad!”

“So, what can I do for the master detective, this morning?”

“Well, first, would your necklace be a Pooshka creation?”

“You know Pooshka?”

“I’ve heard a lot about him.”

“Yes, in fact, he did make it. It’s a birthday present from Pop and B. L.”

“He does pretty well then, does he?”

“Pooshka? He must, though I wouldn’t really think so. He’s survived for some forty years in that little place of his. I see no other means of support.”

“Does he have a mailbox here or get delivery?”

“A box. Lots of folks prefer boxes – a holdover from the old days I guess when the Post Office was the gathering place

for gossip and the like. He comes once a week – Thursday mornings. Seldom has more than one piece of mail. Odd, really.”

“Odd?”

“It’s always a plain number nine envelope, no return address, a Casper post mark.”

“And that’s the only mail he gets?”

“Several times a year he gets a small package from Hungary. Ever since he learned that some of my kids – the ones who live here weekdays – were stamp collectors, he always brings the package up to the counter and has me cut the stamps off for them. He’s quiet. He speaks very little English. He seems to have no real friends – well, I hear that he and Rick Distlemier spend some time together and Pop sells him scrap silver and gold when he gets it. Pop says he’s likeable. I’ve certainly never found anything disagreeable about him. Why the interest in him, if I may ask?”

“Just part of my collection,” Masters answered.

“Collection?”

“Puzzle pieces. In this case, it’s still hard to know which pieces are going to fit.”

“Well, here’s another piece, then. I have no idea if it will be useful. Pooshka and Gerald had struck up quite a friendship after Gerald retired. An unlikely pair, I thought. It had something to do with Gerald’s telescopes I think. Pooshka set lenses for him or something. Now that I’m thinking about it, I seem to recall that he is, or was, into astronomy himself. Maybe that was the initial interest that drew them together – star watching.”

“How about Rick? What would it take to bribe you into telling me about his pen pals?”

“Rick receives almost no mail. When he does, it’s seldom from the U. S. More usually from Europe or Canada. Maybe from relatives.”

“Letters or packages?”

“You’re taxing my memory. Actually, it’s usually letters. I do remember a few years back he got a series of small, flat packages wrapped in brown paper. They each had dozens of stamps on them and he let the kids have them.”

“Can you pinpoint the year any closer?” Masters asked.

“Eight, maybe ten years ago, give or take a year or two – not much help I guess?”

“Time will tell.”

As it turned out, Marge was just too kind a lady to be of much help on the ‘who hates who’ questions, though she seemed some overprotective – noncommittal, would be a better word – about Pop’s attitudes toward folks.

As Masters walked toward the Kastle for his second meeting with Rick, he contemplated an alliance of Doc, Waterson, Pop, Rick, Pooshka and Gerald. In theory, at least, it was possible to add Trudy to the band of conspirators.

Masters’ primary problem remained the means of delivery of the poison. Since the first in line to become Knight of Knights, always pours the champagne for the current Knight of Knights at the celebration banquet, that man had the best opportunity – seemingly the only opportunity – to deliver the poison. Once poured, only one person drank from a goblet. The validity of that method rose or fell on the theory that someone got to each of the first in line Knights, convinced them to commit murder, and provided the poison.

The theory rapidly fell apart, however. It seemed to Masters that Doc would not have participated in such a scheme and, yet, the Knight of Knights ahead of him had been killed. Of course, that had been William Treadway – the father of the man involved in B. L’s accident. And, he could have worked out an agreement with Elmer Innis – the Knight in line after Doc – not to poison him and he would immediately resign. The theory does not address the fact that the other Knights would have known about the plans and so would not have drunk the poisoned drink when they sat as the Knight of Knights. The more he contemplated it the muddier it became. Perhaps, some revisions of the basic ideas might prove more feasible. He’d tuck it away for future evaluation.

Masters stopped at the front edge of the Knight’s property and examined the Kastle with his eyes. Several new questions came to mind. He let himself in. The door to Rick’s office was open. Still, Masters knocked. Rick looked up from his desk.

“Oh, come in. Please. The time got away from me.”

“I’m a few minutes early.”

“Not a problem.”

He took Masters’ coat and they were seated as before.

“David will be along in a half hour or so. He’s eager to meet you. What can I do for you in the mean time?”

“I was just noticing the windows again – the narrow ones. Did I see storm windows on them?”

“Yes, Sir. Another of Gerald’s energy saving ideas. It was quite a chore really. I’m not sure why, but after he finally got the first one in place, the others seemed to go rapidly.”

“Do you know the nature of the problem?”

“Not for sure. They were all specially made, of course. None of the openings were exactly the same size, I guess. I just remember it took him a full day to get the first one on right. He was up and down the ladder a hundred times, I’ll bet. Inside and outside. He never got ruffled. Seemed like more of a challenge than a frustration, I guess. Two days later, though, they had all been installed.”

“From which end did he start?”

“Not an end. He started with the middle window and worked out from there.”

“And, did they provide the expected energy savings?”

“Sure, I suppose. Well, not much really, truthfully. It’s such a big old, fully non-insolated building it would be hard to tell.”

“Actually, I had another question in mind when I called,” Masters said.

“Oh! What?”

“It’s about that check for the Gypsy troupe. Is it possible that you remember the bank on which it was drawn?”

“I was treasurer. I have my personal notes right here. I’m sure I can find that for you.”

More quickly than Masters was able to locate his toothbrush in the morning – the one right there in front of him on the sink – Rick’s manila folder provided the answer.

“Citizens State Bank in Casper. I have the check number if you want it.”

“Yes, if you’d jot that down, please.”

Masters got up and looked through the library as Rick copied the number.

“An interesting library you have here.”

“I imagine you’re actually referring to the books on drug interactions and exotic poisons.”

Masters smiled and turned toward Rick.

“You are well ahead of me, Sir. Yes, those are the ones that interest me the most.”

“I got them when Doc first mentioned the possibility of poison in all this. I felt a responsibility to help solve it all. I got the books. I studied them. I suppose that now I’m somewhat of an expert on such things.”

Masters thumbed through each book.

“Where did you find them?”

“The bookstore helped me. They ordered them for me.”

“I see. Yes, I should have noticed the bookstore’s label inside the front cover.”

Rick seemed agitated.

“This one – Middle Eastern Poisons and Potions – doesn’t seem to have a label. Did you get that one somewhere else?”

“No. They may not have labeled it. It wasn’t going on the rack for sale, after all.”

“I see. Probably,” Masters agreed, slipping it back among the others. He looked further. “How interesting,” he said at last. “Several books written in Hungarian. I didn’t realize you were multi-lingual. I assumed German, of course.”

“A few years back I convinced a friend of mine it was time he learned English – he’d been in this country for some thirty years and still stumbled around the language. I told him I’d teach him to read and write English if he’d teach me to read Hungarian, his native language. I must say I found Hungarian far more difficult than he found English.”

“Pooshka?” Masters asked.

“Yes. You’ve met Pooshka?”

“No. His name has just come up several times since I’ve been here.”

“Is he a suspect?”

Masters thought it was a strange question from the normally calculating, careful, Rick Distlemier.

“No more a suspect than everybody else in this town, I suppose. You must know him pretty well, then.”

“Yes. Probably better than most around here – well,

anybody, actually. We moved in at about the same time. He spoke fluent German – my first language – so we had that as a bond I guess you could say. He’s a jeweler and I’ve bought a few of his pieces. We both prefer a simple way of life. I guess that gives us several things in common.”

“To your knowledge, was he in any way connected with the Gypsy Troupe that performed here?”

“None that I’m aware of. He has never really spoken of his roots. I don’t know how he ended up here. He and I are both rather private people. Neither pries, you understand.”

Masters had to wonder if that last phrase had been intended as a contrast with himself.

“I can certainly appreciate that,” Masters said just ignoring the possible implication. “You got your Hungarian books directly from Hungary, I imagine.”

“Yes, Sir. Pooshka had an address. He wrote the orders for me. I got them one at a time, actually, not knowing how well it would go.”

“Back to the remodeling for a moment,” Master said. “The floor planking – was it purchased here in town?”

“Yes and no. The local lumber yard was our source but it was a special thickness so they had it specially milled in Montana.”

“A special thickness? What was that all about?”

“To meet the safety requirements, the new floor had to be one and five eighths inches thick. That is a non-standard cut.”

Masters shook his head.

“Is there a civil engineer here in town?”

“Rudy at the Highway Department.”

Masters made a note of the name.

“May I sneak another peak at the Main Hall now?”

“Sure. Want me to come along?”

That won’t be necessary but you’re welcome to, of course.”

“I’ll stay here then. Still lots of final preparations for the Celebration of Life, Saturday. I’ll let you know when David arrives.”

The hall was as it had been the day before – flooded with stripes of light from the peculiar windows. The

imperfections in the old glass produced hot spots of light here and there on the floor, table, wall and clock. It resembled a surrealist's painting. He turned on the lights. They made little difference during the day except, perhaps, to mute – somewhat – the harshness of the boundaries dividing sun and shadow.

Here and there, he bounced his weight against the floor. It remained solid – clearly a humorous event in Master's eyes. Again, he examined the table, the chairs, and the clock. He eyed the chandeliers from a variety of angles. With a nod, he returned to the hallway. David Thomas, the current Knight of Knights was just entering Rick's office.

With introductions out of the way, David and Masters moved down the hall to his office. It was Spartan and appeared seldom used. They both took seats in chairs that were arranged in front a large desk – a sister to the one in Rick's office. David spoke first. His question was predictable.

“Well, how's the investigation coming?”

“I'm still gathering information, but feeling very confident at this point. Do you have any ideas that you think might be helpful?”

“I'm pretty much at a loss, I guess.”

“Well, then, let me ask a few questions that may get you started,” Masters said.

David nodded his agreement and appeared to relax a bit.

“Can you think of any one enemy that all of the deceased knights might have had in common?”

“Sure. The damn Gypsies! They're who I keep coming back to. I don't mean I believe in the curse – I don't – but I have to think they are somehow behind it. They're a sneaky lot, you know.”

“Oh!”

“Well, sure. Everybody knows Gypsies are always up to no good.”

“No. I guess I didn't realize that,” Masters said disappointed in the man's willingness to write them all off so easily.

“I've known a few I thought were fine human beings.”

“Well, anyway.”

It was an embarrassed stammering.

Masters moved on.

“Pooshka – is he your suspect then?”

“Pooshka! Is he a gypsy?” David asked.

“So I’m told,” Masters answered. “I haven’t actually heard it from him, yet.”

“Pooshka seems okay.”

He held out the back of his right hand.

“He makes our fraternal rings, see. It’s beautiful work. Takes a month to finish one.”

“Looks expensive. Is that an opal set inside a circle of diamonds?”

“Yes, and in a gold ring,” David pointed out as if to enhance its worth or snob appeal, depending on your point of view.

“An oversized, gold ring,” Masters said, playing to the man’s undisguised vanity. “And an inlaid, gold ‘K’ on the opal.”

“Yes. Only the Knight of Knights rings get to have that added.”

It seemed a clear case of, “I’m the Jones with whom you have to keep up,” to Masters, but he continued. “It’s impressive, I must admit. “Do you know how Pooshka happened to settle here?”

“Yes, I do. The Knights used to get their rings made in Europe. It took four to six months so that jeweler was asked to recommend someone with similar skills here in the States. Pooshka was recommended. He had apprenticed with them and worked there, locally, for some 8 or 10 years before immigrating to the US. We located him in Detroit. We paid his way here and offered him a stipend on top of it. It has worked out quite well. Soon, we will need to be thinking about getting a replacement I suppose. He’s getting up there in years – like the rest of us.”

“How about Rick? How did the Knights find him?”

“The Order had always expected the Knight of Knights to be the administrator. That became tiresome, I guess, so they set out to find an Executive Secretary. Rick held an administrative position in Windsor, Ontario up in Canada – I



don't recall the organization but it had to do with importing stained glass or some such thing. It was one of those fine coincidences, I guess. About the time we decided to look for a person, we received his resume. He wanted to relocate to the States and had heard about our need. I don't recall how. We couldn't function without him, now. He runs the place. I just feel like an extra thumb around here."

"Windsor. That's just across the river from Detroit if my fifth-grade geography still serves me right."

"I'm really not sure," David said with a shrug.

"Speak of your coincidences, David. Two new employees coming from within a few miles of each other, half a continent away. It is a small World I guess."

"I guess," David repeated, clearly confused trying to follow Masters' train of thought and why it might be of any importance.

"May I ask what Rick's salary is?"

"Thirty-five thousand a year. I suppose it's time we thought about a raise. I don't even remember the last time he received one. He never complains much. His needs are apparently very simple."

Masters moved on.

"I am, of course, most interested right now in determining any enemies that you might have, personally."

"Yes. That makes sense," David agreed.

"Can you tell me about the loan to the Waterson Boy?"

David was startled.

"That whole thing certainly careened out of control. It seemed like a sound loan to me. The Bank held the machinery as collateral plus his house and car. The Board had approved dozens that were on far shakier ground. Then the City Council backed out and wham! The Bank Board torpedoed the whole safety net I had worked out. They offered Waterson ten cents on the dollar for his machinery, repossessed his car and foreclosed on his house. The bank then turned around and sold the machinery to another contractor at full price – making ninety percent on it for doing nothing. Plus, Waterson still owed them something over \$300,000. He declared bankruptcy to rid himself of that. It outraged the Bank President – an Allen of course. He

wouldn't let it go and finally had a face to face with young Waterson. A month later, Waterson was dead. Some say suicide. Some say an accident. Some say murder."

"And you? What do you say?"

"If you knew the Allens the way I do – my mother was an Allen – you'd weigh in on the side of murder."

"Do you believe Waterson, the father, would try to kill you?"

"I don't know. From what I've heard, he's pretty well convinced himself it was an accident. I guess you never know."

"The bank president you spoke of – he is not a Knight?"

"No and he hates the fact that he isn't. But frankly, and this is my uncle I'm speaking of, the bravest thing he ever did was maybe remove a sliver from his finger."

"How does he feel about the Knights as an organization?"

He'd have given anything to be a Knight – Allens are supposed to be Knights, you know – but since he can't be, I suppose he dislikes us. That's pretty much how it goes around here – thirty-six men like the Knights and the other five thousand dislike them.

"Dislike? Is that a strong enough term?"

"I don't know. I've never heard him say. Maybe he hates us. I imagine he really hates himself for not qualifying."

"That may be a good take it on it all," Masters said.

David became quite serious.

"Do you have any suggestions for me? Anything to keep me safe through the Celebration of Life?"

"My main suggestion is to call off the Celebration or at least the banquet, but I understand that probably will not be done. My second suggestion is for you not to eat or drink at the Banquet."

"Oh, I couldn't do that. I'm the Knight of Knights."

"I assumed that would be your reaction. I will prepare a package and send it by your house. B. L. Roman will bring it – you know him?"

"Certainly. Such a fine boy. Such a tragedy!"

"Don't accept it from anyone else. The package will contain things like toothpaste, bar soap, a comb, toothbrush,

washcloth, aftershave – and things like that. On the 21st and 22nd, use only these new things. Drink only the bottled water I will supply for you. Tell no one of these switches.”

“Contact solution?” David asked.

“Good point. I’ll see that you get a new bottle. Don’t use ice cubes. Don’t eat or drink anything other than what I supply for you.”

“Okay. Thank you. I feel better.”

“We’ll both feel much better when we have the solution out in the open,” Master said.

“Yes, Sir. That we will. You think that will be soon?”

“It is my intention to have it wrapped up before the Celebration.”

Masters had a final question.

“What was your opinion of all the remodeling that was done around here ten or so years ago?”

“My opinion? I don’t know. I guess I never really had an opinion. Rick insisted it all needed to be done. Gerald seemed to agree, so we had it done. Like I say, we depend on Rick for most everything around here.”

The question seemed to have puzzled David. Rick seemed to wield a powerful presence. Masters rose, shook David’s hand, and left the office.

Interesting, he thought. David’s approach to the possible danger was nothing like that which Rick had described the day before – depressed resignation to whatever might occur. Also interesting was the way in which he had included Rick with Gerald as the force behind the remodeling. In fact, he had certainly made it appear the ideas had been put forward by Rick and that Gerald merely implemented them.

Rick had made it appear that the remodeling had been all Gerald’s idea. There were no witnesses to either verify or contradict those accounts. Could it have been that it was all Rick’s doing and he had just hired the capable Gerald to carry out his wishes? Would it make any difference either way? How could the remodeling be connected to the deaths? It appeared to all be quite a leap in logic.

Masters reveled in being able to ask the correct question. Once asked, the solution could come quickly. His

current problem was to determine which was the proper question.

On the way to the café, he detoured back by Marge's. She was busily washing the fronts of the mailboxes and seemed happy for a break.

"Another quick question," Masters said. "Do you recall any odd mail that might have come for Gerald Miller or Rick Distelmier at about the same time as Colonel Allen's death?"

"Odd?"

"From strange or unexpected places."

"Gerald got mail from all over the World. I guess he'd spent time in lots of exotic places."

"Exotic?" Masters asked.

Well, exotic to me. I've never been further away than Salt Lake City so Cleveland's exotic to me, I suppose. He'd get mail from Tripoli, Berlin, Amsterdam, Madagascar, Brisbane, Johannesburg – dozens of places, I guess. My young stamp collectors loved him. He was always generous with the stamps."

"Packages? Did he receive packages?"

"I'm sure he did. I just really don't remember. Oh, he did get things from an optical company in Canada, sometimes. He was an astronomer of sorts. Several times when my kids got snowed in here over weekends, he'd bring some telescopes over and keep them occupied for hours on end. He'd show them tricks with lenses and prisms. They always looked forward to his visits. For a man who really hadn't ever done much fathering of his own daughter, he was really quite good with kids."

"His family didn't accompany him while he was in the service?"

"His wife had rheumatic fever or some such thing. She died some 15 years ago. Gina was in her mid-twenties at the time. She married a few years later."

"So, Gina's mail wouldn't have been quite so exotic as you put it?"

"Except for letters from her father it was pretty plain. Joel gets things from all over, though. He must get three pounds of mail a day for the paper."

Masters thanked her for the information and was soon

cutting a brisk pace for the café. Just outside, the Orange Steed was waiting patiently in its usual stall. Inside, B. L. had his nose in a book at his usual stall. It was a new tome – something about the formation of super nova. It was quickly put away as he saw Masters approaching.

“So, got it solved?” B. L. intended it as a joke.

“I’m closing in fast, actually. Only a few details to work out.”

“Are you pulling my leg? Woops an inelegant idiom. Sorry.”

His grin faded to serious.

“We’re almost there. A couple of questions, okay?”

“Sure. Okay!” The boy’s enthusiasm bubbled over.

“Where was Gerald living when he retired?”

“In the guest house behind Joel’s.”

“Anybody lived there since?”

“No, Sir, I’m quite sure of that.”

“Would you call Gina and ask if I could look it over?”

“Sure. She’ll have fresh sugar cookies if we dally just long enough,” he reported, only partly in jest.

A minute later the permission was secured. They had a half-hour. It was spent enjoying the pot roast special. The double pecan pie would have to wait, as would Masters’ puzzlement over just what a ‘double pecan’ might be.

Ol’ Cit provided the transportation and they were soon pulling to a stop in the driveway. Gina, bundled in a bulky, neck-to-knees gray sweater greeted them, arms crossed and shivering, on the front steps. She administered a well-practiced bear hug to B. L. and shook Masters’ hand. She escorted them around the side of her large, white, home. Arriving at the guesthouse, she said, “It will be a mess inside, Mr. Masters. I started going through Dad’s things a month or so after the funeral but I just stopped and haven’t been back inside since.”

Taken at face value her comment suggested that if there had been evidence or clues inside, they would likely still be there. It could also have been phrased to disguise the fact that something important might have been removed.

“Do you want me to stay?” she asked, clearly hoping the answer would be no.”

“That won’t be necessary. If I have questions, I’ll let you know. Oh, one thing. Did your father have a work shop here?”

“No. Not really. He stored some tools and boxes in the shed back there.”

She pointed toward the back of the lot.

“Key?” Masters asked.

“This is rural Wyoming, Ray. Nobody feels the need to lock anything around here.”

“How comforting that must be,” he said.

Gina started to leave then turned back toward them.

“When you’re ready to leave stop by the house. Oatmeal cookies!”

“Darn!” B. L. said, snapping his finger. “I had predicted sugar.”

Gina smiled and left. Masters and B. L. entered the small structure. Gina had been right. Cobwebs and dust gave the scene an eerie, Gothic appearance.

“What are we looking for, Sir?”

“I have no idea,” Masters replied. “Something out of character, perhaps. Something hidden. Something that makes you ask, ‘Why would this be here or what in the World is this?’”

They picked-up-and-moved-aside their way through the living room, kitchen and finally, the bedroom.

“Except for the dust, it seems really neat for a bachelor,” B. L. observed. “Everything in its place. Towels on racks. The bed made up. No dirty clothes around. Closets neat and orderly. It sure doesn’t resemble my bachelor pad.”

“An excellent observation. Not the digs of a chronically depressed, despairing man, would you say?”

“No, Sir. Looks more like he was getting ready to show the place. When we sold the house in town about all I remember was how Pop kept cleaning up after me – putting my toys away – doing up the dishes.”

In the bedroom, was a large bookcase. It contained books, pictures, and mementos – one of which was a shrunken head that caught B. L.’s immediate attention. Masters looked to see what had the boy so enthralled, then quipped, “I think I met her on a blind date back in ’44.”

Masters then stood back and nodded his head. B. L. looked where the Old Detective was looking. “What is it, Sir? I don’t see anything.”

“Take a good look. What do you not see that you would expect to see?”

B. L. looked puzzled but diligently gave the bookcase another careful going over. The third time around the proverbial light bulb went off over his head.

“Pharmacy and drug books. There aren’t any. It was his life for 30 years. You know he must have had scads of them.”

“Any boxes under the bed?” Masters asked, deferring to B. L.’s more agile frame.

He looked.

“No, Sir. Not even a stray shoe!”

“Why do you suppose someone would remove a given genre of books from his library?”

“Well,” B. L. said, quite deliberately, “To make the authorities forget it was his specialty or to make them a gift to some school or public library, perhaps.”

“Both reasonable possibilities. You know the libraries around here. Any probable suspect volumes?”

“I don’t recall any. Poison, aside from those in weeds that kill cattle, really isn’t a useful or common topic around here, Sir. I will check it out though.”

Back in the kitchen, Masters remembered something that Gina and Joel had told him that first evening.

“Do you see a large coffee mug anywhere? – One that has the words ‘World’s Greatest Dad’ on it.”

“No, Sir. Maybe it’s in the cupboard.”

“It’s worth a look. Gina said it had been a birthday present the night of his death. I would think a father would want to leave that out where he could enjoy the sentiment for at least a few days.”

“Or minutes if he were about to kill himself,” B. L. pointed out.

Masters opened door after door, examining the contents. Presently, he found the cupboard holding glasses, cups and such.

“I believe I’ve found it,” he said.

It was against the back side of the cabinet, upside down, with a smaller cup sitting on top of it. Using his handkerchief, Masters removed the cup and then the mug, placing them on the counter. In the cup, he found a key.

“Pick up the key with my handkerchief – gently – and try it in the front and back doors.”

It did not fit either and was slipped into an envelope from Masters' pocket.

Masters then blew the dust off the mug. It was definitely the mug in question. That time it was B. L. who began thinking out loud.

“Even if he put it away on the shelf immediately – and as neat as he kept things he might have done that – why would he put it way at the rear with another mug on top of it? He would have to move the cups and glasses at the front to do that. That makes no sense.”

“I think you're getting the hang of this investigation thing.”

Masters gaze stopped on a box on the top of the refrigerator. It was open and sat on neatly folded wrapping paper. Inside was an unopened bottle of after-shave lotion.

“What do you make of this combo, B. L.?”

“A birthday present set aside for the time being. It's rather manly paper and it says ‘Happy Birthday’ on it which does sort of provide a clue.”

“Who's it from?”

B. L. looked through the paper and the box.

“No card so I can't tell you.”

“When do you get or give a present without a ‘to and from’ card?”

The boy thought for a moment.

“When you're delivering it in person, I suppose.”

“Bingo!”

“Bingo, why?”

“Gerald did not receive after-shave from Gina and Joel, so this came from somebody else.”

“Ah!” B. L. continued. That means that someone else might have come here that night to give him a present. It could also mean that he might have been given a present at work and brought it home.”



“What are the chances, if he had received it at work that he would have brought the paper home?”

“Pretty slim, I suppose, especially for a man. The paper would have most likely been removed and disposed of on site.”

“It’s not a certainty, but it is a good bet. Someone else came to see him that night on the pretense of bringing him a present.”

“Probably no prints on the after-shave, huh?” B. L. reasoned.

“Probably not, but we’ll take it along. Is that a popular brand around here, do you know?”

“I’m not quite into needing it – officially – yet, but yes, it’s certainly not a rare brand by any means.”

“We will leave these things here for the time being. Let’s go take a look in the shed.”

B. L. opened the door – double doors, actually. It was roughly eight by ten and unlighted except for a skylight on each side of its peaked roof.

B. L. spoke.

“Weird. It’s almost empty. Have you ever known a closet or a storage area that wasn’t jam packed beyond its reasonable capacity?”

“You do think like a sleuth, young man!”

There was a large tool box on the floor and some yard tools – spade, rakes, weed-eater, an ax and several saws, which hung on the wall. The long, two-man, crosscut saw drew Masters’ immediate attention. He smelled the teeth, which still contained saw dust caked in place. He crumbled some of it between his fingers and smelled again.

“It’s not pine, oak or fir,” he said.

B. L. took a turn.

“I’m pretty sure it’s chestnut, Sir. We have trunk-rounds from several dozen species in the biology lab at school. I’m quite sure this smells like chestnut.”

“A genius brain and a genius nose. What more could a guy ask for.” Masters said.

In B. L’s case, there was an obvious answer to that question which saddened Masters, but the boy just smiled appreciatively, and let it pass.

Masters removed an envelope from his inside coat pocket and received the scrapings, which B. L. carefully removed from the saw.

"It would appear that we may have narrowed down our tree vandal to someone living on this property," Masters said.

It was the first moment that B. L. had seen the connection.

"Gerald, Joel or Gina?" was his question, delivered with a full measure of disbelief.

While B. L. contemplated his sudden quandary, Masters felt along the hidden area toward the back of the single shelf, running high along the length of the wall. He came down with a small cardboard box no more than six inches square and took it outside into the light. B. L. followed. It had been well sealed with reinforced packaging tape. B. L.'s pocketknife soon had it open. With the flaps bent back, B. L.'s look of eager anticipation faded to blank. Masters, on the other hand, beamed the beam of all beams.

"Hot dog! Bingo! And Saints be praised!" came his booming, baritone response.

B. L.'s brow furrowed and he looked into the box again.

"Looks like a box filled with Styrofoam packing beads to me."

"The typical Styrofoam packing beads?" Masters asked.

B. L. picked one up and examined it.

"Well, no. They're more like tiny little solid cylinders."

"Dimensions?"

"Oh, three eighths of an inch at most across the circular dimension and a half inch in length."

B. L. examined the outside of the box. It was addressed to Pooshka and had the stamps cut away.

"I'm still confused, Sir. A box of packing material addressed to Pooshka in Joel's storage shed and you think it's important enough for a Bingo, a Hot Dog and a Saints Be Praised? I don't get it."

"It's not packing material in the usual sense. It's humidity absorbing material – the kind you find inside vitamin bottles."

"I see that, now. I still don't get it though."

"I think I'll just let you put your mind to work on it for a

while. In the meantime, this is to be our secret.”

B. L. zipped his lips. He realized it was Masters’ way of not revealing the nature of an important clue too early in the case. He could accept that, in fact, it became a wonderful challenge. After all, how many sixteen-year-old kids ever got a chance to match wits with Raymond Masters?

“There is one thing that seems odd,” B. L. said, examining the box again.

“And that would be . . . ?” Masters asked.

“The combined weight of all those little pieces couldn’t be more than what – two or three ounces – and yet the box is double thick cardboard as if it were made to carry ten or fifteen pounds.”

“Ergo?” Masters posed.

“Ergo, either the packager used overkill – which would have been foolishly expensive coming all the way from Hungary – or, those pieces were not what came in that box originally.”

“You’re hired!” Masters announced playfully. “Name your price.”

“You better not offer me a contract yet, because I still have no ideas what either Gerald or Pooshka would be doing with 1,000 little dehumidifying, Styrofoam, cylinders – and certainly no idea how they could possibly have any significance in this case.”

“That’s why I’m the one in this team that makes the big bucks,” Masters said, signaling that the boy was not going to weasel one more tidbit of information out of his old friend.

B. L. smiled a friendly, knowing, touché toward Masters.

“Well, in lieu of a contract, then, young man, how about letting me – the Knights, that is – treat you to a humongous, chocolate shake?”

“You’re on. I’ve definitely been worth that much.”

The boy’s grin was as much in admiration as it was playful.

“First, let’s pick up that mug and the after-shave,” Masters said.

Back in the kitchen of the guest house, he examined the mug more closely. Having been upside down all those

years, no dust had attached to the inside surface.

“Look here,” Masters said to B. L., pointing with his pen to a tan ring near the top.

“Looks like a tea stain to me. Marge’s cups always have stains like that. I often do up her dishes at the Post Office. We have a deal – she feeds me junk food and I clean up the place.”

“But . . . ?”

Masters paused for B. L.’s brain to kick in.

“Oh, but it was a brand-new cup. Why would a guy about to kill himself stop to have tea? He might, of course. Maybe he used it to dissolve the drugs in and then drank it down.”

“Let’s search the cabinets again. See what kind of tea we find.”

No tea was found. No coffee was found.

“So,” Masters mused, “He made some tea, threw out what was left of it along with its packaging box, and then drank it to kill himself. Why throw out the tea?”

“Makes no sense. If it were something about tea, the autopsy would have found it.” B. L. reasoned.

The mug was sealed in a plastic sack, as was the smaller teacup that had been resting on top of it.

While packaging the cup, Masters got that look.

“What?” B. L. asked.

“Look at all the other cups in the shelves. They have all been set with the opening up. The Mug, on the other hand was set open end down.”

“And that has definite significance, I’m sure,” B. L. said in a playfully sarcastic way.

Masters smiled but said nothing.

B. L. had been leaning on one of the kitchen chairs. Its seat was pushed in underneath the table. In the process, he tipped it up onto its front legs. Something fell from its seat onto the floor under the table. It was a thud of sizeable enough proportions to catch their attention. B. L. knelt to take a look.

“Looks like an old portable typewriter in a metal case – a regular museum piece, Sir,” he reported.

“Be careful about prints but bring it out and put it on the table.”

He lifted it with his palms at its corners. Masters unlatched the lid and opened it.

“Probably the one Gerald carried around the world with him.”

With the end of his pen, Masters probed, pushed, and tapped this and that. B. L. seemed genuinely intrigued with what in his experience, represented a certified antique.

“Like a printer without toner or a ink cartridge – oh, I see, there is a ribbon on two little spooly thingys threaded across a metal clip-like gizmo.”

“That, of course, would be the scientific description!” Masters said.

Then he became interested in that ribbon.

“Ribbons used to come in three basic varieties – black, blue, and half black / half red for ledger entry work. This one is black and it seems to have been about one third used. Very interesting! Nice find. We’ll take that with us as well.”

B. L. couldn’t resist: “Translation: You tote the heavy contraption, Son, and I’ll carry the cups and after-shave.”

“Very good. I was sure you were multi-lingual,” Masters replied.

They reported to Gina for their cookies, as previously instructed, and were soon back at the café.

The shake turned out to be double pecan pie, instead, but that was fine with both of them. Still no clues about the nature of a ‘double pecan’. However, Masters vowed to keep eating it until he discovered the answer.

**CHAPTER FIVE**  
**Day Three: Afternoon**  
**Kinky goings-on**

Masters had dispatched B. L. to secure a 100-foot carpenter's tape measure, four large bath towels and some bailing twine. Upon hearing the request, the boy laughed out loud.

"Must be pretty kinky. Not sure Mom would have approved," he joked as he turned to leave.

He was gone before Masters could rebut the playful accusation. He went back to his coffee, there in his now comfortable office away from home, at the rear of Mama's café.

He took out his pad and reviewed some of his notes. Snowy on Doc's day. Cloudy on Waterson's day. Clear as a bell on the other days. It appeared another clear day could be counted on for the Celebration that year.

"Clear days, dead Knights. Overcast days, live Knights."

He repeated it to himself and shuddered, as if to shake some sense from it.

Then there was Rick from Windsor and Pooshka from Detroit. Pharmacist, Doctor, pharmacist's mate, and poison. A minimum of a dozen credible motives. A suicide note that wasn't at all like a suicide note. Cashier's checks galore from the same Casper bank. The fleeting friendships between Rick and Trudy, Rick and Pooshka, and the ongoing, Thursday morning exchanges between Trudy and Pooshka – the makings of a romantic triangle that no one seemed to even

notice or mention.

Clearly, it was time to meet the talented Hungarian. Masters called Rick to set up a meeting with Pooshka at Rick's office. A half-hour later, Rick called back. The meeting was set for two-thirty that afternoon. Rick agreed to help translate if necessary. As luck would have it, that allowed more than enough time for one, World's largest chocolate shake – well, make that two. B. L. returned.

With orange transportation at hand, they got the shakes to go and B. L. drove Masters to the site of Donny Treadway's accident.

B. L. provided some information he thought would be helpful.

"It's the highest hill top in the area. It's the make-out spot for teens. You can see for miles out across town and well beyond the interstate to the south – that is, if you take the time to look before the windshield fogs over."

He tittered like an old maid aunt, as if his was the only generation of young people to seek privacy on a hilltop in the dark of night. Masters smiled, nodded, and thought better than to go into the history of the romantic rendezvous. They walked to the edge of the cliff, which was only a 'cliff' in local parlance – just an extremely sharp slope, far too severe to safely navigate with a vehicle. At the bottom, a small but turbulent little stream boiled its way through the gap between the cliff and the equally steep slope of a much lower hill to the south.

"Chief Ryan says Treadway's car was up here, rolled over the cliff and ended up in Denny's Demise, down there," B. L. explained.

"Denny's Demise?"

"Long story about a bank robber in the olden days – probably even before your time," the boy said with a grin but unbroken rhythm. "He got away from town slick as could be but his horse lost her footing trying to go down the cliff and poor ol' Denny and all the money ended up getting dashed around down there in the creek – he was dead and the money just floated back to town. I don't know how much of that's true but it's the lore, at least."

"So, the area has a built-in history for taking lives."

“Yes. I suppose you could say that.”

B. L. nodded.

“The police report stated the ignition was off in Treadway’s car,” Masters said, thinking aloud. “For it to just start slipping over the cliff it would need to be parked precariously close to the edge, wouldn’t you say?”

“You can see there is a slight slope from here back a hundred yards or so. We, I mean, of course the kids who frequent this spot, park well back in the winter when its icy up here. I’ve even heard some kid’s pick-up started to slide one night after a daylong downpour.”

“Treadway died in July. No ice then, even around here, I imagine.”

“I certainly doubt it, and probably no rain either.” B. L. said considering the alternative possibility.

Masters nodded.

“Do you know the exact spot the police say Treadway’s car occupied before it went over the side? Silly question. Of course, you do. Just show me where it was.”

The young sleuth grinned proudly. “You’re standing on the very spot, Sir.”

“How efficient you are, young man.”

“I do try to be. I credit my accident for that.”

Masters expression suggested he was lost.

B. L. explained.

“Well, when getting around takes as much effort as it does for me, I soon learned to plan my activities and moves in the most efficient ways possible. Good stuff can come from bad stuff you see.”

Masters had no words so he patted the lad on his back and began looking over the ground.

“Mud, soft ground, even now,” he commented.

“Yup. Usually that way up here. An artesian effect or capillary action of some kind from the water table I’ve always guessed.”

“And you speak geologist as well, I see!” Masters noted.

“Yes. You could say I have rocks in my head?”

Masters could only shake his head as B. L. giggled.

“You and Pop get the car after the accident?”



“Pop pulled it out and towed it to our place. The State Police Lab guys looked it over. There was nothing worth saving. We sent it to the crusher sometime later. It’s long gone, if it’s evidence you’re seeking.”

Masters raised his eyebrows, folded his arms, and sighed deeply. He took out his small pad and made some notes. Then, he motioned the boy to follow him back some twenty paces from the edge.

“The reports said there were a set of tire marks about here – deep indentations as if a car had been spinning its wheels in the same spot for a period of time. Here, in fact; these look like they could be the remains of such a set. See, here and here. Put your brain to work on that in the context of Treadway’s car going over the cliff.”

Masters’ genuine request for his help sent a sudden feeling of unbelievable importance and esteem surging through his young being. He quickly brought it under control as he began considering the problem.

“It could have been made by the rear wheels of Donny’s car just being revved up way to fast to get the traction needed to move the car forward. Not likely though, I’d guess.”

“Why’s that?”

“Well, think about it. If you were about to drive yourself over a cliff wouldn’t the natural thing be to get up close and take a look at what laid ahead? He was drunk as the lord – pardon the expression if that’s offensive to you, Sir – but he was blotto, not an unusual state for Donny on the weekends. I doubt if, in that state, he would have given much rational thought about some big deal preparation like sitting way back here and revving up to get some kind of a turbo takeoff.”

“Okay, I’ll grant that,” Masters said, “But in so doing the wheel imprints become an even bigger mystery.”

“Got it, Sir. You’ll love this! What if Donny’s car was sitting up close to the edge, where I said it would have been? But, there was a car behind him trying to push him off the cliff. If Donny’s ignition was off, his car was probably in park so it would have been really hard to push forward. The car doing the pushing might well have spun its wheels and dug those ruts in the process.”

Masters looked again at his note pad. The boy had just

perfectly described the sketch he had made a few moments before. B. L. would never see that sketch, of course.

“Very good sleuthing, Son. The police made plaster casts of the indentations but they were just slick impressions with no uniquely identifiable markings. The wheels slid from side to side so it wasn’t even possible to estimate a tire size from them.”

“So, our theory now is that somebody in another car came up behind Donny – who was probably passed out drunk – and pushed his car over the cliff.”

“Yes, and that someone was probably quite inexpert at such things.” Masters added.

“Because of the ignition and being in park?”

“Right. I found nothing in the report about being in park, however. Unless Pop can remember about that, we’ll have to work around it.”

“In a downhill, bumpity-bump-bump, accident like that, the shift could have easily been jarred into some other gear.”

“You’re right, but probably not into park, if my recollection of transmission design serves me correctly,” Masters added.

“Seen enough or want to hike down the hill for a closer look?” B. L. grinned.

Masters put his big hand on the boy’s forehead and playfully pushed him away.

“Back to town, my boy. We have other fish to catch!”

“By the way, I have the stuff you wanted in a paper bag in the back of the truck.”

“Fine. My meeting with Pooshka is in about ten minutes at the Kastle. It shouldn’t take more than fifteen minutes or so. After that I want to explore the attic.”

“The attic?” B. L. was puzzled. “The attic at the Kastle?”

“Ever been up there?” Masters asked.

“Once. Pop was called over there to fix a roof vent that had jammed – one of those rotating jobbies that sucks the air out when the wind blows. There isn’t much much headroom up there. You won’t be able to stand up for sure. I remember I could – I was about six, I suppose. Pop had me do his running back and forth for him.”

“That would have been about ten years ago?”

“Yup. Almost exactly. I remember it was cold outside but really hot up in the attic. Pop explained how the black tar roof absorbed the heat right into the crawl space.

“Pop got it fixed, I imagine?”

“Sure. Like I said, he can fix anything. Turned out it was a dead blackbird trapped inside. It must have put up quite a struggle because it bent the aluminum something awful. Took quite a while but he got it fixed. It was the first time I really got to know Rick. I spent a lot of the day downstairs with him. I remember I was amazed that Pop and Rick knew each other so well. I figured I knew all of Pop’s friends. I suppose that’s how kids are.”

“I imagine we will be crawling, then,” Masters said. “Are you up to that or should we give Bobby a call?”

“Hey, Mr. Masters, I’m crippled, not handicapped. I crawl a heck of a lot better than I walk.”

It was as close to defensive as Masters had ever seen in the lad. He felt bad he had asked, though had no other way of finding out.

“Okay, then. It’ll be you and me on hands and knees.”

“Sounds almost religious,” B. L. joked.

Ignoring it – for effect – Masters smoothed out a paper napkin and with his pen, drew a sketch.

“We’re going to be looking for something that resembles this.”

B. L. studied it without question.

“Nuts!” Masters said. “I forgot to have you bring flashlights.”

“Not to worry, Sir. Being something more than sub-par mentally, myself, I took the liberty of remembering them for us. Anyway, the attic has lights as I recall.”

The last vestiges of the huge shakes required some silent attention and that is just what they received.

“These are the best, aren’t they, Sir,” B. L. said at last, patting his nonexistent paunch clearly poking fun at the old detective’s midriff.

Noting but ignoring the affectation, Masters agreed, “Indeed they are. I will miss them mightily when I leave.”

It was the first-time B. L. had considered that their time

together would, one day soon, come to an end. A sadness crept through him.

B. L. remained uncommonly silent during the last several miles to the Kastle.

"It will probably be best if it's just Rick, Pooshka and me," Masters said as Ol' Cit shuddered to a halt.

The boy nodded.

"I've always got a book. Just yell when you're ready for our second story caper."

The whimsy seemed only a half-hearted on his part.

Masters noted the change in demeanor. He wondered if it was related to the attic. The concern passed as he entered the Kastle. Pooshka had already arrived. Rick made the introductions and Masters took a seat. Rick had prepared tea, explaining it was a particular blend popular in Eastern Europe. It was unpleasantly potent and thoroughly disagreeable to Masters' way of thinking, but politely, he sipped. Small talk soon gave way to the business at hand. Pooshka seemed to understand more English than he allowed himself to speak.

"I understand you are of Gypsy heritage," Masters began.

Pooshka looked at Rick who attempted Hungarian but soon switched to German. That seemed to work better between them.

The answer was a simple, "Yes."

"Are you related to the troupe of entertainers who performed here about ten years ago?"

"All Gypsies are related in body and spirit."

Again, simple and to the point though unhelpfully evasive. It was Rick who pushed for a more direct answer.

"One of the ladies was from my home town in Hungary. She knew my family well. We were not of the same family name. Not first cousins, so to speak."

"It must have been good to get to be with them," Masters suggested.

Unexpected by the old Detective, Pooshka's eyes teared up.

"Yes. It was quite wonderful. I considered leaving and traveling with them. I would have been welcome, you know."

“Yes, I understand that much of your traditions. May I ask why you chose to remain here?”

“I like it here. As a young man, I traveled with a carnival – making and selling my jewelry. I tired of always being on the go and not having roots. Not very Gypsy-like, I’m afraid. On the road, as a Gypsy, I was always hassled. Here there is none of that. I may never be fully accepted, but I am never rejected.”

Masters thought it ironic. The locals had no animosity toward outsiders. They just hated their own.

“How serious do you take the curse?” Masters asked.

Both Rick and Pooshka became restive. The exchange between them clearly involved more than a mere translation. Masters German was still good enough to catch a few key words and phrases about “incriminating themselves,” and “It’s best to leave it at the curse.”

“I’ve seen the devastating powers of the curse, Sir. I take it very seriously.”

“The lady who leveled the curse – was she the one from your town?”

Again, the magnitude of the exchange suggested more than attempts at linguistic clarification. Then the answer:

“Yes. She was well known for the power of her spells.”

“Have you had any contact from them since they left?”

“No! . . . Well, yes!”

“Will you explain?”

“They are a generous community. When they learned of my financial problems, they insisted on helping me out. Each week I receive a check from them. I am most grateful. When I can, I send them jewelry in exchange. They can sell it, you see.”

It seemed to have been the only truly rehearsed answer Masters had been given – one that had clearly been anticipated. He let it go. He did, however, seize the opportunity to pursue his primary goal.

“So, you can tell me how I can contact them, then. It is of utmost importance.”

That question took the old man by surprise. After another lengthy exchange, Rick translated.

“I have a phone number of someone who is in regular

contact with them.”

While Rick continued speaking, Pooshka took out his wallet, thumbed through some scraps of paper, and eventually selected one. He handed it to Rick who copied the number and name onto an index card for Masters.

“Thank you,” Masters said. “That will be of great help. He moved on. I understand you and Gerald Miller were friends.”

“Yes. More like acquaintances.”

It was a subtlety of language Masters had not expected.

“You set some lenses in his telescopes?”

“Yes.”

“Did you do other things for him?”

“One time he had me set a large lens in a flat housing – more like a metal collar, I suppose. He was very particular. It had to be at an exact angle – precise to the tenth of a degree. He never said what it was for. I also drilled holes in several small crystal pendants. He said they were to be used in a necklace for his daughter. That’s about all.”

“So, I assume you would put his things in boxes to deliver or to have him pick up.”

“Yes. Whatever I had around the place.” Pooshka smiled. “Pop has turned me into a regular recycling machine. I never throw a box away. My place looks like a pack rat’s.”

He chuckled aloud.

“How well do you know Pop?”

“I buy silver and gold junk from him to melt down. That’s it, mostly. I feel okay to try out my English with him. He’s a very nice, easygoing man. I wish God had blessed me with a fine son like his.”

“B. L.?”

“Yes. He is always so good to me. He calls me, Sir!”

The mere recollection caused Pooshka to straighten in his chair.

“Have you been married?” Masters asked.

“Yes. Two years and she died of tuberculosis.”

He smiled that smile that is only ever seen when a great pain must be hidden.

“How do you get on with the Knights?”

“Well, I make their rings for them. They pay me a little every month to stay around to do that for them. They don't seem to need many new rings. I put little ‘K’s’ on the stones every so often.”

Masters then addressed Rick.

“Have I missed anything you think needs to be asked?”

Rick was taken aback but recovered quickly.

“Well, no, Sir, I don't know what it would have been.”

Masters stood and extended his hand to Pooshka saying, “Thank you for your help.”

Pooshka responded in English.

“The pleasures was mine own.”

Masters again addressed Rick.

“I'll be in the attic for a while, then. Think it will hold me?”

Humorless Rick had no response. Pooshka could not contain his smile. Clearly, the man understood more than he let on.

“I assume we will need a key to the stairwell,” Masters said.

“No. We don't keep it locked. Really, we don't keep anything locked around here.”

“I may also need a stepladder tall enough to allow me to examine the chandeliers in the banquet rom. Is there one in the building?”

“Yes. In the storeroom to the rear of the Community Room, downstairs. Shall I bring it up?”

“That would be very helpful. Thank you.”

That reminded Masters of a question that had been popping in and out of his mind.

“How do you clean those chandeliers?”

“We use an air spray. It makes quick work of it – far easier than by hand the way I used to do it.”

That led to still another question.

“When did you change?”

“Gerald rigged up a line from a compressor out back. He showed me how to use it. It didn't take much to convince me to make the change.”

Rick smiled. It had plainly been an attempt at humor. Masters smiled and nodded.

“Mr. Masters, Sir,” Pooshka said, standing and turning toward the door. He continued in English. “I just thought one more something about Gerald. You ask what I did for him. I got a bottle – large – of liquid Teflon. Like a liter, maybe. I don’t know how he used it for. Around here, I guess.”

“Thank you. If you should remember anything else, please contact me – through Rick if you prefer.”

In the hallway, Masters found B. L. sitting on the floor by the front door, reading. He looked up as Masters approached.

“Got too cold out in Ol’ Cit. I figured it would be warmer in here. It is.”

He struggled to get to his feet. Masters struggled not to offer help.

“Shall I bring in the supplies?”

“The kinky supplies?” Masters quipped.

“They could only be kinky upon their application, Sir, not in form.”

Masters shook his head and plunged ahead.

“For now, we just need the tape measure.”

“Well, aren’t we in luck? I just happen to have it here in my pocket.”

Inside the Main Hall, they were soon busy measuring the exact distance between the North wall and the Grandfather Clock. Masters jotted down the measurement on his pad. The procedure was repeated for the table, using the north-west leg as the point of contact. The two then went down to the Community Room, directly below. With B. L. again holding the tape against the north wall, Masters backed to the precise point, which, according to the previous measurement, was exactly below the clock. He made a small pencil mark on the wall.

“Well, that makes no sense whatsoever!” Masters said, looking at the ceiling from several angles. Hands at that point where most have a waist, he continued looking up.

“Let’s move the tape to the center of the wall.”

He referred to his notes and again pulled the tape precisely to where the northwest leg of the table should be. The large, black, head of a bolt was right there where the measurement predicted it should be. Still, he shook his head.



B. L. had managed to contain his several questions up to that point, but enough was finally enough.

“Just what are we doing, Sir?”

“Here is my dilemma. Rick said the clock and the table were both moved for structural reasons – so their weight would be more properly distributed over these beams.”

He pointed around the ceiling.

“But . . .?” B. L. asked.

“But, it appears they were both actually moved away from the best beam support. I’m not an engineer but it seems to me the original placements had been well planned to take advantage of the beaming system.”

“So,” B. L. said, thinking aloud and extending the logic, “The movement of the furniture was either due to the miscalculations of a graduate engineer, or for some other, as yet undetermined, reason.”

“Well put. Well put.”

Masters continued to search the ceiling with his eyes.

“What’s that engineer’s name out at the Highway Department?”

“You mean Rudy?”

“Yes. Rudy. Do you know him?”

The boy smiled as if in disbelief.

“Silly question, Sir. You know that I know everybody within fifty miles of here. And Rudy just happens to be Abby’s great Uncle – once removed or something. That ‘removed’ and ‘great’ stuff continues to baffle this brain of mine.”

Masters chuckled out loud, nodding his understanding and breaking the overly serious state into which he had slipped.

B. L. continued.

“Anyway, Rudy’s a relative of hers. Drives a Mustang, owns an awesome RV and always brings Three-Bean Salad to family get-togethers.”

“And his brand of mouthwash?” Masters teased.

“It only took B. L. a moment to understand it was a put on.

“Heavy duty Listerine, Sir. As a highway engineer, he finds it’s the best for his bridgework.”

Masters groaned. B. L. was delighted. A centimeter

wider and his smile simply would have split his face.

“You’d think I’d learn,” Masters said.

“Well, Sir, we’ll just keep at it ‘til you get it right.”

After a moment, he continued.

“Did you want to do something with that info about Rudy?”

“Yes. Considering your close relationship and all, do you suppose you can get him out here post haste?”

“Fast, even, probably. I’ll give him a ring. Rick could call him, too, of course. He and Rudy are best friends.”

“I hadn’t heard that.”

“Yup. They’re the two second best chess players in the county.”

“Second to some smart mouthed teen-age Imp, I assume.”

“See. Practice makes perfect, Sir.”

He smiled and made the call.

“He’ll be here in five minutes. How’s that for power?”

“I’ll reserve judgment until I see if he can count.”

Masters broke out two twisters, and they went upstairs.

Rick declined the offer of a Raspberry treat, quivering and eying it as if it were some strange reptilian life form.

B. L. waited in the hallway for Rudy while Masters went into the Great Hall. Rick accompanied him, watching with interest as he re-inspected the room from stem to stern.

“Are the Chandeliers lit during the Banquet?” Masters asked, without interrupting his scrutiny of the room.

“No, Sir. It is just the sunlight. That keeps it closer to the natural state of things, you see. It is a celebration of nature of sorts.”

“Had you personally ever had reason to think the floor in this room was weakening – before Gerald mentioned it, that is?”

There was some hesitation. It could have represented reluctance. It could have merely represented an attempt to be accurate.

“Yes, I had, in fact. Sagging, I thought.”

“Had you mentioned that to anyone?”

“Maybe. I’m not sure. I didn’t think it was dangerous, if that’s what you’re getting at.”

Rick – cool, calm, organized to the T, Rick – had become defensive. It was not pursued.

Amid a chorus of friendly laughter, B. L. escorted Rudy into the Hall. Oddly, Masters thought, for best friends, Rudy and Rick hardly acknowledged each other.

B. L. made the introductions.

“Rudy, I won’t keep you any longer than necessary,” Masters began. “I have just one question, really, though the answer may be somewhat complex. I need to know if, from an engineering standpoint, this floor was in any structural danger – short term or long term – before the new planking was laid. A corollary question, I suppose is, ‘What purpose is served by the four new support posts downstairs?’ I’m sure that Rick can supply all the additional information you may need.”

Rick seemed nervous.

Rudy seemed uncomfortable.

B. L. seemed puzzled.

Masters was fascinated.

“If you’ll excuse us, B. L. and I have some snooping to do elsewhere.”

The stairway to the attic was at the end of the hallway, behind the second store room at the rear of the first floor. Masters tried the door. It would not open. B. L. tried.

“It’s locked. I’ll go get the key from Rick.”

“Rick said it is never locked. But, yes, if you wouldn’t mind – get it.”

B. L. was back within the minute, Rick in tow.

“Like I told you, Mr. Masters, I’ve never locked that door. As far as I know there isn’t even a key for it.”

“When was the last time you opened the door?”

“Oh, my! I don’t believe I ever have. I was shown the area up there from the top of the stairs when I first took the position here, but I’ve really never had any reason to go up there again. I suppose Gerald was the last person up there and goodness, that’s been at least ten years, now.”

“Can we call a locksmith, then?”

“Pop’s the locksmith around here,” B. L. said. “Since I know him fairly well, why not let me give him a call!”

That done, Rick returned to his office. Masters and B. L. went in search of Rudy. He was downstairs in the

Community Room and ready to report.

“Here are the facts as I see them, Sir. The structure was basically sound before the remodeling. Even with all the added weight from the new flooring it would probably still be safe. During the years to come, the floor might gradually sag, but not much – a millimeter a year, perhaps. The four new support posts down here will very likely keep that sagging from ever happening.”

“What’s your margin of error on those estimates, would you say?” Masters asked.

“Zero, Sir. You can take it to the bank.”

“Thank you for your time and expert opinion. If there is a charge, I’m sure Rick will take care of it for you.”

Rick nodded – looking at Masters rather than more appropriately at Rudy. Rick turned and Left. Rudy followed.

Masters wished he had been privy to the conversation that had just transpired between the two of them. He had another question on his mind and he addressed it to B. L.

“For best friends, they certainly don’t appear to be particularly friendly.”

“How can I put this, tactfully? There have been rumors in recent years that they may be more than just ‘guy’ friends. Change the vowel in ‘guy’ and you’ll get the picture.”

“So, they intentionally appear aloof when together in public.”

“That’s how I see it. Their particular inclination is frowned on in these parts.”

Rudy had left by the time Masters and B. L. returned to Rick’s office.

“Just a couple more questions, if I may,” Masters asked.

B. L. remained at the door, not sure if he should be privy to the conversation. Not being told otherwise, he propped himself in typical teen-boy fashion against the wall and waited. Masters approached Rick at his desk.

“What’s on your mind, Sir?”

“So, Gerald spent some time in the attic during the remodeling?”

“Yes, when he was re-installing the chandeliers – replacing the chains with the pipes. That’s the only time I

remember.”

“Who else has worked up there since then?”

“Well no one I can recall.”

“Pop and me,” B. L. offered, approaching the others. We worked up there the better part of a day fixing that rotating ventilator – when the bird had wrecked it.”

“That’s right. You were just a little tyke back then. I remember, but I do believe it was a few weeks before Gerald started work up there. I remember Gerald saying how grateful he was the ventilator had been fixed, otherwise it would have been unbearably hot. Yes, that’s right, I’m sure of it. The reason we called Pop instead of having Gerald do it was because Gerald was busy building the new support posts in the Community Room. They had to be in before the floor layers arrived the next day, so he couldn’t take time out to do it himself. His schedule was quite tight.”

“Okay then, Gerald, Pop and B. L. in his tyke-sized incarnation. No one else?”

“No one else officially.”

“Officially?”

“Well, I suppose others could have come and gone without my knowledge. The door was never locked. Well, I didn’t think it was. There is a small outside entrance off the roof of the anteroom out back. I was told that it is locked with a bar from the inside. I’m pretty sure about that.”

“Why an outside entrance to an attic?”

“I’m sure I don’t know. It may have been used when the place was being built originally.”

It seemed like a plausible explanation. Masters would have his sidekick check it out once they gained access.

B. L. dropped Masters off at the bank and then went back to the Kastle to wait for Pop. Masters had a three-thirty appointment with the president – Arthur Allen.

Without a handshake or hello, Arthur – older than the hills, Arthur – began speaking.

“The legal paperwork arrived earlier in the day. This folder contains the bank account information you requested. If there are questions for me, I’d prefer we get right to them.”

Abrupt, rude, and self-important. He would have fit right in with the Knights. What a shame he had to remain on

the outside. His hand made, European style, suits, and leather soled, \$500.00, Italian shoes made him appear as out of place in central Wyoming as was Masters. Masters helped himself to a chair – not having been invited to sit – and casually skimmed the material in the folder, delighting in every moment he delayed the fidgeting man behind the desk.

“Rick Distlemier makes regular deposits far in excess of his local salary. Can you tell me the source of that money?”

Arthur swiveled to his computer screen and typed in a few words, hesitating briefly and then making another quick entry.

“The best I can do is to trace them to cashier’s checks from the Citizen’s State Bank in Casper.”

“And they are in the same amount every month?”

“Yes. That appears to be true.”

He turned back toward Masters, folding his large, though frail looking hands on the desk.

“Pooshka. I see he has two regular sources of income deposited.”

Again, Arthur turned away to his screen.

“One is a direct deposit from The Grand Order of Knights and the other is a check he personally deposits – again a cashier’s check from the Citizen’s Bank in Casper.”

It appeared that the information was beginning to catch the old man's interest. He typed in something else as if to follow up.

“Over the past several years there have also been several, more sizable, checks from the Knights.”

Masters closed the folder and addressed Arthur.

“What can you tell me about the financial fiasco surrounding the younger Waterson’s loan for heavy equipment a few years back?”

“Well, I certainly wouldn’t refer to it in those terms. Our loan officer jumped the gun. Waterson’s contract fell through and we had to foreclose. It’s really quite straightforward.”

Masters took a folded sheet from his inside suit coat pocket. It contained notes he had made from the articles Joel had supplied.

“I understand that when Earl Gingrich had a similar problem with the construction of his Automobile showroom,

you worked out a long term, low interest pay off for him.”

“Yes, but it was not similar. A dealership that he had applied for fell through after the loan was made. It was something out of his control.”

“And how is that different from the Waterson situation?”

“You just don’t understand how things are done in the banking world.”

“Possibly, but what about the outstanding loan you had against the sale barn the year it burned? As I understand that was refinanced at your suggestion.”

“Like I said, it was totally different and you just don’t understand.”

“You didn’t like Waterson much, did you?”

“That’s just not true. There are pressures you have no way of comprehending.”

“City Council pressures – things like that?”

“They wield a lot of power. They are influential men. They have the ability to make or break financial institutions – especially small ones like this.”

“None of that seems to explain why you chose to ruin young Waterson.”

“I don’t have to put up with these questions.”

“No, but you do need to understand something about me, Sir. When I smell a rat I don’t rest until it is safely in the trap.”

Masters stood.

“Thank you for the account information. It will be helpful in my investigation. Oh, there is one more thing. It is my understanding that you and the senior Mr. Waterson were romantic rivals as young men. I can only imagine how it must have hurt for an Allen to have been thrown over for a lowly outsider who then turned around and become a Knight.”

Not waiting for a response, Masters left. His point had been to bate the man and he felt confident he had accomplished his mission. Masters seldom stooped to such tactics but immutable reprobates merited special treatment.

He would walk the six or so blocks back to the Kastle. He needed to make a stop at Marge’s place.

“Marge, my Dear,” he said exaggerating each word to forewarn her that he was about to ask a favor.

“What is it that you want?”

She had received the message and seemed delighted.

“From the outside I have noticed several . . . sun-catchers, I think they are called, in two of your second floor windows.”

“And you want the windows,” she quipped.

“I am in need of the highest quality piece you have. I promise to guard it with my very being.”

She began to speak. Masters put his finger to her lips.

“Don’t ask. I assure you I will not contaminate them.”

“Certainly. I do have one that is supposedly an original Tiffany.”

“You could not have done better.”

She left and was soon back. He admired it appropriately. She brought a terrycloth towel in which to wrap it. Masters playfully wiped it clean, front and back.

“Can’t have smudges on such a valuable piece.”

She soon had it safely packaged in a small box. Masters kissed her on the cheek and thanked her again. It may be several days, will that be alright?”

“Enjoy it all week. I’m sure it will be a fine addition to your kinky collection.”

Masters gave her a blank look.

“B. L. stopped for cookies after he dropped you off at the bank. He tends to talk.”

“Oh, one other thing,” Masters said. “Arthur Allen periodically receives packages, the size of shoe boxes, I imagine, from Italy.”

“Why, yes he does.”

“Can you remember what town they come from?”

“No. But they always come insured, collect. I have records. I’ll get back to you.”

Masters thanked her and continued on his way. There was an unfamiliar tow truck parked beside Ol’ Cit. He assumed it belonged to Pop. His assumption proved correct as, at that moment, B. L. and Pop came out of the building.

“Two things,” B. L. began without so much as a hello. “Pop made a key, of course – he looked at his father with admiration – and, I’ll bet you dollars to donuts that it is an exact duplicate of the key we found in the teacup.”



“Well, we can verify that right now – as if we need to,” Masters said in an aside to Pop. He took the key from the envelope and held them together. It was, of course, the match that B. L. had predicted.

“I don’t know why I hadn’t thought of that,” the boy said, pounding his forehead with the end of his fist.

“Don’t damage that brain, young man, I’m not through using it yet,” Masters quipped.

“Supper at seven, our place?” Pop asked. “Joe’s Pizza carry out!”

“You’re on. I’ll buy if you’ll pick up.”

Pop shook Masters hand, though it really wasn’t called for. He clearly delighted in counting the man as his friend. He left.

B. L. and Masters returned to the Kastle, the sack of kinky items in tow.

“You go ahead and get the lights on and such. I need to speak with Rick for just a moment.”

“I can take a hint. I’ll be on the stairs.”

Masters entered Rick’s office.

“I imagine you’ve never had such a pest as me in all the time you’ve been here,” Masters began.

“Not a problem. How are things coming?”

“I feel confident about a speedy solution. Actually, I have a totally unrelated topic on my mind. I understand that you are something of a stained-glass expert.”

Rick looked surprised but did not deny it.

Masters continued as he unwrapped the sun-catcher.

“I am thinking of purchasing this, but I would appreciate having your opinion first. I’ll gladly pay your consultation fee.”

“No fee for you, Sir.”

Rick seemed honored at the compliment.

“What do you have?”

“Well, I’ve been told it may be worth a few bucks. What do you think?”

Masters let it lay on the towel and extended it toward Rick who immediately picked it up.

“Why this is a Tiffany. It’s in magnificent condition. At auction, I imagine it would bring close to a thousand dollars.”

“My goodness!” Masters said, not needing to act a part.

“I had no idea.”

A few more minutes of talk about it and Masters wrapped it up again and placed it back in the box.

“Sure there’s no fee, Sir. You’ve been a big help.”

“Glad to have been able to be of service.”

Masters left, winking to himself as he entered the hallway.

B. L. was seated on the stairs. It was Masters studied observation that teen-boy were able to maintain such a high energy level because when they were not going full steam ahead, they were either leaning, sitting or sleeping. Perhaps the older generation could take a lesson from them.

On the wall, just inside the stairwell, was a small electrical box housing two, fifteen-amp circuit breakers. One was labeled, USE THIS LIKE AN ON-OFF SWITCH FOR ATTIC LIGHTS. B. L. had already engaged that breaker as the stairs behind him were well lit. The second breaker was taped into the ON position and was labeled, NEVER TURN OFF – RESET IMMEDIATELY IF TRIPPED.

B. L. closed the door to the box and they made their way to the top. It was clearly not on the house cleaner’s calendar. Dust and cobwebs from many years seemed to scream, “Stay away! You are trespassing!”

The attic was, at most, a four-foot high crawl space, just as Rick had described. Masters, who had the paper bag, began removing its contents. B.L. was still baffled. Masters read it in his face.

“We must crawl,” he said. “That involved bony knees against filthy, hard, flooring. Make pads from the towels and tie them in place on your knees using the twine.”

“How clever. How forward looking. How much more practical than anything my imagination was spinning. He began the process in good humor.

Masters took out the napkin on which he had earlier made a diagram.

“This is what we’re looking for. It may be slightly different in appearance, but its essence will be the same. How about if you and your younger joints scout ahead? When you locate it, I’ll come and join you.”

“When, not if,” B. L. asked as he got to his hands and

knees and entered the high, flat, surprisingly well-lit expanse.

“When! It will be there or I’ll swear off raspberry twisters for life . . . well, for the rest of the week, at least.”

“It’s already Thursday, Sir.”

“Think I didn’t know that?”

The moved on ahead. Within minutes, he broke his silence.

“I believe this would be a ‘Bingo!’ in the parlance of your Flintized cases?”

Masters rubbed his big hands together.

“Here I come, ready or not.”

It took the big man considerably longer than it had his young assistant. Presently, however, he was at B. L’s side, sitting legs crossed.

“Bingo is right! Good work my boy!”

“Hey, I’m just the trained rat in all this.”

He paused and grinned.

“Doesn’t that rat usually get a reward at the end of the maze?”

“Anything you want, young man. Just name it and it’s yours, once we safely extricate my bulk from this coffin. You’re photographic brain has all of this in mind, right?”

“It’s a lock, Sir. Down to the last detail. I can draw you diagrams whenever you want them. Of course, that same brain has absolutely no idea what I will be drawing but I assume you will enlighten me when the time is right.”

“Yes, when the time is right!”

Before they left, Masters examined the plastic sheeting, which had been carefully draped around the mechanism, presumably to protect it from the dust. He blew on the plastic at several places.

“Aha! Knew they’d be here.”

He took a roll of scotch tape from his pocket and tore off a six-inch strip.

“It’s a fingerprint. Put your hand in behind the plastic sheet – right here – to offer support as I capture it on this tape. It’s not every day you get a pre-dusted fingerprint, you know. Beautiful! Look at that! Just beautiful! Probably a thumb. Probably male.”

“Shame on you for peeking,” B. L. said chuckling,

clearly enjoying his own adolescent witticism.

“Okay, funny-guy. Let’s get out of here,” the big man said.

The words had been delivered with a tone of either excitement or trepidation – B. L. couldn’t be sure.

The picture of Masters trying to return to a crawling posture from a legs-crossed sitting position and then the two of them, flashlights held between their chins and chests as they attempted to back in a straight line, though a cloud of white dust, to the stairs, simply defies words.

Filthy from top to bottom, Masters was the first one back down the stairs. As B. L. arrived, Masters was amazed.

“You don’t have a speck of dust on your entire being. How did you do that?”

Although it didn’t call for a response, the boy had several winners he could have spit out. He chose to just look at the old Detective in awe. He helped Masters untie the pads and soon the paraphernalia was back in the bag.

“So, it’s an inventor – a mechanical tinkerer – that we’re looking for, Sir.”

“That or a best friend of one,” Masters added, extending the playing field a bit.

His remark could refer to Doc and Waterson, Rick and Rudy, Gerald and someone else – Rick, Pooshka, Trudy, Joel, Gina and, rounding out the possible teams, B. L. and Pop.

“I guess that makes Pop and me headline suspects, doesn’t it?” B. L. said, suddenly serious.”

“I would prefer to call you possibles rather than suspects. Suspects have to be probables.”

B.L. sighed deeply, though the relief usually visited upon his emotional state by such an act, seemed fully lacking.

He brushed off Masters’ Suit coat.

“How did you manage to get even your back so filthy?”

“I’m just good, I guess!”

It was humorous enough to produce a mutual chuckle. Lights off and door closed they were once again in the real World.

“Nuts!” Masters said again.

“What?” B. L. asked.

I forgot to get a look at the outside door up there. We

really need that information. Would you mind?"

"Anything for the cause, Sir."

He was soon re-padded and making his way to the northeast corner of the attic. Masters stood at the top of the stairs watching and listening.

"Well, here it is. Can you hear me?"

"Loud and clear."

"It's three feet square and made from nine boards positioned vertically. They are held in place by two horizontal boards, one at the top and one at the bottom. There is also one diagonal board – top right to bottom left. The hinges are on the inside. There is a 2 X 4 bar that keeps it locked. On each side of the door, on the wall is an iron holder – like an inverted, lower case, 'h'. The door cannot be pushed open when the 2 X 4 is secured down into the two holders. Is there anything else?"

"Dust. Has dust been removed from it through recent use?"

"My vote would be maybe but probably not."

"I've never seen a ballot with those options. Explain!"

"It's hard to tell whether it's a century of gunk or just ten years of gunk. I don't see any smudges like hand or finger prints, if that's what you're getting at."

"Okay then. Press against it. Does it give easily?"

"Solid as a vault, Sir."

"I guess that's all then. Come on back and thanks."

"I assume this warrants a double reward for the rat?"

"Double seem reasonable," Masters agreed.

Again, they found themselves back down in the back hall. Again, B. L. unwound himself from his makeshift padding. And again, everything went back into the paper sack. They stopped by Rick's office to let him know they were leaving. Masters approached his desk taking one of the tiny Styrofoam cylinders from his change pocket. Putting it in his palm, he showed it to Rick.

"Ever see anything like this around here?"

Rick looked and then took a second look.

"Actually, yes. Well, sort of. Over the years, I've come across several. The ones I've found were the same shape and size but they're shiny and dark brown. What on Earth are

they? It's simply driven me wild trying to figure it out."

"Where have you found them?"

"Just in the Main Hall, and only on rare occasions. I've saved them all. The first time I asked the Knights if it belonged to any of them. I figured someone might have lost it. No one knew anything about it."

"Can you pinpoint the time of year or does it not conform in that way?"

"I hadn't thought much about it until you asked but yes, it's usually right about this time, I guess. Within a week or two after the Celebration of Life."

Rick opened a drawer and removed a small paper cup. He handed it to Masters. B. L. moved in for a closer look. Masters counted them. "Seven!"

B. L. and Masters silently mouthed another 'Bingo' at each other.

"May I take these along for the time being?" Masters said, pouring them into an envelope without really waiting to receive Rick's permission.

He nodded and shrugged.

Outside in the truck, B. L. said, "I won't ask. Where to now?"

"The police station!"

"And don't spare the horses?" B. L. asked trying to gage the importance of what was about to transpire."

"Get out the whip, my boy!"

"Gee, it's kinky everywhere I go today."

Understandably, B. L. was a very cautious driver. Masters had observed that the boy had two road speeds – one in town and one outside of town. So, they sped toward the station at twenty-five miles an hour. What he lacked in speed, he made up for with increased alertness and the intensity with which he gripped the steering wheel.

Bobby greeted B. L. with a massive, all out hug, but inhibited his initial inclination toward Masters. Chief Ryan came out of the office in the rear of the station and greeted them.

"Got some goodies for you," the Chief reported as he approached them

"As do we," Masters said, setting the box containing the

sun-catcher on the front counter. On top of it was the World's Greatest Dad mug.

"I assume that you do not have Rick Distlemier's fingerprints on file here."

"Not unless they're in the FBI computer files," the Chief answered.

"You will find full sets on the object in this box. I'll stipulate they are his. I assume you do have Gerald's prints available."

"Sadly, yes," the Chief said.

"And Pooshka?"

"No. I doubt if we have his. I've certainly never had reason to take them.

"Well, we will need to get them, tomorrow if at all possible," Masters said.

B. L. spoke, in an effort to save Masters the embarrassment of having to ask the next logical question.

"They have mine and Pops. Mine from the school's Kid Print ID Program and Pops from, well back from the days when he was . . . an exuberant youth, you might say."

Chief Ryan and B. L. exchanged a pleasant, understanding smile.

"So, then, what do you have for us?" Masters went on.

B. L. caught the 'us' rather than the expected 'me'. He was again filled with a wonderful warm feeling of dignity and importance.

"Two things."

He handed Masters a white envelope.

"Here are both the coroner's report and the police report on Gerald's death."

Then he bent down and retrieved a small box from under the counter.

"We really got lucky, Mr. Masters. Somebody" – he looked directly at Bobby – "was supposed to have destroyed this stuff last year. Somehow it didn't get done."

"Good going, Bobby," B. L. said, hoping to temper the Chief's glare.

Bobby shrugged, not sure what had just happened.

"It's the glass and photos from the pharmacy break in the night of Gerald's death," The Chief said probably

unnecessarily.

Masters opened the flaps and moved the box to a table for easier examination. He examined the pictures first.

“Strange. Very, strange!” he said.

The Chief and B. L. looked over his shoulder.

“What is it?” the Chief asked.

“The pictures show a massive breakage of the glass on the drug cabinet and yet, there is virtually no glass here in the evidence box. Any chance some got misplaced?”

“No. I collected it myself. I see what you mean though. I had not noticed it before.”

“And the report said that only these broken pieces had Gerald’s prints on them. There were none on the case or on any hammer-like tool in the drugstore. I come back to it. Why would he have only touched the area on the cabinet he intended to break out? And why would his prints be on both sides. A thief is in and out quickly. He’d bash in the glass, reach into the cabinet, take what he wanted and leave. But look at the pictures. Almost no glass inside the case. It’s all on the floor. And that’s not even the really interesting part. Look at the glass here in the box.”

He handed a piece to the chief who, after looking at it, passed it on to B. L. B. L. saw the problem immediately.

“This is ancient glass. It’s not the kind of modern day glass you’d find in a glass cabinet in an up to date pharmacy.”

Chief Ryan took it back and agreed.

“Shoddy police work. What can I say? This is not an excuse but a reason. You have to remember that from the beginning this was treated as part and parcel of Gerald’s suicide. Gerald had been found, the autopsy performed, and the cause of death identified, hours before the pharmacy theft was even reported. When we knew the cause of death had been barbiturates, and it had been barbiturates that had been stolen, it all just fell together as one case – too neatly, I now understand.”

He shook his head as he stared into the box.

“So, what’s your suggestion, Mr. Masters?”

“Hang tight. Get the print work done as soon as possible. Oh, by the way, there is a print here on this tape that we lifted from the attic in the Kastle. Run it please. It will



be one of our most important pieces of evidence. Now, my partner, here, and I have one more stop to make. I'll need to take a sample of the glass. I'll sign for it."

"Three pretty reliable witness here. I don't think we'll need a signature."

"Does Ol' Cit have one more trip in her . . . him . . . ? I guess I've not been made privy your vehicle's gender. Would it be him or her?"

"Him, Sir. O'l Cit would not be a proper name for a lady."

Back at the Kastle, they found the front door unlocked – as expected – even though Rick had left for the day. B. L. began a prognostication of his own.

"I predict it will be a pane out of the back door."

Having no better place to begin, they went straight to that door. It was solid wood with two, small windowpanes, positioned side by side at eye level. The two of them noticed it at the same instant, although B. L. was the first to verbalize it. He pointed to the left pane.

"Old glass."

He pointed to the right pane.

"Modern glass."

Masters nodded.

"If our reasoning is correct, someone removed the pain of glass and substituted it for the glass at the drugstore. We have to ask to why, who and when? Our first source will be Rick, tomorrow. If it was replaced since he has been here, you can believe he will have a receipt for every aspect of the repair. We will begin with the date. If that's a match, we're really off and running."

"I understand that but running where?" B. L. asked. "How can this possibly tie in with the Knight murders?"

"There is more than the Knight's murders going on here."

It confused the boy but he chose to wait and see what transpired.

"There is one more thing that seems important, Sir."

"Yes?"

"Notice that the putty around both panes has been replaced – I suppose to make it less noticeable that one pane

was new.”

“Excellent. And that brings us to still another thing. See, here in the putty – several partial, hardened, fingerprints from whomever did the replacement.”

“Sure enough, Sir.”

“Call the chief and tell him we need these prints IDed.”

The call was placed and finished in a matter of minutes.

“Now, assuming all of our previous suppositions are correct – and they may not be – we still have to find some way to prove the glass at the crime scene is the same as the glass that was here in this door.”

“Lead, Sir. Old glass varied from batch to batch in lead content. What are the odds – probably 99 in 100 – that both of these panes came from the same glass batch?”

“Very good! Now, mum’s the word on all of this. Nobody is to hear word one, no matter what wonderful charms she may possess. Not a word!”

“That’s cool. I’d much rather spend the time kissing than talking.”

That understood, it was off to a wonderful evening of conversation, Joe’s Pizza, Marge’s cookies and later – for some, at least – kissing, not talking!”

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## CHAPTER SIX

### Day four: Morning

It was a clear, crisp morning. The breeze had the air sock at the end of the little grass runway, standing at attention. Dawn was just breaking. As B. L. and Masters approached, Joel was already doing a walk around of his light blue, six-passenger, two motor Cessna.

“Morning guys,” Came his cheery greeting.

“Good morning, Joel,” Masters returned with a salute.

B. L. did his hug-thing – no words necessary. The boy then performed his own walk around, pulling on this and pushing on that. He clearly knew a thing or two about flying small planes.

The agenda for the morning included a flight to Jackson in the far west central part of the state. Chief Ryan had located the Gypsy troupe there and had arranged a mid-morning meeting for Masters.

“Saddle up,” Joel said at last, satisfied with the condition of things. B. L. added his thumbs up.

“Where’s the hoist?” Masters quipped. B. L. Produced a step stool from the hanger and with less than a truly full-blown huff and puff, the Old Detective found himself inside. It was the same plane in which Joel had brought him from Salt Lake City several days before. The controls seemed to have a different look, however.

“May I ask why that ‘thigh master’ is hanging down below the dash?”

“B. L. grinned.

“Joel modified the foot pedals so I could fly the thing.

He's an instructor, you know. I'll be your pilot today unless you have some objection."

Masters looked at Joel.

"I assume he's not kidding."

"Nope. The boy's a natural pilot."

"Well, okay then, just no loop the loops if you please."

B. L. assumed the pilot's seat and Joel slid in beside him.

"See how this gadget works!" B. L. explained. "I push the paddles with my knees since I can't work the pedals."

"Ingenious!" You design that yourself, Joel?"

"Guilty. Always been a gadgeteer at heart."

"All set?" B. L. asked, as he turned toward Masters to make sure the old friend was properly strapped in. The boy grinned.

"Now cut that out, young man. I'm not so large that a seat belt can't be made to fit."

The boy looked at Joel.

"He's a mind reader. That's really the secret to his success."

It was a smooth take off, a pleasant flight and a soft, professional landing. While flying, B. L. was all business and seldom entered into the conversation.

"I hadn't realized the boy could be that quite for that long," Masters said to Joel as he again set foot on solid ground.

"That's really why I taught him to fly – just to shut him up!"

B. L. loved the attention and basked in the by-play at his expense.

Joel had arranged a limo to meet them. Having taken care of whatever official things that pilots take care of upon landing, the three were soon headed for breakfast at a place Joel knew.

It was B. L.'s first limo ride and he made no secret of the fact. He pushed all the buttons, turned all the knobs, and admired the appointments from gold plated dome light to plush carpet. By the time they arrived at the restaurant, his mouth was again functioning at full tilt. The establishment had an elegance more befitting Joel than either B. L. or Masters. The

menu sported sandwiches and entrées named after celebrities who, ostensibly, frequented the place.

They had two waitresses assigned to wait on them hand and foot – Stephanie and Vicki. They were as pleasant and efficient as one could desire and both as beautiful as if they had just dropped out of a teen-boy’s dream.

The men ordered. B. L. looked around.

“And what will you have this morning?” Vicki asked, addressing B. L. “Anything you want to bring me,” came his quick response.

He pointed to a few things on the menu – that way Vicki had to come closer to him – and the ordering was complete.

In hushed voice, he pointed out to his companions that there were no prices on the menu.

“If you need to be concerned about such things you don’t come here,” was Joel’s simple explanation.

There were clearly many things about the world outside of Allenville, which the brilliant young man still had to learn.

‘How wonder-full,’ Masters thought to himself.

Except for the tiny portions, B. L. gave the restaurant his stamp of approval. Masters agreed. Slim and trim, long-ago-stopped-growing, Joel, didn’t entirely understand their reservations.

The meeting place was a large, older house, neat and well kept. They pulled to a stop behind a Lincoln Town Car, out of which stepped a tall, official looking man. Joel made the introductions.

“This is Ben Billings, a local attorney and friend of mine. He set up the meeting for us at this end. Ben, Raymond Masters the detective I spoke with you about and B. L. Roman, our pilot.”

The latter prompted a double take on Ben’s part. B. L. ignored it, shaking the man’s hand in a forceful, take charge manner. Ben escorted Masters and Joel into the house while B. L. busied himself with the gadgets in the limo. Within minutes, he had extracted the driver’s life history and talked him into a short ride to a burger place – the boy was starved. The two had a fine time ‘slumming it’ together.

Inside, Ben introduced the three Gypsies – a man and

wife and a female third cousin. They sat around a table where more of Masters' least favorite tea was soon served.

During the small talk, he learned they had become permanent residents there in Jackson and performed nightly – six months of the year – in their own theater. The rest of the year they took their show on the road. Apparently, it had been done that way for the better part of the past twenty years. That did not coincide with Rick's account, of never performing twice in the same community, but Masters let it pass.

Masters got right down to business.

"About ten years ago, your troupe of entertainers performed at Allenville in the central part of this state.

"Yes. We did," the man said, revealing nothing beyond the essentials.

"They still speak of the wonderful program you gave."

The Gypsies smiled and nodded at each other.

"I have several important questions for you. The answers have a bearing on a murder investigation."

More nodding. No smiling.

"First, can you tell me how you came to be invited there?"

The third cousin opened a large leather covered ledger. She turned page after page, eventually stopping and running her finger down the lines of entries.

"We were engaged by Gerald Miller and paid the sum of \$5,000 by the Arts Council, Henrik Distlemier, Treasurer."

The other woman spoke.

"Henrik is known to us for many years. His mother was my mother's great aunt."

Masters would wait to figure that out later. She continued.

"I imagine it was Heinrick who told Mr. Miller about us. Mr. Miller was on the Arts Council, yes?"

"No, but it's a small town. I suppose everybody helps out," Masters replied, not at all certain how it may have actually come about. He then asked his second question.

"Pooshka – I apologize for not knowing his first name . . ."

The man supplied it. Masters understood only the initial sounds – Zla . . . and let the remaining five syllables

pass. "Pooshka is an acquaintance of yours?"

"He belongs to our community but chooses to live separately."

There was an animated shrug of his shoulders and a tone of disbelief in the man's voice.

"You have helped support him through his recent financial troubles, he told me."

"Yes. He is family." It implied the unspoken, "So of course we support him. Why would you even have to ask?"

The wife offered Masters her hand across the table. Her fingers were bedecked with a dozen rings.

"This, this, and this, are Pooshka's. Beautiful! Yes!"

"Yes, beautiful. I have admired his work before and hope to own some before I leave the state."

That seemed to have been the correct response. She patted his hand.

"With this next question, please understand it is not my intention to infringe on your beliefs."

The cousin smiled.

"It's about the curse, yes? It took you so long to get to this."

That was certainly not the reaction that either Masters or Joel had expected. The woman continued.

"Gypsies are actors. We act every minute of every day! Mr. Miller engaged us to play a trick on the Kastle people."

"A trick?"

"Yes. I was to pretend that their table was Gypsy property and put a curse on them for possessing it. Until they returned it, their leaders would die. I think I made a wonderful and convincing performance. Everybody said so."

"Mr. Miller paid you to place the curse?"

"Yes, but you interrupted. The best part is this. When we saw the table, we discovered it really was our family heirloom. Pooshka had apparently suspected it for years, but had not mentioned it to us. He had told another group of Gypsies up in Canada – Pooshka knew them well from his days in Detroit.

"They send your Henrik to verify it and get pictures for the family album. I guess he actually got a job out of it. I'm not clear about those details."



So, Masters thought, the coincidence of Rick's resume submission was merely a ruse to allow him to come and examine the table, but good fortune and timing turned it into a career.

"You're saying that even though you recognized the table, it would not have been cause to disturb you?"

"Of course, not. It was generations ago."

She pushed air toward him with her palm.

"Our people made enough money from the sale to that foolish foreigner to feed our village for five years. Our craftsmen got right to work and had another one built within six months. Alas, it's still for sale. Would you be in the market, Mr. Detective, Sir?"

They laughed. So did Masters. Joel remained more reserved.

"Your village took old man Allen to the cleaners – the rascals!" Masters said, enjoying the irony he suspected was lurking there somewhere. His massive abdomen shook in silent laughter.

"You are definitely my kind of people," he said.

"You're not so much different from us, yourself, old man."

Masters had never thought of himself as Gypsy material, although considering it for the briefest moment, he could see himself in bandana and knee boots stomping out some pretty fancy footwork around a blazing campfire.

The man spoke.

"I can ask one question to you, now?"

"Certainly," Masters replied, curious as to what might be on his mind.

"If the people in Allenville like us so much, why they never ask us come back?"

"They were of the opinion that you folks had a . . . superstition about never playing the same town more than once. It was clearly a misconception. I am sure they will be contacting you for a repeat performance."

Joel and Masters said their good-byes on the porch.

"Your wallet, Sir," the man said, smiling and handing it over to Masters.

Masters felt for it. It was indeed gone. A question

crossed his brow.”

“Well, we Gypsies are expected to be thieves. We’re not, but it’s fun sometimes to prove that we could be if we wished to be!”

“And,” Masters added, “Sometimes you slip and speak perfect English, too, yes?”

“Busted!” Came his smiling response.

It had been a useful and more cordial meeting than either of the men had expected. It caused Masters some consternation when he realized he had pre-judged them.

Once back in the limo, Masters looked at B. L.

“You’re also busted, young man!”

“Busted? Whatever do you mean?”

Masters sniffed the air.

Onion rings, burgers, and mustard – not gray poupon!”

Through the rear-view mirror, the boy smiled at the driver who slouched down into his seat not sure what to expect. Masters addressed Joel.

“The breakfast was delicious, my friend, but the portions were so small that it would not sustain a titmouse on a flight across town.”

Joel smiled. The driver scooted back up. B. L. tapped him on the shoulder.

“Kyle, my man, find us the best peach pie ala mode in town and don’t spare the horses!”

The pie was scrumptious. To a continuing chorus of playful protestations from the driver, B. L, wearing Kyle’s confederate-grey hat for effect, drove them back to the airport.

“I’ve got to get one of these someday,” he said as he returned the hat and hugged his new friend goodbye.

As they took off, they left the waving driver scratching his head. It had been the strangest and, perhaps, most pleasant three hours of his uniformed career. Spraying the car with air freshener –that day – seemed no chore at all.

The flight home was filled with the rehashing of events, punctuated by chortles, chuckles and full-blown belly laughs. Ol’ Cit was waiting patiently and seemed pleased to see them again. While Joel and B. L. put the plane to bed, Masters completed his notes. He was confident that the seven murders would soon be solved. However, he intended to

make it eleven for the price of seven.

Back in Allenville, the first item on the agenda was a visit to Pooshka at his house just northwest of town. Perhaps two miles from Main Street, his small, wood plank sided house, was painted Dusty green and sat at the end of a short, dirt, lane behind an aging, overgrown, unattended picket fence. The outhouse and round, stone, well with hanging bucket, indicated a lack of indoor plumbing. Clearly, Pooshka lived the simple life.

Ol' Cit, though dependable and comfortable, was not quiet – a condition Masters felt sure had been carefully orchestrated by its proud young owner. So, their approach was in no way a surprise. Pooska met them in the front yard as they shivered to a stop. His broad smile and animation signaled that he was happy to see them – well, the boy at least. B. L. greeted him in what Masters could only assume was Hungarian. After the lad was released from the lingering hug, he looked at Masters.

“I write his letters for him and he teaches me Hungarian. It's been our private little arrangement since I was ten.”

They were invited inside, Pooshka's hand on B. L's shoulder the whole way. They exchanged some phrases, which Masters assumed involved an explanation of their visit. It was a blatant fishing trip, on Master's part. Pooshka was the sole outsider in the community. Other lips were sealed through loyalty, fear, or what have you. Masters hoped the aging Gypsy would feel freer to share his information. The unexpected positive relationship with B. L. should certainly not hurt.

Masters directed the conversation to a topic fully unexpected by his young companion.

“I understand that the younger Waterson was killed on the railroad tracks near here.”

“Yes, just behind the trees in back,” came his answer in English.

Masters' surprise at the man's prowess in English was evident. B. L. shrugged.

“Some days we just speak Hungarian – others, we just speak English!”

"This is a good boy," Pooshka said.

"Yes," Masters agreed. "This is a good boy."

B. L. looked away, embarrassed at the personal turn the conversation had taken.

Masters returned to the original topic and lead with a wild card.

"Being that close you undoubtedly saw or heard something."

The pause signaled the need for B. L. to translate. Pooshka's face brightened then faded to serious. He looked at B. L. and then at Masters.

"Yes. I never said to nobody. I should said before."

He gathered his thoughts and turned to B. L.

"You help on this," meaning he needed to express his thoughts in his own language. B. L. nodded easily as if to say, 'Sure, just take your time. I'm here for you'."

B. L.'s translated version of the account went like this:

"On the evening Waterson died, I was walking the tracks gathering coal that falls from the trains. I use it to heat and cook. There is a wide fire lane on each side of the track with no trees. It's at the severe curve in the tracks just this side of the far hill. There were two vehicles parked off the road up the fire lane on the other side of the track. I didn't recognize either the car or the pickup truck. There was just one man. He drove the pickup onto the track and got out, leaving its motor running. I couldn't see anybody inside – I thought it was empty – I swear!

"Then the man got in the car. It was a big blue or gray expensive car – I couldn't be sure it was twilight – and he drove away. I thought I would go look in the truck but I heard the train coming. I got scared and came back into the woods and watched the train hit the truck. It happened so fast I couldn't have warned the train in time if I had tried – that sharp curve the way it is. I have never said anything until now. It didn't wreck the train or I would have gone back to help. I would have!"

"I have no doubt that you would have gone back to help," Masters reassured. "Did you recognize the man?"

"No. It was nearly dark. There are deep shadows, then."

“And you have no idea who the car belonged to.”

“Ol’ Cit’s the only one I know by looking at.”

“Let’s leave that. What can you tell me about Rick that I don’t already know?”

Pooshka seemed more prepared for that question. Again, B. L. translated.

“At about the time the Gypsy Troupe came – maybe three or four weeks or so after – Gerald found a post card on the floor in the Kastle. It was from the Gypsies in Ontario. It was a friendly card addressed to Rick. It made some mention – joking like, I think – about Rick’s Gypsy blood. I guess Gerald made a big thing of it to Rick. Maybe he was joking, too. Rick didn’t think so. He was afraid of what the Knights would think if they knew – considering the curse and all. Rick got so bent out of shape over the curse – clearly B. L. sometimes took liberties with his literal translation – that I thought it was strange. Anyway, Rick had told me about it. He didn’t ask any advice so I didn’t offer him any.

“There was one other thing between Rick and Gerald. I don’t know if I should mention it. It is really a private matter.”

B. L. nodded, urging Pooshka to continue.

“Well, Rick it a homosexual. Rudy is his ‘friend’. Many suspect that, but few know it for sure. One evening, late, Gerald walked in on Rick and Rudy in a . . . compromising situation in Rick’s office. If Gerald had told the old Colonel, Rick would have been on the first train back to Canada. Gerald said to me that he could care less about that part of Rick’s life. Rick hates that side of himself so much, that I don’t think he could believe it could have meant so little to the man.”

“You knew of Rick’s Gypsy side, then?”

“Yes. It’s one reason he wanted to learn Hungarian – like something he just should do. He is actually very bad at it!”

Pooshka shook his head and chuckled into his hand.

Masters thanked him for his help and time. Pooshka was not finished, however.

“Rick is my friend and my blood. I don’t mean to get him into any trouble, you know.”

“Yes, I understand that. I realize your intentions are honorable.”

“There is one more thing about the wreck.”

“Oh?”

“The next morning, after the wreck was all cleaned up, I found something strange in the woods. Like I said, I collect the coal. There was a huge piece way off in the trees, not where it could have fallen off a coal car. It was my accident to find it. It was the hard, shiny kind that burns a long time – little bit only smoke.”

“Anthracite,” B. L. interjected.

“Okay. That. Anyway, this piece had blood on it – not bright red but blackish like the blood of animals the morning after a slaughter. I was frightened when I saw it and I just left it there. Gypsies and blood are not friendly. Then, later, when I returned from town after Trudy told me about Mr. Waterson’s accident, I decided it might important, so I go back and get it. I wrap it in plastic sacks and put in my potato cellar out back. I’ve fretted for two years over what I should do with it. I was afraid if I told anybody, they’d think I had something to do with it. But, I think it was might be important so I should protect it. I think the time is now to let the Mr. Masters into it.”

“Pooshka sighed deeply and nodded to himself. He looked to B. L. for reassurance. B. L. patted his hand and nodded, firmly.

B. L. called Chief Ryan and ten minutes later they were carefully unwrapping Pooshka’s package on a table on the back porch.

The dried blood was at first hard to make out against the black of the coal. The coal’s surface was shiny and the blood, dull. During the next few minutes, the Old Detective delivered a forensics clinic.

“I think the lab will find this provides an irrefutable link between the killer and the deceased. This blood along the sharp edge was most likely left when the force cut the hand of the person delivering the blow. That on the blunt side, opposite, here, will probably be that of the deceased. Mr. Waterson, it would seem, did not take his own life, but was knocked unconscious, put back into his truck which was then parked on the track at the curve where there was poor visibility from the engine. The truck’s motor was left running to suggest a simple collision.”

He looked at Chief Ryan.

“I assume the body had been badly damaged.”

“Mangled!”

“Well, there might have been coal particles left in the gash on the head but, of course, there was no reason to have looked, I suppose.”

“We’ll look at the coroner’s report, but I imagine you’re right about the examination having been quite cursory.”

“It’s all right?” Pooshka asked at last.

“It’s alright, the Chief reassured.”

He and Masters knew that a charge of withholding evidence could be filed but on the other hand, he had, in reality, preserved the evidence. The DA would not press charges.

“I feel much betterly, I am telling you that!” Pooshka said.

B. L. put his arms around his old friend.

“You be okay or shall I stay awhile?”

“Can you stay? We make stew!”

B. L. looked at Masters who said, “I’ll catch a ride with the Chief. See you later on this afternoon.”

The ride back to town gave Masters an opportunity to pick Chief Ryan’s brain.

“Arthur Allen. Any dirty laundry there?”

“More soiled than dirty. Nothing illegal if that’s what you’re getting at.”

“Soiled?”

“Not a nice man. That seems to run on the male side of the Allen family, I guess. The women are all sweethearts. There is one thing in his past. Probably nothing but a few years ago, there was a hit and run accident on a county road east of town. A little girl was killed. Arthur was the first on the scene – he found her – called it in. The Sheriff worked that case. Arthur was never implicated. In fact, there were blue paint chips on the body at the place of impact. Arthur always drives a red Chrysler.”

“The driver was never found?” Masters asked.

“Right. There just were no leads to pursue. Well, one, I guess but it’s been a dead end.”

“What was that?”

“Just before he came upon the scene, Arthur’s car was

sideswiped by a car speeding toward him. It damaged the driver's side door and shook up the old man pretty good."

"He didn't recognize the car?"

"If he did, he didn't admit it. Actually, he told the Sheriff that he didn't know who it was. There had been a race that afternoon at the local speedway up in that area and it was suggested that it had been someone from out of the county on their way home. Folks come from hundreds of miles away to these races. The needle in a haystack type of thing."

They arrived at the Police Station. The piece of coal was soon safely repacked in a wooden crate, and Bobby was dispatched with it to the crime lab at Cheyenne. The Chief called ahead to alert them of its pending arrival and to give the specifics about what was needed.

Masters read the reports on Waterson's death. Cause of death – head trauma. Traces of coal – presumably from being drug along the track – had indeed been found in many places on the body including anthracite in the presumed lethal wound.

It was the unusual site of the accident, a quarter mile from the road crossing, which led the sheriff to suspect suicide, though it was officially recorded as a traffic accident with extenuating circumstance.

"Do you happen to know which insurance agent handles Arthur Allen's auto policy?"

"Most likely Larry Allen. His office is in the bank building."

"He'd still have the photographs of the damage to Arthur's car?"

"Actually, we should have those on file. Arthur had to file an accident report here before he could file an insurance claim."

A few minutes later, Masters had the photos. They were of Arthur's red car door with a blue streak and deep slit from side to side. Better than just pictures, there was a small plastic bag containing paint scrapings.

"Would the model be established from the paint alone," Masters asked.

"It should be there," Ryan said. "Maybe in the summary."



“Oh, yes. I found it – an older model Lincoln.”

Masters closed the folder.

“The time-line between Waterson’s death and this hit and run – chief?”

“The little girl died – let’s see – thirty months ago. Waterson died 26 months ago. I forgot they were so close together. You don’t see a connection, do you?”

“Just trying to keep it all straight inside this old gray head.”

The chief didn’t believe that for a minute, but he didn’t press. Masters knew he hadn’t bought it but moved on.

“Is there a Lincoln dealership here in town?” Masters asked.

“Sure is. Ford, Lincoln, Mercury – out on the highway. Need a ride?”

The Chief had learned Masters didn’t let any grass grow under his feet when he smelled a clue.

“You anticipate my every need, Chief,” Masters joked.

It was a short trip. The agency sprawled over several acres and was surrounded by a stand of beautiful pine and oak trees.

“A beautiful setting someone has put together here,” Masters commented.

“The trees? A reforestation grant from the Knights.”

“The kind Pop was turned down for?”

“The same.”

The owner came to meet them. He was a middle-aged man who, curiously, was no relation to the Allen clan. It seemed a rare breed in those parts. Masters explained his dilemma.

“I’m searching for a blue, older model Lincoln that had significant damage to the driver’s side door or front fender. It would have been involved in an accident – side swiping, I suppose you might say – about thirty months ago. Would you remember if your shop worked on such a thing?”

“Well, I don’t, but Buck will remember. He’s been my body man for fifteen years.”

The description was repeated to Buck. He scratched his head. He spit and repositioned his hat.

“I sure can’t recall anything just like that, Sir. I had a

rear end and front, right, headlight panel on blue Lincolns, but no, nothing like you describe. Sorry.”

Masters turned to leave. Buck had an idea.

“You might contact Buddy Brooks up in Edna. He’s a free-lance body guy – semi-retired – got a shop in his barn. I’d try him if I was you.”

“Thank you, Buck. I appreciate your help and suggestion.”

It was, by that time, late afternoon, so Masters had Chief Ryan drop him at the hotel. He wanted to freshen up a bit before walking to Marge’s where he, B. L. and Pop had been promised a dinner of culinary delights beyond description.

First, though, he placed a call to Buddy Brooks, the body man at Edna. Initially, he fared no better than he had with Buck, although Buddy – a talkative, busy-body type – did recall having done the repair work on Arthur’s red Chrysler at that time. Masters wondered why the old man would go clear out there for his repairs, rather than having them done in town. It seemed strange unless he wanted to hide the fact of the accident. And why would he want to do that if it had occurred in the fashion he had described? The ‘plot thickened’ when Buddy revealed – with no encouragement whatsoever – that Arthur had paid him a substantial sum for “keeping it all under his hat” and that he had returned several months later to have damaged front grill work replaced.

“That was another strange thing,” Buddy recalled, well on his way to freely supplying more idle gossip. “Arthur was a real classy dude – fancy clothes, waxed and polished car, not a scrap of trash anywhere inside the car or trunk. Except, he had a bunch of empty Black and White beer cans in his trunk. Black and White is the worst, off-brand of cheap-o beer God ever breathed life into. Now, why would a classy guy like him have that crap in his trunk? Some things you just can’t figure.”

Masters’ thanked him for his help, eager to end the conversation before he was subjected to the details of Aunt Mary’s gallbladder operation and grandma’s electrolysis.

The Old Detective’s brain told him that he was veering off course from his prime objectives but his gut kept luring him on. He knew the connection he wanted to make but

understood the potential pitfalls in trying to prove a hunch.

As he was stuffing the tail of a fresh shirt into his trousers there was a knock at his door. He peered through the security viewer and then opened the door onto a smiling B. L. The lad was soon inside and just as soon seated by the window – again, lending support to Masters’ theory about adolescents and their universal system for energy conservation.

“What do you think?” Masters asked, holding up his suit coat in one hand and a sweater in the other – “stuffy suit or informal tent?”

Ignoring the playful reference to the man’s size, B. L. had a ready opinion.

“The sweater, Sir. Will blend right in to the rustic décor – well not that you are rustic, Sir, but the sweater – oh, well – it’s been what, three days since my last filet of foot hors d’oeuvre?”

“That was my choice too, actually, and being lumped – as it were – into the rustic, rather than stuffy category is certainly preferable to me.”

“No harm no foul, then?” B. L. asked.

“No more than a five-yard penalty, at most.”

“You’re a football fan?” B. L. asked, surprised.

“A high school scat-back if you can imagine that – five foot five and a hundred pounds soaking wet.”

“Wow!”

It had been an all-out, full-throttle ‘Wow’, not a contemplative ‘Wow’ or whimsical ‘Wow’ – a fully undisguised, disbelief-laden, clearly astonished, ‘WOW!!!’

“Five-five you say. What are you now – right at six feet?”

Masters nodded as he hung the jacket back in the closet.

“And, yes, that’s right at an additional 25 pounds for every one of those seven new inches.”

B. L. smiled but didn’t pursue it further.

“What you been up to this afternoon?” he asked, instead.

“Police reports and body shops.”

“Sounds like it should be the refrain in a

country/western song.”

“Let’s put that brain of yours to better use. Picture your salvage lot about two years ago. I’m searching for a blue Lincoln with a badly scratched, probably damaged driver’s side front door and/or front fender.”

B. L. closed his eyes and tilted his head back slightly.

“Nope! Had just the opposite though.”

“Opposite?”

“Yup. Blue Lincoln, older model, badly damaged on the passenger side and rear end – car-truck collision, I believe.”

“Do you have any way of knowing whose car it had been?”

“Pop will have a record. As I recall it happened out on the highway and it was a business man traveling cross country to a classic car show in California.”

“Probably no help then,” Masters said.

“Not so fast, Sir. Stay tuned for the second half.”

Masters smiled and fought his way into his sweater.

“Pop got a request for a front right fender and door for that model and we delivered it to a body shop clear up in Sheridan – took us all day.”

“Sheridan?”

“About as far north as you can go and still be in the state - 220 to Casper, I-25 to Buffalo and then I-90 into Sheridan.”

“It’s a reach but a possibility,” Masters said, perking up a bit.

“‘IT’ being what?”

“‘IT’ being an as yet undisclosed hunch,” Masters said, effectively closing the topic for the time being.

“Just so I can plan ahead, will it be phone or plane to Sheridan tomorrow?”

“Let’s start by phone. We’ll see what take Pop on has it, then we can firm up a plan.”

Masters’ anticipated early evening walk, became a ride in the orange steed. Pop and Marge were in the kitchen putting last minute touches on things – well, Marge was putting touches on the food and Pop, on Marge. After a brief, “Hello, how are you and glad to see you,” she banished the men to the dining room where she soon joined them.

The food was delicious – as advertised – and the conversation, warm and friendly. Masters and Pop spoke briefly about the Lincoln and he remembered where it had been delivered. He would get the phone number to Masters by breakfast.

“You really think that damaged car is somehow connected with these murders?” Pop asked, clearly skeptical.

“This community has seen more than its share of heartache during the past decade. I hope to leave here having tied up several loose ends. That may not erase the hurt, but I’ve found that just having closure usually helps folks move on.”

It had been a good evening and was slightly after 9:30 when B. L. dropped Masters at the hotel.

“See you at breakfast,” Masters said, closing the door to the truck, “And, remind Pop to get me that number.”

In his room, Masters made himself comfortable in the big, chair by the window. The question crossed his mind as to whether that extra-large, extra padded chair was a regular feature of the room or if it had been imported just for his benefit. Either way, he appreciated it and patted its arm to express those feelings.

The various reports, clippings and notes were stacked somewhat randomly on a table beside him. With a new yellow pad in his lap, he began one final review of the accumulated information.

Seven of nine possible Knights were dead and the fate of the tenth was in his hands. There were four other deaths that concerned him. Gerald – an unlikely suicide; Waterson – a suicide-ruled death, turned murder; Donny Treadway – perhaps, as ruled, an accident which occurred during a drunken stupor; and the little girl victim of the hit and run incident.

The dead Knights ran the gambit from despicable to merely intensely unlikable. As a whole – to the town’s people – the Order was part joke and part pain. There were motives from outside the organization and motives from within. The Knights, as an institution, had degenerated from a marginally laudable beginning – to encourage and recognize heroism – into an amoral, back stabbing, status-seeking-at-any-cost,

group of bitter old men.

Neither Donny Treadway nor his father seemed to have possessed many socially redeeming characteristics. The senior Treadway had been outright belligerent and deceitful – the younger seemingly more just an ass by default.

Young Waterson, by all reports was a kind, decent, hardworking type. At the time, he was wronged by the City Council and the bank, the citizens rallied to him and many moved their major banking out of town. Just prior to Waterson's death, Arthur Allen, the bank president who – for some reason – took it all as a personal affront, presumably attempted to pressure Waterson in some manner – the precise nature of which will probably never be known.

As of that moment, no connection could be positively established between Arthur and the deaths of either Treadway or Waterson – though Masters suspected it was there.

The Long List of suspects in the Knight's deaths could well have included virtually every adult in Allenville. Even the Short List was still far too long. Masters had to consider the possibility of some kind of vigilante activity – a lone person, a team or a small, intensely loyal, closed-mouth, group. It would be a short step for well-meaning, egotists to move from seeing the devastating effect the Knights were having on Allenville and taking the necessary steps to eradicate the source – Doc, the senior Waterson, Pop, Joel, Chief Ryan? Masters was well aware that fully frustrated, good people, pushed to the edge, could do absolutely horrendous things in the name of justice.

The vigilante(s) would need to have easy access to the Kastle at the appropriate day and time. He (they) would have needed access to the as yet unverified and unknown poison. If another of Masters Hunches were true, creative, mechanical skill would have been involved.

Joel and Waterson were the only living people who possessed all three necessary attributes. Easy access to the building seemed to present no problem for anyone – it seldom having been locked. Joel's daily mail from the four-corners of the World could easily have included the poison. His recently discovered mechanical skill at the airplane fulfilled necessary trait number three on Masters' list.

Waterson, Senior, a pharmacist, had ready and legitimate access to any drug he wanted. His mechanical prowess was unconcealed and well known. The fact that Waterson and Doc, his best friend, were both spared, was both the best reason to implicate him and the best reason not to. If he were the murderer, he probably would not have killed Doc or taken his own life. That becomes a vote for him as the bad guy. Yet, sparing the two of them, would tend to make him appear to be the number one suspect in such an obvious way that it makes it seem unlikely he would have taken that risk. A vote against him as the bad guy.

Their motives? Joel's would have to do with the blackballing that led to his father-in-law's suicide. The fact that Masters now rejected it as having been a suicide would not change Joel's motivation ten years before. Waterson's motives might have involved revenge against some of the individual Knights who played roles in the events leading to his son's suicide – although, that, too, appeared to have been murder. The problem with that scenario was that five Knights had met their doom prior to his son's death. That left just the vigilante theory if Waterson were to be considered a party to the deaths of the first five.

Pop had a multitude of motives – B. L's accident and its unsatisfactory legal resolution. The Knights who disallowed his request for a tree-planting grant while giving similar grants to the relatives of Knights. The Knights who sat on the Planning Commission and required him to build the expensive fence as if in retaliation for Pop's having pursued legal action against Donny Treadway – a Knight's son. He actually possessed the mechanical know-how. Access to the poison – even knowledge of its existence – was the stumbling block in Pop's case. His brilliant son certainly could have located the poison and even assisted in devising a delivery method, except that he would have only been five at the time all this began. Possible, but unlikely. Pop would have needed an accomplice with a drug connection.

Then there could be other teams. It could have been Pop with Doc or Waterson or Gerald, or, Gerald with Doc or Waterson – but Gerald died shortly after the first murder. And, old Arthur Allen must not be dismissed. He had money to buy

whatever assistance he needed and was well known for his hatred of the Knights.

But, what would have moved him to launch such a campaign of retribution exactly ten years ago? Perhaps there developed some twisted kinship in his mind between himself and Gerald at the time of Gerald's exclusion from the Knights. Perhaps he had just been biding his time until some other dupe could be set up. He seemed to be a people user. If Colonel Allen had, in fact, died of natural causes, Arthur could have seen it as an ideal opportunity to set his own plan in motion and put the blame on Gerald. After Gerald's death, Arthur would have had to make a decision about continuing. Masters understood that once committed to a course of revenge, few people were ever able to pull back. Masters cocked his head and put down his yellow pad.

"Interesting," he said out loud.

"All of this rambling and not a single mention of Rick, Pooshka or the Gypsies – either those from Jackson or from Canada!"

Rick had either not been truthful or had been mistaken about the Gypsy Troupe and their supposed superstition about not performing in the same town twice. The former fit the bill best. For some reason, Rick needed to make sure the Gypsies were not invited to return to Allenville. That would probably have been so they could not reveal something. What? That the curse had been just an act? But why, if it had been Gerald who had set up both their appearance and the curse? Rick could have easily found out about the true nature of the curse from the Gypsies and decided to use it all to his own advantage. But why would he have wanted to kill the Knights – they were his bread and butter. He had demonstrated some compassion for Gerald but there seemed no reason he would have taken it upon himself to exact that revenge.

Were his own Gypsy roots in some way involved – or his German roots, for that matter? Had the Colonel discovered Rick's sexual orientation and threatened to fire him? Masters doubted that the Colonel would have weighed in on the liberal side of that issue.

It seemed doubtful that Rick could be carrying on the



campaign against the Knights alone. Of all the possible teams, there was much to be said for Gerald, with his mechanical skill and possible access to exotic poisons – and Rick with his total access to the Kastle, the dining service and the banquet food.

Pooshka seemed to lack motive and opportunity. It was possible, probable even, that his Old-World connections could have supplied a suitable poison. His skill as a jeweler suggested at least some level of mechanical competence. On the motive side of the ledger, his seemed weak. After the trip to Jackson, it seemed nothing remained of the possible motives connected to his being a Gypsy. His love for B. L. might have stirred the urge for retribution against the Treadways, but probably not the Knights as a whole.

Trudy certainly hated the Knights, but would she have killed her own father in the process of extracting her pound of flesh? She would have needed help and perhaps could have enlisted Rick with the promise of a renewed relationship, though Rudy's entry into the picture seemed to dim that possibility. Trudy and Rick would still have needed a mechanically inclined accomplice.

Marge! She loved kids in general and B. L. in particular. She loved her little community and openly – though not fanatically – held the anti-knight sentiment voiced by most of its citizens. Her connection to the postal service might provide an easy means for the undiscovered delivery of the lethal substance, but how would she have known about such a thing? She would have needed help – Pop of course would be the number one candidate. That would be a wild stretch even under the, 'nice people can be driven to do horrible things,' theory.

It had been a useful review, which confirmed his theories. He needed nothing else to reveal who was responsible for the Knights' deaths. He felt certain the lab reports on the coal would verify his Hunch about who had killed Waterson. Only one piece of evidence still eluded him in tying that death to its actual mastermind. The killer, he felt, had merely been a flunky acting under the power of blackmail. He was also sure that he was just one simple lab report away from cornering Gerald's killer.

Masters' phone rang. It was Pop.

“I couldn’t wait ‘til morning about that Lincoln repair job up north. I just got hold of them and guess whose car it was?”

Masters paused, wondering if he should answer the question with the name ‘Donny Treadway’ or just let Pop deliver his special news.

“Who was it?” the kind old Detective asked.

“Donny Treadway. Can you beat that! He went way up there for repairs. You’d think he had something to hide, wouldn’t you?”

“You sure would, Pop. You sure would. I appreciate your help on this one. See you tomorrow.”

Now there was no doubt in Masters’ mind about what transpired in the deaths of Waterson and Treadway, and what the motives had been. He still lacked an essential link in order to prove it. He made a phone call.

“I’m truly sorry to be calling you at this late hour, Mrs. Treadway. This is Ray Masters. I’m the detective who has been engaged by the Knights to look into the deaths at the Kastle.”

“I heard you were here. Do you know what happened?”

“I’m close. My search has led me to a pair of other deaths – Jim Waterson and your son, Donny.”

There was silence on the other end of the line.

“If you have any information you think I should have or any leads you want me to peruse, I will be pleased to talk with you.”

“I’m still despairing over it all, Sir. I lost my husband and then my son. It’s been a terrible time.”

“I can only imagine your sorrow, ma’am. You have my deepest sympathy.”

“There may be one thing,” she said. “Something I haven’t taken care of for Donny yet. I guess I thought there was no point since he died in an accident but if it can perhaps help . . .”

“And what is that?”

“It’s an envelope in our – my – safe from Donny. He was always in trouble and I’m not proud of that. I’m just saying it so you’ll understand how I took his request with the grain of salt, I guess you’d say.”

“His request?”

“Yes. He gave me an envelope about a month before he died. He said if he was ever killed, I should take it to the police. But, he made me promise only if he was killed by someone. Since it was an accident, I didn’t think that satisfied his requirement of being killed. It’s here if you think it will help.”

“Is it too late for Chief Ryan and me to stop by now?”

“Goodness no. I’m a night owl.”

“We’ll be right over.”

He hung up and dialed the Chief.

“Put on your shoes, Chief. Mrs. Treadway may have a case-breaking document for us.”

“If I only put my shoes on, I’ll have to arrest myself for indecent exposure. Give me five minutes.”

“I’ll be waiting out front.”

Masters, too, needed to make a few additions to his togs, but was soon waiting just inside the lobby door.

On the way to the Treadway house, Masters filled the Chief in on Pop’s revelation. His response was identical to Pop’s.

“Why go way up there unless you’re trying to hide something?”

“Lots of folks asking the right questions around here this evening,” Masters observed.

The windows in the Treadway house were lit from side to side and top to bottom. “It must be so lonely for her,” Masters said as they pulled to a stop.

“Her men were both scoundrels, but I’m sure she loved them.” It was a curt though not sarcastic reply.

Inside, she ushered them into the living room - large, cold and barren. She motioned the men to chairs, picking up an envelope from the mantle before taking a seat herself. She pressed it to her chest as she began to speak.

“This is about all I have left of Donny. Excuse me if it’s hard for me to give it up.”

She handed it to Ryan who immediately passed it on to Masters. Printed on the outside was the phrase, ‘Open only if I am killed by someone.’ Reading just that much sent a chill through the Old Detective’s bones. He opened it with his penknife. Inside was a single sheet. On that sheet, in

Donny's handwriting, was a single sentence: 'Arthur Allen tried to blackmail me into killing Jimmy Waterson and when I refused he said he'd kill me.' It was signed.

Masters returned it to its envelope and passed it back to Chief Ryan. "We'll need some impartial expert to verify the handwriting."

The Chief nodded and then spoke to Mrs. Treadway.

"It is the right thing you've done here. Shall I get someone to come and sit with you – Marge, Gina, Trudy?"

"No thank you. Actually, I feel better, if you can believe that. I had my private suspicions. It's better to know the truth. I didn't think my men understood that. Now, perhaps, this shows that at least Donny did."

In the car, Masters thought out loud.

"It was Treadway's way of attempting revenge on Arthur by implicating him in both Waterson's and his own deaths. That much I buy. I also buy the unspecified blackmailing, although I can only put together a circumstantial scenario to support that. Who did or did not kill Waterson will be established when we get the lab report on the coal."

"It's right here. Came in by courier late this afternoon. I brought both reports for you – the one on the cup, too." He handed them to Masters who eagerly and quickly scanned them both. Closing them, he sighed.

"So, I now know who killed Waterson, who killed the little girl and exactly how Gerald died. Now, I just need to bait a trap and I'll have eleven murders all wrapped up."

"Eleven?" the Chief said.

"Yes. Eleven, Sir. Can you arrange to have all the principles in all of this meet in the Main Hall at the Kastle at 9:30 in the morning?"

"Just get me the list."

Masters took a folded, yellow sheet from his pocket. "Your list, my friend." He smiled.

Midnight saw Masters back in his room. His day was not over. Neither was B. L.'s, although it would be several minutes until the sleeping teen would realize that.

Masters called the boy's cell phone, hoping not to disturb Pop. A sleepy voice answered, a question in its tone.

"Abby? Dear?"

“No, this is Raymond Dear. Sorry.”

The drowsiness disappeared in a flash.

“Mr. Masters. What is it? Do you know it’s after midnight?”

Ignoring the questions, Masters began talking. “I need two quarts of plaster of Paris, a square foot of strong, smooth cardboard, a pair of scissors big enough to cut it, a small sack full of rags, a shoe box and a mixing bowl.”

“And you need these when?”

“Five minutes ago. Andala! Andala!”

“Well, if patching plaster will work, I’ve got it all.”

“That will work fine.”

“I’ll be right there.”

“Don’t forget your pants!”

“Good point, Sir – nor you, please!”

“Touché!” Masters would truly miss that lad.

In ten minutes, the mysterious activity was underway in Masters’ bathroom. In the bottom and up the corners of the shoebox, Masters spread the rags in an irregular fashion. On the cardboard, he drew the outline of the bottom of a man’s shoe – approximating size nine.

While he carefully cut it out, B. L. mixed the plaster in the bowl.

“You can tell me what’s going on here just anytime now,” B. L. said, only half expecting a full answer.

“We’re baiting a trap, my boy!”

“I see. We’re going to try and catch men’s feet?”

“Almost! It’ll all be clear tomorrow morning.”

“Sir, it IS tomorrow morning.”

“Patience, my boy. Have patience and stir!!!”

Masters held up his handy work.

“Does this look to be about a man’s size nine?”

“Looks right on to me, Sir.”

“Okay, then, pour your brew over the rags in the box . . . more . . . more . . . more . . . enough.”

Masters then tapped the box to settle in the plaster. “What’s its setting time? What does the box say?”

B. L. read from the side panel.

“Three to five minutes under normal conditions. I’ve always wondered what normal conditions might be.”

Masters held the box up close to the heat lamp in the ceiling near the shower. After a minute, he set the box down on the counter, took his cardboard sole and carefully pressed it into the plaster – toe deeper than the heal. With a few slight adjustments, he removed the cardboard and there appeared a perfect shoe print.

“One problem, Sir!”

“And that would be?”

“No tread, no design on the bottom. Tennies have them. Boots have them. About any shoe-type thing I’ve ever seen has them.”

“Exactly!” Masters said, without explanation, obviously pleased with his creation and the confirmation of its perfection from his young assistant. “Another two minutes and we’ll remove our block from the box.

As it turned out it was more removing the box – piece by piece – from the block. Once out, and with rags removed, B. L. began to get the idea.

“So, it’s a fake footprint in a plaster cast. The uneven side and corners caused by the rags makes it look like an authentic piece of field casting. Turn it over and voila! – a positive cast of that shoe print as if made in a soft field or somewhere. Manufacturing evidence, are we, Sir?”

“Just think of it as an ink blot. I’m counting on it to be the perfect ink blot.”

“Like in the ink blot test where people read into the shapes, things from their own subconscious or past experiences, Huh?”

“Very good! And, that’s the plan. I am counting on somebody to read his own foot right into this one. Thanks for your help. Now go home. Your father really shouldn’t permit you to stay out this late you know. Go! Shoo! Scat! Breakfast is still at six.”

Smiling and tired, B. L. shook his head and left, thinking, 'That Masters is certainly one of a kind. I'll truly miss him when he's gone.

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## **CHAPTER SEVEN**

### **Day Five: Morning**

### **The Last Roundup!**

The huge, cold, Spartan, Hall seemed more foreboding than usual. Masters would soon occupy the head of the table. At the opposite end sat Chief Ryan and the District Attorney. To the Chief's right sat Bobby and then, Pop, Marge, Rudy and Arthur. To the DA's left sat Joel, Gina, Pooshka, B. L., Doc and Waterson. To Masters left sat Mrs. Treadway, and Trudy. To his right, David Thomas – the current Knight of Knights, and then Rick. Several State Policemen were also present, sitting and sanding here and there in the shadows, against the gray, stone walls. The depressing atmosphere seemed sufficient to keep the assemblage quiet among themselves.

A single, pewter place setting graced the head of the table – plate, goblet, utensils. Beside it was a large, closed, brown paper bag. Under the table, out of sight – a fire extinguisher. Those had been some of several preparations Masters, B. L. and Rudy had made earlier that morning. At precisely 9:30, Masters made his entrance through the large door behind the head of the table. He took several steps into the room and paused to recognize each person by looking them in the eye. He then strode to the head of the table where he would remain standing. Gypsies are not the only great actors in this story!

Masters began:

“Eleven murders. Four murderers. Of those, several are among us here today.”



Heads turned this way and that. B. L. finished jotting something on a piece of paper, folded it and slid it an arm's length away from himself toward the center of the table. No one but Masters seemed to notice.

Masters continued.

"Let us begin with the matter of Mary Ann Little, the four-year-old girl killed several years ago by a hit and run driver. It was five p.m. Donny Treadway had attended the afternoon races at the speedway just north of that accident. As was his style, he drank far too much. Speeding east on the County Road, he struck Mary Ann. He probably paused to consider what had happened. When he realized that he had struck her at such a high speed, he also probably surmised that he had killed her. He sped away, his drunken recklessness accentuated by his terror.

"Arthur Allen was driving west at that same point on the road on his way to get a rancher's signature on loan extension papers. He did not arrive for his appointment that evening. It is a long, straight, stretch of road, where the hit and run occurred, and Arthur saw what had happened and who had done it. Donny's car sideswiped Arthur's, leaving behind a telltale streak of blue paint from his older model Lincoln. I say 'older model' because that is important. It was a classic – forty years old. The paint was unique and the chances of there having been another car like it on that road, at that time, are infinitesimal. Having enough wits about him to try and save his own hide, Donny hid the car somewhere for the night, contacted a body shop in Sheridan – well outside the territory – and under cover of darkness, later in the week, drove it to be repaired.

"We know he was without that car during that week. We know from the body shop records that it was his car that was repaired in Sheridan. We also know that Arthur had his red Chrysler door repaired in an out of the way body shop up at Edna – two counties away – during that same week. The body man who worked on the car confirms that it had a streak of blue paint that could have been from the Lincoln in question. The Body shop at Sheridan confirms the red paint on the door and front right fender of Donny's Lincoln was Chrysler red for the model year of Arthur's car.

“Clearly, neither Donny nor Arthur wanted it known they had been in accidents and went to great lengths to cover it. Arthur, penny pincher that he is, however, could not resist filing an insurance claim thereby providing even more evidence of such an accident, though he reported it as having been southeast of town. How do we know that was a lie? He would not have been there at the time of the accident – verified by a witness on the police report – if he had an appointment in the exact opposite direction. As he left town, going east that afternoon, his car was seen by several folks who confirm that it was not damaged.

“The paint chips and headlight glass found at the scene and on the little girl’s body were from the model Lincoln that Donny drove. So, it seems evident that that Donny Treadway was responsible for little Mary Ann’s death.

“Donny left a note with his mother. Much of it is fabrication but the basic logic of his premise tells us the very story he was trying to hide. First, it was not to be opened unless he had been killed – clearly intentionally. That suggests he felt he was in some real danger, and the fact that several months later he was dead of unnatural causes lends further credence to his fear. In the short note, Donny suggested that Arthur had tried to blackmail him – relative to the hit and run – into killing Jim Waterson.

“We can speculate about a motive to support that possibility. Arthur’s treatment of Jim Waterson had enraged the town and caused severe damage to his bank. Arthur blamed Jim for the bank’s decline and decided that if Jim were out of the way, people would soon forget about that incident and begin coming back to the bank.

“But, back to the note. It also states that Donny refused to kill Jim. That is not true. Donny was a coward who possessed no sense of morality that would have kept him from doing whatever was necessary to save himself. That, in itself, would be enough to have pointed to Donny as the killer, but, thanks to one of the area’s most honest and courageous citizens – Pooshka – the murder weapon was located and preserved. It is a seven-pound chunk of anthracite coal. On its blunt side, Jim Waterson’s blood was found. On the sharp side – the side that the murderer would have had to hold on to

– Donny’s blood was found. The sharp edge had cut his hand at the time he delivered the blow.

“Now, Donny, for all his faults, was not entirely stupid. He knew Arthur well enough – at least by reputation – not to trust him. He must have sensed the strong possibility that once he had done Arthur’s dirty work, Arthur might try to do away with him and thereby obliterate any connection between himself and Jim’s death, so he wrote the note. It seems more likely to me that Arthur had second thoughts about Donny’s ability to keep his mouth shut, particularly while on one of his frequent drinking binges, and, on that basis, decided that it would be necessary to kill him.

“That, was, in fact, accomplished in the following manner. Arthur lured Donny up to the ridge above Denny’s Demise – as I understand the spot is known. It may have been to talk. It may have been on the promise of some continued payments for his silence. Its essence is unimportant. Earlier on the evening of Donny’s death, Arthur purchased several six-packs of Black and White Label beer at a truck stop thirty miles east on I-25. We have Bobby’s good police work to thank for that piece of evidence. Arthur bought the beer cold and purchased a small cooler in which to keep it. Arthur does not drink beer and if he did it most certainly would not be anything as cheap and disgusting as Black and White Label. He attended no gathering that night to which he took the beer. Clearly it was not to be consumed immediately or paying extra to keep it cold would not have been necessary.

“Donny arrived first, at about seven p.m. – a time arranged so it would be long before the teenagers began gathering there. Out of habit, he parked close enough to the cliff to see the view. Shortly thereafter, Arthur pulled in behind him. Arthur got out, took the several six packs of beer with him and sat with Donny in the front seat of the Lincoln. Arthur undoubtedly talked on about something long enough for Donny to have drunk himself into a stupor. Since it is reasonable to assume that he already had a good start in that direction prior to seven o’clock, it probably didn’t take long.

“Arthur, as it turned out, was just plain inept at committing murder. From that point on, he made one mistake after another. He left the Lincoln in ‘park’. He failed to turn on

the motor. He had miscalculated how heavy that old Lincoln would be and how difficult it would be for his lighter Chrysler to push it ahead and over the cliff. The back wheels of his car spun for some time, cutting deep ruts into the ground before finding the traction needed to move both cars forward. Donny and his car careened down the steep slope and into the raging river below.

“To check the scene, Arthur got out of his car and walked to the edge to look over. Satisfied, he then got back into his car and drove home. A late model Chrysler’s front bumper was considerably lower than the old model Lincoln’s back bumper so Arthur’s grill was damaged during the pushing. He took it to the same body shop that he had used before. The body man has given us an affidavit to that effect. He has also described the original work he did on the door and has provided information about Arthur’s payments to buy his silence for both incidents.

Arthur jumped up from his seat.

“I’ve had about enough of this defaming, claptrap.”

He shook his fist at Masters.

“You can’t prove I had anything to do with either death. All you have is reckless speculation.”

With the briefest glance at B. L., Masters reached into the brown paper sack beside him on the table and removed the plaster cast he and the boy had fabricated the night before. He turned it so all could clearly see that it was the imprint of a shoe.

“Your ultimate mistake, Arthur, was when you went back to the edge of the cliff to look down into the valley. You were so intent on your mission that you failed to notice how soft the ground was. You do wear a size nine shoe with smooth leather soles bearing the imprinted name, ‘Ramano’, don’t you Arthur?” Masters inspected the cast closely and repeated, “Yes, Ramano. Do you – does anyone here – know of anyone else in Allenville – or in the surrounding ten counties, for that matter – who wears size nine Ramanos?”

Stunned, Arthur slumped into his seat. His posture disintegrated from that of a raging, wounded, fighter to that of a defeated old man.

“Waterston ruined me, you know,” he began softly.

“The Board was going to replace me. It had been my bank for fifty years and they were going to kick me out – just like that. Donny was the perfect fool to do what I needed done. He became greedy, though, and wanted more and more money to keep quiet. I couldn’t go on that way. Donny deserved to die. You all know he deserved to die! He was a dangerous, disgusting, thorn in the side of humanity. I should be rewarded and praised not vilified for having done it.”

The DA nodded toward the deputies and Arthur was ushered out.

“And so we have conclusions to the murders of Mary Ann, Jim Waterson, and Donny Treadway. Next, I want to address the death of Gerald Miller. It has been widely believed that Gerald died at his own hand but that, as I shall demonstrate, was not the case.

“Gerald had gone through a period of personal depression after having been blackballed by the Knights. However, he had decided to leave here and return to a place where he had friends and that had raised his spirits. I believe that he had been contemplating suicide earlier and that in fact he had written at least one draft of a suicide note – the one found beside his body. In reality, it reads more like a set of preliminary – tentative, even – ideas for a suicide note – a list of things he wanted to say. More about that note later. It is important to know, however, that that note was not typed the night of his death as supposed. Gerald always used his faithful old portable typewriter. It had traveled to all the continents with him. When he first returned to Allenville after retiring, the typewriter had a blue ribbon in it – a color popular in Malaysia, where he had stopped on his way back here from Australia. The note found at his suicide was typed on that blue ribbon. The ribbon, which was in his typewriter the night of his death, was over one third used and was black. Apparently, he had done enough additional typing after composing that sheet that he had used up the original ribbon, and purchased a new one – a black one, which is the popular color here. Suicide notes are not written months prior to the act.

“It was noticed that the paper on which that note had been written had an oil streak on it. It was graphite oil like that

used in locks. None was found in his apartment. A small can of identical oil was, however, found in his locker at the Kastle. I believe the note was found there by his prying killer weeks before the murder and appropriated for future use. Gerald probably didn't even miss it since his mood had improved.

"Item two concerns a coffee mug he had received as a birthday present, just that night from his daughter. It was placed in his cupboard upside down rather than open-side up, as were all his other cups. It made me suspect someone other than Gerald put that cup away. Someone who stores his or her cups open-side down. Keep that in mind. The lab report suggests several interesting things about the mug, itself. Inside were found traces of tea – Hungarian tea. There was also a clear, almost complete fingerprint found on the inside of its wide handle. The experts at the state crime lab were even able to go one step further. They discovered the finger that made that print had been wet with the drugged tea when that print was laid down. The tea was laced with enough barbiturates to kill everybody in this room several times over – far more than the amount the most determined pharmacist/killer would ever use. In the extremely potent tea, however, the drinker would not detect even that large amount.

"As an aside, really, the break-in at the pharmacy was staged. The killer had broken a small window at the Kastle and Gerald, of course, had cleaned up the mess, thereby getting his fingerprints on the glass. The killer then left that glass at the scene of the break-in to implicate Gerald. The lack of his prints anywhere else made us suspicious. When we discovered the glass was of circa 1900 vintage, we began making sense of it all.

"The irony here is that the murderer who made that significant mistake was himself an expert on glass. The print on the mug and the prints left behind in the putty around the windows on the door, belong to Henrik Distlemier and it is he who killed Gerald Miller. Perhaps someday, he will tell us why. My best guess is that Rick found out that Gerald knew both of his Gypsy connection and his gay relationship. He feared that Gerald would report those things to the Knights and he would lose his job, having to leave Allenville, which might mean he would lose the person he loved, as well. Using

the note he had found in Gerald's locker, Rick thought he had the perfect crime – a depressed man kills Colonel Allen for revenge and then, despairing, kills himself.

“And so, we have solved murder number four.”

The deputies escorted Rick from the room. For the first time, there was a buzz of conversation among those in the Hall. Masters let it run its course before continuing.

“That brings us to the reason I was brought to Allenville – the deaths of the seven Knights.”

He glanced at his watch.

“While I talk, I want you to keep your eyes on the top of the goblet, which is sitting here before me. It is filled to the brim with water. The time is now almost ten-fifteen. Tomorrow, at this time, the Celebration of Life will have just begun here in this room. Mr. Thomas will be standing here where I am, now. The Champagne will have been poured and he will be reading a lengthy passage to the other Knights.”

At that moment, water splashed from the goblet – as if a stone had been dropped into it. Masters continued.

“As I discharge this fire extinguisher toward the chandelier above me, please take note of what suddenly appears before you.”

The heavy CO2 lingering in the air revealed several beams of light in the room. One came from the center window high on the East wall and targeted the long narrow piece of crystal atop the Grandfather Clock. From there, it was directed onto a pendant in the chandelier and from the pendant straight down to the surface of the liquid in the goblet. From there, it reflected back to the ceiling.

“My assistants and I made a slight adjustment in a truly ingenious, though lethal gadget that has resided here in the Kastle for over ten years now. Let me explain. On the day of every Spring Equinox, and at exactly the minute of that celestial event here in Allentown, the sun is positioned in the sky so that its rays are caught in a lens attached to the storm window outside the center window up there. It was necessary to install the storm window, because the window, itself, was positioned deep into the shadows of the wide stones that hold it. That lens directs a beam of light, as you have seen, to the clock, the pendant, the reflective liquid surface, and finally the

ceiling. With Rudy's expert help, we adjusted the angle of the crystal piece on the clock so it would set things into motion exactly one day early – today. In the ceiling, at the point on which you saw the beam of light directed, is a photoelectric cell about the size of a dime – all quite invisible from way down here. When activated, that cell triggers a device in the attic, which dispenses a tiny pellet through a 1/2-inch shoot that is housed in the center of the chandelier's, black, support pipe. The chandelier has been positioned so that pipe is directly over the spot on the table where the Goblet fits into the indentation. The splash you just witnessed was made by this year's poisoned pellet as it was delivered into the goblet at the Knight of Knights position. If we were to wait around some time longer – perhaps twelve hours, perhaps several days, which we will later determine – a second tiny cylindrical pellet will fall from the device – probably during the night making itself obscure in some dark corner of the floor. It is released by a timer, which is turned on by the beam and off – automatically – when its mission is completed.

“The pellets are in the form of a capsule – the type made of two, sleeve-like, quick dissolving, parts, one of which slips over the other – like cold pills used to be. In the extreme heat of the attic, such a substance would not melt but might get sticky. If that occurred, they couldn't easily be loaded into the shoot to be released by a flipper device, because they would probably stick together and clump, ruining the procedure. Separated by lightweight, tiny, Teflon coated cylinders, however, they would not stick together. I assume we will find the inside of the delivery shoot – that 1/2-inch steel pipe – is also coated with Teflon or some such non-stick surfacing. It is that second, non-stick pellet that has not yet made its appearance.

“Cleverly, the pellet cannot fall until there is the reflective, clear, liquid in the goblet. Rudy has calculated that as the sun's rays gradually change position, there is only a three-minute time period in which this cycle can be completed. That amount of time, however, assures the triggering of the activity, even if the pouring of the Champaign is not exactly on schedule. The rigidly timed routine of the Celebration assures that the pellet will be released within that time frame. The



inventor of this arrangement needed to utilize the natural curvature of the bottom of the goblet to reflect the light directly to the ceiling. In order to do that two things became necessary. The table had to be repositioned so that the goblet sat in the exact place necessary to receive the light from the pendant. Then, to maintain a non-dissipated light beam back to the ceiling, the bottom of the goblet had to be raised just the width of the new planking that was installed. The clock, also, had to be both raised and repositioned. Its piece of decorative crystal at the top of the face, had to be replaced with a precisely ground glass reflector. That new, reflective crystal, by the way, had been ordered prior to, rather than after, the killer arranged to have the original piece broken during the moving of the clock. Realizing that, I had to wonder why.

“Additionally, we now understand why the chestnut tree was cut to the ground – it had stood in the way of the sunlight. The beam necessary to trigger all of this could not reach the lens in the window so long as the tree was standing.

“Why has the splash not been noticed before? These goblets are huge, holding well over two quarts. Even our dauntless Knights would not attempt to drink down that much in one sustained drink. So, filled only about one third full, that telltale splash stays well within the confines of the tall goblet.

“Why were two of the Knight of Knights spared death from this gadget? It was because of two, unanticipated, freaks of nature. March days are virtually always bright, clear and sunny in this part of the country. The murderer counted on that. A snowstorm on Doc’s day and an overcast sky on Ralph Waterson’s day, blocked the sun and foiled the deadly plan.

“What about maintenance? My examination of the device suggests that it is probably loaded with enough pellets to take out the next fifty Knights. It is completely maintenance-free, as it has to be, because the murderer who designed all of this had no plans to stick around and risk getting caught. After he saw that it worked the first time around, he was picking up stakes and moving far, far away. That plan was thwarted, however.

“Gina, Joel, I am so sorry to have to reveal that the Case of the Gypsy Curse was, in reality, the case of the

revenge-minded, Gerald Miller. His prints are on the device. He purchased or otherwise acquired all of the parts. Its design required his level of expertise both mechanically and astronomically. The poison will be found to be from Malaysia – and I would not be at all surprised if it were from the very tribe he foiled – the same event that led to his nomination as a Knight. An ironic twist in a very sad case.

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## EPILOGUE

[The interested reader may – at some future time – want to re-examine Gerald’s ‘note’ to discover Masters’ first clue to the basic method involved in the Knight’s murders.]

A delighted Raymond Masters discovered that the sheet of paper on which B. L. had been writing just prior to the Old Detective’s presentation listed the eleven victims with the correct murderer beside each one. It was no real surprise to either of them. The boy could become a top-notch detective. It was Masters’ hunch, however, that he would become a skilled, compassionate, pediatric surgeon.

Masters departed Allenville with a sapphire tie tack exquisitely crafted just for him by Pooshka and beautifully wrapped by Trudy, Pooshka’s soon to be very special, long-term, companion.

The morning after Masters flew home, B. L. discovered a precious addition to the hood of Ol’ Cit. Gold-plated and four inches high, it was a plaque that proudly proclaimed: FORGE.

Several months later, the exclusive, Grand Order of Knights, disbanded and was replaced with an all-inclusive organization known as The Friends of the Planet – Joel Nevin, its first Chairperson; Pop and B. L. Roman, Project Co-ordinators. The Community mended.

The names, represented by the initials, B. L., remain one mystery Masters chooses not to investigate. He is, however, determined to go to whatever ends are necessary to expose that elusive, double-pecan!

Exasperated, B. L. eventually proposed to Marge for Pop and a month later the knot was tied. Somehow it also involved something about seven bells?

One week to the day after Masters' departure, Doc received an extraordinary piece of mail, postmarked Rossville, New York. In it were two checks, one, in the amount of \$50,000 from Mrs. Treadway and the other a check from the Knights made payable to Raymond Masters 'for services rendered' in the amount of \$50,000. There was no note included. The back of each check was simply endorsed, "Pay only to the B. L. Roman Surgery Fund."

The End