"If men did not try to get something for nothing, they might often be able to retain what they have."

Harry Houdini, "Houdini On Magic"

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ONE

THE MAGAZINE PARTY

Even before becoming truly invisible, Archie Gray had a habit of vanishing. Life seemed easiest without obligations, without close friends, without predetermined plans – only his camera and his darkroom to worry over. He hated public appearances, particularly in places he might be recognized, or be asked by someone to become *involved.* Yet. He couldn't stay in a vacuum. Not forever. Not in New York. Not when he needed clients for his photographs.

Outside Aunt Dove's holiday cocktail party, Christmas of 1960, Archie had held the laced, pale-red invitation and criminally peered in windows. Things inside were well under way. He heard sounds of faraway jazz music, muted conversations, and dull, clinking glassware. Snow from the white-clouded city night salted his black hair and long coat. He pulled his Burberry scarf around his chin and shivered. The building seemed unbreachable with its whisky-colored shingles and dark glasswork.

Simpler to disappear into a taxi
and forget the whole idea.

Archie's paper invitation was a dare. A recent remark about the lack of quality young women in New York (said off-the-cuff to one of his aunt's many business associates) had been recorded with a pencil scratch, made into a memo, and suctioned through the ducts of the *Englander* magazine building. The comment had reached his aunt's private secretary, Mr. Johns. The bowed envelope, addressed in fine point lettering, arrived only two days before the date of the party. His aunt, her hand, was at work.

Her Upper East Side town-home seemed to judge Archie's lack of glamour. His jacket and trousers, though not in tatters, had scuffs and were in need of a press. He had recently started growing out his hair and his sideburns, making him look older than his twenty-four years. His aunt might comment that he was falsely "toughing up" or turning

bohemian. Neither was true. He had simply become less interested in impressing anyone.

He crumpled his invitation into his fingers.

As he turned back to the street, two fancy couples brushed him on their way up the stairs. They looked brilliant in their Italian blackcoats, the men wearing narrow ties and the girls wearing gowns from New York's best shops. And they *were* girls, particularly the red haired one to Archie's right, whom he immediately recognized.

Quickly, Archie unfolded the invitation. He smoothed the paper on his kneecap, restoring it to a more presentable state.

Because he saw her, her red hair…

the girl, going inside.

He had to follow.

His choice was made.

No disappearance. Not tonight.

The front sitting room was stuffed with magazine employees getting soused on company funds. Ushered past the foyer, Archie checked his coat with a blonde teenage girl dressed in a black vest and white shirt. "Thank you," he said, and put his last dollar bill into the dish.

Aunt Dove, a woman in her late fifties, wasn't one to be surrounded by the aged. Her magazine employees were none over four decades, most in their twenties (the typists, anyway.) Each was a highly educated, well-bred American version of Aunt Dove, copycatted either through intense exposure to the woman or hired for their mirroring qualities.

In the crowd, Archie had lost his target.

The girl's taken to the kitchen. Being chatted up by copywriters with better wages and squarer chins. Archie thought of retrieving his coat and dollar, but decided it would look strange if he left so quickly.

He instead took a position beside the grandfather clock, which loomed over the heads of the partygoers as a watchful chaperone. Next to it, Archie felt very small, but also somehow comforted. It would be difficult to be seen in

this spot, and he liked that. He floated above the room – ready to pierce the ceiling, hot-step the attic, take to the rooftops should anyone start a single conversation.

Do not get involved, he reminded himself.

The upper wainscoting and chandeliers of the house were decorated with streamers and mined with mistletoe. The men and woman, boys and girls, had a vaguely blurry appearance – a postcard, just as (Archie assumed) his aunt had intended. A uniformed waiter slipped by and Archie lifted a martini from the man's balanced tray.

Oh, no.

When reaching for the glass, Aunt Dove had spotted him.

It took five minutes for her to reach his position, though he was only fifteen feet away. Guests waylaid Aunt Dove with asinine laughter and transparent graciousness. Archie didn't feel obliged to ease her journey. *I could be nice; I could meet her halfway. I could. But I won't.* He enjoyed watching as she tapped her finger to her chin and listened (or pretended to) as her workers made small talk or expendable suggestions on how to increase circulation; he enjoyed seeing her eyes widen, followed by a false smile, whenever her dress drew compliments; he enjoyed knowing that he was her destination, and all these others just street obstructions.

The grandfather clock struck nine o'clock, and the old girl finally made it through.

"Archie!" she exclaimed over the chimes and kissed her nephew on both cheeks. "Archie, Archie, *Archie*." The first call of his name had been pleasant; the rest faintly resembled admonition. "I'm super excited you're here, love. *What* are you doing with your *hair*? Did you know your invitation came back in the post? Johns had to confirm your address. 'Has your nephew relocated?' 'No, he's there, as always, in that mud hut he calls a flat.' So we sent a second card, and now you are *here*. Lovely lovely. Aren't you having a smashing time?"

"Happy Christmas, Auntie," Archie said and raised his dwindling martini.

"Oh, Happy Christmas, Happy *Christmas*!" Turning, and with conspiratorial intent, Aunt Dove put her arm around her nephew and fanned to the room with her fingers. "I think everyone's here – my boys, my girls, the very important, the notables and the quotables. And plenty of pretty. See anyone you fancy?"

Archie thought about mentioning the girl in the kitchen. "No," he answered, "and don't try to arrange anything."

Aunt Dove raised her penciled eyebrows. "It's been three *years* since that devilish Caroline Green broke your heart. I don't like seeing you sulk."

"I'm not sulking," said Archie. "I'm…never mind. I can't convince you of anything." Archie stepped back to the curtain, the clock. He hadn't thought of Caroline in months. She meant little to him then and nothing now, but to his aunt, who had met Caroline on St. Valentine's Day, the former girlfriend came to represent the failure of all young love, flummoxed and doomed from the starting pistol. "Go and enjoy your party, Auntie," Archie said with a wave of his drink. It was a less-than-subtle signal to be left alone.

Aunt Dove patted the shoulder of his jacket, gently, and gave a nod. With her long, painted nails, she flicked a stitch that had sprung out of his jacket's seam, to show she had noticed. Soon, she was off into the traffic of the room, tapping shoulders on the way to the kitchen, as if contact at all times was required by the rules of some game.

Archie's eyes drifted to the banner above the grand piano.

'Happy Christmas,' it read,

the English pronouncement beating down the Americanized 'Merry Christmases' that seemed to pop, like thrown firecrackers, from the mouths of the American guests.

Archie was suddenly sick for his childhood. Sick in a way that no magazine or its annual party would cure. *Englander* was a lark: "English News For Transplants," said

the print under the banner of each issue. His aunt had launched the magazine in 1953, funded by money from her second divorce. It began as a twelve-pager, exclusively sold within New York City limits. After two years, its staff occupied the top floor of an Avenue D building. Distribution expanded to Paris. Now six years on, *Englander* owned all floors of a swank 8-story address in Midtown. The magazine, mutating like a virus into a seventy-page glossy, had landed on shelves in, of all strange places, Bombay, India as well as provinces in the Congo. Subscriptions, advertisements, and notoriety were at an all-time high.

But Archie never read it.

Although its content also applied to him, as a transplant to the United States from his birth city of London, it would be too pleasing for his aunt to learn her nephew had become an audience. Whenever she'd quiz him on contents, or cover design, he'd answer simply, "No, haven't seen it, Auntie. Sorry." As a monthly goes, it was fairly well done, by his estimation, but he just didn't want to give her the satisfaction.

He didn't even buy the issue that contained his photograph – the one he took of the magazine's thirty-six staff members for the annual commemorative. He knew it was a mercy assignment, taken out of hunger, so why be fooled that the black-and-white was anything like 'art'?

> His female target appeared in the sliver of the open kitchen door. Archie's eyes lit up with the sight of her.

Her hair was red – the kind of light only natural auburn can produce when it hits the pupils of a young, excitable male. Caroline Green, too, was a redhead. It was one of the earliest attractants for Archie, her American accent and her curvy frame being second and third. This girl in the kitchen was different, though. She was taller. Much taller. Her red hair, cut short, exaggerated her height

even further. She was taller than Archie, who was a solid young man but small-framed, a product of his father's genetics. The Gray men were never, ever considered towers. This stature made sure they were easily overlooked, which worked to Archie's advantage as he ducked back to the curtain, insuring the girl would lose all chances of seeing him through the door.

Archie returned to posing with his martini. His ears became stuffed with the atonal hum of the room's conversations. He tried to concentrate on the jazz combo playing in the corner. It was a four-piece: piano, bass, saxophone, and drums. The saxophonist's long black face was easily seen above the party guests. The musician's eyes shut as he blew the notes of traditional standards and holiday hits. *Not bad, that.* Archie always did like the sound of jazz; it fit the gin, mixing in his bloodstream.

A chair became empty. Stepping from the corner, Archie took the abandoned seat. From this angle, there was an unobstructed sight down to the street. Snow had filled the footsteps of the late-arriving guests.

Ghostly clear on this Manhattan night, Archie could not help but notice a slowly moving taxi, its yellow paint and foggy headlights, as it drifted to the town-home's side of the street and stopped. A rear door sprang open. Emerging from a taxi was a very slight man, yet one with large features, the nose and mouth. The man wore a tuxedo and tails, a top hat and a white cummerbund. In his hand, he held a black cane with a white tip.

His destination was apparent. The party.

The driver was paid and the small passenger bounded up the steps, tapping his cane. He disappeared under the wing of the town-home.

Archie raised himself out of his chair and looked severely downward. He dribbled a bit of his martini on his trousers, and swore. The man could not be seen.

Through the clasped hands of two arm-wrestling men (showing off for girls), Archie kept a careful watch on the foyer for the man's arrival. He waited and waited. The teenage coat girl emerged from the gap and folded her arms,

yawning. His view threatened, Archie stood from his chair. He went onto the tips of his toes. He didn't want to miss the entrance of this intriguing person.

When too much time had passed, Archie bent at the knees to again take his seat.

"Hello,"

said the man wearing tux and tails, fingers rounding a whiskey glass, smiling, and now occupying Archie's surrendered chair. His cane rested in his lap. "Apologies, young man, did I take your seat?" he asked. In the politeness of his voice, Archie detected an accent, a thickness. This man, too, was a transplant. But not from England.

"No," Archie replied, recovering from his surprise. His fuzzy head made a calculation. It was possible that the man, being so short, had entered the foyer, crossed to the bar, and come around the perimeter of the party without Archie noticing. After all, there was the arm wresting, the coat girl, and any number of blind spots in Archie's vision.

Archie understood that it was rude to walk away from someone at a party without chatting. The man's greeting, his apology, seemed like opening lines. Yet it was too much for Archie. He had only made allowances to speak with his aunt, and maybe the girl, but no one else. He wasn't in the mood for new friends. He made a polite smile and drifted away from the occupied chair.

Planting himself beside the jazz combo, he nodded his head to two songs and pretended to be paying infinite attention. The saxophonist – he smiled during the piano solo. *It must be difficult performing for so many people who don't care who you are or what you play. To the guests, you're furniture.* Archie had the belief that the staff of the magazine didn't appreciate much, let alone music. It may have been wrong to apply his aunt's tastes to a roomful of strangers, but he couldn't help himself.

His eyes went back towards the windows, the curtain, and his former chair. Although there were too many guests

blocking between, he assumed the short man in the tuxedo remained seated.

Hovering nearby Archie and the band was Doctor Roman Rollo, his Aunt Dove's second husband of one year, a man she found on a trip home to England, and brought back to America as if she had purchased a souvenir. Archie's new uncle, a good-natured Englishman in his late forties, was a general medicine practitioner, interested in railways, and, on the occasion of their one and only meeting, very pleasant to Archie. The nephew doubted Uncle Roman would seek him out, though. *What would they discuss?* Archie didn't know anything about either of the man's favorite subjects: railways or medicine. Archie raised his glass in salute, though, when their eyes met, and he quickly began to form exit plans.

At a parting of two giggling blonde typists, Archie had a view. His old chair was now empty.

At the end of a song, there was a lackluster applause from those in the room that had paid attention. Uncle Roman, however, was very enthusiastic. Archie didn't join; it would have tipped his martini. His quick plan was to gulp his drink as no one watched, possibly make a brave foray into the kitchen, then leave without saying goodbyes, home to his 'mud hut' to play with his cameras.

The short man, planted under Archie's feet, stopped Archie's turn. The man held his cane between two stubby fingers, his whisky in the same hand's clip, his opposite paw outstretched and holding a sharp white business card.

Archie apologized but did not take the card. "Excuse me. I almost ran over you."

"Take my card," the man insisted.

Archie plucked the card from the man's fingers and let his eyes graze the printing, quickly. He dropped his arm to his side, ready to pocket the object, when he realized: he had looked, but had not read. Again, he was being rude. He drew the card up once more and said aloud:

"Anders Matten III. Escape Artist."

BLACK AND WHITE

"I quite liked your photograph. The quality. The grain. It showed a more classic eye. Enough of these imports from progressive photo stock companies and snap-snap-snap. My nationality is Dutch. We Dutchmen know what is a lasting work of art. Just because you have the speed doesn't mean you should use it. After all, a true group portrait, one which will hold the mystery of the collective as well as serving the purpose of identification...ah, that's a more rare breed. Do you think you have it? The gift for that?"

The man had seen and assumed.

As Archie Gray fiddled with the stuck focus of his Leica 35mm, he considered his new assignment. Nothing really wrong with it, he supposed, as the pay was promising and it fit into his schedule. Three hundred dollars would help him meet his rent. Plus, this Mr. Matten, Escape Artist, had given Archie *carte blanche* to choose the location and style of the photograph. That he liked. No interference. He could let his sensibilities guide him to the proper film, focus, and shutter speed.

Before setting out on his scouting mission, Archie took the train to the *Englander* building. He wanted to confirm the man's integrity. It was so easy to be misled in New York City. No one had ever come up to him before and handed him a job out of the blue. His Aunt was inaccessible for the latter half of the cocktail party. A rush of advertising associates had arrived together just as his head nodded 'yes' to Andres Matten's request for a photograph. The army of well-wishers swept through the party, stopping the jazz music and packing the room to unbreathable limits. Archie took the opportunity to get out.

Anyway, he knew where to find his Aunt Dove.

"Dove Gray, please. It's her nephew."

"I know who you are," said the pretty lobby receptionist with a wink. She was nineteen, no more, with casket black hair cut into a bob. Her red lipstick had smeared on the white telephone, staining the receiver. "Mr. Johns," she said after three rings, "Mrs. Gray's nephew is in

the lobby…No, no appointment…" The receptionist turned to Archie. "Will you stay long?"

"Just five minutes."

This seemed acceptable. Archie was allowed past the lobby and into the elevator. As he thanked the receptionist, she lamented, "Sorry you missed the party…"

See, he thought, *invisible.*

Archie pushed the "UP" arrow and the elevator came noisily down to meet him.

Inside the car…

stood the red-haired girl from the party – the one he found so striking, the one he cropped from the staff photograph and blew up to larger size, a solo. He didn't expect to see her. He assumed she worked at the desks since he had not seen her before, though he was very rarely in the office and she may have been a newer hire. No, no desk for her. Instead, she was here: pulling shut the elevator cage and working the lift lever. She didn't even look at him.

Standing behind her on the ride upward, he let his eyes fall on her back, her thin waist and her shoes. Her red hair just touched the shoulders of her green blouse. He felt dwarfed next to her. As the bell tapped six floors, Archie's eyes stole a look at her legs – long and meaty, the calves hidden by slightly transparent fabric. He felt shame as she expertly drew the car to a stop and announced the floor. "Eight." A minor adjustment and the open elevator aligned with the carpet.

At the exit, she left quickly to answer another call of the car. He barely had a second to note her features.

"Archibald," said Mr. Johns, serious as a gravedigger. Aunt Dove's private secretary, the strapping forty-something ex-Army man, in his tan suit and matching tie, crossed the carpet to take Archie by the hand. He had a mustard stain on the corner of his moustache. Archie smelled the pungent odor of fried food in the office and caught sight of a half-done lunch sack torn open on the nearby desktop. "We didn't expect you. Sorry you couldn't make the party."

"I was there," said Archie, a bit defensive.

"You were? Oh." Johns seemed genuinely surprised and embarrassed. His cheeks colored quickly. "You got the invitation then?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry. I didn't see you there."

"I was in the corner. Look, is–"

"Your Aunt is with an appointment. She's nearly done. Have a chair."

Archie bent into one of three hard oak chairs lined against the wall. Above his head, was a painted portrait of the Queen. A recent redecoration of the magazine's management offices had swung to gimmickry. Most passing through had called it clever; Archie was the first to call it obvious. The Union Jack carpet was a bit much.

"Taking a photograph?" Johns stubby index finger wagged, palm up, in the general direction of Archie's chest.

Archie looked down. He had forgotten his camera hung around his neck. "Oh. Maybe."

"Assignment?" The word was said as if to indicate serious doubt.

Archie wanted to meet Johns's scowl with something biting, but settled for, "Possibly," a single word that betrayed nothing and led nowhere. Johns returned to his desk, his sandwich, assuming the photograph's subject to be a young New York nobody, an equal to the boy.

In silence, the two sat across from each other, the day's light from the window behind Archie making him thinner and thinner to Johns's eyes. If he had been allowed to sit much longer, the secretary would surely have forgotten Archie even existed. At the end of the mustard sandwich, the door to Aunt Dove's office dragged open along the Union Jack's cross-colors.

A man with too-large trousers backed out the door, his finger plugging one ear. "Thanks for the favor," he called back into the room. He gave an awkward, polite smile and an up and down wave of the Fedora hat he held in his right hand. His accent was American, but showed with another color, too, unidentifiable. A man well-traveled with hair slicked, his necktie tossed over a shoulder, his stomach

pushing open a button of his crème-colored shirt, who failed to notice Archie.

Archie, however, couldn't help but notice the serious expression on this man's face, though the man poked through the gloom with a happy *adieu* to Dove Gray as he pulled the door shut.

Johns snapped to attention. From the wall rack, he fetched the man's overcoat. Neither said a word as the elevator was called and the red-haired accomplice shuttled the man down.

"You can go inside," Johns said when the business was finished, his back turned to Archie.

The boy didn't bother to knock.

Inside the antechamber, his Aunt Dove stood by the windowsill and looked down on the busy Manhattan street. Over her shoulder, she said, "Archie. Archie, Archie, Archie. Come to the window."

Archie held his camera close to his chest and let his shoes press into the thick inch of office carpet. Here, thankfully, there was a more tasteful décor – plain curtains, a large desk with blotter, an inkwell, several chairs, walled bookcases, and stacks of *Englander* back issues piled high in corners.

Aunt Dove folded Archie into her arms and pulled him closer to the window glass. "Look down there, love. What do you see?"

"I see people." Dotting the dirty snow of the city's sidewalks and streets, a daily mass of pedestrians made their way.

"People. Yes," agreed his aunt. "Anything else?"

"Taxis. Motorcars."

"Yes. Those, too."

"And snow. Am I missing something?"

Disappointed, Aunt Dove let her hands fall from his body as she eased to the middle of the room and smiled. "You miss everything, dear nephew." He didn't know how to reply. Her games made him tired. He wasn't in the mood for a test. His aunt took him by the shoulders and pushed him toward the chair opposite her desk. She sat on the

corner of the blotter and crossed her legs, ladylike. "I wish you'd pay more attention. You always drift. This to that, that to this. You're twenty-four, Archie. I gave you that staff photo assignment so that you could apply yourself. It's the middle of day and, rather than taking your new credentials studio to studio, you prefer to invade your poor aunt's office."

Archie had heard this speech before. In his head and from her lips. She was taking the place of his parents, both dead, consumed by sudden disease in the early years of Archie's life – bang, bang – back to back floor hits within eight months of a year. Aunt Dove could claim rights through eighteen due to her relation to Archie's father and the will of custody. But years later, Archie felt well equipped to be his own motor. In that moment, he decided to not mention Anders Matten or do any sort of a validation on his reputation. No. Instead, he'd shave hours off his scouting of a proper location. It was a better use of Aunt Dove, and it would keep her from criticizing his employer, should he be disreputable after all. "I've got an assignment," he said bravely. Aunt Dove's mouth dropped open. "Don't look so surprised, Auntie. *Englander* isn't my only paycheck. I've come to ask you a question on a location, then I'm off to do some test photographs."

Aunt Dove kicked her legs and landed on her heels. "That's lovely!" she said, her spirits rising. "You know, Archie, I only lecture because I'm worried. You mope about. Moreso lately. I was hoping to bring you on-staff at *Englander*, maybe as a freelance photographer. But since coming of age you've run away. If you didn't occasionally pop by for lunch, I'd swear you moved back to London."

"I'm thinking about it." Archie rolled his eyes.

"Don't. The Grays are Americanized now. We like to feel connected. You know, I'm surprised you've taken up photography. Another reason I gave you the *Englander* staff photograph was because I was sure you wouldn't do it. It's nice to know I've tested you and you've risen to the occasion. Not that you're irresponsible; I've never felt that about you. It's just that…to be a good photographer – I've

heard it said – you must be a good witness. You must observe." Aunt Dove's finger trotted in the direction of her office window. "When I ask you what you see, sometimes it's more than taxis and snow I'm after."

"I'm sure it is." Archie had grown weary of sitting beneath her and being taught lessons. He was going to miss the good sunlight. New York winters, under clouds, only gave him until suppertime. He had better get on the stick. "Now about a location–"

"What are you photographing?"

"A troupe."

"A troupe?"

"Yes, a group of performers."

"Oh, what kind?" Aunt Dove moved behind her desk and dropped into her revolving chair, spinning to her nephew. Her interest was most certainly piqued.

"I'm not sure. I think they're some type of acrobats."

"Where on *earth* did you meet some of *them*?"

Archie hesitated. He didn't want to confess. The revelation might show the true limits of his opportunities. "At a party…" he said with a wave away. She caught it. The jig was up. Aunt Dove turned and raised her brow. She knew which party, the old bird. "Yes, it was *your* party, Auntie. The founder of the troupe was there, had seen my photograph of the *Englander* staffers, and had asked for something similar."

Aunt Dove's gaze went up to the low ceiling of her office, the spackling. "I don't remember inviting any acrobats…"

"Anders Matten. The Third, I believe."

She looked straight into his face. "Anders *Matten* was at my party? How odd. And he's not an acrobat. He's an escape artist. There's a *very* big difference."

Archie described their meeting – the man in his chair, his small frame, his outstretched card, his compliments of the photographs and the closing of their transaction. He did not, however, mention his wages – one thousand dollars for a single photograph, an amazingly high sum he, as a virtual amateur, could not dismiss lightly. All during the

tale, Aunt Dove remained motionless behind her desk, her right ear cocked slightly to her nephew's voice. At the end of it, Archie folded his hands in his lap, and then fiddled with the lens cap of his camera. "I thought an old theater might be nice. Maybe one that's abandoned. I'd like to get them on stage. Something in the old tradition. You know a lot of people and places, Auntie. You could point me in the right direction."

Archie thought the compliment might loosen his aunt's lips, make her pick up the phone and dial, help get a key into Archie's hands of somewhere grand, somewhere secluded, somewhere free that wouldn't chip into his fee. He had rent to make.

Uncharacteristically slow, Aunt Dove moved over her desk and rested both elbows over top of two back-issues covering the middle spot of her blotter. Her chin rested on her palms, she answered slowly, "I know just the place." She smiled broadly. "But you're got to make me a promise first, before I make any arrangements."

Archie was leery of promises. "What is it?" he asked with skepticism. It might be easier to pull a city directory and go scouting than negotiate with his obstinate aunt.

"I want you to tell me where and when this photograph is scheduled. I want to arrive beforehand and watch from the balcony. You won't even know I'm there."

Archie felt his neck involuntarily move into his shoulders. "Why?"

"Did you see the man in my office? The one who left just as you came in?"

Archie nodded.

"His name is Peter Disney. He's a promoter. He's putting on a show in town next week and it seems he's lost all three of his acts. None have contacted him since hitting New York one week ago. He asked that I keep an eye out. He suspects I might get wind of one of them."

"You?"

"As you said yourself, Archie…I know simply everyone." Dove smiled and leaned back in her chair. "One of Mr. Disney's missing men is Anders Matten." She raised

an eyebrow. "I'd like to observe this Mr. Matten. He was a guest at my party, after all. An uninvited one, but obviously there for a purpose. So do we have a bargain? I won't tell Mr. Disney about our arrangement. Besides, I'm always hesitant to trust anyone in show business. There's something afoot in the city. And it's my job, Archie, to be in on the ground floor."

THE MULBERRY THEATER

The address was 22 Blue Top Street, a half-street hidden behind a building materials workshop in lower Manhattan. Archie arrived by taxi. The driver didn't want to get stuck in the alley snow, so Archie paid him by the trash containers and had to walk the fifty meters to the theater's rear door. A narrow passage, canopied by the overhangs of neighboring walk-up apartments, Archie's claustrophobia was undeniable as he stepped into melting, dirty snow up to his sock tops and searched in the dull sunlight. He consulted his paper map, his Aunt Dove's drawing. This had to be the place.

The red door had no markings, only a rusty cross-handle secured by chains. Chains, but no padlock.

Folding the map in half, Archie bit into the paper with his teeth and freed his hands. Left over right, right over left, turning once then twice, he undid the chains in the memorized sequence, as taught to him by his aunt before exiting her office. Soon, the heavy quarter-inch thick chain fell free from its snake tangle across the bar, and Archie was able to depress the door's handle. He listened as the squeaking gears moved and the bolt slid into its companion frame. The chains sounded loud against the red paint as he put his shoulder into the brace. Without subtlety, the lower half of the door dug into the cement floor of the entrance until it stuck, inward, at a point halfway. He was in.

"Hello?"

Archie thought it impolite to enter unannounced. Abandonment was what he expected, but in New York abandonment as often meant occupied by squatters. He didn't want to risk injury to his small body by six-footer thugs with broken bottles and little to lose. Comforted by the thought that he'd scare the rats off the ship, being the first voice in the place in nearly two years (as his auntie told it), he shouted a second time, moving down the scale to a lower octave.

"Hello!"

Before him was a set of spiral stairs, leading straight up into a hole in the ceiling. Archie could see the rot in the boards, the wood coated with mildew. This place was a health hazard. Instinctually, he covered his mouth with the arm of his coat, letting his camera come free as he took the paper from his teeth and shoved it into his trouser pocket.

For light, he left the door ajar. Little chance someone would come down to the alley, anyway. He would be safe if he didn't stay too long. He was only having a look.

His shoes mounted the spiral stairs slowly, one at a time, and he felt the metal tube wobbling more and more as he went higher. His gloved hand snatched a rope that hung just at the top steps and he used it to mountaineer the last stretch. Through the hole he went, awkwardly, until surfacing into the black.

Archie couldn't see a thing.

No light from the outside door remained.

"The box is on your right. Feel around."

Aunt Dove's instructions seemed easily followed when he first heard them. Now, his face flush and his palms slippery with sweat, the absolute silence of the building's inner void made Archie hesitate. The musty smell of wet blankets entered his nostrils. *Feel around?* Such a vague suggestion. He didn't want to touch anything at all.

Archie put his arms straight out in front of his body and turned slightly to his right. One step, two steps, and he connected with the wall, which moved.

It was a curtain.

He dragged his fingertips, navigating further into the black. To the right. Another step. To the right. His hands moved up and down on the curtain making figure eights on the surface. At last, he found the lever, a phallic obstruction that made him jump. Settling, he gripped his hands around the long wooden bat poking from behind the curtain, and threw it as far as the springs would take it.

Nothing happened.

He had fears of trap doors being opened. A fall to break legs.

He repeated the throw.

This time, he felt a click at the end of the movement, a snapping into place. Gears shifted. Current flowed. The building started to groan like a great engine. Humming came into Archie's ears and he stepped away from the lever, scared of the consequences.

Pop! – a light came on above him, then several more; he had burned a fuse and, like dominoes, the lights hooked to the building's ceiling lighted in quick sequence. Archie shielded his eyes. From dark to light, the room spun as he dropped his arms back to see what had been done.

He was in the theater – the great Mulberry Theater – shut for a decade now. He could see the two-tiered architecture – the floor seating and the loge, the side-boxes, and the small balcony high in the back. He didn't count chairs, but guessed the capacity at three hundred.

He was planted in front of the black fore-curtain, center stage, framed by the gold and red fabric, which had been drawn open from its last occasion. The spiral stairs beneath the stage seemed a naked mistake in the otherwise flat and large vaudeville stage. The over-ornamented proscenium was a distraction, but might look good in a photograph, especially a black and white. His mind had already begun to think like a photographer's.

"Perfect," he said aloud.

The echo took him by surprise. His momentary excitement over finding the lights, seeing the interior, had blinded him to the fact that he was a trespasser. He pulled his light meter from his overcoat and began to take readings. He had fears that he might need to augment the light, which he didn't want to do. To bring in equipment might attract attention. He liked the guerilla aspects of this work, and he believed his aunt did as well. Why else would she suggest a place such as this? She made no phone calls, no appointments. She just gave directions. He had to give the old woman credit: she knew her city.

He would have to consult his manuals. His camera would need special film and a matching shutter speed, if he were to shoot without lights. But it could be done.

In the course of a chilly half-hour in the drafty theater, Archie surveyed the stage from every angle. He climbed into the audience, the orchestra pit, from the usher's breach, the tip of the lobby, the tiers, even the balcony (though he knew he couldn't use it,) until he found the most epic framing for his photograph. Anders Matten would be pleased; he felt confident in this fact.

"Give me something classic," the man had said.

The Mulberry delivered. Thank you, Aunt Dove.

As he finished his test roll, twenty-four exposures, Archie smiled a last time and was prepared to shut the lights and leave. Stepping forward, he froze,

as he saw a man's head
appear from beneath the stage.

Archie jumped, ducked, and hid behind the seats of the second row.

Someone must have come in through the rear door. Stupid of me to leave it open! I've been followed.

"Young man!" called a deep voice, as if reading the phrase from a registry.

Behind the second row, Archie did not move.

"Young sir," he said. The man sounded Eastern European. Archie could tell from the harshness of the clip. "Don't worry," he continued, "I'm a friend." Each word was deliberately paced, not natural but effective.

Footsteps crossed the stage in echo.

Archie glimpsed the man from between two theater chairs. He was in his later forties, bald, with a brown suit and tie, wearing no overcoat. He stood quite tall and scanned the lit chairs for signs of movement.

Resigned, Archie rose from his hiding place.

"Ah. Thank you," said the man, "I'm afraid I don't know your name."

"Archie Gray. Who are you?"

"Doctor Ottokar Hecht."

"Have we met?"

"Not before today."

"I'm not trespassing, you know." Archie was compelled to add this. The way Hecht appraised him showed authority. Archie feared arrest.

Hecht didn't appear to notice Archie's jitters. "I'm a friend of Mr. Peter Disney," he stated plainly.

"I don't know anyone by that name."

"He met with Mrs. Dove Gray this morning. Your aunt? Am I wrong?"

"No, you're not wrong. She's my aunt. I still don't know anyone named Disney." He decided to play his cards close. There was a glint in the eye of this man that made him want to keep quiet.

Archie moved into the aisle of the theater. He fingered the focus of his camera and began winding the spent film, hoping to wrap things up and be on his way.

Hecht looked down on him from the edge of the stage.

"What do you want? Get on with it. You've followed me. I know. I'm not dumb."

Hecht paced, letting his heels clop-clop on the stage. He put his face down to his feet and nodded in understanding. "I love a good stage. Solid wood. Seats. An audience." The man raised his arms above his head then took a practiced bow. "Doctor Hecht, Master of Disguise!" he called. "Doktor Hecht, Meister von Verkleidungen, in my native tongue, thank you, Herr Gray. Titles mean everything in this business, did you know that?"

Hecht leapt from the stage into the lower orchestra pit with far more agility than his age implied. From behind the wall, he sprang onto the stepladder and slipped athletically into the walk space before the first row chairs.

Archie stood toe-to-toe with the German, assessing his simple suit with wide lapels, his bald head and his large ears. He was so much taller than Archie, but, oddly, the boy was not intimidated anymore. Despite the man's flagging of his title, he had suddenly become less threatening, and even extended a hand for Archie to take. Instinctually, Archie met the grip and felt the soft, firm shake of Doctor Hecht. "Doctor of what?" Archie asked.

"Nothing. Everything. Magic."

"You're confusing."

"It's my job. To be that. Sleight-of-tongue."

Archie let his hand fall from the greeting. "You're a magician, aye? Do you want your photograph taken, too?" It was a plain question, one that seemed natural to Archie. "Has word got out? Does everyone know I'm photographing Mr. Matten?" Archie knew immediately he had made a mistake.

Doctor Hecht's face dropped. "Matten?" he said, a mix of emotions in his cheeks and eyes – embarrassment, anger, frustration. "Here's here then?"

"I'm to photograph his troupe. I thought this would be a good location."

Hecht scanned the rafters of the theater. "Yes, from what I know of Matten, he'll be very pleased. Any chance to be on a stage. He's looking to reinvent himself. When's the picture being taken?" Archie was shy with the information; Hecht could sense that. "Come, I'm a friend of Anders. We have shared the bill many times. Matten and his escapes, me and my disguises. I've sailed all the way to America and he's already made plans for publicity. I'm a step behind, then. It's only fair that we should meet. Come, tell me when you'll be taking your photograph, and I will arrive beforehand. Maybe watch from the balcony? Hmmm?"

Archie's eyes drifted backwards over his shoulder to the Mulberry's high balcony. It was going to be crowded. Aunt Dove now this man. There's something strange about so many requests to witness such a non-event.

"It will be fun," Hecht added.

The way the German doctor spun the last phrase made it seem anything but fun. A tick came into the man's left eye. He stared down at Archie for an answer. This man was not leaving until he had agreement.

"Maybe you should contact Mr. Disney," said Archie, the words sounding a bit impolite as they rolled off his tongue.

Hecht made a face. "I'll contact Disney when I'm ready. I have…preparations to make. Matten's doing the

same. It's part of the profession. Preparations." The doctor turned and become suddenly more sanguine. "As I said, Anders and I are close friends. I'm sure he would be quite happy to see me."

Archie shrugged. "All right. Since you're old friends." Archie brushed past the man and popped his spent roll of film from the camera's heart. "I'm photographing them Sunday around teatime. Three o'clock. I'll need an hour to prepare and I don't want to lose the daylight. If I leave the lobby doors open, I might be able to get some interesting shots." Archie patted his Leica 35mm and pocketed his film roll. "I'll have to see how these tests come out, but I'm fairly certain it's the best approach." (Inwardly, Archie was pleased with his professional mind on the matter, even though the majority of his test shots were sure to come out black.) "Three o'clock Sunday," he repeated.

Archie, after exiting the theater and handling the complicated back-door chains, left Doctor Hecht on the street corner outside the Mulberry Theater. They parted with pleasantries. A yellow taxi drove empty into the intersection as Doctor Hecht repeated the time and place for the photograph, confirming he heard it correctly.

Sunday. 3 pm.

Archie got into the backseat of the taxi, not offering Hecht a shared ride back to the East Village, or to wherever the Doctor had lodgings. Also, Archie didn't question the man on his blatant tailing of Archie to the theater, the scouting trip ruined by a spy. It was rude, but the damage had been done. Archie didn't want to arouse suspicion.

When he was far enough away from the older man, Archie instructed the taxi driver to stop at a public phone box. With a dime, he called the telephone exchange given to him by Anders Matten.

"You've found a location then?" said the Dutchman, in high spirits. "Good. Just tell me where and when, and I will be there with my troupe."

"Mulberry Theater, 22 Blue Top Street," said Archie, "Saturday. Noon sharp."

BOLD STATEMENTS AND LITTLE MEN

When Archie Gray returned to the *Englander* offices the Friday before his scheduled photo session with Anders Matten, he expected to see the red-haired girl commanding the elevator, just as he had seen her before. However, this time, the girl sat behind the secretary's desk on the eighth floor, in the place of Mr. Johns.

"Mr. Johns has gone home sick. I sometimes help out. I'm not *just* the elevator girl, you know."

Archie was seduced by the girl's honey voice; he had completely feigned understanding of her words. "Oh," he said, stiffly, and again, "Oh." He hoped she would repeat herself, but she didn't. "So *why* aren't you in the elevator again?"

The girl shook her head and pressed her palms to her soft and rosy cheeks. "Are you deaf?" She then pretended to sign letters. "Are you deaf?" she repeated, with hand signals, speaking slower.

Archie didn't know if he should feel insulted or not. No one had ever talked to him like this – not in the magazine offices. He was, after all, a relation of the boss. With that designation came a hefty amount of political security. "Sorry," he said to the girl, and looked across the Union Jack carpet to his aunt's office door.

"She's vanished," said the girl. "I think she's taken to the ledge. I went inside after she didn't answer her buzzer, but the place is empty." Archie stood stiff. The girl had to repeat herself, again, with hand signals. "Gone. Out. Escaped. The ledge." She made walking fingers across the surface of Johns's oak desk.

"You're joking?" puffed Archie.

She smiled wryly. "Of course. She's gone to an appointment. It's December. Who would use the ledge? She left ten minutes ago. Want me to take a message?" She reached for neither pad nor pencil.

Archie crossed the carpet to the office door, dragging his shoes as he did so.

"Don't you believe me?" asked the girl, with a lilt.

Archie stopped and turned. "She wouldn't ignore me, would she?" he said. "Did she give instructions?"

"Paranoid?" asked the girl.

"All the time."

The girl pushed the button of the call box on the desk. "Mrs. Gray? Mrs. Gray?" she repeated. Archie only heard the sterile wind of an open channel. "See? No one home."

"Fine, take a message." Archie repositioned himself by the desk and extracted a pencil from the round holder beside the call box. The girl raised a brow. "Oh," said the boy, figuring it out. "You're a smart one, then. Photographic memory? All right, I'll test you. You have to get this right, though. It could be trouble if you get the day wrong. You won't, will you?" She didn't bother to shake her head; her eyes affirmed. "Tell Aunt Dove that I'm taking that photograph

Sunday
at three.

At the Mulberry Theater. I'll meet her at the front lobby doors. Got it?"

The girl tapped her temple and winked. "Locked. In here." She said, with weight on each syllable. "Want me to repeat it back?"

"Do you *want me* to want you to repeat it back?" he asked. The girl gave him a wink.

Archie spent Friday evening reviewing his test shots from the Mulberry Theater. As he had predicted, half were black. He would shoot as much as possible during his two hours time with Matten's troupe. He might need the coverage. Again, he debated bringing in additional lighting. It would be expensive. The Matten fee was covering his rent; he needed every penny or it would be a raid of the

trust fund, something he felt guilty about any time he did so. Rather than making reservations for lighting equipment, Archie spent the evening reading poorly translated Russian Leica manuals about shutter speeds - B, 1/1, 1/2, 1/4, 1,8, 1/15, 30, 1/60, 1/125, 1/250, 1/500. He made educated assumptions on what might work with his memories of the midday light of the Mulberry. There would have to be some risk. His only other option was confess to Matten that he was an amateur (which may mean forfeiture of the job) or ring up a camera lab for an assistant, another thing he could ill afford.

What was it about his trust fund that bothered him so? He had limitless funds at his disposal. All that was required was a signature on a banking slip and he could withdraw what he liked.

When he had turned eighteen, his first action was a raid of the trust for two thousand dollars. Promptly, he spent it on fancy clothes and expensive dinners, taxis around town, and on Caroline Green. Like a glutton, he felt fat for hours afterwards. Then, slowly, over the course of several weeks, as he spent the last dozen twenties of his withdrawal on this and that, Archie sunk into waist-high guilt.

His dead parents had left a trust to ensure his future. But what future did he have? He was an indecisive and undirected boy, growing older but not wiser with each year. He had a mild ambition towards a university education, a course of action that might have insured a medium range of test scores and a potential for earnings. But early on, he sensed this wasn't his path. At twenty, Archie suddenly vanished from the school's rosters. He learned nothing except the fact that he had learned nothing. A diploma would guarantee a life in the American workforce, which he never intended to join, but little else. He had searched for other connections in the years following his departure.

He shouldn't have been left so much money when he didn't want to spend it and also possessed no means of earning his way. It was a snakelike dilemma.

Archie's future lay elsewhere, so his remembered guilt at his two thousand dollars left him with only the faintest interest in sustenance on inherited funds. The funds of his dead parents. Blood money, he reckoned, and when considered thusly, he wanted nothing at all to do with it.

Not that he didn't cheat. From time to time.

The unused bank slips folded into the jar near the door of his apartment could be tempting sirens.

But not for photographic lights; not for an assistant.

This shoot was his. He didn't want Aunt Dove, Doctor Hecht, or anyone else interfering. He just wanted the opportunity to take Mr. Matten's picture and get paid for it. Otherwise, it was the fund. The dead parents. Cashing in on tragedy.

On Saturday morning, early, after breakfast, Archie arrived in the back alley of the Mulberry Theater. He had switched into several taxis and various trains, taking a circumspect route to the theater. Hecht may have caught onto his lie. It was important that he lose the doctor in chase, should Hecht continue to shadow him.

Again, he unwound the chains on the red door. Again, he entered into blackness and climbed the spiral stairs through the hole in the center stage. This time, the lights were on. He had left them that way, the chore forgotten. He did not need to fumble for the electricity to light the enormous room in its dim, oyster-colored glow. He propped open the lobby doors with two full coffee cans he had brought from his apartment. This allowed for some daylight to trickle into the theater from the small lobby.

To Archie, the lobby had little photographic appeal. Stripped of its most useful elements, all that remained was a red-painted cocktail bar with a dozen dirty glasses hung upside down in overhead racks. A show poster from a 1951 comedy act (starring two people whose names Archie did not recognize) was hung prominently. On either side of the burgundy carpet, two sets of stairs led either up, to the balconies, or also down, to the toilets, arrows and signs instructing patrons on the proper course.

The front of the building was boarded up strong, just as Aunt Dove had warned when she first told of the theater, its appeal, its seclusion, its history, and its continuing electric bill, paid for by a contributor of the *Englander* real estate advertisement section.

Satisfied that he was getting all he could from the exposed transoms of the lobby, Archie set his tripod and camera in the center aisle of the loge, so that he could zoom into the stage and orchestra pit from an angle. It would be an epic shot, just as Anders Matten had requested. Archie had the perfect lens picked out.

Just before noontime, Archie returned to the front lobby of the theater and, using a hammer he had in his leather bag, pried loose the smallest board in front of the thinnest door. He began to sweat in his collared white shirt but the winter air made him shiver. Flakes of white snow blew in through the opening and along the lobby carpet.

Archie started to worry about the troupe – their garments, the cold of the barely heated theater, and complaints, anything that might make him seem unprofessional. They would be dressed to the nines; performers usually were. But they wouldn't want to wear heavy coats; their cheeks shouldn't be blue. The longer Archie stayed in the Mulberry Theater, the colder it seemed to get.

At five after the hour, Archie took a position outside the theater, on the virtually empty front street. He tapped his foot. No sign of Anders Matten. He returned to the dingy lobby, to read again the comedy act poster. *"Alison, dancing girl, with Levy, ventriloquist."* The act seemed a yawn. An illustration accompanied their names, the heads disproportionably large for the bodies. "Final weeks" read a banner across. A good idea, thought Archie, by the looks of it.

"Mr. Gray," said a voice to his left.

It was Anders Matten, standing beside Archie in the lobby. No approaching sound, no suck of wind from the lobby door, only the small Dutchman at Archie's heel, dressed in a tight tweed vest and matching suit, his tie

loosely knotted, and a small, light Bowler hat resting on the top of his graying hair. Him all right, the man from the Christmas party, the voice on the telephone, the escape artist.

"You startled me," said Archie, who had not jumped at the man's sudden appearance.

"Apologies. The door. I could see you through it. I decided to escape the wind as fast as possible."

Archie looked back to the comedy poster. He was going to point out its traits, but decided against unnecessary conversation.

"Would you show me where the photograph will be taken?" the short man asked politely.

With his arm out and his palm flat, Archie indicated that it was through the theater's archway. Matten removed his hat from his head and bowed, oh-so-slightly, as Archie led along the carpeted path towards the center aisle of the main theater. Once among the seats, Matten smiled widely and proclaimed, "Perfect! It's the perfect place to have our photograph."

"The theater's been closed for awhile, but I have a connection," said Archie, prideful. "It won't look like any other place in the city, just as you requested. Unless someone in New York can remember a show here, it'll be a mystery."

"Perfect," Matten repeated. He was unfazed by the stuffy room, the dreary interior, the minimalist lighting, and the cold. He only had eyes for the stage, its wide and deep dark boards, perfectly measured, and the flushed red curtain behind.

"Where are your men?" asked Archie.

"They're in the lobby."

"Oh?" Archie hadn't seen anyone else, and they had been in the theater mere moments. Matten had not once looked behind him to the entrance and there had been no sounds. Nevertheless, when they both turned to confirm this fact, two stocky men stood spaced apart in the Mulberry's lobby. "Oh!" said Archie again, this time with surprise.

Both men were small – smaller than even Matten – the tallest no more than five-foot-five. The two men had the rough, callused faces of Eastern European laborers. Without a signal, the two formed a line and began to follow Matten down the center theater aisle. As each passed, Archie tipped his head and said, "Hello" "Good afternoon" and the like. Neither spoke, but the greeting received smiles. These men were evidently not humorless.

When he was nearly to the orchestra pit, Anders Matten shouted over his shoulder to Archie, "Don't bother – they don't speak the language." Directing his men as if slicing bread with an invisible knife, Matten soon had his small troupe lined up against the lip of the stage. "Aren't you missing something?" he asked the boy.

"Excuse me?"

"Your camera."

Archie snapped his fingers. "Oh. It's in the loge above us. A better shot from up there."

Matten nodded his head. His eyes went to the loge, but Archie was sure the camera and tripod couldn't be distinguished in the dim light above. "Where shall we stand?" he asked.

"The stage." Archie sensed the words pleased the man, who soon rounded his men, as cattle, in front of the footlights. Archie leapt the lobby stairs two at a time until he reached his position on the loge. His camera had begun to tilt down due to a faulty screw on the tripod's brace. For two minutes, he worked at the base, trying to re-thread the screw so that he wouldn't have to guess at the position of each prior shot.

He sensed impatience from the stage. Matten coughed.

"Sorry, sorry," said Archie to his subjects below. "Dodgy screw on the tripod."

"That's quite all right, Mr. Gray. You can handhold it if you like. We're not that particular." This was a relief to Archie. He only brought the tri-pod to look more professional. He preferred the grip of the camera in his hand, the ability to move freely. With a final twist, he hiked his camera from the tripod brace and swung the thin

leather strap over his neck. "What kind of camera is it?" asked Matten from below. "Is it a good one?"

"It's a Leica. 1958."

One of the small men below on the stage gave a 'humph' of appreciation. The name was recognized.

"Russian," said Matten, nodding to the man.

Archie had been right – there was a Soviet among them. "That's right. Made in the U.S.S.R. Central factory is in Germany, but mine's a bit of a counterfeit. Not top of the line, but I prefer it. 35 x 24 mm frame size, I - 61 2,8/53 lens. It will get you a nice photograph, Mr. Matten."

(Truthfully, the camera made Archie a little nervous. He hated to admit in crowds that his camera was a Soviet make. Times being what they were, it drew disapproving looks. The camera, a neutral device in its own right, seemed to sense this derision and tended to cause trouble. The focus would freeze. The shutter would close. The film might be eaten. It had been in the shop three times since Archie purchased it.)

"Now," began Archie, "I'll start by asking if you have any ideas."

Matten scanned his men's position on the stage. "Ideas?" the escape artist repeated.

"Yes. Do you have a formation?"

Matten paused and thought about this. For a moment or two, he tried to bookend the two others. Then he tried a short/tall, short/tall sequencing. Lastly, he settled for a triangle-shape, the front point being Matten in his Bowler hat, which didn't look good at all.

The men were just too short. They looked ridiculous on the stage. He hadn't counted on that. When he chose the loge for his angle, he didn't consider his subjects, only the curtain and the proscenium. Now that he could see the troupe all gathered, their dark garments and their rather

stolid faces, the troupe appeared very dull. Archie was sure that wasn't Matten's desired effect.

"Hold there. I'm coming down."

The mistake of an amateur shutterbug, this height. Archie hoped it would be overlooked. As quick as he could, he disappeared from his high place and reappeared at the first row chairs.

"I want you lined up, as far forward as you can come without falling into the pit," said Archie. Matten interpreted the instructions for his men using gestures and modeling. "Mr. Matten, would you please take the center? Good. You two on the ends, squeeze in. Thank you." With nudges and a tilted head, Archie worked to move the men into his frame. He took several steps forward until he was no longer in the chairs, but instead flush up against the wall of the orchestra pit.

Now…he started to take photographs.

Click. Click. Click.

From below, these men no longer looked little, but were giants. The tops of their heads filled the small frame of Archie's camera. Their shoes touched the bottom marker in the viewfinder. And in the center, stood Anders Matten III, smiling. It was a foreboding sight. The Mulberry curtain behind the men added texture; the footlights added depth.

After a roll of film, Archie remembered something important. He had forgotten to check the light with his meter. Playing as professional as possible, he casually withdrew the matching Leica meter from his suit pocket and snapped it, taking a reading and adjusting his aperture. He was through a second roll of twenty-four exposures before he realized he was sweating profusely. The must of the theater covered any odor, but under his arms he felt dampness. The same for his shirt collar. He thought to his leather bag, for whether he remembered to bring a towel. Matten's men might be suffering as well, and moist skin makes for bad photographs. Looking up from his eyepiece, though, Archie studied the three men on the stage. Despite their tight coats and hats, their ties and their wool trousers,

none of them sweated. Each appeared perfectly cool and collected. And, considering the reverse effect, none shivered either. They seemed quite unaware of the breeze. These were men conditioned to weather. It was part of their trade: adverse elements.

Another two rolls of film took the better part of an hour. Archie, in the interest of coverage, and to disguise any unpredictability in the camera, tried every shutter setting on the dial. He very rarely moved Matten's men from their original position. He also noticed how the men did not complain. Their legs had to be screw stiff. The normal human shuffling of feet and cracking of knuckles was completely absent. They never let the muscles of their faces loosen or tire. Archie felt that he might go on shooting for days, and if he didn't pass out from exhaustion, as this troupe would never crack. He could tell their training reached to their very bones.

Finally, shortly after one-fifteen on Archie's wristwatch, the young photographer looked up to his subjects and said, "I have only two more pictures left in the roll. I think I have all I need. What do you say we spend the roll with something silly?" It was an idea he had wanted to try in the last roll, but was hesitant to break the momentum.

"What do you have in mind, Mr. Gray?" asked the Dutchman, as if he might entertain just about any idea.

Archie craned his neck over the black orchestra pit and down to the floor below. From the lip of the stage, it was approximately a ten-foot drop. That Doctor Hecht had done it without much effort. Why not these men?

"How would you feel about leaping off the stage…from where you stand now to down into the pit?"

Matten let his eyes drift down. "There are several folding chairs in the way."

"I'll move them," Archie volunteered. "It would make a good shot."

"How so?"

"You'd blur. At least I think you would. I could shoot the exposures quickly – almost on top of each other. It might be an interesting effect."

Matten considered for a moment and then wagged his pointer finger at Archie, then his men, and smiled. "I knew you were an artist, Mr. Gray. I have picked the *right* man. That photograph of the magazine staff had great potential, but we're a more…obliging…group for your innovations."

"Does that mean you'll do it?"

"It's only a few feet."

"Probably ten."

"Mr. Gray, you are looking at the greatest troupe of escape artists in history. Ten feet is not an issue. We've fallen a lot further."

Archie smiled. He set down his camera and climbed the inner ladder of the orchestra pit. With speed, so no minds would have time to change, Archie cleared the dozen folding chairs from the spot of their jump. He stacked them one-by-one in the rear corner of the pit, in the blackest part under the stage. Several times he jumped up and down on the boards, testing them, seeing if the fall of three men would cause anyone to fall through to the foundation. "Seems sturdy," he called up to Matten, who had been speaking with his men quietly. The man nodded, satisfied with Archie's assessment.

When he was back out of the pit and standing ready with his camera, Archie paused. "Maybe this isn't a good idea. Do you want to ask your men if it's all right, one more time? I don't want anyone hurt."

Matten didn't even look back. "They'll do what I say."

Archie shrugged. He raised the camera's eyepiece to alignment. He rested his finger on the button. He began a countdown from three. "Three…two…"

"One!" said Matten and all three men jumped together from the lip of the stage.

As they fell Archie snapped first one picture, then another, microseconds apart.

The men broke formation, different weights falling at slightly different intervals, but only a keen eye would be

able to discern serious variation. Archie didn't see the impact, but he startled as the men came

crashing
down
loudly
inside the orchestra pit,

shoes, boots, and bodies smacking into wood. Archie's feet shook with the collision. He was up and over the wall, looking down. Uncomfortably, Archie laughed.

The men had all vanished.

THE GIRL IN THE BALCONY

Chemical emulsion bit Archie's eyes as he clipped the dripping black and whites to the line. He started on them right away that Saturday night, anxious to see the results of his work. He had strung the yellow quarter-inch rope from the bathroom door, to the window latch, then back to the vanity. This way, he might open or close the bathroom door to the light and not disturb the developing photographs.

In the tiny sink of his apartment, he washed the last of his developing fluid down the drain and blinked quickly. In the red-bathed light of his makeshift processing laboratory, Archie Gray tilted his head at each of the exposures until ghost images began to appear.

The first on the line was nearly finished. It appeared to be a test shot from the balcony, one he only faintly remembered snapping. He could make out the cut brass markings on the side of each theater chair, leading to two-tone, shaded black gaps between the aisles. The banister was visible, as was the drop.

The second on the line was a test photograph of the lobby, which included the comedy act poster.

The third was another wide shot, this time from a place near the balcony entrance stairs, looking down at the fish-eyed stage and curtain.

Now came the meat of it: the performers, Matten's troupe. *How strange they all looked huddled together on the Mulberry stage,* thought Archie. In the eyes of the men, a glimmer of amusement, as if each was aware of a secret humor in being photographed for the purposes of history and promotion. Anders Matten in his hat and vest certainly held command. Archie guessed the man to be a natural leader. The escape artist's hands were folded in front of his jacket buttons, pulling the coat tighter to cover his hard yet protruding belly. His posture, his short arms, his half-winking right eye (a natural affliction or continually interrupted blink, Archie could not tell), were well-captured features from the angle beneath the stage.

As Archie closely examined each developing photograph, the Saturday dusk turning to night outside his apartment window, he began to feel disappointment. Compositionally, all the photographs were sound. And despite having only three stagnant subjects, the men looked relatively glamorous and interesting. Even the rougher two flanking Matten, whom he feared might come out stiff and last century, lit a spark in the frame. However, to Archie, the results didn't seem very magical. When the final posed photograph appeared on the paper, Archie let out a sigh.

With nerves, he anticipated the last two shots as they went from invisible to apparent on the paper before him. The jump from the stage, which he knew offered his last, best hope at salvaging the mediocre execution, slowly came into detail before his eyes.

There it was. The men, falling.

> The first photograph showed the men as their shoes just fell below the lip of the stage.
>
> The second photograph captured the lower halves of their bodies bisected by the stage as they passed from surface to sub-surface.

And each man's clothes ruffled, and each man's face stretched, and each man had angel-like streaks of light from their limbs. The Leica had malfunctioned, the shutter had been set wrongly, and all that Archie had been able to record was a beautiful and bizarre mystery image that could barely be described as bodies.

"Well he won't like *that* one," Archie moaned.

He pictured this last image on a poster. Too abstract to inspire a crowd. People weren't ready for experiments.

When it was safe, Archie propped the door to the toilet, turned off his red light, and began to fix himself hot tea. The water boiled and he waited, thinking the more time he passed the better he'd appraise his work. Sinking, he knew

that he had fouled things up. Not one of the shots was as professional as the *Englander* staff portrait. His choice of lens, his wide apertures and nose-enlarging angles were all wrong. Easy mistakes. Clearly amateurish. Even the strong taste of his Earl Gray tea on his sore throat (the theater, the cold, affecting,) could not ease his disillusionment.

From under the door of his small apartment came a plain white envelope, sealed.

Archie moved forward, tea in hand.

Bending, he clipped the envelope with two fingers of his free hand. Not addressed. A single sheet inside. He tore it open with his teeth.

> *Did you like our disappearing act? Pick your three favorites and meet me at The Red Bird, 333 Dorry Street, Queens, seven p.m. Sunday night. Alone, if you please.*
>
> *Yours,*
> *"The Great" A.M.*

Archie sipped his tea. He supposed he had no plans. After a time, he thought to look in the corridor. *Why didn't anyone knock?* The building corridor was dead empty.

"Three favorites, three favorites," he kept repeating. He debated the meaning in Matten's words. The man had not said 'the three best.' He wanted Archie to be subjective. He removed twelve contenders from their clips on the rope and reconvened on his sofa in the main room, snapping on all the lamps. From there, he eliminated seven. The blurry photograph of the men's fall remained hanging over the toilet.

In one of the remaining five, Matten's head was turned. He kept that one. In another, the men were looking up at the balcony, as if something had been spotted. That made it into the folder as well. Lastly, disparaged, Archie chose a wide shot of the whole clan that was slightly out of focus, a clear error, but interesting nonetheless.

Back in the bath, Archie rinsed his pans and began to tug the rejected photos from the line. One by one he dropped them to the floor, gathering clips in his right hand. He drifted back to the blurry shot, leaving it pinned. Soon the room was cleared and only four rejected photographs remained – the last shot of the fall, plus the three tests: the balcony seats, the comedy poster, and the wide-shot.

He switched them – quickly.

The out-of-focus shot was pulled from the folder and discarded to the apartment floor; the drop to the orchestra pit was shoved inside.

A souvenir of Matten's disappearing trick, at least, even if not a candidate for his publicity posters, Archie rationalized.

Satisfied with his choices, he began to remove the final three tests from the line…

when he noticed
a figure
huddled against a theater chair
in the wide-shot of the balcony.

"What's this?" he said to himself, removing the photograph and dragging it over to the sitting room lamp for examination. Now fully developed, every speck and contour captured by the Russian camera's lens was there to be seen.

Archie tossed the photo onto his supper tray and raced back to the darkroom, for the original negative.

It was nearly eleven at night, but he started again – the chemicals and the paper, the wire and the pins. This time, he enlarged the lower quadrant of the balcony wide-shot. The narrowness of the chairs gave him easy lines to work within.

He did three passes, each zooming closer and closer to what he thought he saw.

When they were dry, he unpinned the blow-ups and raced back to the sitting room.

In seconds, he discarded the first two in favor of the highest magnification of the balcony's chairs.

It was, with a ponytail, most certainly,

a girl, *a spy.*

WHO YOU KNOW

Sunday morning, Archie phoned Aunt Dove at her town-home. "Auntie, can you come a little early this morning? You're still coming, aren't you?"

"Of course, love," she said over the line through distant static hisses. "I've been waiting for the day ever since you stepped in my office. I want to meet this Mr. Matten."

"Come at 2:45. To the theater."

"Is everything all right?"

"Yes. Fine. I'll explain when you arrive."

Anticipating a low ebb of patience, Archie intercepted his Aunt on the corner shortly after 2:30. Lightly, she stepped from her hired car, the uniformed driver helping her over the gutter snow and onto the sidewalk of Blue Top Street. She wore a white wool coat, black skirt and stockings, with pink sunshades. Her hair was done in curls. She had prepared for this espionage as if it were a dinner party.

When Aunt Dove caught sight of Archie, she smiled.

"You can tell the car to go," instructed Archie. Aunt Dove didn't immediately respond so Archie signaled the driver. He swung the strap of his Leica around his shoulder and began reaching for his billfold. "You don't have to stay, driver. We'll be a while. We'll take a taxi home."

Aunt Dove directed the money in her nephew's hand back to the young man's side. "You don't have to *pay* him, Archie. It's taken care of." Aunt Dove turned and gave the driver a confirmation of the instruction. "You may go." The man gave bent at the hips and left, a slightly put-off expression on his face.

Archie took his aunt's arm and began to walk her toward the Mulberry Theater. "Thanks for coming," he said. "At first, I didn't think it was a good idea. Now, though, I want you here. I need your help with identification."

Aunt Dove cooed. "Oooh, i-den-ti-fi-ca-tion." She pronounced every syllable of the word. "I like the sound of

that. Makes me feel so official. Have we gone and joined the secret service?"

"Don't get too dramatic. The day I came to scout the location I was followed. A man named Doctor Ottokar Hecht. Do you know him?"

"Doctor Hecht. No, Archie, I'm afraid not." She said this as if she had anticipated the question, and her answer.

"Are you certain? He claims to be a friend of Peter Disney. I think he's one of his missing performers."

His aunt shrugged her shoulders and adjusted the scarf around her neck. She let her arm drop from its support and lowered her pink sunshades so Archie might see her pupils. "I don't lie, Archibald. The name is not familiar. Perhaps it's an alias."

Archie's eyes rolled. "Do you want to be on a dangerous mission? Have you been to the cinema?"

She shushed him and they were soon at the theater's front entrance. "Aren't we going in the rear door?"

"You'll never make it up all those stairs."

"Of course I will. And I have."

"When?"

"Last summer. How do you think I know about this place?"

"You said business associates, investors, the real estate board."

"*Please*. Do you think me that plain?"

Archie paused by the first window of the lobby. His mind thought of possibilities. Aunt Dove again lowered her sunshades. "Well," he groaned, "it was probably something nefarious, if I know you, Auntie."

"Gambling," she confessed in a whisper, adding a Cheshire grin to her red-painted lips. "This game of *craps*. I went through a phase. An addiction to wagers and dice."

"Why does that not surprise me?"

Archie reached for the oblong door furthest from the ticket window, the one with boards pried from twenty-four hours before. A few more steps and he would have his aunt in a position, someplace different from where he would place the German doctor. When Matten failed to show,

Archie would feign surprise and escort the doctor out. His aunt could then put a face to the name Doctor Hecht, a face to take back to Peter Disney. He would also try and get a photograph, if the German would allow it.

At that very moment, a body burst through the unbarred door of the theater, spinning Archie backwards into his aunt.

The man, wearing a hat and coat, barely stopped at the sight of them. His shoulder collided with the upper glass window on the door and cracked the pane, sending a 'z'-shaped fissure down the center.

"Hey!" cried Archie, recognizing the man's half-turned face, his tall build, his bald head, his high shoulders. *Doctor Ottokar Hecht*. Early as well.

"Run!" cried the doctor, and run he did until he was well across the street and halfway to the dairy shop on the far corner.

Archie and his aunt turned back to the open theater door. Inside, in the very heart of the theater's lobby, waving red and orange curls of fire spread quickly. Dry fabrics, rugs, ropes, the brittle posters, the wooden furniture, the peeling wallpaper, all grew into piping kindle. Flames consumed everything.

Too slowly, Archie covered his aunt's face and tried to nudge her away from the open door, which drew the lobby air, and the fire.

Aunt Dove moved forward, instinctually curious and not understanding the danger. Archie had to lock both her wrists in his grip and wrest his aunt to a spot just beyond the curb.

The flames blew out the front doors of the theater. The heat inside could not be contained. One blackening door blew off the hinges and into the street, not too far from where Aunt Dove stood paralyzed. The other doors were not far behind, their wood being blackened, their portal windows smashing, and lastly their rectangle shapes shifting to that of heat-soaked sticks of chewing gum.

"We have to get further away," shouted Archie. The roar of the fire reached a thunderous pitch. Smoke, as if

puffed from great, windy bellows, enveloped the Mulberry's box office and marquee. The sky began to darken above the building, an unnatural and dangerous storm.

Not resisting, Aunt Dove allowed herself to be pulled over the center line and behind a resting Oldsmobile, parked at a city meter and unoccupied. Two cars sped by on the street, racing to avoid the spurting of flames.

"Someone's going to be upset about this," commented Aunt Dove as the marquee broke loose from its moorings and crashed sideways to the street.

Archie looked to his right. Doctor Hecht stayed put on the corner, watching the fire. When Archie unbent his knees and stood upright, the doctor ran fast in the opposite direction.

"Wait here," said Archie to his aunt and then lifted the camera from his neck. Quickly, he dropped it into her hands.

Before he was even aware himself, his shoes were on the cement and tearing after Hecht. Half-a-block down from the theater, Archie realized that his white shirt was no longer white, but a dirty gray, covered in soot. Dust fell off him as he ran. Bystanders, café customers, men in suits and ladies in dresses, all began to flood the pathway. The fire could be heard for a square mile. Archie's ears burned with crackling and the heavy collapse of the building. Fingers pointed back in the direction from where he had come and several onlookers noticed the state of his clothes. "Are you okay, buddy?" asked one man, a fly in Archie's ear. He just wanted them gone. They were slowing his chase.

Hecht's hat flew off as he took the stairs down to the subway. He didn't stop to retrieve it.

Archie hit the pavement just shy of the entrance and stumbled, badly, into the banister. He tore the shoulder of his coat and had to unhook himself. By the time he regained his speed and had made it to the turnstiles, Hecht vanished. A swarm of commuters, dressed in church clothes, pushed out the gates and knocked Archie's shoulders. He padded his pockets for change. He had only bills and would have to stand in line at the booth.

Resigned and defeated, Archie wandered up the small flight back onto the street.

People looked at him strangely. His heart raced and sweat was on his brow. Now, below him on the sidewalk, he noticed the slick patches of snow that he had somehow managed to avoid. It was a miracle neither he nor Hecht cracked open their skulls. He bent to pick up the doctor's lost hat.

"Whose hat do you have?" asked Aunt Dove when Archie was again within range. She had a look of frozen shock on her face, as if all her muscles had ceased to bear the weight of the skin. She, too, was covered in the ashes of the Mulberry façade. Her white wool hat had become grayish.

"That man's, the one who came out of the theater. Did you know him?"

"Him? No."

"That…was Doctor Hecht. I'm beginning to doubt he's any friend of Anders Matten's."

Sirens came into their ears, the roaring blur of New York fire engines. They weren't far off. In would only be moments, but it was still too late to save any part of the theater.

Dove handed the camera back to her nephew. Archie immediately began taking pictures of the destruction, the M-U-L of the theater sign being licked into non-existence by a patch of flame. Saddened, he stopped his picture taking. It seemed too voyeuristic.

Archie and his aunt let their eyes drift up to the scene. The theater, the ornate, grand and shuttered Mulberry, would not open for another performance.

The Great Anders Matten and his troupe of two would be the last to grace that New York stage.

THE MAN IN THE LIBRARY

"I suppose you'll license any photographs to the *Times*?" asked Aunt Dove, slyly, as she and her nephew entered the foyer of her town-home. They had spent an hour, surrounded by a large crowd of New Yorkers, watching the three arriving squads douse the flames of the Mulberry fire. Very little remained of the building when everything had ended -- only the box office, singed but intact against the building's framework. Archie, exhausted, dropped Doctor Hecht's discarded hat onto the chair next to the foyer's umbrella stand. He turned to find his aunt awaiting an answer to her question. "For money," she clarified, "Sell your photographs of the fire for money. I know the photo editor of the *Times*. Shall we give him a ring?"

Archie tossed his soiled coat onto a chair of the foyer, and then turned. "No thanks."

"Why not? This could be the beginning of a career in news photography." Aunt Dove spun off her earrings and dropped them into a bowl resting on the edge of the corridor table.

"It wouldn't be right," Archie replied.

She nodded. "I suppose that's true. A man has died. And there would be questions as to how you and I knew of, and breached, that bit of private property."

"Who's died?" Archie was confused.

"Anders Matten. His troupe. Don't you suppose they were inside the Mulberry at the time of the fire?"

Archie blinked.

He had forgotten Matten. As there was not really to be a photo on Sunday (something he planned to tell his aunt once she had seen Doctor Hecht), Matten and his men, of course, were safe and sound. He had a meeting with them in just a few hours to show them the photographs. Just as he had wished, the Saturday photo of Anders Matten and his troupe had gone off without a hitch. No spies (unless you count the strange feminine figure in the balcony), no Aunt Dove, no Doctor Ottokar Hecht. All along, he had intended to be truthful with his aunt. He did not expect the

day, however, to be so eventful. With the fire, his little white lie had become a giant black one. He *couldn't* confess now.

"No, he's alive," he answered. "Remember? We were early. Matten wasn't to arrive until three o'clock. He'll probably telephone for a reschedule. He might even think I caused the fire through my own negligence. I'll have to tell him about Hecht."

"Do you think *Hecht* started that fire?"

"It's possible, Auntie."

From the top of the staircase, a man descended, the stiff and black-haired figure of Dove's husband, Doctor Roman Rollo, the daily newspaper held tightly under one arm. "*What*'s possible?" he asked, having just caught the last trickle of conversation. Before his wife could spit out the story of the Mulberry fire, the man added with a point to the foyer chair, "Whose hat is that?"

Aunt Dove looked to Archie, who shrugged.

"Well it's not *mine*," said Uncle Roman.

"It's from the party, dear," said Aunt Dove to her husband. "Someone left it behind and Archie's uncovered it." She gave a flicker of one corner of her mouth to her nephew.

"Why are your faces dirty?"

Dove made a dismissive motion with her hands and then exited to the sitting room as quickly as possible, to avoid her husband's gaze and any further questions. "We witnessed a fire, dear," she said absently to the chairs more than Roman. "Don't worry. We're all right. It's nothing to be concerned about. We were just too close to the action, as the Americans say."

Archie followed his aunt's path to the sitting room. The young man had expected his uncle to return up the stairs with his newspaper. However, he followed the two of them into the sitting room and stood on the edge of the carpeting, waiting for them to turn. "You're back early," he noted. "I told the man waiting that your visit to the shops would be at least two more hours."

Aunt Dove blanched. "Man waiting?"

"You really should introduce me to all your friends," said Roman with a *tsk tsk*. Roman had thought the holiday party to be the end the long parade of acquaintances for his ever-popular wife. In their short marriage, he still played catch-up. "There's a man – looks like a professor, probably seventy if a day. He's carrying a large book. Wouldn't tell me his name. He arrived just before you came home. He says it's of some importance."

"Well, where is he, Roman?" Dove gestured to the empty chairs of the sitting room.

"I put him in the library. I thought he'd be more comfortable there."

Aunt Dove started towards the north-end library. "I'll go and speak with him." Archie stopped his aunt with a hand on her elbow. "What, you want to come, too?" she asked. "You don't want to tell Roman here of our exciting afternoon?" Aunt Dove turned her face away from her husband's eyes. It was clear from her signal to Archie that any story told would be abridged, and was not to contain the full truth.

"I'll save that for you," Archie answered.

Dove gave a wide grin and began to tug Archie's sleeve. "Come with me, then, dear boy."

The two continued marching in the direction of the library, leaving Roman Rollo to stand dumb in the foyer of his own home. He felt left behind, abandoned. He didn't push to follow. With a puff, he mounted the stairs to finish his Sunday newspaper in the privacy of his study.

In the corridor, Aunt Dove slowed. "I'm not going to tell Roman about any of this," she whispered into her nephew's ear. "The fire, the hat, Peter Disney. None of it. Is that clear? Keep it to ourselves, shall we? For the time being."

"But why?"

"Oh, I just don't want anyone else getting *involved*." She used the word as if it were scandalous. And the matter, it seemed, was shut. There would be no debate about it. Not today. Archie could see this in his aunt's expression.

The waiting old man paced the plush carpet of the library, leaving dents under his heavy brown shoes. When Archie and Aunt Dove entered through the single, leather-studded door, the man jumped and quickly grabbed hold of an oversize and heavy book that sat naked without a cover on the reading table in front of him.

At the site of this man – his great, shock white hair and his excited state, his face with bushy eyebrows, his dark-colored sweater, and, above all, his forlorn expression – Aunt Dove's mood changed suddenly. And she recognized him; Archie could see it in her eyes. She said nothing in introduction, however, but quickly nodded and turned to her nephew. "Archie, why don't I ring you at your apartment tonight? Magazine business, I'm afraid. I must tend to it. You'd be dreadfully bored."

To Archie, this man didn't have the look of a magazine man. He certainly wasn't on staff; he wasn't in Archie's *Englander* photograph. And, like the cache of advertisers he witnessed at the holiday party, he didn't seem nimble enough to be involved in any other sort of brisk business. However, Archie's curiosity had to wait. He was already a player in these events and knew that he could barter with his aunt for more information, if required. Right now, the clock was on his mind. He had to get out to The Red Bird in Queens to trade in his three photographs with Matten.

"All right," he conceded, "I have somewhere to be anyway. It must be getting on five o'clock."

"Where? Where do you have to be?" Dove asked, suspiciously.

Archie drew back. "Don't worry. It's just a girl."

Aunt Dove smiled. "A girl? Do I know her?"

"No. I have to get ready."

"A date? On a Sunday?" she pressed.

"It's not uncommon," he defended. "It's casual, but I can't be late. A Christmas party. Yes, that. I'm a guest. How about tomorrow I come to your office?"

His aunt nodded her head and swept Archie back through the library door and into the corridor. "Yes, that sounds fine. Tomorrow, then." Archie started to walk away

and she watched his back. At a point a few feet distant, he turned. His aunt had a strange look on her face. "Is everything all right? That man—"

"I'm perfectly safe," she said in a low, confident voice. She spoke again louder, and with a wave, "Have a good Christmas party, Archie!"

Archie hesitated a moment more. "You know," he said, "I've never chased a man down the street before."

"Adventure," said his aunt softly, "is very similar to *danger*. Yes, Archie, you should be careful. I know how you hate to be involved in anything. You should become an ally with my husband. Ignorance…is sometimes the better course."

Archie dusted his hands. "I'm only the photographer," he said simply, and left his aunt to conduct her business.

THREE PHOTOGRAPHS

What was unusual about The Red Bird Tavern, to Archie, was not its tiny, ship-cabin architecture, or its over-ripe smell of oranges, or the four bodies inside – three women, one man, each wearing the faces of those recently diagnosed with illnesses – but the efficient manner in which he was welcomed and seated. He had been expected. The only soul working – the man – seemed glad for the business and put Archie at a table along the wall, in clear sight of the women. None were attractive, all of them seated apart. Old and smoking cigarettes, with out-of-place red wine glasses. One woman wore a pirate eye-patch. "Slow tonight, but the kitchen's open," said the bar man as he laid a napkin in front of Archie's fingers.

"I'm meeting someone," he replied. If there were a kitchen, he was not sure where it was kept. Or if it were kept clean.

"Thirsty?"

"Not really."

"Best tap in Queens."

"All right." Archie ordered something horribly ordinary and found it in front of him seconds later. The eye-patch woman toasted him but Archie tried to pretend he didn't see her. Here, it seemed, he was not invisible.

As moments passed, the bar man kept watch at the door and Archie fingered his three photographs. He laid them on the bench, on top of the yellow folder he had carried them inside. He was aware that his fingers smudged the matte and oiled the paper the more he held them. Right now they were in top shape, and he shouldn't risk that. However, he wanted to look at them one last time before sale…

Matten, his head turned different from the two others.

The three, looking into the balcony as if something had been spotted.

And the first blurry drop into the orchestra pit.

He looked up from his pint. The clock of The Red Bird, nailed above the bar mirror, slowly ticked. Even from his distance, Archie could hear the gears moving inside. He hoped the owner would switch on the radio. The silence made room's atmosphere even more oppressive.

Halfway through his drink, Archie let his eyes drift. The yellow folder was all that remained by his side. The three photographs

were gone.

"Excuse me," he said politely to the bar man, whose eyes had not left the entrance since Archie's arrival. The man wore a smock and had a bullish manner. When he noted Archie had crossed from his corner table to a spot close to the door, he lost some of his sheen of cordiality. "I've misplaced something," said Archie.

"Your company?" the man chided with a wink. The owner's excitement over another customer or two was dwindling; he took his disappointment out on the first arrival.

Archie kept this confession quiet. He didn't know which of the women might be listening. "No. Some photographs. They were on the bench with me and now they've vanished."

The bar man craned his neck so he could see around his customer, back to the table along the wall. "Pictures?" he repeated. "Did you look on the floor?"

"Yes. All around. You didn't see me checking because you were looking out the window. I put them down…now they're gone."

"Where do you think they went?"

"I'm not sure. That's why I'm asking."

An expression came into the man's face – something slightly amused but irritated as well. He shifted behind the bar and called into the room, "You," he started, addressing the three women, "any of you seen some pictures?"

Though the women sat apart from each other and did not speak, each nodded, slowly, in succession, as if choreographed.

Returning to Archie, the bar man shrugged. "Out of luck," he said, and then rubbed his palms together.

In that moment, Archie hated the man's dry skin and his wispy haircut, his workman's shirt and his dirty trousers. "You've stolen my photographs!" he said strongly, much stronger than he intended.

The bar man sunk back. "Get out of here!" He kicked the door open and pointed to the street. "I don't care what country you're from or how bad I need the money. This is New York, pal."

"I bloody well know where I am!"

"Go back to Ireland!" he shouted.

"I'm not Irish!"

"I'm sick of all you foreigners thinking this is your private place. It's mine! I bought it. But you louses from Europe keep comin' in. Get lost, who needs ya!"

Archie, on the street a minute later, wished he hadn't spoken at all to the man. He could have spent more time searching the bar. His emotions had gotten the better of him. His frustration over having traveled all the way from Manhattan to this tiny square of Queens, only to be robbed, trickled into weary spirits. Now he was really destroyed.

I should have just stayed out of all of this, he thought harshly. *I've not even been paid. Anders Matten has no more integrity that any other two-dollar trickster on the train.*

Archie's thoughts became poisoned, for the whole profession, the whole damn lot of them. He'd never thought much of magicians and escape artists before, and now his only impression was one of bitter revulsion. It was most likely evil sleight-of-hand that robbed him of his photographs. Archie would have to return to his small apartment, rent still not met, and consider the costs of the film and chemicals wasted to fill Anders Matten's vain request. And it was getting late. It would be dark on the train ride back to Manhattan. He wished to never see The Red Bird again.

ELEVATOR

Someone had broken into his apartment. Although the door had remained bolted from the inside, and the windows closed and locked, every single negative and print from the Matten session at the Mulberry had been lifted. Gone were the clipped experiments from the hanging wire; gone were the envelopes of evidence; gone were the originals from the darkroom. Nothing remained. This, combined with the theft from The Red Bird, meant that he had no proof at all of Saturday's shoot.

Vanished. Everything.

He steamed about it. He paced and swore. He searched under his sofa and his small single bed. Also gone was Anders Matten's original card, "Escape Artist," from the bureautop where he had left it.

In his stomach, he knew he had been bamboozled. Duped. Raided. It had been purposeful. He for sure wouldn't get payment for the session, his film, his time. He would be short on the rent and have to dip into his trust fund. The very thought of it made him curl into a ball and, at midnight, attempt sleep. His mind spun with plans: how to approach the police about the theft without mentioning the fire, his trespassing at the theater, or any of his suspicions; how to learn all he could about Anders Matten and Doctor Ottokar Hecht; how to discover the identity of the old man in Aunt Dove's library, and what about him made her so frenzied. Archie just knew it all added up to trouble.

But these leads would have to wait until morning. Some sleep and he could think straight. All he needed was some rest.

But he couldn't. He never closed his eyes.

His legs ached from his sprint after Hecht. He wasn't used to exercise. Even at his young age of twenty-four, his life was a sedentary one. He would do some calisthenics in the morning, after breakfast.

The longer he remained awake, the more his list of responsibilities grew. His schedule, usually light, was now crowded with duties. Important duties. Things that must be done right. His sense of adventure had recessed into a worker's nature. No time to be lazy, or he might just find himself at police headquarters, arrested, or thrown out on the street, evicted. A black cloud hovered over him. He had made a mistake getting involved. He wished he could just disappear.

The next morning, the *Englander* offices reminded him of Dove's Christmas Party. He stood outside, hesitant, in his coat and the morning's snow, debating an entrance. His plot had been to avoid entanglements with his aunt and remain independent. She seemed to know this and was drawing him closer with every action. His new resolution was to use his aunt to find his photographs, get his fee, and be done with everything.

He was waved past the lobby receptionist and through inside the doors. After an inordinate wait, the elevator car stopped with a shuttering of gears and the doors parted, first the outer solid doors, then the interior cage, to reveal the girl.

"Hello," she said, this time friendly. The bite of her voice as she played temporary replacement for Mr. Johns had receded. Along with surprise and having Archie's face appear opposite, she seemed to have a trill of excitement as she said, "I'm glad you're back."

Archie stepped into the elevator car and stayed silent, his mind on his resolution. The girl pulled the car doors closed again and, without asking his floor, pressed the button for Dove Gray's office, and raised the guide lever. They began their ascent.

He sensed that she wanted to talk with him. Despite his attraction, he wanted none of it. No more involvements. This red-haired girl had baited him into the party in the first place; he would never have known Anders Matten if he had trusted his instincts and taxied home before even

entering the party. *Trap-layer*, he scoffed in his head as he glared at the back of her head, her hair, her ponytail.

Ponytail?

Archie reached forward and yanked the control lever of the car. The elevator came to an abrupt stop between floors.

"What are doing?" she said and slapped his hand.

He held his grip. "Your hair is in a ponytail."

"So?"

"Do you wear it that way often?"

"Yes. No. Sometimes. Why? What do you care?"

"How did you wear it on Saturday?"

"Saturday?" Something lit in her eyes. She turned from him. "I don't remember."

"Yes you do." He forced his fingers tighter on the control lever.

She tried to pry him off, but surrendered quickly.

Regaining some bravado, she yelled, "You'll get me into trouble! Someone's probably waiting on another floor. You want to get me fired?"

"You were at the Mulberry Theater. Weren't you?"

She again tried to free him from the controls. "What? You're – I've never even heard–"

"You followed me to the theater, didn't you? On Saturday."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

For a long moment, the two stared at each other, both of them with their hands on the controls. At last, Archie became flustered. His bashfulness returned. Slowly, he let his fingers slide from their hold on the lever. She did not immediately start the car upward. Instead, she stood toe-to-toe, until Archie backed away even further, to rest against the wall of the car. "You're in one of the photographs," he said quietly. "I recognize you now. The way you've done your hair. I was used to seeing it down around your shoulders. My camera had a misfire. A shot I took on accident. Did it frighten you? The flash?"

After a pause, the girl shook her head. "No."

"I didn't see your outline until I developed the photograph that night," he continued. "I had to blow it up three times. You were barely there." The girl rested a hand on her hip. Having her look down on him, even only by inches, made him feel as if he were shrinking before her eyes. "Did you have an explanation?" he asked.

"A reason for following you? Yes."

"What then? I couldn't have impressed you. You've been nothing but mean to me."

"I have not!" she protested, loudly, and then retreated a step, "Have I?"

"Yes. You've been very ill tempered."

"It's how I am. Don't take it too hard."

"I don't even know your name."

She hesitated. "It's Suzette."

Archie nodded. "Maybe it's your red hair. You stood out when I photographed the magazine staff. Fifty people and I remember you. And you're fairly new, aren't you? I hadn't seen you before."

"I joined in October. You've only been around the offices in the last week. And for the day of the picture"

"I've been hiding," said Archie with a smile. "Trying to remain invisible." Archie pushed forward and gave the lever a jog. The elevator car lurched and both passengers shifted as their climb resumed. The arrow above the door moved, clock like, to indicate floors three, four, and five. "You didn't give me a reason," he said as they passed number six.

"I wanted to watch you work," she confessed, weakly.

At eight, the uppermost floor, the car stopped. She did not open the doors.

"Are you a photographer, too, then?" he asked.

"No," she confessed. "I just like watching you. You're *not* invisible, you know." With a skilled movement, she threw the grate of the elevator open and split the doors for his exit into the head office. They both sighted Johns at his desk. The man looked up, only for a moment, before huffing and returning to his writing. "Have a nice day," said Suzette with a hard-to-read smile.

Archie stepped over the threshold and onto the Union Jack carpet. He looked backwards just once, just as the doors again closed, to see Suzette's face and ponytail for only a flash. Somehow, he felt flattered that she had followed him. She was prettier than his other spy – that Doctor Hecht. Being tracked made Archie feel important. And a little like he'd been lied to.

PLAN B, OR, A HISTORY

Wisely, she had written it down. "It would have been too long, and I'm too busy, so take that envelope home with you and study it. Right? Right." Aunt Dove nearly thrust Archie back out the door. Frazzled, unclear, she continued to look back towards the window of her office. Something bothered her, some indiscretion, as if her every word was being secretly recorded. "It's all there," she urged again. "The whole kit-and-caboodle. Everything's inside this envelope. An important friend gave me it. I'd join you if I could, but there's no time. We shouldn't be seen together anyway. It's too dangerous. All right, then? Good day, Archie!"

Archie Gray stood dumb, his aunt's office door squarely shut on his nose. Turning, he saw the expression on Johns's face – a snide agreement with the treatment.

"Not to worry," said Johns, only half-assuredly. "She's been like this all morning."

Archie didn't cherish the thought of getting back in the elevator with the girl, Suzette, just yet. It would seem strange. After all, he had just stepped off the car. He spent more time stuck between floors than in his aunt's office. "Where are the stairs?" he asked, not having known from any prior use.

Johns stuttered and pointed. A slow realization entered the man's eyes – Archie's avoidance had something to do with the elevator girl. He nodded and, for once, helped Archie by showing him around the corner to the narrow emergency steps.

Halfway down to the street, Archie stopped and looked at the sealed envelope in his hands. No printing on the outside. Plain, of a slightly heavier paper stock, unforgiving when held up to the stairway's trickle of daylight through the transoms. With the index of his right hand, Archie pried a fingernail under the adhesive and tore the envelope open. Three square sheets of paper, folded together, were inside. Archie shook his arm to flatten the pages.

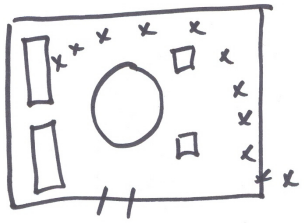
The first sheet had only nonsense:

BDMSQZH RZUZHNM ZS 1:33

The second sheet was a newspaper clipping, with a bolded headline.

"FEDERAL BANK OPENING TODAY."

The third sheet was a hand-drawn figure, crude lines with black ink, smearing.



"Bloody hell," swore Archie as he looked back up the stairs. He'd have to climb them all again and ask more questions. Resigned, he stuffed the three sheets back into their envelope and, with great irritation, huffed up the four flights to the head office floor.

Once back on the landing, he pushed in the door's handle and stepped onto the Union Jack.

Johns again glanced up from his writing. "Back again?" he asked, with actual surprise.

Archie led with the envelope. "I think she's given me the wrong thing," he said, rolling his eyes. "Is she available? May I go in?"

Johns rose from his position at the desk. He straightened his sports coat and combed his hair with his fingers. A black ink-spot dotted his knuckle. He moved to Archie's outside, to the door, and quietly rapped on his boss's office door. "Mrs. Gray," he said, with authority. "Your nephew's back again."

From behind the door, silence.

Johns once more telegraphed on the door. When he received no reply, he let his arm drop. A more concerned fix

entered his eyes. Archie caught the man's wince from his profile. Johns knocked a third time and, again, having received no answer, entered Dove Gray's office uninvited.

"Mrs. Gray…" he said with a plain, but polite tone.

The interior of her office was abandoned. The furnishings – the desk and the lamps, the rug and the clock – all as they should be. Only Aunt Dove was *not* inside.

Archie could tell from Johns's expression that there was no secret exit, no collusion, no attempt at hiding. The man marched to the beige drapes of each of the four windows and opened them quickly, letting in the daylight and the city view. Tenements and offices surrounded the eight-floor *Englander* building. At each window, Johns looked down off the snowy ledges.

"Where is she?" asked Archie, although he knew the reply beforehand.

"I…I'm not quite sure," stammered Johns, clucking his tongue to his cheek. He opened the last window and looked down to the street below, the same view Aunt Dove had impressed on her nephew the week earlier. Cold December air flooded the room. "She was in her office," explained Johns, "speaking with someone. She never left."

"Speaking with someone? When I was inside the door, there wasn't anybody else with her."

"There wasn't? That's odd. No one came in or out. I assumed she was with someone. I heard a man's voice. So it couldn't have been just *her* on the telephone. I most certainly heard the voice of *a man*."

"Are you certain?"

"She sent me on an errand. When I returned…two voices. Someone must have arrived while I was downstairs – someone she shouldn't have let in." Johns snapped his fingers. "We'll check with Suzette. She operates the elevator."

In Archie's stomach, he felt a drop. There was fear for his aunt, the realness of Johns's hunt plain and true, but also there were nerves for seeing Suzette again. He wasn't sure why.

However, there was no stopping Johns, who returned to inner wall and depressed the call button for the elevator. In one minute, the car arrived and the gate opened. Suzette, standing alone, same as ever, gave a smile to her superior and ignored Archie. "Yes?" she asked when neither entered the car.

"Did you deliver anyone else but this young man to this floor in the last twenty minutes?"

Suzette paused then shook her head. "No, Mr. Johns."

"No one at all?"

"No," she repeated, the crispness of her American accent striking Archie as slightly curt.

Johns continued to hold a moment longer before removing his hand from blocking the elevator door. "Thank you," he said to Suzette, letting her return to her duties. A bell rang on the floor menu and Suzette shut the door, dropping the car down to answer the call. "I'm phoning the police," Johns decided quickly, returning to his desk where he picked up the heavy black phone, turning it his direction and raising the receiver to his shoulder. As he spun numbers on the rotary, he asked, "What did she say to you? When you saw her?"

"The elevator girl, or–"

"No, your aunt."

"Not much. She gave me this–" Archie held out the envelope. Johns, as Archie had done, removed the three folded sheets from the envelope and shook them open. "Yes, police headquarters," he said into the phone as he read the contents of the envelope. Archie could hear the ring-through from the operator. "Hello, yes, my name is Mr. Johns, I work for a magazine in midtown. No, that's quite all right. Not an interview, no. We seem to be missing someone. Yes, a missing person. Could you send a car to the *Englander* building?" Johns then proceeded to give the station the building's address and hung up with the assurance that someone would be arriving shortly. When the phone was once again on its cradle, Johns turned to Archie and flicked the three sheets of paper. "What do these mean?"

"I'm not sure," Archie answered. "I think she gave me the wrong envelope."

"What did you come to get originally?"

"I came to chat. Yesterday, we had some…events. And there was a man. At her home, in her library. She was to tell me what he said, I suppose."

Johns's suspicions shot into his cheekbones. "Someone affiliated with the magazine?"

Archie tried to take the letters back. Rabbit-fast, Johns moved them out of reach. "Not for the magazine," Archie explained, "I think he was a distant aquaintance. She seemed to know him."

At this, Johns returned to the other side of his desk. He reached inside the top drawer and withdrew his leather bound scheduler. He opened the book to the current day's placeholder, and then backtracked into the last week, to the day Archie visited, the day he learned of the Mulberry Theater. "Was his name perhaps Peter Disney?"

Archie thought about this. "No. No, that was the man who visited the office last week, wasn't it? She told me about him. No, this man was much older."

"Henry Gore?" he asked, eyes up to Archie, his finger still in the book and the pages behind his back.

"I don't know anyone named Henry Gore," the young man admitted.

"Doesn't ring a bell? I think he's a performer of some kind."

"No," said Archie, the word 'performer' hitting square in the chest. Anders Matten, Doctor Hecht, Peter Disney, the old man, and now this Henry Gore. People were appearing everywhere this week…and they all seemed to know his aunt.

Johns closed his book and bit at his thumbnail. "So she spoke with this older man yesterday? And she let him in her home? Something not right."

At this point, Johns's passion for the investigation wore thin on Archie. The boy began to sense interference. *Involvement.* This was a man academically unchallenged, who set appointments, who looked after his aunt, but who,

he knew, secretly wanted to be more in control of her that she had been of him. Here was a nibble of his former army habits, his protector habits. This was going to take hours of Archie's day. It would not get him any closer to his photographs. The more his mind thought on it, the more he wanted the three pages returned. Maybe it *wasn't* an error? Maybe those truly were – how did she put it? – the whole *kit-and-caboodle*. Action was required if he was going to dodge the beaurocratic vice-grip of Mr. Johns, and the police car en route to the *Englander.* These early questions of Johns were only the beginning. Soon everyone would know about his being at the Mulberry fire, of the arrivals of these mysterious men in New York.

"My aunt mentioned danger," said Archie.

Johns bent down and fumbled in the lower drawer of his desk. He unburied a heavy notepad – a clean slate for recording these strange events. Still curled, he dug free his expensive pen from his shirt pocket, and, in doing so, had to lay the three pages, facedown, on the blotter of his desk, where the leather scheduler rested.

Archie eyed the items like a foaming dog would a bone.

The elevator dinged.

The doors came open.

"Did you call?" said Suzette, who knew very well there had been no buttons pressed. Her eyes fell on Archie, mere seconds before Johns rose above the surface of the desk, arms out.

Archie snatched the pages, and the scheduler, into his hands. He nearly dropped everything as Johns lunged forward. Spinning as a top, Archie tumbled backwards gracelessly into the elevator car. It was the fastest he had moved since chasing Doctor Hecht.

Johns threw his notepad and expensive pen to the carpet and came over the desk – straight-as-the-crow-flies – the shortest route to catch Archie's coat sleeve, which he missed by inches.

Suzette slid the elevator gate shut, blocking Johns's attack. She quickly spun the lever. The car lunged downward and Archie felt his stomach move into his throat.

When dizziness started, he reached out for Suzette's fingers on the controls but, as she had earlier, she batted him away.

"Stop it," she said, "we're almost to the ground floor."

"You're going too fast," he said urgently.

"Just hang on."

At the ding of the third floor, the arrow caught, the indicator slowed, and she took the last at a safer pace. The nausea in Archie's gut doubled. Pressing his stolen items to his chest, he had a moment of remorse. Johns was, after all, only trying to help. Now, if it were true, as he suspected, that something bad had happened to his aunt, he was robbing the authorities of vital evidence.

At the lobby, Suzette took Archie's hand and dragged him towards the exit doors of the building. "Why are you helping me?" he asked, just as the front door receptionist picked up her ringing phone (*Johns!* thought Archie, sure of it). Suzette didn't answer Archie's question. Instead, she barreled out the gold-trimmed doors of *Englander* and onto the New York street. Archie could barely hold the pages. The wind kicked up and took the page with BDMSQZH RZUZHNM ZS 1:30 out of his clutch. Suzette, a head taller than Archie, snatched the paper from the air and gripped it in her hand.

A police car pulled in front of them and two serious-looking New York patrolmen in deep blue uniforms stepped out. The car's lights circled, but there had been no siren. The men, however, didn't even notice Archie and Suzette. They were on their way into the reception area of the building, to get the details of a missing person.

Archie sighed a great breath when they cleared the glass doors of *Englander*.

Suzette whistled down a taxicab and thrust Archie into the rear seat. "Move over," she commanded and soon was beside him, slamming the door shut.

"Where are we going?" he asked, glad that she was doing the thinking.

Suzette examined the paper in her hand, the cryptic sentence. Her head up, she said breathless to the driver,

"Grand Central Station." The taxi was blocks away before Johns reached the street, panting, with the two patrolmen in tow. "They don't know what they're doing," he said through his clenched teeth. "Naïveté." He turned to the officers and spun a finger. "Come with me, gentlemen. I don't know what's going on, but I'm certain nothing good will come of it."

THINGS FROM CERTAIN ANGLES

The Friday before, Aunt Dove had sent out another kind of invitation. "Johns, would you please fetch that elevator girl?" Within moments, her private secretary ushered the redhead through the door of her office and indicated to Suzette that should take the chair in front of Aunt Dove's wide desk. "What's your name, love?"

"Suzette O'Connor."

Dove Gray absently waved Johns out of the office and asked that he close the door. The owner of *Englander* magazine took a long appraisal of her employee. Here was a girl – a pretty girl – who held herself very well. In her duties, she was sharp and attentive. Occasionally, Dove had allowed her to sit at Johns's desk while he fetched things for his boss. She was testing the girl and her abilities. Courtesy was not the girl's strong point, but she blamed that on America and the girl only being twenty. Her height may have been the problem. A natural defensiveness, a bristling, instilled by earlier troubles from schoolmates, who could be so cruel. Suzette O'Connor, whose name she had just learned, whom she referred to as "young lady," or, on occasion, "you," to get past the formality of asking, was several inches taller than most men. "How tall are you?"

"I'm six foot one."

"In heels?"

"Out of them."

Dove remembered all those trips up and down in the elevator, the girl taking up such a huge quadrant and, when her red hair was let loose about the shoulders, appearing to take up too much space. Another assignment had been debated. The girl drove the car better than anyone before her, all the way back to the magazine's move into the building. Dove had tired of the stop / starts at floors, or the missed calls from the floor buttons. This girl was a keeper. Dove had noticed that Archie had thought so, too.

"Do you think my nephew fancies you?"

The girl's eyebrows went up. "Your nephew?"

"Archie. He took the staff photograph last month. Do you think he fancies you? Thinks you're pretty?"

Suzette narrowed her look, suspicious. "I've no idea."

"Do you have a boyfriend?"

Suzette shook her head.

"No matter," Dove waved. "I'm not here to play Cupid." Dove reached into the drawer of her desk and withdrew a washed leather notebook. Opening the book, she found the first empty page, removed a pen from her well atop the desk, and began to write. "I'm going to give you the address of a theater. The Mulberry Theater. Are you familiar with it?"

"No," answered Suzette.

"Vaudeville. High ceilings. It's nice, but hasn't had a show in years. Locked except for one door. Archie's going to be taking some pictures there. I've asked if I might join him, but he's playing clever. He told you he's photographing on Sunday. I doubt that's the truth."

Suzette shifted in her chair. "Why would he lie? It's just a picture."

Dove tore the page from the notebook and handed the address to Suzette. "It's a very *special* picture. I don't think he knows it yet, though. He's photographing someone I want to keep an eye on. You know me, love – I know *everyone*. The friends he intends to photograph may be involved in more than legitimate entertainment. I have only theories, mind you, suspicions, but I'm usually right about these things. I have an eye for danger." Dove paused to pull down the skin below her eye, gazing at the young girl across from her, and then winking.

Suzette noticed the red capillaries swimming up to the iris, the tired look, and gauged how serious this whole affair might be. She held up the page with the address. "What do you need me for?"

"I need someone I can trust. Someone who is not *me*. Archie, if he's trying to keep me out of it, he would see me coming a mile off. You'll be my spy." At the word, she saw

Suzette bristle. "I'll pay you handsomely. You're due for a raise I should think."

Suzette saw an opportunity. "I think so, too."

"How much do you make?"

"One twenty-five a week."

"That's outrageous! How can a girl live in the city on that! You must starve."

"I'm thrifty."

"You're *poor*!" Aunt Dove unsaddled the telephone beside her. She dialed down to accounting. Within three minutes, she had the girl's salary doubled. "I believe in loyalty," she said as she hung up. "Loyalty should be rewarded. You've been a good girl for *Englander.* I'm certain you have talents that you haven't even shared with us yet. Many talents. And I could teach you more, if you like. Your talents. Mine. You'd be unstoppable. And you'll be good in this, too. Won't you?"

Suzette looked at the theater address. Her eyes blinked and she returned her face to her employer. Gracefully, she folded the page and zipped it with her fingers. Lastly, she put the address in her skirt pocket. "I'll try," she offered.

Satisfied, Dove leaned back in her oak chair and let her eyes fall on the windowsill. "I think the photograph will be Saturday. I'm not sure why. I have no idea of what time. I suggest you wear something comfortable. Now…do you want to know which door is unlocked?"

At the first sound, Suzette O'Connor ducked beneath the balcony chairs and removed her shoes. She wore no heels, but she did take note of a clacking sound when she first entered. Rather than risk detection, she unbuckled the straps of each and gingerly slid them beneath the row. Now barefoot, she craned an eye over the balcony edge and watched, as Archie Gray appeared onstage.

The young man looked very serious as he fiddled with the bulb of his light meter, checked his camera's settings, and viewed sections of the theater in the viewfinder. In his

thin coat and trousers, white shirt and mangy hair, she had to admit he had an appealing look. In a scruffy way. She had not paid him much attention at the staff photo shoot. Nervous on that occasion, he sweated under the arms; he became frustrated with the inability of the staff to properly pose; he let his bulb go off in his eye. There was something quite uncomfortable for him in those moments of corralling, composing, and preserving the 1960 roster of *Englander.* Here, though, alone in the dim light of the Mulberry Theater, the young man was commanding.

He had not noticed the lights already lit when he arrived. Suzette had no choice. She threw the switch in order to find a good spot, and, when she had found one, she knew there would be no returning to douse them. He might assume he had left them on himself on his last visit to the theater. Without them, how would she find her way back? The upper part of the theater was pitch black otherwise.

After a time of preparation, Archie disappeared underneath her. She heard his steps, faintly, until the lobby carpet smothered them. Her knees began to cramp and she felt that she might need to use the bathroom. At this time, in her mind, this mission seemed ridiculous. She was no voyeur; she was no *spy*. If anything, she was a contributor. In her life, she had done little but contribute to the dreams, work, and fantasies of others. It was as if she had no real destiny of her own, but would simply drift into assignments that would replace personal ambition with obligation. This was another of the same. Frustrated, she felt like suddenly standing and announcing her presence.

A flash went off in the balcony, followed by the quiet hiss of a camera's innards moving the film to the next frame. She pulled her head down between her knees. *Had her eyes been above the row? Had she been seen?* She was too tall for this narrow space. Between two theater chairs, she watched as Archie turned and retreated. Again, his footsteps vanished on the carpet and, again, he appeared below her on the stage. It had been a misfire, that picture. Archie continued to frame and to test, to set up his equipment and to debate technicalities.

Whoever he's photographing today, thought Suzette, *he's awfully particular.*

She checked the time. It was nearly noon.

Shortly after, they arrived…three of them. A motley group, if she could say so herself. Throughout the polite and uneventful staging of the photograph, Suzette remembered Archie's manners, the same here as with the staff photograph; he had not changed. And his suggestion that they all jump from the stage simultaneously? Crackers. *That won't look good,* thought the girl in the balcony, shaking her head and hitching the corner of her mouth. *Not at all.*

From her angle, she could see right into the orchestra pit, into every cranny. At the edge by the safety bar, she let her fingers drift up so she could steady herself. She watched the three men drop to the boards beneath the stage, into the pit. And then she saw them scramble, quickly, bending over and tucking themselves in like shirttails into a waistline, disappearing, swallowed by something, and then…gone.

She telephoned Dove Gray that evening, as she had promised. "What did you witness?" asked her employer.

"I have no idea," came the reply.

GRAND CENTRAL STATION EXPLANATIONS

During the taxi ride to Grand Central Station, Suzette told Archie everything: of her spying at the Mulberry Theater, of her attempts to describe Matten's vanishing to Dove Gray, of her feelings that Archie was in danger at the *Englander* building. Archie told of the encounter with Doctor Hecht when scouting the theater, as well as the details of the Mulberry fire, and the chase.

"When did you tell my aunt of the photos?" he asked.

"That night. Saturday."

So his aunt had known the Sunday photo session was a lie almost a full day before meeting Archie at the theater. Archie felt the sting of guilt. Then again, his aunt had not trusted him much either.

Grand Central Station swarmed with passengers. It was a busy hour for arriving and departing trains. From the center of the station, Archie and Suzette had a good advantage if trouble. They could run in any direction, or get lost in a crowd.

"Archie," Suzette asked as she spread out the three sheets of paper on the bench between them, "what did your Aunt say *exactly* when she gave you these three documents?" She pointed to the pages – the cryptic sentence, the newspaper clipping, and the amateurish map.

"It's fuzzy," Archie replied. "Just that these documents explain everything."

Suzette scooped the page with the letters and numbers.

Archie continued with questions. "Do you think these are clues about the fire? Or something about those magicians that keep popping up? Or telling where's my aunt's disappeared to?"

Suzette regarded the ceiling of Grand Central Station, the deco designs and the symmetrical shapes. Commuters flooded the causeway, the release of several trains from the catacomb tunnels. The New York stampede had begun.

Footsteps in the large hall of the station made it impossible for Archie to continue.

"Have you heard a word I've said?" he asked finally, with irritation.

"I wonder if this code is related to the map and the article," Suzette speculated. "Not three random things, but one solution."

"Code?"

"Yes, this sentence is a code." Suzette flipped the page and pointed. "These are actually words," she said with a raise of her brows.

Archie shook his head. To him, the message was nonsense:

BDMSQZH RZUZHNM ZS 1:33.

"Yes, all right. It's a *code*," he agreed, exasperated. "But we don't have *the key*." Suddenly, Archie felt that they were wasting time loitering in the station when they should have been hunting for his aunt, or his missing photographs. Though the events of the last half-hour had been swift and strange, he understood little of the dangers that faced them. All he could remember was the look on Aunt Dove's face as she passed him these nonsense clues.

Suzette looked confident. To her, they were on the right course. "I know how to read this code," she said. "My father taught me how. He was in the war. Loved patterns. Hated Germans. Wrote all sorts of codes. He died when I was a kid from some strange flu. Poof. Gone." For a moment, her eyes drifted. Before Archie could offer condolences, she was back on track. "This code," she declared, "is a pretty simple one."

"Then what does it say?"

"It says, 'Central Station at 1:30.'"

Archie blinked. The footsteps around them died down, the last trickle from the tunnels. In the distance, they could hear the final hiss of the train at the line's end, parked until the next run. "And how in *bloody hell* did you know that?" said Archie with rolled eyes.

Suzette poked him with her finger. "It's a simple code," she said. "A child could–"

"*How*?" he pressed.

Suzette took her fingers and pointed to the first letter. "See – this is a B," she said slowly, as if to a slower student, "This is a D, then M." Archie rolled his finger in the air and then pointed to his wristwatch. She sped up her explanation. "The alphabet's just been moved one letter up, and is wrapping again.

A equals Z.
B equals A.
C equals B.
D equals C.

And on through until Z, which equals…um…Y. If you know all that, it's easy to read what is written here."

"You figured all that out while getting into a taxi cab? In just seconds?"

"No," she corrected, "that's *my* typing. Your aunt asked me to code it for her. She destroyed the original message she had been given and replaced it with this one."

"What? When?"

"On Sunday night. She called me to her home and asked if I'd keep the message for her. I suggested we type it into code instead. It's what my father would have done." Suzette could tell Archie was confused.

"Who gave my aunt the original message?"

"Well, I assume it was the man with her."

"Man *with* her? The old man at her house? In the library?"

"Yes, he said his name was Mr. Benedix. She had called me over so I could tell him about what I saw at the Mulberry. He was very, *very* interested."

"Why didn't she just ask me? I was right there with the two of them around five o'clock last night anyway."

"But she didn't want you to learn I was involved. Or learn about her being *in the know* about the Saturday photos. She didn't want to bring you too far into it. She's

very protective of you, you know? Me, that's different. I'm her employee. I've been conscripted. You are her family."

Archie had a moment of fondness for his aunt, the woman was usually so difficult. "I doubt she's *that* protective of me," he goaded. "If that were true, she'd leave me entirely alone. *She's* the one who invited me to her stupid *Christmas* party." Archie picked up the other two documents. "What about these? Were these given to her by that, that Benedix fellow?"

Suzette laid down the coded sentence and picked up the news clipping. "FEDERAL BANK OPENING TODAY," she read, and scanned the text of the article, the picture of the building. "See, I have no *idea* what any of this is about. She didn't have this yesterday. It's today's paper. See the date?"

"Did she have the map?" Archie lifted the hand drawn diagram into his palm.

"No, but that Mr. Benedix had a book of maps. Maybe this is a copy of one of the pages."

"Do you think this is a map is the bank's interior? It looks a little officious. Counters and tables."

Suzette nodded agreement. "That's a good guess." Her head turned back to the tracks, the tunnels. Another wave of passengers had arrived, the approaching bell of the 12:55 train dinging its way into Grand Central Station. "Why don't we wait for the 1:33 train? See who's on it."

"You don't know?"

"No, neither did your aunt. Or Mr. Benedix. Someone entirely different gave the information to them. They didn't say who."

Archie sat back on the bench. "Could it be a man named Henry Gore? Johns mentioned him. He had an appointment last week with Aunt Dove."

Suzette paused. She thought about this. "It couldn't have been Henry Gore. He's missing."

"Since when?"

Suzette leaned forward. "Since early December."

"That's impossible." Archie pulled free Johns's appointment book, which he had carelessly thrown to his

left. He opened the pages and scanned the scheduler until he landed on a name. "Henry Gore had an appointment with my aunt just…ten days ago. See? There. That's why I took this scheduler. The meeting seemed very important to Johns. Maybe inside here there are other names, other clues." Archie held up the leather scheduler. "So, Suzette, smart as you are, and I'll have to admit it – you're a bloody treasure trove to me today – but in this you're wrong. Henry Gore is alive and well, thank you very much."

"Henry Gore never showed," explained Suzette, "The appointment hasn't been checked off. See? It was Dove Gray's one missed appointment this month. If I remember correctly, it really upset her. I was covering for Johns that day. It put her in a foul mood, I can tell you that. She even was sour to Johns the next day. Blamed it on the appointment. No. Something's happened to Henry Gore." Suzette frowned and looked back to the ceiling of Grand Central. "Something bad."

PASSENGER / PLACE / MISTAKE

In a moment, Archie felt dumb as dumb. And short. Standing on the station platform, he was a good four inches shorter than Suzette O'Connor. He had to admit that she was as pretty as the day he first saw her, book-ending her fellow employees in the triangle and tiered staff photograph. *Tall girl at the end* was a compositional choice, not meant to offend anyone. She crossed her arms funny at him when he positioned her at the end of the frame. Maybe that was it. Maybe that look – that *not again* resignation that all tall girls exude when placed in familiar categories – was what Archie remembered so strongly about her.

Then Aunt Dove's holiday party came along.

Suzette was attractive – that hair, that figure, that sense of self confidence, all very appealing to a young man of twenty-four. However, at Grand Central Station, his animal instincts were clouded by reality. She was smarter than him. Probably by a far degree. His education, his studies, his hobbies, didn't amount to puzzle solving and code breaking. He would need her. Aunt Dove must have detected Suzette's resourcefulness when she recruited her so early in the game. Archie was playing catch up. It would be a long race.

"*This* track?" Archie pointed up to the hung signboard above track eleven, displaying the terminus.

"It's the only 1:33 at the station," Suzette replied, the rail schedule in her hand.

Unlike the inner chamber of Grand Central, the platforms were dark and utilitarian. Advertisements were posted on the curved walls of the tunnels. Railway men – conductors, mostly – formed social clumps at the ends of each track, smoking cigarettes or eating sandwiches from barn-shaped tin pails. At the far part of the platform, the 1:25 from Larchmont arrived on time, squealing and hissing to brake just before touching the two enormous spring notches at the track's end.

Archie was worried there would be too many passengers on the platform, that they'd lose their man (or

woman.) The Larchmont train was light, though, and only fifty or so departed. The crowd was quickly off into the inner chamber of the station.

Their train was next.

"Should we hide?" he asked.

Suzette took a moment to think on it, and then nodded. Without being conspicuous, the two moved behind the information booth, a bolted board sign and arrow offering a decent amount of cover.

"Who do you think it will be?" he asked her.

"You're full of questions."

"I don't know *anything.* That bothers me. I usually try to not get involved. Especially with my aunt. This is very typical of her, you know. The whole affair's probably a test." At the thought, Archie's head began to spin. It probably was a 'set-up', a American detectives might say, and he was being manipulated into action. Application for a job, he thought. His eyes roamed their surroundings and he wondered who might be watching. "I just want to get my photographs back," he puffed.

Suzette at last removed her eyes from the track. "That *can't* be all," she said with irritation.

He had disappointed her. "Right, right," he stammered, "and my Auntie. Make sure she's golden. Right, right."

Suzette turned away again.

There, behind the sign, he weighed his comments. Strangely, his photographs did come first. He wasn't sure why. It may have had something to do with how they were taken from him – so mysteriously, vanishing from The Red Bird. He hated mysteries. His aunt, too, had vanished, and if finding one might lead to the other, then all was well, he supposed. He kept his eyes fixed on Suzette's back, her hair, which she had pulled into a ponytail as they killed time. *Well,* he admitted to himself, smiling, *maybe there's one more reason I don't just call it a day.*

"Here it comes," she said, and straightened her back.

The 1:33's bell could be heard in the distance, the *clank-clank-clank* growing and then reverberating off the

concrete walls of the station. At the final corner of the track, the train's front engine appeared, its lone, bright headlamp spraying the corner wall and then focusing on the track's end. The wheel encasements groaned and the smell of oil and engine heat filled Archie's nose.

They stood a mere twenty feet from the engineer's cabin, raised up in the air by six or seven feet more than the tallest head. This was one of the better models, the more expensive, a newer requisition from the city's transit authority. Like a black, polished stallion, the train finally halted just short of the springs and let out a high sigh of steam.

The doors opened and Archie's heart raced into his throat.

Suzette dropped the train schedule and wrapped both her hands around the brace of the signpost. "How will we know who we're looking for?" she said, slight panic in her timbre. It was the first admission from the girl that unknown details made her nervous. He had been steadily relying more and more on her confidence, her known facts – the code, Hecht's disguise, everything. But on the identity of the train's secret passenger, she was as lost as he.

From the steam emerged a flock of people – women, children, immigrants and nationals, some solitary with briefcases and expensive suits, some in billowing dresses and holding the hands of children, some needing assistance off the train car's high steps, some jumping from the car as if it were on fire. This was a normal scene, to Archie. Absent were the obvious differences or trigger actions that his heightened sensibilities sought. It was the 1:33, as always.

Suzette marked each face as it passed, keenly observing, her hands squeezing together in anticipation.

Perhaps it was one of Matten's two men on the train. Archie hoped to remember a face from the photographs. He had become foggy, though, only remembering their vague Eastern European features. Nothing definite.

At the thickest part of the traffic, both wished for a plan, to divide the platform and not miss a single passing

face. However, in a matter of a few moments, the platform had cleared, reduced just to conductors, workers, and the two of them, stashed behind the sign. It was over. The train had arrived and they had recognized no one.

Suzette took the coded page from her pocket and read it once more. "That's all it said – 'Central Station at 1:33.' I swear."

"I believe you." Archie drifted out from behind the sign and wandered the platform. He walked the length of track eleven, craning to scan the interior of each of the now-empty train cars. The cleaning crew appeared from the side stairwell and began to enter the train at various points. As Archie returned to Suzette's side, he checked the faces of each member of the cleaning staff. Again, he recognized no one. "What do we do?" he asked.

Suzette put out her hand. "Give me the news clipping." Archie went into his pocket and placed the page into her hand. Quickly, she read the article. "This bank is opening today. It's open until three o'clock. Want to go and look?"

Archie shrugged. "What choice have we got? At least we can confirm the third clue is a map of the bank, right?"

Another cab fare came out of Archie's wallet and into the hands of a driver. He was about out of capital. Yet to be paid for his Matten photographs, it looked like there might be another raid of the trust fund. After the Federal Bank, he might have to make a trip to his own branch. The institutions were on opposite sides of town. His finances were closer to his apartment, south; this grand opening was north, near Columbus Circle. Suzette didn't offer to pay. On her wages, how could she? She had even suggested the train, but with time ticking, Archie advised against it.

They arrived at the site at twenty-past 2.

The Federal Bank, a tan monstrosity of concrete with twin Roman columns, loomed on the corner of a busy intersection and looked fairly governmental. It wasn't a new building, but an old one, converted. A banner proclaimed

"Grand Opening! Start A Savings Account Today!" in high-blocked letters above the entranceway. Archie doubted this branch did much personal business; it was a house of larger transactions. Financiers and builders…mobster funds, most likely. However, out of the gate, it was good advertisement to show a human side before becoming a reigning institution of greed. In many ways, it was no different from the bank that held his own funds, and, therefore, he brought prejudice into the picture.

Archie checked his wristwatch as they exited the taxi. "Suzette," he started, "let me ring my aunt. There's time. Maybe she's returned. That would put a new spin on things, wouldn't it?"

"What if Mr. Johns answers?"

"I'll hang up."

"You won't ask him first?"

"Should I?"

"Even if she's returned, he'd still answer. He's the secretary, after all."

"I'll ask. I'll phone from…from that pub," said Archie, and threw a finger to a far street, a place opposite the bank.

Suzette looked around nervously. "All right," she said, "but hurry. I don't want them to lock us out. We've only got thirty minutes until the bank closes."

Archie nodded and began to cross the street. The pub wasn't far – a short jog. Once, at the mid-point, he turned to confirm that Suzette still stood on the corner. He gave her an assuring wave of the hand.

Then, turning again, he stopped. Dead.

The pub.

The sign hung above the door said in flashing neon script…"Central Station – Bar And Eatery."

THE GENUINE ARTICLE

"It wasn't *Grand* Central Station, it was just *Central Station.*" Archie grabbed Suzette by the hand and forced her to follow him back towards to the bar. At the corner, she screeched to a full stop, open mouthed, unsure of what to say. "There's been a meeting and we've *missed* it," cursed Archie.

Archie eyed the distance between the two buildings. There had to be a connection between the bank and the eatery. Avoiding the oncoming traffic, Archie continued to drag Suzette, this time across the street and onto the Federal Bank steps. Up they went, ignoring the railing, until they reached the large wooden doors hung on their gold hinges, which opened for them at the exit of a bank customer. Both Archie and Suzette checked the customer's face – it was no one they knew. The two plowed ahead inside, still hand in hand.

The bank's interior was a stunning achievement. The architecture was classic 1920s Deco, from the age of Rockefellers and Howard Hughes. Everything was marble and gold, or marble lined with gold. A hundred customers were scattered about, standing at islands and filling out slips, or seated at desks and discussing loans, or waiting on queue for a teller. Everyone seemed smartly dressed – Archie's assessment of the bank and its clientele not far off. Archie's eyes went to the high ceiling where oval archways showed balconies and lined shelves. In the center, twenty paces ahead of them, a wide staircase gently curled to reach the second floor. "This used to be a library," guessed Archie, as his fix went to faces inside the bank. He couldn't drink in everyone at once – there were too many. Sounds echoed, just as they had in Grand Central, and even his whispers to Suzette ricocheted.

A man caught sight of the two of them. It was a flash, just a glance up from the filing board near the bank slips.

"I know that man," said Archie, turning his back and huddling with Suzette.

"Who?"

"He's…gray coat, on your left. Tough looking. He's one of Anders Matten's men. What's *he* doing here?"

Suzette coyly looked past Archie's shoulder. "I don't see anyone."

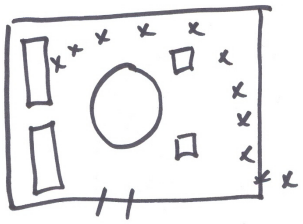
Archie glanced. The man had moved. Archie once more found his position. "He's now over by the far desk." The man paced casually towards the long line of customers. Archie quick-stepped to the nearest station of bank deposit slips.

Suzette, following, kept her eyes moving, but saw no one as described. When she caught up again with Archie, she said dismissively, "I don't see anyone."

Frustrated, Archie swung his eyes to find the man a third time – only now, he couldn't. The man had vanished. Bending at the knees, he looked under the far counter, the island. Maybe he had slipped underneath. But no. Nothing. Archie spun in full circle, searching the room for the original man, or any other of Matten's friends. "He was there," said Archie with a point. "Now he's not."

"Like they're ghosts," remarked the girl.

"No," said Archie, "they're just very good at being quick." From his pocket, Archie withdrew the hand drawn map. He took a spot at the island and flattened the page. Pointing, he showed the correlations. "See?



We're here. This top right box. These slashes at the bottom of the square must be the front doors. That means…" Archie's head turned upward, then downward. "No chandelier. He stepped back from the island and examined the floor. "This circle. See? See?" His blood rising, his chest beginning to stifle, Archie traced the design embedded in the marble of the bank floor with his hovering fingertip. "It's the center of the room. It's this." The design was

nothing more than black and gold triangles flecked with gray and green, formed into a large circle. It was also proof that the hand-drawn map was, indeed, the Federal Bank. "And these two rectangles are the teller counters."

Suzette followed from the map to the real thing, the two long stations with three tellers each, behind windows, conducting business. Her fingernail went to the map's line of X's. "And these?"

Their eyes circled the room, looking for indicators. There was nothing. "Why mark an entrance from the side?" Archie left the banking island and went to the far right corner of the room. Here, aside from hanging artwork and velvet directional ropes, there was nothing. No door. No exit. He put his fingers to the cold marble wall. "No one can get in through this side. Look – not even a balcony here." It was true – the balconies on the second floor of the bank stopped short of this section. Both turned again to face the main room.

Stumped, Suzette and Archie once more surveyed the place where they stood, and the faces of the bank customers.

"We should leave," said Suzette suddenly, a voice in her head telling her *'turn back.'*

At that instant, Archie noticed the bank policeman, arms folded and clearly watching them from across the room. "We're being watched by the guard," said Archie in a hush.

Suzette threw her hands. "Why? We're not doing anything suspicious but traipsing around a brand new bank, feeling the walls, and looking at a map. What's suspicious about that?"

Someone must have heard her.

Alarms went off. Loudly.

Patrons covered their ears. A woman screamed. Fists held tight to money. The guard sped towards Archie and Suzette, yanking his revolver from its holster. Archie's hands went up in surrender.

"Don't shoot!" shouted Archie, the words repeating and fading with the echo.

As if set by charges, paperwork began to fly from behind the bank counter. Tellers moved quickly backwards as money and slips and applications whipped through the air by an unseen wind. Two people went flying, as if they had been smashed into, roughly.

The guard, pistol on Archie, turned his head. The man was terrified. Here, his first day on the job, he was tested. The ringing alarm brought two more guards from the safe-room, their gray uniforms newly pressed, and their revolvers drawn. "What's happening?" shouted one over the din just as his pistol was clipped by something invisible. The weapon skittered across the table in front of him, then took a dive over the edge. When it hit the hard floor, it fired, sending a bullet into the wide, bold-faced clock above the building's entrance. The glass encasement rained down on a man in the doorway, who pulled his coat over his head for protection.

Panic.

Running.

A stampede of customers raced to get out of the Federal Bank. Miniature explosions of paper and money continued behind the counter, sending employees scattering.

The guard whose weapon had fired grabbed his lost revolver from the floor and, this time, held it tightly with both hands. "To the safe!" he shouted to his partner who, much younger and wider-eyed, followed without complaint. This left the original guard alone, to hold down the room, and his prisoners – Archie and Suzette. Suzette could tell the man felt abandoned. "You move and I'll shoot!" he shouted.

"It wasn't *us*!" she yelled back.

Archie bristled. The man's finger was too twitchy to be risk antagonizing. "Easy," was all he said, holding the map in front of him as if it were protection. No bullet could be stopped by paper.

He wished he had never entered the bloody bank in the first place.

CLUES AND SUSPECTS

Arrested, both of them. The three pages from Aunt Dove's envelope were now in evidence. As the only clues handled by the only suspects, things did not look good for Archie and Suzette. They had a coded message with a local meeting place and time; they had an article about the bank's first day of business; they had a clumsy, yet accurate map of the bank's interior, drawn prior to the opening of doors. Authorities were building a case for an inside job.

"Maybe it wasn't exactly *you two*," said the arresting detective, on the scene just fifteen minutes after the crime, "but you're involved, that's fer sure." The man chewed his blunt cigar and had a bad case of dandruff. Luckily, he did not stay in the interrogation room long, as he still had an assessment to make of the scene.

Mr. Johns sat across from Archie and Suzette, letting the silence linger a bit longer than necessary. "I hope you two are happy," he said at last, with a puff.

"It wasn't us," said Suzette, the phrase a ghost of its first utterance, now depleted of air.

"They say it wasn't much – around three-hundred thousand dollars, by first count. It could have been worse. Could have been upwards of a million. Strange thing is…no one can figure how it left the building. There was so much chaos – as I'm sure you witnessed – no one actually saw a bag taken out the front or the back entrance. Whatever you've done to help, you've done it well. But they've caught you and that's that, I suppose. They've assigned the highest-ranking captain to lead the case – a Captain Timkins. He seems very thorough. I hope you don't have any reason to be afraid of that. Go sideways of the law and you get the stick."

Archie went forward in his hard chair, arms out so the dull white sleeves of his shirt appeared wide under his jacket. "Mr. Johns, this isn't *right*. You *saw* my aunt give me that envelope yourself just hours before the robbery. It

probably wasn't even *meant* for me. I went back and asked you to return it. Don't you remember?"

The man shook his head, serious. "I also remember you grabbing my scheduler and running. Or have you forgotten?" Suzette and Archie looked to each other, sheepish. "I want to believe you, Archie, but I don't have enough of the facts. Your aunt is missing and a bank's been robbed. There has to be a connection."

"There is!" said Suzette. "Get us out of here and we'll try to find it."

"I can't do that." Johns leaned back. He washed his hands with invisible water. He was using his age, his former military bearing, his un-flexed parental skills, to try and paint the two suspects into a corner.

Archie huffed. "You should be on our side. My aunt employs you, you know."

Johns was bruised, but quickly let it pass. "I *was* on your side, Archie. Then you stole from me. You ran out on me. You were the one who didn't trust *me*. Why should I do the same for you? I can't encourage illegal behavior, even if it's done by someone I've known for many years." Johns lit a cigarette and tapped his shoe on the tile of the interrogation room's floor. "What I *can* do," he began, "is try and find this Mr. Henry Gore. You say he's missing?"

"Yes," answered Suzette. "Probably. Ms. Gray clearly thought he was going to be at that appointment. He may be the link."

"That Peter Disney," said Archie, "we know he's looking for his performers. Matten – he's a performer. And Hecht says he was a friend of Matten's. Then maybe Henry Gore is with them, too. You said he was a performer."

"Yes, Dove told me that." Gears clicked in Johns. "I'll find him," said the man confidently. He had been given an assignment, a direction, and he took his charge with the same earnestness he applied to his daily work. Johns nodded slowly as he rose from his chair. He stubbed his fresh cigarette out in the nearby ashtray. And then he was gone.

THE SEAM

Archie and Suzette soon found themselves alone, in separate but adjacent cells, at the end of long and quiet aisle of the precinct. New York had beat its reputation for crime waves and drunkards. Business was slow; Archie noted it. "Do you think they're listening?" His ears went to the air.

"They just want to isolate us," Suzette replied with a sigh. She sunk to the hard, triangle chair against the corner of her own cell. Archie approached the barred wall between them. He wrapped his fingers around the cold metal props and rested his aching head against them. His dragged footsteps echoed in the empty quadrant. "This is only temporary," Suzette noted.

"How can you tell?"

"No toilets. I bet they're just trying to scare us."

Archie was too tied to think. It was after nine o'clock at night. Their questioning had been slow and repetitive. Mr. Johns's visit had been the only friendly one. No relatives or lawyers had surfaced, only a slow parade of city officials and patrolmen. In the deepest pocket of the interrogation room, a lone man in a tight fitting suit had stood watch through most of the interviews. Archie pegged him as the Federal Bank manager. The man never twitched, except once, to dust his small eyeglasses and cough.

Archie had spent their first hour in the cells thinking of escape. Now, he no longer thought it possible. He was going to be held a long time. His one telephone call to Aunt Dove's town-home had gone unanswered. In the morning, they might have more luck. Maybe Johns would return with reinforcements. Maybe Aunt Dove would reappear. Maybe the real criminals would be arrested. The cold and clattering cells of the New York authorities would be their bed for the night; Archie knew it.

"I barely know you," he muttered to Suzette.

She raised her chin. "What?"

"I barely know you. You're a complete stranger to me. I took your photograph and that was it. You've spied for my aunt. Strange that I trust you."

"What choice have you got?" She leaned back against the brick wall.

Archie turned from the bars and stood very still in the middle of his square jail cell, eyes closed. A moment passed.

"What are you doing?"

Archie opened his eyes. "Nothing. It's what I did as a child. It calms me down. I pretend I'm nothing. A speck. Dust on the floor."

"Well that's silly."

He shrugged. Pacing his cell, he debated his motives for wanting to shrink into corners. In a way, he envied all the people who kept disappearing. It was exactly what he wanted for himself. But these motives were not for Suzette O'Connor. It wouldn't make a dent on her understanding him, or him her. He had to acknowledge his trust in her, but that was as far as he would go. And his attraction to her. That, too. Whether he wanted to confess his shyness, his hermit existence, of that he wasn't yet sure. "We'll get out of here," he said suddenly, with absolute confidence. "Don't you worry."

Suzette leaned forward once again. "I'm not worried. I'm innocent. You aren't as familiar with the American system of justice as I am." She continued with a single finger held aloft, "Here there's always a fair trail. Here you're innocent until proven guilty. I'm an American citizen."

Archie huffed and crossed again to the bars. "Where's your family? I've had at least *one* person show up. Even if it *was* just Johns. No one's come for you. They offered you a dime and you didn't call anyone."

"Yes I did."

"No you didn't. It's in the pocket of your skirt. I saw you put it there."

Suzette looked down, ashamed. For a minute more, silence. Both suspects tried not to notice each other, or

their situation. Suzette lived alone and had no friends, except for acquaintances at the magazine. They'd be no help.

A loud shifting of the lock startled them both.

In a wave, three men entered the chamber via the corridor. The sound of clanking metal keys on fat rings, hard-soled shoes, and wool uniform legs, scraping, turned the corner and entered the row of cells holding the two prisoners. Two of the men were patrolmen – different ones from the earlier shift, but stone-faced and officious nonetheless. The third man, older with curls and a drop to his spine, tan suit jacket hanging poorly, and cufflinks, raised his face from the floor. Archie recognized the man immediately.

"Doctor Rollo!" he called.

One of the patrolmen tugged a rope planted in the wall opposite the two jail cells. A bench on springs, flat and hard, released from its camouflage on the wall. Rollo's face showed he was impressed with the device, its seeming invisibility, its similarity to a Murphy bed, only smaller. He raised and lowered his eyebrows.

The taller patrolman asked unemotionally if Suzette needed anything. Her eyes focused only on the new arrival. She shook her head 'no.' Satisfied, both patrolmen left with words that they'd return in fifteen minutes and "no funny business."

Roman Rollo crossed his legs on the bench. The two came forward, as if waiting for judgment, and gripped the steel bars of their cells. "Say something, Doctor Rollo," pleaded Archie, noting that there was something a bit different in the way Rollo carried himself. Deflated, defeated, he was weary with the day. "Is there any news?" Archie asked.

"News?" repeated the doctor. "Too much," he said sadly. "News from all directions." Roman dived into the pocket of his tan jacket. He pulled out a folded sheet of paper and held it in his lap. "I…I wish, Archie, that there was a way to get you out of here. I've spoken with that Captain Timkins, but he's, he's quite obstinate. In the

morning, I think I'll have better luck. It'll be a Tuesday. Tuesdays are usually pretty lucky for me." Roman gave a smile, but it soon failed him. "I have to admit, I could use your aunt in this. Dove's still…missing. I'm not too familiar with New York and its laws. I don't have the same connections. I've contacted the magazine's lawyer. He'll probably return my call tomorrow. I've asked for a referral, for a solicitor, someone better suited for these types of crimes."

"We didn't do it!" pleaded Suzette. "They *have* to know that. We didn't have anything to do with the robbery."

Rollo laughed. "Of course not! Everyone in this station knows that as a fact. They're not holding you on formal…charges. Yet. They don't *really* believe you orchestrated this thing." The faces of the two went up then down in emotion. "But they won't let you out," he said sadly. "Not for several days."

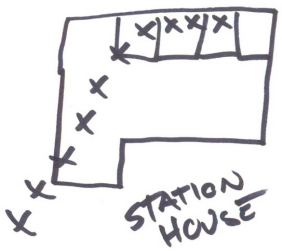
Roman stood, holding tight the folded paper, and approached his step-nephew's cell bars.

"That man…came by again. That Lyle Benedix."

"Benedix!" exclaimed Archie. "What did he say?"

"Very little. But he just gave me this and told me to bring it to you. And to tell you not to be frightened. Yes. His words. 'They'll be perfectly safe,' he said."

Roman unfolded the paper and held it up for Archie and Suzette to see. It was another hand-drawn map with the phrase "STATION HOUSE" printed beneath.



Archie snatched the map out of the doctor's hands. "What's it mean?" he asked.

Roman lowered his chin and raised his eyes. "That, I do not know," he said plainly. "I–"

The door swung open again. Archie quickly pocketed the map. The two patrolmen stepped inside the chamber, but held back close to the door. "Enough," said one with a thick borough accent, "time's up."

Roman leaned closer to Archie's ear. "Benedix had another message to go with that. I thought it was rather confusing. But maybe it'll mean something to you. He said, 'Look up.' He pushed me to remember it, though it seems a little dull now. I suppose he meant 'keep your chin up,' or something like that. Thought it was important."

"Sir, time to go," urged the patrolmen, clanking his nightstick on the doorframe.

Roman began to leave.

"Doctor Rollo!" called Archie.

The man turned. "Yes?"

"Did you report my aunt missing?"

With a dour expression, Roman nodded. "I have." He gave a last, fleeting attempt at a smile. "I will see you both tomorrow morning."

When the two of them were again alone in the cells, Archie snatched the map from his pocket. He crossed his hands into Suzette's cell so she could better see. "See? It's a good thing neither of us is in the end cell. Whatever these markings are, they don't include that cell. We'd be out of luck. But from the third cell on, there's something. See the X's? Just like the bank diagram."

"I still don't understand. What did he mean by—"

"'Look up.'" Archie and Suzette's eyes went to the grimy ceiling of the dark chamber. Nothing out of the ordinary there, only the peeling red paint of the station house top, nine-feet in the air, rimmed by two-inch-wide water pipes, exposed but too high to reach, even with a jump.

Archie turned to Suzette who smiled nervously.

"Do you think you could lift me up?" she asked.

Archie bent on one knee and cupped his hands. Through the bars, Suzette rested her right foot inside the pedestal and allowed Archie to lift her. Using all his strength, he arched his back, put strain into it, and lifted

Suzette two feet off the ground. She was still well shy of the water pipes. He let his grip fail and lowered her back to the floor. "Sorry," he apologized.

"They've designed this place to not be escaped from. I suppose we shouldn't have thought it was that easy. These X's aren't the water pipes, they're something else."

The two looked around, desperate.

"You realize," said Archie, "that we're trying to escape from a jail."

They stopped and smiled devilishly, only for a second.

Resuming the search, Archie drifted to the cell's single chair. Suzette had begun to feel along the floor. But he went opposite. He stood atop the chair and reached his arm up high. Still well short of the ceiling, he flattened his palms against the cold cement walls of the jailhouse. He slid further up, as far as his arms could reach.

Then, at the threaded bend of the spackling, his fingers touched something. It was slightly cold. Moving left to right, he continued to feel. For an instant, he thought the little finger of his right hand became momentarily shorter. It startled him. He drew his arms back to his hips.

"What is it?" Suzette asked, rising from the floor.

"Nothing, I— I thought I felt something."

"What did you do? I didn't see it."

"This." Archie repeated the flattening of his palms, the movement of his hands along the wall, until he found the same spot. This time, for certain, two of his fingers vanished up to the knuckles.

"Stop, stop," said Suzette in a panic. "Don't hurt yourself."

Archie pulled his hands back. They were fine. Intact. "Perfectly safe," said Archie, remembering Benedix's words through his uncle. This time, at the spot, he went up to the joints of his fingers.

Suzette came forward and thrust the map up for him to see. "You found it!" she said, the smile held in her cheekbone and clenched jaw. Her heart beating faster and faster. "The way out."

TWO

THE INVISIBLE BOY

Things began to go missing on the ship.

Thirty-year-old purser Gordon Serkis fingered through his duffle bag. His shaving kit had vanished. Hoisting the open bag from his upper birth to the lower one, he tried another angle, combing the interior canvas bag until satisfied that the shaving kit was nowhere inside. He knelt and swept his hands under the bedding. Then, utterly frustrated, eyed the corners of his white-painted cabin. The ship would be sailing soon; there wasn't enough time to return to his Southampton boarding rooms and continue searching.

He knew the razor should be inside the bag. He put it there and had a clear memory of it. *Had it been this trip? Or another?* So many voyages from England to America in the last twenty-four months, he may have confused this packing with another.

But…no.

Surely habit would have played a part. Stowing his kit had been routine. Repeated. A step in the process when moving from the small boarding rooms of the dockworks and onto the ship itself. Bending, snapping the buttons into their recessed hooks, and tucking the leather case into the duffle had stayed strong in his memory.

"My shaving kit is missing." He mentioned this to a passing deck boy, from Bombay, by the name of Mohan, who spoke little English but understood the accusation. "Have you seen it?"

The boy shook his head 'no' and scrambled down the ship's narrow corridor to the stairs.

Now at sea, Serkis had little hope of procuring another kit. He would have to borrow the neighboring boatswain's set before Serkis's beard grew disrespectable. Part of his duty as purser was to remain neat. Bad marks if he looked criminal. And his beard grew fast, Serkis being part Greek, and genetically disposed to hair. The Englishmen of the crew would laugh at him. "Lost your kit?" they'd smugly

say as he passed them at dinnertime. He had to take action.

The first day, he snuck into the boatswain's cabin and helped himself. Later, he regretted it. He couldn't ask to borrow a razor now. The man would know by Serkis's clean-shaven face that he had gone a day without issue. He would have to lie about how he "made do." He considered saying that he'd lost his kit after the first day, but how could one have a kit go missing while on the sea? It was more believable that it had vanished on the land, had been forgotten. That, at least, was plausible (though irresponsible.) The duty free shop was also off limits to crew. Every day he would have to be this bold; there was no turning back.

"Captain seems to be missing all his caps," said the wheelman casually when Serkis paid the steering deck a visit. The Lady Elizabeth, on its third voyage of 1933, though not the equivalent of any of the government-owned luxury liners, remained a respectable ship with a wide wheelhouse, fit to hold six. The wheel had been made in Ireland and took up most of the steering cabin. The wheelman gave a graceful glide of the wheel to ease the ship along a breaking wave.

"His caps?" asked Serkis.

"Yeah. All three. Vanished."

Serkis pictured Captain Lorber's threadbare head exposed to the elements. It gave him a smile. No cap for a captain meant anonymity. The eighty-four paid passengers of the ship wouldn't give the old seaman a second glance as he stood on decks, hands behind his back, frowning at his crew. He'd have to bark an order or two to even get a look up from a newspaper, or around their sun umbrellas. Captain Lorber wouldn't like his authority undermined, his recognition doused. This had to be a prank of the crew.

Serkis, over the next day, had thoughts about the crewmen he passed as he went about his work. Each white-uniformed employee was an equal suspect. It may have been his imagination, but the purser thought he detected knowing eyes in the men, that shared laughter at

the captain's expense, a minor mutiny in the form of three overboard captain's caps. Casual questions led nowhere. No one would confess to this treason. It was an unclaimed triumph.

When half the stash of dinner forks disappeared from the ship's opulent dining hall, Serkis began to sense a plot. His missing shaving kit might have only been the beginning of illegalities. Over the Atlantic crossing, thirteen days total, he and the other crew searched high and low for the missing forks, hats, and a long list of other crewmember items, Serkis's shaving kit being only one of many reported ghosts. Facts accumulated, suspicions grew, theories abounded, but, by New York Harbor, it was concluded that the goods had been tossed overboard by a deranged passenger.

On the return to England, things held quiet for the first part of the voyage. Objects stayed in their place. Thankfully. Serkis could relax. In New York, he had purchased another shaving kit to comply with his obligations of grooming.

One evening at sea, Serkis stretched out on his bunk and put his hands behind his head, looking up from his pillow to the curved white ceiling overhead. His eyes began to flutter; he was falling asleep. Between blinks, he saw something strange: a quick movement, then a retraction. He held his eyes open a moment more, but could not continue. Flashes were common to him when sleep was so close. He dismissed the movement and went to dreams.

Suddenly, he twitched awake. A object landed on his undershirt. He leaned up on his bunk, but there was little room. Reaching behind, he pulled his tiny goose-light closer to the page, snapping on the switch. In his hands was a quarter-folded piece of paper, and on the paper, a handwritten question…

Do you have any food?

Serkis squinted his eyes and furrowed his brow. He crumpled the page and surveyed the room. No one had

entered; no one had left. He dropped the ball of paper to the floor beneath his bunk and again shut his eyes.

A moment later, a second page, folded in fourths, struck his chest. Again, Gordon Serkis awoke, this time quickly and with irritation. He clipped his forehead on the top brace of his bunk and swore loudly.

They've locked the kitchen stores,
said the second note.

He swung out over his bunk, grabbed the first note from the floor beside his bed, and threw open the door of his cabin. In the corridor, Mohan was passing. "What's the bleedin' idea?" he said to the boy, accusingly, shaking the two notes in the air, one in each fist. "You get your ration, same as anybody. Can't ya hold out? Nibbles make you a porker. And you should be askin' the cook anyway, not me."

Mohan's face showed utter confusion, but the boy apologized anyway and quickly slipped past Serkis. He tried not to meet the purser's eyes; he didn't like what he saw there.

Serkis did not stop the boy's leaving. From Mohan's body, his reaction, the slowing then speeding of his steps, the purser knew he had tapped the wrong man. Quietly, he withdrew again into his cabin and shut the door. To the air, he whispered, "I…I think I have a bit of cake."

Pause.

Another page fluttered between his feet.

Leave it in the corridor.

Going to his chest of drawers, Serkis opened the top one and uncovered the small bit of cake he had pocketed after teatime. It was wrong for employees to take an extra share, but he often got the grumbles near midnight. Maybe this apparition knew that. Maybe he had been seen as Serkis nicked the cake and tucked it into his uniform's inner pocket.

Slowly this time, Serkis returned to the door of his cabin, opened it by its steel handle, and laid the square bit of teacake just outside the rim. The corridor was empty. For several minutes, Serkis stared down at the cake. A crewmember named Wex passed by with a salute but did not notice the cake. *What would I have said to him,* thought the purser, *had he asked about it?* "Baiting a rat," would have been his reply, for it very much seemed that way. Like cheese in a trap was that cake, and Serkis might claim he was doing the work of the exterminators. He could never tell the man the truth – that he held conversations with the very air.

Wex, however, noticed nothing.

Another minute passed.

Behind him, a fourth scrap of paper appeared fluttering in midair. Serkis caught the scrap and unfolded it quickly.

Shut the door?

This made Serkis momentarily angry, to be ordered about. He made mental calculation how fast that oval grate would come open when yanked. Not in a flash like a wood door; this would be a bit slower. Still, if someone was in the corridor stealing his cake, capture should not be a problem. And, as the notes inferred, the ghost was hungry. Serkis, ever so mechanically, shut the door to his cabin and left the cake outside in privacy.

Utter silence, until the faint, very faint, whiff of soft shoes lit into his ears.

Serkis threw open the door!

…to a corridor of crumbs…

The teacake had evaporated.

Frustrated, Serkis drifted back inside his hovel. He shut the door and, disrespectful of his duties, left the crumbs for mice. Seated on the lower berth, the purser picked at his nails with his teeth, and stared at the sequence of notes he had dropped to the floor, some with the writing upturned, legible, others turned over, silent.

Just then, a small scrape told him to look up. Overhead, he saw a boy's hand – from the wrist to the tips of fingers – as a last paper note was dropped from his ceiling.

Serkis ignored the falling message. Instead, he jumped straight like a shot and snatched the wrist with both his hands. His feet off the ground, he swung on the small fingers and put his entire weight into it. The body could not hold. He heard a tearing and a felt a shift, a tumble – someone coming free from balance.

Lightning fast, Serkis collapsed onto his backside. The small hand, then an arm, an elbow, a shoulder, then at last the entire body was pulled from the slit of the cabin's ceiling and landed hard right on top of him. *It was a boy!* A whole *boy*. Serkis smelled him before he could see him. By the size, he guessed at an age after ten, but not much older; by the odor, he guessed a week since bathing. The boy wriggled to his feet, his flailing arms smashing into Serkis's belongings on the top of the chest-of-drawers, and the clothes rack. A pile of white ship's uniforms matted Serkis's right leg and he had to shuffle them off before he could get to his feet. The boy put his hand to the door, to flee, but Serkis had a firm hold of the boy's legs. There would be no escape.

"I was just saying thank you!" the boy cried, panicked. "I was just saying thank you…"

His voice broke all spells. This boy was not a devil from the grave – instead, a flesh and blood child who had clearly gone out into water well over his head. To save him from screaming, Serkis clawed his way up, to stand on his own two feet, using the back of the boy's shirt for tether. He noticed that the fabric and cut were that of a blue workman's shirt, altered for fit, probably stolen from the tailor's in the rear of the ship. Serkis placed his hairy hand firmly over the boy's mouth.

The two, catching breaths, held for a moment.

Serkis felt cake crumbs touch the palm of his imprisoning hand. The boy had wolfed the teacake down.

"Now what's all this?" said the purser, sternly. He looked up to the ceiling of his cabin. There was nothing there – no opening where the boy could logically have been pulled from. Everything appeared normal again. "What's all this about then? How – How did you…do that?"

The boy spoke, muffled by the hand.

"I'm gonna take me hand off," said the man, "and I want an answer. A real one. An' no shouting. Or I'll tell everyone on board what you've been up to. Stowing's a hanging offense."

The boy nodded.

Serkis slid his sweaty hand from the boy's face.

"I'm *not* a stowaway," said the boy quietly, in an accent that betrayed the southern coast of the Isle.

"Well what are you, then?"

"I'm with the crew."

"Not bloody likely."

"I am." The boy shrank his features and made them serious. "I'm as much of a crewmember as you are. I've been on the Lady Elizabeth three years, since I was nine." The shock at his age must have shown on Serkis's face, as the boy continued, "Yes, I'm twelve, I am I am. And I can't help it that I get hungry, or that the kitchen stores have been locked. I've tried to be nice."

"Nice! You stole my teacake."

"I said thank you." The boy pointed to the bed, where the last folded note had landed, a white patch on the brown blanket. Serkis drew back, one hand a vice on the boy's arm, plucked the note from the carpet and shook it open. "It says 'thank you.' I can write. I know what courtesy is."

"How'd you get to be so smart then?"

"The orphanage."

At the word, Serkis nodded, let go of the boy, and retreated against the couplings of his bedpost. "I was an orphan, too, lad," he stated sympathetically then drilled into his voice a more parental tone. "But I got work and I *did not* hide on a ship or steal from honest men." His hand went up and traced along the paint. "How did you do it? How did you get into my room? It's remarkable, 'tis.

Strangest thing, I've…" Serkis stood on his toes and swept his fingers. "There's no vent up there. Nothing to fall in through, as ye did."

The boy became shy.

His inspection yielding nothing, Serkis came forward and stared into the boy's face. "How did I only see your hand, and just that once, when you dropped the note? Where was the rest of you, aye? And why haven't you been caught if you've been here so long? We've got spotters looking for smelly boys in stolen uniforms, cut to ribbons to fit ya." Serkis flicked at the boy, his clothes, sending him back against the door. "So tell me, then, before I call for the guards. Where ya been hiding?"

At last, the boy took a breath. "Tunnels."

LADY ELIZABETH

The Lady Elizabeth was no longer the fine ship it had been in the early part of the century. Now, twenty-seven years later, it felt its age. The Treasury Association, a London collective of bankers, investors, and exploration-minded dreamers, had sunk a good deal of money into their mid-sized luxury liner, to keep it profitable, to keep it afloat. In only the latter were they successful, and that just barely. Every season, the Atlantic's harsh elements rotted away the liner's paint and steel and sides, so much that the more regular members of the crew, including the captain, took to prayers before each casting off. On safe arrivals, in either New York or Southampton, there was a detectable joy in the crew at having survived another two weeks at sea.

The rooms remained nice, particularly the luxury cabins, the grand ballroom, and the upper sun decks. However, down where the least moneyed passengers slept, the cold rattle of pipes and the yawning of the construction did raise a few eyebrows and Christian crosses.

Anders Matten did not like to compare things. At the elemental core, one object was quite like another. The Lady Elizabeth was a ship built on the same principles of seamanship as the dozen other ships tied to the Cunard dockworks of Southampton. But, when lined beside all these other vessels, his chosen ship did seem a bit of a mercy purchase.

When he had made his ticket arrangements in London, travel office brochures fanned out by the seller, the Lady Elizabeth's specifications had been buried under the blotter. He almost didn't notice the ship. What caught his eye was a simple photograph, dating back to the ship's prime, thirty years before, its perfectly symmetrical portals decorating the anterior. He always did like portholes. "What about this one?" Matten had said to the agent as he lifted the tea-stained brochure from the bottom of the stack and placed it on top.

The agent frowned. "A bargain, that one. But not the best of breed."

"It looks all right. And I prefer a smaller ship." Matten tapped the other adverts with a professional drumming, as if they were a deck of cards, and laid them down on an empty chair beside.

The agent took the Lady Elizabeth brochure from Matten's outstretched hand and gave the pages a flip. He had not been asked about the ship, or its prices, in quite some time. "If you don't mind my asking," began the agent, a balding older man with a heavy mustache and chalk-marked suit, "are you more interested in being social, or are you looking for peace and quiet?"

"Oh peace and quiet, always peace and quiet," replied Matten.

"It's just that you're likely to only have a half full roster on this one. If you're looking for companionship, a crowd at the bar, a dance in the ballroom, I would recommend one of those others." The agent gestured with his eyes down to the other brochures. "But if you're wanting a deck by yourself, or a place at the captain's table, the Lady Elizabeth might be just right. And, I could probably get you an upgrade, if you'd like. To a preferred cabin. The fee would be the same as a standard cabin elsewhere. Oh, and I should warn you, the Lady Elizabeth is a bit slower than the others. It'll add two days to your journey. And the seas will be rougher. Smaller boats they tend to–"

Matten was already reaching for his payment, his wallet stuffed inside his tweed jacket. "This ship is fine. And, really, I won't be alone. I'm needing to purchase five tickets. There's me, plus two other performers in my company. Then I also have two assistants with me, traveling to America from their homeland of Russia. Terrible times there, and they're looking forward to getting as far away as possible." Matten noticed the agent's face change at the mention of Russians. "It's quiet all right," he assured, "everyone's papers are in order."

Matten laid before the man a small stack of passports and cash, taking out his own trusted pen to complete the transaction.

"Well," said the agent as he inspected the elements and arranged them according to his beaurocratic needs, "you certainly are very organized, Mr. Matten. Are you a…financier, or a…planner of some sort?"

He was fishing, that man, but Matten didn't mind. He had nothing to hide. "I'm an escape artist. Dr. Hecht, Mr. Gore, and myself are all graduates of the school of magicianship." Matten tapped the passports of the other two. "We studied under the same man: Lyle Benedix, an American. He taught us everything we know. We've been stuck together ever since and we fight like cats." Matten winked and the ticket agent smiled. "These other two Russian gentlemen help me in my act. Mr. Hecht and Mr. Gore have no assistants. They're mostly cards and disguises and that sort of bungle. I escape. Spectaculars. And for that you need more men."

The agent nodded politely. "Tricks, aye?" he asked as he began to complete the forms required for travel.

"We don't like to call them 'tricks.' We prefer illusions. Tricks make it sound like you're taking advantage, committing crimes. We're not bank robbers. We're legitimate men of the theater. Like Houdini, Heubeck, or Robert-Houdin. You understand?"

The agent nodded but did not remove his eyes from the forms. After a long series of pen marks, Matten was asked to place his signature on various documents resulting in receiving a dossier of tickets and a departure date of 21 November, 1960, 6 am sharp.

Matten had arrived in Southampton a day prior to make these arrangements. He also found lodgings in a shanty hotel just off the dockworks. The Russians were infinitely pleased with the rooms, but Matten did not get the same appreciation from the other two. "We shoulda called

Disney to set us up," said Henry Gore in his tough, American accent when he saw the condition of his room. "He'd *never* book us in this fleabag."

Unaffected by the comment, Matten left Gore on the landing and went to have supper with the Russians. Although he did not speak the language, he considered himself closer to the two of them than he ever been to Hecht or Gore.

The Russians had an act in Moscow that was rumored to be quite lively – featuring pistols and ropes. Having contacts with low-level government officials, Peter Disney was able to arrange to fly the men to Antwerp for a single show. After their defection from the Soviet Union, though, it was thought unwise to have them continue their performances, to flaunt their successful escape around the theaters of Western Europe. Matten offered to take them on as assistants to America, just a few shows, where maybe the two Russians might again find footing under their own character.

"We don't like traveling with Russians," mumbled Hecht and Gore in separate conversations before the journey.

Matten couldn't understand this. True, Hecht was German, and it had been only seventeen years since the battle of Stalingrad. Gore, too, considered the cold nature of communism distasteful and distrustful. All this nationalist bunk irritated Matten like sand in shoes. They were, after all, illusionists…performers…artists. Each of them the same under the skin. To exclude or judge based on borders seemed wasteful. A few weeks at sea, and Matten was certain Gore and Hecht would rescind their stuffy manners and suspicious looks. It was only proper for them to try.

The friction with the Russians was only the latest in a series of stabs between the three men. Professional competition was a necessary component for traveling showmen. Especially in magic. There was enormous pressure to improve on illusions and their execution, to invent or re-invent the craft and to try to be original. Theft

and denial fueled and burned many careers in magic. Nothing too bloody had occurred to date. The three had known each other for decades. Each man being as famous as the others helped things. An even keel. The box office receipts weren't tipped to one particular man's favor and their headlining bills were shared by rotation. This was Peter Disney at work. The promoter seemed to like keeping his stables happy. The best way, sometimes, was equanimity.

Not that Anders Matten didn't try to take Disney aside, to lobby that his act was superior, and that *he* should have the spotlight. "I'm the finest, Peter, you know that in your heart." A list of credentials and accomplishments usually followed. "Hecht – pshht – Gore? Good men. Decent sleight-of-hand. Are they stunning? No. Tell me different. You believe it yourself. I admire them. I respect them. But, really, what's disguises, or guessing cards, when compared to what I do? I escape from boxes, from barrels, from crates, from…from locked rooms. The audiences die with suspense. They adore me."

"Your act takes too long to set up sometimes. I've had complaints about the time."

"What? From them? Hecht and Gore?"

"Not just. Others, too."

"But the results!" Matten couldn't believe he had to defend his preparations. There were always rounds of applause far eclipsing his competitors. Maybe, yes, it was the accumulated applause, stored up from twenty-minutes of explanation and rigging, while Gore and Hecht's admirers got small doses, small illusion after small illusion. But isn't it better to have one big battle than a lot of skirmishes? "I think so, I think so," said Matten to deaf ears.

Peter Disney didn't care. Balance. The bill had it. It would remain. "You will continue rotations until I see a change. You're doing well, Anders, you are. And you're young. What are you? Forty? Forty-five? There's still time to make your name. There's still America. Show me something I've never seen before, and I'll reconsider."

Matten had his ticket. Months of lobbying Disney for an American show had paid off. For a few days, Matten was elated at the chance to show his act in New York, Chicago, and San Francisco. He'd be on the same grounds as Harry Houdini. He'd be as famous, maybe moreso.

Then the sabotage.

The ace up Peter Disney's sleeve.

His announcement.

Disney was sending them *all* to America, the three of them plus the two Russians. A test for Matten, but also for the others, to see who would come back alive. Matten thought about jumping ship – a self-financed escape. That would be spectacular. Unheard of. A nice publicity trick for the papers. He'd arrive in New York already a star.

His bank statement put an end to that dream. He had barely enough to buy supplies: ropes, blankets, wax, oil, crating, and chains. And the ocean could be very unpredictable. He didn't want to be eaten by sharks. And it was winter. The water would be freezing.

Matten's only hope was a new trick, a splash in New York so big the momentum it might build would be unstoppable. Dwarfing the other two, separating him once and for all from the mid-level pack of middle-aged mediocrity.

On the eve of their departure, he became incensed that Peter Disney had treated him this way, to think Anders Matten so unable to sustain an audience playing theaters by himself. This was a new territory, these United States. He didn't need Doctor Hecht's or Henry Gore's help with anything.

As the sun set over Southampton dockworks, Anders Matten drank brandy after brandy and watched from the tin roof of the cheap local lodgings. In an hour, it would be dark and he would want to sleep, but he would force himself awake thinking of a trick, a great illusion, a death-defying gamble, anything that could light his way to greatness.

And his time that night would be wasted.

His basic sketches would only be the workingman's drunken tracts, half-inspired, half-torn from the pages of greater escapists. It would be three days out to sea before things would change. And he would discover something extraordinary.

SHIP TO SHORE

Henry Gore and Doctor Ottokar Hecht sat in deck chairs, arms folded, heavy coats pulled around their necks, bracing against the North Atlantic wind. The air, though quite cold, felt good to them after being cloistered inside the Lady Elizabeth's belly.

"Smell that saltwater," remarked Henry Gore as he chewed his toothpick.

Hecht sniffed. "I don't smell anything." He sniffed once more. "That's the deck polish."

"No, no. The sea."

The two men rustled and their chairs squeaked. The wooden slats beneath their bodies buckled and the chains that grounded the furniture rattled in their ties. A few members of the ship's crew passed by, with nods. The two performers returned the gesture.

"What do you think he's planning?" asked Gore.

"Who? Matten?"

"Yes. He's up to something."

Hecht nodded. "I don't doubt it." The German braced against a brush of wind. "But *I'm* planning, as well," he said. "I have new ideas for these shows in New York. I'm going to try something never seen before in the history of disguises."

Gore waited for more.

"Nooo," said the German with a shake of his finger. "I'm not going to tell you what I am planning. That would be a mistake. You will just have to witness it yourself. Let me just say that I will be recognized for this innovation. And I think it would impress even Anders Matten."

Gore laughed a short, machine-gun burst then sat upright, turning his back on his rival. He, too, had a new illusion for New York – one that had taken months in private to perfect. It required a wand, a drape, a fish, a girl from the audience, and, of course, a deck of playing cards. He wished there was more space on the Lady Elizabeth. He wanted to spread out and do a full run. For now, though,

that was impossible. The final execution would have to remain in his head. "New trick," the American snarled, using the word to ruffle Hecht, "Good luck."

"America is a place of reinvention," stated Hecht, shutting his eyes and feigning tranquility. The Atlantic air took his black hair and whipped it, making the man raise his hand to pat it back into place.

Reinvention. Gore considered the word.

Reinvention.

Below decks, Anders Matten continued scrawling in his notepad. He had a problem of weight between his own body and the box he had drawn. Along the borders of his crudely sketched schematic were mathematical calculations – numbers and bars and symbols – X'ed out or half-erased. Rubber shavings littered the small cabin's writing desk and stuck to Matten's palm.

This is maddening! he screamed in his head.

He wanted to use the ship's radio to contact a man in London – a specialist in human factors. The radio, used for only private, important, or official use, was probably locked in the bridge of the ship and inaccessible to passengers.

Just one call, he thought,
and I'd be days ahead in the planning.

He wouldn't want to continue down a path just to be undermined by figures. As it stood now, he would have to lose a quarter of his body weight for the escape to work. True, he was a short and slim man already, but, according to his sketch, he'd be doomed if he didn't weigh significantly less. He must have added wrong.

Yes. That's it. Bad numbers.

He checked his watch. It was 3 in the afternoon.

Throwing on his overcoat and straightening his tie, Matten left the confines of his "luxury" suite (as the lying travel agent had pitched – it was no better than a bunk and table with a few curtains for class.) He squeezed out the hatch and into the corridor. The portals he had admired from the brochure photograph whizzed past his ears as he

strode the practical carpet to the short, metallic stairs, and lifted himself onto the main deck of the Lady Elizabeth.

Hecht and Gore sat chatting in chairs. Matten took pains to avoid them. He had no time for their socializing. It seemed, at times, that those two men were close; he knew, however, that this was just a convenient alliance of like-mindedness. *Horses with blinders*, he thought, and pressed on toward the bridge.

As he rounded the turret, he was intercepted by a mustached and darker-skinned purser with the name SERKIS stitched onto his uniform's pocket. "Excuse me, sir, this area is restricted."

"I need to use the radio," explained Matten. "It's an urgent matter. I have to speak with someone in London."

"I'm sorry, the radio is for ship personnel only. We kin send a telegraph, if you like."

Matten considered this for a moment. His hands padded his trouser pockets, where he had buried the rough drafts of his escape plans. "How long would it take for a reply if I used your telegraph?"

"That depends on the other party, sir. We could have it typed and sent tonight. It would probably reach your party by Monday morning, tomorrow being Sunday. I'd say all tolled you'd have a reply about Wednesday or Thursday."

"That's too long," growled the magician. "I said it's urgent. I've got some figures to go over with a man in London. It's a ten-minute call. I just need your radio."

Serkis bowed his head, shaking it, then took Matten's forearm gently in his fingers. The purser began to move his passenger away from the bridge and back towards the turret. "Perhaps you can discuss it with the captain." He spoke as a father to son; he was using his additional decade to his advantage. Having a thought, the purser cocked his head and asked, "Have you dined with our captain yet?"

Matten shook his head.

"Why don't you give me your name and cabin number. I'll make all the arrangements. Captain Lorber likes to dine with as many passengers as possible on each voyage, but usually has only has the time for twenty or thirty of the first

classers. What class are you in, sir?" Matten began to answer but Serkis interrupted. "Doesn't matter, doesn't matter. I've made you a promise. You've asked to speak with the captain and I shall arrange it. I've been with this ship a quarter-century. I know how to pull a few strings."

"I'm in first class. A luxury suite." Matten felt compelled to answer the question, even when dropped. It was important that this purser not think him a poor beggar wanting to burst upon the bridge and pirate the radio. This solution of asking the captain for his favor seemed to appear too suddenly. Matten sensed a trick, and not the magical kind – the kind that put your off the scent. "Supper with the captain… Yes, that's fine. He can authorize a call to shore, then?"

"He can. He might. But maybe you should write that telegraph as well. Just in case."

The purser was trying to be helpful. Matten didn't want to go too hard on him. And, after all, this was the response he anticipated. Calls to shore were expensive and limited to only the most catastrophic need, or the highest bribe. And he didn't have that kind of money. Not yet.

Matten was shown a pad and pen hanging from a deckhouse light, shielded from the weather by a white steel wall. Gore and Hecht sat steps away. Hecht noticed Matten begin to record his telegraph; the German may have been even able to hear Serkis's and Matten's conversation. No matter. Matten penciled a very broad question in very few words and handed it to the purser, who tucked the message in his uniform pocket along with a two pound fee. "I'll get right on this," he said and tapped his jacket assuringly. "And about dinner: there will be details left under your door within the hour." The two parted company.

Seeing no choice, Matten joined his rivals in the cold deck wind. "I've got a dinner invitation from the captain," he bragged.

"Good for you," answered Gore, snotty.

The three held in silence, the wind picking up and pricking their skins. Soon, one by one, they wandered away in separate directions.

THE CAPTAIN'S FAVORITE STORY

The red-cloth covered table was twice the size of all the others. It could seat twelve around. Matten arrived early and jockeyed his way next to the chair with the largest brace, in the hopes that this specialized brace meant it was, in fact, the captain's regular chair. He heard rumors of a bad back.

As diners arrived, those seated with the captain had a certain uniformity, a certain odor of influence. Taking spaces beside Matten were two older ladies with bird-like hats (which they did not remove for supper.) A white-suited Frenchman with tiny spectacles, an overweight Australian with hairy nostrils, and a lithe red-haired woman in her twenties all arrived shortly thereafter. By the stroke of six, the table was nearly full. Matten could tell everyone had superfluous amounts of money; none were artists; all were luxury class.

In his black suit and wide white tie – a regular outfit for performance – Matten was not as stylish. Those surrounding had clearly tried to best each other with fashion. Matten had only a few options in his closet, and, for this night, he chose simple, workable clothes. He doubted anyone would know that the trousers and jacket could break away and be re-stitched with little effort, that his undershirt was mostly used to spread grease on his torso when trying to extract himself from particularly tight manacles.

By the end of the first course, the captain had not yet arrived. However, neither Henry Gore nor Ottokar Hecht had set foot inside the dining hall, either. For that, Matten was grateful. He didn't want his afternoon brag being turned back on him.

Seated at the farthest quadrant of the hall were Disney's two Russians, Matten's assigned men, who each raised their forks and waved hello. Matten, smiling, waved back with a trill of his fingers. The two seemed to be having the time of their lives. He hadn't had much opportunity to

talk with them lately, being locked in his room these past three days, drafting his schematics, but he would make a point of it tomorrow. Besides, he had better train them a little on his escapes, so customs and immigration authorities in New York wouldn't question if they were genuine assistants to his act, as marked in their papers. The training should go quickly, as they were already familiar with many of the traditional, timeworn techniques through their own Soviet experience.

"Apologies, apologies," said the captain as he entered the perimeter of the table, doffing his cap and smiling with big white teeth. Captain Lorber's crisp blue uniform, with its thin lapels and wide epilates, immediately struck Anders Matten as belonging to a man of power. His frame was impressive, too, standing well above Matten's height and carrying all the authority of his office. He was older than Matten expected, but that didn't matter. The man still had grace. An attending waiter and another ship officer helped Captain Lorber into the high-backed chair and then scurried off to other errands. "I had some routine ship business that ran long," explained the captain. "I hope I haven't missed too much of dinner."

The guests, particularly the women but also the men, launched into a volley of compliments and introductions that lasted the entire second course. When it finally came around to Anders Matten, he simply said that he was a mathematician. His show business pedigree was best left in fog. Besides, if the captain thought he was a low-rent entertainer, the importance of Matten's contacting London might be questioned. This had a second, unintended effect: it stopped the table of socialites from asking him for tricks at the table; he never enjoyed being called on like a circus monkey to perform. Those types of things were more Gore's line anyhow.

"A mathematician? That's impressive," said the captain.

"I'm sure you've met many. On the seas. At dinners."

"I have I have. But I'm always impressed. Numbers were never my strong study." The captain turned to the

other guests at his table. "Not to worry, though. We've got a proper navigator for all the mathematics." (A small, obligated spurt of laughter fell from the others.) To Matten's ears, the captain's voice carried a strange accent, the blend of English working-class pub drinker and American mystery novel detective. There was also a touch of German – the staccato, the precision – along with a bit of the Latin lilt – Italian, or perhaps French. He was a true multi-national, a lifetime of ports creeping into his language. Absorption, thought Matten, the same sponge-like existence he had chosen for himself from touring the continent. A whiskey blend of culture. "I can tell you're from the Netherlands, Mr. Matten."

The magician nodded. "I am. Originally. But I've traveled quite a bit."

"Ever been to New York?"

"No. This is my first time."

The captain asked for a show of hands. Matten was in the minority.

As bits of conversation popped from dining room chairs – interrogation of the captain, mostly, on the workings of the ship – Matten gave careful thought to how he might raise the issue of the radio. *Best to wait until the dinner's end, maybe after a thinning of guests at the table, as some leave for cigars, or air on the deck.* Radio use, and its authorization by the captain, was a request to be made in privacy. Even seated at the man's arm, Matten did not feel comfortable asking the large and officious captain for such a favor. He was conscious of his shortness, of his place at the table, of his tear-away trousers.

The red-haired beauty across the table suddenly spoke up, batting lashes for attention. "Excuse me, Captain. I've heard a rumor and I was wondered if you might confirm it."

"I'll try," he answered as he cut into his well-done filet.

"A friend of mine in New York says your ship…well… that it's haunted."

There was an uncomfortable reaction from those in the circle. Some thought the woman sounded accusing, others

thought she may be joking, and a third, smaller caucus was aware of the implications of haunting.

Captain Lorber took a lengthy pause. He stabbed into the cut morsel of steak, dipped it in juis, and swallowed. After a sip of water, he smiled. "You know, miss, it would be nice to have one dinner on this ship and not talk about haunting."

She leaned forward, not letting go. "So it's *true* then…" The look on her face was positively ravenous.

Matten, always fascinated by apparitions, was genuinely surprised. His face showed it as he said, "I hadn't heard that rumor." If the ticket agent had ever mentioned it, it would have sealed the deal quickly, more than the portals and the reduction of luxury-class costs.

"I used to deny it," said the captain. "Deny everything: that was my policy. And it worked, too. From 1933 to 1952. Don't get me wrong. I wasn't lying. It wasn't a hush-up by the owners. I just didn't consider it real, so why needlessly upset the passengers? Then, eight years ago, we had our answer. The story ran in the English papers. Those passengers who had heard of a ghost, but then stayed in New York where we left them – which I assume is you, miss—" (The redhead nodded.) "…then you probably missed the newspaper stories. It wasn't a ghost. It was a stowaway."

"A stowaway!" said half the table, simultaneously, as if their ears couldn't believe the word.

The captain nodded. "Yes. A simple solution to a complex problem."

"A stowaway? For nineteen years?" Matten had done the calculation quickly, to live up to his mathematical personae. "How is that possible that he wasn't found?"

The red-haired girl began caressing her wine glass. "I want to hear the *whole* sordid tale," she coaxed.

The captain gave a sigh. A thousand times he had told this story. It showed on his face. But the expectant guests around him remained silent, waiting for him to begin, and, even after quickly eyeballing the room for his waiter and his officer, he began to speak, a horse from the gate.

"Apparently, in 1933, the ship played host to a party of orphans from the Whitby Social Home. There were twelve of them, all boys, mostly eastern Europeans and Englanders, all having been placed in the home between the ages of five and nine. A church in America agreed to pay for their passage and to give them homes, out of charity. Someone at Whitby had a connection with the Rockefellers. So I heard told. In the two weeks of the voyage with the children, I paid little attention to who they were or the name of their sponsor."

The Captain looked around the table to see if he was being judged.

"The manifest and the rationale aren't really my charge, you see. I captain the boat. I'm not a ticket agent."

He took an enormous bite of his beef, leaving the table waiting for his chewing to cease.

"Eleven," he continued, cryptically. "Eleven boys landed in America. The last orphan went missing. There was a stir about it, of course. We're not one of the major liner companies, just an offshoot of the more fundamental trade lines – pressed dates from the Congo and the like, hammers from Brazil. The Treasury Association and the local authorities searched the ship and questioned the passengers. We carried two-hundred-forty at the time, plus crew. No one found the boy. It was assumed he had fallen overboard and drowned in the Atlantic Ocean."

The two old ladies in their bird hats gasped.

The captain gestured with his fork. "It's true, it's true. Sounded logical at the time. The ship's not that big. Not that many places to hide. Still. *Where was the boy?* Drowned, said the report. Drowned." The captain put his chin down, in remorse; Matten suspected this part was rehearsed. "The very next trip…strange things started occurring. The most obvious being that half the deck chairs had been tossed overboard. Food stores shrank…only a bit…only by a measure." The captain pinched his fingers together and stalled. "Just enough for the cook to take notice. And then, a month later, there was the leg."

"The leg?" asked the Frenchman.

"In one of the corridors on a lower deck. A passenger claimed to have been kicked in the head as he passed through. When he turned, he saw the lower part of a boy's leg disappear – poof – like a magic trick."

Matten's ears perked and he found himself sitting forward, gripping the ends of the table.

"Around that time, the rumors started. The Lady Elizabeth had herself a ghost! The boy, come back from the deep waters to live amongst the living, to cause us no end of trouble for letting him drown. And, like a gremlin on a bomber, trouble is what we had. He was quite the merry prankster. The boy caused us no end of grief. Never in amounts large enough for bankruptcy, but enough to drive us to distraction. He stole jewelry, only to leave it in the chef's soup. He flooded cabins by dumping buckets through portholes. He stole charts and tucked them in unread novels in the ship's library. He put his handprint in freshly painted walls and dragged mud across newly mopped decks. Oh, I don't really think everything attributed to the boy was really *the boy.* We had a few bad apples in our employ. Every ship has its miscreants. You'd think we had impressed these people to serve! I can tell you, we pay a fair wage. The men and women of the Lady Elizabeth are not slave labor. But this boy…he was like a poison. Many a good sailor left the ship and swore never to come back. Cursed, they called us, all because of these actions."

"Why did the boy stay? I mean, two decades is a very long time," asked a quiet and square-shaped man among those at the table. He had struggled to hear, but now, the captain's table had grown so soft, and all words carried. "Why did the boy not declare himself and get on with his life? Why spend…*decades* causing you misery? Perpetuating this lie?"

The captain snapped his fingers. "Ah ha! Yes. The third question out of my mouth once he had been apprehended. And, although his answer surprised us at the time, it makes complete sense. The boy, as I said, was an orphan – a very troubled child. No father or mother to

model after. Worse yet, his time in the Whitby Social Home had been extraordinarily cruel. He was desperate for escape. Even though he knew he was going to America for adoption and citizenship, all he could expect was more of the same. Violence. Rules. All the authority of an organized society leveraged against him for *failure*. When he came to our ship, he saw an opportunity and he took it. Then, without any learned concept of right and wrong, only a vague understanding of human nature, and his own good will, he began creating his own legend. As the bane of our ship, he had power that he had never before had. Even if his tricks were little pokes and prods, it was enough. He was satisfied. Sometimes, he'd steal a ticket and come out among us, so it wasn't like he was locked away. In fact, he had much more freedom than he ever had on land."

The captain moved back as the plates were cleared and ginger cookies were placed before each of the seated guests, including Matten. The cookies went untouched as the captain finished his story.

"In the end, I understood what kind of man he had become. And he *was* a man. No longer an orphaned boy, he was a man of thirty-one, who had learned languages and skills simply from observing the passengers of this vessel, which he had come to love. The Lady Elizabeth had been his only known address. She was his home. On this, we found a common ground."

"Where's the boy now?"

"Arrested?"

"Is he in jail?"

"Where? England or America?"

The questions came one on top of the other.

Matten tried shush them all. He had the most important question, if they'd only let him ask it.

The captain, though, was prepared for this onslaught. With a bite of his ginger cookie, he said plainly, "The young man died. Took his own life. When he was caught – by a passenger, I might add, a military general protecting his medals from the thief's grasp – the stowaway was questioned and told that authorities were waiting for him

upon arrival in New York. Because the criminal was so slippery, we decided to house him – not in the brig or an available cabin – but instead inside one of the lifeboats, under guard. Faced with leaving the ship, he snapped his neck on the oars." Another bite of the ginger cookie. "We buried him at sea."

A hush came over the table.

Cookies were retrieved, as communion wafers.

Despite the captain's protests, Matten suspected Captain Lorber did, indeed, enjoy this story, the one remarkable legend of his fifty years. The presence of the boy kept two important things in sharp focus: one, that the ship was special, and two, that the captain had solved a two-decade riddle. He had followed the mystery to the end, and it was not a supernatural occurrence after all.

Except…

"I have one more question," began Matten, his words causing starts among the table. "How did he hide? What was his secret? I mean you searched the ship…many times, I'm sure. How could he have gotten away with it?"

"He had help!" inserted the redhead.

"Yes, that, true," agreed the captain calmly. "But there was something else."

"What?" asked the table.

The captain leaned back in his great chair and rubbed his wide stomach. "He claimed he could become…invisible."

LIBRARY MEETING

Anders Matten III left the dinner table positively on fire. He had forgotten all about the ship-to-shore call. More important ideas flickered in his head. What luck! What absolute luck! Of all the ships on the ocean, he had chartered one with a genuine riddle. A riddle that might be cracked to his advantage.

1952. The year the boy had been discovered. It was now eight years later, but there remained a chance. That evening, he combed the entire ship. *I've been with this ship a quarter-century,* the man had said. *I know how to pull a few strings.* That purser, Gordon Serkis. He was Matten's best hope.

Though he couldn't find Gordon Serkis, Matten did stumble upon Henry Gore, who stood with a tailor-made cigarette in his mouth, shuffling a deck of cards, taking-in the night air on the aft of the Lady Elizabeth. "How was your captain's dinner?" he asked with sarcasm. Gore's face changed when Matten didn't provide a quick answer. "Are you all right?"

Matten knew he could be seen straight through – his excitement that obvious. His blood was electrified. He took a deep breath and attempted to explain it away. "Oh, just a bunch of busy-bodies chewing their food and asking a bunch of questions. An evening wasted. I'm terribly angry about the whole thing." He could tell his words not only distracted Gore from the truth, but they gave the American relief at having not been invited to such a stuffy event.

Matten left the card player and kept on his mission.

The purser, the purser.

Another round of the ship and he still didn't have him. He stopped every man in a white coat to explain himself. Special request. The radio. The name of Serkis. Everyone knew the man; one even remembered that Serkis was off duty and had the night free. That meant he wasn't at his post. He could be in his rooms, or anywhere for that matter. *Sometimes he reads in the library,* suggested the

last boy, donning his cap as he fled around a corner to waiting duties.

The library, a below-decks approximation of home comforts, was unlocked, and Matten entered to find two tourists scanning pulp mysteries while seated in fluffy chairs. The gently rocking ship, the lamplights, made the room flutter. The room was bigger than a luxury cabin, but not by much, and the four packed shelves of books amplified the tightness. Standing short, Matten ducked beneath one of the swinging lamps and stood before the tourists.

The first man looked up from his novel, then back down again.

The second man did as Matten had hoped: discovered that three in that tiny room were too many, and exited.

Matten, at the first shelf, began removing the books in a methodical order. Starting from the upper left hand corner, he fanned a book's pages, and then replaced it. He did the same to a second, then a third, then a fourth. After nearly two-dozen books, Matten turned to see the remaining tourist staring at him. This behavior *did* seem unusual. This, too, had the desired affect, as after a few more books, the second man, too, left the library.

Alone, Matten continued his work. He was searching for evidence. If he couldn't find the purser, then the books would have to do. The captain mentioned charts stuffed in pages. One of the boy's tricks. Maybe, just maybe, there has been something undiscovered. A clue, perhaps.

The first shelf finished, Matten moved to the second, hoping for better results.

At the middle pages of the second book, a new body entered the library.

Gordon Serkis, out of uniform.

Matten froze stiff, the book still open. Serkis entered with apologies. "Pardon me. I came for something to read. Oh–" The purser's face changed. He became immediately friendly. "Sorry, sir. I didn't recognize you. I sent that

telegraph of yours. Didja get a chance to speak with Captain Lorber over dinner?"

Matten slowly nodded. "Yes. Yes I did."

"Did he authorize you to use the radio?"

"No."

Serkis frowned. "Well, don't let it worry you," he said easily and entered a few steps more. As he stood above the shorter Dutchman, he clapped Matten gently on the coat sleeve. "You should have a response to your telegraph straight away. The moment an answer is in my hands, it will be in yours." Serkis then began the work of finding something to read. He surveyed the shelves.

Matten remained expressionless.

The awkward moment passed, a snake momentarily eyeing a mouse.

"How long have you be on this ship?" Matten asked Gordon Serkis.

The purser gave a laughing nod. "Yah, know what yer thinkin'. I've read about every book in here over the years. I'm on the second go. Stories I mighta forgotten."

"I've got a story for you," began Matten, with deliberation. "It's about an invisible boy."

Serkis smiled. "Captain tell his story again, aye? Yah, he loves that one."

"Is it true?"

Head to the side, Serkis nodded. "It is."

"So how long? How many years?"

"Me? Since 1931."

"That's a long time on one ship."

"Ya. But this isn't an ordinary ship, is it?"

"No. I suppose not. Mr. Serkis, what do you find so…special about it?"

"Everything," he shrugged. "It's my home."

"That's what that boy said, wasn't it? Before he killed himself."

Serkis turned his eyes back to the bookshelves. "I don't know anything about that." He angled his back to Matten, as if to indicate that the conversation was now over.

Matten gave an estimate: the man was taller, broader than he remembered from earlier on the deck. A sailor's build? Thumbs hitched in his trouser pockets, Matten noted no calluses or visible veins.

"You see," began Matten, "I desire a first-hand account. Are there others that were here in 1952, or throughout the years of the boy? I'd be curious. The captain tells a good tale of the capture, but…well…there's more to the story, isn't there?"

Serkis turned on his heel. "Are you inferrin' something?"

Matten gestured to the books along the wall, their disturbed shelving. "What's in these books?"

"I don't understand."

"You came in here and I was looking for you. That's odd, isn't it? How did you know I was looking for you?"

"Looking for me? I didn't know—"

"You did. You did. Have you been following me? You wanted to stop me from finding something, didn't you?" The purser held his ground, said nothing. "Because, Mr. Serkis, as I've wandered these decks to seek you out, I've had the strangest feeling…that I was being watched." Serkis moved a step closer. It may have been an attempt to corner, to frighten, by narrowing the gap between the two men. Or, perhaps, it was to free a space for the door. But where was there to run on a ship – out to sea? One could not go very far. "The captain concluded that the stowaway boy had a helper. You've got a long history with the ship—"

"I'm not bloody listening to this!" Serkis's protest preceded a push for the door to the library.

Matten grabbed the man's arm. Rather than escalate the mood, Matten put on a softer face. He paused and let the true desperation of his situation come into his character. "Look. You're my *only* hope. Maybe it's not you who helped the boy. Something tells me it's you, but I don't know why. I just look into your face and I feel there's a connection. That you could help me – the way you did with the ship-to-shore. Now the captain said that the boy could make himself *invisible*."

Through this, Serkis's face did not change, but he also didn't run off. Matten kept fingers crossed that no one would invade the library and break this moment.

"My name," he continued, "is Anders Matten. I'm an escape artist, like my father was, like *his* father was. We're a family of practitioners of the last remaining *wonder* in this *wicked* world. But I'm desperate. I must do something big to make my name or I'm finished. Myself and two other magicians are about to land in America. If I don't concoct something *brilliant* in these two weeks, my reputation will remain as it stands today – tired; one of the crowd; unspectacular. All I need…is an advantage." Matten dropped his grip from Serkis's arm. "If you know *anything* about how this boy made himself invisible, you should tell me. And, because of my trade, you know that I will never tell a soul. I'm a magician. An artist. My steps remain a secret. Always."

Serkis paused, considering the offer.

Very slowly, as if materializing through fog, a sly grin appeared on the purser's face. At first, Matten had no idea how to read it. Was this a revelation? He expected a wink to follow. Instead he got two raised, clipped fingers.

Serkis moved his right hand up towards his face. With a practiced and exact lift, he inserted two fingers beneath the skin of his chin, and then stopped.

Matten's nose went inward in disgust.

Serkis continued to peel away the outer shell, just to the chin, the stubble and moustache. Letting go, he left the surface intact. Now, as if for the first time, Matten zoomed in on Serkis's bushy dark eyebrows and receding hairline, the sideburns and ears, until, it was finally revealed not to be Gordon Serkis at all, but instead…

"Ein guter magischer. Ist er nicht, mein freund?"

Doctor Ottokar Hecht.

The smiling doctor registered the shock on his rival's face, the twisted anger and betrayal.

"So it's *invisibility* you're after?" nodded the doctor, letting his natural German accent cloud back into his voice. "There's a secret about, is there, my friend?"

The doctor paused, took a reckoning: Matten's face morphed in a way he did not expect. The escape artist was not amused. He wore instead a colder emotion.

"What's the matter, Matten?" goaded Doctor Hecht. "Afraid I'll find it first?"

"Get out of here," the Dutchman replied between teeth.

Soon, Matten was alone with his empty books. Betrayed. Destroyed. Finished.

THE RUSSIANS

He was stuck in glue. Minutes passed before his legs could move. He reviewed his memories of the captain's table, the dinner guests. Had Hecht been the oafish banker with the small glasses, or the Frenchman? Or perhaps one of the ladies? Hecht had inserted himself; paranoid thoughts swam in Matten's confused head. He saw the face of Hecht on every passenger – in wigs, in makeup, in greasepaint. This was the lowest form of espionage, to shadow and steal in a profession that, until that moment, Anders Matten had considered honorable. Of course there were transgressions – how else did commonalities and combinations get passed from one magician to another? But *this*? Had he ever been guilty of *this*? He had taken pages from the book of Harry Houdini, but he had never deliberately lied about his identity in order to gain access. Never. Doctor Hecht had gone too far.

Even if Matten now found the real Gordon Serkis and learned the secrets of the invisible boy, where would be the guarantees that Hecht, or Gore, or anyone else, wouldn't rob his purse? Matten still had hopes of finding Serkis, but, admittedly, some of the flame had been doused by the reality of keeping things under lock and key. Now *two* people knew of the connection between invisibility and the crewmember – Hecht and Matten. And, also, maybe there were fifty more on the ship – financiers, artists, and circus folk, anyone with an interest in the ship's legend. Matten was outgunned, and he was angry about it.

Unstitching himself, the Dutchman went like a torpedo from the library door and shot off down the corridor. He didn't precisely know his destination. Pummeling Hecht seemed a good, immediate course. He should have put a fist into the man's face the second he removed Serkis's mustache. A wiser route might have been to seek out the captain and have Hecht arrested – some pretense of protocol, of spying on the captain's affairs. But was sitting uninvited at a dinner table really a crime? Halfway to deciding on a course, he was steered a new direction.

Coming at him from the end of the ship's second deck corridor were the two Russians. They both had their arms over each other's warm-coated shoulders and were laughing in a faltering, closed-eye way. They nearly collided with Matten on the carpet.

"Mr. Matten!" both Russians shouted simultaneously. They were drunk from dinner, Matten could tell. Red wine stains dabbled the lapels of the shorter one, who said, "Drink!" and corralled the escape artist in between him and his comrade.

Matten was swept along before he could object. "Where are we going?" he asked, but the two men just smiled.

A few turns and a few staircases, the three arrived at the oval door of the Russian's third-class cabin. Matten was shoved inside but with friendly and rough regard.

In seconds, both Russians had twisted off tops to two casks of vodka hidden in their bed linens. They smashed the metal containers together and took heavy slugs before the taller one handed his to Matten, who obliged them with a hesitant gulp. As the heat settled in his stomach, Matten said, "You know, gentleman, I don't even know your names."

"Tom," said the short one.

"Jerry," said the round one.

"Those aren't very Russian," remarked Matten through another sip.

"The mouse!" said Jerry, broken-throated, with a point.

"Yes, I'm familiar," replied Matten.

"The cat!" said Tom, unnecessarily.

Matten nodded once more.

As they settled in the cabin, and continued to trade slugs from the flasks, Matten began to get a new picture of these men. Both were on the small side, though there was a slight difference in height; both had a moderate English vocabulary; both were good friends, excited for their future, and grateful to Peter Disney – all as Matten expected. However, a new color came into their faces. These men

were slightly devious, devilish, potential troublemakers. It may have been the wine and vodka, in combination with their high spirits, but a deeper vein was now exposed: a danger, not for Matten or his safety, but for pre-designed order.

In a haze of drink, Matten told them the story of Doctor Hecht and his disguise at the dinner table. He omitted the library, the invisible boy.

"Hecht is a bad man," said Jerry plainly.

"And not because he is a German," added Tom, in a quiet voice.

"I don't like him either," agreed Matten. "But my reasons might be different from yours. What don't you like about him?"

"He's…" Jerry struggled with the word. "Too hungry," he said at last.

Matten thought he misused the word. The Russian had meant something other than 'hungry.' Desperate perhaps. But wasn't Matten also desperate? Jerry the Russian had to have meant some other adjective – cruel, deceitful, traitorous. Masters of disguise were often ripe with illegal intent, at least in Matten's experience. But as a drunken minute passed, he realized that Jerry had said the very thing, the word that not only most defined the actions of Ottokar Hecht, but also drilled to why Matten should not be taking Hecht's breach of conduct lightly. Hungry was how Matten had characterized his own first week on the *Lady Elizabeth*. But there's a difference between the hunger to reinvent one's career (as in Matten's case), and to willfully undercut the competition by exploiting your talent for metamorphosis. To assume the form of Gordon Serkis, even if the intention was preservation of the status quo, was, indeed, a hungry move, and one that again, as it had the moment it occurred, turned Matten cold as winter steel.

"I should confront him!" he declared to the Russians, his internal thoughts announced.

A silence followed, then the last polish of the flasks.

"We will go with you," agreed Tom, standing.

"No. I'll do it myself."

Steeled by the alcohol, Matten lifted himself up from his small cabin chair. He moved his fingers through his hair and thanked the two Russians. He liked them more now, understood them better, for they had given him a great insight that changed him from anger to action. This could be fixed if he acted quickly. He had to find the good doctor…

VODKA

Only forty minutes had passed since the exchange in the library. Matten thought his watch had stopped, but, when checked against the ship's clocks (displayed in the main stairs and reading three time zones, including New York's), it proved accurate.

The vodka had gone to his head. Once out in the corridor, he felt weak knees and dizziness. No matter – he would finish his mission. There wasn't much time.

He started by knocking on the door to Hecht's cabin. No one answered. He moved to the dining hall, then the games room, then onto the promenade. No Hecht. After a hurried check of the three cabin levels of the ship, he moved out onto the chilly deck of the Lady Elizabeth.

The sun had now set over the horizon. Only the bulbs hanging from the ship's smokestack gave light. In the center, a huddle of passengers took the air and stamped their feet. Near the lifeboats, blue-coated workmen adjusted the cranks of the lines and dusted the railings – the last of the day's duties. Anders Matten avoided them all and, like a lecher, hugged his coat around his chin and ears, searching.

Turning past the main deck and onto the aft deck, the crowds fizzled; this was isolation, with only the haunting early winter puffs of North Atlantic wind to keep him company. The lighting was also dimmer, as the lamps, hung in the aft watchtower, sprayed just over the starboard side. Matten wrapped his gloved hand onto the black-painted railing and eased himself closer and closer, as a dog on a track, until he came upon his man.

Hecht stood alone on the tip of the boards. He still wore Gordon Serkis's clothes and face. When the man turned, hearing Matten's approach on the scrubbed boards of the deck, Matten saw that same smug expression on Hecht's face, the same one witnessed when the man left the library.

"Hello," said the doctor, blowing a puff of breath out between his lips, only to have it come back on him in the wind.

"I've been looking for you," said Matten simply and moved within steps of his saboteur.

"You have?"

"Of course. We have unfinished business."

Hecht stamped the heels of his hard black shoes. "Unfinished business?"

Suddenly, Matten grabbed tight hold of both lapels of the purser's uniform. He put his foot into Hecht's right kneecap, sending the man off balance. Lifting with one arm and shoving with the other, Matten hoisted his villain up and onto the railing. The adrenaline, the attack, gave him strength, but even as he made the move, so fluid in his head but untested until now, Matten began to question. *No time for doubts* spat his mind, telling him to get busy.

"Keep quiet or I'll kill you!" said the Dutchman.

Panic flooded Hecht's face; his cheeks turned bright red in the bluster.

"It's mine," shoved Matten, "It's mine! So you got it out of me through trickery, so what? Invisibility is *my* illusion and I'm not going to let you steal it!"

Hecht teetered on the railing and Matten had to rewrap his fingers around the man's side, under his arms, to reinstate his grip.

"Let me go!" he shouted.

"Shut up. Shut up or I'll *drop* you."

Hecht's eyes went the water below. Hearing the heavy, motorized chugging of the ship's propellers against the waves, the danger of his position burned into his body. He did not struggle or cry out, but turned again to face his attacker. "Invisibility…" Hecht said, resigned, as if caught by the police and being forced to confess.

Matten shook him once more. "It's mine! I'm going to find that purser and learn it and you'd better not interfere with me. Go discover your own magic, you thief! Or I'll tell the world about–"

"The purser?" The word dumbed the man held on the rail.

In an instant, the vodka cleared from Matten's brain, his situation crystallizing, his doubts tugging his arms like waiting children.

This was *not* Doctor Hecht!

This was the original, the only, the singular *Gordon Serkis*. He was smaller than the doctor, his skin beneath the chin intact, and, most importantly, his face a confused mass of colliding emotions. *Why is this man attacking me,* it says, *I only tried to send a telegram for him.* Realizing what he had done, Matten did a natural defense: he began to let his fingers slip from Serkis's white coat. He would stop his insane, drunken threats and pull the man down; he would apologize; he would flee the deck before anyone could convict him of a crime. He would. He would. But he didn't.

The grip removed, Serkis slipped on the railing, losing his balance. Matten's arm went out, but their fingers passed without connecting. Instead, Matten caught the man's lapel and, easily, the coat came off into his hands. Over the side, Serkis spilled out of his garment and plunged toward the icy waters of the North Atlantic.

"No!" cried Matten, but it did no good.

Serkis's body vanished in the propeller's white caps and never came up.

Matten spun from the railing, still holding the purser's coat in both hands. From inside the lining, the inner pocket,

a small notebook
fell
out onto the deck.

It skittered towards the aft turret, lodging itself underneath.

When Matten looked up again, he saw the horrified face of Henry Gore staring directly at him. As witness.

"What have you done?" Gore asked in a quavering voice.

Matten didn't answer. Silence held between the two.

Laughter came from the main deck. Both men heard it and turned, hearts leaping.

When it was clear they would stay in isolation, Gore whispered another question. "Why did you kill him?"

Matten took a step forward; Gore took a step back. "I – I didn't mean to. I thought he was someone else." Matten again went to the rail and shot a glance over the side. There was no saving the purser, even if he had survived the fall he would have drowned in the wake. The ship was going too fast. And it was night. The man was dead. Matten had killed him. When Matten's eyes returned to the deck, Gore had fled. "I didn't mean to do it," Matten said to no one before disposing of Serkis's coat over the side, and retrieving the dropped notebook from under the turret.

FIRST EXPERIMENT

Henry Gore returned to his room, frazzled. As a witness to a crime, he had an obligation to report it to the captain. Anders Matten would be restricted to his cabin and arrested when they arrived in New York. There would be a trial, and Gore would be involved. This was terrible news.

Gore, just like the others, had hoped to start fresh in the United States, to not be burdened by the repetition of his shows for nonplussed European houses. America was the land of cards, of Old West poker games and mob-run casinos. It was also his home. He shouldn't have left it. If he had stayed on the original tour of his youth, those tiny stages of the Orpheum Circuit, where he was first discovered, and had not accepted the offer of a European relocation, Henry Gore, Master Of Cards, may have been as famous as Hofzinser.

He locked the door to his cabin and huddled on the cot, frowning. He would give himself thirty minutes to think things through. No more, no less. Less might mean a rash betrayal, another, better idea coming to him in the midst of an interrogation with authorities. Murder doesn't happen every day (or does it?). Gore's mind worked softer and more mechanically than other people's. Perhaps there was a better solution. It was only thirty minutes. And it's not like the killer could escape. The ship was still two days voyage from New York. Unless Anders Matten was willing to throw himself to the sharks, there wasn't much the man could do. Except…

Gore had a momentary pause, thinking of his own well being, how his own life might be in danger. He steeled his nerves. Thirty minutes. If a better idea did not present itself, he was off to the captain. Thirty minutes.

Anders Matten, who did not know of his thirty-minute reprieve, considered himself to have only a few minutes before his arrest. The dropped notebook in his hand, he raced to his only allies, the two Russians – Tom and Jerry.

When he knocked on their cabin door, they did not answer. He pounded harder until, after what seemed like hours, Tom answered the door, bleary. Matten could see Jerry asleep through the crack of the door, arms splayed, face down. The men had not lasted much beyond his exit. "Mr. Matten!" said Tom, only with less enthusiasm than in their first encounter in the corridor.

"I need your help," said Matten and pushed his way past, closing the door behind them. "I've – I've killed a member of the crew. By accident. Over the railing. He fell or I pushed him, I'm not sure which. Do you understand me? There's been a witness. Henry Gore. He's probably talking to the captain now. You've got to hide me. Do you understand?"

Tom shook Jerry awake. The two had Matten repeat his story, one syllable at a time. The seriousness of things settled into their understanding. Seated on their bunks, the men looked to their shoes.

"You should not have vodka," nodded Jerry in a last, least helpful attempt at hindsight.

Matten nodded. "Yes. Never, ever again."

From his pocket, Matten retrieved Serkis's notebook. He flipped to a page. Inside was a roughly drawn diagram of a room. Matten guessed it to be the wheelhouse, as the main navigational elements were placed in the diagram as he had seem them, from when he inquired of a ship-to-shore call. Marked around the edges of the room, leading out, were slash marks and lines.

He turned the pages.

Here was a diagram of the main deck, obvious by its shuffleboard designs and deck chairs. Again, the slash marks and lines were present, but only through the center, the main structures including, again, the wheelhouse, this time marked with the initials WH. From the side portal of the wheelhouse, the lines originated (or ended, depending on perspective.) Matten turned back to the wheelhouse diagram and matched the exit point of the slashes with their entrance again onto the main deck. Same portal.

"We have pistols," said Tom.

"What?" replied Matten, absent. He flipped more pages of the notebook. The dining hall. The first level corridor. The coal room. Each page of the notebook was a room of the ship.

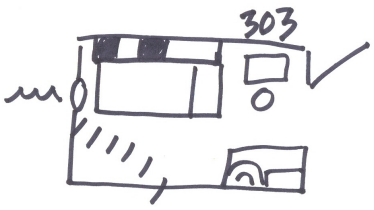
"Two pistols," said Tom. "From the act."

Matten looked up. "Shoot my way out? I don't think so." The final quarter of the notebook was diagrams of the individual rooms. They were in random sequence, numbers jumping from suite 102 on the first class level, to cabin 333 on the third class level, and so on. "What's your room number?" he asked the Russians.

Tom and Jerry replied together: "Three zero three."

It took a minute, but he found the page.

The map.



Face out, he showed the diagram to Tom and Jerry. "Your room," he said plainly. When the Russians returned strange looks, he explained the details. "This book was in the coat of the man I murdered." *The man I murdered.* The phrase stuck in between Matten's throat and wouldn't leave.

Matten stood upright. He went to the portal, holding the diagram out at arm's length in front of him. With his opposite finger, Matten indicated the diagramed objects. "This is your door. This – your beds, stacked, see? Your washroom. This circle is the chair where I just sat, the rectangle the desk in front. This…this must be the portal." Matten knelt on one knee.

Tom moved out of his way, but Jerry began to crowd him. The Russian watched as Matten examined the hard, gray-painted floor of the cabin with his nail. Dissatisfied, he rose up.

"Hmmm, maybe not the floor, but the ceiling." He closed the notebook and waved it once before throwing it on

the bed. "We need three dimensional!" he joked, thinking of his own escape artist diagrams, the depth of field and measurement markings giving an exact picture of how any contraption should be built. The scrawls in Serkis's notebook were the crudest maps he had ever seen – a child's. "Give me that chair," he said, "I'm too short to reach the ceiling."

Tom kicked the legs of the chair up into his hands and dropped the chair down again in front of Matten. It was the smooth motion of a magician, accustomed to prop-chairs and their speedy removal from the stage.

Gingerly, because the cabin was so tight, Matten moved from the bed to the chair. He raised both his arms to the ceiling. As with the floor, he began to move his nails along the plane, feeling around for clues. A moment passed. He began to get dizzy, from the vodka, still present, and his height above the room. He looked down on the two Russians, who eagerly kept watch of his progress.

Suddenly! He slipped!

Both Tom and Jerry threw out their arms to catch him. Matten flailed his hands up to balance again on the chair. His right hand caught on something, a hook of some kind, which bowed with the weight of his body.

"Mr. Matten! Your hand!" cried Tom, arms encircling Matten's legs. His eyes provided emphasized the spot above the Dutchman's head.

Up, Matten saw that the tips of his fingers were gone, chopped off, as if by some horrible machine accident. Only there was no blood, and, he noted quickly and with great relief, no pain. He wiggled his affected fingers. With a bit of pressure, he could draw his arm closer to his body. Slowly, so as not to cause further trouble, he withdrew. He saw his fingers appear once more, one centimeter at a time. For confirmation, he looked to Tom and Jerry. Their mouths fell open. Before they could comment, Matten had once more thrown his hand into the air, planting it again up to the wrist, invisible.

It was as if his hand went through the ceiling and vanished. However, as Matten was certain, the ceiling was

still ten inches from his touch, even when standing on the chair.

With the extra support of his men, Matten no longer feared falling from the chair. "Lift me up by my legs," he commanded, and they obeyed, Tom on his right, Jerry on his left. With his hair grazing the ceiling, Matten continued to move his hand in and out of the marked area.

He seemed to be opening the gap wider and wider, as if he had torn a fabric, created a hole. Soon he had his arm in up to his elbow, completely unharmed, and absolutely invisible.

"I found it!" he exclaimed. "I've found it!"

With both hands, palms touching, he spread the passageway like a whaler opening a dead beast's stomach. Tom and Jerry, sensing Matten's aims, helped inch him up more and more into the widening gap until he had disappeared up to his waist, and they lost their grip.

"I've got it, boys," said Matten proudly, although looking slightly indignant, hanging in midair with his trousers twisted from the struggle.

He was inside of some sort of tunnel. A cool breeze blew through and he could see down each end only a few paces. The light from cabin 303 gave the tunnel a luminescence, but that stopped at the wall, where the tunnel seemed to continue into the adjoining cabin. "Gentleman," he called back, "I'm going to need a flashlight."

SECOND EXPERIMENT

HIDDEN MAPS

Anders Matten returned elated.

Equipped with a box light from Tom's knapsack (normally used for dim backstages,) Matten plowed his way into the gap and through his new discovery. The Lady Elizabeth was apparently covered in small tunnels, cutting through every room. He had been to the captain's quarters, the crew's mess hall, the bilge room, through the cabins of two attractive ladies, along the outside corridor, and finally, back to room 303.

The experiment had been an unqualified success. No one saw him, no one remarked, no one cried out, yet there he was the whole time, right in front of them, or above them, stuck to the ceilings and walls like a butterfly in a cocoon.

One tunnel split the corridor in half and, while inside, Matten sensed he was vulnerable. His box light, shining, might be seen. The lighting in the corridor was slightly less than the cabins or the mess hall; the ratio might be his undoing. However, a porter careened right through the corridor (and right through him) without ever noticing a thing.

Matten was completely protected by the tunnel.

He did, at times, have a certain sense of dislocation or claustrophobia, but those abated. As an escape artist, he was quite used to these sensations. With some practice, the snake-like structure of the tunnels, and his need to spend occasions upside down, would be mastered. He also noted, with a smile, that being a small man had helped. It was the same with his illusions. His stature and his flexibility all spelled success. He remembered Gordon Serkis, about his same height, and thought about Doctor Hecht, a head taller, and wondered how the good doctor might get along. Besides, Hecht and Gore weren't used to escape artistry. Gore was a card man; Hecht wore mustaches. Matten had the clear advantage.

He considered all this as his two new friends helped him back down from his perch. Tom and Jerry were his

same build, maybe broader in the shoulders, but the materials of the tunnels seemed flexible, as if they would hold men their size. "It's tunnels," he explained to his new friends.

The Russians looked to each other.

"It's quite remarkable. You are completely invisible when inside of one. And they're all over the ship, like vents. Like a second set of air ducts. Do you understand?" Matten handed the box light back to Tom. "If there's light in a room, you don't need it, but if someone's shut out the light, you can use your own. It won't shine through, but it will light the way."

Tom switched the flashlight on and off again. He advanced to the cabin's corner, as if he might just ask for a lift up into the tunnel himself, but stopped. Matten was thankful. He wasn't quite ready to share.

"They seem quite safe, but I need to do more experiments."

This is how the boy hid, thought Matten. *He could have stowed away for years more if he hadn't been caught stealing.* Matten again lifted Serkis's notebook from the bed, unmoved since he tossed it there. After a quick scan, his thought was confirmed. No tunnels in the lifeboats, the place the boy had been imprisoned. *The boy knew he was caught, was going to be thrown off his beloved ship. He had no choice but suicide. Or complete surrender.*

"Who made these tunnels?" asked Jerry, dismayed.

Matten shrugged. "I assume they were made the same time as the ship. They're practically interwoven with the architecture." Tom and Jerry were confused. Matten spent a minute rephrasing until they understood. "Quite a trick, isn't it?" Matten said at last.

"The best!" Tom was now getting very excited.

"There has to be more of them," said Jerry, "these tunnels. Maybe on other boats."

Matten hadn't considered this. It seemed possible. A builder doesn't make just one boat; he'd go bankrupt. He'd make a fleet. "You are probably right," he agreed with a smile. This information brought about a new set of

problems for Matten. He couldn't just perform his invisibility trick on ships, could he? No. To reach the audiences he desired, he'd need theaters. He supposed tunnels could exist elsewhere, but how would he find them? He had no other maps than these in his stolen notebook. And these were just for one ship. There were no other "invisible boys" keeping records and legends alive, aided by long-lived crewmembers anxious to keep a secret safe for so many decades.

At "long-lived" his thoughts choked.

There was one other sticking problem.

He was now a murderer – though accidentally.

And Henry Gore. What to do about him.

KEEPING SECRETS SAFE

Thirty minutes were up. In fact, an hour had elapsed. Gore, seated at the foot of his bed, still wrapped in his winter coat, had taken that long to make up his mind. He would have to speak with the captain. If he didn't, and soon, he might be considered an accessory to the crime.

Matten's made his choice for murder – God knows his reasons – but that shouldn't kill my career, he rationalized.

As he lifted up, another horrible thought entered his mind. The danger. What if Anders Matten waited outside of the cabin door, ready to strike? Doctor Hecht was billeted next door. He should enlist the man for protection. Two are better than one. Yes.

His plans were set.

Cautiously, Gore unlatched the door to his cabin and poked his head out into the corridor. No one. One foot over the breach, he stepped quietly sideways until reaching Hecht's door. The doctor answered after only two knocks.

"Yes, Henry?"

"I saw Anders Matten throw someone overboard." Gore thought it best to be complete, clear, and accurate. He was practicing for Captain Lorber. However, this news had the opposite of his intended impact. The clinical facts should have produced a clinical response. Instead, only a confused squint from the good doctor. "It's true," pressed Gore, this time more flustered, "about an hour ago. I've been deciding what to – oh, drat, do you think I'm in trouble for waiting? – damn, I've, look, I need help, and he might be dangerous and—"

Hecht clamped his hand over Gore's mouth. "Shhh. I knew it would come to this." He gently dragged Gore into his cabin, with a roll of eyes, in a manner that so surprised Henry Gore that he had no choice but to obey.

Once the cabin door was shut and both men were seated in the opposite two chairs of the first class cabin (much wider and more comfortable than the Russians berths), Doctor Hecht removed his hand from Henry Gore's mouth. "Whom did he kill?" he asked, with sadness.

"I don't know. Some crewmember. I'd seen the guy around, ya know. On deck. I'm not sure of his name."

"Was it the purser?"

"The purser? I think. Maybe. Why? Why would he kill the purser?"

Hecht paused. He had a whiskey glass next to him on his writing desk. Raising it up, he took a long swig. When he returned it to the blotter, he picked up a glued moustache, flopping like a worm in his pinch. "He thought it was me."

Henry Gore's face went pale.

"I met Matten in the library when I was disguised as this purser. I wanted to know what he was up to. All his planning. He had a new act. He was going to debut something in America and make us look foolish. I was just doing a little reconnaissance."

"Did he say what he was working on?"

"No," answered Hecht, shaking his head. Lying.

"Well he obviously took the purser's intrusion very seriously!" Henry Gore stamped his feet as he spoke, for emphasis. The card player would never stoop to such tactics as Hecht. Gore had plans, too; he desired greatness; but to purposefully trip up a fellow magician...that was wrong. He let the disgust show on his face. "Murder!" he scoffed. "What kind of danger have you put us all in, Otto?"

"Henry," he defended, "if he is willing to kill for his secret, don't you think it's a very important one?" This kept Gore silent for a few seconds. "Let's consider another plan. How about we keep it to ourselves. This knowledge. Just for a while. If it seems that Anders knows something, and he won't tell us, then we'll just have to tell the authorities about his encounter with Mr. Serkis. Won't we?"

"Blackmail him." Gore could see the plan.

"In a way."

"What do you mean 'in a way'? That's *blackmail*. Tell us what he's onto, or we turn him in. Plain and simple *blackmail*."

Hecht didn't agree, and shook his head slowly. He met Gore's eyes with a hard, callused stare.

The decision before Gore was obvious: choose a side – justice (to turn Matten into the captain without delay) or personal advantage (wait and see how the cards lay.) As throughout his life, Henry Gore went with the cards. He had already waited an hour and still stung from the thought of a long trial or possible deportation for them all.

"Okay, Doctor," he said with a sigh. "I say we give it until tomorrow. Let's find Anders tonight and if he balks, then it's the brig, or wherever they hold murderers on this ship. But if he won't tell by New York, I have to come clean. No one will buy my story if I delay." Gore leaned back in his chair. The doctor nodded agreement. "Either way," sighed Gore, "Anders Matten is history."

A piece of paper fluttered from the ceiling and into Henry Gore's lap.

Both men looked up then down.

Unfolding the paper, Gore began to read the handwritten note:

> TRAITORS,
> it said in capital letters.

Hecht and Gore stood quickly. They looked up to the cabin's wood ceiling, the beveled borders, and the lamps. Hecht reached his arm and touched the warm bottom of the burning light. They opened the door and looked for anyone in the corridor, standing with a mechanism, a hook, anything. But the corridor was empty.

When they returned to the center of the cabin, a second note had apparently dropped from the sky and waited patiently on the round rug.

> YOU'LL NEVER FIND ME NOW.

Hecht's mind reached back to the dinner, the library, all that he thought possible in the world of magic, all that he didn't want to share with Henry Gore. But he still let the word's slip. "He's invisible," diagnosed the doctor and then added, with amazement. "It works."

* * *

Two days until New York Harbor.

The Lady Elizabeth crashed through heavy storms, the worst seen in five years. The ship's crew was barely able to handle the requests for anti-nauseams and seltzers. The passengers were barred from the main deck and had to make due with the crowded dining hall, normally only seating forty diners at the maximum, now stretched to over sixty stranded wanderers, those not made sick from the waves of the ocean, those still willing to fight. Card games became the preferred way to pass the time. Poker. High fives. Gin. Bridge. Anything with a wager. The captain turned a blind eye to the gambling; it was easier than upsetting further the already-inconvenienced manifest.

At each pass through the dining hall, Henry Gore eyed the decks of cards as they were cut, and wished he could just sit down and *play.* It would have been fun to sail into America with a full house and a stack of change spilled out on the tablecloth in front of him.

But he wasn't allowed. Hecht had set him on a mission.

Gore spent hours combing the premises for any trace of Anders Matten III. The two Russians had disappeared, too. They were in collusion, the master and his assistants. A little army was forming and Henry Gore didn't like it one bit.

The dark skies and lightning flashes riled his mood. He, too, had a sour stomach from all this movement and wanted badly to just lay down. But it was impossible. However he was doing it, Matten was keeping he and Doctor Hecht wide-awake. Gore's nightstand glass of water had been dumped over his head; a bag of marbles dropped from the sky one at a time, one at each moment of lucid dreams. He was being robbed of his sleep and, subsequently, his rational thought. Flashes of light crowded the corners of his eyes and, at a half-day's journey from New York, he counted thirty-six hours without sleep.

Doctor Hecht didn't fare much better. He combed the inner chambers of the ship, including the boiler room, where he was escorted away from the flames for his own safety by well-meaning but distracting shovel men; he stole a key to the dead purser's room and rifled his belongings, searching for any evidence of how Matten's trick was done; and he, too, was kept awake by annoyances until his nerves became barbed wire.

If the two men passed each other during their searches, they were as likely to snap as smile.

Captain Lorber did, in fact, notice these two and their suspicious activities. A German and an American, acting so odd, roaming his ship. It made him seek out the passenger manifest to confirm their professions: "performer," read Ottokar Hecht's; "playing card illusionist," read Henry Gore's. That sounded like fiction to Lorber's ears. By the time he decided on a radio call to the Treasury Association ticket offices for further information, another squall had hit the Lady Elizabeth, this one so hard that his investigation was forgotten.

Just two hours from harbor, a steward came to the captain's station in the wheelhouse and announced that a crewmember was missing.

"Who?"

"Purser Gordon Serkis, Captain."

"Serkis? Since when?"

"We're not sure, Captain. Maybe last night. He had the shift off and—"

"And he's a very private sort. I know. Have a search done. Call me when he turns up. Thank you, steward." After the dismissal, Captain Lorber debated his choice of words. 'When.' That implied certainty. Gordon Serkis would surely be found. This was natural precedent, as he knew from the men that Serkis sometimes disappeared but would be back in time for shift, right as rain. He often held up in the ship's library, reading, when off duty, though it was frowned on when crewmembers inhabited the same areas as the passengers, unless the crew was at their duties. The library, however, was underused on the Lady

Elizabeth, and because of Serkis's long employment with the ship, he felt an exception was in order. But moments after he spoke the word 'when,' he knew it was not right, attributable, possibly, to the ferocity of the storms and the battle to reach New York without further trouble. A ping in the captain's mind told him that this was Gordon Serkis's last trip across the Atlantic.

"A man's drowned, swept overboard," said an anonymous passenger as Henry Gore passed through the dining hall for the fiftieth time. The trickle of conversation made him slow his steps, then stop. "I heard it from my valet," continued the man, in his sixties, smoking a pipe and playing Aces.

The woman opposite him at the round table leaned forward. "Drowned?" she repeated, licking her lips for the gossip.

"Yes," confirmed the man through his pipe. "A crewmember. Washed overboard. Apparently, he had been with the ship a long time."

When Gore was forced to return to his cabin to gather his belongings, their arrival imminent, he found a folded note, the same as all the others from Matten, waiting for him on his crispy dressed bedsheets.

WILL YOU LET ME LIVE NOW? it said.

A plea. His old friend needed a favor. "Was it an accident?" Gore asked the air.

A moment latter, a fresh note flapped down from behind his back. Gore reached up to the ceiling but felt nothing.

ACCIDENT?

So it wasn't. It was murder, then.

"At least you're honest about it," sighed Gore. He turned around twice in the room. "Anders," he started,

"why don't you show yourself? We can talk about what to do. I…I don't want to read your notes anymore. You're not my pen pal. Come out, and we'll talk about it, and then we'll decide what's best together." He held still, expecting another note to fall. Things remained still. "I've got to pack," he announced. "You think about it."

He was halfway to full on his steamer trunk when he turned and said aloud, "Anders?" There was no answer. Quietly, he continued, "I don't care how you're doing it, you know? I deal cards. I don't want to be invisible. Makes me think of…black magic…or something. I use my fingers, my hands…" Gore stopped his actions. In his hand, he held twin cufflinks. After a pause, he rolled his arms and fanned his fingers and, without the slightest effort, his shirt cuffs were held by the fasteners, their silver shining. His face moved upwards. "Did you see that?" he said with pride. "I don't need your trick. I'm doin' just fine."

At exactly nine-fifteen that morning, the Lady Elizabeth weighed anchor in New York harbor. The storms had stopped and a fog clouded the wooden jetties and the warehouses. Underneath the dim sunlight, the passengers had clustered, as instructed, on the main deck, and waited for the gangway to be constructed. The customs officials had taped off a portion of the dock to direct human traffic to their tables. The cold December air bit into the passengers – despite, heavy coats and hats. Several dozen of the passengers had developed head colds in these weeks, spreading infections easily through the ship. Coughs, like the flash pots of cameras, erupted at intervals around the ears of Henry Gore and Ottokar Hecht.

"Well this is it," said the doctor, his breath blowing in front of his face. "We tell the customs police about your eyesight, or we walk on."

"Matten and those Russians," began Gore, "are the three of them just going to walk into New York, no questions asked?"

"Of course! They're invisible. I envy them. They don't have to stand in queues and declare."

"What about their trunks, their clothes? They'll just be sitting in their room, unpacked."

"That's *their* business, isn't it? Who knows, the two empty cabins may have already been discovered and an enquiry has started. *The vanished.* If they want to enter the new world naked as the day they were born, it would not be the first time. German immigrants have seen this harbor quite often. And not in luxury."

"I doubt they were naked," added Gore with sarcasm.

A steward loudly blew his whistle and the throng began to funnel down the gangway.

"So. What is your choice?" pressed Hecht.

"If an investigation has started, they'll certainly trace things to Peter Disney, won't they? Matten bought our tickets, but Disney arranged the tours. They'll connect those missing three to Disney, and then to us. What would we say, that Matten was–?"

"Sick the last few days, then did not answer his door. We'll assume, like they will, that he and Russians drowned in the storm like that poor devil Serkis. That leaves the stages of New York…for just you and I. Doesn't it, Henry?" Hecht kept his voice low, but certain. He wanted Henry Gore to understand the options. Nothing rash. Nothing wasted. "We are blameless in this, Henry. It's Matten that's in trouble. His discovery of how to disappear is just a temporary delay. He'll be arrested, and tried in court, and we'll learn how he does it. Those are facts. Now I am willing to let his little encounter with Serkis be forgotten to buy more time to learn how he does it. Do you want that same chance? Do you? That purser is *gone*; he's lost at sea. You and I," he urged, with a tug on Gore's coat, "should be thinking about our reinvention in America."

They phalanx took a few steps forward. The two men were nearly to the start of the gangway, to descend in turn.

"It's wrong," shushed Gore, as plainly and decidedly as he could muster.

Hecht's case was lost. He had an immediate vision of a custom's official, the man's professional seriousness, the routine of his questions about fruit or valuables being stymied by the an alert to an actual *crime.* Only moments from now, that would be the case. Gore was going to talk. The murder, the search, the bargain, and the invisibility would all spill out of Henry Gore's mouth the same as a dropped deck of cards from his fumbling hands. Hecht's reinvention would be a garden overgrown with weeds.

At the first step on the gangway, Gore's feet twisted and he skipped a step, colliding into the elderly woman in front of him, who swore in French.

Gore's balance recovered, momentarily. Yet he moved too soon to place his gloved hand on the chain rail of the gangway. His hand missed. Henry Gore's shoes again felt detached from his legs and, as if blown by wind,

he spilled right over the drag of the chain
and down.

Women screamed; men shot out their hands.

Doctor Hecht stepped back into the thrust.

Gore's body fell onto the first retrieval of luggage from the ship's hull, and then he bounced off onto the cold and hard brick of the dock's brace.

No one except the baggage handlers heard the crack of his skull against the ground, but everyone knew it was bad. Customs officials and Treasury Association workers swarmed the spot where Henry Gore had landed, a small pool of blood seeping under his coat and onto the brick.

"Guter Himmel," murmured Hecht before disappearing into the line, his head hidden under his hat, his travel papers and his single suitcase clutched to his chest.

NEW YORK HOSPITAL, BEFORE CHRISTMAS

Mr. Johns was very pleased with himself. Only twelve hours after leaving Archie Gray and Suzette O'Connor in the interrogation room of the New York police, he had discovered the whereabouts of Henry Gore. He did exist; he was unconscious; Johns's old military smarts were firing on all cylinders.

"That's him?" he asked with a wave to the rectangle glass of the patient's door.

"Yes," answered the nurse, whose name badge read 'Emily Wrigley.' She was one of three nurses, and the single volunteer to escort Mr. Johns to the patient's room. "Terrible thing," lamented the nurse, with a frown.

"How'd it happen?"

"Fell from a platform. Been unconscious two weeks."

Johns shook his head slowly, considering the idea. "When will his doctor be in? I want to speak to the man who knows the most about this patient."

The nurse seemed doubtful. "Doctor Holli probably isn't the best person to speak with. After all, the patient hasn't said a word since he arrived. Though we're all hopeful. We all believe in miracles." Here the nurse gave a wide, consoling smile, one that Johns did not quite believe. "There was a woman here yesterday," she added, matter-of-factly.

"A woman?"

"Yes. She asked for the patient and then sat with him for, oh, I don't know, thirty minutes? Then she left. I was on duty but didn't escort her to the room. I didn't catch her name. She was older, shorter. A bit tired. She was dressed well and got along with everyone. She had an English accent, I believe."

A light went off in Johns's head. "That's my employer, Dove Gray."

"Hmmm, yes. Maybe you should speak with her."

"Thanks, I will."

At the exit to the hospital, Johns stood scratching his face. Dove had been missing for nearly two days. But she was here just yesterday. That was a good sign. He was relieved. She was alone, and had not been harmed. As his duty, he would be sure and tell the police this news. Stepping off the curb, Johns began to cross the ambulance lane and into the crowded New York street, where yellow taxis clogged the intersection. He barely had made progress to the taxi stand when her heard the voice of Nurse Wrigley calling after him.

"Mr. Johns! Wait!"

Johns returned to the hospital entranceway to meet her. In her hands she held an envelope, manila with a string fastener dangling.

"Here. I think you should have this. I didn't know that your boss had left it with the patient. The night nurse found it tucked between his mattress and the spring, but a part stuck out. Because of the linen schedule, we guessed it was your boss who left it behind." Shyly, Nurse Wrigley kicked her shoes and looked down on her white apron. "I just found out about it. They forgot to tell me."

Johns didn't completely believe the girl, but decided not to badger her. Instead, he took the envelope and thanked the nurse politely. She turned and gave a short wave, drifting back inside the hospital. When she had disappeared, he opened the flap of the envelope and slid the contents partway out into his opposite palm.

A very old handbill, black on green paper, hit Johns's eye. It was promotional rendering of Henry Gore, wearing a suit from an earlier decade, younger in the face than the man Johns had just seen in slumber, drawn with a large deck of face cards, leaned forward over a star-etched box, with confetti bursting from his name in curly-cue type. The words beneath the name read: "Come and see the greatest card illusionist of this generation! Two performances only!" Underneath the man's cartoon feet was the name of a theater and the city "London", followed by an address, a month and day, and a small admittance charge. In the smallest printing of the handbill were the words "Peter

Disney Productions." Also in the envelope was an old and tattered set of playing cards.

Johns would have to return to the police precinct. There, he could tell of Dove's visit and also turn over the handbill as evidence. He wasn't getting in any deeper. The police needed as much information as possible, the theory of maintaining a central repository being essential to cracking this case. Or so he suspected.

After a quick telephone call to the *Englander* offices, he confirmed that nothing had changed. Dove Gray had not returned. No new appointments had been scheduled. Status quo. He continued on his only known course, to the precinct.

INTERROGATING A GIRL

"What do you mean *he's not here*?" he exclaimed to Captain Timkins, who was rushed to see the inquiring Mr. Johns as the secretary stood drumming his fingers on the ledge of the services window.

The police captain, an athletic man, his uniform's collar smudged with ink from the carbon copy machine, his shirt blooming from his belt, looked shameful as he announced, "Archie Gray has escaped. Last night. Only a few hours after you left the precinct."

Johns was dumb with shock. He thought the comment a joke. "What about the girl?" he asked, as he tried to regain his focus.

"Oh, she's still there," said the captain with a point, as if Suzette O'Connor continued confinement negated the facts of Archie's escape. "But she's not talkin'. Guy vanishes from the cell right next door to her and she says she didn't see a thing. Well, we don't believe it. Not for a second. We've got more charges coming her way to unseal her lips. Obstruction of justice, for one. Purgery, for seconds."

Johns shook his head. "I don't know the girl that well, Captain Timkins, but I doubt those things will sway her. She's already being held on the more serious charge of bank robbery." The captain's composure seemed affected by this estimation; he stammered a few reiterations before leading Johns back to the interrogation room.

The policeman gave a point to the manila envelope clutched by Johns's hip. "Is that for me?" the captain asked as Johns took one of the hard chairs, the same one he occupied the night before.

Thinking, then shaking his head, Johns answered simply, "Magazine business," then smiled, to throw the captain off the scent. Satisfied, Timkins drifted off.

In ten minutes, he had three other plainclothesmen in the room, surrounding Suzette O'Connor.

The girl looked remarkably well. As during each office day, she held her shoulders upright and her chin high. Her

eyes were slightly hollow and her dress a bit messy, but these were the effects of stress and time in the same clothes. Johns felt a sudden rush of sympathy for her situation, and of respect for her strength. These swarming men and their endless questions would not intimidate her. Her red hair, though unwashed, still held some curl and her dress, though wrinkled, held nicely to her body. She used these charms, and short succinct replies, to fluster the proceedings.

"Tell us again what happened?"

"I turned and he was gone."

"Did he tell you he was breaking out?"

"We didn't talk."

"But how could he get out of the holding cell without a key, or without being seen by the guards?"

"I turned and he was gone."

"You're lying, aren't you? You tell us you didn't hear a sound, a scrape, nothing?"

"Complete silence," she says, with a knowing smile that irritated every man in the room.

One of the plainclothesmen changed tactics. "If Mr. Gray was on the run, where would he hide?"

"I don't know."

"Does he have any favorite places to hang out? Places where his friends might be. Bars, or—"

"I don't know."

"You're not being very cooperative, Ms. O'Connor. That won't look good in front of the judge."

"I'd *like* to see the judge." This caused a nervous shuffling. The evidence in the robbery really was paper-thin; they all knew it. And, as the construction of the holding cells proved, it would have been very difficult for Suzette O'Connor, locked in own cell, to have helped Archie Gray in any way with his Houdini-like escape.

Johns decided to intercede. He put aside the envelope with the Henry Gore advertisement and deck of cards, reached across the table, and placed both of his hairy-knuckled hands on top of Suzette's soft fingers. She did not

retract from this overly familiar gesture, as she knew he was, most likely, her one true ally.

"Suzette," he said softly, "I'm working on your release. And I've made some new discoveries today." Johns's words were meant for Suzette, but it was to the captain he turned. "I would be willing to share my information with the police if they would…make some arrangements. Bail, perhaps. Something reasonable a working man like me might be able to afford." The men passed glances. Now he addressed them directly, as a mother. "After all, gentleman, we're fairly certain that this young lady had nothing to do with anything. Aren't we?"

A nervous fidgeting followed in the ranks of the New York authorities.

"What's your information?" Captain Timkins' voice was painted with irritation.

"When we have an agreement," said Johns. More fidgeting. "You can release her into my custody, if you like. I'll be responsible."

This seemed to make the men more agreeable, as there was a long held silence before two patrolmen were called to lift Suzette from her chair and escort her to the release paperwork. When she was gone from the room, Timkins leaned in closely to Mr. Johns's face. "Listen, you," he started, "I've never seen anything like this case. Not in all my twenty-five years on the force. I like working through the facts one by one until we have a case against our man. And I don't like it when the facts, or the man, keep disappearing. Whatever tricks this Archie Gray has up his sleeve, I want to put a stop to it. It was stupid of him to escape. Now it'll take twice as much to trust him. Before, we were just tryin' to scare him. Now…well, now he's a wanted man." The captain placed his hands on Johns's manila envelope. "Archie Gray's our man. He's our criminal. If we catch him again, he won't vanish on us twice. I'm sure of it."

Johns gave a thoughtful cluck of his tongue.

"At this point, Captain, I don't believe you can remain too sure of anything."

TUNNEL SYSTEM

Archie Gray never felt more alone in his whole life. Halfway down the tunnel, which started at the uppermost corner of his prison cell and ended somewhere in the precinct's basement, he became very frightened. Adventure – his chases, his arrest, all events leading to this one – were crushed by the realization that he was escaping from prison in a very bizarre manner. It was rash of him to have trusted Lyle Benedix and the man's crudely drawn map. Burrowing his way into the ceiling – it was ridiculous!

Hanging upside down, Archie found the exit seam by noticing a change of light, the tunnel's luminescence giving way to a clearly marked line. Just as the map had promised, the tunnel wove its way through the old New York building, across and straight down.

The construction of the tunnel was completely invisible to the naked eye. And so was Archie.

He passed through hallways and offices, floor joints and electrical couplings, through desks and chairs, and even through the body of a plainclothes detective, positioned at a desk, reading a magazine, dead center of the tunnel. He tapped the top of the man's head and watched as the fingers passed through the scalp. The man flipped the page of his magazine and began to whistle a tune. Archie passed through the man's shoes and descended through into a hole in the floor.

Ten minutes after leaving his prison cell, Archie passed to the very basement of the building, unwatched as he moved between two poorly strung bare light bulbs of low wattage. He was able to make the tunnel move with him as he sat upright, the walls a stretchable sack. Feet first, he dropped into the basement and landed with a hard crack.

The room had several windows. Lamplights from the street filtered inside. He navigated through the unmarked crates and boxes (evidence, or supplies) until he was at the cellar door built at the top of a small set of stairs. Removing the inner bolt, Archie slipped into the alleyway and vanished from police custody.

It was wrong to abandon Suzette; he knew that. But he had had no choice. After several attempts to climb into the seam of the discovered tunnel, it became obvious that she was too tall and wouldn't fit into the tunnel above their cells. "You go," she had told him, "one is better than none." He had obeyed with a promise to find answers, a prior obligation he wasn't altogether certain he could keep.

On a taxi ride, he thought through his plans, his information. What did he know? His aunt was missing; someone, probably Anders Matten and his men, had robbed a bank of 300,000 dollars; besides Matten, two other magicians were in the game – Hecht, a possible arsonist, and Henry Gore, missing. Peter Disney, the promoter and talent agent, was also a factor. Archie had lost all of his photographs, the police had confiscated Johns's scheduler, and the Mulberry Theater had been burned to the ground. Added to that, Benedix had just helped him escape from a city jail and he did not know why.

Why am I important to Benedix?

At least now Archie knew how Matten and his men had managed to disappear from the orchestra pit, or escaped from the Federal Bank: they had slipped into a tunnel entrance, which they already knew about, and crawled their way out. To impress him, most likely. It wasn't a trick Archie might use again, should police corner him. He had no more maps. Without direction, he knew of no way to find the tunnels or to use them for escape. He would need to discover them like an explorer, or be taught their whereabouts by his mysterious informer.

"We just drivin' around?"

The taxi driver, confused and irritated, had accepted this Englishman into his yellow car with some skepticism. Archie's clothes were still ruffled from the bank robbery, the jail, and his spectacular escape. His hair had been matted from the tunnel and his sideburns ruffled in wiry directions. Those traits (along with his pickup location outside the precinct, and his foreign manners) made the driver particularly unfriendly.

Archie considered. "Times Square," he said, though he didn't know why. A few blocks in that direction and he changed his mind. "East Village." Times Square would be too well lit, with too many policemen. He doubted he was a number one suspect prior to his escape, but now he was not so sure. A call had most certainly gone out over the radio. The change in destination gave the driver more ammunition. Archie didn't want to become memorable, didn't want his face and voice later used as descriptive characteristics on wanted posters. Images of detectives on American television made him shutter with the fear of capture. *The Village, yes. Better than Times Square.* But he couldn't go back to his apartment. Not yet. The Village was in his neighborhood, but he wouldn't be dropped off at the door just to be thrown into jail again, into another cell without access to the tunnels. "Here's fine," he said and paid the driver with his last three dollars, saved from the police by a shove into his shoe.

As the taxi left him standing on the curbside of Spring and Broadway, Archie Gray wished he had access to his funds. He was hungry. The police hadn't fed him. He hadn't eaten since midday. All the banks would be closed (and stepping into one a giant mistake.) He went west on Spring Street and tried to disappear into the crowd.

He needed time to think. He walked to the site of the Mulberry Theater.

Where once it had been just in need of repair, now it needed a razing. The blackened supports of the upper balcony had collapsed and lay against each other like weeping funeral-goers. The marquee had been removed, probably by the fire department, having blocked the street after its struts were burned through. In the evening black, it was a sad sight indeed. *Poor Aunt Dove,* he thought, once again reminiscing about her gambling. *One of her few known hideouts, gone.*

Out of the corner of his eye, Archie noticed a man standing north. He was of average build with slumped shoulders, a rumpled suit jacket, and nervous fingers. His eyes were fixed on the remains of the Mulberry Theater.

Archie took a few seconds before realizing he knew the man. His profile appeared strange at first, as he seemed to be weeping.

It was Roman Rollo, Aunt Dove's husband.

Archie shifted the weight of his body to run away, but then decided to hold his ground a moment more. He had not been seen; he was fifty feet away and in the darkest spot between two lampposts.

The more he watched, the less he expected Roman Rollo to move and, when he finally did, it surprised him. He jumped in reaction. A man crying softly and shyly seemed a terrible thing to interrupt.

Stomach growling, head throbbing, and his options limited, Archie decided to take steps closer to the old doctor. Here, possibly, was an ally.

He didn't want to risk Rollo turning tail when destroying the man's privacy. Archie waited until he was assured that if there was a pursuit, he might have a chance of catching up to him. "Mr. Rollo," he called from a middle distance.

The doctor raised his chin, looked straight and not towards the caller, and then batted his cheeks to wipe the tears away. "Yes, yes," he stuttered, regaining composure. When he felt he was ready, he turned to the voice and let his mouth fall at the sight of his step-nephew. "Archie?" he spoke dumbly, genuinely surprised.

"Yes, it's me."

"They…let you out?"

Archie, at arm's length now, answered, "Changed their minds. They let me go."

"Suzette, too?"

"She should be out very soon."

The doctor held his face of surprise a few seconds more. Before Archie could invent more supporting evidence, he asked, "Did that drawing from Lyle Benedix mean anything to you? Or did you just give up?"

Archie shrugged and smiled. "Gave up." Pause. "Benedix didn't come back, did he?"

The doctor shook his head 'no.'

Both men looked to the wreckage of the theater.

"Did you think she'd be here?" Archie asked.

"Dove? Yes. I had hopes." Rollo kicked his feet. His shoe caught the tip of a small piece of wood, forgotten in the fire's clean up, and sent it flying from the sidewalk to the gutter.

"Have you had any news?"

Rollo looked the boy up and down. "None. I got tired of waiting around. I…I didn't want to even use the phone, tie the line. At last, two women from *Englander* arrived – Betty and Josephine, do you know them? They agreed to watch the house if I wanted to take a walk."

"Quite a walk," noticed Archie. "You're far from home."

"That was two hours ago when I started out. I've been around most of Manhattan. I've phoned the house twice, but still…I think they're keeping me in the dark, the police."

"Uncle…do you think she was kidnapped?"

Rollo gave the boy a strange look. "No. No I don't."

"What, do you think she's left you, then?"

In the man's eyes, Archie saw he had touched a well of possibility, the sting of abandonment, as if this fifty-year-old man had experienced it before, and did not like its repetition. He loved Dove Gray. He loved her and did not want to consider that she had vanished intentionally.

"She loves you back, you know?" said Archie with encouragement.

"Even though I'm her third husband?"

"Oh, she loved them, too. But you are special to her. Trust me on this, Doctor Rollo. I've never in my life seen her so happy."

Slowly, Rollo laid a hand on the boy's shoulder. "Then why," he asked simply and without a crack, "doesn't she contact me and let me know what's happening?"

Archie let his gaze drop to his shoes. He felt immense sympathy for the doctor. Though there had been limited closeness between them – only the vague, likeable smiles and exchanges, the connection tenuous and situational, and solely based on Aunt Dove's glue – Archie did have fondness for the doctor. The woman removed, the two of

them now had a common understanding, one that Archie felt comfortable in exploiting. Despite this emotion, he still had a mission, and very slight resources.

"Do you know anything," Archie asked slowly, "about tunnels?"

What Archie expected was a dismissal. Or a request for clarification. What he got instead was a narrowing of the brow, a close of one eye, the skeptical and surprised look of a man just informed that his own pants were on fire, but not quite ready to do anything about it. "Tunnels?" Roman repeated. "I know a thing or two, yes."

"Do you know what tunnels might have to do with this? This situation?"

"I don't know," said the doctor, assessing, still wary. "Possibly." He let his arm fall from Archie's shoulder and moved to squarely face the boy.

Trust, as always for Archie, came in ebbs. He decided not to rush into anything. "I think that Lyle Benedix fellow might be a magician," he told the doctor. "Doctor Hecht, Henry Gore – these are other people that Aunt Dove knows. They're magicians. It's Hecht's hat in your foyer. Remember? Can it be a coincidence: three magicians? And there's a fourth. He was at the holiday party for *Englander*. Anders Matten is his name."

"Matten?" There was a glimmer in Roman's eyes.

"Do you know him?"

The doctor thought for a moment. "No," he said finally, "not at all."

"I think there's something going on, Doctor Rollo, and it has to do with magic. These men are all connected, but I just don't know how. And they all know my aunt, too. Does she have anything to do with magicians or escape artists? Anything at all?"

Roman's face became stern. Something had coagulated in his memory. Rollo roughly took Archie by the arm and began to walk him away from the Mulberry Theater. A group of tourists passed by drunkenly, but the doctor plowed through them like a taxi in heavy traffic. Though his steps were urgent, Archie wasn't hammered with any

hints of mortal danger. However, the doctor's direction was certain, and he would not be stopped.

"Where are we going?" Archie asked. Rollo did not answer, only held up his finger to shush the boy.

Two more turns and they were back on Broadway, heading north. The closed shops of the district were all dark and only their dim signs remained lit. Though it was nearly midnight, people still roamed. The look in Rollo's eyes did somewhat alarm Archie, but the proximity to other people and the frequent passing of cars did much to rest his nerves.

"Where are we—?" he began to ask again.

Rollo came to a full stop and pulled Archie from the sidewalk. From the street, the picture was evident. Rollo swept his hand forward, as a performer introducing something fantastic, and gave a full fan to a glass window.

A shop.

A signboard.

'The Magic Tunnel'
it read.

"A costume shop?" asked Archie, noticing in the shop's window the dressed row of circus performers, and two sparkle-clad mannequins.

"A *magic* shop," clarified the doctor.

Rollo's finger went out, straight and declarative. He pointed to the sequined lady on the far right of the window display. She had a red wig and a molded face. Her body was shapely and accentuated. In one hand, she held a magic wand; in the other, she gestured to a wooden box beside, its lid open just a touch.

Archie stepped back onto the sidewalk, for a closer inspection. He followed Rollo's finger until his face was against the glass.

The mannequin's features were familiar.

Very familiar.

Her face was void of wrinkles and much, much more girlish, but it was absolutely, positively her.

Dove Gray.

The sign at the red-haired mannequin's feet read in curly-cues:

"What's a magician without his assistant?"

THREE

THE GREATEST SHOW OF 1929

Dove Gray, a girl of twenty.

In London, such girls go many directions – backwards, forwards, left right, up down. The course is mapped for each. Except that when Dove arrived, handbag and suitcase filled with little more than clothes and magazines, she chose uncharted territory instead of well-worn paths.

"I must speak with the stationmaster," she told the girl at the information point – a small booth on the opposite side of the train platform. The train behind Dove Gray continued to exhale steam as she spoke.

"Why?" the girl shot back, herself no more than nineteen, jaw moving with a piece of hard candy between her teeth.

"Because I want to *speak* with him." Dove tried to make herself as authoritative as possible, though in her own country ears there was only tin.

The information girl blinked but did little to answer the request. "Is this an urgent matter?" she asked, routine in her voice.

"Yes. It *very* well may be." Dove colored her words with irritation, near anger, and this got the obstinate creature to move from her chair. The girl lifted an arm to tap the light post in the corner of her booth. Several seconds passed until she found the switch, the connection. The top bulb lit red and the girl waited for it to be noticed.

Dove eased aside for the next patron, an elderly woman lost on her way south. The information girl of the Waterloo junction treated this person no kinder than she had treated Dove Gray.

In a short time, a lanky and effusive man wearing an official-looking railway cap approached the booth, frowning. The sewn name on his sleeve read "Carlyle." The girl gave a sluggish thumb hitch towards the waiting Dove Gray, who stood erect and ready for her opportunity to set things right.

"May I help you, Miss?" asked Mr. Carlyle, the stationmaster, in heavy East End accent.

"Yes. I've just arrived from Burnby, which is south, along the coast, and already I don't like the look of your city." She said 'your city' with some flavor of disgust, to make her comments more of a personal attack.

This affected Mr. Carlyle, familiar only with the simplest of requests from those people not directly involved with the trains and their proper functioning. He straightened his back, sensing her fire. "Oh? How do you mean, Miss?"

"On the train, there was a man, an *American* man, who did nothing but stare at my legs the entire trip. Then, when I pointed this out to the conductor, this rail *employee* only laughed at me and avoided my car altogether, leaving me at the mercies of this…this…person."

Mr. Carlyle stepped back to survey Dove's legs, if only for an instant. For the journey, she had worn a comfortable skirt, but nothing in violation of moral code. True, she was barelegged, with a hem well below the kneecaps. But she held herself like a lady and did not expect such obvious leering, such scandalous regard. "My apologies, Miss," started Mr. Carlyle, towing the line between serious duty and mawkishness.

"Sorry isn't good enough. I want you to have this man arrested."

"Arrested? I'm not the police, Miss."

"Then *call for them*."

Mr. Carlyle took a pause, a step away. "We don' like to see any of our passengers…offended so, but there's very little—"

"Hush!" Dove's finger went up to Mr. Carlyle in defiant point. "You'll have that man *arrested* or I'll write to every magazine. I've got a way with a pen, I'll have you know. And I've accepted a position at one of the most popular periodicals in London. You don't want to have me on your bad side, Mr. Carlyle. Oh, no. There's a man – he's American – he was on that train, and I want him arrested."

Mr. Carlyle considered for a moment.

Dove glanced over her shoulder. The girl at the information point wore a wide grin. After a bitter stare by Dove, the girl's lips pursed tightly and crossed her arms.

On Dove's returning to the stationmaster, he let out a long breath. "I suppose I could have a chat with 'im. Which one?" Mr. Carlyle turned, without energy or enthusiasm for the task, and scanned the thinning crowd from the arriving train.

Dove gave a tight tug on the sleeve of the man's railway uniform. "Look, here – I want more than a warning. I want an arrest."

"On wot *charges*?" He was having his fill of her and her tantrum. This showed in his small eyes and his curved mouth.

"Larceny. Vagrancy," Dove suggested. "*Perversion.*"

"Do you even know what those words mean?" he asked.

"Of *course* I know what they mean." She was angry and ruffled, both. "I told you, Mr. Stationmaster, that I am in London to work for a *very* prominent periodical. One that I doubt you even have the education to *read*. Do you think they hired a woman, yes, *a woman*, because they like the look of her legs? Not from Burnby. I think not. It's because I am *talented*."

"All *right*," he sighed, shushing her with the fingers of his left hand. Carlyle gave a high-pitched whistle. At the very end, eating part of a sandwich, stood a constable dressed in blue with an oval hat on top of his head. The man heard Carlyle's signal, dropped his sandwich back into the box at his elbow, and started towards their side of the terminal. "Can you point out the offending gentleman for me?" asked the stationmaster, without energy.

Dove didn't hesitate. "He's there," she said, and shot out her finger in the direction of the railway café. The small inner building, standing behind a fence of wrought iron and enclosed by smoked glass, was a serviceable café with a limited view inside. Through one of the windows sat a man in his mid-twenties, with perfectly slicked, black hair, wearing a tie and gray double-breasted suit. He was

reading the paper and smoking, and was alone. "You're *lucky* he didn't get away," Dove chided just as the constable arrived by their side.

Without Carlyle's repeating the story to the constable, the two went off in the direction of the café. Mr. Carlyle insisted that the plaintiff wait on the platform until their return, as that was procedure. She doubted this to be an actually documented guideline, but, as the authorities were en route to capture the perverted American, it only seemed fair that she should do as instructed.

From her angle, she saw the following:

The constable and the stationmaster entered the café by the main door.

A red-haired woman, who was quite round in the middle, served coffee to the American.

The American nodded politely.

The American caught sight of someone approaching, folded his paper, and began a conversation.

The torsos of the standing constable and stationmaster became visible in the windows.

The American gave a glance outside, but then suddenly looked back into the café, as if instructed.

The stationmaster bowed to the American, in courtesy.

The American smiled and thanked the two men of authority, who exited the café via the same door they entered.

The American sipped his fresh coffee, and then returned to reading his paper.

On the platform, the constable and the stationmaster poorly hid their smiles.

"Well?" said Dove, severely. "Why don't you have him in irons?"

Approaching, the stationmaster said politely, "He says you are mistaken. He says that, ya, someone was taking advantage of the angle, but that it weren't him. It was his neighbor. He was certain of it. A case of the wrong man."

"Wrong *man*!" she exclaimed. "I absolutely do not have the wrong man. It's him. I remember his face exactly. Wait a moment." Dove paused with eyes upward to the station's

arched ceiling. "The seats around him were empty! A neighbor? Not possible. He's *lying*! You should arrest him for deceiving the police!" Her voice was raised but it seemed to have little impact. The constable was already drifting away.

"Whistle ifs you needs something, Alfie," he said to the stationmaster. "Miss," he added in parting, doffed his helmet in customary politeness, and returned to his half-eaten sandwich. He, too, had glanced at Dove's legs.

After listening a while more to Dove's complaints, Mr. Carlyle, too, returned to his duties. Dove Gray didn't see it, but she suspected a gesture from the information girl had occurred, as Carlyle's eyes suddenly moved over Dove's shoulder and back again.

Soon, Dove Gray was alone on the platform, the train having cleared, though another was already ringing its bell for arrival.

She headed straight for the café.

The American must have expected her because he subtlety followed her from the moment of her entrance. He watched from the corners of his eyes, his face fixed on his newspaper, as she tore past the café's cashier, the waitress standing ready with menus, through the cloud of customers, until she reached his side. Irritated, she tapped her heel and crossed her arms. She then waited impatiently for her offender's attention.

"Why aren't you in jail?" she asked him, thankfully in a low voice so none of the adjoining window tables (all occupied) picked up these words.

The American carefully folded his paper, laid it onto the tablecloth in front of him, and rested his thumb on the handle of his steaming coffee cup. "What's your name?" he asked. When she didn't answer, he said his own, pointing at his tie, crumpled from the trip. "Mine's Henry Gore."

"You don't get to know my name. You haven't shown me the courtesy for it." She kept her body tightly wrapped, her words dryly hung.

Henry Gore gave a look of 'What am I going to do with this one?' before standing and rounding her, to come to the

chair opposite his. Effusing politeness, he drew the chair out from the table, tilted the angle towards Dove, and gestured that she should be seated. "Please," he said, and smiled. "Be my guest." As he again circled her and returned to his seat, he continued smiling until he had pulled up close to his coffee. "Is that courteous enough for you?"

"Not quite," she spat. "You sat down before me."

"Lady, if I waited until you took that seat my coffee would have gotten cold."

Dove hesitated a moment more, wrestling her conscience and debating several snappy retorts. At last, suspecting she might have more of an impact if she were to be seated rather than looming over the man, she took the offered chair. When she did, she became suddenly very aware that though the café window Mr. Carlyle and the constable might be having a good laugh at her expense. She was, after all, exposed. She put them through the trouble of a mock arrest only to join the criminal for coffee not five minutes later. Hypocrisy bled into her face. "You've got two sentences to explain yourself *and* your behavior or I'm leaving," she said, matronly. "I may be from the country but your salacious gazes on the train have left me—"

"*My* behavior?" Gore pointed to his chest.

"Yes. I'm trying to teach you a lesson. So you don't bother other women new to town."

"A mission, huh?" He was appreciative.

"You might call it that. In fact, I'm about to join the staff of a very popular London periodical and *this* – this will almost certainly be my first account, 'Woman Accosted On London Train – Town Overrun By Wicked Men.'"

"I don't think that headline will surprise many people in London. This city's been wicked a long time. Both the men *and* the woman."

Dove returned to her first tactic, holding up two of her right hand fingers, the pointer and the index. "Two sentences."

Gore leaned back in his chair. "All right," he said, taking a moment to collect his thoughts.

During his introspection, though it lasted less than ten seconds, Dove had time to examine Henry Gore's face. She noted his shoulders, back, and his hands, planted on each of his legs. He seemed taller than he had appeared on the train, and more graceful. Rather than an assessment from quick-shot glances, she could now see more of the character in his young face (as he was only a few years older than her.) His eyes appeared softer, greener, and more awake than before, his brow more regal, his hair better placed and lighter in color. Several things about him were, contrary to her first opinion, quite striking.

"All right," he began again, "two sentences. First, I couldn't help but notice your legs because they're beautiful, plain as that. Second, I need an assistant and I think you'll fit the costume."

Dove reared back, aghast. "Assistant?" she repeated with incredulity. "Costume?"

Hands up from his legs, drumming his fingers quickly on the table, Henry lifted a pack of playing cards from his inner suit coat pocket and spread them out in one, swift gesture. Dove found herself moving forward across the table to set the man's coffee at a greater distance, to give him room. He smiled and winked. She was a natural assistant. Fanning the cards, he touched a pinky finger to the top right edge of the line and smoothly glided his hand across their tops. The cards, riding an invisible wave, rose and then fell as the palm of his hand passed over them. He repeated the movement back, then once more to the end.

"Cards," he stated unnecessarily. "I do card tricks. I had quite a bit of popularity in Chicago and Saint Louis. Vaudeville circuits. Clowns and comedians. And, well, some venues more – how should I say? Salacious? I worked the burlesques." He saw her face go slightly red. "But I've given up the more risqué shows. I'm relocating to London. I've got a fat new contract with a man named Peter Disney. Twenty-five dollars a week. Eight shows. All over England, some in France, Germany. Wherever they'll send me." He paused and made his deck of cards do a swan in the air, where they seemed to hold frozen before falling, as

intended, back into his ready hands. The whole sleight-of-hand, if not done correctly, would have resulted in fifty-two cards in his lap and coffee. Two patrons from the booth behind noticed the trick and began a round of applause. "Thank you, thank you," said Henry, before realizing they only spoke German. "Danke, danke," he translated. "See?" he said to Dove. "A European reputation already." Gore stacked the deck of cards neatly on the table, lifted them with a hook of his fingers, and dropped them far to his left, next to the window. "I've got everything but an assistant. See, I don't want to do any of the same tricks I did before. Me and a hat and a table. I'd like to up the ante, as the gamblers say, though I don't gamble. I've been watching my contemporaries and it seems to help to bring in a second. I had in mind an assistant. I even bought a costume in New York, a shop called 'The Magic Tunnel,' run by a friend. I even thought I had the girl to fill it. Turns out I didn't. Apparently…she hates being on the ocean. When she heard I was to disembark in twelve hours, she resigned. So you see, I'm in a pickle. One ten-dollar sparkly costume and no one to fill it. I saw you on the train and—"

"And you had me measured to fit just by looking."

"Exactly. Plus, despite your…harder attitude, and quite unfair sense of justice, you do have a good deal of charisma."

Dove didn't know what to say. It wasn't what she expected at all. She kept silent until something intelligent bubbled to her lips. "Why didn't you *ask* me, then? Not that I'm going to say yes, but if you had all these thoughts, why didn't you say something on the train instead of constantly fixing your eyes on places they should not be?"

Henry shrugged. "Call me demure."

She laughed. "Very well," she said and moved her knees out from under the café table. "Listen – Mr. Gore, is it? Your compliments are welcome, and I wish you luck on your magical career, however I've got plans of my own. Tomorrow I start a position at–"

"A *very popular* London periodical," he poked. "You told me."

Soured, she pursed her lips. "Yes. Well, they don't often hire women for their staff and it's a great leap forward. If I were to run away and, and *join the circus*, so to speak, I don't think I'd ever hear the end of it. Besides, I doubt you pay what they pay, despite Mr. Disney's retainer."

"It'd be an opportunity to see different places, different people. Give you something to write about. The whole of England at least, maybe other places. I bet you've never been outside of your little town until now."

He was right, but she did a good job of dismissing it. She rolled her eyes and shook her head quickly, a simple gesture, so as to move the conversation forward, as if he were being silly. "You know little of me," she said with bravado, "to think that I'd scuttle my life's plans for a man I met on a train."

"Hey, I'm a big fan of trains," he answered her. "Trains are lucky things. I'd choose friends on a train over any other type of friends. Besides, I haven't offered you the job yet. I just put you in the costume."

For a moment, Dove was both provoked by his comment and disappointed by it. She may have been giving more serious weight to his idealist scheme than her brain detected. And now, with the possibility of her losing a position for which she did not apply, her pride grated. Dove stood up from her chair.

"I mean you'll have to audition," he clarified. Reaching into his suit, he withdrew, from the same pocket as he did the playing cards, a short, dull pencil. Taking the Ace of Spades from the center of his deck (without looking at the cards, without thinking), Henry scribbled in the white spaces of the card. "Why don't you come around to this address tomorrow night, after your day at the office? I know you'll probably be very tired, but I'm inviting some friends from London to see the act as it stands today. It might be a good chance to see what you're in for. You might make some friends, at least. They're all good eggs."

Dove held the Ace in both hands, thinking, before she reached around her back for her small travel bag to tuck

the card inside. She did not say if she would accept his invitation.

"Say, what's your name anyway?" Henry asked.

"Dove."

"All right, Dove. Think about it. Might be a good chance to be a part of the greatest show of 1929. I think we'd make a great team."

Dove, at last, smiled at the man. He gave a tip of his head and a friendly salute before returning to his coffee and newspaper. Henry Gore watched Dove Gray leave from the rims of his eyes, smiling all the while, unable to conceal his amusement. She was perfect for the costume; that was a true statement. But more than that…she was perfect for him.

RETURN RECEIPT

It took until mid-day to affect Suzette O'Connor's release from jail. Johns grew more and more impatient with the paperwork as the hours ticked. He had turned the Henry Gore show advertisement over to the police. The deck of worn playing cards, however, he slipped into his pocket, though he did not know why he kept them. "Who is this man?" "What does this mean?" "Didn't show up for a meeting at the magazine, you say?" "You found him?" "What hospital?" "What's the room number?" A whole battery of questions came and went as Johns provided a thin mixture of facts and supposition. He believed that the police were trying to be helpful; he had to trust them. Now it was up to them to take the best-plotted course.

At the exit steps of the precinct, Johns and Suzette stood side-by-side and surveyed the intersections of several Manhattan streets. The endless possibilities. The traffic lights, the shops and their keepers. All the elements of a major American city stood as obstructions and blocked them from any action.

"What's your plan, Mr. Johns?"

"I was hoping that *you* had one," he sighed and looked to his wristwatch.

Yellow taxis passed them where they stood. Hesitantly, Johns raised an arm to catch a driver's attention.

Suddenly, from behind them in the doorway, a whole army of men spewed from the door – plainclothesmen in top coats, uniformed patrolmen, and, lastly, Captain Timkins, who wedged himself between Suzette and Johns and started speaking rapid-fire. "Good. You're still here. You'll never believe it. The money's been returned! Every dollar of it. Fell from the sky, they said, but there's more. Come ride with me. You could be some help." Timkins ringed their arms with his powerful hands and started to move them down the precinct steps.

Johns didn't have a chance to speak. He was tucked beside Suzette in the rear of a squad car. They sped

through the Manhattan streets, sirens going. The caravan of a dozen official vehicles navigated into the financial district and then returned to the district's edges, to the Federal Bank, the scene of the amazing robbery from just the day before.

Suzette didn't speak as she was lifted off the warm leather seat and led by a secondary policeman into the building. Through the golden doors, she stood as she had before, in the middle of a mystery, surrounded by danger, suspicion, and circumstance.

Dead center of the bank's marble floor, knee-high, was a large amount of cash, still bundled, and dropped in a disorganized pile as if it had been poured from bags. Wads had skittered far from the mountaintop, but bank officials had marked those with red bulbs (complimentary Christmas ornaments from the mortgage loan desks.) No one would make off with the strays without someone taking notice.

"That's a lot of money," Suzette whispered, her mouth hanging open.

"You're darn right," said Captain Timkins as he barreled past her ear and to the forefront of his men. "Where's the manager?" he called out into the crowd of people scattered about the room.

A very tall older man sprang forward from the ring. "Here I am," he said, raising a pen in the air as if the object were his credentials. This was the man Suzette had seen in the precinct the night before, standing in the corner of the interrogation room. "Mr. Levy," he said, reminding the captain of his name before shaking his hand.

A plainclothes detective spoke up in unnecessary confirmation. "Yes, Captain, we interviewed that man yesterday."

"Is the door locked?" Timkins asked the manager.

Mr. Levy looked to the sunlight behind the police officials. "No. Thackery, lock the door." A young assistant manager pulled a set of keys from his belt and spun the bolt along the main doors, letting the mechanical *clack* echo in the open space of the bank. Tellers, now safe to come out,

rounded the barricade between the windows and the deposit stations and peered over shoulders.

"Listen here," said the captain to the crowd with a commanding voice, "I want all the customers to stand in that corner, and the bank employees…over there." The two groups separated. There were only nine customers. To Mr. Levy, the captain asked, "Has anyone come or gone since the money appeared?"

"No one's left – I mean, who could leave! Money just *appearing* like that. Two more customers came in after the fact. They're standing over there." Mr. Levy let a finger go out to two of the nine.

"Good," said the captain. "Tell me what you know."

"What I *know*?" stammered the manager. "I know that this is our money. We took a package from the pile and checked the serial numbers against our report from yesterday. I have a copy on my desk."

"And you got a match?"

"Yes, all of them matched," confirmed Mr. Levy. "It makes me fairly certain that these must be the same bills we lost in the robbery."

Captain Timkins and a few of the others came forward and circled the stack of money. Going to one knee, Timkins pulled two stacks free from the middle. He flapped the bricks in each of his hands. They were still in their glued paper bands. At last, he dropped them to the marble floor. "This money doesn't look like it's been touched. Not counted, not anything. It looks as fresh as any money I've ever seen. Is that how it looked when it was stolen?"

Mr. Levy agreed, nodding his head. "We're a new bank, remember? The currency is always a little fresher. The stolen money was a big percent of our opening draw."

The captain stood upright again. "Tell me," he said to the patrolmen around the perimeter, "why would someone stage a spectacular robbery – one they probably could have gotten away with – only to return the money a day letter in pristine condition?"

The men had no answers. For a long moment, the bank held silent as the crowd considered reasons for such

actions. Mr. Levy, off to the side, raised his hand, but was not noticed.

Timkins sounded a dissatisfied grunt. "Okay, men, start taking statements from everyone here. Also, put a coupla men at the door. No one in or out until we've got photographs and statements." His men moved into action. Timkins wagged Mr. Levy in the direction of Johns and Suzette. "Come over here, we're gonna have a little pow-wow. Mr. Levy, you got an office?"

Away from the bustle of the interviews and photographs, the four of them sequestered in Mr. Levy's plain and practical bank office, with a desk, two chairs, family pictures, white carpet, and the complete absence of windows. Once settled – the manager at his desk, the two in the chairs, and Timkins hovering – the captain started down his path of enquiry.

"Mr. Levy, please describe what happened."

The big man thought for a minute and then began, as if practiced. "Around the lunch hour, approximately 12:15 this afternoon, during normal banking hours and in full view of the business, a large amount of bundled cash bills rained from a spot somewhere in the middle of the air and landed, fairly precisely, in the center of the Federal Bank's floor. It created *quite* a noise. After the robbery, I'd say my staff's nerves were fairly on edge. For a moment there, we all thought another crime was being committed."

"And where were you?"

"Here. In my office. I heard the ruckus and came out."

"Okay, go on."

"Well, we were all in shock. I ordered our security staff, doubled since yesterday, to inspect the second floor balcony, in case there was someone up there. But there wasn't. Only old Fletcher from records, who had come out and looked over the ledge."

"I suppose this Fletcher says the same thing – the money fell from the ceiling."

"Not from the ceiling," corrected Mr. Levy with a wag of his index finger, "from the middle of the air. Appearing. Ghost-like."

Johns bit his tongue. He thought the man was dipping too far into the fantastic.

Captain Timkins must have thought the same, as he held up the palm of his hand, gently indicating he had heard enough. He turned to the two others. "This is Mr. Johns. He works for a magazine, but don't worry, he's not here to report. This young lady is Ms. O'Connor, and you may remember her from her arrest yesterday. We had already fairly cleared her in the incident, and this trouble today confirms it for sure. She was with us at the time of the money's return." The captain gave Suzette a trusting smile, his first. Turning back to the bank manager, he continued, "However…last night the young man we arrested in the robbery escaped from one of our jail cells. We're investigating exactly how. Did you see him anywhere near your bank today?"

Suzette leapt forward. "Not Archie! He didn't have anything to do with this!"

Johns could see the captain's side of things. "Yes, Suzette, perhaps Archie felt guilty and has now returned the money."

"If he had committed the crime, of *course* he would want to make it right," argued Suzette, "but he didn't take your stupid money in the first place!" She shot Mr. Levy a look of indignation, the phrase 'your money' being used to stir him. "You're all wrong about Archie. He doesn't know anything. He's trying to help! All he really wants to do it take stupid pictures!"

Mr. Levy's eyebrows went up. "I was just getting to that." Fishing in his tight pocket, the manager retrieved a tiny key, which he inserted into the wide front drawer of his oak desk. From within, he pulled out a plain, rectangle-shaped piece of paper. A print of a photograph – black and white – an Archie Gray original from the Mulberry Theater: three men falling through space, blurred, as they dropped

into the orchestra pit…to disappear. "This fell from the air, too. I gathered it up and locked it into my desk."

Captain Timkins used two fingers to pull the photograph closer to his eyes, letting it stay flat on the desk. Suzette craned to see and then slumped back into her chair.

Johns looked generally confused. "What is it? I can't tell. It looks like…people."

"Yes," confirmed the captain.

"Read the back," said the manager.

Captain Timkins lifted the photograph from the surface of desk and, careful only to touch the edges, dropped it again on its reverse.

Four sentences, typewritten.

SORRY FOR THE TROUBLE.
ONLY FOR SHOW.
TELL THE PAPERS IF YOU LIKE,
YOUR INVISIBLE MAN.

"Is this one of Archie's photographs?" asked Johns of Suzette.

She looked to each of their expressions. "I've never seen it before in my entire life," she lied.

HOTEL SCHOOLING

Twelve hours before the return of the stolen money, Roman Rollo and Archie Gray had found an inexpensive hotel in SoHo, where they picked at a weak room service meal and kept the lowest of profiles. They could not go back to Roman's and Dove's town-home, as the police were sure to be watching. "We've just got to wait," said his Uncle Roman, "until the owner of The Magic Tunnel arrives. He'll know something. He's sure to. I don't believe in coincidence."

"How did a mannequin with my aunt's face get into his shop window?"

"I don't know. Somehow. Dove – oh this was probably last summer – she pointed to the window when were shopping one Sunday. 'Say, look at me,' she had said. I thought she was joking. Now I think it's true."

Archie fell onto the hard hotel bed and yanked the feathered pillow from the blanket, throwing it under his neck and head. "I suppose it's our only lead," he sighed, "so I shall listen to the good doctor's advice."

Roman removed his shoes and sat on the edge of the second bed. Something bothered him. His eyes, normally bright, had dimmed and narrowed, trained on the small, obstructed window at the far end of the room, and its drapes. "Archie," he began, "how did you get out of the jail?"

"I told you. They let me out."

"Did they?"

"Yes."

Roman removed his jacket and laid it on the bed beside him with a flat press of the palm. His irritation continued. "Then why did you ask me about tunnels?" The boy was being quiet. He did not answer. "You remember, Archie. You asked me outside the Mulberry Theater."

Archie turned his face to the old doctor. "Yes, I remember." Archie's voice was as thin as paper. "And you said *you knew* something about tunnels." Archie felt it best

to redirect, to keep his uncle on his toes. The less Archie said the better.

But Roman waved his hand, showing it was nothing. "My father was a railway engineer. Gears and levers. Had a stint in India when I was a boy. I don't know anything more about tunnels than the fact that trains go through them."

Archie understood – by the man's body movements, by his turn of one shoulder and his steering of his gaze anywhere but to meet Archie Gray's face – that there was quite a bit more to the story. "Don't you think it's strange," asked Archie, "that Aunt Dove could have been involved with magicians?"

"I suppose. She's led many lives. Sometimes I hardly know her." His mouth turned down and he sighed. "But I love her regardless." Roman unbuttoned his shirt collar and lay down on his bed.

For a long time, the two men stared straight up at the dingy and cracked hotel ceiling. The wallpaper was peeling; water spots showed. Archie wondered if Roman was inspecting the impenetrable surface as he was inspecting it: suspecting that a tunnel might exist – a shield, an invisible tube. Archie turned his face to Roman, who still held his eyes up. "Uncle Roman," he started quietly, "the police didn't let me out of jail." Roman turned his head but did not change his expression. "I escaped," the boy confessed.

Roman's eyes widened considerably. "Oh?" he asked, not incredulously, but with encouragement for the boy to continue.

Archie reached into the pocket of his trousers and took out the single page given to him by his uncle at the jail – the map from Lyle Benedix. Reaching into the space between the two beds, Roman clipped the page with his fingers and held it up to the lamplight from the bedside table between. A bit of relief appeared on his face, which was strange to Archie, but that face soon clouded with intrigue.

"It was a map of our cells. Those marks – those, apparently, were a tunnel, one which I could crawl into and escape the building."

"A tunnel built into the ceiling?"

Archie nodded. "Here's the incredible part," Archie smiled with remembering, "It made me invisible."

Roman shook his head, a smile crossing his mouth. "Incredible." He returned the map to Archie's waiting hand. *Look up* had been Benedix's final clue. The doctor should have known it was something like a tunnel. Roman could not believe he had been so naïve. His grief, his missing wife, had clouded his reason.

After a moment, Archie became curious. "Aren't you going to ask any more questions? You believe me? Just like that?" His uncle nodded and kept his face trained on the ceiling. "I know what you're thinking," continued Archie. "That there are probably tunnels everywhere. Is that it? But you believe me, don't you?"

"Yes," said Roman softly. "I believe you. And yes, if there are tunnels one place, there are probably tunnels in another. Maybe different kinds of tunnels. Tunnels connecting everything."

"Who do you think built them?"

Roman shrugged his shoulders and pulled free the top blanket of his bedding. "It was probably us. People like you and me. Because they could. Maybe it was the Aztecs or the Greeks, inventing in the same way they invented viaducts or modern roads, only this secret's been lost. Ah, but maybe not. Maybe the skills aren't that ancient. New York buildings didn't exist at that time." Roman nodded in wonder. "And don't forget the machines. Machines make the work go faster. Maybe like a train tunnel. I suspect that everyone who built them is gone. Taken off or killed by disease or war or the times themselves. We lost a lot of engineers in the last two wars. Governments, no doubt, have diagrams locked away in crates." The doctor turned on his side and shut his eyes. "Tunnels," he puffed. "A tunnel system in the very buildings…" Roman seemed appreciative of the venture.

"Tunnels that make you invisible," added Archie, "don't forget that part."

"Incredible," repeated the doctor before shutting his eyes.

Several times during the night, Rollo, unable to properly sleep, would telephone his home and ask if his wife had returned, or had left a message. If *Englander* associates Betty and Josephine were irritated with their extended stay, they did not show it. This duty might get them a promotion – up from the secretarial pool to the advertising offices. *No, Dove Gray had not returned in the night.* Archie and his uncle would have to stick with their plan. 'The Magic Tunnel.' The mannequin. A morning visit.

INSIDE THE MAGIC TUNNEL

The bell above The Magic Tunnel's front door jingled. Right there in front of them, having just removed the key from the night bolt, was a very old man, white-haired and weak in bones. He wore a Cardigan sweater and black-rimmed spectacles, a rust-colored shirt and tan trousers. On his feet were slippers, comfortable ones. Archie placed his face immediately, and the old man, too, recognized his first customers of the day.

He was the man with the book,

the man who had appeared in Aunt Dove's library the day of the Mulberry Theater fire,

the man who had given Roman the map for Archie Gray's escape.

Lyle Benedix.

"Good Heavens!" gasped Doctor Rollo. "This is *your* shop?"

Benedix waved his two customers inside, out of the cold December air, and offered to take their coats. The men shrugged him off. Benedix drifted to the cash register and began to nick at a spot on the counter where splinters were coming loose from the wood. "You're early," the man said in a crackle, the words hard to distinguish. "I don't usually get any people in the door until closer to lunch."

"Then why do you open at nine?" asked Archie.

The old man gave a sly smile. "Practice."

Roman snarled, "Tricks, is it?"

The man nodded and laid his elbows on the pay counter with great fatigue. "Illusions," he clarified.

"Another magician," said Archie with a roll of his eyes. The boy drifted into the first aisle of the small store and touched a top hat held in a faux glass case.

The store was a tight, dusty collection of standard magic-show fare. Nothing remarkable. In fact, it seemed

the display window, with the Dove Gray look-a-like in her sequined costume, was the sole highlight. Capes and top hats, wands and gimmick-laden magic kits lined the shelves of The Magic Tunnel. At the far end of the faintly lit shop, stood a tall bookcase that galvanized the entire west wall. Behind the black-painted countertop hung a blue curtain, parted to reveal an adjoining room and dressing cabinet, red wood with white handles. The radiator heat gave the air a dusty smell.

"Do you have anything on magic tunnels?" asked Archie with sarcasm, fingering the spines on the bookshelf.

"That's just the name of the store, son."

Roman came around from his place in the aisle, a few steps from the bookcase. His face held a fragile look, one of disaster looming, certain. The shopkeeper noticed this and stopped his scratching on the countertop.

"Your map," said Archie. "It worked."

"I can see that," nodded Benedix, smiling. He gestured to Roman. "Does your uncle know what the map was for? Did you tell him?

"I told him last night. He helped me keep away from the police."

Benedix winked. "He's a good man. Dove was right."

At the mention of his wife's name, Roman came forward and put his hands to the countertop. "Where is she? Have you seen her? You know something, don't you? Where did you get that map? Start talking or we'll phone the police."

Benedix's cragged face buckled further inward as he sucked his cheeks to the jawbone. "Now," said the man softly, "you don't want to go phoning them."

Archie pried himself from his own spot and turned to face the exit. The three, in triangulation, held for several seconds. He and his uncle could hear the labored breathing of the old man.

Benedix started slowly:

"Secrets, secrets. That's the currency in *my* business. This is a shop of secrets. You came here to learn. Archie Gray, your aunt wanted you out of that filthy jail. You

didn't connect all the dots between the code, the map, and the newspaper article just to miss the main events, now did you? No, I didn't think so. So I drew you a map. And I gave you a secret. You aunt, she authorized it. I don't trust many people, but I trust her. And I trust her to do the right thing." Benedix paused and gave a false cough. "Did you hear me?" he said again, louder. "I *trust* her to do the *right* thing." These words weren't directed at Archie or Roman Rollo. They were said over the shoulder, with a shift of the eyes, to the curtained area behind the cash register.

Slowly, sheepishly, the blue curtain moved to one side. The hand of a woman appeared. The curtain moved more and Roman filled his lungs with air. In a flash, the woman was out into the center of the shop, waving her arms in maniac throws. "Oh, Roman! Oh, Archie!" she said. "I didn't want to go and get you all *involved."*

It was Dove Gray, found.

TORN PAGE

Roman ran to embrace his wife.

Archie took ten seconds longer than his uncle to react. Then, almost contrary to his emotions, Archie spoke softy and with admonition. "Well I certainly hope you'll tell us what's going on."

Roman and Aunt Dove broke from their hold. "Ohhh," she hummed, turning to a wall mirror, a small one with rabbits painted around the perimeter and hung behind the cash register. "Look what you've gone and done." Gently, she patted the tears away from her cheeks.

His hands glued to Dove's shoulders, Roman turned her to face him once more. "Darling, where on earth have you been? I've been worried sick. I, I—"

"She's been *here*," Benedix chimed in, solid.

Dove touched her hand to Benedix's arm. She let her face soften. "Lyle and I have been friends for many years. Decades, even. Though I don't think we've spoken in a long time. When he arrived at the house that Sunday, I was thunderstruck. I saw his face and I knew there was serious trouble."

"Bad circumstance," gruffly added Benedix. "That's what made me seek Dove. She was the only who could help me out of my dilemma." Benedix returned to his cash register, his worn-away countertop. "She's the smartest woman in Manhattan. And she knows everyone. Everyone in magic, anyway."

"So that *is* you in the window!" Archie said to his aunt and pointed to the back of the red-sequined mannequin.

"Yes," confessed his aunt. She gave a tilt of her head. "Do you really think I knew of that open door in back of the Mulberry Theater from *gambling*, Archie? What kind of a woman do you take me for? I knew it as a former *venue.* For magicians. Peter Disney had recently unlocked the door and had the power switched back on. He told me so when he came to my office last week." (Archie's eyes flashed acknowledgment. He pictured Peter Disney standing on the Union Jack carpet of *Englander* as he exited Dove Gray's

office. This was making sense to him now.) "But I knew of the theater originally…from being Henry Gore's assistant."

"Henry Gore?" repeated Archie. "The man who missed the appointment with you earlier this month?"

Sadness entered his aunt's face. "Suzette told you that, did she? Yes, Henry phoned and wanted to stop in to see me at the magazine. He was returning to the United States for the first time in thirty years, when we did a few shows in New York." She turned down her mouth, but lifted her eyes to Roman. "Henry was my first husband, though I rarely speak of him. It wasn't meant to be. It was a working relationship gone too far. We both knew it was a mistake. I was meant to be here…right now. With you, Roman." Dove held Roman's hand and began to pull him along towards the rear of the shop. "Henry is, most certainly, a genius with the cards. He learned his illusions from many people – including Mr. Lyle Benedix, one of the greatest teachers of magic in these United States. He mentored Henry when Henry was just a boy. Then, when I relocated from England to America all those years ago, Henry introduced me to his old instructor." Dove stopped her walk towards the rear of the store. "And Lyle had two other star pupils…Lyle also taught Matten how to escape, and Hecht everything that man knows about disguises."

"All three were his pupils?" asked Archie.

"That's right. All three. He also, one by one, introduced them to Peter Disney, the promoter and talent agent who put them to work."

Roman pursed his lips and asked, "And where's this Henry Gore today, then? You say he didn't show up?"

"Henry's in New York Hospital. Lyle found him. He's been unconscious for weeks." Dove watched her husband's face change from jealousy to sympathy. His doctor's ethics rose to the surface. "The day he arrived in New York, someone pushed Henry from a platform. The doctors aren't certain if he'll live."

The four held silent.

Archie nodded gravely. "You're full of secrets, auntie."

"Yes. I try not to be, but I am."

Dove pulled her husband a few more paces, then stopped at a shelf. She moved her gaze back to Benedix as he rounded the aisle and stood posed at the end.

Archie puffed out his chest. "If you're in danger, Auntie, I want to help."

Dove cocked her eye to her nephew. "What, Archie, you want to become *involved*? Part of me thought you'd escape the jail and just vanish – not through a tunnel or anything so spectacular, but into the fold where you have always been so comfortable." Archie's face turned red, she noted. "Oh, dear boy. I don't mean to embarrass you. But it's true. You've been in the background of things all your life. Now you've got a taste of *real* involvement and want to finish the job. It's sweet, it really is." Dove switched her eyes from Archie and Roman then back again. "It's the girl, isn't it? It's Suzette. Has she replaced Caroline Green in your affections?"

Archie let out a loud, prolonged groan as he threw up his hands. He mocked banging his head against one of the shop's tall shelves. "Auntie! Grrrr. You drive me *mad* you know that? Absolutely crackers. You're like a scratched record. Look, I've never been in the center of a mystery before. And I've never been bloody *invisible* before, now have I? Not *actually* invisible, anyway. And it's not the girl – though she's quite remarkable. It's my *photographs*. Someone's stolen all of my pictures and I want to—"

Dove waved her hand. "Pish-posh. Your career as a *photographer*. No one risks their life for something so trivial."

Benedix, at the word 'photographer,' cocked his head in thought. He turned from his place at the aisle's end and disappeared from sight.

"His *life*?" Roman's face balked at the word.

Dove looked at the two men as if the gathering threat was obvious, and they were simply being stubborn. "Yes," she said with flat urgency. "Of course. His life." They still didn't register this dire pronouncement. "This is a competition between human beings, men with something very important as a prize. *Fame.* You don't want to insert

yourself between men and fame without taking into account violence. Fame is as bad a poison as money, as bad as jealousy, as bad as political power. It's a very strong motivator. It turns people to demons when not handled properly. Don't you see? *These are magicians trying to top themselves*," she said passionately. "It's the ultimate illusion – reinvention. Therefore, we have to consider the possibly of the one illusion b*etter* than fame: *death*."

"Hear, hear," chimed Benedix, returning to the three with a wide smile, to douse this talk of death. In his hands, he held a mid-sized black and chrome camera, its model curved with a fat lens protruding from the body, its wide shoulder-strap draping his hands. The man pushed the camera out for Archie to take hold.

Once in his hands, Archie turned the camera over. There was no manufacturer's name, only an empty engraving plate. To him, it resembled the Exakta cameras he had eyed in shop windows. The camera was likely ten years old, maybe more, and had scratches along the shell. He put the viewfinder up to his eye and worked the aperture. "What kind of camera is this?"

The old man shrugged. "*Your* kind of camera. It's for you. I think you'll like it. It does interesting things. I've been thinkin' of giving it to a photographer. It's something a friend of mine made himself, using his own special techniques. It might come in handy for you. You'll know what to do with it better than any of us, being a photographer from the start."

Archie hesitated. "Mr. Benedix," he began, "my aunt's right. I'm not too far along as a photographer. You might want to give this to…someone better."

"No one better than a relation of Dove's," said the old man, happy with the gift.

Archie smiled. "Thanks, Mr. Benedix," he said with truth, but his glee faded quickly. He looked to his aunt for guidance. She nodded that it was all right. Archie moved the camera's strap over the collar of his coat, letting the camera rest against his lower chest. "Thanks," he said once

more, and shook the old man's hand. He could now forget his troubling Leica.

"Photographers and their cameras!" cried Aunt Dove. "It's a bad marriage. Just like magicians and their illusions."

"Enough!" said Roman, frustrated. "I want to know why you disappeared. I want to know what's the story with those tunnels. I want to know why three magicians, their teacher, and their talent agent are running around New York *destroying* my peace of mind instead of sawing girls in half, or whatever it is they do best."

Dove reached up with a long stretch of her right hand.

From an upper bookshelf she pulled free a heavy and wide volume, bound with an exquisite leather spine and measuring two inches thick. She brought the book to her waist and crossed the shop to the counter. Dust flitted from the corner binding – a black, unmarked brace that gave Roman the impression that they were unburying an ancient treasure.

To Archie, the book was familiar. "This is the same book you had, Mr. Benedix, when you visited Aunt Dove in your library on Sunday."

"It is," confirmed Benedix with a nod.

Dove and Roman carefully laid the book on the counter's only clear space. Reaching over the book, Dove pulled the stem of a lamp closer, snapped on the light, and tilted the shade. They all could now have a good look at the cover.

NEW YORK CITY
it read in embossed gold letters
set in worn, expensive leather.

"This," began Dove, "is the most important book ever published in this city. It's been on a shelf in the Magic Tunnel for decades until Friday night, when it was stolen."

Dove opened the book by pulling the oversized cover from right to left. The first page was thin papyrus, without writing. She turned the page and a loud crinkle sounded in

the quiet room. The second page was a complicated overhead diagram – building plans, very old, with tips of the yellow showing the wear. There were rips in two places. In the uppermost right corner, the words "CITY HALL" were typeset.

Cutting through the design
in a deep red color
was
a thread, weaving through every floor
and most of the rooms.

A vine-like shape, etched over top of the draughtsman's original design, made by a new hand no less precise than the first.

A tunnel.

Dove turned the page.

The caption under this next set of plans read, "THE NEW YORK SOCIETY LIBRARY."

Dove turned the page once more.

"DAKOTA HOTEL."

Another.

"THE NEW YORK WORLD."

Page after page, landmark after landmark, revealed that nearly every major building dating back to the late 1800s had a secret tunnel system throughout. Invisible tunnels. Just like the jail.

"Where's the police precinct?" asked Archie, breathless.

Dove turned to a page one-third into the book. There, before Archie's very eyes, a red tunnel traced the exit he had used for his escape, running all the way to the storage basement of the building. "That's how I got out," he said to Roman, pointing to the book then pulling the hand drawn map from his pocket. He flattened the crude rendition alongside his finger. The two were a match.

"Forgive my drawing skills," said Benedix as he leaned against the cash register. "I never take the book out of the

shop. I never loan it to anyone. Only a few know it even exists."

"If the book was stolen, how did it get returned?" To Roman, it was an obvious question.

Benedix gave a cough, then said, "It went missing Friday, it was back on the shelf by Sunday morning. Someone had, apparently, borrowed it without asking."

Archie nodded his head. "Anders Matten."

"Yes," said Dove, "for your photo shoot. Anders Matten must have seen the book all those years ago. He broke into The Magic Tunnel and stole the book from Benedix's shelf. He made hand copies, apparently, of certain pages. I'm not sure how many maps altogether. Then he returned the book on Sunday, the day the Mulberry Theater caught fire. Lyle found that the book had been returned and came to tell me about it late that day. Because we knew Peter Disney was in town, we thought there might be a connection to his men and the theft of the book."

Turning another page, Dove pointed.

This page had been torn out. All that remained was a rough edge, just a finger's width along the inner glue of the spine. "Lyle didn't notice this until Monday morning," said Dove.

"What used to be there?" asked Archie.

Dove paused. "The New York Opera House. It's where tonight's performance is to be held. A show. A spectacular. Disney booked it for the great return of his three European magicians. He was originally to have it at the Mulberry. But he moved it to a larger space because of the fire. And because of something else – he sensed he was going to make a lot more money on tickets." She paused, letting this sink in. "And Matten didn't just copy the Opera House map. He tore the page. He didn't want us to know anything."

POSTERS

At last, Johns and Suzette were returned to the street. The bank remained locked with all inside, but, after three hours of milling, it was clear to Captain Timkins that the two of them had nothing to do with the reappearance of the stolen money. His superiors would be on him if he held them any longer.

Outside a throng of reporters and cameramen had surrounded the Federal Bank. Suzette shielded her eyes from the flashbulbs, coming *pop-pop-pop* at her as she tried to navigate down the bank's marble stairway to the street. Johns took her arm. "Steady," he said with military authority and gripped her harder when they hit the first tier. Questions bounced into their ears – some spoken quietly, respectfully (*Would you be so kind as to...?, Would you please tell us...?*), others blaring like rude trumpets (*What's goin' on? Did the bank get robbed again? Five dollars for your story, lady!*) Through it all, Johns held silent, used to the aggressive tactics of the press, as the *Englander* had sometimes employed them when interviewing members of Parliament.

Brushes with elbows and the tactical jabs of Johns's heavy shoulders freed the two into the open space of the street, which was blocked from traffic by barricades. They moved quickly past the police cordon tape and took to the littered sidewalks, heading north.

"I asked it before and I'll ask it again. Where are we going?"

Just at that very moment, a horde of small boys carrying buckets of glue and, under their arms, large and rolled posters, smashed into Suzette. She and Johns shrunk to accommodate the parade, all six of the boys, black-skinned or Italian, as they hurried into position along the wall beside them.

The frontage, a former pharmacy, Mr. Foxley's Drugs, had been shut up with boards, long out of business. The resulting gap in the line of storefronts made an ideal spot for quick advertisement, and the six boys didn't hesitate on

their duty (a nickel a sign) to cover from top to the toe the boarded area, with shining and safely fastened posters.

Size: 36" x 48".

One boy carried a stool to obtain the proper reach.

The posters were red-rimmed with blue tops, hand drawn and quite spectacular.

In the center stood a black formal suit coat, trousers, and top hat, puffed as if filled by the body of a man. The face and other essential features were omitted.

The pack of boys, completed with the work, moved off down the street, glue-buckets and rolled posters in hand, onward to the next opportunistic spot. The advertisements, still wet and drying in the afternoon of a New York day, acted as a magnet for the eyes of Mr. Johns and Suzette. Certain words caught their attention after the bustle died down. Soon, they were nose and nose with the poster, mouths dropped.

COME AND WITNESS!
THE GREATEST SHOW IN NEW YORK'S HISTORY!
PETER DISNEY PROUDLY PRESENTS…
YOUR INVISIBLE MAN,
THE AMAZING ANDERS MATTEN,
FROM HOLLAND
WATCH HIM DISAPPEAR BEFORE YOUR VERY EYES
ONE SHOW ONLY
TONIGHT 8 O'CLOCK
THE NEW YORK OPERA HOUSE

Then, in very small print below:

SPECIAL GUEST:
DOCTOR HECHT,
MASTER OF DISQUISE.

"Could it have been for publicity – the bank robbery?" Suzette couldn't believe it. The sheer audacity of it! To promote a magic show one would never go to such illegal extremes. Captain Timkins would be angry beyond belief. Little chance of the show continuing, she suspected.

"Should we go and tell Captain Timkins about these posters?"

Johns debated. He weighed his duties. The show handbill discovered under the bed of Henry Gore stuck in his mind. After having let that evidence go into the hands of another, there was a heavy feeling of regret. *I should have kept it,* he chastised, sure that it was an important clue to finding Dove Gray, Archie Gray, and the center of the mystery, Anders Matten. It should not be left in lesser hands such as the police. To retain them for a more exact mind, unbridled by New York City paperwork and procedure, would have been a brighter maneuver. "We have to find Archie and tell him about this," he said with a point to the poster. "Do you know where he might be hiding?"

"No," she said. "He escaped, but that was as far as we planned." Suzette had a sudden thought. "You do realize he might see this and figure it out on his own."

Johns looked back the direction from which they had just come from – the bank and the throng of reporters, flash bulbs bursting. "It'll be tonight's paper that carries the story about the note, the return of the money. The police can't keep the story bottled up in the bank very much longer. Some employee will talk and soon it will be all over the city."

"Just like this Peter Disney planned," said Suzette, tracing the typeface spelling the promoter's name and the phrase *your invisible man*, the same exact description as in the bank note.

"Yes. Just enough time for the newspapers to link the two occurrences and do some free advertising, maybe sell out the show at the door…but maybe not enough time for Captain Timkins to get a warrant and close down the proceedings. Very clever, this Mr. Disney." Johns turned and looked along the street for taxis. His arm went up. "Come on."

"We've got a destination, then?"

"To buy some tickets."

"What?"

"You don't want it to sell out before we can get inside, do you?"

Spurred by the urgency in Johns's voice, the two were off into a taxi and whisking towards a ticket agent.

SHOP ACTION

The four looked up from the book of maps. Rollo fitted his hand into his wife's and pressed. "Who made these maps?" asked the doctor.

Dove closed the book. "Someone long ago. Someone long dead, more than likely."

"But it must have been a builder," added Archie. "These are plans are very well drawn."

"These are probably copies of the original plans with the markings of the tunnels inserted," said Dove. "The builders didn't add the tunnels to the structures. Someone else did." Dove, with the help of her husband, returned to the bookshelf at the rear of The Magic Tunnel and wedged the large map book back into its place among the others.

"Mr. Benedix, you must know who drew them," said Archie. "After all, the book is in your shop."

Benedix shook his head. "I wasn't the first owner of the shop. The prior owner of the shop died sometime in 1927. I bought the shop lock, stock, and barrel from an advertisement placed by the deceased owner's family. I know nothing. When I discovered the book and what it meant, I've shared the secret of this discovery very selectively." Benedix paused to check Archie's reaction. "I didn't even tell Doctor Rollo here, instead just asked that he pass you the map."

Archie walked the shelves, reading the spines of the exposed books. "What about these others? Do they tell us anything?"

"Only how to pull rabbits from hats," answered Benedix. "None of these books are for sale. Only for display. The book of maps would be a mystery to anyone allowed only to spend a few minutes with it. It doesn't contain any instructions on how to enter the tunnels, just tunnel maps. This bookshelf is the safest, most inconspicuous place for it. Unless a theft. Or a fire. But that could happen anywhere."

"It should be turned over to the government or, or the police," said Archie.

Dove shook her head. "A magician never tells how an illusion is done."

Roman took both of Dove's hands and stared into her eyes. "All right, then. You've shown us the maps, yes, and Archie and I know all about the tunnels. But we have to know *everything* you do if we're to be of any help." The doctor paused; he could sense his wife's hesitation. "Darling, when we were married, when I came from England to America, I told you that I had just been through some very strange happenings. Well, I did not lie. I have, believe it or not, some degree of expertise in dangerous matters. You will have to trust us. Me and Archie. You *need* allies. Trust us as Benedix trusted you."

Dove melted. "All right. The two of you! Bad for me, I know it."

A voice
outside the store.

The lilting pitch of young boy.

All four froze in positions. Aware of the ridiculousness of it, they all froze in the heart of The Magic Tunnel.

The boy approached their door, calling.

"This very evening!" he shouted. "Tonight! The New York Opera House. Witness the magic of invisibility! A man will vanish before your very eyes! Renowned international escape artist Anders Matten in *one performance only*! Peter Disney presents YOUR INVISIBLE MAN!"

The boy then passed by the shop window, his voice continuing, his pitch altering with distance. He hadn't noticed the slim and sparkled Dove Gray costume in the shop window, or the four of them beyond. He passed with his broadcast, fading in repetition as he moved down the street, passing others, spreading the word. YOUR INVISIBLE MAN. Tonight.

TICKETS! GET YOUR TICKETS!

By three o'clock that Tuesday afternoon, the line for tickets stretched around the side of the New York Opera House. The Opera House had to open three additional windows and conscript six more box office employees. Never in their history had their been such a rush to get into a performance.

The evening papers, with their energetic supposition about the Invisible Man and his identity, his links to Anders Matten, and the possibility of an arrest, had just hit the newsstands. Through the buzz of television, the story of the returned money, the blurry photograph, and the mysterious note added to the flurry of public excitement.

Mr. Johns and Suzette O'Connor had been early in the ticket line. They, too, had to wait, but it was easier on them than on those who came behind. "Four," said Johns and opened his wallet for the ticket seller.

After the transaction, Suzette stopped Johns on the plaza. "Why did you buy four?"

Johns tilted his head, wistful. "We have to hope Archie and Dove Gray show their faces, right? Maybe buying four tickets will work some magic. Here—" He put two tickets into her hand. "For you and your date."

Suzette blushed. "Thank you," she said as she pushed the tickets into the small pocket of her skirt. She considered her clothes. She couldn't go to a show in her current attire. She would have to return to her apartment to change. Her blouse, her hair, her skin, all fumed with the antiseptic smell of the jail. She held up Johns's watch and looked to the time. "It's almost supper. I'm going to go home. I have to get into a dress. Will you meet me here tonight on the plaza? Seven-thirty?"

He scanned the crowd. "I don't suppose there's much we could do between now and then. This show will enormous. Matten is probably making his preparations. It will be an interesting night…if they let him go on stage."

"Do you think Captain Timkins will arrest him?"

"I'm not sure. This is very well timed. He'll have paperwork to get. And, at this point, Anders Matten is really only a suspect. Would they stop a big show for a guess? I don't think so." Johns nodded once more, then looked to his own clothes, his suit, his tie. "I'm going to wait right here. Someone might turn up in the ticket line that's of interest. Do you feel that you'd be safe at your apartment?"

Suzette nodded. She had no reason to think she would be a primary target. Though she had spied for Dove Gray, had written codes and was present at the robbery of the bank, her knowledge was limited. At this point in the day, she'd be just happy to know her employer and her nephew were unharmed, and that Archie was beyond the fear of arrest. She knew his character; he was a photographer, not a bank robber.

As she left Mr. Johns on the plaza, she considered telling him of how Archie had escaped from the city jail. It was an amazing trick. However, she thought better of it. The map and Archie's vanishing into the invisible ductworks were cards best held to the chest. Mr. Johns had been very good to her since springing her from Captain Timkins and his men, but she wasn't quite ready to make him a confidant. She wondered what he might be hiding from her. After all, he seemed a capable investigator. He had found the unconscious Henry Gore – that was something to note. If he had not gone from military service into magazine administration, he might have made a good detective.

The two parted with small waves and concerned nods. Suzette dropped down a subway station and sped south to her change of clothes.

Across town, Dove Gray phoned Peter Disney's hotel but got no answer. "We'll need tickets to the show," she explained as she cupped the receiver. "He said he would give me complimentary ones if I asked. He's probably

forgotten all about me and is selling them for as high a price as he can get." She sniffed; it is what she would do herself, if their places were reversed. After a long succession of rings, she hung up the phone. "We'll have to keep trying."

Archie Gray was let into Benedix's back room and loaned a too-large suit from the man's closet. It was risky for Archie to return to his apartment. Police were waiting; that was certain. But he wasn't dressed for the theater.

Roman telephoned Betty and Josephine and asked them to continue at their posts through the night and into Wednesday. Both girls were relieved to hear that Dove Gray was alive and well. He hung up the phone quickly, in case the police were listening in. Roman did not want to compromise their hiding place. They would wait in The Magic Tunnel until showtime.

In Benedix's back room, his sleeping quarters, they raided his icebox and passed the day. A news broadcast came on the radio and announced the return of the stolen money. "Archie's free, then!" said Roman, pleased.

"You're forgetting, uncle, that I escaped from jail. They probably think it was *me* that returned the money. And, they may also try to prove that I'm the invisible man, since no one saw my escape."

Dove nodded agreement. "That's right, Archie. The best thing we can do is stay put. When the show's over, and they see that Anders Matten's the one who's invisible, things will be different."

"But what about—" Archie was about to ask *but what about Suzette* but stopped himself. The other three were looking at him. He was thinking of Suzette, the girl he left behind. He wondered if she was safe and thinking of him. He wondered if Hecht or Matten had shown their faces at the jail, posing as the girl's relations, paying for her bail. He wondered if the efficient Mr. Johns had located Henry Gore in his hospital bed and brought that fact back to Suzette. She may be alone, without information. Or in danger. Here, he was with three others, two of whom were very close to the action, the knowledge of these strange happenings. Not the same for Suzette. He had abandoned

her. "What about Doctor Hecht?" asked Archie in substitution.

Lyle Benedix sat on his wide bed next to Dove Gray and put two fingers to his thin lips. "Let me tell you this of Otto Hecht." He waited for his audience to get comfortable then began his story. "He came from Europe to study with me in 1941. As a German, he had a rough time in America. But he didn't care for the war…for politics. He only cared for his illusions. He dabbled in several disciplines. Including Escape Artistry. But he was not…a nimble sort of man. His grace was not in his flexibility, but in his speed. I encouraged him to try disguises. It might help him evade the Nazis when he returned to Germany, should he choose. Halfway through his training, the immigration authorities arrived at my doorstep. They deported him that very afternoon. There had been a problem with his paperwork. Some typist had made a mistake. As Otto left…still untrained and slightly scared…I tried to predict if he would be all right. He was a good man twenty years ago, but the changes in Germany were affecting him. He was becoming…disillusioned. That's a terrible thing for a magician to become. Magicians…they live on hope. They live on understanding the workings of the world. To have horror revealed…it changes a man's heart. I knew as he left that afternoon that if I were to ever see him again, he would not be the same." Benedix took a long breath. "I don't think I'll go to the performance tonight. No, I'm too tired of all this. I'll stay and protect the book. Yes. Protect the book. Maybe see some friends."

The front door of the shop opened and there was a jingle of the overhead bell.

Benedix snapped his fingers. "Customers," he said, and left through the red curtain to the interior of his shop. In a few moments, the voices of two young boys could be heard asking about gunpowder tricks. Benedix, with good nature in his voice, led the boys to the shelves and taught them a trick or two.

In the enclosure, Archie, his aunt, and his uncle said nothing. They were deep in concentration, mulling over Benedix's dire assessment of his former pupil.

THE EMPTY BELL

Doctor Ottokar Hecht arrived back at his tiny 58th Street hotel and found his future waiting. All the way down 5th Avenue, he had heard news seller after news seller barking about the bank robbery and 'your invisible man.' It thrust Hecht into the depths of despair. When he pushed open the doors of the hotel and was waved over by the nebbish concierge, he had one last hope that his waiting message would be redemption. Instead, a retraction. The end of things.

> DR. HECHT:
> YOUR PERFORMANCE HAS BEEN CHANGED. WE'LL ONLY NEED TWENTY MINUTES. LONG TERM ENGAGEMENT IN RAPID CITY, SD, BEGINS FRIDAY NIGHT. YOUR TRAVEL ARRANGEMENTS HAVE BEEN MADE. WILL DISCUSS IT WITH YOU AFTER TONIGHT'S PERFORMANCE.
> THE OFFICES OF PETER DISNEY, ESQ.

Just hours before showtime, he had officially been relegated to an opening act with a truncated time, and limited expectations for greatness. Tomorrow, he would be en route to Siberia, or the North American equivalent, where he would perform to crowds of twenty in smoky hotel dining rooms. His great re-invention would instead be more of the same, with one crushing new development: Anders Matten would be a star. The Dutchman would enter the ranks of the great illusionists. Books would be written about his life and his escapes and, of course, his triumphant New York City debut.

Hecht had seen the show posters as well. There wasn't a single wood board in the last fifteen blocks that didn't hold the harbinger of his future. Hecht's title was in the smallest typeface possible to still remain legible. Many posters were the victims of rolled edges, rolled up to smear

the ink and, like rain on a sidewalk chalk, ruin his good name.

Ever since he had set fire to the Mulberry Theater, he knew that Matten would have the best of him. He had arrived early to stake out the location. Something in Archie Gray's manner told him the time of the photo session was a lie. The boy was not to be trusted. Archie Gray had met Anders Matten first and, therefore, was his ally. Plus, the boy's aunt was once married to Henry Gore. It was two against one. Hecht would be the loser in the competition for the boy's truthful tongue.

Arriving early at the Mulberry Theater proved his own undoing, though. He had already heard voices as he entered through the rear door, ajar, left so by Archie Gray the day before. So instead of climbing the spiral stairs, he stayed buried in the space below the stage, near the unlit gas lamps. Through the cracks of the trapdoors, Hecht could see thin light from above. Taking a position in the orchestra pit, in the blackest part of the furthest corner, he watched as Anders Matten and his men demonstrated their trick of invisibility to the empty theater. He assumed they were waiting, as Hecht was, for the arrival of Archie Gray to take their picture. In the meantime, they would use the hours to hone their skills. He watched as the Russians lifted Matten into the air, covered him in robes, and removed them to reveal the man's upper half, vanished. It was completely seamless, this illusion. Hecht had never seen anything quite like it. And neither did the one man who sat in the audience.

"Bravo! Bravo!" cried Peter Disney, his cigar between his teeth. The man's applause carried into Hecht's ears and he had to cover them – the promoter's praise and the troupe's enthusiasm undoing Hecht's strings.

Matten spoke his terms: headlining status, additional funding for a tour, the Russians on his permanent staff. Peter – always the businessman – tried to negotiate. "It's a great trick, Anders, but how will you get the crowds? That's the only thing I care about. And I'm short one act with Gore in the hospital. If I can pack this theater on the night of

next week's performance, it might be something. But how can you guarantee it?"

Matten spoke plainly. "I have a plan. You'll have to trust me. This one performance will be the event of the year. Everyone will want a ticket. I'm even thinking this theater may be a tad too small. You, me, my men…we'll all will make a lot of money. I stake my reputation on it."

In fifteen minutes, the four of them would be gone, and the lower rafters of the Mulberry would be on fire. It was a simple bit of arson in a theater so old and full of code violations. The gas lamps were switched off, but there was combustible residue, and plenty of dry rope. And Hecht had a set of matches. His plan wasn't murder, but to destroy the venue. Disney would have to relocate and this would buy Hecht time to discover how Matten succeeded in this illusion.

The only inconvenience was Archie Gray witnessing Hecht as he fled the scene. He would have to do something about that. However, the next day he received his first note from the concierge: VENUE CHANGED TO NEW YORK OPERA HOUSE, SAME DAY AND TIME. MORE DETAILS TO FOLLOW. THE OFFICES OF PETER DISNEY, ESQ. It had all been for nothing. He had rung an empty bell. The promoter had just gone and found another site for the show, destroying his hopes of delay and discovery of a better illusion than Matten's invisibility.

Now completely sunk, Hecht took the hotel elevator to the third floor. With his key in one hand, the crumpled message from Disney in the other, he dragged his feet until he reached his door.

Inside his room, sat a man.

"I've been waiting for you," the man said and smiled.

Hecht almost didn't recognize him. He was out of his white uniform and looking more regal that he had when he served aboard the ship. Gordon Serkis…was alive!

RETURN OF A DEAD MAN

"Surprised ta see me?" said Serkis as he crossed his legs and leaned back in his chair. He wore a black suit and a Fedora hat. His fingers had rings and his shoes were newly shined. Hecht had forgotten the smallness of the man, his shrunken features, his heavy Greek moustache and his fat, worm-like eyebrows.

Hecht dropped his key and the concierge note onto the floor and quickly shut the door. "You're alive!" he said urgently. "I thought you had been pushed over the side of the ship!"

Serkis nodded. "That's a true statement. Pushed by that foul beggar, Anders Matten. He nearly killed me, you know? Lucky fer me I knew of a spot just below the aft of the ship. A special place. Somewhere I could slip inside. My foot caught on the edge of it and I was able to swing myself to safety."

Hecht crossed the hotel room and sat on the edge of the bed. He hadn't removed his coat, but instead leaned into the living Gordon Serkis with awe. "Do you know why Anders Matten tried to kill you?" he asked. "Do you? It's because he thought you to be, in fact, me."

"Oh, I know all about it," said Serkis casually. "I spent the last bit of the voyage spying. I watched as you and that Henry Gore searched the ship. I listened as my former crewmates pronounced me dead. I searched for Anders Matten as well, but he either kept moving, or he found a very good hiding place. He had my book of maps of the ship's interior, something I inherited from that orphan boy, so I got lost from time to time myself." Serkis took a long pause and gave a dead stare. "I watched," he said slowly to Hecht's nose, "as you pushed your friend, that American, from the platform…" Serkis raised his thick eyebrows, his expression not nearly as severe as his pronouncement.

Hecht pushed his finger into Serkis's face. "You say one word about that and I'll wring your neck."

Serkis shushed the magician with a wave of his hand. "Not to worry. I've got secrets as well. I've been following

your progress, Doctor Hecht. You haven't done so well since hitting the harbor. I know all about Archie Gray, his aunt, your circumstance. Everything. I'm getting to be a very good spy."

"Spy? But to what end?"

"Doctor," said Serkis, infusing the word with spit, "I was a crewmember on that ship for most'a my life. Do you think I enjoyed grovelin', runnin' after towels, helpin' passengers avoid nausea? No, sir. When I discovered the invisible boy on our ship, I decided to befriend him for one reason only: I thought he might lead me to more tunnels…tunnels *off* the ship. The ones on the Lady Elizabeth were very limited. And if I had played *those* tunnels to my advantage, I would have lost everything. I'd never be able to steal from a guest's room and then just *leave.* They'd catch me in customs. It was no way to acquire wealth. But the boy was onto something. I was just biding my time. I was very patient."

"I'll agree to that."

Serkis smiled. He drew his fingers across his moustache. "Years, yes, but it worked. When Anders Matten threw me overboard, I thought it was the end, but it was only the beginning. Mr. Matten knew a lot more about what was on shore than I did. Following him led me to this…" From the pocket of his black jacket, Serkis withdrew a three-folded sheet of dark paper. He wrung the corner and opened the face for Hecht to see. "This," he said clearly, pointing to the professional diagram, "is a complete set of plans for the New York Opera House."

Hecht took the paper up in both his hands. He squinted and tried to read the etchings. At last, he turned the paper back around to Serkis. "What's this red line?" he asked.

Serkis went forward and put his hands on both knees. "An invisibility tunnel." He focused straight into the doctor's eyes. When his message was understood, he leaned back into the brace of the chair.

"An invisibility *tunnel*?" Hecht returned his eyes to the diagram. With a finger, he traced the map, the red line. At

last, he let out a long, excited breath. His heart was racing. "Meine Himmel. Dieses ist unglaublich!"

"It certainly is." The two men sat in appreciation.

"That's how it's done? You crawl into a tunnel?"

"A tunnel. They're everywhere. All over New York. And also on my former ship. In most of the older buildings of the world. Maybe they were spun by spiders, aye? Maybe engineers? But they're there for the taking."

"Where did you get this map?"

"It was in a book. Matten stole the book on Friday and returned it Sunday morning, just before the owner stepped into the room. When I eavesdropped on Peter Disney at his hotel last Sunday night, I heard him get the news about the theater fire, and change the venue." Serkis gave the German a wink. "Nicely done." This comment made Hecht even more uncomfortable. Serkis continued, "I snuck back to find the book and the map fer the Opera House. I didn't want Matten ta have it. Without it, his show would be a failure. That would be good revenge for his shove, aye? Later, though…I learned he already copied the diagrams of all the theaters, anyplace where there could be a performance. He was thorough in 'is research. I tore the page out because the book's owner was close at hand and I didn't have time to make a copy for me'self." Serkis paused. "And I stole it…fer you."

Hecht looked down at the map. Here was his salvation, handed to him by a dead man. He couldn't believe his luck! "All you have to do," instructed Serkis, "is put on your greatest show. I want that man dwarfed. I want him forgotten, as a mere blip in radar. He tried to kill me. That's not forgotten easily, not at'all. Not by a type like me. I want all the glory to go to you. If you do this, I'll get you more maps. I promise."

"Matten's copies, or the originals?"

Serkis nodded at the distinction. "Even better. The full account. Maps of all the cities in the world. Because I think I know where they are hidden. I'll even give you a clue, to keep you guessin'. It has to do with a Red Bird."

DRESSING ROOM PREPARATIONS

Peter Disney paced the floor of the Opera House dressing room. The New York Opera House staff had provided him with everything he had requested: six bottles of champagne, eight bottles of vodka, a chauffer-driven towncar (parked in the alley below), and a full stage crew, who were at that very minute making the final adjustments to the light and curtains. Forty-five minutes from now, Doctor Hecht, Master of Disguise would be taking the boards for a short run of his best disguises. Disney doubted very much that Hecht's show would translate to such a large venue. The man was all well and good on the stages of small theaters, and festivals, and the crumbing houses of European burlesque, but the 1200-seat Opera House? Probably not. It would be difficult to see the skill of Hecht's disguises, his good humor, his ability to be in two places at once on the stage, his subtle shadings with scrims and screens and mirrors. Though Disney's hired crew had placed all Hecht's devices, his trunks, and his accoutrements in the way shown in the pre-show diagram, they seemed smaller on the Opera House stage. Dwarfed. It was a wrong choice for an opening act and Peter Disney knew it.

Even Henry Gore, bless his soul, would fail in this environment. Cards tricks are best done up close. You can only do so much with spotlights.

With the reinvention of Anders Matten, Peter Disney finally had something that could take a larger place in the American halls. He knew the man had potential, but he never expected such a full circle rebirth. On that Sunday afternoon when Anders had invited him to the Mulberry Theater, he didn't know what he might expect. The baseline of his former illusions – the Barrel Trick, the Two Pistols, the Oblong Box – were mostly likely on the bill. These escapes were well practiced and easily taught to the Russians. Two weeks at sea and the subsequent time at harbor wasn't enough opportunity to create new skills. It would be the act as before, adding maybe one or two new flourishes. With Henry Gore in a hospital and Doctor

Hecht strangely incommunicado, to be telephoned at his London office with such an urgent message caught Disney off guard.

I HAVE LEARNED
HOW TO BECOME
INVISIBLE.

COME TO NEW YORK.
SEE (OR NOT SEE)
FOR YOURSELF.

Disney was on the very next airplane. Now, after a week's preparation, the show was set and the house sold out. He never thought it possible – a B-list magic act to become so popular. He didn't agree with all Matten's secrecy and strangeness, but when he saw the headline of the evening paper, he knew he had been right to trust the Dutchman. Even the fire, which, for a time, he suspected that Matten had started, he had grown to blame the condition of venue itself.

"I know you're in the room," Disney said softly, not really expecting an answer. That's how he had first been tricked. It was frightening, at first, to be visited by such a ghost. Then, after ten minutes of the act and a full appearance by his invisible man, he knew. He knew it was a trick and just that. One he couldn't figure out, but a trick nonetheless. *"It's incredible!"* he had exclaimed, seated in the rows of the Mulberry Theater staring open-mouthed to the point of embarrassment. *"Bravo! Bravo! You were right. You were absolutely and utterly right. It's the greatest illusion in history!"* So here, again, in Anders Matten's dressing room, he suspected, once more, that he was being watched. He repeated his statement. "I know you're in the room." There was no answer.

At last, a knock came on the dressing room door.

Disney jumped like a child. He straightened his tie and smoothed his thinning hair with a float of his palm.

"Come in," he said, collected.

The door opened and there, without trick or artifice, was Anders Matten, alone.

"I was worried," said Disney. "I thought you weren't coming."

Matten entered. He wore his show costume, the same as in Europe but modified to include more sequins and a wider cape. Matten said nothing. The stocky man threw his gloves down on the small table of the dressing room and gave a wide grin. "It has happened, hasn't it?" he asked with certainty.

Peter Disney nodded. He put out his hand to be shaken. "Congratulations, Anders. A sell out. I even sold all the press and complimentaries."

The two firmly gripped hands for a moment – tightly, gladly.

"You're in danger, you know," remarked Disney. "I've seen the papers. There's a manhunt. I bet it ends here, at the Opera House."

"I think it will be a case of mistaken identity," answered Matten with a wink.

"I hope you have things under control. This is very risky, attaching my name to a suspected criminal. I suppose there's no success without risk, but, in my career, this is the furthest I've gone past posters and word-of-mouth to promote a show."

Matten took a seat on the long sofa in the center of the dressing room. He surveyed the lighted mirrors, all three rounded by bright, fat bulbs circling their perimeters. The opposite wall was cloaked in red curtains. The far door opened to a gleaming white toilet and sink with cream-colored tiles and deep green trim. "This is the finest dressing room I've had in my entire career!" said Matten, very pleased. "It's an improvement over venues like that Mulberry Theater, that tinder box."

"Yes, it's nice, isn't it? There are towels and sheets in the linen closet. There's a bath. This sofa is also a bed if you want to spend the night. But somehow I think you're beyond that now – sleeping in the dressing room because you can't afford a room at a hotel." Disney was leading

Matten, flattering him. The escape artist understood the implication. He'd be seeing a lot more of this treatment. It was part compliment and part parental direction. Matten had gotten used to this from Disney over the decades. "I'm going to go and make sure everything is set to go out front," said the agent, who moved to the room's exit.

Matten stretched out on the sofa and placed his hands behind his head, infinitely comfortable. "I will, as they say in American films, lay low."

"Good idea." Disney, with his right hand on the brass knob of the dressing room door, stopped. "Did you see Doctor Hecht when you came in?"

"Have not seen him in a week."

"I hope he got my message. The hotel says he picked it up. Beware, Anders, he might be in a foul mood. I've cut his act by twenty minutes. More time for you. You don't mind, do you?"

Matten shut his eyes. "Not in the slightest." Stealing time from Hecht made him smile broadly. Soon, he heard the open and close of the dressing room door and, for a minute, there was nothing but black silence.

A creak came from the direction of the toilet.

Matten ignored it.

A second creak, followed by a squeak of the tub, as a shoe touched the well-waxed basin.

Matten sat upright on the sofa and guided his gaze to the cracked toilet door. "Who's there?" he asked, aggression in his voice. As seconds passed without sound, he began to feel heavy, sinking, as if he had swallowed a large stone.

He knew. He knew it then. Someone else was in the room. "Who's there!" he called.

There was another, barely detectable squeak in the tub's basin and then, from his limited angle, he saw a trouser-covered leg lift up and over the bathtub, the shoe dropping with the smooth grace of a grasshopper. A tan suited arm appeared next, followed by a set of fingers.

Matten's hands shot into his pocket. He quickly wrested out the Opera House tunnel diagram and unfolded it into his hands. His eyes went straight to the spot – his

dressing room, and the clear markings of an invisibility tunnel leading from above the bathtub and into the room. Matten was on his feet, shouting, "No!"

The face he least expected to see appeared in his dressing room and became fully visible.

Doctor Hecht,

eyes narrowed, wearing a bit of surprise himself, his bald head and his wrinkled clothes, the results of his tunnel crawl, made a leap into the dressing room.

The look on Hecht's face immediately registered with Matten. Anger. Anger and hatred.

With all the force in his body, Hecht tackled Matten where he stood and forced him flat to the Oriental rug. Hecht's heavier body weighted down on his chest and the Dutchman was quickly pinned. Matten's three right-hand fingers held onto the tunnel map loosely.

"How do you *know*? How do you know how it's done?" repeated Anders on the brink of frustrated tears. It was only a half-hour until his great show was to begin, and now this! Discovery! "You're…you're too big for the tunnels," Matten said with a struggle. Hecht's kneecap buried itself into Matten's stomach, making it difficult for him to breath.

"Apparently I'm just under the weight limit," smiled Hecht as he crushed into Matten's arm, causing the man to howl as the map dropped free. Hecht left it where it lay and reached up his hand. The German held a towel that he had yanked from the shower's linen rack. Quickly, and with great struggle, he forced the cotton tip into Anders Matten's mouth, stopping his tongue and any more words of objection.

"Yes, yes!" said Hecht with glee. "There's been an informer. Apparently, someone doesn't know the golden rule: a magician," he said loudly, "never tells his secrets!" Hecht raised his fist and took a broad stroke across Matten's face. His knuckles landed on his cheek and a large welt immediately appeared.

Matten blacked out…

* * *

When Matten regained consciousness, Hecht was nowhere in sight. The towel clogged Matten's mouth. He attempted to bend at the hips and lift his arms, but he couldn't do either. His body had been wrapped, cocoon-like, in one of the white sheets from the linen shelf. He rolled one complete revolution and struck his head on the bottom brace of the sofa. Hecht must have heard this, as he came running out of the toilet.

"No, no, no," he said, as a parent, admonishing. He bent down and re-tucked a bit of sheet that had come loose in Matten's roll.

Matten tried to speak, but the towel was too full against his tongue. He thought to himself: *I could get out of the sheet with a wriggle of the shoulders and a bit of escape artistry, but not with Hecht standing over me.* He just needed thirty seconds. Only half-a-minute and he'd be back on his feet, ready for a fight.

Then he heard the sound of running water, distant.

Hecht returned quickly to the bathroom.

Matten struggled, but only had ten seconds before Hecht returned to the room, the bathroom's small utility bucket in his hands. Bending over, the German poured water onto the sheet, dousing the upper half of Matten's body. Matten felt the sheet tighten around his shoulders, shrinking and sticking with wetness. Hecht returned for another fill of the bucket. Quickly, he loaded the container with running bathwater and, within a minute's time, Hecht had made three more pours onto the wrapped sheet. With each douse, Matten felt his body grow colder and more constricted. This was bad, he could tell. His arms pushed to breaking.

The Wet Sheet Test.

That old trick sprung on traveling escape artists.

It was the one escape even Houdini found difficult. No straight-jacket or barrel illusion could match an escape from the immobilizing sheet, soaked with water, suctioned to fit every curve of the escapist's body, no matter the shape

or size of the man. In only a few moments, the entire sheet had been soaked, along with his clothes and his cape.

"There," said Hecht with satisfaction as he finished. "If only I were a real doctor. I'd give you a sedative. I just hope this keeps you still for an hour. Just until I finish my act. I'd break your neck if I didn't think it'd be too easily traced back to me. Maybe another time, Anders." Hecht bent down and snatched up the fallen tunnel map. He stood a moment, examining it. "Ah ha!" he said, leaning over and pointing to the marked tunnel through the dressing room's toilet. "Just as I was told." Hecht stood upright and smiled a devilish, knowing smile. He took out the original map given to him by Serkis. "But mine is much better," he said, holding up both maps side by side. He read the Dutchman's eyes – envy and confusion with every blink. With a match from his pocket, Hecht burned the hand-drawn map of Matten's, watching as the fragments of paper glowed and then withered, falling to the Oriental rug in black tatters. Hecht stamped out the last of the ash. "You can just wait here until after the final applause," he said curtly. "Shame that you'll miss it, Anders. It will be a great performance by Doctor Hecht…as his own…invisible man."

Ignoring the muffled curses and shouts of his rival, Hecht pocketed the original Opera House map, left Matten on the floor, and locked the dressing room door from the inside as he went to make his preparations. *Ten minutes to curtain. Mustn't be late.*

THE OPERA HOUSE

Suzette O'Connor tightly grasped her show ticket. Beside her, Mr. Johns shuffled his feet nervously. The queue in front of them was enormous. It wrapped around the entire Opera House, ending at a midpoint of the street, which had to be blocked off by the police. Much longer than the original ticket line, this queue included hangers-on and passers-by offering large sums of money to anyone who would forfeit their ticket.

Suzette also noted the swarms of patrolmen dressed in their blue uniforms and surrounding the venue. She carefully scouted the men for anyone familiar – someone like Captain Timkins, or any of the other jailers or detectives that had haunted her these last two days. She saw no one. It was only duty men, funneling the crowd and the traffic.

"Where is Archie?" she asked sadly.

Johns shook his head. "I waited here since you left me. I haven't seen a soul. No one of interest, anyway. As far as I know, everyone's still lost. The pursuers and the pursued, both."

"You're not very comforting."

"No," he agreed. "I'm not."

Suzette's face went back to the crowd. Halfway through her pan of the show-goers, her eyes widened. He had been conjured like a ghost. "Archie!" she called out, overflowing with excitement.

Johns heard the name and turned. Both of their faces lit like floodlights as they spotted Archie Gray on the very far sidewalk, crossing to meet them. Archie, at the sound of Suzette's voice, raised his chin and started to jog in her direction. He approached the two in line, his new camera swung around his neck.

Suzette wanted to call his name again, only louder. But it would draw the attention of the police. When he was beside her, Suzette threw her arms over Archie's shoulders and kissed his cheek. "Archie, Archie! Are you okay?

Where have you been? Come into the crowd. If you're seen you'll be arrested!"

Though he didn't want to, Archie broke from her strong clasp around him, confirming that the camera hadn't been crushed by her forceful show of emotion, and allowed himself to be moved into the anonymity of the queue. "I'm all right," he said with strength.

Johns came forward. He, too, was in high spirits, better spirits than Archie had seen the man exhibit up until that moment. After all, he had never been this glad to see Archie whenever he visited the *Englander* offices. "Speak up, Archie. We've got a lot to tell you, and you're probably in the same boat."

"I am, but not now," he replied quickly and under his breath. "I *can* tell you that we found my auntie. She's safe. Look…" Archie gave a sly point to a corner of a neighboring New York building. Standing beside a fruit stand, camouflaged by the gathering crowd for the Invisible Man's performance, were two more bodies everyone recognized:

> Dove Gray, wearing a long formal dress covered by a winter coat and wide-brimmed hat to hide her features. She gave a small, duck-like wave to Johns and Suzette. Her smile showed no fear or deviousness, only welcoming relief. She was as happy to see them as they were to see her.
>
> Beside Dove stood her husband, Roman Rollo, who took his wife's hands and turned her around as three policemen passed on the sidewalk.

"You see," continued Archie, "right as rain. Now we just have to get into the show. Uncle Roman's been trying to buy tickets with a fat wad of Auntie's money, but no one's giving them up. She's also a friend of the show's promoter, a man named Peter Disney. If we could find him,

he might be able to give us complimentary tickets. Our last resort is to wait until the line moves and then slip inside."

Johns's face suddenly colored with concern. "You'll never make it past the security," he said doubtfully. He reached into the inner pocket of his suit jacket and withdrew the two spare show tickets. "I bought two extra. You'll need a third, but take them anyway. Two's better than none. I suggest you don't trust anyone now, not even your Mr. Disney. Nobody except the five of us. Oh, and I found Henry Gore, by the way."

Archie smiled. "Good. But Aunt Dove has already told me. She visited him. She used to be his magician's assistant when she was in her twenties."

Johns's mouth dropped open. "That *minx*," he said, and cocked his eye to Dove Gray. The show handbill found under Henry Gore's mattress now made much more sense to Johns. He padded his pockets for the playing cards. He would need to return them to her at the earliest convenience.

Suzette put her hand to Archie's cheek, softly. "We'll meet here after the show. Right here. You should get out of sight with the others." Dropping her hand, Suzette gave Archie a kiss on his cheek. The boy smiled, uncertain. His eyes went back to Aunt Dove. Even at this distance and half-covered by a hat, he saw his aunt's mouth curl with happiness. "Oh, *let* her see," said Suzette dismissively. She leaned forward and kissed his mouth. Turning into his ear, she whispered, "They found your photograph at the bank, with the money. I won't tell them it was your picture." Suzette pulled away, a sly look in her eyes.

Archie held the two tickets firmly in his hand. He nodded to Suzette, thankful. With a gallop, he was off towards the fruit stand.

Johns turned to the girl. "I'm glad everyone's safe. Things could have turned out very badly. A magician's assistant? Suzette, I learn something new about our boss every single moment I'm in her employ."

"Yes, me too," she sighed back.

A sudden breeze struck their part in the line. A wide and serious parade of men passed right in front of their faces. Men in hats and heavy wool, men in buttoned blue uniforms, men in knee-length trench coats, all marched together towards the closed doors of the Opera House. Like a stuck gear, one man put on his breaks and let the rest pile past, as he turned, with only a hint of surprise, and addressed Johns and Suzette. "Ah ha! I figured the two of you would find a way here. I'm gonna make a note of that."

"Captain Timkins," said Mr. Johns, tired.

"That's right. The man who's gonna crack this case. See these men? We're here to grab that thief the moment he reveals himself to be the invisible man. You don't rob a bank and get away with it. Not even for publicity. It's just not the American way."

"Have you got an arrest warrant?" asked Suzette.

Captain Timkins pursed his lips. "Not…no. It's being reviewed. The judge, it seems, has been a little hard to convince. But we'll have it in time. The performance lasts an hour. We'll have it by the end. If the Invisible Man is fool enough to show his face, and show us the proof of his identity, he'll be in irons before he can pull another of his vanishing acts."

"You'd do this in front of a sold out crowd?" Johns was skeptical. There were politics at work here. He could smell it. In the magazine business, politics were always a part of the process.

"Yes," answered Timkins, confidently. "My men will do what they have to do."

Johns thought he detected a moment of hazy doubt in the captain's eyes, but it passed, just as the captain did, with a nod, joining with his men. Suzette watched as the captain banged on the Opera House door until admitted inside by unseen proprietors.

"He'll do it," said Johns. "He'll break up the show if he has to. If he gets that arrest warrant in time, Anders Matten better clear out. Otherwise, his little publicity stunt will get him twenty years."

Suzette turned. "Do you really want him to get away?"

Johns considered. "I don't know. He may have done some bad things. But I don't know if he's a menace to society."

"But he hurt Henry Gore."

"We don't know that for certain."

Suzette pursed her lips. She, too, did not know how she felt about Anders Matten. She only knew how she felt about Archie Gray.

Archie, returning to the fruit stand, blushed.

"I saw her give you a kiss, you lucky boy," remarked his aunt in singsong.

"Yeah, maybe. Let's talk about it later. We've got other things to focus on."

"Focus," said his aunt with humor. "You're such a photographer. You know, when this is over, you're going to take all of my pictures, you know that? All of them. You'll be the star of the magazine. Would you like that?"

Archie looked to the crowd around the Opera House. He looked to Roman Rollo, who raised his chin, wanting to hear Archie's answer. "We'll see. I don't think magazine photos will be nearly as exciting as freelance." He gave his aunt a wink. From his pocket, he withdrew the two show tickets. "Mr. Johns thought ahead. He bought two extra tickets."

"We'll need one more," said Roman.

Dove nodded. "Once we're inside the lobby, maybe someone would fetch Peter Disney for us."

Roman shook his head. "You two can't just waltz up to the box office. I'm sure they have your pictures posted – one of you is missing and the other is a wanted man. I'll do it. I'll ask around for him." It was decided.

At seven-forty in the evening, the line started to move inside the Opera House. Her hat pulled close, her husband and nephew shielding their faces, Dove led them into the thick line of theatergoers. Kinetic energy filled the plaza; Archie could feel their excitement. Conversations erupted, speculations – everyone had heard of the return of the

money and theories flew past Archie's ears as firm as the late December wind. A light coating of snow started so that by the time the three reached the doors of the Opera House, the shoulders of their coats were freckled with white. They entered, along with the rush, into the wide lobby, stamping boots and dusting shoulders.

The lobby was much different here than the Mulberry Theater. High and wide marble pillars stretched from the floor to the ceiling. Dual staircases wound up towards the loge and the first balcony, then up again to the second balcony and the private boxes. The ambient sounds of the hall – voices and footsteps, laughter and the calls of the ushers – rose to a deafening clatter as the vaulted ceiling angled sound down at those first entering. A systematic line of velvet ropes and ticket takers blocked further entrance. To the right, the sign read "Guest Service" over an inset grill and window.

"I'll ask for Peter Disney," volunteered Roman, who stepped away from the other two and got into the short line of exclusive .

Archie and Dove watched him move forward and tried to stay hidden near the heaviest blocks of people in the foyer. Archie spotted Captain Timkins and his men straddling the staircases and the aisle entrances, with sharp eyes to spot trouble, or their fugitives. "It'll be difficult to get to our seats," said Archie with worry.

"Yes," his aunt agreed. "We'll have to be careful."

Archie lifted the camera from his neck and tucked it under his coat, so it would not be seen. The pants were loose on his body, being Mr. Benedix's, and overflowing at the cuffs. However, those disadvantages worked well to hide the bulkiness of the camera from being seen when he would pass through the ropes.

Roman was in a conversation with the Guest Service worker. He looked back at them and frowned. Slowly, he turned and, as if lost, wandered back in their direction.

"Disney's backstage and asked not to be disturbed," Roman reported.

They stood dumb. People passed them and, for a snap, Archie felt very jealous of their easy move from the foyer into the lobby. "One of us will have to wait outside until the performance is over."

Dove and Archie's eyes fell on Roman.

"I suppose I'm the natural choice," he conceded. His good manners about the sacrifice were clouded with disappointment. However, he took his position well. "I want the two of you to be as careful as you can. Do not get involved unless absolutely necessary. Do you hear me? Stay out of trouble. I won't be there to protect either of you."

Both nodded, understanding the advice to be true.

Dove gave her husband a long kiss. "Thank you," she said. "You're such a wonderful man." Taking her nephew's hand, she walked with Archie towards the ropes and to the furthest, most crowded ticket taker.

Roman, left behind, melted into the crowd. A fish going against stream, he worked his way outside of the hall.

Easily, Dove and Archie were through the ticket line, their stubs torn in half by a young volunteer. The hard part was next. It was impossible not to notice the lines of policemen – plain-clothed and uniformed men, hawk-eyes, watching for familiar faces.

Suddenly, Roman returned to the lobby foyer. He had had a brilliant idea. He spotted Dove and Archie across the lobby, shielding their faces as best they could, but mere seconds from being spotted by Timkins, who scanned the crowd from the banister leading to the loge. Roman knew what he had to do. "The Invisible Man!" he shouted into the echo of the lobby. "He's just brushed by my shoulder!"

It took only the one call. Those around him flitted and rotated in all directions, they, too, feeling for signs of another body in the crowd. "I felt him, too!" called a young boy, then a woman. A scream came from a older man in a pea coat. "Something touched me!" Timkins and his men raced to the spot.

Roman bent at the knees and found a hole in the legs of the incoming swell. He wasn't able to see Archie or his

wife any longer, but he heard the scuffle inside became a greater and greater distraction. He crossed his fingers, both sets, and swam into the falling snow outside the Opera House, into the clear night air, and joined the hundred of others outside on the plaza, those who wanted to be present, but did not have a ticket.

FILM

Past the police, into the aisle, swallowed by the heavy camouflage of the dimly lighted theater, Dove and Archie spotted Suzette and Johns, already seated. Archie, separated from Dove by a large-framed female, had to brake in the aisle, exposed, while Dove continued towards the seats.

A hand reached out
and grabbed Archie's wrist, tugging him.

"Ow," he said, quickly putting strength into his arm and jerking it, easily breaking from the clutch.

The face. He recognized it. That brittle but biting hand belonged to an old man: Lyle Benedix, dressed in his same clothes from the shop that morning. He looked pale and flustered. "Archie," he said to in a hot whisper.

"Mr. Benedix. How did you get in? I thought you were staying behind to guard the book."

"I changed my mind. How can I miss a good magic show? It's my line of work. I've hidden the book in a safe place and some friends have shown me how to get back into the Opera House." Benedix sucked his cheeks and chewed his fingers. "I've got to tell you something," he said. "That camera I gave you. It's not a real camera. It won't take any film. I just found that out tonight. I ran into the man who made it."

"No film?"

"No. The spring is welded on the back. It's just a lens. I told him I gave away his camera and he seemed to think that was pretty funny."

Archie wore his disappointment on his face. He had purchased a roll of 35mm film on the way to the Opera House. Now he had snuck the camera into the theater for no reason.

"Keep it close, though," added Benedix with a wink. "It might come in handy." Benedix looked to the archway of the theater. Two policemen had taken up position on either

side. "I'm putting you in danger," said the old man with a firm pat on Archie's shoulder. "Just…do what you must."

Archie looked to the policemen. When his eyes returned to the aisle, Benedix was gone.

Back down the row, still shading his face so as not to be recognized, Archie took his chair next to Aunt Dove. Mr. Johns was handing her a deck of playing cards, which she did not comment on and quickly put into her handbag.

"That was Lyle Benedix," Archie said into his aunt's ear when she was finished.

"I know," she confirmed, nodding. "I saw him speaking with you. Lyle Benedix is a very wise man, Archie. He is the one who gave me the hand-drawn map of the bank. The tip about Central Station. He's got sources. I don't know who or how, but he's a wellspring of information. But, as a true magician, he keeps things very, very quiet. I learned that about him long ago. He won't tell you anything until he's absolutely certain that's the right thing to do."

Archie pulled the gifted camera from his waist. "He's just told me that this camera doesn't work. What do you make of that?"

Dove looked down at the black and chrome camera. "Doesn't work?" She humphed. "Well, it's for a reason, Archie. Don't question it. Maybe it has another use." She looked to the stage, the shut curtain, the seats of the audience almost filled. "Lyle's the one who was in my office and helped me disappear. Did you know that Archie?"

"Into a tunnel?"

"Yes, into a tunnel. Monday he learned that someone had pushed Henry Gore and he suspected I was in danger, too. I'm still not sure who's at fault for Henry's slip. But I intend to find out after the show. I have a lot of questions for that Anders Matten, I can tell you that."

"What makes you think Matten won't just vanish again after the performance?"

Dove tapped her nephew's knee, assuredly. "And ruin his newfound fame? No. He'll be in the spotlight from now

on. I can sense that about a performer." Dove gestured to the packed audience. "This is all very hard to give up."

"*You* gave it up."

She humphed. "I did. And it was the right thing to do. If I hadn't, I would have never come to New York. I would have never started a magazine. I wouldn't have become Dove Gray. I would be the magician's assistant. After my marriage to Henry dissolved, that wasn't the right thing to be."

Archie looked down the row, across Johns, who still was watchful of the crowd, the balconies, the floor, for any signs of trouble. Suzette sat to the man's right, the furthest into the row of the four. She let her bright eyes fall on Archie's. A nod passed between them. He suddenly wished he were holding her hand. But there were chaperones.

Slowly, Archie lifted the camera into his lap and checked his surroundings. With a kick of his feet, he slid down in his seat, for greater discretion, and slowly brought the camera's viewfinder up to his right eye.

The arched ceiling of the Opera House came into focus, the pale plaster, the support struts, the old world designs spiraling together as the precise work of trained craftsmen. The ceiling blended into a holistic design, a tranquil dome. Archie raised the camera higher, to the chandeliers, to the tips of the private balconies.

He saw something extraordinary.

Held suspended in the ceiling, as trained acrobats on invisible tethers, were dozens of men, women, ambitious boys, young girls, all with private seats for the show. They were small people wearing practical clothes, held inside the casings of the invisible tunnels like the fillings of sausages. With the lens's help, Archie could see the faint spindles of the tunnel's outlines, the crossing network more complex than he had ever thought possible. The structures wormed their way in patterns from one side of the Opera House to another. It was an entire society of privileged tunnel

dwellers, more sophisticated and versatile than Archie had ever suspected.

A man and a young boy sat together in the tunnel closest to the stage, supported upright in a tight formation, the best seats in the house.

He continued to move the camera up and down, scouting the positions. Towards a lower quadrant, he rested on Lyle Benedix himself, hanging easy from a tunnel beneath the closest balcony box. The old man, now seemed much younger and more agile when gilded by the tunnel. Benedix did indeed have friends – lots of them. The tool, the lens, was in use, and the enormity of the secret had finally been revealed. At that glance, Archie knew that he would never betray the oath. This is a puzzle that must stay in secret. These tracts of human land must remain uncharted. The book of maps in Benedix's shop should be guarded as if a priceless work of art. Only shown to those of the greatest character should know of this other world.

The view through the camera grew dark. The lights were being lowered. The show was about to begin.

SHOWTIME

Suzette could tell from Archie's face that he had witnessed something extraordinary through that camera. His quick glance to her signaled that she should not ask; there was no time. The show was starting. Her focus redirected to the stage. Applause began in the house. Johns did not clap, but Suzette didn't see the harm in participating. Politely, she patted her hands together.

The curtains parted with a painful slowness. Although no one could hear the gears turning, the enormous wheels and their strung ropes heaved open the red curtains, revealing the gaping blackness of the stage. Placed around the stage were various tables, two wardrobes, and a scrim.

A middle-aged man with waxed hair and a tailored suit emerged from the left wing of the stage. In his hands, he dragged a microphone on a stand and positioned the stand near the lip of the stage.

Peter Disney.

"Ladies and gentlemen welcome to our show," he said with more bass in his voice that was naturally present. "My name is Peter Disney. This is going to be a very special night. For the first time ever on stage, the secret of invisibility will be demonstrated. I know you've all been waiting for this. You've seen the posters. You know the stakes." Disney was alluding to the robbery. Archie knew this. As did Timkins. However, the promoter slyly avoided any real mention of the crime. "Our first act tonight is sure to dazzle you. All the way from Germany. I am enchanted to present…Doctor Hecht, Master of Disguise!" Disney turned and walked from the stage, to behind the curtain, leaving his microphone in position.

From behind the scrim, a light showed, casting the shadow of a man. A tall man. The audience's rustling, coughs, and whispers all evaporated, to leave only the distant hum of the heat blowers through the vents of the building. Emerging from the scrim and into the spotlight was a body. Dressed in bandages that bloomed from the neck of an up-turned coat collar and wrapped the head, it

was a play on the James Whale classic film "The Invisible Man," causing the audience to move forwards in their seats with anticipation.

Slowly, the man unwrapped his head dressing until, at the end, with panache, the face of Doctor Hecht was revealed to be…intact! The audience gave an audible sigh and laughter, the gimmick playing off their anticipation for the headliner.

In the furthest corner of the hall, even Captain Timkins chuckled, a Claude Rains fan at heart.

Hecht listened to the first applause of his audience and expanded like a balloon. He began his act, the one the doctor had perfected over decades across the stages of Europe. Peter Disney recognized several bits.

Lyle Benedix, from his perch, also noted a few classic costumes and quick changes, the centerpieces of his early teachings for this long-graduated student.

Hecht changed quickly from disguise to disguise. First, he was a doctor, then a filmstar, then Churchill, then Roosevelt. He popped in and out of the two wardrobes. He wore mustaches and wigs and false limbs and a large amount of pride. His craft *did* carry to a large venue; Peter Disney had been wrong. The crowd was entertained and the man rose in Archie's estimation. On stage, he was not the mysterious villain loose on the streets of New York, working a strange plot against Archie, Suzette, and Anders Matten. He was not a man fleeing from a burning theater. At the Opera House that night, he was simply an experienced performer putting on a brilliant show.

Nearby, Hecht's hired assistant – a young girl in her early twenties – received discarded costumes like she were a human clothing rack. Dove Gray noted the experience of the girl, and it reminded her of those days on stage with Henry. As Dove had once upon a time, the girl looked fetching in her sequined costume, long and lithe with exaggerated hand gestures to carry to the back of the house. Dove would have to speak with her after the show, give her compliments. There were very few that understood the craft of assisting a stage performer.

Ten minutes into the act, a thought came into Peter Disney's head. *He's doing well, that German. It's too bad he'll be forgotten when Matten takes the stage. Tough to be the warm up act, isn't it, Doctor?*

In the dressing room, Anders Matten lay immobilized in the center of the Oriental rug, wound up in the wet sheet like a mummy.

He had managed to move most of the towel out of his mouth. One more push of the tongue and it would drop. He could cry for help. *But who would hear me?* said a voice in his head. The show had started. He could hear the audience, the applause, bleeding through the thin walls of his dressing room. His face burned with the effort to release the towel. One more push and it was clear of his tongue and rolling over itself across his cheek. He breathed rapidly, the rush of clean air into his lungs much needed for his next, inevitable act.

The wet sheet had started to dry, sealing his body inside the sarcophagus. Hecht had done a good job, despite his speed. He had pulled the sheet taught; he had poured over the fabric the right amount of water (too much and Matten could wiggle out from the slickness; too little and the folds wouldn't have any tightness); and Hecht had rolled him on his back, so he couldn't get any leverage underneath.

Rocking back and forth on the carpet, Matten tried to get his shoulder into position. Another round of applause shook his ears and spurred him on. *That's* my *show! He's stealing* my *show!* If Matten didn't appear on stage as was intended, all his efforts since the Lady Elizabeth would be ruined.

He called out, "Help! Help me!" Perhaps the Russians were loitering backstage, in the depths of the Opera House, rather than in their ready positions. He had instructed them to be at either wing, to begin the act.

Matten thought of the map – his hand drawn copy from the book. The map had told of three tunnels, as

columns, straight through the grand stage of the Opera House. This was the perfect venue for his illusion. He could not have planned a better placement of tunnels if he had built them as a stage set. "Help! Help!" he shouted again, louder, letting all the saved air from his lungs pierce the empty hallways of the dressing area.

No one was coming. He would have to break his arm. He had no choice.

Captain Timkins tapped his foot, impatient. It was 8:15, halfway through this opening act. "Fan out," he told the six men who had accompanied him inside the main hall. Three went left, three right. They took up fairly obvious positions under each balcony, distracting the patrons along the outer chairs with their dour and officious manners. Timkins rolled his eyes. He wished they had gone further towards the stage. With a hand signal, he urged them on, until the front two were right against the proscenium. An usher approached one of the men, but was shooed away with the flash of a badge.

Timkins opened the door to the lobby and stepped outside, to where a dozen more of his men stood watch. "Where's that warrant!" he shouted.

A uniformed officer came forward. "They've convinced the judge. He's about to sign the warrant. Then it just has to get across town. We have a car and escort standing by."

Timkins nodded. "Good. Bring it to me the second it arrives. As soon as Matten turns invisible, we'll know he's our man. He'll have to reappear, take a bow or do an encore. Disappearing for good can't be the final trick. It can't. When he reappears, we'll arrest him. Got it?"

His man nodded, but didn't break position. "There's one more thing," said the patrolman. "A dead body has been discovered. Across town. In that Doctor Hecht's hotel room."

Timkins looked grave and returned through the door to the main hall. "Man or woman?"

"A man. We don't have a name yet."

"All right, thank you, patrolman. Bring me any details – and that warrant – the second you have them."

Anders Matten screamed as his shoulder popped out of the socket and he shifted his balance onto the exposed bone. He executed the move, as he had in straight jackets, but this time it was much more painful. He should have broken his shoulder before removing the towel, as it was shameful for an escape artist to have to damage his body this extensively for the sake of an escape.

Sliding a hand from around his back, Matten began wiggling his body – shoulder up, shoulder down. At each movement, searing pain shot through his body, but he also gained a few centimeters with each rotation of his muscles. Matten focused his mind on his fingers, their slowly pushing out the sheet from his body until he could bend at his knuckle. His legs still totally immobile, Matten had to count on his tight stomach to help add pressure to the wet sheet and its folds of overlapping cloth. Tears began to run from his eyes, squeezed tight as he fought his exhaustion and hurt.

Then, twenty minutes into the start of Doctor Hecht's performance, a miracle! The sheet tore along a seam, which had been hastily folded near the flat of his left hand. He used the split to his advantage, quickly working his fingers outside the bundling. In seconds, he was laughing and had shot all four fingers out into the air, where they could better tug on the main fold.

It will only be a few minutes now, he told himself, *and I'll be free...*

Hecht had reached the climax of his show. He could sense the audience, *feel them*, their applause and their attentions were as focused as he had ever experienced. His years in Europe had made him a master of his craft. Now, inspired by the sold out crowd and the circumstance, he was a man possessed. This had been, without a doubt, the

single best performance of his lifetime. He caught sight of Peter Disney's face from behind the curtain. The man nodded with appreciation. There would be a future for him in this country, one beyond Rapid City, South Dakota, or any other minor exhibition performance. He was a *theater* act. He was translating.

But, it would all be forgotten. If Matten were to have his way, the opening act would be inconsequential compared to the greatest trick in the history of magic. Something unexplainable and wildly popular Matten's invisibility might have become if Hecht hadn't worked so hard to secure his own future.

Strangling that Gordon Serkis was nothing. In fact, it felt good having his hands around the man's necks. *The Red Bird*, the man had said, and Serkis had not even realized his mistake until he was nearly out of breath. That clue explained everything Hecht would have needed to locate more maps, the words having a known significance. The purser had played his last card very poorly. He could learn a trick or two from Henry Gore.

And now was the time.

Now.

The climax.

Hecht would perform the trick with the help of the dead boatman's map. He would steal the glory from the headliner, who may be found hours later in his dressing room, trapped while practicing an escape from a wet sheet. Matten's ambition would be his ruin. And the trick of invisibility would be remembered as *Ottokar Hecht's* – not Matten's.

Mine!

Mine!

Hecht floated behind the scrim, removed the powdered wig from his French courtier bit, and took a very filling

breath. He gave a final check of the map he had hidden in his trousers.

He emerged with a smile, wearing only a plain white set of trousers and an undershirt. Then, Hecht stood on one of the chairs and signaled for his hired assistant. She moved closer to him, as instructed. Kicking, the chair spun away into her waiting hands and he jumped onto the top of the center wardrobe.

The audience gasped.

Suzette and Archie both moved forward in their seats.

Hecht opened his arms wide, showing the full stretch of his body as it balanced precariously on the unstable wardrobe. Then. Eyes shut. A leap of faith. Hecht curled into a ball and leaped from the wardrobe. His weight took him back, to the right, and, for a moment, the fall seemed certain to be a mistake resulting in serious personal injury.

Only it didn't.

Hecht…had vanished. In mid-air.

The assistant dropped the chair she held, the wood giving a loud crack as the legs connected with the stage floor.

In the wings, Tom and Jerry swore loudly in Russian.

Archie turned to Dove. He was thunderstruck.

On her face was scorn.

The audience held their tongues. Not a single chair creaked. Not a single cough. The entertaining opening act had just stolen the show.

Peter Disney's shoulder was bumped, hard. He turned to see Anders Matten at his side. "My God, Anders," he said in disgust at the man's condition. "What's happened to you?" The escape artist had ripped open his shirt. His arm, now replaced into the socket, hung oddly. The man kept in great pain, covered in perspiration, desperate.

Matten's eyes went to the stage.

He could see his Russians, who, from the distance, couldn't see the damage to Matten's body, but could see the question in his gesture. Tom and Jerry shrugged, disbelieving.

Timkins moved to the front of the stage, dragging the three officers on the right side of the proscenium with him as he traveled.

A solid minute passed.

Then…

He

was

back.

Applause – deafening, unanimous, like a wind threatening to collapse a house.

Doctor Hecht had appeared at the landing spot on the opposite side of the stage (*the third column! cursed Matten*) in fit and fine condition. He even wore new clothes. A fine suit and tie, knotted just so.

"He's stolen my illusion!" shouted Matten, but no one heard. The crashing applause threatened to collapse the walls.

Archie Gray, with Lyle Benedix's lens, had tracked the last few moments before the doctor's re-appearance. The German had been in a tunnel, not too far from his assistant, winding the necktie around his collar, calm as a kitten.

Hecht was taking a last triumphant bow when Timkins' men stormed the stage. Hecht noticed them too late and was taken completely unawares. He was tackled in front of the entire ticket-buying audience, patches of whom shouted in protests for the brutality of it.

Peter Disney ran at the police, full of vinegar. "What in the name of heaven are you doing! This is *a show*!" Disney tried to pry the first policemen from Hecht, but the man had a solid grip. Soon, the agent, too, was snared by another of the six policemen.

As Captain Timkins approached the live microphone at the lip of the stage, Anders Matten shrunk into the corner curtains. Timkins tapped the microphone, sending a boom through the hall. "Is this thing on? Good, good. Where's my warrant!" he shouted with an urgent finger to the open lobby doors at the rear of the hall.

Two uniformed patrolmen raced down the center aisle of the Opera House, one carrying a blue envelope in his hand. When they reached the orchestra pit, they handed the envelope over the gap into Timkins waiting hands. Timkins tore the envelope open. The rip sounded through the address system. "Yeah. Yes," said the captain, satisfied. "You're under arrest, *Mister Invisible Man*."

Peter Disney crossed and snatched the warrant out of the captain's hand. Before it could be grabbed back, Disney read the name on the arrest warrant. "This is for Anders Matten. You've got the wrong man."

The captain shrugged it off. "We'll arrest them both, then. Where's Matten?" Eyes shot around the stage. Policemen drifted to the corners, one landing right where Peter Disney had last seen his headlining act.

"Stop!" called out a patrolman, who began to run toward the rear curtain.

The two Russians were lifting Anders onto their shoulders and running full tilt past the backstage wing, disappearing behind the main curtain.

Chaos broke out on the stage. There were too many bodies, too little coordination. The young assistant to Hecht debated a jump from the stage, but first removed her heels. Most of the audience had moved to its feet, including Archie and his allies.

Suzette quickly scanned the stage and the dozen patrolmen on it as they moved to block Anders Matten's escape. "Where's Doctor Hecht?" she asked, and was right to ask. Hecht had broke from the grip of the two policemen. Both had been thrown to the side by powerful hands and they were now struggling to catch a set of shoes that was quickly becoming a microdot.

Archie raised his camera. Through the lens, he saw Hecht's ascent – straight up into the tunnel at center stage. The spectators in the other tunnels – men, boys, women, girls, and Lyle Benedix – were fleeing in all directions, scattering like ants when exposed to bright light. Soon they would all be gone from the tunnels and dispersed in the street with the crowd. And Hecht. Him, too. Archie followed the doctor up until the German nearly touched the ceiling.

Something in his mind urged him on:

Don't let him get away said a voice. *He's running for more of a reason than any of us know.*

ROOFTOP

A foot into the aisle, Archie started racing. In his ears, he heard Suzette calling. She didn't make it over Johns and Aunt Dove in time to snare his arm. Through the lobby doors, Archie burst into the smattering of people who blocked his way, easily slipping past two ushers who tried to stop him, though they did not know why. His small size and quick speed made him a bullet. He crossed the waxed marble floors and rounded the staircases, jettisoning out the door and into the winter snow – now a full-blown cloud of white. The weather since the beginning of the performance had changed from a lilting Christmas snow into a heavy fall. His coat left behind in his chair, Archie shivered and scanned for Roman Rollo.

Roman saw the boy a split second before the boy saw him. His uncle moved out from between a dozen bystanders to take a front and center position. "Archie, what's happening?"

"They're trying to arrest Doctor Hecht! He knows how to become invisible. Something's gone terribly wrong. I know it. We have to catch him."

As he spoke these words, Suzette was on his heels. She had caught up to him quickly and was breathless. He turned just as she grabbed hold of his arm. "Don't leave me," she said in a pant.

People poured through the lobby and onto the plaza. They were confused, unsure if there was danger. Aunt Dove and Johns were wedged between two banks of people, one moving outside and one moving inside the Opera House. Archie saw that it was hopeless to wait for them. Roman began to move towards Dove, to free her from the snare.

"Come on," Archie said. Quickly, he led Suzette around the side of the Opera House. "Hecht went up through the rafters. I could see it with my camera." Archie pointed to the dangling camera he held tightly to his chest. "That means there must be a tunnel over the rooftop."

"What are you talking about!" she called out as she was dragged through the perimeter alley, past the garbage

cans and the deliveries access road. Two burly police patrolmen stood with their backs turned, guarding the lower docks where grand operas would load materials for elaborate sets. Ducking, Archie spun into a crevice between two cars. He eyed the street parallel to the rear of the Opera House. "I don't understand," pressed Suzette in a whisper.

Archie pointed to his chest. "This camera. It has a special lens. I can see Hecht even when he's invisible." Archie raised the camera to the sky and monitored the area between the Opera House and a green grocers opposite.

"Really?" said Suzette. "Can I see?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I'm not going to just hand—"

Suzette gave him the sternest look, matched with twinkling eyes.

Archie handed over the camera.

Suzette brought the viewfinder up to her eye. "A tunnel?" she asked. "Just like the one in the jail?"

"Exactly," Archie nodded. "They're everywhere, apparently. You've missed my first lesson from Lyle Benedix."

"First?" she said, but then concentrated on the camera. "She arched the viewfinder across the span. Behind them, around the front of the building, the chatter from the exiting crowd grew in volume. More and more people spilled onto the plaza.

"Hey!" she said with a puff.

"Do you see something?"

"He's there." Suzette pointed to an empty space at the top of the grocer's. She then pointed to the chrome around the lens. "This camera is incredible!"

Archie yanked the camera away. Suzette had been right. Doctor Hecht was wiggling his way across a linear tract of tunnel that started at the top crown of the Opera House and then sagged over the street until it touched the ductworks of the grocer. "Let's go," he said then moved along the darkest part of the narrow sidewalk, avoiding the

alley policemen and any scuff of his shoes. The snow on the pavement padded their steps and they were able to slip past with just five feet of distance between them and the blocking guards.

When they reached the grocer's canopy, Archie saw a fresh swarm of policemen surround the exterior of the Opera House. They shined their flashlights into every crevice of the street, every spot of the wall, every ornament of the balustrade.

Again, he raised his camera. "I've got him," said Archie. "I see his foot." Hecht's shoe was moving up over the curve of the tunnel, onto the grocer's roof. The doctor was clearly having trouble, his long leg catching on the turn of the tunnel.

Out of the corner of Archie's eye, he saw something else though the camera's lens:

Three men
wiggling.
Two Russians and
Anders Matten,
taking a completely different escape route – a tunnel connecting the trash area to the drainage ditch.

"Matten's running away, too," he told Suzette and handed the camera over to her. Following his pointer finger, she saw just as Matten and his men dropped into the hole in the street and disappeared altogether.

"He's gone," she said.

Archie looked up the side of the grocer's. A pipe led from their corner turn to the top of the canopy. "We have to catch Hecht."

"Why? He's only stolen a trick."

Archie shook his head. "No. He's done something more. It was him I saw running out of the Mulberry Theater when it burned to the ground. Now he's stolen Anders Matten's act. I think he's done something else! Or why wouldn't he just point the finger at Anders Matten and be done with it? They have the picture of three men, anyway,

from the return of the money. That's a clear indication that Hecht's innocent of the robbery." Archie touched the walls of the grocery, testing the brick to see if he could climb it. "When I photographed Matten, I did not see a man capable of evil. I can't say the same for Hecht. From the first time he followed me into the Mulberry, I knew he was trouble. He's done something and I want to find out what." Archie moved down the brick wall and his eyes took hold of the drain pipe leading up the side of the building.

Suzette looked to the pipe. "I can't climb that," she confessed. "I'm too big." She looked at Archie's smaller frame. "But you can."

Archie tightened the camera strap around his neck. "Go back to the Opera House. Get Captain Timkins. Tell him Hecht has taken to the rooftops."

"What about Matten? Should I tell the captain about Matten going the other way?"

Archie hesitated. "No," he said finally, "I think I know where he's headed. We can find him later."

Trusting Suzette not to ask more questions, Archie started his climb up the pipe.

When he looked to his feet, Suzette was there, staring up. "Be careful," she said.

"I will," he replied then slipped down two feet. She hadn't seen; she had already taken off towards the lighted plaza. For that, Archie was relieved. He didn't like his heroism tarnished by buffoonery.

In a few strokes, Archie was to the top of the canopy, careful not to crack the special lens of his camera on the building's brick. Police flashlights darted across the grocer's, either in mislaid light from the search of the Opera House walls, or from a few of the regulars breaking from the pack, widening the perimeter. Archie couldn't risk being seen. The police might make him return to the ground and he would lose Hecht in the delay.

Jumping on the canopy, its scooping fabric barely giving bounce, Archie landed his arm on the overhang. The inch of snow that had settled made his hand slip, but he regained his grip. With all his strength, he lifted his short

body onto the ledge and fell gracelessly over onto the rooftop.

He raised his camera and shivered.

The snow and nighttime pitch impaired his vision. It was another world on the rooftop. The jutting heating and ventilation machines gave the flat surface strange furniture. Through the lens, he could clearly see the tunnel. The snow left black spaces as it passed through the skin of the tunnels, giving an easy trail to follow.

Stepping across the crackling tar, Archie crossed to the other side of the grocer's rooftop. It did not take him long to find Hecht. There, at the very opposite end of the roof, right at the building's ledge, was the tunnel's end, leading nowhere. Hecht was stuck. His long body had only made it halfway out of the narrowing tunnel. From his hips down, he was frozen; his torso and head pointed in an "L" shape to the ground below. The German cursed in his native tongue, wiggling himself into a fit as he tried to get free from the tunnel.

Archie let the camera fall to his chest. With Hecht halfway out of the tunnel, it appeared that he had been sawed in half. The old trick – the top half of him visible, the bottom disappeared. Slowly, Archie approached the building's edge. Hecht couldn't turn his head enough to see the boy, but he sensed him. "Who-who's there?" he stuttered. In this distance, they both heard the crowds on the street, the scuffling shoes of the policemen, the wail of distant sirens.

"It's Archie Gray," the boy announced.

Hecht seemed relieved. He groaned. "Help me. Get me out of this infernal tunnel. I'm stuck."

Archie took another step forward. From the snowy ledge, he looked down at the street below. The white pavement looked just as hard without snowfall covering; not much cushion should Hecht loose his grip from the tunnel, which swayed a bit with each turn of the man's body. "You might want to go back the other way, Doctor Hecht. There's no more tunnel."

"I *know that*, you fool," he scolded. "That's what I'm *trying* to do. Go back. I can't. Are you going to help me?"

Archie lifted the camera, again found the tunnel in the viewfinder, and touched the air for any entrance seams. "I think the only way into this section is back at the Opera House," said Archie.

"I was afraid of that," said the doctor, still struggling. "I can't go back there. I'd be arrested. Matten and his stupid…bank robbery. He thinks it's harmless. This isn't his country, you know? He doesn't know what's acceptable."

Archie rested his arms on the snowy ledge. He tried to reach down to Hecht, but could not. The doctor didn't see this attempt – his face was still down-turned. The danger he was in had to be obvious. It would be a straight fall onto his head should he make an error in judgment.

"Do you think arson is acceptable?" asked Archie, baiting Hecht.

"Arson?" The word stuck in Hecht's teeth for a moment. "Oh. The Mulberry."

"Did you burn it down?"

Hecht was becoming frustrated. The back of his neck and his bald head became coated with snowfall. Clumps of white stuck to his waist, dampening his shirt and belt. "Is that what's on your mind, Mr. Gray? Who started a little fire?"

"That fire wasn't little. Why don't you tell me who started it and I'll see what I can do to get you out of this mess."

Hecht grunted a second time. "You should not dabble in that which doesn't concern you, Mr. Gray. You're young. You have your whole…life…to get involved in such things."

"How did Henry Gore end up in the hospital?"

Hecht managed to twist himself a bit. His profile visible, his lips moved as he said in short, sharp bursts. "Forget Henry Gore! Forget everything! Just get me out of here!"

"I'll call the police over."

"No, wait!"

Archie rose up. His shadow from the moon crossed Hecht's wet face.

"Wait!" Hecht called out hoarsely. "Wait…Help me. I'll teach you how I do it. I'll show you. Would you like that? I'll show you how it's done."

"I know how it's done."

"Oh, you're with Matten, then? He's not innocent, either." Hecht gave a fierce wrangle from his shoulders and he thought about this, his own Wet Sheet Test, and how he might pass. His hips moved again, letting snow into the space. With his arms, he pulled hard into the tunnel.

Behind Archie on the rooftop, Captain Timkins, Suzette, and three policemen appeared over the railing.

"Archie!" called Suzette, unable to clearly see him through the snowfall.

Waving his arms, he brought them to the spot.

"Hecht!" shouted Captain Timkins. "You'd better surrender! We know you've killed a man. We found the body." Timkins nearly slipped on a patch of snow, but righted himself just in time, the eyes under his white cap settling on Archie Gray, at the building's edge. "Where is he?" asked Timkins, softening but anxious.

About to point his finger down, Archie realized that Hecht, split in half in this way, would give away the secret of the tunnels if he were seen. It would be obvious how he achieved an invisible state. But Archie did not wrestle with his decision for long.

From below came a violent scream.

Archie, Suzette, and the police captain raced to the building's edge. Thirty feet below lay the body of Doctor Hecht. The snow did not dampen his fall. He was dead.

MISSING MAN

Captain Timkins arrived at New York Hospital in late afternoon, three days after the notorious performance at the Opera House. From a tray in the hospital's hallway, he lifted three bouquets of discarded flowers, recently cleared from vacated rooms and awaiting the trash rounds. He shook the dust from the flowers and plucked a few brown petals. Counting the rooms, he came to Henry Gore's – number 333 – and entered to find Archie Gray, Dove Gray and her husband, Suzette O'Connor, Mr. Johns, and the patient, all gathered in a circle and chatting about the events of the past several weeks.

"Oh, no, it's the police," said Henry Gore dryly as he sipped his water from a straw and eyed Timkins in his blue captain's uniform.

Dove rounded the bed and took Timkins by the arm, graciously escorting him deeper into the fray. "Henry, this is Captain Timkins of the local constabulary. He's the main contact on our case. Captain, we're so happy you could join us. And, flowers, no less." She took the three bouquets from his sweating hands and laid them on Henry Gore's lap.

Henry lifted one of the tags from the flowers and began reading. "*To my dearest grandfather, may you get well soon.*" Henry raised his eyes to the captain. "So I'm your relation then. I've gone into a coma and come out with a new family."

The captain blushed. "I'm glad you've recovered," he said shyly and took a few paces backward.

"He's not all better yet," added Roman Rollo, utilizing his best bedside manner. "He's only just come out of it. Over two weeks in this state means he'll have some monitoring and rehabilitation. And some catching up on life in the world outside. There's a lot that he's missed."

"I'll say," said Archie. Suzette's touched his arm as he spoke.

The group had just finished their story – the death of Doctor Hecht, the evidence against him as a murderer, the newspaper legends already being generated, and the

mystery of Anders Matten's whereabouts. Henry Gore barely had time to digest everything. His last memory was of leaving the Lady Elizabeth, and grasping for the ship's rail. "Is it true," the patient asked Captain Timkins, "that the man found murdered in Hecht's room was Gordon Serkis?"

The captain gave a nod. "It was. And we've been able to conclude that it was Doctor Hecht's hands that strangled him. What we don't know…is why. Perhaps you can help the police with that, Mr. Gore."

Gore took another sip of his water and let his eyes set upon those in the room. "I don't know why," he confessed at last. "It's a mystery."

"No idea at all?" pressed Suzette.

The card player shrugged. "I can guess. It's not cold hard fact, but since both of the men were on the boat together maybe they formed an alliance." Henry remembered the precision of Hecht's disguises. "Say," he asked, "are you sure it was Serkis and not some imposter?"

Timkins gave a happy nod. "Positive. First, the clothes he wore had a Lady Elizabeth marker stitched inside. The suit had apparently been stolen from the stocks of the waiters. Second, we went to the ship, preparing for another trip to England. The captain, named Lorber, came downtown yesterday and confirmed the body was his lost purser."

Henry seemed satisfied. He began to look around his room – at his bedside table, the bureau, his feet. "Anybody seen my cards? They didn't vanish, too, did they?"

Dove, with a wide grin, reached into her handbag and drew out the banded deck of playing cards given to her by Mr. Johns. She placed them gently on Henry's blanketed stomach. "Yours, I believe…from our old days," she said. "The doctors found them in your clothes and I snuck them back into your room, along with a poster from one of our shows together." The man had a look of Christmas on his face. Taking in a deep breath, he scooped the cards from where they lay into his eager hands. He cut the deck, held the partials in each hand, and fanned them back together

using his thumbs. His small audience watched for his first demonstration. Henry lifted the cards and tried to make them ride effortlessly from one hand to another. Instead of the perfected rhythm of the Waterloo Station, all those years ago, where Dove first witnessed his skill across a café table, this time the line of barely touching cards broke in the air and rained all over his bedsheets. "Lousy!" Gore laughed and reined them back into a pile near his chest.

Doctor Rollo spoke conciliatorily. "Don't worry, dear sir. You'll be back doing magnificent feats in no time."

Henry looked over the shoulder of Captain Timkins. "Where's that robber Peter Disney? Hasn't he come to see me?"

Dove shook her head. "I phoned him when you awoke. He's trying to set you up a little tour. It's what you wanted, isn't it? A tour of America."

Henry looked at his mess of cards. "Tell him to make it six weeks at the earliest. I've got some practice to do."

His questions answered, Captain Timkins began to drift away from the others. Once he had been assured that it was the deceased Doctor Hecht who had violently pushed Henry Gore from the boat platform, and not Anders Matten as he suspected, his interrogation of the witness was complete. As he made his goodbyes, he signaled for Archie Gray to follow him into the hospital hallway. "Listen, Archie," he began with a whisper and a look over the boy's shoulder to Dove Gray, who stood eyeing the two of them from her corner. The captain cleared his throat. "I've got word. They're not going to charge you. The judge says he'll forgive your escape from the jail because of your role is apprehending Doctor Hecht."

Archie, excited, shook Timkins' hand. "Thank you, Captain, that's great news."

When their hands broke, the captain leaned in and said from the corner of his mouth. "Don't suppose you'll tell us how you did it, huh? Escaped from our little jail?"

Archie blushed. At last, he shook his head 'no.' "Sorry, Captain, a magician never tells how the tricks are done."

Timkins threw up his hands and started away down the hall. "Magicians!" he scoffed. "I've had enough of that sort." In a few strides, he was gone around the end of the corridor, the notes of a popular English wedding tune whistling through his lips, in tribute to his newfound friends.

As Archie returned to the room, his aunt and uncle gathered their belongings to return home. "Would you like a ride, Archie? We have the car outside."

"No, thanks," replied Archie.

"Very well," said his aunt, giving her nephew a kiss on the cheek. "I thought you would want to stay involved with your auntie, but I suppose I was wrong. Going to crawl back into your shell again?"

Archie reached out his hand and lightly touched Suzette's waist. "I don't think that's possible any longer. You've wretched me out for good."

Dove Gray and her husband were soon gone, leaving the three remaining visitors in the hospital room. Suzette broke from Archie and went to kiss Henry on the cheek. "You keep practicing," she said to the card man. "I want to see you put on the greatest show of 1961. It's only ten days away, you know, the New Year." She returned to touch Archie's hand. "Where to now, Archie?"

The boy looked to Henry Gore as he once again tried the air trick, having the same result – a lap full of cards. The man grimaced in embarrassment. "Wait for me outside," Archie said to Suzette, "Would that be all right?"

Suzette traced her fingers on Archie's jacket and high-stepped into the hallway. "Don't be long," she said, and left him alone with Henry Gore.

The card player sorted his cards and looked up to Archie Gray. "I can see that look in your eye," he said suspiciously. "You have questions. There are *always* questions from young boys when it comes to magic. Young boys are insatiably curious creatures." Henry held up his worn deck. "Do you want me to teach you a thing or two? In ten minutes, I'll have you guessing people's cards. It's not as hard as it looks. In five years, you working for Peter

Disney, doing tours of Europe with a beautiful young assistant. Say, how about that Suzette girl? She's a pretty one. Red hair looks good from the audience. Might look strange her being taller, but you could wear platform shoes."

Archie stopped at the end of Henry's bed. "I'm a photographer," he declared. "It's what I want to be."

The man nodded. "So I hear. Stick to takin' pictures, then. I've got too much competition from young upstarts anyhow."

A short silence passed between them.

"Mr. Gore. Do you know anything about a place called The Red Bird?"

Henry narrowed his gaze. "The Red Bird? In Queens?"

Archie nabbed his fingers. "Yes! You know about it?"

"Yeah, sure. It's where Lyle Benedix's school for magic used to be. He taught out of the back of the bar, by arrangement with the owners. He didn't have his shop back then, so he had to make due. So, yes, I know The Red Bird." Gore's face grew nostalgic. "I have a lot of memories of that ol' tavern. Yes, I do. Say, where is ol' Benedix anyway? I thought he'd be here to visit me."

"Oh," Archie said lightly, "I'm sure he's hanging around somewhere." He turned with a wave and left Henry Gore alone to practice.

Suzette stood waiting for Archie when he emerged from Gore's hospital room. There was a barely contained enthusiasm on his face. She read it instantly. Archie had made a great discovery. "I was right," Archie declared. "I know where to find Anders Matten."

CURTAIN

"Ah. Yes. Come to collect your one thousand dollars?" Anders Matten kicked his feet up on the thick top of the wood table and smiled at the young man and woman seated across from him. At either elbow, he was book-ended by Tom and Jerry, his two trusty men who had saved him from the clutches of the law. The corner of The Red Bird Tavern was dimly lit on that night, but Archie Gray could still read the faint dabble of fear on Matten's brow when he realized he had been located. "I don't have it, you know. I never collected my percentage of the tickets. I was planning to pay you when I had achieved a certain level of fame."

They had been in The Red Bird Tavern only moments. Archie, at the sight of the abusive bartender from his visit the week earlier, shielded his face, grabbed Suzette's hand tightly, and made a beeline straight for the rear table. The three women from before were still present, as if they had not left their positions since that time. Each followed the new arrivals with a steady pivot, surprised that the corner three had company. As Archie had predicted, this was indeed Matten's hiding place.

"How did you find me, Mr. Gray?" Matten asked.

"Henry Gore," said Archie. "He's come out of his sleep." Archie watched the Dutchman's muscles relax; he was visibly glad to hear this news. "We know you didn't push him off the platform," continued Archie. "It was Hecht. And that man from the ship, that Gordon Serkis the purser. He lived. He was alive. Well, until recently, when Hecht strangled him to death in a hotel room."

The two Russians turned to their boss. "Alive?" said Tom. "Killed again?" said Jerry.

Matten looked to the two. At last, he shrugged. "I suppose this is all very good news for me, Mr. Gray. These things, coupled with what I've read in the paper, give one hope. However, I am still considered a bank robber. Why would you be consorting with someone like me when you have a very pretty girl at your side? Don't you have dinner plans?"

Matten gave an appreciative wink to Suzette, who came forward with hands on the table.

"Mr. Matten, I *lied* to the police. I told them Archie didn't take that picture of you that was found at the bank. You have all of Archie photographs, remember? If you give them back, or agree to destroy them, there's no evidence that that was a photo of you and your men. Everything else at the bank is circumstantial."

Matten lifted a finger to Archie. "You are surrendering your right to the photographs?" This was a genuine surprise.

Archie nodded. "I don't want them any more. They're not important to me."

"You can have your career back," said Suzette.

"Career," scoffed Matten. "What career? No one knows me here in New York. No one saw my trick. They all think Doctor Hecht was the invisible man. I'll have to start again in a new town." Matten began to pick his teeth, freeing the bits of beef from his Red Bird special. "I don't have any more maps. I'm sure my old friend Lyle Benedix has hidden his book well. Hasn't he?" Matten's eyebrows went up; Archie read his hope, that the book was in Archie's hands, and ready to be bargained for. "It's still in his shop, then? I knew when I came to The Red Bird, looking for my old teacher, just to be told he had moved to Manhattan and started a magic shop, that he'd be the one to help me locate more tunnels. I didn't count that he'd have a book of maps on his very shelf." Matten laughed and pushed away his plate.

"But you didn't steal it," said Archie. "You made copies and returned it. You didn't tear out the page of the Opera House, did you?"

Matten shook his head. "Tear the page? Oh. Hecht had the page with him when he waylaid me. He must have had the same idea – find the book – only he had it a few days later. He took the Opera House map because he knew we were going to perform there. Or maybe Serkis helped him?" Matten sighed. "I suppose all we have is conjecture." Looking around the tavern, Matten lowered his voice and

joined the five of them together in a huddle. "You do realize," he said in a whisper, "that there are rumors that The Red Bird Tavern, and its attached rooms for let, may be the hiding place of a bigger book. More maps. Other places, perhaps." Matten tipped his head towards the three strange women. "Those women spoke of it – particularly the one with the eye-patch. Pirate treasure, is my guess, being guarded by an elite." Matten leaned back from the pow-wow. "Rumors and conjecture. It's all we have to go on."

Archie reached into his coat pocket. He pulled out the camera from Benedix. He laid it on the table in front of the five of them. Suzette, surprised, put her hand to Archie's but he doubled over it with another hand and let the camera stand free in the middle of table.

"That's not your Leica," said Matten, leaning over but not picking up the camera.

"No," said Archie. "It's better than a book of maps. It's a *career*. All you have to do it arrive at a club or a theater, use this camera, and make your map before the performance. This camera has a special lens. You can see the tunnels."

Matten moved his nose until nearly touching the camera. "Really?" he asked with a wide scoop of vowels. "How very interesting." His face turned suspicious. "But why? Why give it to me? You and your girlfriend could start a career of your own…any kind of career you liked." The insinuation was obvious. They could become criminals.

Suzette began to understand Archie's plans. She spoke up with a lilt of wonder in her voice. "You *didn't* rob that bank – you only *pretended* to rob it. You didn't push Henry Gore. That was Doctor Hecht. You didn't kill that purser. It was an accident." She looked to Archie who gave a small nod for her to continue. "Archie wants you to have this camera because…because you're a good person. Probably."

"And this camera complicates my life too much," admitted Archie. "I wouldn't put it to any use, I suppose. Just…fiddle around. Beside, I've got better things to

concentrate on now than adventure." Archie gave Suzette's hand a gentle squeeze.

Matten now let his fingers move out and touch the chrome rivets of the camera's shell. He felt the weight of their trust enter into his blood. The eyes of Tom and Jerry burned into his hands as he folded them over the plastic shell. "A good person," Matten confirmed, accepting their gift. "But will I stay that way?" he asked them.

That answer would come another day.

Archie could wait.