

THE
LAZARUS
MACHINE

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A TWEED & NIGHTINGALE ADVENTURE

PAUL CRILLEY



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For Bella and Caeleb.

*May you have the curiosity of Tweed, the spirit of Octavia,
the extravagance of Barnaby, the joie de vivre of Jenny and Carter—
and the intelligence of Stepp to know when each is appropriate.*

And for Caroline.

May we always look up at the stars and see the lawnmower.

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CHAPTER ONE

Tonight, seventeen-year-old Sebastian Tweed was going to be the voice of a fifty-year-old woman. More specifically, he was going to be the voice of a Mrs. Henrietta Shaw—missing and presumed dead for over a year now.

He wasn't happy about it.

"I'm tired of doing this, Barnaby," he said.

His father glanced at him in the small mirror as he neatened his bow tie. "Oh? And what would you rather we were doing?"

They sat in the cramped carriage of the steamcoach they used to get around the nightmarish streets of London. Bruised and battered, the piece of junk crawled around in a cloud of dirty steam and left behind a trail of leaking oil like a diseased snail that smoked too much.

"*Anything*," said Tweed. "Anything other than tricking old people out of their money. It's not dignified."

"Dignified? You think it's dignified to be out on the streets? You think it's dignified to beg for food?"

"Of course it's not. But at least it's honest. There are other things we could be doing. It doesn't have to be . . ." Tweed waved at their surroundings in disgust. ". . . *this*. Besides, you're going to get caught."

"My boy, I will never get caught. I'm too clever. Plus, I've got you to look out for me."

Tweed shook his head. "I'm serious, Barnaby. I don't want to do this anymore."

"Why not?" said Barnaby in exasperation. "There's no harm! We're giving them peace of mind."

"But none of it's *true*!"

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“Truth is a malleable commodity. And wholly subjective. Our clients believe their lost loved ones have spoken to them from beyond the grave, ergo, their lost loved ones *have* spoken to them from beyond the grave. Simple.”

“Justify it any way you like, but we’re confidence tricksters. That’s all there is to it. And I want it to stop.”

Barnaby said nothing for a moment, fiddling with his bow tie some more. Finally, he turned around. There was a strange look in his eyes. Irritation, yes—Tweed had expected that—but something else as well. It took Tweed a moment to place it, and when he did, it pulled him up short.

Pride. It was *pride* he saw.

“Fine,” said Barnaby. “I was thinking of giving it a rest for a while anyway. Security’s a nightmare ever since that Romanov fellow turned up trying to drum up support for his war against Japan. So you go ahead and find us another way to earn a living. Pick whatever you want and we’ll give it a try. My only condition is that it must make us rich beyond our wildest dreams.”

“What? Don’t be absurd!”

Barnaby smiled. “Only jesting. As I say, find something else for us, and I’ll look into it. Deal?”

Tweed nodded suspiciously. “All right, then. Deal.” He stared hard at his father. “I’m going to hold you to this, old man,” he said.

“Oh, I’m sure you will. But right now, we have work to do, yes? Is the spider ready?”

Tweed stood up and lifted the cushion of his seat. Concealed within was a jumble of brass and silver spiders. He took one of them out. Gaslight gleamed on oiled metal and glinted on the cogs and tiny gears that made up its body. It was about the size of his hand, a small body with long, delicate limbs and a tiny optical lens for an eye.

“Are you ready?” asked Tweed. He didn’t want to activate it too

early, as there was a possibility the Ministry might pick up on the spider's signals and come to investigate. They were getting serious about cracking down on unauthorized automaton transmissions.

Barnaby spread his arms wide and grinned. "My boy, I am *always* ready. It is the sign of the true professional."

He unhinged the door at the rear of the carriage and stepped into the street. As soon as he pushed the door closed, Tweed inserted a small key into the base of the spider and wound it up. The folded legs twitched then extended all the way out and shivered slightly, as if the spider was stretching after a long sleep. Tweed placed it on a fold-down workbench and pulled up the faded carpet, revealing a small trapdoor in the base of the carriage. He lifted the door to reveal his pride and joy, something that would get him thrown into a Ministry cell if it was ever discovered: a homemade Tesla transceiver.

Tweed had designed and built it with the help of a friend of his, a girl who called herself Stepp Reckoner. It wasn't her real name, obviously, but a handle she used in the hope of staying anonymous and out of the Ministry's clutches. Apparently, the name had something to do with computing history. She explained it to him once, but Tweed had stopped listening when she started going on about fluted drums and decimal number systems. There were few things in life worse than an obsessive going on about the subject with which they were obsessed.

Tweed and Stepp had pooled their resources and scavenged bits and pieces to make the transceiver, finding an unused frequency on the Tesla range so they could send commands to their own constructs. Very dangerous. They had almost been caught three times.

But it was worth it.

Tweed inserted a waxed, perforated card into a slot in the side. There was a small click as the machine drew the card deep into its innards. The spider stiffened, turned around, then scuttled off the workbench and dropped to the floor.

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Tweed flicked open the tatty crimson curtain. Barnaby stood by the front door of the house. He glanced back at the carriage and lifted his hand for Tweed to go ahead.

Tweed opened the carriage doors. As he did so, a passing automaton turned to look at him. This was one of the new models, the ones made to look like real people. The white light from the human soul locked in the æther cage in its chest shone upward, casting eerie shadows across the construct's features.

Tweed waited till the automaton had walked past, then allowed the spider to scuttle across the cobbles, where it stopped next to Barnaby's foot. Barnaby glanced down to make sure it was out of sight, then knocked on the door. It was opened by the mark, a tall, sad-looking man called Samuel Shaw, and while Barnaby made his greetings, the spider darted inside.

Tweed closed the carriage doors and turned to the transceiver. He pulled a small lever in its side and two doors on the front slid apart, revealing a tiny, rounded piece of glass. Tweed waited expectantly, but nothing happened. He tapped the glass a few times until it flickered to reluctant life, revealing a grainy, sepia image.

Tweed got an impression of blurred movement—the spider moving to its hiding place. A few seconds later the image paused and Tweed found himself looking at a skirting board. The spider turned in a slow circle, calculating how best to fulfill its program.

It picked a bookcase, scrabbling up onto one of the higher shelves. Then it turned and crept forward until its eye looked down at a large round table.

Barnaby and Shaw entered the room.

"This will do perfectly, Mr. Shaw," came Barnaby's tinny, crackly voice, fed to Tweed through a small speaker in the transceiver.

"Good, good," said Shaw. He cast a vague glance around the room. "Um, can I get you a drink?" he asked.

“A sherry would go down well, thank you.”

While Samuel poured the drink, Barnaby moved quickly to a sideboard and placed a tiny speechifier behind a framed photograph. He stepped away just as a third man strode into the room. The man stopped short and glared at Barnaby.

“Ah . . . Mr. Tweed, this is my brother, Victor,” said Samuel.

Barnaby held out his hand. “A pleasure, sir.”

“The pleasure is all yours,” Victor said curtly. He turned to his brother. “I warned you not to go through with this, you fool. You’re pathetic, you know that?”

Samuel opened his mouth to protest, but his brother turned abruptly and swept out of the room.

“I’m so sorry,” said Samuel, wringing his hands. “My brother . . . he is not a believer.”

“No need to apologize,” said Barnaby. “That’s family for you. Always embarrassing you in public. I have a son who can barely string two sentences together. Drools a lot. Has eyes that look in two different directions. But what can you do?”

Tweed needed to test the transmitter anyway, so he picked it up and depressed the metal trigger. “Most amusing,” he said.

A brief smile flickered across Barnaby’s face as Tweed’s voice traveled to the receiver hidden within Barnaby’s ear.

Tweed put the transmitter down and sat back with an uneasy frown. Barnaby’s original file hadn’t even mentioned Samuel Shaw’s brother, but Tweed had come across some information while doing his own background check. He had been doing this more and more lately, complementing Barnaby’s meager research with his own.

It was laughably easy to get his hands on such things. Tweed simply pretended to be a records clerk at New Scotland Yard and was allowed to come and go as he pleased. His face had become familiar enough to the police that they no longer questioned his presence when he turned up.

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It had come to the point where the preparations for each séance were beginning to take up all of Tweed's spare time. He spent days trawling through police archives and newsprint reports in an attempt to assuage his growing guilt, hoping to give the marks something they could take away with them, something that would put them at peace.

Family histories were always the first thing Tweed looked into, just in case someone at the séance asked any awkward questions about dear cousin Roger who had died thirty-odd years ago. But Tweed hadn't expected Victor Shaw to be in attendance tonight. As Samuel said, the man was vehemently against spiritualism of any kind.

There was a knock at the front door of the house. Tweed peered through the steamcoach window and saw three other guests standing on the sidewalk, waiting to be let in. That would be Samuel's sister, Mary, and her daughter and husband.

While Samuel led them through to the sitting room and took care of the introductions, Tweed paged through his files to refresh his memory on the brother.

There wasn't much information. Victor Shaw. Single. Never been married. Owned a manufacturing plant that supplied glass valves to Babbage & Company for their Analytical Machines. Heavy gambler. Not well liked by those who knew him. Attended church every Sunday.

Tweed closed the file and glanced at the screen. The guests were taking their seats around the table. As Barnaby lowered the lights, Victor returned to the room.

"What's going on?" he demanded. "I thought you weren't going to start this charade until eight o' clock?"

"What difference does it make? We're all here. There's no reason for us to waste Mr. Tweed's valuable time any more than we have to."

Victor took his pocket watch out and glared at the clock face as if it had offended him. When Barnaby retook his seat, Victor hesi-

tated for a second, then sat opposite him. That was surprising. Tweed hadn't thought he would be taking part.

A single lantern in the center of the table was the only light in the room. It cast its glow over the six faces watching Barnaby. Tweed had frequently argued with Barnaby about this, as it made it difficult for him to see, but his father always said he needed the atmosphere, that it did fifty percent of the work for him.

Tweed turned a dial on the transceiver, opening the iris of the spider's eye. The picture brightened until Tweed could see everyone's faces.

But his eyes were fixed on Victor Shaw. There was something about the way he looked at Barnaby that made Tweed incredibly uneasy.

Tweed picked up a transmitter and pushed the button. "Watch out for Victor. He's up to something."

Barnaby's eyes flickered briefly toward the spider on the bookcase, then he spread out his hands. "We must join in a circle," he said in a quiet voice.

Everyone around the table linked hands. Even Victor, though he did so reluctantly.

Barnaby sat in silence for a while. Then he moaned, "Oh ye that dwell beyond the veil, hear us humble petitioners as we call to you."

Barnaby fell silent for another minute before continuing, "Henrietta Shaw. Are you there? If you are present, will you join us? Your husband has questions he would ask."

Tweed picked up the transmitter, ready to be the voice of Henrietta Shaw. The voice would seem to come from all around the room, though it would really come from the spider and the speechifier that Barnaby had hidden on the sideboard.

"We call through the veil, asking that Henrietta Shaw joins us. Can you hear me, Henrietta?"

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Barnaby paused to let the tension build. "I'm getting something. It's . . . it's Henrietta. She's here, Samuel. She's come to see you."

Samuel drew in a sobbing breath. "Henrietta?"

Tweed depressed the transmitter trigger, hating himself all the while. "I am here, my love," he whispered in what he called his "middle-aged woman number two" voice.

The husband of Samuel's niece screamed rather shrilly and broke the circle. Victor lunged to his feet, knocking over his chair.

"Enough of this!" he shouted. Victor turned the gas lamps to full strength, flooding the room with light. Tweed winced as his screen flared white, then he partially closed the eye of the spider. Victor stood by the wall, pointing a shaking finger at Barnaby.

"The man is a fraud, Sam. Any fool can see that."

Samuel lifted his tear-stained face. "How can you say that, Victor? We all heard her. My dear Henrietta."

"It's a trick, you fool! Face facts! She didn't love you anymore. She packed her bags and left. What did you expect? All those business trips you took. You were never here!"

"But . . . but I did it all for her!" wailed Samuel, his voice filled with anguish. "So we could afford a better life. Please, Victor. For me. I want to hear what Mr. Tweed has to say."

Victor checked his pocket watch. "I don't think so. I took the liberty of contacting the police before I arrived, Samuel. They will be here soon to arrest this charlatan."

Barnaby's eyes widened. He pushed himself to his feet. "I, ah, see you have some family issues to sort through, Mr. Shaw. I'll come back when it's more convenient, if you don't mind."

Before Barnaby could leave the table, Victor Shaw reached into his jacket and pulled out a small, pearl-handled revolver. He pointed it at Barnaby.

"Why the rush, Mr. Tweed?"

Barnaby nervously licked his lips and sank back into his chair. Tweed flicked the switch that ensured his next transmission went only to Barnaby's ear, then he slowly lifted the transmitter to his lips. "Uh . . . remind me again . . . what was that you were saying about never getting caught?"

Barnaby looked up at the spider and locked eyes with Tweed.