

CHAPTER 23: PRIVATE INVESTIGATIONS

by Paul Watson

Stone looks around the flat. "Find me their phones."

"What?"

"They'll have communicated somehow. Everyone's on the bloody things these days. So if we find them, we can find a link to our planner. Wear the gloves!"

"If we can unlock them."

Stone looks towards C.O.P.P.E.R. "This unit is able to overcome basic encryption."

"It seems we can. Now find them."

He walks back to the door. "Sergeant, we'll need an ambulance and a forensics team here as soon as possible. There are four comatose individuals here. We believe a fifth has absconded with the stolen articles and is responsible for their condition. Can you and your officers get some information out of the neighbours?"

"We can try. But people on these estates don't talk to my boys."

"Understood. Do your best. We have a serious criminal out there and we need to catch her." he turns back into the apartment.

"Yes. Sir."

"Observation: Sergeant Williams does not like you."

"No. They rarely do. We're outsiders trampling all over their turf. I can appreciate the point, but I do not have time to be nice. Have we found anything?"

"Negative. There are no mobile phone signals present in this property."

"Wonderful. The planner is annoyingly good at her job. Still, at least we know why she used amateurs."

"Query?"

"Disposable assets. They've accomplished their purpose, and now they can't tell us anything."

"Observation: Incorrect. Forensic analysis can determine..."

"Not quickly enough. We need to find them and soon. Mr King, can you detect anything out of place?"

"What? No. Nothing. They used some stinking cigars, Turkish probably. That covers everything else. I can barely smell my anything."

"Of course. Well, we're done here."

"What?"

"It's a dead end, near enough literally. The thieves won't talk. They might provide something from forensics, but that's not something we can sit around and wait for. Let the authorities deal with it."

He walks moodily out of the apartment, his hands stuffed deep into his pockets. "Sergeant, the scene is yours. Please secure it for forensics. Let me know if any of the residents miraculously decide to be cooperative."

"What?"

"We intended to interrogate the thieves. They are unresponsive, and we can only get in your way. So we're getting out of it. Leave all this to the professionals."

"Oh. Right. Yes, sir. We'll handle things from here."

"Good man." he replies and walks off still in a dark mood.

"So, sir, where are we going now?"

"Back to the scene of the crime. See if there's anything at all to find there. However, doubtful as that now seems."

"We'll find them."

"I'm sure we will, Griffin, I'm sure we will. I just hope we find them before it all gets so much worse." he sighs, "And I now have to tell Fergusson. He will not be happy."

At the unprepossessing brick building that houses a formerly secure storage facility. "Doesn't look like much."

"Exactly. Concealment is easier. You put too much obvious security and it makes it an obvious target. Hmmm." he looks over at the cameras, "C.O.P.P.E.R., can you access those?"

"This unit would require a warrant to..."

"It is a matter of national security, so no, you won't. On my authority."

"Accessing relevant legislation...Indeed. You do have that authority. Accepted. This unit will comply."

"Good. Manny..."

"Don't ask. There's way too much activity. Everything's jumbled Can't tell up from down."

"I assumed that. I meant any opinion on their means of ingress."

"Hey, you think I'm going to say anything in front of Robocop there?"

C.O.P.P.E.R.'s eyes iris open, servos whining softly as he turns his head towards Manny, "King, Manfred. Known crimes: Vagrancy, petty theft, pickpocketing, squatting..."

"Hey! I may have lifted a few wallets. This is something else."

"Ok. We do this the old-fashioned way then." he presses the door buzzer, announcing into the intercom, "Nigel? This is Lord Stone and my team. Open the door, would you? There's a good chap." The door lock clicks. "Hopefully they had a more difficult time of it." he pulls the door open and steps through. Red laser light flickers over him.

'Biometrics confirmed.' a second door opens. 'Please proceed, Lord Stone.'

Stone walks briskly through, to find an elderly figure in a pressed uniform waiting, a gun not so subtly on his hip, his grey hair starting far back from his forehead. "Nigel."

"Stone. These yours?"

"They are. How on Earth did they do it?"

"Bugged if I know, 'scuse me, ladies. They got in without the scanner registering 'em. I was at the other end on patrol, like, and by the time I got back they'd already shifted it and gone."

"How long is your patrol route?"

"Not as quick as it used to be, grant you that. But it's still only fifteen minutes to walk the route."

"So, maximum seven minutes. Less because you'd have seen them on the way down. I must admit, it's an impressive performance."

"Not from my end, sir. Ruined an unblemished record, they did."

"Quite. Well, let's see the crime scene. I know the Department's smart boys and girls have been all over it, but we need to take a look."

"This way."

"They let this geezer guard this place? He looks like he'd fall over in a strong wind."

"Be nisce."

Manny shrugs as they walk the white hall into the storage facility.

"Shame they took out so many of the cameras."

"And the automated alarms. They got all of them."

"And the Portrait's the only thing missing?"

"Yup, not even a speck of dust out of place except around it."

"And it's all been dusted for prints?"

"Prints, DNA, electronic contamination. All showing up the same: Jack and shit."

"C.O.P.P.E.R., see what you can glean."

It steps forward, eyes focusing, the lens extending for a more thorough look, a UV light bathing the scene. "Negative. There are no traces. This is highly unusual. Suspects were not wearing protective suits, yet no trace of skin flakes present. Fingerprints detected, but all match analysis pattern of known subjects with access."

Stone sighs, "Well, I suppose it was a long shot that you'd find something the team didn't. Thank you for your time, Nigel. Keep up the good work." He turns and walks away. "Whoever is behind this is too damn good. Not even one trace behind?" the door outside bangs open, "What is the point of modern technology if it can't catch..." he stops.

"Problem, boss?" Diana asks as she almost walks into his back.

"Not at all, Ms Eurayle. In fact, an opportunity." he strides across the quiet road, squatting just in

front of the doorway opposite.

"Whatchuwan?" a gruff voice erupts from the pile of clothes shoved into one corner.

"Information." he pulls out his wallet, "And I'm prepared to pay for it."

A weather-beaten face surrounded by wild, unwashed hair emerged. "How much?"

"That depends on how good it is." Stone slides an orange ten pound note into the man's crumpled takeaway cup. "First question: Were you here last night?"

The dark eyes flick up from the cup to the wallet, "Always am."

"And did you see anything unusual?" another ten pounds enters the cup.

"Like what?"

"Oh, let's say anything around two."

He shrugs. "Don't know if you'd say it was unusual."

"What was?"

"Just a van. Four geezers got out and some ponce in a suit like he's going to the opera."

"Did you get a good look at the...ponce?" Stone's face refuses to convey his surprise. Another tenner enters the cup.

"Nah. It was dark. Saw him under that light, but couldn't tell you much. White bloke, he was." he gropes for something, "Tall, I reckon at least a six-footer. His hair, his hair wasn't as dark as the others, I think."

"And then what happened?"

"They all bundled up to the door and went in."

"Just like that."

The man shrugs, "Just like that."

"And when did they emerge?"

"Ain't got no watch. Not long. The four were carrying something flat an' the ponce was doin' what that sort do best an' supervisin' without doin' nothin'."

"And they all drove off together?"

"Oh, yeah, no other traffic 'til this morning when every Tom, Dick an' Harry screamed in like we was on a cop show."

Stone pushes another three notes into the cup. "Thank you for your information."

The man peers suspiciously into the cup. "Pleasure doin' business wiv' ya." and he vanishes back under the pile.

"Alright, what did that get us?"

"Confirmation on the time. Our first even partial glimpse of the planner, who, I must admit, is not who I thought it was. How many moles are there in the Department? A new question: How did he get away from the flats? There must have been a vehicle there." he sighs, "Maybe the police will find something from the residents."

"If it's not who you thought it was, who did you think it was?"

"Thought we'd get lucky and this was linked to the murder that got all this started. Should have known it wouldn't be that tie-it-all-in-a-bow neat."

"Camera footage reviewed. Four persons observed only. Composite view shows no force used to effect entry. No other vehicles."

"So exactly like our friend said and frustratingly like the cameras inside. No leads, only the vaguest description of the planner. Were there any cameras at the estate we could access? Unless, of course, his bloody vehicle is also invisible."

Manny barks in laughter. "Over there? None that work."

"Congestion zone ones?"

"Accessible, but there are none near enough to determine whether a vehicle entered the estate. And thus no way to track..."

"If we'd only found the..." he stops, "even if they're off a phone contacts the mast, doesn't it?"

"What are you thinking, sir?"

"C.O.P.P.E.R., access the records of the nearest mast. Find all the pings that arrived and left with our van. Then track them to the nearest mast to the estate. Then we follow their trail."

"Statement: That task will take time."

"Can't be helped. Unless anyone has a better idea to find our mysterious planner? No? Then we go back to the Department and wait for C.O.P.P.E.R. to finish."

"Query: If there is a mole at the Department, why return?"

"Just because we know there are moles, doesn't mean they know we know. And even we don't know who they are. So, for now, we allay suspicion and act when we have something to act on."

"This unit understands. Thank you for your cooperation."

The control room of C.O.P.P.E.R., half-an-hour later, "It's happening again. The computers are going nuts!"

"Right! That's it! I'm going to..."

"Wait, wait. They're filing against a case number, 0LDN250827-M13-0001. It's just processing."

"Intense processing."

"Yeah, must be a doozy."

"Hold on, don't cases start with the unit number?"

The Department, the bare white-walled office they've been assigned, not quite enough seats to be comfortable. C.O.P.P.E.R. stands silently in the corner. Stone, naturally, sits behind the desk. Manny lounges over one chair, Latitia sitting quietly in the other. Diana paces, her snakes hissing agitatedly and Griffin stays by the door, watching the agents outside through the glass wall. C.O.P.P.E.R.'s eyes iris from closed to their normal state. It moves from its stiff stance to its more animated position. "This unit has tracked five phones through the network connections. Phone location has been stable since 7am."

"Well, let's hope our planner is still with his phone. Where are they?"

"Henriques Street, E1 1NB."

Stone's shoulder sag slightly. "Of course. Whitechapel."