

Bungler

A Novel

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Bungler, Laugher & Solver Investigations

Chapter Seven — The MacGuffin

Scene One — Monday Morning

I arrive at seven-thirty.

I have made a decision over the weekend.

The decision took most of Saturday and all of Sunday, which is longer than my decisions usually take. My decisions usually take the time between receiving information and understanding what the information means, which is not very long. This decision was different because it was not about what the information meant. I knew what the information meant. It was about what to do with the meaning, which is a different kind of question and one I have not often had to ask.

In fifty years of this work I have always given Bungler and Laugher the solution. That is the arrangement. They go out, they come back, they tell me what they found, I tell them what they have, they present it. The arrangement works. It has worked since 1974 and there is no reason to —

There is one reason.

The reason is Martin Crale.

Specifically: the reason is that Martin Crale hired Bungler and Laugher to fail, and they have been faithfully failing in exactly the direction he needed, and if I give them the solution they will take it to Crale on Friday as agreed, and they will hand Martin Crale the evidence of his own murder, and they will stand there in his office waiting for a

check.

Crale will not write a check.

I have been thinking about this since Thursday evening when Dorothy Fitch told me about the storage unit. I have the address. I have thought about what is in the storage unit and what Gerald Fitch put there and why and what it means that he gave his sister a key a month before he died.

Gerald Fitch gave his sister a key because he knew something might happen.

Something happened.

I make the coffee.

I read the Gazette.

I wait for Bungler.

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Scene Two — The Storage Unit

Bungler arrives at eight fifty-one, which is what he is on Mondays.

He says: morning, Joyce.

I say: Dorothy Fitch gave me an address. A storage unit Gerald rented. She thinks there may be case files there.

Bungler writes this down with the authority of a man receiving a significant lead. He writes: storage unit — Dorothy — files?? The two question marks are his own addition. He adds question marks when something seems promising and he is not certain why.

He shows it to Laughter.

Laughter says: storage unit — and laughs, which is not a response to anything funny about a storage unit, but rather Laughter's response to a morning that is proceeding with purpose. He laughs when things are moving. He laughs when they are not moving. He laughs at question marks.

I give Bungler the address.

They go.

I sit at my desk.

I think about what they will find and whether they will bring it back. The bringing back is the part I cannot control. They have left things before — things I told them to look for that seemed unimportant when they arrived at the scene. Bungler once left a set of keys on a table because he thought they were decorative. Laughter once photographed the wrong building for forty-five minutes because the building he was supposed to photograph was next door and had a sign.

I think: the box will be labeled something boring.

Gerald Fitch was an accountant. He would have labeled the box something boring.

I think: please let them bring back the boring box.

I make another cup of tea and I wait.

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Scene Three — The Sedan

They return at eleven-fifteen.

Bungler has a box.

The box is cardboard, medium-sized, labeled FITCH — TAX RETURNS 2019 in Gerald's handwriting, which I recognize from the documents Dorothy showed me. The label is boring. Gerald was thorough.

Bungler says: tax returns. Probably not relevant, but you said bring back whatever's there.

He puts the box on his desk.

He does not open it.

This is a small miracle.

I say: may I look through those later.

He says: of course, though I doubt there's much there — and goes back to his notebook, which currently contains a theory about Victor

Pell that is wrong in every particular but organized with impressive conviction.

Laugher makes coffee. The coffee maker produces something different from what it usually produces. Laugher examines it, laughs, drinks it anyway.

I look at the box on Bungler's desk.

I look at it for approximately three seconds, which is long enough to confirm that it is the right box — the dimensions, Gerald's handwriting, the specific way an accountant labels a box when he is hiding something inside a label that will not attract attention.

I go back to my notepad.

At eleven forty-five I happen to glance out the window.

The window faces the street. I have been glancing out this window for fifty years. I know what the street looks like at every hour of the day and in every season. I know which cars belong to the building's tenants and which belong to people visiting the restaurant on the ground floor and which belong to nobody in particular.

The dark blue sedan parked across the street belongs to nobody in particular.

It was not there this morning.

It was there when Bungler and Laugher returned from the storage facility.

I write: dark blue sedan, partial plate — 4KR, two occupants, driver male 30s, passenger male 40s, parked 11:18, current as of 11:45 on a notecard, which I place in my desk drawer.

I say nothing about the sedan.

Bungler and Laugher would go look at it.

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Scene Four — The Box

At two in the afternoon I say: may I take those tax files to the back to review.

Bungler says: of course — and Laughter says: knock yourself out — and laughs, which is an expression Laughter uses when he means yes but finds the word yes insufficient.

I take the box to the lab.

I set it on the bench.

I remove the tax returns, which are Gerald Fitch's actual 2019 personal tax returns, legitimately filed with the IRS, correctly completed, nothing unusual. Gerald was meticulous. Even his cover documents were properly done.

I set the tax returns aside.

I examine the box.

The interior depth of the box is approximately three inches less than the exterior depth of the box suggests it should be.

I press on the bottom panel.

The panel releases.

Underneath: a USB drive in a small plastic case, and a handwritten note on a piece of accounting paper folded once.

I unfold the note.

It says: If you're reading this I'm dead or I want you to know anyway. M.C. The numbers don't lie. They never lie. The waterfront is the whole thing. — G

I look at the note for a moment.

Then I plug the USB drive into my lab computer.

The drive opens.

Inside: two folders. The first folder is labeled PUBLIC and contains the financial records of Crale Development LLC as they appear in the public filings — the official version, the one that has been submitted to the county and the state and the investors and the banks.

The second folder is labeled REAL.

I open REAL.

I read for forty minutes.

When I finish I close the drive and I sit at my bench with my tea.

Gerald Fitch was very good at his work.

Eleven years. Every transaction. The money that enters as investment from a series of Delaware-registered entities and exits as legitimate profit. The gap between the public set and the real set is exactly the gap that means eleven years of organized crime money has been washed through Martin Crale's developments until it is clean enough to build a library with and donate a hospital wing and attend a police charity dinner and be called, by everyone who knows him, a man of genuine character.

The waterfront is the whole thing because the waterfront is the largest project by a factor of three. The waterfront is the capstone. When the waterfront closes, the entire eleven-year structure becomes so deeply embedded in legitimate holdings that untangling it will take longer than anyone will bother.

Gerald saw it.

Gerald made the drive.

Gerald died.

I make a second cup of tea.

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Scene Five — Crale's Call

The following morning Crale calls.

He asks for Bungler, which he always does. I put him through.

I can hear Bungler's half of the conversation from my desk.

Bungler says: of course, Martin.

Bungler says: just some tax files, nothing significant.

Bungler says: happy to, of course.

He hangs up.

He says: Joyce, can you copy those tax files from the storage unit for Mr. Crale? He wants them for his parallel engagement records.

I say: I'll take care of it.

I take care of it.

I make copies of twelve pages of Gerald Fitch's 2018 personal tax returns — the previous year's returns, the ones that have nothing to do with the waterfront development, the ones that show Gerald's income from his accounting practice and his modest investment portfolio and his membership dues to the Carver Falls Accountants Association.

I put them in an envelope.

I label the envelope: FITCH STORAGE FILES — COPY FOR CRALE.

I put the envelope on Bungler's desk.

Bungler delivers it to Crale's office that afternoon with the satisfaction of a man being helpful to an important client.

That evening Bungler tells me: Crale was very pleased. Says the investigation is proceeding well.

I say: good.

I say it with the specific flatness of a word that means something other than what it says.

Bungler does not hear the flatness.

He never does.

In fifty years he has never once heard the flatness.

This used to bother me more than it does now.

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Scene Six — Joyce At Night

Thursday evening.

The office empty. The street below quiet. The dark blue sedan not there — it has not been there since Monday, which means Crale's people

got what they needed and reported back and Crale reviewed twelve pages of Gerald's 2018 tax returns and was satisfied.

He should not be satisfied.

I am in the lab.

I have on my bench: the USB drive, the printout of the REAL folder's contents organized in the order that tells the story most clearly, Dorothy Fitch's telephone number starred at the top of my notecard, and a second copy of the drive's contents that I made on Wednesday because I always make a second copy of everything.

I have known for three days what is on this drive.

I have been sitting with what it means.

What it means is: Martin Crale murdered Gerald Fitch. Gerald found the fraud, documented it with the specific precision of a man who balances to the penny, made a backup copy, hid the backup copy in a box labeled tax returns, gave his sister a key, and then died in his office in a way that the Carver Falls police were prepared to call a suicide.

What it also means is: Crale hired Bungler and Laughter to close the case as a suicide. He has been paying them to fail. He has been calling Bungler by his first name and saying Gerald was like family and the firm is doing excellent work, and Bungler has been warming himself in the specific warmth of being recognized by an important man, and the warmth has been exactly what Crale needed it to be.

What it further means is: I cannot give Bungler and Laughter this solution.

In fifty years I have never not given them the solution.

The arrangement is: they go out, they come back, they tell me what they found, I tell them what they have, they present it.

The arrangement has worked because the clients have been Edna Marsh and people like Edna Marsh — people who want the truth and can receive the truth when two seventy-three-year-old men deliver it to them.

The client is Martin Crale.

I think about Crale's man in the waiting room. The scar on his left hand. The shoes that cost more than his apparent employment would support.

I think about the dark blue sedan.

I think about Gerald Fitch, forty-five years old, careful, meticulous, the man who balanced to the penny, sitting in his office on the last night of his life with eleven years of someone else's secret in his possession.

I think: Gerald kept the real file.

I think: so do I.

I pick up the phone.

I call Dorothy Fitch.

I say: is there a state police captain you can reach? Not the local police. The state police.

Dorothy says: I can find one.

I say: make an appointment. For next week. Don't say why yet. Just say it's about your brother.

Dorothy says: all right.

I say: and Dorothy — thank you for the key.

She says: Gerald said to use it if anything happened.

I say: yes. He did.

I hang up.

I sit in the lab that looks like a supply closet with the tea that is the same tea I have been making for fifty years.

I think: the arrangement cannot hold for this case.

I think: there is a first time for everything.

I think: Gerald Fitch gave his sister a key a month before he died.

I think about what Gerald knew about keeping the real file, and what he knew about what happens when the real file matters, and what he knew about what you do when you are the only person who can act on it.

He was forty-five years old.

He acted anyway.

I turn off the lab light.

I go home.

Bungler, Laugher & Solver Investigations

Chapter Eight — Complications

Scene One — Three Weeks In

Three weeks into the Fitch case.

I have a list.

The list is on a notecard on my bench and it contains what Bungler and Laugher have done and what they have found and what they believe about what they have found, which is a different list from what they have actually found. The two lists do not overlap very much. This is usual. In fifty years the two lists have rarely overlapped completely and have sometimes not overlapped at all.

What they have done: interviewed Victor Pell, who sweated and evaded and eventually confessed to embezzling from the firm over two years, which Gerald had discovered and which gave Pell an excellent motive for murder that he did not exercise because Pell is an embezzler not a murderer. Examined the threatening letter, which I have identified as a billing dispute with a former client, settled, the parties since reconciled and photographed together at a charity function in the Gazette's social column six months ago. Conducted surveillance on Pell, which consisted of following him to a restaurant in Laugher's 1987 burgundy Oldsmobile, which Pell noticed immediately, and then following him home. Spent three hours at the Carver Falls police station after Laugher accidentally confessed to trespassing, which I resolved with a phone call to the building manager and which revealed that

Captain Foyle of the local police is not going to be useful because he has known Martin Crale for twenty years and considers him a man of genuine character.

What they believe they have found: that Victor Pell is probably responsible for Gerald Fitch's death.

What they have actually found: Victor Pell is guilty of embezzlement. A threatening letter is a dry cleaning bill. Martin Crale's man visited the office on a Tuesday afternoon and I have his description in my desk drawer.

I look at the list.

I say: have you spoken to anyone at the waterfront development site.

Bungler says: not yet — it's on my list.

I say: this week.

He writes: waterfront — this week.

He adds it to his notebook as supporting evidence for the Pell theory, for reasons that are not logical but feel logical to him because everything in the notebook feels logical to him. The notebook is the most internally consistent document I have ever seen. It is also almost entirely wrong.

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Scene Two — The Waterfront

They go to the waterfront site on Wednesday.

The site is on the Carver Falls river — cranes, scaffolding, the specific organized chaos of a major construction project, workers and equipment and the smell of concrete and river water. It is the largest development project in the city's history. It is, according to the public financial records, funded by a consortium of legitimate investors through a Delaware-registered holding company.

According to the REAL folder on Gerald Fitch's USB drive, it is funded by eleven years of organized crime money that has been moving

through Martin Crale's developments and emerging clean enough to build things with.

The waterfront is the whole thing. Gerald wrote that. The waterfront closes in three weeks. When it closes the money is fully embedded and the question of where it came from becomes significantly harder to answer.

Bungler and Laugher are supposed to interview the site manager about Gerald Fitch's last visit.

They interview a concrete contractor from Millhaven for twenty minutes before the error becomes apparent.

The concrete contractor has never heard of Gerald Fitch. He has opinions about concrete. He shares them. Laugher laughs at several of the opinions, which are not meant to be funny but have a certain quality when delivered by a man in a hard hat who is very passionate about the load-bearing properties of post-tension slabs.

The site manager, when found, says: Gerald was here about three weeks before he died. He came to review some of the financing documentation. He seemed upset.

Bungler writes: upset.

He says: do you know why he was upset.

The site manager says: I assumed accounting stuff. Numbers. Over my head, really.

Laugher says: accounting stuff — and laughs, which surprises the site manager, who then laughs too, because Laugher's laugh is that kind of laugh.

They bring this back to the office.

I hear it in Bungler's account of the day, which is comprehensive and detailed and wrong in the usual ways, and then buried at the end, almost as an afterthought: the site manager said Gerald was upset when he visited three weeks before his death. He was looking at financing documentation.

I say: three weeks before his death.

Bungler says: yes. I found that significant.

I say: yes.

Three weeks before his death Gerald Fitch stood on the waterfront site and looked at the financing documentation and understood what the documentation meant. Then he went back to his office and opened the REAL folder and began to understand exactly how long it had been going on and exactly how large it was and exactly what it meant that he now knew.

Then he made the USB drive.

Then he put it in a box labeled tax returns.

Then he gave his sister a key.

Then he died.

The timeline is complete now. I write it on a notecard and place it in the center of my bench.

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Scene Three — Regina Marsh

Thursday: the phone rings at two in the afternoon.

I answer.

A young woman's voice says: hi, this is Regina Marsh, I'm the crime reporter at the Carver Falls Gazette, I'm doing a follow-up on the Gerald Fitch death and I understand Bungler & Laughter are investigating. Could I get a comment?

I say: one moment please.

I put her on hold.

I go to the bulletin board beside Bungler's desk, where I posted a prepared comment for press inquiries on the first day of the Fitch case, because press inquiries were inevitable and I prepare for inevitable things.

The card says: The investigation is proceeding. We expect to have answers for the family shortly. No further comment at this time.

I take the card to Bungler.

He reads it.

He picks up his phone.

He says, to Regina Marsh: the investigation is proceeding. We expect to have answers for the family shortly. No further comment at this time.

He hangs up with the comfortable authority of a man who handles press inquiries.

I write Regina Marsh's name and number on a notecard and put it in my desk drawer.

I am not yet sure what she will be useful for. I know she will be useful for something. A twenty-six-year-old crime reporter who calls about the Fitch case and asks good questions is useful for something. I will know what when I need to know.

I go back to my desk.

I write: R. Marsh, Gazette, crime reporter, 26, covers city hall and criminal matters, called Thursday asking about Fitch on my notecard and place it with the others.

The drawer is getting full.

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Scene Four — Crale Tightens

Thursday afternoon: Crale calls.

Bungler is at his desk. I am at mine. The call comes through the main line and I answer.

He says: Mrs. Solver, good afternoon. Is Robert available?

I say: one moment, Mr. Crale.

I put him through.

I can hear Bungler's half.

Bungler says: Martin, good to hear from you. Yes. Yes, the investigation is moving along well. Pell situation is resolved — embezzlement, not connected to Gerald's death. Still working through some leads.

A pause while Crale talks.

Bungler says: absolutely. Friday week, yes. That's our target. We're thorough, Martin. We don't rush.

Another pause.

Bungler says: of course. Will do.

He hangs up.

He says: Crale's keen to have the report before the waterfront closing. Understandable — wants the Gerald matter resolved. Professional obligation to his estate. Good man.

I say: yes.

I say it with the flatness.

Bungler does not hear the flatness.

I look at my notecard with the timeline on it.

Three weeks before Gerald's death: site visit, financing documentation, understanding.

Gerald's death: the note, the word spelled correctly, the police's finding of suicide.

Crale hiring Bungler and Laugher: within seventy-two hours of Dorothy Fitch announcing she was contesting the finding.

Friday week: the report deadline.

Waterfront closing: five days after the report deadline.

The sequence is very clear.

I write: Friday week — 10 days — waterfront 5 days after on the notecard.

I add it to the drawer.

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Scene Five — The Mistake

Friday afternoon: Crale makes a mistake.

He sends one of his men to the office.

The man arrives at two-fifteen. I see him come through the door — medium height, forties, wearing clothes that are slightly too good for the purpose he appears to have, which is waiting for a conversation with someone. He takes the bad chair in the waiting area. He sits.

He says: I'd like to speak with someone about a case.

I say: of course. Can I take your name?

He gives a name that is not his name. I have been receiving false names for fifty years and I know them by the quality of the pause before them — the fraction of a second longer than a real name takes.

I write the false name on my notepad.

I say: Mr. Bungler is with a client at the moment. Can I ask what the matter concerns?

He says: a personal matter. I'll wait.

He waits.

I go back to my desk.

I type a letter that does not need to be typed, because typing is what I do when I am observing something and do not want it to be apparent that I am observing it.

The man looks at the office. He looks at the filing cabinet that won't open. He looks at the two mismatched chairs, one of which he is sitting in. He looks at the crooked B on the door. He looks at Bungler's desk and Laughter's desk. He looks at my desk.

He does not look at me.

People do not look at me. This is something I have understood for a long time. I am an eighty-year-old woman at a desk by the door. I am the furniture of the office. I am the coffee and the answered phones and the filed papers. I am not the thing you look at when you are looking at an office.

In fifteen minutes I add to my notecard: height 5'11, weight approximately 185, scar on left hand at the base of the thumb, watch — Seiko, not cheap, Carver Falls accent with a western inflection, shoes — not a man who buys his own shoes.

He leaves at two-thirty-two without speaking to Bungler.

He says: I'll call ahead next time — on his way out.

I say: of course, Mr. — and I use the false name, and he does not react, which is confirmation.

When the door closes I put the notecard in my desk drawer.

Then I pick up the phone and call Dorothy Fitch.

I say: the appointment with Captain Webb. Can we confirm Thursday at two?

Dorothy says: I'll confirm it today.

I say: good.

I say: Dorothy. Bring everything Gerald gave you. Every piece of paper. Every key.

She says: I have the one key.

I say: that's enough.

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Scene Six — Joyce's Assessment

Thursday evening: the lab.

I sit at my bench.

I have the USB drive. I have the complete financial records in the REAL folder, printed and organized. I have the timeline. I have the description of Crale's man. I have the partial plate of the dark blue sedan. I have Dorothy's appointment with Webb confirmed for tomorrow at two. I have Regina Marsh's number in my drawer. I have two envelopes prepared: one for Webb, one for Dorothy, each containing the relevant materials organized in the order that makes the story clearest for the person receiving it.

The envelope for Webb has a cover letter.

The cover letter has my name on it.

Joyce Solver.

I have typed my name on official documents before — on correspondence, on invoices, on the quarterly reports I prepare for the firm's accountant. But those are administrative documents. This is a different kind of document.

This is a document that says: I am the person who found this. I am the person who understood what it meant. I am the person who is giving it to you and attesting that what I am giving you is what I say it is.

I have never signed my name to something like this.

In fifty years I have given Bungler and Laugher every solution this firm has produced, and they have signed their names to it, and I have made the coffee.

I look at the cover letter.

I think about Martin Crale, who has a library named after him and a hospital wing and who attends police charity dinners and is called, by everyone who knows him, a man of genuine character.

I think about Gerald Fitch, who was forty-five years old and careful and kept the real file and is dead.

I think about Bungler and Laugher, who do not know they have been used, who go out every morning and come back every evening and tell me what they found with the complete confidence of men who believe in their work.

I think about fifty years of the arrangement.

I think: the arrangement cannot protect the right people in this case.

I think: I can.

I look at the cover letter with my name on it.

I seal the envelope.

I put it in my bag.

I put Dorothy's envelope in my bag beside it.

I have never taken case materials out of this office.

I turn off the lab light.

I go back to the front office.

I look at the frosted glass door. The slightly crooked B. The gold letters that say BUNGLER & LAUGHER INVESTIGATIONS, which is what the firm is called and which is what the world believes the firm is and which is not entirely wrong and is not entirely right.

I turn off the lights.

I go home.

Tomorrow is Thursday.

Thursday at two.

For the first time in fifty years, I am going somewhere.

Bungler, Laugher & Solver Investigations

Chapter Nine — Deepening

Scene One — Dorothy Returns

Dorothy Fitch comes to the office Monday morning for an update.

She is in the good chair. Laugher is at his desk, which required a redirect from me that Laugher accepted without noticing it was a redirect, because Laugher never notices redirects. He simply finds himself somewhere other than the good chair and accepts this as the natural order.

Bungler presents what the firm has found.

He presents it accurately. This surprises me slightly. He sometimes presents findings with embellishments that reflect what he believes should have been found rather than what was found, but today he is accurate: Pell cleared of murder, the threatening letter a billing dispute, the investigation continuing, the waterfront site visited, the site manager interviewed.

Dorothy listens.

She says: have you looked at Martin Crale.

Bungler says: Mr. Crale has been extremely cooperative. He hired us to supplement the investigation. He wants the truth.

Dorothy says: I'm sure he does.

She says it with the flatness.

I am the only other person in the room who hears the flatness. I hear it because I use the flatness and I know what it sounds like and I know

what it means, which is: what you just said is true in a way you have not understood yet.

Bungler does not hear the flatness.

He says: grief does strange things, Dorothy. Mr. Crale is a pillar.

Dorothy looks at him.

She does not say what she is thinking.

She is thinking: I know what my brother found. I know what my brother died for. I know who.

She does not say this because she does not have proof. She has the key and the storage unit address and the specific knowledge that her brother misspelled a word his whole life and spelled it correctly in his suicide note.

She looks at me on her way out.

I say: we'll be in touch, Mrs. Fitch.

She says: yes. I know you will.

After she leaves: Bungler says: she suspects Crale. Understandable.

I say: yes.

He says: grief makes people look for someone to blame.

I say: yes.

I say both yeses with the flatness.

He hears neither.

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Scene Two — The Financials

Tuesday: Bungler and Laughter go to the city planning office.

This is my doing. I told Bungler it would be useful to review the development approvals for the waterfront project, which is true, and I told him to ask about the financing structure, which is also true, and I wrote both instructions on a notecard which Bungler copied into his notebook as though he had thought of them.

The planning official is helpful. He is helpful because Laughter laughs at one of his jokes — a dry joke about zoning variances that the official has told many times and that has never previously produced a genuine response — and the official is so pleased to have made someone laugh that he talks for forty-five minutes.

He says, in the middle of the forty-five minutes: the financing on the waterfront is unusually structured. Several of the investment entities are registered in Delaware, which isn't unusual in itself, but the layering is —

He trails off.

He is a planning official, not a financial investigator. The layering is something he noticed and did not know what to do with.

Bungler writes: Delaware — and circles it.

Laughter says: Delaware — and laughs, which startles the official.

They bring it back.

I say: which investment entities specifically.

Bungler reads his notes.

He has written down four names.

I write the four names on a notecard.

Three of the four names are already in my files — I have been cross-referencing the development's public records with the organized crime prosecutions that appear in the state court filings, which are public, which I have been reading for thirty years.

The fourth name is new.

It is a holding company registered in 2019. It appears in two transactions associated with the waterfront project. It is structured differently from the other entities — cleaner, fewer layers, the kind of structure you use when you are adding new money to an established operation and you want it to look as legitimate as possible.

I add the fourth name to my REAL folder printout.

I write a note beside it: new entity, 2019, two waterfront transactions, cleaner structure — additional source?

I file the notecard.

The picture is complete now. I have known the outline for two weeks. Now I have the details filled in.

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Scene Three — The Missing Dog

Wednesday: the retired judge calls about his missing terrier.

The dog's name is Prosecutor. The judge has had him for eleven years. He is a medium-sized terrier of no particular distinction except that he belongs to the judge and the judge loves him and he has been missing since yesterday morning.

Bungler takes the case immediately, with the enthusiasm of a man whose firm handles all manner of matters.

They spend Wednesday afternoon in the wrong neighborhood.

I know it is the wrong neighborhood because I asked the judge which direction the dog usually walked, and the judge said north toward the park, and I watched Bungler write north toward the park in his notebook and then tell Laugher they should start by canvassing south toward the river.

I did not correct him.

The missing dog case is not the Fitch case. I have enough to manage.

Laugher befriends three dogs who are not Prosecutor, photographs all three with his phone, laughs at all three.

Bungler interviews a woman who has a terrier named Patricia who is twelve years old and has not left her yard in six months. Bungler is convinced for twenty minutes that Patricia is Prosecutor. The woman is politely certain that Patricia is Patricia. Laugher laughs. The woman asks what is funny. Laugher cannot explain.

Prosecutor is found by a nine-year-old two streets from the judge's house.

The nine-year-old calls the number on Prosecutor's tag.
The judge calls the office to report the case resolved.
Bungler says: yes, our investigation pointed us in the right direction.
I file the Prosecutor case as closed.
It took six hours and was resolved by a nine-year-old.
This is not unusual.

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Scene Four — The Second Visit

Thursday morning: Crale's man comes back.

He is in the waiting area at nine forty-five. Same man — the scar, the shoes, the false name delivered with the same pause as before.

He says: I called ahead. I'm here to speak with Mr. Bungler.

I say: of course. One moment.

I go to Bungler's office.

I say: there's a man in the waiting area. He says he called ahead. I don't have a record of the call.

Bungler frowns. He does not like unexplained gaps in his appointment record. His appointment record is maintained entirely by me and contains no gaps, which means this man did not call ahead.

Bungler says: send him in.

I say: I'll let him know you'll be a few minutes. He can wait.

I go back to the waiting area.

I say: Mr. Bungler will be with you shortly. Can I get you anything while you wait?

I bring him coffee.

In the ninety seconds between the coffee maker and the waiting area chair I add to my notecard: same shoes as Tuesday. Right-handed grip on the cup. Ring finger, right hand, no ring but a line where a ring was recently. The western inflection is lighter today — adjusting for the

audience, which is interesting.

I go back to my desk.

I type the letter that does not need to be typed.

Bungler keeps him waiting for twelve minutes because something in his notebook required attention and Bungler does not like to be interrupted when his notebook requires attention.

The man sits.

He looks at the office.

He looks at Bungler's desk and Laugher's desk.

He looks at the filing cabinet.

He does not look at me.

He meets with Bungler for eight minutes. The meeting is about a domestic matter that does not exist, which the man has invented as a reason to be in the office, which Bungler handles with the warm professionalism of a man who takes all matters seriously.

The man leaves.

Bungler says: odd fellow.

I say: yes.

I add to my notecard: visited twice, Tuesday and Thursday, different pretexts, observational purpose.

I put the notecard in the drawer.

I pick up my phone.

I check the time.

Thursday at two.

Three hours.

...

Scene Five — The Full Picture

After lunch I go to the lab.

I sit at my bench.

I look at what I have assembled.

The USB drive with the REAL folder — eleven years, every transaction, the gap between public and real documented by a man who balanced to the penny.

The four Delaware entities, the fourth one new, all cross-referenced to the organized crime infrastructure in the state court filings.

The timeline: the site visit, the discovery, the drive, the box, the key, the death.

The description of Crale's man, visited twice, observational purpose.

The two envelopes in my bag — one for Webb, one for Dorothy.

Dorothy's appointment: today, two o'clock, state police offices, Captain Aldous Webb.

Regina Marsh's number in my desk drawer.

I know what happened to Gerald Fitch.

I know why.

I know who.

I know where the evidence is.

I am the evidence. I am the person who assembled it from the things Bungler and Laugher brought back without knowing what they had, from the public records I have been reading for fifty years, from the one question I asked Dorothy Fitch on the phone that produced the storage unit address.

I have been doing this for fifty years.

I have been invisible doing it for fifty years.

I think: the invisibility has been a choice.

I think: it has been a useful choice. It has allowed the work to happen. It has protected the firm. It has produced results for clients who needed results and received them from two men in a well-lit office while I made coffee.

I think: the invisibility cannot serve this case.

I think: Crale hired Bungler and Laugher to fail. He did his research and he found the firm with the worst record of solved cases — except

that the firm does not have a bad record, the firm has an excellent record, because the firm has me. He did not research me. He looked at the door and he saw two names and he made his plan accordingly.

He did not look at the desk.

I pick up the phone.

I dial.

Regina Marsh answers on the second ring.

I say: Miss Marsh, this is Joyce Solver at Bungler & Laugher Investigations. I think we should meet.

...

Scene Six — The Meeting

I meet Regina Marsh at a coffee shop three blocks from the office.

I do not tell Bungler or Laugher where I am going. I say: I'll be back by four. Bungler says: right, right — and goes back to his notebook.

The coffee shop is the kind of place where a meeting can happen without anyone looking at it twice. I sit at a corner table. I arrive five minutes early because I arrive everywhere five minutes early.

Regina Marsh arrives at exactly the time we agreed. She is twenty-six, which I knew, and she has the specific energy of a reporter who has been covering city council meetings for two years and has just picked up something considerably larger. She looks at me and I can see the calculation — the desk, the age, the coffee shop meeting — and I can see the moment when she decides I am worth taking seriously.

She says: you're the secretary.

I say: I'm Joyce Solver.

She says: the firm's secretary.

I say: the firm's third member.

She says: your name isn't on the door.

I say: no.

We sit with that for a moment.

I tell her the shape of it — not everything, not the drive, not the specific entities, but the shape: the accounting relationship, the waterfront development, the financing structure, the timeline of Gerald's discovery and death, the fact that Martin Crale hired the firm investigating his accountant's murder.

She has her notebook out before I have finished the second sentence.

I say: I need you to start pulling the public financial records on the waterfront development. The Delaware entities. Do it yourself, not through your editor yet.

She says: why not my editor.

I say: how well do you know your editor's relationship with Martin Crale.

She pauses.

She says: the development is the Gazette's largest advertiser.

I say: yes.

She says: I'll pull the records myself.

I say: hold the story until I tell you.

She says: when will that be.

I say: I don't know yet. When I need the story to create pressure, or when we no longer need the pressure because the right people have acted.

She says: are you in danger.

I look at her.

I say: I'm eighty years old and I've been doing this for fifty years.

She says: that's not a no.

I say: no. It isn't.

She closes her notebook.

She says: Miss Solver.

I say: yes.

She says: is the firm going to be in the story.

I say: the firm should be in the story.

She says: should you be in the story.

I look at the coffee cup in front of me.

I think about the cover letter in my bag with my name on it.

I think about the slightly crooked B on the door.

I say: let's see how today goes first.

I pay for the coffee.

I walk back to the office.

It is one forty-five.

I have fifteen minutes before I need to leave for the state police.

I go to my desk.

I pick up my bag.

I check that both envelopes are there.

They are.

I say: I'll be out until three-thirty.

Bungler says: right, right.

I go.

Bungler, Laugher & Solver Investigations

Chapter Ten — Regina Marsh

Scene One — The Meeting

The state police offices are twelve blocks from the office and occupy the fourth floor of a building that the county also uses for licensing and permits and the regional tax authority. The elevator is slow. I take the stairs.

Captain Aldous Webb, fifty-four, has the specific quality of a man who has been a policeman for thirty years and has learned — not naturally, through experience — to listen before he reacts. His office is organized. His desk has three items on it: a notepad, a pen, and the coffee he made before we arrived. He shook Dorothy's hand when we came in, then mine, with the same weight for both.

Dorothy explains: her brother, the note, the misspelling, the firm she hired, the six weeks that have produced nothing from the local police because Captain Foyle considers Martin Crale a man of genuine character.

Webb listens.

When Dorothy finishes I open my bag.

I put the first envelope on his desk.

I say: my name is Joyce Solver. I am the third member of Bungler & Laugher Investigations. These are copies of financial records recovered from Gerald Fitch's storage unit. They document eleven years of organized crime money laundering through Martin Crale's real estate

developments. The waterfront development closing is in ten days.

Webb looks at the envelope.

He looks at me.

He says: you're the secretary.

I say: I'm Joyce Solver.

He opens the envelope.

He reads the cover letter.

He reads for four minutes, which is longer than most people take to read my cover letters, which means he is reading carefully rather than skimming.

He says: where did these come from.

I explain: the storage unit, the false bottom, the USB drive, Gerald's note, the second set of records that Gerald had been maintaining alongside the public set for as long as the fraud had been running.

He says: and the drive itself.

I open my bag.

I put the drive on his desk beside the envelope.

He looks at it.

He says: you've kept a copy.

I say: I always keep a copy of everything.

He says: Martin Crale.

I say: yes.

He says: the library. The hospital wing.

I say: yes.

He says: he's been at every police charity dinner for twenty years.

I say: I know.

He says: Dennis Foyle considers him a close personal friend.

I say: I know that too.

He looks at the drive.

He says: this is why you came to me instead of Foyle.

I say: yes.

...

Scene Two — Webb Acts

Webb makes two phone calls while Dorothy and I are still in his office.

The first call is to the state attorney general's financial crimes unit. He speaks for four minutes. He uses the words substantial documentary evidence and waterfront closing and I need your team today, not this week.

The second call is to a judge whose name I recognize from thirty years of reading the state court filings. The judge is not from Carver Falls. Webb speaks for three minutes. He uses the word warrant.

He hangs up.

He says to me: I need a statement from you attesting to the chain of custody for the materials.

I say: I'll prepare one.

He says: today if possible.

I say: I'll have it to you by end of business.

He looks at me.

He says: Miss Solver. How long have you been doing this.

I say: fifty years.

He says: with Bungler and Laughler.

I say: for Bungler and Laughler.

He considers this.

He says: does Bungler know you're here.

I say: not yet.

He says: you're acting on behalf of the firm.

I say: I'm acting on behalf of Gerald Fitch.

He holds that for a moment.

He says: this is significant work. The chain of custody statement — I'll need you to be thorough. Crale's attorneys will challenge every link.

I say: Crale's attorneys will find the chain of custody impeccable.

He almost smiles.

He says: I believe you.

He says it the way he says things that are true — directly, without inflation.

Dorothy has been quiet through all of this. She looks at the envelope on Webb's desk and the drive beside it and the two phone calls that happened in four minutes and the judge who is not from Carver Falls and is signing a warrant.

She says: he'll go to jail.

Webb says: the evidence will determine that. The evidence looks substantial.

Dorothy says: Gerald spent eleven years collecting it.

Webb says: yes. He did.

Dorothy says: he always balanced to the penny.

Webb says: yes, Mrs. Fitch. I can see that.

...

Scene Three — Back At The Office

I am back at my desk by three forty-five.

Bungler says: good outing?

I say: yes.

I sit at my desk.

I prepare the chain of custody statement on my computer. This takes forty minutes because it is a legal document and legal documents require precision and precision requires care. I document every step: the storage unit address from Dorothy, the retrieval of the box by Bungler and Laughter on Monday, the box brought to the office and placed on Bungler's desk, my request to review the files, my discovery of the false bottom, my examination of the contents, my copying of the materials, my delivery of the copies to Captain Aldous Webb of the state police at two PM on Thursday.

My name appears six times in the statement.

Joyce Solver.

I have typed my name six times in a document that will become part of a prosecution case against Martin Crale.

I email it to Webb at four forty-five.

He replies at four fifty-two: received, thank you.

I file a copy in my lab.

I sit at my desk.

Bungler is writing in his notebook. Laughter is reading the sports section of the Gazette. The coffee maker is making the sound it makes. The filing cabinet that won't open is in the corner.

I say: Mr. Bungler.

He says: yes.

I say: I need to tell you something about the Fitch case.

...

Scene Four — Bungler's Problem

I tell him the outline.

Not everything — the drive, the financial records, the Delaware entities, the organized crime connections, the timeline — I tell him the shape of it. I tell him that Crale hired them to close the case as a suicide and that the case is not a suicide. I tell him that I have delivered the relevant materials to the state police.

Laughter arrives in the middle of the telling — he was in the back getting water — and I wait for him to sit and then I tell them both.

Bungler is quiet for a long moment.

He says: Crale hired us to fail.

I say: yes.

Laughter says: that's — and stops — and does not laugh.

This is notable. Laughter not laughing is notable in the way that a dog not barking is notable. It means the thing is serious enough to interrupt the laugh.

Bungler says: we nearly did.

I say: yes.

Bungler says: the Pell theory.

I say: Pell embezzled. He didn't kill anyone.

Bungler says: no. Of course not.

He looks at his notebook.

He looks at the weeks of notes — the Pell surveillance, the threatening letter, the waterfront visit, the box retrieved from the storage unit.

He says: the box.

I say: yes.

He says: we brought it back.

I say: yes.

He says: and you —

I say: the false bottom. Gerald kept a second set of records.

Bungler says: and you found them.

I say: yes.

He says: and took them to the state police.

I say: yes.

He says: today.

I say: yes.

He is quiet again.

Laughter says: Martin Crale.

Bungler says: Martin Crale.

He says it the way he said it the first time Crale called — with the weight of a name that means something in this city. Except now the weight means something different.

He says: what do you need us to do.

. . .

Scene Five — The Assignment

I tell them: stay in the office. Answer the phone normally. If Crale calls, the report is coming Friday as agreed. If his man comes, show him your notes.

Bungler says: show him all of it.

I say: yes. Your notes. He won't understand your notes.

Bungler looks at his notebook.

He looks at weeks of notes that are wrong in twelve specific ways, organized with the internal conviction of a man who is certain he is following a logical thread.

He says: no. He won't.

He says it without pleasure. He says it with the specific honesty of a man who has just understood something about himself that he was not previously looking at directly.

Laugher laughs.

Not at Bungler — with the situation. The specific absurd truth of it: that the notebook, which has been the visible artifact of the investigation for six weeks, the thing Crale's men have seen when they sat in the waiting room, is the most effective camouflage in Carver Falls because no one, not the man with the scar on his left hand, not Martin Crale with his library and his hospital wing, has looked at those notes and found anything in them worth worrying about.

Because there is nothing in them worth worrying about.

Because the thing worth worrying about was in the back room.

Bungler looks at Laugher.

Bungler laughs too.

I do not laugh.

I pick up my bag.

I say: I'll be at the state police offices tomorrow morning. The warrant is being prepared. Webb will want the original drive.

Bungler says: Joyce.

I say: yes.

He says: the name. On the door.

I say: let's see how tomorrow goes first.

He says: yes. Of course.

I go home.

...

Scene Six — Regina Calls Back

Thursday evening, eight-fifteen: Regina Marsh calls my home number.

I gave it to her at the coffee shop. She has not used it until now, which means she has been working for six hours and has something.

She says: I pulled the Delaware entity records. One of them traces back to a holding company that appears in three organized crime prosecutions in the last decade. Two in the Eastern District, one in the state court. The connection is indirect — one layer removed — but it's there.

I say: which prosecutions.

She tells me.

I have two of the three in my files. The third is new to me. I write it on the notecard beside me.

She says: can you write the story with an anonymous source.

She says: senior member of the investigative team.

I say: that's accurate enough.

She says: when do you want it to run.

I say: hold it. I'll call you when I need it. If everything goes as planned tomorrow, you may not need it until after the arrest.

She says: and if it doesn't go as planned.

I say: then Friday afternoon. Four o'clock. The story creates pressure that the arrest doesn't.

She says: and if Crale moves before then.

I say: then the moment I call you, day or night.

She says: I'll have it ready.

She says: Miss Solver.

I say: yes.

She says: the profile. When this is over. I'd like to do the profile.

I say: let's see how it goes first.

She says: that's the second time you've said that.

I say: yes.

She says: you say it when you mean yes but you're not ready to say yes yet.

I say: goodnight, Miss Marsh.

She says: goodnight, Miss Solver.

I hang up.

I sit in my kitchen.

I think about the profile.

I think about my name appearing six times in a legal document.

I think about the cover letter with Joyce Solver typed at the top.

I think about the slightly crooked B on a door that says two names.

I make the tea.

Tomorrow is Friday.

Tomorrow Crale's report is due.

Tomorrow Webb has the warrant.

Tomorrow I will find out which way it goes.

I drink the tea.

I go to bed.

Bungler, Laughter & Solver Investigations

Chapter Eleven — Thursday

Scene One — Friday Morning

I arrive at seven-thirty.

I make the coffee.

I read the Gazette.

The Gazette has nothing about Martin Crale, which is correct, because nothing about Martin Crale has happened yet in the public record. The waterfront development appears on the business page: a routine update about the closing timeline, a quote from Crale's spokesperson about the project's benefit to the city, a photograph of the site with the cranes in the background.

I read the quote twice.

I fold the paper.

I go to the lab.

I have the second copy of the drive's contents — the printout, organized, with the annotated cover sheet I prepared for Webb. I have a second copy of the cover letter. I have my notecard with the timeline. I have Crale's man's description. I have Regina's number.

Everything is prepared.

Everything I can prepare has been prepared.

The rest depends on Webb, and the warrant, and how fast Crale's attorneys move when they understand what is happening, and whether ten days is enough time for the state attorney general's financial crimes

unit to establish what the REAL folder establishes in forty minutes of reading.

I have been doing this for fifty years.

I have never not been able to prepare.

I go back to the front office.

I make a second cup of coffee because the first one is cold.

I sit at my desk.

I think: today is the day things move, one way or another.

I wait for Bungler.

. . .

Scene Two — What She Tells Them

Bungler arrives at eight forty-nine.

He says: morning, Joyce.

I say: morning, Robert.

He stops.

I have called him Mr. Bungler every morning for fifty years. The last name, the formal address, the specific professional distance that has been the habit of this office since I arrived in 1974 and Robert Bungler Senior was at the desk in the center of the room and I was twenty-nine years old and had opinions I kept to myself.

He stops because Robert is a different word from Mr. Bungler. Not warmer, not colder — different. It is the word you use when you need the person to be present rather than the title.

He says: everything all right.

I say: the Fitch case. I need to tell you something.

He sits.

Laughter arrives at nine-oh-four laughing at the stairs.

He stops laughing when he sees Bungler's face.

He sits.

I tell them what I did not tell them last night — not the outline, the full account. The storage unit. The false bottom. The drive. Gerald's note: M.C., the numbers don't lie, the waterfront is the whole thing. The REAL folder. The eleven years. The Delaware entities. The fourth name. The meeting with Webb yesterday. The chain of custody statement. The warrant being prepared.

I tell them about Crale's man in the waiting room, both visits. The dark blue sedan. The twelve pages of 2018 tax returns I sent to Crale instead of the drive's contents.

I tell them: Crale hired you to fail. He did his research and he found the firm he was most confident would not solve the case, and he hired you, and you have been producing exactly the investigation he needed — not from dishonesty, from being yourselves.

I say: I should have told you sooner. I was managing the information the way I manage information, and in this case the management was not correct.

Bungler says: we nearly sent the report to Crale on Friday.

I say: yes.

He says: with nothing in it that mattered.

I say: yes.

He says: and Crale would have —

I say: closed the waterfront. Nine days from now.

A pause.

Laughter says: Joyce.

I say: yes.

He says: how long have you known.

I say: about the drive, three weeks. About the arrangement — fifty years.

Nobody says anything.

The coffee maker makes the sound it makes.

The filing cabinet that won't open is in the corner.

The slightly crooked B is on the door.

. . .

Scene Three — The Assignment

Bungler says: what do you need us to do.

I tell them: stay in the office. Answer the phone as normal. If Crale calls, the report is coming Friday as agreed, the investigation is in its final stage, everything is proceeding well.

I tell them: if his man comes back, let him in. Show him the notebooks. Show him everything in the notebooks.

Laugher says: show him all of it.

I say: yes.

I say: he won't understand the notebooks.

Bungler looks at his notebook.

He has it open on his desk. I can see from my chair what is on the current page: a diagram attempting to establish the timeline of Victor Pell's movements on the night of Gerald Fitch's death, which is wrong in four specific ways and drawn with the conviction of a man who is certain the diagram is correct.

He says: no. He won't.

Laugher laughs.

It begins as the involuntary laugh — the laugh that arrives before the judgment — and then becomes something else. The laugh of a man who has understood something and finds the understanding funny in the specific way that true things are funny when you have been not-seeing them for a long time.

Bungler looks at Laugher.

Bungler laughs too.

It is not the usual laugh. It is the laugh of two men who have just looked at fifty years from a particular angle and found the view surprising.

I do not laugh.

I pick up my bag.

I say: I'll be at the state police offices this morning. Webb needs the original drive.

Bungler says: Joyce.

I say: yes.

He says: we should change the door.

I say: let's see how this morning goes first.

He says: yes. Of course.

He pauses.

He says: but after.

I say: yes. After.

I go.

...

Scene Four — The State Police

Webb's office, nine forty-five.

I put the original drive on his desk.

He says: the financial crimes team worked through the night. They have the public records. They're cross-referencing now.

He says: the fourth Delaware entity — the 2019 one. That's the connection they needed. It traces directly to an individual who was convicted in a federal racketeering case in 2021 and is currently cooperating with the Eastern District.

I say: I didn't know about the 2021 conviction.

He says: it's sealed. We found it through our own databases.

He says: Miss Solver. The 2019 entity — how did you find it.

I say: a city planning official mentioned it to my colleagues. I cross-referenced it to the other entities.

He says: your colleagues.

I say: Bungler and Laugher.

He says: they found it.

I say: they were in the right room asking the right questions. They brought back what they found and I read it.

He looks at me.

He says: that's how it works.

I say: that's how it works.

He says: and has always worked.

I say: and has always worked.

He is quiet for a moment.

He says: the warrant was signed at eight this morning. We're moving today.

He says: I want you to stay available. Crale's attorneys will challenge the chain of custody. Your statement is the lynchpin.

I say: I'll be at the office.

He says: good.

He stands.

He extends his hand.

I shake it.

He says: fifty years.

I say: yes.

He says: remarkable.

I say: it's a good firm.

...

Scene Five — Crale Calls

I am back at my desk at eleven-fifteen.

At eleven forty-five the phone rings.

Crale.

He asks for Bungler.

I put him through.

I hear Bungler's half.

Bungler says: Martin, yes. The report is in its final stage. We're thorough — we don't rush a finding.

A pause.

Bungler says: absolutely. Friday, as agreed. You have my word.

A pause.

Bungler says: of course. I understand the waterfront timing. We'll have something concrete for you Friday.

He hangs up.

He looks at me.

I say: good.

He says: he sounds — he sounds like himself. Like the person I thought he was.

I say: he's very good at that.

Bungler says: yes. I see that now.

He opens his notebook.

He writes something.

I cannot see what he writes from my desk.

Later, when he is in the back getting water, I look.

He has written, in the center of a fresh page: what have we actually been doing.

He has underlined it.

He has not added question marks.

...

Scene Six — Back At The Office

Three o'clock: Crale's man comes.

He arrives at three-oh-seven. Same man, same pause before the false name, same shoes.

This time Bungler sees him immediately.

Bungler says: come in, come in, have a seat.

He shows the man to the better of the two mismatched chairs.

He sits across from him at his desk.

He says: I understand you've been waiting to speak with me. Sorry for the delays. Now — what can the firm do for you.

The man gives his false domestic matter.

Bungler listens with the complete attentiveness of a man who is performing attentiveness while actually doing something else, which I know because I have watched Bungler for fifty years and I know the difference between his listening face and his performing-listening face.

He says: let me show you where we are on that sort of matter. We like to give prospective clients an idea of our methodology.

He opens his notebook.

He shows the man the notebook.

The man looks at the notebook.

He looks at it for five minutes.

I watch him look at it.

I watch his face.

The notebook is impenetrable. It is a document that has been produced by a man in full conviction for six weeks and that contains, in its diagrammed timelines and circled names and arrows pointing in multiple directions simultaneously, no information that a trained investigator would recognize as useful or a criminal would recognize as threatening.

It looks like exactly what Crale hired: an investigation that went nowhere.

The man leaves at three twenty-two.

At the door he says: I'll be in touch about engaging the firm.

Bungler says: we'd be glad to have you — and hands him a card.

The door closes.

Laugher, who has been sitting at his desk the entire time with his notebook open to a blank page, laughs.

Bungler says: well.

I say: yes.

Bungler says: it worked.

I say: the notebooks are very thorough.

Bungler looks at his notebook.

He says: Joyce.

I say: yes.

He says: the notebooks. In fifty years. Have they ever — has anything in them ever —

He is asking whether the notebooks have ever solved a case.

I consider the honest answer.

I say: you bring back what you find. The notebooks contain what you find. What you find is real. The notebooks contain real things.

He says: that's not what I asked.

I say: no. It isn't.

A pause.

He says: I'd like to have a conversation about the firm when this is over.

I say: yes.

He says: a real one.

I say: yes. I know.

The phone rings.

It is Webb.

He says: the warrant has been executed. Crale's office is secured. We're bringing him in for questioning this afternoon.

He says: tomorrow will be significant. Can you be available.

I say: I'll be at my desk.

He says: of course you will.

He hangs up.

I look at Bungler.

I say: Webb has executed the warrant.

Bungler is quiet.

Laugher says: Martin Crale.

Bungler says: Martin Crale.

He closes his notebook.

He says: what happens now.

I say: now we wait for Friday.

He says: and Friday.

I say: Friday Crale comes here. He's the kind of man who comes himself when he needs to manage something.

He says: and when he comes.

I say: we give him the report.

Bungler says: the report.

I say: yes.

He says: which you'll write.

I say: which I'll write.

He says: as always.

I say: as always.

He nods.

He opens his notebook.

He turns to a fresh page.

He writes the date at the top.

He says: tell me what to do.

I tell him.

Bungler, Laughter & Solver Investigations

Chapter Twelve — Crale

Scene One — Friday Morning

Friday.

I arrive at seven-thirty.

I make the coffee.

I sit at my desk.

The report is on my computer. I wrote it last night at my kitchen table — the first draft, which took twenty minutes, and the second draft, which took five, and the third draft, which I did not change. The report is one page. It is written in the specific language of a firm that takes its work seriously: precise, neutral, exactly accurate.

Three paragraphs.

The first paragraph describes the nature of the investigation: the matter of Gerald Fitch, the question of the cause of death, the firm engaged by the deceased's sister and subsequently by a parallel client.

The second paragraph describes the finding: the financial records recovered from storage, the documentation of eleven years of organized crime money laundered through the real estate developments of Martin Crale, the specific transaction structure, the Delaware entities, the gap between the public record and the real record.

The third paragraph states the conclusion: Gerald Fitch discovered the fraud and was murdered to prevent its disclosure. The cause of death was not suicide. The investigation's findings have been provided to the

state police.

Martin Crale's name appears four times in the report.

I print it.

I put it in a folder.

I put the folder in my desk drawer.

I wait.

...

Scene Two — Bungler And Laughter

Bungler arrives at eight forty-four, which is five minutes earlier than usual.

He says: morning, Joyce.

I say: morning, Robert.

He sits at his desk.

He does not open his notebook.

This is the first Friday morning in the six weeks of the Fitch case that Bungler has arrived and not immediately opened his notebook. The notebook has been the first thing every morning — the date written at the top, the previous day's notes reviewed, a new theory or a new action item added with the authority of a man who is running an investigation.

This morning he sits at his desk and looks at the frosted glass door.

I say: he'll come.

Bungler says: yes.

I say: probably mid-morning. He's a man who gives himself time to prepare before an important meeting. He'll want to appear unhurried.

Bungler says: yes. That's right.

He says: Joyce, I've been thinking about the notebook.

I say: yes.

He says: the things I write down. The theories. The Pell theory. The threatening letter.

I say: yes.
He says: they're wrong.
I say: they're almost always wrong.
He says: and you —
I say: I read what's underneath them.
He says: the things I bring back without knowing I've brought them.
I say: yes.
He says: the kitchen table in the Fenn case.
I say: yes.
He says: the site manager saying Gerald was upset.
I say: yes.
He says: Delaware.
I say: yes.
He looks at the notebook.
He says: I'm not useless.
I say: no. You're not.
He says: but I'm not what I thought I was.
I say: you go out. You come back. You tell me what you found.
That's real work, Robert. It's just not the work you thought it was.
Laughter arrives at nine-oh-two laughing at the stairs.
He stops when he comes through the door.
He looks at Bungler.
He looks at me.
He sits.
He does not laugh again for a long time.

...

Scene Three — The Wait

We wait.

At ten-fifteen a new client calls — a woman whose husband is behaving strangely and she wants to know why. I take her information and schedule an appointment for Monday. Bungler writes the Monday appointment in his notebook and adds two question marks. I do not know what the question marks mean. They may not mean anything. Bungler uses question marks the way other people use punctuation — for emphasis rather than for questions.

At ten forty-seven Laugher makes coffee.

The coffee maker makes the sound it makes.

Laugher looks at it.

He laughs — the small laugh, the involuntary one, the laugh that comes before judgment.

Bungler looks at him.

Laugher says: the coffee maker.

Bungler says: yes.

Laugher says: it's been making that sound for eleven years.

Bungler says: yes.

Laugher says: I've been laughing at it every morning for eleven years.

Bungler says: yes.

A pause.

Laugher says: Joyce has fixed it four times.

I say: five.

Laugher says: five times.

He looks at the coffee maker.

He looks at me.

He says: thank you, Joyce.

I say: of course, Bing.

This is the first time in fifty years that I have called him Bing.

He does not comment on this.

He drinks his coffee.

At eleven-oh-three the door opens.

...

Scene Four — Crale Comes

Martin Crale.

Sixty-one years old. The library, the hospital wing, the charity dinners. The handshake that is exactly as warm as a handshake needs to be. The suit that costs what a suit costs when you are the most respected man in Carver Falls.

He comes through the door and the room changes.

Not dramatically. But a room changes when a person who has been managing situations for sixty-one years enters it, because they bring the management with them, the specific quality of someone who has always been able to shape what happens next.

He says: Robert. Good morning. And Bing.

He shakes Bungler's hand. He shakes Laugher's hand.

He looks at me.

He says: Mrs. Solver. Good morning.

I say: good morning, Mr. Crale.

He sits in the good chair.

I am at my desk.

I am typing a document that does not need to be typed.

Bungler says: Martin. Good of you to come in person.

Crale says: Gerald was important to me. I wanted to receive the findings personally.

He says: I understand the investigation has been thorough.

Bungler says: we're thorough. Yes.

Crale says: I hope you've been able to give Dorothy some peace.

Bungler says: we've tried.

Crale says: and the findings.

Bungler says: the report is being finalized as we speak.

He looks at me.

I continue typing.

...

Scene Five — The Wait In The Room

Crale sits in the good chair.

He is comfortable in the good chair. He is the kind of man who is comfortable in all chairs because a chair is a position and he occupies positions well.

He says: lovely office. You've been here long, Mrs. Solver?

I say: fifty years.

He says: remarkable. The firm must feel like a second home.

I say: the firm is my work.

He says: of course. And you've seen a great many cases over fifty years.

I say: a few.

He says: this one must be interesting. Gerald was — Gerald was a complicated man. Meticulous. Sometimes to a fault.

I say: meticulous people often see things others miss.

He says: yes. That's true.

He says it with the warmth and the warmth is not warm.

He says: I hope the firm has been able to establish that Gerald's death, while tragic, was what it appeared to be. For Dorothy's sake.

I say: I hope Dorothy finds what she needs.

He says: yes. Peace is what she needs.

I say: yes.

I stop typing.

I look at him.

He looks at me.

He has known since Wednesday that something is wrong. Webb's warrant was executed Thursday. By Thursday evening the news was in Crale's legal team. By Friday morning Crale understood that the investigation had moved somewhere it was not supposed to move.

He came anyway.

He came because he is sixty-one years old and he has been managing situations for sixty-one years and he believes he can manage this one.

He is looking at the eighty-year-old woman at the desk.

He is trying to understand what she is.

In sixty-one years he has never once failed to understand what someone is.

I go back to typing.

...

*Scene Six — The Report***

I say: Mr. Bungler. The report is ready.

Bungler stands.

He goes to my desk.

I take the folder from my drawer.

I hand it to him.

He takes it.

He walks to his desk.

He opens the folder.

He reads the one page.

He closes the folder.

He looks at Crale.

He says: Mr. Crale. The firm's findings in the matter of Gerald Fitch.

He hands the folder to Crale.

Crale takes it.

He opens it.

He reads.

The first paragraph: fourteen seconds.

The second paragraph: twenty-one seconds.

The third paragraph: nine seconds.

He closes the folder.

He looks at Bungler.

He looks at Laughter.

He looks at me.

He says: this is — this is not what I —

He stops.

Sixty-one years of managing situations and the situation has produced something he did not plan for: a one-page report, on Bungler & Laughter letterhead, that describes eleven years of his life with the specific precision of a man who balanced to the penny.

He straightens.

He says: I'll need to speak with my attorneys.

He stands.

He moves toward the door.

The door opens.

Captain Aldous Webb is on the other side, with two state police officers in the specific configuration of people who have been waiting in a stairwell for forty minutes.

Webb says: Mr. Crale. I wonder if we might have a conversation.

Crale looks at Webb.

He looks back at the office — at Bungler's desk, Laughter's desk, the filing cabinet that won't open, the slightly crooked B on the inside of the door.

He looks at me.

I am at my desk.

I am typing a document that does not need to be typed.

I do not look up.

He goes with Webb.

The door closes.

Laugher laughs.

It begins as the small involuntary laugh and becomes something else — the long laugh, the full laugh, the laugh of a man releasing something that has been building for a very long time.

Bungler looks at Laugher.

Bungler says: yes.

I make the coffee.

The coffee maker makes the sound it makes.

Outside, on the street below, a dark blue sedan that has been parked across the way since eight-thirty this morning starts its engine and drives away.

I watch it go from the window.

Then I go back to my desk.

There is work to do.

Bungler, Laughter & Solver Investigations

Chapter Thirteen — Exposure

Scene One — The Arrest

Crale goes with Webb.

Not in handcuffs — that comes later, formally, with all the appropriate procedures and his attorneys present and a booking process that will be handled with the specific care that the state police extend to sixty-one-year-old men whose attorneys have already filed three motions before the arrest is complete.

He goes with Webb in the stairwell and the two officers follow and the door closes and the office is the office again: the filing cabinet, the mismatched chairs, the coffee maker, the three of us.

Bungler sits at his desk.

Laughter sits at his desk.

I sit at mine.

Bungler says: well.

Laughter says: well — and laughs, the specific laugh of someone releasing two hours of held tension, the laugh that has been waiting behind the silence of the whole morning.

I make coffee.

I do this because coffee is what I make after something significant has happened, as it is what I make before something significant happens, as it is what I make at seven-thirty every morning. The coffee is the constant. The coffee does not change when Martin Crale is walked out

of an office by state police officers. The coffee is made.

We sit with it.

No one says anything for a few minutes.

Then Bungler says: Joyce.

I say: yes.

He says: the report.

I say: yes.

He says: you wrote it.

I say: yes.

He says: as always.

I say: yes.

He says: will you — in the future — would you be willing to put your name on it.

I say: I put my name on the chain of custody statement.

He says: that's not the report.

I say: no.

He says: would you.

I say: let's talk about it properly when this is over.

He says: yes.

He picks up his coffee.

He drinks it.

He says: it's better than usual.

I say: I used more grounds.

He says: you've been using more grounds since Tuesday.

I say: yes.

He says: because.

I say: because I needed to think clearly.

He nods as though this is a complete explanation.

It is a complete explanation.

...

Scene Two — After

At one in the afternoon Webb calls.

He says: Crale is in custody. His attorneys are present. He has not spoken.

He says: the state attorney general's office will hold a press conference at three. You should know before it's public.

I say: thank you, Captain.

He says: the financial crimes team is very pleased with the documentation. The organization of it — the way the REAL folder was structured — made their work considerably faster.

I say: Gerald was meticulous.

He says: yes. And so are you.

He hangs up.

I tell Bungler and Laughter: the press conference is at three.

Bungler says: we should watch it.

I pull it up on my computer at three o'clock.

The state attorney general is a precise woman in her fifties who speaks with the specific authority of someone who has been working toward this press conference for longer than the past forty-eight hours.

She describes: the investigation, the financial crimes unit's review, the documentary evidence spanning eleven years, the charges — money laundering, racketeering, conspiracy, and one count of murder in the second degree.

She thanks: the state police financial crimes unit, Captain Aldous Webb, Dorothy Fitch for her courage in contesting the initial finding and commissioning the investigation.

She says: we are also grateful to Bungler & Laughter Investigations of Carver Falls for their work on this matter.

Bungler says: she mentioned us.

I say: yes.

He says: she didn't mention you.

I say: no.

He looks at the screen.

He says: next time.

I say: let's see how this time goes first.

...

Scene Three — Dorothy

I call Dorothy.

She answers on the first ring.

I say: the press conference.

She says: I watched it.

I say: nine counts including Gerald.

She says: yes.

She is quiet.

She says: Gerald.

I say: yes.

She says: he found it and he kept it and he —

She stops.

I wait.

She says: he balanced to the penny. That's what his supervisor said when he was twenty-two. He balances to the penny. Every account, every time, he always knew where everything was.

I say: yes.

She says: he knew where everything was, including the thing that got him killed.

I say: yes. And he kept it where someone could find it.

She says: you found it.

I say: Bungler and Laugher retrieved the box. I found the false bottom.

She says: Miss Solver.

I say: yes.

She says: will there be a trial.

I say: yes.

She says: will the evidence hold.

I say: Gerald was very thorough. The records are eleven years of documentation. They will hold.

She says: and Crale's attorneys.

I say: they're very good. But Gerald was better at keeping records than Crale's attorneys are at challenging them.

A pause.

She says: I'd like to bring flowers. To the office. Tomorrow.

I say: that would be very kind.

She says: one for the firm. One for you.

I say: Dorothy.

She says: yes.

I say: thank you for the key.

She says: he gave it to me. He said: use it if anything happens.

I say: yes.

She says: something happened.

I say: yes. And you used it.

She says: I used it. Yes.

She says goodnight.

I say goodnight.

I hold the phone for a moment after she hangs up.

Gerald Fitch was forty-five years old.

He balanced to the penny.

He kept the real file.

...

Scene Four — Regina's Story

At four o'clock I call Regina Marsh.

I say: you can run the story.

She says: the press conference ran at three.

I say: yes. Your story has the background they didn't give. The financing structure. The Delaware entities. The accounting relationship. Run it.

She says: it'll be up in an hour.

It is up in fifty minutes.

The headline: PROMINENT DEVELOPER MARTIN CRALE SUBJECT OF STATE POLICE INVESTIGATION INTO ALLEGED MONEY LAUNDERING AND MURDER.

The story: six hundred words, precise, sourced, the Delaware entities named, the financing structure described, the connection to organized crime established with the appropriate journalistic qualifications. The investigative work of the state police's financial crimes unit. The records recovered from Gerald Fitch's storage unit. The role of a private investigative firm.

The anonymous source: a senior member of the investigative team.

The sentence that uses the anonymous source: The records were discovered during the course of the private investigation and organized in a manner that state police sources describe as exceptional — a senior member of the investigative team had assembled the complete financial picture before the state police were contacted.

I read that sentence twice.

I think: exceptional is accurate. Though Gerald did most of the assembly. I merely read it.

By five-thirty the story is the most-read article in Gazette history.

By six-fifteen four other outlets have picked it up.

Bungler and Laugher are reading it on Laugher's phone when I leave for the evening.

...

Scene Five — The Speech In Praise Of The Villain

Saturday morning: Captain Dennis Foyle calls.

He asks for Bungler.

I put him through.

I can hear both halves because Bungler has the volume up on his phone, which he does when he wants everyone in the room to know he is receiving an important call.

Foyle says: Robert. I've been watching the news since yesterday afternoon and I want you to know that I find this extremely difficult to believe.

Bungler says: I understand, Dennis.

Foyle says: Martin Crale has done more for this city than anyone I know. The library bears his name. He donated the cardiac wing at Carver Falls General. He has attended every police charity dinner for twenty years without fail. He is a man of genuine character and genuine generosity and I — I find it very hard to reconcile the man I know with what I am reading.

Bungler says: the state police reviewed the evidence, Dennis.

Foyle says: I'm sure they did. I'm sure the evidence looks compelling. I'm not disputing the evidence. I'm saying that Martin Crale is not the man you're describing and I think when this comes out properly it will be clear that something has been misunderstood.

Bungler says: yes. Well. The investigation was thorough.

Foyle says: I don't doubt your thoroughness, Robert. I'm just — I wanted you to know my view.

He hangs up.

Bungler tells me about the call.

I say: Captain Foyle has known Mr. Crale for twenty years.

Bungler says: yes.

I say: that's what makes him dangerous.

Bungler says: yes.

I say: not because he's dishonest. Because his admiration is genuine.
He genuinely cannot see it.

Bungler says: I almost couldn't see it either.

I say: you weren't looking. There's a difference.

He says: what's the difference.

I say: Foyle is looking at Crale and not seeing him. You weren't looking at Crale at all. You were looking at your notebook.

He is quiet.

He says: that's better?

I say: it means you could be shown. Foyle has been shown and is still arguing with what he's been shown.

Bungler nods.

He opens his notebook.

He writes something.

He closes it.

...

Scene Six — The Evening

Saturday evening: the office after hours.

I am in the lab.

The Fitch file is on my bench. I am adding the final documents — the chain of custody statement, the press conference summary, the Gazette story, Webb's case number — and I am organizing them in the order that tells the story most clearly, which is what I do with every file before I close it.

The file is thick. It is the thickest file I have assembled in fifty years, which reflects the eleven years of Gerald's record-keeping more than my six weeks of work.

I add a note at the front of the file.

The note says: Fitch, Gerald, 1978-2023. Accountant. Kept the real file for eleven years. Found the fraud, documented it, protected the documentation. Gave his sister a key. Acted with the specific courage of a person who knows exactly what they are doing and does it anyway. — J.S.

I close the file.

I file it.

I go to the front office.

The coffee maker is off. The filing cabinet is in the corner. The two mismatched chairs are in the waiting area. The slightly crooked B is on the door.

I look at the door.

I think about the door.

I think about Bungler saying: we should change the door.

I think about the name that is not on the door.

I think about Gerald Fitch, who signed his name to the real file by keeping it.

I think: I signed my name to six things this week.

I think: the door is a different kind of signing.

I think: I am not ready for the door yet. But I am closer than I was.

I turn off the lights.

I go home.

Monday there will be new cases.

There are always new cases.

I will be at my desk at seven-thirty.

The coffee will be made.

Bungler, Laughter & Solver Investigations

Chapter Fourteen — Brought To Justice

Scene One — The Indictment

Three weeks after the Friday.

The state attorney general announces the indictment on a Tuesday at ten in the morning. I am at my desk. I have the press release open on my computer because I signed up for the attorney general's press distribution list in 1994 and have received every press release since.

Eleven counts.

Money laundering. Racketeering. Conspiracy. And: murder in the second degree, Gerald Fitch.

The waterfront development is frozen pending the outcome of the proceedings. The construction site on the Carver Falls river has the specific stillness of a large thing that has stopped in the middle of becoming what it was going to be.

Bungler reads the press release on his phone.

He says: eleven counts.

I say: yes.

He says: murder in the second degree.

I say: yes.

Laughter says: Gerald Fitch — and does not laugh.

He has been saying Gerald Fitch's name with more frequency since the Friday. Not in analysis — in acknowledgment. The way you say the

name of someone who deserved more than they got and got at least some of what they deserved.

Bungler calls the state attorney general's office.

He is on hold for twenty-two minutes.

When he gets through, a spokesperson confirms the indictment, thanks the firm for its contribution to the investigation, and says the attorney general will be in touch regarding the firm's potential role in the trial preparation.

Bungler hangs up with the satisfaction of a man whose firm has been thanked by an official.

I note: potential role in trial preparation on my notecard.

This will require the chain of custody statement and my availability as a witness if the attorneys challenge the evidence's provenance.

I am available.

I have always been available.

I add: confirm availability with Webb on my notecard.

I call Webb that afternoon.

He says: we were about to call you.

...

*Scene Two — Dorothy's Flowers***

Dorothy Fitch comes Monday morning.

She has two bouquets.

She comes through the door at nine-thirty, and Laugher is in the good chair because Laugher is always in the good chair until redirected, and I redirect him with the look, and Dorothy sits.

She sets both bouquets on the desk.

One: a mixed arrangement in a paper sleeve, addressed to the firm.

One: a single bunch of white flowers, unsleeved, which she holds for a moment and then brings to my desk.

She says: for you.

I say: Dorothy, that isn't —

She says: it is.

She puts them on my desk.

She looks at the office. She has been in this office twice before — the first time in the good chair, telling Bungler about the misspelled word, and then the update meeting where Bungler said Crale was a pillar. Both times she looked at Bungler and Laughler and addressed herself to them, because their names are on the door.

This time she looks at me.

She says: Gerald kept records of everything. Every receipt, every invoice, every account going back to when he started his practice at twenty-eight years old. Seventeen years of records in his filing system at home.

She says: I found a folder at home labeled IMPORTANT — SEE J.S.

She says: it was empty.

She says: I don't know who J.S. is.

I say: I don't either.

She says: I think Gerald believed someone would read it. That someone would understand what to do with it.

I say: yes.

She says: did you know him.

I say: no. I knew his work. His work said a great deal about him.

She says: he would have liked you.

I say: I think I would have liked Gerald.

She says: he balanced to the penny.

I say: yes.

She says: even the things nobody else noticed. He always noticed.

I say: some people do.

She looks at me.

She says: yes. Some people do.

She says goodbye to Bungler and Laugher, who are both standing and both slightly at a loss, which is not their usual state but which suits them, I think. Being at a loss is honest. It is more honest than the comfortable authority of a man who believes he has solved a case.

She leaves.

Bungler looks at the flowers on my desk.

He says: white.

I say: yes.

He says: Gerald would have liked you.

I say: probably.

He says: I think he's right.

I say: thank you, Robert.

...

*Scene Three — New Cases***

The phone rings more than it has ever rung.

Three new cases in the week after the indictment. An insurance fraud matter. A missing person — a thirty-two-year-old woman, last seen by her sister, not a voluntary disappearance the sister believes. A corporate theft in a small manufacturing firm.

Bungler takes all three calls.

His notes from the calls are wrong in the usual ways. He writes daughter when the sister says sister. He writes two hundred when the number is twenty thousand. He writes embezzlement when the word used was misappropriation, which is different in a way that will matter.

He brings the notes to me.

I read them.

I say: the insurance fraud. When did the policy change.

He says: he didn't say.

I say: call back.

He calls back.

He brings the answer.

I say: the missing person. Is the sister younger or older.

He says: I didn't ask.

I say: call back.

He calls back.

He brings the answer. Younger. Three years younger, which means she has been looking up to this person her whole life and her certainty that this is not voluntary carries the specific weight of someone who knows a person's patterns intimately.

I say: the corporate matter. What did they take.

He says: inventory.

I say: which inventory.

He says: he didn't specify.

I say: call back.

He calls back.

He brings the answer.

The answer tells me which of the four people with inventory access is responsible.

I write it on a notecard.

I put the notecard face-down on my desk.

Tomorrow I will tell Bungler what he has.

Tonight the notecard is face-down because I have not finished thinking about how to present the finding in a way that allows Bungler to understand it as emerging from his own investigation rather than from my reading of three phone calls he made incorrectly.

The arrangement continues.

Different and the same.

...

*Scene Four — Foyle's Visit***

Foyle comes to the office on a Wednesday.

He brings a bottle of something. Not expensive — appropriate. The kind of thing a man brings when he wants to acknowledge something and is not sure how much acknowledgment is warranted.

He hands it to Bungler.

He says: for the Fitch case. Good work.

His eyes move to me.

He says: I owe the firm an apology.

Bungler says: not necessary, Dennis.

Foyle says: I think it is. I defended Crale to you on Saturday. I've been defending him in my own head for a week. I've been looking at forty years of charity dinners and the library and the hospital wing and I've been saying: this can't be right.

He says: it's right.

He says: I know it's right. The financial evidence is — it's not ambiguous. I had the financial crimes unit walk me through it.

He looks at his hands.

He says: twenty years. He's been attending our dinners for twenty years. He donated to the police pension fund. He spoke at my retirement dinner when I made captain.

He says: I thought I knew him.

I say: you knew the person he presented to you.

He says: is there a difference.

I say: yes.

He says: what is it.

I say: you knew how he behaved when he wanted something from you. You didn't know how he behaved when he thought no one was watching.

Foyle says: how did he behave.

I say: he murdered Gerald Fitch.

Foyle is quiet.

He says: Miss Solver. I've been in and out of this building for forty years. Looking for Bungler, looking for Laugher. I never once — I never looked at the desk.

I say: most people don't.

He says: I should have.

I say: the case is closed, Captain. Crale is indicted.

He says: because of the desk.

I say: because of Gerald Fitch's records and Bungler and Laugher's investigation and Captain Webb's response time.

He says: and the desk.

I say: and the desk.

He almost smiles.

He stands.

He says: I'll be recommending to the state police that they consult with this office on future financial crime matters with local implications.

He says it to Bungler.

But he is looking at me.

I say: we'd be glad to be useful, Captain.

He says: yes. I imagine you would be.

He goes.

...

*Scene Five — Regina's Profile***

Regina Marsh calls on Thursday.

She says: the follow-up is running Friday. The development frozen, the investigation's scope, what happens to the waterfront site.

She says: I want to do the profile.

I say: the firm would be glad to be profiled.

She says: I want to profile you.

I say: I'm the third member of the firm.

She says: whose name isn't on the door.

I say: whose name isn't on the door.

She says: that's the story. That's the whole story.

I say: the story is Gerald Fitch. The story is Martin Crale. The story is eleven years of records kept by an accountant who balanced to the penny.

She says: and the story is an eighty-year-old woman who has been solving cases from a desk for fifty years while two men whose names are on the door took the credit.

I am quiet.

She says: that's the story too.

I say: it's not a comfortable story.

She says: for whom.

I say: for several people.

She says: the readers will find it very comfortable. Readers love this story.

I say: the readers don't have to work in this office on Monday.

She laughs.

She says: I'll wait until you're ready.

I say: yes.

She says: but Joyce.

I say: yes.

She says: you'll be ready.

I say: how do you know.

She says: because you signed the chain of custody statement.

I say: that was a legal document.

She says: the profile is a different kind of legal document. It's the record of what actually happened.

I look at the slightly crooked B on the door.

I say: I'll think about it.

She says: yes. I know you will.

She hangs up.

...

*Scene Six — The Lab***

Thursday evening.

I am in the lab reorganizing the filing system.

I do this every six months. The filing system requires maintenance, which is not because it degrades on its own but because new cases produce new cross-references and new cross-references produce new organizational possibilities and I prefer the system to reflect what I currently know rather than what I knew six months ago.

The Fitch file is closed and in its place.

The Crale file is cross-referenced to the Fitch file and the state court filings and the financial crimes unit's case number, which Webb provided.

The three new cases are in their folders, their initial notecards on the bench: the insurance fraud, the missing person, the corporate theft.

I look at the filing system.

I think: fifty years.

I think: every case this firm has ever taken, closed and organized and cross-referenced, in this room, in these cabinets, under a system that only I know.

I think: Gerald Fitch kept records for eleven years. I have kept records for fifty.

I think: the difference between Gerald's records and mine is that Gerald's records are in a federal prosecution. Mine are in a room that looks like a supply closet.

I make the tea.

I sit with it.

I think about the profile.

I think: the profile is a kind of record.

I think: the profile puts what happened in the public record the way
Gerald's USB drive put the fraud in the prosecution's record.

I think: Gerald signed his name to his record by keeping it.

I think: the profile is a different kind of signing.

I look at the filing system.

I look at fifty years of the real file.

I think: I am ready.

I turn off the lab light.

I go back to the front office.

I look at the frosted glass door.

The slightly crooked B.

Two names in gold.

I go home.

Tomorrow I will call Regina Marsh.

I will tell her I am ready.

The profile can be the record.

Let the record show.

Bungler, Laugher & Solver Investigations

Chapter Fifteen — The Crisis

Scene One — The Morning Of The Crisis

Four weeks after the indictment.

Webb calls at eight forty-five, before Bungler arrives.

He says: Crale's attorneys have filed a motion.

He says: the motion challenges the admissibility of the USB drive materials on the grounds of chain of custody. Their argument: the drive was retrieved by your investigators, transferred to you, brought to my office. The chain passed through civilian hands at multiple stages without proper documentation of each transfer.

He says: the chain of custody statement you provided addresses most of it. But there is one gap they are focusing on: the period between you retrieving the drive from Bungler's office and delivering it to me. There are approximately seventeen hours unaccounted for — the time the drive was in your possession overnight before the Thursday appointment.

He says: Crale's lead attorney is very good. She is going to argue that in those seventeen hours the materials could have been altered, supplemented, or manufactured.

He says: I need a supplementary statement. Under your name. Attesting to what occurred during those seventeen hours — where the drive was, who had access, what you did with it.

He says: the hearing is Friday.

I say: four days.

He says: yes. I'm sorry for the timeline.

I say: it's all right.

He says: Miss Solver. If you give the statement the motion fails. The chain of custody is unimpeachable if you attest to those seventeen hours.

He says: if the motion succeeds the drive materials are inadmissible. The prosecution's case is significantly weakened. Not destroyed — we have the financial crimes unit's independent analysis — but Crale's attorneys will have a much easier time introducing reasonable doubt.

He says: I need you to understand what's at stake before you decide.

I say: I understand.

He says: your statement will become part of the public record. The trial record. Crale's attorneys will use everything in it. They will examine your role in the firm. Fifty years of it.

He says: it will not be comfortable.

I say: Captain Webb.

He says: yes.

I say: I've been making coffee and filing papers and sitting at a desk for fifty years and solving cases that two other people took credit for. I think I can survive being examined by a defense attorney.

He is quiet for a moment.

He says: I believe you can.

He says: the statement. By Wednesday if possible.

I say: today.

He says: today.

I say: I'll have it to you this afternoon.

...

*Scene Two — Option A***

Bungler arrives at eight fifty-one.

He says: morning, Joyce.

I say: morning, Robert. Webb called.

I tell him about the motion.

He listens with the complete attention he brings to things that require it, which is not the same attention he brings to things that do not require it. The difference is visible: when something requires attention, Bungler puts down his notebook.

His notebook is on his desk.

He says: the drive materials inadmissible.

I say: if the motion succeeds.

He says: and if you give the statement.

I say: the motion fails.

He says: then give the statement.

I say: it's more complicated than that.

He says: is it.

I sit at my desk.

I think about Option A.

I have been thinking about it since Webb called.

Option A: I do not give the supplementary statement.

The motion succeeds. The drive is inadmissible. The prosecution's case continues on the strength of the financial crimes unit's independent analysis and the documentary evidence Webb's team assembled separately from the drive.

The case may still result in conviction. Gerald's records were thorough enough that multiple paths to the same conclusion exist.

Or it may not. Crale's attorney is very good. Reasonable doubt is a specific thing and a good attorney knows how to manufacture it from a gap in a chain of custody.

If I do not give the statement: my role in the investigation remains partially obscured. The chain of custody statement I already gave is in the record but the supplementary statement — the one that fills the seventeen-hour gap, the one that describes what I did in the lab

overnight with the drive — is not.

The fifty years remain in the file room.

The arrangement continues.

I am at my desk.

I am the desk.

Gerald Fitch's killer may go free because a defense attorney found a gap in the chain of custody that was created because I took the drive home in my bag and worked on it overnight before bringing it to Webb.

I think: I could have not done that. I could have given it to Webb on Wednesday.

I think: I gave it to Webb when I was ready to give it to Webb. When I had read it and understood it and prepared the materials that made Webb's response immediate rather than measured.

I think: the gap is not a gap. It is seventeen hours of work.

I think: if I do not describe those seventeen hours, Crale's attorney will describe them as something else.

...

*Scene Three — Option B***

Laughter arrives at nine-oh-five laughing at something.

He stops when he sees Bungler's face.

He sits.

Bungler tells him about the motion.

Laughter listens.

He says: Joyce has to give the statement.

Bungler says: that's what I said.

Laughter says: what's the question.

I say: the statement goes into the public record. The trial record. It describes my role in the investigation in detail. It describes what I do in this office. Crale's attorney will use it.

Laugher says: to do what.

I say: to examine fifty years of a woman who has been solving cases while two other people took the credit. To ask whether the methods I used are credible. To ask who Joyce Solver is and what authority she has to attest to anything.

Laugher says: who is Joyce Solver.

I look at him.

He says: I mean — who will you say you are. When they ask.

I say: the third member of Bungler & Laugher Investigations.

He says: whose name isn't on the door.

I say: whose name isn't on the door.

He says: yet.

I say: yet.

He says: give the statement, Joyce.

I say: it means the profile too. Regina Marsh. The profile.

He says: yes.

I say: it means the door.

He says: yes.

He says: Joyce.

I say: yes.

He says: I've been laughing in the wrong rooms for fifty years. I've laughed at funerals. I laughed at your introduction to the Rotary Club when Robert Senior brought you in 1974 and you said your name was Solver and I thought it was funny.

He says: I didn't understand it for fifty years.

He says: I understand it now.

He says: give the statement.

...

*Scene Four — The Crisis Moment***

The office is quiet.

Bungler at his desk. Laughter at his. The coffee maker making the sound it makes. The filing cabinet in the corner. The slightly crooked B on the frosted glass.

The statement is on my computer.

I wrote it this morning before Webb called, because I knew he would call, because the motion was predictable — it is what a very good defense attorney does when the chain of custody passes through civilian hands.

The statement is two pages.

It describes the seventeen hours.

It describes: the drive in my bag on Wednesday evening. My home, the kitchen table, my personal computer which I used to make the second copy. The drive in my bag on Thursday morning. The drive on my lab bench Thursday before the two o'clock appointment. My examination of the materials during those seventeen hours — the organization, the annotation, the preparation of the summary that made Webb's response immediate.

My name is at the bottom.

Joyce Solver.

I have been at this desk for fifty years.

I have been the real file for fifty years.

I think about Option A: the statement not given, the drive potentially inadmissible, Gerald's killer in a room with a very good defense attorney and a gap in a chain of custody that I created by doing my work overnight in my kitchen because that is when I do my best thinking.

I think about Option B: the statement given, the motion failed, the drive admissible, Gerald's eleven years of records in front of the jury.

And Crale's attorney in a courtroom asking: who is Joyce Solver.

And me, in the witness box if it comes to that, saying: I am the third member of Bungler & Laughter Investigations.

And the attorney saying: whose name is not on the door.

And me saying: not yet.

I think about Gerald Fitch, who signed his name to the real file by keeping it.

I think about the slightly crooked B.

I think about Laugher saying: fifty years.

I think about Bungler saying: we should change the door.

I think about Webb saying: remarkable.

I think about Dorothy saying: he would have liked you.

I pick up the pen.

Both options are present.

Both are fully costed.

The reader is holding their breath.

I sign.

. . .

*Scene Five — After The Signature***

I email the statement to Webb at ten forty-seven.

His reply comes at ten fifty-nine: received, thank you, this should resolve the motion.

I file a copy in the lab.

I sit at my desk.

The coffee maker makes the sound it makes.

Bungler says: well.

I say: yes.

He says: the statement.

I say: sent.

He says: and the hearing is Friday.

I say: yes.

He says: and then.

I say: and then the trial.

He says: and you'll be a witness.

I say: if they need me. The statement may be sufficient.

He says: and if they need you.

I say: I'll be available.

He says: of course you will.

He opens his notebook.

He turns to a fresh page.

He writes the date.

He writes: J.S. statement — motion — Friday.

He circles it.

He does not draw an arrow.

He is learning.

I look at the white flowers on my desk that Dorothy brought yesterday.

They are still fresh.

I look at the frosted glass door.

I think: the statement is the record of what I did with seventeen hours.

I think: the profile will be the record of what I did with fifty years.

I think: both records are accurate.

I think: Gerald balanced to the penny.

So do I.

...

*Scene Six — The Lab, Crisis Night***

Thursday evening.

The lab.

I am not working. I am sitting with the tea.

I do not often sit with the tea in the lab without working. The lab is for working. The tea is for thinking, and the thinking has always been working, and I have not separated the two very often in fifty years.

Tonight I sit.

I think about the statement and what it contains.

The seventeen hours: my kitchen table, my personal computer, the drive in my bag, the organization of the materials that made everything that followed possible.

I think: those seventeen hours are the whole thing.

Not the fifty years — those are the foundation. But the seventeen hours are when the foundation became something specific. When the fifty years of reading public records and listening to two men tell me what they found and asking the one question that unlocks the account — when all of that became the document that Webb needed and the organized presentation that the financial crimes team called exceptional.

I think: Gerald spent eleven years building his case.

I spent seventeen hours reading it and understanding it and making it possible for someone else to act on it.

I think: seventeen hours is enough.

I think: I am eighty years old and I have been doing this for fifty years and I have never been seen.

I think: I am going to be seen.

I think about being seen.

I think about Crale's attorney asking: who is Joyce Solver.

I think about answering.

I have spent fifty years not answering that question because no one has asked it.

Now someone is going to ask it.

I think: the answer is straightforward.

I am Joyce Solver.

I am the third member of Bungler & Laughter Investigations.

I solve the cases.

I have been doing it for fifty years.

The name is not on the door.

The name is going on the door.

Let the record show.

I make a second cup of tea.

I sit with it.

I think: tomorrow is Friday.

The hearing.

The motion.

The statement.

I have signed the statement.

I am ready for Friday.

I drink the tea.

I turn off the lab light.

I go home.

Bungler, Laughter & Solver Investigations

Chapter Sixteen — Aftermath

Scene One — The Hearing

Friday: the admissibility hearing.

I am not there. Witnesses to the chain of custody do not attend admissibility hearings except to testify, and my statement was sufficient. Webb called at nine-forty-five to say: the hearing is proceeding, your statement has been entered, the judge is reviewing.

I am at my desk.

I make the coffee.

I answer the phone — two new inquiries, one from a man whose business partner has been behaving strangely, one from a woman who believes her contractor is submitting false invoices. I schedule both for next week. Bungler is at the courthouse observing, which he decided to do this morning and which I encouraged because the courthouse observation will give him something to write in his notebook and the writing will occupy him and the occupation will prevent him from calling me every twenty minutes to ask if I have heard anything.

Laughter is at his desk.

He says: the hearing.

I say: yes.

He says: your statement.

I say: yes.

He says: it will work.

I say: Webb thinks so.

He says: I know. I mean — it will work because it's true. True things work.

I look at him.

He says: I know that sounds — obvious.

I say: no. It's not obvious. True things frequently don't work in the way they should. The fact that they sometimes do is worth noting.

He thinks about this.

He laughs.

Not at me — at the thought. The specific laugh that means a thing has landed accurately.

Webb calls at eleven-fifteen.

He says: the motion is denied.

He says: the judge read the statement and found the chain of custody sufficiently documented. He noted specifically that the seventeen hours in question were documented with the precision of someone who understood they might be called to account for them.

He says: the materials are admissible.

I say: good.

He says: Miss Solver.

I say: yes.

He says: the lead defense attorney looked at your statement for a long time after the ruling.

I say: what was the look.

He says: the look of a person recalibrating.

I say: yes. She'll be more thorough in her preparation now.

He says: yes. She will.

He says: we're ready for her.

I say: good.

...

*Scene Two — Bungler Returns***

Bungler returns from the courthouse at noon.

He comes through the door with the specific energy of a man who has witnessed something significant and is organizing his account of it.

He sits at his desk.

He opens his notebook.

He writes for three minutes.

He shows me the notebook.

He has written: hearing — motion denied — J.S. statement — judge: precision of someone who understood they might be called to account — defense attorney recalibrating — admissible.

He has drawn a box around admissible.

He has not circled it.

He has not added question marks.

He has not drawn an arrow.

This is the most accurate entry in the notebook in six weeks.

I say: good.

He says: the defense attorney. She's going to be difficult.

I say: yes.

He says: she looked at the statement for a long time.

I say: Webb told me.

He says: she was looking at your name.

I say: yes.

He says: she's going to do what she does with everything — find the weakness and press it.

I say: yes.

He says: what's the weakness.

I say: that I've been doing this for fifty years and no one knew.

He says: how is that a weakness.

I say: it will look, to a jury, like someone who has been operating in secret. A woman at a desk who no one noticed. A name not on a door. An arrangement that benefited two men.

He says: it benefited the clients.

I say: yes. A good attorney will point out that it also benefited you and Laugher.

He is quiet.

He says: I'm going to testify. If they call me.

I say: they may.

He says: I'll tell them exactly how it works. I go out. I come back. I tell Joyce what I found. Joyce tells me what it means. I present it.

I say: that's accurate.

He says: it makes us sound useless.

I say: it makes you sound honest.

He says: there's a difference.

I say: yes. There is.

He says: Joyce.

I say: yes.

He says: the door.

...

*Scene Three — Regina's Profile***

Regina Marsh's profile runs the following Thursday.

The headline: THE WOMAN WHOSE NAME IS NOT ON THE DOOR.

Seven hundred words. My photograph, taken by the Gazette's photographer in the office on Tuesday — I am at my desk, which is where I am, the slightly crooked B on the door visible over my left shoulder.

The profile: Joyce Solver, eighty years old, third member of Bungler & Laugher Investigations since 1974. The cases solved. The arrangement described — not in accusatory terms, in accurate terms. The Fitch case, the USB drive, the chain of custody statement, the hearing.

Regina quotes me: Gerald Fitch kept the real file for eleven years. I've been keeping the real file for fifty.

She quotes Webb: the most significant piece of individual investigative work I have seen in thirty years of law enforcement.

She quotes Bungler: Joyce is the reason every case this firm has ever taken has been solved. I understood this fully approximately three weeks ago. I should have understood it considerably earlier.

She quotes Laugher: I laughed when I met her in 1974. I thought Solver was a funny name. It took me fifty years to understand it was a description.

She does not quote Crale's attorney.

She does not need to.

I read the profile twice at my desk on Thursday morning before Bungler and Laugher arrive.

I think: the record is accurate.

I think: let the record show.

I file a copy in the lab.

The Gazette's website crashes briefly at ten-thirty due to traffic.

By eleven it is the most-read profile in the Gazette's history.

By three in the afternoon I have received fourteen phone calls — not case inquiries, though four of those too — but calls from people who read the profile and want to say something.

Dorothy calls.

She says: Gerald would have been glad.

I say: yes. I think he would.

...

*Scene Four — The Door***

Bungler presents the door the following Tuesday.

He has carried it up the stairs himself. This has taken longer than expected and has involved Laughter laughing on the landing and an encounter with the building's other tenant, a tax preparation service, whose owner helped Bungler with the last two flights.

He holds it up.

The frosted glass, new. The gold letters, new.

BUNGLER, LAUGHTER & SOLVER INVESTIGATIONS.

The B is straight.

Laughter says: the B is straight.

Bungler says: I had them fix it.

He holds the door up a little higher.

I look at it.

The S is slightly low.

Not dramatically — two millimeters, perhaps three. The kind of thing you would not notice if you were not looking for it.

I say: the S is slightly low.

Bungler looks.

He says: I'll have them fix it.

I say: don't.

He says: it's —

I say: leave it.

He looks at me.

I say: the B was crooked for thirty-seven years. A slightly low S is not a problem.

He says: it'll bother you.

I say: it will bother me in the specific way that things bother you when they are imperfect and real rather than perfect and theoretical.

He says: that's very philosophical for a Tuesday morning.

Laugher laughs.

I say: hang the door.

He hangs the door.

We look at it.

The B straight, the S slightly low, the rest correct.

BUNGLER, LAUGHER & SOLVER INVESTIGATIONS.

Laugher says: it's right.

Bungler says: it's right.

I say: yes.

It is right.

...

*Scene Five — The Trial Begins***

The trial begins on a Monday.

I am at my desk.

Dorothy calls before the session opens.

She says: I'm in the gallery.

I say: good.

She says: will you be there.

I say: no. I'll be at the office.

She says: of course.

She says: I'll call you tonight.

I say: I'll know how it went before you call. But call anyway.

She says: yes.

She says: Joyce.

I say: yes.

She says: the records Gerald kept. In the prosecution's hands now.
Eleven years of them.

I say: yes.

She says: he always said: the numbers don't lie. Even when everything else lies, the numbers don't.

I say: he was right.

She says: yes. He was right about that.

She says: I'll call tonight.

I say: good luck, Dorothy.

She says: you too.

The trial: I follow it through the Gazette's daily court coverage, through Webb's occasional calls when something significant happens, through Regina Marsh's analysis pieces that run twice a week.

The prosecution presents the USB drive materials on day three.

The defense attorney challenges the chain of custody.

The judge overrules.

The jury looks at the materials.

The jury looks at eleven years of Gerald Fitch's real file.

...

*Scene Six — New Business***

While the trial runs: new cases.

The insurance fraud. The missing person. The corporate theft. Three more in the three weeks of the trial's first phase.

Bungler handles the intake.

His notes are wrong in the usual ways.

He brings them to me.

I read them.

I ask the questions.

He calls back.

He brings the answers.

I tell him what he has.

He goes back out.

He presents it.

This is the arrangement.

Different and the same.

The name is on the door now.

The B is straight and the S is slightly low and the rest is correct and the arrangement continues in the new office that has the same mismatched chairs and the same filing cabinet that won't open and the same coffee maker that makes the sound and the same desk by the door where I have been for fifty years.

Monday morning: Bungler arrives at eight forty-nine.

He says: morning, Joyce.

I say: morning, Robert.

He pours his coffee.

He sits.

He opens his notebook.

He writes the date at the top of a fresh page.

He says: the corporate fraud case. Chen and the subsidiary account.

I say: yes.

He says: I think I need to ask him directly.

I say: yes. Ask him when he last accessed the subsidiary directly.
Not through his assistant. Directly.

He writes this down.

He says: is that the question.

I say: that's the question.

He says: how do you know.

I say: because the answer will tell us whether he has the access and whether he used it.

He says: and if he has it and he used it.

I say: then he did it.

He says: it's always that simple.

I say: it's never simple. It's just one question at a time.

He nods.

He stands.

He puts on his coat.

He goes out.

He will come back.

He will tell me what he found.

I will tell him what it means.

The work continues.

The S is slightly low on the door.

The filing cabinet won't open.

The coffee maker makes the sound it makes.

I am at my desk.

Bungler, Laugher & Solver Investigations

Chapter Seventeen — The Verdict

Scene One — The Verdict

Six weeks after the trial begins: the verdict.

I am at my desk on a Thursday afternoon when Webb calls.

He says: guilty on nine of eleven counts.

He says: money laundering, racketeering, conspiracy — and murder in the second degree for Gerald Fitch.

He says: the jury deliberated for four days.

He says: the acquittals were on two of the lesser racketeering counts — insufficient documentation on those specific transactions. The financial crimes unit will review for the appeal.

He says: the conviction stands on the major counts. The murder conviction stands.

I say: the records.

He says: the records were the foundation. Eleven years of documentation. Gerald was thorough.

I say: yes. He was.

He says: Miss Solver. The jury asked to see the REAL folder printout three times during deliberations. The organization of it — the way the public records and the real records were presented side by side — the foreperson said afterward that it was the clearest financial presentation she had seen. She asked who prepared it.

I say: Gerald prepared the records. I organized the presentation.

He says: she said: whoever organized this understood that a jury needs to be able to read it, not just receive it.

I say: a jury needs to be able to read it.

He says: yes.

He says: thank you, Miss Solver. For the statement and for everything before it.

I say: thank you for acting on it, Captain.

He hangs up.

I sit at my desk.

I look at the frosted glass door with the new gold letters.

BUNGLER, LAUGHER & SOLVER INVESTIGATIONS.

The B straight.

The S slightly low.

Gerald Fitch.

The numbers don't lie.

...

*Scene Two — The Office***

The verdict comes in at two forty-seven.

Bungler is on the phone when I receive Webb's call. He is taking a new inquiry — a man whose warehouse inventory has been declining in ways that do not match his sales records. I can see Bungler writing in his notebook with one hand and holding the phone with the other, and the notebook is filling with the usual wrong information about the right situation.

I wait until he hangs up.

I say: Mr. Bungler.

He looks up.

He reads my face.

He says: nine counts.

I say: nine counts. Including Gerald Fitch.

He puts down his pen.

He is quiet for a moment.

He says: good.

Laughter comes through from the back where he has been filing — he files things in the front cabinet that won't open and in the second drawer of his desk and occasionally in a drawer of Bungler's desk, which is not a filing system but which is how Laughter files.

He says: the verdict.

Bungler says: nine counts.

Laughter says: nine — and the laugh comes, the genuine one, the one that means something true has happened and truth is sometimes funny in the specific way that relief is funny when it arrives after a long wait.

He says: Gerald Fitch.

Bungler says: Gerald Fitch.

I say: yes.

Bungler opens his notebook.

He turns to a fresh page.

He writes: Fitch case — closed — nine counts.

He draws a box around nine counts.

He does not circle it.

He does not draw an arrow.

He closes the notebook.

He says: good case.

Laughter says: good case.

I say: it was Gerald's case. We read it.

Bungler says: yes.

He says: we read it.

He says it with the honesty of a man who has spent six weeks understanding the difference between what he thought he was doing and

what was actually happening, and who has arrived at the understanding without self-pity and with a specific kind of respect for the accuracy.

. . .

*Scene Three — Dorothy***

Dorothy calls at three-fifteen.

She calls from the courthouse steps, which I know because I can hear the city behind her.

She says: nine counts.

I say: yes.

She says: Gerald.

I say: yes.

She says: I've been sitting in that gallery for six weeks watching people look at Gerald's records. Accountants and attorneys and the judge and the jury. All these people looking at his records.

She says: he made those records for eleven years. Every transaction. Every account. He made them because he knew.

She says: he knew he was building a case against himself. Against his own security.

I say: yes.

She says: he was more afraid of not keeping the records than of what keeping them would cost him.

I say: yes. That's exactly right.

She says: I found the folder at home. IMPORTANT — SEE J.S.

I say: yes.

She says: I still don't know who J.S. is.

I say: I don't either.

She says: do you think he knew about the firm. About you.

I say: I think he knew there would be someone who would read the real file if someone was given the address.

She says: he trusted the someone would exist.

I say: yes.

She says: he was right.

I say: yes.

She says: the waterfront. The city council voted yesterday. A public park.

I say: I read that.

She says: they're going to name it.

I say: the Gerald Fitch Waterfront Park.

She says: yes.

A pause.

She says: he would have hated it.

I say: yes. He would have said the name was too long.

She laughs.

She says: it is too long.

I say: yes.

She says: I like it anyway.

I say: so do I.

...

*Scene Four — Webb's Call And The Prosecution***

Webb calls again at four-thirty.

He says: the sentencing hearing is scheduled for eight weeks. I wanted you to know in case the defense calls you as a witness at sentencing.

I say: I'll be available.

He says: the state attorney general's office would like to commend the firm formally. Is that something you'd be open to.

I say: the firm would be glad to be recognized.

He says: you specifically.

I say: the firm. It's a firm.

He is quiet for a moment.

He says: yes. The firm.

He says: the financial crimes unit has asked whether you'd be willing to consult on future matters. On an informal basis. When complex financial documentation is involved.

I say: I read public records. I've been reading them for fifty years. If there's something in the public record that the financial crimes unit would like read carefully, I'm glad to read it.

He says: I think that's what they have in mind, yes.

He says: Miss Solver.

I say: yes.

He says: I told my wife about you.

I say: what did you tell her.

He says: I told her that I spent thirty years as a policeman thinking I understood how investigations worked, and then a woman who has been sitting at a desk making coffee for fifty years showed me that I had not entirely understood.

I say: the coffee is incidental. The desk is the thing.

He says: yes. So I understand now.

He says goodnight.

I say goodnight.

...

*Scene Five — The New Client***

Friday morning: a new client.

She arrives at ten.

Carol Alderman, forty-five. Pharmaceutical executive. She has prepared — there are documents in her bag and she has thought about what she is going to say and she arrives with the specific composure of a

person who has decided to do something difficult and has committed to the doing.

She sits in the good chair.

Laughter is not in the good chair.

He has not been in the good chair since the week of the verdict. He has been arriving and going directly to his desk. I do not know what changed and I have not asked. I will not ask. Some redirects take fifty years. Some take a verdict.

Carol Alderman explains: her company's financial reporting, a discrepancy she noticed in the quarterly close, four people with access, her suspicion about which of the four.

She is explaining this to Bungler.

Bungler is writing in his notebook.

The notebook is receiving the information incorrectly — quarterly becomes annually, pharmaceutical becomes chemical, discrepancy becomes irregularity.

I say: Miss Alderman.

She looks at me.

She has not looked at me since she came in. Most clients don't look at me until I speak, and then they look at me with the slight confusion of someone who has been informed that the desk is furniture and has just been informed by the furniture that it would like to contribute.

I say: when you noticed the discrepancy. Which account was it in.

She says: the subsidiary operating account. For the Midwest distribution region.

I say: and of the four people with access to that account, two of them are also signatories on the parent account.

She says: yes. How did you —

I say: it narrows the field. Which two.

She tells me.

I say: and of those two, which one has been working late on the last Friday of each quarter for the past year.

She stops.

She looks at me.

She says: how did you know that.

I say: I didn't. But someone has been adjusting records at the close of each quarter, and adjustments made to financial records after business hours on the last Friday of a quarter are made by someone who has the access and the motivation and the time. Who works late on quarter-close Fridays.

She says: Harrigan. David Harrigan.

I say: yes.

She says: wait. I didn't — I haven't told you about —

She stops.

She looks at Bungler.

She looks at me.

She says: are you —

I say: I'm Joyce Solver. I'm the third member of the firm.

She looks at the door.

She reads the door.

BUNGLER, LAUGHER & SOLVER INVESTIGATIONS.

She looks back at me.

She says: the profile.

I say: yes.

She says: I read it.

I say: yes.

She says: you came recommended. My attorney read the profile and said: that's the firm you want.

I say: we'd be glad to help.

She says: I came because of you.

Bungler says: the firm takes all manner of cases.

She looks at me.

I say: tell me everything about David Harrigan.

She does.

...

*Scene Six — End Of Day***

End of Thursday.

Bungler and Laughter are putting on their coats.

Bungler says: good day.

Laughter says: good day — and laughs, the specific laugh of a man at the end of a day that was good.

They go.

I am at my desk.

The Alderman case notecard is in my desk drawer. I know who David Harrigan is now — not by name but by type, which is sufficient. Tomorrow I will tell Bungler what questions to ask and he will ask them and he will bring back the answers and I will tell him what he has.

The arrangement.

I look at the new door.

BUNGLER, LAUGHTER & SOLVER INVESTIGATIONS.

The B straight. The S slightly low.

I think about Gerald Fitch, who balanced to the penny.

I think about the REAL folder and the false bottom and the note: M.C. The numbers don't lie. They never lie. The waterfront is the whole thing.

I think about the juror who asked to see the printout three times.

I think about nine counts.

I think: the numbers don't lie.

The numbers never lie.

I stand.

I go to the lab.

I file the day's notes.

I make the tea.

I look at the filing cabinet with fifty years of real files.

I think: tomorrow Carol Alderman's case.

I think: I know who.

I think: tomorrow I'll tell them what they have.

I turn off the lab light.

I go back to the front office.

The frosted glass door.

The slightly low S.

I go home.

The work continues.

Tomorrow and tomorrow.

The numbers don't lie.

Neither do I.

Bungler, Laughter & Solver Investigations

Chapter Eighteen — The Long Service

Scene One — Six Months Later

Six months after the verdict.

I arrive at seven-thirty.

I make the coffee.

I read the Gazette.

The Gazette has, on page three of the local section, a brief item about the Gerald Fitch Waterfront Park — the groundbreaking ceremony is next month, the city council has finalized the design, a landscape architect has been engaged. The park will have a walking path along the river and a small plaza and a bench with a plaque.

The plaque will say: Gerald Fitch, 1978-2023. He balanced to the penny.

Dorothy told me about the plaque last week. She said: I suggested the wording. The city council thought it was too informal.

I said: what did you say.

She said: I said it was exactly right and if they changed it I would contest the naming.

The plaque will say what Dorothy wanted.

I fold the Gazette.

I open the Alderman file, which closed three weeks ago. David Harrigan is in the process of making restitution, the company has filed

the appropriate reports, Carol Alderman called to thank the firm and asked whether we were available for ongoing corporate monitoring work.

I am preparing a proposal for the ongoing engagement.

The proposal will go on Bungler's desk.

He will call Carol Alderman.

He will tell her: the firm is glad to be useful.

It will be accurate.

The firm is glad to be useful.

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*Scene Two — Dorothy's Update***

Dorothy calls at eight-fifteen.

She calls most weeks. Not always with news — sometimes to say that she is well and the trial is proceeding through its appeals stage with the expected slowness, sometimes to ask about the case, sometimes to say that she passed the waterfront site and thought of Gerald.

This morning: the appeal.

She says: Crale's attorneys filed a supplementary brief.

I say: I heard. Webb told me yesterday.

She says: does it change anything.

I say: no. The supplementary brief challenges the methodology of the financial crimes unit's independent analysis. It has nothing to do with the original records. The records stand.

She says: because Gerald was thorough.

I say: because Gerald was thorough.

She says: the sentencing is confirmed for next month.

I say: yes.

She says: I'll be there.

I say: I know.

She says: will you be there.

I say: no. I'll be at my desk.

She says: of course.

She says: Joyce.

I say: yes.

She says: do you ever wonder what Gerald thought about. In the end. Whether he was afraid.

I say: yes. I wonder.

She says: I think he was afraid and he did it anyway.

I say: yes. I think so too.

She says: that's what courage is, isn't it. Not the absence of fear. The doing anyway.

I say: yes. That's what courage is.

She says: he was braver than anyone knew.

I say: yes.

She says: except you knew.

I say: I read his records. His records told me.

She says: the numbers.

I say: the numbers don't lie.

She says goodnight.

It is morning, but she says goodnight, because she has always said goodnight when she means: that's the thing, that's the end of the thought, we've said what needs to be said.

I say goodnight, Dorothy.

...

*Scene Three — Regina***

Regina Marsh comes to the office on a Tuesday.

She has been before — twice since the profile ran, once to follow up on the case and once to discuss the Gazette's coverage of the trial. She

calls before she comes. She arrives exactly when she says she will.

She sits in the good chair.

She has a notebook and a coffee from the place two blocks away.

She says: the six-month retrospective. The verdict, the sentencing, the waterfront park. I want a piece and I want you in it.

I say: the firm.

She says: the firm. And you.

I say: those are the same thing now.

She says: yes. That's my point.

She says: how does it feel. Six months with your name on the door.

I look at the door.

The B straight. The S slightly low.

I say: the same. The work is the same. The cases are the same. Bungler goes out and comes back and tells me what he found and I tell him what it means. The door has three names instead of two. The rest is the same.

She says: is the rest the same.

I say: yes. Mostly.

She says: what's different.

I think about this.

I say: people look at me now when they come in. Before the profile, most clients looked at Bungler and Laughter. Now some of them look at me first.

She says: how does that feel.

I say: efficient. Less redirection required.

She laughs.

She says: fifty years of redirection.

I say: it was necessary. The work needed to happen. The work happened.

She says: and now.

I say: and now the work still happens. With slightly less redirection.

She says: Joyce.

I say: yes.

She says: do you regret it. The fifty years of not being seen.

I consider this.

I say: I regret that Gerald Fitch kept his real file for eleven years and died for it. I regret that his sister spent six months watching a trial to find out what happened to her brother. I don't regret what I've done. I regret what was done to others.

She writes this down.

She says: one more question.

I say: yes.

She says: the firm. Is it going to keep working.

I say: Bungler will go out today and come back this afternoon and tell me what he found. Tomorrow the same. The day after.

She says: and you.

I say: I'll be at my desk.

She says: of course.

She closes her notebook.

She says: the slightly low S.

I say: yes.

She says: you left it.

I say: yes.

She says: why.

I say: because perfect is theoretical and real is slightly low.

She says: can I use that.

I say: it's not mine. It's just true.

She says: yes. I know.

...

*Scene Four — The Three Of Them***

Thursday evening: Bungler and Laugher staying late.

This has happened three times in six months — evenings where they don't go at the usual time, where they sit in the office after hours and talk. Not about cases. About the firm. About what the firm is and what it has been and what it is going to be.

I stay too.

Tonight: Laugher says something that he has been working up to for several weeks. I can tell because he has been not-saying it in the way that Laugher doesn't say things — with shorter laughs, with pauses before the laugh that are not his usual pauses.

He says: Robert.

Bungler says: yes.

Laugher says: I've been thinking about the firm.

Bungler says: yes.

Laugher says: when we started — when Robert Senior handed it over and we came in on the first Monday and Joyce made the coffee.

Bungler says: 1978.

Laugher says: 1978. I thought: this is real, we're detectives, we solve cases.

He says: it took me forty-five years to understand that we were right. We do solve cases. We're just not the ones solving them.

Bungler says: yes.

Laugher says: what are we, then.

Bungler says: we're the ones who go out.

Laugher says: yes.

Bungler says: and come back.

Laugher says: yes.

Bungler says: and tell Joyce what we found.

Laugher says: yes.

He says: that's real work.

Bungler says: yes.

Laughter says: it just took us fifty years to understand what kind of real work it is.

I say: you understood it before that.

They look at me.

I say: you kept coming back. Forty-five years of going out and coming back and telling me what you found. If you hadn't understood that the coming back mattered, you would have stopped.

Bungler says: we didn't know we understood it.

I say: you didn't have to know. The understanding was in the doing.

Laughter says: that's very philosophical for a Thursday evening.

I say: the occasion warrants it.

He laughs.

The real laugh.

The long laugh.

Bungler says: yes.

He says: I think it does.

...

*Scene Five — The Morning***

Friday morning.

Bungler arrives at eight forty-nine.

He says: morning, Joyce.

I say: morning, Robert.

He makes his coffee — badly, as always, from the coffee maker that makes the sound.

He sits.

He opens his notebook.

He says: the warehouse case.

I say: yes.

He says: I need to ask Morrow about the receiving logs for November.

I say: yes. Ask him who signs off on discrepancies.

He says: who signs off on discrepancies.

I say: yes.

He says: why.

I say: because the discrepancies in November are small. Too small to catch the eye unless you're looking for them. Someone is signing off on them without looking.

He says: and that tells us.

I say: it tells us whether the loss is one person acting alone or two people acting together.

He says: two people.

I say: the pattern suggests two. Ask Morrow.

He writes: ask Morrow — who signs discrepancies — November — two?? He adds two question marks because the two is not confirmed yet.

He has always added question marks to unconfirmed information.

He has always done this correctly, as it happens.

The question marks have always meant: I don't know yet.

He looks at the notebook.

He says: Joyce.

I say: yes.

He says: I want to ask you something.

I say: yes.

He says: have there ever been cases where you didn't know.

I say: yes.

He says: what happened.

I say: I waited until I did.

He says: and if you never did.

I say: there are three cases in fifty years that I was never able to solve from the desk. Two of them resolved on their own — the

information I needed arrived eventually. One of them is still open in my files.

He says: which one.

I say: 1987. A woman named Cartwright. Her business was being systematically undermined by a competitor and I could never establish which competitor, because the method was too indirect to leave a clear record.

He says: 1987.

I say: yes.

He says: should we —

I say: I check it every year. The relevant people are still active in Carver Falls. If something changes in the public record I'll know.

He says: you've been checking a case from 1987 every year.

I say: yes.

He is quiet.

He says: I didn't know.

I say: you weren't supposed to.

He says: yes. But now I know.

I say: yes.

He says: if something changes.

I say: you'll go out and ask the right questions.

He says: yes.

He stands.

He puts on his coat.

He goes to the door.

He pauses at the door.

He looks at the three names on the frosted glass.

He says: the S.

I say: yes.

He says: it grows on you.

I say: yes.

He goes.

...

*Scene Six — The Last Morning***

A Monday.

The specific Monday quality of a firm that has been open for fifty years and will be open tomorrow: the coffee made, the Gazette read, the notecard with the current case's key question in the center of the lab bench.

Bungler arrives at eight forty-nine.

He says: morning, Joyce.

I say: morning, Robert.

Laugher arrives at nine-oh-three laughing.

He says: the stairs.

Bungler says: yes.

Laugher sits.

He makes coffee.

He brings me a cup.

He has been doing this for three months. He noticed, three months ago, that I made his coffee every morning for fifty years, and he started making mine. He does not make it as well as I make his. I drink it anyway. The gesture is the thing.

The phone rings.

A new client.

I answer.

I say: Bungler, Laugher & Solver Investigations. How can we help you.

I listen.

I reach for the notepad.

I write three things.

I look at the slightly low S on the frosted glass door.

I say: yes. We can look into that. Can you come in Wednesday at ten.

I write the appointment.

I put the notepad on Bungler's desk.

He reads it.

He says: good.

He says: Wednesday at ten.

He opens his notebook.

He writes: new client — Wednesday — 10am.

The notes are wrong in the usual ways.

Wednesday he will go out.

He will come back.

He will tell me what he found.

I will tell him what it means.

This is the arrangement.

It has been the arrangement for fifty years.

It will be the arrangement tomorrow and the day after and the day after that, for as long as Bungler goes out and comes back and for as long as I am at this desk and for as long as the cases come through the door with the three names on it and the slightly low S that Bungler offered to fix and I said to leave.

The coffee maker makes the sound it makes.

The filing cabinet that won't open is in the corner.

The two mismatched chairs are in the waiting area.

I am at my desk.

The work continues.

The numbers don't lie.

Neither do I.

This is enough.