

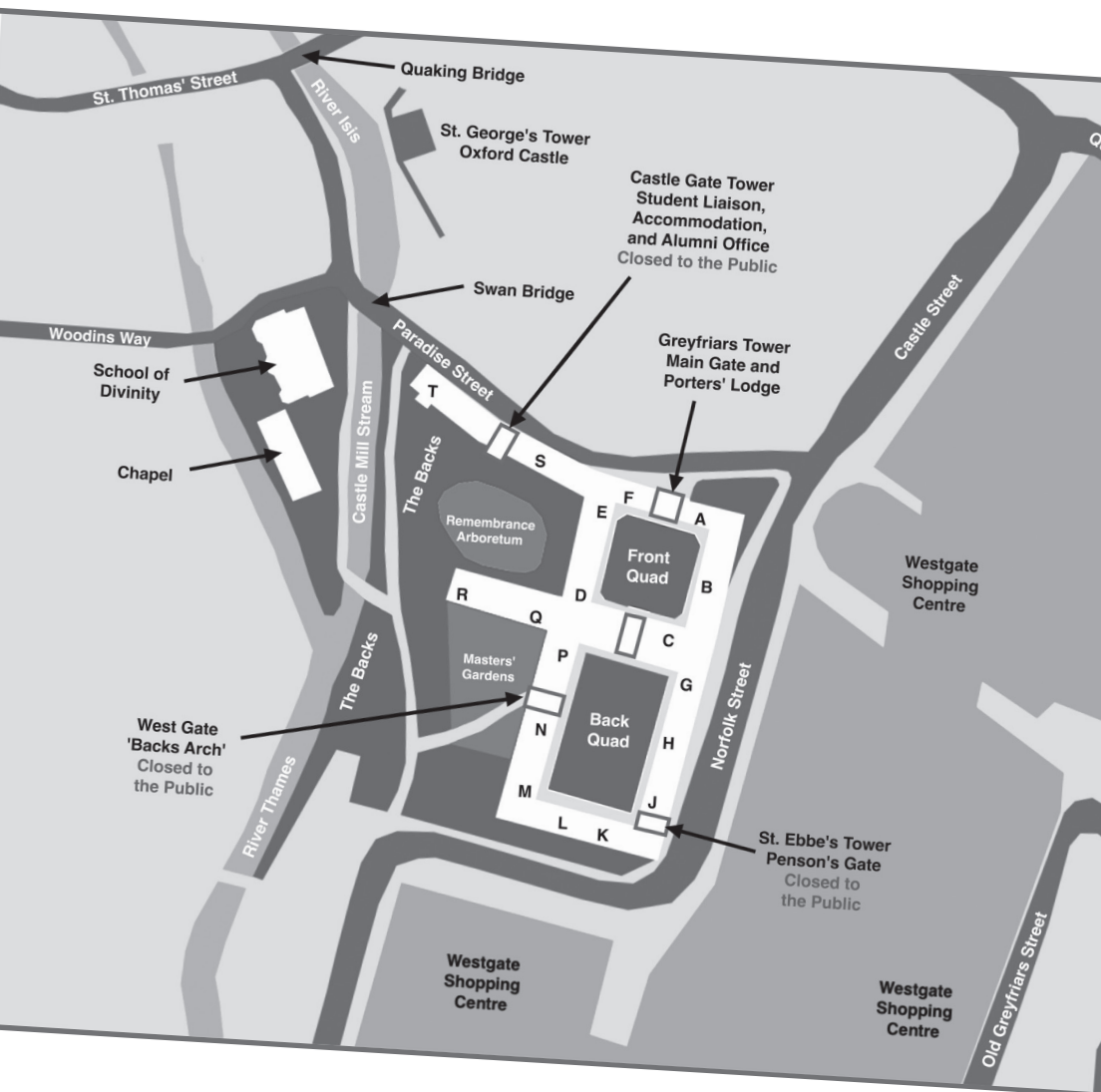
Full of Beans

A BACK-IN-TIME
MYSTERY



MARK J. WILSON

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Redwood
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Disclaimer: You'll probably notice that this book is a bit of a linguistic blend of British and American. A bit like the author. We've kept the British bits (spellings like 'colour', phrases such as 'bugger off', and the liberal use of the Oxford comma) so that the characters sound like themselves, but tidied other things up using The Chicago Manual of Style rather than the Oxford Guide to Style. Sorry Oxford. We hope to spare American readers from gasping in horror at certain quirks, like those rogue periods that dangle outside quotation marks in British writing. While CMOS preaches consistency above all, we've been consistently inconsistent—choosing which rules to keep, which to bend, and which to gleefully break. In short: we've tried to keep everyone happy—our British characters, our American readers, and our own editorial sanity.

I owe huge thanks to my wonderful wife, Carrie, whose belief in me got me started and kept me going, and whose sometimes-brutally-honest opinion made me work hard to keep improving the manuscript. The book is dedicated to Carrie and her coffee machine, which would constantly instruct us to "Fill Beans," whether the hopper was full or empty. Without either of them this book might never have been written.

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PART ONE
CASES ARE LIKE BUSES

1.

THE FIRST DEATH OF CORVUS DURANT

07 NOVEMBER 2022, 2.08 P.M.

Akito Takaya was pacing fretfully around the quad of Westgate College. Heavy raindrops pattered on his umbrella, but all he could hear was his internal conflict. As soon as travel restrictions had lifted in Japan, he had booked his flight to England.

Corvus Durant had been one of Akito's heroes—one of the greats in the world of theoretical physics. Admittedly, he was old now, in his fifties, and had not done anything noteworthy for twenty years. In his day, he had the potential to rival Stephen Hawking and Roger Penrose. But his day had been and gone.

Akito needed to challenge Durant, but he felt the need to contain the hurt and anger that had been frustrating him for months. Akito felt he needed answers to his questions, but also thought the professor was owed respect. He would calmly demand an explanation. Why had Durant stolen their paper? Their groundbreaking research? Akito could not bring himself to accept that Durant had done it for his own personal gain. And what had happened to Georgia? Where had she gone? Akito knew Durant had seen her that day. What exactly had happened when they met?

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He pushed open the door to Staircase E. He folded his umbrella and propped it against the wall. Then, with a determined stride, he mounted the stairs. At the first landing, his heart was pounding, not so much from exertion but from dread and adrenaline. He continued up the next flight of stairs, then continued along the narrow balcony at the top of the staircase. He stood in front of a heavy oak door with a shiny brass number three.

Akito knocked. The silence surrounding Akito was a contrast to the turmoil within him. His heart pounded and his mind raced. He rapped the wood sharply and painfully with his knuckles. With his fists clenched, he banged harder, causing the sound to echo in the stairwell. As his patience ran out, Akito pounded on the door with his fists. "Open the door," he shouted. "Open the door!"

The heavy door opened wide, and an imposing figure stood before him, almost filling the doorway. "Keep it down, or you'll have the police 'round here," Durant said with a menacing undertone.

Akito looked up at his ageing, erstwhile hero. Durant was a big man with a round, red face, a salt-and-pepper beard, wild eyebrows, and a very angry glare. He had a muscular physique, with a little extra bulk around the middle from all his years of eating rich refectory comfort food. Durant towered over him, but Akito looked him in the eyes, with his arms by his side and determination on his face. Akito tried to appear as tall as he could, but his voice trembled.

"I am Akito Takaya, and I demand to know what you did! Why did you steal our paper? What happened to Georgia? Where is she?"

"What?" Durant's scowl changed to surprise, and then to indignation. "Who the hell are you?"

THE FIRST DEATH OF CORVUS DURANT

"I was co-author of the paper you published," Akito stated, feeling the need to make his claim to the stolen work.

"Co-author? She never mentioned any ..." Durant protested. Akito opened his mouth to repeat his demand, but Durant spoke over him. "Never mind that. She told me it was her paper. Your colleague gave me her ideas to see if I could use them." Durant planted his hands on his hips and leant forward. "And I can prove that I was here in my rooms after she left the college."

"No! I know you stole our paper word for word. And I know you know more about what happened to Georgia." The sound of breaking glass came from somewhere inside. "Is that Georgia? Is she in there?"

Akito tried to push past Durant to get into his rooms. Durant grabbed his arms and shoved him back. Akito took a step backward and charged at Durant with all his might. Akito was small, short, and had a slim frame. All Akito succeeded in was making Durant stumble a couple of steps backward, and Akito fell forward through the door.

As Akito was getting to his feet at the threshold, the professor turned to look over his shoulder, back into the rooms behind him. Akito readied himself to charge Durant again, but before he could, Durant was running at him in a panic. As Durant's hands connected with Akito's chest, Akito stumbled backward out onto the balcony. As slight as he was, Akito was pretty nimble, and he stepped to the side and pushed Durant's hands away from him.

Durant was heading for the balustrade with considerable momentum, and as he hit the railing, he toppled and his legs flew out behind him. He grabbed at anything he could, one hand seizing a

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spindle, the other clutching the lapel of Akito's jacket. With nothing slowing his impetus, his legs followed his body over the railing. Gravity snatched Durant, and his grasp failed. Akito felt the hand slip from his jacket, and Durant plunged down the stairwell. There was a sickening bang as the man hit the floor below. And then silence.

Akito stood looking over the balustrade in disbelief. A panic rose inside him, and his body was spurred into action. Akito ran down the stairs as fast as he could, two steps at a time, half stumbling, half jumping. He got to the bottom of the stairs and stood, looking in horror.

Any sense of urgency evaporated. It was clear from the bizarre angle of Durant's head that his neck was broken and there was nothing to be done. He crouched by Durant's crumpled body and felt for a pulse to confirm what he already knew. The famous professor was dead. Akito would not get any answers from him now. He stared at the professor's open eyes, wondering if he should close them out of respect, like they do on TV.

Akito was in shock. Was it his fault that the professor fell? Akito relived the moment he pushed Durant's hands away. He felt an ice-cold chill run across his skin.

"Is he dead?" called a voice from above.

Akito was jolted back into reality. He looked up to the balcony from which Durant had fallen. A young woman was leaning over the railing. Her dark touseled hair fell around her face as she looked down at him. Akito felt terrible having to tell her that Durant was dead.

"Yes. I'm so sorry." Akito called up to her. "Yes, he's ..."

"Then run!" the woman blurted out, gesturing toward the quad. "Just run! Go!"

THE FIRST DEATH OF CORVUS DURANT

The urgency in her voice shocked him. It was clear that she thought he was to blame for Durant's fall. Akito felt responsible. He felt guilty. He was panicked and frightened again, and he was confused. Her instruction was all he could focus on, so he obeyed it. He grabbed his umbrella and ran out into the quadrangle, out into the rain. He put up his brolly to shelter from the downpour and to hide from the world. Then he scurried out through the main gate and into the anonymity of the street beyond.

KEEP IN TOUCH

If you'd like to see what I'm working on next—or just want to say hello—you can find me at:

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To keep up with Phil Beans and to explore some of the places mentioned in the book, visit:

geekygumshoe.com

westgatecollege.org.uk

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