

The Case of the Serendipitous Switch

A Thomas Cole *Whodunit!*

Book One:

[Read first.]

Tom Gnagey

(C) 2020

Family of Man Press

/

**I'm Thomas Cole,
Private Detective, the City, 1950**

Actually, I'm only *Thomas* to my mother. To most everybody else I'm *Tommy*. When somebody calls me *Tom*, I quickly grow suspicious – clearly, they don't really know me, but for some reason want me to think they do, or in the least, they are trying to cozy up.

For those who care about such things, I'm a lefty – I believe that means it's good luck if you touch me, or maybe that's a chimney sweep. I don't particularly like to be pawed, anyway.

As private eyes go in my city, I'm not on the A list – probably not on the B list – maybe on the C list – I hope at least on the C list. It isn't that I'm not a first-rate investigator – I am – even have a two-year degree in criminal justice – unusual here in my city – many in my profession are as sleezy as their clients. It isn't that I don't have good connections on both sides of the law – I do. I worked as a cop for five years. It is more – well, a colleague once put it this way: “Tommy, you're too honest to ever make any money in this racket – not willing to slip the law or look the other way for a good payday, and you're a sucker for the penniless underdog.”

He was probably right. I enjoy my work and that's what counts, right? A painter paints to paint. A writer writes to write. I earn enough to pay my bills. I have a room – a walk-up – third floor, rear, with a rusty metal fire escape out back. They used to be called, *a room, plus*. These days they're called an *efficiency*. A cat by any other name is still a cat.

I have one – a cat. I call him Edmond Randolph after the first Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. Did you know that – that the first chief justice was Edmond Randolph? I often wonder what he calls me – my cat, not the chief justice. All things considered, Edmond really isn't much good as an assistant. I installed a cat door in the lower right pane of the window at the alley end of the kitchenette. He comes and goes as he pleases. I assume there are lots of high-class ladies in his life – Edmond's generally a high-class guy – Albacore Tuna or his snoot in the air.

Back to me, the private detective. My office is the rear booth at Jack's Diner. I saved his son's bacon a few years back – I mean I *really* saved it – so he takes good care of me – endless coffee and an occasional, day old, donut. I try not to take advantage of him. I worry about his son – the young man has trouble in his blood.

I am about to turn thirty-five. Girls are wearing penny loafers and poodle skirts, and boys have flattops and spend lots of time making sure their baggy blue jeans have their cuffs turned up to precise dimensions.

My lady, Connie, has been my lady for a number of years. It's comfortable. She's in charge of lady's ware at *Montel's Five and Dime*. It sits at the corner of Washington and Adams – powerful figures in American history. I guess I'm a history buff. Sometimes Jake bets new comers to the diner that they can't name a year in US history for which I can't state an event that took place. I've never lost – I've not always been right, but Jack's a world class conman. Bets are usually a dollar. We split the take. I usually get my share in lunch or dinner – typically works to my advantage.

I grew up on radio mysteries like the Fat Man, Suspense,

Phillip Marlow, Mystery theater, the Shadow, and Inner Sanctum. I'd been hooked by the time I turned ten – I would become a beloved, wise-cracking, private eye and risk all to protect the downtrodden and best the bad guys. By thirteen I had added girls to that list – beloved, wise-cracking, girl magnet, private eye . . .

Truth is, I turn down as many cases as I take. A reputable detective has to have a good nose. Each case has a smell – I don't mess with those that reek.

Good, bad, or indifferent, there was no way I could ignore the next case that fell into my lap – and, *my* how it reeked. My very existence came to be on the chopping block. It was early April. I hoped to see early May.

/

CHAPTER ONE

April First, 1950

I struggled to lift my head off the table and worked to focus my eyes. No doubt about the headache – I'd been slipped a Mickey. I remembered coming into the diner and taking my usual booth – rear corner across from the grill – Jack's grill – he owned the place. I heard Betty's voice as if through a tunnel.

"You look terrible, Davey. Been sleeping there for twenty-minutes, honey. If it had been anybody else, I'd a thought you'd hung one on."

She put her hand on my forehead and spread my eyelids with her fingers. The sudden burst of light hurt. I pulled away. Sitting up, my head spinning, I loosened my tie and undid the top button.

Betty was the waitress at Jack's Diner – six a.m. to three or so – off Sundays. I'd known her for at least ten of my thirty-five years. She had poured gallons of coffee for me there where I sat doing crosswords waiting for the wall phone to ring – my private office – Tommy Cole, private detective.

"What's with the, *Davey*, Betty?"

"What do you mean what's with the, Davey, Davey?"

Something besides my Titanic-sized headache was not as it should be.

Betty left and returned with a seltzer and two aspirin.

“Must be the flu, Betty. Came on all of a sudden.”

For the moment, I'd play along. I took out my wallet. I remembered having a burger, fries and a shake – I needed to pay – eighteen, plus eight, plus fifteen – forty-one cents plus a penny for the Governor.

I handed her a dollar bill.

“Find me a half dollar and keep what's left. I need to get myself home.”

As I waited for the change, I looked through my wallet – there hadn't been a lucrative case in nearly a month. Rent would be due at the end of the week. I hoped I hadn't been rolled. Inside, there were bills, lots of unexpected bills – ten, one-hundred-dollar bills. Something was more than very wrong.

Curious, I began searching the other compartments. That confirmed it: blank checks, ticket stubs, and driver's license – all with the name David Marlow. Mine were gone. The home address listed on them was not mine – all the same, just not mine – 2243 Crane Street – uptown – streetcleaners and painted storefronts. I lived at 11515 South Main Street – downtown – pickpockets and plywood windows.

I carried my gun permit and detective license in a separate, soft leather case in my inside jacket pocket – for easy access. With growing discomfort, I found myself looking around as if to invoke some act of secrecy. I removed it and opened it close to my chest – David Marlow on each with the new address.

One hears about it, but one never considers doing it – I pinched myself. I was awake and I felt pain. I wondered what the next step might be. For me, it seemed to be a quickly growing sense of foreboding – anxiety – fear, even, maybe. Suddenly, nothing seemed certain – that seemed to include the uncertainty.

It was like a wide strap was being cinched around my chest – tighter and tighter and tighter. It was as if my lungs had collapsed making every breath a strain. I'd been there before –

it had seldom turned out well. I preferred when the mysteries in my life involved discomfited *others* – well-monied, comfort seeking, beautiful, weeping women who smelled good – *that* sort of others. This was new. This was *not* good.

Several questions popped into place immediately: why, by whom, for how long, and to what end? They just laid there, lifeless, ignorant, offering not so much as a hint about what was going on.

I sucked up the final half inch of cold coffee – I hated cold coffee, but I hated even more not using everything I'd paid for. That's right – it was free. Anyway, I gathered my trench coat as I slid out of the booth and worked myself into it – substantial tan fabric, matching wide belt with a large buckle, ample pockets inside and out, extra-wide lapel. I determined my snub-nose was still in my chest holster inside my jacket, left side just below my armpit. Sorry about that, holster. I experienced a considerable urge to see if it was still loaded but didn't look. Betty returned with a fifty-cent piece. I gave her a peck to her cheek wishing, like usual, she'd lay off all the powder. It didn't disguise her fifty plus years; it just made them look pathetic.

I left through the front door, not my dependable point of exit. I stood at the curb thinking I'd catch a cab home – to my comfortable old South Main address – when I discovered I had left my hat behind – a brown, felt, fedora worth ten bucks. For ten bucks, I'd climb the Atherton Building – outside – in an ice storm – nude – with lightning pricking at my cheeks.

I returned to the diner, figuring Betty would meet me, hat in hand. Not so. Betty was not in sight. There was a new girl – some younger. Confusing. I would learn her name was Gina. I walked to the rear of the long, narrow room – booths to the left, counter to the right – and plucked my hat from the peg on the back wall.

I approached Gina.

“Betty gone?”

“Jack says she gave notice at noon and she left as soon as I got here.”

“Left to where?”

“No idea.”

“And you just happened to be here to take her place?”

“I’m Jack’s brother’s ex. I’ve subbed for him before. He called. I came.”

“You seem too classy to be a waitress in a place like this.”

“I am. Thanks for noticing. You coming or going?”

“Going – for the time being. Came for my hat.”

I lifted it to my waist as if to prove it. Dumb!

“Nice hat.”

“Won it in a card game – years ago. Sort of like my trademark these days. I’m . . .”

“Dave Marlow. I know. Jack said you’d be back when he noticed your hat. He said that wasn’t like you – being forgetful.”

“No. Yes. I’m not going to deal with it. If you decide to stick around, I’ll see you another time. That’s my booth back there, by the way. *My* phone on the wall too; if there are messages, I’ll be grateful if you’ll take them – can’t promise tips – hard times – but always appreciate friendly, human, gestures. Callers may ask for Tommy Cole – like a pseudonym – alias.”

“I know pseudonym. Like you said, I’m far too classy for a place like this.”

I left and caught that cab. It would be a fifteen-minute ride. I needed to clear my head – nothing about that past half hour had made sense. I usually walked places that were within ten blocks. Just then, I didn’t trust my legs. I knew who I was, yet I could not easily prove it. Betty was gone and Jack was lying. What margin would anybody have in replacing my identity? I’d worked cases involving amnesia – this was *not* one of them.

I considered the Mickey. I’d been at the diner for an hour mostly looking through the paper – reading the police reports to see if anybody might be in the market for a private eye. One possible. I looked up the phone number and made a call. No one answered. That must have been when somebody doctored my drink – when my back was to the booth. I’m a pretty trim specimen. That Mickey was enough to take out a two-hundred-and fifty-pound ward boss. My head continued to feel like it was

a stone in a foundation – pressure and pain.

The question remained: how were the switches made without being seen – wallet and such? Maybe that didn't matter – Jack, Betty, Gina all seemed to be in on it. None of that made any sense – well, Jack and Betty at least. We'd been friends for years. I didn't know Gina from Adam – well, quite obviously, make that Eve. The threat may have grown beyond me to include them. I wasn't even sure what I meant by that. Threat?

“What day is it, driver?”

“April first, Sir.”

Ah! April Fool's Day. A prank. Who do I know that would consider a near lethal Mickey a prank? Wrong track, I think – way too much work, needing way too many connections – driver's license, banking information, city license, name change on checks – Hmm. I needed to check out that new bank account – see if it was authentic and funded.

“Driver. Change of plan, please. Drop me at First Savings Bank.”

It was only a few blocks out of the way. I paid him with 'old' money – I had a few small bills. If things panned out, I would trade in one of the larger bills for smaller ones. I had to smile; whatever was going on, there seemed to be a financial upside to it.

It was a large bank in the middle of downtown – lots of foot traffic in that area – business and personal – revolving doors. I estimated twenty tellers standing behind a large, horseshoe shaped counter, all of them busy taking care of folks. I positioned myself between two short lines – each with three folks ahead of me. I'd opt for the one that moved most rapidly. It was the one on my left.

My turn.

“A quick check of my balance, if I may.”

I handed over my new bank card and new driver's license – a two-inch by three-inch piece of heavy, green, marbled paper containing all the necessary information – name, age, height, weight, hair and eye colors, and address. It amazed me. If all

that checked out with the records, I had access to the account. There needed to be a new security innovation – a fingerprint or a photograph of the person on the back, perhaps. Too expensive and the technology too complicated, I'm sure.

The teller left and was right back with a slip of paper on which she had written a number: \$9,750.00.

I asked for an assortment of ones, fives and tens in exchange for a hundred. Upon reconsideration, I offered a second for five twenties. I thanked her and left, trying not to appear suspicious – something that *always* made a person appear suspicious. A man in a mask with a gun would have gotten less attention – or so it felt as I walked to the door carrying a thump, thump, thump in my chest, and lungs that never seemed satisfied.

In order to cover my bills each month I needed to bring in \$166.00 – \$180 if I treated myself to a steak dinner once a week. My balance suggested I could go on vacation for five years and have change left over for peanuts and cotton candy – something less than that if luck allowed pretty girls hovering around my wallet.

I continued to my apartment in another cab. Out of habit, I suppose, I looked things over – up and down the street – rooftops and basement windows – everything seemed normal. I climbed the six, crumbling, cement, steps to the small landing. I readied my key for the front door to the building and inserted it. It would not turn. I removed it – making sure it was the right one – and tried again. It didn't turn. Of course, it wouldn't. Where was my head?

Between buildings, to the south, was a two-foot-wide firebreak. It ran through, front to back. I made my way to the alley and climbed the fire escape to my rear window. It was locked. I tried reaching in through Edmond Randolph's entrance to free it, even though I knew up front that the human body did not bend in the required manner. I think my psych prof called that neurotic behavior – repeating a behavior that had already proved fruitless.

I removed my shoe to use in breaking an upper pain so I

could reach the lock. I heard voices coming from inside – I really hadn't looked. I moved aside to a spot where I couldn't be seen but could view the kitchenette – a three quarters wall separating it from the main part of the room. A man and woman appeared from the left. He sat at the table with a paper. She took cups from a cabinet and poured coffee. It was my cereal cabinet, not a cup cabinet. She joined him, and they spoke in low tones – seemed cordial with smiles and chuckles. I couldn't make out the words.

It was not my table. It was not my coffee maker. It was not my toaster on the counter. The towels by the sink were not mine, and they were hung up – mine enjoyed the more relaxed and informal, lay in a heap, lifestyle. This was something more than a prank – but I had understood that pretty much right from the beginning.

I made my way back down to the alley floor and returned to the street, where I motioned for another cab. As I was reaching to close the cab door, Edmond Randolph slipped inside and made himself comfortable on the seat beside me. At least I had one loyal companion.

I gave the cabbie my new address – 2243 Crane. The ride took twenty minutes. I wasn't familiar with the building – brown stone, one step up to a slab landing, six stories, clean, white trim newly painted, white front door with key-secured, functioning mailboxes to its right. I searched the names. There I was: David Marlow – 404. The door mat said welcome and I felt like it meant it. Everything about the setting seemed friendly, so why was I trembling?

I felt certain the key would work. It did, opening the door into a comfortably sized, bright and clean entry hall with a large light fixture hanging on a golden chain from the high ceiling, maroon and white striped wallpaper, a side table sitting on a gold-colored throw rug below a properly sized mirror. The floor was stone slab in variegated, brown to reddish hues – brown mortar. A staircase hugged the wall to my right. At the rear of the entry hall was an elevator. I took the stairs. The chief justice scampered up ahead of me.

Later, I would learn that front door was left unlocked from

six a.m. to ten p.m. so when I thought I had unlocked it, I really hadn't. Regardless, the key worked.

Four-zero-four was at the rear, left – apparently eight apartments per floor facing each other across a rather spacious, ten-foot wide, carpeted, hall – white wainscoting with unsoiled wallpaper above. Each door boasted its own, unique, color scheme. Number 404 was medium blue and light brown – quite acceptable. The key worked. There was a deadbolt – reassuring. Somebody else, of course, had a key – *not* so reassuring.

I flipped on the light and scanned the place from side to side closing the door behind me – working the deadbolt. The bedroom was to my right, the kitchen straight ahead. I had entered into the living room. There was a small coat closet to my right beside the front door. The apartment was not, in my way of thinking, spacious – roomy, perhaps – by any name, it was a good deal more than what I was used to – real rooms with doors. I went from room to room. The bathroom was off the bedroom – the usual fixings – sink, shower and so on. The place was nicely furnished with what appeared to be new furniture – nondescript but each piece compatible with the others in style and color scheme – blues, browns, with just enough red to add a spark of life to the place. The walls were apartment tan, the ceiling popcorned white, and the floors carpeted in medium nap, beige, just a touch of variegation. I was a barefoot guy, so that would be nice. It was as if somebody knew my habits. I smiled.

My suspicion about the bedroom closet was correct – a new wardrobe and in the style and colors of my preference. A similar situation graced the chest of drawers. Whatever was going on had been disturbingly well researched and executed, and it had not been inexpensive. My first thought was to have the lock changed. That meant I had new safety concerns floating pretty close to the surface – generalized concerns, which were different from those more temporary – acute – fears that came and went from case to case.

Life had taught me the most difficult situations were those that promised significant doses of both good things and bad things. It appeared I found myself in just such a spot.

Edmund Randolph had stretched out in front of the fridge on the beige and brown flecked linoleum. Through the years he had extended his patience-span to a full 60 seconds.

“Meow!”

It had not been angry – but more than a little peeved. For those five minutes I had let my attention wander from His Highness.

I opened the door feeling good about what I’d find – six cans of albacore tuna – even a good supply of things for the human. After a five-minute feast, he went to the kitchen window. What do you know – a cat door. He paused and looked back at me as if to say, ‘Nice place, Davey. Hold down the fort. I’m going to check out the neighborhood – maybe meet some ladies.’ He left. Interesting to me was that his approval of the new digs was clearly important to me. What a strange species we were.

Davey? I had just referred to myself as, *Davey!* That reinstalled the anxious feelings that had faded during my initial tour of the new place.

I was an *RC Cola* man. I didn’t really like it better than Coke, but you got more in a bottle. There were six bottles in the Fridge – soon there would be five. I took it into the living room and flopped back into the recliner – large, blue, quite comfortable. Several grades above a discount store. I kicked off my shoes.

I figured my Tommy bank account had been closed. Going to check on it was not a good idea. I always kept a minimum balance of \$250 – my health and emergency fund. There had been times I’d missed meals rather than take from it. I thought of it as my green security blanket. I guessed the trade had been more than a little in my favor – that two-fifty for over ten thousand – bank and wallet combined.

As something akin to paranoia began creeping in, it came to me there might be microphones or cameras spying on me. Who knew how long my sugar daddy had taken to set things up? I hoped ‘daddy’ enjoyed my philosophical discussions with Edmund Randolph more than Edmund Randolph seemed to. I shouldn’t complain about the cat. He let me stroke him most

times when I needed to. He always remained attentive during conversation while he was eating. He trusted me to meet his needs. Little did he know that the thick cream treat I poured for him before bedtime really wasn't good for him. Should I list *my* vices!

The phone – tan, on what must have been a thirty-foot cord and ideal for a barefoot pacer – sat on a small side table beside my chair. I dialed Jack's Diner just to see if it worked. It did. I hung up. It made me wonder if I'd be billed for utilities and rent. I had no feelings about it one way or the other. Well, actually, I did; I figured my free ride would continue at least into the immediate future. Aside from the new identity that had been forced on me, it seemed to be the one consistent aspect of all this – my free ride.

I pushed the lever and let myself recline. Push forward to move it to the rear – why not! Everything else was suddenly backwards.

I needed to bring what I knew into focus: Somebody – 'Daddy' – had eliminated my real identity and outfitted me with a far-ranging and apparently substantial alias – David Marlow – sort of a *classy* moniker, actually. He had arranged a bank account, which held more money than I had ever seen at one time. My association with my previous living quarters had been swiftly wiped clean – as I suspected was the case with my previous bank account. There were new quarters – modest but better than I'd known since leaving home for college. Financially, I'd be okay.

Was I supposed to wait for some sort of direction? I could see no other way forward. How would it arrive – by mail, under my door – perhaps fastened to that door with a dagger? Hopefully, not after another Mickey. I'd pick up and search early editions every morning – perhaps the personal ad sections. I had used that as a means of communication before. That and radio were the primary means left to me for communicating with the outer world now that Jack's Diner had been removed from my life – or had it? What was really keeping me from continuing to frequent the diner? If they chose to now call me, Davey, I could let them. I wondered if the coffee would still come free. I'd think

on all that some more.

What if I'd take the money and run – not among my real-world alternatives, but an interesting 'what if' to contemplate. I liked my city. It had been mine all my life. My impression was, I had entered one of those 'no place to hide' scenarios. I had to learn to live with the reality that eyes were on me. Taken as a whole, what I knew was more suspense filled than threatening. It pointed to a wealthy 'daddy' who was taking very good care of me. What was his reason?

One thing seemed certain; he wouldn't have done all this for *no* reason and since there had to be a reason, he would make sure I found out what it was. It was in his court – *it*, being my life, I suspected.

I was suddenly hungry. There were cold cuts, milk, and juice in the fridge. There was bread in the bread box – my mother had a bread box on the kitchen counter when I was a kid. No point – just a fact – a pleasant memory – decorated in Pennsylvania Dutch tradition to complete the image. As a kid, toward the end of the month, when the food budget ran low, I'd often have catsup sandwiches for lunch. I loved them. Probably still might.

I had money. Why not return to Jack's for lunch? My head was back to normal – I could move it up and down, side to side, without becoming nauseated. On a straight shot, a cab ride would take ten minutes – the walk a bit less than twice that. I'd spent my life walking those streets. I knew them well enough to drive a hack, myself.

I freshened up and changed shirts. Twenty minutes later I left the cab a block south of the Cafe. I strolled in like I had for years and rescued a pack of life savers from the box next to the register just inside the door. I put a nickel in the slot and removed the morning edition – in the turmoil of the day, I had misplaced my copy. My booth still had the 'reserved' sign on it. That was somehow reassuring. I shed my trench coat, folded it accordion style, pushed it across the seat, and slid in beside it.

Gina brought coffee and a smile – no conversation. I supposed she'd talk if I initiated it – that's what my favorite

waitresses did. I was intent on examining the paper – moving beyond the police reports to find out about the state of the city and see if the personals had anything that seemed aimed at me. I had no idea what I was doing but doing something seemed better than the alternative. Most likely, it was the Marlow name I should be searching for – that was plainly at the center of it all.

The morning edition had two sections – the four o'clock edition only one – late breaking news, the real estate listings, legal notices, and society pages – both cost a nickel. I was sure the overcharge for the second would be attributed to mechanical technicalities of the vending machines.

Page seven, halfway down the righthand column – *'Millionaire David Marlow person of interest in the death of his wife.'* It went on to tell the story that supported that headline. Marlow denied it through his attorney. Of course, he did.

I sat back, putting one and one and one together: If Marlow was a suspect in his wife's death – fairly or unfairly – and I were, however temporarily, David Marlow, it would certainly behoove me to prove Marlow innocent, before the authorities closed in on *me*. A novel approach for getting hired help, I'd give him that.

Why the ruse? Why would he have not just contacted me directly if he wanted my help? He must have figured, because of some factor unknown to me at that point, I most likely would not have taken the case. It was nice to have been wanted that much but, still, why me? He had seen to it that I was deep into it, want to be or not. Wealthy, clever, thorough, and most likely *not* guilty. I say that because if he weren't, what margin would there be in hiring a detective with a reputation for being honest and doggedly thorough? You know a man like that had investigated me down my brand of tweezers – *Zeus*, for the nosey among us.

Earlier, I had set aside the fact that the small name plate beside my hall door read: John Jackson. I figured that had been overlooked from the previous resident. The Building Super would get around to it eventually. The name on the mailbox had been Marlow. Ah ha! I'd put money on the fact that by the time I arrived back at the apartment, the mailbox would have been changed to

Jackson as well – to keep the ‘Marlow’ me, hidden. It would only remain there on the box long enough for me to find the apartment. I just might have to begin keeping notes. This had become hip deep in twists and turns.

It had all fallen into place quickly; to risk my skin – as Marlow – and to save my skin – as Marlow, I first needed to save *his* skin – *our* skins. It had to mean that his skin *could* be saved. I was on it. You *bet*, I was on it!

/

CHAPTER TWO
The Thick Plottens
(As my grandma used to say.)

Gina's voice sidetracked my thoughts.

"You just reading and drinking, honey, or you in for food?"

"Gina. Yes. Food. A steak, medium well – one from his family stock, not the run of the mill fare. Round it out with a baked potato – fresh, not reheated from last night – with lots of butter. I'll start off with a salad – fresh head – thousand island – please don't drench it. A couple of rolls – solid, not all air – heated please – butter on the side. Maybe pie later. Thanks."

"Sounds like somebody just had a payday."

"In a manner of speaking. A little up-front money on a new case."

She offered a smile and nod. I couldn't be sure what that meant, but then, I didn't know her very well, yet. I returned the smile. She left – coffee pot in hand. I continued through the paper. Nothing caught my eye. I turned to the sports section. Baseball season was about to begin – April 18th it said. I wasn't an avid fan but enjoyed listening to the occasional game. I mostly followed the Yankees. Had already placed a five-dollar bet on them to win it all. Hoped by August I'd have all this behind me

and, maybe, an extra twenty or so from that wager.

The meal was fine. It was as if Jack had gone all out for me – making it special. I had to wonder why. That was not a side that frequently showed through his ‘live and let live’ approach to life. My assumption was that it had to do with the lie he was helping promote – my identity switch. He had to know that I knew, of course. He had never seemed like that type. Something quite serious must be eating at him. I had to wonder if family members had been threatened, forcing him to participate in the bad stuff – *bad* was probably the wrong word – no idea what the right one might be – *new*, maybe – new stuff?

While I waited for pie – chocolate meringue made with whipped cream – I went to the phone book – there was no David Marlow listed. I called information and asked for the number. I was told it was unlisted. Only helpful in that it confirmed there was a David Marlow there in the city – I knew that had to be true of course. D.A.s don’t accuse shadows.

I called the number that appeared on the dial of my new phone. It rang. At least it worked. I wasn’t sure what I had expected. Would I have been surprised if it had been answered with a, ‘Meow’. I already knew it worked – outgoing, at least. I noticed I was low on phone nickels – I’d need to buy a role from Jack, soon.

The pie was delicious – fresh, free of those moisture droplets that cling to the meringue on day-old pie. I hadn’t even asked. My thoughts returned to Jack. It seemed he was doing what he could for me short of admitting the fraud.

Gina handed me two guest checks: one for the meal and a second that had two messages and phone numbers on the back. She offered no explanation. I thanked her and left a quarter tip – slightly less than ten percent but more than nothing. I hoped she was okay with that. It seemed my miserly genetic make-up had not been affected by my newly arrived affluence.

I returned the calls wondering if they might have had information for me about the current puzzle. Neither did. I declined both cases – a missing male poodle and a missing husband – usually a lot of similarities.

I was walking the street south by two thirty. It was a beautiful day – April was not dependably nice in the upper Midwest. I was headed for the library and the back issues of the paper, needing to find information about the death of Marlow’s wife.

The information gods were with me: a full article and a shorter sidebar.

Her car went over an embankment – brake line had a pinhole leak. She had been driving back from a summer cabin where she had spent the weekend preparing it for the coming warm weather. It mentioned that Marlow owned a metal stamping business. I had no idea what that was. Figured it was not affiliated with the Post Office. Sounded like a finger on the scale operation – heavy stamps. Oh, well, / chuckled.

Willingly settling for that, highlighted how my sense of humor seemed to have been on hold since the Mickey. Finding myself in a mood to take stock of things, led me to realize my new shirt was more expensive than what I usually wore. It really was more comfortable, softer, roomier, whiter, even. Who’d a knowed? I became eager to try on the new slacks and jackets. I wasn’t an underwear kind of guy, but the prospect of something soft and roomy just might prod me to even give *it* a try.

Connie thought it was a disgusting habit. I never had figured that one out. Nobody knew, so how could it matter to anybody? And how did that make me a less worthy human being? Oh well, one of life’s mysteries I had not yet been able to solve. At ten, I would have giggled myself senseless, thinking others were ‘unaware of my underwear’ – at least I had been normal back when I was ten.

The preliminary announcement of the car accident was in an afternoon edition. The following morning’s edition ran a more detailed account. Still no hint it might have been murder. Several days out came the first indication that Marlow had been implicated – something about fingerprints on the brake line. Not a good sign for our side. Unless it involved a brake line fetish I’d never heard of, it would be hard to explain away.

The three bylines were attributed to Barry Schumer at the

Daily Herald. I needed to contact him. The Herald Building was a few blocks west – wrong direction, but I'd walk it.

Barry wasn't in. I left my number – not name – not yet sure which to use – Cole, Marlow, or Jackson. That reminded me to be sure and check the name on my mailbox when I got home. I left and walked in that direction.

Interesting. *Home*. I wondered if I would miss my former place – I'd been there eight years. I had the habits of my upstairs' neighbor down pat – heels that clicked against her floor meant a dress up night, extra flushes after a night out probably meant too much to drink, sounds of a squeaking floor that moved from place to place rather than footsteps suggested stocking feet and she was in for the night; the records she played reflected her mood – *Lawrence Welk* records probably upbeat or ready to dance – *Wagner*, definitely depression, banging on the door warned of an impending knock-down-drag-out with a drunk, over amorous, ex.

In buildings, sound traveled down. I wondered what my downstairs neighbor knew about me. I wondered if he'd miss me. I just assumed that Edmond Randolph's entourage would miss him. The walk took less time than I had anticipated. My anxiety seemed to be translating into increased vigor.

I inserted the key into the mailbox while checking out the name – John Jackson. Was I good or was I good? The box contained a letter from the property management company apprising me of the situation. I owned the apartment, but there were fees being paid by charging a numbered bank account there in the city – trash pick-up, pest control, tax assessment, routine maintenance, maid service, emergency number and other things. I wondered if it was my bank account. I didn't remember numbers well – still had to figure out 7×8 every time I came up against it – 7×7 was 49 plus seven was 56. Don't even get me started on 8×7 . Other than math, I had done well in school.

I climbed the stairs to my apartment. Imagine that – me a property owner. Mom would be so proud. That information highlighted that others had keys. I wasn't comfortable with that. I supposed the dead bolt, mechanically locked and unlocked

from the inside, should help when I was there. I would have to consider the situation.

Edmond Randolph looked my way as I entered the apartment and waited at the kitchen door for me to pass. He rubbed up against my ankle and arched his back. I picked him up and we rubbed noses. My attention was drawn to his collar – to the *tag* on his collar, actually. It was new with the new address and phone number – I carried him to the phone to make sure.

He didn't readily warm up to strangers. It was hard for me to believe he'd let anybody handle him for the time required to make that exchange. It was the same collar. I might have my first meaningful clue. Clue about what?

I snapped the cat door shut, confining him for the time being. I removed the collar – careful not to disturb any prints that might be on it. It was blue, shiny, plastic with a metal buckle. If anything had ever been designed to attract fingerprints, that was it. I flattened it out on the kitchen table and sprinkled it with powdered sugar, blowing off the excess. No prints on the front, meaning it had been wiped clean – not even mine. I turned it over – several prints. Looked to be from two people. I was dealing with an amateur.

My apartment came fully equipped. Using the cellophane tape from a kitchen drawer, I saved the three best prints – tape stuck to one of the black cards I carried with me for that purpose. The prints were not mine. It raised several questions that I chose not to contemplate just then. I put it back in place around his neck and unfastened the flap on his door. He looked back and forth from the window to the fridge – what a decision – food or female companionship – he chose to eat later and made his way outside. Toms and guys were clearly a lot alike.

Were there ways in which those prints could have gotten there other than during the switch of the ID tag? I supposed some sweet little old lady might have picked him up and worked her fingers under the collar. Not likely, even though the animal was attracted to perfume, so might have allowed it – most old ladies reeked of it. I remembered that from the ancient teachers I had in grade school. As a boy, I always found it offensive. The

principle discouraged me from wearing a gauze mask in third grade.

My best guess was that it had to have been somebody right there in the neighborhood. City cats never roamed far from their home base.

It made me wonder if the invasive guy lived there in my building. That was unnerving, although, it presented possibilities. How could I get prints of the other tenants for comparison? Two possibilities came to mind, but I'd have to wait until folks were asleep to undertake that mission – capture prints from the mailboxes or the apartment doorknobs – 6 X 8, that would be 48 knobs. A pack of black cards.

It was a seed salesman's dilemma. When I was ten, I ordered a box of flower seeds from the back of a comic book. Deal was, I'd go door to door selling them and earn a nickel profit for each of the fifty packets. Two and a half dollars was a big deal at that age.

Problem: I found I hated to approach people asking them to buy from me – hence, the seed salesman's dilemma. I needed them to answer my knock, but I really hoped they wouldn't, so I didn't have to ask them to make a purchase. Upshot: mom had flower seeds for the next five summers. I needed to get the prints, but I really didn't want any of them to match – well, *sort of* a seed salesman's dilemma.

I remembered Professor Toomey's primary operating maxim: always know your enemy – he meant his characteristics, of course. It was unsettling to believe I might be rubbing shoulders with the bad guy and not knowing it. It would mean there was a third party – Marlow, me, and cat-print man. How might a third party fit into the picture and why did I keep characterizing him as 'bad guy? He had really done nothing but good things for me so far."

It seemed reasonable that Marlow hired somebody to do all the prep work – arrange things for the identity shift. That made sense, I supposed, from a millionaire who was apparently out on bail and under close scrutiny by the cops. How old had those articles said Marlow was – forty-nine, I believe – hmm – 7 X 7 –

my sort of humor.

Anyway, why should I be concerned about the presence of a third party – so far it seemed he was taking very good care of me? I should probably be pleased he was around. He needed to keep me safe. Considering the whole twisted situation, things appeared to be getting better rather than worse – for me; I relaxed a bit knowing the bulk of my work lay ahead.

I needed to make two lists: *one*, ‘what I knew’ and *two*, ‘what I needed to find out’ – the second would surely be the longer. It was how I always started a new case and it had seldom failed me.

I got comfortable: loosened my belt a notch, hung my blazer in the coat closet, and slipped out of my tie, shoes and socks.

How would I explain all this to Connie? I wouldn’t. She’d call me at Jack’s like usual or I’d call her. We’d use *her* apartment not mine. I’d make up an excuse about it – water line problem or a kitchenette remodel. She understood that when I was working a case, I was often absent from her life for days at a time. That should work. She might have even indicated she was going to be out of town. Guys dependably fail to remember such things.

I donned the most recent addition to my apparel – my reading glasses – and settled into the recliner to spend some time with a book – Mika Waltan’s, *The Egyptian* – my keeper had good taste. I liked to read. Connie liked for me to read. She said it made a man sexy – I strive to be manly and sexy. She said reading billboards and the back panels of cereal boxes didn’t count. Such a snob.

There was a knock on the door. I looked at my watch – 4:35. I tensed. That was a new response. I lay my glasses on the side table and moved to the door where I looked – that is, peeped – through the peep hole. There appeared to be the top of a young, sandy-haired, head out there. I opened the door – a three-step process I would need to get used to – first unlatch the chain, then move the dead bolt and finally turn the handle. If I began having many visitors, I’d have to add a vitamin to my morning routine.

Before I could ask the reasonable question, the boy offered a broad smile, handed me a folded newspaper, and began speaking.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Jackson. My name is Jerry Adams and I’m your Daily Herald paper boy. You being new here and all, I wanted to come right over and offer you the opportunity to have the finest paper in the city double delivered right here to your door twice a day – morning edition by 6:35 – guaranteed – and afternoon edition by 4:15 – assuming none of my teachers have requested my presence after school.”

I smiled.

He continued.

“This copy is complementary – a kind of welcome to the neighborhood present. I will provide a doorlatch hanging receptacle to receive your papers when I deliver them. Sixty-five cents a week – seventy-five if you want our huge, unmatched, five section, Sunday Edition with four pages of color funnies – my favorites are *L’il Abner* and *Snuffy Smith*. They tickle my ribs. You may cancel at any time. Of that sum, I receive thirty cents for my timely and reliable efforts on your behalf. Being remembered with something extra at Christmas is nice but not required, you understand.

“So, what do you say? I can sign you up, right?”

“How could I refuse? You have a pitch like Whitey Ford. No curve balls in there, right?”

He offered an ear to ear grin.

“Never a curve ball from me, Sir. I’m a lefty like Whitey *and* like you, Sir.”

“What makes you think I’m left-handed?”

“You carry your pencil and little spiral pad in your right shirt pocket for easy access by your left hand. Makes me think you’re a writer or maybe an undercover policeman.”

“Very good.”

The kid intrigued in me in so many ways.

“What else do you know about me?”

“Like a game, huh? Okay. You wear glasses but only for reading and I just interrupted your reading – those little pad marks on either side of the bridge of your nose are fresh – and, the absence of glasses when you got to the door. You prefer a casual way of life – bare feet and undone top buttons – shirt and slacks. Even so, you value a nice appearance – combed hair at this hour of the day, away from anybody who could see you. The slacks and nice shirt tell me your work is something above day labor. Living here at 2243 says you do reasonably well financially. I could probably go on if I could see inside.”

“You get an A+ from right there in the hallway – make a first-rate detective someday.”

“Thank you. I’ll add that to my list of possible life choices. Here’s a card with my supervisor’s number in case I ever miss a delivery – which I won’t – or you have some other complaint – which you won’t. Mom does my route when I’m ailing, and I don’t consider myself ailing if I can both see and walk without falling over – that was one of my dad’s jokes. He died in the war. That just slipped out – it wasn’t intending to play the pity card. Mom and I are doing fine.

“Anyway, here’s that card. How do you prefer to pay? I have payment receipt stamps by the week, so, any assortment of weeks will work. I tear them out of my book here for you, so we never have to hassle over if you did or if you didn’t pay. May I suggest you keep them in order in an envelope in your desk or dresser drawer? Some people take advantage of a kid. I can tell from our conversation that you would never do that. And, oh, you have a gentle sort of sense of humor. I like that.”

The kid had all the angles covered – I’d give him that – nice presence, good eye contact, wonderful smile that he didn’t have to force, and my, did he have the words – they fell from his mouth like bubbly water from a waterfall. I got the idea they could also be fired like rounds from a Tommy gun if a situation required it.

“Let’s do a month in advance,” I said.

His face brightened – I would have bet such a cheek to cheek upgrade was not a possibility.

We completed the transaction - \$4.30, four receipts. I remembered all that from my own route years before but would not have interfered with his chance to present it. That done, he had more to offer.

“I also save my Saturday mornings to do odd jobs for special clients, so, if you are ever in need of such a thing you can give me a call” – out came a handprinted business card.

“Just so I understand what you are offering, what sorts of tasks are you up to?”

“I am very good at running errands and am trustworthy in case they involve the transfer of money. I am very good with a vacuum cleaner – wash windows but will admit upfront I haven’t mastered how to leave them streak-free. I’m good with a bucket and rag when it comes to washing cars and, in a pinch, I’ll even consider doing dishes – I am careful but have occasional problems with slippage. I can make up a pretty tidy bed – strip it and apply new sheets and pillowcases and such. You can trust me to wash your clothes at the laundry at the end of the block.”

“Sounds like you’re going to make somebody a good wife someday.”

Grins.

“That’s like something my dad would have said. Well, I need to be going. There’s also a new guy down in 203. John Smith. *There’s* a common name for you. I have seven Smiths on my route – two Johns. Thanks a lot, Mr. Jackson. I look forward to giving you excellent service.”

My bet was that he would. The boy clearly believed in himself.

I took the paper to the recliner, put on my glasses – the ones that left those little pad marks on the bridge of my nose – and settled in to finish what I had started earlier but interrupted with steak, pie and the trip to the library.

It popped out at me from the back page. It sat in the far-right column, at the top, as if a last-minute addition: *David Marlow, Accused of Wife’s Murder, Gone Missing*.

CHAPTER THREE

Tommy, Davey, Johnny?

The article was actually two stories in one and offered several pieces of information. Marlow's nephew, Stephen, age twenty, reported his uncle missing after arriving at his house for a visit. His uncle was nowhere to be found. The butler nor the chauffeur nor the maid had seen him since breakfast time. As Stephen left the house to get in his car, he was fired upon – three shots at his feet into the gravel driveway. None hitting their mark – or, their 'Stephen' as the case seemed to be.

Marlow's attorney said he had no information about what happened or where he might be. According to a court order he was not allowed to leave the grounds of his estate at the north edge of the city. That, of course, was mostly an 'on his honor' arrangement allowed because of his spotless reputation as a pillar of the community. If it were found he left of his own volition, he'd be in contempt and would find himself behind bars – if and when he was found.

I supposed being found alive and put in jail was a better alternative than being found not alive and put in the ground. I shuddered. Not sure why. I'd seen plenty of men buried – perhaps not the professional advertisement I should be

disseminating. It did mean, he wasn't available for me to talk with. That probably would not have been a good idea anyway, so that wouldn't change the mechanics of the case. New on the scene, however, was Stephen, the nephew. The attorney's name had also surfaced in the article – Jacob Bartow. I expected a large, follow-up story in the morning edition.

After a ham, cheese, and baloney sandwich – butter not mayo – and a glass of milk, I turned in. It was going on ten. My plan for the following morning was to wake up, pluck that early edition out of the whatever that Jerry said would be holding it for me on my doorknob, walk to Jack's Diner, and carry on with my well-practiced, and more or less comfortable, early-day routine. When I added bacon and eggs, they'd think I was sick – maybe ask to see the money up-front. I smiled as I turned off the light on my nightstand, comforted myself onto my left side and settled into my traditional opening position as I awaited Morpheus.

Where had that mattress been all my life? It felt like heaven – generally firm but topped with several inches of softness. Hard and soft at the same time – like a hot fudge sundae – hot and cold at the same time. I would have to give up my getting-ready-to-sleep-time-worrying until the morning walk. I was soon dreaming of wonderful things – well, I just assumed they were wonderful things. I seldom remembered more the tail end as I emerged into consciousness with the light of day.

* * *

The shower was twice the size I was used to, white tile – not rusting metal; glass door – not moldy, green, flowered curtain; a removable shower head on a flexible hose with variable pressure – pulse, even. I wondered why I'd ever want to get out. The safety razor was a top of the line model, far superior to the brand I had used since that shadow first appeared across my upper lip – mother's gift at fourteen. Inside the medicine cabinet were *my* aftershave, *my* deodorant, and a variety of other familiar, lesser, necessities.

As I moved into the kitchen to drip dry, Edmond Randolph again did his part to brighten my life by eating the tuna I sat before him – a different brand from at the old place, but clearly

acceptable. He approved of the bowl I had selected, having given it a good sniffing and licking before I filled it. He always ate two-thirds of it and saved the rest for later in the day. I made a piece of toast and buttered it while he stretched out and watched me. He made no move to leave. I wondered, if he didn't go, how he would spend his time alone there in our new digs – I suspected an unsuccessful search for a mouse – unlike the old place. He might fault me for that. Plan 'B' always seemed to be a nap.

Come now, 'Tommy', there were *really* important things you needed to be thinking about.

As I left, I found the paper right where Jerry said it would be – folded into quarters across its face. I left the interestingly designed, heavy cardboard, 'hanger' on the knob, not knowing when I would return and not wanting to cause any missteps in the delivery of my first, afternoon edition. I stopped on the second floor to see where Mr. Smith had taken up residence – a medium green door – my least favorite color unless it involved trees and grass. I gave the knob a once over, remembering I needed to recover prints. Maybe that night. It, as well as three others on that floor, were hung with the Mark of Jerr-o.

Outside, I soon buttoned my coat collar against a pretty nippy morning breeze. I passed several men carrying briefcases. Now that I could afford one, perhaps I'd go shopping. I supposed they came in brown – I had no problem with black but for my wardrobe I pretty much stuck with brown tones – sometimes a blue or yellow or white shirt under my sport coat. Why a tie, I couldn't tell you. They truly had no socially redeeming characteristics. Well, they could add a nice splash of color – my brown ones didn't. At times they saved a shirt by catching the gravy. I supposed they relieved anxiety for those having a deep-seated fear of buttons.

I entered the diner and out of habit moved toward the newspaper dispenser. I redirected myself. By the time I had walked the diner through to the back and reached my office, I had removed and folded my trench coat. I tossed the paper onto the table and slid into the seat. Gina arrived with coffee. I took a quick sip – as if I were addicted, or something – good and hot

the way I liked it.

“The coffee seems to have improved since your arrival, Gina; could that be so?”

“Two secrets, Davey – a pinch of salt and a pinch of cocoa sprinkled across the top of the grounds. Cleaning ten years of gunk out of the brewing system just may have helped some, too. A full brew takes half the time it used to. Hope that vinegar taste doesn’t linger.”

“Not a trace. Whatever you did, I certainly approve.”

I let the, ‘Davey’ pass and pointed to the menu on the wall above the grill.

“How about I get the number three this morning – crisp and scrambled, buttered, no jelly, fried not hashed?”

Humorously, I thought, I laid two bucks on the table as if to prove I could afford it. She caught my implication and smiled. I liked Betty better, but I imagined Gina would grow on me. She exhibited more smarts. I’d wait for a reading on her heart. I was some concerned about Betty. I’d think about how to get an update, later.

“You planning to stick around here a while?” I asked.

“A while, I guess. Jack’s a nice guy in a pinch and needs the help. I like to keep busy – what do they call that – a win/win situation?”

I nodded, figuring it had been largely rhetorical. I took out my little spiral notebook – the one in my right pocket so it would be handy for a lefty – and got to work on what I knew and what I still needed to know about the ‘case’. I supposed it was a case – the file folder in my desk drawer was marked, ‘*The Serendipitous Shift*’ – I was big on whimsical titles according to Connie.

The Players (so far) (In Addition to Me)

>Marlow – wealthy, recluse, married – or was – lives in mansion on north edge of the city.

>Me – my identity has mostly been wiped out in favor of the David Marlow name

>Helen Marlow – David’s wife, deceased

- >Stephen Marlow – David’s 20-year-old nephew, whereabouts unknown
- >An as yet unnamed chauffeur, maid, and butler at Marlow residence
- >Jack – owner of Jack’s Diner (ten years ago I informed him the name needed an apostrophe. He added it.)
- >Betty, the missing, long time waitress at Jack’s.
- >Gina, the too classy replacement waitress
- >Jerry Adams, my new, bright, observant and loquacious paper boy.
- >Jacob Bartow – Marlow’s attorney
- >John Smith, the other new resident in my new building at 2243 Crane who I suspect as being Marlow’s on-site ‘fix-it’ guy.
- >Edmund Randolph – the cat who allows me to live with him. I had a role in mind for him.
- > Sergeant Bale, another probable player, the officer who put the cop in me, training me up from a pup after the academy. We rode together for five years in a black and white. Since I left the force, he was often a good ear – a source for information and strategy.

What I Know

- >My name was Thomas ‘Tommy’ Cole
- >Someone had forced a new identity on me – David Marlow – new apartment, wardrobe, and \$9,750 plus
- >Old friends Betty and Jack have somehow been coerced to play a game with me – referring to me as Davey. Gina – new to the scene and my life – seemed immediately comfortable with the moniker as well.
- >I am living under still another name – again, given to me – John Jackson.
- >Marlow – me, now – has been accused of murdering his wife (evidence includes prints on brake line which had been tampered with prior to the accident in which

she died)

>Marlow has gone missing since his first court appearance.

>Bottom line seems to be: I need to prove Marlow innocent in order to save my own skin. (That's not a lock but enough to push me to see it through. Marlow has been photographed and printed by the department, so physically the case can hardly be made that my body is that of Marlow)

What I Need to Find Out

>Is it Smith or somebody else who is arranging things?

>Is the arranging actually being done at the direction of Marlow?

>If not, who and what would they have to gain by tampering with my life?

>Why was I selected to pinch hit for Marlow?

>Where is Marlow?

Did he disappear on his own? If not, who arranged it? Why?

>Learn about Stephen

>How to prove Marlow's innocence

>get a look at the evidence

>who stands to gain from Marlow's conviction?

>who stands to gain from Wife's death?

>How have Jack and Betty been manipulated into going along with the ruse?

>Are there other players who would have reason to do all this for some personal gain? (I guess that's a repeat – shows how much concern I have about it, I suppose.)

I hadn't chatted with Jack for some time. He'd been avoiding me since the Tommy/Davey thing had entered our relationship. While my breakfast sizzled on the grill, he turned toward me.

“You doin’ okay . . . Davey?”

It was definitely not his sort of conversation.

“Doing fine. You?”

He nodded, looking around as if he wanted the conversation to continue but had run out of ideas. It gave me the chance to work in the newest feature of my plan.

“I’ve taken a case that’s putting me in a squeeze. I’d like you to refer to me as John, for a while – can you do that for me? Never know when the wrong ears are within range.”

His face brightened.

“Sure. We can do that. *Anything* for you – *Johnny* – *Johnny* okay?”

“Perfect.”

Gina had been listening. I felt sure she’d go along without missing a step – or a refill. Jack clearly seemed relieved. I thought I understood why – that the lie he was being forced to promote was suddenly off the table. If he did what I asked, he was off some very uncomfortable hook.

He turned back to the grill and added two slices of bacon and an egg to my order. That was the kind of celebratory guilt-work I could live with!

The name thing had come to me on my walk that morning – if I was Marlow and if Marlow was a target of the cops and who knew *who* else, I’d be better off to shed it. John Jackson seemed the reasonable, built in, alternative – Johnny, the more comfortable version thanks to Jack. Giving it only minimal additional thought, it seemed clear that had been the plan – why else would it have been placed at my door and mailbox?

I moved the notebook to the side as my meal arrived – yes, guilt-work was to be recommended. I nodded at Jack. He winked. We had communicated – I just wasn’t sure *what* we had communicated.

I arranged the plate to my left and the paper to my right – left-handed, right-eyed. I scanned the first several pages, looking for articles that related to my situation. It wasn’t until page seven of the front section that I found something, and what a something

it was. There, staring up at me was a picture – only one column wide but as much as I needed, for sure. It was labeled, *David Marlow, murder suspect*.

I reached for my coffee but lifted the paper closer instead. *That* face was *my* face. Suddenly lots of things fell together – began making sense. Like, why he chose me, a ‘C’ *Lister*, rather than a big-name, ‘A’ *Lister*, private detective? He’d already forced *his* identity on me. *Now*, I was wearing *his* face as well – or he mine. Hmm?

I needed to contact Sarge – Sergeant Bale, my old partner – and see if he could check out the mugshot and the prints that went with it. Marlow had me by the proverbial man parts. I was clearly not just being inconvenienced – I was in danger – miles more than I had realized. A cop might recognize me from the picture and just that fast, I’d be locked up awaiting trial for murder.

I hitched my head to draw both Gina and Jack close. We were alone within twenty-five feet.

“One more thing regarding that new Johnny case I mentioned a few minutes ago. It involves a face change for a little while – blond hair will become black, and my fuzz free upper lip will sport a moustache. Probably keep a couple day’s growth of stubble as well. Okay?”

Jack shrugged and nodded. It seemed to say, ‘A Tommy by any other name is still a Davey, Johnny’.

Gina did a repeat and warmed my coffee. Like I have said, she was a, ‘let me respond to you’, rather than a, ‘let me tell you’, sort of conversationalist.

During those past few minutes, I had grown anxious – more than that – fearful. My immediate goal was to fix my look – something to hide behind. Until then, I’d avoid cops. I realized that my paper was open to the picture. I quickly refolded it. I needed to find other pictures of Marlow to determine whether we really looked alike or if somebody was supplying pictures of me to replace those of him. This thing was becoming convoluted. I needed a new hat – or none at all. Lots of guys had started going bareheaded. That might be more effective, anyway – it would

exhibit my dark hair more easily, since it would be exposed, not hidden under the hat. Oh, my! Convoluted, for sure!

I left the two bucks on the table where I'd put it earlier – it allowed a nice tip for Gina. Not sure I wanted her to get used to that. I would return home by taxi, so I wasn't out in the world parading my face around on the off chance that anybody had really paid attention to that page seven, column two, photograph. When I need a nice crisp picture of a suspect, the paper gives me fuzzy copy. When I'd be best served by fuzzy, I get crisp. The photo gods were not playing ball with me.

It sounded like I was throwing myself a pity party. Not like me. I needed to approach it in a matter of fact manner – as just one of many things I needed to take care of in a new case.

As I began gathering my things and stood preparing to leave, a man at the front booth suddenly stood, also. He tossed several bills at the register and, not waiting for change, hurried on his way. Strange. Was there somebody tailing me? I got only a quick glance at his face. It was thinish rather than roundish. It was tan rather than pale. It was youngish rather than oldish. That wasn't much. I believed that I *hadn't* seen it before. It was partially hidden by a hooded sweatshirt drawn tight and tied at the chin. I couldn't determine hair or eye color or lobed or unlobed ears. Of course, it might have been nothing. It might have been something. Just then, I would go with *something*. I was in full self-protection mode. It took longer to live one's life that way, but it seemed all I had was time.

I left the diner, caught a cab, and busied myself behind the paper, keeping my face out of view of the driver's mirror. I handed the fare over the seat and left with no comment – unmemorable would be the byword until I looked less like myself. I didn't believe any of the other building residents had yet seen me, so the transformation should pose no problems within the building.

Jerry might be different, but I had no reason to expose myself to him – perhaps I could have found a better way of expressing that.

I need to back up a step. On the way home I had the driver

let me off in the vicinity of a drug store. I didn't have that cab wait, again, not wanting to be memorable. I purchased black hair dye – Jet Black, matte, according to the label. There was a novelty/magic shop one block to the east. I used an alley and met nobody on my way.

There, I purchased an assortment of life-like, artificial mustaches, using the excuse of needing them for the members of my high school aged nephew's barbershop quartet who were performing for a charity event. I hoped that spread the need among four folks other than just me – so it dispersed the attention away from me. I might have been better off to have said nothing at all. Uncalled for information usually sounded like uncalled for information and that became immediately suspicious. I figured clerks in a place like that kept their mouths closed; I imagined they understood many barbershop quartets were not barbershop quartets. In trying to do so well, I'd really *not* done well at all.

That cautioned me against spur of the moment decisions. This had the potential of quickly becoming a life-threatening situation. I took heart in the fact I had not seen Front Booth Man since I had left the diner. I smiled at the thought that it would be ironic, if, in the novelty store, I had met him buying his own mustache to disguise himself from me.

I entered my building at 9:30 – the mail had not come. I realized that I didn't know when it arrived. Mailmen should post that.

Up in my place, I made myself comfortable. I read the directions on the dye container – wet hair with hot water, work the entire contents of the little bottle into my hair, wash hands with soap and water immediately, let stand five minutes, rinse thoroughly for several minutes. Pat dry on expendable towel. I figured I was up to following those directions. I'd use the shower as my base of operations.

Ten minutes later I was combing my hair in front of the bathroom mirror. I certainly looked different. Black hair, fair skin, and blue eyes. I shrugged. It would be what it was. It involved one of those arranged, German/Italian marriages several generations back. It was worth a smile.

I positioned each of the four mustaches in place and did my comparison shopping. I liked the one that worked itself into long, slender, points on each side, but I needed something less – something more run of the mill. I settled on one that resembled two ‘Ls’ laying on their sides. 📏📏

The store clerk suggested I purchase one tube of ‘adhesive’ for each of the boys. Whether he was being practically helpful, or taking advantage of me in my transparent lie, I didn’t know. With the supply of goop on hand I should be able to wear it to my grave and use the excess to seal the lid on my coffin. I put the one I had selected in place on my upper lip. There was nothing wimpy about the adhesive – it would out weather a hurricane. The color was a good match to my new hair. Now, if I just had some hair on my chest to go with it! Connie had no objections to my unadorned torso. I would need an explanation that wouldn’t raise her anxiety – my profession, itself, did that – better now that I was off the force. I’d make it work.

I donned my shirt and was tucking in the tail when there was a knock on my door. I slipped my snub nosed into my left pants pocket and went to take a peep. Interesting to me, my heart was racing, and I found I was taking rapid, shallow breaths. That sucked!

/

CHAPTER FOUR

“Most Likely to Die in Prison”

I peeped. I recognized the top of the head. I opened the door not really having rehearsed my explanation for the change in my appearance.

“Jerry, my man. Surprise! What do you think?”

Rather than expressing surprise, his response was more studied.

“Downside: I’ve heard that women prefer blond men. Upside: I think the change makes you appear more masculine. I’m not a fan of hairy lips but that works well on you. Ages you ten years. Assuming you didn’t grow that overnight, it is artificial. You need to be more precise when putting it in place – a bit askew.”

“Thank you for your evaluation and advice. I assume there is a reason for your appearance here at my door.”

“That was an interesting line. I like expressions that rise above the mundane. You may have picked up on the fact that I work to scatter them among my verbiage.”

“Like *that* phrase, I assume.”

“Yes, Sir. Probably *presume* rather than assume, but we can discuss that at another time if you like. I am here to alert you

to a new program of which I have just been made aware. The *Herald* will now accept prepayment for subscriptions six-months in advance with a five percent discount – my take remains the same. They also accept it for twelve months in advance for a ten percent discount. On those, I get a five percent fee. No pressure, understand, but I want to make certain you are aware of every possible financial advantage I come across. May I straighten your dash? It is a bit unnerving. Difficult to determine if *it's* on the slant on your upper *lip* is on the slant. You have a nice nose.”

“Please. Take care of it – the dash not my nose.”

He broke a quick grin at my attempt at silliness.

I leaned down just a bit. He worked thoughtfully. He seemed to do most things thoughtfully. At last he stopped.

“Much better. Those of us with only average looks must do all we can to maintain a good image.”

So, I was just average. I guess I was in good company – he indicated he also fit that category. He was cute, but cute was never a sure harbinger of grown-up handsome. He'd have approved of that phrase.

“So, how much would a year cost me – I assume that's transferable if I should move.”

“Second question, first. Yes, anywhere within the city limits. First question: Fifty-one dollars and sixty cents for the year less ten percent comes to \$46.44. I'll even handle that pesky forty-four cents for you.”

“Sounds like a good idea. My wallet is on my dresser. Step inside if you like.”

He liked!

I turned and walked into the bedroom. Presently, I could all but feel his hot breath against my neck. I plucked out three bills and counted them into his waiting hand.

“Twenty and twenty makes forty and ten makes fifty.”

“I don't have change, Sir, and anyway, I said I'd pick up the forty-four cents.”

“Did I ask for change, Jerry?”

“No, Sir, but . . .”

“Are you trying to tell me how to live my life?”

“No, Sir . . . well, quite honestly, I probably am. Everybody accuses me of it, but an extra three-fifty-six is a sizeable over extension of the requirement. I mean, I’m the best paper boy you’ll ever have – no question about that – but even so, it’s not worth three-fifty-six. I mean, really, what is there for me to do – fold a paper in fourths and insert it into the cardboard receptacle the newspaper provides. A monkey could be trained to do that – especially now that I don’t have to collect and offer receipts.”

I tried to just move beyond the discussion.

“For my information, Jerry, why are you not in school at this hour?”

“A parent/teacher conference day.”

I could tell he remained uneasy about the money, so I tried again.

“Okay. Back to our financial impasse. I will make one offer and one offer only – after that it goes away – off the table – kaput, skedaddled – out of here – gone.”

Jerry smiled understanding I was about to have some fun with him.

“You keep all the money I have placed in your hand, *but* you must treat me to a malted milk at Sally’s Malt Shop across the street – at a time of our mutual choosing.”

“You really drive a hard bargain, Mr. Jackson, but I will do my best to comply. Can’t today but could Saturday morning – say ten – she doesn’t open until ten.”

“You have a deal. I’m glad we didn’t have to arm wrestle to settle it.”

“You would have still won, Sir. Look at these sticks I’m still wearing for arms. Mother Nature is taking her good time allocating my hormones to my muscular development.”

“Rest assured, she will, and in the not too distant future.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“I’ve already been there and survived. Trust me.”

“I sure wish my father was here to reassure me about things like that. Anyway, about Saturday – we meet there or here?”

“How about here. That way you can assist me across the street – now that I have suddenly aged ten years.”

He smiled and agreed.

“Done. Several minutes before ten. And thank you.”

I thought his cheeks would bust.

“Sure. See you then.”

I reached out and ruffled his hair, immediately wondering if I should have. He leaned into my hand and made no effort to withdraw. He needed that kind of thing from a man. I probably needed to pull back a bit in that relationship – but, *after* the malt – I’d promised that. I had Edmond Randolph and occasionally Connie. I wasn’t big on responsibility. I’d already gotten rid of my African Violet and goldfish for that very reason. I got enough of being responsible for others in my line of work. I suppose ‘Occasionally Connie’ was not ‘Permanent Connie’ for the same reason.

As to that malt, it was to occur on Saturday morning – and *that* was the following day. My. The lad didn’t mess around, boy – reminded me of Ozzie Nelson’s kid from the radio show.

Jerry left after carefully folding the three bills and tucking them deep into his jeans pocket. I relocked the door after him and sat back in the recliner – my recliner – think of that.

So, which entry from my long list of things should I look into next? I scanned down the page I had prepared in my spiral. I called Sarge. I presented my situation as a hypothetical, not wanting to get him involved directly. I hit the real point of the call.

“If that sort of thing were really going on, I’d have to wonder whose prints and picture were really on file with the police, wouldn’t you?”

“And you’d probably need that information immediately. Hey, I have to go now – have things to do down in Records. In a second, fully unrelated matter, do you have a new phone number?”

I read it to him off the phone. Clearly, he was on his way to see what he could find out for me. In many ways, he'd been like a dad to me. I'd never known mine. I often wished he'd have entered my life ten years earlier – Sarge. No idea how that might have changed things, but then, a relationship always changed both lives. I had no doubt that it would have been for the better.

Thinking about my new recliner led me to think about my former furnishings – they weren't in my former apartment – where were they? They could have been burned, but that would have presented a major hassle. My bet was they were either in storage or had been sold to a secondhand shop. The second of those would have been the most efficient – call the guy, have him come and give you a bid, accept it and have him cart everything off on the spot. The change had been made in a matter of hours. Finding out the details of that might get me a step closer to my handler – the fixer – whatever.

I got out the phone book – the city was divided into three phonebook areas and each phone received the two for the area in which they sat – one was the book of numbers and the other the yellow pages. The others were available on request. Both my old and new places were in the same section – far south corridor.

“Used Furniture,” I said aloud as I thumbed through the more colorful copy. I estimated nearly fifty in the list. On first look it seemed like an impossible undertaking – probably a ‘daunting task’ in Jerry-speak. Sometimes I got pretty good insights. All he had needed to do was get rid of the stuff so there was no need to shop around. I called AAAA Used Furniture – Buy and Sell. A man with a medium gruff voice answered.

“Yeah?”

“My brother recently sold a room of furniture to you. There was a rocker involved that is a family heirloom, which he mistakenly sent with it. I'd like to get it back – I'll pay, of course. Your business picked it up from a third-floor apartment at 11515 South Main – 304.”

I listened.

“You didn't. Sorry for my mistake. Thanks for your time.”

I repeated it two more times, then bingo. How brilliant was

I – third name out of fifty?

“You still have the chair. Understand I don’t know you from Adam and no offense you understand, but before I make the trip down to your business, I’d like to confirm the name of the person who sold it to you. Some less scrupulous stores might try to slip a ringer in on me, especially when I don’t know the chair, myself.”

He took a minute and returned.

“John Smith. Gave his home address as 587 West Drew Street.”

“That’s it, alright. Thanks so much. Please hold it for me. I’m Bernie Landers. Can’t get there until the first of the week, Okay?”

“Okay.”

“What will the price be?”

He gave me a price. I only added that because it seemed a caller in that situation would want to know. I had no intention of going for it.

John Smith. Seemed I had recently come across a John Smith. I imagined if I counted, I’d find over a hundred in my phone book alone. Only one of them, however, had become a part of my life. I would work on the assumption that greatly shrunk the coincidence factor.

I had wondered how I’d react, if I found evidence the new Smith in my life might be something more than a fluke. For the moment, at least, it did not leave me with a good feeling. I hoped that would change. It was my first solid connection to anybody related to the case. I felt quite smug about the clever way I’d found out about him. The main question remained: was he employed by Marlow or was he freelancing, using me in some way other than proving Marlow’s innocence. How could I determine that my Smith was or was not one of the legitimate John Smiths? My hunch was that he wasn’t. How to find his real identity?

My phone rang. I figured it was Sarge – he was the only one I’d given my number to. It was Sarge.

“I have some interesting things about the hypothetical you posed to me. M’s picture is M alright. His prints, however, belong to a kid I used to know. That presents the prosecutor with a real problem – the prints on the brake line – the ones that implicated Marlow, have now changed and implicate the kid instead. Has to have a contact in the department – disheartening. I’m looking into it.”

“Why not switch the picture, too?”

“M was arrested one day and disappeared several days later. His picture had already been circulated on wanted posters. Prints weren’t attached. Couldn’t risk the chance M’s picture and the kid’s picture might be discovered to be different – though from what you said, that’s not likely. Except for people who know you well, that picture *is* you.

So much for the hypothetical, Sarge. I continued.

“I plan to get another set of prints overnight that I’d sure like to get run. Any chance?”

“I’ll find a reason. The locals and the FBI’s can be accessed with minimal cause. As you know the military list is a bit trickier. A name always helps.”

“Thanks, Sarge. I’ll be in touch; I owe you one.”

“In a hundred years, you’ll never be able to repay me everything you owe me, son.”

He chuckled himself off the line and hung up.

He’d been right. Out of the Academy I’d been a pretty impulsive, know-it-all. He was constantly having to rein me in. Not for that, who knows what would have happened to me – dead at the hands of a bad guy or dead at the hands of the Captain.

Smile.

I set about trying to find Stephen Marlow, the nephew. I called the reporter who had not yet returned my request for a contact – Barry Schumer. He had been busy but was willing to share information with a detective. The call had been cordial and helpful. I got Stephen’s home address. It was in a small town a few miles to the west of the city.

I made a call to the high school there and spoke with a

librarian. She was quite chatty and clearly wanted to be helpful – a trait common to most in her line of work, I had determined.

“I’m working on a family tree and have received information that part of our family settled in your area. The purpose of my call is to see if I would be allowed to look through copies of yearbooks as a starting point. I have found it is usually the very best starting point and have always appreciated the help local schools have been willing to provide.”

She assured me she’d be happy to help, and I arranged to meet her right after lunch. I took a cab to a car rental place I often used and procured a vehicle for the afternoon. I had called ahead. It was waiting.

They knew me well. I would need to explain my change in appearance. By the time I arrived, I had it worked out in great detail in case that would be needed.

“Tommy. Good to see you again. Like the new look. Makes you seem more mature. Your information the same – still at the South Main address?”

“Glad you keep that on file; always speeds things along. Something cheap, like usual.”

“Figured that – the same one as last time – ’48 Ford.”

“How much you need as a deposit?”

“Twenty, for you.”

Briefly, I wondered if that was more or less than for others. It brought a smile.

I was on my way in ten minutes a bit miffed that I hadn’t needed my wonderful explanation for the new look – it involved a play at a local little theater group, which, alone, I figured would have upped my prestige value – an actor. Why was I griping? No hassle should be a good thing.

I entered the city limits at noon. Wasn’t to meet Mrs. Clapper until one. It gave me time to look around the town. As the broader region to the west of the city had become populated with bedroom communities during the past decade, the little town had become surrounded – swallowed – no room to grow – so it remained an island – a quaint little snapshot of forty years earlier.

I walked the Main Street and entered the cafe for lunch. The special was an open face hot beef sandwich with mashed potatoes and gravy, two other vegies and rolls on demand.

I sat at the counter hoping to find a talkative somebody behind it. Turned out to be Mable.

“Interesting town. Quaint. Love it.”

My opening salvo. Always lead with a compliment.

“I suppose lots of families have a long history here.”

“About ten families go back a half dozen generations, I’d say. You here for a while or passing through?”

“Passing through but have an interest here. I went to college with a boy named Marlow and he said he grew up here. George Marlow. Ring a bell? Thought I’d look him up if he’s still here.”

“We had a Marlow family, but it was Lester and Karen. They’d a been a lot older than you. They have a son, Stephen, but he’s a lot younger than you. Always in trouble. No George, I’m afraid.”

“Lester was a businessman, I suppose,” I went on, just casting about to see what it might reel in.”

“Grocery – Blue and White Grocery – next block east. I guess Lester was sort of the black sheep of his family – had a younger brother who’s super rich – lives in the city, I think. I think he’s in some sort of trouble. Don’t keep up with city stuff.”

“So, it sounded like they are dead, the parents?”

“Terrible tragedy – burned to death in a house fire. Stephen didn’t get the sympathy most boys his age would have. That wasn’t right. He was a horrible kid, but they were his parents he’d just lost. We should have been kinder toward him.”

“The Blue and White Grocery, you say.”

Another conversation extender.

“Sold a few years ago by the family attorney – he was in charge of the estate. The boy wasn’t of a mind to run it. Stevie’s run through the money he got for it with fancy cars, clothes, trips – such things. That boy’s always been a loser. A big

disappointment to his folks, I can tell you that. It's generally agreed he must of been born with a screw loose, you know. Had polio, too. Walks with a slight limp, but he was no good long before that."

"Does Stephen still live here in town?"

"Moved on earlier in the year – maybe to the city. Haven't seen him since. Honey, I better make the coffee rounds, or my regulars will start gettin' grumpy. Good talking with you."

She giggled at her 'gettin' grumpy' joke and left with the brown pot in one hand and the orange one in the other.

I finished my lunch – excellent food – veggies were hot but crisp, unlike the mush served in similar places I've frequented – no particular one in mind, of course! I smiled.

Mrs. Clapper met me in the front hall. How sweet, I thought. The library was on the second floor of the rather stark, 1920's, red brick building. She led me to the section I needed and asked if she could be of further help.

"I still remember how to raise my hand if I need assistance. Thanks for going out of the way for me like this."

I pulled the seven most recent editions and took them to a table.

Enter Stephen as a Freshman. Looked more eleven than thirteen. The pictures got larger, year by year. The book from the senior year was the most revealing. Each class member had been given a descriptive phrase – 'Most likely to succeed,' 'Most beautiful,' 'Mr. Wonderful,' and so on. For Stephen it read, 'Most likely to die in prison (or in a back alley).' I'll say one thing; the editor allowed more words for him than anybody else. The feelings about the boy were clearly strong and unbecoming.

I searched for additional pictures or mentions in the activities and sports sections. Except for a one-word entry – Scouts – under 'Activities', his presence was nowhere to be found. I used my miniature camera to get a picture of his senior picture and returned the books to the shelf. I thanked the librarian and made my exit. She seemed to be expecting something more dramatic. Sorry to have disappointed her.

Driving back to the city, I pulled together what I knew. For one thing, the address the reporter had given me was old – inaccurate. I would assume that was unintentional. Stephen had been on the social margin in high school, with less than a stellar reputation – quite the opposite, in fact. A disappointment to his parents. He was alone in the world from about age seventeen. A poor money manager, but then many late-teen kids would fall into that category. He had escaped the military apparently because of complications of polio – a limp.

I needed to find out what sort of relationship he had with his uncle, David Marlow. There seemed to be a relationship – he is the one who reported him missing and took several rounds of incoming after a recent visit. That suggests there must be a player – an armed player – I haven't yet uncovered – and neither have the cops, I assumed. A business rival of Marlow, perhaps. It may have nothing to do with David – just somebody 'Marginal Stephen' had crossed or in some other way aggravated, which seemed the better possibility.

That sure was a delicious hot beef sandwich. I'd have to make that trip again. They had pie. Maybe Jerry and I could . . . What am I saying? No trips with Jerry. My goodness, what is wrong with me?

It was going on three by the time I got the car returned – four bucks for four hours. Seemed outrageous.

I took a cab home. Arrived at three-twenty.

The reporter had provided some interesting information about the shooting. I reviewed my notes from the call. Stephen reported hearing three shots in all, fired from behind a hedge at the edge of the property west of the circular drive in front of the mansion. He saw dust puff up and pieces of gravel scatter near his feet as he stood on the gravel surface in front of his car. The hedge was close to fifty yards away. Some sort of rifle was clearly involved; also, somebody who knew his or her way around such a weapon. At that distance it would have been an easy shot. Why would the bullets have hit the ground instead of hitting him or traveling on? Rifle bullets don't just drop after fifty yards – unless that's where the shooter had aimed.

Stephen reported that he moved in behind the car until he could determine what was going on. None of the help witnessed the event, although all three heard the shots, according to the reporter's story.

The Butler said it was one of four or five times Stephen had been at the mansion the past several months. He was seldom there since the deaths of his parents, nearly three years before. He reported that the meeting that day lasted no more than fifteen minutes.

Several things to contemplate.

How can I go about tracking down David Marlow? I'd sure like to get a look at the underside of the car in which Mrs. Marlow died, and David's study and bedroom. I think it's time for a 'get-to-know-your-local-butler' conference. I had let the car go too soon.

I called a cab and waited out front.

CHAPTER FIVE
The Nuts and Bolts of the Case

It was the butler who answered the door. I had added sunglasses, but I still got a second look. I expected that I would.

“My name is . . .”

“Thomas Cole. I am aware of the relationship – such as it is – between you and Mr. Marlow. Won’t you come in. I have been expecting you.”

Now, that was a twist I hadn’t expected.

“Thank you. Yes.”

“We can talk in the sitting room.”

He motioned and led me through an ornate door off the large, ornate entry hall in the huge, ornate mansion. He offered me a chair and took one himself. He continued.

“Mr. Marlow took me into his confidence, as he has ever since I began working here when he was three years old. He said if anything should happen to him, and if you contacted the house, I was to cooperate with you. He clearly had a premonition.

“I am aware of the strange plan to get you involved. I see that it worked. I had warned him against it. Mr. Marlow is a game

player – a fierce competitor – I’ve been letting him beat me since his Chutes and Ladders days.

“Up front let me say that I have no information about his whereabouts; disappearing was not part of his plan, at least as far as he shared it with me. That said, how can I help you?”

“Assuming he did go off on his own, would you have any idea where he might choose to go?”

“What an astute question. One the police have not asked. I’ve been thinking about it, of course, but a Butler learns not to offer things unless asked.

“There is a summer cabin on the lake but that would be too obvious, don’t you agree?”

“That would seem right. Any other place?”

“He has a small plane kept at a rural air strip ten or so miles west of here. With that, he could be most anywhere by now, I suppose.”

“Can we check to see if the plane is gone?”

“Immediately.”

He walked to a phone, made reference to a small book he carried in his jacket pocket, and dialed a number. He was back and seated again almost immediately.

“The plane is still there. They have not seen Mr. Marlow in recent weeks.”

“Thank you for that. When did you staff people first notice him missing?”

“He came down for breakfast, read the paper and said he was returning to his den. He asked that he not be disturbed unless somebody was bleeding – Mr. Marlow has a splendid, if twisted, sense of humor. I am told that he attributes it to his long association with me. I have never denied it. He often asks to be alone.”

“But specifically, when did somebody notice that he was missing?”

“His nephew, Stephen, arrived about 11:30 that morning demanding to see him. He was making a scene, so I went to the

den to see if he would see the boy. I knocked. There was no answer. I knocked a second time, louder. I opened the door and called in. I went inside. He was not there.

“By then, Stephen had just barged right in. Seeing he was not there, he stormed out and left. I located Potter, the chauffeur, to consult with him on the matter. We decided we should wait until evening before taking any action. He had said he did not want to be disturbed so that was the tack we took. It appears Stephen called it into the police.”

“May I see the den?”

“Of course. The north end of the entry hall – to the right. Follow me.”

It was a large room with a twelve-foot ceiling, mahogany panels on the walls, built-in bookcases, a natural stone fireplace with a large window on each side of it. The floor was wide wood plank fastened in place with wooden pegs. To the left was his work area with an oversized desk and several side chairs. To the right were a library table and four chairs toward the front and a conversation area toward the rear near the window – a large sofa with two matching chairs facing each other across a low table – the window to the left. There were, perhaps, a dozen, colorful throw rugs scattered about the room raising the tone of the room from dreary to almost cheery.

“I assume the police have examined this room.”

“Perused would be a more fitting word than examined. No search for fingerprints or things like that. I was unimpressed by the paltry once over they gave it.”

“Did they say why – just the once over?”

“My impression was, because it was not the proverbial ‘crime scene’, but no one said, specifically.”

“No car missing, I assume?”

“That’s correct.”

“The whereabouts of the car his wife had been driving at the time of the accident?”

“In police custody.”

“What’s your take on that accident and the fact he was

accused of his wife's murder?"

"Let me be succinct: Mr. Marlow loved his wife. He had nothing to gain and a lifetime of love and devotion to lose. The evidence is puzzling. Do you know of it?"

"Not specifically – prints on the faulty brake lining as I recall."

"May I call Potter? As the chauffeur, he knows cars better than I and has an interesting perspective. He does not know of your role in this specifically. He will accept the story that you are a detective looking into the matter for the attorney. I will use the name, Cole, unless you have some objection."

I shook my head and shrugged.

The room, honest to goodness, had three of those gold cords you pulled to get the attention of help – the butler, the chauffeur, the maid/cook, I assumed. I figured they only existed in old, black and white suspense movies known for their butlers, shadows and secret panels. He pulled the middle one. Potter arrived a few moments later. The Butler – James, I would learn – guided the explanation. I had to wonder if the two of them had not rehearsed it all ahead of time – perhaps just discussed it often enough to make it seem that way. I'd see where it led.

"Share with Mr. Cole your theory about Mrs. Marlow's accident – the physical evidence."

Potter was a match in age to James. Both seemed fit and trim and, as I had already determined about James, both were mentally capable and articulate.

"Good to meet you, Mr. Cole."

I figured the 'Mr.' was so well engrained into their souls that I'd not even try to discourage its use. He went on.

"Several things. First, I have read the police report. Oddly, I think, the only places Mr. Marlow's prints appeared were on the fittings used to couple the several sections of brake line tubing together. During the installation process, that tubing had to be held in place somehow – a glove, I know, but why on that hand and not the one attending to the fittings? And, even more, if his mission had been to prick the tube to cause the leak, why had

he been handling the fittings – the couplings? They were new. The copper line was not.

“Second, I am quite certain that Mr. Marlow does not know a break line from a gas line or a conduit through which electrical wires are bundled.”

“Did you share that with the police?”

“I did not. James and I have been pondering over whether I should. It seems you have rendered that question moot.”

“Did he drive, and did he pilot his plane?”

“He could drive. He didn’t. Not sure he had a license. Learned to land a plane in case something happened to his pilot while they were in the air. He was something of a safety freak.”

“You said, ‘was’.”

“Yes, I did. It reflects my fear he is dead.”

“How?”

“At the hands of some malevolent perpetrator. I have absolutely no idea about whom that might refer. Nor, do I have a motive. He was – is, let’s say – a good man.”

“I understand he owns a rather lucrative manufacturing business.”

“Yes. One of those that became a success the moment he touched it – working small sheet steel and aluminum pieces, from rings to car doors. He gives all of us here shares every Christmas. After all these years, I imagine that amounts to a considerable sum.”

“Imagine?”

“He provided us each with a fireproof lock box and every year I – at least – just drop the new paper inside and lock it up ‘til the next year.”

“I assume there is a will.”

“There is. His attorney will know the details. He had no children.”

“Unless you object, I want to snoop around in here a bit, gentlemen, and then do the same in his bedroom. Please remain to verify that I haven’t removed anything, or, if I do, what it is.”

Somewhat humorously, they took steps backwards as if choreographed. From previous cases, I had learned that the help, in places like that, were very good at waiting quietly and fading into the background. I snooped.

“I need to check that window to the left of the fireplace. I’ll need a chair or a stepladder.”

Together, they moved a chair from the library table into place and offered me a hand up. It was what I figured I was seeing from below. I took a picture and returned to the floor. Neither of them asked and I didn’t offer.

There was nothing more of immediate interest.

I asked them both to accompany me to his room. It turned out to be a suite of three rooms just next door on the east side. There were doors both from the den and the hall. Its several windows looked out upon a large yard with a woods beyond. There were two double beds – matching four posters, side by side in the south east corner of the room. One thing seemed odd immediately.

“One bed is made up and one is not. There must be a story about that.”

James chose to respond.

“Mr. Marlow is a man of curious habits. For example, he insists on making his own bed. I bring him clean sheets twice a week – every Wednesday and Sunday morning while he is in the shower. He strips the bed and then makes it up, dropping the soiled linen down the laundry shoot – there. He always attends to that right after breakfast. I have never known him not to.”

“And yet . . .?”

“I know – unmade.”

He continued in a more confidential tone.

“There is one other very strange thing about it all. He always sleeps in the other bed.”

“I suppose the reason for that is unimportant,” I said. “Any idea why he would have made the change that night?”

“None.”

I bent down and took a good sniff of the unmade bed. I walked to the other one, pulled back the bedspread and cover and did a repeat of the process.

The bed that is freshly made up has the clean sheets on it – can smell the laundry soap. On the other, that has faded away. If he is a stickler for clean sheets, he did not sleep in the unmade bed. Monday, he changed the sheets on the south bed – the one you indicate he uses. What’s with the huge, decorative pillow laying on the south bed – it must be four feet side to side.”

“A gift from his wife – holds some private significance between them. He replaces it on the bed every morning. Where it rests at night I do not know.”

“Let me get the sequence straight. His wife’s accident occurred late on a Monday afternoon. He became a person of interest in her murder on Wednesday and was ordered to remain here in this house. Thursday morning, he went missing without a car. Correct?”

The men nodded.

“It was also Thursday morning when his nephew visited, correct?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“When was the last time he had visited here – before Thursday, I mean.”

The two of them conferred. Again, it was James.

“Tuesday of the same week. Late afternoon.”

I nodded and began snooping. Potter ‘ahem-ed’.

“Something, Potter?”

“Something from the police report on the examination of the wife’s car. The brake line on that car was composed of three lengths of tubing, one from the master cylinder toward the rear wheels where it splits into two – one going to each brake. Foreign cars present a nightmarish web in their undercarriages. That makes a total of three fitting nuts and one ‘Y’ coupling. I’m using the generic ‘nut’ to mean the coupling device, whatever it was. The report said Mr. Marlow’s fingerprints were only found on the ‘Y’ and two of the nuts. The third had no prints on it at all –

installed but with nobody's prints. Very strange, you see, since the others all had prints."

"I see. A great observation. You have an explanation?"

"No, Sir – just the observation."

As a matter of my aimless examination of things, I moved back to the unmade bed, interested in the arrangement of the sheet and blanket – if the bed had been slept in, it was barely disarranged. Compared to my bed, mornings, it appeared freshly made. I pointed that out. James responded.

"Mr. Marlow is all business when he sleeps – no tossing or turning. I can vouch for that since he was a child."

For no particular reason, I picked up a pillow – the one that lay in the center of the bed and I presumed the one he had used last. As I moved it, I saw tiny glints – reflections. I drew it closer and placed it on a table beneath a lamp.

"Is there a magnifying glass handy?"

"In the drawer of his bedside table," James offered.

He produced it for me. I held it with a hanky out of habit. I believed I knew what I was seeing, but I asked Potter for his opinion – he, being the most mechanically inclined of us three.

"Take a look here, Potter, and give me your first impression."

He took the assignment seriously and studied it for some time.

"Metal filings, Sir. Brass would be my guess. They are the kind that might be produced during the process of cutting threads onto a bolt or inside a nut."

It had been my thought as well. How odd was that – metal filings on a pillowcase? I'll tell you how odd that was – extremely. How would they have gotten there – from the man's face when he lay his head against it – from his hair, perhaps? I had another possibility. I addressed James.

"Any chance such metal shavings could have been picked up in the washing machine?"

"He reached for the magnifying glass beside the pillow

and gave it a rather careful once over.”

“My impression is probably not. Notice that they just lay on the surface of the cloth. Had they survived the pummeling of a wash and dry, I would expect any remaining on the fabric to be embedded in some way – clinging, you see. These just lay there, Sir. Additionally, there would be no source for them in any of the clothes washed in that machine.”

“I will need to have you two send me bills for your assistance. You are quite good at this.”

They shared a smile at each other, plainly pleased with my remark.

I examined the sheets. There were a few filings but very few compared with the pillow and all toward the top beside the pillow. As I worked at the bed, James turned on the overhead light to assist me. I acknowledged it with a nod in his direction. I believed I had a very supportive team behind me. I assumed it behooved a butler to be accurate in his observations.

As I turned back to the bed, my eye was again caught by those glints – reflections – two different spots. One was from the top of his nightstand. Closer inspection indicated a few of the filings there. The second had been from the floor – more specifically from the grate covering the heating duct beside the headboard. It appeared to have rained metal filings in the room. There, that explained it! Not really, of course, but as good as I had up to then.

“Help me move the nightstand away from the bed. Do you have a flashlight?”

Potter helped with the move and James retrieved a flashlight from somewhere in the room – I hadn’t paid attention.

I got to my knees and focused the beam down into the duct, through the grate. The heating duct made a ninety degree turn in the space beneath the floor. The heating duct gods were with me. In my entire life they had never once failed me. I smiled. The men wondered. Had that duct continued straight down, I would have missed what looked to be an important find – a shiny brass nut laying in the dust.

If that were the size and composition of the nuts used on the brake line, it could be the noose that sealed Marlow's fate. As James held the light, I removed the grate and took pictures of it where it lay.

I reached in with a pencil and snagged it, presently placing it on the table beside the pillow. The two men nodded at each other; the meaning was not immediately obvious. It could have meant they had known it was there and were pleased I had located it – doubtful. It could have been in recognition of my masterful detective work. I would go with the latter until some new evidence shattered that ego-bolstering interpretation.

“Powdered sugar and cellophane tape?”

Potter left – to the kitchen I assumed – while James went to the desk and returned with a dispenser of tape.

“Is this to be a makeshift fingerprinting arrangement like in the whodunits?”

“It is, indeed. You are aware of the technique?”

“I must admit that as a child, I was hooked on those Saturday afternoon, black and white, detective movies at the Plaza Theater. Not to boast, but I was usually one step ahead of the gumshoes, if I may borrow a phrase.”

“That does not surprise me in the least.”

Had he been a peacock, he would have preened. I had never thought much about it, but I suspected domestic help probably did not receive their fair share of complements and recognition for their work. Good for me for having done that.

Potter soon returned with an inch of powdered sugar in the bottom of a paper, Dixie cup – enough to print every doorknob in the Empire State Building.

I set the nut on a newspaper and poured just a smattering of powder onto a small piece of paper. I blew across it ever so gently. The men leaned in as I blew a second time to clear away the excess from the nut. They were clearly disappointed that there were no prints. That fit my hastily formed hypothesis and just might lend evidence in support of Marlow's innocence. I took a close-up and placed it in a waiting envelope – James had

anticipated my need although I did carry a supply.

I placed the envelope in my inside jacket pocket, ready to leave.

“If I may use a phone, I need to call a cab.”

“Oh, no, Sir. Please let me drive you. In fact, if you are without a vehicle, let me manage all your transportation needs. Until Mr. Marlow returns, I am relegated to washing and waxing. Rather than the limousine, there is a far less conspicuous Ford, if being incognito is important.”

“How generous. I will take you up on that. Thank you.”

I offered my hand for shakes. James removed several sheets of paper, folded, from his inside, jacket pocket – his being black with tails compared with Potter’s which sported gold braid and brass buttons. He offered them to me.

“Our copy of the police report of the accident if you do not have one – a photostat, but quite readable.”

I thanked him for that and them for their help.

“Leave the rooms just like they are. The police may want to reexamine the place. Also, if you would, each of you please write a short and to the point rendering of what went on here today – what the three of us did during our investigation. Just keep them in case the police need verification – write those independently, of course. I am taking the pillowcase. Let me leave you a note to that effect. Is there a sack I can use?”

James provided one and held it open while I placed it inside.

“On second thought, I need to return to the den. Bring the powder, please.”

I had questions.

“On Stephen’s recent visit – the next to last visit – Tuesday, I believe you said – where in the house did they meet?”

“In the den,” James said.

“To your knowledge, were they together the whole time?”

Potter answered.

“No. They were not. I passed Mr. Marlow in the entry hall

a few minutes before Stephen left. I was heading for the stairs to go up and assist Amanda, our maid, with a problem about a door hinge. I asked if I might be of help. He said Stephen had asked to borrow a book he knew was in the library and the Mister was on his way to fetch it.

“That left Stephen alone in the den?”

“Yes. For several minutes – three would be my estimate.”

“And that was how long before the shots were heard?”

“Less than ten minutes. There was something odd about those shots – James and I talked about it.”

They nodded at each other as Potter pointed back and forth between them. He continued.

“They were quite loud. If I had been asked to guess, I would have said they had been fired from the area of the front porch rather than way over by the hedge, which, we understand was the boy’s story.”

“The police were called at that time?”

“Yes. By Stephen. They found three slugs in the driveway – it is gravel as you will remember.”

I nodded – one of those, ‘I plead ignorance’, nods always coupled with a shrug.

“What was Stephen driving that day?”

“An older model van,” James said.

Potter added, “Like a delivery panel truck, not a whole lot longer than a station wagon – a bit taller.”

We entered the den. I mounted the chair so I could reach the lock on the window I had examined earlier. It was a flat, slide and turn lock, familiar to windows in older houses, so it offered a nice sized surface to work. Within a minute or so I had removed prints from it. Unlike all the other window locks in the room, it was in the open position – that had drawn my attention to it before.

I thanked them again and had soon slipped in beside Potter in the front seat of the Ford. I had waved off his offer of assistance. I could tell that made him uncomfortable. I was half that man’s age for goodness sake; I could attend to myself. Still,

it had not been my intention to offend him.

I was home in time to search the fridge for supper. I noticed the Lord and Master had cleaned up his bowl and apparently left for the night.

I set my alarm for two o'clock – I'd take prints from Smith's doorknob. Suddenly, I had a number of things for Sarge to look into for me: the prints from Smith's door, the brass nut for a comparison with those used on the brake line of Mrs. Marlow's car, the pillow case, an envelope containing brass filings for a match to the nuts on the brake line, and the print from the window lock.

Regarding Smith's doorknob, there were lots of prints – overlapping prints – but it was clear they were mostly the same. I isolated a nice, clear thumb and a good index. I extracted enough to fill three, short, strips of tape. There was one odd set – small – a woman or a child. Ah! My bet would be it would be found to belong to super-salesman, Jerry.

Back upstairs and mostly for fun, I took prints from my doorknob. Inside, I examined them at the kitchen table. There were mine and there were those smaller ones I expected. They matched with those from Smith's. Like I said, just for fun.

I was interested, however, in a third set there on my knob. They were under prints – those that had been laid down first. My. My. A perfect match to Smith's. That reminded me of the prints I'd taken from the inside of His Majesty's collar. As I had expected, a quick comparison told me they were Smith's. There was one other revelation, however – a second set on that collar – Jerry's. Hmm?

/

CHAPTER SIX

Confusing Prints

Sometimes in cases, I don't know for sure where I am or where I need to be going. This was turning into one of those. My agitated mind would not let my body sleep.

I remained restless the rest of the night, but I must have slept, because I awoke at eight. I got ready for the day with a shower, put on the coffee, had a bowl of cereal and engaged Edmond Randolph in a few minutes of belly rubbing – his, not mine. My blondish beard had never been thick and, although it was some darker than my original hair color, it took a lot to be seen. I didn't dislike it. Black hair. Blond whiskers. Maybe not such a good idea after all.

Sarge would be working noon to nine, so I'd need to wait a few hours to contact him. The prints I had accumulated were in individual envelopes on the table. I arranged them side by side across the table and placed the tape sections just below, sorting them by print design.

- >Smith: from his doorknob, from my doorknob, from the cat collar
- >Jerry: from Smith's doorknob, from my doorknob, from the cat collar

>Unknown from Marlow's window lock.

Well, now, 'wouldn't that frost ya' – one of my mother's sayings, suggesting a puzzlement resolved in an unexpected manner. That *unknown* print was not unknown – it was Smith's. Two possibilities came to mind: Smith had met with Marlow in his den, which seemed like a possibility if he were Marlow's employee and my fixer. Or, Smith was Stephen, the last known visitor to the den.

All that raised the question about why there would be *any* 'foreign' print on that window lock in the first place. Hmm? I would get back to that. I was more than a little intrigued about the possibility that my Smith might be Marlow's Stephen.

Back to why that print was on the window lock. Two possibilities: first, unknown. Second, unlocking the window so the abductor could return to perpetrate the abduction – through the window, from the outside – if, in fact, Marlow had been abducted rather than just running off – which, from the outset just hadn't fit well into the wider picture – although he had dropped the case in my lap with no way of contacting him. My how my thoughts rambled sometimes.

"If the prints were Smith's, and if he were working for Marlow, what reason could he have had for taking Marlow? If the prints were Stephen's, what reason would *he* have?"

Two questions requiring answers, which is why I had put them out loud to Edmond Randolph like that. He yawned, stood, and left through his door without so much as a shrug, goodbye, or good luck. I had become a cat lady!

I wondered how old that cat was. He had come as original equipment with my previous room. He was young when we met. Eight to ten, currently, I supposed. I had no idea how long a cat lived. I had a feeling Jerry would know.

Speaking of, the lad arrived for our ten o'clock at nine-fifty-six – as he had promised, a few minutes before ten. I was beginning to recognize his knock. Neither my African Violet nor my fish had ever knocked or made appointments with me. Clearly, I was encouraging more of a relationship than I

traditionally pursued with human type people. I suppose in all fairness, the get-together had been at my request – *why*, I couldn't say.

Earlier, I had unlocked the door. I called for him to come in while I donned my socks and shoes leaning forward from my recliner. He was wearing a white shirt, bow tie, black slacks and well-shined leather shoes. Dressed up. He was defining this as a big event.

Shoes tied, and in light of young master Jerry standing there ready for the prom, I buttoned my collar, donned a tie, and added a jacket – quite different from the informality I had been envisaging. It would be fine. I just needed to adjust my mind set. And, of course, he was also wearing his wonderful grin. I easily worked up one of my own; his was infectious – as has probably been written far too often. In the end, I figured we were an acceptable fashion match.

I had to wonder if he knew that while he was on his way home Friday, I had called his mother to introduce myself and ask permission – apologizing for not having done that ahead of time. We chatted for several minutes – longer than would have been necessary. She was sweet and thanked me both for taking an interest in her son and for the courtesy of the call. She had a final admonition.

“Jerry has a leach-like quality when it comes to men. You need to understand that at the outset.”

I thanked her, wondering if that reference implied clinging or bloodletting. At any rate, it confirmed my general impression. Although I didn't mention it, I could relate – having gone through a similar phase at about the same age. Perhaps that was why I was opening a crack for him in my life. Being that self-aware, I figured I was responsible for whatever developed. Part of me hoped he hated me so it would all be over. Part of me hoped he'd stick around – at arm's length. Most of me suspected I'd have to move to Nome to shake him.

He entered as if it were a well-established habit, my paper in hand. I received it and set it aside. I retied that second shoe.

“Good morning, Mr. Jackson. A bit of a chill out there. You

see I wore my early spring jacket. I suggest the same for you.”

Ah ha! He was really the reincarnation of my mother!

Cat returned, paused to look over the new guy and, remarkably, with some dispatch, trotted across the room to him. It had been a morning of puzzlements. Jerry got to his knees, sitting back on his legs and took *my* feline into *his* arms. Just perhaps, I felt a momentary twinge of jealousy.

Jerry looked up at me.

“We’ve met out back in the alley. His collar had somehow fallen off and Mr. Smith was trying to slip it back on. Cat didn’t like him one bit, so I offered to help. I’m good with animals. Mr. Cat let me hold him while Mr. Smith finished buckling the collar in place. I’m glad you see to his welfare in that way – the flea repellent collar and the identifying data.”

“Well, then, Edmond Randolph and I appreciate your help – thanks.”

He looked immediately puzzled.

“You and the first Chief Justice of the United States . . . ?”

“Yes. I see. An explanation. Cat’s name – Edmund Randolph.”

“What an excellent name. I’ve always thought cats are constantly judging us humans – like Justice Randolph here – making a negative judgement of Mr. Smith and a positive one of me. A very clever choice.”

I figured there was no harm in letting him believe what he chose to believe. Truth was, that name had come from a fortune cookie.

“May I call him, *Justice*?”

“That will be strictly between you and him. I believe I am more *his* human than he is *my* cat.”

“I like that very much. Apropos of the more generalized relationship between the species.”

“So, he didn’t like Mr. Smith?”

“Scratched the back of his hand, in fact. May I try something?”

“I suppose if it doesn’t involve drawing blood.”

Jerry grinned and nodded.

“No blood. I have acquired these two dog whistles that you see around my neck, each on its own leather thong. When blown into, they provide vibrations the human ear cannot detect but dogs can.”

He blew in one as if to prove his contention. I nodded.

“Didn’t hear a thing,” I said. “The cat, however, seemed to. See how he came to life in your lap.”

“I did. That was the something I wanted to try – to see if cats also heard it. Dogs can be taught to obey commands they send – sort of like dots and dashes, I’m thinking. Cats don’t obey commands of any kind very well, so I don’t know if it would work with them. Will you take a whistle and turn away and blow it to see if he reacts in such a situation?”

I turned and I blew, and cat went so far as to stand and arch his back, raising its face up to meet Jerry’s.

“Satisfied?” I asked.

“One more thing, please. Would you go into the kitchen, close the door, and blow on it and see if ‘Justice’ reacts? – from a distance and through a wall.”

Interesting. I was intrigued and did as he asked. I blew. Before I knew it, cat had slipped through the swinging door and was at my ankle rubbing his back against me.

“Thank you. It seems there is a built-in reaction that doesn’t need training – he goes toward the source – and, the ultra-high, sound vibrations are at least not entirely contained by walls. Mother would love it if it affected me that way – one toot and home I’d go.”

I smiled assuming that probably revealed something related to an ongoing point of contention in their home.

“Thank you for your help. I’m always doing little experiments like that. I often use Mother as my assistant. During such times she refers to herself as *Igor* and moves around awkwardly. I think you’d like my mother. She likes to joke and laugh.”

I hoped that hadn't been a trial suggestion of matrimony and returned the whistle to Jerry. Justice hurried to his door and left. Jerry and I, less hurried, approached *my* door, and left. It was immediately clear that falling into comfortable conversation would never pose a problem. He had two chatter speeds; his 'putting on a hustle' paperboy speed – fast enough to not let any interruptions – I had witnessed that before – and his more typical, 'just Jerry' speed – fairly constant but allowing for give and take.

We descended the stairs. I asked my question.

"So, how old do you figure the cat might be?"

There would be no idle guessing. He thought it through out loud.

"He still has a very nice coat and can respond rapidly when necessary. His eyes are a bit cloudy, though, and the pads on the bottoms of his paws are well worn. Best guess would about ten."

"How long do cats live?"

"Twelve to fifteen years, assuming they don't have an unfortunate encounter with a vehicle."

I smiled, thinking it had been an attempt at humor. He had been serious. In a city, it had been a point well taken.

We crossed the street and arrived at *Sally's Malt Shop* just as she was turning the 'OPEN' sign that hung in the window beside the door. It was an older storefront with pink trim and frilly things here and there. She wore a pink dress and a white apron.

He looked up at me; "She's running a few minutes behind this morning. Actually, not really unusual for her."

He pushed the door open ahead of me. We entered.

"Master Jerry. Good to see you. Don't you look fine? Who's your good-looking friend?"

"This is John Jackson. He's new to the neighborhood. Mr. Jackson, this is Sally."

Sally extended her hand for a shake.

"Sally Keller, malt maker extraordinaire. Jerry, here, has taught me most of what I know about life."

He looked up at me.

“She’s just kidding about that.”

Sally and I exchanged a smile at the kid’s expense, but he didn’t catch it. Jerry offered an unexpectedly short version of their relationship.

“I help around here sometimes.”

Sally continued.

“Counter or booth, gentlemen?”

I looked down at Jerry and offered a shrug, putting the choice on him.

“This is our first outing together, so I think a booth would more appropriately fit the formality of the occasion.”

“Choose your spot, then.”

The boy put some thought into it and settled on the one in the front corner furthest from the door. He was going for privacy. He waited until I slid in and then he slid in across from me, removing his jacket in the process. During that moment of awkward grappling, he appeared to be eleven for the first time. Sally brought menus. Jerry held forth on the merits of each offering, in the end suggesting the chocolate-banana-peanut butter, double-sized, milkshake.

“It is quite thick. Malt messes with the flavor combination so I go with it straight.”

I held up two fingers and Sally returned behind the counter. I called after her.

“Coffee with that for me if it’s available.”

“Fresh and strong, coming up.”

“My mother likes coffee with sweet things. She says coffee with sweet and cola with salt. I have decided not to indulge in coffee until I’m thirteen.”

No justification for the pronouncement was offered. I wondered if he expected me to take notes.

His prattle continued, focusing on himself, his interests and likes and dislikes. Apparently, he believed in just putting it all out there on a first outing together. I found him delightful as

well as fascinating. It struck me that his peers might not see him that way – an overly precise adult in an eleven-year-old body. He would take care of that ‘*struck*’ without inquiry.

“I have very few friends, actually. I find my peers boring and they find me obnoxious, so some years back we agreed to keep our distance. In a few years, when the time comes that I will require female companionship, I hope I will come upon a girl with whom I share similar traits and interests – who isn’t put off by who I am.”

“I have the idea that someday you will sweep a girl off her feet and live happily ever after.”

“That is a reassuring observation.”

My coffee arrived – black. Sally had read my mind. I nodded. She smiled. The lad continued.

“Mothers are odd creatures in many ways.”

I had not clue one what had prompted the comment but did believe his head was capable of processing several lines of thought at the same time. I wondered if his smarts could even be measured – accurately.”

“What makes you say that?”

“My mother requires me to brush my teeth before I get in bed at night. I think that is reasonable. Then, she makes me brush them again first thing in the morning. Tell me, how are my teeth going to get dirty while I sleep. See! Odd!”

It required no response from me, and I was pleased not to have been put between mother and son.

Sally arrived with a tray: two very large milk shakes and an order of French fries, they were on the house. The straws were mammoth.

“Sally knows how much I love French fries. From eleven to one she also offers cheeseburgers. They are stupendous – I suppose ‘delicious’ would have been a better descriptor, there.”

“How about, stupendously delicious,” I offered?

Jerry grinned and nodded with some enthusiasm.

“Ah! The adverb thing. I like it.”

Sally raised an eyebrow. I had never mastered that one eyebrow at a time skill. While struggling to acquire it as it a youngster, I feared I might rip my forehead apart. We exchanged another smile. I got the idea I was being double-teamed.

“Take your first sip of the milk shake, Mr. Jackson. I want to study your response.”

I sipped. He studied.

“The best shake ever, right?”

“I must say it is *very* good. A *delicious* flavor combination.”

He beamed, clearly having heard the exact response he wanted – that it was, in fact, the best I’d ever had.

Sally called across from behind the counter.

“Everything okay over there?”

“Just excellent, Sally. Thank you.”

It had been Jerry, without consultation.

“Mr. Jackson said it is the best shake he’d ever had – I may be paraphrasing his exact words, there.”

“Since we are becoming fast friends,” I began, “how about calling me Johnny like my other friends do?”

“I would like that very much. I was planning to broach the subject later.”

“Good. That’s settled. Excellent fries, as well,” I said.

Again, we sipped and enjoyed the treat. Again, the lad offered an off the wall comment. They seemed to occur by some sort of spontaneous generation fully independent of the topic at hand.

“Mom’s big on church. The minister asked me not to return to Sunday School because he said I kept asking the wrong questions and parents of the other kids had called and made the request. Someday, I will be interested in getting your take on the possibility that the laws of this universe could support a spiritual realm.”

He ‘uncombusted’ as rapidly as he had begun and was on to other topics.

Not really to my surprise, Jerry was a world class dawdler,

at least when it came to eating. I suspected a close correlation between that and deep, fascinating, thoughts. He clearly enjoyed every drop – every morsel – every *ort*, he would probably say. It was eleven thirty when we left – Jerry paid as had been our arrangement – clearly proud to do so. Thirty-five cent shakes were the most expensive I'd ever had, but mine really was the best I'd ever had. I would remember about the lunch-time burgers that existed no more than a hundred paces from my recliner.

Jerry walked me to my building where he offered his hand for a shake and watched me inside. He turned south at an exuberant trot – run, jump, run, jump. It had actually been a pleasant time. My African Violet had seldom such fascinating conversation.

My next task was to develop the film from my little camera. It was the most expensive thing I owned – top of the line. The bathroom had no window so made a perfect dark room. There was a photography shop between home and Jack's, so I'd drop the film off for enlarged prints Monday morning – or before.

There were mostly shots of things taken at Marlow's – the pillow, widow lock, the nut in the duct, and add in the picture of Stephen from his yearbook. Some odds and ends from earlier. One of Jerry looking quite spiffy in front of the door that morning before we left for Sally's.

I called Sarge. I asked if I could get access to the Marlow file, especially what had been found at the spot of the shooting. I also had prints for him to run – Smith's from there in the building and those from the window lock.

We arranged to meet for lunch at two. He would bring what information he'd been able to gather.

I needed to speak with the attorney – Jacob Barton. At the hourly rate they charged clients, I had no reluctance about calling him on a Saturday – charged to Marlow.

He was surprisingly cordial and clearly concerned about his client. I asked about a will and other relevant legal work. He was exceptionally open with me. I assumed that had been approved by Marlow, earlier – one of those, 'if it happens',

scenarios.

Marlow's Will transferred everything to his wife if she survived him. Otherwise, after gifts to his employees at the business and the house, it left everything to an inner-city school – St. Paul's, an Episcopal school doing great things for kids in a struggling neighborhood. It was a regular recipient of his donations. He had provided his household staff with shares in his company that would allow them a good life through their retirement years. The mansion and grounds were left to the school.

On an additional note, the attorney mentioned a trust fund for Marlow's nephew payable when he turned twenty-five. Stephen was Marlow's only living relative. The attorney said it was quite straight forward – Stephen reached twenty-five and the fund was available to him with no restrictions. In a bit of editorializing, he confided that Marlow really didn't believe the boy would survive to twenty-five as badly as his life had always gone. "The boy has been on a collision course with disaster since the day he was born." There was one caveat about the trust – he could not access it while he was under arrest, in prison, on parole, or for a period of five years after release from such entanglements. Actually, those same conditions were also included in the will for each of the domestics.

I met Sarge at Jack's Diner – our regular spot from my cop days. He had introduced me to the place, in fact. After the small talk, he got down to business.

"No progress to report on Marlow's whereabouts. As dead an end as I've ever seen. On another front, three slugs were found in the gravel in the driveway right where Stephen indicated he believed they would be. There is a problem – they were fired from a .22 caliber handgun not a high-powered rifle."

That gave some credence to the impression James offered about the origin of the noise appearing to be much closer than the hedge.

That raised numerous questions: had Stephen done the shooting; if so, to what end? And, why tell the lie about it? It might also indicate his general ignorance about firearms.

He had one other piece of information that interested me; the day after Marlow's disappearance there had been several anonymous calls made to the police department suggesting they search the cabin up on the lake just north of the city – not one call, but three over a period of just sixty minutes – notes specified they were all from a male voice. No suggestion whether they were the same or different voices.

The police had searched the cabin and found no trace of Marlow. As soon as the police arrived at the cabin, the calls stopped. Could have been a coincidence – could have represented the human penchant for doing things in threes – could have been somebody watching the place and once the police had arrived, the caller's purpose had been served. What purpose if Marlow was not there? A nosy neighbor, maybe – there were a number of cabins there on spacious lots, sharing the south end of the lake.

I handed him an envelope with samples of the prints I believed belonged to Smith. If they were a match to local prints, obtained by local law enforcement, it should only take hours, otherwise, it could take days. My hope was local. I provided both Smith's name and Stephen's on that one in a million chance they were the same person. I wished I had asked Jerry for an estimate of Smith's age. I had no idea and the Chief Justice refused to say.

Finally, I gave him the pillowcase, which held the metal filings. I went through my concerns and my interpretation of what I had found – incorporating Potter's take on things.

"They seem to be brass like the nut I found in the heating duct beside the bed on which the pillowcase had been. Look closely and you'll see several of the filings still attached to the inside of the nut – it wasn't cleaned after the threads were cut into it. I can imagine that means either amateur thread cutter or it was never intended to be used. From the police report, I read about Mrs. Marlow's car, I have developed this theory:

"The bad guy in all this, in order to implicate Marlow in his wife's upcoming accident, gained access to his bedroom through a previously unlocked window and placed the nuts and the

coupling on his pillow – Marlow would have to move them and, in the process, leave his fingerprints on them. At some point before Marlow touched them, one nut fell and entered the heating duct – an easily imaginable slide off a silk pillowcase. It would have been print-free like the others. Finding them at bedtime, Marlow picked them up and laid them on the nightstand to care for later. I’m sure he was more than a little puzzled. That night, Bad Guy somehow retrieved them, perhaps leaving a similar set behind so Marlow wouldn’t know they had been taken. Had he done so, there would have been four nuts, assuming Bad Guy had not known one had fallen away.

“Later, when he prepared to install them on her car – with the prints intended to implicate Marlow – he found one was missing so was forced to use one that didn’t bear Marlow’s prints.

“The fact there were no prints on the tubing but were on the nuts, adds credence to that theory I believe. The installer wore gloves, thereby not disturbing the prints on the nuts and leaving none on the tubing. What are the chances such tubing would have had *no* prints on it *at all*? It was original on a car that was three years old. It had been wiped clean.

“It leads me to think the print on the window lock, was put there as it was being unlocked – the way I found it – so Bad Guy could later enter the house and leave the fittings, then exit that same way and later reenter the room and retrieve them. It might also be related to Marlow’s abduction – enter, chloroform him or take him at gun point and, also, leave through the window. That would indicate only one Bad Guy – the one who knew the window would be unlocked.

“The question becomes, who had access to that window lock? Stephen, possibly; he was in the house during the time those things could have happened. The help indicated he had been there on several occasions in recent weeks. That brings us to consider the household help – Potter and James. I need to find out about additional visitors.

“Let me call James. Just take a minute.”

Sarge playfully handed over a nickel to make the call. A few minutes later, I had what information was available.

“Only one other outsider on the premises before the accident – the exterminator. He came once a month always on a schedule that would have put him there several days before Mrs. Marlow’s accident. James referred to him as *Orval* and said he works for *City Exterminators*. I often see their trucks around the city.

“I guess that handles what’s on my mind. I’ll wait to hear from you.”

Sarge went on to catch me up on his wife and kids and we had the visit wrapped up in thirty minutes. I walked him to the front door and returned to my booth, signaling with my cup I was ready for a refill. The regular weekend waitress was there – Mildred. I liked Mildred – sixtyish, I supposed, with red hair that should have been gray, hips that could have demolished narrow doorways, and a joyfulness that was infectious.

She plainly had decided not to use my name but did comment on my new look.

“For a new lady, I assume, she said, circling my face with her index finger. “Still a lot around that hates the Aryan look, I guess. You do dark hair good. I’d get rid of the caterpillar on your upper lip – not that I object to a mustache on general principles – I used to tell my husband I didn’t mind going through a little brush to get to a picnic.”

She giggled, poured and left me alone with her wisdom.

A bit later, she brought me my messages. Three. One deserved a call back. I’d do that later from home. I had a phone of my own, now, thanks to the elusive David Marlow.

I ordered pie – peach ala mode – refrigerator cold. Mildred served it with fresh coffee – cup and all. I tried to dawdle over it, thinking I needed to master the technique if I were to have more food-based adventures with Jerry. It gave me a smile. Violet and fish had never required me to dawdle.

Finished, I walked home, thinking it would be a good time to get to know my new neighborhood.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Abducted X 2 !

A good detective knows that the real story of a neighborhood is told in the alleys. It is where the unseen citizens dwell – the eyes and ears from the margins of society – the segment of our species that will survive when the rest of us perish. Several scurried off when I entered the alley that ran behind my building. They were probably wanted by the cops – or had reason to think they might be. I could see that several remained. Dependably, they were the best sources of information – not on the lam, no axe to grind, and eager to make a few bucks. They were also good judges of wealth – information was for sale on a sliding scale – at a price they believed the asker could afford. Since I had no intention of paying for anything, my more affluent appearance probably didn't really matter at that moment.

I entered from the north. It ran that city block from end to end, so revealed the rear entrances of two dozen or more business and apartment buildings exposing their backsides across the alley. It was narrow; two delivery trucks could not pass. The buildings tended to be long – deep, front to back – and were three to six stories high. The street-facing ends suggested pride, care, and a hint of prosperity. The alley view was the great equalizer – dirty, peeling paint, neglected.

Decades before, it had been paved in brick. Through the years that had become uneven with some bricks upended and stacked along the base of the walls. Many of the resulting depressions had been patched with asphalt. In places, the surface was an inch thick in hard-packed dust and dirt. I noticed it was cooler in there than out on the street and the paving was damp. The sun seldom graced the area.

Dark green and dirty red trash receptacles sat close to every back door – large, medium, small. The trash trucks made their rounds every morning at five – the unsung heroes of our city. Our block produced lots of trash, a sign of affluence that provided supplies and sustenance for the alley people – a reason there were so many there. A dependable, gentle, breeze moved north to south; without that, I imagined it would have reeked with the unpleasant odor that defined our ‘throw away’ lifestyle. Black iron ladders and fire escapes clung to the mostly brick walls. In my building there was a door at the rear of the central hall on each floor that opened out onto its fire escape. I had a momentary vision of how it would appear if the ironwork were painted in bright colors – red, blue, green, yellow, and if the paving bricks were cleaned and restored to their natural earth-tones. I was amazed there were enough hidden nooks and crannies to house the unattached population that called it home – roofs and basements, I suspected.

I walked the alley all the way through and paused from time to time to chat with those who would – all bearded with sunken eyes – ageless, though not threatening or unkind. I must have spent nearly five minutes with one who called himself, Patch. It seemed clear why – he wore a black patch over his left eye. I didn’t take that as a guarantee it was blind. As I moved on, he tipped his tattered hat. That might have represented respect; it might have been patronizing – laying the basis for a payday later. He knew where I lived. I supposed he had time in his life to take note of such things. Names didn’t seem important, there – the ones offered were most likely not attached to their birth certificates.

Back in my apartment, I went to the coat closet and removed the hat that had been awaiting me there when I arrived

– black, felt, narrow brim. I returned to the hall and opened the door, moving out onto the little iron landing. I two-finger whistled to catch Patch’s attention. He looked up and raised his arm in recognition, breaking a smile across his face. I sailed the hat in his direction. My amazing effort dropped it within ten feet of him – worthy of self-praise, which I both offered and accepted. He indicated his appreciation and made the switch immediately. It had been nothing to me and apparently everything to him. Still another responsibility I did not want to get sucked into. So why had I?

I pictured myself as an independent sort whose primary goal in life was to take care of *numero uno* – it had always been that way – well, me after mom. Connie said that was cover to protect the gentle being that lived inside me. I suppose life had given me reasons to build barriers and live in a self-protection mode – no man in my life, a mom working two jobs, church basement clothes made fun of by the kids at school, and a determination to defend myself and mother against all demons – physical, verbal, and imagined. Few kids messed with Tommy Cole. Behind that bravado, I was always scared. Maybe I still am.

It was five o’clock. I hadn’t yet had a chance to read the paper – only one edition Saturdays and Sundays – so I settled into the recliner to get myself up to speed on what was happening in my city.

At some point I had dozed off, awakening at eight when the newly dubbed, *Justice*, landed in my unsuspecting lap. We went to the kitchen and found things to eat. I was tired and entered my bedroom.

Two odd things happened in rapid succession. Edmond Randolph jumped off the bed where he had been stretched out and left on the run through his door, *and*, a few minutes later there was a knock on my door.

I went into the living room, wondering, of course who might be there. My momentary fantasy was a large, father cat, wielding a shotgun, having come for Edmond Randolph. It wasn’t.

“Patch. An unexpected visit. What’s up?”

“Something I need to tell somebody, and I figure you’re the best one.”

I motioned him in out of the hall and closed the door. He continued – hat in hand.

“Sammy and me just saw something we fear is bad stuff. In the alley – behind your building – a car – a big old thing – backed up to the fire escape and the driver got out and climbed to the second floor. He used a key and went inside and returned carrying another man in his arms – he was asleep or knocked out or dead – no way of telling. He laid him on the back seat and closed the door. As he was moving around to the driver’s door, the kid – Jerry – who had seen what we seen – ran up to him and asked if he could help. Without so much as a second passing, the man struck him with his fist and the boy fell to the ground. Then, the man picked him up and put him in the car on the passenger seat. He got in and drove off north. Sammy thinks it was an Oldsmobile but can’t be sure. A rounded turtle [trunk] like an Olds for sure. For reasons I’d rather not disclose, I am not at liberty to contact the police, myself. I figured you would do that.”

“Yes. Certainly. You did the right thing. Did you recognize the man with the vehicle or the one he carried to the truck?”

“Couldn’t really make out the face of the unconscious one. The other was young. He may live in the building. Sammy says he’s seen him around recently. He had a key.”

“And Sammy is?”

“Another Alley Guy.”

Complete stop. I wouldn’t press.

“Anything else?”

“How about a license plate number?”

“*That* would be the Jackpot, Patch.”

He reeled it off. I copied it down.

“I need to get out of the building now. Sort of claustrophobic inside places like this. Why I live outside.”

“Okay. Thank you. When I speak with the police, I will keep your assistance out of it.”

“You are a good man. Thank you. If you can let me know what happens – about the boy, you know?”

“Sure. One more thing – is Jerry in the alley this late, often?”

“Just Saturday nights. He once said his mother has a church meeting on Saturday night, so he slips the rules and galivants a bit – ‘galivants’ was *his* word.”

“I can believe that. Do you know which church?”

“No, Sir.”

“Thank you, again.”

I called the night desk at the local precinct and related what Patch had told me. Then, I called Sally at the malt shop number figuring it would just ring at that time of the evening. I was surprised.

“Hi. This is Sally.”

“Sally. I didn’t really think I’d reach you. This is Johnny, Jerry’s friend from earlier. Sorry to bother you, but a situation has come up. It seems Jerry has been abducted from the alley behind my building. I have alerted the police but not his mother. I’m told she is at a church meeting. Do you know the church?”

“Yes, I do. One thing Jerry apparently didn’t tell you is that I’m his aunt – his mother’s sister. Let me take that part of it from here and I’ll meet her at their place and stay with her. This is just terrible. Any idea what’s going on?”

“None, really. Appears to be one of those wrong place at the wrong time things. I’ll keep you posted. I’m sure the police will be in contact with his mother as soon as they locate her. Thank you, Sally. Someday you must tell me about that magic phone that finds you wherever you are.”

“No magic. I live upstairs from the shop – one line – two phones.”

We hung up. I paced. Edmond Randolph returned and took his new favorite napping spot on the foot of my bed. He, *also*, seemed to know a great mattress when he found one. His head moved back and forth as he watched me pace. Edmond Randolph was easily entertained.

At nine, I received a call from Rosie, my longtime source for information at the precinct – she ran the evidence locker but had fingers that extended well beyond that. Her message was that the car belonging to the license plate was stolen and had been located in a parking garage a mile north of where I was. It was clean except for one odd item – a dog whistle on a leather thong under the front, passenger side seat.

“Good old Jerry. He was okay and he validated that was the car in which he had been abducted. He had no way of knowing there were witnesses who had fingered the car.”

I called the desk again and suggested they be on the lookout for the van owned – and, I supposed licensed – by Stephen Marlow. It was just a hunch, but when clues dried up, hunches fed the baby. I would contemplate the relevance of that metaphor or whatever it was, later. I understood it.

I felt helpless. The phone rang, again. It was Sally. She had located Jerry’s mother and was with her. The police had sent a policewoman to stay with her – comforter, the stated purpose, protector, the more subtle purpose. I saw Sarge’s hand in it. He had just gone off duty.

Another call; that one from Sarge. There had been no luck on finding the print I’d handed to him from the local search. It had been hand delivered to the FBI with a rush. I just imagined every request to the FBI was hand delivered with a rush attached. Nonetheless, how could it hurt? I thanked him and hung up.

It suggested several possibilities. The person had lived such an exemplary life he had never been printed – unlikely for a person actively involved in an abduction. It might be a young person who, if he did have a record, would have his name, prints and file protected as a juvenile. Stephen would certainly fall into that category – juvenile records were protected virtually forever in that state. I had no idea how serious his scrapes with the law had been.

I would operate on the assumption Stephen and Smith were one and the same – apparently Marlow figured his nephew’s shady skills were just what he needed to carry out his plan to get me involved. He lived in my building, so if he had been

hiding somebody – my assumption being, Marlow – his apartment would be an ideal spot to stash him for the short run. With the apartment rented under the name Smith, there would be no obvious way to connect it to Stephen, and even if there were, he had not yet been connected to Marlow's disappearance. This was suddenly becoming something more than a serendipitous switch – Marlow's identity to me and mine to infinity and beyond – a catchy phrase – Jerry would love it.

It came to me that Jerry had showed me *two* dog whistles. I called precinct again.

"The dog whistle found in the Oldsmobile belongs to the abducted boy. He clearly left it as a clue. He has a second. Be looking for it during the search. It will suggest things are on the right path. There is just a chance that a dark blue bow tie may also be left – not sure about that. His mother might know."

They always thanked me for my calls. I had a good reputation with the department – probably better since I left the force – well, undoubtedly better – our parting had been a mutual agreement, which wiped out several pending complaints against me. I had never taken advantage of my relationship and had always been honest and straight forward in my requests and the information I supplied. It was pretty much the opposite from the relationship the private eyes from the radio series always had with their local authorities.

My feelings of helplessness grew beyond just that, to anxiety and by midnight, fear. For over four hours 7,000 cops had possessed what information there was – still nothing. I doubted if Smith had holed up temporarily – not with two people along. He'd head straight for some previously prepared destination. Maybe back to his little hometown – he certainly knew every square inch of it. That was a good possibility, so I let precinct know.

I reclined in the recliner, smiling at how much sense that made. I reached for the phone and dialed. It rung.

"Potter. I am about to take advantage of you in an extreme fashion. A boy has been abducted, and I have good reason to believe it may be connected to the whole David Marlow thing. I

need transportation, pdq.”

“Of course. Thirty minutes – thirty-two if socks are required. Should I bring James?”

“Will be dangerous enough for the two of us. I got the idea you are much better prepared to deal with danger than he is. Tell him I am holding him in reserve.”

“That will satisfy him. In thirty, then.”

I called Sarge to let him know what I was up to.

Thirty minutes *on the dot* later, he was at my front door. On a hunch, I had brought Edmond Randolph and delivered him to the back seat. I took my place to Potter’s right. He hesitated and looked over at me.

“It will help if I know where we are heading.”

“Oh! Of course. Sorry. To the cabin. How long?”

“If I access the cross-town expressway and off-ramp at 145th street, and take County 23 north, I’d guess forty-five minutes.”

I must admit that I looked – no socks.

A black and white arrived and pulled in right ahead of us. A young officer exited the car and, after looking in through the windshield with his flashlight, came to my window. Potter became uneasy. I rolled it down.

“I’m here at Sergeant Bale’s orders, Sir. Escort?”

“A lights and siren escort if you’re allowed. Part of the Missing Adams boy case. Get us on the cross-town, off at 145th street and head us up County road 23 north at the city limits. Got that?”

“Yes, Sir. The whole precinct is abuzz over this one. A kid – my gosh! Hold on to you false teeth if you got ‘em.”

He looked across at Potter but spoke to me.

“Will he be able to keep up?”

“He once drove in the Daytona 500, officer. He may pass you.”

It garnered a smile and nod. We were immediately on our way.

“I will do my best to live up to that tall tale you just laid on the young man. Hold on, indeed!”

We managed the thirty minutes to the city limits in twelve. The black and white pulled into the right lane and blinked his lights. We sped on past.

“What about the County Sheriff’s patrols up here in the country?” Potter asked.

“I’m sure we’ve already been given clearance. Just keep on keepin’ on; your skills behind the wheel amaze me. If not the Daytona, where then? You’ve clearly raced.”

“Rockford, Friday night stockcar races back in my youth. Had dreams of the Indianapolis 500. A dream never to be fulfilled.”

“Make *this* your 500. Two people’s lives may depend on it.”

“Tally ho, then!”

I was forced back into the seat as we accelerated. I appreciated Chuck Yeager’s accomplishment more than ever.

I had to wonder if that young officer could have kept up. I felt safer there with Potter soaring along north of 90, than I did on a typical snail’s paced, horn-blasting, shouting match, cab ride there on the city streets.

Presently, he slowed, and pointed ahead to the left.

“The access road to the lake. We’ll do well making twenty-five on it. The cabin is only a mile or so from here. A relatively insignificant amount of time, I suppose.”

“Is there enough moonlight to douse the head lights?”

“I believe so. Let’s try it.”

His, ‘believe so’ had been accurate.

“There are actually two driveways – one to the garage and one to the boat dock just beyond. Do you have a preference?”

“If any part of my theory is correct, he will have taken them into the cabin for safe keeping, unless he had visions of cement boots at the center of lake. I’ll go with the garage. That means, let’s use the other one. I will walk back to the cabin.”

“There is not twenty-five yards between them.”

We passed the garage. There was no vehicle. My heart sunk. It had seemed like the obvious plan.

Potter left the road and slowed to a stop.

“Here comes my big gamble, Potter. Can the dome light be turned off?”

“Yes, Sir. Consider it off.”

I picked up cat and placed him on my lap. A good tummy rub usually kept him there and contented for five minutes. I opened my door.

A minute passed. Two. Three. Five. The tummy rub continued.

“Give the headlight the quickest flash ever recorded. Make it three in rapid succession.”

He did. We waited another minute. It happened just like I figured it should.

Cat stood, bristled, and leapt to the ground heading for the cabin. I followed. He stopped at a cellar door, the kind that slanted out from the building and sloped to the ground. As a four-year-old I had waxed ours with bread wrappers and used it like a slide.

Above it was a small window, covered on the inside with what looked to be a heavy drape. From the high placement of the window, my best guess was that it was a portal into a bathroom.

The drape quivered ever so slightly. I took out my snub nosed and stepped back behind a tree, well-hidden in its shadow. Cat meowed as if aggravated. Presently, the drapes parted. Heaven only knew how, but there was a very welcome, familiar face – Jerry – blowing his heart out on the whistle.

Cautiously, I stepped toward it. He showed me his hands – well bound with rope and a strand encircling his neck and apparently down his back – to his belt or ankles, I suspected. Strictly an amateur arrangement.

Regardless of the rest of that snapshot, the one thing I had been counting on, the one thing I felt sure he had up his

sleeve all along, was that dog whistle. He was counting on ‘Mr. Justice’ and he was counting on me to figure that out. It had clearly been his real message to me when he left that whistle behind in the car – Edmond Randolph was his hope for rescue.

I walked to the top of the cellar door and inserted the blade of my pocketknife under the wooden window frame. I turned it back and forth hoping to raise it just enough to insert my fingers under it. Prying with the blade of that little knife would have surely snapped it. It worked well, and I soon had the window open enough for him to wiggle himself out headfirst into my arms. He did not hesitate. I moved with him behind the tree where I made short work of the rope.

He was whispering as I worked.

“I gave the plan a seventy percent chance of working,” he offered as he pulled his hands free.

He had earlier proclaimed me plain looking and now only slightly above average in intelligence. I’d settle for both. He continued.

“The bad guy is Mr. Smith. He has given the man with him two injections since the three of us have been together – something to keep him knocked out, I am quite sure. The man is upstairs in the back bedroom tied up on a bed. Smith had me tied to a second bed but once he left us alone, I managed to slip out of those ropes – he’d fail the scouting badge for knots, I’ll tell you that.

“I played dead – well unconscious – the entire time. I think he is worried he hurt me really badly – not worried for me, understand, but because that complicates things for him. He never spoke to me or tried to bring me to. By the way, that unconscious man looks a lot like you but with blond hair. Might he be a relative?”

“No. We’ll deal with that later. You say the bad guy left you – do you mean he left the cabin?”

“That’s right. First, we were in a car that smelled a lot like a grandmother. Not for long. He drove to a parking garage and put us in a van – maybe a panel truck. I had but a split second to look. Once we arrived at the cabin, he took me upstairs. He tied

my wrists and ankles and then tied me to the posts on a bed. Then he brought the man up. He gave him a shot from a syringe and looked at me like he was considering doing the same to me. He looked at the vial from which he filled the needle and decided not to. All those years of practicing looking out through the tiniest of slits between my eyelids really paid off.”

The wonderful adventures he and I would have had, had we been kids together.

“Excellent report. Now, here is what I need for you to do. There is a car about twenty-five yards over there – I assume you saw its lights flash.”

He nodded.

“I blew the whistle anytime anything out of the ordinary occurred. That was an excellent, ‘out of the ordinary’, by the way. Like a light source stuttering in the dark.”

I continued.

“The driver is an elderly man – a good friend of mine. You go to him. Use your gadget to get cat back in the car. His name is Potter. Understand? It is important that you don’t ad lib, now. You go to him or we may find ourselves in a peck of trouble. Did Smith initially park by the garage?”

“Yes. Outside, out front.”

“Tell your story to Potter, especially his parking routine and that he is gone. Tell him I’ve gone after Marlow – the man upstairs.”

Jerry nodded, turned, and, blowing into his gadget, hurried off among the trees in the direction of the car.

I let myself in through the window. There were two doors – front and back. I made my way up the stairs, noticing I still had my gun in my hand. That must have been most disquieting to Jerry who didn’t know what I did for a living. I wondered why he hadn’t asked.

At the top, I turned toward the rear of the building. Two doors. I opened the one to my right. Marlow was on the bed exactly the way Jerry had described things. I didn’t take time to get him out of the ropes. I hoisted him into a fireman’s carry and

worked myself downstairs and out the back door. Two minutes later we were fitting him across the back seat. I motioned Jerry and the cat into the front seat between us, and Potter backed us out onto the access road.

Anticipating the next dilemma, Jerry commented.

“We arrived from the west.”

“And we came in from the east,” I said, thinking out loud. “I suppose we can assume he will follow his former MO, so let us return the way we came. If we meet a vehicle, you and I will duck down out of sight, Jerry. Got that?”

Of course, he got that. He probably had thought of it before I had. Anyway, we were soon back on the county road heading back south toward the city.

“We passed a filling station not far back here,” I said. “We need to stop and use a phone.”

We were soon upon it. Potter pulled in and stopped just beyond the gas pumps. The lights were no longer on. It had closed. The garage sat back ten yards from where we were. I got out and went to take a closer look. I could see in through the large front window.

There was a pay phone inside. I had come off in such a hurry I had neither my wallet nor any change. I returned to the car.

“I found a phone. Need change.”

“I’m afraid I, also, came without any money,” Potter said, checking his pockets to make sure.

Jerry understood the problem. He removed his right shoe, separated the insole from the bottom at the heel and had soon placed two nickels in my palm. I would thank him later.

I searched the ground for a wire to use as a lock pick. There were always lengths of wire laying around gas stations. That one was no different. I bent it into proper shape and inserted it into the 1930’s edition of an exterior, lock and knob.

“Hold it right there,” came a voice out of the darkness from behind me. “Hands up.”

/

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Story Comes Together

All along, it had been my assumption that it was the bad guy who had called the police about the cabin, counting on the old adage, 'if it's already been searched there is no need to search it again'. It is why he had been holding Marlow at the apartment at my building – Smith's apartment, until that search was complete. That night he had decided to move the man to the cabin.

I was also assuming, the man behind me with something sticking into my spine was the bad guy – evidently returned to the cabin in time to see us leaving and followed. He had either a gun or a finger poking me. I would cooperate and not take any chances. When I could get a peek at the man's face, I could satisfy my hunch – that Smith and Stephen were one and the same.

That would not be necessary. As he reached around to take my gun from its holster, I saw the back of his hand, freshly scratched by a cat.

Still, I did a partial turn, as if out of habit and just long enough to confirm it was the face I had recovered from the yearbook. He wore a hooded sweatshirt. I was quite sure it was also, Sweatshirt Face, from the diner.

“Keep your head facing the door, put your hands up against the door frame and spread your legs.”

I detected stress in his voice.

Sarge had taught me that immediate action had a better surprise factor than delayed action. I called out in a loud voice.

“Potter. Go! Go!”

Then to Stephen: “If you turn to shot at the car, I will surely be able to overpower you with my three years of Marine training. You will be dead before you hit the pavement.”

By then, I had no doubt it was a gun in my back – mine if not his. The car sped away. I figured I had bluffed my way through the first round.

The second round had already begun, although I didn’t fully understand it. Looking into the window on the door I could see the reflection of what was happening behind me – behind Stephen/Smith. Jerry was moving in on him – clearly, he had left the car earlier – perhaps through the back door or across Potter’s lap to the other side of the car. He hadn’t exited on this side. He was carrying a bucket – that water bucket for washing windows, I assumed. I couldn’t figure his plan, nor could I do anything to put an end to the boy’s dangerous foolishness.

A few seconds later, I *could* figure his plan. He doused the man in liquid and flicked on a cigarette lighter, holding it up and to one side. It was gasoline.

“Bad Guy. Drop your gun or I’ll ignite the gas. Shoot me and the lighter will drop and ignite the gas on the pavement and be all over you in a second. Count of three. One, two . . .”

In an unexpected move, Bad Guy fired a shot into one of the pumps and it burst into flame. He turned and ran into the dark – more lucky than smart that the flames did not trail and engulf him. It was in that sudden burst of light that I first saw his van parked out at the road. I scooped up Jerry over my shoulder and made a beeline around the corner of the building for protection.

The pump exploded and the flames shot two dozen feet into the air. I set him down and grasped his hand as I led him in a hurried, wide, loop back south to the highway. My plan was to

leave Jerry in the drainage ditch beside the road and then get to Stephen's van before he did – stranding him and transporting us – but there was a growing wall of flame between us and it. I chose to leave the van alone and move south along the road toward safety.

A set of red taillights flanked by bright backups came powering toward us up the road – a vehicle in reverse. I pushed Jerry into the ditch and lay down beside him wondering what might be available to use as a weapon. The vehicle stopped. The passenger door swung open. A voice called out. “Get in. Get in.” It was Potter to the rescue. We scrambled up the rise and did just that. He headed south.

“For anybody who might be interested, my pants are still dry.”

It had been Jerry, not me, although . . .

Potter and I exchanged smiles. I ruffled the kid's head, as I turned to watch out the back window. Jerry continued.

“That was certainly a more exciting Saturday night excursion than I had planned.”

I would deal with *that* later.

“We still need to get to a phone, Potter.”

He pointed to our right – a farmhouse.

In light of the flaming night sky, they were understanding and became most helpful.

I made calls to both the sheriff and rural fire department. Very soon a squad car passed us screaming and flashing like fireworks through the night. Two fire trucks were close on its heels. The flames were easily seen, having risen to fifty feet or more leaving no doubt about their destination.

A second sheriff's car pulled into where our car was sitting at the end of the lane, by then well lit. A deputy got out and I approached him, identifying myself with my private detective credentials and revealing I had made the calls. I referenced the case and contact people at the City Police Department. We gave the deputy our story. He called in an all points alert for Stephen and his van.

An ambulance arrived and took charge of Marlow.

That over, I had Jerry call his mother. The ride back to the city was instructive. Jerry related his experience blow by blow. As was his habit, he began by setting the stage.

“Let me lay out the complete sequence of events – there will be some repetition from what I have already indicated to you, Johnny, so Mr. Potter can get the full picture.

“Mother has a meeting at church every Saturday night to coordinate the Sunday School lessons for the following morning. Mercifully, my presence is no longer required on Sundays. Anyway, I am allowed to stay home while she is there – *that*, by the way, may have just come to an end. Typically, I do not stay home. It has become a useful part of my practical education about life in general and the dark underbelly of city nightlife more specifically. I often tread the alley behind your building and have developed several instructive relationships there.

“This past evening, I was there to engage in an experiment with my dog whistles. I wanted to determine if the two frequencies – large low pitched compared with small higher pitched whistles – attracted different sorts of animals. In among the stores, there are six apartment buildings backing into that alley so there would be lots of pets, I figured. I’ve noticed many have pet doors. My plan had been to walk the alley end to end blowing one sized whistle and then return blowing the other and take note of what each attracted. Evening would be the best time because other sounds would have quieted from the helter-skelter of the day’s din.

“I had barely gotten started up the block when I saw Mr. Smith at a strange vehicle parked at the bottom of the fire escape. I approached him, wondering if I could help with whatever he was doing – it seemed odd in every possible way.

From twenty feet I saw him lay a man’s body on the back seat. At about two feet he swung at me. It hit the side of my head and hurt something terrible. I fell to the ground with some force, landing some six to eight feet away. I never really lost consciousness – groggy, for sure. It came to me immediately that I needed time to figure what was happening, so I pretended to

have been knocked out.

“I heard the back-door of the car slam shut just before he picked me up and put me on the passenger seat in front. I had no plan other than to play dead, so to speak.

“He got in and we turned north and drove for no more than five minutes when we stopped. He moved the man in the back first, which allowed me time to get a look and determine what was taking place. Being moved from the car to the van suggested the one I was in would be left behind.

“It was then that I decided to leave one whistle behind. Several elements contributed to that decision. First, nothing went unobserved in that alley – what had happened, had been seen. Second, my friends there would not let it go unreported. Third, Johnny would learn about it and the whistle would confirm for him it was the car used in my abduction. Fourth, I hoped you would catch on that I could use the other one to communicate with the Chief Justice. I knew it was a shaky leap to believe you would understand that I needed you to bring the cat as you found your way to me – you and the police. When I found reason to believe you might be close, I would blow the whistle and hopefully attract one Edmond Randolph. As an esoteric element in my plan, I kept the small one – representing me, the kid – and left the large one – Johnny, the grown up, suggesting the communication possibilities – me to Johnny. Like I said, esoteric.

“I must admit that first time in your apartment, when you went into your bedroom, I took a fifteen second fact finding stroll through your coat closet and found your gun and holster hanging on a peg and your detective license in your jacket pocket. Because of the inappropriate manner in which I had come upon that knowledge, I haven’t been able to bring it up for discussion. A boy has to be careful about who he trusts. I hope you will appreciate that as my motivation. Anyway . . .

“I realized my plan involved a lot of long-shots, but it was all I had. Fortunately, they turned out not to be long shots at all. I have assumed right from the beginning we had a pretty strong connection, Johnny, and I guess the events of earlier this evening tend to support that.

“Smith took us to the cabin – seeming to travel a roundabout route – and, well you understand the rest.”

“What sorts of things did he say?”

“It is odd about that. He never once addressed me – of course he thought I was unconscious. Up in the cabin, however, he did talk, and it got quite frightening – I mean, very, hairy, scary. He sat on the bed beside the man and spoke right at him as if he could hear.”

“Do you remember what he said?”

“I assume that by now you understand my brain is rather special. Of course, I remember. He started out as if he were apologizing to him for not being appreciative of what the man had done for him. Then he was off on a transition statement justifying why whatever all that had been about, it was not enough to justify him – the bad man – sparing his life. Then the *really* scary part. He said he would make it painless. He said he had not been able to locate a quick acting poison, but he had a gun that could not be traced to him and he had studied just how mob assassins did their job – one shot, properly placed and the victim never knew what happened. Then he ended. I’m sorry Aunt Helen had to have a few moments of terror as she went off that cliff. I really am, but you two had no cause to keep that money from me.

Jerry offered a full-body, shudder.

“I can tell you I hope to never be that terrified again in my life. I understood if he was going to kill the man, that had to be his plan for me, too – it was obvious he couldn’t count on me not telling what I knew.

“When he left the cabin, it was like a huge window of relief because I knew it gave me a chance to do something. I figured my only hope was that what I had planned with the whistle, would actually work, and that depended entirely on whether or not you picked up on my clues – really, I suppose, it was on how relevant my clues had been.”

“I am so sorry you had to go through that,” I said. “Don’t close that away inside yourself. I’ll be here for you any time you want to talk.”

“About that – and in a related matter – I expect to be needing a babysitter Saturday evenings for the next year or so. Would you be available? We could start out at Sally’s – Dutch treat, of course – and then play a wonderful new board game I got for my birthday called *Clue*. I’m certain you’d love it. Do you know it?”

“No, I’m afraid not.”

Potter spoke.

“James and I play at least twice a week. I agree it is a superior game, firing up the old synapses at a mighty rate.”

Humorously, Jerry turned to him.

“By the way, what do *you* do Saturday evenings? Three can play that game.”

“I have one question remaining for you, Jerry. How did you come by the gasoline at the filling station; the hoses were padlocked to the pumps.”

“My pocketknife has an awl as one of the many blades. I figured the bottom loop in a hose must contain gas that wasn’t drained out – from its sagging position during the filling process. I drained the water from the bucket, poked a hole in the bottom of that sag in one of the hoses, and let it drain into the bucket. When it was about a quarter full, I figured time was running out for you, so I made my move. I don’t smoke in case you are wondering; I am just more infatuated by fire than probably seems healthy for a boy my age.”

Forty minutes later, he had reunited with his mother, Marlow had been admitted to the hospital for observation, I had returned to my apartment, and Potter returned to be with Marlow. I called James to catch him up on events. He would take a car and meet Potter at the hospital. I got the idea that James driving a vehicle was a huge life event for him.

I called precinct and after hearing my story they agreed to put a black and white at Jerry’s place. I suspected the same was being done for me. I opened the rear hall door and stepped out onto the fire escape landing. Patch stepped under a light above a door across the alley. Clearly, he had been waiting. I clasped

my hands above my head indicating things were okay. He returned it and disappeared.

Back inside, I shed my coat, tie, shoes and socks, and collapsed into the recliner. Edmond Randolph jumped onto my lap as if ready for our usual belly rubbing routine – a nice evening ride in the country should not interfere with that, right? No doubt, he would expect his ration of cream after a few minutes. Just another getting ready for a night out on the town in the life of *Casanova Cat*. I thanked him for his help. He purred and playfully reached up for my face.

With those things handled, he was out his door for the night.

I secured the dead bolt, closed down the apartment and was soon ready for bed. The relief I felt could not be complete as long as Stephen was on the loose. I still could not figure his motive behind the odd configuration of events. With Jerry's testimony about what he had overheard, we at least had that to tie him to the sabotaging of his aunt's brake line. I would speak with Marlow the following morning and perhaps he could shed light on it. I figured the case against him would be given a second look. I would continue to pursue it – with his permission, of course. What an interesting meeting *that* should be!

Before crawling in, I went to the bedroom window that overlooked the alley – probably not a feature that landlords played up when showing the apartment – and looked down. As I had expected, a two-man squad car. There was another out front, I felt certain. That was a good-sized commitment of manpower. I was being well cared for. I had to doubt if the same degree of effort would have been made for the average citizen – but then I had just solved their top priority case for them, saving an innocent kid and recovering the subject of a manhunt that had left them sitting on their hands. For just a moment, I let myself feel special! I was clearly an *above* average citizen. The manhunt for Stephen, however, was still on.

* * *

Seven o'clock the following morning found me at Jack's for breakfast, messages, and information. Gina was back. I got

the impression she was feeling quite comfortable there. I had dropped off the film for prints. Like Sally, my photo guy lived above his shop. I sent a lot of work his way. He'd have them for me in an hour.

Gina had my coffee poured before I finished the long walk from the front door to the rear. She pulled tickets out of her apron pocket and provided explanations as she read from each one. She had certainly taken on the unofficial role as my girl Friday without complaint and, in fact, with some degree of dedication. She read off the messages.

"Connie called for Tommy – I figured you were the closest thing we had to that. I can understand about the use of an alias with a woman. One for Detective Cole – Donna – a former client, she said, with a new problem."

I remembered her – *all* of her! I'd return *that* call.

Gina handed me the notes. I nodded. My way of thanking her without having to engage in explanations.

"Let's do a stack of pancakes, scrambled eggs and bacon, so crisp it stands on its own."

She left with the coffee pot – there were only two other customers – toward the front – on stools at the counter. Jack leaned over the counter after putting my things on the grill.

"You doin' okay? Heard rumors this mornin'."

"I'm fine. A busy night. A bit tired. Thanks for asking. And thanks for the rest of it."

He offered a puzzled look that soon faded to a smile. My belief had become that he and the others were part of a plan to protect me. I wasn't sure of the details but figured I'd have a better idea after visiting Marlow later that morning.

I waded through section one of the paper. Page five – two-line banner – regular font: *Explosion at Gas Station north of the City. 'No one reported hurt and fire contained after an unexplained explosion at Jimmy's Filling Station on County Road 23, ten miles north of the city. Bla, bla, bla, etc. and bla, bla, bla.'*

Finally, an article I could relate to – me and my recently singed eyebrows. Burning hair was truly a revolting scent.

After I finished eating, and as I was reassembling the paper to take along, I pulled out the funnies and waved them at Gina. She was pleased to take them off my hands – so, she was classy yet down to earth – a rare combination – like my Connie.

Outside, I hailed a cab to the hospital, hoping Marlow was still there. An older lady – a volunteer – at the desk located his room number with more difficulty than I figured was reasonable and pointed me to the elevator.

A few minutes later I was at his door. I was surprised and puzzled that there was no police presence there – was he not a suspect in a murder and might he not need protection from his abductor who was still at large? I opened it just a crack to determine if he was alone. He was. In bed. I knocked and went on in.

“David Marlow, I presume,” I said stopping a few feet from his bed. We *were* the spittin’ images of each other – give or take a decade.

He replied.

“And, David Marlow the second, *I* presume,” he said clearly uneasy with my surprise presence.”

He had been sitting back and scooted up, reaching toward the gadget with the button.

“You won’t need that. I come in peace. How are you? A world class headache, I imagine.”

“*That’s*, for sure. I have been assuming it is you I have to thank for my return – my life, I figure. I owe you an explanation.”

Taking a lesson from Sarge, I paraphrased him.

“You owe me a whole lot more than that, but we can get to those things later. Before you say your say, I need to make a call. You should have a cop outside your door.”

As luck would have it, Sarge was working desk. I explained the situation. He agreed with me there had been a lapse in protocol and he would see to it. I hung up. Marlow had listened. He nodded – I took that to mean he appreciated my effort.

He pointed to a chair between the bed and the window. I

sat.

“You want to specify a starting point of particular interest?” he asked.

“Okay. Stephen’s role in all this – the he and the Mr. Smith character.”

“I need to provide background. There is a trust fund I set up for him when his parents died – he was seventeen. He has proved to be so irresponsible that my wife and I put some restrictions on it. Originally, I believed holding it until he was twenty-five would be sufficient, thinking by then he would surely have matured and be able to manage it. Events since he received the inheritance from his parents have proved me wrong on that.

“Last month, we changed the terms so he would only receive a set allowance each month. It is to go into effect on his birthday, now a month or so away. Recently – just before my wife’s accident – Tuesday, I believe – he visited me for the stated purpose of borrowing a book he knew was in my library. His real purpose was talking me out of making the change. I gave him no encouragement that I was inclined to do any such thing. He ranted and raved and stormed out.

“As he approached his car out front, he was apparently shot at – at least that’s his story. I don’t believe it. Coincidentally, after that visit, I found my revolver was missing from the drawer in my nightstand. I tried several times to call him and ask about it, but his phone was never answered. I didn’t want to get the police involved.

“When I arrived in my bedroom after dinner the night before my wife had her accident, I came upon a bewildering situation. There were several brass coupling nuts and a line splitter arranged on the pillow on the bed I never use – there are two in my room – heirlooms from my grandfather who was a woodworker and made them. I have no idea how the fittings got there. I wondered if it were a prank from James – we have pranked each other since I was tad. Whether it was my inquisitive nature or some level of paranoia, I pulled the blanket and top sheet back to see if there might be some other irregularity – the

replica of a snake or such. Pure silliness, you see. I placed the hardware on my nightstand and went to bed. In the morning they were still there, however, instead of three nuts there were four. I was quite sure I had not miscounted. The mystery had grown from the night before. I left the bed as I found it until I could figure out what it was all about.

“When I was arrested on suspicion of murdering my wife by sabotaging the brake line, it all came into focus. The nuts had been arranged so I would put my prints on them, somebody would collect them, replacing them with a set of identical fittings, and I would become a suspect. Devious but rather creative, I thought. That extra nut in the morning has bugged me to this moment. I put them in my safe if you need to verify my story.

“The explanation I had created seemed so farfetched and I had no way of proving it, that I figured it would not support my legal defense. I needed a reputable private detective but figured that a reputable sort wouldn’t take the case – based on what I had – a flimsy, unprovable, story concocted to save myself. In my grief and terror, I devised the plan to force you to get involved. Several years ago, you worked on a case for Sam Locke, a college friend. He had nothing but the highest praise for you and your work. He, also, mentioned that you were a dead ringer for me. You can imagine how the plan flew together from there.

“I needed help to pull it off. As much as I had never trusted my nephew, I did have compassion for him and the problems his immaturity had caused him. It had not been my responsibility to raise him, but I could have done more – I had very little to do with his father once we left home and went our separate ways. The property came to me in the will. He was never able to accept that. I was never able to understand why our parents had made that odd decision.

“A necessary side trip here. My brother was two years older than I. We never got along. He was mean and hurtful. When we reached 21, my father – a rather wealthy man – gave us each our share of our inheritance. My brother invested in a grocery store. When it came my turn, I invested in the metal stamping plant – small, run down, a challenge – I have always loved challenges. Bottom line, his investment remained small

time and mine became big time – largely due to the requirements of the war, I’m sorry to say.

“Back to Stephen. I figured my legal situation could be used to give him an opportunity to prove to me he could act responsibly. There has never been any doubt about his intelligence – he’s just seldom opted to use it in a responsible manner. Fortuitously, he called me. I laid out my proposition – I would give him a chance to prove himself and if he did, I’d release his trust fund.

“We talked at length several times putting the plan together in great detail. He had several excellent ideas – like I said, he was nobody’s fool.

“At the outset, Jack and Betty were contacted through the mail and their roles were spelled out for them – the consequence of not following the instructions was that you would likely be convicted of murder. Plain, simple, effective – that was Stephen’s contribution, actually. I found it repugnant but, in my panic, I didn’t disallow it. I employed Gina – Gina Stone – to keep an eye on you, and report to me. She is a private detective from Rockford. Without knowledge of the specifics, she took the job solely on the basis that she would be protecting you – a fellow professional.

“You need not point out to me the illogic and poor decisions I have made, and I’m willing to accept the consequences. Periods in which grief, fear, and panic intertwine are not the times to make momentous decisions such as I tried to do.”

There was a knock on the door. A young officer entered and explained his presence. Thinking I would have a more difficult time obtaining Marlow’s cooperation, I had brought my copy of Stephen’s yearbook picture. I handed it to the officer suggesting he was the person of interest. He returned to the hall.

I turned back to Marlow.

“I don’t understand why Stephen turned on you, if he believed you were giving him this chance to redeem himself and receive the money from the trust fund.”

“Several things. First, I now understand that he killed my

wife and planned to get me out of the way in order to get his hands on the full inheritance – not just his trust fund – or that’s my thinking. He didn’t know that was not possible according to our wills. Greed and his lack of human empathy is what it came down to. With Helen dead and me in prison, he figured a good lawyer could break the trust and, better still, if I were executed for her murder, he’d be home free with all my money. You may find some other explanation.”

“Sometimes an activity, once started, gains a life of its own, David. A plan begins small with a limited goal and then gains strength through small successes and soon has morphed into something huge – not necessarily based in logic or fact or reality. If a trust fund is good, the whole oyster would surely be better. It supports your theory, I believe.

“Any idea why Stephen did the shooting routine at your place?”

“Stephen has always set things up so he would be pitied, be seen as the victim. It was the only way he had found to gain positive attention. I have to believe it was just some outgrowth of that. If I became convinced somebody was trying to kill him then, perhaps, I would soften and back off from my decision about the trust fund. It’s why he agreed to help me set up the identity shift – a way to get his hands on some money immediately – for expenses – while he waited for the big payoff. I needed to put a good deal of cash at his disposal to set it all up.

“I have a question for you, Tommy. Any idea why the brass fittings were placed on *that* bed instead of on the one I sleep in?”

“I have a theory – that bothered me as well. That huge pillow – it made it appear that bed’s sole purpose in the universe was to hold it. That would have made it only logical to assume the first bed would be the one you used. Like I said – a theory.”

Marlow took on an obvious, new, serious tone.

“As terrible as it is to contemplate, I have wondered if Stephen was not responsible for the fire that killed his parents. He certainly worked that for all the sympathy he could garner and profited from it handsomely.”

I had to admit, as I came to learn more about Stephen, that had crossed my mind, as well. The people in his little, hometown certainly had a low opinion of him.

“One other thing I still don’t understand,” I went on, “is why, if Stephen was willing to kill his aunt, why he wasn’t also willing to kill you right from the start.”

“Who knows? I have wondered about that very thing. My best guess is this; during his teen years he got into a huge amount of trouble. His parents could not afford good legal representation, so, misguided as it was, I supplied the necessary legal manpower. I want to assume that some part of him has been able to appreciate that. His not killing me outright may be his twisted way of thanking me. Who knows? He is plainly one very sick puppy.”

“Clearly, something changed. He had to understand that the abduction could only end one way – he couldn’t keep you alive after that. In fact, it’s clear purpose was to get you out of the way to obtain your money.”

“I’ve thought it through from that angle, too. Let’s assume he did contact an attorney and laid out a hypothetical – what if such and such. When the attorney cast doubts on the plan achieving what Stephen wanted, he understood it would take more than my incarceration to achieve what he wanted – that only if I were dead would he have a chance of inheriting what I had.”

“You’ve given it a great deal of good thought, David. Thank you for both your information and educated speculation. I will make arrangements to move from the apartment as soon as I can. I have used very little of the money in the bank account. I figure that amount will handle my expenses.”

“Perhaps you have not heard the latest, Mr. Cole. My attorney was in earlier this morning. In light of these recent developments, he has filed a motion to have the charges dropped and the city attorney has agreed. Just need a judge to approve it.”

The door opened and the officer handed me an envelope.

“For you, Sir, from precinct.”

I passed the information along to Marlow as I read it.

“They’ve located Stephen’s house – a temporary rural location. They found a metal working lathe and several compression fittings that had been recently threaded – identical to those used on the brake line. I guess that gives us physical evidence to back up what young Jerry overheard at the cabin.”

“You have saved my neck, my behind, and everything in between. Name your fee, keeping in mind it will represent how much you believe my life is worth, so I exhort you to make it sizeable; I’m sure you would not want to offend me.”

I stood. We exchanged smiles and a hearty handshake.

“I will need to think about that and get back to you.”

“Well, as a place to start, understand that the apartment and the bank account are yours and there will be no discussion about it. Think of that as a small down payment on what I owe you.”

CHAPTER NINE

Life and Death: One

I headed for Jerry's home, wanting to assess his situation – his state of mind. He was happy to see me and asked immediately if they had caught Mr. Smith yet. I was honest with him. His apparent resilience dumbfounded me. I spoke with his mother in private and she confirmed what I had observed.

“Sally's is open from 11:30 to 1:30 on Sundays in case either your hunger or your sweet tooth needs to be satisfied.”

Another glimpse verifying that he really was eleven.

He had the makings of a politician. I hoped he found some other passion to pursue – something that presented less potential to pervert his integrity and moral character.

His mother needed to leave for church – a brave woman, perhaps a big part of the answer to my resilience question. I offered to take him under my wing until she returned. I suggested she find a friend and spend time with her – or him as the case might be.

“Well,” Jerry responded, arms folded across his chest, “I for one think Johnny taking me under his wing is a simply fowl, idea – that's f-o-w-l. A pun you get it?”

We chuckled. He seemed satisfied. I remembered well that era in which I believed all my jokes needed to be explained – and, typically, rightfully so.

When we arrived on the sidewalk just outside, I was surprised at the array of vehicles parked at the curb. I recognized the Ford, which had navigated us through our adventure the night before – it had been washed and waxed – Potter’s way of winding down, I assumed. I understood the presence of the squad car. I had no idea about the late model, light blue Dodge sitting behind it. The front doors of the Ford opened. Out stepped Heckle and Jeckle – that is, Potter and James. They approached and James became the spokesperson.

“It seems that Mr. Marlow is celebrating his new position in life – still having it – with a generous mood this morning, Sir. The keys to your new vehicle – something about more down payment. Potter tells me it is a Dodge. Wear it in good health.”

Jerry ran to it and got in the passenger side. He rolled down the window.

“Well, come on. Sally’s waiting.”

“It’s two hours yet until she opens.”

“That will give us time to break her in. What you gonna name her? May I suggest, Jannette, after Jannette Rankin the first female member of congress back in 1916 – you seem to have a penchant for using the names of political figures.”

I mused that she could hardly really be worthy – she had never appeared in *any* of my fortune cookies. A reverie I would not share.

“Jannette it will be. I love it. May I call her Jan?”

“That will be between you and her eight cylinders.”

It clearly struck him as hilarious, and he giggled himself onto the floor – limp as the proverbial dishrag.

Once he regained his composure and reestablished his presence on the seat, he spoke.

“I think we have several other things to talk about, also, Johnny.”

“Oh. Alright, then. Do you think two hours will allow

sufficient time?”

Jerry understood it had been intended as a joke and responded with a smile. I moved around the car and got in beside him. The engine easily came to life, hardly making a sound and its response was amazing. We left. Jerry waved to the bystanders then turned and began talking.

“I have something rather important on my mind.”

It called for no response, so I offered none. I readied myself to receive one of the profound, unsolvable riddles of the universe. He continued.

“I was just wondering, after last night and all, do I have to start back with *Mr. Cole* and gradually become more familiar, or may I just skip forward right to, Tommy?”

“Let me introduce myself, young man.”

I offered him my hand.

“I’m Tommy Cole, private detective, former marine, former cop, and full-time friend of Jerry Adams.”

He grinned and accepted my hand.

“Good to meet you, Tommy Cole. I’m Jerry Adams, an erstwhile fugitive from the Seventh Street Methodist Sunday School and pleased to have a new adult friend.”

We shared a chuckle. He leaned just a bit in my direction as if hoping for a hair ruffling. I didn’t. I could have. I’m not sure why I didn’t.

With burgers, fries, and shakes under our belts, I returned him home at two o’clock. By then I had picked up a black and white tail. I drove to Jack’s and went directly to my office at the rear. Gina greeted me.

“Davey! Having a good day?”

“One of the best in my life, detective Stone. How about you?”

“So, the jigs up, is it? Hope we can end on a positive note.”

“The mere fact you have boosted the quality of Jack’s coffee to nearly gourmet status, will endear you to me forever. Be sure you leave those instructions behind. And, of course,

thanks for being here for me.”

I pulled her close and left a peck on her cheek. There was no disgusting heavy powder to stick to my lips. Who’d a thunk it – I missed that.

“Betty will return tomorrow. Marlow has seen to her financial needs while she was away.”

“I figured – though only recently.”

Jack reached across the counter and offered his hand. I did that half stand-up thing and accepted it.

“Good to have you back, Tommy. Been one of the hardest things I ever had to do. Hope the two of us is good.”

“Of course. Just had lunch, or I’d put you and your grill through the hoops – tab on the diner, you understand.”

“Speaking of which, take a look at this baby,” he said.

I didn’t understand. With both hands, he motioned me up and close. I soon understood. A new, stainless steel grill with all the latest features. I privately hoped the loss of the historic aftertaste attached to the previous one would not pose a significant problem for his old customers – how would we cope when everything no longer smacked of bacon and onion. Mr. Marlow was a generous man.

I was back in MY apartment right at four o’clock. I had told precinct I could manage without a squad car looking over my shoulder. If Stephen were as smart as I had been led to believe, he’d be in Denver by then. Still, a car followed me home. Apparently, I had been out voted.

Weekdays, that would have been when Jerry delivered my paper. He had taken to knocking and hand delivering it when I was there. I was reaching for the phone to check in with precinct about the man hunt when there was a knock at the door. It made no sense, but I felt a smile welling up inside me. Anticipating that the universe was about to present a world class grin beneath a mop of finger-combed, sandy hair, I opened the door.

There was no sandy hair. There was no grinning kid. It was Stephen, with a gun, clearly unnerved. He pushed me back, shoved his way inside and kicked the door closed behind him.

I had already stripped to my slacks – period.

“Put on your shoes and that long coat, now!”

Keeping the gun more or less on me, he checked out the kitchen and bedroom from their doors. Once I was outfitted according to his instructions, he removed a sheet of paper from his pocket, unfolded it and placed it on the seat of my recliner. It offered an ominous demand.

*\$100,000 dollars small unmarked bills to see him again.
Will contact you Monday for payment – twelve noon.*

He spoke.

“Down the fire escape. Play it smart and you may live to get into the pickup truck you’ll see down there. Got it?”

“Yes, Sir. I got it. I suppose you’ve considered adding a third kidnapping and extortion to the list of your crimes is not going to be a helpful thing once you are caught – and as smart as you are, you know you will be caught.”

“Two more charges on top of murder isn’t going to change anything. We all do what we need to in order to stay alive for even one more minute. You know that. That’s where I am right now. I’ll do *anything* it takes to stay alive for one more minute. You understand?”

“Yes, Sir. I understand.”

“Anyway, I got this thing planned – a good chance I’ll get away with it.”

He took care to stay well out of my reach. I figured my ‘marine’ comment at the gas station had made a believer out of him. We paused at the rear landing just outside my door. He raised his hand as if it were a signal. Two teenage boys ran up to the squad car and spoke excitedly to the policeman inside. It was loud enough I could hear.

“Something’s happened to the cop in the car out front. He’s slumped over the steering wheel.”

The car pulled away, light flashing. The boys looked up at Stephen. Stephen dropped a small bag over the side. They

picked it up and disappeared between buildings on the opposite side of the alley. A pickup backed into view from the south. Another teen got out and followed the route the first two had taken. It had been an efficient and well-orchestrated operation – I'd give him that. The boys did their part, the boys got paid, the boys disappeared into the city never to be seen by Stephen or the cops again.

He hurried me down the steps and around to the open driver's door. He motioned me in and across the seat. He got in beside me. With his gun in his left hand pointed at me across his lap and handling the steering wheel with his right, he headed us south to the street where we took a right and then zigzagged our way, street by street, corner by corner, to the south edge of the city. He headed east on a seldom used, unmarked, one lane, blacktop. After a mile he stopped, engine running.

“Turn your head and look out the side window.”

I turned my head fully expecting the butt of his pistol to come crashing down against my skull. Instead, he secured a blindfold in place. He tied my hands behind my back and tied my ankles together. We continued, making a variety of turns plainly designed to confuse me about where we were. Other than the initial command, he had not spoken. At one point when I tried to speak, he elbowed my ribs with such force he probably damaged them. After an automatic, staccato-like groan, reflecting genuine pain, I kept quiet. He appeared to believe that his plan continued to unfold smoothly. The trip continued for well over an hour. I stopped trying to keep track of our direction. From the everchanging route, I had no idea how far we were from the city – one mile – forty miles – south, east, north or west.

At one point we changed vehicles – two minutes, tops. It had a new car smell. That, and the fact the ride was smother and quieter, were my only pieces of information. In my imagination, I figured he would have put down the gun once he was convinced that I could no longer see – slipped it inside his belt or on the seat close to him. I also figured that by then it was going on six o'clock which mean dusk. Each new piece of information provided additional options or limitations for me.

Since he chose not to talk, I had no reliable way to assess his frame of mind. I assumed he continued to be unsettled, like it had been in my apartment. I wondered how he expected the ransom note would be found. Perhaps the ruse about the distressed policeman would cause contact with me upstairs. They had a key. It was too messy leaving something to chance like that. His plan had been well-ordered to that point. *That* seemed just too messy.

We stopped after pulling off to the side of the road – at least that’s how it felt. He left the vehicle – his door remained open – the cooler evening air entered – there were increased outside sounds. I could hear him dialing a phone – at a phone booth – clearly in an isolated area where he had no concerns about having me seen, tied and blindfolded as I was.

It soon became clear how the note was to come to the authority’s attention. He had called someone and told them they needed to contact the police and check my apartment. My guess was, it was nobody directly associated with my life but somebody he knew would follow through – another tenant in the apartment building, perhaps. Marlow had been right – Stephen was nobody’s fool. As my boyhood, comic book hero, Batman, would have said, ‘What a shame he used his brilliant mind for evil instead of for good, Robin!’ Robin would have grimaced, nodded, and pounded one green-clad fist into his other green-clad palm.

My mind was trying to divert me from my dilemma. ‘That’s not what I need you to be doing, right now, *mind*. A little help, here, if you will, please.’

We were immediately back on the road. From what I had heard while the door was open, I figured we were on a blacktop that ran alongside a major highway. I heard lots of traffic, but it had no direct interaction with us.

We soon turned right and all that faded into the background even though from the noise and flow of air it appeared his widow remained down. The relatively smooth ride of the blacktop gave way to the less even and noisier surface of a gravel road. Presently that become so rough he had to slow.

The most rural of the roads in the area were farmer upkeep operations, so their condition depended on whether the road or grandma's operation seemed more important that season.

We crossed a bridge – that noise was so familiar as to be unmistakable. I heard rushing water – probably a stream from the impact of the sound. Streams produced lighter, higher pitched sounds than rivers.

Suddenly, it became considerably cooler and darker. I could tell from the edges of the blindfold. I had no immediate, dependable, impression about that. Well, a cave, but what sort of cave allowed a vehicle to enter it? Perhaps a warehouse – that might seem both dim and cool. At any rate, it took my head no place that seemed useful.

Wait! *The Cavern* – a place near the campground where, as a kid, my scout group went several times every summer. I wondered if Stephen's had also. In his yearbook the one activity listed under his name had been Scouts. The Cavern State Park served all the troops across a wide area.

If so, we had crossed the state line and were thirty miles south east of the city in an area of low hills and rock outcroppings – standing like a belch in Mother Nature's master plan of level planes and fertile soil that defined that part of the mid-west. The stream I had heard would have been *Beaver Creek*, which ran through a low wide valley. On the south side of the valley there was a Cavern, which was large enough to enter with a vehicle but then for only twenty yards or so at which point it split into several tunnels each with its own name. Wholesale camping in that area didn't begin until mid to late May so the likelihood of anybody coming to my rescue was slim to none. All that was assumption.

I had to wonder why a cave – why there? It would be chilly – in the fifties once deep inside the hill. Insisting I bring my coat gave me hope that he planned to keep me around for a while – waiting on the money, perhaps. It also added credence to my whim about being at the caves.

As precise as the original plan had seemed, the rest of it appeared hit and miss, random, unorganized. Perhaps, that was

just my hopeful interpretation. He had gotten away. Why not just keep going? He really could have been in Denver by nightfall. This phase of his doings seemed likely to doom his entire undertaking. I just didn't understand it. Truthfully, I had to wonder if Stephen understood it. His 'coping well enough' exterior might be disguising a fully out of control interior. That was always a dangerous combination.

I had to remember we were now into Plan B, since killing Marlow had crapped out.

I was relatively helpless. If there were viable options, I certainly did not see them. I was immobile and could not defend myself. Those things would remain even without the blindfold. He had expressed no plan, so I had no idea what to expect. That was the very way I would have run things if I were in his place.

He opened my door and instructed me to get out of the vehicle. I turned my body and slid to the ground. He removed the blindfold. Everything I had assumed about the location was correct. We had been riding in a car bearing dealer plates – taken for a test drive and never returned, I assumed. Probably left the keys to his van as collateral. Inside the car, I had noticed the growing smell of canvas – it was his backpack – large – heavy straps with a waist brace to help support the weight. Supplies. It was another likely sign that he planned to keep me around a while. That was reassuring, but it did not nothing to alleviate my basic concern – to die or not to die.

He strapped a forehead – coal miner's – light on himself and then one on me. He turned them on. He untied my feet, hefted his backpack, and pointed to the left. I moved on ahead of him toward the easternmost opening – it was low and more square than round or oval like the others. I had been in the cave many times – stayed the night even and played hide-and-seek. Apparently, he knew it as well.

As I recalled, it widened considerably just inside. Ten yards beyond the entrance there was a spring fed pond, the water welling up from a deep hole. It was no more than six feet across and fed a small rivulet that ran on ahead down the center of the gently sloping passageway – ten to fifteen feet wide and

six to ten feet tall. The water was cold. Laying in it for one minute – two, if you really wanted to prove yourself – had been part of the initiation ritual the summer I was thirteen. Up until then, the worst two minutes of my life – probably the most rewarding as well. Funny how those things so often went together – establishing a baseline for a powerful, life affirming, positive, belief in oneself and one's ability.

As a youngster, I had been taken by the fact that such a cave presented the darkest dark I had ever known. As we progressed, it didn't take long for the air to become significantly colder. Sans shirt, I was glad to be wearing the trench coat – thick, water repellent, fabric with something called a millium lining – supposedly, it reflected the body heat, not letting it escape. It seemed I was about to put that saleslady's pitch to the test.

There were other reasons I was glad to be wearing the coat. I'd see if I had a chance to introduce any of them.

We walked on for fifteen minutes navigating the several twists and turns – about as far as that tunnel went, the way I remembered it. Others were longer and varied more in width and height. There was a permanent, primitive camp site in a roundish, widened area at the end, referred to as *Cul-de-sac Station* on the park brochures – perhaps twenty-five feet across a generally round diameter. There was a fire pit directly below a crack in the ceiling that sucked the smoke up and out. There was a half dozen, stump-height flat-topped rocks set in a circle around it. My friends and I had roasted many a hot dog while sitting on them. A flat, raised ledge, encircling it, was great for sleeping bags, up off the floor and seldom damp. The constant air flow kept that section moisture free and the air fresh.

The little stream poured gently over a twelve-inch water drop into a small pool and entered an underground stream below. Word was that if you dived to the bottom of the pool one would find an opening that ran east and came up into a similar pool some fifty feet on the other side of the back wall from where we were. The lore was that once a boy named Skeeter Pence was chased into the cave by a brown bear and he dived in and swam to safety through the underground stream. Hence, that *Cul-de-sac* was known among the scouts as *Skeeter's Alley*.

I could only imagine how cold, uncomfortable and terrifying such a move must have been for a young teen. Whether that tale was true or not, the mere idea of old Skeeter had made him a hero of legend to hundreds of thirteen-year olds.

He (Stephen not Skeeter) pointed for me sit on the floor as he slipped out of his backpack and removed several items; two wool blankets, a coil of half inch rope, two smaller sacks, a box of ammunition, a second hand gun – which he also slipped under his belt, a coffee pot, a skillet – a few other items.

He removed a square of canvas that had been covering the fire pit revealing logs ready to be set afire, which he did. It was, by design, a *small* fire, which was more than enough to light and heat the immediate area. Again, he showed he knew what he was doing and probably that he had done it before. He removed the light from my head and placed it in his backpack. He was going to be efficient, keeping prepared to move on quickly, perhaps.

He took a seat within arm's reach of me and unfolded the wax paper from a sandwich previously cut in half. He took a bite of one half. While he chewed, he held the other half close so I could do the same. He went back and forth until they were gone. Having been told not to talk, I nodded. He nodded back.

There were two large canteens. He drank. He opened the other and positioned it for me to drink. He was keeping a careful watch on me but never made eye contact. I wouldn't try to untangle the strategy or psychological issues underlying that behavior. His uncle had characterized him as, 'one sick puppy'.

Questions came to mind: It was Sunday evening. His note said he would contact the authorities on Monday. That required a phone, which, in turn, required leaving the cave. There was a pay phone near the entrance to the park. Would I accompany him or be secured and left behind? Which would be most to my advantage? I assumed I would also be secured in some way for the night. He had made no move to untie my wrists. My circulation had long been compromised at both my ankles and wrists. It was gradually returning to my feet.

He loosened the rope around my wrists – my hands had

been behind me – and retied them in front of me. He slipped a noose-like configuration around my upper calf, just below my knee. He rearranged my belt so the buckle was in the rear and then looped the rope from the noose around my belt so the loop couldn't be slipped off, down my leg. The other end was attached to an iron ring set into the back wall – something I had not been aware of from before – perhaps his own recent addition. It was brass. I was soon on an eight-foot tether – short enough to keep me away from the fire or pool but long enough to let me stand up or to recline on that ledge that ran the circumference of the area.

He tossed one of the folded blankets onto that ledge within easy reach. The implication was that I was to arrange it and lay on. We would be warm enough from the fire. Additional firewood had been piled elsewhere on the ledge. All of that confirmed that the plan had been in the works for some time – or, if not *the* plan, some generic, fall back option if things didn't go as planned. Things had not gone as planned unless that plan had included striped duds and forty to life in the state pen.

He removed a short string of sleigh bells from his backpack and cinched them tightly around my neck – when I moved, they rang. He secured them in front with a small padlock through holes in the leather backing. He re-tied my ankles.

He arranged a place for himself on the shelf closer to the entrance. He added a sizeable log to the fire set so it would burn slowly – end to end – a scouting trick.

He motioned, somewhat impatiently, for me to arrange my blanket and lay down. He placed his backpack in such a way that he could lay back against it, raising his head and shoulders so he could keep me in sight. I only hoped that if my bells rang by accident, he'd look before he pulled that trigger.

CHAPTER TEN

Life and Death: Two

Thinking back over the events of the past forty-eight hours, it seemed clear that Stephen had received very little sleep. I had to hope that worked in my favor. I had arranged myself on my blanket and had unbuttoned my coat – a reasonable thing to do considering the warmth from the fire. He had opened his jacket as well.

I could turn my head to the left and watch him. I let him nod off, thinking he might rouse himself the first time that happened. He did. He shook his head and scooted up a bit onto the backpack. He was soon asleep again. I'd take a chance and get to work. I unfolded my broad coat collar up around the bells so he could not see the area.

I ran my fingers along the front edge of the coat – the side with the buttonholes. It contained several items. I was after the short length of piano wire and soon had extracted it right through the fabric.

I worked it into the padlock. It snapped open. Carefully, I

removed the strip of bells and laid it aside. I raised my knees to give me access to the split at the bottom rear of my coat. That wider hem contained an ultra-thin, serrated, knife blade. I worked its point through the fabric and removed it. It was a three-inch blade on a five-inch, flat handle.

In addition to the loop, the consistent feature of a true noose, was the rope coiled around itself to provide a strong, tight, slipknot that would hold great weight. It was within easy reach when my knees were raised like that. I selected a spot between the second and third coil and began sawing through the rope. My *plan* was to cut virtually all the way through it, in there, where such a slit could not be detected. My *hope* was it would hold together for general movement but easily tear apart with a forceful jerk, freeing me when that time came.

That finished, I went to work on the rope around my ankles – four turns around them with a knot on the outside toward the top, front. I began that cut just beneath the knot, again, where the likelihood of being seen from a casual glance was minimal. By then, the muscles in my hands and fingers had tired and were cramping. I put my knees down and rested. He remained asleep.

After five minutes, I began work on the wrist ropes, my plan was identical to the one I used on my ankles. I soon understood that would not work. I had such restricted use of my hands – fingers, mostly – that I had to make that cut at the spot available to me. Still, I was able to work from my wrist out hiding the slit toward my skin. The awkwardness of the operation was, again, tiring. I took several rest breaks.

Stephen roused a number of times during that half hour. I was on my back so his brief glances in my direction revealed nothing. Once satisfied that I could break the remaining fibers, I replaced the wire and knife into their carrying places in the hems. My preparations reminded me of Jerry and the coins in his shoe. He'd make a good detective someday. If, instead of nickels, he had carried a piece of Bazooka, that would have already made him a gum shoe. I needed to remember to tell him that – it would send him wriggling to the nearest floor in hysterical gyrations.

Those were all preparatory moves – making ready to take

advantage of as yet unknown opportunities. I wouldn't risk going to him right then – him with a weapon loosely aimed in my direction and a second carried inside his belt. I replaced the bells and snapped the lock shut. I managed to get some sleep in a succession of short naps. In the long run, I knew I would have been better off had Stephen not slept, but what was, was.

Morning found him adding wood to the fire. I sat up on the edge of the ledge. He nodded at me. I nodded back.

Presently, he fed me a banana for breakfast followed by as long a drink from a canteen as I wanted. He was not being cruel about my captivity. That might indicate he had planned to let me go if he got the money. More likely, it was his way of lulling me into a state of cooperative hopefulness until the time for the delivery of the money came and passed. I understood kidnaped victims seldom lived. As unnerving as that was, I needed to keep alert and productive in my plan to somehow get the best of him. I'd not risk being shot during such an attempt until the last possible second – Stephen had said it, 'We all want to live through that last possible minute'.

I imagined he had post-kidnapping plans for escape. By then, the auto theft from the dealership would have been reported, so I had to wonder what his plan was for obtaining the ransom. He had to know the police department was all over the case.

He tidied up, always keeping things ready to move on. He noticed my wrists and reached out and examine them – rubbed raw from the activity the night before.

"Stupid to struggle against half inch rope. Figured you'd be smarter than that."

It was 7:00. He said he'd contact the authorities at noon about the ransom. We continued managing our mutual boredom until 11:30. Without speaking he motioned for me to recline on my spot on the ledge. He reached into my front pants pocket and removed my change. It still contained the two unused nickels Jerry had loaned me Sunday night. I needed to repay him. It indicated Stephen had failed in one part of his planning – a nickel for the payphone – probably the one at the entrance to the park.

He pocketed it and unzipped a small side compartment on the backpack from which he removed a syringe and vile. He sucked up the last inch of the liquid and walked to me. Was that the time to make my move?

Before I could assemble a plan of action, he had stuck me, and my world fuzzied up rapidly. It seemed I was falling backwards through space. I remember nothing more during the next several hours. Initially, I had hoped 'one inch of sleep juice' was a low, short term dose – was all that he had left. Jerry indicated he had been reluctant to use it on him.

Sometime later, the good news came to be that I was alive and awake. The bad news was, I had a world class, throbbing, headache and double vision. Stephen was nowhere in sight. I struggled to read my watch, eventually remembering to close one eye with double vision – 1:20. I struggled to sit up – woozy. I struggled to stand up – wobbly. I took several steps as a trial run – weakly. Being upright somehow began clearing my head and returning strength to my legs and arms. I ripped myself loose from the ropes and selected a good club from the firewood. I turned and moved unsteadily toward the entrance. I had soon left the light of the fire behind and took to feeling my way along the wall. I should have made a torch. I was in too big a hurry not knowing his itinerary. Several minutes into the trek, I began feeling much better. My head cleared and my gait both straightened and strengthened. Those were good things. In the darkness, I had no way to evaluate my vision.

I paused, stood up straighter, and took a half dozen good-sized breaths. Those also helped. I figured I was close to feeling human again. I estimated I was within one bend of the entrance so expected to see slips of light at any time. After a few more yards, I saw the first of it – a narrow band outlining the curve of the wall at the last turn just ahead. It grew wider as I approached. I was soon standing in the light – if dim – near the entrance of that tunnel. The large entry cave – the cavern – spread out in front of me – mostly to my left.

I began to allow hope – real, believable hope, different from the fantasy of hope spawned by need and fear in the absence of possibility. Once I got outside, I could go to any of

several good hiding places. The final goal of my plan was to make my way across the valley to a road with cars and people and the protection and freedom those things assured. Between my situation at that moment and later, it was strictly improv time.

As I neared the larger opening, things began to go south. Stephen pulled up in an older model car. Even from that distance, we made eye contact for a split second. I had moved too far forward into the light. Did I make a run for it outside or return inside? Being virtually unarmed, compared with him, I decided to take my chances inside, believing the darkness would be my friend. There were lots of cracks and crevasses in the walls that I should be able to use to my advantage – hiding spots. Hide, let him pass, return to the mouth of the cave and leave. My problem would be locating them in the dark.

Keeping my left hand against the wall, I did my best to run. On several occasions I tripped over rocks and fell. Each time, I scrambled to my feet and continued. It was then, I first realized that the damage Stephen had done to my ribs with his elbow in the truck was going to limit my activity. The pain seemed to be amplified with every jolt and every quick move. I had endured pain before. It seemed something had snapped inside my chest the last time I had fallen. New pain. Trouble breathing. My bet was he had fractured a rib with his elbow, and the impact from the fall had finished the job. I had momentary visions of a punctured lung and internal bleeding.

I could hear him coming after me – he had the advantage of a forehead light. Presently, I saw flashes from it bobbing through the darkness. He was catching up. One pass lit me for just a second. I moved on rapidly. A shot rang out. I heard it ricochet from wall to wall. Not a good thing – random shots into the dark – *my* dark. His decision to shoot me changed my strategy, which had evolved to just flattening myself against the wall and clobbering him with my club as he passed.

As the light from our fire began brightening the area, I figured that realistically, I had but one chance. I stepped out of my shoes and lost the raincoat. I sure hoped that Skeeter Pence lore was just loaded with truth. At the pool I paused long enough to execute two huge and painful breaths. I plunged headfirst into

the water, pulling and kicking myself toward the bottom. To the east the lore said – that would be to my left. It was there – an opening something larger than eighteen inches in diameter. I entered, pulling and kicking hoping I didn't pass out from the pain. The light from the pool behind me dimmed until I was again in total darkness.

I pulled.

I kicked.

I pulled.

I kicked.

The water suddenly warmed. That mythical pool on the other side, perhaps. By then my lungs were aching both from the outside and the inside.

I looked up. Light – dim but light. I began making my way toward the top. Every ounce of survival instinct in my being shouted at me; 'take a breath, take a breath'. I knew I dared not, of course. I continued pulling and kicking.

I wondered at what point my automatic reflexes would take over and force that breath that would flood my lungs with lethal water – the basic necessity of life might well kill me. Even during what seemed likely to be my final moments of life, I contemplated that irony.

Then it happened. My head broke through the surface

I gasped.

I shouted, "Skeeter, I love you, kid."

I breathed like I had never breathed before. I breathed more than I needed to breathe just because I could. I would never take a single breath for granted again.

Unbelievably cold, I struggled up over the edge of the pool finding that I was still in a cave, but it was shallow and straight enough to let in some amount of light. I was so cold and contemplated that for the first time. I had never shivered to the point my limbs trembled uncontrollably and my head shook from side to side. I staggered toward the light. My earlier uncertain legs hardly qualified as a stagger compared with *that* stagger. I did that 'across my chest slapping thing' with my arms. For the

record, it did nothing but add to my pain.

I paused at the entrance – no more than five feet high and two wide. Perhaps that was why I had not explored it before. Taking a lesson from before, I stood back in the shadow, figuring I could see out better than he could see in. It was midafternoon – the sun was to my left – I would be facing north – the city some thirty miles to the northwest. Nothing really looked good, but then, compared to how it could have been, I took great comfort even in the danger and the pain and the uncertainty. Still, I needed a plan. Oh, that's right, I had one – hide until dark and then set off to find a road. Stephen would extend his search to where I was. I needed to be gone from there.

I remembered a tiny cave somewhere above the mouth of the cavern. Access to it was through a naturally disguised, vertical slit not more than a foot wide. I wasn't sure I could slip through that anymore. It seemed to be my one choice. Did I dare risk showing myself?

Figuring Stephen knew the Skeeter lore and understanding I had not magically disappeared from the first cave, he would very soon be looking for the second cave referenced in the tale. I needed to move on quickly.

Once outside, I scanned the area up top. I saw it – a ten-yard climb with ample foot holds. The problem remained. I would be out in the open. I had no choice. The rock face of the hill was cast in reds, whites and blacks allowing me to blend in at least somewhat – skin tones and black slacks and hair. I thoughtfully kept from positioning myself in the definitive human form.

The climb was going to be hard on my bare feet. That concern would have to be secondary to my chance for survival. I remembered a caution given us at the academy to never let yourself get into a position from which there was no safe retreat. I was sure that little cave did not meet that dictum. I'd said it before; what was, was.

I made the climb. I managed the squeeze through the opening. I felt safe for the moment. The area was no larger than six by eight, but once my eyes adjusted to the dim world inside, I could make out things with no problem. The first thing I saw was

the first thing I heard – a rattler.

I hoped it was still hibernating or just emerging from it so would be lethargic. My club had long been left behind. I stood still. It remained coiled and its rattler demonstrated only occasional, minimal, movement. Perhaps things continued to be on my side. I estimated the snake would be no more than four feet long when straightened out – more a guess than a scientific or mathematical calculation.

Having it remain coiled suited my plan. It was a poor plan. It was potentially a deadly plan, but it was my only plan. Its head was facing forward, toward the opening. I was behind it.

Slowly, steadily, I squatted. I figured a snake could hear but I really didn't know. I'd ask Jerry. A quick smile. I hoped it wasn't my last.

Slowly, I sat and then lay back on the floor – a vulnerable position if he suddenly became alert.

It made no move.

I raised my legs high.

It made no move.

Presently, I shifted my body until my feet were directly above it.

It made no move.

I was, by then, positioned close behind it. Clearly, the snake was in some state of lethargy.

I lowered my legs until my feet were just off the ground. I drew them up to my chest.

It made no move.

The 'all or nothing' moment arrived in my life once again. With both feet, I pushed against the coil and shoved it through the crack out into space.

With some caution, I crawled to the opening to make sure it had fallen away. It had. I took time to see that I was alone – no other little varmints with which I must do battle. I was. I sat back against a wall wondering when too much was actually going to become too much.

Being small and open to the air, the cave was relatively warm by late afternoon – the air was warm, the rock against which I was leaning was warm. I removed my slacks and wrung them out then spread them on the floor to dry. Once out of them, I immediately felt warmer. My shaking eased. I dozed off sitting up and slept until nearly seven. I looked outside. The sky was nighttime dark out there. A slip of a moon cast the ground with little more than highlights here and there – a tree, a boulder, a stand of prairie grass. Things like that – as if disconnected in dark's vastness.

I understood that not having found me, Stephen would be watching, probably from way out front where he had a commanding view of the width and height of the hillside. I slipped back into my mostly dry slacks. I noticed my feet were bleeding but dismissed it considering my main goal – to escape the area.

I left the cave knowing it might be my undoing. His revolver would likely be inaccurate at that distance. I had no way of knowing about his skill with weapons other than he had been able to hit a gravel driveway from three feet above it. To *my* advantage was the darkness. Outside, I made my way back down to the ground. Still no indication of Stephen. I bent low. Slowly, I moved to my right up against the hillside, away from the cavern entrance and, hopefully, away from Stephen. My belief was that slow motion, rather than rapid motion would be less obvious to a distant observer.

Presently, I was thirty yards from the opening. I bellied down in a stand of tall, prairie grass and elbow-crawled forward to a point from which I could scan the open area between me and the access road, which paralleled the creek on this side. At that point, everything hurt. I had heard about it. You get to the point where the pain is so generalized, you stop noticing specific parts of it. I had believed that the truth to be taken from that story was that at that point things seemed to get better – they didn't.

I wondered what had been going on with Stephen. Had he made contact with the authorities? Had he received the payment? Had he been refused the payment? My guess was the second; why else would he have returned other than to do me in like he promised in the note. Had he had a hundred thousand

dollars in hand, one would think he would have made a run for it. I had no reason to believe he had any longstanding score to settle with me. I hadn't known he existed seventy-two hours before. Harming me would merely be fulfilling the mechanical conclusion of the promise. Perhaps that had become his obsession – fulfill the conditions of the plan before getting caught.

Painful as it was, I continued crawling through the grass toward the road. It was like the fable of the man who survived the desert by telling himself to take just one more step and then one more step and then one more step.

I lost track of how long it was taking me to cover that hundred yards. I would crawl a yard and I would rest. I would crawl another yard and I would rest. To an observer, tears from pain appeared just like tears from sorrow or fear – they weren't.

Finally, there was no more grass and the road came into view – narrow, dirt and gravel. I flipped over onto my back keeping my eyes closed for some time searching for some sense of relaxation – renewal – some position that might be less painful. Presently, having experienced none of that, I opened them and looked up toward the sky. It was the strangest looking sky I had ever seen. *Really*, it was. I had to wonder if I were hallucinating as an aftereffect of the knockout drug.

“Sarge?”

“Who else would it be riding in on his white steed to save your sorry behind – again – kid?”

I made an effort to sit up. He motioned me to remain low.

“We have Stephen in sight. Just waiting to make sure you were safe. You look absolutely terribly by the way.”

“You, too, old man, but at least I have an excuse. How did you find me?”

“Later, on that.”

He removed a 4th of July type rocket from his jacket – the orange paper tube loaded with powder attached to a slender, eighteen-inch-long, stick. He stuck the end of the stick into the ground, positioned it to fly straight up, and lit the fuse. It sputtered

its way into the sky brightening an irregular path as it flew.

A half dozen cop cars lit their lights and began moving across the flat expanse from the road toward the hillside. A loudspeaker announced their purpose and asked for Stephen to make the sensible decision and give up. I raised up onto my knees so I could follow what was coming down – cop talk for . . . well, ‘what was coming down’.

Presently, the young man stepped out of the shadows, arms in the air and, without direction, took the spread-eagle position flat on his face on the ground. Sadly, the action appeared to be well practiced. I supposed it was him hoping to assure himself that one more minute of life.

It was finally time for that sigh of all sighs that signaled things were over. My, how that hurt. I was safe. I’d live to risk everything another day.

“Wow! Thanks, you know, old friend.”

“I can only imagine what things define that, wow, Tommy. We clearly need to get you to the hospital. I will hear no objections, so just shut up your prattle.”

He stood, twirled his flashlight over his head, motioning for the ambulance. I had no intention of objecting. I realized what terrible pain I was in – feet, chest, wrists, elbows, even the hairs on my head seemed to be screaming. Sarge rode with me.

He made the basic explanation:

“Stephen called precinct about payment. We went with his demand – small bills in a brief case and no chase car. He indicated he had an explosive devise set near you and if he didn’t get back in time to turn off the timer – well, you get the picture.

“We had made the drop at the phone booth he designated in his call. We had it under observation, of course. He drove up and with only minimal difficulty, transferred the currency into a bag and left the case behind. I’m sure he thought the case was bugged. It was. We had locked the case, so he had to expend a few extra moments prying it open.

“During those few extra moments, a young officer had crawled to the rear of his car and attached a tracking bug to the

bumper. We traced the car here. I contacted the park ranger who gave us the lay of the land – the caves and tunnels and such.

“The local sheriff cooperated fully, but only agreed to a one-hour window after arriving before we were to begin the search, inch by inch. I owe him for that, by the way. I figured if there was any way for you to escape, you’d make it within that next hour. Considering the time it took for Stephen to make the call, wait until drop time, drive to the phone booth, and return here – I figured you had three hours to make your move.”

“Sounds like a plan right out of the mind of one Jerry Adams,” I said, more to me than Sarge.

“Jerry? Don’t get me started on that kid. A call to precinct every ten minutes with questions *and* non-stop suggestions. Captain finally gave him a number and a permanent officer to talk to. I always told you the Captain had a soft spot – somewhere.”

I was admitted to the always chilly, big building with all the windows and dependably populated by pretty, white-clad females. In surgery they repositioned my broken rib so it would heal – there was something about stainless steel staples. They picked a pound of sharp gravel out of the soles of my feet, elbows and knees. They cleaned and medicated my wrists. Finally, situated in a room, a very attentive nurse combed my hair and gave me a sponge bath. Interestingly, she used an actual sponge. Hospital stays really weren’t all that bad. I might well feign a cough to extend it.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

All's Well that . . .

I was soon asleep and slept the clock around plus six more, or so they told me.

I awakened at ten the following morning or whatever day it was. My chest was trussed up in elastic, mummy-like bandages feeling considerably better than I remembered. My feet, knees, elbows, and wrists were wrapped. I was hungry. They served a man-sized breakfast. I was thirsty – ice water and orange juice, by the pitcher.

A nurse counted out four pills and forced them down me – all business – just the hint of a smile.

“Pain and infection fighters,” she said. “You really didn’t take very good care of yourself last Monday. We’ve decided you need a wife.”

“We.”

“The nurses and candy strippers.”

“I will begin interviews at noon.”

That got a smile but not a laugh. Somewhat disappointing. She stuck a thermometer under my tongue, effectively

silencing me.

“I have an envelope for you, and it was placed in my hand with threat of being drawn and quartered if you didn’t receive it immediately upon ‘coming to’ as the lad put it – not quite five feet, 90 pounds, sandy hair that has perhaps never seen a comb. Somehow, he got by security, and the night nurse found him here sleeping on the floor on the other side of your bed.”

I nodded and took the envelope.

Dear Tommy,

I was so frightened, but I always knew you’d best the malevolent culprit. I have to wonder how anybody grows up to be so devoid of human decency. We will need to talk about it. Please communicate with me as soon as you stop bleeding and such. Bleeding is not one of my good things.

*Your very, very, very good friend
who is happy to have you back
in more or less good shape . . .*

Jerry

It caused a smile from that place deep inside me that captured and saved wonderful feelings for later enjoyment and consideration – very, very, very, good friend, indeed!

I put the note back into the envelope and placed it on my bedstand or whatever it might be called in a luxurious, private room – thanks to David Marlow, I was sure. Reaching out like that really hurt. Withdrawing my arm back to the bed really hurt. I supposed I would have to submit to the doctor’s dictum about not working for a month.

Speaking of which, a doctor, who I did not know, dropped in and did those doctor things as he stood there, looking down on me like God himself: held my wrist, listened to my heart, pinched my cheeks, pulled apart my eyelids – a lot like what I did on a first date. If he puckered up, we’d have to have a talk.

“If you promise to behave yourself, you can go home. I’ve already signed the release form. Make sure you see your own doctor next week. Leave his name at the nurse’s station and we’ll

have the records sent to him. You will need to use a wheelchair for the next ten days while your feet and knees heal. Only sponge baths until then. Is your environment set up to handle that?"

I nodded. I'd see if I could incorporate Connie into my rehabilitation environment. Fortunately for her, I figured, she had been visiting her sister in Milwaukee that past week so had remained oblivious to my situation. I had so many boo boos for her to make better that I was looking forward to my period of convalescence. Connie could pamper with the best of them. I'd pilfer the sponge and take it with me.

"Thanks for whatever it is you did for me, Doc. About this pain – torso, ribs, the length and breadth of my eyelashes and toenails?"

I left it as a question.

He smiled – *close* to a chuckle but no cigar.

"I've written a prescription. It will go home with you. They're not candy. Take no more than you really need. Addictive. No refills. Follow the instructions. Understand?"

"Yes, Sir. You're indicating I can probably get rich selling them off the fire escape in the alley behind my apartment."

"You think like a crook."

"Have to, Sir. I'm a private detective. And by the way, you think like an addict."

"Touché."

He shook my hand and left. I always cringed at the shaking of a doctor's hand, figuring they were a sanctuary for every variety of pathogen known to science.

To my surprise, Marlow arrived to take me home – well, Marlow and the dynamic duo – James and Potter.

I had made the call to Jerry, and he and his mother were waiting on the walk outside my building. We entered and I used the elevator for the first time. I spoke directly to Jerry who stayed well within 'hot breath' range while he worked the buttons.

"You should be in school, young man."

His mother responded.

“Ever try putting a whale in a fishbowl? He insisted on being here and you can imagine the rest.”

“I assume you need to get back to work, yourself. Jerry can stick with me for the day if that will help.”

We exited the elevator. Jerry pushed me down the hall and had a comment.

“It is my intention to stick with you whether it will help or not.”

How does one argue with the inevitable? His mother had news.

“You are now looking at the newest R7 at Plant 4 of Marlow Industries. I have no idea what an R7 is or where Plant 4 is or, for that matter, what Marlow Industries is. What I do know is that it does not involve dirty fingernails or scrubbing floors and the promised paycheck will be substantially more than anything I have ever earned, *and* that Mr. Marlow insists on two paid weeks of what he calls transition time between jobs.”

I looked at Marlow and he winked.

I handed Jerry my key and suggested the rest go inside – make a huge pitcher of lemonade and wait for Mr. Marlow and me. I closed the door, giving us privacy in the hall.

“I’ve decided on my fee, David. You did say sky’s the limit?”

“I did. I meant it. So, let’s see how highly you value me?”

“I’d like for you to see to four years of college for that young friend of mine – Jerry Adams – very bright, and the world needs to make sure he becomes one of the educated good guys in our lives.”

“Ah, yes, Jerry. He and I became fast friends while you were missing. He spun plans to get you back like a cob spins webs – that wasn’t original – from a Raymond Masters Mystery I’m pretty sure. I had given the same idea serious thought. He is sure attached to you.”

“Seems I’m attached to him as well. I have no idea what to do with that.”

“Pretty simple, Tommy. Just be there for him. He’ll provide

far more guidance than you will need if you just watch and listen.”

“I suppose I knew that.”

“I suppose you did.”

“By the way, thank you for the car. I really don’t know what to say. I feel uneasy about keeping it.”

“Think of it as a retainer for the next time I need your services.”

“*That* seems unlikely.”

“I’m not so sure. One can just never be certain what mischief James and Potter may be plotting now that they have had a taste of – as Jerry calls it – the dark underbelly of the city.”

I knew it had been offered as a joke and yet I was certain there was some kernel of truth in what he said. I could hardly wait to hang their mug shots on my bedroom wall.

The end, or maybe not!