

The Cases of
Art and Milly
Montague:
golden age detectives



By Tom Gnagey



Art and Milly Montague: Golden Age Detectives

4 Short Mysteries

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Case # 1: The Canyon of Death An Art and Milly Montague Mystery

SECTION ONE

If a choice had to be made between Dingle Dell and Death Canyon, most would choose to live out their lives in the former. The Dell, as it was known locally, boasted one thousand residents, although in all honesty it was more like seven hundred or so. It had been established as a mining town at the convergence of Red Creek and Crystal River in western Colorado, founded in the mid-1800's by D. D. Dingle – hence its name. The ore dwindled and between 1860 and 1960 it struggled to survive. That it had survived would not be verified by searching for it on any maps. It sits on the northeast side of the bend in Crystal River ten or so miles WNW of Marble and twenty miles directly south of Redstone. It has grown (well shrunk, actually) into a thriving tourist trap (that is, quaint stopover for well-healed vacationers on their ways to and from the major recreational spots in the area – Aspen, Spring Gulch, Snowmass and others).

Arthur and Millicent Montague – Art and Milly, according to their preferences – have lived their 82 years with joy and gusto, sixty of them happily married. After Art retired from his position as a professor of Natural History at a state university they returned to the little community in which they had grown up. Milly (her preferred spelling) was a successful writer of murder mysteries, well known outside the Dell as Grace Garrison: Grand Dame of the Mystery. That nom de

plume remained Art and Milly's little secret, locally, accomplished in part by adorning the jackets of her books with a picture taken fifty years earlier.

Perhaps it wouldn't be fair to say that as a couple they were nosey – well, face it; that would most certainly be fair. Usual or unusual, happy or not happy, benign or treacherous, if it occurred within fifty miles of the Dell, one or both of them knew about it. They read the papers – Art enjoyed spending time at the library. They listened to the gossip – Milly quilted with the 'girls' and they both were regulars at the senior center.

What didn't come their way personally, was eagerly shared by the twins who lived next door – Rusty and Becky, bright, twelve-year-old whirlwinds. Having lost their parents a number of years earlier, they lived with their Uncle, Ted – an artistic free spirit who, facts be known (and they were) the twins took better care of him than he did of them. Oddly, perhaps, it had become a satisfactory and stable arrangement. Ted painted in oils and water colors and worked as needed in the bookstore owned by Art and Milly. The four of them – the oldsters and the twins – had gained the reputation locally as a team of first class detectives, a fact none of the four would dispute. Ted's head was mostly elsewhere and the basis for the coming and going of the four typically escaped him. All in all, it had become a comfortable, wonder-filled way of life for all five.

“Art! Milly! Got stuff!”

“Big stuff!”

It had been the greeting from the twins as they clamored through the back door and into the kitchen. Knocking was neither a part of their lifestyle nor a requirement at the Montague's house.

Art and Milly were enjoying a second cup of early morning coffee.

Becky sat and continued talking. Rusty went to the refrigerator and poured himself a glass of milk. Art hitched his head in the direction of the bread box – typically an endless reservoir of Milly's baked goods, more or less there for the purpose of sustaining the ever-starving young male. He rescued several tarts, turned the remaining chair around and,

straddling it, took a seat across from his sister at the round table. Becky continued.

“Another body was discovered at Death Canyon this morning.”

“Another dead and badly mutilated body,” Rusty added.

If there were the least possibility of associated gore, Rusty would relish the opportunity to point it out.

“You have more?” Art asked, folding the paper and placing it beside his saucer indicating earnest interest.

“Deputy Carson says it’s a male in his late sixties. Looks like he fell off the rim of the canyon and bounced a half dozen times or so on his way to the bottom. Wish I could have seen that!”

(It had been Rusty’s comment, of course.)

“How many does that make this summer?” Milly asked.

“Four, I believe,” Becky said.

Rusty nodded his confirmation, his mouth too full to speak.

“The deputy have any ideas about it?” Art asked.

“Like the others, he says they’re calling it an accident – another tourist not paying attention to the signs that caution against moving beyond the fences,” Becky added shaking her head, clearly saddened by the event.”

“What was the man wearing?” Art asked.

The twins looked at each other, blank face meeting blank face.

“We’ll find out,” Rusty said. “What are you thinking?”

“It appeared to me the last one – the middle-aged man from Nebraska – wasn’t really dressed for a hike. If this one wasn’t either, we may have something to look into.”

“I suppose the body was taken to Doc Meyers?” Milly said offering some direction.

“Don’t know. Probably. Eventually it’ll be moved to the Chief Coroner’s office down in Gunnison. Why?” Rusty asked.

“Let’s by-pass law enforcement on this one and see what doc can give us. He’s more likely to spill the beans than the guys with badges.”

“Gottcha,” Rusty said with a decided nod. He stood, stuffing the last tart into his hip pocket.

Milly turned to Becky.

“You will remind the boy not to sit down with that pastry in his rear pocket, won’t you?”

Becky smiled.

“I always do!”

The youngsters were soon on their way.

After pulling closed the long-sprung screen door, Milly put the last tart on a plate and took it to the table, dividing it mostly in half. As had been their custom since childhood, the one who had not done the dividing got to choose first. Art’s eyes danced as he carefully studied their dimensions and took the bigger one. (It was also according the life long tradition and no big secret between them that when Milly did the cutting, one piece was always larger than the other. (Art benevolently allowed her to do most of the dividing.)

“You’re thinking foul-play?” Milly asked.

“Foul play? Well, consider the facts. How many similar accidents have occurred out there during the past half dozen years – two, three at the most, total? Now, four in one summer – in fewer than two months, actually.”

“I see what you’re saying. What’s with your interest in their clothes?”

“How do male tourists dress when hiking the canyon?”

“Well, good, sturdy hiking shoes or boots for one thing. Jeans or Cargos, I suppose. A loose-fitting shirt – gaudy, more times than not.”

“Right. That last man had been wearing slacks and loafers. I’ve been wondering about that right from the git go.”

Milly chuckled.

“What?”

“I was just wondering what your former students would think. I doubt if the words, ‘git-go’ ever crossed the lips of the learned professor Montague back in the day.”

“The purpose of language is to communicate. Clearly, mine just did.”

He smiled and reached across the little table taking her hands in his. Although they seldom spoke of their love, it was perpetually present and always obvious. They had made a good team as kids, had been wonderful parents together, experienced a very successful vocational period and currently were devoted octogenarians. Blessed with good health and

enduring inquisitiveness, they continued to live full and happy lives. The twin's entry into their world a few years before only added to their good fortune. They moved into the living room.

Within the hour, the youngsters were back. They entered through the kitchen and made their way into the front room, bickering the whole time. It was their way. They understood it was mostly offered in good humor. Art saw it as a wonderful give and take that would provide the basis for continued growth – it had worked quite well for Milly and him. Milly understood, but still wished it would be tempered somewhat.

“You didn't have to run so fast.”

“Did so. My body is made for running fast.”

“Even so, you need to learn to be more considerate.”

Art interrupted.

“And did the young Bickersons discover anything worthwhile above and beyond considerations of speed and inconsideration?”

“Good stuff,” Rusty said deferring to Becky with his hand.

She typically delivered the facts. Rusty was more into creative speculation.

He sprawled out on his back on the floor, knees up. Becky took a seat on the footstool.

“The man had no ID on him – suspicious we think. Who'd go on a vacation without some kind of ID?”

“And get this,” Rusty added rolling onto his side, head supported by his hand. “Doc says his clothes were barely bloody and not ripped or torn.”

“And there's more,” Becky continued. “The jeans were way too large around the waist and he wasn't wearing a belt.”

“His pants would have dropped down around his ankles after a few steps,” Rusty said, adding the obvious and chuckling, seeing, as he usually did, the comical side of the situation.

“Shoes?” Art asked.

“Citified. Leather tops, rubber soles, laces,” Becky said.

Art looked at Milly and nodded. She understood, they were off chasing another mystery.

Ten o'clock found the four of them wheeling along in Art's old pickup, the twins in the back in the interest of protecting the contents of the picnic basket, which sat between (meaning guarded by) the two old folks upfront. The gravel road – well, single lane trail – was not known to the tourists so there was no traffic. Progress was slow, there being ruts and holes every few yards and a high center ridge that had to be avoided in deference to the ancient vehicle's low slung oil pan.

They were headed along the canyon floor toward the spot where the body had been found by five boy scouts at sunrise that morning. The only indication of the spot was the discarded yellow crime scene tape wound loosely into a ball and wedged into the crotch of a large bush. Even before the truck stopped, Rusty had hit the ground running.

"So, what's first?" He asked.

"Blood," Art offered. "See if there are any traces of blood on the rocks down here."

Ten minutes later none had been found. Rusty had climbed ten yards up the steep slope in his search. Whether he saw some related purpose to that or made the climb simply because he could make the climb was not immediately apparent. Then . . .

"Something!" he called down to the others.

"And that would be?" Art asked.

"Let me get a picture before I pick it up. Then I can tell you better. What it is, I mean."

"Good thinking," Milly called up to him.

"I think it's cloth – really thick cloth. Probably black."

"Boys," Becky said as an aside to Milly. "They don't even know black when they see it."

They exchanged a knowing look.

Rusty was soon back down beside the others. He handed what he had found to Milly. He figured she would be the expert in cloth and such.

She looked it over.

"Odd. It's two pieces both torn to be the same general size and shape."

She handed it to Art as Rusty explained further.

"Impaled on a sharp rock – icicle sharp."

“Torn from a suit coat,” Milly said. “This heavier piece is the outer material and the shiny, thinner piece is the lining.”

The others nodded after giving it their once overs.

“Plainly it has not been weathered,” Milly added receiving it back from her husband. She smelled it. “Recently dry cleaned.”

She passed it on to Becky who added her sniff test and nod of confirmation.

“But no blood,” Rusty pointed out clearly disappointed.

“Probably not unexpected,” Art said. “There would have been at least one shirt – maybe two – between the body and the coat.”

“Did you notice that it’s hemmed on two edges?” Becky asked.

“How could that be?” Rusty asked.

“The vent in the rear – the split at the bottom center of the back,” Milly explained.

They all nodded.

“That help us any in identifying him?” Rusty asked.

“Can’t be sure,” Milly said. “Need to talk with a tailor.”

“Like Mrs. Baker?” Becky said. “She makes the vests they sell in their shop.”

“Sounds like a good starting place to me,” Milly said.

“So, we already know quite a bit,” Art began.

“We do?” Rusty asked wondering how he had missed it.

“We know the man’s clothes were changed after the fall because, he lost this piece on the way down, and there were no cuts or tears in the jeans he was found wearing. And things about the size and belting of his jeans do suggest he had been redressed.”

“I just remembered one other thing doc told us,” Becky said.

Rusty interrupted.

“That the man’s shoes were scuffed and both untied. I doubt if they’d get untied during a fall like that.”

“So, what does that tell us?” Art asked.

“Well,” Rusty began, “They probably got scuffed during the fall and were untied after he lit?”

It had ended up a question. Becky finished her

brother's idea.

"To remove his pants, somebody would have probably had to take off the man's shoes and then put them back on after the jeans had been pulled onto him. Maybe the bad guy forgot to retie them or he was short on time or somebody was coming and he had to hurry."

"That's how I see it," Art said.

"If this were murder," Milly said, "it seems like it may have needed a team – one to push or throw him off the cliff and one down here to fix up the body."

"Good thinking, Mill," Rusty said running with the idea. "It's a good twenty minutes from up there to down here by the shortest route I know of."

"Well," Art began, "not the shortest, but from what we hear about the body, the route it took is probably not to be recommended."

It received smiles all around – well, a broad smile from Rusty and polite indications from the women.

"Underwear?" Art asked.

"Don't wear any, myself in the summer," Rusty answered missing the point of the question. "Too hot."

"He doesn't," Becky said. "Boys are so disgusting."

"I think Art was referring to that on the body," Milly explained. "If it had not been changed and belonged to the deceased, it may provide some clue to the man's identity."

"Won't DNA and fingerprints do that?" Rusty asked.

"Only if there is reason for them to be on file with some agency," Art said. "If he had been a law-abiding fellow, probably a dead end there – no pun intended."

"But always appreciated," Rusty said smiling, then continued.

"So, what do we do with the cloth I so skillfully ferreted out high above us at great personal risk to myself?"

"Depends on whether or not we find the rest of his clothes," Art said acknowledging the nature of the boy's deed with raised eyebrows. "Let's break up and search the immediate area and see if the bad guy may have stashed them somewhere close. I doubt if he'd want to be caught with them in case some aspect of his plan didn't work."

"I've said it before," Rusty said, beaming up into his old

friend's face. "You'd make one heck of a criminal, Art."

Milly's eyes danced.

"He spent a large part of his 40 years at the university teaching Introduction to Natural Science to freshmen who really didn't want to learn about it. Perhaps that was criminal."

It was worth a chuckle all around. They spread out and began the search. The twins moved quickly ahead of the others.

"Art. You're a genius," came Becky's excited voice. "I got it here barely covered by some flat rocks."

"Don't touch it 'til I get a picture," Rusty called as he hurried in her direction.

The find was soon spread out across the hood of the truck. Milly gave the commentary.

"Navy blue, worsted. I'm not familiar with the label so it's probably expensive. Art always bought in the less expensive stores. Rusty's scrap fits the torn part in the rear. Lots of rips – the left leg nearly shredded. The trousers had a beltless waist – probably why no belt in the jeans. The bad guy just expected he'd be wearing a belt that he could use. Pant size 34 waist, 38 inseam. Above average in height and quite slender – that fit the description of the body?"

"Sure does. Six feet four or five and 185 pounds."

Art thought out loud.

"It would seem the bad guy or guys, as we are describing him or her or them, didn't know the man personally, considering the oversized jeans."

"Like one size jeans fits all cadavers?" Rusty said, continuing the thought.

"Don't say that awful word," Becky said making a face.

"What word? 'Size?' That's all you seventh grade girls can think about. Too much below the waist and not enough above it."

Becky folded her arms and put on a pout.

Art continued Rusty's original thought.

"It may have been poor planning or it may have been he really didn't know the man's size. Either way, very careless. I'm betting the jeans he was found in were shorter than they should have been. You two check that out with doc as soon as we get back to town. Milly and I will drop the suit

off with the sheriff. I want to see what we may be able to find out about the other three deaths out there this summer.”

“You think they’re all connected, don’t you,” Becky said.

“We just need to try and make sure one way or the other.”

They pulled to a stop in the meadow alongside Crystal River, where Red Creek joined it, and spread a lunch on the checkered wool blanket Milly had brought along. They talked about the case and recalled what they collectively knew about the previous deaths – which wasn’t much they soon realized.

Rusty looked longingly at the cool water, briefly considering a swim before noting to himself that a skinny dip with two females present probably wouldn’t be considered in good taste.

‘Social conventions – ugh!!!’ he thought to himself.

At twelve, boys always feel a struggle between the carefree latitude of childhood past and the ever more restrictive expectations of adolescence and beyond. From what he had experienced up to that point, however, it actually seemed like it was going to become a pretty good tradeoff so his moments of angst were typically short lived.

Back in town, they dropped the twins off at doc’s office. Art suggested they caution Doc about not smearing or disfiguring any possible fingerprints on the shoes. Art and Milly proceeded to the sheriff’s office.

Sheriff Westover – John – was rarely there, the local office being manned by a new deputy, Billy Carter. The Montagues didn’t really know the young man well so they were eager to meet him. An invitation to a home cooked supper would probably even be in order. That day, John was present – well, on his way out as they approached the door.

“Art, Milly, so good to see you! It’s been a while – the Jasmine Caper, as I recall.”

Hearing the conversation, Billy stepped out onto the covered porch in front of the old-west style office. It blended in well with the motif that repeated through the main drag and even into the homes that sat back into the village.

“You folks met my new deputy yet? This is Billy Carter. Billy these are two top drawer detectives – Art and Milly Montague. Some say they’re the best thing that’s happened

to law enforcement in these parts since the first time I was elected sheriff.”

John, Art and Milly shared a smile. Billy seemed puzzled. John continued.

“I assume you’re here about the death at the canyon this morning.”

“That’s right,” Art said. “It was a homicide, by the way – not an accident.”

“Really?” Well, that probably changes my itinerary for the afternoon. Come in. Billy, a new pot of coffee. On second thought, Milly would you mind doing the honors. His coffee is worse than mine.”

“I thought that sometime ago they had reclassified your brew as a deadly agent,” Art joked.

“As I recall you’ve put away your share over the years. Clearly, it must be an amazing elixir of life.”

Billy was clearly confused by the whole situation. Two old geezers with one foot in the grave being introduced as top notch detectives and clearly being paid the respect that would imply? Surely it was joke of some kind – putting the new guy on or perhaps the sheriff was merely patronizing them.

“What we’d like from you, Sheriff, is information on the other three deaths at the canyon this summer. Seems like way too many to be a coincidence to us. Here, by the way, is some evidence in the current case – the actual clothes the deceased had been wearing as he fell to his death.”

He handed over the plastic Wall Mart bag containing the suit.

“If I may suggest, you need to get prints off the shoes the man was wearing. The twins are over at doc’s now alerting him to be careful how they are handled. Probably need to handle all those clothes as evidence, if I may be so bold.”

“You may be as bold as you feel the need to be, Art. You know that.”

He turned to his deputy.

“Run over to Doc’s and carefully gather up those clothes and the shoes. I’ll drop them off at the lab when I return to my office this evening.”

Then back to Art and Milly: “I’ll get the information on

the other deaths for you. Still email such things to Rusty's address?"

"That will work fine. Thanks."

SECTION TWO

By 10:00 the following morning bits and pieces had started arriving at the breakfast table. It was just Art and Milly. Doc's finding was among the most important. The cause of death had not been the fall but a blow to back of the man's head with the oft referenced blunt instrument. It had occurred immediately prior to the fall. The skull had been compressed suggesting great strength on the part of the perpetrator. It also suggested the weapon's shape – rounded. There were splinters left in the scalp and would be sent to the lab for analysis.

"I need to get over to Doc's before those splinters head for the lab," Art said. "I'll walk. You need to stay by the phone. On the way I'll see if I can find Rusty. If you need me and can't get me at Doc's, try the boy's cell phone."

"We really should consider getting one of those phones, dear," Milly said.

"Not until I'm convinced they don't turn brains to mush."

"So, it's okay for Rusty's brain to turn to mush in your service?"

"Your logic really does complicate my life, you know, dear."

It hadn't been an answer, but Milly understood it was a close as she would get. They exchanged pecks to the lips and Art was off in search of the 'boy wonder' as he had often referred to him when out of ear shot of the lad. His search would be short lived.

"Hey, Mr. M. Was on my way over. What's up?"

"Heading to Docs. Need to examine some evidence before he lets go of it."

"Sounds important."

"I hope it is. Where's Becky? Didn't know she let you out of her sight during the summer."

“She and a gaggle of girl friends are off doing stuff. Be back by noon. I got an email from the Sheriff about the earlier canyon jumpers. Want to hear, now?”

“Certainly.”

“Well, let’s see. All men – fifty plus in ages. Looks like the first and third were dressed like tourists – jeans and plain white T-shirts. Here’s a goodie. Only the first one had a driver’s license on him. The other two had wallets but they were empty except for a few small bills.”

“Make a note on that gadget of yours. First, find out who claimed each body. Find out if they were staying around here or passing through. See if you can find out about their underwear.”

“Check: Disposal of bodies, lodging, and something to satisfy Art’s new under garment fetish.”

He giggled into his arm. Art noted but didn’t comment on the comment.

“Here’s a question for you. What percent of the adult male tourists you see around here wear white T-shirts. Make it a percent.”

“Oh, maybe like none.”

“And yet three of the four victims of the falls were clad that way. Add another note to find out about the condition of the clothing when the bodies were found.”

“Got it. You actually want me to follow up on it or pass it on to Mill so you guys can handle it?”

“The latter – yes. We’ll take care of it with the sheriff. Now, shifting topics. About your baseball bat.”

“Want to hit me a few?”

“It wasn’t what I was thinking although I’m not against it, as you well know. What kind of wood are they made from these days – I have failed to take notice?”

“Lots are aluminum, of course, but mine is Ash. Coach Claiborne says hard maple makes the best – doesn’t flake off and leave uneven spots that can misdirect a ball.”

“Burt uses his lathe to make the bats he sells in his wood shop, right?”

“Right, but they aren’t really for playing with. They have cutesy sayings painted on them – strictly tourist stuff. Lots of different sizes and colors. He uses Aspen, by the way. Lots

of free aspen in these parts. Way to soft and light weight for competition bats.”

“Often, after one of your extended expositions like that, I feel you’ve told me much more than I ever really wanted to know. That one, however, was chock-full of useful data.”

Rusty smiled deciding to accept the compliment and ignore whatever the rest had been. He followed up with a question.

“So, what’s with the ball bat thing?”

“Doc says our victim’s head was bashed in with a rounded blunt instrument. Could be any appropriately sized piece of a tree, but I figure knowing too much is better than knowing too little.”

That comment muddled the water even more in light of Art’s previous ‘exposition’ comment about his tendency to ramble on, but it typically took no more than a shrug for Rusty to rid himself of less than pressing questions.

They were soon at Doc’s. They entered through the rear door which led into his supply room. Rusty cracked the door into the section that served as the coroner’s area. Doc was there, alone with the sheet-covered body. He knocked as he opened the door.

The three of them were soon examining the splinters in question.

“Looks to be no bark fragments in this sample, Doc.”

“Right. No bark.”

He and Rusty exchanged a puzzled look.

Art held a toothpick-size splinter up to the light. He smelled it and rolled it between his index finger and thumb.

“Aspen,” he said at last.

It was one of those things a natural historian would know.

“It’s from the core of the wood, not the bark, then. What else do you notice?” he said handing it to Rusty.

Rusty picked up Doc’s magnifying glass to begin his examination.

“One thing for sure, it’s been processed.”

“Processed? What do you mean?”

“The one edge has been varnished – shiny, non-porous, a darker color than the other side.”

“Very good. Tell me more.”

“Considering our previous conversation, ball bats are varnished or sealed and bark-free while tree limbs are neither of those things.”

Art turned to Doc.

“Did the deputy pick up the clothing and shoes?”

“Yesterday afternoon. I may have smudged any finger prints on the shoes. I just pulled them off not thinking. Odd, a hiker wearing dress shoes, don’t you think?”

“Yes, that’s what we think, too,” Rusty said nodding as if to confirm Doc’s observation.

“What about the jeans?” Art asked.

“Well, way too big around the waist and, like you suspected, legs were way too short – by at least four to six inches. Safe to say they didn’t belong to the victim.”

Art had seen and heard what he had come to see and hear so they left Doc to begin his day caring for the living.

“You up for a road trip?”

“You know I am. With or without Milly?”

“It matters?”

“No. Just different strategies. If it’s with, I’ll be content with whatever she brings along to eat. Without, I’d pester you to go for a swim.”

“No swim and not just because Milly will be coming. We’re staying up top today.”

“Up top on the rim of the canyon? In order to . . . ?” he twirled his hand as if to coax more out of his old friend.

“If you wanted to get rid of a wooden bat used in committing a murder what might you do with it?”

“Burn it.”

“When?”

“Soon. Before I could be caught with it. Oh, I get it. You think bad guy number one may have burned it close by the crime scene up there. Not bad for octogenarian gray matter, Art.”

“Thank you, Dr. Russell Case.

“You’re welcome, Dr. Arthur Montague. That doesn’t fit you, you know.”

“What doesn’t fit me?”

“Montague. You’re more like a Smith, or Jones, or

Jackson – more common, and that is a compliment.”

“I am sorry that in deference to your sensibilities I didn’t select my parents with more care.”

The two of them could go on that way for hours, much to the chagrin of both females in their lives. It was always worth a smile between them and a more-or-less high five. Art still had not mastered the . . . well . . . the art of the move, which, of course, made it all the more humorous.

Rusty stopped off at his house to leave a note for his sister and then joined Art and Milly in the truck as they were preparing to back out of the driveway.

“So, where do we start?” Rusty asked, riding shotgun to Milly’s right.

“In the most secluded fireplaces we can find up there. I doubt if the bad guy would have risked making an illegal fire out in the open.”

Rusty smiled.

“That grin conceal something private or can we be privy to it?” Milly asked.

Rusty, who seemingly had few secrets, happily obliged.

“Not ok to make an illegal fire, but ok to knock off a guy. Somehow funny, ironic, I suppose.”

It may or may not have been worth the effort although it got a smile and quick shake of the head from Art.

They were soon at the picnic area some fifty yards back from the rim of the canyon – forty-five from the fence.

“You know the area up here, Rusty. Where are the most unused, well-hidden fireplaces?”

Without hesitation, he pointed northwest.

“Behind that grove of large trees. Our science teacher brought us out here once to see the 100-year-old Aspens. They need lots of light, you know. They come up as shoots from the root systems and can’t develop in the shadows. Aspens benefit from forest fires – burning off bigger trees that keep them in the dark. I stumbled onto the little picnic area over there that day. It’s less than a football field away from the drop point.”

“Drop point?” Milly asked.

“Well, if the guy was dead before he fell, I assume he was dropped off the cliff for some reason.”

“Good observation,” she said.

There were only three fireplaces in the cozy, little, secluded area, each with a table near-by. Art hoped it was so secluded that it had not been used during the past several days.

“I don’t want to throw cold water on all this, Art,” Rusty said, “but you do realize that wood burns into ashes, right?”

“I do, that, but Aspen is a poor burner – slow and often won’t sustain a flame itself unless mixed with other wood. It’s one reason they survive forest fires and why they are used in making wooden matches – it burns so slowly. I’m hoping the bad guy didn’t know that, and failed to provide enough kindling to finish the job.”

They each headed for a different fireplace.

“I think this may be it,” Milly called almost immediately.

The others quickly moved to where she was – well, Rusty moved quickly. Since turning eighty, Art only seemed to have one speed. He referred to it as, ‘just fast enough’.

As it turned out, Art’s hunch had been correct.

“Get a picture, son. Then we’ll need a bag from the truck.”

Art chuckled as Rusty trotted off.

“I still can’t get used to the fact that today one takes pictures with his telephone. And that those pictures don’t have to wait to be developed. And that they can be sent halfway around the world in a matter of seconds. My grandfather would have blown neurons over just hearing the proposal of such a concept.”

Rusty returned, sack in one hand and the lunch basket in the other, while Art and Milly were still examining the remains of the bat.

“Little of it actually burned,” Art said. “I think there may even been some charred blood – don’t know if that can be useful. I’m sure there won’t be prints. But, each end bore the distinctive five arm gripper marks.”

The remains were bagged. Milly’s lunch was served and enjoyed. At straight-up one o’clock they pulled into the driveway, back home. Becky was waiting on the front porch. Deputy Carter pulled in right behind them.

“Looks like the shoes won’t be any help,” he began.

“They were wiped clean of prints. Just thought you’d want to know.”

“Yes. Thanks,” Art said.

The deputy tipped his hat to Milly and left.

Art and Milly exchanged a glance.

“What do you know about that man?” Milly asked addressing Rusty as they joined Becky on the front porch.

Art and Milly sat in the swing. Rusty slid the wall down taking a seat on the floor.

“Not much. Started working here about two months ago. I heard he’s only a year out of deputy school – whatever that’s called. From Arizona or Nevada I think. Lives alone in the room over Edith’s Emporium on Main. Seems to be a loner. Really not heard anything either good or bad about him – that’s usually good, I guess. Seems nice enough the few times I’ve had reason to talk with him.”

“Does he have a vehicle of his own?”

“Yeah. A red Jeep – not new but brand new tires – extra wide it seems to me. I saw Bernie putting them on at his garage early in the week – late Monday afternoon. Has a removable cab – the Jeep not the tires. It’s off this summer – the cab not the . . . you got the idea I guess.”

Becky rolled her eyes.

“Ready for a secret agent type assignment, Rusty?” Art asked knowing full well the enthusiastic answer he’d receive.

“Always! You know that.”

“The key word here is sneaky.”

“Then you know you really have the right guy for the job.”

“Find Billy’s Jeep. Remove a sample of the dirt and such from the tire tread. Go deep, clear down to the belt rubber. Take a good-sized sample from several of them.

“Including the spare?”

“Sure. Why not? Then, do the same from our truck, here. The newer one on the rear should hold enough for what I’m after.”

“Not much tread on any of your tires.”

“Hence, the newer one! In light of that be careful not to puncture them. I assume your pocket knife will be the implement of choice.”

“That’s what I was thinking. What shall I carry the evidence in?”

“Let’s think of it as samples not evidence at this point.”

Art looked at Milly hoping for a suggestion.

“I have an assortment of small zip bags. Several should be the right size. You will need two, right?”

The guys nodded then Art added, “Better make that four. Rusty may find some unpredictable something-or-other.”

“Right! Those always interesting U. S. double Os.”

The women groaned. The men chuckled.

“I really don’t get what we’re doing, Art,” Rusty said, at last realizing he had agreed to the mission without understanding its purpose.

“How often does anybody travel that old road along the base of the cliff in the canyon – the one we took to look over the place where the body was found?”

“Like, never, I’d say. Snow covered eight months of the year. Under water in April and May from the thaw upstream. Nothing of interest to the tourists down there. There’s a handful of scouts on foot once in a while like the ones that found the body but they hike in and out. ”

Milly put six small bags and a sharpie marker in a larger bag and Rusty was off on the trot. Art turned to Becky.

“How about you? Ready for a mission of your own?”

“Of course. What?”

“We need to know which vehicle Deputy Carter used when he went to retrieve the body in the canyon.”

“Which vehicle?”

“Yes. A Sheriff’s car or his Jeep. It needs to be done without raising any suspicion. You must not appear to be overly nosey.”

“I can do that. My Dad used to say I could charm the warts off a toad – not that I’d ever want to, you understand.” She offered a shiver. “Sooner the better I suppose.”

“You always understand the unspoken message. I keep hoping some of that will rub off on your brother.”

The three-chuckled figuring it would never happen and taking some solace in the fact that at least a few things in life were still completely predictable.

While the youngsters were occupied elsewhere, Art and

Milly walked Main Street to drop in on several old friends. The first was Burt, the wood worker. He sold every conceivable souvenir that could be fashioned from wood – plaques, rocks glued to wooden bases, wooden nickels, bird houses, weather vanes, beads, drinking birds, hat racks, and on and on and on. He also made and sold bats.

“Hey, guys. I assume you need information since you never come slumming here among the shops.”

Art turned to Milly.

“These small-town shop keepers are so suspicious. You noticed that?”

“Indeed. Suspicious to a fault. And such an attitude!”

She pushed her hand in Burt’s direction, playfully.

They shook hands all around and shared a lingering smile. Art got down to brass tacks (one thing not available at Burt’s, by the way.)

“Need to know who you’ve sold bats too recently.”

“Oh, let me see, about four dozen people in the past five days I’d say. Probably currently strewn over a dozen states. Interested in one, yourself?”

He pointed to the display.

“Serious stuff as the twins would say,” Milly added to get things back on track.

“I see. Well, if you could suggest a size that might help. Most sales are the smaller ones with the clever saying on them.”

Art offered some guidance.

“Full size. Made of Aspen. Varnished or shellacked.”

“Narrows the field considerably. Most of those are painted a bright color. Let’s see. Yes. Sold one in varnish to a big man over the weekend – Sunday, early afternoon.”

“Big?”

“Big around. About six or maybe six-one, three hundred pounds, minimum. Drove a black van – Chevy – late model – sliding side door. Nevada license plate.”

“All that for real?” Art said, startled at the amount of information.

“Of course, for real. He parked out front. I remember him because of his gigantic size and because he was wearing a suit and tie – definitely not tourist trappings.”

“Didn’t happen to get that license plate number, did you?”

“Sorry. Give me a heads up next time and I’ll tell you when and where he last got his oil changed.”

“How did he pay?”

“Cash – a fifty. Not an unusual denomination for tourists though most use credit cards.”

“Anything else you remember about him?”

“You mean like that his name was Thomas. D. C- - something?”

“Yes, that’s the sort of thing I had in mind.”

“His driver’s license showed when he had his billfold open. This thumb was covering the rest of the last name. It was a Nevada license, by the way.”

“Age?”

“Hard to tell with such big fellas. Mid to late thirties, maybe.”

“Anything else that might be helpful?” Art asked.

“Well, one thing, maybe. If you need to tie that bat to this store there are two things. I have my lathe guide to carve a fatter bat than normal – to give more room for the words. And, where most lathes hold the wood in place at each end with a plus shaped indentation, I use one with five arms – snugger hold so I can work faster.”

“Thanks for your help,” Milly said. “Will we see you and Amy at the social Sunday night?”

“Wouldn’t miss it – not if I want to keep my happy home, at least. A big case, I assume?”

“Looks that way,” Art said offering nothing for which his old friend had really been fishing. See you Sunday, then.”

They went next door to Mrs. Baker – the tailor and primary seamstress for the village.

“Fran. Got a minute?” Milly asked.

Art hung back giving the women room to talk. Milly took the torn section of the coat from her purse.

“What can you tell me about this, or better put about the man who was wearing the suit this came from.”

Fran studied it for only a moment before she began spinning her best guess.

“Very expensive material. Thick to maintain its wrinkle

free form but very porous to remain cool. More likely from the south than up here. Extremely well made – precise stitching – not some sweatshop in Bangladesh. I'd guess it came from a thousand-dollar suit."

She handed it back.

"How's that?"

"Remarkable, actually. Thanks. See you Sunday evening?"

"Wouldn't miss it. May have to hog tie Henry and tote him over in the back of the pick-up, but we'll be there."

They crossed the wide street to the Sheriff's office. He was there. So was his deputy. Art hitched his head and the two of them went out on the porch while Milly took on Billy inside. Everybody loved Milly and she could talk to anybody. Art figured it would be a useful encounter and wondered if the young man would still have dry pants by the time things had been concluded.

"I was wondering, Sheriff, if these clandestine surveillance camera gizmos you have around town just might have picked up a license plate from a black van parked in front of Burt's place a few days ago – he can give you the day and the approximate time."

"Most likely. I'll get Billy right on it."

"I'd really rather he not be involved in this in any way. I will explain later but hope you'll just go with me on this one at this point."

The sheriff shrugged and nodded.

"Sure. Whatever you say. I'll take care of it myself. Is there more I should know?"

"Approach with caution. The driver of that van just may be our canyon killer."

"Really? You're moving pretty fast on this one. You need protection?"

Art looked at the man over the top of his glasses.

"You're really offering us protection? Come now, John. I thought we'd been beyond that for ten years."

"So, what do we want to know about this dude if I get a plate?"

"His occupation and connections. Should be from Nevada. His name begins, Thomas D. C - - -. Need the rest

of the last, I suppose. See if he's overnighted around here recently. Pays cash – odd for in a tourist town where plastic is the rule. See if he is in any way connected to the deceased – once we get an ID there. And, oh, see if you can connect him to anybody here in town or near about.”

“That should pretty well keep me occupied so I won't be bothering my wife and grandchildren for the next few days.”

Art smiled and nodded a bit sheepishly.

Milly came outside.

They excused themselves and began the trek up the gentle slope toward their house. They looked at each other and as one asked, “So?”

It was cause for a chuckle. Milly admitted she hadn't gotten anything that seemed useful from the tight lipped young deputy. He seemed nice and was polite. His childhood dream was to be a race car driver but some adult in his life had steered him toward law enforcement. Since he's been here he's started helping out with the youth baseball program. His jeep seems to be the love of his life.

Art relayed the more significant wheels he had been able to set in motion.

Becky waved from across the street and ran to meet them.

“You have to begin making my assignments harder. That one took no cleverness at all. Billy used his Jeep. Jenny's crushing on him in a major way and she was following him that day. She saw him leave Bernie's Garage Monday late afternoon heading west toward canyon road. She figured he wanted to try his new tires out on rough terrain. She was particularly impressed when she saw him paying cash – many hundreds of dollars she said. One more thing; she saw him get two calls on his cell while he was waiting. She said there was a good deal of emotion involved in his response. She couldn't hear the conversation.”

“Great work, Becky,” Milly said pulling her close as they walked along. “Now to get Master Rusty's contribution so we know where we're headed.

SECTION THREE

Rusty was waiting on the back steps – well, not really, he was crawling under them in search of any change that might have fallen from the pockets of those sitting there over the past century. He found two acorns and a half dozen well rusted nails. Interestingly, he didn't seem disappointed. He surfaced with a grin.

Inside, Art spread a newspaper on the kitchen table. Rusty had labeled each plastic sack as to its specific source. He explained as he relatively carefully emptied the contents of the bags into separate piles.

"After I got the scrapings from the left rear tire I began thinking. I had run across three distinct layers of gunk in those treads. So, on the right rear I separated the contents out into the three layers. I think I have something."

"We're all ears," Art said clearly intrigued by the boy's approach.

"Okay. Look here at containers numbers Two, Three, and Four – Number One was from the first tire. Just discount that stuff for the moment. What do you see in number two? It was in the manner Art often encouraged the boy to think things through. He was turning the tables. Art answered, tickled at what was going on.

"I see tiny chips of rock with lots of sand."

"Right! Now, what was in container three?"

"Hmm. Dirt, mud, pieces of grass, maybe some tar and chat."

"And now, the last one."

Art looked at it for some time.

"I'd say it looks a whole lot like container number two, bits of rock. What do you make of it?"

"Containers two and four are filled with debris from the canyon trail – well road, I guess. It matches what I got from your truck. The middle layer is from someplace else – like on

the streets, the chat and tar and grass and dirt, like from town driving at least. That tells me that right after he got his new tires he went into the canyon – I suspect to change clothes on the stiff. Then he drove around town – maybe while on patrol – probably on grass somewhere. Then, next he returned to the canyon, which filled in the last layer in the treads – I’m thinking when he was called there by the scouts to collect the body.”

“A first-class job of detective work, Rusty,” Art said. “Becky found eyes that saw him going toward the canyon right after getting the new tires, also. That source relates he paid cash for them.”

“There’s more,” Becky said. “I didn’t include it because it didn’t seem relevant, but Jenny said when Billy got back to town from that first trip, which we’re thinking was to the canyon to care for the body, he went out to the baseball diamond and drove around for a while picking up the bases and some other equipment. That was probably where he picked up some of the dirt and grass.”

“You are probably correct,” Art said. “At any rate it appears we have two layers of your discovery locked in, and what’s in between is relevant only in that, it tells us two separate trips were in fact made to the canyon before those new treads got filled with debris.”

“Guys, I’m not done yet,” Rusty said some disgust in his tone. “Look here in bag six. Strictly town and blacktop driving junk. Know where I found it?”

Nobody bit so he continued.

“From Billy’s spare – the best one of his old tires.”

“And?” Becky asked.

“And, it tells us it wasn’t his custom to drive the canyon road before Monday. Applause will be accepted.”

“Fascinating observation, Sherlock,” Art said pushing around the material in that final pile one way and the other with a pencil. I think it gives us cause to move ahead looking into him as a suspect, although it doesn’t really prove any wrong doing on his part. It could be like Jenny surmised, the first time he just went for a spin to try out his new rubber.”

“So, what’s next?” Rusty asked.

“You put a note inside each sack, which tells all about

its contents – date, time, suppositions and so on. Then we'll drop them off for the Sheriff. In the meantime, we wait for several pieces of information from law enforcement.”

“On it.”

The boy got to work.

“Becky, do you suppose your crushing friend, Jenny, knows anything more about Billy that might help us? Sounds like she's researched him at least a little bit.”

“Probably. I can have the whole scoop in a matter of minutes. Nobody likes to talk like a girl in love.”

Rusty reacted by sticking his finger down his throat and making an assortment of disgusting sounds.

She left without comment.

Doc called.

“I forgot to pass on one piece of information to you and the Sheriff. In the back pocket of the jeans the deceased was wearing I found a card from the clothing store – like a label of sorts I suppose: Jerry's Tall and Large Men's Shop in Carson City, Nevada. I forgot that I put it aside, but I handled it more carefully than the shoes. Get any useful prints from them, by the way?”

“Interestingly, they were supposedly wiped clean. Any ideas about that?”

“None. I figured mine would be all over them. Mine should have been all over them. I certainly didn't wipe them. What you thinking?”

“The obvious, I guess. Somebody in the evidence chain didn't want us to find any extraneous prints – incriminating prints, better said, I suppose.”

“Well, the card's here. Let me know what to do with it.”

“Hold onto it. My young print expert and I will be right over.”

As Art hung up, Rusty, acting on what he had just heard Art say, was already headed for the door.

“I'll get my print kit from my room and meet you out front of our place. I'll need three minutes.”

“I'll need seven just to get from here to your front yard.”

They exchanged a smile as Rusty left on the trot. Art assumed he had seen the boy walk but really wouldn't be able to swear to that.

Art and Milly played out their usual parting ritual – a short peck to the lips – and Art was on his way as well, scurrying along at ‘just-fast-enough’.

“So, Doc has something we need to print before handing it over to the sheriff?” Rusty said stating his assumption.

“That’s right. You didn’t hear his side of the conversation. A card or label from the store where the jeans had probably been purchased. I am assuming it’s the shiny, colorful, pasteboard or plastic variety. If so, we could ask for no better print holding surface.”

“Gotcha! Guess we’ll know in a few minutes.”

And they did. It was, as Art had suspected, a shiny four by six inch, colorful piece of pasteboard with the store name on one side as part of a multi-colored ad, and blank white on the other.

“Why in the back pocket?” Rusty asked. “I’d think advertising would be attached to the outside where it could be seen”

“The purchaser probably removed it and stowed in the pocket, probably forgetting it was there.”

Rusty nodded accepting that probability as he got to work.

“This is just way too easy,” Rusty said as he rather expertly applied the powder with the fat, fine bristled brush to the back side.

“Several are badly smudged but there are a couple really good, clear prints. Look to be thumbs, I’d say. I’ll take a picture first before I capture them on cellophane tape. Probably be finger tips on the other side – will be harder for my camera to separate from the colored background but I’m sure the lab can do that with their more sophisticated software.”

“I don’t know. I’m coming to think that software you carry around under your hat is pretty darn sophisticated, itself.”

It received a full-face smile and nod from the young man, clearly noting his appreciation of the observation.

“Got an evidence transfer sheet, Doc?” Art asked. “I think we’ll run this on over to the Sheriff’s office and hope he’s

here.”

“I saw his car in front of his office less than an hour ago,” Rusty said.

As they left, Rusty called back to Doc.

“Don’t take any wooden Indians.”

“I think that’s wooden nickels, son,” Art suggested.

“Oh, yeah. Wooden Indians would probably make for some pretty cumbersome currency.”

It was worth a lingering smile between them.

“So, ‘cumbersome’ – your new word for the day?” Art teased.

“Sometimes words just bubble up unexpectedly – probably can be attributed to that software thing under my hat.”

“Automatic updates, I take it.”

“Gotta be, unless they just arrived along with my new stream of intriguing hormones.”

“Well, new words may well accompany the hormones but I doubt if ‘cumbersome’ would be one of them.”

“We always have a good time, don’t we, Art?”

“We do. You are a bright star in my life.”

Feeling no need for his own follow-up Rusty became contemplative during the remainder of the walk to the Sheriff’s office. (So, the boy could walk!)

“Got stuff for you,” Rusty said as they entered and approached the Sheriff who sat alone at his desk toward the rear of the big open room.

“Stuff is good, I suppose,” he said, smiling up at Art.

Rusty handed over the envelope containing the label and the transfer form.

“Handle the label carefully,” Rusty cautioned. “Filled with incriminating prints from one of the two bad guys.”

The Sheriff raised his eyebrows.

“Two bad guys is it now?”

Rusty deferred to Art, thinking he may have said too much.

“This store label was in the jeans the body was wearing. It occurred to me the jeans could well be a fit for the ‘Van Guy’ you’re searching for – a little over six feet tall and very big around the waist.”

“Labels are typically full of prints, you know,” the sheriff said, “from the printers to the clerks to everybody who examined the merchandise on the shelf.”

“I think you’ll find this one more to the point. No more than two sets, I’d guess,” Rusty said as if offering his ‘expert’ opinion.

“Hope that’s correct,” the Sheriff said. “It will simplify matters. Won’t prove anything but may get us a good lead.”

He studied the dusted prints. Rusty pulled up the photos.

“How about I email this to you?”

“Good idea. You have my address, I imagine.”

“Stored away right here in my software,” he said pointing to his head and smiling up at Art.

The sheriff let it go having long before given up trying to make sense out of the private exchanges between the other two.

“A nice job of taking prints, by the way, Rusty. I see what you mean – probably not more than two people indicated.”

Rusty smiled and nodded a self-satisfied, ‘told you so’.

One of the machines behind the sheriff beeped to life.

“May have something for us here,” the sheriff said turning to attend to it.

They waited in silence for several moments.

“Yes. Got the Van owner’s name.”

He printed a copy and handed it to Art without comment. Rusty moved to his side so he could see. The three of them exchanged glances. The name was Thomas D. Carter, age 36, of Silver City, Nevada, which was a virtual suburb of Carson City.

“I assume that last name was the reason you asked me to handle this myself.”

“Right, John. Better safe than . . . well you know the drill. Need to explore any possible relationship with your deputy, Billy Carter.”

“Can’t often say this, Art, but this time I’m one step ahead of you. I went through Billy’s personnel file earlier wondering what you’d already sniffed out. It lists a Thomas Carter as his oldest brother, a Carson City, Nevada address.”

“Seems we could facilitate the fingerprint search by suggesting Thomas Carson,” Rusty said.

“No sooner said than done, young man.”

The Sheriff sent a quick text message, presumably to his central lab.

“Give them a minute or so,” he said verifying the nature of the communication.

Rusty drummed his fingers on the desk top. The men took note.

“The impatient younger generation,” the sheriff said to Art. “When I started in this business we had to eyeball thousands of finger print samples on 3 X 5 cards often over a period of weeks in order to search out a print. Today, sixty seconds is cause for finger drumming and pacing.”

His phone rang verifying the prints as those of Thomas.

“I need to take this up in private with Billy. He’s out on rural patrol. I’ll call him in. Get back to you after I see what the deal is.”

The two thanked the Sheriff and left for Art and Milly’s place. Becky was already back, offering her findings to Milly. She started over as the guys entered the kitchen and took their usual seats around the table.

“Billy grew up in a little town outside of Carson City – Silver City. An only child raised by his older brother. Don’t know the circumstances surrounding that arrangement. Won some race car competitions when still in high school. Completed a two-year community college program in law enforcement and worked for six months down there as a city cop before passing the exam that qualified him to apply up here. Been here ten weeks. There’s one tragedy in his life that Jenny knows about – his senior year in high school his girlfriend died in a car wreck on prom night. She doesn’t know the circumstances surrounding it. And one more thing. That brother visited Billy here two months ago. A huge man she says.”

“Once this is all wrapped up, let’s make sure we remember to thank Jenny for her help,” Art said.

“My software really needs some nourishment,” Rusty said, glancing over at Art with a grin.

The women looked at each other, puzzled. Milly spoke.

“Well, nourishment I understand. Software I don’t, but assume it will be made clear in time if it is in any way important.”

She pointed to the refrigerator.

“Cold peach pie – just the way you two strange men like it. Use what milk’s left. Need to get more, Art.”

“Put it on the list. My own software seems to be out of date and fully useless for such applications.”

Suddenly it all came clear. Even so, Rusty had to comment.

“Art, here, is still running an original 1990s Tandy program while I came supplied with Microsoft’s latest programs and a subscription to regular updates.”

Art nodded, thinking it was probably a pretty good analogy. The women felt no need to understand the details but nodded pleasantly hoping to move beyond it without more chatter.

“Let’s summarize what we have,” Art suggested savoring the first bite of pie with eyes rolled back into his head.

“I’ll take notes,” Becky said. “I have the best handwriting.”

“She does,” Rusty said in full support of her assertion.

Milly produced a yellow pad and pencil from the drawer in the table.

Rusty began.

“Well, two people were likely involved – one up at the canyon rim to drop the body, and one down below to change its clothes.”

“Why change clothes at the bottom of the canyon,” Milly asked. “Why not before sending it over the cliff?”

Art responded.

“I imagine it suggests they were in a hurry to plant the body – at least bad guy number one was. I suppose we can refer to him as Thomas, at this point. He seemed to be in a hurry all the way around – the clothes thing you just mentioned and the immediate and careless attempt at burning the wooden bat. It was as if Thomas wanted to make sure it wouldn’t be he who was caught with any of the evidence. The calls Billy got may also reflect that – a very impatient Thomas

not wanting to have to wait around, and Billy there without tires to be able to immediately do as instructed.

“Makes sense,” Milly agreed.

Rusty continued.

“Bad guy # Two was careless in hiding the suit down in the canyon and not retying the shoes. I wonder how he got the jeans that belonged to his uncle.”

“Probably they were left when Thomas visited a few weeks ago,” Milly said. “Bad guy Two – Billy, I suppose we are suspecting – used what he had on short notice, rather than risking a local purchase that might be traced back to him.”

“Could well be the scenario,” Art said. “Time will tell on that, I suppose. What else?”

“We have established a Thomas connection via the prints to the jeans,” Rusty continued. “And we can say with certainty that the red Jeep made two trips to the canyon immediately after getting the new tires. That fits the scenario and general time line as well”

“And the bat,” Milly added. “We have good reason to believe it was purchased by Thomas here in town the afternoon before the murder.”

Becky held up her left hand indicating she needed time to catch up. Presently, she nodded and Art continued.

“Where’s the coroner’s report from Doc? Did he establish a time of death?”

Rusty remembered.

“Between five and seven, Monday evening. That was the exact time frame when Billy was in the canyon the first time. Also, it would have been pretty dark down there by that time – the sheer walls and depth.”

“It suggests the man was alive until just before his body was sent down the canon wall,” Art said. “It brings a question to mind. Why dispose of the body here?”

“The dead guy must have been local,” Rusty said. “Find him here, kill him here, and dispose of him here. Back to the efficiency thing we’ve pretty well established as a pattern for Thomas.”

The house phone rang. Art answered.

It was the sheriff.

"May have just got a break. Mickey, down at the Red Butte Motel, called to say one of his guests had not checked out and his car was still in the parking lot – A man checked in alone Sunday evening and had a reservation for two nights."

"I have a hunch, Sheriff. Check out whose credit card was used to make the reservation.

"I have that. Oh, my. Good catch old, young man. Thomas Carter."

"And the guest's name?"

"Motel register says Bart Miller. Car registration says Larry Hill."

"You're running down both names, I assume."

"That's still working in the system but should have the info any second. In fact, how about this? Let's see. The Bart Miller at the address given is unknown. The registration name – Larry Hill – pans out – from Vegas. And, get this, he's been reported missing since Sunday morning according to his wife. I'll keep you informed as more information becomes available."

Art hung up and presented what he had just learned.

"I got more stuff here in an e-mail from the Sheriff's office," Randy said. "Sorry I hadn't checked before."

"A piece of electronic mail, from the internet, on your picture taking telephone – do I have that correct?" Art asked.

"Perfecto!"

Art shook his head at Milly who reached out and just patted his hand.

"So, you two lovebirds want to hear what it says?"

"Yes. Go!"

"Thomas Carter is a suspected free-lance hit man. Nothing ever proved. Has a very expensive condo in the north section of Carson City. Lists his occupation as a free-lance reporter – at least the free-lance part seems accurate."

"Seems messy for a professional," Milly said. "Too many loose ends, don't you think – the bat, the jeans, the motel reservation."

"More and more it does look like a hurry up arrangement," Rusty pointed out.

Art nodded and went on.

"The man – apparently, Larry Hill – was lured here by

some unknown means which included two days free lodging. Thomas killed him, probably hoping to make it look like an accident – counting on the local yokel law enforcement to be less than thorough.”

“Which they were – less than thorough – if it hadn’t been for us,” Rusty noted.

Art raised his eyebrows as if in silent agreement and went on.

“The Dell may have been selected for any or all of several reasons. The rural element I just stated. The distance from the hit man’s home territory. And the possible assistance from the young man he and his wife raised – Billy – who would have had eyes and ears inside any investigation.”

Rusty had a comment (of course).

“The bad guy clearly underestimated the local free-lance AMB&R Detective Combine here in Dingle Dell. And I emphasize the FREE part of that statement.”

It was worth a group chuckle.

The final email confirmed that a hit on Hill had been known to be in the pipeline – an up and coming hood who had crossed the mob once too often.

The evidence – including the two last minute calls to Billy – led to the arrest and conviction of Thomas Carter. Billy’s story completed the case.

Thomas had manufactured facts that falsely implicated Billy in the death of his high school girlfriend, but had withheld the evidence ostensibly to protect his nephew. Billy had been passed out drunk in the back seat at the time of the accident and truly didn’t know the facts of the situation so believed his Uncle. Under threat of exposure for the girl’s death, Thomas had used Billy on three previous occasions that summer to ‘tidy up’ his hits. Billy had used jeans and T-shirts purchased from a local second hand clothing store – but the last time, on the short time-line over the weekend, he used what he had, jeans that Thomas had, indeed, left at his place. Billy had removed most of the money from the victims’ wallets and admitted that was what he used to buy his new tires. The first two of the victims had, in fact, been pushed to their deaths. The final man – Hill – was a former boxer and Thomas didn’t want to take any chances so he used the bat to make sure

there would be no struggle at the edge of the cliff. It had been a spur of the moment hit order from the mob as Billy understood it – and when the mob says hit, you hit.

So, when at the last moment, Thomas needed assistance with the hit, he again used the threat of turning over the accident evidence to the authorities to force Billy to assist him. Under the circumstances, and with Billy agreeing to turn states evidence against his uncle, charges were not pursued against him, although he could no longer be employed in law enforcement. Come to find out it had been Thomas who had forced him into the field that he really hadn't wanted to pursue. He was at least free to give his dream life as a race driver a try. Since Billy couldn't implicate the mob, and of course Thomas didn't dare for fear of his own life while in prison, it appeared Billy would be safe.

Becky was soon off to dish the gossip to her girlfriends. Milly did likewise with her quilting group. Art and Rusty snuck off for some hit and catch in the meadow near the headwaters of Red Creek, and (please don't tell the women) a half hour or so of skinny dipping. Believe it or not, Art could still win the cannon ball contest hands down (well, maybe not hands down!).

Case #2: The Case of the Hangman Ghost An Art and Milly Montague Mystery:

SECTION ONE

With the arrival of summer, many possibilities opened up in the Crystal River Valleys of northwestern Colorado. The deep snows of the winter succumbed to the bright sun and warmer southern breezes opening up areas inaccessible during the five coldest months. One such place was the tiny village of Crystal, often called Crystal City on older maps of the area. Founded as a rip-roaring mining center in the mid-1800s the area gave up large amounts of copper, lead, zinc, and silver – even a short run of iron. At its largest, Crystal boasted a population of 400 – 390 men and ten, what shall we call them, feminine comfort specialists should make the point. It sits in a rugged, steep-walled valley – canyon – on the Crystal River east of Marble, and therefore just a bit further east of Dingle Dell, the home of Art and Milly Montague, the octogenarian detectives whose efforts grace these pages.

As the ore dwindled the population followed suit and by 1915 only eight people remained, and then only during the summer months. Although still listed as a populated place by the government, it was essentially a ghost town. There were several cabins that could be rented for short stays and one business that had survived amid the several lifeless buildings on the main street. It passed for a general store – broadly construed. Crystal City was accessible from Gunnison County Road 3 (that stretch locally referred to as County Rut 3), by ATVs – well, ATVs and Art's old four-wheel-drive pick-up

truck.

Milly, a mystery writer of note under the pen name Grace Garrison, was researching background for a new novel to be set in a place such as Canyon City. It was the reason for their early July – early Monday morning – trek along the treacherous, ever rising road already described. They had secured a cabin for five days – the maximum amount of time it was available to any one party.

It would be the longest time they had been away from Becky and Rusty, the twelve-year-old twins who lived next door, since the kids had arrived in Dingle Dell two years before. They assisted the old couple on cases and they would miss the enthusiasm and energy the youngsters brought into their lives. Rusty had forced a cell phone on them and had given them lengthy instruction in its use so they could keep in touch in case research or other things needed to be done back home.

Two miles outside of Crystal that phone rang. Milly managed to answer – clearly pleased at her newly attained prowess.

“Hey, guys. Rusty here – and Becky,” came the impatient voice.

“My, I had expected it to be the Duke and Duchess of York,” Milly said teasing a bit by underscoring the non-necessity of the explanation. “The Dell still there, is it?”

“That sounds like something Art would say.”

“How could such a thing have possibly rubbed off on me after only sixty years of marriage?”

It received the intended giggles from the other end.

“We are a mile or so outside of Crystal City, heading up what I hope will be the final hill. It’s quite a climb.”

“Good. Glad you’re safe. Still don’t think it’s a good idea for kids your age to be out on your own in the wilderness like that.”

The new phone was stuck on speaker and they had no idea how to turn it off, so Art was privy to the conversation. He spoke, probably louder than necessary.

“We’re doing fine. I’m counting on our past 82 years of life experiences to stand us in good stead during this little jaunt.”

“Hey, Art! Well, just wanted to force you to check in so we didn’t have to worry – hint, hint,” Rusty said. “Let us hear from time to time. Becky’s a worry wart, you know.”

The boy hung up. Milly pressed a button and hoped she had, also.

The cabin was just that, one room, plank and rock exterior, with ‘facilities’ out back. They had brought a supply of food sufficient for a week and were amazed at how little it actually took when Rusty wasn’t along.

Their mission included taking lots of photos from which the setting could be established and descriptive passages could be written later. They were also interested in hearing first hand from the residents about the area’s history and any colorful characters in its past.

The two other cabins were also occupied – apparently, they were a popular venue and the substantial rental price they commanded would indicate that must have been true. The best-known feature of the little town was Crystal Mill, the most photographed structure in Colorado according to some sources (cover). It was a log and plank structure, which sat atop a sheer cliff at the river’s edge, partly supported by dozens of huge timbers built up Jenga style from a rock shelf some twenty-five feet below. The town sat just to the west.

They unloaded their bags and Art made sure he understood how to light the propane hot plate and kerosene lanterns before darkness overtook the area later on. Logs and kindling had been laid in the fireplace ready to roar to life and fend off the inevitable chill of the evening, still half a day away.

“Well, this may not be good,” Milly said pointing at the mirror beside the bed.

Art moved to her side. Scrawled in lipstick on the glass was the single word, printed in capitals, “LEVE!”

“If it’s not merely the well-marked exit from Alice’s Wonderland, then I would agree, not good,” Art said. “Probably not left by a scholar. Like, where’s a good old capital ‘A’ when you need one?”

“Hush your prattle, Art. This seems serious. It raises several questions, you know.”

“Several may actually underestimate the situation, my dear.”

“Who even knew we were coming except for the twins and the person we rented from? Well, I suppose in a small place like this that probably includes all six or so residents up here.”

“I mentioned it to Sheriff Westover,” Milly said.

“Perhaps the twins let it slip to somebody,” Art said, grasping at straws.

“Maybe who is not the question we should be pursuing.”

“‘Why’ instead, you mean,” Art said nodding.

“‘Why’ number one would probably be that somebody didn’t want us snooping around up here,” she said.

“I guess that would lead us directly to ‘why’ number two,” Art went on. “Why would our presence here seem threatening to anybody?”

“Before, it’s always meant somebody was up to no good and feared he’d be found out,” Milly explained all quite unnecessarily.

“Now you sound like a hood from the pages of one of your novels.”

“I take my lessons from wherever they can be found. Maybe I won’t be writing the story I was planning.”

“So, it’s agreed that we will stay, then,” Art said more than asked.”

“We’ve never run away from a mystery before. I for one am just too old to change.”

“Old or hard headed?”

“One often comes with the other, I’ve found.”

It was worth a chuckle, a hug, and a quick trade of lip to lip pecks.

“I suppose we go about our original agenda until we get sidetracked,” Art said.

The largest portion of the area remained in the shadows of mountains and trees so they donned light jackets and set out to explore the quaint little town. Several ancient looking structures still graced both sides of what appeared to have been the main street. One was operational, housing a compact general store which also sold trinkets and books, many by a local author, Roger Neal. They admired his work and had hoped to meet him, but upon inquiry found he was

gone for the week. They would purchase copies of anything new before they left.

Standing on the hard packed, gravel street, they could look up into the surrounding hills where buildings in various stages of old age and dying revealed slips of themselves through the trees. As much as they wanted to experience at least one of them, they understood that their mountain climbing days were probably well behind them.

It had taken just under an hour to see what was there on the Main Street. They returned to their cabin to open a can of chili and enjoy an apple before returning to begin taking pictures.

“Our lipstick guest has been here during our absence,” Milly said, again pointing to the mirror. “You did lock the place, right?”

“I had to unlock it just now so I assume I locked it before.”

The first message had been cleanly wiped away and replaced by three words – ‘FOSTER PLASS – ATV’.

“Probably means Foster Place – ATV,” Milly said translating.

“Where is the map of this area that Rusty printed off for us?” Art asked.

Milly produced it from one of the folders in her briefcase.

“Is there a Foster anything on it?” Art asked trying to maintain focus through his trifocals. “They should really call these glasses 2 ½ focals – that bottom bit is so small I can seldom find it, let alone see through it.”

Milly ignored the mini-rant. She always ignored his mini-rants. She understood they were fully necessary, but she’d not reinforce them with comments pro or con.

“I see two places – Foster’s Grain and Supply and a cabin up in the hills with the name Foster attached to it.”

“Wouldn’t need an ATV to get to the Supply house. We saw it at the far end of the main drag. Must be the cabin. Shall we give it a try with the pick-up?”

“I’m game, although an all-terrain vehicle is suggested, here.”

“Does it seem to you the game has suddenly been

reversed?” Art asked.

“Not sure what you’re thinking.”

“Well, the first message – LEAVE – certainly seemed to be telling us to get out. This one seems to be inviting us to stay – participate, even?”

“What would be the surest way to keep us here?” Milly asked.

“I see. Of course. Tell us to leave. Hmm. It suggests we’re playing with somebody who knows things about us.”

“And somebody who hoped we would stick around. I wonder why they/he/she can’t just come out and talk with us about whatever it is?”

“Maybe the Foster cabin will give us a clue,” Art said.

An hour later the old pick-up had come through for them again and they pulled to a stop a short distance down an incline from what, according to all indicators, was the Foster place. It was a small wooden structure built right into the side of the mountain. Due to the assortment of boulders and rocks strewn forward down the slope from it they approached it on foot the final thirty yards. It would most certainly have taken an ATV to traverse that stretch in and around the big stones.

“Look there, Milly. The front door has been set back in place – see the shiny new screws in the hinges.”

“And there is that piece of relatively new plywood set across the window on the inside. If there had been glass it’s long gone. Perhaps somebody’s remodeling it.”

Art moved to the door and found it opened out with relative ease, producing a squeak which, under the proper circumstances could have been construed as eerie. They moved inside and turned on their flashlights finding nothing that seemed immediately interesting. It was mostly just one empty room, perhaps fifteen feet square. The remains of a table and chair lay in disrepair in one corner. Across the rear were two, large double doors secured with a beam set horizontally across the center. Together, they raised the beam out of the metal brackets on each side of the doors and set it aside.

“That’s been moved recently,” Art said.

“I noticed. Hardly any dust on top. Everything else in here is layered in decades old filth.”

“Lots of shoe prints in the dust,” Art said pointing. “Somebody’s been here recently – maybe the one who is working on the place.”

Only the door to the right opened – out. They lit the area beyond before entering. They searched the ceiling, floors and walls – solid rock. The area had either been a natural cave or a mine cut directly back into the side of the hill – most likely some combination of both, Art assumed.

Art went ahead, moving inside some twelve feet.

“Looks solid as Gibraltar to me. No recently fallen rocks on the floor. Seems safe. Come on in.”

Milly joined him and they moved in another twenty feet where the tunnel veered sharply to their right. The area there was wider and much higher with beams across the top and supporting posts at the sides.

“Oh, Oh,” Art said, shining his light high ahead of them.

“Oh, Oh, indeed,” Milly agreed. “Looks like a hanging to me.”

“And very recently,” Art said as he approached the body to get a closer look at the face and hands.”

“New rope,” Milly observed. “Dress shirt, slacks and city shoes. Most likely not a local.”

“Wearing a large ring, see. Like a sports award, maybe. A Super Bowl or Olympics something or other. I’ll light it with the flashlights and you see if you can get a picture of it.”

That done, Milly used her camera to take several more shots from various angles, one a close up of the face – well, as close up as she could get to a body dangling five feet off the floor. It revealed a middle-aged man who was quite average looking in every way.

“We need to call Sheriff Westover,” Milly suggested. “Rusty programmed his number into the phone. You remember how to look it up?”

“I think so. The lad made me pass a test before he’d give me the truck keys.”

What usually would have been reason for a shared chuckle only received raised eyebrows considering the awful sight hanging overhead.

There was a grinding noise behind them. They turned and lit the way back toward the entrance. As they rounded the

turn they saw the door closing, scraping against the rock floor. As they reached it, they heard the beam being seated into place on the other side. The door would not budge. The phone would not work from inside the mountain.

“Not the way I had planned to enter eternity, but as grave sites go, this one is at least inexpensive.”

It had been Art’s remark as he searched the edges of the doors with his flashlight, pushing here and there.

Then they heard it – the definitely eerie screech of the closing front door. Whoever had been there had left.

SECTION TWO

"I, for one, am going to take a seat on the floor," Milly said. "I think better sitting."

"I'll join you, but sincerely doubt if it will help me think any better after having recently been entombed in the side of a mountain."

They moved close to each other, Art's arm around his precious lady, holding her hand in his lap. They sat silently for some time there in the quiet darkness.

"You hear that?" Milly asked at last.

"Maybe."

Art stood and helped Milly to her feet. They put their ears to the door. Clearly there was something going on just beyond. The sounds seemed to indicate that the beam was being slipped up and out of its resting places in the brackets.

A loud, raspy voice delivered a deliberate, three-word message – demand, perhaps.

"Count to ten."

Milly began a slow and studied count while Art tried to decide whether he even wanted to play the game.

"Ten," she said at last. "Now let's open the door."

Art put his shoulder to it and it opened with ease. The beam lay on the opposite side of the door from where they had placed it earlier. The front door was closed. Art hurried to open it and moved outside looking one way and the other. Nobody was in sight. Milly joined him.

"I suppose we need to make that call to the Sheriff," she said.

That done, they closed the big inside door and set the beam back in place – not sure why – then waited for the Sheriff to arrive. He would come in close by helicopter and then he and his deputies would ATV to the location. He estimated a half hour.

"I'll take forty-two," Art said.

“I’m going with forty-one, then,” Milly came back.

It was a game they played, seeing whose estimate of the law officer’s ETA was closest. Only one thing they knew for sure. It always took longer than what they had been told.

That day Milly won – thirty-six minutes.

“Sorry for the delay but pulling the ATV trailer to carry out the body slowed us down. So, what do my favorite sleuths have going this time? I thought I was getting you out of my hair for a week.”

They exchanged a smile. Art hitched his head and led the Sheriff and his deputy inside. Milly waited outside hoping to catch sight of an onlooker that would be mostly sequestered behind a boulder or tree at the edge of the forest, she figured. The men found the victim. Milly didn’t find her onlooker.

The sheriff returned alone so he could call in his preliminary report. Art remained with the deputy. The call was placed.

“Middle aged, white, male, hung by the neck, neck apparently broken, half inch new rope, no wallet or ID, method of arranging the hanging not immediately obvious. Feet a good five feet above the cave floor. Let our pilot know it will be at least another half hour. More later.”

“I have this head shot,” Milly said bringing it up on her camera. Not sure how to transfer it to your phone so you can send it to the lab for that facial recognition magic of yours.”

“My deputy will get some on his phone. May I see yours, though?”

Milly pulled it up.

“I don’t recognize him from any recent wanted alerts. I assume you don’t either.”

Milly took another studied look and shook her head.

“No, but does it appear to you there are pincher marks from glasses across the bridge of his nose?”

“It does. Good Catch. We didn’t find any glasses in there. We’ll get prints and have them working before we get back to the office. If he’s in the system, we’ll have an ID before sunset”

“Could you send a photo of the man’s face to Rusty. He seems to have ways of finding things.”

The sheriff nodded.

“What brought you way up here to the mine, anyway, and I do understand the two of you don’t really need rational reasons.”

“In the short time we’ve been here, two rather mysterious messages appeared on the mirror in our cabin. I have pictures. Let’s see . . . Yes, here.”

She handed the camera to the Sheriff.

“Any ideas?” he asked.

“A few, but nothing much more than somebody obviously wanted us to find the body up here. He or she couldn’t or wouldn’t contact the authorities himself. Must know something about us – both that we are detectives of a sort and that we wouldn’t be convinced to leave just because somebody made the suggestion. The spelling suggests less than a stellar education or some level of mental impairment. I’m betting male, due to the formation of the letters and, if it were that same person who rescued us, from his deep raspy voice and the fact that he had to be strong enough to move that heavy timber by himself.”

“Not your suspect in the hanging, then.”

“No.”

Art returned and addressed the sheriff.

“I asked your deputy to send a photo of the ring the man was wearing to Rusty so he’ll have something to do besides worry about us helpless old folks. He’ll wet his pants when he hears we happened onto a murder and they aren’t around to help.”

Milly further explained.

“We engaged the twins to help Ted run our bookstore this week hoping that would keep them constructively engaged in our absence.”

The deputy arrived and stood in the doorway.

“Got all the pictures. Will need some help getting the body down.”

The sheriff and Art followed him back inside.

Milly continued her surveillance of the wooded area beyond the small clearing. She detected movement to her left but gave no indication of having seen it. She worked her way in that direction, bending over from time to time as if to examine a rock or plant or low bush. Presently, she was

within a few yards of the spot. As she stopped and looked directly at the area something turned and quickly made its way deeper into the forest.

It hadn't been a bear and for that she was both immediately relieved and bothered that she had been so reckless in her behavior knowing they roamed the area. It had been a person dressed in jeans and a red and black woodsman's shirt with a brown, flopping ear-flap hat. Tall and slender. More young than old. She hadn't thought to get a picture. She blamed all those lapses on octogenitis – a complex of maladies set forth by Art to describe most lapses in judgment and short term memory that had begun afflicting them since they turned 80. It also served as a wonderful, all encompassing, category to explain a host of other mental and physical imprecisions and not immediately enjoyable or acceptable personal foibles.

She hurried back to the relative safety of the cabin. The body was bagged and removed to the trailer. The sheriff stood beside the door looking around.

"Nothing here to be printed – ancient wood and stones all covered in an inch of grime. I guess we'll be on our way. We'll keep you posted."

"And we'll keep you posted," Milly answered.

"So, you're in this, I take it," the sheriff said.

"All the way."

"Well, you need to know then that you'll begin hearing about 'Andy'."

"Andy?"

"Many of the locals – primarily those living up in these hills – believe that most of the pranks and much of the unexplainable pain and unpleasantries in these parts are the doings of Andy, the ghost of a teenager who fell from the mill into the raging waters below and was never found."

"And that occurred when?" Art asked.

"Late 1800s – any local can give you the exact date and time. He's been known to scrawl messages before."

"You speak of him as if you believe in his existence," Milly said.

"Just giving you a taste of what you'll be hearing."

"Has he been blamed for murder before?" Art asked.

“Can’t recollect that he has. Mostly the smaller unexplainable things – run away livestock, broken legs, missing money, fires, a small-scale avalanche a few years back. Things like that.”

“We appreciate the heads up.”

The sheriff and deputy left. Art and Milly returned inside to make sure the beam was in place across the doors, wanting to secure the site so no youngster that might come exploring could get hurt back in the mine.

As they were preparing to lift it into place, they turned and looked at each other. Milly spoke their thought first.

“You know, it would be well for us to know what might lay beyond the area in which we found the body hanging.”

“This time, let’s move the beam well inside the mine so there won’t be any surprises,” Art suggested.

That done they moved beyond the murder scene. The passageway narrowed significantly with numerous pockets cut into the walls and ceiling looking like giant pock marks.

“Apparently, the ores were laid down in hit and miss fashion,” he said pointing to the indentations.

Milly nodded as they continued. From time to time they came across areas supported by beams and posts like it had been at the site of the hanging, but mostly it was solid rock. Five minutes into the trek they came to the end of the tunnel. Several things were fully out of place. Against the back wall leaned an eight-foot-tall step ladder - blond in color and new in appearance. The remainder of a coil of half inch rope lay at its base. Three shorter lengths of rope were draped over a step on the ladder. Art moved to examine them, handing one to Milly.

“Blood, I’ll bet,” he said pointing to a short section along one of them.”

“Ideas about it?” Milly asked.

“Could have been used to tie the victim’s wrists on the trip up here. The others could have been tied around his ankles and knees over the clothing.”

“Were there ligature marks on the wrists?” Milly asked.

“I didn’t notice. The body wore long sleeves. We’ll let the Sheriff know as soon as we get back outside. There are new store labels stuck to the ladder. They just may offer

some finger prints.”

“And here’s a bar code label attached to the end of rope coil. That may help identify its source. I’ll get a picture for Rusty to run down. Oh, I can’t send him pictures from our camera. Did he show you how to take pictures with the phone?”

“He did. I think I may even remember. Yes. Here we go. Light the label.”

The picture was taken. It remained up for grabs as to whether or not they could figure out how to insert it into an email, but that would be for later. After a dozen additional photographs, they made their way back to the entrance.

Milly saw it first and pointed. The beam was not where they had left it. They anxiously turned the corner and, much relieved, saw that the door was still open. The beam was out on the cabin floor positioned to be easily inserted across the doors.

“Seems young Andy is a considerate ghost,” Milly said.

“Andy? Ghost?” Art asked.

“I’ll fill you in on the way back down the mountain.

Art found himself riding the brake and keeping the old pick-up in low most of the way back to the more generally level area that cradled the cabins. He was surprised that the trip down the road took longer than the original one had, climbing up the mountain.

During the ride, Milly filled Art in on the lore about Andy the ghost. She also managed to send the pictures of the label on the ladder and the bar code from the rope to Rusty. That, of course, had prompted a call from the lad and she reluctantly filled him in on the recent happenings.

“I’ll see if I can dig up anything on the Andy guy. Already have the ring narrowed down. It’s a class ring, not a sports ring. Very expensive. I’m running down the manufacturer then it should be easy to find the school. I’m thinking private because of the ring’s quality. Looks to have a ruby set in an onyx base so I’m guessing a school with black and red as its colors. Like I said, I’ll get back to you. You guys be careful. Things are going fine at the store, by the way. Ted sold one of his paintings – the large sunset behind McLure Pass. Also, sold a set of Bea’s hand woven

placemats.”

“If you should happen to also sell any of our books, I’m sure you’ll let us know,” Art called out, putting on a tease.

They could see the boy’s grin in their minds’ eyes.

Back in the cabin they both immediately looked at the mirror. They were not disappointed.

“Thanc U.”

“Considerate, helpful, and well-mannered,” Milly said in reference to their new companion, ‘Andy’.”

“We need to learn more about the residents up here – in town and in the outlying areas,” Art said.

“Probably better wait ‘til in the morning, don’t you think? You missed your nap this afternoon so we should turn in early.”

Art nodded his agreement. He fried the potatoes and spam while Milly cut fruit for a salad. They sat close to the fireplace fire and reminisced about childhood memories of doing homework on the floor in front of the hearth – or was that Abe Lincoln? Memories meld.

The salt pork and egg breakfast was cause for chuckles about cholesterol and blood pressure. Art had long insisted that if some kind of malady would just befall him he might begin taking better care of himself.

It was a chilly, cloudy morning so they opted for sweaters under their jackets. Between ten and two the town was inundated by tourists so they hoped to work the locals prior to then. The clerk at the general store – single, fifty something, gray hair clearly trying to fight off the red-toned dye, and cheeks sporting an abundance of red blush – turned out to be just the kind of Chatty Patty they required.

The six, sometimes eight, permanent summer residents did their best to avoid the four to six dozen visitors that arrived daily during July and August. They each seemed to drop the obligatory twenty to fifty dollars for goodies, books, and souvenirs before braving the return trip back down the mountain to Marble where many of them overnighted. Most tourists only ventured as close to town as the mill, oeing and ahhing for a few minutes and snapping the coveted personal photo of the famous structure. Among the souvenirs for sale, Milly noticed pastel drawings of the local scenery signed by

Patty C.

“Your work?” Milly asked, pointing.

“Yes. I dabble. Don’t pretend to be a Van Goff but folks seem to like what I do.”

“It is very nice. We’ll make sure to get one before we leave.”

As it turned out there was nothing available in written form about Andy, but Patty had an endless supply of related stories. The brief version involved the seventeen-year-old, Andrew Cox, living with his grandparents (no reason available). On a bet, but mostly to impress a young lady, Andy climbed to the top of the old Mill. In the process, he slipped and the rest has been reported. His ghost vowed to remain among the living to protect his beloved from harm. Why he was still around after more than a century was not contemplated in the lore. Known to be a prankster in life he continued to be one in the afterlife. He had been known to communicate with the living from time to time – typically by way of printed messages. Upon being pressed for specifics those messages had only been evident within the past ten years or so. A late blooming ghost, perhaps.

“He’s no stranger to the store, here. He’ll come in at night and borrow books to read. They’ll be gone a couple of days and then show up again – sometimes without the jackets. Another one will go missing. I guess he’s making up for his lack of education as a mortal. He’d dropped out of school at twelve, or so goes the story. Sometimes other things are missing – toothbrushes, soap, over the weekend even some lipstick.

Patty verified that most of the pranks attributed to Andy were harmless, teen boy sorts of things. None had approached violence. The finding of the body in the mine had not yet been generally circulated among the residents. Before they left they received an email from Rusty. Attached was a rendering of what Ted thought the face of the deceased would have looked like, eyes open and smiling in life. It had been a stroke of brilliance on someone’s part. Milly thanked Rusty for their assistance and offered the picture to Patty for possible identification. She was quite certain she had never seen the man, and no man that age would have escaped her

careful consideration.

She had very little information about the Foster cabin or mine or whatever. The Feed Supply Store had carried that name for many generations and through many owners. It was not a name of any of the current residents in town and none up in the hills that she knew about. There had been a young man in town over the weekend who was a stranger to the area and was not staying in any of the cabins. He remained well after normal tourist hours. She hadn't seen him since Sunday afternoon. It was Tuesday. They left.

Outside Milly made the logical suggestion.

"We need to get the time of death. Think I should bother the sheriff?"

"We pay him to be bothered. Go for it."

There were actually several pieces of information waiting for them. Time of death had been placed at late Sunday night – sometime before midnight. The victim's wrists had been rubbed raw by rope as if he had been tied tightly for many hours. Bruises on his head suggested they had been secondary, as if perhaps they occurred when he had been placed in the trunk of a car or some such thing. The ladder Art and Milly had located had probably been used in the execution – the victim forced to stand on top of it and then having it pulled out from beneath him. The sheriff's speculation was that the victim had remained tied up until after the hanging when the auxiliary ropes had been removed. No idea why.

The stranger Patty had mentioned was in his mid-twenties, long blond hair, an ear ring in his left ear, spoke with a northeastern accent, bought junk food, and had asked her no questions.

As they stood there hoping to spot some other resident with which to chat, Patty came out of the store and called to them while she moved in their direction.

"One more thing. That blond kid was wearing a very expensive looking ring – red and black stone in a gold setting. It was large and masculine looking. Not sure what you're looking for but thought that might help."

They thanked her and moved on down the street. The tourists were beginning to arrive. The road from the Mill ended at Main Street so most parked there, looked around,

spent some money and returned the way they had come.

An older man approached them from between two of the buildings. He made no effort to introduce himself but did begin speaking as he stopped a few yards from them.

"You're the detective couple from the Dell. Folks in these parts don't take kindly to outsiders unless they leave lots of cash in their wake. I heard about the hanging. Thought you'd be interested to know there was a stranger in town over the weekend. New Hampshire plates on his dark blue Lincoln. How a hippie like him could afford a car like that I got no idea. He was a scruffy sort. Long hair, earring, unkempt appearance. Didn't get close enough to get a whiff, but I'm thinking that was a good thing."

"I'm interested in why you're telling us this, if we outsiders aren't welcome," Art said.

"Sooner solved, sooner you'll be out of our hair. All little places have their secrets. Don't want ours to get spread around."

"Will you talk with us about Andy?"

"The ghost? Some believes, you know. Nobody's ever seen him. Mostly a folk tale, I'd say."

"Any young people live out in the hills?"

"Gotta go. Wish you luck. Be careful."

The man returned from where had entered the street.

"That was an odd encounter," Milly said looking the figure into the shadows.

"For some reason, he felt the need to provide us with that information. Maybe, like he said, to get us on our way in a hurry. Maybe something else."

"How did he know we were detectives," Milly asked. "It seems to me we should be complete unknowns up here."

"The Dell is only a couple of dozen miles away from here. I suppose word travels."

"But to ID us on sight, like that? Somebody had to know either that we were coming or that we were already here."

"I suppose you are right in all of that," Art said. "A mystery within mystery."

"A mystery within two mysteries, dear – that and the mirror-writing, lifesaving angel with the penchant for privacy if

not anonymity.”

“Angel, not ghost?” Art chided.

Milly shrugged.

“You caught how the man cut things off when I asked about young folks living out in the hills.”

“I did,” Milly said. “One of the secrets the community holds, perhaps.”

“Let’s ask Rusty to research any major crimes that may have happened up here during the past twenty or so years. Maybe unsolved. I’ve never heard of any, myself. You?”

“Don’t believe I have. I am a bit disappointed about all this, however,” Milly said.

“Why’s that?”

“I hoped that a ghost town would come complete with lots of ghost stories – mine collapses, lover’s triangles, rich girl/poor boy/angry father; those sorts of wonderful ghost stories. The kinds of things Marc Miller writes about. I guess I was hoping for inspiration as well as background.”

“And a ghost that hangs people isn’t inspiration?”

“Let’s see: newly purchased rope and step ladders, imports his victim in the trunk of a car. Different M.O. from any ghosts I’ve ever heard about.”

A young couple in their early twenties approach them from down the street.

“We’re Mike and Karla. Just here for the day. Heard down at the general store you two are here to solve the case of the hanging ghost. Just wanted to shake hands and wish you well.”

“The young man offered his hand. They shook. The couple continued on their way.”

“That was odd,” Milly said. “Seems both Patty’s mouth and imagination have been working overtime – The Case of the Hanging Ghost.”

“Could be to your advantage,” Art said smiling.

“How’s that?”

“Write the story and sell a ton of books from right here. That could go a long way toward fattening our twin’s college fund.”

“We’ll see. Has possibilities. The good teen ghost vs the bad hanging ghost. Sends chills up my spine just

contemplating it.”

“Have you ever heard of a ghost that wore an ear ring?” Art asked, doing his best to whet Milly’s literary appetite.

They made their way through the growing crowd back toward the cabin. As they started up the lane to where it sat, they saw their pick-up, driver’s side door open, careening down the slope toward them. The long lane was flanked on each side by a heavy log fence. The truck picked up speed and would soon be upon them.

SECTION THREE

From the right, up the lane, ahead of them, a flash of red vaulted the fence, entered the cab, and the vehicle skidded to a halt just yards from them. They turned to attend to each other and in that instant the red shirted figure was out of the truck, back over the fence and into the woods beyond.

“Your angel came to save you, Dear,” Art said pulling Milly close.

“Mine? Looks like you survived as well. He’s still out there watching, you know.”

Art raised his arm and waved in the direction of the woods.

“Thank you, friend. Hope you’ll come visit us sometime.”

Much to their surprise, a red clad arm emerged from behind a tree and returned the wave. Just that soon it was gone.

“So, now what?” Art asked.

“Well, I suppose you get in the truck and back it up the lane to our cabin,” Milly said. She had always been the practical one.

That done they were soon inside. A call came in from Rusty.

“Got stuff. Item One: Ten years ago there was a deal up there.”

“Oh, well, that solves the whole case. A deal!”

It had been Art chiding the boy for his brevity. ‘The boy’ ignored it and continued.

“Can’t prove this but the identical story comes from several sources. Seems there was a hill couple – among the very few year-round residents – with a mentally handicapped son, about ten. It was known they physically abused him something awful – beatings and such – but nobody moved to help him. Well, when the summer residents returned that year

they found those parents strung up – hanged – from the gait posts at the end of Main Street. Seems they had been dead for months but in the freezing conditions up there it had been hard to tell. There is no official police record of the incident. Apparently, the summer residents dealt with it – swept it under the snow bank, more precisely. Consensus seemed to be that the couple got what they deserved. There was a stepladder on the ground near-by. The kid has never been seen since. It doesn't appear much of a search was ever launched to find him. No indication of exactly where they lived but that's not unusual up there in the mountains. One reference mentioned the possibility of a very old grandmother. Like I said, only one reference about that."

"Excellent detective work, son," Art said. "I think it begins to explain a lot of what's been going on. Anything on that ring?"

"Be patient, Grasshopper. Item two: The ring turns out to be a school ring from The Hanover Academy for Young Gentlemen in New Hampshire. Dates back to well before the Civil War – the school not the ring. They even formed their own Yankee regiment that fought in the war. Anyway, it's one of the most exclusive and expensive residential schools in the country. Have to be a relative of a former graduate to gain admittance. Hard to understand how the first students could have been admitted if that requirement was in place from the beginning."

They could picture Rusty closing his right eye and cocking his head as he contemplated that conundrum for a moment.

"Anyway," he continued, "that's what we got so far. You two are safe, obviously. Things are fine here. I assumed the pastries in your freezer were there for my benefit. Came upon them during a routine once over of the house to make sure everything was okay."

"Yes, they are for you two," Milly said, "except for the one probably infected with salmonella from some bad milk I may have used to finish up a batch."

"That would have to be the one that's left, then, since I've downed the rest and still feel fit as a fiddle. I'll have Beck try it and see what comes of it."

“You should know better than to try to best the boy, Milly,” Art said. “He is a first class, if perhaps pathological, think-quickly-on-his-feeter.”

“I heard that, Art, and I’ll take it as a compliment. Moving on. Item Three: The ghost of Andrew Cox – known simply as Andy locally. Nothing much really new or different from what you already seem to know although it does seem that his appearances have become far more frequent during the past half dozen or so years.”

“Half dozen or so?” Art asked. “That’s hardly the level of precision we’ve grown to expect from you.”

“Different sources, different stories. You reads the tales, you takes your pick. Sorry if the material at hand won’t allow my usual level of accuracy. You guys take care. Gotta go. I’m meeting . . . a guy down at the meadow in a few minutes.”

It was Becky’s voice that broke in.

“The ‘guy’ he’s meeting is Ellen Kay, truth be told. I predict some very awkward if not failed attempts at smooching.”

“Give me that phone, you snitch. . . NO! . . . Don’t put it in there. You know I can’t . . .”

The phone went dead – or was that the thumping of a heart.

“Seems everything is proceeding normally back in the Dell,” Milly said.

“Hormones! Hard to believe the lad is allowing them to take control of his being.”

It was worth a long hug and several moments of heartwarming memories.

Milly put on a pot of coffee and Art added a log to the fire. They settled into the rustic chairs facing the hearth.

“So, what do we know?” Art began. “A dead, middle aged man, wearing a school ring from an exclusive boy’s school in the northeast. He was hung in the style used right here ostensibly by a boy a few years back to do-in his abusive parents – incorporating the apparent use of the stepladder. Andy, the ghost – or your angel – can spell a bit and reads a lot. He seems to be watching over us for some reason. He pointed us in the direction of the hanging and we can assume

that it was he who freed us from certain death inside the mine behind Foster's cabin. He saved us from spending eternity with tire tracks across our faces. He seems to know things about us that are difficult to explain."

It was as if the proverbial light bulb lit above Milly's head.

"There was an article about us in the newspaper after we solved the Jasmine Caper, remember?"

"Was it in the 'Rocky Mountain Star', Art asked. "I noticed copies of that paper on the counter at the store. Didn't seem to be for sale – more just for customer browsing."

"I think it was, The Star. See if Rusty – well, probably Becky considering the recent phone conversation – can find out which issue it was in."

He handed the phone to Milly.

"It best be between you women at this point, I think, since it seems the conversation will begin at the other end somewhere within the depths of her bra."

Their bookstore back in the Dell had a collection of several local and area papers, dating back a dozen years – the oldest issues were on microfilm. For a school project, Rusty had begun transferring them to searchable computer files, which had made the store a popular research center for authors and researchers in the area. Becky and Tim would get right on it.

As Art and Milly were disposing of the paper plates that had held their lunch, the phone rang.

"Becky here. Got stuff – oh, my gosh. I'm sounding like Rusty. Anyway, found the article. Shall I email it to you?"

"Just give us the date and the topics it covered," Milly said.

"Okay, well, your personal histories, names of your kids, retirement here in the Dell, and a list of many of your cases. A couple of paragraphs about you as people – caring, compassionate, helpful, bla bla bla. A photo of the two you looking very grandparentish. Touches on most everything important in your lives except Rusty and me."

It had been intended as humorous but, in fact, spoke the truth. The conversation ended.

After Art's nap, they walked back to the store where

they engaged Patty once she was free of customers.

“We see you have copies of the Rocky Mountain Star. Do you happen to keep them?”

“Yes. We do. Our local author often uses them as research for his stories. We’ve had folks from the University come to search them as well. If you want to take a look they’re upstairs on the table to the right. They’re in order. Oldest on the left. Please put them back exactly where you got them from. There’s a sheet of cardboard on top to use to mark the place.”

“You seem to be very well organized, Patty. We appreciate your efforts and yes, we’ll go up and take a gander. Thank you.”

The copies were laid out just as advertised. It was a small, twelve page, strictly black and white, weekly with ads of more interest to the locals than to the tourists. Its news coverage was pretty well limited to the northern, western slope area of the state.

“Thar she blows,” Art said, sliding the issue in question out from the others. Milly dutifully inserted the cardboard place holder.

Art spread it out on top of the stacks and began paging through it. Together they moved from headline to headline.

“Oh my!” Milly said, pointing. “The top section of page five is missing – carefully torn out. “I guess we go ahead and search the rest to make sure?”

“Or,” Art suggested, “call Becky and determine the page our article was on.”

That seemed like the most efficient – their eyes being less than proficient for such a scanning activity in the poor light available there in the attic.

“Rusty here,” came the cheery greeting. “What’s up?”

“Just checking in to make sure your lips still work for the more typical form of interpersonal communication,” Art teased.

“My lips are no longer any of your business.”

“That seems reasonable. Becky found the article about us in the Star. We need to know what page it was on.”

“Sorry I wasn’t here. I remember stuff like that. Top half of page five. I guess you have the date and issue

number.”

“Yes. Thanks. It seems that Andy the Ghost may have lifted that section for his own use.”

“What? You’re making no sense.”

“I’m so glad you understand. I was beginning to question my own take on it.”

“I assume you will fill us in later.”

“You can count on it. Oh, one more thing. Do you have a name for the kid who supposedly hung his parents?”

“Hitch. The only reference was, Hitch. Want me to look further?”

“Yes, although I have no idea where. He was probably born right here in the hills. Doubt if his birth is recorded anywhere – if, in fact, the person even exists.”

“Let me see if I can work my magic. I’ll get back to you.”

“Thanks, as usual. Later. And, oh yes, there is a new stick of lip balm on my dresser.”

It had been followed by a hurried hang up on both ends. He turned to Milly as she carefully tucked the folded issue back into its proper spot and removed the cardboard marker.

“Assuming Andy and your angel are one and the same – well, the modern version of Andy at least – I think it is reasonable to assume he is both the book borrower from the store and the one who liberated our article from the paper. Perhaps our picture reminded him of the grandmother Rusty referenced – trusted folks, apparently. Maybe that person protected and cared for him after the death of his parents.

They went back downstairs. The room was empty as it was nearing two o’clock. Patty motioned to them and took a sheet of paper from the shelf under the register.

“You seemed interested in that hippy kid with the ear ring so I done a little sketch of him for you.”

She laid it out on the counter facing them.

“Excellent. Yes. Thank you. Just as you described him. How tall would you guess?”

“Not tall. Five eight tops. Wore lots of layers so his weight is a harder guess – one sixty give or take.”

“What do we owe you?”

“I’ll just add it to the cost of the picture you’re going to buy later.”

She offered a wonderful smile and a wink.

“By the way, does the name, Hitch, mean anything to you?” Milly asked.

“Not a good thing to be inquiring about around here, I can just tell you that much.”

“Very well, then,” Milly said. “We appreciate your warning and won’t press the issue. I hope our inquiry can remain just between us.”

They received a nod as Patty bit at her lower lip.

They left immediately and took seats on the bench in front of the store.

“We need to get a photo of this sketch she did for us, sent to both the sheriff and Rusty and see if they can identify the face,” Art said.

Milly was already smoothing the sheet out between them on the bench and handed the phone to Art. He seemed to have become the expert in telephone photography and zapping things out across the airwaves (a hold over term from the days of radio – real radio with dramas rather than merely a collection of 50,000-watt juke boxes. You may look up ‘juke box’ if necessary.).

By the time they arrived back at the cabin, several text messages had made their ways into the phone. They went through them in the order they had been received.

The first was from the sheriff who had verified Rusty’s find about the ring and school, and also had an ID on the hanging victim. His name was Walter Brandt who had been a social studies teacher at the academy. He was spending the summer researching his concept of the mini-clan – tiny enclaves of generationally, socially bound groups. The people inhabiting the hills surrounding Crystal City had long been one of his interests and he often spoke about them to his students. The sheriff had also been able to put a name to the hanged parents – Hitchins, Tom and Martha. He could find nothing about a son or other children. There were no records of either parent having ever attended any area schools. The case had, in fact, been investigated but all leads immediately petered out. The case was considered dead – well, closed.

Rusty had found on-line copies of the year books from the academy and searched them for the young man with the ear ring. He was quite certain that he and Becky had identified his pictures in the copy from six years before – name Randolph Goodlow, III. He had been a junior and did not appear in either of the editions just prior to or just after that year. The headmaster’s phone number was included in the message.

Art called that information into the sheriff believing that mode of contact would be the most productive. Rusty had already seen to that. They should have known. The sheriff had found information regarding it. Randolph had been kicked out of five different schools from the time he began Jr. High – typically for fighting and other physically aggressive behavior. The academy was his last known school placement. His father and grandfather had attended there. Apparently, he and at least three girls had committed parenthood together. He had acquired a lengthy arrest record – mostly drunk and disorderly conduct, the first of those at age twelve when he had stolen a relative’s car.

He apparently blamed his teacher, Walter Brandt, for being asked to leave the academy. Since his necessary success there had been tied by his father to his trust fund, the boy became furious and threatened the teacher, who refused to take it seriously – perhaps he had been teaching in that sheltered enclave for too long.

The sheriff had several other bits and pieces: Randolph drove a late model, blue Lincoln; Brandt’s van was found at the bottom of a canyon on the other side of the mountain from Crystal City. Since there were no personal or professional files in the car, police suspected they had been stolen.

Art thanked the Sheriff and turned to Milly.

“It could provide an alternative explanation of the similarity between the two hangings – Randolph reading the Hitch lore in Brandt’s files and deciding to copy the method to divert suspicion back to somebody local.”

“Makes sense. But why would he have tried to seal us in the mine – assuming it was he who did that.”

“He may not have been ready for the body to be

discovered. He probably felt the need to put many miles between him and here before that happened. I'm sure he believed that nobody ever explored the old cabins on the hill so he felt safe using the old mine. Then, when we showed up at the mine, his grand plan began falling apart so he felt the need to keep us quiet about our find."

"Poor Randolph," Milly said with a sigh. "Such an unhappy and disturbed young man. Even with wealth, family, and all that accrues to those things, something went sadly wrong, didn't it."

Art nodded. What more was there to say?

Another call came in from the Sheriff.

"Just thought you'd like to know that Randolph's Lincoln was just located outside a restaurant down in Pueblo. Apparently, he is headed home – east at least. The locals have the car staked out and expect an arrest at any time."

"Well, I feel better," Milly said.

"As do I. Let's celebrate. What's left in the larder?"

"How about canned chow Mein? Brought Chinese noodles. Tempting, no?"

"You really know how to seduce a man. How can I help?"

With the addition of hard rolls and orange slices they felt they were enjoying a feast. They spent some time planning the next day – places Milly wanted to photograph and a trip to the Mill, which had been at the top of their original list. Although not really bed time it certainly felt like bed time. Art banked the fire for the night, dosed the lanterns, and they were soon snuggled together under the covers. (Yes, octogenarians still snuggle!)

They had been asleep for some time when Milly jiggled Art's shoulder and gently cupped her hand across his mouth, whispering into his ear.

"Somebody's in here."

They remained still and quiet hoping the sounds would give them a sense for where the person was. The always present night-time breeze whistled across the roof and around the sides of the cabin adding to the difficulty, while, however, also muffling their own whispering. The fire had dwindled to darkened coals. The moon lit the crack where the drapes met

in the center of the window and also cast a long, narrow streak of light from where the door stood ever so slightly ajar. A figure passed in front of the window – inside or out was difficult to tell. Assuming the person could see no better in the darkness than they could, they hatched a plan. They rolled the blankets down toward their feet.

“On three you roll onto the floor over there by the wall and I’ll do the same here,” Art whispered. “There are two iron pokers to the right of the fireplace.”

“One, two, three.”

They hadn’t been the moves of young gymnasts, but they had served their intended purpose. They heard a man’s voice swearing. Since rising without assistance from a position on the floor was definitely no longer in Art’s physical repertoire of easy things to accomplish, he crawled toward the fireplace. In the process, he collided with the intruder’s legs. He was also soon on the floor stringing together swear words neither of them had ever imagined let alone heard.

In a rush of wind, which slowly opened the door, the fire burst back to life and lit the room. The figure got to its feet and raised one of the pokers over Art’s head.

What followed was something of a blur. The door opened wide. The figure fell backward. It groaned several times and then lay quietly. The lantern by the door was suddenly lit. There, of course, stood the angel named Hitch. He had brought rope and soon had the, by then unconscious, young man with the ear ring hog tied face down in a most uncomfortable looking position. He moved to Milly first, and offered her his hands to help her up. He then did the same for Art. He tipped his floppy eared hat and turned to leave.

“No, no, no, no, no!” Came Milly’s voice. “We don’t just let our hero’s walk off into the sunset or moon shine or whatever might be appropriate at this moment.”

The young man offered a smile at her playful offering of confusion.

Art carefully offered his hand. The ensuing shake was tentative and quickly accomplished.

“I’m Art. This is my wife, Milly. We assume you are our new friend, Hitch.”

He looked puzzled.

“We read about things, too,” Milly said.

His brow smoothed and he nodded removing his hat and placing it over his heart.

“It seems that we owe you our lives on at least three occasions,” she went on. “We can never repay you for that, you understand.”

He shrugged, though clearly understanding what she had said.

“We are pleased that you know of us and that you trusted us. Now we know you and we trust you, also. Is there something we can do for you, something that will help make your life better?” Milly went on.

Hitch moved to the table and picked up a book.

“I like to read books.”

The voice sounded years younger than the body would have suggested.

“We will work out a way for you get lots of books. What kind of things do you like to read about?”

“Girls.”

It had been offered as a matter of fact response to the question.

“Okay, girls. Are there other things?”

“Animals . . . people in cities . . . like what you do.”

“Solve mysteries, you mean?”

He nodded.

Art had quickly formulated a plan.

“Every Friday there will be a package of books waiting for you at the bookstore. We know you go there sometimes. Just one thing. The package will say: For Andy, but it will really be for you. We’ll see that Patty leaves it on the counter by the register. Okay?”

Hitch smiled and nodded.

“People think I’m Andy.”

It had been delivered with the grin of an imp. He pulled up his sleeve and pinched his arm.

“See, I’m no ghost. I’m Hitch.”

“May I ask you a question?”

Hitch nodded.

“Why did you direct us to the hanging?”

Hitch sighed as if wondering whether he had the words

to explain. He began.

"I been fixin' up the old mine fer my new place. I done somethin' very bad when I was little and I figured I'd get blamed agin fer the hangin' in the mine."

His hands moved to his throat.

"I didn't want to get hanged fer somethin' I never done."

"We do understand that. You are safe by the way. That old case has been closed and you were just a little boy back then. Nobody will ever bother you about that."

"Really?"

Tears began flowing down his cheeks. He made no move to deal with them.

"I better go. People mustent know you know me."

"Wait a minute, there," Milly said with some emotion. "We don't hide our friendships from anybody."

It was reason for another smile, but Hitch knew how things really were. He had one last question:

"You comin' back sometime?"

"You bet we will be back now that we have a friend up here. Look for notes – letters – from us in your book packages. We'll let you know."

Another nod.

"I can't read cursive."

"That's good for us to know."

He turned and made his way out into the darkness.

They would not attempt to change the young man's way of life unless he initiated overtures in that direction. Perhaps books could be supplied that would help him expand his horizons – help him contemplate new possibilities. Milly would never refer to him by name in anything she wrote – it would be an invasion of privacy.

The sheriff was called and had soon arrived. Randolph was picked up. Sleep would not come and even the cocoa didn't seem all that proper without the twins. It may have been the very first, wee hours of the morning, cocoa party, ever held by way of picture taking, internet accessing, texting and talking, cell phones in the history of communication.

"By the way, Rusty, when we get home tomorrow evening you must show Art how to turn off the speaker on this gizmo. Good night, son."

“Good night, son” Art added, “or is that now, ‘hot lips’?”

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Case # 3: Case of the Disappearing Documents An Art and Milly Montague Mystery

SECTION ONE

The American Pride Festival was Dingle Dell's most important mid-summer event. It combined street shows, parades, circus acts, magnificent rides, music and drama all done up in a one of a kind carnival atmosphere. It had begun during the early months of World War II as a way of affirming the American way of life. From there it expanded in various directions and, although having experienced its share of growing pains down through the years, evolved into the most anticipated local occasion of the year. Centered on Independence Day it typically began on July first and ran through the tenth – too long by most accounts to remain vibrant, but just long enough to fill the local coffers with great gobs of NLM – non-local money.

That year the major display, which was intended to draw in folks from across the country, was the one of kind, Display of a Dozen Decisive Documents – official papers and personal snippets, which had directed or redirected the United States toward its greatness. Many of them were so valuable that federal agents were on hand to guard them.

It was one of those events that did well across an extended geographic area since the annual inundation of two hundred and fifty thousand visitors sought housing as far north as Carbondale and Glenwood Springs and as far south as Gunnison. Most of the three hundred homes in the Dell rented out rooms, and temporary RV campgrounds sprung up from

every front yard, field and meadow within thirty miles. It WAS a big deal.

Art had been on the committee to secure the documents. Milly had, as usual, assisted with the advertising. Ted and the twins ramped up the inventory at the bookstore with theme related books and memorabilia.

The evening before the Festival was to begin, Art and the twins were at the City Building when the documents arrived in a Brinks Security truck. A specially designed, robbery proof metal display case had been constructed at some expense to house the exhibition. One federal agent was to be on guard at all times and two local law enforcement personnel would join him when visitors were present. Truth be known, the locals were more for show than protection and had been given specific instructions to stay out of the way. They would direct the flow of visitors into the lobby through the west front door and out through the east front door.

The lockbox was moved from the truck into the building. The agent, having the only means to unlock the case, did so and then arranged the documents according to the pre-arranged plan. Rusty took pictures, having fashioned himself a badge that read, Official Festival Photographer. It seemed to have worked. Milly had loaned him her high resolution digital camera with the understanding she got his first born if he lost or damaged it. It had been worth an exchange of smiles and a hug between them.

With the documents locked into the display case and the officers on post, Art and the twins left, hearing the doors being locked behind them. It had been a yearlong undertaking to assemble the documents and arrange for their display. Art felt a sense of relief as he entered the kitchen. He had left the twins at their house next door with their ready promise to be available for breakfast at six the next morning.

* * *

The day proceeded like most of the past first days of the Festival. Additional sheriff deputies arrived and spread out among the rapidly growing crowd. Every church and club in town had a make-shift, twenty-dollar a day, parking lot arranged in a back yard, on a portion of the school grounds or commandeering a near-by field. For many of them it became

the major money making event of the year.

Milly was always taken by the immediate rise in the decibel level of the background noise. No more the sounds of birds and children at play or barking dogs or cheery greetings exchanged between walkers, but rather the spirited din of a crowd bent on having a good time. Both had their place, she decided. She was just pleased in the knowledge that in ten days the gentler sounds of a contented, happy humanity would again settle into their rightful place there in Dingle Dell.

The first day passed without incident. Books and paintings flew out of the bookstore. Rusty feared they may have under ordered the special inventory. Art shrugged. What was, was. His goal in life was not to amass a fortune but to enjoy as many moments as life allowed. It was a philosophic cornerstone that he and Milly had shared since childhood. Rusty knew of their belief, of course, and was willing to explore it, but at twelve the lure of a large pot filled with gold pieces at the end of the rainbow seemed hard to beat.

At the end of the first day they gathered in the kitchen – they being Art, Milly, Becky and Rusty. It was a cherry coffeecake and milk or coffee occasion. Milly lifted one slice onto the plates in front of Art, Becky and herself while, humorously, sitting the pan with the two thirds that remained in front of Rusty. The three exchanged glances and smiled. Rusty assumed the distribution had been fair and equitable and dug in without second thoughts.

“We may have a possible problem, guys,” he said.

Eyes rolled around the table like the wave in a football stadium. Rusty always found possible problems. They would listen. They were that sort of folks.

He reached into his shirt and removed several sheets of paper, folded once the long way. He handed them to Milly without immediate comment. She smoothed the creases and dealt them around the table.

“Pictures of the documents,” Art offered. “I saw you taking them last evening. Looks like they turned out very well.”

“Do you have the pictures of them the agency sent to you ahead of time to use in advertising and such?” Rusty

asked.

“Yes. In the folder on top of the refrigerator.”

He pointed.

“I like your filing system,” Rusty said with a smile. “All the good stuff right there together. Anyway, compare my pictures with those in the folder.”

Becky brought the original pictures to the table.

Rusty continued to stuff his gullet and guzzle milk. The others traded pictures back and forth and, in the end, offered a group shrug.”

“Afraid we need more, Rusty,” Milly said offering the group consensus.

Rusty stood and moved to a spot between Art and Becky. He arranged several of the pictures in side by side pairs, then pointed.

“Here. Here. Here. And here.”

He retrieved the magnifying glass from the drawer beside the sink and handed it to Art. Art studied the areas. He began nodding slowly.

“Indeed. We may well have a problem.”

“What?” the women said as one.

Art handed Milly the magnifying glass and began offering the explanation.

“It seems . . .

“ . . . that the ones we have are fakes,” Rusty continued, interrupting, with his short and sweet first take.

He went on to point out subtle differences – a smudge, a variation in the watermark, ink tone and transparency discrepancies.

“See if you can get Bethany on that phone of yours,” Art said to Rusty.

“It’s late on the east coast, you know,” he said as he began the process.

“She’s a big girl. She knows how to wake up.”

Bethany was Art’s contact person at the agency with whom he had been working to procure the document. Rusty, as always, was his go-to phone service.

He handed the phone to Art. The discussion was both to the point and fully evasive. Art, as a professor, had mastered the technique decades earlier. The gist of the

conversation had been that, indeed, they had been sent the originals and not facsimiles or substitutes. He gave her no indication that any problem was suspected; just wanting to make sure the documents were actually what they were advertising them to be.

The conversation had been brief. He handed the phone back and began laying out the situation to his cohorts.

"It appears the documents we were sent were the originals, but those that arrived here are not the originals and we are the only ones who know that."

"They're fakes!" Rusty added, emphatically.

Art continued.

"So, either the, fakes, were handed over to Brinks originally or there was an exchange made somewhere along the way. From my conversation with Bethany, I feel confident that the originals were placed in the hands of the transport company. It is my understanding that a federal agent accompanied them every step of the way. If those assumptions are correct, the switch had to have occurred after the lockbox was removed from the truck here in the Dell and before it was opened in the City Building."

"That took like how long; three minutes' tops?" Rusty said making the calculation.

"Yes, about that," Becky added.

"Considering the large size of the lockbox such a switch would be next to impossible," Art said thinking out loud.

Becky continued the idea.

"It looked like it had been specially made just to hold those documents," Becky said. "They vary greatly in size – from what, six by eight inches for the smallest to eighteen by nearly thirty for the largest one on parchment?"

"Right. I agree, Beck," Rusty said.

Momentary silence overtook the kitchen. Mouths fell open. Rusty had just agreed with his sister. Art humorously put up his hands as if for protection against the falling sky.

"Okay. Okay, guys. I get it. It's just that she's so seldom right about anything that I feel it's only proper to point it out when she is."

It had been accepted by the others as a humorous offering. The truth of that interpretation was in no way a

certainty.

Art returned the focus to the problem.

“That lockbox was nearly two feet wide and three feet long. About six inches thick, wouldn’t you say?”

The twins nodded. Rusty continued the description.

“It had two dial operated locks on the lid – one near each of the front corners. There was no handle so the Brinks guys carried it out flat like a piece of plywood. It was clearly quite heavy. There was a piano hinge spanning the rear attaching the lid to the base. The metal was what, close to a half inch thick? Fire protected, I’m guessing. When it was opened, I noticed a gasket around the lower lip that would have sealed it water tight. The truck had a big sticker above the rear wheel that said, ‘Climate Controlled Shipping Worldwide’.”

Becky had more things to add.

“Each document was in its own pasteboard envelope which was sealed inside a slightly larger plastic envelope. It took the agent a good half hour to unwrap them and set them into place in our new display case.”

“The instructions we were given requires the room to be kept at between fifty-eight and seventy-eight degrees at all times,” Art added. “It’s the main reason only ten people are allowed inside at a time – to control the inflow of outside air as well as to lessen the increase in room temperature that could come with more bodies.”

“What I hear you saying,” Milly said, “is that it would seem to have had to have been an exchange of the entire lockbox – the one from the truck with the originals for the one that was opened inside the City Building. Duplicate lockboxes.”

“Looks that way, alright,” Rusty said. “Is this not the greatest thing ever, or what?”

“Not the way I would have characterized it in – oh, I don’t know – maybe a billion years,” Art said.

“I get what you’re saying, but just think about what a magnificent mystery this is for us to solve.”

“Actually,” Milly said reaching over and patting his hand, “I believe we all got your meaning the first time.”

Rusty shrugged and grinned. He brushed all the

crumbs into one corner of the empty pan, put it up to his mouth, and tapped the last remnants of the coffee cake into the funnel formed by his waiting lips.

“You are a disgusting animal, brother.”

Rusty, of course, could not let that just lay there.

“And since we are twins, that also makes you a . . .”

It had been a humorous exchange but neither of them was about to indicate that. No two people had ever loved each other more than the twins; it was just that without exceedingly keen powers of observation that could, on most occasions, easily be missed.

Rusty continued.

“So, do we call the Feds back?”

“I’m inclined for us to go it alone for a while,” Art said. “I do understand that Bethany told me the documents were originals, but, if for security reasons they were not, I sincerely doubt if she would have confided that truth to me, do you?”

“I suppose not,” Rusty said. “So, my question remains. “What’s next?”

“That wasn’t your question,” Becky pointed out.

Art moved on without acknowledging the squabbling. He looked across the table at Milly.

“I’m thinking we need to confide our suspicion to the sheriff. If he knows something we don’t, I’m pretty sure he would find some way to call us off, don’t you.”

Milly nodded.

“I agree. I think I’ll feel better if John knows what we’re up to. What do you kids think?”

It was one of the first times they had been directly asked for an opinion on such a basic aspect of a case and they were both taken aback. They looked at each other, looks of puzzlement quickly morphing into confident appreciation.

“We’re good with that,” Becky said speaking for the two of them.

“Of course, if it turns out to bite us in the butt I want it noted whose idea it was,” Rusty said raising his eyebrows in Art’s familiar fashion.

He held out his phone, the unspoken question being should he call the Sheriff.

“Go for it,” Art said.

The button was pressed and he handed the phone to his old friend. Art explained their concern and asked if they could have access to the City Building still that evening. The display had closed at eight. It was going on nine. Arrangements were made and they were soon on their way.

Only a federal agent remained inside and although he seemed puzzled at both the sheriff's request to enter and the goings on that followed he stood back and just watched.

Art spoke his thoughts as they moved from place to place and examined things in the room beginning with the very basics.

"This front room is typically used as the reception area from where residents filter in and out of the offices from the hall just on the other side of that rear wall. There is one central door there which has been cordoned off with a folding screen during the exhibition. During the festival, residents use the rear entrance when they have business here. All of the usual chairs, tables, and such have been removed from out front. The only piece of furniture here now is the specially constructed display case, which is how long, Rusty, fifteen feet?"

Rusty nodded.

"That leaves six or so feet on each end of it to the outside walls, with six behind and twelve in front. Visitors enter through the door to the west – the right as we stand here facing the case – and exit on the east."

"Where was the case made?" Milly asked

"Denver," Art answered. "A company that specializes in secure displays. Except for the unbreakable glass windows, it is actually a relatively thick steel case, which is covered in light oak wood veneer. It is outfitted with a number of alarm systems that react to things such as touch, movement, opened doors and general tampering."

"Sounds secure to me," Rusty offered really wanting to touch it and prove the contention that an alarm would go off. He restrained himself.

"Sheriff, I'd like for us to reenact the arrival and placement of the documents," Art said.

The Sheriff nodded and looked at the Agent who responded with a shrug and his own nod.

“Okay,” Art continued. “The agent was out here in front of the display case with the lockbox, which had been placed flat on the floor by the Brinks Guards who had left immediately. Milly, you stand here and play the part of the Agent. We all saw the box leave the truck, come inside, and be placed on the floor. Then Rusty, Becky, the Sheriff and I were asked by the agent to move behind the case. Let’s do that now and stand exactly where we each stood. The agent unlocked the display case from the front and we helped him raise the top, which is hinged all the way across the rear. It was very heavy. We held it open while we watched through the glass windows as he removed each document from the lockbox and placed it on the spot especially reserved for it in the display case. As far as I can recall, neither the lockbox nor the documents were ever out of our view. Is that how the rest of you remember it?”

They all nodded.

The agent present there with them had not been the one who had done the transferring and stood quietly at the rear, arms folded across his chest.

Art continued.

“Once the final document was in place, we lowered the top and the Agent used his four keys and locked the four locks across the front.”

The Sheriff interrupted.

“And, remember he asked me to verify it was locked. I attempted to lift the top from the front and determined it was, in fact, secured.”

“Then,” Rusty added, “After that, I spent some time taking pictures with Milly’s camera. I took a couple of long shots and then several face-on shots of each document individually. I’m planning to use them as part of a Civics project.”

“Then we left,” Becky said.

As if on cue, the five of them shook their heads. The Agent remained silent in the corner, clearly having no clue as to what was going on but not moved to ask about it.

They thanked him for his patience and left, the Sheriff headed East to his office next door and the others West toward home.

“Let’s sleep on all this and regroup in the morning,” Milly suggested.

“Good plan,” Art agreed.

“Great! That’ll give me some time to look into things,” Rusty said.

Again, it was cause for the synchronized eye roll among the other three. They wouldn’t ask. They each wanted to be able to mount a worry-free sleep.

SECTION TWO

Rusty had been busy. Nobody asked if he had gotten any sleep. They were eating breakfast around the kitchen table – eggs, ham, biscuits and gravy, muffins and – for Rusty – raspberry sherbet. For him, raspberry sherbet always followed ham or bacon. Whether that was somehow based in fact, lore or superstition none of the others had a clue nor would they open up the topic by asking.

“So, I got lots of stuff. Becky, you’ll need to take notes.”

Milly supplied the requisite yellow pad and pen from the drawer in the table.

“From what I could find, the cabinet maker seems to be above reproach. He has a picture of the display case on his web site to demonstrate his expertise and reliability, I suppose. The Brinks firm, of course, also gets an ‘A’ rating by any standard. The two guards have been with Brinks for ten and twelve years, they are family men, spotless records, and live a strictly middle class life style.”

“How in the world could you have possibly found that out?” Art asked.

“Well, I chatted them up while they were waiting for the agent to say he was ready for the delivery inside. Then I took that information, names, ages, kids, and such, and found them on an identity verifying site I hack . . . er, found. The bottom line is the bottom line.”

Art and Milly looked at each other and shrugged. Rusty continued.

“I think that supports our earlier idea that the switch was not made during transit.”

Art spoke.

“So, I’ve been wondering, who would have reason to steal such one of a kind documents – and toward what end?”

Rusty grinned.

“Most people would just say ‘why’, but the professor

says, 'toward what end?'

"Most people would say, 'banish that male twin' to the tar pits, but I keep saying, 'aw, let him come back'."

The points had been made.

"Say more," Becky asked, looking at Art.

"Well, I see two possibilities – ransom or a reclusive private collector."

"Reclusive collector?" Rusty asked.

"Well, think about it. Many art collectors possess expensive, one of a kind paintings and gladly show them off to all comers. That's all legitimate. They purchased them through legal channels. But these documents will be known to have been stolen. Their holder can never show them to anybody. They can only ever be for his own private viewing – pleasure – feeling of power or what have you."

"You're talking mega-wealthy, then," Becky said.

"Most likely."

"So, the end holder, as you called him," Milly began, "is most likely not the one who pulled the heist."

"Heist?" Rusty asked grinning.

"Her personal penchant for watching late night, black and white, cops and robber's movies," Art explained.

Rusty addressed his sister.

"When have you heard 'heist' and 'penchant' all in the same, short, two sentence conversation?"

They enjoyed their moment – partly just the fun of it and partly because they realized how just knowing these unique people was making a wonderful impact on their lives.

Milly continued the line of thought.

"I doubt if we will be told if there has been a ransom demand and, more basic still, who in their right mind would try to extort the Federal Government who possesses the documents?"

"I agree. Most likely not for ransom, then," Rusty said. "So, that leaves the reclusive ratfink theory."

"For some unexplainable reason, that popped an idea into my old head," Art said. "There are basically three aspects we haven't explored."

"The lockbox," Rusty offered.

"The Federal Agent," Becky said a bit more tentatively.

“Whoever installed the show case in the City Building – electrical, securing it to the floor, the flood lights, and so on,” said Milly.

“You guys are good. Here I was thinking the three blind mice – Rusty’s ‘ratfink’ reference. Sorry.”

It came as a chorus:

“No, you aren’t!”

Art shrugged and quickly tried to return to the serious aspects of the case.

“So, we need to do some background checking on the lockbox builder, the Federal Agent who unloaded the documents, and the display case installer.”

“And by ‘we’ of course you mean ‘me’,” Rusty offered sounding more proud than put upon.

“I’ll get the installer’s name and what other information I can from the mayor,” Art said. “He oversaw that process. He’s like a ten-year-old boy when it comes to watching construction projects.”

“I’ll go with the lock box guys,” Rusty said. “Although, I think that’s dead in the water before it sails.”

Becky couldn’t resist.

“All ships are dead in the water before they sail, doofus.”

“You know what I meant. Nothing about the lockbox seems important since the switch had to have been made after the box was opened.”

“Still, let’s check it out,” Art said.

“I spend most of my time at school studying things that have no clear relevance to my life so I suppose that has prepared me well for this nonessential assignment,” Rusty managed with a sigh.

He had lodged his protest and that was all that really mattered.

“I’ll assist the reluctant one,” Becky said.

“It seems to leave the Federal Agent to me,” Milly said.

“I figured you had connections,” Art said.

It had been a slip referring to contacts made while researching things for the mystery novels she wrote – the ones she wrote as Grace Garrison, unknown to anybody there in the Dell including the twins.

“Connections?” Rusty said. “Milly has connections?”

“Oh, yes. From my days as a spy during World War Two. You’ve read about, Mata Milli.”

Rusty smiled and nodded at the poorly attempted humorous cover up, but he’d tuck it away for some further private research later on.

“Let’s go do our separate things and meet back here at noon,” Art suggested.

“It’ll have to be cold cuts and potato salad, guys,” Milly said. “It seems I’ve just become a working gal. No apron, no cooking.”

Art began by tracking down the mayor who was in his element, glad-handing both the locals and outsiders alike. Art caught up with him at the corn dog stand near the fire station. The Mayor was short and stout of cheeks and tummy. He had never been seen without a smile. One of the local jokes about him was that his hands were calloused – not from real work but from shaking.

“Got a couple of questions – for my final report on the document display”, Art began. “Want to give credit where credit’s due. Who installed the display case in the City Building?”

“Banacek and Son; basically, they’re electricians out of Denver. They work with the cabinet maker and do most of his big installations.”

“How long did it take?”

“Three, no, four days. Had both attic and crawlspace work. The display case came with a back-up generator system in case the power went off – to keep the AC churning there in the reception area.”

“How many workers?”

“Three. Cid, his son Gary and a goffer, a kid named Benny.”

“Anything unusual happen while they were working?”

“Unusual? Can’t say there was. They had to turn the power off several times but, face it, we really aren’t all that busy in the Dingle Dell City Building so it couldn’t be considered an inconvenience.”

“Thanks for the update. Just want to be sure we have the facts correct.”

Art really wanted to wipe the mustard off the mayor's cheek but resisted in deference to local expectations. The mayor was certainly not slovenly, but neither was he ever ready to be presented to the queen. He walked to the bookstore to see how Ted was handling things all alone. Come to find out he wasn't. Connie, his on-again, off-again lady friend, was there helping him. Apparently, the twins – who really liked her – had unilaterally engaged her to help for a few days. It was a busy time but they were clearly doing fine (and so were things at the bookstore!).

On several occasions in the past Milly had crossed paths with ranking law enforcement officials. She often based her fiction on real life cases. She had established a good contact at the federal level – agent Mann (who happened to be a woman!). She spoke to her by phone. Her story was that she was doing research on what Art had dubbed 'reclusive collectors of ill-gotten booty' and asked for resources to which she might turn for ideas and background. Several pieces of useful information were shared. She also asked about the care used in selecting agents for assignments like guarding the documents and was assured it required the highest clearance. As the conversation drew to an end, the Agent provided a cryptic closing comment.

"I'm not going to tell you this you understand, Mrs. Montague, but in light of the first part of our conversation, there is a gentleman in the Vail area by the name of William Bradford."

With that, she hung up.

Milly had just been oddly pointed in a direction. Whether it was because of something Mann already new about a case that she felt Milly might be a part of, or just a lead to a sometime suspect, Milly couldn't be sure. At any rate, her investigation had taken so little time she donned an apron and changed the noon menu to include hog dogs with mac and cheese.

Becky and Rusty had moved out onto the back porch to think.

"Do you know where the lockbox is now?" Becky asked.

"Not really. It may have returned in the Brinks truck."

"But if it didn't, we just might be able to get a look at it."

“Good thinking, Beck! I imagine those Federal Agents who guard the display would know.”

Within minutes they were at the display. The line was a block long. Being parts of lines was not something Rusty’s innate impatience allowed.

“The back door,” he suggested.

The mayor’s secretary, Madge, was the only one working.

“How’d you get stuck back here?” Rusty asked.

“Somebody has to answer the phone and we drew straws. I lost. So here I am.”

“And pleased to be doing your part, I’m sure.”

It had been Becky on her way to charming off a few warts – well you had to have read an earlier case. Rusty picked things up.

“We just got worried about where that lockbox is being kept – the one the documents arrived in. Don’t dare let it get lost. Be needed for the return trip next week. So much confusion around here, you know.”

“So, you want to get a peek at the lock box, you’re saying,” Marge came back looking at the boy across the top of her half lens glasses.

“Well, I was, in fact, trying not to say that, but you saw through us.”

“She saw through YOU, Rusty. I was on my way to doing just fine.”

“Truth is, guys, I have no idea where it is. I’ve never even seen it.”

“Do you know who is in charge of it?” Becky asked.

“No. My guess would be the Federal agents or the Brinks Company, but that’s only a guess.”

“Well, thanks anyway. Hope you get sprung from here sometime this week so you can take in all the festivities,” Becky said.

“Truth be told, I’d just as soon be here in the AC. If you’ve seen one clown making balloon animals you’ve pretty well seen them all. You kids have fun.”

Rusty turned to his sister as they rounded the building toward the crowded street.

“I got a couple of shots of the lockbox that first night.

Let's go home and blow them up on the computer. Maybe we'll see something."

"If I were you, I'd refrain from talking about blowing things up with a computer at a well-guarded gathering such as this. I'm sure there are ears here we've not heard about."

Rusty shrugged neither agreeing nor disagreeing.

They were soon home and into the process. There were two shots of the outside of the box – one as the guards were carrying it inside and the other after it had been placed on the floor in front of the case.

There was only one shot of the open box – a side view from above that Rusty had taken through the glass from the rear while he was supposed to have been helping hold the top of the case in place as the documents were being arranged. Nothing seemed particularly unusual, considering the entire, specially made, lockbox was unusual to begin with.

"How about the pictures you took of the display case itself."

There were more of them than Rusty had remembered taking – several from the front plus the shots of each individual document. Rusty also had downloaded the picture the cabinetmaker had on his website. He printed the front views and they moved with them to his bed to study them.

"Holy Moly, as Billy somebody used to say in Captain Somebody comic books."

"What, Becky asked.

"Look across the base of the cabinet – the lower ten inches below the inset panels."

"I see ten inch pieces of decorative wood, each about three feet wide – five of them spanning the width at floor level filling the spaces between the six legs – sort of like baseboards."

"And? Look back and forth the between the web site picture and this one I took."

"Sometimes when you get all Socratic like Art it really irritates me, brother."

"Humor me on this one."

"I've been humoring you ever since you used to kick me in the face when we were in the womb."

"Unlikely, since we are fraternal, but you make your

point. Here, let me point out what I saw.”

Becky took a moment to look.

“I see. That base board on the far left is like shoved in or under a bit at the floor in the one you took but not in the one from the web.”

“And that can only mean one thing,” Rusty went on twirling his hand like Art when he wanted to hear more.

“It is hinged from the top for some reason.”

“Okay, enough Socrates crap,” Rusty said. “Here’s how I see it. That panel – or board as you called it – is just high enough and wide enough to allow that lockbox to slide underneath the cabinet. Now, let’s assume the one next to it works the same way. Then, while we were distracted for just a second securing the top of the cabinet, the Agent pushed the Brinks box under one hinged panel and pulled out an identical box from the other – it containing the fake stuff.”

“The switch would have had to happen just as we got the top raised and were each figuring out how to balance it there. It was the only moment we might have been considered distracted as a group. That’s an infinitesimal time frame, Rusty.”

“You’re right, and very risky,” he said, sitting back to contemplate the situation. “But, if it did happen that way, the cabinet pretty much had to have been remodeled once it got here, adding the hinged panels while it was being installed. That would lead us to the Banaceks – father and son.”

“It also means there is a fake, duplicate box – and I know you’ll get on to me about how a fake can’t be a duplicate – had to have been put in place near the end of the installation.”

“Which would further mean that the builder of the fake box had to have the exact specifications of the real box well ahead of time. Since it was special made, that makes the task a billion times more complicated.”

“Unless both boxes were made by the same person,” Becky added. “Do we know who made the lock box?”

“We just may! Back to the Bat Cave, Robin.”

“What?”

“Just come over to the computer with me. Here, let me pull up my first shot of the lockbox as it was laying on the floor

in front of the display case. See that smudge in the lower right corner.”

“I do.”

“It may be the name plate of the builder. Let me see if I can enlarge it and then try clearing it up with that pixel enhancing software Art and Milly gave me last Christmas.”

“I thought you only used that to enlarge certain features in the pictures you take of the girls swimming at the lake.”

Rusty acknowledged her comment with raised his eyebrows and got to work without comment. A few minutes later they had a readable image: Fairfax Metal Works, Bayberry, Connecticut.

“You know what else is headquartered in Bayberry, Connecticut?”

“No, but I’m thinking I will any second now,” Becky said.

“Brinks Security.”

“It makes sense, I suppose, that the security company would be involved in designing and building the lockbox that’s to be involved in such a government undertaking as this,” Becky went on. “I’m still not certain where all this gets us.”

“Simple! All we have to do is find the dishonest employee at Fairfax Metal who made the duplicate box and sold it to the bad guy for a considerable sum, connect that guy to the ratfink bad guy, find the original documents I see what you mean. Well, I think we should at least run the idea by Art and Mill.”

“I hate it when you shorten Milly that way. Why don’t you shorten Art to Ar?”

“Well, the ‘Y’ in Milly adds an entire syllable, while the ‘T’ in Art doesn’t – it just hangs on all by itself – no effort. I’m hungry. It must be time for lunch.”

“And I’m aggravated so I’m sure it’s time for a change of company.”

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SECTION THREE

“You make the best mac and cheese in the universe, Mill – y,” Rusty said giving a quick glance at Becky who smiled and nodded. “Thought it was to be sandwiches.”

“My assignment took less time than I figured it would. I have a name for you to look up on your identification verifying site or whatever you called it. William Bradford. Lives in the Vail area.”

“Sounds like the sort of good substantial name I’d give a St. Bernard,” Rusty said. “William Bradford.”

“Do we get to hear more?” Art asked quickly moving beyond Rusty’s private musing.

“My contact threw it out in a very esoteric way – delivered as if I had not even received the name from her. It came as a response to my inquiry about reclusive collectors. Bradford is seemingly very wealthy and perhaps – apparently, even – suspected in such things as I described to her.”

“Good. A genuine lead. I’ll get on it right after lunch,” Rusty said. “We got stuff, too.”

He pointed to Becky with his mac loaded fork as a detour on its way to his mouth.

“Well, Rusty found the name plate of the company that manufactured the lockbox – Fairfax Metal Works in Bayberry Connecticut. That’s the same city where Brinks is headquartered.”

The Brinks part had been offered as her personal aside and prompted Rusty to roll his eyes.

“Interesting,” Milly said.

“There’s more,” Becky went on. “The display case has a hinged panel along the bottom front, which is just the right size to allow the lockbox to be slipped into it – under the cabinet on the floor.”

At that, Rusty commandeered the conversation and explained the several aspects of his theory.

After the complex and convoluted explanation had concluded, Art responded.

“Occam’s Razor, son.”

Rusty cocked his head and furrowed his brow. Art went on to explain.

“It is a law of parsimony, roughly stated, ‘always go with the simplest explanation first’. There seems to be nothing simple about your theory.”

“You got a simpler one?”

“Well, no, I suppose I don’t. But, I suggest we launch a search for one.”

“The St. Bernard sounds like our best starting point, then,” Rusty offered with a nod, which seemed to at least sanction old man Occam’s contention.

“We haven’t been able to locate the lockbox,” Becky said. “I’m thinking the Sheriff probably knows where it is.”

“MTC, Rusty,” Art said.

Milly and Becky looked at each other in confusion.

Rusty smiled over at Art.

“Put the letters into the context of the moment and there is only one possible meaning – Make The Call.”

He did.

Art spoke with Sheriff Westover. He smiled, nodded, thanked the man and hung up.

“You seemed to have received information that tickled you,” Milly said offering her own smile.

“You kids had something very right and something very wrong.”

Rusty twirled his hand.

“There is, in fact, a swinging panel across the front of the bottom of the display case on the left end. However, it was according to the original design and is for the specific purpose of storing the lockbox until it is needed for the return trip. Being kept right there in the heavily guarded room seemed like the best place for it. No unauthorized person would have access to it. It was actually very good detective work, though, kids. Superior powers of observation.”

“Me and Beck – that is, Beck-y and I – the twins with superior powers of observation – will go track down the St. Bernard – William Bradford. All you have is the Vail area,

right.”

“Right,” Milly said, “and that he is a wealthy recluse so it may be very difficult to locate him. Probably hidden behind numerous walls of anonymity.”

Rusty nodded and licked his fork clean.

“Cobbler at three,” Milly announced as a way of suggesting there would be no immediate offering of dessert.

The twins stood and left. Milly refilled the coffees and the two of them sighed in unison. They loved the twins dearly but they could be exhausting.

“The key to all this is in one of two places,” Milly said.

“The lockbox or the envelopes,” Art continued.

Milly nodded and continued.

“Those pasteboard envelopes. I didn’t see them but I’ve had this vision that they might be double-walled. She took a sheet from the always handy yellow pad, folded it long ways and tore it along that fold. Then she folded one of those strips in thirds, which approximated page-shape. Using cellophane tape, she sealed the two long edges leaving the narrower top and bottom open. She demonstrated the two openings by turning it one way and then the other.”

“Ingenious, my dear,” Art said.

He took the unused strip of paper and tore two sections that were small enough to fit inside the mini-envelope Milly had created. He penciled a large ‘X’ across the face of one and handed them Milly. She inserted one into one end and then turned it and inserted the other into the opposite end, handing it all back to Art who added a large ‘M’ to one side of the envelope.

“So, let’s say the ‘real’ document – the one we’ll represent with the ‘X’ – was slipped into the ‘M’ side of the envelope like this. And, the corresponding false one was placed into the unmarked side, like this. Let’s further speculate that the Federal Agent who was present here to transfer them from the lockbox to the display case was told to slip out the documents from the top opening as they lay in the lockbox. Back when they had been loaded they had been positioned so the fakes were facing up. With no knowledge, there was an opening on the bottom the agent dutifully made the transfers, which, in each case, left the original in the other

section of the envelope. The lockbox was closed and stowed under the base of the display case for safe keeping.”

“Then, the originals still had to be removed,” Milly said. “There would only be one person who would have access, you know.”

“The Federal Agent guarding the place over night,” Art said. “Actually, there are three agents who rotate shifts so all three become suspects in that scenario.”

“Several problems, with that, however,” Milly went on. “It’s unlikely that all three Federal Agents would be in cahoots in something like this. Then, how would the documents be removed from the building, one of them almost three feet long? Even rolled up they certainly couldn’t fit into the brief cases that the agents carry. I suppose it’s possible they could have been removed and then handed to somebody out the back door.”

“Except that there are the 24/7 surveillance cameras trained on the display case,” Art added.

“I suppose the tapes from them could be screened for down-time,” Milly continued, thinking out loud. “The lenses could have been blocked for a minute or so and then unblocked after the deed had been finished.”

“Need at least five minutes – more likely ten,” Art said thinking back about the original unboxing operation. “The security monitors are housed in the sheriff’s office next door. I’m sure John will get them screened if we suggest it. There is a twelve-hour night watch – the display closes at eight in the evening and opens at eight the next morning.”

“When, would you think the thief would make his move – early in the week or later?”

“I don’t know how to predict that. What would the parameters be?”

“Well, the time of night would need to be well after the crowds left the street so such activity would not be seen through the front windows.”

“So, say between 2:00 and 4:00 A.M.?”

“Makes sense,” Milly said. “But which day?”

“My bet is on earlier, rather than later. That way if something came up to interfere or delay it, the process could always be tried again later.”

“And this will be night three. Hope it’s not already too late.”

“Of course, this is only one possibility,” Milly cautioned. “We could be way off base.”

“We could ask to have the Federal Agents switched for a new set,” Art said.

“Then we’d perhaps protect the documents, but we’d never uncover the plot or its principal players.”

“I suppose we need to go with what we have, then,” Art said. “As we get more we can tweak our thinking. Let’s see if the sheriff can discretely hide a mini surveillance camera in the room that would be overlooked by the bad guy.”

“I have an idea for that,” Milly said giggling. “We’ll go wash all the glass – to ostensibly get rid of the fingerprints. In the process, we can do the large front window and leave a mini camera up in one corner of it. As long as we’re in there we could also leave one on the baseboard on the front wall. Two might be better than one.”

“Millicent Ann Montague, you have a devious mind.”

“Well, it was devious enough to hook you, my dear.”

“And here all along I’ve thought it was I who conspired to seduce you.”

They talked with the sheriff by phone and set things up. Art would go learn how to install the cameras and, thinking the more distraction the better, the four of them would descend on the City Building at 8:30 that evening to clean up the room. The sheriff would have it arranged. The twins and Art were already known to the agent who would be on duty. Milly was the kind who could ask a teller to please exchange her twenty for three tens and get away with it. She would present no problem.

Milly Cobbled in the kitchen.

Art napped in the living room.

The twins hack . . . that is, worked the websites sniffing out the St. Bernard (not an altogether pleasing image, I suppose.).

Predictably, there could have been a countdown – two fifty-eight, two fifty-nine, three o’clock! The twins came pushing and shoving their way through the back door.

“Smells extraordinary. My guess is apricot,” Rusty

offered.

“And your guess would be correct. You two whip the cream. It’s in the freezer chilling.”

It was their well-established practice and went off like clockwork – most likely an analogy soon to be fully meaningless to the newest generation.

As they enjoyed Milly’s handiwork, the youngsters filled them in on what they had. Rusty began.

“The Bradford guy makes his money from a couple of mines still operating in a major way here in the Rockies and from the money from investments all that allows. The family stopped counting their money when they added the ‘s’ to Billion. Apparently, it is William, in his late sixties – who is actually William the Second – and his son, the Third, mid-thirties, are all that are left to enjoy the money. The sixty-year-old, Second, is the recluse – hasn’t been seen in public for thirty years. The Third is much more visible, but typically in Brazil or on the Rivera or other assorted nude beaches around the world – like I said, much more visible. Apparently when he was younger, he and his father had gained some celebrity by frequenting such places together.”

He giggled himself into putting down his spoon – a seldom witnessed event so long at the bowl in front of him had not yet been licked clean.

“We couldn’t find anything about either one of them relative to art collections or the like. Not sure where that leads us.”

“You two aren’t opposed to following up on mere hunches, are you?” Art asked.

“I figured that was what we had just been doing, so no,” Rusty said having decided to go with all of that rather than the more popular teen term – doh!

“What was the name of that Metal Works company, again?”

“Fairfax Metal Works.”

“See if you can determine who owns it – I mean really owns it assuming there may be holding companies involved.”

“I thought we were going another direction,” Milly said clearly puzzled.

“Just nailing down other possible options, dear.”

Rusty grinned turning toward Milly.

“Either ‘other options’ or a way to get us out of his hair so he can have his way with you in private.”

“You found me out, son. I really do suddenly have this uncontrollable urge to take her aside and engage her in a passionate, mid-afternoon session of scrabble.”

“I’d apologize for my brother’s despicable behavior, but if I started doing that I wouldn’t have any time left to do anything else.”

* * *

At five o’clock the twins entered the book store.

“So this is where you guys are,” Rusty offered as if exasperated with them.

Art and Milly looked at each other and then at Ted. They all nodded and Art spoke.

“I believe it is now unanimous. This is where we are.”

“We been looking all over for you.”

“Yes. All over,” Becky explained sarcastically, still irritated with her brother. “At your place and here. Such an imposition!”

“What is it you need,” Milly asked.

“Got stuff you’ll never believe,” Rusty said unfolding a yellow sheet that had ridden that far in his rear pocket.

“Well, if we won’t believe you, then . . . “

It had been Art’s attempt to poke some fun at the boy. It was ignored.

“The Metal Works company is, like you figured, owned by another company, Winston Conglomerate. Winston is controlled by Davidson Diversified and that company is owned by our own beloved little ratfink, the St. Bernard.”

“Now we just need to find the first domino,” Art said.

“Domino?” Rusty asked.

The others nodded as if to say, ‘What the kid said’.

“You know. Set up a line of dominos and then tip that first one.”

“And the rest fall relatively effortlessly,” Rusty said finishing the description. “So, where do we look for that number one domino?”

“I suddenly have a pretty good idea. When the display closes tonight we need to get in there and examine that

lockbox. Milly and I had another plan in mind but I'm convinced now that the secret resides in the lockbox – that first domino."

"Tell us more," Becky asked.

"I've given you all I have. You know I'm not big on coincidences. Follow the elements: In response to Milly's query about a possible reclusive collector with no legal scruples, her Federal Agent contact immediately provides the name of the wealthy loner, William Bradford, who lives close by, and a chain of companies is discovered with Bradford on one end and the Metal Works company that built our lockbox on the other."

"And," Rusty added, "the fake documents right here in our City Building – that's what started it all."

"So, we're really going into this evening blind, is that the plan," Milly asked taking Art's arm.

"I'm glad I have made myself clear on that point."

"We've done well with no more than that before," Rusty said, seemingly energized at the thought of having absolutely no idea what might develop.

"How about if you guys pitch in and help Ted get this place straightened up, shelves restocked for tomorrow and things like that. Order in a pizza while I go have a chat with Sheriff Westover about this evening. And, keep the food in the back room. Don't want the books reeking of peperone."

"I don't suppose that was really a question – the 'how about if' part," Rusty asked.

Ted shoved a broom in his hands and pointed to the floor.

"Interesting how answers sometimes arrive without a word being spoken," Rusty said grinning.

Becky moved to the round table of books and began straightening them. Milly started working the merchandise on the shelves behind the counter. Somewhat humorously, Art handed Ted the dustpan before exiting through the front door.

At the outset of the conversation, the Sheriff related that they had gone through the surveillance tapes and hadn't found any lapses like would have been necessary to implement Milly's idea about the Agents' involvement. Then, Art presented what he had, and laid it on the line with the

sheriff.

“I’ll tell you, John, I don’t know the how of it but I do know that answer has to lie in that lockbox. What do you remember about it?”

“Well, let’s see. A steel case – sides, top and bottom. The material looked to be nearly half an inch thick so it is very heavy. The top is hinged across the back of the long dimension – about three feet I suppose. The sides are split between being parts of the top and bottom – what, maybe two and a half inches as the lip around the lid and four or four and a half as a part of the bottom where the documents were stored?”

Art nodded his general agreement.

The sheriff continued.

“I’m not sure what else to add. There is a waterproofing gasket that is attached around the top edge of the bottom pieces. And the inside is covered in cloth – black cloth like the inside of a suitcase. It may cover and secure some kind of padding – I don’t know that for sure.”

“Can you describe the outside in any more detail?” Art asked.

“Not really. That was never the focus. They brought in, set it on the floor and the Agent opened it by working the two dials and lifting the lid by the knob on the front lip of the top. I guess to say the outside was steel is about all I have. Very plain Jane – strictly utilitarian – in appearance.”

“Okay, then. We’ll meet you at the City Building at 8:30.”

Art returned to the bookstore. The place looked surprisingly better. The empty spaces on the shelves suggested that a large amount of merchandise had been sold. Perhaps Rusty was right. Next year the orders would need to be increased. He hated to disappoint the tourists by being out of what they wanted.

The pizza was very good. The company was exceptional. The impatience surrounding the lockbox had spread far beyond Rusty.

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SECTION FOUR

It was a different Agent – Michaels – on duty that evening. He was cooperative in every way, although, like the others, he remained indifferent and kept to himself except when addressed. Rusty and the Sheriff brought a sturdy, wooden, library table out from one of the offices at the rear of the building. The lockbox would be placed on it for ease of examination.

Before that was done, Art had a question for the Agent.

“Were there any specific instructions provided to you agents about handling the lockbox?”

“Just one, sir. It was only to be opened and closed twice while here – originally when the documents were removed and then the second time when they were placed back inside for the return trip. And it was only to be relocked – the dials twirled – when ready to be loaded back onto the security truck.”

“And from whom did those instructions come?”

“I assume from our superiors. I have hard copy of the memo in my briefcase. I can check.”

“If you will, please.”

A moment later he had the memo in hand and corrected himself.

“It seems to have come from the manufacturer – a company named Fairfax Metal Works. Signed by Mildred B. Purcell, the liaison officer, whatever that may mean. Do I need to check with my line of authority?”

Art deferred to the Sheriff.

“Not at this time. It was just a point of interest.”

In a quiet aside, Art asked Rusty to check out the Purcell women at once if he could. The boy put his fingers to work on his phone. Art continued.

“The box is about to be opened for the second time so do as you need to do in terms of that line of authority,” Art said

to the Agent.

“The memo only seems to refer to the Federal Agents, Sir. I have to assume this is a big deal or you wouldn’t be expending so much energy relative to it.”

“Energy?”

“Dave, the agent that was here the last time you came in after hours, filled me in on your – well – strange behavior. What is okay with the sheriff will be okay with me – short of shredding the documents, I suppose.”

“Thank you,” Art said. “And by the way, the four of us, excluding the Sheriff, are well known around these parts for our strange behavior. Dave’s description was probably right on.”

A long moment of silence followed the placement of the closed box on the table. They looked it over – top, sides, back and front. On the top was a large decal that read, ‘THIS SIDE UP AT ALL TIMES’. Rusty pointed at it and the others nodded. Art attempted to turn the knob used to raise the lid. It would not turn or slide or pull out or push in. Rusty examined the hinge across the rear, pronouncing it sound. Milly and Becky agreed that aesthetic considerations had obviously not played any part in its design.

Art looked at the Sheriff.

“Let’s get this thing opened up, John.”

Together they raised it from the front. It had straps inside at both sides that kept it from flopping backwards when open – holding it back at a stable ten-degree angle.

“Looks to be significant padding on the bottom,” Art said pointing. “The sides are six inches tall on the outside and nor more than four on the inside.”

Rusty poked the bottom with his finger.

“Hardest padding I’ve ever felt.”

Art and the sheriff duplicated the boy’s examination, nodding.

“Perhaps not padding but fire resistant material, then,” the sheriff added.

“None on the sides or top. That make any sense?” Rusty continued.

The sheriff shrugged and furrowed his brow.

“A false bottom?” Milly asked moving closer for a better

look.

“If it is, it is perfectly concealed,” Art said leaning in close to take another look. He felt around the entire outer boundary and shook his head.

He stood back looking back and forth between the Agent and the box. He began nodding his head.

“You are expecting strange, Agent Michaels. I’m about to give you strange.”

Art tossed a dime into the case.

“Assume that represents the documents from here, loaded and ready for their return trip. Then he hitched his head toward the sheriff who moved into position to help lower the heavy lid.

“That’s lid closing number two here – actually number three in total if we include the closing at the Federal Agency of origin. So, when we open it up, it will show us what the Agency would find when it’s opened back there in a few days.”

It was opened. The dime was revealed. Nobody seemed impressed.

Art closed the box.

“That was closing number three here, four in total.”

He raised his index finger and paused a moment – for all of his level headedness, Art did have a dramatic flair.

“Now, I, *Arthur dini*, the World-renowned magician, direct your attention to the contents of this lockbox.”

They opened the lid.

“Oh, my?” said Milly.

“I don’t believe it,” said Becky.

“I see it but you got some major explaining to do, Art,” said Rusty.

The Agent and the Sheriff looked at each other meeting dropped jaw with dropped jaw. There in the bottom were ten documents inside ten envelopes. They all assumed they were the originals and awaited Art’s explanation.

“Two things have been teasing my gray matter,” art said: “Milly’s false bottom – well you understand my reference – and the Agents being restricted to only two openings and closings. That second thing seemed particularly odd. I had to wonder how such a counting or sequence might play a role in all of this. Here is what I imagined.

“When the original documents were placed in the case at the Agency, the second, hidden, compartment, which already carried the fakes, had previously been secured into the lid. The original documents were placed into and carried in the bottom compartment, which it was assumed was the only compartment. The box was closed for the first time. When closed that first time, some mechanism released the second compartment from the lid and it took its place covering the lower section so completely and snugly we couldn’t detect its existence. When opened here, it naturally seemed to be the bottom section that was revealed. It was what would just naturally be expected. Nobody had any reason to suspect otherwise. The fake documents were unloaded and the box was closed for the second time (the first time here in relation to the Agent’s memo).

Now, let’s pretend it is time to load the documents for their return trip. The lid is opened as we did a few moments ago. The top compartment, still visible in the bottom section, remains empty, ready to receive the documents – the fakes that have been on display here. They are put inside and the lid is closed for the third time (the second and final time allowed, here) and locked for the trip in the Brinks Truck.

“Now, move ahead to the other end of the trip – back at the Federal Agency that made the loan of them to us. The box is opened for the fourth time and the upper compartment is still sitting inside the lower compartment, presenting the fake documents to be retrieved – the dime if you will remember. With no reason to suspect they are not the originals, they are given no more than a cursory once over, just to note all ten titles have, in fact, been received. The inventory is certified.

“The box is closed and probably relocked, though that is of no real importance I’d guess. The Brinks truck returns the lockbox to the Fairfax Metal Works – the owners and leasers of the box. Somebody there then clandestinely opens the box for the fifth time, which somehow triggers a mechanism that catches the compartment that belongs in the lid – by then empty – and secures it up there, revealing the original documents still in the compartment below – right where they had been all along. He retrieves them and puts them into the

pipeline to the end buyer – St. Bernard . . . I mean William Bradford, I assume. I also imagine at that point the bad guy is able to quickly and easily remove and destroy the extra compartment that had been built into the lid, returning the lockbox to nothing other than a regular if oddly sized lockbox.”

“Got stuff, here, Art. Guess what the ‘B’ stands for in Mildred B. Purcell. It’s Bradford and she’s ol’ St. Bernard’s sister.”

“That just might represent a trustworthy insider,” Art said.

“What a great set-up,” Rusty said. “When or if the fakes would eventually be discovered, nobody can be found to be at fault. Nobody at the Federal Agency could be shown to have been a part in it; nobody in the Brinks organization could be put at fault; and nobody here or any of the Federal Agents here could be guilty because of the surveillance cameras.”

“And, in the end,” Milly said, “there would be no physical means for tracing the switch since the lockbox would have been reconfigured to its benign design.”

“Now, about those dominoes, Art,” Rusty said, really asking a question.

“We’re looking at domino number one right here, the box. You can bet that Mildred B. Purcell is the second domino back at the Metal Works and will be ready to teeter the minute she is presented with our scenario and is accused of complicity. And that will tumble every last one of them along whatever convoluted path it becomes that will lead directly to the Bradfords’ front door. I assume it involves the father and son – the younger always being the visible front man – so both will be implicated.”

“I wonder what billionaire’s do in prison.” Rusty asked, mostly seriously.

“Well, they probably keep their clothes on, for one thing!”

It had been Agent Michaels’ comment, offering what may well have been the first ear-to-ear grin he had ever allowed during his entire career.

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Case # 4: Death by Code **An Art and Milly Montague Mystery**

SECTION ONE

It was Saturday evening in Dingle Dell. Art and Milly were in their living room sitting on the couch together enjoying popcorn and watching the Lawrence Welk show. The twins, Rusty and Becky, were sitting on the floor enjoying popcorn and watching Art and Milly, fully unable to comprehend how they could tolerate, let alone apparently enjoy that dreadful music that had melody and harmony and a regular discernible beat. And then, of course, there were the singers who insisted on pronouncing the lyrics so the words could be so easily understood. It was a mystery to their young beings. Where was the challenge?

There was a knock at the back door – no one ever used the front door at Art and Milly's. Rusty jumped to his feet and went to answer it.

"Hey, Sheriff Westover," the others heard him say. "You bring treats in the sack?"

"Afraid not."

"We're all in the living room watching the 400th rerun of Lawrence Welk's tribute to Russ Morgan or Irving Berlin or Norman Vincent Peale or somebody."

They entered the living room. Art lowered the volume on the TV.

"Unexpected pleasure, John," he said offering his hand from his sitting position. "If it's social have a seat and watch Bobby and Barbara trip the light fantastic. If it's business, let

us turn off the sound.”

“Business, I guess.”

Milly handled the remote and the room became quiet, visited only by the fickle flashes of colors careening here and there around the room.

“A new case, I hope,” Rusty interjected before the fact.

“A new case, alright. I’m reluctant to bother you folks with it, but I need the best help I can get on this one. It involves me – my very life, perhaps.”

They others looked at each other knowing they were in before the sentence had been finished.

“You know we’re here for you,” Milly said.

“Yeah. Give!” Rusty said slipping back onto the floor beside Becky and indicating a chair to the man with his hand.

The sheriff sat and placed the brown paper bag he was carrying on the floor between his feet. He removed a small wooden box. It was eight-inches square. He handed it to Art who spoke aloud about it as he looked it over.

“One eighth inch basswood. A soft wood. Unfinished. Looks to be a lid that slides into grooves on three sides a quarter of an inch from the top. Very well made. Sides and bottom solid. Way too heavy to be empty.”

“Right on so far,” the sheriff said. “Let the kids open it.”

Rusty made the move and relieved Art of the box, clearly surprised at its weight. He held it while Becky slid out the lid.

“Another box inside.”

He looked up at the sheriff who began his explanation.

“A set of ten nested boxes, all similar in design and appearance except for size.”

Rusty wanted to point out that if there were ten boxes total, only nine of them were actually nested, but thought better of it at that moment.

“I found it sitting on the step outside my office when I was leaving about an hour ago. They were in this brown sack – from an IGA. There was also this sheet of paper.”

He removed it from his inside coat pocket, unfolded it and handed it to Art while the twins continued to un-nest the boxes and replace the lid in each.

“You really have to see it to understand it – well,

understand is certainly not the right term – to see what we have, might be better.”

The twins stood and moved to the couch beside Art and Milly. Across the top in large hand printed letters it said, “Death to you some night real soon.” Below that it bore four more hand printed lines, arranged as if a poem – verse, perhaps. Milly read it aloud.

1 is first and 10 is last
Cereal is oddly cast
By 8 slash ate like shiv the ‘cay’
And spared of death, U or me.
Rusty saw things he felt needed pointing out.

“The first two lines rhyme like it was a poem. The second two don’t like it isn’t. Either the writer’s English is atrocious or it is a cleverly crafted . . . something or other.”

“I’ll put on coffee,” Milly said, immediately understanding they were in for a late night.

“Shed that jacket, John,” Art said confirming the arduous task ahead.

“I have a call I have to take over toward Marble. I’ll be back as soon as I can. I’ll not call or drop back if it’s after midnight.”

“If we close up shop before that, Rusty will give you a call, Okay?”

“An even better plan. I hate to abandon ship but duty is duty, you understand.”

Art walked with him to the back door and watched him across the lawn and into his squad car. They had been good friends for many years.

Back inside, they gathered around the kitchen table. It was where they always did their best thinking as a group.

“Better call your Uncle Ted and let him know you’ll be here a while,” Milly said.

Rusty nodded and handed his phone to Becky then proceeded to pour two glasses of milk and rescue the cookie jar from beside the sink. She made the call.

“The verse presents a hidden message, of course, Art began. I tend to believe it is the second option that Rusty suggested – a cleverly crafted something or other.”

“At some point, we will need to find the connection

between the verse or message with the boxes,” Milly said.

“Bring the boxes out here to the table, will you kids?”

The collection of various sized cubes soon occupied a large portion of the round table top. Becky arranged them in order of size. They each picked one up and began examining it in a random, aimless sort of way.

“Mine has some letters printed on the underside of the lid,” Rusty said holding it up for the others to see.

They all examined the lids on their boxes and came away with the same finding – a row of letters – on two there were numerals and on one symbols such a plus sign and asterisk.

“What are you doing?” Becky asked addressing the question to her brother.

“I’m sniffing the insides of the boxes to see if I can detect the smell of some kind of cereal. I can’t. It was the only obvious clue, which, upon investigation, of course, seems to have not been an obvious clue.”

“Let’s begin with the first line of the verse,” Art suggested. “Since there are ten boxes I think it may be safe to assume the numeral ‘1’ refers to either the largest or the smallest box and the numeral ‘10’ to the other.”

“Ah, like setting up a series according to size,” Becky said making sure she understood.

“My bet is on the smallest one being ten since it is the last one to be opened,” Milly said.

The others nodded.

“Cereal is oddly cast,” Art read thoughtfully. “Oddly cast means what?”

“Well, cast is like a dramatic group that puts on a play,” Milly said. “Or it is also used like, ‘They cast Jake in the part of the old man.’”

“Or an outcast or they cast off their old coats,” Becky added.

“Or cast the fishing line,” Rusty said.

“So ‘oddly cast’ might mean there was something unusual about the casting or the assigning of the role or part of the process of getting rid of,” Art said going with the ideas. “And what is it that ‘oddly cast’ refers to?”

“The cereal,” Rusty said. “Some odd kind of cereal –

like honey-possum crunch? I'm lost."

"Maybe not the variety of the edible cereal with a 'c'," Milly said, "but using that oddly spelled word in place of the intended word, 'serial' with the 's'."

"Homophones," Rusty said nodding. "Words pronounced alike although spelled differently. Cereal and serial. Nice catch, Milly."

"Serial makes sense in light of what we made of the first line," Becky said. "Establishing some sort of order or series – one through ten."

The others nodded.

"It also establishes that the actual words used or presented in the verse may not obviously hold the meaning intended by the writer – not straight forward," Art said, "but we still don't have enough to interpret those first two lines accurately, I'm betting."

"Let's see what the rest of it has to offer," Rusty said.

Art read the third line.

"By 8 slash ate, like shiv the 'Cay'."

Rusty connected the possible gore.

"A shiv is like a narrow knife often used to kill people in prison and slash seems connected with that idea – slash open the flesh. Convicts often fashion them out of toothbrushes. Sharpened to a point they can penetrate six inches into a body."

"So, a shiv would more typically be used for stabbing rather than slashing," Art said, partly as a question.

"I guess so. Doing one of those acts doesn't rule out also doing the other, though," Rusty came back.

Art nodded. The women shivered. (No . . . well yes, pun intended.)

"Let's move on," Milly suggested. "Shiv in 'Cay'. And notice two things about the word cay – it is set off by apostrophes and it does not really rhyme with the final word in the final line – me. Being set off like that usually means some special meaning or turn to the word."

"Suppose the writer meant clay, instead?" Rusty asked. "Makes more sense a shiv might be used to penetrate clay than cay. "What the heck is a cay anyway?"

"I learned about them in social studies last year while

we were studying the Bahamas,” Becky began. “They are low islands – the highest points are often only a few feet above sea level. The word is often pronounced ‘key’ and in fact the ‘cay’s off southern Florida are actually called ‘The Keys’.”

“What a fascinating association, Becky,” Art said. “And, the pronunciation, ‘key’, does rhyme with the word ‘me’ in the final line – like an added clue.”

“So, stab the key?” Rusty said. It came out as a question. “How can that make any sense?”

Milly thought out loud.

“Instead of something to be done to the key – stab it – the word shiv might refer to some action to take with the key – a use, like push the key or polish the key or some such thing. What else could shiv mean if we look at it as a different part of speech?”

Rusty was off and running with the idea.

“Shiv is a noun. But, if used like, “Shiv the guy, Lefty”, it becomes a verb.”

Becky took over.

“And, if shiv is a substitute for some other word – like what used to be ‘good’ is now called ‘bad’ in some colloquial speech – it certainly could mean something like ‘stab’ – a verb.”

“Here’s one for you, Rusty,” Art said. “How might a highly-educated snob word the phrase, “Shiv the guy.”

Rusty thought for just a moment, understanding Art was referring to the way he sometimes took language to ridiculous ends to make a point.

“How about, ‘Insert the slender pointed weapon well into the flesh of our adversary.’”

It produced smiles, and helped switch the track on which their thoughts had been riding.

“So, ‘shiv the cay’ could become something like, ‘insert the key’. Is that where you’re so deviously leading us, Art.”

“Devious? Me. Never. And don’t hog the cookies, son.”

Rusty slid the jar in his direction with a grin.

“You mean, “Will you please refrain from commandeering the entire stock of tollhouse delights, in which the entire company, here, also takes extreme pleasure?”

“Now that you’ve got him started he’ll never quit, you know that, Art,” Becky said crossing her arms and putting on a pout.

Rusty expanded his grin and with great drama inserted one more cookie into his mouth.

“Recess is over, folks,” Milly said. “Back to line number four.”

Again, it was Art who read it.

“And spared of death, U or me.

“Well, the word ‘and’ at the beginning connects what follows with what has come before,” Milly pointed out. “So, something about all that above seems to allow for somebody’s death to be spared – either the Sheriff’s or the writer’s.”

“Like a gruesome game,” Becky said. “If you figure this out right you live and I die but if you don’t figure it out right, I live and you die.”

“And,” Art said, extending the idea, “clearly the writer believes it will be the sheriff who will die. It suggests a huge ego; somebody who truly believes he is superior intellectually – perhaps in every way – to John.”

“So, sure that he is betting his life on John’s what . . . ignorance?” Becky came back.

“It sure seems that way,” Milly said.

“Why the use of the ‘U’ instead of spelling out the word, ‘you’?” Rusty asked.

“Could just be part of his word game,” Becky said.

Art also had some thoughts.

“It’s only a guess of course, but I’d say it may have been used to play down the importance of or demean his adversary – John. Suggesting he is not worthy of a real word.”

“I’m thinking it’s not John but the Sheriff who is seen as this person’s adversary, if you get the distinction,” Rusty said.

“A very good and probably important observation. It may well be somebody that John as the Sheriff, did wrong in the eyes of the writer at least.”

“Are we saying the writer is the one the sheriff hurt or that the writer is somebody who has taken up the cause of the so-called wronged individual?” Becky asked needing clarification.

“An excellent question,” Art said. “That second

possibility hadn't entered my head yet."

"And, it multiplies the possible bad guys by about a billion," Rusty said trying to put it into a new, overwhelming perspective. He had a tendency to think in overwhelming.

Art picked up the paper with the verse.

"How about if we begin by considering the first two lines as one distinct message and the last two as a distinctly separate message?"

"I was going to suggest that same thing," Milly said. "The first part seems more like a hint about deciphering the message and the second part more like the means for avoiding the intended outcome – the death of Sheriff Westover."

"I don't know about your older, grayer, heads, but my younger, reddish-brown, boy head is swirling. How about we set that aside and think about what part the boxes play in all of this. I'm thinking it must be important because I doubt if you can just go out and easily find a set of nested boxes like this. The bad guy either built them or had them specially made."

"All good points," Milly said. "I do wonder if something about boxes plays a part in this. It seems a cumbersome way of providing a clue or set of clues unless it held some pretty significant meaning."

"Okay, guys, enough speculation," Rusty said. "Here's a concrete step we can take. Let's arrange the lids, undersides up, in order – serial order – from biggest to smallest and begin thinking about the line of letters and such on each one."

"Excellent. What time is it?" Art asked.

Going on ten," Rusty said looking at his phone – a concept Art and Milly were clearly never going to fully absorb. "I vote for pizza. You guys can even choose what kind."

"How generous of you," Art said. "And are you offering to pay?"

"I would, but it clearly gives you such pleasure to provide those sorts of delicacies for us that I just couldn't bring myself to deprive you in that way."

"See! I told you that you had opened a Pandora's Box," Becky said.

The choices were negotiated and Rusty made the call.

Milly and Becky arranged the lids while Art refilled the elders' coffee mugs.

"To the yellow pad, my dear," Milly said handing it to Becky.

Becky had readily accepted the role of scribe, since Milly's writing was too slow, Art's was illegible, and Rusty's was, well, Rusty's.

"Number lines 1 through 10 down the page," Art suggested. "Which are we going to call number 1?"

"I say go like Milly suggested," Rusty said. "1 the big one and 10 the littlest one."

While Becky copied the information from the lids, the others spoke about the sheriff, briefly remembering some of the cases they had worked together and what fine people he and his wife were. They clearly feared for his safety and privately pledged to do their best to get to the bottom of whatever was going on.

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SECTION TWO

Presently the pizza was delivered – half sausage for Art and Rusty, a quarter peperone for Becky and a quarter pineapple/bacon for Milly. The list had been completed.

- 1= ROOSTERS
- 2= STURUPS
- 3= ELEMENTERY
- 4= 7 2 0 1 4 6 3 2 2
- 5= @ # \$ % + ? *
- 6= 0 X 7 7 7 7, = 0
- 7= ELEMENTS
- 8= CATCHESIT
- 9= THROWSTOME
- 10= THROWSTOME

Rusty had picked up the lids, and cleared them and the boxes from the table making room for the pizza and the yellow pad, which Becky had turned so the others could read what was on it.

“Seems to define ‘gibberish,’” Rusty said never reluctant to state the obvious.

“It will only be gibberish until we determine what it means,” Art pointed out.

They each read down the list of entries silently.

Stirrups is misspelled, Becky offered, then grew silent.

Milly began speculating.

“It could be a letter counting code – use every second or fourth or tenth letter. It was popular during the Second World War. Or, it could be a synonym code, in which each word must be translated into its synonym for the message to make sense.”

“The last two entries are identical,” Rusty pointed out. “They could be read as the three words, ‘throws to me’, or the two words, ‘throw stome’. I should know the word stome, but forget.”

Becky took great pleasure in supplying the information.

"In microbiology, a stome or stoma is a mouth-like organ, which sometimes comprises the majority of an organism. The picture beside the word in the dictionary is Rusty."

She giggled as did the others. Rusty took it in good humor but everybody knew he had stowed it away for pay back at the proper moment.

"Let's give the every few letters approach a try," Art suggested.

"How," Becky asked.

"Look at ROOSTERS. Every other letter – assuming you begin with the first one – would produce r o t, which could be a word. That would leave just the R from among the remaining e, r, s, which doesn't make any immediate sense. If we continue to move on from word to word it becomes r s u s l m n a y – taking it through the third word, ELEMENTARY. I see two words there: 'us' and 'nay' but since there are so many extraneous, unused letters I'd vote against the every other letter system."

"Let me give every three a try," Rusty said.

"r s r t u p l e a"

"It gives us 'up' or 'plea' but like in the other approach there are lots of unused letters."

"Okay, my turn, Becky said. "Every fourth letter."

"r t s u l n y"

"That's a big nada, also," Rusty pointed out. Plus, once we get into the next line it is all numbers, which are not used in spelling if I recall things correctly."

Art spoke.

"Looking at just the first words it's obvious that neither every fifth or sixth letter will make any kind of sense either."

"So, the letter sequence approach doesn't work," Milly said. "How about the synonym or antonym approach?"

They each offered possibilities and Becky took them down.

Rooster could = chicken or male and antonyms could be hen or female

Stirrups isn't a word but could mean, stirrups.

It might mean straps, loops, rings, footing. Not sure

about opposites.

Elementary = easy, beginning, basic, simple, fundamental.

Its antonyms could be hard, end, complicated, complex.

Who knows about the line of numbers or symbols?

“The sixth line suggests something interesting,” Art said. “It seems to be an equation or a completed math problem: Zero times 7777 equals 0.”

“That would be correct, right?” Rusty said. “Anything times zero is zero.”

“It is correct but fully esoteric,” Milly said.

Rusty grabbed that one.

“Esoteric: Obscure, mysterious, cryptic.”

“Imagine that,” Art offered, smiling, “A coded message being cryptic.”

“These men of ours are so easily sidetracked, have you noticed that?” Milly offered as an aside to Becky.”

“Sometimes it can be used to our advantage, you understand.”

Milly nodded. The ‘men’ waited patiently, arms folded across their chests, for their ‘women’ to come back from being sidetracked. The irony escaped no one’s attention.

Art read on down the list.

“ ‘Elements’, ‘catches it’, and the two ‘throws to me’ – I like the three word interpretation of those lines since they hold together and make more sense. It could be one is three word and the other is two, however.”

“So where does that leave us?” Rusty asked.

“Right about where we were when we started, I suppose,” Art said, “except for having our attention called to the interesting photo which graces the dictionary pages.”

“At least that provides me with celebrity the rest of you don’t have.”

“Or notoriety,” Milly said indicating the opposite of Rusty’s contention.

“You know,” Rusty began, “Boys my age never win. Just look at the sitcoms on TV. We are always portrayed as the inept, awkward, disgusting fools of the species.”

“Sometimes the truth can be ugly,” Becky said.

“It’s late and the conversation has deteriorated beyond

the place of being productive,” Art said. “Let’s wrap it up for the night and begin at breakfast in the morning. Call John and let him know the plan, Rusty.”

Milly was immediately asleep as was her life-long style. Art relived the situation a time or two before accepting the arms of Morpheus, himself. Becky spent a few minutes filling Ted in on the new case. He always appeared to be listening and smiled or nodded at most of the right places. She was also soon asleep. Rusty only had two states of consciousness – fully awake and fully asleep. The latter typically overcame him within seconds of his head hitting the pillow. It is doubtful John Westover or his wife slept well that night. Art had wondered about the villain in it all. If he weren’t sleeping well it was undoubtedly due to his excitement and anticipation of victory rather than from guilt or anxiety.

* * *

It was a melon, patty sausage, and Dutch toast breakfast. Dutch toast was like its French kin but had a little flour, baking soda, salt and sugar added to the eggs. It bulked up the coating and delivered pieces substantial enough to need a knife and fork (or just pick it up and dunk it in syrup like somebody we know might do!).

With the dishes cleared away – it was the men’s turn to clean them up – they turned their focus back to the mystery at hand. The sheriff had told Rusty when he called him the night before that the problem in Marble was going to take at least one more day and asked that he be kept up to date on their progress. A team from his office was also working on it, but he was clearly putting his stock in his friends from the Dell.

“Here’s what I think we have, so far,” Art began. “We have pretty well established that a sequence of some sort plays an important role. We further agree that it most likely has to do with the order, by size, of the nested boxes. The only relevant feature of the boxes seems to be the line of information printed on the underside of each lid. Since that could have been provided on any sheet of paper, we think the concept of the box or boxes must also be important.

“Last night we mostly skipped over the first half of the third line – ‘By 8 slash ate like . . .’ having focused on the cay/key and shiv concepts. I think we have come to believe

that references the necessity of placing a key into some unknown lock. We know the writer plays fast and loose with spelling, definitions, references, and such. It may merely be a clever way of presentation or it may reflect some kind of thinking disorder – brain or mental disorder.”

“I’ve been playing with that slash thing and it could be this,” Rusty said.

He took a new sheet from the yellow pad and wrote it out – 8 / 8.

“Like the date – August, eighth?” Milly asked really stating it as a suggestion.

“Or, Rusty continued, eight of eight, which might take us back to the serial thing. It doesn’t help in a letter sequence substitution. You get, s e r 3 ? = t s s o. It makes no immediate sense anyway.”

“I was wondering if we should have begun with the first letter in each sequence last night or the number of the letter,” Becky said. “Rusty just used the second way – counting to the 8th letter first. Using the way we did it last night, it would come out with a different set. Just now I re-did the ones from last night using Rusty’s approach, but nothing seemed to show up that way either.”

“Let’s go back to the beginning,” Milly suggested. “What is the first sequence of significance we met that we can be sure of?”

“The box sizes,” Rusty said.

“That’s right. I think that’s where the solution is going to be.”

Art nodded and offered some information.

“Interesting. There were two codes used by spies during the Civil War that used pages in books. If we consider each lid as a page it could be similar. In both codes, many letters or words were underlined on a number of pages. One code used the first letter that was underlined on each page – or the fifth or tenth or what have you. The other, harder to crack code, is known as a progressive sequence. The letter of interest changed places from page to page. A simple example would be on page one it would be the first letter found underlined. On the second page, it would be the second. On the third, the third, and so on.”

“Let’s give them a try,” Rusty said repositioning the yellow pad back in front of his sister.

“I see an immediate problem with the first approach,” Art said. “None of the letters or symbols are underlined on the lids.”

“So, scratch method one,” Rusty said. “We can still make method two work.”

“How so?” Milly asked.

“Do it the simple way Art illustrated. Lid one letter one. Lid two letter two and so on.”

Becky began making the underlines on the sheet from the night before.

“R from ‘rooster’, T from ‘stirrups’, E from ‘elementary’, the numeral 1 from the number sequence, the + sign from the symbol sequence, the seven from the math problem, the T from ‘elements’, the I from ‘catches it’, the M from the first ‘throws to me’ and finally the E from the second ‘throws to me’.”

“What do we have?”

Becky turned the pad so they could see it. Rusty read out loud what she had copied there.

“R T E 1 + 7 T I M E.”

“Remember old Occam’s razor?” Art said. “The simplest interpretation is often the best.”

“Rusty and Becky nodded in unison. Becky spoke.

“RTE is an abbreviation for Route, like a road. One is a number meaning a single unit. The plus could mean to ADD or it could mean AND. Seven, most obviously – most Occam-like – would mean seven units, and T-I-M-E spells the word TIME.”

“Route one and seven time,” Rusty said his brow reflecting his puzzlement.

“Go back and look carefully at the math line,” Art said. “What have we been missing?”

“Ah! The comma after the last seven. That sure clears it up, Art!”

“Did I just sense sarcasm in your tone, young man?”

“Sorry. It just seems like every time we think we have something going here it all falls apart.”

“Maybe not,” Becky said, “if we keep that comma with

the seven, like they are a unit. It separates the first part of the line from the word, Time.”

“Very good,” Art said. “It could be like two clues for price of one row of math.”

“What scares me,” Rusty said, “is that I believe I understood that, Art.”

“Let’s think about that one plus seven,” Art went on. “I see three immediate possibilities; add one and seven and get eight – route eight – keep the one and seven side by side and get seventeen – or stick with it like it is stated and get route one and seven.”

“There’s a place south of here just off of the highway between here and Marble that has a convergence of the two county routes, One and Seven. I’m sure I’m right. Let me pull up a local map here on my phone.”

Art knew his was right but let it play out. A moment later they were passing around the phone, which showed just what Rusty had remembered.

“I’ve ridden down in that area on my bike with my friends. Several home – what do you call them – home-manufacturing places and business sit right there. There’s a potter, a memorabilia shop and a doll maker for sure – maybe a picture frame maker, also. Others I can’t remember right off.”

“Okay,” Art said nodding. “Let’s set that aside as a piece of information. Eventually these individual bits should begin fitting together in some way. Back to the word, ‘time’. Brain storm. Anything?”

“Like only so much TIME left before the sheriff gets wacked.”

That had been Rusty’s offering (but the reader understood that).

Milly had a thought.

“If 8 / 8 is a date, that is a point in TIME in a manner of speaking. Don’t know where to go with it.”

“Well, if that’s a deadline of some kind, we’ve got to get our butts in motion,” Rusty said. “Today is August sixth. The eighth isn’t far away.”

The others acknowledged the possibility.

“If it means the eighth of a set of eight, like Rusty

suggested,” Art said moving on, “What might that mean? Where is there a set of eight somethings?”

“There are eight boxes – plus two,” Becky offered. “I know it would fit 8 / 10 better.”

“Lids six and seven both have eight elements in them, if we discount the comma on number six. The eighth in each sequence would be zero in six and S in seven. I don’t see that getting us any place.”

“I agree,” Milly said, “But, like Art said, put it in the growing stack of bits and pieces.”

“We’re doing fine here,” Art said. “Gathering lots of possibilities. That’s our starting point. Let’s move on.”

“I’m bothered by that cay/key thing,” Becky said. “We are thinking it means a physical key that can be slipped – shived – into a lock or some such thing. What if means, ‘the key to the puzzle’, instead?”

“Interesting. Very interesting, actually since we have no physical key with which to work,” Art said. “The sheriff didn’t mention having been given a key. We certainly haven’t found one in the boxes. I must admit I figured there would be something of importance in the smallest box. No idea what, but it would have been an ideal place to hide something like a key.”

“Maybe we haven’t found a key because we really haven’t looked for a key,” Rusty said.

The others stared blankly – though patiently – at each other waiting for the boy to explain.

He went to kitchen counter where Milly had re-nested the boxes – lidless – the night before, and brought them to the table. He separated them, shaking each one during the process.

“Although I have twelve years to look back on in which I have seldom had any clue what you were doing – nor did I typically care – this time I will ask: What are you doing, Rusty? We already know they are empty.”

As he finished with the smallest one his brow furrowed and he cocked his head.

“Heft this one guys.”

He handed it to Art. Each in turn, around the circle, did his or her version of a heft.

“Not sure what you’re getting at, son,” Art said. “Tell us more.”

“It seems to me that smallest one weighs more than it should.”

“Now, I see what you’re getting at and I tend to agree.”

Rusty was already into a reexamination. He took the pen from Becky and used it to get a rough measurement of the depth – outside and then the inside. He nodded.

“That’s that, folks.”

At first it appeared to be his full and sufficient explanation. Happily, it wasn’t.

“Let me get several pictures first. Then I’m going to show you that it has a double bottom – the depth inside is way less than the outside suggests it should be.”

The others watched and gave him his head as he took the pictures and then, using the larger blade on his pocket knife, worked the false bottom piece up toward the top of the little box eventually slapping it out onto the table.

“Interesting, but what does it prove?” Becky asked.

“Hmm. Not sure. I felt certain there would be a key – or something – hidden away down there underneath it.”

Art put out his hand and Rusty placed the little square of basswood into his palm. He hefted it and looked at it from all sides, with and without the magnifying glass. Presently, he had a comment.

“Look along this end of the piece.”

He showed it around the table. When it came to Rusty he took it back from Art and nodded.

“Looks like a filler made from a mixture of sawdust and white glue covering that edge. I learned how to make that in wood shop at school to fill in imperfections. Now it makes sense.”

As Rusty went to work on the piece, Art made the explanation of what he was sure Rusty was about to discover.

“That piece has been hollowed out just enough to hold a small flat object, a key, I’m betting. Then the opening was plastered over with what Rusty described, a mixture of glue and sawdust. It results in an almost imperceptible, darker tone and a shinier surface if it isn’t carefully sanded.”

“Eureka! Guys, looky here what I got,” Rusty said.

He tipped the piece on edge above his own palm and shook out a key.

“Not much of a key, I’d say,” was his first, clearly disappointed response. Like something you’d use to open a diary lock. It does have a special pattern of indentations across the bottom so I’m thinking it’s something more than a generic key. I’m betting it is tailor made to fit just one lock – one lock somewhere here on planet Earth. That’s depressing.”

SECTION THREE

At eleven o'clock Art called the sheriff and filled him in on their findings and hypotheses. John had nothing of any importance to share with him.

"What can you tell me about the intersection of county roads 1 and 7 just south of highway 3 between the Dell and Marble?"

"There's a doll maker there with national recognition. Collectors come from thousands of miles away. She does special orders and makes storybook dolls and replicas of famous dolls from the past. Because of her being there, several other little businesses have popped up – you could say piggybacking on her fame. The area is unofficially known as – and I'm sure this will astound you – Four Corners."

"Oh, yes. I know Four Corners. Back in my days of bicycle excursions there were only a few houses there, maybe a one pump gas station. I'm thinking that area is known for some other reason but I can't place it. It's undoubtedly unrelated to all this. I think we four will be taking a fieldtrip down that way after lunch. Feel free to meet us if you're free. I do hope you are traveling with some deputies for protection, John. If we are correct in our thinking the deadline is drawing close – tomorrow evening."

The conversation ended.

Rusty responded to what he had been able to hear.

"Fieldtrip! Great! I'll drive."

He got the Montague double whammy – deliberate stares over the tops of two sets of gold rimmed glasses.

"Aw, come on now. You know you'd miss it if I didn't occasionally say something out of left field."

Art turned to Milly.

"Would you miss that, dear?"

"Well, honestly I suppose I would."

"Yeah. Me too. Do you suppose we will ever best the

lad?”

“Seems doubtful, but I’m told miracles do happen.”

“You two done?”

“Are we done, dear?”

“I’m done. Are you done?”

“For the moment, at least, I think I’m done.”

They turned back to the twins.

“Now, where were we?” Art said. “Oh, yes, I was about to hand the truck keys over to our new chauffer.”

“Really!”

“Of course, not. I think that was a certifiable gotcha, son. Becky, go put it on the calendar.”

“Moving on,” Rusty began, “what are we looking for down at the crossroads?”

“The reason for it having been included in the message, I suppose,” Art said. “Let’s quickly review what we pretty well think we may know for certain, more or less.”

“I like the level of confidence indicated in that statement,” Rusty said.

It got the round of chuckles he hoped for. He never knew in situations like that if Art had intentionally set him up so he’d be able make the joke or not. He really didn’t care.

Art continued.

“We think we’ve handled the first two lines of the verse – the serial matters referring to the sizes of the boxes – the lids actually. We think we have established the date and general time the sheriff will be attacked – tomorrow evening – although we have no idea where or how or an exact time. We have a key that should somehow play a role in stopping the attack on the Sheriff. Again, we have no idea how to use it. We know the bad guy has set it up in his mind as a contest between him and the sheriff – with only one possible winner – survivor. We think there is some additional significance to the boxes other than just to carry the message in their lids and the key in the smallest one. The big deal in all of this was the coded message delivered by way of the ten lids.”

“It raises an interesting question,” Milly said. “If the bad guy believes he can actually kill the sheriff on cue tomorrow evening, doesn’t that mean he has some way of making sure he will be near-by at that moment?”

“It does.”

“One of his deputies, maybe,” Rusty offered.

“MTC, my boy,” Art said. (Their short hand, you may remember, for Make That Call.)

“John. We have reason to believe your would-be assassin has some way of staying very close to you. The only ones that come to mind are the deputies you are keeping with you. Just a head’s up. We believe we have worked it down to the final point – still don’t know exactly where the key must be inserted and what it will do. By the way, does the concept of box or boxes or nest or nested hold any significance for you?”

“Nothing comes to mind right off, but I’ll keep working on it.”

Art handed the phone back to Rusty who clicked it off.

“Nothing comes to mind for him,” Art said summarizing the conversation. “What other kinds of maps and such can you bring up that phone of yours?”

“Like most any kind that’s made, I guess. What you thinking?”

“Well one of our main questions at this point has to be why we have been given the reference to the Four Corners area. I figured something about it might show up on a map. I’m sure there is something about that area that holds some meaning for me – probably from my childhood living around here.”

Milly pulled him close and whispered an extended comment in his ear.”

“Oh, my! Really? You and me. The Box Elder forest. Fifteen. Oh, my goodness. Yes, it comes back to me. That certainly should have been memorable.”

The twins looked at each other. Both of their visions were romantic in nature, but very different in magnitude.

Milly turned to the youngsters, folding her hands on the table and leaning forward as if ready to share some wonderful, confidential secret.

“We were fifteen. We went on a picnic in the woods just south of the Four Corners. Rode our bikes. We were best friends, but that was all it had ever been. That day we were alone – and don’t think that hadn’t taken some big-time finagling. One thing led to another. I reached over with a

napkin to wipe the leavings of fried chicken off his mouth and our eyes met. In a thousand years, I would never have predicted such a thing would happen that day. He pulled my head close to his and we shared our very first kiss.”

“That is so romantic, you guys,” Becky said, tearing up and wanting to linger over the moment.

“Pretty tame, I’d say, Art, old man,” Rusty said ready to move on.

“How about lunch at the Chicken Shack,” Art said. “It’s on our way to the

Four Corners and my entire being suddenly has this all-consuming craving for fried chicken.”

Becky checked in with their Uncle Tim and they piled into the old truck heading west toward Marble on County Road 3. The café sat at the edge of the Dell. As was often the case, Rusty was riding in the back. He didn’t feel inappropriately isolated back there if they’d leave the rear cab window slid open. By the time they pulled to stop, he had found several things on his phone. He shared them as they waited for their food to arrive at their booth.

“Here’s a road map.”

He showed it around eliciting very little interest.

“Here’s a map of features of interest to the tourist.”

That received more attention from Art and Milly.

“There’s the Forest,” she said. “After all these years I wasn’t sure if it would still be there.”

That was more than enough of an opening for Rusty.

“It is the largest Box Elder tree forest west of the Rockies. It is mostly a mid-western and eastern tree. It likes lots of moisture and light the same as Aspens and once it takes hold it’s like a humongous weed. They grow fast and don’t live long. Their wood is weak and porous and isn’t any good for use in building or making furniture. It’s only real purpose seems to be in making fiber board and there is a huge fiber board plant just on down the road from the Four Corners.”

“Interesting,” Art said. I was aware of almost none of that.

“Here’s some pictures of the home businesses that sit right at the Corners.”

He passed the phone around.

“Look there, Art. I’m sure that big old house was there back when we were kids.”

Becky looked it over.

“Odd shape – two stories in front and only one in back with that long sloping roof and big chimney sticking up right in the middle.”

“That design even has a name,” Milly said – it’s called a salt box house because it is shaped like the old salt boxes that used to sit in every kitchen.”

“You guys been hearing what I’ve been hearing,” Rusty said all quite seriously.

The others could offer nothing but furrowed brows.

“Box Elder tree. Salt Box house. Nested Boxes.”

The brows smoothed, replaced by nods. More than that it moved Art to remember.

“I knew there was something special about the Four Corners – other than our romantic tryst, dear. That area is the home of a heavy weight boxer of some renown – I can’t pull out his name. I do remember that his reputation got tarnished someday. Not following such a violent sport, I really don’t remember any more than that.”

Rusty was already at work.

“Gustoff Hielman is the guy you’re after. He fought under the name, Gusto the Great – talk about ego. A contender for the heavy weight crown back about thirty years ago. And oh, here’s something that’s bound to be worth double desserts. He was convicted of killing a man during a bar fight up in Redstone. That was twenty-nine years ago. He was set for the championship bout to take place just days after his arrest. And, guess the date of that bout, my most revered comrades?”

He went ahead and offered it.

“August the 8th at 8:00 p.m.”

Double desserts finished, they were off toward the Four Corners.

“We need to do some brainstorming about just where a key like this might belong,” Milly said. “Rusty already suggested a diary lock – as if he may have had some experience picking one.”

Becky flashed a resentful look back through the open window into the back. Rusty shrugged.

“It’s what brothers do. I was wondering if dolls had keys to make them talk or walk or cry or whatever.”

“Possible,” Becky said.

“Some dolls used to have to be wound up to move their limbs or cry or say ‘mama’,” Milly said. “Those keys, if you want to call them that, were always attached – build in – as I recall.”

“Jewelry boxes?” Art asked.

The others nodded without comment.

“Lock boxes, like small safes,” Rusty added.

“What about other toys?” Art asked.

“Race cars – the old-fashioned ones at least. Uncle Ted still has some like that our grandpa gave him.”

Art nodded, but not convincingly.

“I just don’t think we’re on the right track yet. I guess we can look around down there and see if anything pops out at us.”

“We are assuming that the key will fit something at the Four Corners. Are we sure that’s a justified assumption?” Milly asked.

“What else do we have to assume?” Rusty asked.

“Unless the physical clues were metaphorical and merely suggested something about a box that was the key to the answer,” Milly said.

It was cause for some silent thinking. Eventually Art spoke.

“Well, there is the Boxer from down there – down here, I guess since the corners are just ahead.”

“But why ten boxes?” Rusty asked. “If your suggestion is right, wouldn’t one box have made the point? And they were nested – how does that enter in to it all?”

“Ten fights building up to a big event, like all the preliminary fights?” Milly said/asked, little confidence suggested in her tone.

“Or ten rounds in a championship fight, back then,” Rusty offered.

“Or, merely as a means of supplying the clues, Art said applying Occam’s Razor. I really don’t know. Just ruminating

through my old gray matter.”

Rusty went to work in the dictionary on his phone.

“Ruminating: Pondering, reflecting, cogitating. Got it.”

“Interesting,” Becky say. “I believe my brother was just ruminating about ruminating.”

It achieved chuckles across the cab up front.

Art paused at the intersection.

“So, where do we begin?”

“The two biggest places seem to be the doll maker and the memorabilia place,” Milly said. “I doubt if many picture frames require locks and keys.”

Art rolled them into the parking lot between those two building. The doll shop was in a two-story house of 1920 vintage. The other was in the saltbox house.

“I got something else,” Rusty offered through the window from the back. “It’s a no brainer but I’ll let you guess anyway. Guess whose boyhood home just happens to be the saltbox house?”

“The Boxer?” Becky said more of a question than an answer.

“Bingo, sis.”

“I think I need to talk with the Sheriff,” Art said.

Rusty poked the buttons and handed the phone through the window.

“John. We may have a break of sorts. Were you involved in the murder case up at Redstone that involved the boxer, Gustoff Hielman?”

“Involved? I’ll say. It was one of my first big cases as a deputy. I assembled the evidence that convicted him. You think he’s involved? He was sent to prison for a long time. I’ve not been notified that he’s been released and I should have been considering the threats he made against me at the end of the trial. Let me check. I’ll get right back to you.”

“We are down at the Four Corners about to search for the proper place to insert the key we found embedded in the smallest box.”

“Later then.”

The sheriff hung up.

“Am I correct in assuming the Saltbox house is our first choice?” Art asked.

“It’s mine,” Rusty said.

“Mine, too, as much as I hate agreeing with my brother.”

“And mine,” Milly added.

Inside they found themselves in a large entry hall overly decorated with souvenirs and antiques of every description. Beyond it, in all three directions lay room after room of collectibles from Barbies and old Coca Cola signs, to celebrity lunch buckets, Walt Disney memorabilia, and signed sports paraphernalia. There were Beanie Babies, comic books, iron toys, paper doll books, Star Trek, and more. Rusty offered his objections to the signs suggesting some items were authentic replicas of certain revered items.

After an hour of general browsing, not a single possibility became obvious.

“Maybe we should at least take a look next door at the doll place,” Milly suggested.

Becky agreed.

“I think the girls want to go play with dolls, Art.”

“I’ll bet they have boy’s dolls, too,” Becky said.

“Boys don’t have dolls,” Rusty snapped.

“Do, too. Batman, Darth Vader, Power Rangers . . .”

“Those are Action Figures, not dolls.”

“I dare you to look up ‘doll’ in that precious dictionary of yours. You’ll see they are all really dolls.”

“If the Bickerson Twins can put their definitional differences aside until later, we are deep into a very serious situation, here,” Art said.

“Sorry,” Rusty said. “It was just us being us. Genetic, I’m guessing.”

“Let me hear some random associations with key or keys and box or boxes or nest or nested,” Art said as they took seats on two of the benches on the lawn in front of the saltbox.

Rusty began.

“Key stone, key word, Florida Keys, Box canyon, cereal box, box truck, bird nest, machine gun nest, nesting instinct, Elliot Nest – no, wait that was Ness I think . . .”

Becky continued.

“Key to my heart, boxed in, box top, pill box hat.

Art had a few entries.

“Box your ears, key player, keycard, keyhole, keynote, keypad, keyboard.

“Boxville, Kentucky – had an aunt who lived there when I was a little girl,”

Milly added.

“Anything in any of that?” Art asked.

“Who knows?” Rusty said. “Once our thinking goes beyond the Four Corners it all becomes overwhelming.”

“How certain are we that the solution is going to be right here?” Milly asked, rephrasing her previous concern.

“We don’t have anything else,” Art said.

Rusty said his say.

“The clues all legitimately point to this area and, in fact, this building. Saltbox house, Box Elder trees, Gusto the Boxer.”

“Of course, we’re assuming Gusto is the one behind this,” Milly said. “For all we know the man may be dead.”

Rusty’s phone rang. It was the sheriff. Art took the phone and mostly just listened.

“Hielman was released from prison three months ago, as a medical consideration case – he’s dying of pancreatic cancer with only months to live. His petition to die at home was granted by Judge Blackstone. My office is trying to track him down. He’s supposedly wearing an ankle GPS device.”

“If I were you, John, I’d find a deep hole, crawl in, and remain there until all of this is over.”

“Not what I’m paid to do, and by the way, I believe it is just such a deep hole we’re all trying to keep me out of.”

He hung up, promising to keep them up to date.

“Looks to be an item by item search, then, gang,” Art said. “Anything with a slot the right size for the key to fit. It will most likely be something that actually requires a key so as to not seem out of the ordinary. I don’t know what else to say.”

“The two of us with younger legs will begin upstairs,” Rusty said.

“Appreciated,” Milly said.

The shop closed at eight and they had completed no more than ten percent of the area. They would return in the

morning with reinforcements from the Sheriff's office.

Art and Milly turned in early. The sheriff had arranged a six-a.m. start and had ordered the building closed to visitors. He planned to be there as well. The last message they had received reported Hielman had checked into a hospital in Gunnison some distance to the south. He was listed as a 'come and go' patient – there when he needed to be and elsewhere as his condition permitted. He had been listed as elsewhere for the past three days.

* * *

The information had become worse overnight. A man fitting Hielman's description had purchased a quantity of TNT, ostensibly for a mining operation. He apparently had whatever credentials were required for the purchase. While in prison he had worked in both the wood shop and the electronics shop. He had acquired the necessary skill to disable his ankle unit if he wanted to. He must have, because the state police had lost track of him nearly three days before. There had been no tracking report of him visiting the area near the Sheriff's office, or the explosive dealer. Deputies were going door to door in the vicinity of Four Corners trying to ascertain if he had been seen or might even be present there. He had no relatives still living in the area.

Apparently, the notification of release had been sent to the man who had been sheriff at the time of the conviction – dead fifteen years. It had not yet made its way to Sheriff Westover.

SECTION FOUR

The twins were in the kitchen making their version of a hearty breakfast for four when Art and Milly emerged from their bedroom.

“Elves at work, I see,” Milly said.

“Or mice,” Art added sniffing the air.

“If they are mice, they are pretty talented. Looks like Western Omelets, fried ham, Texas Toast with assorted jams, with juice and coffee.”

“Very considerate of you, kids,” Art said, assisting Milly into her chair (as if she needed any help). He assumed his usual place across from her at the table. Becky filled the dishes at the stove and Rusty delivered them without comment – an unusual state of affairs.”

“We have a couple of quiet kids this morning, Milly.”

“I noticed. Suppose we should ask?”

“I imagine it will come out on its own – three, two, one . . .”

“Okay, here’s the thing,” Rusty began. “We’ve realized this isn’t just about playing a code game – it’s really a matter of life and death – the sheriff’s for sure, and maybe ours, if we find ourselves in the wrong place at the right time. *Kaboom!* You understand what I’m saying?”

“We do,” Milly said.

“We have talked it over and have decided it’s probably too dangerous for you to be on hand down there today,” Art went on.

“Not on your life,” Rusty came back. “We’ve come with it all this far. We’re not about to be denied the climax.”

“I can refuse to take you along,” Art said.

“We can be there in thirty minutes on our bikes,” came Rusty’s defiant, if low key, response.

Becky reinforced it with a deliberate series of nods.

“I can forbid you from going down there.”

“No, you really can’t.”

“I can politely ask you not to go down there.”

“And we can politely refuse.”

“Okay. You may come along but we’ll need your Uncle Ted’s permission.”

Rusty made the call. He explained the situation in a relatively straight forward manner. Permission was obtained so long as they stayed with Art or Milly at all times.

“Understand your participation is being allowed with great reservation.”

“Understood. Now let’s devour this grub and be on our way.”

Art filled them in on the new information from the Sheriff. From their expressions, it was clear the big deal they had been thinking about had just become much bigger.

Rusty tried to incorporate the new data.

“So, Gusto probably had the skill to build the nested boxes. He knew the territory at the Four Corners well enough to find whatever his plan called for. He knew the saltbox house for sure. He has explosives and with his electronic know-how he can probably set them off remotely.”

“I had not yet considered that last possibility,” Art said. “How does that expand our knowledge of the use of the key?”

“Referring back to the verse, remember it mentioned either U or me being spared of death. I think that’s pretty plain,” Rusty said.

The others looked at him waiting for his explanation.

“What? If the key is inserted in whatever and turned before the deadline – eight this evening – the sheriff lives and somehow Gustoff dies. If it isn’t inserted in time, the sheriff bites the dust and Gustoff lives – at least for a little while longer.”

“I suppose Gustoff feels like he has nothing to lose, considering his physical condition,” Milly said.

It was reason for sighs around the table.

Breakfast over, they were soon in the truck and within twenty minutes were pulling in between two squad cars. The sheriff greeted them.

He asked to be filled in on the particulars of the search the day before. Rusty’s offer notwithstanding, Milly became

custodian of the key – the only one they all trusted to keep it both safe and at the ready when the time came that it would be needed.

The item by item search continued through the morning. The sheriff had a deputy bring in boxes of burgers and fries for lunch. Art was about to miss his early afternoon nap for the second day in a row.

The afternoon produced several possibilities but the key didn't fit – one was an antique, twirling, porcelain ballerina; the other a child's bank of the Mickey Mouse Club incarnation.

Time was running short. It sat at the front of everyone's mind but no one spoke of it. Seven o'clock came and went. Seven thirty. Seven forty-five. At Seven fifty-five the sheriff ordered an evacuation of the house. As the second hand began its final trip around the face of the huge clock in the lobby, Rusty called out.

"I got it. Give me the key."

He wrenched the key from Milly's hand and raced up the stairs, all before anybody could restrain him. The sheriff took off in pursuit. Those in the lobby reluctantly moved toward the door at the direction of the deputies.

Art and Milly paused and watched the second hand on the clock – fifty-seven, fifty-eight, fifty-nine. Then from across the road to the south they heard an explosion. It was a van that Art had noticed earlier but had no reason to question. It had blown up and was engulfed in a storm of fire.

A few moments later, Rusty and the Sheriff came down the stairs, side by side. Rusty was carrying a small object. They met at the center of the entry hall. Rusty explained.

"That first day we were here I noticed this old metal, kid's bank – it's a Snap, Crackle, Pop, Rice Krispy's bank. It was sitting on a wooden base and I assumed they were fastened together. A few minutes ago, it hit me in a flash – Cereal – that odd word in the verse. Somehow it just all came together. I picked up the bank thinking I'd have to break it off the base but it wasn't attached. I inserted the key in the bottom and began winding it. It opened a slot in the top for a deposit and played a tune."

Art continued.

"And, I'm assuming, with that act, an electronic signal

was sent to a detonator of some kind in the van across the road. My bet is that Gustoff Hillman's body will be found inside."

"It seems the bad guy played the game completely honestly – according to the rules he set up," Becky said. "Right from the start he said it would be the sheriff or him. He lost. It was him."

There was still the matter of how the sheriff would have been killed. Art walked over to the grandfather's clock in the lobby. He opened the door to the bottom section."

"There's enough TNT in here to blow this entire house from here to Montana. It would have taken all of us with it."

"So, Hielman, figured I'd be here," the sheriff said.

"I imagine he was never far from you during the past several days. With his apparent knowledge about such things he was probably even monitoring your calls. I believe if he hadn't thought you were appropriately on his trail he would have fed you the additional information you needed to make sure you'd be here at the proper time."

"He must have arranged all this at night," the sheriff said thinking through the sequence of necessary events.

As he walked outside with his four friends he addressed them.

"I think that from this day forward, Sally's Ice Cream Parlor will have one treat apiece set aside every day for each of you guys."

Rusty, of course, had a comment.

"One of us here is a growing boy, Sir, and I'm pretty sure one treat just won't meet the lad's ever growing metabolic needs."

"Okay, then – tell you what – once a week I'll throw in a family size box of Rice Krispy's."

THE END