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The Last Train to Blackwood

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Chapter One: The Whistle in the Night

The Blackwood line was less a route and more a rumor these days, a forgotten artery pumping life into a dying town. Elias Thorne had heard stories of it, of course, everyone in the regional police force had. A relic from an age when steam still ruled, connecting the bustling metropolis of Atheria to the remote, perpetually shrouded logging community of Blackwood. Tonight, however, the rumors were roaring to life, a desperate call echoing through his precinct's battered radio.

It was a sound that always snagged Thorne's attention – the frantic, clipped urgency of a dispatcher who'd clearly just received news that could curdle milk. "All available units, repeat, all available units to Atheria Central Station. Reporting... an incident aboard the Blackwood Express. Confirmed fatality." The dispatcher's voice hitched, a rare moment of unprofessionalism that spoke volumes. "Suspected homicide."

Thorne, halfway through a lukewarm cup of instant coffee that tasted vaguely of regret and pencil shavings, slammed it down with a clatter that made his partner, Detective Reynolds, jump. Reynolds, a man whose permanent state of being seemed to be 'mildly startled,' dropped the half-eaten doughnut he'd been meticulously dissecting.

"Homicide?" Reynolds squeaked, crumbs clinging to his mustache. "On the Blackwood Express? That rattletrap still runs?"

Thorne was already shrugging into his worn tweed jacket, the familiar scent of stale tobacco and old investigations clinging to it. "Apparently, it does. And it just got a whole lot more interesting." He grabbed his car keys, the jingle of them a familiar prelude to chaos. "Come on, Reynolds. Looks like our quiet night just went off the rails."

The drive to Atheria Central was a blur of flashing blue lights and the incessant wail of sirens. The city, usually a vibrant tapestry of late-night revelers and the hum of commerce, felt strangely muted, as if even the urban sprawl held its breath for the Blackwood Express. Thorne navigated the congested streets with practiced ease, his mind already sifting through possibilities. A train. A remote line. A murder. The ingredients for a truly perplexing case were already simmering.

Atheria Central was a magnificent, anachronistic beast of a building, all soaring arches and polished brass, a testament to a grander era of travel. Tonight, however, its grandeur was overshadowed by a frantic energy. Uniformed officers swarmed the platform, their faces grim under the glow of the station lights. A small crowd of

onlookers, drawn by the commotion, gawked from behind a hastily erected barrier.

The Blackwood Express itself was an imposing sight, a long, dark serpent of steel and steam. Its polished black exterior gleamed dully under the arc lamps, the brass fittings on its carriages hinting at a bygone luxury now faded by time and neglect. A plume of white steam hissed from its stack, a ghostly exhalation in the cool night air. The air was thick with the metallic tang of train brakes, the faint scent of coal smoke, and something else – something sharp and unpleasant, the unmistakable odor of blood.

Thorne and Reynolds pushed through the throng, their badges held high. A harried-looking Sergeant Miller, his usually impeccable uniform slightly rumpled, met them at the entrance to the platform. His face was pale, his eyes wide.

“Thorne, thank God you’re here,” Miller gasped, running a hand through his thinning hair. “It’s... it’s a mess. The train’s still here, but it’s due to depart in less than an hour. The conductor’s threatening to leave regardless.”

“Leave?” Thorne’s voice was a low growl. “With a murder victim on board?”

“Says it’s a scheduled run, sir. Says Blackwood needs its supplies. Apparently, the line’s so isolated, if this train doesn’t leave tonight, it won’t for another week. They’re running on fumes up there, he claims.” Miller wrung his hands. “He’s a stubborn old coot, Conductor Gable. Says his contract with the Blackwood Logging Company is ironclad.”

Thorne’s jaw tightened. This was precisely the kind of complication he didn’t need. A moving crime scene, a deadline, and a belligerent conductor. Perfect. “Where’s the body?”

“Compartment C, sir. First-class carriage, second car from the engine.” Miller pointed a trembling finger down the length of the train. “We’ve secured the scene as best we can, but it’s... confined.”

“Confined is an understatement on a train, Miller,” Reynolds muttered, already looking a little green around the gills. He’d never been a fan of tight spaces, or dead bodies, for that matter. Thorne often wondered why he’d chosen police work.

“Alright, Miller. Brief me on what you know so far.” Thorne began to walk briskly towards the train, Reynolds scurrying to keep up.

“Victim is a Mr. Alistair Finch. Local industrialist, apparently. Headed up some mining operations north of here. Recently acquired a substantial stake in the Blackwood Logging Company, coincidentally. Found by a porter during the final boarding check. Single stab wound to the chest. Looks like a clean job.” Miller swallowed hard. “No

weapon found on scene yet. No signs of forced entry to the compartment, either.”

“A single stab wound.” Thorne mulled this over. Not a frenzied attack, then. Calculated. “And no weapon. Means the killer either took it or disposed of it before anyone noticed.” He paused at the entrance to the second carriage. The air inside felt heavy, thick with unspoken dread.

“Any witnesses?”

Miller shook his head miserably. “That’s the other problem, sir. The train was almost fully boarded, but Compartment C is a private berth. Finch had it to himself. And the porter who found him swore he hadn’t seen anyone suspicious enter or leave the compartment in the last hour.”

Thorne pushed open the door to the carriage. The interior was a marvel of dark wood paneling, plush velvet upholstery, and ornate brass fixtures, now dimly lit by the train’s aged electrical system. It felt like stepping back in time, into a forgotten world. The other passengers, mostly huddled in their compartments, peered out with wary, frightened eyes as they passed. Whispers, hushed and nervous, followed them down the narrow corridor.

“So, a private compartment, a silent killer, and a missing weapon,” Thorne summarized, his voice flat. “And we have less than an hour before this rolling tomb decides to leave town. This is going to be fun.” He glanced at Reynolds, who looked like he was contemplating a career change to something involving fewer dead bodies and more fluffy kittens.

“Just try not to get sick, Reynolds,” Thorne advised, not unkindly. “We’ve got a killer on this train, and I have a feeling they’re not going to be making our jobs easy.” He took a deep breath, the metallic tang of blood now undeniably stronger. The Blackwood Express was not just a train, it was a sealed box, and somewhere within its rattling confines, a murderer was hiding. And Thorne had to find them before the whistle blew again, signaling the final, permanent departure of the last train to Blackwood.

Chapter Two: A Body in Compartment C

The air in the first-class carriage, for all its antiquated opulence, hummed with a palpable unease. The plush velvet and gleaming mahogany seemed to absorb sound, making the hushed whispers of the other passengers even more unsettling. Thorne's gaze swept over the closed doors of the compartments, each one a potential hiding place, each one a small, self-contained world. Reynolds, meanwhile, was visibly struggling, his face a shade of green that clashed terribly with the carriage's deep crimson upholstery.

"Right, Reynolds, try to keep your stomach where it belongs," Thorne murmured, his voice low enough not to alarm anyone further. "This isn't your first dead body."

"It's the smell, sir," Reynolds managed, pressing a hand to his mouth. "And the confined space. Feels like the walls are closing in."

Thorne grunted, understanding the sentiment even if he didn't share the intensity of the reaction. There was something uniquely claustrophobic about a crime scene on a train. Every surface was a potential clue, every passenger a potential suspect, and the entire investigation was hurtling towards an imminent departure.

They reached Compartment C. A uniformed officer, younger and even more visibly shaken than Miller, stood guard, his eyes darting nervously up and down the corridor. He snapped to attention as Thorne approached.

"Detective Thorne, sir," the officer stammered, his voice tight. "Everything's untouched. Just as the sergeant ordered."

"Good work, officer," Thorne replied, his eyes already on the door. It was slightly ajar, revealing a sliver of the dimly lit interior. He pushed it open fully.

The compartment was a testament to old-world luxury, or what remained of it. A small, upholstered bench seat ran along one wall, opposite a fold-down table. A large window, now dark, offered no view save for their own reflection. In the center of the small space, sprawled awkwardly on the patterned carpet, lay the body of a man.

Alistair Finch. His name echoed in Thorne's mind as he stepped inside, Reynolds hovering uncertainly in the doorway. Finch was a man in his late fifties, dressed in an expensive, if slightly rumpled, suit. His silver hair was neatly combed, but his face was contorted in a silent scream, eyes wide and unseeing, fixed on the ornate ceiling above.

The single stab wound was exactly as Miller had described: a precise, brutal incision just above his heart. There was surprisingly little blood, just a dark, viscous stain spreading slowly into the plush fibers of the carpet. The lack of excessive bleeding suggested a quick, efficient blow, likely delivered with a sharp, thin blade.

Thorne knelt beside the body, careful not to disturb anything. He donned a pair of latex gloves from his pocket, the familiar ritual a small anchor in the swirling chaos. He observed the victim's hands. No defensive wounds, no torn fabric, no signs of a struggle. Finch hadn't fought back, or if he had, it was minimal. This reinforced the idea of a swift, surprise attack. Or, more disturbingly, the attacker was someone Finch knew, someone he trusted enough not to be immediately wary of.

He checked Finch's pockets, a necessary first step. A leather wallet, thick with currency and identification, a slim silver cigarette case, a pocket watch on a delicate chain. All present. No signs of robbery. This wasn't a random mugging. This was personal.

"Anything, sir?" Reynolds asked, from his position in the doorway, still looking decidedly unwell.

"Valuables intact. Not a robbery," Thorne stated, rising slowly. He scanned the compartment again. Every detail mattered. The small, brass luggage rack above the seat was empty. A faint indentation on the carpet suggested a briefcase or small bag had been there recently. The fold-down table was bare, save for a few crumbs that suggested a recent snack.

He moved to the window, running a gloved finger along the condensation-streaked glass. No obvious signs of forced entry there either. The lock appeared intact. This meant the killer had either come in through the door, or they had somehow gained access from outside while the train was stationary. Given the height from the platform, that seemed unlikely without drawing attention.

"So, someone came in through the door, killed him, and left without a trace," Reynolds summarized, finally venturing a few steps inside. "And no one saw a thing."

"Or no one is admitting to seeing a thing," Thorne corrected, his gaze lingering on the closed door of the adjacent compartment. "These trains aren't exactly soundproof, Reynolds. Someone must have heard something."

"But the porter said he saw no one suspicious," Reynolds argued.

"Suspicious is subjective. A killer doesn't always wear a mask and wield a bloody dagger, Reynolds," Thorne said dryly. "Sometimes they look perfectly ordinary." He

crouched down, examining the floor around the body more closely. The carpet, while plush, was old, its pattern faded. He ran his hand lightly over it, feeling for anything out of place. His fingers brushed against something small, hard, and metallic, tucked almost entirely beneath the edge of the bench seat.

He carefully extracted it. It was a single cufflink, intricately carved, made of what appeared to be dark, polished wood, inlaid with a small, glinting piece of what looked like obsidian. It wasn't Finch's. Finch's cuffs were secured with simple silver ones.

"Well, well, what have we here?" Thorne murmured, holding it up for Reynolds to see.

Reynolds' eyes widened. "A clue! A real clue, sir!" His enthusiasm seemed to override his nausea for a moment.

"Indeed. Our killer seems to have been a little... forgetful," Thorne said, dropping the cufflink into an evidence bag he pulled from his jacket. "Or perhaps, it was left deliberately." The thought struck him, a chilling possibility. A calling card.

He then moved to the door, examining the latch and handle. No signs of forced entry from the outside. The lock was a simple bolt lock, common on these older carriages. It could be opened from the inside or with a special key from the outside.

"Miller said no weapon was found, correct?" Thorne asked, looking around the small compartment once more, meticulously scanning every corner, every shadow.

"That's what he said, sir," Reynolds confirmed.

Thorne opened the small wardrobe built into the wall. Empty. He checked beneath the bench seat. Nothing. He even cautiously peered into the small, antiquated lavatory attached to the compartment. Clean. The killer had been thorough, or incredibly lucky.

"Right. We need to get a full forensic team here, but time is against us," Thorne said, straightening up. "I need a list of every single passenger on this train. And I want them questioned, one by one. Starting with anyone in the immediate vicinity of this compartment."

He paused, looking at the dead man. Alistair Finch. An industrialist. Recently acquired a stake in the Blackwood Logging Company. A motive, perhaps, lurking in the shadows of business dealings. Blackwood. The name resonated with a sense of isolation, of forgotten grudges and bitter rivalries.

"And Reynolds," Thorne added, turning back to his partner, "I want you to track down this Conductor Gable. I need to speak to him, and he needs to understand that this train isn't going anywhere until I say so. I don't care what his contract says. This is a

murder investigation.”

Reynolds, emboldened by the discovery of the cufflink, nodded with a newfound resolve. “Right away, sir. I’ll bring him to you.”

As Reynolds exited the compartment, leaving Thorne alone with the victim, Thorne felt the weight of the investigation settle upon him. The rhythmic hiss of the steam from the engine outside seemed to mock the stillness within the carriage. He was on a moving target, a race against the clock. The Blackwood Express was poised to disappear into the remote wilderness, and with it, potentially, the killer. Thorne had to secure the scene, identify suspects, and piece together what happened, all before that final whistle blew. This wasn’t just a hunt; it was a siege.

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