

The Case of the
SHADOW IN THE NIGHT

A Raymond Masters Mystery
Number 18 in the Series

Garrison Flint

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Family of Man Press

**Acknowledgment is given to Robbie Miller
for his momentous contribution.**

- G F

(Smile! See later in the book.)

**Books in the
Raymond Masters Mysteries Series
By Garrison Flint***

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Case of Too Many Suspects, The
Murders at Tanglewood Inn
Case of the Shadow in the Night

[*Garrison Flint is a pen name of Tom Gnagey]

The photo of the author's shadow
used as the basis for the cover
was taken by John Hammond.

CHAPTER ONE
Day One: Morning
(Briefly, first, must come the night before!)

Raymond Masters could not be accused of being a tech whizz. His home phone in tiny, Rossville, New York, was a land line. His 'voicemail' was an answering machine purchased in the 1980s complete with little reels of magnetic tape and buttons to push marked 'Play', 'Stop', 'Rewind', and 'Erase'. There were several others, but he had never found a need to investigate what functions they served. They represented the only mystery in his life that had not reached out and garnered his attention.

As he entered his bedroom after an evening of dining out with friends, Masters took note of the blinking red light, pushed 'Play', and changed into his robe and slippers, making himself comfortable for the rest of the evening. The gadget came to life with a series of gentle shivers. A voice emerged through the row of horizontal slits on top.

"Ray. I'm sure you must assume I am dead and have been dead for decades. This message suggests you are wrong. It's Ken Miller, Harvard, that year we managed our Master's Degrees in criminology and went on to celebrate graduation night by toasting ginger ale at the only non-alcoholic bar within miles of campus. Do you realize that was fifty years ago? My, my! I've followed your illustrious career – some of your exploits

even made their way into a few of my detective novels – thirty-six to date, can you believe that? They are the only progeny I’ve spawned. Hope to someday meet that Flint guy who writes about your cases. What is it with him and all those dashes?

“Anyway, recent events suggest I am in need of your professional services – your usual fee, however outrageous it may be. I am well-healed as the tired expression goes. As I recall, I still owe you about seventeen million dollars from our Cribbage games in college – not sure if you were really that good or if I was just that bad. The best bet would be some combination of those.

“I will appreciate a call when you get this – my phone knows how to ring day and night. I am eager to hear from you. The matter has become urgent.

“PS. If you need to be teased, a two-ounce yellow frog just killed my 200-pound Saint Bernard – in the first two seconds of the first round of their encounter.”

He left his number.

Teased, indeed!

After a few seconds, the machine beeped, shivered again, and went back to sleep. Masters was never willing to bet it would wake up, much like him after he tucked his 6-foot, 250 pound, 75-year-old frame into bed at night. That always gave rise to a smile.

“What a nice surprise. I hope his situation is not as serious as this might lead me to believe. I wonder how we came to drift apart?”

The later it got in the day, the more likely Masters was to speak his thoughts out loud – fading gray matter, fading focus, fading memory – he wasn’t sure. Perhaps he just found his dulcet tones reassuring.

He punched in the number – he *had* upgraded from dial to touch pad – about the same year as the Apple XS iphone appeared in stores. A voice came online.

“Kensington Miller residence. Butler of the Manor, Worth Billingsly, speaking. How may I be of assistance?”

That had certainly taken the traditional, *Hey!* to a new level.

“Worth. My name is Ray, Ray Masters and I am returning

a call from Ken.”

“Oh. Yes, Sir, Mr. Masters. My instructions are to put you right through. Hold just one moment – more realistically, several. Mr. Miller is snorkeling in the south pool with Master Robbie, you see. I do so dislike it when he drips into his phone – the whole buried in rice treatment, you understand.”

In fact, there had been virtually nothing about that exchange that Masters understood. He waited – one of his best things since he retired from the force, he figured. It gave him time to do a onehanded shuffle-through of the mail he had retrieved from the box as he returned home. Among it were three postcard ads – two for Viagra and one from the local funeral home. He smiled, wondering if they were in cahoots. His big tummy jiggled as he chuckled. Presently . . .

“Miller here.”

“Ray here. Calling to collect that seventeen mil. Small, unmarked, bills, if you please. And, yes, that was my best Bogie imitation.”

“Ray. How great to hear from you and thank you for getting back post haste. Is it possible you have a week or so you could put at my disposal?”

“Of course. Just buried my previous client. Sure you want me involved in this thing?”

Chuckles on the other end of the line.

“I will send a plane for you. Cessna Skylane. My pilot says it will most likely be able to both land and take off again from the airfield slash pasture at Rossville, providing you keep the cows out of the way. You say when.”

“How about first light – say seven in the morning. For some reason, that single lightbulb atop that one pole does not adequately illuminate the strip for a nocturnal rendezvous. The way it often blinks in the wind does seem to reassure the cows on cloudy nights, however.”

“Pilot’s name is Jefferson. He’s top rate. Used to fly air rescue during forest fires and other disasters. Used to lifting heavy loads.”

Chuckles.

“And to where will I be flying?”

“Here.”

“Imp! You always were an Imp.”

“Just up the street to Rochester – New York, that is. Half hour – three at the most. I’ll have a car on the tarmac. Plan to have breakfast here with me while I fill you in. Ha! Fill you in while I fill you up – must make a note of that for some upcoming book. Tomorrow, then.”

Masters hung up. For the angst implied in his phone message, there had not appeared to be any in *that* conversation.

* * *

With the pasture, that is, *airstrip*, no more than three blocks due north of his cottage, Masters set a brisk pace in that direction at six-forty-five. He heard the plane before he saw its flashing white light settling down out of the near darkness. He and his suitcase were soon comfortably inside with him strapped into the seat beside the pilot. They were quickly back into the air headed mostly north above the western edges of the Finger Lakes and the gently rolling hills of west central New York.

There was coffee – black. There were raspberry Danishes – pink. Miller *had* been reading those Flint books.

They touched down at seven-forty-five and taxied to a secluded spot near a limo parked at the edge of the asphalt. The chauffeur approached and opened the door, assisting the big man out and taking his bag.

“I am Benson, Sir. It will be a fifteen-minute drive unless you choose to stop on Front Street for some hanky-panky.”

Masters chuckled at the fully unexpected line.

“Mr. Ken said he thought you would enjoy my offbeat sense of humor. I just needed to verify that at the outset, Sir. Front or back?”

“Front if I’m allowed. I find back seats predictably stuffy.”

“I, also. It is why I drive not ride, Sir – well, that and the size of my bank account.”

Benson spoke with the distinctive remnant of a childhood, British accent.

Masters commented on the Limo.

“I have ridden in black limos. I have ridden in white limos. This is my first baby blue limo.”

“When you meet the boy – Robbie – you must inquire about that. He’ll bend your ear for a half hour about it – providing aesthetic, political, and social ramifications.”

The old detective let that go with a smile and nod.

They passed *Strong Memorial Hospital*. Masters pointed.

“I once had a bullet removed from a most unflattering part of my anatomy in that big place. The first hospital I had ever been in where there were colored lines on the floor that you could follow to get to your chosen department. That was a long time ago. Just for your information, it had no department named, ‘Wounded Behind.’”

“Sounds like a Steve Martin western,” Worth said.

They chuckled. Masters was intrigued; at that point, both the man’s comments and reactions seemed out of character for the staid, distinguished looking, older gentleman with the closely cropped gray hair and discreetly pointed narrow moustache. He continued.

“I do hope you made a full recovery, Sir.”

“It’s Ray, please, not sir, and, only on long flights do I ever feel so much as a twinge.”

“Is there a story told that goes along with the twinge, Ray?”

“More of a moral; never bend over to pick up your hat in the presence of a nervous fifteen-year-old suspect, wielding a homemade handgun.”

He chuckled. He and Masters were going to get on just fine.

Benson paused the limousine at the front gate of a mansion that had clearly seen two world wars and, perhaps, even, a few wet behind the ears Union soldiers. The gate was twenty feet wide and ten high, black, wrought iron. It clung to posts, setting the edges of the break in the lofty, gray brick wall that surrounded the square city block on which the huge house sat. It sprouted like a lesser castle from the gentle rise toward the rear of the profusely flowered and treed, lush, green expanse.

“Behold, *Miller Manor*, the far too large, far too expensive, and, historically, far too bleak, 30 room cabin of

Kensington Miller – my esteemed employer. Many would say it is actually the realm of Robbie Miller – fifteen-year-old nephew, son of Mr. Miller’s sister in law – who just allows the rest of us to be a part of his life.”

He smiled.

“I thought a subdued moment here at the outset to take in the estate might be advantageous for you. The gate is strictly ornamental. As you can see, it opens automatically when a vehicle approaches – not one whit of security intended by its massive presence.

“The mansion is three stories with a dank, dungeon-like, mostly unused basement. Two pools – one outside in back and one enclosed on the far side hidden from view by the building – hereafter to be referred to as a house – another of Master Robbie’s innovations. The gray stone was quarried not fifteen miles from here. Built in the late 1800s for an English family, whose bloodline had been ‘built’ in the 1600’s according to both documents and rumor. The dark red trim replaced peeling white a few years ago. Although perhaps not obvious, it cast the edifice in a bright and cheery way it had never known. Mr. Miller had the interior refurbished when he bought it a half century ago – about the time I set out in the world on my own, in case that is of any interest to you – and then repainted the interior last month. It retains the charm of the original decor with generally non-offensive, pleasant, upgrades that offer a bright and cheery interior.

“His sister in law, Doris Miller is the cook – and a good one. She became a part of things a dozen years ago, after a vehicular accident in which her husband was killed and her son, Robbie, was injured and put in a wheelchair for the rest of his life. The lad has an indefatigable, sunny disposition and is sharp as a whip – or is that ‘tack’. Mr. M. invited Doris and Robbie to just come and live here, but she insisted on being useful. I am not sure about their financial arrangement, nor is it really any of my business, but I am irrepressibly nosey by nature.”

“And clearly well educated.”

“Some by books. Some by street. All by intention.”

Masters figured that raised the possibility for interesting

stories.

“As you may know, Mr. Miller is filthy rich – first his long list of bestselling mystery novels, then a few were made into movies and later, they made a five-season run on TV in Canada – in re-run forever, it seems. He is generous to a fault and is forever giving his help raises and gifts.

“Aside from those of us here, he seldom sees anybody – a recluse by any definition. That began about a dozen years ago, I’d say. I have no confirmed explanation. There was no wife who left or died. He never married. Was quite a lady’s man in his earlier years. I can certainly vouch for that as I might surmise you can as well. Some real beauties. Now, never. He makes book signing tours but despises them – will do six venues in a long day just in order to get the whole thing over in a hurry so he can return here. He jokes that after such a day he has to send his smile out for physical therapy.

“I do believe his best friend was his big dog, and it was most certainly *his* dog – constant companions. The loss will be hard on him.”

“*That* is my snapshot for you. Mr. M. asked that I spin you some background before I dumped you in his lap. I understand you two have a history.”

“We do. Decades ago. College. I appreciate your update. Unfortunately, he and I have drifted apart.”

“Happened to my wife and me after several years of marriage. I tell people the basis for our divorce was incompatibility: I had no income and she wasn’t patible.”

Benson enjoyed his little joke.

They moved up the circular drive and stopped at the porch, which spanned the front and rose two stories high, supported by six, circular, pillars. It presented six, formidable, eighteen-inch-deep marble steps, which were twenty feet from side to side. There was a four-foot-wide ramp just to the left of center – an addition that had not known FDR or JFK or even OJ. The front door swung open revealing a smiling young man in a wheelchair – traditional, move the wheels yourself variety. He waved over his head with an interesting degree of enthusiasm and waited on the porch at the top of the steps.

A man about Benson’s age appeared behind him and

moved down the steps. He wore a colorful sweater, black trousers and black, leather, shoes – similar to the Chauffeur’s surprising attire.

“That would be Worth Billingsly, the butler. English descent and would be far more comfortable in the tux I assume he was born in. Things have gone informal since Master Robbie and his mother arrived. I keep my uniform clean and pressed just in case this is all a dream from which I will awaken needing to trade in my cardigan for something more traditional.

“The young man, as you have ascertained, is Robbie – Robert Miller, *Junior*, to be specific. Fifteen. Fiercely independent and as I have indicated, simply brilliant – his father was a philosophy professor. A constant source of chatter. You know how most little kids ask, ‘What’s that?’ or ‘What does that do?’ Robbie never did. From the time he arrived when he was four, he’d say, ‘That’s a . . .’ or ‘That does so and so.’ Often, he was correct. His mind works more like the hose than the sponge – car guy talk related to washing them – a force rather than a receptacle – a teacher rather than a pupil – always a beginning rather than an end. But why do I try to explain that which is about to explode upon you. I love the boy, but my he is challenging – challenging and exhausting – challenging and exhausting and irrepressible. I could go on, but the mere recitation would wear me to a frazzle. In a moment you will understand.

“I must alert you – no, *warn* you – that he has read all of the books about your cases and made lists of things he believes each of us needs to know about you – relative to our positions. Expect to be quizzed.”

“I must say, I have never been given a more thorough and useful briefing than yours, Benson. Thank you. I can tell these people are all important to you.”

“We are important to each other, Ray.”

Worth arrived from the steps and opened the door.

“Mr. Masters. Welcome to Mr. M’s home, informally known as *Miller Manor*, though never officially named. I’m Worth. I was officially named. We spoke on the phone last evening. Let me collect your bags.”

“Just one. Back seat. Looking at those steps, I’m glad I

took my old man's multiple vitamin this morning."

"Quite honestly, we all use one of the rear, ground level, entrances except when we are attempting to impress somebody. May we assume you have been properly impressed so we may dispense with this from now on?"

"You may, indeed."

The two were certainly cut from the same cloth – Benson and Worth.

He led the way up the steps.

The boy was chattering well before they reached the top.

"Here, let Ali and me handle the bag – on my lap. You'll be in the guest room next to mine. I arranged that. Maybe we can work out a secret code and tap messages back and forth on the wall after the others think we are tucked in for the night. I'm Robbie."

He offered his hand across the suitcase.

"And I'm Ray. I can still manage the Morse Code, but my old gray matter might not be up to learning a new one."

"I knew you'd say that – that you were 'Ray'. It's how it is in the books. I've read them all. So has Uncle Ken, but I may not have been supposed to spill those beans."

He hunched forward a bit, playfully put his index finger to his lips, and giggled.

"What beans? I see no beans," Masters came back looking around, feigning puzzlement.

They shared smiles.

"This is going to be so great, providing nobody else gets hurt. I am to leave that part of the story to my uncle. My mother is, therefore, his sister in law, but you have likely already been told that numerous times along with the warnings about how challenging, tiering and wearing I can be. It is all true. I understand that. My brain has not yet learned to keep its Social Filter turned on and front and center. Just tell me to shut up when such a time arrives. My feelings won't be hurt. I often challenge *myself* into a state of utter disgust."

"Ali?" Masters asked as Robbie turned around and headed into the house ahead of him.

"My wheelchair. After Mohammad Ali – one of my all-time heroes – a fine gentleman and humanitarian in every

sense of the terms. I am attempting to live up to his high standard of integrity.”

Interesting to Masters, he had bypassed the man’s formidable success in the ring.

“Ali, here, is a propel-it-yourself model, I see.”

“Yes, Sir/Ray. From the waist down I’m a fairly useless scarecrow but from the waist up – where I have good control of things – I’m building a superman. Work at it every day – weights, dynamic tension, pull ups, swimming, and, propelling the chair – the whole thing. My tutor, Mr. Wilson – Josh – is an amateur body builder. Won some competitions. He helps me plan my routines. You’ll just love him. Comes four days a week. I gave up regular school years ago – just too much hassle and frankly, it had nothing challenging to offer me. The kids were dunces and too often, I told them so.

“You’ve also undoubtedly heard about the accident that required my association with, Ali, here. Bottom several vertebrae crushed into dust along with the nerves. To date, at least, there is no great fix for that sort of devastation. I believe it will come within the next few years. My goal is to be standing and walking on my wedding day – dancing at the reception. Just one small, unresolved, first step left relative to that, you might say. I need to learn how to talk with girls. I get very little practice here. It would be the one positive about being in school, I suppose.

“Have you considered joining the Girl Scouts?”

Smiles.

“I wish!”

They moved through the spacious entry hall.

“Let me drop you off at Uncle Ken’s den – here on the first floor just to our left there. I’ll put your bag in your room up on second. I’m looking forward to lunch on the rear deck. It is to be a beautiful fall day.”

“Before you abscond with my duds, let me trade this traveling suit coat and tie for a cardigan so I will not only be more comfortable but will fit in with the apparent local dress code.

That accomplished, Robbie rolled up to the door, bent forward and knocked, entering without waiting for an invitation.

“Guess who I found – hat in hand – begging at the front door, Uncle Ken. I didn’t frisk him but have it on good authority he doesn’t carry a weapon. See you two at lunch.”

Ken stood. A warm smile blossomed as he rounded his desk. He offered one hand for a shake and placed the other on his old friend’s shoulder.

Masters spoke first.

“Ken, you haven’t gained a pound.”

“Ray, you have.”

They chuckled.

“Let’s sit over here by the window. I see you have met the Lord of the Manor, my nephew. The light of my life and the spark that keeps this dreary old edifice humming. It is so good to see you. Wish it weren’t under these circumstances.”

“I must say my interest has been piqued, Ken.”

“Yes. I’ve been wondering where to begin. As an author I seldom begin a story at the beginning – give the reader an intriguing run around up front to set the stage, understand, but let me get into it. I assume Benson regaled you with a wide-ranging background episode. We will call that the preface.”

He moved uncomfortably in his seat as he gathered his thoughts.

“My staff and I seem to be under attack, Ray. I have been unable to unravel any of it. It is certainly easier to *construct* mysteries than to *solve* them. Let’s see, now. In order, here are the events – at least to date. He offered a single shake of his head – sad and quite frankly, terrifying.

“Monday evening – nine o’clock or very near that – Worth came knocking at my door – banging, more accurately. He related that Betsy, our maid, had come screaming out of her room as he was about to enter his on the east side of the second floor. It seems she sleeps with a heating pad at her feet to sooth her arthritic toes. As she drew back the sheet and blanket to arrange them for the night, she was met by a coiled rattlesnake – a *deadly*, rattlesnake. Had she just crawled in like would normally be the case, she would have most certainly been bitten.

“Robbie can fill you in about it. He is something of an expert on snakes, frogs, and related amphibians. It represents

a natural extension of his dinosaur period when he was seven. He has some interesting speculations regarding that snake. He is, in fact, the person who dealt with it. It remains in a terrarium in his science room. Most kids have a playroom. Robbie has a science room with books and aquariums and terrariums that are home to a vast variety of interesting members of the slimy genre.

“Moving on. Tuesday morning, Socrates and I were sitting with my laptop out on the deck.”

Ken pointed through a glass door to the north.

“Socrates?”

“My dog.”

Masters nodded.

“Worth arrived with a small package wrapped in brown paper – heavy, double-corrugated cardboard, sealed in tape – something less than a foot square and perhaps six inches high. It had just been delivered and was addressed to me with the return address of my agent. She sends things occasionally. That side was clearly marked, THIS SIDE UP. I dispensed with the cord and cut around the top of the paper with my pocketknife, carefully keeping the upside, up. With the paper gone, I saw it was a box with a lid with a lip that slipped over the top – a lip of two inches all around. Socrates – my huge St. Bernard – was a nosey sort and was right there in the midst of things. First, I removed the lid in such a way that freed the side nearest the dog, first.

“Inside was a tiny, yellow, frog. It leaped at Socrates, affixing itself to the side of his nose. Within minutes the dog was dead. In the confusion, the frog hopped off the deck and into the back lawn. I called Roscoe, our grounds keeper, to alert and warn him about the frog – having no idea about it or, really, what had just happened.

“Later, when I questioned Worth about the delivery, he said the doorbell rang and by the time he got there from the rear of the entry hall, a man was entering a big brown truck out front and pulling away. He never saw his face or, much else about him. Worth will fill you in on all that.

“Robbie can fill you in on things about the frog. Using my description, he was soon able to pull up a picture and

information from the web. The picture was of what I had seen. He identified it as a poisonous frog from the South American rain forest. I think he called it the *poison dart frog*. They are tiny – no more than twice the size of a man’s thumbnail, some may grow to an inch and half in length – and come in various colors and designs, but the yellow one is what was here. They are so dangerous that Robbie thinks it may be illegal to import them. He’s working to verify that.”

“Did you contact the police?” Masters asked.

“Not at that time. Let me go on.

“At a few minutes after one, I received a call on my cell phone from Robbie – I had not yet told him about Socrates. He knows I am not to be disturbed between noon to five – my major writing block – so I figured two things: something of great importance had come up and that he was not in the house or he would have come to my den. He had found Roscoe – the grounds keeper I mentioned – on the ground near a small stream that runs east to west across the rear of the property. He was dead with a bloody temple. His hoe was a few feet away. There was blood on the metal blade. It was then that I contacted the police.

“Detective Portman arrived. He could be straight out of one the early Flint books – the definition of the bungling cop. He took the information, got the medical examiner involved and said he would be back. I am still waiting for him to return. There is more.

“Later, Tuesday afternoon – five or so – Worth found me here in my den. He was upset. Wednesday is his day off. He often spends that day in the woods to the north of this property. He is a wannabe rugged individualist, and, despite his pale mien and meek manner, he certainly comes closer to that than I do. He frequently leaves here with a sizeable backpack and duffle bag late Tuesday.

“He reported that as he was leaving through the east, rear door, and as he turned to pull the door closed, he felt something impact the rear of the backpack. He figured it was a pebble that had been playfully tossed his way by Robbie who was usually outside at that time. He slipped out of it to see what Robbie might have wanted. At that point, he realized there was

no Robbie, but there was a short, narrow, primitive-looking dart sticking out of the backpack. He had the good sense to leave it where it landed and came to alert me.

“Robbie, just finished with his exercise time outside, happened into the room and heard Worth’s report. We checked it out. Robbie was familiar with such a thing – a blow dart used by isolated Amazon tribesmen. The sharp end was usually poisoned – the missile itself being too small to harm a monkey, the tribe’s favorite dinner. As Robbie said, ‘So much for that ham sandwich in the backpack’.

“I reported it to the police immediately, thinking I might rate something above Portman’s pay level. That was when it came to mind that I needed to contact you. Before I could do that, there was still another event.

“Benson had taken Doris to spend the night with a friend across town. Doris is Robbie’s mother, you will recall. It had just begun to rain – a very light misty sort of rain – the kind you barely notice until you begin walking through it. As he slowed to approach the main gate, a brown delivery van pulled away from the curb and headed directly toward him. The glass was tinted, so he could not see the driver. Benson was tending to the business of handling the car and paid little attention to what he might have been able to see through the oddly, open, window. The truck skidded across the street into the opposite curb, the engine dying at a light pole.

“Just prior to that, the front left side of the truck bumper and fender scraped the front left fender of the limo. The driver regained control and sped off. Benson decided not to give chase. He did note that the truck had no license plate or other identifying marks. Later, comparing notes with Worth, he felt sure it was the same truck used by the delivery man who dropped off the frog box.

“One more thing, then it’s yours, Ray.

“It is regarding my attorney, Farley Roland. During early Tuesday afternoon – not long before Robbie found Roscoe – he dropped by to leave some legal papers for me to look over and sign. At nine that night – last night, after I had already called you – I received word from the police that he had been found dead at his office. Placed time of death between four and five

p.m. The cause of death was not immediately discernable.

“I’ve been scratching my head on this one, Ray. In my books, I often depend on the slightest little things to grow into important clues. Here may be one of those. Farley always comes – came – in through the door to my den from the deck out there. There is a narrow walk around the east side of the house from the parking area. Most other visitors use the front door.”

“Before you ask, *no*, I haven’t the first clue who might be involved in all this. I should have called you sooner.”

Masters spoke:

“Well, rest assured, had I been here earlier, there would have been nothing I could have done to prevent any of this. No guilt on your part for delaying that call.”

Ken nodded and raised his eyebrows, a gesture which suggested only marginal agreement as Masters continued.

“I assume there is no animosity between or among your employees or former employees. From what I’ve witnessed they all consider themselves family.”

“I believe that is an accurate impression. I feel so badly about Roscoe. He was a sweet old man – a loner, like me. I called to warn him the moment the little creature escaped across the deck. I guess he was careless about handling it when he located it. I described what had befallen Socrates, thinking that should be enough of a warning. At that point, I hadn’t, of course, received the particulars from Robbie about the species, so I was just working from what I’d witnessed, not from any technical data.

“Of course, I am devastated about Farley, my attorney. We’d worked together for thirty years.”

“Have they determined his cause of death?”

“As far as I know that has not been determined. I suppose, ‘found dead’, does not equate to murdered, does it.”

“A short detour, Ken. I am so sorry that you lost your dog – Socrates. I’m sure that leaves a sad hole in your life. I understand he was without any doubt *your* dog.”

“He was. Twenty-four hours a day, every day. Thank you. A ‘hole’ is exactly the proper concept. You know, I did everything right for him – I took good care of him – shots, meds

and food to match his age, an information chip to help get him back to me if we ever got separated. I will miss him for sure. Don't know if I'll get another one or not. Hard to lose a loved one, like that."

"I can only imagine. I would point out that you had Socrates to enjoy every day since he came to live with you, and you only lost him once."

Ken nodded. Masters moved on.

"I understand that besides Robbie, Roscoe, Worth, Benson and your sister in law, there is only one other regular employee – Josh somebody, I believe – Robbie's teacher. I assume he has been thoroughly vetted – a background check."

"Yes. He is a fine young man. A good role model for Robbie – his mother and I both agree. A master's degree from our old Alma Mater. A positive work ethic and a brilliant match for my nephew – we feel fortunate to have found him. He has been with us for ten years. Lives away – *off campus*, as Robbie puts it. Comes in nine to four, four days a week – Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday."

"Then he was here on the premises Tuesday, the day most of the bad things took place."

"That's correct. I won't second guess you, Ray. This is your show. I warn you, that doesn't go for Robbie. He is an uber-inquisitive individual and demands perfection. His mind spins theories and questions faster than a cob spins a web. Don't hesitate to ask him to back off."

"As I recall, that sounds a lot like your frequently offered description of an old cohort at Harvard. What did you used to call me?"

"You mean to your face?"

Chuckles.

"I don't remember exactly – believe it included the words 'intrepid, dogged, and bloodhound', however. Professor Sampson would ask for a five-page analysis of a case, and you'd bring in twenty with charts, drawings, and graphs. That did *not* endear you to your classmates, you know."

Smiles.

Nods.

Breakfast was served. For Masters, toast, sausage,

eggs, hash browns, and biscuit and gravy with orange juice and black coffee. Ken had fruit and cider.

“You know, Ray, that’s a heart attack waiting to happen.”

“And *still* waiting after seventy-five years. At my last physical, my doctor said I was healthy as a horse and almost as big as one.”

“That’s a *great* line. May I use it?”

“My belief is that Flint has already used it, but why not. I’ve never read any of those books, myself, so really can’t say.”

A moment passed as they arranged things on their plates.

“So, Ken, what about your enemies. Surely in seventy-five years you have accumulated a few.”

“There was Bill Andrews. He swore to draw and quarter me and spread my entrails across my hometown square. It was over the hand of a pretty girl. Of course, we were eight and in third grade. Other than that, I really don’t know of any.”

“No literary rivals? I’ve had cases where writers and agents killed each other off in reckless abandon.”

“That, *Restless Crossbow*, book. I found it fascinating. Seemed to prove just how amazingly creative we writers are as a group.”

“Or, how ruthless and amoral you are. Robbie mentioned you may have read one of two of them.”

“What I’m sure he told you was that I have read all of them and occasionally call my bookstore to see if a new one has arrived.”

“Well, he didn’t go that far but did suggest I not introduce the topic.”

“I don’t read other mystery writers as a course of habit. Don’t want to pollute my style with theirs, but for obvious reasons, I have made an exception for Flint.”

“I need that police contact – Portman, did you say?”

“Yes. Clearly a relative of somebody within the department. Couldn’t have been appointed because of his mental prowess or forensic skill. Sort of a hapless entry into the family of man.”

“You speak like you write.”

“I have sometimes wondered about that. My conclusion

is that I write like I speak. Bring it up to Robbie and he'll do a half hour monologue just on the background related to such a quandary."

"He seems to be both an exceptional and fascinating young man. I look forward to getting to know him better."

"I love the boy in every way, but I do offer one caution. It stems from the oft quoted adage, "Give an exceptional and fascinating young man one iota of encouragement and he will soon be camping out at the foot of your bed."

"Oh, yes, *that* old adage. I have it on a banner above my library shelves."

"*This*, in itself, is fascinating to me, Ray."

"This, *what?*"

"We haven't seen each other in forty years and yet here we are bantering back and forth like we were back sitting in the dorm."

"Are you saying some find it easier than others to bring old ruts back into focus?"

"I am saying this is how I hoped it would be, and I am basking in it."

"Kidding aside, I have been taken by it as well. Now, back to that seventeen million dollars."

"Like it has always been, get too close to the big man's heart and he runs away."

"Long ago, I concluded that only with a thoughtfully compartmentalized mind, can a cop maintain his sanity and a clear view of the noblest side of our species. The heart is still there, but the password is carefully guarded."

There was a distinctive knock on the door.

"Let me guess, Ken. Robbie?"

"And the old detective scores again. The door will open without further encouragement from me – 3 – 2 – 1."

"Sorry to intrude but . . . why are you two grinning like Cheshire cats?"

"A private take on life. What's up?"

"I have been doing additional research relative to the frog – the yellow frog – the Poison Dart Frog. There have been developments."

"Please go on."

The young man closed the door and rolled in close.

“As you are aware, it is native to the tropical rainforests of southern middle America and northern South America. Its venom is not a true venom but is more accurately classified as poison – among the deadliest of any poisonous critter on the planet. It does not transfer its poison by biting or spitting – as is often reported. When it feels threatened, its skin secretes a slimy poison. A single fingertip touching it can kill a man in seconds.

“It gets its name, you see, not because it shoots poison darts, but because the natives of the rainforests use the poison to cover the points of their darts.

“Here come *new* interesting developments number one and two. There is a professor at the University, here, that is known world-wide for his study of venomous and poisonous animals – interestingly, all rather small – most would be considered tiny – virtually all, amphibians. I think we need to pay him a visit. Dr. William Dey. I have just read several articles he has written about this very frog. That’s number one. Number two: there is a pet store here in Rochester that specializes in small, venomous, and poisonous critters. Its website suggests the availability of a very complete and varied range of those species. If not in stock, it suggests it can procure it.

“Now, ready for interesting development number *three* of those *two* I mentioned?”

Smiles.

“That pet store owner was found dead in his shop this morning from what sounds like blunt force trauma according to the police report. Doubt if the largest rattler in the place might have sported a rattle big enough to inflict such a blow.

“So, what do you think?”

It was directed at Masters.

“I’d say solid, preliminary, police work. Useful and interesting starting places. The cop in me hopes the professor has been warned on the off chance the bad guy had some part in the pet store owner’s death *and* that the pet store owner has some relationship with the professor *and* that it is in some way nefarious *and* related to the little yellow guy that popped out of a box here yesterday.”

“Are you making fun of me?”

“Absolutely not. I have never let a seemingly inane tangle of unrelated findings dissuade me from following them as leads. The second essential gene for a good detective is the *Untangler Gene*. The *Snoop Gene* is the first, by the way, and is essentially present in any good detective. You seem to have that one in spades. The solution of the case will disclose whether or not you have the UG.”

Robbie managed a grin at the shorthand.

“You present a viable scenario; for some reason, the professor and the pet store owner – known associates of poisonous animals, if not each other – have played some part in procuring and supplying the frog used in the attempted murder of your uncle and perhaps the unintended murder of Roscoe. The murderer could be either of them, or, more likely, they might have been used by a third party – the real bad guy. Their participation could be fully innocent – well, not if importing the frog is part of it – or they could be accomplices – paid or otherwise. It seems reasonable to throw in the snake in the bed, as well. As one set of possibilities, that scenario will require a good deal of sorting out.

“A starting place will be to determine if there actually is some link between the professor and the pet store owner. One might surmise there is – their mutual interest and proximity. It may well be benign, of course.

“I think it is time / contact the police, Ken.”

CHAPTER TWO

Day One: Early Afternoon

After lunch, and back in the den, Masters enlisted the aid of Ken and Robby.

“It is essential to assemble a timeline – one that will be accurate pretty much down to the minute, so let’s get at it. Where do we begin?”

“Betsy and the rattler,” Robbie offered.

“As I understand it, that included Betsy, Worth and eventually, you, Robbie.”

“Right.”

“Can you gather Betsy and Worth for me?”

Robbie made the calls.

Betsy arrived first, Worth a minute or so later.

“Please take seats. I need to get quite specific about the time you discovered the snake in your bed, Betsy – may I call you Betsy?”

“Been Betsy all my life. My father was hoping for a son. Had the name Bartholomew picked out. Always believed I lucked out being a girl. Named us alphabetically. Older sister is Abigail. Younger siblings are Calvin, Derrek, Elliot, Fredrick, and George. He eventually got his boys – a whole basketball team.”

It appeared Betsy – *not* Bartholomew – would be less than shy about providing information.

“As I understand it, you were arranging your bed for the

night when you discovered the snake.”

“That’s right. I think I can be quite specific about the time. On Monday evenings I watch that reality show with all the girls who moan and groan about all their problems. They got nothing compared to what me and my sister had with five brothers. Anyway, it goes off at nine. I didn’t watch the final commercials – they run four at the end – it’s a rerun channel – so I went directly to my bed to make sure the heating pad was on and in place – I have it pinned with safety pins but still, I always check on it. The pad is under the bottom, fitted, sheet. I always follow the same routine: fold the quilt down to the bottom – I leave it on the bed to help keep my feet warm. Under that is one blanket and the sheet. I pull them back together. *That* is when I saw the snake – right in the middle of the bed.

“There was one odd thing about that. When I drew the sheet back, I thought I smelled wood smoke. Anyway, I soon left that wonder behind. I went out into the hall to seek help. I was on my way next door to get Worth. He was coming down the hall – hurrying because he had heard me scream, I suppose.

“So, the time was most likely nine on the nose when I found it.”

“Worth?”

“I’m quite sure Betsy’s estimate is accurate. I watch the local news at nine. I had been making the rounds locking the doors for the night – one in front, two in back and the exit from the pool room. I was a bit behind schedule because I found the east rear door was already locked. That was odd and I took a moment to work the lock to make sure it was operating properly. It was. It’s never locked until I lock it. I unlock them all between five fifty and six in the morning and lock them all between eight fifty and nine each evening. All of us have keys – one key fits all.

“Betsy dragged me into her room raving about a snake.”
He turned to Betsy.

“Sorry, but you *were* raving, and you did drag me, Betsy.”

“I’m sure you’re right. Me and slimy creatures have never got along. I just stay out of Robbie’s ‘Jeepers Creepers’

room upstairs.”

“I called Robbie right away,” Worth went on. “I figured he’d know what to do about the snake. One thing seemed odd, I thought; the snake made no move to go anywhere. It just laid there sort of curled up. It put its head up and sort of looked around but didn’t try to leave. Like he’d hung one on the night before and decided it was not worth it to move.”

“Robbie. I understand you arrived shortly after that.”

“Yes, Sir/Ray.”

He consulted his phone.

“Worth’s call was at one minute after nine. It lasted fourteen seconds. He just mentioned the snake and asked me to come help. I grabbed a drawstring, heavy canvas bag and my hook – a device with a loop on one end of a long stick that can be tightened just below the head to secure them.

“So, my room’s on the second floor next to the elevator. I had just exited the elevator, coming upstairs from my last, nightly sprint around the grounds. Let me first interject my own observation about that door. When I left to go outside at about eight thirty, it was unlocked, and I left it that way. When I returned, it was locked – the way Worth says he found it. I figured for some reason Worth had made his rounds early that night. I used my key to enter and left it locked the way I had found it.

“My point was that the elevator was right there waiting for me on two. Takes eight seconds for it to close the doors, deliver me to the first floor and open its doors. Add six seconds for me to move down the hall to Betsy’s room – combined time, fifteen seconds tops.

“The door to her room was open. I knocked and entered. Like Worth said, the snake looked lethargic making it simple to get in under control. A young one – not three feet long. I slipped it into a bag and tied it shut. Often a snake will thrash about for a moment or two, but it didn’t. I smelled what the other two had smelled. Smoking a snake is similar to smoking bees to keep it sluggish. I had read about it but never tried it and frankly doubted if it would work. Eventually, I took it to my science room and locked it down in a large, empty, terrarium.

“How long do you think a smoked snake might remain

less than alert?”

“I will need to get some solid data, but if I were to proffer a guess, I’d say less than an hour for sure – maybe even less than half an hour.”

“So, most likely it had to be done after arriving here, rather than before, unless the bad guy has a place within a block or so of the house.”

“I’d think that would be accurate. A portable snake smoker. Do you suppose that phrase has ever been uttered before in the whole history of the English language – *a portable snake smoker?*”

“Perhaps you could Google it. Until then, I am interested in your encounters with the rear door. What time did you leave through it?”

“I left my room at – let’s see. I have my phone alarm set to remind me at eight thirty. I had been reading. I finished the paragraph, marked the page, laid the book on my desk, slipped into a hoodie and left right away. I’d say I left my room at eight thirty-two. That would have put me at the rear door no later than eight thirty-two and a half. Like I said, the door was not locked. I rolled around the quad – the rectangular system of sidewalks surrounding the massive flower garden – my usual ten times – twenty minutes. I took a few moments to talk with the new roses Roscoe added a week or so ago. They like the place, by the way.”

He offered a grin. That had been oddly reassuring to Masters.

“It probably put me back at the door at eight fifty-five. That is when I found the door locked. I unlocked it, let myself in, relocked it and took the elevator up to my room. There by eight fifty-six, easy. I was undressing for the night – had removed my hoodie and shoes when I got the call from Worth.”

“So,” Masters went on, “sometime between eight thirty-two and a half and eight fifty-five, that rear door got locked. None of you saw anybody at or near the door, I take it.”

They shook their heads. Betsy raised her finger the way folks do when formulating a thought, they want to share.

“Maybe something, since you want us to be all precise about things. The last break for commercials in the program I

was watching came about eight fifty, I'd say. That's predictable from evening to evening. I usually go into the bathroom during that two-minute commercial break. I did that last night."

"Helpful, Betsy. Try this on and give me feedback," Masters said. "Sometime before eight fifty, the bad guy entered the house – perhaps through the south, rear door, although that is not essential – then entered Betsy's room at eight fifty while she was in the bathroom, deposited the lethargic snake under the covers on the bed, and left through the south, rear door. Perhaps out of habit, he pressed the button in the handle hardware that locked it, then left while Robbie – following the age-old adage – had stopped to smell the roses."

Only Ken and Robbie offered smiles. Everybody nodded, agreeing it could have happened in that way. Robbie had an additional thought.

"From the amount of the lingering smell of smoke, I'm thinking he had the smoker with him and left a few puffs in under the sheet for good measure."

"Interesting. Makes sense," Masters said.

Robbie then had the essential comment.

"Making it all doubly scary is the fact *that* suggests the bad guy is somebody who knows this house and the habits of those of us who live here – down to the minute. I vote we keep the doors locked twenty-four/seven for a while."

"Not at all a bad suggestion, however, if the person has such total access to the habits of you people, might he or she not also have a key."

"Shall I have the locks changed?" Ken asked.

"A good idea, I believe."

TIMELINE: ENTRY ONE: Betsy's encounter with the snake. Roughly between 8:50 and 9:00 pm, Tuesday evening.

Masters thanked Betsy and Worth and suggested that if anything else came to mind they should let him know – immediately. They left.

"So, what is the next event – the arrival of the frog

package?"

"Yes," Ken said. "I believe so." He looked at Robbie who nodded, confirming it. "Worth was a part of that as well."

"Can you chase him down before he gets too far, Robbie."

They were right back.

"Sorry, Worth. I guess we need you for the next situation as well. The package.

"Ken?"

"The story really begins with Worth, Ray. Let him begin."

Masters turned to the man who was again sitting.

"I guess you're on, Worth."

"Well, let's see. I was doing my routine morning butlering things on the first floor – washing the glass in the rear doors – when the front doorbell rang. We almost never get guests. I can't say I hurried to answer it but neither did I dawdle.

"I looked through the peep hole, but everything looked blurry – dew, I figured. I went ahead and opened the door. Two things: I noticed the big brown delivery truck out front at the foot of the steps and just the back of a man in what looked to be a brown jump suit. The door closed behind him before I could get a definitive look. The glass in the truck was smoked – odd I thought.

"Second, was the small package on the porch sitting on the door mat. It was wrapped in brown paper and tied with substantial white cord. About a foot square and six inches deep. It was addressed to Mr. M. and I noticed it bore the return address of his agent, Miss Dutton. Merely out of curiosity, I looked out after the truck, but it was down the driveway and heading west – to the right – on *Boyd*, the street just beyond the wall.

"I went directly to Mr. M's den – variously referred to as his work room, his creative center and the dungeon, depending, I believe, on his inclination to write or not to write. I knocked on his door, he responded, and I entered. He was out on the deck. The sliding glass door was open. When I arrived, Socrates was receiving a thorough ear scratching – he so loved those. Mr. M was sitting on the divan. I told him what I had and how I came to have it. I placed it on the seat next to him and left. Socrates,

of course, jumped up on the seat and gave it a good sniffing.”

“So, you didn’t see the delivery man’s face,” Masters asked.

“No. Truthfully, I really didn’t see the delivery man at all – more like a dark brown blur before the door to the truck shut behind him.”

“Was there anything about the package or the way it was placed that moved you to consider it?”

“No. Those delivery men never stick around for a signature anymore – ring the bell, set the package, and run back to the truck – much like a naughty game we played at twilight as children.”

“Thank you. Sorry to have interrupted your butlering activities.”

“I suppose it would be difficult to actually interrupt an activity that has been going on relatively non-stop for thirty years, Sir.”

Worth stood and left. Robbie had been taking notes on his tablet or iPad or laptop or digital abacus. . . Masters had no idea which of any of those things it might have been – nor did he really care. The old detective turned back to Ken indicating he should pick up the story.

“Like Worth said, he placed it on the seat next to me. Socrates was an inquisitive sort and his nose was right there while I put it on my lap and used my pocketknife to cut the cord and then cut away the paper – around the edges of the top.”

“What time would you say it was at that point?”

“Five or six minutes after ten, I suppose. No more than that. With just a little doing I can be exact. The opening and closing of the door to my den is automatically recorded – it came as part of the software that records whatever is said in the room – voice activated – time and date stamped. I often pace as I dictate.”

“We may want that later. Go on. You were opening the package.”

“Well, like I told you earlier, when I raised the lid, the frog jumped up and lit on the side of the dog’s nose/muzzle. He died within moments. The frog hopped off the deck and into the back lawn. Although I didn’t know frogs could be poisonous, I quickly

concluded it had played a part in Socrates' distress. I called Roscoe immediately. He thanked me for the warning."

"What time would you say it was by then?"

Ken tossed his phone to Robbie.

"That call was placed at 10:07:34 and lasted until 10:08:59."

He tossed it back.

"Robbie is our tech savvy go-to-guy out here."

"What was Roscoe's reaction to the information you provided?"

"He thanked me, like I said, and said he'd be careful – said he was wearing his rubber boots. He mentioned we needed to ask Robbie how to go about finding and capturing it. I told him I would handle that – maybe call animal control. I had taken it quite seriously."

TIMELINE ENTRY TWO: Package delivery, opening, and frog escape – 10:05 to 10:07:34 Tuesday morning.

"Next would be when I found Roscoe," Robbie offered. "That was at a few minutes after one. I see I called Uncle Ken at four minutes after one. I had my sketch pad, and Ali and I were on our way to see if I could find something along the stream that called out to be sketched.

"I saw Roscoe on the ground – say, ten feet up the bank from the water in the stream. The hoe was laying not far away – or maybe it was *lying* not far away – I've never taken time to really get that straight. It had blood on it – on the blade. There was also a dead mole in the vicinity. Roscoe hated moles like husbands hate in-laws – or so Benson has told me. I assume the blood was from the annihilation of the rodent.

"Reacting from instinct rather than brains, I foolishly let myself down out of my chair and felt for a pulse – there was none. I noticed right off his left hand was black and swollen – like I imagined it might be from a hundred hornet stings. Immediately upon realizing I couldn't help Roscoe, I called Uncle Ken. He called the police. I didn't cover Roscoe not wanting to contaminate the crime scene – I carry a blanket in

Ali's backpack, so I could have. I remained there until the cops came.

*TIMELINE ENTRY THREE: 1:04
Tuesday afternoon.*

"When did you call the police, Ken, and when did they arrive?"

"I placed the call immediately – as soon as I hung up from Robbie – say five minutes after one. Detective Portman and an officer – his driver – arrived at about one thirty. Oddly, he didn't come to the house. Robbie found him wandering the back lawn and called to him.

"Robbie, why don't *you* continue. You are the one who dealt with him."

"Okay. One-thirty is a very accurate estimate. Like I said, I remained there beside Roscoe's body feeling really bummed out – a phrase from my mother's generation. I saw a man in a suit walking around the corner of the house and onto the back lawn. I called to him, assuming he must be the police. About that time a uniformed officer came into view right behind him. They came toward me.

"Portman offered his take on the situation after the first thirty seconds. I sincerely believe he thought he had it all wrapped up. He said: 'Clearly the old man fell from his wheelchair while hunting ground hogs, sprained his wrist, hit his head on the hoe and died on the spot'."

I tried to set him straight, saying something like:

"No, Sir. This is a more reasonable scenario, you see the chair is mine: there was a poisonous, yellow, frog loose on the premises and the two of them met, Roscoe was bitten or whatever and died almost immediately. My observation says he has been dead no more than an hour."

"A ground hog named, Roscoe?"

"No, Sir. That was the man's name. He was our grounds keeper."

"Why did he have a poisonous frog? Never heard of a poisonous frog, myself. Certainly, never heard of a yellow frog. Frogs are green."

“The officer was taking notes. We exchanged rolling eyes. It was as if he were apologizing but had no authority to change the course of things. I shifted my attention, began speaking directly with him, and related the events up to that moment. He took notes. I cautioned them about the likely presence of the frog there in the lawn or down by the creek. The officer called the medical examiner. She arrived about a half-hour later. By then, I was back in Ali.

*TIMELINE ENTRY FOUR: 1:04 Tues,
Roscoe’s body found*

*TIMELINE ENTRY FIVE: 1:05 Tues, Ken
Called police*

*TIMELINE ENTRY SIX: 1:30 Tues,
Portman and Officer arrive*

*TIMELINE ENTRY SEVEN: 2:30 Tues,
Medical Examiner arrives.*

At what time was the body removed?

“It was gone by three. Portman didn’t call for any help with the crime scene. His assistant took several pictures while we waited on the M.E. I asked if CSI would be coming. Portman said they would work from the photographs. I really had to wonder if he knew what CSI meant.”

*TIMELINE ENTRY EIGHT: 3:00 Tues,
Body removed.*

“I’d like your permission to call an old friend in the police department, Ken.”

Robbie took out his phone.

“You have a number?”

“Just get me the department.”

He punched in the number and handed it to Masters.

“With whom am I speaking, please. . . Officer Campbell, this is Detective Raymond Masters, an old friend of Chief Watson. Please tell him I am on the line. It is an urgent matter. I have my stopwatch running, son. . .

“Johnny. I heard they’d kicked you upstairs. What’s that about incompetence rising to the top? . . . I have what might be an awkward matter here. It involves a Detective Portman. . . I see. . . Uh hu. . . We accept your apology. I understand how things can fall through the proverbial cracks. We need a forensic team PDQ and a copy of the ME’s report as soon as possible. I’m working the case for another old friend you’ve probably heard of, the mystery writer, Kensington Miller. . .

“Within the hour. Thank you. Maybe coffee before I leave your fine city. Give my love to Lois. Oh, one more thing if I may. Could you have animal control give me a call. We seem to have a deadly tropical frog loose in this part of town. Hope he is still inside these walls. We have an expert here on site and there is a professor at the university who is also knowledgeable – the little guy’s name is Poison Dart Frog. . . No, *not* the professor, the frog, you imp. Later, then.”

“Wow!” Robbie said. “He snaps his fingers and the heavens open up. It is like in the books. I often wondered.”

Masters and Ken shared a wink.

Masters addressed Robbie.

“Did you move anything at the scene of Roscoe’s demise?”

“No, Sir. Hoe is still where I found it. Portman didn’t touch it. The old mole is probably bloated and stinking to high heavens by now. Oh, one thing. I put a small sheet of canvas over the blade of the hoe in case of heavy dew or rain.”

“Very good thinking. May I ask how you happened to have a sheet of canvas with you?”

“Sometimes I find things that need to be painted instead of just sketched, so I do the sketch on canvas to be painted later. Sort of like those famous evidence bags you always seem able to produce the moment they are needed.”

A phone rang. Robbie answered.

“For you. Animal Control – the director – says his name is Johnson.”

Masters took the phone and suggested he begin by speaking with Robbie. Robbie took the phone into the hall.

Ken smiled and spoke.

“I think we need another Timeline entry, Ray:

Masters Opens up the Heavens: 1:36 pm Wednesday.
Chuckles.

“Moving on. What’s next?”

“It involves the Worth incident with the dart sunk into his backpack. I mentioned it before; his day off is Wednesday. Just so you don’t think I am too harsh a task master, all my employees receive two, two-week paid vacations a year. Back to the incident. He leaves about five Tuesday evening and arrives back in time to open the doors at six on Thursday morning.

“All that repetition is to refine the time for your timeline. It was Tuesday afternoon, at about five fifteen, when he came to me in the den – quite shaken – unusual for our staid old Worth. He was carrying his backpack in front of him at arm’s length. I’ve told you the story. We can set the time of his arrival in my room at exactly five fifteen – I had just finished writing for the day. I keep to a fairly rigid schedule or I suffer burnout. I had saved my work to the computer and a flash drive – I noticed the time on the file entry – and was on my way to the kitchen to find something to nibble on until dinner. That would put the delivery of the dart into Worth’s backpack at pretty close to five thirteen. Shall I call him?”

“Later perhaps. Has the dart been analyzed by forensics?”

“It was turned over to the police. I have no further information.”

Ken paused and continued.

“As we have been talking today, it now hits me that, *that* incident may be related to Benson’s incident of about the same time – a few minutes later, actually, out in front on the street. His encounter with the big brown truck.”

TIMELINE ENTRY NINE: 5:13 pm Tues,
Worth’s Dart Encounter

TIMELINE ENTRY TEN: 5:20 pm
Benson’s Big Brown Truck Encounter.

“I need to talk with Benson about that experience with the truck.”

Robbie came back from speaking with animal control.
“Idiots!”

“And, tell us, how did the conversation go?”

It had been Ken and was worth smiles all around.

“I suppose I should be more tolerant – they have never had such a challenge before – looking for an infinitesimal frog that could be most any place in this part of the city. I think I did convince them to post a precinct-wide warning with a picture of the little guy. I guess I had no good suggestion for them other than that. We could have a major disaster on our hands. One person – child, most likely – tries to pick up the pretty frog, one person dead. Ten people try to pick up the pretty frog and . . . we all get the picture.

“Do you want to hear more about the frog?”

“Certainly,” Masters said. “I never turn down relevant information.

“May be some repetition here. That should help you with the test that will come later.”

Smiles.

“The brightest colored members of the species are the most poisonous – yellow being near the top of that list. Their poison varies in potency depending on what they have been eating. Their typical diet includes mites, ants, termites and small spiders. They are a gluttonous species – eating as much as their digestive systems can hold. When full up of the right insects, their poison is at its most dangerous – especially after a feast of termites.

“Being from the floor of rainforests they prefer hot, humid conditions in the deep shade. Have outstanding vision. They are usually non-poisonous when in captivity, which makes me think our little guy is not long from his home habitat – a very recent arrival. Only one known predator – a snake, also common only to the floors of rainforests. Basically, the only animal not quickly effected by its poisonous slime. There are stories of a larger animal picking up the frog in its mouth, immediately dying and the frog literally crawling up the animal’s esophagus and hopping off to freedom.”

“Have you saved the box in which it came? Of course, you have – Robbie was involved. Let me rephrase – may I

examine the box in which it came?"

"Up in my science room, Mr. Ray. Anytime you want. Secured inside a plastic bag."

"I want to see that, and I need to speak with Benson."

"Benson is gone to the carwash. Let's do the frog package, first."

"Very well," Masters agreed.

"I will let you two do that," Ken said. "I'll corral Benson when he returns."

Upstairs, Robbie set the bag on a table and untied it. He removed the box. Except for the lid, the brown wrapping paper was still in place. Masters tapped on it and spoke.

"Not the usual plain brown paper wrapping. Do you have a magnifying glass larger than what I carry on my keychain?"

Robbie produced one, assuming the question had to have been rhetorical. Masters directed his attention to a series of subtle white lines – essentially squares, ever decreasing in size – squares within squares.

"What do they suggest to you Robbie."

"That the paper was produced in the size we see it – not torn from a typical roll of wrapping paper. Since it was printed, it is probably way more expensive than its plain cousin. One has to ask why such paper would have been used? Also, it has a very slight sheen. I'd say not one's typical off the roll paper, for sure."

"There's a new project for you – find out all you can about the paper, where and by whom it is manufactured, where it may be available locally – everything. Save a sample."

"I have the piece Uncle Ken cut off the top. I'll get right on it. It might suggest something interesting – being clearly expensive paper, the killer might be a monied person."

"You do think like a cop. Let's look inside."

"Let me warn you, there are still a few tiny insects in there – alive; I presume a special feast to keep the frog's poison potent during the trip. They will try to leave the box once the lid's off. My observation is that insects prefer to be anywhere but where they are – much like human toddlers, I suppose."

He removed the lid. He had been right. He had also been prepared and placed a pane of thick glass over it.

“Very good. Does that mean you have studied the insects?”

“Only enough to recognize that most of them are not native to this part of the world. My plan is to identify them, so I can nail the place they come from. I’ll begin by comparing them with the insects common to the rainforests.”

“I suggest you begin with rainforests close to an international airport, since time seems to necessarily play an important role.”

“I hadn’t thought of that. Great. I’ve been thinking Professor Dey at the university might be able to help us bypass a lot of the research – he may just know things. He is a herpetologist – studies amphibians and, I assume that necessarily includes, where they live and the things they eat.

“There is no restriction on their importation, like I had initially suspected. They are available in specialized pet stores in the United States. We may not need to consider point of origin and method of transport.”

“I believe you said the poison soon loses its potency once it leaves the rainforest. My thought would be those specimens available in shops would probably not be dangerous.”

“Good thinking. I see. I’m on it.”

“Very good. First, please help me get a call through to the professor.”

Ten minutes later, an appointment was set. Fifteen minutes later, Benson returned. Twenty minutes later, they were on their way to the campus.

“I appreciate you agreeing to see us on such short notice, Doctor Dey.”

Masters laid out the situation and the questions: how could such a frog arrive in Rochester, *quickly*, and who were the best bets for having procured it?

“It is not difficult for a researcher to import such an animal. Most universities have restrictive protocols about that, however. My educated guess is that this one comes from eastern Peru.”

Robbie had a question and having assumed he was a full-fledged member of the detective team, felt free to ask it.

“If the one procuring it had nefarious intentions for its use, so did not want its acquisition to be traced to him, he might not want to go through the usual channels – a pet store, for example. Are there less than obvious means for importing such a little critter?”

“Interesting. There is a vast network of folks who trade in such things – from insects to big cats. Your best bet would be to contact an upscale pet store. They would know, even if they didn’t use the resource.

“Perhaps I shouldn’t even bring this up, but I have a relatively new colleague here in the department – Bob Zimm. Manages the live species laboratory compound down the hall. Finishing his PhD. During the past year he has made two trips to South America arranging for various species to be brought here to the university – related to his dissertation, I believe. Don’t know him well. I have to assume he is strictly on the up and up, but you said, *anything* I might know.”

“I did, and I thank you. Do you have many species that carry deadly substances – poison or venom?”

“Several dozen – a few from our own south west, but many from other places in the world. Lots from Australia. The joke in my circle is that unless it *speaks* with an Aussie accent, don’t touch it if it’s from Down Under – most deadly creatures per square foot of any other region in the world. No *harmful* poison dart frogs, however. I just might add for your general information, there are such little critters on several of the Hawaiian Islands. Also, if I were looking for one in an environment like a large lawn, I would begin looking for ant or termite hills close to water.”

“We got that – a bevy of ant hills along a stream. Roscoe – the deceased grounds keeper – joked recently that he was ready to import an anteater to get rid of them. He was never very tolerant of yard pests. On occasion, he even banished me. I didn’t even waist my humorous line about ‘uncleaters’ on him.”

Smiles.

“I give you maybe one in a billion chance of finding it. That is one tiny amphibian. As you appear to know, there is an upside to that. Once away from tropical conditions and their

preferred diet, their poison rather quickly loses its potency. Realistically, it will probably be dead in a week from the change in environment. Rochester in the Fall is like the north pole to them.”

Masters nodded.

They talked on for some time and then took his directions to find the Bob Zimm to whom he had referred. It was six doors away. The door was ajar. They knocked. No answer. They entered. An open door seemed odd. A sign on the door: *Warning: Do not leave with ants in your pants* – was probably hilarious to those who worked there feeding the menagerie of tiny beasts.

Warning signs were everywhere. *Do not open terrariums! Venom deadly. If you get bitten, remember, I toad you so.* Robbie pointed out a number of species with which he was familiar. He was clearly amazed by how many he wasn't.

It appeared nobody was there. Robbie took it up.

“First, I find it unsettling that the hall door was open – a room containing many dangerous killers and we just walked in. Second, we are being allowed to just roam around like it was some sort of municipal petting zoo for little critters.”

Masters called out.

“Mr. Zimm! Bob Zimm? Anybody?”

Robby had moved some distance away. He called back across the room to Masters.

“If the Zimm guy is about six feet tall, a hundred and eighty pounds, black hair and brown eyes and wearing a white lab jacket with the name, Zimm, embroidered on it, I think I just found him. Best guess: he is dead – on the floor – behind a counter – in a contained pool of blood. The back of his neck is puffy and black resembling Roscoe's hand. Discounting human participation, I'm guessing the bad guy was a snake in a snit.”

Masters hurried (well!) to him and confirmed all of that – the name from the man's wallet, his terminal condition from his lack of pulse, and the venomous attack from the dark, puffy area just up onto the base of the neck – at the rear.

“Call the main switchboard here at the university and request security, PDQ.”

Robbie placed the call. Masters was surprised the boy

had the number on speed dial – or whatever it was called those days. Two officers arrived within minutes. Still, Robbie thought it was far too long a response time. He would send a memo to the president. Masters used the time to snoop – the body and the immediate area in the room. He asked the officers to call homicide.

“When you contact the police, use my name. It should get you expedited service.”

They made the call and were impressed with the response.

Robbie and the old detective gave the security officers their statements and waited.

The police arrived. A few minutes later the Medical Examiner entered the room accompanied by two young men in long, white, jackets and neon tennis shoes. Robbie figured they were seasoned veterans. Masters figured they were twelve.

“Mr. Masters. I’m Clair Browner, the ME. So, what do you think we have here?” she asked, offering her hand for a shake and donning her glasses with a well-practiced, one hand, flick and slip into place. Her two, young assistants stepped forward to listen. It appeared they had been primed to do so.

“A body with a puffy neck – the rear of the neck. No fang marks are visible. I suspect an injection of venom with a small diameter syringe. The deceased had been an expert in venomous amphibians. He would have been too knowledgeable to have been bitten by any of the little guys captive in this room. Something is quite wrong. I suspect murder. I will be interested in the exact source of the venom – most likely a rattlesnake due to its quick acting deadly potential and relatively easy access.

“You will find the likely needle in the trash can – there. Our bad guy would not want to be caught with it on him. Unlikely to find fingerprints, but if there are, they will be on the underside of the plunger flange – left there as the killer was filling the reservoir. Our killer believes he is cleverer than he is, so just may have forgone the latex gloves.”

He turned to the officers and continued.

“He will be somebody familiar to the personnel in this building – coming and going at will. He had a key – a card key

– to this room. My best guess is that he is under thirty – maybe under twenty-five – to blend in with the others on campus. If I were to bet, I'd place his height not much more than five feet five. The swelling begins between the T1 and C7 vertebra at the base of the neck. A person of equal or greater height would have found it handier to make the injection higher than that – probably on the side of the neck, in fact. The path of the needle will likely be at an upward angle through the flesh.”

The ME looked at the young officers.

“Include those things in your report and your supervisor will think you are brilliant. Thanks Mr. Masters. We'll follow up on your observations.”

Masters and Robbie left. Benson was watching for them and met them with the limo at the curb.

“When we near the mansion, Benson, I'd like for you to stop at the place of your encounter and go through the interaction you had with the big brown truck.”

As they approached, Benson slowed and began describing what had taken place.

“I was returning from dropping Robbie's mother off at her friend's across town. It had just begun a very light, misty, rain. The pavement was barely wet. When I approached the driveway, the brown delivery truck pulled away from the curb, up there – it was some thirty yards ahead of me and on the opposite side of the street. In order to avoid a collision, I sped up, believing I could turn into the drive and it would miss me.

“During the first second or so, I didn't realize it was intentionally coming directly at me and accelerating. In turn, I accelerated. About halfway to me it began to slide – rear to its left which turned the front to the right. It just dinged my front left fender as I managed to make the turn to get out of its way. It ended up momentarily stalled, front, right wheel jumping the curb over there by the pole. It restarted immediately, backed up a few yards, and sped away – past me going east.”

“And the driver?”

“Could not see him – well, *did* not see him. The windshield was tinted glass. Never seen that variety of a truck with those kinds of windows. Oh, the driver side window was rolled down, still I couldn't see inside. It was dark in there, and

my attention was obviously elsewhere.”

“Robbie, see if you can find a missing truck notice online – maybe in the police reports, maybe on social media. I imagine those tinted windows will be the essential clue. It seems unlikely the driver was a legitimate Big Brown driver.”

Robbie got to work clearly delighted to have been handed the assignment.

“Please pull over here at the entrance to the big circular driveway, Benson. I’d like to look around out there.”

Robbie unloaded his chair, insisting he be a part of it. He had all the tricks of that process down pat. Truth be told, it took him less time to exit the limo than it did the old detective. Masters noted that but kept the smile to himself. ‘Show off.’

Benson stood, leaning against the front, left fender, folding his arms. Masters walked the area, from time to time asking questions of Benson.

“Is this about where the truck sat originally?”

“I’d say ten yards further away.”

“Could you tell if the engine was running before you arrived?”

“No. I was paying no attention to it. I have to imagine it was, as quickly as it came upon me. On the other hand, maybe not, since how could he have known when I would appear?”

“Were its wipers working?”

“I just don’t know. Sorry. It flicked through my head that it was odd the window was down, since it had begun raining, even if so lightly.”

“But you could not see the driver’s face.”

“That’s correct. Wait. I believe I saw a hand extend out the window. Yes, because I remember wondering if the driver was thinking he could push me away, should we get close during his slide. Just one of those nanosecond-long, fleeting, foolish, impressions that one’s brain presents when it has nothing reasonable to offer.”

“Did you, or had you, noticed the sky – light, dark, sun, clouds?”

“It had darkened remarkably just prior to the rain setting in. I considered turning on the headlights, but we were so close I felt it wasn’t necessary.”

“Did the truck have its lights on?”

“No. About lights, however. Just as the incident got underway, the lights on the poles on either side of the gate came on – they are operated automatically as darkness approaches in the evening.

“Oh, one other thing – a maybe/perhaps/possibly sort of impression. When they came on, just for a second a glint of reflected light appeared on the street beside the truck. That would have been at about the moment it began its slide. Near the gutter over there. Glass or a can, perhaps.”

“Had you noticed the hand prior to that or after that.”

“Let me think. Prior. Once the slide began, the hand was withdrawn. It all happened so quickly – probably no more than five seconds from the time the truck pulled out until it sped off – maybe seven adding backup time.”

“I see leaves have been raked into the street at the curb from the berm outside the wall.”

Robbie responded.

“Yes. Roscoe did that Monday. He said he hoped the street cleaning machine would suck them up when it came by so he wouldn’t have to bag them. There are only a few. The main shedding will be in a month – the middle of October. He liked to stay ahead of things.”

Masters crossed the street from where the truck had been parked and began moving the leaves with one foot. Robbie contained his impression of the large old detective as a ballerina. The apparent search went on for some time.

He held his arm out to keep Robbie back.

“Got something dangerous-looking here.”

He pointed at the gutter in which he had just been playing footsy with the leaves. They backed away.

“That, my friend, is a pipe bomb. Only a foot long and two inches in diameter, but when packed with black powder and set off, it can be unbelievably destructive. Help me get the bomb squad on the phone.”

They arrived ten minutes later. Robbie gave *their* response time a thumbs up. Masters and Robbie returned to Benson at the Limo. The old detective spoke.

“My first impression is that the bomb was meant for the

Limo – more specifically, you, Benson – but in the confusion of the slipping truck, the driver’s aim must have been off, or some technical problem occurred. My guess is that it got dropped prematurely and rolled to the gutter. The pipe is shiny cast iron. It was likely what you saw glinting as the lights came on, at the wall.”

“You do get a lot of mileage out of virtually nothing, Ray.”

“You should have heard him out at the university, Robbie said. “Except for a name and social security number, he solved the murder right there and then.”

“So,” Benson said, let me get this straight; you are suggesting the driver had his window rolled down so he could toss the bomb at this vehicle and had it not been for the slippery pavement, he might well have succeeded?”

“That is how it looks at first take. You got enemies, Benson? Ex-girlfriends, their angry boyfriends, angry, well-tattooed competitors from your last demolition derby?”

Benson’s smile was weak, but it was a smile.

“Not unless they hold grudges for thirty years.”

The bomb took their time while they examined the bomb.

Presently, the lead officer approached Masters. He removed his heavy head gear.

“Strictly amateur, Sir. The problem was evident right from the start. The timer was faulty. It had been set for a mere ten seconds but failed. It was easily disarmed. You will want it saved for evidence, of course.”

“Yes, please. Amateur bomb makers typically are not careful about leaving fingerprints. After all, it is supposed to be blown to smithereens.”

“We’ll see that it gets delivered. How do we mark it?”

“Just the name, Masters, should do the trick and thank you.”

“You will receive our initial written report shortly.”

“Thanks for your rapid response.”

“Yeah,” Robbie added. “Kudos on that response time!”

They left. Benson drove the limo to the low, five-bay garage that spread to the east side of the house. Robbie and Masters made their way up the driveway. Robbie had a concern.

“I’m wondering what caused the truck to slip. The pavement was barely wet, according to Benson.”

“There is an interesting phenomenon – not sure if it has a name. Old blacktops like this one have absorbed lots of oil during their lifetimes. The slightest amount of moisture, mixing with that oil, spreads it over the surface of the road as a super slick, ultra-thin layer. Steve, a bus driver friend of mine, says that those first few moments after a pavement such as this one first gets wet, is the most dangerous time for slipping and sliding on it. Soon after, the tire traffic from the flow of vehicles dissipates the film. Seems he was right.”

“Might it also not mean the driver was inexperienced at the wheel of a truck that size and made all the wrong moves – ending up against the right curb like that?”

“I think you have the exact combination pegged.”

Things had grown well beyond a microscopic frog the size and color of a couple lemon drops, into four murders and four attempted murders. Masters had to wonder just how persistent the bad guy was going be – were those people upon whom his initial attempts had been bungled in line for additional attempts? He shuddered.

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CHAPTER THREE

Day One: Mid to Late Afternoon

Once inside, Robbie headed for his uncle to regale him with his big friend's unbelievable exploits; his big friend headed for the kitchen to finagle goodies out of the cook. Masters posited that salad and fruit just didn't last a big man like it must those four, scrawny, male denizens of Miller Manor. (Some might call them fit, trim, and healthy!)

Hoping for a twofer, Masters also wanted a chance to speak privately with the cook – Robbie's mother, Doris Miller.

"Hey. The big man is right on time. My son said it was incumbent on me to ensure there was a larder of blood sugar spiking delicacies readily available at ten, two and four. Good to meet you. I'm Doris."

"And does Doris come with a thesaurus?"

"Just quoting my boy whose motto is, 'never use a quarter word when a dollar word is available'. He has not yet come to the realization that often makes for very poor communication."

"I must say he is delightful, Doris. You must be proud of him. I have to wonder, despite his upbeat attitude, if there is not a darker element lurking there somewhere considering what he has been through and the devastating turn his life took so early on."

"He and I had that conversation when he turned ten. He said, 'Smiles and optimism are like the blankets on cold winter

nights that make you know everything is going to be just fine until morning’.”

“I wonder how he views, ‘morning’ in that context.”
“I asked him that. He said, ‘one can never know what the next morning will bring – it is one of the things that makes life so exciting. Some nights I can’t sleep just waiting for it to get here’.”

“So, how does it feel to be raising an eighty-year-wise teenager?”

“By far the best feeling of my life.”

She motioned for him to take a seat at the table and brought a Masters-sized mug of coffee. She removed the dome from the goodie plate. His blood sugar did indeed scream out at the very sight – “*Raise me! Raise me!*”

“I am at a loss for a motive for the recent events here. In cases like this I go back to basics and learn as much as I can about the people involved. Are you able to speak about your life – the accident in particular.”

“Yes. I’ve dealt with that – well, Robbie and I have dealt with it together. Got questions or shall I just shoot from the hip, here?”

“Fire at will – understand, of course, Will may not appreciate it.”

“One question for *you* first, if I may, Mr. Masters.”

“Of course.”

“How does that author, Flint, capture the real you – like that ‘fire at will’ comment – when he is not around during the investigations?”

“We were childhood friends, went to college together, have spent time with each other several times a year since then. I suppose what I am when I’m with him, I am when I am away from him. I don’t know what else to say about it.”

“That was my guess – assumption, I suppose. Thank you. Now, back to that smokin’ Colt 45.”

“My husband, Robert, Robbie’s father, Ken’s younger brother by ten years, was a professor of philosophy here at the university – a brilliant man. He rose up the academic ranks rapidly. He loved the outdoors – hiking, camping, biking, swimming. Robbie celebrated his second month of life in camo diapers in front of a tent on a mountain slope in Colorado. He

has very few firsthand memories of his father.

“One evening, his dad had taken him to an early evening preschool event. As they started home, a vehicle, never identified, struck their car, killing my husband and crippling Robbie. It is still classified as an unsolved vehicular hit and run homicide.”

“Where did that take place?”

“Here in the city. We lived on the south side not far from his school.”

“And, from what I have gleaned, it was soon after that that you and Robbie came to live here, with Ken.”

“That’s right. It was a generous offer, but I had major reservations about it. Ken had just experienced what can only be described as an aberrant year in his life. The usual straight arrow, fell into a dark year of drinking and relationships with, shall I say, women of lesser reputations. He stopped writing and just began wasting his life. Robert was concerned and approached him but to no avail. We only had minimal contact that year. Robbie had no contact with him. He was essentially a stranger.

“But then the accident. Ken was on my door step the next morning, sober, clean shaven, compassionate and helpful. He took care of all the necessary business with lawyers, the funeral, saw to our comfort and such. His concern and sobriety continued over the next month or so. When he suggested Robbie and I come to live here, I was ready to give it serious consideration. He certainly seemed to have returned to being the ‘brother’ Kenny I’d always known.

“A short side-trip, here, Ray. Robert and I married late – and I was several years younger than he. For many years it seemed that we were not going to be able to have children. Then Robbie. I’m sure all children are precious to parents, but you can understand how that word takes on its full meaning in a case like Robbie.

“I had worked as an assistant chef at the best restaurant in the city. Becoming the cook here seemed a natural. We worked out a deal – free room, board, medical expenses and a college fund for Robbie and a generous allowance for me in exchange for my services. It was all at Ken’s insistence and

was unbelievably generous – so heavily one sided. Ken is an exceptionally generous person.”

“Seems like lots of lifechanging things occurred all at once – the accident, your husband’s death, becoming a single parent, Robbie’s medical situation, Ken’s sobriety, and the move here.”

“All within a matter of six weeks, actually.”

“Has it been the same roster of employees during that time?”

“Roscoe became a permanent employee a few months after we moved in. The former grounds keeper’s health failed, and his family put him in a home of some kind. Rosco came here after retiring from the university’s grounds crew.”

“It appears the employees all get along well – didn’t mean to put words into your mouth, there.”

“Not at all. Yes. We are family. May sound trite, but it is how it is. They have accepted us without reservation. Right after the accident, Robbie needed constant attention – he was unable to take care of himself in any way and needed physical therapy several times a day and interpersonal attention a thousand times a day. Keeping a four-year-old flat on his back for months is the challenge of all challenges.

Benson and Worth were lifesavers during that period. Betsy and Roscoe subbed for the other two while they helped my son. And Ken, of course, was always available and saw to it that Robbie had the very best doctors. I had to take him to task for doting over him – some would call it spoiling him. He backed off with no hard feelings.

“When he was eight, Robbie went through a period when he denied his father had died and insisted Ken was actually his father. He got that straightened out with the help of counseling.”

“I understand his teacher, Josh Wilson, has been with him for ten years, can that be right? Ten years?”

“Yes. He was originally hired to tutor Robbie when he was attending public school in first and second grade – not that he had difficulty with the classes, but that he was years ahead when he entered school so needed his educational horizons broadened. After that, it became clear that he and a traditional school setting were just not compatible. Ken arranged for Josh

to take over completely – well as close to *taking over* as anybody has ever taken over anything from Little Master Independence. They have worked out an arrangement – twenty-five percent of the time on traditional subjects and the rest on things that interest Robbie. I get the idea Josh is very good at subtly guiding his interests. On the yearly academic testing required by the state, he is at the top of the charts in everything. He will tell you everything but *pole vaulting* and that he's working on that – don't discount that he may be. They have become close. He has been a blessing. I am sure Josh is paid exceptionally well."

"Is there any reliable long-term prognosis for Robbie's condition?"

"It is awaiting new advances and technology. Robbie knows more about that than I do. He is quite hopeful and is in regular communication with several research centers."

"It is not a deteriorating condition, then."

"That's correct. My fantasy is that he can already do more than he demonstrates openly around here – all for some big dramatic moment he is planning, like sliding down the bannister, landing on the floor from a backflip, and doing somersaults across the room on his next birthday. Undoubtedly a mother's wish-fulfillment dream."

"With all the trauma Robbie's experienced, I hesitate to ask if there is more that I haven't heard about."

"I believe that catches you up to date. If I think of more, I will *get you up to speed* – as a teen who I know often says."

"I appreciate the talk *and* the pastries. It appears my preferences have preceded me. Thanks again. Oh, I have not been told where in this magnificent old home *you* live."

"I have a suit of four rooms across the west side of the third floor. It was where Robbie pretty much grew up. He moved into his own room down on the second floor when he turned thirteen. 'Geez, mom. I'm thirteen. I need my privacy!' I sure miss him, but we manage to spend time together every day. He's pretty good in the kitchen, himself."

"One final question – no easy way to ask it. Are there any skeletons in *your* closet that might have some bearing on what's been going on here?"

“You mean that body of my ex-lover padlocked inside the freezer in the basement?”

“I think that might qualify.”

“If you can find it, I’ll fess up. Seriously, my life has been Robbie. No exes, no despicable in-laws, no chefs irate because I stole their recipes. Can’t think of a single *skelt*.”

They exchanged smiles and Masters left. He liked Doris. He liked all Ken’s people.

He found the Medical Examiner standing in the entry hall.

“Doctor Browner. This big old place needs lines on the floor like in hospitals to get one from place to place. May I help you?”

“I found the front door open, called out, and let myself in. I’m looking for you, actually. I have several pieces of information you’ll be interested in.”

“Let’s go into the chair and sofa room – I’m sure they have a more acceptable name for it, but I have not been made privy to it.”

Masters took a large chair and Doctor Browner, the center of a couch. They faced each other across a low coffee table. She opened her brief case on the seat next to her and spoke as she removed and opened a folder.

“In order, I suppose. The gardener – Roscoe Meredith – was effectively killed twice.”

Masters raised his eyebrows. She continued.

“He was hit on his right temple with a baseball bat sort of weapon – just above the ear. From the placement of the wound he was struck from the front. It’s your business to take that one from there. I suspect it would have rendered him unconscious or nearly so. As is typical in trauma such as that, it also caused fluid release in the membranes surrounding the brain which would have likely swelled and killed him.

“He was also injected with rattle snake poison in the fleshy part of his right palm. I assume the hit came first, because I can’t imagine the man just standing there allowing himself to be injected. It was rattle snake venom and caused immediate, fatal, neuro-pulmonary failure.

“An interesting side here suggests that at some point,

Roscoe got in a blow on the assailant with his hoe. The blood on the blade was initially thought to be that of a dead mole found a few yards away from the body. In fact, it is human blood, not belonging to the deceased. If a match is found, we have placed another party at the crime scene. Unseen on the clothed body was a deep bruise above his left kidney. A blow struck while he was still alive, and his heart was pumping. Common sense says that came first, then the blow to the head, and finally the venom.”

“But there is no way to set the time of the hoe strike, am I correct?”

“You are, if you’re speaking of a precise moment. That blood had, however, been exposed to the air for the same amount of time that I estimate Mr. Meredith had been dead. So, at least a very good correlation, there.”

She handed Masters a sheet, which contained all of that and more. She had a second sheet.

“Now, about the man at the university, Mr. Zimm in the ‘venomous things’ lab. He was, as you suspected, injected at the base of his skull at the rear of his neck – same variety of venom. A huge amount of venom compared with the amount contained in a strike from a snake – accounting for what was most certainly a relatively immediate death. A handwritten, background note on this report states that Zimm was hard of hearing suggesting the killer was probably able to come up behind him undetected. It also suggests, the killer very likely had knowledge of that condition – my surmise. They may have even known each other, but that’s your department. One’s natural reaction when attacked from behind is to turn around and face the intrusion. Zimm managed that just in time to fall to the floor on his back. His eyes remained open – muscle extension due to the venom.”

Again, she handed the sheet to Masters.

“In regard to the pet store owner; time of death between six and eight this morning. Cause of death blunt force trauma to the rear of the skull – with an interesting twist.”

“And here I didn’t even know ‘interesting twists’ were blunt.”

It had been Masters with a sheepish smile.

It was reflected by her own. She continued.

“At the site of the blow – which cracked the skull, suggesting a person with a great deal of upper body strength – there was not only the owner’s blood but also traces of a second type of blood.”

“And that second type was from Roscoe,” Masters said rather than asked.

“Why, yes. That’s right. Not much, but enough.”

Masters offered his initial interpretation.

“It establishes that the same weapon was used in both murders – dry blood on the bat from Roscoe was transferred from the weapon to the wound on the store owner. One question: any evidence to suggest the shape of that weapon?”

“Yes. In both cases the indentation was rounded – concave – in other words, not like a 2 X 4 – more like a ball bat as I indicated. One more thing about that. Both men were hit exactly above their ears. That suggests some expertise aiming and swinging a bat, I’m thinking.”

“Another question – this one more opinion, I suppose. About how much of the surface of a bat would have probably made contact with the skulls in those cases – a percent of the circumference?”

It was clearly not a question she had been expecting. She rolled up a magazine from the table and let it loosen to the proper circumference.

“Would you say that’s about the size of a ball bat, Detective?”

“About perfect for a softball bat. Do I suspect a bit of fast pitch in your college days?”

“Guilty. As to the circumference, I’d say no more than 15% – perhaps 20% if it were a skinnier baseball bat. Those both might be on the high side.”

“My thoughts as well. A fairly narrow range. Didn’t get lucky enough to find splinters?”

“Afraid not. An interesting question, however. A blow with that much force would be expected to have left splinters.”

Masters nodded and accepted the paper. She produced a final sheet.

“Regarding the poison on that dart that entered the

man's backpack. Nothing exotic, so I suspect it was not directed at him by some rogue, scantily clad, Amazon, warrior. It was the same variety of rattlesnake venom as we've seen before. Probably establishes part of the MO in much of this – amphibian secreted poison.”

She handed the report to him.

“What fine work, doctor. When you are finished with the dart, I would appreciate receiving it – well cleaned, of course. Thank you for expediting your examination, report, and the personal delivery.”

“I have recently come to understand that when Raymond Masters makes a request, everything else stops.”

Masters offered a sheepish smile. He continued.

“One more thing. Did your lab get to examine the dog that was killed here yesterday? I had made that request.”

“Glad you reminded me. Yes. I needed help from a specialist to identify it – venom from a tiny amphibian called a – let's see here.”

“A Poison Dart Frog.”

“Why yes. You must have suspected as much, so you know it is not native to this part of the World.”

“I did and I do. I had also suspected it in Roscoe's death, where I was wrong. The little guy appears to be loose in the back yard, here.”

“Oh, my. Their poison is absolutely deadly from what I could determine. In fact, it's really worse than that. The poison is exuded from its skin, so as it moves through the grass, it leaves traces behind that could be contacted by other animals or barefoot kids.”

“I must admit that is a factor I had not considered.”

They shared shudders.

“May I ask one more favor, doctor? That frog arrived here in a box. Could you go over the inside of that box in a most meticulous manner and see if anything out of the ordinary may have been absorbed by the cardboard? I know what I'm suspecting, but I'd rather not telegraph that and influence your search.”

“Absolutely. Like a final, practical exam. This is getting to the point of being fascinating. I'll just need the box.”

“Robbie has it sacked in plastic and ready to transport. I believe he has removed the insects that rode along with froggy. We can pick it up on the way to the front door.”

He walked her to the porch and down the steps to her vehicle. She left with a nod and a smile.

As he turned to reenter the house, Robbie was waiting at the open door.

“The ME, I see. What’s up? Reports already?”

Masters handed them over.

“I’ll be interested to hear your reaction to them.”

Robbie offered his own sheepish grin.

“You knew you’d get my reaction whether you’d be interested in hearing or not.”

The lad seemed to be quite self-aware. They exchanged smiles.

“Mom’s putting on a real feed for dinner. In the dining room at six.”

“I do hope we don’t have to dress for dinner.”

“Well, it might be a little chilly if you don’t, but I say each to his own.”

“You are a clown, young man.”

“I do my best. One of my main functions among this motley crew is to banish sadness and dispel the blues. I live among old people who only really have each other. Mr. Rossi, who was the grounds keeper when I first arrived here, used to call me LMS – *Little Master Sunshine*. I always liked that. My shrink says I still try to live up to it – too hard sometimes. Dr. Ashley’s a cool guy – you’d like him. Ten minutes in and you’d have each other analyzed right down to the deepest, darkest, facets of your soulless Ids.”

Masters put on a shudder.

“Thank you, Dr. Freud.”

“That’ll be three hundred bucks – I’ll file insurance later if you like.”

He giggled himself nearly out of his chair. Masters delighted in the boy’s reaction. LMS, indeed!

“Got a minute to talk, Robbie?”

“Sure. How about the sitting room?”

Sitting room. Masters wondered why that had not come

to mind earlier. Again, he took the big chair. Robby moved himself from Ali onto the couch – reclining back against one arm cushioned with a well pummeled pillow.

“Much like Dr. Ashley’s arrangement. ‘Lay back, relax, and spill your guts.’ Lay it on me.”

Masters returned the lad’s brief smile.

“Your mother has filled me in on the physical events that resulted in your coming to live here. I suppose I am interested in other things as I search for a motive. Does anything come to mind that may shed any light on that? I’m well aware that nobody knows what goes on in a household like the kids.”

“Especially we sneaky, inquisitive, overbearing ones.”

Another quick smile. It may have been confirmation. It may have been an admission. It may have been a question. Regardless of any of that, he clearly hoped it would be received as humorous. It was.

“I would think that would add to their efficiency, for sure.”

“First, I draw a blank about motive, Sir. That was a long time ago. I was barely a tadpole. If it stems from something back there, somebody’s been holding a grudge for a long time. Why wait so long?”

“An essential question. Perhaps that person was not in a position to act on his grudge until now.”

“Hmm. Not sure how to process that. Like he moved away, or he was a sick person back then who just recovered enough?”

“Like that.”

“When I was in the hospital there were lots of kids.”

“I hear that is often the case in a children’s hospital.”

“Now who’s being the imp? I don’t really remember them. Maybe somebody’s parents. I don’t remember them either. What I’m getting at is that Uncle Ken’s money might be mixed up in it somehow.”

“Maybe move on from illness and money-related things.”

“Okay.”

Extending his stiffened arms to the seat, he scooted up straighter and back a few inches.

“One thing, first. If it *had* been a kid, he would have likely had to have grown up to do the things that have been done.

That would have taken ten or so years. That puts it within the timeline, for sure.”

“That crossed my mind, as well. Does it ring any specific bells for you?”

“Not right off the bat – pardon that expression. I’ll think on it. I’m sure I made enemies back when I was in school – I was really obnoxious. I delighted in lording my intelligence and knowledge over the other kids. That was all I had, after all. That goes nowhere for me, however. If I hadn’t been in a wheelchair, I’d have probably been all quite regularly beaten to a pulp – perhaps, even deservedly. I suppose there could be a grudge from back then. Doc really helped me straighten out all that. I now keep my disdain for the righteously ignorant to myself. I accused Doc of doing that to me, so I’d get ulcers worrying about it and he’d be able to keep me as a patient longer. *Ka-ching!* He never denied it. There was always an element of mystery about him.”

“May I ask if you currently see him?”

“You may, and I will even answer. Not since I turned ten. I do not suspect him, by the way.”

Masters was not sure whether to take that as a thoughtful response or as an attempt at humor. It had not entered his mind, but from then on it certainly would linger there.

Something came to mind for Robbie.

“There might be one thing. I was only four, so the facts and particulars will need to be verified by those who were grown-ups at the time. It happened about as soon as mom and I moved in here. As I recall it, Mr. Rossi, the former grounds keeper who I mentioned, had grandsons – twin boys – who were older than me – almost teens as I remember it – ‘big boys’ in my mind, at least. While playing in the stream – something Uncle Ken forbade due to the dangers of snakes, possible broken glass bottles, and drowning – one of them got bitten by an Eastern Massasauga, a small snake whose venom can be deadly – especially when it enters a small body. They are typically reclusive and shun people. Only bite when trapped or threatened.

“The way I remember it, I was with them but stayed up

on the bank in my chair – electric, back then and unnamed. The two of them had found the snake and were poking at it with sticks. I had warned them about not wading in the water – over and over again. I remember yelling at them about how they were mistreating the snake. It struck one of them – two or three times in quick succession – and I remember how he screamed. I have never heard or seen a person in so much pain. His brother pulled him up on the bank. He was soon dead in front of me on the grass. I had called Mr. Rossi on my phone and I remember him running to where we were. He was old and never ran. I suppose that’s why it made such a lasting impression. Although I had not thought about it, I’m sure the boys were precious to him.

“The other boy yelled back saying it was my fault his brother got bit – it was my screaming that riled up the snake. About that time Uncle Ken arrived – I guess Rossi had called him. I explained what had happened. He called 911 and then raked the boy over the coals something awful for disobeying his rule about the stream.

“Later, my uncle said he felt bad for having done that – the boy had just lost his twin. He said he should have been demonstrating compassion and support, not faulting him. I believe that, too – for what I did as well as Uncle Ken.

“I really don’t remember any more about it. Some of that may be more what I’ve been told than what I remember. I do remember I got really upset. I had just had my father die. And then that. I do remember screaming at the one who lived – that if they had followed the rules it wouldn’t have happened. Doc says that was probably my way of relieving my guilt about not having been able to stop it. Oh, and the boy put his hand over my mouth to silence me – hush me. He released me when Mr. Rossi arrived. He whispered a threat for me to keep my mouth shut about how it had happened, or he’d break my neck. I believed he could do it. I was four and he was twelve. Like I said, my memory is that I *didn’t* keep my mouth shut.

“I still get all knotted up inside just remembering about it. Uncle Ken said it was very rare for a member of that species of snake to roam so far east. He explained it by referencing the exceptionally cool and wet spring we were having. My take was

that somebody's pet had gotten away and they'd be feeling sad about that. For whatever reason, I avoided the stream for months after that. To this day, I wear my jeans tucked inside high top boots when I plan on being close to it. I like to sketch that area – 'nature's ever-changing symmetry,' Josh calls it – reeds, cattails, ferns, moss, a variety of taller grasses, bushes, water splashing off the rocks, and an everchanging smattering of color from short lived, wild blossoms. I do like organization and I suppose symmetry is at least a cousin of that category."

Masters nodded.

"I can only imagine what a trauma that must have been for a little boy your age. It was soon after that that Mr. Rossi left and Roscoe arrived, am I correct?"

"That's how I remember it. In my mind it seems like they were here at the same time. Have to ask the others. The adults in this place can put dates to it all. Uncle Ken has a folder in his wall safe marked, 'Staff'. It includes a list with dates of people arriving and leaving his employment from way back."

"And may I ask how you have knowledge of such a folder?"

Robbie understood he had been *had*.

"I am a hopeless snoop, Mr. Masters. A few years back I went through my lock picking phase. There are few challenges like a top of the line wall safe. Need I say more?"

"I suppose only you can really answer that question."

Robbie nodded, but chose not to elaborate. He left the impression the phase had not been an entirely positive one. Masters had to wonder if there were other, perhaps troubling, remnants from those days. He didn't press it.

"Here is a question that expands the possibilities of the case, Robbie. I'd like you to set your head to thinking about it. Nothing pressing – take, say, twenty, maybe, thirty seconds."

Smiles. Robbie took such comments as validation of his worth and acknowledged competence and was eager to prove it.

"If your uncle were the primary target, why all the other deaths? A corollary question: If Ken's death were to be a cover for *another* murder, which victim might *that* be – the actual target?"

“Wow. Okay. Fascinating. Multiple possible motives. Like to make it seem it was a serial killing when only one was the actual target and maybe *not* my Uncle.

“Here are some related thoughts I’ve already had, Mr. Masters. Sorry, I’m having trouble calling you *Ray*. Anyway, I have been supposing the bad guy used the frog because he figured nobody around here would know about it and it would seem like death from natural causes. That is discussed in the literature. So little of its poison is necessary to be lethal that it becomes nearly impossible to detect in the human bloodstream after just a short time. Apparently not so with a dog. I guess I’m saying the bad guy had done his research, well.

“Anyway, he may have panicked and went down the line killing off witnesses or possible witnesses. That probably assumes that Zimm *and* the pet store guy were involved in procuring the frog for him, doesn’t it? The attempts on Betsy and Worth, and the killing of Roscoe, don’t seem to fit into that scenario – nor the thing with Benson being blown to bits unless somebody has an aversion to blue limos. Could there be several plots going on at the same time? Could that even mean more than one killer? Maybe two plots moving forward simultaneously but toward different ends?”

“Those are questions that I’ve considered as well, Robbie. I think we need to gather all the possible alternative angles we can, regardless of how unlikely. If we aren’t aware of them, we can’t investigate them. One thing seems likely: that the bad guy or guys have some history with poisonous creatures. Maybe a hobby. Maybe a profession. Maybe something more. I mention it, so you will keep it in mind.”

Robbie nodded.

Masters continued.

“Assume Ken was the primary target. Assume, as you suggested, that the bad guy had second thoughts about how well he was pulling off his plan. So, he decided to protect himself. One solution to that might seem like he needed to kill others in his supply chain – and we must remember that we have not established the truth in that assumption about the members of his supply chain. The question has to arise about how or why the other four – the employees, here – become

involved? I suppose that keeps alive the ‘two plots’ theory’.”

“I hadn’t given that much thought,” Robbie said, “but think about this: this guy seems to have delivered the package, *unseen*, put a snake in Betsy’s bed, *unseen*, killed Roscoe, *unseen*, and had the encounter with Benson, *unseen*. This guy seems to come and go like a shadow in the night.”

“One thing seems *unlikely*,” Masters said, “that all five of those people from this household would have each provoked the same man’s deadly intent. These are all nice people. How would they all have invited the vindictive ire of the same person?”

“And another thing; he’s clearly not just out to attack the people in this house in general or the people close to Uncle Ken, because Mom, Josh and I have not been threatened in any way.”

“Yes, that is an interesting point. One might assume if he were out to punish Ken, first, he would have assaulted his loved ones, and most certainly would have done it *before* killing Ken – revenge is most often offered to make the target suffer, and give the perpetrator a sense of satisfaction at his despair or discomfort.”

“That seems right, and all the collateral damage has come *after* the attempt on Ken.”

“Hmm.”

“Hmm.”

[There are seldom two, simultaneous, Hmm’s in a Raymond Masters case!]

Masters broke the silence.

“Get me the police line. I think we need some protection out here.”

It was soon seen to. A black and white at the front gate and two officers to walk the grounds. Masters continued.

“When I reach a going-no-where-point like this, I find the best approach is to change the topic entirely – free up my mental faculties and allow them to romp freely in, around, and through my old gray matter.”

Robbie attempted to characterize that suggestion.

“As I recall from the books, your favorite distraction is coffee and goodies.”

“Astute observations. I have, however, just come from your mother’s kitchen where she basted my pallet with delicious offerings.”

“And, likely, your *brain* with both fascinating and terrifying tales of Robert Miller, the second.”

Smiles.

Robbie continued.

“I made her a list of your preferences from the books.”

“Your efforts on my behalf are appreciated, son.”

Masters patted his sizeable tummy.

“You seem to keep fit and trim, young man.”

“I’m fifteen. Most of what I consume gets equally split between my energy expenditure and my growth process.”

“May I get very personal and ask if your legs are growing in tandem with your upper body?”

“They are, pretty much, in terms of length if that’s what you mean – and feet – moved up a shoe size last month. Doc says they are quite healthy even if not well muscled. They get exercised every day – Josh usually – amounts to moving them and deep massaging them for me and straining them to promote increased blood flow and muscle growth. The blood flow was not impaired by the accident – well it was, but blood vessels can self-repair, unlike nerves. Since I have no feeling in them – my legs – what *could* be an extremely painful activity is not. I swim every day and figure the way they get buffeted around in the water forces them to get stimulated as well. That may not be scientific, but the possibility motivates me to take time in the pool pretty regularly.

“I push my upper body development very hard. Have established a mini-gym at one corner of the indoor pool room. I spend time with the weights every day. I climb the rope and use the bars. Josh supervises that. I think I’ve mentioned he’s an expert at such things.”

“Your mother tells me you keep on top of medical advances that may be of help to you.”

“Yes. I am actually quite knowledgeable about the field and can speak with the physicians, nearly on a par with them. I get the idea they get a kick out of that. I could have some procedures done right now that would probably make me

mobile – probably in an awkward manner – but I figure I am only fifteen. The field is blossoming with new advances. So, I'm going to wait just a bit longer when I feel certain *better* fixes will be available.”

“Very interesting. Suggests a great deal of patience for a boy your age. Speaking of bodies – and this is certainly a fuzzy connection – but I have meant to ask you about Mr. Rossi – his size and such – stature.”

“Came from relatively short, Italian stock. His family came to the States just prior to the second world war. Mostly, I remember his long, white hair and that his skin wore a permanent tan. I thought that was great. I'd regularly put my arm next to his to check on how my tan was coming. He was always encouraging. I could tell he liked kids. Again, my memory will be poor. At four, everybody towers over you like a giant. My guess would be five-five or so – his height. I will check with Worth and get back to you.”

“Is he still alive?”

“Yes. In a rest home. Betsy keeps in touch with him, I believe – special occasion cards and such. I have the idea Uncle Ken helps with his expenses. I guess since he never spends any money on himself, he has it to spend on others.”

“Thank you. Where will I find Betsy at this time of day?”

“She'll be on two, vacuuming the halls. She's quite well organized – sticks to her routine. That really helps the rest of us with *our* planning. Actually, all the help is good that way. Betsy's smarter than she appears. She's is a real sweetheart underneath; sort of standoffish to lots of folks. I think she is shy. Let me take you to her. I got stuff to do in my room. You need to come see it when you're finished with her.”

There was no hiding while using that machine. She turned it off and put on a smile as Master's approached.

“Hey, Betsy,” Robbie called out. “Mr. Ray needs a word with you. Why don't you use the sitting area by the windows at the end of the hall? See you in a few, then, Mr. Ray.”

They sat. Robbie turned, popped a wheelie of sorts, and with an array of stock car noises, powered off to his room.

“What a pleasant spot here,” Masters said.

“It is. I often come here with a book to read and enjoy

the view down on the pool. I do a lot of reading. Everybody else here is educated so I've been playing catch up for the past twenty-five years. More than you wanted, I'm sure. What can I do for you, Mr. Masters?"

"I am told you may know about Mr. Rossi's condition and whereabouts."

"Yes. He and I were close while he was here. He is not doing well, but at 88, who is, I suppose. He lives at Hartford House, a sheltered care facility – they let him live his life but are there to help when he wants or needs it. I try to visit him once a month on my day off. Never for long. More like touching base, I guess. He likes sugar cookies. He seems to appreciate it. Mind's still sharp. Never had much of a sense of humor – those hot-headed Italians, you know. They take every little thing like the survival of the World depends on it – and then feel like they have to offer their opinions and be a critic of everybody else's. He is a dear old man; I didn't mean to take away from that."

"Does he still walk on his own?"

"Oh, yes. Says he puts in a mile everyday – inside, I'm thinking. Probably a bit of a struggle, I'm thinking, but he was always a determined type."

"Does he leave the facility?"

"Occasionally. He likes to go to parks and complain about the poor job the grounds crew is doing."

She giggled and shook her head."

"Were you here at the time his grandson was killed down at the stream?"

"Yes, Sir. He was never the same after that. He was gone from here within months – maybe weeks. Roscoe had already been employed to help him. Mr. M. would have never fired him but saw he needed help."

"Do you recall if there were legal proceedings surrounding the incident?"

"I remember the family's lawyers and Mr. M's lawyer had a sit-down meeting here that lasted most of one morning – three pots of coffee. As far as I know, nothing was ever done with a judge in a courtroom if that's your reference. I don't know anything more than that, I guess."

"Had you known the boys – twins as I understand it?"

“Hellions, if you and God will excuse the term. They could just walk through the house and it would be in shambles – muddy prints on the carpets, fingerprints everywhere, rearranging things, walking on the furniture. And mouths like you couldn’t imagine. I’ve not lived a sheltered life, Mr. Masters, but they could string profane words together in ways I would have never imagined possible. Hard to believe they could have been from the Rossi family. Poster children for kids with no parental supervision is what they were.”

“When you eventually formulate an opinion about them, please let me know.”

It had been offered through a smile and received with one.

“I did come on a bit strong, I suppose, but I will not retract one syllable.”

“So be it, then. Anything else you think might be helpful?”

“Well, in the boys’ defense, like I said, they come from a backwoods family where ‘girlfriend’ and ‘cousin’ are synonymous. I don’t mean that to be unkind. Mr. Rossi was clearly ashamed to be related to them – mother’s side of the family. From what little he has related about it, book learnin’ was discouraged, and whippins were severe and often. What chance did they have, I suppose?”

“I appreciate that new perspective.”

Masters stood to leave.

“Can you point out Robbie’s door?”

His question was more to extend the conversation than for actual assistance.

“Enter at your own risk. There are two rooms actually, one where he lives with desk, bookcases, chairs, bed and such, and one just to this side that he calls his science room – filled with creepy, crawly, slimy, varmints. We have an arrangement; I don’t go in there and . . . well, I guess that’s it. You may want to avoid looking at the back of his closet doors if you are easily embarrassed.”

Masters chuckled and followed her extended arm to a door in the middle of the hall – a bright red door emblazoned with black skull and crossbones and the words, *Scientia vincit omnia* – Latin for: *Knowledge Conquers All*, if Master’s fleeting

interface with the dead language had not failed him.

He knocked.

“Come in, Mr. Ray. I am detached from Ali at the moment.”

He was sitting in a comfortable looking chair in front of one of several computer monitors. As with most of the chairs in the room it was outfitted with a seatbelt. He swiveled around to greet the old detective with arms extended from his sides.

“My World. What more could a boy want – well, perhaps some feminine companionship, but that is another topic entirely.”

“Three monitors?”

“Different software. I can go into it if you’d like, but I am assuming you would not . . . like.”

“Correct. I often can’t even remember how to turn on my cell phone when it rings.”

“I am surprised you have one.”

“I carry it for emergencies – like when I am attacked by a gaggle of girl scouts selling cookies. The 911 operator always seems miffed when I give that as the reason for my call.”

“You are hilarious. How about I get a second bed and you move in. I don’t snore, I bathe every day, and always wear the clothing that has the least offensive odor as determined each morning by studied, comparative sniffing.”

“An offer that is clearly hard to turn down, but *Philo* would miss me back in my cottage in Rossville.”

“*Philo?*”

“My philodendron – parts of her, at least, have been with me most of my adult life. Consumes a good portion of my den by now.”

Smiles.

Masters looked around.

“I must say, for a boy your age, you keep a very neat room.”

“Betsy and I have an arrangement. She agrees to stay out of my science room, and I let her have her way with things in here.”

“And that just proves that confused and fully misunderstood interpersonal, motives *can* contribute to a

plainly successful, win/win, relationship.”

“What?”

“Just an old man’s idle ramblings comparing your take with hers. I like the room very much.”

“Thanks.”

Robbie pointed to a bookcase.

“All the Flint books there on the second shelf. I suppose, you know that he writes other mysteries, too – ones in which you do not appear.”

“I am aware of that and have even read some of *them*.”

“I like to write. I like to draw. I’m a science nut and a nerd. Mostly, I really like to learn new things. I sometimes worry I’ll have trouble deciding on a profession to pursue later on. Josh says not to be concerned. He says a person has no need to limit himself to one field or endeavor. I’m sorry he isn’t here this week. You two would love each other.”

“I noticed he was absent.”

“Uncle Ken gives everybody two, two-week paid vacations every year. This is at the beginning of this one for him. He’s traveling the Incan areas of Middle and South America. He is quite an authority about ancient cultures in the Americas. Earlier in the year he was off to the American Southwest. If he ever finishes his dissertation, ancient American cultures will be the area of his PhD.”

“How do you carry on your exercises and such in his absence?”

“Geraldo, a physical therapist from *Strong Memorial Hospital*, comes every day after work – usually pretty close to right now, in fact. We get on fine – not much of a sense of humor but he’s good at his job. And, it gives me a chance to practice Spanish. He does chuckle a lot when I speak. That may be because he is responding to my delightful wit, or, more likely, to my unique approach to butchering his language – ‘*El padre ist shada*’ – my double speak substituting German when I don’t know the Spanish.

“I learned Spanish so I could read the Spanish Classics. It means I am a better decoder (reader) than encoder (speaker). I get the idea Geraldo has no interest in the Spanish Classics, unless they have long, back, hair, a beautiful smile, and offer

measurements close to 34/26/36.”

Masters chuckled.

“I have heard a rumor that the backs of your closet doors share similar interests.”

“Betsy!”

“It was offered in her appraisal of you as having a typical teen boy side as well as the obvious atypical side.”

“I find the most challenging part of dealing with adult females is that they have never been fifteen-year-old males.”

“I will leave that to your private deliberation.”

There was a knock on the door.

“Come in, Geraldo. Got a guest.”

He was short and slender and rather good looking, appearing younger than he certainly was. Despite Robbie’s description of a generally humorless individual, his face offered an easy, well-practiced smile. Masters surmised that any face might seem humorless compared to the perennially upbeat one Robbie faced each day in the mirror.

Robbie made the introductions and Masters left. Perhaps Doris could scrape up some little something to tide him over those next thirty minutes until dinner time. He squared his shoulders, raised his head, and followed the scent to Goodie Land.

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CHAPTER FOUR

Day One: Evening

Masters thought the evening meal was a wonderful affair; everybody who lived or worked in the house ate together at the same table. There were place cards with names to designate each person's seat. Robbie explained.

"Here's how it works. After every evening meal is finished – I'm in charge of clearing the table – I collect the place cards, shuffle them like playing cards and arrange them in that order around the table for the next meal. That way, over time, we all get to sit beside and across from everybody. The table seats ten comfortably so there is always room for guests. It was my idea."

"I see. So, I just happened to be the draw of the deck that was to sit at your right this evening."

Robbie grinned.

"I have been known to cheat."

The heads around the table all bobbed in energetic agreement. There were chuckles.

"Uncle Ken has one rule about conversation at meals; it has to be positive – that leaves out war, famine, crime, politics, hordes of locusts, and Barney, that purple dinosaur for kids. I'm thinking an alien landing might be allowed if they didn't demonstrate a proclivity to suck the blood out of us humans. Circumstances have not yet permitted that topic to be tested in any legitimate way."

Ken spoke.

“We can dispense with that decree if you need to talk about the current situation, here, Ray.”

“I wouldn’t think of stepping on such an agreement. I think it is a great one. Just for clarification, though, does that preclude talking about the local triple-A baseball team?”

“It should if it doesn’t,” Benson said. “And I suppose I cannot justify that opinion without breaking the rule.”

Robbie had a follow-up directed at Masters.

“Did you know Benson played minor league ball back in the dark ages – they’d run out on the field in their pinstriped loincloths from their dressing caves and afterwards showered in a nearby waterfall. He played for the White Ankles. They used pterodactyl nests for gloves and large clubs and spherical rocks, of course, to round out the equipment. The game was even called Baserock, if I recall my history correctly. Wives were used for bases. If you performed poorly, instead of sending you down to the minors, they just tossed you into the tarpits. I suspect that the gasoline we are using today is composed, in part, at least, of washed-up relief pitchers with very high ERAs.”

He offered a short, if deliberate, drum roll with his fingers on the edge of the table suggesting he had finished. The group groan seemed well practiced. He bowed from the waist accepting the response as an accolade.

“So, was that prepared or adlib?” Masters asked.

Doris answered.

“Oh, we wish it took time for him to rehearse but, alas,” she said, the back of her hand to her forehead, “his brain just spontaneously combusts with such monologues at the drop of most any noun, verb or punctuation mark.”

“Well, I for one, enjoyed your soliloquy, young man. At some later time, I will enjoy being entertained by having you combust over the fact I spent my teen summers as a lifeguard regularly ogled by beautiful young maidens.”

“Oh, my, Sir. Really? There is at least a three-minute bit in that without even giving it a second thought.”

By the time dinner was finished it was seven o’clock. After the inane beginning, the conversation had easily settled into a series of relaxed and pleasant, exchanges.

As folks scooted away from the table and began moving on with their lives for the evening, Robbie's phone rang.

"It's the M.E. for you. I arranged to take her calls so I could expedite the dissemination of information."

"More likely, because you wanted to make sure you didn't miss anything," Masters said.

"Or, that! At any rate, you can't argue with the efficiency."

He handed Masters his phone.

"We have finished with that box," she began. "An interesting collection of dead insects left under the bottom flaps. Frog food I assume."

"Yes. The very food necessary to rev up its poison to its peak strength. Please tell me you found blood from the frog."

"We found blood from the frog. Not much, but it was there soaked into the bottom. It seems that is somehow helpful?"

"It is. I will explain later. Thank you."

He handed the phone back to Robbie.

"And that will be a closely held piece of information, I assume," Robby said.

"It will. It suggests at a 99.99% level of confidence that even though it is likely still alive, you do not have to worry about that frog still inhabiting the back yard. In the service of extreme caution, I'd still wear boots out there, however. It also convinces me that I can now explain the 'why' of Roscoe's murder. Later about that."

Robbie got on with clearing the table.

Masters turned to Ken who was standing nearby.

"A few minutes of private time, Ken?"

"Certainly. In my den."

They took seats at the big window. It was dark outside. A breeze had come up, which gently rippled the water in the pool animating the reflection of the moon as formless, friendly, sparkles ascending playfully in all directions.

Masters began.

"Robbie put something in perspective for me when he described the bad guy in all this as being like a shadow in the night – coming and going as he pleases, when he pleases, where he pleases – unseen. It means he or she knows this

house very well and, in fact, the precise habits of at least some of its residents.

“In a moment, I will ask you to brainstorm with me to find candidates that qualify in those ways – know the house and know the people. First, here are several related things that might help set the stage.

“He – the bad guy – knew it would take Worth enough time to answer the door mid-morning after he rang the bell so he could return down the steps to the truck without being seen. He needed to know what time Betsy went to bed – a delay would mean the rattler might leave the sheets if it had time to shed its smoke induced drowsiness. He was probably known to Roscoe since he approached him from the front. He had to know Worth’s Wednesday evening routine – leaving for the night at about five and by which door he typically left so he could lay in wait behind the shrubs. All that is made more important by the precise timing of Robbie’s jog around the flower garden.

“Clearly, a member of the staff could know those things. *I’ll keep after that.* What I need from *you* are ideas about others that would have some way of knowing those things. Not asking for a full accounting right now, but I need you to think about it.”

“Interesting. How does one go about discovering that shadow in the night, Ray?”

“One dark speck at a time, Ken. Gather great gobs of related information and then ferret out what has to be relevant. I have a two-part motto: reject no possibility at the outset and search for the right question to ask about them. It is always that right question that ultimately solves a case – or any problem for that matter.

“You have been considering who might want you dead, I’m sure. A blank?”

“Afraid so. In one of my books, I’d just go back and write in another character or add something sinister to one of their pasts. Real life presents a more difficult task. I would certainly hope I have not harmed or offended anybody to the point they want me dead.”

“I would have you add, ‘threatened’, to that list – that you might have harmed, offended or threatened. May I assume

you would not suspect any of the folks who live with you here?"

"That's correct. It becomes uncomfortable now that you have planted the possibility."

"An inevitable part of the investigation. Once the bad guy is found that discomfort should leave. Thank you for your time. Not a pleasant topic, I understand."

Masters left to find Robbie.

Masters *found* Robbie waiting outside the door.

"What? No parabolic listening devices?"

"None that are visible, at least."

He offered his wonderful grin.

Masters continued.

"Do you have a baseball bat?"

"I do. A Louisville Slugger made of Northern White Ash from the wooded hillsides of Pennsylvania. The best wood is from periods of consecutive, drier seasons – that adds density. Sort of late for a pick-up game."

"Question two: where will Benson most likely be this time of day?"

"In his room watching baseball on TV. If not live, reruns on some sports channel. He is still obsessed with the game."

"Will you alert him by phone that I am on my way to enlist his assistance for a few minutes?"

"Of course. / means we, I assume."

Masters allowed the assumption and continued.

"We will need to take the bat with us."

"Benson's room is here on the first floor. Let me go get the bat from my room while I make the call. Wait here. It will take me a few seconds fewer than two minutes."

Masters waited.

It took him a few seconds fewer than two minutes.

Robbie pointed.

"Behind the kitchen – northeast corner. We gonna beat the livin' daylights out a the snitch, Big Guy?"

"That was my best Edward G Robinson. What did you think?"

"Let me just say I thought it was your best Humphry Bogart."

"Yeah. I have no ear for voices. It's one reason I speak

Spanish so poorly, I believe. That gurgling ‘R’ sound is my downfall. When I am forced to pronounce it, I just twiddle my fingers along with my regular errr, and hope they understand.”

The door was standing open in anticipation of their arrival. Seeing the man in a ball cap, jeans and a sweatshirt cast an entirely different image – set of possibilities, actually.

“Benson. I hope you will assist me with a short experiment.”

“Certainly. I have always loved experiments. What? A vinegar and soda erupting volcano? In sixth grade I added orange food coloring to mine for an added dash of realism. I received extra credit for it.”

Masters chuckled at the fully unexpected response – monologue.

Robbie grinned, pleased that one of *his* people had been able to entertain the big man.

“Without providing you with any information ahead of time, I’d just like you to take this bat and make like you were getting ready to receive a pitch.”

He obliged – not a bad stance for a sexagenarian.

Masters retrieved the bat, twirled it around as if examining it for some undisclosed reason and returned it to Benson.

“Would you repeat that for me?”

He did.

“And now just one more time.”

Take. Twirl. Hand back.

Robbie had to say it.

“Watch out, Benson – I’m thinking there will be something linked to ‘three strikes and you’re out’. Luckily there are no tar pits close by.”

Masters’ smile was more a required one than an appreciative one. He was focused and responded to Benson.

“Thank you. I believe you just offered support for my theory. Do you know if Worth played ball?”

“I am quite certain he did not. He relates that he avoided team sports in favor of mountain climbing, archery, camping and such – more the lone, independent type.”

“I will explain later. Again, thank you.”

Masters turned to Robbie.

He offered the snap motion of flicking a whip.

“Onward, my Huskie. Fetch Worth.”

Robbie grinned, fully at bay but fully involved.

Worth was sitting on the deck out back. It had been Robbie’s first guess – speaking of somebody who knew everybody’s habits.

They went through the same ball bat routine with him. He seemed pleased to be included in whatever it was and asked no questions. He was the consummate employee of such a household – be available, do it without question, and expect no explanation. Clearly, the ‘butlering gene’, Masters suspected.

Masters presented the same three tasks and left him with essentially the same phrase. He and Robbie returned inside. Masters gravitated toward the chair and sofa room with Robbie at his heels.

“So, this ball bat volcano thing open for explanation, Mr. Ray?”

“It is.”

“Take a chair, please, Sir. I seem to already be seated.”

It was clearly one of his standard jokes. Masters acknowledged it with a quick smile and spoke, using the bat to illustrate.

“A bat was used in the murders of Roscoe and the pet store operator. The blood from Roscoe, although mostly dried by then, mingled on the bat with the blood of the second victim. My question was, ‘what are the chances the murderer would have struck them both at exactly the same spot on the bat so that transfer could have happened?’

“I referred back to my ball playing days and had my theory. Benson confirmed what I remembered; an experienced player always holds the bat in the same orientation to the trademark – so he can see it, so the impact area will be about 90 degrees on around the bat from it – the strongest and solidest dimension. On all three occasions, after I twirled the bat, Benson, out of habit, subconsciously repositioned it that way. Worth, to whom a bat was just another club, positioned it in random manners.

“Now, young detective, what does that probably tell us about the killer?”

“Aha! The wily old detective hits a fly ball and asks me to field it – so to speak. It tells us the killer may well be an experienced ball player. This is so great! What do we do with that piece of information?”

“We tuck it away and hope it may come in handy down the line.”

“That’s rather disappointing. I hoped you had the culprit in your sights.”

“All I would have at this point are two unlikely suspects.”

“Who?”

“Robbie and Benson – well, I understand the M.E. played softball in college if you want to ramp that up to *three* unlikely suspects.”

“And one other, I believe.”

“Oh?”

“Raymond Masters, according to his recent admission.”

Another smile.

“Reconsider that in light of *opportunity*, my boy. Now, we need to keep two related facts in mind. First, the wounds from the bat were so severe, they had to have been made by a very strong person – one with a powerful swing. Second, from the upward angle of the wound, they were administered by a person shorter than the victims – each of them something over six feet.”

“Sounds more and more like I keep moving up toward being the chief suspect – strong, blow delivered from below, knowledge of how to hold a bat, and, my fascination with the sound of wood resonating off a skull.”

“Exactly.”

“What?”

“Josh with me, kid, and expect me to Josh with you. However, if the bad guy shares your fascination, perhaps we should be calling him the *Resonator*, rather than *the Shadow in the Night*.”

“Here is one more piece of the puzzle for you to consider, Robbie. The blows were delivered with sufficient force to crack the skulls and yet there were no splinters left in

the wounds – wounds that have a 90-plus% possibility of having been inflicted by a bat.”

“Got it. The murderer is Fred Flintstone. Probably a few colorful vitamins scattered around the crime scenes. We should hurry before Bam Bam collects them and feeds them to Dino.”

“Your head does do fascinating flips, doesn’t it?”

“One of my best features, I’ve always thought. Teachers seldom agreed.”

“Well, I must come down on your side, but, perhaps, we should keep that between the two of us.”

Smiles.

Index fingers to lips.

“Back to the question – *no splinters.*”

“I’m sure you had that figured out ages ago, Mr. Ray. Must be an aluminum or other sort of metal bat.”

“A gold star for that. The M.E.’s report assures us that even a well cleaned stick of aluminum would harbor blood traces. Few substances reactivate dry blood faster than wet blood. So, when we come across it, we will be that much closer to a solution.”

“Interesting. I did not know that about blood. I am learning lots of useless facts. I love it!”

“Ready for another puzzle?” Masters asked.

“Yes. Always! I appreciate you including me in this, although I understand it is more for my education than as an assist to solving the – what are they – crimes, I suppose.”

“I’d call them murders and attempted murders.”

“Of course,” Robbie came back with a shiver. “That’s enough to prickle a guy’s spine, you know. I was wondering earlier if mom and I are safe from attempts on our lives or if that could still happen.”

“We can’t be sure, can we? The chief has provided two uniformed officers – six, actually, two in three, eight-hour shifts to fend off evil doers.”

“That’s a relief, although I understand the safety thing can’t be a guarantee – considering what we’ve seen from the shadow guy. What’s the new puzzle?”

“If the killer were really one of the residents here, and understanding each of them has had an attempt made on his

or her life, which one would have been most likely to have faked the attempt on himself?”

“That’s the kind of scenario-changing paragraph Uncle Ken would put in one of his books right after it looked like things were about to be solved.”

“Well, let’s examine them. You begin, with Ken and the frog in the box.”

“I suppose Uncle Ken could have had the frog sent to himself – the dog thing suggests he was not properly prepared to receive it, however, thus the tragedy. He would have never risked sacrificing Socrates in such an uncontrollable situation like that. As a writer of mysteries, he knows better than to insert such an uncontrollable element into a plot unless you want it to be uncontrollable.”

Without prompting, Robbie moved on down the line.

“Betsy could have easily placed the snake in her bed but nothing about that seems likely the way she is disgusted by everything in my science room. I’ve been removing spiders from the house for her since I was five. The timeline would certainly work for her, however.

“In a related thought, Worth was apparently right there ready to rush to her aid at the exact time it came down. That could mean he knew it was about to happen or hadn’t had time to remove himself from the scene after having arranged it. But if he were the attempted killer, he’d have not saved her, I suppose.

“Back on topic with Worth. He certainly could have stabbed his own backpack with a dart – probably the easiest to fake of all the attempts until the purchase of the dart was traced to him. Overly simple, I’d say.

“Now, about Benson? If he were in cahoots with the truck driver, he could have arranged to have the bomb dropped before the detonator was activated – staging things to look like the truck was momentarily out of control. I suppose the fender bender could or could not have been part of the plan. The slick asphalt could not have been predicted.”

“Excellent,” Masters said. “Do you have a favorite?”

“Hmm. I suppose it would have to be Benson. He would have been able to be in total control of the non-explosion having

employed a faulty timer from the beginning. Had it not been for the mist, that whole package offers an easily controlled situation. It was certainly assembled to look like a serious attempt. And it was his mention of a 'glint' that led you to find it, if he would have wanted you to. Back at their lab, did the cops figure out anything new that's useful or telling about the bomb? Did you call it a pipe bomb? I assume that would be more difficult to trace than a bomb that was purchased somewhere. Are there such things? Can you just go out and buy bombs? My cultural ignorance is showing."

"Mostly, just the components. All cities have illicit bomb makers. What a country we live in. Sorry that's what we're handing over to your generation, Robbie."

The lad shrugged as if he had already accepted that. Masters had a question:

"I'm interested in why you picked Benson rather than Worth."

"The complexity issue. To make an attempt seem real I'd think one would go for something more complex than jabbing a dart in a backpack."

"Interesting, for sure. Are you finished?"

"Of course not. This is Robbie."

Smiles.

"So, the discovery of the bomb suggests somebody in the sequence of events had to know about bomb making or have connections with somebody who did."

"Yes, it would. I have not received a report that speaks to that. I'll call first thing in the morning. They also owe me their analysis of the paint left on the limo from where the big brown truck hit it. Any other thoughts that seem relevant or even remotely possible?" Masters asked.

"I don't see how it might be related to all this, but there is something I've thought about from time to time. Let me just say it, and you will see how it probably isn't related."

"Okay. Let's hear it."

Robbie became plainly thoughtful, taking time to assemble his thoughts. Then, he began.

"On the first and third Friday afternoons of every month – unless it's a holiday or there is something special going on –

Uncle Ken takes the Lincoln and is away for several hours. He asks not to be disturbed during that time. He never says where he is going. That's odd enough, but Uncle Ken *never* drives – except then. At one point I fantasized that he was making blackmail payments about something. That idea never became well developed, however. I suppose the idea had been sparked by his book, *The Deadly Relationship*. I have not discounted that a woman might be involved. My point is, if it represents some sort of nefarious or sordid activity, it might present reasons for doing away with Uncle Ken.

“I've considered hiring a car and driver and following him. Decided it is none of my business. Usually, that would not stop, me, understand, but this is Uncle Ken, so I've given up on the plan. Still, it's really strange to me. Can't seriously think it's connected with all this.”

“Nor can I. Doesn't mean it may not be. Nefarious relationships rarely work out well for either party. How long has that been going on?”

“I suppose I was seven at the time when I first became aware of it. I was nauseatingly inquisitive when I was that age.”

“And you aren't now?”

They exchanged a smile. Robbie offered a sheepish shrug.

“I prefer, *unrelentingly* to the alternative,” he came back. More smiles.

“New topic, Robbie. Anybody out of the ordinary been here in the past month or so – not entirely sure what I am asking?”

“Well, Geraldo has come to sub for Josh a couple of times for my PT. He had doctor's appointments for shots and such for his trip to South America. Some passport stuff, also, I think. The cops have been here because of the foul play. It would be funny if it had been a chicken that had been killed – then it would have been fowl play – hmm, I'll bet that would work better in print than in spoken form.”

“Still, I enjoyed the pun. Back to the question, perhaps.”

“Let's see. About six weeks ago Uncle Ken went with a new trash pick-up service – they recycle by category. I sort of insisted on the change. Oh, the place was crawling with

painters for several weeks – every surface that could be stained or painted was – stained or painted. Tarps and orange extension cords everywhere – not Ali-friendly, I can tell you that. With the twelve-foot ceilings, you can imagine there were scaffolds everywhere. Uncle Ken wanted them in and out in a hurry, which meant they sometimes worked twelve or fourteen hour days. That also meant a huge crew – the old, six brushes for one week instead of one for six.

“The company used non-stink paint – another of my ‘insist upons,’ so it was more tolerable than it might have been. How do you like it? Most of the walls used to be medium gray. The new, light tan mien may not seem like much of an upgrade but for us old timers, it’s a bright new world. Moved a few shades lighter on the wood, also – from mahogany to oak. That meant the wood had to be first sanded and cleaned of years of oil and wax, then covered with a nondescript base in a medium shade of ochre – then the lighter stain. Was noisy with the sanders working ten hours a day for so long. Must have set Uncle Ken back a pretty penny. It’s why it took so many weeks. So, what do you think?”

“I found it immediately pleasant upon entry for the first time.”

Robbie nodded.

“I can’t come up with any other newbies around here, Mr. Ray. Same grocery delivery man I’ve always known. Uncle Ken insists we use a small, local, Mom and Pop store a few blocks away. I’ll keep thinking. You must have a reason for the inquiry.”

“Yes. The lead clue in all this is that the bad guy or guys clearly had specific, up-to-date information about the house – arrangement of rooms, who would be where, when – residents’ predictable routines. Assuming he is not one of you residents, somebody had to have been able to study you – recently. Understand?”

Robbie gave Masters a look and remarked: “Come now, Mr. Masters. The last time I *didn’t* understand something was when the doctor swatted my behind after I had already begun breathing on my own. I’ve been meaning to get back to him about that. I have the proof – captured on my father’s video of

the whole process – both magical and disgusting. It was fascinating seeing myself suddenly emerging into the world – like the moment I became a human being suddenly needing to fend off the harsh conditions of my new environment for the very first time. From my initial reaction, I plainly did not find the sudden change of venue to my liking. I believe it is related to the peace and security I now feel while I'm in the pool – the warmth and when underwater, the quiet.”

Masters shook his head. Benson had been right – the boy could do a half hour on most any topic. The old detective had not yet learned the boy's middle name but was certain in some language it would translate as *Imp*.

He enjoyed his private little joke. He would even consider sharing it with Flint in case he might want to use it.

“We need an agenda for tomorrow. You and your computers can probably assist in ways I can't even imagine.”

“Shoot.”

“We need to establish whether there was a relationship between Zimm at the animal lab and the pet store operator, and, the pet store operator and anybody else in the herpetology sector of the university. We need information on any trips to the relevant rainforests any of those folks took, or had some hand in.”

Robbie began putting things together.

“I have learned one interesting thing, already, that is central to the poisoning; aside from everything else, that Poison Dart Frog is basically only poisonous while in rainforest conditions. Away from them, it becomes docile and relatively harmless within forty-eight to sixty hours.”

“And what does that suggest about our current case?” Masters asked.

“Well, either it was zipped up here overnight, so it didn't have reason or time to docilize itself, or it was kept here in rainforest conditions with a rainforest diet.”

“I agree. See if you can find out about such a place near here – an artificial rainforest environment.”

“Best guess would be the university – there are also several smaller colleges plus the State University of New York just down the road at Geneseo. Of, course we need to take a

look at the pet shops in the area. I can see one of them maintaining a small area like that. I may do that, myself, right here. Wouldn't really take more than a fairly simple arrangement in one terrarium – heat, moisture, limited light, several types of insects.”

Robbie's phone rang. It was for Masters. Big surprise! In the entire time the old detective had been there, the boy had not received a single call that was for him. That was rather sad, Masters thought.

“Masters, here.”

It was the report on the bomb. He listened intently for some time.

“Thank you. You will send me a written report as well? . . . I see. Okay then, thank you.”

He handed the phone back.

“The man said something about my copy of the report having already been sent.”

“Ah, yes. I see. As an attachment to an email. Shall I open it?”

“I'd rather have a printed copy if that is an option.”

Robbie punched a button.

“Being printed up in my room as we speak. My printer is wireless. You may or may not understand that. All you need to know is that a hard copy will be waiting for you anytime you want it.”

A few minutes later, up in Robbie's room, Masters had the report in his hands.

“So?” Robbie asked and paused, expecting the full story.

“I had a pretty good idea what to expect. It was a pipe bomb filled with readily available black powder – make a note for us to see if we can track down that sale – very likely to a first-time customer. The timer was a commercial purchase – same note about that. Make and model is listed here. That timer was faulty – a cheap-end model – just like the team had suspected when they were here. It had been set; it just didn't obey the command.”

“So, Benson missed being blown to bits by a failure of technology?”

“That would *seem* to be the case. The man said the

bomb was a perfect replica of a design that's rampant across the web. The plans could have been downloaded from any one of a hundred sites. It is popular because of its simplicity – a length of pipe capped at both ends, black powder, a fuse, and a timer – nails or screws if you are so inclined.”

“Scary – I mean that most any lunatic could obtain and use that plan to commit terrible deeds.”

“Indeed. One of the not so nice aspects of modern techno-society. On the phone, the man just said it contained enough powder to shred a bulldozer.”

“Was there shrapnel of any kind included in it?” Robbie asked.

“No. It clearly had one purpose and that was to destroy the car. I suppose the pipe and car itself would provide the shrapnel to take out the occupant – no shrapnel, more room for powder.”

“Earlier you emphasized the word ‘*seem*’. What did that imply?”

“If somebody merely wanted to make it look like Benson were a target – but he wasn't – what better way to do it? Toss a bomb with a technical problem in his direction. You suggested that possibility, earlier.”

“I see. Speak of a possible twist. And that is absolutely hilarious, but of course you can't understand. Benson's middle name is Oliver – an Oliver Twist.”

Masters nodded and offered a single ‘chuck’.

“Now, where were we? Doesn't matter. While I'm thinking about it, it might be instructive if we had the names of those twins and a current address of the survivor if you can find it. And, see we can get any security tapes from inside the pet store. I dislike loose ends.”

“I'll work on those things still tonight. Betsy may have some idea of sources I can use. Anything else from me, tonight, Mr. Ray?”

“No. You are being a big help. I appreciate that.”

“You do carry a cell phone, right?”

“I do.”

“And I am going to say you were just kidding about not knowing how to answer it.”

“Correct. It might be a good idea if you’d add your number to my call list – I think that will bring it up to seven. I am feeling overwhelmed – becoming a virtual social butterfly.”

Robbie took the phone and soon had the deed completed – Robbie’s number on the old detective’s phone and Masters’ on his.

“Want me to accompany you to your room?”

“A kind way of asking if I remember which room is mine?”

“I have no doubt but that you know that, and, about a million other things concerning this case you have not chosen to share.”

“A million may be a bit of a stretch.”

They shared smiles and took the elevator together to the second floor, parting for the night at Masters’ door.

CHAPTER FIVE

Day Two: Morning

Masters looked at his watch – five-twenty in the morning and somebody was knocking on the door. Whoever it was did not just enter – it would not be Robbie. Masters sat on the side of his bed and slipped into his robe and slippers. He managed his old bones to the door, fondly recalling the days in which that would have been a straight shoot. It was Ken.

“Ken. What a surprise. What brings you to this door at this time of the morning?”

“Robbie is gone – missing. He and I have a standing jog together time Thursday mornings at this hour.”

“Robbie jogs?”

“He says he ‘rogs’ – his combination of rolls and jogs. I asked the police that are on station here to search the grounds and call it in. I already checked the pools – one of my fears since the day he moved in.”

“May I see his room?”

“Of course.”

Its door was open. They entered. Masters stopped just inside and looked about.

“You see anything unusual, Ken?”

“Well, let’s see. I suppose my head had not gone in that direction after ascertaining he wasn’t here. One interesting thing. Robbie demolishes a bed at night – the sheets and covers. As you can see, they are virtually still in place. He sleeps with a light on – to help him get around at night if he needs to. That light is off. His cellphone is on his bedside stand.

Save for the shower and swimming, he's never away from his phone. His ankle brace is not hanging on his bed where it stays during the day."

"Explain the ankle brace, please."

"Certainly. At night he wears a device that holds his legs together at the ankles to protect them from being damaged as he thrashes around while he sleeps. His own invention. His legs have no feeling so he has no way of knowing when he might be harming them. They look much over-sized, flat, metal handcuffs, covered and padded in soft leather. He hates them and removing them is his first priority when he gets up."

"Also, he keeps a folded blanket draped across his headboard within easy reach in case he gets chilly during the night. It is not there."

Masters walked to the bed. He sniffed the air. He leaned down and picked up the pillow, sniffing it.

Ken continued talking.

"There is a camera in this room – on twenty-four hours a day except when Robbie turns it off for privacy issues. We can check the tapes or discs or flash drives or whatever the latest iteration the gadget uses. Never had reason to do that before. I have a camera guy who comes and checks out the system once a month. Having been told nothing to the contrary, I assume it is working well."

"The videos may be helpful for confirmation, but here is what we will find: a person entered from the hall door – probably soon after I left him there at about eleven. Robbie was in bed – asleep or almost. I say early rather than late because of the relatively 'undestroyed' state of his sheets and such as you noted. He was rendered unconscious with ether – administered the old-fashioned way – onto a cloth directly from a shaker bottle – enough spilled onto the pillow while he struggled that it can still be detected. Once unconscious, he was wrapped in that extra blanket and carried from the room. I estimate Robbie weighs about 110 pounds, which adds credence to the belief his abductor is a rather strong person.

"I suppose other cameras will help us follow the exit path. My hunch is that at some earlier time, the abductor put tape over the lock bolts in the outside door through which he

entered and exited. If it is not still in place, traces of the adhesive will remain. I assume there is an entrance road out back for deliveries.”

“Yes, there is – a single lane blacktop winds in among a stand of trees across the north east corner of the property, enters the property at the street just south of the small bridge setting astride the stream.”

“That is most likely the way he came and went then – through one of the two rear doors. You should probably notify the other residents of his absence – Doris first, I suggest.”

“Does he wear a watch to bed?”

“Yes, with a lighted dial so he can tell time regardless of the position in which he finds himself when he awakens. He is fifteen and can easily sleep the clock around when scheduled activities don’t interfere. He has always been good about meeting his obligations. His life is full. I imagine he only puts away eight hours most nights.”

“Help me remove the sheets and covers and search them for something not expected.”

Masters shook the blanket, plainly expecting to find something. He didn’t.

Ken shook the top sheet.

“Like this envelope, you mean?” he asked.

“*Exactly* what I mean. Put it down to preserve fingerprints, although I don’t expect any. This person had run through this routine dozens of times, perfecting his strategy – *not* leaving prints is high on a bad guy’s don’t-do-list.”

Using his handkerchief, Masters opened the unsealed, generic, legal-sized, white envelope. It contained one sheet, which held a short, computer printed, message.

*‘100 thousand dollers in 100 dollar bills.
Put in heavy, brown envelop, addressed
to Michael, PO Box 1249, City. Hand to
maleman when he makes delivry to this
house on Thursday at 4pm. Don’t
survalle mailman or kid will be bit by a
snake until ded. Than he will be set free,
unharmd.’*

“Several things seem clear, Ken. He may have an ‘in’ of some kind at the Central Post Office and believes he can intercept the envelope there – even the most inept amateur would know he couldn’t just walk up to a Post Office Box and remove its contents without being caught. Another possibility might be to intercept the envelope between this house and the post office. That would be my best guess – accost the mailman when his truck stops to make a nearby delivery. That could reduce the time the envelope would be in transit to just a few minutes. Should we have to go through with sending the envelope, we’ll have the letter carrier replaced by a detective.

“Question: are letters often handed to the letter carrier?”

“Yes. In fact, he always knocks to hand us the mail and take what we have. He receives a hefty envelope for himself every Christmas. His name is Eddy, by the way. Been our carrier for more than a dozen years, I suspect. Drives one of those short, squat, anemic appearing square vans that never looks or sounds like it will have enough get up and go to make it to the end of the block. It was one of Robbie’s regular tasks around here when he first came – to have the mail ready and hand it to Eddy. Eddy usually had a treat of some kind for him. That gradually stopped. He got busy with school and other things, I suppose. Worth takes care of that these days.”

“No reason to suspect Eddy, then?”

“No reason.”

“We will have forensics go over the envelope and note paper. I hope the payment will not need to be made, but let’s prepare the envelope anyway. Figure the size of a stack of 100 bills and have somebody cut like-sized sections out of 20-pound, dark green paper. Not sure how we will handle it yet. I’d like to get Robbie back here before that deadline – four p.m. today – a delivery time our bad guy knew about, by the way. I will remain here to snoop while you tend to the call and alert the others.”

Ken left.

Masters snooped.

He could have made the call himself, but believed Ken needed to be kept busy.

As trite as it might seem, Masters was never without an

assortment of small evidence envelopes and his keychain-magnifying glass. He took the pillow to a well-lit table and examined it. He found a tiny, jagged piece of what might be either latex or some other flimsy plastic. It was no more than three quarter of an inch in its broadest dimension – had a bluish tint. Masters guessed it had been somehow torn from a latex glove. It may have been snagged on that ankle brace gadget – that made sense. He saved it in an envelope and continued his search.

Ten minutes later, Ken returned with Jake Watson from the forensics division. Masters laid out what he had and handed over the evidence envelope with a suggestion.

“Under bygone day conditions, I’d suspect this comes from a hospital’s latex glove dispensary – they are used in so many industries these days it is not the good lead to a hospital that it once was.

“Also, I suspect there will either be tape on the lock bolts of one of the two back doors or adhesive suggesting it was recently present. Probably that silver tape rather than masking tape. I suggest in either case, see if there might be prints for you to raise, especially on the adhesive side of the tape should it be there. It is typically overlooked. Good adhesive will grab and often tear a latex glove apart, so the bad guys usually do the taping with their bare hands, then assume they have wiped the tape clean. If that’s the case, there may be lint or such from a rag or hanky. One never knows whether that may be helpful. Just be thorough.”

Jack raised his eyebrows and responded.

“You are not really saying to just be thorough – you are saying to be Raymond Masters thorough – two different things – my wife has read all the Flint books and relates them to me item by item.”

Masters smiled and left the team to its work. The smile was his way of not having to deal with the comment. Inside, he was terrified for the boy’s safety. The abductor – assuming it was the same person he had been dealing with – had proved himself to be erratic, inept, impulsive and without a conscience – a dangerous mix. His one consistent trait seemed to be his passion for his mission. He had seen that sort of unreliable

behavior many times. There was no assurance Robbie would be released. He did remember one case featuring such a personality where the abducted child was released, only to be immediately abducted again with another ransom demand. For safety sake, Masters had visions of putting Robbie in a cage once he returned! Had the situation not been so serious it would have raised a smile.

“How do we get a look at what the cameras have caught, Ken?”

“In a cubby in my den. Now?”

“Yes. Now.”

He spoke as they descended the stairs and crossed the expansive entry hall to Ken’s den.

“We have every reason to believe that Worth locked the outside doors last night around nine as is his routine, is that correct?”

“It is. He hasn’t failed to do that in thirty years. It merely amounts to poking a button in the center of a heavy-duty doorknob. I have already asked him. Benson was with him as he made his rounds – they were playing cards later – they have been engaged in a double-solitaire tournament for seven year, they tell me. That evening it was in Worth’s quarters.”

Masters was satisfied, understanding there were tapes that would verify all of that – well, not the rampant, crazy, off-the-wall, excitement of double-solitaire tournament play, of course.

He addressed Ken, seriously.

“None of what has transpired to this point, guarantees that the attempts on your life or the other’s lives is over. Clearly, he still has access to the house even with a police presence. He had to have come inside yesterday when the back doors were unlocked in order to rig the locks. I hope the cameras might provide clues.”

At the console, Ken poked buttons and a video began to play. It did not provide what Masters had hoped to see. Ken spoke, puzzled, as he continued poking buttons, moving from one camera to another.

“Look. Nothing but blurs – time stamped but blurs. There’s his form coming and going like you predicted – in the

back door, up the stairs to Robbie's room – then, inside the room doing the things as you predicted – then rolling Robbie into the blanket and managing Robbie over his shoulders in a fireman's carry – back down the stairs – and out the back door. It doesn't appear he stopped to remove the tape but through the blurring it's difficult to be certain. I just can't understand why those three cameras – back door, stairs, and inside the room – are all blurred – out of focus.”

“When were they checked last?”

“Let's see. The first of last month. That means they are due again the end of next week.”

“Get your guy over here as soon as possible.”

“Okay.”

He made the call. The guy – Alan Jefferies – entered the den forty minutes later. Ken had continued trying to manipulate the images in a desperate attempt to get a good look at the abductor. Masters made several calls. A few minutes after the camera guy's arrival, Betsy arrived with three mugs of coffee. She winked at Masters. The others did not understand. Flirting? Betsy! They thanked her and she left.

Ken explained the problem to Jefferies, and he set to work checking the central console.

“There is absolutely nothing wrong with the electronics even though the pictures from those three cameras continue to be out of focus. See, the time stamps, which are set here in the control center, are perfect.

“And just those three cameras?” Masters asked.

“Let's run through the series and make sure.”

He took a few minutes to determine what each of the dozen cameras was seeing.

“There are the three interior units that share the problem. Add the one out back that focuses on the entry area including the back doors and the one doing similar duty out front, making five.”

Masters posed a possibility.

“It seems then, that the camera lenses have been tampered with in some way, so the distortion is coming right from the source, rather than from electronic manipulation?”

“Excellent analysis, but a lens change in these

miniaturized units involves removing the camera, dismantling it, and making the replacement – not likely to be done out of sight in a busy place like this. At best, that would take fifteen minutes each if done by a well-trained technician. Who knows how long by an amateur? The indoor cameras are located on the walls at ceiling height twelve feet above the floor. A ladder would be required. When was the last time you've viewed the videos, Mr. Miller?"

"As far as I can recall, this is the first time I have ever had reason to view them."

"May I ask you to examine the cameras, themselves," Masters said. "Start with the one in the boy's room."

"Yes. A good next step. I have a ladder in my truck. Give me five minutes."

They did and he was soon standing on the fourth rung, face to face with the unit at ceiling height.

"I have a suspicion, but I will need to take the unit apart."

"Let's get on with that, then," Ken said, clearly growing more and more impatient as the minutes ticked away."

It required a few moments to remove the camera from the wall and place it on a table; a few more to disassemble the case and free the innards and the lens. It took but one look. Jefferies handed the lens to Ken who handed it without examination to Masters. Masters held it up and took a look.

"So, the lens has been coated with a substance that does not render it opaque but does distort – milky up – the image sufficiently to make it useless."

"Clever, really," Jefferies said. "Had it been a secondary lens put over it – which had become my best bet – we could have reversed engineered it and brought the image into focus. Here, though, somebody coated the lens with a thin, translucent substance. Some places it's thick and other places thin, so there is no continuity to the distortion. Whoever did this was either highly competent or lucky in his ignorance."

"We tend to go with the second, Mr. Jefferies."

It had been Masters who continued.

"Am I correct in assuming that coating could be applied from the outside without tampering with the camera casing?"

"That's correct. Like somebody was applying rubber glue

with the brush from a bottle. Fifteen seconds from unscrewing the bottle to re-screwing it.”

“Excellent. Thank you. Discovering how he managed to gain access to it will be up to us. We appreciate your help and your prompt response. I assume Ken will want you to repair or replace the lenses immediately.”

Ken nodded.

Jefferies assembled his tools and prepared to leave with the ladder. He would call to make an appointment to do the repairs. There was one final thing on his mind.

“You know, Mr. Miller, your boy could have done everything I’ve done. He’s watched me like a hawk over the years— even offered suggestions I’ve taken. I can’t charge you for it.”

“The boy is elsewhere, today, Mr. Jefferies, so we did indeed need your help. Send me a bill or I’ll sic my secretary on you, and you know *that* is definitely not what you want in your future.”

Chuckles.

Nods.

Ken held the doors. Jefferies left.

“That raises an interesting question – your secretary, Ken?”

“She always takes these two weeks off for a family gathering down in New Jersey.”

“Been with you a while?”

“Twenty plus years. A ninety-pound powerhouse – Ruth Bolton. Unmarried – never married. Works three mornings a week, here – some take home things. Never misses a comma or an ‘ie’ for a ‘y’ or a ‘their’ for a ‘there’ for a ‘they’re’. And, unbelievably, she knows how to use ‘lay’, ‘lie’, ‘laid’, and ‘lain’ without thinking about it. She is not bashful about restructuring sentences she finds clumsy. She also does much of my research. Lives off campus – Robbie’s term, you may remember.”

They had taken seats at the window back in the den. Masters continued.

“Help me understand about Josh’s whereabouts. Robbie said he is in South America and yet you said he had been here

on Tuesday – the day the bad things happened.”

“He left here mid-afternoon to catch his flight.”

Masters nodded.

There was a knock at the open door to the hall.

“Yes. Come in.”

It was Frank Watson, the lead forensics officer.

They stood to hear what he had or didn't have – the latter being Masters' best guess.

“Not much, I'm afraid. Some fresh dirt on the floor in the boy's room. It wasn't on the boy's shoes. We'll see if we can determine where it's from. Blue wool lint from the bottom sheet at the point where the pillow lies. Looks like tiny scrapings of soft leather at the bottom of the sheet. Preliminary evidence suggests whoever lays their head on that pillow uses Pert Shampoo.”

“A portable lab?” Masters asked, surprised.

“More like the ‘birds of a feather’ thing. My assistant uses Pert and made the sniff connection. Sometimes the best forensic work is pretty low tech.”

“I can explain the blue lint and the shreds of leather,” Ken said. “The leather is from an ankle brace he wears at night – it is soft and wears off over time. The blue wool lint is from – and you must both promise never to reveal this – a small square of material cut from the ‘blanky’ he had back when he was very young. He keeps it under his pillow. I suppose he feels it when in need of an extra dose of security, and Lord only knows if any young man deserves an extra dose, Robby does.”

“Mum's the word, Sir. I'll get you a report on what we have later today. You asked we look at door locks?”

Masters offered the guidance.

“Yes, the rear, outside door on the first floor – the one to the east. Looking for tape or adhesive and fingerprints. The efficient butler may have already removed surface prints. I may have mentioned those things. One more thing comes to mind. See if you can find any evidence that a mid-sized, commercial delivery van may have been out back recently – that could be anywhere from close to the door on out the rear entry road. The recent rain should have washed it clean of previous leavings.

“And just one more thing – I'm beginning to sound like

Columbo. There are four cameras from which I need to have prints gathered. The prints from this coffee mug can be used to exclude or involve the technician who works on them. Our maid was kind enough to offer her assistance so we could gather them.”

Ken suddenly understood the wink. His fantasy had served its purpose – a romantic tryst between a detective and a maid in his next novel. He directed Watson to ladders in the shop.

By then, it was going on mid-morning. The police notices were on the air, Robbie’s picture on every officer’s phone, and a task force had already hit the streets. Masters advised Ken to let the police do what they were trained to do. He suggested that he go to Doris and just be there for her. Even though nobody had more faith in Robbie than his mother, it had to be a terrifying time for her. There were so many awful possibilities one could consider if he or she were prone to – and Masters understood a mother *would* be prone to.

Masters arranged with the department to be regularly updated through his phone – news or no news. It was situations like that, that made him believe cell phones just might have a long-term future, after all. He could chuckle at himself about such foolishness.

He found Benson outside doing what chauffeurs are always doing when they are not driving – tending to the vehicles. Apparently, there were four, the Limo, the Lincoln and two smaller, if not inexpensive cars. Since the ’56 Chevy came on the scene, Masters had difficulty identifying models. Benson pointed out the one Robbie had his eye on once he got his license. It had already been outfitted with the modifications his condition would require. He shared, as if a secret, that the lad sometimes just sat in the driver’s seat for long periods.

“Benson. You up for a fieldtrip?”

“Of course. I need something to keep myself occupied. Like everybody here, I’m out of my mind with worry for Robbie.”

“And, like I told Ken, it really is best to leave that in the hands of the police. You and I are needed to ferret out what other relevant information there may be relating to the basic case. We need to begin at the haunts of one Bob Zimm – his

apartment and, perhaps, the main science building. Know it?"

"Yes. The building. Last semester Robbie took an AP course in biology there. We made the run Monday, Wednesday, and Friday – arrive for a nine o'clock class, leave for points unknown at ten o'clock."

"I hadn't heard about that class. What was that about points unknown?"

"Afterwards: Tacos from Mama Tina's, Chicken from Charlies, or to Big Daddy Dukes, for Breakfast or a Double Cheeseburger and fries. He has been taking a college course first semester each year for the past four years. During those fifteen weeks, I gain ten pounds. The food's wonderful and the help at those three places treat him like a prince. And, why wouldn't they; Robbie is as good as they come – always leaves smiles and laughter in his wake."

Masters placed a call to the private police line he'd been given.

"Ray Masters here. Question. Have you a current search warrant for the amphibian lab at the university? . . . Great. How about Bob Zimm's home – he was the curator – recently deceased? . . . Am I free to enter and search without a warrant in hand? . . . Fine. I am on my way to his home now; please have an officer meet me there. Will you send me the address, please? I may or may not need to look at the lab after that. Thanks."

Benson began to believe the old detective knew a good deal more about technology than he let on.

A black and white was waiting as they pulled up. A young officer greeted them, opening the car door for Masters.

"Good morning, Sir. I'm Officer Atherton – John Atherton – Johnny to my friends and J.J. to my mom, and what my wife calls me is probably classified. Chief says anything you want."

"Chief is most kind. My main goal is locating a safe in apartment six – providing there is one – a safe not an apartment six."

The officer chuckled.

Benson remained with the car. The other two entered the building and found the door of the apartment still decorated with yellow police ribbon, which offered terrible threats if

anybody tampered with it.

“Since I have no idea what you will be doing, please ask if I can help, or boss me,” the young man offered. “Been married seven years, so I am quite skilled at being bossed.”

He smiled and chuckled.

Masters smiled and nodded.

“Where would you expect to find a safe in this apartment, officer?”

“Well, the floor would be ideal – solid concrete. I watched the building go up as a kid. Lived just down the street. Perhaps the wall between the bedroom and the bath – fully secure within the apartment. If we find it double thick, that may be a sure bet.”

“Since bending is not one of my top ten skills, let’s do the wall thing first in the bedroom.”

They found no picture to swivel revealing what they were after. The dresser was too heavy to allow reasonable access, and there was no headboard on the bed to contain a secret compartment. He moved into the bathroom with the officer at his heels.

“Aha. Haven’t seen one like this in years. You see it, John?”

“No sir. Tub, stool, sink, shower, but no safe.”

He kicked back the bath matt to be sure.

Masters went to the medicine cabinet and felt along the underside of the front. The unit protruded an inch from the wall, which was not necessarily obvious the way the mirror extended an inch all around the unit.

“Here we go, John.”

He pressed a well-hidden button. The medicine chest popped away from the wall supported by a hidden piano hinge on its right side. He swung it open revealing the front of a safe complete with a keypad lock – ten buttons set as a three by three matrix plus one and numbered one through zero.

“Now all we need is the entry code – it will be six digits and we will find it jotted down somewhere in this room. Scientist-types are forgetful and believe they are cleverer than they really are – away from their work, at least. You check the upper hem on the shower curtain. I will check inside the water closet on the stool. . . Got it. You can stop looking. Can you jot

this down, please: 0-3-0-9-3-8? It was written on the brass ball with an indelible sharpie. Probably is meaningless – just random numbers – for added security. Scientists are big on random numbers.”

“Got it, Sir.”

“Go ahead and punch it in. See if it works.”

“See if it works or see if it explodes? I’ve studied about such things.”

Before Masters could step in and relieve him of the duty – the possible danger – he had completed the procedure and pulled the safe door open – round – ten inches in diameter – two inches thick – a serious safe as home safes went.

“Will you, please, make a video of what I do in case it is ever questioned? The officer positioned his phone and Masters began going through the contents. There were warranties for appliances, the apartment lease, a handgun permit, an original social security card, his passport, an envelope with car related information and a large, brown envelope labeled MISS. Masters removed that and opened it – held closed only with metal prongs. It turned out to be a genuine, Bingo.

“There were a dozen sheets of handwritten notes. They summarized arrangements leading up to and including an agreement in which he would procure a poisonous amphibian for client X in return for five thousand dollars – twenty-five-hundred up front and the rest upon delivery plus four days – time to prove it’s worth, which Zimm appeared to have guaranteed. There was no money. On the back of one of the sheets was a handprinted phrase; *\$ like DrD might have done*. Dr. D. didn’t ring a bell. It might be a professor or some previous mentor.

Masters thought.

John spoke.

“I have a five-year-old daughter, Sir. Her favorite book is *Dr. Doolittle Talks with the Baby Animals*. Dr. D? Just sayin’.”

“Fascinating. We came past a bookcase in the living room.”

They were soon inspecting the spines of several hundred books. Most were paper backs – some scientific – some cloaked in images of scantily clad women clutching long

cigarette holders in their teeth and holding smoking guns at their sides.

There was one row of hardbacks. *That* caught Masters' eye. He ran his fingers along them.

"Want to bet on this one?"

The young man repositioned his head and read the spine out loud: "*Dr. Doolittle* by Hugh Lofting. Ah. The original."

Masters removed it from the shelf and opened it.

"Look here, John. The old *hide-\$2,500-in-a-hollowed-out-book* ploy."

It was worth his smile.

"I made a book like that for my private things when I was in fourth grade," Sir. "Only problem was, at nine, I didn't have any private things to put in it. Eventually became home to a few pretty stones. I wonder what ever happened to that?"

Masters handed him the book and the envelope of papers.

"Take possession of these and see that the serial numbers on the bills are run. They may want to collect recurring fingerprints in case we get lucky, later. Maybe there will be some connection we can make. That completes things here for now."

They closed and locked the safe, reset the medicine cabinet, and John repositioned the curtain properly apportioned along the rod. He had clearly been well trained.

"Do you happen to know where *Mama Tino's Tacos* is located?"

"Oh, yes. Close by on Maple between Washington and Jefferson. Best Taco's God ever breathed life into."

That had presented an image that clearly needed some sorting out. It wouldn't happen that morning.

Masters tucked a bill – one of his own – into the young officer's pocket.

"Mama Tino's for your family tonight."

"I am not allowed to take gifts of any kind, Sir."

"And I would *never* think of offering *you* a gift. That is strictly an early birthday present for the prettiest five-year-old on your block. Surely we can't be faulted for that."

His wonderful smile blossomed.

“Mary Beth thanks you, then.”

At the curb they shook and went their separate ways.

“When does *Charlie’s Chicken* open, Benson? I have a definite hankerin’ fer country fried chicken.”

“It opens right about now, actually.”

“To Charlie’s then, and don’t spare the horses – or chickens perhaps in this case.”

“I have the distinct idea that Charlie’s does not *spare* the *chickens*, Ray.”

It was nonsense worth chuckles.

“Eat-in or drive through, Mr. Ray?”

“Is there a park close by?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Then how about a picnic, Benson? We can get away from it all for at least a few minutes. Perhaps you should call somebody at the house to let them know we have discovered something of interest that we have to follow up on and will return before noon.”

They placed their orders and waited in line – three cars ahead of them.

Benson called Worth.

“Worth. Ran into a bit of a sticky wicket, but about to solve the age-old conundrum about why two aging gentlemen crossed the road to find the chicken. Be back there by noon. No word on Robbie yet, I assume. . . Okay. Hold down the fort until we return.”

“Taken care of, Sir. Nothing about Robbie, yet, but I assume you know that.”

At the park they took their boxes and drinks to a friendly looking picnic table. Masters appreciated that Benson let him carry his own. Way too often, folks felt compelled to take care of him. It was his least favorite thing about being a ‘somebody’, or, perhaps just an ‘oldbody’.

“Wisdom suggests, Benson, that we sit on opposite sides of this table.”

Svelte Benson offered a grin.

“You have something on your mind, Mr. Ray, or has your love of nature just suddenly overwhelmed you?”

“I am that transparent, am I. Must be losing my touch. I

wonder if you feel comfortable speaking about the changes in Ken during those last few months before the accident. How long was that?”

“Most of a year, actually. He stopped writing, took lots of walks and slept a lot. During the last several months he was typically *tipsy*, shall I say. I had never known him to drink before. And there were *two* big changes. First, the one I assume you are speaking of – his sudden addiction to alcohol and obsessive need for female companionship. Second, when, after the accident, all that stopped – from the next day to this – no more women and no more booze.

“The second seems easily explained – that after his brother’s death, he felt a responsibility to his brother’s family that required sobriety. It is said when they were young, Ken, older by ten years, related to Robert more like he was his father than an big brother. The first may be as easy to explain – maybe not. I have a few, though incomplete, private, facts to go on. He had been seeing one woman for a number of months – always away from the house. I have no idea why. Betsy and Worth were certain a wedding was in the offing and each of them experienced some trepidation surrounding their future employment – if there was to be a new lady of the household.

“What I have to share now is a mixture of facts and speculation that may be in no way related. If it wasn’t for the desperate times in which we live, I would not share it.”

“Rest assured, unless it fingers the bad guy, it will never leave my lips.”

Benson nodded, having already taken his head down that path. He continued.

“Prior to his bout with the bottle, I had taken him to several – more like a dozen – appointments with a urologist. His specialty was prostate problems. Short version is, after a series of unsuccessful treatments, Mr. M. had to have it removed – cancer. Nobody else here knows that. He seems to have recovered completely.

“Also, just after that was when he *began* his *womanizing* – I believe is the term. I’m not a psychiatrist, but I have my suspicions about what he may have had to prove to himself. It was late in that time that he began seeing his special lady. It

went on for three or so months and then just stopped. That is when he began drinking more heavily. I am sure I have just told you more than I know. I'll try to answer questions if you have them.

"I suppose more than one jilted man has taken to the bottle, Benson. You have no idea what happened, I suppose."

"Not really but perhaps, maybe."

"Your confidence overwhelms me."

It was worth a smile. Benson continued.

"I had determined her name was Sally Waters – the snoop in me is uncontrollable. She was a waitress at a diner down near the railroad depot. He had showered her with very expensive gifts. I saw a notice in the paper about a wedding between a woman named Sally Waters and Lawrence Fuller – actually, Betsy is the one who found it and I made the connection.

"The evil part of me believes she allowed three months in which to take everything Mr. M. would give her, sell it, keep the money and marry the man she really loved. It was like she arranged for Mr. Miller to supply her dowry. Awful thoughts, I know. I felt guilty for having thought them without any sort of proof, whatsoever."

"The interesting possibility it allows would be the question about whether she would have some lingering reason to kill Ken or at least want to see him dead if by somebody else's hands. One has to also ask if perhaps *he* broke it off and she remains a smitten woman with revenge in her heart. It allows still another possibility – that her husband found reason to believe Ken did her wrong in some way and it is he who has been perpetrating these attempts on Ken and the rest of you.

"In most cases it is better to have too much rather than too little information. It seemed you had additional things to say about how it stopped suddenly at the time of the accident."

"I probably said or implied something else, yes. Its awful nature may have just been one of those shocks life sends us, compelling us to pivot on a dime, so to speak, clear our head and turn our life around."

It sounded like Benson was speaking from personal experience. He continued.

“There is one more thing, Mr. Ray – not at all well-focused but right from the start it seemed to me like Mr. Miller felt somehow guilty about it – the accident, the death, the maiming of the little tyke. Like I said, not at all well-focused as feelings go and certainly not based in anything factual.”

“And it is possible that may have had nothing to do with the accident – maybe left over from something like believing he had been negligent in the amount of attention he had been offering his ‘little’ brother while he had – in your words – been womanizing and what-have-you, instead. I appreciate your openness and the extent of your *input*, as this computer generation puts it.

“My. Look at the time. We better get back before they send the Mounties after us.”

Benson smiled and deposited the boxes and cups in the green trash barrels. *That*, Masters would allow without contention. It did bring up a point of contention for him; why did parks always have green tables, as if they were so vulgar they needed to be camouflage – why not red or orange or lavender, and add some spark and life to the green expanse? He let it go.

It was a mere fifteen-minute ride back to the house.

“Something’s going on at the house,” Benson said as he slowed to make the turn into the driveway.”

Masters responded mostly under his breath.

“Oh, my. A police car with flashing lights. That’s usually *not* good news?”

It had just pulled to a stop as the limo came up behind it. The lights went off. Benson and Masters left the limo and approached it. The officer who had been driving moved around the rear of the squad car to open its passenger door. Ken, Betsy, Doris and Worth hurried through the front door and down the steps to meet it. It seemed they had been forewarned about something. Worth had Ali in tow and bounced it along to the sidewalk below. Masters took that as a positive sign.

The officer – six feet six and would have given Masters a run for his money at the scales in the feed store – picked up blanket-garbed Robbie and deposited him in his chair. Robbie offered the ‘hands clasped over his head’ salute of the victor. His mother rushed to him and they held a long embrace.

The officer offered his hand to Masters, who had questions.

“Is the boy alright? Should he see a doctor?”

“Let me put it this way, Sir. I can’t understand how he managed it, but it appears that Superboy, here, chewed his way through the roof of the truck, before attacking his abductor, leaving him looking like the man had just gone twelve rounds with *Mohamad Ali* – in his prime – with the assistance of his boxing daughter, *Laila* – with George Forman, cooking brats, on standby. The EMTs couldn’t find a scratch on the kid’s body. In all honesty, I believe they did put a dab of antibiotic on a mosquito bite.”

As he and his mother separated, Robbie spoke looking up at the gathering at the bottom of the steps.

“A funny thing happened to me on my way to becoming sixteen.”

It received the reaction he was going for. He shook the officer’s hand and with Ken’s assistance rolled up the ramp and into the house. They gathered in the sitting room. He spoke again.

“I’m going to record this, Mr. Masters, because your man Flint will surely want to use it in the upcoming novel.”

He removed his phone from its pocket on Ali. Some good butlering had seen to its presence there. Acutely aware, Robbie, even acknowledged that with a nod in Worth’s direction.

“Tell Flint that I will accept a brief mention at the bottom of the title page – in fourteen-point, Britannica Bold font – that’s Robbie, with an ‘ie’, Miller, for the record.”

He proceeded to tell his story. The women wept through their smiles. The men shook their heads. In the end there was polite applause.

“Well, enough of that,” he said once finished, assuming he would have a second opportunity to go into more detail when Masters did his summary of the case. I am starved and vote we all pile into the limo and go pig out on some Charlie’s Chicken – extra slaw, extra fries, with an I-V of Mountain Dew.

There were no objections, after all, neither Benson nor Masters had had dessert.

“One suggestion, Master Robbie,” Worth offered. “You might want to consider shirt, pants and shoes before you approach the feast.”

“Prudes! The whole world is filled with prudes!”

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CHAPTER SIX

Day Two: Afternoon

Lunch had been a grand time, filled with humor and laughter, relief and at least some degree of closure. Robbie remained mum about the abduction saying he would offer his story in its entirety later on. Masters would allow the police the rest of the afternoon to gather evidence and he would then pull the case together in the sitting room at seven that evening.

Once back at the house, Robbie approached Masters in the hall outside their rooms.

“There is something more I must talk about with you. It is probably less about the case and more about Uncle Ken – probably me as well. Can we talk in your room? I don’t want the memory to become a lingering ghost in my room after I talk it out.”

It was the most serious and clearly important concern the boy had offered during Masters’ stay.

“Of course. Come in. Before you begin, just be certain it is something you really want to share with me – that in the morning you are not going to wish you hadn’t.”

“Thank you for that. I have already worked it through. I’m good.”

“Okay then. You have my undivided attention.”

The old detective motioned them toward the Masters-seized recliner near the wide, floor to ceiling window, which overlooked a stand of trees to the west.

Robbie began with the oft required sigh.

“What I have to say will probably seem a bit disorganized – random, even. I will try to make it all fit together in the end.

“I am aware of the stories about the year my Uncle went off his rocker, so to speak – the women and the drinking and general disregarding of responsibility. I know about his operation. I know about the woman breaking up with him. That is all background that I assume we share, correct?”

“Correct.”

“Good. That means I may be able to get all this off my chest in no more than six months.”

“I do hope there is room service, then.”

Robbie offered a weak smile, which Masters acknowledged with one of his own.

“I am a snoop, Mr. Ray. It is in my genes. Once it gets fired up about something, something inside of me whips it up into an inferno – a blazing cauldron. That *really* is how my mind talks to me, so I’m just going to let it flow without dummifying it down like I normally do.

“The story develops from three disparate sources: one relates to things I found in Uncle Ken’s wall safe several years ago. The second relates to something I found in a secret room in the basement. The third is how it all sheds light on his sudden shift to sobriety at the time of my accident. I’ll begin with the second – the contents of the secret room.

“This building has a full basement, which is mostly useless – *undedicated and unused*, perhaps, better stated. Under the main stairway at the rear of the large entry hall on the first floor, there is access to a saferoom down there designed to protect people from storms and tornadoes. It was an original feature of the house as I understand it. We’ve used it a few times since I’ve been here, although it is difficult to imagine how this old fortress with twenty-four-inch-thick stone walls could be damaged. The safe room is basically a fifteen-foot square cube with twelve-inch concrete walls and ceiling, outfitted to be relatively comfortable for up to a dozen people – supplied for weeks if necessary. It doubled as a potential bomb shelter back during the cold war. I mention it only because I always thought it was the only useful feature the basement had.

When I was ten, a time when my snoopiness peaked, I became fascinated with that whole area down there and began exploring it – end to end and side to side. There are several rooms around the edges but mostly it is an open expanse dotted with a half dozen one-foot-square, cement, pillars that support the structure above. It should be noted that the north west corner of the basement actually rises above the ground, the lot having been leveled at that point to create the back lawn which slopes gently down to the creek.

“Anyway, all those rooms, except one, were unlocked – you can imagine the one that piqued my interest. It occupied that same, far, northwest corner of the basement. It prompted my pursuit of locks and their picking that I have mentioned. A few days – a week tops – after discovering the room, I had finally fashioned a key that unlocked it. It was the old-fashioned variety, four inches long with a flat blade at one end cut with open channels. It was discovering the proper, channels that was the challenge – took so long.

I entered. It was wired with a wall switch and overhead light. I wondered where all the dust had come from – it covered everything in a quarter inch of – well, dust. I won’t go into that since it plays no part in my story – although I still have to wonder about it – dust, in a sealed room? Oh, well. I imagine any diligent housekeeper may ask the same question, daily. Anyway . . .

“It was ten feet wide and twenty-five long. It had a garage door positioned to open through the west wall – toward the rear of the house, onto that back lawn I just spoke of. Note here that there is *no* door there on the outside of the house. It has been cleverly cemented over and sits behind evergreen shrubbery and short, spreading trees – ewes and arborvitae. The dark green, basement wall becomes a backdrop for an attractive spread of year-round greenery. All that is also mostly tangential to the story.

“Sitting at the center of the room, up on cement blocks, sits a Black Cadillac – medium sized – a model from twelve years ago. The front, driver’s side fender is demolished, and the grillwork is pushed back into the radiator, suggesting a significant collision. The driver’s side windshield is broken –

splintered the way they do when impacted from the inside – and is laden with what appears to be dried blood – black and at this point flakes off easily when scratched with a fingernail.

“The inside of the car is very fancy – maroon leather upholstery, a multi-purpose console between the front seats, the top section of which raises up on a rear hinge revealing a bar which, when I found it, contained only one empty bottle – capacity probably six.”

“On the front, driver’s side seat in an unlocked, brown attaché case are two newspapers, both copies of the *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*. One was folded in such a manner that it revealed a story about the accident I was in. The other, similarly folded, from a day later, revealed a story about an eighteen-year-old boy who was found in his father’s auto garage with life-threatening injuries – traumatic brain damage according to the article.

“In that attaché case, there were also two brown envelopes. Inside one were the vehicle registration, VIN, and insurance papers verifying that car belonged to Uncle Ken. Inside the other were two smaller envelopes – each held paint chips – like some that might have curled loose from an old house or building – except they were shiny. Few buildings are painted with shiny paint. My surmise is they are from vehicles. One was marked RMF and the other KMC.

“I will run my thoughts by you in order to verify *my* impression of what the letters mean, but first, do you have a theory about the letters against which I can check mine?”

“Well, this car belonged to Ken Miller – KM. It is a Cadillac – C. KMC. Following that pattern and what you have presented, I would assume the RM might refer to Robert Miller – your father. If the third letter does indicate the make of car, I would guess ‘F’ stands for Ford. RMF.”

“Very good. My figuring as well. I have been able to establish we were in our family’s red Ford at the time of the accident. Does it seem reasonable that the contents of those envelopes are paint chips from each car?”

“It does. I’d rather not commit myself entirely without examining them, however. You have the papers and envelopes?”

“I left them right where they were on the front seat of the car. They are easily obtained if we must have them.”

“As *you* seem to be, Robbie, I am, also, stumped about why the elaborate scheme to hide the vehicle and yet make available in the car what seems to be evidence of its part in the accident.”

“It seems like Uncle Ken believes it all needs to be preserved for some reason. Do you suppose it was Uncle Ken who was driving the Caddy when it ran into our car?”

“That seems to be one of the possibilities. But why the article about the boy and his physical condition?”

“I know. That has been a dead end for me, too. All this stuff the past few days has for some reason made me want to get it figured out. I am unable to confront Uncle Ken and I’m afraid questions to the people who were living here at the time would only raise suspicions or dredge up dark secrets they do not want to revisit.”

“And, in what way are you expecting me to respond to what you have disclosed, Robbie?”

“How about you take thirty seconds to put it all into proper perspective, so I can go on with my life having no lingering questions about it all?”

He offered a shrug and a weak smile indicating he had no idea what he wanted other than to talk it out. Masters understood how uncomfortable that must be for him. It was certainly unfamiliar territory – not understanding.

“When I’m confronted with a going-nowhere situation, here is how I proceed, Robbie. I make lists of all the information I have, the information I need, and all the questions those things raise. I list alternative explanations and possibilities, then sort through them for the most reasonable – the one or ones that can be supported by facts or observations – sometimes just by logic or common sense.

“Next, I eat and drink coffee while I let it all percolate – no pun intended there.”

“Will you get me started?”

“Of course. You see, you and I share that snoop gene and what you have revealed has mine fired up as well.”

Finally, Robbie was able to launch a genuine, hopeful,

smile. He took out his laptop, apparently ready to take notes.

“Oh, Robbie, Robbie, Robbie. *Not* on a laptop. ‘Real’ detective thinking must be done on a yellow pad. It won’t work unless it’s on a yellow pad. I just happen to have several in my suitcase.”

Masters hitched his head in its direction. Smiling at the playful absurdity of Masters’ foolish contention, Robbie selected two and handed one to Masters. They each had pencils and exchanged a smile over the fact they were both those dirt-cheap, yellow mechanical pencils from Walmart. One of those, ‘can’t buy just one, have to buy six’, products for which that retail chain is famous.

“Here is the information I might list just to get started,” Masters began.

He wrote as he spoke. Robbie duplicated his list.

Car in secret room

Secret room plainly disguised from outside

Attaché case on front seat

It contained two newspapers from near the date of Robbie’s auto accident.

One paper held an article about the accident.

One paper held an article about another boy found injured in his father’s auto shop.

“Is that a good starter list of our information – complete?”

“I think so. It leaves out the background information about Uncle Ken’s behavior changes.”

“Let’s consider all that general information. Now, to the list of information we need. Feel free to jump in.”

Why put the car in a secret room?

Did Ken hide the car from the authorities?

Why was the room clearly disguised from the outside?

Why was the attaché case left in the car?

Why was the article about the other boy

included?

How was the boy – James – associated with Ken? In other words, why was his injury so clearly important to Ken?

“I suppose,” Masters went on, “that we can assume the reason for the newspaper account of the accident is to set the basis for everything else. That all of this relates in some way to that accident. Do you remember the boy’s last name?”

“Yes. James Allen Como. Son of Marie and James Como, Sr. from here in the city.”

“That will likely be key to all of this. Do you have any information about that relationship?”

“The boy and Uncle Ken? Not really.”

“Do you have anything else that might seem relevant?”

“I guess not. Wait. Maybe. Don’t know how. Let me pull up some pictures here on my phone.”

“And the boy has no idea just how absurd that sounds to a person my age – pulling up pictures on a phone.”

It was mostly ignored. Masters realized it was becoming a tired line from members of his generation.

“Here. Good. Thought I might have deleted them. I have pictures of stuff I found in the glove compartment of the Cadillac. None of it made any sense – just seemed like normal stuff. Now, it seems it may have been left in there for some purpose – what, I still have no idea.”

Robbie positioned himself so Masters could see his screen as he spoke.

“They are mostly receipts. A half dozen from a car care and repair place – the one he always used – just down the street, actually. One of my first, solo, journeys when we first got here was to roll down there and buy penny gumballs out of a machine with a glass dome. They let me think I was on my own, but I saw Benson in the woods to the north. I didn’t mention it.

“My allowance back then was a dollar a week and, at my request, mom always provided it in dimes – that was pretty much as expensive as any of my individual purchases were. I felt pretty grown up, plunking down my dime on the counter and asking for a nickel and five pennies in change. Not much else.

Maybe you can make something of it.”

“Several things seem interesting. We are considering a car accident. Enlarge those receipts from *Jimmy’s Auto* if you will so my old eyes can make them out.”

Masters studied them.

“The car seemed to be having brake problems around the time of the accident. Several receipts refer to it. Note the dates and the services performed – a new master cylinder among other items – apparently the final attempt at fixing a brake problem.

“First, I am intrigued that the owner of a Cadillac would have a neighborhood mechanic work on it. Don’t those expensive cars run on computers that need other computers to diagnose problems.”

“They do. Hadn’t thought of that.”

“Second, each receipt – copies of work orders actually – contains a box for the mark of the mechanic who did the work. It appears these all have the same mark – I make it to be JCJ. Can your young eyes verify that?”

“Yes. JCJ. So, where does that take us?”

“For one, JCJ is not the boy’s initials – JAC. It may indicate some employee – Jack Clark Jefferson, for example. We need to find that mechanic’s full name. You understand that businesses often keep the former name when they are sold. *Jimmy’s* may actually be *Alfonso’s*.”

Robbie nodded.

There was a knock on the door.

“That will be Worth with coffee. I texted him and asked him to bring it up earlier. Actually, I texted him *earlier* and asked him to bring it up.”

Masters offered a smile at the correction.

“How thoughtful. Before or after my reference to room service?”

“Before, actually. I knew you’d take time to talk once I got up the nerve to ask.”

They exchanged a nod and Robbie spoke.

“Come in, Worth.”

“Coffee, Sir, and a few goodies from the kitchen for you, and a quart sized glass of OJ for the young man.”

“Thank you, Worth. That will hit the spot. A conspiracy between cell phones, I understand.”

“Yes, Sir. Something like that – or thumbs. Thumbs seem to have replaced ten fingers on a keyboard as well as vocal cords these days. Actually, nine fingers – my typing teacher never assigned a single task to my left thumb even though I dutifully kept it at the ready.”

He placed the tray on the coffee table and prepared to leave.

“If you have a moment,” Masters asked.

“My life is just sprinkled with moments that I have, Mr. Ray. What is on your mind?”

He remained standing.

“The question would be more appropriate for Benson – it has to do with the care of the cars – their mechanical care. What can you tell us about *Jimmy’s Auto*, that at least *used* to service Ken’s vehicles?”

“Yes. He still uses it for the more minor things – oil change, fluid checks, battery issues, things like that. Sometimes for Sunday emergencies. Convenience, I believe. He gives them a call and they come over, pick up the vehicle, tend to it and return it. It is little more than a block to the west. During Benson’s vacations they do the washing and waxing. Perhaps if you had specific questions.”

“Is Jimmy the owner?”

“Yes, Sir. Jimmy Como. He has owned and operated it for as long as I’ve been here – more accurately, for twenty or more years, I’d say. Tragically, his son was in some sort of life-threatening accident a dozen or so years ago – maybe not quite that long. I believe he may have eventually died. Don’t take that as gospel. Jimmy’s never been the same, I can tell you that. His smile is still there, but it just sits on his face. It no longer has roots down to his heart, if you know what I mean.”

Masters and Robbie shared a look.

“I think that takes care of what we had on our minds, Worth. Thank you and thank Doris.”

Worth did his little, almost bow thing and left.

Robbie felt special to have been included in that way – *we, our*. Few others would have noticed.

“I’d say that makes a connection, Mr. Ray. What’s next?”

“First, see if you can verify the address of the garage in which the boy was found.”

“Give me a sec. . . . Okay, it was the one down the street – *our* Jimmy’s.”

“Are the newspaper’s back issues available online?”

“Yes. That’s where I just found the address. What sort of articles?”

“Let’s begin with the hospital admissions. You can figure the dates.”

They grew silent for the better part of a minute. Masters felt the need to be productive, so he spent that time admiring and savoring a cheese Danish.

“Got it. If you wish to make still another comment about how unbelievable cell phones are, I will gladly pause a moment for you to be appropriately amazed.”

“Smart Alec!”

It spawned a genuine smile.

Masters motioned him to continue, thinking, ‘just wait for the day when your children make fun of you for having used a *computer* instead of a *gillywhatsadoin* that is powered for life by a drop of hemp juice and reads one’s thoughts through your retina from across a room – in the dark.’ He did take time for a private smile. It gave him time to lick his fingers.

“The boy was admitted early morning the day after my accident and discharged a month to the day later.”

“Interesting juxtaposition with the accident but no firm connection. First, we need to confirm the Cadillac as one of the vehicles in the accident. Then we need to place the Jimmy boy inside one of the vehicles. That article about the accident – I noticed it was continued on another page. Have you read that part?”

“Originally. Not recently. Let me pull it up online. . . . Got it. Let’s see. Ah. Yes. Can’t imagine I’d have failed to tell you this. It was a hit and run. To my knowledge – and I’m quite sure about this – that has never been solved – who it was – who’s car it was. That fact lingers to motivate my current quest and misgivings. I am sure I’d have heard about such important new information.

“The accident happened at twilight. The story I’ve been told is that my preschool had just finished its dress rehearsal for the big Halloween show we were doing for our parents. Lots of it was done in darkness with spotlights, hence the dark of the day for the rehearsal time in the gym. I have seen my father’s video he made. Pretty corny, really. Anyway, the article puts the time of the accident at seven forty – one block east of the school building. No description of the other car is given.

“Our car was a red Ford. There were no witnesses at the scene – at least so said the article.”

“I imagine you have pictures of the paint chips.”

“I’m after them as you speak. Okay, in the RMF envelope this is what we have.”

He handed the phone to Masters while he described it.

“Judging from the juxtaposition – a great word by the way, Mr. Ray – the red color is beneath the black color.”

“That would be consistent with the black Cadillac running into the red Ford. Next.”

Robbie brought up a second picture without comment. Masters spoke.

“The black color is beneath the red. Seems to be a collision match.”

“If we only had a way to date this particular accident, which involved this particular black Cadillac by way of those chips,” Masters said.

“Not exactly but maybe sort of there is a way. Hear me out. I told you about the outside of the garage door having been cemented closed.”

“Yes. Clearly *after* the car was parked in the room.”

“Well, ten-year-old Robbie Snoop, conducted a thorough examination of that wall – inside and out. I figured that in some way the coverup on the outside might have been built so that entire section opened out, so the door inside could roll up, and the vehicle could leave. I searched for secret levers and remember visions of the Batmobile leaving and entering the Batcave. Do you know those references?”

“I do – Pow! Bam! Whammy!”

Robbie smiled and chuckled. He continued.

“Well, I found no such arrangement – just three or four

inches of concrete plastered over the front of the door. But, and here is how this all relates to your musing about the date, down in the lower left corner of the concrete was a strange thing. Here is how I conceived it: the mason – out of habit, I suppose – had added the date down there – drew it into the concrete – impressed in about a half inch – like maybe with the point of a trowel or a stick or nail. But somebody came along after the concrete had dried and filled in that date – the impression – with concrete in an attempt to eliminate it. By the time I got to it, the filling had begun to slough off – little sections of it had loosened and fallen to the ground. Plainly, the fill job had been done by somebody unfamiliar with good cementing techniques – Uncle Ken, maybe. The colors were slightly different as well. I completed removing the fill and revealed the date. Here. Several pictures.”

Masters looked. A sequence of four pictures verified his description. He thought aloud.

“What you have connected here suggests that probably the paint chips from the envelopes were left in the car at about the time of the date on the concrete work and that date was only a few days after the accident.”

“That’s it. What do you think?”

“It presents a plausible, circumstantial, sequence. Typically, I would think, for a piece of remodeling such as that, the door would have been removed and the space filled either by cement blocks or a wooden frame-and-plywood span to then be plastered in cement to more or less match the raised unburied section of the wall of the basement. The way it was done suggests great haste, wouldn’t you say?”

Robbie nodded, thoughtfully, clearly a new take on it for him. Masters continued.

“Since it appears your Uncle set all this up for posterity, it would be simple enough to have him verify it. You have clearly decided not to go that route.”

“That’s right. If my uncle had been driving the car that killed my father and did this to me, I assume he would be in terrible trouble – legally and emotionally. I don’t want to be the one who does that to him. On top of that, think what it would do to our relationship. In many ways, he has become my dad – or

close to it.”

Masters nodded. It did not mean he agreed with the strategy. It meant he grasped his meaning. Robbie understood. Masters was curious about the boy’s matter of fact approach to it. He detected no anger or misgivings should the scenario be accurate. That seemed odd. More reasonably, a youngster would be oozing the need for revenge and retribution. He left it alone and continued.

“Assuming those assumptions are basically correct, let’s move on to why your uncle so clearly associated the Como boy’s situation with the accident.”

“I have spent a lot of time thinking about that – back before I had any idea who the boy was.”

“And?”

“Only a way-out possibility. That the boy was a passenger in the car and got severely hurt. It seems safe to assume Uncle may have been intoxicated – according to the stories surrounding him at that period in his life. The possibilities from there are limitless; Uncle Ken, not being in his right mind, made a series of poor judgements and left the scene. Then, he could have dropped the Como boy off at the garage and left. That one probably gets top billing.”

“Point One: Why would he have had the Como boy with him? Point Two: The windshield was broken in front of the driver, not the passenger. Point Three: Why would Ken have been there at that time? Would he have come to the dress rehearsal?”

“I doubt that. Our families weren’t very close back then. I suspect my parents were sheltering me from him. I can only remember being in this house a few times. I remember thinking it was a horribly stark and unpleasant place. To this day, when I see a picture of rooms with high ceilings, I remember the stale smell I associate with the house back then. It wasn’t until much later that I learned it wasn’t the walls or the architecture that made a house warm and wonderful; that is all about the people who inhabit it together. Mom and I have truly lucked out in that department. Can you see how much I don’t want the facts to change any of that?”

Masters nodded – a conversation for another day.

“It appears he has left nothing behind to indicate his motivation for being at the accident site. Considering the care he took to lay out and preserve the physical evidence, it seems odd he would have just left *that* to the imagination.”

“I hadn’t thought of it that way, but yes, it does. It opens up another avenue, though, Mr. Ray. In Uncle Ken’s safe in another brown envelope marked PENDING, were three copies of some fully uninteresting legal papers. The only picture I have is locked away in my mind, but let’s see if I can’t reconstruct it.”

He smoothed the yellow pad open to a fresh sheet and marked on it as he explained.

“First, it was on a lawyer’s stationary with his name and such centered at the top – it was the lawyer who recently died. I really had no relationship with him. It was dated earlier in the month of my accident. Then on a separate line it said: RE: the matter of the final disposition of the assets of Lawrence R. Miller, deceased. He was my grandfather and rich as blazes, I guess. For some reason his two sons had a falling out with him. I may have heard something about neither of them wanting to take over the family business – no idea what that was.

“By then, I was pretty bored so just skimmed down to the bottom. Here is maybe the connector. At the bottom were lines for signatures – one after my father’s typed name and one after Uncle Ken’s typed name. Both of those lines were dated the day of the accident. Only Uncle Ken had added his signature. It appeared to be a document that needed both signatures – his and my father’s. There was also a place for notary information; the name of the notary was already entered – typed in – awaiting his seal, signature, date, and such below it. Clearly, it did not get signed by my father *or* notarized. The accident occurred late in the day and it had still not been signed. I just imagine that should tell us something.”

“Maybe only that both Ken and your father were very busy men. At any rate, if it didn’t get signed on the date typed on the form, the form would have to be retyped to be signed at another time. One wonders why Ken would have saved useless forms like that.”

Robbie shrugged.

“See if you can find that notary – an email or preferably

a phone number. I see you wrote, Richard Scruggs. Not sure why they wouldn't have done that at the lawyer's office."

Robbie worked the internet.

"Yes! Richard Scruggs, notary – 1322 East Truman Street. Oh, my. I attended Harry Truman Elementary School at 1200 East Truman Street. It gives us proximity to the accident."

"It certainly does. Good work, son. See if you can get him on the line for me."

Moments later:

"Mr. Scruggs. My name is Raymond Masters. I am a detective working with the Rochester Police Department on a recent series of crimes. I am in need of a piece of information from eleven years ago and am counting on your gray matter working better than my gray matter."

Scruggs responded, happy to try and be of assistance.

Masters gave him the date, then went on to explain.

"The Miller brothers, one mid-fifties and one early sixties were, I believe, to meet you during the evening hours to have you notarize a set of legal documents. They did not arrive due to a vehicle accident. Do you remember or have records of such a scheduled meeting, and can you verify the time and that it did *not* take place?"

He needed time to search for the information. Masters preferred to stay on the line rather than being called back. He had learned that too often other calls, a pizza delivery, or a restroom break got in the way of a person's good intentions. Five minutes passed. Scruggs came back on the line.

"Fascinating. I have the folder under the name of Ken Miller. Just as you described it. The Miller Brothers. Eight p.m. Here at my office. The transaction was under some sort of stringent timeline and their attorney was out of the country. Now, this is interesting. It appears that a month later, I received a check to cover my fee from Ken Miller. That seems to be the last I heard of it. I hope that helps."

"It does. Thank you so much. If there is a fee for this, send your bill to the police chief referencing consultation with Masters."

He returned the phone to his young companion.

"You heard all that, I guess."

“Yes. Seems a lock on the reason for Uncle Ken being in the area of the accident at the time it occurred. Sadly, it lends credence to the idea it was Uncle Ken who was involved in the accident.”

Robbie’s phone *croaked*.

“My ring – special during the investigation.”

Masters shook his head.

Robbie answered.

“Yes, Sir. Right here . . . Mr. Scruggs.”

“Ray Masters, here.”

“Yes, Mr. Masters. Scruggs, here. More things came to mind, so I looked a bit further. You want them?”

“Certainly. Thanks for the courtesy of the follow up.”

“Ken Miller had been an off and on client of mine – privacy stuff, book related matters, things of that nature. It’s why I remember, I’m sure. I had never met his brother. Anyway. About six thirty the evening of the appointment, Ken called. I could tell he had been drinking – it was a real problem for him back then. His message was that he was under the weather – we’ll understand that was in quotes – so was sending the forms by a currier. He had signed them and asked I just go ahead and notarize them. I have to admit, I had done that for him before under similar conditions. So, I agreed. He gave me ID information for the currier, so I’d know it was all on the up and up. Odd as it was becoming, I wondered who else it could have possibly been. Anyway, like I said earlier, neither his brother or the currier arrived. The paperwork was finalized and notarized several months later by Ken – his brother having died. For what it’s worth, it makes that boy unimaginably wealthy once he turns twenty-one.”

“Thanks for the extra effort Mr. Scruggs. Double that fee when you bill the chief.”

He handed the phone back. Robbie spoke.

“I know about the inheritance in case you are wondering. It is an unwanted burden to discuss another day.”

He shrugged. Masters continued.

“I think we need very little else, and we’ll have this part of the mysteries solved to our satisfaction.”

“You have lost me for sure, Mr. Ray.”

“I need to speak with the police chief. You have that number, I believe.”

“Yes, on my emergency list. Am I to call it?”

“Please.”

After minimal runaround, Masters was speaking again with his old friend.

“Johnny. Have another favor if it doesn’t offend rules and procedures. I need information about an EMT visit some eleven years ago. It is my belief that the subject of that call is long deceased. Need to know about his condition when they first examined him.”

“Certainly. I’m going to have my guy, Richard, here, connect you with their records department and authorize your questions. Still working the Miller case?”

“Sort of. Is that good enough?”

“You know it is. Here you go. Make sure you stop by before you start the hike home. Give me two hours’ notice and Lois will have a tin of goodies for your backpack.”

Richard transferred the call.

“This is Detective Masters. I need old data about a call to which your staff responded about eleven years ago.”

He provided the essential, identifying data. He was put on hold – another five-minute wait. Masters nibbled and sipped. Robbie chugged the last few inches of juice. The boy’s level of inquisitiveness was nearing the point of spontaneous combustion.

“Yes, I am still here. . . . No need to apologize.”

He listened and took notes. Robbie punched the record mode on the phone. Masters continued to take notes.

“Thank you for your assistance. Is there a case number if I need something more. . . . ETRM4991. Thank you.”

“That was certainly interesting stuff, Mr. Ray. Thanks for letting me listen.”

“Indeed. Let’s make sure you heard what I heard. They arrived at Jimmy’s Auto at 9:04 after receiving a 911 call at 8:56. The call had been placed by the boy – Jimmy Como – from the garage phone. The report of the examination and the transcript of the conversation with the boy at the garage before he fell into a coma should arrive on your phone shortly.”

“Already here. Want to read it or have me summarize it? I read at a ridiculously rapid rate.”

“Go for it, then.”

A moment later.

“Several things. He had only vague – come and go – snippets of memory about how he had been injured or how he got to the garage. Faint images of a car accident. He remembered driving and that the brakes were virtually inoperable. He had driven slowly. He remembered at some point ending up at the garage on foot where he made the emergency call. He had lost his cellphone. His head and face were badly scraped and cut and covered in blood. His blood alcohol level was three times the legal limit. He made one strange comment the EMTs didn’t understand but noted. ‘Tell Ken I’m sorry about the work on the cylinder.’ I am guessing that means *he* installed the new master brake cylinder and knew he had not done a good job or something akin to that.

“He had symptoms of pressure on his brain; blood vessels had burst in the whites of his eyes – they surmised fluid was gathering between the protective membranes inside his skull. They called his father and then transported him to the hospital. They also suspected the skull at his forehead – under a serious, open, contusion – had been fractured. Before he was able to finish his story, he passed into the coma. When they opened his shirt to work on him, they found the papers he had been delivering – still in a large, manila, envelope.

“It notes that in cases with strange circumstances, they are required to contact the police who contacted Uncle Ken – the papers led them to him.”

Masters synthesized the story as he figured it had played out.

“James left the car here at the house and walked to the garage. Ken found the car and subsequently hid it in the room where you found it – probably to protect the boy and provide him time to think it all through. He soon took the subsequent steps to entomb it the way you found it. That seem right to you?”

“Yes. I don’t know if I told you that I still have no memory of the accident. I was strapped into the regular seatbelt on the passenger seat beside my father. They say I was in my

Halloween costume – a lion. The severity of the impact caused my small body to slide through the straps and be hurled through the air and out the windshield feet first. I remained in a coma for three days. The first thing I remember seeing was mom’s face. She had hold of my hand. You know the first thing she said? Of course, you don’t. She said, ‘About time you woke up. The dishes are stacking up in the sink.’ At that time, I had begun helping with the supper dishes as part of my allowance arrangement.”

Masters put down his pad and offered several more impressions.

“Let me try to put all our snippets into context and sort out the sequence. Correct or question me along the way. Some of it will be educated supposition. Here is my take – short version. Record it if you like.

“Ken and your father had agreed to meet to sign the legal papers at the Notary’s office after your dress rehearsal. Ken was unfit to drive due to alcohol, so he engaged the son of the garage owner to deliver the papers for him. I assume we could find he used him to run errands, frequently. On his way in Ken’s Cadillac, the boy found the bottles in the console, and by the time he got close to the school was dead drunk. He may have even pulled over to do some of the drinking while on route.

“In a terrible coincidence, the brakes failed, and he crashed into your car slamming his head into the windshield, causing the severe brain damage. Amazingly, he remained conscious. That kind of neurological damage often doesn’t fully manifest itself until later. In the mental fog that followed, he left the scene and drove the car back to Ken’s. He had just enough strength left to make it down the street to the garage on foot where he made the 911 call and collapsed – well-after his father had left for the night.”

“Enter a final piece of evidence,” Robbie added. “At the very back of his safe was a small box – the kind checks come in. I didn’t figure Uncle Ken wrote checks anymore. There were cancelled checks inside it. They were all written to the same place and all dated the first of each month. I do not remember specifically the first date, but I do know there were fifteen checks. They were all made out to *Hillcrest Long-Term Care*

Hospital – it sits just south of the city. Each check bore a case number and the notation, JAC, Jr. The few I looked at were for seven thousand dollars each. Uncle Ken was paying for his care.”

Masters carried the story forward from that information.

“Put that supercomputer inside your head to work. Let’s assume the first check was written around the end of the first month after James was discharged from the local hospital and entered Hillcrest. I am assuming when he left the local hospital, he was unable to go home so went directly to the long-term facility. Count the checks forward and figure the date on which your uncle stopped writing them.

“Okay, got it.”

“Now, we need to examine the obituaries just prior to the date of that final check and determine if there is an obit for the Como boy. Perhaps there is some site that can be searched.”

Robbie worked for some time.

“Got it. County Records Office. Sort of sad. I feel like I know him. Here’s the date he died at the long-term hospital. Like you figured, only one more check was written after that.”

Masters nodded.

Robbie became philosophical.

“I understand, now, about Uncle Ken’s sudden turn to sobriety. It is a terrible reason, but an understandable explanation.

“In light of the new information, it comes to me that the JCJ in the box on the work orders was, indeed, Jimmy’s code – Jimmy Como Junior to distinguish him from his father. That is one of those loose ends I just hate to leave behind on a case.”

Robbie offered a weak smile and a nod with no comment. There was something Masters needed to ask.

“Are you convinced the questions you came here to investigate have been answered satisfactorily?”

Robbie sat back in his chair and allowed a few tears. It had been a situation he had to get resolved. He supposed it was better than it could have been – his uncle had *not* been driving. That was, perhaps, the only redeeming feature they had found – and, of course, how his uncle had taken care of the medical expenses.

“I feel so badly for Uncle Ken – having to live with all that for the rest of his life. He is a really good person, you know.”

“Yes. I know. If it makes things any less tragic for you, I doubt if there are any legal charges that would be pending on him this far out from the incident. His several acts of irresponsibility did, in ways, cast him as a responsible party, of course. Bottom line, legally, the fault probably lays largely on the bungled installation of the master cylinder, or on whomever trained the boy to do that or supervised him. It is probably best not to assign blame. Where do you go with the information from here?”

“I already went one place. About Uncle Ken’s outings on the first and third Fridays. On the Hillcrest Hospital web site – all quite by accident – I found a notice: *Noon, First and Third Fridays, Alcohol Addiction Seminars for Teens, Ken Miller, Leader*. It is amazing the relief I feel. I guess I had assumed he used that time in some nefarious endeavor – which, of course, was foolish, dumb, stupid, idiotic, totally uncalled for and reason for me to be ashamed for the next eighty years.

“Aside from *that*, first, I am going to destroy that key I made to the secret room. If it is ever opened again, it will be by my uncle with his key. Second, I’m going to leave the disposition to the process Uncle has already put in place – the car, the evidence, the secrecy. Third, I’m going to chip away the concrete on and around that date and destroy all traces of it forever. Fourth, I’m going to try to live my life with Uncle Ken in such a way that he never finds out that I know.”

He turned, face to face with Masters.

“I am not asking for your agreement or blessing with any of that, Mr. Masters, but that is what I am going to do – what I *need* to do. I was right about one other thing.”

“And that is?”

“I’m leaving all those ghosts right here. I may never enter this room again. If you’ll excuse me, I need to be alone now. I can’t ever thank you enough, Mr. Masters.”

He offered a damp hand for a shake.

He turned and went to the door, tears, again, flowing.

He left the room.

Assuming the universe is a kind and supportive entity,

the ghosts would remain behind.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Day Two: Evening Masters' Summary

They had gathered in the chair and sofa room. In addition to the family and staff that lived in the big old house, were the police chief, the Medical Examiner, Watson from forensics and Geraldo. The man Robbie had taken into custody was not present for reasons to be seen.

Masters stood and walked to the front of the gathering. He began.

“It has been said that Raymond Masters is known for his logical, concise and to the point summaries of his cases. Do not expect that today because this case has been random and disjointed in every way, from beginning to end. Let me begin our roundabout journey.

“I will refer to the killer, attempted killer, and kidnapper as Mr. S, as we have been doing here during the investigation. It might be more appropriate to refer to him as the ‘worry wort’ because that one trait was his undoing.

“The recent attempt on the life of Ken Miller is among the most poorly implemented crimes I have investigated and yet, in the disarray that accompanied every step, it has not been among the easiest to solve. I will give him this much; he was able to move with great stealth according to precisely researched plans.

“It has, however, been rampant with a string of second

guesses about assumed possibilities that were never there. Instead of following a series of maybes, worrying that he may have not sufficiently covered his trail, he'd have been better off to use his time to go after Ken a second time. We are happy he didn't, of course.

"The killer overthought many of the events surrounding his activities. We will recall that the attack on Betsy was the evening *before* the frog attack. That has been bothering me – kill off a witness *before* there was any crime to witness. It turns out that through a convoluted series of events, and unknown to Betsy, she knew Mr. S. and he had said things in her presence about wanting to harm Ken, which he believed might lead her to identify him as a suspect. So, he tried to assure her silence before the crime.

"He feared Worth might have had a good enough look out the front door at the time of his original delivery of the lethal package, that he might be able to identify him. *That* was not so.

"He wondered if Roscoe had seen him in the back lawn shortly after Ken had opened the package. Most likely he had not but more on that in a moment. As I proceed, there will be several, 'more on that in a moments'. His attempted attack on Benson is more complicated and I'll deal with that later. It was, however, ill conceived.

"Somewhat more realistically, he feared the pet store owner, who, if interviewed by the authorities, might have passed on information about his several, fact finding, conversations about small poisonous animals. Being small of stature, he had donned teenager's clothing and black rimmed glasses and posed as a reporter from the school paper. That information comes from studying the security cameras in the store.

"Also, realistically, he feared that Mr. Zimm at the University, who the killer had paid to clandestinely import the special species of frog for him, might have figured out who he was. He had taken a job as an overnight janitor on that floor of the science building in order to get information he required about Zimm and his lab and to make communicating about the purchase, simple."

"I will begin the explanation of the several crimes in

reverse order with the several murders and attempted murders the killer believed had become necessary to protect himself. That takes us immediately back to the murder of Mr. Zimm.

“It went like this. The Suspect in all of this – Mr. S. – after researching what he figured would be the perfect, hard to trace weapon – the special frog who’s poison dissipates rapidly within the human systems – made several anonymous contacts with Mr. Zimm – always in writing, never openly revealing himself. He had done his back-alley research well and had been given to believe Zimm had slipped the law on several previous occasions, bringing illegal animals into the country for clients who paid him well. After passing several notes between them, Zimm agreed to procure the deadly frog on his next trip to the rainforest, which took place over this past weekend. He returned on Monday evening. He was paid twenty-five hundred dollars up front with another twenty-five to follow later. In Mr. S’s story to Zimm, he claimed to be making the purchase for a third party. In reality, of course, it was for him and he didn’t intend to pay Zimm anything. In notes we recovered, Zimm indicated how little he trusted Mr. S, so he had moved the advance money to a safe place. The money was found in cash in the hollowed-out center of a hard-back book in his home.

“Those efforts make us wonder why Mr. S would go to such ends to procure a frog that could be bought right here in Rochester on the open market. *That* reflects to two things: secrecy and potency. Mr. S. believed that he couldn’t risk being found to be a known purchaser of his weapon and local shop records would reveal that. He knew just enough about the frog to understand it lost its potency within days of removal from rainforest conditions.

“To protect himself, he chose to kill both Mr. Zimm and the pet store owner – Zimm with an injection of rattle snake venom and the owner with a blow to his temple from a baseball bat. I assume the backup plan was to inject him as well if the blow did not kill him.

“About that – it was a case of thinking he was smarter than he was. Believing a wooden bat might absorb a victim’s blood and skin cells and leave traceable splinters, he chose to use an aluminum bat, which he erroneously thought could be

washed clean of blood and such.

“At this point, I need to interject that once the police had Robbie’s kidnapper in custody, things came together rapidly. There were physical searches of his home and lockers, as well as personal records searches – banking matters and so on. He had taken out a short-term mortgage to cover the initial payment to Mr. Zimm. Most likely, his plan was to steal it back and repay the loan immediately. Mr. S. is not a man of means.

“Also, the icing on the cake, there were notebooks filled with precise details about this house, the people, their routines, even food preferences – perhaps important if he had been considering poison as a possible option. That didn’t make it into his playbook.

“Mr. S. happens to be the star baseball player on his small-town men’s summer league team. A blow from a bat, therefore, seems like a likely choice of weapon – something with which he was already an expert. In his trophy case in his room are two bats – both awards for his performance with the team – one wooden and one aluminum. As part of his overthink, he figured he should not purchase a bat just for his evil deed – word might get out even if he later burned it – he had heard about circumstantial evidence. The ‘worry wart’ factor.

“On the assumption no one would assume a trophy bat sealed in a plastic display case would be used as a murder weapon, he used his own aluminum bat and, afterwards, washed it – with Clorox and returned it to its case. Clorox, though touted as the ideal agent for removing blood, really isn’t foolproof anymore with modern technology. Undoubtedly, the ME and her staff were quite pleased the bat had been imprinted with words about the award. The stamping process used to impress the letters into the bat’s surface, caused minute fractures in the metal which accepted and hid traces of blood and skin cells.

“There will be more about that bat in a moment, which provides a segue into the third killing – Roscoe.

“Early on, I asked myself why the killer would risk allowing the frog to get away here in the house once the box had been opened and, presumably, it had performed its service – the point of all this – killing Ken Miller. The most reasonable

explanation was that Mr. S felt sure he could recapture the frog – but how, such a tiny, unpredictable, being in such a huge area – minimally, the square block guarded by the tall, gray, wall.

“When Ken was talking with me about Socrates – his long-time canine companion and the first actual victim in all of this – a hunch began to form. To prove, it required possessing the frog to examine – or did it? Dr. Browner, the medical Examiner, assisted in finding the necessary clue.

“Ken, in his conversation about the care of his dog, sparked the idea. In my mind, I posited that a chip – a homing device – might have been implanted under the frog’s skin to assist in its immediate retrieval. That procedure would have had to have taken place within an hour or so before its arrival at the den in the box – remembering there was only a minimal time period during which the potency of the venom remained deadly. Assuming the insertion site for such a chip would not heal overnight, there was some chance that spots of blood might have been deposited on the floor of the cardboard box in which it was kept and delivered. Through the outstanding work of the ME and her team, they not only found blood, they were able to identify it as belonging to the species to which our little, yellow, frog belongs. Congratulations, Dr. Browner. The reality of a chip was still a long shot, of course. Having been captured and transported such a long distance might have damaged him in some more natural way and led to blood loss.

“That is background that sets the stage for Roscoe’s death. Mr. S remained nearby after the delivery, returning to the grounds and waiting. Using the appropriate electronic device, Mr. S. was able to make short work of searching the lawn and surrounding area, quickly homing in on the frog. We know he found it – again, more later. I’m sure that originally, Mr. S. figured he would only have to search the den. The unexpected change of venue to the deck required the extension of the plan.

“Roscoe had been working at the rear of the grounds and Mr. S. must have seen him during his search for the frog. Roscoe made no move toward him, so he might have been in the clear. Mr. S decided he could take no chances. After securing the frog, he returned and approached Roscoe from the front. Roscoe, probably leaning on his hoe, exhibited no

reluctance to meet him. I am quite sure he recognized him, in fact, just as Mr. S feared he might.

“When Mr. S got within striking distance, he removed the bat from behind his back and struck the first blow to the area of Roscoe’s kidney, stunning him. Why there instead of the head? My guess is, that the way they were positioned on the lawn, Mr. S – shorter to begin with – was positioned slightly down the slope from Roscoe. That is borne out by the direction in which Roscoe fell. A good, solid, connection was not assured from there. The lower blow may have been to force Roscoe to bend down in pain. It seems it gave Roscoe time to raise his hoe and land a blow of his own. I felt sure that would be verified when Mr. S could be examined. It was – a nasty gash to his forehead. The blood match with the hoe implicated the kidnapper as the perpetrator. Mr. S then administered the blow to Roscoe’s temple. Being the shorter of the two, the blow to his head landed at an upward angle – the way, a few hours later, it would also appear on the pet store owner. The blood that seeped onto the bat from the wound on the store owner, contained traces of foreign blood – it was found to be Roscoe’s – connecting the bat and the perpetrator with both deaths.

“The blow to his head had not killed Roscoe. Mr. S. had come prepared and injected the stunned Roscoe with rattlesnake venom. He lay there with an arm extended making that hand the easy and quick target.

“Why not just use the frog to kill Roscoe? Several things may have played parts; he didn’t want to risk losing it in the nearby stream – he’d never recover it from there. He suspected the poison’s potency on the frog’s skin would have been markedly reduced by having been handled with leather gloves during his recapture, he couldn’t be sure the poison would be lethal. It surely would have been, by the way. That handling would have encouraged additional poison to be secreted and distributed across his skin.

“Now, to address the final murder, that of Mr. Miller’s attorney. We may never know for sure, but let me surmise, here. That last time Attorney Farley came to the house was on Tuesday, early afternoon. He entered the den, as was his habit, through the deck door. My best guess is that since the time

correlates well with the time Mr. S. came back to collect the frog, he might have feared Farley had seen him and could identify him should an occasion for that arise. So, he later killed him as well. (More WW factor insecurity.)

“Farley, an older man, had laid down to rest on a couch in his office. He was found wearing a sleep mask – it was daytime. My hunch is that Mr. S approached him with the intention of using his bat. He had with him the back-up syringe of snake venom and – again adlibbing – decided a change of MO might be a good thing. He approached the sleeping Farley, forced the needle of the syringe into his brain through his ear leaving no obvious means for the murder. Naively, he believed it might go down as a heart attack.

“At this point, let us dispose of several lesser, though important pieces of evidence. First, the Big Brown Truck. Mr. S had recently stolen it from a town south of here and painted it to resemble the well-known, corporate, delivery truck to make it less conspicuous – one of a dozen such trucks making right turns all across the city – hard to identify a specific vehicle. He chose to hide it half a mile west of this house in a grove of trees. He probably drove it *to* that spot after the delivery and *from* there in preparation for the accident with Benson and the limo. That successful element of secrecy effectively kept it from being seen by witnesses. Betsy, however, takes her walks along that street so he might have thought she had seen it earlier during one of his practice runs – another possible reason for the planned attack on her. Somehow, you see, he knew who she was and things about her routine.

“The frog – all decked out with a shiny new chip – was found in a jar under the front seat of the truck and now resides safe, mellow, and harmless at the amphibian lab at the university. The chip – about the size of a hearing aid battery – was carefully tucked under the skin on its belly. The incision was secured with a single stitch of black thread. I must give Mr. S credit for carefully planning his approach to handling the frog safely.

“The unexpected fingerprints found on the security cameras here in this house matched those of the man who we will accuse of the varied crimes related to this case.

“The truck had also been used to remove Robbie after he had been taken from the house through the rear door. Although we have indisputable evidence about his use of the truck, thanks to Robbie’s escape, we can *also* confirm that in this way: It has a minor oil leak and as it approached the rear door by way of the rear entry road, it dripped oil onto the blacktop, recently washed clean by the rain. As it backed out, once Robbie had been secured in the back, the tires from the truck crossed that oil and provided sufficient tread imprint patterns to ascertain they were from the truck of interest, the one with finger prints most everywhere on it from a recent headlight replacement, to the door handles, steering wheel and padlock. Clearly, Mr. S. had not anticipated the truck would be located and tied to the crimes. I assume his plan was to immediately paint it some other color. Displaying no license plate, it surely *would* have been located even without Robbie’s escape. Those same fingerprints were found on the adhesive side of the tape used to hold the bolt in place on the door lock, on the plunger from the syringe used to kill Mr. Zimm, and on the pipe bomb used in the Benson incident.

“About that muffed bombing. I was puzzled about why Mr. S was clearly waiting on the street out front for Benson to return from taking Doris across town to friends – at the exact minute he returned. He would have had to have known about that trip – time to and from? I asked the forensics team to search the limo for one item. They found it – a tracking device inside the hood.

“A greater puzzle was *why* Benson was attacked. How could Mr. S believe he had been involved as a witness – to what, when, where? I drew a blank. I backtracked. Remember, Doris had been in the vehicle when it left the grounds. This is my surmise, although I have no proof to back it up.

“Throughout, we have been wondering why there had been no attacks on Doris or Robbie. Eventually, we saw the attack on Robbie – the ransom demand was a secondary benefit. His primary goal in the abduction was to kill Robbie, not the ransom or to punish Ken. Robbie *was* the second of his two primary targets. For a time, the ransom assumption side-tracked my investigation. Similarly, his goal in bombing the limo

was not to kill Benson, but to kill his passenger – Doris – Ken’s sister-in-law and Robbie’s mother. The motive is not clear. Playing psychoanalyst, I might deduce that he had deeply vengeful feelings toward his own mother. Weight may be given to that, presently. For whatever reason, it seems clear that by that point he was winging his attack on her. When he saw her leave in the limo, he assumed she would return in the limo.

“My guess is, that he had added the tracking device to the limo on general principles at some earlier time. It seemed reasonable that might be useful. As I said, I can’t be sure of that. At any rate, it seems that he believed she was in the returning limo, and it was she he thought he was attacking. Why would he have had the bomb? His notes reveal they – three more were found in his house – were back up plans, more of his over planning.

“There is evidence the brown delivery van was the one involved in that near disaster with the limo just outside the wall, here. The truck’s left front fender struck the left front fender of the limo. Paint smears left on Benson’s vehicle show the sequence of paint jobs on the truck – originally white and much later brown. Also, the paint left on the truck’s fender shows the unique layers of limo paint jobs – originally, traditional limo black over a maroon undercoat and, later, the unique topcoat, the blue it currently wears.

“The truck had been stolen from a rental establishment just south in Geneseo, a college town with a wide variety of vehicles originating from across the country. That paint job had covered orange markings over a base of white. The brown paint had been applied by Mr. S at the place he owns at the edge of Union Hill, a small town just east of Rochester. The tinted glass we have been wondering about, was, in fact, a transparent spray that performed like the special glass. The cans were found under the front seat. Much like a temporary tattoo, it could be stripped off at a later time – a good part of his plan to set that van above casual suspicion.

“His home base was discovered by the forensics team when they noticed and then traced fresh soil found on the floor of Robbie’s room. It had to have been left there by the person who abducted him, since nobody who had regularly been in that

room would have had any reason to contact it and bring it into the house. It turned out to be from Mr. S's land, the former site of a concrete company – the soil had all the expected distinctive elements associated with that. One insomniactic neighbor had witnessed Mr. S. spray painting the truck at one a.m. the week before – the night of the day it had been stolen.

“This is perhaps as good a point as any to address Robbie's abduction. Initially, it presented several puzzling aspects. If Ken was supposed to be dead by then, from whom did the abductor intend to receive the ransom? One of my original premises had been that it was an add-on to the original plan. Having knowledge his plan to kill Ken had failed, rather than make another attempt on Ken's life just then – he had a lifetime in which to try again – he'd go for the money. It supported the idea that the plan had entered an adlib phase. As much thought as he had put into the scheme, that must have been unnerving – seeing the plan unraveling.

“As to the implementation of the abduction: The short version is that sometime on that afternoon, Mr. S. taped the bolt on the rear door lock so he could later enter the house, which he did shortly after midnight. He rendered Robbie unconscious with ether, which he probably obtained from the setting where he works – more in just a bit.

“Like I said at the outset, there are no straight lines to follow in this case.

“Robbie had only a short-lived grasp on what was happening as the attack began – the unmistakable odor of ether and the cloth being forced over his mouth and nose. That gave him just enough time to act on one quick thought. He reached under his pillow, took a piece of wool he keeps there, and tucked it under his watch band for safe keeping. He had no particular plan but believed having it might work to his advantage. Perhaps he could tear it into small pieces and leave a trail. That was not to be the case but as we all know, sometimes even the best plans never need to come to fruition. It was later found in the truck, which would have placed Robbie there had that been needed.

“Through outstanding work of our forensics team, they discovered that on a tiny piece of plastic glove that was left

behind, was Robby's saliva. He had, at some initial point during the administration of the ether, tried to bite one of the person's hands and in so doing chewed off a tiny piece. After the fact, his saliva was matched to a torn glove in the suspect's pocket. Kudos to both forensics and to Robbie for that.

"Mr. S. then carried him down to the truck and left with him, backing out along the delivery blacktop to the street. I think it will be instructive for Robbie to speak to what happened after that."

Robbie moved up beside Masters and faced the gathering. He clasped his hands in front of him as his elbows rested on the arms of his chair.

"I remember nothing about the act of abduction itself, although Mr. Masters' characterization seems reasonable. Later, at 3:45 a.m., I found myself waking up in darkness. My light should have been on, which it wasn't. I was loosely wrapped in a blanket, which I didn't recall doing. That seemed odd. I knew it was mine because it smelled like the sanitizing freshener, I use. I lay on a hard surface, not my bed. I, also, smelled gasoline, which would have never been present in my room. I was somewhere else.

"Feeling around me and finding nothing but a wooden floor, I managed to sit up. I scooted backwards – the easiest way for me to move on my own. I came up against a wall. It was not just a regular, flat, room wall. It had horizontal slats – one by threes – set at about twelve-inch intervals up the wall. They were affixed some three inches out from the wall on other vertical strips of wood. Later exploration confirmed that was also the case on the walls to my left and right. The enclosure was six to eight feet wide. The floor had flat, metal strips – several inches wide and a foot apart running the long way – front to back. I understood; I was in the back of a covered truck – a panel truck or van or a box truck. The wooden strips were 'tie strips', to which ropes were secured to hold parcels in place. The vehicle was not moving. Later, I determined it was ten or twelve-feet front to back. I had a growing headache. I moved to where I was certain the rear, roll-up door would be. I found it. Although that confirmed my conclusion about being in a truck, I was unable to lift it. It had become my cell.

“I sat back to make sense of it all. My quick conclusion was that I had been abducted – kidnapped which suggested I was likely being held awaiting a response to a ransom request. That seemed serious, for sure, but might be buying me time.

“Off and on, there were faint flashes of light coming from the ceiling. I had seen delivery trucks with translucent plastic panels in the roof. Lights of some sort were flicking against them like headlights, perhaps, bobbing across them from some distance – since I heard no noises suggesting traffic. I needed two things to make my escape: some way to get to the ceiling – those roof panels – and, an implement of some kind with which to cut through or break through them.

“I had, earlier, realized I was still wearing the brace across my ankles that I wear at night. It is made of steel and leather and resembles well-padded, oversized handcuffs connected by a short chain. I reached down and removed it, draping it around my neck so I wouldn’t lose track of it in the dark. I am extremely strong in my arms, chest and abdomen. My plan was to use the cross strips on the wall and pull myself up to the top. Once there, I would need to hold myself in place with one arm while using the metal portion of the brace to attack the plastic panels with the other. I understood that if my abductor heard me, that escape route would soon be off the table – he would surely come to investigate.

“An additional idea necessarily came to mind. If I were positioned high on the wall at the rear of the truck, and the person opened that back door to get a look, I might be able to fall on him and subdue him. It became my two plans in one – work to break through the roof or, if necessary, subdue the person by falling on him. I wished for my belt from which I could have fashioned a sling to hold me onto the side, freeing both arms for the job at the roof. There was no belt. I wished for my pocketknife to use in cutting through the plastic. There was no pocketknife. A thought briefly flitted across my mind; perhaps, I could make my fortune selling a new line of boxers with pockets and belt loops.

“There was, however, the blanket. Quickly reconfiguring things, I saw how I could use it for the sling – tying it like a hammock to the top slat where I could either straddle it or sit in

it.

“I felt the brace to find some sharpest edge. I had designed the brace myself so there would be *no* sharp edge. Its purpose, after all, was to protect me. What I had was my original idea: scale the wall, fashion a sling to hold my weight, and break the plastic with whatever force I could muster with the metal from the brace. I worked with the brace trying to find the most productive way to hold it. In the end, I fit my hand through a cuff as though to use it like a set of brass knuckles. I would pound against the panels.

“I reached the ceiling without problem. I had developed useful skills climbing ropes and working out on the bars. I was very near the big back door, facing the rear in case plan two needed to be implemented.

“Having only one free hand, it took some time to thread two corners of the blanket into position behind and around the slat and tie them together. The headache continued but seemed no worse. I figured it was an aftereffect from the ether, which, by that point, I remembered.

“My eyes had adjusted to the darkness, but even 20/20 vision aimed into the dark was, at best, seeing nothing at all. Using the occasional sparks of light through the plastic panels as my guides, I chose the spot where I would begin working. I estimated that panel was perhaps fifteen inches wide and three times that long. It was nearest the wall in that rear corner. I adjusted the position of the sling. I figured if the panels were nailed or screwed in place, my hammering against them just might dislodge the hardware and I would be able to lift the panel high enough to remove or at least bend it. If not, I would have to depend on being able to break through it. I hoped they were fiberglass rather than some more substantial form of plastic.

“I worked for some time and believed I was making progress on both fronts – there was a tiny hole, and the panel gave along the rear edge as if it were becoming dislodged – freed. Not having been visited by anybody at that point, I figured I had been left there alone – wherever ‘there’ might be.

“Fifteen minutes later, needing rest, I worked my way back down to the floor. I allowed ten minutes of flat on my back rest and then made the climb again. My legs, of course, were

useless. I continued as before. From that point, progress was very slow and the process far more exhausting than I had figured. Several of my knuckles had begun to bleed. The angle was odd and awkward and few of the muscles I was using seemed to have either strength or endurance. After many more alternating work and rest periods, I was able to bend the rear of the loosened panel upward, which tore the fibers and presently made a fifteen inch, mostly square opening. Light burst in on me – initially hurtful but welcome.

“I wondered if I should rest before trying to exit or just press ahead. I decided to continue, believing I had more options and was therefore safer outside than inside. I released the blanket from the slat, gathered it up with one arm, and pushed it out onto the roof ahead of me. I hung the brace around my neck again. Then, I took hold of the exposed, far, edge of the opening finding it was a narrow metal beam. Gripping it tightly, I let go of the wall slat with my left hand and caught hold of the opposite edge of the opening. I felt much like an ape in the jungle.

“With virtually no difficulty, I pulled myself out onto the top of the truck. I lay flat and pressed the bent plastic panel back down so it would not give away what I had been up to.

“After a nighttime of working in the dark, I welcomed the light outside. My eyes adjusted quickly. Perhaps all those carrots mom has been forcing down me all these years actually *were* useful. I’m still not sure why she disallowed my chocolate covered carrot on a stick proposal.”

They shared smiles.

“The sun was virtually straight above me. It was 11:29. I was in a rural area – a compact barnyard to be specific – a small house, a small barn, a chicken coop with a few nonplussed hens scratching and pecking the ground. There were several, abandoned, round, concrete, silo-type structures. Not much else except for some wire-and-post fences in need of repair, which crisscrossed the area.

“There were several houses to the east and a small town beyond, but no other vehicle was in sight. There was no telling what might be inside the barn. I dragged myself corner to corner to corner to corner, taking in the view, so I could learn the lay

of the land – more specifically, the ground below me. Terrain and I were not great partners without Ali. My best escape plan seemed to be fastening one corner of the blanket around the metal beam at the site of the escape hole, draping it over the side, and sliding down to the ground. Should I retain the brace as a weapon or slip back into it? I kept it handy and draped it over my waistband so I wouldn't lose it.

“After tying one corner of the blanket in place, I turned myself face down ready to work my way into position to slide my legs over the side. A vehicle approached along what I had already ascertained was a dirt access road entering the area from a main road some fifty yards south. Time for a quick Plan B, or C or K or whatever it was by that time. I pulled in the blanket and flattened out to reduce my silhouette. It was an old pickup in need of most everything – a grill, passenger side door, right side headlight, paintjob. Its role was certainly function rather than vanity. It stopped. The headlight – on for no apparent reason – went off. The engine ran on after the key had been turned, eventually coughing and shuddering to a stop.

“The driver's side door opened and a man – short of stature though burly – stepped out. He walked directly toward the rear of the truck. My heart began thumping against my chest. He had a key ring in his hand and was sorting through it. I had an important decision to make; should I position myself at the rear edge of the roof and attempt to fall on him from there, or should I try to make my escape according to my plan down the blanket. The blanket was just too close to the rear corner of the truck. I would be both heard and seen. And once on the ground what could I do – throw dirt in his face?

“I pulled myself to the rear edge of the roof, my idea being just to get a quick peek and estimate my odds. Though short, the man significantly outweighed me. It was a relatively young man. Oddly, he was wearing hospital scrubs – loose-fitting garments – top and pants.

“My decision was made for me. As he worked to insert the key into a padlock, he glanced up and saw me. I didn't wait. With my hands curled over the rear edge of the roof, I powered myself forward over the back. My shoulder landed on his throat

inflicting some damage and pain. I won't say I hadn't aimed for it but will admit luck played a significant part my direct hit. His head had slammed into the ground.

"While he remained stunned, my weight was enough to hold him to the ground, face up. I quickly righted myself and was straddling him at his waist – virtually face to face. While he was still dazed and somewhat confused, clutching his throat, I reached under me and pulled his top up over his head, which effectively rendered his arms and vision useless for the moment. While he struggled with that, I pivoted facing his legs and slid his pants down to his ankles. I pulled myself down his legs and sat on them tying the legs of his pants around his ankles so he couldn't walk. I elbow crawled my way back to his shoulders. He already had struggled his arms out of his shirt, which remained over his head so he could not see. I rolled him onto his stomach and sat on his back. I reached for my brace, which by then had fallen to the ground. It was within reach. Pulling his arms behind him, I clamped his wrists into the handcuff-like portion of the brace. He squirmed and swore in at least three languages.

"I told him it would be a shame if I had to choke the life out of his miserable body, as I leaned forward and tightened my strong hands around his throat. He calmed immediately. I prodded him, urging him to squirm forward a few feet to a sapling. I opened one cuff, pulled his arms forward and positioned them so the trunk was between them and rearranged the cuffs on the far side of the tree. Unless he could uproot the twelve-foot-tall oak, he was secure. I had moved rapidly. That entire operation had not taken more than a minute. I moved some distance away to think about my options.

"During the skirmish, his cell phone had dropped from a pocket. I scooped it up, activated the GPS, and called 911. Then, I called Uncle Ken. I found I was shivering – boxers did not provide the necessary buffer against the early morning cool. My blanket was on top of the truck.

"Five minutes later, two police cars arrived, screaming and flashing and bouncing along the uneven dirt entry road. On their tail was an ambulance. The EMTs provided a blanket. I provided a quick explanation of my physical condition. They

brought me a bottle of water and a wheelchair. I hadn't realized until that moment the degree of security that chair provides me. I called mom to let her know I was alright, while the medics dutifully gave me a once over. The officer who had arrived first secured the bad guy behind the mesh in the rear seat of his car. Having determined my physical condition did not require medical services, the other helped me into the passenger side of the second car. He was a huge man. Twenty minutes later I was back home.

"Instead of offering any kind of protest, the man curled up into a ball on the seat and wept uncontrollably. My first reaction was to feel great sorrow for him. I guess I had expected him to look like the picture of Mr. S I had painted in my head. He didn't, in fact, he looked more like a frightened teen."

Robbie looked up at Masters signaling he was finished. Masters spoke.

"Thank you, Robbie. What you were able to achieve is amazing. Next time I have to navigate a dark alley, end to end, I certainly want you by my side."

Robbie smiled into his face and nodded understanding it meant a lot more than the words that had expressed it.

There was nervous laughter – spontaneous, strained, short lived. Several repositioned themselves in their seats. Masters continued.

"Mr. S. had no identification on him and in his growing, unresponsive state, was mostly unable to communicate. The night before, forensics had come through again and contacted me just before I turned in. The tiny, bluish, plastic-like scraps found on Robbie's pillow were from gloves only used locally in one small nursing home. Rather than latex, they were made from hemp. It took just one short email with a picture attached to obtain the identity of our Mr. S. He worked there as a nurse's aide.

"I will say more about that shortly but let me relate that the fancy brown paper in which the original box was wrapped came from the hospital. The Rotary Club – like it did once a month – had dropped off gifts for the residents, all wrapped in that paper. Mr. S used what he found in the trash. I've solved

cases on the basis of less that, but thankfully, that was not necessary.

“Now, back to the attempts on the lives of the residents, here. A lingering question has concerned me about how Mr. S. was so knowledgeable about the house and the ways of the people who live here. It was their steadfast adherence to routine that aided him. There had been no changes in longtime staff. That seemed to leave one of the residents as the best suspect, or one of the other two who regularly frequented the house – Josh or Geraldo.

“We have verified that Josh has been where he claims to be in Peru. Geraldo owes his proof of innocence in this case, to his wrongly assumed guilt in another one – for which he is on conditional release. In *that* case, he is required to wear a GPS ankle bracelet that tracks his whereabouts almost minute by minute. That bracelet shows him miles away from each of the crime scenes. Mr. Miller has found him a lawyer who assures us he will soon be acquitted of the shaky accusations against him.”

Masters continued.

“The blow gun and poison dart sent Mr. Worth’s way at the rear door was traced to a small manufacturer in Oregon from which it has been established Mr. S purchased it through their website. These days even poison darts have bar codes. What is this world coming to? It is frightening to think that if he had not turned back toward the door at the exact moment the dart had been sent his way, Worth would have undoubtedly been another victim.

“What was the source of the venom used to kill Mr. Zimm at the university, Farley, the attorney, and Roscoe, right here? Mr. S. had a secure room in the barn at his place of residence, which housed a half dozen Rattlesnakes. The venom found in the victims is a match to that specific variety of rattler. We can fairly assume Mr. S. milked them himself. There were instruction manuals relative to that process in his house. The necessary paraphernalia was found in a closet.

“Our Mr. S. suffers from diabetes for which he takes insulin injections. He used old syringes for his deadly injections into Zimm, Farley, and Roscoe. It is likely because of that

condition that he arrived at his plan to inject the venom in the first place. Remnants of his variety of insulin were found in the skin at all three injection sites.

“That is a lot of bits and pieces of information, representing a lot of detective work, but it still doesn’t even get us close to the motive or motives behind the attacks. My list of possible suspects ranged from the mailman, to the grocery delivery man, to the auto repair man, to the exterminator, to the pool maintenance crew, and others – perhaps even somebody hired by the former grounds keeper related to the death of his young relative in an incident at the stream years before.

“For the full story, we must return to an earlier time – back to when Robbie and his mother arrived here. A story is told of a summer day when a set of twins were playing in the creek at the back of the lot. They riled up a poisonous snake and one of them was struck and died. If that had not placed sufficient strain on the surviving twin, he had also been unmercifully accused of complicity and disobedience by his grandfather, Robbie, and especially Ken. At home, his father had beaten him unmercifully. The boy was traumatized. That boy grew up to be our Mr. S.

“The psychologist who examined him at the jail reconstructed it in this way.

“As he retold the tragic story to himself day after day, year after year it gradually took on an evolving tone that offered him some protection from his awful guilt – it had been Robbie’s screaming that had caused the snake to react – therefore it was Robbie’s fault his brother died, not his or his brother’s. He had, therefore not deserved the soul-numbing scolding from Ken or the repeated beatings from his father.

“In his mind’s attempt to deal with the overwhelming fear of the venom that killed his brother, he gradually reconfigured it into something of interest, of fascination – something to be involved with – something to control. Eventually, it became his method of choice in his plans of revenge. And why not? It was where all this began.

“That remaining twin boy is now a young man in his early twenties. He recently worked here in this house as a member of the painting crew. During that time, he put the finishing

touches on his decade-long plan of revenge against the two people he had truly come to believe were responsible for his brother's death. Part of that plan was to render the camera lenses inoperable – a simple task for a painter working from ladders and scaffolding. He used his freedom to approach each of the cameras to be disabled and coated the lenses with a minimally translucent varnish, which allowed only useless images to be transmitted to the electronic recording devices. He treated the peep hole in the front door in that same way. The method was clever – the cameras were rendered useless, yet, looking at them, nothing appeared to be out of the ordinary.

“For the parade of missteps Mr. S took, I will give him credit for having at least considered most of the necessary elements needed to perpetrate his plan.

“At the city jail, our Mr. S was housed alone in an isolated cell. When his lunch tray was delivered, the guard found him hanging from a rope of bed sheets. The guard rushed in and cut him down. He survived but remains in serious condition and is incapable of communicating. That is why he is not here. He could not answer questions or follow the simplest direction. The doctor says it was not a result of the suicide attempt that caused his problems. Quite clearly, his tortured mind has snapped. He has tucked himself safely away from the world – most likely safely away from himself. The doctor said it seemed likely, that since that day at the creek, he had allowed himself only one goal in life – planning his revenge against Mr. Miller and Robbie. He bided his time until maturity, skill, finances and opportunity could allow the plan to be launched. When that fell apart there on the ground beside the truck in the barnyard, there was suddenly no purpose, no person, left inside him.

“Let me fill in the asterisk I suggested earlier about Mr. S and his vendetta against Doris. Talking about that with the psychologist he added some support to my theory. He said children often blame those they think should be protecting them from abuse as much or more as the actual abuser. Assuming he was unable to understand why his mother just stood by and allowed his father to beat him, he fits that pathology, and it most likely explains, then, why Doris – a mother – became a secondary target.

“He has been moved to a fine, secure, mental health facility in the area. The disposition of his case is pending until it becomes clear how things are going to turn out for him. Although his prognosis is not good, *he* is safe and more or less physically comfortable, and *you* are all safe with my hope you can soon also return to lives wrapped in feelings of safety and comfort.

“Sometimes, reestablishing a safe environment for the innocents involved has to be more important than convicting or exacting societies’ pound of flesh from a perpetrator. Sometimes very bad things happen even though they do not happen at the hands of basically evil people. We must wonder how this boy – clearly traumatized in so many ways – was abandoned and forced to just deal with it by himself, letting it eat away all sense of reason and decency within him. Those things gone, hate rushed in and flourished. His purpose became singularly focused.

“I am not turning a blind eye to what he has done, but I hope it may refocus *our* loving attention on those who apparently have no reliable, personal source from which to obtain it – as Robbie once put it, no warm blanket to see them safely through to morning.”

“Robbie’s early remarks about the suspect leads me to think of this as *the Case of The Shadow in the Night*. I hope that with the help of experts, young Mister S. will come to discover ways of casting out his shadows and finding the light that each of us *must* find on our way to becoming all that we are positively capable of becoming.”

Robbie glanced over at Ken. It was just that sort of loving attention he was sharing and implementing through his program for teens at Hillcrest. His uncle caught Robbie’s eye. He winked. Somehow Ken knew that he knew – everything. A fascinating new chapter in their relationship was clearly on the horizon. Perhaps, even, a promising career path for an exceptional young man.

Alas, after all of that, one monumental, still unresolved, hurdle continued to plague Robbie; how in the heck do you talk to girls?

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