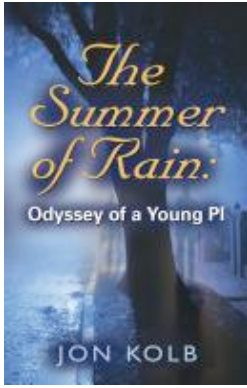




*The
Summer
of Rain:*

Odyssey of a Young PI

JON KOLB



*In **The Summer of Rain**, young Bobby Broyles fights to build a new life for himself and to uncover the secret of the missing wife of a mysterious, wealthy man. As a tsunami of crime engulfs his city, Bobby encounters seductive rich women, devious politicians and cynical funeral directors. Bobby must solve a crime, avoid death, and save his parents from an assassin's knife. You are invited along for the ride.*

The Summer of Rain

Odyssey of a Young PI

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**THE SUMMER OF RAIN:
ODYSSEY OF A YOUNG PI**

Jon Kolb

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Dedication

For advice and encouragement during the writing of this book, my thanks to: The Whitefish Bay Writing Group; The Milwaukee Writers Group (Bill Murtaugh, Jane Thompson, Chris Christie and the late Sprague Vonier); Adam Just and my wife, Donna.

PART ONE

Carlos the Snitch, peddler of half-truths and unfounded rumors for a fee, sits across from me. It's a bar of his choice, a musty, marginal place. Carlos wears a smirk. Probably thinks he has me. I need him. I have a fish on the line and no boat to row. Carlos raises his rum on the rocks to the light and watches ice dance.

"How's it going?" I ask. It's a miserable summer. The summer of rain. It's raining now, I brought it in here, resting in the soles of my wingtips. Mom always says wear your galoshes.

"I'm hangin' in," Carlos says. "I miss the sun. But business is good. People are edgy. They do bad things to each other. Homicides soar."

He lowers his glass.

"What'ya need?"

"Enjoy your drink," I say, softening him up for a discount.

"Bobby my friend, meter's running," he says, one arm draped on the booth, one combat boot resting on a chair. It's his turf, I'm young and I'm green in the business.

"Okay. A real estate guy--executive type-- hired me. His wife is missing."

"My congratulations to the man. Teach me how."

"He doesn't see it that way. She went out at night to meet a girlfriend and never came back."

"Women talk a long time," Carlos says, draining his rum.

"Weeks?"

He waves for another drink-- on me and best label in the house. We eye each other, search the bar's shadows, take measure. I mean to win this duel, there's a lot on the line, for

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me and for her, the missing wife. A pinball machine blinks. The new drink arrives.

"Executive you said?" The smirk's back in place. "Not your usual type client, my friend. The butcher. The baker. The candlestick maker. Jealous men of the people. That's your clientele. How do you know this man has money?"

"The way he talked down to me."

"Bingo," Carlos says and makes a gun with his fingers. "And why you?"

"I came recommended," I say.

His smirk curls.

"Besides, this summer, everyone's busy. Cops, PI's, bodyguards. He must've worked his way down the phone book to me. I need to deliver on this," I say and then wish I hadn't given him an edge.

"Word to the wise," Carlos says. "Rich man, can get who he wants, hires you. Something smells."

"You think?"

"I think."

"Any charge for that advice?"

"What are friends for? Now, the other stuff, the info," he says, stirring his drink and extending his meaty, free hand, "for that, pay for performance."

I grease him. His hand doesn't move. I grease him some more.

I hate that I need him. He isn't the best, he'll sell you a lie and mark it up for good measure. But he's cheap overall and some of it's fact, you sort through it like you sort through the rain and the fog. I look at him there with that smile. He's a mess--camouflage pants, Margarita-ville shirt, combat boots--what does that stand for? The Clown Prince of Chaos? When I left the factory, I became a suit. You are what you are. Carlos kids himself. Thinks he's an extra in some kind of flick. But I

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need him, it's my first year in the business. My Dad-- Journeyman Robert Broyles II-- knows punch presses in and out. Hydraulic and mechanical, small coil-feeds to thousand-ton monsters that shake the earth when they draw metal. I followed him to life on the plant floor; the first twenty-five years of my life, punch presses, baseball, beer and our little town, that's what I knew. One day, a twenty-ton Muenster lulled me half to sleep; without malice, the die closed. I looked down and two fingers were gone. At the end of my hospital stay, the doctor said "you're free to go now". I took him to heart, grabbed the settlement money, checked out career paths open to someone like me, enrolled at SouthWest Tech and got the PI certificate. I designed my own cards and had them worked up at QuickCopy: Robert Broyles III, Discrete Investigations. It's a new life, I'm a changed man, you grow with the times. I'm still learning.

"Check back in a week and bring your wallet," Carlos says after I tell him the little I know. He bottoms out his drink, stands up, shuffles a straight line to the waitress and pats her an insulting pat on the butt as he heads out the door.

In the ashen light of the bar, I study a grainy snapshot of Elaine Hobson. Friends, relatives, personal trainer, hairstylist. No leads, no footprints. Not even a shadow. Mrs. Charles Hobson, her alluring smile in the crook of my hand, has vanished. I settle the bill and head outside, into the damn rain.

* * *

Some days I wonder what world I've walked into. The few early jobs I get come from old buddies who want their wives followed. I wasn't raised in a convent, my Cub Scout Den Mother taught us how to fake it on bus passes, how you cover up the punch holes as you slide past the driver. But who knew how much cheating was going on?

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At least the routine for doing this stuff is simple, even a new guy can do it: stake out places, peer through the shrubs or park outside forlorn motels and record moments that change your friends' lives forever. Not all days are alike and I can get out in the world, I've left the four factory walls behind. That's good. Some days are the same, though. Turn the deadbolt, flip on the lights, open mail, read spam until your eyes burn bloodshot, answer the phone--wrong number or buddy can you spare our cause a dime? Watch paint peel. At tech school they said you need a physical presence but until Charles Hobson came along, I wasn't sure I could afford even this broom closet with a window. Hobson was my dark angel in this slippery new world.

"I'll pay top dollar," he said at that first meeting, taking in my bleak surroundings one block down from the aging city bus barn. "She means the world to me, money means nothing," he pleaded, an edgy, lean man with a tight face. "I expect results. The police are hapless. Fools, crooks and incompetents. Every thing's a dead end to them. Do what you have to. Cut corners. I have connections, if you need something, let me know. I can run interference. But get results."

Money sings and I listened. After he left, I sat and stared at his check and finally felt like I was real. Today, fresh from my meeting with Carlos, I watch rain through my window. It's not that much water, just enough to rob the world of picnics, ballgames and walks in the park. A mist covers your glasses, sits on your windshield. Rain has its own rhythm, it's not the heartbeat, like a good pop song, it's something off- tempo, jarring. Our little town, a spot on the map, growing pains from new people and new crimes on the street, doesn't deserve this. From my darkened office, staring down on the street, I make out figures--people, squirrels, birds-- all floating like ghosts

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through the gray. The summer of rain. You can't let it get to you. It's just weather. The phone rings. It's Attorney Joe Mayo.

"Fuck ducks," he says.

"What?"

"Nice weather for ducks. If I hear that one more time...fuck our feathered friends."

"What'd you find out?"

"I'm an officer of the court, beholding to no one but the blind mistress of justice and I say someone has to pay for this Chinese water torture we're going through."

"Cry me a river," I say. Mayo's okay, we go back, two young guys stuck in the same slow lane to success. Sometimes he rubs like sandpaper on a sore. "What'd you find out?" I repeat.

"Zip. Vanished without a trace, as they say."

"Zip? With all your sources? Low-level law clerks, janitors at the courthouse. Secretaries you hustled. Zip?"

"Fuck you, Bobby," he says with the affection born of our long friendship. "There was one thing. It's not much. A raised eyebrow."

"Huh?"

"At the realtors' commission. His name--Hobson--my contact wouldn't talk, but her eyebrows shot up like antennas."

"I'm not paid to check on my client," I say, but I listen.

"Beware the hand that pays you. You're new at this. Think of your client as a punch press and be wary. Make sure you're not being used. Why else would a guy like that hire a guy like you?"

"I came recommended," I explain, not mentioning the reference was an old, lying friend. "I've got an uncle in real estate. I'll check Hobson out," I say, moving past Mayo's insult. "Keep working your end. Courthouse, morgue, beat cops."

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"I'm an attorney, you know," he says, voice edgy with pride. "I'm walking a fine line here. My inquiries have to be discrete."

"Be discrete."

"I'll submit my hours." He hangs up.

Is he right? Am I being used? I'm being paid, that's my answer. There's no well-paid suckers in this world. Outside the sun threatens to peek through stubborn clouds.

* * *

Uncle Fred is Mom's favorite by default. When she was young, her other brother-- Kenny--drove out to LA to write for the movies. "Americans are a restless people" became one of her sayings. Uncle Fred was okay to me when I was a kid. He'd call everyone "Joe", as in "What'ya know, Joe?"

"Sorry about your accident, Joe," he says, gesturing at my hand with the three fingers. "Heard about it from your mother."

"It bought me a new life."

"You look good in a suit," Uncle Fred says, but he's the one who's comfortable in a suit and we both know it. I tug at my lapels to make the thing fit.

"Have a seat," he says. Carefully clipped gray hair frames Uncle Fred's forehead, tortoise shell glasses are propped on top of his head. He drapes long legs and pinstripes over his desk.

"You didn't used to be here," I say, taking in his new space.

"Just moved in. The business needed more room. Things have picked up."

Uncle Fred's hit mother lode; his fourth floor view is on eye level with the high- roller bank just off Main. His place sparkles and shines. Ceiling to floor windows with a view, potted plants from a far- off jungle, kinky artwork, carpet that folds over your shoes and smells like fresh chemicals. Clients come to this kind of place and beg for help, you don't chase

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them. Uncle Fred has what I think I want out of life. Finding Mrs. Hobson is my first step.

"Hobson?" Uncle Fred says. "Met him a few times at a realtors' show. Mostly writes commercial stuff. Restaurants, bars, office buildings. Came out of nowhere, never heard of him, suddenly he has his own company and he's lunching with the mayor. There are rumors about the guy, but I don't know him that well."

"He seemed straight to me," I say, remembering my first meeting with Hobson and the check he wrote.

"Your Dad said you were gullible. Of course, your Dad is pretty damn cynical, so I guess it all evens out. In your new line of work, you want to watch out, Joe. You're not in the factory or the bowling alley now. You're walking down streets with some mean people," he warns and sounds like he knows what he's talking about. "This weather is something, huh?" he adds. "And the violence! Our little town has grown up."

The phone rings; Uncle Fred ignores it.

"It's okay," I say. "Go ahead."

"They'll call back," he says, like someone who has more business than he needs.

"Who else would know about Hobson?" I ask.

"I thought you were looking for his wife," Uncle Fred says, looking down at the desk covered with letters. He grabs a gold letter opener and starts slashing at the mail, like he's gutting a string of bass.

"I've hit dead end on her. Background on him may lead to her. Or, to a motive." I watch him carve up letters with his dagger, cutting open the pile with nervous speed. He notices me noticing.

"With practice, you get pretty good at this," he says and puts down the opener. "If you have to, there is someone you might talk to. Ed Stimowicz. Ed's retired but still knows

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everybody. He'd know more about your man than I do. Watch your step, Joe. Hobson's connected to serious people. You do deals on bars and nightclubs, it's a special clientele. Say hello to your mother for me, okay?"

Uncle Fred reaches out to shake goodbye, then pulls back from my three-fingered hand. He looks down at the plush carpet. His secretary arrives for the day. She smiles at Uncle Fred and checks me out, up one side and down. She's young and pretty and looks like she goes with the place.

* * *

Fender bender fog. There's always winners and losers and this summer it's body shops and PI's who are raking it in. Visibility this morning is zero, I reach Stimowicz's place on edge and in a sweat. The new me. Maybe it's the drive, maybe the punch press rearing it's head. Repressed memory the doctor called it. What does that mean? Thank God for insurance.

A TV- blue hue dances in Stimowicz's window. White siding has turned rain- stained tan, trim paint curls at the edge. No signs of success or corruption. I knock.

"Don't want any," a voice rasps through a crack in the door.

"I'm not selling."

"Don't con a con man, kid," the voice says. The crack grows smaller.

"Fred Evans sent me. He's my uncle."

The door widens.

"How's the old swindler?" the voice asks and a head appears.

The face matches the voice-- gray stubble shadow, crow's feet, hair matted flat across a pale forehead. He's dressed in pajamas, exhales a trace of bourbon, wears a snarl that looks

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like it arrived at birth. How could this guy sell if he never believed? You have to believe to succeed.

"Evans is your uncle?" Stimowicz says. "I don't see it. You got an ID?"

I explain it's my mother's brother, so the names won't match up.

"Don't suppose anyone would claim him unless it was true," Stimowicz says and opens the door. "You're interrupting my TV." He waves a liver-spotted hand in my face. "What's with the black suit? I thought you were a Jehovah."

His living room mirrors the world--cigarette smoke hangs in the air like the fog. Stimowicz mutes the TV and glances back at the screen as we talk. I spot a family picture on a side table.

"My 'see you at Christmas' family," he says. "I still pay the premiums on my boys' life policies. What's a father for, huh? So, what's your game, son?"

"I'm a private investigator."

"A noble profession," he sneers. "Just a little more corrupt than everyone else in this world," he adds and swivels his head toward the TV. "I know most of the PI's in town," he says out of the corner of his mouth. "Never heard of you."

"I'm new at it."

"A virgin PI! What a thought."

"Uncle Fred said you knew everyone in the real estate business," I say in a hurry. I'm in competition with the dreams of daytime TV.

"Your uncle's a bullshitter, you know that, right? I'm gonna guess there was a reason he sent you to me. He wanted to get rid of you. Pass you on. I assume you yourself were not the reason, you appear to be an acceptable nephew type, outside of that hand of yours which has a story behind it I don't want to hear. Anyway, for some reason, Uncle Fred wanted to get you

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out of his hair. I'm sitting here wondering what that reason was. Maybe if you get to your point, I'll figure it out."

He lets out a deep cough after this speech and to make sure the cough won't go away, drags on one of two cigarettes burning gray on a table in front of him .

"Charles Hobson," I say. "Can you tell me anything about him?"

Even through the haze that clouds the air, I see Stimowicz go a darker shade.

"Time's up."

He stands to make his point.

"What?" I ask.

"It's a familiar saying--'time's up'. 'See you around'. Same thing. Can you see yourself out? Say hello to Uncle Fred."

"Wait. Hobson's wife. She's disappeared. Can't you..."

"I used to know a lot of men's wives, son. Not anymore. Now are you going to get back to work, or do I call the cops and file a trespassing charge?"

"Give me something. Anything. Or I'll.."

"Who's kidding who, sonny? You won't do anything. Talk to Uncle Fred," Stimowicz says, gesturing toward the door. "He knows Hobson as well as I do. Maybe better."

"Thanks for your time, enjoy your smokes and soaps," I snap and wish I hadn't. You never know who might change their mind and help when you need it. I fight my way through the dense air out into the foggy mid-day, lost in a blind alley with doors that keep opening a crack and then slamming shut.

* * *

"I didn't say he was a nice guy," Uncle Fred says into my cell. "He isn't a nice guy. So what? "Uncle Fred's on the defensive.

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"I don't care about nice. The only thing came out of his mouth was cigarette smoke."

"He didn't know Hobson?"

"Oh yeah, he knew Hobson. He knew a lot about Hobson. But he wasn't talking."

"He's not bashful," Uncle Fred says. "Something doesn't make sense. Didn't he give you something? A name?"

"Not even a blind alley," I try on and wait for the silence.

"Maybe you should back off of this thing, Joe," he comes back, not missing a beat. "Maybe you're stepping on someone's toes. Word gets around fast in this town. There's plenty of other work this summer."

"Not for me. Not at this kind of fee. You must know something about Hobson."

This time there is silence on the line.

"You're the detective," he finally says, voice clipped. "I'll keep my ears open. I've got someone on another line here." Suddenly he's concerned about losing a call. "We'll stay in touch," he says and the phone goes as dead as the trail I'm following.

* * *

Ka-chunk, ka-chunk. Monotonous, deafening roar. Familiar smell of hydraulic fluid leaking somewhere through an aging press. Fork-trucks threaten your life, honking, flying past, chasing parts down narrow, asphalt aisles. What fool would miss this?

"Look who's slumming! Three-finger Bobby."

"Little Bobby. The man formerly known as Bobby Broyles--wing tips and a tie!"

"Bobby! Keep your hands at your sides, we get free doughnuts for safety."

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"You guys haven't changed," I say. "Same creepy, grade-school humor."

They miss me, I think, but it's not that, I'm a break in the predictable day. They've got their feet on the ground, these guys, and the long, long years stretch before them.

"Hey, Robert Broyles Senior," one of them shouts. "Big Bob. A suit's here to see you."

Big Bob spots me and walks over. There's no smile on him.

"What's this about?" he asks, putting a hand on my shoulder and guiding me out of the way of an overhead parts basket.

"Just stopping by," I say as I duck. "Got a question."

"It's break time," he says. "You remember, right? My feet should be up on a chair. My butt in repose, feet on a chair. You couldn't call tonight?"

"I guess I wanted to see how the old place looks," I say, surprising myself. We step into the cafeteria. He gets his usual-- no sweetener-- and joins me at his usual table.

"They painted the cafeteria," I say.

"Must be a bad week you got homesick for the Hometown House of Hell. Isn't that what you called it?"

He doesn't accept that I turned my back on this, it was good enough for him.

"This place wears on you, but there were good days," I say, feeling the warm glow of familiarity in my veins.

"It's a living, not a picnic. Of course, you're on to bigger things now, aren't you?" He points at his watch. "Time's running. What's on your mind?"

"Uncle Fred."

"That's your Mother's department."

"It's touchy. I wanted to start with you."

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He nods at two guys who walk by. They double take on me and nod on their way to a donut.

"I'm not forgotten," I say.

"Not with that mess. Guys remember that all their lives."

"Think I don't?" I say as unwelcome memories slip back.

He pauses, then grunts. "What's your question, son?" he asks, voice softened, eyes on the clock over my shoulder.

"I'm working a case. My first big one. I hit dead ends everywhere, including Uncle Fred."

"Deadend Fred. I like that."

"That's it, he isn't. Not in his business, anyway. I always thought he did okay. Up one time, down another. He used to borrow from you guys when he was down. I went to his office yesterday. It's a palace. Smells like money. What happened?"

Break time is ticking down, guys are filing out to work, but he's not moving. Something clicks.

"Now you mention it, he's got a new car," he says. "Big Chrysler. I wondered about that. What's this got to do with you?"

"I thought he might give me a lead. He stonewalled. Sent me on a goose chase. It doesn't add up."

"If he struck it rich, he owes us money."

"Maybe it's simple. The lottery. Long-lost great aunt. I don't know. It's eating me. Ask Mom about him. Exercise discretion."

"Exercise discretion?" he says and slits a thin smile. "I didn't raise you to talk like that."

"That's SouthWest Tech talking. It slips out."

"Your Mom'll be proud. She's got ambitions for you."

"That why she always read to me?"

"I read to you. Some."

He stands up.

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"Sunday. Chicken dinner," he says. "Don't wear the suit." It's then that he finally asks how it's going and I say I'm still learning. He says watch my backside and heads back to work. I wind my way out of the plant, walking within feet of my press, the one that got me. They shoot animals that maim a man, but that press is back at work like nothing ever happened. It's jaws gape and chew and puncture metal, penetrating the sheet steel and spitting out parts. I shiver, pull myself back and step outside into the world.

* * *

I go to the net to check out Hobson but don't expect much from an open source. The truth lies molding under a rock this summer. The phone rings. The voice is unfamiliar and rough, like the rattle of a muffler on it's last run to the shop. He's Captain Mendes, 3d Precinct, and it's clear his position carries weight with him. He insists on seeing me, today, his office. I accept. I ask Joe Mayo about Mendes.

"What do you know?"

"Not much," Mayo says. "He's the Man of Mystery, shrouded in mist."

"C'mon, Joe."

"Somebody brought him in from out of town, which is strange. Most of these jobs go to insiders."

"And?"

"He's got a temper. Short fuse on a big stick."

"Not political?"

"Put it this way, he runs for Son, his momma don't vote."

"They had to go outside for a guy like that?"

"Who knows? Desperate measures, desperate times. Our town's never been like this. He'll shake things up, I guess. Watch your step."

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"Anything on Hobson?" He says he's still checking. I hang up, pick out my boldest, most confident tie and head down to Precinct Three.

I enter through a back door, like I was told. An officer lets me in, walks me down a flight to the bowels of the building, then up stairs and down a dark hallway, footsteps echoing off ashen walls. We enter a large office with a large, black desk. My escort shuffles backwards out the door. The shoulders behind the black desk could fill a doorway. The shoulders pivot to face me. I spot two framed pictures of some Army general with ribbons on his chest propped up on the floor, waiting to be hung. Mendes asks "coffee, tea or milk?" then tells his sergeant two coffees-- both black. He motions me into my seat. I look up.

"We got something in common," he says, smiling a forced smile. "I'm new to this town, you're new to the profession. Two new guys in a pod." He holds up two fingers side by side and winks.

"Birds of a feather?" I say.

"Sure."

"Welcome to our town."

"You Mr. Ambassador?"

"Well, no, but I was born here."

"I know. Played quarterback, shortstop. Screwed around, trashed some bars. Disorderly conduct guy."

"Huh?"

"I do my homework," he says, rocking back in his chair.

"Homework is good."

"For example, Mr. Ambassador, you're on the Hobson case."

"Yeah?"

"I assigned good men to that case. I hate to see you waste your time."

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"I'm getting paid," I say.

"You strike me as a guy who wouldn't want to get paid for nothing."

I nod, like a man of principle, but who knows, the landlord doesn't care. Mendes fumbles with a folder on his desk, lays the folder down, admires his fingernails. Over his shoulders, gray light slips through metal blinds and settles on the pictures on the floor.

"Not planning to stay?" I say.

"What?"

"Your pictures. Not gonna hang them?"

"First things first. I've got a town to clean up. Pictures can wait. So, what've you found out?" He trains hazel eyes on me.

"It's early."

"You got nothing?"

"I didn't say that."

"You came close," he says and flashes a deep smile. "Look, speak freely. It's just between us girls. You must've found something. Let's work together for our mutual benefit. Okay?"

I'm not going to bite, I think that's how you play this.

"All trails are cold so far," I say. "Mind if I ask? What have your guys turned up?"

"Tit is for tat? This is what we got." He holds up the folder. I reach for it, he pulls it back. "We got leads. Testimonies. Background."

"You got a head start on me. I'm just getting going."

"You got nothing. We established that," he says, mood shifting now that he doesn't think I have anything to offer. "Not that I expected anything. The only thing you're gonna find will stick to your shoes and smell from a block away. Right?"

His broad, flat nose pulses, taking in my scent. He opens a drawer, a nail file comes out. He works his nails.

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"No disrespect," I say, " your guys had found anything important, I wouldn't be hired. Right?"

This warms him up, the short fuse and big stick smolders. His coffee tan face shades to ocher, the corners of his mouth twitch. I'm holding my own, learning on the job.

"What'd you say?" he demands.

"If you had stuff, you wouldn't waste your time with me. Would you?"

"Who do you think you are?" he sputters, voice spraying a fine mist in the air.

"Come again?"

"I'll explain it," he says, rocking his chair, fighting his anger. "In this business, appearance is everything. How does it look, a guy like you gets called in to help? I mean, you didn't even graduate at the top of your fucking tech class." He waves a piece of paper in the air. "Grade point 2.7. That's not so hot if I remember."

What doesn't this guy know? What can I say that he won't throw back at me?

"You need my help," I try on.

"You couldn't help a blind man cross an empty street."

"You don't know the lay of the land," I say, warming. "You're in over your head."

It works. He blinks.

"Say again? I'm over my head? You're the rookie, rookie."

"How many guys wanted this job you got?"

"I give a shit."

"Yeah you do. Every one of them wants you to fail."

"Not gonna happen, pal."

"And their wives. Uncles, cousins, buddies on the bowling team. Grade school teachers. They all want you to fail. They all hate you--the outsider."

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"You're a brown-nosed little weasel, aren't you?" he whispers. Veins pulse across his temples, he wants to get me outside in an alley after dark.

"Most of us go way back in this town, Captain. Friends, enemies, networks. Do our Italians trust our Russians? Do Hispanics hate the blacks? Which side of the tracks are guys from?"

"Do the spics hate the dagos?" he sneers. "That kind of thing?"

"I didn't say that."

"Do you micks hate the wops?"

"That's not..."

"That's how men talk where I come from. No mincing words. This is a pussy town you got here."

"You left all that behind," I say. "All the connections that matter, the history. The dirt. The stuff you used to squeeze guys with. You had it. Now it's gone."

I pause, surprised at myself. Is it enough?

"You little bullshitter," Mendes says. "Think you know all the angles? One town's like the other. I'll figure it out."

"There's bitter, civic pride in this town, Mendes. We stick together. You need me."

"I'm here on a mission," he says, looming over the desk. "My mission is me. I'm not gonna fail. Besides which, you're bullshitting. You and your connections."

The coffee sergeant tries one more time. This time he spots me and I look at him.

"Hey, Bobby. I didn't see you," he says.

"Hey, Tony. How's it going?"

"Good," he says, glancing at Mendes. "How's your dad?"

"Still punching parts," I say, turning my cat smile on Mendes.

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The sergeant leaves the coffee and exits again. I thank God for this long-shot. I continue my smile.

"Good guy, Tony," I say. "Nice wife--Angie-- and two kids."

Mendes glares at the door. He swivels toward me.

"Mr. Connected, huh?" he says. " Knows everybody and everything. Ballsy Bobby. My savior. My redeemer king."

"I've got a cell phone," I say. "That's all I'm saying. We trade tips. You solve the case, I get a fee."

He taps an angry beat on his desk with a pencil. He leans back, folds his hands, hunches his shoulders. He lurches forward, trying to cast a shadow.

"Don't get in our way," he says. "You want something, you ask. You find out something, you let me know."

He drops his voice and narrows dark, angry eyes: "Cross me and you'll disappear into the fog."

I nod my head. I'm holding my smile.

"You said Italians and Russians," he says. "There any Russians in this town?"

"Not that I know of."

"Bluffer. I like that."

He stands.

"Why our town?" I ask. "Why are you here?"

"Opportunity knocked," is all he says. He doesn't flinch as he shakes my wounded hand.

* * *

Joe Mayo calls, breathing heavy.

"It's all over the place," he says. "Courthouse, City Hall. You and Mendes. And your big meeting."

"You have confirmed something I personally experienced. Planning to bill me?"

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"You're missing the point. Everyone's talking. Secretaries, law clerks...you know, all my sources. All the cops, his guys. They mention your name and roll their eyes."

"Tony couldn't keep his mouth shut."

"It isn't Tony. It's Mendes. It's 'Broyles this' and 'Broyles that'. He drops your name every chance he gets. I don't get it. Do you?"

I'm not sure. He called me down there to milk me and then to cut me out. Maybe he decided to let his guys know he had an insider to wise him up. Maybe my name will give him an edge on the island he's on. People use people, that's one thing I'm learning in my new world.

"Are you there?" Mayo asks.

"I guess so," I say but I'm not sure where I am or where I'm going. "How long does it take to get through law school?" I ask, dreaming of escape. He laughs into the phone.

* * *

They catch me halfway between the parking lot and the entrance to my apartment building. It's late afternoon but too cloudy for shadows to warn me. There are two of them. I don't know how I know that, but I do. One is tall--the blow comes from above. I hear "fucker" on my way down. Some people have to work themselves up to this. I think of the punch press as the shock waves hit me. Which is better, an angry blow or maimed with no intent? The hit on my head doesn't hurt. I feel my knees buckle, my chin slams into the ground, I taste dirt, my neck twists. I'm kicked in the back. Someone leans over me, breath of half-digested garlic. "Nighty night" he whispers. The gray world fades to black. The next thing I hear, before my eyes open, two nurses are talking as they hook up machines on my bed. My first sight is Mom. I make out Joe Mayo, sitting in

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a chair, reading a magazine. Why isn't he out working? I try to smile.

"That's my boy," Mom says.

Dad appears, gives me a thumbs up and tells the nurses to close the blinds. The sun is an angry ball.

"Did I miss Sunday dinner?" I whisper, not knowing how long I've been out.

There's pain now, even through the IV drugs. Whatever the stuff is, I can't think. There are flowers in a vase.

"I told you this was no way to make a living," Mom says, leaning over my bed.

"Don't lecture him now," Dad says, strange words from someone who lectures me so much. "You're the one who said he needed an education."

"I never said he should do this. I said two fingers were enough to give to those machines of yours."

"Machines of mine? Where do you get that?"

"From 'the boys this' and 'down at the shop that'", she says.

"The crummy plant looks pretty good now, doesn't it?" Dad says. "Doesn't look like this investigator thing is his calling."

I try to sit up to stop this, but it's too much, the pain won't let me. Mayo gets up and walks over to my bed. Now there are five angels hovering.

"Any leads on who did this?" I ask Mayo.

"The cops are looking into it," he says. "Your case and the murders and the car jackings and the bank hold-up-- you get what I mean. I know the name of a good private investigator."

"Don't talk, son," Mom says and glares at Mayo.

Dad again tells the nurse to close the blinds. The sun shines off the white walls and white sheets. We're all squinting, like cave creatures forced into a blinding, open world. The nurse pulls the blinds. The room turns gray and feels normal.

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"Your Uncle Fred sent the flowers," Mom says.

"Who told him?" I ask. I'm no longer sure who I want to know what. The thought makes my head throb.

"Not me," Dad says.

"Your Uncle Fred is connected," Mom says. "He knows things that go on in this town."

"No flowers from Mendes," Mayo cracks.

"Mendes?" Mom asks, looking at me, ignoring Mayo. "Who's Mendes? Back when you had a normal life, we knew all your friends. Janice, a nice girl, friends from the neighborhood and sports, friends you had all your life from a normal childhood. They were normal people you'd meet in normal places. And now this." She looks like she's going to cry. One of the nurses walks out of the room; the other one says I need my rest, everyone can come back this evening. Mom gives me a peck on the cheek, Dad puts his arm around her and walks her out. Mayo stays behind.

"I think we better drop this," he says. "Money isn't everything."

"Maybe it was something else. Did they take..."

"They cleaned out your wallet. Anyone with brains would do that. To cover up. They could've been cops-- friends or enemies of Mendes. Or someone who was in on Hobson's disappearance. The list is large. Considering you're unknown, you've got lots of enemies."

"I must be on to something."

"Yeah? What are you on to?"

"I don't know."

"Think what they'll do if you find anything out."

"You've got to have a name to get anywhere. This'll get me noticed."

"You're a detective, Bobby. You just got clues. The bump on your head. The bruise on your kidney. Clues. The clues say

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we ought to get out. Back to spousal cheating and deadbeat dads. I'm no hero. If you were, I bet you aren't now. Are you?"

Before I can answer, the nurse collars Mayo and escorts him to the door. The answer is no: I'm no hero. I drift off into drug-inspired dreams of Elaine Hobson. She's younger and even prettier than her picture. I reach out to touch her, realize what I'm doing--what my client will do to me-- and pull back. What am I doing? She disappears in my dream like she disappeared into the rain. But I feel happy, the drugs have kicked in and do wonders. The sheets smell clean. I look up and there are no clouds above me, I'm seated at a desk like Uncle Fred's, slashing at mail. My hand has five fingers sewn on with red thread. When the dream is over, the doctor says I'm almost free to go; this time it doesn't feel like freedom.

* * *

My office is a mess. It always is. Mayo calls. He has something.

"Elaine Hobson was seeing a young cop named Bill Girard. He testified in a case of mine. Walks like he owns any place he's in. Body builder. Slippery. Dumb. Bad apple."

"Mendes didn't tell me about this guy."

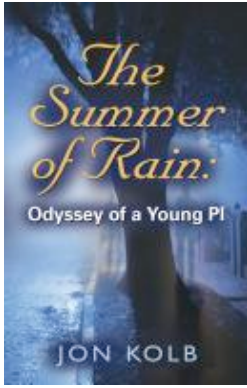
"A cop covering for a cop? Or, Mendes doesn't know? He doesn't seem wired into things yet. I'd say he's got more enemies than you. Of course, we're not sure how many you have, so I could be wrong."

"Keep checking on Girard. I'll introduce myself to him when I feel better."

"How's the head?"

"Thinking slower than ever," I say and hang up.

* * *



*In **The Summer of Rain**, young Bobby Broyles fights to build a new life for himself and to uncover the secret of the missing wife of a mysterious, wealthy man. As a tsunami of crime engulfs his city, Bobby encounters seductive rich women, devious politicians and cynical funeral directors. Bobby must solve a crime, avoid death, and save his parents from an assassin's knife. You are invited along for the ride.*

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