“Well, then,” Morris said, beating a rhythm with his slender fingers. “We certainly have a tidy little problem here.”

“Indeed,” Detective Portsman responded, gritting his teeth. “Officers Parker, Lawrence, Edwards, get in here,” he barked, conjuring up a few officials from across the house. They walked briskly into the hallway before standing shoulder to shoulder, awaiting orders. Detective Portsman walked down the line like an experienced sergeant, his hands held behind his back.

“Parker, I would like you to stay back here and watch the ranch. Report anyone coming in or out as well as communications, such as letters, documents, telegrams, and the like.”

Detective Portsman rubbed his chin with a thoughtful look.

“Lawrence, I require you to scout out any unsavory areas in the vicinity of the ranch. Investigate underground bars and places where people can get a drink. Do not wear your uniform, just ask around and buy a few bottles, they will divulge information if they have it. Edwards, I want you to locate the late Mr. Saxon’s coworkers at the brokerage and compile general reports on all of them. Deliver them to me after they are complete. Good luck.”

Detective Portsman scrawled an address and telegram number on a slip of paper and handed it to me.

“Here is the address of the station and a direct line to my office. If you or Mr. Morris feels as though you have any epiphanies, please share them,” he said.

Morris grinned and held out his hand for Detective Portsman to take. He gripped his hand and shook it firmly.

“It was an honor to meet you, Mr. Morris.”

“Oh, please. The honor of assisting you in this investigation dwarfs any alternative.”

The corner of Detective Portsman’s mouth twitched.

“You don’t need to flatter me, Mr. Morris.”

“I do not? I’d assume you would rather I embody a more antagonistic side of myself you so skillfully inferred the existence of?”

Detective Portsman’s face cracked into a smile.

“Hardly. I can only say that it is great luck that you are not truly a criminal.”

“I would not refer to it as ‘luck’. Imagine what I could do with the abundance of wealth a skilled thief would possess! I could even purchase a new walking stick!”

Detective Portsman snorted before breaking off into an oddly light laugh, as if he had refrained from indulging in humor until this moment.

“I could do with more men like you, Mr. Morris, although I might be out of a job if that were the case.”

It was Morris’s turn to laugh with his trademark tinny guffaw.

“Indeed. As much as I would like to banter with you, Detective Portsman, I would hate to distract you too much from the case at hand.”

“Very true. Farewell, Messrs. Morris and Hopkins..”

“Same to you, Detective.”

“Thank you for your time, Detective Portsman.”

Charles Morris and I finally exited the ranch and traveled back down the grassy hill to the original path we had blazed. Morris continued his walk alongside me, albeit with a sly new look adorning his face.

“I would be curious to hear your thoughts on the case at hand, Bill,” he said, shifting his head momentarily.

I considered Morris’s question for some time, letting my thoughts develop with each crunching step. The case appeared to have two very different interpretations based upon both the inferences of Morris and Detective Portsman: for the former, the entire problem could be one of deterministic nature, as in the entire story presented by the case could be falsified. For the latter, the case is protocol, barring a few singular details. Given the accounts of the members of the household, the entire case as well as the people involved appeared illusionary in the sense of the term. The affair seemed indeterminate given the current available evidence.

“I am afraid I do not have any sort of unique insight to add, Morris. All I can suggest is to wait.”

Morris nodded.

“My thoughts exactly.”

I was intrigued. I had believed Morris might have been several steps ahead of me in the case!

“Truly?”

“Truly. There is little to do now besides speculate. However, it is possible we may be able to set up our movements for possible developments. You are correct in the sense of Detective Portsman’s position as an investigator; the path he pursues has already been set. In short, his goal is to simply locate an individual or organization responsible through clandestine methods. In contrast, we will conduct a parallel inquiry based on our own assumptions. Suppose the case and the clues have indeed been fabricated. What do you believe the end goal of such a misdirection is for?”

“I might have thought that it was simply to divert attention, although as you explained beforehand, such a blind would not hold up to even basic scrutiny, hence the necessity for a more complex diversion.”

“Excellent. This theory is testable using Detective Portsman’s methods, which we will undoubtedly see the results of. If he finds nothing, he may conclude that the letter is a sham, but if he finds evidence of the existence of such a cult, then the letter is either genuine, or this case is much more complicated than it first appears. In both circumstances, we find a clear course of action: to discover the group which will then lead us to the conclusion of the case or blatant evidence of a deeper conspiracy. As Detective Portsman is effectively verifying the first set of possibilities, we may address the next branch. If the group is fraudulent, yet seeks attention whilst maintaining this level of misdirection, we may infer that there is some unknown reason why the group wishes to be found. Now, Mr. Hopkins, if you were in charge of this group, how would you encourage the authorities to seek you out?

“Perhaps through a public goading?”

“It is possible, but I personally find it a bit unlikely. The group is creating the image of a highly secretive cult with a professional air of their crimes. In addition, even Detective Portsman, who, judging by his expertise and the wrinkled skin on his hand, is quite experienced, still was unaware of this group. They are trying to conceal themselves whilst leaving a notable trademark. It makes me believe that they may try to commit another crime of sorts, perhaps even another murder, so as to capture attention once again.”

“Would that not defeat the purpose of the motives postulated for killing Mr. Saxon?”

“Brilliant! It would, although I would invite you to look at the case from a slightly different perspective. Let us suppose Mr. Saxon’s death was not the end goal of this crime, rather it was to distort another crime by adding exponentially more suspects and possibilities to the case. In effect, it could be an inspired tactic to have a man as unpopular as Mr. Saxon killed, given his number of possible foes.”

“I see… although I must admit that this is a plausible theory, do you really find such a layered conspiracy likely?”

“Ah, another good point. In most cases I would say this possibility is far-fetched, but as Detective Portsman is exploring one alley of this conundrum, it would not hurt to test another hypothesis.”

“True. How do you plan on going about your investigation? I expect it might involve your subordinates in some capacity?”

Morris snickered.

“Of course. If you would visit in a couple of days to confer over breakfast, I will gladly inform you regarding any new developments.”

“Certainly. Thank you, Morris,” I said as we approached the edge of town, the automobiles audibly roaring in the distance. Morris’s face settled into a content look.

“Not a problem, Bill. Not a problem.”

Chapter Two: Act of Imitation

Unlike the past few stories I have taken to write down regarding Mr. Charles Morris, this account was appreciably longer than the rest. My sincerest apologies to any reader who sought to finish this tale in one sitting. Some may find it fortunate as Mr. Charles Morris is significantly more present during this narrative, but I digress. Our key plot continues two days after the last chapter ends, where I ventured to Morris’s apartment complex with the day’s newspaper.

The weather had not subsided in that time period, resulting in the appearance of many heavily bundled folk walking down the sides of the streets. The building where Morris lived was visible even from a great distance, which likely would have been for its benefit had it been built anywhere except the cusp of the city. It was a great rectangular brick building, reminiscent of children’s blocks or some arcane chest.The facade was a dull reddish hue, as though someone had attempted to bleach the color with only mild success. Gaining entry was simple, as was reaching Morris’s door, since he lived on the first floor of the building. I had been there several times in the past, but the iconic lacquered door always made me pause before knocking.

I rapped my knuckles against the wooden surface, emitting a hearty thump which seemed to reverberate throughout the hallway. Shortly afterwards, I heard deliberate footsteps approaching the opposite side of the door before it cracked open, allowing a bright light to shine through the windowless hall.

“Morris?”

“Ahh, Bill! I’ve been expecting you, please make yourself at home.”

Morris stepped back and unbolted the door with a sharp sliding noise, opening it to reveal that he had kindled the fireplace in the blackened grate of the room. A short table sat in

the center of the chamber with two plates of eggs and vegetables upon it next to a large pitcher. A few cigarette stubs sat in a tarnished ashtray adjacent to the set meal.

"It was quite cold this morning, hence the lit fireplace. I am sorry to say that I may have mistakenly singed the edges of the rug, although I really should never have had it placed there anyway," he said as he reclined in his seat.

I sat down opposite him and poured him some of the liquid from the pitcher, which appeared to be coffee, although he swiftly waved his hand upon registering the sound.

"I highly appreciate your offer, but I have already had enough to drink for today."

I narrowed my eyes slightly, the coffee pitcher held awkwardly in my hands.

"It is not even lunchtime."

His glasses twinkled in the dancing light emanating from the fireplace.

"I am aware, although you may not fully grasp how much of it one can drink absentmindedly whilst planning."

I suddenly perceived the slight dropping underneath his eyes.

"How long have you been awake?"

Morris let out an airy laugh.

"Oh, that is a trifling detail. An hour here or there, maybe," he said. "But I feel as though I have made great bounds in my approach towards this particular situation, but first, I heard the distinct crinkleling of paper as you walked in. I imagine you have brought the daily newspaper?"

I chuckled under my breath.

"You do not miss very much, do you? I have."

Morris displayed a serene expression as he lifted a small cigarette to his face and removed a lighter from his jacket.

"If it would not be too much trouble, would you please read it to me?"
"Certainly."

I carefully unfolded the sheaf and located the front page as Morris lit his cigarette, inhaling gradually throughout my discourse.

"Murder on the wetlands: a shocking crime has been committed! The broker Mr. Oliver Saxon was found dead in own living room two days ago, seemingly killed in the middle of the night. The only clue in the entire room was a conspicuous note posted on his body, signed by a V.R. Professionals believe he may have been part of some arcane corner of the underworld where he may have conspired along with other criminals. Mr. Saxon was an unpopular man, said several members of his own household, the interviews and testimonies of whom are detailed below…"

Morris sighed and positioned himself higher in his armchair, clasping the patched armrest.

"I believe you and I know the rest. Still, I expect it was an intelligent move on the part of Detective Portsman to reveal information about the letter to the public. If anyone has heard of the organization it is possible they may come forward although I consider this a forlorn hope, as they had already established themselves to be willing to eliminate others. I must hold the construction of this narrative in high esteem; currently, both Detective Portsman and I's thought process are perfectly reasonable within this context, yet developments in the immediate future do not easily eliminate possibilities."

“I see. If no one volunteers information then both branches of inference are equally valid… if someone does, it is within your initial prediction as to the capacity of such a misdirection, and thus proves little.”

Morris pushed his cigarette down into the ashtray, leaving the lingering scent of tobacco in the air.

“Exactly. I am in what is effectively an informational void. Detective Portsman may advance his case with evidence but to maintain my own logical rigor, it is extraordinarily difficult to test my premises.”

“But how do you know that such a misdirection is even likely?”

Morris wagged a finger at me.

“That is the crux of the issue. I am only considering such a counter factual stance given the consistency needed for such a misdirection. If the killer simply left the letter behind, then the slightest bit of further inquiry would see through the matter. Although it would serve to use up some adversarial resources, why point away from other possible suspects? If Mr. Saxon was a widely disliked man, why would one specify an underworld group? It scales down the possibilities significantly, regardless of if it is correct or not, the investigation will end up there. From the caution exercised during the murder, we know the crime was likely well planned, so why take an alchemical detour at all? The man who killed him was likely a professional in the same cesspool-like circles as what the letter suggests, so why bother? It would have been best to leave him unconnected to anything. My conclusion is that we are being led to believe a fact which may not be the truth. To maintain this conception necessitates further acts of misdirection, hence why even someone coming forward for evidence becomes unreliable for this purpose, a detail which becomes excruciating when attempting to consider if a testimony is accurate or not.”

“So how do you plan on gathering further information?”

Morris beamed at me.

“Now that is where we can be a bit more proactive. For practical purposes, let us assume the killer is still in Austin. We know that he knew the layout of the house as the circumstances of the murderindicates either significant luck that Mr. Saxon was in the living room or an active scouting of the premises, further supported by the fact that he was seemingly aware of when the household would leave. From this, we can determine that either the group has several operatives here that informed him of the schedule, or he scouted it himself. Whatever the reason, the logic follows that the organization is capable of functioning in Austin. This is a realistic supposition based on the local geography as I was informed by a friend of mine who works in the cartography business that the ranch is situated directly next to the wetlands, which are unsafe at best to traverse, notwithstanding that the muddy ground would leave copious amounts of physical evidence. From that, we can fairly determine that he followed a path around the edge of the city to arrive at his mark, as walking directly through the city at night would risk being spotted. After he left, he had about eleven hours before the murder was reported and Detective Portsman arrived. I expect Detective Portsman has already searched the possible train manifests for men of that description who have left Austin, yet the lack of news or of a direct transmission leads to to think that he was unsuccessful. This appears to indicate that the killer either left on foot, which would be risky when nearing daylight, or is still in Austin. Of course, it is possible that he left on a wagon or an automobile, but almost any layman would

have reported transporting such a man at this point. This also leaves the possibility that he was driven out of town by an accomplice using or of the many backroads, although it still signifies fortunate news, as it means that the group has once had a physical presence here, which could make them easier to trace."

"I assume that your plan is more preemptive than Detective Portsman?"

"Yes. Earlier this morning, I had someone purchase several bundles of local newspapers and distribute them to various individuals. The plan required them to take up a station around the various alleys in the region. They were told to make note of passing vehicles and people, especially to try to sell their respective newspapers. They were told the purpose of such an exercise was part of a research project regarding financial priority in less monetarily gifted communities in Austin, as well as to test the sales of a diversity of news outlets. It was astonishingly simple to spread barely a dozen men across the vicinity. Even if our antagonist questions the timing of the project, they may rationalize that the task was executed at this point specifically due to the casual increase in sales that would indubitably occur from such a fantastical crime."

It was an excellent plan certainly, but I suspected Morris had a secondary stratagem at play. Surely he did not spend the entire night concocting such a scheme? I had seen him improvise tactics of comparable quality in the past.

"Hmm…"

Morris emitted a low tone which evolved into a constant hum as he altered the position of his collar.

"Of course… that is not solely what I worked on. I may have sown a fair bit of trouble in the legal underground. Mr. Freud Wilson may have received an anonymous tip off that someone has been attempting to muscle into his felonious empire through a group only referred to as V. R. in connection with recent events…"

I almost choked when I properly registered what Morris stated.

"You… provoked Mr. Wilson?"

Morris chortled at the sound of my voice, clearly thrilled by my shock.

"Yes. All it took was drafting a short letter in altered handwriting before delivering it by proxy in the heart of town. Short of extremely taxing analysis, I doubt he will trace it back to me. This move will force the group, V. R., if they do exist, into action, which may escalate our chances of discovering clues. If V. R. is an isolated group or an individual, it is possible that my little newspaper trick may catch them in its net."

I took a short sip from my cup on the table and folded my hands. Morris had effectively weaponized his own knowledge to cut through the impenetrable curtain of the case. He would lose almost nothing if either of his plans failed, and might even turn out a profit from his newspaper gambit if it achieved nothing else. However, I was curious about the vague operations by which Morris constructed his plans.

"You always mention these men of yours, who exactly are they?"

"Anyone within my service, of course. It is incredible what a desperate person will do for even a few small coins, it is only a matter of where to locate them, which usually narrows down to gambling dens or bars. They do not make ideal agents, but they are more than capable for executing the extremities of the operations. I have very few lieutenants, as in persons who are competent enough to skillfully control information given to them, hence my need to conceal data

which could otherwise easily be exploited through a weak link. This also contributes to my fondness of proxies, as the more proxies and methods of distortion at play assist one greatly."

At that point, a sharp knock could be heard against the door, punctuated by a ruffling noise and a grunt. A muffled voice penetrated the room.

"Uh…sorry to bother you, Mister… ah, Mr. Morris. A telegram arrived for you."

Morris, who was fiddling with his lighter, palmed it into his jacket pocket and pushed himself upwards, walking towards the door. He expertly undid a chain lock that I had failed to notice as I had entered and opened the portal for the man, a person with a scraggly beard snaking down his chin and a drooped bowl-like hat. He was holding a sheaf of yellowish white telegrams under his arm.

"Apparently this message is urgent. I believe it's from some detective? I may have glanced over it a bit."

Morris held his hand out and the talkative gentleman passed over a particular sheet with the clearly visible Western Union text printed on it. He waved a hand and the man stepped back, continuing his journey down the hall with Morris closing the door behind him. I was slightly bothered by Morris's inconsistency of caution in the situation given that he had likely just received a message from Detective Portsman which could be easily traced to him. Just as I had that thought, Morris seemed to anticipate my thought process, explaining as he sat down.

"You may be wondering why Detective Portsman has a direct line to my address, given the strategic risk it presents. I had wondered the same thing, and so the telegram I received was not for Charles Morris, nor was it from Detective Portsman."

"I don't understand…"

"Allow me to illuminate. Detective Portsman is considered to be part of an active investigation, and as such, it would be highly suspicious to associate myself with him at this moment. This requires some informational modification, so I went directly to his office the other day in the station under the guise that an object had been stolen from me. I told him to communicate under a different name in the department, which he acquiesced to. The telegram is addressed to a Mr. Caleb Pearson, whose address happens to be another telegram office, where I delivered special instructions to have it further transported to an adjacent address, although I told the clerk as I stepped in the other day to tell the courier that the letter for Mr. Pearson is actually meant to be delivered to my address. After that, I informed him that I was simply an intermediary and that the telegram would be brought to yet another office. From this, it is nearly impossible to determine who the message would actually be for or to track its location in sincerity."

"But what of the couriers themselves? We just witnessed how one might reveal information about your communications!"

"Whoever the murderer is will be hard-pressed to track down a courier with full knowledge of the telegram given the route it has gone through. Even if they interrogated the gentleman who delivered it to me, they would only know that it was delivered by a detective from a specific office and further investigation would only yield false information about an intermediary, a third office, and an unrelated police investigator."

"One of the most singular methodologies I have ever witnessed."

Morris smirked.

"Thank you, Bill. May I have the honor of having you read the telegram to me?"

“Without a doubt.”

I cleared my throat and carefully lifted the paper.

“Second on one nineteen Winchester. Stop. Require assistance. Stop.”

Morris stood up and handled his walking stick carefully, rubbing his fingers along it.

“One nineteen Winchester. The ‘second’ could refer to a second murder within this context. I suspect he would be referring to Winchester street, but-”

“Detective Portsman would not have blatantly written the address as he knew you valued discretion. Furthermore, one nineteen Winchester is an empty lot,” I said, realizing the encoded nature of the letter. Morris crossed his fingers on his walking stick, his fingers crowning its silver head as he smiled at me.

“That was precisely my train of thought. To continue, Detective Portsman must have known that one nineteen Winchester was a message he thought I could deconstruct. Could he be referring to the Winchester Repeating Arms Company?”

I attempted to recall the complex suburban geography of Austin as I leaned forward in my seat. In Old Enfield, there was a munitions store belonging to the company lying south of the more prominent neighborhood, which sat along Windsor road amongst several emporia. If he was referring to Windsor road, then the one nineteen likely meant one nineteen Windsor road.

“I believe I know where he is referring to, Morris.”

Morris straightened the front of his jacket with a free hand and conjured a sable scarf from thin air, wrapping it around his collar as he ambled to the apartment door.

“Then by all means, please lead the way,” he said, holding out an arm.

Shortly after this exchange, we were sauntering up Windsor road, taking in the rustic nature of the habitations which stood indifferent to the cold morning, like some great monuments adorned with wooden siding. It was a strangely solitary road that opposed us, as if the populace was absent, taking leave of their own accord. Signs of life ironically increased as we made our way to the crime scene, many officers having been placed along the curb near the location in question. They milled around, conversing with each other under their breaths, the only indication of which being the frozen air issuing from their mouths. One of them, a short man whose hairline was hidden by a cap, beckoned for us to come towards him.

“Mistahs ‘Opkins and Morris, I reckon?” he asked in a thick accent.

“Correct.”

He snuck a knowing look at another officer before waving his arms dramatically.

“Detective, Ah, Portsman is just inside. ‘E was ‘specting you gentlemen, though some o’ the men didn’t believe ‘e would take a civilian. ‘E’s still inside if ya want ‘im,” he said, jabbing a thumb at the front door which had been flung open. The uphill path to the door was flanked by two bushes encircling the property and effectively fencing off the estate from the quadrangle. We reached the entrance after a brief climb against the stone stairs preceding the domicile. We heard an oath as Detective Portsman appeared through the door with gritted teeth with a grieving woman behind him. He looked back while still talking.

“...Take her outside, we can’t have her wandering about the scene,” he said, turning to face us.

“I’m afraid I have to dispense with the pleasantries, a man named Carl Barnett was killed, stabbed in the neck. There was another letter from whomever the killer was,” he said firmly.

Morris sighed.

“What did the letter say?”

Detective Portsman removed a bloodstained paper from his grey coat and unfolded it.

“Another bout of churlish humanity. V. R.”

I stepped closer to the letter and gazed at it.

“That’s odd. If we accept we are dealing with a professional, then this is a very unclean job.”

Detective Portsman nodded, inserting the letter into a packet.

“I agree. I would rather not show you the grisly scene, but there was clearly a struggle. Mr. Barnett was home alone, the sole other resident being his daughter who visited every week for a lunchtime talk. We only discovered the body at this point from a neighbor who realized that a package intended for him was delivered to his own residence by mistake. As I am sure both you and Mr. Morris have already determined, Mr. Barnett was wealthy enough to live in such a respectable area. Very much unlike Mr. Saxon, he does not seem to be anywhere near as unpopular, in fact he was quite liked at the company he worked at. The real kick is that the company he worked for was the same as Mr. Saxon, a brokerage called Ward & Clews, a very upper crust establishment. On the day of the discovery of his death, I visited their office. Most of what the brokers said aligned with the testimonies of Mr. Saxon’s household, him being framed as an extraordinarily dislikable person, albeit with undeniable persuasive skill.”

Morris leaned with considerable force against his walking stick, as if trying to drill it into the stone porch.

“Were there any other developments?”

“Yes, but I would recommend you two take a seat before we continue,” he requested, pointing to a few wooden chairs that sat forgotten next to a concrete pillar supporting the eave. I quickly led Morris to his before taking one for myself, although neither the chair nor the overhang spared me from the chill. Detective Portsman took one for himself but just rested his hands on the top rail, revealing his cracked skin.

“Before dawn, Officer Lawrence managed to find an indirect connection to this V. R. group. He had to talk to some beggar for a few hours but he eventually confirmed that the man actually knew something about the cult. He made some claims, which if they can be confirmed, would prove enlightening.”

“How did he know he was not lying?”

Detective Portsman put a hand to his face.

“We do not, but his information would be consistent with details from the investigation which were not revealed to the public. For instance, he told Lawrence that they had extremely strict rites, which if violated, were construed as a great insult. Despite the fact that the original letter was never introduced to the masses, this point aligns perfectly with the wording of it.”

Morris adjusted his glasses momentarily.

“Who and where is this man?”

“His name is Ronald Carrow. The only other detail we know is that he was a hod carrier at some point. He was found at a bar stuck in the alley between two residential buildings a few blocks away. The moment I thought he might have valuable information, I requested Lawrence bring him directly to me, though I was interrupted by the sudden report of this murder. I can only hope Lawrence manages to make it here with him.”

“Of the murder itself, was there any other evidence at the scene?”

“The scuffle itself was clearly not significant since there are no signs of skin or blood under his nails, so the killer probably had a jacket. There are several other details which may imply something more sinister at work. Notably, the writing utensil, the method by which the note was folded, and the murder weapon were all different from the original crime.”

Morris raised his eyebrows.

“Could it be that the crime was an act of imitation?”

“How exactly?” I asked. “Could it not be that they sent a different assassin?”

Detective Portsman raised his eyes to me.

“Technically, but I invite you to take a look at the precise wording of this new letter. To borrow Mr. Morris’s method, the implication through the word ‘another’ implies that Mr. Barnett also betrayed the group or disrespected them. This is improbable as Mr. Barnett would have seen that Mr. Saxon died and realized that he himself was no longer safe, which he did not take proper measures for. Even though the letter might look like it relates perfectly to the first, as if it might require personal knowledge of the original’s content, even if the original letter had said almost anything, this secondary letter would have been an appropriate followup. It also lacks the imagery associated with the first.”

The skin under Morris’s eyes crinkled.

“I have a feeling you may have anticipated this development. You never unveiled certain information about the crime so it could not be replicated, no?”

Detective Portsman pursed his lips.

“I had some idea of what a sensational crime might spur a man with a grudge to do. Creating a link between two unrelated crimes would be a natural choice, especially in the wake of the previous crime. I decided to preclude that option by taking further precautions. For example, knowing that some might find it odd that I let two strangers into this crime scene, I told my men that I had requested you due to previous charges you two have which pertain to this case in the event that V.R. might make a connection.”

All of a sudden, a mustached officer in a long coat bounded towards us, panting heavily. Detective Portsman turned sharply to him.

“Ah, Officer Lawrence! I’m glad you made it.”

Officer Lawrence bit his lip, his chest rising up and down from heavy breathing which was clearly visible in the cold.

“Carrow is dead. We got as far as the yard before he dropped, spasming. He stopped breathing soon after.”

Detective Portsman gasped and rose to his full height.

“What?! I need to see the body immediately. Tell me exactly what happened. Come along, you two.”

We moved posthaste to the courtyard only to find a poorly dressed corpse dressed in patchwork clothing and worn, fraying gloves. The body was splayed on the grass with several men standing over him, muttering.

“He was hesitant to come with me,” Officer Lawrenced explained, gesturing with every word. “It seemed like he was worried some terrible accident might happen. I assured him he would be much safer where I would take him, although I naturally did not reveal I was law

enforcement in case he might flee. Finally, he obliged but complained of stiffness about a block away from this address. By the time we got here, it was too late."

Detective Portsman bent over the body, raising a finger to his chin and prodded several of the dead man's limbs. Although Carrow's eyes were glassy, he seemed to have an unnatural smile on his face.

"Strychnine poisoning, I presume. It is a likely diagnosis given the stiffness and spasming, as well as the trademark *risus sardonicus*. His right arm is more firm than his other limbs, which suggests that his jacket may have been pierced with a needle coated in it. There are a number of other details which can be inferred, such as that he was left-handed, which is told from the more intense wear of his glove there. Bags under the eyes indicate that he did not sleep very well."

Detective Portsman carefully removes the man's jacket to show a thin shirt beneath it.

"Look at his left shoulder. There is a small blot of blood staining the cloth, so we may assume that is where he was pricked. Officer Lawrence, was there anyone who marked you as conspicuous?"

Officer Lawrence shrugged.

"There were many shady individuals in the bar, but none who made such a murderous impression. Surely not while we were walking, I was vigilant the entire time."

Detective Portsman huffed.

"It's very possible he was not actually stabbed with a bodkin, but rather shot with a dart-like object. The entry wound is miniscule which allows for many possibilities. Whatever it was, for it to have fallen out or been immediately removed yet still resulting in his death tells me that the tip was probably not purely coated but rather had a concentrated, likely gelatinous bit of strychnine using a binding agent to ensure a proper lethal dosage. However, it is much more likely that he was simply pricked as for it to have been embedded within him without him noticing for so long is implausible."

Detective Portsman gazed at the jacket before prudently putting a hand inside its pockets and removing a number of coins and a balled up paper which he put aside. He smoothened the creases of the paper and held it up, carefully reading it.

"*To whom it may concern,*

I hope this note finds you well and you will do us the honor of delivering it to Detective John Portsman, Mr. Charles Morris and Mr. William Hopkins who all have been so zealous in this investigation. This is what happens to those who cross us or betray our trust. This is your only and final warning.

Veritas Rubra."

"*Verits rubra*…," Morris whispered thoughtfully. "The red truth."

Detective Portsman nodded.

"It has the same symbol. This is a genuine article. Speaking of which, the letter itself directly mentions Messrs. Morris and Hopkins by name. As we know, Mr. Morris and I already took up precautions to protect our connection, so whoever wrote it clearly knew of our

correspondence. This seems to insinuate that the author of this letter was present at the original crime scene, or how else could they have known?"

Morris tapped his chin with a finger.

"It could theoretically be a forgery made by someone at the original crime scene, but I would personally go by that train of thought."

Detective Portsman straightened himself and patted his grey coat.

"I must see Mr. Saxon and Mr. White again. It is possible that this is their work if your elaborate theory truly has some merit."

Morris exhaled, emanating his condensed breath as if he had just removed a cigar from his mouth.

"You seemed to imply Mr. Barnett was very likeable?"

"Yes, his daughter stated he was a very social man who had many friends. He was divorced, but it was about ten years ago, so I doubt that has any bearing on this murder. He was obviously a savvy businessman, so we cannot rule out jealousy as a possible motive."

"It is also within reason to suggest that he was killed partly because he worked at the same company as Mr. Saxon. It indicates a wish to align the brokerage itself with the crime."

Detective Portsman nodded before responding.

"I agree. I would presume the man responsible for Mr. Barnett's death worked within the brokerage with an axe to grind. I suppose I will take a visit to the brokerage again to ask a few questions," he said as he turned to Officer Lawrence.

"I want you to take Officer Clarence to the bar and give him civilian clothing. Have him ask if anyone has left recently. Instruct him to take careful notes of any suspicious activity. We know the culprit was likely eavesdropping on your conversation and that he knew you were an undercover officer as the letter was clearly intended to be delivered to us."

Detective Portsman rolled a metal pen through his digits while looking at the house.

"Messrs. Morris and Hopkins, I advise you to make your way to your respective residences in the event of a more direct attack."

Morris bowed slightly and held out his arm for me to take. Strangely, I thought I might have detected a smirk beneath his normally neutral facade.

"Well then," he said, fixing his collar which had become undone. "It appears our services are no longer required."

I took his arm and led him from the path of the house, still seeing the officials descending on Mr. Carrow's body, like gnats on putrid meat. What a curious case! First, we have a man killed for presumably being part of a cult, then betraying them, followed by a secondary murder of a man who worked at the same company, yet the consensus was that the crime was framed as being of a similar token to that of a cultic death. Even more odd was the third murder, which proves that the culprit is much closer to the original scene than what was initially considered and that is evidence of a wider conspiracy.

"What is your perspective on the case, Morris?"

Morris tapped his forefinger to the head of his walking stick.

"I find it odd that the perpetrator decided to needlessly give away information. It serves its purpose as a warning, but it could have been done in any number of easier, less risky ways. For example, it would have been simplicity itself to drop an anonymous package at Detective Portsman's office with the use of a pretext, or as it had his name anyways, they would have

even been able to leave it right outside the station with assurance that it would reach the person it was intended for. The manner by which it was performed suggests that they want this information to be known. If this information is meant to be known, then we are being baited if the cult is indeed real or not. However, Detective Portsman is not strictly correct with our possibilities being limited to those within the original household. If the cult does exist, then they would feel pressure from Mr. Wilson and his gang, causing them to seek an explanation. If they were intelligent enough to determine a connection between Detective Portsman and I, then the letter would be an excellent gambit to divert our attentions to the ranch of the late Mr. Saxon when in reality they may have derived the information from separate means. I am unsure what the other murder has to do with this grand scheme yet, but I am sure it will come to light soon enough."

"I see. What about the risk of a personal attack?"

At that instant, a ray of light streaked across the lenses of Morris's glasses, giving the impression that the eyes behind them were shining with cunning.

"I will take precautions, but I have a feeling that any attack upon us will not be of the type you may be expecting."

"I do not understand…"

Morris stopped on the sidewalk with a hand on his walking stick and the other in a pocket, smiling at me.

"I would enjoy enlightening you, Bill, but I am afraid I may need you in the dark for a day or two. It is essential to my… ah, plot."

I sighed.

"Must I always be in the dark?"

Morris reached out his hand to my forearm.

"I am sorry, Bill. But do you trust me?"

I thought back to our adventure with Mr. Wilson and how he was thwarted by Morris. Even if I had won the game on my own, I would likely have been implicated in crimes with the currency. Did Morris not also drag me out of the veritable quagmire of austerity once more with our confrontation with Mr. Buchanan? I was almost never told many of the details, but as he stated when I visited him near the beginning of that account, he has never led me wrong.

"Yes, I do. Possibly even with my life."

Morris took out a box of cigarettes and offered me one before taking one himself and lighting it.

"I cannot overstate how much I value your trust, Bill. As you have seen yourself, this place is full of those who mislead and deceive, so a dependable man has incalculable worth."

I almost laughed.

"I thank you, Morris, but from what I perceive, you are not to be excluded from those who deceive."

Morris chuckled, almost choking.

"The difference is that I am crooked with those who are crooked. As you very well know, I hardly dupe those who do not try to hoodwink people themselves. There are, of course, exceptions, such as if I require your ignorance for the sake of a plan, but that in itself is of great assistance to me."

“It is true that you are a very… unique man, unlike anyone I have ever met. You have had a variety of times you could have betrayed me if you really were an unsavory man, but you never have, at least in the long term.”

Morris sneered.

“I shall take that as a compliment. I only hope you trust my ability in execution.”

I broke into a throaty laugh.

“If there is anything I have complete faith in regarding you, Morris, it is certainly your ability.”

Morris paused to inhale some of the smoke.

“Thank you, Bill. I trust we shall continue this venture?”

“Affirmative,” I said as we went arm in arm back to his apartment, the morning sun unimpeded and casting its warm light upon the neighborhood, enunciating the normally gray tone of the edifices.