

The young banker had been walking for at least twenty minutes by the time he realized he was lost. The lack of lighting from the night sky proved to be something even Bertram Munson could not overcome. Trees lined his path and their branches provided a grand canopy to block out any hope of a moonlit walk. Down the lane, Bertram could make out the barren crop fields that had just been harvested the month before, leaving the fields very flat. Bertram would have taken more time to enjoy his surroundings if he could only figure out where he was.

Bertram had only been living in Cambridge for a month since the bank he worked for started expanding to the more rural boroughs of England. It seemed only within Bertram's poor luck that his sense of direction suddenly decided to fail him. When he left town he had been certain he was walking in the correct direction: take a left at the bakehouse and continue on until the fork in the road. Unfortunately, it seemed as though the fork in the road would never come.

The descent into fall was never pleasant in Cambridge; the air was moist with daily rain and consequently, the ground was always sopping wet. Bertram's boots were caked in mud and every step he took only made the situation worse. Dark clouds hung overhead and brought with them the threat of rain at any minute-- rain meant fresh mud, and fresh mud was not favorable.

Bertram's misdirection and the less than desirable weather were not the only things on his mind. The banker's fingers pulled at his waistcoat where a crumpled telegraph transcription had begged to be forgotten. Bertram removed the parchment from his pocket and gazed down at the daunting inscription:

I know what you did.

No more. No less.

There were a great many things that Bertram could foresee as probable cause for this note-- he *had* accidentally taken his neighbor's milk the previous week. Or perhaps the message was referring to child he had scolded for picking his daisies...

No.

No, Bertram *knew* why he had received the telegram. His stomach churned with anxiety as he thought about his actions. His fingers began to tremble and Bertram would have given anything to resolve the immense guilt pulling at his heartstrings.

The truth was, for three months Bertram had been slowly "misplacing" money from all of his client's funds; nothing anyone would fuss over-- five or ten quid at the most. Besides, his clients put away more money than they knew what to do with-- it wasn't like they were in debt or anything. In a way, Bertram was like Robin Hood-- taking from the rich to give to the poor, or in this case: himself.

Before he was a successful banker, Bertram had put himself in quite a bit of debt for the air of importance he so longed to possess. There were now three different lenders he was slowly paying back, and there was only so much of his own money he could sacrifice-- after all, a young man such as himself had to remain very prestigious in appearance.

The most concerning aspect of this whole ordeal with the telegram was that someone has found out Bertram's secret. He hadn't been at this branch for more than a month and already there was someone onto his plan. He had been careful, assessing all previous ledgers and finding ways to write in the losses. He made sure to not take from the same client twice (unless they were due for an audit) and even then, he paid his dues quite inconspicuously. Or so he thought.

The fact of the matter was *someone* was onto him...the only question was *who*?

"A little late for a stroll, isn't it?" a voice spoke, shattering Bertram's concentration on his qualms.

Bertram looked up from the parchment, crumpling it quickly before stashing it back in his waistcoat.

The voice had come from Sydney Albrecht, an older man who lived a few houses away from Bertram. His features were cutting in and out with the flickering moonlight but Bertram could recognize his birdlike face anywhere.

Sydney was a decent man-- at least from Bertram could tell-- but his nose was one of the most unsettling sights the young banker had ever seen. It was long, large and made Sydney's eyes look extremely small in comparison.

"I'm only just now returning from work, I'm afraid," Bertram informed as he adjusted his coat and tried his best to not shift in his mud-soaked boots. He did his best to mask the tone of relief that washed over his demeanor-- a familiar face was nice, even if it was not an appealing one.

"Why it's a quarter to ten," Sydney declared, "What *ever* took you so long?"

"There was much to be done in the office," Bertram sighed, "I needed to stay late to audit the ledgers."

Sydney clicked his tongue and nodded stiffly, "I see, is *that* what you call it?"

Bertram cleared his throat in an anxious huff and furrowed his brow-- if he didn't know better, Bertram would say Sydney's tone was almost patronizing if not the least bit condescending. Trying to give the gentleman the benefit of the doubt, Bertram shook his malcontent from his face and relaxed his tensed shoulders.

"I beg your pardon, sir, but I call it what is for there is nothing else to call it," Bertram said nonchalantly.

"A curious statement," disputed the other, "I believe my employer would refer to it differently."

"Your employer?"

"I think you know him," Sydney mused, "You owe him quite a bit of money."

*Well that could be anyone...* Bertram thought, his heart now pounding to a crescendo in his chest.

Sydney nodded at Bertram's silence, "Does an Edgar Haines ring a bell? He's quite the distinguished fellow."

Bertram nodded, "I know the name."

"I thought you might," the older rocked lazily on his boot heels, "And I'm sure you're well aware of the dues you are owing, am I correct?"

"I have been paying my dues," the banker snapped, "Every month, just like we agreed."

"You have," Sydney confirmed, "But you must understand that paying in *stolen* money is not a safe affair."

Bertram shrugged his shoulders and shook his head, "I am sorry to disappoint you, Sydney, but I must say that I know nothing of stolen money."

With a swift flick of the wrist, Sydney retrieved a small hand pistol from his breast pocket and aimed the barrel at the young man, "Is that your final answer?"

Bertram said nothing. His palms were sweating, his pulse was rushing. He had one chance. He had to take it.

"I'm afraid I must go," Bertram announced.

A moment of suspended hesitance hung in the air -- Bertram was running.

The moistness of the muddy ground made it quite difficult for his daring escape. Despite the fact the trees had not grown particularly close together in these woods, the branches of said trees did not protest the notion of hitting Bertram in the face at every opportunity. Moving his right arm barred in front of his face as a shield, Bertram pressed forward, trying his best to maintain a zig-zagged pattern.

The banker's only solace came from the fact that Sydney was much older than him and his physical condition had to be a disadvantage. However, Sydney was not as disadvantaged as Bertram would have liked, and within a matter of seconds he was trailing right behind him.

Bertram leaped over a fallen tree, his feet sliding beneath him as the traction on his boots was lost to the mud that had dried on his shoes. His chest was pounding and he could begin to feel a shortness of breath pulling at his throat.

In an effort to shake his predator, Bertram veered left in the direction he suspected the farm lands to be.

Sydney pressed forward, his hand tightly securing the pistol as he moved. He moved to gun to shooting level and did his best to aim a few feet ahead of where Bertram was moving. If he timed it just right...

He fired.

Bertram slammed himself to the ground at the sound of the gunshot and he watched as the bullet ricocheted off a nearby tree. He closed his eyes in thankful disbelief before finding the adrenaline to push himself to a standing position and carrying on his way. He did not turn around to see how close Sydney was to him, but rather he made a break for the clearing of trees he could make out just a few feet away.

The recoil from the blast set off Sydney's balance and he fell, face first into the forest ground. He scrambled to find his footing, but an old wound in his right knee got the better of him. He was falling behind now, Bertram was already out of sight.

Breaking out of the forest and into the neighboring farmland sent Bertram's eyes asunder. He searched for a new direction to go-- in the distance he could make out several farm houses but they were all too far to be of any real benefit. Then, out of the corner of his left peripheral he saw it: a wooden barn-- and an empty one from the looks of it.

Without a moment's delay, Bertram ran with all his strength to the ajar barn door.

The barn was dark on the inside, and the rain pattered violently on the wooden roof. Bertram collapsed against the wall in a stolen moment of safety while his eyes scanned the area for some form of protection. Rusted tools lined the walls and barrels of hay were scattered carelessly across the floor. On the wall to the right of Bertram, he spotted a mucking shovel and he quickly grabbed it from its place. It may not have been a hand pistol, but it was something-- and that would do.

With his new weapon clutched tightly in his hand, Bertram crept to the barn door and peered out in the rainy field. Just a few feet in the distance, Sydney was making his way toward the building-- his pants leg torn and his hair wild.

"I know you're in there," Sydney called, his voice being drowned out by the sound of rainfall.

Bertram tried to press himself as far into the barn wall as possible, now would have been a great time to suddenly discover the gift of invisibility. But Bertram had no such luck. With a racking sigh, Bertram held his breath and waited for Sydney to make a move.

He could hear the other's footsteps sloshing in the mud:

Twenty feet away.

Fifteen feet.

Teen feet.

Five.

Four.

Three.

Two.

There was a brief lull as Sydney stood outside the barn doors. His body was shaking in the lack of heat but this condition did not stop him from entering the barn.

As soon as Sydney's vague silhouette could be discerned in the darkness, Bertram struck him with the shovel. The blow sent the other to the floor, his hands clutching his face. Bertram looked down at his prey and reared back for strike two.

Strike three.

Strike four.

It wasn't until the fifth blow that Bertram stood back and looked at the mess he had laid before him.

Sydney's blood had splattered everywhere, his face now bruised and bleeding in the form of a lifeless pulp.

Bertram had hit him four times too many.

With a shallow breath Bertram dropped the shovel and ran his bloodied hands through his hair. At least the threat was over...but now there was the matter of the body. With a huff he slumped to the floor and allowed his muscles to tremble with lactic acid. The adrenaline was leaving his body and he rationalized a well-deserved rest for just a moment.

His eyes were heavy and his entire body ached in one continuous bruise. The violent rain had transformed into a soft pitter-patter now, a gentle lullaby that quickly put the young man, unwilling to sleep.

He was only asleep for no more than a few hours but his come-to was far from appealing for when Bertram woke up, both Sydney and the shovel were nowhere to be found. The only indicator of the night's events came from the great deal of blood that was soaked into the hay. Bertram looked around in a daze before making out what appeared to be a crumpled piece of parchment. He retrieved it lazily, and unfolded it to reveal a daunting message:

I know what you did.