Chapter 3: Insight and Conflict

The next parts of this narrative require some contribution from available sources that I managed to procure after the case itself was resolved. One of the sources in question was the casebook of Detective Portsman, which I managed to persuade him over a luncheon to allow me to incorporate into a more complete overview of the case and his investigative methods. As such, I shall be integrating excerpts from his rather dense notes into my descriptions. I will warn any readers that Detective Portsman's descriptive abilities are discontinued past terse, clinical definitions, including the passage of time. Henceforth, I present the interview conducted by Detective Portsman of Mr. and Mrs. White:

December 16th, 7:55 AM - 119 Windsor Road

I left the scene of Messrs. Carrow and Barnett feeling immensely dissatisfied. Although I think I had composed an interesting hypothesis of the second murder, it being that of an imitator, we still had yet to explain the pattern dictating the first and third. Damn it, I might have expected all the victims, and as such, members of the gang, to have something in common. They were all male, but that hardly narrows it down. Mr. Saxon, if unlikeable, was an influential figure! He was wealthy, he had connections. But Mr. Carrow was an extremely poor man who should not have had much of anything to do with the gang. Unless… perhaps he was some sort of intermediary? That theory could work. If he engaged with the enforcers of the gang who got their hands dirty, then the respectable gentlemen in the higher echelons of this society would naturally need a man like him. If he gained nothing from this exchange, maybe even coerced, it would be logical for him to betray the cult.

8:10 - Wright Building

I went immediately to the Wright building, an offshoot of the Driskill hotel. Both of the Whites were staying there, reasonable given the resources at their disposal. I thought they might know something about the late Mr. Barnett. An embellished building, definitely heavily inspired by the romanesque design of the parent hotel, but those details are practically irrelevant to the case.

The prologue and interview itself went as follows:

"Mr. White?" I said, knocking on the door. I thought I may have heard a small noise in the room before it was opened by Mr. White wearing a scarlet smoking jacket and holding an unmistakable H. Uppman cigar.

"What is it?" He said, cupping his hands in front of the cigar as he held it to his face. His hands were slightly pale compared to when I had seen him last.

"May I come in? I have some questions."

He sighed and pouted for a split second.

"Fine. Come inside. This better be quick after you forced me out like that before."

"Yes, my apologies, it was protocol."

I couldn't quite make out what he responded under his breath.

"What was that you said, Mr. White?"

He sat in a large cushioned armchair made of mahogany wood and bit into the end of his cigar.

“Nothing. So what happened? You must be here for some reason.”

“Before I begin, do you know where Mrs. White is?”

“She went out for some groceries. For how nice this place might be, the food selection isn’t very good. Breakfast should have happened half an hour ago!”

“Hmm. She went out for groceries, you say? How long ago was that?”

“Just a few minutes before you arrived,” he said, tossing the mangled remains of the cigar onto a silver ashtray with many other remnants.

I took a step closer to Mr. White.

“You will have to come up with a better lie than that. Where is she?”

Mr. White froze.

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Tobacco isn’t very good for one’s appetite. There aren’t any significant indents in the mat in front of the door. It seems like you might have been raising your hands from how pale they were when I stepped in. She is in this apartment, isn’t she? You just pushed her into the adjacent room.”

Mr. White clenched his fist and loosened it.

“Yes.”

“You didn’t necessarily want anyone, not just me, to see what was happening inside this room. I advise you to choose your next words very carefully, Mr. White.”

He gritted his teeth.

“She is in the bedroom right now. It is the door to your left. How my wife and I handle our relationship is none of your business.”

“It very well can be if you don’t cooperate, so I recommend you stay truthful.”

He said nothing but bit his lip before nodding.

“So. What do you know about Mr. Barnett?”

He raised his eyebrows in surprise.

“Mr. Barnett? He worked at Ward & Clews with Mr. Saxon. I barely know anything about him, I’ve already told you that Mr. Saxon practically never spoke of his job.”

“Nothing?”

“Nothing.”

“Have you ever heard of anyone named Ronald Carrow?”

He looked up to the ceiling.

“He sounds vaguely familiar. Was he in construction at one point?”

“Yes, he was a hod carrier.”

“Then yes, I was acquainted with him. I invested in a construction company a few years ago and had to go downtown. He came up to me asking for a minor job, which I gave him. I don’t know anything else about him so don’t bother asking.”

“I see. Has Saxon’s last will been put into effect?”

“Not yet, but it isn’t as though I don’t know what I am getting. Saxon was quite clear when he was alive that I would be inheriting the ranch itself. He left everything else to his sister. You could say he was being generous to me, but I would like to think he only left me the ranch because he knew that the property tax and upkeep would be a thorn in my side.”

Very interesting. Besides a grudge, we now have a physical motive for Mr. White to kill Mr. Saxon. It also explains his insistence on being the ‘de facto’ head of the ranch when I began this investigation. He might pretend that the ranch would be a burden, but no matter what, it would be a valuable piece of property he could sell. But this also opens a possibility for the murder to have been committed by Mrs. White. Extremely improbable, but possible. There is technically a motive, but it currently lacks psychological support. I initially believed that Mr. White might lack the needed will, but his behavior was concerning.

I went to the side door and opened it to locate Mrs. White who was sitting on the linen bed, red-faced. She stood up.

“Detective Portsman? What happened?”

“Did you know Mr. Carl Barnett?”

“He worked with my husband, no? He mentioned him to me occasionally, but I am afraid there is not very much information that I can share. He seemed to be a kind soul based on my husband’s description, but I never personally met or saw him.”

“He’s dead.”

Mrs. White blanched and put a hand to her mouth.

“What?! Oh, his poor family.”

She paced across the room with her shoulders hunched low.

“Do you know someone, anyone, who might have had something to do with him?”

She sat down and exhaled deeply.

“I am not sure… I- another murder? I just need some time.”

“Take your time.”

She scratched her fingernails against the fabric and moved her lips ever so slightly.

“W-well, I do not know anyone in particular who had something against him. Mr. Saxon would often mention those who he found unpleasant or unsuccessful to me. Perhaps one of those men became disillusioned and envious…”

I took out my notepad.

“Are there any names you can remember?”

She sat ruminating for a moment.

“There was Mr. Johnny Blake, who blundered on a major stock deal a few months ago. Nathan Montague and Francis Cantor, a duo who miswrote many transactional papers.”

“Thank you, Mrs. White. Is there anything else you would like to share with me?”

“Now that I think of it, I misplaced a few articles of jewelry, although that was over a month ago. I do not believe it will be relevant, but it may be worth noting. I believe that is all.”

I carefully checked the door behind me before turning back to her.

“I do not approve of Mr. White hitting you.”

She cast her eyes downward before massaging her shoulders.

“Detective, I think that is beyond the scope of this discussion. I appreciate your concern, but… sometimes he behaves like that. It is what it is. Please do not bring up this topic any further.”

I sighed.

“This is not a light-”

“Stop,” she said firmly.

“Very well. But do not hesitate to call the authorities if you feel unsafe. You may do what you want in your relationship with him, but when it leaks into legal territory, such as assault, it is my job to deal with it.”

She said nothing, opting to stare at the sheets instead. I returned the favor and left the room without another word. Mr. White was waiting for me in the living room.

“So how did that go, Detective?” he said caustically.

I swept back my coat to reveal my holster to him.

“Watch yourself, Mr. White. I could not care less about your sarcasm, but I will be waiting when you overstep.”

Mr. White cast a grimace and went back to chewing on a cigar as I left the apartment. I have no patience for those men who think they are above the rest, and as much as I regretted dealing with him, I had possibly obtained invaluable information for the case. Upon returning to the station, I immediately called my assistants to find out more about this trio of men as it was our only real lead up to this point. At that moment, it also struck me that perhaps I might need to spread out my search. Based on my previous conclusion with the second authentic letter, it seemed that the killer or members of the group were present at the initial crime scene, as they knew the connection between Morris and I. Officer Lawrence was someone who was in attendance and more crucially, was the only confirmed individual who was around Carrow when he died. It did not constitute definitive evidence, but it was possible he was involved. He could have easily pricked Carrow. Despite his position as an officer, I could not let that eliminate him as a possibility and so I sent a man to watch him. I hope he will understand after this horrid matter is resolved.. Morris himself was included in this group, one of the reasons why I sent him back to his abode. Besides being a more defensible position if he would be attacked, it would make him easier to observe.

But what to do now? There was nothing to do besides waiting, and as such, I was on standby for two days before an extremely unexpected incident.

December 18th, 9:10 AM - Austin Police Station

It was the early morning of the 18th, perhaps an hour after I started my shift. I was in my office organizing my papers on a previous case I had been working on, as the culprit was still awaiting trial. My secretary, Mr. McKinnon knocked on my door with great haste and burst inside.

“Detective! Officer Kant is on the receiver. It doesn’t sound very good.”

I rushed to the police radio and lifted the tab to my ear.

“This is Detective John Portsman.”

I heard Officer Kant’s voice crackle on the end of the line.

“Portsman! I’m calling from the phone box at the corner of seventh and Collins. Blake is dead. Stabbed in the heart, it seems like.”

I bit my lip to hold back an oath. How was this even possible?

“How in blazes did you let him die?”

“There was nothing I could do. It seems like they got him at the shift rotation when I swapped with Freeman at dawn. In the past murders, they infiltrated the house through the front door. It seems like they’ve been doing a bit of observing themselves and analyzing our shifts. I found the back door to be broken in, very professional-like.”

“Fine. I will be there within the next quarter hour.”

9:23 AM - 220 Harland Street

I rushed downtown to the crime scene to see Officer Kant pacing up and down in front of the residence.

“Status of the residents?”

He flicked a cigarette from his hand.

“He lived with his sister, who thankfully didn’t awaken during the murder. This case could have been much bloodier, although we might have caught him had she notified the neighbors.”

I glanced around the front yard, taking careful note of the surroundings.

“I doubt it. Assuming he entered and exited through the back door, he could have easily made an escape through the bushes onto another property. Given that the man was likely a professional, he probably had plain clothes on his person. He could easily stick the blade into the earth as he left, and as you may have noticed, his footprints are unnaturally flat and light. They are wider than one might expect, so as to disperse weight more effectively and leave an even more insignificant footprint. These are damning in of themselves, so I doubt he would have held onto them in escape. They were most likely covers worn on the soles of his actual shoes, which could have been easily disposed of.”

I leaned closer to the ground to analyze the markings.

“They are strangely indented. An average person makes an indentation with their back foot when stepping forward then another in the front when pushing off for another step, which creates the effect of a stride. Here, there is a more pronounced indent in the front, as if he was leaning on the front of his legs or bending his knees to simulate an awkward gait. He was trying to hide his height in the event someone would try to make such a calculation.”

I stood up and scanned the ground ahead once again.

“He doubled back to retrace his footprints in case they left a mark, but he slightly overcompensated. They lead back to the bushes bordering the house on the left, but that would be inaccurate. He went back the way he came, near the rear geraniums, but he pushed through the greenery. It’s possible, albeit very unlikely, that he was spotted by a neighbor.”

Officer Kant raised the brim of his hat.

“Never seen anyone like you, Detective Portsman, and I doubt I will. I took his sister out on the porch if you want to speak to her. I’ll ask the neighbors if they saw anyone.”

“Good. There is no sense in setting up a perimeter at this point, as he is likely long gone.”

I went up the yard to see a woman sitting on the porch who had a frozen expression on her face.

“Ms. Blake?”

She didn’t respond.

“Ms. Blake?” I repeated. She seemed to become cognizant of my presence and turned her dark eyes to me.

“Hello,” she said in a neutral tone.

“I am Detective Portsman. I have some questions about your brother’s death.”

She looked down at her feet.

“Death?”

“Ms. Blake, are you feeling quite alright?”

She stood silent and swayed.

“I… can’t believe it. How could I have not intervened? If… I could have stopped him-”

“Sit down, Ms. Blake.”

She acquiesced and sat with her arms folded.

“I am extremely sorry that this occurred, but I need to know if you had observed anything abnormal before the murder?”

Ms. Blake appeared to not hear me.

“It doesn’t feel real.”

“Yes, sometimes when a person experiences great loss, they have a surreal awareness for some time. It will pass.”

“But… what if-”

“I am afraid I must interrupt you, Ms. Blake. The man responsible was a consummate expert in his field. There was absolutely nothing you could have done to improve your brother’s situation. In fact, by staying asleep, I might argue you spared him any pain that would have resulted if he was awakened by you. You are not responsible for this tragedy, but with your assistance, we may be able to discover who it was.”

She maintained her expression and nodded after a short period.

“So, what do you have for me, Ms. Blake?”

She opened her mouth but quickly shut it. Her lip quivered briefly before stiffening.

“Last night, we were taking a short walk together. We used to do it every morning before Johnny got a job at Ward & Clews, which demanded he be there a bit earlier. Since then, we shifted the schedule to the evening. I didn’t notice anything out of the ordinary, whether physically or behaviorally. We went to bed in our respective rooms as usual. I… thought I may have heard something in the night, but I didn’t investigate the sound. I woke up at about dawn when I went to retrieve some water, as I was parched. I had an odd… intuition and looked into Johnny’s quarters…”

She abruptly cut herself off.

“After…after that, I went outside. I knew I required help even though I didn’t want to believe it. A man in plain clothing approached me and asked what had occurred, which I told him. He told me to wait here and he hastily ran down the sidewalk.”

“What was the noise you heard? Could you describe it or where you heard it from.”

“No, I don’t believe so.”

“Hmm. Is there anyone who you believe may have been responsible for this?”

“Regretfully, no. He was a tad bit envious of Mr. Barnett, so possibly they had a feud, but Mr. Barnett was murdered.”

I sighed.

“Thank you for your time, Ms. Blake. I will be analyzing the crime scene.”

I navigated to two bedrooms next to each other and opened one of the askew doors to show the impression of a body under some linen sheets. It was Mr. Blake. A scarlet blot surrounded a small incision in the sheets where the blade had penetrated his body. I stripped the blankets covering his corpse and looked at the wound. It was an extremely clean cut and matched the triangular archetype of the original murder. I raised his hand and noticed a small paper which had been inserted below his pillow. I raised the paper and unfolded it.

Using our title for one's own crime is a despicable practice.

Veritas Rubra

Following these words was the alchemical motif that had thus far been characteristic of the cult. The letter seemed to imply that Mr. Blake had committed a crime in their name despite not having been involved. Could it be that Mr. Blake had Mr. Barnett killed? It would explain the inconsistency of the second crime scene. Clearly this group disliked those who might copy them and wish to be credited with those acts they have definitively committed.

But back to the matter at hand. There was no bruising from strangling around Mr. Blake's mouth and judging by the presence of rigor mortis in the extremities but not the larger muscles, he had been dead for anywhere from two to four hours. He had not been smothered then stabbed, so I would expect that his mouth was only covered to prevent outburst during the actual stabbing. It was possible that he had bitten into whatever the assassin used, so I peeled back his lips to examine his teeth. As it turned out, I discovered a black fiber, probably composed of some sort of organic collagen, most likely dark leather. Not many handkerchiefs are made of leather, so I would think that the culprit's gloves were composed of this substance.

Seemingly, Mr. Blake had purposely used the name of V.R. to misdirect investigative efforts, but it backfired horribly for him. However, how had *Veritas Rubra* actually determined that he was the impersonator? I highly doubt he went himself given that he is a broker by trade and given my perspective of his physical characteristics, I am unsure if he could have brutally overpowered another man. No, he had definitely sent an emissary. If he did indeed go about this course of action, there must have been a transaction that occurred. It would be very possible that he went in person but I think it would have been safer for him to send a telegram. If I could access the telegraph archive of Western Union, then there could be a wealth of information available for tracking down the mercenary who committed the second murder and even to establish a connection to V.R. given that we know they were aware of such a message.

In addition, this development led to a unique opportunity. If V. R. values the proper use of their cult, what if this death was credited to another person? It seems that they might try to unearth his identity to kill him. Maybe I can construct a situation to my advantage given this information. I went outside to see Officer Kant once again.

"I may need your assistance for a distinctive plan that could bear fruit."

He shrugged.

"What do you plan to use me for?"

"As bait, if possible."

"Excuse me?"

"You will be perfectly safe, Officer Kant. All I require is for you to act as a resident of a specific building for a few days."

I called for the commissioner once I returned to the station and suggested that a certain tactic be executed using rented houses. I planned to give credit to an as of yet unknown killer who had left a note there. V. R. would clearly know that the man responsible for taking credit would have had to have been at the crime scene, which would have only been possible for a police officer who was there. This will lead them to the conclusion that either Officer Kant or I

had planted the paper. But what of Officer Lawrence? If he was an informant of *Veritas Rubra* he might spoil my plans, so I decided to inform him that this plan was a false one meant to misdirect *Veritas Rubra*'s efforts and possibly fool them into thinking that Officer Kant was the killer. After this, I would tell him that in truth there was significant circumstantial evidence pointing towards a subsequent break-in and that we suspected the real killer was a different man who we required he watch. Little would Officer Lawrence know that his own actions would be monitored. If there was an attack on the second man, then Officer Lawrence would most likely be an informant for V.R. as he was the only one informed of that aspect of the plan and would operate on that level of information. If he was not, then there was no considerable harm done.

11:20 AM - Western Union Station

After organizing the logistics of the plan with the commissioner, I headed over to the Western Union telegraph office. I went to a desk with a telegraph operator behind it and sharply rapped the wooden surface to get his attention. The man, a decrepit being, looked up at me.

"I am Detective Portsman of the Austin Police Department. I wish to look over some telegraphs that could aid in investigating a crime in progress."

"Detective, eh? I am sorry to inform you that there is a privacy policy here. I am not permitted to simply show you our archives, even given your affiliation."

I slid a twenty dollar bill over the desk.

"What I am doing will not hurt anyone, and I will get the information I desire one way or another. I simply am offering you an easier path for both of us."

He hesitated and blinked his baggy eyes.

"I-I want your word that I will not be prosecuted if this gets out."

"You have that as a given. This is between you and me."

He stood up and escorted me to a backroom full of cartons.

"This is our storage room. It should have every sent telegram that went through Western Union within the last month. I will give you an hour."

I rapidly used the alphabetical sorting system to locate the carton with the telegrams I desired, flipping through the files within to find Mr. Blake's name. Bingham, Binns, Blake. There it was. September 20th, a telegram sent to a coworker at Ward & Clews about a business deal. October 3rd, a telegram detailing a conflict of interests within the company sent to a low class journal. October 16th… a telegram sent to a man named Evan Taylor detailing how to dispose of a product and listing a payment method for the man's consultation. It was sent at just the right time and the language was analogous to the crime that had been committed. The telegraphic address was incomprehensible to me, so I copied the text into my notebook and returned it to the clerk. He lifted a dusty monocle to an eye and squinted at the text.

"It's a shorthand for Pflugerville, an extremely small suburban area up to the northeast. It's mostly populated by German families although there is not much there. The exact address is 126 Pecan Street."

"Much appreciated."

I immediately detailed what my investigation had yielded in my notebook before hailing a cab to the small neighborhood. I felt exhilarated that I had actually acquired a proper foothold on

this case given how slippery it had seemed before. If I could locate this mercenary, then the only detail left would be the enigmatic *Veritas Rubra* themselves, but I had a suspicion that the conclusion may not be as simple as I think. I could not let even a limited success cloud my judgement before the case truly concluded.

"Here we are sir."

"Much obliged."

12:46 PM - Pflugerville

I stepped out of the cab and strode down the dirt street until I found the correct house, a dilapidated old structure. I knocked on the door and waited for a response, only for a man to walk up to me. He was wearing a torn up coat and had a beard snaking down his chin.

"Herr, what are you doing? That house is abandoned, nobody lives there."

"Hmm. I am looking for someone named Evan Taylor and thought this is where he might reside."

The man stroked his beard.

"Herr Taylor did live here, but that was years ago. He was a *Geschaftsmann,* an entrepreneur of sorts. Some of his mail still goes here, though it's usually gone by the time the next day comes."

"Where did Mr. Taylor go?"

"I don't know. He left without informing anyone. He was an unattached man. Why are you looking for him?"

"I had a business proposition for him," I said, going closer to the man. "If you happen to know where his mail goes, I would be delighted to enlist his services."

The man looked over at me with searching eyes.

"As I said, I don't know where the mail goes, if that is what you're looking for. For all I know, some street rascal takes it every night. I haven't bothered checking and neither does anyone else, it's generally not safe at night."

I tipped my hat.

"Thank you, sir."

"You are welcome."

How strange. From this development, I assume that Evan Taylor has been using his disappearance as a cover for acquiring information. It would be perfectly plausible for those in this poor neighborhood to take advantage of abandoned mail, nor would they have a real incentive to misdirect any messages. Presumably, Mr. Taylor has someone to pick up his messages, and we may be able to exploit that link.

Nevertheless, I needed to return to the station to further my schemes. I managed to procure another cab before dusk and a quarter of an hour later, I was pacing in my office. As I have established, I needed to establish a trap for the agents of *Veritas Rubra*, but they had two valid targets: Officer Kant and I. It was essential that Officer Kant be their only suspect, but I theorized that they had come to that conclusion already. I had already been involved in all the previous murders involving the cult and knew that crossing them, especially during an active investigation, would be incredibly foolish as I could be persecuted by the state for tampering with evidence or murdered by *Veritas Rubra*, whose work I was intimately familiar with. Officer

Kant, however, had the lucky circumstances of having access to the crime scene before anyone else was present. Barring a direct outside observer, once the facts of the case came out, it would be assumed that he was the only one who could have distorted the evidence.

December 20th, 10:20 PM - South 3rd Street

Two nights later, the implementation of my strategy was at hand. The previous morning, the press had released an exclusive story regarding the new murder and I knew that *Veritas Rubra* could not ignore such prey dangling in front of them. Officer Kant had just arrived at the domicile late that night, although he was by no means alone. From our previous operations, I was aware of the assassin's methods. He would first observe to calculate the correct time when his victim would be solitary, then strike. I watched, concealed from any windows, from the kitchen to see Officer Kant pick up a novel and flip through it casually. He took a bite of an apple and reclined on the couch in the living room.

This was our second night through this routine and I could only pray that our adversary would finally appear. I waited for perhaps an hour, wondering if this would be another failed attempt until I heard a subtle scraping noise coming from the front door. One of my officers behind me lifted his Smith & Wesson, but I raised the back of my hand. If we revealed ourselves now, he might be able to escape. Officer Kant hardly noticed anything and a figure slowly stepped forward through the door. It was a stout, lithe man in thick, jet black clothing wearing a cloth mask. He navigated prudently with moccasin-like footwear, his footfalls almost entirely silent. As Officer Kant turned around, He flattened himself against the wall bordering the two rooms with unnatural agility. I became motionless, awaiting any sort of movement. I saw the flash of a keen blade exit the man's sleeve and his muscles tense as he prepared for the killing blow. Officer Kant would not have even had time to draw his gun if the man got a chance to move, so I waved my hand and exited the shadows.

"Stop!"

The man froze for a fleeting moment and rapidly turned to the door, which I shot before he could open it.

"That was your only and final warning. If you persist, the next bullet will strike you."

The man seemed to hesitate and he froze.

"Drop the blade!"

He released the knife from his hand and kicked it towards me.

"Very good. Turn around and walk backwards towards me slowly with your hands raised above your head."

The man did so and I firmly grasped his arms with another officer's help, putting handcuffs on him. I directed the man to a chair and took his mask off carefully, revealing a clean shaven middle aged man with salt and pepper hair. He had a square jaw and fiery, intelligent eyes.

"Who are you?"

He cleared his throat.

"I get it, the game is up. It won't help me to hide information, exactly, so I don't lose much by telling you. I am Evan Taylor. I worked as a businessman about three years ago, but I moved into a much more lucrative business."

“Hired murder?”

“Correct. Pays a lot better than trying to sell some new idea.”

“Were you hired by John Blake to murder Carl Barnett?”

Evan Taylor rapidly darted his eyes around the room.

“Hold it, I’m only going to answer any more of your questions given one guarantee: I refuse to get the chair or dock. I don’t plan on dying anytime soon.”

“I will see what I can do. It could be framed as a deal.”

“Good. Let the record show I’m only stating this information under that assumption. I did kill Carl Barnett.”

“But why would you do that if *Veritas Rubra* would not approve of such a thing?”

Evan Taylor began laughing.

“*Veritas Rubra*? You better prepare yourself for the truth. *Veritas Rubra* never existed. I’m not sure why she decided to create it like that, but the point was to misdirect police efforts and make seemingly random deaths connected so the authorities would overanalyze the case. Or at least that’s what I think, I’m not paid to ask for clarification.”

For perhaps the first time in years, I was dumbfounded by a statement. So this trap proved that my suspicions for Officer Lawrence were unfounded.

“But… who killed-”

“I was responsible for all the deaths,” he said, interrupting me. “I don’t know why the client wanted those people specifically dead, but I got the job done.”

“What of Carrow?

He held a blank expression on his face.

“Except that one. I did not kill Carrow, nor do I know how he was killed.”

I pondered the issue. Neither the key assassin nor Officer Lawrence had killed Carrow, yet he was undoubtedly a part of the entire conspiracy. Neither of those present were responsible, meaning…

“Suicide,” I said aloud. “But I digress. Your communication system involves your old address, no?”

Evan Taylor nodded.

“Ha, you stumbled across that? I moved to Pflugerville because I thought the underdeveloped community could be a gold mine. I was right, but only because of how out of the way it was, making it an ideal place for messages.”

“You had men pick up your dropped mail, didn’t you? People would assume it was stolen.”

Evan smiled.

“Use your imagination. I never had anyone pick up the messages, only see what would happen to them at night. If they were taken and kept, I laid low since someone might be looking for me. If they were just thrown away, then they would look at and transcribe the messages for me a few days later. I’m sure you know the qualities of lemon juice, don’t you, detective? The letter would be sent to me with the messages within, written in lemon juice.”

“I would assume they were sent to a pseudonym and that the papers had false messages written on them? It would be very odd if someone was just sending blank pages.”

Evan clicked his tongue.

“Ooh, only one of two. The messages were written on the envelope itself. Nobody ever checks the envelope. You always just rip it open and dispose of it.”

“Exceptional work, I must say.”

He just shrugged casually.

“It worked well enough. Until now, at least.”

I noted the details that Evan shared in my notebook and tucked it into my coat pocket.

“I expect you had a note to leave at this murder as well?”

“Correct. It’s in my right pocket.”

I removed the letter and unfolded it.

The arrogant man never learns.

Veritas Rubra

“Who is your client, Mr. Taylor?”

“All I know is that she is female and probably wealthy. She paid me in raw stones but hid her face behind a veil.”

A female who was high profile and was somehow involved very closely in the case. A woman who could have had a grudge against one of the victims. Someone who was holding back information the entire time. Someone who knew that both Morris and I were involved in the case and could have written the letter from *Veritas Rubra* threatening us. The culprit could only be… Mrs. Dolores White. I ground my teeth in anticipation.

“Where are the stones, Mr. Taylor?”

He rubbed the side of his head on his shoulder.

“I refrained from selling them within the span of the crime in the event that the transaction could be traced back to me if the woman were exposed. I have them in a deposit box in the Littlefield Building.”

“Thank you for your cooperation, Mr. Taylor,” I said, turning to my fellow officers. “Take him to recover the stones then bring him down to the station. I need transportation to the Driskill hotel immediately. I must have a word with Mrs. White.”

“Right away, sir.”

I watched Taylor being attended to as he was deposited into a cab with a calm expression, seemingly unbothered by his circumstances. I cogitated deeply, dancing with the possibility of the culprit. Mrs. White was in an abusive, unhealthy environment, no doubt. She likely felt suffocated by her brother’s smothering nature and her only other escape being cut off by her husband. She must have known he might be accused, which would have solved a problem for her, although given that she would inherit a majority of her familial wealth through the death of her brother, she could likely get away quite effectively simply through her newfound monetary capacity. She could flee at any moment, so speed was of the essence.

10:40 PM - Wright Building

We raced through the streets in a police vehicle and upon turning a few successive corners, we had found ourselves by the hotel. I barged through the front doors and stationed a couple of officers by the stairs. There was no room for error. I rushed up the stairs, breathing heavily by the time I had reached the door. I knocked deliberately against it, clearing my throat. Mr. White opened the door to see me, rolling his eyes.

"What?"

"I must see Mrs. White right away."

He raised his hands.

"Hold on. Why?"

"I suspect she may be behind a part of this conspiracy. Your wife is a dangerous criminal."

Mr. White stood with his jaw agape.

"She is in the living room," he said, furtively looking behind himself.

I entered the room, which was nearly identical to what it looked like the last I had seen it. Mrs. White was sitting with a novel on her lap, looking with a bewildered expression.

"Mrs. White. I understand your motivations, but that does not excuse the murder of your own brother, Mr. Barnett, and Mr. Blake. You are under arrest for three counts of murder, disturbing the peace, obstruction of justice, and assault."

She seemed shocked at my accusation.

"Excuse me?"

"Mrs. White, although I pity you, I cannot humor you in this delicate situation. If you do not surrender yourself, I may be forced to take physical action, which I would prefer not to."

She let her novel drop to the floor.

"Wh-what? I didn't kill any of those people. Why on earth would I kill my own brother? Why these senseless murders?"

"I suspect you felt trapped, but this is my final offer to come quietly, Mrs. White."

With wide eyes, she held out her hands, which I put handcuffs on. I led her to the lobby of the hotel, the whole time with her pleas going unheeded.

"I didn't kill them… why is this happening to me?"

I stayed silent, not entirely trusting myself to speak. My intuition screamed that I had made some fatal error, but the logic was there. I taciturnly turned her over to my partners, watching her in the cab window. I knew I was correct. I had to be correct. She had the motive, a direct connection to the assassin by his own admittance… she was the only one who fit the profile, yet… something was wrong. Very wrong.

10:55 PM - Austin Police Station

I sat in a spartan room across from Mrs. White, who I can only describe as stupefied. She didn't speak, although her mouth was moving. One of my men entered the room with a rectangular case, which he set on the table in front of me.

"Here is the deposit box you requested, sir," he said as he handed me a small key. I waited until he left the room until he exited then unlocked the container, revealing perhaps a half dozen brilliant jewels. I removed several of the baubles and carefully placed them on the stone surface.

“Do you recognize any of these stones, Mrs. White?”

She glanced down at them.

“Yes. I had a lovely necklace with two of the emeralds. I could be mistaken, but I believe that I had those three rubies in a brooch. The diamond was part of a set of a score of gems set into a valuable tiara. Mr. White can corroborate, as he purchased those pieces for me about five years ago.”

I sighed heavily and inserted the stones back into the box. Mrs. White had proven that the stones belonged to her, which in turn practically doomed her. It was possible that if she was the conspirator she might deny owning them, but there would be no point if Mr. White could simply confirm he had bought them, as we could reference the dealer they were purchased from.

“Thank you for your time, Mrs. White. Unfortunately, you must remain detained for now.”

“I-I understand.”

With that, I departed the room.

December 21st, 8:15 AM - Austin Police Station

The following day, I entered the workplace in a daze as my coworkers congratulated me for my work on the case. I declined any sort of invitations and retreated to my office, where my secretary was waiting for me.

I went over my notes of the case, scanning for any glaring inconsistencies.

“The case is solved, Detective Portsman. Excellent work.”

“Is it? That is precisely what I am puzzling over. Please excuse me.”

My secretary turned to the door and closed it as he left.

I laid out the papers across my desk and exhaled. Morris was correct that *Veritas Rubra* never existed, so how would he handle the case from here? I could consult him, but he might have suspected surveillance on my part. He would concoct some sort of alternative theory… analyze the behavior of both Mr. and Mrs. White. Mr. White acted strangely when I confronted his wife, not even asking for evidence. Any self respecting man would have defended her tooth and nail, but I knew he was a coward. Or… was there a different reason? What if Mr. White wanted her to be arrested? What would he gain? If anything else but murder of her own brother, then not much. But… if he had a half-competent lawyer, he may be able to build the argument of constructive trust and bring his wife to a civil court. He could claim that as her brother’s killer, she was holding the inheritance as an involuntary trustee for the benefit of the heirs, in other words, Mr. White himself. As an equity court, almost any civil court in Austin would take his side. They could not have a killer claim the property after all!

What of the second issue? Evan Taylor specifically stated he had seen a wealthy woman. If it was not Mrs. White, who could it be? What if… Mr. White had an illicit relationship? He clearly was not fond of his own wife. He could have taken the jewelry, given the stones to his partner to deliver to Mr. Taylor, then Mrs. White would have been forced to identify the stones as her own, further damning her. This hypothesis also explained the seemingly inexplicable connection between Mr. White and Carrow, and reframed Mr. White’s previous actions in an entirely different light. Had he purposely made such poor decisions and lies to dissimulate? It

was hard to imagine a man such as himself would have been responsible for such an intricate plan.

It was an interesting theory, but to ring true would require definite evidence. This theoretical plan would have required communication between both Mr. White and his mistress, likely through telegrams. They cannot have communicated between the 14th and now, for the man who was watching him never reported him sending anything to a stranger, so any messages would be dated from before the 14th. Perhaps it was time to visit the Western Union station again.

8:30 AM - Western Union Station

I arrived at the station at half past eight, shortly after the establishment opened for public service. Spotting the same ancient man I had before, I strode over to his console and knocked against it. He raised his eyes, which widened before tightening.

"...yes?"

"I am afraid I must see more of those telegrams."

He coughed and smiled.

"And I am afraid I cannot do that for you. Is there anything else you need?"

"I need to see them."

The man put his gnarled hands on the desk before him.

"... you've made an error, haven't you?"

"Possibly."

"There is no 'possibly'. You would not be this desperate otherwise. You strike me as someone who wants to be as pragmatic as possible. You want to complete your task no matter what. As far as I know, there is no timespan in particular for investigations, so you have made some crucial error."

"Yes, I have made an error. What that error is, I am unsure, but I must remedy the issue. I… may have thought with raw logic a bit more than from a sense of perspective. A woman's freedom may be at stake."

The old man closed his eyes.

"Very… very well. But I refuse to allow you to enter again without a court order."

"Agreed."

I entered the dimly lit room once again and sifted through the messages. I managed to locate Mr. White's dossier with exceptional speed and I began to analyze it. Within recency, he had sent several business related telegrams after the 14th, although that was none of my concern. It was highly problematic as I was not entirely sure what I was attempting to find. Many of the telegrams before the 14th also contained various propositions but nothing leaped at me as being incriminating. Nevertheless, I persisted in my search. If this deeper layer existed, then what would it consist of? Mr. White would obviously be found suspicious if Mr. Saxon died, as their grudge was no great mystery, so he needed to divert attention in the event that his telegrams were analyzed. Thus, it must be that the messages he sent, if they were indeed by telegram, would be completely inconspicuous. What were the possible disguises? A bank notice could not effectively convey a secret message as they tended to have very precise vernacular and digit records. Account information must be concrete, which reduces flexibility of messages.

This in turn excludes most legal documents and transactional updates. Any letter sent especially to an individual would be risky, so what if the telegram took the form of a corporate announcement? It would not be directed to any specific person and could presumably only be decoded for whom it was meant. This nullifies our border of the 14th, but still means that the order to execute Mr. Saxon must have been passed before then. Upon further investigation, the telegrams lacked the ambiguous wording characteristic of concealed messages. But what of a printed circular? Telegrams were awkward and could often only dispatch elementary messages. A larger text with room for redundancy would likely be more useful. Mr. White worked as an accountant and made several announcements within the timeframe of the last month, though only two fell into the mark of before the 14th, and only one of them was of sufficient length:

Class Financers *December 10th, 1920*

Dear Clients and Community,

Vital to our current business plan is a recent acquisition which may improve our financial reach. We are pleased to inform those to whom this action concerns that our general advisory services will be extending into an establishment on South 3rd Street. Yesterday, this building was purchased for a very favorable price from Henry Calhoun, a financial agent who had owned the property since his move to New York. This strategic move will improve our ability to address our rival firms. We value any manner of counsel which will allow us to improve the quality of our financial advice in this context. Please take note that any shape or form of critique is to be left at the registrar's office to be reviewed.

We thank stakeholders for their continued contributions to Class Financers.

Sincerest Regards,

Mr. James White

Tax Accountant

The letter, though mundane at first glance, has several odd properties which could indicate a coded message, however well hidden. The wording is formal, but forced and awkward at times. There are certain ciphers we might eliminate as options simply due to symbolic limitations, such as the Masonic pigpen, simple substitution, and Caesar ciphers as none have any sort of obvious bearing except for either alien symbols or gibberish text, of which this is neither. What of a polyalphabetic cipher, such as the Vigenere cipher? Once again, we have the issue of the lack of indistinct text. If there is a code, it either has to do with the exact wording or lettering involved. The exact wording does not yield much, neither taking the first letters of each word or skipping several times gives any sort of coherent message. Taking the second and third, or a backwards numerical reading does not yield any result. I conclude that it is probably

not a first letter cipher or any of its derivatives. We can eliminate a Cardan grille as well as due to offset lithography, Mr. White could not be sure if it would be correctly proportioned.

Maybe by analyzing the odd choice of words we might be able to narrow down the puzzle. The body of the text begins rather abruptly with the word ‘vital’, which although is rational in context, it is strange. The origin of the building is most likely largely irrelevant information to include in such a business letter, but I suppose he could have incorporated it for thoroughness. The text is stiff by the concluding line, with the ‘we thank’, but it serves its purpose. What about the numbers on the letter? There are seven numbers, six in the date, and one in the body. Using numbers to letter decoding, we get ‘babjcad’ which is nonsensical. Wait a moment… if this is a layered cipher, what if we apply a Vigenere key? What would be a key used by the culprits to conspire together? Something integral to the case. What of ‘Veritas’? No, we end up with an indiscernible string. ‘Rubra’? ‘Rubedo’? No such luck. Hmm… the main body of the message has seven sentences which happens to be exactly how many digits are on the page. If we correspond each number to a line, we have an explanation for why the first word seems so sudden. It was chosen purposefully. But ‘0’ cannot correspond to a letter, so let us assume that ‘0’ can signify skipping a line or looping back to ‘10’. Applying the ‘10’ interpretation to each line gives us the words:

Vital
Action
Yesterday
Address
Value
Critique
Stakeholders

It seems evident that there is some sort of message here, however inscrutable. Unfortunately, this approach may need to be discarded as I cannot recall anything significant in my investigations in this case regarding November 9th. As far as I can tell, Mr. White’s company did not have its value consequentially altered. However, I doubt it is a coincidence that some of the awkward words ended up on this list. There must be some key to infer the solution. What if we turn to the numbers themselves? If we add them, we end up with sixteen, which is hardly relevant for counting letters of these words. If we add those numbers, we get seven, which is also unimportant as many of these words are not long enough. What is the length of these words? They are five, six, nine, seven, five, eight, and twelve letters respectively. Interestingly, both ‘vital’ and ‘yesterday’ have exceedingly uncommon letters to start with. Similarly, so does ‘value’. Every other word is at least six letters long, which is fascinating as it echoes the sixteen motifs I had alluded to. What if I correspond one and six to each successive line in alternating fashion similar to our original course of action? We end up with ‘vnysvqs’ which is worthless. Perhaps this is the encoded message? If we apply any sort of letter shift cipher, then we derive nonsense once again. Let us try a Vigenere key again, assuming ‘a’ equals zero. ‘Veritas’ does not work and neither does ‘rubra’. ‘Rubedo’ is also…

V = 21 R = 17 21 - 17 = 4 = E

N = 13	U = 20	13 - 20 (+ 26) = 19 = T
Y = 24	B = 1	24 - 1 = 23 = X
S = 18	E = 4	18 - 4 = 14 = O
V = 21	D = 3	21 - 3 = 18 = S
Q = 16	O = 14	16 - 14 = 2 = C
S = 18	R = 17	18 - 17 = 1 = B

Actually significant. The string ‘etxoscb’ is conspicuously an order of initials. ‘ET’ is Evan Taylor, ‘OS’ is Oliver Saxon, and ‘CB’ is Carl Barnett. The ‘X’ is symbolic of the execution. But this letter cannot be intended for Mr. Taylor. If it was, then there would be no reason to place his name, it would obviously be meant for him to eliminate these targets. Therefore it was likely intended for someone within Mr. White’s circles who would see the letter. In addition, if Carl Barnett was meant to be killed in the first order, then… Mr. Blake was never responsible for his death. Was it all meant to be a blind? I do not know.

I rummaged through the compartment containing Mr. White’s messages until I stumbled upon a document detailing his clients as well as those other individuals the letter was intended for. I could immediately narrow down the partner to the women on the list, which was not very many. Past that, this woman had to be someone with time to spare to correspond with Mr. Taylor and was likely someone who had met Mr. Saxon personally. Given Mr. Saxon’s age and Mr. Taylor’s description, I would guess that the woman is anywhere from twenty to forty years old, probably by a lower value.

These inferences eliminate large portions of the mailing list, narrowing the possibilities down to about ten names. If Mr. Saxon did fall in love with his mistress, then I would think that their initial meeting would have expanded into certain outward ventures on his part. In other words, it’s possible that they went on romantic expeditions. If we assume this, then the suspect should have at least one letter proposing a rendezvous as opposed to a simple financial meeting in his workplace. That generalization is enough to take us down to one name: Anna Carter, whose clientele list informs me that she lives at Clark’s Estate near the edge of Austin, next to 2nd North Street.

It was imperative that I confront her as quickly as possible. If I could get her to confess, such as through a bluff, I could acquire concrete evidence to convict both of them. But I must not forget that this may be my last chance to explore the Western Union Archives, barring a subpoena. Who was another person who would be able to recreate many of the notes from *Veritas Rubra,* someone else, who insinuated themselves into the crime scene? Charles Morris. I personally doubted he was responsible, but I could not pass this opportunity. His file was surprisingly thin, containing only a few telegrams, likely due to his paranoid telegram redirection. However, there was a queer telegram inside the folder.

Mr. Wilson / meeting on twenty fifth / harrington warehouse / early day / Charles Morris

I had heard of Mr. Wilson. Before the Volstead Act, he owned a bar that was quite successful. In response to the enactment of the Act, it was transformed into a brokerage, which enjoyed moderate business. From what I was aware, Mr. Wilson was still the owner, but what would he have to do with Mr. Morris? I had surmised that he might have been involved in crime

in the past. It was a definite prospect that Mr. Wilson had never shut down his bar, but had just transferred it. Didn't Mr. Morris also confirm my suspicions that he was once a gambler? Illegal, sure, but where would he be able to operate? Was the bar always a gambling den? It would explain the connection between these two men. Furthermore, Mr. Morris had no real stock records, even in his telegrams, which suggests that cannot be the link between the two men. All things considered, he may be a valuable asset to Mr. Morris.

I retrieved my findings after organizing them and left the building, thanking the old man on my way out.

8:50 AM - Clark's Estate

With a file under my arm, I approached the front desk occupied by a woman examining the room rack behind her. She fiddled with one of the keys before facing me.

"How can I help you today, sir?"

I shuffled towards the desk, surreptitiously revealing my badge to her.

"I am looking for an Anna Carter who I suspect lives here."

The woman cast an odd look at me.

"Ms. Carter? It has actually been quite a bit since I've seen her. She is down the other hall, sixth door on the right."

I followed her directions to the sleek door and knocked against it. There was no answer. I gently turned the knob, but it refused to open.

"Ms. Carter!"

Once again there was no response. Had she anticipated my arrival and escaped? But if so, how did she lock the door? I rushed towards the front desk.

"Has she gone out?"

"Not that I know of. The last time she was here, she checked in."

"I need the spare key to her room."

She handed me the key, which I raced to insert into the door. I slowly pushed it open, but there was no one in the room. The bed looked as though it had been slept in and the shades cast open. The wardrobe contained simple clothing, but there was nothing out of the ordinary. Where was she?

I scoured through the desk in the room, only to find a few pins and a ledger which was completely blank. I struck a match and held it to the pages, but no writing appeared. Curious. Examining the floor yielded few results, only a couple of scrapes. Suddenly, I noticed a pin which had been left under her desk. I bent down to retrieve it and perceived two letters which had been roughly carved into the baseboard of the room. *V* and *R*.

Chillingly, the words had clearly been inscribed furiously into the wood with the pin, which had been dulled and warped by the task. I believed the myth of *Veritas Rubra* to be dead and buried. Had it taken a life of its own in some twisted man's mind? What could be concluded is that the text was probably written by the victim, but why? Did she simply 'assume' they were agents of the society? If she did, why did she not scream out? How did they even infiltrate the room to begin with? The narrative was dripping with inconsistencies. A possibility is that a crime has not been committed at all, rather that this is an attempt to fake one's own death or abduction.

Nonetheless, we still have the question as to how she left if the door was locked and the lady running the front desk did not see her. My first assumption is that she escaped through the window, which is highly unlikely given that the window barely made enough room to allow a man's arm through, definitely not an entire person. My solution which solves both of these problems is a disguise of some sort. Imagine waiting for the desk schedule to shift and leaving concealed in some garb. If they questioned where you had come from, which would be unusual in itself, they could say they had arrived before their shift. It may have been time to ask Mr. White a few questions about his involvement in the case.

9:40 PM - Wright Building

I checked in with the secretary to ensure Mr. White had not left before reaching his room. Sure enough, he had not. I made my way to his room and knocked on the door with purpose. A few seconds later, Mr. White cracked open the door.

"Oh. It's you."

"May I step inside, Mr. White?"

He teetered behind the door as his eyes avoided mine

"Haven't you bothered me enough?"

I put my hand against the doorframe.

"Mr. White! Do you have anything to hide? Because if not, there should be no issue with me entering. Would you prefer I come back with a warrant and break down your door?"

He swung open the door and bared his teeth like a dog.

"Come in," he said vitriolically, stepping aside.

"Thank you, Mr. White."

I leaned against the wall of the room which had been left in practically identical condition as Mr. White sat in his chair.

"Mr. White."

"Yes?"

"I know you have been having an affair."

His eyes glazed before he took out a cigar and began furiously smoking it.

"I am running out of patience, Detective. This is the third time you have barged into my home, and this time you are accusing me of adultery?!"

I walked over to the chair and stood over Mr. White.

"So I expect the name Anna Carter means nothing to you?"

"One of my clients. So what?"

"I know about the messages, Mr. White. Don't play the fool with me, even though you match that profile. You always disliked Mrs. White."

Mr. White turned beet red and spit at my feet.

"You are lying, detective! You have no proof! You-you-"

"So surely you would have no issue if she named you as her lover when I questioned her?"

"She-what?!"

"Would you like to see the transcript, Mr. White?"

Mr. White blanched.

“No, no! You are lying! She wouldn’t betray me so s-”

“Thank you for your confession, Mr. White. I now know you two were corroborating.”

Mr. White froze.

“But… the transcript…”

I took out my file to reveal a page with text scribbled over it before crumpling it and tossing it into the fireplace.

“A fabrication, Mr. White.”

He slumped in his chair.

“What… now?”

I retrieved a pair of handcuffs from my jacket.

“You are under arrest, Mr. White.”

He seemed confused.

“For what? Immorality is not a legal problem.”

“For the fabrication of a cult to achieve several murders and defame your wife to obtain her fortune.”

“Excuse me? I had no involvement in those murders. Yes, Anna Carter and I were romantically involved, but I never killed anyone.”

“Then I am certain Ms. Carter fled for no reason, and left the symbol of the cult simply for fun. I am not an idiot, Mr. White.”

“Then she set me up. I didn’t have anything to do with that foul business. How do you know she wasn’t orchestrating it on her own?”

“Mr. White, you personally wrote a letter with an encoded message meant for her.”

“No! I never did! I’m being framed! She-she must have intercepted it and modified the letter! I am innocent, listen to me!”

I put the handcuffs on his wrists with a satisfying click.

“That’s enough, Mr. White.”

At last, I had Mr. White escorted to the police station and put into custody. With the charge acting as a black mark on his career, the next day’s paper precipitated the loss of his job. Mrs. White was released soon after his capture and was returned to Mr. Saxon’s estate, which had been released from investigation.

However, I had to search for the other culprit before we concluded the case. There were also the unaccounted for jewels which had been part of a ‘score’ of diamonds according to Mrs. White. Could it be that Ms. Carter kept them for herself? If she did, we may be able to look out for them if they are pawned or otherwise used in a transaction.

December 23rd, 11:30 AM -

I had finished looking over a report of burglary in my office when my secretary knocked on the door.

“You may come in.”

He ventured across the floor with gravitas.

“Detective… one of our men found a body. They think it might be Ms. Carter.”

“Already? How did she die?”

“Seems like she was pricked with strychnine, similar to Carrow.”

I lifted up the case file again.

"But we believed Carrow committed suicide. Maybe… she took the coward's way out when she realized she would likely be imprisoned for life or even executed. Is there any other news?"

"Well, a few cases of petty theft and an accidental overdose of digitalis from a woman named Margaret Gutner, but nothing directly pertaining to the case."

"What of the body?"

He nodded with deliberation.

"At first, it was transported to a mortuary near the edge of Austin, where it was discovered, but I issued a request directly from the commissioner to deliver the body to a local morgue near Oakwood Cemetery downtown for analysis and identification."

"Excellent. Have Mr. White be brought to aid us."

"Certainly."

I rubbed my hands together in anticipation. Was this complex, bloody business finally going to end?

12:00 PM - Greenwood Morgue

My entourage and I entered the morgue to see a suited elderly man standing behind a table. He had a solemn expression on his face.

"How can I help you, er, officers?"

"We were notified that a body was recently transported here."

He lifted up an organizational sheet and scanned it slowly.

"Yes, the presumed Ms. Carter. You are here to identify her?"

"Quite so, and that fact may be integral to a case we are working on."

He raised a withered hand to a narrow hallway to our left.

"She should be on a table down on the first door."

"Thank you."

We approached the room with baited breath and I finally laid eyes on one of the true conspirators. She was curled awkwardly on the table, a hallmark of strychnine poisoning. She possessed smooth, feminine features with a sculpted face. Her body was well dressed, with a purse laying beside her on the table. Mr. White was shocked, his face distorted with silent anguish.

"No,no, no! Anna!"

"I expect you identify this woman as Ms. Carter?"

He scrunched his eyes.

"As much as I hate to say it, yes, that is undeniably Anna Carter. I-I don't want to look at the body anymore."

I lifted her purse, a skinny rectangular object, and opened it carefully. Inside were several articles: a handkerchief, a bottle of perfume, a razor, several bills, and a small note. I lifted the note to my eyes to make out two letters. A 'V' and an 'R'. I lifted the purse and shook it, but it made almost no noise, as if it were stuffed with cotton. I removed a small knife from my jacket and made a slit in the lining of the purse, revealing some tissue paper, but nothing came

out. I removed some of the paper and a few sparkling stones fell onto the table. She had indeed attempted to escape with the stones!

“Officer Kant, please remove all the diamonds from the bag.”

He took the bag from me and began to warily remove the stuffing. I turned to look at the body. It was extremely difficult to ascertain the time of death due to the strychnine poisoning stiffening the body, the only thing that could be reasonably assumed was that the death occurred within the last twenty hours due to a lack of odor. The presence of *livor mortis* that is not fully fixed in place indicates that the death was somewhat recent as well.

“Where was the body found?”

Officer Kant counted out some of the stones.

“If I remember correctly, it was located near Clark’s Estate, next to an old cabin. The ground was patchy and frozen there, so not many footprints.”

Conceivably, she had been hiding out in the cabin, but then why did she suddenly commit suicide? She had the stones, although once again, I suppose she did not want to risk being caught. But where was her disguise? She must have used one to exit her apartment. I looked at the body again and noticed a puffing of the fabric near her waist. I carefully cut open the thick line to show a concealed line of cloth. I pulled the large rectangular cloth out, unfolding it as it exited. It was a maid outfit! Now we have confirmed that hypothesis, but why did she bother with this last note? Did she want a last jab at us, leaving this motif, or was someone else responsible for her death? Strychnine was not a pleasant death. Of all options, why this one? Of course, if she had a realization and strychnine was the only substance on hand, then I suppose it would be plausible.

“Mr. White!” I said. “How long have you known Ms. Carter?”

He rubbed his eyes.

“About a month and a half.”

I rubbed my chin. This entire narrative was highly consistent. It was perfect, but something was picking at me. Why did she have a razor with her in her purse? If it was for self defense, she would have used it if someone pricked her. If it was not in self defense, I would have assumed she used it to carve the ‘VR’ symbols, but a pin was used instead. The blade was not dulled, so if it had been used, it was for something soft. Hypothetically, if she was murdered, she must have anticipated her own death, ergo she knew her body might have been searched, so surely she would not hide anything incriminating her murderer on her body. This could all be coincidental, but… possibly she had hid something in her room? But then why did she not cry out or seek help if she knew she was in danger? Well, if I was on the run, I would not alert others to my position. Uncomfortable questions, such as how I knew I would be in danger would abound.

It could be that she hid something in her apartment, a failsafe of sorts in case she was in danger. This line of reasoning would hardly hold under the lightest scrutiny, but maybe… just maybe… there was something at play here. I handed my findings to Officer Kant.

“I must stop by her apartment again. There may be a clue I missed there. Take Mr. White back to his holding cell.”

“Affirmative.”

12:20 PM - Clark’s Estate

Before I knew it, I was back in her room, overturning every available object. There was nothing of significance, not in any of the drawers or the cabinets. I ran my fingers through my short hair. Had I gone mad? Was I simply overthinking the case? I crouched close to the ground and analyzed the carved letters. If I were Ms. Carter and I were in this position, what would be my thought process? I would use the pin to scratch out the letters as a clue, then… what? What would be my insurance? I take out some item which can be used as my leverage and hide it. But where? They would notice a dulled razor. What is close to me and consists of a material which is not rough? Oh my Lord. The carpet.

I lifted the corner of the carpet and noticed several stitches across the edge. They could have been nothing, or… something. I slit them open with my pocket knife and maneuvered through the stitching with a finger. I felt a small paper and pulled it out. The 'VR' lettering was a decoy! It could simply throw off anyone, even her enemies who attempted to interpret it.

With shaking hands, I unfolded the letter.

With this, I name the man who allowed me to take on the mantle of his group and advised me throughout this endeavor. He allowed me to connect with Mr. Taylor and certain unscrupulous circles, although I am concerned he may seek to leave no loose ends. Let the record show that the person who killed me in the event of my death is none other than Charles Morris, a blind man who built significant influence in this town.

Anna Carter

This revelation staggered me, but then it all made perfect sense. The stranger who entered the scene conveniently, had incredible epiphanies, then exited. It was the perfect cover. He was one of the few who knew I associated with him, he was obviously poor, but that could be remedied! What did he do immediately upon arriving at the scene? He insinuated himself in the household. He was trying to make himself indispensable. If he organized the case from the start, Mrs. White would soon become divorced from her husband and probably turn towards the poor, pitiful, but brilliant mind who comforted her. He could efficiently monitor the investigation, and no matter what, he would end up benefiting.

What of this group she spoke of? Well, Mr. Morris was likely involved with Mr. Wilson, as indicated by the letter. I already know of Mr. Wilson's possibly illicit connections, so it was conceivable that they were involved. So, a trap must be set. Mr. Morris could have no fear that anyone would make such a connection without this letter, so he will not expect me to use it against him. His meeting on the 25th will be grossly interrupted by my own department, and I will capture him and his entire group at once. No one except the commissioner will know of this discovery until then so as to hide my plans.

Detective John Portsman, signing off for now.

Now, dear reader, we may return to my own, rather verbose narrative that continues two days after Detective Portsman's dramatic finishing statement. The previous evening, Morris had invited me to attend a particular show that would be playing in an uptown theater the following

morning and I could not decline his offer. He seemed strangely tense, but also excited, as if some great plan was coming to fruition.

I had hardly arrived at his door when he burst through it to greet me, one arm raised, with a grin upon his face. His clothing was cleaner than usual, free of creases.

“Ah, Mr. Hopkins! I am glad to see that you have made it,” he said, twirling his walking stick with a flourish.

“Of course. I would not miss it for the world.”

“Admirable. Now, I have sent for a cab which may be arriving within the next few minutes. Would you be opposed to waiting outside with me?”

“Not at all.”

We went through the front door, a bout of warm air touching my face as the vehicles made their way past us. The rhythm of pedestrians was ever-present, despite the lower population of Austin compared to its sister towns. The strong scent of tobacco inundated the environment, not entirely unpleasant, but simply adding a certain flavor to the whole scene.

“Morris, you have not told me many of your thoughts regarding the murders. Did you hear that they caught Mr. White?”

Morris’s lips tightened, but his smile remained, almost like he wanted to laugh.

“I did, indeed. However, my good friend Detective Portsman took to refrain from bringing me along to any more scenes. For my own safety, or so he says.”

“I know. But… you seem as though you suspect some alternative?”

“Very shrewd of you, Bill. I believe he may suspect me, as ridiculous as that theory sounds.”

I nearly snorted.

“Nonsense.”

Just as I finished speaking, a peeling yellowish cab slowed down next to us, the engine still firing. The driver, an oily looking man with a goatee leaned out the window with an arm folded over the side door.

“Mistah Morris?” he asked.

“Him and his very good companion.”

The man rapped his fingers on the dashboard and beckoned for us to enter. I helped Morris inside before entering myself. The car was a trifle bit warmer than the great outdoors, likely having been heated in the sun. Almost immediately upon entering the cab, Morris screwed the top off his walking stick and replaced it with a curved wooden handle that he had mysteriously procured. He expeditiously inverted his jacket, showing a sort of strange green lace up the hem and a series of shiny buttons going towards his sternum.

“Morris… what are you doing?”

“Bill,” he whispered in a low tone. “I have reason to believe that we are being followed, and as such, I am altering my appearance.”

He took a strange lump from his pocket and thrust it out, revealing a squashed top hat, which he perched on his head. He removed a pair of glasses with a squarish orange lens and replaced his own with them.

“But… why?”

All throughout this odd exercise, Morris was still smiling at me.

“Don’t worry, you are not in any danger. Please take my walking stick and use it. We shall walk arm in arm. Make sure to create a large berth in crowds so as to hide my blindness.”

“Are we not seeing a show?”

“Yes, but a bit later than anticipated. We have some business to take care of. Oh, and please don this bowler hat. It may be needed to prevent identification.”

“Morris… I am not sure about this.”

Morris simply looked at me with an expectant grin.

“Have I ever led you wrong?”

That was all I required to hear.

“Very well.”

Our cab raced through the streets with considerable speed, and I watched the low lying buildings fly past us like some great urban kaleidoscope, varying colors and individuals of all ranks. As suddenly as we had begun, the cab halted and we were dispensed onto what could be called a sidewalk near the local theatre. Morris steered me to the center mass of a crowd, and I could barely make out the snatches of conversation in the groups over the din. The square ended with a series of cars waiting for various people. One of the drivers waved at us.

“Mister Gruber?” He called, signaling at Morris.

“Absolutely.”

The man carefully stopped his automobile to allow us to break off from the crowd. We had entered when Morris began changing his appearance once again.

“So… Morris. What have you done this time?”

“Well, it could be that Detective Portsman is searching for me with great gusto. He expects me to be at the Harrington Warehouse in a short period of time. I have no doubt that he is tracking us right now.”

“What?!”

“Bill, I advise you to look back at the development of this case. A well planned crime, no doubt, with extreme intricacy and handled with considerable finesse. Do you think they would not consider the blind man and his friend who take a walk by the scene of the crime almost every day, like clockwork? If they performed a basic investigation, they might be able to infer my reputation as a conniving person. They would know that I crave stimulation and puzzles, and what about letting the greatest case of the decade grace my fingertips? I could not resist contributing my insight to the case. But what then? If they knew I was going to be involved, how suspicious it would seem if a stranger was implicated in the case they otherwise had no involvement in. Indeed! A man with underworld connections being accused. I had a feeling I would be suspected at some point in this entire spiderweb of intrigue, it is what any logical criminal would do. So, I made preparations. The case continued to have a theme of plateauing before a separate culprit was found, so I had to subvert that plateau. If this culprit knew of my underworld connections, then the obvious, most efficient move would have been to frame me as a member of the group which opposed them, in this case, *Veritas Rubra.* If we think about the progression of the case in these terms, it is a reasonable conclusion as the culprit knew of Detective Portsman’s trap and even anticipated it by adding another narrative unbeknownst to Evan Taylor. Therefore, I believed that they may have anticipated my move by placing Mr. Wilson’s gang against their own. If we look upon this situation from their perspective, then the most efficient course of action for Morris would be to take that move, so once again, it would be

fair to conclude that we may frame Morris as a member of that group, so as to turn his attempt to stop us against him. What they may not realize is that I had sent a telegram to Mr. Wilson, requesting a meeting on the 25th. This may seem irrelevant, but if you also take into account that I have been sending Mr. Wilson anonymous tips about police activity to build trust, then another message I sent, one stating that I am the leader of *Veritas Rubra*, that the group is indeed real, although has had to back up due to general pressure, frames the telegram in an entirely different light. Now Mr. Wilson believes I am trying to eliminate him by luring him into a trap to alleviate my own risks. He will obviously see this as an opportunity to kill me by sending his own men, then defaming me with his tip, which will have been accurate, if not framing it as self defense. He will obviously disregard my contingency as he can simply dismiss it as defamation from a desperate murderer. What of Detective Portsman? I thought until the 25th may be enough time for the culprit to frame me, and I would not even have to worry about his wrath since then. Naturally, Detective Portsman would search through the Western Union Department, one way or another. Given his cautiousness, he would undoubtedly find my telegram and make the connection that I am meeting with my gang, but he will not reveal that information to the public as he will wish to set a trap for us, which would be most efficient by trapping all of us at once. He would not even use it as a preventative measure, as for all Detective Portsman knows, there will be no more murders as the case plateaued. He can only gain through this plan. Hence, we enter the endgame where Mr. Wilson will try to crush me at the warehouse and Detective Portsman will try to trap us there. Detective Portsman will arrest the men there, sparing me, and he will find a concealed docket there containing the information I had compiled against Mr. Wilson back in our previous adventure involving an interesting game of hangman. He will use that information against Mr. Wilson, who will have sent his vanguard to be captured and thus will be defenseless."

"Oh dear. What if Detective Portsman realizes this is a trap?"

Morris delicately combed his hair.

"He will not. I am sure he will be able to find out we had taken this cab, and he will then believe that we are attempting to flee. How foolish would Morris have to be to go to the very place that he deemed to meet Mr. Wilson! But there will be two cabs waiting for us on arrival at our destination. One will go to the edge of town, perfect for fleeing, but the other will go to the warehouse. Detective Portsman will be first misled to believe I went out of town, but then he will realize he has been fooled by a double bluff and attempt to follow us to the warehouse. Alternatively, if he tries to follow the one going to the warehouse, which will already take time to track down, he will end up right where I want him to be. As for Mr. Wilson's group, I have had a locked room set up within the warehouse. They will assume I have concealed myself within it and it may delay them for some time. Unfortunately, the window of opportunity is very narrow, but it is what I can do."

"A masterpiece. But how did you manage these preparations whilst being observed?"

"Ahh, what is man if not resourceful? There are beggars everywhere on the streets. Drop a coin with a folded note and they will do whatever you like, especially if it seems semantic on the outside."

I was captivated by the plan Morris had spun with only a few notes and a couple more fares.

"The cab is slowing down. Prepare for our next stop, Bill."

We left the car behind and organized ourselves near a train station where there were a couple of cabs which honked at Morris. It occurred to me that Morris had likely altered his appearance each time to match a description he had given each one beforehand. We navigated to each one where he told the drivers to simply go off to their destination without any passengers. They were confused by his instructions, but finally agreed, leaving us in a cloud of fine dust.

"What now?"

Morris lit a cigarette and puffed on it once.

"They cannot be far behind us. Go far to the left. We will walk about fifteen minutes to Cedar Springs Road. I have a car waiting for us there to take us to the wetlands."

"What are we going to do there? There is nothing but the old ranch there where this all began."

"The ranch, and one person who was released recently," Morris said, releasing a small cloud of smoke.

"You can't mean-"

"Mrs. White. But let us fly first."

I nervously walked alongside Morris, who was careful to obliterate our remaining footsteps before going on the sidewalk. The rural street next to us continued to wind until we came across a small taxi. The man inside it flicked out a cigarette stub and displayed a leathery hand on the side of the car. He had strikingly dark eyes and blinked them rapidly at both of us.

"Better be one of y'all, I musta've been waitin' all mornin'. Is one of you Villefort?"

"That would be me."

"Get in."

He drove with blazing speed through the progressively narrow street until we finally arrived at the border of the wetlands. He nodded at me before allowing us to leave. Morris waited a minute or two for the man to depart then held out his hand for his walking stick, which I gave him. He brandished it like a sword and he followed me up the greenish mound to the ranch. The building was left just as it was near the beginning of my narrative, albeit with an additional air of unrest. The sycamore trees stood like large watchtowers, like some unseen figure was watching our progress from the shadows. I shrugged off these thoughts and knocked firmly against the door. At first, there was no answer. I knocked again, the vibrations resonating with my entire body. Something was at hand here.

With that, the cold metallic handle turned sharply, and a vibrant woman, if somber, opened the door. Dolores White. She was wearing a loose fitting linen dress, as if symbolic of the freedom of her abusive husband, whose actions had been reported by Detective Portsman with much derision. She was only mildly surprised to see us.

"Oh. Hello Mr. Hopkins. How are you doing, Mr. Morris? Please, come in for some tea."

Morris bowed respectfully.

"Sure. It would be improper to decline such an offer."

She led us through the cavernous house to the dining room, where she had a china set sitting atop the wooden table, the light from the chandelier reflecting and refracting all over the room with the morning light. She stood over a pot of boiling water with several crushed herbs next to her in a golden tray.

"What will it be?"

Morris raised himself up and pursed his lips.

“I’m afraid I have a matter of serious importance that needs to be discussed.”

She laughed, an airy, light sound.

“Oh, really? I never thought tea would be of such concern to you.”

Morris gave a brief smirk.

“Mrs. White… or rather Ms. Saxon, as will soon be your title… I know you killed your brother and husband.”

Her radiant smile faltered.

“I-I did not-”

“I hate to correct you, but you did. You despised your brother, but at the same time, you appreciated his protectiveness. However, it was too much. Smothering even. You married Mr. White to escape him, but he became the antagonist of your life. Both of them grew bitter and pushed you over the edge. I know the truth as well. This… Ms. Carter never existed. She was a fabrication made by a desperate woman to test her husband’s loyalty. She was based off of a real person, whose identity I cannot attest to. You used a mortician's putty and your own acting skills to seduce your own husband. He failed your test, and so you came up with a plan to eliminate both of your problems. You pretended to have been robbed of your jewelry, which ended up in your alter ego’s hands. You used them to hire Mr. Taylor to commit multiple murders with your *Veritas Rubra* narrative. You purposely dropped the hint that the culprit was among those in the original investigation to frame your husband. You intercepted his letter to add a code, a breakable one at that, albeit extremely difficult. It was not a coincidence that Detective Portsman reported that Mr. White was abusing you. You set him up by provoking him. You faked your own death as your alter ego by inviting the woman who she was based off of here, then murdering her. Mr. Carrow? A poor, hopeless, but most of all, malleable man. You could convince him to kill himself. What would he say? He was a half step from bankruptcy, he may as well go out with a few more coins for whiskey. Now, you may have used a similar method for poor Ms. Carter, but I suspect you had someone else kill her. Someone… who had very little hope. A woman named Margaret Gutner, who had a short time on this earth anyway. It was probably easy to convince her by proxy to kill your model, then overdose on digitalis. I would guess you maybe gave her money for life insurance? Or better yet, gave her money for her children to receive in her will. It is amazing what people will do when they are hopeless. Oh, and what of Evan Taylor? You obviously planned for Detective Portsman to set a trap. You wanted him to become captured so you could frame yourself. At the end of the day, who would suspect the woman who had already been cleared of crime? Not to mention the false patterns you set. For a moment, I even believed I may have been mistaken. You opened so many possibilities for investigation, from Ward & Clews, to underground cults, to a fringe assassin. Sometimes I wonder how Detective Portsman came so far in his investigation. Maybe I shall ask him one day.”

Mrs. White waited patiently throughout Morris's speech, her face becoming more and more scarlet.

“Why-I have never heard such a bundle of offensive accusations before! I repeat that I did not kill my brother, or anyone else.”

Morris put a hand on the table and exhaled.

“You did. You did not want to, but you did.”

“You don’t know how-”

Morris raised a finger.

“Yes, I do. I despise being so confrontational, especially towards a wronged woman, but I do know exactly how you feel. I have had no control over my life for nearly two years now, except a few unique circumstances. I know the suffocating feeling of being trapped, the pain of not being able to do what you wish to. That horrible sensation of having everything, all your potential, vanquished. Your radial artery betrayed you in our first meeting, Mrs. White. I already know that you are the culprit since it is not any of the others at the first crime scene. Your emotion was real, genuine, distress. The best acting is that of those who are not acting. Mr. White was a self-aware man, a coward who thinks he is able to dominate others. I knew from the outset that this family was dysfunctional. You were being truthful that you regretted Mr. Saxon’s death. In fact, if you could have had it any other way, I am sure you would have. He defended you, something you were clearly aware of, but it was too much. He treated his staff with tolerance, imagine how he treated the woman he grew up with!”

Mrs. White sat with her eyes closed and cheeks rosy. When she lifted her head, there were tears streaming down her face.

“It-it-it’s true. I am a monster.”

Morris gazed with sightless eyes and a dignified expression.

“No. You have done deplorable, horrific things, but you are not a monster. Not yet. It is not too late. You can confess your actions and detail everything to the police. There is a road to redemption, if long and hard. I will not say you are entirely vindicated by your circumstances, but it may contribute to leniency from both the court and God. I would be the monster here to prevent you from redeeming yourself, which would defeat the entire point of the agency which we both desire. The choice is yours.”

Mrs. White waited as the boiling water hissed. She stood up and swallowed hard.

“I will confess.”

Morris grinned.

“Then how about we enjoy some tea before the police realize what I have been up to? Be sure not to poison it, I will know.”

A shadow of a smile appeared on her face.

Our story resumes two weeks after this account, when Mrs. White, or rather Ms. Saxon entered a plea deal with Detective Portsman regarding her sentencing. It was agreed that she would not receive the death penalty in exchange for the expedition of her case, as there was virtually no evidence inculcating her involvement besides her confession. Parallel to the conclusion of the *Rubedo* case, Mr. Wilson was arrested shortly after his gang’s capture at the Harrington warehouse, where they were confronted by a dozen police officers.

Although Charles Morris and I were detained upon being found at the ranch, we were released a few days later in light of the new evidence, along with a written apology from Detective Portsman. Mr. White was released, although he was charged with something relating to provocation. Morris took me to the theater, where our narrative finally approached its end.

I sat next to Morris on the crimson cushions overlooking the show, an adaptation of *Taming of the Shrew*, which Morris was listening to with great interest. He occasionally asked a question of clarification to me before staying perfectly still and silent, as if he were an automaton. I could hardly focus on the narrative given the thoughts swirling around my head in the moment. The entire experience with the *Rubedo* case felt highly surreal, like a distant dream or a novel I read in my youth. Morris barely spoke of the case either, though he frequently sent letters to both Detective Portsman and, strangely enough, Ms. Saxon. I did not ask why and would not know why until a later adventure… but that is not within the ambit of this story, or at least this highly personal narrative.

Fin