

Siddhi Garg

## Pocketwatches & Sconces

The gas smells like sweet almonds, which is an absurdly romantic way to die in a windowless room. I am about to turn into a very clever corpse very very soon. *Think. Think. Think.* Carbon monoxide is odourless so that means this must be — this must be cyanogen chloride, that's why my throat is closing and my eyes — *eyes eyes eyes* — are burning. I can't even scream for help. That uses oxygen and oxygen is a luxury I lost sixty seconds ago. Instead, my brain does what it does best — it catalogues the irrelevant. Three details. One: exactly a hundred and twenty seconds before my lungs give out. Two: a mahogany desk, polished everywhere but the second drawer handle. Three: the grandfather clock in the corner is ticking three seconds too slow.

Ten minutes ago, I was insufferably pleased with myself. I sat in Peregrine's plush parlour sipping black tea while meticulously laying out every single thread of evidence that proved his guilt. I had thought his wide eyes meant terror. I couldn't have been more wrong. I should have known better. He glanced at his silver pocketwatch when I was finished, offered a sickly polite smile and stepped out the reinforced oak doors, leaving me scrambling on the floor wondering exactly how this could have gone so wrong so soon. I hadn't cornered the mastermind in his lair. No no. I had walked straight into his execution chamber.

*Black spots. Black spots. Black—* The cyanogen is pooling round my knees, thick and suffocating while my throat is a tube of crushed glass. *Don't breathe don't panic don't fall.* Amateurs beg for keys; I tear the room apart with my eyes. My boots skid across the parquet. *Move. Move. Running out of time.* One: deep, frantic friction marks scraped onto the Persian rug. Hidden exit. Two: the hem of the velvet curtains is quivering — a cold draft blowing through a hollow panel behind the plaster. Oxygen source. Three: fresh scratches on

the brass mantle sconce. Someone yanks it down hard. Frequent use, I assume. The lock isn't in the door then. It's right above the hearth.

A memory flickered into focus. I dismissed it as a useless detail. But was it something more? A hint, possibly? Peregrine hadn't gloated at all — very untypical of him — simply sighing through the keyhole. "Arrogance is a slow poison, Felix. You admire the grand design, yet you ignore the mechanics of patience." And a mechanism always has one thing. A counterweight. It was all a balanced key system. The sconce was the lever and my body weight was the key.

*Three steps two steps one.* My vision narrows to a pinprick of black lace. *Jump, grab, pull. Don't let go.* I leap, fingers snagging the sconce. Metal bites into raw skin. Fingers *slipping slipping*. I throw my entire seventy-kilogram weight downward. *Grind. Click. Whir.* Lead counterweights groan. The gas burns my chest, an internal furnace bellowing for release. My arms shake, muscles tearing, lungs completely and utterly empty. *One inch. One second. One breath.* The brick wall shudders and gives way, the panel swinging wide open.

Air — chilly, sharp, magnificent air — shatters the stifling heat within me. I collapse across the threshold gasping, coughing blood-bitter poison onto the stone floor of this hidden corridor. *Alive. Alive. Alive.* My vision clears, eyes tracking the tunnel stretching out into the dark before me. I look down. Right at my feet, weighed down by that silver pocketwatch sits a folded piece of cream cardstock. Peregrine. I snatch it, unfolding it with trembling fingers.

*Took you long enough. Do try to keep up.*

A dangerous grin spreads along my lips as my pulse steadies. The panic vanishes. The pain recedes. He thinks he won a head start? I adjust my coat, step into the shadows, and begin the hunt.