

# SNAKES & LADDERS COPPERHEAD BEGINS



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## CHAPTER 1

The strange, copper-coloured hood was almost alive in Bob Wayne's hands. Though the metal was strong enough to stop a sword strike or even a low-calibre bullet, it felt almost weightless as he rolled it between his fingers. When the man who had raised him, Governor Edward Bronson, had passed the strange mask to him, the story that came along with it had been almost as amazing.

In the Old West, Bob Wayne's grandfather had been something between an outlaw and a vigilante, making his living through clever, non-violent train and bank heists that sounded like something out of a Saturday matinee serial. Along with the clever capers that he pulled, he would also don the mask of the Copperhead to right wrongs to balance his criminality. Bob was torn, imagining a grandfather he'd never known as a criminal, but he was also proud to think that despite how he paid for it, he put most of that money to use fighting far worse crimes.

The Old West was a long time ago, but maybe Ouroboros City was due to mark the return of the Copperhead, all these decades later. World War II might be a couple of years in the rear view, but not all the bad guys had been in Nazi Germany. There were plenty of home grown bastards in need of some old fashioned justice, even in 1947.

Finding his mentor and the only father he'd ever known dead in his locked study had released something inside Wayne. Not that there was much to find, beyond a huge splatter of blood and a few scraps of flesh and bone. If not for the mangled remnant of Bronson's very distinctive cigarette lighter, and one nearly intact fingertip, the victim's identity would have been impossible to determine. How the assailant had entered, committed the gruesome murder and left the locked room without leaving so

much as a footprint in the blood had the police baffled. They had called in the FBI, since the victim was a state governor, but they would not arrive for at least another day and Wayne wasn't optimistic that they would be able to make more headway than the local cops.

Perhaps the gruesome nature of the murder had ignited an ancestral need to avenge evil, or it might have simply been a good man seeking justice, but whatever the motivation, the very next night, Bob Wayne donned the mask of the Copperhead and began his search for answers.

The hood was no longer the loosely draped mask his grandfather had worn. Bob Wayne had added some fine wire to sculpt it into something truly menacing that at once hugged and concealed his facial features. By turning the saggy hood into a close-fitted cowl, his peripheral vision was no longer impeded and quick head motions didn't dislodge it. A flared neck completed the serpent-like aspect he had created. The Copperhead once again stalked the night, ready to deal out justice and vengeance.

Uncle Ed had told Bob about his efforts to keep a consortium of racketeers from pushing through a bill to legalize gambling in the state. Bob wasn't personally anti-gambling, but if the mob got its hooks into a gambling scheme that the state backed, they could run crooked games, loan sharking and any number of other illegal activities under a squeaky-clean cover. His Uncle Ed was having none of it.

Bronson's willingness to stand up to the mob might have won him votes in the next election, but it had gotten him killed in the most gruesome way imaginable before he had the chance to make a single re-election speech. Bob Wayne wasn't going to let that stand. And neither would the Copperhead.

A D-Day vet and no stranger to the boxing ring, Bob Wayne had no fear of the common hoods that frequented the dingy, smoky pool hall. It was a well known gathering spot for lowlifes who preyed on the weak and

weak-willed. Until they got their legal digs up and running, the mob ran their rackets from the backrooms of a dozen places like this in Ouroboros City and another dozen even less savoury. The Eight Ball Hall was as good a place as any to start.

The bouncer laughed as he spotted the Copperhead. It was the expected reaction to Wayne's mask, so surprising was it to see a grown man in a full copper cowl. He had considered a more athletic outfit, but to carry his two automatic pistols, now concealed in shoulder holsters, and the other toys he kept in the improvised belt beneath his jacket would have meant hours, if not days, of sewing and modifying a suit to his needs. The simple, double breasted suit concealed a surprising number of sins.

Hooking a toe behind the man's knee as he strode towards him, Copperhead let the man's momentum bring his head to the perfect level for a swift uppercut as his leg buckled unexpectedly beneath him. So quickly did the mountainous doorman land on his back, out cold, that most of the room hadn't even turned towards the commotion. The few who had seen the viper-fast strike lay the man out spread the word around the room in short order. Seconds later, all eyes were on Copperhead.

The tension only held for a moment.

The nearest table was being used by two gorillas nearly, each as imposing as the bouncer, their tobacco stained fingers and missing teeth marking them as likely enforcers. Copperhead could smell the cheap whiskey from where he stood. One man, his pool cue still in his meaty fist, stalked towards the masked man, murder in his eyes.

Copperhead did not wait for him to arrive. A nearby chair slid solidly into the man's thighs, kicked hard as Copperhead darted to his left, dropped a hand to the green baize of the billiard table and propelled himself in an arc that brought his foot directly into the stumbling man's face. He let his momentum carry him over the table to land a second kick to the

solar plexus of the thug's beefy friend. The gap toothed goon folded around his midsection with a thunderous grunt, coughing up some of the cheap booze he'd just swallowed as he dropped to his knees.

Rolling off the table, Copperhead snatched a billiard ball in each hand and in rapid succession fired them at the two men at the next table, discouraging them from drawing their guns, one ball to one man's wrist, the other to an Adam's apple. Reaching into his own jacket, he pulled out his two 9mm pistols and set his back to the nearest wall, moving the guns calmly across the stunned patrons and calling, "I'm not here for any of you. I just want a name."

"No rats in here, goldy!" called an anonymous voice from a darkened corner of the smoky room. Copperhead could only see the man's silhouette from where he stood. The guy had an upturned beer bottle in his fist and was shaking it aggressively in Copperhead's direction.

A 9mm slug shattered the bottle, spraying the thug with shards of glass. Gasps ran around the room, followed by a silence as still as the grave. The wisp of cordite smoke from the barrel of Copperhead's gun wafted up to the grubby ceiling, a promise of worse if the masked man did not get what he was after.

Behind the bar, the barkeep gave him a long, hard stare and a curt, almost imperceptible nod. With every eye on him, no one but Copperhead could have seen the motion. The portly barkeep tossed a towel over his shoulder and used the motion to conceal a thumb that pointed to the door that obviously let out into the alley behind the pool hall.

"Tell your boss I'm coming for the man who ordered the hit on the governor last night. Copperhead will not rest until there is justice for that." Keeping his pistols trained on the room and its still patrons, Copperhead backed slowly out of the smoky pool hall. As he neared the door, the bouncer made to rise from his back where Copperhead had left him. The

man reached into his jacket as he sat up, his right hand emerging with a fistful of revolver.

Another strike of Copperhead's foot relieved him of it. As it spun in space above the two of them, the masked vigilante holstered his left hand gun and snatched the pistol out of the air in a single, sinuous motion. He hefted the heavy revolver and grunted his appreciation. It was a serious hand cannon, not a crummy little Saturday night special. He sighted down the gleaming barrel and gave the bouncer a wink. "Thanks! This might come in handy, big man."

An instant later, he was gone.

By the time they had recovered their wits enough to follow, all the goons found outside were parked cars and grimy streets.

## CHAPTER 2

In the alley behind the Eight Ball Hall, the portly barkeep emerged from the door with two heavy sacks of garbage that he soon tossed into the overflowing dumpster. Descending smoothly on the the nearby fire escape ladder, letting his weight pull it down to street level, Copperhead stepped lightly to the ground, one of his pistols loose in his left hand. This could well be a trap and both men knew it.

“Big risk coming in hot like that,” suggested the balding tap puller.

“I needed to get someone's attention. Tap dancing isn't my style.”

“What's with the mask?” asked the bartender, wiping his hands on his stained apron. “Don't those usually come with a cape?”

“I just want a name, not fashion tips,” growled Copperhead. He had considered a cape, but there just wasn't the time to test the idea. Back in the war, he'd heard tell of some special operative who wore a yellow one. He swore it drew enemy fire away from his body, so the story had gone. Spy... something. Basher, maybe? Spy Basher didn't sound quite right, but it was something like that.

“All the numbers go through Joey Gets,” said the retreating bartender, turning the door handle and cracking the door.

“That his real name?”

“Nope. Joey gets whatever he's sent for. Joey Gets.”

“Thanks,” offered the Copperhead.

“You thank me by not shooting up my place again. I hate mixing plaster, and I'll never get the paint matched.”

“Nobody in there cares,” said the Copperhead, not without sympathy.

Holding the door with his shoulder, he idly spun a wedding band on his left ring finger with his right hand as he met the Copperhead's eyes. “It

might be a crummy dive, but it's my crummy dive. Davey Wilkins," he said by way of introduction, tapping his chest. "I voted for the governor. Good man, trying to do right, near as I could tell."

"He was," answered the masked man, turning away. "When does Joey Gets come this way?"

"Right after I close up. Midnight on the nose, like clockwork."

"Do yourself a favour and tell him tonight's the last night he runs numbers out of your joint."

Opening the door, Davey shook his head with a laugh. "I like breathin', so I'm gonna pretend you didn't say that." The door thunked closed, solidly behind him and the Copperhead heard the sound of two heavy bolts being thrown from within.

He understood Wilkins' situation. The man likely had every cent wrapped up in the pool hall and if thugs like Joey Gets leaned on him, there wasn't much he could do but let them have their way. The cops hardly acknowledged that this end of town even existed. Ouroboros City was mostly made up of the wrong side of the tracks and all but a few of the city fathers even noticed except to take their cut. A small fish like Davey Wilkins could either play ball, or make his wife a widow.

On the stroke of midnight, a gleaming black sedan rolled smoothly to a stop at the back alley door. An impeccably dressed man, his hair greased back, and a toothpick clenched between his pearly white teeth below a pencil thin moustache, climbed nimbly out of the driver's side. A bored looking woman in an expensive, if revealing dress, lit a cigarette and stayed in the passenger seat, pulling the rear view mirror towards her to check her makeup.

Joey Gets strode to the locked door. He didn't knock.

The door opened for him, as if by magic. Davey knew the drill.

Ten minutes later, the sedan was tooling along the Ouroboros City

streets. It rode lower than it had when it pulled into the alley, but Jimmy Gets was too busy stroking the silk stocking on the knee of his passenger to notice.

The sedan pulled into a lot and a garage door rolled up to allow it in, the car hardly slowing as it cleared the opening. Before it had even screeched to a halt, the door was closing behind it. Joey Gets and his passenger climbed out. From the back seat, he retrieved two satchels, each obviously heavy enough to require some effort to move.

A table was set up in the garage and two more bored looking women sat behind it, while three goons, their jackets removed to reveal shoulder holsters holding automatic pistols, stood watching the doors alertly. Their sleeves were rolled up and all three looked tough and capable. From his vantage in the trunk, Copperhead could not see where Joey Gets went, but he heard him talking to another man, though he couldn't make out the words. Five men, all armed, plus the three women. Not good odds.

The Copperhead needed a distraction.

One of the women rolled a small cart across the room. On it, several stacks of bundled bills were arranged in a neat block. She lined it up beside two other, identical carts about ten feet beyond the trunk of the sedan.

Perfect.

Copperhead waited for her to return to her work at the table. A flip top cigarette lighter emerged from one of his pockets and with a flick and a toss, he started a nice little blaze. It took at least a minute to catch well enough to start belching smoke but seconds after it did, a commotion went up and all the goons and all the women came running to try to extinguish it. Their backs turned, Copperhead slipped out of the trunk and used the car's bulk to hide his movements as he manoeuvred towards better cover. A flight of stairs at the end of the warehouse led up to an office

and he could see figures moving around in there, watching as the underlings fought the tiny fire.

The next rung on his ladder.

Time to smoke them out.

### CHAPTER 3

The lighter wasn't his only one, fortunately. He had thought to bring two, just in case and he was glad he had. Arson hadn't been on his night's battle plan, but it was turning out to be an effective tool. Whoever Joey Gets was working for, they were closer to the one who paid for the hit on Uncle Ed, and Copperhead wanted them.

The satchels Joey had collected from the Eight Ball Hall were sitting, open and unattended on the counting table, their piles of loose bills spilling out onto the wooden surface. Unlike the tight and tidy stacks on the cart, the loose paper caught instantly and in seconds, hundreds of dollars were blazing merrily away.

One of the women caught sight of Copperhead as he retreated before the impromptu bonfire and screamed in alarm as she saw what he had done. The guards, Joey and the fifth man he hadn't seen until now turned, drawing their weapons. Copperhead was faster.

Two 9mm pistols barked, spitting lead as fast as he could squeeze it from them. Two men went down before they had fully pulled their own iron, Joey, his boss and one other guard diving clear. The women scattered like roaches in the light, screaming and flapping in their panic. He ignored them.

A sound above him alerted him to the overseers coming onto the little railed catwalk in front of their elevated office. Instinct had him diving for cover before the Tommy-gun opened up and peppered the spot where he'd stood with dozens of rounds, the ricochets flattening the front tires of Joey Gets' sedan and raising a clipped cry of agony from the unnamed boss that Joey had reported to.

Copperhead rolled until he was directly below the catwalk, firing four

quick shots straight up into the metal framework. One of the two men, the one with the Tommy-gun, tumbled over the railing and landed on the concrete floor in front of him with a wet thud. The Chicago Typewriter slid and bounced across the cement, coming to rest about ten feet away from Copperhead.

If the other guy up top didn't have a similar weapon, the Thompson would end the fight in a hurry. If he did, Copperhead likely wouldn't feel a thing. He dived for the Tommy-gun, swiping it up as he passed but not stopping to fire it. He barrelled ahead until he was far enough along the body of Joey Gets' sedan to have cover from the man still above him and the two remaining gunmen on the other side of the car.

Thanks to all the gunplay, the two blazes had well and truly caught now, sending licks of flame all the way up the walls as the fire spread to the wood of the carts and table, respectively. The skin of the warehouse was metal, but the beams and columns were a mix of wood and steel, and there were paper posters, and other flammables spread all along the walls and near enough to the piles of money that the fire was starting to spread. In another minute or two, there would be no getting the blaze under control.

Joey and the remaining guard popped up and hammered the sedan with a hail of lead, but they couldn't see exactly where Copperhead had gone to ground, so their fusillade only pounded holes in the car's body, not his. From above, a woman's voice called, "He's further back, near the trunk!"

Without hesitation, Copperhead dove towards the car's front, letting his right hand pistol lead the way, firing three quick shots, blindly, at the elevated office. He didn't expect to hit anything, but he couldn't have Miss Lady-in-charge picking him off as he avoided the stream of bullets that ventilated the sedan's aft at her instruction.

"Don't shoot where he was, you idiots!" she ordered, angrily. "Put your

lead where he's *going!*”

“Sorry boss,” came the distinctive voice Copperhead had identified as Joey Gets. “We can't see him!”

Copperhead poked his head up and fired a burst from the Tommy-gun at the voice. There was a choked gurgle and the last guard yelled, “Joey!” as the dead man tumbled back into the flaming money carts.

Joey's corpse slammed onto the blazing bills, scattering the carts and sending little bundles of burning cash flying in all directions. One made it as far as the open window of the back door of the sedan and in moments the upholstery was smoking and burning brightly. From above, footsteps hammered down the metal stairs, the woman yelling “Get out! The car's gonna go up! Get out!”

Smoke billowed so thickly that Copperhead lost sight of the one remaining gunman, but he wasn't important. If Copperhead couldn't see him, he wouldn't dare shoot in the vigilante's direction, for fear of hitting the boss lady in the blinding smoke. Copperhead cocked his head, listening for the target he was here for.

There!

A dive and a tackle and he was atop a fiercely hissing, spitting, clawing wildcat. The boss lady was no lightweight starlet, but she was no match for Copperhead. In a moment, he had her on her feet, one arm twisted up cruelly behind her as he marched her through the smoke and out the door. It had only cost him most of the skin on his left arm and a tooth that wiggled alarmingly when he stroked it with his tongue.

“Lady, I hope you know how to drive,” he growled as he frog-marched her towards a little cluster of cars tucked behind the warehouse. He saw that she was a tall, solidly built woman, somewhere in her early or perhaps mid-thirties, a mass of curly red hair framing a face with flint-hard, wide-set eyes and a broad nose that was dusted with freckles. Flames licked out

of the roof, sending smoke billowing into the night.

“You're a dead man, whoever you are,” she spat. Now that they were outside, in the light of the rapidly burning warehouse she turned awkwardly to try to meet his eyes. “Victor's gonna make you eat that stupid mask.”

“Victor,” he said, quietly.

Copperhead had a name.

## CHAPTER 4

Sitting in the passenger seat of the boss lady's drop-top roadster, Copperhead was grateful he had decided against adding a hat to his outfit. Given how fast she flipped through the gears and how lightly she treated the brakes, he'd have lost it long ago. Her mechanic must be a wizard of some sort, he thought, to keep the little convertible running so smoothly, considering how much punishment her lead foot was dealing out.

“Where are we going?” he demanded.

“You wanted the boss, I'm taking you to the boss. No skin off my nose if you have a death wish,” she scoffed, dropping to a lower gear as she slewed them through a sharp curve. The needle never dropped below sixty, the tires screaming in protest as they gave up their skin to keep the car on the road. She smoothly powered out of the curve, skipping a gear as she hammered the throttle. The needle slid past seventy and kept climbing.

Her mass of curly red hair fluttered in the wind, oddly stiff and tight. He watched her closely, but she didn't seem in the least intimidated by his presence or the Tommy-gun he rested in his lap, its business end pointed at her chest. She wore a barely feminine business suit, the knee-length skirt and low heels the only concession to her sex. From the waist up, the suit might have come from the same tailor as his.

Her hands were bare, and her nails, though they had taken a good deal of Copperhead's skin in their tussle, were immaculate. Not painted, simply polished and sharply pointed, to his chagrin. If she wore any makeup, it was so expertly and subtly applied that he could not detect it in the moonlight. She was beautiful in a hard, cold way, like a metal statue or sculpture.

Without a doubt, she was the best driver he'd ever seen. She handled

the roadster like a lover, coaxing performance from it that he could hardly believe, taking curves at speeds that made it hard for him to swallow. In this situation, he didn't dare show any outward concern, so he was grateful for how much of his face his strange mask covered.

“Up ahead. If you don't want to get us both turned into Swiss cheese, you'd better leave the chopper in the car when we stop. Victor's guys are twitchy,” she suggested.

“They won't shoot me with you so close,” Copperhead observed, forcing his dry mouth to form the words.

“You sure about that, Goldy?” she asked, giving him a serious look. “I'm replaceable. And you? They might ventilate you, just for wearing that,” she finished, briefly lifting her right hand from the gear shift to gesture at his cowl.

“Copperhead,” he corrected. “I am the Copperhead.”

“Your name will be 'Copper-dead' if you get out of the car carrying iron,” she mocked.

They sped through an open gate and the tires crunched as they skidded to a halt on the tidy gravel drive that looped around a massive stone fountain dominating a perfectly manicured lawn. Four men stood on the large, curved staircase that led to a massive wood and metal door that would have looked at home somewhere in medieval Europe in the Dark Ages. Torches, actual flaming torches, not electric lights, blazed away on either side of the huge portal, adding to the illusion of stepping back in time. The mansion was five stories high, at least, at its centre. The wings curved off and out of sight. Whoever owned it lacked for nothing, except perhaps humility.

Each of the four guards remained impassive as the pair climbed out of the roadster. Seeing the bulges beneath the men's tidily tailored suits, Copperhead took the boss lady's advice and reluctantly left the Tommy-gun in

the footwell. Unless he wanted to unleash a torrent of bullets as a greeting, there was no way he could take four armed and alert men out in the open like this. Even whipping the chopper up as they arrived would not guarantee four clean kills before they returned fire. While he was sure the Copperhead cowl might take a glancing blow from a bullet or two without penetrating, he wasn't otherwise bulletproof. At all.

“Copperhead, meet the boys,” said the woman, sliding gracefully around the nose of the roadster to stand beside him. Unexpectedly, she hooked an arm in his and started up the stairs. “Boys? Meet Copperhead. He wants to meet the boss.”

The men turned to watch them pass, but made no move to block their path. As they topped the stairs, the huge door split cleanly down the middle and swung silently inward, inviting them inside.

“Come on, masked man,” the woman said, brightly. “Victor isn't someone you keep waiting.”

Inside, two more armed men stepped in front of them. These two were all business, polite but firm. They gestured for Copperhead to raise his arms to be frisked.

“Shoulder holsters, either side,” he offered, casually. “A few toys in the belt, too.”

One man stood back, a hand in his jacket, ready to pull his pistol, while the other relieved the vigilante of his weapons and tools. The whole belt was unlatched and pulled out from under his jacket. Fortunately, he had a second, more conventional belt to hold up his trousers, which the guard was kind enough to leave him.

Once he was disarmed, the two men gestured to a grand stairwell that led up two full flights without turning. It was a serious climb, the stairs unusually deep. Copperhead could feel a burning in his thighs by the time they reached the landing. His companion didn't seem at all challenged by

the climb, flashing him a mocking smile as they reached the top.

“Victor likes to look down on the world,” she said, by way of explanation.

Across the landing, another set of massive doors, these more elegant than imposing. They swung silently inward, and Copperhead could see a man, dark-haired and sporting a neatly trimmed, dark beard, seated behind a massive, oaken desk.

The layout was not unlike pictures he'd seen of the Oval Office, with two couches set up facing each other, a small table between them, in front of the desk. On one couch, a chubby, balding man in glasses and a rumpled suit sat, sipping from a cut crystal glass, a decanter of something amber coloured on the table in front of him. Over his rumpled suit, incongruously, he wore a white lab coat.

“Perdita, my dear,” called the bearded man from his massive leather chair, “I didn't expect you this evening. And who is your interesting friend?”

“This,” she chucked a thumb over her shoulder at Copperhead, “is Copperhead. He burned down the warehouse and all of the week's takings.” As she spoke, two men, the ones who had opened the double doors, apparently, stepped out from behind those doors. Each had his pistol drawn, held with the muzzle pointed at the floor, hands crossed atop it, index fingers resting along the barrels of the automatics. Good trigger discipline, Copperhead noted, knowing that meant that both men were professionals and likely excellent shots with their weapons.

“And why, Mr. Copperhead, would you do such a thing?” asked the man. “We have never met. What could I have done to deserve such violence at your hands?”

“Victor, I presume?” asked Copperhead, working to control his voice. The bearded man inclined his head in acknowledgement. “I believe you

had someone close to me killed.”

“I’m afraid you’ll need to be a great deal more specific, Mr. Copperhead,” said Victor, sincerely. “Lives in Ouroboros City are cut short all the time.” The man on the couch chuckled over his glass, earning a warning glare from Victor. He ignored it and took a swig. “Business, you understand?” finished the bearded man, his tone languid.

“Governor Edward Bronson. A good man. Killed at your order, I believe.”

“Indeed. The Governor was most uncooperative,” said Victor. He gestured at the two men. They closed on Copperhead. “A simple signature on a piece of paper was all I required, but your friend would not agree to sign the bill. Such a waste, over such a minor issue.”

“Money. A good man’s life for more money,” spat Copperhead, warily watching the two men approach.

“Not money, Mr. Copperhead.” When he saw the puzzled look on what he could see of the vigilante’s face behind his mask, he added, “I don’t expect you to understand. The bill will give my organization access to those with power. Money is only the means to an end. Casinos attract powerful people. If those people lose enough, they are willing to trade some of that power for the opportunity to lose even more.”

“Blackmail then,” growled Copperhead. “It amounts to the same thing. You killed a man for your greed.”

“Not one man, Mr. Copperhead.”

“Is that a threat?” demanded Copperhead, angrily. The two guards were within arm’s reach now.

“Hardly. You interfered with my operation, tracked my minions to my operation, to me, personally. Your life was forfeit the moment you took Perdita here hostage.” Victor gestured at the two men and each took hold of one of Copperhead’s arms.

“And now, you will learn how your friend died. First hand.”

The chubby man on the couch chuckled again. When he met Copperhead's eyes, his chuckle became a full-throated laugh. The two gunsels spun him around, roughly and marched him out of the ornate office. The little man's laughter followed him down the stairs.

## CHAPTER 5

Down the grand staircase and into the bowels of the massive mansion, the two gunmen led him, their pace almost too fast to keep up with. His arms pinned, and each man wider and beefier than he, Copperhead had little choice but to be dragged along. Soon enough, the echoing laughter was beyond his senses.

They hustled him into an elevator, just large enough for the three of them and no more. Only one button on the panel and one of his captors stabbed at it as the doors closed. Rather than turn as most would in an elevator, they kept him facing the back wall of the chamber and a few moments later, that wall was revealed to be a second door, opening into a brightly lit hall.

The cold realization that he was about to die washed over him, welling up from his belly and sending a barely controllable shiver into his bones. Copperhead felt dizzy in a way he had never experienced, not even on the beaches of Normandy. Unlike the abstract, almost surreal experience of running into the teeth of enemy gunfire, surrounded by hundreds of his fellows doing the very same thing, this was death he could not deny. It was just there, at the end of the hall. Its icy fingers reached through his tissues and twisted. And kept twisting.

Like a serpent.

One of the goons opened the door to a laboratory space, the temperature within was almost cold enough to frost his breath. Victor's voice came over a loudspeaker, hidden somewhere in the ceiling. "Gentlemen, please secure our guest to the feeding rack."

The two men shoved him towards a strange, boxlike frame and secured his arms and legs in metal sleeves, designed to hold someone in place in an

X configuration. His arms spread above him, his legs spread just wide enough to allow him to retain his balance. Copperhead was helplessly pinned.

He looked wildly around the chamber, hoping to find something to help him escape, but beyond racks of test tubes and unfamiliar scientific apparatus, the only other item in the room was a strangely fogged bell jar holding what looked like a tiny tree. From one limb dangled a lumpy, misshapen cocoon, mottled green and red. No help from that quarter.

One of the two men scooped up the jar at Victor's instruction and then the two men, now satisfied that he was secure on the ominously named 'feeding rack', hurried from the room. He heard the door latch securely and then Victor's voice once again came through the hidden speaker, "Mr. Copperhead, I would like to introduce you to Dr. Moreau's greatest creation. We call it the Ripper."

Copperhead looked around but saw nothing in the room that might fit the description.

"It will take some time for the room to warm sufficiently to allow it to make an appearance. Now that you have compromised my little enterprise, the local authorities will undoubtedly follow along presently, once they trace the ownership of the warehouse you destroyed. By the time they arrive, this place will be in a similar condition, but you won't live long enough to burn with it."

A hiss and a clunk followed and Copperhead's keen senses told him that the sound had come from an array of pipes and tubes in one corner of the room. One large canister was labelled LOX and another Freon. Liquid oxygen and freon, coolants, he knew.

A whirl followed and warm air wafted around the room, raising the temperature swiftly. A bead of perspiration trickled down his cheek and onto his neck beneath the copper cowl, nothing to do with the temperature. He

pulled and struggled against his bonds. His gloved hands and leather shod feet could not possibly pass through the narrow metal sleeves that held him at wrist and ankle.

Across the room, a hatch on the wall at floor level rattled. His eyes locked on the spot. The door popped open and for just a moment, a mottled green and red shape appeared in the opening. Then the lights went out.

“Apologies, Copperhead,” came a new voice. Perdita. “We are shutting down the operation, and the fire control system is tied to the lighting in the basement areas. You'll be meeting one of Dr. Moreau's magnificent friends in the dark.”

“Justice will find you both, Perdita,” he called, with more bravado than he felt.

“Justice? When Victor and I finish our work, we will *be* justice.” She paused and for a moment he thought perhaps she had severed the connection, but then her voice returned, smugly cool. “You believe yourself the hero, but the clenched fist of evolution will remake the world. One day soon, men like you will see the error of their misguided ways.”

If she said anything further, he didn't hear it. His senses were suddenly and completely focused on the touch of something large and probing on the toe of his shoe. Whatever it was, it was moving slowly, almost gently, but it wrapped around the metal sleeve that held his ankle and *climbed*.

The sensation was oddly familiar. It felt like his leg was being wrapped in a man's arm, an incredibly flexible arm, a bicep thicker and stronger than the muscles of his athletic legs. It didn't squeeze, but he could tell that if it chose to constrict, it would crush him like a rotten piece of fruit in his fist. If it reached his chest, he knew it could easily stop him from expanding his lungs.

As the wrapping, grasping whatever-it-was reached the top of his thigh,

it paused its progress. He felt a subtle shift, and dozens of sharp, intense pricks of pain all along the length of his leg. The wrapped form reversed its course and he felt those needles dig into his flesh. In his mind's eye he realized how Uncle Ed had met his gruesome, bloody fate. Whatever was crawling and squirming its way up his leg had teeth on the *outside* of its body.

The Ripper.

An image of the garter snakes he and his friends had plucked from the grass as children, daring each other to pick them up and chase the girls with them wrapped tightly around their hands. The little wriggling bodies had been surprisingly strong for being so whip-thin, and he now understood the sensations wrapping his leg. Some kind of serpent, twisted by Dr. Moreau's science. A snake, he realized, might find its way into a locked study and out again, without leaving a trace. The cold laboratory now made sense as well.

Such a creature would be helpless in the cold.

The knowledge would do him no good if the thing got its coils around him and sank its unnatural teeth into his flesh. In his near panic, the cold, clammy feeling he had experienced in the corridor returned.

Only it didn't abate this time. He felt icy fingers reach out from his torso, stabbing along the length of his arms and legs. While he could barely move, he was able to clench his fists and... yes, his flesh was noticeably cooler than it should be. Spreading his hand open, he could feel that cold spread, as if he was shedding the heat of his blood.

The thing wrapped around his leg noticed the change too. It had once again started to climb its way towards his torso, sliding uncomfortably between his legs, pushing its strength firmly against his manhood in a bizarrely pleasant sensation. As the strange, unnatural coolness permeated Copperhead's flesh, it hesitated, loosening its grip almost imperceptibly.

Again, he struggled against his bonds, though he knew it to be hopeless. Only as he tugged down hard against the metal sleeve that held his right arm, this time he felt his joints give and compress in a way he could not readily describe. He tightened his thumb against his palm and curled his hand into the best approximation of a cylinder he could manage and tugged again, harder. There! His hand stretched and folded enough to slip inside the sleeve!

A moment of panic as he realized his palm was now compressed within that unyielding metal shackle, but another hard yank pulled it free completely. The room was so dark he could not see his hand clearly, but it flexed normally and the fingers against his face only felt cold, but otherwise perfectly normal. Teeth gritted, he ignored the sensations coming from around his waist as the hesitant monster reacted to his movements. He tucked his left thumb against his palm, compressed his hand as best he could and yanked. This time he did not hesitate and the strange stretching, compressing sensation came and went almost instantly as his hand pulled free of the shackle.

Impossible.

For the moment, he put that thought to one side and concentrated on his left leg, the one unencumbered by the growing weight of the writhing beast now again making progress up his torso. Pointing his toe and subtly shifting his weight to his right leg, he pulled hard with his knee and calf. His shoe slipped free and pushed against the collar of the metal sleeve that held his ankle. Even his sock couldn't fit in the round space that held his flesh. But somehow, his bare foot slid through the shackle.

He flexed his ankle, feeling his toes wiggle in the warm air of the room. He rested the foot on the top of the sleeve for balance; the metal felt warm in contrast to the cold of his flesh.

And now the problem of his unwelcome company took hold of his at-

tention. Every time the creature hesitated and let itself retreat, he felt the pricking of its impossible teeth along its length, digging painfully into his flesh through the material of his suit. Some places hurt more than others, he noted with concern.

He didn't dare try to free his right leg. The motions of his efforts had reawakened the creature's interest in him. As his body temperature had dropped, the thing had almost begun to release its hold on him, but now it was again fully engaged in wrapping him in its piercing embrace. He was almost free, knew he could free his other leg at will, despite the strangeness of that, but he was afraid to move a muscle.

Now what?

Holding himself as still as he could, bracing his weight against the three welded shackles that had held him, he tried to draw that strange, icy coldness through his blood again. It built more slowly this time, but somehow he could feel it working, even direct it after a fashion. He focused his attention on his torso, the warmest part of him next to his copper-covered head. Cold, he thought fiercely. Cold and still, his lungs, his heart, his muscles slowing, stiffening with the icy, immobilizing chill, as if the heat leeches from him like a snake in the snow.

Around his waist, the thing stilled. Its grip... yes... it loosened, just a little.

He directed more attention to his legs, letting the cold permeate the muscles and bones there, allowing the heat of his blood to dissipate and drain away.

Instead of retreating, which he had feared it might, the slithering, impossibly muscular length of it moved, but laterally. He felt the loop around his waist loosen further as the serpentine length of it quested for the metallic frame that held him upright. It reached it and the grip slackened further as the thing pulled itself across and away from his body. After a

few more minutes, he was entirely free of its scaly, toothy grasp.

He remained still for a long while. When he heard the hatch clatter as the Ripper retreated from the laboratory, he shifted his balance and yanked his right foot through the confines of the metal sleeve on that ankle.

Free.

A muffled scream told him that his tormentor had found freedom of its own.

Time to move. His control over the strange cooling he had used to deceive the Ripper was growing. With a steady effort, he was able to warm his muscles to their normal heat and vigour in a few moments. He slipped his shoes back on and stepped to the door. Listening, he could hear nothing beyond.

What he saw when he cracked the door confirmed that the Ripper had indeed been responsible for the murder of his dear uncle. In the light of a single emergency bulb, the pool of blood and flesh that was splattered across the floor was larger and fresher than what had remained of his uncle, but the pattern was identical. A trail where the beast had slithered through the blood was even now filling itself in as the scarlet fluid rejoined into a smooth, almost pretty pool that showed no evidence of the Ripper's passing.

Copperhead had no choice but to step through what remained of his two captors as he made his way back to the little elevator. The car was still on this level, and he stepped within, half expecting to hear Victor or Perdita's mocking voice over the loudspeakers, but no one challenged him as he stabbed the single button. The doors closed behind him and a moment later, the doors ahead of him opened onto a hellscape. The mansion was ablaze, and he despaired that all his efforts might have been for nothing. Just making his way through the unfamiliar halls would have been a challenge under normal circumstances. With the entire, massive structure en-

gulfed in an inferno, he stood little chance.

Still, he was alive and that meant he could still fight. He chose the straightest course and barrelled out of the little elevator car, holding one arm protectively over his eyes as he raced ahead. All he needed was a window or a door. The hall ended and he jinked left, not thinking, simply reacting. One direction was as good as another, since he had no idea where he was within the building.

Something told him it was slightly cooler to his left, he realized. Not a sense of heat on his skin, but more like a sensation tickling the inside of his brain. He had never felt anything remotely like it, but he knew that the flames were more intense to his right than his left, though he could discern no difference with any sense he could name. He powered ahead, following this new instinct.

Cooler air ahead.

Cooler still to his right now.

And there! A window.

Crossing his hands before his face, he dove toward it, tucking his head as best he could. A crashing, slashing instant later and he was falling. The second floor!

Damn.

No time to think. Tuck, roll. And roll.

He slammed to a stop, arms and legs splayed akimbo, his back uncomfortably pressed up against a low stone wall. He tumbled and writhed until he found his feet. This must be the far side of the house or perhaps all the way at the rear of the structure. The driveway was nowhere in sight. Above him, windows exploded outward as the flames engulfed the rooms behind them, glass tinkling hotly to the ground, little tendrils of smoke puffing up where bits of hot metal or smouldering wood met the damp grass.

In the shadows, Copperhead saw a massive, slithering shadow for just a moment and then it disappeared into the dense forest that surrounded this side of the massive, burning mansion.

The Ripper had fed well. Copperhead gathered himself and headed off in the opposite direction, though. Just in case it still had room for dessert.

## EPILOGUE

Three days later, the police had mopped up what was left of Victor's operation. The mansion had burned to the foundations, apparently rigged to do exactly that rather than leave any evidence of the scientific work in the basement or whatever else he, Perdita and Dr. Moreau had been up to. The bodies at the warehouse had been identified and the FBI had found a fingerprint on the windowsill of Governor Bronson's study, matched to one Joey 'Gets' King, a local racketeer with ties to the East Coast mob.

Bob Wayne watched all this happen in the newspapers and gave the reporters who swarmed around him no comment when asked about what he thought of the investigation into the death of his mentor and childhood guardian. His tale wouldn't have been believed and Copperhead had not closed the case, though both the FBI and the local authorities had declared it solved.

Unsure of his next steps, Bob Wayne retreated to his own study, poring over newspapers from all over the country, hunting for a whiff of Victor's organization. The phrase Perdita had used as she was condemning him to death, "The Clenched Fist of Evolution," struck him as too regimented and formal to be a mere turn of phrase, so he kept his eyes peeled for anything that smacked of weird scientific experimentation as well.

When he wasn't pursuing the investigation, he was exploring his strange new abilities, trying to find their limits and understand their function. After a few days of working at it, he could lower his body temperature a dozen degrees almost instantly, at will. His bones seemed looser, though the muscle that encased them was also strangely stronger. He could not only pull his hands out of tight handcuffs but also squeeze his entire frame into surprisingly tight spaces, though the effort was painful and dis-

concerting. Heat also seemed to be something he could sense, though through what mechanism he could not say for certain.

All of these abilities spoke of reptilian or ophidian roots. He had heard of the so-called 'supermen' who exhibited strange abilities, but Bob Wayne had never truly believed any of the stories. During his time as a soldier, he had heard so much gossip among the troops that he had learned to tune out all but what he could verify for himself.

This he could verify, and it both fascinated and terrified him.

He wondered if it might be something in his family tree. He knew that his father, the late Garnott Wayne had been one of two brothers. He had seen pictures of his father and his uncle Thomas, though he had never met his uncle or his cousin. Unlike Garnott Wayne's modest life, Thomas Wayne had been quite famous and his family and their tragic history were well known. If such strange abilities plagued that branch of the family, surely the press would have uncovered such a thing long ago.

Of his mother's family, Bob knew next to nothing. She and his father had married; little Robert was born a year later and then they had tragically died in a horrific train crash that had claimed dozens of lives, but somehow, miraculously left little Robert unscathed. He didn't even have any pictures of the woman.

The more he thought about it, the more he wondered if perhaps her side of the family might not be the answer. While his father's history wasn't as well documented as that of his more famous brother, Ed Bronson had known his father well enough to foster his orphaned son, the two men having grown up together. In all of Uncle Ed's stories about Garnie Wayne, nothing remotely lizard-like had ever come up that Bob could recall.

The only detail he knew about his mother was how she and his father had met. She had been a student on an archaeological dig in South Amer-

ica when his father had been making his way as a roustabout in Venezuela in the years after World War I. A few hours of research pulled the half forgotten name out of his memory. Another day of research in the library gave him the lead he needed.

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The telephone in the parlour was there more for show than actual use. In his old age, it rarely rang. A thin layer of dust had accumulated on the receiver, the violence of the ring sending motes of it dancing into a shaft of light that split the dark room cleanly in two, where it entered through a crack between the heavy drapes.

More annoyed than curious, the old man heaved himself out of his deep leather chair, marked his place and closed the book he had not been reading before setting it beside his half empty brandy glass.

Seeing the motes catching the light, he was about to mention the state of the dusting to Jessie, only then remembering that she had been gone for... what was it? Three years now. The dust would have annoyed her, sending her on one of her much missed tirades about the state of the place. No one could terrify a household staff like his dear, departed, Jessie.

Another insistent ring broke his reverie. He lifted the receiver and in the British tradition answered, "Challenger," almost as a question.

There was a long, crackling pause. Then a tinny, faraway voice came down the line, asking, "Professor George Challenger?"

"This is Professor George Edward Challenger. To whom am I speaking?"

"You don't know me, sir. I'm calling from America, Ouroboros City, to be exact." The city's name meant nothing to the professor, so he waited for the man to finish.

“My name is Bob Wayne. I believe you knew my mother.”

## **THE BEGINNING**