

PERCIVAL HOOVER

— CORGI DETECTIVE —



A COASTAL TOWN, TWO DEAD TEXAS,
AND A DOG WITH TOO MANY QUESTIONS.
PSYCHOLOGICAL
NOIR
MYSTERY

CASE ONE

COLLATERAL

DEATH

J. KUSHLEY

About this preview

This PDF contains the prologue and the opening act of *Collateral Death*.

Further details about the complete novel
are available at percivalhoover.com

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Prologue

The Soil and the Say

No one had seen the children's bodies. The coffins had been closed long before they reached the cemetery, sealed by the undertaker, quietly, without question. And it seemed no one had asked to open them. The city hadn't waited long. There were no families to object, no legal delays, no public inquiry. Just two names. Two boxes. And a quiet morning at the edge of Bellwick Cemetery — grey, windless, and still. It didn't rain, but the air carried the kind of damp that clung to your sleeves, as if reminding you to keep things brief.

Percival Hoover stood near the path, alone. Under a bare-limbed tree, apart from the others. Not hiding. But not among them either. Far enough to be mistaken for a shadow. Close enough to hear every word the priest didn't quite mean.

Chloe. Julian. Then silence again.

There were only a few people. Some he recognised. Others he might have seen once or twice. A handful were strangers, their presence neither explained nor questioned.

Above him, water clung to the branches. Now and then, droplets fell. One landing on the crown of his deerstalker. He didn't shake it off.

The coffins were lowered without ceremony. No music. No readings. No flowers. No photographs. Just the scrape of rope and the weight of it all.

The priest spoke gently of peace and purpose, of dust returning to dust, as all must do, of grief as a path we all must walk. But he used their names only once — early, briefly — as if even that had to be rationed.

Most of the group left early. Steps shifted back towards something like normal life. Eventually, the last pair walked off.

At last, the silence changed. *It belonged to him now.*

He moved. Slow steps, heavy. The mound beside Chloe's grave rose high enough that he had to climb, just a little. The loose earth shifted under his paws as he found his footing. His pads sank into the mud, smaller than they should've been for the weight they carried. Then he reached down with his right forepaw and dragged it slowly through the soil beneath him.

The sleeve of his coat brushed the edge of the mound — tweed against mud — and came away streaked dark with earth. He didn't care.

The earth moved. Loose, but not light. It resisted. It clung to his pads. Gritty, cold, unyielding. He scraped again. A little more. Then let it fall. The sound it made was quiet, a soft, crumbling thud, but it hit somewhere inside him like weight. Like something had been broken off and dropped in.

He paused. Looked at his paw. Dirt under the claws. A smear of something green. His joints ached. His breath felt thin.

He stared at the soil. It didn't smell bad. Just honest. Freshly turned. Raw. The smell of something opened. And it struck him: absurdly, sharply — that every soil is grave soil. Every handful made of what came before. Dead things. Crushed things. And yet: roots. Seeds. The start of something.

The thought didn't help.

He looked at Chloe's coffin again. Still in the wrong place.

And suddenly, she was there. Not in the ground, but whole. Upright, in motion, caught mid-sentence. Her hair a mess, her eyes alert, her coat still too thin for the weather. She wore that wire ring she'd made herself, always

slipping sideways on her finger. She was talking — too fast, as always — jumping from one thought to the next, trying to sound older than she was and not quite pulling it off. Making a point no one had asked for, then doubling down when she realised no one was following. And when she noticed, she laughed. Like the world couldn't quite keep up with her.

And in that moment, she wasn't broken. She was proud. Maybe even happy. Despite everything that life had stacked against her.

He heard the word in his head — *life* — and it felt obscene, standing here. It hit him like a kick to the stomach. Everything inside him locked. But he hadn't come to fall apart. He'd come to say goodbye.

To Chloe.

And to *Detective Hoover*.

Another scrape. Another small gesture, shaped like ritual.

And then he said it. Almost soundless. More breath than voice.

“Sorry.”

Not for what had happened. But for the world being as it is.

And for the end of something he hadn't finished.

— FOUR DAYS EARLIER —

ACT I

I-1

The Dog and the Names

Percival Hoover hated mornings.

He hated them with the precision of someone who had catalogued their offences, and found them guilty. Repeatedly. He got up early anyway. Just to spite it. Mornings, as he knew them, were a conspiracy of bad light and worse timing. And no matter how quiet the world tried to be, it always found one goddamn gull to ruin the illusion.

Somewhere outside, one of them screamed — high, sharp, like feedback from a broken speaker. “Case in point,” he muttered.

Percival Hoover was a Pembroke Welsh Corgi. A speaking one. He wasn’t animated, and he didn’t have a ventriloquist trailing behind him. That much could be said with confidence.

He could speak. And think. Sharper than most people, if anyone asked him.

How that came to be, no one knew. Least of all Percival. He had stopped answering the question years ago. Because it never led anywhere useful. It

was like asking the sea why it moved, or the wind why it turned corners. The universe did strange things sometimes, and this was one of them.

Over the years, theories had piled up. Some were laughable. Others, unsettlingly specific. One of the more persistent ones claimed he was the last remnant of a classified intelligence programme. A canine trained for deep-cover surveillance. The project had been shut down, officially. But traces remained, they said: a command vocabulary no dog should know. Unnatural focus. And a tone of sarcasm that felt... acquired. Not born.

Percival had read worse.

He wasn't sure what was stranger: the idea itself, or the fact that people seemed to need one. A reason. A box to put him in. Like it would make him easier to look at. Easier to ignore. As if naming a thing made it less of a problem.

He didn't blame them. People wanted stories. Preferably the kind with beginnings. And explanations. And maybe a bit of redemption at the end. He wasn't that kind of story.

Whatever the reason, he was here. Walking, working, watching.

He was *Percival Hoover*. The detective.

The wind clawed along the window frame, dragging last night's damp across the glass. It hadn't rained, not properly, but everything was wet anyway. The way Bellwick liked it.

Bellwick lay on the northeastern coast of England, somewhere between Scarborough and what people once called the edge of the map. He had looked it up once: The old name had been Björgvik. The Bight of the Bell. A Viking outpost, carved into the cliffside to guard the waterline. They watched for sails and lit signal fires when one was spotted. All that remained was a cracked runestone near what was now Pier 3½. The bell was gone. So was the cliff tower. What was left was weather — and a town that had grown around it.

The Bellwick weather was one of the reasons why Percival Hoover always dressed properly. Shirt. Tie. Waistcoat. How he managed to put them on remained a delicate interplay of stretchable fabric, impeccable body control, and patience. The rest was one of those quiet mysteries no one really wanted solved.

When he stepped outside, he added a tweed coat and matching hat — both tailored, naturally. People sometimes said he looked like a caricature of Sherlock Holmes. He considered that a compliment. Style mattered. So did function. And tweed, as it turned out, was surprisingly good at hiding dog hair.

He lived alone in a converted tailoring office, above what used to be a tackle shop, just one block from the patch of green around a small lake known as Little Nell's Pool. The town centre folded itself around it. Buildings and streets loosely gathered along its edge, as if drawn to the water. Percival didn't like to think about that place. Didn't glance that way if he could help it. *Not anymore.*

The flat wasn't much, but every inch of it was his. Designed for function. Every shelf, drawer and surface had been adapted, shifted, or replaced over time. Trial and Error. And stubborn routine.

There was no sofa, no chairs. No upright anything, really. A low mattress on the floor, layered with wool blankets. Filing drawers at nose height, marked with tiny scent tags only he could read. A kitchenette with open shelving, a biscuit tin that clicked shut with a paw, and a kettle fitted with a lid he could open with his snout.

The tap had been modified too: low, with a single lever he could nudge with a forepaw. Handy for drinking. Or for tea. Mostly for tea.

There was no stove, no fridge. He didn't cook. Just dry goods and a ceramic bowl that served as cup and dish.

The kettle he'd filled five minutes ago clicked once and fell silent.

Percival leaned in, gripped the handle with precision, and tipped the water into a wide ceramic bowl. The teabag was already waiting. Earl Grey, because anything milder felt like weakness.

He let it steep. Long enough to do its work. Not long enough to turn bitter. Then he reached for the spoon. He'd trained himself to hold it, wedged just so between the pads of his right forepaw. It didn't look graceful. But it worked. One careful lift. A flick over the bin.

Done.

Mrs Rajani came in twice a week. To wipe the floors, empty the bin, and restore a level of order he couldn't quite manage alone. He liked things

clean. And he liked her. She didn't talk much, and she never moved anything without asking. But whenever she came, he left. Always.

Because she used a *vacuum cleaner*.

And if there was one thing Percival Hoover hated more than cats, it was vacuum cleaners. The irony was not lost on him.

He turned back to the tea. He had developed a method involving balance, timing, and a carefully calibrated tongue angle. He approached with care. Nose to steam. Tongue to rim. Angle. Timing. Retraction. It mostly worked. Except when it didn't. He licked. Winced. Tried again.

Adaptation was part of the job. Not just as a detective. As a *category*.

The letter was still in the corner where he kept his paperwork.

Dear Mr Hoover,

We regret to inform you that your current status under the Species licence of Conditional Civic Operability is subject to formal review.

This process has been initiated in response to an anonymous complaint received on file 38-B/1447, alleging multiple breaches of procedural boundaries, including but not limited to:

Disregard for established human command structure,

Independent investigative activity conducted without formal oversight,

Unclear adherence to expected behavioural norms for non-human civic participants.

As such, you are hereby requested to provide, within ten (10) working days of receipt of this notice, a complete response addressing the following....

Percival let out a long, narrow breath through his nose. The rest was worse. Behavioural norms. Command structure. Social utility. Ten days to respond.

He nudged it aside.

The licence had never been real, not in any legal sense. Just a favour from a

mayor who liked his work and didn't want a fight. But it had been enough. Access. Recognition. A bank account. The right to rent a flat. The dignity of existing on paper.

And now someone wanted to test the paper.

He glanced at the letter again. He'd deal with it. Eventually.

He pawed the letter a little further away and pulled the newspaper closer. He had it delivered to his door every morning.

Bellwick Herald, Tuesday edition. Thin as always. The front page featured an article about potholes on Mill Lane. Below that, something about a stolen bench that had been returned to the park — freshly painted, no explanation given. Percival raised a brow. "Civic duty dressed as vandalism. The town improves."

He flipped to the inside pages. A report on reduced bus schedules. A sheep that had wandered into the chemist's. A blurry photo of a boy holding up a suspiciously large parsnip.

Then, lower right corner. No headline. No photo. Just a small grey box.

Tragic Incident at Industrial Docks

Two teenagers. A boy and a girl. The note said the incident had occurred the previous night, and had been reported to the *Bellwick Herald* just before the press deadline. A statement from the police was expected later that day. No further details were available. *Except for the names.*

Percival didn't move. Didn't blink. Just stared at the names until they looked wrong.

Julian W. and Chloe D. Not many teenagers in Bellwick. Fewer with those initials.

His Chloe.

His jaw tightened.

Thursdays.

Books spread out on the floor because she refused the table. Pencil marks everywhere. Arrows. Boxes. Crossed-out guesses she insisted on keeping. She read aloud even when he told her she didn't have to. Rushed ahead. Missed half the line. Went back without apology.

“Don’t tell me yet,” she’d said. “I want to see where I end up.”

He’d sat opposite her, silent. Letting it happen. Waiting for the moment she stopped fighting the page and started listening to it. Sometimes she got there. Sometimes she didn’t. But she always tried again. He kept the time. Kept the books. Came back the next Thursday.

And now she was dead.

So was Julian. He knew him too — from his visits at the Children’s Home. Both gone.

He left the paper where it was.

He dragged himself to the corner, where the low tap waited. Head low, ears flat, tail tucked tight. Each step felt heavier than the last.

He nudged the tap with a paw. The water spluttered, then flowed. Normally, he’d fill his bowl. Not today. He leaned in, placed his forepaws wide, and drank straight from the tap — messy, ungraceful. Cold water on the tongue, on the gums. Sharp. Clearing. Then he ducked his head under it, let it run over his snout. It felt good.

He pulled back and shook. Water flew in every direction. The floor caught most of it. Just water. Mrs Rajani would know.

He padded to the window and anchored his forelegs up onto the sill. Two gulls wheeled above the rooftops, their cries thin and distant. Below, a boy walked by with a backpack too big for him. A woman dragged a green bin to the kerb, stopped halfway, and stared at the sky — as if checking for something important. Across the street, a faded stucco building caught the morning light. Ground floor: a tanning salon that never seemed to have customers. Next to it, a copy shop with crooked signage. Above that: flats. Narrow balconies. Drying racks. Someone’s laundry forgotten in last week’s rain.

He knew what lay behind that building.

Little Nell’s Pool. Still. Dark. Unasked.

His chest tightened.

He turned away from the window, but too late — the thought had already landed. Like a breath he couldn’t unbreath.

He felt it rising, that familiar, terrible rhythm. Not memory, but the pull

of it. The slope. He backed away from the sill. Paced once. Twice. Tried to breathe slow. Count. Focus.

But the room was wrong now. Too small. Too bright. The damp on the floor catching the light like fault lines.

No. Not today.

But it was already happening. His back met the wall. Steady. Solid. He braced against it, front paws firm on the floor, head slightly lowered. Eyes closed. The image was starting to form, just shapes, echoes, water.

That name.

He forced his breath through his nose. One in. One out. Again.

His collar felt tighter than it had a minute ago. The knot of his tie pressed against his throat. He opened his eyes, fixed them on the bookshelf, and counted spines. Left to right. Four blue. Two green. One leather-bound. Focus. Order.

The shape inside him twisted once, then stalled. Claws still there. But no grip. He held. Waited. And slowly — very slowly — the weight began to recede.

Not gone. Not *ever* gone. But contained, at least for now. Pushed back into that quiet corner where he kept things that couldn't be fixed.

He exhaled. Wiped his face with a foreleg. He stood there for a moment longer, chest still tight, but no longer in revolt. That had been a close one. But he'd managed it. And that counted.

He tried to think of something ordinary. Next Thursday, Marvin was bringing those new biscuits — the ones with the cinnamon glaze. Percival had marked the day. He'd been looking forward to them. But the happy thought didn't last.

His ears twitched. Not at a sound — at a certainty. Something *terrible* had happened. He turned and crossed the room, looked at the newspaper again.

Chloe.

The letters were still in place.

The world wasn't.

I-2

The Director and the News

At the far end of one of Bellwick's cheaper corners stood a five-sided patch of land. The neighbourhood was called Lowfield Rows. Brick terraces from the dockworker days. Still standing. Just.

Three sides of the property were closed off by an old brick wall, patched and leaning in places. One held a stiff iron gate, wide enough for a van. The sign above it read: *Bellwick Children's Home*.

The other two sides were wire fence, rusted at the joints, slack where the posts had shifted. Beyond the gate stood a long brick building, L-shaped, with narrow windows and a roof that leaked at the corners.

Inside, twenty-three orphans were officially under care. The number fluctuated, but that week, it was twenty-three. Just enough to keep things barely manageable. Or just barely out of hand. Depending on the day.

There was a yard out back. Concrete, with weeds pushing through where the surface had started to give. A few stunted trees leaned toward the wall, never quite growing straight. An old climbing frame stood near the edge,

its paint flaking, one rung missing. Off to the side, a metal spring held what was meant to be a proud horse, but looked, unmistakably, like a pony.

At the far end lay a weathered outdoor board game, made from stone slabs arranged in a fading grid. It was once meant for checkers, or something close. Most of the pieces were long gone.

Near the wall stood an old well, bricked round and sealed with warped boards. The pump was still there, painted bright blue, like someone had once cared, briefly, and then forgotten all about it. The older children used to tell stories about it. That it was deep. That it was dark. That orphans who misbehaved got sent down there, and that they weren't alone when they got there. It was meant to scare the little ones. Didn't work so well anymore. Even the youngest had started to roll their eyes. No one really believed the stories. But sometimes, late in the year, when the wind pushed through the yard just right, they still told them. Just in case.

But on that particular morning, no children were outside. It was breakfast time. And the Director of the Bellwick Children's Home did not allow delays.

Martha Kelmor had held the position for longer than anyone expected. The story went that she had once worked as an administrator at a care facility in Leeds. When the director there had died unexpectedly, Martha stepped in as interim replacement, and did the job well enough to be noticed. A few months later, an opening came up in Bellwick. She took it.

She had been in her mid-thirties back then. Now, twenty-five years later, she was still there. Not because she was particularly fond of the children. She never was.

To her, they were always something to be processed.

But the job came with free accommodation, meals, and — most importantly — security. In an unstable economy, that mattered. And the world's supply of orphans wasn't likely to run out. Stupid parents always found a way to get themselves killed. Car accidents. Pills. Alcohol. You name it.

She never included smoking in that list. That, she enjoyed herself. The smell of it followed her, and often got there before she did, no matter how many breath mints she used. Ever since a couple had filed a complaint after an adoption meeting, claiming she had smoked in front of the

children, she had kept it to her private rooms. Not because she agreed. Just to avoid paperwork.

Another habit, one she never dropped, was watching the children eat. Breakfast was where the real trouble showed, if you knew how to look. In her experience, mealtimes said more about a child's emotional state than any report ever did.

„Let the clever doctor run her psychology sessions and fill out her charts,“ Martha thought. She watched how a child poured milk over their cereal and knew what was coming. Years of observing children — that was her PhD.

The dining hall was bright in the mornings. Light fell through three tall windows, softened by faded sunflower curtains. Six sturdy tables filled the room, surrounded by mismatched chairs. Donated, salvaged, or painted by the kids long ago. At the back, a low counter held cutlery baskets and a water dispenser that muttered to itself. Above the kitchen hatch, a slogan had once been painted. Only “Together we” remained. The kids had added their own: *Together we eat. Together we fight.* Martha had erased *Together we fart* herself.

Breakfast came from the kitchen behind the hatch. Small, narrow, tightly run. Mrs. Redley ruled it with hairnets, strong arms, and a bang of the ladle when things got out of hand. She locked the pantry with a bolt and wore the key like a weapon. Ivette and Aaron brought out trays: porridge, scrambled eggs, toast with foil-pack butter, and jam that rotated quietly.

By the time bowls hit the tables, the room was in full swing: clinking, scraping, laughter. A toast-catapult broke mid-launch. Someone gave a dream monologue with sound effects. A napkin flew. No one mentioned school, a sure sign it was the holidays.

Martha disliked the noise, but let it go, as long as no one cried or bled. Ivette clapped twice. “Right then.” Silence fell. Mostly. The kids mumbled their makeshift rule: “No swaps, no fights, no seconds till we’re done.”

Then the real noise began: spoons, chatter, elbows, jam.

At the staff table near the kitchen, Martha Kelmor took her seat. Her chair was taller than the others. Not a throne, just a model from an old office set, slightly raised, with solid arms. From there, she could see everything. And this morning, she watched it all a little longer than usual.

Maisie was still spreading butter on the same piece of bread. Too slowly. Too carefully. She was hiding something. Martha didn't know what, not yet. But she'd find out. Sammy was already on his second portion. He ate fast. Focused. A growth spurt, Martha thought. Almost certainly.

But the most important thing that morning: Four chairs were empty.

Two of them she could explain aloud. Dorian and Liza were sick. Ivette had brought them breakfast on trays and left it outside their rooms. Martha suspected exaggeration — Dorian always looked a bit pale — but better safe than cleaning up vomit from the dining room floor.

The other two: Julian and Chloe.

That was different.

The police had called early. Soft voice, cautious phrasing. Like bad news was fragile and might break in transit.

Found at the docks. Unresponsive. That was the word the idiot settled on, like it made things softer.

She thought about the two.

Julian. Arrogant, cocky, always sure he'd outsmart everyone else. Well. Not anymore.

Chloe. Little miss "look at me". Shoulder bare, lips bitten, acting grown-up when it suited her. Drifting wherever Julian went, hoping to matter. She wanted his attention. Thought flirting with trouble made her interesting.

It just made her dead. Silly little cow.

Martha had taken the call in silence. Smoked in the kitchen, twice. Then washed the ashtray, put the mug away, fed the cat. Routine. She knew what would follow. Calls. Forms. Statements. A post-mortem or two. Possibly Hoover. That dog had a nose for spectacle and a habit of sniffing where he shouldn't. It didn't worry her. The facts were clear enough. Two teenagers looking for trouble and finding it. End of story.

Still, it would stir things up. Police. Journalists. Maybe someone at the Council trying to make a name for themselves.

Let them come. Let them all come. She'd have to be careful what got written down. Keep Ivette away from the press. What went in which file. Most people would be overwhelmed by all that. But she was *Martha bloody*

Kelmor. She had kept this place running through staff cuts, inspections, budget freezes and worse.

She'd manage this, too. Like always.

Martha flinched. Behind her, someone cleared their throat, harsh, like gravel in oil. At the same moment, she caught the smell: sweat, disinfectant, and something vaguely metallic.

Fester.

“God’s sake, don’t sneak up like that,” she snapped. “You smell like a bloody workshop.”

He didn’t blink. Same as ever: hollow-eyed, boiler suit half-zipped, both legs streaked with grime where he’d wiped his hands. He scratched at a stain on his sleeve, eyes fixed somewhere past her shoulder.

“Dr Leyton called,” he mumbled. “Says she’s running late. One of her regular house visits. The session with Agnes is moved to tomorrow. We’re to pass it on.”

Martha rolled her eyes. “Of course she is. Rephrasing people’s problems back to them and calling it insight.” She took a sip of tea and set it down with a clack. “Find Agnes. Tell her.”

Fester hesitated. “I’ve got maintenance rounds. And I’m not sure which one’s Agnes.”

Martha opened her mouth, already halfway to fury—

“I’ll tell her,” Ivette said, passing with a stack of napkins.

Fester looked at them both. Then turned and shuffled off, uneven step, as if one foot forgot what the other was doing.

Martha watched him vanish into the corridor. Every building had its ghosts. Hers just wore overalls.

She looked out over the tables.

The children were still eating. Loud, sticky, chaotic breakfast. It all looked so normal. So stupidly alive. She watched them for a moment: laughing, elbowing, dripping porridge across the tables like none of it mattered. Like the world hadn’t already made up its mind about them.

It had. Long ago.

The cards were dealt, and none of them held a winning hand.

That wasn't her fault. That wasn't something she could fix. All she could do was keep the roof from caving in. Feed them. Count them.

And wait for the next one to run out of luck.

Her eyes moved from face to face.

One of you. *Sooner or later.* The next mess is already on its way.

I-3

The Press and the Clash

Press conferences in Bellwick were rare. And when they happened, it was never for good reasons.

The room was in the basement of the Council Hall. Once a storage space, now repurposed with rows of mismatched chairs and a podium that wobbled if leaned on too hard. The floor was cracked linoleum, uneven in places, and cold underfoot. Two fluorescent lights flickered in staggered rhythm, as if trying to outlast each other.

Three journalists had shown up. One was Henry Loxley, a freelance reporter who normally covered school board meetings and local sports. His camera was old, his notepad full of crossed-out shopping lists. The other two ran local blogs — *Bellwatch* and *The Quay View* — both part-time operations. One taught English at the secondary school. The other ran a tattoo parlour. None of them had press credentials.

A small plastic tray of supermarket biscuits sat near the door, mostly untouched. They were soft, sad, and completely wrong for noon. Someone really should've gone with sandwiches.

The door opened with a scrape, and Lieutenant Vernon Ashford entered like a man expecting applause.

He wore a dark wool coat, neatly pressed trousers, and a grey scarf knotted too precisely to be accidental. His hair was short, parted just off-centre, every strand in place. He looked like someone who'd watched police dramas, taken notes, and now rehearsed in public.

He stepped behind the podium with a subtle shift of angle that turned his right side slightly away from the room. Enough so the damaged ear — the one flattened and scarred from a childhood fight behind his family's scrapyard — stayed out of view. Most officers wore their scars like badges. Stories of action. But Ashford never did. He always angled himself just so: interviews, briefings, even photos. As if the old wound embarrassed him. Or reminded him of a version of himself he'd rather forget.

He unfolded a single sheet of paper and waited half a beat too long before speaking.

“Good morning,” he said, scanning the room as if there were more than three people in it. “For those I haven't met: I'm Lieutenant Vernon Ashford, Investigative Liaison Officer for Bellwick District, attached to Regional Command North, reporting under internal case designation BWD-03/25.”

He paused, as if expecting someone to write it all down. No one did.

“We appreciate your attendance today. I know it was short notice. But transparency is important, especially in sensitive matters involving the welfare of minors. We're here to provide initial clarity, to avoid speculation, and to honour public concern.”

Another pause. A glance at the paper.

“Late last night, at the industrial docks near Pier Three-and-a-Half, two deceased teenagers were found by a dockworker preparing for the early shift. A boy and a girl, both residents of the Bellwick Children's Home. The victims have been identified as Julian W., age 15, and Chloe D., age 13. Emergency services were called immediately. The scene was secured. Initial observations suggest alcohol was a central factor.”

He glanced at the page again, mostly for show.

“Significant traces of vomit were found near the bodies, and the initial

on-site assessment of the boy indicated clear signs of excessive alcohol consumption. He was discovered lying on the planks of the dock. The girl was found in the water, caught against a metal rod near the edge. There are no signs of violence. No indication of foul play. At this time, all evidence points toward tragic misjudgement.”

He folded the top edge of the paper slightly between his fingers. “Are there any questions at this stage?”

Henry Loxley cleared his throat. “Do we know what kind of alcohol was involved?”

Ashford shook his head. “No container was found at the scene. No bottle, no label, nothing that could be tested. We’ll have to wait for toxicology from the autopsy.”

Loxley followed up. “Will there be a full investigation?”

Ashford gave a mild shrug. “A standard inquiry, of course. Autopsies are pending, as per protocol.”

Another reporter, the one from The Quay View, leaned forward. “And *off the record*... what’s your personal take?”

Ashford hesitated. The kind of silence that said: I know I shouldn’t. He glanced down at his notes again. “I’m not here to speculate.”

The reporter smiled slightly. “Of course not. Just, someone with your experience, you must have a gut feel. We all know how it works. You’ve seen this sort of thing before.”

Henry Loxley added, “Yeah, come on. You’ve been at this longer than most. If *anyone* can read a scene...”

Ashford didn’t reply at first. Then he shifted slightly, just enough to seem reluctant. But flattered. He leaned forward, voice lower now. More conversational.

“Off the record? We’re talking about kids from the Home. No curfew. No real supervision. They drink, they dare each other, they get it wrong. You give teenagers too much freedom and this is what sometimes happens.”

He let that hang, like it needed no follow-up. Then he added, with a smile meant to look sad: “Not official yet, of course.”

No one spoke.

He folded the paper again. “This briefing is concluded. Thank you.”

He stepped away from the podium, posture still exact, still turned just enough to keep his old scar out of sight. As if even now, with no cameras left, the habit wouldn't let go.

In the very back row, half-shaded by the dim striplight above, Percival Hoover shook his head in disbelief. Not at the tragedy, but at the stupidity of the man on the podium. Ashford had let himself be drawn into a personal analysis, off-script and on record. He knew he shouldn't. And he did it anyway.

Percival hadn't been on the press list, of course. And he hadn't signed in. When he arrived, just before the briefing started, he'd taken the farthest seat. Behind a column, just left of the radiator, partially screened by the dim striplight and the sloped ceiling beam that had never been fixed. It wasn't invisibility. But it was enough. Especially with Ashford focused on the front, and always more concerned with the camera than the corners.

Percival hadn't taken notes. He hadn't even moved. But his ears had tilted slightly, the way they always did when something didn't sit right.

It wasn't a secret that he didn't like Lieutenant Ashford. And the feeling was mutual. But this wasn't about that.

Two dead teenagers, and twelve hours later it's all wrapped in press statements? With a personal theory, and no sign of doubt? That wasn't police work. It was theatre, staged certainty, dressed up as authority. Maybe there really wasn't more to the case, but the way Ashford had leaned into his assumptions, spoken as if it were already settled, left no room for questions. A self-fulfilling mistake. And that, more than anything, was what bothered him.

“Mr Hoover?”

The voice came from the aisle. Henry Loxley. Notebook in one hand, camera slung across his chest. Friendly, but persistent. The kind of man who asked the same question three different ways if he didn't get a quote the first time.

“Been a while since I've seen you at one of these,” Loxley said, stepping closer.

“There's usually no reason to,” Percival replied without looking up.

Loxley chuckled. “Are you... *looking into this?*”

“No,” Percival said. “Just a concerned citizen.”

Loxley hesitated. “I remember your name came up back when I started that piece on the Children’s Home. Never got to finish it: Kelmor pulled the plug without much explanation. But someone had mentioned you did tutoring work. Helped some of the orphans.” He paused, then added more quietly, “One of them was Chloe, right?”

Percival gave a small nod.

Loxley lowered his voice. “Do you have a comment?”

Percival turned his eyes toward the now-empty podium. Then back to the reporter.

“I have an opinion,” he said. “But no comment.”

Loxley opened his mouth to ask something else, then thought better of it. He gave a respectful nod and stepped back.

Percival waited until the room was empty. He looked to the door, already knowing who he’d find on the other side.

But first — the tie. He fished the tail end from his waistcoat with one paw and caught it between his teeth. Then pinched the knot between two claws and nudged it upward. Not elegant, but effective. Once it sat right, he smoothed the fabric flat and tucked it back in.

There. Civilised enough.

Then he dropped down, deliberate, and made his way to the exit.

Chief Edmund Harrow was waiting just outside the door, coat open, hands in his pockets, eyes scanning the hallway like he’d rather be anywhere else. Tall and broad-shouldered, but starting to stoop with age, he kept his head shaved smooth. The overhead lights caught on the skin like a dull reflection in wet stone. He had the kind of face that rarely moved: watchful, unreadable. The kind that made you check your own tone without knowing why.

He noticed Percival and raised an eyebrow. “Didn’t expect to see you here.”

“I know I wasn’t invited,” Percival said. “But you know I have my sources.”

Harrow gave a vague grunt, something between amusement and

disapproval. “So what brings you?”

Percival glanced toward the windows at the end of the corridor, where the light was just starting to dull.

“I knew the girl,” he said. “Chloe.”

Harrow straightened a little. “From the Home?”

Percival nodded. “I tutored her. She struggled with reading. *Dyslexia*.”

Harrow let that sink in. “I didn’t know that.”

“No reason you should.”

For a moment, the hallway was quiet except for the hum of the emergency light above them.

Then Harrow said, quietly, “Thirteen.”

Percival gave a short nod. “Last spring.”

Harrow didn’t respond. He just looked at Percival. Then nodded. Slow, deliberate, and maybe a little heavier than before.

The door behind them opened again. Ashford stepped out, coat already buttoned, eyes sharp from whatever satisfaction he thought the briefing had earned him. He spotted them and came straight over.

“What’s *he* doing here?” No greeting, no pause.

Percival turned his head slowly. “Good morning to you, too, Lieutenant.”

Ashford scoffed. “Of course. Can’t resist a bit of drama, can you? Always sniffing around for the angle no one else believes in.”

“Hold your horses, Ashford,” Harrow cut in, voice level but firm. “Hoover knew one of the children personally.” That slowed Ashford for half a second, just long enough for Percival to respond.

“Just here to listen.”

“Sure. And next week, you’ll be digging up corruption, or claiming it was all part of some conspiracy.”

Percival’s ears angled slightly. “I go where the questions are.”

Ashford stepped closer. Too close. He was tall enough that Percival had to crane his neck to meet his gaze. The man’s aftershave hit him first:

artificial, overconfident. *Bright blue*, too polished to be honest. Almost metallic at the edges.

Percival held his ground. Didn't flinch. But he stopped looking up. Let Ashford stare down all he wanted. He simply turned his gaze slightly aside, as if the man wasn't worth the full angle.

Ashford's voice snapped back. "And you don't even need to find anything. You just show up and let people wonder."

Harrow shifted again but stayed quiet now.

Percival kept his tone even. "Two children are dead. You gave it *six minutes*," he said to Ashford's shoes.

"They drank themselves to death," Ashford said. "Just because you knew one of them doesn't make the obvious untrue."

Percival didn't look up. Just tilted his head slightly, voice still even. "Well, thank you for reminding me that *proximity* clouds judgment. You seem remarkably certain for a man who just wrapped a press conference around a pending autopsy."

Before Ashford could reply, a camera flashed. Close, unexpected. The photographer, a wiry man from The Quay View, lowered the lens and grinned.

"Well, would you look at *that*," he said. "The Bellwick Police, now proudly advised by an *actual* professional."

Ashford opened his mouth, closed it again, then turned on his heel and walked off without a word.

I-4

The Quay and the Colour

After the press conference, Percival didn't go straight home. He walked with his head low and ears still. There was no plan, just a direction. *Forward.*

A few people turned as he passed. Tourists, mostly. Couples in weather-proof jackets, trailing plastic bags. Worn shoes, slow steps. One man took a photo of him. Percival didn't flinch. He'd stopped reacting a long time ago.

Bellwick wasn't a large town, but it was dense. Shops leaned into one another. The streets tilted and dipped like they couldn't decide which way was down. He passed the bakery with the good rye, the restaurant that claimed to be historic but had LED candles in every window. A woman in a raincoat greeted him by name. He nodded back. Didn't slow.

The police station came into view just ahead. A red-brick building with a slanted sign and a reputation for being exactly what it looked like. He turned right before reaching it. Didn't need a second run-in with Ashford today.

The wind picked up near the edge of town. Somewhere in the distance, a delivery truck backfired. Percival didn't startle. He kept walking, paws steady on the uneven pavement, past streets that hadn't changed and never would.

Bellwick was many things. Broken, damp, familiar. *But it was his.*

At the next crossing, he made a left and reached the coastal road, officially the A1726, though no one called it that. It ran straight from north to south, cutting through Bellwick like a line someone once drew too hard on a map. There wasn't a single car in sight, but he waited at the light anyway. Children might be watching. He wasn't going to be the reason someone ran into traffic with a biscuit and bad judgment.

When the signal changed, he crossed. Paws precise. Head held steady.

Lowfield Rows sat at the edge of town like something added late to a plan that never worked. Semi-detached houses, tight fences, windows with curtains drawn halfway. The kind of place where front gardens were mostly gravel and old toys. But it had rhythm. And people. And the occasional smell of real cooking. Tucked behind the shuttered warehouses of North Quay, the area had once housed dockworkers, back when freight still moved and the trawlers still came in heavy. The houses had been built fast and cheap. Two up, two down. Red brick, white trim. Each one a mirror of the next, lined up like teeth. Most had a patch of garden out front that no one had time to care for, then or now. The streets were narrow. The fences low. The doorbells all sounded the same. Laundry still hung between the walls. Footballs still bounced off the fences.

Percival reached the green — a patch of stubborn grass surrounded by three benches and five opinions about how it should be mowed. He chose the bench that faced west. Hopped up, settled and adjusted his coat with one paw. Watched.

A group of kids were kicking a ball back and forth with loud disagreement about the rules. One of them wore a cape. Another had two different shoes. None of them seemed to care. He watched the game unfold in beautiful chaos. Shouts, scrapes, a near collision with a bin, and a goal declared that no one accepted but everyone moved on from.

Lowfield Rows wasn't great. But it was a place. A home, he thought. A family you returned to at the end of the day, even if dinner was late and the roof leaked. The children at the orphanage didn't have that. They had

rooms, and noise, and supervision. *But not this.* Not a space that felt like it was already theirs.

Percival gave half a sigh.

Then he dropped back down, adjusted the fit of his waistcoat — purely ritual — and turned toward the old industrial docks at the edge of town. He walked on, past the last houses, until the pavement cracked and ran out.

He stopped at the edge of the wall and looked up. Old brick. Still solid in places. Cracked in others. It ran the length of the northern dockside, a barrier from another time. Once, it had separated the working harbour from the housing rows behind it. There had been a main gate. Tall, iron, wide enough for trucks and men with lunch pails. But that had been welded shut years ago. Now only the weak points remained: gaps where the brick had surrendered to salt and wind, slowly, persistently, doing the work no maintenance budget ever seemed to manage.

Percival found one of the smaller ones. Low, narrow, tucked between a drainpipe and the stump of a long-dead post. He pushed through, one shoulder at a time, coat brushing against the damp wall. A soft grunt as he cleared the edge. Then a quick shake — head, ears, back legs — to get the moisture off.

He looked up. *North Quay.*

It looked like it always did: damp, rusted, underwhelming. He let his eyes drift over the warehouses, the fencing, and the rails swallowed by moss. Everything here felt half-abandoned, but not completely forgotten. Like the town couldn't decide if it still needed the place.

It hadn't always been like this. There used to be noise. Cargo. Welding. Workers shouting through steam. Back when the fishing fleets were larger. For a long time, North Quay had been just as busy as the south. But then the routes changed. New systems. Bigger ships. Fewer hands. And the work drifted away, slowly at first, then all at once.

He passed the first row of buildings. Shuttered and dented. Doors patched with makeshift locks or left hanging half off. Paint peeled. Bolts rusted. Some windows had been boarded up from the inside. He paused at one, eyeing the crude timber slats.

There had been talk. He'd heard it more than once: about turning the area

into something new. Studios. A creative quarter. Co-working spaces. Even a café, supposedly. But no one with real money had managed to picture that in Bellwick. And so North Quay remained what it was: Quiet. Empty. Waiting for someone else's idea to arrive.

The Loughmere Channel split the harbour clean in two: South Quay had cranes, movement, actual cargo. North Quay had birds and wind and whatever was left behind.

It also had space. Enough to be alone, or not. The kind of place where young ones went to smoke, to drink, to make out. To do the things they weren't supposed to. No one watched too closely. And the Quays were big enough that, if you wanted to disappear for an hour or two, you could. He'd found a runaway here once, curled up behind a stack of pallets.

Percival knew dockworkers still came up this way. Not for work, but for salvage. A hinge here. A spare pane of glass. A rusted handle that could be coaxed back to life with the right tool. They slipped through the same gaps in the wall as everyone else. No one had keys. No one asked. Technically, it was trespassing. Officially, salvage from North Quay was off-limits. But no one stopped it. Not the council. Not the harbour authority. People took what they needed. And the town looked the other way. They called it "the boneyard."

That was how the bodies had been found, or so the story went. A man named Terrence — part-time welder, full-time gossip — had come looking for a door latch. He'd found the girl instead. Floating. Motionless. Her jacket had caught on a bent metal rod, jutting from the crumbling edge of the pier.

That *one* detail had kept her from drifting.

The boy had been lying further along the planks, slumped against the concrete.

Dead.

Percival closed his eyes to picture the scene.

If no one had come that day, if the tides had pulled a little stronger, Chloe would've been gone. Out past the mouth of the harbour. Lost to salt and sea. Or to the seagulls. They'd already begun to circle, he'd been told, when the bodies were found. Not in malice. Just in hunger. They didn't care if they stole your chips or picked at a body that used to be *someone*.

Someone who'd laughed, and cried, and tried to become something more than she was given.

He thought of her now. Briefly. But not lightly.

The images came without warning, a dozen fragments at once. Chloe at the chalkboard, frowning at the letters. Chloe in the hallway, shrugging too hard at a joke she didn't understand. Chloe with a slice of toast in her hand, eyes darting sideways, waiting for someone to notice her shoes didn't match.

It hit him in the chest. Low and sudden. A heaviness that pulled at his breath and made his back legs feel just slightly unsteady.

He stood still and let it happen.

Then he straightened. Reset his balance. Pain wouldn't help her now. *Time to do some work.*

He leaned down, near the planks. Found traces of old sweat. Cigarette ash. Something sugary. Cola, probably. Everything smelled exactly how it was supposed to. Old sweat: dull grey, almost grainy. Ash: pale, bitter white. Cola: sharp red, edged with caramel brown.

Most people forgot smells. *He never did.*

They stayed with him. Stubborn, vivid, *alive*. The aftershave of a missing father. The carpet glue in a flat where a girl used to hide behind the couch. The burned dust of an old electric heater.

After a while, the smells became too many. *So he gave them colours.* He didn't plan it. It just happened. A way to sort things. Anchor them. Make sense of what didn't want to be held. Sometimes it was obvious. Bleach was high-pitched white, almost metallic. Petrol was oily green. Other times, it came layered. Like the night someone vomited extra hoppy IPA in a stairwell. That sickly orange-pink he still couldn't smell without blinking. Percival never told anyone. It wasn't a gift. Just a system. A filing cabinet for his nose. And once you started smelling in colour, you couldn't stop. There were more colours than words could carry. Some were damp and heavy, like wet moss in a cellar. Others were sharp and dry, hedge clippings on a hot day. Same name. Different truths.

Percival knew dogs were technically colour-blind. Why he saw scents in colour was anyone's guess. Another mystery on the pile.

There was a juice box half-flattened near the edge of the pier. One of those single-serve ones: cheap, over-sweet, shelf-stable until the end of time. The straw was missing. The label had faded, but he could still make out a red apple and the tail of a brand name curling into the crease. He stared at it a little longer than necessary. Someone had made a choice. Not a child. Children didn't buy juice. A parent, maybe. Or more likely, a parent in a hurry. Too many things to pack. Too little time. And the juice box won. Convenience over nutrition. Over waste. Over preference. Maybe the kid hated it. Maybe the father would've preferred fresh juice, cold and tart, from a glass bottle, but didn't say so. Maybe no one thought about it at all. But it still ended up here. Flattened. Forgotten. Left behind like most things that were chosen too quickly.

Percival glanced at it once more, then moved on.

He sniffed again. Just to be sure. Vomit — stale, bitter, still clinging to the planks. And beneath it, *something else*. Alcohol, yes, but not gin. Not vodka. Something sharp, and *wrong*. Too sweet up front. Then the burn. A scent he didn't recognize.

Dark purple, edged with yellow. Like rot dressed up as fruit. He filed it. New category. Pending.

He looked around thoroughly. No blood. No broken glass. No bottle. Nothing tucked under the boards. Nothing tossed nearby.

Two dead children. And no container? Where did it go? Where did it come from?

And nobody saw a thing?

He paused near the edge. Looked at the water. Still. Indifferent.

Was Chloe drunk? Did she fall? Did she drown? All three?

They were questions no one at the Bellwick Police Department seemed interested in. He'd seen it before. Tragedy wrapped in paperwork. Filed, then forgotten. Two dead children, and no one really looked.

Not properly.

Not like they would've if it had happened in *Clifftop*. If it had been two boys from the good side of town, sons of architects or consultants, there would've been noise. A task force. A headline war. But this? Two names from a system nobody wanted to fix. No votes in it. No glory.

Just orphans. And the quiet hope that no one would dig too deep.

He felt the anger rise.

He wouldn't file this one. Not yet. Not ever, if it came to that. Somewhere behind the numbers and silence, there had been a girl with unmatched shoes and toast in her hand.

He sat back on his haunches. Watched the water.

No evidence. No clue.

He didn't know what it was. But something was wrong. He'd learned to trust that hunch. It didn't shout. It *hummed*. Soft and steady. Like a warning from somewhere just beneath the surface of logic.

Just a feeling.

And that dark purple. He hadn't smelled it before.

But he would.

Somewhere.

I-5

The Gap and the Form

He squeezed back through the narrow gap in the wall, brushing moss and memory from his coat. His thoughts were still at the pier — the colours, the questions with no answers — when it hit him.

The hearing.

Damn it. That was *today*.

He shut his eyes for a second. *Species License Review, Category 3. Attendance required.* Like he might forget the joy of proving his existence to a board of humans with clipboards.

Of course he had no watch. What was he going to do? Strap it to his tail? He trotted three streets west, stopped in front of a bakery window. Above the loaves: a plastic clock, still ticking. He exhaled. *Plenty of time.* Just enough for the long way. He'd need it. To settle his thoughts, realign his spine, rehearse his patience.

By the time he reached the main doors of City Hall, the fur along his neck had flattened. Composure reloaded. *Time for the circus.*

The entrance opened into a wide atrium: glass panels, tiled floor, a reception desk in the centre. Light fell in sharp angles from the skylights above. And that special kind of silence only government buildings managed. Not peace, but latency. He padded up to the counter. The clerk didn't look up right away. Just tapped at a screen.

“Name?”

“Percival Hoover.”

A pause. “Reference number?”

Percival sighed. “0883-CH-R35-slash-B.”

The man typed. Expressionless. “Room 2B. First floor. Take the left staircase and wait until you are called.”

He followed the hallway signs to 2B. Muted carpet. Posters with slogans. “Respect diversity. Monitor anomalies.” “Cooperation begins with classification.” He looked through the glass door of the waiting room. Green walls. Plastic chairs in an anxious semicircle. A water cooler in the corner. No cups. All seats were empty. He pushed the door open and stepped inside.

Percival had barely crossed the threshold when it happened.

A streak of wiry fur launched itself from the shadows, a blur with eyes, teeth, and unearned confidence. Before Percival could react, the dog was at his backside, nose-first, full-commitment.

“Excuse me?! EXCUSE ME?!”

He flailed forward, tail pulled tight like an emergency brake, ears flattened in a mix of alarm and deep existential offense. By the time he spun around, the dog had seated itself neatly in front of him, tongue out, tail wagging like a malfunctioning metronome.

They stared at each other.

Then the dog barked.

Percival squinted. Concentrated.

Nothing. *Not even static.*

The dog barked again, cheerfully.

He backed away half a step, then sat down, quickly, defensively. Reflex.

Instinct. Protection.

“Em... hello,” Percival said awkwardly. “I am... not here to fight.”

The dog tilted its head.

He cleared his throat. “Who... *who* is a good boy?”

The tail went into overdrive.

Percival blinked. “Really?”

“Who is a good **boy**?” he repeated, trying a different pitch.

Wag wag wag.

“Who... is a **good** boy?” He said it slower, uncertain if he was training the dog or summoning a demon.

The dog bounced in place, yapped with joy.

Percival stood up with military stiffness.

“This is deeply unsettling.”

Just then, the door opened. A woman stepped in, jingling keys.

“Sorry, just popped to the loo. Thought he’d be fine waiting.” She glanced at the dog, then back at Percival with a smile.

“I think Bubbles likes you.”

Percival gave her a long, pained look. “That’s not the word I’d use.”

She didn’t respond. Just sat down and buried her face in a paperback with flames and a shirtless man on the cover. Percival climbed onto a chair — deliberately, slowly — and sat upright, back stiff. He kept one eye on the door. And the other on Bubbles.

The room was too warm. Not by much, but enough to make his coat feel like it was actively punishing him. He considered taking it off. The deer-stalker too. But the idea of wriggling out of both, here, in public — no. Not happening.

The heat pressed in, slow and steady. *Why was this taking so long?* He had a scheduled appointment. He’d been on time.

Across from him, the woman was still buried in her paperback, unmoving except for the occasional turn of a page and a faint, dreamy smile.

He stared. Waited. Nothing. Then he quickly let his tongue slip out and resorted to a round of high-speed panting. Not graceful. But better than overheating. Bubbles noticed immediately. The little dog perked up, ears forward, tail twitching with intrigue. Percival froze. Looked at him, his back pressed a little deeper into the seat.

Twenty-two deeply uncomfortable minutes later, a door opened and a voice called out:

“Mr... *Hoover*?”

Percival slid from his chair with all the grace of a condemned man and followed the woman into an office with closed blinds and a cluttered desk. The light was flat, the furniture older than the century.

She was in her forties, wore glasses on a string, and had the smile of someone who'd been to three workshops on compassion and failed all of them.

“Take a seat,” she said.

He did. It squeaked. She sat down opposite, opened a folder, clicked a pen. Then looked up.

“Full name?”

“Percival Hoover.”

“Date of birth?”

“Unknown.”

She hesitated. “Could you give me an estimate?”

He thought of one of the more ambitious theories. That he'd been born in Windsor, part of a royal litter. Special diet. Controlled handling. Baroque music piped into the kennel. Until one day, *he'd vanished*. Stolen, lost, released. He found the story oddly flattering. And wildly improbable.

“I was found near a train station in the late 2000s. My teeth were intact and I hated everyone. That's all I've got.”

She made a note.

“Species?”

“Still a dog.”

“Subspecies?”

“Pembroke Welsh Corgi.”

“Have you ever identified as any other subspecies?”

A flash of absurdity crossed his mind — what if he said *Irish Wolfhound?*
Just to watch her write it down.

“No.”

“Are you currently experiencing any instability in species presentation?”

“I don’t even know what that means.”

“It’s a standard question.”

“Well, then no. No instability. I’m very... *stably* canine.”

More notes.

“Do you consider yourself bipedal, quadrupedal, or ‘fluid’ in your locomotion?”

He stared. “You’re joking.”

“No, Mr Hoover.”

He sighed. “Quadrupedal. With occasional standing.”

“Standing duration?”

“Depends how interesting the cheese is.”

She didn’t smile. Just clicked her pen again.

“Do you consume human food?”

“Define ‘consume.’”

She looked up.

“I eat cheese. And dry biscuits. I drink tea. I do not use cutlery.”

Another note.

“Any recent mating activity?”

Percival blinked. “Excuse me?”

“It’s a standard health and temperament indicator.”

“I’m a detective, not a Labrador on holiday.”

“Still, yes or no?”

He narrowed his eyes. “No.” A pause. “Would you like me to elaborate?”

She shook her head quickly. “No, thank you.”

He exhaled. “Then perhaps we could move on.”

She turned a page.

“Have you at any point attempted to impersonate a human being for gainful employment?”

“Again, I’m not sure what that even—”

“Yes or no.”

“Well... I wear a tie. Regularly. And I investigate crimes.”

She frowned. “Is that a yes?”

“It’s a contextual *no*.”

She made another mark on her form.

“Final question for today: Would you classify yourself as emotionally stable, unstable, or species-ambiguous in response patterns?”

Percival just stared. Then said, flatly: “Emotionally stable. Borderline sarcastic. Strong preference for privacy.”

She clicked her pen. He cleared his throat. “Right. Is that it, then? Can I have my license now? I’ve got work.”

She gave a thin smile. “Oh, this is a preliminary compliance session, Mr Hoover. A mid-stage observational review. Not a finalisation hearing.”

He frowned. “Meaning?”

“It means this is merely an intermediate panel checkpoint as defined by Clause 7-C of the Inter-species Integration Framework. Nothing is decided *today*. You are still far from obtaining renewal certification.”

He opened his mouth, but she had already launched into a slow, monotonous explanation.

“Pending the Species Classification Committee’s secondary protocol audit, your case will be referred to the cross-domain liaison board for procedural harmonisation and—”

He stopped listening. His mind drifted.

To a bench at the station. The smell of old fabric. The sound of someone saying “You poor thing.”

He hadn’t understood the words then. But he’d understood the *tone*.

Later came the questions. Later came *language*.

Speech changed things. Apparently, it made you a problem. If he’d barked instead of talking, they’d have chipped him, fed him, praised him, and called it a day.

But no. He had opinions. *And that made him a threat.*

No collar. No owner. No pack.

Not quite human. Not quite canine. Just enough of both to unsettle the system.

And so now he filled out forms to prove he wasn’t dangerous. He stared at the woman across the desk and wondered: Was this what being human felt like? Confused. Categorized. And always one wrong answer away from being someone else’s anecdote.

He thought of the crumbly cheddar back home. And for a second, he smiled — soft and absent, like something warm had wandered through.

Then Bubbles came to mind, unfortunately. That eager little nose, far too curious for its own good. He shuddered.

Then Joe’s. A drink later. A seat in the corner. Something hot. Definitely earned.

“Mr Hoover?”

The voice snapped back into focus.

He looked up. The woman was staring.

His mind rebooted. “Would you mind repeating the question?”

“I asked if you have a preferred species liaison officer assigned. Yes or no?” She repeated it, louder this time. As if volume would help.

He sighed. “No. I don’t have a favourite bureaucrat. Shocking, I know.”

She didn’t react. Just ticked a box. Then closed the folder with a snap that sounded more final than anything else in the meeting.

“We’ll be in touch,” she said, standing.

Percival slid off the chair. “Oh good. I was worried you might forget.”

She offered a thin smile. “You’re hard to forget, Mr Hoover.”

He gave a small nod. “It’s the *tail*.”

And with that, he left. The door clicked shut behind him. Percival quickened his pace. Down the steps, past the metal bins, out into the square. He felt a deep, almost physical aversion. Not just to what he’d witnessed. But to what it stood for.

He needed an outlet. A pillow to scream into. A sack of rice to headbutt until enlightenment. But the council hadn’t provided either.

He spotted a narrow tree, planted in one of those civic flower beds, boxed in by bricks and bureaucratic good intentions. A sad little thing with two branches and a commemorative plaque. At its base, half-buried in mulch and gravel, lay a stick. Dry. Splintered. About the size of a sceptre.

Perfect.

Percival picked it up with his teeth. Bit down. Hard. His jaw tensed. His molars flared in protest. Then: *Crack*. The stick split with a dry, satisfying snap. He spat the pieces to the ground and exhaled. *Better*.

Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed a kid on a scooter. Maybe eight. Maybe nine. Helmet askew, mouth open. The boy stared at him, half awe, half alarm.

Percival met his gaze. “Remember that move,” he said. “You’ll need it around puberty.”

I-6

The Drink and the Ghosts

Percival crossed the square in silence. Southbound, through the old town's narrowing lanes, where bricks leaned in like they were sharing secrets. At the stone bridge, he slowed. The stream below was thin this time of year, just a trickle between Loughmere Channel and Little Nell's Pool.

He looked left. Deliberately. *Away from the pool.*

Home was just a few blocks ahead. One left turn, one right, twenty-seven steps up.

But not yet. Too much still buzzing in his fur. Head too full. The kind of full that made the next step feel heavier than it should be. So he kept walking. Up along the channel on Loughmere Promenade South, past the pump house, past the old newspaper stand with the sun-bleached headlines from last week still in place.

He slowed, then stopped. Stood there for a moment.

Then turned toward the bar.

The *Split Lip* stood at the eastern edge of Bellwick's town centre, right

where the old cobbles met the promenade along the Loughmere Channel. There were a few iron chairs and round tables out front. An optimistic nod to coastal weather, arranged like a Parisian café pretending not to be in England. The sign above the door said only one thing: *The Split Lip*. Most locals knew the story. Joe had been a competitive kickboxer in her twenties: multiple national titles, a stint in Prague, a photo in *Fighter's Weekly* with one eye nearly swollen shut. She named the place after her most frequent injury. A nod to her past, and a warning to anyone who forgot it.

Percival reached the door and rose onto his hind legs, one forepaw hooking the lower handle. With a practiced tug and a quick shoulder nudge, the door gave way. He slipped inside before it could swing back, let it fall shut behind him, and gave a quick glance to the back. His usual table was free.

He paused, as always, to take it all in. Inside, the bar looked narrow at first, low ceiling, dim light, but stretched deep beyond expectation. Wooden floors, scuffed clean. Four taps behind the bar: bitter, pale, stout, and a lager from the coast called *Grifter's Fog*. He'd sniffed it once. It smelled like salt and metal, or brownish yellow in his filing system.

No menu. Percival approved. Menus invited choices. Choices wasted time. No music either. The jukebox stayed silent unless someone fed it. And thankfully, no one had. He liked bars that didn't assume you needed distraction.

Percival caught the smell of old wood and cigarettes, even though smoking had been banned for years. Plenty of regulars made a point of exhaling one last drag inside, just to prove they could. Idiots.

Percival inhaled once more, filed the scent away. He finally padded past the bar without speaking. Joe wasn't there. Not that he could see much from his height. But the man on the second stool, the one who usually ogled her like it was a sport, was busy inspecting the bottom of his glass. Joe was definitely out of sight.

He took his place: third table from the end, far enough from the jukebox to think, near enough to the exit if someone got stupid. He gave a practiced hop, balanced briefly, then settled into a half-sit that wouldn't have worked for any other species. The chair was low, the table even lower, at least for someone with a long spine and four legs. The angle wasn't ideal.

But he'd adapted like he always did.

A few seconds later, the kitchen door swung open. Joe came out carrying a small crate. She used the kitchen for storage, no one had seen food come out of it in years. She spotted him, gave a quick wave and a raised eyebrow. He nodded once. That was enough. She turned to the counter and started heating.

He glanced around. Most people just watched.

He *observed*.

It was how you learned what changed. And what never did.

Two dockworkers at a side table were deep in football talk again. Same argument, new teams. A woman near the window was reading yesterday's paper. Must've been gripping: her tea hadn't been touched in a while.

And in the back corner, near the dartboard, three men were halfway through a game and well into their fifth round, judging by the number of empty pint glasses on their table. Loud voices, sloppy aim. The kind of laughter that didn't need a reason.

And the man on the second stool — Percival had labelled him *Ogleman* months ago — had lifted his eyes. Now they were glued to Joe, tracking her every move. As if staring was the only thing keeping her there. Ogleman's hand rested on a glass of something called a Cherry Dock Punch. Too sweet, too orange, with a plastic sword through the cherry like it had died for the garnish.

Percival's drink had no name. It wasn't even on the menu. It was warm oat milk, a drop of vanilla, a splash of something vaguely medicinal — herbal, maybe bitter — and exactly *three* mini marshmallows, one of which had to be pink.

It had started as a bet. Joe claimed she could make something he wouldn't finish. He proved her wrong, and ended up liking both the drink and the story behind it. No one else ordered it. And Joe probably wouldn't make it for anyone else. She usually served it in a ceramic vessel she'd had made for him. Not a cup. Not a bowl. Something in between. Low. Wide. Weighted. With a little ridge he could grip with his teeth, if needed.

He didn't need to. When she brought the drink, she placed it exactly where it needed to be.

“You’re early,” she said.

“I try not to be,” Percival replied. “But today feels like a four-marshmallow kind of day.”

Joe raised an eyebrow. “That bad?”

“It’s not the worst. But it’s trying.”

She paused. “Want me to bring you a fourth?”

He looked at the cup. “No,” he said. “I’m still in control.”

Joe gave the faintest smirk, then turned and walked back to the bar.

Percival didn’t drink alcohol. It dulled the edges he needed sharp. He leaned in and took a slow lick. Perfect, as always.

He remembered Julian, vaguely. Slim and tall for his age. Almost fifteen, if he remembered right. Growing into his frame too quickly. Straw-blond hair, usually tousled in that calculated, careless way some teenagers perfected. *Strikingly good-looking*. Clear skin, sharp jawline, perfect teeth. The kind of beauty that drew attention, and knew it. He always seemed confident. Effortless. Like someone who expected to be seen. Percival hadn’t paid more attention. Now he wished he had. Because even without knowing him well, he was sure of one thing:

It had been Julian’s idea. And Chloe had followed him there.

A chair scraped somewhere. Laughter. Loud, slurred, forced.

“Hey, hey, look who’s here,” a voice called out. “Paw Patrol’s finest. Come to sniff out our unpaid rounds?”

Percival didn’t move at first. Then he turned his head. Slowly.

The man who’d spoken was one of the dart players, the loudest of the three, and by now firmly into his sixth round. He was already grinning at his own joke, the kind of grin that tried too hard to land before the punchline did.

“No,” Percival said calmly. “I’m here to observe the long-term effects of poor decision-making in confined social environments.”

The man squinted. “Huh?”

His mates howled. One nearly slipped off his stool.

The drunk hesitated. For a moment, it looked like he might say something else. Push it, turn it into a thing. Then he glanced toward the bar. Joe was watching. Not frowning. Not moving.

The man hesitated. Then laughed, loud and late, and turned back to his friends. The moment passed, as did the tension.

Percival took another careful lick. The surface of the drink steamed gently, pale and steady.

Chloe had struggled with letters. Not words, just the things they were made of. They refused to stay still for her. *b* turned into *d*, *p* turned into *q*. Some days, even *e* looked suspicious. But she kept showing up. Thursday afternoons. Always five minutes early, always pretending it was by accident. He'd taught her strategies: slow tracking, finger pacing, breath timing. Last time, they'd read a ghost story together. She'd laughed when he stumbled over the word "fluorescent." Then asked what it meant. When he explained, she'd said: "Like the light that makes classrooms feel weird."

He hadn't corrected her. She'd been right.

He stared into the cup.

If energy never disappears, if it only changes form, then where did it go? All those hours. All that focus. The concentration she'd learned to hold like a thread in a storm. *Where was this energy now?*

Gone, like she was?

He didn't know.

The word *gone* lingered. Simple. Final. Small enough to fit in a whisper, heavy enough to split a person in half.

Gone.

He hated the word. Gone meant no more questions. No more looking. Gone let people stop caring. Sometimes, gone was just another word for missed. Or left behind. Or failed.

He knew what would come next.

And there it was.

The shift. The weight behind his ribs. He didn't fight it. Maybe he deserved it. So he sat still and took it.

Then it hit. *Hard*. Like a crack across the glass. Sudden. Blinding.

The name.

Etta.

He jolted by the shrieking sound inside his skull.

It hit differently than Chloe. Older. Heavier. Not a bruise, a buried thing. One he'd covered. Built a life around. Chloe was tragedy. But Etta was something else.

Something that went back to a *choice*.

His.

The air around him tightened. The edges of the room went soft. And somewhere, beneath it all, a thought began to form. One he hadn't let himself name before. That maybe history didn't repeat itself. Maybe it just... looked for similar shapes. Patterns it could fold itself into. Patterns ...

"Hey."

Joe's voice, low and close.

He blinked. She was standing beside him, cloth in hand, wiping a table that didn't need it.

"You're doing the *stare* thing."

He hadn't noticed. Not the glass in front of him. Not the sound of the jukebox sparking to life in the background. Not the way his shoulders had gone rigid.

He forced a breath — shallow, then deeper.

"Sorry," he said, and it came out rough.

Joe didn't press. She gave the surface one last swipe, then walked back to the bar.

He stayed still a moment longer. Let the tension bleed out through his paws. The air stopped buzzing. His chest loosened, not fully, but enough. The pressure sank back into whatever corner it always came from.

He drained the last of the warmth from the cup. Then he hopped down from the chair, a short drop, but his legs felt slower than usual. He gave a single nod in Joe's direction. She didn't wave this time.

He trotted toward the door. The steps felt more like his again.

Behind the bar, she opened a small green notebook and made a single vertical mark. The page was filled with them: quiet lines, nothing more. Percival always ordered the same thing. Month's end was close. Marvin would be by soon to settle up. There were quite a few marks.

Percival pushed the door open, stepped into the night air. Two men were standing outside, smoking. They didn't look at him. Across the street, the Loughmere Channel caught the last of the light. A couple walked arm in arm along the promenade. Further down, a woman leaned on the rail, staring into the dark water. She might have been looking for ducks. But there were none. They were all in Little Nell's Pool this time of year.

He thought briefly about walking along the water. Clearing his head. Then a gust of wind caught the corner of his coat — sharp, unwelcome. He changed his mind. Better to go home.

He was halfway down the path when he heard steps behind him. Not rushed. Hesitant.

“Mr Hoover?”

He turned.

A man — late fifties, maybe older — jacket too thin for the weather, eyes that didn't quite hold still.

“Sorry,” the man said quickly. “Didn't mean to, I just... heard you was askin' about what happened down by the docks.”

Percival paused. “You should speak to the police.”

“Can't,” the man said. “Not *again*. Got a bit of history, innit.”

He looked down, rubbing the back of his neck.

“But I thought maybe... I could help. Just a bit.”

Percival studied him. “Go on.”

“I live down Lowfield Rows,” the man said. “Been there twenty-odd years. That night, I was out, walkin'. Me wife, well. Needed air, y'know.”

He scratched his chin.

“Anyway, I cut through by the pump house. Back path. Quiet. That's when I saw 'em.”

“The two children from the Home,” Percival said. “Heading to the docks. That’s known.”

The man nodded. “Aye. Right.

Just... thing is,

not two.

Three.”

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