

'In *The Green Ink Ghost* Ben has created a fascinating world, rich in detail and intriguing characters. A mystery to be solved indeed!'

Dan Sefton, Screenwriter (The Mallorca Files, Trust Me, The Good Karma Hospital and many more)

'This classic thriller set in a post-apocalyptic world, reminiscent of Dickensian London, is a real page turner. The characters draw the reader in to the class divide between the silkers and the threaders, and after a few pages you are there on the streets of Old Camdon with Michael Banyard and Josiah Mingle as they attempt to unravel the information they are receiving from a mysterious letter writer. The vivid descriptions of the surroundings and people allow you to stand alongside the private investigators on every step of their earnest, funny and soul-searching, quest for the truth. Prepare to be taken on a well-written, winding road through the incredible imagination of Ben Mears.'

Julian Roderick, teacher, author of 'The Felix Jones Adventures

'Ben Mears goes from strength to strength as a writer and storyteller. A voice that latches on to you and doesn't let go until the end.'

Dr Alistair Sims, bookseller and publisher

A
Banyard & Mingle
Mystery

Volume II

THE GREEN INK GHOST

B J Mears

instant
apostle

First published in Great Britain in 2020

Instant Apostle

The Barn

1 Watford House Lane

Watford Herts

WD17 1BJ

Copyright © B J Mears 2020

The author has asserted his rights under Section 77 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as the author of the work.

All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Every effort has been made to seek permission to use copyright material reproduced in this book. The publisher apologises for those cases where permission might not have been sought and, if notified, will formally seek permission at the earliest opportunity.

The views and opinions expressed in this work are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views and opinions of the publisher.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

This book and all other Instant Apostle books are available from
Instant Apostle:

Website: www.instantapostle.com

Email: info@instantapostle.com

ISBN 978-1-912726-32-5

Printed in Great Britain.

Thanks

Special thanks to my beta readers Keith Munro, Matt Cooper,
Revd Dr Simon Woodman and Henna Mears.

My thanks to Edward Field, Alison Hull, Julian Roderick,
Kate Coe, Dan Sefton, Simon Lupton,
Dr Alistair Sims, Joy Mears,
Nicki Copeland and the fantastic team at Instant Apostle.

Special thanks to Phil Girdlestone Photography for the image
of Baker featured on the back cover.

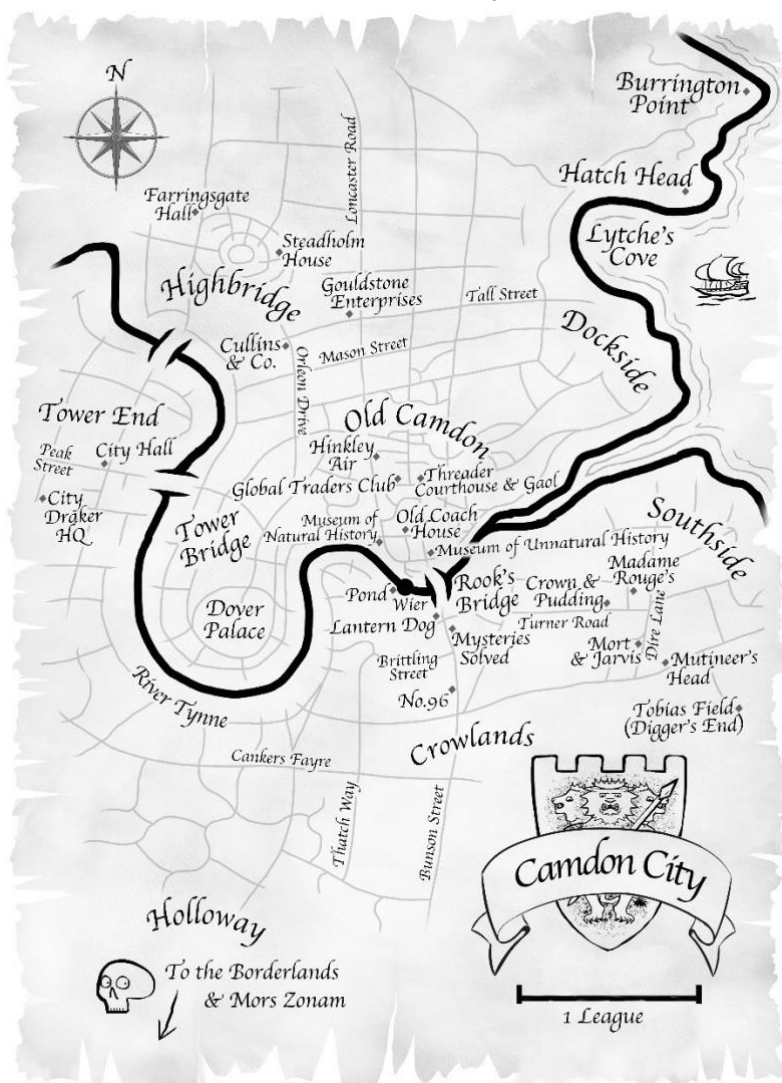
Contents

Camdon City	x
The Eleven Months of the Earthorian Year	xi
Prologue	15
1. The Unwanted Letter	17
2. Dead Men Don't Write	26
3. A Pocket of Frogs	39
4. The Order	49
5. The Unexpected Arrival	61
6. Bunkin's Tea House	71
7. Harris	80

8. The Dress	90
9. Names	100
10. The Uninvited Guest	108
11. Cadavers	117
12. Mort and Jarvis	127
13. Notice of Interment	140
14. Secrets of Dover Palace	149
15. The Passage	158
16. Bones of Mors Zonam	162
17. Green Ink	174
18. Questions	186
19. Silver	190
20. Shades of Black	195
21. The Willow Problem	205
22. The Raven and the Sorrow	215
23. The Plan	227

24. Destination Pyronitronite	238
25. Dover	248
26. The Valley	255
27. Deadlock	263
 The Shadow of Grayrton Mire	 271
Prologue	273
1. The Legend.	275

Camdon City



The Eleven Months of the Earthorian Year

1st: Tithemoon

2nd: Doblemoon

3rd: Trimoon

4th: Quartersmoon

5th: Thriplemoon

6th: Sixthmoon

7th: Fipplemoon

8th: Hexmoon

9th: Honourmoon

10th: Twinemoon

11th: Elventide

The year is 1795 AD (After Doon)

The threaders thread the silk.

The silkers wear the silk.

Prologue

Josiah's spade strikes wood around five feet down.

'That's it. Willard's coffin.' Standing at the edge, I peer into the pit.

'I think it is.' Josiah scoops soil from the lid, adding to the spoil heap. When he's cleared half of the lid, we swap places and I finish the job. The coffin is still intact and seems remarkably strong. Oak, presumably. Little else would survive as well, buried for so long. It even withstands Josiah's substantial weight. We clear the clinging earth from around the sides and gradually work the coffin up and out of the grave, laying it on the ground. It's awkward, slippery work.

Now for what is, perhaps, the grimmest part of the job.

We prise the lid off with the tips of our spades and look upon the withered remains of Willard Steeler. Josiah recoils at the sight. Steeler's skull leans, jaw yawning, hair fragmented and grey, falling to his pallid brow. He is little more than bones dressed in a gentleman's fine grey suit and black tie. All silk, of course. What flesh survives is dried out, the skin thin like parchment stretched tight.

There are superstitions surrounding the dead among the threader population, more so than with silkers. There are tales of witchcraft, of ghouls rising from the grave to haunt, drinking blood, preying on the living, but we silkers take a far more pragmatic view. The dead are dead. We observe a simple yet tempered respect for them.

Usually.

'It's all right, Josiah. There's nothing to fear.'

'But he looks so... alive!'

'Yes. He's half-mummified. But take it from me, he's thoroughly dead.'

Because the coffin is intact the interior is clean of dirt, except for the partial decay of the body, of course. This will make our job a little more bearable, for now we must search the corpse and the entire box. Unfortunately.

I take a half-crown from my pocket. 'Heads or tails?'

1 The Unwanted Letter

In which Banyard receives a letter and Mingle receives a clout

My father's death was a mystery from the start. He was well one minute. Dead the next. It all happened in such a trice that, before I knew it, at the age of fourteen, I'd become the master of the house, proprietor of the private investigations agency *Mysteries Solved*, and sole comforter to my bereft and ageing mother.

A Draker, one of our city watchmen, found Father's body one night at the end of an alley in Old Camdon, not ten minutes' walk from our home at 96 Bunson Street. Nothing suspicious about that – each of us ventured across Rook's Bridge into the old town on a regular basis – and, with no visible damage to his body, the mystery was passed directly to our city's hard-drinking but capable coroner, Myrah Orkney, who quickly labelled it death by failure of the vital organs. I mean, could there be a vaguer cause?

And why?

Why had his body upped and failed like that without warning? Yes, he had suffered illness some six years before, but he had fully recovered. I'm no pathologist but it seemed most peculiar.

Among my inheritance came Father's old tricorne, now my favourite hat. I will not part with it for the world, though in a sea of toppers it is most unfashionable. It carries with it a sense of the man he was, as though all those years of use have imbued it with something of his nature.

Father's passing left his partner, Jeremiah Shrud, overwhelmed with work so we bought him out with some of Father's savings. He promptly wrapped up what cases he could before retiring from the business and moving away, leaving my mother and me to handle what remained.

In any case, that was five years ago, and I only mention it here to set the scene because, as I sit in the case room upon this sweltering summer's morning, my father's death becomes poignant once more, as you will see.

The office is humming today, a blur of activity. The air is stifling. We have many cases in progress and my operatives race around at a speed unusual for our dusty outfit. To be fair, it's become less dusty since we employed Elizabeth Fairweather as secretary – Lizzy for short. She sits primly at her desk, as shapely and smart as ever, dealing with a queue of clients. Mysteries Solved has never before been in such demand and we owe it all – well, most of it – to my esteemed partner, Josiah Mingle, and his inclination for *excellent ideas*.

Ridiculous ideas, more like.

Josiah, now rescued from his previous life as a threader, is gradually settling into the flow of silker ways and often lurches purposefully around the office, dictating, organising, reviewing, interviewing. With the sudden influx of cases, I saw fit to have him manage one – we'll see how that goes – and I fancy he carries his head all the higher because of it, which is a good thing because it might improve his muscle-bound stoop. He's still crowing over our successful recovery of Great King Doon's priceless remains and funerary urn.

Which he stole in the first place, by the way. Did I mention that?

But these new cases lose interest for me when I open the letter delivered to my desk this hour. It's an unsettling, unwelcome message.

The paper is crisp and creamy. The same flowing script of green ink forms my name on the pristine envelope and the words inside. I unfold it and read as time pauses, my associates dashing in a haze around me. For me, all is quiet, all is frozen, at least on the outside. Within, my heart rises to my throat, pounding like the jibes of a dilapidated steam truck.

Dearest Michael,

My story is long and involved and so I shall strive to remove myself from the episode about which I will here divulge certain facts. I have other reasons for wishing to remain anonymous, reasons that I am not at liberty to share. However, it is imperative that you believe I know the following details to be true and without question.

The first is this. Your father's death was unnatural. There are several other similar deaths you may also find of interest, each erroneously pronounced, those of Zacchaeus Mandon, Foster Keen and, lastly, Miss Martha Judd. Those responsible, a secret order of high social flyers, are long overdue their comeuppance.

I cannot name the culprits outright as yet, and I fear I may never do so due to circumstances beyond my control. Yet, suffice to say, I believe a little digging would reveal much. You should begin at the grave of Willard Steeler.

Yours truly,

Demitri Valerio

The moment passes. The world continues to turn as questions flood my mind. I raise the page to my nose and sniff.

Foreseeably, it smells of ink and paper. No help there, then. In our reception room I grab Lizzy's arm as she passes.

'This morning's letter – did you see who delivered it?'

'No, Mr Banyard. It was on the mat when I opened up. I simply placed it upon your desk.'

There's an explosion of glass at my side as a large mass enters the room from the street, shoulders first, via the windows to land before me on the floor. Shards rain and settle and, after the briefest silence, a voice of fury follows Josiah's trajectory.

'And let that be a lesson to you, sir! I've never been so insulted!'

Josiah picks himself up and dusts himself down as, outside, the hulking figure in the top hat and cloak slouches away. Pedestrians on the street stop to watch. Steam trucks and

clockwork cars continue to hurtle by. And that's pretty much how Josiah first entered my life, too; exploding into my world with shattering consequences and heralding a new atmosphere. He's an expense I can ill afford. Most of the time he's a kind of idiot. And just occasionally, a genius.

'Good morning, Josiah.' I brush a glistening fragment from my shoulder. 'Who've you been insulting now?'

'It wasn't an insult. It was a compliment,' he replies.

Lizzy interjects with a shrewd guess at the truth. 'You complimented Mr Farringsgate's wife?'

Josiah nods. 'A little too highly, I fear. You can take the window out of my wages.'

'Was it worth it?' I ask. I've noticed that Lizzy has been watching Josiah frequently and, on the odd occasion, has flirted with him. She flashes him a killer smile.

'You haven't seen Mrs Farringsgate,' he says. 'You'd have complimented her, too.'

Lizzy slaps him lightly on the shoulder. 'Oh, Josiah...' I *have* seen Mrs Farringsgate but I choose not to correct him. 'Perhaps. Sweep this up and get on to the glazier at once. We have the security of the office to maintain.' At least the airflow has improved.

'Right away,' he grunts.

We're all good. In fact, we're as thick as thieves.

'And work on your client relational skills. I suppose Mr Farringsgate will disengage our services now.'

'Naugh. He'll come around. I'll visit this afternoon and grovel. Farringsgate loves a good groveller.'

'I'm sure – and you'll gain another glimpse of the formidable Mrs Farringsgate, no doubt.'

'Why, Mr Banyard, whatever are you implying?' quips Josiah. 'You're bleeding,' says Lizzy, placing a hand on his shoulder. 'Sit down. I'll fetch a dressing.'

Josiah is one of those people who enjoys life to an irritating extent. He appears to relish Lizzy's attention as she brings

dressings and scissors. She releases his tie, undoes several buttons and draws back his shirt to reveal the cut and several bulges of muscle before swiping the miniscule wound with iodine and taping a cotton wad in place.

‘There. Good as new.’

He lunges to peck her cheek but she shoves him aside before he can strike. She slaps his arm again. ‘Josiah Mingle, I’m not that sort of girl.’

Josiah closes his shirt and re-knots his tie, grinning. Lizzy smiles back at him. As he sweeps glass, my thoughts return to the letter and my father’s mysterious death. Questions float to the surface.

Why has the writer waited until now to send a letter? Who is he? Can any of the information be trusted? If so, it is a report of four murders. Quite a claim, though it seems the author is for some reason unwilling to provide much assistance in naming the guilty.

Several phrases stand out upon a second reading.

Episode: A carefully selected term that conveys much. What this person experienced that led them to their conclusions must have happened over a reasonable period of time. It’s safe to assume, then, that the conclusion was built upon a number of instances and is no mere whim. No reactionary cry, but a deliberated and calculated communication.

High social flyers: Perhaps this accounts for the lack of names as it implies people of influence and, therefore, great power. It follows that they might also be dangerous and fear has curtailed the writer’s words.

Unnatural: The writer has gone to lengths to avoid the term *murder* and therefore to avoid an outright accusation. Perhaps again the threat of reprisal is the cause. They are not brave or able enough – for whatever reason – to name names.

Two further questions bother me.

Firstly, the author obviously knows more than he’s saying. Is a second letter soon to follow?

Secondly, the message ends with a suggestion although, in keeping with the rest of the letter, an ambiguous one. More so, it's implied: exhume Willard Steeler's body from the grave. Is this truly what was meant?

For a while I'm too deeply entrenched to share this new development with anyone. I sit, attempting to digest it, recalling those last days of my father's life as I witnessed them. I remember him being insular at that time, constantly busy, always out in the field, following one lead or another. He went to work early each morning and came home late, exhausted and looking more haggard than ever before. Shrud, working an unconnected case, was unable to provide answers to the questions left behind. Even my father's case notes were of little help. It seemed nothing could be done and certainly nothing we could do would bring him back. To compound the general air of hopelessness, both Mother and the Drakers persuaded me to forget any thoughts of investigating. Our efforts soon waned in the overbearing shadow of Father's funeral and our grief.

This letter, however, has changed all that. One small page has quickly turned the whole thing on its head and now there's nothing left to do but investigate.

I make a cursory search for the casefile my father was working on when he died. Perhaps there is something in there that may help. From memory it is file number 2216 but the shelf by my desk only holds files as far back as 2300.

I lean through the doorway into reception. 'Lizzy, where are all the old files?'

Sitting at her desk, she looks up from a clipboard. 'They're boxed up, in the store room. Top shelf.'

'Right.' I enter the store and rummage until I have the file in hand. I pause, turning back to the boxes to root out a second file, this one fat and bearing no number but instead the word *Gawpers* written down the spine. It's an old file my father kept, holding records of every gawper encounter known to him.

Now, gawpers, in case you were unaware, are beings of legendary status. Many believe they exist. Probably more believe they don't. Gawpers come and go like the mist. No one knows how they do it or where they come from or where they go, but it is thought, by those who believe, that they come with ill intent. It is said that those who encounter a gawper are doomed; that if they do not perish immediately they will die soon after; that, if somehow, they manage not to die, some other tragedy will befall them. A loved one will collapse or become fatally ill with some terrible disease, for example.

Gawpers are tall beings with glowing white eyes of flame with which they probe your thoughts while you tremble, fixed to the spot like a statue. It is impossible to tell how the gawpers move. They appear to glide above the ground, or the water – wherever they happen to be.

You may be forgiven for thinking, 'My, my, Micky, you seem to know an awful lot about gawpers.' Well, there's a good reason for that.

I've seen them.

And each time it's happened, I have sweated blood.

I place the gawper file on the shelf over my desk before returning to my father's last casefile, wondering. Did he meet his end beneath the flaming white gaze of a gawper?

The file's rust-red cover is tatty, the edges worn. An elastic band holds it closed and a stamp in faded red ink on the front reads UNSOLVED. With my father's funeral and everything that followed, I can recall little more about the case other than the number and the general nature. It wasn't my case, after all. Father was investigating the death of a wealthy man of Highbridge. Even Shrud told me to let it go and, begrudgingly, I had done so.

Now my interest is piqued and I can't help myself. The name on the spine reads Oliver Ingham. I open the cover and read. Oliver first came to Mysteries Solved with fears for the safety of his daughter, Tillie, who had received several threats in the form

of badly written letters. Flipping through the file I soon find them. The writing is as terrible as my father's notes suggest, the letters poorly constructed, the words irregular, misspelled and speckled with misplaced capitals.

Miss Tillie Ingham,
ShoRt is yoUre time Now. DeAth comeS fore You.
OOh, thE wurms wil Taist your Flesh and Go
murMur.
I wiL have JustiCe.
DWeria PhilShaw

Was the hand that shaped these words crippled in some way or perhaps that of a child in early schooling? I take a new sheet of paper and attempt to copy the style. It's almost impossible, the written formations being so unnaturally peculiar. My closest attempts come when I swap to write with my left hand. All of a sudden a word leaps out at me from the letter.

RUN.

The first three capitals that are misplaced. Was that the true meaning behind the letter? A clear message in a simplistic code? One has to wonder.

Perhaps not, though. I jot down the rest of the unnecessary capitals.

ASYOETFGMLJCWS

Surely meaningless. Checking back for my father's remarks on the letters, I find he recorded no relating comment. It's frustrating because I'm desperate to know what he made of all this.

I move on to the second letter.

Miss Tillie Ingham,
Die whore. Die. I'm comminG for your hEarT. Black
is the cOLOR. YoU Traitor! DArkness awaitS You.
HOw yourE flesh wil fester wiTh ForGotten wurMs. I
wiL have JustiCe.

There it is again! Am I mistaken? The first unconventional capitals! The message is unmistakable.

GET OUT.

Wondering who this *Dweria Philshaw* is, I read and reread my father's notes but there's no mention of the threatening letters other than a basic description of their unusual style. It's so peculiar because I'm sure this is where anyone else would have started. I certainly would have. It's almost as if some of the notes are missing.

And then it strikes me.

Mother...

2 Dead Men Don't Write

In which treasure is unearthed

Ninety-six Bunson Street is a big old house that would have been grand in times gone by. Now it's a creaking shell, a little too worn in places. In the green room, I place the file heavily upon the table before Mother as an incriminating exhibit. Unable to conceal her discomfort, she gazes restlessly between the file and me.

I'm vexed and I look it. 'There are notes missing, aren't there?'

The accusation stings. She bluffs. 'I don't know what you mean. What is this?' She touches the file.

'Come now. You surely recognise it. It's Father's last case. His notes are incomplete. Would *you* know anything about that?'

She rises to step away, quietening for a few moments by the fireplace. 'It was for your own good, Michael. Everybody said so, even Lord Draker.' Lord Bretling Draker is the Minister for Criminal Investigations and chief of the Camdon watchmen.

'Bretling Draker? What has he to do with this?'

'I took the file to him after... after it happened. He said we should drop it. He held your father in high esteem, you know. Said if *he* couldn't solve the case then *nobody* could. I didn't want you running off and getting into trouble. Michael, you were young. You still are. You must understand –'

'I understand, all right. I received a letter today. One implying Father was murdered. If you still have the notes you removed from the file, please give them to me now.'

She considers this and leaves. For ten minutes I wait alone in the green room, brooding, while she clomps around upstairs, eventually reappearing with a fist full of papers.

'Here. For what good it'll do...' She's wounded.

‘Thank you.’ I take the pages, feeling I’ve been cruel in some way. I sit by the fire and reorganise the file, attempting to reconstruct its original order.

Mother pours me a port as if in apology and leaves me to it, though she’s unsettled.

It’s slow work but the task helps me to familiarise myself with the content and, an hour later, I have a good feel for what’s in the file. The first section is Father’s initial notes and the letters. I presume these are the originals as I see no reason to think otherwise. I find the missing notes about the Philshaw letters and see that Father’s thoughts mirrored my own. I learn at least one new morsel: Dweria Philshaw is not a real name, at least, the *Philshaw* part isn’t so, it follows, the writer must have invented the name to be sure they remained anonymous without landing an innocent party in trouble. I can’t help feeling disappointed. Our most obvious line of enquiry, debunked.

I also find a faded imograph of Tillie Ingham. She was pretty with curling hair and a strong face, an attractive girl in her late teens, her unsmiling gaze fixed upon the camera lens.

The next pages are official documents – most likely copies – concerning the disappearance of Tillie: Draker reports, court statements and newspaper clippings following the story as it unfolded. Towards the back are further notes and some pages torn from my father’s diary, detailing his movements during the later days of his investigation. The latter portion and most of what Mother removed concerns the murder of Tillie’s father.

Gathering the pages together, I return them to the file and head back to the office but, before I get far, Jinkers – our neurotic neighbour – steps out from his doorway.

‘It’s curious to see you here during working hours, Micky. Is something amiss?’ His hair is riotous today, sticking up in tufts here and there. His eyes are as large and crazed as ever, roaming as though hungry for something new to devour.

‘No, Jinkers. I needed to see Mother.’

‘Oh, I see. And how is Mother?’

‘She’s fine.’

‘Excellent!’

I’m not sure why he thinks this is excellent. He barely ever speaks to Mother.

There’s an awkward pause while he continues to block my way on the narrow pavement before asking, ‘Seen any gawpers lately?’

‘Not for a while. You?’

‘No. I wonder if they’ve all gone...’ He mutters this as if talking to himself.

‘Gone? Gone where? Gone from where?’

‘I don’t know. Just gone, I suppose.’ As he speaks, a mottledgrey cat with black tiger stripes arrives to wind about his ankles. He reaches down and collects it in his arms. ‘Do you think they’ve gone, Mr Kaylock?’ Mr Kaylock stretches his neck and makes a noncommittal noise somewhere between a growl and a purr. He has menacing yellow-green eyes that flick to me as Jinkers continues. ‘Mr Kaylock says he’s not sure.’

‘Right. Well, I’d best get on. Good day, Mr Jinkers.’ I step into the road to pass him and walk on.

He calls after me. ‘Micky, do you think there were gawpers before the cataclysm?’

‘I don’t know.’ I give him a wave. He’s an odd fellow but harmless.

It’s not only a window that Josiah has cost me. He was a convicted threader when I first met him, a thief by the name of Silus Garroway, bound for the gallows. I intervened and brought him back to Camdon City, paid for his false papers and a wardrobe of silks, and set him up here, reinvented as my business partner. Our names are emblazoned in golden letters across the shopfront.

Banyard & Mingle: Mysteries Solved

He's one of a growing list of once-oppressed threaders I have secretly rescued, all unlawfully. I'll hang if my work is ever revealed to the silker authorities.

Out of habit I glance through a copy of the *Camdon Herald*. There's nothing much of interest other than a piece on a local threader court case. Mumford Foxer of Tower End has been convicted for the theft of a gold clock and for fleeing his master's domain. The Drakers caught him heading for Holloway with the clock in his possession, and a swift hearing followed.

Threaders are the low end of society, little more than slaves, who perform all the menial yet necessary tasks: washing clothes, cleaning, cooking, building, clearing the privies and cesspits, digging graves, mining, farm labouring, basically any hideous job that no one else wants to do. They are paid a pittance and generally treated like scum. There are harsher laws to govern the threaders, much harsher than the laws for us silkers. They are not permitted to wear silks, for one thing, although that is the least of their concerns. If found guilty of a crime they are generally dispatched by their silker masters or hanged publicly or, on occasion, banished to Mors Zonam, the zone of malignant desert stretching beyond the Borderlands. This is to be the fate of poor Mumford Foxer, who no doubt took his master's clock with hopes of selling it for enough money to make good his escape and survive for long enough to find an improved position elsewhere. In Mors Zonam, a place thought to be damaged by the cataclysm, it is understood he will suffer a slow and agonising death in the inhospitable terrain where undocumented beasts roam. The whole system is unjust and I would change it like a shot, if I could. And I would probably launch some hair-brained scheme to save Mumford Foxer if he hadn't already been transported. With a heavy heart I close the paper and set it on my desk, recalling my cousin's words in my mind: *'You can't save them all.'*

While the glazier thumbs putty around the new pane, we gather in the case room: Josiah; my debonair cousin Mardon;

Penney, a recent but worthy addition to our team, with whom I'm utterly smitten; Lizzy and me. Joe takes the first of the Philshaw letters to read. 'Can worms actually murmur?'

Here we go. He'll probably spend the next hour deliberating the limitations of worm anatomy. 'I know it doesn't make sense. It's not the only thing about the letters that doesn't add up. Mardon?'

I've mulled over the case notes and the green ink letter alone for most of the day and now I want to know what the others think, even if it means pulling their heads from their respective cases.

My cousin Mardon can usually be counted on for enlightenment. His habit of late is increasingly to leave his Lancaster surgery in the capable hands of his business partner while he moonlights for me. I think he's bored with pox-ridden patients and the never-ending stream of battered threaders. I wait impatiently as he rereads the letters.

'I admit they're very odd. I imagine the illiteracy is deliberate. Too contrived to be anything else, which makes sense when you consider the hidden messages – though those are also strange.' The others focus on Mardon.

Josiah asks, 'What messages?'

Mardon explains. 'Here. In the misplaced capitals. The first says RUN. The second, GET OUT. Hardly threatening talk. More of a warning, I'd say.'

'My thoughts precisely. And the following superfluous capitals?' I prompt.

Mardon grunts and sucks on his pipe. 'Nonsense, there to help disguise the main messages.'

'You did notice the same misplaced capitals follow these warnings in both notes, and they appear in the very same order?'

He looks again. 'By thunder, you're right. Another code, then?'

'If so, it's beaten me. What else can you say?'

‘Not much.’ He shrugs. ‘I’d need to know more about this girl’s circumstances. Who is she?’

‘*Was* she. My father believed her dead. She disappeared without a word shortly after receiving these letters.’

‘Did your father notice the hidden messages?’ asks Mardon.

‘He did. Though I’ve only recently acquired the notes that include his comments. This is Tillie.’ I give Mardon the imograph of the missing girl to pass around.

‘She may still live. Perhaps she took the hint and escaped whatever perils were heading her way,’ says Mardon.

‘Perhaps. She was a bright girl by all accounts. In any case, Tillie was or is the daughter of Oliver Ingham, chief designer and engineer at Hinkley Air, based in Old Camdon. Oliver Ingham was the man who hired my father to investigate Tillie’s disappearance. It seems he was murdered before my father was able to get very far with the case. My father died soon after.’ ‘How soon after?’ asks Penney.

‘Two weeks. Of course, the three events may or may not be connected. We should remain open-minded.’

‘It all sounds very dubious to me,’ says Mardon. ‘First Tillie disappears, her father is murdered and then the investigating agent is found dead? I’d be very surprised if your father wasn’t killed for getting too close to the truth. What did the authorities say?’

I fill them in on the details: the discovery of my father’s body, the coroner’s infuriatingly inconclusive report and the Drakers’ insistence that the case be dropped.

‘That’s even worse!’ says Mardon, billowing smoke. ‘Clearly, your father was murdered by some clandestine means – poison or suffocation. It’s a set-up, if I ever saw one. A conspiracy.’

‘How awful,’ Penney mutters. ‘Would the coroner not have seen something to suggest that? I mean, if your father was poisoned.’

‘Not necessarily. The signs may be easily missed.’ ‘How was Oliver Ingham killed?’ asks Josiah.

I flip through the casefile and take out an imograph of the murder scene in which Oliver's broken body is sprawled unnaturally across a shattered barrel in a cobbled alley, blood pooling from his lacerated throat. Thankfully, imographs are only black and white. I pin the image to the corkboard on the wall. 'His throat was cut before he fell from the top of the Hinkley building.'

'So, he was killed by someone else at Hinkley,' says Lizzy.

'Apparently, but if my father's notes are correct, Oliver had good relations with his co-workers – was quite popular, by all accounts. My father spent the last two weeks of his life trying to get to the bottom of it all. He was confident that no one from Hinkley Air was involved.'

'That's a puzzle, then,' says Penney. 'He was killed by someone on the rooftop of the Hinkley building but not by an employee.'

'Supposedly. The entire case is peppered with riddles. No wonder my father didn't get very far.'

There's a pause during which an unspoken question hovers in the air around us. I think we all sense it.

So why have you now gathered us to look at this old, unfathomable case?

In answer, I produce the green ink letter from my waistcoat pocket.

'This morning I received a letter.' I read it to them, and when I'm finished, pass it to Mardon.

'Why now?' he says. 'If Demitri Valerio, whoever that may be, knew for certain your father was murdered, why wait until now to tell you?'

'Good question. Perhaps something has happened to prompt the gesture.'

'Surely that is why,' says Penney. 'Something has happened to change circumstances. And recently.'

'Like what?' asks Josiah.

'I don't know. New evidence?'

“‘A secret order of high social flyers...’” says Mardon. ‘Could account for the Drakers calling it off. One word from the right wig and they scurry beneath the nearest rock.’

I nod. ‘Someone powerful is behind the killings, I believe. Someone with real money and influence. Do any of the other victims mean anything to you? Zacchaeus Mandon, Foster Keen or Martha Judd?’

The names draw a blank. Penney is perhaps the most highly connected among us because of her father’s wealth. She shakes her head. ‘I haven’t heard of them.’

‘Who says they’re even real people?’ asks Josiah. ‘The entire letter could be twaddle. Someone’s sick idea of a joke.’

I lean close to correct him with a whisper. ‘You mean someone’s idea of a sick joke...’

‘That’s what I said, isn’t it?’

I continue. ‘Either way, it will be easy enough to prove with a trip to the City Registry Office.’

Mardon holds the letter up to the light coming through the case room’s frosted-glass windows. ‘Demitri Valerio. Does that mean anything to you, Micky?’

‘Well, it wasn’t written by Demitri Valerio; not the original, at least. He was a renowned judge, his fight for justice for the poor made him famous back in the fourteenth century. I looked him up in one of Father’s books.’

‘You mean he’s dead?’ asks Josiah. ‘Very.’

‘Dead men don’t write,’ says Mardon.

‘A ghost, then,’ says Josiah.

‘It made me wonder if it isn’t a woman writing in an attempt to further disguise her identity. The whole thing has a distinctly feminine feel about it. I’d say the hand was female, wouldn’t you?’

‘Quite,’ says Mardon.

‘How can you possibly know that?’ Josiah scoffs.

‘Oh, it’s a well-documented science. There’s a doctor who’s written a book on the subject. Fascinating stuff,’ says Mardon.

‘Is it?’ says Josiah. ‘I’ll add it to my reading list right away.’ I’m pretty sure Josiah doesn’t have a reading list. His ability to read at all is questionable. ‘Just because it’s in a book it doesn’t make it true,’ he adds.

‘There’s an obvious element we seem to be avoiding,’ Mardon points out.

I nod. *‘I believe a little digging would reveal much. You should begin at the grave of Willard Steeler.’* ‘Well?’ says Josiah.

‘Well what?’ asks Penney.

Josiah looks at us all in turn. ‘This Steeler fellow – are we going to dig him up or not?’

The City of Camdon Registry Office is a broad, stately building in the heart of the old town. As you’d expect, it’s where all the official records of births, deaths and marriages are stored, mostly for use in court hearings and the like. The dusty corridors are tight and dark, its storerooms numerous, and the entire place smells of mouldering parchment and paper dust. I have to pester the moustached duty clerk several times before I find what I’m looking for, and his face alone conveys his growing irritation at my presence. He’s a greasy-looking fellow with narrow shoulders and oiled whiskers and hair. His suit of dark-grey silks is faultless, probably because he never does an ounce of real work that might cause a wrinkle.

I’ve told him three times now that the individuals I’m researching are dead.

‘You’ll want the deceased section,’ he announces curtly, with uncanny enlightenment.

‘Isn’t that what I’ve been saying?’ Finally!

‘It’s down the hall, second on the left.’

When I find the room I’m alone among the boxes of files, drawers and high shelves, each crammed with information on the dead. The following search is lengthy but this is what I learn.

Zacchaeus Mardon was a property developer who lived and worked in Tower End. His date of death is recorded as 5th of

Quartersmoon, in the year 1783 AD (*After Doon* – Doon being the *Great King*). That was twelve years ago.

Foster Keen, a carriage driver from Tower Bridge, died the following year in Trimoon.

Miss Martha Judd was a dressmaker from Highbridge. She died just four years ago in 1791.

I write the details in my notebook for reference.

The fourth register I try reveals Willard Steeler to have been a city entrepreneur from Highbridge who passed, as rich as they come – yet no less dead – two years ago. An obituary kindly provides his current whereabouts: an overburdened cemetery, also in Highbridge.

The cemetery is overlooked by tall houses of golden stone, now a greenish hue in the moonlight as we creep, pulling a heavy machine behind us. It leaks a little steam and smoke as we move. The wheels were squeaking so we've oiled them and now they rotate almost silently.

Josiah, my accomplice in this foul act of illegal sacrilege, dumps the spades and the sack of coal he's carried onto the grass. I see no reason why the Drakers, or anyone else for that matter, might give their consent, and so we dig without any. A pale-blue watch lamp on the street illuminates the graveyard around Steeler's ostentatious tomb well enough for our purposes. I read the inscription.

*Here lies the body of renowned industrialist
Willard Steeler, much loved husband and
father. Born 16th Trimoon 1711 AD
Died 24th Hexmoon 1793 AD*

Before we can begin to dig, we must tackle the heavy capstone that covers the top and I'm grateful for Josiah's remarkable strength, without which we would not have a hope. With a huge effort we inch it sideways from the tomb. It grates against the stone edging beneath with a soft rasping noise and we lower it,

dragging it perilously along one lip until it hits the ground with a dull thud.

