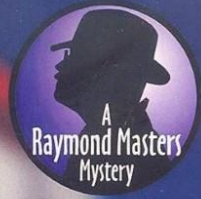


The logo for Family Man Press, consisting of the letters 'fmp' in a stylized, lowercase, cursive font.

*Everybody loved the old man.  
Still, someone was trying to  
kill him - over and over and over again.*

THE MAN WHO  
REFUSED TO  
**DIE**  
Garrison Flint

Another Family Friendly Book from the Family of Man Press

# The Man Who Refused to Die

A Raymond Masters Mystery

**BOOK THREE**

Garrison Flint

The Family of Man Press

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Before the days of cellphones.

## **Chapter One**

### **Day One: The Players**

Juan Blanco was one of those rare people who truly didn't have an enemy in the World. A few people were put off by his forthright manner, which could, perhaps be interpreted as arrogant. A few may have been jealous of his immense talent. Some even envied him the four wives he had consumed during his long life. But enemies? No. Not by any stretch of the imagination.

That had been the overwhelming consensus – at least up until Saturday past.

Juan Blanco was ... well ... Juan Blanco – unique in most ways. Born alone with his mother, to a chorus of yipping, hungry, stray dogs, in a dirt-floor shack in a Texas border town, Juan had managed to spend most of his eighty-one years in his thirty-room mansion in southern Florida.

As a seven-year old, he retrieved his first guitar from a rubbish heap behind the dance hall where his mother worked as a singing waitress. By the time he was fourteen, Juan was performing classical concerts to rave reviews from one end of the continent to the other.

Juan was a lover – also in the classical sense. He loved passionately and he loved often. His mother died when he was sixteen. Finding it uncomfortable to be alone and suddenly freed to follow his all-consuming but not necessarily prudent adolescent urges, he married at seventeen. He also married at twenty-two, thirty-nine and fifty-four. Each marriage ended for reasons other than the lack of love – the love never waned between him and any of his wives. With each divorce

developed a strong, unwavering, friendship that endured effortlessly through the years.

In perhaps the strangest twist of Juan's romantic chronicle, his ex-wives became close and dear friends with one another. This was made all the easier since they lived under the same roof. Juan provided a spacious apartment for each of them in his rambling, white stucco, red-tile-roofed estate, La Casa de la Musica – The House of Music.

The old man's mind remained sharp and his fingers nimble. Had it not been for his rapidly progressing health problems, Juan would have still been enchanting audiences with his magnificent touch and acclaimed interpretation of the classics. For six months, he had been battling cancer – incurably spread throughout his internal organs. His excruciating pain, though never spoken – became increasingly apparent in the mournful lament of his music as it wafted from his room late into the night. It was the saddest of times at La Musica.

\* \* \*

Retired Police Inspector, Raymond Masters, had met Juan some forty years earlier during a case in which a murder had occurred backstage at the concert hall where Juan was performing. They became fast friends and continued a correspondence if, now, only at Christmas and birthdays. Masters admired Juan both for his musical genius and for having maintained his slender, Latin, figure, well into his senior years.

Slender, as an accurate descriptor of Raymond Masters, had slipped away during his thirties and the unpleasant battle to regain it had been fully abandoned by his forties. Now in his seventies, the old detective savored ample portions of pot roast, pastry and plumb pudding without so much as a twinge of guilt. He merely chose to ignore the fact that his cholesterol numbers hovered close to those of his imposing IQ.

Masters also admired Juan's natural, Clark Gable moustache. Masters' own was oversized and haphazardly bushy as if designed by a dysfunctional committee.

\* \* \*

It was Rebecca, Juan's second wife, who introduced herself to Masters from the other end of the Saturday morning phone call. The initially pleasant surprise immediately saddened.

"Somebody tried to kill Juan last night," she began, her halting voice choking back her emotions.

"Tried? How?"

"An overdose of his pain medicine. Apparently, someone dissolved several tablets in the water on the bed stand – the water he uses to take his medicine."

"You're sure it wasn't Juan's own attempt to end his suffering?"

As the words left his lips, Masters wished he hadn't said them, but sooner or later, it would have been necessary. Rebecca seemed prepared.

"He says not. The police asked him straight out. Juan's a stubbornly honest man. I believe him. Over the years, he's strayed from his Catholic upbringing, but, still, he'd never kill himself."

"So he's alright at this time?"

"Yes. He's joking about it all. You know Juan. I'm sure he's concerned on the inside, though. Probably blaming himself. Wondering what he ever did to cause someone to want him dead."

"I understand. I'm sure you're right about that."

"Can you come? Please. Juan – well, all of us – need you desperately."

"Of course. I'll be there first thing in the morning."

As he hung up, the puzzlement had already begun to grow. Juan Blanco was not the sort to have been intentionally and deliberately murdered. He was not of the ilk to make enemies. If he had a fault, it was his obsessive, overly generous inclination to keep everything on an even keel. That was not an approach to life that would lead to a man's murder – or attempted murder. An unplanned blow from a burglar caught in the act perhaps, but not a premeditated deed such as this.

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Maria (Juan's fourth) met Masters at the airport. The limousine was white - inside and out. A stylized picture of a

brightly colored guitar resting on a sea of black staff and notes swept across the right front fender and hood back to the driver's door. The plates read BLANCO. Juan didn't flaunt his wealth but neither did he conceal it. Juan was just what Juan was.

Masters introduced himself to Justin, Juan's new, young chauffeur and handyman. Once seated inside, Masters got right to the point.

"Have there been any developments since yesterday, Maria?" he began as he lost the struggle to span his substantial girth with the seat belt.

"Well, maybe," Maria began, hesitantly.

"Maybe?"

"It seems an old acquaintance of Juan's – Jerry Johnson, who used to do arrangements for him – wrote him a threatening letter a few weeks ago."

"Threatening? How?"

"Jerry accused Juan of stealing a large number of his arrangements – never paying for them. The letter sounds like the two of them had discussed the problem several times by phone. Once, when Jerry called, Sarah intercepted it - just by chance - and informed him Juan was dying. She thought that would bring out some measure of compassion so he'd stop his harassment, but I guess it backfired."

"Backfired?"

"A few days later a letter arrived addressed to Sarah. It demanded \$250,000 within the week and said if it didn't arrive as directed Juan would meet his Maker slightly ahead of time. That was about five or six days ago."

"How did Juan react to that threat?"

"Sarah never showed it to him. In fact, none of us knew about it until yesterday – after the attempt."

"Sarah hadn't taken it seriously, then?"

"No. She couldn't imagine that Jerry would ever do anything like that. Now she feels simply terrible, of course."

"This Jerry Johnson – I don't seem to have any recollection of him. Can you refresh my memory?"

Maria suddenly became agitated, looking away and out through the smoked glass window to her right, though apparently at nothing in particular. She continued.

“I never knew him, myself. It was way before my time in Juan’s life. All I know is hearsay, you know. Sarah and Rebecca can fill you in better than I can.”

Masters took the cue and changed the topic.

“How did the attempt on Juan’s life happen to fail?”

“He simply didn’t drink more than a few sips of the water when he took his pain medicine. When Lawrence arrived for their practice session, Juan was unconscious. Lawrence called 911 and Dr. Faraday. They pumped his stomach and did other things – I’m not sure just what. After about an hour Juan roused. That’s it, I guess.”

“How is Juan, today?”

Masters’ tone was somber and suddenly sad.

Maria burst into tears. Masters put his big arm around her and pulled her close. She accepted the gesture with no resistance.

“He’s in so much pain – even with the pills. He won’t admit it but he winces every time he moves. His eyes water when he walks. He cries out – moans – in his sleep. The only time he seems to be unaware of it anymore is when he is playing. Thank goodness, he can still play. He plays a lot.”

She loosened herself just enough to look Masters straight in the eyes.

“It’s a terrible thing for me to say, but he’d have been better off if he had drunk that whole glass of water. His terrible suffering would be over, now.”

She returned her head to Masters’ formidable chest and sobbed quietly. They rode in silence for some time.

“I’m glad to hear that Lawrence Munoz is still with you?” Masters offered at last.

“Oh yes. He’s really become the closest person to Juan these past few months.”

“Do they still play together?”

“Oh, my yes, every day.”

“What a magnificent musical presence the two of them create,” Masters said.

“Juan talks about the next tour they would make – all the capitals of South America. He always wanted to do that, you know. He realizes it won’t be, of course, but Lawrence goes right along with all the planning.”



“I’m eager to see him again. Just sorry about the circumstances. When Olivia called some months ago to inform me of Juan’s condition, I wanted to come but was deep into a case in Canada. Since then I’ve just been a coward, I suppose.”

“We’re all glad you’re here. We haven’t told Juan. Sarah thought the surprise would do him a World of good. Prepare yourself, though, Mr. Masters. He’s skin and bones. Dr. Faraday gives him no more than a few more months, if that.”

“I appreciate the warning.”

It bothered Masters that he had forgotten about Jerry Johnson. Of course, he often couldn’t remember why he found himself in the kitchen searching for some unknown item, but that he expected at his age and it always brought a smile to his face. Remembering Jerry, on the other hand, should have been in a different category – like remembering the first piece that Masters had recited in church as a child. He still remembered those ten lines word perfect.

It would be another thirty-minutes to La Musica. Since it appeared that Maria preferred not to talk, Masters let his thoughts wander in and about the other people who were important in Juan’s life.

Sarah had been Juan’s first wife. They had married as teenagers and they had loved as teenagers. They soon found that away from parties and bed, they had little in common. She had been a beautiful, though timid and fearful young lady who was easily swept into the fantasy of status and security that accompanied her relationship with the handsome, confident, universally adored, Juan Blanco. To be loved by him was any girl’s dream come true.

Theirs had been a suitcase and trunk life – on the concert circuit 350 days a year. Sarah loved Juan fully and completely but she grew to detest the no-roots life style that seemed to be his lot. After three years, Juan realized it was a hopeless situation. He purchased a lovely, comfortable home in West Haven - a small town in central Florida. His plan was that Sara would live there happily. He would support her there like a queen and would continue to live his life on the road, visiting her as often as possible. “Often” didn’t happen.

On the road, Juan's eyes wandered. At home, Sarah became lonely and also sought companionship. Within months the marriage was amicably dissolved. They remained devoted friends and Juan would have it no other way than that he would continue to support her.

Eventually, Juan built La Casa de la Musica and in it, a grand apartment for Sarah. She never remarried although had several long-term relationships. One of them had been with a successful interior decorator whose business she inherited upon his untimely death. She had grown into a strong, competent lady, who, in fact, had difficulty suppressing her, now natural, overbearing manner. The brisk movements of her tall, slender body, the long gray hair swept up into a bun on the crest of her head, and the only recently necessary dark rimmed glasses gave her the countenance of an unapproachable old maid librarian – a countenance she all quite deliberately created and maintained. At eighty, she made no pretense of appearing to be anything other than an old lady – proud in carriage and more frequently sharp of tongue.

Rebecca had been Juan's second wife and their relationship had lasted – no, survived - five years. It was during this marriage that he began building his mansion. Having learned from the errors of his first marriage, Juan began planning his tours so he could be home one week each month. Often, Rebecca accompanied him on the road. She enjoyed traveling and developed ways of entertaining herself when not decorating Juan's arm at one event or another.

It was early in this relationship that Juan engaged Lawrence as his backup guitarist. The three developed an extraordinary friendship. Rumor had it that Lawrence married too young and too soon to prevent himself from acting on his romantic feelings for Rebecca. Lawrence divorced two years later, shortly after the birth of his only son, Carlos, who bore Juan's middle name.

As the years wore on, Juan spent fewer and fewer weeks at home. Long before their marriage was officially dissolved, Juan and Rebecca had become little more than good friends. Rebecca and Sarah became quite close and eventually worked the home decorating business together.

Many mistook them to be sisters.

A few years later, Olivia, a beautiful, young, concert pianist entered Juan's life. After a brief courtship, they were married on Juan's 39th birthday, and remained together, happily, for a dozen years. Olivia enjoyed life on the concert circuit and although they only infrequently found themselves sharing the same stage, they arranged to be in or near the same city as often as possible. Separation, punctuated by frequent, passionate, rendezvous, appeared to be the secret to a successful marriage for Juan – well, that and a gorgeous, doting, talented, wife seventeen years his junior.

Olivia was an interesting mixture of confidence on stage and insecurity off. Her pleasant features, wrapped by long black hair, were punctuated by dark, demure, eyes and a constant smile. Her laugh – seldom contagious – was also constant and often inappropriate, regularly irritating most casual acquaintances. From Juan's outspoken love she gained self-esteem and from his thoroughgoing confidence in her, independence. With those necessities of life achieved, she left the marriage but like his other wives, she could never bring herself to leave Juan.

Three years later - at fifty-four - Juan and Maria were married. Maria was a successful artist specializing in huge, muted, watercolors of weeds. She was wealthy in her own right and had become a well-known patron of the arts. Together they established and personally funded a scholarship program for promising, though needy, young musicians and artists.

They had a good life together that spanned two decades. Juan joked about the fact that each successive marriage had lasted longer than the others.

"If I'd marry again, I'd have to live to be 110 to keep this progression alive," he quipped on the day of his final divorce.

Juan credited the success of that marriage to the fact that Maria was older than he (by almost three months!). Maria said it was due to the good training they had each acquired from their former spouses – Maria having outlived two previous, wealthy, husbands. Most of their friends privately credited its success to the fact that in his sixties, Juan's

“romantic” needs (demands) finally abated to a more reasonable (many said “normal”) level. They had been separated for eight years when it was discovered that he was terminally ill.

At eighty-one, even with advancing arthritis, Maria still walked proudly erect. With the regular and escalating assistance of Este Lauder, et al, she appeared decades younger and that was exactly how she wanted to appear.

Lawrence was an extraordinary musician in his own right. Like Juan, he was a prodigy – his natural gift surfacing prior to his sixth birthday. He was as shy and retiring, as Juan was forward and outgoing. Perhaps “forward” leaves an incomplete impression. More accurately, Juan invaded life. He was incessantly self-centered but never in an intentionally hurtful or degrading way to others. He was talented. He was handsome. He was totally irresistible. Others seemed to gladly bow to his whims. That was how things were and that was how he saw himself. The fact of his egotism seemed to genuinely escape him and that only made him more loveable – childlike, in fact.

Although Lawrence had the technical and interpretive skills to have become a successful solo artist in his own right, his reclusive tendencies and lack of self-confidence would have surely prevented him from ever walking onto a concert stage alone. He understood his limitations and appreciated the opportunity Juan had given him. Just to be able to play was all that mattered to Lawrence. He genuinely delighted in the adulation Juan received. Living in the warm shadow of greatness was far preferable to remaining in the cold darkness of oblivion.

Lawrence had been a scared, socially inept, sixteen-year old genius when Juan discovered him playing for change in a hat on the streets of Miami Beach. Being six years younger Lawrence immediately and reasonably established a dependent relationship with Juan – one that Juan never discouraged nor seemed to tire of. Lawrence became like the younger brother Juan never had. If they had ever exchanged a harsh word, it had been well out of earshot of those who knew them best.

Lawrence’s son, Carlos, now a grown man and best

described as a ne'er-do-well, never liked Juan. He hated that his father had named him after the man, and from the time he was eight, insisted on being called Carl.

It was not all Carl's doing. Juan deliberately set a wall between himself and children. He and Sarah had a son who died suddenly and inexplicably at five months of age. That loss devastated Juan and he vowed to never be hurt in that way again – thus the wall and no more children.

Juan typically practiced ten hours a day, the first three to five of those with Lawrence. When Lawrence was finished for the day, Juan expected him to be a companion (plutonic, of course) to his wife (whichever one it happened to be at the time) when she was with them on tour. Lawrence never veered from that trusted role although in the case of Rebecca the stress became nearly intolerable for him. He loved her deeply but that was never spoken between them. They were both as loyal to Juan as if he were the king of the realm. In many ways, he was.

Masters closed the window between the driver and passenger sections.

“Maria, what can you tell me about your new driver, Justin? How long has he been with you?”

“Justin came about five months ago. Billy just became too old for the job. He went to live with his daughter in Pensacola. Juan supplied an ample retirement package of course. Justin just turned twenty and came on the recommendation of Detective Stone – Sammy Stone – of the local police department. You'll meet him later in the day, I'm sure. He's handling the case. Apparently, as a child and teenager, Justin had been in some trouble – lots of trouble, as I understand it – and Sammy took him under his wing. Sarah says that's like having the blind leading the blind. You'll understand that better after you meet our bumbling Sammy. At any rate, Justin seems to have turned his life around. He's a fine driver, even Rebecca agrees to that, and he seems to just naturally know how to fix anything that gets broken. I personally think he's a jewel in the rough. Sammy cajoled him into E.M.T. training a year or so ago but he dropped out after a few months. He's not dumb by a long shot: just not a book smart person, you know? “

“Is he married?”

Maria smiled as if the question tickled her.

“No. He’s hopelessly shy around girls. He suddenly becomes a red-faced, inept, thirteen-year old whenever there’s a young lady within thirty yards. He lives in the same quarters over the garage that Billy had.”

“Friends?”

“Not many. He’s a pool player and frequents Harvey’s Snooker Parlor during his time off. His old friends just meant trouble for Justin so he steers clear of them. I guess he’s just not found a way to replace them. He seems to feel closest to Olivia and Lawrence around our place – perhaps because they’re the youngest here in the Senior Compound as Sarah calls it. He enjoys humor but doesn’t seem to understand how to initiate it himself – or maybe he’s just afraid to try. He’s a lot like Olivia in that way. I think his home life, as a child, was pretty severe and unpleasant. I like him.”

“I can tell that you do. And you trust him?”

Her answer was thoughtful and not immediate.

“Yes. I’ve never had any reason not to.” The question, however, seemed to have given her pause.

“He sounds like a great find.”

“I think so. Don’t know how long he’ll stick around, of course. He should be able to do better for himself. Young people need to be with young people.”

“I forget the name of your secretary,” Masters said, ready to move on.

“Dora. Dora Bailey. She’s been with Juan for almost forty years. She’s the one who keeps us organized. I don’t know how any of us would manage without her. She does it all from attending to every detail of his concert tours to seeing that the caterers get tipped appropriately before they leave.”

“Caterers?”

“We’ve taken to having our evening meals brought in on Tuesdays, Thursdays, Saturdays and Sundays. It gives Wilma, our housekeeper, a break and frankly, it gives us a bit more variety. Wilma still cooks for us like we had the digestive systems of fifteen year olds.”

“Ah yes! Wilma! I’ve never met a peach cobbler that holds a candle to hers. Is she well?”

“Oh yes, as well as any of us old folks are, I guess. Some time ago, Juan suggested that she hire an assistant, but she preferred the caterer arrangement. She hates to have anybody in her kitchen.”

Maria's brow furrowed.

“Back to Dora. She seems to have taken Juan's illness and now this attempt on his life worse than the rest of us. She's teary eyed all the time and when she's not in her office, she just sits in her room with the drapes pulled. It's like she's gone into some kind of depression that she turns on and off.”

“I'm sorry to hear that. I guess we all react in our own ways to things like this.”

“I suppose so. Something just seems really strange about her reaction. Like she is grieving ahead of time.”

“I see. Have any of you talked with her about it?”

“Rebecca and I both tried, but she just brushed it off, forcing a smile, as if that would somehow contradict the tears streaming down her face.”

Masters had no useful response so he turned his attention to the view outside. They were moving along a wide, beautiful, split, boulevard approaching La Musica. The ancient palm trees along the white, sandy berms stood like sentries - their long, slender, deep green leaves stirring gently in the breeze as if encouraging them on toward their destination. With the sun at its zenith, the bright world was without shadows. Masters rolled down the privacy window to gain a better view of the scene ahead. The limousine, maintaining a constant forty-mile per hour pace in the fifty mile per hour zone, permitted – virtually required – the other vehicles to pass it. The glances directed toward the sleek, white, automobile from the passersby suggested a mixed reaction. There was awe and fascination at the sheer luxury, and dismay if not disdain at the unhurried tempo. Children waved from the rear windows as if by merely recognizing the limo's existence they somehow shared in its elegance. Teens slowed to gesture and yell disparaging comments as teens will do, and then sped on down the road to rails of youthful laughter. Masters hoped they made it safely home to their parents that evening.

At last the car slowed and turned into the long, brick-

paved driveway of Juan's estate. The high, white, solid wall around the grounds provided some measure of privacy, though Masters surmised it had been placed there to engender and further the Blanco mystique. The black, wrought iron, gate closed behind them and they slowed to a stop at the elegant entryway to La Musica. Maria's door was opened first. Justin immediately realized the impossibility of Masters sliding his considerable bulk across the seat to that door, so he quickly moved to the other side and extended a welcome hand to the old detective who nodded appreciatively.

The white, stucco-faced mansion was mostly on one floor. Juan's bedroom and studio were the only upper level rooms in the main house and were toward the rear overlooking the kidney-shaped pool in the courtyard. The building could be described as sprawling (or rambling if one were looking to honor its style). More realistically, it was a haphazard assemblage of attached apartments, arranged to feign the appearance of a single, flamboyant, residence.

Despite its architectural imperfections, it served its purpose flawlessly. Each apartment had its own entry onto the interior pool area as well as to the porch that wrapped around the outer perimeter. A semi-open hallway set between the pool and the building provided a sheltered means of accessing the main residence. There was a huge living room with a dark-beamed, vaulted ceiling, an oversized dining room and four guest suits, each with a private bath, kitchenette, and sitting room.

The décor was Mediterranean from the massive sofas and chairs to the bulky, dark wood, marble-topped tables and garish, metal lamps. The immensity of the rooms tempered the size of the furnishings. Skylights flooded the house with natural light during the day and indirect lighting provided a similar, though softer, effect during the evening hours.

Dora's office was just off the front entrance along a short, wide hall that led into the living room. The kitchen was behind the dining room and Wilma's (the cook) quarters were behind that.

Olivia met them at the front door. Her less than pleasant, high-pitched voice was made all the more abrasive by the flood of emotion as she broke the news.



“There’s been a second attempt on Juan’s life.”

“Oh no!” came Maria’s response, all color fading from behind her painted cheeks.

Masters put his arm around her.

“What was it this time?” Masters asked, wincing at the thought.

“Something in his sandwich, we think. Dr. Faraday isn’t sure.”

“Is he going to be alright?” Masters asked.

“It seems so. They’ve pumped his stomach again. Poor baby. How much more can he take?”

“Have the police been informed?”

“Yes. Lawrence called them immediately. Detective Stone should be here any minute.”

Olivia broke into tears. Maria moved to embrace her.

Lawrence appeared from the living room.

“Not a very good greeting, I’m afraid, Sir,” he said, shaking Masters’ hand.

His eyes were red but the tears had been controlled.

“Justin, will you please take Mr. Masters things into the Blue Suite.”

Justin had just arrived with the luggage and briefcase. He nodded, silently, and disappeared down the hallway opposite the living room door. The young man seemed overwhelmed by the events as they unfolded.

Maria spoke.

“Lawrence. Will you and Justin see to Mr. Masters for a few minutes? Olivia and I must go see Dr. Faraday.”

Lawrence nodded, as did Masters, both understanding the ladies’ uncertainty and anguish of the moment.

“Let me show you to your rooms, then,” Lawrence suggested.

“Fine,” Masters agreed. “I’ll just take a few minutes to get settled in. I’d like to be called as soon as Detective Stone arrives.”

As they entered the Blue Suite, aptly named, as it was blue from top to bottom – walls, bedspread, curtains and drapes, chairs, carpet and throw rugs – they found Justin with Masters’ open suitcase on the bed. Justin sensed it was an awkward moment.

"I've never done this before. I wasn't sure if I was supposed to put your things in the closet and dresser or not. I've seen the bell boys do it on TV but I've never brought anybody's things in like this before."

Masters' endearing, broad smile alleviated the tension.

"It would have been just fine for you to take care of things like that for me, Justin. I appreciate your kind gesture. Since I'm here, why don't we do it together."

Masters recognized a fine opportunity to become acquainted with the young man. Lawrence seemed to understand and excused himself saying.

"I'll come and get you when Sammy – er, Detective Stone – arrives."

Masters turned his attention to the clearly nervous young man.

"So, I understand that you have been employed here for just a short time, Justin."

"Yes, Sir. That's why I'm still so awkward about how do stuff like this."

"That's not a problem. We've all been new at a job at one time or another."

He handed the boy a suit to hang in the closet.

Justin began to relax. This big shot detective didn't seem half as scary as he'd expected. Justin only really understood down to earth folks and it seemed that was going to be Masters' style.

"I can get your things pressed, if you want me to. Wilma's great with a hot iron. She does my uniforms for me."

He extended his arm and sleeve as if to offer proof.

Justin was clearly proud of his chauffeur's uniform – a navy blue, tightly-trousersed, double-breasted, brass buttoned, Neru-collared, uniform. It nearly overwhelmed his slender stature.

"I'll remember that. Let's see if they'll hang out overnight. If not, I'll surely call on you. By the way, does Wilma still make that delectable peach cobbler?"

"Oh, yes Sir. It's my favorite. I'd probably stay here just for that."

He offered a broad, natural grin.

"I can see you and I are going to get on quite well, my

boy.”

Masters’ tone became confidential and he leaned close to Justin.

“Would you believe that I’ve been known to fly clear across country just on the promise there would be piping hot peach cobbler waiting when I got here.”

“Really?”

“Really!”

They continued sorting things into drawers and closet space.

“You can call me Justy if you want to. That’s what everybody calls me, well, everybody but the folks out here. Justin always seems stiff, ya know. These old people are wonderful to me, but they are pretty stiff.”

“Like grandmothers?”

“Exactly! You know, you’re okay, Sir. I guess I shouldn’t have said that. I still get confused on what I should say to who and when I should just keep shut.”

“I’m glad you think I’m okay, Justy. I think you are, too. Why don’t you call me Ray.”

“Oh, I could never do that, Sir. Sarah would hang me out to dry.”

“Okay, then. How about this. When we’re out among the stiff crowd, I’ll be Mr. Masters. When we’re alone together, I’ll be Ray?”

“I can do that, Sir, er Ray. Wow. Thank you, Sir, er Ray. I’ll probably never get this right. I’ve always been a slow learner.”

“You don’t appear to be a slow learner to me. If anything, I’d say just the opposite.”

“How so?”

Justin was clearly stunned though intrigued enough to press it.

“Well, back at the car when you ascertained (Justin’s brow furrowed), when you saw that there was no way I’d ever be able to get out through Maria’s door you immediately came to my rescue. That was quick thinking. And here, during these past few minutes, you watched how I arranged things and you did it exactly the same way. No slow learner could do those things.”

“How about that? You sound a lot like Sammy – Detective Stone. He sort of sponsored me, so I could get this job. Really, he rescued me. I was headed down a really bad path.”

Masters interrupted before the lad could bare his soul prematurely and perhaps regret it later. There would be time for that if it seemed appropriate.

“Tell me about Detective Stone.”

“Well, he’s smarter than he seems to be. (An interestingly defensive way to begin a description of a friend.) I mean he says lots of dumb things and makes really off the wall suggestions but after all’s said and done, he’s pretty smart, I think. Lots of folks think he’s a joke, but he did make detective and that shows he’s not a joke, wouldn’t you say?”

“It would sure seem that way. Is he married?”

“Yes, twice, he says. ‘Married to his job and married to his wife’. I’m not quite sure which takes first place.”

Justin giggled and shook his head. This Stone should at least be entertaining.

“Me and him are a lot alike, I guess. We both do lots of dumb stuff but we never mean to hurt anybody, you know. Dumb just happens for us. He’s helped me learn to laugh at myself. That really helps. I used to take all my mess ups really serious – like they all proved how worthless I was. Now I can mostly smile about them. Oh, I still do my share of dumb stuff, but it’s not the end of the world anymore, you know.”

“Sounds like you’ve already learned one of the most valuable lessons life has to teach. Many folks never do learn not to take their foibles too seriously. (Another furrowed brow). Foible means a weakness or imperfection. We all have them.”

Justin nodded his head.

“Thanks. My vocabulary stinks. That’s why I flunked out of E.M.T. school. I just didn’t know the words in the books. I spent all my time looking them up. After a month, I developed a severe case of dictionary-thumb.”

They both smiled at his humorous reference. Justin was obviously pleased that Masters appreciated his little joke.

“Other than that, did you like E.M.T.?”

“Yeah. I did. It was like I was preparing to do

something really special – really important.”

“And your present job here?”

“It’s okay. I like taking care of the car and getting to drive it. The girls think I’m really something in my uniform and hat you know. I really like fixing stuff. I’ve always been good with my hands like that. Girls don’t seem to like guys with dirty fingernails though.”

“You don’t have a girlfriend, then, I take it?”

“No. Sure wish I did but I don’t.”

“Well, that’ll come in time.” It was a hollow, fully unhelpful comment, but Masters had no idea what to tell the young man. The somewhat awkward silence that followed was broken by Lawrence’s knock on the door.

Justin attended to it.

“Detective Stone, Mr. Masters,” Lawrence announced.

“Hi Sammy,” the young man said enthusiastically. I’d like you to meet my friend, Mr. Raymond Masters.”

The boy beamed a cheek-busting beam as he looked back and forth between the two men.

Masters moved to the door and extended his hand. It was a warm and lingering handshake that he received in return. Masters could tell a lot by how someone shook hands, and warm and lingering was certainly on the positive side of the ledger.

“Good to meet you, Inspector. I’ve heard and read a lot about you. I welcome your help on this one. Can’t understand who in his right mind would want to see Juan Blanco dead, but whoever he is, it doesn’t seem like he’s about to give up.”

“I’m pleased to get to work with you, Detective. Justy, here, makes you out to be some kind of superman.”

An affectionate glance passed between the lad and the policeman.

“I don’t know about that, but I do think it’s time to get upstairs and see what’s been going on. Please come along, Detective.”

“I’ll be right there.”

Masters turned to Justin.

“Thanks for all your help. I’ve enjoyed getting acquainted. Do you suppose you could muster up a sandwich, ham on rye if it’s available – no mustard? I’m

famished.”

“I’ll go kill the pig, myself, Sir,” came Justin’s unexpectedly astute retort. Masters did a second take. Justin grinned and shrugged.

“Sometimes it’s just there.”

It was going to become a good friendship.

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## **Chapter Two**

### **Day One: The Circumstances**

It was a hushed hubbub at the top of the stairs in the wide-open hall outside Juan's bedroom. Dr. Faraday was speaking with the four Ladies of the household – Sarah, Rebecca, Olivia and Maria. Sarah and Rebecca welcomed Masters with ready embraces, clinging to him a bit too long as if to draw some strength from his being. Dr. Faraday introduced himself. Lawrence asked the question:

“Will he be alright?”

“He's a tough old trooper. It looks like he foiled another attempt.”

“Can you give us any more details about what actually took place?” Masters asked.

“Best I can determine, someone laced his sandwich with more barbiturates. Juan was still so weak from the first episode that he tired at the thought of eating and fell asleep after a couple of bites. It was enough to knock him out rapidly and came close to arresting his breathing but he struggled through it. I have him on oxygen now.”

“Can we see him?” Maria asked.

“One at a time and only a few minutes each. If I don't let you in, he'll find a way to come out here. He wants to assure you all that he is okay. His biggest concern is finding out who would want to kill him. He has asked for you repeatedly, Mr. Masters.”

The ladies looked at Masters. He shook his head and motioned them on in first. Without hesitation, Sarah entered the room. The others talked among themselves.



Detective Stone began gathering the usual information. Apparently, it was again, Lawrence who had found Juan.

"I looked in on him and saw the sandwich laying there in the plate on his chest as if he had fallen asleep in mid-bite. When I approached him to clean up the mess, it became clear that his breathing was very shallow. I called for Betty – Juan's nurse. She was out on the veranda relaxing. She said Juan had insisted that she take five while he ate. Dr. Faraday was in the kitchen, preparing to leave. He had already examined Juan and pronounced him fit enough to do anything he felt up to. I called the kitchen on the intercom while Betty did whatever it is nurses do in such cases. Doc arrived on the run within the minute and took over. I believe they pumped his stomach again, but Doc can fill you in on that."

Faraday continued the narrative.

"He had stopped breathing but thanks to Betty's CPR he came back at just about the same time I arrived. Yes, we did pump his stomach. The sandwich lay open on the plate where Lawrence had placed it. It quite clearly had white powder in it. Later I put it in a plastic bag for you, Detective. I assume you'll find that once again it was the drug I've given Juan for pain and the same one that was found in the water glass yesterday."

Betty came out of Juan's room. Maria introduced her to Masters and thanked her again for her quick thinking. Betty looked beat. Dr. Faraday suggested she take an hour and go to her room to rest. He offered to stay. Reluctantly, she accepted but said there was some tidying up she wanted to do first. She went back inside.

"Just who has access to these pills?" Masters asked.

"Virtually anyone in the house. Betty lays out eight pills on his bedside table every morning. Juan knows that's all he dares take during a day's time. The main supply is locked inside a cabinet downstairs in Betty's room."

"Yesterday, was it the pills on his table or pills from the locked supply that had been misused?" Masters asked.

"I don't actually know," Dr. Faraday replied, feeling doltish for not having thought about looking into that earlier. "It appeared to me that Juan had a reasonable number of pills left at the time of the ... whatever you call it ... incident. If he

hadn't I imagine I would have noticed."

"And today?" Masters asked pressing the same line of questioning.

"I'll have to go look."

He entered the bedroom and returned almost immediately.

"I'd have to say the person took pills from the table today. There are only two left and Juan can only remember taking two. His memory is not real great when it comes to things like that. It's why we lay them all out for him every morning. Still, I'd say some are missing."

"How many would it take to kill a man his size?" Masters asked.

"Four taken at all at once would probably do it. Maybe only three. He's so weak and frail."

"Aren't you afraid Juan might be tempted to take them himself and escape his pain permanently?" Masters asked, again wishing the question had not needed to have been asked.

"Not really, but then what if he did?"

Faraday sighed and his voice trailed off as a single, unguarded, tear slowly made its way down his face. He turned away, his Hippocratic Oath unashamedly tarnished. The silence suggested there was an unspoken agreement with that premise among those in the hall.

Into that silence came Justin, with the largest ham sandwich Masters had ever seen. He went over to the old detective and offered the plate, which was enthusiastically accepted.

In a hushed tone that matched the mood of the group, Justin asked how Juan was doing. Reassured that he was okay, the young man sighed and nodded, plainly relieved and happy at the report.

Sarah came out of the room and related that Juan had fallen asleep. Impatient to the point of agitation, Olivia insisted on taking her turn regardless. After some discussion among the ladies, she went into the room as Betty came out and went down stairs. Several minutes passed. Masters was talking with Sarah about the threatening letter. Stone was questioning Maria about the night before. Doctor Faraday was

renewing himself a few steps away on the veranda. The veranda was accessed through a set of French doors at the opposite end of the hall from the stairway.

Olivia came screaming out of the room.

“He stopped breathing! He stopped breathing!”

“Doctor!” Masters called with calm authority. “Come quickly, please!”

Masters entered the room and removed the wet pillow from beneath Juan’s head in preparation for Dr. Faraday to administer CPR. Within seconds, the doctor was doing just that. Stone assisted, being more up to date on such procedures than were any of the rest of them. A long minute later Faraday proclaimed, “He’s back, folks. He’s back!”

Olivia turned and ran out of the room. Maria followed to console her. At Masters’ suggestion, Sarah and Rebecca also left.

“Detective, I think we need to set up a twenty-four-hour watch schedule in this room,” Masters declared.

“Raymond! You son of a gun! Nobody told me you had arrived.”

Those were Juan’s first, faint words as he opened his eyes to the imposing figure of his old friend. He seemed oblivious to his most recent traumas.

Masters turned his attention to Juan.

“You didn’t think I’d miss the big party, did you?”

Masters took Juan’s hand and held it firmly.

Juan looked puzzled. “Party?”

“Yes. The party you’re going to throw to welcome me back to La Musica.”

“Oh. That party. The one with dancing girls and fountains of champagne. Of course! I suppose you also expect peach cobbler.”

“Most certainly.”

They chuckled, quietly. Masters leaned down and embraced his old friend. It was as if Juan didn’t want to let go, but did, perhaps out of sheer exhaustion.

“I’m tired, Raymond. Come back in an hour and we’ll get caught up on things, Okay?”

“Okay. In an hour.”

“I’ll take the first watch,” Stone suggested to Masters,

out of earshot of Juan. "You go do that snooping you're so famous for."

Amused at the directive, Masters agreed. Outside, he motioned Dr. Faraday into the privacy of the veranda.

"Did you notice something strange about the way Juan's face appeared just now?"

"You mean the indentations, like the sleep lines a person has first thing in the morning from having slept on a wrinkled pillowcase?"

"Yes, Sir. That's exactly what I meant. Do you recall if they were there earlier?"

"Not to my recollection. Betty will remember. Perhaps Sarah."

"Any connection between that kind of feature and anything that's happening with Juan medically?"

"None."

"And the whites of his eyes – bloodshot?"

"Hard to say about that with all he's been through. I'll check it out with Betty. She has the best handle on such things".

"May I impose on you to take some surface scrapings from inside his mouth and nose?" Masters asked.

"I see where you're headed. Certainly. I better do that immediately."

"Thank you. There is one more thing, Doctor. I'm still concerned about the apparent, ready, availability of the drugs that have been misused in this case. Do you have any other ideas on that matter?"

The doctor thought for a moment.

"Not about the availability. Obviously, they're right there on his bedside table. People are in and out of his room all day long. Virtually anybody could take them, one at a time, I suppose. It never crossed my mind that would be a concern in this home. To get them from Betty they'd first have to gain access to her room and then be skilled in picking small locks like the one on her cabinet."

"Yes. That's pretty much what I thought, too," Masters said. "Well, thanks again."

Dr. Faraday turned to leave and then turned back toward Masters.

“This may not be related – probably isn’t, in fact, but you said ‘any thoughts’.”

“Go on.”

“Well, you know the boy, Justin – the new chauffeur?”

“Yes, I’ve just met him.”

“Well, he’s always and forever asking me medical questions. It seems to be his passion. I don’t mind. In fact, I rather enjoy it. He seems to have a quick mind and every answer seems to raise additional questions. That’s beside the point, I suppose. What I was leading up to was that several weeks ago, he asked me point blank what the lethal dose would be for Juan’s medicine. It was just part of one of our lengthy conversations over dinner and I didn’t place any special importance on it at the time. If anything, I guess I interpreted it as his being concerned about Juan taking too many. In light of the past few days, however – well you did say ‘any thoughts’.”

“Yes, I did. I appreciate the information. I’ll keep it in mind.”

Faraday returned to Juan’s room. As the doctor left, Lawrence joined Masters out on the veranda. The two men stood silently, surveying the view of the court yard below – the deep blue of the pool, the wide white brick walkway surrounding it and the red tile roofs on either side looking very much like a large horseshoe, open end toward them. Sarah’s and Maria’s apartments were on the left – Olivia’s and Rebecca’s on the right. Across the rear was the five-car garage and workshop capped by Justin’s apartment on the East and Lawrence’s on the West. Rows of tall palm trees provided a backdrop separating the house from the city skyline beyond. From the outside, it surely appeared like a great white fortress: from the inside, an inviting, serene oasis.

“It is a beautiful view, isn’t it,” Masters said at last.

“It is that. As often as Juan and I have sat here playing, I never fail to appreciate the beauty.”

Silence.

“Where is your son, Carlos, these days?” Masters asked, making small talk.

“Actually, he’s here. He arrived late Wednesday night. He’s on his way to New Orleans. I imagine he’ll leave

tomorrow. You can never tell with Carlos.”

“Where does he call home, these days?”

“New York City. He’s been there most of his life. It’s where his mother lives. They’re pretty close in a cat and mouse sort of way. That may or may not be good.”

Masters overlooked the editorial.

“I forget what he does for a living.”

“So do I,” Lawrence said, as if trying to make light of the situation but telegraphing more than a little displeasure. “I mean, there’s no telling. I think he said he’s selling satellite dishes. Maybe it was security systems or safes. I’m really not sure. He’s done about everything at one time or another.”

More silence.

“How well do you know the nurse – Betty, is it?”

“Yes, Betty. Not real well, I guess. She’s been here a few months. She came when Juan began needing more specialized care than the rest of us could give him. We old codgers wore down in a hurry, I’m afraid. She seems both tireless and efficient. She can handle Juan – probably better at making him follow Doc’s orders than the rest of us. She’s real pleasant. Fits in pretty well around here. Pitches right in wherever she’s needed. We’ll probably ask her to stay on to be here for the rest of us after . . . well you know.”

His lower jaw trembled and he looked away.

Masters thought it best to keep him talking.

“What do you know about her past?”

“Not much, I guess. Dora will know. You can believe that! She must have interviewed a dozen nurses before recommending Betty. I think these attempts on Juan’s life really have Dora upset. It’s like she and Betty both feel responsible or something.”

“Of course.”

“No. It’s more than that. I mean I think the last patient Betty cared for was murdered.”

“My goodness! I see what you mean, then,” Masters said, tweaking his ever-rebellious moustache.

There was again a period of silence.

“The caterer will have dinner ready at five,” Lawrence added as if taking his turn at keeping the conversation alive. “We eat early around here. The ladies like to spend long

evenings in their apartments.”

Masters extricated his pocket watch from the overloaded depths of his front, right pocket. It was already going on two o'clock. The talk of dinner reminded him that he still had the largest portion of that ham sandwich waiting for him somewhere. He excused himself and went back into the hall. The sandwich was on the credenza across from Juan's room, next to the door to the studio. The others had abandoned the area. Masters began making his way down the wide, gently curving staircase to the living room. Justin, back into jeans and a tee shirt, was on a stepladder changing light bulbs in the recessed trough near the ceiling.

“I'm not sure I thanked you for the sandwich,” Masters said, raising it as if in a toast to all things delicious. “Truly magnificent!” His deep, baritone, voice emphasized his sincerity.

“Thanks. I slapped it together myself. Didn't know if you liked lettuce and mayo so I just put a little of 'em on it.”

“Remember the recipe. We'll do it again.”

Justin grinned and climbed down the ladder.

“I understand the caterer will be arriving soon,” Masters said.

“Yeah. Four times a week like clockwork. In at 4:30 out at 6:30.”

“Who all eats together on those occasions?”

“All of us. Juan insists. He says nobody's any better than anybody else around here, so we all eat together. I've never been included like that before. It's like I'm finally getting to have a family but now . . .”

The rest of the words didn't come. He meant, of course, that he wondered if it would all be over for him once Juan died.

“According to Maria, they couldn't survive around here without you, Justy.”

“Really? She said that?”

“Really! She said that!” Masters assured.

Justin bobbed his head around as if to say, ‘cool’.

“Is there anything I can do for you, Sir, - er, Ray?”

“He looked around to make sure his informal address had not been overheard by anyone.

“Have you seen Carlos?”

“He likes to be called Carl. Yeah. He was in the pool when I came from my room a few minutes ago.”

“Thanks. I think I’ll go say hello. I haven’t seen him since he was a little boy.”

Justin was moved to add a personal commentary.

“Him being a friend of yours I probably shouldn’t say this, but I’ve just never known anyone before who seemed so angry all the time. There’s no pleasing him. Just now when I walked by him he gave me the finger and called me a perverted, money grubbing, young gigolo. He had no call to do that. I do my best to do everything he asks of me. Last night I fixed a tear in his golf bag with duct tape. It’s not permanent but it’ll keep him from losing a club. You know, I can’t ever remember seeing an old man giving anybody the finger, before. He’s just bad news if you ask me.”

“No, he didn’t have any reason to do that and yes, I realize he’s a pretty angry man. You’re a good judge of human nature.”

Justin shrugged.

“It doesn’t take much talent to figure where he’s coming from.”

“Oh?”

“M-O-N-E-Y! He only shows up around here when he needs money. I even overheard Lawrence admit that to Juan once.”

“Too bad. That must make Lawrence feel rather downhearted.”

“I suppose Lawrence loves him – he is his son – but he’s got Carl’s number. I doubt if he gets a dime this trip.”

Masters made his way out of the living room, across the dining room and through the French doors that led out into the pool area. It was deserted. He took a seat and enjoyed the last few bites of his sandwich. Masters didn’t take food lightly. He savored every morsel.

He was certain that the samples from Juan’s mouth and nose would contain lint and perhaps feather down from the pillow. The man’s breathing had stopped, all right, but not on its own. Masters was convinced he had been smothered – a third unsuccessful attempt on Juan’s life. The impressions on



his face and the condition of his eyes told the tale. In his weakened condition the most fragile resident could have held him down long enough to have done the deed.

There could be only two suspects – Betty who was in the room alone with him before Olivia entered and Olivia who was there after Betty left. Masters seldom gave any possible suspect the benefit of the doubt, but he did tend to discount Olivia – she obviously loved Juan dearly. That left Betty. When Dora returned to work on Monday, he would examine the nurse’s background more thoroughly. He would also look into Juan’s financial arrangements – trusts, the will, things like that. As much as he liked the lad, Masters sensed the ring of a con man in young Justin. He’d talk with Stone about the boy’s background.

Masters would need to establish the whereabouts of all the players at the times of each attack. Lawrence had found Juan the first two times. That could put him toward the top of the list of suspects. However, during the third attempt, he was in the hall with Masters as were Sarah, Rebecca, Maria, Justin and Dr. Faraday. Wilma was off for the afternoon and evening. During the second attempt, Maria and Justin were in the limo with Masters

His thoughts were interrupted as Sarah joined him. Masters rose to greet her. She pulled up a deck chair and they sat.

“How are you doing, Sarah?” Masters asked compassionately.

“Pretty shaky, I guess. It’s like some kind of a nightmare. We’re all just exhausted. None of us have slept in two days. We can’t think straight anymore.”

“I can only imagine how draining it must be. Are you up to helping me fill in some blind spots?”

“Sure. At least I’ll try. It’s better to feel helpful than helpless, I suppose.”

“You’re aware, of course, that in a case like this everyone who has access to the victim is going to be a potential suspect in the eyes of the police.”

“I hadn’t thought about it, but yes, I suppose so.” She paused and looked him in the eye. “Surely you don’t suspect any of us here at La Musica, do you, Raymond?”

“It’s my job to be as objective as possible. It’s as important to clear you as to accuse you.”

“You’re right, of course.”

Masters had again – and not unexpectedly – sidestepped a direct question without ruffling any feathers.

“I need to know where everyone was during each of the attempts on Juan. Let’s begin with the first. Tell me whatever you can remember about that time.”

“Well, let’s see. Dr. Faraday was just leaving Juan as I went in to say good morning. It was about seven am - perhaps seven fifteen – that was Saturday morning. Doc drops in here every morning before he does rounds at the hospital – it’s just two blocks due west of here. Betty was with them. I told Betty to go get herself a cup of coffee – that I’d stay with Juan for a while.

“Juan and I talked like we do every morning. He said that he felt fairly strong and he wanted to get dressed. He went into the bathroom and returned in about fifteen minutes, shaved and dressed and looking good. Apparently, all the moving about had been more painful than he had expected. It always is. He took one of his pain pills. I handed him the glass of water. I guess Betty had already poured it from the pitcher of ice water on the bed stand. Then he made a strange request. He asked if I’d close the drapes. It was too bright. He always loved the morning light, but I did as he asked.

“Anyway, he had just taken a couple of sips – enough to get the pill down – when Betty returned with her coffee and a glass of orange juice for him. He put down the water and began sipping at the juice. He asked me to tell Lawrence that he felt like playing - to have him drop by about 8:30. That was earlier than usual by several hours. I left soon after that. He had lain back down on the bed. I went back toward Lawrence’s apartment – it’s clear back over the garage, you know. He and Carlos were in the pool. That Carlos gives me the creeps. He has a great body for a guy in his late fifties, I’ll give him that: Too bad he has such a lousy personality. I gave Lawrence the message and went back to the kitchen to rustle up some breakfast. Wilma had bacon and sausage ready and fixed me an egg. I know it’s not old people’s food, but what

fun is it to be alive if you can't enjoy yourself."

Masters nodded his agreement.

"Did you see Justin at that time?"

"Not then. He always swims laps early in the morning - usually from 5:30 to 6:00. He swims nude so gets it over before he thinks the rest of us are up and about.

"And Saturday morning?"

"Oh yes. He was in the pool on schedule."

"You dirty old lady, Sarah. You peak at him, don't you?" Masters quipped, reaching out and rapping her on the arm, playfully admonishing her.

"Hey! Just because I'm old, doesn't mean I've given up my fantasy life! Justin's the only thing left around here that even faintly resembles a hunk. Anyway, he wouldn't care if we all gathered on bleachers to watch. For all his shyness about things in general, he doesn't seem to be the modest type. I even think he gets a kick out of it. It's no secret we watch him. There aren't many secrets around here. For all I know, Juan may pay him to parade around in his birthday suit just to entertain us girls."

They smiled again.

"Wait," she said, cocking her head. "I did see him later. He came down the outside stairs from his room and went into the garage. He usually washes the cars early in the day before we start making demands on him for this and that."

"I brought my breakfast out here on a tray to eat by the pool. Lawrence and Carlos were gone when I returned. I saw their wet prints trailing off toward his apartment. That's when I saw Justin, like I said. When I finished my coffee, I went over to the chaise lounge there, to try and take a nap. At 81 it takes a lot of naps to get through a day - especially now."

"I was awakened by Justin shortly after 8:30, I guess it was, when he told me about Juan's problem. He'd been fixing a wall switch in the hall when Lawrence found Juan. Faraday and the E.M.T.'s arrived a few minutes later - Betty had called them immediately. We all thought Juan had just finally come to the end of his struggle. Then Faraday noticed something peculiar about the glass - white residue around the rim - and he called Detective Stone. He arrived about 9:00."

"You hadn't noticed anything strange about the glass

earlier?" Masters asked.

"No. I wish I had. I probably wouldn't have known anything was wrong even if I had seen something."

"Any idea where the other ladies were early that morning?" Masters asked.

"Maria sleeps late – we usually don't see her until after nine. I hadn't seen her Saturday morning until I went and told her the bad news. That would have been a few minutes before nine, I guess. She was still in her gown and robe. I'm not sure where Olivia was. She usually goes for an early morning walk alone around the inside of the compound. She's worn a regular cow path along the wall. She was in the kitchen when she got the word from Justin. I don't remember about Rebecca, either. The first time I saw her was in the hall outside Juan's room. Lawrence was consoling her by the door to the veranda."

"And Dora?"

"Dora lives in town. She doesn't come in on Saturday or Sunday anymore unless it's for something special. Lawrence called her after things had settled down and we were sure Juan was going to be all right. She offered to come out but Lawrence assured her there was no need for that."

"When did you first learn that Faraday's suspicion about drugs in the glass had been confirmed?"

"That would have been around 10:00 – maybe 10.30. Detective Stone got a call from the lab. He told Faraday and Faraday told the rest of us. Later he told Juan. That's when we decided to call you."

"May I ask whose idea that was?" Masters asked

"Originally, I think it was Lawrence's, actually. He said something like; 'Do you suppose we should call Raymond?' We all looked at one another and immediately agreed."

"So," Masters began to summarize, "Wilma was in the kitchen. Lawrence and Carlos were in the pool. Olivia was probably out walking. You were in and out of Juan's room, out here by the pool, into the kitchen and then out here by the pool again. Betty was with Juan except for her short coffee break and Dora was in town. Justin had returned to his own room after swimming and then, while you were eating went down into the garage. You're not sure about Rebecca."

“Yes. That’s the way I remember it. Oh, and Dr. Faraday was there with Juan earlier.”

“Are you up to running through the second attempt?”

“Sure! I anticipated questions once you arrived so I took an extra dose of ginkgo biloba this noon.”

Masters was intrigued by Sarah’s uncharacteristic exhibition of humor. Perhaps it was her way of dealing with the events – perhaps something else.

“Well, let’s begin then. Had either Maria or Justin been in Juan’s room Sunday before they left to pick me up at the airport?”

“I don’t think so. Like I said, Maria sleeps late and Justin just never goes up there unless Juan calls him for some reason. I’d been in to say good morning about nine. Faraday came about ten. On Sundays, he makes his hospital rounds late and he usually stops off here afterward. Wilma feeds him breakfast and Justin keeps his coffee cup full while he picks his brain about medical information.”

“Medical information?”

“Justin seems to be a frustrated doctor at heart. He’s constantly asking questions about things he sees the paramedics doing on TV. That kind of thing is what I meant.”

“Did they talk Sunday morning?”

“I believe they did. Yes, I’m pretty sure they did.”

“Okay. Go on.”

“Well, again, Juan said he was feeling good and again asked for Lawrence - he was to come by about noon. I delivered the message. Lawrence was playing across the hall from Juan’s room in the studio. Apparently, Juan called down on the intercom for Wilma to fix him a sandwich - cheese and lettuce on sourdough bread. It’s long been his favorite. I’m sure it’s not on his list of approved foods but what the hell! Wilma was bringing it to him when Rebecca met her at the bottom of the stairs. She took the plate as she was on her way up to see him. Rebecca said Juan was sitting up on the bed looking over some old arrangements. He said he wanted to eat out on the veranda and Betty helped him get situated out there. As he ate, he and Rebecca talked. After a few minutes, she left.

“He tired in a hurry, according to Betty. Now it seems it

may have been the drug overdose. Anyway, Betty helped him back into his bed and propped him up. He still wanted the sandwich so she put the plate on his lap where he could easily reach it. Then she said she returned to the veranda while Juan slept.”

“That would have been at about what time, Sarah?”

“About 11:30 - give or take ten minutes, I guess. Maria, Olivia and I were all in the living room watching church services on TV - we hardly ever go to church anymore. Of course, Rebecca never did. TV makes it easier for us. That was from eleven to twelve. Rebecca came in and joined us at about 11:30. We were surprised at that to say the least.

“But, I need to back up. At about 11:15 Justin came in to get Maria to go pick you up. She insisted it be her who went to get you.”

“And they met me at 12:30. Amazingly, the plane was on time. We got back here at 1:25. What took place between 11:15 and 1:25?”

“Let’s see. Lawrence found Juan at noon and Faraday and the paramedics were here almost immediately – no later than 12:15, I’d say. Betty had been working on Juan and I guess had saved his life. Somebody called Stone – I don’t know who did that. Then you arrived around 1:30 like you said and Stone must have arrived just a bit after that.”

“Let me back up, Sarah. How does the water pitcher in Juan’s room get filled?”

“Wilma leaves the pitcher of fresh ice-water and several clean glasses on the table outside Juan’s door. She leaves one about six am, one at noon and another about five.”

“What hours is Betty usually with Juan?”

“No set hours. Usually not at night after dinner. She goes in about six am – Juan’s still an early riser. Then she’s just in and out all day as he needs her or as she needs to make sure he’s taken his medicine. She takes his vitals a half dozen times a day and gives him shots three times, I think it is.”

“Who recommended Betty in the first place?”

“I believe it was Dr. Faraday. Dora interviewed an interminable number of folks – she always goes overboard on things like that. She and Juan settled on Betty mostly, I think,

because Doc had used her services before and seemed very pleased with her work. I think she was a great choice. She fits in well, around here. I'd personally like to see her stay on. She does as much for the rest of us some days as she does for Juan."

"It sounds like she was a good choice," Masters agreed.

"There is something else, since we're backing up," Sarah said.

"Oh, what's that?"

"We've had a prowler the past few nights."

"Prowler?"

"Yes. Olivia and I have both seen him. She scared him off the other morning while she was out on her morning walk. He disappeared behind the garage when he saw her. We didn't think much of it. Every so often, some teenagers take a notion to come and take a dip in the pool at night."

"You said you also saw the prowler?"

"Yes. I was out on the porch at about two or three in the morning – I couldn't sleep so I went out to sit and watch the stars for a while. I saw a man – well, I assume it was a man – messing around by the trellis."

"Which trellis?"

"The one on the outside wall there beyond the entry to the pool from the living room."

"Does it extend to the second floor?"

"Yes. That's what's so troubling. A person could climb up and get onto the veranda by Juan's room."

"Can you be more specific about what night that was?"

"Last Thursday I think – yes, early Friday morning, actually. You'll have to ask Olivia about what day she saw him. It may have been the day before."

"It sounds like you think it was the same person both times."

"I just assumed that. That may not be accurate."

"Could you tell anything about how this prowler looked?"

"He was wearing black sweats. I shined my flashlight on him hoping to scare him off. Thank goodness it did. I don't suppose that was a very bright thing to have done."

“Did you see his face?”

“Yes, but he was so far away I couldn’t really make out anything about him.”

“What did you do about it?”

“Nothing, really. I just figured that was probably how the kids get over the roof and into the pool. We’d all been puzzled about how they did that.”

“But now you think it might not have just been a kid?”

“Well, I can’t be sure. Maybe yes. Maybe no. All I know is that there’s no one at La Musica who’s an enemy of Juan. So, it must be someone from outside.”

“You think it may be the prowler who has been making the attacks on Juan?”

“Who else could it be?”

“What about the caterers? You say they’re here on which days?”

“Tuesday, Thursday, Friday and Sunday. Monday, Wednesday and Saturday Wilma prepares dinner.”

“So, they would have left early Friday evening before the first attempt on Saturday morning.”

“That’s right.”

“And they will be here a little later on today?”

“Yes. Their timing doesn’t seem to coincide with the attempts, though does, it?”

“Not on the surface at least.” Masters said, leaving the matter open. “I suppose there might have been some way for one of them to lace a glass with drugs on Friday night. Perhaps something could have been placed in the cheese or lettuce in the same way – the night before.”

“Is there anyone else around here who likes that kind of a sandwich?”

“No, just Juan. He likes sharp cheddar and sourdough bread. None of the rest of us like either of those.”

“The drinking glasses Juan uses – I assume they go directly up to his room from the kitchen.”

“Yes, like I said, some clean ones with each pitcher.”

“From the shelf in the kitchen, to the tray left outside his room. That gives a whole lot of folks a whole lot of opportunity to tamper with them.”

Masters shifted his focus.



“Fill me in on this Jerry Johnson. For the life of me, I can’t remember about him.”

“You probably never had reason to know about him. He was a two-bit guitarist with an incredible talent for arranging. Juan encouraged him and from time to time gave him specific assignments.”

Masters noticed none of the uneasiness that Maria had demonstrated when asked the same question. He shook his head.

“I have all of Juan’s records and I just don’t recall that name.”

“I’m not sure he ever used Jerry’s arrangements when he recorded. Juan always said that recordings are more intimate than concert hall performances. He and Lawrence did most of their recording arrangements themselves.”

“I see. Well that explains it then. And the recent letter? You had just begun telling me about it upstairs when Juan encountered his last problem.

Sarah shifted in her chair uneasily.

“Well, it was just out and out extortion. He made the choice quite clear – \$250,000 or Juan’s life.”

“There had been phone calls before that – between Juan and Jerry?” Masters asked.

“The conversation I had with Jerry last week led me to believe that. I’m not sure how many or when. I assume several before I intercepted one, but I can’t be sure.”

“So, you aren’t certain if he had spoken directly to Juan about it?”

“I thought so, but I can’t be one hundred percent certain, no. I told Jerry about Juan’s health problems thinking that might make him back off but two days later the letter arrived.”

“You still have the letter, I assume.”

“Yes. It’s in my room. Shall I get it?”

“I’ll look at it later. I’m sure Detective Stone will want to examine it. Did you notice the postmark?”

“Yes. New York City.”

“And it arrived by regular mail?”

“Yes, it did, last Monday. I haven’t discussed it with Juan and I don’t think it’s a good idea. It’ll just upset him so.”

“I can understand that,” Masters said. “Has Juan mentioned Jerry lately?”

“Not that I know of. None of the other girls have brought it up.”

Masters smiled to himself at Sarah’s repeated use of the word ‘girls’. But then, inside his own head he was still only eighteen so he figured they could just as well be girls.

“You’ve been a fountain of useful information, Sarah – well, you and your gingko whatever it was.”

Masters’ playful remark rated only a faint smile from Sarah. He rose to his feet, kissed her on her make-up free cheek and excused himself.

Inside, he met Detective Stone at the bottom of the stairs.

“Detective. Do you have time for us to compare notes?”

“Sure do. I was just coming to find you. Why don’t we sit at the card table in the living room? It’s light and bright over by the windows.”

The card table was not your run-of-the-mill, Wall-Mart, fold-up, tubular metal variety. It was an over-sized, six-sided, dark wooden table with thick, tapering, angular legs and a marble inlay top. The chairs matched in style and bulk, with backs and seats upholstered in brown leather with burnished gold tacks.

‘Finally, a chair that fits me in all dimensions,’ Masters thought to himself as he eased into its complete comfort – taking time to enjoy the uncommon experience.

“Where do we start?” Stone asked suggesting that he had deferred leadership in the case to Masters.

“How about making a list of the things we need to find out?”

“Sounds good. Sounds good.”

Out came his pocket-sized yellow pad and ballpoint pen.

Detective Stone had that never-quite-put-together look about his person. The green and orange Hawaiian shirt on anyone else would have been fine – gaudy, perhaps, but fine. On Stone, the collar stood up on one side and the rest of it sagged and stretched in odd places. His lime green pants

bagged in front and stretched to near splitting in back. His black hair, though neatly cut, was plastered back with oil giving it a Brillcream sheen right out of the 1950's. Clusters of matted hair became disarranged and hung here and there comically. Short and slender in stature, he possessed a head more suitable in size for a man much taller. A gaunt, red-nosed face and a wart on his chin added to the caricature, which, unfortunately, made it hard to take him seriously.

His unkempt appearance hid a good mind, which was, however, prone to mystifying correlations and unpredictable side trips. He was as conscientious as they came, however: eager and energetic by nature, and took notes in longhand at an incredible rate of speed.

Stone was at the ready as Masters began.

"I'm sure that much of this you've probably already attended to."

"We'll see. We'll see." Stone's eagerness to begin overflowed.

"Did you test the water in the pitcher as well as that in the glass?"

"Yes, Sir. The water in the pitcher was clear as a whistle on a summer's day."

"How about the juice glass."

"Ditto! Nothing! Nada! Clean!"

"How about prints on the water glass?"

"Only Senior Blanco's."

"Are you sure? Sarah said she handed it to him and Wilma would have put it onto the tray."

"I'll have it double-checked but the lab boys said it was clean."

"No. I'm sure they know what they found. We just have to account for its appearance."

"Must account for water glasses appearance. Got it!"

"Did you check the cheddar cheese and lettuce in the kitchen for drugs?"

"No, Sir. Good thinking. Which cheese?"

"The sharp cheddar. Wilma can point it out. Probably should go ahead and check the lettuce and sourdough bread as well, if they are still around."

"Got it. I'll get the boys on it right away."

“We need a thorough background check on several people. Betty for starters: Who she worked for previously; Why she left; The health and wellbeing of her patients at the time of her leaving – Well, you know the kind of thing.”

“Yes, Sir. Who else?”

“Lawrence’s son, Carlos Munro – he goes by Carl, I believe.”

“Carlos AKA Carl Munro – background check. Got it?”

“Now, Detective, what can you tell me about Justin?”

“Justy? Do you suspect Justy?”

“I suspect everyone and no one, Detective.”

“Yes. I suppose so. Everyone and no one. Let me put that down . . . Well, Justin. He grew up here in West Haven with a single mother. She’s a cleaning lady. Never really wanted a kid the way I see it. He has no idea who his father is. I doubt if she does either. Justy was out on the streets when he was still filling his diapers. There’s no right crowd on the streets, you know. He drifted from one bad bunch to another. He was always a shy kid. Scared, I’d say. Never fit in because he really didn’t like to do the stuff the street crowd was into. When I came across him he was fourteen and still didn’t smoke or do drugs. How much more out of place in the street crowd could a kid be than that? I figure he’s still . . . how shall I say this . . . without firsthand knowledge of intimate man-woman relations.”

“What first brought him to your attention?”

“He was picked up by a beat cop because he was out collecting door to door for the Soldier’s and Sailor’s Widow’s Fund.”

“No such fund?”

“Right – no such fund – at least not one he was connected to legitimately. Apparently, he’d been pulling that scam for several years. He was pretty well organized about it. He kept a list of which houses contributed and went back a couple times a year. He was raking in close to a thousand dollars every three months.”

“An enterprising young man!”

“An enterprising young con man with a wonderful smile, big brown puppy dog eyes and a line so polished he made me want to contribute even though I knew what he was up to.”

"It sounds like you sort of adopted the boy," Masters said.

"I saw a lot of myself in him, I guess. I grew up on the streets of Miami. I got him a job at Sebastian's Gym as a locker room boy. He began taking better care of himself – keeping clean – doing a little bodybuilding – never wanted to be a Swartzmanfager, just look well-toned, you know?"

"He seems to have achieved that, from what I understand from Sarah," Masters said.

"Oh, yes. He's proud of himself in that way. He stayed in school. I was there at his graduation. His mother wasn't. That day he asked me if I'd seen her there. I almost cried. He just shrugged his shoulders and turned on that cover-all-unhappiness-grin of his.

"After that I helped him get into an E.M.T. training program. He couldn't or wouldn't cut it. When Billy was ready to retire out here – Billy had been a cop for thirty years – that's how I knew him – I talked to Senior Blanco about the position. He has a soft spot for kids like Justy. I guess he started out about the same way. Bottom line, he gave Justy a one-month tryout and he's been here ever since. But, Justy wouldn't have any motive to want Senior Blanco dead – would he?"

"I guess that was going to be my next question for you. Who's he the closest to around here?"

"He talks a lot about Lawrence. Lawrence seems to go out of his way for Justy. He's also close to Dr. Faraday – always pestering him about some medical question."

"What about the ladies?"

"Wilma, I'd say. He helps her with the dishes and some of the heavy cleaning. That's not in his job description, mind you. He just likes to keep busy. I think he really likes to be helpful, too."

"The ex's?"

"Oh, he's really nice to all of them. Pampers them, I'd say. He gets a kick out them – calls them his gaggle – I guess that's a herd of geese. They all respond well to him, I think. He gets a hoot out of showing them his physique in the morning at the pool – and I mean his complete physique if you get my drift."

The exaggerated wink was right out of I Love Lucy.

“Yes, Sarah mentioned he got the ladies’ full attention early in the day.”

“Actually, it was Juan's suggestion – maybe requirement you could say.”

Masters moved on.

“But, you’d not say he’s closer to one of them to any other.”

“No. That may be partly because of the advice I gave him when he came out here.”

Stone just left it hanging as if he had no intention of clarifying his statement.

“And what advice was that?” Masters asked, teasing out the meaning.

“Advice? Oh yes. Well, I told him that when a rooster wants to get along in the hen house he plays no favorites.”

The analogy was a bit obtuse but Masters got the point, and the fact that he did, amused him in one of those shake your head and gently snort sort of ways. Apparently, Justin had got it also, and it seemed to be working!

“What you seem to be saying is that you don’t know any reason Justin might be involved in these attempts?”

“That’s right. He makes good money – great money, actually. Senior Blanco has been very generous with Justin. Everyone here treats him very well. He gets to drive fancy cars, wear a flashy uniform and fix things – It’s like heaven for him here.”

“You’d say he’s put his troubled past behind him, then?”

“Yes. I’m sure of it. The biggest scrapes he got into as a boy were things he was being paid to do – steal a VCR for a fence, make deliveries for the hoods, case stores and homes for thieves.”

“Do you think he’s beyond taking money for criminal activities at this point in his life?”

Stone paused and looked Masters in the eye.

“I think so. I hadn’t really thought about it in that light. He’s cut most of those old cords.”

“Most of them?”

“He still plays pool with Mack Foster’s son, Freddie. I don’t think they’re really buddies. They just play pool together on occasion.”

“This Mack Foster?”

“A local small time hood with Miami and Atlanta connections; maybe a few to New York City. Reportedly, he mostly does odd jobs for the big boys. Like they say, he’s strictly peanuts in the elephant’s cage.”

Masters wasn’t aware that was what “they” said, but he got the idea.

“Do you have any reason to think any of those big boys might have it in for Juan?”

“Hadn’t thought about it. There was a rumor – oh, twenty years ago, or more – that Juan got some Don’s daughter pregnant. It just faded away so I never took it seriously. Gosh! He’d have been sixty years old at the time. With Senior Blanco rumors like that surfaced every few months.”

“Well, you might nose around about things like that. See if anything comes up.”

“Yes Sir – nose around ... comes up. Got it.”

“Is there some way to check flight manifests for the past week to see if a Jerry Johnson flew in or out of the area? I know that’s a lot of airports to cover, given the geography of this area.”

“It’s not such a problem in this day of computer networks. I’ll see what I can do.”

“Most likely Johnson’s flight would have originated out of the New York City area.”

“What’s the connection?”

It was Stone’s first question of merit.

“Extortion, it appears. He made a written threat against Juan’s life if he didn’t pay \$250,000.”

“He actually wrote that in a signed letter?” Stone asked, clearly stunned.

That would be question of merit number two, for those who are keeping track!

“That seems strange, doesn’t it,” Masters said. “You’d think that even the greenest extortionist would know not to sign his name to a threat.”

“I’ll need to see that letter,” Stone said.

“Of course. Actually, I haven’t seen it yet, myself. Sarah has it in her apartment. They haven’t told Juan about it

and I agree that for the time being there's no good reason to bother him with it. Have you heard anything back from the lab about those samples taken from Juan's mouth and nose?"

"No. There's hardly been time."

"I suppose. I just don't like the idea of having two prime suspects walking around here freely until we rule out a suffocation attempt."

"You mean, Betty and Olivia?"

Stone seemed surprised at Masters' apparent accusation.

"Look at the facts. They were the only two with opportunity – other than Doctor Faraday, of course."

"Whatever would their motives be?" Stone asked, clearly puzzled.

"What would anyone's motive be?" Masters began, suggesting the magnitude of the problem. "First thing Monday morning we need to go over Juan's legal matters with Dora – his financial situation – trust funds for the ex-wives or others – his will – things like that."

"Dora will have it all at her fingertips. She's the best organized lawyer that I've ever known," Stone offered.

Masters' face registered surprise.

"Lawyer, did you say?"

"Yes. Didn't you know? Juan hired her fresh out of law school. She was some kind of a whiz kid herself – got her law degree when she was twenty or so. She's just what he's needed around here. Can't be easy keeping this menagerie running smoothly."

'Menagerie' seemed an appropriate term – just one Masters had not expected to hear cross Detective Stone's lips. He was indeed a unique mixture of brains and bumble.

Maria peeked around the corner as if in search of something. It was actually, someone.

"There you are Detective Stone. I came as soon as I got your call."

"Call? What call? You're supposed to be sitting with Senior Blanco. Who's with him?"

"Well, no one. Like you said in your call, he would just be alone for a minute. But I thought you said to meet you in the kitchen. When you weren't there I just began a room to



room search. I'm sorry I misunderstood."

"Maria. It wasn't me who called you," Stone said, excitedly.

He glanced at Masters. They rose to their feet in unison and moved quickly to the stairs.

"Did I do something wrong?" Maria called, trailing after them.

"Don't worry about it. Just please phone 911 and get Faraday," Masters called back over his shoulder.

Doing anything quickly – outside of the confines of his mind, that is – was an impossibility for the imposing figure of Raymond Masters. Detective Stone darted ahead up the stairs. By the time Masters had arrived, Stone had already begun taking the necessary steps.

Juan was in bed, unconscious but breathing. His arms and legs had been taped to the bedrailing. His mouth and nose had been taped shut. Stone had removed the duct tape from his face. He explained:

"The tape over his nose had come loose and he was breathing – such as it was – through his right nostril. The tape was flapping there – off when he exhaled and back over his nose when he inhaled. He couldn't have been getting much air. A few more minutes and he'd have been a goner."

Masters helped remove the remaining tape from Juan's legs and arms.

Betty arrived on the trot from down stairs.

"Maria said I might be needed up here. What's going on?"

She nudged Stone out of the way and began examining Juan.

"His breathing is shallow but the rhythm is nearly normally now. His BP is faint but coming back. He's definitely unconscious – not just asleep."

Masters filled her in on how they had found him. Maria arrived, huffing and puffing from her far too hurried ascent of the stairs. At the sight, she fainted. Masters and Stone put her in a chair. Stone brought her a glass of water saying, "Here, let's see if she'll drink this."

Maria opened her eyes with a start and looked around, waving off the water.

Stone had already thought better of his offer and returned the glass to the tray.

“Maria. Did you get the calls through to the hospital and Faraday?” Masters asked, continuing to hold her hand.

It was a sad and exhausted voice that answered.

“Yes.”

Presently, they heard the scream of the ambulance begin to subside as it lumbered into the compound through the front gate. Within minutes, the paramedics were in the room. It had become an all to well-practiced run for them.

“I think we should pump that stomach again,” Betty said. “I know there’s not a physician around to give the order but the man’s life is at stake.”

The paramedics didn’t hesitate.

A few minutes later Dr. Faraday arrived.

“How could this have happened? I thought he was under twenty-four-hour surveillance.”

He looked over the situation and nodded his approval for what had been done up to that point. He took the stethoscope and began listening here and there.

Masters spoke.

“There has apparently been some subterfuge afoot around here during the past fifteen minutes or so.”

He explained about the call to Maria that had lured her out of the room.

Justin arrived on the run.

“I heard the ambulance clear out in the shop. What is it this time?”

“Another attempt on Juan’s life,” Stone reported.

“How can I help, Mr. Masters?”

“Take Maria down to the living room. Let her lie down. Keep the others down there until Detective Stone tells them otherwise. Use your charm and keep them calm.”

Stone preened, nodding his agreement and standing a bit taller than before.

“I suppose you think this calls for a round-the-clock police guard in the room, don’t you?” Masters suggested more than asked, addressing himself to Stone.

“Yes, Sir. I certainly do. I’m on my way to see to it immediately.”

Masters turned to Faraday, awaiting some news.

“The old boy’s coming around. I don’t know how he keeps doing it. You and I would have both been long gone by now.”

Faraday’s personal reference presented a thoroughly unpleasant thought, so Masters dismissed it. He was thankful that Juan would survive. Unfortunately, allusions to the poor state of his physical condition always induced pangs of hunger. Dinner was a full hour away. He slipped down to the kitchen for a carrot. Finding none, he had two cream puffs instead!

### **Chapter Three**

#### **Day Two: The evil deed**

It was the custom at La Musica that once dinner was finished, everyone retired to his or her own bastion of solitude. There had been, however, an unmistakable lingering that Sunday evening. Uneasiness pervaded the grand old villa not diminished in the least by the presence of armed policemen on the premises. Stone had not stayed for dinner. The ever-grumbling Carlos had scarfed down his meal and left early. Eventually, Dr. Faraday left, followed immediately by the caterer and his staff. Lawrence accompanied Betty back upstairs and looked in briefly on a quietly resting Juan. Leaving her there, he chatted for a moment with the young policeman sitting guard duty in the hall, and then made his way back to his apartment.

Arms folded, like a pouting child, Justin flopped onto one of the sofas in the living room as if he intended to stand watch there all night. The ladies left as a group and headed for their apartments. Masters joined Justin in the living room.

“Coffee, Justin?” Masters asked.

“No thanks. I’ve never acquired the habit.”

“May I join you?”

“Sure. Glad to have you. ... I love this big room. All by itself, it’s ten times bigger than any place me and mom ever lived in. ... Things really stink around here, right now, don’t they, Sir?”

“It is a very sad and scary time, I’ll grant you that.”

“Sad and scary and stinkin’,” Justin confirmed, emphasizing his contribution to that set of alliterated

adjectives.

Masters sipped his coffee, quietly. Justin looked around the room, sighing frequently as he systematically focused on things on which he seemed particularly fond.

Presently, a weary looking Betty entered the living room on her way to her rooms – the pink suite. She said goodnight and disappeared down the hall totting her well worn medical bag.

“Nice lady,” Justin said, nodding after her.

“Seems so,” Masters said attempting to keep the tone cordial. He picked up a paper and scanned the front page. Nothing caught his fancy so he refolded it and put it down. In that moment, Justin had fallen asleep. Masters smiled hoping the lad could have a restful slumber. He stood up, unfolded an afghan over his new young friend, dimmed the lights, and made his way to his own suite.

\* \* \*

What an interesting situation: Everyone alone – No one with an alibi!

\* \* \*

The banging on Masters’ door presented a welcome relief from the terrible dream he had been experiencing. It had been something about Dr. Faraday pelting him with giant carrots and his retaliating with cream puffs. The clock radio said three fifty-six. Masters struggled to his feet, pulled on his never quite large enough robe, and answered the door. It was Justin. His face was wet with tears. He was sobbing.

“Mr. Masters! He’s finally done it! He’s killed Juan!”

“Come on in. Sit down. What’s this you’re telling me? Start again.”

“I guess I fell asleep on the couch earlier. I woke up about five minutes ago, and decided to go on upstairs to make sure everything was okay before I went back to my room. When I got to the top of the stairs I saw the cop laid out cold on the floor, his head bashed in. He was bleeding something awful. I went right into Juan’s room. It was the very same thing in there. His head was bleeding – it’s smashed like a safe fell on it. It’s just terrible. I felt his neck for a pulse. There isn’t one, Mr. Masters. I called 911 anyway and Dr. Faraday. Then I checked the cop. He’s still got a heartbeat

but he's barely breathing. What should I do? It's the most terrible thing I've ever seen."

"First," Masters barked in a voice any drill instructor would covet, "Stop your blubbing and act like a man. I need you now. You're my right arm. Stand up."

The shock of hearing the usually soft-spoken man speaking that way startled Justin, clearing his head. He sprang to his feet.

"I'm okay now. Thank you, Sir. Just tell me what to do."

"Go get Betty and get her up to the policeman. Just tell her that you need her and her medical bag upstairs immediately. You can fill her in on the way. Follow her lead. Don't let anyone other than the paramedics and Faraday up there. Don't touch or move anything unless it's absolutely necessary. I'll call Stone. Where will I find his number?"

"I put it on speed dial on the phone in the dining room. He's number seven."

"Go! Go!" Masters urged. Justin took off on the run, drying his eyes on his shirttail. Masters found his slippers and hurried to the dining room. In seconds, he had Detective Stone on the line. He'd be there in fifteen minutes.

Masters turned on the front entry light and opened the door. He knew the siren would bring the ladies. How was he going to handle them? Unexpectedly, a squad car pulled in and two policemen came on the run.

"Detective Stone sent us. You Masters?"

"Yes. You first aid certified?"

"Yes, Sir. Upstairs then. Hurry."

Masters pointed the way.

It seemed an interminable wait for the ambulance. The squad car had awakened the ladies and soon they bustled into the living room all chattering at once. Lawrence was close behind. Masters motioned him to his side as he spoke.

"Juan is having a bad night, folks. The paramedics are on the way. The best thing you can do is to go into the living room and wait. You'll be in the way upstairs. How about somebody making a pot of coffee?"

Olivia offered. The other three followed her. In their frilly robes they looked like a mother duck and her brightly

painted ducklings on Easter morning. At least that will keep them occupied, Masters thought.

“Lawrence, I need you to stay here and wait for the ambulance, okay?”

“Yes, Sir. Okay. ... He’s gone, isn’t he?”

Masters put his arm on the old man’s shoulder.

“Yes, Lawrence. He’s gone.”

Lawrence turned and went out into the entryway to wait. His body shook from his sobbing.

Masters climbed the stairs. Justin and one policeman were attending to the wounded officer.

“He’s still unconscious, but he’s breathing better,” Justin announced.

“Stay with him. Keep him comfortable. Good work, Justin.”

Masters entered the bedroom. It was every bit as terrible a scene as Justin had described. Betty was just pulling the sheet up over Juan’s face. Tears were streaming down her weary face. Masters went to her and pulled her close. He addressed the policeman.

“No chance?” he asked in faint voice.

“No Sir. No chance. I’m very sorry.”

Masters escorted Betty out into the hall.

“Justin, I need you to take Betty back to her room and stay with her until I come and get you.”

“Yes, Sir. Come on Betty. Let’s get you back down stairs.”

The paramedics arrived.

Faraday arrived.

Stone arrived.

Betty came back for her bag. She had forgotten it in the chaos.

The paramedics took the wounded officer to the hospital.

Faraday wept openly and went down stairs to break the news to the ladies.

Stone sniffled as he stood surveying the crime scene.

“Well?” he asked Masters.

“Well, the first thing I’m going to do is get dressed – that will surely make all of us more comfortable. The second thing

I'm going to do is have a cup of coffee. Then we'll get started. Get your lab crew out here ASAP. Wake them up! Do a full photoshoot. Print every blunt object within twenty yards of this hallway. Do a room by room, and bag anything that looks suspicious. Print everybody including Maria's parakeet. This one has been bizarre from the moment I received that first call from Olivia. I've felt it my bones since the opening gate. Set up an interrogation room in the studio across the hall there. We'll begin with Justin. He was the first on the scene. Then we'll talk with Lawrence and Betty. They were the last ones to see Juan alive. The ladies have made coffee. Better get some while there's time."

Masters turned and went down stairs. At that moment, there was no doubt who was in charge of the case. Both Stone and Masters were relieved at that turn of events.

As Masters approached his room, he saw that Justin was sitting on the floor in the hall outside Betty's door. He went over. Justin stood up putting his finger to his lips.

"Betty went right to sleep. I felt uncomfortable being in a room with a sleeping woman so I came out here. That was all right, wasn't it?"

"That was fine. You've really been a big help. Will you do one more favor for me right now?"

"Sure. Anything."

"Go to the kitchen and bring a piping hot cup of coffee to me in my room. I'm going to shower and get dressed. Just come on in and make yourself at home."

Masters tended to do some of his best thinking in the shower. He made some quick conjectures. To deliver a blow of the kind he had just witnessed would have taken more strength than most of the women possessed. Of course, with an adrenaline rush, who knows what strength any one of them might have been able to muster. On the surface, it appeared that only Betty and Wilma had that power readily available. All the men – Lawrence, Carlos and Justin – appeared strong enough.

It was important to get the medical examiner's judgment as to time of death just as soon as possible. It looked, of course, as if the attacks had occurred within minutes of one another. But what if Juan had been attacked



much earlier and left in his bed for the night by either Betty or Lawrence and then later – for some unknown reason – someone had come back and bludgeoned the policeman.

Then there was the matter of an alibi. No one would have one. That leveled the playing field in a most unhelpful way. It made it even more important to be able to tie the four previous attacks with the proximity of one of the possible suspects. Of course, the primary suspect, Jerry Johnson, was still nowhere to be found. That approach presupposed that there was only one, relatively inept, perpetrator who was working alone. It seemed more and more likely that that might not have been the case.

Then there was motive. It would be important to get to those financial records just as soon as possible. It was unimaginable to Masters that Juan's will would not have taken good care of all the people there at La Musica. With him so few weeks away from death anyway, why would any of them feel the need to speed it up? He would need to search for any immediate financial crises among the players. That seemed unlikely. Estates took time to settle. Attempting to hurry it up made little sense, unless the perpetrator had been unbelievably naive about the amount of time involved in such matters.

Besides money, jealousy is always a good motive. One problem: La Musica seemed to be a jealousy-free zone. That appeared to leave the third of the big three reasons for murder – revenge. For a man with no enemies – except, perhaps for this Jerry Johnson – revenge would either lead nowhere fast or should hone in on the killer immediately. At first glance the idea of a mob-related hit seemed out of the question – no mob-related hit man could ever be such an amateurish bungler – unless he wanted to make it appear that some amateurish bungler had committed the murder. There was certainly plenty of fodder for that kind of a scenario.

Masters left his trademark suit and vest on the hangers, opting for the more casual look of a tan safari shirt (which he humorously referred to as his tent) and matching pants. As he entered the sitting room, he heard the unmistakable ding of a microwave.

“Your coffee's been sitting here getting cold,” Justin

explained, “So I put it in to heat up when you turned off the shower.”

“You are a gem, Justy. Thank you. I may just pack you in my bag in take you home with me.”

Justin grinned as if both pleased and embarrassed.

“I didn’t figure you’d be thinking that way after the way I messed up earlier.”

“Messed up. Not at all! When you found the victims you quickly examined them, determined that the paramedics and Faraday should be called and then came for assistance. I think you did a fine job. No mess up there that I can see.”

“Yeah, but then I fell apart. I should have been able to hold it together. I’m twenty years old, for God sake.”

“Justin, I’m going to tell you a story and if you ever repeat it I’ll flat out deny it.”

Justin perked up, somewhat puzzled at the comment.

“When I was a rookie cop at my very first murder scene, I took one look around the blood splattered room and immediately threw up on my partner’s shoes.”

“You? That’s hard to believe.”

“Remember. I’ll deny it!”

“Yes, Sir!”

“You did fine. I’m proud of, Justy. Now, how about that coffee?”

“Oh, yes, Sir, er, I mean Rookie.”

Justin laughed wildly, perhaps more as a release of his tension than from the actual humor in his little joke. Masters chuckled right along more taken with Justin’s reaction than the joke. It was perhaps the last laugh they would have for some time.

“Justin, in a few minutes Detective Stone and I are going to begin questioning everyone who was on the grounds last night. Since you were the first at the crime scene, we will want to talk with you first. Understand that since no one here has any way of proving where he or she was at the time of the attacks, everyone must come under close scrutiny (Justin exhibited his now familiar furrowed brow) – investigation.”

“You mean we’re all suspects?”

“In a case like this the concept of suspects gets complicated. No one is a suspect and yet no one is not a

suspect.”

That time Masters let the furrows pass without further explanation.

“The job of the investigators is to show three things: opportunity, which in this case everyone seemed to have; means, that will await the discovery of the object used; and motive, which will probably be the case-breaker in this instance.”

Justin nodded as if he understood, at least in a general way.

“Let’s go on upstairs and find Stone, then, and get the ball rolling,” Masters said in as innocuous a fashion as he could muster.

“Should I be worried?” Justin asked, sounding very much like a ten-year-old handing his parent a poor report card.

“Only the guilty party has any reason to be worried.”

“You always have a way of sidestepping questions you don’t want to answer directly,” Justin observed. “But, I guess I understand what you’re saying. Ok, then. Let’s go. I don’t have anything to be worried about.”

He certainly made that sound genuine. Masters put an arm around the boy and they left for the living room. It seemed everyone was gathered there so Masters took the opportunity to explain the program to them.

“During the next few hours, Detective Stone and I will be chatting with most of you as we gather information important to the solving of this attack. If anyone feels the need to have a lawyer present, please feel free to obtain one as rapidly as possible. We are beginning with Justin, since he discovered the crime scene. Then we will want to talk with Lawrence and then Betty since they were the last to see Juan alive.”

Olivia sobbed out loud at the mention of Juan’s name.

“Lawrence, you’re in charge down here. If you need me I’ll be up in the studio.”

Masters and Justin made their way up the stairs. They heard Carlos and Lawrence have a brief, loud exchange.

The lab crew had arrived. Pictures had been taken. The Medical Examiner was beginning her preliminary examination. It was a quiet, methodical group of

professionals. Masters was impressed. Stone was out on the veranda, leaning over the iron railing reaching for something.

Justin flashed a worried look at Masters.

“Sammy’s going to fall to his death if he isn’t careful – and he’s never careful.”

He hurried over and took hold of the man’s belt.

“Hey, Justy. Thanks. I was getting a bit rocky there. Masters, look here!”

Masters joined them. With Justin’s help, Stone stood back up.

“What did you find?” Masters asked.

“Looks to be black wool – a little three cornered piece snagged on that screw head. Could be from someone climbing up the trellis from below.”

“Nice going, Stone.”

Masters took the find and examined it thoroughly.

“Has the feel of expensive cloth,” he commented as he returned the evidence to Stone who placed it in a small plastic evidence bag and marked it.

“Justin’s all ready to talk with us,” Masters said, “So let’s get on with it. Looks to be a long day ahead.”

They entered the studio where Stone had arranged several comfortable looking chairs around a table similar in appearance – though smaller – to the card table in the living room. They took seats. Justin sat forward on his chair, his hands folded, knuckle white, on the table. Relaxed would not have described the boy. Merely tense would have also missed the mark. Try taut! Taut with wildly jiggling legs, and lips repeatedly moistened by an overactive, apparently dry tongue.

Masters attempted to relieve his anxiety.

“Justin. We’re your friends. Sit back. We need you to be clear headed so you can remember every possible detail of what you saw.”

Justin took a deep breath and nodded but didn’t alter his position.

Stone began.

“Just tell us what happened from the moment you awakened on the couch until you knocked on Mr. Masters’ door.”

“Ok. I can do this. Let’s see. Like you said, I was asleep on the couch. Somebody had covered me up with one of those fancy African blankets. I suppose that was you, Mr. Masters.”

Masters nodded, acknowledging that it had been he.

“Thanks.”

Again, Masters nodded, amused at the interesting mix of tension, diligence, and good manners.

“I looked at my watch. It said 3:51. At first I said to myself that I could sleep for another hour and a half – I usually get up about 5:30 – and my first decision seemed to be whether to just stay there or to go back to my place. I decided to go back to my place. The couch really isn’t all that comfortable. It looks like it would be but it really isn’t. I got up and folded the blanket and then decided I’d go upstairs and make sure the cop, er officer, wasn’t asleep on the job. As I climbed the stairs and my eyes first got level with the second floor, I saw him lying there. At first, I sort of congratulated myself for my suspicion about what he might be doing but almost at that same second, I saw his head and the blood. He wasn’t just asleep. I felt lightheaded, you know. For a second my feet wouldn’t move. Then it hit me that if the officer had been attacked Juan probably had been, too. At that moment, I hated myself for not staying awake like I’d planned.

“Next thing I remember was me in Juan’s room. I guess I had turned on the light. Anyway, I was over at his bed and looking down on his face. It was the worst thing I have ever seen. Just all automatically like, I reached out and felt for his pulse in his neck. That was the thing we were taught to do first in E.M.T. school. I couldn’t find one. I tried over and over again. I pulled back the sheet and tried in his wrist. There wasn’t one there either. I started to cry – you said you wanted to know everything, right. I covered him back up and wiped the blood off my hands on the top of the sheet. Then I went back out into the hall. I can’t honestly say I went out there to help the cop but when I got out there, I saw him, so I went right over and examined him. He had a strong pulse but he was breathing really shallow. His face was gray – except where it was covered with blood. God! It looked awful! Since he was breathing on his own, he didn’t need CPR so I went

over to the phone on the credenza and called 911. Then I called Faraday – Betty has him on speed dial on that phone. Then I didn't know what to do next so I ran down the stairs and across the living room to your door, Mr. Masters. That's about it."

"That's very good, Justin," Masters said. "Now let us ask you a few questions that might jog your memory on a few other things."

"Sure. Okay."

Justin eased back in the chair, though still sitting at attention.

"Were the doors to the veranda open or closed?"

"The right one was closed. The left one was open – ajar I think is how you'd describe it. It was open about two or three inches."

"Try and remember if the light was already on in Juan's room or if you did really turn it on."

Justin sat back and closed his eyes as if trying to bring back the exact image he met as he entered.

"Well, the door was shut tight, I can see that. I had to turn the handle to open it. When I swung the door open, the light from the hall flooded his bed. Yes. I remember that, so the light in the room had to be off, didn't it. Now I remember, I was searching for the switch with the back of my right hand, as I stood there pretty stunned, looking at Juan. Finally, I had to turn my head in order to find the switch. It's a good foot to the left of the door frame. Most of the switches in this house are no more than half that far away."

"What about the windows in Juan's room? Were they open or closed?"

"Juan always sleeps with the windows open at night. I can't actually remember how they were, though. I don't think I even looked over toward them."

"Did you wonder if the attacker might still be around somewhere?"

"No. It all happened so fast and it's all so open up there. You can see everything at a glance. I guess it never entered my head. I suppose it should have but it didn't. I suppose he could have been hiding in the bathroom."

"Anything else you can remember, Justin?"

“Not right now. If anything comes to me later I’ll let you know.”

“There is one final question I have to ask, even though I wish I didn’t.”

“Did I kill Juan? Is that the question, Mr. Masters?”

“Yes, that’s the question.”

“I understand. No. I didn’t kill him. I loved him.”

“Thanks for your help, Justy,” Detective Stone said. “I’ll see you down stairs later. Would you ask Lawrence to come up, please?”

“Sure. This may be harder on him than anybody, you know. They were like brothers.”

Justin pushed in his chair and left.

“Not much that’s helpful there, is there,” Stone said with a sigh. “We could have reconstructed that all by ourselves.”

“Perhaps that’s the problem, Detective. Could it have been too pat?”

“Ah.” Stone nodded and jotted a few additional notes.

Masters went on to other things.

“Any word from the lab on the samples taken from Juan’s air passages?”

“No. I’ll call in after seven. No one there will know anything until the day team arrives.”

The faint knock at the open door signaled the arrival of Lawrence.

“Come in. Close the door and have a seat. How’s it going down stairs?”

“Like you’d expect, I suppose. The women are crying and Carlos is in the pool, beer in hand. Sometimes it’s hard to believe he’s really my son. His temperament is more like Juan’s except Juan never let his get out of control, of course. Well, let’s get on with it if we can. I think I need to go back to my room and get stinkin’ drunk.”

“I can’t imagine you doing that, Lawrence,” Masters said as much amused as puzzled by the bluntness of the odd comment.

“Never have before, but this seems like exactly the right time to begin.”

Stone broke the short silence.

“Exactly what did you see when you went up after

dinner with Betty to look in on Juan.”

“The police officer was sitting there in the chair facing the stairway.”

“That would have put his back to the veranda,” Stone interrupted. “Were those doors open or closed?”

“Closed. Yes, they were closed. I opened the door to Juan’s room - it opens in - and Betty entered first. The ceiling light was off – just the light on his nightstand was lit. It’s adjustable and it was turned down as far as it could go. Juan likes some light in case he wakes up and needs something. He was sleeping on his back. That’s the most comfortable for him he says . . . said. I just stood over his bed for a minute or two while Betty took his pulse. She nodded, meaning it was fine. I nodded back, patted Juan on the shoulder and left. I made small talk with the officer for a few minutes – well, more like half a minute I suppose. He said he’d pulled a shift and a half – six PM to six AM. He had a mystery book he was reading. Said he couldn’t resist a good mystery. He planned to make detective someday. Then I went down the stairs and right out to my apartment.”

“Was Carlos there – at your apartment – when you arrived?” Masters asked.

“Yes. He was sitting there in his underwear watching wrestling and throwing peanut shells at the set when something happened he didn’t like. The only thing about that that really surprised me was that he hadn’t started on his nightly six-pack yet. I went into my bedroom and put on a Lawrence Welk CD to drown him out. I got into my PJ’s and lay down on my bed to read. The young officer’s comment about a mystery whetted my appetite. In fact, Mr. Masters, I pulled out one of your old cases, A Gathering of Killers. Now that title seems to fit things around here, doesn’t it? I probably turned off my light about nine. I had difficulty falling asleep, worrying about Juan and how things would be once he was gone. I had no idea that time would come so soon.”

“Do you have any idea when Carlos went to sleep?”

“He sleeps on the couch. I woke several times. At one-something-or-other, I still heard him in the living room. At three, it was all quiet, so I guess he turned in sometime in-between there.”



“When did you awaken this morning?”

“I heard the siren. It didn’t sound like the ambulance, so for a minute I relaxed about it. Then when I heard it stop out in front, I figured something was wrong. I put on my robe and slippers and came up to the house. The ladies were already on their way.”

“Where was Carlos during all of this?”

“He was asleep on the couch. The place smelled of beer so I assume he finally got into a six-pack.”

“You have no doubt that Juan was alive when you left him and Betty there in his room last night?”

“Oh no. He was alive. I watched him breath. He was alive when I left.”

Neither Masters nor Stone had the nerve to ask him if he’d killed his old friend.

“Thanks for your help,” Masters said, getting to his feet and extending a hand. “I’d reconsider that binge idea if I were you though. If you’ve never had a hangover, I’ll tell you for sure that you really don’t want to experience your first one at our age.”

Lawrence shook Masters’ hand and shuffled toward the door.

“If Betty is awake will you have her come up? If not, let’s begin with the ladies – your choice as to whom we see first.”

He nodded and left.

“Let’s see what your lab guys have to say so far.”

The two men went into the hall. Stone engaged the print man who was dusting the railing on the veranda. Masters moved on into the bedroom. The medical examiner had just finished her exam.

“I’d place the time of death somewhere between two and three,” she announced, anticipating Masters’ first question. “It appears to have been four very solid blows to the forehead with the ubiquitous blunt object. I’d say the last three had been unnecessary. They were all solid whacks. Whatever it was, it appears to have been just the right size and weight for the job. I doubt if it was something that the intruder just found lying around. Can’t tell you much more now.”

“Thanks for your help. We will expect to hear from you

as soon as you have things pinned down for sure?”

“Yes. I’ll call right away.”

Masters went out onto the veranda.

“Anything?”

“Strange, actually,” Stone said. “Look here along this top railing by the trellis. See where he’s dusted. There are all kinds of prints – layer upon layer – like you’d expect except in three places. See here. There’s not a single print. It’s the same here and here. What do you make of that?”

“I think I know how that came about. Have them go over those blank spaces with a fine-tooth comb. I want to know about anything they find – no matter what.”

Stone pointed two of the officers toward the spots. They had overheard the instructions from Masters and went right to work. Before Masters and Stone had been able to turn their backs one of the officers called to them.

“I have lots of fibers here. Like, maybe, somebody used a heavy cloth to wipe it clean.”

“Would those fibers be wool, perhaps – black wool?”

“Yes, Sir. Most likely. How in the . . .”

“The intruder wore gloves and where he grasped the railing he rubbed off the old prints. I imagine all those prints are left over from the night swimmers.”

“But three hands?” Stone asked unable to keep from appearing foolish in front of his team.

“My guess is that one set of two was made coming up the trellis and then going back down one hand hit the same spot as before but the other grabbed a new spot.”

“Very good, Mr. Masters. Well, get it bagged and labeled guys.”

In one breath, Stone had just vacillated from an awestruck amateur to the all-knowing detective in charge. ‘Who but Stone?’ Masters thought to himself. He continued out loud.

“It seems clear that the intruder came up the trellis and probably attacked the officer from the rear. Call the hospital and find out all the details about the placement of the blows to his head. If he’s regained consciousness, find out how soon we can speak with him.”

Pausing only a few seconds to finish his notes, Stone

was then off to the credenza to use the phone. Betty appeared at the top of the stairs on Justin's arm. They walked toward Masters.

"Thanks for coming, Betty. I know how exhausted you must be. And Justin. What a surprise. I thought you were headed back to your room."

It was Betty who spoke.

"Mr. Masters, Justin has been wonderful. When Lawrence came up here, Justin just took over. He got the ladies into the kitchen making sandwiches for the policemen and fixing breakfast for themselves. He just kept everybody calm and busy. Whenever one of us would begin crying he'd say something like, 'I need you ladies to be strong, right now. You're my right hands. Don't let me down.' He's a very special young man." She patted his arm and smiled up into his face.

Masters looked at Justin and nodded. Justin shrugged his shoulders and looked at the floor, embarrassed about it all.

"I told you that you weren't a slow learner," Masters whispered into the boy's ear as he accepted Betty's arm and escorted her into the studio.

"Are you up to some questions?" Masters asked.

"As much as I'll ever be, I suppose."

She sat down heavily.

"Just tell us exactly what happened from the time you and Lawrence started up the stairs after dinner last night until you got back to your room."

"Like you said, Lawrence and I went up to Juan's room together. We've been doing that for weeks. Lawrence said hello or something like that to the policeman who was posted up there."

"Exactly where was the policeman when you arrived in the hall from the stairs?"

"He had pulled the big chair out into the center of the hall and was sitting in it facing the stairs."

"How far out from the double doors to the veranda would you say he was sitting?"

"Oh, I'm not sure. Maybe five feet, probably less."

"Let me ask it this way. Do you think the doors could have been swung open into the room without hitting the back

of his chair?”

“Oh yes. There was plenty of room for that. They were closed though that evening.”

“Okay. Go on.”

“Well, Lawrence opened the door for me and we both went inside Juan’s room. I had picked up the pitcher of fresh water from the table by the door. The light was off so I turned up the bedside lamp just a bit so I could see. I took Juan’s pulse in his wrist. He’s ticklish on his neck and that often wakes him. His pulse was regular and fairly strong.”

“How was he positioned in the bed?”

“On his back. He always sleeps on his back. Well, when Lawrence found out he seemed okay, he patted Juan on the shoulder and left. I heard him chatting with the policeman out in the hall for a little while. Juan had two pain pills left and I moved them to the edge of the tray closest to his bed in case he needed them during the night. I poured out the stale water from his glass – that’s how come the cactus in the corner is growing so fast – and filled it with fresh water from the new pitcher.

“I pulled a chair close to the bed and put his guitar on it so it would be within easy reach. Juan often wakes up during the night and plays. I think it eases his pain. I went into his bathroom and put the used towels and wash clothes into the hamper. Then I hung fresh ones on the racks. I turned on the night-light in there so he could see if he got up.

“That’s about it. I turned the bedside light back down to low and left. I closed the door and said goodnight to the policeman. He was reading a book when I left.”

“Was the door open or closed while you and Lawrence were in the bedroom?”

“It was closed – that’s the old floor-duty nurse in me, I suppose. ‘Always keep the patient’s door closed for privacy’. Then I went right down stairs. I saw you and Justin sitting in the living room and just stuck my head in to say goodnight. I went right on over to my pink palace – that’s the name Justin just gave it. You probably thought me rude for not staying to chat but I was really beat.”

“Not at all. We understood completely. Is there anything else you think is important for us to know?”

“Nothing I can think of right now.”

“Thanks for your help. We’ll let you know if we need anything else.”

Masters helped her to her feet and walked her to the door wanting to ask Justin one more question. The boy was patiently waiting, sitting on the top step, back against the railing.

“Justin,” Masters said, as he and Betty approached the stairs.

Justin jumped up.

“Yes, Sir.”

“When you entered Juan’s room this morning, are you sure there were no lights on.”

“Yes, I’m sure. It was pitch dark except for the light from the hall.”

“What about the lamp on the bedside table?”

“It was off. No doubt about that. It was off.”

“Okay. Well, thanks to you both. By the way, did someone say sandwiches?”

Justin broke into a grin. He pointed to the credenza. There were two plates, piled high and a carafe of coffee with real cups.

“Justin. I may just marry you,” Masters said, playfully patting him on the head.

“I just might have something to say about that, Mr. Masters, Betty said, hanging heavier than necessary on Justin’s arm and laying her head against his shoulder.”

Justin blushed. It was as close to a smile as any of them had seen on Betty’s face since dinner the night before. The two turned and went down stairs.

Stone approached Masters.

“The hospital says it looks like the blow to the officer was administered by a blunt instrument from the rear right – meaning just over the officer’s left ear.”

“A single blow, then?”

“Yes. That’s what they are saying. He’s still in a coma but his vitals are stable. They say his chances are pretty good. It’s all in a wait and see mode. By the way, I was able to get the poop on those scrapings taken from Juan. It’s exactly as you suspected – lint and goose down. Somebody

tried to smother him, all right.”

“What a conundrum! We know it was one of two people but will never be able to prove which one, Masters said.”

Masters positioned himself approximately where the assailant would have had to have been in order to have delivered the knock-out blow to the officer. Pretending to have a club, he struck toward the imaginary head.

“Notice anything strange, Stone?”

He repeated the movements.

“You should be hitting him on the other side of his head. Here let me show you.”

That fact that Masters had set it up intentionally fully escaped the man.

Stone’s first swing was exactly like Masters’ had been – delivering the blow to the right side of the officer’s head. Stone reversed his swing.

“Gee, that’s downright awkward.”

Masters surveyed the officers at work and called one over. He explained what he wanted her to do.

“Pretend you have a club in your hand and that you are trying to hit a person, sitting here, in the side of his head.”

The officer raised her arms and delivered the blow to the exact location specified in the report from the hospital.

Stone looked puzzled. Masters explained.

“You and I are right handed but this officer is a lefty. It would take a lefty to deliver that exact blow with enough strength to do that kind of damage.”

“So, we’re after a fairly strong, left handed person, with access to a well-balanced club of some kind,” Stone said aloud all quite deliberately as he wrote it word for word on his pad. “Who do we have around here who’s left handed?”

The only two choices were disturbing – Lawrence and Justin. Of course, the handedness of Jerry Johnson was not yet known.

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## **Chapter Four**

### **Day Two: Motives**

Having finished the initial interviews, Masters and Stone moved their operation to a colorful, umbrella table beside the pool. The early morning sun had not yet invaded the shadow-draped courtyard between the ladies' apartments on the east and west, the main house on the south and the garage complex on the north – neither had the commotion of the half dozen police officers scouring the compound for clues.

“So, who done it?” Stone asked, both as an attempt at humor and as a serious question, which he appeared to think Masters would be prepared to answer.

“Lots of possibilities – few solid pieces of evidence. What’s your take on all of this?”

Stone felt important to be included in the speculation.

“Looks like three possibilities to me,” he said, turning in his chair and becoming professional in his tone. “Someone climbed the trellis, opened the doors, knocked out the officer, killed Juan and left by the same route. If it weren’t some outsider, like this Jerry Johnson guy, the only ones around here strong and agile enough would be Justin or Carlos. Justin, unfortunately, is the only left-handed suspect in that possibility.

“Then, it could have been Lawrence and Betty. They could have done it when they went up to see him right after dinner or sometime later in the night. Betty could have distracted the officer from the front while Lawrence casually moved into place behind him and administered the blow – Lawrence being the lefty in that pair. Lawrence is the one who



says he found Juan near death on the first two attempts on his life. That could have just been some kind of a set up to make him look innocent after the real attempt, which was to come later on. Seemed strange to me that the stories of Lawrence and Betty were exactly the same. No two witnesses ever see things exactly the same way.

“A third possibility would be that same scenario, but with Justin and Betty after they had supposedly gone to sleep. They could have planned it well ahead of time. If Betty was the one who had tried to smother Juan earlier, this one makes sense. Betty’s last patient also died an unnatural death, you’ll recall.”

Masters nodded, not so much in agreement as in contemplation of several ideas Stone’s narrative had spawned.

“I suppose we should get the official report on that death, shouldn’t we,” Masters said.

Stone jotted it down.

“Motives?” Masters asked referring back to the three possibilities Stone had presented.

Stone sat quietly, pondering the question.

“Hard to say, isn’t it? Probably related to money somehow – not sure how, though.”

“I’m interested in how you came to team up Justin and Betty?” Masters asked.

“They just seemed to be so friendly – so close – earlier. It was like they had some special relationship. Hard to put my finger on it. It was the way she looked at him and the way he refused to look at her. He does talk about her a lot but up to now I just figured it was his fascination with all things medical.”

“You think they have a winter-spring type of romantic relationship?”

“I never suspected it – not before, anyway.”

Changing the subject to something less speculative, Masters asked, “Did you get the Jerry Johnson letter from Sarah?”

“Yup. It’s right here. It’s got a New York City postmark. Would have probably arrived last Monday like Sarah said it did. It’s typed – probably computer printed, actually, I suppose. The envelope and paper look to be the garden

variety found in any office – white and eighteen to twenty pound.”

“Read it aloud, would you?” Masters asked, leaning back and closing his eyes as if to block out all distractions.

“Sure.”

He removed it from its envelope and began reading.

“Juan – In regard to our previous discussions, I want \$250,000 in my hands before the week’s end or you will meet your demise well ahead of schedule. I will contact you in a few days with instructions. – Jerry Johnson.”

Masters took the sheet from Stone and studied it.

“The note is hand signed – a rather improbable if not outright stupid thing to do in an extortion note. Probably the sign of an amateur at things like this. Then there is that word, week’s. My guess is it would take a fairly well educated person to remember to make that word possessive in that situation. The word ‘demise’ suggests that same thing. And look at the letters in the signature. Do you notice anything odd about the two J’s and the two R’s?”

“Well, just that they are dead ringers for each other – both J’s and both R’s I mean.”

“That’s another thing that bothers me. Signature writing is never that precise. No two renditions of a given letter are ever that close to looking alike. What else do you see?”

It’s on a strange slant.”

“I agree. It slants the opposite way from a right-handed signature but something about it doesn’t convince me it’s been written by a lefty. Let’s see if you can find an expert to give us an opinion.”

“Got a good one! Dr. Laura Wright. She’s out at the University. Sounds like you think the note is a fake.”

“Either a fake or a very clever attempt to make us think it’s a fake.”

“I’ll have somebody run it out to the college,” Stone said. “Let me get that started right away. While I’m inside, I’ll check with Dora to see if she’s ready for us.”

Masters had to wonder if Stone had taken some kind of a ‘get organized’ pill – perhaps he got into Sarah’s gingko baloney, or whatever she had called it. He noticed that Justin had slipped into a chaise at the other end of the pool. He had

taken off his tee shirt and was thumbing aimlessly through a magazine. His face wore a sullen expression. Neither quiet nor sullen appeared normal for the lad.

“Justy!” Masters called. “Come on up here.”

As if to authenticate his invitation he motioned with a gigantic swing of his big arm.

Justin brightened at the invitation and set a brisk pace to meet Masters, slipping back into his shirt as he walked.

“You looked pretty down, just now, or was that my imagination?” Masters said.

“No. Well, I mean, yes I probably looked down and no, it wasn’t your imagination. I ‘m just feeling really out of place around here all of a sudden. I guess my feelings are hurt that I haven’t been asked to be in on any of the planning. The ladies and Lawrence are in there talking about the funeral and I wasn’t included. It’s not that I’d have any suggestions, you know. It’s just that I thought I was a real part of the family out here. It’s dumb to have thought that. They probably all just think I’m some snot nosed kid that Juan picked up at the police impound center. They’d be right about that, I guess.”

“Whoa Nelly! What’s got into you? You know that’s not how they feel. They’re just all so self-absorbed in their own grief right now that they can’t think about anybody else’s needs – anybody else’s feelings. They’ll come around. You just have to be patient. We old geezers tend to contract a one track mind during a crisis like this.”

“Yeah. You’re probably right – not about being an old geezer – about the mind thing. You always seem to be right, anyway.”

“What are you reading?” Masters asked, hoping to change the lad’s focus.

“My bible – Mechanics Illustrated. Lots of helpful hints about the kind of stuff I do around here.”

He handed it to Masters.

“I imagine that’s not high on anyone else’s reading list around here.”

Justin smiled. No, not really, although a few weeks ago I caught Sarah paging through it. That was sort of funny as I think back on it.”

“Funny? How?” Master asked, keeping the

conversation alive.

“Well, I often leave it laying around out here. One morning I noticed Sarah tearing a page out of it. I didn’t think anything of it at the time. I figured there was an ad for something she wanted – it’s full of ads. She didn’t know that I saw her. When I got to it later, I noticed she had just taken a page out of the classified section. She might have just used it to wrap something, gum, maybe. I don’t know. Anyway, when I approached her she joked that I should be reading Playboy instead. I told her I had lots of back copies of Playboy if she wanted to borrow them. We laughed a little and she went into her apartment. Like I said, it was no big deal.”

Justin moved on to another topic as Masters paged through the magazine.

So, how’s the investigation going? Figured out who the bad guy is, yet?”

“Unfortunately, no, I’m afraid! Everyone had opportunity and no one seems to have a motive.”

“What about that Jerry Johnson person from Juan’s past?”

Masters noted that Justin appeared to have more information about that than seemed reasonable.

“How did you know about that?” Masters’ tone was laid back rather than accusatory.

“The ladies talk. They talk in the car. They talk in the pool. They talk at meals. They just talk. Seems like not much is kept private from me. I suppose that makes me feel good – trusted, included, you know.”

“Yes. I can understand that. Perhaps you can help me.”

“Sure, if I can. Shoot!”

“Since the case is too long on opportunity and too short on motive – except for Johnson, perhaps – I have to focus on means. Play a mind game with me. If you were going to bash in someone’s skull, and you had plenty of time to pick your weapon, what would be some of the obvious choices?”

Without missing a beat, Justin shot back, “A baseball bat. It’s whole reason for existing is slugging things. It’s well balanced and has all the weight out at the end where you’d be needing it.”

Masters was impressed but it became a two-part question.

“But what if you had to take this implement with you as you sneaked around the property at night and climbed up a wall to get to the second story? Would you want to be carrying a bulky, heavy, baseball bat with you?”

“A kid’s bat, then. They’re only about twenty-four inches long. I had a great one as a little boy. They pack quite a wallop. You could slip it under your belt to carry it. That’s how I always did it. When I was six, my belt had a permanent bulge from it. That little knob on the end keeps it from sliding out. I’d choose a kid’s bat if it was me.”

“You just may have something there. Do they still make them?”

“Mr. Masters!” Justin said as if admonishing the man. “I’m not that far from being a kid. Sure, they still make them.”

Masters reached for his money clip and removed a fifty.

“Here. Go buy one. On second thought, go to lots of places and see how many different brands or styles you can find. Buy one of each. Will you do that for me?”

“Sure. It’s better than sitting around here moping. Thanks for asking. I guess I needed something important to do.”

“This may be the most important thing we’ve done to date in this case. Keep thinking about other similar kinds of clubs, okay. Now go! Scat! Hurry! And, oh yes, if you happen to run across any of those strawberry twisters or shoestrings – the red licorice looking things – pick me up two pounds.”

“I love those things!” Justin said.

“Then make it four pounds!”

Justin looked at the fifty-dollar bill and then at the old inspector. Masters peeled off another fifty. Justin nodded and smiled.

“Stuff costs more these days, you know. I’ll see that you get all the change.”

Justin was off at a full trot and just disappearing around the side of the garage when Stone returned.

“What’s got into Justin’s pants?” Stone asked, for some reason amused.

“I sent him on a secret mission.”

“Secret mission?”

“Yes, I sent him to buy some baseball bats and strawberry twisters. What did you find out?”

Clearly baffled, but determined to appear unflappable, Stone let it pass.

“Well, I got the letter on its way to Dr. Wright out at the university. She’s waiting for it and will get right back to us. Dora is also ready for us. She is really upset. She’s sad about Juan’s passing of course – terribly sad – but I think she believes the ladies will just put her out to pasture now that Juan’s gone. Hell, if they did that, they’d all be hopelessly bankrupt in six weeks. According to Justy, Dora takes care of all the investing and everybody’s banking. She makes all the appointments – hair, massage, facials, movies, opera, travel, fittings. This place would simply fall apart without her.”

The two men went inside and were soon in Dora’s office. It was larger than seemed necessary, neat and tidy, and the only part of the house that wasn’t done in a Mediterranean motif, which suggested a will at least equal to that of Sarah, the decorator. It looked like an accountant’s office out of some 1940’s, “B” movie, complete with the spindled wooden rail and swinging gate separating the public from the private areas.

Her huge wooden desk was to the left side of the room and set at an angle up near the railing so she could look out over her entire empire. On the wall behind her, was a large, small paned, floor to ceiling window. To her left, a walk-in safe. Across the back wall were a dozen, four-drawer, legal size, wooden, filing cabinets – all in matching mahogany. Above them on the wall were corner to corner cabinets with doors – also mahogany and sporting brightly polished brass hardware. The floors were wide, oak-wood planks, set in place with wooden pegs and waxed to a fine sheen. Near the front in the public section were a half dozen uncomfortable looking chairs surrounding a low table, which was home to a selection of remarkably up to date magazines. In the center of the rear section, there stood a massive table with ten matching chairs. It was to that table that Dora directed the men.

Dora was a short, stout woman, certainly having seen fifty but perhaps not sixty. She had a tightly pursed mouth and permanently furrowed forehead mercifully cloaked by the classic pageboy cut of her graying, brown hair. She wore large glasses with mottled rims, clearly intended to match the color of her hair. Had it not been for her gracious smile and warm greeting, Dora would have had easily been mistaken for a thoroughly unattractive person.

Although Masters had met her and even chatted with her from time to time on his several previous visits to La Musica, he did not pretend to really know her. Her conversations were plainly scripted to reveal as little about herself as possible. Aloof? Perhaps. Frightened? Perhaps. Socially inept? More than likely.

Dora took a seat – clearly her seat – at one end of the table. Masters and Stone pulled in on either side of her. With her hands folded on the table, she cut to the chase.

“I’ve pulled the records you requested. Where shall we begin?”

Masters responded.

“First, would you give us a general overview of the financial side of things around here now that Juan’s gone.”

Without acknowledging the request, she began.

“They were wealthy men.”

Masters interrupted.

“They? I don’t understand.”

“Juan and Lawrence were equal partners in their financial affairs. It has always been that way. Juan insisted. Half of all profits became Lawrence’s.”

“I see. Please go on.”

“Olivia, Rebecca and Sarah each have a trust fund that Juan set up for them at the time of their divorces. Not even Olivia will ever be able to spend all that money – not if she were given a whole new lifetime.”

“You left out Maria,” Stone said, thinking he had caught an oversight.

“Maria refused Juan’s offer. She’s quite wealthy in her own right. She accepted her apartment but that’s it. She can buy and sell the other three – combined – ten times over. Carlos has a trust fund also, but he can’t touch it until after

Juan's natural death."

"Natural death?" Masters asked, clearly surprised at Dora's choice of words.

"Yes. It's worth about two million dollars but some years ago, Juan's lawyer and I advised him to add the 'natural death' clause. It was just after Carlos was involved in that murder in Connecticut. Nothing was ever proved against him, but he inherited a bundle from the victim – his wife of less than six months. Juan didn't like the idea but when even Lawrence urged him to do it, he . . . he conceded more than agreed."

"And Carlos knows all about this new arrangement?" Masters asked.

"Yes. He tore the lawyer's office apart when he was told. He ranted about trust and loyalty and family – off the wall things, really, considering the terrible way he treated Juan. Carlos is not a nice person. He has a violent temper – I've even seen him strike his father. On one occasion, I heard him threaten to kill Lawrence if he didn't do something or other. It was just an idle threat I suppose but it characterized the man. He carries his grudges forever."

"Go on," Masters urged.

"Wilma's trust fund has already kicked in. When she reached 55, it began paying her a hefty sum every month. She could have retired in luxury, but she preferred to stay on here. These people are her family, you know. She did agree to the caterers at that time, however. In addition, she's remembered in Juan's will.

"Justin wasn't forgotten either. There was something about that lad that immediately hit a chord in Juan's heart. He set up a lump sum trust. Justin can only use the interest. When Justin dies, the original principal is turned over to the arts scholarship fund that Juan and Maria support."

"How much interest are we talking about," asked Stone.

"Wisely but conservatively invested in today's economy, I'd estimate somewhere in the neighborhood of \$200,000 a year."

"And what triggers those payments to Justin?" Masters asked

"Either when Justin reaches 25 or upon Juan's death."

"Is there a 'natural death' clause?"



“No. That’s only been specified for Carlos.”

“Is Justin aware of this arrangement?”

“Not really – not fully I suppose is a better way of putting it. He knows he has a good pension program and that he will be given the full details about it after he completes his first year of satisfactory employment.”

“Are the payments dependent upon that ‘satisfactory year’s employment’ clause?”

“No. Nothing is said about that in the paperwork.”

“Okay. Who else is involved financially?”

“Billy, the retired chauffeur – he’s set up exactly like Justin except, of course, he’s already drawing his payments.”

“That just leaves you, I guess,” Masters suggested.

“Juan paid me a very generous – most would say ridiculously generous – salary all these years. I could live quite comfortably on what I have saved. There is, however, a trust fund for me as well. It follows the design of those for Wilma, Billy and Justin, except it is only activated upon Juan’s death. I guess he intended to keep me around forever.”

One received the impression she thought she was smiling – perhaps on the inside.

“What else can you tell us about the will?”

“I can only reveal its general plan. Juan directed that none of its specifics be revealed before its official reading – we need to set that time and place, by the way.”

“Tell us what you can, then,” Masters said.

“It has some quirky clauses. For example, he specifies certain dollar amounts to each of four dozen charities. But, if his death is not natural, or happens under suspicious circumstances, those gifts are revoked and Lawrence receives the entire amount. Juan’s intention is ... was ... that if Lawrence felt any of those people or groups had anything to do with his death he had the power to withhold payments to them and divvy it up among the rest. Juan trusted Lawrence completely.”

“Do you?” Masters asked.

“Completely!”

“But, if Lawrence chose to, could he just keep the entire sum, almost on a whim, it seems?”

“Yes, he could, but he wouldn’t.”

“You said quirky clauses - plural,” Masters said. “There were more?”

“The suicide clause is a strange one. He set up the will so if he took his own life, the ladies’ trust funds were each cut in half. He offered no explanation. Both his lawyer and I questioned him when he added it about seven months ago. He answered with a shrug. When Juan shrugged, that meant the discussion was closed.”

“That, I remember,” Masters said.

He changed the direction of the conversation.

“Juan and Lawrence must be far wealthier than is generally thought,” Masters said, fishing for whatever tidbit Dora might be willing to throw his way.

“Let me just say that in the late 70’s and early 80’s we took a flyer and invested heavily in several small, unknown computer technology companies which have since become the powerhouses of that industry.”

“So, we’re talking many, many millions of dollars, are we?”

“Mere millions would look like chickenfeed.”

Masters sat back dumbfounded. Dora broke the silence.

“You’re in the will, also, Mr. Masters. Juan said you’d never accept it outright so he set it up in such a way that if you choose to, you can name up to fifteen entities to share in the interest from a portfolio of investments – entities being either individuals or charities.”

Masters shook his head in disbelief. Dora continued.

“Juan named over three hundred other, individual, people in his will – most of whom no one around here would have ever heard of. He was a generous man and he never forgot a kindness – however small.”

“I am assuming that none of them were aware of their being in the will?”

“That’s correct. Well, so far as I know, at least, that’s correct.”

“What about Jerry Johnson?” Masters asked. “Can you tell me if he’s in the will?”

“Jerry Johnson?” No. I’ve never heard of a Jerry Johnson. Who is he?”

“It seems the more people we ask about him, the less we really know. Could you search your records for that name, just the same? It’s crucial to this investigation.”

Dora nodded politely though plainly puzzled. Dora knew her records. She was quite certain they contained no mention of a Jerry Johnson.

“One final financial question, Dora. I know it puts you on the spot but you seem to be the only one around here who knows what’s been going on. Who has the most to gain from the murder of Juan Blanco?”

Without hesitation, she rendered her answer. “Financially, Lawrence Muno.” Then without further hesitation she added, “But I’d bet my life and yours that he had nothing to do with it. He’s a kind and gentle man and was completely devoted to Juan. It’s ironic, in a way, that his health is failing so rapidly now, also.”

“I wasn’t aware of that. It’s serious, then?”

“I assume so but I don’t really know that for a fact. I just know I have been paying several of Lawrence’s high priced doctors a great deal of money these past four months. He’s on several medicines, also. Perhaps, I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“No. That’s important for us to know. You did the right thing. ... Back to the others. Are any of these folks in financial trouble?”

“I’ve never let that happen,” she answered, the slightest air of indignation in her tone. “Well, I can’t speak for Carlos. From the little I know about him, he’s always in financial trouble, but his father continues to bail him out. Carlos lives on credit cards – never seems to have any cash. He runs them up to their limits and then expects Lawrence to pay them off. Lawrence always does. There is something strange about that recently, however.”

“Strange? How’s that?” Master said, asking for clarification.

“Well, Carlos has been here since Thursday and Lawrence hasn’t requested a check for him yet.”

“You write Lawrence’s checks?”

“I write everybody’s checks. They each receive a cash allowance every Monday morning. The ladies and Lawrence

set the amounts they want to receive. Then they all just charge anything else. Plastic has revolutionized my life these past thirty years, Mr. Masters. I pay all the bills. Wilma, Justin and Betty receive their wages in cash. The envelopes there on the front counter – they contain everybody’s cash for this week. Justin and Wilma usually pick up theirs early in the day. Nobody’s come in yet today. I suppose I can understand that.”

“If you think of anything that you feel might be helpful, let us know immediately,” Masters said. The men left. The rest of the day was filled with the dull details of police work. Masters left most of that to Stone. He needed to get away and think so he had Justin take him for a guided tour of West Haven.

It was an old town of perhaps 50,000 residents and for the most part had escaped entrapment by the proliferation of unimaginative, cracker barrel, subdivisions. Mercifully, the classic old buildings had been spared the grotesque metal-panel facelifts so popular in the 1970’s. Old was obviously acceptable – perhaps even revered. Masters could appreciate that!

West Haven had its elite section of pretentious, expensive homes and expansive estates, though, interestingly, they were across town from La Musica. Juan had built his home in that area where the fingers of the middle class and poorer sections of the community intermingled. It had undoubtedly been done more by design than chance.

Justin set the route, clearly feeling a responsibility to make it a representative tour. He pointed out several of the houses and apartment buildings in which he and his mother had lived – openly avoiding her current residence. The Mercedes was clearly out of place in that world of Justin’s youth. Though physically superior in most ways to the decrepit, sullied slums of large cities, it clearly allowed, if not openly encouraged, a less than neighborly, less than hopeful, less than lawful approach to life. Justin’s sole comment, while there, was rhetorical.

“Ever really love something that made you feel terribly uncomfortable?”

Many of the fine old stores continued to flourish in the

unblemished, easily accessible, downtown area. Uncharacteristically, Main Street actually appeared to have remained the main street from end to end. At one point, Justin indicated a discount store he frequented.

“They mostly just have old stuff in there, but if they have something you need, you can get it dirt cheap. I always go there first. I got pillows, sheets, silverware – well, probably aluminum-ware – even chamois and paper towels.”

They rode on.

With few exceptions, it was an immaculately maintained community with numerous, large, inviting, green areas throughout. The open-air amphitheater with its orchestra-sized band shell was the contribution of Juan and Maria. Juan had played the final concert of his career there nine months before. The governor, the vice-president, and the ambassadors from Mexico and Spain had been in attendance. Justin had not, and he was clearly sad about that.

They stopped for a time in one of the parks and while Masters watched with delight from the tranquility of a shaded, wooden bench, Justin engaged a small swarm of nine-year-olds in a game of chase.

Masters contemplated several aspects of the case that needed his attention. The extortion letter had been addressed to Sarah on the envelope but the salutation was to Juan. Why write a note to one person and send it through the mail to a different person? Also, the follow up information about how and where to make the payoff had apparently never arrived. If the true mission of the note had been to obtain money, why would the extortionist abandon that and go ahead with the murder?

He also thought back to Stone’s three theories about the murder. If Lawrence and Betty had been involved, it couldn’t have been during their time in Juan’s room right after dinner. The timing was wrong. Juan had died hours later. They would have had to come back between two and three in the morning. That would suggest premeditation. It would have also, Masters thought, raised the suspicion of the officer on duty. A suspicious officer is an alert officer. Would he have just allowed Lawrence to have position himself behind him? More to the point, perhaps, how could Lawrence have hidden

the weapon during that time? How may have been the wrong question? Where might be more productive. At some earlier time, the weapon might have been left out on the veranda or hidden behind the heavy drapes that flanked the French doors.

If it had been Betty and Justin, she could have approached the officer alone from the front as if on a routine nighttime visit. While he was distracted, Justin could have climbed the trellis and attacked him from the rear. That probably made the most sense in terms of matching personnel with the deed. The lack of motive remained.

Thinking about late hour visitors that the officer would have felt were legitimate, a fourth possibility flashed through Masters head before he could dismiss it. It involved Stone approaching the officer from the front and Justin administering the blow from behind.

The sorting produced no answers but it provided more possibilities and put several things into a new perspective.

The excursion had been refreshing for both Masters and Justin. They returned to La Musica ready to get back to work.

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## Chapter Five

### Day three: The mounting evidence points to no one

Tuesday morning found Masters in the living room perusing the local paper. The media's handling of Juan's death had been as gentle as could be expected when a world-renowned figure meets with foul play. The yellow sheets would be poking around of course, trying to sensationalize it all, but that too would soon fade away.

Stone arrived at about nine and the two compared notes. As they were on their way to the kitchen for Masters' mid-morning snack, Dora approached them.

"I've been looking for you. I hardly slept last night wondering if this might be important. I don't know why I didn't think to bring it up yesterday.

Sustenance would have to wait. They followed her into her office and took seats in the front of the room.

"What's on your mind, Dora?" Masters asked.

"Well when I came in Friday morning things were out of place here in my office."

"Out of place?"

"Yes. I'm pretty well organized – heck, I'm compulsively over-organized – anyone will tell you that. I know where every scrap of paper is. Things had been subtly disarranged. Papers that should have been on the tops of piles were not. Drawers that should have been completely closed were open just a bit – maybe only a quarter of an inch but that's not how I keep them.

"My stamp drawer was a jumble – I didn't do an inventory but I imagine quite a few first-class stamps are gone.



I still buy stamps by the sheet – old habits die hard you know. A lot of mail goes out of here as you can imagine so I buy a dozen sheets at a time – first class, that is. I tear them into quarters so they will fit into the space in the drawer. I was running low or I probably wouldn't have even noticed.

“Later that morning I got the idea that the old safe had been entered. It's not very secure by today's standards, I suppose. It has a four-number combination and no time lock. Things just weren't right in there. I can only be pretty sure of one thing. It's hard to put my finger on anything else, specifically. I'm quite sure the wills had been handled.”

“Wills? Plural?” Masters asked.

“Yes. I keep everybody's will here. They're all in a cubbyhole in the safe. I have them alphabetized by first name. I keep them all face up. Billy's, mine and Juan's were face down.”

“Those would be the first three in alphabetical order, correct?” Masters observed.

“That's right. I might have left them like that but I can't imagine it. I haven't touched them in over a month.

“Did you speak to anyone about any of this?”

“I just asked Wilma if she had cleaned in here Thursday evening. She said that she hadn't. She's the only one with a key. Sometimes Justin mops the floor in here for her after the ladies have all gone to their apartments for the night. She said not that evening, though.”

“Does she just hand over the key to Justin when he helps out that way?”

“I imagine. But Justin's a pussycat. I can't imagine him doing such a thing. Could he get into the safe?”

Masters deferred to Stone.

“Well, I doubt if he could, but in all honesty, he certainly knows some guys who could have that door open in two minutes flat.”

“I think we should have the print man come in and snoop around on some of the suspect surfaces in here,” Masters suggested.

“I'll get 'em in and out as fast as possible,” Stone said addressing Dora.

Dora was clearly not pleased at the prospect of having

an officer underfoot there in her sanctuary, but nodded her understanding.

“As long as we have your ear again, Dora, what can you tell us about Betty’s background? I understand you investigated that rather thoroughly before she was hired.”

“She came highly recommended by Dr. Faraday. She has worked for some of his patients in the past. She got high marks from all of them. Her last two cases took nasty turns, however. In the first one, the old man had Alzheimer’s and somehow got to a balcony and fell off. No one ever charged her, or even blamed her, in his death but it seemed to really shake her up.”

“Did you discover any motive she might have had for causing the accident?” Stone asked.

“She was remembered in his will. She’d been with the family for six years. I don’t know if that would be considered a motive or not. In the other case the man was out and out murdered - a 45 slug to the head while he was sleeping.”

“I remember that one, now,” Stone added. “It had all the marks of a mob hit. The old guy had connections. Nothing was ever proved, though.”

“But Faraday trusted and respected her enough to recommend her?” Masters asked, just to tie it up.

“Yes. He had no reservations.”

The two men stood and started toward the door. Dora spoke again.

“This may not be anything either. It just popped into my head, but on Thursday, I was just ready to leave the office for the day – that would have been about five of five, I suppose – and I got a call from Lawrence saying Wilma needed me in the kitchen. It was something about an order she needed to place. It didn’t make much sense, really, but I left here and went right over. Wilma said Lawrence must have misunderstood her. She didn’t want to speak with me. We were both puzzled by it but I didn’t really give it a second thought. Lawrence is old and has a lot on his mind. I just let it go. I went back, got my purse, locked the door and left. Like I said, probably not anything.”

“We’ll keep it in mind. It’s difficult to know what will and won’t be important in this case. Thank you for your time and

patience with our questions,” Masters said. “Let’s hold off on the reading of the will for a couple more days. Is that possible?”

“Certainly. I’ll just wait to hear from you.”

As the men crossed the hall to the living room, a young detective approached them.

“Detective Stone, we found something out back behind the kitchen. You need to take a look before we move it.”

The find was a black trash bag. It had been knotted closed at the top. The policeman had untied it.

“There’s a bag inside it, Sir, and it’s bloody.”

Stone donned the latex gloves that one of the officers handed him. Masters motioned off the pair offered to him, placing his hands behind his back, much like a small boy being admonished by his mother in the candy store. Stone carefully removed the inner green sack and placed it on top of the low, black dumpster. It was rolled up from side to side, the blood only appearing on the exposed surface and toward the bottom of the bag. As it was unrolled to lay flat, it could be seen that the vast majority of the bag was blood-free. A quick peak revealed there wasn’t anything inside.

“First, we’ll need pictures as it lays here,” Stone ordered. “Type the blood and save it all for a DNA work up.” He had quickly run out of suggestions and looked over at Masters, hopefully.

“Masters began: “The blood is still wet - probably due to having been sealed up in the knotted outer bag. Look here and here! It’s as if the blood is of two different colors – this little spot a rich dark red and all the rest lighter, more anemic looking. Keep those samples separate. Don’t damage either bag. Run the bags for prints, though I doubt if there will be any.”

He pointed to a spot ten inches from the bottom of the bag – an oval area about an inch across its shorter diameter. It was essentially free of blood.

“There appears to be some kind of impression on the bag right here. It may be the bag manufacturer’s monogram but I doubt it. It’s hardly a designer bag. Have the lab pay particular attention to that area, inside and out. Transport the bag flat, just as it is. If that is an imprint of some kind we sure

don't want to lose it."

He continued his visual examination.

"This looks like traces of adhesive from tape here at the top, again here in the middle, and at the very bottom. It seems to have some black fibers in it. Check it out. Tell the lab crew to consider nothing insignificant."

Stone made several more procedural suggestions to his officers and then the two men went back inside through the kitchen door. They were met by the unmistakable aroma of Wilma's Peach Cobbler.

"No one told me you was comin', Mr. Masters, or I'd a been waitin' at the front door with it when you first pulled up."

"Detective," Masters announced, "Your pallet has not lived until it's been treated to Wilma's Peach Cobbler.

Wilma blushed, pushing air at him with the palm of her hands. Soon the men were on stools at the counter enjoying the nearly too hot treat. It was delicious plain. It was delectable with Wilma's home-recipe whipped cream. Though Masters truly preferred it refrigerator-cold that would have offended Wilma. It presented a good opportunity to talk with her.

"As far as you know, Wilma, did anyone go into Dora's office Thursday evening last week?"

"Dora asked me that very same question. No. At least nobody used my key to git in."

"I understand that sometimes Justin helps with the cleaning and mopping in there."

"Yes. He's such a dear child. A body just wants to take him home. I could do it, you know, but it makes him feel like he's helping me out, so I let him. I just love that young man. Actually, most weeks he mops and vacuums the whole place – usually early evenin'. He's got ants in his pants, that one – always needs to be doing somethin'."

"Does he know where you keep the key to Dora's office?" Stone asked, getting right to the point.

"Sure. Right here in my pocket. Everybody in the house knows that."

She pulled out a key ring boasting two dozen keys.

"One key on here for every room in the place. Senior Blanco didn't believe in master keys. He wanted everybody to

have their privacy.”

“And no one could take them – borrow them – without your knowledge, then,” Masters said.

“That’s right, lessin they caught me napping.”

She giggled.

“Do you give Justin the key ring when he cleans?”

“No. Not usually. He says he don’t want the responsibility. I go open a room and later go back and lock it up. Keys and locks are a joke around here anyway. Nobody’d never go into nobody else’s place without them bein’ there.”

“You said not usually,” Masters said. “Sometimes?”

“There’s been a few times I was too busy in here – couldn’t leave a sauce or somethin’ – and he took them when he cleaned.”

“Would he be gone very long with them?”

“Only a half hour maybe. Maybe a little longer.”

The men finished their cobbler. Masters all quite unceremoniously used his index finger to scoop the last prized morsels from his bowl. Justin entered, sniffing the air.

“I knew it! Wilma’s Peach Cobbler. Bring it on, Mama!”

He slipped onto a stool beside Detective Stone and fumbled in his shirt pocket.

“Here, Mr. Masters. Receipts from five stores and your change.”

He reached it across in front of Detective Stone.

“The ‘merchandise’ is safe and sound up in my room.”

The comment escaped Wilma entirely.

Stone looked puzzled but didn’t ask.

Masters hushed his tone and, winking at Justin, explained to Stone.

“The secret mission.”

Justin smiled.

Stone nodded, knowingly, though still without a clue.

“You were successful then?” Masters asked, sounding pleased.

“To the tune of fifty-eight dollars and forty-seven cents successful – less the three eighty-seven for the berry strings.”

“If you’re gonna wait around for Justy, here, to finish his

cobbler,” Dora began, “I’d better put on another pot a coffee. He’s the world’s slowest eater. Can’t keep his prattle shut long enough to chew.”

Justin was plainly pleased with the teasing and slowed down to match her prediction. He obviously loved the old woman – quite clearly a mutual feeling. His having addressed her as ‘Mama’ earlier, now held more meaning than it had initially.

“I’ll tell you what,” Masters said. “Detective Stone and I need to go over our notes. Justy, when you’re finished – provided it’s sometime this week – would you be kind enough to bring us each a cup of Dora’s freshly brewed coffee out by the pool? Then we’ll go examine ‘the merchandise’.”

With a thumbs up, and through a mouth full of cobbler, Justin managed a garbled, “You got it!”

Masters and Stone thanked Wilma more than was called for but not more than was expected, and returned to poolside.

“So, what do you make of the trash bags?” Stone asked.

Without waiting for an answer, he went ahead and gave his impression.

“To me, it looks like somebody wiped off that blunt instrument on one of them and then tried to hide it inside the other.”

“That’s one possibility, alright,” Masters replied, humoring the policeman. “But, if you were going to wipe something clean of blood, would you choose something slick and non-absorbent like a plastic bag or would you use cloth or perhaps paper?”

“I see what you mean. You’d never get it clean with a plastic sack,” Stone confessed.

Masters moved on.

“Once the lab has dealt with the blood and any other foreign material inside and out, we need to find the source of those bags. They use black bags throughout the house, here. The outer bag is probably one of them. I imagine that Dora buys them a case at a time. It’s the green one I’m really interested in, because it had to have been brought into La Musica by someone, probably by the killer. It’s also the one

with the blood on it.

“There’s another thing that puzzles me about those bags,” Masters continued, thinking out loud. “Usually a killer would just throw away or hide the weapon itself. But, it appears that in this case the weapon was rolled up in that green bag well ahead of time and taped in place so as to not come loose. It was a protective sheath over the weapon, itself. That makes me think the weapon must have some value to the killer. He or she felt comfortable using it, but didn’t want to be rid of it. Perhaps it needed to be returned to the place from which it had been borrowed.”

“Or the killer wanted to plant it on somebody else to point the finger at them,” Stone added.

“An interesting idea. Jot that down will you.”

Stone beamed as he wrote. They sat in silence for a moment pondering the problem. Then Masters asked, “How’s the room by room search going?”

“I believe the main house has been finished and they’re just beginning on the ladies’ apartments.”

Masters looked at his watch – almost ten o’clock.

“Could you have them do the two apartments over the garage first – those of Lawrence and Justin?”

“Sure – no problem.”

Stone motioned to a passing officer and gave the directive. The young detective spoke into his radio and soon the area teemed with policemen moving toward the rear of the courtyard.

Five minutes later one of the officers appeared on the balcony in front of Justin’s door. He motioned the men to come. They were quickly there. Well, Stone was quickly there. Masters arrived in what might be termed a timely fashion!

“Thought you should see this.” The young officer said. “Four sacks of little baseball bats. The ideal blunt instrument if you ask me.”

At least there seemed to be a consensus about that.

They had been removed from the bags and laid out side by side on the table. Masters counted them. There were six. He looked at the receipts. Only five. Closer examination suggested one of them was not new – well worn and chipped,

in fact.

“Where did this one come from?” Masters asked, pointing.”

“I was about to tell you. It was in the bedroom, in a dresser drawer, Sir.”

“Bag it carefully and give it to the lab boys. The others aren’t to be considered evidence.”

The policemen seemed stunned.

“Was there anything else of significance in the drawer with the bat?” Masters asked.

One of the other officers responded.

“Just a bunch of first class stamps, a couple of pencils, a pad of paper, some string, a few twist ties, coupons for pizza and junk food, a roll of strapping tape and another of duct tape. It looks like the kid’s junk drawer. Everybody’s got one.”

Justin appeared at the open door, a cup of coffee in each hand.

“So, it’s my turn for the big search. Feel free to clean the place while you’re at it, fellas.”

He handed over the mugs.

“You other guys want coffee? I’ll be glad to go get more.”

They declined.

“I looked for you down at the pool and then saw all the activity up here. Figured I’d find you here,” Justin explained more than was necessary.

Masters pointed to the old bat, still on the table.

“This must be the one you were telling me about – the one you had as a kid.”

“Yup. Old Betsy. Not a very original name but, heck, I was only six when Mom bought it for me. Lots of battle scars as you can see.”

Justin moved to pick it up and demonstrate the accuracy of his statement.

“Please don’t touch it, Justy,” Stone snapped in a commanding tone and style unfamiliar to their relationship.

It wasn’t until that moment that it seemed to hit him.

“Oh! I see. You think that could be the murder weapon. I suppose it could be but it’s not. Suddenly this doesn’t look real great for me, does it?”



He backed up with no place to go.

“We’re going to let the lab give it a going over. If it’s not the weapon, there’s nothing to be concerned about is there?”

Masters words seemed to offer a quickly accepted pick-up for Justin. He nodded his head quite deliberately. Either he was not the killer or he was a fantastic actor.

“I see you found the other bats – the ones I bought for you.”

Stone and the other officers stopped in their tracks, turning to look at Masters.

“Yes. Thanks. There is something missing from that mission though.”

It’s in a cabinet in the kitchen. Different store – different sack. I put ‘em away out of habit, I guess.”

Baffled, the officers turned and slowly went back to work. Masters began examining the new bats. Stone and Justin watched with interest. Each model was just slightly different in size, weight, and, of course, the trademark. One matched Justin’s and Masters commented on the fact. Justin replied.

“It looks the same but it’s a rip off – made out of cheaper wood. Mine’s an authentic PeeWee Slugger. It’s made from hickory like the big-league bats. This one’s made out of pine. What’s the world coming to?”

He managed a quick smile.

Masters rubbed his hand over the oval trademark. It was deeply indented into the wood.

“At least they’re still branding that model,” Justin said, watching Masters. “See these three? They just have the trademark printed on in ink. One season of normal treatment by some reckless five-year old and that mark’ll be gone forever. Cheap! Shoddy work, I’d say. And you pay ten bucks for it.”

“Looks like you’ve recently taken steps to preserve yours.”

“Yeah.” His tone became solemn. “When our trailer burned down – I was ten – it was the only thing I could save. It’s pretty precious since it’s all I have left from those first ten years of my life. A couple of months ago, I cleaned it up real good and gave it five coats of lacquer. It’s all ready to be

passed down to my little slugger, someday – when he’s old enough to appreciate such things.”

“If that’s your goal,” Stone teased, “It might be a good idea to learn how to look girls in the eye without turning and running.”

Masters joined in the joke.

“Detective Stone, I hate to have to burst your bubble, but little sluggers don’t come about just by looking a girl in the eye.”

Justin turned seven shades of crimson and went into the kitchen. He returned with the four bags of strawberry twisters and placed them on the table alongside the bats.

“More evidence?” Stone asked.

“Ah, yes!” Masters replied. “Evidence of one man’s weakness.”

He picked up the bags and, winking, tossed two of them back to Justin.

“Payment for a job well done. It looks like your mission was a complete success.”

“Yes, Sir! Thank you, Sir!” Justin said, snapping to boot camp attention. He sensed the two of them had the policemen fully confused. His grin suggested his impish delight at the situation. For a moment, Masters let himself hope that this new young friend was not the killer. He knew that was poor police procedure – a double problem since he was certain Stone must harbor that same hope.

As Masters and Stone made their way down the stairs, Masters made another request.

“Make sure the search includes all the cars.”

Never missing a step, Stone jotted it onto his pad.

Stone had to ask, “You think this bat of Justin’s is the weapon?”

“I certainly hope not. Even if it would be, it doesn’t convict Justin. Someone else who knew about it could have borrowed it. That could be why it wasn’t just destroyed in the first place. It needed to be returned. There are still a multitude of loose ends and missing pieces to set in place before we’ll know.”

“It sure didn’t appear to be discolored, like you’d expect if it had just recently been covered with blood.”

“You’re right there, but, having been wrapped so carefully, I doubt if the actual weapon will show any traces of blood.

Stone nodded, as if admitting that he should have realized that.

The men returned to their outdoor office by the pool. Masters spoke.

“I’m counting on one of two things. That the lab finds traces - inside the green bag - of the material from which the club was made, and/or that if it was a child’s bat, that the blow was struck at the point of the trademark so some remnant of an indentation will be embedded in the plastic.”

Stone was quietly dumbfounded, feeling more than a little inept in the presence of the wise old detective.

“Here are some more things we need to check out,” Masters began as if dictating to a stenographer. “Compare the adhesive on the duct tape that Justin uses around here with the adhesive we found on the green sack. Justy says he only uses first class tape. He says it’s thicker, stronger and sticks far better than the cheaper varieties. That makes me assume the adhesive is somehow different from that one to the others. Let’s get some of both varieties over to the lab and see if they can verify that.”

“Consider it done,” Stone said, as he emphatically put the period in place at the end of his entry.

“Then, make sure your people search for black wool sweats. There may only have been one set or we may be looking at samples from several sets – considering the appearance of the prowlers. In any event, take any black sweats to the lab, three-cornered hole or not. We might get lucky and find some kind of match with the fibers on the trellis. I imagine the fibers on the adhesive are from gloves, rather than sweats. Add black, cloth, gloves to the search list.”

“Why would the murderer remove that tape?” Stone asked. “He didn’t seem concerned about leaving the bags behind.”

“That’s an astute question, my friend.”

Stone sat up a bit straighter. Masters was continually amused and somewhat saddened at how the least scrap of a compliment brought Stone to attention.

“It’s only a theory, but the murderer could have prepared the weapon somewhere else – wrapped it up and taped the sack in place around it, I mean. Only later, did he recognize the difference between the tape he used and the tape available around here. It’s a long shot. That would require that the person have had a good deal of knowledge about duct tape.”

“And that he was interested in keeping the blame among the members of this household,” Stone added, with unbelievable insight.

“Good point,” Masters said. “It’s also interesting that he didn’t make the same kind of observation about the trash bags,” Masters added. “That brings to mind another possibility, however.”

“What’s that?” Stone asked.

“Think about it. At three or four in the morning in the dark, the difference between dark green and black might not be obvious.”

Stone not only had another helpful question but he supplied an answer.

“Would that be more true for old people than for young people? I’ve noticed my night vision isn’t what it used to be. Colors fade fast after sunset. When I get called out in the middle of the night, I dress in the dark so I won’t bother my wife and I’m likely to end up wearing gosh awful color combinations.”

Masters chuckled inside thinking the man must always dress in the dark. Mentally, he also slapped his own face for having made such an unkind observation. Somehow, it had been worth the pain!

“You make another interesting point, Detective. Yes, I would think you’re right about that.”

Lawrence approached them.

“Lawrence!” Masters said warmly. “Pull up a chair. We need to chat about a few things if you’re up to it.”

“Sure. I guess. Like what?”

“Dora tells us you’re a very wealthy man.”

“That’s what she tells me, too.”

A faint, quick smile appeared and left.

“I have very little need for money, you know. It’s mostly

an embarrassment. Lots of money made Juan feel secure. It's always just sent shivers up my spine. I guess now I'll have to begin dealing with that side of life. I'm getting on in age and I need to make sure it all goes to worthwhile endeavors. It's a responsibility I always avoided – never wanted.”

“May I ask who your primary beneficiary is at this point?”

“My will leaves most of it to Carlos. I don't have anybody else. I'm thinking I should probably change that. I can't decide. Maybe if Carlos had all the money he needed he'd turn himself around.” Lawrence's tone was not convincing.

“Does Carlos know how your will reads?”

“I've discussed it with him but not for many years.”

“Does he know how wealthy you are?”

“He doesn't have a clue. I think he actually believes that Juan paid me minimum wage all these years.”

The idea seemed to amuse Lawrence. He shook his head.

“I understand you have to bail him out of financial difficulties occasionally?” Masters said, hoping for more than mere confirmation. He wasn't disappointed.

“I used to. I did it all the time. Ever since he was a child Carlos would try for the shortcuts, never really putting full effort into things you know. I finally came to see that by protecting him from himself, I really wasn't helping him. A couple of months ago, I told him that was all over. He's a middle-aged man, for god's sake. It's time he made it on his own. It's not that Carlos is stupid. He's really quite bright. He's always been good at whatever he tried. He just can't stick with anything. He either gets bored or he goes overboard and loses everything.”

“What sorts of things has he done?”

“You name it! He's into a home TV satellite dish business now. Before that, it was home security systems. He once acquired a small heating and air conditioning store but he soon ran that into bankruptcy. He did the same with a Warehouse Closeout Store – he sold the odds and ends manufactures had left over when they stopped making a certain line of some product. It was mostly household

products, I guess. The profit margin on stuff like that is tremendous. He once had five thousand cases of Cushion Delight toilet paper and moved it to a motel chain within twenty-four hours. He made fifty thousand dollars profit almost overnight. I'm sure it was gone before the week was out.

"He always loved sports. He dreamed of making it big as an athlete. Like most boys, I suppose, his first love was baseball, but he didn't have the necessary hustle. When he was in his early twenties, he was a boxer – had no heart for the training, just enjoyed beating on his opponents. Later, he spent a short time as a fight promoter. I think he got mixed up with the wrong bunch. Anyway, that didn't last long. He's driven cabs in New York City. He's worked in banks and was even a lab technician right out of college."

"College? What did he study?"

"Girls and sports, in that order. It took him five years and three paternity suits to graduate. He was always a pretty good athlete – in and out of bed, I guess. I shouldn't have said that. He just makes me so angry sometimes. At least he graduated and I should be thankful for that. He started out in school with a learning disability so, really, he's come a long way. He played all the major sports at the small college he attended. His major was chemistry. I think he has a minor in sports rehabilitation. Oh, the one business he seemed to really like was a sports memorabilia shop he had a year or so ago. He blew that, too. Got caught selling fake mementos."

"Why did he let that go?"

"One day somebody walked in and offered him a good price and he sold on the spot. Money in his pocket has always been his reason for living, I guess."

He paused.

"This conversation seems to be a whole lot more about Carlos than about me."

"I suppose so. It's just that Carlos is an unknown quantity around here, whereas you aren't. You're the only real resource we have where Carlos is concerned," Masters explained.

"Yes. I can see that, I guess. Well, I wish I could say there's no way he could be the killer but I can't. I really don't

know him very well. I do know he has a violent temper and doesn't seem to have a compassionate bone in his body. I know he always disliked Juan. He even refused to use his name because it's Juan's middle name. I can't see him killing the man, though, especially since Juan was already at death's door. I'm sure Juan probably remembered him in his will – Juan was a forgiving and generous person. But to hurry up his death by a few weeks in order to get that money sooner just makes no sense. I think Carlos is too smart to have done that. He's been through probate and knows how long it takes.”

“Actually, it makes even less sense than you think,” Stone added. “As you probably know the will stipulates that if Juan was murdered, Carlos gets nothing.”

“Carlos and a huge number of other folks,” Masters added, tweaking his mustache at an unusually high rate.

“Have the funeral arrangements been completed?” Stone asked.

“Yes, mostly. There will be two services – one private for the family early Friday morning at the chapel at St. Luke's. There will be a public service in the main sanctuary at noon that day. Juan had so many fans and admirers that the family feels it's only right to let them be a part of it. That's why we allowed the extra couple of days. So, folks could come in if they wanted to. My, it is a sad time. Catch the murderer, whoever it is, Mr. Masters. It was such an unthinkable deed.”

He grew silent and looked off into the distance.

“I suppose I shouldn't condemn the murderer. I must admit that the first time I found Juan unconscious, I considered doing nothing and just letting him slip away from his pain. My religion wouldn't allow it. I'm not sure how I feel about that – mostly angry now at my religion, I suppose. I could have saved him that awful, painful, final experience.”

“The Medical Examiner assures us that the first blow killed him. He was undoubtedly asleep at the time and never knew what happened,” Masters said, trying to console his old friend.

“Thank you, Mr. Masters. That's good to know ... anything else from me?”

“That's all for now. You've been very helpful.”

Lawrence left and Justin arrived.

“Wilma has a buffet set up in the dining room. It’s sort of a drop in and eat whenever you want to arrangement. She made plenty for all the policemen, Sammy.”

“Thanks, Justin. It sounds great! Will you pass that on to the officers? We’ll be right along,” Stone said.

“Sure thing.”

Again, Justin seemed pleased to be helpful. Also, since Masters’ reassuring remark in his apartment, the young man seemed to have lost all fear of becoming a genuine suspect.”

\* \* \*

There had been four, amateurish, bungled attempts on Juan’s life and then a final, rather professional, successful one by a relatively strong, agile, left-handed perpetrator. All of the players had the opportunity to commit the fatal act. There seemed to be no reasonable motive in sight, however. The only truly despicable player – the one for whom everyone would all root to be convicted – was right handed and stood to lose his entire inheritance because of the murder. The left-handed young man with the proper kind of weapon – and therefore the most likely suspect - was a loveable, helpful, thoroughly delightful person. Many investigators would tear at their hair, scream out loud, and ask the gods, “Why me?” Masters, on the other hand, felt invigorated by the challenge and hungry for no particular reason at all! He departed in search of the buffet.



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## **Chapter Six**

### **Day four: The facts only muddy the water**

By three, o'clock the Wednesday afternoon the lab reports began trickling in. Every few minutes Stone's cell phone brought some new morsel for Masters to chew on.

"They've located a Jerry Johnson who fits the profile. He's been a New York City resident, a musician's guild member – though his dues lapsed years ago – and get this, Ray. Last week he moved to Cartersville – not an hour's drive from here – forty-five minutes in a squad car."

"You have an address, then."

"The Oaks, at 2741 Fairview Lane. Shall we go talk with him?"

"First, let's make sure he's there. Contact the Cartersville police and see if they can determine that without arousing his suspicion."

"Done."

There was more information passed along to Stone during his call to the station. He was pleased to tell Masters.

"The blood on the bags is from two separate individuals, just as you suspected. One is Juan's type and the other is the officer's. DNA matches may take a week or more."

An officer approached them, a bagged black sweat suit in hand.

"We found this in Mr. Muro's apartment. It has a three-cornered piece missing from the front of the left hip area – just like you said to look for."

"Thanks officer. I'll take charge of that," Stone said,

immediately handing the bag to Masters.

The absurdity of the transaction was not lost on either the officer or Masters.

Masters took it from the bag and began examining it. There was a three-cornered piece missing, but it was three times larger than the piece Stone had found on the railing.

“Well, send it to the lab anyway. Who knows what they might find.”

“Do you think those are Lawrence’s?”

“From the short legs, I’d say they belong to Carlos. I suppose it’s about time we have a chat with him.”

\* \* \*

Carlos had commandeered the grassy area between the rear of the garage and the high, back wall of the property for his own private putting green. Perhaps an acre in area, it provided a lush, green, closely cropped oasis, bringing a welcome relief to the mantle of white sand, which blanketed that portion of central Florida. With the afternoon sun at his back, Carlos was putting ball after ball back toward the garage.

“Good afternoon, Carlos,” Masters said warmly as they approached him.

Carlos was small in stature though well built, with bristle-short dark hair – graying at the temples. He didn’t allow his concentration on the putt to be broken by their presence. When he finished, he looked up.

“Time for my inquisition?” he asked sarcastically.

“If that’s how you choose to characterize it,” Masters replied, fully unruffled by the tone of the remark.

“How long’s this going to take? I’m due to tee off at Overbrook at four sharp.”

“It shouldn’t take long. Shall we go over and sit on the benches?” Masters suggested, pointing to the small garden area a few yards to the east.

“I’d rather duke it out right here,” Carlos shot back, apparently ready for a fight.

“Fine,” Masters answered. After all, he had given the man the choice. “First, we need to know where you were between two and four a.m., Sunday morning.”

“Asleep on the couch in Dad’s apartment.”

“Can anyone verify that?”

“Can anyone verify that you were asleep in the Blue Suite at that same time?”

“I’ll take that to mean no,” Masters said. “How did your sweat pants come by this hole?” Masters offered the pants for Carlos to examine. He declined to accept them.

“Who knows? They’re old. Holes happen. Is that all?”

“How well do you know the people here at La Musica?”

“I hate that name. It’s like Juan thought he had some patent on all The Music in this world.”

Masters rephrased the question.

“You’ve been here often, I understand. Do you feel like you know these people fairly well?”

“No. I’ve made it a point not to.”

“At least you know your father. What can you tell us about him?”

“The packrat? He’s been Juan’s pansy for what, fifty some years now. He’s one of the world’s only living men without a backbone. He let Juan walk all over him – use him.”

Masters ignored the man’s ventilating since it was clearly based on a complicated string of inaccurate bits and pieces of information. Instead, he tried for a clarification.

“You referred to your father as a packrat. May I ask why?”

“He saves everything. His place is full of junk. He’s always been that way and it’s always bugged me. I say if I can’t use it today, get rid of it. God, he still has an unwrapped ball of kite string from 1940.”

“Any ideas about who might have killed Juan?”

“No. Maybe that old bitch, Dora. She’s had her hands in his wallet for years.”

“Do you have any proof of that?”

“Getting proof is your job, I believe.”

“You must at least have some reason for your accusation.”

“She’s a woman – they’re all money grubbers. She had access to thousands of dollars. You don’t really think she’d just take good care of it all for the old man without skimming some for herself now and then, do you?”

“She seems totally trustworthy to me,” Masters said, baiting Carlos.

"If you trust bitches at your age, you've led a very sheltered life, old man."

"Anyone else on your list of suspects?"

"Take your pick! The place is crawling with them."

"By 'them' I assume you mean, 'women'?" Masters said forcing Carlos to clarify.

"Yeah. Women! Spelled, b-i-t-c-h-e-s."

"I understand you've been married several times. It's hard to believe that, the way you seem to characterize females."

"A male needs a female. That's God's most damnable practical joke on us guys. It's like he's trying to see how much crap we're willing to put up with in order to get our comfort."

"So, you do believe in God, then?"

"Once a Catholic, never an atheist – no matter how hard you may try."

"Did you kill Juan Carlos Blanco?"

"You just had to bring up that middle name didn't you? I hate it."

"Did you hate Juan?"

"All my life with every fiber of my being. As a kid I used to lay in bed at night thinking up ways to kill him."

"And did you kill him?"

"No. He was dead already, really. Why would I waste my time or risk prison at this late date? Anyway, it was a joy to know he was suffering. Can I go now?"

"Yes. By all means. Please leave. Detective Stone and I will consider that a monumental favor."

It had been for effect, of course. It was not Masters' way to be rude.

Masters turned toward Stone and they nodded emphatically, looking much like a scene in profile from an early Laurel and Hardy movie. For just a moment, Carlos looked puzzled, then his natural sneer returned. He picked up his golf balls and headed toward the garage.

"A thoroughly despicable human being," Masters said, most uncharacteristically.

"If despicable means the lowest of the low-lifes, then I agree."

"We're definitely on the same wave length," he assured

the detective.

Masters motioned toward the benches in the shade of some huge, exquisite, azaleas.

Stone spoke.

“Can’t think of anyone I’d rather put away, but there’s not a shred of evidence pointing in his direction – no motive – no means. Poor Lawrence. It’s hard to believe such a fine man could have fathered such a lousy son.”

“Their voices sound so much alike I guess Lawrence has to claim him. It’s my hunch that if we met his mother we’d probably understand. Still, we are sitting here with a strange case quite aside from all that,” Masters said, ready to move on. “See if you can find the cleaning lady who does Carl’s apartment in New York City. He’s bound to have someone. I’d like to speak with her by phone.”

Puzzled, Stone dutifully made another call and again he received additional information from the lab.

“The worst possible news,” Mr. Masters. Stone’s shoulders slumped and he sighed and interminable sigh. “The lab found that indentation on the bag you were looking for. It’s the one that matches Justin’s bat.”

It wasn’t the report Masters had hoped to receive, either.

“Should I arrest him?” Stone asked.

“Yes. I suppose you should but he’s not going to be leaving. If he did kill Juan, he’ll be sticking around to reap whatever benefit he thought killing him would have for him. If he’s innocent, he has no reason to run, unless we confront him with the evidence and scare him away. Can we hold off just a while longer? There are still many missing pieces.”

“Since you put it that way, I don’t see why not. It would be the most gut-wrenching arrest I’ve ever had to make, I’ll tell you that.”

He paused before continuing.

“There is some good news, though, maybe,” Stone continued.

“What’s that?”

“The tape adhesive on the bag is from the cheap brands, not the kind Justin uses around here.”

“Hot digity!” Masters said in a rare show of elation.

“It gets even better! They’ve traced it to a brand that’s manufactured in Taiwan. It’s not a big player in the market outside of a few large, East Coast cities. The green bag, on the other hand, seems to just be a green trash bag – actually, it’s a three-ply bag, green-black-green. It’s made here in the US by the millions! Or it was made here, anyway. Apparently, the manufacturing process has changed and this particular fabrication method hasn’t been used for ten years or more. The lab says it’s only because of its thickness that it held the partial impression.”

“Partial impression?” Masters snapped.

“Oh. Yes. That’s what they called it. Is that important?”

“It depends on what part of the trademark was picked up. On Justin’s bat, I noticed that the inside of the ‘e’ on slugger has chipped away. See if you can get any details on that.”

\* \* \*

The impression had been from the other half of the trademark so the definitive, missing chip could not be verified. The impression was not sharp enough to make a positive to particular bat – just to the brand. That didn’t let Justin off the hook – it just suggested more fishing was in order.

Lawrence arrived in work clothes pushing a wheelbarrow containing a hoe, rake, and a bag of fertilizer.

“I wondered whose loving care it was that had created this beautiful spot,” Masters said greeting the man.

“I can come back later if you folks are talking privately.”

“Not at all. In fact, I was just thinking that I forgot to ask you a very important question earlier.”

“Sure. What’s on your mind?” He began, putting on his work gloves, deliberately, as if they were the finest white gloves – the final touch to elegant evening ware.

“What can you tell me about Jerry Johnson?”

Lawrence’s face went blank.

Surprised, Masters tried to clarify.

“Jerry Johnson - the arranger.”

There was still no indication of recognition.

“Sorry, Mr. Masters. That name just doesn’t ring a bell.”

"We were lead to believe that Jerry Johnson used to do arrangements for you and Juan."

"Jerry Johnson? No, Sir. Not to my knowledge. There's a chance he might have done some way back before I joined Juan. That would make him an antique."

"Any chance Senior Blanco would have kept that kind of thing a secret from you?" Stone asked trying to make sense out of an increasingly baffling aspect of the case.

"I sincerely doubt it. I suppose it's possible but I can't see why. That just wouldn't make any sense. I did most of the arranging early on. Later, we just worked things out as we practiced. Look at our recording labels from the past forty years. There aren't even arrangers listed."

"Odd. Well, thank you. We won't keep you from your work," Masters said, plainly bewildered by the exchange.

Lawrence spoke.

"It's pure enjoyment out here away from everybody. They're all darlings but if it weren't for Justy, I think I'd go completely bonkers with their incessant chattering. Every time they run into one another, it's as if they haven't seen each other for a decade. I get a kick out of it really, I guess. They're yapping almost before they're within earshot." He shook his head, smiling.

"They all get along well, then?"

"Like loving sisters. It's probably the most peculiar living arrangement in the history of mankind, but it certainly works."

He turned to lift out the bag.

"You know," he said, stopping, bag in his arms, "One of Maria's husbands was named Johnson, and the dude Sarah got the decorating business from was Jerry. None of that is probably important. How many thousands of Jerrys and Johnsons must there be in this country? It's all I can seem to dredge up. I'll keep the old gray matter working on it."

Lawrence returned to work. Masters made a mental note. Stone attentively entered it onto his pad.

"Anything from the background check on the caterer?" Masters asked Stone.

"It's pretty much a blank. Apparently, Maria knew the man from several years back. He catered some of her



fundraisers for the Arts Scholarship Fund. She mentioned him to Dora, but I'm sure it was Dora and Wilma who made the final choice. They interviewed several others. There's still more to come on that."

"What about the helpers?"

"Turns out the assistant is a former female friend of Justy. They went to school together. Never dated, but they knew each other. It's usually just the three of them who come."

"Three?"

"Oh, yes. The caterers are a man and wife team. They always come together."

"Any of them happen to be . . ."

Masters' question was interrupted by Stone.

"Left handed? Interestingly the man and the girl are both lefties. What's the chance of that?"

Masters shifted his position and addressed Lawrence.

"When the caterers were here, did they typically have any direct contact with Juan?"

"Sometimes Juan came down to dinner - not so often during the past month. One of them would usually take a tray up to him. He rarely ate very much anymore."

"Can you remember about last week?"

Lawrence leaned on the hoe.

"Juan had been feeling pretty well this week. I believe he had a tray taken up every time they were here. And, oh, I feel pretty foolish about having forgot this, but on Thursday, Janice - Justin's friend - didn't come. It was a young man, instead - Marty, I believe his name was."

"Did you hear why she didn't come?" Masters asked.

"Something about her car being towed. Turned out it was a practical joke or something. That may not be right. You better look into it yourself. Anyway, she didn't make it to work on time so the young man subbed. He must have been new. He didn't seem to know Jack about catering."

Masters turned to Stone. Stone spoke first.

"Got it. Check out Janice's car problem and run a check on Marty."

Masters nodded. Lawrence suddenly turned pale and took a seat on the nearby green, wooden, bench.

“Is there a problem?” Masters asked.

“Oh, it’s my fool ticker.” He patted his chest. “Doc says it’s become enlarged and when I bend over too long it gets squeezed and that somehow makes me light headed. It can’t be fixed short of a transplant and at my age, a transplant is out the question. It seldom really bothers me much except out here and sometime in the pool.”

“But yet you still garden and you still swim?” Stone asked.

“What good’s living if you can’t enjoy it?”

Masters noted that seemed to be a recurring philosophic premise among the residents there in the ‘Elder Compound’.

“I take my medicine and go in for monthly check-ups – wouldn’t take the time for the office calls but there’s a really sweet nurse there I’d like to get to know better.”

His eyes sparkled and he raised his eyebrows as if in jest.

“A cradle robber, are you?” Masters joked.

“I suppose you could say that. She’s only sixty-four.”

They smiled all knowing that they were pursuing smoke in the night.

“Can we help you in any way?” Stone asked.

“No. I just need a minute and I’ll be as good as old.”

He chuckled at his own little joke. So did Masters and Stone.

Masters had to ask.

“Lawrence, have you told Carlos about your health problem?”

“I didn’t for years but a few months ago, when it seemed to be getting worse, I decided it wouldn’t be fair for me to just drop dead someday and surprise him – though if I could have been around to watch his expression, I might have waited. That’s a crude way of stating it I suppose but what I’m trying to say is that I felt I owed it to him to let him know.”

Rebecca approached with a tray of lemonade.

“I noticed this all male convention back here. Thought you might enjoy some refreshment.”

She shook her head and drew her lips tight when she noticed Lawrence’s ashen tone, but didn’t mention it. Masters

figured the tray was just a charade so she could check up on Lawrence. He seemed to be aware of it as well, but again, he didn't mention it. The men gratefully accepted the drinks. Lawrence slid to one side of the bench making room for Rebecca in the middle and the tray at the other end. She seated herself and spoke.

"Olivia and I have been wondering when it will be our turn to be grilled."

She smiled indicating the term was a light-hearted reference.

"How about right now?" Masters said. "Detective, get out the thumbscrews."

Three of them chuckled. Stone seemed momentarily befuddled. He stopped short of searching his pockets.

"What do you have to tell us that might be useful," Masters asked, painting a verbal inkblot for her to respond to.

"I don't know. I assumed you would have some questions. I can tell you one thing though. It wasn't any of us who live here at La Musica." She emphasized the three words 'who live here' as if to specifically exclude Carlos. She turned a quick glance at Lawrence. He nodded that her characterization was acceptable.

Stone attempted a diplomatically couched question.

"Many folks seem to be surprised that you two haven't become an item."

Obviously surprised, Rebecca looked Lawrence in the eyes and patted his leg affectionately.

"He has proposed to me," she said.

"Perhaps two dozen times," Lawrence added, a wonderful smile spanning his leathery old face.

Rebecca continued.

"We agreed – well, mostly we agreed – it wasn't the thing to do so long as Juan was alive. Time will tell, now, I suppose."

She smiled a lingering smile up into Lawrence's face.

"I hear you have some competition from a younger lady at his doctor's office," Masters teased.

"Perhaps I'll have to accompany him the next time and check her out."

Masters continued, drastically changing the tone of the

conversation.

“There’s no gentle way to say this. The consensus of the residents, here, seems to be that Juan is better off dead. I could go so far as to suggest that has been the opinion for several months – that he would have been better off dead. Would you concur, Rebecca?”

She sighed. Her narrow shoulders slumped.

“Yes. We all thought that, I’m sure, but it was never spoken of – not that I know of at least.”

She looked at Lawrence for confirmation. He nodded and spoke.

“It was one of those unspeakable thoughts – hopes, even, perhaps. He was in such excruciating pain and it only got worse day by day. I’ll admit it has been the most difficult thing I’ve never done - not helping him end his misery.”

He covered his eyes with his hand and broke into quiet sobs.

Rebecca spoke.

“You may or may not be aware that Betty was providing Juan with extra pain pills when he’d use up the number Dr. Faraday had prescribed for the day. I’m sure Faraday knew about it, but I don’t think he ever confronted her.”

“It sounds like there was a conspiracy around here to help him do himself in, if he decided that was what he wanted to do,” Masters said as if a question.

“I suppose you could say that, though a conspiracy would have involved the overt cooperation of several individuals, I believe. That was not the case. I’m certain of that. Perhaps it is better characterized as a quiet or unspoken conspiracy.”

She also began to cry quietly.

It seemed appropriate to leave Lawrence and Rebecca alone, so Masters and Stone excused themselves and went inside, crossing to the card table in the living room. Olivia was playing the grand piano in the corner opposite them. She finished and approached the men. They applauded politely.

“How lovely, Olivia,” Masters said, getting to his feet. Stone followed suit.

“You should still be on tour.”

“Thank you but no thanks.” She took his outstretched

hands in hers and accepted a peck on the cheek.

“When the stage pianos in the grand old theaters are suddenly younger than you are, you know it’s time to go home. I do enjoy playing however. Juan always seemed to enjoy it. I usually come in and play after my morning constitutional. Often, I’d hear Juan playing along upstairs.

“We seldom played together, you know. I’m not sure why. He probably didn’t want to show me up. It’s been nice these past several months to have finally done that.”

She laughed her nervous laugh and twisted her long dark hair. At sixty-two she was the youngest of the ladies but in many ways seemed older. She dressed older. She walked older. She talked older.

“Tell us about the prowler you saw recently,” Masters asked.

She laughed her quiet, caustic, laugh.

“I was out for my walk. I do five laps around the inside of the wall every morning. Billy calculated that to be about two miles. The other morning I saw a person on the grounds over near the trellis. He ran behind the garage and I didn’t see him again. I assume he had a way over the wall there on the East Side or maybe he circled all the way around in front and went out the gate.”

“That must have been frightening,” Masters said, searching for her emotional take on the situation.

“More startling than frightening, I’d say.”

She laughed.

“I had a black belt in Karate, once. Juan talked me into taking classes – said it would build up my self-confidence. He always knew what was best for me. It did me a world of good, actually. I’ve never used it and I’d probably pull a Charlie horse if I tried any of the moves these days, but it still makes me feel safe.”

She laughed again.

“Probably foolish to think I could depend on that.”

“These prowlers. Any idea if it was the same person both times?” Stone asked.

“No. It could have been. According to Sarah’s description, both seem to have been about average height and build. Our impressions were that they were male. I never

got a close up look. I couldn't identify him if asked to. Sarah thinks it may be teenagers trying to go for a swim in the pool. To me it seems like the wrong time of day for that. I doubt if kids would be dressed all in black. It is worrisome – especially now since . . .”

She laughed again, dropping her head and looking into her lap, her forced smile belying her great sadness.

Masters followed her gaze. Her hands were folded. The short-sleeved blouse revealed the well-toned hands and arms developed during her fifty-year relationship with the piano.

“One more question if you're up to it,” Masters asked gently.

“Sure.”

She sighed and raised her face to meet his.

“You were with Juan shortly after he had come back from the second attempt on his life. It was you who noticed that his breathing had stopped.”

Olivia changed positions nervously.

“Did you at that time notice that his pillow was wet?”

The question surprised her.

“Wet? His pillow? No. I didn't notice that.”

Stone looked equally puzzled at the question. The tension of the discussion finally unleashed a torrent of tears. Stone offered his handkerchief. She accepted it gratefully and too soon had herself under control.

“That's more than enough for now.” Masters said. “Thanks for speaking with us.”

She flashed a brief, labored smile at each man, rose, and left the room, all with the grace of a sophisticated grand dame.

The handkerchief was left on the chair. Stone picked it up. This thing's sopping wet. I never saw the likes!”

Masters moved on.

“See if you can make a connection among Justin, Janice – the caterer's helper – Marty, who subbed for her, and Freddie Foster, the mobster's son.”

“Reputed son of the mobster,” Stone said, attempting a light hearted, legaleeze, correction and not realizing that he had just, instead, put the parentage of Freddie into question.

“I have an itch about something,” Stone said after completing his notes.

“An itch?” Masters asked, amused at the term.

“It’s about Betty and that bag of hers. She always has it with her. It got me to thinking when she left Juan’s room after the pillow thing. She was exhausted and yet halfway down the stairs with Justy, she turned around and came back up to get the bag she had left behind. She could have sent Justy for it, as tired as she was, but she came back up herself. She could have just left it there. Nobody would have bothered it. I have to wonder what she’s carrying in there that’s so blamed important to her.”

“A most interesting observation, Detective,” Masters said, “Especially the part related to the pillow incident. Any hunch as to what might be in there?”

“How about a kid’s bat?”

“You’re suggesting she might have set up the attempts as decoys in her plan to later do Juan in with the bat?”

Stone shrugged and raised an eyebrow.

“Seems like a possibility.”

Masters stroked his moustache.

“The problem I see with Betty as the killer is the officer that was struck.”

Stone frowned, having missed the point. Masters continued.

“She could have hit him too, couldn’t she?”

“Yes. But think about it. In all likelihood, the officer would have known Betty was there – I can’t see her climbing the trellis and surprising him from the rear, can you?”

“No.”

“Suppose, then, that the officer knew she was there, and allowed her to get behind him as if to go out onto the veranda, perhaps. Then she hit him – the handedness issue aside for the moment. Why would she just knock him out? When he came to, he would be able to identify her. The same general problem remains if either Lawrence or Justin was in on it with her. She’s a nurse. She’d have known he was still alive.”

Stone’s face lit up.

“What about this? Say she hit him once and knocked

him out. Then she went into the bedroom and did in Juan. When she went back out to check on the officer, she heard someone coming up to check on Juan. Betty hid out on the veranda until that person went into the bedroom and then she hurried away before that person came back out. She wouldn't have had time to deliver more blows to the officer."

"Very good, my friend. Let's see if we can produce such a visitor. So far, no one has admitted to that. Perhaps that's because it didn't happen or perhaps it's because no one wants to place him or herself at the murder scene."

Masters was impressed – shocked would be a more accurate term – with Stone's skill at playing the Devil's advocate.

Stone's phone rang. It was the lab.

"The cheese and bread were free from relevant contaminants," he reported, obviously using the phrase he had just been given.

The phone rang again. It was Dr. Wright from the university. The conversation was stimulating. "Uh huh. Uh huh! Uh huh!! Thanks. I'll get on it."

"Dr. Wright. Our hunch was right. She says the note is the work of a right hander trying to disguise his or her handwriting. She says it looks like a woman's hand. She also suggested that we take handwriting samples from all the possible suspects. The words she wants to see are 'John, Larry and Jacob' – in that order. Who are John, Larry and Jacob?"

Just as the man amazed Masters a moment before, he immediately reinstated himself as dunce. "I imagine she wants to see the two separated upper case J's and the two contiguous lower case r's," Masters explained.

"Ah. Clever not using the name Jerry Johnson."

"I had a thought, Detective. We have been assuming that Jerry is a man's name. Could it not also be a woman's – short for Geraldine, perhaps?"

"Shall I re-run that NYC check?"

"Good move, I'd say. And the sooner the better! I get really uncomfortable when a case remains unsolved after three days. It does present us with a new aspect, however," Masters said, thinking aloud. "If it is a woman she had to have



a male accomplice make the calls to Juan and Sarah.”

“Or the other way around,” Stone said in another flash of insight.

“Other way around?” Masters asked.

“Yeah. Suppose the man purporting to be Jerry Johnson made the calls but then got a female accomplice to write the note.”

“You’ve done it again, Detective. All your good thinking is really muddling up an already muddled up case, you know.”

Stone looked blank – perhaps apologetic.

“That’s a compliment, Detective.”

Stone smiled himself to attention, even though he wasn’t sure what had just transpired. He left to see to the gathering of handwriting samples.

Wilma entered the room.

“Oh, there you are Mr. M. There’s a phone call for you. Someone named Safrin from New York City. It’s collect. I accepted the charges seeing it’s for you.”

She handed him the phone and left.

“This is Raymond Masters. How can I help you?”

“My name is Safrin Sarhan. I’m Carlos Muno’s cleaning lady. A police woman is here and she says you wanted to talk with me.”

“Oh, yes. Thank you so much for calling.”

“Didn’t have much choice, seems to me.”

“Well, I won’t take much of your time. I just need some information. You aren’t in any kind of trouble.”

He could almost feel her relief right through the phone.

“These may seem like strange questions but you know us cops – we’re a strange breed.”

The silence at the other end seemed to confirm her agreement.

“First, what color are the trash bags Carlos uses? . . . I see. Okay. Is there a manufacture’s name or label on the box? . . . Okay. Fine. Do you know if he owns a small, child-size baseball bat? He does. It is. Okay. What do you do with his mail when he’s gone? . . . I see. . . . Okay. . . . Has he received anything out of the ordinary in the mail today? . . . Anything else? . . . Okay. Thank you so much, Safrin. May I speak with the police woman, please?”

Another voice greeted him.

“This is Officer Patrick.”

“Officer. Thanks for your help. I need a sample trash bag from that apartment if that can be arranged. I assume you’re working under a warrant?”

“Yes, Sir.”

After several more requests, the conversation concluded and Masters sat back to think. If there had been a conspiracy, it would have had to include a dozen or more people and that, he thought, was highly unlikely. He saw no thread tying the several unsuccessful attempts together and certainly had no hard evidence connecting those with the actual murder.

The attempts, of course, could have been diversions, to head the investigation away from the killer. A professional could have staged the apparent clumsiness of the attempts in order to implicate an amateur. The lack of a stranger on the premises at the times of those attempts tended to rule that out – tended to, but didn’t entirely do so. Perhaps the true outsider had made him or herself appear to be an insider. That list would include the new comers to the scene – the caterers, Justin and Carlos. Carlos, of course, wasn’t truly a new comer, and his motivation would seem to have been to keep Juan alive to die a natural death so he wouldn’t be cut out of the will.

Perhaps Betty should also be included on the newcomer list. She had been involved in what appeared to have been a mob-related murder the previous year and an untimely death the year before that. Betty the moll hardly made sense. Of course, that would be the objective in such a case. As much as he hated to admit it, Stone’s theory about Betty acting alone and being interrupted made as much or more sense as any of the others. (A theory is one step above a hunch, two above a guess and a dozen or two above one of Stone’s itches - just in case you’re making a chart?)

The whole Jerry Johnson aspect could be a rouse to sidetrack the main investigation – but by whom?

Masters needed to take a long walk in order to sort out the tangle. Armed with a bottle of diet cola and a large bag of corn puffs, he set out to follow Olivia’s morning route around

the inside of the wall. He was mindful that it probably would not do for his figure what it had done for hers.

## **Chapter Seven**

### **Day Five:**

Detective Stone found Masters in the living room.

"I just got more in about the Johnson over at Cartersville. He's an arranger and - get this - he's ambidextrous. Unfortunately, he's 88 years old and has just moved into an elder care facility. Under the circumstances, I had a detective from over there go ahead and speak with him. He denies ever having worked for Juan. His son, Harry, has a Carlos-like ring to him. He mooches off the old man, is in and out of scrapes of all kinds, and seems to be in deep financial trouble with a half dozen loan sharks in New York City and at least one casino in Atlanta."

"My goodness, Detective, your department does good work – and fast."

"The chief said to pull out all the stops on this one. Seems he and Juan had a close connection through the Arts Scholarship fund. It put his daughter through Julliard back when he was a struggling young detective, and now he goes all out to support the fund raisers."

"Deep financial trouble sounds a whole lot bigger than the \$250,000 requested in the note," Masters said. "What's the financial status of Jerry, himself?"

"Seems like he finally got smart a few years ago. He put everything he had into a trust fund to care for himself. Harry can't touch it. It's not a lot. I'd think it might support him in that home for maybe five or six years. An extra two hundred and fifty thou would provide a whole lot of security that he doesn't have right now."

Stone continued.

“I’ve got a theory. Let’s say the mob wanted Juan hit for one of his romantic encounters with the wrong young lady. Knowing of Harry’s financial problem, they employ him to kill Juan. In return, they’ll cancel all or some of his debt. Harry adds the extortion touch himself – he’s right handed by the way – to pad his pocket with some ready cash. He uses his father’s name and occupation as the basis for the threat. Then, somehow Harry gets wind of the attempts on Juan’s life, so he decides he better hurry up and do it even without the 250,000. It sort of falls apart there, I guess.”

“Not if the method of murder had been specified by the mob. If any of the other attempts succeeded, they would know Harry hadn’t fulfilled his obligation. Therefore, old Harry would be back to square one.”

“Nice touch,” Stone said. “Revenge hits often have the method of execution specified by the avenging party. It usually has something to do with the reason for the hit. Not sure how a bat could play a part in an illicit affair, though.”

“Do you have anything more specific about Harry’s background?”

“Just a little. It seems he’s been into every shady line of work you could list. He has convictions for battery, embezzlement and get this, extortion.”

“Good work! Let’s see if he has a set of alibis for the times in question.”

“I’m having them bring him in for questioning,” Stone added, looking at his watch. “If we leave now, we should get down to the station just about the same time they arrive.”

“Fine! Let’s travel in style, okay?”

Without waiting for Stone’s approval, Masters went to the house phone and pressed 2. Actually, it was ‘B’ for ‘Billy’, the former chauffeur, but it was all the same button.

“Justin here,” came the business-like voice from the cell phone on the other end.

“Justy! Masters at this end. What’s the possibility that you could transport Detective Stone and me down to the police station?”

“Chances are pretty good. Now?”

“As soon as it is convenient.”

“Give me five minutes to get into my chick-magnet-uniform. I’ll meet you out in front.”

By the time the two men had tied up a few loose ends and arrived outside, the limo was ready, the door was open and Justin was standing as if at attention awaiting their arrival.

“Thank you so much, Justy. My waistline appreciates this more than you can know. The designer of those squad cars just didn’t have me in mind.”

“No problem, Ray. It’ll be my pleasure,” and from the look on his face, it clearly was.

Stone looked at Masters and silently mouthed the word, “Ray?” Masters smiled. “That name’s available for you to use more regularly, too, you know.”

Stone wasn’t comfortable calling one of the World’s most respected detectives by a nickname – he had tried it and it left him with the jitters. Justin, of course, really only knew him as a down to earth, retired ex-cop who was rapidly becoming a very good friend. That was how Masters preferred it!

Stone pulled out a folder containing the handwriting samples and offered it to Masters.

“I used Dora’s fax to get these out to Dr. Wright. Thought you’d want to take a gander, too.”

Masters examined each sample rearranging them as he went. Finished at last, he handed them back to Stone.

“If you would, please, number them in that order with the top sample being one.”

Conversation stopped as Stone undertook the task.

“Want the oldies station?” Justin asked at last.

“Sure. Good idea. Just keep it low,” Masters answered. “By the way, I understand you know Janice and Marty from the Caterers.”

“I went to school with Janice. Wanted to date her but went brain dead whenever I got close to her. She and Freddie are a thing now.”

“Freddie your pool playing friend?”

“Yeah. I don’t see him anymore.”

Thinking it might be because of Janice, Masters didn’t pursue it.

“And Marty?” Masters asked.

“He’s a friend of Freddie’s – I really don’t know him. I know who is – that’s about it.”

“What does Freddie do for a living?”

Justin snickered. “When your Mack Foster’s son you don’t have to do anything for a living – the family’s loaded. I think he just helps his dad. I never asked. He never said. We just played pool and lied to each other about our alone time with girls.”

“Has Freddie or his father ever offered you work?” Masters asked.

Justin moved his head slightly to one side so he got Masters into full view in the mirror.

“Not since I was fourteen!”

The words were deliberate. The look matched.

“The question wasn’t intended to offend you, Justy. I just thought it might open up some useful information.”

“His old man’s scum. You suspect Freddie or Mack in Juan’s death?”

“Nothing points to that at this point,” Masters said. “I just feel more comfortable covering all the bases.”

Justin relaxed. His customary smile returned.

“I shouldn’t have barked at you,” Justin said. “I apologize for that.”

He looked into the mirror requiring a response.

“That’s not necessary and it didn’t appear to be a bark from where I sit.”

Justin and Masters nodded at each other’s images.

Stone’s calculation had been correct. The Sheriff’s patrol car had just pulled in ahead of them. There being no good place to park a limo, Justin helped them out and said to call when they were ready. He would be in a nearby parking lot. He handed them a card with the number.

Masters nodded appreciatively.

“Pretty classy, my friend. Not only a limo and uniform but engraved personal cards as well.”

Justin smiled his natural ear-to-ear grin, plainly appreciative of Masters’ recognition.

“We should be less than an hour, I imagine,” Stone added.

The men went inside.

An interview room was arranged for the four men – Harry brought an attorney – and they seated themselves around a time worn table. Harry was as slovenly in appearance as his three-piece suited attorney was elegant. Harry’s mostly bald, tan head seemed to float at ear height on a sea of unkempt, shoulder length, tangled, graying hair. He wore sandals, chain upon chain of beads, and his upper arms both sported gargantuan, black tattoos of some not immediately recognizable creature. Upon sitting, his tie-dyed muscle shirt soon crept up over his protruding, hairy belly – a situation he made no attempt to correct. Otherwise he appeared clean and spoke as an educated person. Masters mused to himself that the man seemed the perfect blend of a white Mr. T and a sixties hippie – well except for the belly and missing Mohawk, perhaps.

After the introductions, Masters explained the reason for the meeting.

“The name, Jerry Johnson, has come up in the investigation into the death of Juan Blanco. As his son, we hoped you might be able to shed some light on several areas of uncertainty.”

Harry looked at his attorney. Clearly, it was a well-practiced routine. The attorney nodded.

“Ask away,” Harry said, turning back toward Masters.

“What has your father done for a living most of his life?”

“He’s been an arranger – music. He started out with the big bands. When they did their swan song in the 50’s he turned to doing classical and semi-classical stuff for all the little Boston Pops-type groups out there in Podunk, USA.”

“To your knowledge did he ever arrange for Juan Blanco?”

“I don’t think so. The cop asked Pop that earlier. His mind’s not real sharp anymore. When Blanco’s name came up, he knew about him, of course. He even has some of his tapes. But he said he hadn’t ever worked for him – wished he had. I don’t personally remember it, either, but Pop was forty-two when I was born. It could have been earlier.”

“What do you do for a living, Mr. Johnson?”

“I’m a day trader – stocks, bonds.”

“Doing well, are you?”



“Some days are good. Some days are not so good. You know.”

Stone became uneasy with the pleasant conversation.

“We need to account for your whereabouts, day by day, since last Thursday.”

Harry conferred with his attorney, mouth to ear and behind an open hand. It continued back and forth for some time, then Harry spoke.

“I drove Pop down to Cartersville from New York on Wednesday and Thursday. He won't fly. We stayed overnight in a motel near Fayetteville, North Carolina. The moving van arrived Friday morning and I helped him settle in – it took most of the day. On Saturday, I drove over to the Tampa area coast to soak up some rays. Got back to my motel near Pop's place early Monday morning.”

Stone pressed on.

“Can you substantiate all that with witnesses?”

“No. Well, maybe. I suppose I could resurrect some hotel clerks and waitresses if I needed to. What's this all about?”

“The attorney stood up and set his attaché case on the table in front of him.

“The interview is over. Unless you are ready to charge my client with a crime, we will be leaving.”

“You're free to go,” Masters said, jumping in before Stone could confound the proceedings further.

“Thank you both for your time and cooperation. Then, he addressed the attorney specifically.

“May I have your card in case we need to be in touch?”

There was a note of hesitation as the man reached into his vest pocket and produced his card.

Masters then turned the card over and placed it on the table in front of Harry, offering him a pen. “Would you be so kind as to jot down your address and phone number – again, just in case.” Masters majestic presence, combined with his warm smile and soft, deep voice could lull a wolf into protecting a deer. Without hesitation, Harry wrote out the address and laid the pen down beside it. He and his attorney then left without further comment. Masters handed the card - by it's edges - to Stone. “Bag it along with the pen and run

the fingerprints. Have Attorney Guccionne checked out for possible underworld or casino connections. I've never trusted attorneys – especially those wearing thousand dollar suits.”

Stone had remained seated, plainly puzzled by Masters' behavior. His face suddenly cleared as he stood to receive the evidence.

“I see your game. Pretty clever! Pretty clever!”

Disregarding the comments Masters continued.

“Also, see if there is any connection between Carlos and Harry or between Betty and Harry or Guccionne. Masters followed Stone as they made their way through a labyrinth of narrow halls to the lab office. The officer at the desk had an envelope of messages for Stone.

“Look these over if you like while I check my desk and voice mail,” Stone suggested.

Masters took a seat and began sorting through the bits and pieces of scribbled notations. The report on the sweat pants was of particular interest. There were tattered fibers found along the edges of the top inch of the triangular tear. The bottom three quarters of the area, however, indicated cleanly cut edges. The original rip at the top had been greatly enlarged with scissors – probably in an attempt to show a mismatch between the small piece found on the railing and the size of the hole in the pants, thereby rendering it useless as evidence. It demonstrated the intelligence but also the technical naiveté of the person involved. It still did nothing to place the pants at the scene at the time of the murder. There was certainly no evidence that someone other than Carlos could not have been wearing them. They would have fit Justin and perhaps, with great strain around the waist, even Harry.

The black fibers from the adhesive on the green trash bag were garden-variety fibers from wool fabric sold throughout the world. That would be of no help.

The next note just might, however. Two pairs of black, wool gloves had been found. One set was in Justin's dresser and the other was in the glove compartment of the rental car Carlos was driving. Masters mused to himself that may have been the first time in recorded history that anyone had actually put gloves in a glove compartment! Masters scribbled a note on the bottom of the sheet and handed it back to the desk

clerk. She read it and then took it into the lab behind her.

The next note resulted in another, "Hot Dignity."

Inside the green bag, along the non-bloody side, the lab found traces of wood. It only amounted to infinitesimal splinters, but definitive in type – hickory!

Another note reported that no female Jerry, Jerri, Geri or Geraldine Johnson with musical connections had been located.

Stone re-entered the office.

"Two things," he began. "Carlos is into an Atlantic City casino for over two-hundred thousand dollars. Justin is into his pool buddy, Freddie, to the tune of fifty-thousand dollars."

"Fifty-thousand dollars!" Master said, getting to his feet and then repeating himself. "Fifty-thousand dollars? Justin?"

"That's the word on the street. It came from a usually reliable snitch," Stone said. "And, oh, a third thing. Harry's attorney – Guccionne – is a big-time operator. Only defends the bad guys. His fees are off the charts; very successful according to the DA's office."

"Mob connections?"

"He's never been on their payroll, if that's what you mean. He's strictly a freelancer."

Masters returned the envelope to Stone as they began moving toward the front of the building. Stone put in a call to Justin.

"Better do a more complete financial check on Harry," Masters suggested.

"Already got it in the works," Stone said pleased he had beaten the old detective to the punch.

As they stepped through the front door, the limo was waiting. Justin's easy stance, his natural smile, and his unaffected greeting combined to underscore his innocence and yet there remained some large and gnawing questions.

"Try your seatbelt, Ray," he suggested – his impish grin full blown.

"I've tried, Justy. It runs out of strap well before it encompasses my breadth."

"Humor me," Justin insisted.

Masters went through the motions. My goodness! It fits. Justy, what did you do?"

“I just worked my special street-kid magic.”

“Well, however you accomplished it, thank you so much. We’re legal. I’m safe. Let’s be on our way.”

With his precious cargo carefully tucked into the rear of the car, Justin pulled away and headed back toward La Musica. After ascertaining that they didn’t want music, Justin began raising the privacy window.

“Leave the window, Justy,” Stone said. “We have another question for you.”

“Sure.”

He pressed the button on the door and the window rolled back down.

“Shoot.”

“Word on the street is that you owe Freddie some fifty thousand dollars. What gives, Justy?”

Stone’s tone was more compassionate than accusatory. Justin sensed that. The limo momentarily slowed. It was his only discernable reaction to the question.

“I suppose you really need to know about that or you wouldn’t a asked.”

It was not a question. It was not a statement. It was Justin thinking aloud.

Although it required no answer, Stone, of course, answered.

“Yup. We sure do.”

Justin shrugged his shoulders and rolled his head repeatedly like an athlete before the big game.

“I found out that Freddie sometime hits Janice. I hate that. About a month ago, she told me he’d become pretty violent toward her and that he said if she tried to leave him, he’d hurt her mom first and then her. It made me so upset that I threw up. The next day I confronted Freddie at the Snooker Parlor. He told me to butt off. I pressed him. He threatened me with a pool cue. That’s when I got the idea.”

“The idea?” Stone asked.

“Yeah. Probably not one of my better ones – looking back – but I challenged him to a best of five games eight ball match. If I won, he would agree to let Janice leave his life and never bother her again. If I lost, I’d agree to pay him some money.”

“SOME money?” Stone asked with exaggeration.

“I started out offering him a thousand dollars and he just laughed at me. Finally, he set that price, thinking I’d back down. I didn’t. Best of all neither could he – there in front of all his buddies. I usually play him even up. We always played for games – loser paid. We ended up pretty even, usually. There was one thing I hadn’t counted on, though.”

“What was that?”

“When I get mad I fall apart. When Freddie gets mad, he just seems to get sharper. He won the first three games. It was a slaughter. I gave him my marker. He said since we’re friends he wouldn’t charge me interest. I told him weren’t friends any more. Then he said, “Well, in that case it’s 10% a month. I don’t know what I’m going to do. I make great money but I can’t afford five grand a month in interest. I’ve considered going to California or Alaska. I guess I’m glad you found out. I really need some help with this.”

Masters spoke.

“We’ll find a way to help you over this hump, Justy. First, though, there are two things you need to do.”

“Anything!”

“First, relax your grip on the wheel or you’ll break it off the steering column. Second, slow down – we’re traveling nearly eighty miles an hour.”

The car slowed. Color returned to Justin’s knuckles. Masters continued.

“I assume that when you realized the desperateness of your financial situation you began searching for a solution.”

“I sure did.”

“I also assume that you wondered if you would be remembered in Juan’s will.”

“Yes.”

Justin brought Masters into view again in the mirror.

“And I assume it was you who went through Dora’s office searching for the will a few nights ago.”

“You’re better than my Mom! She always knew when I was up to not good. Yeah, it was me. How’d you know anybody was in there? I thought I’d been too careful to be found out.”

“Dora. Compulsive, well organized, know where

absolutely every scrap of paper is, Dora.”

Justin nodded.

“Hard to pull anything on her, I suppose.”

“How did you get into the safe?”

“It was open. I just walked in.”

“It was open?”

“Yeah. I thought that was funny. There was another funny thing, too. The window behind Dora’s desk was open – it opens up from the bottom – she likes fresh air. The floor’s always a mess there with all the dust that blows in.”

“Did you find what you were searching for?” Masters asked, ignoring for the moment the odd twists Justin had just presented.

“No. I really didn’t know what a will would look like. I looked under ‘W’ in the file cabinets but couldn’t find ‘wills’. I went into the safe but it was just overwhelming. All that stuff in little boxes. I knew I’d never find anything in there.”

“Were the file cabinets unlocked, also?”

He smiled.

“No. Two short pieces of steel wire will get me into most any simple lock. Guess I’d make a pretty sad cat burglar, though, huh?”

The question was passed over.

“What did you do about the window and the door to the safe?” Stone asked.

“I closed them and locked them. I didn’t want anybody coming in and stealing anything, you know.”

Both Justin and Stone missed the near absurdity of his statement. Masters smiled. Stone soberly nodded in agreement with Justin. Masters smiled again and moved on.

“What about the key to the door? How did you manage to get that?”

“That’s probably the worst illegal thing I did in the whole thing. On Tuesday, I borrowed Wilma’s key. I waited ‘til she was making white sauce. She never leaves one of her sauces unattended so I knew she’d give me the key. I took it to the key shop down at the strip mall – we’ll pass it any minute now. Then I returned the real one to Wilma. It all took about twenty minutes. I have it. I’ll give it to you when we get back.”

“What do you know about your retirement plan and the

will?” Masters asked, accepting his former explanation without further comment.

“Not much. Sammy told me I could trust Juan to do right by me, so I never questioned it – not until I got myself into this scrape. I figured I should gather all the info I could before I decided whether or not to run off. Every time I mess up Sammy says, ‘You gotta get all the data first, you knucklehead’. I’ve finally started doing that. I figured if I was going to get some money from the will – and everybody knew Juan didn’t have much longer – it sounds sick, but I really didn’t think about it like that – well, if I was going to get something I could use that to help pay off Freddie.”

“How long did you think it would take for you to receive your inheritance?”

“I asked Dora, once. She said the will would be read a few days after he passed on. I figured when it was read somebody’d hand out the checks.”

He paused, as if reflecting on something and then continued.

“I’ve been feeling really creepy about something today.”

“Creepy?” Masters asked.

“Yeah. I really liked Juan a lot - I probably even loved him in a family way, you know. But when it finally sank in today that he had passed away, I felt this huge sense of relief, like, now I wouldn’t have to run away from my home ‘cause I’d probably have enough money to pay off my debt.”

“What you’re feeling is pretty natural, I’d say,” Masters said. “I don’t know any way to quickly wash it away but in time, you’ll be able to deal with it. The important thing I believe I heard was that you haven’t been wishing him dead – you were just contemplating how things would be after he died. That’s a substantial difference, Justy – a big, positive difference, I think.”

“Yeah. It is. It really is. Thanks. I think I can live with it if I remember that.”

“I have one more question, Justy, then I’ll leave you alone, I promise,” Masters said. “Dr. Faraday mentioned to me that you had asked him some questions about the number of Juan’s pills that would have to be taken for it to be a lethal dose. Do you remember that conversation?”

“Yeah. I sure do. It was one of the hardest things I ever did for Juan.”

“For Juan?”

“Yeah. One day about two months ago – maybe only six weeks – he asked me to take him for a drive – just me and him. We took the Mercedes and he sat up front with me. We talked about a lot of stuff. He asked me a lot of questions about myself and he told me stories about when he was my age. It was a really good time – probably the closest I’ve ever felt to him. Toward the end of our drive, he asked me to find out about the medicine dose. He asked me not to mention it to anybody else. He said he didn’t want to worry anybody, but he just wanted to make sure he didn’t ever take too many. I guess I really didn’t believe that but I let on like I did. I told him I’d find out and I did. Betty was slipping him some pills on the sly, the way I read it. I don’t know why he didn’t just ask her. I have to admit I really thought he was planning on killing himself, but then as the weeks went on and he was okay, I relaxed about it. I told myself it wasn’t my responsibility, you know, but I still felt really uneasy about it.”

“Thanks for your help, Justy. That’ll be all for now.”

Justin rolled up the window and turned on his favorite station – just in the front section, of course.

“Do you believe him?” Stone asked.

“He sure seems to have all the answers – and quickly,” Masters said.

“If it were anybody but Justy, I’d take that as a sign of his probable guilt – having all the answers so ready, you know.”

“I know,” Masters agreed, a frown forming.

“Any guesses as to whom the first visitor had been to Dora’s office that night,” Masters asked at last.

“First visitor?” Stone asked.

“If we accept Justy’s story, someone had been there ahead of him. From the way he left the safe and window open, I’d say Justy scared him off when he unlocked the front door.”

“That window’s at ground level. Anybody could have climbed in there, even old Maria,” Stone said.

“But someone had to have opened it from the inside after Dora locked it for the night. That rules out some



outsider.”

“And rules in virtually everybody else,” Stone added with a sigh.

The rest of the trip reverted to small talk between Masters and Stone. Masters related something about the handedness issue that was gnawing at him. He couldn’t put his finger on it. Stone spoke about the black fibers and seafood salads – no particular connection as far as Masters could tell.

As the two men entered La Musica, Dora met them in the entryway.

“Something’s come up that may or may not be connected with your case,” she began. “Do you have a minute, though?”

“Certainly,” Masters said and they followed her into her office. She went over to her desk and pointed to a package.

“It’s just all around strange. Pete, our mail man, just dropped this off with his delivery.”

Masters picked it up. It was addressed to Carl Muno at his street address in New York City, but rather than saying New York City, NY it simply had the shortcut, five-digit zip code - 21101. The note scribbled on its label, presumably by the mailman at the other end, said, “No such address.”

Masters asked Stone, “Look up Carlos’ New York address. Do you have it there in your pad?”

“Sure”

A few flips of its green-lined, yellow pages and he read it off. With one exception, the address was identical. The return address was simply: La Musica, with the proper street address, city, state and zip. No particular person’s name was indicated.

Masters addressed Stone: “I suppose this indefinite return address gives Dora the right to open it, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Yes, Sir. That’s no problem.”

Dora produced a box knife and quickly had the strapping tape cut. It was a case-carton for paper towels that had been cut down into a flat box, about three inches high by twenty-four inches square. The box carried the name of the brand Wilma preferred and that Dora always ordered for her.

Most likely, it had originated from La Musica. It bore a sea of first class stamps in sufficient amount to have reached its destination. Carlos could therefore, have mailed it to himself, or it could have been mailed to Carlos by anyone there who wanted to frame the man. The contents might answer those questions.

The flaps were unfolded. Inside, nestled among wads of crumpled newspaper – the local West Haven Harold – was a child's bat.

"Don't touch it," Masters cautioned, as he withdrew his handkerchief from his hip pocket. He grasped the tip of the bat through the cloth and placed the bottom in his flat palm, rotating it until the trademark could be seen. "Pee Wee Slugger," Masters read aloud with the tone of a conquering hero.

He brought the bat up to his nose and smelled it. Then, moving it so Stone could also smell it he said, as if thanking the gods themselves – "Hot digity – its mahogany! I know who killed Juan Blanco."

Dora and Stone exchanged surprised glances.

"Get this to the lab at once. They will discover two things of major importance to this case. First, that the splinters in the bloody, green, trash bag match this bat, and second, that the lower half of the trademark of this bat will have minute traces of the green plastic from the bag, embedded in its wood. This is the murder weapon."

"But I thought the murder weapon was Justin's bat," Stone said perplexed.

"I knew that Justin's couldn't have been the weapon all along. I'll explain later."

Justin stuck his head through the doorway. Masters motioned him inside.

"This, my boy, is the murder weapon."

Justin looked as shocked as the other two.

"You're sure?" he asked, leaning down to smell it.

"It's just like mine except it's in a whole lot better shape. I thought you believed my bat was the weapon."

"I'll clear it all up later," Masters said. "In the meantime, no one is to leave here without gaining Detective Stone's permission first. Justy, please pass that word along to the

others, he said as he carefully put the bat back into the carton.”

Justin nodded that he would carry out the request. As he noticed the box for the first time, he appeared suddenly agitated.

“I’ll get right on it.”

He left quickly, looking over his shoulder as he disappeared through the door.

## **Chapter Eight**

### **Day Five: The menagerie**

Although the handwriting expert said her findings were inconclusive, she leaned toward the same person Masters had initially sorted to the top of the stack of samples.

No connection had been found between Carlos and Harry other than that they both owed substantial sums of money to the same casino. That didn't rule out either of them as the murderer, however.

The caterers were squeaky clean. It turned out to be a retired minister and his wife. They hired troubled young people they felt they might be able to help. Janice's car problem had been just that, she had parked in a fire lane and had been legitimately towed. Marty had been the handiest substitute. He still did odd jobs for Mack Foster, however, and that earned him a spot on the suspect list.

\* \* \*

According to Masters' instructions, Justin had arranged chairs in the living room to accommodate the gathering of interested parties. Masters had invited them to arrive after dinner at seven o'clock. Several, who might have chosen to stay away, had been required to attend by the DA's office.

The ladies sat as a group in four straight back chairs which they had scooted closer together than originally arranged. They were dressed as if going out for a night at the opera. Wilma and Dora sat together on the couch both wearing what they had worn all day. Betty, in her usual blue, button down the front dress and white sweater, sat alone in a

large chair off to one side. Lawrence and Justin, dressed casually, occupied a second, smaller couch. Sandal-shod Carlos, clad in a khaki tee shirt and tan shorts, calculated to disparage the nature of the gathering sat alone – intentionally as far away from the others as possible. Bedecked in suits, Detective Stone, the Police Chief and the Assistant DA sat at the card table. They were all facing the grand piano in the corner which was the where Masters stood in his freshly pressed, double-breasted, dark brown, suit and shiny, far too wide, tan, silk tie. Several uniformed policemen were stationed toward the rear of the group.

Masters began.

“Thank you for coming. It is a sad time for most of us here so I won’t prolong these proceedings beyond what is necessary to clear up the mysteries of the past few days and to announce the name of the murderer of Juan Blanco.

“There were five attempts on Juan’s life. One occurred on Saturday, three on Sunday and the final, successful attempt in the early hours of Monday morning. Initially it appeared to me that the first two might have been aborted attempts at suicide. Had they been, they would have transpired in the following manners.

“Early Saturday morning, Sarah was in Juan’s room and handed him a glass of water with which to take a pill. We are told that he asked her to close the drapes – a means of getting her to turn away, perhaps. With her back to him, he took the glass – into which he had previously dissolved several pills – wiped Sarah’s fingerprints from it so as not to implicate her, and began sipping the water. Something, no telling what, may have made him reconsider the attempt. He sat the glass down and began drinking the juice Betty had brought him. Still, his system had already been overloaded with the drug and he went into pulmonary arrest. Betty applied her techniques and saved his life. Why dissolve the drug in the water rather than taking it as tablets? Perhaps, so he could back off from the attempt at any moment if he decided not to go through with it. Once he had swallowed three or four pills, there would have been no second chance. I will return to that later.

A second possible suicide scenario: “On Sunday noon

Juan began eating a sandwich laced with the drug – far more than would have been needed to kill him. It is possible that during the time he had Betty help him move out onto the veranda, he had spread the drug onto the sandwich himself. Why spread it out? For the same reason as dissolving it in the water – a built-in escape hatch. I will also return to this attempt later.

“The motivation for suicide was self-evident – to stop the pain. But, what would have been his motivation for stopping the suicide attempt. His religion? He had effectively given that up years ago. No, Juan knew himself well – his strengths and his weaknesses. As his pain increased and he came to more fully understand just how terrible it would be toward the end, he changed his will. He adjusted it so that if he committed suicide, the ladies he loved more than anything in the world would lose a substantial part of their inheritance. He knew that he might give in and kill himself to escape the pain, but he also knew that he would never do that if it would hurt those he loved. The clause had nothing to do with the ladies and everything to do with himself.

“The third attempt will surprise many of you because you were not aware it took place. Immediately after the second attempt with the sandwich, someone tried to smother Juan with a pillow. And then there was the fourth attempt using the duct tape, which also failed. Neither of these could have been suicide attempts.

“This has been a case filled with unintentional misdirection. I say unintentional because it wasn't as if the murderer set out to confuse and confound the investigation. It just happened, without planning, in a most haphazard fashion. Looking for connections when there were none, became one of the several fascinating stumbling blocks in this case. The four unsuccessful attempts on Juan's life, for example, were in no way connected to his eventual murder. In fact, none of the four attempts was connected to any other attempt.”

A short-lived buzz swept across the gathering and looks were exchanged and heads shaken.

“In reality, you see, this has been five separate cases. I will return to them.

“Let me deal now with several of the other confusing

issues. First, is the prowler. He was real, though at first I must admit I had my doubts and I apologize to Sarah and Olivia for that.”

Masters tipped his head in their direction. They nodded their acceptance.

“The prowler that Olivia saw on Thursday morning was the same individual Sarah saw Friday night. On Thursday, the prowler was investigating the possibility that the trellis could be used as a ladder to the second-floor veranda. Using the earliest morning light as an aid, he or she determined that it could. In the darkness of Friday night, the prowler practiced the ascent and decent several times, preparing for the murder – a series of trial runs, if you will.

“Then there was the matter of Jerry Johnson and the extortion note. Upon first examination, the story seemed so unbelievable that I tended to believe it. Who would have made up such a flaw-riddled tale? I assumed that either it was the work of a rank amateur or that of a cunning professional working to throw suspicion elsewhere. It turned out to be a strange combination of both – a rank amateur working to throw suspicion elsewhere. There was no Jerry Johnson – at least not an extortionist Jerry Johnson who had ever worked for Juan. I became convinced of that when no follow-up communication was received about delivering the money that had been demanded in the note. The note had been written by one of our players and then sent to a mail forwarding service in New York, which, in turn, mailed it here. That fabrication set the scene for many oversights along the way, however. If we already seemed to have our primary suspect, why look too thoroughly at the other more remote possibilities? Again, I will return to the perpetration of this hoax shortly.

“The weapon. It’s rare in any murder investigation that the first hunch about an unknown, immediately unavailable, weapon is correct. In this case, it was – it happened to be Justin’s hunch. Would the murderer make such a correct suggestion upon first being asked? He might if he thought that would protect him in some way – make him appear innocent because of the suggestion, especially if he felt certain that weapon would eventually be discovered. More

commonly, however, the murderer would feign ignorance or suggest some decoy.

“Early on, we knew the exact type of weapon – a Pee Wee Slugger child’s bat. We had the imprint on the trash bag and the slivers of hickory wood. We just couldn’t make a positive match between the possible weapon at hand – Justin’s bat – and the actual murder weapon. Ingeniously, it had been wrapped inside the trash bag and the bag secured in place with duct tape. The preparation had been done well ahead of time. The murderer either failed to recognize the importance of the trademark and the imprint it could leave or he or she miscalculated its position inside the sack at the time it was used.

“The green bag used was of a type no longer manufactured. Therefore, we knew it had to have been saved by someone for a dozen years or more. Once we knew there was a stash of them right here on the premises, our job became immediately easier.

“The adhesive used on the tape was another clincher. It was not the adhesive currently in use here on these premises. It had either come from elsewhere – a large city – or it, too, had been saved for many years by someone here at La Musica. One of two sets of black wool gloves located here bore traces of that same adhesive – the adhesive, one of which had contacted during the unwrapping of the bag at the dumpster.

“After this case, ladies and gentlemen, I shall never again complain about the United States Postal Service. It provided us with the final clues that pulled the case together. The bat, which was the murder weapon, had been sent by priority mail on Monday morning to Carlos Munoz at his home address – well almost at his home address. Three of the numbers in the zip code – 11201 - had been reversed, becoming 21101 - and it ended up in Magnolia, Maryland where no such street address existed. The postal service then shipped it back immediately to the return address at La Musica. Now at my age, I often confuse number order so I can commiserate with the shipper of that package.

“Why would the murderer send it to Carlos in the first place? Most obviously to make it appear that he was the



murderer. But then, if Carlos were the murderer, he might have shipped to himself to get the evidence out of sight, not thinking we would search his apartment way up in New York City. Hmm. Why put a return address on it at all? I suppose to keep it from standing out as different to an alert letter carrier or maybe just out of habit. There was no reason to believe that it would be returned and if it were, it should only confound the investigation.

“The stamps used to mail the package had been taken from Dora’s stamp drawer. We know that because they bore Dora’s fingerprints plus those of the pilferer. Unused stamps from the theft, bearing the same fingerprints were found among the thief’s personal possessions. All of that would stand whether or not Dora had been a party to the crime. On a positive note, the stamps found among the possessions of two other suspects did not bear Dora’s prints. Although that did not vindicate them, it kept the investigation on track.

“How was I so sure that Justin’s bat had not been the murder weapon? It had been well sealed with shellac and therefore could not have left splinters in the trash bag. Just because the weapon was not Justin’s, did that, by itself, leave him off the hook? No, it did not.”

Justin squirmed. The ladies looked distressed. Carlos yawned and glanced at his watch.

“The clincher in terms of the weapon was the traces of the green plastic sack imbedded in the bat at the trademark – the point of the blows during the attack on the officer and the murder of Juan.

“Usually, when an investigator determines a plausible motive, he merely has to run down the leads until he can establish opportunity to commit the crime and the means with which to do it. However, it was the motive that eluded us throughout this case. Not until I discovered the identity of the killer was I able to begin piecing together the motive.

“The murder had been planned for some time. The preparations had been made well in advance. However, if, one week ago, you had asked the murderer who he was going to kill, he would have named a different victim.”

Stone shifted in his seat and glanced at both the DA and Police Chief. He answered their quizzical looks with an

honest shrug of his shoulders. Even Carlos began taking an interest in Masters' monologue.

"Let me clear up the break-in at Dora's office. There were actually two intruders that night. Justin has already admitted his role in it."

Betty sighed out loud and Wilma began to cry.

"Justin says he made a copy of the key – I have it here – and let himself in. He was in some financial trouble and his life, along with that of a friend, was endangered. He had to find out if he had been mentioned in Juan's will and if so, determine if that amount would be enough to get the vicious man to whom he owed the money out of his life. According to Justin's story, he was unable to find the will. He had found both the safe door and a window open. If we believe his story, it indicates that someone had preceded him into that room that night – Thursday of last week. If we don't believe him, we might assume that he or an accomplice – perhaps a safe-cracking buddy – entered and left by way of the window.

"I now know who used the window because of the fingerprints left behind on the windowsill. Why be so careless as to leave prints behind after such a well-planned break-in? That person had stolen some stamps. In the process, he or she – and from now on I will merely say he for sake of easy communication – had to remove one of the latex gloves worn up to that point. If you have ever tried to pry stamps apart, let alone pick them up, wearing a rubber glove, you'll understand. At some point he became startled – perhaps by Justin's key in the door – and he closed the drawer and had to make a quick exit using his bare hand.

"Earlier, in the safe, the first intruder had found what he was after – the wills. The one he had gone looking for turned out to be of less interest than the one he stumbled onto. Its contents immediately changed his mind about a number of things.

"But, what if Justin had also found the wills and determined from Juan's that he was coming into the money he needed to save his own life. Would he have committed murder to assure his own safety?"

"One important question remains about the break-in. How did the first intruder get in? Dora says she received a

call at five before five that Thursday afternoon. It summoned her to the kitchen. While she was gone, the would-be intruder could have, entered the office and unlocked the window – one Dora would have just locked as she made ready to leave for the day at five o'clock, her regular time of departure. The first intruder then waited until dark and merely raised the window from the outside with his gloved hands. A second scenario might be that Dora made up the whole story of the call and left the window and safe unlocked herself so that she or some accomplice could return later.

“Now to the murder itself. The murderer waited until the wee hours of the morning when he would be less likely to be seen. He climbed the trellis, carefully opened the doors from the veranda, and hit the officer in the head. Determining that he was knocked unconscious, the murderer proceeded into the bedroom. He probably turned off the night-light immediately so as to not cast shadows on the drapes or to protect his identity if anyone should enter the room. He then struck the lethal blows and left the same way he had entered. Whether or not the policeman was alive was of little consequence since he had not seen the intruder so would not be able to identify him. He left the door open a crack, probably unintentionally but it suggested the route of exit and therefore most likely, the route of entry as well. On the way up or down, he tore his sweat pants on the wrought iron railing. I have to assume that happened at the time of the murder. If it had occurred on any of the earlier runs, he would have noticed it and undoubtedly would have taken steps to retrieve it.

Masters turned toward the men at the table.

“Detective Stone, I have in this manila envelope the necessary evidence to arrest the killer of Juan Blanco. Will you please take into custody, Carlos Munoz.

Stone nodded to the officers and they approached Carlos, slipped cuffs in place, and stood behind him.

He sneered and spat symbolically in Masters' direction.

Masters ignored the display and continued his presentation.

“The fingerprints on the stamps and on the window sill are those of Carlos. The voice on the phone calling Dora to the kitchen was not that of Lawrence but Carlos. They sound

so similar, few can tell their voices apart on the phone. One of the perplexing aspects of this case has been the handedness issue. Carlos writes and eats with his right hand. When I saw him putting, however, I noticed he was facing east and putting south. To do that he had to be holding the club like a left hander, moving the club across his body from left to right. Further investigation determined that he, like many, learning disabled people, is ambidextrous. It was his learning disability – commonly known as dyslexia – which caused him to reverse the numbers in the zip code on the carton containing the bat. Lawrence had indicated to me that one of Carlos's less admirable traits, was that he always went for the shortcut. Leaving off the written city and state and substituting the shortcut, lone zip code, further pointed in his direction.

“Adhesive matching that on the bag was found on his gloves. His experience in the heating and air conditioning business had alerted him to the difference between the inferior duct tape he had used on the bags and the more durable brand available here in the house – a discovery made quite accidentally when Justin mended his ripped golf bag for him. So, he removed the tape from the bag – the tape that had accompanied him to West Haven from New York. He failed to understand that not only the fabric backings of the tape but also the adhesives were different. The wad of tape was later discovered rolled into a ball in the cup on the fifth green at Overbrook. The adhesive matches that on the green bag, has bits of green plastic stuck to it, and it bears the fingerprints of Carlos.

“It was the scrap of wool from the sweatpants that first made me look toward Carlos as the primary suspect. Black wool is not the fabric for a sweat outfit here in Florida. It is the fabric of a more northerly place of residence. The only more northerly residents involved in this case were Harry Johnson and Carlos. When Harry's involvement was effectively discounted, only Carlos remained.

“I became intrigued by something his father had mentioned to me about Carlos's behavior on Sunday night. Uncharacteristically, he had delayed his usual drinking binge until after Lawrence had gone to bed. I asked myself why. Perhaps it was to keep himself stone cold sober until after the

murder. Carlos is a bright man. He would have realized the hazards of attempting the murder while under the influence.

“Now for the most distressing part of the entire scenario and I apologize in advance to Lawrence for having to present it here. There is no way to ease its delivery. Carlos was in desperate need of money – large amounts of money – to pay off loan sharks and a casino debt. In his total, sociopathic, selfishness, he hatched an appalling plan. He would kill his father and obtain the inheritance. He made the preparations – the bat from his days as a memorabilia dealer, the twelve-year-old trash bag from the Manufacturer’s Closeout Store, and cheap tape left over from his days in the and heating and air conditioning business.

“As one final check on the current status of his inheritance, he gained entrance to Dora’s office. His time as a safe and home security system salesman had evidently provided him with the skills needed to open the safe. He saw that in Lawrence’s will, he was the sole heir. He could have left it at that but he was attracted to Juan’s will. He knew he had something coming from it and he knew about the natural death clause. But as he read on, he was struck by the fact that if Juan was killed, all of the money previously allotted to a number of charities – about half the fortune – reverted to his father. He quickly saw that to give up his little pittance under the natural death clause in order to come into the larger amount when his father died was the far better deal for him. His father was ill and might soon pass on. If not, Carlos would help that along himself. As I said, that is the most distressing part of the whole case.”

Addressing Carlos, Masters asked, “Is there anything you would like say?”

Carlos stood, his hands cuffed behind his back and glared at Lawrence.

“I’ve always hated you every bit as much as I hated Juan, you know. You abandoned me as a kid. You loved Juan more than you loved Mom and me. If I ever get free, I’ll complete my first plan and do to you what I did to that Mexican Devil.”

He spat again and was escorted out of the room.

Justin put his arm around Lawrence. Their heads

settled against each other. Tears streamed down both faces. Lawrence sat limp, staring off toward nowhere. Silence reigned in its most horrifying manner.

Masters broke the ghastly quiet.

“There is a positive footnote, primarily for you, Justin. A short time ago, Mack Foster received by messenger, an anonymous tip that his son had been mistreating a woman along with information about its relationship to your marker. For all of Mr. Foster’s deplorable activities, he respects the family and especially women. Thanks to the quick thinking and fine police work of Detective Stone, that tip was accompanied by an affidavit verifying both the abuse to Janice and your exchange with him. It was signed by four of Freddie’s pool hall buddies who were recently arrested in a burglary attempt. I understand that at this moment Freddie is on a plane headed South, about to become an errand boy in his uncle’s operation in Haiti. In this envelope, I have for you, your marker and Mr. Foster’s apology. You and Janice are safe.”

Then, as if an afterthought, Masters added. “Oh, yes, there’s a very sweet young lady waiting for you in the park once these proceedings have concluded.”

Justin’s tears became sobs through the faintest of smiles. He mouthed a silent, “Thank you,” toward Masters.

As the buzz subsided, Masters still had one piece of unfinished business to attend to.

“Except for Maria, Sarah, Olivia and Rebecca, I ask that the rest of you now leave the room. They filed out in a solemn procession.

When at last only Masters and the four ladies remained, he moved closer to them, and began pacing back and forth in front of the lightly curtained floor to ceiling windows. His darkened, imposing silhouette seemed to emphasize and sustain the somber mood already set.

“Ladies. I want to tell you a story – a fairy tale, might better characterize it. I will only tell it once and will then never speak of it again. I call it, “The Man Who Wouldn’t Die: A Love Story.”

The ladies looked at one another – a ripple of uneasiness passing among them. Masters continued.

“Once upon a time there was a great man. Let’s call him, Oh, I don’t know, how about Juan – who was dearly loved by four long time women companions. Let’s see – why don’t we call them Sarah, Rebecca, Olivia and Maria.”

The ripple swelled – the sea of white caps bobbing nervously.

“The man was living in unbearable pain – more unbearable, perhaps, for the ladies who loved him than for Juan, himself. Unable to see their beloved – who would very soon pass on from the all-consuming disease – in such agony, each one took it upon herself to end his suffering. Each made the decision privately and without consultation. None shared her plan with any other. Each one was willing to incur the full consequences of the law if caught.”

The ladies surveyed one other. Their agitation began shifting to subdued interest.

“The woman named Sarah in my story, made the first attempt, having slipped a pill into her pocket on each of several different days so as to not call attention to the loss. On Saturday morning – in my fairy tale, understand – she stirred the pulverized tablets into Juan’s water – the water that she knew he would soon be using to wash down his first pill of the day – hoping to wash away his life in a peaceful, painless sleep. She had wiped her prints from the glass hoping to confound any investigation that might follow. The attempt failed when it was interrupted by the nurse bearing the man’s favorite drink – orange juice.”

Sarah averted her eyes to the floor, her proud shoulders slumped and tears began to flow as she sobbed quietly.

“The following noon, the lady I’m calling Rebecca, who had also secured several of the pills and had also pulverized them, laced the sandwich as she took it to Juan. He tired and fell asleep before he had ingested an immediately lethal dose.”

Rebecca turned in her chair and faced the fireplace – a distant countenance absorbing her.

“Olivia – that’s the Olivia in my story – had a more straight forward method in mind. She would wait until Juan was sedated or was otherwise deeply asleep. She then held

the pillow over his face drenching it with her tears as she attempted to quit her beloved's pain forever. When his breathing ceased, she lovingly replaced the pillow under his head probably kissing him on his forehead before announcing his plight to the others. She found the activity more strenuous than she had expected so had hurried the process and her attempt failed as well."

Olivia broke into uncontrollable sobbing, her face in her hands, lowered to her chest. Her outburst did not deter Masters' narrative.

"And finally, the fourth, loving attempt to end Juan's suffering – enter the Lady I call Maria. She was sitting watch in his room – a watch established to protect him. Maria also waited until Juan was deeply asleep. Tenderly – lovingly, even – so as to not arouse him, she taped down his legs so he could not arise and his arms so he could not remove the suffocating duct tape, which she then applied over his mouth and nose. Maria's arthritis kept her from pressing the tape tightly enough over his nose and his natural breathing blew it off, just enough, and just long enough, for him to survive. Maria concocted a phone call from the lead detective on the case, which supposedly summoned her away from Juan's room, thereby leaving him alone and accessible to the fictitious murderer's attempt.

"Sarah, who had been planning her attempt for several weeks, had previously written an extortion letter which she signed with a fictitious name – a person, supposedly out of Juan's past. When that letter came to light, the other ladies – all quite on their own – confirmed and sanctioned the fictional identity – immediately seeing how it could be used to cover their own attempts. Using a re-mailing service – the address for which she had found in the classified section of a Mechanics Illustrated Magazine – the letter arrived on schedule at the house and afforded considerable, additional, misdirection to the case.

"When the son of Juan's best friend – in our fairy tale let's call the son Carlos – dropped in out of the blue, he completed the task which the four ladies had so pitifully bungled. The ladies' roles in the case – none of which could be proved – remained undiscovered by the local authorities



and overlooked by the aging old detective.

“Each lady, though free of any legal liability, would live out her life carrying with her either the satisfaction that what she had tried to do was justified by her love, or with a relentless, soul wrenching guilt that would repeatedly plunge its insidious fingers into the very heart of her being.”

Masters strode to the door. He stopped, turned, and surveyed the wonderfully warm and inviting room one last time, knowing that he was about to exit La Casa de la Musica for the final time. As his gaze came to rest again on the ladies, he finished his story. “And that, my good friends, is my never to be retold love story about The Man Who Refused To Die.”

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