

The Case of the
Convoluted Kidnappings:
A Thomas Cole *Whodunit*

Book two in the series

By

Tom Gnagey

– Books need to be read in order – characters continue
Book One: Case of the Serendipitous Shift
Book Two: Case of the Convoluted Kidnappings

(C) 2020

Family of Man Press

See private detective
Tommy Cole's
Pedigree
In
Book one,
The Serendipitous Shift

CHAPTER ONE

Fender Bender

I was heading south on Jackson, a shortcut from Connie's place to mine. We'd just spent the evening together – dinner at Olivia's, movie at the Park Plaza, cuddle time at her place. I was feeling great, just settling into the realization I was living in a new apartment and driving a new blue Dodge thanks to the generosity of my previous client. (Book One) Life was looking good.

I'm Tommy Cole, private eye, the city, 1950.

* * *

As I passed the Harrington Hotel, primarily a plush, residential hotel for the rich and famous, a black limo powered its nose out onto the street. It applied its brakes too late and bumped my front, right fender. Had I also not been alert to the situation it might have been a tumble down the street and burst into flames event. So much for the *new* in new car.

I set my hazard lights and got out to do the insurance exchange and call the cops and make an accident report. The driver got out – a man in his early thirties stuffed into a gaudy uniform. No angry words were exchanged. I wrote the information on the back of one of my cards and handed it to him. He read it. Rather than reciprocating, he hurried back into his vehicle and drove off.

That bothered me but more than that, I was concerned about what I had seen in the back seat – a boy, stretched out, asleep, eight to ten years old. My question: Why would such a jolt not have awakened him? Why was the woman in the passenger seat not at all concerned about his welfare – she had not so much as glanced back to check on him?

I got a partial plate number - T _ _ _ 326 – instate, license renewal in October, two years down the road. Also, on the upper left windshield there was an oil change reminder from *Edward's Limo Service* up on 55th street. The car was outfitted with narrow, whitewalls, just coming into use, replacing the wide ones that had been around for a while. There was one bumper sticker – *LR Kemo Sabe-22317*.

I drew a quick diagram of the cars' positions, then pulled off the street into the hotel parking lot. I walked a half block to a phone booth and called precinct alerting them to the accident and requesting a squad car. It pulled in before I made it back to my vehicle. I knew one of the cops from back when I was on the force.

“Ken! Graveyard shift. You been a bad boy?”

“Subbing for Dave – his wife's having a baby. What you got here?”

I showed him the diagram. I had added the other information on the back of the sheet. The report took less than five minutes. I was in bed by mid-night.

The next morning found me walking to Jake's Diner. It was a nice morning – already near seventy degrees at eight o'clock.

“Hey, Tommy.”

“It was a duet – tenor and alto – Jake and Betty – owner and waitress.”

I walked the length of the room to my 'office' – back booth near the wall phone.

Betty brought coffee and a day-old donut – my usual 'on

the house' offering to begin my day.

"Let's add biscuits and gravy to that, this morning – two biscuits. Any calls?"

"Nope. Quiet start to the week the way it looks."

"Just as well. Had one drop in my lap last night – at least something I want to look into."

I had brought my newspaper from home and out of habit began going through the police reports in search of possible leads on new cases. One possible. I'd look up the number and make the call later on.

I removed my little spiral pad from my shirt pocket and began getting organized.

I was hoping for a call from Sarge on that partial plate. It should be easy to put a vehicle to it here in the city – late model Cadillac Limo with narrow whitewalls. I needed the owner.

I'd probably do as well visiting *Edward's Limo Service* and finding a chatty mechanic. It was within walking distance on a nice day.

I'd see if I could handle that bumper sticker right off. I thought I had it figured. A mother and her ten-year-old son were enjoying breakfast and conversation in the front booth. I hand printed a copy of the sticker, tore it from my spiral pad, and moved toward the front.

"If I may intrude for just a minute, folks. I have a question that I think only a ten-year-old expert can answer."

The boy smiled and sat up straighter. The mother seemed intrigued. "I'm Tommy Cole, by the way. The staff here will vouch for me."

I pointed, she turned, Jake offered a thumbs up. She offered no objection. I placed the little sheet on the table and slid it toward the boy, looking at the mother for permission.

She nodded and craned her neck for a look.

I removed my hand.

“Can you tell me what this means – I copied it from a bumper sticker?”

His face brightened when he realized he really was an expert.

“Yes, Sir. A black and white bumper sticker. Our car has one, too. The LR stands for Lone Ranger. It means somebody belonging to that car is part of the WPJ radio, *Kimo Sabe Club* – like a Jr. Tonto – a faithful helper. The number at the end is the kid’s membership number. I’d say a high number like that’s a fairly recent member. All *Kimo Sabes* have a card on file at the Lone Ranger Radio Club at WPJ radio station with their description, address and such in case any of us is ever in any kind of trouble – like lost or hurt or something.”

He proudly produced his card from his wallet. I studied it with interest doing my best to make it seem that both it and he were more important because of it. He beamed.

“You have been a huge help, son.”

I tossed a quarter on the table.

“Have a milk shake on me and treat your mother to a cup of coffee. Thanks.”

I nodded at his mother. She seemed more fascinated than disturbed by my intrusion. We exchanged a quick smile.

I had the general idea right. I’d been a Tom Mix straight shooter, myself – probably still had my membership card if I searched mom’s attic.

It gave some legitimacy to having a boy sleeping in the back seat. Still, him not waking up and the woman showing no concern for his welfare bothered me.

Here’s how it would go: A chat with somebody at Edward’s Limo, a mild con job on somebody at WPJ radio, and a call to Sarge about the license plate. Maybe by then, I’d have something

more than a thorn in my brain about it.

I finished my breakfast and took time for a second cup of coffee before beginning the walk north toward 55th street. That beautiful morning, in which I had been basking, soon took a dark and painful offramp.

Half a block into my walk, a dark blue, older model Ford drew up close beside me and slowed. The back window rolled down. Four shots rang out. Pain invaded my left shoulder. The car sped away. I saw enough to determine it was not the limo from the night before. I missed the plate.

This was not a good thing, especially for a lefty!

I slid my back down the wall and sat, leaning against the building, examining my arm. Not enough blood to suggest it had hit a major vessel. Throbbing pain. Only one hit from four shots. Odd! A shop keeper came out of his store and knelt beside me.

“Call the local precinct. Ask for Sargent Bale. Tell him Tommy’s been shot in his shoulder. Give the address. Get a towel or something I can use to put pressure on this hole that’s oozing my life away.”

An ambulance arrived seconds before Sarge and a second squad car soon after that.

I waved the medics off and motioned for Sarge to get me into his car. The other officer took statements. Sarge and I needed to talk while he drove me to the ER.

Before he pulled out onto the street, he called the license plate into headquarters. Several, quick-thinking bystanders had taken it down. They all agreed. How unusual. I also had him run the plate from the limo the night before. It hadn’t worked its way to him yet.

He lit the light on top and punched up the siren.

I filled him in on the previous night.

“Can’t be sure the two are connected, of course, Sarge.”

“Probably not true. That limo number from yesterday belongs to one owned by Frankie Giordano. I’ve encountered it before.”

“The Crime family, Giordano?”

“The same.”

“What did I ever do to him?”

“Apparently, you saw something you shouldn’t have.”

“You mean like his limo leaving the Harrington Hotel at 11:30 on Sunday night?”

“Maybe. Maybe something you didn’t see but could have.”

“The kid in the back seat! Sprawled out asleep. Didn’t even acknowledge the accident – the quick stop. Didn’t wake up. Any missing nine or ten-year-old boys, Sarge?”

“I’ll check it out, of course.”

“Where can I get a quick, recent, update on the family? Something that might reliably indicate a kid that age?”

“They’re Italian. There’ll be lots of kids. We have pounds of family background. First, we need to get you patched up.”

“There is something we both understand, here, Sarge. If it was Frankie’s men and if they had wanted to kill me, they *would* have killed me.”

“You’re right, of course. Question is, why not? And ‘why’ means – now that he has your attention – what purpose are you now or about to serve for Frankie – assuming it was Frankie.”

“One more probability to consider, Sarge. That motionless boy in the back seat. He had to be unconscious not to have roused at the moment of the accident. Chloroform, probably. That has the smell of kidnapping to me. You?”

“I follow what you’re saying. Absolutely no proof of that. If so, that bumper sticker probably doesn’t refer to the kid – he’d hardly be kidnapped in his own vehicle, right?”

“Hmm.”

They patched me up – flesh wound, through and through, missed the bones – tore up the meat. Like my mother said, ‘You mustn’t say it hurts like hell, because you’ve never been there to determine just how that would feel.’ By whatever name, it really hurt like eternal punishment.

I left with a good-sized bandage – overkill I thought – my left arm in a sling, and what was left of my shirt after the nurse had done battle with it.

“I better get you home. You’ve had quite a shock to your system.”

As my former partner, it was not the first time he had occasion to say such a thing to me. He went on.

“You are apparently safe. I’ll have the boys put together a summary of everything about Frankie’s family and have it dropped by.”

The radio crackled to life. The plate from the shooter’s car belonged to an older model Ford reported stolen just hours before. It had been recovered in the parking garage on 56th street. So much for that lead. Frankie or not – probably not going to be any way to confirm that. The windows were smoked so I had no information about its occupants. My sense was that the shots came from the rear seat on the passenger’s side. A handgun – not Frankie’s style – he usually wanted there to be no doubt about the result – tommy guns, his firearm of choice. It was dark inside, and I couldn’t make out a face through the open window.

“So, cheddar rather than Swiss.”

“What?” Sarge asked.

“The sort of comparison young Jerry would make – all in one piece rather than riddled with holes.”

Sarge smiled and raised his eyebrows. He dropped me off in front of my building.

Speaking of Jerry, a few minutes later, when I stepped off

the elevator on my floor – the shoulder had asked for a ride up – a familiar figure was sitting beside my door – my ten year old genius, friend who would have us in masks, matching tights, and capes if he could have his way. His back was against the hall wall, legs straight out across the floor. He was reading and jumped to his feet when he saw me.

“To what do I owe this honor, Jerry, and why aren’t you in school?”

“Second query first; teacher workday – getting ready for the end of the school year. Final exams next week, then I’ll be free so we can spend more time together. First query, which requires a bit of background information. Rich old Mr. Marlow, the guy whose posterior you saved in your last case, got me a police scanner for my help. I heard the chatter about Tommy Cole getting shot. I assume you can complete the story by yourself.

He moved close and examined my sling.

“Left shoulder, huh? They do nice work at the ER at City Hospital. I’m sure I can change that for you when the time comes. I can see we need to get you out of that shirt and into something full-cut and comfortable. Same for your slacks. They’re blood-soaked, too.

I handed him the key and he let us in.

“Is it your intention to stay home the rest of the day like I’m sure you’ve been admonished to do?”

“Have to see how I feel later. I think I’ll go to bed and see if I can sleep.”

I had to admit the kid was good help with the shirt, shoes, and slacks. Amazing how helpless one becomes with only one arm available to support his life. He selected a short-sleeved shirt from my closet. He cut a short slit in both directions from the left armpit to allow it to slip around the bulky bandage. He insisted on doing the buttoning – clearly the only way it would have gotten

done. I can unbutton with one hand but never mastered the buttoning side of that equation.

My phone rang. Jerry answered.

“Residence of Thomas Cole, Private Detective. This is his best friend and off time assistant, Jerry. Tommy is indisposed at the moment. May I . . .

I rescued the phone and continued.

“Tommy, here.”

It was Sarge.

“Why isn’t that kid in school?”

“Teacher workday, or so he says.”

“The main switchboard just received an odd tip – ‘search Thomas Cole’s car for evidence about the kidnapping’.”

“What kidnapping?” I asked.

“Exactly. Apparently, they didn’t say. Doesn’t yet exist as far as the cops are concerned. There’s been no report filed.”

“Interesting. It seems at this point nobody knows about the kidnapping except, perhaps the kidnapper/caller himself. At least if verifies my assumption – that it was a kidnapping. Shall we take bets on what we’ll find in my car?”

He guessed first.

“I’ll go with a piece of the boy’s clothing.”

“I’ll go a bit further out on a limb and say a vial of chloroform. Meet you in the parking garage just south of my apartment building. You say when.”

“Thirty minutes. Don’t begin the search until I arrive.”

“Why, Sarge, it sounds like you think I’d break protocol, or something.”

The phone hung up heavily at the other end.

I turned back to Jerry.

“I got detective stuff to do. I’ll need for you to be on your way.”

“I will call you later. I can stay the night if that would be of help. One folded comforter on the floor and I’m good to go.”

“As always, I appreciate your offer to help. I just need to see how things go. Call between eight and nine if you want.”

He left with some reluctance. I was five minutes from the garage where I kept my car. I was weak, so I guzzled a long swig of OJ from my refrigerator for quick energy. I returned to the living room and worked my way down in my recliner to catch a few minutes rest before I needed to leave. Perhaps not a good thing. I hoped I could get out of it by myself.

I had lost more blood than I realized – the left pant leg had been soaked. I knew how to handle that – wasn’t the first time – move and change directions very slowly so I didn’t faint, and drink lots of water. At the ER, they’d hooked me to an IV while they worked. I felt certain I would regain my strength by that time the following day. My body’s blood makers had learned how to work overtime. Jerry had set the slacks to soaking in cold water before he left and dropped the shirt into the trash.

Another thing had struck me from the anonymous call: nobody called me Thomas but my mother. My card did read Thomas. A connection, I figured between the accident, my card, and the call.

Minutes later, I struggled myself back into an upright position. It would have been humorous to watch, I was sure. Jerry would have suggested selling tickets and popcorn.

I met Sarge and directed him to my vehicle – the one, which, until the night before had been my shiny, *new*, vehicle. I kept forgetting I could afford to have it fixed – anyway, insurance should take care of most of it.

We had been right, of course. A boy’s shoe and a bottle of chloroform. It could go two ways: evidence I was the kidnapper or fodder for blackmail. With Sarge involved, that really only left the

first, I guessed. Bad guys never anticipated that good guys usually did the good thing, like call the cops right off.

If the bad guys in this case were amateurs, there would be no prints on either item. Professionals would leave the prints on the shoe to prove the connection with the boy. Probably wipe the vial clean.

It was clearly not professional – not top dollar, at least.

Interestingly, there was still no report to the police about the kidnapping. Either somebody didn't want their name to be associated with it, or ransom demands were in the process of being fulfilled. Something was definitely screwy.

I returned to my place ready to hit the sack. My shoulder had finally presented the long-term, throbbing, ache, I was sure would be setting in. It was beyond my usual two aspirin limit for pain. They'd given me a shot and a vial of pills at the ER – limit of one every two hours. I took two, figuring I'd certainly be asleep for two hours. I smiled. Sometimes my dubious grasp of mathematics worked to my benefit.

I needed to let Connie know I was okay. She might have heard by then. I left a message at the store – she wasn't allowed to take calls while on the floor. There'd be lots of TLC and a new shirt in it for me. That couldn't be all bad. I smiled.

I didn't awaken until three – Chief Justice Cat was hungry and had made himself comfortable on my chest. I was hungry, too, but clearly, I was far from comfortable. I needed one of Jake's rib eyes. I needed to stay safe. Dilemma.

Sarge had agreed that if the shooter had wanted me dead, I'd be dead, so I was probably safe on the streets. I had been warned to back off – from something – from the abduction, I had to figure. I fed my lord and master, went downstairs, and hailed a cab. Interesting, I was a left-hand hailer and momentarily wasn't sure how to proceed – humans are a strange sort. A few minutes

later, I was cozied into my rear booth. First piece of business – pop a pain killer. They had heard, of course.

Jake came out from behind the counter – a rare event seeing the full-length version of the short, rotund man in his white hat and long, once white, apron. He asked how I was – if there was anything he could do for me. The ‘nice’ factor was balanced out by the odd factor.

I gave him the sanitized version – less the kidnapping stuff. He seemed satisfied – expressed sincere concern. It was no secret there was a soft heart beneath his gruff exterior, but it was nice to have it verified sometimes.

“I’m going to order, Jake. Be nice to have a clean grill.”

He smiled, returned to his station behind the counter, and scraped it clean.

“Betty, my dear. Let’s have a rib eye from Jake’s *private* larder. Also, a nice big baked potato – cooked through – with butter, and let’s start with a dinner salad – fresh lettuce and tomato, please. Thousand Island – not drowned. Coffee, of course. Maybe a piece of pie later. Thanks.”

A familiar figure entered from the rear hall and came directly to me. He slipped in across the table. It was Mooch, my longtime informant – a well-tanned, oily skinned, long haired, slip of a man with oversized nose and stand-out ears. He knew things about people the people themselves didn’t even know. I figured whatever it was, it would cost me big. I usually had to go looking for *him*.

“Word’s out. Frankie G’s grandson – Randy – has been kidnapped. He lives with his mother at the Harrington Hotel. Late last night. Been no ransom demand yet. Frankie’s declared no cops. Look for his daughter – Randy’s ma – to contact you. No word about why.”

“Good information, Mooch. How much?”

“Not a thing. You’re a good man. You needed to know.”

Translation: if anything happened to you, a large part of my livelihood would evaporate – about as sentimental as the little man could get.

“Thanks. Keep your ear out. Will have good dollars for good updates. No idea why me, you say?”

“None. Thinkin’ it must a come from Frankie, himself.”

He left. Unfortunately, he didn’t take his stench with him. I reached up and pulled the long chord from the ceiling fan. Those gadgets had minds of their own, but presently, it had worked itself clear up to slow. The air would soon be back to the aromas of fried onions and sputtering hamburgers. Interesting how what’s *usual* comes to seem like what’s *right* – the way things *should* be, regardless of the truth of the matter.

The food was more than acceptable – Jake had taken pity on me and searched out a good-sized steak. I topped off the main course with a slice of refrigerator-cold apple pie sprinkled with the cinnamon-sugar usually reserved for morning toast. Apple was nowhere near my favorite pie, but for some reason seemed exactly right at that moment – pain affected me that way – go for the unusual – perhaps a distraction. I had forgotten how much I really *didn’t* dislike it. Cutting the steak with one bum arm had presented a challenge – the pie not so much.

The phone rang. Betty answered. It was Sarge. I got up and took the call.

“The Captain wants you to come in for questioning – routine but my advice is, don’t. It smells. Expect the street cops to look the other way if they spot you. Don’t know how long we can keep it up. I’ll call you after I get off – where?”

“I’ll be home, most likely. How serious is Captain?”

“Like I said – routine – no fanfare – he’s gotta do his duty. There may be some pressure from upstairs – mayor or DA. I’ll look

into it. Stay low.”

I returned to my booth. I would finish the pie and coffee and leave. Jake’s Diner was like my calling card. Somebody would be dispatched there to find me if I didn’t show up on my own. It was routine. If I weren’t there, the order would probably get lost.

Betty had removed my plates. I was blotting my lips with my napkin as the front door opened. Two ‘goon-looking’ men wearing sunglasses and dressed in black entered. They each had one hand inside their coat and wore the look of the mob from head to toe. When they spotted me, they motioned with some vigor for somebody to enter from the street. I had never had a face to face with Frankie. I suspected that was about to change.

CHAPTER TWO

Two Goons and a Pretty Lady

My initial indecision about whether I should remain seated or stand was decided for me as a beautiful woman about my age entered the room. At that hour, it was just she and I in there. One of the black suits pointed and she moved in my direction. She stopped in front of me.

“Cole?”

“Yes, ma’am. Tommy Cole. Please have a seat. It’s not the *Ritz* but it works.”

She offered a short-lived, natural smile and sat.

Of course, the *Ritz* was a Hotel and not a food joint, but that didn’t seem to matter to her. She appeared self-confident and in control of her situation – focused. I was just a bit rattled.

“Mr. Cole. I need your help.”

“May I ask why *my* help?”

“Let’s just say the information I have about you paints the picture of the perfect investigator – honest, compassionate, decent, nonjudgmental, dogged, and effective.”

I was pleased those traits had penetrated the crime family. I hoped they'd chisel them on my tombstone, should the occasion arise in the near future. I had the idea that unlike most of her relatives, she probably even understood what the words meant.

It did present an interesting momentary flash – the traits a bad guy that I had in my sights would fear; the traits a bad guy in need of such help would seek out. Touché or something, Frankie.

She continued.

“Confidential, of course.”

“Up to the point somebody makes me walk the plank over it, yes.”

“My name is Sally Rakes. My father is Frankie Giordano, but you probably know that. I mention it to put an honest spin on me right from the start. As far as I know, it's not relevant to my problem. My son, Randy, nine, has been kidnapped. There has been no demand for ransom, so I'm at a loss about why. Money is all I have that most people would see as valuable.

I had a falling out with my father over family matters at eighteen. I married to spite him. Randy is the result – the only good thing about that year – maybe about my life. His Father, Karl Rakes, twice my age, can buy and sell my father – Dad has always hated that – also hated that I did not marry Italian – the reason why I didn't, of course.”

“How do you know the boy has been kidnapped. Nine-year-olds tend to take themselves on adventures that don't end well.”

“Word's on the street – the reliable street. I need you to find him and return him to me safely. Money is no object. I have a five-thousand-dollar retainer in my purse if you agree to help me.”

I continued just as if five thousand dollars meant nothing to me. My heart rate increased. My mouth went dry. I hoped she couldn't tell. Such a large sum did suggest how desperate she was.

“Have you spoken with your father about the situation?”

“Briefly. His employees brought me here. Is that important?”

I patted my shoulder.

“Word on the street – the reliable street – has it that I owe one slug in the shoulder to Frankie Giordano. I have my suspicions why. It is also tied to your son’s abduction. Does that change your proposition?”

“Certainly not. I have no information about your situation with him. Sorry, of course. I wouldn’t count on it having been Frankie. I suppose that puts the ball in your court, as Karl used to say, and say, and say!”

She removed an envelope from her purse – it plumped as she slid it across the table in my direction.

“Questions first.”

I slid my open spiral pad back across the table to her. I added a pen.

“How do I contact you free of a bug? What is your address? What suspicions do you have – people, organizations, anything? Are you still married to Randy’s father? Name the boy’s best friends and anything you can about how to contact their families. If you hear *anything*, you will contact me?”

She nodded and spoke as she wrote. I, for one, never did that effectively.

“I divorced his father soon after Randy was born. I suppose if I suspect anybody, it would be Karl. Not a nice man. Owns several companies – have no idea what they do. He always manages to get his way. He’s more a, ‘take them to court’ sort than a ‘mow them down’ sort. Don’t know why he isn’t considered a crime family – maybe he is. I suppose I’ve led a sheltered life. From time to time since Randy was born, Karl has demanded that he be given custody and that Randy live with him. My father did

step in and put a stop to those in-person demands years ago. I'll give Frankie credit for that. He, himself, has issues about not getting to spend enough time with his grandson. I just couldn't abide him teething on a snub nose, 44.

"Describe the man – Karl."

"Large – six/five, over two hundred and fifty pounds. Walks with a limp from a war injury. Always wears a flower in his lapel.

"Randy's three best friends live in the hotel. Like most of the kids from families that live there, they are homeschooled for safety reasons – tutors. There is a play area in the basement where they get together almost every day."

She slid the pad back to me.

"I will leave now. I will expect updates as you have them. If you don't return the envelope, right *now*, I will assume I have you in my employ. As dear old daddy says, 'once in, never out'."

She stood and paused for only a moment.

"Thank you, Mr. Cole."

I stood.

She offered her hand, turned, and left – me standing there with a bundle that just might get me another bullet – better placed.

As I sat back down, Jake leaned over the counter and became all confidential-like.

"A new dame? She's gorgeous. Done with Connie? Can we expect her here often? What's the deal with the goons? She must be a somebody. Movie star?"

That was the longest monologue I'd ever been privileged to hear spill from Jake's mouth at one time. Something had prompted his interest. He might have been playing dumb to see if I really knew who I was dealing with. If that were the case, thanks for the concern, Jake.

I called precinct and left a message for Sarge to return my call PDQ. I motioned for more coffee and returned to my seat.

Betty dropped off my tab – a buck twenty with tip. Things were getting expensive. I pointed to an item at the bottom – OJ.

“What’s this, Betty dear? I didn’t have orange juice.”

“OJ – shorthand for, ‘On Jake’. Not many of those in existence – hold onto it – may be worth hundreds in the future.”

She giggled at her little funny.

I held up the ticket toward Jake and offered a thumbs up. He beamed like a kid getting a gold star on his reading page.

Suddenly there was a bright new light on things: Frankie would not have me shot if his daughter were about to hire me. I remained intrigued that he might have had some part in that. Hmm?

The phone rang. I took it myself. It was Sarge. I related to him what had just transpired with the missing boy’s mother.

“At least, I assume it was his mother. Can you believe that – I didn’t ask for ID.”

“Thirtyish, five/five, long black hair, brown eyes, probably black or brown dress with colorful scarf around her neck, measurements that live in all teen-boy’s dreams.”

“That was the lady, alright. You’ve been holding back on me – have an encounter with her?”

“Lost poodle wearing a ten thousand-dollar necklace, a year or so back. Pleasant. Cooperative. Appreciative. The lady was nice as well.”

He chuckled over his little joke and went on to confirm his impression.

“Hard to believe she’s half Frankie.”

“What do you know about the Rakes guy – Karl?”

“He owns several dubious businesses – thought to be fronts for smuggling and such. Ostensibly, import/export activities. The DA follows him closely. Such concerns seldom trickle down to the level of a sergeant.”

“Did you just say, *Ostensibly* – my Sarge?”

“I know words sometimes. Back to considering your neck in all this. Be very careful. Seems you may be caught between the two most – wait for it – *despicably horrendous* men in the city.

I smiled. He couldn't see, of course. He went on.

“When I began writing a story about my experiences as a cop, my wife bought me a thesaurus – I have to pull out a few biggies every once in a while, just to prove how much I appreciate it. Keep me up to snuff on everything. Nothing new here, by the way.”

“And just when on the brink of eloquence, he reverts to, ‘up to snuff’.”

We hung up chuckling. Betty brought coffee. I didn't know why I kept drinking it all day. Only the first cup in the morning really tasted good and I suspected *that* had more to do with my nose than my taste buds.

I sat and began looking over the several sheets Sally had written for me: three friends with parent's names, addresses and phone numbers – from memory – *that* must tell me something. There was a phone number labeled, ‘mine’ – a private line I assumed. Interestingly, in addition to Rakes, there was another on her suspect list – Max Boyle. Behind his name she had written, ‘ex companion’. That would deserve further investigation. I wondered if ‘ex’ implied something qualitatively different from what ‘former’ would have.

Betty returned with two aspirin and water.

“You been fightin’ that left shoulder the past hour – take these.”

I accepted and downed them under her eagle eye even though I knew they'd not touch the pain. She was a sweet person and I'd never discourage that. As I may have said earlier, the folks at Jake's Diner did what they could to take very good care of me.

Their marginally realistic take on me was that of a carefree, reckless maverick. More true than not, I supposed. I never wanted to put them in danger. For just those few seconds before Sally's entrance, I was afraid my presence there might well have done that.

I made a call.

"Butch. Tommy, here. Need a secure hideaway for a week or so. Cooking area, furnished. Three outfits – coats/slacks/hat – light jacket – tan. Make it a half dozen shirts. A very well stocked kitchenette. Phone, but listed under some alias. Away from human traffic. Better add a well stuffed sleeping bag. Got something?"

Butch was a man of many talents when it came to going incognito. Trustworthy. Prices varied with how desperate he thought the client was. I figured to pay top dollar.

"Got just the thing – about a block from Jake's. Stairs between buildings. Second floor. Windows on four sides. Larger than you need, but I'll arrange the price. What you say?"

"Sounds perfect. Not above a bowling alley, right?"

"You still holding that against me? Guarantee it will be as quiet as the morgue."

I could have dwelled on *that* but chose not to.

"Need it yesterday."

"Where are you?"

"Jake's."

"Ten minutes. Meet me in the space between 1456 and 1458 Paxton. Come through to the stairs at the rear near the alley. I assume you'll have the money."

"I will. In ten, then."

I approached Jake, subdued tones.

"You still use 44 caliber ammo?"

"I do."

"Can you sell me a box?"

He disappeared into the back room, reappearing in a few moments with a carry-out sack. I slipped him a ten.

“You take care now,” he said.

I sensed the man was becoming protective in his old age.

I paid my tab at the register up front and left walking a round-about path that eventually got me to the long, narrow, dark space between a cigar store and swimming pool servicing agency. I looked around before entering, then moved back to the stairs – three feet wide across a five-foot opening. Butch was sitting on the top step – number sixteen. I climbed to meet him and offered two, one hundred-dollar bills. He hesitated and scratched his head. I add another. He opened the door and handed me two keys. There was to be no look around for approval. He spoke as I entered ahead of him.

“There will be three deliveries within the next hour. Prepaid so don’t let them con you out a no money – food, clothes, linens and that sleeping bag. A ten-dollar tip might help seal their lips. I’ve implied there might be more work – to keep them honest and hungry.”

Butch knew the ropes. He’d been plying his trade for twenty years. He would see that his assistants would not have loose lips, tip or not. He left.

I lifted the phone – there was a dial tone. I copied the number into my pad. A double bed with a thick mattress that didn’t sag, a table and three chairs, a nice recliner, a sofa, a dresser and an empty closet. The place was clean. Windows not so much. They wore matching drapes – thick, tan – opened and shut by hand. Two, large, braided rugs on a ‘kitchen tiled’ floor – also tan – variegated. The bathroom was small but would work just fine. Butch had been right – way too much space. The medicine chest was well stocked, including gauze, iodine, aspirin, a razor, blades and soap. Must have been Butch’s standard contribution.

It was one of two reasons I kept using Butch: absolute secrecy and fully competent.

I pulled the end table close to the recliner and took a seat. I called young Jerry.

“Hey, buddy. Got an assignment for you. You up for a little detective helping?”

“Always for you, you know that. Do I need to take notes?”

“I doubt if that will be necessary. I have to be away from my apartment for a while. One: I need you to *stop* delivering my papers – don’t want it to appear I’m not staying there. Two: Collect my mail from my box downstairs and take it with you. When we talk by phone you can help me go through it. Three: feed His Majesty, the Cat – your usual paper delivery time would be good rather than a special trip that might draw attention. If he’s not there, fill his bowl anyway – you know what he likes. If you need to buy food for him, there are some bills in my sock drawer. Always use the front entry – don’t want the alley people to get suspicious, seeing you up and down the fire escape. Rather nobody knew about all this. So, keep it all looking normal.”

“See. I told you it was a good idea to give me a key.”

I moved on without comment. As I recalled the word ‘badgering’ should have been apart of that sentence.

“What I’m doing is strictly precautionary – I am not in any immediate danger. Feel free to use some of the money for occasional shakes at your aunt’s place. I will leave it up to your supercharged brain to concoct a reasonable story for your aunt and mother about my absence. Keep it simple – s i m p l e – simple.

“*Now hear this*: DO NOT ADLIB on this plan, PLEASE!”

“Never fear, Jerry’s here. Stalwart and dependable. You’ll call?”

“I will. Not on a regular schedule but probably after seven

in the evenings when I do. You do not have my current number. It's better that way. We good on all this?"

"Absolutely! I am some concerned about you."

"Fair trade."

"Why do you say that?"

"I am *always* concerned about you. Behave and be safe."

I hung up.

The food arrived first – a large box carried by a teenager that looked a lot like Butch. Half an hour later the clothing arrived – well chosen, not wrinkled. Included socks and a pair of my kind of shoes – an added extra from Butch. He was good. That delivery man was in his early twenties – he looked a lot like Butch. Finally, the bedroom things and the sleeping bag. That man not only looked like Butch, it was Butch. I suspected nepotism was afoot.

"Everything satisfactory, Mr. Tommy?"

"Perfect. Thanks for remembering the shoes."

"Inside left shoe, be careful."

He left without explanation.

Inside the shoe I found a box of 44 ammo. He had a way of knowing things. With my new arsenal, I was prepared to fend off the James Gang – assisted by the Daltons – and Billy the Kid.

I made the rounds of the windows to check the locks and get an idea about the views I had – pretty much 360. During that stroll, I discovered unique things about the door – it opened in – two inches thick, metal jacketed, solid core, heaviest duty hinges, knobs and locks, and two sets of cross-the-door, 2 X 4, timbers that slid down into iron brackets on each side – one was eighteen inches down from the top and one 18 inches up from the bottom. It had a peep hole. I was living in a fortress.

I relaxed and looked over the food supply. The young man had delivered things to the shelves and refrigerator. Humorously, he brought a dozen cans of albacore tuna and a half gallon of

heavy, sweet, cream. I already missed Cat.

It was going on five p.m. I was worn out. I heated a can of hash in a skillet – added an egg in the center – not bad, actually – way too salty – and went to bed, figuring I might be awakened by Sarge. No, I wouldn't. I hadn't given him my new number. I got up and called precinct.

“Message for Sargent Bale. Deliver ASAP. From Tommy. 468-223-1726 code AB – that's A B.”

It was a number code we had used years earlier that systematically shifted numbers. I didn't want that phone number to fall into the wrong hands. Phone numbers led to street addresses and street addresses could lead to unwanted visitors.

I would try that bed thing a second time. I'd deal with Connie and her access to the number later. Surprisingly, I slept soundly – uninterrupted. Sarge understood and observed my need for sleep.

I awoke with a sore neck and a raw throat. Wasn't used to sleeping on my back – I was a left side guy. That night I'd see if I could arrange something on my right side. Still lots of pain and stiffness – at least first thing in the morning.

I realized there would be only the most careful shower, aimed at keeping the bandage dry. I removed the sling and let my arm dangle before entering. It hurt but at the same time offered some relief – the change of position. I managed. Good for me.

Toweling off presented more problems than showering. I figured I had a low-grade fever so had used water on the coolish side. No need for a thermometer – Betty would do the motherly forehead thing and offer her pronouncement.

I managed myself into my clothes – more a circus act than a proper dressing. I skipped the coffee making and decided to take the envelope from Sally with me. I slipped it into my inside jacket pocket – dark brown with tan trim – figuring it was safer on my

person than unprotected in my room; that door was only super-secure when I was inside. I made my way to Jake's Diner via the alley. I felt quite spiffy in my new duds and brown hat. It was not quite six as I entered from the alley door.

They opened at five. My arrival was considerably earlier than usual because lolling any longer in bed would have just been uncomfortable. Perhaps, I would try the recliner that night. Didn't know why that hadn't come to me the night before.

It was too early for messages. I slid into my 'office'. Betty brought coffee and put her hand to my forehead.

"About a degree. That coffee won't help none."

"As I understand it, the purpose of a temperature is to burn off unwanted germs. Let's think of it as a *cleansing* instead of a *fever*."

She smiled and pushed air in my direction. I was quite sure she believed I was pulling her leg. Early morning coffee was an improvement over 'later in the day' coffee.

"How about a couple of Danishes – one cheese and one raspberry if you have them?"

While she left to see what she could find, Jake leaned across the counter, holding his shoulder.

"Is the pain bad?"

"I figure the mere fact I'm still here to feel the pain is a good thing."

He smiled and nodded. Wished he hadn't asked. That seemed to ramp it up a few notches.

"Nothin' from the grill, Tommy? Got some nice little breakfast steaks."

"Not now. Maybe later."

"Oh, got a envelope for you. Delivery boy waiting at the door when I got here this morning – so high, sandy hair that's never seen a comb. He said it was important this got to you first

thing.”

I opened it – a single sheet – from Jerry of course. The mere fact of it concerned me. It was printed in his very best, atrocious, hand.

‘Tommy: two men watching your apartment – one from the alley and one in a parked car across the street. Figured you needed to know. Since I’m the paper boy, I’m sure they will see my presence as legitimate – above suspicion – kosher, if you’re so inclined. I will continue caring for things. Chief Justice Cat is doing fine. – J.’

Apparently, not returning to my apartment had been a good move. On the other hand, I’m sure my *not* showing up back there will be suspicious in itself. Better suspicious, I guess, than another casualty of big city crime. I had to wonder if they were prepared to follow me, prevent me from leaving, or harm me. Hmm?

I had my escape route planned from Jake’s in case some unsavory looking character entered – back door, up the iron ladder to the roof, west across the roof to *Benny’s Men’s Ware*, down that fire escape between buildings and to safety out on the open street in front. I had even practiced in my head – the one-handed ladder climbing bit. I had availed myself of that route before.

My order arrived. I cut a slice off the Raspberry Danish and fed it to Betty – she loved them and playfully went along with my foolishness.

I needed to make a list – not an easy undertaking I found for a lefty with only one hand – his right. I held the opened spiral pad in place with the weight from my game arm – hand – and made it work.

>Find a way to ask Randy’s friends if they had any information that might be useful.

>Get Mooch to listen for things that might connect me to the Rakes guy.

>Have him eyeball the men watching my apartment to see what he knew about their affiliation. In lieu of carrying a can of Lysol, I'd meet him outback in the fresh air.

>Contact *Edward's Limo Service* and continue that line of inquiry.

>Find out about Sally's previous companion – Max Boyle.

I should have worn the mustache from my previous case. I couldn't afford to be recognized. My hair had pretty well shed the temporary dye job from back then and was back to Tommy Cole Blond.

Better than counting on a disguise, I'd be more appropriately served making sure I just wasn't seen. In service of that, the new room had been a good move.

Betty brought me a newspaper. I forked over a nickel for that and added a half dollar for the rest. It would allow something for her.

Still no article about a kidnapping. It was being well guarded. I hoped that by the end of the day, Rakes and/or Frankie would understand I wasn't going to reveal what I'd seen. That puzzled me. If Rakes – Sally's prime suspect – pulled off the abduction, how did it take place in one of Frankie's vehicles? Also, if it had been Frankie, surely, he would not have used one of his own limos. Perplexing – as my young friend might have dubbed it.

I looked up Max Boyle in the phone book and copied down his address and phone number. He turned out to be Maxwell Boyle, MD. – pediatrician. Hmmm. Chloroform?

I could see this case would require movement all over the city – Karl in the northwest, Frankie in the south – the hotel dead center. I called Butch, again.

"I need a car – not new – nondescript – small rather than large – legitimate tag. Short-term rental, not purchase."

"Got just what ya need – an import from a few years back

– called a Volkswagen Beetle or bug – black – engine in rear – production is only beginning here in America. It will have the tank filled. Won't out-race a PD vehicle but is quite maneuverable – interior smells like pine trees. Pretty good, leather-like upholstery. Hasn't transported a body in six months. Will come with a lease agreement in the glove compartment, so you can pass the license and registration request if you're pulled over."

Like I said, Butch was the best at what he did. I agreed. We'd meet in the alley behind Jake's in a half hour.

"Bring a hundred for the first week."

Seemed quite reasonable – maybe a special price for bundling car and room.

I had basically the whole day still in front of me. My first stop would be something within snooping distance of Boyle. S'pose I could pass for a ten-year-old with a fever? There would need to be some other approach. Early onset hormones, perhaps? I chuckled!

I missed Connie, already!

/

CHAPTER THREE

Enter the Bug

The vehicle was perfect in looks and performance. I headed out to get my first impression of the good doctor.

Rather than having an office in one of the many medical buildings downtown, Boyle's was a small, free standing building on the far north side – the monied part of the city. It sat at the edge of a residential area – his office three lots away from his house. I parked a block away and walked an alley that ran behind his home and office. I stopped at the house first.

There were two back doors – one typical in structure and appearance, and one – double-wide – more like it led to Fort Knox. There were multiple locks and bars. Perhaps a well-protected drug repository. Perhaps something else. Maybe a stairway leading to a basement where something nefarious might be going on. I know, my imagination was busy setting up way out possibilities while offering no proof. Shame on you, imagination. I was, however, looking for an abducted, nine-year-old – so, good going, imagination! Can't solve a problem until you ask the proper question – I learned that from my favorite fictional detective,

Raymond Masters. Of the possible players in the game so far, this doctor seemed the least likely to be the bad guy.

I moved on down the alley to the office, which was still fifteen minutes from opening.

I made my way around to the front where there were two cars – head-in parking at the curb. One, a small nondescript model was at the far end – Nurse or office manager I imagined – there ahead of the doctor. Dead center was a Chrysler occupied by a mother and pre-teen daughter waiting in their car. Perhaps I could transform that into a source of information.

As I crossed in front of the car, I dropped my pad, making it obvious it had happened yet clear that I was unaware of it. The girl exited the car and called to me.

“Mister, you dropped something.”

In my memory, eleven-year-old girls – pigtails and thick, horn-rimmed glasses or not – were obnoxiously helpful.

“She picked it up and I turned and met her halfway.”

“Thank you so much. That little pad represents my brains – would be lost without it.”

She looked at my sling.

“I do not believe that Dr. Boyle takes patients over fifteen, Sir.”

“Ah. Yes. I’m not here to see Dr. Boyle as a patient. I’m from the automotive center that cares for his car. Came to pick it up so it can be serviced. It’s a surprise from the lady in his life, so please don’t let on you know – birthday or something, I think.”

“How romantic. I won’t tell. How’d you get here? Don’t see a car.”

“I was dropped off in the alley. Back door locked so I figured I’d try the front.”

“Ten minutes yet. He drives some kind of a sports car. You married?”

“No.”

I hoped that handled it. She was standing far too close. I would not have been surprised if she was working up to a proposal. I stepped away a few feet and changed the subject.

“Does doc have kids?”

“He’s not married, if that’s what you are asking. Don’t know whether he has kids or not.”

Naivety or knowledgeable beyond her years? I did not know. I plunged on.

“Has he been your doctor long?”

“From the moment mom’s gynecologist put me in his hands as a newborn, I imagine.”

Scratch naivety.

“He has a Pomeranian named Joker and Siamese named Princess. I *like* dog people. I *love* cat people. You got a pet?”

It felt like I had just been handed my last cigarette before the blindfold was tied in place.

“I do. Edmond Randolph, a cat – been with me for eight or so years. Sleeps on the foot of my bed. We’re pretty good buddies.”

I couldn’t believe I was working that hard for her approval. Her expression suggested I had passed her test.

A woman in white appeared inside the front door and unlocked it, waving to us. The girl ran on ahead. Her mother got out of the car and approached me.

“Thanks for holding Jasmin’s attention for a while. I love her dearly, but when confined with her, she drives me crazy. She sees her mission in life as needing to fill every moment with chatter.”

“The pleasure was mine. Have a good day.”

They moved inside. I ambled the sidewalk back toward the Bug. What had I learned? Not much it seemed. Well, there was that double-wide, fortified door on the back side of his house.

Unless he was inclined to kidnap children and hold them for one purpose or another, I imagined that was a go nowhere lead for me. He pulled in as I crossed into the next block.

With his home being so close, I was surprised he had driven. Maybe returning from early morning house calls. I passed the front of the house as I continued on to my car. The grounds were being patrolled by two men, light jackets, slacks, open collars, shiny leather shoes, bulges under their left arms. Their presence was puzzling – armed staff roaming the lawn making it appear more like a bad guy’s place than a doctor’s.

There was a small speedboat on a trailer parked on the triple wide driveway. Well-groomed grass – a Tiger Lawn Service sign near the foundation. Those are usually stuck in the lawn closer to the sidewalk to serve as advertising. Why not? Probably overkill. I tended to start that way and then trim things back to the essentials once I determined what those ‘essentials’ needed to be.

I kept moving, doing what I could to make them think I hadn’t seen them. They seemed pleased with that. I unlocked the Bug and entered, sitting there for a moment. First Impression: Boyle – bright, wealthy, pet lover, outdoor slash lake enthusiast who had bought into the urban fantasy of allowing his self-worth to be dependent upon an oil-free driveway and an immaculate yard. *And*, a man with reason to need protection. I needed to see if Sarge knew anything about the good doctor.

I spent a moment getting my bearings and moved on to the hotel where Sally Rakes lived with her son. I had no idea how much fun it was to drive a Bug in city traffic – zoom, swish, scoot, oops. Almost missed the turn-in. The Harrington Hotel was an old standard in the City – had hosted political gatherings and lavish weddings since the 1930s.

When I was a teenager, a three-story warehouse had been

demolished to make way for the parking area. That suggested several things: there was money behind the hotel and there was lots of money being spent there to refill the coffers. I had no information to support my wonder about mob involvement but would not dismiss it until I did my research. A hotel seemed like a natural operation for money laundering – a few false rentals a night could clean up a bunch of money in a year's time.

I entered the lobby and soon learned the first three floors were nightly rentals. The upper floors were residential suites. Two elevators for the first three floors. Four for the upper floors – those rides required a special key held only by residents. There was an entry board – press a room number button, state your business, and either get buzzed inside or be told to take a walk.

I was less interested in getting buzzed in than I was just getting a look at the setup. Hotels were required to have fireproof stairwells in addition to elevators. Elevators did not operate during fires – a safety precaution. I headed for a swinging door to my far right – hugging the outside wall beyond the wide desk area. It led to a long hall – less elaborate – with a second swinging door at the far end.

There it was – still another door – substantial looking – labeled, 'Emergency Stairs'. I figured anything labeled 'emergency' should not be locked. I was wrong. I wasn't interested in using them at that moment, anyway. There were three doors leading to the outside – all equipped with exit bars – push and the locked door opened – the escape route for residents during emergencies. I assumed it was how the boy had been removed from the hotel. I also assumed there would be virtually no regular traffic on those stairs – who'd climb from four to ten flights of stairs when elevators were readily available in the lobby? It was the perfect physical setup for an abduction.

How the abductor gained entrance to Sally's apartment to

get the boy, I had no idea – a key left over from family or a past lover? Doubtful. A ten to a desk clerk seemed more likely. Sally was clearly a smart lady – well, *woman*. I didn't know her well enough to determine if she qualified as a lady. I'd bet she did, however.

I tried the door at the base of the stairs again – it would not budge. I suspected the same push-bar arrangement on the inside as on the rear doors. A secure arrangement. So, the abductor had to have gone *up* one of the elevators and come *down* the stairs if he had exited through that door. How would he have reached the seventh floor where Sally and Randy lived unless he or she had an elevator key?

I returned to the lobby and rode to the third floor – as high as one could go without a key. I spotted the exit sign at the far end of the hall, pushed the exit bar and opened the door into the stairwell. Bingo. It continued to the upper stairs without any sort of security barrier. Seemed like a bad arrangement. Continuing up that stairwell, I could reach the doors to the upper floors.

I entered and climbed to the fifth floor. Ah ha! Perhaps not such a bad arrangement after all. The doors to each floor were locked – another use of the push bar from inside I assumed.

Each door had an eight-inch window – thick glass with imbedded wire mesh. Seemed secure. I climbed on up to the seventh-floor door – Sally's floor. Another, *ah ha*. The glass in that door had no mesh. I figured it was a recent, temporary, replacement – fresh putty marks on the pane.

A possible scenario began to take shape. The abductor followed the path I had just taken to the 7th floor stairwell door, where I was standing. With a circular glass cutter, he cut the glass, tapped it to separate it and using some sort of thin saw blade, inserted it through the crack to cut the wire mesh, and removed it. Through that opening, he fed a length of inflexible something – a

cane or wooden, one by two, perhaps. Placing it against the bar below, they pushed down, and the door came open. Later, maintenance replaced the broken glass with the short-term patch glass. Maintaining a supply of the wire-embedded panes would not seem reasonable. There was seldom any reason for them to break. I'd take an 'A+' in *Detective 101* for that configuration.

Of course, the bad guy or guys could have had inside help – a resident or an employee who met them there and opened the door for them – or, earlier, taped the latch so it didn't catch and could be pulled open from the outside. Neither of those would explain the need for the temporary replacement glass in the window. Though more complicated and sophisticated, I'd still go with my take on it – the fewer people involved, the better.

I returned to the lobby the way I'd come, ready to move on. I walked across the parking lot to my new ride.

Before stopping at the Limo Service, I figured I needed some background information, so I drove south from the hotel to near Frankie's compound and then to the Edwards *Limo Service* building, noting the mileage.

I must admit, I'd never heard of the Edwards place, but then limos and I were not really on a first name basis. I parked across the street – a two lane street. I wanted to just eyeball the place for a while. Several limos came and several limos left during the ten or so minutes I sat there watching. They had six bays twenty yards back from the street. A few vehicles arrived driven by chauffeurs, but most were apparently 'pick-up and deliver' – the drivers wearing Edwards, blue uniforms.

I had no legitimate reason for contacting them and honestly, I had no idea what they might have to offer me. Often, 'no ideas', turned into 'great ideas' once I got a feel for how things went. That little detective voice inside my head told me I needed to get inside, so, I crossed the road and entered the front door.

It was a ritzy waiting room – oversized, expensive looking furniture, with coffee, tea, champagne, chips and dip, cookies. A young woman approached me offering her hand and smile.

“You must be new here, Sir. I have a great memory for faces. I’m sure I wouldn’t have forgotten yours.”

I could accept a little false flattery – I was male.

I took her hand for a shake. She held it too long.

“Winston Torrell. New to the area. I’m opening a *limo-with-driver* business and will need a high-class care service.”

She was well prepared with an initial spiel and answers to all my questions. Neither of us brought up fees. I wanted it to appear that didn’t weigh heavily on my decision – the wealthy got special treatment – fair or not fair, they did. At my request, she gave me a short tour of the garage where the mechanics and detailers worked – it was cleaner than my living room. I was attracted to the check-in desk and watched as a worker filled in a brief form before moving to begin work on the vehicle.

“I’d like to chat with some of the workers – to get a feel for the atmosphere you maintain.”

“Certainly. If you will stay out of their way, go to it. I’ll be back upfront. Come see me before you leave, and we can go over our maintenance plans.”

I headed for that work desk as a bell sounded. Apparently the ten o’clock morning break. All work stopped and the men headed for a door to the far left marked, ‘Employees Only’. Nobody paid any attention to me. I moved behind the desk and determined how the system worked. Each vehicle was assigned a permanent Edwards Number. Each workorder contained that number in place of the owner’s name.

I had copied down that number from the oil change decal on the limo that had done combat with my right fender. I flipped through my pad. 444-34. I should have remembered something

that simple. The file was set up using those numbers. I found the file – there was no owner’s name attached. The business was, interestingly, high on privacy. Why? My interest was in dates. It had been detailed on the 14th and again on the 15th. The fender bender had occurred late night on the 14th. It had returned for the same detailing process the next day.

It told me one thing for sure. That vehicle had not taken the lad far – not cross country to some out of the way destination for sure. The odometer readings recorded on the sheet verified that – 004752 on the first date and 004793 on the second – forty-one miles. I needed to do some figuring.

So, if the limo started from Frankie’s compound and drove to Edwards for a cleanup at the outset – I had just determined that was 7 miles; then back to the compound – 7 miles to wait until nighttime; then to the hotel to get the boy – 6 miles; back to the compound – 6 miles; and back to Edwards the next day for clean-up #2 – 7 miles. That would come to thirty-three miles – eight miles less than the odometer readings suggested the limo had been driven. I wondered if that was within reason for the miles used in the abduction – or it may have made some other short run. Just info for one of several working hypotheses. I sure would like to have access to anything they may have found when they did that second clean-up. The initials on the form from the person picking up the vehicle were HH on both occasions. The work-person, JJ. Maybe later on that.

As a bit of overkill – that little voice was persistent – I walked the length of the huge room just snooping to see what there was to snoop. A workman entered from a side door – JJ, indicated on his badge. Fortuitous, as Jerry might say. Perhaps not with only three men working the garage at that time. My response was quick and to the point.

“Hey. JJ. Tuesday you detailed my boss’s limo – your

number 444-34 – front right fender bender. I think I may have lost my wallet between the seat and back, maybe. Any sign of it?”

“We can look at the log, but if I’d have found it, the desk would have called to let you know. I’m sure it wasn’t there. You paid for a complete detail and all I found was one thing: an unopened pack of Teaberry Gum. Oh, I vacuumed the car and checked the ash trays, but that’s all I found. I can check the lost and found. Just take a minute”

We walked back to the desk. He reached underneath and produced the little pink pack of gum.

I chuckled and commented as he handed it to me.

“Buggsy – Teaberry is like one of his food groups. Thanks for your time.”

He chuckled. I left, managing to avoid Miss Smiley Dimples, 1945. I had hoped to verify something more specific about ownership even though Sarge vouched for the plate number.

I doubted if Frankie would have been responsible for his grandson’s kidnapping, but I was a careful and thorough detective. Follow up on those clues while they were hot, was my motto – well, really not, but . . .

I returned to Jake’s for lunch entering through the back door.

“No calls, honey,” Betty said, as I slipped into my booth. I had parked the Bug in a space off the alley to the south of the diner.

“What’s the special this noon?”

“Pot roast, two portion sizes, seventy-five cents and a dollar. Both come with a drink, roll, a scoop of raspberry sherbet and a Lorna Doone cookie.”

“Sounds good. Let me spring for the buck size. Seen Mooch?”

“Not this morning. Got the Lysol ready in case.”

We shared a chuckle even though the humor in it had long since grown stale.

I had left my folded paper on the seat, earlier, so picked up where I had left off. Page seven. *Man Found Drowned in Green Creek North of City*. He was identified as a small-time hood named Harry Hemstad, age 36. Hardly a natural death – wrists and ankles bound with piano wire.

That caught my attention – Harry Hemstad – the work order at Edwards had been signed for by HH. Probably a stretch – still it went into my little spiral pad.

The pot roast was very good. He’d served me up an extra-large portion. I dawdled over the sherbet and a fresh cup of coffee. The cookie was a nice way to end a meal. I was getting handier as a one-armed guy. Cutting the ‘fall apart by itself’ pot roast had been a relatively simple, one hand operation. I needed to think about that – a sirloin steak would pose problems. Betty was the motherly type – she’d help her favorite private eye.

I counted out some nickels and made several calls.

I left a message for Sarge to call me.

I left a message for Mooch to call me.

Sarge called right back.

“I need to know about the man drowned in Green Creek this morning – Harry Hemstad. Specifically, any association with Frankie Giordano or *any* crime biggie, I suppose. Also, anything in the files on a Dr. Maxwell Boyle. Does the department have a report on the Randy Rakes kidnapping yet?”

“No report. No request. As far as we’re concerned it has not happened.”

“Okay. I’ll keep going it alone. You got that number I left, correct?”

“Correct. Got your address from Ma Bell (phone company).

Got my ear out for anything recent on Karl Rakes. Be careful.”

“Thanks, later.”

In a few minutes, Mooch beckoned me from the back hall. I went to him and we moved out into the alley. Betty owed me for that!

“I hear there are two guys watching my apartment. I’d like you to take a look and see if you know about them. Sooner better than later – there may be a night shift tradeoff later.”

I gave him a ten and my new phone number. He didn’t hesitate and scurried off between buildings. I went back inside and made it to my booth through a fog of air freshener. I wondered if ‘stench’ would be admissible as testimony to identify a suspect in a court of law.

He was back in half an hour. He had seen them. He did not know them by sight. His impression was they were high class enough to be Frankie’s. He had the car’s plate number. He’d taken photos with the new instant, Polaroid Land Camera, and was on his way to see what he could find out about them on the street.

I called Sarge – got him first try – he was working the arrest bench. I fed him the plate number. He’d get back to me.

“It hurts,” I said to his inquiry. “Anything on Boyle?”

“Nothing out of the ordinary. His degree and license are legit. Not so much as a parking ticket on the record. No professional complaints. Handgun permit. I have a few other places to look. Maybe this afternoon. Anything I can do for you personally?”

“I seem to have it under control. Oh, there is one other thing. Know anything unflattering about *Edwards Limo Service* on 55th?”

“Work the wealthy – legit and mob. They require a subpoena to get the least little amount of information. I’ll see what else I can dig up. You be safe, now.”

I chuckled as I hung up. Be safe! Certainly, he knew me better than that!

I dropped a buck and some change on the table for Betty and left out the back. Fifteen minutes later I had the Bug tucked away in a far corner of the Hotel parking lot. My goal was to brush shoulders with some of the kids who lived there. Word had always been that the place was sprinkled with marginal relatives of crime families. I'd see what worked its way up to the surface. If the kids were part of that, they probably didn't even know. I figured my risk for mingling was minimal.

I flipped through the business cards I carried for special needs. There it was, *John Miller, Toys and Playground Equipment*.

Inside, I approached the front desk and presented the card to a young man in his mid-twenties. Slender, shirt and tie – slicked back brown hair, pocket saver, glasses, everything about him reeked uncomfortable.

“Here to look over the children’s playroom, so I can finish my bid on some new equipment. I was told Tom or Tim, maybe, would get me access. I assume it’s an existing complex.”

His badge read Thomas.

He looked at my card with some care.

“Who made that suggestion to you?”

“Hmm. A man in a small office on the second floor – forties, black hair graying at the temples, brown eyes, heavy eyebrows, black rimmed glasses, no necklace or earrings.”

The young man’s face blossomed into a full out grin at my foolishness. He called for a porter.

“James. Mr. Miller is to have access to the playroom.”

James had seen sixty – a distinguished looking gentleman with impeccable posture, white hair and rimless, octagonal glasses. He nodded and hitched his head for me to follow –

straight to the residents' elevators, down one floor, and ten steps down a hall to a door marked, Playroom. Seemed appropriate. He opened the double, swinging door and motioned me inside.

"Will there be anything else, Mr. Miller?"

"Any idea when the children use this room."

"It will be inundated by that whooping and hollering untamed species in a few minutes. My best advice is to protect yourself at all times. Like baby copperheads, their venom is ten times worse than an adult's."

I chuckled at his humorous analogy – clearly not a doting grandfather. I handed him a five – way over tipping – I clearly got his attention. It couldn't hurt to have an established, eager, contact on the inside. Five bucks would buy me that, even in a plush place like the Harrington.

I walked the room looking interested and making notes – real ones in the event I'd be approached. It was a huge room, big enough for running and biking – perhaps fifty feet by seventy-five or eighty – eighteen feet ceiling. There were swings and a slide and a merry-go-round. A wonderful climbing mountain with hand and foot holds and caves and tunnels. There were four bikes and several scooters. It looked to be mainly boy stuff. I wondered how large the herd would be – apparently some scheduled break time. I was prepared for thundering hooves.

The door swung open. I moved to one side wondering if I should cover my face with my arms or retreat to a corner and assume the fetal position.

CHAPTER FOUR

Pimps, Prostitutes, and Money Laundering

Three boys entered at a leisurely pace, engaged in what was clearly a serious discussion. I craned my neck to see who might be behind them. Nobody. Me thinks James had put me on.

They stopped and eyed me. The tallest one in the blue, button up the front shirt approached me.

“May we inquire as to who you are and what your business is here? This room is reserved for young people.”

Taken aback, somewhat, at the boy’s language pattern, I looked myself over – feeling here and there.

“You mean I’m not a young people? Are you sure?”

It got a smile from blue boy and snickers from the other two – red boy and yellow boy. I became serious.

“I’m John Miller from Atlas Toys and Play Equipment, here to see how I might be able to improve on the facilities for you in this recreational area.”

Red and Yellow – who had hung back – joined us.

“Like how and what?” Red asked.

“Well, I was looking at the slide – twelve feet tall, but just a straight shoot to nowhere. I was thinking fifteen feet tall with a 360-degree curve halfway down.”

They moved in closer.

“I’m Rodney.”

“I’m Blane.”

“I’m Adam.”

Glad to meet you guys. Hope you might have some suggestions for me.

“A splash pad would be nice.”

“A racetrack with electric cars along the outer wall.”

“Double wide so we can race.”

“What great suggestions. You designed play areas before, have you?”

Grins.

“Only in our heads, I guess.”

“Tell me, are you the only three kids in this entire hotel?”

“No, there’s Randy and six girls – a few really young kids. The girls never come here.”

“May I ask your ages?”

“Ten.”

“Eleven.”

“Ten.”

“And the Randy kid?”

There was a moment of uneasy silence as they looked from one to another. Adam, the eleven-year-old and the boy who initially confronted me, spoke.

“He just turned nine, but he is in some sort of pickle right now. We aren’t sure what, but his mom keeps giving us flimsy excuses about why he can’t join us. Must be something worse than sick – we always see each other when we’re sick – like a mutual support brotherhood – I got that from the *Three*

Musketeers.”

I pulled my imaginary sword, assumed the position, and he happily engaged me in a dual. I gave up when I saw the others unleashing their weapons.

They smiled. I continued the conversation.

“You seem concerned about the Randy kid.”

“Yes. We are.”

“What kind of a kid is he – for instance what kinds of things does he like to do? I might be able to scrape up some samples for him that he would enjoy – if he’s sick.”

“He’s still big into dinosaurs – a bit childish, but he’s so smart he knows twenty times as much about them as any of us did when we were his age. He likes to read science fiction. He’s pretty musical – piano and a wooden flute he carries everywhere. A piano down here for him might be nice. He swears by Italian sausage pizza and Teaberry Gum.”

“Not at the same time, I hope,” I said.

Laughs. The boy continued.

“He’s always inventing things. He has a bedroom *and* a ‘tinkering’ room.”

“Inventions?”

“Like a noose that comes apart as soon as there’s ten pounds of weight for it to support.”

How practical, I thought. Something every nine-year-old boy’s life cried out for.

“And his best one is a toy truck that unfolds itself into a robot that moves menacingly when his motor is wound up. We all agree that has commercial possibilities. He’s not into the financial side of things. His mom is super rich.”

“I assume super rich moms can be nice people.”

“Oh, yeah. She’s great. Invites us for lunch at least once every week. One time she fixed chocolate covered pretzels for the

appetizer, chocolate pound cake drizzled in hot fudge for the main course and chocolate ripple ice cream to eat with Ritz crackers for dessert. She's always a lot of fun."

"What about his father?"

"Don't know. He never talks about him. Hasn't ever lived here as far as I know."

"You guys have dads at home?"

They all nodded – two smiled and one didn't.

"Why you got all those questions about Randy?"

"You guys can speak for yourselves about these improvements. I just don't want Randy to feel left out."

"He's big into making things, not doing things. He often brings a book and reads instead of playing. I reckon he knows just about everything."

"You've all been a great help. I may need to talk with you again. Keep thinking about things. I won't keep you from your activities any longer."

I didn't feel bad about the deception; when I found the boy, I just imagined his mother would be happy to spring for the modifications and additions.

"Have fun."

"Can I ask you something?"

It had been the silent one – yellow.

"Sure."

"What happened to your arm?"

I leaned in close and became confidential.

"A bad guy shot me in my shoulder."

I put on a pained expression.

They took it as a joke and chuckled.

They walked me to the door and down the hall. One used his key to get me onboard the elevator. Suddenly, I had *four* inside men at the hotel – three of them free of charge.

Just outside in the lobby, I met James. I approached him wagging my finger, playfully. He was wearing a grin from ear to ear – as has been written far too often.

“Let me guess, James. Six grand kids who get regular horsy rides from grampa?”

“Close enough.”

He reached into his coat and produced a cigar – the symbolism was plain – close but . . . He also handed me back my business card as he offered a knowing wink. I responded with a quick smile. I had no idea what that exchange had been about. Evidently, my act had not fooled him. Could it be he was a house detective in disguise?”

I hurried through the lobby to the front door. I'd never heard of a hanging in the lobby of the Harrington – I'd ask to use Randy's noose.

Back at the diner, Betty handed me a message from Sarge. He'd be working the desk until off duty at three. I'd be cutting it close. I placed the call. He had information.

“About the Harry Hemstad character; small time for hire hoodlum – for a few bucks, he'd slip the law for anybody. Last known crime family affiliation was with Frankie – marginal at best. Reputation was reliable with no conscience. Must be accurate, since he's been plying his trade here in the city for quite few years – those who fail don't last that long. What you got on him, Tommy?”

“I'm quite sure I've connected him with the limo I suspect in the Rakes boy's kidnapping. Probably the driver. Like to see a mug shot if you have one. Does he have a female he works with? Redhead, thirtyish, not particularly attractive. On a related matter, a bevy of fourth grade boys crowned Randy's mother as a really good egg – sunny side up, even. She feeds them chocolate – that may color their view. The boys don't know squat about Randy's

situation, and they are clearly concerned about their friend.

“On still another matter, the car watching my apartment has a plate I’d like run.”

I gave it to him. We ended the conversation.

I left, ready to head across town to the WPJ studios. Mooch was waiting at my car.

“Got stuff on those apartment sitters. B.L. Tredway and Hooper Conley. Both for hire hoods. That’s it, I’m afraid. Nobody seems to know who they’re working for. Probably not hitmen. New to the area, I’m thinkin’.”

It was worth another five. He left. I whooshed the air with my hand.

I suddenly missed cat. I wondered why. Ah ha! Mooch smelled a whole lot like Cat’s litter box.

The radio station was on the 15th floor of the Stratton Building in the center of the city. I needed a story – a con, more precisely. Fortunately, my head had always spun them on demand. I approached the receptionist.

“Hi. I’m Carter Long – a freelance journalist, new to the city. Sorry, I don’ have a business card yet. I’m working on an article about, ‘radio and kids in a big city’. Trying to show the importance of radio in kid’s lives and highlight the significant responsibility stations such as yours have toward their education, entertainment, and wellbeing. It’s to be a three-part series. I’m fascinated with your *Lone Ranger Club* and wonder if I could talk with someone about it.”

“Sure. Let me find Warner – he runs that effort – also an assistant news editor.”

Warner looked almost young enough to be a ‘*Jr. Kemo Sabe*’, himself. He steered me into the break room – small, cluttered, centered on a round table, six chairs and the coffee pot. Also, of note, I suppose, the long empty donut box.

He poured. We sat. He went on at length about how the program worked and what its goals were. Basically, just two; to provide a mailing list for station promotions and to maintain a file of information, with a thumbprint, to be used in cases of missing children.

“That’s interesting. Do the police use your data?”

“Often, in fact, with a parent’s permission.”

He pointed to the cabinet on which the coffee pot sat.

“In that card file are over ten thousand sets of data going back six years. Needs to be culled, I suppose. Won’t be.”

“Would it be proper for me to examine a card?”

“Of course – I’m sure you won’t publish private information.”

“Goodness no.”

With a sweep of his arm toward the wooden cabinet, he indicated I should take my pick. I did the spiral thing with my index finger as if about to make a random landing – I chose to randomly land on the drawer labeled R. I fingered my way through the cards to Rakes and pulled out a quarter inch-thick batch hoping I’d been either heady enough or lucky enough to find Randy’s card.

I sorted through them slowly as if studying them – nodding sagely from time to time. There it was, Randy Rakes. Same address, same mother, interests were inventing, music, and reading. Most important wish: To be happy. Why should that make me sad? The card was dated two years before when he had been seven. Alternate contact: Jenny Oliver – aunt. I memorized her address.

I thanked Warner. He asked for my phone number. He didn’t stipulate why, but I gave him Jake’s with the explanation that being new to town with no office, Jake was kind enough to let me sit and write at the diner. He could leave a message and I’d get back with him. He didn’t seem to question it. I left.

One new piece of information – Jenny Oliver, Randy’s aunt.

I wondered what kind of an aunt – probably mother’s sister. The information was several years old; maybe I’d still luck out on that location.

I drove to the address – Jenny’s – extreme north west edge of the city – on Beaver Point Trail. There was no beaver or point or trail. My hope to see a dam was dashed. Looked to be four acre lots, twelve room houses, lawns that didn’t stop, and short lanes leading into the buildings’ double and triple wide garages. Jenny’s house was set at the rear of the expanse.

The rural mailbox boasted Jenny Oliver. It would be difficult to sneak up on the place. I stopped at the mailbox, opened it, and sorted through four pieces of mail. Among them was a dues statement from the American Association of Child Psychiatrists. *There was a new twist.*

The garage door opened, and a Lincoln pulled out and drove in my direction. I decided to confront it. I walked a few paces up the driveway and moved into the grass. The car stopped and the window rolled down. Black hair, dark eyes, looked more fascinated by my presence than put off. She was not the woman from the kidnapping limo. I showed her my Private Detective Badge and ID.

“Dr. Oliver. I’ve been retained by Sally Rakes to look into a problem surrounding Randy’s whereabouts. May we talk?”

“She has told me of your involvement. Get in. I can give you ten minutes of driveway time. Sally is my younger sister – Giordanos.”

“The boy’s aunt?”

She nodded.

I nodded and went on.

“One, I am concerned about his welfare during a possible period of abduction. Two, I am, of course, looking for possible leads. Three, anything you can offer, that I have no way of

knowing that might be relevant.”

“Two possibilities float to the top: Either Sally’s ex-husband or our father. No love is lost between them – Frankie and Karl. Possessing the boy would be a symbol one or the other had won – won what, not even they know. Randy is an exceptional child, but only a child. I believe that short of mistreatment, he will weather the situation just fine.”

“You have reason to suspect or expect mistreatment?”

“I have no reason to suspect or expect anything. Just reflecting that both men are *awful* human beings and the people who work for them are no better. Who knows what their greed and jealousy might produce?”

“Can you indicate if the boy’s emotional situation is chronic or acute?”

What an interesting question – astute, even. Randy would survive just fine without me. My presence in his life is more Sally wanting to make sure things are going well – she desperately wants to show both men that she is a perfect mother. My presence is more prophylactic than curative. Warning: never wager with him on chess matches.”

We exchanged smiles.

“Have you spoken with his teacher, Dr. Wendt – Charles Wendt, PhD?”

“No. Seems an interesting slip up on Sally’s part. Contact?”

“I have nothing specific. Try *Tutors for Geniuses* in the yellow pages. Sorry. That came off like I wasn’t taking the matter seriously. Sally knows, of course. Her reluctance does seem odd – perhaps just an oversight during this difficult time.”

She smiled and looked at her diamond studded wristwatch – my clue to leave. I thanked her. She turned left and headed for the City. I didn’t want to appear to be following her so sat in Bug and waited out a few minute buffer. The list of necessary contacts

was becoming unwieldy. My admiration for the Bug was increasing – a German make, I assumed from the name. Truthfully, I had not heard of it.

A few minutes later, I pulled into a cafe. I'd get a cup of coffee to cover my need for their yellow pages.

Wendt was not listed under 'tutors'. I tried 'teachers'. Nothing. I went to the white pages. There he was. Sometimes I outsmarted myself. I got the phone number and an address on Collie Place. Lesson: Milt's Diner had far better coffee than Jake's – twelve miles out of the way, but better. If confronted about that, expect me to deny I ever said it.

While there, I checked in with Sarge at his home number. He had something.

"Got two things of interest on the HH limo driver who was later found drowned. One, detectives have classified it as a homicide – sometimes I wonder how they got to be detectives. Also, in his pocket, the officers at the scene found an envelope containing ten, one hundred-dollar bills. Return address, Giordano Enterprises."

"Sounds like a plant to me."

"I agree," Sarge said. "The detectives are on it – Martin Peters. Feel free to contact him. He knows about you and me."

I'd leave that to the detectives at precinct. A dead punk could be of no help to me. I was beginning to worry about all the time that was passing with no results. I'd try Randy's teacher – Charles Wendt. I called. He answered.

"Dr. Wendt, I'm Tommy Cole a private investigator working for Sally Rakes. It appears Randy is missing. I'd like to chat with you at the earliest possible time."

"Certainly – missing! Sally cancelled his classes for the rest of the week – said he wasn't feeling well. You say where and when."

“Do you know Jake’s Diner on . . .”

“Grew up in that neighborhood. Not ten minutes from me. Fifteen minutes, then?”

“Fine. I may be a few minutes longer. I’m at the west edge of the city. Tell Jake you’re waiting for me and take the rear booth – my office.”

“Until then.”

I hung up and took my coffee with me.

I made good time. Most of the traffic was leaving the city so I had the inbound mostly to myself. That coffee really was better.

Wendt was there when I arrived.

Betty alerted him as I entered through the rear. He stood for a shake. He was a pale, thin boned, myopic man in his late forties dressed in a brown suit, vest, and tie. I was afraid to squeeze his hand for fear I’d break him. I didn’t – squeeze or break. We sat. He was having tea. Betty brought coffee for me.

“Thank you for the meeting, Doctor.”

“I am eager to help – and make it Chuck. I know I don’t look like a Chuck, but if you will.”

“Certainly. I’m sure at my age I should be Tom, but it never feels right – I’m Tommy. I know you’ve only had a few minutes to think about things, but has anything come to mind?”

“First, Randy is a strong lad and bright. I think those things will be on his side.”

“By strong you mean?”

“Personality, fortitude, brave, I would say – almost adolescent in his level of fearlessness. After that, I am not sure where to go. Do you have questions?”

“Does he talk about Frankie Giordano, his grandfather on his mother’s side?”

“Only after he has spent time with him.”

“I was of the impression he did not do that.”

“Three times a year if things work out – always Saturdays – for his birthday, for Christmas and for Frankie’s birthday.”

“What impression does he give you of those visits?”

“Back when he was younger, he expressed happiness about it – always lots of presents and good times. Just prior to his eighth birthday, three of his friends informed him about his grandfather’s crime connections. He did his own research and has been reluctant to return since then. Gifts always arrive anyway.”

“Any reaction other than the reluctance?”

“At first, a great sadness and fear, I would say. Not fear he would be mistreated or hurt. I believe it was focused on the fact he was of the Giordano blood line. He worried about whether that would destine him to become a criminal. Not so much anymore. His Aunt helped him work that through – she is a psychiatrist.”

“Places? I’m not even sure what I’m asking – places he might be taken – if Frankie even has anything to do with it.”

“He loved what he called the farm – south east of the city as I recall. Nothing else comes to mind. He described the Giordano Compound as containing a dozen or more buildings overflowing with cousins and uncles he didn’t really know.”

“What about the other side of the family – Karl Rakes?”

“As far as I know, he has never been allowed to see his father. It is my impression that Frankie enforces that. At any rate, Randy never speaks of him.”

He leaned in and became confidential.”

“Karl, himself, is no angel. Long suspected of being a higher-class crime king pin himself – more brains and fewer bodies. Randy seems to have researched that, as well. I do recall that on one occasion when he was much younger, he suggested he would like to get to know him – ‘a little bit’ – his words. I suppose that would be normal for a boy – to want to know his father.”

“Yes. I can vouch for that. At his age, I would have walked

barefoot across broken glass for just one hour with mine. You think he might have run off to meet him?”

“Randy is a strong-minded lad. I would not say it is out of the question. He is so close and dependent on his mother, that has to be mixed into the equation – would he risk hurting her – worrying her? I’m inclined to doubt he would do that.”

“Has he shared things he’s learned about his father?”

“He once wrote a thinly veiled story about a rich man who decided he would never see his son again, because he was afraid his criminal life might harm him. I wept when I read it, I will tell you that – like needing to positively justify the man’s absence from his life. I wept.”

“You believe he came upon evidence of Karl’s illegal activities.”

“I had wondered even before that story if he might not know things. One morning for his vocabulary lesson he wanted to know the meaning of several words that should not have been a part of his experience – at eight.”

“For example?”

“Pimp, prostitute, money laundering, mechanic – the hit man variety.”

“Wow! I’d say you are right. Did the words come up again?”

“Never. I imagine he enlightened his friends about them. Boys tend to be interested in things like that even before they can understand them.

“There is one other interest that popped up out of nowhere – maybe a year ago. He began studying blood types and how the parent’s blood types were manifested in their offspring. I never had a grasp on how the interest came about – he tells me I am *A positive*. It left as an interest as quickly as it had come.”

“You have been very helpful, Chuck. If you think of anything else – facts or hunches – contact me immediately. I will give you

a temporary phone number, but it must not get spread beyond you. I even hesitate to write it down for you.”

“Just let me see it. Like Randy, I have a photographic memory.”

I jotted down the number on a napkin and turned it toward him. He took a quick peek, tore it off the napkin and dropped it into what remained of his tea. I liked this little man. He felt obliged to explain.

“As I boy, I fancied myself a spy, so acquired numerous skills I believed would be useful. That is the first time I have had an opportunity to use that one. It felt like a grand initiation into the brotherhood.”

He gathered his hat and umbrella, stood, and left. Did I say I really liked that guy? Bright, honest, to the point, and just quirky enough to make him memorable.

Suddenly, I had several new and promising lines of investigation open to me. I would eat and go back to my room and see what sort of plan I might put together. I needed to call Jerry and let him know I was okay. He might have new things for me. I sure hoped I hadn't put his safety in jeopardy.

CHAPTER FIVE

Over Geniussed?

I drove Black Bug back to its sheltered nook close to my new room. It blended well into the shadows. I still felt uneasy there. I climbed the steps and entered the room. I closed the door but stayed close as I removed my handgun and flipped on the lights. It was a sprawling, open room. Only one place for a man-sized object to hide himself – the shower. No man, wet, drowned, or otherwise. I holstered my gun.

I locked and barred the door and shed enough clothing to get comfortable. I looked around for cat. No cat, of course.

From the beginning, I had believed the sling had been over-kill. I removed it. I moved the arm side to side, front to back, up and down. There was pain, but it was quite functional. Dilemma: continue wearing the sling to keep would be attackers off balance or ditch it and move my life back to normal? I'd think on that.

I sat in the recliner and called Jerry – it was early evening. “Doing well, I imagine,” I used for an opening.

“Very, thank you. And you? Haven't heard your name

associated with anything untoward on the scanner.”

“I am fine. Been very busy, today.”

“I assume you are well into the new case.”

“You assume correctly. Anything from there around my place?”

“Some. I have set up my observation post in our booth at my aunt’s malt shop – a perfect view into the car. The first two observers have been shuffled out and two new ones are in place. Same vehicle. Just before the change late this afternoon a woman brought the man in the car take-out from a restaurant – *Jose’s*, according to the sack. She sat in the car with him for some time. They are clearly more than just friends. I got her picture. I felt badly for her.”

“Why’s that.”

“She is a very unattractive woman.”

“Red hair, full, shoulder length?” I asked.

“Very good. More detective magic, I suppose.”

“A hunch from another lead. How did you get close enough for the picture without revealing the camera?”

“With my camera secured inside a shoebox, I went up to the driver and asked if he wanted to buy a paper. Click! He did, in fact. Gave me a quarter and told me to beat it. I beat in right in the back door of my Aunt’s malt shop and whomped up one magnificent Milk shake. I added some marshmallow cream to the one we had – peanut butter, banana, chocolate and marshmallow. I do believe it is an improvement.”

“I thought she would be closed.”

“We have a blood-kin understanding. I can go in and make what I want so long as I leave money on the register. She could afford to give it to me, but she is striving to help me become a responsible person. I respect that.”

His remark prompted an idea as well as a smile.

“A question to put your brain to work on.”

“Atrocious grammar there, Tommy, but, okay, what.

“Think about how I might get a blood sample from a person without them realizing what I was doing.”

“Hmm. Install a dip stick?”

He thought his joke was hilarious. I could see him falling onto the floor over it. He recovered. It had made for a good chuckle on my end as well.

“I will have to think on that. Somehow using whoever might give him shaves comes to mind or a nurse puncturing his finger for a blood test. I’ll keep after it. Oh, if you don’t need the actual blood – just the blood type – look for his medical records or for his dog tags from when he was in the war.”

“All great ideas.”

“Hey, here’s another one. Have cat scratch them – cat hates everybody but you and me.”

It really did improve a private detective’s lot to have a boy genius in his life. The boy part remained practical and direct. The genius part brought high level connections. If not always useful, at least dependably entertaining.

“Cat doing well?”

“Not sure how to tell with a cat. He’s sticking with his routine. Roams at night and sleeps by day, spends an inordinate amount of time licking himself. The very thought of having a hair ball disgusts me to the point of gagging.”

On that *truly* disgusting note, we ended the call. I popped a Royal Crown Cola and leaned back in the chair.

I called Sally, Randy’s mother.

“Sorry to bother you so late. I’ll make it brief. Are you by any chance privy to Karl Rakes’ daily or weekly routine – barber, lawyer, anything that takes him away from his house?”

“He plays poker Wednesday nights at the Royal Billiards

Club on Olivette – 22 hundred block I believe. Game always goes on into the wee hours. By invitation only – high stakes.”

“Remember any of the help there – bar tenders or the like.”

“There was one, an older man, Hitler style mustache. Let me see. Jack maybe . . . no, Hank. My impression has always been that there’s probably nothing he wouldn’t do for a few bucks – the green variety, not the antlered sort.”

The woman was maintaining a sense of humor. Up until then, she hadn’t appeared like the sort that had one – a sense of humor. Perhaps her way of coping with her fear and sadness.

“I guess no contact about ransom or some other demand.”

“None. I’m so worried and I feel so helpless. My inclination is to *demand* that you hurry. I know you’re doing your best.”

“Do you know the layout of Karl’s home, specifically where his bedroom is located?”

“Second floor, northeast corner – back side of the house. Karl’s a big fraidy cat. He has an iron ladder from a window to the ground. His greatest fear is being burned to death – a carryover from a war experience, I’ve been told. I suppose I shouldn’t make fun of him like that.”

“One more question: do you know Randy’s blood type?”

“I have it in my lockbox. His *and* mine. He was on a blood typing jag about it a year or so back. Give me a moment.”

“Let’s have yours as well if you have no objection.”

By the time she picked up the phone again, I figured it had been *two* moments but decided not to quibble. I would have to suggest to Jerry that he contemplate just what a moment was. He’d love the challenge. She read them off and I wrote them down.

“Thanks for that. I have nothing substantial to report, but I have gathered lots of helpful information. You just hang in there. Oh, one more thing, is Karl married?”

“Three divorces later, he’s been single several years.”

“Thanks. Later.”

It was Wednesday evening. *That* was Billiard Club evening. I needed to think this through carefully. I could attempt to search his home for the dog tags while he was out – probably some staff left behind – or see if I could in some way draw blood at the club. I was a pretty good second story man when my body was intact. That, also, of course, necessitated that I could get across the grounds to the house, and I had to assume that was well protected territory. Back on with the clothes – switched my blazer for a light jacket.

Could Hank break a glass and cut Karl? The more I thought about that approach, the less I thought of it. I'd take my chance at the house. With him away, his bedroom should be unoccupied. If that drew a blank, there would still be time left for plan 'Hank' before the wee hours ended.

It was a sprawling, two story, tan brick house – stark in lines set on a large lot surrounded by an eight-foot brick wall with a manned, iron gate out front. I would see if out front had an out back. The houses were set some hundred yards apart – the area reeked of exclusive everything. The first cross street to the north was a quarter mile from the driveway. I took a right on it and presently another right. I found myself viewing garages, out buildings, dumpsters and like behind a selection of very expensive homes.

The wall behind Karl's place completed the enclosure of the lot which included a rear gate near a short driveway leading into the garage. It, also, was two story, though lower than the house – the difference between 12-foot and 8-foot ceilings, I imagined. There were rooms above the garage – quarters for the help, I figured. There was no guard there like there was out front. Probably just inside. I suspected lots of motion sensors. To my advantage, I believed, those sensors would be directed at least

eighteen inches above the ground to avoid false alarms from wild animals and roaming dogs and cats from the neighborhood.

I drove to the end of the block and parked off the road, nosed into a small stand of bushes. All private detectives should drive small, black, vehicles. They hid so well anywhere there was a shadow. There was a substantial drainage ditch on the side of that street nearest the homes. It was dry. I bent low and returned through it to the Rakes' place.

Sensors most often scanned in arcs – half-circle paths. I assumed they were housed on the metal pole in the center of the back yard. Because of that, I figured the rear corner across from the garage would be my best bet for entry – the curved scan missing part of the square corner, itself. I was about to put my arm and shoulder to the test. I expected pain.

I jumped and caught hold of the top of the wall. I pulled myself up at the corner and let myself down onto the grass inside. That was mostly right arm strength. I squatted back against the wall, waiting to see if I needed to beat a quick retreat. Things remained calm. I flattened out on the ground taking the position familiar to all marines – the military elbow crawl. That would keep me low enough. Should be a lark without machine guns strafing the area twenty-four inches above my head. The area was unlit. Bad guy's compounds are never left unlit at night. Perhaps I had misjudged him. Perhaps a sensor contact lit flood lights from atop that metal pole. I supposed I was about to find out.

At ten yards, I stopped to scope out the house. The windows on the second floor at the south east corner were dark. I saw the ladder. It was clearly intended to get him *down* from the second floor rather than allow anybody *up* from the ground. It was a pull-down arrangement from eight feet up the wall. I'd had to clear twelve-foot walls in basic training. That, of course, had been years before. Connie said I still had a spring in my step. Let's hope

that was a matter of fact rather than flattery.

Again, counting on that circular sweep thing, I stood up against the back wall of the house. I'd need a running start to jump for the base of the ladder. To that end, I backed up along the wall. I would approach it from its side – hugging the wall as I ran. I didn't hesitate. It needed to be a perfect on first attempt. It was.

Somewhat gingerly, I hand over handed myself up onto the ladder until I could secure a foot on a rung. To that point, a well-executed plan. I inched up slowly toward the window – slow movement was less likely to be spotted. There would be some security measure at the window. It was the simple electrical connection variety between top and bottom panes. If the the circuit were broken, an alarm would sound.

There were a few items a detective always carried on his person: a gun, a knife, latex gloves, and lengths of 100 test cord, and wire. Using my wire, I extended the connection so the circuit would not be broken when I raised the window.

That might pose a problem. It was a slide catch sitting inside atop the bottom section of the window. Using the industrial diamond on my ring, I etched a rectangle in the window just outside that latch. Using the butt of my knife, I tapped that section and it fell inside in one piece. I ducked below the window waiting to see if anything were going to happen. Nothing.

With caution, I raised the lower section. The caution was overkill – if there was a second trigger it would go off regardless of my degree of caution. I entered, left leg first, and closed the window. I pocketed the piece of glass for later and fumbled for my penlight in my pants pocket.

The room was dimly lit from outside light – mostly the nearly full moon – perhaps the reason for no lighting out back. I went directly to the dresser. As I had predicted, there was a jewel box on top – yes, men were beginning to have them – rings, watches,

keys, tie clip, change, the stray poker chip. I removed the upper tray and lit the bottom section with my penlight. How easy could this be? Dog tags. K Rakes, ID number, Air Force, Methodist, blood type. I copied that into my pad, replaced it, returned the tray to its place, and closed the lid.

I turned, making ready to leave the way I had come.

Oh! Oh!

I heard footsteps in the hall outside. Not enough time to use the window. I needed to hide. To my immediate left of the door was the wall. To the right a closet which jutted thirty inches out into the room. That configuration set the door into a small recess – alcove. Using the wainscoting as a foot hold, I moved above the door and stretched across the open space at the ceiling, in effect wedging my six-foot body in a slight arc between the outside wall and the closet wall. As a recruit, I could hold it for an hour. As a *me*, in the here and now, we'd just have to see how well I could make it work.

The door opened, and the light came on. It was a slender, well-dressed man in his sixties – a butler, I figured. He walked in and looked around. He opened the bathroom door and looked inside. He opened the closet doors and shut them. Carelessly, I thought, he was carrying no weapon.

Unless it was his usual routine at that hour, he had heard me there in the room and was checking it out. He approached the door, turned to give the place a final look, flipped the light switch, and left. I waited another few minutes remembering that when one's body was properly arched, that position was really not difficult to maintain for an extended period.

Quietly, I let myself down. It had been too close a call. *Way* too close. I thanked the twelve-foot ceilings for the assist. I looked out the window to see if there had been any obvious uptick in activity – like in response to an alert. It seemed safe. I let myself

out onto the ladder and forced the window closed. Working through the rectangular opening I had cut out of the glass, I closed the lock. I added a thin bead of transparent glue to the edges of the piece and gingerly forced it back into the opening. It should not allow a draft or be seen immediately behind the curtain – probably be found at window washing time. That would be *never* in the places I had lived.

I reset the wiring from earlier and was ready to make my escape. I made my way down the ladder and, swinging from the bottom rung, let myself drop the several feet to the ground, aiming to land quietly up against the wall. The sudden jarring of my body caused bright pain in my shoulder. My retreat was a back track of my approach.

Less than ten minutes later, I was back in the front seat of my Little Black Bug. I listened, wondering if I could actually hear the pain coursing through my shoulder. It took several deep sighs to set my life back on track. I left heading away from the houses only turning back toward the city after I was sure I had not been followed.

It had been a good night's work without the necessity for bloodletting. Just for kicks, I would still listen to the list of procedures Jerry would have for me the next time we talked.

I had just slipped the law – breaking and entering and doing damage to private property. Police and judges have typically given private detectives wide leniency in cases where it served the greater justice. Still, it always left me with a bad feeling.

Secured back inside my room, I made myself comfortable – again – and created a world-class sandwich. I added a glass of milk and slipped into the recliner with my spiral pad. I began comparing the three blood types I had gathered. My right-handed printing was dreadful.

Oh, My! Karl could *not* have been Randy's father – and I

assumed Randy had discovered that. Perhaps it had been the point of his interest in blood types. How he might have found Karl's, I can't imagine. Maybe, family records in a lockbox. Why hadn't I just thought to ask Sally? Why Randy had felt a need to make that investigation, I can't imagine. I had to wonder what that revelation had done to his head. Had he informed his mother? I'd vote no – surely, she would have told me something that important. Finally, did it have any relevance to his disappearance? It certainly presented a problem if Karl planned to claim the boy as his own.

By morning, my arm was really paying the price. I downed a pill. I'd needed to renew that prescription. It had only contained a dozen pills. My doc would do that. He'd been a high school classmate with a fairly new Family Medicine Practice. I figured I was like family. I put the vial in my pocket for later in the day. I showered and dressed with less difficulty than before and drove the Bug to Jakes. I wanted to walk but figured I'd need transportation later in the day and wanted it to be nearby.

With early morning niceties out of the way, I settled in with coffee and the paper. I'd think about breakfast later. Betty brought me a day-old pastry. I got the hand to the forehead routine – a trade I'd not object to.

“Still a bit warm, honey. You keep close watch on it.”

I had opted to use the sling at least to begin the day.

I worked my way through the headlines and banners to the police reports – mostly petty things: names, incident descriptions, not much more. An article on the same page drew my attention –

Willy Platt, Alleged One-time affiliate of Frankie Giordano, in critical condition from gunshot wounds.

The story went on to refresh my memory. He had been a rising star in the Giordano organization. In a bold move three or

four years before, he had a disagreement with Frankie and left the area – California was the rumor. I hadn't heard about him since. I certainly didn't know he was back in the city – just visiting or reestablishing himself? Merely interesting; not relevant to my life. Well, it could be a disruption to Frankie's life. Not sure how that might enter into it all. I understood my interest was fed by the fact I once had a run-in with him – Platt – in a case involving illegal racetrack transactions when I was still a cop.

I left a message for Mooch. I'd just feel better if I knew what was up with Platt. I put a call into Sarge. He called right back. I asked him what he knew. Not much other than the department was bracing for trouble – the body bag sort of trouble. He reminded me that Platt was a really smart cookie – Harvard law degree, thanks to Frankie. He'd taken up residence on a small, mostly unimproved, stretch of land west of town. He didn't specify exactly where. A house, I presumed. *West* was between Frankie to the south and Platt to the north.

I ordered breakfast. Betty saw me using my left hand and gave me the wrinkled brow.

“Surprisingly better this morning, Betty.”

I moved my fingers as if to offer proof.

“I've always healed fast. As I kid, I was known for growing the fastest scabs on the block. The envy of all the other four-year old boys.”

“Sometimes you are simply disgusting – Thomas Cole. Wonder why you're not married yet.”

That had been as judgmental as I'd ever heard Betty.

I suppose it *had* seemed disgusting there among the bacon and sausage of early morning.

Mooch returned my call.

“What's up with Willy Platt being back in town?”

“Hush, hush! Nobody's talkin'. Generally thought it's the

early move toward a takeover of the south side. I'll keep my ear to the ground, but he's in no shape to take over anything this morning. You heard. Shot up. No charge, today."

"Thanks. Stay safe."

I'd pass that much onto Sarge later, even though it seemed he had already heard the scuttlebutt. My concern had to be that if Frankie were involved in my case, the distraction presented by Platt might cause unforeseen complications – dangers if, indeed, grandfather had the kid. I wondered if Platt had any connections – good, bad, or indifferent – with Karl Rakes. I supposed a two on one attempted takeover had a better chance of succeeding.

Sally called. I hadn't expected calls from her at ten a.m. I could tell from her voice it was something big.

"This morning there was an envelope taped to my front door. It is about Randy. Can you come over immediately?"

"Of course. Give me twenty minutes."

"Enter the hotel through the rear delivery door. Come up the back stairs. Do you know where they are?"

"I do. How do I get access? The bottom and top stairwell doors are locked?"

"Roger will be there."

"Roger?"

"An employee."

I figured that meant, 'bodyguard'.

As it turned out, Roger was about my age, red hair, nice looking, well dressed, and a neck that couldn't even be *estimated* with a tape measure. He escorted me up the stairs, entered the 7th floor with a key, proceeded down the hall, opened the door, and motioned me in ahead of him.

Sally met us. Roger disappeared. We sat across a low, glass coffee table in the spacious, everything white, living room – very wealthy womanish – very un-nine-year-old boyish. She stood

out like the star in her black dress. She handed me the envelope. I figured prints would be irrelevant, so I just accepted it. Weeping Sally was not inclined to talk, so I removed the note and read it.

Sally Rakes: You will stop the search for your son, or he will be killed. Comply with this request and you can assume he will be well taken care of. He will come to accept his new life. His unique educational needs will be seen to. Call off Cole!!!!

Benefactor

So, the boy, himself was the ransom. In other words, prepare for a life without him. Somebody else wanted him. I suddenly understood the clandestine requirements attached to the visit. The signature baffled me – whose benefactor?

“First, Sally, we have no idea if this information is valid.”

She handed me a photograph that had apparently accompanied the note – Randy, I assumed, standing, in his pajamas, holding a newspaper dated the day before. It was legitimate, I’d seen it. I noticed one interesting feature. He was holding the paper in such a way that the first two fingers on each hand were crossed in front. Out of the ordinary – clearly some sort of signal from a kid who was always thinking.

“Any idea what the crossed fingers might mean?”

She looked as if she hadn’t noticed and shook her head, patting at her eyes with her handkerchief.

“Anything else about the picture strike you as odd? He was clearly trying to send a message.”

“I hadn’t considered that. Yes, he would have done that.”

She took the photo and studied it, perked up a bit as if hope might have reentered the picture.

“Two things, maybe grasping at straws. He never lets his photo be taken while he’s wearing his reading glasses and look at

the odd way he's holding his mouth – open – again, uncharacteristic. And, I hadn't noticed before, but he's parted his hair on the opposite side – usually combed over to his right – here it is combed over to his left.”

“Excellent. No idea what any of that means, I suppose, other than he had clearly taken steps to create a message. Spend time trying to make associations with any odd aspects of the photograph. We should get the police in on this, you know.”

She shook her head. I figured daddy had said and she was not about to go against his wishes.

I left hoping the young genius had not over-geniussed those of us who had to decode his clues.

CHAPTER SIX

“Well, that was disappointing!”

I called Sarge from the phone booth I had used in the parking lot the night of the fender bender

“A development, Sarge. Sally got the note we’ve been waiting for. Different from what I was expecting. Still refuses to work with the cops.”

I described the situation.

“Also, she was directed to take me off the case – underlined. Not sure how that got out. We were holding that information really close to the chest.”

“You better make like you are off the case in a convincing fashion. Want a cop on your tail?”

“Wouldn’t refuse it.”

This might take more than the three Royal Crowns I had left in the refrigerator. I stopped at a mom and pop grocery I’d frequented over the years. Also needed bread and milk and sweet no-nos – a combo box of donuts, pastries and, snack-size pies.

I ran them by my room. It was eleven fifteen when I returned

to the Diner. I needed a new case – one that would be pursued out in the open – obvious. I called Gina, the private eye from my last case. She could be there in an hour. I had explained I needed a foil – a distraction – somebody appearing to need my help and arriving intermittently at the Diner asking for me or seeing me if I were there. She seemed eager.

I leaned in across the counter to Jake.

“Gina is going to return and help me with a case. Make like you don’t know her. Pass that on to Betty.”

He managed a knowing nod and wink. I just assumed he understood.

Gina arrived at two and I filled her in, apprising her of the possible danger. I told her she’d be paid her usual per diem plus expenses without asking what that was. I felt sure Sally would be good for it.

“You taking suggestions on this one?” she asked.

“I’m always *listening* to suggestions. Shoot.”

“If you believe you’re being watched, we can legitimize this meeting as a new client if you’ll follow me out to my car. Had a fender bender of my own. I can show it to you, hand you something on a scrap of paper, point a bit here and there, throw my hands in the air, you can nod, I can hand you a few bills – which you *will* return to me later – I’ll leave and you can go back inside.”

“What a nice touch. Let’s do it. As if I’m to go after the hit and run guy who damaged your car.”

We stood to leave. I had what I thought was a legitimate suggestion:

“After that, will you join me here for a meal?”

“Goodness no. I served that stuff for a week while I was undercover, remember. I know things.”

We shared a laugh.

Out front, we put on our show. I thought it went well. She drove away. I went back inside counting the bills in an obvious fashion. She would return intermittently.

I paid my tab for the day and left out the back door for home, making that stop at Gerald's – doctor Gerald Most – my friend from my youth – and got a bottle of pills – only after he examined my arm and swabbed it down with Iodine. He seemed to enjoy my pain – we had been fierce competitors during our teens.

Inside my room, I popped one of the last three pills in my original vial. Actually, I was impressed at how well I was doing. I removed my jacket, tie, and shoes and took a seat in the recliner.

It was going on four. Jerry would be finishing his paper route. I shut my eyes and waited a half hour before calling him.

As was typical, his greeting was enthusiastic.

“Hey, Tommy. Great to hear your voice. Did you hear that the new hood in town got shot – Platt's his last name? That connected to you?”

“I doubt it. You busy?”

“Never too busy for you. You need somebody to ride shotgun?”

“I was thinking more about a sneak into your aunt's malt shop for conversation and something sweet. I have some things to run by you.”

“By me? Sure. Say when.”

“First, I need to hear your mom's approval.”

He called out the situation and apparently held out the receiver to pick up her answer.

“Hear that. She's fine with it.”

“Tell her thanks. How's her new job going, by the way?”

“She loves it. I can tell she's much happier. Finances have eased considerably. That means she worries less about things, so

I worry less about her. I assume I'm to meet you *at* the malt shop considering all the clandestine stuff that seems to be going on."

"Right. Back door. Rap five times. Fifteen minutes."

"Roger and out."

So much for the leisure attire. I dressed and left.

There was a small room with a table and chairs just off the kitchen. Jerry thought it would be best because no lights would need to be turned on in the dining area. At that moment, I felt caught between two young Einsteins. Where had they been back when I was struggling with algebra?

"So, what you got for me, Tommy?"

The milk shakes were ready when I arrived, and a triple order of fries had been dropped in the grease to bubble and brown.

"My case involves a boy about your age with a brain nearly your size. I've never met him. He is missing. In a picture his abductors sent to his mother, he appears to be sending her clues. I wanted to tell you about them and see what message you might make out – the more the merrier, I guess."

I drew a stick figure mimicking the photo, emphasizing the peculiarities I had found. He took it and became quite thoughtful.

"It would be helpful if I knew something about the nature of his situation."

"Lives with his super rich mother. He was abducted from his apartment in a limo. Maybe chloroformed. Might be a custody battle. Can't be sure about that. I am told he is bright and clever. In the picture his hair is parted on the wrong side – to the left rather than right."

He nodded as if that had been helpful. I pointed out the features to be considered. He began immediately.

"The most obvious, I'd think, are the two sets of crossed fingers – 'double-cross'. The hair – perhaps 'left', or just 'L', or

'Part', or just the obvious, 'Hair', or any word beginning with 'L' or 'P'. Hitler parted his hair that way, didn't he? Maybe a substitute for 'hare', 'rabbit', 'bunny'. If the boy had been me, the well-combed hair could mean 'neat' or 'odd' or 'unusual'. Comb, maybe.

"The glasses. Hmm. 'Eye' or 'I', come to mind. Or 'frame', or 'glass' or 'lens'. Since he didn't usually wear them, maybe he was indicating he was being forced to do something he didn't want to.

"The mouth. Drawn the way you've done it – sort of a vertical oval – it might indicate 'O', or 'zero', or 'surprise', or 'singing', or 'talking'. If one characterizes it as more puckered than just open, it could be 'kiss' or 'bitterness'. Maybe 'pursed' as a reaction to bitter or acrid. That might translate to 'purse' or 'wallet' or 'money' – I think those are pretty far out, but you said everything. Here's an idea. Maybe, it represents something to do with 'blowing' or 'breathing' like a deep sigh, or saying, 'whew' or whistling.

"Any of that helpful?"

"Won't know until I know, I suppose. Certainly, lots more than I had. Let me put it to you another way – from another direction. Put yourself in his place – a nine-year-old. What sort of message would you be trying to send to your mother in his circumstance?"

"That is an excellent twist. Have some more fries. Let's see. The picture itself would show I was okay, so I could eliminate that.

The newspaper – a City paper – with the date would show I was still in the city. *Where* I was within the city would be the main thing, I guess. Maybe how I got there – some sort of a trail to follow. Maybe somebody to contact who I knew would know about the place."

"Interesting. All about location."

“Except for the crossed fingers. I was thinking, that might be a signal about the ‘why’ of it all – why he was taken – or some danger. I still think double-cross would fit either of those, don’t you?”

“I follow your logic. It would mean he had to have heard something that suggested that. Keep thinking on it, okay? You’ve given me lots of starting places. Things okay at my place?”

“Yes. I go in and check every day. You’ll need more ice cream when you return – and saltines.”

I smiled to myself. It appeared that soon, I would have been checked on to the point there would be nothing left to check on.

We finished the goodies and washed the glass containers. I peeled off a buck to leave on the counter.

“That should cover our next clandestine rendezvous as well – she allows me a family discount.”

At the back door, Jerry offered a gut-busting hug. I found myself returning it. I had enjoyed the time with him. I was back in my room by six thirty.

While I put on a pot of coffee – sweet always requires coffee – I called Connie and explained I was on a new case that required me to stay incognito for a while. She always understood. Her sister was coming to visit. They were close. I was happy for her.

I eased into my recliner – left arm still not happy about making that move. I took a stab at decoding Randy’s message – trying to assemble the clues into some meaningful statement or set of directions.

What are the basics? He’s a bright boy so could spin dozens of esoteric associations to his clues. Since he was bright, however, I hoped he’d realize keeping it simple was the best way to go. So, what would be simple?

‘Left’ or ‘hair’ would be the obvious message from the part

change. Hmm. Maybe both, that's an interesting idea. Left would be a direction. Left from where – turn left? Turn left off of what? Off of hair? Off of head? Off of pate? Off dandruff?

Suddenly feeling less than brilliant, I moved on to the glasses. The detective in me wanted to go with 'frame' and combine that in some way with 'double-cross'. Perhaps he was relating things he had overheard. That might be too sophisticated. I also liked some version of 'eye' – 'I' as an initial representing something – a name? 'C' from 'see' was another possibility.

How about the mouth? Most simply it would be the shape – an oval or circle. 'Zero' or 'O' – a street number, perhaps. Hole? Tongue repository. Ugh! Nothing was making sense.

If he had been awake during the abduction, I'd think he might be giving directions about the route taken, or landmarks they passed – but he had been unconscious.

Unconscious or not, I liked that last idea – clues to where he had been taken, after all, he wanted to be rescued. To be rescued, somebody had to know where he was. That made sense regardless of how he had come by the information.

If, by some set of circumstances, he had *not* been unconscious or had roused shortly after I saw him, he may have overheard things – things he would have had to have overheard to include them. It gave even more credence to the combination of 'double-cross' and 'frame' – things he reasonably could have overheard. It also might have spoken to a nagging question I'd had right from the start. Why hadn't a boy's limp body slid forward off the seat onto the floor the moment the limo jerked to a stop when the brakes had been applied? If he had earlier slipped his hand between the seat and the back for stabilizing himself, he might have been able to prevent the fall. It would confirm he had been awake from the start.

More and more I liked that new take on it – awake, taking

care of himself, observing landmarks, overhearing conversation. It was, of course, speculation but what private eye didn't live or die on speculation early in a case? It might also paint the picture of amateurs – not familiar with the use of chloroform.

The following morning, I'd go back to the scene of my accident and drive the avenue south, the way the right lane directed traffic. I'd keep my eyes out for anything that might be associated with the obvious clues as I was coming to see them. The percolator sputtered, signaling the coffee was ready. I turned out the lights and sat at the little table with a donut and a steaming hot cup – I often thought better in the distraction-free environment of the dark.

* * *

Again, I arrived early at the diner. I had left the sling behind. I still got Betty's hand to the forehead.

"Feels better today. Good. Any infection must have been handled."

"Thank you, Doctor Betty. Add your fee to my tab, today."

She brought coffee. I ordered something different to eat.

"How about a chicken fried steak platter this morning."

Somewhat humorously, Betty put her hand back on my forehead. The three of us enjoyed a laugh.

I lingered over the breakfast. Not bad. Perhaps, even good. I placed a buck and a half of Sally's money on the table and left to find the Bug. It waited for me as patiently as any of my vehicles ever had.

My mission was to drive the route south from the Hotel parking lot and see what popped up for me or out at me. I entered the lot and then circled back and stopped at the exit, setting my head to take in absolutely everything that might even be remotely connected with the clues that I'd already been over so many times.

I turned right, onto the avenue, keeping to the right lane so

I could do minimum speed. The boy had been laying with his head toward the driver's side facing the back of the seat. From that position, if he were able to look at anything, it would have been up and out the rear window – so I could discount things within ten feet of the ground – they'd have been blocked from his view by the seat. It was a view mostly to the rear and west – the driver's right. I realized he would be seeing the backs of things that I would be facing from the front as I drove south. I did what I could to make that adjustment. Might have to drive the northbound lane later to obtain a full front view of things.

My choice for the hair parting clue was split between 'left' from the change in his part and just plain 'H' from the word 'hair'. That might mean there needed to be something on my left that was some way related to 'H': a business name, a street name, a sign – maybe with an arrow. I hadn't realized how many signs there were along a major street like that. It would likely take several trips up and down.

I would be looking for something I could turn *onto* – like a street or driveway – or something I could turn *into* – a business parking lot, perhaps. 'H'. *Happy's Potato Donuts, Heep's Jeeps, Honest Abe's Short-Term Loans, Hyper-glide Transmission Repair* – it went on and on. I needed to decide how far I'd drive. At least to the city limits, I imagined. That would put me near Frankie's compound. It might depend on what I found along the way. I should have brought a street map.

Between where I started and the city limit sign, there were only two streets that began with 'H' – Hoyle and Harrison. As I drove, it came to me that street names were the best bet if he were telegraphing the limo's route. I returned to Harrison – the nearest and the obvious connection with his hair – and turned left – west – onto it. I noted the odometer reading.

The clue I had yet to deal with was the mouth shape – I had

decided on 'O' although I'd hold 'breath', 'nothing', and 'zero' in reserve. Hmm. Also, it might represent 'surprise'.

I drove on for several miles, nearing the west edge of the city. I stopped in front of a farm with lots of white board fences and perhaps as many as a dozen, low, barn-like buildings. There were magnificent horses in the fields and what looked to be an oval racetrack in the distance behind a sparse stand of trees. The arched sign above the entrance to the lane announced, *Quarter Horses, bred, trained, managed.*

From there, the street shriveled into a narrow country blacktop trailing off through unremarkable grassland. I turned back toward the city noting, I had driven just under four miles. That connected in no way with any of the clues. I would return and do it all over on Hoyle.

It was a residential street with middle class houses – occasionally, a few stores in clusters. Nothing suggesting an 'O'. Hoyle eventually ended in a *cul de sac*, so I headed back.

That had been the most disappointing ninety minutes of recent months. The clock was ticking. The poor kid. His poor mother.

Starting back at the parking lot, I drove it all one more time finding no reasonable alternatives to the path I had taken or the options that seemed to be available. I returned to the diner a bit down over it.

There had been several calls. New case inquiries. I ignored them and drowned my sorrow in three more cups of coffee. Yuk. Why *did* I slurp that awful brew all day long?

I had a burger and fries to take away the taste of the coffee and an RC to take away the taste of the burger. The cola had been a good alternative – *fresh and zingy*. I wondered if I might be able to sell that phrase to a cola company. Distracting *inanities* – I wondered if that were a word. If not, it should be.

I must have missed something in that picture. I called Sally.

“Sally, I need to examine that photo of Randy again. How can I go about that?”

“Best if you don’t come here, again. You know the pizza place two blocks north of the Hotel – *Pete’s Italian Pizza*? It’s Randy’s favorite spot, so if I’m followed it would not raise any suspicion.”

“I don’t know it, but I will find it. When?”

“I can be there in ten minutes.”

“I’ll need fifteen. I’m on my way. Thanks.”

She hadn’t tried to sneak around for sure – her smoked glass limo was parked to one side of the lot. I pulled in at the rear where the help parked, I assumed – mostly old clunkers.

I entered the building. She was nowhere in sight. I chose a booth in a secluded alcove and ordered a cola saying I was waiting for someone. The drink arrived with a basket of breadsticks cozied together by a red and white gingham cloth. I figured I had committed myself to an expensive hour or so.

Presently, Sally entered. She had evidently been waiting in the limo. Perhaps, she wanted to make sure I had not been followed. Reasonable. She was wearing a large brimmed black hat and sunglasses. If she were trying to disguise herself, I needed to tell her she stuck out like a sore thumb. She sat across from me, set aside the hat and glasses, and removed the photo from her purse.

“I should have had a copy made for you, Mr. Cole. I will have that done yet today. I’ve looked at it for hours. Anything special you’re after?”

“I’ve spent the day trying to run down all the possible clues I’ve been able to pull from it. Nada, I’m afraid.”

I held the picture up close and even donned my reading glasses. It was a humorous moment – as I did that, so did she.

We shared smiles.

We sat in silence. A waiter arrived.

“The usual, Miss. Rakes?”

“Make it two. One for the gentleman.”

She had apparently been honest about frequent visits. I scooted the basket across the table. She didn't partake. I did.

From the beginning, I believed our interpretation of the oddly shaped mouth was the weakest link in the set of clues. I slid the picture back across the table to Sally.

“Talk to me about his mouth. Anything that comes to mind? Nonsense is fine.”

“Nonsense you asked for. A circular pizza. An ‘O’. Maybe, ‘ooo’. Maybe a ball, although he's not really into sports – a magnifying glass. A record – a 45 record with the hole in the center.”

She held it up closer and squinted. I offered her my handy dandy, pocket magnifying glass. She took it and nodded, then bent in close. She slid it back to me.”

“Take a toothpick and trace around the mouth – follow every irregularity. Use the magnifying glass.”

I was intrigued. I did it. I repeated it several times.

“Who but a mom would have seen that. It's not an ‘O’ but a ‘Q’. The tip of his tongue is sticking out at the bottom right. You are magnificent, Sally. In fact, it fits in with a place I just knew had to be the place but for lack of a meaningful clue, I put on hold.”

We talked the few minutes before the pizzas arrived. I had mine fixed to go with a bottled drink. The waiter handed Sally the ticket and she signed it. So much for my intended chivalry. I thanked her. She thanked me. I smiled to myself wondering if that would be the remainder of my fee, above and beyond the retainer. I would not complain if it were.

I prepared to stand. She reached across the table and

placed her hands on mine.

“You really believe that clue will get my son back?”

“All I can say is, I believe we are closer than we have been up to this point. When all the other pieces of a jig saw puzzle have fit together, you can be pretty sure the last piece is going to fit.”

She nodded. I stood and left to my car. I needed to wait until dark. I turned on the radio and opened the box. My, it smelled good. My it *tasted* good. It seemed there really was something better about fifteen-dollar pizza.

A half hour passed. Sally exited the building and entered the limo. A few minutes after Sally left, a green Olds left. Odd, I thought. It had been there when I arrived. I had seen no one enter or leave it. Then, it just started up and left. The sun had just set. I wasn't close enough to see the occupant and hadn't thought to get a plate number.

I returned to Harrison Drive and drove to within a half mile of the Quarter Horse farm or ranch or center or whatever. It had been four miles. Hmm? Four miles times two – in and out – and that accounted for the extra mileage on the limo's odometer. Interesting. I stashed the Bug and crossed the road ducking my way through the white board fence and into the darkness of the field.

My goal was the ring of low buildings, which sat twenty yards back from the road. Some were plainly stables. Others were not. I was looking for a building marked, 'Kidnapped Kid Inside'. Several of the buildings had cupolas on top. I immediately became leery of them – ideal, armed, lookout posts with 360-degree field of vision. They were all dark behind half-length windows encircling the top.

Only two buildings had lights on. I bent low and crossed to one of them where I approached a window to get a peek inside and determine what the arrangement was in there.

Apparently, part of that arrangement was the muzzle of a gun stuffed into my back.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Drat the Dome Light!

The man inserting his gun into my kidney, reached around and emptied my holster.

“Are you the person I see to apply for a job?” I managed.

“Front of the building. Inside. Keep quiet.”

I suspected keeping quiet was better than keeping dead, so I did as he requested. I knew from training on two fronts that taking on one man immediately was better than taking on a group later. I figured I needed to be extremely cautious, however, because a boy’s safety was at stake. That convinced me to wait.

Inside, a second man approached me – a mid-level boss of some kind I figured. He had questions for me. None of my answers seemed to please him – I mean *no* sense of humor at all. A few initial slaps morphed into fists to the stomach.

Sometime later, I woke up in a small room lit by what light came in through a barred window to my right and a smaller, open, barred window in the door to my left. I had been propped against a wooden wall. My mouth was bleeding – I knew because I could

taste it. I blotted it on my jacket sleeve. My stomach screamed with pain each time I drew a breath.

My head cleared gradually. I managed myself into a standing position and examined both windows – the way too solid bars in particular. There was a low, iron bed with a mattress on the floor at the wall to the right of the door. Apparently, they required such facilities often. Not the way I had envisioned things beginning. In my eagerness to locate the boy quickly, I had not been as cautious as I should have been.

Checking my person, I found the only thing they had confiscated was my gun. That meant they had left most of my arsenal intact, which included the slender knife that made its home inside the belt to my holster. I had been disarmed dozens of times and all but once my holster was left in place. On other occasions, I had been relieved of my belt and shoes. Not that time, so I believed my situation was intended to be temporary. That could mean set free or killed. If I were to be asked, I had a preference.

I needed to think and use my remaining resources judiciously. I moved to the mattress and sat, my back against the wall. If I had been taken to the 'brig' in the compound, perhaps that was also where they were holding Randy – *if* they were holding Randy. My evidence for that was something less than strong.

It made me wonder just who 'they' were. The general layout of the city was that Karl Rakes controlled the northwest corner of the city. Frankie Giordano controlled the south side. There was a strip of disputed territory – a neutral zone – that ran west to east that separated them – sort of. If the street rumors were true – and Sarge seemed to believe them – the new kid on the block, Willy Platt, was trying to establish himself on the west side across that unclaimed band into the city. Quarter Horse Manor was dead center along the outer edge of that strip.

Pratt, according to the papers, had been attacked and put in the hospital just hours after the abduction – probably not a coincidence. Somebody had to be running his operation. I knew from before that Pratt was a horse man. My only contact with him had been over betting irregularities at the County Racetrack east of the city – the only legal gambling venue in a six-county area.

Why would Pratt be involved in kidnapping Randy? Interesting; Frankie was his grandfather and Rakes was, for all intents and purposes, his father. Add into that mix, Jerry's astute suggestions about 'double cross' and 'frame', and I had the first meaningful – if still fuzzy – potential leads in the case.

Who might be double crossing who? Who might be framing who? With that cast of characters, it would be up for grabs. The basic question had to be, who would benefit from the boy's removal from the scene? Recent events suggest it was most likely, Platt – assuming I was on his property. So, why Platt? How could that work to his advantage?

More immediately, I needed to determine how I could locate Randy. I stood and went to the window in the door. First, I ascertained what I could about the general setup. There was another room like mine in size directly across the hall from me and another next to it to my left, kitty corner from me. I assumed there was one across from it – next to me – four little holding rooms. The hall between them was six feet wide. There was a door on the wall to my right at the end of the hall. I assumed it led to the outside.

I called out in a normal voice; "Hey, anybody else in here?"

There was no response. I repeated it a bit louder. Again, no response. The silence suggested I was alone. I raised my voice.

"Hey. Whoever's in charge of this luxury suite, I need to use a bathroom and quick, or else I will be wetting myself and throwing

up right here.”

There was the expected rustle of a chair and movement from the bigger room at the left end of the hall. A large man with a gun approached. I repeated my situation for him. He unlocked the door and motioned me back the way he'd come.

“Thank you. Hope I didn't wake anybody else in here.”

“You're the only one here.”

We arrived in a large room that occupied the front half of the building – twenty feet square – where fist-man had ‘introduced’ himself to me. The guard pointed to a door to my right.

“Leave the door open.”

I entered and went through the motions of taking care of my business. As a twelve-year-old, in addition to holding hot water in my mouth before mom stuck the thermometer under my tongue, I had mastered barfing on command into the toilet – part of my unflinching strategy to get out of going to school. I found that it was like riding a bicycle. There was no window in the restroom, so I wasn't able to get a look out that side of the building. He moved me back to my room. He had been in no way abusive. I thanked him.

I left him with, “Black nine on the red ten, center column.”

He understood my reference was to the ongoing solitaire game on a table in the front room. He didn't even thank me.

With that distraction, he left, leaving the hall light on. My room immediately became far lighter. Dumb luck, but I'd take it.

I had garnered several bits of important information: the size and layout of the building. Comparing it with the several identically sized buildings I had seen, it confirmed the door to my right was an exit. Recalling from earlier, I had the sense my building was on the north edge of the circle, near the road. There were only the two of us in the building. His handgun was the only weapon readily available in the building. And, I saw the room key

long enough to get information about its specific shape and size. It was an older model key with a flat, double-indentation blade on a four-inch shaft.

I removed a short length of steel wire from the cash in my hidden, holster pocket and knelt at the door, beginning to fashion a key shape to release me. I noticed something of interest. My stomach now hurt so much that I no longer felt the pain in my shoulder. That silver lining thing, I supposed.

I inserted the 'key' a half dozen times before I found a design shape and size that worked – about par for me. I left it in the lock and went to the outside window – a foot square with three vertical bars set deeply into the frame. I would never be able to budge them. I had already removed my jacket. I picked it up and held it so when draped properly, it covered the window – rendering the opening dark when viewed from the outside. I figured there was enough light from inside to be easily seen through the opening.

As long as I was there, I would assume Randy was, also. I'd send a message into the darkness – certainly that was better than trying nothing. There was an identical arc of buildings in that direction across an open, circular expanse. My signal would be addressed toward those buildings. One of them showed light through the front window – the big room, I assumed.

I began moving my jacket, first covering and then exposing the window to mimic the Morse Code – light and dark – dots and dashes – 'R R' – the boy's initials. It made more sense than offering the old reliable, SOS. I repeated the message patiently for a half hour. I had no assurance he would see it or even that he was within ten miles of being able to see it. I had a feeling they would shield him from witnessing any violence – thus, me here and him elsewhere. I figured he knew the code. I was banking on it, in fact. I had no idea by what method he'd respond, especially

if his room had been darkened for the night.

Presently, something changed outside. A sound – higher than lower in pitch – mellow rather than harsh. Not a harmonica. A bird, perhaps? At night? I lowered my jacket and looked and listened. It rang a bell, but I couldn't pull it together. What was it? From where was the memory trying to bubble up? I remained baffled for several moments focusing on the wrong aspect of it.

Eventually, it came to me. The boys in Randy's building had mentioned he carried a wooden flute with him. As the boy spoke of it, he held his hands apart to show the length – eight to ten inches – an easy, if odd, carry even in pajamas – secured under the waist band.

Presently, I realized the sound was broken up into a series of stops and starts of two distinct lengths – dots and dashes. I was rusty at quickly deciphering the code so hoped it kept repeating. It did. Eventually I had it. *'RR here second W from N Who R U.'*

I did my best to forge an answer.

'Here to get U, RR. Ideas.'

'One man gun N room.'

'OK. Hang tight. Patience.'

I added a final admonition; *'SHHH'*.

He was in the second room – window – from the north end in which sat one man with a gun. The setup was like my building - he'd be next door to my left as I faced the door.

I was wearing a white shirt and a light tan jacket – not good nighttime escape colors. I had already proven that, I guess. I turned my jacket inside out exposing the dark brown lining. That would be better, at least. I slipped into it, zipped it up, and pulled the collar up around my neck.

I turned my makeshift key and it worked like a charm – well, more like a key, I supposed. Leaving the door closed, I called out.

“Sir – Guard – May I ask to have this hall light turned off.

Never could sleep with a light on.

Since leaving it on had been his error in the first place, he took the reminder and walked back toward me. The light hung on a short cord between my door the one across the hall from mine. It operated from a pull string. Being right-handed, when the guard reached up to take hold of the cord, his back was partially toward me. I put everything I had behind it and rushed the door, swinging it out into the hall. It knocked the guard to the floor. One, well-placed shoe to his jaw and he was out cold. For all the times I had been required to practice that move in boot camp, I had never used it. Another bicycle to be grateful for. I suddenly saw the utility of all those repetitions I had hated so. Live and learn. More appropriately, I guessed, *learn and live*. Interesting.

I took his gun and slipped it into my shoulder holster – a good enough fit. I dragged him into my cell where I secured his hands behind him with my tie and his ankles with more wire. I positioned him on the floor so his hands were also secured to a leg of the bed, which, itself, was bolted to the floor. I removed his shoes and stuffed one of his socks in his mouth. That may have not been kosher, Marine handbook, procedure. Hoped he didn't contract athlete's tongue.

I took his key ring and fastened it to my belt – there were only three. I moved back into the hall and locked the door behind me. Eventually, he'd free himself or be found, but I figured I'd bought myself fifteen to thirty minutes.

I left through that rear door. One of the three keys on the guard's key ring locked it. I squatted in the shadow by the steps to set a plan that would allow me to cross the twenty-five yards to Randy's building. Figuring it had been the light-colored jacket that had given me away, before, I was far better camouflaged that time. There still was my blond hair. What was, was.

Rather than stoop low and run, however, I went back to the

elbow crawl. That would be no picnic – arms or stomach. I moved slowly across the grassy expanse and into the shadow beside the steps at the rear of the boy's building. I stayed put for several minutes, catching my breath. That maneuver had saved my bacon on two occasions within the past forty-eight hours.

I moved up the steps on my knees to maintain a low profile and inserted the key at eye level, beseeching the Key Gods to make it work. It did. Carefully, I opened it a crack. Then a larger crack. The rear hall was dark, but the setup was like where I had been held. I could see clear through to the lighted front room and the duplicate guard sitting with his duplicate back to me at a duplicate table.

He stood and stretched, then refilled his coffee cup. He walked in my direction stopping just inside the hall to look left and right. He returned to his chair. I returned to breathing. I eased the door in and entered on my knees. I pushed the door almost closed, leaving it ready for a quick getaway.

One, two, doors – Randy's. I crawled to it and stood up on my knees. In a stroke of what was certainly pure genius, I offered up a very quiet signal – SHHH – my way of announcing my presence – referring back to my coded message. I inserted the key. It turned. The door opened in of its own accord. The boy was pulling on it.

I put my finger to my lips. Randy was clad in a dark blue robe over his pajamas and slippers. Perhaps, that better explained the easy presence of the flute. I closed the door, so I could set some ground rules with him. I whispered.

“First, are you okay?”

He nodded, mimicking my finger to his lips.

“I'm Tommy. Your mother sent me. You managed the greatest clues in the photo I've ever seen.”

He grinned.

“We will leave through the back door. Do you know how to elbow crawl?”

Of course, he did! He was a nine-year-old boy – veteran of a hundred battlefield fantasies.

“You will follow me. Do exactly what I do. *No* adlibbing.”

He grinned but didn’t explain or comment.

“Ready?”

He nodded. I reached for the doorknob.

From the outside, somebody opened the rear door I had used. I locked Randy’s door from the inside and motioned him onto his bed. I slid underneath. He quickly arranged his blanket, so it draped to the floor hiding me. *That* sort of adlibbing I could tolerate. He feigned sleep. *That*, too!

Lesson: When in imminent danger of being shot, it is best to be accompanied by a boy genius.

The man who had just entered walked to the front room and raged at the guard about having left the back door open and unlocked.

“You better hope the prisoner is still here – for *your* ever-lovin’ sake.” (Exact quote modified for virgin ears.)

They came back to Randy’s door. One of them rattled it as if to make sure it was locked. He unlocked the door, flooding the room with light from the hall. I assume they looked the place over and determined that a sleeping boy was all they needed to see. They left. They locked the door. I heard the backdoor slam and its lock being turned.

The hall light went off and the guard returned up front.

“Stay still,” I whispered.

And we did for another five minutes.

The boy’s rapid breathing matching my own.

“Okay. I’m coming out. We’ll give this thing another go.”

I arranged his two blankets and small pillow the best I

could, fluffing them to represent his body. That's how it was done in every 'escape from a cell' movie I'd ever seen.

I unlocked the door and moved Randy out into the hall ahead of me. I locked the door behind us. At the back door I unlocked it and, again, moved Randy out ahead of me.

"Squat in the shadow to the left of the bottom of the steps."

"I relocked the door and knelt beside him."

"You doing okay?" I asked.

"An honest answer would require a lengthy discussion about how you define, *okay*."

I smiled. I had had considerable experience with such a young mind.

"Remember, do *exactly* what I do."

He grinned again. I'd have to remember to ask him about that.

We kept close to the foundations and moved from building to building right around the circle they formed until we came upon a spot only yards from a long hedge that hugged the inside of the board fence beside the road – Harrison Street.

After a brief pause to eyeball him, we proceeded to the drainage ditch on the opposite side of the road and crawled the remaining distance to the waiting Bug. We stopped there and rested – laying back against the grassy incline. Drat that dome light. There was no way to open a door without it coming on. It wouldn't be bright, but it could easily be seen for a block through the pitch darkness.

"If I may borrow your robe, I will reach it up to cover the driver side windows, while you enter from the other side and reach up and flip the slide switch turning off the dome light. Got it"

I receive a look rebuking the insult. Of course, he *got it*.

It came together like a charm – well. Within another minute, we were on our way. I explained the next step.

“We will go back to my place for the rest of the night. In the morning I will need to check with the police and your mother before we take any next step.”

“Because the bad guy might think mother sprung me and go to her place for answers – and for me?”

“Exactly.”

There would be no way of hiding the grim facts and possibilities from Randy. I would not try.”

Presently, I pointed off to our right.

“I will make a call from that phone booth to let your mother know you are safe. You, please, stay low – out of sight.”

Her phone rang and rang with no answer. I became concerned and called Sarge at his home.

“Got Randy. Can’t get his mother to answer her phone. Will you send a car to investigate? The boy and I will be at my new number. We *will* be careful, so just save your breath. It would help if he had a set of duds – wearing PJs and a robe. Maybe a drop at the steps of my new place. And some Teaberry gum.”

I returned to the car.

“Some sort of phone mess up going on. We’ll need to call again later. We will go to my place – very temporary quarters, quite unlike what you are used to.”

“I’m a pony express rider at heart. Hard to imagine overnight conditions worse than what they endured. Shall I remain out of sight?”

“I think that will be best. What do you think?”

“Really? You are asking my opinion?”

“Yes. Should I assume you are not used to that.”

“You should, and I am *not*.”

Without further discussion, he settled into a sitting position on the floor in front of his seat – knees up and back against the door. It brought to mind just how small and vulnerable he really

was. I started the car and moved back onto the street.

“Just what is your profession, Tommy – may I call you Tommy?”

“You may. I prefer it. May I call you Randy?”

“You may. I prefer it.”

He had a wonderful, natural grin.

“I am a private detective registered in this city and this state.”

“You must be the best if my mom hired you. She is quite picky and only goes first class. Was your mother doting and overprotective?”

An interesting question fifteen minutes into our first meeting.

“No. She encourage my independence and expected me to pull my weight – whatever that could be at each stage of my development.”

“Wow! Lucky, you.”

“I had no father, so it was easy for me to accept that role.”

“I have no father, either. Well, I do, but he is not in my life. One of the saddest things for me.”

“I can relate. I won’t pretend to really understand – we are different guys in different situations.”

“I like you, Tommy. You have a last name?”

“Cole as in C-o-l-e.”

“Like Old King Cole.”

“I suppose, yes. Seems I lost my crown somewhere out there in the tall grass tonight.”

He chuckled.

I continued.

“Question: How did you avoid the effects of chloroform?”

“I use chloroform when adding to my insect collection, so the smell is familiar. When I awoke in my bed because somebody

was on top straddling me and holding my arms at my sides, I got a whiff of the stuff and assumed it was meant for me, momentarily. I managed a huge breath and began struggling – for effect. Once I could tell the cloth was over my face, I let myself go limp as if it had done its job. They put me into my robe and slippers and the man slung me over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. In the end, I was laid onto the rear seat of a vehicle, on my right side, facing the back. In terms of the best physics, that was backwards – my weight should have been to the rear.

“From there I could make out a few things through the back window. The scene kept moving, of course, and was quite disjointed – meaningless – so I concentrated on the street signs, most of which I could see plainly.”

“Remember the accident – the fender bender?”

“Certainly. I held onto the seat to keep safe. Thinking back, I recognize your voice – were you there?”

I explained – the brief edition. He seemed satisfied.

“When did you devise the clues?”

“Pretty much during the few minutes they were preparing me for the photograph. I insisted on having my hair combed – if they wanted it to look like me. Same for my glasses, which I hate to wear and only use when I’m reading or doing close up work of some kind. Doc says I’ll grow out of the need for them. I leave a pair in my robe for bedtime reading.

“I thought back over what I knew about the route and my location and just adlibbed as things proceeded.”

“I almost missed your ‘Q’ – was going on the assumption it was an ‘O’ or zero.”

“I knew that one was iffy from the beginning. I didn’t dare expose too much tongue or they’d think I was making a face, yet I needed to make sure there was enough to be seen. Sounds like I needed a little more.”

“Sounds like you managed to do it perfectly. Here I am. Did they treat you well at the horse place?”

“They didn’t abuse me in any way – fed me, provided water, allowed bathroom breaks, mostly left me alone. None of them were willing conversationalists, however. My impression was that they were mostly high school dropouts feeling invincible because they had a gun to wave.”

“Do you believe you overheard anything useful. I guess I’m not even sure what I mean.”

“I often find that posing esoteric questions to myself forces me to grow and consider things I had never considered before. So, let’s see; I may have. During the ride in the vehicle – a limo, I assume – all limos smell alike – the man and the woman talked all the way – like a lover’s spat, I guess. She was on him for getting involved in playing one big bad guy against another big bad guy. It seemed he really worked for somebody other than the person he had abducted me for – pardon that prepositional placement. It’s why I went for the ‘double cross’ idea in my clue.

“Other comments made me believe my abduction had something to do with framing somebody – making it look like I had been taken by one somebody when really I had been taken by somebody else. I don’t have any specifics on any of that.”

“You’ve said enough, so I can fill in the blanks. That was excellent detective work.”

“Really? Thanks. I just did what came to me – of course, lots of good things just come to me – I got this big brain thing going on.”

“One thing that has baffled me. How did you manage to have your flute with you this evening?”

“I often play it in bed after I turn off the light. Soothes me. Just before I fall asleep, I slip it inside my pajamas at the waist band to protect it from getting mixed up in my sheets. Actually, I

guess, it's like most kid's blankies – it offers me a sense of security to have it with me in bed. Dumb, I know, but you asked. Nobody other than mother knows that.”

“Thanks for sharing, then. Your secret's safe. One more question – your grin when I referred to ‘adlibbing’.”

I got the grin still another time.

“Mother says that *all* the time. I tend to believe I know better than other people, so I often reconstruct direct orders to fit my vision – it just seemed humorous when you came up with the very same, word for word, caution, I guess. It was like you knew me.”

I drove a circuitous route, so it took nearly a half hour to get to my new home sweet home. As I pulled into the alley from the east, I saw taillights exiting at the other end of the block. I hoped that meant supplies had already been delivered for Randy.

“Let me get out first and look around.”

He didn't respond and stayed put. There was a large brown paper grocery bag on the bottom step. I returned to the car and carefully opened his door. Because of his awkward position on the floor, I reached in under his arms and lifted him out – like a sack of feathers.

I moved him up the stairs ahead of me as I carried the bag in one hand and the gun in the other. I determined that the door was, in fact, still locked. I unlocked it. We entered, and I secured the timbers across the door. At the top of the stairs he had worked his hand inside my belt and was gripping it tightly. The drapes were all closed – it was how I kept them. I flipped on the lights

Randy released his fingers and gave the room a quick once over.

“A neat place. How long until I get to talk with mother?”

“Honest answer; I don't know. Her phone line will need to be fixed.”

“I appreciate honesty – not a whole lot of it in my life.”

How to make a guy feel guilty, 101.

I handed him the brown sack.

“I assume new clothes for you. See what you think.”

He dumped it out on the table. Perhaps he really was only nine years old!

“Not bad – I love them, actually – like real boys’ clothes. And gum. My favorite! And some candy bars. Thanks.”

“Your welcome – later you’ll need to thank a cop we all call Sarge. You’ll probably meet him tomorrow.”

He nodded.

I pointed to the kitchenette – the rear, the alley side of the room.

“Food if you’re in the mood – Royal Crown and ice cream make a pretty good float. Sandwich makings. Fruit.”

Before we could move in that direction, there was a rap on the door. I doused the lights and drew the boy close in front of me, standing back against the wall next to the door. I put my hand on my gun.

Rap, rap rap rap, rap rap. Randy turned and clung to my waist. I removed the gun from my holster.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Unraveling the Convolutions

One rap, three raps, two raps – 132 – the last three digits of Sarge’s badge number. I went to the door and rapped 9-3, leaving out the final, third number. Presently, there were four raps – the last of the three in my old badge number – 934. I opened the door. He entered. I turned on the lights. He handed a cardboard box to Randy but spoke to me. Randy took the box to the table, knees on a chair, and began going through it. Apparently, a selection of games, books and other things appropriate for a boy his age. Good old Sarge.

We spoke in low tones. He began.

“His mother is missing. Either an inside job or she knew her abductor – no forced entry. The only thing out of place in an otherwise impeccable apartment was a book on the floor in the living room.”

“Title?”

He took out his pad.

“A kid’s book: *The Day Carl Lost his Goose.*”

“It seems leaving great clues runs in the family, Sarge.”

“I’m not with you.”

“We seem to have three probable players here. Frankie, Willy and ____.”

“Ah! *Karl* Rakes with a ‘C’.”

“Not sure how she’d have retrieved that book while being abducted,” I said.

“Evidence suggests she was reclining on the boy’s bed when it came down – in his room, near his bookshelf. I suppose she might have been looking at it. Memories, maybe.”

“That also suggests it wasn’t that she opened the door for somebody she knew but required an inside contact. My vote goes to a man named Roger. I’m not sure of his role in the family.”

Randy had been listening.

“Roger is our driver and bodyguard. He has a room with a private entrance out into the hotel hall as well the door at the end of the hall in our apartment. Wears dark suits, vests and ties. Carries a gun in a shoulder holster. Always smells good.”

“Do you know how she came to hire him?”

“My understanding is that my grandfather insisted that he provide protection for mother as a condition of him not bringing her home when she left at eighteen. Not sure what their spat was about – teen angst and an unsympathetic father is my best guess. She was old enough to be out on her own, legally, you know,” he added as if needing to defend her.

“I suppose that puts her in danger, doesn’t it?”

“We have to proceed on that assumption, son,” Sarge said.

Randy wasn’t finished.

“I believe there is one more thing you should know about that book – will probably just confuse things mightily – the name of the goose is, Roger.”

Sarge and I exchanged glances. Coincidence?

Randy kept working at the box – stoic in his response. Sarge left. I went to stand beside the boy, and he grabbed me around my waist and began crying – chest heaving, sobbing, tear gushing, crying. It presented a first for me. I did what I felt was right, just standing there and holding him close, gently rubbing his back and waiting it out, silently.

After a while, the sobbing stopped, and he gradually went limp in my arms – cried himself to sleep. He was exhausted. I should have anticipated that. I carried him to the bed, removed his slippers, and pulled the sheet up around him. It looked like the sleeping bag or the recliner for me. I'd try the recliner first.

In just a few hours the sun would be up. I needed to catch what sleep I could.

* * *

'What sleep I could', lasted until eight – quite a sleep-in for me – especially on Saturday. I glanced over at Randy, still asleep and positioned just like I'd left him. I needed a shower so took care of that. After a quick shave and fresh clothes, I felt nearly human again.

Decisions: should I venture out with the boy to Jakes or fix things there? What balance between safety and sanity should I institute? I would wait to check in with Sarge until after the boy woke up.

Randy stirred, turned onto his back and opened his eyes. I wondered how he would react to the start of the new surroundings.

He turned his head toward me.

"Oh . . . Yeah . . . Terrible stuff . . . Safe here."

He rolled onto his side and continued.

"Any word on mother, yet?"

"I haven't called, waiting for you to wake up."

"I'm awake," his subtle way of telling to get my behind in gear, I assumed.

“First things first: how are you feeling?”

“Frightened, anxious, uncertain, confused, relieved – I suppose relieved most of all. I didn’t thank you last night. Thanks. I understand you risked your life to rescue me.”

“You’re welcome. Hungry?”

“I suppose. I heard you in the shower. Can I take one? I feel quite scudsy.”

“Be my guest. You can tell which towel I used. Only one bar of soap, I’m afraid.”

“You got cooties?”

“Nope. Got vaccinated in third grade.”

He offered his first smile of the day.

“Okay on the bar of soap, then.

He moved to the bathroom. He was a shower singer – how wonderful. *Ragg Mopp* had never been belted out with more gusto. I relaxed a bit. I figured for a lad who was ‘frightened, anxious, uncertain, confused and relieved’, a good distraction was in order – Jake’s it would be. I called ahead to make sure everything was safe and normal. Mooch had been in and left a message. Betty said she had bravely launched an attack with Lysol and the air was no longer noxious. Jake had bestowed a purple heart on her – most likely a raspberry Danish. I alerted them to our arrival and cautioned them to keep the celebration to a minimum – we were in hiding.

Showered, dried, and outfitted in new duds, he reentered the big room.

“That was great, like I imagine it would be at camp – rustic one might say. You know the best part, of course.”

“I guess I don’t.”

“I didn’t have to brush my teeth. I’ve always hated that. I fully understand why it is necessary – but, then, so is dying and I’m not really fond of that idea either.

I was beginning to see glimpses of his mother's sense of humor. I had to admit, I was interested in the relationship the two of them had – a fastidious mother raising a nine-year-old male. My, my!

“If you approve, I'd like for us to have breakfast at my favorite diner.”

He set his feet, crossed his arms across his chest, and put on a frown.”

“No!”

I was taken aback. It had not been like the lad I'd come to know. He held it for a long moment, then broke a broad grin.

“Just kidding. I've always wanted to just say, ‘no’. I must say for those few seconds it did feel great.”

I took it as a compliment – he felt comfortable enough with me to give it try.

I called Sarge. He said the deed to the land where the Quarter Horse farm is, was under a name unknown to the police but did reflect Platt's wife's maiden name. Platt was playing it smart – unless, of course, Platt had nothing to do with it. Neighbors reported that the farm buildings had gone up on open fields over a period of one week just two months before – perhaps a reason the buildings were all designed alike – pre-fabricated in halves and trucked in, I imagined. Pre-fabs were becoming increasingly popular in rural areas and small towns.

“Maybe follow up on the purchase of those buildings, and the construction company,” I suggested.

Sarge seemed to appreciate the suggestions.

Randy and I set off in *Bug*. He assumed his place on the floor without prompting.

“I like the car – it's like a little kid's peddle car with a motor.”

Randy, like Jerry, saw wonder and possibilities in absolutely everything that careened off his brain. I was uncertain

if getting them together would be a good thing – didn't want to set up feelings of resentment in Jerry – well, in either of them for that matter. At any rate, I would not intentionally expose Jerry to additional danger.

The Bug slid into her parking spot as if she remembered where and how. They had taken me at my word and not made a big deal over our entry through the back door. I pointed to the booth. He pointed to the reserved sign. I pointed to it and then to me. He offered his wonderful grin as he slid in opposite me – that put his back to the front of the room and the top of his head six inches below the high back of the booth. He was concealed from forward eyes. I made the introductions.

Betty was there immediately with her hand to my forehead. "Back to normal. Thank goodness."

Quite humorously, Randy had a question:

"Do only handsome middle-aged gentlemen get your attention or is there some available for a cute as a bug nine-year-old?"

"Honey, I got so much attention for cute as a bug nine-year-old that you'll soon be running down the street, screaming, to get away from it."

Chuckles all around as Randy got palms to his cheeks and a kiss to his forehead. He delighted in it. It made me wonder.

"The breakfast menu is painted on the wall above the grill. The lunch and dinner menus are painted on the wall above the soda fountain."

"I have already ascertained that."

Of course, he had. Had I learned nothing from my association with Jerry? Very likely, he knew Jake's shirt size and the brand of powder with which Betty plastered her face every morning.

We ordered. Betty brought me a paper.

“Front or back?” I asked Randy holding out the two sections of the paper.

“Back. Funnies. I assume you are searching for information related to my mother.”

“I am and will share whatever I find.”

He opened the paper to the funnies and spread it across the entire table. Finally, something about him that seemed nine years old!

It interested me that I really wanted Randy to like Jake’s food. It arrived. We ate. I soon had his report.

“Love the hash browns – have the hint of onion flavor. The eggs, while tasty, are not really scrambled in the classic sense – they are more an egg omelet cut into little sections. Very good sausage patties, of course that’s more on the packaging company than the cook. Hard to ruin sausage. The buttermilk biscuit was delicious, brown and firm on the outside and yet light on the inside. The gravy, frankly, is way too thin – a good amount of sausage pieces but way too thin. Either half the grease or double the flour.”

“Your over-all rating – A to F? the entire breakfast.”

“Okay, but you realize it is a useless and perhaps even deceiving rating. “I will give a B- – make the improvements I suggested and an A- is a real possibility.”

He had been serious. Jake and Betty had been listening. Betty seemed to think the rating was high – Jake a bit low, but he took it in good humor. Randy looked across the table into my face.

“I just realized that I have neither my check book nor cash. I’ll be good for it.”

“A secret between us – your mother gave me an advance large enough to keep us both in breakfasts until your children are my age.”

“I’ll accept that, but when all this is over, I’ll treat you.”

“Sounds good to me.”

A nine-year-old with a checking account?

When we were finished, Betty cleared the table and directed a wink at me and a question at Randy.

“So, what kind of pie do you need to finish things off, this morning?”

He looked at me.

“Is she serious – pie for breakfast?”

“This is Jake’s World. The rules are perhaps a bit different here than you may be used to.”

He seemed eager to embrace them.

“Can you please tell me what kinds you have.”

She reeled off a half dozen. He gave the choice his thoughtful consideration.

“Question, if I were to order peach pie, could that be served cold with ice cream?”

“It could. You know, that’s Tommy’s favorite dessert.”

He looked at me for verification. I nodded. He broke a grin.

“That, then, and another for my friend, here. Did you know he saved my life last night?”

“I didn’t, but I am not at all surprised. He’s saved quite a few lives since I’ve known him.”

He sat and stared into my face. I could see his wheels turning but understood they were private, so I didn’t intrude.

Like Jerry, Randy was a dawdler when it came to dessert. Perhaps it was the age. I tried to match him bite for bite. I still finished first.

I wondered what I was going to do with him. I had detective stuff to keep after. Like most stores frequented by boys, Jake’s had a comic book rack up front. I wondered if they would be too low brow for him. I sent him forward with a buck to make purchases. He returned with ten, needing a penny for tax. Perhaps, at his age, there just was no *brow* where comic books

were concerned.

“This will be stupendous. Thanks. Here’s how I approach this genre of literature.”

He assumed I would be interested. I liked that.

“I read them through for the story and emotion – usually either humor or exhilaration. Then, I go back through them to make the necessary corrections – plot flaws – dialog slash graphics disconnect and rate the piece for its overall acceptability for most boys my age. I prefer a one to eight scale – no sitting on the fence in the middle – either tips toward okay or not okay.

“A change in direction before you get involved in your literature, Randy. How often do you see your grandfather Giordano and your father, Karl Rakes?”

“As seldom as possible. Grampa Frankie has legal right to have me one day every four months – three days a year. I feel very uncomfortable in his presence, even though it takes a panel truck to transport all the stuff he gives me each time. Karl gets me two non-holiday weekends a year unless I come down with my periodic fever. Mom has final say, the way it seems.”

“You refer to Frankie as Grampa but Karl as Karl rather than dad or father.”

“It is a less than pleasant conundrum.”

“And, also, quite a puzzlement,” I added with a smile.

He understood my little jab at his penchant for using words most people didn’t understand. He offered a quick smile.

Had I said, *Penchant?* I didn’t realize intentional loquaciousness was a communicable affliction. Clearly it must be!

“I responded to the ‘conundrum’ remark, with – ‘be glad to talk about that anytime you want.’”

He looked me in the face and offered a single, less than enthusiastic nod. Clearly, this was not going to be that anytime.

He laid his back on the seat, knees up, and began exploring

his new treasures. I called in reinforcements for team-coffee and began trying to sort through the likely roles of the big three – Frankie, Platt, and Rakes.

I had wondered, of course, who had shot me and why? At that point, my studied conclusion was it had been HH and Red Head for their own purposes rather than in the service of anybody else. They panicked when they saw my private detective card with the insurance information and hoped a carefully placed, non-lethal, slug would make me forget anything I had seen. In fact, Red could have been driving and HH in back doing the shooting. I assumed they couldn't afford a hit squad.

More basically, how did all three families become involved in what should have been a simple, 1,2,3 kidnapping? It was Frankie's grandson, Frankie's limo, perpetrated by one of Frankie's part time henchmen – HH. It seemed odd that Frankie would be willing to lay that kind of trauma on his own grandson and toward what end? Jerry's admonitions came to mind again – double-cross and frame.

It seemed unlikely that the man who believed he was the boy's father would do that, either. It was, I had learned, *his* employees who had been staking out my apartment. HH's Red Head who had assisted with the abduction had transferred herself to one of Karl's goons. Why?

Why would Karl have his people at my place if he weren't involved in some way. Perhaps, when he discovered I was working the case, he figured there was a chance, if I found the boy, I'd take him there and they could take him. Plausible but uncomfortable. If Karl wanted to implicate Frankie (frame) and get him out of the boy's life, perhaps he could then move in and get more time for himself. It all seemed fuzzy – iffy.

My translation of what Randy overheard, however, was that it had been Karl who issued the original contract for the kidnapping

before Pratt got involved. More thinking.

Karl and Frankie had never seen eye to eye on anything, the way it seemed – Sally moving out, Sally marrying Karl, Sally getting a divorce. And Platt: if he could stir the hatred between Frankie and Karl, maybe he could gain some advantage – a foothold across the center of the city. He got shot up, so whatever his intention had been, it hadn't seemed to work. On the other hand, Platt *had* ended up with the boy at the horse farm before I foiled things. What had the plan been for Randy? There had been no ransom demand – perhaps it was something far more sophisticated than that. Perhaps it involved reshuffling the power structure in the city – cede me so many blocks and I'll not harm your grandson. Pretty gutsy if that were the plan.

Sally's abduction seemed out of place – a last minute addition to the plan, perhaps. Maybe totally unrelated. If Frankie and Karl both wanted more time with Randy, I couldn't see how kidnapping her could possibly be to either one's advantage. With the boy gone – presumed for ever – perhaps Karl saw it as an opportunity to win back the love of his life – by kidnapping her? Confusing! Doubtful.

So far, it appeared to be a case in which all the principles were losing – except Sally, perhaps. She had implicated Karl – and perhaps Roger – by leaving the book behind. The cops were on that. Where would Roger have been at the time she was taken? It's possible that he could have been in on *that* as well. He had spent his life close enough to organized crime to know playing one side against the other was dangerous business. Hmm?

It left my head spinning. That reminded me to take another pill.

The one possible player my musings had not considered was Dr. Boyle – Sally's one-time companion. That had been close to a decade before and Sally implied the relationship had not

lasted long. I believed I needed to talk with him. What would I do about my young charge? I'd call good old 'uncle' Sarge.

I moved to the phone and spoke in low tones.

"I need a safe place for my you know what for a couple of hours or so. Any Ideas?"

He came back.

"Translation: Sarge, will you take him off my hands for a while so I can stick my nose into places that may well chop it off.

"Of course, I will. He's a principle in the hottest case precinct has going right now. All quite legitimate. He can ride with me. Let me take my break at the diner. I'll come in so he can get to feel safe with me, then he can ride with me for a while. It should be fun. I'll park in the alley and come inside. Prepare him, of course."

"Thanks. All of the above. How soon?"

"A half hour. Tell Betty I instruct her to put on a new pot of coffee timed for my arrival and dust off a clean to-go cup – large."

I did. Betty loved it. She'd known the man for many years and he always treated her like a princess – an older model princess but a princess.

Randy sat up and crossed his arms on the table – inquisitive not defiant.

"So, I'll be with Sarge for a while."

"Elephant ears!"

He grinned.

"I wish. Did you know elephants can hear sounds two octaves below what humans can?"

"I did not. It would be interesting to know what a growling stomach sounded like to them."

Another grin and a nod of approval for my esoteric – his word – association to his fact.

"I wonder if Sarge will have any new, useful leads on my

mother. I do hope they are not harming her or making her uncomfortable. Comfort is right at the top of her personal priorities.”

I felt sad he hadn't added, 'right after her love for me'. More and more it seemed they had a mother slash son, business-type understanding instead of a loving family relationship. Surely, she had not staged all this to distance herself from him – fake her assumed death and leave him behind – freeing herself from the responsibility.

She had clearly not loved the man she married. And it seemed the purpose of that marriage might have been solely to have him father a child, cementing her independence from her father. She hated Karl. I had to wonder how – deep down – she felt about the son of the man she had used and now hated.

I was letting my fantasy life run out of control. Speaking of fantasies, I needed to call Connie that evening.

Sarge arrived to a handshake from Jake and a kiss to his cheek from Betty.

“That was nice, what you and they did just now,” Randy offered.

Sarge turned to respond to the boy.

“Yes, it was. They have been good friends for a long time. I bought Tommy his first cup of coffee as a new cop, right here. Been like family for a long time.”

Sarge pulled in beside me.

“Have you ever ridden in a Police Car, Randy?”

“My mother has discouraged the idea during several cautionary lectures about my upcoming adolescence.”

“How old did you say you were, and what stunted your growth?”

Randy turned to me.

“I like your mentor, Tommy. He doesn't seem either stuffy

or gruff to me at. Go do your thing. I promise not to harm him.”

I raised my eyebrows. Sarge chuckled, his big tummy jiggling on for some time.

“Meet back here or shall I pick him up at the precinct?”

“If I have a vote,” Randy said, “I suggest at precinct. I can’t imagine how great it would be just strolling around in a sea of policemen.”

The arrangement complete, I urged Sarge out of the seat so I could leave. He handed me a parking pass. I would have forgotten – my ‘real’ car had a permanent, visitor’s parking decal.

Randy stood and administered a hug. It seemed to have become a tradition between us. Two boys with big heads and big hugs. That couldn’t be all bad. Made me wonder how cat was doing. I got a craving for a tuna salad sandwich. I needed to just be on my way.

CHAPTER NINE

Fathers, Fathers, Everywhere!

I called ahead for a time to see Dr. Boyle, explaining quite honestly what I was about. He cleared time immediately. I was at his front door in thirty minutes and in his office in thirty-one. I guessed him to be in his early forties – nice looking, slender, fun clothes appropriate for kids. His smile was soft and genuine and his handshake firm and lingering. He looked me in my eye as he spoke. He directed me to a seat in his consultation room.

“Your phone call disturbed me. Sally Rakes is missing?”

“And like I said, that needs to be kept confidential. The only clue we have points to Karl Rakes her former husband and the presumed father of her son, Randy. I have several sets of blood types I’d like you to look at and speculate about.”

“I laid them out on the desk.

“This is the mother’s. This is Karl Rakes’. This is the boy’s. What stands out to you?”

He leaned forward and took time to thoughtfully examine them. He sat back in his chair.

“You are expecting one response; I will give you two. First, Karl Rakes cannot be the biological father. Second, considering the situation as it was almost ten years ago, the most likely candidate for father, born out by these findings, is me.”

He removed a card from his wallet and laid it on his desk. He spent the next five minutes pointing here and there among the assemblage of data explaining his statement – a mini course in genetics, which shed one possibility after another until only one likely probability remained.

“And that is why, I suggest there is a 99% chance that I am the boy’s father. Does Sally know?”

“She may suspect. She has not shared that with me. Of more concern to me is that when Randy became interested in blood types and their characterization a few years ago, I’m sure he must have discovered the truth about Karl – that he is *not* his father. Having come to observe how his mind operates, I would bet the farm his research – process of elimination – has led him to you. Of course, he would not have had your blood to test. He may not even know of you, specifically other than a man in his mother’s life. Have you had occasion to meet the cunning young man and if so, did he scratch you?”

It received a quick smile.

“I have never seen the boy. I have had no contact with Sally since she sent me away. She asked I not make contact and I have adhered to her wishes. The hardest thing I have ever had to do. I loved her with every cell in my body. To this day I have no solid information about what happened. I supposed Karl offered her a better deal somehow – his money, perhaps, although I’ve never really believed that. I have to believe it entailed some threat to her safety or one of her loved ones – sister or the boy, perhaps. I have even harbored the romantic idea it was I she was protecting. It is the saddest mystery of my life.”

“So, she has not contacted you within the past twenty-four hours?”

“No.”

He looked surprised.

“You have reason to believe she might. I thought she had been abducted.”

“She left a clue which might implicate Karl. The larger case is strewn with apparent double-cross, framing, disloyalty, and a brewing mob war. One theory is, her abduction may have been of her own doing – a way to flee her responsibilities forever. My impression is that she is a decent woman – overwhelmed, but decent. I believe she would find a way to see that her son is taken care of. The only way that could happen – assuming she knows Karl is not the father – would be if she placed him with his real father – that would keep him safely away from the two crime families in her life. It seems it would put you squarely in the middle of it all. If that should be the case we are expecting further information verifying the facts.

“So, I have come as much to alert and warn you as to have you help establish Randy’s parentage – though it had been my best hunch.”

“I have had no contacts from anybody. You seem to believe I may be in danger.”

“Only if Frankie and Karl know of your biological role in things as they fight each other for custody. As I noted, it would be you, not either of them, who would have first chance for custody of the boy if she does not return.”

“Have you considered that one or both of the families might have decided to get rid of Sally in order to open things up for a custody battle – grandfather vs father.”

“I have. However, I am sure Frankie would never intentionally harm his daughter, which leaves Karl – rejected

husband – as the bad guy of choice. Also, I don't believe Frankie would put his grandson through the terror of being kidnapped.

"There is another man, Platt, in the picture – a young, ambitious, mobster, formerly affiliated with Frankie and only recently back in the city as his own man. It is certain he is the one who kidnapped Randy while Karl was out to possess the boy and make it look like it was Frankie. If he incited problems between Frankie and Karl, it might be to his advantage as he attempts to usurp some of their territories."

"Complicated!"

"Yes, mindboggling, in fact, and way too full of suppositions – what ifs.

"Well, doctor, I will not occupy more of your time. I saw lots of running noses waiting in the outer room. I appreciate your help. Give me a call if you get an idea, want to talk, or need my help."

"I stood, we shook, and I turned to leave."

"Would you allow one fully misplaced, nosey question – no response required, of course?" I asked.

"I suppose so. You have ways of intriguing me, Mr. Cole."

"That Fort Knox like lock system on the over-sized, double back doors at your house. Why? It's been driving me nuts."

He offered a broad smile.

"I collect sports cars with celebrity histories. The door leads to a sizeable underground space in which they are kept – a huge vault, I suppose."

"I see. Well, thank you."

I turned again.

"One more thing. The day I was snooping at your place, there were two armed men walking the grounds. I *suppose* that's a question."

Another smile.

"Jackson Security. I always have them present when a

vehicle is scheduled to arrive or be traded or sold. They accept it, put it away, and lock it up. Earlier this week I received car number eleven, which is worth an obscene amount of money.”

“Thank you so much. I just may begin sleeping again. They were loose ends that turned out to be neither really loose nor ends, were they? Thank you for taking my intrusions in such good humor. By the way, I’m into small, imported, cars myself, I drive a ’48 Volkswagen Bug.”

We shared a chuckle and he patted my back as he walked me to the door.

“I will be in contact with you if I think of anything, Tommy. It is I who must thank you.”

I acknowledged the receptionist and left. There was one way, way, way out possibility elbow crawling its way through my gray matter. The good doctor had initiated all of it, so he could get custody of his son and thereby get his hands on Sally’s fortune to help satisfy his unquenchable thirst for expensive cars. Like I said, way, way, way out.

There was a phone booth at the end of the block. I called Jenny Oliver, the psychiatrist and Sally’s older sister. She could see me if I got to her office within the hour. I did.

“Thanks for seeing me. First, Randy is free from his kidnapper and safe. Second, I’ll just say it – Sally seems to have been abducted, leaving a clue that Karl may have been the perpetrator. First question: any chance she would fake such a thing to rid herself of the responsibility of raising her son?”

She skipped the question but responded.

“Any demands – ransom?”

“No. I have to wonder who they’d be directed at?”

“Frankie?”

“If that’s so, I doubt if we’ll ever know.”

“You’re right, I suppose, she said. “I am interested in the

'fleeing responsibility' scenario you propose, Mr. Cole. Original with you?"

"Yes. Based strictly on supposition – hints from my time with the boy. The relationship between Randy and his mother seems – what – artificial – a dance around sincerity. A finicky, comfort seeking, perfectionist female, having to raise a brilliant – if in most ways typical – nine-year-old boy. As I remember, nine-year-old boys are a species unto themselves – willingly allowing adults in their lives only for sustenance and support. I just don't see it happening, happily."

"Perceptive. Are you also implying Sally was in on the kidnapping – a way to secure the boy someplace else – like with his grandfather or father."

"An intriguing possibility, isn't it? You may or may not know that Karl Rakes is not Randy's father. I have discovered that through blood-related information and confirmed it with the probable father – a physician."

"My, you are good, Mr. Cole. I am so glad to hear the boy is back safe and sound."

"Safe – how sound will probably not be known for some time. He is going through really tough times."

"Yes, of course. How can I help?"

"I am going to trust that if you have information about Sally's whereabouts you will tell me or the police. Randy trusts you. If he wants to talk will you see him?"

"Of course, in person or by phone – *your* call on that – Randy's continued safety and wellbeing is our first priority. May I ask where he is."

"I think that is premature. I can assure you that he is safe and doing pretty well. Quite confused, as you can imagine. He expresses fear and sadness. He has not asked for you – that's on my shoulders – gathering possibilities."

“I understand. Just let me know if and how I can help. He expresses concern for his mother, does he?”

“He does, like a boy might do if his pet turtle went missing. More information seeking comments than emotionally distraught. It does seem his genuine wish that she is not harmed or discomforted.”

“From the beginning, Sally had problems accepting, Randy. He was conceived out of spite and immediately characterized as a mistake. As far as I know, she does believe Karl is the father. She immediately distanced herself from him – one of the two constant reminders of her ill-conceived plan – no pun intended.”

I offered a quick smile – she continued.

“To her credit, however, caring for Randy is really the only thing she has ever dedicated herself to in a consistent fashion – guilt-driven, perhaps. She cannot help but be overprotective. She may not have clue one about how to be a great mother, but she’d like to be. It is difficult to believe she would give up the one thing she has dedicated herself to doing well.

“Sally is brilliant, but intellectually lazy and has been insecure from the start. She is terribly afraid to fail so she often won’t begin things. As a little girl she was her father’s princess. He was controlling and understood nothing about what girls needed. Mama did her best, but Frankie is one who has to be in complete control – people, activities, plans. Neither of us had a good relationship with him from the time we reached twelve or thirteen – her relationship was far worse than mine. She fought him. I ignored him. He and I parted on generally good terms when I left for college. I never went home again. Mama and I talk often – weekly.

“As you are aware, I’m sure, that on her eighteenth birthday she ran away. Frankie finally got the message and, once she was

found, set her up with the apartment and a sizeable trust fund. When Randy was born, he established a fund for him as well. Since she had never been allowed to make her own decisions – to take responsibility for herself – she grew to be a fully incompetent adult – fearful and insecure. Frankie is a horrible human being, but he loves us and Randy in his own way.

“If what you are really asking is, would he go to these ends to assure his grandson was more fully and firmly in his life – *no*. I’m sure it is his greatest sadness, but he would not intentionally put either the boy or Sally in jeopardy – physically or emotionally.”

“Have there been other men in her life?”

“She has never let me be privy to that side of things – odd, sisters usually share the most intimate details of their romantic encounters.”

“*Your* present-day relationship with her?”

“Distant but in no way really negative or antagonistic. She asked me to help Randy with his problems about having the Giordano genes in his make-up. Apparently, she trusts me. I think my academic and professional accomplishments have always been difficult for her. She knows she could have experienced similar success if she hadn’t been so hellbent on punishing our father. She defines that as *his* problem rather than hers and, yet, look at her.”

“You have been a great help to me. Please consider the best place for Randy in case anything *has* happened to his mother.”

“I will. Thank you for your part in getting to the bottom of all this.”

“We’re not there yet. Just one more thing, doctor. Do you know anything that might make a child’s book – *The Day Carl Lost his Goose* – important in their relationship – Randy and his mother?”

She offered an easy smile.

“His favorite book as a four-year-old. It may have been the first book he could read all by himself. Something his mother had given to him as a birthday present. It may be the only thing she ever did for him that he acknowledged as wonderful and special. In the story, Carl was a quirky animal doctor and one morning his pet goose was gone. The book goes on to outline all the steps he took to find her. He did of course.”

“*Where* did he find her?”

“In a safe, cozy nest with a new goose friend to play with – exactly where he should be, and Carl came to understand that was where he really belonged. It’s really about love – its wonderful side and its sometimes sad side – it’s about selfishness and selflessness.”

“Thank you. If anything comes to mind that you think might be helpful, please call me.”

I handed her my card and wrote my new number on the back, circling it.

“My temporary number.”

I left with verification of hunches that I had long believed had to be true, as well as important new information. I assumed I could trust the doctor/sister/aunt.

I called precinct to make sure Randy was there. I got Mary.

“Oh, my, yes he is here. It is my impression the boy is now in charge of the department. He has acquired a hat, a badge and a night stick. I’m minding my Ps and Qs, I’ll tell you that. His presence has sure ramped up the dedication of this place to find his mother. Won our hearts, I believe, would sum it up.”

“Let Sarge know I’ll be there in a half hour.”

As I drove, I reviewed what I figured I could prove.

ONE: Platt had kidnapped Randy – provable beyond a doubt. The original plan was hatched by Karl – motivation

uncertain, perhaps to punish Sally, perhaps to assure more time with the boy. When Platt got wind of the operation, he siphoned it off for his own benefit and had the boy delivered to him.

The oil change decal and odometer readings on the limo further verify it was most likely involved in Randy's abduction. The extra eight miles represented the extra from the avenue, down Harrison, to the horse farm – and back. Also, the Teaberry gum missing from Randy's robe pocket.

TWO: Frankie and Red tried a side angle when they put the shoe and chloroform in my car – they intended some ill-defined shake down or frame, but I had the police in on it before that could happen.

THREE: Still a bit iffy, although likely beyond much doubt. Karl discovered Platt's part in disrupting his plan and had him shot. Frankie had no way of knowing about Platt's involvement.

Yet to be meaningfully characterized was the whole thing with Sally. I wanted to believe either Frankie or Karl was behind it. I wanted to believe she would not intentionally abandon her son. The obvious clue from the book she left behind tended to implicate Karl. Was that true or could that have been her way of taking revenge on her ex? If not Karl, it left Platt or Frankie. I had pretty well factored out Frankie, unless he felt his experiment had failed – letting his princess ineptly face the world on her own – so he would bring her home and take care of her.

Randy had tossed Roger into the mix. That needed a good deal more thought. More than once, I've found an underling, patiently waiting on the sideline for that one opportunity to swoop in and make it big.

There could be another reason for Sally abandoning Randy – the threat that if she didn't just leave it alone, something awful would happen to him – at the time of her leaving the scene she did not know Randy had been found. A typical mother's deep-

down love for her child would not let that happen if there was something she could do to protect him. That probably left Karl as the perpetrator. I'd thought it before – with her out of the way, he'd lay claim to the boy. Would that have been based in genuine feelings for the boy or strictly revenge against Sally and or Frankie? That held together. I still wasn't sure.

So many parts and options and few if any of them seeming to turn out the way they had been planned. I was convinced a few more ruminations through the whole assortment of bits and pieces and the real story would emerge.

Perhaps, things were already coming together. These options seemed more realistic than my first hunches. I believed I was beyond the blindfold game of pin the crime on some bad guy's behind.

I parked and entered the precinct building through the south door – the cop's door just off the squad car parking area.

Mary was still at the desk. She pointed down the hall to the squad room. I could hear the ruckus before I arrived. As I pushed the door open ahead of me, I found myself in the middle of a cops and robbers battle of momentous proportions. Grown men in blue suits squatting, kneeling, crawling around in and about table legs as they followed 'Chief Randolph' who was leading the charge against the bad guys' hideout – the mop closet, it seemed.

The moment Randy spotted me he stopped what he was doing and ran in my direction. The manhunt was over. Seven sheepish looking officers stood, holstered their index fingers, and brushed off their uniforms. They were good men. I gave them my thumbs up.

Randy and I shared an embrace. That time it was not evident who had initiated it.

"This is the best bunch of guys I've ever been with. Not at all like what I thought cops would be. Sarge had to go take care of

something. He said just to check out with Mary when we left so he'd know things were okay."

He accepted shakes from the men and hugs from the women. We were soon back in *Bug*. I asked if he were hungry.

"My guys, back there, stuffed me full of junk food. I should probably wash it all down with a milkshake."

I had asked. I got my answer.

We headed for Jake's. I, for the record, was hungry. Those guys never filled *me* full of junk food – humph!

"One huge milkshake for acting Chief Inspector Rakes, here. What flavor, buddy?"

"Chocolate with marshmallow, if that is a possibility – thick rather than runny, please. If your straws are narrow, I will take two, please."

"I am starved, Betty. Lay it on me – please include a double cheeseburger and fries – double up on the fries. I have the idea my partner, here, is the kind who will sneak them when I'm not looking.' You know how *cops* love to eat!"

It was a wonderful grin that held in there for the whole time he looked into my face. He regaled me with his experiences at the precinct building. He got the grand tour, had his fingerprints taken, got locked in a holding cell, left an identification sample of his voice on a recorder and wandered through the evidence locker. Clearly, the most important part was the give and take with the men – *his guys*, that is.

He rambled on through our meal and through the ride home and up the stairs and into my room. He apparently still had room for an RC. I joined him. I sat in the recliner with Randy – cross-legged – on the rug in front of me.

"Thank you for all that, today, Tommy. I understand it was a combination babysitting gig and a distraction for me from my several concerns. Let me say it worked out well on both fronts."

“It looked like the men were enjoying it as much as you were.”

“It did look like that, and that amazed me. I had no idea grown men behaved like that. I suppose that is a sad commentary on my relationships with adult males.”

“They said you were welcome back anytime – we’ll have to make sure you take them up on that. What did you think of Sarge?”

“A fascinating combination of hard as nails and soft as a Teddy Bear.”

“You nailed him first time out.”

“He sure loves you, you know, Tommy – that must be wonderful. He had one great story after another to tell about you. I especially liked the one about when you lost your pants while diving to find a little girl’s doll, she had dropped into the lake in City Park.”

He giggled again the way I suspected he had when he heard the story the first time. There was something about losing your pants that dependably struck every nine-year-old boy’s funny bone.

He became serious.

“I am very confused about what has been happening. I understand that crime families are involved and that it is something serious among them. I got Giordano blood, you know. My aunt says it doesn’t foreordain me to a life of crime. When I first found out about it, I’d cry myself to sleep at night worrying about it.

“Within the past year my friends and I have uncovered information that Karl Rakes may also be involved in criminal activity. That would have been devastating, I suppose – a double whammy – if I hadn’t already discovered he wasn’t . . . oops!”

“That he wasn’t your father. I know. I just met with a physician who verified that.”

He nodded, showing no particular emotion.

“Well, it was a great relief when I determined that.”

“May I ask which came first – your interest in blood typing or your hunch Karl wasn’t your father?”

“You *may* ask. It was the first – just an interest in typing that began in my study of genetics, which led to gathering blood samples with which to practice. I got the pedigrees on all three of my best friends there at the hotel and their parents and one aunt and uncle. It all checked out just like the books said it would. Science is so great!”

“How did you come by Karl’s blood type?”

“It occurred during my brief foray into safe cracking – I was eight. Inside mom’s wall safe, I found an envelope filled with family records – their marriage certificate, my birth certificate, social security cards, Karl’s military records, and things like that. If I had my equipment, I could type yours and we could see if we might be related.”

“I still wear my dog tags if you want to take a look.”

He considered the opportunity for some time.

“I guess I’ll pass. I’d rather have you as a friend than a relative unless you’d be my dad.”

“As wonderful as that would be, you would not find that to be the case.”

Again, it was the wonderful grin, held for a long moment as he studied my face.

I looked at my watch.

“One more question for you, and then it will be time for one of those games Sarge brought you if you want or perhaps begin one of the books.”

“Your question, then, please.”

“The limo that took you away from the hotel the night you were kidnapped had your Lone Ranger bumper sticker on it. I

don't understand that."

"Frankie supplies our personal limo – we get a new one every Christmas. The one you speak of must have been the one we had during my *Kimo Sabe* phase."

"So, the limo was Frankie's?"

"Yes, unless there is a bumper sticker Imp that takes some kind of delight in switching the stickers from bumper to bumper."

"Okay then. Thanks."

He took me at my word that it had been the last question.

"Your Sarge brought 'CLUE'. You know that game?"

"I have heard about it – understand the basics – never played."

In the end we settled for a couple of hands of Hearts. He took all the hearts on all four outings. He played like a genius. He celebrated his successes like a nine-year-old – on the floor, legs kicking into the air. How wonderful.

We were both tired. He opted for the sleeping bag – in keeping with the rustic/camping theme he had embraced earlier. Once he was settled in, I turned off the light and got into bed.

"You okay, tonight, partner?"

"Honest answer, *no*, that really isn't possible. Do I feel safe and well cared for by somebody who cares about me, yes?"

He paused and then . . .

"Tommy."

"Yes, Randy."

"This has been the very best day of my life. Thank you."

He turned over and was immediately asleep.

I also turned over – *sleep* would be another matter.

/

CHAPTER TEN

Swiggin' Pathological Microorganisms

I couldn't sleep. Rather than get up and roam, I remained in bed. I didn't want to disturb the kid.

Sarge had offered several new pieces of information. The Red Head had a long record – identified by telephoto shots of her in the car with the surveillance guy. There was a fingerprint on the bottom of the chloroform jar found in my car – it was hers – amateurs. The man in the car across from my building had also been identified as one of Karl's employees. They were moved on, using an old 'neighborhood menace' law from 1920. The order had been served on the driver, the man in the alley, and Karl, since the information about the vehicle showed he owned it. They have cleared out. I wasn't ready to return there yet, however.

While Randy had been at the precinct earlier that day, Sarge had him look at the shoe found in my car. He identified it as his and went on to prove it by suggesting if he removed the Buster Brown label on the inside of the heel, they would find his name and address. Randy was a cautious sort. Caution developed as a

defense against fear. I hoped that didn't prevent him from enjoying life.

The Red Head had sung like a canary – as it is often described in dime novels. She explained how HH had first double-crossed Frankie – his regular employer – by taking five hundred dollars from Karl Rakes to kidnap the boy and make it look like it had been Frankie – the limo. Also, that he had taken another five hundred from an associate of Platt to sidetrack the boy to Platt's Quarter Horse Farm. She verified that it was she and HH who had tried to frame me with the chloroform bottle and shoe they had picked up at the time of the kidnapping. Sarge said I was off the hook.

She seemed to know nothing about Sally's situation. She had been booked as an accessory to kidnapping, to which she had pled guilty. She did not or would not finger HH's killer. There were three good candidates. How dumb could HH have been thinking he could double-cross two mob bosses and live. I supposed dead was dead regardless of the 'family' that did it.

In a nutshell, Karl had paid \$500 to have HH stage the kidnapping, HH was to make it look like Frankie had done it, HH then took another \$500 from Platt to deliver Randy to the horse farm. Red had no insight about what was to be done with Randy in the long run.

My guess was that Frankie had killed HH, and Karl had shot up Platt. No proof of either of those. Platt was still unconscious in intensive care so some underboss was running the show – what a grand opportunity for him to find some way of doing-in Platt – pull a plug, add air bubbles to an IV – the list of possibilities went on. I'd have Sarge make sure there was a guard on his door. I was sure his own people were already on station there – nurses, doctors, custodial staff. Loyalties were about to be tested.

I still had nowhere to go with Sally's disappearance. If the

Red Head really had no information about that, it was probably not Karl – she had worked for him on and off for decades. I saw no margin in Sally’s abduction for Platt. He was too smart to try and extort Frankie for her return.

That seemed to leave Frankie or Sally herself. Sally’s life had been laced with bad judgments and emotionally based decisions. To believe she could mount a phony abduction on her own was hard to conceive – smart enough but not stable enough to carry it out. I always came back to the Randy factor – would she endanger or otherwise harm her son?

I doubted if a ‘sane’ Sally would. The description her sister had painted was of a woman never more than inches away from severe emotional distress. Perhaps she snapped and reeled into a spiral of poor decisions. *Still*, I couldn’t imagine her pulling off such a thing by herself. Perhaps she had lived a clandestine life away from Randy and had developed relationships there that could be supportive of such a thing – not only supportive, but perhaps had instigated it assuming financial benefits. Again, her sister’s comments could almost be taken as support of such an arrangement – insecure, searching for support, vulnerable.

There was a faint knock on my door. It startled me into an upright position in the bed. Randy hadn’t stirred. I took my gun from where it was resting under my pillow and approached the door. I did the badge-knock thing in case it was Sarge back for some reason. Nothing. Somewhat recklessly, I let myself believe such a quiet tactic would tend to indicate friend rather than foe. Surely, Jerry had not discovered my place and had made his way to me for some reason.

With gun in hand, I surely had the immediate advantage over any bad guy I might confront when I opened the door. I removed the wooden bars, unlocked the latch and, keeping my foot close to the bottom of the door to prevent it from being forced

open against me, I pulled the door toward me an inch. A face appeared. A well-established calling card soon filled the evening air – it was Mooch.

I moved out onto the landing and closed the door.

“Mooch?”

“Got big stuff. Word is that Frankie just got a ransom demand for his daughter, Sally. Big bucks. Serious stuff happenin’ at his compound – cars arrived. Big pow-wow underway at this minute.”

“Cops know?”

“Doubt it. Maybe! Who knows?”

“Any word on who the demand came from?”

“Nobody sayin’.

“Am I good for payment? I’ll leave you an envelope at the diner first thing in the morning.”

“Sure. Hate to take anything – the boy and all you know.”

That the Mooch had suddenly become philanthropic would have signaled the end of days. He left down the stairs and slipped into the night.

I tried to sleep and must have succeeded, since I awakened at six-thirty. Randy was still sawing logs. I had always thought that watching a sleeping person was like an invasion of privacy – helpless to disallow it – but I must admit, I lingered a few moments over the lad sprawled across the sleeping bag. At some point he had disengaged himself from it and had gone free-range. The room did stay pretty warm.

I made ready for the day and chugged a refreshing amount of OJ straight from the bottle – forgetting there was another mouth suddenly involved with my refrigerator. I had the idea he’d make do with a few of my germs – *pathological microorganisms*, in Randy speak, I was sure.

I needed to be on my way.

“Hey, lazy head. You going to sleep the day away?”

He smiled before he opened his eyes.

“Good morning. We still okay, I guess?”

It suggested just how near the surface his fear remained.

“We are fine. Get your duds on. Jake and Betty are surely waiting for our royal presence.”

Another smile. He was soon ready.

“A swig of OJ to hold you over?” I asked.

“I doubt that in my entire life I have ever characterized a drink of anything as a *swig* but why not?”

“I must caution you that I drank directly from the bottle earlier.”

“Great. With the brains my germs must have and the strength and cunning yours must have, we may just start a super race of the little devils. We will call it, *‘Tomrandyorvid’*, *the super bug, working tirelessly for the betterment of mankind.*”

It was good for a long look through smiles.

* * *

I left the envelop for Mooch with Jake. He handed me one in return.

“Gina. About closing time last night. She’s been in and out a half dozen times – I guess that was about her thing with you.”

It was a short note saying she figured her job was done and wished me well. She enclosed her card – less as a courtesy and more as a reminder where to send her check, I suspected. My impression was that her presence had most likely kept some of the bad guys at bay. It was nice when plans actually worked.

“So, what’s up for today?” Randy asked as we ate.

“First, I’d like to get your impression of Dr. Wendt – your tutor.”

“Chuck – he prefers for me to call him that – no ego serving need to be called doctor. I respect him as a teacher and a superior

mind. If he were a child, I'd probably not choose him to be my friend – he just seems too delicate – maybe fragile would be a better word. He is mostly a numbers guy. I am mostly an anything but numbers guy. I don't mean I find math difficult, or that I don't have great respect for its necessary place in our progress as a culture, I just don't enjoy things that are always so predictable. I like a little room for unexpected possibilities.”

I suspected, then, that those past 48 hours must have sent him into a stupor of absolute ecstasy. He continued about Chuck.

“I trust him and feel safe with him. There are no subjects he considers off limits and he will speak to any question that I ask. He tends to be a *teller* rather a *pointer*.”

“I don't understand.”

“He gives me lots of things to learn – a teller. I would prefer if he'd give me a question and point me in some direction to discover or unearth the answer – the Socratic method of teaching if you are familiar with it.”

I nodded.

“I am. I tend to agree. Sarge was that way with me when I was a neophyte on the force. It didn't always protect me from unpleasant situations, but what I learned sure stuck with me.

“Exactly. I've been overprotected since the moment doc spanked my butt – surprised, in fact, mother would have allowed it. Mother is well intentioned. Don't get me wrong. I figure much of it has to do with the fact she's never been a boy, so she really can't understand certain things.”

“Back to 'Chuck'. Do you believe he would have any reason or desire to be a part of your mother's abduction?”

“I had not thought about that. My first reaction is a resounding, 'No'. If, upon consideration, I develop a different point of view, I will let you know. He has never been married, so I'm not even sure if he is attracted to her – or females in general.”

He didn't expand on his take about the man's sexual orientation, so I didn't pursue it – and he would have, if he had any question about it. It seemed I could write Dr. Chuck off as a suspect.

“While you were at the Quarter Horse Farm, did you overhear anything at all?”

“Mostly just a lot of swear words from the two men who were guarding me when I first arrived – losing a hand at cards seemed to require it. Most guys laugh a lot when they are together. Those men didn't. Right from the start I wondered why. Sad or unhappy I suspected – maybe fearful. They never let me engage them in conversation – I even dummed down my vocabulary, so I figured they'd understand me.”

I smiled at his sincerity. He continued.

“They treated me fine, never even raised their voices. When I was taken to where you found me, one of the men brought me an extra blanket and that little pillow you saw. I thanked him, but he made no response.”

“You heard no references to anybody who might have been their boss or employer?”

“Interesting. The name ‘Big Guy’ came up several times, but that probably gets us nowhere – like a generic appellation for head man. Wait, one of them went on and on about somebody he referred to as Red – perhaps the female you said helped abduct me. If one can believe the man, she is not a very nice woman.”

I decided not to follow up on that, either. If he had questions, he could consult good old, Dr. Chuck.

“There is one other player in all this we haven't talked about – Roger. Do you know if there was a romantic relationship between him and your mother?”

“Gosh, I hope not! I never liked him. I mean, he never disrespected me or harmed me in any way. I felt safe with him. He

was just cold and insincere in his interaction. In answer to your question, all I can tell you is that they never stood too close or made goo goo eyes at each other when I was around. I will go further and say I never suspected it but then thinking about romance is not a part of a nine-year-old boy's typical agenda, you know."

"Certainly. I understand that. Let me try it another way – did they spend time together, socially?"

"No. It was all business as far as I could tell. He ran errands and accompanied us whenever we were away from the apartment – like I think I said – chauffeur and bodyguard."

"Did you ever have babysitters – no offence intended."

He grinned, appreciating my recognition he really was no longer a baby to be sat.

"Rarely. Sometimes my aunt. I liked that. She's a hugger and a sit-close-to sort of person. I enjoy reading to her. She's not picky about the subject matter. She's a very good 'CLUE' player. I love that game. Mother seldom went places where I didn't go with her."

The payphone on the back wall rang. I got up and answered. It was Sarge.

"I thought you should know – Platt died at the hospital early this morning. We must assume some self-serving underling is now solidifying his power within the organization. He will have to launch some big deal operation to prove his worth. My best guess is that he'll have three possible targets for that – Frankie, Karl, or you. He may decide to test the waters by taking out the least powerful as he works his way up the line – straightening his learning curve. I've put a *two-man* car on you. I'll radio them your location. When you can, keep precinct apprised of your plans as you move around the city. I'm concerned for the boy. You can leave him here, again, if you need to."

“Okay. Thanks for the info, the car, the offers and the caution. The Karl Rakes surveillance is off my apartment, right?”

“Yes.”

“What do you think about me going back there? The last place they’d look, I’m thinking.”

“I think you’re right. We can arrange a safehouse.”

“Maybe later. I’d feel safer on my own turf. The kid’s still really dependent on me, so I won’t put him into anybody else’s care except as a last resort. How long for the car to catch up to me?”

“Give them fifteen minutes to get in place.”

“Okay. In twenty, we’ll leave here – rear door. We’ll stop at a neighborhood store for supplies, and then head to my apartment. There is a spot beneath the fire escape for my Bug. We’ll enter the building up the fire escape. Thanks. Later.”

I returned to the booth.

“About time for us to get our day going, partner.”

I motioned for Betty.

“My coffee and his drink to go please.”

I handed her a five.

“Put the change as credit on my tab. Take a half dollar for yourself.”

“Where we off to?”

“Remember that first night, I said that upstairs room where we’ve been was just temporary? Well, I think it’s time I show you my permanent apartment. I will explain later so ask you to just go along with things for now.”

He shrugged, Randy-speak for, ‘sure, why not’.

I wrote several things on the back of my card: Jerry’s name, address and phone number and the same for his aunt’s malt shop. Sarge’s number. Now, how to explain that to him so he didn’t freak out.

“I hear that some unsavory men want to talk with me. I’ve been avoiding them by staying away from my place for a few days.”

“The ones that shot you over taking on the case to find me?”

“Yes. If not them specifically, that kind at least. I didn’t realize you knew that connection.”

“I dislike math, but that doesn’t mean I can’t put one and one together.”

I handed him the card.

“There is a slight chance they may try to hassle me, still not convinced I’ve given up that case. If that happens, I want you to hightail it for whichever of these locations seems the closest. Try not to let anyone follow you. Both places have an extra key under the back doormat. Enter and take the key with you. Relock the door. Then call Sarge at the bottom number. I can count on you to follow those instructions, right?”

“Of course. No adlibbing. Finally, it’s getting exciting.”

Apparently, I had misconstrued the recent events; getting kidnapped and rescued had *not* counted as exciting. I hoped I was doing the right thing – keeping him with me. I figured the chances were small anything might go wrong.

I gave him a tightly folded twenty-dollar bill.

“Keep this deep in your pocket – an emergency fund.”

We gathered our things and made our way out to the alley. The squad car was parked at the far end. I checked the Bug’s back seat before opening the door. We entered. I moved us south at a leisurely pace along the avenue and took a right on Sycamore – home to the Mom and Pop store I liked. Expensive but convenient and run by nice old folks who I enjoyed helping.

“We’re going to stop to pick up food. If there are things you’d like, I’ll count on you to load them into the basket.”

“I seldom get to go shopping. This should be great.”

I parked at the front door and explained the geography.

“My apartment – address penciled in on the front of the card – is one block straight ahead – Sycamore dead ends into my building. Across the street, this way, is the Malt Shop. The owner lives upstairs. The other address belongs to a family I know quite well – a boy of about your age and head size. It’s three blocks south on that street. Use my name immediately and explain there has been trouble. They will take it from there.”

“Got it.”

We spent five minutes gathering things from the shelves and filled two brown grocery bags to overflowing. I could tell it was all new to Randy and he delighted in it. A good distraction against the ‘what-might-happen scenario’ that I had laid out for him.

Two thug-types entered from the rear, guns drawn. They told the old couple to kneel behind the counter and remain there for ten minutes. They ripped out the phone cord and motioned us out that door. There was a dark green van waiting with the engine running and the side door slid open.

I looked down at Randy and winked, alerting him there would be some upcoming shenanigans. Counting heavily on the diminished mental prowess of the two goons, I began spelling: ‘timetokickshinsandrundoitnow’. I turned the wrong direction as a distraction.

“Smack!”

“Ouch, you little &\$#@*&.”

Before he could straighten up, Randy had disappeared between buildings. Limping Man gave up the chase and returned. They lay me on the floor in the back of the van, and we took the alley south for two blocks and then turned east. Clearly, it was me, not the boy, they were after.

I couldn’t see out the front and the small windows in the two

back doors were dirty, so they were not of much help either. I did not understand why the officers had not followed protocol and covered the rear of the building when I stopped. Contemplating that would be of little help. Perhaps they had been gassed – sounded like a Karl tactic – heard of it before. Like I said, little help.

I was not tied but was staring down the barrel of a very luger-looking handgun. As long as the goons were with me, they couldn't be with Randy. I so hoped he didn't decide to adlib. Putting him together with Jerry just may not have been the best move I've made in my lifetime – woe unto the bad guys if they should clash, however.

“I suppose it wouldn't do any good to ask where we're going.”

I got a glare and a very clever, comeback: “Shut up”. So much for cultivating a positive relationship with luger boy.

Early on, I had lost track of direction. If it were Frankie – south. If it were Platt's new guy – west. Karl would take us north west. I had no idea. Sarge hadn't said, but I assumed with the Red Head's confession and testimony, Karl's days of freedom were numbered. If he were to exact his revenge on me for my part in it all, it had to be immediate. There was also Sarge's take about the Platt guy trying to run me up the flagpole. I might make a good hostage if such a need arose. HH and Platt were no longer available as witnesses. It left two organizations, only one of which remained intact enough to function well. Still, my inclination was that my current comrades were from the Platt organization – perhaps something put in motion before his death. Perhaps, like Sarge had said, the new guy was building his rep on my back. I could have been wrong on either count.

Assuming Karl was soon to be in custody, his organization would also be up for grabs like Platt's – chaos in mob-land. Frankie was apparently going all out relative to the ransom

demand. He'd never paid a cent in ransom before. Would that be different since his little princess was involved? Only as a last resort, I figured. Bodies would fall – hopefully not mine.

It was a good half hour ride. It was not long after we left the city sounds behind that we stopped. The driver reached in through the open door and blindfolded me. I was slid outside into a standing position. I heard no highway traffic – that could have been any one of the three compounds.

They led me inside a building, up a flight of stairs, down what I assumed was a long hall, and was finally moved into a room to my right. I was tied onto a bed, spread eagle on my back. The door slammed shut. I couldn't tell if somebody had stayed in the room with me. As a test, I began struggling at the ropes. No comment. I figured I was alone.

Just out of the blue, I recognized that left shoulder was feeling quite good. I hadn't required a pill in twelve hours or so. Internally, my abdomen still hurt, but I would live with that.

With just a little trial and error, I determined it was the rope around my right wrist that offered the most give. I strained at it to make sure I had extended all the give possible. The rope was loosely woven baler twine – the distinctive odor gave that away. The individual strands began breaking. Still, it was a slow and strenuous process.

After about fifteen minutes, I was ready to slip loose.

After about fifteen minutes, a thug came back to check on me. I returned my hands to the loops that had held me. He entered. I could hear him breathing – some eight feet away, I estimated – just inside the door. He left without contact or comment.

On neither of those door closings had I heard the lock click. Just information for the time being. I slipped my right hand free and went to work on my left. That went much faster – separating

out the individual strands and snapping them.

I slipped the blindfold up onto my forehead, and I went to work on my ankles. As I worked, I tried to formulate a plan. None came to mind.

I heard more steps from the hall.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

And the Earth Trembled!

I had hurriedly rearranged my hands and feet back inside the four loops I had prepared. The steps went on past the door. I waited several minutes before resuming my escape.

As I had been looking up from the bed, I had taken note of the opening to the crawl space in the ceiling. That confirmed I was on the top floor – the second floor. It also indicated a possible escape route. Hanging from the windowsills there in my room would make it no more than a two- or three-foot drop. Those windows, however, were not constructed to open. Short of making a wild dash down the hall in the hope of finding a rear door, the attic seemed to be my only hope for escape.

I moved a chair under the ceiling opening, mounted it, pushed the covering up, and slid it out of the way. My plan-on-the-fly involved returning the chair to where it had been in the corner across the room and jumping up from the floor so I could catch hold of the edge of the opening and then pull myself up into the attic, closing the lid behind me. I just might buy some time leaving my captors with a headscratcher – ‘how could he have gotten out

that way without using the chair?’

I wasted no time, made my move, and was soon secreted in the attic. I replaced the covering. To my advantage, I found two old dressers stored up there. I stacked them one on top of the other over the opening. They were heavy. It would delay my pursuers even more.

My next job was to find a way out of that attic. The floor was plywood. In the center, there was a dormer on each side of the peaked roof – strictly ornamental, making me think it was a nice-looking building from the outside. Nice looking often signaled wealth. The windows were hinged and held closed by two strong metal latches – top and bottom along the right side. The windows provided enough light so I could function easily. The one I chose to examine opened in – with some difficulty. It had been painted closed. I counted three coats of paint. That suggested the building was at least fifteen, maybe, twenty years old, compared with the relatively new, last building in which I’d been held prisoner.

That was all just data gathering – no idea how it might become useful. The drop from the eave would be considerably further than from that second-floor window – at least ten feet once I was hanging from it. I would be able to handle that. Problem: they were both open to easy view from outside so would have to be used at night.

The view suggested a farm with a large barn, several outbuildings, fenced-in areas, and a quarter mile entry lane from a blacktop. None of that helped me locate it in relationship to the city. Randy had enjoyed time at his grandfather’s farm. Was that on the south of town? Compared with the last farm I had escaped from – which was everything white – this one was everything red – more traditional – more Karl Rakes, I figured.

From the configuration of the attic, I could verify that the room in which I was being held was on the back side. Looking the

other way across the attic, I estimated the building was fifty feet long and probably twenty wide, which included a hall along one side – the front side, I assumed, as I studied things from that dormer.

There were louvered, wooden, vents in each end of the attic – eighteen inches square – another possible escape route with a slightly longer drop to the ground. The windows would be easier but the vent to the rear would be least visible from the grounds – it looked out upon a woods only several yards away.

From my vantage points there in the dormer windows, there appeared to be only one vehicle – the van that had transported me. It sat across the open space near the barn. There could be others in the outbuildings, of course. I heard no voices or indications of movement either downstairs or outside. Interesting. Somebody had checked on me once. Somebody walked past that room door once. That person didn't return, suggesting there was likely a back stairway.

If, in fact, there were only the two men who brought me, I had some chance of escape during the day. If there were more, I would need to wait until dark. There were several additional odds and ends stored up there with me – chairs, nightstands, a small table, a fishing pole, and a box of old blankets and rags. While I considered my possibilities, I positioned a chair in the dormer facing the lane. Sitting there, I should be able to monitor any coming or going.

Stapled in place along the back side of the floor was a telephone wire. I might cut that before I exited the building, but in case I might get to use it, I'd wait.

As best I could tell from the angle I had, the stand of trees – a woods, it seemed – ran the width of the back of the acreage. I had ascertained that was west. The sun was nearly overhead. The barn sat close to the trees some thirty yards across a grassy area

from my building. A plan began to come together.

Remove the vent on the west end of the attic. Using the table and one chair like a ladder I could position myself to feet-first myself out that opening on my belly, drop to the ground, and disappear into the woods. There was some obvious risk. One of the two windows down in the room I'd been in was centered on the west wall. If that were also true on the first floor, I would be dropping right in front of it. Perhaps that room was empty. Perhaps it wasn't. A speedy retreat in among the trees might get me out of sight before anyone who had seen me drop could take a serious look outside.

It had a better chance of working in the dark. That would waste half a day and I didn't have half a day. I had very likely left the boy in jeopardy. I had made no progress locating Sally. Time could be running out for her. I needed to find her. I had an idea about that but couldn't act on it as long as I was stuck somewhere out in the country.

I surveyed the area again. Clearly, all of the activity out there took place east of the woods – between the woods and the blacktop – between the barn and my building. It gave me some hope a daytime adventure just might work. There was a broad, relatively high hill a mile or so to the east – hiding the city, I figured. We hadn't traveled far enough for those tall buildings to have sunk below the natural horizon.

That was my plan, then, and I needed to get on with it before they discovered I was missing – that could have been at any moment. What resources did I have? Like usual, they had taken my gun but left my shoulder holster, which carried my bag of tricks – my security blanket. We would see what, if any, of that might prove helpful.

My backup plan would be that once I hit the ground, I'd flee on west well into the woods. There was a state park in that

direction, but I had no idea how far away it might be. Anyway, I needed to head back to the city – east, I assumed.

Using the knife from my holster, I cut the caulking from around the wooden vent unit hoping I might be able to just pull it, or at least its frame, away from the wall. That was not going to be the case. The unit was nailed into the wall studs. I had no way of removing the nails. I would have to remove each louver individually. They were a quarter inch by two inch, horizontal, slats. I pulled on several hoping I could break them. I couldn't. My approach needed to be quiet.

I got to work immediately using the serrated edge of my knife. It worked well as a saw, but there were twelve louvers and it would take some time. At the academy, I had taken an elective called something like, Engineering for Cops. Basic principles began presenting themselves.

I would cut part way through a slat, vertically – the narrow edge. That would weaken the integrity and I should be able to reach my fingers through to the other side, grasp it, and pull it forward. If I had cut far enough into it, and if I had positioned my hands properly, the slat should break toward me, and I could remove it without spending further time sawing.

The first attempt suggested I had made the cut deeper than necessary – it broke with hardly any effort. That was a good piece of information – a time-saving thing.

The remaining eleven took no more than fifteen minutes – total. My little knife, with its tiny teeth, made hardly any noise. I could tell from the smell that it was pine – a soft wood – another break. The escape gods seemed to be with me. Presently, the hole was wide open. I cleaned the inside rim of splinters.

I got off the chair and moved it to one side. I carried the old kitchen table to a spot directly beneath the opening. With the chair on top, I figured I was at the right height to maneuver my body into

the opening legs-first, belly down – a most unnatural contortion to achieve while balancing atop a pile of furniture.

Oh, oh! I heard a vehicle – perhaps several. I hurried to the front dormer. Two cars. They stopped at the end of the lane in front of my building, and, one, two, three, four, five, men got out, each one brandishing a tommy gun – that looked like Frankie. Man number six then exited the front vehicle and, along with three of his goons, entered my building. He was a large man with a limp and a flower in his lapel – *that* looked like Karl. Had my escape been discovered, and reinforcements been called in to find me? Perhaps I should have cut the phone line earlier.

Presently, I heard loud, angry, voices downstairs. It went on for some time. The two men who had captured me left with him – apparently the big guy's prisoners. They were placed in the back seat of one of the cars. Six men had exited those cars. Six got back in. Two of the heavily armed goons remained behind as the cars departed. It answered one question: it had been Karl – not Platt – who had abducted me.

Momentarily, I felt bad both for those two men – my men – and for me. My escape had just become exponentially more difficult – improbable even. I waited to see how the men positioned themselves. They entered the building – maybe a break for me – maybe not. If I had just come on duty to guard a prisoner, what would I do first? Check on that prisoner. If so, I figured I had a minute – ninety-seconds at best.

I cut a fifteen-foot section out of the phone line, thinking that would make it impossible to 'fix' in a timely fashion. I coiled it and slipped it into my rear pocket. Never knew when a length of phone wire might come in handy. I sure didn't want them to find it and be able to make it operable.

I mounted the pile of less than steady furniture, slipped my belt buckle to one side so it wouldn't catch, and laid a folded

blanket over the bottom of the opening to pad the splinters and nail heads. I lay across the chair on my stomach, lifted my legs slightly to the level of the opening and backed out on my belly. I reached back and positioned my hands for the hanging, made that move, and, hesitating only a moment, dropped to the ground. Ouch! Double ouch, actually! Without so much as a look back, I bent low and hurried straight for the stand of trees. I continued inside some five yards where I'd be well hidden. None of that expended much energy, yet I found myself breathing heavily.

Once they had followed my escape route through the building, it would be obvious where I went. My only hope was that they believed I would get as far away from the farm as possible, so they would launch their search on through the trees to the west.

I turned right and hurried south through the trees toward the barn. There was a door facing me on the west side. Bent low, I crossed the five open yards and entered with some caution. Inside, it was dark. My eyes adjusted quickly, and I could see everything I needed to see. First revelation: no vehicles.

The central area was open with stalls along both walls. Ten feet overhead was a wide plank ceiling – the second floor – with a half inch showing between boards. There were two permanent, wooden ladders – one on each side leading up into the hayloft. I could see bales of hay on the upper floor – lots of them. Surely, my escape would be found momentarily.

My first concern, therefore, had changed from immediate escape from the farm to staying alive. I climbed a ladder to the second floor. It was a huge open area with a fifteen-foot high, hip roof. I began rearranging the bales in the north east corner. Using my igloo building skills honed during my twelfth winter, I fashioned a four by six foot 'room', almost five feet high. It was enclosed by six feet of bales in all directions. At the bottom, I arranged two of them, so they slid in to fill the little entrance tunnel. I finished the

outside, so it looked to be a well-squared stack of bales put away for the winter – similar to the other stacks.

Okay, so my shoulder was *not* well-healed yet.

It had come together in less than fifteen minutes.

I assumed there would be enough natural vents to supply air. I hoped it would not be necessary for me to remain in it long enough to use up all the air in the first place. My floor was three bales thick – enough to stop slugs from any random sprays of their guns – I hoped. Ironic: Tommy Cole being killed by Tommy Gun!

The advantage was, I felt quite securely hidden. The disadvantage was, I couldn't see out – I could hear, just not see. It was not a good setup for a former claustrophobic. I hoped I had left that behind in bootcamp.

After firming up the inside of the bales making sure the structure was internally stable, I bellied back out through my bale-size opening and moved the five feet to the north wall. I could see out through cracks between the boards that formed the upright siding. I was facing 'my' building. At least twenty-five – probably more nearly thirty-five minutes had elapsed since the two, new, gun-toting men had entered 'my' building. There had been no response of any kind from them. Hard to believe. I knelt close to the wall sitting back on my legs, so I could keep watch.

That gave me time to consider possible next steps. The only vehicle in sight was the van that had brought me there. It was parked ten feet from the barn facing in toward the door. I doubted if it were locked. If I were to take it, I'd need to hot wire it. That would make noise. I'd been a pro at that since I was a fourteen-year-old, *almost*, juvenile delinquent. Back then, I had the skills, just not the inclination.

Then it began. With loud voices, the men exited the building clearly excited and carrying their guns. They circled the building in opposite directions beginning the search. I heard one call out

as if giving orders. The escape end of that building was hidden from my view by the rest of the building. The voices became louder. They met up across from me in the clearing and paused for a short strategy meeting – voices, pointing, looking around. I couldn't understand the words.

One took off into the woods – the logical response, I figured. The other headed for the barn. I belly-backed my way in through my entrance, pulling one bale to fill the opening. Inside I slid the second into place and the tunnel was filled. I understood it was a futile gesture, but I took out my little knife – it was all I had.

The man had continued in my direction; I heard him open the double doors downstairs. Then, I heard nothing more for some time. Presently, I became aware that he was pulling bales away from the several stacks close by in the loft. I sat there in the dark – me and my little knife against a tommy gun that could fire a hundred rounds every four seconds. My hope was, he fired none at all.

My wall shivered. He had probably pulled the several outer layers away, five bales thick at that point. If he broke into my room, my best chance would be to dive through the opening, grasp the barrel from underneath to keep it pointed elsewhere, and either try to wrest it from him or remove his appendix.

I slipped my knife inside by belt, positioned for an easy grab, and crouched ready to spring. It reminded me of Cat after a mouse. One difference: his mice were seldom armed.

The movement stopped. I couldn't hear where he was moving, but whatever he was doing, it was not affecting my straw fortress. I sat, still alert and listening. During the next several minutes I sensed nothing. Then, I heard the barn door closing. How considerate of him – how *very* considerate of him.

Finally, I let myself relax. I pulled the inner bale inside from my exit hole. I decided to also pull the outer bale inside. I bellied

out and looked around. Remaining low, I moved to the wall and found a crack. He was standing outside looking around – twenty or so feet from the barn – just beyond the van. My belated fear had been that he had closed the doors from the inside for effect and remained in there with me, waiting for me to make some move – which, all quite foolishly, I had. That is what I would have done in his place.

After scanning the area, he left on the trot toward the woods. What should my next move be? They were both gone and otherwise occupied. I might not get that chance again.

The van was parked, headed in toward the barn. I would need to make a wide circle with it to head back down the lane. It would be a generally unimpeded path. The noise of a vehicle starting would just be what it was. Not really loud, but there in the middle of nowhere, the sound would be clear and its nature, obvious.

My plan developed rapidly. I sat there outlining it.

Step one: get to the van from the barn. That was to my advantage; the driver's side was opposite the woods. I would be shielded from their view.

Step two: open the door and lay on my back on the floor under the steering wheel. Still shielded.

Step three: make sure it was in neutral – a stick shift off the steering column. All done inside.

Step four: cut the wires and make the proper contacts to start the engine. It was at that moment I would first place myself in danger.

Step five: mount the seat bending low and pull the door closed.

Step six: put it in gear, hit the foot feed, and take that wide arc back toward the lane, raising up occasionally, only long enough to keep me headed down the road.

I used the ladder to return to the bottom floor. I released the latch on the door and opened it just enough to let me pass. I closed it behind me and crouched.

Here we go.

Step one.

Step two.

Step three.

Step four.

Step five.

And finally, step six.

Ten miles per hour.

Fifteen miles per hour.

Twenty miles per hour.

Snub nosed Tommy guns like they were carrying were lethal close up but generally didn't have much accuracy at a distance. I was counting on that. My, how I was counting on that!

It was when I hit thirty that I heard the firing begin behind me. I floored it and lay down across the seat to my right. With large windows in the rear doors and paper-thin seats, I had virtually no protection. Putting distance between me and the gunman was my only reasonable hope.

At that moment, I first believed I just might pull it off.

Or not!

I raised my head to peek forward and aim for the gate.

A car turned off the road and pulled onto the lane as I came within fifty feet of the blacktop. Figuring I had nothing to lose, I kept my foot on the peddle and drove directly at it. A high stakes game of chicken. I had the speed advantage. At the last possible moment, the driver swerved, and the car rolled, coming close as I moved on through the gate.

Originally, the van had arrived from the north. I figured that road would backtrack me toward the city. I had to brake severely

to make the abrupt left turn. I waited for shots to be fired from the passengers in the car. There were none.

Presently, I saw a welcome sight – three squad cars speeding toward me up the narrow blacktop from the north. I slowed and flashed my lights four times – a signal Sarge and I had between us in the old days. I pulled onto the shoulder and stopped. I got out and approached Sarge as his car slowed to a stop – window down. I spoke loud enough so the other officers could hear as they stood behind their open doors.

“Bad guys in a rolled car just inside the gate. Two others armed with Tommy guns up at the farm – maybe only one – one took off after me through the woods to the rear. Karl’s men.”

The others had heard, and Sage waved them on ahead.

Presently, shots were fired.

Presently, the shooting stopped.

Presently, my heart returned to near normal – I wished!

“Thanks for the wipe-up detail, Sarge. How in the world did you locate this place?”

“I didn’t.”

“What?”

“It seems two boys with oversized heads, one of whom had the van’s license plate number and description, phoned it to me. I put it out on a ‘do-not-apprehend-call-in-upon-sighting’ alert. Wasn’t going to put your life in danger. The boys tracked the locations of those call-ins using what they heard on Jerry’s police scanner. They plotted the statistically most likely destination the van had set for itself.

“We verified their hunches with our own knowledge of a half dozen suspected crime family sites in that area and finally, here we are. Jerry will chastise us for wasting all that time rechecking his data. He’s probably right. We were fortunate to get over a dozen accurate sightings.”

“I assume this acreage belongs to Karl Rakes.”

“It does.”

“I think he was here an hour or so ago – a big man, flower in his lapel, walked with a limp.”

“You get a plate number? He’s gone under cover.”

“Too far away. Anything new on Sally?”

“Nothing.”

“Let me ride with you. I have the only reasonable idea that’s left. If the payoff has been made, we may well be running out of time.”

We headed back to the city and pulled into Pete’s Italian Pizza.

“Let me go in alone. I’ll whistle if I need help.”

I entered and took the booth Sally and I had used. The waiter, Pete himself, I was quite sure, arrived with his grand Italian smile in place beneath his wide, black mustache. I showed him my badge.

“Act naturally. There may be eyes on us. I need to know who belongs to a dark green Olds, that wears this plate number.”

I opened my pad and pointed to it.

“That belongs to a friend of Sally Rakes’ chauffer, Roger. I don’t know the man’s name in the Olds. When Roger brings Miss Sally here, the other car often arrives, also – the two men talk outside. Friends, I assume.”

I thanked him and left.

“We need to find the dark green Olds that bears this plate. The one time I was with Sally and her chauffer, Roger, that car was here in the parking lot. It left after Sally left. The pizza guy says it is often that way. The two drivers talk. It is my first connection between Roger, and anybody not named Rice or Giordano.

“The only theory I have left – and its two-edged – is that

Roger is in on her disappearance – either as the kidnapper and one requesting the ransom or as her partner in crime, trying to extort more money from her father. My bet is that the Green Olds Guy is somehow involved.

“How could that end – with her death is the first possibility – or with her just showing up, feigning she is ‘unable’ to remember where she’s been as her excuse in the second instance – a million dollars richer and no reason to be suspected. Either way, it leaves Randy out in the cold – mother dead or in jail and him alone with millions of dollars.”

“And the green car?” Sarge asked.

“Like I said, our only tie between Roger and anybody else. It tends to point to the first instance – kidnapping. Roger would not need an accomplice if the plot were just between him and Sally.”

Sarge had called in the number while I was speaking. Before I finished, he had a name and address. Sally couldn’t be held at Roger’s place – a room attached to her apartment at the hotel – so if she were being held, it just might have been at the green car guy’s place. It was the last card I had to play. Dispatch said the car belonged to Fred Johnson, age thirty-six – unknown to the department. For a change, one of the players lived on the *east* side.

We hurried across the city through traffic – lights and siren. Several blocks before arriving, he shut them down and parked a block away. It was a house – two stories, white, older, front and back doors, front porch, a garage to the west – entered from the alley. The green Olds was parked in the driveway, just outside the garage. Enough probable cause to allow us to move.

We had played this scenario before – Sarge at the rear. I’d approach and knock on the front door. Things would go easier if Roger or Fred didn’t recognize me. It must have been Fred who answered the door – not the red head who had led me up the back

steps at the hotel. As if on cue, backup arrived – silent approach.

I pulled the man out onto the porch and dropped him face down onto the floor. I motioned for one the new officers, who took charge. The second officer approached me.

“The warrant, Sir. You’re legal now.”

“Inform Sarge out back. Quickly, now.”

Gun drawn, I entered the house into a front hall. The open stairs were to my right against the outside wall. There was a door straight ahead and French doors – double, slide into the wall doors – closed – to my left. Decision time. If Sally were in on it, she might be in the living or dining room to my left. If she were the victim, and therefore in danger, she’d more likely be held upstairs. I’d vote for upstairs where she could be more securely sequestered.

I opted for the stairs. By then, I figured Sarge was inside on the first floor. Out of habit, I checked my weapon – clip loaded. I moved slowly, waiting to hit that squeaky step that could give away my presence. No squeak – a first time for everything. There was a landing from which the stairs continued to my left – six steps to the top.

I moved up into the hallway. Six feet ahead, it turned right. With my back against the wall at the corner, I peeked around into the main hallway. There were two doors on each side, opposite each other. They opened in. Again, back against the wall, I side-stepped to my left to a place beside the first door, I turned the knob and shoved it open. No one inside. Apparently, not the same for the doorway behind me.

As I turned back to the hall, Roger was standing there holding Sally in front of him as a shield. He was brandishing a handgun and spoke.

“Drop the gun and kick it down the hall – he motioned to my right. I did as he asked. There was a shadow where there was no good reason to have a shadow. I understood and eased out into

the hall, then moved a short step backwards to my right – the way I'd come.

I began talking.

“Roger, I will take your gun. The way things stand here, with the house surrounded, it can only end badly for you.”

“If bad for me, I guarantee it will be worse for Sally and you. Here's what you need to do right now, Cole, if you value this woman's life . . .”

I never got to hear what he wanted me to do. The shadow had been Sarge nearing the top of the back stairs. He had come forward to within several feet of Roger who had moved into the hall when I did, his back to Sarge. Those were tricky operations – disarming a man holding a gun to a hostage's head without anybody getting hurt. Sarge nodded. I flattened myself against the wall to my left as he reached around and grabbed Roger's gun wrist. I moved in quickly and also grabbed it allowing me to remove the weapon as Sarge wrestled him to the floor.

He cursed the way I had never imagined a chauffeur could curse. I held Sally close as she trembled and wept uncontrollably. She managed a question.

“Roger said he'd hurt Randy if I didn't cooperate. Is Randy okay?”

“Randy is fine, physically. He's confused and fearful and really needs his loving mother more than ever in his life. The time has come for you to step up for him.”

She nodded. I handed her my handkerchief and she dabbed at her face. Women always dabbed. Men always wiped. No idea why.

“When can I see him?”

I looked at Sarge as an officer cuffed Roger and took him downstairs.

He tossed me his keys and waggled his index finger at me.

“No lights. No siren. Stay under the speed limit.”

How many times had I heard that? He was a smart man.
You’d think he’d learn.

/

CHAPTER TWELVE

Reunion

I called in a specially worded request on the car radio.

“Car 521 calling dispatch. Cole here. I have a female passenger, late thirties, insisting that she get to see her son, Randy. Am on route. Consider me 1032 (on break).”

It had mostly been for Jerry’s listening pleasure on his police scanner.

He and his new friend were in the middle of the street appropriately representing their age group, jumping up and down and round and round and screaming just to be screaming. They were so busy celebrating they failed to see the car until I was right on them. My intention had been to round the car and open the door for Sally, but she was out and hurrying toward Randy before I made it outside.

It was exactly the kind of reunion it needed to be – a full body embrace that lingered on and on and on. They were wet with tears and couldn’t get enough of each other’s faces. Jerry approached me.

“Looks like we did good, again, Tommy. He’s a great little kid. He and I have big plans.”

Wait! Did I feel the earth trembling?

* * *

In case you haven’t been taking notes: Karl paid HH and Red to kidnap Randy, using one of Frankie’s limos, making it look like Frankie was the Kidnapper. He wanted to punish Sally and gain more son time. It hadn’t been well thought out.

HH then double-crossed Karl and delivered Randy to Platt whose group sent the ransom note to Sally, believing Frankie would think Karl was the kidnapper so he’d go to war with Karl opening up territory for himself – Platt. It hadn’t been well thought out.

HH and Red had big plans about extorting me, but that evaporated before it really got underway. Early on, fearing I would expose them to either Frankie or Karl, they wounded me to discourage me from continuing on the case. It hadn’t been well thought out.

Roger, essentially a Frankie plant in Sally’s household, sensing the chaos within the crime families, kidnapped Sally believing he could wrangle a sizeable payment from Frankie whose manpower had been spread dangerously thin. It hadn’t been well thought out.

Karl did-in Platt when he discovered the re-routing of the kidnapping. It hadn’t been . . .

Such a pleasant little cast of characters!

Rather unbelievably, Sally confirmed it had been Frankie who suggested Sally engage me to find his grandson. Respect from the underworld – who’d a thunk? Perhaps, that moved me up to at least the B List of Private Dicks there in the city. How would that line look on my business card: ‘Recommended by the underworld’s biggest and baddest, Frankie Giordona’. Maybe print

up just a dozen to show around for kicks at parties. I'd like to think hiring me had been about the only thing that had been well thought out.

The bad guys all went to trial and then to jail. Randy and his mother began forging an appropriate and openly loving relationship. Randy met Dr. Boyle over pizza at his favorite place. They hit it off immediately, filling the room with laughter and smiles and plans for future adventures. Sally began reconsidering her relationships. Jerry took Randy under his wing and I was sure wonderful things would happen. (I am finding it is difficult to live one's life with his fingers crossed.)

That reminded me, Randy, checkbook in hand, still owed me a breakfast at Jake's.

It was nice when I could be a part of helping things work out well for others. Perhaps, I needed to put my talents to work on keeping Jake's hash browns from picking up that onion flavor from his grill. Oh, that's right, Randy liked it. I'd find another project soon; I always did. Where did I put that last phone number from Betty? That would have to wait. I dialed Connie's number. She still owed me a new shirt and an evening of exceptional TLC.

The End