



# The Case of **TOO MANY SUSPECTS**

Five admit to killing the old man...



using a revolver loaded with blanks

## **Garrison Flint**

**The Case of  
Too Many Suspects:  
A Raymond Masters Mystery**

*BOOK FOURTEEN*

**Garrison Flint**

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **Day One: Early Afternoon**

Simon Gabriel was a despicable human being. Even he agreed and with no apologies. His relatives hated the old man with a thoroughgoing passion but that would not keep them from attending his annual, week long, Fourth of July gathering – required by Simon if they wanted to share in his substantial estate as supposedly divvied up among them in his will. Their attendance was motivated largely by greed and was exaggerated, perhaps, by their desire to extract what they figured was their rightful pound of flesh for the contemptible ways in which he had treated them.

Through the years, Simon had made personal loans to some of them and later foreclosed on their homes and land for late-payment. He established competitive businesses and through a combination of negotiating exclusive contracts with suppliers and under-cutting the price of goods or services, sent others into bankruptcy. There was more but that documents the acrid flavor of the relationship.

The favorite pastime among the relatives at these annual gatherings was a game of one-upmanship – or would it be one-downmanship? Each argued his case for having been treated the worst by the man.

Simon married a much younger woman – Candy – on his forty-fifth birthday. There were two sons – Adam and Benjamin – ten months apart in age, now in their early thirties, and sharing not so much as one socially redeeming characteristic between them. Their mother committed suicide soon after the second was born and they were raised by a

nanny – Claire. The old man has two younger brothers – Worth and Zack – and two younger sisters – Annabelle and Beatrice. In descending order, it goes Simon, Worth, Anne, Bea, and then Zack as a very late entry.

Simon lives in a sprawling, adobe house – mansion if it had been created in any other architectural style – in one of the many desert valleys several hundred miles north of Las Vegas. His executive jet provides easy access to the World although he prefers to remain at Hacienda Grande, as he refers to the thirty-room house and the thousand acres on which it sits.

Masters entered the case – which really didn't qualify as a case at the time – through the backdoor, so to speak. Claire, the Nanny who had remained to care for the ailing Simon after his boys left home, had become friends with the old detective on a previous case some thirty years before. There had been a recent threat made against Simon's entire household. Claire contacted Masters for his advice. She suspected something dire might happen during the upcoming Fourth of July gathering. Masters agreed to be there, provided Simon would agree to his presence.

Simon, unable to believe in the goodness of others and therefore uneasy about the loyalties of those who would 'give away' their services, sent Masters a sizable retainer and engaged him (and, he assumed, his unconditional loyalty) to 'look after things' during the get-together.

Simon's plane picked Masters up at the Las Vegas airport at noon on July first – Monday of the weeklong celebration at the Hacienda. By one o'clock, he and his several bags found themselves loaded into a van heading from the private landing strip north toward the house. The affable, teenage, driver, Carlos, clearly enjoyed conversation.

"So, I hear you're a big shot detective from back east?"

"Well, at least I qualify as big," Masters said, chuckling at his own little joke as he patted his portly tummy.

Carlos' cheeks broadened into a wide, appealing, natural smile.

"I know the books," he said as if in an honest attempt to level the playing field.

"Flint?"

The boy nodded.

"How long have you worked for Mr. Gabriel?"

"Forever. My mother is the housekeeper and I was born here on the kitchen table. I have no father – well, I guess you understand about such things."

Masters nodded.

"I just imagine you know everything that goes on around here, then, don't you?"

"You could say that, I guess. Always been a snoop. Not a whole lot for a kid to do in a place like this. I have a dog – Boxer. He got his name because as a puppy he loved carrots."

"You have me thoroughly confused!"

Carlos smiled again.

"In order to beg for the treat, he'd stand on his hind legs and like throw punches with his front feet. Like I said, I think he's mine but Boxer thinks he's Mr. G's. He'd give me up in a nanosecond if a choice were forced. More than you wanted to know, I'm sure."

Masters smiled and gave that little off to the side nod that said, 'You're right of course but I wouldn't want to offend you'.

"What are you – sixteen?" Masters asked.

"This time next month you'd be right. I'm tall for my age. I suspect my father was a white basketball player – that's my fantasy anyway. I used to think one day he'd come for me but I've given up on that. Mama and I get along just fine. For all my complaining I have a great life out here."

"How about you and Mr. Gabriel?"

"Get along, you mean? Okay, really. I know most folks hate his guts but he's always treated me well. He's in so much pain now that I do what I can to make him comfortable."

"Do you know the nature of his ailment?"

"Ailments, actually. Emphysema and crippling arthritis. The emphysema is the lesser of the two in severity. He refuses treatment for either one anymore."

"A painful combination, indeed. His coughing must jar his joints and cause terrible agony."

Carlos nodded clearly hurting for the old gentleman.

"He likes to go for rides in the van. I drive him places – been doing that since I was twelve."

"Places?"

"He likes to just have me take off in some direction. He'll say let's go southeast for an hour this morning, so I drive us southeast for the next sixty minutes. When we're alone like that he always sits up front with me – like where you are. When others are along he sits in back. No air conditioning when he's in the van. The dry heat out here seems to make him feel better. I just strip down as far as is decent and let the old sweat flow. Sometimes we talk and sometimes we each just play among our own private thoughts."

"You speak beautiful English and that represents nothing more than an observation."

"Unusual, I suppose for a half-breed, Mexican kid raised out here in the center of nowhere. All I have are good models, I guess. The pilots are college grads. The same for Mr. G. of course. I have the same tutor that Mr. G's boys had – Adam and Benny – Mr. Clark – in his sixties now, I suppose. I like him a lot. He's a painter. Well known in these parts at least for his desert-scapes. I paint too, but I'm nowhere as good as Mr. Clark."

"Mr. Clark have a first name?"

"Yeah. Get this! Kent. Kent Clark. When I was little I wondered if he was really Superman, who was usually disguised as Clark Kent, but for some reason re-disguised here as Kent Clark. A bit complicated and convoluted but I bet you get the idea."

"Indeed! What did you decide, by the way?"

"Decide about?"

"Superman?"

"I saw him prick his finger sewing on a button once and that pretty well shot the fantasy."

"Girlfriend?"

"Me or him?"

"You!"

"I wish! Not many fair young maidens come riding by out here on runaway steeds needing to be saved."

"I come back to it again. You have a wonderful way with words."

He grinned.

"Thanks. My goal is to become a famous writer and illustrate my own books. Mr. Clark says I need to write less flamboyantly and paint more flamboyantly. I guess those things come with practice. I figure if I know a dollar word I should use it. He says a couple of quarter words are better if I want to make sure my readers all understand what I'm saying. It's really hard to resist, though."

"A Herculean obstacle to surmount, you contend?"

Again, the boy grinned.

"Yes, Sir, a hard thing to fix."

They chuckled at their little game of word play.

"I'll have to hook you up with Flint sometime. He loves to work with young writers and just between you and me sometimes he, too, throws in those irresistible dollar words you were speaking about

"Wow! That would be awesome! I'm going to hold you to that."

They pulled to a stop in front of the house. Carlos deposited Masters and two of his bags just inside the main entrance hall promising to be right back with the third and take his things to his room. Claire rushed in to greet the old gentleman.

"Oh! Ray! Ray! Ray!" she said administering a lingering hug. "Thank you for coming. I feel better, already."

"Good to see you again. How is it that you and I are the only people I know who haven't aged one whit during the past three decades?"

Claire blushed and released herself. Carlos returned with the final bag.

"Which room?" the boy asked.

"The south guest suite on the west wing. You be careful with his things, now."

She turned back to Masters.

"We've held lunch for you. Mr. Gabriel wants to see you at two."

"Thank you. Let me get out of my traveling clothes and into something southwest-comfortable."

"Carlos will show you the way. Too much room in here if you ask me. It's like running the Dallas airport getting from



one end to the other. I'm thinking of putting in for a set of rollerblades."

They exchanged smiles and Masters followed Carlos across a huge, red-tiled, living room, into a hall that he would later learn encircled the outside of the house insulating the inner rooms from the relentless heat of the days and then recycling it to warm the chill of the nights. Masters' suite, being at the end of the hall, had outside windows to the west and south in addition to the skylights present in the interior rooms.

Carlos helped unpack while Masters released his bulk from the clutches of a twelve-button vest and donned a flowered shirt and summer weight baggy slacks.

"Much better," he said at last. "Thanks for all your help. Have the others arrived yet?"

"The relatives? Goodness no! They are required to check in on Monday – today – but for most of them that means 11:59 p.m. They don't want to be here one second longer than Mr. Gabriel requires."

"You understand their reluctance?"

"I've been told. Can't really understand it – the things he has supposedly done to them. Like I said, he's always been a nice guy around me – generous even. I don't dispute the stories, mind you; I just don't understand it."

"Does he ever talk about his relatives?"

"Never, well sometimes he recalls stories about his sons, Adam and Benny, when they were little kids. Mostly how they fought downright bloody battles from the moment Benny was able to steady himself on all fours. That's about all."

"Have you eaten yet," Masters asked indicating he was ready to leave.

"Have I eaten yet, when?" Carlos joked.

"Yes, I see. If more than ten minutes have passed you're ready to begin all over again. And never gain an ounce. Oh, to be sixteen again!"

"And that would have been about fifty years ago, if I may be so bold as to hazard a guess."

"You sweet young thing! Make it sixty and you'll be a good deal closer."

"You and Mr. Gabriel are virtual contemporaries then. He will celebrate his 70th in August. I must say you have it all over him in how spry you seem to be. Not at all seventyish, Sir, and I mean that all quite truthfully."

"I and my spryness thank you and please call me Ray. It fools me into thinking I'm actually younger than my driver's license suggests."

"I knew you'd get around to the Ray thing. The books!"

Carlos smiled his way down the hall toward the kitchen.

"Claire will have you set up in the kitchen since she says you will prefer it to the starkness of the dining room. I assume that's okay."

"You assume properly. Claire has a good memory."

"You'll think good memory when you see all the goodies the women have cooked, baked, and squeezed for you, Sir . . . Ray. I'll get that yet. Oh, by the way. Here's the first installment on the case of Raspberry Twisters she got in for you. The rest are in your middle, dresser drawer."

Carlos removed a pack from his back pocket.

"I was supposed to give them to you when we first met. Oops!"

"She'll never hear about the delay from me, young man."

Carlos nodded and smiled. Masters was no different than he had expected.

They entered the Kitchen – unexpectedly cozy compared to the large, stark, clean-lined rooms Masters had seen up to that point. It had the look of a traditional, Midwestern, kitchen with space for a large round table in one corner separated from the rest by a breakfast island.

An attractive, petite, dark haired, woman in her mid-thirties approached as the two entered. Carlos went to her and kissed her cheek.

"Mr. Masters this is my beautiful mother, Maria Ramirez. Mama this is Mr. Raymond Masters. He will insist that you call him Ray."

"Claire forewarned me, Ray. It's really good to meet you and to have you here. If Carlos becomes a bother, tell him to vamoose. He knows his Spanish every bit as well as his English."

"Ah. Bilingual."

"Trilingual if you count pig Latin," Carlos joked.

"Iway ightmay avehay ownknay atthay away ayfulplay adlay ikelay ouyay ouldway ebay intoway Igpay Atinlay," Masters said. (I might have known that a playful lad like you would be into Pig Latin.)

"Andway Iway ightmay avehay unsuspectedsay ethay amesay ofway ouyay." (And I might have suspected the same of you.)

"Suspected kid or playful, do you mean?" Masters asked sustaining the lightness of the moment.

"Both, it appears, Sir . . . Ray."

Masters smiled and patted the boy on his back.

"Close as I can come to Pig Latin is a Cesar salad, and ham sandwiches with lemonade," Maria said.

"I'll swap your offering for your son's any day of the week," Masters said. "Although I must agree that ham and Cesar do have to be in some way related to Pig Latin."

The smile exchanged indicated that at least Carlos and Masters enjoyed his little attempt at humor.

The plates were filled and Carlos delivered them to the table where Masters had seated himself. The boy hesitated.

"I hope you are going to join me, son," he said sensing the dilemma. "I hate to eat alone – although I have been known to do so on occasion."

It was the message Carlos was waiting for and he sat. Soon his mother and Claire also joined them, sipping cold drinks of their own.

"I take it that the reason for my presence here is no secret?"

"No. It isn't," Claire said glancing among the others.

"Well, then, fill me in on the details. You mentioned a threat?"

The others looked to Claire to tell the story.

"In the mail on June 4th was a letter with no return address. Thinkin' it was junk mail I almost threw it out but then noticed it had a first-class stamp so I put it in Mr. G's stack and took it to him in his room like usual. He has me open everything and read most of it to him. It's hard for him to hold things – his arthritis.

"Well, I saved that for last and explained I didn't know if it was even anything worth lookin' at. He had me open it and read it. It was all typed up fancy like with a border and fireworks goin' off up the right side – like computer stuff I suppose. Anyway, it was just two sentences: This Fourth of July will finally be the true Independence Day for the Gabriel heirs. But some of the visitors and help will get wasted."

"Mr. G. just nodded and showed no emotion one way or the other. He seldom does show emotion but it was all so clear that somebody was warnin' him they were going to kill him – and probably the rest of us – you'd a thought he'd a reacted someway, wouldn't you?"

"I see what you mean. You have the letter and envelope?"

"I do. Mr. G. said for me to keep it in a safe place in case anything did happen. That was when I convinced him to let me contact you. At first, he was all out against it – you, I mean. Then about three hours later he called me to his room and said he'd rethought it and gave me the retainer check and said to have you arrive on the first – today. It was our safety – not his – that I think turned his thinking."

"You have handled the letter carefully, I am sure."

"We worked together before, remember. I knew enough to keep my fingers off a it once I knew what it was. I'll get it for you after you finish lunch."

Masters nodded. Carlos seemed suddenly restless. Masters addressed the women.

"Do you have ETA's for the relatives?"

"All be here by mid-night," Maria said. "There rooms are ready – always use the same ones. Some years ago, Mr. G. actually had name plates installed on the doors – who knows what was really behind it."

"Tell me about them – the relatives not the rooms."

It garnered smiles all around.

Claire began, looking to Marie for help from time to time.

"Adam is the oldest son. Early thirties. He owns a small company that manufactures storm windows and screens. Advertises on TV and through the mail. He's well known as the Screen Man all over the southwest. Once had a major

garage door company but word is Mr. G. run him out of business. Never married.

"Benny's ten months younger and teaches science in a private boy's school. Never married either. Was onto some super medical breakthrough in a lab where he worked right out of college but Mr. G. bought out the company and shut down the project before he could finish his work."

"Worth is the brother just younger than Simon and they never got along, the way I hear it. Fought bloody battles over girlfriends and things as kids. Worth had a booming, state-wide, laundry service in Iowa and Mr. G started one that ran him out of business. He managed a branch of Mr. G's operation up there for a few years but now he and his wife are retired. One son. No grandkids."

"Annabelle Smith is his oldest sister. Mr. G. ran her husband out of business. He was a rancher and Mr. G. somehow bought up the rights to the water he needed and he went bankrupt. They're livin' on social security near Reno.

"Bea, Beatrice Foster, is married to Jay, Mr. G's attorney. They're the only ones who seem to have never got hurt by Simon. Jay works his keister off to please Mr. G so he earns every penny he gets. They have two kids and four grand kids – probably the most normal bunch a the lot.

"Zach is the baby of the family – seventeen years younger than Simon. Married late. Has one boy still in high school – about the same age as Carlos. His wife got ill and ran up huge medical bills before she died. He borrowed from Mr. G. and then couldn't repay when he lost both legs in a car accident and lost his job as a floor manager in a Casino. Mr. G. foreclosed on his home so now he and his son live in a couple of rooms up over some old building.

Carlos interjected, "I can hardly wait for Billy to get here. I really like him. Always has a smile and a joke for every occasion. He helps his Dad give music lessons and tutor kids. I guess that's what they live on now."

"Where do they live?"

"Over in Carson City, southeast of Reno. They'll drive in. I'm sure they couldn't afford to fly. Usually the first to get here."

"It would seem so simple for Simon to send his plane

for them," Masters said, fishing for some response.

He got three sets of raised eyebrows and closed mouths. They were clearly unified in their reaction though its exact meaning remained somewhat unclear.

"Fresh strawberries and homemade ice cream for dessert," Maria said, breaking the awkward silence.

Carlos gathered the plates and carried them to the sink while his mother prepared the treats. It was one 1:45. Just time enough for Masters to enjoy the final course before meeting Simon.

The phone rang and Claire answered.

"Mr. G. will meet you at the North end of the living room," she said, conveying the message. "There's no hurry. He enjoys just sitting and looking out the window. He tends to take a chill if he's out of his suite too long, however. He keeps it outside-hot in there during the day."

At precisely two o'clock, Claire accompanied Masters into the living room. A pale, frail, gaunt looking, Simon was sitting in a motorized wheelchair in front of the wall of huge, floor to ceiling, windows, a wool afghan pulled close around his shoulders. A dog, Boxer, Masters assumed, lay beside him.

"Mr. Masters, Mr. Gabriel," was her simple introduction. "Can I get you anything? Hot tea?"

"No."

It was terse and to the point – no more or less than Claire seemed to expect. She left. Simon did not extend a hand for shaking and Masters didn't force the issue with his own, thinking a shake might be painful to a man in his condition.

"Beautiful dog," Masters said, presenting his opening volley in what was usually a required round of small talk.

"Belongs to the boy. Insists on pestering me. You know about the threat by now of course," Simon said immediately getting down to the business of the moment. It had not been a question yet seemed to require an answer.

"Yes, although I haven't seen it yet. Claire said she would get it for me later."

"It will be well if you can determine who sent it."

"Your phrasing seems strange. I assumed that to find

that person was pretty much the major reason I was engaged."

"Yes. Well. I made a change in my Will and the relatives' take will be substantially affected if I am done in, as they say. Jay Foster, my brother-in-law attorney – the only person in the family I trust – can fill you in later."

"Have you been openly threatened like this before?" Masters asked.

"Now your words are strange – 'openly'? I would say this is clandestine compared to the shouted threats I've received to my face on dozens and dozens of other occasions."

"From whom?"

"Through the years, they've all threatened me. They are a bunch of wimps, really. I tried to make them strong but they didn't accept my overtures in that way. The lot of them failed to grow from adversity. I've always thrived on it. Can't understand how they all just willingly roll over and succumb."

Masters wouldn't press further at the moment but Simon seemed to harbor a very different take on his actions toward his family than they did. Could it be he really thought his devastating moves on them had been for their benefit?

"You feel certain the threatening note came from a family member?" Masters asked.

"Hadn't considered that it might be from elsewhere. Interesting. Let me think on that possibility and I'll get back to you."

"I have seen no guards or personal protection here on the grounds. That seems a bit risky for such a wealthy man."

Simon patted the right pocket of his robe.

"I carry my protection right here."

He struggled to remove an old, .22 caliber revolver – a snub-nosed six-shooter that would have been more at home in a lady's handbag in a Roy Rogers western.

"Excuse me for asking, but can a man in your physical condition actually retrieve and handle that rapidly enough to make it useful as protection?"

"I'm sure my relatives have often wondered the same thing. Probably not, really, but that will remain our secret. And, I have engaged you. I thought you were known for

protecting people."

"Actually, I usually come on the scene after some unpleasant act has been committed."

"Unpleasant act meaning a murder, I assume."

"You assume correctly. I will certainly do what I can to see that isn't the case here."

Simon raised his eyebrows. It seemed an established reaction pattern there in the Hacienda. When the three had displayed it in the kitchen, Masters figured it meant, "When pigs fly!" From Simon, however, it seemed closer to, "We'll see about that." Perhaps the two were not all that different – opposite ends of the same continuum.

"In your mind is there a front runner in terms of the threat – assuming it is a family member?"

"Worth has had the opportunity to hate me longer than the rest just by virtue of being closest to me in age. What I did to Zach was far worse than what I did to the others. It's a toss-up really."

"Perhaps it's none of my business, but you speak of these terrible things as if they were almost routine – that you are somehow blameless in it all."

"You're right. It is none of your business. What's been done has been done."

He looked out across the desert and paused before continuing.

"Every Saturday night of my life from as far back as I can remember until the day he died, my father beat me unmercifully. He said it was to make a man of me. Later I determined that it probably had done just that. When he died, I became the head of the family – inherited the business. I felt it was then my place to make men out of the rest of my clan. I wouldn't beat them of course – not physically. But I would beat them in other ways."

"It appears from what I know that instead of making them you broke them."

"Wimps. Pure and simple. Discussion closed."

Masters accepted his pronouncement and changed the subject with a smile.

"The boy – Carlos. Seems like a great kid. He certainly likes you – clearly enjoys the time he gets to spend



with you."

Simon nodded directly into Masters' face and then looked away. He gave no other response. Again, Masters didn't press.

"May I ask how you made your money?"

"Railroad. My father owned a sizeable portion of a regional railroad out here. Covered four states with no competition until the aviation industry matured and became competitive. I sold my shares at exactly the right time. The company was bankrupt two years later."

"There had been several partners, had there?"

"Just one other. Yardley Best. Son of the Englishman who came west with the railroad and built his from scratch."

"And he is where, now?"

"Yardley? Somewhere in Utah. We never liked each other. He owned seventy percent of the company and was a genius when it came to running it – in good times, at least. I was very young and let him do the work while I sat back and played. Rode in his caboose, so to speak."

It garnered the first smile Masters had witnessed from the old man and deserved and received an unexpected chuckle from Masters.

"May I ask why you have this Fourth of July gathering each year?"

"So, I can be with my family. Why else?"

His tone expressed surprise at the question as if the answer should have been self-evident. Masters nodded, seeing nowhere to go with that line of questioning. Simon continued leading the conversation down a different, though related, path.

"Zach has a son about the age of Carlos. They seem to get on well. I like to sit here and watch them play catch and swim in the pool. They spend lots of time just talking – about girls and such I imagine. Sixteen seems like a long time ago, Raymond."

He turned his wheel chair and left for his suite. Boxer followed, never having given the old detective so much as a second look. Masters sat back and reflected on the unusual meeting. He imagined he had just been privy to a rare, seldom tendered, peek at the soft and compassionate side of

Simon Gabriel.

Carlos appeared, a tall, thin, bespectacled older man in tow.

"This is Mr. Clark, Mr. Masters. Don't stand. We'll sit."

The two men chuckled at the boy's take charge approach as their eyes met and they nodded in silent greeting. Carlos continued.

"I figured you'd want to meet Mr. Clark before all the hubbub got underway around here."

"Hubbub?" Masters asked amused at the choice of word.

"I suppose I get the credit or blame for old fashioned expressions like that," Mr. Clark said. "And, I hope you'll call me Kent."

"If it's old fashioned it has to be to your credit, doesn't it?" Masters said. "And I'm Ray. I understand that you're an artist of some note in these parts."

"My protégé has been talking, I assume."

"Out and out bragging would be more accurate. I'm eager to see your work."

"It's more like my play, I suppose. I understand you dabble in art as well."

"Sculpture. Strictly for my own pleasure. I make no pretense of being good. Just for fun."

"Well, we have clay in the studio if you feel the need while you're here."

"Thank you. I'll consider it. You've been here a few years, I hear," Masters said moving on.

"I came when Mr. G's sons were just tots. I'd just finished my PhD back East. He wanted the best education available and probably preferred that I worked them harder than I did. Learning should be fun and relevant. Their father didn't understand that but allowed it. They both did well in college so I must not have damaged them beyond repair."

"I understand you're grooming both an artist and a writer in Carlos, here."

"He's an excellent student. I'll tell you a secret about him if you promise not to pass it on to him."

Masters leaned close and shook his head, assuming a serious face indicating that he would never do such a thing.

Carlos beamed at the by-play.

"I learned early on with him that the only way I could get him to do his regular schoolwork was to offer him extra credit assignments once the other was finished. It's worked like a charm for ten years."

"And here I thought it was I who tricked you into providing all those fun things for me if I'd hurry up and get finished with the boring stuff," Carlos said with a grin.

"Sometimes everybody wins," Masters said with a smile and single clap of his big hands.

Kent reached out and ruffled Carlos's hair. The boy clearly loved it and leaned into his dear teacher's hand like a puppy to his master.

Masters became serious.

"Any take on the threat?" he said forming a short, open ended, question.

"Well, of the relatives, I know the two boys best and, as you will surely find out from other sources, either of them is fully capable of making such a threat. If I may be so bold as to make a suggestion, Ray, it may be that it's not the threat itself that's significant. It may be the subtle, surreptitious, way in which it was delivered. This family yells their threats outright. No secrets about feelings – well, negative feelings at least. The idea of a threat delivered in a plain envelope and stated in such an offhand manner just doesn't fit this bunch."

"Thank you for that. The same hit me early on and Simon, himself, suggested essentially the same thing."

Kent wasn't finished.

"I imagine you'll find that of the lot of us, only three are really beyond suspicion."

"Maria, Claire, and Carlos?" Masters asked.

"Yes. Those would be the three."

"That poses a dilemma for me," Masters said.

"And that would be?" Kent asked.

"Frequently, in my cases, it's the least likely suspect who ends up being arrested for the crime."

"Oh, my! I hope I didn't jinx anyone," Kent said seemingly upset by Masters' remark.

"I'm sure you didn't. I am intrigued that you appear to be including yourself in the pool of suspects."

"I'm sure you'll find out. At the time his sons left for college – they both passed the state high school graduation exams the same year – I secured a position teaching art at a small private school. Mr. Gabriel pulled some strings and my contract was voided before I could begin. The message was that the same would happen no matter where I tried to go."

"Why would he interfere? He was willing for you to remain here?"

"He insisted that I remain here. That was his sole purpose. I've never mentioned this to Carlos."

He turned to the boy.

"I don't want you to get the wrong idea. I love having you for my student. I just thought it was time for me to try something different."

Carlos shrugged.

"Not a problem. I can understand that. You've made it very clear that you like having me around. The feeling's mutual, you know."

The two exchanged knowing glances.

"Well, unless you have something else for me right now, I'll let you get back to your painting or whatever," Masters said, addressing Kent.

They stood and shook hands. Kent left. Carlos remained behind, hesitantly, as Masters turned and studied the long, broad, view allowed by the windows.

"Can I help with anything else, Sir . . . Ray?"

"Who else is there around this place besides the two pilots? Where do they stay, by the way?"

"They have rooms at the hanger – plush hotel-like, you might say. There are three pilots, actually. They rotate so two are always here on call. He really doesn't use the plane much. Seems like a great waste of money to me."

"Okay. Others?"

"Pedro. Pedro Sanchez. He's the handyman. Fixes everything that needs attention around here from light bulbs to broken roof tiles. Been here about the same length of time as Mom. He lives in the little house on the far side of the hanger. He's probably my best friend here. I like to fix things, too. Always have."

"Married?"

"No. I thought I'd wait until I'm at least seventeen."

It was good for a shared chuckle.

"Seriously, he was once. Not since he's come to work here. Don't know the story. He's never offered so I've never asked."

"Age?"

"Early to mid-forties, I'd guess. It's never come up. I do know that his mother was from Mexico and his father from Brazil. He swears in Portuguese. It's just enough different from Spanish to confuse the hell out of all the Spanish speaking folks in these parts. Pardon that. I realize you don't use profanity. Why is that, if I may ask?"

Masters smiled.

"Profanity is a lazy man's way of speaking. Those prone to swear don't stop to think about what idea they really want to convey. They just use a generic swear word instead. That way neither they nor those who hear them truly know what message they really wanted to convey. In my line of work, I can't be that imprecise. I need to know exactly what I'm thinking and others need to know exactly what I mean."

"I guess I only partly understand."

"Here's something that should help. Every time you use or want to use a swear word, take time to think about what other word or phrase would precisely convey what you really mean."

"I'll give it a try. Thanks. That's a ... blank of an idea – a very good, useful, fascinating, thought provoking, idea."

They exchanged smiles and Masters turned to look out the window again.

"And you live where in all of this."

"Mom and I have like a min-suite – two rooms and a bath. It used to be a bedroom and a living room. Since I arrived at puberty, we turned them both into bedrooms with our own sitting areas. It works out pretty well. It's just off the kitchen to the south. Claire's room is just to the north – straight over there at the end of the hall," he said, pointing across the living room. "Mr. G's suite is to the right about half way down the hall. That's it extending south right out there behind the patio." He pointed out the window to the left.

Masters nodded.

"How has it been, growing up in this place?"

"Mostly good – great, even, I'd say. The only real downsides are not having other kids to hang with – and more recently, no girls. At this rate, I'll have slipped my first vote into the ballot box before I've slipped my tongue between a girl's lips."

Then as a second thought he added.

"Don't mention that part to Billy. I have sort of led him to believe I have lots of experience in the girl department. He has all kinds of stories about him and girls and so I guess I just concocted some of my own in order to keep up."

"And Billy, of course, may have done the same, you understand."

"No. I mean, yes. I mean, I'd never thought about that as a real possibility. Wow! Fascinating. It's almost like you might have been a teenager yourself, once, you know. Did you lie about girl stuff, too? I guess that's none of my business. Sorry."

"Let me answer it in this way. It appears you and Billy are very normal teenage boys. So was I. Enough said?"

"Enough said. Thank you for that. I guess I really miss having that kind of a relationship – with a man, a father."

He sighed deeply and eventually shrugged his shoulders. Masters felt for the lad but had no good response. They stood there in silence for some time enjoying the view and their growing friendship.

At last, Carlos turned and looked into Masters' face, still not saying anything.

"Something on your mind?" Masters asked cocking his head, signaling his readiness to listen.

"Lots, actually, but since you're clearly not sixteen and female most of that is irrelevant."

They shared another chuckle. Carlos indicated the chairs and they sat again.

"It's about the mystery of my parentage – fatherage, I guess more specifically."

Masters sat back and folded his hands allowing the boy to proceed at his own pace.

"I've never had anybody I could talk with about it. I don't mean to burden you if you'd rather not."

Masters turned his open palm in the boy's direction, signaling him to continue.

"Bottom line: I don't know who he is. Mom says she'll tell me when I turn 18 if I want to know. She always cries when I bring up the topic so I don't. I told you about my basketball player fantasy. She's always been noncommittal about exactly when she came to work here so I don't know if she was pregnant before or got pregnant after she arrived here. If it was after, there are a limited number of father candidates: Pedro – though looking at me I'm clearly half white so he probably wouldn't qualify. That leaves Mr. Clark, Mr. G. or one of the pilots. The pilots have all changed since back then. There's an outside chance she might have had a boyfriend who lived nearby but other than a few, old, hapless miners, there just aren't any white folks who live anywhere close out here in the desert."

"So, you will find out when you turn eighteen, I guess."

"I guess. Maybe. I don't want to put mom through the painful conversation, you see."

"Half of you is your mom. The other half is your father. Everybody has the right to know where both of his halves came from. In my experience, it usually provides great relief to a mother to get that burden off her chest when the proper time comes. By forcing the issue, you may provoke a few tears in the short run but be doing her a large favor in the long run."

"You're a wise man, Mr. Masters. Thank you. You've given me good things to think about. Things I haven't had to put in the pot – so to speak – before."

Eventually, Masters broke the ensuing silence.

"Do you have thoughts about the source of the threat?"

"The Independence Day reference – metaphoric, I suppose – makes me think it came from a family member. I don't really have a clue beyond that. They are all educated. I have wondered about something, though. It seems like it was written in two – I don't know what to call them – two thought patterns. The first sentence is abstract – smooth – and the second very concrete – harsh, jaggedy."

"Very good. If writing and art fall through for you look me up," Masters said. "I was immediately hit by the same

contrast."

The repeated honking of a car horn, growing louder over time, interrupted the conversation.

"That's Billy and his dad," Carlos said, his face lighting up. "I'll need to go greet them. Billy just got his license. I gotta see this."

"You run on. I'll be eager to meet them once they're settled in."



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## **CHAPTER TWO:**

### **Day One: Later in the Afternoon**

Masters was savoring a raspberry twister and enjoying the scenery from the same comfortable chair where he had been when Carlos left him a few minutes earlier. The pervasive somberness of the Hacienda was suddenly transformed by the laughter and loud, happy, voices of teenage boys.

They approached the old detective, pushing and shoving their way the length of the living room. In stature, they were the same height. Billy had the wider shoulders and more muscular arms.

"Mr. Masters, this is my friend, Billy, I was telling you about."

"I'll plead old age and remain seated, Billy," Masters began. He extended his hand and continued. "It's nice to meet you. Somebody around here has been eagerly anticipating your arrival."

"Good to meet you, Sir. Carlos has already filled me in on why you're here. It's downright scary if you ask me."

"Sometimes a threat is only a threat," Masters said, trying to allay the boys' fear.

"But sometimes it isn't!" Carlos added, an ominous tone setting his words.

"Thanks, Pal," Billy said planting a quick fist into his friend's shoulder.

"Well, I think we should be realistic about it. That's why Ray is here. He likes to be called Ray, by the way."

"Got any suspects?" Billy asked flopping into a chair.

Carlos stood behind him, still beaming about his presence.

"I only arrived a few hours ago, myself so everything is up for grabs. I'm just getting acquainted with the case. My first step will be to meet the family members."

"So, I'm one of the first family members you've met, I guess. I didn't make the threat. Now what?"

"Tell me about yourself."

"I'm almost seventeen. I live alone with my Dad because my Mom died a few years back. He and I give music lessons and tutor kids."

"I didn't realize your father was a musician."

"Piano and guitar. It's how he got his start out in the big world way back when he first left home. Played in a casino band. When it broke up he went to work for one of the Casinos and worked his way up to floor manager. Then Mom got sick and passed on, and he had the accident that took his legs, and here we are – a pair of carefree bachelors living it up in two rooms above Miss Kitty's Dance Hall."

"Are you really this upbeat about things or am I witnessing the keeping-his-chin-up version of Billy Gabriel?"

"Mostly it's the real me. Dad always says that letting bad stuff get you down can't help and always hurts so we just try to smile our ways through whatever life brings us."

"I admire you for that. I'm eager to meet your father when it is convenient."

"He'll be along any minute. You'll find him to be very well organized. A first things, first, sort of guy. Could drive you nuts if you let it. Right now, you come in second place to unpacking, I'm afraid. Carlos told him that you will want to chat with him."

"I think we'll go catch a swim, if you don't need us right now," Carlos said addressing Masters.

"Catch one for me as well," Masters said smiling.

Billy frowned and muttered as the two moved outside through the big, glass patio door:

"What's this catch a swim thing? I don't . . ."

The door closed behind them.

Claire entered.

"Need anything, Ray? Zach and Billy got here a few minutes ago."

"I've met Billy."

He pointed outside toward the pool.

"I'm expecting Zach any minute. Understand he's still getting settled in. How does this week progress, by the way? Are there activities? Meals together? What goes on?"

"Three meals a day – eight, twelve and five. Kitchen's always open. Most gather to eat together. Mr. G. joins them for the evening meal and for a while in the living room during the early evenings. That's always awkward. Real conversation is hard to come by. Then Simon leaves and everybody bad mouths him for the next three hours. There's a fireworks display every evening – every day's bigger and better than the day before. They swim and play tennis. There's a putting green east of the house and a driving range down behind the hanger. They usually go for a ride in the airplane. Then comes the morning of the 5th they're out a here like rats leaving a sinking ship."

"Does Simon spend time alone with any of them?"

"Not really. He and the two kids usually go off for a ride in the van once or twice. He likes them both."

Zach entered the room navigating his hand powered wheelchair by himself. He was a robust looking man – from the waist up at least. He had no difficulty making the chair respond to his every whim. Spotting the two across the room by the windows he made his way toward them offering a broad smile.

"Zach, Mr. Masters – Ray," Claire said, offering one of her short, staccato, introductions.

Masters offered his hand and they shook.

"I've already met your boy. Seems like a fine lad."

"He is that. A real trooper. Couldn't have made it these past few years without him. I understand that a new wrinkle has been added to our happy little get together this summer – a threat?"

"Afraid so. Two, in a way. One appears to be directed mostly at Simon. The other poses a more general threat to those who live and visit here."

"Any ideas who it's from?" Zach asked, readjusting the position of his chair so he faced Masters more directly.

"I can only say that my best first guess is some family

member. But that is just a first guess. I only arrived a few hours ago, myself. Do you have any insights that might be useful?"

"Probably not the staff, here. They represent about the only people in Simon's life who he hasn't hurt. He takes very good care of them, I'd say. You'd hope it wouldn't be his sons. That would just leave his brothers and sisters – there are four of us. On the surface, at least, just which one of us it might be would be a toss-up, I suppose. He has hurt us all in the deepest of all possible ways. I suppose you know about all that."

"I've heard second hand renditions. I always like to hear those kinds of things directly from the horses' mouths as it has been called."

"I think I'll leave you two alone, then," Claire said sensing her presence might make the conversation awkward.

Zach began.

"My wife had an inoperable brain tumor. We spared no expense in her treatment. She lost the battle nine months after the initial diagnosis. I borrowed nearly a quarter of a million dollars from Simon to cover her bills. I guess we both knew it would take me forever to repay it but we set up a schedule. I was able to meet every payment until I was in the accident. I figured at that point he'd cut me at least a little slack. On the day I first defaulted on a payment, he took possession of our house, car, boat and RV and everything in them. The only home my son and I had for two weeks was my hospital room. The folks I worked with at the casino passed the hat and the owner kicked in a sizeable chunk so we could rent the place we have now and get a new start. Between the two of us we're making our way. I hate that we have to depend in part on Billy's income, you know, but like he's told me, 'That's just how it is right now and that's okay'."

"Your tone suggests no animosity toward your brother."

"How would that help anything?"

"Yes. Well, it wouldn't of course, but very few folks understand that."

"Animosity or not," Zack added, "I'm sure I have to be high on the suspect list."

"Nothing has really happened yet," Masters pointed out.

"The threat, yes, but until some attempt at following through on it occurs there is no actual case, here."

"So, we wait for Simon to take a slug to the head and then go looking for the bad guy?"

"I hope that is not the way it plays out. I can't guarantee it, of course. I'll do what I can to sidetrack any such intention."

"Shouldn't there be a bodyguard with him at all times?" Kurt asked with an unexpected hint of compassion.

"Can you imagine your brother standing for that?"

"Not for a minute. I understand. He's hired you to protect him but he won't let you protect him. Sounds like the binds he has always enjoyed putting people in."

Masters changed the topic.

"Tell me about Kent Clark."

"A fine person. An outstanding teacher. Great artist."

"Capable of murder?"

"Who knows what any of us is capable of, Mr. Masters. Would I suspect him? No. Probably any of the rest of us ahead of him. I can't imagine what he would have against Simon."

Masters noted with interest that he apparently did not know about the obstruction of the teaching position – that was probably to Kent's credit.

"Of the four siblings, would you venture a front runner?"

Zach stopped to think and then shrugged.

"Worth is basically as vicious as Simon. They came close to killing each other in a fight over a girl once. They were both hospitalized. Simon suffered a concussion and broken bones and Worth lost the sight in one of his eyes. They seldom spoke after that."

"Who got the girl?"

"Larry Miller, actually. She called my brothers barbarians and eventually married Miller. I can't understand either of them just letting that happen. I really can't."

"You mean without taking revenge of some kind?"

"Yes. Like that. It's just not like either one of them."

"I don't suppose you happen to know where Mr. and Mrs. Miller are now, do you?"

He shook his head.

"No idea at all. I was too young to even know what was going on at the time. Worth and Simon were teenagers. I came along much later – a big surprise to one and all, I'm sure. Our two sisters were born in between."

"Why do you come to this affair?" Masters asked.

"Partly out of curiosity, I suppose. To see everybody else and watch them seethe through the week. Partly because it's required if I'm to get a piece of the pie once Simon dies. If it were just for me, I'd have stopped coming years ago. But I want Billy to get an education. He'd like to be a physician. The only way that can happen now is if some of Simon's money filters down to us."

"Not expecting to hit it rich at the casinos?" Masters said attempting to lighten things.

"Those who bet in a casino for any reason other than the pure fun of it, have to have a financial death wish."

"I understand. Of course, I wouldn't know about addictions to such things; have a raspberry twister?"

It was a private joke but still, Masters had to chuckle out loud.

There was a commotion in the front hall way. Zach turned his chair and craned his neck to see around the corner.

"Bea and Jay – my number two sister and her husband who also happens to be Simon's attorney. I suspect he only married her so he could weasel his way into the family. That may not be fair. Simon seems to trust him more than the lot of us put together. They live down in Vegas and he's here weekly. She never comes along except for this week."

"What's her beef with Simon?"

"Story is that he was way too overprotective of her when she was young and ran off dozens of her male interests during her adolescent years. I remember some of that. For as frail as Simon is now, he was strong and energetic as a young man. Few who knew him would take him on physically. There has always been a super competitive part of Simon – even when it wasn't needed. It's always been more than just winning – it had to be crushing, devastating, catastrophic. He was never a gracious winner yet never a sore loser either. He took a loss as a challenge and would drive himself until the weakness had been overcome. I suppose that's more than

you probably expected in response to your question."

"In my business, as in life, more information is usually preferable to too little. Please feel free to go greet your sister if you like. We will have time to talk more, later."

He nodded and made his way back across the length of the living room disappearing around the corner into the entry hall.

Masters turned his attention back out the window and to the boys in the pool just beyond. After an initial period of high energy high jinks they had settled into quiet, water-treading, conversation. Quite clearly Billy did most of the talking. Masters imagined the boy's worlds were as different as could be – father-son, mother-son; city, rural; girlfriends, no girlfriends; public school, private tutor. It was plain why Billy's side of the equation seemed to be infused with more wonder-filled things to talk about.

Masters had been struck by how the two of them looked alike; they could have been brothers – Carlos sporting the deeper down, natural tan of the two. Both had black hair and brown eyes. Both retained the youthful upturned nose. Their cheekbones were high and lips full. Each had a dimple in the center of his chin. No one – including the talkative Carlos – had mentioned it. Masters had to wonder why. Perhaps there was a secret, unspoken to outsiders.

A few minutes later, Zach returned with Bea and Jay. Masters stood and offered his hand in greeting.

"Zach says you're here to protect the wretched old fool," Bea said, forgoing the usual pleasantries that follow an introduction. And then, before Masters could respond, added:

"What will it cost us to pay you to leave?"

Her bluntness was both unexpected and mean spirited.

"Now, Dear. Let's not give the detective the wrong idea," Jay said rushing to offer damage control and sounding more like her lawyer than her husband.

He turned to Masters.

"My wife tends to speak her mind even when it's not called for."

"I hate him just like everybody else in this family," she went on. "That's no, big, dark, secret, you know."

Jay rolled his eyes and shrugged.



"And I had been given the impression that of the entire clan, you two get along with Simon the best," Masters said gently prodding for something more.

"As you know, I'm sure, I'm his attorney. I suppose that gives me a different basis for a relationship," Jay explained.

Masters motioned them to take seats. Zach turned his wheelchair around and left without comment. Jay continued.

"Simon loves to play games. He tends to disregard the short-term effects on those with whom he plays. He also fails to tell the others what the rules are. He expects them to be bright enough to figure them out. So far, none seems to have done that."

"You're referring to the fact that he truly believes he's helping those he hurts?"

"Figured him out so quickly? I'm impressed," Jay said.

"No credit to me on that one. Simon came right out and told me in so many words," Masters explained.

"Did he tell you about the recent addition to his will?" Jay asked.

"Recent edition? Mentioned something about it but preferred for you to provide the details."

"You need to know. He added one sentence which presents the ultimate double-bind. Its first purpose is clearly to torment and tantalize his relatives. You have to know Simon's mind. Stating it without all the required legalese, it says: 'To the person with enough guts to kill me instantly, I hereby bequeath the sum of fifty million dollars.'"

"Fifty million! How much of a dent does that put in the pot?"

"Sizeable," Jay said. "It poses several interesting questions for the relatives. If somebody else should collect that sum there won't be nearly as much to spread around as there would have been. So, do you protect him so nobody can collect? In order to get the money, of course, you would have to be proven guilty of murder so you would probably not ever be able to enjoy it. Your immediate family, could, of course."

"Do you know Simon's motivation?"

"Like I said. Devilment, mainly. He is in so much pain that he really wouldn't mind if somebody put him out of his

misery. He'd delight, though, in watching the others rushing in to see that nothing happened to him – quite a turnabout from the threats they regularly make against him."

"So, by inviting his murder he is in effect setting up a protective screen of relatives," Masters said. "He's betting no one will have the gumption to kill him but, as you said, in his condition he'll risk the slight chance that he's wrong. Any idea how or if that may be associated with the threat made against the clan for this week?"

"No idea, at all. You're the only one other than Simon and me to hear of it so far."

Masters had a thought, but didn't share it. What if Simon had set up the threat himself to see what happened? It would be like still another game giving them the opportunity to come together and work toward some common goal – or not!

"So, that new clause in the will is not generally known among the relatives," Masters said.

"Right. I am to inform each one as they arrive here today. They know there is to be a significant announcement. That explains our own earlier than usual arrival and undoubtedly, everyone else's. I'm already one behind so you'll excuse me, I need to explain things to Zach."

"Just one more thing. The help? I assume they are remembered in the will?"

"Claire, Marie and Pedro are to each receive a rather generous one percent of the final pot."

"And that would be the pot that had been reduced by the 50 mil if Simon is killed and the killer is convicted?"

"That's correct."

"Thanks for the heads up. We'll talk more, later."

Jay left. Bea remained and spoke.

"It seems to me that new clause muddies the water for you."

"And how would it do that?" Masters said smiling back at her.

"Seems obvious. He really doesn't want to be protected. It would ruin his game."

"But, he does want the rest of you protected you see."

She mounted a frown and remained silent. Masters continued.

"In his own way – maybe even his own twisted way – Simon loves you all. He won't just stand by and let someone else harm you."

Still no response. Finally:

"Hard to realize there is such a side to him," she said gazing out the window.

Masters continued.

"I take it that you and he have not gotten on well through the years."

It was really a question.

"Let me illustrate it this way. When I was four, he and I were riding alone together in the caboose of our private family train. He left the car, saying his was going to watch the view from the rear platform. Instead, he climbed up and over the top of the car to the front, let himself down between the cars, and uncoupled the caboose, remaining with the train himself. I was left alone and terrified in the middle of nowhere for several hours. And that may have been the positive highlight of our relationship."

"I assume he was disciplined for that."

"Our father beat him bloody every weekend. Simon took the view that if he was going to be punished whether he did anything wrong or not he might as well do things deserving of it."

"Your father was a tough man in all areas of his life?"

"Not really. Just with Simon. He was rather gentle with the girls and just basically ignored Zach. He didn't seem to enjoy his sons like he did his daughters."

"How old was he when he died?"

"Young. He died on his fortieth birthday. Ironically it was in a train accident."

"Can you give me more details?"

"Very few, actually. The family was traveling in our private train from Las Vegas to Reno – we had homes in both places. It was late on a Saturday night. My sister and I were asleep in our compartment when the train jerked to a halt. We heard loud voices out in the hall and went to investigate. Apparently, our father was nowhere to be found on the train. Mother, Worth, Simon and the conductor had been looking for him. The train began backing down the track in the direction

from which we had come, looking for him. Eventually he was found – dead – having been run over by the train. How he could have fallen onto the tracks was never determined."

"You were how old?"

"I was twelve. Anna was fourteen. Zach was just a new baby. Worth was sixteen and Simon was seventeen."

"I'm sure this seems to be belaboring a point that is totally irrelevant now, but what cars were on your private train?"

"The engine, of course, steam with a coal fired boiler. Behind that the tender that carried the coal. Then a small car which served as living quarters for the engineer and fireman – he shoveled the coal and kept the steam up. Then a small baggage car. After that was the combination diner and living-room car. Between it and the caboose was the sleeper with three compartments – one for our parents, one for Anna and me, and one for Simon and Worth. The conductor slept in the caboose and Kurt with our parents."

"I remember back when I was a boy it seemed to me that having a private train would be the ultimate luxury," Masters said.

"Luxurious, yes. But filthy! One day on the train and everything you owned was laden with soot and smelled of smoke."

"Ah! The burdens of wealth!" Masters said.

It garnered the first smile to grace Anne's very well preserved, sixty-five-year-old, cheeks. Whether that was due to a vigorous genetic line, creams, injections, or tucks, Masters could not tell nor did it particularly interest him. It did seem obvious that the color of her jet-black hair had probably been augmented. Jay, her equal in age, maintained a similarly youthful appearance, his gently graying sideburns only hinting at his true age. Perhaps it was something in their water. He chuckled quietly to himself.

"I understand you have two children and some grandkids?"

"A boy and a girl. Each of them has a boy and a girl. They won't be here. Both decided long ago to drop out of the sweepstakes Simon holds every summer. They are doing well for themselves. Jay and I could learn a lot from them if we'd

let ourselves."

Masters frowned and cocked his head. Bea explained.

"Money, beyond what they really need, has never been important to either of them. So, when they don't have much, it can't affect their happiness. Jay and I fret about money all the time and my husband makes a very good living.

"You seem to be the only relative Simon hasn't decimated."

"He liked my choice of a husband and early on, at least, enjoyed our kids. I've often wondered about it though. Why? Like you asked."

"Apparently, you never needed a favor from him?"

"No. I suppose not."

"And, he seemed to need or at least preferred Jay's services over others."

"Yes."

"Simon appears to lead a very simple life. Yet it seems he needs a lot of your husband's time."

"I don't know all the details, of course, but Simon owns real estate all over the western United States. He buys and sells it like a pawn broker buys and sells jewelry. It is time consuming from a legal standpoint."

"I see. Yes, I can imagine how it would be."

An elderly appearing man entered the room. He walked with a cane and was stooped. That, coupled with the black patch over his left eye required exaggerated head movements as he stopped to get his bearings. His unkempt, long, thin, white, hair blew wildly as he passed beneath the air-conditioning vents.

"Worth." Bea said, identifying him for Masters. "In his own way, he's every bit the scoundrel that Simon is. His wife never comes. Spouses are not required to attend. He's a broken man – bitter and broken."

She stood and waved him toward her.

"Worth, this is detective Masters. Simon engaged him relative to the threat thing. You know about that, I guess."

He nodded and extended his hand. Masters stood and shook it. Worth slowly eased himself into a chair.

"I'll leave you two gentlemen alone to share our family's darkest secrets," Bea said, planting a kiss on her brother's

forehead. She left for the kitchen. Masters had noted with interest the switch in her demeanor after Jay left. Bitter and cool to almost open and affectionate.

"I suppose I'm your chief suspect in the threat thing, as Bea called it."

"You? Why would it be you?"

"Simon and I didn't get along – from the day I was born, to hear it told," he said. "We fought a half dozen times a day as adolescents. And I mean fought. Later, he ruined my business just as I was ready to expand into two other states. Simon could never stand to see me succeeding. School was easy for me and he hated that. Girls always gave me the nod first. That ate holes in his gut. Looking at me now I suppose that's hard to believe – the part about me and the ladies."

"It seems lots of folks have reason to want to hurt Simon. I'm more interested in who might want to hurt the rest of you."

"Interesting. You couldn't say we have a close family but I wouldn't think any of us would have reason to hurt any of the others. Actually, it's always been us against him. I have even wondered on occasion what might hold us together if something did happen to him."

"You have no suspect in the threat, then," Masters said.

"Not really. If I could figure out some purpose in it, then I might be able to slot somebody into the scenario."

"Well, then, let's do some supposing," Masters said. "What if that purpose was to scare off some portion of the relatives so they wouldn't show up here and therefore forfeit their portion of the inheritance? Any ideas?"

"I'm afraid it could be any one of us if that were the motivation. The fewer here the more for those who are."

"How about this one: Somebody who figures it is unfair that all of the relatives are slated to share and therefore wants to scare the least worthy away and out of contention."

"Now, you pose an interesting proposition, but 'fair' is a tough concept, as you well know. It could be his sons, Adam and Benny, who think that their closer position in the bloodline should give them precedence. Or, it could be one or any combination of Simon's siblings who could think, "We were here first so it should be ours, or "Our father gave everything

to Simon and he should have spread it out among us all so the money should be ours."

"My consideration has led me to both of those possibilities as well, Worth," Masters said. "What about the employees that might say, "We are the ones who have really slaved for Simon all these years. The money should therefore be ours."

"There is some logic to it, but given the staff here it won't hold water. These are the finest people you'll find anywhere. Anyway, as I understand it, they are not included in the will. Some separate document provides for them."

Masters thought it interesting that neither Simon nor Jay had made that known, specifically. He wondered if the help knew about how their share was to be calculated. If they did, then they realized that whether all the possible heirs were left or none were left, their percentage share would be the same. The one element that would affect their take was if somebody won the prize for killing Simon. That led to another question. Did the offer to pay the 50 million extend to the help or did it stop with the relatives? He would make a note and ask Jay.

"It was a long, hard trip, Detective Masters," Worth said at last. "I need to rest before dinner, if you'll excuse me."

"Certainly."

"If I could bother you for a hand up. My arthritis tends to lull this old body into believing that whatever position it's in, is where it should remain forever."

Masters stood and helped him to his feet.

"You and Simon both with the Arthritis, I guess."

"All of us kids have it to some extent. Our mother lived in excruciating arthritic pain for twenty some years. I said I'd never live with that. I'd just end things. Easier said through the brash courage of a young man than carried out through the uncertainties of a timorous old man."

"May I ask two more very brief questions?"

"Certainly."

"Your son?"

"Bless his heart. He is mildly mentally retarded you know. After a fall down a flight of stairs when he was three."

"No. I didn't know."

"He lives with us. Just turned forty-four. Does okay in our protected environment but couldn't make it out on his own. It's why my wife never comes along. She and our son stay home. He doesn't take well to change."

Masters nodded. "The second question: Your education? You speak eloquently with a studied precision in the words you choose."

"I received a B.A. in philosophy. Simon begrudged me that as well. It's fully useless in the real world, of course. Priceless to me as a person, however. Most people look at something and just see it. I look at something and am immediately in awe of its potential, its history, its place in the Universe, and its ramifications for good and evil, for changing the course of history. Precision in making observations and in language are the basic prerequisites for precision in thinking, as you know. And without precision in thinking, humanity will simply disintegrate."

"Several times you've added that phrase – 'as you know'," Masters said. It was more than an observation.

"The Flint books. I'm an addict when it comes to reading about your cases, I'm afraid."

Masters nodded as Worth shuffled away in search of rest and, Masters surmised, a haven from the inevitable, impending, bedlam of the family gathering.

Jay returned looking for Bea.

"Left five, maybe ten minutes ago," Masters said. "Do you have moment for a couple more, quick, questions?"

"Sure. Any diversion from the forced interaction with this greedy horde is always welcomed."

He took a seat – the same he had occupied previously.

"Is the 1% inheritance clause for the staff members generally known among the relatives?"

"Not even the staff knew about it until this time last month. The relatives somehow got the idea there was an arrangement for the staff all quite separate from the Will. Simon asked me to bring them together – the staff – and explain it to them. They were stunned. I didn't go into any dollars and cents details but they understood it represented a sizeable sum – certainly enough for any one of them to retire in comfort. Unless they have spilled the beans about it,



nobody else knows. I suppose that is no answer at all. Sorry.”

“No. That’s fine. Do you know why Simon chose this time to inform them?”

“Ray, I long ago gave up trying to determine Simon’s motivation for anything. To look at his real estate dealings, for example, even the most trained eye only sees a disjointed hodgepodge. Year after year, however, he consistently posts huge profits.”

“What you’re saying is that he always knows what he’s doing and why he’s doing it.”

“Yes, that’s what I’m saying. He is compulsively organized. Nothing gets to him faster than having his routine interrupted. . . . There was a second question?”

“Yes. What limitations are there on who can collect the 50 million for killing Simon?”

“He phrased it in an interesting fashion. ‘Anyone who has been on the grounds of Hacienda Grande as a legitimate part of the most recent Fourth of July celebration’.”

“Do you interpret that to include the staff?”

“I certainly do. And Carlos if you’re wondering. Probably not the fireworks guys but that might be contestable.”

“Follow me on this,” Masters said, leaning back and closing his eyes as he often did when deep in thought. “If you were a staff member and you believed that somebody would kill Simon for the money, and, knowing that would significantly reduce your take, and if you truly felt you needed that money for someone else – a loved one, perhaps – then it would behoove you to rush in and be that killer.”

“The path you’ve presented seems logical, if that’s what you’re asking. You would have to add that the said staff member was willing to give up their own freedom and perhaps even their own life in order to carry out such a plan.”

“Yes. Interesting. Well, thank you. Like I try to keep telling myself, ‘There really is no case yet’. Some part of me clearly isn’t seeing it that way, is it?”

“In my experience, detectives are never on vacation,” Jay said. “Always looking. Always putting pieces together. Always analyzing clues in the context of what ifs.”

Masters chuckled.

“Guilty on all counts, I’m afraid. Thanks for your time and observations – professional and personal.”

Jay stood to leave. Another question entered Masters’ head.

“Is that clause actually legal? Paying somebody to kill you?”

“The way it is actually worded sets up a fund to provide for the welfare of the designated dependents of anyone convicted of murdering Simon Gabriel. I’ve had the help of the best legal scholars. I’m convinced that it will pass muster in the U.S. Supreme Court if necessary.”

“Thank you again for your time.”

Jay nodded and moved in the direction of the entry hall as Calamity Jane – or her modern-day look-alike – strode into the living room from the general area of the kitchen. In her late sixties, her skin was tan and leathery, well wrinkled from years of abuse in the sun. Her hair was closely cropped, mousy brown in color. She wore an open, decorative, red, vest over a yellow, short-sleeved blouse. Her full, brown leather, skirt, lavishly sequined in a rainbow of hues, draped midway between her knees and ankles. There were the boots, of course, basic brown with intricate flower designs up the outside tops. The neckerchief was yellow and brown; its specific pattern could not be discerned from a distance. It was an interesting mix of the rootin’ tootin’ old west and charming femininity. All that seemed missing were the six guns, and Masters had no doubt she knew how to use them. Though not necessarily attractive she was most certainly striking.

“Annabelle, I assume?” he said standing as she approached him.

Her hardy handshake was accompanied by a wide, endearing, smile.

“What gave me away? My dainty, wallflower like, appearance?”

It was a raspy though not unpleasant voice.

“Actually, I had no preconception. I’m afraid it’s strictly a matter of being the last entry on my list. I’ve met all the other women. I’m Ray Masters.”

“Yes. I knew you immediately.”

“My dainty, wallflower like, appearance?”

“No. The stash of red twisters in your left shirt pocket. That would make you right handed with a bent for making things easy on yourself. Assuming you broke out a new pack soon after lunch, and knowing most packs contain twelve, and seeing four left, I’d say your addiction requires four per hour, one every fifteen minutes.”

“Impressive! A detective?”

“A fan. Avid reader. If it’s a detective book, I’ve read it. My addiction.”

She took a seat, sat back – spreading her arms in both directions across the back of the couch – and continued.

“I know about the threat and the recent – fascinating – change in the Evil One’s will. Jay said you were brought in to keep things cool.”

“Cool? Your language is clearly more ‘hip’ than mine, I’m afraid.”

“I teach riding to underprivileged kids. I can charm you with endless strings of youthful lingo the meanings of which I still haven’t figured out.”

“What’s your take on all this?” Masters said painting what he hoped would be an attractive ink blot.

“Ah! One of your famous fishing trips. Well, let’s see. Where to begin? I hate Simon. I could gladly strangle the life out of him and, on several occasions when younger, tried to. I also tend to dislike the rest of the clan. Zach has some redeeming features and his son is a prize stallion. I like the help out here but hate the ‘out here’. They keep it freezing inside. I spend as much time as I can outside – something Simon and I apparently have in common. It’s ironic – I suppose is the word – that he is in so much pain now, considering all the pain he has inflicted on others during his miserable lifetime. You can take me off your list of suspects. I’m not going to do him in, you see, because I enjoy seeing him in such terrible pain. Snuffing him out – I volunteer some time in the inner-city, as well – would be a favor to him and I would never do him a favor. So, you see, it is my intense hatred for the man that would keep me from ever laying a hand on him. I suppose that qualifies as ironic, as well.”

She cocked her head apparently indicting she had rested her case.

“You are an interesting person, Annabelle Smith. I look forward to meeting your husband – I assume he came along.”

She sighed and dropped her hands to her lap. Her eyes became suddenly moist and a trail of tears trickled down her cheeks. Her chin and lips quivered away several attempts to begin her response. Finally . . .

“Joe won’t be coming. He passed away three months ago. Nobody here knows. That’s how I want it to remain unless it’s absolutely necessary to make it known.”

“I’m so sorry. I had no idea. You have my deepest condolences. I’ll do my best to keep it private between us. Won’t he be missed?”

“Joe hasn’t come for years. He died a broken, depressed, old man. His hatred for Simon consumed him and he wallowed in bitterness. During his last years, he didn’t even faintly resemble the man I had married and lived with so happily for so many years. This is a terrible thing to admit, I suppose, but now that he’s gone the thing I miss the most is his Social Security check.”

“I’m sorry about how things have turned out for you.”

“Thank you. You are a kind gentleman. I still have the next few days to watch and bate Simon. That should pep me up for a while. Right now, I think I’ll go tease the boys out at the pool. It’s like an annual ritual between us. They are two real sweethearts, you know. I always approach them at the pool and pretend to begin stripping, inviting them to skinny dip with me. They make predictable excuses like, ‘If you were only fifty years younger we’d take you up on it in a second.’ They know I’m playing. We have fun together. Aside from watching Simon hurting, my time with them is always the highlight of my stay.”

“Go. Enjoy. And thank you for your candor. Again, I am so sorry about your loss.”

Masters turned to watch the shenanigans poolside. This year the boys had apparently planned to turn the tables on her and nobody enjoyed it more than Anne. Although he couldn’t hear, he could imagine the patter. The boys slid into the water as she approached.

‘Hi, boys,’ she said sauntering up to them.

Dramatically, she tossed her vest aside like a stripper

approaching her pole on the runway and sat down to remove her boots.

‘Hi, Anne.’

‘I’m ready for that annual skinny dip. How about you guys?’

The boys looked at each other and nodded. Then, they turned back to her and in unison said.

‘We’re all ready. Come on in.’

At that, they each reached under the water, struggled a bit, and then tossed their suits in her direction. Anne sat back in the lawn chair and laughed ‘til she cried. She shook her head, donned her boots and vest, and stood up. Then, in a clearly unanticipated move, she picked up their suits, and went back inside as the boys jumped up and down waving and shouting their protests. Once again, Ol’ Annie had won the day.

Once inside, she dropped the suits beside the patio door, turning toward Masters as she passed through.

“Let ‘em stew for a few minutes and then, if you will, return their suits.”

Masters nodded, enjoying the little prank, and indicating that he would take care of things. He figured it needed to be at least a full twister-length, pause.

### **CHAPTER THREE: Day One: 11:35 p.m.**

The knock on Masters' door had clearly been intended only as an announcement of their arrival rather than a request for permission to enter. Carlos and Billy, clad in the boxers they wore as sleepwear, entered the suite and approached Masters in his bed. He was immediately aware of someone's presence but not until Carlos clicked on the bedside lamp did he know who it was. Shielding his eyes from the light, he worked himself back into a sitting position against the headboard. He looked at his watch.

"You do a bed check at 11:35 every night?" he said, the puzzlement at their presence showing clearly in his uncharacteristically brusque tone.

"It's Mr. Gabriel – the Simon one, that is," Carlos began.

"What about him?"

Carlos looked at Billy who continued.

"We think he's dead. There is blood. He's in his bed."

"And you were in his room at this time of night, why?" Masters said pulling back the sheet and with some effort managing to corral his less than willing bulk into a sitting position on the edge of the bed.

It was Carlos who explained.

"He goes to bed at nine. I help him get ready and see him safely into his bed. Then about 11:30 I go back and check on him, pull up the blankets – he likes to sleep under several – before I hit the hay."

"And tonight, you found what?"

Masters pointed to his slacks hung over the back of a chair. Billy reached them for him.

“When I go in to check on him he’s usually snoring. Tonight, he wasn’t. I was pulling up the covers and when I got them up to his chest I saw the spot on his pajama shirt. It was dark there in the dim light. He keeps just one small lamp on in a far corner. Billy was with me.”

“I didn’t see the spot until Carlos pointed it out,” Billy added. “You had to get down really close to see it. When I leaned down I saw right away that it looked like blood. Then Carlos turned on the overhead light and we were both sure. He wasn’t breathing. We came right here.”

Masters stood, pulling up his suspenders and reaching for his triple extra-large, profusely flowered, Hawaiian shirt – bright enough to light up the night all by itself.

“Lead the way,” he said, stepping into his slippers.

They were soon down the hall, across the far end of the living room and into the hall that lead to Simon’s wing. Carlos hesitated and looked at the others before opening the door.

“Carlos entering,” the boy said out of habit.

Masters raised his eyebrows, a silent question as to why he had announced himself if he thought the man was dead.

“Mr. G. has a sound activated recording system. When anybody enters or leaves, they are to announce it. His way of keeping track of our comings and goings, I guess. All conversations in here are recorded. Like now. It’s all being recorded.”

Masters moved right to the bed and pulled up Simon’s shirt. He searched for a pulse.

“Blood? Yes! Dead? Yes!”

He turned to the boys, his deliberate, business-like, manner immediately mellowing.

“I’m so very sorry. I know how fond you were of him. We need to call the legal authorities. What department serves this area?”

“The Sheriff. It’s five on his speed dial.”

“Really,” Masters said, a question immediately coming to mind. “The Sheriff’s services are needed out here that often are they?”

“Oh, no. Mr. G. is just a careful man. I doubt if that button was ever pushed, in fact. It’s just a precaution in case intruders enter the house or something like that.”

Masters nodded and moved to the phone on the desk in front of a draped, floor to ceiling, window.

“This is Raymond Masters, a detective engaged by Simon Gabriel at his Hacienda Grande in the desert. It appears that Simon has been killed – a bullet to the chest over his heart. How soon can you have someone here?”

“It’s a twenty-minute helicopter ride. We’ll do our best to be there by five or ten after midnight. Please turn on the yard lights. No moon up there tonight. Need all the help we can get finding you. Don’t touch anything, but then I suppose you know about such things. I imagine Sheriff Cranston will want to do this one himself. I’ll put a call in immediately. May take another five minutes to swing by and pick him up.”

Masters returned to the bed and began examining the body.

“But the deputy said not to touch anything,” Billy said clearly confused.

“This is THE Raymond Masters, Billy,” Carlos said as if defending the action. “Believe me, he knows what he’s doing and the Sheriff will understand that. Some things are best discovered immediately, right, Ray?”

“Right to the second part, at least. We’ll have to await the Sheriff’s reaction to my meddling to find out if he agrees with your first contention. Wouldn’t you boys be more comfortable somewhere else?”

“I was closer to him than anybody, other than maybe my mom,” Carlos said. “I feel like I need to be here with him.”

Masters nodded.

“Then, I’ll need your help, Billy.”

“Yes, Sir. What?”

“Go inform Jay and have him come here immediately. Don’t awaken anybody else although I imagine they’ll come out like mice after cheese once the helicopter arrives. And, Oh yes. Then, will you please wait for the Sheriff outside. Take a powerful flashlight and direct the helicopter to a spot just beyond the pool out back. I’m sure you can figure out how to do that. Then bring them here.”



“Consider it done, Sir. You be okay, Carlos?”

Carlos nodded and looked up at Masters.

“We’ll be just fine.”

Billy turned to leave.

“You might want to put some pants on, son. It will be pretty chilly outside and it was a female deputy I was speaking with on the phone.”

Masters continued his examination. Carlos took a chair across the room preferring not to watch.

“He was always really nice to me, you know,” he said to Masters as if in some sort of necessary defense of the old man.

“He was very fond of you. I could tell that from the brief conversation I had with him. You have clearly been the source of much joy in his life.”

“Thank you for that, Ray. I thought that was how it was but Mr. G. wasn’t much on giving positive feedback. When he just didn’t yell at you for something it was like the best compliment he knew how to give. I understood that and I guess he knew it. I’ll miss our drives across the desert. This morning I took him up to the top of the mountain east of here. He just wanted to sit and look out over his land – just about everything you could see to the west was his. That’s a lot of sand and mesquite.”

Several minutes of quiet followed, eventually interrupted by the unexpectedly rowdy entrance of Jay and Bea apparently arguing over who should be the first to see the body.

“Jay,” Masters said in simple greeting. “I thought you should be the first to know.”

“Billy gave us just the briefest information. How? When?”

“My guess is a .22 slug directly into the heart from very close range – probably six inches or less. He’s been dead no more than two hours, so it most likely took place during the fireworks display. Death would have been instantaneous meeting the requirement in the Will if you’re wondering.”

Bea leaned in between the two at the bedside to get a look.

“So, now we just wait for the killer to deliver his

confession and the rest of us can all go home.”

“I suppose it could play out that simply,” Masters said in response. “I doubt if it will.”

“Why do you say that?” Bea asked moving back and looking Masters in the face, awaiting an answer.

“If the killer wanted to be caught – leaving no doubt about his guilt – would he have pulled the trigger in the absence of witnesses?”

Bea remained quiet for a few minutes walking to stand beside Carlos. She pulled his head close to her in a touching, thoughtful, act. It allowed the boy’s tears to begin flowing and he reached out and held his arms around her waist. Eventually, she freed herself and turned back toward Masters.

“A confession will do, won’t it? I mean that should be every bit as good as a witness, right?”

“Depends on lots of factors. We’ll just have to see how things play out.”

A chorus of hushed voices accompanied by the shuffling of slippers was soon heard advancing down the tiled hall toward Simon’s area of the house.

“Bea, can I please count on you to keep the others away from this room? Once the Sheriff has a chance to look over the scene we will have a more complete announcement for them. That will also give Jay time to prepare a statement from the family.”

Bea left without comment. Carlos wiped his eyes.

“Carlos, we need you to flood the grounds with light for the copter. Can you take care of that, please? Perhaps the pilots and Pedro should be alerted as well so its arrival doesn’t give them cause for undue concern.”

Carlos nodded, wrapped himself in a blanket, and left. Masters took out his pocket knife and being careful not to touch the bedside table opened the drawer. Inside was Simon’s .22 revolver.

“I’m impressed. How did you know it would be there?”

“Haven’t you ever read a detective novel? The rich dead guy always keeps his pistol in his nightstand.”

The intended humor was lost in the tragedy.

Securing a pencil from the desk, Masters slipped it inside the short barrel and lifted the gun to his nose. He

moved it toward Jay who also sniffed. They nodded.

“Very recently fired would you agree?” Masters asked.

“Yes. Certainly within the two hour time frame you say we have here.”

Masters flipped open and donned his half-lens reading glasses and continued to examine the gun visually under the ceiling light in the center of the room. He frowned but made no comment, then replaced it into the drawer just as he had found it. There were two boxes of cartridges in the drawer as well. One contained .22 shorts and the other, also .22, but of a variety with which he was not immediately familiar. He would await the Sheriff before tampering with them.

It wasn't long until the unmistakable clapping whir of a helicopter grew louder announcing its imminent arrival. Masters moved to the window and opened the drapes to watch the proceedings. There were five who left the aircraft – three in uniforms and two plainclothes. Masters guessed that the taller, older, man in street clothes would be the Sheriff. Billy spoke with him briefly and then led them around the pool and inside. They were soon at the room. The Sheriff entered alone.

“Masters? As I leave and breath!” he said extending his hand to shake, the other placed firmly on the old detective's shoulder.

“You have me at a disadvantage, Sir. You seem to know me, but . . .”

“The Humphrey case. Hollywood, California. Twenty-five years ago. The scrawny rookie cop who shadowed your every move for the entire week. I believe your exact words were, “Son, you ask more questions per step than anybody I've ever known. I'm sure you're going to make a great cop.”

“Carl? Carl the mouth Cranston! As I recall you were still talking as I boarded the plane home.”

“The same. Well a few more pounds here and there, some gray in the temples, and a wife and five kids, but yes, Carl Cranston. It is so good to see you.”

“We'll make time to catch up later on,” Masters said. “It's Simon Gabriel. Shot in the heart at close range probably with the .22 caliber six shot revolver there in the drawer – it was closed and I opened it. Examined it but didn't touch it.

Been dead less than two hours. When I arrived here at 11:45 the room reeked of gun powder – thick, like it must have been at the OK Corral. So, I assume there will be multiple slugs in the body – hard to tell through the general mass of congealed blood.”

“Killer probably wiped the gun clean,” the Sheriff said, thinking out loud.

“I wouldn’t assume that. There is a chance this killer wants to be caught. I’ll explain later. Did you bring a forensics guy?”

“The best – well the best available at this hour of the week.”

He called into the hall. “Tom!”

A baby-faced, young man entered carrying two bags. He was the other un-uniformed member of the group.

“Tom I’d like you to meet an old friend of mine, Raymond Masters. What he says goes – without any hesitation.”

“Yes, Sir. Good to meet you, Sir. I assume you are the RM that Carl refers to all the time.”

“Enough chit chat,” Carl said, acting the least bit embarrassed. “First, dust the night stand and the contents of the drawer. Collect the prints. Determine when the gun was fired. Let us know when we can handle things.”

He turned to Masters as if asking if there was more.

“I suppose a paraffin test for gunpowder or whatever test you use these days. Everybody on the premises is a suspect so everybody gets tested and printed.”

“Bennett can assist you. Get him started right away,” The Sheriff said.

Tom provided the other deputy with a box of supplies and then went right to work in the bedroom.

“Somebody from the coroner’s office will be here directly. Can we send that landing specialist out to guide them in? He did one heck of a job.”

Master smiled. Certainly. He will be delighted to hear himself being referred to in that way. Masters stuck his head into the hall. Billy and Carlos had taken seats on the floor, backs against the wall. They were sharing the blanket around their shoulders.

“We’re expecting the coroner’s helicopter momentarily. Will you two go out and guide it in? The Sheriff is impressed with your skill so whatever you did, just do it again.”

The boys got up and left together.

“You have suspects?” Carl asked.

“A house full, one of whom may even step forward and claim responsibility.”

“That would simplify things,” Carl said clearly not understanding but realizing it would be explained in due time. “You say we can expect to find multiple wounds?”

“The preliminary evidence suggests that. Some things about the gun and ammo bother me. I’m eager to get a closer look. What do you know about cartridges labeled, Fancy Powder Number 4?”

“You could ask a thousand cops and none could answer your question, but you are in luck, Ray. My first beat was the movie making section of Hollywood. Those shells were developed for the old black and white westerns. Some continue to be manufactured, but by only one company that I’m aware of. Come in five loads – one to five – reflecting the amount of powder which translates into the amount of smoke and flash each one produces. They are blanks, of course. You’re not going to tell me he was killed by a volley of blanks, are you?”

“Can’t answer that yet.”

The Coroner arrived and the boys escorted her to the hallway just outside of Simon’s suite. She was forty-five, looked thirty-five, and was gorgeous in jeans and a sweatshirt. The heavily breathing boys, didn’t seem to notice the age difference. Masters and the Sheriff met her in the hall.

“What we got?” she asked, speaking directly to Carl.

“Well, first of all, the bad news. Simon Gabriel has been murdered – gunshot or shots to the heart. Been dead about two hours. Shot from within six inches away by a .22 caliber revolver.”

“If you already have that much it doesn’t sound like you need me.”

“That brings me to the good news. I’d like you to meet Raymond Masters.”

“RM in person. If you knew how many stories I’ve had

to sit through about . . . perhaps I should rephrase that . . . stories I've had the profound privilege to hear and profit from."

The three chuckled and exchanged glances. The look flashed at them from Carlos was the kind a lad got from his mother when he let a swear word slip in her presence. He didn't appreciate the levity. She went inside. The forensics officer appeared at the door and announced he had finished. He found several sets of prints on the chamber, barrel, and the handle and trigger.

Masters had some specific questions.

"Did you find prints on the casings that remain in the chambers? Were the casings from live ammo or blanks? What make and model were each of the bullets? What about the amount of residue – powder – left in the barrel? Would you say it was typical or excessive?"

The young man paled and looked into the Sheriff's face as if to scream help!

"Well?" Carl asked, underscoring the validity of Master's questions.

"I will need to examine the weapon back at the lab, Sir. Let me jot down the questions."

"You have captured the prints, I assume?" Masters said.

"Yes, Sir. Every last one on the exterior of the weapon."

"May I examine it then, please?"

It had not really been a question. The young man opened the bag and handed it to Masters who moved with it under a light in the hall. He donned latex gloves and carefully removed each casing – one at a time – and examined it.

"Magnifying glass?" he asked.

It was immediately in his hand.

"This one live or blank would you say?"

The question was repeated for each of the six casings as it was removed, examined, and then replaced. The three of them agreed that five of them appeared to be blanks and that only one of the casings was from a live bullet. Masters continued his examination and made an observation.

"Look here. The blank cartridge still in this chamber was somehow not fired; all the others were. And look inside

the chamber that it occupied, here, there seems to be copper residue although the blank has a steel casing. You'll need to check that out."

"Yes, Sir."

"Note that it would have been in the fourth chamber after the first chamber that was fired."

The Coroner appeared at the door. The boys drooled. Masters telegraphed the logical question.

"And you found ...?"

Just as you suspected. Time of death about 9:45 give or take five or six minutes. Looks like two slugs to the heart about an inch apart. I'd say one of them was fired with the end of the barrel pressed against the chest – left a clean opening. The other shot came from a few inches away – flesh torn at the point of entry. There is an excessive amount of powder in the area of the wounds – both on the shirt and clear through to the skin. One other thing that seems really strange. Come in and take a look."

Masters and Carl entered the room behind her. She pointed at Simon's left temple. Masters bent down and took a closer look. He sniffed. He nodded and then examined the area a second time using the magnifying glass. He nodded again, speaking as he straightened up.

"Two distinct bruise spots some four inches apart and each showing small rings of gun powder burn. The skin at each spot is slightly torn. The barrel of the gun would have been pressed against the skin to produce such markings from blanks."

He turned to the coroner.

"The size of the burn rings – do you agree they are consistent with the opening in a .22 pistol?"

"Right on the money, I'd say. Do you want more time with the body or shall we remove it? I assume this is an ASAP. We can have preliminaries by mid-morning if we get on our horses."

"Thank you. Yes. That will be greatly appreciated,"

Masters said.

The body was soon removed. Masters, the boys, and the Sheriff went to the living room where the others had gathered and remained. Billy went to stand behind his father's

chair. Carlos joined his mother and Claire on a sofa. Masters spoke.

“You are aware that Simon was killed. We will have more definitive information in the morning. Would anybody like to confess right now so the rest of us can go back to sleep?”

He paused and looked out over the gathering halfway expecting a volunteer. No one offered a response.

“Then I would suggest we all return to our quarters and get what rest we can. It goes without saying that no one is to leave until we have this all tied up.”

The large room was soon nearly empty as if leaving the area would allow them to escape the unpleasantness.

“I’ll leave two officers behind, if that meets with your approval, Ray,” Carl said.

Masters nodded.

“I’m not expecting any problems, but given the long-standing nature of unrestrained, explosive, emotions in this family, I wouldn’t rule it out, I suppose. Probably a good idea.”

“It will be Bennett and Black.”

Carl waved the two over to him and made the introductions. That finished, Masters went to where Carlos and the women were sitting.

“Maria, can we get a pot of coffee brewing for the two deputies who will be staying the night?”

“I can take care of that,” Carlos offered. “Mom and Claire need to get some rest. We still have this crowd of people to feed and care for in the morning.”

He kissed them both on their cheeks and sent them on their ways.

“Very nice, Carlos. I’ll join you in the kitchen in a few minutes.”

Carlos left the room. The deputies turned on a TV and took seats. Masters walked Carl to the door and watched him and his crew into the helicopter and then up into the dark of night. Pedro approached him at the door.

“I’m Pedro, the handyman, Sir. I’m wonderin’ can I turn off the lights now? They brings in the coyotes an’ rabbits. It makes fer quite a mess come mornin’.”

“Yes. By all means. Turn them off and thank you. It’s



good to meet you, by the way. I have only heard nice things when your name is mentioned. We'll talk more in the morning, Okay?"

Pedro nodded and left. The grounds soon faded back into moonless darkness. Masters walked toward the kitchen feeling his shirt pocket for a twister. It was empty. He chuckled wondering if his symptoms of withdrawal would be evident to anyone other than Anne.

In the kitchen, he approached Carlos and put his big arm around the boy's shoulders.

"It was all wrong in Mr. G's room," Carlos offered, as he continued arranging mugs on the tray.

"What was all wrong?" Masters asked moving to a chair at the table.

"The drapes were pulled. He always watches . . . watched . . . the fireworks from his bed through the windows. It's why they were set off in the valley to the west of the house like that. Also, he wasn't like I'd left him on his side facing the window. How could he see the fireworks laying there on his back with his head facing the ceiling?"

"I noticed an empty water glass on his night stand," Masters said.

"Empty. Yes. Well, I take it to him, usually when I get him into bed – along with his pills. If he's in lots of pain he uses it to take the medicine. Sometimes it's still full in the morning – then I know he had a good night. Sometimes it's empty – that means he was hurting and took his medicine. This evening there was already a glass on his table – I guess he'd fixed it, himself – so I poured out the one I'd taken in and sat the glass on the counter in the bathroom."

"Would he have taken his medicine before the fireworks were over?"

"He says it takes fifteen minutes before the pain medicine starts working. Before we go for our rides he always takes some. The jiggling he gets in the van is painful. We always wait fifteen minutes or so after he's taken it before we start. That hasn't answered your question, I know. I'd say that since this was the first night of the fireworks, and that meant it was short – they get bigger and better every night as the week goes on – I'd say, yes, he probably took it right after

I left him. He doesn't like to take it when I'm there."

"It doesn't make him groggy then if he takes it before your outings."

"I need to explain. Actually, he has two kinds of pills. One to relieve pain – the ones I was talking about – and one to knock him out when he doesn't think the milder one will do the job. That's why I leave two on the plate – one of each kind. You saw that the white one is left on the plate meaning he took the yellow one – the sleeping pill. I knew he was in lots of pain yesterday. They work faster. I doubt if he actually got to see the fireworks before he fell asleep."

"Where did he keep the pills?"

"In the medicine chest in his bathroom. I suppose that makes sense?"

"Yes. Probably a dumb question."

"When did you put them out for him?"

"Early – maybe three or so. I wanted them to be there for him if he needed them early. Like I said, he was in lots of pain yesterday."

"Are you up to talking about his gun or do you know anything about it?"

"I'm up to it and yes I know a lot about it. He had me clean it every Saturday morning. I'd break it apart, clean and oil it, and reload it for him. He always watched and pointed out things he thought I'd overlooked. I seldom had, but I just went along with it. His crippled hands wouldn't allow him to do it so watching and such was as close to doing it as he could come – making the suggestions, I mean."

"Loaded with what?"

"That's another thing that wasn't right in there tonight. He always had me load it with some special kind of blanks. He said they made lots of noise and produced lots of smoke so if he ever had to fire it, he thought it would convince the person they were real and they'd back off."

"And why not just use real ammo?"

"He knew he was frail and weak and was afraid that an assailant – that's the word he always used – could easily overpower him, take the gun, and turn it on him. It was like a 'buy some time' ploy you could say."

"I see. So the gun and the blanks should bear your

fingerprints.”

“Yes. Nobody else ever touched that stuff.”

“I found a small box of real – live – bullets in the drawer of his nightstand. What do you know about that?”

“It’s been in there for as long as I can remember. When I was still a little boy, he made me promise that I’d never touch them. I promised but then I also did open them up when he was gone. I wanted to see what there was about them that I wasn’t supposed to know about. Like little kids do I guess – tell one not to do something and they’re on it like ants on honey.”

“What did you determine when you opened them?”

“It was basically just a big disappointment. I knew no more afterwards than I had before. Fortunately, I didn’t try them out in the gun.”

Masters raised his eyebrows and nodded.

“That coffee finally smells a lot like coffee, son. I’ll help you with it into the living room.”

As it turned out that wouldn’t be necessary. The aroma had made its way down the hall and the two deputies arrived sniffing the air. Carlos showed them where things were in the kitchen and invited them to make themselves at home.

“You better go try and get some sleep,” Masters said to Carlos.

“I suppose. Lost my bunkie for the night. Billy always stays with me when he’s here. I’m sure he went back to be with his dad after the . . . whatever you want to call it.”

“Some will call it a tragedy. Others will praise it. You know how this clan is.”

The boy nodded, administered a lingering bear hug to his new friend, and left for his room. Masters returned to Simon’s quarters. Several things Carlos had mentioned raised new questions in the old detective’s mind.

First, he examined the box of live cartridges. It was a box of fifty and there were four missing. Although he did wonder why some were missing it raised no red flags. They had steel casings like the blanks. He went over to the window and placed small plastic evidence bags over the two shiny, decorative, marble ends of the pull cords. He would add those to the list for printing. He leaned down and smelled the

empty glass. Nothing. He bagged the glass as well. He would have the lab give it the once over.

Then he entered the bathroom. Spacious, neat, built to meet all of Simon's special needs. There were support bars in strategic places and a stool so he could sit in the shower. There was even a hot-air drying area, sufficiently large so he would never have to dry with a towel.

One thing was missing: the empty drinking glass that Carlos said he had set on the counter. Masters opened the door under the sink. No glass. He searched the linen closet by the door. No glass. He examined the contents of the single drawer in the counter. No glass. Perhaps in the turmoil of the evening the boy had misremembered what he had done.

But, it was the medicine chest that was his reason for being in there. It was surprisingly uncluttered, possessing none of the outdated containers of medicines for colds, flu, and wart removal typically found in such places. Of special interest to Masters were the two prescription containers – one for a well-known pain medication and the other a potent sleeping pill. It was just as could have been predicted from what Carlos had indicated.

Unlike what Carlos had indicated, the container of sleeping pills was empty – not a situation that well-organized Simon Gabriel would have allowed to occur. He made another note and slipped it into the sack with the drinking glass. He then bagged both prescription containers.

As he reentered the bedroom he caught the glint of something on the floor at the edge of the desk. His well engrained reluctance to bend over was overpowered by his bent to be inquisitive. He couldn't reach the floor. He made the ultimate sacrifice and got down on his hands and knees.

"Probably the first time a hippo has been seen in this room," he said chuckling at his little joke.

The source of his investigation turned out to be a .22 caliber bullet. Not wanting to waste the effort he had expended getting down there and would expend during the process of returning to his feet, he felt around under the desk, his hand covered with his handkerchief. Another bullet – same size. It moved him to lower his head so he could look

under the desk. There was a third.

With all three in hand, he crawled to the nearest chair and had soon (a relative term!) rejoined the clan of homoerectus. Questions flew within his mind. How had the cartridges gotten there? What were the circumstances surrounding them being positioned there under the desk? Whose fingerprints, if any would be found on them? Would it be determined – as it appeared – that they came from the box of cartridges he found in the drawer? When had they fallen, or been planted – an intriguing alternative. If planted, why and by whom and to what end?

Masters assumed for the moment that given Simon's penchant for neatness and cleanliness, coupled with his emphysema, his room was probably vacuumed daily. If that were true, the bullets had been deposited since the last time that had occurred – certainly within the past twelve to eighteen hours. Questions! Wonderful questions! Masters loved questions. Until the right ones were asked the case would never be solved.

He gathered his collection of little evidence bags into a pillowcase, procured from the linen closet just inside the bathroom door, and left, Santa Clause fashion, for his room. The lingering aroma of coffee was tempting and caused a momentary hesitation once in the hall but caffeine was not his friend at that way too early a.m. time of the day. Anyway, his urge for a twister was overpowering. Like caffeine, twisters stimulate his brain. Unlike caffeine, twisters also calm his frazzled nerves. Masters has been known to go get himself frazzled just so he could justify another twister.

Back in his room Masters took a seat in the oversized, leather covered, recliner, broke out a pack of twisters, and stared out the window up into the twinkling darkness. It was going on four. He was tired and as he gave serious consideration to just closing his eyes and remaining there in the chair until daybreak, there was a knock on his door. Unlike that of the boys' earlier in the evening, this one apparently required an answer.

"Come!" he called out.

The door opened slowly. It was Worth. Considering he was probably the one person on the grounds in poorer

physical condition than he, Masters felt obligated to get to his feet and offer assistance.

“Worth. What on earth are you doing roaming the halls at this hour? Have a seat.”

He sat in one of the two roll back chairs that matched the recliner in style and covering. Masters returned to his chair.

“I have come to confess to having killed Simon. I’m not up on such things as this. What comes next? Do you cuff me and call the coppers?”

“Next comes some conversation. Why would you do such a thing?”

“My wife and I will soon be gone and that will leave our son without a place to live. We have no savings to pass on for his care. The money from killing Simon will see to his needs for the rest of his life – and my wife’s for the rest of hers. Like I mentioned earlier, Ray, I really can’t tolerate living in all this pain. Now, I won’t have to be concerned about taking my life. The State of Nevada will do that for me. A win, win situation you see.”

“For the record, I’ll need to hear just how you went about it.”

“Certainly. I understand. Well, let’s see, while he was dining this evening I went to his room and dissolved two of his sleeping pills in the glass of water on the nightstand beside his bed. I have seen it there often enough to know where it belongs. I figured a double dose would keep him under so I could enter after he was asleep and shoot him. I did that, entering his room just as the fireworks display started. He was sleeping on his left side which made it easy for me. I took the gun from the drawer in his nightstand, put it up to his heart and pulled the trigger. Then I put the gun back into the drawer and returned outside to be with the others. Oh, that isn’t absolutely accurate. Forgive me. When I first picked it up I cracked it open to make sure it was loaded then snapped it shut like they did in the Roy Rogers and Hopalong Cassidy movies.”

“And how did you know about the gun and the sleeping pills?”

“Everybody knows about those things. He’s never

made a secret of it. Ask anyone.”

“I see. I will do that. You know, Worth, I always just hate making arrests at this hour of the day. How would it be if you just return to your room and we’ll finish things up after breakfast?”

“However you want it handled. I won’t leave the house. You don’t need to worry about that. Thank you. Sorry to have bothered you this late.”

Masters helped him up and saw him to the door.

“What was that all about?” he asked himself out loud. Major parts of his story didn’t hold water. Clearly there was to be no sleep that night. Masters’ mind began racing. He had to wonder if Worth’s arthritic fingers could have even pulled the trigger, let alone uncapped the prescription bottles and handled two small pills.

He returned to his chair, reclined it half way and closed his eyes to think.

Another knock. Another sigh, and an ever so brief inclination not to respond. But he did.

“Come in.”

It was Zach who wheeled himself into the room and rolled to a stop a few feet away.

“Do you know what time it is, Zach?” Masters asked.

“No. Actually, I don’t. But I have to speak with you. I need to confess to the killing of my brother.”

Masters wrinkled up his face and pulled on his earlobe.

“What?”

“I killed Simon and I want to confess. I waited to come to you now to make sure you will understand just how the money is to be used for Billy and his education. Will you agree to be the trustee for him?”

“Whoa! Slow down! You’re saying you killed Simon to get the money needed to send Billy through college and medical school?”

“Yes.”

Silence.

“And why would you do this, Zach? You’re still a relatively young man. Billy needs you, not that money.”

“I haven’t told anybody, but I have cancer. It’s in my liver and spreading. They give me no more than a year to live

– maybe as little as six months. Billy doesn't know. I want to get this matter settled first then I'll explain it all to him."

"Are you crazy? You want your son to go through life knowing you killed somebody for him? He'll never accept that!"

"I know him pretty well. I think he will. It was the only logical thing to do given the entire set of circumstances."

"I'll need to hear just how you went about it, then."

"Okay. Yes. I suppose you will. While Simon was still out in the living room right after supper, I entered his room, and dissolved two sleeping pills in his drinking water. It was easy to tell which pills were which from the directions on the bottles. I had a great cover story in case I was found in there. On occasion, he has let me use his shower – it's set up for us cripples and is much easier to use than what's in my suite."

"And the part about you killing him?" Masters asked.

"About five minutes into the fireworks – I was sitting in this thing at the rear of the gathering just outside the sliding patio door in the living room – the one near where you were sitting this afternoon – I came inside, went to his room, and blew his brains out with his own .22. He keeps it in his nightstand – everybody knows that. Then I went back outside and the deed was complete in less than ninety seconds."

"Was he on his side or back?"

"Side. I had to move his head to the side to place the gun against his left temple. I couldn't reach high enough from this chair to do it in the right one the way his head lay."

"And why the temple?"

"I didn't want to put a hole in the front of his head. That would look gross as he lay in his casket."

"Do you remember the color of the sleeping pills?"

"Yes. Bright yellow. So, what's next? Remember, I really think I should be the one to break all this to Billy."

"This may sound strange but I'm not going to take any action on your confession until after breakfast in the morning. You return to your room, now, and for Heaven's sake, don't say a word about this to anybody – especially Billy. Do I have your word on that?"

Zach nodded and turned his chair around.

"I'll see myself out. Thank you. Sorry for disturbing you



so late.”

“Geezzzz! Who next? Sweet little Maria?”

That time it was a light rapping – the style one might use hoping to only get your attention if you were already awake. Still standing, Masters went to the door.

“Maria? What in the World? Come in.”

She stood just inside the closed door, wringing her hands. Her face was streaked with tears from hours of crying. She didn’t look up at Masters as she spoke.

“I killed Mr. G. Simon Gabriel. I am here to make a statement, I think it’s called.”

“Come in and sit down. What kind of nonsense is this? You are not a killer. Carlos says you can’t even swat flies.”

She took a seat on the round backed chair, sitting close to the front as if only planning a short stay.

“He was in so much pain, Mr. Masters. I just couldn’t stand to see him suffering so much. When he announced he wanted to be killed, I thought it should be done by somebody who loved him very much and I’m afraid Carlos and I are the only ones who fit that. I knew I had to do it quickly so Carlos wouldn’t be tempted. He is such a good boy filled with so much compassion I was afraid he would do it. He can use the money for his education or to start a business or to see the world or to do whatever he decides he wants to do with his life. Mr. G. saved my life once, Mr. Masters. I wouldn’t have this life to give him back if it hadn’t been for him.”

“I don’t understand.”

She sat back in the chair and began weeping uncontrollably. Finally, she raised her head and looked Masters in the eyes. Her sobbing gradually stopping.

“I was being raped and he shot one of my two attackers. They had already said they were going to kill me after they had their way with me.”

There was another knock at the door.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **Day Two: Early Morning**

Masters opened his door. It was Carlos. Masters entered the hall and closed the door behind him.

“I can’t find Mom. Sorry to bother you – why you still up, anyway?”

“Your mother is inside. We are talking. She is very upset over this whole thing.”

“Let me in then. I’ll take care of her.”

“Right now, I think she’d rather you didn’t see her so upset. Parents don’t like to have their kids see that side of them, you know. They feel like they have to always present the picture of strength.”

“Okay. I see – I guess. I’d never thought about it that way but I think I understand. What shall I do?”

“Go back to your room and rest. Tomorrow will be a strenuous day around here. I need you to be ready. You’re my go to guy, you know.”

“I am? I mean, I am! Okay, then. I’ll be ready. Thank you for my Mom and everything.”

“You’re welcome. Good night.”

The boy turned and walked on down the hall nodding his head and growing in stature as he reflected on what Masters had said about their relationship.

The old detective went back inside and took his seat. Maria had regained her composure.

“If you are going to confess to this deed, I need you to tell me exactly how you did it – how you went about it.”

She flashed a quick, nervous, smile and began.

“At dinner, this evening – well, last evening, I guess – when I went to bring in the dessert, I slipped away for a minute and took a glass of water into Simon’s room. He keeps one by his bed. As I entered I saw he already had one. He likes it room temperature. I figured Carlos had already prepared it since his pills were already laid out in the little dish on the stand beside his bed. So, I went into the bathroom and got some sleeping pills – the yellow ones not the white ones. I poured out the water from the glass I brought, and picked up another empty sitting on the counter. Then I went back into his bedroom and crushed the pills into his glass with my fingers. I wet each one first. They fall apart easily when wet. I left immediately.”

“And why did you put the sleeping pills into his water?”

“So, he would not wake up when I came back later to shoot him.”

“How many pills?”

“Three or four. I was nervous. I’m not sure. Three I think.”

“And when did you go back?”

“About half way through the fireworks. It only took a minute. I went in, got the gun from his drawer, held it with both hands in front of his heart and pulled the trigger. Then I put it back and left.”

“In what position was Simon when you last saw him?”

“On his side. On his left side – like he had started to watch the fireworks through his window before he fell asleep.”

“Were the drapes open or closed?”

“Let me think. Open. I remember looking out and realizing the fireworks had stopped for some reason. I knew they couldn’t be over but it did make me want to hurry back outside. In the hall, I heard somebody up at the end by the living room so I went in through the kitchen and circled around through living room after making sure nobody was there.”

“Are you sure Simon was alive before you shot him?”

She looked puzzled.

“Yes, he was alive. I kissed him on his forehead . . . to say good-bye. His skin was warm and his eyelids moved – twitched, fluttered. He was alive.”

“One last question; did you wipe your prints off the

gun?”

“No, Sir. I knew I was going to turn myself in. Why would I have done that?”

Masters sighed one of his interminable sighs and then sat forward, open palms against his knees.

“Here is what I need you to do. Go back to your room. Get some rest – sleep if you can. Then, in the morning prepare breakfast and don’t let on to anybody – including Carlos and Claire – anything about what you have just told me. I need you to be strong. We will deal with it later. Do you understand?”

She nodded and stood. Masters got to his feet and held her close in a long embrace. He walked her to the door closing it behind her.

“Perhaps I should just leave the door open. It would make traffic control easier tonight – this morning – whatever!”

Again, he sat. Again, he reclined the chair half way. He kicked off his slippers thinking that had to be the end of the parade.

He must have dozed off because the next knock on his door awakened him. He looked at his watch. Seven minutes had elapsed since Maria had left.

“Come in, please.”

He rubbed his eyes and shifted his chair into a sitting position.

“Excúseme, por favor, señor Masters.”

It was Pedro.

“Come in. How can I help you?”

“My English is not so good as the others, here. But I would like you to take my . . . confesión . . . how you say?”

“Confession, practically the same word, you see. Confesión para qué – for what?”

He seemed surprised at the question.

“For killing señor Gabriel with the pistola.”

Masters wondered if he should begin scratching hash marks into the woodwork to keep count.

“Come and sit.”

He motioned him to the confessional – that is, to the round back chair. They sat.

“Tell me about it?”

“Just as the finalé grandé begin – la iluminación hermosa del cielo – how you say?”

“The beautiful illumination of the sky?”

“Si. While everybody watching up in the sky, I come inside and do it.”

“Tell me exactly – exactamente – how you did it.”

“I went to his – dormitorio, you say bedroom. He was asleep. I took the pistola from the cajón de la tabla - ¿usted entiende?”

“Yes, I understand. You took the pistol from the drawer of the table.”

Pedro nodded and presented the briefest smile.

“I put the pistola to his chest – como esto – like this.”

He demonstrated with his index finger to his heart.

“I looked away and pulled the trigger – I maybe pulled it dos veces, it is all like a blur – and then put it back in the – drawer, and went back outside – me apresuré.”

“You hurried back outside.”

“Si.”

“How was Senior Gabriel positioned – posición?”

“On his back.”

“Did you wipe your prints off the gun – pistola?”

“Prints?”

Masters rubbed his thumb across the soft pads on the ends of his fingers then touched them to the arm of the chair pointing to the invisible prints.

“Ah! Huellas digitales. No.”

“And why did you kill him? From all reports you and he got along pretty well.”

“I cannot tell you why. Estoy apesadumbrado, señor. Perdóneme.”

“You being sorry for remaining silent doesn’t really help me solve this case, Pedro. I need to know your motivation – su motivación.”

Pedro pursed his lips and shook his head. That decision was clearly final.

“We will need to talk more in the morning. Now, you go get some sleep. I’ll call for you tomorrow, okay?”

“No arrest me?”

“Not just yet. I need to check out some things.”

Pedro looked puzzled. Masters stood. Pedro followed his lead and – head down, hat in hands – left the room ‘mumbling’ at that point in Portuguese.

Not wanting to know the time – thinking that would limit his ability to go to sleep if it indicated only a few minutes until morning – Masters lay back on his bed and closed his eyes.

\* \* \*

It was the suddenness of the bright light bursting upon his room that eventually awakened him. Masters was a one eye at a time riser. With the left, he noticed his drapes had been opened. With his right, he saw Carlos standing beside his bed.”

“Good morning, Ray. I’m glad to see you got a good night’s sleep. I tossed and turned, myself. May not be at my peak today but I’m counting on my youthful vigor and enthusiasm to keep me alert. What’s first?”

“What time is it?”

“Seven sharp. I figured you needed to sleep in. I took the liberty to lay out some clothes. I used to do that for Mr. G. There’s a fresh towel and washcloth ready beside the shower – I just figured you were a shower guy and not a tub guy. I’ll be back in fifteen minutes with coffee.”

“Well, okay then. I see that I’m being well taken care of. That all sounds fine. When will the others be arising?”

“They usually descend on the dining room table for breakfast at 7:59. Mom has it ready to go at eight. She’s ahead of schedule this morning. Must have got up early for some reason. I’ll go roust out Billy – unless there something else I need to be doing.”

“Billy rousting sounds just fine to me. Thank you, by the way. I might have slept until noon.”

“Not according to Flint. You’re an early riser. Frankly I was a little disappointed to find you still in bed.”

“And Flint hasn’t seen the sunrise in forty years!”

“What?”

“Never mind. That’s the extent of the bitter old man in me this morning. I feel better already.”

Somewhat confused, Carlos left the room. Masters made himself presentable. Fifteen minutes later – almost to the second – Carlos came through the door, coffee in hand.

“I didn’t knock.”

“I noticed.”

“I figured since we are partners in all this I didn’t need to. I can, from now on, if you’d rather.”

“No problem for me. Mi casa es su casa.”

“More precisely that would be: Mi sitio es su sitio.”

“Ah! Yes! ‘Room’ not ‘house’. How did the rousting go?” Masters asked as he buttoned his shirt – yellow with brown palm trees that day.

“Let’s just say that I was amazed at how accurately the kid could fling a pillow without ever opening his eyes.”

“Oh. That reminds me,” Carlos said as he began making up Masters’ bed. “You remember last evening when we were talking and I was pointing out things that were not right in Mr. G’s room?”

Masters nodded as he briefly considered and quickly dismissed the idea of tucking in his shirt.

“The pillows were wrong, too. He always sleeps with two pillows. He has trouble breathing unless his head and shoulders are elevated a little. They are specially made – hard packed goose down. Really firm and supportive but still soft. Not sure how that can be but it is. Anyway, there was only one on his bed when Billy and I found him. I know there had been two earlier. I put fresh pillowcases on them. He was a stickler for cleanliness. After he gets in bed I always arrange them for him. It was always hard for him to get comfortable. There were two to begin with, alright, but not later.”

“Odd, I’d agree,” Masters said. “What would the killer want with his pillow? That does remind me of something as well. How often and when is his room cleaned – vacuumed is what I really mean?”

“Every morning right after breakfast. Claire usually takes care of that. He always sat outside by the pool and watched me swim laps – I do a hundred twice a day. Trying to develop upper arms and a chest the girls will like. Billy says it’s all come along pretty well since last summer. Now if only some pretty girls just would come along so all my hard work could be admired.”

“The rapidity of your extraordinary verbal formulation astounds me.”

"I put interesting words together pretty fast, too."

They chuckled as Masters helped him pull up the bedspread.

"You're a pretty good maid. Best Western is always looking for help I hear."

"I'm glad to know my future is assured, Sir – Ray. What was with the question about the vacuuming?"

Masters opened the top drawer of his dresser and removed the little, clear plastic, evidence bag that contained the three .22 caliber bullets.

"I found these on the floor in there – under the desk. Any ideas about how they might have gotten there?"

"No. They look similar to those in the box in his drawer."

"I checked. They are. Identical, I figure. We'll have that verified of course."

"As far as I know Mr. G never used any out of that box – fifty count I believe."

"Right again. Four are missing from the box. I found three. I need to use your youthful agility to search in places hippos can't."

"Sir?"

"A private joke between me and the hippo. I need you to give the room – particularly the floor – a thorough going over to see if that fourth one is anywhere to be found."

"Now?"

"Now would be good for me. I'll trust you to see that we get to breakfast on time."

Carlos grinned.

"If I may be so bold, Ray, it appears to me that I am in far greater need of breakfast than you. He pulled up his T-shirt and rubbed his washboard flat stomach. I'll get us there in time."

They were soon in Simon's room. Carlos was immediately on his hands and knees searching with his eyes and the flat of his hands on the surface of the Berber carpet. Five minutes later the two of them were convinced the fourth cartridge was not there.

"You have any – even way out – ideas about how the other three might have ended up on the floor under his desk?"



Masters asked as Carlos continued to re-investigate areas he had already searched.

“Eso es un puzzler,” he said shaking his head.

“My Espanol is not all that good but I assume you said that is a puzzler.”

“Correcto mundo.”

“That’s Spanish?”

“No. Fonzie from Happy Days reruns.”

It may have been the deadpan delivery. It may have been the absurdity. Regardless, it hit the old detective’s funny bone. Masters’ rotundness shook with a chuckle that rippled his being from his full, round, cheeks to his size twelve shoes.

During the moments of contagious, self-sustaining, tension releasing, laughter that followed, Carlos lay back on the floor rolling from side to side. During the process, he spied something shiny behind the right rear leg of the nightstand. He moved in closer to see what it was.

“Look here, Ray! Well, on second thought let me just tell you what I just found. A blank – like I load the revolver with. Shall I pick it up?”

“Here. Use my hanky. Be gentle.”

It was soon deposited on the desk. It seemed to be a match to those in the box.

Masters said he needed to examine the bed.

“It is probably nothing you want to view, Carlos.”

“And I’m sure it’s nothing you WANT to view, either. It’s what we detectives do. If I can’t take it I’ll leave.”

‘So,’ Masters thought to himself, ‘The boy has promoted himself from go-to-guy, to partner, to a full-blown detective. Perhaps I will soon be able to retire, after all – if my boss, there, will let me.’

The deputies had covered the bed with a black, plastic, tarp. Carefully Masters pulled it down from the top. There was just one pillow. The lower sheet was soaked with blood – by then blackened as happens with blood, air dried. Masters searched for a bullet hole in the sheet. There was none. He wasn’t surprised. A .22 slug powered by old powder would have likely lodged in the body after having been slowed down initially by the thick, tough, muscles of the heart. Yet, there was so much blood?

He replaced the tarp.

“That pillow isn’t the one he would have been sleeping on,” Carlos said.

“Explain!”

“I’m not sure how to put this. Mr. G was, well, stingy. I mean he was thrifty about things. Last Christmas one of the people or firms he had done some business with gave him a very expensive set of hand woven, silk pillowcases with southwest patterns on them in vibrant colors. One of a kind, actually. I remember the first night after he got them I had his two pillows all set up in those new pillowcases. He chastised me – in good humor but I understood not to do it again. He said there was no reason to wear out two such expensive gifts. He’d settle for one of them and one plain pillowcase from there on out. Last night, as usual, he had one of the brightly colored ones and one plain one. The pillows were stacked up. Like I said, he needed to have his head and shoulders elevated in order to sleep well. He always laid his head against the silk, patterned, one – he said it gave him good dreams. So, like I said, finding him with his head on the plain pillow case was wrong.”

Masters believed the boy but had no idea how it fit into the case. He stowed it away in his head with the gathering mass of other things that didn’t make any immediate sense.

“Tell me about this window by the desk,” Masters said, walking toward it.”

“What about it?”

“I’m puzzled by why those outside watching the fireworks did not see what was going on in here. The edge of the patio is no more than ten feet from the wall. And with even the small amount of light in here, and the darkness outside . . .”

“All the windows are one way – special reflective glass that allows light in but reflects the heat. Somehow they also prevent you from seeing in regardless of the light differential but you can always see out.”

Masters nodded.

Finished in there for the time being, they left.

Breakfast would be another ‘good news – bad news’ event for him. The food would be delicious and the old

detective would enjoy every morsel. But, once finished, he would have to begin dealing with the multitude of confessions. He would just have to find ways of putting them off for a while longer. Perhaps he could hide!

“What’s next?” Carlos said wiping his mouth and refolding his napkin as Masters lingered over one final cup of coffee.

“I believe it must be time for your morning swim, isn’t it? Why don’t you and Billy go soak your heads for a while? I’ll know where you are when I need you.”

The boys stood and left to change.

He found himself alone at the table wondering where Simon’s two sons were. He had neither seen them nor heard of their whereabouts. He asked Claire, when she entered pushing a cart she would use to carry off the remaining dishes.

“Claire. I haven’t yet met the boys – Adam and Ben. Have you seen them? I assume they made it here by the deadline.”

“Eleven fifty-nine on the head. My job to check folks in. Staggered in drunk as skunks and headed right for their wing – they had a suite of their own back when they were growing up here. Mr. G. kept it maintained for them ever since. We probably won’t see them ‘til noon.”

“Another question, if I might. The fireworks last night. Is it customary to have them the night of the relatives’ arrival? I understood they usually didn’t arrive until near midnight themselves.”

“It was like Mr. G’s Fourth of July gift to the staff, I think. That was never said but it’s what I surmised. We would always gather together and enjoy it. Most years he would come outside and sit with us that first night. Never speak, but he would be there. I think the large number of early arrivals kept him away this year. Maybe if he had been outside . . . things wouldn’t have happened the way they did.”

“It brings up another question. Who does the fireworks?”

“A company that specializes in doing displays for parties and such. They’re headquartered in Cedar City, Utah. It’s a regular arrangement. They show up about the last day

of June every year and begin setting up. I guess it's quite a complicated thing – especially the longer more lavish shows on the third and fourth.”

“Same crew each year?”

“I guess I don't know the answer to that. Really, they just come with their RV and trailer and do their thing. We seldom see any of them. I'm sure that was all according to Mr. G's instructions. He didn't like having strangers around. Carlos and Billy may know them. As little boys, they snooped everything.”

“If you see Adam and Ben before I do, please tell them I need to see them ASAP.”

“I will, but don't expect miracles. They don't comply with anybody's requests but their own.”

“So far, you haven't painted the All-American Boy image for either of them.”

“I tell it like I see it, Ray. You know that from before. I'd not trust either one as far as I could throw them. I do my best to just avoid them now that I'm not obligated to deal with them. We all do.”

“Again, I appreciate your candor. How is Maria handling things by the way?”

“Stopped talking. That's how some folks handles terrible tragedies, I guess. I see tears well up in her eyes but I know she wants to be left alone. When she's ready to talk, she'll come to me.”

“And how about you? Are you doing as well as it appears?”

“Of course, not; you know that. I just do what I need to do. We'll get through this. We're all worried about what comes next for us, I guess. This has been our home for so long. I'm no spring chicken, now, and Maria and Carlos have really never known another home. But, like I said, we'll get through it.

“Oh, I guess I have a question for you, Ray. About the fireworks. Should we call the rest of them off?”

“What would Simon have said?”

“He'd have said, 'To hell with adversity, on with the show,' or some such thing.”

“I think you just answered your own question.”

“Yes. Thank you. I’ll tell the others. More coffee?”

“Thank you, no. I’m over my limit. I have to maintain a delicate balance between caffeine intake and Twister consumption. Thank you for the supply, by the way. It was most thoughtful. I promise this will be the last question – for the time being, at least. When was Simon’s bedroom last vacuumed and who did it?”

“Yesterday morning about eight thirty. That’s the usual time. It’s my job. Yes. It was eight thirty. Carlos had taken Mr. G. outside to get some sun. Simon enjoyed watching the boy swim his morning laps. Probably brought back memories of his own youth. He sits right up close to the pool so he can watch every stroke.”

“Thanks. As usual, I appreciate your help.”

Claire clattered her way to the kitchen, the rest of the dirty dishes in tow. Anne approached. She had shed the leather skirt for tan jeans belted with a colorful, yellow, scarf, but otherwise looked the same part as before. She pulled up a chair beside Masters.

“I need your ear for a few minutes, Ray.”

She was as somber and serious as she had been lighthearted and upbeat the day before.

“I know. You killed Simon. Let’s see, I imagine you shot him once in his left temple with the revolver from his table drawer.”

Her brow furrowed. She leaned back.

“You are good, Raymond Masters! How in the World did you conclude that so soon?”

“You’re pulling my leg, of course!” Masters said. It had been intended as his humorous lead-in to ask for her ideas on the case – given her penchant for detective-type thinking.

“I don’t pull legs over such serious matters and seriously, how did you track me down?”

“Let me get this straight,” Masters said, straightening himself in his chair and turning to face her more directly. “You are confessing to having murdered Simon Gabriel – your brother, Simon Gabriel.”

“That’s right. I have a statement written up here and I’ll sign it as soon as we have witnesses.”

“Why on Earth would you have done that? Like you

said, he was your plaything – you the cat and he the mouse being playfully tortured. And yesterday you said you'd never kill him."

"Just to toss you a distraction until after the deed was done. Didn't want you trailing me last evening after the fireworks."

"I assume you have the details there in your statement, but for now will you give me the short version?"

"I waited until after the show was over and everyone was busy feeding their faces on the ice cream and cake. I've found most folks become inattentive while gorging themselves. After I filled my plate I slipped inside, went to his room – there was nobody inside – took the gun from his drawer and placed it to his temple. It was all over, clean and painless, in a second. I put the gun away and returned to the party. The pistachio was extra good this year. Did you have some?"

Masters ignored her intentionally glib question, more interested in the nonchalance with which she described her heinous deed.

"Weren't you afraid he'd awaken, or be awake in fact?"

"I saw to that earlier. I slipped into his suite when he went to the kitchen for coffee about eight. He does that regularly, though unlike many aspects of his daily ritual, it is not on a precise schedule. I waited for him in the kitchen and left as he entered. I took the last several sleeping pills from his jar in the medicine cabinet and dissolved them in the glass of water beside his bed. Someone – maybe him – had already placed two of them on a small plate on the nightstand – them meaning pills."

"A word about your motivation, please."

"Certainly."

She crossed her legs as she began.

"I'm soon to be a seventy-year-old, sun baked, prune, with no money and no will to go on. The plight of the inner-city kids I've worked with has left me depressed – despairing would come closer to the truth. I can't begin to do for those dear children all that they need. But, can you imagine what fifty million dollars in the right trust fund could do – will do, now, I guess."

“Motive, opportunity, weapon. You’ve covered all the bases haven’t you?”

“I believe I have. I’d prefer to be taken away quietly out of site of the others – especially the boys. It’s hard to know if I’ll be seen as hero or a villain by this clan. I would hate to get egged in this killer outfit – so to speak.”

“Here’s how we will proceed: You keep your statement for just a while longer. I need to check out the corroborative evidence from the crime lab so we can be certain that we have an ironclad case. We wouldn’t want you getting off on a technicality, now would we?”

“Well, no. I hadn’t thought of that. Okay, then, I’ll wait until I hear from you.”

She re-folded her papers, stood, and walked off in the direction of her room.

Masters decided on a brief field trip. He stopped at his suite to don a cap – thinning hair led to burned scalp – and made his way outside and down the gentle slope toward the site of the fireworks rigging. He found himself alone and though he knew virtually nothing about such things could see it had not been reset yet for that evening. There were three rows of low, permanent, foot thick, cement, walls or platforms on which the fireworks were set. Each was three feet high, which he assumed, made it easier for the workmen to make the preparations. As would be expected, Simon had done it up right.

Masters walked along beside the walls stopping every so often to examine this or that. He was impressed how each display item was clamped firmly in place. They were spaced unevenly along the tops of the walls with a fuse running from one to the other. It seemed a disappointingly low tech operation. Light the fuse at one end and sit back while it ignited the canisters and what have you along its route. It would have to have been a top of the line, very slow burning, timing fuse. Such fuses were made of rugged material with the gun powder twisted inside. As the powder burned it ran along the glowing fuse, though the base material was never entirely consumed in the process. Its remnants remained making its course easily tracked.

The spacing was probably somehow proportional to the

amount of time the previous display took to complete its portion of the show. That way the run-on or over-lap between displays could be controlled. Halfway down the second wall Masters noted the fuse was broken – severed. Part of it was hanging off the back side of the wall – perhaps four inches. It suggested nothing specific to him but he found it intriguing. He took note that behind where it hung was a small soot blot.

He finished making the circuit of the little walls and then paused to survey the area back up toward the house. The pit he was in was down a significant slope from the house and the length of a football field to the west. His recollection was that the fireworks had been displayed in the sky just slightly to the east of the pit – between it and the house. The physical set up was ideal. The danger of falling hot debris remained well away from the viewing area and most of the show could be seen at a gentle upward angle – no great neck strain like he had often experienced in stadiums and pastures.

He sighed, ready to start back up the slope toward the house, noting that he would not be able to match the brisk pace he had cut on the way down. He noticed a runner approaching from his left so he paused. It was a man in his late twenties clad in shorts and running shoes – both boasting expensive brand logos. He slowed and stopped as he drew near. He looked from Masters to the pit, clearly wondering about the connection between the two.

“Morning,” Masters said in his usual cheery tone, offering a broad smile.

“Good morning, Sir. Can I be of some help?”

“With the hill, you mean. No, there’s a lot of me to carry up there but I’ve always been blessed with strong legs, inexhaustible endurance, and indomitable perseverance.”

“No, I meant the fireworks area. I’m Neil. I’m in charge of the display. You were looking at it. I’ll be glad to answer any questions. It’s usually the kids – the two boys – who stop by but I make exceptions. They’re probably too grown up this year to mess with such things.”

He flashed a smile.

“Just a big kid myself, I suppose. I was just out for a walk and veered this way to take a look. (He crossed his fingers behind his back.)



Masters was always hesitant to ask case related questions of strangers when their role had not been established. He'd just offer his general interest to satisfy the young man.

"I guess I expected cables and generators and panels with buttons and switches."

"Come down to Vegas any hour of any evening and I can show you that kind of set up as well. This is really pretty simple – not inexpensive – but very straight forward in its discharge. The old match and fuse still work quite well."

"A slow fuse, I assume."

"Yes, Sir. Most of it's one and one – one inch of burn length per one second of burn time. So, here, for example, the second canister is connected to the first by twelve inches of fuse – it will ignite twelve seconds after the first one. The one over here has thirty inches after it because it takes longer to complete its firing sequence – six rockets shot out of this guy at five second intervals."

Although Masters had already figured all that out, he let Neil complete his explanation.

"You been here other years?"

"The last six or so. Beginning to feel like home. Few places have us more than just one day. It's a good gig."

"I imagine you'll begin setting up again soon, then?" Masters said fishing for a timeline.

"Tonight's show is about twice as long as last night's but I can set it up in under three hours. I don't like to get it finished too soon. Then I have to stick around and see that nothing happens to it until show time. I prefer the comfort of the air-conditioned RV."

"Looks like it would take the patience of Job to work that all out and measure and rig the fuses just right."

"It does require a very focused approach. I have lots of patience – lots and lots of patience."

He smiled.

"That's the RV you spoke of, there behind the hanger, I take it."

"Yes, Sir. A pretty nice one. Drop by and take a look any time. It's never locked. They have the very best accommodations here. Electricity, water, sewer, AC, TV, and

shade. Can't get much better than that for an RV'er."

"You do this alone then?"

"Nights of the third and fourth I'll have help. A few tricky maneuvers on those set ups. The fourth's show is ninety minutes with twelve sky fillers."

"Well, I certainly enjoyed last night and am looking forward to tonight."

"I'll make sure not to disappoint you. I'll do a big yellow starburst in honor of you and that shirt. Fifteen minutes into the show."

"I'll go begin bragging about that right now. Thank you. Hope to see you again."

"Yes, Sir."

Neil hopped, started his run on toward his RV. Masters, sighed deeply, and began planting one heavy foot before the other as he methodically picked his way back up the hill. Half way up he stopped to rest and waxed philosophical.

"Neil and I are so much alike, really. He has two youthful, agile, spring loaded legs and I also have . . . two legs."

He required the Rx of the closest lawn chair as he reached the pool. The boys were still swimming laps. Carlos saw him and stopped to talk, hanging his folded arms up over the edge. Masters looked at his watch.

"I can't believe it takes you guys forty-five minutes to swim a hundred laps. You slacking off this morning?"

Billy rolled onto his back and waved as he passed.

"Decided on two hundred this morning. Billy's always bragging about his aquatic prowess – his water skills as well – so I figured I'd put them to the test. So far, he's making a believer out of me. It's so great to have him here. I always miss him a lot after he leaves. Well, I better go or he'll be a full lap up on me."

Two things impressed Masters. First, how much the boys really did look alike and second, that Carlos had not been kidding about their lap swimming garb – or lack thereof. He sat back to relax and watched the boys as they periodically put on a sprint to impress each other. After a few minutes, Claire approached him a phone in one hand and sunscreen in

the other. She offered the phone with, "Sheriff," and the plastic container with, "Skin."

He nodded his thanks and put the phone up to his ear, struggling to hold it in place with his shoulder as he endeavored to open the copper colored plastic container.

"Masters here."

"Ray, Carl here. We're about five minutes out – Sally the coroner, Tom the forensic officer, and me. Got some interesting stuff. Right up your alley."

"And what kind of stuff do you consider to be right up my alley?"

"Fully inconsistent and totally baffling. Over and out."

It deserved and received a single, forceful, chuckle. For a moment, he contemplated informing the boys that the gorgeous female from the night before was about to land and look upon them in their natural state. Just as quickly the Imp in him dismissed the idea. It was worth a short volley of tummy, jiggling, chuckles. He began applying the soothing ointment, trying to recall how he had withstood the onslaught of those harsh rays all those years now past. Oh, yes, by staying indoors.

He watched the boys in the pool seemingly very serious about completing their laps.

The four from the helicopter entered the living room. Masters motioned them to the dining table. Maria entered with coffee and iced tea.

"So what do you have or not have as the case may be?" Masters asked, pretending to roll up his nonexistent shirt sleeves.

"One .22 caliber, lead, slug in the body," Sally began.'

"As expected?" Masters said, indicating a slight question in his tone.

"Not really. Tracing its trajectory from point of entry to its final resting place against the spine, it never pierced the heart. The shooter had to either be the world's worst shot or the best – and expertly aimed to just miss it. Adding to the mystery is the fact that the heart was definitely punctured by a bullet, in the front and out the back and eventually exiting the body just to the left of the spine some ten inches above the final resting place of the other slug."

“But I examined the sheet and mattress, myself,” Masters said. “There is no bullet hole in either.”

“That was my finding last night,” Tom added confirming Masters’ discovery.

The four of them looked at each other in silence.

“So,” Masters continued, “You’re saying there were two shots fired into the body from a gun loaded with blanks. Setting that aside for a moment let me guess that the one that exited the body left copper residue along its path.”

“Wow!” Sally said. “I’m impressed. That’s right on. Also .22 caliber I’m guessing but from the damage done I think it was a hollow point.”

“That may be lucky for us,” Masters said thinking out loud.

The others waited for more.

“Had it not expanded upon impact like hollow points are designed to do, it might not have left that residue.”

The others nodded, understanding. Masters thought out loud.

“Typically, a hollow point would stick there in the body.”

“The man didn’t weigh a hundred pounds dressed,” the coroner said. “There just wasn’t enough body mass to stop it.”

Masters nodded.

“What else?”

“I can talk about the prints,” Tom said looking around as if asking for permission.

The Sheriff nodded.

“Let’s see where to start. On the handle of the pistol, there were two sets of perfect prints. One belonged to Pedro, the handyman, and the other to Anne Smith. There was also a mass of really old, oily, under prints on the handle. They appear to belong to the boy – Carlos. Four of the casings also had the boy’s prints on them. The casing in chamber five turned out not to be from a blank as we had agreed last night before microscopic examination. It was from a live cartridge. Different powder than in the blanks but manufactured by the same company. It was of the same type as in the box of live ammo found in the drawer of the night stand.”

“Let me guess again. That casing bore the prints of Simon Gabriel.”

“Yes, Sir. Right again, Sir.”

“Question?” Masters continued. “You haven’t specifically mentioned the unfired blank cartridge in chamber four. I assume it was wiped clean of prints.”

Tom nodded and humorously, turned to Carl. “Can I expect this to just keep happening?”

“Oh yes.”

He shrugged.

Masters had a second question about it.

“I’m assuming it didn’t show marks from the firing pin – as if it had been struck but had not fired?”

“An interesting point. Yes, I mean no; it had no scrapes or indentations similar to those on the others.”

Tom returned to his notes.

“The pull knob on the night stand – not really a knob you know but a six-inch-long metal do-dad – don’t know what you call them – was loaded with prints from end to end – overs, unders, partials, completes. Basically, everybody here in the house except for Mr. Masters had fiddled with it. I did a probable sequence study. It compares which are on top of and underneath which other prints. By a system of elimination, I think I have the order in which they were laid down. No idea when, of course.”

“I’ll give this one a try, also, if I may,” Masters said, leaning back and closing his eyes. “From most recent to least recent they would be, Ann, Pedro, Unidentified or smudged, Maria, Zach, Worth, Simon, and Carlos – probably lots of Carlos underneath.”

Carl smiled. Tom nodded his head.

“Do we really need to continue, Ray?” Carl asked. “It sounds like you already have this one wrapped up without the help of the World’s most up to date crime fighting techniques and equipment?”

Masters ignored the Sheriff’s playful question.

“Tom, I need you to dust these three cartridges and this blank that I found on the floor of Simon’s bedroom. Can you do it before you leave? I assume you have the comparison prints with you – the ones the other deputy secured from of the folks here in the house last evening.”

“Yes, Sir. I’ll get to work on them as we talk, here.”

Masters continued.

"I'm sure they will be only Simon's but it will be useful to have it verified by some of those latest crime fighting techniques I've been hearing about."

"When you dusted the cartridge boxes before you left last night did you find any prints other than those of Carlos and Simon?"

"One set of unknowns on the box of blanks. They don't belong to any of the folks out here."

Masters took a small plastic bag from his shirt pocket.

"I almost forgot this one. I found this blank turned upside down inside the box of blanks. Can you print that before you leave as well, please? I need to have you verify that it had prints of both Simon and Carlos – Simon's should be on top."

"Yes, Sir. No sweat, Sir. I can do it now."

Masters turned back to Sally.

"About the barbiturates in his blood – four, maybe five, times the allowable limit?"

"About that, yes. Only one type as far as we've been able to determine. It appears they came from his empty prescription vial. Had he lived another hour the massive dose of barbiturates would have undoubtedly killed him by itself. Do you suspect attempted suicide?"

"No. Not in a million years."

He continued.

"Tom, the unfired blank in chamber four. There is no doubt that it was from the box of blanks?"

"No, Sir. No doubt – well, one in million, maybe."

"And the slug found in the body was fired from Simon's six shooter?"

"Yes, Sir. Very distinctive markings. No doubt."

Masters leaned forward, elbows on the table, looking from one to the other.

"We find that missing slug and we find our killer."

Masters reached into his hip pocket and pulled out a sack containing two sections of spent plastic cylinders he had picked up in the fireworks pit. He handed them to Tom.

"I need these dusted for prints. Probably be several sets – most of them from people who have handled them as

they traveled from the manufacturing plant to the buyer. There should be one set common to both cylinders, though, and set as overprints as you call them – the last to be set down. I need to know who they belong to.”

“Why not just tell me? This blank is just like you said. Carlos under Simon. And the three bullets from the floor bear only Simon’s prints.”

“Thanks. An old detective’s hunches don’t hold water without verification. By the way, here’s the original threat that got me here. It’s in its envelope. Do everything your fancy gadgets know how to do – prints, scents, impressions. Surprise me! The only local prints should be Claire’s.”

He turned to Carl.

“Just to be tidy, I’d like a check run on the fireworks guy – Neil somebody. Claire may have his last name. If not she can tell you how to contact the company he works for and you can go from there.”

Carl made a note and nodded, then indicated that two relief deputies would be along at noon to spell the two who remained overnight.

Masters received the written reports. The sheriff and his deputies returned to the helicopter, waved on their way by cut-off clad Carlos and Billy.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **Day Two: Mid to Late Morning**

Masters was enjoying a mid-morning cup of coffee in the chair by the window, looking out onto the patio and pool beyond. Actually, he was enjoying a raspberry twister, which he was dunking into his coffee while sitting in the chair by the window, looking out onto the patio and pool beyond. He drank coffee but to say he really enjoyed it after that first cup in the morning would be stretching the point.

Realistically, he probably wasn't 'seeing' the patio or the pool or the beyond. He was deep in thought rerunning what he knew about the case up to that moment.

Simon had been killed – shot with his own .22 caliber six-shot revolver, a relic right out of the Roy, Gene and Hoppy days of silver screen westerns. Two slugs had entered his body – one remained and one escaped – apparently to nowhere as it had not been found nor had it left any trace of its existence on the sheet or mattress. He had been drugged multiple times – the combination adding up to a lethal dose, which, given a few more minutes would have killed him all by itself. Everything about it was amateur and yet it had that professional edge.

For example, if a mere overdose of his sleeping pills would have killed him, why shoot him? Amateurs might not know the power of the pills so would rely on the gun. Amateurs might assume too many dissolved pills would have been tasted and the water not finished thereby foiling the overdosing plan. Not knowing for sure about that, one or two at a time seemed safe. Why make sure he stayed asleep?



He was feeble and essentially helpless. The weakest suspect could have easily subdued him and pulled the trigger. That, Masters thought, weighed in on the amateur side – not wanting the man to actually know who was about to kill him. A professional not only would not care, he would not have been known to Simon in the first place.

The gun had been emptied. Typically, that would indicate the killer just kept firing until the gun clicked silent – usually found in crimes of momentary passion or where there was a desire to minimize the length of suffering. The revolver had been thoroughly cleaned and loaded with blanks by Carlos under Simon's supervision two days before – a weekly, Saturday morning, ritual according to the boy. The story was that Simon only ever kept blanks in the gun, apparently, the same set of blanks for years. They were removed and then reloaded each week as the gun was thoroughly cleaned and maintained by Carlos. Clearly Carlos was the one with knowledge of the gun, the ammunition, and had regular, easy access to it.

Masters reconstructed the loads, chamber by chamber. Chamber One: steel casing from a blank with the prints of Carlos, which would be expected if the cleaning and reloading ritual was to be believed. Chamber Two: steel casing from a blank with the prints of Carlos – as expected. Chamber Three: steel casing from a blank with the prints of Carlos – as expected. Chamber Four: an unexploded blank with no prints and no marks from the gun's firing pin – unexpected. Also, traces of copper filings on the walls of the chamber under the casing. Puzzling. Chamber Five: had fired a live .22 bullet bearing the prints of Simon – the victim. Also, a steel casing. When fired, it missed the heart and lodged against the lower spine. Chamber Six: steel casing from a blank with the prints of Carlos – as expected. One live bullet fired; two live bullets entered Simon's body. Two guns? Masters doubted that.

The pillow was missing. Wearing a \$1,000 pillowcase it could have been the focus of a robbery, which might or might not have been associated with the murder. He would have to check and see if its mate was still safe. Any one of the relatives could have convinced himself he was due at least that much.

Then there was the parade of confessions, all with perfectly orchestrated scenarios, and unshakeable motives – well, the motive of Pedro was still up for grabs but Masters had the feeling it would also be credible. For the first three of the confessors there was no smoking-gun-type evidence left at the scene; there were the fingerprints on the drawer but any good defense attorney would have them discredited in a minute's time. The final two, however – Pedro and Ann – had left tell-tale fingerprints on the handle of the gun. Interestingly, none of the confessors – willing suspects might be a better term – admitted to having wiped their prints from the gun. Five suspects and yet Masters was certain that all six chambers had been fired. Pedro said he might have pulled the trigger twice. That would seem to explain it – except for those copper traces in chamber four, the two live cartridges, and the unexploded blank.

Trying to reconstruct Simon's part in all of this, Masters had a single, major, question. It was not whether or not the old man had inserted the single live cartridge after Carlos had cleaned and loaded the gun. It bore only Simon's fingerprints. It was not why the live bullet had been loaded into the revolver – so any would-be assailant would have the means to kill him swiftly. It was not even why he had left blanks in all the other chambers – so if the would-be killer muffed the job with the first shot he would not have second or third or what have you chances at correcting his error. Not killed properly on the first attempt, no fifty mil! Perfection! It was how Simon's mind operated.

The question plaguing Masters was why that live cartridge had been placed in the fifth chamber rather than the first. That would have required five trigger pulls before the live bullet fired. That did not represent efficiency or economy of effort, and contradicted Masters' basic theory as well as everything he thought he knew about how Simon's mind worked. Unless it had been part of the game. Masters doubted that but would not dismiss it. Masters seldom dismissed even the most remote of possibilities.

He formulated a To-Do list:

- 1 Examine the walls in Simon's bedroom for evidence of the missing bullet.

2 Find the other special pillow case.

3 Ask each of the 'suspects' about the pillow arrangement at the time they 'killed' Simon.

4 Reexamine the cartridge boxes taken from the drawer.

5- Await the report on the prints from the fireworks and threat.

6- Meet and chat with the sons – Adam and Ben.

7- Acquire and open a new pack of twisters.

The most important things first, he set out to accomplish number 7.

The window in the sitting room of his suite faced the slope down to the fireworks pit. As he sat there struggling with fingernails, teeth, and eventually pocket knife to open the new shrink-wrapped goody package, an idea began formulating in his mind. The more he thought the more forceful became the nods of his head.

Armed with a fresh pack of twisters (and a broken fingernail) he went in search of Carlos and Billy. They were playing catch near the putting green on the east side of the house.

"Gentlemen!" he said, announcing his presence as he approached from their blind side.

"Mr. Ray!" Billy said, speaking first.

The game came to a halt and they walked to meet him.

"What brings you out into our blistering, morning, desert, sun?" Carlos asked grinning at what he thought had been a little joke.

"I wasn't aware your desert had its own sun but given the heat and brightness out here I just might be convinced. Actually, I need your help – both of you. Which one of you is the fastest – runner, I mean."

"Carlos, without any doubt," Billy offered. "He's been chasing after jackrabbits out here on the desert since before he was old enough to hold up his own diapers. Me, I'm a city boy, good at taking stairs two and three at a time but not much for the straight-line stuff."

Carlos beamed but remained quiet.

"So, what's up?" Billy went on.

"I need to get an estimate of how long it takes a young

man to run – say two hundred yards out here in this terrain. You up to being timed, Carlos?”

“Sure. Like Billy said, I spend half my waking hours running from place to place out here. Shoes or barefoot?”

“Shoes.”

“Shirt or skin?”

“Shirt.”

“On the level or up and down rises?”

“Up and down. I didn’t realize there would be so many parameters to establish for such a seemingly simple act.”

Carlos grinned.

“I’ll have to go inside and get shoes and shirt. The shoes will slow me down, you understand. Will the slope on the west side of the house work?”

“I think it should be fine. Billy and I will meet you over there.”

Carlos took off on the trot. Masters set a slower pace and Billy followed suit.

“Oh! We’ll need a stopwatch. I forgot to mention it to him.”

“No worries. I have one on my watch and another on my cell phone. Cell phone’s easier to read.”

He held it out toward Masters.

“Actually, I’d like you to do the timing if you will. I want Carlos to start from down the hill – say at the place they set off the fireworks, run up to the front door of the house, and then return down to where he started. That’s about a hundred yards one way, isn’t it?”

“Yes, Sir. I’d say so.”

“With you down the slope with him, you can get the most accurate time. Okay?”

“Sure. I probably shouldn’t ask why we’re doing this, right.”

“You’ll know all about it when the time’s right – so to speak. Tell me some more about yourself. Junior? Senior?”

“I’ll be a junior. They started me a year late – said I was pretty immature for school. Glad they did. Interesting, though, I could read music without any problem at five but couldn’t tell a ‘b’ from a ‘d’ until I was eight. Still have to stop and think sometimes.”

“What is or are your instruments?”

“Violin, piano, percussion. I teach all three. I play in the children’s symphony – first violin. I play a little guitar. Like to be in a band. No time for that with music, lessons, school and all, and dad discourages it.”

He became quiet, somber even, as they crossed the patio.

“Something on your mind?”

“My dad’s dying. He doesn’t know that I know. I figure he’ll tell me when he thinks its best. I don’t know what I’m going do? We don’t have any savings. I sure as hell – excuse that – heck, don’t want to be farmed out to any of my crazy aunt’s or uncles. It’s very scary right now. I guess I’m a little jealous of Carlos. I always felt like Maria was my second mom. I suppose things out here are up for grabs too, though, aren’t they? I hadn’t thought about that until this second. Poor Carlos.”

“I’m sure things will work out. Maybe you need to press the issue with your father. It may just be hard for him get it out in the open with you.”

Carlos caught up with them, still struggling into his T-shirt.

“What you two so sober about? Claire says the fireworks will go on this week just like always.”

“We’re grieving for all the rockets that give up their lives for our Fourth of July enjoyment,” Masters said.

Carlos received the message that the conversation had been none of his business and seemed to accept it without problem. Immediately, Masters recognized the choice of the word ‘grieving’ had been a poor one on his part. Both boys sobered again. Masters pressed on to other things as they stopped at the top of the slope.

“As I’ve explained to Billy, I want you to begin down there by the pit, run a direct course up the hill and around to the front of the house, touch the front door, and run back down to the starting point. Billy will time you with his phone – I suppose the two of you don’t even recognize how bizarre that sounds – time you with his phone. Ah! Progress!”

“I’m ready,” Carlos said.

“Okay. Walk down the hill. I want those legs to be

fresh.”

The two of them pushed and shoved their way down the slope – it was how guys related. Masters remembered, suddenly saddened, that he had never had any of his own to watch push and shove their way down a hill.

“Ready or not here he comes,” Billy shouted as Carlos began his mad dash up the hill, well to Masters right. How he could smile while having to endure such a grueling exercise Masters did not understand. A few seconds later he was flying by in the other direction, yelping and adding a jump here and there that had not been a part of the prescribed activity. It would be fine. Masters just wanted a rough idea, anyway, thinking that it was data he would probably never even need.”

After all of that, Carlos still managed to match Billy stride for stride as they ran back up the hill to where Masters was waiting.

“Twenty-nine point two on the nose.” Billy announced as the two of them collapsed onto the ground.

“Not too shabby,” Masters said emphasizing it with a series of deep nods. “A few more years of regular practice and you may just match my time.”

“You used to do two hundred yards in under twenty-nine seconds?” Carlos asked.

“Goodness no! I was referring to the complete consumption of a one inch section of raspberry twister. I’m still good enough to take you punks on any time, any place.”

Masters chuckled out loud. The boys shook their heads – not really in disbelief – more in amazement that the great detective would lower himself to saying something so dumb!

“What’s next, Pard?” Carlos said getting to his feet.

“I need to see five of the folks here one at a time and for only about a minute each. If you two can get that organized, I’ll talk with them in the sitting area just inside the sliding door at this end of the living room.”

Carlos looked at Billy.

“You’d think that would be worth at least one twister apiece, wouldn’t you?”

“I certainly would think so. Little enough for the effort we are about to expend in his behalf,” Billy came back

enjoying the playful relationship that was developing.

Masters withdrew two of his precious goodies and handed them over.

“Two more upon the flawless completion of the assignment.”

He listed the people he needed to see. They nodded, chuckling and chewing their way inside. The seventy-five-degree wall of air that met them was a welcome, cooling, contrast to the hundred plus experience they had just encountered outside. Masters closed the door behind him.

Claire spotted Masters from across the big room and held up an empty lemonade glass. He nodded. A tray with pitcher and glasses soon arrived.

“Thank you my dear. You anticipate an old man’s every need.”

Somewhat unexpectedly she took a seat across from him and folded her hands in her lap. She leaned forward.

“Where do things stand?” she asked.

“Well, I have no answers but I do have every reason to believe the case will be wrapped up by tomorrow evening – sooner if a little luck replaces skill here and there.

“That’s no answer and you know it.”

“It’s the best answer I can offer. I know what had to have happened and the sequence in which things had to have occurred. I promise to keep you posted. How’s everybody doing?”

“The honest answer is everybody’s falling apart. I’ve never been around such a sorry lot of depressed old people in my life. Makes me glad I’m only sixty and have this indestructible sunny disposition. Maria still won’t talk. Zach won’t come out of his room. Worth just paces up and down the tiled hall with that steel tipped cane of his – shuffle, shuffle, click. Shuffle, shuffle, click. Could drive you mad all by itself. Ann has clearly been into something stronger than the cooking sherry and Pedro is still to finish item number one on the list I gave him early this morning. The boys seem to be doing the best or at least covering up their true reactions the best. I’m glad they have each other. They’re as close to being brothers as you can be and not be related, I suppose. I need to make funeral arrangements. You’ll tell me when I can set a day.”

Masters nodded.

“Certainly. Like I said, the case should be solved shortly. Have Adam and Ben been seen yet this morning?”

“Not by me. You know, it could be that they don’t even know about their father! In all of the hubbub I certainly overlooked telling them. Oh, my!”

“Perhaps I better go find them,” Masters said. “I have a few folks to see here first – it should only take a few minutes.”

“I’ll move on then. I should probably go along with you. I’m really the only mother sort they ever knew. I do love them both but I really don’t like either one. You understand that?”

“I certainly do. We’ll meet up in a few minutes, then. Thanks again for the refreshment.”

Claire left as Worth arrived. He took a seat.

“This it? Handcuff time? I’m ready. The waiting is killing me – strange choice of idiom, I know.”

“I still have some loose ends to take care of. I appreciate your patience with me. Sometimes things take longer than seem reasonable.”

Worth nodded, not happily, but he nodded.

“I have one more question for you,” Masters said. “When you were in Simon’s room – the last time – with the gun – did you notice the pillow arrangement?”

“I suppose. What about it?”

“How many pillows were there on his bed?”

“Two. One in a plain case and one with some wild design on it.”

“On which did his head lie?”

“The colorful one.”

“Thank you. That’s all I need right now.”

Masters helped him to his feet and he shuffled back to walk the hall.

Zach rolled up, slowly and deliberately. There was noticeably less gusto in his movements than there had been the day before. His trademark smile was not in evidence.

“Thank you for coming. I have just one more question for you. Tell me about the pillow arrangement at the time you entered the room to shoot Simon.”

“Pillows? There were two. He was laying on a colorful one – it had a sheen, like silk or satin. There was a second



under that one. Together they raised his head and shoulders as if he had some problem that required his head to be elevated – his emphysema, I assume.”

“Thank you. I’ll get back to you.”

“Have you seen my son this morning?”

“Yes. Spent some time with both the boys, in fact. He’s a fine young man.”

“That he is. How do you think he seems to be doing?”

“Better than you and all the others around here. For a group of folks who all purported to hate the man’s guts, the depression level is all of a sudden, unexplainably, hip boot high. Strange.”

Zach shrugged.

“That’s it?”

“That’s it. You better get something to eat. The ladies are keeping things available in the kitchen.”

With no further comment, he turned around and headed back in the direction of his room.

Carlos and his mother emerged from the hall that led to Simon’s suite and the kitchen. He handled her like the most fragile china doll. Still she looked broken. He looked puzzled.

“Can I stay” he asked.

His mother shook her head. He looked at Masters who spoke.

“It will just be a minute.”

He left, making his reluctance adolescent obvious.

“One quick question, Maria. How were the pillows arranged when you entered Simon’s room for the last time, last night?”

“Arranged? There were two like usual. One on top of the other, like usual. His special pillowcase – the one with the southwestern designs – was on top.”

“Thank you. That’s all I needed to know, right now. I will talk with you more, later.” His voice then took on a more commanding tone. “Your son needs you to be strong for him now, Maria. He lost a loved one as well, you know. Act like his mother!”

She looked up and nodded, straightening her carriage as she stood. Carlos returned, still clearly miffed that he had been excluded from the conversation. They returned to the

kitchen.

Billy arrived through the sliding door with Pedro, holding him by the arm.

“He didn’t want to come. I took him by the arm and he didn’t resist. I wasn’t sure what to do?”

“You did fine. Stay here for just a minute while he and I talk.”

Pedro remained standing. So did Billy.

“Pedro, I need to ask you just one more question. How were the pillows arranged on the bed that last time you were in Mr. Gabriel’s room?”

“Pillows, no. Was just one – uno – pillow. It was under his head.”

“Can you describe it – the pillowcase, I mean?”

He looked puzzled. Billy sensed the problem and came to his assistance.

“Funda de almohada.”

“Ah. Si. Blanco, white.”

“Thank you, Pedro. That’s all for now. Claire really needs your help around here, Sir. Shouldn’t you be as helpful as you can for as long as have to be here?”

“Si. Si. Gracias. Si!”

“And Billy, thanks for the assistance. I didn’t realize you were proficient in Spanish.”

“This is southern Nevada. Proficiency goes without saying – at least among the kids. Anyway, Carlos insists.”

Pedro headed for the kitchen, in search of Claire, Masters assumed. Billy was left unexpectedly empty handed. He didn’t ask the obvious question: What had been meant by the phrase, for as long as you have to be here?”

“That just leaves Anne,” Masters said. “Would you try to find her? She may be in her room, a bit tipsy if you understand the term.

Billy did the-thumb-of-an-open-hand-to-the-mouth-with-the-quick-backward-flick-of-the-head thing, indicating that he understood. He left and was soon back – alone.

“I found her. In her room. She’s in no shape to come to you. I’d suggest you might want to go to her.”

“Lead the way,” Masters said. “On second thought, lend an old man a hand up first, and then lead the way.”

She was reclining on her bed, head propped up by two oversized pillows. She clutched a nearly empty, square, bottle with both hands.

“Raymond, Raymond, he’s our man. If he can’t . . . la la la . . . then nobody can!”

It represented her greeting as the two entered the room after knocking. Billy offered to leave.

“Considering the state of affairs here, I’d rather keep you as a witness.”

“Affairs. I’ve never had a real affair, darling. Are you sure you’re up to it at your age. Are you sure I’m up to it at your age?”

“See what I mean!”

It had been an aside from Masters to the boy who nodded but still took one step backwards as Anne began fiddling – unsuccessfully – with the buttons on her blouse.

“Anne, I need you to focus. I need to enlist your detective sense. Remember back to when you were in Simon’s bedroom last?”

“Yes. We were alone but he didn’t make any advances toward me like you have. He was zonked out you know.”

“Yes. I need you to remember exactly how the pillows were arranged.”

“Wrong question, Skippy. It should have been, ‘I need you to remember exactly how the pillow – singular – was arranged.’”

“Let’s just skip that one, then. What color was that pillowcase?”

“White as the new fallen snow. White as a virgin’s young breasts. White as . . .”

“We get the idea. It was white. You’re all quite sure about that?”

“Honey, this here is the world’s greatest detective reader-abouter you’re talking to ... with ... at. Of course, I am sure. I think . . . I’ll just . . . pass out now.”

And with the fluttering of her eyes back up into her head, she did.

The two left her room.

“I’ve never seen a drunk woman before. It’s really disgusting, you know?” Billy said, visibly shaken. “I’ve known

her all my life and I've never seen that side of her. She's always so up-beat and joking with us. When Carlos and I were preschoolers, she'd let us sleep over with her, and when we did, we'd always have a party and play games and stay up too late and get throwing-up sick on junk food. She was like a one lady carnival. Definitely my favorite Aunt – or relative, for that matter. Nothing like this. All of this happened because of Uncle Simon's death – well, murder, I guess? I thought she hated him."

"Perhaps that's her problem!" Masters said. "You be okay? We can talk if you want."

"I'll be fine. I guess I just need things to do, you know – keep my mind occupied. Maybe I'll go swim some more laps."

"Maybe you need to go talk with your father. If talk won't come, then just being with him may be helpful."

"I'm not strong enough for that."

"How do you know?"

"I just know."

"And you just know, how? Have you tried and failed?"

"No. . . . You aren't making this easy on me, Ray, Sir."

"Is that how you plan to grow into a man – having people in your life who make growing up easy for you?"

"I guess I hate you for that and I thank you for that. You're suggesting that it's time to put up or shut up. I used to think when I got to be all grown up everything would finally be easy. Dad always made being a dad seem that way. I guess I missed something along the line."

"The true Greats at anything always make it look easy. Go and make being a loving son look easy, now. Okay?"

"Yes, Sir. Mr. Loving Son! Mr. Easy! Mr. Cool! I'm ready. I'll do it. Right after I go and throw up."

Masters went in search of Claire as Billy went in search of some porcelain privacy.

Claire was in the kitchen finishing up with Pedro, an apparently changed man from moments before. He left with a tip of his hat directed over Claire's shoulder at Masters. Masters winked – caught by Claire as she turned to greet him.

"I won't ask, but thank you," she said. "Time to roust out the big, bad, boys?"

Masters nodded. Claire pointed toward the front entry

hall. "East wing."

"Check my memory in a hurry, here. They are both in their early thirties – Adam the oldest by less than a year. He has a replacement screen business and Ben is a science teacher in a private school."

"So far so good. They both live in the San Bernardino area of California. Interstate 90 to 75. Made the trip lots of times myself. It's where my sister lives – Apple Valley, just north. Benny teaches at a low prestige boys' school – him being single and being there and all has raised some eyebrows among the relatives. From the number of girls the two of them smuggled into this house when they was teens I can tell you there's no reason to suspect that. Both been heavy drinkers since they left home for college. They'd have such tussles as kids you'd a thought they hated each other. Wasn't so. They just had short fuses and swung before they thought. Actually, living way out here they was about all they had – just the two kids here. Maybe that's why they always stopped just short of killing each other.

"Benny was always the smart one but nobody ever referred to it. They finished their high school studies here with Kent the same year. Went to different colleges, then Benny went on for his PhD. Neither one come close to marriage the way I hear it told. They smother me when they're here. Their poor mama died when they was still in diapers. When I arrived, they took to me like ducklings to their mother."

"You said the mother died. I understood she committed suicide."

"The facts as I know them are she fell off Devil's Rock and died. Could a jumped. Could a slipped. I suppose she even could a been pushed. Coroner ruled it suicide. She hated it out here – her a twenty-two-year-old city kid, married to a reclusive man pushing fifty. Story is that Simon wanted six kids and promised her two hundred fifty thousand for each one, payable after number six was seen safely into the world. Could be that after two she figured it really wasn't the bargain she thought it would be. It seems to be agreed though that her death was the turning point in Mr. G's life. He began his withdrawal from everybody then. Never did recover. I probably just told you more than I really know – like usual."

They turned down the hall to the east. Twenty paces later they were at a set of huge double doors. Claire knocked – some secret, rhythmic, knock. She just looked up at Masters and shrugged apparently thinking any explanation would be more confusing than none.

“Mama Claire,” came the muffled but clearly enthusiastic response from inside.

“They’ve never had a modest bone in their bodies. No telling what state of dress or undress they may be in.”

The door opened onto two fully clad, nice looking young men. Masters was essentially just ignored as they each took their turn twirling Claire round and round planting kiss after kiss on her neck and forehead. Once the celebration died down she made the introductions.

“May we step in and talk for a few minutes?” Masters asked.

“Sure, our mess is your mess.”

“Actually, as messes go this is one of the more messless I’ve experienced,” Masters said, looking around and trying to set a light tone.

There was a sitting area and they took seats.

“Beer, wine, tea, juice?” Adam said. “Sorry, we don’t have any.”

The brothers thought it had been hilarious and high fived like kids on a little league team.

“Hush your prattle, boys,” Claire said – a phrase that got their immediate attention.

Masters surmised it had been recognized as one of those parental phrases of last resort, from earlier in their lives.

“We have some bad news,” she continued. “Obviously, you haven’t heard yet.”

“You mean the wacking of dear old pop?” Adam asked. “We heard. Pedro told us last night. We couldn’t find our keys to this house of horrors when we arrived so we engaged the peon’s help. He spilled the beans.”

Ben continued.

“So how have you been, Mama Claire?”

“You two disgust me,” Claire said, standing, one hand on her hip and the other wagging a finger in their faces.

The two men looked at each other. It was Adam who

delivered the punch line.

“If we had a nickel for every time you’ve said that to us we would have no need to show up for this annual freak fest.”

“You two actually hold down real jobs out in the world? I mean, really? Do you?” Masters asked hoping to force some more mature perspective onto the conversation.

“Sorry,” Ben said. “We tend to handle tragedy with humor.”

“Humorous to whom, I have to wonder,” Masters continued.

“Sorry. What can we say?” Adam added.

“So, who done him in?” Ben asked.

“I’m working on that. Your father engaged me ten days ago, to come and look into a threat he and the family had received. Now, I find myself also investigating his death. I’m not convinced the rest of you are really out of danger yet. It could be, of course, that his death had no connection whatsoever with the threat.”

“So, this is like one of those Murder Mystery Weekends where people shell out a thousand bucks to attend?”

“This is real life, not fantasy, and I assure you that a real-life killer will be discovered, charged, prosecuted, and found guilty. Would either or both of you like to audition for THAT role?”

“So, what do you want from us?” Ben asked appearing to be the first of the two to begin taking the situation seriously.

“We had come to deliver the news of your father’s death,” Master said. “I’ll need a complete run down of where you were between seven and midnight last evening. I need names, places, witnesses, and I expect to have them in hand within the hour. Also, offer your fingerprints to the first uniformed deputy you run across. If you will excuse us, we’ll make our way back to civilization.”

They stood and left. In the hall Claire spoke.

“Raymond! I didn’t know you had that in you. You’re really not just that big, soft, Teddy Bear we’ve all come to love and enjoy.”

“Part of my stuffing seems to have nettles in it. When they get stroked in the wrong direction my disposition sometimes takes on an odious manner, and those two are like

nettle magnets.”

“Do you really suspect them in their father’s murder?”

“Do you?”

“It’s something I have not wanted to consider, I guess. I don’t want to think I raised children who would be capable of such a thing. They are, of course. It’s my greatest sorrow.”

“Well, I suppose if you were the only person who ever influenced their development I’d let you blame yourself. You weren’t, of course, so stop that nonsense. Sorry. More nettles I guess.”

They smiled into each other faces and entered the living room.

“I need to make a call to the Sheriff. I’ll see you later.”

Claire detoured toward the kitchen and Masters proceeded to Simon’s room where he knew number 5 on the phone would reach out and touch Carl.

“Carl. Ray Masters. Say, I need a few more bits and pieces of information. The autopsy report on Simon’s wife for one. The entire file – or copies – would be appreciated. Also, can you do a background check on her? She went by the name Candy Goode when she danced the strip in Vegas. Then whatever you have on Pedro Sanchez the handyman out here. Finally, I’d like to know some details about the life of Maria Ramirez, the longtime cook and housekeeper here. Just things prior to her arrival – family, friends, love interests, things like that. Then before Pedro came to work here there had been another handyman – Johnny White. I’d like to know what happened to him, where he’s been, where he is now. And, oh, yes. The father of this clan – I guess I don’t even know his first name – died in a fall from the family’s private train some 50 or so years ago. I’d sure like a look at that autopsy report.”

“Anything else? I believe I counted three additional requests after the word, ‘finally’. Looks like we should have at least – oh, I don’t know – maybe another hour or two left this week after attending to all these requests.”

He chuckled into the phone.

“Week? I need it all by this evening. Hop to!”

Masters hung up before Carl could plead his case about the recent budget and staff cuts and so on. It was an



imposition but then Masters had made a pretty good life built on imposition.

“What do you want to know about my mom for,” came a familiar voice from behind Masters.

He turned around. Carlos was standing in the doorway, arms folded, leaning against the frame.

“That was not for you to hear, but now that you did, come in. I’ll try to explain. Close the door. I don’t need any more prying ears. I should have been more careful. It’s my fault, really.”

They sat. Masters began.

“As you know somebody made a threat against the people here in this house. Threats are sometimes the result of years of seething about something before they finally surface and take shape. There is nothing in Claire’s background that would call forth such a response. Now, I have to look elsewhere. I have to protect all the potential victims. If there is something like that in your mother’s early years I need to know, you understand. Given the uncertain circumstances of your . . .”

“Conception is probably the word you’re seeking.”

“Yes, conception, there seems reason to take all possible steps to protect her and you as well as the rest here.”

“I see. That’s okay then. Sorry I questioned you. I just didn’t understand. I’m not really patient about such things.”

“Feel better, then?”

“No, of course not. My mom’s safety may be at stake here. How can I feel better?”

“Yes. It was an inappropriate assumption – that receiving an answer to your question would automatically make you feel better. Sorry.”

“So, what do we do?”

“I for one am ready for lunch. What time is it?”

“Twenty ‘til lunch. Three hundred and twenty ‘til dinner.”

“I think I’ll opt for lunch then, just for starters you understand. We have some time, here. Will you show me how the recorder – the sound activated recorder – works in here?”

“Sure. In his lower right desk drawer.”

Carlos went to the desk and sat in the chair. He opened the drawer and pointed to the device.

“Want to play something back?”

“Yes, the night of Mr. G’s death if you can find it?”

“No sweat. I just plunk in the date and the time and push search. What time?”

“Five p.m.”

“Done. Then, wait till the whirring sound stops and watch for the amber light to come on. There. Then just push replay. See the LED window here? It gives the time of each recording. It picks up most sounds so lots of it will not be talking. Actually, that night there won’t be much recorded. Him and me when I got him into bed will be about all.”

Masters had his pad ready to take notes.

“That’s the door opening at 5:14. That’s the door closing. That’s the door opening at 5:31. That’s the door closing. I don’t get it. Who would be coming and going like that without announcing themselves? Mr. G. wasn’t even in his room. Again, the door at 5:45. Closing. Opening, 7:56. Closing. Opening at 7:58. Closing. Opening at 8:12. Opening at 8:59 – that should be me – Yes. There. I announced myself. The one just before was probably Mr. G. He never announced himself.”

They played through the tape past the conversation between Carlos and Simon – it caused Carlos to shed some quiet tears.

The series of sounds, which should come after the door closing behind Carlos at 9:15, were what Masters was most interested in. The door opened. A bullet sounded. Carlos jumped and looked puzzled.

“Just one? I thought I heard that all six chambers had been fired.”

Masters put his finger to his lips signaling to just listen. Several minutes passed on the LED readout window and then the sound of another door and another bullet. At one point, there were two quick shots fired all within a two second interval. When Masters had heard enough he had Carlos reset the machine.

“I really don’t get it, Ray. Maybe the machine went batty or something. It doesn’t make any sense – the long

intervals between shots I mean.”

“Later on I will explain it all to you. It does make perfect sense, knowing what I know and you don’t. Okay?”

Carlos nodded.

Masters nodded.

They left the suite and went into the dining room.

Carlos hesitated and tugged Masters to a stop beside him.

“That’s Adam and Benny, Mr. G’s sons. Bad news mom says. You talked to them yet?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact, I have. Less than an hour ago.”

“And?”

“And they seemed less upset than any of the rest here at the house.”

“Predictable, I suppose,” Carlos said. “I don’t want to sit anywhere close to them. They give me the Willies.”

“We can sit at the east end, the length of the table opposite them, alright?”

He nodded, clearly still uneasy and walked toward the table in his big friend’s shadow.

The table was quickly filled with others, setting up a barrier of a kind and providing other venues for conversation. Billy and his father were there – a happy surprise for Masters. They sat to the right of Carlos, the two boys together. Bea and Jay sat to Masters’ left. Mr. Clark sat nearest Adam and Ben. From the quiet conversation that ensued among the three of them they seemed happy to see each other. Several seats remained empty.

As they ate, Masters’ attention was drawn again and again to the frequent, often sustained, glances directed from Adam and Ben toward Carlos. Could it be that there was something to the orientation rumors about Ben after all and perhaps his brother as well? Had something unseemly taken place between Carlos and them in the past that Carlos had not disclosed? His emotion had certainly been more than dislike – fear, perhaps?

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **Day Two: Early Afternoon**

"That lull in the fireworks last night," Masters said, approaching the boys, poolside, as they prepared for a mid-day plunge. "What's your estimate of the time it occurred?"

"No need to estimate it," Billy said pulling out his cell phone. "About thirty seconds after they stopped I called my girlfriend. I'm the impatient type. Give me a second here and I can pull up the time. . . . Yes. We talked from 9:41:30 to 9:43:49 – approximately two and a half minutes. Add to that the original 30 second lapse and I'd say close to three minutes. I hung up as soon as the show restarted. Dad says it's impolite to talk on a cell at concerts, and such. I figured this was one of those 'and suches'."

Masters made a note and thanked him, then returned inside. Claire was tidying up the living room. As it turned out she was busying herself as she waited for him to return inside.

"Got two things, Ray," she began.

"Two sitting things or two standing things?" Masters asked.

"Sittin' is fine," she said with a quick, obligatory, smile.

Masters took the chair by the windows – the one that had become his office.

"Two things, you say."

"Yes. First, Jay and Maria have been looking for you. I'll go tell them you're back after the second thing. You know that silk pillowcase – the one that wasn't being used – the one that's been missing that matches the one that's missing on the pillow?"

Assuming he had actually followed the convolutions of her question, Masters nodded suddenly very interested.

"I found it and you won't like where."

"Where?"

"In the bottom drawer of the chest that Billy uses."

"Any ideas how it may have gotten there?"

"No. Mr. G. got new sheets and pillowcases every day. I'd strip the old ones just before I washed – about nine in the morning – did the laundry up while Maria and I did the morning dishes. There are usually only a few things from me and Maria. Seldom anything volunteered from Carlos. His complete summer uniform consists of just cutoffs. After the laundry dries – usually just two loads for the whole of it – one towels and bedding the other clothes – I fold the clothes and sheets and such and put them in piles on the counter in the laundry room. I make one pile for each person. Then, as I get to a room for its once over lightly dusting every morning, I deliver the pile for that room. Clothes go in the top drawers, linens in the bottom, towels in the bathrooms."

"I assume at some point Simon's bed was made up with fresh linens?"

"Carlos usually did that. He was very protective of Mr. G. They had a special bond. Carlos took good care of him."

"So, Carlos would have put on the fresh pillowcase that morning."

"Right. What would Billy want with that pillowcase, do you suppose?" Claire asked.

"I won't know that until I ask him, I guess. Where is it now – that pillowcase?"

"Oh, I left it right where I found it."

"And you were into that linen drawer, why?"

"I had fresh pillowcases, of all things, for all the rooms this morning. Got behind over the weekend getting ready and all. Maria and I did a deep cleaning of the whole house. Just behind, that's why."

"Okay. Thanks for the information. I'll look into it. If Jay and Maria want me, I'll be right here for a few minutes."

Masters made a mental note that Billy's drawer was situated in the room he shared with his father – an admitted killer of Simon.

Jay and Maria arrived shortly, Maria – head down – following Jay. They took seats beside each other on the sofa across the coffee table from Masters.

"I'm here as Maria's temporary attorney, pending any possible conflict of interests," Jay announced.

Masters was puzzled. He loved to be puzzled because it exercised his mind. He perked up.

"Go on."

"A complication has come up that affects the case in a major way. The bottom line is that Maria wants to retract her confession."

"Now you have me intrigued beyond the point of no return," Masters said, folding his hands on his expansive front and settling in for the complete story.

"This will take some time – you have it now?" Jay explained.

"My time is your time."

Jay turned to Maria.

"Start back at the very beginning. If I think something needs to be added or clarified, I'll jump in."

Maria nodded, her hands in her lap, her dark eyes gradually rising to meet Masters'.

"I think you know that I came here to work when I was sixteen. My family was very poor. I had seven younger brothers and sisters at the time – well, one is my twin brother. It was time for us to go to work and help support them. My father got a job for my brother at the Ranch where he worked and a friend of his there arranged for me to come here as the cook and housekeeper.

"My time here got off to a very bad start. The very first night I was so excited and so frightened – it was the first night I had ever spent away from my parent's home – that I couldn't sleep. So, I put on my robe over my nightgown and went outside to go for a walk and think.

"I had never seen an airplane up close so I walked down toward the hanger hoping I could get a peek at one. I was up on my tiptoes trying to see in a back window when somebody grabbed me from behind and put a hand over my mouth. A male voice told me to be quiet. That he had a gun and he'd kill me for trespassing if I made a sound. He moved

the gun to where I could see that he really had it.

"Then he put a bandana across my mouth and tied it so tight behind my head it hurt. It was very dark behind the hanger. He turned me around and I saw there were two of them. One kept the gun to my head and the other one undressed me. The next half hour was the worst in my life. They took turns raping me – over and over again. Toward the end one of them slipped the bandana down away from my mouth so he could kiss me. That's when I screamed. The other one kept threatening he would kill me if I didn't stop. By then I felt so dirty – so dishonored – spoiled for any man who might consider me for his wife – I would have been happy to have been shot.

"Another man came around the front of the hanger – he was just wearing his underwear. He started yelling. 'What's going on? Stop that! Who are you?'

"One of my attackers shot at the man several times and he fell to the ground. Then the two of them gathered up their clothes and ran away out into the night. At that very minute another man came from the house with a rifle. When he saw me there . . . naked . . . he figured out what had happened and fired several times at the two of them as they ran down the slope. One of them screamed in pain. He fell and the other one picked him up and carried him away. Like I said, it was dark, and behind the hanger – in the shadow hiding the moonlight – I couldn't make out features real good.

"It turned out the man with the rifle was Mr. G. He took his jacket off and helped me into it so I would be covered. I was cold and was feeling nothing – numb I think is the word. He put his arm around me and we walked to where the other man was. Mr. G. shined his flashlight in his face. It was Johnny, the handyman who was here before Pedro came. I didn't know him either, at the time. Mr. G. told him to stay put and took me inside. Claire had heard the commotion and met us at the door. Without a word Mr. G. saw me into her arms and returned back outside.

"I'm fuzzy about what happened next outside. Mr. Foster knows about that."

Jay continued the story.

"By the time Simon had gone back for Johnny – who

had been shot in the thigh and couldn't walk – Adam came around the corner of the hanger – apparently the same one Johnny had come around earlier. He immediately began telling his father how he had been out shooting Jackrabbits and saw the rape taking place there on the ground and had fired at the molesters. He said it had been Johnny and two of his friends – Tommy and Davy Mendoza – who had committed the rape. He saw the Mendozas running away and gave chase. Simon helped Johnny back to his house – his mother lived there with him – so his wound could be attended to. Simon himself cut out the slug and pocketed it. Johnny insisted it had not been him. He said that the Mendoza boys had not been there that night. He accused Adam and Ben – 16 and 15 at the time.

"Simon's bullet had hit Ben in the . . . well, in the butt. He had hidden out in the valley and Simon hadn't been able to find him. About an hour later the two boys hooked up and Adam drove Ben to the doctor's house some fifty miles away. They had the bullet removed and the wound patched up. Ben feigned illness and remained in bed for the next several days, experiencing great pain when he tried to walk. By the fourth day he was up and around. He explained his limp as a sprained ankle."

Maria inserted an explanation.

"I had not met Adam and Benny so I really didn't know who they were. They stayed away from me as much as they could during the rest of my first week."

She nodded at Jay to continue.

"Well, on the basis of his son's eye witness account and the fact that Johnny actually confessed to doing it the following morning, Simon fired him. He and his mother were gone within twelve hours of the rape. Why he confessed I don't know. Some threat from the boys I have to assume.

"A week or so later the doctor made contact with Simon and delivered the slug he'd taken out of Ben along with the story of what had happened. The boys said it had been a hunting accident and pleaded with him not to tell their father because he'd take the guns away and so on and so on. The doctor smelled something fishy and that's why he contacted Simon.



"Simon put the pieces together. The first night Johnny had insisted it had been Adam and Ben who he had seen with Maria, one of whom had shot him. Maria later agreed it had not been Johnny who had spoken to her as the activity progressed. He had grown up in Brooklyn and that was not the accent she had heard. She told Claire who told Simon that she was sure she had scraped one of their backs and thighs pretty deeply with her finger nails. Her attacker had slapped her repeatedly after it happened.

"Simon confronted his sons in the living room as they came in from the driving range after the doctor left. Simon had them strip. Adam's back and upper leg showed the telltale fingernail marks. Benny's behind showed the bullet wound – a wound made by a hollow point long rifle bullet – the kind Simon kept in the rifle he had carried that night. The proof was in and incontrovertible as far as Simon was concerned.

"He herded the boys, still buck naked, out behind the hanger away from all prying eyes and instructed them to beat each other senseless. If he thought they were pulling their punches, he'd send them to the ground with a rap across their back with the stock of his rifle. When they would pass out he'd wait for them to come to and require them to start again. The two of them were in bed for four days after that. Claire cared for them so she can fill you in on the details. The doctor visited every day. No reports were ever filed."

"And all of this relates to Maria's confession, how?" Masters asked.

It was again Jay.

"Nine months after her rape, Maria gave birth to Carlos. Simon accepted the fact that the baby was his grandson even if it had not been determined by which of his sons. Carlos has never been told about any of this – it was an agreement between Simon and Maria. He was to be told on or any time after his 18th birthday if and when he wanted to know.

"The complication is this. Maria was not aware that Simon had arranged for a huge – and I mean huge – inheritance for Carlos. So, you see the complication. Carlos does not need the . . . what can I call it . . . reward for the killing of Simon, which was the major motivation behind

Maria's confession."

"Yes. I see. That does put an interesting twist on things."

Masters drummed his fingers against his belly and sighed a long, Masters sized, sigh.

"It is a huge relief to me, really – the withdrawal of your confession I mean, Maria."

Maria and Jay exchanged puzzled brows and then turned back toward Masters.

"I have proved beyond any doubt, Maria, that you did not kill Simon Gabriel."

"But I shot him."

Her hand went immediately to her mouth and she looked up at her frowning attorney.

"Actually, you didn't. You merely discharged a blank against his chest. He was still alive when you left him. The matter of intent to kill remains, I suppose.

She broke down and began sobbing uncontrollably. Claire had been busying herself at the far end of the living room well out of earshot but making herself available if needed. Masters motioned to her and she was immediately there.

"Maria needs you, Claire."

Claire nodded, helped Maria to her feet, and the two of them disappeared down the hallway.

"I assume Adam and Ben know and have accepted the parentage situation."

Jay nodded. Neither will ever openly acknowledge it nor take any steps to act responsibly in regard to it, of course. Until that single time behind the hanger, Simon had never held the boys accountable for any of their lifetimes of misdeeds. I don't know how Claire put up with it. She was charged with raising them but prohibited from disciplining them in any meaningful way. An overreaction by Simon to the way his own father had treated him, I imagine."

"Perhaps that explains the furtive glances they cast in the direction of Carlos from time to time."

"I have to assume that Simon never did tell Carlos about their relationship," Jay added.

"From the way the lad talks, he has no idea," Masters

said.

“That’s my impression as well. It must have been a refreshing relationship for the old man, you know,” Jay said.

“I’m not sure I understand,” Masters said.

“To have somebody in his life who clearly cared about him – loved him – just plain and simply because he cared about him and loved him. No designs on his money. Just an honest fondness.”

“I see what you mean. Given his take on human nature, Simon probably wouldn’t have risked ruining that by telling Carlos about the relationship.”

Masters switched gears.

“Another subject. How were things left between Simon and his former business partner, Yardley Best?”

“Fuzzy,” Jay began. “Simon seldom spoke of it. He got out of the relationship just before the railroad collapsed. Simon had a sense for such things. Yardley held it against him. He always felt Simon knew something one partner should have shared with the other. Yardley mortgaged everything he had in order to buy out Simon. It was something he had wanted to do from the beginning. When Simon finally agreed. I think the thought of having the full company to himself at last clouded his best business judgment – so to speak.”

“Was there contact between them during the final year or so of the railroad’s existence?” Masters asked.

“Once. Yardley came begging for money – that was Simon’s account of it anyway. Simon gleefully turned him down. He abhorred poor business sense. Thought anyone with it deserved to be destroyed. Witness what he did to his own family members.”

“Yardley ever take any steps that could be considered revenge driven toward Simon?”

“None that I know about. During the final year of the business he was scrambling to save what little he could. There was something about impropriety in the transfer of funds among family members, as I recall, but that’s all I remember. Nothing really aimed at Simon.”

“Where is Yardley now?”

“I don’t have any idea. I’m sure Simon did. He kept

track of such things. It may be in his records. I can take a look if it's important."

"Perhaps you could give it a try. I'm still concerned about the threat that was made. Not convinced that danger is really over. It could be that the murder of Simon was just phase one or it could even be that it was totally unrelated and the threat is yet to be acted upon."

"I see. I hadn't considered that second possibility. And you think Yardley could be behind it?"

"It's the old 'no stone unturned' thing that I'm cursed with. Like Simon, I'm a very careful man when it comes to solving cases."

Jay stood and prepared to leave, pausing to watch the boys in the pool.

"You can understand why they look so much alike, now, Ray. Cousins of some variety – never can keep that straight when it gets past first."

He moved off toward Simon's office. Masters stood and went outside to speak with Billy.

"Billy, I have a question or two for you. Can you get out and talk for a few minutes?"

"Sure. What's up?"

They were both quickly out of the water, dripping across the brown, aggregate, patio that stretched its arms around the pool. Masters took a seat in one of the sturdier looking redwood chairs.

"This could be considered a private matter," he began, looking back and forth between the boys.

"Carlos and I don't have any secrets. If that makes it okay with you, it's okay with me."

They pulled up lawn chairs and sat.

"It concerns the missing silk, pillowcase – not the one missing with the pillow in it; the mate to it. You probably know it was not in the linen closet where it should have been."

They nodded, presenting that, 'So what?' look.

"It seems it turned up in the bottom drawer of the dresser you are using in your room, here, Billy. Any ideas about how it got there?"

"No. I didn't see it in there but then I guess I haven't had any reason to open the bottom drawer. I'm traveling

pretty light this week. Cut offs, T's, and a jacket and jeans for the evenings. All my stuff easily fit into one of the top drawers."

"I was in that bottom drawer on Sunday morning," Carlos offered. "Clair and Mom were so busy I helped out by delivering the laundry around to the rooms. Clair had it all laid out in piles on the counter. They were small piles – a couple of sheets and pillow cases and several towels and wash clothes for each guest room. I delivered to all the guest rooms and then took Mr. G's laundry into his room. I dropped it off on the bed before I put the rest of the stuff away. I had already made up his bed except for the pillow cases."

"And by put away, just exactly what do you mean?"

"I put his handkerchiefs in his dresser, left the pillow cases on the bed, and carried the rest of the pile into the bathroom and set it down on the counter beside the sink. Then I put the sheets and other pillowcases into the linen closet and put the towels on the towel racks. The bathmat went on the floor."

"And you remember seeing the second silk pillow case among the items you put into the linen closet?"

He paused.

"Actually, no, I guess. I just assumed it was somewhere in that pile. I really can't say that I saw it, though if you had asked me without all the rest of this, I'd probably have said it was in the pile. It's like a mental image but probably left over from all the other times."

"So, there were only hankies, towels, sheets, and pillowcases in that pile. Claire led me to believe she did up all of all of Simon's soiled clothing every morning. There were no pants, shirts? No underwear?"

"Now that you mention it, that was odd – just hankies. I was trying to hurry because I knew Mr. G. was waiting on the patio ready to go for our ride. I guess that's why I didn't notice."

"May I suggest we drip our way to Billy's room and take a look in that lower drawer?"

"Sure," they said offering a unison shrug.

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Billy pulled open the drawer.

“Take it all the way out and put it up here on the bed so an old man doesn’t have to bend over.”

The pillowcase in question was the second item from the top. Clearly there had been no attempt made to hide it in the bottom of the drawer. Masters began removing items layer by layer. The three of them began chuckling – giggling, perhaps, better describes it.

“I see you’re in to wearing size 44 white boxers, old men’s undershirts, and really classy argyle sox,” Masters said. “I believe our ace delivery boy here got some things mixed up.”

“Ooops! Guess I separated the piles at the wrong place. Like I said they were small and I piled one on top of another to save a few steps. Sorry if I caused a flutter of suspicion or anything.”

“Suspicion of me?” Billy said, frowning, clearly seeing the big picture for the first time. “You thought I was a thief, Sir, Ray, huh?”

“Not for one second, Billy, though it’s a shame really.”

“Why’s that.”

“Flint could have written about it as, The Pillow Case.”

It was met with round after round of groans from both boys. Masters felt pleased – smugly self-satisfied would more accurately describe it. Long ago he had convinced himself that the elicitation of a groan after one of his puns only signified that the groaner wished that he had thought of it first.

“One more question, Carlos. Why would both silk pillowcases be washed on the same day? Weren’t they alternated on the pillow day by day?”

“Claire hand washed them. She preferred to do them together – every other day.”

Billy’s cell phone, clipped to his still wet cutoffs, rang.

“Claire says there’s a phone call for you on the house phone. The Sheriff. She couldn’t locate either of us so figured we might be together. A clever lady.”

“I’ll take it down the hall in my room. Which button do I push, Carlos?”

“4 for In – that’s also ‘I’ for In – and 6 for Out – that’s also ‘O’ for Out. My own super great idea.”

“If I dial ‘B’ for Braggart does that automatically ring in

your room?"

Masters chuckled himself down the hall, into a chair, and raised the phone to his ear.

"Ray. Take a seat and get a pad. Lots of interesting stuff. Not much of it immediately relevant to the case but really interesting."

"Well, if it's genuine 'irrelevant stuff' then I'll be sure to take meticulous notes. I am seated – pen in hand – shoot."

"On two of the background checks – Neil the Fireworks guy and Candy the former wife. Candy first. She worked as a dancer and cocktail waitress in the hotel where it was apparently common for Simon Gabriel to vacation periodically – first week of every other month the way the way it looks. It's common practice for porters to pay a ritzy hotel in order to get hired – in order to get those huge tips. It's virtually unheard of for a dancer/waitress to do the same and yet she did. More than that, she was known to always wait on Simon. She'd double the tips to the assigned waitress for the privilege of waiting on him."

"It would seem Miss Candy went after Mr. Gabriel and not the other way around."

"Sure looks that way but it gets better. Her name was Gertrude Goode. Note that last name. For the six months before moving to Las Vegas she lived in Oregon – for the purpose of establishing legal residency, it seems. While she was there she changed her last name to Goode from . . . get this . . . Best. Her father was Reggie Best, brother of Yardley Best, Simon's partner in the railroad."

"Most interesting. Do you know where she lived prior to Oregon?"

"Cedar City, Utah. Ring a bell?"

"The home base for the Fireworks company that puts on the shows here."

"Right. Now it gets downright fascinating, Ray. Neil Foster, the young man who is working the fireworks shows at the Hacienda – and who worked them there for the past several years as well – is a nephew of Candy. The owner of the Fireworks company is Jack Foster – a nephew of Jay Foster, Simon's brother-in-law and attorney. Jack married Betty Best – Yardley's daughter and Neil is their son."

Complicated but the bottom lines seem to be that Candy was a close relative of Yardley Best and that Neil is a close relative of Yardley, Candy, and Jay."

"In and among all of this excellent police work, did you run across the current whereabouts of Yardley, himself?"

"Yes. Just outside of Cedar City. He's done rather well for himself since his problems with the railroad. Into real estate. Took a lesson from Simon, it would seem. Bought property similar to Simon's purchases in the same neighborhoods and sold at the same times that Simon sold. Also interesting is that, for reasons we haven't been able to discover yet, Candy lived most of her life in her Uncle Yardley's home. Think there might be the basis for considering some sinister kind of collusion there?"

"It is certainly a tempting turn to take. Let me get one thing straight. Jay Foster's brother married Betty Best – Yardley's daughter – and they had Neil – the young man working the entertainment here this week."

"Right. I had to draw it all out on a chart to keep it straight. Actually, it was Jay's step brother, adopted by his father when he remarried."

"Anything else to make this even more complicated?"

"Just one. Neil was raised by his grandfather, Yardley, which put Neil and Candy under the same roof for a number of years."

"Okay! I think I have all that. Anything else?"

"We rolled to a dead end on the prints on the fireworks canisters. They aren't known to any of the military branches and aren't available in any law enforcement data base."

"I figured they would be Neil's. Tom did print him that first night, right?"

"I'm sure he did. I'll check to make certain but yes, I'm sure of it."

"Tell you what," Masters said. "On a hunch, a couple more favors for me."

"Favors, nothing. You're doing my work, remember."

Masters ignored the unveiled attempt at flattery.

"Run Neil's prints and see what comes up. I just imagine it will be quite a surprise. Then, see what you can find out about a Mr. and Mrs. Larry Miller. About Simon's age,



I assume. He and his brother, Worth, fought over her as teenagers and she dropped them for this Larry Miller. I haven't a clue as to how to find them. By the way, did you have any success in locating the Johnny White who worked here before Pedro?"

"It's the last thing here on my list. Yes. Found him in record time. Less than three minutes I believe after we began the search."

"How in the World after all these years?"

"Ingenious police work, really. My very practically minded secretary found his name in the phone book and called to verify he was who we were looking for. I've arranged to have him brought out there within the hour."

"I'll be looking forward to chatting with him. He's how old now, would you estimate?"

"Pushing fifty, I'd say. He's done very well for himself. Married. One son. Lives in an upscale condo. Runs a household repair service with a dozen crews and trucks. Even so, it looks to me like he's living way beyond his means. See what you think."

"Thanks for the call. Can't say it's helped support any of my theories, but data is always good in the long run. In fact, I sense it just spawned a new theory on its way to supporting one of those original theories."

Not wanting to take the time necessary to explain that, Masters hung up. The boys appeared – again, after a single knock.

"So, what's next?" Carlos asked as they sprawled into the other two chairs.

"Neil – the fireworks guy. You know him well?"

Carlos answered.

"Neil and Craig. Neil worked our show at least six years now. Craig's second year."

"You've talked with them I imagine. Watched them set up. Things like that."

"More when we were little kids, I guess. Neil was always friendly. A nice guy. Brought us candy. He seemed interested in things about the family and people who lived here. We'd have long talks while he worked. Comfortable. You know. I haven't even seen either one of them yet this

year," Carlos said.

Billy continued.

"I saw Neil Monday afternoon shortly after we arrived. He was jogging up around the house. You must have seen him, too, Carlos. Oh, no. Remember, we were taking the trash bags down to the dumpster when your mom called you in to help her carry groceries or something. You told me it would only take a minute and I should stay out by the pool and put some color to my lily-white city skin before we went swimming."

Carlos nodded.

"Did you speak with him?" Masters asked.

"Not really. Did the 'hi, how ya doin' thing. He stopped and jogged in place for maybe half a minute then took off. He circled the house maybe a half dozen times then ran off toward the RV. Hope I'm in that good a shape at his age."

Masters smiled to himself at the age reference – ancient at 26.

"When did the RV arrive?" Masters asked.

"Saturday about noon," Carlos said. "The guys talk about our RV set up down there like it's some kind of luxurious resort. Mr. G. put in a shower and an air conditioning duct and satellite TV for them to hook into years ago. I couldn't have been more than four. I oversaw every aspect of the work. What I'm getting to is they like it here so they come early and stay late."

"You keep saying they. Isn't Neil here alone?"

"Yeah. Now," Billy said. "Craig came with him and then left. He'll be back on the 4th I think he said – maybe the 3rd. I guess it was more than a 'hi and bye' conversation after all but it seems I didn't really pay much attention to it."

"I'm expecting a helicopter in a short while. It will bring a Mr. White – Johnny White. He was the handyman here just before Pedro came."

"Carlos jumped to his feet.

"Is he tall?"

"What?" Masters said. "I have no idea. I've never met him."

Masters was only puzzled for a moment as he and the boy exchanged a knowing glance. Carlos knew the name and

the proximity of his leaving with his mother's arrival. Apparently, Johnny had been one of the men he privately held as a possible candidate for his father."

Sensing he had been mysteriously enthusiastic in his response he quickly returned to being nonchalant about the whole thing although his legs bounced and his bottom squirmed on the chair.

Masters wasn't sure how to respond so he didn't.

"I have some things to finish up here. Did you unscramble the laundry yet?"

"No. That's your subtle way of suggesting we should re-sort things out and redeliver."

"That would save Claire some steps. And, keep an eye out for the copter, also, if you will. I'll meet Johnny in the living room."

The boys were off to rectify things. Masters reviewed his notes and made a new list. He was fully aware that the mere fact that some of the laundry had been mixed up did not rule out the possibility that the special pillow case had, indeed, been hidden there by someone after the muddled delivery by Carlos.

Eventually he heard the helicopter so moved into the living room. A female deputy ushered Johnny inside. Carlos hung back in the shadows of the hallway to give the man the once over from a distance. The man walked with a noticeable limp. He was tall, but there the resemblance stopped.

Upon seeing him, Masters looked at Carlos from across the room and the two broke out in laughter. Johnny White had the most beautiful black skin either had ever seen. Masters apologized.

"I'm sorry for this strange reception, Sir. It's just that Impish teenager over there. A private joke. Please forgive us and have a seat."

The deputy handed Masters a thick envelope.

"More reports," she said.

Masters accepted them.

"Hot, cold, and lukewarm drinks available in the kitchen, down that hall if you want."

She nodded and left.

"How about you, Johnny?"

“I’m fine. I understand Mr. Gabriel was murdered. How can I help? He was such a fine man.”

Those were not the first words Masters thought he would hear out of the mouth of Johnny White. They were not the tenth or hundredth or thousandth words he expected to hear out of the mouth of Johnny White.

“Your characterization of Mr. Gabriel surprises me. Can you explain?”

Johnny smiled a wonderful smile and nodded.

“Many years ago, there was a dreadful incident out here – a rape. I was accused, fired, and ordered off the property. I didn’t know what I would do. I was just a kid. I’d worked here going on four years. My mother and I had moved out here from New York. But that’s hardly relevant. Back to the story. Before I left here that next morning, he asked for an address to send my last check to. He was an honest man – with his employees at least. I gave him my mama’s uncle’s address in Carson City. It was the only place we had to go.

“About two weeks later – it was a Monday morning – a envelope arrived from him. My pay I thought and it was, but more. There was a letter of apology and a check for a extra five thousand dollars. I have to admit Mama and I was overjoyed – I’d never, ever, had five thousand dollars in my possession at one time. In the letter, it said – and I’ll never forget this because it changed my life forever – ‘Invest this in something you know how to do’.”

“I got an old van and painted Johnny’s Complete Household Handyman Service on the side along with my Uncle’s phone number. I just started driving up and down the streets of the upscale neighborhoods and by the end of the second week I had a full schedule of work.”

“A month to the day later another envelope arrived and in it was another check for five thousand dollars. They kept coming for five years – not every month, but most months. I think I understand about the irregularity, now. He didn’t want me to depend on them. He wanted me to believe I needed to take care of myself. You can see why I said what a fine man he was.”

“Yes, indeed. Considering what you have just told me my next request will seem odd – perhaps even inappropriate.

But, for the record I need to know where you were on the night of July 1st. I also need to have your fingerprints taken.”

“I understand. I’m sure it must have seemed that if anybody would have a grudge to settle with Mr. Gabriel it would be me. You don’t have to apologize. I do have a question if I’m allowed.”

“Certainly.”

“Were the real offenders caught and punished.”

“I’ll answer you but first, I understand at the time you said that you saw who they were.”

“Yes, Sir. His sons. Adam and Gabriel. I heard the girl scream – It woke me up and I ran outside to investigate. When I yelled at them they stepped out of the shadow – from behind the hanger – and I saw who they was, all right. Later that night Adam come to my place and said if I didn’t confess to it he would hurt my mama. That’s why I confessed.”

“Then let me assure you that they were caught and punished – in a way at least.”

“Thank you. I’ve wanted to know for all these years. Was the girl okay – I mean I guess a victim of rape is never really okay but . . .”

“She has done remarkably well for herself. She is still here in fact. The Imp in the shadows over there is her son. The two of them have built a good family together.”

Johnny took a piece of paper from his shirt pocket and unfolded it.

“When the police contacted me and told me what had happened, I figured I would be a suspect, so I put together a running list of my whereabouts on the day of the murder, the one before and the one after.” He pointed to the page. “Here is where I was at these times. Here is who I was with. Here is how to contact them.”

“You are a very well organized man, Johnny.”

“I have Johnny’s Handyman Services in seven cities in four states. I employ two hundred people. I have to be well organized or I’d never make it to my grandson’s little league games.”

“It seems you have a wonderful life.”

“Yes, Sir. Thanks to Mr. Gabriel.”

He leaned close toward Masters.

“Do the boy and his mother need anything? I’d feel it a privilege to help – anonymously of course.”

“Let’s just say they were both well remembered in Mr. Gabriel’s Will.”

Johnny sat back and changed the subject.

“Have you met Injun Jim?” he asked.

“No. It’s the first I’ve heard the name. Should I meet him?”

“He once told me a story about seeing Mrs. Gabriel fall to her death from Devil’s Rock. His version is quite different from the Coroner’s. It may be useless information. It may be helpful. It may be irrelevant.”

“But you must think it is important?”

He didn’t answer the implied question, but did have something to say.

“Injun Jim and I shared one thing in common when I lived out here. We were viewed as having no status and little worth. The same went for our word. He never told the authorities what he seen. He knew they’d just dismiss it out of hand and it might lead to trouble for him or his family.”

“Thank you for the lead. If it does nothing else I hope it allows me to meet Injun Jim. Just the name fascinates me.”

Johnny nodded. They stood and shook hands.

“If you do see ol’ Jim, tell him Johnny says hello.”

Seeing the meeting was over Carlos approached them.

“I’m sorry for acting so rudely when you first arrived, Sir. I apologize.”

“Accepted. I never require an apology when such wonderful, genuine, laughter is involved. Laugh often. It is an essential ingredient for building a good life.”

“Thank you, Sir. That’s great advice.”

“You’re welcome. And it’s Johnny.”

He extended his hand and they shook. The deputy appeared on cue and after a briefing about getting Johnny’s prints she accompanied him back to the helicopter. Masters and Carlos stood watching through the window as it took off and leaned into a wide circle heading back toward the city. Carlos spoke.

“Seems like a really nice guy. I’m sure he made some lucky kid a great dad, you know?”

Masters extended his big arm across the boy's shoulders.

The single tear making its way down each face remained private.

What was left to be said?

## **CHAPTER SEVEN**

### **Day Two: Late Afternoon / early evening**

Masters returned to his seat and donned his reading glasses. The envelope contained dozens of documents and pictures. Much of the information dealt with the death of Candy.

The bottom line in the coroner's report was that her death was due to a self-initiated fall off Devil's Rock into the rocky canyon eighty feet below. She died of massive head and internal injuries. At the inquest, there was testimony from a dozen sources all relating to her depressed mental state just prior to her death. Aside from that, there was little of substance. Simon testified that she left the house for a walk about ten on the Sunday morning of her death. He remained in his office working. Maggie, the housekeeper at the time had gone to church and had taken the little boys with her. That left just Candy, Simon, and the old handyman on the property. Her body was found about noon by two Indian boys playing in the canyon. One came to tell Simon. The other stayed to protect the body from the Coyotes and other scavengers. Simon drove to the spot in a jeep and returned the body to the house before calling the authorities. The boys' story was recorded by a stenographer and later read into the transcript of the inquest. There was an objection filed to the report – an extremely rare occurrence. An attorney for an unnamed client criticized those involved with the inquest for failing to look into the possibility that Simon had been a party to his wife's death.

When he had digested every detail, Masters went in



search of Claire, who he found out on the putting green with Carlos and Billy. He stood and watched for a few moments before they spotted him.

“Hey, Ray!” Carlos called.

Masters approached them.

“Who’s teaching whom?” he asked as Claire sank a fifteen-footer.

“Let’s just put it this way,” Billy said by way of answering Masters’ question. “I started with a buck and I’m flat broke – so is Carlos.”

“My! My! Some kind of betting?” He said feigning disapproval. “And here in the State of Nevada of all places? Unheard of!”

It garnered the smiles though not the belly laughs he was going for.

Carlos explained the situation.

“We take turns, each putting from set distances. One foot, then two, then three, and so on. For every foot your opponents make, you pay them a penny. It usually all stays pretty even until we get out to eight or ten feet, then Claire starts raking it all in. Want to try?”

“No thanks. In my day, I’ve been hustled by the best of them. Learned my lesson early in life. I do have a question though. What can you tell me about Injun Jim?”

“Looks about a hundred years old. Lives alone in a cabin a couple of canyons to the east. Lives off the land. The land owners around here just let him roam about and take what he needs. He’d never take more than that.”

“Lives alone?”

Claire spoke.

“He raised two great grandsons after their parents were killed. I guess I never heard how that happened. The boys would be close to forty now, I imagine. Haven’t seen them for years. Seldom see Jim up close but every so often I see him walking the ridges. He’s pretty much a loner. I think he and Pedro see each other sometimes. He and Johnny were pretty friendly back when.”

“I need to speak with him. How can that be arranged?”

“I can drive you to within a half mile of his cabin,” Carlos said. “A rough ride but I imagine you’d survive it. Then

by foot on up the canyon a piece.”

“I am well-padded for such adventures. When can we go?”

“Soon as you’re ready. I’ll need to check in with mom. Can Billy come?”

“If it’s alright with his father.”

“I’d suggest a hat,” Carlos said. “Let me fix you up with a great one.”

While the boys trotted off to make the preparations, Masters walked Clair back to the house.

“Any bad blood between Jim and Simon?” he asked.

“No. None that I’ve ever been aware of. Don’t know that they ever even spoke. You got reason to suspect him in Simon’s murder.”

“No. Nothing like that. Johnny just said he thought it would be worth my while to chat with him about things in general around here. He’s known this land and its people for a long time apparently.”

“He has. He’s a gentle man. He did really well with the boys he raised. Mr. Clark saw to it that they had books to study. Mr. G. may have been in on that. Anyway, they’d come by often, inquiring about my health but really hoping for sweets. If their teeth rotted away it’s all my fault. They loved lemon drops and caramels.”

“They sound like my kind of people,” Masters said.

He opened the door and followed Clair inside. Jay was pouring himself a lemonade.

“Jay. If you have a minute I have several questions.”

“Sure. Kitchen table, or your ‘office’?”

“This is fine. I think I’ll join you. That lemonade looks pretty good.”

Claire left and the two men took seats.

“Do you know of any ongoing relationship between Simon and Johnny White after Johnny left here?”

“Relationship?”

“Financial, to be specific.”

“No. None to my knowledge. Why?”

“He said Simon sent him monthly checks – sizeable – for several years after he left here – reparation for Simon’s hasty rush to accuse him of the rape, I imagine.”

“Simon kept one private account and just gave me monthly, lump sum statements for accounting purposes. I’m sure he has records. I just haven’t found them yet.”

“Could that fund have managed payments of as much as five thousand dollars a month?”

“Yes. It was often over twenty thousand a month. I couldn’t figure how in the world such an old recluse could manage to spend that much. My fantasy was that he hid it in a very large cookie jar in case bad times befell him.”

“Okay then. Second item. Jack Foster.”

“My almost nephew. Son of my step-like brother. He owns the Entertainment company that puts on the fireworks shows here. He married Betty Best – Yardley Best’s granddaughter.”

“And Yardley’s younger brother, Reggie, also had a daughter, is that right?”

“Now you’re stretching my recollection. I was never very close with that part of the family. Frankly, I just don’t like them. I can find out but if I were a betting man I’d say you already know all of this.”

“Guilty. Jack’s company got this job through some of his almost uncle-like’s influence?”

“Now I’m guilty. Yes. Simon knew all about it upfront. He was alright with it. What was it about the girl? Reggie’s daughter. Reggie was a lot younger than Yardley, by the way.”

“Reggie’s daughter was Gertrude Best, later changed to Gertrude Goode, and later still to Candy Gabriel.”

“Oh, my! You’re sure of that?”

“Absolutely.”

“Is it one of those, ‘small world’ things or something more intentional?”

“Intentional. Well planned and executed, it seems to me. Candy was out to hook Simon and she spared nothing to reel him in.”

“Why? Motivation? What?”

“The most obvious would have been to enjoy some of the Gabriel riches that she – or she and some member or members of her family – thought was rightfully hers or at least Yardley’s.”

“A family conspiracy?” Jay asked, appearing surprised.

“Looks like it could have been just that.”

“But to get it, Simon would have had to die.”

“Yes. That’s right.”

“But how could that be related to Simon’s death? It happened almost thirty years after Candy’s. The Yardleys have no basis to claim any part of the estate.”

“I know. Interesting, isn’t it? If Candy were to have inherited it, she would have needed to have outlived Simon – a good probability had she lived and been patient about it. Put another way, Simon would have had to die before Candy. Were there, to your knowledge, any attempts ever made against Simon’s life?”

“Absolutely not. Lots and lots of threats but no actual attempts.”

“The Coroner’s report on Candy’s death had an objection filed to it. Any way to find out who the attorney was representing in all that?”

“Afraid not. Privileged.”

“Okay, then. Thanks for the chat. If there is any way to verify the checks written to Johnny it would clear up one of the pesky details still clouding the water.”

“I’ll get right on it.”

Carlos peeked his head out from behind the frame of the open door to the laundry room. Billy’s head soon appeared just above him.

“Well, looky there, Jay. Two of the three stooges,” Masters said.

“You guys done with your old man talk? We got places to go and get back from before sundown.”

They entered the room and Jay left, chuckling for the first-time Masters could recall.

“Got some food for the trip,” Billy said hefting a brown paper shopping bag onto the table.

“Any real food in there or just junk stuff.”

“Nothing real, I’m afraid,” Billy said apologetically.”

“Good going, amigos! I knew I could count on you two. Let’s get out of here before Claire or Maria force something healthful on us.”

“Van’s gassed and ready,” Carlos said methodically, as if beginning a pre-launch countdown. “Billy’s dad says he can

go – so long as you will be along. Got food. Got a cooler of iced pop and water. Billy's cell in case of an emergency and a .410 in case we meet up with an unfriendly rattler.”

“Are you implying that you also have friendly rattlers out here?” Masters joked.

“I guess we'll have to wait and see,” Carlos came back.

“That .410 a repeater?” Masters asked.

“Single shot. One's all I ever need,” Carlos answered confidently.

It didn't fill Masters with feelings of comfort or wellbeing but, the outing had been his idea so he'd take what came.

As they approached the van Masters remembered about the hat.

“My hat?” he asked as Billy opened the rear door and slid the food and cooler across the seat. Carlos opened the front door on the driver's side and said.

“No! No! Señor. Su sombrero!”

He pulled a three-foot-wide sombrero from the front seat.”

“I couldn't resist taking this one for you, Ray. Tall, wide and stately.”

“I assume you just added the 'stately' to make the 'tall and wide' more palatable. Well, it did. Thank you. I love the burgundy tassels hanging from the brim. I suddenly have the urge to dance the la cucaracha.”

“I don't think there is really such a Mexican dance, Ray, but we look forward to your interpretation, anyway. Mom has castanets.”

Boys will be boys and before the van had broken the perimeter of the grounds around the house, out came the chips and pop. (Masters offered some to Carlos and Billy, as well!)

It was a beautiful drive across the desert and up and down low, red rock ravines. There was no road, so far as Masters could discern, but Carlos never faltered. It had been nearly twenty minutes when he pulled to a stop in the instantly cooling shadow of a canyon. He pointed to a thin wisp of white smoke up a slight incline in the narrow, steep walled, canyon ahead.

“Injun Jim's place,” Carlos said. “Probably smoking

rabbit jerky – making it, not inhaling it. Best you’ve ever tasted.”

“Never having tasted any, you would be correct I suppose. I assume you do know this man, right.”

“Of course. Not to worry Kemo sabe!”

“Do you know the man’s last name?”

“Nope. But I do know he prefers to be called, Injun Jim.”

Masters donned his sombrero. The boys immediately rearranged it – with some voice-raising discussion – to the eventually agreed upon authentic southwestern angle. Carlos supervised the application of sunscreen. That completed to his satisfaction they began the half mile trek up the rocky canyon floor. Carlos was barefoot, apparently feeling nothing; Billy found the going a bit uncomfortable even through the soles of his tennis shoes; and Masters silently wished that every step could be the last.

The man who Masters assumed was Jim was sitting on a blanket under one of a half dozen trees there in the upper portion of the narrow, blind, canyon. A small, drip fed, pond, nestled close to the sheer side of the ravine. The area was an oasis, of sorts, a good twenty degrees cooler than the desert below. The one room cabin had been built by layering row upon row of flat, red, stones from the canyon floor. It sported a rippled, galvanized, metal roof and rusting, round, metal chimney. A rifle leaned against the door frame. Jim was dressed in camouflage shorts, an ancient, black, tuxedo coat (tails) open in front, and a Chicago Bears hat. He did not stand as the party of three approached him.

“Hey, Mr. Jim,” Carlos began in a somewhat exaggerated friendly tone. “I’m the kid from the Gabriel place – Pedro’s place, you know.”

There was no response. He tried in Spanish.

¿Soy el cabrito del lugar de Gabriel - el lugar de Pedro, usted sabe?

I speak good English. Who are you, again?”

Masters was beginning to see that Carlos had not been entirely candid about his relationship with the old man.

“I’m Carlos, a good friend of Pedro. This is my friend Billy and this is Raymond Masters, a detective here

investigating the death of Simon Gabriel. Did you know he had passed on?"

Jim nodded.

"Yes. Condolences to his family. What is there to bring you here?"

Masters responded.

"I was speaking with an old friend of yours, Johnny White. First of all, he says hello."

Jim nodded and broke a short-lived smile.

"He indicated to me that you might know something about the death of Mrs. Gabriel – something that you have not shared with the authorities."

Jim looked at the boys and motioned with his head toward the pond.

"Go cool off in the water."

They understood that he wanted a private conversation with Masters and, although reluctant to be left out, did as he requested.

"Why now? Why so long?"

"Mr. Gabriel did not die of natural causes. He was murdered. The trail leads back in time. I'm seeking information that might shed light on the motivation of some of the people involved."

Jim smiled a full-out smile.

"What?" Masters asked, amused and puzzled at the response.

"You sound more like the wise old Indian than the wise old Indian does."

"It was unintentional. No offence, please."

"None taken. Just an observation. Stereotypes die hard, you know."

"I know. Like some think large men like I, eat a lot. Oh, bad example, I suppose."

Jim chuckled out loud.

"I like you Masters. You are genuine and don't take yourself too seriously. I will share with you what I know, but what I know is not motivation – it is simply actions I observed."

"I'll take that. Johnny thought it was important."

"Johnny is well?"

"Yes. Doing fine. He has a fine life. A grandson now

seems to be the apple of his eye.”

Jim nodded, clearly pleased to hear that.

“It was a Sunday morning – mid morning. I had climbed to Angel Rock, some hundred feet north of Devil’s Rock and fifty feet higher. I often go there to refresh my soul. You can view the entire countryside from up there. I take my binoculars to see what the eyes alone can’t see.

“That morning I noticed a couple – a man and woman – climbing the rock below me – Devil’s Rock. It is less difficult than it may sound. Devil’s Rock is actually an outcropping from a cliff. There is easy access from behind – a slope leads up from the valley that bounds the Gabriel place on the East – on this side.

“I got them in my glasses and recognized who they were – the Gabriels. Not wanting to pry, I turned my attention elsewhere. A few minutes after they reached the summit I was scanning across the area where they were standing. Mr. Gabriel was in front about ten feet back from the edge of the Rock – the cliff. She was twenty feet behind him. She took off on a run straight at his back, her arms stretched out in front of her. I was too stunned to shout a warning. She was small and he was large. Although she moved him to within a few feet of the edge – clearly it seemed to me trying to push him over – he regained his footing and turned around – to his own left. She was clinging onto his right arm. When he turned, she was flung over the edge.

“When he realized what had happened, he sank to his knees and sobbed so loud I could hear it clearly. I wanted to go to him and console him. My wife was taken from me when she was also young. I felt for him. But I was an Indian – a nobody. I learned when very young that meddling in the white man’s problems only led to even greater problems for my people so I made no move. In fact, I laid down on the rock hoping he would not see me if he looked in my direction. He may have. I don’t know. He left, in a hurry, back toward his place. I stood and watched him run until he was out of sight over a hill. He didn’t return. I thought he was going for a truck or something to recover her body.

“After an hour, I spoke with my great grandsons, who lived with me at the time. I told them why we had to be less



than honest about things. We devised our story. One boy ran to tell Mr. Gabriel that the body of his wife had been found and that his brother had stayed behind to protect it from predators. He came in a jeep and retrieved her body and that is the last I know of it. I hope that may help.”

“You are telling me that it is your clear belief that his wife was trying to kill him by pushing him off the cliff?”

“I have tried to envision other reasons for her action. But, like I said, I can only report what I saw. I do not read the hearts of people I don’t know.”

“If I need that as a formal statement will you repeat it?”

“If you believe it is necessary, I will.”

“Thank you.”

The wiry, ancient, man helped the less than wiry, old, man to his feet. The irony escaped neither of them.

“You haven’t commented on my outfit,” Jim said smiling and twirling around once.”

“I avoid those monkey suits like the plague. It seems to work for you, however.”

“I hate them, too. Been trying to wear this one out for thirty year but it refuses to be destroyed. Must have been an exceptional batch of wool.”

“And my hat. You have a reaction?” Masters asked, mimicking the twirl.

“My gods would not forgive me if I were strictly honest with you about that.”

“That bad, huh?”

“Worse than that my large friend! But, if you like it, wear it. A man must first of all be true to himself.”

“Finally, the wise old Indian is sounding like a Wise old Indian,” Masters said, offering his hand.

Jim accepted it warmly, then continued, putting Masters on a bit.

“What? No traditional Ugh! How! or raised hand Scout salute?”

“Gave all that up when Indians became Native Americans. I’m still not sure about using the term wampum. It’s not my nature to be offensive to any group.”

“The way I understand it, Ray, you can refer to money any way you want to so long as you leave lots of it behind in

our casinos.”

The trek back down the slope to the van was no less arduous for the two tenderfoots than had been the one going in.

“So, did you find out what you came to find out?” Carlos asked, after they were seated in the van and headed back west.

“I acquired interesting and perhaps useful information. It may explain some tangential elements. I had no pre-established agenda or specific expectations when I arrived.”

“Need that interpreted, Billy?” Carlos said back over his shoulder, really kidding Masters about his flurry of dollar words.

Billy replied mimicking Injun Jim.

“No. I speak good English.”

The ride back, directly into the late afternoon sun, seemed longer and less pleasant than the earlier one. Neither chips nor cheese puffs eased the pain although the three gave them every opportunity to do so.

“Pot roast with all the trimmings and strawberry shortcake for dinner,” Carlos announced, then turned back to Billy. “Since Ray arrived the women have spoiled him rotten, only fixing things Claire knows he likes.”

“Pot roast sounds pretty good to me,” Billy said.

“Yeah. Me too, I guess.”

“So, what you boys are saying is that because of my presence here the two of you are dining on delicacies you might not have otherwise received?”

“Something like that, I guess,” Carlos admitted with a sheepish grin.

“Taken one step further, I suppose that could be construed to mean you owe me?”

“My guess is that it would only seem that way to one prone to using fuzzy logic,” Carlos said, kidding the old detective.

“Hey, kid! If it weren’t for the use of fuzzy logic I wouldn’t have solved half my cases. That brings me back to this case – the pillow case to be specific. We still have one missing – covering a pillow. Every house has its hiding places. Where are they in the Hacienda?”

“You mean places designed specifically for storage or those out of the way, seldom traversed, spots a boy just might hide certain kinds of magazines.”

“Both I suppose. If the pillow were hidden by someone who knew the building well, I’d expect to find it among those pretty ladies. If it were hidden by an outsider or infrequent visitor, probably in the most inaccessible parts of the known closets and the like. Actually, if my hunches are correct it would need to be some easily accessible spot between Simon’s bedroom and the front hall by way of the kitchen.”

Carlos became thoughtful.

“Kitchen cabinets, laundry room cabinets, coat closet in the entry hall. Those would be the regular sort of places. Out of the normal spots would be under the stairs that lead to the deck up on the roof, or the storage space above the entry hall itself. About three feet high. Billy and I made a fort up there the summer I was six.”

“After dinner, I’ll ask you to take me on a guided tour.”

“Is that to include the nudie stash?”

“You trying to give an old man a heart attack? I’ll stick to seconds on Maria’s wonderful strawberry shortcake.”

The boys wondered if Masters was pulling their leg – implying that such things no longer interested him at his age. Masters wondered if the boys understood that some interests never really dim. One thing they both understood. Strawberry shortcake would be a good prelude to the search, regardless.

The dinner gathering was subdued. The initial attempts at polite conversation soon gave way to an uneasy silence. Adam and Ben, as expected, enjoyed each other’s suggestive humor. For them, life seemed to have become a celebration since their father’s passing. They did have a question for Masters. Adam voiced it.

“So, where do things stand on that payoff for killing him? Will somebody be able to claim it and how much would that reduce what the rest of us get?”

“The investigation is proceeding. I’m sure that by this time tomorrow I will have all of the answers for you.”

“Tomorrow?” Ben said, surprised. “Don’t these things usually take weeks – months?”

It was Claire who came to Masters’ defense.

“Not when Raymond Masters is on the case, honey. If he says tomorrow, you better bet it’ll be tomorrow.”

It had clearly not been a reassuring piece of news for most of them. One by one they got up and left. It interested and perplexed Masters who had assumed it would bring relief – finality – to those who had already confessed. He was sorry it had upset them. The up side to their unexpected departures was all that excess shortcake that would need his attention.

The search of the possible hiding places produced nothing of value – well not in terms of finding the pillow. The boys, on the other hand, seemed delighted to have renewed some pleasing old acquaintances. Ironically, one of the magazines featured a spread, which starred none other than Miss Strawberry Shortcake. It produced some giggles. Masters was beginning to understand why the boys swam a hundred laps twice a day! For him, a brisk walk out to the patio would have to suffice.

He didn’t quite make it, taking his familiar seat at the end of the living room instead. He beckoned Jay to his side.

“I assume we can search every nook and cranny here on the property without a search warrant.”

“Right. The one sticky exception might be the RV. Not technically accessible although it does come as a part of the hired show. Sticky. If they have nothing to hide, I assume they will allow it.”

“I need that pillow and every hour that passes our hopes of finding it lessen.”

“Why your interests in the pillow?”

“Aside from the obvious reason, I have to wonder why the killer would take it with him. That’s the why behind my interest. I’ll get some officers out here in the early morning to go over this place with a fine-toothed comb. My cursory search of the house, just now, revealed nothing – well, truthfully, certain parts of it revealed almost everything.”

He smiled and shook his head.

“Never mind. You had to be there. In the meantime, have you found out about those checks to White?”

“I found a ledger – all handmade entries by Simon. It shows a very different side of the man. The checks to Johnny White are all there. Also, tuition payments to the State

University some years ago, to pay Injun Jim's great grandsons' way through college. A dozen other charities. His last entry was a nice sized bonus for you pending the successful conclusion of things here. There are two other recurring payments that may be of interest. One of twenty-five hundred dollars every month for the past forty-eight years to a Libby Austin in Phoenix. A second for three thousand a month to an Abe Thompson. Up to twenty years ago, it was only half that. Then it just stopped six months ago. The Austin payments continued right up through the first of last month, however."

"Interesting. Blackmail, you suppose?"

"That was my first question."

"You have addresses?" Masters asked.

"I'm sure they will be in there somewhere. I'll find them."

"When will you read the will?"

"We need to decide between us when the best time will be. I need to know if the fifty mil will need to be deducted up front. Most of the Will, will be presented in percentages and such rather than dollar amounts pending liquidation of his holdings. We can expect all hell to break loose when Adam and Ben hear how their father treated them in the Will."

"You mean it will seem like too little from their standpoint?"

Jay began with a seemingly unrelated explanation.

"There is no statute of limitations on rape in this county – a piece of legislation Simon bought, if you will, years ago. In the Will, he bequeaths his sons a promise – a promise not to have his attorney turn over to the authorities the proof he has of their rape of Maria – in exchange for their immediate transfer of their shares of his estate to Carlos. Rape is taken seriously around here. Maria and Carlos are both loved by everybody. Adam and Ben would never see the light of day again if the States Attorney got her hands on that information. It's privileged in my hands, of course."

"Simon is still playing games even after his death," Masters said.

"Indeed. And I repeat. Let's make sure we have some extra, blue clad, muscle with badges on hand when the Will is

read.”

“Are there folks other than those who are here now who will need to be at the reading?”

“No. Just our big, happy, family and the staff.”

Considering what you’ve told me I think there’s no time like the present to search this place. I’m going to call in some reinforcements this evening.

Jay left. Masters made the call to Carl and had Carlos bring him one of Simon’s pillows done up in the remaining, well-traveled, colorful, silk pillowcase. By six, the Sheriff and a swarm of deputies had arrived in two helicopters. Masters outlined to Carl what he needed.

“I think our chances of getting a look inside the RV without a warrant will be best if you and a couple of deputies take that assignment. Then, probably two more for the pilots’ quarters, hangers, and the plane. One should be sufficient for Pedro’s house. The rest can have at it here in the main house – start with Adam and Ben’s suite and car. Have your guys gather ‘round and I’ll show them what they’re looking for.”

Carl motioned his people in close. Masters addressed them as Carlos held up the pillow.

“This is what you’ll be looking for. Let me rephrase that. The exact mate to this one is what you’ll be looking for. Carlos will bring it among you. Feel it and note its extra firmness. He’ll pull the pillow case back so you can see what the pillow looks like without the case in should it have been removed. It is a handmade, one of a kind, pair. If you believe you have located it, handle it as little as possible and call in. I want to see it where it lies. Questions?”

There were none. As each one finished examining the pillow he left for his assigned area.

A half hour passed. Masters sat. Carlos paced. Billy strummed a guitar – it was pleasant, soft, soothing. He was very good.

Another half hour passed. Masters sat. Billy paced. Carlos strummed the guitar – it was NOT pleasant, soft, soothing! He was terrible.

Two hours later the last deputy had checked in. Nothing! Masters thanked them saying that now at least he knew where it wasn’t and that in itself should be helpful. His

kind words and broad smile did not reflect the letdown he was feeling.

"Thanks for your help, Carl. I assume there was no problem at the RV."

"None. Offered us lemonade, in fact. That's some vehicle. Doubt if me, my wife, and five kids could survive in it overnight, but maybe you should consider life on the open road, Ray."

"My cozy little place back in Rossville is just fine thank you – for the little amount of time I seem to be spending there now that I'm retired."

"You'll never be retired and you know it. Just before they put you in the ground you'll open up the lid and hand out a note containing the final clue to some long thought, unsolvable case."

"Your story makes one large, and perhaps faulty, assumption, Carl."

"And that is?"

"That a casket will actually be found that's large enough to hold my remains. Have a twister?"

Carl and his staff departed. It was going on 8:30. Masters needed – well, wanted – a snack. Having to sit there watching the deputies scurrying over and around the premises had left him famished. Maria was there sitting on a stool at the breakfast bar grating carrots. Boxer was there on his hind legs throwing punches left right for the occasional treat.

"Good evening, Maria. Anything for an old sparring partner," Masters said offering a few jabs through a less than picture perfect crouch.

"Lots of carrots."

"I see. Why are you devastating them that way?"

"Carrot and raison salad for lunch tomorrow. It's best done early and chilled overnight."

"Boxer prefers not to wait, I see."

"First thing he's eaten all day. He misses Mr. G. Just lays beside his bed waiting for him to come through the door. Now I wish he was his old, mischievous, self. Earlier in the week he got into the trash bags and had them strewn all over the kitchen floor. But now. . . It must be hard for a dog."

"And for the others who loved him. How are you

doing?"

She shrugged and went back to grating the carrots.

"It's hard, you know. My life has changed around so often the last 24 hours that sometimes I forget which one I'm living."

Master opened the refrigerator. Maria offered a suggestion.

"Strawberries in the blue bowl with the plate covering it. Shortcake in the breadbox beside the sink. Ice cream in the freezer, left side of the fridge."

Masters went about the business of fixing his snack.

"Can we talk?" he asked.

"Sure. What?"

"I'm interested in how your family is doing? That's a lot of brothers and sisters – seven did you say?"

"Seven when I left home. Nine now. Only the two youngest are still there. Pablo – my twin – is married and has two children – a boy and a girl. They live down on the Albertson Ranch; he and my father and three other brothers work there, too. They have tried to get me to come but I like it here. I am family here, too. Claire is like my second mother. Carlos is comfortable here and he is getting such a fine education. Mr. G. lets us use a pickup to go visit them when I have time off."

"This may seem indelicate – ill-mannered – but do they know about the rape and Carlos coming from it."

"Si, yes. When I found I was pregnant, I had no other choice. It was the hardest thing I ever had to do. I wanted them to understand that I had not been with a boy by my choice before marriage but I hated for them to know what a evil thing had happened."

"And they were supportive of you, of course."

She nodded and brushed back a tear.

Masters changed the subject as he slid into a stool beside her, prepared to savor every morsel in his bowl.

"What about Carlos? How do you think he's doing?" he asked.

"Carlos and I are very close. We always have talked easy. But about this he won't talk. I try. I say, 'Carlos, what are you feeling?' He clamps his lips together and leaves. I



don't know how to reach to him."

"It sounds like he's struggling to be a man – not that that's the best way to handle things but he probably doesn't really know how to be strong the way he thinks he should be so he just clams up – remains quiet. I'm sure he will talk with you when the time seems right to him."

"I hope so."

There was a long pause accompanied by the rhythmic grating of carrots and the staccato-like clink of a spoon against the bowl. A distressed expression grew on Maria's face. She put down the grater and carrot and turned to look at Masters.

"You don't believe that Carlos is the one who did it, do you? He often spoke of how bad he felt about the pain Mr. G. had to endure. If he really believed Mr. G. was asking him to take the pain away – you know – I believe he would have done it."

"One confession per family is all I'm allowing on this case and you've already used your limit. Carlos is a fine boy. I know he loved Simon from the bottom of his big, warm, compassionate, heart. It seems highly unlikely to me that your son had any part in it."

Masters was immediately disturbed by his phrasing – highly unlikely? Was there some part of him that held the same question Maria had just voiced? He shivered at the thought and, being a man, decided not to pursue it in word or thought. He excused himself and, with bowl in hand, found his way back to his chair in the living room. There were several reports he wanted to review.

He managed a smile at Tom's comment at the bottom of the fingerprint report on the glass taken from Simon's room. "One would think the glass had hosted a convention of finger tips."

They were all there laid down in the same order as the timeline of the water drugging confessions would have suggested. There were none from Carlos. The top prints from Simon. One set on the outside of the bottom from Claire – her right index and middle finger. Initially, that was unexpected. Over all, this had to be the most careless, the most clueless, the most inept, group of would be criminals Masters had ever witnessed! It drew a furrowed brow and a shake of the head

but no chuckle.

He needed to make a note but was without his pad. He searched the pile of magazines on the coffee table, finding an advertising circular from Adam's Screen and Door Company. He folded it in half and began writing. When done, he folded it again and slipped it into his shirt pocket.

The clan was gathering for the fireworks display. Kurt and Billy had become inseparable since supper. Anne had recovered enough to walk a straight line across the living room to the patio door. How she would enjoy the spectacular through her sunglasses he didn't know. Bea and Jay ceased haggling long enough to stop and pass the time of day with Masters before exiting the room to the patio. Maria, Claire, and Carlos arrived together.

"Anything I should be doing?" Carlos asked stopping to talk as the women went on outside.

"Just enjoy the show, I guess. Tomorrow will be a taxing day so get a good night's rest. I may need the plane. If the pilots need to be alerted ahead of time perhaps you could do that this evening."

"Where to? It will help them get flight plans ready to file."

"Sorry. I don't know yet. I'll let you know as soon as I do."

Carlos nodded and left, walking past the gathering and trotting down toward the hangers.

As the first pop sounded in the night sky, Masters joined the others outside. He was followed some five minutes later by Adam and Ben. Worth and Kent didn't show. The onlookers were less than enthusiastic through the first ten minutes but had relaxed and seemed to be enjoying the beauty and majesty of it all by the half-way point. Boxer howled from time to time from inside Simon's room; apparently, his ears didn't take kindly to the resounding, aerial, explosions.

Carlos returned and took a seat on the patio floor beside Masters' chair. Few words passed between them. With the ignition of the huge, yellow, burst, Masters stood, flapped his shirt, and bowed as if it had all been his doing. It drew some chuckles and applause.

Later, Carlos stood and listened.

"That's not Boxer's 'stop the fireworks' howl. Something's wrong. I better go see what's up."

He left and Masters returned his gaze to night sky. Presently Carlos was back whispering into the old detective's ear.

"You need to come with me right now, please."

Having been a whisper Masters understood it was some kind of a private matter. He didn't respond but got up and followed the boy inside.

"What?" was his question as the door slid shut behind them. Boxer continued to be disturbed up on his back legs boxing his young heart out. His distress appeared to be directed at the fireplace screen.

"Come over to the fireplace."

Carlos moved quickly across the room. Masters was soon there.

"Look behind the logs. I don't know what it is but it sure has upset Boxer."

"Please stand back and let me take a look."

Masters set the screen aside, got down on all fours, and stuck his head inside the opening.

"A brown paper sack – something rolled up inside it. Hidden behind the logs."

He lowered his head to get a closer look at the package.

"Bring me a seat cushion from one of the chairs."

Carlos looked puzzled but quickly carried out the request.

"Now, go out into the front hall and take the dog with you."

"What? Why?"

"There's the slightest chance this may be explosives. Since they have been stashed in among the logs, I assume, if it is explosives, it is not fixed with a detonator. Somebody would be counting on the fire to ignite it. So, it seems a safe bet but just in case get your keister out of here."

"That cushion isn't going to offer much protection you know."

"Probably not but it makes me feel better. Now scat!"

"Reluctantly, Carlos did as he had been instructed."

Masters positioned the cushion – the long way – between his arms and reached in and removed one of the two logs covering the sack. Then, he moved the second.

He sighed and paused making sure his hands would remain steady for the main event. He reached in and carefully, slowly, picked up the sack, moved it toward him, and laid it on the hearth in front of the opening. It was tied with string. He secured his pocket knife and cut it away – the cushion still between him and the bundle. Then he slowly unrolled the package. There were twelve sticks of fused dynamite, themselves tied together with string.

He motioned to Carlos who was by his side in a matter of seconds.

"What's that?"

"TNT!"

"What was it doing in the fire place?"

Masters paused for his reaction.

"Oh, my ever lovin' gosh! Somebody was trying to blow us up. It's a gas lit fireplace so no one would have been expected to get close enough to see the brown package. It blended right in with the brownish logs anyway. One press of the starter button up here and kapowee!"

"It was burned last evening. Is that the usual?"

"Yes. Mr. G. would roll up close to it after dinner to keep warm while he sat with us. The week of the Fourth though we usually have two fires. One after dinner – mostly for Mr. G. –and one after the fireworks show – for the rest of us. Evenings get chilly outside here on the desert."

"Who lays the logs?"

"Pedro, usually. He laid it up this morning and then about seven this evening. You don't think he put the boom boom stuff in there, do you?"

"At this point I have no way of knowing. Please stay here and see that nobody, including Boxer, touches anything in or around the fireplace. I need to get the Sheriff back out here."

The call was made. Carl said he would send his explosive expert and two additional deputies immediately. Masters donned his latex gloves and removed the TNT – still

in its wrapper – to the safety of his suite, then returned to the living room. Carlos was sitting cross-legged on the throw rug in front of the fireplace; Boxer's head lay in his lap. They both looked up as Masters walked toward them. He couldn't remember when he had seen two such sad sets of eyes.

"Let's keep the TNT just between us, guys," Masters said looking from boy to dog and taking a seat beside them on the raised hearth. Including Boxer, as he clearly had, brought a smile to Carlos. He rubbed the dog's ears and drew its face close to his.

"Hear that. You're one of the guys and no gossiping about the boom boom!"

Boxer's tail wagged; it was only one wag or perhaps half a wag as it stopped after moving in one direction – but it was the most positive reaction Carlos had seen for some time.

"Still time to catch the big finale outside," Masters said.

"I better stay in here with Boxer. All the noise at the end bothers him – hurts his hearing I think. You go ahead. We'll be fine."

Masters understood that to mean Carlos wanted some time alone with the dog. The big man was soon back outside awaiting the arrival of the explosives team. In the meantime, he sat back and enjoyed the beautiful displays glistening above. There was no doubt about it, however. He definitely agreed with Boxer about the accompanying, distasteful din.

## **CHAPTER EIGHT**

### **Day three: Morning**

It had been a shot. Masters knew shots and it had been a shot.

The swiftness with which he was out of bed and into his robe and slippers amazed even him – especially him. Because of the way the Hacienda was constructed, it was difficult to locate the direction from which the noise had come.

As it turned out that would present no problem; the hall was filled with folks in various stages of dress – everyone but Worth. His door was ajar. Masters knocked. No answer. Masters entered. Worth was in his bed unconscious but groaning in pain.

Masters soon determined that he had a bullet wound to his chest. It had probably punctured his lung. Carlos appeared by his side dragging the two deputies with him.

"Get medical help – fast," Masters said. "Call the Sheriff and tell him we have another shooting. I imagine one of you deputies is more qualified to administer first aid for this sort of thing than I."

He stepped back. With a nod the deputies immediately agreed upon a division of labor. One placed the calls and herded the anxious audience away from the door. The other donned latex gloves and unbuttoned Worth's top.

"Kid. You have a first aid kit?"

"An excellent one. I stocked it myself. Be back in a jiff."

The deputy glanced at Masters.

"In a jiff?"

"He's lived his life surrounded by old people. Fifty years ago jiff was hip – no make that hot, no, I guess it's cool. Makes an old head swirl but you get the idea."

Carlos was back – in a jiff – and he was right; the kit was contained in a small suitcase, and was as well stocked as many county doctors' offices.

The second deputy returned.

"I got the emergency physician on the phone here."

He put it on speaker. The situation was soon described. Blood pressure and pulse rates were passed on. A simple fluid replacement I-V was hung and begun. Due to the large amount of blood loss a person to person transfusion was to be attempted. The deputy had no experience. Masters had seen it done often in the old days and instructed the deputy in fashioning the necessary device from a length of tubing and two I-V needles.

"Blood type?" Masters asked.

"There on the chart," Carlos said pointing inside the lid of the first aid kit. "I have everybody listed. . . . AB positive."

He ran his finger down the list.

"Let's see; Zach and Billy have that type. I'll be right back"

Carlos left. Masters turned to the deputy.

"Get us four, firm, bed pillows STAT!"

He was back immediately followed by Billy and Zach. Masters placed the pillows on the bed to Worth's right constructing a makeshift raised platform of a kind."

"Which one of you" Masters asked looking back and forth between Zach and Billy.

"It will be me," Billy said. "Dad has medicines in his system and we don't know how that might affect Uncle Worth."

"We have your permission for this, Zack? The boy's underage."

"Yes. Certainly. I only wish it could be me."

Masters turned to Billy. "This question requires your completely honest answer, son. Any chance you have any sexually transmitted diseases?"

Billy looked at Carlos – sheepishly – and then back at Masters, sighing. "No chance. Never had sex."

Carlos put his arm on Billy's shoulder.

"Nothing to be embarrassed about. Most of what I've told you about that stuff has been lies too. Ray says it's just what we do are our ages – like it's our job. I figure it's just mental practice for the real thing later on. From what you've told me, you should be very well practiced."

A smile passed between them.

"Okay, then. Billy lay down on the pillows, here. The deputy will insert the needle that's on one end of this tube into your wrist. He will let your blood fill the tube completely to purge any air and then insert the needle on the opposite end into your Uncle's wrist. The blood will begin flowing from you, being at a higher level and with a stronger heartbeat, into Worth. Just relax."

Masters crossed his fingers behind his back.

Carlos moved to Billy's side of the bed and with no more words took his best friend's hand.

The preliminaries were accomplished and Billy's precious blood began flowing into his Uncle Worth.

"BP stabilized – coming back a bit, even," the Deputy announced after five minutes.

"Hold your applause folks," Billy joked. "All in a day's work for SuperStud."

"SuperDud, you mean?" Carlos came back nervously.

Within fifteen minutes the MediVac helicopter had landed and the medical staff took over. A drainage tube was inserted into Worth's chest cavity and a more appropriate solution added to the IV before the transfusion was terminated. He was removed by the helicopter to the hospital. Anne accompanied him. It had been at her insistence.

Before they left they administered make up liquid via an I-V to Billy. That finished, Masters and Carlos helped an extremely weakened Billy into the living room. The boy lay down on the couch across from Master's chair and Carlos took up sentry duty on the floor in front of him. Claire plied him with orange juice and his father sat behind the couch wiping back his own tears.

Masters dressed and returned to the living room.

The first report on Worth's condition came forty minutes later. He was stable. The bullet had exited his body – something already known at the Hacienda as Masters and the



deputies had located and extracted it from the mattress. It was also a .22 slug. Not from Simon's gun – that weapon was under lock and key in the evidence box. The MO had been the same, however. A shot to the chest.

The sheriff arrived in his helicopter and one deputy went to meet him, catching him up on things as they ducked under the torrent from the big blades and headed for the house.

"Who's been out here on a motorcycle this morning?" were Carl's first words as he entered through the patio doors.

"No one to my knowledge," Masters said standing and looking from face to face of those gathered there, to see if anyone else knew of it. There were shrugs all around.

"Why do you ask?"

"There's one heading northwest away from here at a snail's pace."

"I'd suggest you go pick him up. It could be our shooter," Masters said.

"Bob. Clint. Use the chopper and be careful. Assume he's armed."

The two deputies hurried outside and climbed on board.

"The motor cycle was traveling slow?" Masters asked.

"Could have been a kid, I suppose, but the trail of dust certainly made an arrow pointing back here. An unskilled rider at any rate. My guys will catch up to him in no time."

"You now know most everything we know, Carl. One shot fired at 4:47 give or take a few seconds. The hall was immediately filled with people so the assailant had to have made his way immediately outside – unless he is one of us and just blended in. If he left he could have used the front door or the one you just entered through. The door to Worth's room was ajar. No indication of a struggle, though quite honestly Worth couldn't have mounted a struggle if he'd tried."

"Another round of paraffin tests?" Carl asked.

"Probably, but first, let's just hold off on the morning showers here and wait to hear from your copter."

"Copter dates you, Ray. These days they're choppers."

"I thought choppers were motorcycles, hogs – or bad guys who dismantle stolen cars."

Carl removed his hat and scratched his head.

"You complicate my life, Ray. It's a matter of context, I guess. I'll accept the fact that you know the lingo even if you don't speak it."

"So, how long 'til I can swim my morning laps?" Billy asked.

"You gave up a lot of blood. I'd not count on having lap swimming energy for several days – maybe a week," Masters said."

"I guess that means Carlos will have to swim doubles for us the next few days," he said.

Carlos looked up at Masters.

"Any reason a guy in his condition can't be slugged?"

"I certainly know of none. Do you know of any, Sheriff?"

"Can't think of a single one. I would, however . . . too late."

The punch had been thrown. How that much pain could produce that large a grin, Masters could not be sure."

"You were saying, Sheriff," Carlos said getting to his feet dripping in the orange juice spilled during the activity."

"Oh, I was just saying I would, however, watch out for that big glass of orange juice."

"Back to the serious business, here, Carl. Let's huddle over some coffee in the kitchen."

"Away from prying ears, you mean?" Carlos asked just making sure it had been intended as a fully private meeting.

"You catch on fast. You'll need your time for those extra laps anyway."

A small pillow whizzed by Masters head as he ducked into the hallway.

"I could have hit you, you know," Carlos called, chuckling to himself.

"I can't believe you threw a pillow at Raymond Masters," Billy said clearly dumbfounded.

"I can't either. Got caught up in the moment. I'll apologize later. Let's go get a start on those laps. Think you're up to sitting poolside and fending off the morning air?"

"May take another glass of juice."

The bantering only faintly hid their growing fears.

In the kitchen, there were fears as well.

"Report on the TNT yet?" Masters asked pouring coffee for the two of them.

"Old stuff. Run of the mill mining stock. Could have been stolen from any of a dozen miner's shacks within a hundred miles of here. Tom found a bevy of prints on both the sticks and the sack. He'll have them IDed shortly if they belong to anybody around here. The mark of an amateur, of course."

"Thinking once the stuff blew up, the prints would be gone, you mean," Masters added.

Carl nodded and continued.

"Neil isn't Neil, by the way – at least according to the prints we took from him out here."

"I assume then that he is Craig somebody."

"Yes. Craig Benson an employee of the fireworks company."

"Do you have the actual Neil person's prints yet?"

"No. Haven't been able to locate him. Hoped to find him out here today. Tom even trusted me with his pocket printing set."

"He wasn't at the RV last night, then?"

"The person who gave us permission to search said his name was Craig Benson. Didn't know about the problems with the prints at that time. I didn't ask for ID. I suppose we should confront him about it."

"No time like the present," Masters said.

Five minutes later they were knocking on the RV door. The person Masters had known as Neil answered the door, a small white, kitchen, trash bag in hand, clearly on his way to the dumpster.

"Sorry to bother you at this hour but there seems to be some problem about just who you are."

"In here or out there? Cooler in here."

The men moved inside. The bag was dropped by the door.

"Coffee? Lemonade?"

Both men declined as they took seats. The mystery man poured himself a lemonade and leaned back against the edge of the kitchen table.

"How to start?" he began.

"Neil is the main guy on this gig. He was scheduled to be here during the first two days alone. Then I was to join him on the third and fourth. His brother got hurt in a car accident over near Reno last Friday so he asked me come and fill in – at least that's his story. He's . . . how can I say . . . he drinks and gambles to excess, and has missed a lot of work because of it, so he asked me to use his name if it ever came up. He said nobody but the kids ever came around and they knew me from last year so no introductions would be needed. Then you came along, Sir, so I introduced myself as Neil according to the arrangement."

"When do you expect Neil, Craig – it is Craig Benson, isn't it?" Masters asked.

"Yes, it is, and he should be in by noon. Tonight's display is absolutely spectacular and it'll take the two of us at least six hours to get it up and ready to run."

"You see, Craig, I have one problem with your story," Masters began.

Craig squirmed.

"None of the prints on the spent fireworks canisters from the first night match yours. There are some nice, big, fresh prints, which we are certain were laid down at the time the fireworks were being installed, but they are not yours. How can that be? In fact, none of yours were anywhere to be found down here after that first night." (Sometimes the old detective takes poetic license with the facts to move things along.)

"I see. Of course, we didn't know we'd have a detective on staff here at the time we concocted the story. Okay. I came the morning of the second day and was to say I'd been here the night before. I really don't know why. He's my boss. What was I supposed to do? What's the big deal, anyway? Me or him? The display went off as scheduled and I assume without a hitch like usual."

"You're aware Simon Gabriel was murdered on the night of the first, aren't you?"

"I am now. I wasn't until the Sheriff came to search the RV. I assumed they were looking for a gun. I've never owned one. Don't know about Neil. You think me or Neil was in on killing the old man? Why? This is the best gig on the circuit."

"Thank you for your time. Your innocence will be best served by not passing on the particulars of this interview to Neil. Please do, however, tell him the RV was searched last night. He needs to know –legal requirement, you see."

Craig nodded, clearly puzzled. The two left and headed back to the house. Carlos had stopped swimming laps and Billy had joined him in the pool."

"Hey. You think that's wise, being in the pool when you're so weak?" Masters asked sounding very much like a parent.

"Carlos and I figured it out. Because of buoyancy, I'm lighter weight when I'm in the water so I'm expending less muscular energy so more of it is available for making new blood. If that isn't really scientific I'd rather not hear it. I do feel a lot better here in the cool, supportive, water than out there frying in the sun."

"Science be damned! Your logic makes total sense to me," Carl said with a slap of his thigh and a broad smile, weighing in on the boys' side.

"Three to one against the old man. At those odds, I guess I'll give in. Just be alert for dizziness and such. It's no time to be macho."

"I understand and Carlos, the old mother hen here, is smothering me with caution."

The copter – that is chopper – appeared overhead and the two men headed for the safety of the patio. The deputies had somebody in tow – old, short, and scruffy looking but spunky enough to fight the young officers every inch of the way.

One of the deputies explained as they extracted him from the helicopter.

"His wallet says his name is Abe Thompson. He won't confirm it. He was heading NNW at a blistering 14 miles an hour on an ancient Harley. We secured it under a tarp out there. Probably need to commandeer a truck and go back after it. And, oh yes, this old codger bites so watch out. Also, found a .22 pistol. When he saw we were coming in after him he tossed it away. In the end we had to chase him down on foot."

Masters moved close to the man and spoke.

"I recognize his name. For years, he received regular monthly checks from Simon. They were cut off a few months ago. The pattern looks to be blackmail."

Masters had painted the worst scenario first, hoping to urge the man to defend himself with the truth. He didn't. 'My!' Masters thought. 'Could it have actually been blackmail?'

"The evidence at first take, at least without lab confirmation, would seem to suggest you shot Worth Gabriel less than two hours ago. You can save everybody lots of time if you'll explain how you came to do that?"

The old man pursed his lips in a definite demonstration of defiance. Clearly there would be no confession or information. Carl sensed it too.

"Abe Thompson, you are under arrest on suspicion of the attempted Murder of Worth Gabriel. Read him his rights on the way back to the city. Take him in and return here. Ask Tom for any new reports he may have."

"Want a real plane ride?" Master said, addressing Carl but not escaping the ears of the youngest detective and self-appointed partner.

"I know that plane like the back of my hand. If you're going someplace I should probably go along and handle things onboard."

"With your mother's approval, I see no objections to that," Masters said waiting for the next, predictable, volley.

"And, since I'm really needed to care for our hero, Billy, I suppose it would be best if he came along, too."

"Tell me, young man," Carl said all quite seriously, "Has your mother ever won an argument with you in your whole life?"

"Let me put it this way, Sir. I have one great allowance and it just seems to get larger and larger and larger."

Carlos turned to Masters.

"Where too and when? I'll go down and tell the pilots."

"Phoenix and as soon as they can be ready."

Masters and Carl went inside.

"I assume you have a couple of hours for a little ride," Masters said.

"Certainly. What's the deal?"

"The deal is another possible blackmail suspect – that

would be a blackmailer of Simon. He sent her a monthly check for some forty years – Libby Austin by name."

"Nothing else to go on?"

"Nothing. I need to get her street address from Jay. Suppose you could . . ."

"Arrange police transportation for us while we're there? I knew you wanted me along for more than just my world class conversational skills."

"Add mind reading prowess to that as well, it seems."

Jay was located in the room where he had spent the majority of his stay – Simon's office. Bea was there knitting, keeping him company. It was a strange relationship they had, but somehow it worked for them.

"Have you been able to find that address for the Austin woman?"

"Sure have."

He shuffled through the clutter on the desk and located a three by five card. He handed it to Masters who had another question.

"Turn up anything on that Abe Thompson person? Apparently, it was he who shot Worth."

Bea perked up.

"Abe Thompson? That was the name of the conductor on our family's private train back when I was a kid. Short, plump, cantankerous?"

Masters looked at Carl.

"That would seem to fit alright," Carl offered. "Do you know of any problems between him and either of the Mr. Gabriel's?"

"We're talking ancient history here, guys. He hated all us kids equally. We messed up his neat and orderly train. I have no recollection of anything specific. Better ask Anne. She was always more of a people person than I. Could charm the skin off a donkey. Maybe that's where she got that gosh awful skirt she's been wearing around here."

Jay rolled his eyes, long ago resigned to the fact that his wife would have her say regardless.

"If anything comes to mind, let me know," Masters said.

She shrugged, then had an additional thought.

"Did you know that the bad boys left the premises last

night?"

"You mean Adam and Ben?"

Her silence indicated his assumption had been correct.

"You know that how?"

"Saw them leave and saw them return."

"Times?"

"Left immediately after the fireworks were over and returned about one o'clock – a.m."

"You were where?"

"Up on the deck on the roof. If there's a breeze out here at night, it'll be caught up there. I couldn't sleep – the Simon thing and all."

"Car?"

"Adam's"

"Direction?"

"Back down the access road for this place. Out of sight behind that first little rise."

"Condition upon their return?"

"You're asking if they were intoxicated?"

"That's one of several possibilities," I suppose."

"Seemed stone cold sober to me. Didn't say a word that I could hear from the car to the house."

"Thanks for the heads up. Anybody else see any of that, do you suppose?"

"I saw them return," Jay said. "I woke up and missed Bea. Went looking for her. Didn't have to look far. She loves it up there at night. I arrived just about the time the car's headlights separated into two, on its way back toward the Hacienda. I saw them get out and walk to the private entrance of their suite."

"You two are a fountain of information this morning. Thank you. The Sheriff, the two boys, and I, are heading for Phoenix. Barring anything unforeseen we should be back here in time for lunch. I'd like to say we should call a meeting of the principals for this evening but I'm still awaiting a couple of pieces of information so we better hold off for now."

"You have it solved?" Bea asked.

"I've had it solved since that first evening. I just haven't had all my ducks in a legally tight row. Have a good morning."

"I assume that was not a bluff," Carl said once they



were in the hall and out of ear shot."

"Not at all. I've known what had to be. Just still need a few more things to substantiate it all. By the way, if you will, instruct your deputies to allow no one to leave the premises, and just in case our trip takes longer than I plan, have them re-search the RV about two o'clock. I'd have a warrant in their hip pocket this time."

"You can smell the finish line, can't you?" Carl said.

"Oh, yes, my friend. Oh, yes."

"Will we need clothes?" Carlos asked greeting the men as they boarded the plane.

"He means the dreaded three S's of summer – shirt, sox, and shoes," Billy added, feeling a fuller explanation was in order.

"The two of you will need to agree to remain in the plane the entire trip. Attire is strictly up to you. Agreed?"

Both boys nodded apparently not really disappointed.

Once in the air it became clear that Billy had flown less often than Carlos. He stuck by the window, in awe of the view. Carlos, on the other hand, enjoyed the view less and his friend's reactions to it all, more.

The flight took something over an hour. A dark blue Chrysler pulled alongside as the plane rolled to a stop on a restricted area of the tarmac. The driver was a Captain in the Phoenix PD and a friend of Carl's.

Twenty minutes later the car stopped in front of the address on the card Jay had provided. It was a small, 1940's bungalow, neat in appearance with a single, narrow, flower bed running from the small entry stoop to the north edge of the house. The flowers looked very thirsty.

The three men approached the front door. The Captain knocked, figuring the first contact should be initiated by the local agency. A woman in her early seventies answered the door. Her long, white, hair encircled a face that was still attractive in a natural, unpainted, sort of way.

"Ms. Libby Austin?"

"Yes."

"I'm Captain Jackson from the Phoenix Police Department," he began holding out his identification. "This is Sheriff Cranston from south central Nevada and Detective

Raymond Masters. They are investigating a murder within the Sheriff's jurisdiction and need to have a few words with you."

"Murder! How dreadful. And you think I know something about it. I can assure you I haven't been out of Phoenix for twenty years.

She was pleasant but firm in her delivery.

"Come in. Can't afford to cool the outside."

They took seats. The house smelled musty as if it had been closed up for a time. Perhaps it was just an unavoidable byproduct of her 'keep the inside, inside', philosophy.

"Now what's this all about please?"

Masters took the lead.

"We only intend to take a few minutes of your time and appreciate your cooperative nature. A man we have reason to think you know has been murdered – Simon Gabriel."

"Simon. Oh, my! When?"

"Earlier this week at his home. It was noticed that in his ledger he was making regular payments to you by check. We are here to inquire as to the why of those payments."

Libby gently teased several tissues from a box on the end table beside her chair and dabbed at the corners of her eyes. Her attempt to mount a smile soon failed. She sighed.

"Dear Simon. Long ago, more years than seem possible now, he and I dated. To be completely accurate I also dated his younger brother, Worth. I could see that I was coming between them. At one point, they fought a terrible battle – they thought it was over me but I had indicated no consent in the matter. I was also seeing another young man, Larry Miller. The Gabriels were rich brats. Larry was a poor boy, but he swept me off my feet with his good looks and persuasive line.

"I dropped Simon and Worth after their brawl, letting them know in no uncertain terms I'd never have anything to do with their Neanderthal types again."

"Larry and I were soon married. It was about six months later that I began having second thoughts about the kind of man my husband really was. He was a con artist and made his living swindling others. He had lots of enemies, which meant we were constantly on the move. I hated my life and in a moment of despair wrote a note to Simon apologizing

for the horrible way I'd treated him. I got no response.

"A few weeks later one of Larry's former marks shot him dead as he was leaving the hotel we'd been living in. Suddenly I was all alone. I had no husband, no means of support, no place to live. Again, I contacted Simon and pleaded with him to at least answer my letter. I gave him the post office box where we had been receiving mail.

"A week later an envelope arrived with his return address on it. My heart danced, as they say. I opened it. Inside was the first check for twenty-five hundred dollars, with a note that said, "I'll send more when I can. I can see I'm no good for you. Don't contact me again. I'll love you forever. Simon"

"Well, every month since then a check has arrived. I have kept to his wishes all these years and never contacted him."

"Did you remarry – the name Austin?" Masters asked.

"I went back to my maiden name."

"Did you work?"

"I didn't need to. I've spent my life volunteering – mostly at the children's hospital."

She stood and walked to the mantle removing a framed certificate. Masters read it out loud.

"Our deepest appreciation to Libby Austin for 100,000 hours of volunteer service in her lifetime."

He turned and looked at her.

"One hundred thousand hours?"

"Count them up. Forty hours a week, fifty weeks a year for fifty years. I was never blessed with children of my own but I have a lifetime of memories of thousands of them at the hospital. Their certificate was really their way of saying I had become more of a burden than help – like abandoning a car after 100,000 miles. I took their hint. The local kindergarten lets me come in and read to the kids a couple times a week. That's probably enough now anyway. I have fifty years of soaps to catch up on and I walk several miles every morning with friends I've made at the Senior Center. I am so sorry about Simon. Don't worry about me, though – financially, I mean. I own every house on both sides of the street in this block and I've invested in paintings that have increased nicely

in value."

She pointed around the room.

"I'm wealthy, at least in the way I define it."

The men stood to leave. Libby was not quite finished.

"If you need to verify any of this just check with Volunteer Services at the Hospital – they have my fingerprints and such. Is there family? Simon's, I mean?"

"Two sons and a grandson."

"Please give them my condolences if that seems appropriate."

As they approached the door to leave Masters noticed a piece of luggage sitting behind the couch. It had fresh labels on it. He took note and once outside jotted down the information on his pad. Several obviously new stickers had caught his eye. "Reno loves you. Come back soon" "Southwestern Association of Volunteers."

On the way back to the airport, Masters had them stop at a fast food drive through. He picked up a dozen double something-or-others with cheese, and an assortment of sides and drinks.

"I forgot about the boys," Carl said. "I'm sure they must be starved."

"Boys?" Masters said. "This stuff's for me. They can fend for themselves."

Once the plane was in the air and headed North West, the goodies were passed around. The outing was well ahead of the time frame Masters had allotted.

Carl made several calls attempting to pinpoint information about Libby's recent trip to Reno. Fifteen minutes later her itinerary was down in black and white on Masters' pad. Flew to Reno on June 25th. Stayed in the Yodel Inn, Attended the Volunteers convention, of which she turned out to be the Historian, and returned to Phoenix no more than an hour before the men spoke with her. That explained the drooping flowers and the stale smell of her house.

Masters had to wonder why she neglected to mention the trip. In fact, why had she so carefully led them to believe she hadn't been out of town for 20 years? Perhaps it was nothing more than her off hand way of saying she stayed pretty close to home.

"So, Libby was in Nevada, only a few hundred miles from the Hacienda when both Simon was murdered and Worth was shot," Carl said, attempting to elicit some sage take on it from his old friend."

"Twister for desert?" Masters replied understanding Carl's game and bating him a bit.

Then he got serious.

"Get her prints faxed to your office along with a photograph. If she had gone out to the Hacienda what means of quiet transportation would be available to her from Reno?"

"Some sort of limo service or car rental. Helicopters would not allow for a stealthy entrance and even if they lit a dozen miles away she couldn't make it there and back on foot."

"There was no garage and no car in front of her house. I doubt if she drives. Have your guys canvas the appropriate limo agencies, then. See if Thompson, the conductor, will admit to knowing her. Check back and make sure her maiden name was really Austin – Bea may know that. First, see if you can get an update on Worth."

The report on Worth was positive. He had undergone surgery to repair the damage to his lung and one rib that had been shattered by the bullet. He was in stable condition.

The boys were clearly relieved and voiced it over and over again. Billy was regaining his strength at a remarkable rate. Masters had a momentary fantasy that the boy was really the son of superman, alias, Clark Kent, alias Kent Clark. That spawned another idea he'd have to look into later. The return trip was uneventful – just the way Masters preferred plane trips to be.

It was noon as the four of them approached the patio in the van. Carl went to his waiting helicopter and left. Lunch was being served as they entered the house. The boys ate as if they hadn't each put away two, cholesterol-laden, double whatevers with cheese just an hour earlier.

"Kent," Masters said making small talk. "I'm still to see that studio of yours. How about after lunch?"

"July is down time for me. Carlos takes it off from his studies. I usually head out for two or three days at a time to paint. The week of the fourth requires my presence here. Got

clay ready and waiting if you're so inclined."

"I'll look forward to the tour, then."

Masters and the boys managed to force down slices of apricot pie with ice cream – the boy's pie warm and Masters' icebox cold. Claire had remembered his preference and he expressed his appreciation.

After the general tour of the studio was concluded – a long narrow, A-frame, room constructed entirely of triple glazed, heat reflective, widows – Masters got down to business.

"Does the name, Libby Austin ring a bell?"

"Libby. Yes. She buys half the paintings I put up for sale. Don't really know much about her but assume she's very wealthy. Widowed, I believe. Never comes to me. I always go to her."

"To her home in Phoenix?"

"That's right – well, to her gallery. I use the van, loaded to the hilt, and drive down and back. I usually take two or three days and enjoy the city. Beautiful place. I've done some paintings of sites in the old town section. Usually stick to landscapes but that area's just too tempting."

"I wonder what she does with the paintings."

"Has them hanging in the house next door – I referred to it as her gallery. It's mostly my stuff. She's holding onto it expecting it to increase in value – which it has, much to my amazement. Last time she joked about that saying something like, 'You know if you'd just kick the bucket or be put on trial for some horrendous crime, the worth of these things would skyrocket for me!'"

"May I inquire about the price you receive for a painting like this one, for example?"

"When I sell them myself, I receive somewhere in the neighborhood of \$5000. Dealers and volume buyers like Libby get half off."

"She has a beautiful painting – about half this size – in her living room," Masters said.

"I guess I've never been in her house. I'm complimented that you liked it. Here are some Carlos did. Notice his subtle use of color. He seems to prefer the somber tones and goes for realism. I keep after him to free up his

spirit and just fling some colors. His personality seems to be very cautious and serious."

"Still, he does fine work. I would have never suspected these were the paintings of a fifteen-year-old."

"He's really more interested in computer graphics. You know the kids and computers. I have some of that work over here. In fact, here's some of Claire's, too. She and her computer classes over the internet tickle me for some reason."

Masters picked up several pieces bearing the initials of Carlos.

"Interesting. He certainly doesn't shy away from color in these pieces," Masters noted. "I suppose there's special software necessary to do such things."

"Lots of it and more every month. Takes me six weeks to learn a new program. Carlos has it mastered in an evening."

Masters unfolded a piece of paper he had been carrying in his shirt pocket.

"The graphics on this piece, for example. I assume it is probably from one of those software programs."

"Looks to be from two programs, actually. I wouldn't pretend to be able to name them but the graphics – see here and here – work in a few letters and words – wish, zoom, bang. They are quite different in style, pressure, and configuration compared with the main text. Carlos might be of more help."

"I appreciate the tour and the information about computer things. I may be back with Carlos after while."

"He has free run of the place any time. Never locked."

Masters left checking his pocket to make sure he had a sufficient supply of twisters to entice Carlos into helping him. Outside, the thermometer had soared into the three-digit range, the first two being 11. It was egg frying on the sidewalk weather. The boys were back in the pool, neither one expending much energy. It looked inviting and although hippos could swim, Masters would be content with boyhood memories of the swimming hole on Spider Creek.

He walked to poolside and beckoned them to come inside. They were soon by his side. Again, he unfolded the piece of paper and showed it to the boys.

"A flyer from Adam's screen company," Billy said with a

shrug.

“Would either of you know what software was used to produce it?”

Billy shrugged again. Carlos took it into his hands, immediately intrigued by the challenge presented by the question.

“Not sure but I think I can find it for you. Why so interested in an advertisement?”

“You’ll be the first to know. Proceed, young Mr. Gates!”

“Oh, this isn’t Microsoft. Much too shabby. Most likely freeware from the internet. The computer in the studio will be the best one to use for this. Great gobs of memory and I already have lots of stuff stored on it.”

He was soon seated at the computer. Masters and Billy stood behind him.

“Hot button DSL internet access.”

He pushed a key and there was the web.

“There is a site – out of Belgium, if you’re interested – that allows you to match sample fonts and stuff in order to find out what it is and where to get it. Here we are. I’ll just scan this into a Word document. . . there . . . then cut a sample and paste it into the box on the site and click the ‘find’ button. There it is. Just like I expected. Probably some computer student’s thesis project. LRA-046. The letters are probably the designer’s initials and it is his 46th project. Maybe not. So, now what?”

“I want to know everything there is to know about using it – downloading it. Is that the term?”

“That’s the term. Let me just do that. It will contain all the info. While that’s going on we can find the graphics program that did the house, and the starbursts and stuff. Same process but we’ll enter the graphics section instead of the font section. It looks to me like the picture of the screen was a drawing made by a computer from a photograph of the actual screens Adam sells, so I’ll eliminate that from the search.”

He fiddled for a while but after a half dozen, “Drat it’s,” and several, “Talk to me baby’s”, he located the program. Another piece of freeware – shareware to be accurate.

“Are these two from the same designer or whatever you



might call him?”

“No!”

“So, the graphics program and the software program would not have been found on the same site or bundled together – is that the terminology?”

“That’s it. Very good. But goodness no. Different eras. One chance in a trillion that this virtually unknown font has ever been used with this virtually unknown graphics package. Some skinflint just pirated whatever he could find. Woops! I guess that pirating skinflint would be Adam, wouldn’t it.”

“The lesson you have just taught me has made my day. Have a twister. You, too, Billy. You’ve been great moral support. How’s your strength, by the way?”

“I’m still not ready for laps – or even lap, maybe. I’ve never been weak like this. It’s a good thing, I think. I’m getting a new perspective – like how it was for Uncle Simon and how it is for Uncle Worth. It must be awful, knowing that day after day you were going to have to just drag yourself from one thing to the next. My dad will probably get that way before . . . I think I’m better prepared to understand and be helpful, now. Boy, it’s going to be hard.”

Carlos voiced an idea.

“It only makes sense for you and your dad to come and stay here. We’ll hire a nurse. We can fly him to his doctor’s appointments. You and I can take excellent care of him, keep him laughing. Kent can tutor you. I’ll probably inherit at least several thousand dollars. That can help pay for it all.”

“Could that really be worked out, you think?”

The question had been directed squarely at Masters.

“If it seems right to your father, I have no doubt it can be worked out. Finances will no longer be a problem.”

“I’m going to go talk with dad. If he’s a hard sell will you help?” he asked Masters.

“I’ll be pleased to speak with him. No promises. It has to be his decision.”

Billy left – his initial, exuberant, trot soon slowed to what might be best described as a wino weave.

Masters and Carlos walked back into the deserted living room and took seats. The relatives seemed to prefer isolation in their rooms to rubbing elbows out in the house.

“I don’t know which would be worse, you know?” Carlos said thoughtfully.

“I don’t follow.”

“Never having a father in the first place or having one and losing him.”

“Perhaps it depends on the father.”

Carlos nodded his agreement – at least on the outside. Masters wept for the boy – on the inside.

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## **CHAPTER NINE**

### **Day Three: Mid-afternoon**

At two o'clock the Sheriff returned with the warrant for the RV. Masters gave him a list of other warrants he wanted to have served immediately and Carl made the arrangements via phone. He brought four deputies with him – two as replacements for those he had been maintaining there at the Hacienda and two extras, 'Just in case'.

Masters remained inside the house while Carl and two deputies served the search warrant on Neil and Craig. They were back within ten minutes one of them carrying a large black trash bag with the wayward pillow inside.

"So how did you know it would be there?" The Sheriff asked. "I won't sleep 'til you tell me."

"Think about it. Where is the safest place to hide a piece of evidence?"

"In some places, you feel sure won't be searched. Ah ha! Since the RV had already been gone over from stem to stern it became that safe place – it had already been searched. And, the RV is never locked so anybody could have access to it. You knew what we'd find, of course."

"I was very sure. Have you examined it yet?"

"No. Figured you'd want to tell us what we were going to find, first."

Carl smiled at his old friend.

"I'll play your game," Masters said. "I'm thinking there will be three bullet holes in it."

"Three? That doesn't fit with any of the other evidence."

Carl just shook his head as he pulled the pillow from

the sack and turned it this way and that counting.

"One . . . two . . . three . . ."

"I'll have the full explanation this evening," Masters said. Let's set that up for eight, here in the living room. Do you have the last couple of reports on the prints?"

"Brought them along. I've read them but none of it makes any sense to me."

Carl removed an envelope from his rear pocket and handed it over. Masters opened it and hurriedly scanned the contents.

"Good work, Tommy boy!" he said. "Here, take him a twister. Bring Anne back with you from the hospital so she can be present. We'll need somebody from the States Attorney's office. Also, I'll want Abe Thompson back out here this evening. Has he given up any more information?"

"Unless you count teeth prints, no – not so much as name, rank, or serial number. You apparently know how he fits into all of this."

"I believe I do but I'll need Abe's assistance. Just hope his anger over a certain set of incidents is ready to be provoked into a fit of reckless rage."

"I better get back to the office then. I've logged more chopper miles the past three days than in any given month of the year so far. It's decimating my transportation budget."

"I can just leave if that will help," Masters said planting a smug smile on his face.

"On the other hand, I just imagine that budget could still probably even spring for at least one case of raspberry twisters."

"You say the nicest things. Everybody here at eight, then."

Carl left and Masters went in search of Jay. Again, he was found in Simon's study – alone that time.

"Jay. We need a meeting of all the principals here at eight this evening. I'm ready to wrap it all up. The Sheriff will see to getting Anne, Abe, and the RV guys. Will you take care of informing the rest? It would probably be a good idea to set things up so Worth can hear the proceedings at the hospital – by phone I suppose."

Masters used the next hour to collect and organize his

thoughts. Jay informed the relatives and staff. Carlos arrived and sat down across from Masters, waiting silently for the big man to open his eyes. Masters sensed his presence. One eye told him he was right. He sat up.

"Carlos, my boy. What's with that grin?"

Before he could respond, two deputies entered the living room from the entrance hall with Adam and Ben handcuffed together – wrists and ankles. The taller one explained to Masters.

"They were attempting to start their car as if to leave, Sir. The orders were that nobody left. When their car wouldn't turn over they became abusive – the reason for the cuffs."

Adam spoke in their defense.

"We ran out of beer. Since when's it a crime to go get beer?"

"Since the order was given not to leave," Masters said. "I guess take them to their suite and post guards. If we have to treat them like preschoolers, we can do that."

The deputies prodded the brothers back toward the front hall. The grin grew on Carlos's face.

"Something to show me?" Masters asked the boy.

"Show you? Oh, you mean like these three spark plug wires?"

He pulled them from his pockets – one from each of three.

Masters looked puzzled waiting for the explanation.

"They're cowards and evil. I figured if they thought they might be suspected in any of this they'd high tail it out of here when Jay told them you had everything solved. So, I guess you could say I just did a little preventative maintenance on their vehicle."

Masters' smile grew wide and he chuckled out loud.

"You're something else, young man. Nice work."

"I've grown extremely agitated since I learned you actually had things solved. It's like what I want, of course, but I don't want any of these people to be the bad guy. Can you understand that?"

"I certainly can. It's never easy to realize a loved one has a dark side."

The boy nodded and sat back.

"Where's Billy, by the way?" Masters asked.

"He and his dad are still huddled in their room talking things out, I think. Maybe with Jay."

"Earlier, it sounded like you knew about his father's condition."

"Like he told you," Carlos said. "We don't keep any secrets from each other. I hope he and his dad come to stay here and that he can remain after . . . you know."

"I hope so, too."

"Mom says we will have plenty of money. I guess Mr. G. left her some."

"You won't have to worry about money, Carlos. I can guarantee that."

Carlos nodded. "We don't need much, you know. It would be nice if there could be money for college but Mr. Clark says he thinks I can get some scholarships in either writing or art. I'm pretty handy. I could probably get a part time job as a handyman."

"What would you do if you had a lot of money?" Masters asked.

"A lot? Like thousands? Well, Anne talks about the kids she works with who don't have anything compared to what I have. I guess I'd have her help me work out a way to help them. Having lots of money has never had to be one of my worries. I really don't want to have to deal with lots of money – look what it did to this family. I just want to write things that will be useful and entertaining for others and paint some pictures that will bring a sense of beauty to those who view them. I want to have a family – a wife and two children. I want to be the best father who ever lived. I can't imagine what else I'd ever need, can you?"

"No. I can't imagine what else you'd ever need. In the meantime – preferably sometime before your wedding day – I need to speak in private with Pedro. Would you see if you can find him?"

"Sure. You keep custody of the wires?"

"Gladly. Here's a twister for quick energy."

He left and was almost immediately back with Pedro.

"I'm going to go swim off some of this nervous energy

that's suddenly overwhelming me. Yell if you need anything."

Again, he left.

"Pedro. The time has come to put up or shut up – do you know what that means?"

"Si. Tell you why I shot Mr. G. or take back my confession."

"Exactly."

Masters folded his hands across his expansive middle and waited in silence.

"Mr. G. treated me well, but that wasn't how he did with others. He was stingy – tight with a buck – you know. I seen him and Carlos together a lot. It was always Carlos who was doin' the talkin' and takin' care of – never Mr. G. It was like Mr. G. was just using him – the way he used everybody. It's always bothered me.

"Then, one day about a month ago, I guess, Carlos and I was talking – he liked talking to me in Spanish and I'd practice my English on him. My English is not so good. If not for Carlos it would be even . . . what? Badder? It probably sounds very strange to anybody who is listening to one of those talks of ours – each of us babbling away in a different language.

"Anyway, that day he seemed really down – sad – bothered – about things between him and Mr. G. At one point, he even admitted that Mr. G. always used to abuse him but that had stopped. I got so mad I wanted to go kill the old man right away. I didn't say nothin' to Carlos but I had an uncle who did that to me and no kid should have to go through that. So, I decided to wait until the noise of the fireworks and shoot him then.

"After I done it, it was like my head cleared up. I knew I needed to turn myself in for what I done. Then I remembered the rumor about Mr. G. offering to pay a lot of money to the person who'd kill him. So, I came to confess to you so Carlos could have money for college."

"We really need to clear something up with Carlos. Let me get him."

Pedro nodded and sat back on the couch as Masters opened the patio door and called out. The boy was soon there, towel in hand, and took a seat on the floor so as to not



get the furniture wet.

"I need an immediate straight answer about something."

Carlos frowned and nodded. "Sure. What?"

"Pedro believes that a month or so ago you inferred that when you were younger Simon Gabriel abused you – sexually was the connotation."

"What? How in the . . .? No. Mr. G? Never!"

He turned to Pedro. "What did you think I said?"

Pedro's response was emphatic.

"You said he used to abuse you but he don't no more."

"What I said was, 'He used to amuse me. I meant I was feeling bad because his sense of humor wasn't as evident anymore."

"Amuse?"

"Diviértase, ¿hace bromas, usted entiende?"

"¡Oh mi! ¡Cómo es terrible! Estoy tan apesadumbrado."

"It's alright, Pedro," Carlos said. "No harm done. Just calm down."

"Well, that's not how Pedro will see it," Masters began.

"What do you mean?"

Masters turned to Pedro.

"I need to explain – to tell the boy. Okay?"

Pedro nodded and tears began rolling down his cheeks.

"Pedro has confessed to killing Simon."

"Pedro! No!"

"He didn't but he thinks he did."

Pedro frowned.

"I did! I pulled the trigger. Bang! Bang!"

"You pulled the trigger, alright, and I understand that you think you killed him, but you didn't. Take my word for it. I will prove it when we get together this evening."

"Wow!" Carlos said looking directly into Pedro's face. "I don't know what to say. I don't know whether to thank you for caring about me so much or yell at you for being such a gosh, darned, fool. I think I'll yell at you!"

"Let's all just feel fortunate that his plan didn't work. I have no idea what the States Attorney will do in terms of the intent to kill charges she could file. We should know about that by the end of this evening's get together."

The house phone rang. Carlos answered.

"It's Anne for you."

He handed the phone to Masters, asking,

"Can Pedro leave?"

"Sure. Just be back here by eight this evening."

Pedro left.

Carlos stayed.

Masters talked.

"Anne. This is Ray. What's up?"

"Just heard from the Sheriff's office that he's bringing me back out there this evening. Sounds like you're finally ready to pull my plug."

"I think you have a fascinating experience awaiting you."

"I have something from Worth you need to know. It pertains to his would be killer. As soon as he heard the name of the suspect he began spilling the beans."

"About his father's death, I assume."

Silence on the other end.

"Hello. Anne?"

"Yes. I'm here. Just can't for the life of me understand how you knew that."

"My nose. Detectives are issued special noses. It would help if you could bring a signed statement from Worth if he's willing."

"He's really down – not physically; he's doing amazingly well in that department. They've already moved him out of intensive care. But mentally. He's saying things like he wishes Abe had been successful. That he has nothing to live for. That he should have been killed. If I didn't know I was the one who shot Simon, I'd certainly think that he had."

"Things will work out. I'll see you here by eight. In the meantime, don't do anything stupid – like open a bottle."

"Tell her I say Hi," Carlos said as he heard the conversation drawing to an end.

"Tell him I heard that," she said.

Masters hung up.

"She heard you."

"She's always been my favorite of all the relatives that gather here every summer. I've never even met her husband,

so she seems like an old maid – and I didn't mean that as a put down. Older, single, lady – that's what I should have said. I suppose this event will stop now that Mr. G's gone. I'll miss it. I never really liked most of them but they have a way of growing on you."

Billy and his father came down the hall from Simon's office where they had just concluded a conference with Jay.

"It's been worked out," Billy announced. "Jay said that once the Will is read it'll be clear that the plan to move out here will present no financial problem. Not sure what that means but we figure Jay should know."

"We still have to work out eventual guardianship," Kurt said and by work out I emphasize the word work. Billy isn't pleased with any of the obvious alternatives."

"I won't stand for it, is actually what I said," Billy explained folding his arms.

"There is plenty of time to work that out," Masters said. "Let's hear the Will first and then go from there."

It received a single nod from Billy and raised eyebrows from Kurt.

"Mostly it sounds great, you know," Carlos said getting up and putting arm around Billy's waist.

"Yeah. I understand that. Let's put it aside like Mr. Masters said. And no offense, but I've had just about all the adults I can handle for one day. Carlos and I are going for a walk or something."

Kurt bit his tongue, wanting to warn his son about not overtaxing himself. Masters did likewise. They left through the patio door. Carlos stuck his head back inside.

"Will there be fireworks this evening?"

It had been directed at Masters.

"Assuming the fireworks guys get it all set up and somebody has a match, I see no reason that it shouldn't go on as scheduled – a least for most of the folks."

Masters again needed to speak with Jay.

"Can you be prepared to present just the bare bones of the Will this evening?"

"The Will is just bare bones. Simple. To the point. Complete in two pages. Sure. No problem. Before or after the bad guy gets fingered."

“You sound like a reporter in a Mickey Spillane novel.”

“I’ve read my share. Perhaps it rubbed off. Carlos will need to be prepared ahead of time, Ray. Simon goes into it all and refers to him as his grandson.”

“I was sure that would be necessary. We need to approach Maria first.”

“I spoke with her not two minutes ago. Since attendance at meals has become so spotty, she’s planned a come and go buffet this evening. It’s going on 4:30. I imagine we could pry her away from her preparations for a few minutes.”

Masters nodded and the two men headed for the kitchen. Claire was there helping.

“Maria. Jay and I need a few minutes of your time. It’s about the Will and Carlos.”

“I’ll make myself scarce for a while,” Claire said.

“No. Please stay. You know I don’t have any secrets from my Mamma Claire. She can stay, okay?”

“That’s your call, Maria. Sure.” Masters said.

They took seats around the table. Masters began.

“I’ve asked Jay to read the Will tonight at our gathering. Because of its wording, Carlos needs to know about the circumstances of his parentage. I know it’s earlier than you and Simon had agreed on, but then neither of you could have foreseen his premature death.”

Maria began to sob. Claire pulled her close.

“I’ve dreaded this time so much. I’ve just pretended it would never have to come. I guess that dream has to stop now. I understand that he needs to be told. I don’t know if I’m strong enough. Will you folks stay while I talk to him?”

“I think it should be just you and Carlos,” Claire said patting her hand. “This is a mother to son thing, don’t you think?”

“I agree with Claire,” Masters said. “Any or all of us can be easily available if he has questions that need immediate attention.”

Maria nodded and wiped at her eyes with her apron. It really didn’t help. The tears continued to flow.

“I’ll do it now. Do you know where he is?”

“He and Billy said they were going for a walk. As far as

I could tell, however, they walked as far as the Patio and took seats. I'll go with you and bring Billy inside if that will work for you."

"Yes. Okay. Sometimes being a mother is so hard."

"As you're talking with him just remember that regardless of his beginning, he has developed into a wonderful human being with love and compassion and good will for others. He is going to make a positive difference in this World – mark my word. We certainly wouldn't want to do without him. Remember those things."

Again, she nodded. She stood and kissed Masters on his forehead. The two made their way to the patio. The boys were sitting, talking. Their mood was unmistakably serious.

"Gentlemen," Masters began as he and Maria approached them. "Maria needs a few minutes alone with Carlos."

"What's up, Mom?"

Maria remained silent looking at Billy. He stood and reluctantly moved inside with Masters – glancing back over his shoulder at his friend as if feeling he needed to be offering some sort of support.

"There's not bad trouble for them, is there?"

"No. A mother and son talk that just can't wait any longer."

"He's had the birds and bees talk so this must be about his dad."

Masters nodded. They took seats in the living room.

"Whoever he was, Carlos will be okay with it. We've talked it out before. He believes it's a privilege to be alive – to be a person – a human being. I'd never even considered that until one time – maybe last summer, I guess – he just started talking about it. He said that who his father was really doesn't matter to him anymore – well not in such a big way like it used to. He will be sad for his mother, of course, if she got a broken heart over it or anything like that, but once it's all out in the open they can begin handling it. I'm glad it's happening. I think his mother will be very proud of her son."

"How about you, Billy? Are you ready to handle it? This doesn't just affect the two of them."

"People say we look and act a lot alike. My favorite

fantasy has been that we are brothers adopted out when very young and my parents took me and Maria took him. I've seen my birth certificate and know that isn't the way it was but I fell asleep smiling about it many a night when I was a little boy. Even so, he and I have always had like a special bond. I guess it doesn't really matter why. I suddenly seem to have lots of stuff on my plate, too, but Carlos and I just agreed we'd help each other through whatever happens – however things turn out.”

“And I have no doubt that you will.”

“By watching Carlos's face, Masters could pretty well follow the content and progression of the conversation as it unfolded on the patio. In the end, there were tears – lots and lots of tears – and a lingering hug that didn't want to stop.

When, at last, they reentered the house, Claire was there for Maria, and Billy was immediately on his feet for Carlos.

“Come on, Cuz,” Carlos began, putting his arm around Billy's shoulders. “We have big stuff to discuss. My room.”

They headed down the hall.

Masters headed for the buffet.

\* \* \*

At 7:45 two choppers arrived – one with the Sheriff, Anne, Abe, the coroner, and Tom, and the other bearing the States Attorney and several deputies. The relatives and staff took it as the signal to gather. Masters and Claire had arranged the seating. The speakers would have the large fireplace to their backs.

Soon after the TNT had been discovered, Masters placed a rolled up, brown, paper, look-alike, grocery, bag in among the logs making it appear the bag had never been removed. The purpose for that would become evident as the evening proceeded. The fire had not been lit since then. No one felt like one the night before.

By eight, most had gathered and were seated. The last to arrive were Adam and Ben, escorted, uncuffed, by two deputies walking a discrete distance behind. Masters had directed that they sit on the front row.

Masters began.

“Two things will take place here this evening. Jay will

provide a quick summary of Simon's Will so each of you will know where you stand, at least in a general way, in terms of your inheritance. Then I will discuss the several crimes that have been committed."

He motioned to Jay and took a seat at the end of the front row, next to Bea. Jay began.

"Simon was a wealthy man – perhaps not as wealthy as some of you hoped and wealthier by far than others suspected. He was a game player – serious and even vindictive at times. He wanted to win. As much as that, however, he wanted each of you to win. In his own, perhaps twisted, way he attempted to make you stronger. Having said that, let me begin with the details.

"Once his assets are liquidated – which may take up to a year – his total worth will be in the vicinity of 250 million dollars. If Mr. Masters finds that someone here deserves the 50 million Simon offered to his killer, that sum will be reduced to 200 million. I will base my estimates on the larger sum. Claire, Maria, Pedro, and Mr. Clark are each to receive one percent of that – two and half million dollars each. Another ten million is set aside to maintain and run Hacienda Grande with ten more split among several of his favorite charities and ten for other expenses necessary for the conclusion of his estate. That leaves 210 million dollars. His formula for distributing his wealth is simple. His seven, closest, blood relatives each receive equal parts – 30 million apiece."

Frowns and a murmur washed across the gathering.

"You are clearly having difficulty with the number seven. Let me list the relatives. Worth, Annabelle, Beatrice, Kurt, Adam, Benjamin, and Carlos, who Simon rightfully claims as his grandson. A DNA study conducted several years ago, conclusively established that relationship. There is one exception to the formula I just mentioned. Let me read directly from the Will.

Due to their abhorrent act in the mutual molestation of Maria Ramirez during the week of her arrival here, my sons, Adam and Benjamin, are hereby directed to sign over their entire portion of their inheritance to the boy who is the son of one of them, Carlos Gabriel Ramirez. Not doing this I direct

my attorney to hand the evidence confirming their guilt, which I have collected and verified, to the States Attorney of this jurisdiction with my personal recommendation that they receive the maximum penalty under the laws of this county, forty years with no possibility of parole.

Jay walked over to Adam and Ben, a document in his hand.

“Simon directed me to allow you sixty seconds in which to make your decision. Most of that is now gone. Sign where indicated.”

They looked at each other, then signed.

“That concludes this preliminary reading of the Will. Each of you who are included will receive a copy of the complete document for your records. I will be available to answer any questions.”

He took a seat. Masters waited a few minutes so brief exchanges could take place among those present.



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## **CHAPTER TEN**

### **Day Three: Evening**

Masters stood, moved to the fireplace, and turned toward the group, putting on a shiver and rubbing his hands together.

“Does it seem chilly in here to you folks? I think I’ll light the fireplace if you’ll excuse me for just a moment here.”

He took his time, expecting an incriminating reaction. He got just that as he moved to press the lighter button.

Adam jumped to his feet, quickly followed by Ben.

“No! Stop. We’ll all be blown to Kingdom Come.”

They shielded their faces with their arms and attempted to move away. The deputies took them in hand.

“And why would you think that?” Masters said leaving his hand on the button, playing with them just a few moments longer. As the fire roared to life and the paper bag went up in a harmless puff of smoke they became quiet, suddenly realizing they had been set up. Nothing was blown to Kingdom Come – well, nothing but the innocence of two men.

Masters really hadn’t needed the incriminating actions he had just provoked from the two but his flair for the dramatic primed him to enjoy teasing such self-incriminating reactions from his adversaries.

He became serious as Adam and Ben were returned to their seats.

“This case began with a threat – a two-part threat – one against Simon and one against the remainder of the participants in this Fourth of July assembly. My Hunch is that it was written by two people, the first sentence by Ben, the

brighter, better educated and more eloquent of the brothers. That was the threat against Simon. The second, I imagine was edited by Adam without Ben's knowledge. It was poorly written and quite concrete compared with the more abstract nature of the first sentence. Here is how I envision it came about.

"They agreed that it was time to receive their inheritance and that one way of increasing their share was to make sure some of the other relatives failed to show up this week. They delivered the threat, which they figured should be strong enough to do just that. They misjudged the determined, if perhaps reckless, single-mindedness of this group, however. They all showed up, some probably urged on by the very nature of the threat.

"The killing of Simon was clearly high on their list of priorities for the week. Since their threat against the others had done nothing to reduce attendance they suddenly felt some urgency to reduce the competition in another way.

"Part B, their agreed upon backup plan, was then put into effect. Sticks of TNT, stolen from a mining shack not twenty miles from here as they drove in together on the night of the 31st, were placed in a discarded, brown, paper, shopping bag and hid among the logs in this fireplace. The idea was that when the fire was lit, as was the tradition after the fireworks during this week, all those present would be killed leaving more inheritance for them. They weren't very subtle about it. They left the premises during the exact time period the explosion should have taken place.

"How do I know all of these things? The trail led me through cyber space. The fonts and graphics used on the threat are the same as those Adam uses on his advertising brochures. They are both rarely used programs and never bundled together. The chances they would both be used on any given document are extremely small. The chances they would be used on two documents by two different parties, are infinitesimal.

"I assume that Ben wrote up the original two-part threat and gave it to Adam to make up on his computer. Adam thought the second sentence – the one dealing with the threat against the family and therefore the most important to him –

was too weak, or too subtle, or some such thing, so he changed it. He used the software with which he was familiar. It would prove to be his downfall. The two pieces of software have been located on Adam's computer – again a one in a million or better possibility.

“The original basis for this investigation was the threat against the others in the second sentence. Simon would have taken his chances but not where the lives of his loved ones were concerned. In relation to this, I assume the two of you will be charged not only with making threats of bodily harm but also for the attempted murder of a house full of relatives and staff. The one thing – as criminals – you did right in all of this was leaving no fingerprints on the threat itself. A word to the wise, however, boys. Next time don't leave your fingerprints on the andirons, the explosives, and the damp sack you choose to wrap them in. And do your research more thoroughly. Boxer, the dog who lives here, loves carrots. The sack you chose had carried wet carrots home from the grocery. Boxer gets credit for locating the TNT. Seldom before – never before, in fact – have I encountered criminals so inept that they could be brought down by a fifteen pound, clearly depressed, sad-eyed, puppy dog.”

“Fifty years ago, there was another crime – murder perhaps – committed within this family and it is time that it is settled once and for all. While riding with his family on their private train the patriarch of this clan – the father of Simon, Worth, Ann, Bea and Kurt – was killed in a fall from that train. It had been more than a fall. The conductor, Abe Thompson, witnessed the incident and later blackmailed the two perpetrators.

“It is general knowledge among this group that as a boy, Simon's father beat him regularly. Simon and Worth fought bloody battles between them but defended each other whenever necessary. So, too, it was in the matter of their father's treatment of Simon.

“The boys plotted together against him, probably for years, just waiting until they grew powerful enough physically to take him on. They worked out every detail. A ride on the train did not give Simon a pass on the beatings. His father would call Simon to the baggage car on Saturday night and

the brutal ritual would be carried out. On one such Saturday night, two sons arrived at the car. Simon had never before lifted a hand in self-defense. That night years of anger boiled over as the two of them beat their father to death. Very likely that had not been their original intention. They then dropped his body between the cars to make it appear he had fallen off the train. Later, when he was reported missing, the boys helped their mother and the conductor search the train.

“Abe had seen the beating through the window on the rear door of the baggage car. Why he didn’t intervene we won’t know unless he chooses to tell us. Perhaps it had to do with something he had noticed during the middle stages of the attack. Sometime before losing consciousness the father had torn a button from each boy’s shirt and put them in his mouth – probably a means for the authorities to identify his assailants in case he didn’t make it. The boys were wearing their dress-up, traveling clothes – identical shirts imported from France with oyster shell buttons not common to the southwestern United States. The father was also wearing such a shirt.

“Abe was the first to leave the train when the body was discovered. The buttons he expected to find in the mouth were not there. Abe was resourceful so – out of view of the others –he pulled buttons off the father’s shirt and probably put them in his pocket for safe keeping.

“Later he approached the boys and presented the ‘missing’ buttons as his proof saying he would swear he had found them in the father’s mouth, which would prove they had killed him. It probably wouldn’t have, but they were young and scared. Abe began demanding and receiving blackmail payments. Those payments eventually settled into \$1,500 a month from each Simon and Worth. When Worth fell on hard times, at the hands of Simon, some twenty years ago, Simon took over the second payment.

“Why did Simon continue to pay for so many years? At least partly, I imagine, because he didn’t want the negative publicity to harm his family.”

Masters moved so he could look Abe in the face as he continued.

“Also, partly, I assume because he felt so sorry for the pathetic, helpless, figure of Abe Thompson – an inadequate

little man who had never really succeeded at anything in his life. He was unattractive and couldn't even get a woman to marry him. At one point, I wondered if Abe might have come back to kill Simon, who had recently cut off the payments to him altogether. Then I realized Abe was far too incompetent a human being to pull off such a sophisticated plan."

Masters well calculated words achieved their purpose.

Abe jumped to his feet waving his cuffed hands in the air. His face was red and his breathing rapid. Two deputies had to restrain him. They had been prompted to let him have his say.

"Incompetent, am I? Pathetic, am I? Helpless, am I? Let me tell you something Mr. Smarty Pants, big city detective. I got into and out of this house without being detected. If it hadn't been for the unfortunate coincidence of the Sheriff's whirlybird coming by at just the wrong moment, I'd have pulled off the prefect crime. Me. Abraham P. Thompson shot Worth Gabriel on July third. That's how incompetent I am, pig. I spit on you!"

"You talk big, little Abe, but I doubt if you could have even found him in here if his name plate hadn't been on the door. And another thing, you don't seem to have any motive for killing Worth. I think you're just trying to make a name for yourself."

"Name nothing. Twenty years ago, Worth hired a hussy to wine and dine me and make me fall in love with her. I married her in California. After a Reno divorce, she took half of everything I had and left me. He crushed my heart. Took my life right out from under me. That's plenty of motive for killing him wouldn't you say – you, you, you, fat old man?"

"Sounds like plenty to me. You win Mr. Thompson. You have proved yourself to be the better man."

Abe's momentary gloat quickly turned somber as he realized what he had just done – or, more accurately what the fat old fancy pants big city detective had baited him into doing.

After a long, quiet, moment he addressed Masters, soberly.

"Those buttons? Did Simon or Worth tell you about the buttons?"

"Neither, Abe. It was a matter of using this darned old

fuzzy logic of mine. The medical examiner's photographs showed that the second and fourth buttons on the deceased shirt were missing. Second and fourth? A strange way for fate to remove buttons as a body was being buffeted around under the wheels of a moving train. Then in the autopsy I saw where two buttons had been found in his stomach – swallowed during the pummeling he had taken from his sons. If someone – a clear thinking someone – wanted to take two buttons but not make it immediately noticeable, he just might remove every other button so the shirt remained closed not calling attention to the fact they had been removed. That part about the boys each having a button missing I sort of made up to fit a void in my story. A few hours ago, however, we did locate two, old fashioned, oyster shell buttons in your jewelry box. You see there needed to have been four missing buttons. Two were found in the dead man's stomach. It was not likely that during the fall he would have taken time to pluck them from his own shirt and swallow them – and for what purpose if it had been a fall? It left two still missing, you see. What purpose could they serve? It was a small step from there to blackmail, which also required that you would have had to have witnessed the beating or the buttons would have been just so much litter.

“Additionally, if it is of any real interest to you, the body had been severely damaged deep in the muscles from the waist up – the area of a beating – and had relatively little such damage below. There were also choke marks around the neck all of which had, no doubt, been conveniently overlooked by the medical examiner in deference to the family.”

“Just one more thing, Mr. Thompson. Worth was not killed. He is recovering nicely.”

The deputies removed a subdued and beaten Abe Thompson from the room. Masters turned to another subject.

“I need to clear up one more thing before I get on with the murder of Simon Gabriel. The supposed suicide of Candy Gabriel. I will be brief since the details will not be of much interest to most of you. Candy, as it turns out, was the niece of Yardley Best, Simon's former partner in the railroad. As best I can piece things together, a plan was hatched – maybe involving Yardley himself though I have no immediate proof of

that – in which Candy would change her name, marry Simon, and remain with him for several years to make it respectable. Then she would kill him, making it look like an accident, and inherit all his millions. Sweet revenge for what he had supposedly done to Yardley.

“A problem arose on the morning she attempted to push her husband off Devil’s Rock. She was accidentally flung to her death as she attempted to push Simon over the edge. Simon loved his wife. He was devastated by her death and by her attempt on his life. It was then that he began his withdrawal from society. He never told the true story of her death because he didn’t want to tarnish her name. There was an eye witness to the event who verifies the actions leading up to her fall.

“Now to the matter of Simon Gabriel’s murder. Down through the years there are certain expectations I have come to count on in my cases. One of those has been that I will collect clues, determine who the guilty party is, and – when possible – find a way to elicit a confession from that person. Not so in this case! – Well, not entirely so. Within six hours after the murder I had an unsolicited confession – and then another and another and another and another. Yes. Five confessions and all five were complete with believable motive, undeniable timely access to the victim – not once but twice – and knowledge of the weapon, which later was determined to have killed him. The paraffin tests on all five revealed they had indeed fired a gun within the past few hours. In all cases, there were fingerprints left at the scene and in several cases even on the weapon itself. All five could not be the killer. My first task was to prove which of them weren’t.

“There was another problem. Simon kept that gun loaded with blanks. Although everyone seemed to know where the revolver was kept, only Simon and Carlos knew about the blanks. Carlos cleaned the gun and reloaded it in Simon’s presence every Saturday morning. The boy’s prints were on most of the casings left in the revolver’s six chambers.

“Let me reconstruct the crime as it actually took place. Simon was drugged – five times in fact: At approximately 5:15 by Worth, 5:30 by Maria, 5:45 by Zach, 8:00 by Anne and



when he went to bed by Simon himself. More accurately his drinking water was drugged at those times by those people. When he took the sleeping pill that Carlos had laid out for him the additional barbiturates were already in the water. He drank it down.

“Carlos helped Simon into bed at 9:00 as was their routine. By 9:15 or so he had situated the man onto his left side with his head on his usual two pillows – top one colored case – so he could watch the fireworks out the window – the window with the drapes still open – the window containing one-way glass so no one could see in; something that would only be known by the staff and family. He was in great pain and immediately upon the boy’s exit Simon took his sleeping pill.

“At 9:30 the fireworks began. Simon was asleep. Worth entered the bedroom, took the revolver from the drawer of the bedside table and shot Simon in the chest. Unbeknownst to him it was a blank. He put the gun back and left. Heavily drugged Simon remained asleep on his side, his head on the colorful pillowcase. The drapes were still open.

“At 9:35 Zach entered the bedroom and shot Simon in the temple. Again, unknown to Zach it was a blank. Simon was still on his side. Two pillows. The drapes open. He left.

“At 9:40 Maria entered and shot him in the chest – another blank thought to be a real bullet. He was still on his side. The drapes were still open. He was still using the two pillows.

“At 9:43 the actual killer entered the bedroom and closed the drapes thinking that was necessary to keep others from seeing in. He had heard about the old, .22 caliber, revolver – perhaps from the boys long ago – and had decided to use it so the slug – if found – could not be traced to another gun. He was probably surprised to see a blank in the chamber. Nevertheless, he carried on and removed the blank, loaded in a bullet he had brought with him – a new one with a copper slug, which he was confident would fire. Then, he took the colored pillow from under Simon’s head and doubled it up behind his torso. He rolled Simon over onto his back to stabilize the pillow while he shot the fatal bullet directly into the heart. He removed the pillow which had caught the slug, put

the pillow in a black trash bag – earlier taken from the kitchen in a nearly discovered, hurriedly exited visit – and left Simon lying on his back, head on one plain white pillow. He then removed the copper casing from the gun and started to return the blank to the chamber. The blank was carelessly knocked to the floor behind the table so, in the interest of his short timeline, he took a new blank from the carton in the still open drawer and put it into the chamber that had just fired the fatal shot. It was now one chamber beyond the last one fired so that new blank remained unfired. He wiped the handle and trigger clean of fingerprints, and left.

“At 10:00 Pedro entered. Simon was on his back, dead, the drapes were closed, one pillow was missing. Pedro fired a shot from a distance of several inches – this time it was a live bullet previously inserted into the gun by Simon himself. That bullet missed the heart and lodged next to the spine. In the excitement, Pedro pulled the trigger a second time – that one a blank. He put the revolver back, and left.

“Finally, at 10:10 Anne entered the room. There was one pillow; the drapes were closed. She took the gun and put it to Simon’s temple and pulled the trigger. It was a blank. She did not realize that. She put the gun away and left.

“The fireworks had masked the gunfire, although the thick concrete walls of the house would have done that regardless. By a little after ten the fireworks were over and everyone was enjoying conversation and desert on the patio. Eventually everyone went directly to their rooms. It had been a long day and they were tired, easily convinced by Masters to skip the fireplace fire that night. At 11:30 Carlos went to check on Simon, just as he did every night. Billy was with him. They found Simon dead and came directly to get me in my room.

“Some background is necessary to make sense of all this. Sometime after Carlos had loaded the gun on Saturday and after the cleaning of his room on the day he died, Simon replaced the blank in the first chamber with a live cartridge. It was an extremely difficult task for his crippled hands and he managed to drop the first three on the floor before he got one to slip into place. When the thrifty old gentleman put the blank back into the ammo box – the one, which he had removed to make room for the live ammo – the best he could do was to

set it in the box upside down. It bore his prints as did the casing of the live shell in chamber five.

“Question. How did the live shell end up in the fifth chamber that had been fired?” Simon would have undoubtedly put it into the first chamber so if anyone were to try and kill him it would be done with the first clean shot, the first pull of the trigger. He only gave the would-be killer one chance, one live bullet out of the six. Only one of the would-be murderers opened the gun to make sure it was loaded. Most of them wouldn't have known how to do that or what to look for. Worth, the first of the parade of suspects, mentioned to me that he cracked it open like he had seen done in the westerns. What else is always done at that time? The revolving chamber is given a whirl with the thumb. It was always a part of the ritual. I assume that Worth also added that, unconsciously, to his initial response with the gun. In so doing he reset Simon's live bullet into chamber five – the one Pedro eventually fired. It was a completely random act.

“Now that we know who the killers are not it is time to determine, who the killer is. This was a well-planned operation. Probably several years in preparation.

“In many ways, it comes down to finding the wrong, unexpected, and missing prints here and there. The single blank left unused in the revolver should have borne the prints of Carlos. Instead it was wiped clean. Who would have done that? The person who had slipped it into the chamber. A person not wanting his or her prints to be associated with the shooting. Most of the suspects, remember, wanted to leave that proof behind – or at least didn't care if it was. The others all bore prints that fit the scenario. Why were only Pedro's and Anne's prints found on the handle of the gun? Because the killer – who acted just before them – had wiped the handle clean to get rid of his own.

“Now to the elusive, colorful, pillowcase and the pillow it covered. What roles did it play and more importantly, why was it removed?

“The killer knew guns well enough to know that the bullet he – or she – was using just might travel all the way through Simon's body. He or she may have even planned for that to happen. Either he didn't want the slug to be found,

thinking it might provide a clue to the shooter or, more likely, he wanted to keep that slug for some reason. In either case, he doubled the pillow up and rolled Simon over on top of it. Then he shot him, determined that the bullet had been caught in the dense goose down, and slipped it into a black trash bag he had earlier, ineptly, taken from the kitchen; Boxer got the blame, by the way. Why steal one from the house? Because the only ones the killer had were small and white, too easily seen at night as he left the house. The pillow had three bullet holes not because three bullets had been fired into it but because of the way the pillow was folded over. The bullet had enough power to enter the pillow, exit the other side, and enter the folded under portion before coming to rest there in the down. He and the evidence were gone within two minutes of entering the house."

"The lab has verified that the slug caught in the pillow was fired from Simon's gun. It was copper, of course, matching the copper trail it left from the chamber in the revolver, along its way through Simon's body and into the pillow.

The pillow was temporarily removed from the premises in the trunk of a car. Once it was known that the RV had been searched it seemed like a safe place to hide it. Why bring it back? Time, I think was the problem. How about just burning the evidence? If you have ever smelled the distinctive, pervasive, foul smell of feathers, you will understand why that was not an option – not here on the grounds at least. It brings us back to the probability that the killer had some reason to preserve the evidence – the slug that killed Simon, which was found buried deep within the pillow, itself hidden within the trash bag that was rampant with the killer's fingerprints.

"Then there were the prints of an index finger and a thumb on the box of blanks. They didn't match any of the prints we had gathered from the folks here at the time of the shooting. An outsider. Interesting! An outsider with ready access to the house and gun. Those prints did, however, match some other unidentified prints on fireworks canisters down in the pit where the displays originate. But they didn't belong to the man who said he had set up the display and supervised its firing. The prints of the man I knew as Neil

Foster were, come to find out, not Neil Foster's.

“Almost as an aside, here, but for the record, I need to deal with one of those other out of place sets of fingerprints – Claire's prints on Simon's glass. It was determined that prints from her index and middle fingers were on the bottom of the glass and a thumb print on one side and a third finger print on the opposite side. They were under prints.”

Masters reached for a glass on the mantel and the small dish towel beside it. He picked up the glass in his left hand and went through the motions of drying it with the towel in his right. He turned it upside down in his left hand, finished drying it, and picked it up from the bottom as if to set it on a shelf. He clearly demonstrated how the prints had been laid down. All the glasses in Maria's kitchen were stored top down to keep the dessert dust out of them. Claire often dried the dishes. How they got there was really no mystery.

Masters then moved on – or back – to the mainstream of his presentation.

“A chance event led me to my prime suspect. The fireworks in small displays, like the one on the night of Simon's death, are hooked together with various lengths of slow burning fuses. On that night, however, about half way into the program one section of the fuse separated in such a way that the chain of fire stopped, unable to make contact with the rest and continue on its way to the next canister. Could it have separated and drooped over the edge after burning? That is possible but the dark, scorched, smudge on the cement wall behind where it dangled suggests it was re-lit with a large flame, like from a butane lighter.

Had the supervisor been present in the pit he would have merely relit the next fuse segment immediately and the show would have progressed with no noticeable lull in the performance. There was a lull – nearly three minutes – a bit longer than from 9:41:30 to 9:43:49 as timed on Billy's cell phone while he made a call during the down time. Kudos to modern technology, the perennial impatience of boys in love, and father's attempts to encourage common social courtesy in their sons.

“Where could that display-supervisor have been? The lull coincided exactly with the time the fatal shot had to have

been fired. My young assistants have demonstrated that it would have been an easy jog, within that time frame, up the slope from the pit, to the house, and back down to the pit leaving plenty of time to have entered the house and killed Simon.”

“The real Neil Foster was, interestingly, known to a few you on sight – but not to me. So, when the fireworks guy introduced himself as Neil that first day I encountered him, I accepted it. The real Neil, however, had been seen jogging around the house on Monday afternoon by Billy who had known him for a half dozen or so years. I assume that run represented a last reconnaissance mission for him – perhaps the time he entered the kitchen and took the trash bag. He left his prints on the yellow trash bag box under the sink.

“Later, he left them on the shiny, marble, chord pulls on the drapes in Simon’s room – pulls that were carefully dusted and disinfected every day leaving no prints from previous days. It is his prints that were left on the box of blank cartridges in a room where he had never been allowed access. It is his prints that were left on the spent canisters used in the fireworks display that evening placing him here on the evening of the murder. It is his prints left on the dropped blank cartridge found on the bedroom floor. He would have wiped it clean of course had he had the time to find it. Craig, the second fireworks specialist, has outlined for us Neil’s actual comings and goings this week.

“The question remains as to why, Neil. It appears that your life has not been stellar – a drinking problem, a gambling problem, and work habits that would have had you fired long ago had you not been working for a relative. Your finances have been devastated by gambling debts. I imagine you thought you had your own ace in the hole – your grandfather, Yardley Best. Growing up you regularly heard him spew his bitterness against Simon. I can guess that once he regained a fortune you may have surmised that by killing the man who had caused him so much hardship – maybe even betrayed him – you could win Yardley’s favor and a sizeable share of his money.

“It leads us to make sense out of the most baffling part of the case, Neil. What lead you to use the pillow to catch the

slug in the first place? The bullet – a common type, available anywhere ammunition is sold – would tell no tales coming from Simon’s own gun. Then, why the desire, if not the necessity, to remove it? There seems to be one, overriding possibility. Possessing the pillow and slug would offer Yardley substantial proof of your deed as the details of the murder began seeping out through the media. My feeling is that your grandfather will be deeply disappointed in you, and all of those riches – even supposing he would have shared them with you – will be of little benefit to you as you spend the rest of your life in prison for the murder of Simon Gabriel.”

Masters paused, taking time to move his gaze from one, now familiar, face to another. Each received his expansive, unhurried, smile, which confirmed their unique and special friendship.

“When I look back on this week, good people, I’ll always think about it as, The Case of Too Many Suspects – suspects who have now become my good and treasured friends.”

## **EPILOG**

### **Life Goes On**

If you give it half a chance, life usually has a way of working things out in a positive way, given the big picture; at least that's been the experience of Raymond Masters.

The nine months that followed had its ups and downs for the folks who had decided to make the Hacienda Grande their home. The ups far outnumbered the downs, the saddest of which was the predicted passing of Kurt. As the result of some fancy legal footwork by Jay, Maria was designated Billy's legal guardian – the two boys' fantasies had come true in a sense. They moved into the suite in the east wing.

At the urging of the others, Anne also moved into the Hacienda and, according to reliable sources, has not so much as even eyed the cooking sherry (although there are rumors of some late night solo skinny dipping!).

The five 'willing suspects' each received a year's probation and two hundred hours of community service, which was arranged through Anne's volunteer program. The boys and Claire always went along – Billy drove the Van and Carlos critiqued his every move. (His time would come!) Months ago they had surpassed the required amount of court ordered time but saw no reason to stop. As it turned out, Pedro became the favorite of the inner-city boys, many of them of Hispanic backgrounds. It may have been the fatherly, forthright, tell-it-like-it-is, role he chose to take with them. It may have been the interesting Portuguese phrases he taught them. Probably some of both.

Worth returned to his home from the hospital as a part



of an experimental research program for the treatment of arthritis in senior citizens. Charges were not brought against him in the death of his father. Physically, he was quickly improved and his life began a definite upward trend. His son – less averse to activities outside the home than the parents had allowed themselves to believe – assisted him with his community service – volunteering at a sheltered care facility. Due to a large donation, there was a suite with Worth Gabriel, II's name on it just waiting for him when he became ready.

Bea and Jay continued to bicker their way through their clear and undying love. She began accompanying Jay on his weekly visits to the Hacienda. He continued as the attorney for the family and for the Gabriel Benevolent Foundation, into which each of the heirs contributed a substantial portion of their inheritance. It had been the brainchild of Carlos and would support a wide variety of causes, including those with which Simon had been furtively associated for many years. They agreed not to accept donations from outside the family except, of course, that one large bonus check written from Simon to Masters. It had already been endorsed over to the foundation – what else could they do? Besides, they had agreed to make Masters an honorary family member – provided he promised never again to dance his la cucaracha in public! He agreed with the condition that he could keep the hat. [Perdóneme. Su sombrero!]

Kent and Claire happily announced their engagement after a ten-year clandestine romance. The boys were fairly sure they had seen 'glances' passing between Maria and Pedro but would let that take its natural course. They were far too busy trying to locate girls willing to accept their own, amorous, glances. Attending a regular public school two days a week greatly advanced that possibility. Arriving in their own private jet every morning probably didn't hurt their chances either!

Although the DNA report was made available to Carlos – the one that established which of Simon's sons was his father, he chose not to find out. Perhaps in the future, but for the time being he was content to be his mother's son and Billy's brosin – the boys' designation of their unique relationship, brother cousins - brosin.

Masters kept his promise and arranged for Carlos to spend two weeks with Flint at his home in northwest Arkansas. Under his tutelage, the boy began crafting a mystery novel of his own – The Case of the Missing Twisters. Like Masters, his detective also had substantial measurements – 38-24-32. ‘Detective Rachel Amour at your service, you *d o l l*, you!’

The end