

FROM THE PECULIAR MIND OF  
**KENNETH JAMES ALLEN**



# MACHINES

FROM THE FILES OF CADDIUS FINCH

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# Machines

**Caddius Finch Files, Volume 1**

Kenneth James Allen

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MACHINES

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**Caddius Finch Files**  
Machines

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For Indi and Bash



“Go for it. The future is promised to no one.”

Wayne Dyer

• • • •

“No one is perfect, everyone with a bright future has a dark past.”

Jvongard

• • • •

“I wanna know where we go

20 years from now

Will we see a future

Built by new machines”

*New Machines*, Vinyl Theatre



# The Eight Rules of Caddius Finch

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Rule number 1: There is no such thing as coincidence

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Rule number 2: Assumptions are dangerous

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Rule number 3: Keep moving forward

• • • •

Rule number 4: Expose and make use of your adversary's weakness

• • • •

Rule number 5: The case is not over 'til it's over

• • • •

Rule number 6: Don't turn your back on anyone

• • • •

Rule number 7: Always have a backup plan

• • • •

Rule number 8: The chase is always on

# Chapter 1

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## MURDER.

The word screamed at me from my hand machine. I read the accompanying communication many times on my journey from the capital, yet that word drew my eyes like a siren's call. The electronic communication I had received from Professor Pyke the day before was so curious in nature it had regarded my attention immediately.

*Special Detective Finch,*

*I am writing to you to ask for your personal assistance.*

*Someone is trying to murder me and there is nowhere else to turn.*

*I am holding a demonstration in but a week's time to showcase an invention. Since the announcement, I have received many threats, including attempts on my life. The local constabulary seem incompetent or unwilling to assist me in this manner. There is no one else I can trust, nor has your mental fortitude to ascertain the identity of the culprit.*

*I recall seeing you at your conference last year and know that someone like you will appreciate and respect my efforts. It is you, Special Detective Finch, that can help me, and no one else.*

*I realise the inappropriateness of such a request and apologise most sincerely. I am aware this application for your services is outside the bounds of the Catcher's Office. However still, I invite you to meet in person, at my address, so we may continue this conversation further.*

*Please come post haste.*

I recalled the conference Pyke mentioned in his communication. I had delivered my revolutionary presentation in a lecture theatre full of those that were connected to, or interested in, understanding the idiosyncrasies of the criminal mind, titled 'Criminal Profiling & The Future of Police Work'. In attendance included members of regional constabulary, the wardens who master the prison barges, right up to the militaristic powers that take ownership of the prisoners undertaking their

prescribed conscription. And, of course, who could forget the standing ovation I received when I ended the presentation with my catch cry.

I seemed to have gathered quite a following after publications reported my efforts in disabling a supply chain of root beer and dynamite to our foreign enemies by members of local parliament, no less. The culprits in question had done their mightiest to throw other Catchers off the scent, directing them towards a series of criminals who had been dismissed from their sentences. However, one piece of evidence led me to the masterminds—a single rose petal.

Consequently, the Catcher's Office has undertaken several propositions to move into administrative or training roles in an effort to better disperse my skills to others. The Chief Magistrate himself has sequestered my attention to his private office. However, I politely refused all invitations, informing that I shall desert my current standing when the last breath has departed my body.

The carriage pulled up at the house, the squeaky brake sending screeching waves echoing into the still evening. The horses stamped their hooves impatiently on the wet cobblestone thoroughfare. Minuscule raindrops dotted the windows. I clicked off my hand machine, transforming the interior into obscurity, my face once ablaze now confiscated by the shadows. The only luminance that infiltrated the carriage originated from the dull street lamps and the half-moon that slipped between heavy clouds.

With a gloved hand, I pulled back my sleeve and positioned my watch in a slice of light. I had arrived only slightly ahead of schedule. The two-hour ride from Everington contained only a whisper of trouble: a slight drizzle as we left the capital that slowed initial progress, as well as the potholes that scattered the tracks in no-man's-land. They had been so numerous I had lost count.

The carriage driver descended from his seat and opened my door while clipping down the folded step. I stuck my head out the portal and inhaled a lungful of the crisp night air. The soft scent of burning

pine needles filled the air, mixed with the cold of the northerly that had blown for a week.

I had missed places such as this, moments like this. The calm before the storm. When I ventured to the regions for business, I never appreciated my environment. My mind was always on achieving something, my thoughts elsewhere. This trip was an unexpected foray into my past.

I stepped down, my boots landing soundly on the stone. Looked at my driver. He smiled in return. He had introduced himself as Jace.

“Welcome to Grace, sir,” he said.

I never forgot a name... or a face... or a place for that matter. Those things had a way of securing themselves in my mind and cataloguing themselves accordingly. Then, of their own volition, they would connect to form a whole picture, one where everything became clear and made sense. If I had had my way, I would have filed Jace and all he represents into a section called ‘Superfluous’ or ‘Unnecessary’. However, it was not up to me.

Despite the shadow thrown across his face from his driver’s cap, he looked thirteen but might be as young as eleven. Soft blond hair fell from the front of the cap and covered his eyes. His clothes and shoes were dirty, not unforgivable considering his position as driver of the carriage, yet the backing of a bright silver pin was visible on his vest.

I drank in the clues as I looked over him. He stared back and puffed out his chest.

“Everything alright, sir?”

“You were a Runner in his Royal’s Command and have recently been medically boarded. You’ve chosen the position of driver in order to reinstate yourself amongst the other officers and re-join the front. Also, you have an affliction for Sugar May’s Extra Coated Jellybeans.”

He blinked, stepped back in disbelief.

“How on earth did you know that, sir?”

“Simple, really. The first giveaway was your stance; your back is straight and your shoulders are back. The pin you are wearing, which

you are required to wear on your vest, has a particular pressed mounting only deriving from the Command. The fact it is silver denotes you as a junior rank. However, the pin is turned inwards, suggesting you aren't proud of the fact you've been released. You were boarded because of a leg injury, hence your slight limp. Given your build, I would suggest a muscle strain, rather than shrapnel, was the cause of the issue, making you a Runner. The care you took in descending from the driver's perch suggests you are looking after your injury, for any other driver would jump the final steps. You could have retired on the pension, however know that once you do, you could not re-join the line, hence your role of driver, where being able to navigate from one point to another on a map is critical, just like that of a Runner."

He blinked again in disbelief. "And the jellybeans, sir?"

"From the colourful substance between your teeth when you smiled. Something to keep your mouth busy on the long rides. The grimy markings on your pants told me you had purchased Sugar May's Extra Coated Jelly Beans for this journey. There are but two shops in the capital that stocks this variety, one of them being opposite the Magistrate's court, where you picked me up."

Jace applauded. "Well played, sir. A true Catcher, you are."

I tipped my bowler hat and felt my long hair fall in front of my face in the process. I swept it aside and tucked it behind my ear. I reached into my pocket and pulled out a silver coin. Jace backed away as if the currency were diseased.

"Oh, no, sir. I couldn't possibly take the private earnings of a Catcher, sir."

"Nonsense," I cried, flicking the coin into the air.

He clapped at it energetically and caught the silver between his hands. He drove it into his pocket with a grin. "Thank you, sir."

He turned, retrieved my bag from the luggage compartment under his seat, and tipped his cap to bid farewell. And with that, Jace clip-clopped off into the evening towards his next engagement.

Alone with the night, I took another breath as I viewed the house. A solid two-story concrete structure, modest by all accounts of who the owner was, or claimed to be. The wooden shutters on the upper story were closed to keep the cold air out and the hot air in. On the ground level, shadows of light danced on and decorated every transparent surface. I was excited to smell food on the cooker, for I had nothing beyond a beef sandwich during my trip.

I stood at a small iron gate, affixed into a short stone wall that ran the length of the frontage. It was hardly the heights of security I was expecting, especially, very especially, because of the electronic communication he had sent me but a few days ago.

I checked my watch. Precisely on time. I picked up my bag and placed a hand on the gate. It protested loudly as I pushed. Then a smell. Peculiar and harsh, encircled me, attacked me. I covered my nose.

Then light. An incredible amount. A white ball grew from the centre of my vision as the sound was sucked from the air. A silent wave of hot air attacked me, picking me up and throwing me backwards. Flames emanating from where the house once stood licked the night like thirsty serpents. Bricks, bits of rubble, wood, everything, was sent in all directions at pace. The sound quickly caught up and blasted my eardrums.

As I sailed back through the air, a single thought occurred to me.

My landing would hurt.

## Chapter 2

---

AND I WASN'T WRONG.

It was morning light. I had taken a position in front of the house, that is, where the house used to be. My leather travel bag, that I had momentarily lost after the blast, was beside me, contents secured and unharmed. I rubbed my lower back. It had taken the brunt of my landing as the resulting explosion threw me into the wall of the residence opposite. The night had slipped by in hazy recollections of clanging bells and murmurs of a gathering crowd. Sunrise had brought with it my awakening and a cleanup in full swing.

The scene in front of me was a mess. The blast had transformed the Professor's house into a pile of rubble. I had little doubt the cause had been an explosive charge, albeit larger than anything I had ever experienced. I was more interested to find out who did it and why. These were the questions that haunted me in situations like this. I needed to know, and I always found out the answers... one way or another.

The fire department contained the scene while other workers searched the wreckage for survivors. Given the extent of the damage caused by the explosion, I found it difficult to believe they would find anyone, and if they did, that person would certainly be dead.

Cleaners scurried the area like ants — so many of them I lost count — perhaps seven or nine of age, with soot and dirt caked on their faces and clothes. The crew carried manageable debris to nearby piles accumulating on the edge of the property, where others would lift or throw them into wagons. Buckets of water were passed along a human conveyor belt where a member of the fire department sloshed over some burning embers.

I dabbed the corner of my mouth with my pocket kerchief and readjusted my bowler hat as I watched the workers of Grace go about their duty. A breeze turned into a gust and I pulled my collar up to protect myself from the icy blast. Events played through my mind: the

communication, my arrival, the explosion. A story to tell, nonetheless. However, a crime had taken place. I needed to investigate. And that meant...

“Oi!” A voice called out. “You can’t be here!”

I turned. A constable, fifteen years of age, slightly large and yet moving with a certain elegance, bounded towards me. He raised his gloved hands as if to shoo me away from the location.

I threw out my hand. “Good morning, Constable, I’m Special Dete...”

His hand grabbed mine and he pumped wildly. “Oh, no need for that, sir. I know who you are. Caddius Finch, finest Big City Catcher that ever was. It is my absolute pleasure to meet you, sir.”

The vigorous handshake was to the point of nausea. I released my grip on his hand, yet he continued to squeeze mine, a large smile on his face. I pried my hand away.

“And you are?” I enquired with lacklustre enthusiasm.

“Oh, forgive me, sir. I am Constable Twix. At your service.” He gave a mixture of a salute, a nod and a curtsy. It was underwhelming and unentertaining.

“Well, Constable Twix, best you run off and find your Sergeant. We will have much to talk about given these events.”

“Oh, I can do better than to go and get him,” Twix responded, the smile still large on his large face. “The Super has requested your attendance.”

“Is that a fact?” I said.

I followed the constable, my bag in one of his hands, his legs moving with excitement, down a street running perpendicular to the crime scene. He stopped at a taphouse a few doors down. A sign hung above the door that read ‘The Distinguished Pig’ in a wavy banner under a finely dressed sow, winking to the audience, with a frothy root beer in its hoof. I found it confusing and intoxicating in the single viewing. The



building promised me not only probably the finest root beer in Grace but also convenient lodging at an appropriate and affordable price.

Twix opened the door and ushered me inside. The room was dark, the floor sticky underfoot. Its air was stale, a mixture of salty and sweet, typical for this type of establishment. Empty chairs and clear tables took up every available space. Behind the counter, a man cleaning a glass nodded in my direction. I removed my bowler hat and returned gesture. He was large, muscular, about twenty. He wore a white shirt, stained with root beer. The top three buttons were open to allow his excessive chest to breathe, sleeves rolled above the elbow. He didn't try to hide his emotions, and I couldn't tell if he was annoyed to have opened his taphouse so early in the morning, or irritated the local constabulary was taking up residence within it.

Twix led me to a booth that boasted street views and held the only patron in the bar. We stood at the end awaiting invitation.

"Detective Finch, this is Superintendent Carthy," Twix introduced proudly.

Carthy didn't look over. He sat, his gaze fixated on the outside world, his hands clasped in front of himself. The superintendent's cap sat beside him on the table. His blond hair was neatly parted and slicked back with an illustrious shine.

I removed my coat and looked for a place to hang it or someone to give it to. Finding neither, I draped it over the back of the nearest chair and tossed my bowler hat onto the accompanying table. I pulled down on my vest, the black buttons secured from waist to neck. My weapons hung freely from my shoulders: my taser on my left and extendable club opposite—the tools of a Catcher. I could sense Twix gazing at them.

I worked my way onto the bench seat opposite Carthy. With Twix moving in beside me, I shuffled along to the window. I outstretched my hand and introduced myself, ensuring to emphasise the fact I was a Special Detective. I didn't make up the title, but since I had it, I preferred to enforce it.

Carthy didn't accept my offer. The look on his face suggested suspicion, and he had every right to be. I would have had the same reservations if I was in his position. He was but twenty, young for someone in his position, however, I could see experience behind his grey eyes. Military? Perhaps. Battle might account for the scar on the side of his face, a crescent that began at his widow's peak and ended at his left eyebrow. He looked like someone who knew how to handle himself and was more adept at giving orders more so than accepting them.

"How was your journey from the capital?" Carthy asked, straight faced.

"Nothing to write home about," I offered.

"Not even Furlow Forest? Home of bandits and thieves?"

"Not even," I replied. "Suspiciously quiet. Perhaps they knew of my carriage. Regardless, gave me opportunity to think of my arrival."

"Exactly! What are you doing here?"

The question was short and sharp, my suspicions of military background confirmed.

"I went and got him, sir," Twix broke in. "Because you asked me."

Carthy stretched his neck at the interruption, the sneer on his lips curling further if it were possible.

"Perhaps I can ask how you knew I was here," I offered.

"This is my town, Catcher, and I have connections most do not. However, if you must know, I was informed of your sudden departure from the capital to Grace by someone in the Catcher's office."

"Is that a fact?" I pondered.

"It most certainly is. Now, perhaps you can tell me *why* you are here."

"I received an electronic communication from Professor Pyke a few days ago inviting me here. He thought someone was trying to kill him. It seems he was correct in his assumption."

"Three root beers," boomed the jaunty voice. "On the 'ouse, of course... for the local constabulary."

I looked up at the drinks courier as he set the mugs on the end of the table. He was the one that gave me a slight nod as I entered — the publican — his cheerful demeanour strangely at odds with his first impression.

“Take them away, Bourke,” Carthy dismissed. “We are on duty.”

“But,” he stammered, clearly confused. “You always —”

“I said take them away!” Carthy said the words in such a tone the publican could not possibly have misunderstood the meaning as anything other than their intention.

Bourke dropped his smile, allowing an air of disgust rattle across his face. He picked up the mugs and carried them back to the bar.

Carthy stared at the glasses longingly. I could tell he was yearning for a drink. I can understand to an extent, I do leisure on the frothy goodness of a root beer after hunting down a killer as much as the next man, however, I draw the line at drinking before the sun has passed its apex.

Carthy shook his head. “What were you saying?”

“I said I have communications from the Professor. That is why I am here.”

“I trust you have proof of this?”

I reached for my hand machine, but then stopped. “Am I under investigation, Superintendent?”

“Certainly not. I would never accuse a Big City Catcher such as yourself. To do so would be dissent. It would be like you accusing me of drinking on duty.” He pursed his lips. “However, you can imagine my surprise when I found out you are coming to Grace, with no notice given to my station mind you, and arrive at the very same moment an explosion rocks my fair town.”

“I appreciate that, Superintendent,” I said as I extracted the hand machine from my breast pocket. “Asking the simplest questions is required for a robust understanding of the situation — I would do it myself. Please believe me my reasons for being here are innocent and good

natured in the least. I could say that any crime perpetrated in my presence is purely coincidental, however I don't believe in coincidence. It is one of my rules."

"Rules?" Carthy heightened.

"Yes, rules. There are eight of them, designed to keep my actions true."

"Sounds ludicrous."

I ignored his jibe, spun the hand machine and slid it across the table. Carthy caught it and perused the screen.

"I had taken leave to attend to the Professor, hence the lack of notice of my impending arrival. However, given most recent events, I'm sure you would agree that the Catcher's office will investigate."

"As the law is written," Carthy mused without meeting my gaze. "I am well aware of the extent of my charge." He levelled his stare and passed the hand machine back to me. "Especially when someone like you comes into play. I know who you are and what you've done. Your... exploits are difficult to ignore."

"Is there something on your mind, Superintendent?"

"I was just wondering why you were asked to leave Grace all those years ago. You seemed to have disappeared for many years, and then only to return out of the blue as a Catcher. So, tell me. How does one of but fifteen establish himself in the Catcher's Office with the rank of Special Detective?" He clenched his jaw.

I swallowed. The Chief Magistrate himself sealed my file and stored it in his personal vault.

I looked at him deadpan.

"It seems," he continued as he stared at me, "that we all have our secrets."

A piercing silence.

"If it's all the same to you, Superintendent, I would rather focus on the investigation."

"As I'm sure you will," he countered.

I clasped my hands in front of myself. "I am sure you knew the Professor. After my office received the communications from him, and on the understanding his request was well out of our jurisdiction, we advised him to contact his local constabulary service. As you read, he felt he needed some expertise on the matter at hand, given the threats following the announcement of his demonstration."

"Yes," he said. "I am aware of the demonstration."

"Did he?"

"Did he what?"

"Did the Professor make contact with your station?"

"Mr Finch—"

"Special Detective Finch," I reminded him.

He clenched his jaw again. He didn't seem to enjoy being corrected, especially by someone like me, particularly in front of a subordinate. He replied slowly, deliberately.

"Special Detective Finch, I can assure you if our office received any communication from the late Professor we would have investigated wholly."

"So, you're saying the Professor never contacted your station?"

"Detective, this is sounding an awful lot like an interrogation. May I remind you *I* am the Superintendent in this region, and you are merely a guest, a colleague if you will."

"Forgive me, sir, I'm just establishing facts."

"Yes," Carthy said suspiciously.

"And I would appreciate any assistance the local authorities might be able to offer."

Beside me, Twix raised his hand emphatically, and oohed like a pupil calling for his teacher's attention. Carthy rolled his eyes and looked down at the constable, giving him a non-verbal command to speak.

"Please, sir," Twix said excitedly. "May I be involved? I do so wish to be a detective one day."

“For the love of God, Twix,” responded Carthy. “Put your hand down. This isn’t kindergarten.”

I said, “I would certainly hate to go back to the Chief Magistrate and inform them the local constabulary denied the aid of their office. It would be a shame, indeed. Not a good look on someone’s personal record.”

Carthy rubbed his forehead. I could tell he was in pain, and it was hitting him on all sides, from all directions.

“Fine,” he said eventually. “You can work with Twix here, maybe teach him some smarts along the way.”

“Military?” I had to confirm my suspicions.

“Excuse me?”

I pointed to my forehead. “That scar. I speculate its from time in the military, and hence correlates to your rise to Superintendent given your age.”

“Quite correct,” Carthy said. “And yours?” he questioned, pointing to the side of his face.

I ran a finger over the scar tissue from my right ear to my chin. “A maniac’s blade. Routine questioning in a dark alley. I guess I hit a pressure point for the assailant. This,” I said pointing to my crooked nose, “has been broken more times than I care to mention. And this,” I said, removing my left glove to reveal a missing pinkie finger, “is thanks to an overzealous mouth that latched onto the closest appendage he could find during an apprehension.”

“The perils of justice,” Carthy announced.

“There is no sacrifice too great to do the right thing,” I responded.

Carthy nodded. “Very well then. Best be on your way. I will check in on you.” He exchanged glances between myself and Twix, and I wasn’t sure who he was referring to.

“Check on *both* of you,” he stated.

Well. That cleared that up.

## Chapter 3

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I WALKED UP THE COBBLESTONE street towards the house... that is to say, where the house used to be. Twix was chirping at my heels, excited to be on the case, and no doubt extremely ecstatic to be working such a case with myself. I know what you're thinking, and I don't want to brag, it's just that the Catcher's office and the town constables are in two very different leagues. In all honesty, I didn't mind Twix. He could offer much needed localised knowledge and contacts that would take me hours or days to generate.

"So, Twix, what can you tell me about the Professor?"

"Oh, the Professor?" He scratched his head. "Well, inventor of a lot of things. Too many to mention. The streetlamps for one... that wonderful taser on your shoulder for another."

"Yes, I noticed you admiring it."

"Yes, sir. Nothing gets by you, sir."

I smiled. "Thank you, Twix, however, I well know of the Professor's exploits. I want to know about the man, not his inventions."

"Well," Twix said, deep in thought. "I'm not too sure I know anything about him specifically."

"I see." I needed to be blunter with the questions of my new companion. "And how long has the Professor been a resident of Grace?"

"Retired here... what... five years ago? Grand old age of thirty."

Thirty! A lifetime away.

"Has there ever been any trouble? Arguments with anyone? Misdemeanours?"

"To tell you the truth, it's been a while since we set eyes on him."

We arrived back at the crime scene where the cleanup crews continued to shift rubble in search of a body. Remarkably, the iron fence still stood. I reflected on what the house looked like before it had exploded into a pile of rubble. A proud two-story structure, lights in the

windows, a silhouette. The good Professor? Or someone else? The victim or perpetrator of the wretched crime?

“Tell me more, Twix.”

“Well, I remember when he first came here, he spent a lot of time at the taphouse.”

“And you never engaged in any conversation with him?”

“All very cordial. Hellos and Goodbyes, How d'you dos, that kind of thing. Nothing more. He spent a lot of his time in conversations with that Bourke chap. But then...”

“Then what?”

“Well, I stopped seeing him there. The word was he had found something else to occupy his attention.”

“Which was?”

“Beats me, sir. But I remember when distinctly because it was when the girl went missing.”

“Missing girl? I don't recall an investigation of a missing girl in this region. It certainly would have registered on the report.”

“Report, sir?”

“Yes. Before I go anywhere, I always peruse the regional report. That alone can give quite a perception of the ensuing landscape.”

“Oh, well, I don't know what to say. Kind of above my pay grade. The girl was a traveller, a drifter, a loner. Minnie, I think her name was. However, no one came forward to push the investigation.”

“If no one came forward, how on earth did you hear it?”

“At the taphouse. A farmer, Grickson's his name, from just outside of Grace was a regular. He got talking how the girl disappeared one night. He was scared to report anything in case us lawmen thought he was responsible. I suppose the root beer loosened up his tongue somewhat.”

“If she was a drifter of sorts, what's saying she didn't just up and leave?”



“Because she left her belongings, along with the fact that Grickson was due to pay her a silver coin the next morning. An unusual series of events that’s for sure.”

“So why wasn’t the Catcher’s office informed?”

“That I can’t tell you. We checked out the farmhouse, the Super himself led the charge. I heard he had poor Grickson locked in a room for days trying to tease out a confession. In the end, he released him without charge. There was no evidence mind you, and as I said, no one came forward. I guess they figured it was best to just let it be, not to rock the cart, as they say. There’s been not a scurry of issues since.” He pointed to the pile of rubble, “Apart from that, of course, sir.”

“I see. I would very much like to talk to this Grickson fellow.”

“Couldn’t possibly, sir,” he replied, his tone one of incredulity.

“Why? Because they are coincidental? Rule number one, Twix. When a crime has taken place, there is no such thing as coincidence. There is only connection. The fact the girl went missing about the same time as the Professor removing himself from the public eye may impact this investigation. Grickson himself might have suspected the Professor of having some part in the act of the missing girl, vividly imagined or otherwise, and have taken matters into his own hands. We can’t rule anything out here, Twix. I do encourage you to keep an open mind on the matter and follow my lead.”

“I see, sir. Yes, sir. But you can’t talk with Grickson.”

I sighed. “And why not, Twix?”

“Because he’s missing too, sir.”

I turned to him. “I beg your pardon?”

“Missing, right after the girl went missing. That’s how the story goes.”

“Two people? Two missing people, linked, and no one bothered to call the Catcher’s office?”

“Don’t know what to say, sir. The Super himself investigated. No footprints leading to or from the farmhouse. No one else around to make a comment. No leads. No evidence.”

I rubbed my forehead. “Did this not register with you, Twix? First the girl, then Grickson, and now the Professor?”

“The Super said that sometimes these things happen, and if no one comes forward to push the investigation, then there is no point investigating.”

“It would seem something untoward is happening to the good people of Grace. Remind me, Twix, to have a little chat to that Super of yours to help him understand the boundaries of his station. A man such as Carthy has responsibilities and duties... however, forgive me, Twix. I am speaking out of turn about your superior. I do not wish to place you in an awkward position. That would not be setting our relationship off on the best possible footing.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Finch.”

“Sorry, sir?”

“Call me Finch. If we will be working together, call me Finch. Sirs are for your teacher or your immediate superior. I am neither.”

“Err, right, sir, I mean, Finch.”

Twix scratched his head. “Beg my pardon for asking, but what could have done this? We don’t get an entire building exploding often here... in fact, I don’t recall it ever happening. And not just buildings. I mean we rarely get explosions around here anyhow.”

“Regardless of efforts to stop imports, bandits have been transporting powder here from the Orient for years. It seems those crafty criminals continue to find ways through the line and into the hands of nefarious characters.”

“So, it was the Orientals? Who blew up the house?”

“Second rule, Twix. Assumptions can be dangerous. In fact, your leaps in logic are a little disturbing. The most powder I’ve seen used by

bandits have been minute measures. Charges to blow locks off boxes or doors. Certainly not to the extent of destroying an entire dwelling. No bandit could afford the amount of powder required for this damage, and besides, why would bandits blow up the Professor's house? If this is murder, why go to the effort when there are so much simpler means to dispatch a man. No, this was something else, something else entirely."

"But what then?"

"That, Twix, is what we're going to find out. We will start by laying out what we know."

"And what do we know?"

"We know the Professor had invented something, something that, he suspected, would put his life in jeopardy. Why I cannot say, who, I could only guess. But his house is now a pile of stone."

We stared at the scene together. Side by side in silence, letting the sounds of the clean-up fill our senses; the clunking of stone as the crew threw large pieces of rubble into the cart, a rhythmic chatter amongst the people on site. Another constable, waving people through and encouraging others to continue walking.

I yawned. "Be a good man and let me know when they find something."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to set up my lodgings and commence my research."

"Very well. There are two boarding houses in town." Twix pointed down the road. "You've got the Pig where we met the Super, or you've got the Confluence which is on the other side of town and is slightly less terrible."

I had arrived in town at the very late hour on the assumption the Professor would provide a bed for the night. That plan fell through rather quickly. I looked back down the lane towards the Distinguished Pig, thought of the owner and his apparent disdain for the uniform. I wondered how often Superintendent Carthy visited their premises and how many times pints of root beer were left unpaid. Was it an arrange-

ment, or merely expected? If it carried some mutual benefit, what was Bourke getting out of the deal? Questions for another time, no doubt.

“Very well then, Twix, I will choose proximity over comfort and take up residence at the Distinguished Pig.”

“That is very good news, Finch.”

I nodded. “You know where to find me. Feel free to communicate via the hand machine. You can find my details in the directory.”

“Certainly, Finch. Just one question.”

I looked at him, waited for his enquiry.

“The Sergeant mentioned you grew up here. What happened? Why did you leave?”

I looked down at my shoes for the answer. Didn’t find it there. “It does no good to dwell on the past, Twix. It is of no consequence. It certainly doesn’t change the facts of this case.”

He nodded, somewhat satisfied with the answer.

I turned and took a step.

“Waxer, by the way,” he said.

Pivoted.

“Waxer?” I repeated.

“Waxer. Waxer Twix. You can call me Waxer if you like.”

I extended my hand, which he took with glee.

“Thank you for your assistance, Constable Waxer Twix.”

After a few pumps of his hand, I dropped it and backed away.

“No, no, I just can’t do it. I shall call you Twix.”

## Chapter 4

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I CHECKED INTO MY LODGINGS with minimum fuss. I avoided the owner, Bourke, and instead was serviced by a sweet red-haired girl by the name of Lacy. She was fourteen if she was a day, her hair pulled back and secured, her clothes pressed. She informed me the room I had secured was reserved for travelling dignitaries and political advocates, and that strings had been pulled so I may have that space. Why Bourke thought anyone of any standard would visit a town like Grace, or if they did why they would stay at the Distinguished Pig, is beyond me, and I didn't spend too much time thinking about it.

With my overnight bag in hand, I ascended the staircase. Each tread to the first floor groaned under my footsteps as did the journey to the second level. At the landing, I surveyed four doors, one in each corner of the level, each with a number carved into the surface. Mine was number six.

I unlocked the door with the brass key Lacy entrusted to me and attempted to push it open. The door heavily protested my advances, and it took a forceful hit from my shoulder for it to open. It creaked loudly as it swung inwards.

Dust wafted playfully in the light that streamed in through the window. The bed made to military precision; the room furnished meagrely. I wondered if anyone had ever stayed in that room before. I stepped inside, kicked the door closed, placed my bag on the bed and inspected the room. A bed, a desk, a private washroom.

I removed my coat, hat and gloves, each finding a home on an armchair that occupied the corner of the room, certainly serving no other purpose, uncomfortableness oozed out of the thick fabric. I went to the window and pulled back the light curtain to reveal a view of the street a story below. If I positioned myself just so, I could look up the street to towards the Professor's house. From that vantage point, I could see

the crews continuing to work. Stones passed from one hand to the next, full carts pulled away to let empty carts take their place.

I retrieved my machine from a compartment in my bag, laid it on the desk and powered it up. It whirred to life, the monitor glowing with anticipation. I connected the wire that was coiled on the desk and pressed it into the port on the back of the machine to allow me access to the network. I opened my electronic communications and found the most recent from the Professor. I had memorised the copy sure enough, but memories are fickle, even mine. My recall might have misconstrued, misinterpreted, or mistranslated. In light of recent events, it deserved another inspection.

I read it again. And then again. And once more. Each time placing different emphasis and tone on various words. It would be all too easy to assume the Professor was in a panic or distress when he wrote the communication. But what if he was measured and purposeful? Does this change the message? And why mention the presentation I gave? It was oddly out of place, and I wasn't sure if he was stroking my ego to convince me to come or something else entirely.

I opened another display on my machine and entered into the electronic version of The Catcher's Office. I searched for the Professor's name through our records but found nothing. No arrests, no warrants, no rub with the law at any time or in any way. He was not a known associate of any criminal. I then entered into the Records House using my restricted access. I searched again, and it didn't take long before an activity list for the Professor appeared on my screen.

Since the first machines commenced use, a government decision was decreed to record everything. Over time, machines became commonplace. There was the usual debate of keeping private conversations private versus the argument that if you are innocent, you should have nothing to be fearful of. Public pressure resulted in diluting the regulation to record merely dates and times.

So, before me on the display was a list of items labelled as 'V', 'C', or 'D', meaning voice conversations, electronic communications, and machine displays people had accessed.

Some information in the list grabbed my attention. While there were lines of data up to a few weeks ago, this gave way to lines of hash marks. The last entry was clean and was the electronic communication the Professor had sent to myself requesting assistance. It was not strange for small pieces of data to become corrupted, it was the nature of the beast. However, to have it so widespread on someone's record, one could justify the assumption that human interaction had intervened. I sent an electronic request to the Records House to explain the anomaly, pressing the importance of such information was pertinent to a Catcher's Office investigation and continued my research.

I had gone from specific to broad, trying to paint a picture of the man. The more I understood of him, the more I could understand the investigation. And so, I turned my attention to the Public Record. Professor Pyke often held demonstrations and presentations with citizens about theories or inventions. My research indicated the community at large held the Professor in high regard.

And then something happened. His final appearance was marred with contempt. I listened to the recording. If I were to summarise, it would be a fanciful dream Pyke passed off as reality. He spoke of *smart* machines. Machines that look and talk like us, that we could engage with, and could be controlled to accomplish simple tasks. According to comments remarks on the recording, people suggested he had lost touch with common reality and was well past his prime when deliberating on such matters.

The idea of such a thing, as absurd as it appeared, was no different to the invention of hand machines. The ability to control data, and access it from any location? Ridiculous. A machine you can carry and communicate with anyone? Absurd. Yet, here we are today, with such equipment.

I looked at the date and time the recording took place. It was just prior to Pyke taking leave from public graces. Perhaps this was why he disappeared from view. Perhaps this was why he feared for his life. Perhaps this was why he wanted me to investigate. His communication with me outlined no such specifics, and so I was once again stuck waiting for a breakthrough at the crime scene.

At around noon, I was absolutely famished, so made my way down to the taphouse. The room was relatively empty, apart from a few patrons here and there, grouped together at tables, murmuring to each other. At regular intervals, the door would open and someone would enter to join one of the tables. The roughness of their voices grated against each other and filled the space with ease.

I took a seat at the bar and ordered a root beer and a meat sandwich from Bourke. Didn't bother to ask for the origins of the meat. I've learnt on my travels to not question where or how the local food is sourced. I dropped a silver dollar on the bar.

Bourke looked at it. "I can't be taking no privilege from the constabulary," he said, shaking his head.

"Well, it's a good thing I'm not with the constabulary then," I said with a wink.

"Whatever you're with, I can't be taking it. Rules is rules."

"Ah, I do like a man of principle. But Bourke, I get reimbursed from the State, from the tax that people like you pay. So, basically, you are paying yourself for a drop of your finest root beer and slice of meat from god knows where."

He scanned the area timidly before sliding the coin off the top and into his hand. He slid it into his pants with the deft touch of a pick-pocket.

"Don't mean we're friends or nothing like that."

"Oh, we will be best friends soon enough, Bourke." I picked up the mug and tipped it towards him.



He grunted, gave a slight nod and disappeared through a door to the kitchen.

I waited. Occasionally the door would open, allowing a draught to snake its way to the bar and blow across my neck. I pulled out another silver coin and held it on its edge. I flicked it. The coin spun; the images engraved on it a blur. Light refracted off at angles. Mesmerising. The voices become dull as my mind started to wander.

A silhouette, my hand on the gate, a flash of light. Pyke's communication for assistance, missing entries on the public record, smart machines. Withdrawal from the public eye, a missing girl, an absent farmer.

A hand slammed down on the coin, the effect snapping me back to reality. The hand looked soft, supple. I could smell her before I saw her. A concoction of sickly sweet peach and musky earth.

"Tell me," she whispered.

I sat back. "Tell you what?"

"Who did it?" Her voice was whimsical, her smile deadly. She fluttered her eyes.

I sat back in my chair. I made the educated guess she was talking about the explosion at the Professor's residence. "And what is your interest in Professor Pyke?"

"Professor Pyke? I don't care about Professor Pyke, sir." She looked around and leaned in. "I care about the missing girl," she said softly. "Beth."

I remember Twix talking about a missing girl, and a missing farmer.

"Do you mean Millie?"

She looked at me quizzically. "No! Beth."

"Oi!" The voice, loud and authoritative erupted from the kitchen doorway. I didn't have to turn to know it was Bourke. "I thought I told you not to come in 'ere botherin' the patrons no more!"

With a flash, the girl was gone, as deftly as she had arrived. I looked down at the empty bar, realising her departure carried with it my coin.

It seemed every conversation I had in Grace contained some secret to be unlocked, some joke absent a punch line.

“Sorry ‘bout that,” Bourke said as he slid a plate to me. I looked down at the sandwich that looked remarkably appetising, surprise meat or otherwise. “I told ‘er not to come in ‘ere anymore... disturbin’ me customers and all.”

“Quite alright, Bourke, good sir. But who was she?” I looked up, but the publican had disappeared.

“sir!” A hand came down onto my shoulder and I flinched, instinctively reaching for my taser.

It was Twix. “Jesus, Twix. Can you please find a better way to announce your presence?” I looked at him. He was panting heavily, his face wet from sweat. “Good God, man, what on earth have you been doing?”

He sucked in a deep breath and unbuttoned his collar. “Running... to... find... you.”

“And now you have, Twix. May I ask why you are in such a hurry to find me?”

“The,” he said breathlessly, “doctor.”

“What about the doctor?”

“He’s... he’s...”

“He’s what?” I said, trying to keep my frustrations buried.

“He’s got the body. He’s got the Professor.”

## Chapter 5

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I FOLLOWED A FAST-MOVING Twix out the taphouse door, the constable narrowly missing a collision with a twelve and a thirteen-year-old, their overalls caked with dirt, their shoes a mess. They had been part of the clean-up crew and I surmised they were off to soak the rest of the day away in a mug of the Distinguished Pig's finest. Twix turned and tipped his cap at the couple as he bounced off like a child on his way to a sweet shop.

"Slow down, Twix," I called out, as he bounded down the middle of the street towards the very centre of town. He nearly tripped on the uneven stone a few times and ran through between two old ladies, thirty-five if a day, forcing them to spin through his storm of movement before he scurried around a corner.

I stopped to apologise and help them on their way and grew infuriatingly concerned with Twix's aggressive canter. I called again to the corner and was met with a gust that enveloped me with its icy grasp and flipped up the tails on my coat. I held my bowler on my head and forged on to the corner, trusting that either my instincts would guide me to the doctor's office, or Twix would realise I was not on his boot heels and would retrace his steps to find me.

As I rounded the corner, I thought it might have been the latter. There was someone in front of me, and it took my brain a moment to register I was looking at someone's chest. I looked up into a grin that bared stained teeth. And then I was flying; picked up, spun and pinned to the side of the building with such ease, in my immediate sense of terror, I was also in awe.

The brute held me in place by my collars, my feet dangling freely in the air. I had become level with his eyes. They were dark and cold to look at. His head was bald, and a scar ran over the bridge of his nose, a product of too many fights. It was impossible to tell how old he was but I guessed he was sixteen and could tell this wasn't the first time he

had used his fists to do some talking. I looked down at his forearms. They were thick and pulsing. Was he a sailor? A builder? A soldier? He leaned in. His breath was fresh with root beer and chewing khat.

“Can I help you,” I asked, contemplating my move. I quickly weighed my options, and I had plenty to choose from. Two weapons ready within my coat, in easy reach, each attached to a shoulder. I could raise my knee into his groin. Bring my forehead down onto his nose. Chop into his side, just below his ribs. He was sloppy, surely unfamiliar with whom he was dealing with. Numerous possibilities. But I didn’t utilise any of them, not yet. I needed to know what he wanted before I incapacitated him.

“If I were you, I would be leaving town.”

“Well, it’s a good thing you’re not me, then.”

He didn’t take well to my humour. He pulled me away from the wall and pushed me back, harder this time. The back of my head caught hold of some jagged stone. I winced. He smiled.

“You’re not wanted here,” he growled.

“Who sent you?”

He smiled again and grunted.

Footfalls, in the distance, someone running this way, the sound of leather boots on stone echoing off the walls. Twix perhaps? Coming back to find out where I had gotten to. I turned my head down the alleyway and he followed my gaze. I drove my head down, my skull crashing into the side of his head. He turned his head away and loosened his grip, enough so I was now standing on the ground. To his credit, he didn’t groan. What he did was much worse. As I reached for my baton something hard hit me in the side of the head. A fist? A club? Either way, it turned my vision upside down.

The next thing I knew a face was leaning over me. He removed his cap.

“Well, what are you doing down there?” It was Twix.

“Did you see him?” I coughed.

Twix stood up, looked around and leaned back down. "See who?"

I pointed to the end of the alleyway, towards the street. Twix left my vision. I clenched my eyes, rubbed my forehead, before rolling over onto my stomach. I used the wall to help me stand. When Twix returned, I was bent over, still trying to correct my view.

"Nothing there, sir."

I held up a finger.

"Sorry," Twix said, realising his error. "Nothing there, Finch."

I threw my head back and drew in a deep breath through my nose. Water, flowers, meat. Salt. I opened my eyes to meet Twix's concerned gaze.

"Are you, okay, Finch?"

"I was attacked. It seems someone doesn't want me to stay."

"Attacked? By who?"

"Big guy. Bald head. Black eyes. A scar on his nose," I breathed. I rubbed the side of my head. "Big hands."

Twix shrugged. He pulled out his hand machine and entered in some notes. "I'll write it in here and get to it later."

"Twix. Since I've arrived here in Grace, a house has exploded, I have been attacked and found out about three missing people. It seems there is something more going on here than I initially thought. I believe there is a lot to discuss with Superintendent Carthy."

Twix swallowed and remained motionless.

If it was anyone else, I would chase the attacker to the end of the earth and make them pay. But it was me they harboured an attraction to, and I had more important things to focus my attention on.

"Come Twix, take me to the doctor."

"Oh, are you hurt, Finch?"

"What? No! You were taking me to see the Professor's body."

"Ah, yes! Now I remember." He started to break into a run.

I grabbed his arm. "Can you please explain why you are in such a hurry?"

“Not exactly.”

“Well, he’s not going anywhere, is he? He’s dead, isn’t he?”

Twix looked at me as we rounded another corner. “I’m not sure?”

“Are you saying he’s alive?” That was a cause to run. If the Professor was alive, who would know when he would draw his last.

“No, Finch. Not saying that either.”

“Well then, what are you saying?”

Twix looked like he was in pain although I’m sure he was just searching for the right words. In the end, he took off into a steady run. It seems he didn’t have the vocabulary to explain.

I followed after him, my left hand on my baton, ready for what might be around the next corner.

And the next.

## Chapter 6

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BUT THERE WAS NOTHING around the next corner, other than more corners. We weaved through streets and alleyways, sinking deeper into the heart of the town. We eventually reached our destination. With a large breath and patting down of coats, we entered.

We stood in the foyer of Kramer's Emporium. It was a small shop, the front of which comprised potions, elixirs and other medicinal concoctions, for sale to the public at the right price. Kramer himself greeted us.

"Thank you, Special Detective Finch, for coming as quickly as you could," Kramer said. He wore a white coat and sported an orange bow tie. I'm sure at any other time his face exuded knowledge, a friendly smile that put his patients at ease. Now, however, concern had worked its way into the man's forehead forcing his glasses to slide repeatedly down his slender nose.

"Please, call me Finch. Twix here was in quite a hurry to arrive, so I trust there is something of importance we should see."

"But first," Twix jumped in. "Finch here has knocked his head. Would you have anything for the... ah... blood?" He paled.

Kramer nodded and retrieved a bottle of liquid from a nearby shelf. I retrieved my kerchief, soaked it by upending the bottle, and dabbed it gently on the back of my head. I didn't ask what was in it, but it stung, so I assumed it must be both good for me and working.

"Come, gentlemen," Kramer said. "This way."

We walked down a narrow hallway, past a doorway I couldn't help peeking into. It was an office, a place for the good Doctor Kramer himself to inspect ailments and recommend a tonic or two.

The next doorway was our destination. It was a makeshift theatre and provided Kramer with a place to undertake minor procedures without the equipment or skill that existed in the capital. Windowless, musty, yet clean to the eye, the walls held diagrams of the human body,

along with several other diagrams I failed to recognise. A skeleton hung in one corner and a small sink in the opposing. Along one wall was a shelf comprising two rows of ordered medical tools.

However, it was the table in the centre of the room that held my attention. A pale white sheet draped over the outline of a body. At once my heart sank. The Professor's suspicions had proved correct, and I had been too late to do anything about it.

Kramer stood on the opposite side of the table and pulled out his own hank and wiped down his face. He nodded nervously. "I've seen nothing like it," he said.

"Like what?" I enquired.

The doctor replied by pulling down the sheet, revealing the body underneath. On the first inspection, it was the Professor, identical to the images I saw on my machine earlier that day. His brown hair, wild and unrestrained, was like a mane. He was greying at the temples, which connected to his salt and pepper beard. At thirty-five, he was well into his downward spiral, yet looking at him I felt a pang of sadness. Not because I knew him, because I didn't, and certainly from no more than a few searches on my machine. I was upset about what else he could have done, what more he could have invented, the wasted potential. A brilliant mind from all accounts, on the cutting edge. He made hundreds of thousands of lives better with what he created. He changed the country, impacted the world. He changed our human race. And now he was nothing more than a cadaver, a lifeless mass on a wooden table.

Kramer had opened Pyke's clothing to reveal the torso. The first thing that struck me was the lack of blood. No mashed limbs, no large pieces of stone in place of vital organs. No gashes, no openings. No marks, no bruising.

"Mmm," I said. "Interesting. Nothing obvious."



“Remarkably preserved, if that’s the right term, given the destruction of his home. I believe they found him in a cavity created by two or three load-bearing stones,” said the doctor.

Right term? It was an interesting remark. I looked up. “Doctor, what in your opinion was the cause of death?”

Another rub of his hank over his sweaty head. “I don’t believe you are asking the right question, Finch.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Listen.” The doctor turned to the array of tools on the table and retrieved a patella hammer from the selection. Highly unusual in this situation, given it is used for testing reflexes, and therefore utterly useless on a dead person.

I watched with interest as he held the hammer over his head and brought it down at pace into the late Professor’s chest. A high-pitched noise clinked where a dull thud should have emanated forth. Bizarre.

“Would you like me to do it again?”

I held up a finger and then touched the Professor’s chest. His skin didn’t feel like skin. It didn’t move like skin. It didn’t have the same properties. I poked, I massaged. I moved my hand around. Instead of the natural indentation of ribs, I found hard and flat tissue. Further down, his stomach was solid.

“All over,” said the doctor.

“Everywhere?”

“Yes!” he exclaimed.

“How the hell can that be, doctor?”

Silence.

I looked over the body, considered everything I had witnessed since arriving. “Is this even the Professor?”

The doctor took a step backwards and wiped his head again. “I don’t know.”

He turned, grabbed a blade from his table, and returned. I watched as he held it at the Professors throat and pressed down.

With a groan, Twix rushed out of the room. Beyond the shopfront, I could hear poor Twix purging his stomach into the street. The slowly closing door deafened the noise I likened to a dying animal.

I returned my attention to the doctor. The knife went in, but not deep. No blood. He pulled the blade down, a metal on metal screeching noise filled the air. Still no blood. The doctor stopped. He worked the tip of the blade under the incision and leveraged it up. The skin stretched, but not like I've seen skin do. In my line of employment, I've seen many a dead body and been part of investigations into causes of death, however, there is nothing in my past I could align to this situation.

“What am I to take from this, doctor?”

He didn't reply, merely peered into the gap he had created.

Twix came back in, looking tender. He took one look at the doctor, turned and departed again. I had hoped his constitution would improve.

The doctor continued. He pulled back a swath of skin to reveal a dull metal plate.

“What the hell is this, doctor?”

He didn't reply.

“Doctor!”

Nothing.

“Is this even the Professor?”

All unanswered. The doctor continued to cut away and peel back the skin, revealing further metal. The Professor's torso looked like a banana, skin peeled and pinned from a central incision that ran from throat to navel.

I took up residence on a chair in the corner reading an assortment of medical journal papers when Twix finally resurfaced. He held a hand up to his eyes to shield his gaze from the body on the table.

“My dear Twix, this is something we will need to work on.”

"I apologise, Finch. It's just that, I've never really seen a dead body before."

"Twix, how long have you been serving in the constabulary?"

"Three years."

"And not a single body?"

"No."

I started to make a comment, something startling obvious, yet held it in. I would cover that later.

"So," Twix began. "Where are we at with the Professor? Any clues?"

"Clues, yes. Professor, No."

"Sorry, sir?"

I stood and pointed to the body. "That is not the Professor."

Twix slowly looked, his hand coming down. "Then who is it?"

"Not 'who', Twix, but 'what'."

"What are you talking about, Finch? I'm lost."

I explained to Twix the articles I found that morning, including appearances before the Professor disappeared from public viewing. That what we were looking at was the Professor's invention. At least, I thought it was. I mean, I hadn't seen it do anything, or heard it say anything. Perhaps the explosion it endured had rendered it useless.

"So," Twix said rubbing his head, "we are no better off than when we started."

"On the contrary, Twix. We know two things."

"Go on," Twix said, pulling out his hand machine to make notes. He looked at me expectantly, ready to transcribe what I said next.

"For one, we have a lure."

"A lure you say?"

"Yes, Twix. If this is the reason someone destroyed the Professor's dwelling, then the perpetrators may come back to finish the job they started."

Twix was typing furiously on his hand machine. "Uh, huh. And the second?"

“The Professor may still be alive.”

“Oh really,” Twix said, tapping away on his hand machine. “So, where to from here?”

I looked at Twix and smiled. He wanted to hear it as much as I wanted to say it.

“The chase is on!” I said emphatically.

Unexpectedly, a high-pitched whine erupted through the silence. We turned as one to the table. Without warning, the mechanical Professor’s eyelids popped open. We jumped back, Twix grabbing at my arm. I had to shake him off. The mechanical body, under its own steam, sat upright.

“Hello, Special Detective Caddius Finch.” Its mouth did not move. It sounded exactly like the Professor, just as I had listened to a recording of him that morning.

I edged around the table, taking in the sight. The eyes were clear, inhuman. I waved a hand in front of its face. No reaction, no flinch.

“What are you?” I asked, trying to keep my voice steady.

“I am a smart machine. Professor Pyke invented me.”

“Do you have a name?”

“I cannot answer that question.”

“Why not?”

“I cannot answer that question,” it repeated.

I circled the thing as I continued to ask questions. I tried to ascertain how it all worked, trying to reveal the science behind the magic trick, the hidden clockworks.

“Where is the real Professor Pyke?”

“He is dead.”

The response came swiftly, without emotion, even cold. It sent a shiver down my spine.

“Who killed him?”

“That’s what you need to figure out.”

The machine whirred again. The eyelids shut and sat back on the table.

I approached cautiously and gently prodded it in the face. No reaction.

“Wake up!” I shouted in its ear. No movement, no flinch.

I shook it. Nothing.

I looked up. “Twix, good man, what were we talking about when this thing turned itself on?”

Twix shook his head, still in shock. I turned to the doctor who stood steadfast in his spot, eyeing the machine with a sense of curiosity as opposed to Twix’s fear.

“Doctor?”

He didn’t move.

“Doctor!” I shouted. He shook his head to awaken from his daydream.

“Oh, sorry. What was the question?”

“What were we talking about when the machine started? I’m trying to determine the triggers required to activate it.”

“Oh,” Kramer said, furrowing his brow. “Something about a chase I believe.”

I nodded, stepped back and sung out my catch cry. The machine sprung to life with a “Hello, Special Detective Caddius Finch”.

I tried numerous questions, however, could not uncover anything useful. Of its own accord, whether the restriction was time or number of questions, the machine whirred, shut its eyes and lay back on the table. Twix tried his own brand of questions that proved fruitless, the machine ignoring him outright. This, I thought, was most interesting. I asked the doctor to try, and after some coaxing, did. And nothing happened.

I rubbed my chin. “So,” I began, talking to myself more than anyone else present. “The Professor said he had seen my presentation about the future of criminology. He has recorded my voice and somehow

used it in this thing. And the fact my voice activates it means he meant it for me.” I pondered. “But what of the message?”

“That the Professor is dead?” Twix enquired.

I ignored him. “Twix,” I breathed, “I think it’s best you get your Superintendent.”

“With all due respect, Finch, I think the Super would rather receive updates from you and you alone.”

I turned. “Twix, I do not intend to give him merely an update, he needs to see what we have discovered. This is a critical piece of evidence that needs his protection.”

“Pardon me for saying, Finch, but he can very easily say no to me... a lot harder to say that to someone like you.”

I sighed.

So be it.

## Chapter 7

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AFTER RECEIVING CRUDE directions from Twix and ensuring the doctor locked the Emporium's doors post my departure, I set off to locate the station. I navigated the passages of Grace, running along cobblestone paths, through tunnels and alleyways, before discovering the station house: a proud Victorian structure, with solid foundations, an elevated wooden door requiring the ascent of three steps to reach it, five large curtained windows donned the frontage, and a clock on its steeple that kept Grace to time.

I had so many questions to ask and so many statements to make. This case was becoming as intriguing as the town. Unreported missing people. Brutes demanding I leave town. It was Carthy's responsibility to maintain law and order in the region, however, it seemed he had let his guard down. Undesirable things were happening in Grace, and it seemed Carthy was doing nothing about them.

And nothing is what he was doing when I stormed into his office, amidst some fierce words from his assistant. His office door clattered against a bookshelf as I barged in, Carthy himself standing to attention, woken from his trance, his gaze being torn from some imaginary object outside the window. Exactly what was going through his mind or what he was focussing on would forever be a mystery.

"Finch!" Carthy yelled as he rounded his large wood desk to face me. "What is the meaning of this interruption?" His muscles tensed and fought against the restrictions of his uniform. He hurriedly fastened his top button, tidying his outfit. "You have no right to see yourself into my office without my express permission!"

My initial intention of the somewhat rumbustious entry into his office was to alert the Superintendent to the remarkable discovery and to bring him hastily to Kramer's Emporium. But to see him sitting at his desk staring out into the world shocked me. In a moment of weak-

ness, rage consumed me and, sorry to say, overtook my rational thinking.

“Superintendent Carthy, the meaning of this interruption, as you call it, is to make you aware of your failings as the leading police officer in the region. There have been a number of things made apparent that is of great concern to me. And as I see here, you are behaving in the manner in which you have investigated them, which is ‘little’ and ‘un-productive’. I have little choice but to talk with the Chief Magistrate about this!”

Carthy stepped up. “How dare you come into my station, in my office, and make such accusations? Detective Finch, do not forget the allowances I, personally, have made for you to undertake your investigation into the death of Professor Pyke.”

I counted off the indiscretions on my fingers. “A farmer named Grikson, a young drifter called Minnie, a girl named Beth. All missing, none recorded as submitted to the Catcher’s Office for special investigation. How do you explain yourself?”

“What on earth have they to do with the explosion?”

“Just answer the question, Superintendent!”

Carthy took a deep breath and lowered his head. When he rose again, he smiled and tutted. “Dear sir, please don’t tell me your excessive reaction is not due to fable and fancy. Surely you have a better nose than to rely on the words of others to create your case.” His words were slow and cold.

“What are you talking about?”

“The story of a missing farmer and young drifter is lore. A story relayed in taphouses, propelled by root beer, and propagated by those that love a tale. Nothing more than that.”

“But you investigated, did you not?”

“Catcher, that tale existed in these parts long before my arrival, well ahead of my rise to Sergeant. There’s even an old barn on the outskirts of town to support the myth.”



“Twix said you investigated the disappearance yourself. Even took leave to the farmhouse.”

Carthy shook his head. “I don’t know what to say, Finch. Twix is a little muddled with the facts. Tis true we investigated the farmhouse, as there were reports of noises in the night coming from up that way. However there was nothing at all to talk of, a wasted effort by all accounts.”

My heart sank. I felt like a fool. Someone has misled Twix and in turn, he has misled me. I could not tell you who was the bigger fool, the one telling the story or the one believing in it. I took it as blind faith from the constable and in a fit of emotion have portrayed the falsities as fact.

“Beth, on the other hand, is entirely different.”

Different? Perhaps I was on to something. Anything!

He continued. “I am sure you received this information from Shire, a young girl with red hair?”

I thought of the girl at the taphouse who squandered me from my root beer and my wealth. She was as Carthy described, although I didn’t respond.

“Anyway, she reported this exact story not a few weeks ago.”

“Then why wasn’t this reported to the Catcher’s Office?”

“Because there is no evidence that such a person exists, Finch. On my personal investigation, I found it out that Shire is a pickpocket, a jester. She plays games with people to earn their trust and sympathy and then relieves them of their valuables. Before I could arrest her for such crimes she absconded and I haven’t seen her since.”

“I see,” I said, looking down.

“Next time you see her, make sure you arrest her and turn her into this station for proper processing.”

“This town isn’t that big, Carthy. Are you telling me the might of this constabulary is unable to find this street dweller, a girl no less?”

“Shire has proved elusive, Finch. A hider in the shadows, a thief in the night. She has eluded us on more occasions than I care to mention, placed three of my good officers in the hospital, she did.”

I broke the conversation and took up a place at the window. Gripped my hands behind my back and drew in a large breath, needing to centre myself. I felt dejected, had lost the upper hand on the local constabulary. I was a big City Catcher—I don’t make mistakes; I capitalise on them when criminals make errors. But on this occasion, I was wrong. So very wrong.

“Don’t be hard on yourself, Special Detective. You are not the first officer of the law carried away with such fancy. I have to sit down every recruit and explain the difference between fairy tales and reality, fiction and fact.” He came up and stood beside me. “Finch, I forgive you for barging into my office.”

Shame. That’s what it was, that was the feeling. Ashamed of my actions. I guess I should have apologised, perhaps the silence did that for me. I wondered how many of my own rules I broke in my outburst. Why was I so angry with Carthy in the first place? Why did I feel aggrieved against him?

“Now, did you come here to accuse me of not doing my job, or was there something else?”

I couldn’t answer.

Carthy continued. “Is the investigation progressing?”

“It is progressing well, at least, I think it is.” I immediately regretted my words. I have never been unsure of something in my life but at that moment something rattled me. “I’m sure I’m getting somewhere because I have received a strongly worded message to leave town.”

“A message?”

“Yes, delivered forcefully.”

“That will never do, Finch, not in Grace, not on my watch. We occasionally get sailors coming through, looking for some relief from the

shoreline, sometimes looking to make trouble. I can see into it if it suits. It would be no burden on my part.”

“Thank you, Carthy, however, I must decline. There is enough work required on the investigation of the Professor.”

“Anything I should know about?”

I turned to face him. “They found something at the crime scene that needs your urgent attention.”

“And what is this something that has been found? Significant, I suspect. A body I assume?”

I shook my head. “No, well, not exactly, but I still need to show you something. Something special and important. A piece of evidence that needs your guard.”

“If this evidence is so important, where is it?”

“Twix is standing vigil over it as we speak, however I feel we need—”

Carthy’s face dropped. “You left Twix in charge of important evidence?”

“Is there a problem?”

“We must go now, Finch. Immediately.”

I grabbed his arm. “Is there some delinquency I must know about?”

He shook his arm free. “Finch, I apologise, I should have told you this sooner. I have had suspicions about Twix’s allegiance for a short while now. I was reluctant to assign him to this case because of those suspicions.”

“Why not just tell me, Carthy?”

“I did not want to taint your perspective, Finch. I felt that if anyone could sniff out the true Twix, you could, through your investigation,”

“If you have suspicions, as ominous as they may be, why not inform the Catcher’s Office? Why not start an internal investigation?”

“Because the Chief Magistrate would not take too kindly to know the only piece of evidence I have is a gut feeling.”

“A gut feeling? You base your concerns on a hunch?”

“Given your recent actions, Finch, I would have thought you of all people should understand.”

I stepped forward. “But evidence backs my hunches, not the other way around. Trust me, if you go seeking evidence because of an expectation of what you’ll find then you’ll find it. It will be skewed and distorted and tainted.”

Carthy put a finger to my chest. “You can't trust him, Finch. Please know this.”

## Chapter 8

---

WE RAN BACK, DOUBLE timing our efforts through the streets and alleyways. Carthy produced a whistle and between blows, called out for people to escape our paths. We arrived back at the surgery in a fog of our own breath. The sun had set beyond a haze of cloud and with it any heat the sun had beamed during sunlight hours.

We found the door ajar, splinters of wood on the ground, a broken lock on the door. Carthy and I looked at each other. I retrieved my baton and flicked it down so it extended to my knee. Carthy reached for his truncheon and held it over his shoulder as he edged the door open.

I resisted the urge to call out, frighten or scare the criminal. Best to not alert them of our presence and catch them unawares rather than give a speedy chase. The front shop was open, a few bottles had spilt from the shelves and lay broken in pieces on the floor, their liquids having dissipated quickly. A thick aroma filled the air, ammonia perhaps, and I covered my nose with my sleeve to avoid inhalation.

Through a doorway, Carthy darted into the doctor's office while I went to the surgery. There, I found Twix, outstretched on the floor, flat on his face. One arm stretched out in front, the other by his side. Neither the doctor nor the mechanical Professor was there.

I rushed to Twix's side, crouching down beside him. Trustworthy or not, I needed to check on Twix's state. I found a pulse in the folds in his neck and felt a warm exhale from his nose. He was alive, merely knocked out.

Carthy appeared at my side. "Is he dead?"

I turned. "No. Go find me some smelling salts."

"And where am I supposed to find that?"

"This is a doctor's office! Find some."

Carthy returned a minute later with two pouches and a bottle. "Here," he said, handing over his bounty, "I'm not sure what's what so perhaps a little trial and error is in order."

The contents of the second pouch seemed to work, with Twix rousing quickly after inhaling the odour. The smell wafted to me and I felt repulsed and alert at the same time.

I tied the bag off and absentmindedly pocketed the goods. Twix groggily got to his feet, holding his head.

“Twix? Twix!”

“Oh my, what happened?”

“Exactly, Twix, what happened?”

“I... I don't know. I was standing there one second, and the next... nothing.”

“Where's the Professor? Where's the doctor?”

Twix looked around the room and then looked at us like he was looking at us for the first time.

“When did you guys get here?” Twix looked at the Superintendent. “Superintendent Carthy! What are you doing here?”

I pulled Carthy to the corner of the room for a private conversation while Twix slowly looked around the room.

“I think he's been drugged,” I whispered.

“Drugged?”

“Yes, some kind of chemical that affects his memory.”

“Or he drugged himself.”

“Possibly, but something tells me if Twix is involved, he isn't working alone.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Carthy, the evidence I needed to show you was a...” I paused, trying to find the right words to explain what I had witnessed. “It was a mechanical being, a doppelgänger of the Professor, but not the Professor himself. It was made of metal and some sort of elastic skin. And it spoke.”

“Spoke? This sounds ridiculous.”

“Trust me, Carthy, I would not have believed it myself if I had not seen it with my own two eyes. But this is exactly what Professor Pyke

was working on, this is what people were after, this is the reason someone destroyed his residence. Now, there is no way someone like Twix could steal the good doctor and mechanical Professor away.”

We both looked at Twix as he investigated the doctor’s walls as if he had just entered the room. He moved to the skeleton in the corner that was hanging by a piece of string attached to the ceiling. He nudged it and it gently swayed towards him. He did it again. And then again.

“This could be an act,” Carthy said, “To throw us off the scent. Remember, don’t be fooled.”

Twix was now at the doctor’s table eyeing his tools. He ran a hand over them and then quickly pulled it away, throwing a finger between grimaced lips.

“On second thoughts,” Carthy continued, “I agree with your analysis. Someone else then, but who?”

“Someone strong, someone menacing.” And then I stopped. Perhaps the same person who accosted me in the alleyway after I had lost Twix. Was it all a ruse? Was it all a part of his plan?

I placed a hand on Carthy’s shoulder. “Let me continue the investigation.”

“Very well, Finch. But tread carefully, especially around Twix. I trust you will keep me up to date with your dealings?”

We shook hands. “Most definitely.”

## Chapter 9

---

WE SAT ACROSS FROM each other at the Distinguished Pig tap-house. Patrons flocked to a few of the other tables. At one table, dirty faced ten-year-olds, no doubt part of the clean-up crew, laughed heartedly through the steady stream of root beer. At another, a bunch of dark-haired teens sucked on soap laden bread. Empty pint glasses littered every other available surface. The usual night's rush was on the decline with citizens looking to reacquaint themselves with the warmth of their homes. We sat with mugs of root beer in front of us, our respective hats sitting on the table.

I picked up my mug and held it out. "Well, it has been an eventful day. Congratulations for making it through."

Twix slowly picked up his mug, clinked against mine, yet didn't drink.

I looked at my companion over the froth in my mug. "Now, what on heaven's earth is wrong with you?"

"I don't deserve it, Finch. I don't deserve to be sitting here with you drinking. I don't know what happened this evening, but I know I made a mess of the investigation."

Twix confounded me. I could not make heads or tails of him. If he was playing me, he deserved to be on a stage somewhere playing a role in one of Shakespeare's plays, not trudging the Grace alleyways preserving order. If he wasn't playing me, then Carthy was entirely wrong about the boy. I was lost in limbo, having to carry on, without letting my partner know everything I did. Over my years I have learnt to trust in my perspective. I decided I would continue the investigation as per protocol and tread very lightly on everything else.

"I appreciate you feeling that way, Twix, however, it has happened and pays us no duty to dwell on events past. However, is there nothing else you remember about this afternoon? Anything at all, no matter how minute the detail?"



Twix stared at the table and then clenched his eyes shut. "I was talking with the doctor, general tête-à-tête, you can appreciate. I heard a bell. He said a customer had entered and he must go and service them. I heard whispering, low voices. I thought it might have been coming from the... you know... thing on the table, so I leaned in, without laying a single second of vision on the ghastly thing. Then there was this smell, a real strong smell." He opened his eyes. "And then everything went dark." He took a drink. "Nothing until I woke up and you and Carthy were there."

I smiled. "Very good, Twix."

We drank in silence. I was weighing him up in my mind. What to believe, what not to believe. Facts, I reminded myself. It all came down to facts. And the facts are the doctor is now missing, along with vital evidence. Twix finished his mug, and I motioned for Bourke to bring over two more.

"Oh, I really shouldn't, sir." He hiccupped. "Oh, sorry, I get like that when I have too much of the frothy goodness." However, when Bourke laid down two more mugs, Twix grabbed his cheerfully and took a large gulp. I parked mine beside me.

"So, tell me again about this Grikson fellow."

"Grikson?"

"Yes. It's just that I've heard a few different stories around town and it would be very useful to know where the truth lies."

"The truth lies with what I told you," he said with a jovial tone and slack jaw. "I was at the farm with Carthy, just us two. Carthy checked the residence, I checked the barn. We met a few minutes later. He said there was nothing more to investigate."

"I see. What sort of farm was it?"

"Crops, mainly. Whatever animals had been there were wandering aimlessly. Whatever crops that were planted had died."

"I see. I heard it was a yarn, spun by people over a mug."

“Well, if people be talking about my exploits, then so be it.” He held his mug in the air as if to salute them. “But I tells ya, that place just gave me the jitters.”

“Place?”

“Yeah, Grikson’s stead. Just didn’t feel right, something out of place.”

“Did you tell Superintendent Carthy about your feelings?”

Twix chortled. “Who am I to do such a thing, Finch? Carthy is the Super. And when the Super makes a call that’s the call it’s going to be.”

“And the same for the girl, Millie?”

Another gulp, another hiccup. “And the same for the girl.”

“And what about the street dweller, Beth?”

He stroked his chin. “Can’t say I’ve heard that name before.”

I looked out the window, the streetlamps aglow in the failing light.

“Beg my pardon for asking, but what’s this got to do with the Professor’s investigation?”

I shook my head. “Nothing at all, dear Twix. Nothing at all.”

“So, what do we do now?”

“Now, Constable Twix, given the situation we are in and the evidence we have collected so far, we begin by generating a list of potential suspects. If the mechanical Professor was something that people would kill for, who would be interested in such an invention?”

Twix shrugged.

“Come on, Twix, open that mind of yours.”

“Well, are you talking about people who wanted it or people who wanted to destroy it.”

“Precisely, Twix, precisely.”

Twix drank wilfully as we discussed industries, companies, names of individuals who in some way, directly or indirectly, would profit, one way or another, from the death of the Professor and the theft of his invention.

“The Professor was due to hold a discussion here in town.”

“That’s right,” Twix said with a mouthful. “Staying over at the Confluence.” He tipped his mug towards me. “Which is where you should be staying, Finch, not ‘ere.”

“Regardless, Twix, I will need the guest list.”

“It’s a big list. Over fifty I’d be guessing. Sounds like a lot of people to talk to.”

“But we don’t need to talk to all of them, Twix. That list, combined with our conversation, what was recovered from the crime scene, and the Professor’s electronic letter to myself, as well as my own intelligence, will narrow down the suspects to a manageable amount.”

“But what if it isn’t any of them?”

“Rule number three: Keep moving. Eighty per cent of something is better than a hundred percent of nothing.”

“Or what if they’ve already fled? Why would a murderer stay to be caught?”

“Why wouldn’t they stay among the cover of others? Either the killer has left town at which point we will send out a party of horsemen to find them, or they are here biding their time. Either way, we will find them.”

Twix looked at me, a brew of root beer-induced euphoria, confusion and awe.

“Just get me the list,” I said. “Meet me here tomorrow morning with six of your finest colleagues, and we shall really get this investigation into gear.”

Twix nodded.

“Oh, Twix, civilian dress tomorrow. No point alerting our suspects to our intent before we need to.”

“I’m not sure the Super will go for that. Our uniform is our badge, an officer of the law above all.”

“You work for me, Twix, and by association, so will the other constables. Don’t worry about Carthy. We have reached an agreement, an impasse of sorts.”

We spoke as the patrons of the taphouse thinned and the street-lamps burned brightly. And all the while I watched Twix. I waited for a signal, a sign, something out of place that I could leverage. Yet there was nothing. Nothing at all to make me think Twix was anyone else than I presumed him to be. And here's the thing. If you don't know who you can believe, the only thing to fall back on is the facts, which means they need to be corroborated by someone else. This led me to my next challenge: to find someone who could offer another perspective on what was happening and what the hell I had gotten myself into.

As we spoke, I pulled a silver coin from my pocket. I placed it on the table on its edge and flicked it. It spun across the table and found a home in a groove on the table top. Events played out in my mind. The explosion, the mechanical thing found in the rubble, missing people, my attacker. For some reason, my brain focused here. Bald head, scars over his nose, those dark eyes, his arms. What about his arms? Thick, muscular. A mark.

Bourke came to the table holding a mug in each hand. He said something, but it didn't register with me. He sat them down. And I stared at them. More correctly, I stared past them, to Bourke's forearm.

"Say, Bourke."

"Aye, Catcher, what have you?"

"Nothing, sir, but I was curious about that."

"About what?"

I pointed to his arm, more specifically to the marking on his right forearm.

He pulled his sleeve up slightly to reveal more, then pulled his sleeve back down, almost to hide embarrassment, but the look on his face betrayed more than that. "That's... nothing."

"It's just that, I've seen something similar to that once before."

Bourke placed a hand on it. He passed a nervous glance to both of us and then took his leave.

Interesting. I turned back to Twix, who was still in a conversation that only he was a part of.

Then a figure dashed past our window, a shock of red locks glowing in light streamed down by the streetlamps. Shire. I merely caught a glimpse of her profile, but I was sure it was her. I left Twix to the rest of my root beer and pulled myself out of the booth. I burst through the taphouse door and into the brisk evening, the cold stinging my face. I once again found myself on the chase, pounding up the cobblestone streets.

The tails of a cape disappeared around a corner and I followed, and as I neared the entrance to a laneway, they darted around the next. I called out yet Shire made no effort to slow or abscond the chase. Either Shire didn't hear me or didn't want to. But chasing is what I do. I quickly found myself in a labyrinth of laneways and alleys, past backdoors and street grates. Steam from heating systems filled the confined spaces, the displacement of the mist creating the path for me to follow. I was quickly turned upon my heel, my compass completely at a loss as to where I was.

And then, around the next corner, there she was. Shire, standing at a dead end, a hood pulled over her head, the vapour of her breath coming out in clouds, mixing with the haze. She pulled back the hood to show her eyes. The streetlamps couldn't penetrate the depths of the alleyways, leaving the moon as the only source of light. But even that was inconsistent as the cloud cover blew in and out.

"My, you are persistent," she said playfully. "Have you come to take me away as well?"

I held my hands out, to show I wasn't holding anything. "I mean you no harm. You are Shire, are you not? Your name?"

A smile. "That is my name. Who are you working for? Who is doing this?"

I shook my head. "I don't understand. I'm from the Catchers office, and report to the Chief Magistrate directly. I'm don't work for anyone else. I'm here to investigate the Professor's death."

"I saw you talking with Superintendent Carthy earlier. Are you in league with that treacherous man?"

"I assure you I am in league with no one but the truth, Shire. My intentions here are pure. The simple fact is I am here to find the people responsible for the Professor's demise. But I'm keen to listen to concerns you have of the Superintendent."

She stepped toward me. I stood my ground. I have faced larger brutes in my time and have not backed away from any of them. And I certainly didn't intend to back away from a girl in a dark alley.

"Oh, my. For a Big City Catcher as you, you really have not a single idea what is happening around here, do you?"

"Would you care to enlighten me on your perspective?"

She circled me. I instantly felt like a steer being rounded by the farmer coming in for a kill.

"Bad things are happening here in Grace," Shire started, her voice a whisper that consumed me. "People are going missing."

"Like Beth?"

"Yes."

"What about the farmer Grikson and Minnie the drifter?"

"I have heard their names."

"You mean heard the stories?"

"I believe they are more than fable."

Could I believe her word over that of some who was in the rank of Superintendent? I reserved judgement on both sides.

"What did you know of the Professor?"

She continued to silently encircle me. Even her footsteps were innocuous.

"What do *you* make of the Professor?" she countered.

"I'm not sure yet, but I shall continue my investigation, regardless."

Shire was back in front of me, her hands in her pockets.

“Best you do.”

“Why?”

She said nothing.

“And why should I trust anything you say?” I proffered.

She leaned in and whispered. “I don’t think you should trust anybody.”

A footstep behind me. I turned. Impossible to know where from exactly, the scraping of a foot on stone could carry and ricochet off walls a ways over.

When I turned back, Shire had an outstretched hand in front of her face. She blew and my face became engulfed in white. I spun, my body crumbled to the cold stones. My vision doubled as I caught Shire’s cape tails disappear around a corner. My breathing laboured, my throat clogged, darkness growing from the sides of my vision. I reached into my coat and extracted the bag of smelling salts I absconded from the doctor’s office. I fumbled with the tie, as I laid my head down, the energy sapping from me. Footsteps in my ears, boots in my vision, coming toward me. I got the bag opened and pushed it up to my nose. The sharp aroma fought against the powder Shire blew into my face. My vision sharpened, then blurred, then stretched lengthways. Up became down, the floor the walls. I was numb yet could feel the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. A metallic taste in my mouth. Blood?

Hands. Hands on me, opening my jacket. A face. Twix?

“I thought I told you to leave town!”

“Twix, is that you?”

I felt lighter. Then the ground came up at me. My face was cold. I saw the walls, then the night sky framed with brick buildings. An electric crackle. A blue light. A face hovering over me. “This investigation is over. Next time, I won’t be as forgiving.”

A pain in my chest, a current passing through me.

Burning flesh.

Darkness.



## Chapter 10

---

I WOKE. SAT UP WITH a gasp and looked around the gloom. I was in my room, laying on my bed, fully clothed. The faint glow of a street-lamp flooded through the light curtain over the window. Long shadows filled the walls. Was it all a dream? No, I'm sure it wasn't, but if it wasn't, how the hell did I get back into my room? I was talking with Shire when Twix ran by the window. No, that's not right. I was talking with Shire in an alley when Twix came by. No. There was some powder. A pain in my chest. I couldn't get the events right in my head, they jumbled together like someone had dropped my brain on the floor.

I flicked on the lamp beside the bed. The dull luminescence initially blinded me and I threw my head back down. After some seconds I tried again, positioning my watch in the light. Through squinted eyes, I made the time out to be after two in the morning. I rolled my feet to the side of the bed and tried to right myself. It took energy, a lot more than I had, but eventually I was sitting up. I had my elbows on my knees and my head in my hands when the overwhelming urge to erupt came over me. I ran to the bathroom and upended my stomach's contents, and then I continued until bile rose and burnt my throat.

Pain. Everywhere pain. I clutched at my chest, it was tender to the touch. I unbuttoned my shirt to reveal swelling, red in the low light. The pain. Was I tasered? Did someone use my weapon against me? I pulled open my coat. The taser wasn't there. I pulled open the other side, my baton was missing as well.

I washed my mouth out and headed back to the bed. All I could think about was the administration required to report a missing weapon to the Catcher's Office. It was the least of my worries though. There was so much more going on than that. As I reached the bed, I stopped. I felt it before I saw it. A presence, the feeling of someone else in the room.

I turned to the door where a menacing figure stood in the shadows, a shaft of light from the window illuminating their lower half only. By my hazy calculations, I placed them at over six foot tall. I could see the bottom of a club swinging lazily in the light.

I instinctively reached for my baton, only to remember it was missing. The figure stepped forward, the light raising to reveal his chest, thick, muscular arms gripping his weapon. I placed a foot back and crouched. The safest place to be when someone swings a club is either close to the attacker or footing it in the other direction. Given the latter wasn't an option, I played out the scenario in my mind. They would charge forward, raising the club over their shoulder, and I would wait. When a few feet away, I would leap forward. I would attack the eyes, the nose, the ears; sensitive components of a face. And then, while they were writhing in agony, I would work the club away from them. I would have the upper hand and the matter would be dealt with.

But the figure did not charge forward, nor lunge, nor do anything. Instead, it spoke. "You should be careful who you speak to."

"Bourke?"

He stepped forward to reveal himself.

"Bourke, what are you doing?"

"There are lots of bad people around, Finch. You don't know who you can trust."

I maintained my stance as I spoke. "You know, Bourke, that's the third time in two days someone has told me that I should be wary as to where I place my trust. Now, perhaps you put that club down."

Bourke looked at me and then leaned his club against the wall. "I don't mean you no harm, Catcher. Besides, if I did, I would have caved your head in while you were passed out or left you in the alley for the rats."

He had a point. "Fair enough." I righted myself, dropped my hands to my side. "How about you tell me why you are here."

I stepped to the side as Bourke walked past me and eased down in the corner armchair. It groaned under his weight yet held firm. He looked down at his hands as if they held the answer to my question, which remained unanswered as to why he was in my room.

“Bourke, why are you here?” I repeated.

“I found you in a back alley, out to it, you were. Figured it best to bring you back here.”

“Very kind of you. May I ask what *you* were doing in the alley?”

“Just strolling by,” he said, his eyes falling away to the floor. “Enjoyin’ the evenin’.”

“Bourke, please. I’m not sure anyone, not even someone like you, would be strolling ‘round those parts.”

We stared at each other for a time.

“Fine,” he said gruffly. “I saw you dash out after that girl. Thought I would make sure you was okay.”

“You mean Shire?”

“Yeah, bad news that one. Troublemaker. Banned ‘er from the bar. Cost me a few root beers and silver coins in my time, she did. Best you stay away from ‘er as well.”

“She tells me people have gone missing here in Grace.”

“There...,” Bourke looked passed me to the door. “There are stories, things I’ve heard.”

“And what have you heard?”

“I can’t say, for fear of causing trouble for myself.”

“From who, Bourke?”

He chewed over his response. “I can’t say.” He pulled back his sleeve to reveal his ink marking. “You were asking me about this earlier.”

“Yes, I remember.”

“It’s a military ink marking, the sort of thing you would get when you got off the barge and they hand you a uniform, if you catch me understanding.”

And I did. So, Bourke had a record of sorts, and conscription was part of his sentence.

“Nothin’ is worth going back there for,” he rumbled.

I thought I might ask Bourke to help me track down this scallywag and find out why he had accosted me in the alleyway and warned me out of town. However, you do this job for long enough to get to know when someone’s lying or telling the truth or saying something in between. I can say for certain that Bourke well and truly played in the grey.

“I will do my best to protect you, Catcher, but I can’t guarantee anything. Best you watch your back.”

“From who?”

“I just want to say I’m sorry for what I did, but I’m willing to do what it takes to right the wrongs.”

“What did you do?” I said, leaning forward.

Bourke stood up; his body loomed over me.

“People in this town know more than what they be letting on. Some are tricky to navigate, if you know what I mean. Hard to see what side of the silver he be residin.” More fingers being pointed.

He walked to the door and swept up the club on the way. Over his shoulder, he said, “Follow the birds, Catcher. They will lead the way.”

He stopped.

“Hopefully you will find some answers there that satisfy your curiosity.”

## Chapter 11

---

SLEEP WAS LEFT UNATTAINED. I spent my hours staring at the ceiling, waiting for things to fall into place, however, the jigsaw wasn't coming together. I had multiple people pointing fingers at each other, a handful of people I needed to trust, and I wasn't sure I could trust any of them. Ex-prisoners pointing fingers at the constabulary, officers of the law pointing fingers at each other. Everyone seemed innocent and yet everyone seemed guilty. I couldn't tell who was playing me for a fool. Mystery upon mystery, ambiguity and vague statements clouded over me. It produced a fog around my investigation, for the reasons I was there in the first instance.

My hand machine made a noise as I lay in bed, the sunlight in the window becoming more intense as it rose. The clouds had parted, perhaps foreshadowing how the investigation itself would unfold. I reached over to the bedside and read the electronic letter. It was from Twix announcing his arrival in but thirty minutes, and the guest list to the Professor's exhibition, as we discussed the previous evening. I must hand it to the young constable. Amongst seemingly drowning his conscious in several mugs of root beer, he had indeed been listening and came through with flying colours.

Myself, on the other hand, felt like the floor of a taphouse on a Saturday afternoon. My head still pounded. My mouth was dry and my belly empty although I'm sure Bourke could make up for both those things if I could just haul my sack of bones out of bed.

I trudged down the stairs loudly, banging off both walls as I descended, all the while attempting to dress myself. I took a seat at the bar and waited for service, eyeing the guest list as I did so. Eventually, Lacy emerged from the kitchen.

"Something to eat this morning, Catcher?"

"Aye, coffee and whatever else you can manage. Bourke around the back, is he?"

She shook her head. "Can't say I've seen him this morning. Might be in an alley somewhere, wrapped around a keg of root beer or a warm friend, if you catch my drift." She winked. I did; however, I didn't find it plausible.

I had been sipping my coffee and reading the list Twix sent through while waiting for breakfast when the door to the taphouse opened and someone shuffled in.

A blue cap landed beside me; the constabulary emblem emblazoned on the front.

I sighed. "Twix, I said no uniforms."

I looked up to see Superintendent Carthy taking the seat beside me.

"Oh, Carthy, lovely to see you this morning." Not even *I* knew if I was speaking the truth or not.

"And to you, Finch. A good evening, have you?"

The previous night was still jumbled, and I rubbed my head. "Just fine. To what do I owe your presence this morning?"

Lacy appeared from the kitchen holding a plate of hot food. When she saw Carthy sitting there, her smile dropped to a scowl. She placed the food in front of me, carefully, delicately. She looked at me and her face changed, lightened.

"Anything else for you, Catcher?"

I shook my head.

She turned and started to the kitchen.

"Nothing for the Superintendent this morning?" Carthy enquired of Lacy.

She stopped. Her tight shoulders dropped. She spoke without turning. "Nay. Not from me. Not this morning. Not any morning, if I had my way." And then she was gone.

Carthy leaned into me. "She'll come 'round that one. A little rough, but she'll come 'round."

I looked at him blankly. "Is there something I can do for you, Carthy?"

“I was merely assisting a colleague of the law. I came to let you know that guests of the Professor’s ill-fated exhibition are beginning to leave town. It seems some of them have caught wind they, in fact, might be considered suspects in the investigation and would rather choose the open road instead of an interrogation room.”

“I see. And how do you suppose they found this out?”

“Well, it hardly takes a genius to work it out. The man who had brought them here is dead. Some of them, I’m sure, have nefarious backgrounds. Others may, being high standing dandies, prefer to keep their own status clean from a police investigation. The rest I am sure are a mixture of the two.”

The taphouse door swung open again. We both turned. A heavily puffing Twix fell into the room, his hand on the door handle — the only thing stopping him from collapsing on the ground. As per instruction, he wore civilian clothes, opting for a cheque-patterned suit and matching drivers cap. His brown shoes were cracked, scuffed and muddy. Old leather gloves adorned his hands. The aura of lower-middle-class hung over him, the badge of lowly compensated constable proudly displayed. Given the situation that was unfolding at the Confluence, the civilian ruse seemed rather unnecessary. However, there was nothing that could be done about it.

“The Confluence,” he puffed. He must have run all the way over.

“I know, Twix,” I said, standing.

“People... are... leaving,” he managed between breaths.

“Yes, Twix,” I said, placing on my bowler hat and pulling on my black, calf leather gloves.

“We need to—,” he stopped to take in a big breath.

I walked to the door. “Go?”

He nodded and turned.

A voice broke behind me. “Oh, Finch?”

I turned to Carthy.

"I suppose I will look after this for you." He pulled the plate of food towards himself and picked up a fork. "Would be a shame to let it go to spoil."

"A shame indeed, Carthy. Enjoy. Compliments of the Catcher's Office."

"Us military men must stick together."

I looked down. "Quite."



I MARCHED OVER THE cobblestones and down a path, Twix close behind, his breathing remarkably under control. The free-flowing sound of hoof and carriage wheels on stone filled every sense.

"The coaches," he said mid-stride, "They be lined up down the block. Seems everyone is looking to disperse. I've got one of our officers to mar with proceedings, a uniformed man, to slow things up."

A black coach passed by at speed, most likely enroute to join the queue to pick up its owner. Either that or the driver was looking to make a quick coin on the promise of a fast trip home, an escape through a back door and the narrow alleys to avoid the unnecessary mess they found themselves in.

"Good work indeed, Twix."

"Thank you, sir," Twix managed, skipping forward a few steps to keep pace. "Have you thoughts on who to talk to? Did you manage to reduce the size of the contingent? I have men on the ready for instruction."

"Four," I replied.

"Four? Just four?"

"Four that stand out greater than the rest. Four that have greater motivations than the others. Four that I would very much like to talk to."

"Should be easy then! Who, may I ask, are the four?"



I handed my hand machine to Twix. "Have your men hold on to these four. Keep them separated. Station them inside the rooms with the suspects."

Twix copied the names into his own hand machine, juggling the equipment whilst negotiating uneven footings, gutters, laneways and pedestrians.

"The General? The others I understand, even without knowing their backgrounds, they make sense. But the General?" He handed me back my hand machine.

I held it up. "These hand machines are commonplace but haven't always been. Do you know the history, Twix?"

He shrugged, so I continued.

"The military. They were looking for ways to better communicate with soldiers on the battlefield, for soldiers to better coordinate their attacks. Before these things they used to hum."

"Hum?"

"Yes. It's the kind of noise that sits in the background, that no one takes notice of, unless you're listening for it."

Twix shook his head, like he was trying to get that useless piece of information out of his head. "I still don't know what this has to do with the General."

"Well, the General, before he was a General, introduced this emerging machine to his superiors, which is how he achieved his rank in the first place."

"I see. I'm still not sure though why he's on the list."

"Because, dear Twix, not only did he introduce the technology to the great military machine, but he stole it."

"Well, I haven't heard of this story."

"Precisely, and I'm sure he worked very hard to keep it this way. Many people went missing or ended up in tragic accidents. Eventually, everyone linked to the hand machine disappeared. Some say the original inventor worked out of a basement in high command to perfect the

technology before he was simply put down, his usefulness expired. And behind it, all was the General.”

“So why wasn’t the General ever put to justice?”

“Because the General became the General, and you don’t become the General without knowing who to talk to and when, and without having to navigate politics and bureaucracy. He wasn’t brought to justice because he was given a promotion, and the investigation ceased in its tracks, forever lost to the archives, never to see the light of day ever again.”

“Wow,” said Twix, jumping up a gutter. “Do you really think the General did it?”

“We will find out soon, Twix, that I know.”

I stopped. A flock of birds flew by overhead, due north, squawking as they flapped in formation. *Follow the birds.* Twix, slow to react, carried on a few steps before stopping.

“Something the matter, Finch.”

I pointed up. “Those birds there. Where are they headed?”

“Beats me.”

“Well then, what’s over in that direction?”

Twix shrugged. “The hotel, where we’re headed.”

“And beyond that? Anything of interest? Anything of importance?”

He shrugged again. “Marshlands... the cliffs... the open expanse of the sea, if one would venture far enough.”

I watched as the last of the flock disappeared, swallowed by the short, Grace skyline.

“Something you need me to check out?”

I shook my head and regained my course. “More important things to keep your mind occupied at the moment, dear Twix. I will need you to observe the interviews with the suspects.”

“Really, Finch?”

“Of course. I want you right beside me.”

*Where I can keep an eye on you.*

## Chapter 12

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THE FIRST THING THAT struck me about the Confluence was its size. The building's eight storeys rose above the skyline as we approached from the west, through an alley and between two buildings that blocked out the sun, to arrive at a smooth street lined with shops bustling with patrons and their carriages. It felt like a world away from the Grace I had known for the past few days. I wondered where the proverbial tracks were that we stepped over to enter into this place. I wondered why, with all this flair and pomp on his doorstep, why the late Professor Pyke would locate himself at the less-affluent end of town? And what trade was Grace providing that it required such large lodgings in a manner befitting dukes and the well-to-do?

To my right, shops and services bustled with customers. To my left, a bridge led back into the heart of Grace, its cobblestone surface combined with gold-lined railings and light fittings made the perfect fusion of the old and the new, creating a transition for people to enter this new part of town. It rose over a river that used to border the town. It was too cold to swim in, too wide to swim across, and offered nothing in way of sustenance.

Citizens and travellers traversed the stretch of iron and concrete. Various carriages, both people and goods wagons, flowed in both directions on specified paths. Some people had stopped at its minor crest to admire the morning sun, engaged in some innocuous conversation.

However, it was what was in front of me that caused the greatest interest. The front of the Confluence hotel was a nightmare. Men in top hats and tails were calling for their coaches, held at bay by a uniformed officer who was blowing his whistle energetically. A line of horse-drawn carts lined the street to the bridge, the horses stamping their feet with as much impatience as the owners waving their fists.

A carriage at the hotel entrance was being looked over, both inside and out, by uniformed lawmen. They ducked in and out of every open-

ing available, even making the driver get off his perch to check it. And just when the massing passengers thought they were done, they would start over amidst the groaning crowds. It was a powder keg waiting for a spark.

As we arrived, Twix had received notification that the four people we wished to speak with had been detained in separate rooms, each on a different level.

“Very good, Twix,” I said. “Please allow these people to go about their travel requirements.”

Twix ran over to the nearest officer and whispered something in his ear. As Twix left him, he waved an arm and alerted the waiting crowd they were allowed to depart. A cheer erupted and ripped through the masses.

We hustled our way through the melee and into the foyer via three large glass panels that revolved on central axes. The foyer yawned open in front of us. To the left, a series of leather reading chairs complemented with a small table and lamp repeated to the wall. To the right, a bar. But not a bar like at the Distinguished Pig. Rows of every variation of root beer available lined a counter in front of a mirror. The barman himself, a boy of sixteen dressed in a white coat and black tie, poured the contents of one glass to another, his moves as slick as the brown hair on his head.

In front of us was a long desk that facilitated the check-in process. On either side were two ascending staircases that curved around and met each other, creating a landing above the lobby. An impossibly large chandelier hung over us.

I leaned into Twix. “I thought you said this place was slightly less terrible than the Pig.”

“That’s right.”

I looked around. “Are you sure about that assessment?”

Twix took in the view, hitched his pants up, and said, “Yes.”

Perspective. If I had my time again, I might have reconsidered my comment to put proximity above my own comfort.

A man approached. Short. Stout. Nineteen. He removed his wire-frame glasses with shaking hands, plucked the white hank from his pocket, polished the lenses vigorously, and then returned the cloth to the top pocket of his dark jacket.

“Sirs, can you please tell me the meaning of this? I have identified law officers taking ownership of rooms upstairs, unannounced, demanding. I have a hotel to run, and that crowd out front is causing quite the ruckus. If this disturbance continues, I shall be seeking damages from the local constabulary. Believe me, we shan’t—.”

I placed my hand in front of his face to get him to stop talking. “Sir, my name is Special Detective Caddius Finch from the Catcher’s Office. You are currently harbouring a criminal, a murderer no less, within your walls. Surely the talk you receive once this is known will do more damage than a gathering of middle-aged gentlemen scrambling for their coaches.”

The manager’s face dropped. “What do you mean ‘murderer’?”

I ignored his question. “I trust we will receive your full cooperation.”

Without waiting for an answer, I walked past the manager. Behind the reception desk, I and Twix stood at a bank of gold doors encased in dark wood panelling. I sighed. “Ah, it’s good to see some luxuries of the capital have finally started to trickle into the regions.”

“I’m still getting used to the darn things,” Twix replied, ringing his hands together tightly.

There was a soft chime, and the doors slid apart. A young boy, about the age of eight, pushed a hand out to hold the doors open. As well as his white coat, the similar attire to the man at the bar, he was adorned with white gloves and gold trimmed bellboy hat.

We stepped onboard.

“What floor, please?” the Operator enquired, his voice small and soft. It sounded like some well-tuned words over a harsh street accent, like swiping a cloth over an oily bench-top.

“Two,” Twix grunted back.

The operator pressed a button on a panel and the doors slid shut.

I took a moment to inspect my surroundings. The spacious car was decorated with gold and oak wood panelling. The sides and back were mirrors, giving the illusion of infinite space.

I leant into Twix again. “Twix?”

Twix made a noise.

“Where on earth has the money come from?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean the two vastly different sections of Grace. The Grace I remember was where the Pig is, a town based on the characters of cobblestone streets and darkly respectable alleyways. Certainly not smooth streets with highfalutin European couture and Egyptian coffee at every turn!”

“Progress, Finch. I take it that it’s been a while since you’ve been back?”

“A little while, yes.” More than I cared to own up to.

“Aye, you turn your back for a second and look what happens.”

“Yes, but *how* did it happen?”

“Outside investment. From all parts, from all different companies. People thinking that Grace has more to offer than a warm root beer and cloudy days. Can’t say I see it myself, Finch.”

“I see. I wonder what they are getting in return?”

Twig shrugged. “Don’t really know what Grace has to offer.”

The car slowed, a ding emanated, and the door opened. The Operator stood to the side. I placed a coin in his hand as we passed out into the hallway. In either direction, a seemingly endless pattern of glass inset in picture frames followed by a room door. The specific door we

were after was flanked by two boys, plain-clothed officers of the law. They looked up and nodded as we approached.

“And who is our first guest this evening, Mr Twix?”

“I’m glad you asked, Finch. This would be a Mr Sinn, inventor, owner of Sinn Machines.”

“Very good, Twix.”

“One question,” he asked as we stopped outside the door. “Why are we meeting with Mr Sinn?”



## Chapter 13

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“BECAUSE OF YOUR ACCUSATION, Mr Sinn.”

“Accusation? What accusation?” he cried.

Mr Sinn sat back in his chair, a look of shock broke over his face. His dark eyes, behind solid dark-rimmed glasses, stared across the table at me, his smooth cocoa skin tight over his chubby cheeks. A tweed jacket over a woollen vest befitted his role within the scientific community.

“A few years ago, now, although I doubt you have forgotten.”

Mr Sinn remained silent.

“You do know who I am, do you not? Are you not aware of the access I have? What things I can see and read?”

“But... but of course,” Sinn blubbered, driving his hands into his pockets and turning his head. Whether it was to hide his expression or merely a tactic to regain his thoughts, I soon realised it was the latter.

I looked over to Twix, who sat quietly, a look of discomfort on his face. I looked at him questioningly, a raised eyebrow, pursed lips. It made me uneasy just to view him.

Sinn spun around and caught my attention.

“Ah,” he started, “I remember now.”

“And what do you recollect?”

“I had asked the Catcher’s Office to investigate an invention the late Professor Pyke had given to the patent office.”

I blurted out a laugh, semi-uncontrollably. “Mr Sinn, you paint a very rosy picture of the communication the Catcher’s Office received. When I read your words, I would have painted a storm in full force over a raging sea.”

Sinn’s face dropped.

I sat back in my seat. “I believe you flat out accused Pyke of stealing your invention.”

Sinn looked down and then smiled. “Yes, so I did. I guess there was no need to cause any more pain than there exists within the community.”

“I think we would rather just deal with the facts at hand, regardless of how painful they may be.”

“Of course, Detective.”

“Special Detective.”

“Of course,” Sinn repeated. “However, the accusation doesn’t mean I am a murderer, surely. It feels like you are painting me with a brush I do not deserve.”

“Maybe,” I said, sizing up the individual. “However, it does mean you had a motive.”

“That was years ago.”

I sat forward. “Regardless of how long. You were biding your time, waiting for the moment to strike.”

“No.”

“From an investigation made by the Catcher’s Office, it was deemed there was no theft. In fact, before we could even notify you of the ruling, you had dropped the accusation entirely. Why?”

A pause, then, “I determined it was foolish.”

I looked into his eyes. “Liar! Tell me why!”

“I... I,” he stumbled. “I wasn’t thinking.”

“Try again, Mr Sinn,” I said sternly. Each exchange was increasing with octaves, bellowed voices projecting over the small space between us. Our bodies had followed our volume, gently lifting off our respective chairs. I was leading him to exactly where I needed him to be, full of emotion, to the point of him losing all rational control. When I read the profile of the inventor, I knew he was going to be susceptible to such a strategy. Theoretically brilliant, emotionally shallow. A chink in his armour. I was never going to win battling him with wits, so I needed to rely on a different part of his being.

“I was wrong.”

“No, Mr Sinn. Tell the truth!”

“Because I was advised to,” Sinn shouted as he slammed a hand down on the table. The small flower vase fell and broke, water flowing onto the table and falling onto the floor. The cups jumped from their saucers and landed on their sides or at angles against their counterparts. Silence. Sinn looked at me hard. He pushed his glasses up his nose. Eventually, he turned and walked to the window, his hands clasped behind his back.

My voice followed him. “Advised?” I said calmly. “And who offered such sage guidance to you?”

I couldn’t see his face, however, I imagined him biting his lip, trying to stop whatever he was about to say pouring forth out of his mouth and somehow implying he was directly or indirectly responsible for what happened.

“A friend,” he said coolly.

“And what friend would that be?”

Silence. I let it go. Seconds. Ten seconds. Thirty.

“Perhaps you would be more comfortable telling the Magistrate while bound in chains, Mr Sinn. I’m sure the other occupants of the barges would love your company.” I looked around the room. “Although I’m sure you can agree the surroundings would not be quite as omnipotent as to your liking.”

I saw his head drop.

“The Professor,” he said slowly.

“Professor? What professor?”

“Pyke,” he said over his shoulder, and then slowly turned. It looked as if a shadow had been cast over his face given the light from the window he was standing in front of. He lifted his head. “We came to an arrangement.”

“An arrangement? Do tell.”

Sinn shook his head. "I'm afraid to say that our agreement is sealed, Special Detective. Not even the Catcher's Office can investigate without the express written permission of the Magistrate himself."

"So, you say, Mr Sinn. However, that doesn't take away the motive for the departure of Pyke."

He smiled.

"Is something funny, Mr Sinn?"

"When you read the sealed agreement, and I'm sure you will, you too will find humour in your comment."

"You could save me some time and tell me."

"Let's just say it was in my best interests for Pyke to stay alive. His death is going to cost me considerably."

I stroked my chin. "Rest assured I will check up on this, Mr Sinn, and if I find out there is a slight deviation to your words you will find yourself in chains quicker than you can blink."

Sinn didn't say a word, merely turned back to the window.

I took the opportunity to change tact.

"Where were you two nights ago?"

"I wasn't there if that's what you are asking."

"Then enlighten me. Where were you?"

"I was... at dinner."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Because you paused."

He turned again and approached the table. "I am sure."

"And can anyone corroborate this?"

He sat back down. "I'm sure someone can." He reset the teacups on the saucers. "Perhaps one of the wait staff."

I turned to Twix who was typing on his hand machine.

"Anyone else? Another guest, perhaps?"

He searched the table like he was looking for the answer. "Miss Vil, Miss Elizabeth Vil."



I STOOD IN THE HALLWAY with Twix, having had the two civilian-dressed officers close and lock the door.

“Interesting, is it not, Twix?”

“It is indeed, considering our next conversation.”

I pulled out my hand machine and tapped in an electronic communication to the Magistrate direct, seeking permission to access the closed agreement between Sinn and Pyke. It wouldn't go straight to the Magistrate mind you. There were many hands and bodies in the way. Nevertheless, a response would be forthcoming.

“Shall we, Twix?”

I started to move towards the internal stairs however Twix remained steadfast. I turned to see him staring at the ground.

“Is there something the matter, Twix?”

He sauntered to my side as he stared at his feet, no doubt deep in thought. “I was just wondering.”

“Go on.”

We walked.

“If I could lead the next conversation.”

“Twix, these conversations are delicate. There are strategies required to place the suspect in the most vulnerable situation, the place where they are most susceptible to let their guard down and relinquish information pertinent to the investigation.”

“Working with you, with all of this, is a great learning experience for me. But I need to experience it all, every bit of it. I can learn from watching and listening, but surely I need to also learn from my mistakes.”

I looked at him as we ascended the stairs, clouded marble with a fine red carpet running down the centre. Ornate steel balustrades and railing kept patrons separated from a grisly death.

Twix had a point, as he did have most of the time. “Very well then, Twix. As you request, I shall take a supporting effort to our next conversation.”

He smiled.

“However, if I see an opportunity or need for my assistance, I will come forward.”

“Very well, Finch. Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet, Twix.”

Twix chortled. “What could possibly go wrong?”

## Chapter 15

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THE CRACK OF THE SLAP rippled through the air like a shock wave, Twix's head snapping around, his cheeks jostling from the attack. The skin on skin connection was pure and was sure to leave a mark. I didn't know whether to be concerned, outraged or merely laugh at the encounter. It was an attack on the law, sure enough, however, I felt it was an attack on Twix's character more than anything.

As I suspected, Twix tried to imitate the conversation with Sinn. He tried to push her into a corner, it's just that she would not have any of it. She had stayed cool through the initial conversations however Twix kept pushing, and I kept watching, eager to see where it would end. And it did, a few pushing and provoking questions later, with Miss Vil taking a stance, rearing up, and setting forth with a zinger that left Twix reeling.

I sensed movement from the officers stationed in the room and I held out a hand to stop them.

"I will see you in chains for that!" Twix yelled, a hand on his red cheek. "You'll be on a barge by sundown for laying a hand on a well-respected officer of the law!"

Miss Vil rubbed her hand and calmly took her seat. She gave a sideways glance to the officers who resumed their position near the door before returning a hazy gaze to Twix. "And who's to say your chubby little hand didn't find its way onto my knee?" She winked, a smile growing on her red lips. It felt as beautiful as it was deadly. "Believe me, constable, I have chewed up and spat out more important and higher on the social scales, than you."

The fifteen-year-old's brown eyes narrowed, and Twix could do nothing but sit. His mouth opened; however, no words came forth. Out of ammunition and out of options, he looked to me, and I nodded in return. I looked over our second suspect. She wore a beige dress, the colour of freshly sheared wool, hung delicately from her shoulders. A

white fascinator stood out from its neatly prepared background. Everything about her was perfect, from her makeup to the way she swings an open palm. Perhaps easily enraged? Perhaps capable of using explosives? Or something more? Time would tell.

“What about you, detective? Are you going to ask me some questions?” She winked as she spoke, her voice calm and alluring, a snake waiting to strike.

I cleared my throat, acutely aware of her persuasive means.

“Special Detective, Miss Vil.”

“Well, of course, you are,” she said with the wave of a hand. “However, let us stop this charade. Would you rather not exchange the questions for a Virgin David at the bar?”

“A Virgin David?” I enquired.

“Yes. Root beer and candied apple in a glass lined with lemon juice and native ants. The ants are dead off course. It’s all the rage.”

I shifted in my seat. “If it’s all the same to you, Miss Vil, I would rather get to the bottom of Professor Pyke’s murder.”

“Well, I had nothing to do with it! I can’t see how I could possibly help you with that.”

I leaned forward. “Perhaps start by answering a few of my questions.”

She looked away as if it were an inconvenience to do such a thing. “As you wish, but I doubt how I may assist.”

“That is more than fine, Miss Vil, for now, for I do not wish to talk about Professor Pyke.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Then *who* do you wish to talk about?”

“Professor Anderssen.”

Her face twinged, an eye closed slowly and then opened. “Professor Anderssen?” She repeated his name several times while searching the ceiling. “No, I’m quite sure I don’t know that name.”

“Oh,” I began. “I think you do. Years ago now, you lost much silver on a hand machine instruction.”



“sir, I am an entrepreneur. I make and lose silver all the time.”

“Oh, I think you remember Anderssen. You had spent considerable amounts on the development of his instruction; to give people the ability to use their hand machines to generate photographic evidence of the food they ate and share it with others.”

“Perhaps, it might ring a bell.”

“Then it might also ring a bell that the instruction failed dismally in the market, causing you to lose substantially.”

“Yes, now that you mention it. It does come to mind.”

“And that Professor Anderssen’s body was found in an alley in the capital, at the rear of your offices, with multiple stab wounds to his chest and a crushed skull having plummeted three stories to the pavement below.”

She stared at me. Her pupils narrowed.

“Detective, that was a long time ago and nothing become of it.”

I leant back and nodded. “You are quite right; nothing came of it. With all the evidence there really wasn’t any evidence at all, and so the investigation was closed by the Catcher.”

“And as such, why raise such a horrific event?”

“Because you lost money recently on one of Professor Pyke’s instructions.”

Miss Vil stood and paced the room. Eventually, she stopped in the centre and looked at me as she folded her arms. “Just what are you implying?”

I stood and walked over to her. “You have history, Miss Vil. And history repeats. Professor Anderssen was dealt with harshly. And here we have another dead Professor, following similar dealings. A leopard does not change its spots.”

She smiled, just a little at first. Then it quickly became laughter.

“Do you find the Professor’s death amusing?” I exacerbated.

“Oh, my dear fellow. Is that all you have? Some unsolved years-old case? Let me assure you, it was in *my* best interests for Professor Pyke to remain alive.”

“Is that so, Miss Vil? Perhaps you would like to elaborate.”

She moved to the window and looked out over the buildings. “I lost money on an instruction Pyke had created, yes, I will admit to that. However, he apologised, profusely, and suggested doubling down on a different project he needed funding for.”

“And of course, someone can corroborate this?”

She shook her head. “It was a personal deal.”

“Even still, there will still be a trail.”

“Be my guest,” she said as she waved me away.

“Believe me, I will. I still don’t understand why you would trust someone who had lost your silver.”

She turned. “What can I say. Pyke had hit my nerve, made me curious. He told a good story and showed me a prototype. It was new, different, the likes of which you have never seen.” She approached me; her stare unflinching as she advanced. She placed her hands on my lapels and tugged down gently. “So, you see, I don’t find Professor Pyke’s death amusing, I find it an inconvenience.” She leaned in and whispered in my ear. “Of course, I’m not going to say I didn’t enjoy the news that poor old Anderssen met *his* demise. He should have been more careful as to whom he dealt with.”

She pulled back, and I stared into her eyes. I hoped to see warmth, compassion... guilt. Instead, they were cold, uncaring. A shiver ran up my spine and I did my best to hide it.

I backed away from her and collected my bowler hat from the table.

“Just one last question, Miss Vil.”

She stood, unmoving, waiting.

“Where were you two nights ago?”

She crossed her arms and tapped her chin as she thought. "Two nights ago, let me see." A few seconds passed. "Oh, I do believe I was at dinner the entire night."

"Of course. With Professor Sinn?"

She looked at me curiously. "Why do you ask?"

"Oh, nothing," I said shrugging. "It was something he said in passing."

"Well, if he said it, it must be true," she responded with a smile.

"That's right. You and..." I left the statement open and waved my hand, inviting her to finish the sentence.

"Mr Black?"

I waved a finger. "Ah, that's right! Mr Black, how could I forget. Miss Vil, thank you for your time."

Outside, Twix continued to rub his cheek. "Sorry, Finch. Don't know what happened in there."

"I sure as hell know what happened, Twix! Like I said, strategies, tactics, approaches. Read the person, find the chink in their armour, then exploit. Rule number four. Expose and make use of your adversary's weakness."

"Like you did with Miss Vil?"

"*Exactly* what I did with Miss Vil."

"So, what are you thinking?"

"Too early to tell, however, I need to check up on a few things." I pulled out my hand machine and sent an electronic communication to the Projects Office. If Pyke had been searching for funding it would show there, along with Vil's payment.

"And what of this reference to Black? I tell you, Finch, this is getting more and more curious as we go."

"Yes, it will certainly be interesting to see what he has to say."

"Good thing we're going to talk with him next."

"Did you want to take the lead on this one, Twix?"

Twix rubbed his cheek again. “If it’s all the same to you I think I’d rather just soak up the experience.”

## Chapter 16

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AND JUST AS WELL. VAUGHAN Black was a large man who didn't seem to take any stick from anyone. In fact, I was sure the two officers outside of his room prayed he would cooperate with their demands without a fight.

He sat with thick arms threaded across his barrel chest and he wore a permanent sneer on a face that had seen the harshest of ocean storms. One of his ears was mangled beyond use and he had a scar that encircled an eye, most likely due to some conflict with fortuitous pirates. Regardless, he made no effort to hide or disguise his disfigurements, opting to shave his head, small stalks of yellow growing over a large melon of a head like freshly cut grass.

His curt responses to my questions merely added to his unsavoury persona. His size was more than intimidating, the bulk an advantage if someone wanted to pilfer the Professor's smart machine invention at pace.

"Why were you going to attend the late Professor Pyke's demonstration?"

"Because I was invited."

"Really? By whom?"

"By the person who sent me the invitation."

Of course.

"And would you care to elaborate on who that person was?" I asked, waving my hand, inviting Black to offer up some information.

"No."

One thing can be said for Black. He answers the question, and only the question, in the most efficient means necessary. One thing I did notice, however, was his complete lack of emotion. Every answer, every syllable, cold as steel on a winter's morning. Every response directed over the table struck me like a wasp.

“You know I can call the magistrate and have access to your records in minutes?”

He paused, then, “Yes.”

I sighed.

“I find it strange that someone of your employ within the Workers Office would come with the sincerest of intentions.”

“In what way?”

“Well, in the public presentations leading up to his demise, the Professor spoke of machines with sufficient smarts to accomplish the simplest of manual labour tasks.”

We stared at each other. Black chewed something invisible.

Eventually, he spoke. “So?”

I paused. “Let me come back to that.”

“Three years ago, you were investigated by the Catcher’s Office.”

He rubbed his square jaw, the first movement I had seen during the conversation. “I don’t recall any investigation.”

“Oh, just because you didn’t see it didn’t mean it wasn’t happening.”

He shrugged.

“Let me assist with your memory. Bentley Lane, leader of an opposing Union office went missing. Gone without a trace, was missing for seventy-two hours.” We stared at each other across the table. “And just as we start sniffing around your door, Lane miraculously reappears, shaken, but alive. All attempts to gain intelligence from him was futile.” I leaned forward, my elbows on the table. “You see, Mr Black, Lane wasn’t talking. Whoever had kidnapped the poor sod gave him the scare of death. There was nothing we could do. Any formal investigation was ceased, archived, cold.”

“What’s your point?” he snarled through clenched teeth.

“Well, my point is that you seem to be someone who doesn’t let anything stand in their way.”

“And why should I let anything stand in my way? I’ve paid my dues, done my time, worked my way up, and there is nothing that’s going to knock me off my perch.”

“Exactly! Why should anybody tell you what to do?”

“Too right!”

“No one should take away your livelihood.”

“Absolutely.”

“That’s why you needed to get rid of the Professor!”

“Corre .. hang on a minute.” He slammed a large hand down and the table shook. “I had nothing to do with it!”

“And just why not? The Professor’s invention had the potential to put a lot of people out of work, meaning your member base would plummet overnight. Over time, it would decrease to a point where you yourself would be not required. You’ve proven to not let anything impede your success. Is it too much to think you needed the Professor, and his invention mind you, out of the way?”

Black rolled his neck from side to side, bones crunched and popped as he moved. They clasped his hands together and stretched, his knuckles cracked from the pressure.

“But I didn’t want the Professor out of the way.”

I sat back and crossed my legs. “Is that so?”

“Yes,” he said, folding his arms, “That is so.”

I started to ask a question and then stopped. I had learnt my lesson. “Tell me why it is so.”

“Because the Professor assured me himself.”

“I’m sorry. But when did you speak to the Professor?”

“I didn’t speak to the Professor, per se. He spoke to me.”

I placed my hands behind my head. “Enlighten me, Mr Black, for this story is becoming enthralling.”

He looked at the wall and bit his lip as if trying to recall the conversation... or *a* conversation.

“He said that while there would be a short-term decrease in member numbers, those out of work would establish new skills, and find jobs in new areas. This would not only replenish what I had lost, it would boost my membership considerably.”

“You don’t seem the type content on the ambiguous nature of a ‘short-term loss.’”

He took a deep breath and slowly released. “He also said he would pay me for my troubles... for any short-term losses.”

“I see. I might view that interaction as extortion.”

“No, no, no. You’ve got that wrong. The Professor came to me with that deal.”

“And you can verify this, an electronic communication of sorts?”

He looked from me to Twix and back again. “I’m afraid not, Detective.”

I blinked slowly. It felt like the right side of my head was about to explode. “Special Detective. And why not?”

“Because it was a conversation. In person. Face to face.”

“And I suppose it was sealed with nothing more than a handshake.”

“That’s right.”

“Very convenient, for you, Mr Black.”

“A hand might mean nothing where you from, but for someone who has sailed many a nefarious sea, where things above you, beside you, and below you, could kill you at a moment’s notice, a handshake is stronger than any piece of paper and floral signature upon it.”

“Uh-ha.” I tapped my fingers together as I stared over the table.

“Where were you two nights ago?”

“Dinner.”

“That was a quick response, Mr Black. You seemed pretty sure of it.”

He didn’t move.

“And was there anyone else at dinner, that can corroborate this alibi?”



He didn't respond. So, I kept talking.

"If I mentioned the names of Mr Sinn and Miss Vil, would that ring any bells for you?"

He was motionless. Even his chewing motion had stopped.

I stood. "I will take that as a yes."

• • • •

"WHAT DO YOU THINK?" Twix was reading something on this hand machine. "He sounds devious."

"Perhaps. Listen, I think it's time we divide and conquer. I want you to find any link between Black and the Professor, any meeting they might have had. And while you're at it, found out where he was yesterday early evening when the Professor's smart machine went missing. Ask around the hotel, see if anyone saw him around."

"Do you think the General will add any further colour to the investigation, Finch?"

"Well, let's see. So far, we have motivation, history, collusion, possible extortion. We've got the means, the smarts and the physical attributes. I'd say more than one person is involved in this crime. There is a stronger link here, we just need to find it.

My hand machine emitted a ping. I had received an electronic communication. I retrieved the device and checked.

"You know what, Twix? Before you investigate, how about we make an arrest?"

I marched towards the stairs. Twix ran to catch up. "Who?"

"Mr Sinn. The Magistrate's Office tells me there is no sealed agreement between him and the late Professor. Sinn has been lying to us. We will use this as leverage, we will use him to turn on the others. He is the most susceptible, the most likely to fall under the weight of imprisonment."

Unfortunately, we weren't quick enough.

## Chapter 17

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WE DESCENDED THE TWO flights at pace, all the while Twix attempted to raise the officers inside Sinn's room to prepare. I wanted the honour myself of arresting the liar and interrogating him then and there. There would be no shackles, no lengthy trip to a holding cell. I would make him talk using every method known and allowed to me by the Catcher's Office. Wet towels, a bathtub, my baton. I had many tools at my disposal for finding out the truth.

"Can't get 'em on the hand machine," Twix panted as he hurried to keep up, dashing across the landing between sets of stairs that separated the levels.

"Not to worry, Twix. We'll be there soon enough."

As we rounded the corner the sight of a plain-clothes officer, lying prone on the floor, unmoving, filled my vision. His arms outstretched, his legs in the room itself, keeping the door ajar. Twix came up behind me fast and almost barrelled into my back, changing tack at the last minute. The sight of the man on the ground made him gasp.

"Sinn!" Twix shouted under his breath. "He knew we were coming for him!"

I remained silent and extracted my baton, whipping it down and extended it to full length. I held it against my leg as I moved cautiously towards the lifeless man, Twix just behind. With my eyes on the space between the door and frame, I knelt down beside the prone man and checked his pulse. Still alive, but would be certain to have a nasty headache when he woke up. I stood, silently pushing Twix to the side and raised my baton over my shoulder, ready to swing down if necessary.

I nudged the door open. The crime apparent, the victim ostensible. The small table and chairs, the ones we happened to be sitting at not that long ago, lay strewn around the room, upturned and at various angles. The table contents dispersed. Against the wall to my right was the

second officer, sitting against the wall. His arms hung lazily beside him. On the bed, Mr Sinn lay amongst displaced sheets. The picture was a far cry from the neat and pristine image that it used to be.

“Oh my,” Twix said, standing at my shoulder. I thought he might have had to scarper to the restroom to upend his stomach contents, given his previous form. However, to his credit, he held his nerve. “What the hell happened to him?”

“I’ll check him out. You make sure the killer isn’t hiding elsewhere in the room.”

While Twix cautiously checked the room for any signs of the perpetrator, I investigated the body. Mr Sinn’s clothes were a shamble, visible signs of a struggle. His glasses lay beside him having been dislodged from his face during the altercation. Lifeless white eyes stared up at the ceiling. A look of anguish stole the majority of his features. There looked to be some bruising on his neck, red marks, consistent, in my experience, of someone who had been strangled to death.

Twix appeared from the bathroom with his hands on his hips. “Nothing here, Finch. Looks like the killer left the same way he arrived.”

I picked up one of the upturned chairs, righted it, and sat down in the middle of the room.

“So,” I began. “We are looking for someone who can break down a door, overcome not one, but two, trained officers of the constabulary, and strangle a man.”

“Well,” Twix said, removing his cap and scratching his head. “That could be anyone.”

“Certainly, Twix. However not just anyone would want to go to the trouble of committing such an act unless there was a purpose, a motive. Whoever did this, had a reason. Possibly to keep Sinn quiet.”

“What about Miss Vil? She seemed a little put out when you told her Sinn mentioned her name.”

“I recall,” I began, “However, not only would she need to commit this crime but she also would have had to overcome two additional guards located inside her own room. It feels like that suspicion went from possible to improbable.”

“What about Black? If they were all in this together why not him?”

“That’s just the thing, Twix. If they were all in this together why murder a member of the group? Unless of course, the person thought Mr Sinn was going to cave into questioning.”

“And Black certainly didn’t seem like someone who takes kindly to someone interfering with his plans.”

“Very well then.” I stood. “Call the officers watching Black and check for further foul play. Let me know as soon as you have confirmed.” I headed for the door. “While I’m gone, check with the officers. Try to rouse them and see what they know.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to go and check on Miss Vile. If Black is trying to clean up some loose ends, chances are he’s heading there next.”

“Or he’s already been there,” Twix said nonchalantly.

## Chapter 18

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I GRABBED THE STAIR rail, pulling myself up, skipping stairs with every bound. One flight up. Twenty-four marble steps in a sweeping arc. I rounded the corner to find constabulary seemingly knocked out. Déjà vu. One was face down. The other lying in a foetal position against the wall, their head on an outstretched arm. From the view at the point where the stairs met the landing, they appeared sleeping. With my baton once again at full extension and on my shoulder, I stalked down the corridor, keeping an ear for sound, anything that might indicate the perpetrator is close. Unfortunately, the only thing I heard was my steady breathing and irregular heartbeat.

As I approached, I noted the door slightly ajar, same as downstairs. I nudged it open. Similar scenes to Mr Sinn. Items disturbed; furniture upturned... a body. Ms Vile lay on the floor at the foot of the bed. Her limbs lay in akimbo. A shoe, missing from Ms Vile, was on the other side of the room, a possible attack or defence against the culprit. Her head was at a funny angle, and this along with purple bruising suggested she met her end via a broken neck. Her face still held her shock, her mouth gaped open, yet no more sound would utter from her full lips.

I was too late; the killer had struck. I was, once again, two steps behind and struggling to keep up. I pulled out my hand machine and keyed in a number, eager to speak with Carthy. This situation was quickly spiralling out of control, even for a Catcher... even for me.

However, before I could press the last number, my hand machine buzzed.

“What is it, Twix?” My answer was curt and sharp.

“I think you need to get to Black.”

“Have they arrested him?”

There was a pause. “I’m not... I don’t think so. The officer sounded groggy.”

"I'm on my way now. Call Carthy and get him here now. I will meet you at Mr Black's room."

"What about Ms Vile? Is she okay?"

"No, Twix. No, she's not."

I ran out of the room for the stairs, the hand machine still pressed to my ear. I could hear Twix puffing, obviously climbing the stairs, a floor below me. "What's going on, Finch? What's happening?" His voice wavered of someone entirely out of their depth, kicking furiously to stay above the waves.

I didn't know what to say, other than, "I don't know, Twix. I really don't know."

Stairs disappeared beneath my feet as I once again ascended the Confluence at pace. As I hit the landing, Twix jumped down from the stairs leading up to the next floor. I looked behind me. "What the hell are you doing up there? I thought you were coming from Mr Sinn's room on the first level."

"I was," Twix said, sounding surprised that I should even ask how he came to be descending onto the level. "I figured the elevator was the quickest way. Just that in the frenzy I told the operator the wrong floor."

I shook my head. "Yes, yes, whatever, Twix. Come, let us get to—" And I stopped.

No officers outside the room at all, no apparent sign of a struggle. That is, of course, until I stood in front of the door. Splintered wood around the frame, a boot print square on the door. It seemed as if the attacker had undertaken a more direct attack to gain entry.

The door swung open freely. Inside the room, an officer was crumpled in a heap near the bath door. The other officer was lying face up, limbs at all angles, eyes closed. Like the others, neither man had drawn a weapon which meant the element of surprise was indeed surprising.

The centrepiece of the crime scene was Mr Black. He sat at the table, the same table that held our conversation, his head tilted back, his arms crossed over his chest. Defiant, it seemed, even in death, as if

willing the attacker to do harm, and not put off when they actually did. Betwixt his neck and arms was the weapon responsible for his death. The intricate handle of a silver bread knife stuck out, and blood had gathered at the wound.

Twix rushed past me to the private bathroom, the sound of him up-ending the contents of his stomach loud and echoic.

So, Mr Black was certainly not the suspect. Which meant, not only had I no suspects for Professor Pyke's murder, I had no suspects for these murders either.

Which wasn't entirely true. There was one more person we hadn't spoken to yet, and perhaps they held the key to everything. I went to the door.

"Where are you going?" A voice asked as I turned the handle.

I turned. Twix came out of the bathroom, slowly. He had one hand on his stomach and the other on his phone.

"Our last suspect!" I shouted. "Surely, he holds the answers to all of this. Surely, he can point us in the right direction. Least of all, if the killer is still out there, he may be headed there next!"

"You're right."

"Of course, I'm right," I said as I opened the door. And then closed it again. "Wait, what? What am I right about?"

"The killer heading there next."

"What are you talking about, Twix?"

"I just got a call from the officers outside the General's room."

My heart sank. I dropped my head against the door frame. My hand slipped off the handle.

"Twix," I said slowly. I felt sick. "If you are going to tell me the General is dead, I am going straight to the Pig for five rounds of root beer."

"Sorry, Finch. You're going to have to cork that thirst of yours because you couldn't be further from the truth."

## Chapter 19

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I KNEW HIM AS SOON as I walked in, as soon as I saw him.

The General stood as if at attention. His back was straight, despite the copious medals that adorned his barrel chest. His dress uniform was blue, with the insignia of his rank displayed proudly on his sleeves, collar and cap. A Sam Browne belt finished the ensemble, complete with a revolver on his hip. He was regal at first glance and intimidating at subsequent viewings.

“Ah, Catcher. I was wondering when you would be making your way here,” the General barked, his brown bushy moustache bristling with every word.

Beside him, kneeling on the floor with his hands constrained behind him, was a man. Shaved head, cold eyes, blood dripping from a once-too-often broken nose. The man from the alley. The same one on my first day told me to stop investigating and leave town. Here he was, in all his thuggery, paying the price for attacking the wrong man, for the General had seen his fair share of conflict and tough enough to have survived it all. Two officers flanked the Thug, who looked down upon their prey with menacing looks and marks on their faces. Obviously, the Thug had gotten a few punches off before succumbing to the General.

I looked at the quarry. “The Magistrate thanks you very much for your assistance, General.”

He rubbed his large right hand, presumably the one that was responsible for breaking the Thug’s nose. “No problem at all, Catcher. I’m a man of service, after all.”

“Regardless, General. I suppose the Magistrate will write to recommend another commission for you.”

The General grunted. “Perhaps, as a matter of repayment, you could inform me who he is, why he’s here, and why I’m being held for questioning?”



“In order of your questions, General, he is the one, I heavily suspect, of doing away with the others I have questioned today. He came here to do the same to you. Why? I’m yet to ascertain. But I will when I have the opportunity. What we can agree on is that you got the better of him. Now, why you are being held? I do so apologise for the inconvenience, although with pressing matters here,” I pointed to the Thug on the ground, “Perhaps we could postpone our conversation in the briefest.”

The General nodded. “As you must, Catcher. I have much respect for your Office.”

“Although, how, may I ask, you managed to apprehend such a brute?”

“Certainly, Catcher. I was standing by the window when this thug burst in through the door. He made short work of the officers here, sorry to say. When I saw the look in his eyes, I realised there was only one way to deal with him.” He held up a fist. “Brute force, Catcher, brute force. I had seen something similar with my stint in the Mage. Khut root chews every damn one of them. It gave them the same cold, steely look. Murderers, savages, every last one of them. Best they find the shackles on a rotting barge if you catch my words. And most of them did, you know, only to re-join our ranks as part of their punishment.”

I nodded. There was nothing to be read between the General’s lines, mainly because he didn’t need words to hide his intention. He had gained boundless respect from his numerous campaigns, time and time again earning victory from impossible tasks. There is no one that the Ministry trusts more than the General.

I turned to Twix. “Call Carthy and have him take this one away. We shall question him in the confines of a cage where I am sure he both no doubt belongs and will find himself in for the rest of his days.”

“Already done, Finch. Carthy’s on his way.”

“Very well.” I walked up to the man and crouched down in front of him. “What about you,” I said. “What’s your name?”

No reply.

“Anything you wish to say for yourself?”

He lifted his head and stared at me in silence.

“You don’t deny the charge?”

He smirked! The nerve of it all.

I stood. “Answer me!” I screamed.

Nothing. He slowly lowered his head.

Then he mumbled something.

“I’m sorry? You have something to say? Any words for your defence?”

He slowly raised his head again. “You are too late, Catcher. This will all be over soon.”

He closed his eyes and returned his chin to his chest.

I stood and turned to face Twix. “I want you to go with him and Carthy back to the station while I stay here and talk with the General.”

“Are you sure?”

I nodded. “Carthy or no, he will have his hands full with this one. Best he has the best man in the constabulary by his side.”

Twix beamed. “Thank you, sir.”

Then his face dropped. The look of pure joy turning into pure fear in the space of a millisecond.

“Finch, look out!”

But it was too late. He was too quick. In a seemingly impossible instant, the Thug had weaselled out of his handcuffs and lunged at me. I turned to see a flash, and I was hit hard. Not from my front but from my back. Twix had pushed me out of the way, only to become the target of the attack.

I felt the Thug brush against me, a hand close to me, as I stumbled forward. I thought for a moment Twix had taken the weapon from me, however, when I regained myself, I turned to see the Thug standing per-

fectly still behind Twix. The Thug had wrapped an arm around his prisoner's neck, the other holding my taser against Twix's head. I felt my jacket, knowing the criminal had somehow lifted my secondary weapon from my being. It was then I realised I had been underestimating the Thug, not giving him enough credit for his amazingly quick actions.

Feeling somewhat embarrassed the brute had gotten the best of me, I held out my hands, like I was trying to soothe a beast. "Now, don't do anything stupid. That is a man of the law you are holding. There are penalties, severe penalties, should you do something irrational. Would you rather find yourself on a barge or the bottom of the inlet with a block of cement tied around your ankles?"

He pulled the taser away from Twix's head and pressed the trigger. Blue lightning crackled between the prongs. Twix's light brown pants darkened, and a steady stream of urine flowed out of his pants leg and onto the floor.

"Don't come any closer, Catcher. I told you this was all going to be over soon, and that's exactly what I meant."

I stepped forward. "We're not going to let you just walk out of here with a member of the constabulary in your arms."

He stepped back. "Just watch me," he snarled. "I killed those people. I killed all of 'em, that bloody Professor to boot, but I'm not going on no damn boat again! Never again!"

"So," I started. "You admit it. A total of four deaths you lay title to. Your crimes are well beyond that of a prison barge. Why did you do it?"

He smirked. "That one, Finch, I'm taking to the grave."

"Why?!" I screamed. "Why did you do it? I need to know, why!"

He ignored me, content to remain silent and hold not only Twix hostage, but also the reasoning behind his brutality.

Our dance continued. Me forward. Him backwards, towards the door. I caught the General in the corner of my eye, rounding the room, flanking the fugitive. He bawled his fists, ready for action.

"You've got nowhere to go, Thug," I stated.

The General was in the perfect position to strike, however held his ground. I willed him to attack the Thug, to end this madness. He remained stubborn in his stature.

The Thug stood in the doorway, with Twix clinging to consciousness by a thread. His feet kept slipping from under him, his body being held upright by the arm around his neck. The look of concern only grew as his face went red and his white eyes bulged.

“On the contrary, Catcher. I’ve got the world open to me. I’ll be with the birds, I will.” Eyebrows raised over wide eyes. “With the birds,” he whispered.

The blow to the side of this head came fast and furious, and with a swiftness that surprised everyone, most of all, the recipient of it. The dull thud turned the Thug’s lights off in an instant, causing his eyes to roll back in his head and roll sideways, crashing onto the floor. Twix also collapsed, but for entirely different reasons.

Carthy stepped into the doorway, a red smear on his club he held by his side. He touched his cap in greeting.

“Well,” he said. “As they say, timing is everything.”

## Chapter 20

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IT TOOK THE WORK OF Carthy and two of his officers to carry the unconscious Thug to the elevators, as was the prisoner's size. The rest of us followed, including the General who was no doubt looking for a handshake from the Superintendent of the local police force for his efforts, if not a ceremony bestowed by the Chief Magistrate.

Luckily, the mass of crowds eager to get away as Twix and I arrived that morning, had dispersed. Their trip to Grace would no doubt be a party favour told in parlours for many years, and no doubt they would be embellished to the nth degree.

The officers loaded the ruffian into a waiting carriage, easily identifiable from the box design, barred windows and a faded 'CONSTABULARY' stencilled on the side in large white print. The two, white, drive horses brayed and clapped their hooves impatiently as the carriage jostled when the additional weight was added.

Carthy locked the door himself and pocketed the key as the two officers jumped up into the driver's seat. This carriage lacked every comfort that innocent people are able to enjoy.

He turned to face me. "Well done, Finch. Seems you have caught the one responsible."

"I certainly can't take credit for this catch, Carthy. The result here is very much thanks to the General here," I said as I presented the General.

Carthy pushed out a hand. "Well, this station thanks you, General. You have gone above and beyond."

The General took the hand and shook vigorously. "Just doing my part, Superintendent."

"Enough of the modesty, General. I shall recommend an order in your name."

The General's moustache bristled and he brushed it down, all the while murmuring to himself, an inwards congratulation.

“And let us not forget Twix here,” I said.

Carthy’s eyebrow raised. “Oh?”

I gave Twix a sideways glance. “Instrumental, one would say.”

Carthy eyed the junior officer. “Is that a fact?”

“You’re a lucky man, Carthy, to have such talent in your midst. Given the right encouragement, I would say young Twix here is headed for big things.”

“Is that right?” Carthy said to me. He then turned to Twix. “We shall discuss this further later, Constable Twix.”

Twix beamed and just about blushed. “Thank you, sir.”

Carthy turned to me. “Where to from here then, Finch?”

“A few minutes with the General, Carthy, and then to the station to interrogate our suspect here.”

“Suspect? I think you will find a guilty man! Confessed he did. I heard him myself while crouched outside the General’s door! I think my station can take care of the details from here, Catcher. It won’t take long to order the noose. How about you take the rest of the day off? Celebrate the fine detective work you have undertaken. Take Twix, buy the man a drink for his efforts!”

“Appreciate the offer, Carthy. But I am here to see this case though, and I won’t be through until the confession is witnessed, signed and stamped with His Majesty’s seal. Besides, I have a few questions in need of answering, if you would indulge me?” I turned to Twix. “Rule number five. It’s not over until it’s over.”

Carthy paused, and then said, “As you wish, Finch. You have the full support of my station. We shall detain the rogue and await your attendance.”

I nodded.

Twix stepped forward. “All the same to you, Superintendent, I would consider it a privilege to escort the prisoner to our holding cell.”

Carthy looked at Twix and then to me. I could see the look of concern on his face.

I recalled Carthy's earlier concerns about Twix and how I couldn't fathom any of them. He did, after all, put his life on the line to save mine. That, at least in my books, earned the right to divulge oneself from suspicion of any wrongdoing.

"Twix has been nothing but a consummate law professional," I said. "I see no harm in him seeing out this component of the process. I trust him wholeheartedly."

Carthy chewed this over. He eventually stepped aside and waved Twix through. Motivated by a rush of blood, Twix moved to embrace the Superintendent. As Twix embraced his superior, Carthy pushed him away.

"For the love of God, Twix. It would seem there are still some things to work on."

Twix nodded and brushed past him, almost knocking his superior off balance as he did so. Twix jumped up and grabbed the wagon's bars. He started shouting obscenities at the prisoner.

"Twix!" Carthy shouted. "Some professionalism in the constabulary."

At once, Twix jumped down, turned, saluted.

"Rush of blood, Carthy," I said. "Excitement from the chase. He will calm soon enough, no doubt sleep for hours post."

Carthy didn't respond. He had fixed his stare on a driverless black carriage that was stationary beside the constabulary cart. We followed his concern. "Hey," he called out.

A black cloaked driver climbed to his position.

"Move it along," Carthy ordered. "You are blocking the path. This is official business, lest you fancy a night in the cells."

The driver—wild, dark hard under a dark hat—lifted his hand to his face. He made a signal and flicked on the reins. After a series of clicks, the horses pulled forward, removing the obstruction.

Twix jumped on the rear of the wagon in the watcher's post and smacked the carriage roof. The driver slapped the reins and the carriage

lurched forward into life. I watched as the drive horses plunged into a melodic trot and traversed the smooth road, heading to the bridge, and the station located in one of the many dark alleyways beyond.

Something bothered me. But I just couldn't put my finger on what it was.

Carthy stepped around and into my vision.

"Finch, how did you want to handle this conversation with the General?"

A hand on my shoulder pulled me around, my view spinning. When the world settled, the General's face filled my outlook.

"Catcher, I wanted to say it was an absolute pleasure to have worked with you today."

I acknowledged the comment and turned back to the cart. However, the General grabbed my shoulder and spun me around. "So, are we going to have a chat now? Or should I order a Stones from the bar?"

"A what?" I mused, somewhat distracted in my own head.

Carthy jumped in. "Oh, root beer laced with spices and set alight? Why, that would be the way to converse!" Carthy grabbed my other shoulder. "Catcher, what does one say to that proposition?"

"Sorry, what do I say to what?"

"Are you going to have a chat, or not?" Carthy pushed.

But I couldn't let it go. I started to turn as I spoke. "Yes, yes, in a hasty minute."

Then a crash. Shouting, whinnies, a crack. I pushed Carthy out of the way, who he himself was in the midst of turning to the ruckus.

I focused on the bridge. Something had gone wrong. The police box was resting precariously on the railing, the driver horses stamping their hooves having all but escaped their lodgings. Twix and the officers had jumped clear but were now scrambling to their feet, attempting to grab hold of the box and at least secure it on its perch.

I instantly broke into a run, Carthy a step behind, the General's barking voice loud in my ear. I watched helplessly as the efforts of Twix



and others was a futile match for gravity and physics. The box was slipping and inch by inch gaining momentum, manoeuvring to its tipping point.

The horses backed up.

“Quick,” Twix yelled, “Untie the horses. It’s going to go over.”

As we hit the approach at speed, there was a loud crack as the shaft snapped, releasing the horses, who bolted as a pair, still tied to each other. The resulting force reverberated the length of the pole to the box and provided the necessary effort to begin the slip over the edge. Twix and the others stepped back, separating themselves from any potential entrapment to the icy depths below, and watched as the police box disappeared from view.

Then a silence that seemed to last forever, the kind of silence where the bang was imminent but no one knew when it was coming. Eventually, it came, raw and uncompromising. The box crushed as it hit the river below, upended and slowly started to sink.

We were all lined up on the edge, taking in the view, utterly powerless to help.

I took a step back and removed my coat, throwing it to the ground followed by my hat.

Carthy looked at me. “What the hell are you doing?”

“The man’s going to drown!” I yelled.

Carthy grabbed my shoulders. “It’s suicide man!”

“I need to know!” I bellowed into his face.

Twix said, “It’s too late, Finch. There is nothing we can do.”

We watched, as did the crowds that gathered, as the final corner of the carriage went under the surface with a bubbling gurgle, wholeheartedly swallowed by the abyss. More silence. Minutes passed. And still, we looked, what for, I was uncertain. If the lack of oxygen didn’t get him, the frigidness of the river would. Even if he escaped, he would still die. His body would be lost to the depths forever. It seems fate had expedited his sentence, sending him to a watery death before us mere

mortals could do it. Perhaps I shouldn't have been overly concerned given the result was the same, however, due process wasn't followed, steps were missed, and questions left unanswered. I loathed having to report on the case, and worse when the Magistrate read it. Four dead suspects. It wasn't a good look for the Catcher's Office. I would be lucky to walk away with my position and escape any formal charges.

I slowly backed away, through the crowds that had gathered on and around the bridge to stare into the water, hoping to glimpse something, of anything, that could be a talking point over their coffee, or root beer, or whatever tickled their fancy. Again, another story that would be told in front of fireplaces. 'I was there,' is how it would start. And then facts would intermingle with fiction, and new stories would emerge, fake heroics would be created.

I picked up my hat and placed it on my head haphazardly. Pulled on my jacket. Took one last look at the Confluence, the eight stories of wondrous concrete and glass engineering, turned my back and started over the bridge.

Over the murmurings and rumblings of the crowd, I heard my name. I kept walking.

"Finch! Finch!"

Twix arrived at my side, puffing. "Where to from here, Finch?"

I stopped and looked at him. "Where to? Where to?! Have a look around you, Twix. It's over. There is nowhere to go." I started walking. "This case is closed. The Catcher's Office appreciates your assistance with this case."

I made a mental note to mention Twix's good work in my report. That along with words already said to Carthy should land him in good stead. The rest would be up to him.

"What about rule number five? It's not over 'til it's over."

"Take a look around you, Twix. It's over. It's all over," I said, walking away from Twix.

"Well," Twix yelled out, "Where are you going?"

“I’m going to pack and drink several root beers. Not necessarily in that order.”

I didn’t look back.

There was a reason I left Grace in the first place. The events of the past days had reaffirmed that reason, cemented it into my conscious. Death had followed me there, a hungry, wild dog unable to leave my side.

It was time to leave Grace, and God willing, I wouldn’t return.

## Chapter 21

---

IT WAS SURPRISING HOW easy it was to reach the bottom of a mug when you cared not for the outcome. Maybe it shouldn't have been so surprising. Maybe it should have been enlightening. Regardless, after the third, I found my disquiet slipping away in a barrage of froth.

When I arrived, I was the only one in the establishment and so took up residence on one of the stools at the bar, my bowler hat sitting vigilantly beside me. No one came to talk to me. Not Carthy, not Twix. No one wanting a report or to understand what happened at the Confluence, or to steal my drink for that matter. Perhaps Twix had filled them in, perhaps there was nothing more to say on the matter.

Over time (however much time had passed), the taphouse patrons had grown in numbers, the drone of conversation had snuck up on my silence. It was only when someone plonked a fourth mug down in front of me did I snap out of my reflection.

I looked up at her with slack eyes. "Where's Bourke?" I grumbled, keen to settle any tab that I may have created.

"I... I'm not sure," Lacy stumbled.

"What do you mean you're not sure? He's always here." Or had been for the few days I was in town. I let that sink in. A few days. It had felt like longer. So much had happened. Mysteries. Ambiguities. Riddles. More questions than answers.

She rung a dry rag in her hands, the look of concern growing on her features. "I mean I haven't seen him. He hasn't come in. No communications. No messages. Nothing. It's like he up and disappeared in the middle of the night."

I took a sip from the mug. "And has this ever happened before?"

"No... well, I mean, he used to go for days at a time."

"Where did he go?"

“He would never tell me. He would close me out, tell me to forget about it. I could tell he didn’t like where he was going. Came back all muddy on every occasion, like he had been crawling in the dirt. Said he owed someone a favour; said he was almost done repaying the debt.”

“Well, perhaps he has returned to his hole in the ground.”

“No, Catcher. No, he hasn’t.”

“And how can you be so sure? Are you a detective? Are you with the Catcher’s office? Can you not keep abreast of your employ?”

“This is different! Don’t ask me how or why, it just is.”

A cry rang out from down the bar as a patron shouted out an order.

She gave me one last look, that mixture of anger and sorrow, threw down her rag and attended her duty.

I took a second to reflect on my response to her, how blunt and ugly it was. I always prided myself on helping those in need, with getting to the bottom of things. I have failed in this case and failed in my conversation. What an ass. I picked up the mug, looked at the top of it, my reflection in the mixture. I stared down deep, to the bottom of the glass. Then sat it back on the bar.

Sleep. Time. Space. These were things I needed, not the bottom of a mug. I couldn’t believe the obvious took so long to enter my consciousness. Tomorrow I would concern myself with Bourke although I’m sure he would emerge in the morning having undertaken a splurge of Khut and wondering what all the fuss was about. Khut. Maybe that would help. Perhaps it would help get my thoughts in order. I pushed the notion out of my head.

I returned the mug to its resting place on the bar and awkwardly rummaged in my pocket for some silver. I leaned back on the stool to retrieve it, my body balancing precariously on the precipice of falling on my buttocks.

Leaning forward, I flicked the coin onto the bar. Whether by skill (highly doubtful given my condition) or luck (which I don’t believe in), the silver landed on its edge and miraculously began spinning. Not

at a great rate, mind you, however enough to gain my attention and steal my interest. I gazed at it as the taphouse lights reflected off the surface, the coin's engraved symbols coming to life and fading away into shadows.

Khut kept coming into my mind. The man who attacked me had been chewing it. The General mentioned it as something the enemy had. The man had a marking, same as Bourke, who told me it was a special military insignia. Carthy was also in the military. Twix, well, was never in the military, would never make it in the military. The General caught the Thug, the Thug died. The Thug mentioned birds, as did Bourke, as did Shire. I can't trust anyone, yet everyone wanted me to trust them. The Thug said he killed the suspects and the Professor. The Professor! The thing I was there for. Why did this all happen? Professor had a smart machine, somebody wanted to stop him, or somebody wanted to steal it. Either way, the Professor was dead. Was everything tied up in a neat little package, or was it a colossal mess on the floor? Nobody found. Everyone was connected, yet not, at the same time. What am I missing? I felt like a pawn on the chessboard, waiting for someone to move me into position, fodder for the more important pieces as they moved around the squares, each with their own agenda, each with their own *modus operandi*. It must connect. Everything connects, I can connect everything. But I don't know how. It will come. Let it come. Let the pieces connect.

*Thud.*

I shook my head and blinked. I stared at the small pouch that had landed on top of the coin, arresting momentum instantaneously, flattening the object. A rush of a cloak brushed past me, a vale of fiery red hair. I knew right away who it was. Thrusting the pouch into my coat pocket, I retrieved my bowler hat, and followed.

The cold bit me without remorse, like a rabid dog refusing to let go. The street was silent, the quiet roar from the taphouse fading with the closing door. The clip-clop of a horse somewhere in the streets. It had

gotten dark, don't know when. Shuffling feet to my right, the remnants of a cape disappearing around a corner. An overwhelming sense of déjà vu hit me and I grabbed my chest.

I rushed to the corner and peered around. The root beer and temperature making my head light. I peered into the gloom, weary and curious. Hands darted out and grabbed my lapels. Then I was spinning, my head a mush of nothing, my view half-light, half abyss, the light half getting smaller until it was a mere shaft somewhere in the distance. And then it was gone.

I blinked slowly, my slanting world slowly levelling out. A dark figure. My eyes adapted slowly. And then there she was. Shire. Her pale features under a dark hood.

"Well, hello, Shire," I said, a whimsical, drunken note on my words.

She flew at me, impossibly fast, her hands on me, her momentum pushing me back. I quickly found the wall, my back smashing against it. I puffed, semi winded.

Her face came in close until I felt like our faces shared the same cavern. "Don't you 'hello, Shire' me. I thought I could trust you, I thought you were going to help us. But all there's been is more death, more bodies, more people going missing."

I looked down, ashamed, unsure of my ability to fulfil my post. "I know."

"And now Bourke has gone missing."

"This is what I heard."

"Well, for someone who knows so much I find your action for justice dissimulating."

I reared up, swaying slightly. "Don't you tell me about justice. I have been pulled from pillar to post. Now, Shire, now is the time you come clean. Now is when you tell me. No more games. No more tricks."

She stepped back. "I will tell you what I know if you promise to do something with that information."

I nodded, the cold air somewhat sobering, and she started talking.

“You ever wonder what Carthy has over Bourke?”

“I often wondered why Carthy spends so much time at the tap-house and why Bourke puts up with it.”

“Carthy checks up on him. Bourke owes him.”

“Owes him what? Owes him why? He told me he wanted to right his wrongs. What did he do?”

“Bourke told me about a tunnel once. It must be about that.”

“A tunnel? What tunnel?”

“I’m not sure, but it’s not about what it is, it’s about what it’s used for. He made himself part of proceedings.”

“What proceedings? What is he involved with?”

“He wouldn’t say, but I know it has something to do with the people that went missing.”

More accusations. The mystery deepened.

“Bourke doesn’t seem to have a very high regard for you,” I stated coldly.

“As well he might. Before the explosion, I saw him carry something heavy into the Professor’s place. He didn’t come out till early the next morning.”

“The Professor’s place? Are you sure?”

She nodded. “I questioned him about it, accused him of things. I harassed him, begged him to tell me what was going on. All he said, was to *follow the birds*. Over and over he said it. When he spoke, his eyes would glaze over, like he wasn’t there.”

“Why are watching Bourke so closely? Why do you care?”

She looked down at her hands. “Because.”

“The is not an acceptable answer, Shire. You said you were going to tell me everything.”

She took a deep breath. “He’s my brother.”

I drew a sharp intake of breath. “Well, that is interesting.”

“You’ve got to help him. Help everyone.”



I thought of the flock that flew overhead that morning and what Twix said existed beyond the town. "What does it mean to follow the birds?"

She shrugged. "He wouldn't tell me."

"Well, what's to the north?"

She shrugged again. "Nothing. Marshlands. Cliffs. The sea."

I sighed. "And what is it that you have me do?"

She stepped back. "You are a Catcher, are you not? Are you not supposed to investigate such things? Such accusations?"

I thought of my allegations against Carthy the previous day, of his lack of process and procedure around missing people. I had lost my currency during the exchange. Now I had nothing left to even think about investigating such a person. "Accusations that are founded, not words that have been plucked from thin air."

"People are missing, are they not?"

"That is yet to be founded."

She stepped forward. "Bourke is missing, is he not?"

"That too, Shire, is uncertain. For all I know he's lying in a puddle of root beer and his own piss."

"There is so much going on here. I don't understand how you don't see that!" Her eyes were pleading yet her voice carried spite.

"You have not provided me with any evidence of anything! What we do have is people who have died, and the person responsible lost to the depths of the river." I stepped forward. "There is no evidence of people going missing. There is no evidence of Bourke going missing. The investigation is over!"

"Please," she mouthed. Eyes pleaded, like a beggar seeking scraps.

I sighed. "He is a big lad who can take care of himself, however, if he doesn't surface in the next few days, seek the help of the local station. They will make an initial investigation and, as per protocol, will instruct the Catcher's office if expertise is required."

“I can’t trust Carthy,” she said through clenched teeth. “And neither should you.”

I smiled. “And that is exactly what he told me about you.”

Silence.

“Why are you so blind?”

I straightened my coat. “Now, I’m going to go and pack, and in the morning, I will be gone, at which stage I am sure Bourke will have risen from whatever depths he has lost himself to.”

Shire stepped back, the look of shock turning into sadness. She placed a hand to her face, and darted off into the alley shadows, quickly becoming engulfed by the gloom.

## Chapter 22

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THE NEXT MORNING SEEMED to have come at a rapid pace. As I packed my belongings the feeling of unfinished business nagged at me like a leech. I stood in the middle of the room, hands on hips and stared into nothing, attempting to reconcile my last conversation with Shire.

Grace was a contradiction. Law without order. People going about their lives amidst a series of missing persons. Death and destruction against a backdrop of human interaction. No one seemed to care, either for the events or for the people going missing. Even the part of town on the other side of the river harboured hustle and bustle with top hats and stiff collars. It was another world away that was merely a walk away. The town concealed secrets that hadn't been revealed, and, after all, the best way to keep a secret is to pretend there isn't one in the first place. But without Bourke, there would be little hope in connecting the dots.

I utilised my hand machine to arrange return carriage back to the capital, and headed downstairs. However, when I arrived, I made two startling discoveries. The first was I actually hadn't eaten a meal in days, due to the expeditious nature of the case. The second was Bourke, who carefully placed the plate in front of me. He was very much alive, very much not missing, nor in a stupor, although he seemed to have endured a few scraps whilst absent. One of his eyes was blackened, and a poorly covered cut ran the length of his cheek. He grimaced while he walked. I found it odd someone had gotten the better of Bourke, given his size.

"I ran into Shire this last evening."

Bourke grabbed a glass and polished with the towel that was hanging over his shoulder. "Did you tell her to stay away from here?" he said, maintaining a focus on his chore.

"She told me you two are related."

He stopped; hands frozen. Squeezed until the glass shattered in his hand.

“You’re trying to protect her, aren’t you? That’s why you keep warding her away.”

He shrugged, absorbed himself in the thin lines of blood on his hands. “So, what if I am. Ain’t no law against that, is there?”

“But, why, Bourke? What is happening? What have you got yourself mixed up in?”

“Just best she stays as far away from ‘ere as possible, as far away from *me* as possible.”

“Shire told me she saw you going into the professors house.”

“You believe everything you ‘ear, Catcher?”

“Believe it or not, she is the only one I *do* believe right now! Tell me Bourke, what have you gotten yourself into?”

Silence.

“Is it something to do with Carthy?”

He looked up at me, his brow furrowed. “Carthy?”

“He’s always here, Bourke, always watching you. What do you owe him? What has he done to you?”

He sighed, pulled back his sleeve and pointed a bloody finger at his prisoner ink. “This,” he said. “I did my time, did my bit for the Command on the frontline. Did things I didn’t want to so the nation could advance. Figured it owed me something. So, I did things for money, enough to get this taphouse. Carthy suspects some untoward, which is why he be in ‘ere so often.”

“So Carthy’s not involved?”

He shrugged. “I don’t fully know what there is to be involved with. But Carthy ain’t the one I’m afraid of.”

“Even still, Bourke. That’s not enough to abscond him from this treachery.”

He looked away. “Just follow the birds, Catcher. That’s all I can say.”

“You keep saying this, Bourke. You need to give me more.”

“You’re the Catcher. Figure it out.”

I mulled this over, thought about everything in hushed silence. As I placed a silver on the counter, I made one more request of Bourke.

“Can I trust you, Bourke? To be there if I need you?”

“I just want to right the wrongs. I’ve been runnin’ for most of me life, fightin’ for the rest of it. I’m tired.”

“No one can alter their past. And it’s easier to pave a new path with others by your side.”

A mutual, silent nod, secured the transaction.

I sent an electronic communication to Twix. As I stood on the precipice with bag in hand, Bourke ducked into the kitchen as I bid adieu to the taphouse.

While waiting for the arrival of my homeward bound carriage, I paced around the rubble that constituted the Professor’s house. The sun used the clouds as effective cover, the morning a hazy grey, the winds picking up and dying down at irregular intervals. The street was quiet.

Twix arrived, as per my request, and skipped up the gutter and stood at the low gate, grasping it with both gloved hands. He had returned to his constabulary uniform “What on earth are you doing in there, Finch?” he shouted.

At that moment, my private carriage pulled up, pulled by two chocolate horses whose muscles glinted even in the cloud-covered sky. They whinnied and shook like it was an inconvenience for them to stop their momentum. The driver, who looked remarkably like Jace who drove me to Grace in the first place, tipped his cap. I returned the gesture.

I invited the driver to take stock for some moments and waved for Twix to join me on the property.

He waved me down to him in reply. “No! Down here, good sir. Your chariot awaits your immediate departure!”

Our exchange continued until he finally succumbed to my request, and, after a lengthy sigh, pulled open the gate. It protested loudly as it shuddered open. Twix took careful step upon careful step until he

joined me in what would have been the middle of the house. Debris surrounded us. Uneven broken external walls encompassed us. Cinder and ashes scattered the area.

The clean-up crew, having found what they thought was the body, had ceased working. It seems they had yet to receive the continuation order, given the culprit was dead and the case all but closed. I assumed one I departed they would ascend upon the property to earn their silver coins.

“What on earth are you doing up here?” he said, looking around at the debris with his hands on his hips.

“I thought we should return to where all of this started, Twix.”

“Well, now that we’re here, I think it’s time we left.” He pointed to the carriage. “Your travel has arrived.”

I looked at the carriage as if for the first time. “Of course. To be honest, I wasn’t sure whether you would come, given our last conversation.”

“Understandably upset, Finch. Think nothing of it. Now, I think it’s best we go, not safe to be here amongst the remnants.”

I smiled and nodded. I offered my hand. “It’s been a pleasure, Constable Twix. You have many a great year ahead of you. Detective one day perhaps? A member of the Catcher team?”

Twix smiled, a twitch in his eye as he gripped my hand. “Thank you, Finch, and not if it wasn’t for you. Now, let me accompany you to your ride.”

“Of course, but there’s just one thing,” I said, maintaining my grip on his hand. “And it’s bothering me.”

“And what’s that, Finch?” he said, wrenching his hand away.

“Well, we never really investigated the crime scene itself, did we?”

Twix pondered. “Well, no, I guess we didn’t. But we didn’t have to. Once they found the body, or what we thought was the body, everything happened so quickly. And now, well.” He threw his hands up in the air. “The case is over. You said so yourself.”

“Perhaps.” I put my hands on my hips. “Rule number five. The case isn’t over until it’s over.”

“But you said it was over.”

“Birds, Twix. Birds,” I began as I started pacing.

“Birds?”

“Quite. I heard it from Bourke, and even the Thug mentioned it. Heck, I even heard it from Shire.”

“Well, the Thug? Ramblings of a madman. And if it be from Shire, chances are its folly. Can’t be trusted, that one.”

I stopped and looked at him. “So, I’ve heard.” I started patrolling again, encircling Twix as I spoke, concentric circles getting bigger and bigger. “Shire also said Bourke had done some work for the Professor.”

“Finch. The Professor is dead and the man responsible, also. This case is over. There is no need to concern ourselves with such thinking. Come, let me walk you. Think it over on your journey. If a remark hits you with wonder, send me an electronic communication and I will look into it for you, or better still, turn the steed around and come back. But now, Finch, now is not the time for rash accusations.”

Impulsive judgements had not been my friend in this case. It had placed me at odds with Carthy. It had pushed Shire away. Felt like wedges were being driven between me and everyone I ran into. Stories. Musings. Insinuations.

I nodded. “Maybe you’re right, Twix. But there’s been one thing missing from this entire case.” I stopped my foot mid-stride and looked at him. “I need to know *why*.”

Stepped down.

The ground creaked under my weight.

“Finch,” Twix called. “Come on, we really must be going.”

I held up a hand. I shifted my weight to my back leg, lifted my foot, and planted it down again. Once more, the moan of stressed wood leaked out of the ground, like steam rising from a boiling pot. I ignored Twix’s pleas to leave and began clearing remains away from the area,

firstly by kicking away dirt, ash and stone, and then on my hands and knees, making large sweeping motions to reveal boards.

Sufficiently cleared, I stood. A large wooden door, a one-metre square trap door, encased in the floor of the Professor's home. My hypothesis was that this was a secret door no less, the ash covering it a rug or other covering to disguise or hide it. The structure of the door was remarkably intact, given the condition of the rest of the dwelling, perhaps in part by the debris from the upper floors snuffing out the fire before it could take hold on the wooden door.

In any case, there it was. Although the fact it survived, wasn't the most curious thing about it. Adorned on its surface were three etchings, a larger work in the middle flanked by two smaller replicas. Their lines were straight and sharp. At a glance, they were birds, depicted as an emblem, their wings outstretched, their heads turned to the left. But on closer inspection, they were phoenixes, the ancient bird analogous with resurrection and life after death.

I looked up at Twix. "Follow the birds," I muttered.



## Chapter 23

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“WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU talking about, Finch? Sometimes I think you have absolutely lost your mind!”

“Follow the birds!” I stood and circled the imagery at my feet. “This is what Shire was saying, what Bourke had said. The birds. Not birds in the sky.”

“Fine,” he said. “There are birds, but I don’t see what this has to do with anything. And may I remind you your coach is waiting?”

“A tunnel,” I said, crouching by the door, running my hand over the engravings. “Shire said Bourke had built a tunnel for the Professor.”

“And you think a tunnel is under that? Are you mad?”

“Well there must be something under it! What else is the purpose of such a door?”

“Perhaps it leads to a cellar? I understood the Professor enjoyed some homebrewed root beer.

“Nonsense, Twix. Look at the placement. Directly in front of where the fireplace once stood. No. This must be something more. And if it is a tunnel, it must lead somewhere!”

“I don’t know why we are spending our time here. It’s over, you said the case is over.”

I looked up. “It’s not over because we are merely at the beginning, Twix. Another mystery has made itself known to us. Aren’t you curious? Bourke, the Professor... maybe even Carthy for all I know; they are all connected somehow.” My mind was still out about Carthy, despite Bourke’s recommendation of him.

“I know the Professor is dead,” I continued. “Along with the self-confessed murderer and the case is seemingly closed. But this is our opportunity understand the motive!”

Twix stared at me and eventually nodded. “Very well, Finch, my education continues. Let us follow this trail and see where it goes. What can I do to assist?”

“Very good, Twix. Firstly, see if we can open this darned thing. I can’t see a ring pull or anything else to leverage it open. Perhaps the Professor had a secret device somewhere to unlock the door.”

I stepped up onto the door and it groaned.

“Finch, do be careful. It doesn’t sound very secure.”

I bent my knees. “On the contrary, Finch. I’m sure the Professor built the door sturdy enough. See?” I jumped. When I came down, the ground gave way and I fell through the opening. Darkness swallowed me, and what felt like an hour free fall was, in reality, a few seconds of flailing limbs before I came to a sudden stop. I hit the ground and rolled into the abyss. I looked up to a square of light above me, the portal which I fell through. The luminance pointed to a ladder that had been fixed into the wall. Yes, that would have been a handy device in which to lower oneself.

A head appeared a few metres above me.

“My god, are you alright?”

I coughed as I stood, dusting off my coat and looking for my bowler hat that had been lost in the fall. The air was thick and musty, the scent of dirt hung heavily around me. “Nothing that has killed me, Twix. Now, would you care to join me?”

Twix swung his legs over the opening and descended the ladder. By the time he had reached the bottom, I had used the soft glow from my hand machine to scout the immediate area for my hat, locating it and dusting it off.

Twix landed heavily, and said, “Where to now? Can’t see anything down here. You would have thought the Professor would have been so kind as to install some lights for us!”

I removed my gloves and used my hand machine to illuminate the walls. They were rough and of solid earth. I searched for a switch, but found nothing.

“Handcrafted,” I said. “Obviously the Professor, and from all accounts, Bourke, went to a lot of effort to create this. The question is why.”

I judged the height of the tunnel to be over two metres, certainly large enough for someone with the bulk of Bourke to stand without hunching over. I shone my light source down the tunnel. It stretched away from us, the light from my hand machine illuminating a few metres in front before it dissolved into nothing. As I stepped forward, I noticed there were vertical beams on the walls and horizontal beams in the ceiling for structural integrity. Are they what Shire witnessed Bourke bringing into the Professor’s house? Along the ceiling were long cylindrical bulbs that remained dormant.

I looked back at Twix. “Are you ready?”

He nodded slowly, his gaze transfixed on the darkness.

And so, we shuffled down the tunnel, one hand out illuminating the path, the other against the wall. I could feel Twix close behind, his body tense, his breathing unbalanced. I understood the Constable’s reaction. I had been in much worse places and in more fearful situations. Times where life could be lost in the blink of an eye where you had to think and move quicker than your adversary.

As we continued our silent expedition into the unknown, random shadows formed from the uneven surface danced across my vision. It hypnotised me and my breathing eased. In the sensory deprivation, I could feel myself lulling into sleep, every step seeming closer to the brink of unconsciousness. Numbness entombed me.

“You still there, Twix?” I managed to enquire of my partner.

There was a moment of silence, and then, “Right here, just behind you. Don’t do anything stupid and race off and leave me here in the dark.”

I scoffed, but I wasn’t really listening. My mind had wandered, thinking, eliciting connection. Pyke. Bourke. Shire. The smart machine, voice activated. My voice, only my voice. Suspects. Four suspects.

Sinn. Vil. Black. All dead. Thug. The General caught him. Murderer dead. Carriage driver. Familiarity. Similarity.

My hand machine buzzed, surprised with the fact it was working, and checked the display, my face glowing eerily in the gloom. I had received an electronic communication from the Records House, in reply to my request for them to check into Professor Pyke's profile. I recalled with ease the anomaly that was his data and remembered the hashed lines.

According to the Records House, they could recover the data simply because it had not been corrupted. It had been deleted. The two names displayed seeded mass amounts of concern in my mind. Apparently, the deleted data outlined voice communications between Pyke and the General. Which begs the obvious question as to why the General didn't divulge this pertinent piece of information earlier on. Was it the sign of someone who had ulterior motives, trying to hide their actions, or was it something else entirely?

And the person who deleted the lines in the first place? None other than Superintendent Carthy! Unusual to say the very least, as Carthy would have needed two things. One, expressly written permission from the Chief Magistrate himself, and, two, someone at the Records House to accomplish the task. I found the former the most interesting, for two reasons. One, the Records House would have been acting on the orders from Magistrate's Office, so this, on the surface, seems least sinister. And two, the Chief Magistrate, who would have had to sign the order himself, is one of the most respected, not just in the country, but since the office came into effect a century before. On top of that, he is a friend; someone I hold in the highest regards for integrity and honesty. If he was involved, I had been blindsided. If he wasn't, there was a fox in the proverbial henhouse. As important and connected as that situation was, it was secondary to my current purpose.

My brain kicked into overdrive, pieces of the puzzle coming together to form a solid image. Bourke suggested that Carthy was a good per-

son. But sometimes people do good things for bad reasons and vice versa. It seems that Carthy had been playing me all along, and his suggestion that Twix couldn't be trusted was a ruse, an effort to distract me from seeing the truth, and he had succeeded.

"Twix, I believe your Superintendent is more involved in all of this than I first thought."

"Oh? Do tell."

"The tattoos Bourke and Thug had, representative of prisoners in forced militaristic servitude. Bourke bows down to Carthy, of his own will or otherwise, perhaps due to their military connection. The Thug chews Khut as the General had mentioned in his dealings at the Mage. When Carthy arrived at the General's room, I thought he had touched his cap in greeting, but he was looking at the General. It was a salute, Twix! Is it so much of a leap to suggest that Bourke and the Thug work for Carthy, who in turn reports to the General? We know Bourke was working for the Professor, and Carthy had ordered the deletion of records that showed conversations between Professor and the General!"

"So, you are saying Carthy killed the Professor?"

"Slow down, Twix. All I'm saying is that he's more involved than first thought, and the fact he hasn't been forthcoming with his level of involvement, one could surmise he is trying to hide something."

"Are you saying he is somehow mixed up with the deaths of the suspects? I knew he couldn't be trusted. I told you that, Finch!"

"Well, I suppose, as logic follows. If he was, in fact, reporting to Carthy and acting on orders. This is way bigger and deeper than I first thought, Twix. I shall need to contact the Chief Magistrate at once to let him know of my findings. This mystery deepens at every thought."

Silence. I stopped. We had come to the end. A ladder stretched up in front of me. I shone my hand machine up the rungs to a wooden trap door just above me. It was then I noted we must have been walking at a slight incline.

“However,” I postured, “Carthy didn’t have the list of suspects we conversed with.”

“No,” Twix replied and then paused. “Maybe he was following us. Seeing who we spoke to, who we suspected, so he could kill them.”

I inspected the ladder rungs.

“But not the General,” I said. “We hadn’t spoken to him yet. So how did the Thug end up there?”

Silence.

“Either the General’s involved in all of this,” I said as I turned. “Or you are!”

The blow to the side of my head came fast.

My world quickly evaporated.

## Chapter 24

---

I GASPED. THE WATER was cold, and it felt as though my life force was picked up by the scruff of its neck and thrust into the present. I breathed heavily as the wetness soaked into my clothes, colour slowly filling my vision. My long, wet hair fell over my eyes, like bars for my vision.

I was sitting on a chair, and I could feel my hands bound behind me. A hand appeared over my shoulder and a small pouch was thrust into my nose. I wrenched my head away, the smelling salts at war with my senses.

In front of me, standing in his uniform, with a bucket hanging lazily by his side, was Twix. A slack smile was on his face as he looked at me, his head cocked to the side.

“Twix!” I uttered quietly.

The room was massive, with well-lit ceilings high above me and a big wooden door far behind him. The floor was hard and covered with hay. A barn, no less. I recalled Twix mentioning a farmer and transient farm hand that had gone missing. Was this related? In the distance, shrouded in shadow, was an unknown figure, large and unassuming.

To my left, I saw my taser and baton sitting on a table. Beside them was my neatly folded coat, my hat atop like it was to be gifted to someone. A clinking of metal objects caught my attention and I turned my head to the right.

Rows of silver bodies attached to overhead beams, suspended in place by chains that looped under their arms. They were faceless, devoid of any features, genderless, metallic things, naked of everything but their raw materials. At the end of the row I saw what looked like the metallic body of the Professor. I thought back to the smart machine that was recovered from the crime scene: the absence of body mangling despite being buried under blocks of Portland cement and rock, a metal

chest uncovered by the Doctor, and spoken word even though the mouth never moved. There it was.

Beside all of that, two people were bent over a table, an operating table, their backs to me, engaged in low conversation. One man handed small tools to the someone in a white coat who accepted them without looking. He would use them and then hand them back in exchange for another. Although I couldn't see their faces, I knew immediately who they were.

"Aren't you supposed to be dead?" I mumbled loudly.

Both bodies righted and turned. Professor Pyke handed his tool to Doctor Kramer and wiped his hands on his coat. Kramer placed the tool with its counterparts on a table and pulled the sheet over the body on the table.

"Welcome, Special Detective Caddius Finch," Pyke announced as he approached.

He clasped his hands. "I'm so glad you were able to take on this case. Your assistance so far has been extraordinary... invaluable... enlightening even!"

"Is that so, Professor? Perhaps you would care to enlighten me."

He glanced at Twix and then back to me. "Certainly. I see no harm in that. You see, not everything is as it seems."

"I can see that because right now I'm not sure what's going on. It was of the general understanding that you are dead, Professor. So perhaps start there."

Pyke looked somewhere behind me and suddenly a thick arm was placed around my neck. It squeezed and a pain immediately filled my brain. A mouth came up close to my ear. "Remember me, Catcher? I told you I had the whole world ahead of me!"

The Thug? My brain was a scramble, fighting for oxygen. I struggled as I felt my face burning up.

"Enough!" Twix yelled out, and the grip subsided. I gasped for air, yet the big arm remained around me.



“Well,” I huffed between breaths. “Today is just full of surprises! I thought you were dead as well!” I looked up at the Professor. “I don’t suppose you are going to march out three dead suspects, are you?”

Pyke smiled. “No, Finch. They *are* dead!” His eyes narrowed. “Thanks to you.”

I struggled against the constraints, but more so to remove the weight that was the Thug’s arm, off my chest.

“What the hell are you talking about? Have you gone mad?”

Pyke stepped forward. He removed his glasses, cleaned them with his white laboratory coat, and placed them back on his nose.

“On the contrary, Finch. This is the clearest I’ve thought in forever. You’ve seen my new smart machine. You must realise the potential of such a thing, the implications for everyone.” Pyke came in close and leant on the arms of the chair, his face just in front of mine. “I need to know, Finch. I needed to know who could have stolen it, who is putting my invention in jeopardy. You of all people should understand that.”

“So, you orchestrated your own death.”

Pyke stood up and inspected his nails, a passive look came over him and waved off my allegation. “It was the only way.”

“And got me to determine the potential suspects so you could kill them.”

“Killed them first, Finch,” Pyke said. “Before they stole from me or worse, killed me. Consider it... proactive self-defence.”

I clenched my jaw, aching to jump out of the chair and strangle him myself before the Magistrate’s noose could be craft.

“If the Thug works for you, why did he threaten me and suggest I leave town?”

“Why, to spur you on, of course! How do you make a Catcher work harder? Tell him to stop!”

“And then your goon does the deeds, gets caught, and fakes his own death.”

“Many moving parts,” the Professor replied nonchalantly.

“But how...” I cast my mind back to the previous day. Carthy locked the wagon door and placed the key in his pocket. Wait! Twix’s awkward embrace, hands on the Superintendent. He stole the key! And then up at the bars, dropping the plunder to the prisoner! Then there was that black carriage, blocking its line. Something didn’t sit right.

“It was you,” I said, narrowing my eyes. “You were driving the black carriage.”

A smile grew on the Professor’s face. “In disguise,” he added. “Indistinguishable at first glance, even to the world’s greatest Catcher! Although it was that darned Superintendent that laid waste to our plans that day. For the Thug should have made his escape with Twix in the back of my carriage.”

Twix stepped forward. “I had to think quick,” he said. “Needed to release the prisoner before you had a chance of questioning him. He’s not packing as much up here as the rest of us.” He tapped the side of his head. “Maybe that should be one of your stupid rules! Think on your feet.”

I squeezed my eyes shut. Why had I missed this? How had this escaped me?

“And the cart over the edge of the bridge into the icy depths?”

“Fun and games,” Pyke said. “I planted a small amount of powder on the front wheels. Unplanned. Unscripted. Yet fruitful in every sense.”

A worthy adversary, disgustingly so. I had been more than a step behind the moment I arrived in Grace. They had gotten the better of me at every turn.

“So, the General is part of this ruse as well?”

An applause erupted from the shadows. The figure stepped forward out of their sanctuary and into the light. The General.

“Congratulations, Catcher.” He walked up and placed a hand on Twix’s shoulder while he spoke to me. “You, sir, have played your part

very well. There is nothing and no one left in our way now, including you!”

With the General involved, it seemed there was no end to their reach.

“And the missing people? Are the stories true? Grickson, Millie, Beth?”

The Professor arched his spine. “The best way to confuse a story is create lore around it. The fact is, Finch, they were invaluable specimens to my work. There were problems that needed to be solved, some facets of human anatomy I needed to better understand. As well as that, I needed fresh samples! The human skin is such a difficult organ to work with, and I needed it to be as fresh as possible.”

Oh my god. He skinned them alive.

“You’re a monster!” I roared.

“Oh, I only took people who meant nothing to no one. It was a harmless act... well, give or take.”

“You won’t get away with this!”

He stepped back. “And who will stop us?”

I looked around. Restrained. Horribly outnumbered. I was a dead man. I could do nothing but stall them for as long as possible.

“So, it was you, General, and your Thug, that stole the smart machine from the Emporium?”

“As it had given you sufficient information to spur on your investigation into potential suspects, there was no point leaving that around, leaving it for the likes of Carthy to interrupt our little game.”

“So, Carthy isn’t involved in this!”

Twix smiled. “Carthy is a patsy, a scapegoat, a stooge.”

“But he must be involved, you are in his bloody charge for god’s sake. He must...”

“Oh,” Twix replied, “You’d be surprised what we can get away with.”

“But the communication from the Record’s House. Carthy ordered the deletion of records.”

“Did he?” Twix replied, his voice whimsical, like all of this was a sick game... and he was winning.

I looked at the General who I suspected of being in charge of proceedings. “What are you planning to do?” I jerked a head to the metal bodies hanging up. “What is this really all about?”

“We,” the General stated, “are going to wage war!”

*We?* But there were more pressing questions to ask.

“War? Against who?”

“Against the capital of course!” The General said as he thrust out his chest. “With an army of smart machines, of things that don’t feel pain, who don’t stop, who aren’t afraid. They will do our bidding without restraint. There will be no stopping us!”

*Us?* Are there more people involved? How far does this conspiracy climb?

“This is ludicrous!” I screamed.

“This isn’t ludicrous! This is reality! This is the future!” The General said, standing tall as if it were patriotic to think in that manner. “First the capital, and then our enemies the Capital refuses to acknowledge.”

“No, I shall not humour you any further, General. This is heresy! A crime punishable by death! I’m afraid you have to untie me. You are under arrest. You are *all* under arrest, by order of the Catcher’s Office.”

The General sneered. “We will untie you, Catcher, when the last breath has left your body! For you, the journey is over.”

My eyes went wide.

Twix stepped forward. “We were willing to let things lie, to let you go, when you were willing to walk away, but you just couldn’t let it go. You just couldn’t get in your carriage and return to the capital. You had to push and push, and now, here we are. You in that chair, me out here. Either way, Finch, it is too late. Whether you had left or not, we have won.”

Pyke and the General nodded to Twix and retired to the operating table. Twix approached, pulling a knife from his belt.

“Twix!” I whispered. “Help me. Untie me and together we can overtake them. You can be a hero!”

“I can’t do that, Finch.”

“God damn it, Twix, stand up for yourself! You’re better than them. Don’t be forced to do their bidding! Have I taught you nothing?”

He stopped and stood upright. His mouth slowly transformed from a smirk to a smile. His giggle turned into a guffaw, his laugh echoing across the room.

“Oh, poor, Finch! Is that what you think? I am so disappointed.” He gripped his hands behind his back and bent in close. “I don’t work for them, you twit. They work for me!”

My mind trailed off.

And then everything hit me. Twix being drunk at the taphouse, pretending to be knocked out at the Doctor’s Surgery, urinating on the floor when taken hostage by the Thug. And then I thought. Twix pick pocketed the prison cart key away from Carthy. I thought I had seen Twix with my taser in the General’s room and I had been right. I thought I had underestimated the Thug, when in reality I grossly miscalculated Twix. It was all an act. All designed to manipulate me, to draw my attention elsewhere. An illusion, misdirection, a magician’s trick. I had been played for a fool. I had ignored Carthy’s warned.

I was infuriated.

“Who are you?” I said between clenched teeth.

Twix laughed. “You’ll never know who we are.”

There’s that *‘we’* again!

“You’ll never know who *I* am.”

“Of course, I will,” I said bluntly. “When I get out of here and arrest you, I will match your fingerprints to the Records House.”

With the knife in his mouth, he worked off one of his gloves and threw it against the wall. He turned his hand and waved his fingers. His

fingertips had been severely burnt, rendering any act of attempting to match his prints an impossibility.

He leaned in, knife at the ready. “You’ve got nothing, Finch. You’ve let all of this slip through your fingers. But you shan’t slip through ours!”

“Stop,” I whispered. “Do you hear that?”

Twix trained his hearing. A faint hum encircled us, picking up in volume. The sound snuck up on us, starting so faint, I could barely register it. But I knew what was about to happen.

I pulled my head back. Before Twix or the Thug could act, I cranked my head down. My forehead crashed into the bridge of Twix’s nose. Blood exploded out and lashed my face.

Then three things happened in quick succession.

With a loud groan, Twix stumbled back, holding his face.

Thug’s arm tightened around my neck.

And the lights went out.

## Chapter 25

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A PUNCH. THAT UNMISTAKABLE sound of a fist on face, somewhere in the dark. A resulting grunt. Then the sound of someone blowing, quickly followed by a growl behind me. The grip around my neck loosened and then disappeared entirely. A cold blade was pressed against my wrist and in an instant, my bonds were gone.

I immediately darted to the table to my left in a hasty, blinded search of my trusty baton. I found it. The overhead lights flickered on. I turned, weapon at the ready. Sections of the barn alternated between light and shadow, giving me intermittent snapshots of the scene.

To my right, the Thug was cowering in the corner, his hands grabbing at his eyes. Long scratch marks trailed down his face leaving thin trails of blood from forehead to chin. His hands were outstretched to either reach for something or defend against something, either way, the something that he feared was visible only to him. I suspected Shire of blowing white powder into the Thug's face, similar she did to me at the dead end of an alley somewhere behind the Pig.

She dashed towards Doctor Kramer, who had circled to the other side of the operating table in order to distance himself. His face grew in horror as Shire approached, her blade throwing flashes of light as she ran. Pyke was fiddling with something under the sheet on the table, ignoring the ensuing battle. A flicker of light, and the Professor was slumped against the table. Resignation on his deadpan features. He had taken the coward's route to avoid prosecution.

A crunching sound stole my attention. In my periphery, I witnessed The General unleashing a gigantic haymaker that forced Bourke onto one knee. The military man had a trail of blood running out of his nose and I assumed Bourke had struck first. The General had retaliated and I saw him prepare a knee destined to Bourke's face.

This all happened in the blink of an eye. And despite all of this action taking place, it was what was happening to my immediate left that

required my full attention. Twix, or whoever he was, stood there. Although he bowed his head slightly, he looked up at me with cold eyes. He stared through his hair that had fallen over his face, so he looked like a fiend behind bars. Blood streamed out his broken nose. A maniacal smile overcame his face. He turned the blade over in his hand.

“Alright, Catcher,” he said evenly. “Let’s see how good you really are!”

He launched at me, not with his knife, but with a foot. It was not only unexpected but surprising for someone such as Twix to accomplish such a technique. It showed that I had misjudged his appearance as well as his character, and that grossly had me on the back foot.

I awkwardly fended off the attack with my baton and moved to my right, to the chair I had been tied to. I was hoping to throw it at him, use it as an attack or distraction, something to give me an advantage. Alas, I was thwarted when I realised it had been secured to the floor. I needed to move away quickly. Sensing he was close I jerked my head away. The blade flew in front of my eyes.

I swung my baton as I spun out of the way. It caught nothing but air as it flew in a wide arc over his head, my intended target crouching, readying to unleash a reply. As my baton finished its journey at the furthest point of its sweep, Twix jumped at me, blade first.

I had no choice but to release the baton and fall back. The knife came in close. I grabbed his hand as I fell, and using his forward momentum, pulled him down onto my crouched feet. I kicked hard and sent him sailing over me.

I rocked back on my hands and sprung to my feet, the kip-up move I learned from an Oriental. I raced forward to my baton, breathing heavy. I had burned through much adrenalin in such a short space of time and I feared I wouldn’t have the stamina to maintain a long encounter. Twix, on the other hand, looked like he was enjoying the contest. He had rolled to his feet and smiled more wildly than ever, his blade still in hand.



Over his shoulder, I observed Kramer swing a small metal box at Shire as he skirted the table. In the fringes of my vision, the General had Bourke in a headlock, and the latter had thrust an elbow into his opponent's gut. I realised this fracas could not continue forever, and neither side would concede. This was all or nothing. We knew too much. We need to be stopped as much as they did.

I threw my baton down. It was too long and cumbersome to use. Besides, my opponent was well versed in fighting techniques that allowed him to evade my weapon with ease. I needed to rely on other, less rudimentary, art forms; methods one picks up when they remove themselves from society for a number of years.

The baton clattered to the floor. Twix's eye's remained fixed on mine. "Well, I hope you weren't thinking I would give up my blade."

I planted my right foot back in a short stance and held up my hands in defence, my left hand open, my right closed in a tight fist.

"I wasn't hoping you were going to give your blade up," I said. "In fact, I was counting on you keeping it."

Twix stood up straight and walked towards me. No trepidation, no fear. He swung the blade and I blocked his arm with my own. His other hand, a fist, came at my face. I ducked and blocked with my other arm. I kicked forward hard, my boot sinking into his stomach. As he crunched over, he pulled his knife down hard and it cut into my arm. I felt the cold blade splay my skin; a warm trickle of blood oozed out.

More attacks. More blocks. Blows. Parries. Another cut on my forearm. And then another on my cheek. Adrenalin blocked the pain, but I didn't know how long that would last. I was merely defending, waiting for the right opportunity to attack, however his technique offered little prospect of landing a solid blow.

I swayed in my spot. Through half blurred vision, I saw Shire drive an object into Kramer's chest. I spotted Bourke deliver a devastating uppercut to the General who took two steps back before falling.

Twix must have seen my unsteady posture as the beginning of the end, and he was right. He lazily kicked forward. I caught his foot and using full force, drove my elbow into his knee. There was a loud crack and Twix roared as it bent in the wrong direction. I released and he squeezed his leg as if to push the pain away. It hung limp as he shifted his entire weight. He swore at me, multiple times, through clenched teeth as spit flew.

I couldn't help but smirk. He screamed and attacked me with the blade, his last effort to win the battle with a solitary leg left to him. I easily caught his hands. I kicked at his damaged leg, resulting in another thunderous call, and then his good leg.

We fell. As we landed, I turned the knife towards his chest. There we lay, me on top, the tip of the blade hovering just above his neck.

"It is over, Twix, or whoever you are. You are under arrest. Look around you. You've lost. And believe me, when we are through with you we shall not only know your real name but everything you are up to."

His grimace inverted into a smile, and he laughed, of all things. "No, Catcher," he said, blood on his lips. "You will never know who we are or where we will strike next!"

The next bit happened so quickly I was unable to stop it. Instead of pushing against my hands, he pulled them down. There was an instant of resistance as the point pierced his throat, but then the blade slid in easily. Blood gushed from the opening. His breathing consisted of short gasps, with blood burbling in his gullet. I stared at him in disbelief.

He stared back with lifeless eyes.

## Chapter 26

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THE MAN I THOUGHT I knew, the one that played me for a fool, had left me. I was once more, filled with unanswered questions; a puzzle with missing pieces that I needed to find. I pushed myself off the dead man and stood. The room, that just a few moments ago was ablaze with contest, had died down to a sombre hush.

I regained my belongings as my comrades approached. I offered my hand to both of them and we shook to our success.

“Thank you, Bourke. And thank you Shire.”

“Thanks to you,” said Shire, “for taking one last look, for believing me.”

I nodded.

“Bourke here offered me some reassurance that he would look out if I did. I can’t thank you both enough.”

Shire bowed her head.

“I have no doubts you overheard the conversation about your friend Beth” I said to her. “I am sorry, I truly am. We shall have our justice, Shire.”

Bourke’s blood-covered knuckles gripped my hand strongly. “I hope this makes amends, Catcher, for past discrepancies and all.”

“Aye, it does, Bourke. I will see to it.” It seemed that even though brands couldn’t change, a person’s character could.

I looked around at the aftermath.

“What are we going to do with this lot?” Shire enquired, also taking in the scene.

The Thug propped against the wall; his head cocked to the side. Froth covered his mouth and dripped down onto his large chest. This time there would be no doubt as to his death.

“Seems you gave him a treatment of twice,” I said to Shire.

“Thrice actually,” she replied, almost proudly. So be it.

I pointed to the supine body of doctor Kramer. “What about him?”

“Unconscious, but alive. Definitely a headache when he rouses,” Shire said. “Maybe even a few stitches.”

I looked at Bourke. “And the General?”

“Same, with an addition of some broken bones. I’m not sure which, but I’m ‘appy to break ‘em again to get ‘im to talk.”

“Good man, Bourke. That may certainly come in handy for someone like the General. I was hoping to do the same for Pyke.”

We looked to Pyke; whose lifeless corpse still leant up against the base of the table. “Unfortunately, it looks like he wasn’t prepared to fall into our hands.” And then I noticed it. We walked over, me flanked by my two offsidiers. I stood over him. Waited. Noticed the sheet on top of the table was decidedly flat. I kicked Pyke in the chest. The clang of boot on metal echoed around us. I chewed the inside of my cheek.

“What the hell was that,” Shire asked.

“It seems that Pyke has once more gotten the better of me. He must have taken leave in the commotion and placed this *machine* here in his place.” I pointed up, to the metallic objects above us. “This, all of this, was part of their plan to forge an attack on the capital... and god knows where else.”

“What are we going to do?” Bourke asked.

“We are going to hunt him down, before he generates anymore carnage.” I looked at my companions. “The chase is on, dear friends.”

A whirring noise filled the area. We looked back down at the metallic body of the Professor. Its eyes glowed red.

“Do you smell that,” Bourke asked, sniffing the air.

I followed suite and screwed my nose up. “Yes, what is that? Burning? It’s horrid.” Then I thought back to my arrival. About to enter Pyke’s property when a smell wafted around me. The same smell. The result then was catastrophic. The danger in that moment was extreme.

“We need to get out of here!” I yelled. “Now!” I ran for the side entrance, with Bourke and Shire in unquestionable pursuit. “Just keep running,” I shouted over my shoulder. “As far away as you can!”

Bourke's large legs took up the ground easily. Shire sprinted past me, her agility serving her well. Bourke bust through the side door, the wooden barrier flinging back and erupting from its hinges. A sheet of afternoon sun cut us as we delved out into it. I clenched my eyes, and although temporarily blinded, stayed true to my escape from imminent death.

Then there was silence. Birdsong had ceased. Footsteps disappeared. I couldn't even hear my breathing. Light. Bright light enveloped our bodies. A fierce explosion. It filled every sense. An unseen force picked us up and thrust us into the nearby woods, branches and trunks rushing at us at impossible speeds. We crashed through bushes and across undergrowth like rag dolls in the ocean being beaten against the rocks. And then there was nothing.

The light was low when I was roused by a slap in the face. It was Bourke, who quickly lifted me to my feet. Every part of my body ached. Bourke looked like someone had attacked his person with a thousand knives. Shire held her arms around herself, the side of her face red from blunt impact.

We stood at the edge of the clearing, amongst a dozen felled trees, the last of the sun disappearing behind us. The barn and everything—and everyone—in it had disappeared, replaced with piles of smoking ash.

"What the hell was that?" Shire asked, tapping the side of her head. "Damn, I just can't get this ringing out of my ears."

"This," I started. "This is bad. Very bad. When I arrived at Pyke's home I smelt a similar aroma. Vile and pungent. Not long after the house became a pile of rubble. But this, this is much worse. The explosion, the impact, the damage; so much more powerful. It had come from the metallic thing that looked like Pyke. He called it a smart machine, but now their true purpose is revealed."

"What do you mean?" Shire asked.

“They don’t just plan on taking over the capital. They plan on leveling it to the ground!”

“Do you think there’s more like that?” Bourke asked.

I was asking myself the same question. “We must assume there are until we can catch up with Pyke and tease the information out of him. But we haven’t got much time.” I turned to Shire and Bourke. “The constabulary hierarchy has been compromised, to the highest degree. We can’t take this above ground. With the General now a pile of dust we have no culprit. If we commence accusations against people like him, it will most likely be us to see the inside of a prison barge, if not the end of a rope. I can’t do this on my own, I need your help.”

I looked to Bourke. “You said you were through running and fighting. However, they are two qualities I am in desperate need of at this moment. Can I count on you?”

“Aye, Catcher,” he said, and we shook on the agreement. “Some things are worth risking your life for.”

“Glory be,” I said, and turned to Shire.

“And what of you, Shire. Can I have your commitment for this endeavour?”

Despite her pain she replied enthusiastically. “We will bring the fight to them.”

They looked at each other and nodded.

“So it shall be,” I affirmed.

It didn’t take too long to raise Chief Magistrate Timothy Mooney on my hand machine. Recent events had left me in a state of confusion as to who I could trust and not, and the ledger had firmly swung to the latter. Unfortunately, this included my old friend, the Chief Magistrate.

I relayed key points to him but did not detail every element of my investigation. I told him about the suspects, their ensuing deaths, and ultimately, the unfortunate accident that had befallen the one responsible.

I omitted everything that took place in the barn, including knowledge of a conspiracy that has gripped the foundations of government, into the various Office's that kept the country safe and running. Trust was something that needed to be built because, at that stage, everyone was a suspect. Everyone was suspicious for being connected to the collusion.

I also held close the fact the Professor was alive and on the run. He was the only one who could give me details of the scheme; names, places, times, dates. And if not, direct me to someone further within their secret order. It was apparent they were willing to lose their lives for the same dark secret Twix was.

I requested a formal face-to-face discussion of the case, where I could gauge reactions from the Chief Magistrate to some deep and provoking questions. To my surprise, he responded to my request enthusiastically.

"As a matter of fact," the Magistrate Mooney said, "Your attendance at my office is of an urgent nature." His voice was raspy, formed from the years of yelling at people in the good man's navy. Too much salty air and sunshine had played havoc with his voice box yet played him in good stead to obtain the position as the country's leading lawman. Seemingly a man with unquestionable veracity and impartiality.

"Oh, really, sir? What brings my attention so rapidly?"

A pause. "I cannot divulge over electronic means of communication, Finch. We must speak face to face. There are wrongdoings at the highest levels, and I need someone I can trust on the matter, and there is no one I trust more than you to seek justice."

"I see," I murmured. He had alluded to what sounded like the same conspiracy that I had stumbled across, quite literally, here in Grace. This tipped the scales somewhat towards my side than that of my potential adversaries. "Magistrate... Mr Mooney... Tim. There are other things I need to tell you. Information that I have found out that may be pertinent to your current troubles."

The line went dead.

I unsuccessfully tried to raise him again.

Then I felt it. A low grumble. The shaking earth. An earthquake? Unlikely, not around here. There hasn't been a reported quake in the country, let alone the region, for a century. This was something else.

My hand device emitted a noise. I read the electronic communication to myself.

"The Magistrate has fallen. Your government is broken. Welcome the new machines."

Dear God! I imagined the metal bodies held up by chains. Thought about the explosion we just endured. A foul stench had befallen the capital. No one was safe. My mind was a continuum of sinister thoughts, each more frightening than the previous.

And then my hand machine emitted another noise, and I answered a voice. communication. The line crackled, distorted whispers transformed into high pitch whines. A whistle in the distance, a crackling of flame. Shuffling, rubbing.

"Finch!"

"Yes! Is that you Tim?"

"Finch! They're dead! They're all dead! An expl..."

"Tim!"

"Find somebody, anybody, that can help."

"I will, sir."

"Hur—"

And the line went dead.

I looked at my crew. They were misfits, yet together we had triumphed over our adversaries. Bourke was big, strong, and loyal. Shire was lively, agile and tenacious.

They were the ones I could rely on.

They were the ones I could trust.

They would help me put an end to the madness.

Rule number eight: The chase is always on.



I needed to catch the people responsible.

I am a Catcher.

It's what I do.

## Acknowledgements

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I LOVE THE CONTRADICTION that writing is a lonely business and yet there are many people that helped me to get this book published.

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## About the Author

Writing for over a decade but just getting into self-publishing, I enjoy any story that makes me second guess what the hell is going on. When I'm not writing in Brisbane, I'm facilitating workshops, MCing conferences, and keynote speaking all over Australia.

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