

## Prologue

The man propped his motor scooter against a gravestone and dusted the snow from his jacket. He patted his pockets. Good. Everything was in place. He tossed his leather satchel over a shoulder and tramped along the avenue of bare trees that led out of the Grove Street cemetery.

Twice he almost lost his footing as he shuffled along icy paths into the campus of Yale University. Alphonse hated winter. Sure, he had natural insulation to fend off the chill, but his joints were no longer up to it. From November to February, he creaked. He had promised himself a holiday in Fiji: two weeks of sun and sand, a hammock under a palm tree, cocktails with tiny paper parasols. But then he received the phone call. And he was

yet to say ‘no’ to the person on the other end of the line.

Alphonse huffed a plume of steam into the morning air as his boots scuffed and skated across the courtyard outside the rare-books-and-manuscripts library. The Yale campus, in America’s north-east, sat under a fresh dump of snow.

Alphonse paused in front of the large box-like building with its sides designed like an albino checkerboard. He adjusted his beret and leaned on the revolving door. He greeted the woman at the information counter cheerily, but her manner held all the warmth of the courtyard outside.

‘Professor Peregrine, you say?’

‘That’s right,’ Alphonse said with a wry smile. ‘Just like the falcon.’

The woman ran a finger down a list of visiting academics. ‘You don’t seem to be here. Which university are you from?’

‘The Van Den Hoofdakker Institute,’ he said with a mild accent. ‘In the Netherlands.’

The woman looked up through over-sized glasses, then back down to the list. ‘Mm-hmm,’ she said. ‘And you’re here for the Voynich Manuscript?’

Alphonse ran a hand across his round belly. This was going to be too easy.

‘You’ll need to check your bag in at the cloakroom,’ the woman said.

Alphonse’s heart skipped a beat. ‘I have to check

my satchel?’ he said. ‘That is most inconvenient. My notebooks. My pencils.’ He raised a corner of his mouth and gave his head a cocky wobble. ‘Surely some exception can be made’—he looked at a nametag pinned to the woman’s cardigan—‘Patricia. *Such a pretty name.* Can’t we bend the rules, just this one time? Patricia?’

The receptionist didn’t blink. ‘No.’

Alphonse’s brow wrinkled. This one was troublesome. But he had made a career of sweet-talking his way past the Patricias of this world.

‘Perhaps, Patricia, you and I could have coffee sometime?’ His eyes sparkled as he leaned an elbow on the counter. ‘I assume you don’t have a boyfriend?’

The receptionist glared at him through feline eyes. ‘Professor Peregrine,’ she said. ‘You can either check that bag in or you can go back to the Van Den Hooffendacken—’

‘It’s Van Den Hoofdakker,’ Alphonse corrected. ‘In the Netherlands.’

The receptionist gave him a look that said she really did not care.

‘Uh—I’ll check my bag in,’ Alphonse said. ‘Could you tell me where the nearest men’s room might be?’

Without shifting her gaze, the woman pointed a pencil towards the far end of the library.

Five minutes later, Alphonse was back at the counter, a notebook and pen in his hand.

‘I’ve checked my bag in, Patricia,’ he said brightly.

The receptionist considered him with a wary eye. ‘But not your coat?’

Alphonse ran a hand across his belly, which appeared to be somewhat larger than it had been when he entered the library. ‘I feel the cold,’ he said.

‘Mm-hmm.’ The receptionist pushed herself to her feet. ‘This way.’

Alphonse followed her down a spiral staircase to a vast open-plan study area. Academics and students, their heads bowed over ancient texts, occupied banks of study cubicles. The receptionist led Alphonse to a large glass-walled room and opened the door. On a desk in the middle of the floor was a roughly bound nest of papers, about the size of a school scrapbook. It appeared to be extremely old.

‘No smoking, no eating, no drinking,’ the receptionist said. ‘And wear these at all times.’ She held out a pair of white cotton gloves. ‘The Voynich Manuscript is at least five hundred years old and is one of a kind. It is very fragile.’ She pointed to a row of archive boxes that lined the floor along one of the glass walls. ‘All these documents are extremely rare. They’re waiting to go back to the stacks.’ She leaned down until her nose was a bare centimetre from Alphonse’s face. ‘Do not touch them.’

‘Of course, my dear Patricia,’ Alphonse said, with a tiny bow. ‘You can rely on me.’ He glanced at the walls of glass that allowed an uninterrupted view of the library and coughed into his hand. ‘It is somewhat like the bowl

for the goldfish, yes? I prefer to do my research without distraction. Is there somewhere more...private?’

The receptionist looked at Alphonse as if he was an untrustworthy ten-year-old in a lolly shop. She flicked a switch by the door. A tiny electric motor whirred and a bank of navy curtains was drawn around the walls. As the final pane was blocked off, she said, ‘It’s double-glazed. Soundproof. Satisfied?’

‘Only one thing could make me happier,’ Alphonse said with a wink.

The woman narrowed her eyes. ‘No smoking. No eating. No drinking.’ She closed the door, leaving Alphonse to himself.

The moment the door clicked shut, the smile left Alphonse’s face. He tossed his notebook into a corner, pulled on the white gloves and settled onto a desk chair. He cracked his knuckles and took a deep breath.

Gently, he opened the manuscript cover. The pages were thick between his fingers, more like pressed cloth than paper. They were covered with an array of shapes and patterns. It was an alphabet in a language the likes of which Alphonse had never seen. Page after page was filled with intricate symbols. Hand-painted illustrations showed a curious mix of dancing maidens and bizarre plants. There were pictures of odd-shaped vegetables and trees with root systems like clutching skeleton fingers.

Alphonse closed the manuscript with the greatest of care, and ran a finger along a wire cable that tethered it

to a metal ring clamped to the desktop. The manuscript itself was attached to a thick Kevlar board—it would be impossible to remove the document without destroying it.

Alphonse studied the security set-up. ‘Titanium,’ he mumbled to himself. He unbuttoned his coat and shrugged it from his shoulders. Underneath he wore a false belly strapped to his stomach like a kangaroo’s pouch. He tore open a velcro fastening and fished inside, removing a thick roll of cloth tied at the middle.

Nimble fingers untied the bundle. What appeared to be a can of lemonade was nestled inside.

Alphonse picked up the can and unscrewed a concealed top. It popped off with a hiss. Inside was a tiny valve and tap handle. He took a mechanical pencil from his pocket and bit off one end to reveal a long needle-like point. He jabbed it into the valve to form a nozzle and opened the gas tap. A blue flame ignited, sharp as a scalpel.

Alphonse laid the cloth across the manuscript as a fire blanket, taking care to ensure the ancient masterpiece was completely covered. Then, pulling dark glasses over his eyes, he directed the flame onto the cable.

A shower of sparks sprayed across the desk. After a moment, the cable glowed red. Alphonse flicked off the gas tap and pulled out a tiny silver chisel and hammer from his pouch. A gentle blow from his lips flared the hottest point of the cable. He placed the edge of the chisel onto the hot spot and struck it with the hammer. The

cable broke neatly in two with a *ping* like the sound of a crystal glass being flicked with a fingernail. Alphonse smiled to himself.

Then he looked up. The room was on fire.

Sparks had ignited the archive boxes, turning the ancient documents into a million-dollar bonfire. Alphonse's eyes popped at the sight of the wall of flame just metres away.

'Eep!' he cried.

Smoke rose up the curtains. Alphonse's gaze shot to the ceiling above the door. The red eye of a smoke detector blinked back at him.

'Eep!'

The grey haze climbed higher. An archive box exploded in flames. Alphonse heaved the desk chair across the carpet and jumped onto the seat, riding it like a high-rise skateboard. He took a leap and flung out his hands as far as his stubby arms would allow and managed to wrap his fingers around the smoke detector just as the first piercing *PEEP* sounded. For a second he hung there, suspended from the little white box on the ceiling. The smoke rose higher.

*PEEP!*

Alphonse swung his legs furiously, trying to wrench the alarm from its moorings. In mid-swing, it gave way. Alphonse landed on his back with an *oomph*. He looked with satisfaction at the alarm in his hand. Then it let forth with a stabbing *PEEP-PEEP-PEEP*.

Alphonse clambered to his feet, hurled the alarm to the floor and stomped on it again and again. Each blow forced out another piercing *PEEP*. Smoke choked the room. Alphonse doubled his efforts to kick the alarm to death. Finally the little white box gave out its last, feeble squawk, and Alphonse stumbled across to the desk, hands wafting smoke from his eyes. He sighed with relief.

The Voynich Manuscript lay safe beneath the fire blanket. But smoke still billowed from the archive boxes. Alphonse rummaged in his kangaroo pouch and pulled out another soft-drink can. He fumbled with the false end and out popped a short hose. He shook the can and let loose a torrent of foam towards the burning boxes. But the surge shot the can from Alphonse's grip and he stumbled back. His foot landed in a pool of white froth, sending him reeling to the floor. As he landed, for the second time, he was suddenly aware of two things: his mini fire extinguisher was spinning wildly on the table, coating the curtains with a blanket of expanding foam; and the room was growing lighter. Then he noticed the whirr of a tiny electric motor.

The curtains were opening.

Alphonse stared in horror as the glass walls were slowly laid bare. He clawed himself upright and cast a panicked eye to the room beyond. He was surrounded by scores of students at their desks. Behind him, the archive boxes continued to belch smoke like factory stacks. The



fire extinguisher farted out the last of its foam with sufficient force to shoot it across the room. It ricocheted off the side of Alphonse's head.

The curtains completed their journey.

The fishbowl was fully exposed.

Alphonse stared for a manic second at the acres of academia around him. Pens scratched on paper; fingers tapped on computers. No one raised an eye.

There followed a frenzied beating of the switch box as Alphonse tried to get the curtains moving again. After a flurry of swearing, the electric motor sparked into life, sending the drapes on a torturously slow path back around the room.

Alphonse dived towards the table and whipped off the fire blanket. He yanked a protective sleeve from his pouch and slid the manuscript inside. Shoving the package down the front of his trousers, he searched for his coat and found it on the floor. In seconds he had the coat on, and the oxy torch, the fire extinguisher and the gloves stuffed into his fake belly. He took a deep breath and buttoned himself into place. Apart from the thick smear of foamy ash across his face and clothes, he looked mostly unremarkable.

Alphonse took a step towards the door. His foot slid in a mush of foam and parchment and he landed bottom-first in the stack of smouldering archive boxes.

*'Eeep!'*

He bounced to his feet and was out the door. He

scuttled across to the spiral stairs just as the first fingers of smoke curled into the main study area. He threw a casual ‘Thank you, Patricia,’ over his shoulder as he breezed past the information desk and out through the revolving doors.

It was brisk outside—far colder than when he had arrived. He lowered his head and charged across the courtyard, past a cluster of wide-eyed college girls who stared after him as he disappeared around a corner in the direction of the graveyard.

‘The Falcon has swooped again,’ Alphonse said to himself with a grin of triumph.

It was only after he threw his leg over his scooter and plopped into the saddle that he realised the backside had burned out of his trousers. In an instant, the soft skin of his buttocks froze to the ice-covered seat.

Witnesses would later tell police that the fire alarm that sounded from the library was extraordinarily loud. But it was nothing compared to the screams that came from the stout man on the motor scooter as he shot past them and out of the campus.