

Insane in the Mundane

Part 1

“Is he here yet?” said George for the third time that hour.

For the third time that hour, his assistant and personal butler, standing stiff and straight by the door to the lounge, let out a small sigh. “No sir, I’m afraid not.”

For the third time that hour, George let out a groan and resumed his pacing around the lobby. “How long does it take for a blasted detective to get here?” he fretted.

There was more than enough room to accommodate his pacing. While others might have called the space a gymnasium, to George and his family it was merely the lobby of a grand mansion. The walls were tall, made of a thick, dark wood etched with lavishly detailed markings. Equally detailed was the opulent decorations adorning them, a mixture of fine art and family photos. Each blown up to enormous sizes and framed in elegant trim made of gold and bronze. A massive home usually only housing a few servants and its one resident, Yoseph Steccotti, uncle to George.

To the left and right of the lobby were wide doorways leading to the other rooms of the home, while the centerpiece was a massive staircase, elegantly connecting the upper and lower floors. The massive doorways had equally massive doors adorning them, usually spread wide open, practically off their hinges, letting visitors and staff through them with ease. Today, however, they were shut tight, and only George had the key. Today there would be no movement through the house. George would see to that.

George paused his pacing for the fourth time that hour, opened his mouth to once again pose the question to his butler, but was interrupted by the rumbling of a nearby engine. Wordlessly, the two immediately made for the front door. They opened it and stepped onto the patio, awaiting their new arrival.

The new arrival in question was barreling their way up the long driveway leading to the manor in a bright red convertible. The roar of the engine was loud, but equally as loud was the music blaring from the cheap sounding stereo. It was completely unintelligible, but noticeably loud and violent. George didn’t know much about music, he only vaguely understood this sound to be “metal”.

The cacophony only got louder as the vehicle approached. George held his breath for a moment as the vehicle approached and he realized something: the car wasn’t slowing down. He froze, unsure what to do about the situation. Let them crash? Step in front of it? Neither seemed like a good option. He resorted to shouting “look out!”, but his words couldn’t be heard over the noise.

It was ultimately futile, however, as the convertible all at once whipped around, in a sudden yet smooth motion. In an instant the nose of the car was 180 degrees in the opposite direction, skidding off the paved driveway and onto the muddy grass directly in front of them. The car’s back wheels spun for a moment before the car finally came to a dramatic halt, spitting up grass and dirt upon George and his butler, causing them both to jump back. With a snap somehow loud enough to cut through the noise, the driver pulled the key out of the ignition and cut the engine.

The sudden silence allowed George to find his nerve and start toward the car and driver. Someone is about to get a not insignificant bill for grass stains on a \$3,500 suit. His nerve was shattered once more, however, by the sheer absurdity of his new arrival.

The driver emerged from the vehicle and approached the two. He wore a tall Gus hat, adding to his already tall stature. Standing at full height, he looked to be well over 6 foot. His teeth were showing, partly because he was grinning like a maniac, partly because his teeth were firmly

clenched around a cigarette holder, currently in use. In his right hand was a short glass filled with orange juice.

As George's eyes inspected the man, his brow only furrowed in further confusion. Even this man's clothes were awe-inspiringly off. He wore a beige coat, despite the fairly hot and humid weather. While this wasn't unusual for a detective, the coat was so big and so ill fitting it practically hung off the man rather than being worn by him. It practically fluttered like a cape. Under this jacket was the, again predictable, dress shirt and tie, yet his white shirt was stained with odd colored patches, most likely spills from his juice. His tie, meanwhile, might have looked normal at first glance but upon closer inspection, was decorated with large purple spiders and ghost-white cobwebs. Clearly this was something to complete a Halloween outfit than something meant to be worn by a professional. His eyes, meanwhile, were obstructed by thick aviator sunglasses. The lenses so shiny and reflective George was practically blinded by the glare off of them.

This... elaborately dressed individual finally reached the two and stuck out a hand. He spoke through his gritted teeth, shaking the hand of George's butler, then George himself. "Howdy, folks. Lieutenant Detective Rook's the name. Where's the body at?"

George and the butler said nothing. Not waiting for a reply, Rook took a long hearty gulp from his glass.

"Ahh! Nothing like a cold drink in the morning to get the senses fired up. Oh, where are my manners? Would either of you boys like a drink? I've got plenty."

George finally managed to find his voice. "Th-thank you. I actually would appreciate a drink. It's been a long morning as you can imagine."

"I'm sure, I'm sure." Said Rook. He handed George his glass and quickly returned to his car, pulling two glasses from the backseat and a large plastic bottle filled with more orange juice. The large bottle had its label torn off but it most likely was a typical storebought gallon of juice at one point. He quickly poured two drinks and returned to the two, taking one for himself and handing the other to the butler.

Rook clinked his new drink against his old drink and downed it all in one gulp. Confused, but not wanting to be rude, George brought the drink to his lips, taking a small sip but immediately spitting it out. He coughed and gagged and spat and looked back up at Rook, who was looking back at him with concern.

"What's the matter, orange juice too acidic for ya? I get that. I have some cranberry juice in the car if that's more your thing."

"Good god, man!" spat George. "Was that vodka?!"

"Sure was. The good stuff too. The cheap stuff isn't bad with a mixer but you can't beat a good bottle of Honey Hummingbird, if you ask me. Don't you folks have Screwdrivers around here?"

George's eye twitched. "It's. Nine. AM!"

Rook let his aviators slide down the bridge of his nose, exposing his eyes and letting the two see his very exaggerated wink. Still grinning and talking through his teeth, he said "Gentlemen, crime has no morning routine. Now let's get on with it, we're wasting daylight!"

Rook passed the two, scooping up George's unfinished drink with his free hand, and entered the manor.

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*I stood in the enormous lobby of this opulent manor these folks called home. Home to some is merely a place of rest, but to these folk, you'd think it was a place of worship. The elaborate structures were a monument to their decadence. It felt like the maw of a giant wealthy creature, the walls forming teeth the size of tree trunks, the staircase a marble tongue. A space big enough to run*

*in, yet it felt claustrophobic. The walls were massive and too close, looking like they were merely waiting for their moment to swallow me whole.*

*Every case is a story, I always say, though it remains to be seen if this story is a tragedy or a comedy. A manor. A victim. A killer. You'd think that'd make it a tragedy, but life has a way of making the most tragic things funny.*

"Mr. Rook?"

"Hmm?"

Rook turned to see George and his butler approaching from behind, both faces filled with looks of concern.

"Damn walls are closing in, man." Muttered Rook.

"Excuse me?"

"I said, where is the body?"

George and his butler made for the door on their left. "Through here. It's in the kitchen. We left it alone as best as we could. But, to get to the kitchen we have to pass the lounge. I think we'll want to make a stop there."

Rook followed the two through the doors as they opened them. "Why is that?" he asked.

George returned a grimace. "Because all of the suspects are waiting there."

~\*~

*A few sets of doors later, my gracious hosts and I entered the lounge. The claustrophobia of the lobby somehow seemed worse in here. Maybe it was the missing staircase, as a fine leather couch occupying the center of the room seemed to take up even more space. There was a fireplace on the west wall, though it wasn't alight. Understandable given the already hot weather.*

*Several individuals were making use of the room's namesake. A woman in a yellow sundress stood in the corner, fanning herself, while two men were sitting on the couch, our entry interrupting their conversation. They all looked bored.*

*If the lobby was the mouth of the great beast, then the hallways were the gullet, and this room is it's belly. And much like my belly after a bad night out, it's filled with parasites and gutterworms.*

"What?" Said one of the men lounging on the couch, eyes narrowed at Rook. "Did you just call us gutterworms?"

"Ah... I thought for sure I was only thinking that." Said Rook, sipping his glass.

"Who is this?" said the now annoyed woman standing in a corner.

George gestured at Rook. "This is-"

"Seargent Detective Rook, at your service." Rook made a gesture that was a salute, a bow and a curtsy all rolled together. "I'm assuming you're all the murder suspects. I'm sure your fathers are proud."

A pause. It dragged on longer than Rook had expected, interrupted by the woman in the sundress. "Suspects? What do you mean by that?" she said, previously bored but now concerned.

"Well, whatever!" said Rook. He gestured to the room wildly, it was unclear what the gesture was supposed to imply. "Anyways, let me get your names, occupations, relation to the victim, and pants size."

A few 'huhs?' and 'whats?' arose from the room. The lounging men looked each other in confusion. Rook responded to this with a chuckle. "Haha! Just kidding... I never need occupations."

*This part of the job... boy do I hate it. It's so bureaucratic. Just isn't my style. Lining up people one by one, like cattle awaiting the slaughter. Hell, at least cattle can look forward to it all being over soon. Hello sir/madam, name, occupation, pants size, etc... this isn't how you meet people, meet*

*friends. So inorganic. A real friendship is one where both participants want to talk to each other, a chance meeting blooming into a bond with threads as strong as spider's silk. Perhaps that's for the best. Maybe it's best not to get too close to suspects, since one of them is the culprit. Doesn't make this part of the job any less boring.*

*Let's see now... there's George, who greeted me, nephew to the victim and accountant for a large bank. Pants size, 38. He's a chubby fellow, and clearly the one trying to keep the peace. He's the one who found the body in the kitchen, only a few hours ago. After which, he closed off the crime scene, kept everyone in the lounge, and called me.*

*There's Christopher, son of the victim, pants size 34. A young-ish man, maybe late 20s early 30s. I'm told he looks a lot like his father, but I've never seen Yoseph in person so it's hard to tell. Christopher was in his room when George found him, he seemed to just be waking up when George began his gathering.*

*Then there's Andrew and the sundress girl, Stacy. Second nephew and daughter in law, respectively. Pants size 36, dress size 10, also respectively. They spent a lot of time together, rarely being apart. When George found them they were just leaving their bedroom, about to have breakfast.*

*They each relayed their alibi for the crime, as lavishly detailed as the house itself. I didn't bother committing them to memory. Seems fruitless to remember anyways, after all, one of them is lying.*

*Returning to the subject of tragedy or comedy... despite my clear instructions, everyone was far more willing to give me their pants size than their occupation. If I was in the audience I would be laughing... but as a mere actor with an incomplete script... I'm contemplating.*

*"Thank you all for your cooperation." Said Rook as he concluded his final interview. He took another swig from his glass. "I assure you this crime is being taken very seriously"*

*"Yes!" Interjected George. "I had everyone stay in this room as soon as they could be found, so no one has gone anywhere and the crime scene hasn't been disturbed."*

*"Very good, Watson." Said Rook. He finished his drink and set the empty glass on the mantle above the fireplace. From his pocket he produced a can of beer, recognizable as such by the label 'Big Belly Beer' and its rotund smiling mascot. He cracked it open, took a sip, and began again. "Now in the spirit of cooperation... get the hell out of here."*

*A few chuckles from the room, which Rook did not return. Instead he let his aviators slip down his nose again, eyeing each individual in the room. "Folks this is no laughing matter. A man has been murdered and someone in this room did it. Now I'm just one man. A fine man with a rugged chin and an impressive car, but one man just the same. And if I'm going to solve this case I need everyone to pitch in. So once again in the spirit of cooperation, get the hell out of here... and search for clues."*

*A few coughs and awkward glances from the room. They said "is this guy for real?". Slowly but surely, the room cleared out. The only one not awkwardly shuffling was George, who was standing mouth agape at Rook.*

*Not even looking in his direction, Rook gave a snap of his fingers and headed for the door leading to the crime scene, calling back to George as he went. "Come along, Watson."*

*Still stuck in stunned silence, George didn't know what else to do besides follow Rook into the kitchen.*

## **Part 2**

*I once left a bag of trash in the garbage bin in my garage for a whole week one hot summer in July in 1996. The stench that emitted from that bastard can was the worst. A mixture of burnt hair, rotting food, and the feces of the festering maggots. It was awful. It was the most foul thing I'd ever smelled... until I smelled the stench of death. They say experience triumphs all and brother, let me tell you, you can't say something smells bad until you smell death itself. Nothing can beat the pure sensation of experience. Funny how it doesn't seem to matter how long a body has to be dead to start raising that scent. An hour, a day, a week, they all immediately invade your nostrils with that same vicious odor.*

*Yoseph Steccoti's body wafted the familiar scent of death. He was on his stomach, still as... death. His position did nothing to reinforce whether or not Christopher actually looked like his father. He was in nothing but slippers and a bathrobe, the back of which was punctured by the handle of a knife. A pool of barely dried blood welled around the body, creating a red lily pad. If this was my first body I would say something like 'he was just sleeping in an odd position, with an elaborate sleep aid meant to cure back pain'. That pool of blood beneath him would have been a bit harder to explain... but not that much I think.*

"Mr. ROOK!" called George, furiously.

Rook, gaze still fixed on the body with hypnotic wonder, raised a single finger and wagged it. "Watson, it's bad form to interrupt a detective when he's reviewing a crime scene." He tutted.

"Stop calling me Watson, damn it! I'm not some detective's assistant!"

"Assistant?" Rook shook his head. "No, I'm referring to Bubba Watson, 12 time PGA tour winner. See, in this analogy, you're the golfer and I'm the caddie." He grinned and took another long gulp of his beer.

George shook his head, still angry. "That doesn't make any sense, if I'm the golfer, that would make me analogous to a detective and I'm no detective, *you* should be Watson."

Rook sipped. He sipped again. He sipped a third time, this time longer than the first two. "Anyways what do you make of all this, George?" he finally said.

George put his head in his hands. "Oh god I think I'm going to faint. You're completely insane."

Rook sipped the last of his beer and tossed the can behind his head. It arced beautifully, and *almost* hit the trash can behind him. He produced another can from his pocket, but before he could crack it open, George reached out and slapped it out of Rook's hands. It clattered to the floor nearby, burst open, and sprayed liquid in the corner of the kitchen, only narrowly missing the body.

"Would you cut it out with the blasted drinking and solve the damn murder already!" he shouted.

One of Rook's eyebrows arched high enough that it could be seen over his sunglasses. Calmly, he produced another can from his pockets, causing George to balk at Rook's lack of regard for the physical laws of space.

Rook cracked open the can and began to sip. He spoke between sips. "It helps me think."

George returned to his head in hands position. "Then get thinking, will you? You've done absolutely nothing since we arrived but ruin my uncle's driveway and spilled beer in his kitchen."

A sip. "You did that."

George threw up his hands. "Whatever, I give up, just call me when you need me." He spun on his heels to leave.

A sip. "Now hold on just a minute there, George."

George spun back around on his heels, exhausted at the situation. "What? What could you possibly have to tell me?"

A sip. "I think I know who the killer is."

George blinked. For a moment his heart leapt with glee, but it quickly returned to Earth. He shook his head. "You're just saying that, I don't believe you."

A sip. "Try me."

George folded his arms. "Alright... who is it then?"

A somewhat longer sip. "I don't know- wait damn it I'm not done!"

George had already spun back on his heels to leave before Rook had finished speaking, but he was too tired to put up much more of a fight, so he spun back around again and made a "get on with it" gesture.

A sip. "Alright, so I don't know *exactly* who did it, but I take offense to folks who don't respect my skills as an investigator. Let me put it this way, I don't know who did it, but I have a pretty strong idea who *might* have done it, and who *didn't* do it. I think that counts as progress."

George folded his arms again. "Alright then, *detective*," he said the word "detective" with as much spite and bile as his voice would allow. "Get on with it then, what have you got?"

Rook finished off his beer, once again missed the trash can, and once again pulled another can from his pocket. *Crack*. Sip.

"Firstly... the door we came through had a lock on it, but it was unlocked." As Rook spoke he gestured using his beer can hand to the various subjects he would describe. "This is the only entrance in or out of the kitchen, and you wanted to protect the crime scene, yet this door was still unlocked. The only reason that would make some kind of sense is if you didn't have the key to lock it."

George had his arms folded, but his expression had gone from annoyance to intrigue. "Okayyy... where's the key then?"

Sip. "In the old man's pocket. I didn't even have to look, it's the only place that makes sense. Don't believe me, check for yourself."

George was starting to reel in. "I don't have to, you're right. I knew he had it on him."

Sip. "And you knew that because...?"

"Because Uncle Yoseph always had the key."

A sip. A grin. "Yep. Figured. Excuse my crass observation, but I'm going to guess old man Yoseph had some kind of weird diet, or didn't trust his kids, so the only way he could entrust this door to stay locked was if the key was with him.

But that brings us to why the door was unlocked and why the body is here. The door must have been locked most of the day before the crime was committed, yet the body is in here. This leads me to think one of two possibilities. First, the assailant followed Yoseph into this room to commit the crime, or, Yoseph escorted this person in the kitchen himself."

George nodded. "Go on."

A longer sip. "Both possibilities are a bit too broad at the moment to say which for sure is right, but it does tell us a few things. Either someone really had it out for the old man to suddenly barge in and attack him, or Yoseph was on somewhat friendly terms with this individual. Considering I don't see much sign of a struggle, and the only people in the house are family members, I'm leaning towards the 'let in friendly-like' theory."

George nodded again.

Sip. "Next we have the murder weapon. A simple kitchen knife. A knife is missing from the rack on the far east wall, most likely that's where the murder weapon came from. Adding to my theory, the fact that this knife came from this kitchen *could* indicate that it was a crime of passion, a sudden decision to act violently, rather than premeditated. Can't say for certain, but let's call it a hunch. What adds to this hunch is how the body was simply left here. Seems like no attempt was made to hide the body or the murder weapon. This to me screams rush job."

He leaned in close to George, whispering smugly. "This, by the way, is why I was ok with letting the suspects wander around the house. I don't think someone guilty of a crime of passion would do it a second time so soon. Not to mention if they weren't smart enough to try and hide their crime, I doubt they're smart enough to try and dispose of any evidence. If they were, the knife wouldn't be right in front of us."

He stood straight again, and began causally pacing back and forth across the kitchen, gingerly avoiding the puddle of blood under Yoseph and swinging his can dramatically. "Continuing with my crass observations, the knife was fairly large and dug in pretty deep, this leads me to believe the assailant was male. Old fashioned way of thinking it may be, but I don't think a woman could have dug the blade in that deep. Besides the only woman in the house is that Stacy girl, and she looked to be on the scrawny side."

George nodded along, eyes following Rook as he paced, but still he remained guarded. "So the killer had to be me, Christopher, or Andrew?"

Rook nodded. He took a moment to finish his beer and miss the trash can once again, and instead of producing another can from his pockets, he instead produced a small box of cigarettes, added one to his holder, and lit it. He took a long drag and exhaled. "That's what I think, anyway. But there's one more little detail I picked up on."

"Which is?"

Another long drag. This time accompanied by one of Rook's now trademark grins. "You called me. You didn't call some pig with a badge. You called an independent detective to solve the murder of a very wealthy and very powerful individual. This leaves me to infer that everyone in this family wants this taken care of quietly. No press, no cops, and someone so outside of the system that even if they did leak out any details, they wouldn't be believed anyway."

George turned red. "That's... not unusual."

"Oh I think it is. And it leads me to my next point, motive. Why exactly would someone, in his own family no less, have it out so bad for this old guy? Then it hit me." Rook was leaning in closer and closer to George as he spoke, who was backing further and further away, avoiding eye contact. "Where had I heard the name Steccotti before, and why exactly would no one associated with that name want to give me their occupations?"

"I-I- don't know what you mean."

"It's because... their jobs aren't exactly on the level. Yoseph Steccotti, and by extension everyone in the family, are part of the Steccotti criminal underground. This was a mob hit."

George pushed Rook away and stuttered and stammered. "Th-th-that's not true! My uncle might have had some less than reputable business partners but I won't have you go around accusing--"

He was cut off as Rook put up a hand. He had backed away and was now taking drag after drag of his cigarette. "Relax, Georgie. I don't give a shit what Yoseph or anyone else in the family was up to, it's not any of my business. But it does make for a pretty straight forward motive, even if the details are still hazy in my head. Yoseph was a rich, powerful man. And rich powerful men often cultivate rich, powerful enemies. I'm guessing one of the other boys off'd Yoseph to move up the ranks, or for getting back at him over a recent power play."

George straightened himself. Though still flustered, he was impressed. "Alright, alright detective I get it. Despite my observations you do seem to actually be doing something." He paused. "Hang on a second, you said 'one of the other boys' just now. You mean you don't think I'm a suspect?"

Rook exhaled and nodded. "That's correct."

"Why?"

Rook grinned and took a step forward, patting George on the shoulder. “For two reasons. One, when I mentioned there was a murder, no one seemed all that surprised. That’s suspicious behavior in my book. Not to mention no one in the lounge was crying hysterically or acting nervous in any way. No one but you seemed all that concerned that their relative just passed away. Hell, no one even feigned surprise.”

“Hmm...” murmured George. The thought had apparently not occurred to him. “What’s the other reason?”

Rook’s grin somehow went bigger than before. “Because I like you, George. And I’m a good judge of character.” He patted George’s shoulder again and took another drag. “So lemme ask you... who do you think killed him?”

George shook his head, “I don’t know. Like I said, I’m not a detective. Plus, I don’t like thinking about my own relatives that way, even if the truth says otherwise.”

Rook nudged his shoulder. “C’mon. Man to man, friend to friend. Let your thoughts wander. If you had to guess.”

George thought about this for a moment. He let himself turn to Yoseph’s body. As harrowing as it had been to discover it that morning, looking at it now somehow let him focus. “Hmm... I don’t know. I really don’t know. Anyone in the house *could* have done it, but everyone has a solid alibi. If I had to take a shot in the dark... perhaps Andrew?”

Rook nodded. “Uh huh. And why is that?”

George rubbed his hands sheepishly. “Well I hate to say this... but sometimes I don’t always trust him. No real reason, he’s just always been distant and hard to get a read on. I suppose I wouldn’t put it past him, as ghastly as it is to say. And you know what else? I’ve never liked that wife of his. Stacy always seemed like a bit of a ditz to me, she’s less of a partner and more of a trophy.”

Rook nodded again. “Ahh good instincts. My former theory excluded Stacy, but perhaps Andrew did the deed while Stacy ensured he had a good alibi.” Another drag. When he was finished, he pulled another can from his pockets, cracked it, and pointed a finger, the hand still holding the can, at George. “Although, George, let me give you a bit of advice. Careful what you say about wives. After all, *all* of them are trophy wives.”

George squinted at Rook. “What?”

Rook leaned forward, grinning wildly. “Because brother, when I’m with her... I’ve won!” He cackled a deranged, drunken laugh, and swaggered to the door, heading back to the lounge.

George stood still squinting at the empty space where Rook had been. “...What?”



### **Part 3**

*Once again I find myself in the belly of the beast, a tapeworm in its gullet. I trudge my way to the fireplace. I consider lighting it. It would make for a nice effect, but at 78 degrees in mid August, it's probably for the best that it's off. I rub my temples and think. The booze and nicotine and THC and coke and whatever else is floating in my body form a cocoon that blocks out the noise of the outside world. In here I can finally think. There's only thoughts here, only feeling, only impulse. Facts are irrelevant, there is only truth here.*

"There is only truth here." Declared Rook to the fireplace.

There was a beat of silence. After it dragged on, Rook looked around and noticed George was not in the lounge with him. Rook stomped his way back to the kitchen to find George still standing over the body of his uncle. Though he was looking at him from behind, Rook could tell he was lost in thought. He whistled and George shook himself back to reality.

"Hmm, huh, what?"

Rook nodded at him. "There's only truth here."

George blinked. "What?"

Rook shook his head. "Never mind, gather the troops, it's time to shoot the buzzards."

George blinked again. "What?"

Rook shook his head violently. "Gather everyone in the damn lounge, I'm going to reveal who the killer is."

George shook himself out of his shock. "You-you figured it out?"

"That's what detectives do don't they?"

George smiled and made his way for the kitchen door. "I'm sorry I every doubted you!"

Before George passed him, Rook's hand clasped his arm. "That wasn't rhetorical."

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I watched the cattle line up, one by one. Moo... moo... they said or perhaps that was just my imagination. Wouldn't surprise me though. It's hard not to want to mentally dehumanize them when you know damn well one of them is insane enough to want to end the life of another human being. The only question is how to go about it. Produce a pipe, announce that the killer is in this very room? Dramatically overexplain while the music scores the scene? Slip them a piece of paper and let them suffer in silence? Nah, that didn't work last time. They're all staring at me now. I hate being stared at. I turn to the fireplace and clasp my hands behind my back. That makes me look professional to them, I think. I just need to avoid eyes and stand comfortably.

I wonder what are they thinking right now? Are they afraid? Ready to bolt at the first sign of capture? Perhaps when I say their name they will simply yank a weapon out of thin air and shoot me dead. That sure wouldn't be pretty... might be cool, though. A fine way to die. Maybe not fine, but funny. Theatrical, maybe. Expected, to put it another way. Picture the headlines. "Famous and handsome detective shot dead by the culprit that he totally called a mere moment prior". A comedy? To me, maybe. The cocoon of my brain begins to shed. The drugs are starting to wear off. That's ok. Soon it will be over.

"Gentlemens and lady," began Rook, back still to his suspects, "I have gathered the facts and have a concrete understanding of the following. Yoseph Steccotti was murdered. Cut down by one of his own flesh and blood. Why, I may not be totally sure of, but who? That I know for sure."

As I let that sentence hang, a tense silence filled the room. Now this part of the job is what really excites me. The single moment before all is revealed. There's enough tension in this room for 100 detective novels. It's stronger than any drug... well except for maybe black tar heroin. The tension is as thick as a steak grilled to perfection (medium). Better get out my steak knife.

I feel the eyes of the killer land on me. There you are, you bastard. Now that you're cornered you really are starting to fall apart. I feel like a gunman in an old west story. My accusation, my gun. My bullets, the evidence. My aim, logic. All working together in tandem to fire a single round that will end it all. My holster is making my hip ache. If I don't draw my weapon soon, I'll need a hip replacement.

The music is swelling. The letterboxing is becoming claustrophobic. It's time... draw! I whirl around and point finger at my target. Right between the eyes.

"Fastest gun in the west." I said with a smirk. My target wasn't prepared for this duel. He folds immediately, erupting in rage. My holster is heavy again, save for one less bullet of truth let loose.

"Fine, I did it! I don't know how you figured it out but it was me!" exclaimed Christopher, jumping from his seat on the couch.

The air in the room was tense again. Despite Rook shooting the tension with his accusation, it had quickly returned. Nobody moved, no one knew what to do. Rook took it upon himself to lean against the fireplace.

"Now, let's all just relax. No one's cuffed ya... yet. Why don't you use your words, Christopher. Tell us what happened."

Christopher spun his head left and right. His eyes were wide and wiry. He sweated profusely. The looks he was being given around the room, however, seemed to calm him. They were more of surprise and concern than hostility. He moistened his lips. It was suddenly very dry in here.

"Alright... I... I stabbed him. I stabbed father-"

"You bastard!" shouted George, who moved in to restrain him. He was suddenly stopped however, by Rook, who held up his beer can in a "give him a minute" gesture. It stopped him instantly.

Rook nodded at Christopher. "Go on."

"I...I stabbed father. I was angry. I met him early this morning for breakfast. He wanted to talk business. As soon as he and I were in the kitchen he told me what he planned to do and I just... I just..." Christopher broke down in tears, falling to his knees. His breathing raspy with sobs. "It was just so horrible. I had to stop him, by any means!"

The sudden outburst of their culprit caused the former suspects to surround him. They gingerly patted his back and helped him to the couch, still sobbing.

"Chris..." said Andrew. "Go on, tell us, what was Uncle Yoseph going to do that was so horrible?"

"He... he..." gasped and choked Andrew. "He... was going to give his money away. To *charity!*" At this Christopher returned to his sobbing, and gasps spouted from Andrew and Stacy. George and Rook, meanwhile, remained stone faced. Rook took a sip of his beer and eyed George, who was standing with his fists balled and teeth clenched. He started to speak but no one could hear him, he was muttering unintelligibly.

Rook cleared his throat. "Speak up, Georgie."

"That's. All?!" growled George.

The sobbing and panic from the couch subsided a bit, replaced with puzzlement at George.

"G-George," stammered Christopher. "He was going to give it away. All of it! There wasn't going to be anything left for us!" He splayed his hands, pleading for George to understand.

"You." George muttered. "Are. A millionaire."

The last of Christopher's sadness melted away, replaced with pure confusion. "And?"

George spoke in small, angry barks, gradually evolving into upset shouts. "You. All. Are millionaires. I should know. I do your damn taxes every year! Or lack thereof!"

Christopher, Andrew, and Stacy all exchanged confused glances. It was Christopher who spoke up again. "I'm not following?"

George's rage was causing him to stutter. "You-you-you! You spoiled, rotten, nasty children! How could you do something like this? Uncle Yoseph was like a father to me. He taught me how to ride a bike for fuck's sake! And you, Christopher, you killed your own father over something as stupid as money?"

Christopher shook his head. "George, I think you're still not getting it. He wasn't going to give me *any* money. He was going to give it to *the poor*." He said "the poor" like one describes the look of a toilet after a bad case of food poisoning.

George stared at the floor while the entire world spun around him. "I... I can't do this anymore. Rook, take him away, just get him out of here!"

"Wait!" Andrew popped from the couch. "What if... what if we didn't press charges?"

George nearly fell backward. "What? The hell do you mean? Christopher *murdered* Yoseph!"

"Well," Andrew said, starting to fumble his thoughts. "Well, yes, in a way, that is what happened, technically... but suppose we... didn't punish him for it?"

"Why in god's name would we not do that?"

"Well... Christopher, now that Yoseph has... passed, that makes you the rightful heir to the Steccotti crim- business empire. Since you would be in charge you would have the final say over all the funds in his bank account and what to do with them..." he trailed off but gestured to the room.

George felt the room spinning again. "You're saying you don't want Christopher to be punished... so he can prevent Yoseph's funds from going to charity?"

Andrew clapped his hands. "Yes! Quite! I was a little worried you wouldn't get it, George."

Stacy came to Andrew's side and patted him on the shoulder. "Now there's an idea. I mean we don't *have* to press charges if we don't want to, right?"

George was rubbing his temples. The world wouldn't stop spinning no matter how hard he rubbed them. "No. Not going to happen, that's insane. You're insane for suggesting it, and you all should be thrown in jail with him. Rook. Take. Him. Away!"

All eyes were on Rook now, who had been in the middle of lighting another cigarette. He gazed back up at the room, eyes just barely over his aviators. He glanced left. Then right. He exhaled, then shrugged. "Majority rules, I suppose."

Part 4

A tragedy or a comedy? I still don't know for sure.

While the room was stunned silent by my decree, I excused myself and made for the exit. The drugs were wearing off for sure now. Booze can only hold so much of me together. The cocoon has shed, and the truth has sprang forth like a butterfly. Ah, those wings look delightful.

I made it to my vehicle and threw myself in the front seat. Hey there, girl. Did ya miss me? I reached for the bottle filled with screwdriver in the back seat, gonna need something strong to get me home. I poured myself a drink, and toasted to no one in particular. Before I could down it. I heard a voice calling me from the patio. It was George. His voice was sullen and defeated.

“Mr. Rook? Can we talk?”

Rook did not reply. Instead, he waved the man down, and pointed to the passenger seat of his car. George understood, stepping down the patio, and on to the muddy grass. He didn't care. Cleaning a pair of \$600 shoes didn't seem like a high priority any more. He plopped down into the passenger seat of the car. Rook immediately poured another drink, and offered it. George took it without a second thought.

For a moment the two men sat in silence and drank. George wasn't sure how to proceed, while Rook was merely enjoying a moment of peace.

“Rook...why didn't you arrest Christopher?”

Rook stared long into the distance. At the end of the driveway, a car passed by.

“Let me tell you what would happen if I booked him. Christopher has money and mob connections. Chances are he might not even see the inside of a courtroom. If he did, the case would be so stacked against the defense that he probably would get off. If he didn't, and that's a pretty big 'if' mind you, then the worst he's going to get is a month long vacation at a minimum security hotel. He'll be out in a month, maybe even less, having learned nothing, and even worse, he'd now understand the worst the system can do to punish him is smack him on the wrist.”

Rook paused and sipped his glass before continuing again. “No, come to think of it, a smack on the wrist isn't the word for it. Smacks leave impressions. Marks, bruises. Permanent reminders of the consequences of his actions, and because he would be reminded of it, he wouldn't be able to forget it, couldn't let it go. What would happen to him in the legal system is something more akin to a gentle brush with a fan on the wrists.” He barked out a bitter laugh.

George had been drinking from his glass the entire time Rook spoke. When he was empty, he gestured for more, and Rook obliged.

“That's not always true.” Said George. “You don't know what could happen to him, maybe it will be enough to scare him straight. Even if he never ends up on death row, perhaps Christopher could be rehabilitated some other way.”

At this, Rook let out his bitter laugh again. He lowered his hat and spoke again.

“Rehabilitation. That's a funny word. So many syllables to describe something as simple as making you understand what right and wrong is. You'd think most people would come out of their mama's pipes understanding things like 'don't kill people'. And most folks do. Yet, here we are. Your cousin murdered his own flesh and blood for trying to do the right thing. Bitter as it may be, I don't think there's any rehabilitating that.”

George was getting annoyed, downright angry. Part of it was the liquor settling in his brain, part of it was Rook's words. “Well... if you think that, if you're so sure that nothing can be done about him why don't you just walk right in there and blow his brains out? Skip the system entirely, just deliver your own justice, Rook! Do it! Go on!” he was shoving Rook's shoulder, it wasn't quite strong enough to be considered anything more than playful.

Rook looked at George and smirked. “Because George... I'm not a killer.”

Another sip.

“Besides, I never said I *didn't* believe in rehabilitation. People change their minds all the time. They're fickle like that. Think about your Uncle. On a whim he changed his mind, wanted to use his money to do good instead of evil for once. Even for someone as low as Yoseph Steccotti, perhaps it wasn't actually too late for him to change. I just think it was too late for Christopher. But it might not be too late for you.”

Rook was staring at the road again, blatantly ignoring the narrowed eyes of his passenger.

“Me? What are you talking about? I'm no murderer.”

“No... not yet. Funny thing about crime is that it can happen anywhere, at anytime. It can be committed by anyone. Crime has no gender, no race, no nationality. To put it in a really abstract way, crime has no moral agenda. What's considered a crime is different depending on the law of the land after all. Governments excuse their own soldiers of ending lives all the time, yet are still willing to send one person to death row over the death of another.

So if anyone, anywhere can be a criminal... how do you become a criminal? Crime isn't a job. You don't go to school to learn how to be one for years and years, get a fancy degree in Crime-economics and then apply at the crime factory. No, one becomes a criminal in the abstract way. The way that's harder to quantify. They become a criminal the same way one becomes interested in anything else: their surroundings allow them to be one.”

“I don't follow.”

“What I'm saying is that I didn't know Christopher before he was a killer, but if I had to guess I bet he was just another little boy like anyone else. But, he wasn't born into a family filled with love and care, he was born into the Steccotti family. He was born into a family that taught him that money was the only thing that gave anyone any reason for living. All that life had to offer, the sights and smells, the experiences, the joy of creating, the simple act of *living*... reduced to numbers. Cold, cynical, objective, downright binary, numbers. Of course Christopher would kill his own father over money, he was never taught that money had any other use besides one's own happiness.”

Rook concluded and sipped his drink again. After a moment George chuckled a sloppy, drunken laugh. “Oh hohoho! Rook, I never once took you for a nihilist. Do you really think so little of people? Christopher was doomed from the day he was born? What pointless hopelessness. If you think killers are that preordained why not simply never get out of bed in the morning? What's the point? They're destined to kill someone anyway!”

Rook continued to stare.

“I never said he was doomed. People always have a choice. When confronted with information that blatantly upsets one's world view, you can do either three things. One, fight it and reject it outright. Two, flight. Runaway, ignore it, pretend you're still correct and that that was simply an anomaly in this never ending chaos we call life. Or, three, acceptance. You accept new information and change your habits accordingly. So rarely are people able to do this one, since adjusting to new things is so damn scary.

Christopher took the first option. When presented with the reality that his father considered some things above money, his mind outright rejected it. ‘No! This can't happen!’ it said, and he did everything in his power to make sure the world stayed exactly where it was, as he understood it. He chose wrong, and he chose wrong because the world taught him that the only thing he could choose were the wrong choices.”

“So he made the wrong choice but the world only gave him wrong options? Still sounds like nihilism to me.”

“It does, yes, but I think what separates me from the nihilists, and therefore, us from the killers is that we understand the choices are wrong. If I was in Christopher's position, and all of a sudden the opportunity to kill my old man dropped into my lap, I would recognize how terrible of an

option it was, and not choose it. Better to look for a new solution than make a bad decision you can't take back, if you ask me."

"I guess so... I still don't totally get it. All I know for sure is that I wouldn't have made that choice either."

George finished his drink again, and motioned for another. This time, however, he noticed Rook eyeing him, a momentary hesitation before filling his glass again. George returned with an eyeing look of his own.

"You... don't believe me?"

Rook shrugged, a bit of juice spilling from his glass, staining his shirt. He either didn't notice or didn't care. "We will never know... but you and Christopher aren't that far off, as far as upbringings go. You're both part of the same family, you both care far too much about money--"

"Now hang on just a minute!" George rested his drink on the console in front of him so he could turn (as best as one could turn in a passenger seat) to Rook, and point a finger at him. "We may have had similar upbringings but we're not the same person! I'm my own man, and I know that when push comes to shove, money is just numbers on a page, no human life is worth all the numbers in the world! Unlike Christopher, I actually care about people."

Rook never took his eyes off the road as he spoke. "What's your butler's name?"

"Huh?"

"That assistant of yours, the one who was following you around all morning, the one I greeted on the patio. What is his name?"

"Why that's absurd. He's been with the family since my grandfather's time. Of course I know his name."

Rook did a 'go on, then' gesture.

"It's... it's... Jer... no, Gerald... oh..." George's face flushed with embarrassment and shame. He brought his head to hands and started sobbing. "I... I don't know. That man has been with the family for generations and I don't even know his name oh god, oh god!"

Rook gingerly patted George on the back, it was clear he didn't exactly know how to handle this sort of thing. Before he knew it, George had reeled back up, grabbing Rook's arm in desperation.

"Rook... I'm just like him, aren't I? That's what you're getting at. I treat people in my life like they're just numbers on a page every damn day, I'm a damn accountant for god's sake. I would have killed him too, wouldn't I?"

Rook, once again gingerly, brushed off the clinging arm. "I'm not saying you definitely would, but I'm afraid you're already on the path. That's what this world does to people, it takes them and molds them into people who make bad decisions. And some decisions there's no going back from. But you're not a killer, George. The fact that you're sitting here right now, feeling any amount of regret whatsoever, that tells me you're no killer. Killers don't feel remorse, regret, or self reflection, they lack those instincts."

George sniffled and pulled his drink from the console. He brought it close, practically cradling it. He sipped between sobs.

"So... what am I supposed to do? What can I do?"

Rook shrugged again. "Don't kill anyone." He declared.

"No shit."

Rook laughed, it was the first non bitter, non sarcastic laugh he'd had all day. "I mean, make better choices, George. Every day you choose to treat people like numbers, like they only exist on the page. Perhaps, going forward, you choose to treat people better. Put more good into the world than bad. Perhaps you can't undo decades of bad actions, but you can at least try."

Rook finished off the last of his drink and reached for the bottle of screwdriver. Empty. He didn't think he'd be sharing this much all day. "Welp. Booze is drying up" He said. "I better get on home."

George nodded and gulped down the last of his drink. "Thanks for hearing me out." He said. He climbed out of the car and stood by it, leaning against the doorframe.

"Anytime." Rook said, tipping his hat. He snapped the key into the ignition. Immediately the engine roared to life, accompanied by the blasting of the radio at max volume. Rook turned the radio down, just barely audible. He can't always be heard when Dead on Arrival is on.

"Hey, one last thing," He said to George. "Not to put too fine a point on it, but I doubt that your family will be all that keen with you being the only one willing to put a fellow family member in jail. You might want to lay low for a few days."

George stiffened and turned a pit pale. This seemed like news to him. "I'll... watch my back."

George began to walk back to the patio, but stopped short and returned to the car. Leaning on the doorframe again, he leaned in and asked, "Hey, Rook, tell me something. How did you figure out Christopher did it? What was the smoking gun"?

Rook look backed at him, his trademark grin showing all of his teeth but saying nothing. The silence, save for the rumble of the engine and the now soft playing radio, dragged on. Far longer than George wanted it to. Slowly realization creeped in as Rook's face remained stiff with manic glee.

"You- You didn't know?!"

Rook cackled. To Rook, it was a laugh of a prankster pulling off his most glorious stunt, to George it was the ravings of a lunatic.

"Nope. I just took my best guess and he caved. After all, I narrowed it down to only two suspects. All I had to do was guess and I had a 50% chance of being right. Looks like luck was on my side, this time."

George stammered and stared. This happens sometimes. Some folks really just can't wrap their brains around the mind of a detective. With a wave and a grin, I slammed my foot on the gas. I'm sure I kicked more grass and dirt all over George and the patio, but I didn't turn around to check. My machine and I sped out of the driveway with the speed of a bullet, narrowly missing the overly expensive mailbox as I peeled out onto the road. I bet it would have splintered real nice if I had hit it.

The road stretched on in front of me. For noon on a Saturday, there was hardly any traffic. Plenty of room to really burn some rubber. So where was I? Tragedy or comedy? George probably didn't think it was all that funny, but I was starting to see the humor. I laughed. It was a long trip back to base, and it was hot as hell. Damn buzzards are gonna start circling soon.

Epilogue

George stood on the front lawn of the manor for a few minutes longer. He didn't want to go back inside. It didn't seem like a welcoming place anymore, it might as well have been a jail cell. That didn't change the fact that most of his belongings were still in there, and he would have to go back in eventually. Still, he stood there for as long as he could muster, until finally he felt an oncoming dehydration headache and finally made the decision to walk back inside.

The manor's grand lobby echoed his footsteps, practically mocking him. He looked around and didn't see a trace of the others. He gingerly stepped towards the lounge and leaned against the doorframe, straining his ear. In the lounge he could faintly hear the sounds of Andrew and Stacy comforting Christopher, as well as their various assistants doting on them all. George halfheartedly paid attention. He didn't really care anymore what this room full of people he once knew were doing with themselves. Once the conversation turned to what to do about the body, George backed away from the lounge. He *did* in fact care about what was to be done with Yoseph's body but he didn't want to hear what the others were planning. No doubt it was nefarious and meant to further distance Christopher from his crime rather than any actual respect or care for Yoseph. Shaking his head, George began climbing the staircase. He'd already made up his mind that he'd have... Whatshisname properly put Yoseph's body to rest, and declare his death as natural causes. He didn't like this outcome, but George figured, if that was the only way to safely get Yoseph's body into a proper coffin and not a damn dumpster, then it will have to do.

George reached the top of the staircase and walked down the west hall to his bedroom. The matter of Yoseph's body taken care of in his mind, next was what to be done about himself. Rook had been right about something, it was time to start making good choices. And first on the list of good choices seemed like to get as far away from the rest of the Steccotti family as possible. A trip. Yes, a trip. Just a private vacation, nothing that would raise too much alarm... he hoped. Once in his bedroom, he immediately pulled his suitcase from beneath his bed, flung it open, and began haphazardly throwing clothes, shoes and other luggage into it. As he did so he finally noticed someone standing in his doorway. Given his situation, one would figure he should have acted with a bit more surprise at someone suddenly appearing in his doorway, but exhaustion was taking over and instead George decided to merely turn around and see who his visitor was. It was his butler, Mr... that guy. He looked somewhat worried.

His normally staunch posture had faltered, he was looking a bit pale, and fumbling with his hands. "Ahem... err... excuse me sir, but-"

Suddenly George had stepped in front of him. Eyes wide with sincerity. "What is your name?"

The butler was taken aback. He couldn't remember the last time anyone in the Steccotti family had asked that. "Err... it's, Bruce, sir. Bruce Hamson."

In an instant George's hands clasped around Bruce's fumbling digits, and he shook them vigorously. "Hi Bruce, I'm George Steccotti. It's been a hell of a long day and I think we're all in need of a break. How about we take care of Yoseph's funeral arrangements as soon as possible, quietly and respectfully of course, and then you and I go for a trip? I hear Vegas is nice this time of year."

Bruce smiled weakly. His initial worry hadn't gone away, and was now being mixed with confusion but also, compassion. "Erm... that sounds rather nice, sir, but... we have a bit of a situation that needs tending to first."

George unclasped his hands and narrowed his eyes. "What else could there be besides the funeral?"

Bruce swallowed hard. "There's a... Detective Rook here to see you."

George's face lit up with excitement. "Why send him right on up, Bruce! I didn't think he'd be back so soon. Tell him I hope he brought more screwdrivers! Ha!"

A few minutes later, Bruce was replaced with a stern looking Japanese man in a stiff black suit, clean white shirt, and plain black tie. He had short black hair, and his face was completely expressionless, the stern look of a lawman who had seen far too much in his time on the force. George was suddenly unsure if he should be shaking his hand or saluting.

“Good morning,” said the man, his voice dry and flat, mirroring his very subdued appearance. He bowed slightly as he spoke. “I apologize for my very late arrival. My name is Detective Stewart Rook, you called for my services this morning regarding your uncle.”

George stared at the man. He pointed a puzzled finger at him. “You’re... Rook?”

“Correct, sir.” Once again the man bowed. “I once again apologize for my tardiness. It is not my usual routine. I had to find a taxi late in the morning after someone had stolen my car- sir are you alright?”

George leaned against his bed as the man spoke and slowly fell onto it as the world started going black. “Blurb... urg... olv...” was all he could manage before the darkness finally took him and he sank into unconsciousness.