



PINCHED CREATURE.

I was spending the afternoon with my associate Moxie Mallahan. Moxie was Stain'd-by-the-Sea's only reporter, a job she had learned from her parents, who had run the town's newspaper, *The Stain'd Lighthouse*. The newspaper was shut down, Mrs. Mallahan had left town, Mr. Mallahan was sleeping late, and Moxie and I were just hanging around the lighthouse, doing a little reading and talking over various incidents that

had happened recently. “It’s been too long since we’ve done this,” Moxie said.

“Done what?”

“Had an uneventful time like this.”

Right on cue, the doorbell rang, as if to say enough was enough of uneventfulness, and when Moxie opened the door, there was an event. The event was a boy several years younger than I was and much more upset. He wore a white coat like a scientist and had two pairs of glasses, one over his eyes and the other perched on his head.

“I’m sorry to disturb you,” the boy said, “but you’re the closest neighbor and I need some help.”

“Oliver,” Moxie said. “I didn’t know your family was still in town.” She turned to me. “Oliver’s parents are the only veterinarians left in Stain’d-by-the-Sea. So few people have pets nowadays, I’d assumed the Doctors Sobol had closed up shop.”

“They have,” Oliver said, his eyes blinking nervously behind his glasses, “but I’m here for

a few more months running the business until they come and fetch me.”

“Well, if you ever want company,” Moxie said, “hike up the hill and we’ll play some Parcheesi. This is my friend Lemony Snicket, by the way. He won’t play Parcheesi because he says it’s inane.”

“It *is* inane,” I said, “and inane is a word which here means pointless and dull.”

Oliver frowned, and I can’t say I blame him. If you are worried about something, it is not a good time to listen to people argue over games and vocabulary. He sat down glumly at the bottom of the stairs that spiraled up to the lighthouse’s lantern.

“I’m sorry, Oliver,” Moxie said. “We were prattling on while you have something on your mind.”

“I sure do,” Oliver said. “I’ve lost a newt.”

Moxie and I both looked at Oliver. If we’d looked at each other we might have laughed.

“It might sound silly,” Oliver said, “but this newt is very important.”

Moxie’s eyebrows went up underneath her hat. “What could be so important about a little lizard?”

“First of all,” Oliver said, “newts aren’t lizards. A lizard is a reptile, and a newt is an amphibian. Second of all, this newt is a very rare subspecies. I’ve lost an Amaranthine Newt, known for its bright yellow color and prevalent left-handedness. It was the only one in captivity and prized by herpetologists and southpaws all over the world.”

“Why do they call it the Amaranthine Newt, if it’s bright yellow?” I asked. “Amaranthine means purple, doesn’t it?”

“Its eggs are purple,” Oliver said. “My father took the eggs with him to his new job at Amphibians-A-Go-Go, an aquatic animal center and amusement park just outside the city. The newt and I are supposed to join them there

soon. If I can't find the newt, my father might lose his job."

"Don't fret, Oliver," Moxie said, although I could see that Oliver just kept on fretting. "Snicket here has a knack for finding strange missing items. Isn't that so, Snicket?"

"It's sometimes so," I said. "Oliver, why don't you tell us how the newt slipped away?"

"I don't think it slipped away," Oliver said. "I think it was pinched."

"Somebody stole it?" Moxie said. "That's a serious accusation to make." She sat down and opened a case sitting on the floor. Inside was a typewriter that Moxie Mallahan always kept nearby, and she started taking notes immediately on the clattering machine.

"I'm making it seriously," Oliver said. "The Amaranthine Newt lives in a special tank on a desk in my examining room, so I can always keep an eye on it. It was there when I opened for business this morning."

“And how many patients did you have today?” I asked.

“Just one,” Oliver said. “You were right about few people having pets, Moxie, but Polly Partial has two of the last cats in town, and one of them has a narcissistic disorder.”

“Polly Partial, the grocer?” Moxie asked, and met my eye. Neither of us was fond of the woman who ran Partial Foods, but lots of people nobody is fond of have sick cats.

“Her cat Paperbag has been a patient of my family’s for a very long time,” Oliver said. “I can’t imagine that his owner is a thief, but greed and newts can do strange things to people. I examined Paperbag and went to my desk to write out a prescription. Then I escorted Partial and Paperbag out and spent a few minutes in the backyard watering my father’s zinnias. The flowers match the trim on the office, as long as you keep them healthy, and I’d like to leave the place looking nice. When I went back into the office, the tank was empty.”



“Someone must have snuck in while you were gardening,” Moxie said.

Oliver shook his head. “I would have heard anyone else driving up the road.”

“They need not have arrived by automobile,” I said.

“To pinch my newt,” Oliver said, “they’d need a similar tank. You couldn’t fit one on a bicycle or a donkey. Polly Partial must have stolen the newt, but I don’t see how.”

“I don’t mean to be rude,” I said, “but can you really trust your eyes? I notice you have not one but two pairs of glasses.”

Oliver gave me a stern, lens-covered look. “My eyes aren’t perfect,” he said, “but with these glasses I can see perfectly well, and I keep the other pair on my head for reading.”

“You don’t have bifocals?” I asked, referring to eyeglasses that combine two lenses into one.

“There aren’t any optometrists left in town,” Moxie told me. “The closest eye doctor is way

over in Paltryville, but she doesn't have a very good reputation."

"Did you use your reading glasses when you were with Paperbag?" I asked Oliver.

He nodded. "When I wrote out the prescription."

"Well, I'm sure you saw clearly," I said, "but I'm not sure I do. Shall we walk over to the Sobol office?"

Oliver said yes and so we did, Moxie carrying her typewriter and me trying to think. It was a warm, breezy day, with the wind carrying a salty smell from the seaweed of the Clusterous Forest, an eerie phenomenon that lay below the cliff we were on. But we walked the other way, down a road as bumpy and cracked as a vase falling down stairs. Soon enough, we could see the office of the Doctors Sobol, a far-away building with yellow and orange trim, but when we rounded a corner, something made us stop. There was a car, pulled over to the side of

the road, and a man frowning at the car like it'd given him socks for his birthday.

“Good afternoon,” I said.

“Not in my opinion,” the man replied, and used his right hand to point at one of the car's tires. It also looked a little sad. “I seem to have a flat.”

“There's a garage about a half mile that-away,” Moxie said, pointing thataway with one finger.

“Thank you,” the man said. “I'm a doorknob salesman passing through town, and I'm late for an appointment. I guess I'd better walk on over to the garage. My car doesn't have anything valuable in it, so I suppose it will be all right.”

I peeked through the window of his car. I couldn't help it. I've been trained to do such things. There was nothing in it.

Oliver had other concerns. “You haven't noticed a newt crawling around, have you?”

“Or a suspicious person?” Moxie added.

“What kind of person?” the man asked. “I

saw a woman driving by in a beat-up grocery van. And what kind of lizard?”

Oliver sighed in annoyance. “It’s an Amaranthine Newt,” he said, “and that woman is probably a thief.”

“A newt will be hard to find,” said the stranger. “But I might look in a patch of zinnias I passed. It could blend in and hide there easily.”

“You’re thinking of a chameleon,” I said, “but you’re probably right that we won’t find the newt. We might as well help you instead.”

“What?” Oliver said, blinking in astonishment, and Moxie frowned.

“Do you have a spare tire in the trunk?” I continued, talking to the man.

The supposed salesman shook his head. “Nope.”

“That’s too bad,” I said, “but maybe you have something that would do in a pinch.”

“I don’t think so,” the man said quickly, in a pinched voice.

“In a pinch” is a phrase which here means “in a difficult situation,” and a pinched voice is a whiny and nervous one. But neither of these pinches was the pinch I was thinking of. “Open the trunk anyway,” I said, “so we can see the special newt tank you have hidden there.”

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The conclusion to “Pinched Creature” is filed under “Dishonest Salesman,” page 213.