



I get the call-out at dawn. An emergency at ToppLabs. Half an hour later, I'm standing in the foyer of the most famous research centre on Mars, the place where brilliant scientists study underground Martian bacteria. And they don't just study them. They develop ingenious ways to use them.

The people here are smart all right. Well, today, I'll have to be smarter.

I wait nervously until Doctor Topp herself emerges. She looks puzzled.

"Can I help you?"

I flash my Red Planet Police card. "Minnie Sharp. Detective."

"They sent a kid?"

It's 2117 – and some adults still can't accept young people in my line of work. I try not to let it get to me. "I'm the right person for the job," I assure her. "Take me to the crime scene."

Doctor Topp leads me down a corridor and pushes open a door marked Cryogenic Storage Room. "In here, we study how materials behave at very low temperatures," she explains.

There is an enormous glass freezer. Inside that freezer lies a man, pale and still as ice. I know his face from the news. Farrell Flint.

Doctor Topp looks shaky. "I arrived early this morning, and here he was – locked in and frozen stiff."

It seems a fair description of his situation.

"He's working on a very exciting project," Doctor Topp continues, "encoding secret messages inside bacteria. He believes we can use antibiotics to decode those messages. Earth spy agencies are desperate for the technology. We could make a fortune."

"Is he ... dead?"

Doctor Topp shrugs. "Not necessarily. Bacteria can be frozen for years, then brought back to life. We do it all the time. But a *human*? We'd have to defrost him very slowly. And it might not work ..."

"Who uses this room?" I say.

"Farrell, me, and three other scientists. They all worked late last night. I went home."

"I'll need to interview them," I say.



Felonius Flint's lab room has stinking muck heaped on every bench.

"Why would anyone freeze my brother?" he wails.

"Farrell is your brother?" I ask. Interesting. "Do you get on?"

"Of course."

"Always?"

"Always! Even though people consider him the better scientist."

Interesting again. "Are you sure they think that?"

"It's obvious. I spend my days trying to turn Martian rock into compost, and it doesn't matter which bacteria I try - nothing works. The whole project is a failure."

"Just how jealous of your brother are you?" I ask.

Felonius looks me in the eye. "All right. *Very* jealous."

"No further questions," I say.



In the next lab room, Carey Love clutches a jar of squirming white larvae. "I'm trying to find cures for diseases," he explains. "I test Martian bacteria on these larvae."

"That must be very rewarding."

"No," Carey says. "It's awful." He stares into his jar. "The things I have to do to these poor, defenceless creatures. Unspeakable things. Every day. To thousands of them." He begins to weep.

"That's tough. I'm sorry."

"Some days, I don't think I can go on. These poor, poor baby waxworms."

"Have you told anyone about how you feel?"

"Only Farrell. He kept saying 'Tell Topp'. But I was scared she'd fire me."

I pause. "Did you worry that Farrell might tell her himself?"

"All the time."

"Did you ever think about *stopping* him from telling her?"

Carey is silent for a second. "Yes!" he finally sobs.

"Thank you for your time," I say.





- Bright liquids bubble in the third lab room. They smell delicious. Mirtha Dare-Sweetly welcomes me in. "I use Martian bacteria to create fizzy drinks," she says, peering at a test tube of golden liquid. "Mmm. My finest brew yet."
 - "What will you do with it?"
 - "My half-brother on Earth is a very successful businessperson. He says selling the drink will make millions."
 - "Really?"
 - "Yes. Even Farrell liked the idea."
 - "What do you mean *even* Farrell?"

Mirtha sighs. "Farrell was always banging on about the environment. He said conservation on Mars was more important than anything. *Such* a dreamer! But he liked the idea of the drink factory because it will be on Earth. His precious Mars will be safe from any pollution." Mirtha lowers her voice and leans closer. "Of course, Doctor Topp found his attitude infuriating."

"Oh?" I say.

"A travel company wants to bring tourists here for caving adventures. But *some* people – mostly Farrell – think our caves contain undiscovered bacteria. He worried that tourists would disturb the cave ecosystem and was planning a campaign to keep them away."

"And Doctor Topp didn't like that?"

Mirtha lowers her voice again. "She's scared the government will think we're troublemakers. They might even shut the lab down. This place is Topp's life. She worries dreadfully."

"Thank you, Mirtha," I say. "You've been very helpful."

I march into Topp's office. "Truth time," I say. "You wanted Farrell gone because he was threatening to protest against the new cave tours."

"Excuse me?" she says.

"You came in early this morning, lured Farrell into the freezer, and locked him in."

"I *knew* kid detectives were a bad idea," says the doctor. "Firstly, Farrell and I had a long talk yesterday about SpaceDare – the travel company. He convinced me we need to stop them. I'm going to fight for our caves and their bacteria, and I'll take the consequences."

"Secondly, that freezer works very slowly. If I'd locked Farrell in this morning, he wouldn't be frozen yet. But he is, which means someone did it last night."

I'm mortified. For a few terrible seconds, it seems true – I'm as wrong for this job as anyone can be.

Then I have a thought: if Farrell froze slowly, then he had some time to ...

"Doctor Topp," I say, "take me back to the freezer."



I peer through the glass, scanning the scene. There!
I motion to Doctor Topp. "That black thing in Farrell's pocket ...
what is it?"

"His bacterial coding machine."

"I assume you know how to use it?"

We take the coding machine from Farrell's frozen pocket and hurry
to his lab. Doctor Topp opens the box, removes a transparent slide, and
places it in another box – the decoder.

Seconds pass. Then one word appears on the decoder's screen: Mirtha.

"I don't understand," gasps the doctor.

"I do," I say.

"Mirtha *Dare-Sweetly*," I say. "I charge you with the freezing of Farrell Flint."

Mirtha's jaw drops. "Why would I do that?"

"Maybe because you're related to the person who runs *SpaceDare*
caving adventures? Maybe because that person is, in fact, your half-
brother, the successful businessperson on Earth. Fizzy drinks are only
half the story."

The sudden fury on Mirtha's face tells me I'm right.

I go on. "You wanted Farrell out of the way so your half-brother
could continue with his tourism venture, whatever its impact. Perhaps
he was even paying you to get rid of Farrell."

Mirtha looks around for an escape, but Doctor Topp blocks the door.

After I call for back-up, and Mirtha is taken away, Doctor Topp
shakes my hand. "You *were* the right person for the job, Minnie,"
she says.

I smile as if I knew it all along. "Speaking of the right people ...
can I make a suggestion?"

Two weeks later, I receive a message from Doctor Topp. She's taken
my advice: Carey has been given Mirtha's job, fermenting drinks. He's
much happier. Meanwhile, Felonius's unsuccessful compost project
has been put on hold. He's taken over Carey's work on disease.
He doesn't mind doing unspeakable things to waxworms ... as long
as he's helping the human race.

Best of all, Farrell has been successfully thawed. Not only is he
working on his coding project, now he's heading up a new division at
ToppLabs: investigating how cryogenics might save the human race.

As for *SpaceDare*, the business went bust. No one wanted to go on
one of their tours once they heard what Mirtha and her half-brother
had done. The undiscovered bacteria of Mars are safe. For now.



Who Froze Farrell Flint?

by Johanna Knox

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