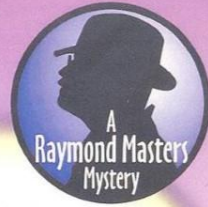


What secret might the smiling corpse
have carried to his grave?
Masters understands - will you?



The Case of the

Smiling Corpse

Garrison Flint

Another Family Friendly Book from the Family of Man Press



The Case of the Smiling Corpse
A Raymond Masters Mystery

BOOK TWO
(Of 15)

Garrison Flint

Family of Man Press

Revised and © 2013, 2017

///

CHAPTER ONE

Day One: Sunday - The Crime Scene

It was just after three A.M. when the phone rang in the bedroom of retired police detective, Raymond Masters. He found it a most disagreeable occurrence though not because he had been awakened from a fascinating dream or even because it was still the middle of the night. His animosity grew from the fact he was lying on his side facing away from the phone stand, and the mere thought of having to turn his considerable bulk 180 degrees to reach it was exhausting. He tweaked his walrus-like moustache, sighed a gigantic sigh, and somehow mustered the necessary effort to reposition himself. It seemed easier than he had remembered. Perhaps his early morning walks in the woods behind his cottage there in the hills of western New York had been paying off.

“Masters here.”

On the other end was Detective Dave Little from the Rossville Police Department. Rossville was the small, friendly, Finger Lakes town that Masters had selected as the ideal place to live and enjoy life after leaving his position in a large metropolis on the East Coast. Although he had retired from the department, he had not disassociated himself from police work. He commanded substantial fees from the largest law enforcement departments in the world for his case consultation services. Occasionally, he willingly commanded no fee whatsoever, as would be the case with this call from his friend, Detective Little.

“Got one here I’d like to have you take a gander at before we put it to bed,” came the detective’s somewhat

cryptic, announcement.

One would not characterize Detective Little as dumb – he could not have risen through the ranks of the dozen or so others in the department to become detective had that been the case. Masters would describe Little as being less dim-witted than he was odd-witted. He was one of the few detectives Masters had ever known who could observe a victim's eleven stab wounds to the heart and seriously consider suicide.

"What do you have?" Masters asked, squinting the fuzziness from the numerals on his digital alarm clock.

"Got your neighbor, Lester Ellington, dead as a door latch. Looks like suicide to me. Found him in his den. The door was locked from the inside and the room is on the third floor. Key still in the lock. The one window was latched from the inside. Just the same, the Chief would sure like you to look it over for us. Haven't had a bullet inflicted death in these parts for years. Well, not unless you count old Marty Miller. He shot himself in the foot, got infected and he died of the gangrene back in eighty-six."

'Could it be that Detective Little had finally come across a crime scene he had interpreted correctly?' Masters mused to himself, as he replayed the elements just enumerated.

"I assume you found the weapon."

"Twenty-two caliber six-shooter. Haven't seen one like it before. Like something out of an old Roy Rogers matinee flick. Ellington was a collector, I guess. Lots of guns on the walls in here. Doc Keller says the hole in his temple seems consistent with a 22-solid point. Sure wasn't like I expected it would be."

"What wasn't like you expected it would be?" Masters asked, feeling the need to clarify the remark.

"Ellington's ex-pi-er-ation. The way everybody hated his guts, I figured for sure somebody would blow him away just for the git-tickle of it."

Masters decided to pass on clarifying the 'git-tickle'.

"Give me twenty minutes, Detective, and I'll be there."

"I can send a car."

"I'm only 100 yards from his driveway. I'll just walk down the hill. Thanks anyway."

“It’s your shoe strings, Sir. See you in twenty.”

Masters shook his head and grunted a single chuckle. Little was one of a kind. One thing Masters would give him – Little saw to it that a crime scene was well preserved. That was probably something he had learned from watching cop shows on TV rather than from any kind of formal training, however. He chuckled again.

Although neighbors, Masters rarely saw Mr. Ellington. He didn’t seem to be the outdoor type. Actually, his only one-on-one with the man had been two years before when the two of them met in the finals of the local Chess Tournament. After a long and well-played match, Mr. Ellington had been victorious over the old detective. Masters respected him for his chess prowess but knew very little else about him – other than for the sort of rumors that abound in all small towns.

It was April and the early morning air would have been more than a bit brisk had he not been wearing his trademark, dark suit, vest, and far too wide, striped, silk tie. As he strode the gravel road toward the Ellington mansion, he played over in his mind what little he knew about his neighbor. The man was a retired banker in his late-sixties who had recently lost his wife in a car accident south of town. It was a collision that involved the teenage son of a friend of Masters. No charges were filed largely because the autopsy revealed the woman was well past the point of intoxication at the time.

The story was that Ellington’s maiden sister-in-law had always lived with them; at any rate, she maintained a suite somewhere in the house. She took her walk along that same road most every evening. Masters couldn’t remember having seen her during the past week, however. There was a Hispanic, live-in, handyman/grounds keeper in his mid-twenties who lived with his grandfather in a small apartment over the three-car garage. Masters seldom saw the old man and assumed he might be ill.

The previous afternoon Masters had heard what sounded like target practice with a small caliber handgun coming from the general direction of the firing range toward the rear of Ellington’s huge back lawn. Perhaps as many as twenty-four rounds had been fired within a fifteen-minute period. It was a new activity. He had not heard shooting

there before.

Masters stopped in front of the huge, ancient, gray stone home to get a feel for where things were. The green trimmed house was set far back from the road. The doublewide front door greeted visitors from the center of the house under a small entry porch up several wooden steps from the cobblestone sidewalk that curved out toward the garage. The garage was to the south – the side furthest away from Master's cottage. A long circular drive entered at one side of the acreage and left at the other approaching the porch in the center.

Eight, century-old, oak trees and several smaller pines made the lawn their home. A tall, full, uncomfortable looking Catalpa tree huddled close to the northeast corner of the house – rear, left as you faced the building. The grass was kept precisely trimmed – spring through late summer. Fallen leaves were immediately raked and burned. Snow was removed, practically before it had fallen. There were two large yard lights that come on at dusk and went off at dawn - one to the south of the garage and one to the north of the house. Despite the grand possibilities of the setting, the place was generally cheerless in appearance.

Masters was greeted at the front door by his virtual lookalike, Detective Little. The policeman's moustache was smaller, more neatly trimmed, and stayed in place with far less attention than did Master's. Masters' genuine admiration for that well-behaved moustache remained unspoken. Little was shorter in stature and ... how can it be said ... as unimposing as Masters was imposing.

With no lack of huffing and puffing, they were presently at the door to the den on the third floor. It was entered from a large central hall that ran the length of the house front to back. The room was on the northeast corner. The single window was to the east facing the back yard and was partially obscured by the Catalpa tree. The den, like the rest of the setting, presented a drab and barren appearance.

"We had to saw the door off its hinges to get inside," Little said, pointing to the door where it leaned up against the wall in the hall. "The key is just as we found it – on the inside and tweaked just a bit off center so it couldn't be pushed out

from the outside. It's one of those old-fashioned keys. Like a miniature jailer's key."

Masters examined the lock and key with his eyes.

"Have you dusted yet?" he asked.

"He's inside, just finishing up. Probably not much need to gather prints, though. Looks like suicide, plain and simple."

They entered the room. Masters moved to the window. The shade was pulled down to within about five inches of the sill. After making sure photos had been taken, he rolled it up. The latch on the window was as strange gadget. It was a length of one by two, hinged at the inside top of the frame so it would flop down against the side, touching the top of the lower window to keep it from being opened. The original, metal, turn latch had been removed. To open the lower window, it was necessary to flick the strip of wood up out of the way before raising the sash. The hinge kept it in place. An ingenious arrangement, actually. There was also a length of similarly shaped wood for the purpose of holding up the bottom window when it was open. Examination showed the rope and weight system installed when the house was built to ease the opening and to hold the window open at any height was long since gone.

The wooden trim, the window, the inside of the door, and the bookcases in the room appeared to have been freshly painted white. Oddly, Masters thought, there were several large books strewn in disarray on the floor under the window. Two were open with pages bent as if thrown or dropped onto the floor. A dozen others were neatly stacked on the floor under the window. The large bookcase to the right of the window was nearly full.

The victim, Lester Ellington, had apparently been sitting on a very low footstool in front of the desk at the time the gun was fired. If he had been sitting erect, his back would have been against the desk. His body had fallen to his right – west – and was about equidistant from the window on the east, the west wall and the hall door to the south – ten feet or so in each direction. The gun had been found sticking out from under his abdomen.

"Don't that beat all?" Little asked just assuming Masters knew what was on his mind.

“And what would that be?” Masters asked.

Little looked surprised that he had to explain.

“The corpse. It’s smiling. I never saw a smiling corpse before. Mr. Ellington sure never smiled while he was alive. Don’t that just beat all!”

“Perhaps he’s trying to tell us something,” Masters added intending the remark as humorous, even though he realized that Detective Little had never, in the entire history of their relationship caught on to even one of Master’s attempts at a witticism. That, in itself, gave the old detective an inner chuckle and is undoubtedly why he persisted in his attempts.

“Footstool been dusted?” Masters asked.

“Sure has,” said the technician.

Masters moved it to its obvious place in front of the fabric matching, wing-backed chair in the corner by the bookcase. He took a seat in the chair and put his feet on the stool.

“Quite an uncomfortable arrangement,” was his comment. “Any ideas about why the stool is so short?” he asked as if addressing the entire crew. No ideas were offered.

Sitting in the chair, Masters noticed what seemed to be the imprints of furniture legs in the carpet behind the desk. He went to examine them.

“Little. What do you make of these?”

There were four such imprints. A moment’s comparison for size and placement verified that the desk had recently been moved forward to its present position. Slide marks were barely visible in the carpet. It was as if someone had tried to brush them away which Masters thought a reasonable act after moving a heavy piece like that.

“It was pushed from its original position to its present position,” Little said at last, verifying the obvious.

“That’s the way it looks to me, too,” Masters said suddenly realizing that it was perhaps not going to be as cut and dried as it first appeared.

“Secret panels?” Masters said, attempting a second joke as he tried to put the pieces together.

“Let’s get on that, Ben,” Detective Little snapped at one of the officers in the room as he, himself began examining the books in the bookcase for a secret latch.

Masters ignored the misunderstanding as the young policeman began a methodical search on the other side of the room. Masters couldn't decide who to pity more – the humorless Little or the mindlessly obedient officer. It deserved and received a double chuckle and a tweak of his moustache.

Masters was admiring a set of silver candlesticks and the two tall tapers that graced them. At his touch, one of the candles fell over. As Master reached out to reset it, he noticed the bottom – the part that set down into the opening in the holder - was far too short to properly stabilize it there. He unseated the other candle and noted that it, on the other hand, was longer and more properly proportioned for the holder's depth. He took the shorter candle in hand and began looking around the room. He examined the doorframe with his fingers. He moved to the window and repeated the examination. His hand suddenly stopped.

"Here, Detective. Look at this."

Little hurried to his side.

"Feel the slick, waxy buildup here in the slot where the bottom window slides up and down?"

"Yes, sir. It is a waxy buildup for sure."

"Take scrapings and see if they match this candle. I may have ruined the prints on the candle but see what they can find."

"Right away."

He motioned a nearby, eavesdropping officer to the task.

"What do you suppose it means?"

"It may be as simple as the window got stuck and the creative Mr. Ellington used the material at hand to help make it slide more easily. It may eventually seem to mean something with more relevance to the case."

"Masters continued to search the woodwork around the window.

"Look here. There seems to be a tiny scratch in the paint – like a slit – on the side of the window frame just above the top of the bottom window."

He slid the wooden latch nearly closed.

"There," he said, as if having found what he had

predicted. "There is a matching slit in the latch stick. Something was forced in between the latch stick and the frame – probably to free the stick in order to open the window."

Masters looked around the room in search of something in particular.

"Ah ha!" he said at last, walking over to the desk. He carefully picked up the letter opener, looking at the tip of the blade. "Paint. Dust it! Compare the paint here to the paint on the window."

Again, Little motioned the officer to follow through on Masters' suggestion.

"From the ease with which the paint peels off, it would appear to have been only recently repainted. Seems like a strange thing to do if you were about to commit suicide," Masters said, examining the paint in several parts of the room.

"Makes our job easier," Little suggested.

"How's that?" Masters asked.

"Well, if we do need to get prints, the old ones will be gone. Just the recent ones will remain."

"Good point, Little. Good point. Let's go ahead and take prints on the door and window to begin with. Let's do both sides – inside and outside. See what the window glass has to offer – may find too many there to be helpful."

"Who called the police and why?" Masters asked the detective.

"Joan Goodman – his sister-in-law – called about midnight. She said she had just returned from a week in New York City. Lester was a night owl – seldom turned in before one or two in the morning, she said. So, she came right up to the den to tell him she was home. The door was locked but she could see the light was on through the crack at the floor. She said she had never known him to lock it – the arthritis in his hands was so bad she wasn't even sure that he could lock it. She knocked but there was no response. She called out but still nothing. She checked his bedroom and then looked throughout the rest of the house. When she didn't find him she decided to call us."

"And your man got here when?"

"Ben, when did you arrive?"

“Twelve-forty, give or take a few minutes,” he answered as he continued thumping the walls and pushing on the stones in the fireplace. Masters thought it comical and chose not to watch for fear he might indicate that.

“No witnesses, I gather.”

“Not really. There is Jimmy, the handyman. I talked with him but he wasn’t any help.

“I assume Officer Ben called you,” Masters said just for clarification.

“Yup. I got his call at” - he got out his small pad and lick-thumbed his way through it – “at one sixteen. I arrived on the premises at one forty-two. I called in the crew almost immediately. Our first job was to gain access to the room. I saw the key was still in the lock from the inside and that the door was also hinged on the inside. An officer climbed up the tree outside to the window but saw that it was latched with that stick-affair. So, wanting to preserve the door casing and the lock, I had them saw the door off its hinges. We wore latex gloves, of course.”

“That was an excellent procedure, Detective. Excellent, indeed!” Masters said. Detective Little swelled with pride – not necessarily attractive when starting from a barrel-chested, two hundred and fifty-five-pound frame. Masters had been in the community just over seven years. He figured Little had added ten or so pounds a year to catch up with him. The moustache had appeared within the past five years. If imitation were indeed the highest form of flattery, then Masters felt appropriately flattered. So long as they sat on opposite sides of picnic tables, things should be fine.

“Are Joan and Jimmy available?”

“Yes, Sir. They’re down in the living room. I sent an officer to sit with Jimmy’s grandfather. He’s ill and Jimmy was concerned about him.

“Where can I interview them?”

“You can use the sitting room – at least that’s what Joan called it. Looks like another living room to me. Smaller and more cluttered with dust catchers, I suppose.”

Surveying the room one last time, Masters turned and followed Little down stairs.

“This is Miss Joan Goodman – sister of the recently

deceased Mary Ellington and sister-in-law of the most recently deceased, Lester Ellington,” Detective Little said by way of introduction.

A third grader would have had more tact in the situation, but what had been said, had been said. It didn't appear to phase her in the least, however.

Miss Joan, as everyone called her, was a well preserved, fiercely independent, lady in her early seventies although her carriage and manner seemed that of someone much younger. She didn't feign youth with hair color or wrinkle creams. She was what she was and you were at your pleasure whether or not to accept it.

“I'm sorry about your loss. I'm Raymond Masters. Detective Little has asked me to assist in the case. Are you up to some questions?”

She nodded and they moved to the sitting room. She had little to add that she had not already told the detective.

“The woodwork in the den seems to have been freshly painted. Do you have any idea why?”

“No. I wasn't aware it had been done. It hadn't been before I left for the city.”

“What was Lester's mood when you last saw him?” Masters asked.

“Improved, I'd say. He had been so depressed after Mary's death – well we both were. That's the main reason I went off to the City for a week – to try and snap out of it, myself. Those last few days though he seemed better – more active, more talkative. He was really the reason I took the little vacation. He suggested it would do me good to get away from here for a while. He was right. I hated the man but the fact was, Lester was always right.”

She hesitated as if there were something else on her mind.

“If there is anything else, please tell us,” Masters urged.

“Well, after his son died – that must be thirty-five years ago now – Lester became very depressed and attempted suicide – pills that time. I thought he might react the same way this time so I was hesitant to leave. He seemed so good, though, and he was quite insistent. I guess I should have followed my own instinct and stayed around.”

"If he had decided to take his own life, there really would not have been any way you could have stopped him even if you had been here, now would there?"

"Well, probably not. He was a strong-minded individual. You said 'If he decided to take his own life.' Is there any doubt about that?"

"It appears to be suicide at this point. The locked door and window would seem to rule out anyone else's involvement."

Joan nodded in agreement, as if relieved to hear it.

"I can't say I'm surprised, really. The terrible pain he had to endure from the arthritis – it was degenerative, you know – and he never had a moment without pain. I suppose that, and Mary's death, just pushed him over the edge."

She smiled, oddly, as she spoke of his terrible pain. It had been a mixed message. It was, also, an interesting, interpretive summary that somehow seemed uncalled for and out of place at that moment. He thanked her for her cooperation, reiterated his condolences and dismissed her.

When they were alone, Masters turned to Little.

"Let's find out what she might have had to gain from Lester's death."

"Well, I can tell you one thing for sure – well almost for sure. She's the only living relative so she'll probably inherit the old boy's millions."

"I see. Let's find out for sure, okay?"

"I'll get right on it. William Barton is – was – his attorney."

"One more thing, Detective. See if you can find out how Joan and Lester really got along. She sounded so compassionate, almost too compassionate, considering what we seem to know about the way Lester treated people in general and her own statement about her feelings toward him."

Little dutifully took it all down in his notepad.

"What do you know about the Ellington's son's death?"

"Well, let's see what I can remember. Georgie was two years ahead of me in school so that would have made him about ten when it happened. Story was that his dad – Lester – left out a loaded gun and the boy blew his own head off by

accident. Just about broke up the marriage – at least that was the scuttlebutt. I remember hearing the men at the café saying she kicked him out of the bedroom forever. They seemed to live separate lives after that.”

“Any other women in his life that you know of?”

“No. Don’t even recall any rumors. Personally, I can’t see that any woman in her right mind would have a contemptible chap like him in the first place.”

“No rumors about him and Joan?” Masters asked.

“Never!”

The detective seemed bewildered by the question.

“She is your typical old maid, so far as I can tell. She never married. Never had a date that I know of. Lived with the Ellington’s right from the time they were married, I believe. She can verify that, of course.”

“What about Mary’s drinking? She was intoxicated when she died. Was it a once in a while thing or was it chronic?”

“Chronic – at least after Georgie died.”

“That’s been a long time. Wonder why Joan didn’t mention it? Guess we didn’t present her with an appropriate opportunity.”

“Joan would be very protective of Mary,” Little said. “They were as thick as sisters, you know.”

Masters continued to be amused and amazed at the detective’s disordered analogies.

“I guess we’re ready to talk with the handyman. What’s his name, again?”

“Arroyo. Jimmy Arroyo.”

A few minutes later Detective Little escorted Jimmy into the sitting room. Masters shook his hand and offered him a seat. Jimmy was a strikingly handsome, well built, bright-eyed Latino in his mid to late twenties. The orange and brown sport shirt that he was wearing accentuated his wavy black hair and deeply tanned skin.

He had grown up in Rossville and was known as a bright young man who, because of family obligations was well on his way to nowhere. He lived in the apartment over the garage with his ailing Grandfather and had been in the Ellington’s employ since he turned eighteen. He had dropped

out of school at sixteen. The townspeople couldn't understand why he continued to work for them. Lester treated all employees as if they were dirt or worse. So far as Detective Little could remember no previous handyman had remained longer than six months.

Masters introduced himself - that not being one of the things Detective Little seemed to feel was his place.

"Did you hear or see anything unusual last night?" Masters began.

"I've been thinking about that since I talked with Detective Little before. It was at twelve before nine that Mr. Ellington called me and said the north yard light was out and insisted that I take care of it immediately. It tried to beg off 'til morning but he got really upset and demanded that I do it right then."

"You say it was twelve before nine. How do you remember that so precisely?"

"The cop show Gramps and I were watching was just at the place they were about to shoot it out with the bad guys, you know, and I looked at the clock thinking why couldn't he have called ten minutes later."

"But you went immediately to fix it?"

"Oh! Yes! When Ellington bellows – well bellowed - you did what he said, or else. He wasn't a very patient man. I suppose you've heard that."

"Yes, or words to that effect. Go on."

"Well I got the ladder and a new bulb out of the shop downstairs and went right over to the light pole."

"What time would you have arrived there? Be as accurate as you can."

"It couldn't have taken me more than five or six minutes. It didn't – I remember looking at my watch in the moonlight as I got to the top of the ladder, wondering if I'd get back in time to see the end of the program. It was just going on five 'til."

"Then what?"

"I found a mess and lost all hope of seeing the end of the show. The bulb had exploded, somehow, and I had to use my pliers to unscrew what was left of it. It took me forever to get it out – wiggling and pulling, you know how that goes. I've

never seen one that exploded like that. Must have been some kind of power surge. That's all I can figure."

"Did you hear anything that sounded like a shot?" Masters asked.

"Not then."

"Not then?"

"No, not then. I had heard like a real crisp backfire from a car during the commercial at about twenty to nine. Gramps heard it too. I even looked out the window but the car was gone. Thinking back, it could have been a small caliber shot, I suppose. Couldn't have been Ellinton's suicide shot, though, since he called me soon after that."

"You're probably right, there. Anything else?"

Jimmy hesitated. Masters encouraged him to continue.

"I saw somebody trotting cross the front lawn on foot from the south and go to the front door. At first I thought it must be Joan, but just as soon realized she wouldn't be running. I guess it was one of those quick, random, thoughts you have when you're trying to make sense out of nonsense, you know."

"Yes, I understand." Masters said, becoming more and more impressed with the young man's intelligence and quick comprehension of situations. Jimmy continued.

"I just stayed really quiet up on the ladder. From that angle it was hard to tell who it was at first."

"At first?" Masters asked.

"Yeah. In the bright moonlight, I saw it was the Williams kid - the one that was in the accident when Mary was . . . killed."

Jimmy's tone became suddenly sad and he looked away from Masters and out the window.

"What did he do?"

"It was strange. He trotted right up to the front door. I expected him to knock - that's how it looked. But he didn't. He appeared to put something into the mailbox beside the door. Then he went around - trotted, again, really - to the south side of the house. I didn't see him anymore. When I got down I looked around back there but didn't find him so I just went on back up to my apartment."

"Did he seem to be trying to hide his presence - like

sneaking around?" Masters asked.

"No. Like I said he ran right up off the road and across the yard big as day."

"He was running when you first saw him."

"Yeah. Like a pretty fast jog – something like that."

"You didn't call out to him."

"No. I'm not sure why. I was so surprised to see him there. It was like he really didn't belong, you know?"

Again, Masters sensed sadness in Jimmy's tone.

"Yes. I see," Masters said. "Let's go back to the day or so before. Were there any out of the ordinary happenings – visitors, requests from Mr. Ellington, things like that?"

"Where shall I start!" Jimmy said implying there had indeed been more than a few.

"Begin as far back as the first strange thing that you remember."

"That would be his den. He asked me to repaint his den – just the woodwork, actually. It didn't need it. It was white and there weren't any chips. Nothing like that. But I repainted it, of course. It took parts of two days. When I got to the window, he had this idea that he needed a new latch. I must admit the old metal slide jobby wasn't really secure in the old wood, but it was the third floor for gosh sakes. Not much chance of a robber entering that way.

Anyway, he had drawn up a plan for the gadget that you've probably already seen. It's a one by two cut just long enough to become a wedge between the top of the lower window and the inside top of the frame by the ceiling – kind of like when you install a window air conditioner so the lower window can't be opened upward by the vibrating unit. He had an ingenious addition though, I thought. It was to hinge it at the top of the frame so it could swing up out of the way when he wanted the window open, and then it flopped down into place when he closed the window. With his crippled hands, it would have been quite a job to put that stick back in place just right.

"Several years ago, I had cut him a little board to use as a prop to keep the window open. The old rope from the pulley system originally installed in the place had snapped off the counter weights in the wall. When that window closed, it

really slammed!”

“So you finished painting and constructed and installed the hinged device. Anything else?”

“Several days later, after the paint had dried, I went back to put all the books and stuff back into the bookcases. He said he needed to explain about the new latch. That was a strange comment coming from him because he never explained anything. Anyway, he said somebody had threatened him. He didn’t say if it was a death threat or not. I didn’t even think of it that way. Anyway, that stopped me from being curious about the latch, I guess, and I really didn’t think about it anymore. That day he had me try it out several times to make sure it worked without fail. He sort of overdid it, I thought, but then if I’d have been threatened and unable to protect myself like him, I suppose I might have overdone it, too.

“Does the term ‘footstool’ ring a bell with you?” Masters asked.

“Yeah. That’s another of the crazy things I mentioned. He had me cut exactly three and three-quarters inches off each leg of that stool. He said it was so he could step up onto it easier in order to use it to reach the top shelf in the bookcases. I may just be the handyman but I’m nobody’s fool. I could see that wasn’t the real reason. He was too short to begin with. If anything, he needed three and a half inches added to it.”

“What about a spike in the sill?”

“A spike in the window sill? No. There wasn’t a spike in the sill, Sir. I’m not sure I understand.”

“We found a four-inch spike recently nailed into the center of the sill. Not having any fresh paint on it, we assume that it had to have been put there since the paint job.”

“No. I don’t know anything about a spike.”

“Do you think Mr. Ellington could have driven a spike like that himself?”

“Four inches? I doubt it. His hands were so weak and his shoulders were even worse. I don’t see how he could have done it.”

“Who else might have been available to do that for him after the time when you finished the painting?”

“I don’t know who it could have been, but then, I’ve been away more than usual this past two weeks”

“How’s that?”

“Mr. Ellington had me running strange errands for him. One was clear over to Cartersville to pick up some ammunition – that was just yesterday afternoon. He never shoots anymore like he used to. Maybe it was connected to being threatened. But I couldn’t understand why I had to go to the gun shop over there when I could have got it right here in town.”

“Exactly what time were you gone?”

“I left at noon and got back about three thirty.”

“Other errands?”

“Several after dark. He had me go pick up groceries one night and a bottle of wine another night. I made three or four of those kinds of runs for him the past week.”

“And that was unusual?” Masters asked.

“Yeah. I hardly ever heard a peep out of him after five. I could count on having the evenings for myself. That’s how we had it set up.”

“How long would you be gone?”

“About an hour, maybe a little longer.”

“Is there anything else you remember?”

“Well, one more thing, though it’s probably not really out of place. Yesterday about four thirty in the afternoon he called me to come up to his den and shut and lock his window for him. He said his hands were too stiff and he couldn’t manage it. So, I did it. He made a big deal about making sure the latch was securely in place. It was. Then I left and didn’t hear anymore until the call during the cop-show.”

“So your trip to Cartersville was before you closed the window for him.”

“Yeah. I got back about a half hour before that.”

“You’re sure enough the prowler on the front lawn was Brandon Williams to swear to it in court if you were asked.”

“Yes, Sir. But, that – ‘prowler’ - does remind me of one more thing – something Gramps said. He said he thought he saw a prowler lurking around several times when I was gone on those errands. Gramps gets nervous when I’m gone at night and keeps a look out for me to return. He tries to work

me, you know, and I figured that might just be a way to try and keep me from leaving him alone again. Maybe it wasn't, though. Maybe Brandon or somebody had really been here before."

"Did you know Brandon, other than just to know who he was?"

"Not really, well sort of. Sometimes I eat at the burger joint where he works evenings and weekends. He's a real friendly kid. We always say 'hi', that's about it. One night last week – I think it was Wednesday - he slid into the booth beside me and asked me about gliders."

"Gliders?" Masters said calling for clarification.

"I make remote controlled gliders, about yae big."

He spread his hands to suggest a five-foot wingspan.

"We talked a while. I told him I'd be glad to show him what I had and help him get started if he wanted. He seemed really interested. Really though, I had mixed feelings – kind of uneasy."

"Why was that?"

"Because he was involved in that accident. I know they say it wasn't his fault but I still felt kind of funny. Every chance he got, Mr. Ellington raved on about how it really was his fault and the cops were just covering up because his dad was a bigwig in the Republican Party."

After a few more minutes of small talk, Masters thanked Jimmy for his help and showed him to the door as Detective Little put the finishing touches on his notes.

"Better get down to that mailbox, don't you suppose," Masters said.

"My thought exactly. I'll get the print guy to dust it."

As Little went upstairs to get help, Masters went to the front porch. With his pen, he opened the flip-up top on the mailbox. Inside, was a sealed envelope from Lester, stamped and addressed to the Rossville Police Department. Masters didn't remove it. He would let the techs take care of that. As he waited for Little's return, he looked around on the ground, under the doormat, and behind the bushes finding nothing but a 1937 penny and some litter, including a Butterfinger wrapper - reminding him he had not yet had breakfast.

Rather than opening the envelope there, Masters

suggested it be taken to the lab for a complete going over for things like prints and saliva, and to determine if it had remained sealed once it was originally classed – pieces of evidence that opening it might destroy.

The box revealed four repeating and layered sets of prints.

“Probably the mailman’s, Lester’s and Joan’s for three. Any clue as to the third?” Masters asked the technician.

“Can’t say for sure but two different thumb prints look a lot like those I remember finding on the window sill – one with big swirls and one with little ones. I’ll have to verify that, however.”

Officer Ben arrived in the entry hall.

“You’d better come and look at something we just found,” he said, more excitedly than one would expect from a seasoned policeman. But then, that police force was not typical in many ways. Masters wondered if, indeed, he had found a secret panel. Wouldn’t that be a hoot!

Instead, it was an envelope addressed to Masters. It had been hidden under the desk blotter.

“Dusted yet?” Masters asked.

“Yes Sir. They appear to be those of Mr. Ellington.”

Carefully avoiding touching any flat surface, Masters opened the unsealed envelope and removed a single folded sheet of paper.

The note read simply: “Masters: I think I’m going to be killed! Here’s your chance to get even, if you’re up to it. Lester Ellington”

It was strange in every aspect. Why would he be addressing the information to Masters, a virtual stranger? The envelope appeared to have been intentionally hidden. How could Lester have thought that a hidden envelope could be of any help to him? It was addressed simply to Raymond Masters in a large scrawl that covered so much of the envelope he could not have intended to also add a mailing address underneath and mail it. There was no clue as to whom the suspected killer might be, so why would he have written the note in the first place? And to what did the second line refer? ‘Here’s your chance to get even if you’re up to it’. Get even for what? Did it mean to take revenge for Lester by

finding his murderer? The last five words seemed to offer a challenge. It raised many more questions than it answered.

As Masters poked around under the blotter, he found another peculiarity. There, in another envelope, was a ticket for an ocean voyage. It was made out in Lester's name and had an embarkation date exactly one week from the following Monday. Why would someone contemplating suicide book passage for himself on a voyage? He would have to think about that later on.

"Let's take a look at the door," Masters suggested to Little.

It was leaning against the wall in the hall. The key was still in place, slightly askew, as it had been found, so that it couldn't be pushed out from the other side and opened with another key. The prints on it were smudged, the usual condition of keys, but the partials appeared to match Lester's. There was one on top of the others that matched the unknown print that was suddenly creeping up all around the place – the windowsill, the books by the window and the mailbox.

Masters addressed Detective Little.

"Well, Little, how are you going to call it?"

"Still looks like suicide to me. Seems that between his worsening arthritic pain, his wife's death and the panic from the threat on his life, that he just decided to end it all himself. He has a history of suicide attempts. The crime scene seems to bear that out. The door was locked from the inside. The window locked from the inside and done so by Jimmy himself just a few hours before the death. A twenty-two-caliber hole in the victim's head and a twenty-two, recently fired, gun beside the body – one that appears to have only Lester's fingerprints on it. Has to be a suicide."

"Sure looks that way on the surface, at least, doesn't it," Masters said.

Little thought that meant that the great detective agreed with him. Masters intended it to signal that he had substantial reservations.

"I suppose you'll still await the final ballistics and scientific reports before assigning it to the judge as a suicide," Masters said, suggesting the logical outcome of the morning's findings but fully expecting that Little had ignored it all.

“Oh. Well. Yes. Of course,” Little stammered as nonchalantly as one can with egg on one’s face.

///

CHAPTER TWO: The Rest of Day One - Sunday

Masters walked the remaining six blocks to the quaint, little, downtown area of the village and slid into the one booth in the diner that would accommodate his bulk.

“Usual?” Came Alice’s voice from behind the counter at the far end of the large open room.

Masters nodded, indicating he would have the usual – five pancakes, three scrambled eggs – fluffy – three sausage patties, a large juice – half orange and half cranberry – and coffee. The coffee arrived as he was taking out his pen and smoothing a paper napkin on which to make notes.

“So, what about ol’ man Ellington?” Alice, asked, pouring the first of what were usually his half dozen cups of coffee.

“Yes, indeed,” was Masters’ calculated response, realizing that she really only wanted an opening so she could impart her impression of the whole affair. By that late in the morning, she should have honed her story down to its finest details. Her entertaining take on the world’s events was always a highlight of Masters’ day. He tucked the big white napkin under his chin and prepared to listen.

“Seems to me – and I ain’t no big city Dick, ya know – but it seems to me one a two things happened. Either his old lady hired a hit man to git him before she bought the farm and he went ahead and made it good, or that Mexican kid took him out because Lester found out that Jimmy and Mary had been makin’ whoopee for the past ten years and threatened to do something awful to him.”

“Interesting proposals,” Masters said.

Certainly, they had not been ones that had crossed his mind.

Playfully gruff, Alice was rapidly losing the battle to remain middle aged, although she was perhaps the only resident of the small town who had not yet noticed. Aside from that, she knew every other piece of dirt birthed in Rossville since 1950 and was pleased to share it with anyone who would feign the slightest interest. Masters, therefore, encouraged Alice to elaborate. Understand, mere silence on his part, encouraged Alice to elaborate.

“His wife, she never got over the fact that Lester caused her little boy to shoot himself. There was no smooch ‘n woo between them after that, I can tell you that for darn sure. Everybody thought old Lester was a scoundrel, but he didn’t hold no candle to Mary. She just never showed it out in the open.”

Alice leaned in close and became quite confidential in tone.

“I knew a gal who worked for ‘em as a maid for about six months some fifteen years ago. The stories she could tell! Screaming and dish-tossing tantrums every day - and that was before she started her boozin’ up for the night. Lester was probably happy she banished him to the top floor. It’s a wonder they didn’t kill each other off, the way they went on.”

“And she and the Arroyo boy are rumored to have had a thing going?” Masters said, setting the stage for the next round of rumor and innuendo.

“No rumor. Everybody knew it. That’s why she hired him – an eighteen-year-old stallion for her own private stable. Them Mexican boys, you know, they mature early and have a inborn knack at being great lovers. I’ve had a few myself in my day. Why else would you hire a kid for a handyman that wasn’t handy with anything except high school girls in a rumble seat? I had to feel sorry for him when Mary died. He moped around and looked awful – didn’t take care of his person, you know. I think he took it really hard. Seems a bit better this past week.”

Alice was called to another table but she would be back. Masters was always her very best audience and Alice

wouldn't pass that up – not even for a table full of two-bit tips. Masters made some notes. If not suicide, how could the murderer have gained entrance into the fully secure room? What about a love triangle? What about a hit man? What about Jimmy as the hit man Mary had hired? That was an interesting possibility. If he loved Mary, would he get rid of Lester for her if she asked him to, even after her death? Would he get rid of Lester on his own for revenge because the man had driven her to drink – eventually killing her? Or, would Joan have done the old boy in for that same reason? What about a love quadrangle – Mary and Jimmy, Lester and Joan? The possibilities were getting more and more fascinating.

Of course, none of those would be worth pursuing if the lab reports came back as expected. They would not be available until later in the afternoon so there was probably no reason to be looking for trouble. Masters had just never been able to resist spinning a motive.

Nevertheless, some elements of the case didn't fit neatly into the picture. They might all be easily explainable coincidences, of course. There were the footstool and the spike. And why have the den repainted and improve the window security if he were planning to kill himself? Same with the ocean voyage. Of course, the suicide could have been an impulsive act. Lester didn't appear to be that type, however.

The books on the floor also posed a problem. It was a hodgepodge of subjects including the archeology of Thailand, stamp collecting prior to 1900, Mexican architecture, the Zigfield Follies and lizards of the Amazon. It was more like a collection of books that would have found their way together out of a lack of use, rather than because he suddenly wanted to review them. Perhaps he was getting ready to cull them out of his library. And why had Lester worked so hard to keep Jimmy away at certain times or was that just part of the young man's story - a fabrication to cover up something else not yet apparent?

Why the note from Lester to Masters? That was the main aspect of the case that gnawed at the old detective. It served only one purpose that he could see; it got Masters involved in the case. Why would Lester have wanted to be so sure that Masters would be a part of it? He must have thought

that the local police would miss something and he wanted to enlist the services of someone with a better track record. If Lester had killed himself, why would it take an expert to prove that? The closed room, the gun – it was just not making sense. If someone else had actually pulled it off, and Lester had been quite sure that it was about to happen, then perhaps Masters could understand. But if that had been the case, why not name names in the note or at least give some direction to the investigation – something about the nature or source or timing of the threat; something that would be of some potential help. Under other circumstances, it might have implied a game – a challenge of some sort. But that seemed unlikely since Masters' opponent (being dead) could never reveal should he prevail in the resolution of the competition.

Such bafflement always made Masters hungry. Luckily, Alice arrived, loaded from fingers to elbow with plate after plate of wonderfully aromatic dishes, each supercharged with calories and cholesterol and seemingly impatient to invade his arteries and bloat his countenance. He would have to stop eating such things. Perhaps he would begin his diet the following day!

“So, Alice, what do you think about Detective Little's theory that it was suicide? It did all take place in a room locked from the inside, you know.”

“Lester Ellington commit suicide? That's as unlikely as squirrels mating in January. As a kid, he was too afraid of violence to try out for water boy. He thought he was God's gift to the world and woe be unto anybody that didn't realize that. He'd never take himself out. Never!”

“Not even with the pain he had from the arthritis?”

“I seen him around – even in here sometimes. He could hold a cup and cut his steak with the best of 'em. I think that pain stuff was mostly for pity – that's what I think.”

“What about his depression over his wife's death? Wouldn't that have been enough?”

“Well, I'll give the S.O.B. one thing – he really did love Mary. He chased her all through school. I remember him bringing her flowers to school way back when they was still in fifth grade. He really loved her well before his hormones kicked in. I'd bet a day's wages – make that a week's wages

– that in all those loveless years after Georgie died that he never once cheated on her with another woman. That’s how much I think he loved her.”

She poured Masters another cup of coffee and removed the quickly spent juice glass. Again, she became all quite confidential.

“They had to get married, you know.”

The revelation was accompanied by a big, I-know-it-for-sure-and-certain, wink and nod.

“That’s the only reason she’d a ever hitched up with him.”

“You’re sure of that?” Masters asked.

“Three months along when she made that trip down the aisle. All us girls knew it. She blamed him for ruining her life almost before it had really started, ya know? When Georgie was born they said he was premature – sure, a seven pound, thirteen ounce premature baby. Fat chance.”

“And you don’t think there’s much likelihood that Lester and Joan were playing footsie somewhere along the way.”

“Not a chance. Joan was just plain to selfish to share herself with anybody. She moved in with them right off the bat to protect her little sister. I’m surprised she ever let them share a bedroom. She was terribly jealous from the start and I don’t think it ever got any better.”

“Jealous of what?”

“Of Mary. Joan raised her. Their old lady was a undependable tramp – God rest her soul. They have different fathers. Probably never even knew who they were. Joan was like Mary’s mother. She fought all her battles for her as they were growing up.”

“Would Joan have wanted Lester dead?”

“In a Kremlin minute!”

Masters had no idea how that saying may have originated, but felt sure it telegraphed an emphatic, ‘yes’.

“I see. Well, Alice, as usual, you have been a fountain of information and I love you for it. Now, if you’d bring me just one more little pitcher of syrup, I’ll be in your debt forever.”

“You do go on, ya know.”

She came as close to blushing as Alice ever came close to blushing.

* * *

Masters left a twenty on the table, which included a hefty tip for Alice, and stepped outside. It had warmed significantly since he had first encountered the day. He looked up the gentle slope toward his home. Somehow, those five pancakes and quart of coffee always made it look like Mt. Everest.

‘Quaint’ may be an overused adjective, but in the case of Rossville, it seems quite appropriate. The town was based on a summer tourist economy. City folks came to the country to partake of the lakes, the sun and the “quaintness” of the small villages. Therefore, quaint was indeed the commodity the Town Fathers strove for from the zoning ordinances that required shake shingles on all buildings to the old-fashioned overhanging porches that lined the downtown’s carefully maintained, narrow, cobblestone, Main Street.

Most of the homes appeared to be as old as the hills themselves. Those that weren’t, had been made to look the part. Masters had fallen in love with the place years before. He had remodeled the two-story cottage in which he lived to fit right in. It was brown-tone, native stone half way up the first story with weathered-green clapboard siding the rest of the way. The trim and doors were a deeper green. The roof was steep of pitch to quickly sheer away the significant winter snowfall. The new cedar shingles had been artificially weathered to pretend a well-aged aura. The second floor was lit from sets of two dormers front and back and from oversized, floor to ceiling windows north and south.

More than a few times, visitors had knocked on his door to inquire what kinds of things he sold there. That pleased the old gentleman, proving to him, in a way, that he truly fit in. He ignored the fact that no one else in that area of the state chose to regularly wear a dark suit, vest, and bulky, silk tie. He likewise interpreted the endless parade of glances he drew each time he walked the streets as merely proving what a friendly lot of people had been attracted to the cozy little community. Each look was returned with a broad smile and slow, deep, dignified nod. It wasn’t that he didn’t fully realize his appearance was out of place. He merely chose to continue dressing in the manner that had been familiar and

comfortable to him for those past sixty years and adjusted reality accordingly.

Masters had arranged to meet Detective Little at ten thirty back at Ellington's so they could go over the grounds together. He arrived precisely on time – which was his style. He stopped at the south edge of the property and mentally replayed Jimmy's account of the night before. He was standing at about the place Brandon would have left the road and headed into the yard. A large tree obscured the light pole. He walked toward the house until he had the light in clear view. It was certainly possible that someone up a ladder by that light could have seen the scenario that Jimmy suggested. He went on toward the front porch. Only the final five feet or so at the porch were obscured. That would explain why Jimmy couldn't be sure what Brandon was doing at the door.

About that time, Detective Little pulled up. The two walked around back.

"You say you had an officer climb the tree by the den window?" Masters asked.

"Right. It's a Catalpa tree. Loose bark this time of year. His uniform was a mess. The man's wife will hate me."

"How close to the window could he get?"

"Oh, he got close enough to try and open it.

"So, installing the window latch was not entirely unreasonable, I suppose," Masters said as much to himself as to Little.

They walked closer to the tree. After parking the squad car, Officer Ben caught up and followed like a terrier at heel, fresh from obedience school.

"Officer," Masters said, shielding his eyes from the sun, "Do you see that piece of string or thread flapping from the branch over here?" He pointed.

"Yes, Sir."

"Do you remember seeing it there earlier?" Masters answered his own question. "Of course, you didn't it was in the black of night when you were up there, wasn't it?"

Officer Ben fidgeted, not knowing if he was still required to answer or not. His quandary was put to rest with Masters' next request.

"Would you mind retrieving it for us? I hate to send you

up that dirty old tree again, but I think we should take a look. Treat it like a piece of evidence. Touch it as little as possible and bag it on the spot.”

Ben took on the task as though it were the most important assignment of his life. Masters and Little moved on, walking the back yard.

Little took it upon himself to point out certain items of interest.

“Ellington had a shooting range back there at the edge of the woods. He used to be a champion marksman. I haven’t heard him shooting for years. Not since his hands got so bad.”

That reminded Masters.

“You know, I heard shooting over here yesterday afternoon, soon after lunch. I figured it was someone taking target practice back in the woods.”

He led the way back to target range – a stack of well-weathered bales of straw in front of a sizable mound of dirt now covered with grass and a variety of weeds. As he examined the straw, he noticed a series of recently made depressions in the faces of the bales. He had seen the same thing before. The rotting straw had easily collapsed under the pressure of slugs that had been sent its way. He looked behind and pawed through the grass on the mound. His suspicion was confirmed.

“Take a look, Little,” he said, pointing to a freshly made hole in the ground. “Dollars to donuts we’ll find a couple of dozen rounds of freshly fired slugs in this area. Let’s get your team on it at once.”

“What do you suppose it means?” Little asked

“One more piece of the puzzle that doesn’t fit the picture on the box.”

“Little pretended he understood.

Ben arrived with the string carefully preserved in a plastic sack. He handed it to Little who handed it to Masters who opened it for a clearer view. He smelled it and gave it to Little.

“What do you smell?”

Little sniffed as if about to enjoy a vintage cognac.

“Gunpowder?” he said, clearly confused.

Ben was dispatched to get the team back. Masters again began walking. They came upon two twelve-foot, creosote covered poles set eight feet apart at the south edge of the property.

“Any idea about these?” Masters asked.

“Might have been a swing for the boy at one time,” he said, a surprisingly astute idea, even though in an odd place at the edge of the lawn and so far away from the house.

“Do those look like metal screw in hooks up near the top?” Masters asked.

Shading his eyes, Little confirmed his observation.

“Big suckers, aren’t they,” he added.

“Big and still shiny. I’d say they are relatively new additions to the posts,” Masters continued. “Would you make a note to ask Jimmy about this set up?”

Little added the notation in his dog-eared notepad.

Masters turned and surveyed the lawn. As he stepped off to cross to the south edge of the property he caught the glint from something in the grass about mid-way across the expanse. He approached it and found a gun. Not any gun but a six-shooter, another twenty-two-caliber. Upon closer examination, it became obvious that it could have been the exact companion to the one found in the den.

“Well don’t that beat all!” Little mumbled as he motioned Officer Ben back across the lawn.

One sniff and it was obvious that it had been recently fired – not as long ago as the day before at the firing range but sometime within the past twelve hours.

Little shook his head.

“Another piece to put in that box,” he said making a convoluted reference to Masters’ earlier puzzle box comment.

“One bullet fired,” Masters observed.

“Just like the other one,” Little said, accentuating the obvious. “At least we know this one couldn’t be the weapon that killed Lester,” he went on.

“Oh?” Masters said inviting an explanation.

“It’s out here and the body was locked up tighter than a wino inside the den.”

“Seems to pose a dilemma, doesn’t it?” Masters mused

drifting off into deep thought.

Little saw no dilemma but nodded in rhythm with Master's slow, deliberate, bobbing, head movements.

Masters had to wonder how the gun got there, but more to the point, who put it there? It appeared that during those past twelve hours only Jimmy and Brandon had been in that area, but that, of course, was all based on Jimmy's story. The time line could be collapsed even further since the police had been watching the grounds since the early morning hours. If it had been fired no more than twelve hours before then it had to have been dropped there sometime between eleven, the night before, and around one thirty or so in the morning. It was the time frame of the shooting. But, as Little had indicated, it just didn't seem to fit in as a part of the death.

Masters headed back toward the house. About twenty-five feet from where the gun had been found, lay the most enormous rubber band he had ever seen. It was an inch thick and a good ten to twelve feet long. He summoned Little.

"What in the world is this, do you suppose?"

Little knew the answer. Had he been a peacock, he would have preened his tail feathers.

"That's a launch band. The kids who are into model gliders use them to launch their planes."

"I see. So, this would be something Jimmy would use, then?"

"Sure is. They are big suckers, aren't they?"

"Would it be like Jimmy to just leave it laying around?" Masters asked, more to himself than Little.

"Kids today," Little said. "They leave their stuff all over the place – never put it away."

In Masters' estimation, Jimmy was no kid and seemed far too responsible to leave something which appeared to be that expensive just lying around. It was bagged as evidence.

Again, Little had something worthwhile to contribute.

"Those posts over there could be Jimmy's launch area. The launch bands have to be attached to something up high in order to shoot the glider high enough to stay airborne."

"Bravo!" Masters said, applying a sizable pat to Little's back.

Little beamed and walked and bit taller as they made

their way back toward the house. They were met by Ben. He was carrying a large plastic sack, which contained a fat, hard, maroon, throw pillow.

"I found this in Joan's closet."

"Why were you looking in there?" Little asked. "I haven't authorized a full house search."

"Well, actually, Miss Joan found it and brought it to me. She was trying to put her suitcase away on the upper shelf where she always kept it and it wouldn't fit in. She got up on a chair and found this stuffed to the rear of the shelf. See where it's all torn to shreds on one end. She says it's her pillow but it was on her couch and all in one piece when she left for the City. Looks like somebody ruined it and tried to hide it."

"We won't pull prints off that," Masters said.

He removed it from the sack and began examining it. He noticed several white lines across one end.

"Paint, white paint." He said out loud.

There were four, very thin, very straight paint lines about five inches long running parallel to one another about an inch apart.

There was a small hole where the stuffing was coming out. He began feeling at the opposite end of the pillow, squeezing and pushing it this way and that."

"Bingo!" he said at last.

"See here."

He displayed a small hard bulge between his thumb and index finger.

"Cut it out carefully, Ben. Don't damage it. I imagine it's a twenty-two-caliber slug. We'll need the forensic guys to see if it matches one of the guns."

The phone rang and Joan answered.

"It's for you, Detective Little."

"Little here. . . . You don't say. . . . You don't say. . . . You don't say!"

Masters looked expectantly as Little hung up.

"That was the lab. The bullet they took out of Lester didn't come from the gun we found in the locked room."

"Want to guess which one it came from?" Masters asked rhetorically.

Little, of course, missed that and felt compelled to

answer.

“The one from the grass?”

It came out more a question than an answer.

“Prints?” Masters asked. “Did they identify the prints on the gun from the den?”

“No. There weren’t any prints on that gun at all.”

“And on the cartridges?” Masters asked.

“None there either. All wiped cleaner than a whistle. One strange thing though. May not be important. But then it might be. It’s strange how sometimes the most unimportant little things turn out to be the really most important things in the long run.”

Raymond Masters was a patient man, but at that moment, he was ready to reach down Little’s throat and drag out the findings syllable by syllable.

“What!” Masters finally managed as Little paused for a breath.

“Several things, actually. They found lots of lead shavings in the chambers and the ends of the bullets were badly scratched up – not at all like the usually smooth, rounded ends of new bullets – though I guess they could hardly be used, could they?”

“Anything from the autopsy?”

“Another funny thing there. There were no powder burns on his head and no powder residue on his hands. How could he have put a gun up to his temple and shot himself without leaving traces of powder? This thing is getting down right weird. Better get a bigger box, Masters. Better get a bigger box.”

“Time of death?”

“Between nine and ten last night – leaning toward the nine side.”

Masters thought out loud.

“The exact time that nobody has an alibi – Jimmy says he was up a pole so his grandfather can’t vouch for his whereabouts. Joan was somewhere between the City and Rossville, alone in her car. Brandon was supposedly galloping around the lawn and then disappeared from sight behind the house. Little, we need to talk with Brandon immediately. He’d better have an airtight alibi.”

“So, I guess we begin treating it as a homicide?” Little asked.

“Right now, all I know is to treat it as a death that occurred sometime between nine and ten p.m. Saturday night with the lethal bullet being from the gun found twenty yards away from room which was locked from the inside. Mr. Ellington is still the late Mr. Ellington, isn’t he?”

“I can call the morgue . . .”

“I was kidding, Little. I was just kidding.”

Masters shook his head in disbelief at the density of his unlikely sidekick’s brain. Little, of course, assumed he was just deep in thought about the case. The second gun was rushed to the lab.

Joan fixed sandwiches, for which the officers and Masters were deeply appreciative, since it had slipped well past noon without their notice. Masters rushed nothing - especially the act of eating, which he had developed into an art form. In this case, it worked to his disadvantage as the others had wolfed down most of the food long before he was ready for seconds. Joan kindly fixed more, bringing a fruit bowl as well. She appreciated his savoir faire – something sadly lacking among the others, she thought.

It was just after one o’clock when Officer Ben escorted Brandon and his father into the sitting room.

“What’s this all about, Ray?” the elder Williams asked Masters as he stormed into the room. “Ben here says my boy’s a suspect in Lester’s death.”

“Well, I wouldn’t go that far, John,” Masters said, trying to calm things down and gesturing for them to be seated. “We are just collecting information from people who may know something.”

“I don’t know anything about his death,” Brandon said, trembling from his Nike covered toes to the Mets ball cap covering his sandy hair.

“Maybe you know something but aren’t aware of it, Brandon,” Masters suggested. “I need to have you tell us what you were doing here last night.”

Brandon looked at his father who appeared to have been taken completely by surprise by the question.

“Were you here last night, Brandon?” he asked.

Brandon took a deep breath and scooted up to the front of the couch, hands clasped, elbows on his legs.

“Yeah. I was here, but just for a minute. I came over to run an errand for Lester – Mr. Ellington.”

“You knew, Lester Ellington?” his father asked, again surprised.

“It’s kind of a complicated story, Dad. I’ve just been keeping it all to myself. That’s the way Lester said he wanted it.”

Masters spoke.

“Just take your time. Think back and tell us your story, just the way you remember it.”

“Well, okay.”

Brandon remained clearly nervous and made no attempt to hide it. He stood up and began pacing.

“As everybody knows, I was in the accident that killed Mrs. Ellington – Mary. Apparently she was drunk and came through a red light at the intersection south of the Hyway Café just as I was crossing on green. She was coming so fast she was up and over that little rise and into the intersection before I saw her. She was driving without lights and it was . . . dusk, I guess. The sun had set but it was still light enough to see things close by. I was doing thirty – the speed limit. I hit her car in the rear right fender area. Her car twirled around and spun into the gas pumps at the Quick Stop and the whole thing burst into flames. I was spun in the other direction and wound up across the street, upside down. Thank God for seat belts!

“As you know, I wasn’t charged with anything. Even so, Lester still blamed me - at first. I guess I can understand that. He came over to the house and yelled at Dad and me about bringing suit and ruining us. He was really obnoxious. He even took a swing at Dad and hit him in the shoulder. It seemed to hurt Lester a whole lot more than it did Dad – Lester had real bad arthritis in his hands and shoulders. Soon after that, he stormed out of our house.

“I didn’t hear from him again for several weeks. Then one day he came into the Burger House where I was busing tables. He called me over to his table and began apologizing for his bad behavior. He said he wanted to make it all up to

me. Somehow, he found out I was into bow shooting. He said he had a bow he'd like to give me. It was a favorite of his. With his arthritis, he couldn't use it anymore.

"He seemed so friendly and so really sorry about the scene he'd made, I felt bad for him – I still do, really. So, when he asked - more like begged – me to come over later that night after work and pick it up, I said okay. Everybody I've ever heard talk about him said he was a mean, ugly sort. That night he just seemed to be a very sad and lonely old man, so I agreed.

"It's a beautiful bow that I could never afford, myself. At first, I refused it and then let him talk me into it. He said not to tell anyone where I got it. He didn't want people to know about it. He gave some reason that made sense at the time but now, I'm not sure what it was. It was something about having removed it from his will or some such thing. I guess I just wanted the bow so much I didn't question it. Anyway, I went along. I even lied to my folks about it, saying I had saved the money. They had no idea how much stuff like that costs so they just accepted it. I'm sorry, Dad.

"Up in his den I admired the gun collection there on his wall. I really don't like guns, but sort of went on about it to be polite, you know. He invited me back the next night, again after work, so he could show them to me and tell me all about them. I really wasn't all that interested but like I said, he seemed so lonely and with his wife dead and all, I thought maybe I could help him feel better somehow.

"Oh. There is one strange thing now that I look back on it. He asked me to always come to his place by the bike trail at the back of the property, just into the woods. He knew I was back to riding my bike since my car got totaled in the accident. He said he didn't want to bother the handyman – Jimmy – who had instructions to report anyone who came onto the property. He'd see me if I came across the lawn out front. It made sense at the time.

"I went back the next evening and we talked about the guns. He had a story about each one – it was like they were his kids, you know. Remembering it all seemed really important to him. He like patted each one when he put it away. Actually, it was pretty interesting. Some of them date

back to the Spanish American War and he had all the information about who they had belonged to and which battles they'd been in – stuff like that. I even asked if I could do a report on them for school. He seemed happy about that idea. I really got to like the man and I think he really liked me.

“Then yesterday, he called and asked me to come over. I went about 1:30, I guess. It was soon after lunch, anyway. He met me downstairs by the kitchen door. He had an old six-shooter and a box of 22 shorts. He owned a pair of them and I suppose I had made over them the night before. They were like straight out the old West and that interested me.

“Anyway, we walked back to the target range by the woods. It hadn't been used for a long time. I could tell that. He had me get a paper bulls eye target from the shed and put it up on the stack of hay. There were rusty old nails still in the hay to hang it on. He showed me how to load the gun and let me shoot. He was a surprisingly patient teacher. I was pretty good actually, though aiming a pistol and a bow are really quite different. He said I was a natural and suggested I join the County Pistol Club. I said I'd think about it, but I didn't really mean it. One thing amazed me. I always thought all six shooters had hair triggers. That one sure didn't. I definitely had to pull on it.

“We stayed out there for about twenty minutes, I suppose. I must have shot it empty maybe four or five times. Then he said the damp air was getting to his arthritis so we'd better go inside.

“There was another strange thing – two of them, I guess, now that I think back on it. First, he had me open the window in the Den just after he had said the damp outside air was bothering him. Then he had me reload the pistol. None of his other guns were loaded. He had even lectured me on how dangerous that could be. I knew about his little boy's death but I just listened and didn't let on I knew. I figured maybe he kept that one for protection. Another thing about that – I started to reload from the box of short shells I had been using on the range but he stopped me and handed me a new box of longs. That seemed even stranger but I didn't question it. I just did it. When I finished, I tried to hand it back to him after it was loaded but he said his hands hurt too much

so he had me lay it on a shelf in back of his desk. Then, a little later, again because his hands were hurting so, I guess, he handed me the key to the door and had me put it into the lock for him from the inside. He said he had difficulty getting it started. I didn't think twice about that, really.

"Oh, I almost forgot. When I opened the window for him, he spotted a small glider stuck in the tree outside – the tree with the big white flowers in the spring. He said it must be Jimmy's and asked me if I'd mind going down stairs and climbing up to get it down. He said he was afraid that if a wind or rain came up it would be knocked out of the tree and get broken. He acted like it really mattered to him that it didn't get damaged. So, when I left, I climbed the tree and got it down. I put it on the back porch like he told me to."

"That was about it for that visit. . . . I need to go back. He found out my birthday was on Sunday – today, 'happy seventeenth Brandon' - and he said he had sent me a little gift that would be arriving at my place in an envelope in the mail on Friday. He made me promise I wouldn't open it until the evening of my birthday – that's tonight. Again, it seemed strange but 'strange' appeared to just go with Lester. I promised. It was waiting for me when I got home from work on Friday afternoon. I noticed it wasn't sealed, but I didn't even peak inside. I still don't know what's in it. It's on my dresser."

Masters interrupted to ask Ben to go over and pick it up. Brandon and his father gave their permission and John called ahead to alert his wife. Then he turned his attention back to Brandon and to the initial question he had asked the boy.

"We have a report that you were seen here on the grounds last night. Where you here?"

"Yeah. I was here. About eight thirty he – Lester – called me on my teen line and asked me if I would do him a big favor. He said he had an important letter that needed to be postmarked on Saturday, and in all the excitement of having me around, he had forgotten to take care of it. He said it would be ready at nine but it had to get down to the post office before ten because that was when they ran the last postmarks for the week. He asked me to come over and pick

it up, and then drop it off at the post office. He repeated that it would be ready right at nine and he'd put in the mailbox at the front door for me. He suggested that I come the front way, by the street out front, because it would be faster from my house. Then he said I should leave by the bike trail because that would be the fastest way to the Post Office. He was right about that but I thought it was a strange change from what he had said before. Anyway, I went right over. I had to run in order to get there on time. No lights on my bike and Dad won't let me ride it on the street after dark."

Masters interrupted.

"Did Mr. Ellington know about that – that you weren't allowed to ride after dark?"

"Yes, Sir. He knew. We talked it about. He even sided with Dad's point of view on it."

"Okay. Go ahead."

Well, I found the envelope right where he said it would be. I got it out of the mailbox and took it to the Post Office for him."

"How did you leave the property?" Masters asked.

"I left by the bike trail, the way Lester had said to do. Like I said, it made sense."

"Did you happen to see to whom the envelope was addressed?" Masters asked, not really hoping for a helpful response.

"Yes, I did. It was to a Mr. E. Funk. I remember because I thought if you turned it around it would be to Mr. Funk-e – Funky. Seemed humorous at the moment, at least. It was addressed to somewhere in Albany - sorry I don't remember where. One other thing, it was one of those envelopes with the little clear plastic windows that the address shows through. It had a tiny little printed return address label on the outside – like those you get free from veterans' organizations or humane societies."

Another question from Masters.

"Did you see anyone on the grounds that night?"

"No."

"Was there anything strange about the grounds that night?"

"Strange? I don't think so. Well, maybe this isn't what

you mean but that yard light between this place and yours was turned off. I even considered going around to the side to check on it but Lester seemed in such a rush for me to get his letter to the Post Office that I just went on.”

“Is there anything else? Even any seemingly insignificant thing?”

“I don’t know what it would be. Well, if it’s insignificant that you want, I noticed Saturday afternoon in his den that his footstool was only about half as tall as it used to be. I even mentioned it. At first, he sort of blushed and then just mumbled something about the damn Mexican handyman being unable to follow simple directions. He just dropped it and moved on to something else so I didn’t say anything more.”

“Do you know Jimmy Arroyo, Ellington’s handyman,” Masters asked.

“I know who he is. He comes into the place where I work to eat sometimes. He usually orders take out for his Grampa. He’s always friendly – seems like a nice guy. Some night last week I talked to him for the first time really. Lester told me that he’s into gliders and I think that might be neat so I asked him about them. He said he’d be glad to show me the ropes. I was supposed to come over here this afternoon, in fact. Like I said, I really didn’t know him but one thing seems pretty strange. He’s just way too smart to only be a handyman”

“Two more questions. Did you notice anything strange about the window sill in the study on Saturday?”

“Strange. No. Like what?”

“Like a spike driven into it.”

“A spike – like a big nail?”

“Yes.”

“No, Sir. I opened the window and I’d have noticed it”

“What about books?” Were there any books on the floor?”

“Oh, I forgot. I’m sorry. Yeah. He had me take a bunch of books off the top shelf and stack them on the floor beside the bookcase under the window. That was strange, too. It was like he didn’t know how many he wanted so he had me just get one at a time. I could have got them in two trips

but I must have made dozen.”

“Did he give you any reason for needing those particular books?”

“He just said he wanted to go through them and he couldn’t reach them.”

“They were all from the top shelf, all right next to each other?” Masters asked.

“Yes, Sir. I don’t see how he could have reached them himself.”

Officer Ben returned to the room with the envelope. He handed it to Little, who handed it to Masters.

“May I open it?” Masters asked addressing both Brandon and his father.

They nodded yes.

Using appropriate caution, he removed the single sheet and unfolded it. It was a letter from Lester informing Brandon that Lester was going to sue him in the amount of twelve million dollars for the wrongful death of his wife, Mary. The jaws in the room dropped in unison. There was silence.

“The envelope was open, as you said, Brandon,” Masters noted. “In fact, it appears that it had been sealed and then re-opened.

“I swear, I didn’t open it. It came that way. I swear. I swear!”

“Brandon, we will dust this sheet for fingerprints. If we find any we will need to compare them with yours. I’d suggest you talk to an attorney.”

Brandon looked at his father.

“Why do I need an attorney?”

Masters explained.

“Here’s what we know. It now appears that Ellington may not have committed suicide. That would mean he was murdered. If so, you are a prime suspect and here’s why. You have in your possession a letter saying he was going to sue you. That’s motive. You have admitted being on the premises at the exact time the coroner says Lester was killed. That’s opportunity. If we should find your fingerprints on the murder weapon, that would provide the means. It doesn’t look good. But that doesn’t mean any of us believe you killed him, Son. My advice, however, is not to say another word without

consulting an attorney.”

The phone rang again. Again, it was for Little.

“You don’t say? My! My! Okay. Thanks.”

He motioned Masters to the door and they spoke in hushed tones. When they rejoined the group, it was Masters who spoke.

“I’d get that attorney immediately, John. The lab has finished with two more pieces of evidence. The stamped, sealed, envelope – one we found in the mailbox this morning – was addressed to the police and contained a letter from Lester stating that Brandon had threatened his life Saturday afternoon after receiving the notification of the suit he was bringing in relation to the death of Mary.

“Also, the preliminary report is in about the second gun – the one we found in the back lawn this morning. It was the weapon that killed Mr. Ellington. Of the six bullet casings in the gun, five have prints from the same person and one has no prints at all. One bullet was fired. The prints match those of a boy on file with the Jr. Deputy program. They are yours, Brandon.”

“But I told you, Lester had me load the pistol in his den after I had been shooting with it. I told you that. The only thing that’s wrong is that all of the bullets should have my prints on them.”

“I’m not saying that I don’t believe your story, Brandon, but right now the evidence says otherwise. We would like your cooperation, John. We will need all of the clothing Brandon wore yesterday, and we will need to perform a powder test on his hands.”

“Certainly,” said Mr. Williams, pulling his boy close. “I’ll call my attorney right now.”

///

CHAPTER THREE

Day Two: Monday - The Morning

Monday morning found Masters at the travel agent's office down town.

"Good morning, Mr. Masters. Planning a trip, are you?" the rosy cheeked, middle aged lady said as he entered the small office.

"Good morning to you, Millie. Actually, I'm here for information in connection with Lester Ellington's death."

"I guess it's always too bad when things such as that happen but I'm yet to hear anyone express much grief about it in his case."

"He wasn't very well liked, was he?"

"He treated folks like he was king and we was entrails."

Masters was certain that had been the most vivid description of his reputation that he had yet encountered.

"He recently arranged for a voyage through your agency I believe."

"Yes, he did. He came in last Monday. Right about this time, in fact. The whole thing was peculiar, you know."

"Peculiar?" Masters asked.

"Yes. Peculiar! He came in and said he wanted a two-week cruise to begin in two weeks – that would have been a week from today. I said it was too short notice. He said he didn't care where it was to, but it had to leave sometime this week or next. I looked in some of the ragtag offerings – not really his style, you know, but all that he seemed interested in was to get away in a hurry. After a while I found him one leaving from San Francisco and doing the outer passages up

to Alaska. I told him it was really too early for a nice weather trip up that way, but it seemed like he wasn't even listening. He paid in advance with his credit card. I guess it's alright to be telling you all this."

"I'm working with the police on this one."

"I figured. That must mean something's up, huh? Some hanky panky, is there?"

"We're not sure yet. Just checking all the angles."

"I hear the Williams boy is a suspect. He's a sweet kid but he does have a temper, I'll tell you that, for sure."

"Is that right. I guess I've never seen that side of him."

"About a year ago, a new kid in town made some slur about his mother – she's part Mexican, you know. He hunted the boy down and beat him senseless – almost killed him the way I heard it."

"I didn't know that," Master said wondering how he (or his dependable ears, Alice) could have missed such an event.

"Brandon's dad had it hushed up. Paid the new family to move away. Probably a good chunk of money. It all happened so fast that the police were never even notified."

"And may I ask how you know about it?"

"The boy's mother – a single mother, a really lonely sort – came in looking for work and I felt sorry for her. I told her she could do the cleaning around here and at my house. She was really happy and appreciative, but then the fight happened that night and the next day she came in to tell me they had decided to move on. I guess I had been the only one around here who'd been nice to her and she sort of confided in me. Poor lonely woman. Her son was always in trouble. Sad situation. I've often wondered what ever happened to them. Even thought I saw the boy back in town not long ago. I could have been mistaken of course. Kids change so much at that age."

"Millie, I thank you for the conversation and the information."

"Any time, Mr. M. I'm always happy to see you."

Masters left and made his way across the street to the Police Station where he was always treated like a celebrity. It was for that reason he avoided the place whenever possible. He reacted poorly to fawning and those who fawned.

Detective Little came out from behind the counter to greet him. Ben arrived with a mug of coffee. Jake opened the hinged gate so he could enter into the rear of the station. Mike replaced the usual wooden chair beside Detective Little's desk with a leather upholstered one from the corner. Feeling appropriately 'fawned', he addressed the detective.

"I have several things on my list. You may have already seen to them, of course."

Detective Little took a clean sheet of lined paper, touched the tip of his pencil to his lips and said, "Shoot. What's on your mind?"

"We need to try and locate the Mr. E. Funk who Brandon said was the addressee of the envelope he mailed for Lester."

"Already on it. Only two Funks with an E for a first initial. One is Esther so that rules her out. The other is Edmond. We have a call in for him."

"Good start," Masters said, genuinely impressed. "Then we need to get a look at Lester's will. William Burton is his lawyer, I believe."

"Motive! Good thinking. I'll get right on it."

Masters was amused as he watched Little laboriously make a note that spanned eight lines. Masters would have merely jotted down the word 'will'.

"I imagine it would be impossible to establish robbery as a motive, wouldn't it,"

Masters said. "It doesn't seem likely that anyone other than Lester would know what was in the den in the first place. We could have Brandon and Jimmy look it over, of course. They both admit to being there recently. One of them just might see that something was missing. Why not list that as a 'maybe'."

Detective Little continued to make notes.

"We also need to snoop around the house and grounds a bit more. If Brandon's story about shooting on the range is true, then we should find the paper target somewhere. That would tend to explain the powder residue I assume you did find when you tested him last evening."

"Why, yes we did. You were expecting that, huh?"

"I was expecting it either way. If the lad shot the man, it

would be there. If he merely did the target shooting, it would be there. Alone it doesn't mean much. We have to look further."

"One other possibility," Little said. "The boy could have done both – target practice and shot the old guy."

Masters nodded. It was a legitimate possibility.

"Do you know anything about a major fight that Brandon may have been in about a year ago?"

"I think it happened but there is no evidence of it. No complaint was ever filed. It was long over before the department even got wind of it. The other boy and his mom were long gone by then."

"Did you talk with the Williams family about it?"

"No sir. I had no legitimate reason to approach them."

"No. I suppose not."

Masters switched topics.

"We need to find out who else could have been at Ellington's on Saturday to help him drive that spike. Any ideas?"

"No. Not off the top of my head. Jimmy and Joan would be the ones who would know if anybody else tended to come around there. We should probably ask them."

"It's amazing to me," Masters said, getting to his feet. "I live a hundred yards away from them and I know virtually nothing about them."

Then as an afterthought he added, "What did the lab boys find out about the slug from the pillow?"

"Fascinating, I'd say," Little said. "It was fired from the gun we found under the body."

"I figured as much," Masters said. "It's almost as if there is a third party in all of this who is trying to muddy the waters."

"A third party. Makes sense. Makes darn sense!"

Little was amazed at the proposal.

Masters was amazed at Little.

"There is another interesting finding about the gun we found outside – the weapon that killed Ellington," Little continued. "It had dirt and grass well up into the barrel as if it had been thrown down in that spot rather than just dropped. And wedged under the pearl inset on the handle was part of a

tree leaf. Probably one that was laying around on the ground out there.”

“An oak leaf?” Masters asked.

“Nope. Catalpa.”

“That’s very interesting,” Masters said. “What would you estimate the proportion of leaves to be in that yard? Maybe fifty to one oak over catalpa? And yet it lands on a Catalpa. Not a bet I’d take.”

“Nor me!” Little added emphatically, trying to hide his complete bafflement at the detective’s line of thinking.

“Are you up to another walk around the grounds, Detective?” Master asked.

“Certainly. Just let me get the boys working on the things in these notes.”

Ben drove them the seven blocks up the hill to Ellington’s home. Jimmy greeted them in the driveway.

“I found something. It may be left over from the police work but I figured you should see it. I didn’t touch it.”

He guided them around to the back of the house and spread the bushes directly under the den window. On the ground was a latex glove, split down the back to the fingers. Upon closer examination, it appeared to have been cut from the opening down to the area of the top knuckle – probably with a scissors. Masters pointed out that there were stretch marks on the upper portion of the glove so it would have probably been cut after having been worn.

There was a small piece of scotch tape flapping from the end of the index finger and what appeared to be a tiny deposit of blood near the end of the slit.

“That’s not from any of my men,” Little said. “Ben, you’d better bag it.”

“How did you happen to come across it, Jimmy?” Masters asked. “It seems pretty well hidden.”

“I was trimming the bushes. Mr. Ellington had been on my case about doing them for a week. I just thought I should complete it before I left. It seemed the right thing to do. Dumb, I suppose.”

“Where will you be going?”

“I really don’t know. It’s all come up so fast, you know. Miss Joan said I could stay on, but I don’t think that’s what I

should do. I've really wanted to leave for a while, now. This is a good chance. I'm sort of thinking about Jr. College. I got my GED and M... my friends always told me I should go to college."

Masters noted that the young man seemed more and more agitated the longer he spoke of it. Perhaps that was natural under the circumstances. Perhaps it was not. Masters changed the topic.

"When the shooting range was used, where did the used targets get thrown away?"

"I don't know. It hasn't been used since I've been here and that's going on eleven years, now. Mr. Ellington's hands didn't allow it, I guess."

"Well, it was used on Saturday. If you were going to get rid of a used paper target where would you put it?"

Jimmy turned around and surveyed the back yard. "In the shed over there, I suppose. I keep a trash barrel inside.

"Mind showing us?" Masters asked.

"Sure. It's the old shed. I guess it used to be for the lawn mowers and stuff. Since the garage addition, that's where all the equipment is stored – more room and more secure. I use the shed for my gliders."

The shed was not locked and the door swung open easily. The barrel was half full of trash. The target was not in sight. Officer Ben began digging into it. Hardly hidden, he found a spent target of the exact description Brandon had given. It was wadded up – loosely – and covered over by several shingles.

"That's one of Mr. Ellington's, I think," Jimmy said.

He climbed onto a crate and searched a top shelf with his hand.

"Here they are." He removed a pile of moldy targets an inch thick and presented them to detective Little.

"They're a match to the one in the barrel, okay," Little announced after a lengthy visual comparison.

The others had reached the same conclusion the moment they had been produced.

"It's pure luck it's still here," Jimmy said.

"How so?" Masters asked.

"I always burn the trash in the barrel first thing every

morning. I'd have been doing it right now if you hadn't showed up."

"Well, yes, then. We were most fortunate, weren't we?"

Masters' gaze turned to the gliders.

"So, these are your gliders, are they," he said, hoping to get Jimmy started in conversation about them.

"Yes, Sir. I have almost too many for this little space, now. Something funny about that. I found this one – he pointed to the smallest of the lot – up on the back-porch Saturday evening. It isn't one of mine. I brought it out here for safekeeping. At first, I thought it might be something Brandon had bought over but he really seemed like he wanted me to help him pick stuff out. It could have been Robbie. He's a kid that lives on the other side of the woods in the old metal Quonset hut – the one with the rounded roof. He comes over a lot and often helps me fly them. He's always talking about how his dad's going to buy him a new glider. I think that's all wishful thinking. His mother died a few years back. His dad's really down on his luck. He doesn't work regularly. There would never be money for something like that. Sometimes I pay Robbie a little something for helping me around here. He's a good kid in a lousy situation. I wish I could give his dad some work, but Mr. Ellington nixed that. Not sure why."

"Did you see Robbie around here on Saturday?" Masters asked.

"Saturday. Yeah. Robbie has sort of adopted me, I guess you'd say. I jog every morning and he's started coming along. If he doesn't show up, I sort of worry about him. We jogged for about a half-hour up and down the bike trail in the woods. Then I went inside to shower and he went home. He wanted to fly gliders but I told him I wouldn't have time because I had to go over to Cartersville on an errand for Mr. Ellington."

"What did Mr. Ellington think about Robbie being here, since he seemed to have something against his Father?"

"I thought he just tolerated it because it was something he thought I liked, but then on Friday morning, when I came down from my shower I saw Mr. Ellington actually talking to him back by the shed. By the time I got around, Robbie was gone and I never brought it up with Mr. Ellington, of course."

“Did you ask Robbie about it?”

“No. I figured it was his business.”

“How old is Robbie?”

“Eleven. Twelve in August, I believe.”

“Is he any good with a hammer?”

“With a hammer? Well, yeah, actually his is. He helped me put the shingles on this shed not long ago. I’d say he was real good with a hammer.”

“Tell me about these enormous rubber bands,” Masters asked, reaching out and feeling several hanging from hooks on the wall.

“Those are launch bands. I use them to shoot the gliders high up into the air. Once they are up there, I use the remote controls to see how long I can keep them aloft.”

“Where do you do your launching?”

“Just outside. Mr. Lester let me remodel the old swing set. The poles. You’ve seen ‘em.”

“Oh, yes. Detective Little was pointing them out to me yesterday. Do you suppose we could talk you into a demonstration sometime? You have peaked my curiosity.”

“Sure. Anytime. My little babies love to show off. They do best on hot days or afternoons after the ground is hot and there’s a good updraft.”

“Oh, one more thing,” Masters added. “Do you know where the ammunition is that you purchased for Mr. Ellington on Saturday?”

“I left it on the kitchen table with the change. That’s where I always left things he sent me for.”

“You had a key to the back door, then?” Masters asked.

Jimmy pulled out a key ring. “I have keys to all the doors.”

“Well, yes. I suppose a person in your position would need those, wouldn’t he,” Masters said.

Jimmy seemed to realize that having the keys might not be a good thing and he hastened to add, “Only the outdoor keys. I don’t have keys to the inside doors. I don’t have one to Joan’s apartment or to his den, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“Thanks for clearing that up. You have been a big help. We will need to take that smaller glider to the lab and have it

dusted for finger prints.”

They moved outside and Jimmy closed the door.

“Say, I’d like to take a look at that light you fixed. Do you have a ladder you think would hold a man of my size?”

“Not really, Sir. No offense, but that’s three stories high. The extension ladder bends under my weight.”

“Then it looks like Officer Ben will have to be my eyes.”

Officer Ben drew to attention as if about to receive a special mission from the head of the CIA. He was as slim as Little was ... not.

A few minutes later, the ladder was in place and Ben made the climb to the top.

“Just tell me what you see up there. For example, do there appear to be glass fragments embedded in the pole?”

“No, Sir. I don’t see any evidence of that,” Ben called down.

“How about any blackening, like the heat of an explosion might cause.”

“No, Sir. Nothing like that.

“Not even around the socket?”

“No, Sir.”

“What about the reflector? Any damage to it?”

His response was not so immediate and he examined the large metal reflector inside and out.

“No, Sir. Sorry, Sir.”

“Okay. I guess you can come on down. Thanks for looking,” Masters said, clearly disappointed.

Officer Ben had a final question.

“How about this slug imbedded in the post. Would you like me to get that, Sir?”

“Slug. Show me where it is.”

Ben pointed and ducked out of the way to provide Masters with a clear line of vision.

“Ben, can you turn around and sight back toward where you think it may have been fired from?” Masters asked.

Ben went through more contortions that were probably called for but his sighting was well done. He stuck a knife in beside the slug approximating the angle of entry. He sighted along the line, which that created back toward the house.

“Hard to say exactly, Sir. Either the top of the window in Mr.

Ellington's bedroom or the bottom of the window in Mr. Ellington's bedroom."

"Ben, you're a genius," Masters said, intentionally spreading it on thicker than reasonable. "One more thing. In your judgment, how long ago would that slug have entered the post?"

"The splinters around it aren't weathered – they're bright colored like fresh wood. I'd say it happened within the past few days."

"Give that man a promotion! And get pictures." Masters said, breaking into an-ear-to-ear smile. As he started back toward the house, he turned to Jimmy. "Thanks for the ladder, Jimmy, you've been a big help this morning."

Officer Ben felt very important, although he had no idea why. Detective Little assumed something significant had just been learned, but he had no idea what. Jimmy felt uneasy, as if he had become a suspect but had no idea how. Masters sensed a scenario forming in his head. It was not complete but it was gaining clarity.

"Perhaps the puzzle had been intentionally put into the box with the wrong picture on it," he mumbled.

He turned to the young man.

"Jimmy, may we speak with your father. It will only take two minutes."

"He doesn't speak English," Jimmy answered as if trying to protect him from interrogation.

"No problem, son. Hablo Espanol." Masters said.

The conversation did, indeed, take only dos (sorry) two minutes. Masters asked about the phone call during the cop show, the time of day, when Jimmy left and returned and, in the end, if the cops had managed to get the bad guys. The old man was happy to report that they had and went into more detail than Masters could possibly understand. Jimmy smiled.

Jimmy's father substantiated everything in Jimmy's story. The problem for Jimmy remained. Because of that, he had no alibi for the time of the crime. Perhaps he was up the extension ladder. Perhaps he was up the Catalpa tree. Perhaps he was inside a secret panel. Masters smiled and shook his head.

"Let's look the den over again, Little," Masters

suggested.

On the walk over to the house from the garage apartment, Ben cleared his throat, obviously trying gain Masters' attention.

"Something?" Masters asked.

"Well, maybe yes, maybe no, you know. When I was looking through the trash, I came across this checkbook. It seemed strange – it being thrown away and still having most of the checks still in it. "

He slipped it out of his inner jacket pocket and handed it to Little who handed it to Masters.

It was the carbon copy variety and belonged to Joan. Thumbing through the copies, two things jumped out at Masters. There were two large checks to Jimmy – ten thousand dollars each just a week apart. The second was dated a week before that past Sunday. There were also several smaller checks to Pete Phillips, an ancient, sleazy, private detective from Rochester. It was not at all clear which side of law he really worked. He was well known to both Masters and Little.

Masters began to wonder if Alice may have had it all figured out well before the evidence had been gathered. Large payments to possible hit men? He didn't fully buy it but he tucked it away in his mind.

Joan had left early in her car, according to Jimmy, and wasn't expected back until after lunch. She was making funeral arrangements and taking care of other family business.

They entered the house through the back door. The boxes of ammunition and change were all still on the kitchen table, just where Jimmy said he had put them. They were marked with red stickers from the police department indicating they had been cataloged but not moved. Noting the caliber, the men made their way up to the third floor.

Masters suggested a bypass.

"Let's take a look in Ellington's bedroom. I want to look at that window that Ben sighted to when he up the lamp pole."

The bedroom was on the northwest corner of the house – one side facing the front lawn and one Masters' cottage. It was less than a homey looking place – stark would have probably erred on the side of cheery. Masters moved to the

window on the north corner. It opened easily. Masters circled an area on the right side of the frame.

“Have the lab check this window for powder – especially this area I’ve marked.”

They left and went to the den, the third door east down the large hall.

Little’s first move was to the gun rack. He quickly discovered that the ammunition in the kitchen did not fit any of the relics on the wall.

“It’s the kind you would use in competition. Probably the kind he used years ago. What would have prompted him to get that in now?” He shook his head and joined Masters at the widow.

“This window has to be the key,” Masters said. The locked door is pretty much a given. Locked from the inside with the key positioned so it could not be pushed out from the outside. It has to be this window.”

“Did I tell you the lab boys found powder on the books?” Little asked.

“Interesting. They seem to be a long way from the body. That would place the murder weapon over here near the window, wouldn’t it.” Masters often added a ‘wouldn’t it’ to the end of his sentences so Little could agree and feel like he was actually participating in things as something more than a shadow.

“If the powder on the books came from the murder weapon?” Little added.

Although that may have just been a random comment to keep himself in the conversation, it was insightful. It now appeared to Masters that the light had been shot out by an expert marksman from the window of the bedroom. Time would tell if that slug was from the murder weapon. The question was who did the shooting? Perhaps it could have been Ellington. Certainly, at one time he had possessed the skill to make such a shot. It could have been by someone in the apartment with Lester, who perhaps had forced him to make the calls to Bandon and Jimmy and then killed him.

Still, how would he have been able to gain entry into the den? Through the window, of course. But how. It was Jimmy who said the window was locked from the inside.

There was no independent verification of that fact. So, if Jimmy had been in on it in some way, he could have been lying. The window could have remained open from when Brandon said he had opened it for Lester.

Then the killer could have entered from the tree outside, or merely perched there and shot through the open window, then lowered the window and the hinged latch would have swung down in place, securing the window.

Jimmy's fingerprints were on the top of the window, the latch and the prop stick, all freshly painted. The fingerprints, therefore, had to be fairly recent. Brandon's prints were also on the latch, the bottom – inside and outside – of the lower window, and the prop stick. Ellington's rounded out the three sets that appeared in all three places. Another, unidentified set, had been found on the windowsill. They were smaller, perhaps a woman's.

"Detective, open the window, would you please?" Masters asked.

Little obliged. He held the hanging latch out of the way with his left hand as he shoved the window open with the heel of his right hand pushing up against the top inside of the window.

"Ben. Would you show me how you would open it?"

Ben obliged, also. He moved the latch to the side with his left hand just as Little had done. Then, using his right hand, he pulled up on the small metal handle at the base of the window, getting it about half way open before running out of leverage.

"What would you do to open it the rest of the way?"

Ben thought for a moment and then cupped both hands under the window and pulled up as if lifting weights.

"Thank you, gentlemen. See where your fingerprints would be, Ben. They would be on the outside where you cupped them around the bottom of the window, even though you were still inside the room."

"So," Little summarized, "Even though Brandon's prints are on the outside they may have been made from the inside. That would be in line with what he said about opening the window at Lester's request."

"I'd bet on it. Do you suppose that your print man

preserved the print orientations?”

“He always does.”

“Would you mind giving him a call to check that out. If that’s the case, then there are no prints on the outside that could have been used to open the window from the outside.”

“Could have worn gloves,” Ben suggested in a burst of bravery.

“Could have,” Masters agreed. “And, Oh, Little, ask what they found in or on Brandon’s clothes. Anything at all.”

On his own initiative, Ben had pulled the footstool over and, on tiptoes, was examining the top of the lower window section – the section that slid up and down. It was an especially tall window unit and that part wasn’t visible straight on, it being nearly six feet from the floor.

“You’ll want to see this,” he said.

“What have you found?” Masters asked.

“The new paint is all scraped off into a little pile back against the frame. It’s like the 1 X 2 wooden latch was forced into place really hard and stripped back the paint.”

Masters realized he would not gain access from the footstool. He pulled a sturdy looking wooden chair close and using the stool as step, eventually got himself positioned.

“I see what you mean. But from the position of the scrape, it would mean the window would not have been fully closed. Here, let me lower it to the point where the latch fits into the scrape and you judge how many inches it is from the bottom sill.”

“Almost exactly five inches.”

Masters climbed down, preserving the step arrangement for Little.

“For that to happen, something had to be wedged under the window – a pile of the books, perhaps, something like that. Why would that have been done?”

“Maybe he just wanted a little air so he propped it up with the books,” Ben suggested, being the ever-practical member of the troop.

“That’s an interesting solution. It could well have been done that way. But why engage the latch so forcefully? Usually when the window was open the latch was flipped up out of the way entirely. That reminds me. To within how many

inches of the sill had the roller shade been pulled?"

Little remembered without reference to his notes –
"Five."

To finally have some solid pieces of the puzzle to analyze made Masters' heart race with excitement. He knew this would be one of the keys.

"Little! Where exactly was the powder residue here on the window sill?"

Little pulled out his note pad and flipped through its pages. There was a puddle like deposit on the right side of the sill and a little right above it on the window itself."

He pointed to the spots. Masters leaned down (no small undertaking) to sniff the sill.

"Did you notice this, before?" Masters asked.

"What's that?" Little asked.

"This tiny round indentation in the sill just about in the center of the area of the powder residue. There is a line – like a thin scrape – across the paint from the dent to the outside edge of the sill. Hardly noticeable but definitely made since the paint job. You can see the old paint underneath."

Ben spoke.

"Yes, sir. It was there when I first examined it. I made a note of it."

"Good eyes, Ben. Appreciate your young eyes. They go too soon, believe me. Did you get pictures?"

"Yes, sir. Blow-ups."

Masters stepped back to view the entire window.

"Those two separate deposits of powder certainly could have been made from the same shot," Masters concluded.

"Speaking of deposits," Little said, "I suppose we should look over Lester's bank accounts, don't you?"

"Certainly, and probably both Joan's and Jimmy's. Did you find Lester's bank book or account books?"

"His check book. I left it here. Figured you'd want to go over it. Top right hand desk drawer. That's where we found it," Little answered.

"No time like the present, I suppose," Masters said, drawing back the big leather chair behind the desk and sinking himself into its soft, staid, upholstery.

"Only one really unusual thing that pops out," he said

after five minutes of careful scrutiny. "Six weeks ago he withdrew twenty-thousand in cash. Let's make a note to ask Joan and Jimmy, and I guess Brandon, if they know anything about it. Seems like our only sources of information are also our prime suspects. Not a good situation."

"No. Not a good situation at all," Little repeated.

"Hum." Masters began paging back toward the beginning of the bankbook. "He also made a four-hundred-dollar withdrawal in cash every Saturday. Do you suppose he actually spent that much on things every week?"

The question had been more to himself than to anyone else. It bothered him. He would have to find a way to look into it further.

Masters moved to the bookcase and began looking at the books.

"Little! Ben! Look at the book case with me. Stand back and just look at it. What do you see?"

"Books," Little said. (Do you suppose we could have predicted that?)

"Perhaps I asked the wrong question. What don't you see?"

"Books." This time it was Ben who had answered.

"Explain!" Masters urged.

"Well, right there in the middle of the middle section there aren't any books. It's like a ten-inch gap. There are books everywhere else, but not there."

"Just what I was thinking. Why would there not be books at the exact place that would be the easiest for a man with Lester's arthritic problems to reach them?"

"Hmmm," came Little's studied response.

Masters examined the books on either side of the gap. To the left were books about business and finance. To the right, began a series of Zane Gray originals, in order by date of publication.

"He was a meticulous man. Very orderly. Probably one reason he had been such a successful banker. So why would he leave a gap right here?"

Masters took several off the shelf and examined them.

"Look here, gentlemen. The bottoms of the books."

"Why, they all have white paint on them," Ben said,

pulling several more off at random and checking them. It was soon determined that the books had been re-shelved too soon and each bore the distinctive mark of the newly painted shelving. It was also found on those books which had been stacked on the floor.

“Well, I don’t know how that helps us, but it’s an interesting finding,” Little declared.

“It may help us if we can locate the books that were in that gap. Look closely. See the lines on the shelving where the book covers removed a trace of the paint. If we can find the correct batch of books we can place them right back where they used to be sitting. How about a search of the house for books with white paint on the bottom edges of their covers?”

“Yes, sir. Ben, you see to it.”

“Let’s add Jimmy’s apartment to that search, also, what do you say, Detective?”

“Very good idea, Masters. Officer, make it so.”

“Speaking of Jimmy how about talking with him again, now that we have seen Joan’s check book?”

They made their way down the stairs and out the back door to the patio. Jimmy was trimming the hedge near the back porch as the men left the rear door. Little motioned him to come over.

“Yeah. Something I can do for you?” he said placing the electric clippers down on the step and wiping his green stained hands against his hip pockets.

“We found one of Joan’s recent checkbooks in your trash barrel this morning and there are a couple entries that involve you. We hope you can clear them up for us.”

Jimmy fidgeted, took off his hat and ran his fingers back through his hair.

“Sure. Whatever you need. Ask.”

His words suggested cooperation. His manner suggested anxiety. His tone suggested fear. His eyes darted from place to place as if wishing for a way out.

“There are two checks in here made out to you. Each one is for ten thousand dollars. Seemed pretty large. We’d just like to understand what they were for.”

Masters’ tone was calm and matter of fact. He looked

the young man squarely in his eyes and waited for an answer.

"The checks are for jewelry. I had some jewelry Joan liked and she bought it."

"That's a lot of jewelry for a person in your position to have on hand. Can you tell us how you came by it?"

"It was . . . my mother's. Times are hard right now. I needed money. I showed it to Joan and she liked it so I sold it to her."

"And she gave you two checks?"

"Well, at first I said I just had a little but after she bought that, I told her about the rest and she bought it, too."

"Okay, well that seems to clear that up, Jimmy. Thanks again for your help."

It had been too easy and Jimmy knew it but he picked up the clippers and returned to the hedge.

"You surely don't believe him, do you?" Little asked Masters.

"No. Not a word."

"Then why just drop it, like that?"

"Jimmy has a secret. Now we know it also involves Joan. A little squirming is good for the soul. We'll just see how Jimmy reacts."

"By the way. What was the report on the fingerprint positions on the window?"

"Brandon's? Just as you suspected. They fit perfectly from the inside. Not only were they too low to have been from the outside, but he would have had to have crossed his arms. The right-hand prints are on the left and the left on the right. They were definitely made from the inside."

"And Brandon's clothes?"

"Well it fits the boy's story. There's Catalpa bark all over them. Of course, he could have got it from climbing the tree to shoot Lester through the open window, too."

"That bothers me. Why would Brandon admit to opening the window if he were going to use it later to shoot Lester, and why would Jimmy swear he closed the window and locked it?"

"Maybe Brandon and Jimmy are in it together," Little suggested. "That way Brandon's story would make him look all lily white honest and Jimmy's story would provide the

stumbling block for the 'Brandon outside entry' theory."

"Interesting idea, Little. For the 'anybody outside entry' theory, actually."

Masters thought it over.

"What about the gunpowder on Brandon's clothing?"

"Down to his shorts! There was enough powder residue to suggest he'd participated in the defense of Mid-Way Island."

Masters sighed.

"Again, it might back up Brandon's claim of having been at the firing range but, as you pointed out, that doesn't rule out the fact that a little more could have been added at the time of the murder."

"One thing's for sure," Little said.

"What's that?"

"He couldn't have got all that powder on him from firing just one shot from a six shooter. He had been doing a lot of shooting somewhere, at something, on Saturday."

* * *

Joan returned shortly after noon to find Officer Ben going through her bookcases.

"Orders from Detective Little, Ma'am. Got to look at all the books in the house."

It didn't seem to be more than a minor annoyance to her. Masters witnessed her nonchalant response as he knocked at the open door to her living area.

"Come in. May I help you?"

"If you have a minute we do have a few questions."

"Certainly. Coffee. I just brewed some fresh."

"Yes. That would be very nice, indeed," Master said.

Little nodded his agreement. She excused herself and went to the kitchen.

Young people would most certainly have called her apartment old fashioned, from the over-sized, spring-cushioned chairs and sofas to the flocked, maroon and gray striped wallpaper. There were a variety of throw rugs on glistening, wide-plank, dark pine, floors. At the windows were cut lace curtains and heavy, almost overpowering valances done in fabric that matched a sofa and chair set. On a small,

square, shiny-mahogany, table, canopied by an ornate, hanging, Tiffany light fixture, lay a jigsaw puzzle well on its way to completion. There was but one chair there as if it were expecting only Joan to join it. On the end table beside the couch were a selection of crossword puzzle and cryptogram-type books. Several novels punctuated the décor. Whether they were for show or enjoyment was not at once apparent – as they seldom are.

“It’s such a strange time,” Joan said, as she righted the cups on the silver tray and began pouring.

“Yes, I’m sure it must be,” Masters said.

“Here I am spending the day making funeral arrangements for the man I most despised in the whole world.”

“It was not the comment any of them expected.”

“I’d of happily seen him into his grave years ago. Then, at least, the burden of his final arrangements would have been on Mary. She’d have probably felt just as I do, though. She loathed the man, too.”

It was all said more through exhaustion than anger. More matter of fact than emotional.

“And when will the funeral be?” Masters asked.

“I told them to take a match to him and I’d arrange a memorial service sometime next week. I suppose there might be someone who would want to attend.”

Again, it had been an emotionless, matter of fact response. That time, however, there was clearly a tone of abomination.

“Now, what can I do for you gentlemen?”

She placed the tray on the tea table in the center of the area in which they had taken seats.

Masters produced the checkbook. Joan stiffened at its sight and then forced a smile. Is that mine? Did you find it? How can I thank you? It’s been lost for several days. She reached for it but Masters chose to open it instead.

“We found it in the trash. Not knowing it has been lost, we assumed it was meant to be burned this morning. That made it public property, so to speak, and we looked at it. In doing so we noted three checks we would like to have you explain, since it seems possible they may be associated with the case in some way.”

“Lester’s suicide?”

“It is looking less and less like suicide and more and more like murder, Miss Joan,” Detective Little explained, almost proudly.

“Oh, dear.”

Masters continued.

“There are two checks to Jimmy and several to Pete Phillips. Those are the ones in which we are presently interested. Can you tell us about the ones to Jimmy first?”

“To Jimmy.”

She trembled visibly, and put her coffee back on the tray.

“Well, he had some jewelry that I wanted and he agreed to sell it to me. I gave him half of his asking price up front and then had him get an appraisal on it. When he brought that back to me and I saw they were the original pieces, I paid him the other half.”

“What do you mean, ‘the original pieces’?”

“Well, there is no eloquent way to put this, I guess. Our mother, Mary’s and mine, was a tramp – a prostitute. She made a lot of money and to keep it from being obvious in a bank account she put much of it into diamonds and other jewelry. Mary, bless her soul, made some bad decisions the last few years of her life and little by little she gave pieces to Jimmy. She was very fond of him. After her death, I found that the jewelry was missing and upon reading in her diary, it was clear what she had done with it. So, I told Jimmy I wanted it back. It’s all I have left of my mother. I suppose you can’t understand how her things could mean so much to me after the way I’ve talked about her. But they do and I wanted to get them back.”

“And Jimmy. Was he willing to part with them?”

“They didn’t mean anything to him. They were just payment for stud services. I’m sorry. That was crude. I’m not usually a crude person, really, I’m not.”

“Jimmy and Mary were . . . romantically involved?” Masters asked.

“If you’re asking if they slept together, yes. If you’re asking were they in love, it’s more complicated than that. Mary’s diary leads me to believe she grew to love him deeply

over the years but never expected he would be able to return it – he being so much younger. I can't speak for Jimmy. I know he was sweet and tender and treated her extremely well. To begin with, it was strictly a business deal for him. Later on, I don't know."

"What did you think of the arrangement?"

"It was Mary's business. She had dispatched Lester from her bedroom when he killed their son. I suppose she needed some companionship. She was always the kind who did. I never understood that, but I loved her more than anything in the world, and I wanted to see her happy. So, I kept my mouth shut. I must sound like a perfectly terrible person to you. I'm really not."

"And Lester didn't suspect anything?"

"Who knows? There was nothing he could have done about it anyway."

"Couldn't he have fired the boy?"

"It'd been hell to pay if he had. Mary was, how shall I say, mean-spirited, when anyone crossed her. She'd been that way since she was a little girl. She took after her mother. It got worse – much worse – after she started drinking."

"Drinking?"

"Soon after Georgie was killed, she began drinking. She just never stopped. It was Lester who drove her to it and I hated him so for doing it. My only regret, now that he's dead, is that I didn't have the guts to do it myself. He killed my nephew and he killed my sister, just as sure as if he'd done it with his bare hands."

She took her coffee again, apparently calmer than her words would have implied or perhaps because her words had released her from her apprehension.

"And the checks to Peter Phillips?" Master asked realizing by then that he only needed to open a topic and she would run with it well beyond his intentions.

"Pete. He's the scum of the Earth, you know. I dated him, years ago. I actually considered his proposal of marriage. I can't believe I did that - must have been temporarily insane. Anyway, about six months ago I got the idea that Lester was seeing another woman. He'd leave and return at odd hours. It was just my old maid fantasy, I

suppose. I hired Pete to look into it – he was the only person I knew who did those kinds of things. I thought that if he was stepping out on Mary and I could prove it with pictures, she might divorce him.”

“You really wanted him out of her life, did you?”
Masters asked.

“I’d have done anything to get him out of her life.”

“Including killing him or having him killed?”

“Absolutely!”

“I think it might be well for you to speak with an attorney, Miss Goodman. You have just said you wanted him dead. You were alone with him in the house at about the time of the death. A gun, clearly associated with the death, was found in your closet. And you have paid large sums of money to one man who is also a suspect and to another who is suspected of being a killer for hire.”

“My, my, how a few days can change a girl’s life,” she said, calmly. “Okay, I’ll call William Barton.”

“Since he is Lester’s attorney, I would suggest you find another. He may be able to recommend one, however.”

“More coffee, gentlemen?”

They both waved it off.

“One other small item, Miss Goodman. What about the bow – I suppose you’d say it was very important to Lester. What do you know of it?”

“Bow as is bow and arrows?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Lester never had a bow that I knew of. I never saw one in the house, at least – suppose that doesn’t mean he couldn’t have had one.”

“Nothing that would have been considered an heirloom or appropriate to pass on in his will?”

“Not so far as I’m aware.”

“I keep thinking of additional things to ask, Masters said, somewhat apologetically. Do you recall the reason that Robert . . .” He looked at Little for assistance.

“Carter. Robert Carter.”

“Yes. Do recall the reason that Robert Carter was released as the handyman?”

“Lester lost his pocket watch. Left it in a coat he seldom wore. He saw Robert come out of his bedroom where he’d been changing a bulb and immediately accused him of the theft. Fired him on the spot. Lester found the watch a day or so later, but Lester was not the kind to admit a mistake. Once fired, forever fired. That was just about the time Studman arrived.”

“Jimmy?”

“Yes. Sorry.”

Masters thanked her for her cooperation and the two men stood, preparing to leave.

“I found them,” came Officer Ben’s voice from the bedroom.

Detective Little got up and went to the door.

“Found what?” he asked.

“The books with the white bottoms.”

Masters joined them in the bedroom. Ben was up on a chair re-searching the shelf on which the pillow had been found.

“Six books here in all. They were pushed back into the corner – stacked sort of haphazardly. Should have taken a picture first. Sorry. Couldn’t see the bottoms from this angle.”

“You did fine, Officer,” Masters said, taking the books from Little, who had received them from Ben.

“Books on puzzles. They are all books on puzzles.”

“Like crossword puzzles or jigsaw puzzles?” Little asked.

“Neither. They are mind benders. Mind games. Logical games. Conundrums of the ages.”

“I see,” Little said, which suggested to Masters that, of course, he didn’t.”

Taking the books into Joan’s living room, he asked if they were hers.

“Not mine. They are – were – Lester’s. He was a brainteaser freak. He’d work on a single problem for weeks at a time. He even belonged to some club on the Internet where they would put up puzzles they devised and then see who could solve them first. He had a good mind. I’ll give him that. Once his body gave out, I guess that’s all he had left.”

“Do you have any idea how the books made their way

onto your closet shelf?"

"None, whatsoever."

Masters pawed, repeatedly, at his mustache.

"The paint lines on the pillow. They may have come from having been pressed up against the books here on the shelf. That would mean the pillow never actually needed to have been up in the den as I had suspected – it being the only part of the house recently painted."

The three men excused themselves and left Joan's apartment.

"Think she did it?" Little asked.

"If she did, she's the first seventy-year-old woman I've known who could shinny up a thirty foot tree in the dead of night. Not that she's not feisty enough. Now as to whether or not she is capable of hiring it done, I'd have to say that she is."

"What about the books?"

"It's a puzzle in itself, isn't it? Why would someone take just that set of titles from his shelves? And when were they taken? Sometime after Jimmy re-shelved the books and before Lester locked himself in his den on Saturday evening. That didn't leave much time to read or learn something from them, if that were the purpose for having taken them. It is a puzzle in itself."

It had been a most interesting morning. Interesting mornings, made Masters hungry. When the police went back to the station, Masters went home to fix a salad. (After all, he needed something to accompany the large pizza and double order of Buffalo wings he had just phoned in for delivery. He had put off his diet until the following day.)

///

CHAPTER FOUR

Day Two: Monday - The Afternoon

Masters' walk back down the hill did little to ease his growing indigestion. He continued to be amazed at how a person of his own obvious intelligence could continue to overindulge, day after day, without learning his lesson. He popped three Tums and hoped for the best.

Little was already there sitting on the front steps, himself finishing a box of doughnuts and a soft drink. Attempting a humorous gesture, Masters offered him his roll of antacid tablets. The bid for a smile escaped the detective. Masters wasn't surprised.

"Found that Funk letter," Little announced, wiping the glaze from his cheeks. "The Police in Albany got right on it for me. It was a payment for a book that Lester had purchased a while back – something called, Brain Busters and Closed Door Murders or some such thing – that's not exactly right. I don't have it in front of me."

"Prints?"

"We, or maybe Brandon, got lucky there. They found one perfect, full thumbprint on the envelope's window. It was Brandon's. Guess he was being truthful about that, at least."

"And the postmark?"

"Ten P. M. Saturday night, Rossville Post Office."

"I don't suppose you . . ."

"If you mean did we check with Mable, the Postmistress, yes we did. Ben says she remembers it was slipped into the side door drop sometime between nine and nine thirty. She had cleaned it out at nine, since there was

hardly ever anything mailed later than that. She heard the metal bonnet on the slot clank sometime after that. She was on the phone. When she got back to pick it up it was nine thirty.”

“Superior, Detective! It substantiates that part of the boy’s story. The question remains, how long would it have taken Brandon to run from here to the Post Office?”

“Officer Ben is running it right now,” Little said, pleased to be one step ahead of the old detective at least once in his life.

“You’re on top of things, aren’t you?”

“Try to be, Sir. Try to be.”

With his fingers, he blotted up the remaining glaze from the bottom of the box.

“Anything from the lab yet on the latex glove – the one slit from the opening to the fingers?”

Little took out his ever-present notepad.

“Fresh powder residue on it, suggesting it was used to fire a gun. The spot of blood matched the victim’s in type and such. DNA report is not in. There is also some new information on the launch band and the string. The band is almost clean – just the tiniest bit of powder at one end – you had asked them to check. That really doesn’t even say it was in the vicinity of the killing. The back of the lawn by the target range is dusted with powder. The band could have picked it up there. But the string - that’s a strange one, it is. There are three separate spots on it that have powder – smack dab in the center of it, and then spots out twenty-seven inches in both directions from the center. One more thing. At nine feet-nine inches on each side of the center they found traces of oil – they think it’s sweaty body oil – lots of salt in it apparently.”

“How long was that string?” Masters asked.

Little paged back toward the front of his pad. “Fifty-three feet, three and a quarter inches.”

“Undoubtedly cut without precise measurement, wouldn’t you say.”

“Seems like it,” Little agreed.

“More like it was cut to fit a given space or purpose,” Masters said, thinking out loud.

“Fifty-three feet, though,” Little said. “That doesn’t fit

any dimension we have at the crime scene.”

“Just tuck it away. It’ll fit sooner or later,” Master suggested. “What about the key to the den door?”

“Again, that fits the Williams boy’s story. Brandon’s partial thumb and index prints on the end you turn with, and Lester’s thumb and index prints on the flat part that’s inserted into the lock. Lester’s is clear as a bell. Brandon’s was smudged but there was enough to confirm it as his.”

“It fits his story but unfortunately it also puts him in the den with his hand on the key from the inside. Could mean he locked the door before crawling out the window after having shot Lester. We can’t establish when that print was made of course, so I guess it wouldn’t be damning evidence in a courtroom.”

“His story seems to fit both possibilities perfectly,” Little said.

“What’s that?” Masters said asking for clarification.

“Well, his story sounds reasonable, you know, just the way he tells it, and the evidence backs it up all the way. But that same evidence can be used just as strongly, to spin a story of the boy murdering Mr. Ellington. He enters through the front door that Ellington left open for him, he locks the two of them inside the den, he shoots Lester, exits through the self-locking window, and climbs down the tree, all in time to still get to the post office before nine-thirty. And, there are no eyewitnesses to support or reject either possibility. Do you suppose he’s smart enough to have planned it all out to so perfectly protect himself that way?”

“Time will tell. Brandon’s a smart lad, no doubt about that. Most amateur murderers aren’t smart enough to do that, however.”

“Amateur?” Little said indicating he didn’t understand.

“I just mean that if Brandon did it, I would call him an amateur compared with a professional hit man.”

“I see. Yeah. You’re right, of course. Think it has the marks of a professional job?”

“Could be. Perhaps we need to speak with Pete Phillips. Can you arrange that for us?”

“Consider it done.”

“We mustn’t forget Jimmy. He had access to the house

with his keys. He was gone at the time of the death with no alibi. There is a glove outside the window he could have used to protect against the powder residue. He was checked for powder, wasn't he?"

"Oh, yes sir. Not a trace."

"Did we check his clothing for Catalpa bark?"

"I'm afraid not. Shall I get on that?"

"Give it a try. Probably too late now. He'd have gotten rid of that kind of evidence after he heard we went after Brandon's clothes. We both dropped the ball on that one, Little."

"Yes, sir. Not good. Not good at all. Here's an idea."

Masters shuddered.

"Maybe Jimmy and Brandon were in on it together. They admit being together this week. Jimmy leaves the front door open and Brandon pulls the trigger."

Before Masters could comment on the surprisingly plausible theory, Officer Ben came running up.

"Nine minutes," he said, having hardly broken a sweat. "Nine minutes from here to the Post Office; twenty-three from the Williams' house to Ellington's front door. Doesn't seem to prove anything one way or the other."

"Except that you are in exceptionally good shape, young man. Nice job," Masters said with genuine admiration.

"One other thing, perhaps," Little said, mashing down his mustache the way the old inspector did when deep in thought. "Nine minutes from here to the post office gave Brandon twenty-one minutes to kill Mr. Ellington."

"Make a note of it," Masters said knowing it was true but not wanting to hear it. "Let's see if we can find Jimmy. I want to hear his side of his relationship with Mary."

"I saw him go up to the apartment as I was driving in."

They made their way up the enclosed staircase and Detective Little knocked on the door. Jimmy answered.

"Detective Masters and I would like a few more words with you. May we come in?"

"Sure. Do I have a choice?"

It was delivered with a half-smile as he pushed open the screen door.

"Yes. You can refuse to talk with us. That's your right,"

Masters said, pausing to await his decision.

“Come on in. What’s on your mind? Let’s sit out here at the kitchen table so we won’t worry Gramps, okay.”

“Fine,” Masters agreed.

As they made themselves comfortable around the chrome legged, marbled topped kitchen table, Jimmy offered soft drinks. Little accepted. Masters declined. Jimmy was already nursing a Mountain Dew. The place was neat and clean, though furnished with an interesting combination of contrasting used furnishings. On the table were several books – soft back manuals would better describe them. Preparing For College Entrance Exams, and Preparing for the Miller Analogies Test.

Making small talk to break the ice, Masters commented on the books.

“Looks like either you or Gramps is getting serious about going to college.”

It garnered the other half of the previous, limited, smile.

“It’s fun actually. I especially like the second one. It makes you think about how things are alike and different. ‘Boy is to girl and Man is to Blank.’ You have to fill in the blank. That was just an easy example. They get really tough, like this one, ‘Sun is to grass as blank is to dinosaur. Mary said it was vocabulary building. I always thought of it more like a game. That’s how I thought about math – like a game. If I ever get to go, I think I’ll major in math – maybe teach it someday.”

Masters closed the book and returned it to its place on the table.

“Jimmy, Miss Joan told us that you and Mary had a relationship that went well beyond that of employer and employee. We need to hear your side of that story.”

Jimmy sighed as if it were a relief that it had finally come to light.

“I knew it would come out. You probably think I’m some damn gigolo. It started out that way. I’ll admit that. I was a poor kid – eighteen years old – with a very active sex drive – I guess. I had dropped out of school at sixteen so it was hard to get a job. I began doing odd jobs for Mr. Ellington – mowed the yard, raked leaves, things like that. They went

through handymen like, well, pardon the analogy, Sir, but like you go through Tums. The way I heard it, if it wasn't Lester they couldn't get along with it was Mary. Anyway, they gradually asked me to do more and more. I needed the work so I learned to put up with whatever crap they threw at me.

"One day Mary offered me a full-time job right out of the blue. She didn't beat around the bush at all. She said I'd be the handyman and her lover. I was shocked, ya know. I think I even gulped. She and I had never done anything. Oh, I knew she watched me when I had my shirt off outside but she had never ever lead me to believe she was interested in me that way. God! Just look at the age difference. Anyway, she said I'd already passed the test to be handyman. All that was left was for me to pass the other test. At first, I didn't catch her drift but, right then, she took me by the hand and led me into her bedroom.

"Well, the point is I passed that test, too, I guess and she hired me on full time. I got two-fifty a week – more than I dreamed I'd ever earn – a thousand dollars a month! I expressed my concerns about Gramps. He'd raised me from the time I was six. He was sick with emphysema and I figured it was my turn to take care of him. She knew that he couldn't work so she offered the apartment – free of rent – and suggested that he move in with me. I couldn't turn it down for a whole host of reasons, you see.

"Gramps was pleased. I already had more education than anybody in my family had ever got and he worried about the crowd I was hanging with. They were trouble makers. So, here I am."

It had been a concise and candid accounting. His brow furrowed as if he were considering saying something more.

"There is something else on your mind?" Masters asked.

Jimmy nodded, but with clear reluctance.

"After a few months, she started giving me extra things."

"The jewelry?" Masters asked.

"Yeah. I wasn't truthful with you about that before. It wasn't my mom's. It was things she'd given to me over the years. In fact, she said that it had been her mom's – that's

where I got that idea.”

“Her idea was that you would sell it and have more money?” Masters suggested.

“Yeah. That’s what she said. That way Lester couldn’t trace any extra payments to me. Mary hated her mother and was glad to get rid of the jewels.”

“But you kept them.”

“Yeah. By that time, I had become really fond of Mary. I thought I loved her, in fact. I probably didn’t then, but later on, I really did. I planned to give them back to her someday. It didn’t seem right to take money for what I was doing when I loved her and really wanted to be doing it. Can you understand that?”

“Certainly,” Masters said.”

“When she died, I wanted to kill myself. I might have, too, if it hadn’t been that Gramps still needed me. I couldn’t get myself out of bed in the mornings. I didn’t care how I looked. I did a half-ass job at everything around here – that’s why the hedges didn’t get done. That’s why the storm windows are off but the screens aren’t up yet. I finally got the widows washed last week but only after Mr. Ellington really got on my case. I’ve been really down. I still am, actually.

“I guess I shouldn’t admit this, but I hated Mr. Ellington so much. Joan always said he was the one who drove Mary to drink – and she did drink too much – every night, in fact. We’d . . . well, we’d have our time together from about six to seven or seven thirty and then she’d drink herself to sleep. I couldn’t stand to see that so I’d leave. She said she understood. I think she really did.”

“How much did you hate Mr. Ellington?”

“If you mean did I hate him enough to kill him, sure I did. I just didn’t have the guts to do it.”

“Would you have killed him if Mary had asked you to?”

“Maybe. She never did. We never talked about it. We never talked about him. It was like he didn’t even exist for Mary. I loved her. What can I say? Sure, if she’d asked me to, I probably would have. But she didn’t and I didn’t.”

“What about Joan? Do you think she would have killed Lester?”

“In a Kremlin minute! Well, not by herself. She’s a

classy lady, but she sure hated him enough to have him killed.”

“And if she had paid you, say twenty-thousand dollars, would you have done it for her?”

“No. Not for her. I’d never have done it for money, anyway. You just don’t seem to get it. I loved Mary!”

Jimmy stood up and began pacing as he continued.

“There is something else you need to know. About seven months after I began working here – I remember because I had just turned seventeen - I started receiving an envelope in the mail every Monday with three, one hundred dollar bills in it. There was never any explanation. Just a typed note the first time telling me to never mention it to anyone and not to deposit it in a bank account. The word ‘anyone’ had been typed in capital letters. All these years I just assumed it was from Mary, but it kept coming even after she died. Then I was really puzzled. I still can’t figure it out.”

“Where did you keep the money?”

“I bought a safe. It’s in my bedroom. You can see it.”

“Later perhaps. Right now, I would rather see the envelope you received today – this being Monday?” Masters asked.

“Sure. Let me run down and get the mail. I haven’t done that yet. My box is at the bottom of the stairs.”

He returned, sorting through his mail, to say there was no money envelope in it. He was clearly bewildered. So was Little. Masters seemed relieved.

“I suppose it sounds like that was a lie too. Well, it wasn’t. You can believe me or not, but it wasn’t a lie. Am I a suspect in all this? I need to know. Do I need a lawyer?”

“We are hardly into our investigation,” Masters said, pushing himself to his feet. “At this point I should say there certainly is no evidence to suggest you should not be a suspect and quite a bit suggesting that you should be.”

“There goes my college fund.”

“What?” Masters asked.

“Lawyers are expensive. All I have to pay one with the money that I’ve saved for college. It doesn’t seem fair having to spend it all to defend myself against something I didn’t do. Does that seem fair to you?”

It didn't, of course, but neither Masters nor Little had an answer. They thanked Jimmy for his cooperation and left.

"Well, do you feel as dirty as I do?" Masters asked.

Little didn't catch the meaning and merely brushed off his sleeves as if the stair railing had been dusty.

"You buy the money in the envelope story?" Little asked.

"Hard to say. Why do you suppose he'd tell it if it weren't true?"

"Maybe it was to cover up the real source of all the money we are going to find in that safe of his when we look," Little said in another rare burst of insightful police thinking.

His brilliance dimmed considerably as he continued.

"It could be that Mary and Joan pooled their jewelry and money and hired Phillips. Phillips, still feeling like the scorned lover of Mary, wanted to take revenge on Lester, so he sweetened the pot out of his own pocket, planned the hit and gave the money and jewelry to Jimmy to do the actual trigger work."

"You're reaching, Detective," was Masters' only comment.

Little realized he should have stopped while he was ahead, but then Little was never really ever sure when he was ahead.

It wasn't that it could not have come about exactly the way Little described it. There was just no solid evidence to support it.

"We need to talk with Brandon about the fight. Can you call in and see if we can arrange that. His father and his lawyer should both be present with him."

"Done!" came Little's predictable response.

They got into the squad car to return to the Police Station. A call was coming in from Ben.

"Finished the print ID's on the books in the den. Those on the shelves were just Lester's and Jimmy's. Jimmy's were overlaying Lesters' so he probably did put them back on the shelves like he said he did. The books on the floor follow the same pattern except that some of Brandon's prints overlie all the others. There are lots of smudges on those books. The lab guys say that could be because someone wearing gloves

or handling them with a handkerchief or some such thing touched them last.”

On the way, Masters thought out loud.

“Remember the unidentified person or persons Gramps says he saw lurking around the grounds when Jimmy was away? What possibilities do we have there? It could have been Brandon. That seems to fit with Brandon’s story. It could have been Jimmy, if he really didn’t go anywhere but was up to something else – like visiting either Mary or Joan.”

“Or Lester,” Little suggested.

“Interesting. Yes, or Lester. Or it could have been someone else or no one at all, like Jimmy suggested.”

“Maybe Jimmy said it was nobody, just to cover up for himself.”

“Another interesting possibility. We certainly have no lack of suspects, do we? There’s one other suspect we haven’t talked much about?”

“Who’s that?” Little asked.

“Lester, himself. If he was really in all that pain and if he was really depressed about his wife’s death, then, if he didn’t have the guts to kill himself, he might have hired a hit man.”

“But why would he have gone to such lengths to make it seem like a suicide, if he had hired a hit man?”

“Not sure. Perhaps to protect the hit man. Maybe to keep someone from collecting on his life insurance. Better check that policy. It would be interesting to see who he might have wanted not to get anything.”

By the time they arrived back at the station, Little’s head was reeling from the possibilities Masters had been spinning.

“I’ll be over at Alice’s for a few minutes,” Masters said. “If I’m not back by the time Brandon arrives, call me there.”

“Lunch?” she called across the empty room – a typical plight of the establishment at mid-afternoon.

“Just coffee, well coffee and maybe a Danish . . . or two.”

He engaged her in conversation and directed it quickly to Jimmy. She seated herself across the booth from him.

“How well do you know Jimmy Arroyo, Alice?”

“Better than I told ya the other day. When he was just a little boy – ten or so – I let him work here a little bit for spending money. He swept up, did dishes, even made salads when we got busy. I got to know him pretty good. He was real nice as a little guy, you know – polite, trustworthy and cute as a bug.”

Masters had suspected as much because it accounted for Jimmy’s use of the ‘Kremlin minute’ phrase – a saying he had never heard outside of that cafe.

“You imply he didn’t stay so nice once he got older.”

Her tone changed.

“He ran with a rough bunch for a while. He stopped coming around. He was always hanging with the easy girls.”

“Why Alice. I do declare you were jealous of them!”

She shrugged her shoulders.

“Maybe a little. He had kind of been like the son I’d never had, ya know. I hated to see him going wrong. I tried to talk to him about it once but he just blew me off. It hurt. I thought we had something – friendship, I mean. Nothing more, you understand. Then he fell into the clutches of Mary Ellington and I really never seen him much then. It was like I didn’t mean nothing to him anymore. Sure, that hurt. It hurt a lot. It still hurts.”

If it had been Mary Ellington who had been murdered, Masters just might have found another prime suspect, but it had not been Mary Ellington. It was obvious that Alice had mixed feeling about the boy. On the one hand, she still cared deeply for him and yet she hardly disguised the fact that she had been terribly hurt by him for having abandoned her. Perhaps that accounted for the way her first renditions of the murder seemed to implicate him. Masters was not entirely sure the feelings she had for him were merely motherly as Alice was leading him to believe. ‘Hurt can turn to revenge in a . . . a Kremlin minute,’ he thought to himself, smiling.

He had discovered much more than he had expected – much more than he wished he had, in fact. He carefully brushed the crumbs from his mustache, blotted the corners of his mouth and again, and left her a larger tip than was reasonable. The strong and self-sufficient Alice, who he had come to know and like, suddenly seemed somehow enfeebled

and lonely. Discovery was always important but it was not always pleasant.

He had been inside the station for only a few minutes when Brandon, his father and their attorney arrived. Masters shook the father's hand warmly. They had known each other well for a number of years. That made the mission doubly difficult for the old detective. There seemed to be no words to say at that moment. They entered the conference room and took seats.

"Brandon, we actually have some good news, such as it is," Masters began. "Your fingerprints were not found on the sheet of paper on which Mr. Ellington had written the letter about suing you. That's in your favor, although neither were mine and I did open and read it. A prosecutor would say you could have known its contents without leaving fingerprints.

"Also, Detective Little located the envelope you said you had mailed for Lester Saturday night and it had one of your big beautiful fingerprints on it. That's also in your favor, however nothing says you could not have taken the envelope from Lester's den on your own, concocted the story, intentionally planted your perfect print on it and mailed it, knowing it could be easily traced from your description. It had traces of gunpowder between the plastic window sheet and the envelope paper. That may or may not refer to anything about you or your participation.

"Considering everything we know at this time, it still remains, that virtually all of the evidence fits two very different pictures – the one you drew in your account of your recent relationship with Lester and the one that says you killed him.

"What we really are interested in now, and why I requested that your father accompany you, is a fight that you supposedly had with a young man some time ago in which you reportedly beat the kid senseless."

Brandon looked at his father. His father looked at the attorney. The attorney nodded, indicating they should answer.

Mr. Williams started to answer but Masters interrupted.

"We need to hear Brandon's version, first. Then we'll want to hear from you, John."

Brandon began, speaking softly, clearly uncomfortable with the subject matter.

“His name was Cliff. He and his mom had just moved to town. I really didn’t know him. One day after school he saw me getting out of our car in front of the Burger House. I didn’t have my license yet and Mom had driven me. I went around to the driver-side window and kissed her good-bye. I always do that when I leave her.

“Well, Cliff saw it and after Mom drove away he said something like, ‘So you’re mom’s nothing but a mexi-slut, huh?’”

“It made me furious but I kept my cool. I’d heard similar things before. I walked right by him – sort of brushing him out of my way – and went inside. All evening it ate away at me. I have the finest mother in the world and I really let it get to me. By the time I got off work, I had myself so worked up that I called Mom and said I had a ride home. Then I went looking for Cliff. I knew about where he lived, down behind the wharf on Lakewood. I was lucky – well, maybe not – but I found him walking alone along the road in that deserted section between the marina and the old Methodist church. I snuck up on him, put him in a hammerlock and dragged him back behind the bushes. Then I just started beating on him. He wasn’t a person to me, just something I hated with all my heart. I couldn’t stop myself. I didn’t stop until I was exhausted.

“When I realized what I had done, I was flabbergasted. I felt for his pulse. I really thought I had killed him. He was still alive. I was too tired to carry him, so I dragged him to the house that I thought was his. I laid him down on the front porch and knocked on the door. Then I ran like hell back into the darkness. I waited to make sure somebody found him. As soon as they did, I went home.

“Mom said I looked terrible. I told her my ride didn’t pan out so I had gone for a run instead. She bought it I guess. At least she didn’t say anything more to me. I felt so bad – guilty I guess – that I woke up dad about three in the morning and told him what I’d done. He took over from there. He went to see Cliff’s mom and paid her a bunch of money to keep them quiet and to move away. They left town the next day and I guess we’ve never heard from them since.”

He looked at his father who confirmed with a nod that

was what had happened.

“John, I need an honest answer here, and it may not be easy.”

Mr. Williams looked directly back at Masters.

Masters was direct.

“Is this violent tendency in Brandon an ongoing problem?”

Mr. Williams again looked to his attorney who again nodded.

“I have never know Brandon to react this way. If anything, he’s not aggressive enough. Ever since he’s been a little boy he’s let other kids take advantage of him. You know that yourself. He dropped out of football at the coach’s suggestion because he didn’t have the necessary killer instinct. The boy goes out of his way not to step on ants, for God sake. No, Brandon’s not a violent person. That was strictly a one-time outburst.”

“If Brandon is charged and it goes to trial, you will have to prove that beyond a shadow of a doubt,” Masters said more as a friendly suggestion than as a warning.

“Is he going to be charged?” John asked.

Masters deferred to Detective Little.

“That decision will be made by the prosecuting attorney’s office within the next few days. If I had to wager a guess right now, I’d say yes.”

Brandon put his head in his hands and began crying. Masters shook his head in compassion toward John. John nodded back and ushered his son out of the station and into the car.

Masters shook the attorney’s hand even though he thought attorneys in general were a disgusting lot.

“At two-hundred-dollars an hour, I’d say you just earned a hundred bucks a nod. Good day, Sir.”

“You believe John about the boy’s temper?” Little asked

“It coincides with my impression. I’ve known the lad since his was ten.”

Ben interrupted.

“William Barton, Lester’s lawyer returned our call and said he can see you in ten minutes if you can get over there.”

Masters and Little sighed a collective sigh.

“Might as well get both of these Clarence Darrows out of our hair in the same afternoon,” Masters suggested.

They walked the two blocks to Barton’s office. Little wondered what a clarencedarrow was, but didn’t ponder it long. The office was on the second floor of the bank building – the bank in which Lester had owned a dominating share at one time. They were greeted warmly by the tall, well-tanned, attractively bald, middle aged attorney.

“You’re here about Lester Ellington, I assume.”

“That’s right. Just a few questions,” Masters said.

“I’ll gladly help in any way I can. Lester was more my friend than my client.”

“Didn’t realize he had any friends,” Little said, all quite out of place but not out of character.

“He was misunderstood around here. It wasn’t all undeserved, of course. Lester never felt obliged to put his best foot forward in a public way. He was like two people. If he liked you, whatever he had was yours. If he disliked you, he’d destroy you with his every resource. There was no in between with Lester. You were liked or you weren’t.”

“And how many would you say ended up in the ‘liked’ column?” Masters inquired.

It brought a broad, but sad smile from Barton.

“I’m afraid they can be counted on one hand – two hands at the outside.”

“Being close to him, what can you tell us about his mood, his state of mind since his wife died?”

“That’s easy. It vacillated between terribly angry and terrible depressed. It was angry when he focused his attention on the Williams boy and it was depressed when he focused on himself and his own role in it all.”

“What did he see his role had been?” Masters asked.

“He knew – hell, everybody in Rossville knew - that he had driven her to alcoholism by his carelessness that resulted in his son’s death. You may find this hard to believe. I know he had a cold-hearted reputation, but Lester loved Mary more than anything else in the World – he did to his dying moment, I can tell you that for sure.”

“Even though she reportedly would have nothing to do with him as a husband for the past thirty-five years?”

“That’s right. He understood. He even thought she was fully justified. The death of Georgie just about drove him to suicide back then. I’m terribly saddened but not surprised that he took his own life after Mary was killed.”

Little felt it was appropriate for him to interject something official.

“We aren’t convinced it was a suicide. In fact, it now looks pretty conclusively like murder.”

Barton was clearly surprised.

“Are you sure? It makes no sense. He came in here the week after Mary’s death and had me inquire if his life insurance policy would pay in the event of suicide. He had me really worried, but with Lester, you just stayed your distance – friend or not.”

“Interesting. And did it pay for suicide?”

“Some. Actually, it paid only twenty-five percent of the face value.”

“And what was the face value?”

“Two million dollars.”

“May we ask who the beneficiary was?”

“That’s is a bit stickier. It is only stated in his will and that is sealed until its reading later in the week.”

“May we at least see the list of people who will be invited to the reading of the will?”

“I suppose, but you must agree that its contents don’t go further than the three of us for now. I don’t want a local uproar over who’s in and who’s not.”

He opened a folder and handed the list to Masters. He and Little read down the names.

“Seems pretty predictable, to me,” Little said.

“A couple of odd entries, I’d say,” Masters added.

“Is there anything else you can think of that might help in our investigation?”

“Who do you suspect?”

“Just between the three of us?” Masters asked.

“Certainly,” came Barton’s reply.

Masters looked at Little, who was chomping at the bit to name the names.

“There is Joan Goodman, the sister-in-law, Jimmy Arroyo, the handyman, and Brandon Williams, the young man

who was in the accident in which Mary was killed. It looks like he's leading the pack at this point. Mary, herself, has not been ruled out entirely. There may be a mystery man – hit man type of person – involved, but we aren't at liberty to talk more about that just now."

Little felt quite important for having received the nod to deliver the list and had said a good deal more than Masters felt was appropriate, but it was Little's prerogative.

"Well, I can only say if it was Joan or Jimmy, they made a big mistake. Can't say more."

His remark could have been interpreted as a threat, although the tone seemed to imply something else. Masters couldn't put his finger on it.

"It's probably important for you to know that Lester was in constant pain from advanced, degenerative arthritis," Barton offered. "In the past, he seldom spoke of it, but I could tell. Every move seemed simply excruciating the past several months. Several times recently he had said he just didn't think he could tolerate it much longer."

"Do you know anything about the cruise he was planning to begin next week?"

"Cruise, like in an ocean cruise?"

"Yes, sir?"

"No. In fact, I'm quite sure he had no such plans. He had just sold his last bit of interest in the bank and he had a meeting set with his financial counselor here in my office for . . . ten A.M. Tuesday of next week. We were going to tie up the loose ends relative to the investments he had selected."

"And what about a recent twenty-thousand-dollar payment to Pete Phillips?"

"Pete Phillips, the sleaze-ball P. I. from Rochester?"

"One and the same," Little answered.

"No. I know nothing of any dealings between Lester and Pete. I assume he's your mystery hit man?"

"You know his reputation well," Masters said answering the question without really answering it.

"What about the suit that Lester planned to bring against Brandon Williams in the wrongful death of his wife?" Masters asked.

"First, I've heard of it," Barton said. "How did you come

by that information?"

Masters explained the letter. Barton seemed genuinely baffled.

"He certainly did not consult me in the matter. That doesn't mean he may not have used some other attorney, of course."

"How would you have advised him if had made such a proposal to you?"

"I'd have told him to go home and forget it."

"No grounds?"

"None, whatsoever!"

"Any idea why Lester would prepare such a letter? It didn't have a lawyer's ring to it."

"Not really. He hated the boy, I know that. He made no bones about it. He did blame him for Mary's death even though I tried my best to explain the circumstances to him. I think that deep inside he bought Joan's version – that Lester had driven Mary to drink so in reality, the accident and her subsequent death were really his fault. The outer Lester just couldn't face that truth."

"It doesn't seem to be much of a secret in our fair metropolis that Mary and Jimmy were lovers. Did Lester ever speak of that to you?"

"Only once, in an oblique sort of reference. It was probably eight or nine years ago. I had said something about how sad it seemed to me that he and Mary both had to live such lonely lives in their later years. I was putting in a not so subtle plug for some kind of reconciliation. He commented that the chasm was far too wide and, anyway, he no longer had any needs for intimacy and hers were being well taken care of."

"Did he mean anything specific when he said he no longer had any needs?"

"He had a cancerous prostate removed twelve years ago. He has been impotent ever since."

Barton drifted back to the suicide.

"The information I received was that Lester's body was found in his den, locked from the inside with the gun at his side."

"At first that's the way it appeared until the gun that was

locked up with him in that room turned out not to be the murder weapon.”

“Wow! What a strange twist! Sounds like you have your hands full on this one. Well, anything else then? I have another appointment waiting.”

“Just one. Not a pleasant one. Would you have benefited in any way from Mr. Ellington’s death?”

“Barton smiled. You’d make a good prosecutor, Masters. No, actually, I have a great deal to lose by his death. I have been earning a tidy sum from managing his legal affairs. It now appears that will soon come to an end. More importantly, I have lost a dear friend.”

“No offense, but it had to be asked.”

“None taken. Lawyers don’t dare take offense or they’d be neurotic wrecks. We’re not in the most popular profession you understand. As I understand it, proctologists rank ahead of us.”

Masters even managed a smile. He nodded and thanked him for his time and assistance. Soon he and Little were back down on the street. Masters pointed to the park in the square and they strolled off in that direction.

“Barton seemed pretty cooperative, didn’t you think?” Little suggested.

“Yes. That was my impression, too. He probably knew the real Lester better than anyone else knew him. He describes a frighteningly complex person – almost two people – one capable of undying, compassionate love and one of thoroughgoing, revenge-filled hate.”

“If it had been Brandon who had been done in, we’d have one sweat-free case. Lester would have probably even admitted to it,” Little said thinking he had just been amusing.

“In a way, Brandon has been done in, hasn’t he?” Masters answered.

“You don’t think Brandon did it, do you?” Little stated more than asked.

“I’ve known the boy for the greater part of his life. I’ve known his family. I just cannot fathom him as the cold, calculating killer that pulled this one off. Even though we seem to have established that a few years ago, he impulsively gave into the uncontrolled rage within himself, it does not paint

the portrait of our killer. This murder was meticulously planned. I am beginning to believe even some of the apparent mistakes may have been intentionally woven into the plan. No, I don't think Brandon is capable either emotionally or creatively to have pulled this off."

"You mean he was set up?"

"If he was, we had better soon find some evidence pointing to it. The Prosecutor will undoubtedly be charging him within the next twenty-four hours if we don't."

They took seats on benches angled away from one another.

"Detective, would you be kind enough to recount the evidence against the boy at this point, Masters asked?"

"Okay. Well. He is the only one of the current suspects with gunpowder on his person and his clothing. He is the only one with Catalpa bark on his clothing (of course we aren't sure about Jimmy) and we are assuming the killer had to climb or descend the tree. He was the only one whose prints were found on the murder weapon and the key to the den. By his own admission and an eyewitness report, he was on the premises about the time of the murder. He is the only suspect with a history of violence. And, oh yes, that letter to the Police Department that you found in Lester's mailbox, it contained a note saying that Brandon had called to threaten his life. Brandon also had an immediate motive – the letter about the threatened civil suit. It sure sounds like a prosecutor's dream case to me."

"That last thing you said."

"Dream case?"

"No. Before that. That he had an immediate motive. The envelope containing the suit letter provides Brandon's only motive and it was postmarked Thursday so he could not have received it before Friday at the earliest."

"Brandon said it came Friday," Little corroborated.

"So, even if it had arrived in Friday afternoon's mail and Brandon had read it immediately, that would have given Brandon no more than thirty hours to plan and carry out the murder. That's just not time enough to construct such an elaborate plan, wouldn't you agree?"

"Yes, sir. That would seem right. Just not enough

time.”

Masters continued speaking, as much to himself as to Little.

“He would have had to go somewhere Saturday after he got off work and shoot enough rounds to get himself covered in powder. Neither he nor his father owns a gun. The envelope to Funk would have to have been a pure accident with extremely quick thinking. Doesn't seem possible a boy his age, totally inexperienced in this type of sinister activity, would be able to construct that part of the plot in the few seconds he had to think about it.”

“What you say makes sense to me,” Little said as if his confirmation were ultimately important.

“That letter to the police – did the lab boy's find it to be authentic – really from Lester?”

“Funny about that. No saliva on the seal – scotch taped shut. The stamp was one of those peel and stick kind. No fingerprints anywhere. The letter was a computer printout. Could have been done at any public computer center – the library even.”

“So, it may or may not have been written by Lester. But, if we believe Brandon's account, one thing is for sure. Someone had to have put it into that mailbox after nine o'clock when Brandon took out the Funk letter. Who was available to do that? Jimmy, Joan and Lester – maybe Mr. X the mystery, lurking man.”

“How about Jimmy's Grandfather? He was on the grounds?”

“Interesting, Little. I had not considered that possibility. Add him to that list.”

Little felt he was on another roll.

“Perhaps, it was a conspiracy involving all four.”

Masters didn't dignify it with a response at the moment, though he did note it.

“What's the evidence left against Mary?” Masters asked.

“Well, besides Gramp's observation of a stranger on the grounds that might have been going to see her, there really isn't any. She probably has the best motive though. And she had thirty-five years to plan the perfect murder – no

impulsive slip-ups left in that kind of a plan I'd wager. If we would assume the jewels were payment to Jimmy for the hit, she could become a good suspect. We have no way to know when he received them from her. She did seem to have a darn good motive."

"I'll give you that. Mary's seems to have the most open, longest-term motive. But, what about Joan? She hated Lester every bit as much – maybe more."

"In Joan's case, it's motive with opportunity – unless she can establish that she actually arrived back home after the time of death. She could have hired it done, of course. She seems to have some big bucks to spend. And we know she spent some in Phillips' direction."

"Ever hear of a hit man taking his payment by check in two hundred and fifty dollar installments?"

"No. The checks could have been a cover in case anyone happened to see them together. The real payoff could have been in cash."

"Little, there is a wonderfully devious side to your personality. You make a valid point. The same could hold for Mary, however – I mean the cash payoff. One other problem with Joan and her hit man. Don't you think she would have established an air tight alibi for herself at the time the murder was to take place?"

"If she knew that," Little added.

Masters moved on.

"And Jimmy. His long-term motive would seem to have combined both Joan's and Mary's - Joan's, in that Lester may have driven her sister to become an alcoholic and Mary's in that he had killed her son and made her so miserable. He too, would have had a long time to consider and plan it. But then, at Mary's death, Jimmy would have had an all-consuming motive to actually do it - if he truly bought Joan's premise that Lester ultimately caused her death."

"And Gramps?" Little asked, not wanting his own recent edition to be overlooked.

"What about Gramps?" Masters mused out loud. "He would, of course, be protective of Jimmy if he had reason to think his grandson needed protection. Any ideas what could have put that kind of thought into his head?"

“Not really. Mary’s Will, gave everything to Lester – for some reason she had never changed it from the original one they had drawn up right after their marriage. So, killing Lester wouldn’t seem to help out Jimmy, financially.”

“Unless,” Master added, “Grampa was angry that Lester received the inheritance he felt Jimmy deserved. But, he’s old and sick and poor. Not really much chance there, do you think?”

Reluctantly, Little agreed. He attempted to regain some standing with a final, out of the blue, theory.

“What if the unknown prowler was that Cliff kid, come back to plan and take revenge on Brandon for the beating?”

What Masters did not need or want was another suspect from left field. Having now been put into the pot, however, Cliff’s possible role could not simply be discounted out of hand.

///

CHAPTER FIVE

Day Three: Tuesday

With breakfast under his belt – his size forty-eight belt – Masters strode down the gravel road from his cottage, past the Ellington home and onto the narrow, cobblestone street, which declared official entry into Rossville.

At eight-fifty-five, he arrived in front of Dr. James McCullum's office. Detective Little, already parked at the curb, got out and greeted him. Together they made their way inside. The secretary offered coffee but the men declined. At nine o'clock Dr. McCullum opened the door to his private office and motioned them in. Dr. McCullum was Masters' age – though looked younger - and had practiced in Rossville his entire professional life. Masters suspected there was not much about any of the residents this slender, bespectacled, forthright little man didn't know – if he would just share it.

"Doesn't look like your diet's going any better this year than it has during the past seven, Raymond. What shall I do with you?"

The two were good friends and shared an occasional chess match when time and schedules permitted.

"You said in your call, Detective, that you had questions about Lester Ellington. How can I help?"

With a nod, Little deferred to Masters.

"Just a couple of things, Jim. How crippling was Lester's arthritis?"

"Actually, it was more painful than crippling although since the pain kept him from doing things I suppose that would

be considered crippling, wouldn't it. Let me say it this way. Lester was physically capable of doing things his pain wouldn't typically allow him to do."

"Could he have placed the gun against his own temple at an exact ninety-degree angle and fired it?"

"He could have raised the gun to his temple and fired. However, the degeneration in his shoulders would not have allowed the height needed to acquire the angle you suggest. The bullet's path would have been from the temple toward the top of the skull – not straight across."

"Could he have aimed and fired a pistol, accurately hitting a small, stationary target some thirty feet away?"

"Yes, though the pain would have been excruciating. He had been a U.S. Championship Pistol Marksman at one time."

"I see. Weren't there pain medicines he could have taken to ease his suffering?"

"Yes. In fact, I wrote a prescription for him just last week. He didn't take them on a regular basis, however. For some reason, which I can't readily explain, the best pain drugs reacted badly with his anti-depressant and he and I agreed that he had to remain on the anti-depressant. The combination produced massive hives and seemed to give him severe abdominal pains and dried up his mouth and joint fluids. All his liquid seemed to come in profuse sweating. Sometimes individual body chemistry will cause such reactions."

"Anti-depressant? Had he been on that long?"

"Many years. It was a chronic condition for him – situational but chronic. He talked himself into it. It was over his son's death and his wife's reaction to it. I don't mean it wasn't real. It was. Without the medication, he would have been dangerous to himself. I tried to convince him to see a psychiatrist, especially after Mary's death, but Lester was above that kind of thing. I warned him again to be careful about that interaction last week when he asked for the pain medicine. He said he was going on a cruise and just wanted to have some pain pills along in case the damp air caused too much of a problem for him. I was terribly distressed to hear of his suicide. Probably shouldn't have written that prescription."

Monday morning quarterbacking, you know.”

“Well, we have reason to suspect that it was not suicide,” Little said in his most confidential tone.

“Really. From what I heard it seemed cut and dried – locked room, gun by his side – sounded classic. Was there no note?”

“Suicide note? No, there wasn’t, Masters answered. Why would you ask?”

Dr. McCullum removed his glasses. “Lester always had to have the last word. It just doesn’t sound like him not to leave a note. Perhaps you’re on to something.”

“Can you confirm that he had his prostate removed eight or so years ago?”

“That would have been twelve years ago,” Little said correcting the timeline.

“That’s correct. Twelve years ago,” the doctor confirmed.

“And it left him impotent?”

“That’s also correct – as far as I know at least. He never brought it up after the condition set in initially right after the surgery. It appeared to be a non-issue for him.”

“Anything else about his condition that you think might be helpful for us to know?”

“Perhaps. The pain caused his fingers to shake when he attempted tasks calling for precision – things like holding a pencil, picking up a pill, putting a stamp on a letter. To help alleviate that problem he had run across the solution of wearing tight-fitting rubber gloves. I saw it work for him, myself. I’ve even suggested it to others since then. My point is, in that way he could do a few things he might find impossible otherwise.

“Another thing - and I’m the first to admit the man was a flat out bastard - but he really loved Mary. He never, ever stopped loving her, and Mary was a bitch from day one. When he talked about her, his face softened and his eyes glowed. It was the only time I ever saw him smile – really smile, genuinely. I saw it again during his last visit. I’m as certain as I’m sitting here that he never once cheated on her, even after she moved him upstairs. That’s why I say his impotence was a non-issue for him.

“There may be one more thing I should share with you. I hesitate because one of the parties, unlike Lester, is still alive and resides here in town. I suppose second hand testimony wouldn’t be admissible in court anyway, though would it? Okay, and I assume this stays confidential unless it absolutely has to be made public.”

“Absolutely,” Masters assured.

“Well, about six months after the Arroyo boy went to work for them - that would have been ten or so years ago – I treated Lester for the aftermath of a severe beating. He was knocked senseless and didn’t call me to his home until the following morning. It hadn’t been Lester’s plan to tell me who had done it to him but it slipped out. He said it had been Jimmy.”

“My, you are just full of surprises. Did he give you any idea what the beating was all about?”

Well, yes. After he let Jimmy’s name slip he went ahead and said that the boy said things suggesting how angry he was about the fact that Lester had been responsible for Georgie’s death and more specifically for Mary’s alcoholism. He said that he loved her and he was going to take good care of her even if Lester wouldn’t.”

“Had the boy been drinking?”

“He thought so.”

“And Lester didn’t fire him?”

“Lester said - and I quote – ‘Isn’t that the sweetest thing you’ve ever heard?’”

“Strange. Did he elaborate?”

“No. He never spoke of it again.”

“Was it delivered sarcastically?”

“No. I wouldn’t characterize it that way at all.”

“Doc, you have been extremely helpful. Thank you so much. By the way, Jim, Brandon Williams got himself mixed up in the middle of this case and he’s pretty shaken by it all. He respects you. Maybe you could find some excuse to talk with him.”

“Wouldn’t you know it. I think it’s time for his annual physical.”

As the two large men vied for a comfortable exit through the smaller than customary office door, Doctor

McCullum, beckoned them to wait. The look on his face indicated a quandary within, and that further suggested that they might or might not hear what was on his mind. After a prolonged hesitation, he chose to speak.

“Here’s another ‘just between you and me’ piece of information. During his last several visits – a sprained ankle and a bad cold – Brandon asked a multitude of questions about lethal doses of drugs that would not be readily detected as the intentional means of ending a life. He said it was connected with a school project. I was concerned enough to mention it to his mother. He didn’t seem depressed, but then often, once a person finally makes up his mind to kill himself, the outward appearance of the depression lifts. His mother’s description of his behavior over the past several months gave me no reason to suspect that is what he had on his mind. That’s just for what it may be of worth to you.”

Masters thanked him again, and the men left.

On the drive back to the station, Little proclaimed his solution.

“I’m leaning toward thinking that a very depressed Lester hired a hit on himself because he wasn’t sure he could actually manage to shoot himself and he was afraid of the suffering and humiliation if he missed.”

Although Masters couldn’t agree with the motivation, the concept of Lester hiring someone to kill him had crossed his mind. Perhaps it was part of a larger plan in which Lester framed Brandon for his murder - Brandon being Mary’s killer as far as Lester was concerned. At that moment, it seemed as reasonable – and as unreasonable – as any other theory they had developed.

“Too bad there wasn’t a butler,” Masters said out loud, as they pulled up into the detective’s private parking space.

It passed over the Little’s head – a double, tummy-jiggling chuckle for Masters.

The chat with the doctor had taken longer than they had planned. Pete Phillips, the private investigator from Rochester, was already waiting for them at the station. Pete was short and slight of stature, disheveled of dress, and shifty of eye. His greased back hair, striped suit, and fidgety air gave life to a caricature of a hapless villain from the pages of a

Daymon Runyon script. Without the traditional small talk, the three men moved directly into the interview room.

“So’s, what do you distinguished gentlemen of the law enforcement domain have on your astute minds that you needed to call upon my singular expertise?”

Little’s forehead furrowed in unqualified disbelief. Masters’ merely hoped the interview would be brief and that the creature’s noxious mien wasn’t contagious.

Masters took the bull by the horns (perhaps, the reptile by it’s tail, would paint a more accurate picture).

“As you were informed on the phone, Mr. Phillips, we are looking into the recent death of Lester Ellington and are interested in certain contacts you have had with some of those associated with the crime.”

“That would be Miss Goodman and Mr. Ellington, the deceased, himself, I assume.”

“Yes, it would. We have run across some checks they each made out to you and hope that you can quickly clear up the nature of your relationship with them.”

“Certainly. I always yearn to cooperate to the utmost fullest with my colleagues in the law enforcement estabulary.”

He took a folder from his shabby, brown, briefcase – his only office, Masters assumed – and pretended to consult it as he spoke.

“Joan Goodman engaged my professional services back in June of the past year for the purpose of maintaining surveillance on Mr. Ellington – whom I shall hereafter refer to as the subject. She had reason to suspect that the said subject’s faithfulness to his wife was dubious in nature so asked me to obtain a portfolio of snapshots and other relevant information about such shenanigans. No such details was forthcoming and I was about to report such to her when I was got in touch with by the subject himself – that was about two weeks ago. Apparently, my usual flawless tailing procedures had been made, and he requested a meeting. I agreed and he made me a most lucrative business proposition. I, being an upstanding believer in the American Way and the free enterprise system for which it stands, took the subject up on his generous offer. I ceased my surveillance of the aforementioned subject and presented my very convincing

and well-elucidated report to Miss Goodman exonerating the subject from the aforementioned suspicion. That would be the sum and substance of the associations to which you gentlemen was referring.”

“Was anything ever said or even hinted at from either one that they were in the market for a hit man?” Masters asked.

“A hit man! No sir. They was both classy people. Who do you infer they wanted the hit to be on?”

He looked back and forth between the corners of the ceiling.

Ignoring the question, Masters moved on.

“We will need a hard and fast alibi as to your whereabouts between the hours of eight o’clock and midnight last Saturday evening.”

“Fascinating that you should ask. I just happen to have listed on this sheet, a dozen acquaintances who can bear witness to the fact that I was in Rochester on the night which you stipulate.”

“And why would you have such a list prepared ahead of time, if I may ask?” Masters inquired.

“I have not stayed at the quintescent pinnacle of my profession by allowing myself to be ill-prepared, Sir.”

“No. I am very sure that you have not. Is there anything else you would care to share with us – based on your professional expertise in the matter?”

“Well - and no bill will arrive for this piece of significant data - it wasn’t Mr. Ellington who Miss Goodman should have been concerned about. Mrs. Ellington was carrying on in a most torrid fashion with a pretty boy right under her nose and still, Miss Goodman was unable to ascertain the same. That’s the only freebee I has for you. Is there anything else?”

“What, if anything, did you do to earn your considerable fee from Mr. Ellington?”

“He was in need of some specialized information about the boy who killed his wife in the car accident – his interests, daily schedule, temperament, other unfavorable incidents in which he had been an unfortunate party too - things like that.”

“The boy’s name?”

“Brandon Williams.”

“And your report said he was an easy going, gullible, good student, who worked evenings and weekends at the Hamburger House, liked bow shooting and had a weakness for lonely old people. Oh, yes, and that on one occasion he had become enraged and beaten up another boy.”

“Bravo, Mr. Masters. However, you left out that he was a nut about reading murder mysteries – had been from the time he could read. His room is filled with them. He even has boxes of them under his bed, some quite cleverly hiding his nudie mags. Mostly though, you did a fine job. I could use a man of your caliber in my employ.”

Masters smiled.

“When vultures prefer cake, Mr. Phillips. And, oh, don’t forget to leave that list of acquaintances you say provide your alibi. Rest assured each and every one will be contacted for their own alibi on that evening. I’m sure there will be no problem verifying that you were all together during those four hours. It made for a crowded room, I imagine.”

Phillips’ eyes darted between the two men. His fingers drummed his briefcase.

“Let’s not get into harassment of private citizens here. That could make for a most lucrative lawsuit. Most lucrative.”

“Good-bye, Mr. Phillips. Please go home and never come back,” Masters said in a most uncharacteristic way. Clearly there had been some ulterior motive.

“And take a bath,” Little added in a spontaneous rush of support for the old detective.

Masters looked at Little.

“I suppose we should take a look at Brandon’s room.”

“It would seem so, if the ferret was telling the truth,” Little answered.

“You have exquisite taste in whom not to like, my friend,” Masters kidded.

“Likewise, I’m sure.”

* * *

Little had called ahead to see if Brandon’s parents would require a search warrant. They said that wouldn’t be necessary. Brandon was in school. Doris - Mrs. Williams - met them at the door and gladly accepted the outstretched

arms and lingering hug of her old friend, Raymond Masters. Doris was, of course, all consumed by Brandon's predicament, but still felt compassion for Masters as he attempted to do his job in the case.

Little fiddled with his tie as the other two made uneasy small talk about the family. At last, she urged them to proceed with what they had come to do.

"You two go at it. I'd rather stay out here. The lawyer said that was fine. Let me know if you need anything. Coffee, by the way? I have fresh."

"That would be wonderful," Masters said.

Little nodded.

She showed them to the room and then continued on into the kitchen. The room's general appearance was unremarkable. It looked like a teenage boy's treasured haven from the world. The sign on the outside of the door read, 'No one over 19 allowed beyond this point.' Under that in parenthetically presented smaller letters was added, 'Unless you're female, to die for beautiful and naked'. There were posters on the walls, a small TV, a computer, a CD player with massive earphones, a study desk, file cabinets, a bed piled high with colorful pillows and an entire wall of built-in bookcases, broken only by the small, shuttered window in the center. Beside the bed was a unique card table. On its top was printed a chessboard. It was flanked by two chairs. The board set-up suggested the middle of an unresolved game. From Masters quick assessment of the positions, it was a game between accomplished players.

On the wall beside the door was a bulletin board, randomly adorned by slips of paper held in place by colorful pushpins. One announced the Spring Dance at school. In its margin were penciled a half dozen girl's names – potential dates, Masters assumed with a smile. One was a schedule for peewee baseball practices. Brandon was listed as one of the assistant coaches. The last report card, sporting all A's and B's. There was a sadly fragile, colorless, long dead, boutonniere pinned in the center at the top. It must have held some lasting significance. A dozen red and blue ribbons from various archery competitions adorned the right side – top to bottom. Wallet size pictures of eight nice looking young ladies

– school pictures - occupied the left side. Seven of the eight professed their love for the boy. (Nice going, Brandon!) The eighth had merely written, ‘See ya ‘round’. Masters bet on that one – the plainest looking of the lot - to eventually become his bride. There were dozens of email and website addresses. In the center of that hodgepodge, was pinned a pair of his red bikini under shorts. Masters made no attempt to guess at what significance that may have held.

The room’s neatness may have testified to their anticipated arrival. It may have also merely reflected Brandon’s well-ordered approach to life. There were hundreds of books – books on bows and arrows, reference works, scouting and camping, and a section of self-improvement titles. The vast majority, however, were mysteries. He had the whole collection of the Hardy Boy’s Mysteries and dozens of Ellery Queen and Perry Mason titles. There was an entire bottom shelf stacked with issues of The Hitchcock Mystery Magazine. He was, as Phillips had said, clearly a mystery nut. It was not a finding that would bode well for his situation. Under the bed were dozens of more neatly boxed mysteries – those apparently more appropriate for younger readers, put away but not forgotten. And there was the stash of dog-eared Playboy and Penthouse magazines - traditional trappings of a teen boy’s abode.

In one file cabinet were fat folders containing neatly typed manuscripts – mysteries, which Brandon had apparently written. On his desk, between the dictionary and the Thesaurus was another large book - one Masters would have rather not found – The sourcebook of locked-door murder mysteries. He pointed it out to Little.

“That’s the same book Mr. Ellington was paying Funk for in that envelope – I’m sure it is.” He searched his notes. “If you will remember I couldn’t recall its exact title before. Yes, sir. That was the one the check was for in that window envelope. Must be some book – the check was for ninety-nine, ninety-nine, but then it was to be sent overnight-express. Don’t that beat all, though – them both having that same book.”

“I would guess that this is that book. I’m just as sure it won’t have Ellington’s prints on it. But, it just may have Mr. E.

Funk's prints. Let's at least check it out."

"I'll see to it," Little said, carefully bagging the book.

"As damning as the interest in such murder mysteries may be, it does blunt, somewhat, the scary implication of Doc's information about Brandon's interest in lethal drugs."

Little looked confused.

"Well, on the surface, an interest in lethal drug dosages could mean an interest or even intent on killing oneself or someone else. However, a writer of murder mysteries needs to be accurate about such things. I'll bet when we read these manuscripts of his, we'll see why he had expressed such an interest."

"I see. Shall I bag the manuscripts? Just mark them and leave a receipt. We can go through them later."

Doris arrived with the coffee, but didn't linger. Masters followed her into the hall.

"It appears Brandon is a budding author."

"Yes. He's been obsessed with being a writer since before he could write. He used to dictate his stories to me while he sat on my lap. I'd take them down verbatim. When I read them back to him, he'd know if I'd changed even one word. Until recently, he always seemed eager for me read what he had written. Not so, the past couple of years, and it's just as well. We have an understanding."

Masters seemed puzzled.

"An understanding? Were they that gory?"

"Oh no, nothing like that. His stories, whether mysteries or outdoor adventures, now always seem to include a liberal sprinkling of boy-girl things that go further than his mother wants to hear about. I understand, of course, he's sixteen – well seventeen now. I'm just uncomfortable with it. So, our understanding: he can write it but I don't have to read it."

She smiled and shook her head.

"What about the chess game in progress?"

"He is playing with an internet acquaintance from Russia, no less. The game has been going on for over a month. They play for a half hour each evening."

"Thank you," Masters said.

Doris moved on into the living room and Masters

returned to the bedroom. The two men searched quietly for an additional fifteen minutes. Masters picked up a book and commented, "Well, at least the boy has excellent taste in what mysteries he reads."

"How's that," Little asked.

"Here's Garrison Flint's account of one of my first cases as a retired free-lancer, The Murder No One Committed."

"I've read it. Wonderful work. Wonderful work." (No conceit in this corner!)

They searched further. Presently, Little found Brandon's personal journal hidden behind a row of tall books on the top shelf of the bookcase. He handed it, unopened, to Masters. Masters sighed. Let's seal it but we won't read it unless it seems absolutely necessary." Little seemed to understand. It was a flash of unexpected compassion that caused Masters to pause and take note.

"On second thought," Masters added, "Have it dusted. We just might find Phillips' prints on it. If so, we can bust him for illegal entry."

The idea brought a duet of broad smiles to the men's faces.

"Ferrets need to be in cages," Little said.

He thought himself being serious. Masters chose to chuckle.

"Brandon seems to have a special interest in self-improvement and improving his mental powers – I suppose not at all unusual for a lad his age," Masters observed, looking over the titles in the headboard of his bed. And here, on the other end are a half dozen books about chess. Looks like Bobby Fisher is his mentor."

Lester refrained from commenting since he had absolutely nothing to say. It was a rare moment of appropriate self-restraint.

When they were finished, they thanked Doris for her cooperation and for the coffee. There was another long embrace and they left.

"Little. You are going to have to keep my deductive powers honest from here out. My heart tells me the boy could not have killed Mr. Ellington but my intellect says it's the most reasonable explanation. You must play the devil's advocate

for me whenever the opportunity arises, agreed?”

“Yes sir. Agreed.”

Detective Little had not felt so important since the time he had inadvertently fallen into a raging stream while attempting to save a little girl and had, all quite accidentally, actually saved her.

Of course, he thought Masters intended for him to begin immediately so, he began immediately.

“We’ve talked about how Lester may have carefully set up Brandon to take the fall for his death. The information from Phillips – if we can believe it – suggests that may be true. On the other hand, it might be the other way around.”

Little stopped as if his logic were crystal clear. The message had escaped Masters.

“Go on and be more specific.”

“Well. What if Brandon was the one setting up Lester? We keep thinking that Brandon didn’t have enough time to set it all up. Maybe his plot has nothing to do with the letter about the suit. Maybe that’s not the motivation at all but he just wants to make us think so.

“What if the fact was that Brandon was feeling guilty about being part of the accident that killed Mrs. Ellington and he blamed Lester for having driven her to drink? If he hadn’t, then Brandon wouldn’t have anything to feel guilty about. So, maybe Brandon thought it was somehow his duty to take revenge for Mary on Lester since she couldn’t do it herself. So, he found a way to get close to Mr. Ellington, win his confidence, work out a way to kill the man, and make it look the other way around. Maybe his obsession with murder mysteries just took over inside his head and drove him to complete the plan. Could be it was over and done with before the boy realized he had actually done it.”

Two things struck Masters. First, that Detective Little could actually keep that much going on in his head at one time, and second, the disquieting kernel of possibility in a generally absurd take on the events. For a moment, he felt some slight animosity toward Little for having played the game so well. Beginning with that assumption, other things fell into place. Perhaps Lester had not written the suit letter – Brandon could have faked that. Perhaps it was not Lester’s

idea to have Brandon mail that particular Funk letter – the one that might get Brandon off the hook about the book. He could have taken it at some other time and just used the story about coming to pick it up as an excuse which he also thought would work to his advantage as a time-line alibi. The target practice could have been his idea rather than Lester’s, though Masters thought if that had been the case Brandon would have managed to work in an eyewitness. Perhaps he thought the unexpected noise of gunfire would attract Masters’ attention from next door and he would investigate just long enough to see Brandon and Lester together. Enough rounds had certainly been fired to arouse someone’s curiosity.

More and more Masters wished his phone had failed to ring on that early Sunday morning just past.

Little had a suggestion.

“We probably need to talk with Jimmy again about the alleged beating of Mr. Ellington. If it’s true, it shows a new side to his character – makes him a little better candidate for suspicion in an aggressive crime – especially one against the same victim.”

Masters agreed and they were soon parked in front of the garage below Jimmy’s apartment. The door to the workshop was open. Jimmy was working on the engine of one of the lawn mowers.

Masters approached him, clearly interested in what he was doing. Motors of all kinds were a mystery to him. He admired anyone with the skill to fix them.

“Good morning, Jimmy,” he said in his usually warm and friendly manner.

“Hi. Need something?”

“My toaster stopped working. Wondered if you could take a look at its motor for me.”

Jimmy and Masters shared a smile. Little stood stoically, as if amazed to learn that toasters had motors.

“We have one more small matter to ask you about,” Masters said, turning the conversation to the point of the visit. “It’s not particularly pleasant.”

“I wondered when you’d get around to it.” Jimmy said as if reading Masters’ mind.

“It?” Masters said as if asking.

“The time I beat the crap out of Mr. Ellington.”

“Well, I wouldn’t have phrased it just that way, but yes, that is what we are here about. We’d just like to hear your side of it.”

The sight of Little, with his pad and pen at the ready, quite plainly made Jimmy nervous. Nevertheless, he began. He kept working as he spoke.

“I’d been here about six months – it was the night of my nineteenth birthday, in fact. Mary had arranged an intimate and very expensive little party for the two of us in her quarters. There was a Champaign filled bathtub, caviar, and cheeseburgers under glass – her idea of a joke. I hated the caviar, by the way – even more when she told me what it was. The rest was great.

“Well, after we ate, we sat together in the tub and just kept sipping away at the Champaign. The more she drank the more she talked about how she hated Lester for letting Georgie die. The more she talked and the more she drank the more I saw the connection between her being an alcoholic and Lesters’ role in it. The more I drank the clearer it seemed to become.

“After our party was over, I was still a little drunk. I never drank and Mary seldom even offered me anything. She knew I didn’t like the idea of her drinking. So, I probably overreacted to the alcohol. Anyway, after I tucked Mary into her bed for the night, I went looking for Lester. I had worked up quite a passion about it and later I understood I hadn’t really been in my right – or at least my usual – mind. I found him out back. He often spent time out by the old firing range after dark. I just went up to him and started beating on him. I told him what a terrible thing he had done to Mary and how someone as wonderful as her didn’t deserve that to happen to her. I even went so far as to tell him I loved her and that I was going to take care of her forever. I beat him until he was unconscious and left him on the ground bruised and bleeding I guess.”

“Your guess?”

“Yeah. I woke up about five in the morning in the grass behind the shed. I had the worst headache and the worst memory of my life. It all came back slowly. I couldn’t believe

what I'd done. I didn't know whether to tell Mary or not. I decided not to. I figured he would tell her when he fired me. But he never did either. I couldn't believe it. Every day for the next month I expected to get the ax but he never spoke of it. It was like it had never happened.

"You know the most unexplainable part of it all? From then on, he never yelled at me again. He never complained about my work. When he told me to do something, it was more like he was suggesting it. The tone of his voice was . . . I don't know . . . different . . . softer . . . I'd say kinder, but Lester Ellington was not ever really kind. And, here I am, all these years later, still in love with Mary - his wife - and now they are both gone. Most days, they seem like the lucky ones - dead and free from this terrible sadness that just won't go away."

Masters put his big hand on the young man's shoulder. There were no appropriate words that he could seem to muster. Jimmy spoke, again.

"Wow! Do I feel better getting that out! It's worth getting arrested just to have it out in the open."

"We aren't going to arrest you, Jimmy."

"You're not?"

"There's been no complaint filed. There's no eyewitness, and it's just your word against our impression that you are a kind and gentle young man totally incapable of such an act. Right Detective?"

"Oh, yes sir. Right. Totally incapable," Little mumbled over his notes.

"By the way, Jimmy, I'm still eager for that glider demonstration you promised me."

"Hey, you just name the time. My time it your time."

"Let's say around two this afternoon, then."

"I'll be here. I feel like I should thank you. You don't know what a relief it is to get that dirty secret out into the open. You just can't know!"

"Let's just make the thanks mutual, and call it even, okay?"

"Okay. I'll see you about two, then."

Once they were back in the car, Masters spoke to Little.

"Does anything jump out at you about Jimmy's time-line

since he came to the Ellington's?"

Little flipped through his notes. (It should be said that as 'cop note flippers' go, Little won hands down. His deliberateness and 'time to the correct page' were unmatched. His skill at using the technique to appear busy when there was absolutely and obviously, nothing to do, was unequaled. Those things aside, however, he most certainly would have won on flair alone.)

"Very interesting" Little said. "Those three hundred dollar payments started the month after he beat up Mr. Ellington. I wonder who would have been so appreciative of that vicious act that he or she would have rewarded Jimmy week after week for all those years."

"Just what I was wondering. The obvious person, Mary, seems to have been ruled out. Do you suppose Joan witnessed the act? Might she be withholding something from us?"

Without so much as a nod, the two of them got out of the car and headed for the house. Little thought to himself, 'Great minds think alike'. To Masters, it was unquestionably unnerving that their thoughts resembled one another's so closely.

Once inside, Little knocked at Joan's apartment door. She was soon there.

"My two favorite policemen. Come in. To what do I owe the pleasure of your company, this time? Have a seat?"

"No thank you?" Masters said. "This should take but a minute. We wanted to ask what you might know about an altercation that took place between Jimmy and Lester on the night of the young man's seventeenth birthday. I realize it was some time ago, but anything at all that you might remember might prove helpful."

"You talked with Jimmy about it yet?"

"Yes ma'am. He verified that it took place," Little answered, pleased to be able to insert himself into the conversation.

"Lester used to go out and sit in the grass at the back of the lawn – always after dark. He seldom ventured out during the day except to transact business. I suppose he contemplated things that could have been – perhaps basked

in the adulation he had received as a marksman. Who knows? Anyway, that evening I heard him go out but didn't hear him return. He was not a considerate man and when he entered the house, he always slammed the back door regardless of who might be trying to sleep. Anyway, when he hadn't returned by two a.m., I became concerned. Don't ask me why I'd be concerned about someone I despised so much, but I was. I went looking for him. I found him beaten and unconscious, face down in his shooting range. I went to get Jimmy to help me but I couldn't raise anyone in his apartment. His grandfather never answers the door. I figured Jimmy was spending the night with Mary and I wasn't about to burst in on that scene.

"So, I came back here, got a blanket, a pan of water, a washcloth, towel and the first aid kit and went back to him. I cared for him the best I could. It was a warm summer night but I covered him anyway – something I remembered hearing about shock.

"At about three thirty he came around. He was out of his head for the first few minutes. He babbled on, over and over again, something like, 'Jimmy, please stop, I'm an old man'. Once he regained his senses, he didn't ever actually tell me who had done it. He just asked me to never speak of it to anyone, especially Mary, and to help him back to the house. I helped him up to his bedroom and kept my word, never speaking about it until this very minute. In all the years that I knew him that was the only time the man ever told me 'thank you'. He even seemed sincere."

She nodded her head as if to emphasize that she had finished.

"I assume that was the altercation to which you were referring."

"Yes ma'am. That was the exact altercation," Little confirmed.

"Do you have any idea what brought it about?" Masters asked.

"Well, I always assumed it had been Jimmy who had gone looking for Lester, so it must have been something Jimmy had in his craw. Where Lester was concerned, I figured it could only be about Mary having been driven to drink

by the man's irresponsibility. If Mary had given the kid one too many to drink, he might have gone off half-cocked. For all I know it could have even been her idea. I told you she had a really mean streak in her – God rest her soul. I don't know any of that for a fact but that would be my best guess. I often wondered about how Mary's life might have been different – better – if Lester had died that night. Perhaps I should have just gone back to sleep in the first place.”

Masters understood about the wish to have just gone back to sleep in the first place. He thanked her and the two men left her suite.

“She's either a great – and well prepared – guilty-as-sin actress or a thoroughly innocent bystander who allowed her human compassion to override her animalistic hatred that night,” Masters offered in a moment of sober reflection.

* * *

The two o'clock demonstration was fascinating to Masters. Robbie had arrived in time to help. He seemed to know a great deal about it and obviously enjoyed being with Jimmy. The huge rubber bands were doubled and each end then double looped around one of the two metal hooks at the top of the poles. The double band was drawn down and back about fifteen feet from the poles. The gliders had a special catch in the underside near the front. When released, the glider was catapulted a hundred feet or more into the air. Once it was air borne, Jimmy worked the flaps and tail from a portable remote control pack. He was quite skillful. He could engineer loops, rolls, bank and stalls – all the maneuvers required in competition. The landing was so precise that it rolled right up to Jimmy's feet and stopped. Masters clapped (soon followed, of course, by Little and then Ben). Masters said shaking his hand.

During the exhibition, Robbie had assisted as he could. Afterward, Jimmy busied himself getting his equipment ready to put away.

“So, I imagine this is young Robbie you've been telling me about. Hi, Robbie. I'm Raymond. Good to meet you.”

Robbie took his hand and managed a shake thing.

“You come over here a lot do you?” Masters began.

“Some. Mostly mornings to work out with Jimmy.”

"I hear you live across the woods from here."

"Yeah."

"When I was your age I used to dream of having a woods to play in. I was raised in the city. You're pretty lucky to have woods all to yourself."

"Yeah. It's a lot of fun. You can come and play in it with me sometime if you want to."

"I just may take you up on that. Are there hunters you have to be careful about?"

"Not supposed to be. It's still in the city limits. Can't hunt in the city limits."

"That's right. I guess I forgot. Ever any folks out just shooting targets?"

"Naw. Not much. They usually go out to the range by the lake for that. They'd get into trouble if they were caught doing it in these woods. It's a funny law, though."

"Funny? Why is that?" Masters asked.

"Well, I guess it was okay for Mr. Ellington to shoot in his own private range right beside the woods but it's not okay to do it in the woods."

"I can see how that could be confusing. Did you see Mr. Ellington shooting very often?"

"Never. Well, unless you count the time he let the Williams kid shoot."

"When was that?"

"Saturday after lunch. I watched 'em from my tree house. It's right over there but I've got it camouflaged so good nobody can hardly ever pick it out."

"I sure can't pick it out," Masters said, shading his eyes and giving the area a serious once over. "Maybe someday you can show it to me."

"You mean you want to get up in it?" Robbie asked clearly disturbed at the prospect.

"Oh, no. I'd just like to see it. I'll bet you have it fixed up really nice."

"It's great, all right. I'll be glad to show you."

"That same afternoon, Saturday, did you see Jimmy leave?"

"Yeah. He left right after lunch in the truck. It was before the Williams kid got here."

“Did you know where he was going?”

“He said he had to run an errand for Mr. Ellington, way over to Cartersville. He didn’t get back ‘til after four, I’d say.”

“Being so close, you probably knew the Ellington’s and Miss Joan pretty well, then.”

“Kinda, but not really. I mostly came to see Jimmy and Gramps.”

“What did you think of Mr. Ellington, just from what little you did observe, you know?”

“He was okay. Sometimes he’d give me money to do stuff for him.”

Jimmy seemed surprised. Masters noticed.

“Did he pay pretty well?”

“Yeah, I’ll say.”

As soon as it was said, he stopped in his tracks as if he had let a cat out of the proverbial bag.

“Well, I’m glad to hear he took good care of those who worked for him.”

The boy was relieved Masters hadn’t pressed. It was intentional of course but Jimmy didn’t understand that.

“I didn’t know he paid you to help him. What did you do for him?” Jimmy asked.

Robbie didn’t answer.

Masters intervened.

“Maybe it was just a private thing between Robbie and Mr. Ellington. Is that how it was, Robbie? Just a private thing?”

“Yes, Sir. That’s how it was. Private.”

“Well, I don’t know about you folks, but I’m ready for some lemonade,” Masters said, attempting to move the conversation in another direction. “And I believe I saw some in the refrigerator. What do you say?”

“You guys go ahead,” Jimmy suggested. “I need to put the glider inside. I’ll catch up in a bit.”

It was a move designed to separate Robby from Jimmy, if only for a few minutes.

“I suppose you were helping Mr. Ellington with his special project last Saturday or, let’s see, was it Friday?”

Masters, the Grand Duke of fishing trips, was at it again.

"It was Saturday. How did you know? I thought it was a secret."

"I live up on the hill there. It's hard to miss what's going on down here. I guess I'm just kind of a nosey old man."

Robbie looked up at Masters and smiled as if they had just shared a private joke.

"And when did he contact you – ask you to help him?"

"Friday morning after me and Jimmy got done jogging. Jimmy always goes and takes a shower right away and he needs to. He really smells. I can sweat and sweat and I still don't smell." He sniffed his own armpit as if to offer proof. "Jimmy says that'll start after my hormones kick in."

Amused, Masters turned the conversation back toward the case.

"I saw the spike." he went on, casually. "Nice job."

"Thanks. I didn't miss a single time."

"That was getting on in the afternoon, wasn't it?"

"Yeah. It was about a quarter to five. I had to be home by five."

"And earlier in the day you . . . I forget what you were doing."

Robbie got quite confidential.

"Mr. Ellington got Jimmy a new glider and as soon as I saw Jimmy leave in the truck, he had me come over and hide it up in the tree by the window. It was a great present. He was going to give Jimmy clues and make him track them down, sort of like a game. Jimmy and Mr. Ellington both like games."

"You say he paid pretty well, did he?"

Robbie pulled out a twenty-dollar bill.

"I'll say. Twenty bucks just for hiding the glider. Then he gave me another twenty when he told me not to tell. I gave that one to Dad. He wouldn't have believed that I made forty dollars in one day. I plan to give him the other one next week."

"What a generous lad you are, Robbie," Masters said.

"Me and Dad, we take good care of each other. Dad used to work here some as the handyman before Jimmy started full time. That's when I was a baby. He don't have nothing regular, now, but he always works when he can. We

don't have much but we got a good thing together. The lady from Family Services don't seem to understand that. She keeps trying to take me away from him. She just don't understand how good it really is."

Masters tucked away that unanticipated piece of information for future investigation.

"Did he always pay you when you helped him?"

"Yeah. Never that much though. He even paid me sometimes when I didn't help him. At first, I told him I couldn't take it if I hadn't earned it. He said it was like a prepayment plan. That someday when he needed my help on a big project I'd have already been partly paid. That seemed to make it okay.

"When would he pay you for not doing anything?"

"One night last summer I was – well, this isn't a very nice thing to tell, really. I climbed up the tree by the den to look in. I don't even know why for sure. I'd never been in there and it looked like such a great place, I guess. Anyway, I was a little too close to the window – it was open – when Mr. Ellington came back into the room. I tried to hide in the shadow but he had already seen me, I guess. Funny what he done, then. He walked over to the window and looked out, not at me, but up into the sky at the moon. He started talking – all real calm and relaxed like. He said something like, 'That's a real pretty moon tonight, don't you agree, Robbie?' I was so shocked I was answering back before I even thought about it. Pretty soon, we were having this conversation, just like we was friends or something. We talked for ten or fifteen minutes. He seemed really nice. When he was ready to stop, he reached in his pocket and pulled out a dollar bill. He said, 'Thanks for your good conversation. Treat yourself to an ice cream. Come back again sometime.'

"Then he kind of turned back toward me and pulled out a five. He said, 'Let's just keep our talks a secret between the two of us. People might think it was funny, you and me talking, you know.' For six bucks, I'd keep just about any secret. I never told anybody 'til now. I did the right thing, didn't I?"

"You sure did. Don't worry about that. So, you and Mr. Ellington had some more talks?"

“Oh, yeah. We had lots of them. Just during the good weather. He never invited me inside. I always just sat in the tree. That wouldn’t work in the rain or sleet, ya know.”

“Sure. That makes sense. And Jimmy didn’t even know?”

“Nobody knew. Like I said, I can keep a secret, good.”

“Well, I’ll tell you what. You’ve been so much help to me today that I think I just might have a spare twenty for you myself,” Masters announced at last.

He took out his money clip and tugged a twenty free, planting it firmly into the boy’s palm.

“Wow! Thanks. But I don’t see how I helped you. You already knew everything – except about the talks.”

“It’s called confirmation, Robbie. What an investigator thinks happened has to be confirmed by an eye witness.”

“And I’m the eye witness! That’s important, huh?”

“That’s very important and you have been an excellent eye witness - one who looks like he could really use that lemonade about now.”

It was a warm smile of newly kindled friendship that passed between the youngster and the old detective. They both hoped that there would be many more such smiles in their futures.

When the refreshments were over, Robbie and Jimmy went into the workshop. Masters and Little walked to the car. Masters’ next declaration astonished the detective.

“Well, I know who killed Lester Ellington. I’ve just not yet figured out how to clear all those who didn’t.”

CHAPTER SIX: Day Four: Wednesday

It had been arranged that the three primary suspects – Joan, Jimmy, and Brandon – would all take polygraph tests on Wednesday morning. Masters had a second list of suspects for later examination if that would seem necessary. The fact that each was so eager to submit to the lie detector, led Detective Little to dismiss the activity as unnecessary.

Masters cautioned him.

“Remember the brain-teaser books, Little. We have a game player in our crowd and a game player just might be eager to take on such an ultimate challenge as the polygraph. They each had access to the books. They ended up in Joan’s apartment. They were covered with Jimmy’s fingerprints and Brandon readily admits being in and out of Lester’s den on numerous occasions. Brandon is an excellent chess player. Joan is fascinated by jigsaw puzzles and cryptograms. Jimmy is into word games. If it comes down to this all being a game, the polygraph results may end up being crucial.”

Suddenly, Little mustered renewed enthusiasm for the morning’s activities. Joan was scheduled for nine o’clock, Jimmy for ten and Brandon for eleven. There was no reason for Masters to be present; a polygraph expert from the state police department was to conduct the sessions. Tuesday afternoon and evening, Masters, with Little’s ‘assistance’ had prepared detailed lists of information they wanted the technician to explore. Many items were the same for each suspect including the final two questions. Were you a party to the killing of Lester Ellington? “Did you, by your own hand, kill

Lester Ellington?”

Little would have settled for just those two. Masters thought it was crucial to explore other aspects of the evidence; especially the explanations each had given for the seemingly incriminating evidence against him. The list for Brandon was many times longer than for the other two. It was why he had been scheduled last.

As was his custom, Masters had jotted down, for his own amusement, the answers he thought each suspect would give to each question, along with an indication as to whether the polygraph would register it as true or false. He was seldom wrong. Masters was an accomplished game player, too! A successful morning to Little would be for two of them to come through the tests free and clear and the third found to be the obvious killer even though that thought saddened him. He had come to truly like each of the suspects. A successful morning for Masters would be defined in a very different way.

Little and Masters had Ben bring them up to speed on the final few lab reports.

“I may repeat a few. Just stop me if I do. I’m not sure which ones you may not have received. The report on the prints from the ‘Locked Door Murder Mysteries’ book showed the Williams boy’s on top and Mr. Funks under them.”

“No other prints?” Masters asked.

“Well, there were two sets of unknowns. The lab boys think those were made in the manufacturing and packaging of the book.”

“Seems reasonable. Strange there are none from Lester. Assuming it is his book, he handled it very carefully from the moment he received it.”

“Oh, it’s Lester’s, all right. They found a packing slip tucked into the pages near the back. It was on thin paper. Wouldn’t have been seen if one of the lab techs hadn’t been thumbing through it for his own amusement. It was purchased by Lester Ellington two weeks ago.”

“Bingo. Give those lab boys a promotion.”

To Little’s way of thinking, Masters seemed pleased beyond the importance of the information.

Ben continued.

“The boy’s diary – I guess guys call them journals – had

only his prints and two other partials. They said it was like the book had been wiped clean a few weeks ago. The partials belongs our friend Pete Phillips.”

“Double Bingo!!” Masters said and then quickly asked, “Were there any other traces of Phillips in that room?”

“A half dozen big beautiful prints on the desk, the file cabinet, the wastepaper basket and the bookcase.”

Suddenly Little seemed pleased.

“Ben, we can have the ferret arrested for illegal trespass. I’m sure John will press charges.”

Ben made a note, then continued.

“That glider we brought in had lots of prints on it, like you’d expect since it had been on display in a store. But, the boys determined the layering of the three sets we’re interested in. It’s the kid’s – Robbie’s – on the bottom, Brandon’s next and Jimmy’s on top. That seems to verify the sequence of events as related by the each of them. We located the store where it had been purchased. Lester was the one who bought it. The clerk IDed his photo immediately. Speaking of that, the bow you asked about – the one that Brandon says Lester gave to him - same store, same day, different clerk. No doubt on that ID either. Paid cash for both items. Didn’t examine either one and had them sacked before he touched them. Strange behavior like that helps a clerk remember.”

“Then there’s the scotch tape that was on that latex glove. It has a partial from Lester of all people. It was on the end as if left over from some previous time.” Masters nodded as though it was what he expected. Little nodded because Masters nodded. Ben waited for the nodding to stop and then continued.

“The scissors from Lester’s desk had traces of latex on them. The lab can’t say more than that – I guess latex is latex. But the paint on the letter opener is definitely the same as that on the wall.”

“I wonder how they can be so sure.” Masters asked, not expecting an answer.

Ben went on.

“It says here there were two layers of paint on the opener – the new and the older one underneath. Two different brands that were manufactured five years apart.

They feel confident that's not a coincidental combination."

"Your lab boys are good, I'll give them that, Detective," Masters said with a tone of complete approval.

"About the window frame in Lester's bedroom, there was a significant powder deposit on the left side of the outer frame about five feet from the floor. Actually, it was on the outer frame like the window had to have been completely open to receive it.

"The slug from the lamp pole contained glass fragments from the type of light bulb used in that socket. Now, these are really interesting findings," Ben said, editorializing a bit on the report's contents. "The non-murder weapon had five bullets left in it. There were no prints on them but the lead ends of each had been all scratched up and there were lead particles found around the upper edges of each chamber." He looked up from the report. "I'd say some really nervous person was trying to load that gun - shaking so that he - or she - couldn't slide them in cleanly."

"Good observation, Ben," Masters said.

"Then, in the other gun - the murder weapon - five of the bullets had the Williams boy's prints on them but the sixth was wiped cleaner than a whistle. Now, here's the best part. That sixth, clean bullet, was all scraped up just like the ones in the other gun. Now, don't that beat all!"

Little spoke.

"If Brandon's the killer, it clearly wasn't an impulsive act. He didn't just storm into the den, pick up the gun and shoot the man. He loaded the gun first."

"Unless," Masters said with a long sigh, "The boy went home after loading the gun on Saturday afternoon - like he said - looked at the letter about the suit, became enraged, went back to Lester's after dark and, in a fit of anger, used the gun to shoot the man. He then locked the door from the inside and crawled out the window allowing it to lock itself from the inside."

"So, you do think Brandon's our killer," Little said. "What a terrible shame."

"Let's wait for the polygraph results. In the meantime, I need to take a walk and clear my head," Masters announced getting to his feet.

His walk was a short one – across the street to Alice’s place. Masters didn’t want to be at the station as the suspects arrived for their tests.

“Breakfast or Danish?” came Alice’s question as he entered the café.

“Both!” When he had things on his mind, the old inspector found it was helpful to eat until he was visited by enlightenment. On some of his more difficult cases that had taken days!

“Thank you, ma’am,” he said playfully as she brought his coffee.

“So, I hear it wasn’t Ellington who blew his own brains out after all. Who do you think it was? No lack of suspects, I imagine.”

“Who would be on your list this morning, my dear?”

“Well, Miss Joan stands to inherit everything, unless Mary already gave her half to Jimmy. Either way, she’ll get a bundle. Jimmy had nothing to gain – money wise – either way. Revenge, maybe, but he is basically a pussycat. After those two, just line up everybody who ever had a business dealing with the old boy and then, follow those with everybody who ever worked for him. That’s a line that’ll stretch around the block, I’ll tell ya that for sure.”

“So, your money’s on Miss Joan?”

“I’m not bettin’ this one. Way too many people hated his guts.”

“How about you? Did you hate his guts, too?”

“Big time! He foreclosed on this diner sixteen years ago. I’m sure you know that by now. I missed four payments. Mother was in the hospital dying and I couldn’t do both - pay the mortgage and give her what she needed. He wouldn’t even talk to me about an extension. That’s when he sold it to Bill Barton, his attorney. Bill’s been a good landlord. I have no complaints there. My beef’ is with Ellington. Heartless ass! That’s what he was. I would have had this place free and clear by now if his wasn’t for him.”

There was a quivering in her voice – the kind that is often a prelude to tears – (or murder?).

She strode off toward the kitchen.

“Full or short stack?” she called back over her shoulder.

“Full, very full, please.”

The door opened behind Masters and someone entered. He turned to look. It was Jimmy. He walked right back toward the kitchen, apparently not noticing Masters. He took a seat at the counter closest to the kitchen. When Alice backed through the swinging door with Master’s breakfast, he raised his hands and yelled, “Surprise!”

Alice stopped in her tracks. She managed to say something to him, so low that Masters couldn’t hear. Jimmy said, “I’ll be here.” He turned on the stool to follow her with his eyes as she moved across the room toward Masters. When Jimmy spotted him, there at the front booth, he followed, apparently happy to see him.

He stood beside Alice as she deposited the plates. He slipped his arm around her waist.

“This used to be my best girlfriend, Mr. Masters. She was like a mother to me back when I really needed one.”

He looked down into her smiling face.

“I’ve not been a very attentive son since I’ve grown up, have I Alice?”

Alice shrugged and tilted her head, still in shock from his being there.

“Well, I have decided that once I get this Lester thing behind me, Alice and I are going to be more like family again, if she’ll have me.”

Alice was still speechless, so Masters spoke for her.

“If I were a betting man, which I am, I’d bet she’d have you back in a Kremlin minute, wouldn’t you my dear?”

Alice nodded and warmed into Jimmy’s arm.

“You two go back and get caught up. I’ll be just fine her. Well, you might leave me a coffee pot and an extra syrup – and perhaps some extra pats of butter for the Danish.”

“I only have a few minutes. I have to take a polygraph test at the station at ten. Once that’s over, I’ll come back and we can make some plans.”

He accompanied her to the rear of the room where they talked quietly.

Masters enjoyed his breakfast – every morsel! He was pleased at Jimmy’s homecoming. It appeared the young man had the right idea about what the good life was all about. And,

provided he came out of this a free man, it seemed he would be able to take a stab at it. At five before ten, he kissed Alice very sweetly on the cheek and went across the street.

Alice returned with a fresh pot. Masters spoke first.

“Wasn’t that a nice thing to have Jimmy drop in like that. It’s obvious that he cares about you.”

“Who’d have known?” she said, collapsing into the booth.

Her bearing baffled Masters. Rather than being elated or comforted, she seemed to be lifeless and downhearted.

“What’s wrong, my dear,” Masters asked, reaching across and putting his big hand on top of hers.

“Just confused, I guess. I never dreamed he’d be back in my life, ya know?”

Masters didn’t press. He was not totally surprised at her reaction. She got up and walked slowly toward the rear of the room.

The next twenty-four hours was going to prove very interesting there in the little village of Rossville, New York.

* * *

At a few minutes before one, o’clock Brandon was finally finished. Masters was in the waiting area to greet him as he exited the office. He extended his hand and Brandon seemed happy to see a familiar face.

“I expected your parents would be here,” Masters said.

“I asked them to stay at home. I figured it would be tough enough without thinking of them being all uncomfortable out here in this gosh awful place.”

“I can understand that. Police stations always have given me the willies.” Masters shivered at the thought.

Brandon mirrored his movement and they chuckled.

“How do you feel about it? How do you think it went?” Masters inquired.

“I feel really good. I did my Deep Mind relaxation and visualization just before we started and felt really centered through the whole thing. I have to wonder who thought up some of those God-awful questions, though. They were enough to make you feel guilty even if you weren’t.”

Masters hurried along from that question.

“I’m glad you feel good about it.”

“When will I know if I passed or whatever it is I had to do?”

“We’ll have the technician’s preliminary impressions in a few minutes. If there are any problems, you might be called back for another session. If not, I’ll give you a call later this afternoon.”

“I want to thank you for all the help you’ve been, even if you have seemed like the one trying to put me away for the rest of my life. I overheard Mom and Dad talking last night about how hard this must be on you – you being a friend of our family and everything. I’d been so caught up in my own side of it all I didn’t even consider that. You alright?”

“I’m alright? Thank you for asking. You run on home and be with your parents. I’ll call either way.”

“Either way?”

“If you passed or if we need you to come back tomorrow.”

“Oh. Okay. Yeah, I better be on my way. I am absolutely starved. Mom always takes that as a good sign.”

Masters was joined by Little, who invited him into the conference room to meet with the technician.

“These were strange sessions,” the little man began as he cleaned his wire-rimmed glasses.

It was a beginning, which did not fill Masters with the sense of relief he was expecting.

“How’s that?” Masters asked almost cautiously.

“Let’s go over them one at a time.”

He took a bulky roll of the polygraph paper out of his over-sized briefcase and began unrolling it as though it were a scroll in a scene from a Cecil B. DeMille movie.

This is Miss Goodman. She was the most nervous of the lot. It took a long time to establish a base line. See all this erratic movement at the beginning. Once she settled down it all went rather rapidly.” He rolled to the end, pausing to ‘hmm’ and ‘ahhh’ several times.

“Here, this begins the ‘aid or abet’ question and here’s the ‘murder by her hands’ question.”

“Is she our killer?” Little asked, unwilling to put up with anymore suspense.

“I’d say there’s about a 99.9 chance out of 100 that she

is not.”

Masters studied the chart for a few moments longer, then motioned that he had finished.

“This is Mr. Arroyo. He was cool right from the start. He joked with me about all the connections. Said he was ticklish. Nice young man.”

Again, he scrolled from beginning to end pausing here and there to circle things with his pencil.

“Well? Well!” Little said.

“Not a chance in hell this man ever even killed a rabbit. He’s certainly not your murderer.”

“It’s Brandon then,” Little said clearly distressed at the prospect. “I was so afraid of that. His poor parents. Such a waste.”

“Let’s see what, specifically, the man has to tell us,” Masters said.”

“Brandon was a real corker, he was,” the technician began. “After I had him hooked up, he asked for one minute to ‘fix his head’. I figured he meant he had a crick in his neck or something like that but that wasn’t it. He closed his eyes, began taking slow, deep breaths, and real gradual like, this serene look appeared on his face. He looked like an angel I tell you – the most confident angel that ever wore a mop of sandy hair. I’ve never seen anything like it. Well, then he opened his eyes and just nodded at me like he was signaling he was ready.”

“And?” Little asked.

“And he answered every question without hesitation. When I’d repeat one, he’d get that little smile of his and just go ahead and answer it again – always just like the last time.”

Then quite confidentially and with an awkward wink, he addressed Masters.

“The boy does have Playboys under his bed, Mr. Masters.”

“And in the end, is there any doubt in your mind about the conclusions you can reach from his session?” Masters asked.

“None whatsoever. He’s no more guilty than Detective Little, there.”

Little looked bewildered. He started to speak but found

he had nothing to say. Masters stood up and shook the technician's hand.

"No need for a call back on any of them, then?"

"None whatsoever. This is the most honest, cleanest cut, most cooperative bunch of desperados I've ever examined."

He giggled as his own little joke.

"I still wonder what that thing was the kid did. You could just seem him . . . transforming before your eyes. It was a kick, I'll tell you that."

Little and Masters left the room.

"What about that mind fix that Brandon did?" Little asked. "Could that have messed up the results?"

"It is an exercise that clears your mind clear down to your heels. I'll show you about it sometime. It is a way to control emotional responses. I've never known it to be used to beat a polygraph, though."

"So, what are you saying? Did he or didn't he falsify the record by doing that?"

"Perhaps or perhaps not," was Masters' response.

It was of no help to Little who was more confused than ever. The situation tickled Masters.

"If you would be kind enough, Detective, would you see to it that all the people on this list are invited – make that required – to be at Lester's den at nine o'clock tomorrow morning. I will clear it all up for you and for them, at that time. Now, I'm off to deliver the good news to Joan, Jimmy and Brandon. You don't mind if I do that, do you, Detective?"

His head still spinning, Little twirled his hands and said, "No, that's fine. I'll get right on the list. You realize there are folks on this list that haven't even been a part of our investigation - Alice from the café and Robbie's father?"

"Yes, Little. I made out the list, remember?"

He felt a refreshing sprightliness in his gait as he stepped off toward the café. Jimmy and Alice were deep in conversation at the counter. Masters merely stuck his head in the door and offered a thumbs-up.

"I passed? I passed!"

"With flying colors," Masters added. "The two of you will be receiving a summons to appear at Mr. Ellington's Den

tomorrow morning at nine. You'll get all your answers then."

"A summons? Me too?" Alice asked, appearing more than a little concerned. "Who'll run this joint? I can't just close down. What'll my regulars think?"

"They'll probably just think you're very important to be invited for the unveiling," Masters explained.

"Unveiling?" she asked?

Jimmy explained.

"For the unveiling of the killer."

He turned toward Masters,

"We'll be there. I'll handle things here."

The walk to the Williams residence took ten minutes. Hardly anything in Rossville was more than ten minutes away from Main Street – all three blocks of it. He rang the bell and was soon invited in.

"You passed, my boy. Not a single blemish on the entire record. The technician was quite impressed with both your speed and your candor."

The Williams family collapsed onto a loving, family, embrace. Tears flowed freely. Words weren't needed. Later, after a few minutes of small talk, Brandon approached Masters, a large brown envelope in his hand.

"Dad explained that you were undoubtedly the one who formed the questions for that polygraph test. I'm sorry about what I said before at the station and I wanted you to have this as a little 'please-forgive-me' present that I fixed up for you. You can open it later."

The boy was so serious. Masters had to wonder what was up. He said good-bye and was soon out on the front walk. Intrigued, he paused to remove the contents of the envelope – a Playboy opened to Miss July. The whoop of delight forthcoming from the stout old gentleman, jiggling there on the sidewalk, was heard throughout the village. (The several calls to the police station reporting a ground tremor in the vicinity were not taken lightly.)

The trek upgrade toward the Ellington's and his own cottage beyond, became a leisurely walk. He took time to speak with the townspeople, petted a few cats and stopped from time to time to admire the view of the low-lying rolling hills that surrounded the valley. Masters thought the lush

softness of those hills symbolized the goodness in humanity and preferred them to the stark, sheer, less comforting, cold peaks of the West.

He had one stop left on his itinerary. Joan was sitting in a lawn chair on the back patio, the phone clasped in her hand.

“Mr. Masters. I didn’t expect to see you. I thought there would just be a call. Does this mean bad news. I was so nervous I came close to vomiting all over that confounded contraption.”

He stretched his arms out to his sides.

“Could this big teddy bear be bringing you anything but good news?”

“Really. Oh. I am so relieved! I mean I knew I was innocent but still, I was so nervous. I couldn’t think straight. I’ve just been sitting here thinking how badly I must have performed. I’m not used to performing badly.”

“Well, you are officially off the hook, Miss Joan. You may even want to stop strangling the telephone.”

She smiled and quickly put it down.

“Coffee, tea, me?” she said acting silly as folks do when met with sudden relief.

“I am not a tea drinker. I have just had some coffee and I would never take advantage of a girl in your suddenly vulnerable condition no matter how attractive she might be. I would, however, like to stroll out to the end of the back yard for a moment if I may.”

“Certainly. Back yard strolls just happen to be free today.”

“By the way, there will be a gathering of the cast of characters related to Lester’s demise in his den at nine in the morning. I hope that meets with your approval.”

“I’ll have things ready. That will be fine,” she said.

He bowed slightly and turned, making his way across the lawn. Well before the woods, he stopped and made a beckoning signal with his entire right arm. He repeated it several times. He saw the leaves in one of the nearby trees begin to quiver and soon Robbie appeared on the run to meet him.”

“How’d you know I was up there, Mr. M?”

“I think you and I have ESP or something. Somehow, I just knew you were there.”

“Gee, that’s special, huh?”

“Very special, indeed.”

The boy all quite naturally put his arm around Masters waist and fixed his gaze upward toward his new friend’s face. Masters draped his arm around the boy’s shoulder and directed their walk to a spot where they could observe the Catalpa tree and the den window.

Joan could see them but not hear the conversation. She saw Masters point toward things and then Robby, excitedly making indescribable gyrations with his hands, but in the same general direction. After a few minutes, Masters patted the lad on his head, handed him something from his pocket and sent him back toward the woods.

After looking the boy into the safety of the trees and underbrush, Masters waved his good-bye to Joan and strolled around the north side of the house on his way home. She heard him whistling as he went. She wished she had asked him about the others and how they had done in their polygraph sessions. She would just have to wait like the rest.

As Masters reached the road, Jimmy pulled up beside him in his truck.

“Got a minute, Mr. M.?”

“Certainly, Jimmy. I always have time for you.”

“Get in. I have something to show you.”

Jimmy pulled off to the side of the road and reached across to open the door.

With some effort, Masters climbed into the cab.

“What’s up?”

“I just got my mail. There’s a letter from Mr. Ellington. It was postmarked last Thursday in San Francisco. I suppose he arranged to have someone else remail it for him – well you’ll see. You’ll never believe what it says. At least, I hardly can. Here. This envelope was inside a bigger brown one.”

He removed the envelope from his shirt pocket and handed it to Masters. On the outside, it said simply: “To Jimmy. DO NOT OPEN until I am dead. I will trust you to honor that request. Lester Ellington.”

Masters removed the three, hand written sheets and

read aloud. “Jimmy: Since I am certain that my life is soon to be over, I feel the need to say several things to you. Please understand that I loved my wife, Mary, more than life itself. She came to the point – perhaps rightly so – that she could no longer love me. I accepted that, even though it tore me apart a little more each day that I lived. She deserved to be loved and treated like the lady that she was. She deserved companionship and to have someone for whom she could care deeply. Mary, as you know, had profound physical needs. It has given me great comfort to know that, in you, she found so much of what she needed. I want and need to thank you for the respectful and tender way in which you treated Mary. I could tell the night you battered me into unconsciousness that you cherished her like I did. I offer my condolences to you, now, in your time of grief over her passing. To confirm what you will undoubtedly come to suspect, the money you received each Monday was from me – the only way I knew to repay you. I’ve never been good at saying thank you, face to face. I wish for you a full and happy life. Lester Ellington”

“Can you believe that?” Jimmy asked, still reeling in disbelief.

“Well, I felt sure he was the source of your anonymous weekly payments. It was something Doc McCullum related to me about that incident on your nineteenth birthday. The thing that surprises me is the depth of emotion and sincerity that pervades this letter. He truly was a man of two minds”

“Two minds?” Jimmy didn’t understand.

“He loved or he hated. There was no in-between.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Day Five: The Two Minds of Lester Ellington

Masters arrived in the back yard promptly at eight thirty where Robbie and his father, Robert Carter, were waiting for him. After the usual get acquainted handshakes and small talk, Masters explained to Mr. Carter that Robbie had agreed, pending his father's approval, to help him in a demonstration a bit later in the morning. Mr. Carter consented. Joan met them at the front door. They went inside and climbed the two flights of stairs to the third floor.

Robert Carter's handsome features were hidden – distorted even – by the countenance of a man who had experienced far less than the best life had to offer. An eighth-grade dropout, he had spent his life working at whatever menial jobs were thrown his way. Had it not been for Robbie, his life would have ceased with the premature death of his beloved wife five years before. From his brief association with Robbie, Masters postulated that Robert was far more intelligent than his station in life had allowed him to demonstrate. He most certainly had been an able father. His son was a positive delight!

Joan directed them to a storage room from which wooden, folding chairs were obtained and set in two rows across the northwest corner of the sizable den – diagonally opposite the window. There were thirteen invited guests. The gathering was to serve two purposes. First, the will of Lester Ellington would be read by his attorney. Then, Masters would demonstrate the way in which the death had occurred and ultimately reveal the killer.

Detective Little was the next to arrive. To say that he was 'a titter' would not merely be old fashioned, it would describe his appearance to a tee. He remained by the door assuming the role of host, as if it were the social gala of the year.

William Barton, Lester's attorney arrived wearing a three-piece black suit with red tie and carrying a slender black brief case. He took a seat at the desk, assuming (as lawyers are wont to do) that he was to be in charge.

Jimmy escorted Alice into the room. Her dark blue dress and matching pillbox hat and heels seemed to fit the somber aura she presented. It was not the Alice of the café. She appeared to feel uncomfortably out of place. She fidgeted, twisting her white, lacy handkerchief. She acknowledged Masters' greeting but her gaze was not allowed to catch his. Jimmy looked handsome as usual. Wearing dark blue slacks, he sported a bright red, full cut, long sleeve silk shirt and a smile to match. To that point, he and Masters seemed the only two of the lot who felt at ease.

The Williams arrived as a family, appearing to feel uneasy about being in the room, which had played such a distressing role in their anguish during the past several days. Brandon pulled out a chair for his mother at the end of the back row and helped her be seated. They each wore a dark suit, Brandon with an open-collared blue shirt; his father with a blue and white striped tie. Doris wore a plain white blouse and a simple, feather hat.

Phyllis Waverly, the prosecuting attorney then arrived, her black brief case unintentionally matching her black pantsuit and dark rimmed glasses. She was not unattractive but was one of those people who manifested a disheveled look regardless of how hard she might try to appear otherwise. She took a seat at the end of the front row. Not wanting to miss a single word, she took out her tape recorder and made ready to capture the entire proceeding.

Finally, Joan returned from down stairs where she had been greeting the guests and directing them to the den. At her heels was Pete Phillips wearing what was perhaps his only suit and tie. He slipped into a chair close to the door, his eyes darting about the room as if there were soon to be a quiz

concerning its contents.

As the striking of nine wafted up the stairwell from the Grandfather's Clock in the entryway, a policeman in the hall closed the door. Masters rose and addressed the group.

"Thank you all for coming and being so prompt. We shall not take a great deal of your time. As you are aware, there are two purposes for our get-together this morning. First, Mr. Barton will read Mr. Ellington's will. Then I will recreate Lester's death in the only way that satisfactorily incorporates all of the evidence and I will divulge his killer."

He nodded at Mr. Barton and took a seat between Jimmy and Robbie.

The attorney remained seated, removing his half-frame glasses long enough to briefly address the group.

"The will is short and to the point. It was Lester Ellington's request that his will not be made public until after the cause of his death had been determined. The authorities inform me they are satisfied that has now been accomplished. There are several curious references in the will that I think will be clarified later as Mr. Masters provides his explanation of the events surrounding Mr. Ellington's death."

Glasses again in place, he began to read. His monotone seemed intentional, as if providing some measure of protection against becoming emotionally involved.

"This is my final will and testament as witnessed and attested to by my attorney and friend, William Barton.

I make no apology for the way I have lived my life. There is only one thing I would change and you all know that involves my own irresponsibility, which led to the death of my son, George.

My estate shall be distributed in the following manner:

To Robert Carter and his son Robbie who was as close to a son as I have had the past thirty-five years, I leave all payments from my life insurance policy. I assume the amount of that sum will ultimately be determined by Raymond Masters.

To Alice Baxter. I have repurchased your café and I leave it free and clear to you.

To my sister-in-law, Joan Goodman, I leave one half of all that remains of my estate with the one stipulation below.

I leave the other half to Jimmy Arroyo on the same stipulation, which is, that Joan and Jimmy will share and both occupy the house. Otherwise, that entire sum will go to a charity to be determined solely by Dr. James McCullum.

Should it be determined that I have died by my own hand, my attorney is directed to establish a \$150,000.00 fund to be used only for the college education of Brandon Williams. Should it be determined that I have been murdered, that same sum shall be given outright and immediately to John and Doris Williams.

The marble chess set goes to my most worthy adversary, Raymond Masters.”

There was an immediate hum of hushed conversations among the guests. Masters paused to let it run its necessary course before rising and facing the group.

“As we have seen, Lester Ellington was not entirely an evil man. He was, in fact, a man of two minds. One of them was exceedingly sick and twisted. That part of him hated himself so completely that it could not be consciously admitted. Had it been, he would have been unable to allow himself to go on living. He hated himself for what he had allowed to happen to his son and he hated himself for how that irresponsibility had affected his wife. His mind took its revenge by inflicting terrible pain on his body targeting, as it usually does, his most logical weakness. In his case, it was his arthritis, magnifying that suffering tenfold over what was physically reasonable.

“Unable to consciously admit his part in Mary’s alcoholism and her death at its hands, his mind required him to find someone else to blame. The most convenient, and therefore the most likely, nominee became the boy involved in the traffic accident – Brandon Williams. In Lester Ellington’s most honest, conscious opinion, there was no doubt that Brandon had killed his wife. The evidence to the contrary was never considered.

“When Brandon was not charged with the homicide, Lester could not accept the fact that the boy had gotten away

with it. So, he took the lad's punishment into his own hands. The most just punishment, according to Lester's impaired way of thinking, was to irrefutably implicate him in another death – Lester's own. The evidence against Brandon would be so complete, so tight, so incriminating, that no jury could help but convict him. For Lester Ellington, that, would be justice.

“Superimpose onto this scenario Lester's penchant for game playing – for mind games. He was an accomplished game player – one of the best I have ever encountered. Undoubtedly, he fancied himself unbeatable. He nearly was. In a matter of a week – two at the most – Lester's brilliant intellect created the ultimate frame. It was planned perfectly down the minutest detail – well there was one tiny error, which I shall point out momentarily. As we shall see, though, the major fallacy in his undertaking had nothing at all to do with his perfectly engineered plan. It had to do with the incorruptible, virtuous, guiltless minds of the several suspects. When confronted by the polygraph, it became immediately obvious that all of the impressive and convincing evidence to the contrary, none of these good people had committed the crime. Sometimes people can train their minds to beat the polygraph. If Lester considered that at all, he counted on the fact that the prosecution would be able to turn that against his prime target – a student of Deep Mind Mastery.

“Lester engaged the assistance of Pete Phillips, who skillfully supplied the information required about Brandon. He found that Brandon was a good, helpful, forgiving, often gullible, human being. He learned of his interest in bow shooting and mental games, himself. He learned that Brandon was a bright lad, fully capable – at least on the intellectual level – of planning and carrying out the type of plot, Lester envisioned. He discovered his ace in the hole – Brian's practice of mental control. Without Mr. Phillips help, the plan could not have been born.”

Masters turned toward Phillips, who was, by that time beaming broadly at the flowery things the old inspector had been saying about him.

“It may or may not amount to provable conspiracy, Mr. Phillips, but your prints were found in Brandon's room and that is certainly going to get you arrested for unlawful entry.”

The door beside Phillips opened and two officers removed him from the room. Little clapped noiselessly to himself. Masters continued.

“Lester approached Brandon, utilizing two of the boy’s primary areas of vulnerability – Lester’s apology for having accused him in Mary’s death and presenting himself as a lonely old man, who occasionally needed someone to lean on. If Brandon Williams is anything, it is forgiving and helpful. He gained Brandon’s trust and systematically led the lad through all the steps and activities that would ultimately prove his guilt in Lester’s death.

“Jimmy’s and Brandon’s stories are the honest and genuine story of the events. Lester invited Brandon over to shoot the six-shooter at a time when he had sent Jimmy off the premises and at a time when Joan was not home. He had arranged her outing to the City merely to get her out of the way while he executed the several facets of his plan. He had Brandon reload the gun with bullets that had more kick than those he had been firing. His plan required as much recoil as the old gun could muster. He had Brandon open the window, thereby leaving his fingerprints in exactly the right place to suggest the boy exited the room by way of the window. He had Brandon ‘rescue’ the glider so his clothing would harbor the telltale Catalpa bark further ‘proving’ he had been in the tree on Saturday. He handed Brandon the key, which Brandon placed in the lock, leaving behind his finger prints.

“After Brandon, had left and Jimmy had returned, Lester had Jimmy close and latch the den window so Jimmy would be able to testify that it had been closed late in the afternoon and that Lester’s hands were so bad he could not have opened it. Later, Lester did open it, undoubtedly with the help of a massive dose of painkiller. He had to pry the latch from the side of the window frame using his letter opener, leaving the matching scars we found on the frame and the latch.

“Earlier, and while Joan was gone, Lester had the room painted to remove past fingerprints, thereby making it easier for the police to find those, which Lester so skillfully allowed to be planted there. The windows had been washed earlier than usual for the same reason. The storm windows had been

removed earlier than usual so the windows in the den and his bedroom could be opened and have direct access to the outside. He bought the book on closed room murders and gave it to Brandon to further implicate him. He bought and presented to Brandon the top of the line bow to lure him into a relationship and to 'buy' the boy's loyalty.

"It became the most significant game of his life, thus the reference in his note to me: "Here's your chance to get even, if you're up to it." I assume it was a reference to his besting me in a chess tournament some years ago. The plan began serving several masters – the destruction of Brian and the besting of Masters. Just how and why he came to see me as his competition I am not sure. It was one of the strange twists his mind took somewhere along the way.

"By Saturday evening, the frame was in place and the trap was set. The letter to Brandon announcing the suit for the wrongful death of Mary had been sent on Thursday so it would arrive early – a day before the murder. It had been sealed and unsealed before it was mailed to make it appear that Brandon had opened it in time to read it and get angry enough to go over and kill Mr. Ellington. The sequence of events then went something like this:

"Lester pulled a latex glove onto his right hand – probably with considerable pain. He fired the bogus murder weapon into the pillow and stashed the pillow and the gaming books in Joan's closet. He probably thought the pillow was safe there and that the tiny bullet hole would not be noticed since the pillow belonged in Joan's apartment. The books needed to be hidden during the initial part of the investigation but later would cast suspicion on Joan – suspicion, which he was certain other evidence would later refute. He needed a cast of suspects so it would have less of the aura of a frame. The gun was fired, of course, to make it appear to be suicide at the beginning. That gun was then placed on the floor where his body would later fall.

"At 8:30 he called Brandon's private line and requested his assistance in mailing the letter. He had carefully and accurately estimated the amount of time Brandon would need to get there on foot. After all, Lester had grown up in Rossville. There was not much about it he did not know.

“At about 8:45 he took the gun that was to be the murder weapon into his bedroom, took careful aim at the yard light, steadying the gun against the left side of the window frame where powder was found, and shot out the bulb. He then reloaded one bullet into the gun, giving it six full chambers. His shaking, pained hands, made it difficult to load and in the process, he was unable to cleanly slip the bullet into the chamber. Instead, the end repeatedly hit against the sharp edge of the chamber scratching the lead end and leaving lead scrapings there.

“At 8:48 he called Jimmy and demanded his immediate attention to the darkened yard light. Upon hanging up he took the window envelope to E. Funk and put it into the mailbox. The powder on the envelope suggests he handled it while he was still wearing the glove after he fired the guns.

“Finished with the glove, and knowing from past experiences that he had difficulty pulling a glove off his sweaty, swollen, hands, he cut it off with the scissors from his desk. Cutting left-handed is never easy for a right handed individual and his arthritis made it all the more difficult. In the process, he nicked the back of his hand and got a speck of blood on the glove – so little he didn’t notice. Through his pain, the nick itself went unnoticed. The glove was then set aside for a few minutes while he made other things ready

“Once Jimmy was up the pole – and it didn’t matter to Lester whether or not he and Brandon saw one another – Brandon arrived exactly on time. There was, in fact, a built-in time cushion of some fifteen minutes from about ten till until five after when Lester knew Jimmy would be outside. Brandon’s arrival didn’t have to be precise – just obvious. Brandon then left by the back lawn into the woods so that Jimmy would not be able to testify as to the time Brandon had exited the scene.

“Shortly after Jimmy had the light working again, Lester took the letter he had written to the police – the one saying Brandon had threatened to kill him – down to the mailbox. Lester’s pain medicine kept his mouth dry, thus the scotch tape was used to seal it rather than licking it. It had to have been delivered to the box after Brandon removed the first one.

“Back in his den, he locked the den door from the inside

using a handkerchief or some such thing to prevent his fingerprint from smudging the one he had so skillfully had Brandon place on it earlier. The glove was off by then since no powder traces were found on the key. He turned it further than necessary so it could not be pushed out from the outside. He wanted the initial look of the scene to be that of a locked room suicide.

“Lester then arranged the ingenious gun-firing set-up, which I will demonstrate with Robbie’s help. As you will soon see, Lester did all of the work, then, the killer merely had to take the one final step that fired the gun. I was led to this discovery by two facts. First, the window shade had been pulled down to within five inches of the bottom of the window. I had to wonder, ‘Why not all the way down?’ You will see presently, why it could not be all the way down. The second discovery I will point out in a moment.”

“At this point, I need Robbie’s help to relate to us some of the things Mr. Ellington engaged him to do.” He motioned to Robbie to come and join him.

Masters helped the boy get started.

“At what time had Mr. Ellington instructed you to arrive that afternoon?”

“He said four-forty-five, exactly.”

“And just before that, Mr. Ellington had you borrow that big rubber band from the shed, is that correct?”

“Yeah. We borrowed it. That’s all. After he used it to play the joke, I was going to return it, Jimmy. Honest I was.”

Jimmy gave the boy a thumbs up and nodded as if to say don’t worry about it.

“And he needed your good help to install it?”

“Yeah. I did that when I did the spike. He never told me what it was all about but he said I shouldn’t tell anybody, because it was part of the surprise for Jimmy. I suppose now that he’s dead it’s okay to tell, isn’t it.”

Masters nodded reassuringly.

“He was real testy about where I should hook the band in the tree. It had to be over a really short but strong stub and he had me change it around three or four times. It had to be straight out from the middle of the den window.”

“What seemed to make the difference about where you

hooked it?" Masters asked.

"He was like Goldilocks."

Masters let his amusement show. He chuckled aloud as he asked, "How was that, Robbie?"

"He didn't want it too tight and he didn't want it too loose. He wanted it just right."

"I see, and I'm sure you were able to get it just right. You must have been quite brave to have crawled way out on those branches like you did."

"I'm a pretty brave kid. You can ask Jimmy. I'm a good climber too. I've done it my whole life out in the woods."

"And which branch did you end up looping it around?"

"Not around really. Just over a short stub."

"He went to the open window and pointed. "It was way out on that single limb – I'd say close to twenty feet from the window – the dead one."

"And the spike was used to . . ."

"To attach the other end of the band to - so it would be there handy for Mr. Ellington, I guess, when he played the joke."

"You said 'end' – singular. It wasn't doubled then like when you launch the gliders?"

"Nope. It wasn't doubled. Like I said, one end over the little stub and the other over the big nail."

"Robbie, I need you to climb out there and attach the end of this band just the way you did late Saturday afternoon. Pretend I am Mr. Ellington. Folks come and gather around if you want to so you can see just how this was done."

Everyone except Alice moved to the window.

Robbie draped the band around his neck and climbed through the window. Nimbly, he made his way across the tree and straddled the limb next to the stub of the branch over which it had been looped. He carefully repeated the process just as he had done it for Mr. Ellington and then began making his way back toward the window. Still, ten feet away, the band was stretched to its full, slack length.

"Here's where it gets tough," Robbie explained.

He had to begin stretching it as he moved through the branches back toward the window. It was about all he could do to stretch it far enough and loop it over the spike on the

windowsill.

“The smaller fingerprint – the one we at first thought might be that of a woman – turned out to be Robbie's.”

“Thank you, Robbie. Great job! You may all take your seats. Robbie tells me that he often did small jobs for Lester and for a few extra dollars kept it all a secret. Robbie's word is good. I'm sure he would have kept the secret even without the extra payment. During the past year, Robbie and Lester had many conversations. Robbie related to me how he would often sit in the tree outside this window in the evening and he and Mr. Ellington would just chat about all kinds of things. They were friends and I'm sure the man's passing has been hard on Robbie.”

Robert put his arm around his son and drew him close.

Then, Masters picked up the gun.

“Let's move ahead now to where we were before Robbie's demonstration. Lester was back here in the den. This is where that second discovery came into play. Remember, the shade was pulled to within five inches of the sill. This gun, from top to bottom at the handle is also exactly five inches. Keep that in mind. Lester placed the gun on the windowsill in an ingenious manner. Note this bump on the bottom of the handle where the two halves of the handle attach and notice this sighting bead at the rear of the barrel. It's about the size of a slightly overgrown B-B.

“Now, observe the indentation in the windowsill and how the bump on the handle fits down into it perfectly. Also, see this indentation in the bottom of the lower window frame. As I close the window down onto the gun, see how it slips right over that rear, sighting bead. The gun is thereby held in place between the sill and the lowered window. The two bumps on the gun, fitting as they do into the indentations, hold it so firmly that I can now take the rubber band off the spike and slip it up on the handle so the pull of the band is toward the outdoors.”

To accomplish that, Masters had to raise the window slightly so he could lift the handle high enough to slip the band under and up onto it. He then lowered the gun and the window back into place.

“To make sure the window stayed put, Lester than swung down the hinged latch and forced it into place. That's

how the paint was scuffed away on the top of the lower window. To provide added stability at the moment of firing, he used the stack of books that Brandon had made under the window. To insure that Brandon's fingerprints would be on the ones he ended up using, he had Brandon take them down one at a time. Using a handkerchief to handle the necessary remaining book or two, he built it up so the barrel of the gun was resting on them. They received powder residue when the gun was fired. Because of their position, very little reached the rubber band. Lester had requested that Brandon bring down more books than would be needed in order to assure there would be the necessary assortment of thicknesses required to just reach the barrel. Those that were not used were left haphazardly on the floor."

Using a yardstick to assist in his next demonstration, Masters held it straight out from the barrel of the gun to show the line of fire.

"As held in place, the gun would fire straight into the den at this height. Jimmy, you are close to the height of Mr. Ellington. Would you please assist me by taking a seat on the sawed off footstool here in front of the desk."

Jimmy looked nervously at the gun.

"I assure you the gun is not loaded," Masters said, recognizing Jimmy's reluctance.

Jimmy smiled sheepishly and took the seat.

"The line of fire, you see, is directly at Jimmy's temple. Had the stool been at its original height, the bullet would have entered the throat instead. Also, notice the position of the desk. Lester moved it forward so the front of the desk would be in such a position that when he leaned back against it, his head would be in the direct line of fire."

"To have executed all of the physical activities I have described – twice up and down two flights of stairs, opening and closing the bedroom window, moving the desk, and positioning the rubber band – Lester needed a very high dose of his pain medicine. The ocean cruise had given him the excuse to obtain those drugs from his doctor and it also provided a ringer, so to speak. If he were planning suicide, he would not have been planning such a trip. It was to make the prospect that he had been murdered seem valid."

“There remained only two more aspects to his plan – well three if you count getting someone to pull the trigger. He attached the cut latex glove to the end of the rubber band with the cellophane tape. You will see why momentarily.

“The final element in the plan involved the string. As you have guessed by now, it was slipped over the trigger and was pulled by someone – the killer. I will get to that in a moment. First, I want you to see how his ingenious set-up worked.

“When the gun was fired, the recoil pushed it backwards, out of its two precarious, indented, lodging points. Once free of the window, the rubber band propelled it, twirling, into the lawn where it lit barrel first, taking dirt and grass into it. On its way through the tree, it picked up the bit of Catalpa leaf. The band flew free of the short stub to which Robbie had attached it and it also sailed out onto the lawn. The Glove, which was also to have been flung away from the building, had been only loosely taped to the band and it merely fell to the ground, landing behind the bushes at the foundation. The string, being as long as it was, got snagged in the branches of the tree. When the gun was dislodged, the window fell shut and the wooden latch swung into place, effectively locking the room from the inside.”

Masters instructed the guests to pay close attention and they could see exactly what happened when the gun was fired. Gently, Masters tapped the open end of the barrel with the handle of the letter opener, simulating the recoil at discharge. The gun flew out the window, the window slammed shut, and the latch fell in place locking it tight. The demonstration was so successful that the weapon landed only a few feet from where it had been found, the rubber band followed and the string again got tangled in the tree.

“Now, as to the string.”

As he talked, Masters set the second gun into position on the windowsill so he could complete his demonstration. He produced a second length of string; it was the actual string that had been used.”

“I’m quite certain that Lester did not believe we would figure it out to this point, but just in case we did, he added one final brilliant distraction. The string is over fifty feet long. That

is easily long enough to be pulled by someone out in the tree or even standing on the ground below. This is the one place where Lester's ingenious plan was flawed. Whether he just overlooked it or thought we would overlook it, I can't say with any certainty. Perhaps, some deep part of his mind caused him to slip up, because it wanted us to figure it out. Regardless, the string was the case breaker.

"As we have just seen, the string could not be tied tightly onto the trigger or it would not have fallen free as the gun flew through the air after having been fired. It had to be able to slip off. So, the string was doubled and the loop formed in the middle was slipped around the trigger. If the string had been draped outside, the only powder would have been found here in the middle where it was slipped around the trigger. The rest of the string would have been outside and away from the powder spray. However, it also had powder residue here (he pointed) at a point twenty-seven inches on each side of the trigger residue at the central loop."

Masters slipped the loop around the trigger, then to the left and around the spike and finally handed it to Jimmy, asking him to hold it for a moment. The excess string was coiled on the floor in front of the window ready for instant, tangle-free takeoff.

"When in this position the firing of the gun sprayed powder on it at this spot where it comes back, passing close to the end of the barrel – twenty-seven inches of string from the trigger loop. The body oil found at the point where Jimmy is holding the string further confirms this configuration. The set-up was truly inventive.

"So, it was that soon after nine p.m. last Saturday evening, Lester took a seat on the specially prepared stool, leaned back against the specially positioned desk, and, fully convinced in his heart that he had perpetrated the perfect frame, pulled the string that ended his life. Smugly elated with his plan and himself up to his final second, he offered me my first clue that things were not as they seemed – he offered me the case of the smiling corpse."

EPILOGUE

Life Goes On

It is fascinating how good things frequently emerge from bad things.

Joan and Jimmy agreed to occupy the house together according to the stipulation in the will. Jimmy and his grandfather took over the suite on the third floor. Jimmy was accepted into the local junior college in the teacher education program with a major in math. It was his intention to offer his services to the Rossville Junior High as a dollar a year math teacher when he graduated. (Local young ladies suddenly began giving in second and third looks!)

Although he no longer needed to work, Robert Carter accepted the job offered him as handyman and he and Robbie moved into the apartment over the garage. (The man walked taller and seemed better looking in his new position.)

Robbie soon found a comfortable tree limb outside the window of the old detective's den and managed to visit there often. (Depending on the season, cocoa with cinnamon toast or lemonade with a peppermint stick was always served.)

Alice and Jimmy rekindled their mother-son relationship – both reveled in it. (Alice again appeared middle-aged!)

Brandon's college fund was suddenly doubled, insuring his education through graduate school. (He would become a bestselling novelist and husband of you know who – or is that 'whom'!)

Detective Little basked in the part he had played in the solution of the town's only death by malicious intent in thirty years. Oddly, or perhaps predictably, the importance of his

role grew each time the tale was recounted. Within months, Masters' participation had become a seldom-referenced footnote. (Masters chuckled away a good ten pounds just hearing about it – another one of those 'good things'.)

Joan, relieved of her lifelong, all encompassing, concern for her sister and hate for her brother-in-law, set her sights on Raymond Masters. (The old detective respectfully declined and beat a hasty retreat to his den, although her promise of bread pudding with honey-thickened lemon sauce lingered as an enduring temptation!)

The End