

RYAN HARTMAN

the MOST
forbidden
VOWS

A **MURDER** MYSTERY

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Prologue

“A vow is only forbidden when it’s unbreakable but will be broken.” -Robert V. Sanzo

If I’ve learned anything in my long and mostly uneventful tenure here on Earth, it’s to keep a low profile. It doesn’t matter who you are, what you do, and whatever the hell you believe — keep a low profile. For me, it’s very much important, since in approximately eighteen hours, or whenever one of the imbeciles that dwells in this Victorian maze finds their beloved homeowner asleep for all eternity, police will come staggering to the scene where foul play will be most definitely suspected eventually. Yes, whoever you are reading this impeccable tale, I am indeed the murderer of this murder mystery story. I guess I could inform you of who I am, but that would take away from the story your imagination is about to be enveloped in. Like I said, it’s all about keeping a low profile, so without further ado, let the curtains open to reveal this strange, unnerving, puzzling, bloody, and most of all, entertaining mystery that I know none of you will be able to solve.

Chapter I

The bliss of the early morning sights and sounds was suddenly interrupted by sirens blaring down the street, racing towards the mansion known as Caper Grounds. The ominous manor's lone chimney raged with smoke plowing into the air. Three police cars pulled up the mostly vacant rounded driveway that followed the pristine, metal gate at the manor's entrance. Once the cars screeched to a stop, men in uniforms raced out of the cars, hurried up the stone stairs towards the brick exterior, and through the ancient mahogany door leading to the foyer.

A woman raced down the left side of a split staircase, then down the main steps that faced the officers that were now all inside the mansion's foyer. The only light in the small room was from the orange sunlight rolling through the large, circular window located just above the threshold, as well as a small lamp illuminating the common room to the left of the foyer.

"Oh, dear Lord," the woman said as she completed her descent down the steep flight of stairs. "I just found him in his study. Oh, dear Lord."

"Mr. Sanzo, what has been the biggest inspiration for your screenwriting career?"

A man in a light brown linen suit with a long, black tie checkered with thin red lines draped over it sat upward in a large,

cushioned chair as another man in an identical chair mesmerizingly watched him as he spoke. A group of reporters also watched, flashing lights on their cameras after every other word the man spoke, curious about his response to their questions.

“Well, it’s – everything,” the man began. “Everything I see. I like to go on long walks around the town my home is near. It’s a quaint little town in the middle of nowhere. When I walk, I always admire the brick buildings, trees planted on the edge of sidewalks, cars calmly driving around, birds chirping a beautiful symphony. Everything inspires me, even the simplest of things.”

“Mr. Sanzo,” a reporter asked, “you’ve written so many screenplays for pictures that ended up becoming huge hits commercially and critically. How do you do it with such ease?”

“Well, every story starts with an idea, a simple one. It’s the simplest things that then branch out into other things. One thing happens, and it causes a bunch of other things to happen. That’s the basis. That thing doesn’t have to be interesting, it just has to be *something* so that interesting things can branch from it. Once you know one part, the other parts become much clearer and that’s when you see the whole picture. You believe one thing is something, then you see something else, and realize that thing isn’t quite what you thought it was. It’s different, and it knows it. That’s the whole point of a story. Something that someone can see and think to themselves, ‘wow, that was really something’ or ‘wow, this wasn’t anything like I thought it was’. That’s what makes a brilliant story brilliant.”

About twenty-five minutes had passed from the officers' initial arrival to the estate to where the dead screenwriter's body rested when two men entered the home. They walked into the common room where the police were interrogating the woman who first informed them of the death.

When the men entered the room, everyone turned and faced them. Margaret slightly jumped and wore a shocked look on her face. One officer questioned, "And who are you?"

"Good morning, officers and madam," one of the two men spoke. "I am Detective Darell Rao Whichard, and I am the detective reported to come here to this house to check for foul play. Standard procedure."

The detective wore a flat, black fedora on his head, as well as a thick, dark-grey jacket over a light-grey button-down shirt. His baggy, maroon pants draped over his black dress shoes that could certainly be heard anywhere in the house when they stomped onto the common room's floorboards. The reading glasses resting on both his earlobes were small with thin, rectangular lenses outlined in a thick dark-blue.

He then motioned to the man standing next to him, who was in near identical attire but had a much more concerned and anxious expression on his face. "This here is my partner, Detective Ken Kramer."

Ken nodded at the sound of his name, muttering a soft "hello".

"I apologize, detectives," an officer started, "but we do not need detectives at this moment. We barely have any knowledge of, well, anything."

“We still must find any evidence of foul play, officer. Standard procedure.”

“Pardon me,” the woman said as she rose from her large brown chair that was drowning in festive pillows, “but you believe that someone might have *murdered* my dear Robert? Oh, please. No one would dare murder the most esteemed screenwriter of today.”

“Madam, I apologize, but like I said, standard procedure. We just have to make sure.”

Despite her willingness to fight back, the woman returned to her comfortable chair wearing a look of disgust on her face.

“Excuse me, madam, but you wouldn’t happen to know if any family is nearby would you? If so, is it possible to have close family gathered here? I’d like to get to know the family.”

“*Family?* Why do you want to see any of our *family?* What involvement would they have in this?”

“Is it possible?”

“I suppose it is, but none of them would ever—”

“Like I said, madam, standard procedure.”

As the woman left to inform her loved ones of their desired presence, two officers waited patiently in the common room with the two detectives.

“Detectives, we know very little of what happened here, but I’ll tell you what we do know.” The police officer speaking was a dark-skinned man who carried lots of intimidating muscle, especially compared to his tall but thinner accomplice, who was as white as a sheet of paper and wore a uniform that looked noticeably oversized. “I

am Officer McKinley, and this is Officer Foster. We arrived here with other officers this morning at approximately eight-ten in the morning. We had received a call prior to that from the woman whom you've just met, telling us her husband was dead in his study upstairs."

The other officer joined in on the retelling. "That woman is Margaret Sanzo, her husband being the famous screenwriter Robert Sanzo. She said he was just lying on his chair in the study. We checked, no gunshot or incised wound was found on his body. The medical examiner we called this morning told us that the body can be overlooked on Wednesday."

"Do you know if he had any medical problems, like heart issues perhaps?" Darell asked.

"We don't know," Officer McKinley responded. "Ask Mrs. Sanzo when she's finished calling her family."

"What about this house? Anything special about it?"

"Pretty special, actually. Robert basically built it himself about forty or so years ago. It's the strangest house you'll ever see — like a Clue board sprang to life."

Chapter II

In the span of the following couple of hours, members of the Sanzo and Ward family arrived at Caper Grounds, and each person was interrogated around the time they arrived. Coincidentally, someone new arrived around the time one questioning was completed. They started with Margaret as they anticipated the rest of the family's arrival.

When she exited her room and climbed down the main stairs, the police signaled Margaret to the dining hall located just beyond the split staircase from the foyer and to the left. When she walked in, the two detectives were already sitting in adjacent chairs on the far side of the large, rectangular dining table that lay beside the large, unlit fireplace on the back wall. As she approached, Darell motioned her to sit in the chair on the other side from him and Ken.

As she sat, the detective called, "Officer Foster, please shut the door and wait in the foyer. As the family arrives, tell them to wait in the common room."

"Sure, detective." Officer Foster obeyed. Officer McKinley remained in the dining hall as his comrade left for the foyer.

Darell began as Ken and Officer McKinley watched intuitively. "While we wait for your family, I thought I'd ask you just a few standard questions and get an idea of what's happened here. As you said, Mrs. Sanzo, your husband had no wounds of any kind, so while it is not completely out of the picture, we have not ruled his death as a

homicide yet. However, as far as I'm aware, only the family members we are expecting today have access to this home due to the gate blocking the driveway that only the family knows the password to pass it. Correct?"

"Y-yes, detective," Margaret replied.

"Now, while that doesn't rule out anyone who doesn't have access, we'll stick to direct relatives for now." He then reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a pack of cigarettes, picking one out and sticking it in his mouth.

"Mrs. Sanzo," Ken said. "Did anything happen last night that was out of the ordinary?"

As Darell lit his cigarette, he added that Ken's question was a good one and pointed toward Margaret.

"Well, um," she began before clearing her throat, "nothing was very strange. I was going to bed and called Robert into the bedroom to kiss me goodnight."

"Where was Robert?" Darell asked after taking his cigarette out from his mouth.

"I believe he was in his study, writing. He always wrote during the late evening. Rarely was ever in bed before eleven o'clock. Always went to bed late and woke up early. I only ever saw him in bed if I woke up in the middle of the night."

"Sounds pretty wonted," Ken noted. "You didn't hear anything, a sound even, during the night?"

"No," Margaret answered. "All I heard was Robert say a few things throughout the night. I remember he said something like 'type

that' and 'wow', but he always talked to himself; said the most random things. I was asleep by around nine-thirty, woke up around seven-thirty. Robert wasn't in bed, as usual, so I went to greet him in his study and realized he was ... well ..."

"I understand, Mrs. Sanzo," Darell said dolorously. "Anyway, tell me about your husband. I of course know of his screenwriting successes, but tell me your side, not the public's side. Yours."

"Um, uh, well, Robert was, well, wonderful. He cared for me, he cared for his kids, he cared for his family. He cared for pretty much everybody. He loved people. He was the person who'd go on walks through the town down the road, going into shops on the daily to greet the workers inside. He never saw himself as famous. He saw himself as a normal man who just wanted to spread kindness by giving people a good story."

"Ah," Darell said. "Sounds like a wonderful man indeed."

"Um, yes. He saw his writing as a message of hope. He loved telling people a story that anyone could relate to and understand. He wanted people to know that they weren't alone. He wanted people to watch the movies he wrote and relate and leave the film in awe. That was his life's goal." Margaret paused as she sniffled, letting a few tears trickle down from her bright blue eyes.

"I believe that will be all, Mrs. Sanzo," Ken said. "You may go."

The woman nodded and slowly treaded out of the room through the door being held open by Officer McKinley.

"Margaret, please bring someone in if they have arrived."

A few moments passed before a man came into the dining hall. He was very tall and fairly thin. He wore a bright red sweater and a pair of wrinkled cargo pants that reached the floor, engulfing his black-and-grey sneakers. The man took the seat where Margaret just was and pulled himself towards the table, on which he rested his elbows on with his hands interlocked like he was praying.

“Good morning sir. Who must you be?” Ken asked.

“Mmm, good morning detectives. My name is Jonas Sanzo, and I am Robert Sanzo’s younger brother.”

Jonas seemed to be very proper, but also mildly shy. His leg shook on the floor making his whole body vibrate, slightly rattling the dining table.

“Mr. Sanzo,” Darell began, “I am Detective Darell Whichard. This is Detective Ken Kramer.”

“Pleased to meet you, sir,” Ken added. “We’d just like to ask you a few questions this morning on the matter of your brother.”

“Umm, alright,” Jonas said.

“So,” Darell started, “Mr. Sanzo, it is believed your brother, Robert, died at some point last night while in his study. When was the last time you saw Robert?”

“Uh, the last time I saw him was, well, last Tuesday, I believe. Me, Claire, Ella, Harold, and Bella came for dinner that night. The last time I’d seen anyone in the family.”

“Who are those people, if you don’t mind me asking?” Darell readjusted his chair before pulling out another cigarette. “We’re still getting to know the family.”

“Well, Claire is my girlfriend at the moment. Ella is my niece, Robert and Margaret’s daughter. Ella married Harold Ward, and Bella is their daughter. She’s usually the only one of theirs that comes to small gatherings like that.”

“Ella and Harold have more kids?” Ken asked.

“Yes, Ch-Charlie, Noah, and Wilson. All in their thirties, Bella still in her twenties.”

“Did anything unusual happen that night?”

“No, not that I recall. We just ate dinner, played our usual game of poker, talked, drank, smoked. All the usual.”

“Is there anyone in the family that would have any reason to want Robert dead? Not saying someone did murder him, but is there any motive?”

“Uh, well, I don’t think so. Everyone loved Robert. I don’t really know why any family members would kill him.”

Darell took the cigarette out of his mouth, a cloud of smoke drifting out from his breath as he said, “Please, Jonas, tell me about Robert. I’d like to know more about him.”

“Umm, well, um, Robert was, well, an unusual man. He was clever, and he knew he was clever. He always liked doing things himself. Very independent. Very creative. I mean, um, he never liked the way his wife made his morning tea each day, so he actually made some weird contraption that would make the tea itself. Every month he’d fill some giant plastic container with all the shit that made the tea, and every morning his contraption would take what it needed from the

container, the same amount each day, approximately, um, six in the morning, and make his tea. It was weird, but kinda neat.”

Following Jonas’ questioning, the detectives waited about an hour before anyone else showed up. Ella and Harold Ward came first, followed by Robert’s son Marcus Sanzo and finally Luke Ward, Harold Ward’s brother.

Before they interrogated anyone else, Officer Foster came into the room with an announcement. “Detectives, a couple of others have arrived. Margaret said that some won’t be coming today but could tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow, officer?” Darell asked, his tone a bit unpleasant.

“Yes, tomorrow. I apologize, detective.”

“Who and what for?”

“Wilson, Charlie, Noah, Bella, and Tyson Ward. According to what Margaret was told, Wilson can’t get anyone to watch his daughter, Charlie has been across the country for months, Bella and Noah don’t live near here, and Tyson is out of the country for his job.”

“Fine. I suppose we can interrogate some tomorrow. Get someone in here now.”

“Um, My name is Ella. I’m Robert’s daughter, detective.”

“Uh, The name’s Harold Ward. I’m married to, um, Ella; she’s Robert’s youngest.”

“I’m Marcus Sanzo. Robert was my father. I’m his oldest.”

“My name’s Luke Ward. Harold’s the younga brotha tuh me.”

“When was the last time you saw Robert?” Darell asked.

“Um, the last time I saw Robert was this past Friday, the fifteenth,” Ella explained. “The whole family was in town because the new movie Dad wrote the screenplay for was coming out, and he wanted us all at the premiere. It was a, uh, fun evening, not that the movie was that good. Dad’s screenplay was excellent, but the studio just didn’t understand his vision.”

“Yesterday, it was,” Harold explained. “Me and Ella came here yesterday because Robert needed help with something. Said something was, um, wrong with the computer. Hated computers, he did. But he said he was calling someone, I think he said it was a toxicologist or something, somethin’ about his new screenplay he was working on. We helped him with the computer, and left. That was around ten o’clock yesterday morning.”

“Umm, I haven’t seen Dad in a couple of weeks,” Marcus explained. “He’s been working hard on a script for months now. The man hates being disturbed. Says that when he’s writing, um, he can’t do anything else. Every time he writes a script, he always first makes these goofy-ass machines to do stuff so he doesn’t have to do it.”

“Like tea, perhaps?” Ken asked.

“Exactly like tea! He made this stupid-ass thing that would make tea for him instead of himself making it. Dad’s always makin’ weird shit that has nothing to do with writing. Just like this house – a giant Clue board. So weird.”

“Uh, I rarely see duh guy eva,” Luke explained. “He’s always up tuh somepin’. Never got no time for duh family. Only eva see ‘em when duh family gets togetha on holidays and premieres, that’s ‘bout it. Last time was probably like, oh I dunno, like tree monts ago for Christmas.”

The county police station was located on the edge of the town that sat about five miles away from Caper Grounds. It was a quaint little town, only above twenty blocks of mom-and-pops shops basking in the sun every day in the middle of nowhere. The station was small, looking like a local convenience store with blue and white painted on the exterior. The building, along with the rest of the buildings in town, looked just about as old as time itself, with every brick and stone looking as if they’ll break apart at any moment.

The time was nearing ten o’clock during the evening, and the town had turned off all its lights for the night. The only light was the lone lamp slightly illuminating the police station, where the two officers and two detectives sat around a table in the station’s lobby.

“I don’t think we can rule this homicide or not just yet,” Officer McKinley stated. “While there’s definitely something uneven about this, we don’t have enough information.”

“Robert’s two kids, his daughter’s husband and his brother all had different stories of when they last saw Mr. Sanzo,” Ken said. “At least one of them lied, possibly more.”

“Such an odd thing to lie about, though,” Officer Foster shared. “I mean, in traditional homicidal investigations, they lie about what happened during one time. Everyone had different times in general.”

“Detective Kramer,” Darell began, “recite to me the last time everyone said they saw Mr. Sanzo.”

“Certainly.” Ken reached into his small briefcase, pulling out a piece of lined paper he had been taking notes on during the interrogations. “The last time everyone saw Mr. Sanzo. Margaret said it was last night in his study before she went to bed. Ella Ward said it was this past Friday, March fifteenth at the premiere of a new movie Robert screenwrote. Harold Ward said he and Ella saw him yesterday at his house to help him with his computer. Marcus Sanzo said a couple of weeks ago without specification. And finally, Luke Ward said he hadn’t seen Mr. Sanzo since Christmas, three months ago.”

Darell pulled out another cigarette as he began to think aloud. “Why would Ella say she saw him Friday if she and Harold saw him yesterday? And if they wanted to make zero note of their presence by Robert yesterday, his last day on Earth, why would Harold say they were there? He even specified he went with Ella — makes no sense.”

“What movie did Robert write that they went to see?” Officer Foster wondered. “*Was* there a premiere recently?”

Ken approvingly hummed at the officer's idea, and pulled a small, light grey laptop from his briefcase. After lifting the lid, he pressed the keys for a moment before discovering an answer. He hummed again, this time with a mildly intrigued tone. "According to his page online," Ken started, "the last movie Robert Sanzo wrote released last year."

Chapter III

The following morning, as sunlight poured out of the bushes lined in front of Caper Grounds, the police and detectives arrived at the manor while unrecognizable cars were unoccupied on the other side of the curved driveway.

“They must already be here,” Darell proclaimed.

The four men walked into the home to find people whom they couldn’t recognize waiting in the foyer and in the common room. After a few seconds of heads turning at the sound of the front door opening, Margaret and Jonas came from the kitchen behind the split staircase to welcome the men back.

“Good morning detectives, officers,” Margaret greeted. “The rest of the family is here, detectives. They are ready to be questioned.”

“Great,” Darell said. “We’ll take them one at a time. We’ll first get set back up in the dining hall, then we’ll take everyone individually.”

“Splendid. Would any of you like some tea or coffee?”

“Coffee for all of us would be lovely. Thank you Mrs. Sanzo.”

Darell gave Margaret and Jonas a simple smile before leading the group into the dining hall beyond the stairs, to which Margaret and Jonas followed to access the kitchen.

Because of the guests all already waiting at the manor, the two police officers as well as the two detectives were able to listen in the dining hall. After spending a few minutes setting up in the dining hall,

Officer Foster left the room to escort their first suspect in to be questioned.

“Certainly. My name is Tyson Ward. My father is Luke Ward, who I believe you spoke to yesterday.”

“Yes, indeed,” Darell confirmed. “Tell me, Tyson, where and when did you last see Robert Sanzo?”

“Last time I saw Grandpa was two weeks ago. It was for our usual dinner and poker game we’d get together for like once a week or so.”

“Who was there?” Ken asked.

“Me, my siblings, my parents, Grandma and Grandpa of course, and Grandpa’s brother Jonas.”

“Nothing unusual happened?”

“Not that I recall. Pretty normal get-together.”

“Who won the poker game?”

“I think my dad, Luke, won.”

“Um, hi. My name is Bella, and Robert was my grandfather.”

“Bella, when was the last time you saw your grandfather?” Ken questioned.

“The last time I saw him was, umm, I think it was the last time we came here for dinner.”

“And when was that?”

“I believe it was three weeks ago, the 26th of February,” Bella explained. “The whole family came here for dinner.”

“The *whole* family?”

“Yes. Everyone came.”

“Did you play poker as well?” Darell asked.

“Um, yes, we did, of course. We always do.”

“How did it go?”

“Um, it went well. I believe Robert won, as he usually does.”

“Ah,” Ken murmured before asking another question. “Bella, tell me about your relationship to Robert.”

“Of course. Me and my Grandpa had a special bond. He told me that when I was little I’d always ask him questions, and I was always his ‘suck-up grandchild’ as he used to say. He loved secrets – like why he designed his house like a giant Clue board. When we’d play poker, I never liked playing, so I just watched. Grandpa was terrible at reading bluffs, which my brothers loved doing. So, I decided to be of use. I created my own secret language, and gave each letter a different letter denomination. I always would watch sitting behind my brothers, so I could see their hands. Basically, I’d say random words that actually meant something else — the language only me and my Grandpa understood. I would say ‘cap’ which meant bet, ‘shit’ meant fold, ‘rearm’ meant check, and ‘vodka’ meant raise. I’d randomly say each word to give him an idea of what they had and if they were bluffing. I cheated him to a lot of victories that way.”

“Morning, detectives. I’m Wilson Ward, grandson of Robert, son of Ella and Harold.”

“When was the last time you saw Robert?”

“Believe it was last weekend I saw him. Yeah. Me and my siblings came up to wish him a happy birthday. The guy turned sixty-two, so we thought it’d be a good idea to come up and say hi.”

“Just you and your three siblings came up?” Ken questioned.

“Yeah, just us four. We were only here for about an hour.”

“Have you ever come to have dinner and play poker with the family at all?”

“Yeah, I have a few times. We haven’t really done it in a while, though, since the old guy’s been hard at work on some fancy new scripts.”

“I see,” Darell shared. “When was the last time?”

“Probably last month, I guess,” Wilson replied.

“Um, hello, um, detectives. I’m, uh, Noah, um, Ward.”

“And you are Robert’s other grandson?” Ken checked.

“Um, yes, I am. My dad is, um, Harold, and my, um, mom is Ella.”

“Noah, as I’m sure you are aware,” Darell started, “we have already talked with your other siblings.”

“Yes, um, I’m, uh, aware.”

Ken asked, “Tell us when you last saw Robert Sanzo.”

“Uh, sure. I last saw him, um, at his movie premiere, um, last week.”

“The whole family was there, I presume?”

“Uh, yes, of c-course.”

Ken leaned in a bit and rested his elbows on the table, stacking his arms on top of themselves. “Noah, while you’re here, I’d like to get a bit of insight on your brother, Charlie, who couldn’t make it. Could you tell me a bit about him?”

There was a faint stomp sound for a moment, and the table slightly rattled. Noah, now with small droplets of sweat letting go from his hairs, made a quick scrunched face before beginning to talk. “Um, well, um, Charlie, uh, Charlie. Oldest brother. He, um, has been away for, um, a while. Some job, uh, opportunity or something like that. I, um, haven’t, um, seen him in months.”

“What kind of job opportunity?”

“Don’t know. He just, um, said he was leavin’, and, um, left.”

Following the conclusion of the family interrogations, the two policemen moved to sit in the chairs of the dining table directly facing the two detectives. Ken was jotting something on his notepad, which now had multiple pages flipped behind the pad filled with crucial information. Darell wore a complexed look on his face as he stroked his chin with his right thumb and index fingers, murmuring words to himself that were inaudible to the others.

“I have ideas,” Officer Foster said, “but we can’t conclude on anything yet.”

“Honestly,” Ken began, “I can’t even conclude if there’s still foul play involved here. Sure, there’s suspicions, but I’m at a loss. We need more information. Can’t conclude anything just yet.”

Darell was now stroking his chin with even more force. "It doesn't add up," he said. "It just doesn't add up."

"What doesn't?"

"Everything."

A couple of hours passed and the entire family still dwelled at Caper Grounds, impatiently waiting to leave. The officers stayed at the manor to keep anyone from leaving as the detectives tried to fit any pieces they could find together. Eventually, the detectives returned, being greeted by the officers, Margaret, and Jonas.

"Welcome back, gentlemen," Margaret spoke, using a tone that was only mildly inviting. "Have you come to any conclusions?"

"Sort of," Ken responded. "Mrs. Sanzo, do you mind gathering the family in the lounge?"

"Not at all," Margaret answered pleasingly. Jonas followed her as she went up the staircase.

Darell turned to Officer Foster and said, "No one left, right?"

"Everyone's still here," Officer Foster reassured.

A few minutes went by before the family was fully gathered in the lounge. The lounge was just past the kitchen behind the split staircase. Dark, wooden doors led into a large room blanketed in red-stained darkness due to the painted windows on the side wall facing the doors. Small torches mildly lit the room, along with the bright fire blazing in the fireplace centered in the backmost wall. On the back wall close to the fireplace was a large bookcase, the only one of its kind in the room. Paintings brushed with dark-toned colors lined the side walls, with styles that somewhat matched the beautiful carpet designed

with similar colors that covered most of the wooden floorboards. Pristine, ornamented couches and cushioned chairs huddled around a low wooden table in the middle. Members of the family occupied the chairs and couches, as well as leaned against the walls and paced between each side of the room.

“Ah, he’s back,” Tyson said as the detectives marched through the doorway.

“Well, detective,” Harold questioned, “did you figure out the killer?”

“Unfortunately,” Darell started, “I have not yet decided on whether this death was by homicide or not. Thereby I can’t yet name a killer, and thus would like you all to stay at the house until we can figure more out.”

A chorus of frustrating groans flew across the room, melodizing in a harmony of unpleasantry.

“Seriously, detectives?” Marcus said angrily.

“Cuh mon, we got places wuh gotta be,” Luke added.

The family’s irritated chorus was capped by a subtle sigh from both detectives as they left the room with the police.

Chapter IV

With the family being forced to remain at Caper Grounds under the police and detectives' orders, Darell and Ken decided to stay at the house as well. Margaret allowed them to take Charlie Ward's room with him out of town, and the men set up in the unoccupied room. The space had two twin-sized beds, one against each side wall, with a large, ancient-looking dresser in between them facing the door.

As the stars in the dark sky outside began to glimmer around the full moon, the family separated itself in the many bedrooms located around the mansion. By ten o'clock, the only light in the house was from the dimmed lamp posts placed in the house's front garden that leaked through the few uncovered windows in the home.

After a couple of hours, Ken awoke. Still lying in his bed mostly covered, he rotated his smartphone that sat on top of the dresser to face him. It flashed Ken with its mild brightness and a large 12:28 plastered over the lock screen wallpaper.

Quietly, he pushed away the thin comforter he had been under, picked up the phone, and stood up to walk out of the room. Ken had been curious about things all day, and wanted to explore the house for himself without anyone being alert. Thankfully, the manor's floor consistently stayed quiet, leaving no creaks when a foot was pressed against it anywhere. Ken was able to leave the room without making a single sound, successfully reaching the second floor hallway.

Most of the family dwelled in rooms on the mansion's second story, which was shaped like an upside down U, with the hall stretching to the left and right past the split staircase before turning towards the front of the manor.

Ken was eager to head downstairs since no one slept on the lower level, but he remembered that, unlike the floorboards, the stairs were extremely noisy when stepped on, sounding like a terrifying shriek after every step. So, Ken remained on the upper level to avoid the possibility of waking up the family. The upper level mostly consisted of bedrooms as well as a couple of bathrooms – but the more intriguing room to Ken was the study located two doors down from his bedroom.

Ken trotted across the hall, which overlooked the dark foyer below. He delicately pulled open the dark green door that led into Robert Sanzo's study. The only sound it made was the quaint scratching of the floor as it opened. According to Margaret, the study was Robert's writing place, somewhere where he could flawlessly write screenplays on his ancient, brass typewriter that now rested unoccupied on the small wooden table against the wall leftmost of the door. The door was specifically designed to leave no space between it and the floor so that no light could seep through a small opening if Robert's wanted the lights turned off excluding the small lamp next to the typewriter. When Ken flicked on the lights after closing the door, he realized the study looked exactly as Margaret described; furniture lined the walls, including the main sofa which was centered with the back wall and could be transformed into a small bed.

Ken sighed as he sat down on the couch, expecting more than just a usual room. The study was the most unadorned of the entire manor. While everything looked as old as the manor itself, as was the furniture in most of the mansion's rooms, the study's furniture looked much more threadbare. The couch cushions were stained and scratched, as was the desk and gray carpet.

Ken walked towards the wooden desk where Robert Sanzo once sat. He searched a few of the drawers that were connected to the bottom of the desk, but each was vacant. Ken sorrowfully sat in the black office chair, contemplating his next move. Should he return to his bedroom or look somewhere else? He was just about to leave when a light switch in his brain suddenly flickered to generate an idea.

Ken spun the chair to face the desk and rolled towards it so that his legs were under the main body. Remembering what Margaret said about what she heard her husband say the night he died, he steadily pressed the 'T' key on the typewriter, then the 'H' key, then the 'A', and finally the 'T' again. Suddenly, the part of the wall directly against the desk completely shifted to the left, revealing a miniature spiral staircase.

Ken quickly got up from the chair and crawled beneath the desk. The spiral staircase twisted upward and downward. He started downward, and took the metal stairs down the bottom of the slender room. A lone doorknob lay against the wall directly beneath the one he just crawled through. He twisted the doorknob and quietly strolled through the opening. Miraculously, he found himself going through

the bookcase in the lounge, which he then realized wasn't a bookcase at all. It was a hidden passageway.

Curious as to where the stairs ascended to, Ken closed the door and climbed to the top of the stairs. Just like at the bottom, there was a lone doorknob attached to the wall. Ken twisted open the knob and walked through the passage.

The space he found himself in was dark, and nothing was visible. He could feel a string hanging from the ceiling, and without no hesitation he tugged on it. The string flickered on a small light that only somewhat illuminated the room that Ken could now clearly tell was an attic. Boxes were towered around the small space, almost like a cardboard city had been built with them. However, Ken's eyes weren't drawn towards the boxes. They were instead drawn to the box directly in front of him. On it rested a shiny gold ring that glimmered under the small light. On the cardboard in front of the ring was writing that read "Don't Play His Game" in permanent marker.

Chapter V

After finding the mysterious message in the manor's secret attic, Ken left via the spiral staircase and exited through the opening into the study, which was veiled by the wall as soon as he went through.

The next morning eventually came, and Ken neglected to inform Darell of his discoveries the previous night. To the knowledge of everyone else, Ken never left his bed during the night.

The morning was quiet as most of the house guests remained in their beds as the hour became seven o'clock. Outside of Darell and Ken, the only other person awake in the home was Maragret. The two detectives found her in the kitchen, preparing to cook a small breakfast for herself. The detectives walked in just before she was about to begin, and Darell asked if she would instead like to join them on a trip to a coffee shop in the nearby town, to which she agreed.

The drive into town was quiet. Caper Grounds was far enough away from the quaint, rural community that any existence of a town couldn't be seen from the property. After driving a few minutes down the road, miniature buildings came into view individually, and the town entrance eventually revealed itself.

The coffee shop was located on a corner in the town. Like most of the businesses in town, the shop was very small and therefore could only seat about twenty customers at once. The bright red chairs and checkered, circular tables gave the impression the place was mimicking a traditional diner design, but the rest of the shop appeared to be more

dilapidated than a typical diner. The broken jukebox beside the rusted front doors chiefly represented the entire establishment.

The three took a booth, the only four booths in the restaurant being located against the wall facing the town. The cushioned benches that faced the table in the center matched the standard restaurant seating with its screaming reds and blues that almost made the lights obsolete with how much they brightened the room.

"This is the only coffee house in town," Margaret said as the trio sat in the booth. "It was Robert's favorite place for some reason." She subtly chuckled at the memory of her husband.

The vacancy of the restaurant led to a waitress greeting them almost immediately. "Good morning," she said in a mild voice. Her attire did not reference the coffee house at all, which Ken noticed as unique. "What can I get y'all to drink?"

"We'll all just take coffee," Darell answered.

"I'll get the pot and some mugs," the waitress said as she left.

"Margaret, why did Robert like it here so much?"

"Um, honestly, I don't know. I mean, uh, this place has nice food and all, but it's just, um, well, showing its age."

The waitress returned with a steaming pot of coffee and three small, white mugs. She distributed the mugs around the table, then dispensed coffee into each one. After placing the pot on the table, she asked, "Do y'all know whatcha wanna order or do ya need a minute?"

Darell responded, "Umm, I think we're ready. I'll take an eggs benedict."

The waitress quickly wrote something on her notepad, then turned to Ken and asked, "For you, sir?"

"May I have the ... (he skimmed the menu for a moment) the creamed chipped beef on toast, please?"

"Certainly," the waitress said. "And you, ma'am?" She turned to face Margaret after writing down Ken's order.

"Oh, I'll take a sunny-side up egg with sausage and toast, please." Margaret replied.

"Of course. It'll all be done in about fifteen minutes, folks."

"Thank you," Darell called before facing Margaret again.

Ken asked, "Margaret, I know this isn't an interrogation or anything, but I am genuinely curious. Your family seems tight. I've heard about your dinner and poker parties you have hosted. Why would anyone in the family have a reason to murder him if homicide is the situation here?"

"I can't name you one," she said, thinking deeply about the question. "Our family is tight, and we've always been that way. If someone did anything to him, I, um, don't think it's someone in the family."

"Has anyone not related to you come to the manor recently?"

She shook her head, "Not that I recall. Only family members I remember in the past couple of months. There are cameras around the house if you want to check, but they probably won't show you much."

After the group got their food and ate as much as they could, they left. Ken asked Margaret to wait in the car for a moment before they left.

"I'm suspicious," Ken told Darell as the two stood by the front door of the coffee shop. "Nothing adds up."

"Yeah," Darell agreed. "Plus, we have a small problem."

"What's that?"

"The medical examiner can't come until Friday. Said she couldn't make it until then for some reason."

"How long are they going to keep the death under wraps before it gets spread to the news?"

"Another couple of days, they said. It helps that he lived so remote."

The two finished their conversation before meeting Margaret at the car. "You know," Ken began, "I can see why Robert liked it there. Quiet and empty, just like his study – only with good food as well."

Margaret chuckled again and the three headed back to Caper Grounds.

After a couple hours since breakfast, most of the family had temporarily cleared the home for work and errands. The police forced everyone to keep all of their belongings at the home to make sure no one ran off, as well as placing trackers on the bottom of each car without the owner's knowledge.

The house was basically completely vacant by lunchtime, so Ken decided to do more exploring, this time without the need to be scrupulous. He started in Robert and Margaret's bedroom. The design of the room matched that of the lounge downstairs with its dark aesthetic and keen, pristine embellishment. The large king-sized bed

rested in the middle of the room against the back wall. It was the only bed in the mansion with a canopy over the mattress.

After finding close to nothing in the room, Ken moved on to the room next door, which was Bella Ward's room. Her room was cozy with lots of pillows and blankets covering the headboard holding the full-sized mattress. The wooden dresser adjacent to the door had a lone sheet of paper lying on the top. Ken quickly noticed it and curiously picked it up. The sheet visible from when it was on the dresser was blank, but black pen bled through from the back side. Ken flipped the piece of paper and saw, in Bella's handwriting, letters. On the top of the page she wrote "Bella-Pop Letters" and below was every letter of the alphabet in order, with a random letter beneath it. Most of the letters could be seen, while some had been scribbled over to where they were completely covered. Ken took a picture of the page, returned it to the dresser, then moved to the next room.

Wilson's room was next, and it was strikingly similar to Robert and Margaret's room with its elegant, ancient decor — however the large window on the leftmost wall brightened up the room more. Ken peeked around but still found nothing of interest. Beside the large bed located in the back corner against the wall opposite of the front door was a miniature nightstand. On top of the nightstand was a picture frame, with Wilson and a young girl in the photograph.

"That's my daughter," a voice suddenly mentioned. Ken turned to see Wilson standing in the doorway of his bedroom. "Good morning, detective."

“Oh, good morning, Mr. Ward,” Ken replied shakingly. “I apologize, I was just looking around the house.”

“No problem. I get it, with all the detective snooping stuff, that is.”

Ken turned back to the nightstand and the picture, then picked up the frame. “This is your daughter, you said?”

“Indeed,” Wilson confirmed. “Maya’s her name. We took that at the zoo a few weeks ago.”

“I see. Oh, and I learned about your wife yesterday. I’m very sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you, detective.”

“How old is your daughter?”

“She’s six years old.”

“Hm.” Ken put the picture frame back onto the nightstand, then turned back towards Wilson. “Well, I suppose I should find Detective Whichard. Can’t find anything in this house.”

As Ken began to leave, Wilson called for him as he walked for the doorway. “Detective, do you suspect foul play with my grandfather’s death?”

Ken paused. “We haven’t yet decided, Mr. Ward. I believe *something* happened, and I highly doubt this was suicidal.”

“Alright, have a nice day detective.”

“You as well, Mr. Ward.” Ken turned back for the hall and left the room.

Following their early breakfast in town, Darell left for somewhere he neglected to inform Ken of. He explained he just had to

run an errand because was curious about something, but he didn't explain further.

By close to dinnertime, the house had almost nearly refilled. Most of the family was back at the house, chatting in the lounge.

"And that's when I said there was nothing in there! Nothing!" Marcus explained, which made the family cackle hysterically.

"How did he not see that coming, that dumb ass!" Harold remarked.

"What tomfoolery," Margaret added.

Suddenly, the sound of the manor's front door opening and slamming shut was audible, and a voice came screaming through the hallways. "Ken! Ken!"

It was Darell, yelling as he ran to the living room. "Ken!" He paused for a minute as he approached the doorway into the lounge with the two policemen right behind him. Ken feverishly rose from his chair and hurried over to Darell. "Darell, what the hell is going on?"

Darell looked at Ken, then faced the family. "Perfect, the family's all here." Darell then hustled towards the fireplace and plotted himself right in front of the glowing flames. "Family, the murderer has been discovered."

Chapter VI

A collective gasp rang throughout the room.

“So there *is* a murderer?” Tyson asked quizzically.

“Yes, there is. And I know who it is.”

“Darell,” Ken whispered, “what the hell did you find?”

Darell motioned for Ken to sit, and he did so in the closest chair to where he had moved to.

“Sanzos, Wards, your murderer has been discovered. And it is none other than...”

Darell pointed directly at Ella and Harold.

“*What?*” Margaret blurted astonishingly.

“Yes, in fact, Ella and Harold Ward both killed Mr. Robert Sanzo.”

“Darell, what did you find?” Ken asked.

Darell began, “Well, now I will tell you.” He pulled over a chair to where he was standing and sat down, legs crossed, mind spinning with knowledge.

“Ella and Harold, they loved Mr. Robert Sanzo. Of course they did. But they loved something else just a bit more than that. They loved this house. The house where Ella grew up, the house Ella raised her children in, the house Ella would eventually die in with her husband by her side. That’s all she wanted – this house. She has her own house, one up about twenty-seven miles up the freeway. Mortgage is spillin’,

and she needed this house soon. But what did Robert say? He said no. And I got proof.”

Darell reached into his pocket and pulled out a thumbdrive. “This morning, while me, Ken, and Margaret were out at lunch, Mrs. Sanzo mentioned something about cameras around the house, and I was curious, so I found one and saw a sticker on it that led to the place that saves all the footage they captured. So I looked through it, and I found something.”

Darell then pulled out his phone, and opened the photos application. “The guy there gave me a thumb drive to store a couple of files on. This is from just outside Mr. Sanzo’s office right across the hall here, about two weeks ago.

Darell played the video on his phone and faced the speakers on the device outward toward the family. Only a faint voice belonging to Robert could be heard. The voice said, “I know what you did, and I’m not givin’ you a dime or even a square inch of this house, you hear me? You failed me, and you ain’t gettin’ anythin’.”

“But, detective, how do you know that was our parents?” Noah asked.

“Well, according to the rest of the footage I saw, the two of them were the only ones in the house that day. Mr. Sanzo told Ella straight to her face that she wasn’t gettin’ anything, according to his will. However, as the family knew, and knows, very well, Mr. Sanzo never had a will – or did he.”

Out of his pocket came a folded piece of paper, and when Darell unfolded it, it read, ROBERT'S WILL with sentences beneath it.

"This was a will designed by Ella in her father's handwriting – one that said everything was going to Margaret, Ella, and Harold. They were in it for themselves, and the last thing to do was pick up the property a bit early. So, they waited for the right moment, let Robert forget about it, then they struck. They came here on Sunday, the day Robert died. They took him into his study when all he expected was 'computer help' they said. But in actuality, they just wanted him dead. So they killed him. That night, before they left, while he was in his study, they suffocated him. Grabbed some pillows and pushed them right into his face. After a minute, he was out cold, and Margaret couldn't hear his muffled screams because the study was designed so very little sound would go in or out. They left, said goodnight like nothing happened, and left. They had won. No one would suspect them. No one – unless they forgot about the cameras, or told very different stories of the last time they both saw him before he died. Now *that* was tomfoolery."

"Yeah," Officer Foster started, "but how can you prove they faked the will?"

"Well, if I've learned anything about Mr. Sanzo, it's that he was a proper man who always did stuff one way. For example, everything he wrote was with inky, black pens. Look in his office."

Darell sprinted out of the lounge and across the hall to Robert's attic, the rest of the family following. Darell frantically ripped open

drawers and pulled out tons of miscellaneous pages, all written in the type of pen he described.

“The will is written in blue. Sanzo hated blue, and he also hated his standard, non-inky pens. He wouldn’t have written somethin’, especially his *will*, in blue. He doesn’t even have a blue pen in here!”

“I guess that makes sense,” Officer McKinley. “I’d like to see some of those video files.”

“Wait, are you serious?” Ella screeched in horror. “We did none of that!”

“I think until we are completely certain of this, we should have the two of them locked up for the night, and we’ll see where we fall tomorrow.”

Officer McKinley and Officer Foster walked towards Ella and Harold, who could only stare horrifically at them as their hands were cuffed behind their backs.

The officers hauled the two to the door as they screamed in anger and anxiousness while Darell smiled delightfully.

About twenty-five minutes later, the family resorted to their rooms, all shaking in slight suspicion and worriedness while Ella and Harold were driven to the police station with Darell. Ken remained downstairs, too shocked to fall asleep. He decided to make himself a cup of tea while the rest of the apprehensive family went to sleep.

In the kitchen, Ken discovered Robert’s tea-making machine, remembering what the family had told him about it in their interrogations. While curious, Ken decided to just make himself tea the traditional way.

He opened the cupboard above where the teapot was on the counter. A small box of tea bags lay inside. He picked one up, then searched for any packets of sugar. He shifted things around, including the box, and found something unusual. It wasn't a packet of sugar – it was two near-empty glass vials of morphine.

Roughly ten minutes later, the police returned Darell to the manor, who told Ken that the killers were locked up.

“I think I'm going to stay here for another night,” Ken told Darell. “Just to help the family cope.”

“Alright, we'll I'm leaving.” Darell nodded. “Well done, detective.”

Darell left the house in his own car as Ken stood in the doorway of Caper Grounds, an uneasy feeling brewing inside of him.

Chapter VII

Following about two hours of failed attempts at falling asleep, Ken decided to not dwell in his bed waiting. Instead, he got up, and went straight for the study. With nowhere to start looking for more clues, Ken resorted to revisiting the secret attic above the study. He entered the study and reopened the secret passage, and climbed the spiral staircase to the uppermost floor.

When he opened the door that led into the secluded room, he found it looking a bit different than the first time he discovered it. To the right of the door was a towel draped over something, with a small sign taped to the towel. Ken quietly walked up to it and read it. The sign consisted of multiple letters that one their own spelled nothing.

Ken looked at the strange sign, then remembered. He quickly pulled out his phone and scrolled through his pictures until he found the photo he took of the piece of paper he discovered in Bella's room. Connecting letters to letters, he decoded the sign which actually meant "If You Can Read This, Come In".

Ken peeked behind the draped towel to find Bella herself sitting in a giant fort of towels and blankets holding a tiny whiteboard. Ken entered the fort as Bella watched with a nervous expression on her face. He was about to say something when she cut him off with a quiet "shh" to silence him. She looked down, quickly scribbled something down on her whiteboard, and showed it to Ken. It was another message

consisting of unfitting letters. After decoding the words, Ken realized it said “Cameras Everywhere”.

Bella then erased her message and wrote a new one. The second message she wrote translated to “It Was Not My Mom”. She then wrote another message, which translated to “If I Say Who I’ll Die”.

Ken looked at Bella horrifically and astonishingly, now being confirmed of his previous suspicions that something else was going on. Bella wrote one more thing on the whiteboard, reading “Reovida Dk Eava”. However, because the message consisted of too many of the letters that were blacked out on the page, he couldn’t decode it. Ken stood up, slightly hunched over due to the fort’s diminutiveness, and left via the towel behind him.

As he headed for the door, he turned to look at the box that he’d found the message on the initial time he’d come upon the attic, but to his puzzlement, the gold ring that was by the message was missing.

Ken hustled down the spiral staircase, still cautious not to wake the family, but at a much more hurrying pace. He took the steps all the way to the bottom and entered the lounge. He entered the vacant, pitch-black lounge, curious to find something else. As he searched, two words he’d heard multiple times cycled around his brain continuously: *Clue board*. The constant reference of the board game in comparison to the house intrigued him, especially with one key similarity both mansion had that Ken had now figured out – secret passages.

A Clue board has one in each corner, Ken thought. *I wonder if...* He interrupted his train of thought by sprinting down the hall and into

the other back corner of the mansion, which was the dining hall. He spent a couple of minutes searching the gigantic room. What caught his attention was the fireplace against the back wall, which had a near identical design to the fireplace in the lounge, only being larger in size. Curious, he investigated the fireplace, and found what seemed to be a crack in the back of it that formed a large rectangle. The part of the wall was actually a camouflaged sliding door, and was able to be shifted to the left and behind the actual wall it lay beside.

Ken stared into the black hole that appeared with the removal of the blockade, and began to descend down the cement stairs that led straight into the mouth of complete darkness.

As Ken reached the bottom of the stairs, he noticed another hanging string like the one in the attic. He pulled it, and the darkness washed away, revealing a small cellar directly beneath the dining hall. The bijou yet open space had large shelving units lining the shelves with equally large tables spread out in the center of the room. The tables were covered with stacks of miscellaneous objects, from clothing to papers. The table located in the back right corner of the cellar was the least cluttered, with only a few less papers and objects on it than the others. Ken looked there first, and there he found some papers that lured his interest.

One page was Robert Sanzo's will that Darell had suspected was a hoax Ella and Harold created to give them ownership of the house and tons of Robert's money. One of the pages beneath it was the receipt for the purchase of medications, morphine included, from somewhere out of the country with the buyer's name crossed out.

However, the most interesting paper Ken found was the will of Lana Ward, the deceased wife of Wilson. Shocked, Ken quickly folded up a bunch of the intriguing papers he found and stuck them in his pocket before looking at more papers around the cellar. After about eight minutes of searching, he discovered on one of the tables was a family picture that was framed in a beautifully ornamented black frame. Ken stared astoundingly at the picture, which had just told him everything he needed to know.

The next morning, Ken awoke early and decided to head for the coffee shop in town while the rest of the family slept. He sat at a table alone, only ordering a cup of coffee while he studied some of his findings from the cellar.

Roughly fifteen minutes after getting seated at the restaurant, Ken was surprised to see Marcus enter the coffee shop. He looked around for a bit before quickly moving to sit with Ken once he spotted him.

“Oh, good morning, Mr. Sanzo,” Ken greeted as he began putting his stuff away.

“Good morning, detective,” Marcus responded. “Have you been here awhile?”

“No, not for long.”

“Did you order anything?”

“Only tea.”

Marcus stared at Ken blankly, with a nervous expression growing on his face. He started to look hesitantly around the desolate eatery, which caught Ken's attention almost immediately.

"Are you okay, Mr. Sanzo?" Ken asked.

Marcus turned back to Ken to answer, speaking very timidly. "I, umm, I, uh..." He paused for a moment, then continued. "Detective, they didn't do it."

"I know, Mr. Sanzo."

"My sister didn't kill our father. She didn't."

"Mr. Sanzo, do you know something?"

"Yes." He paused for a second, then went on. "But I can't tell you."

"Why not?"

"He could be watching me."

"Who could?"

"I can't say. If I do, he said he'll kill me and the entire family."

Ken leaned in towards Marcus. "Mr. Sanzo, I know what's going on. I know the full story, only I'm missing a couple of key details. That's it. I know your sister and her husband are innocent and are wrongfully sitting in a jail cell at the moment, and every hour they sit in there, the closer someone gets to getting a giant payday."

Marcus looked surprised. "Payday?"

Ken leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms. "It's all about the money, Mr. Sanzo. It always is. Someone kills someone to get a big chunk of cash because they're dead, and they do anything to cover their tracks. All about the money."

“But who would do that? Who wants the money?”

Ken paused after being asked the question. “Someone who is trying desperately to cover something up so the girl he loves will still be his.”

Chapter VIII

When Ken and Marcus returned to Caper Grounds that morning, the family was cleaning out their respective rooms, packing their goods as everyone planned to depart from the home later that day.

Officer McKinley and Officer Foster were in the foyer talking to Darell, all of whom turned to the front door as soon as Ken opened it.

“Oh, good morning, Detective Kramer,” Officer Foster said. “We didn’t realize you were gone.”

Darell smiled at Ken before shaking his hand. “Detective, our investigation is complete. We have confirmed that Ella and Harold Ward were indeed responsible for the killing of Mr. Robert Sanzo.”

Ken nodded, squinting while staring at Darell. “Yes, I see.” He hesitated for a second, then asked, “Darell, do you mind gathering the family in the lounge? I’d like to say a few words to the family.”

“Oh, well, sure, detective. I’d like to say some things too.” Darell hustled up the main stairs and started knocking on doors on the upper floor.

Ken motioned for the officers to follow him into the lounge.

“Detective,” Officer Foster started, “is everything alright?”

“I need you all to listen to me very carefully. Everything Darell said before is wrong, and I have *actual* proof. I need you to listen. Ella and Harold are innocent.”

“Detective, what are you saying?” Officer McKinley asked puzzlingly.

“Just stay here by the door.”

Darell led the family into the lounge a few seconds later as the officers stood by the door, greeting everyone with nods as they entered. Darell leaned against the side wall beside the door. Ken paced in front of the fireplace as every chair and couch in the room became filled.

Once everyone had filed into the lounge and was seated, Ken began. “Good morning. I’d like to say a few words before you all leave this morning.” He paused for a moment, then turned to face the officers and demanded, “Officer Foster, please shut the door and dim the lights.”

Officer Foster did as he was asked as Darell stared at Ken quizzically.

“My partner, Detective Whichard, made an assessment just last night that Ella and Harold Ward had murdered Mr. Robert Sanzo. According to his investigation, Ella and Harold wanted this house after Robert’s death, so they made a fake will that would give the house and other stuff to the two of them, and then killed Robert to speed up the process. Now, while that is indeed a fine investigation, I decided to run my own investigation, and found something a bit more interesting than what Detective Whichard had assessed. There’s a lot more to it, actually.”

“Detective,” Luke interrupted, “what are yuh talkin’ about?”

“What I’m talking about is that Ella and Harold Ward didn’t commit any crime.”

Another sea of gasps flooded the room. “What did you find, detective?” Jonas asked.

“Well, now *I* will tell you.” Ken reached for his briefcase, which was lying idly on the ground. He opened it, which caused all sorts of things to fall out due to it being overfilled, and pulled out a sheet of paper.

“This piece of paper is a will. The will belongs to Lana Ward, the deceased wife of Mr. Wilson Ward. Lana of course passed away about one year ago today, but she surprisingly had no will – or so the police thought. This will, along with a bunch of other stuff, was found by way of a secret cellar here in the house. The will here is pretty normal, fairly wanted stuff on it, except for one major thing.”

Ken turned the will to face the family. “According to Lana’s will, the custody of their child, Maya, went to her brother and his wife, not Wilson.”

“Wait, what the hell are you talking about, detective?” Wilson blurted out. “Of course Maya is mine. She’s *my* daughter.”

“Not according to this will, Mr. Ward.”

“But detective,” Noah asked, “why would she not give Wilson custody of their own child?”

“Well, Wilson here is someone you’d call a player, a manipulator, or even just a goddamn cheater for cryin’ out loud. Wilson was having multiple affairs, and when Lana found out, she was ready to pack up and leave. Now Wilson didn’t care about *that*. What he cared about was his daughter, Maya, who Lana threatened to sue him for custody of the girl. So Wilson went his own route. I believe

that Wilson murdered his wife, but he was unaware that this piece of paper even existed.”

“Come on, this is absolute bullshit,” Wilson called out. “You don’t have any evidence of anything, you’re just blurting out whatever’s on your goddamn mind!”

“Yes, you’re correct. I have no evidence. I only believe that you killed your wife. But what I do know is that you were a player and would do anything to keep custody of your daughter. At the very least, Lana was dead, and Wilson had run off with Maya holdin’ his dastardly hand the whole way.”

“Excuse me, detective,” Margaret started, “but what does Lana have to do with Robert?”

“Well, somehow Robert found out about all of this, and it’s extremely likely that it was from Lana herself before she died. Nevertheless, Robert knew everything, and he wanted Wilson to know that. That thumb drive with the audio clips on it that Detective Whichard showed us? He was actually talking to Wilson. ‘I know what you did, and I’m not givin’ you a dime or even a square inch of this house, you hear me? You failed me, and you ain’t gettin’ anythin’’. Robert loved his grandchildren and had very high expectations for them. Wilson failed Robert, and Robert wanted *everyone* to know. Plus, he knew the Lana wanted Maya to live with her brother, and wanted that wish to be fulfilled.

“So he devises a plan, a plan to silence his dear old grandfather. This would keep all of Wilson’s secrets from getting out and he’d even get another cut of money from his dead grandfather. And Wilson

didn't suffocate anyone, nor did he work alone. His plan was simple: sabotage Robert's tea-making machine by putting a heavy dose of a lethal liquid into the container with all the tea ingredients, and every day he'd be getting just a step closer to dying to an overdose."

The room gasped again.

"There was only one problem – Wilson didn't know how to get that lethal liquid. So, he got some help. He recruited Mr. Tyson Ward to help."

"Me?" Tyson exclaimed.

"Now Tyson was important because he works out of the country and Wilson knew that Tyson could get him the illegal drugs he needed. Tyson agreed, wanting a cut of the cash as well, and supplied Wilson with two small vials of illegal morphine."

Ken picked up the two vials from his briefcase which he'd originally discovered in the kitchen cupboard the previous night. "Both of these vials were almost completely emptied into the container part of the machine, and for the next week, Robert had been drinking unhealthy doses of morphine for almost two weeks. And that claim I *do* have some evidence for. See, I thought it was strange that the medical examiner was taking so long to come here, and that's because after she was called by the police officers here, the meetin' was canceled by someone who told her *not* to come. But then I discovered that it didn't matter, because another thing I found in that cellar was a toxicology report, one that Robert had gotten the day he died. In fact, he was talking to the medical examiner initially on his computer, which is why Ella and Harold came to help with it." Ken pulled out another

piece of paper from his briefcase. “This is the toxicology report proving that an illegal substance was found to be the cause of Robert Sanzo’s death.”

“But detective,” Officer McKinley began to ask, “who could’ve canceled the appointment with the medical examiner? She had direct connection to *us*.”

“Well, there’s one more piece to this puzzle,” Ken assured. “Wilson knew that Robert didn’t have a will. What he didn’t know was that Robert *did* have a will. A will he made moments before he died, a very simple one. He knew immediately that Wilson had done this, so his will said that he would get nothing. Everything would go to his wife and kids, not Wilson or Tyson. The only way to get his grandsons to lose was for them to win.

“He died, unfortunately, and was found the next morning by Margaret, and within ten minutes, Officers McKinley and Foster arrived, and about fifteen minutes later, I arrived with the detective who I was last-minute paired up with: Darell Whichard. Robert knew that there was no preventing his death, and that all he could do was hope the police and investigators could figure everything out. So he made our job a bit easier. He put everything in his hidden cellar – everything that would prove his grandsons’ committed the crime.

“But Wilson and Tyson were one step ahead of him. Wilson found out about the will. He was watching the cameras in the study the moment he died, and saw the will’s conception right before. So he decided to make something up, make up his only story. He just needed someone to tell it.”

Ken turned toward Darell. “Darell, last night when I was in the cellar, I found something truly astonishing. I found the main piece to this entire puzzle.”

Ken pulled out the family picture from his briefcase he’d found framed in the cellar and began to slowly tread towards Darell. “When I was searching all the bedrooms in the house yesterday, I found pictures of each person here in their respective bedrooms. The only room I didn’t find pictures in was the room we stayed in, which was the mysterious Charlie Ward’s room. I thought I knew close to nothing about Ella and Harold’s first born because no one told me anything about him. However, I do know him. I do know him, don’t I, Charlie?”

Darell stared at him, stunned. “What the hell are you saying, Ken?”

Ken turned back towards the family. “Wilson and Tyson needed someone to persuade the police into sending their parents to jail so they’d get the money that Robert’s will said was going to Ella and Harold. So, they recruited one more person.” Ken turned back to Darell and showed him the family picture. “Notice anyone, Charlie?”

Charlie gulped and turned to face Wilson, mystified.

Ken turned back to face the family and continued speaking. “Monday morning, as everyone was on their way here, Wilson blackmailed everyone via a simple text message. The message said that if anyone here told anyone that Detective Darell is actually Charlie Ward, they’d be killed, along with the rest of the family. Charlie made

everyone believe that Ella and Harold had killed Robert, when in actuality they did no such thing.”

Ken refaced Charlie. “Darell Rao Whichard. What an shit choice for a fake name.”

Charlie quietly chuckled to himself. “Hm. Well done, Ken. I actually didn’t think you could do it. Well done.”

Wilson and Tyson stood up quietly as everyone was glaring at Ken and Charlie.

“You’re finished, and there’s nothing you can do,” Ken affirmed.

Charlie mildly chuckled again. “I guess you’re right, Ken. There is nothing we can do.”

Suddenly, every light in the room was extinguished, and a blanket of blackness engulfed the lounge. Collective screaming filled the room, and after a few seconds, three loud gunshots blared before light poured back in via the opening of the lounge door.

When Margaret flickered the lights back on, the police were gone as well as Charlie, Tyson, and Wilson. More screaming sounded and everyone turned to face the fireplace. In horror they watched as Ken lay on the floor, a small pool of blood forming around his chest.

Chapter IX

Charlie, Tyson, and Wilson had bolted out the door after flicking off the lounge lights and firing a bullet straight through Ken's chest using one of the officer's guns. The three hustled out of the house and into Charlie's bright-red Corvette that was waiting on the edge of the curved driveway. The officers followed, getting in their police car which was on the opposite end of the driveway. Officer Foster flipped on the sirens and Officer McKinley took control, slamming the brakes as they flew up the lone road which led to the meadow's main street that dipped right into the nearby town.

Charlie took the wheel of his own car and drove the trio off the Caper Grounds property, the police speeding close behind them.

In their car, Officer Foster snatched the radio to inform the rest of the town's police, saying, "This is Officer Foster and Officer McKinley, we have a shooter in a red Corvette convertible now leaving the Caper Grounds property. Vehicle in pursuit, send backup. Over."

Officer McKinley gave Officer Foster his gun and he pointed it out his window, aiming the firearm toward the spinning tires beneath the Corvette. He took a couple of shots, all missing the thinly-exposed tires and only denting the back of the convertible.

As the Corvette neared the end of the road, Officer Foster fired more shots while Wilson took the gun they stole from Officer Foster and started firing back at the cop car. Officer Foster missed the tire

again, while Wilson successfully nailed the front window, causing pieces to disconnect from it.

Another cop car waited on the meadow's main street right of the Corvette, so Charlie steered the car to the left and forced it away from the town. Both cop cars drove side by side with the Corvette right in front of them, and officers from both cars fired at the criminals.

Eventually, they successfully fired a bullet straight into the back right tire, forcing the Corvette to spin out and rotate to face the cop cars. As soon as the tire was hit, both cop cars slammed to a stop, and the officers poured out of both cars immediately.

"Freeze!" Officer McKinley shouted, all three officers excluding him pointing their pistols at the Corvette. Charlie, Tyson, and Wilson slowly raised their arms into the air. "Charlie Ward, Tyson Ward, and Wilson Ward, you three are all under arrest for the murder of Robert Sanzo, the attempted murder of police officers, and falsely incriminating Ella and Harold Ward. Hands behind your back."

Ken screamed as blood slowly trickled out of the wound left by the bullet. Bella quickly called for medical assistance as Noah and Marcus raced to grab towels from the kitchen to cover the bullet hole in the side of Ken's chest.

Marcus pushed down the thick array of towels over the wound, which caused the volume of Ken's screeching to increase.

"Stay with us, Ken," Marcus called. "Stay with us!"

Marcus pressed harder on the wound. "We need to get him to a hospital now! Where the hell is an ambulance?"

“It’s on its way,” Bella answered. “They’re on their way!”

“We need them here now!” Marcus cried. “He can’t go much longer!” He turned back to Ken and yelled “Stay with us, Ken! Stay with us!”

Shortly after, an ambulance arrived, and doctors sprang into the house to assist Ken. The family hurried to move out of the way as they cried watching Ken get wheeled into the ambulance.

A few minutes after the ambulance left, the policemen returned to Caper Grounds to consult with the family.

“Where’s Detective Kramer? Is he okay?” Officer Foster questioned immediately.

“He’s heading to the hospital,” Bella responded. “Ambulance came to pick him up.”

“Where was he shot?”

“The left side of his chest,” Marcus said. “We were able to stop a lot of the bleeding, but I’m not sure if it’ll be enough.”

The bright light from outside flew in through the window, further brightening the white walls that surrounded the small room. A large bed was planted against the wall next to the massive window, watching the small television that was connected to the ceiling and opposite wall via metal, black poles.

Margaret and Jonas sat sorrowfully beside the bed in folding chairs on the opposite side of the room from the window. Ken rested peacefully in the bed, blanketed in a thin, cyan blanket that nearly enveloped the entire mattress due to its sheer size compared to the bed.

After Margaret and Jonas waited for roughly thirty minutes, they watched as Ken slowly awoke, his bright blue eyes being the only thing they were focusing on at the moment.

“Oh my goodness,” Margaret exclaimed joyfully as she stood up from her chair.

“M-Mar-Margaret?” Ken spoke softly.

“Yes, it’s Margaret and Jonas.”

Ken began to wake up more and shifted his body to sit up in his bed. This caused mild harm in his chest due to the now stitched wound, to which he verbally made clear with a quiet “errh” sound.

“Be careful, detective,” Jonas noted.

Ken breathed heavily. “Did we get them?” he asked.

“Yes. They’re in prison.”

Ken sighed. “I’m very sorry. I’m sorry about Robert, and I’m sorry that it was your grandchildren that committed the crime.”

Margaret smiled mildly. “Thank you very much, detective. My husband is now avenged, and he can rest peacefully in heaven.”

Ken smiled. “Well, thank you for visiting me here.”

“Of course, detective.”

A doctor then walked in, wheeling a cart of all sorts of medical tools. She greeted Margaret and Jonas before politely asking them to leave.

As they exited the hospital room, Margaret said, “Ken, if you ever need anything, this family is here for you.”

Ken smiled. “Thank you.”

“What will you do next, detective?” Jonas asked.

“Well, once I’m better, I’ll just have to wait for the next case.”

“We wish you luck, detective,” Margaret said.

“Margaret, what do you think Robert is doing right about now?”

Margaret sighed and smiled more. “Probably still coming up with some wacky tricks and clever ideas. That’s who he always was. He always believed that you always had to break some rules to have a good time, but cherish the rules that matter the most. It’s like he always said: ‘A vow is only forbidden when it’s unbreakable but will be broken.’”

She followed Jonas out of the room, the shiny, gold ring on her hand glimmering under the hospital room light.

The End