"Impossible!" the chief shouted, slamming down the phone.

"What is?" Parker asked, trying to stay as calm as possible. He had gone into the chief's office to say good-bye before leaving on vacation. Just in and out—that was the plan. He didn't even feel bad about all the work someone else would have to do while he was away. But the look on the chief's face told him he was fooling himself.

"What's the matter?" Parker asked again, not really wanting to know—but knowing he should ask.

"The Vosburg!" she barked furiously.

"What about it?"

"The Vosburg is gone!"

"Gone?"

"Do you know what that means?"

Parker had a hunch what it meant for him. Fourteen pleasant afternoons of fishing were going to have to wait until this matter was settled. And far from storing his nine millimeter automatic, he was going to have to clean and oil it. To put it simply, he was back on the job.

Still desperate to deny the facts, Parker tried one last ploy.
"Gee, that's too bad. I'm sure Stanfield can track it down," he said quickly, heading toward the door.

But as his hand reached the knob, he heard a familiar click. The chief had locked the door from the button on her desk.

"Stanfield is in England, working on the Collingwood murder," she said. "Besides, he doesn't know anything about diamonds."

"Me neither!" Parker shouted, gleefully.

"You'll learn," the chief answered. She tossed a leather dossier on the desk. Parker picked it up reluctantly, as if it were a fish too small to keep. He flipped through the dossier slowly, stalling for time while he tried to come up with an excuse for not taking the case.

Mistaking his silence for acquiescence, the chief pulled a photo from the files and tossed that down too.

"There's the answer to your question."

"Hmmm?" Parker said, caught off guard.

"Meissner," she said flatly.

She thought he was considering suspects. But he actually had a different sort of question in mind. Like whether it was possible to collapse on the rug and develop a broken leg. Still, the photo caught his attention. It was a rare shot, taken quickly by a hidden camera. It showed a dark man with shifty eyes and a long nose. Willem Meissner, the master jewel thief. Wanted in a dozen countries across Europe for robbery and blackmail. Against his will, and better judgment, Parker found himself being drawn into the intrigue.

"You think he stole the Vosburg?" Parker asked, sitting down to consider the possibility.

"We're sure of it," the chief insisted, tugging her jacket into line. "Our informants told us he was going to try for it. And he disappeared last night, right after the Vosburg was taken."

"Any idea where he went?"

"It's coming through now."

The chief walked over to a plexiglass box on her desk, unlocked the hood and lifted it. Underneath was a secured fax machine on which a document was being printed. When the transmission was complete, she took the paper out, read it, and dropped it into a shredder next to the desk.

"Do you have dinner plans?" she asked.

"No," Parker answered, somewhat surprised.
The Vosburg Diamond

In six years, she had never invited him to dinner before. She must be getting soft, Parker thought. "Who's paying?"
"Interpol."
"Great. Where to?"
"Strudelberg."
"You're taking me to dinner in Austria?"
"That's where Meissner was last seen. Four o'clock this afternoon. I've booked you on the next flight. Our agent will meet you at the airport."
"Oh."
"And while you're there, you will recover the Vosburg diamond. Right?"

A plane ticket, the final gift from the chief, landed firmly in Parker's lap. He looked at it without moving, hoping it would go away. But it didn't. It just sat there. And so did he. The pause gave him time to consider the cruelty of a world in which an international jewel thief could steal a priceless diamond the very day his vacation was scheduled to begin.

It wasn't until he was flying over the Austrian Alps late that night that Parker finally began to accept the situation and focus on the subject at hand. The dossier the chief gave him was full of
details. But the bare facts about the diamond were well known to everyone in the international community.

The Vosburg diamond, originally found in South Africa, was one of the world's great gems. Judged by the four factors on which diamonds were measured—purity, color, weight, and cut—the Vosburg was no less magnificent than the Orloff or the Koh-i-Noor. It was an emerald-cut diamond, completely flawless and clear as spring water. At forty-five carats, it was the size of a matchbook. And at three million dollars, quite a bit more expensive.

Its history was no less striking. In 1894, it was stolen by thieves from the Capetown estate of Heinrich Blok and disappeared from the world market for two decades. In 1920 it was found on an idol at the mausoleum of the Pasha of Miraj, only to be stolen again sometime during the Indian struggle for independence. It next turned up when the estate of the Earl of Whitcombe was put up for public auction. At that time, the anonymous buyer of the gem offered it to the British Museum for display. Two years ago, it joined an international gemstone exhibit that was touring the great
museums of Europe. It was being transferred from the Louvre in Paris to a truck when thieves subdued the guards and snatched it.

An hour later, Parker was in a taxicab careening through Strudelberg. Many of the streets in the old city were made of uneven stones, and the driver seemed intent on clattering over each one. Interpol’s man in Austria, an owlish little bureaucrat named Kipps, was sitting next to him and struggling to keep his glasses on his nose.

But the ride itself was not the major problem. That honor went to the news Kipps was giving him in a wheezy whisper. It concerned the latest development in the case. The fact that Meissner had already been found. Dead.

“Oh, no,” Parker said. If it was true, the chief would never approve another vacation. He’d be stuck in the office until fish learned to walk.

“I’m afraid it’s true,” Kipps said. A pothole sent him jolting onto the floor of the taxi.

“How did it happen?” Parker asked, trying to keep his spirits up and his lunch down.

“He was shot,” Kipps answered, climbing back on the seat.

“No witnesses? No clues to the murderer?”

“Oh, no. We know exactly who did it.”
“You know who killed Meissner?”
“I’m taking you to meet him right now.”

The taxi screeched to a halt in front of an impressive old baroque building on Leiderstrasse. This main street, which dated back to the Eighteenth Century, was lined with grand buildings. But the one at #205, where the taxi stopped, was unique. It was the current headquarters of the Civilian Police Bureau.

Inside, Parker followed Kipps through an immense ornate hallway to an office on the second floor. There he was introduced to a large man with a wide face and a great swirl of a mustache. This was Inspector Bent, who squeezed Parker’s hand as if it were a sponge, and pointed him to a chair.

“We have—how shall I put it—a bit of a problem,” Bent said, mopping sweat from his bald head with a limp rag.

“So I hear.”

“Unavoidable, I’m afraid. But a tragedy nonetheless.”

“It certainly is,” Parker said, thinking more of his own future plans than Meissner’s. “Why don’t you tell me what happened?”
"We had been keeping an eye on Meissner for some time. And when we heard about the Vosburg theft, we knew a meeting would be arranged with one of his contacts to pass on the gem."

"And?"
"I had my men pick up Meissner the moment he left his hotel room today, around four o'clock."
"Before meeting his contact?"
"Well, yes."
"Wouldn't it have been better to wait until after they met? You could have gotten Meissner, the diamond, and the contact."
"Yes, I suppose, in retrospect..." Bent said, mopping another puddle of sweat from his broad head.
"Then what happened?"
"We brought him immediately here to our interrogation room. That was precisely at half past four. I was just about to search and question him when the gun went off."
"What gun?"
"Mine. I had taken it out to show him that I meant business, and it accidentally went off."
"You shot Willem Meissner?"
were a few small gems in a leather bag, but not the legendary diamond.

"From what I understand," Kipps continued, "Meissner always followed the same pattern when he was trying to pass off a stolen jewel. An envelope would be delivered to him from his contact. This envelope contained the time and place of the meeting. These meetings took place all along the Leiderstrasse, which is, of course, the main street in the city. The envelope also contained a secret letter. This letter proved to Meissner that the arrangement was authentic, and not some police trick."

Among the items on the table were, indeed, an envelope addressed to Meissner, the floor plan of a building marked with an X, and a watch.

"It's all there," Parker said confidently. "The letter is in the envelope, the watch tells the time, and the floor plan indicates the place."

"Unfortunately," Kipps answered, "it's not as simple as that. The envelope had no letter in it. It contained only the floor plan and the watch. But the building shown in that floor plan was torn down last year. And the watch stopped hours ago."

"I see," Parker said, scanning the other objects on the table and finding nothing of much help. "And this is everything he was carrying?"

"Absolutely," Kipps said. "We went through every stitch of clothing. This is it."

"And so you see," Bent interrupted, "there is nothing much more we can do about this matter. I'm sorry. May I have you driven to the airport?"

"Didn't he say anything at all before you plugged him?"

Bent blanched at the expression before answering.

"Nothing. He only asked for a glass of ice water," Bent said sadly, pinging one of the glasses with a chubby finger. "The situation being so tense, we all were quite thirsty."

There was a small patch of blood on the floor where Meissner's body had landed. A dark red smear. That stain seemed to sum up the whole mess. And Bent and Kipps stared at it in defeat.

But Parker was not distracted. The more he looked at the objects on the table, the more he saw. He had a growing suspicion that the answers to the mystery were right there. Somewhere among the random items Meissner was carrying
were the clues to the secret letter, the location of the rendezvous, and the time of the meeting. Maybe even the whereabouts of the Vosburg diamond.

Assemble the puzzle and see if you can find out where and when Meissner was going to meet his contact, what letter was delivered, and where the Vosburg diamond can be found.

**The Solution:**

After Parker said, "Once all the clues fall into place, you see something." Kipps asked hopefully.

"Only the letter and the time and place of the meeting," Parker said casually.

"Impossible," Kipps insisted.

"It's all downhill from here," Kipps told the envelope, as you suspected. "Parker says, "Put everything together for something else. Let's start with the letter. Take a look at the floor plan. There's your letter.""

"It's in the shade of the letter E. Kipps said.

"Following the contour with his finger, "Exactly. That was part of the code. A different letter on the alphabet for each meeting." Parks said, "And the message is a coded message too. It tells the place. It's a puzzle. It's set. At exactly 2:05."

"And why does that tell you?" Kipps asked, but his voice had taken on an ominous chill.

"That number sounds familiar to you, Inspector," Kipps said, "the number of this very building."

"Yes, meaning Meissner was coming here, to..."
The Vosburg Diamond

"Right" Parker answered. "I don't know if it's really called the Vosburg Diamond, but the stone was worth a lot of money. And it was never meant to be stolen. And if I could find it, I would.

"I heard you say something about the Vosburg Diamond," Parker replied. "I'm just a cop."

"Well, we'll see about that," said Parker. "I'm sure it won't be easy to get it back."

"You never got away with this," Kips asked. "You'll never get away with this," Parker replied. "I know."

"I was just a cop," Parker said. "I don't know much about diamonds."
The Vosburg Diamond

in a clear glass of water.

Thanks to Bent, Messer never got a chance
to retrieve it. But Blackbird didn’t have time to go
home. He took the Vosburg and more importantly,
a free ticket to his favorite port and tackle shop.