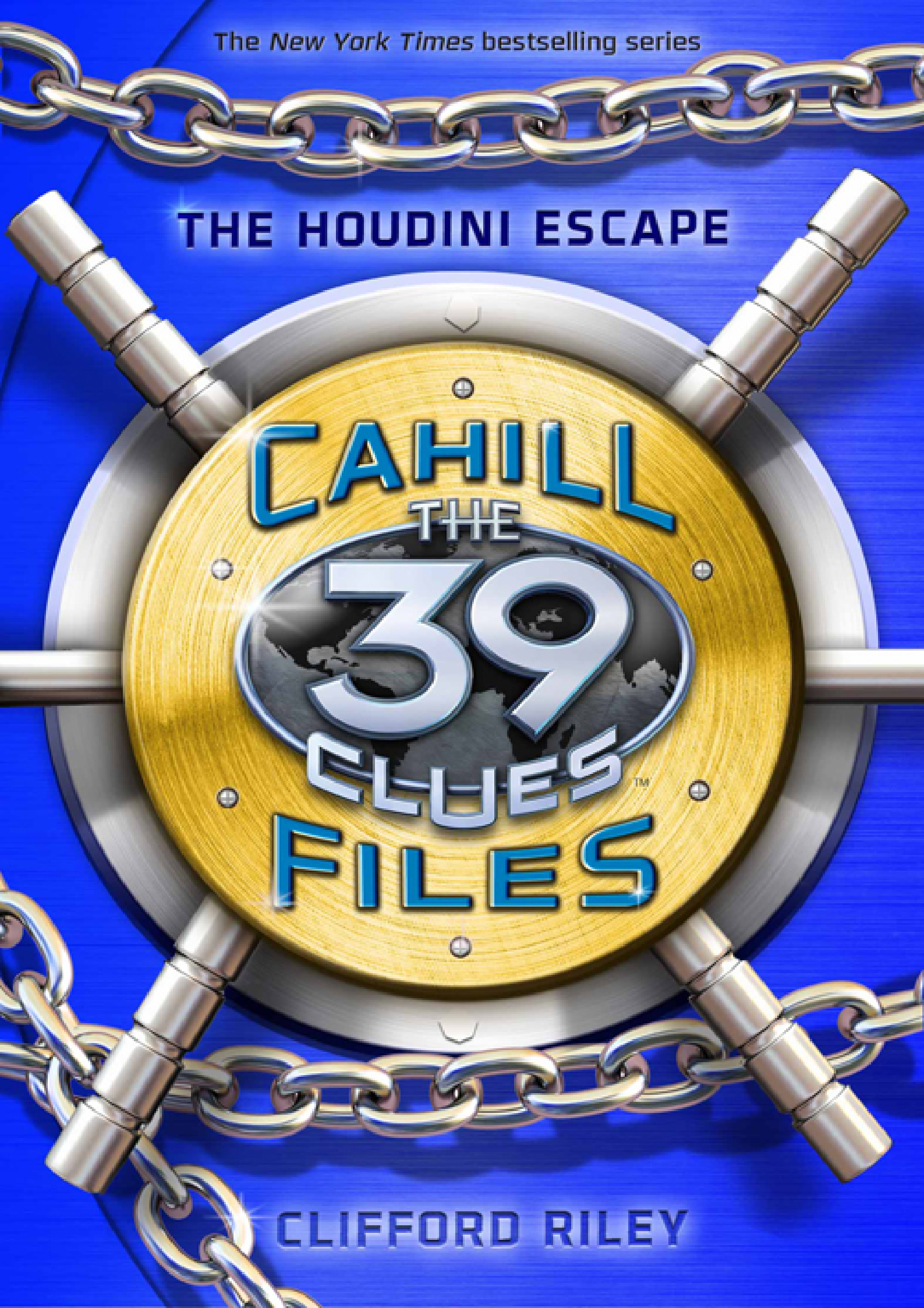
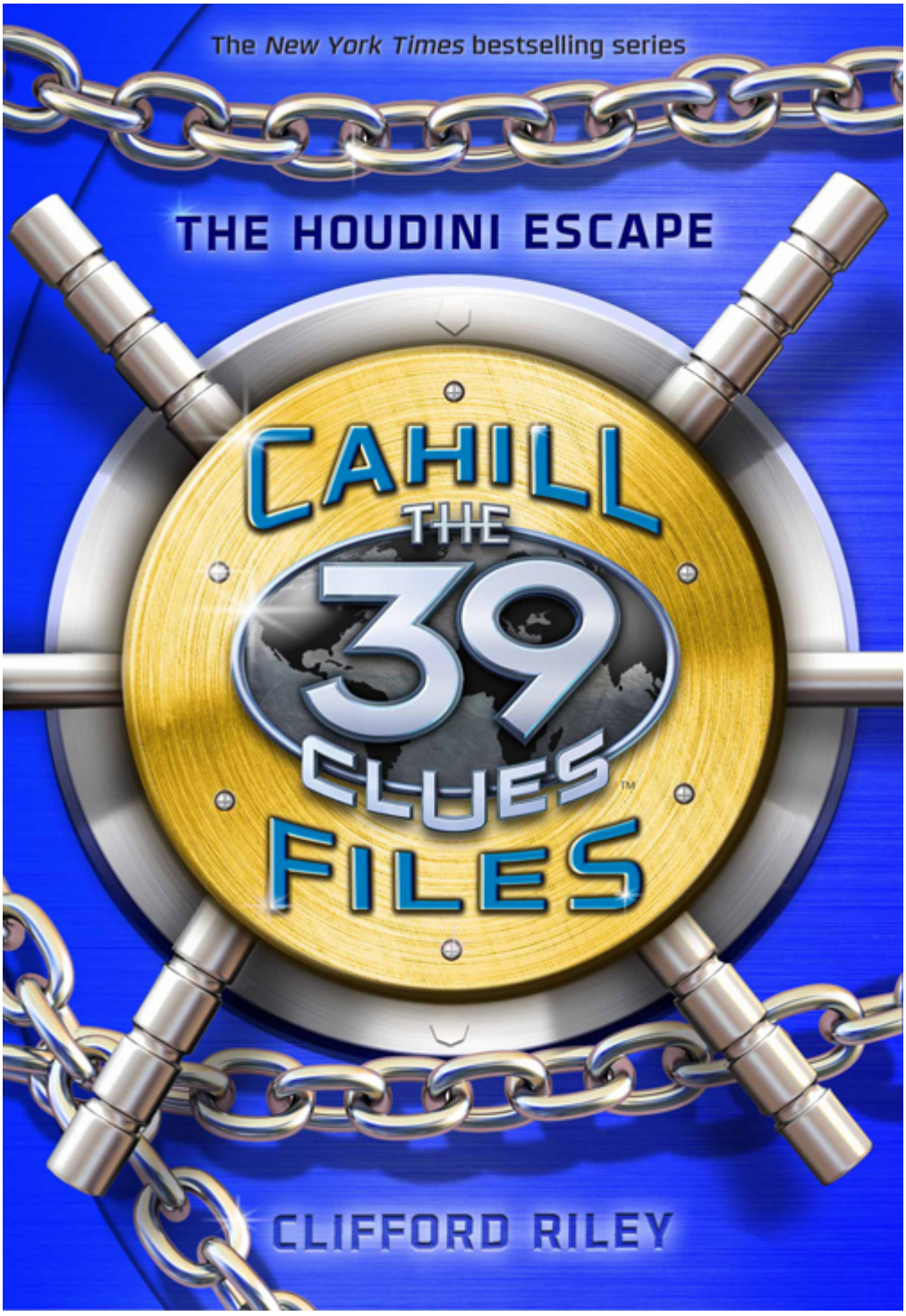

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To whom it may concern,

The information in this book comes from the Cahill vault, which means that *none* of it was meant for your eyes. Over the past 500 years, a number of exceedingly dangerous items have been placed in the vault for safekeeping—assassination orders, confession-filled diaries, treasure maps, and many other items that I know better than to list here. Documents that have sparked wars, incited revolutions, and led to the downfall of governments, kings, and empires.

It was *not* my idea to make this material public. I was given specific instructions by my former employer, William McIntyre, to protect the information in the vault. However, after recent tragic events, it looks like I'm taking orders from someone new—someone who believes that the Cahill Files are essential to the security of the Cahill family . . . and the world at large.

And so, the vault has been opened. Do with these stories what you will. But when you find yourself weighed down by the secrets and scandals that shaped history, just remember one thing: I told you so.

Clifford Riley

THE HOUDINI ESCAPE

New York City, 1891

It was the final show of the night, and the eyes of every person crammed inside the tent were trained on him. Harry "the King of Cards" Weiss advanced down the aisle, his voice filling the cramped space as he told the story of the four kings. They were brothers whose mother had been forced to send them away at birth, which he illustrated by shuffling the four king cards into the deck.

As the audience bought into the story, Harry's voice grew steadier. He might be only a teenager, but he knew that he needed to speak with the confidence and poise of a veteran magician. Harry could feel the excitement build as he wove a tale of each brother going on his own path and becoming king of a distant land.

As he neared the stage, he brushed against a boy leaning in too close, and with an undetectable motion, Harry slipped the queen of hearts into the boy's pocket. There was a reason the light in the tent was kept dim.

Harry reached the stage, turned, and held out the deck in his left hand. "Now, these four kings were

separated at birth. But one day, they all traveled back to their home for a reunion." He stared down at the deck and wrinkled his brow. The audience would expect him to pull the four cards out of the deck, but instead, Harry palmed the cards from a hidden pocket.

"The king of diamonds, the great merchant, came from the west," he said as the card appeared in his right hand. He knew that, to the audience, it would look like it had materialized out of thin air. "The king of hearts, the great poet, came from the east. The king of spades, the great architect, came from the north. And the king of clubs, the great warrior, came from the south."

The audience applauded, and Harry grinned. Breathing a sigh of relief, he felt like a king in his own right. Every magician used sleight of hand like palming cards, but Harry always worried that someone would catch him, or call him out. Now, the hard part was over. All that was left was the triumphant final reveal, the moment that made everything worth it: the countless hours practicing, the smell of sweat and smoke that filled the tent, the worried expression on his parents' faces whenever he talked about magic.

"But what about the poor mother, who was forced to send her sons to the four corners of the earth?" Harry could feel the anticipation growing. Surprising an audience was one thing. Getting them to go along with the story was what gave him a rush. "Yes, their

mother, the queen of hearts — she was supposed to be there, too. But where was she?"

Harry looked around, miming a search. Finally, he peered out into the audience.

"I can't seem to find her. You, boy," he said, pointing at the child he'd identified earlier. "Do you know where the queen is?"

The boy shook his head mutely.

"Hm. Maybe you should check your pocket. You never know what might be in there."

The boy looked confused, but checked his pocket. Harry grinned. In a moment, the queen of hearts would meet her sons, the reunion would be complete, and Harry would bow out to a standing ovation.

The boy came up empty, and Harry chuckled. "Maybe your other pocket," he said with ease.

The boy stuck his hand into the other jacket pocket. As the bewildered audience member checked his pants, Harry's stomach tied itself in knots. What had gone wrong? He knew he had dropped the card in the boy's pocket.

"It's there somewhere, ain't it?" Harry demanded, his practiced performer voice falling away like a piece of cheap scenery.

The boy began to pat his jacket anxiously, and even searched the ground around his feet.

“I’m sorry,” the boy said, looking up at him with wide eyes. “I don’t have it.”

The audience began to fidget, and the tent filled with the sound of whispers and a few snickers. Harry’s mind raced, but when he opened his mouth to improvise an excuse, nothing came out. In an instant, the confident showman was gone. Suddenly, the King of Cards was just Harry, the immigrant kid with the funny accent who worked in a tie factory.

As soon as a few smirking teenagers stood to go, it was over. Within moments, the audience was shuffling out of the tent, muttering about wasting their money on some hack.



Even before the last audience member had left the tent, it hit him. He had gone for the wrong boy. Harry grimaced. Somehow he had gotten turned around. In the dim light, they all looked the same. It had been the boy on the other side of the aisle.

He wanted to run outside and yell, to call them back and demand that they see that the trick really had worked. But it was too late. Harry sighed and began shuffling around the stage to pack up. Other magicians had chests, trap doors, and trick mirrors, but he had to make do with the simplest tools: silk handkerchiefs that he could force to change colors, rings that he could separate and connect, and several decks of cards.

Harry froze as the distinct smell of cigar smoke and cheap whiskey filled his nose. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the tent flap open, and the portly ringmaster stormed inside. Harry faced the back wall and concentrated on refolding his silk handkerchiefs, unwilling to face the ringmaster, Thaddeus. The smell grew stronger and the low stage creaked as the heavy man stepped up.

"You better have a good explanation for what happened out there," he said, grabbing Harry by the collar. Harry suppressed a groan. The other seven shows he'd performed that day had gone perfectly. But of course Thaddeus had only seen the one he botched.

Harry turned around to face him. The man was standing close, his girth practically bursting the buttons on his bright red jacket. "I'm sorry, but —"

"Quiet," the ringmaster snapped before taking another puff of his cigar. "I billed you as the King of Cards. My show's about sparkle, pizzazz … ya know, *magic*. The king of something doesn't lose track of his card! Three of them had the nerve to ask for refunds! I didn't give 'em money, but I had Larson give them free hot sausages. All because you can't find the queen!"

Harry felt his heart speed up. "It won't happen again. I promise." If he lost this job, it could take months to find another magician gig. He'd probably have to take extra shifts at the factory. His family

counted on the income from his weekend job — he couldn't come home empty-handed.

Thaddeus glared at him. "You made the show look bad, kid. People will talk. I'll lose ticket sales from this, no doubt about it."

Harry's shoulders tensed as he imagined the look on his parents' faces when he told them he lost the job. His mother had been endlessly patient when he first started practicing, letting him find her card over and over again, never letting on when she realized his method. His father, on the other hand, had always tried to uncover the secret, which had taught Harry one of the most important rules of magic: never perform the same trick twice in a row. But now it looked like all his hard work would go to waste.

The ringmaster twirled his mustache and sighed. "I can't pay a magician who doesn't do magic. One more mistake and you're done. And I'll spread the word to the rest of the town." He started lumbering toward the front of the tent, but then turned to look over his shoulder. "Unless you double your ticket sales next weekend, you'll never work Coney Island again."

The flap closed, leaving Harry alone with nothing but his flimsy props and empty pockets. He had just enough for the horsecar fare, but nothing to give his mother for the grocer. Weighed down by a heaviness that started in his stomach and extended to his feet,

Harry blew out the lamps in the tent and headed out into the Coney Island night.



Harry trudged along the deserted boardwalk on his way to the horsecar that would take him from Coney Island back to Manhattan. The families were all gone and the lights were off, taking with them any sense of festivity. Now it was just carnies tearing down their tents or trying to entice the loitering teenagers to take one last ride on the Switchback Railway.

He saw one older man playing Bottle Up, attempting to use a ring on a string to put a bottle upright. Harry shook his head when he noticed the smudge of chalk on the back of the man's shabby jacket. That meant he was "marked," a fool who had lost a pile of money at one game — and could likely be suckered into losing more at another booth. The bright lights of Coney Island were the first thing many immigrants saw in New York — the ships passed the boardwalk even before the Statue of Liberty — and the new arrivals would often come soon after leaving Ellis Island, much to the delight of the con men, who knew how to take advantage of them.

Harry sped up to pass several grim-looking men huddled in an alleyway, exchanging money. He glanced in the opposite direction, pretending to be interested in the barking dogs outside the racetrack. The men were probably selling stolen goods, but it

was none of his concern. And everyone knew that Police Chief McKane looked the other way. That is, if he and his captains weren't actually in on the deal.

Harry worked for Thaddeus, so no one bothered him. But that hadn't always been true. The first time he'd tried to perform magic on the street, three burly men had tried to "teach him a lesson" about respecting other people's "territory." Luckily, Harry was a track champion at the Pastime Athletic Club, and he easily outdistanced them, but he ran into similar problems until Thaddeus saw him doing his act at a dime museum in Queens and hired him to perform weekends in his show.

Even after tonight's disappointment, Harry was still proud to be performing in Coney Island. He might be between the bearded ladies (women with glue and hair) and the unicorn (an unfortunate horse, glue, and the horn of an even more unfortunate narwhal), but he was a showman with a real show.

His father sometimes talked about the great performers and artists that he was related to as members of the Cahill Family. He even claimed that creative geniuses like Mozart and Lord Byron were among their distant cousins, though it was hard to imagine his serious father, a former rabbi, having anything to do with such colorful figures. Harry longed to take the stage like his ancestors had — but his parents had made it clear that his main obligation was to help support the family.

Harry wanted to be useful. He knew how much his parents worried about money, especially now that his father was too ill to work. But he wished they believed he could do better as a performer than he could cutting ties. Harry knew lifers at the factory, grizzled men and women who had been doing the same job for decades and making the same pay. They didn't starve, but they never got ahead, either. They just sat at the same worktable day after day, slowly withering away.

The wait for the horsecar, a horse-drawn wagon that carried about fifteen people, was brief. Normally he would have been happy to be home sooner, but even with work in the morning, Harry wasn't eager to face his family. He hung back at the end of the line before reluctantly giving the driver his last pennies and crowding onto the carriage with the carnival tourists and workers returning to Manhattan.

The horsecar bumped its way through Brooklyn. It was starting to get late, but the streets were still crowded. Omnibuses full of men in hats wove between endless rows of wooden stands where vendors made their final sales pitches, hoping to sell their remaining wares at discount prices before heading home. Grubby children played in the street, dashing between the horses and skirting around the ash barrels that stood overflowing on every corner.

He changed horsecars, and slumped in the back as the coach bumped over the Brooklyn Bridge. Although the sky was dark, the electric lights in the new

buildings allowed Harry to make out the silhouette of the skyline — the skeleton frames of the new skyscrapers looming over the smaller structures.

Next to him, a group of Chinese workers played a betting game that involved guessing the number of beads in a bowl. Each time someone won, the whole group would erupt in cheers. Harry watched out of the corner of his eye. With his sleight of hand, he knew he could make money at a game like that, but he'd seen what happened to cheaters who were caught in Coney Island. Sleight of hand got a lot harder if your hand was missing a few fingers.

As they traveled uptown, the streetlights grew farther apart and the city settled into sleep. After another horsecar change and a walk of several blocks, Harry arrived at West 113th Street, where he lived with his parents and five siblings. His stomach rumbled as he walked up the stairs to his family's town house. He hoped there were leftovers from dinner for him to eat. Without the money from his show, there was no knowing what tomorrow would bring.



The house was dark, and Harry let himself in as quietly as he could. He'd forgotten his key again, but that was no problem — a few seconds with the pick from his bag of magicians' tools and the lock was open. Ever since his brief apprenticeship to a locksmith back in Appleton, Wisconsin, Harry had

been trying to think of ways to incorporate his skills into his act, but kept coming up short. He couldn't imagine anything less exciting than someone picking a lock onstage.

He padded through the hallway, anxious to make sure he didn't wake his family. But as he crossed the darkened parlor, he stepped on something that crunched like broken glass. Harry shook his head. One of his siblings must have broken something again. He reached toward the sideboard and fumbled for a moment before his hands found the gas lamp and matches.

As the light filled the room with long shadows and a dim orange glow, Harry's breath caught in his chest. His family's keepsakes, which normally stood proudly on the mantel, were all smashed. Portraits, his father's awards, Harry's cross-country medals, and even the crystal glasses from his parents' wedding had been reduced to a pile of fragments and shards. It had not been done recklessly — the only way to cause this type of damage was to crush each piece individually. A terrifying thought planted itself in his mind, and coils of dread tightened around his stomach. What if someone had hurt his family?

He raised the lamp, revealing deep scratches in the wall above the mantel, slashes that looked like the letter V. Harry stepped back and slipped on a piece of the wreckage, too shocked to even try to find his balance. He sent a chair flying as he fell, and landed with a thump, still clutching the gas lamp.

As Harry pulled himself to his feet, he could hear his parents stirring in their room. The door opened and his mother appeared. Harry darted forward to stop her from entering, but it was too late. She gasped as she took in the scene, turning around to clutch Harry's father as he cautiously shuffled into the room.

"I thought you said they wouldn't bother us here," she whispered. "They came into our home." She brought her hand to her chest. "While we were *sleeping*."

His father's face was unreadable as he surveyed the scene. "Harry, go to bed." Since he'd fallen ill, Mayer Samuel's voice had grown thin, a crushing blow to the former rabbi who'd once transfixed crowded synagogues with his authoritative baritone. "Your mother and I will take care of this."

"What h-h-appened? Who … ?" Harry stammered.

When his mother saw the concern on Harry's face, she forced her mouth into a weak impression of a smile. "Don't worry. It looks like someone must have broken in. But they're gone now. We'll report it to the police in the morning."

Harry knew she was lying or at least hiding the truth. He raised an eyebrow at his father, hoping for a better explanation.

"Mother?" a girl's voice squeaked from the doorway. Harry's sister Carrie and brother Leopold were standing there in their nightshirts.

“It’s nothing, dear,” his mother said, shepherding them through the door and back to their room.

“What’s really going on?” Harry asked his father once they were gone.

His father said nothing and shook his head, lowering himself wearily into his favorite chair.

Unwilling to leave, Harry bent down and started cleaning up. He salvaged the few pieces that still had some value, and swept the rest of the wreckage into a pile.

“Thank you, Harry,” his father said, and then fell silent again as Harry swept the debris into a dustpan and emptied it into an old sack.

“How were your shows?” Mayer Samuel finally asked, as if changing the subject could hide the fact that something terrible had happened. Harry felt a flash of irritation. If he was old enough to support his family, then he was old enough to know the truth about the break-in. But before he had the chance to release the cutting words forming in his throat, Harry caught a glance of his father’s weary face and softened. “Not great,” he admitted. “I bungled the last trick, and Thaddeus refused to pay me.” When his father didn’t respond, Harry continued. “If I make another mistake, I’m out forever,” he said flatly, feeling his last tendril of hope shriveling as he admitted it.

His father just looked at the floor. Harry knew he was disappointed, but too kind to say anything while

the wound was still fresh.

“Harry, why do you keep doing this to yourself?” his mother asked from the doorway. “You’ll drive yourself mad trying to make a living from magic. Don’t you want a steady income? Or the ability to support a family?”

Harry clenched and unclenched his fists.

“Someone breaks into our house, shatters our valuables, and carves our wall … and you want to talk about my job prospects?” he retorted.

“Your mother and I will handle it,” his father said quietly. “An old acquaintance just wanted to send me … a message. I’ll make him see reason and we’ll work something out.”

“We want what’s best for you, and for the family,” his mother added. “I know performing is your dream, but it’s time for you to start thinking about your future.”

Grateful that his parents couldn’t see his flushing cheeks in the half light, Harry mumbled a hurried good night and headed to the room he shared with his brother Theo. His mother was right. As much as he hated it, he needed to take responsibility. He wouldn’t go back to Coney Island next weekend. Instead he would ask the foreman if he could take extra shifts at the necktie factory.

As he tossed and turned in bed, he could hear his parents whispering in the parlor, their voices

wavering between anger and fear. Harry strained to listen, but he couldn't make out their words until nearly an hour later, when his father spoke while passing his room: "It's my debt, Cecilia. I have to pay it one way or another."



Harry's scissors snipped, and the shape of a tie emerged from the striped cloth. He laid it carefully on the cart and grabbed another sheet of fabric, deftly maneuvering the blade until another tie appeared. Harry placed it on the cart, and waved one of the younger boys over to deliver the pile to the sewing table.

The air in R. H. Richter's tie factory was a symphony of production. Scissors snapped, carts squeaked, and from the other room came the lilt of the seamstresses' gossiping. He had liked it better when he was younger, pushing carts from room to room to keep the production flowing. He'd even carried a pack of cards with him to entertain the younger cutters when he had a free moment and the foreman wasn't around to yell at him.

But the idea of spending the rest of his life here filled Harry's stomach with dread. Day in, day out, he cut the same shape out of fabric. Every few weeks, the color or pattern of the material would change. Today, it was black and gold stripes. But there were no new challenges, no opportunities to use his imagination, or even his *brain*. The sun gleaming

through the dirty windows seemed to creep across the sky more slowly each hour. And whenever he looked at the older men and women who had spent their lives in the factory, he could almost see himself in their weathered skin and resigned expressions.

It was a small mercy, but at least he had his friend Jacob next to him, scissors snipping out a monotonous counterpoint to Harry's own. "I've got your book," Jacob whispered when the foreman turned his back to them. After saving up for weeks, Harry had finally been able to buy a secondhand copy of a book written by the greatest magician of the modern world, Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin. Harry had stayed up all night reading about Robert-Houdin's accomplishments: He read minds, brought orange trees to life, and even suspended his son in midair. Before Robert-Houdin, magicians had been limited to performing at fairs and on street corners, but he had raised magic to an art. He had owned his own theaters, performed for kings and queens, and had even been sent to Algeria by Napoleon III to use his magic to discredit a gang of con men gaining influence with faux-magical abilities.

The book had opened Harry to the world of possibility, to the chance that magic could be his ticket out of the soul-crushing tedium of factory life. But that had been nothing more than a child's foolish dream. "You can keep it."

"What are you talking about? It's your prized possession."

“I’m not doing magic anymore,” Harry said flatly. “I need to focus on helping my family.”

“You *can’t*,” Jacob exclaimed, then glanced around, relieved to see that the foreman wasn’t looking their way. “Not after all the work we’ve put in. And besides, I’ve seen what happens when you perform. You become a completely different person, Harry. It’s what you were meant to do!”

The two had been practicing magic in their spare time for a year now, performing together at various sideshows. When Harry’s father had become too ill to work, a spot in the factory had opened up, and Harry had convinced the foreman to hire Jacob as a cutter.

Harry turned away. “I’m just not good enough at magic to support my family.” He finished a tie and carefully laid it on the cart.

“How many times have you told me how you want to be just like Robert-Houdin?”

“We’ll never get the money to build illusions like he had,” Harry said, struggling to keep his voice low. “He used magnets and clockwork and had a crew of assistants, a carpenter, and a mechanic. He could make an orange tree blossom!”

“But what about the metamorphosis trick we talked about?” Jacob asked. “It requires a special prop, but we could afford it if we saved up.”

“You don’t get it,” Harry snapped. “I’m done. I have to help my parents provide for my family. I can’t

spend money on magic boxes."

The foreman's heels clicked at the end of the hallway and the boys returned to their work. Harry's hands had learned the motions long ago and could cut out a necktie almost automatically.

Maybe one day, if he got a promotion and his father got better and came back to work, he would be able to afford to build a great trick. The thought of performing the metamorphosis filled him with new energy as he imagined the look on the audience's faces as they realized that he and Jacob had "magically" switched places while one of them was locked in a box.

Harry's mind raced as he thought about how the trick would work. Were there ways to make the switch faster? There were definitely ways to improve on the design of the box. If only he could talk it over with a carpenter ...

A hand clamped on Harry's shoulder, and as he snapped back to reality his scissors slipped, cutting too far into the fabric. "What are you doing?" Harry yelped, before turning to see who it was. "You ruined this tie!"

The massive foreman loomed over him ominously. He looked like he belonged in a construction crew, or at the head of a Roman legion, instead of working in a tie factory. But Harry knew that he had been wounded during the Civil War, and hadn't been able to move easily in over two decades.

“You ruined it before I got here, Weiss,” the foreman rumbled.

Harry glanced down. Sure enough, he had cut straight across the fabric rather than at an angle, leaving the tie with the stripes going straight across. He gulped. The whole batch was unsellable.

“I’m sorry,” Harry said meekly. “My mind must have wandered.”

“Weiss,” the foreman growled. “Look at your cart.”

Harry looked over at the cart. His heart sank. Every single one of the ties was cut at the wrong angle. The room filled with a busy silence as the other workers stared intently at their task, pretending not to listen.

“You immigrants are all the same,” the foreman said, his lips curling with disgust. “You always want a job, but you never want to work. You know the rule: You don’t pay attention, you don’t get paid.” He shook his head and pointed to the door. “Get out of here. And don’t bother coming back.”

Jacob looked up for a split second, catching Harry’s eye with a panicked look. Then he turned and bent back to his cutting. They knew from experience how quickly the foreman’s anger could shift focus.

“But my family —” Harry protested.

“I said get *out*,” the foreman spat. “You’re lucky I’m not making you pay for all this wasted cloth. You better leave before I change my mind.”

Harry stood up in a daze, and took a step before realizing that he was still holding his scissors. The foreman held out his hand and Harry automatically handed them over. He walked out into the sunlit street, still bewildered by what had just taken place. In less than twenty-four hours, he'd managed to lose two jobs. He wasn't cut out to be a magician, and apparently, he didn't even have what it took to work in a factory.

"Watch it." Harry stepped to the side as a woman holding a large basket brushed past him, shooting him a nasty look. The street was packed with people rushing in all directions, but Harry simply stood and stared. Normally, the crowds and the noise filled Harry with a sense of excitement, but today, they just made him feel terribly alone.



Shops and pedestrians flashed by as Harry jogged up Broadway. He didn't have money for a horsecar, and running was the only way to loosen the knot of guilt and fear that had started growing in his stomach as he left the tie factory.

He'd spent the first few hours wandering around the garment district. Racks of clothes lined the streets, made by immigrants like Harry, and sold to the middle-class women who could afford new clothes for their families. The salesmen stood outside, each trying to drown out the others with their promises about supplying the latest fashions for

the lowest price. There were black and gray waistcoats for the men, and long ladies' dresses edged with ruffles and frills. For the more daring, there were special ladies' costumes for bicycling, complete with pants.

He'd looked to see if any of the stores were hiring, but every one seemed full up. Finally, he'd decided that there was nothing left to do but to head home and tell his family what had happened. He walked the first few miles until the factories and shops gave way to crowded apartment buildings and crumbling houses, and then he began to run. He'd learned the hard way what happened to immigrant boys who dashed through the fancy residential areas — once he'd been stopped by a policeman who thought that Harry was a thief escaping from the scene of a crime.

With a few detours, it was a perfect five-mile course from the garment district to his family's home on 113th Street in Harlem. His dedication had made him a champion runner at the Pastime Athletic Club, and he had even won a medal last year in a citywide competition. When he'd been asked to pose for the local paper after his win in the cross-country meet, he'd bought a handful of medals from a trinket shop on Coney Island and stuck them across his uniform. The reporter had seemed skeptical, but the photographer ate it up. Being a stage performer had taught Harry that making an impression mattered. And it wasn't like Harry had actually said that he won the medals. People saw what they wanted to see

— it wasn't his fault if they made assumptions that weren't true.

As Harry turned the corner onto his block, he saw three men knocking on the door of his family's town house. By the time he ran up the steps, they had already been let inside and Harry could hear them talking with his father. He entered quietly and stopped a moment in the foyer, allowing his eyes to settle on the wooden staircase that had once been finely crafted, but was now chipped and worn. As Harry paused a moment, reluctant to go up and face his parents, his father's voice filtered down the stairs.

"You must understand, I've been trying," his father was saying. "I've fallen a bit ill. But I am resting, and I have faith that it will pass."

The man at the other end of the conversation said something softly. It sounded like he had a Hungarian accent, but Harry couldn't make out the words. He knew he shouldn't eavesdrop, but he couldn't force himself to go up the stairs or back out the door.

"I just don't have the money," his father continued. "We're close to losing the house as it is… ." His father's voice faltered.

Harry felt like he'd been punched in the gut for the second time in one day. His father owed these men money. Harry knew how these debts were accounted for in Coney Island — you either paid up, or someone would have to fish your body out of the harbor.

And this, of all days, was the day that he had lost his job.

“I have paid on time for years. Just give me a few extra weeks, and you’ll have your money.” Harry could hear the pleading in his father’s voice.

There was silence from above. Harry hoped that it was the men reconsidering their position, but his hopes were dashed as he heard the Hungarian-accented voice speak in low, threatening tones.

“I understand,” Mayer Samuel answered, his voice thin and reedy.

Harry heard the floorboards squeak as the men walked toward the stairs. After they’d left, Harry opened the door, slipped out, and began hurrying down the street.

When he was a few paces behind the men, he slowed to a walk, taking care to stay to the side in case they turned and he needed to duck into an alley. All three men wore expensive suits, but the one leading the way was carrying a silver walking stick, and his black hair was slicked back with oil. He had the erect posture that Harry associated with the elegant ringmasters who performed in the big circus tents at Coney Island. They made his own boss, ringmaster Thaddeus, look like a small-time crook. Which wasn’t far from the truth. The man wrinkled his nose and walked more quickly as they passed two grubby boys playing in the gutter.

The men swaggered down the street, not bothering to look around, and Harry found himself following them. He had only intended to get a quick look, but as Harry replayed his father's words in his head, he grew desperate to find out who these people were. His father was a man of principle — how had he gotten mixed up with men who would break into his house and destroy his family's valuables?

The sun was setting, and Harry was easily able to trail them without raising suspicions. When they hailed a passing hansom cab, Harry jogged behind the plodding horse, keeping a safe distance and trying to stay in the shadows.

The cab wound through the edges of the city as the moon rose, passing factories that had emptied for the day, and a few that had electric lights installed. Finally, they turned down to the docks. For a moment, he thought he had fallen too far behind and lost them, but he turned a corner and saw the three men disembarking and the cab heading back into the city.

Harry slunk through the shadows as the men walked closer to the water, toward the smell of fish, coal, and garbage. The wooden piers that stretched out into the river were so long that they seemed to disappear into the night.

They had been met by a larger group of what looked to Harry like six policemen. For a hopeful moment Harry thought that the men were about to

be arrested. If they were in jail, surely his family's debt wouldn't matter. But the two groups were simply talking, and Harry's heart sank as he saw the distinctive man with a bow tie, handlebar mustache, and beard who seemed to be in charge.

It was Police Chief McKane, the corrupt and despotic man who was behind every shady deal on Coney Island. He was also the fire commissioner, schools commissioner, public lands commissioner, superintendent of the Methodist Church, and head tenor in the church choir. He even played Santa Claus in the yearly Christmas pageant. Nothing went down in Coney Island without McKane's approval. He had been on trial multiple times, but the state authorities could never get the charges to stick.

McKane was speaking to the man with the slicked-back hair, whose name was apparently Zoltan. They were discussing a business deal that had evidently gone sour, for McKane was shouting, and his face had grown red. Occasionally, Zoltan would interject a few low words, but mostly he remained impassive, watching the police chief with an amused smile. Tension mounted between the observers, and finally, McKane reached for his gun.

Harry held his breath as the scene turned into a flurry of activity. Zoltan lunged for McKane, while his companions flew at the other policemen. For a moment, the sound of footsteps, shouts, and cracking bones echoed through the night air, but they soon

gave way to a faint chorus of groans and labored breathing.

Zoltan had the police chief in a headlock and was holding a gleaming blade to his throat. His companions were standing over the pile of injured policemen on the ground. Harry gasped and took a few steps back into a shadowy alley. When he peered out again, he saw McKane involved in a very different sort of negotiation — one that had him pleading for his life.

Harry pressed his back against the wall and tried to make himself as small as possible. Following men like this was suicidal. They were obviously trained killers, and if they could take out a band of policemen, there was no knowing what they'd do to an unarmed kid.

Zoltan smiled and said something Harry couldn't hear. The terrified-looking police chief dug an item out of his pocket, shoved it into Zoltan's hands, and ran off into the night.

A few moments later, Harry heard the footsteps of the three men coming toward the alley. He ducked down as low as he could, trying to hold his breath despite the rank odor of the trash he was using as cover. Their pace slackened as they passed him, and Harry's heart felt like it slowed as well. Finally, the footsteps receded, and Harry waited a minute before he stood up.

He gingerly stepped over the trash, trying to avoid getting dirtier than he already was, then stretched his legs, which had fallen asleep from the combination of running and crouching.

Harry felt a brush of air, and before he could react an arm was wrapped around his chest and a knife was at his throat. A voice whispered in his ear, gravelly and threatening. “Who are you, boy?” He couldn’t turn his head to see the man behind him, but he could smell the pungent oil in his hair. Down the street, he could see the other two men returning.

“I’m Harry,” he blurted, catching himself before he gave away his last name.

“Why were you watching us?”

“I didn’t — I wasn’t —” Harry stuttered. The cold blade of the knife dug into his skin, and he could feel a drop of blood making a trail down his neck. “I was just sleeping there,” he lied. “I got kicked out of my house.”

“You chose a bad spot for a nap,” the man growled in his ear. He drew away and shoved Harry into the arms of the other two men. “Come.”

His two companions grabbed Harry and dragged him forward. Harry tried to pull away, but they just gripped his arms tighter.

Harry’s legs were shaking as he looked back and saw one of the policemen lying on the ground, moaning in pain. He should never have followed

these men. It had been foolish to think that he could do anything to help his family. All he'd done was make things infinitely worse. And now, it looked like he might have to pay for his mistake with his life.

They led him onto the piers toward one of the boats, and dragged him up the gangway. "Where are we going?" Harry shouted, struggling against their grip. His legs skidded on the wood, unable to keep him balanced as the men hauled him forward. Were they going to take him with them? Lock him in the hold? *Torture* him?

They dragged Harry onto the deck of a small steamship, and a few minutes later, were pulling away from the pier, out onto the Hudson River.

Zoltan stepped forward and leaned in, so close that Harry could see his own reflection in the man's gray eyes. "I know who you are," he said coolly. His Hungarian accent was noticeable, but didn't sound like the other immigrants in Harry's neighborhood. His voice was more polished, as if he were used to speaking — or maybe commanding — large groups of people. "You're Weiss's son. Did he send you to follow us?" Zoltan shook his head. "I expected him to know better."

"He didn't send me," Harry answered. "Please don't hurt him. I'll help pay back his debt. I work at a factory, and I'm taking extra shifts —"

Zoltan's face twitched, and Harry fell silent.

“Too late now,” Zoltan said. “You weren’t supposed to see any of that.”

Harry could feel wind blowing across the deck as the steamship pulled out into the harbor. How long would it be before his parents started to worry? A surge of guilt briefly overwhelmed his fear. He didn’t want to die, but the thought of his parents grieving him was almost worse.

Zoltan turned to address one of the other men. “Istvan, I know I’ve performed strangulation, suffocation, and premature burial, but have I done drowning?” Istvan shook his head. “Really? I can’t believe I have such a hole in my repertoire.” He shot Harry a smile that might have been considered winning had he not been discussing different methods of committing murder. “I have a reputation for a certain level of showmanship.”

Harry felt his heart start to race. They weren’t just trying to scare him. They were really going to do it. He winced as Istvan wrenched his arms behind his back while the third man went to the cabin and pulled out coils of rope.

“Are you sure we don’t want to try my new Winchester rifle?” Istvan asked. “Or perhaps the wakizashi sword I bought off that Japanese merchant?”

Zoltan grinned. “Don’t worry, I’m sure we’ll find a way to employ your new toys soon.”

Harry's stomach twisted, as if someone had already plunged a sword inside him. He imagined his mother's breakdown as she heard the news. His father's quiet resignation as the truth sank in and one more thread of his old life unraveled. His siblings would be crushed, but worse, who would even make the money to feed them? And Harry would never take the stage again. Never know the thrill of a perfectly executed illusion, and the cheers of a crowd enjoying being taken in.

He couldn't let this happen. He had to find a way to escape.

For a moment, Harry considered trying to fight them, but he knew that was pointless. There were three of them and they were all larger than he was. And there was probably more of a crew on the bridge and belowdecks. Harry breathed in and stood up straighter, almost as if he were onstage. A sense of calm and purpose settled over him. He couldn't overpower them, so he would have to survive some other way.

Feeling almost in a dream, he stepped forward and let them tie him up. As they looped the rope around his arms, he clenched his biceps. Harry had spent years performing as "Prince of the Air," and there was nothing for building muscle like hanging by your arms. He flexed his muscles as they tightened the ropes and waited for them to move on to his feet before he relaxed them. Once his biceps were no

longer clenched, he could feel that the ropes were significantly looser.

The fear and panic coursing through his body gave way to the same anxious energy he felt just before going onstage. But he couldn't let the men know he had a plan, and he allowed his body to go limp as Istvan carried him toward the rail. Harry's heart was pounding as he tried to squirm around to look out over the water. They were far from shore, but the lights of Manhattan were still visible.

"You don't need to do this," he yelled as they neared the rail. "My father will pay. I'll pay, too!" He needed to sound like he thought he was about to die. It wasn't difficult. Harry knew there was a high chance his plan would fail. But he couldn't dwell on that now.

It was showtime.

Istvan grunted and set him on the deck next to the rail. Harry looked down and grew slightly dizzy as he watched the choppy water splashing against the bottom of the ship about four stories below. "You don't have to do this!" Harry yelled, feeling a new wave of terror threatening to take over his body. "Please!"

Zoltan gave Harry a push. He teetered for a moment, staring at the dark water below. Then the boat lurched and he lost his balance and plunged overboard.



Harry took in a deep breath before he hit the surface and the icy water closed around him. He wiggled like a dolphin, swimming farther underwater. He needed time to escape before he came up for air.

He writhed and thrashed, using the looseness of the ropes around his arms to his best advantage. The chill of the water clamped down on him and he could hear nothing but a dull roar and the thudding of his own heart. The ropes were cutting at his skin but he barely noticed as he strained to extricate himself.

For a moment, his right wrist seemed trapped in a knotted loop, but with a painful wrench he pulled it out. His hands were free. With his legs still tied, Harry looked up. The lights from the ship filtered through the dark water, and he could just make out the outline of the steamship's hull.

His lungs were screaming for air, but with a stroke of his arms, Harry dove deeper into the water. He waved his bound legs like a fin. As he reached the ship's hull, he grabbed on to the barnacles underneath and hauled himself down. If he surfaced too soon, the Vespers would know he'd survived.

As he passed the keel, the ship's paddle swung into motion. Harry felt a moment of panic as it started to drag him backward. With a kick of his legs and rapid pulling of his arms, he moved away. His lungs were burning and he felt his head pounding as he strained for the surface.

Finally, he broke the water and gasped. Air flooded into his lungs. In his ears, his ragged breathing sounded incredibly loud, but luckily the noise of the steam engine and paddles seemed to be drowning it out.

He could hear Zoltan and his companions talking on the other side of the boat, and as his air returned, he smiled with satisfaction.

Harry clung to the hull of the ship as it began to gain speed and pull out of the harbor. Holding on with one hand, he used the other to untie his feet. The wet ropes seemed to stick to each other, but he finally got them untangled and let them sink into the water.

“He’s not coming back up,” Harry heard Istvan’s voice carrying from the other side of the ship. “Looks like he’s too small and skinny to float. I win. You owe me ten dollars, Bjorn.”

“The ship started moving. We weren’t close enough to see,” Bjorn protested. “If I toss some dynamite in and blast-fish him out, would that count?”

“Enough,” Zoltan cut in sharply. “We didn’t come to America just to dispose of nosy children. It’s time to get to work.” He paused. “We’ll finish this conversation below deck.”

Even though he was clinging to the boat, Harry continued to tread water. In the freezing water, it was important to keep moving to stave off hypothermia.

As the steamship moved past Governor's Island, they passed a garbage scow headed back toward the city. Harry pushed off and set out with vigorous strokes. He latched on to the scow as it chugged past and hauled himself on board. The captain of the tugboat might see him, but Harry hardly cared. He was out of the freezing water, and would be back in the city within minutes.

And if he'd planned correctly, Zoltan and his crew would think he was dead — which meant he was safe, for now. As he stripped off his soaked clothing and huddled down, Harry watched the steamship glide out into the bay until it disappeared into the night, leaving only the trails of its smokestacks.



"What were you thinking?" Harry's father demanded. "You were very nearly killed! Zoltan is a murderer. The Vespers use him for their most dangerous missions — they only sent him to collect my debt because he was in New York on other business."

It had been late when Harry returned, but his parents had been waiting for him. Early dawn light was coming through the parlor windows, and Harry could hear the city around them starting to wake up. His father's face was white from his illness, and he had an extra blanket draped over his legs.

"Who are the Vespers?" Harry asked, too tired from the events of the night to try to defend himself. "What do they want with our family?"

Harry's father sighed, and paused for a moment. Finally, he looked up, fixing Harry with a sad stare. "You're too young to remember this, but life wasn't easy in Hungary, especially for Jews. I spent many years trying to arrange for us to come to America, but when the paperwork finally came through, we still didn't have enough money for the passage. I took a loan from the Vespers in order to buy a ticket for myself, and to leave behind enough money for you, your mother, and your four brothers to come over."

His father turned to his mother, who nodded silently, urging Mayer Samuel to continue. "It was foolish," he admitted. "At the time, I didn't know much about the Vespers. I understood that they had some sort of vendetta against the Cahills, but they were the only people in Budapest willing to lend that kind of money without any sort of collateral." He closed his eyes, as if recalling memories stored deep within his mind. "And now I know why. The Vespers are a worldwide network of criminals, and I should have never gotten involved with them."

"Why didn't you pay them back?" Harry asked.

His father shook his head. "I did. I tried. But they kept raising the interest until the payments became impossible." He gestured toward their sparsely furnished living room. "We've given them all we have."

"That's why we've been so demanding with you and your brothers," his mother added sadly. "We had

no choice but to save up to try to pay them. We knew they would find us eventually."

Harry couldn't believe what he was hearing. "So they were the ones who broke into our house?" His father nodded. "We have to do something," Harry insisted. "I'll go to the police."

"You will do no such thing," Mayer Samuel commanded, his voice regaining some of its old authority. "The Vespers control every major crime ring in the city. There's no knowing what sort of influence they have with the police. You'll only make things worse."

A surge of hot rage welled up from somewhere deep inside him. "Well, I have to do something. I'm not going to stand by while they threaten our family."

"Harry," his father said, fixing his son with a stare that made it clear he'd heard what happened at the tie factory. "All you need to focus on is finding employment. Go do your shows this weekend to bring in a little money, and then find a real job next week. I'm sorry. I wish things were different."

"What will happen to you?" Harry demanded. "Won't the Vespers come back?"

"I'll take care of it," Mayer Samuel said. "We'll scrape together as much money as we can before they come back next week. But the most important thing is that you stay out of sight. The Vespers can't know that you survived. Not after what you saw down by the docks."

“Father, what if I —”

“No.” His father’s voice became stronger for a moment, almost as if he were his old self. “I may not be around much longer. This was my mistake, and you have to let me handle it.” Harry could see the thinness in his father’s pale cheeks in a new light. Mayer Samuel was wasting away, and the man who used to pick up Harry and spin him around, letting him pretend to be an acrobat, was never coming back.

“Harry.” His mother couldn’t quite look him in the eye. “Please do as he says. You can’t come back home until the Vespers return to Europe. Zoltan hates to be crossed, and he hates to make a mistake. If they see you, they will kill you … and then punish the rest of our family as well. Do you understand?”

Harry gulped. “I won’t let them find me. I’ll stay with Jacob until they leave. And once they’re gone … I’ll do my part to take care of the family. I swear it.”



Harry offered the deck, and the girl pulled the top card off as instructed. The audience watched intently.

“It’s the five of hearts. That was my card,” she announced. “But what happened to …”

“I suppose it was on top of the deck all along,” Harry joked. “Perhaps you simply imagined putting it in your pocket.”

His brush with death had left him jittery, and up until the moment he stepped onstage his hands had been shaking. But by the time he started his first trick in each show, the usual calm settled over him. In the low light of the stage, he morphed into the King of Cards.

She checked her pocket. “It’s gone!” she squealed. The audience cheered. Harry bowed, made a few cards appear and disappear, and stepped into the tiny backstage to a final round of applause. He sat down heavily on the small wooden stool. The “backstage” was little more than a heavy piece of black fabric blocking an area of a few square feet from view. There was nothing back here but the chair, a few rags, a flask of water, and an old drum. He sat back and mopped his brow with a handkerchief. It was his fifteenth show that Saturday, and there was time left for another two. It took about ten minutes for the old crowd to leave and the new one to assemble. Every audience had a different feel, and Harry would often change the order of his tricks to keep the crowd engaged.

Harry had snuck out to Coney Island early that morning, desperately hoping to escape notice. New York was an enormous city and the chance of him running into Zoltan or one of the other Vespers was tiny, but Harry’s heart still leaped every time he saw a man with black hair.

He could hear Thaddeus outside his tent, urging fairgoers to see the amazing magician inside. From

the way he spoke, it sounded like “the King of Cards” was capable of truly incredible feats. Harry just hoped that he was capable of the incredible feat of getting paid for his day’s work.

Although it was a grueling life, realizing that this was his last weekend of shows reminded Harry how much Coney Island felt like home. There were the circuses with high-flying acrobats and majestic lions. The ringmasters would bark out commands, drawing hundreds of eyes to every new spectacle. There were magicians who had devices that let them saw their assistants in half and make them disappear.

Harry knew how it was all done, of course, but he still let himself go along for the ride, clapping and hooting with the rest of the crowd as the assistants reappeared in the audience, unharmed. There was even a drama to the concessions sellers, who hawked their treats with booming voices and made cotton candy sound like a piece of cloud stolen from heaven. How could he leave it all behind?

When the audience was inside and settled, Harry picked up a mallet and beat a drum four times. He didn’t have anyone to pull open a curtain, lower the lights, or play music for him, so this was the only way to make his entrance appropriately dramatic — or, at least, get the audience somewhat quiet for his entrance. He played one final drumroll and leaped onto the stage to a smattering of applause.

He started facing away from the audience. He stretched out his arms, and then, with a flourish, a fan of cards appeared in each hand. There was slightly more applause, and a boy hooted. Harry smiled to himself, gathering his confidence. The audience was his to win. With a deft move, he made the decks vanish again. He spun to face the crowd, and it felt like his stomach did a backflip.

He was there. In the front row.

Zoltan was relaxed in his seat, using a toothpick to remove dirt from under his fingernails. He glanced up at Harry, giving him the same expectant look as the rest of the audience. He was flanked by his two companions, Istvan and Bjorn.

The sight of the three men sent a shiver down Harry's spine. What were they doing just sitting there?

With nowhere to run, Harry had no choice but to start the show. Perhaps, if he could buy himself enough time, he'd come up with a plan. His mind raced as coins appeared and disappeared, handkerchiefs changed color, and cards obeyed his every command. Zoltan laughed at the appropriate moments, applauded for each successful trick, and was generally a perfect audience member.

He shouldn't have stayed in the city. He shouldn't even have gone back home. The only way to convince the Vespers he was dead would have been to disappear completely. Would they take it out on his

family? Harry could imagine Zoltan and his companions walking up the stairs of the Weisses' house again, this time with murder on their minds.

But it was too late for recriminations now. Harry let the audience's applause build his confidence as he surprised a man by handing him the watch that had been on his wrist until a few minutes earlier.

Harry extended the show, buying himself time with elaborate stories and extra illusions. After the fourth card trick in a row, he could see a few audience members in the back begin filing out. If he didn't act soon, they would all leave, and he would be alone with the Vespers.

As soon as he'd made the decision, Harry felt his muscles relax. It was time to perform, and he was ready. Harry produced a new deck of cards and stepped off of the stage.

"Sir, would you please shuffle this deck for me?" he said, offering the cards to Zoltan, coming within an arm's length of the man who had tried to kill him. A part of Harry was screaming for him to make a run for it, but he buried it away.

It was showtime.

"Of course," Zoltan replied amiably, mixing the deck with the practiced ease of a gambler. Harry might have worried that the Vesper could stack the deck, but at this point he didn't care.

“Please take the first card for yourself,” Harry said, letting his best announcer’s voice boom through the tent as he stepped back onto the stage. “And pass the deck around. Ladies and gentlemen, each of you should take a single card from the deck.

“I will now present you with a new illusion. One that has never been seen before by mortal eyes!” he declared. There was no lie there — this was a trick that he had never even thought of before tonight. He walked to the center of the room and stood under the gas lamp. A successful magician would have drums and an orchestra to build the tension, but Harry only had the pounding of his heart against his rib cage.

“Examine your cards closely,” he announced. “Look around — each of you has a different card. Now hold your card in the air, but hold it tightly.” The audience complied, including an amused Zoltan. “I will turn out the light, and when I turn it back on, every one of you will have the exact same card,” Harry announced.

He reached up to the lamp and turned the key, plunging the tent into darkness. Some of the ladies gasped, covering Harry’s stealthy footsteps.

“Ladies and gentlemen!” he declared loudly.

“Brace yourselves!” he reached the door, and began shaking the tentpoles.

“Prepare yourselves!” he boomed.

“I’m very sorry!” he shouted as he successfully pulled the tentpoles out, stepped through the door,

and let the tent entrance collapse behind him as the audience screamed in shock.

It was a simple trick, really. Distract the audience with a big promise, turn out the lights … and then collapse the tent on them and run like the wind.



Harry broke into a sprint as he rounded the corner. The audience in the tent was yelling, but with a glance back, he confirmed that only part of the tent had collapsed. No one would be hurt.

No one but him. And, he realized with a sinking feeling, his family as well. Harry glanced back again. Zoltan and his crew had somehow made it out of the tent and were running after him.

They were fast, but Harry knew he was faster. He could put on a burst of speed and outrun them. But what was the point? He could run as far or as fast as he wanted, but the Vespers would find him. They were too connected. Too powerful. Too ruthless.

Harry knew the implicit threat that every criminal kingpin held over the more or less honest people that he preyed on. “Cross me, and I’ll kill you. Run away, and I’ll kill your family.” Glancing back, he could see it written on Zoltan’s face. Harry could run away and hide forever — but he couldn’t hide his sick father. He couldn’t hide his younger brothers and his little sister.

Harry stopped and turned around, letting the three Vespers catch up to him. He could see the fury on Zoltan's face, now modified with slight confusion.

Harry stood tall, facing the men, and held up his hands in surrender.

"Take me," Harry said. "I know it's over."

Istvan and Bjorn slowed, but Zoltan kept coming and lowered his shoulder. He slammed into Harry, knocking the wind out of him.

Harry's vision went blank for a moment and he collapsed to the ground. His lungs burned as he strained for air. Harry gasped, but the breath just didn't seem to come.

"You don't get to negotiate with us," Zoltan said from above him. His two companions' laughter mingled with the roar of white noise in Harry's ears as he struggled for air.

For a moment, Harry was sure he would die, but ever so slowly his breath came back. Harry looked up at the three heads clustered above him, framed by the lights of the fairgrounds and the dim stars above that. No one would stop to question them. As far as Coney Island was concerned, large criminals had a right to beat up short boys. It wasn't worth risking their necks to interfere.

"Kill me," Harry croaked. "Only please, please, leave them alone."

Zoltan was unmoved. “You died last week when we threw you into the river. I even sent a telegram to Vesper One, telling him to add your drowning to my tally. I will *not* be made a liar.” For that one moment, Harry thought he saw a flicker of concern in Zoltan’s eyes. But then it was gone, and the ruthless killer was back. “Since the moment your feet hit the water, you’ve been living on borrowed time.”

Harry closed his eyes. His escape had been for nothing. They were still going to kill him. They were still going to destroy his family. “But that’s not how it has to be,” Zoltan added. “You could be resurrected, if you do what needs to be done. How would you like to be alive again?”

Harry stared at Zoltan, unsure whether or not the man was playing a game with him. “What are you talking about?” he wheezed, still struggling to catch his breath after his sprint.

Zoltan inclined his head so he was looking straight into Harry’s eyes. “You are a talented boy, even if you are a nosy piece of tenement trash. Your magician’s tricks are not real artistry, but they have a certain utility.” Harry bristled but remained silent. The more time this twisted criminal spent taunting him, the less time he’d have to torture Harry’s family. “I need you to acquire an object for me. You’ll break into the specified location, use your special *talents* to escape, and then bring me the item the day after tomorrow. I’ll be waiting on the docks with a special crate to transport it back to Europe.”

Zoltan leaned even closer. “If you succeed, I will forgive your family’s debt and leave your father in peace. If you fail, you will be arrested and sent to prison for a long time. But don’t expect anyone to visit you there — if you fail, I’ll make sure each member of your family dies a unique and memorable death.”

The Vesper rose, standing with the expansive performer’s posture that Harry had worked so hard to imitate. “So do we have a deal?”

Harry didn’t hesitate. He knew his parents would be horrified if they learned that he’d allowed the Vespers to pull him into their web of criminality and deceit, but there was no other choice.

“I’ll do it.”



Harry and Jacob shuffled through the crowd, doing their best to look like awestruck tourists. Given the unbelievable array of sculpture, pottery, and paintings around them, it wasn’t difficult. There were paintings taller than Harry, full of knights, angels, and noblewomen in vibrant colors. There was even a collection of daggers, swords, and armor with beautiful inlays. To Harry, the Metropolitan Museum of Art was like an elegant version of Coney Island, with all the drama and spectacle but none of the dirt, violence, and corruption. He and Jacob had worn their best clothes, but Harry still felt shabby next to

the fine gentlemen and ladies taking the afternoon to stroll through the exhibits.

The museum was in an enormous brick building, topped with spires that made it look like a castle to Harry. And as large as it was, Harry had seen construction starting outside that looked like it would add entire new wings. Harry wished he could spend the day wandering through the museum. They'd even passed paintings by his famous ancestors, giving Harry a thrill that temporarily made him forget his nerves. But he had work to do — after memorizing the layout of the building, he had an even more important task: locating the object the Vespers wanted him to steal.

On their way in, Jacob had purchased a map of the collections. Harry pretended to be confused, frequently pulling the map open and looking around in every direction. In reality, he was committing the entire map to memory. According to Zoltan, the plan called for him to be wheeled in during a fake delivery, and he couldn't know for sure where he would end up. He needed to be able to find his target from anywhere in the museum.

"Unbelievable!" Jacob whispered as they entered the Greek and Roman section, passing by a massive marble sarcophagus.

The plan was to sneak to the Greek and Roman exhibit, replace the artifact he was meant to steal with a replica the Vespers had created, and then

deliver it to the Vespers' ship. Thinking about the assignment left Harry nauseous for a number of reasons. If he failed, his family would be punished in horrific ways. If he succeeded, a group of evil criminals would take a priceless treasure. But Harry knew what he had to do. When it came to choosing between his family and a piece of art — no matter how important — the choice was clear.

They strolled through the Greek and Roman exhibit casually, pretending to stop and examine every artifact. Harry could hardly believe that the statues, lamps, and even an incense burner had survived over two thousand years. He tried to imagine what relics might remain of his life in New York two thousand years from now. Would the tools for his magic tricks end up in a museum some day?

"Why did the Greeks need so many statues of headless naked men?" Jacob asked, looking at a row of sculptures.

"According to this," Harry said, pointing to a plaque, "the head was probably broken off. But I don't know why these guys couldn't keep their clothes on."

Harry instinctively turned his head away and pulled out the map as a museum guard walked by. There was nothing to be worried about yet — the guard couldn't possibly know what they were planning — but he could feel himself tensing up anyway. He closed his eyes, stood up straight, and envisioned himself on stage. He was about to perform

a routine disappearing act, nothing more. He opened his eyes and led Jacob to the target.

The artifact the Vespers wanted was tucked away in the corner of a room in the Greek and Roman wing of the museum. The gallery was full of marble statues and exotic figurines, busts of great leaders and ornate columns. But he was after a simple Hadra *hydria*, or water jar.

It looked like the small urns that the fortune-tellers in Coney Island used to decorate their tents and cultivate an air of foreignness, though less striking than those. Still, if the Vespers wanted it, the artifact had to be far more important than it appeared. The idea of Zoltan holding this work of art in his hands made Harry sick to his stomach.

It was locked in a glass case, and according to the plaque, it was from around 213 BC, and was inscribed with the name *Theudotos*, although scholars weren't sure why. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry examined the lock on the case and was relieved to discover that it looked fairly old. It wouldn't prove much of a problem. The locks on the doors to the museum were another matter entirely — Harry doubted that he could pick them quickly enough to avoid being caught. And worse, it had looked like they required a key to get either in or out.

Jacob nudged him. It was time to move on. A couple of poor boys in the museum were already an

unusual sight — most of the other patrons were older gentlemen and well-dressed ladies.

“Why does he want it?” Jacob whispered as they walked on to the next case. “None of this makes sense.”

Harry shook his head. “No idea. It’s not really my concern, I guess. At least it’s not one of those huge paintings — I have no idea how I would carry one of them out.”

The boys wandered through the rest of the galleries, pretending to give the other artifacts just as much attention as they had paid to their target. A few minutes later, they sauntered out of the exhibit and headed back outside.

Harry would have preferred to scope out his escape route, but it was off limits to the public. He would just have to trust that the Vespers’ plan would work. As they walked out of the museum, Harry glanced back at the outside wall that he would need to rappel down on his way out. That would be after being smuggled in, making it past the night watchmen, and getting to the roof. The whole plan seemed to be one impossible feat stacked onto another, but he had no choice. The image of Zoltan stalking into Carrie’s room was enough to strengthen Harry’s resolve.

Harry parted ways with Jacob and headed for his rendezvous with the Vespers. It was time for the show.



Harry's legs were beginning to cramp. He was crammed into a large Egyptian urn, arms clutched tightly to his sides and head tucked down. A bag containing the replacement jug had been stuffed in on top of his head, and his knees banged into his chin every time the dolly transporting the urn hit a bump. The stairs up the front of the Metropolitan Museum had been the worst. "I'm supposed to be a demolitions expert, not a delivery boy," Bjorn had groused when Zoltan gave him this job. Harry was pretty sure Bjorn had bounced him straight up the steps out of spite.

They were lucky the vase hadn't come apart on those stairs. It was completely fake — the paint had barely dried by the time Harry climbed inside. Still, to his untrained eye, it had appeared real enough. He needed to believe the plan would work. If it failed, Harry would go to jail for attempted burglary and his family would be murdered. He wasn't sure whether it was the danger or the bouncing of the dolly that was making him feel sick.

The bumping finally came to a stop and Harry could hear voices through the urn's ceramic sides.

"Delivery for Egyptian art," Bjorn said in his thick Swedish accent. When they had been discussing the heist, Bjorn had suggested adding dynamite to Harry's crate so that he could set the fuse and run to the artifact, creating a diversion. Harry had been relieved when Zoltan vetoed the idea — especially

since, judging by Bjorn's burned hair and lack of eyebrows, his methods didn't always work perfectly.

"Uh-huh," another man, probably a museum guard, said. "Do you have the bill of lading?"

There was a pause, and Harry's breath caught in his chest. He had known the plan was crazy, but he had expected to at least get into the museum before being arrested.

"Hmmmm. This is a little unusual." The guard's voice came through. "We weren't expecting this delivery today."

Bjorn mumbled something, too soft for Harry's ears.

Harry could hear someone opening the top of the shipping crate. A tiny bit of light filtered down around the uneven edges of the lid. Harry held his breath. All the museum guard had to do was lift off the lid, and the game would be up. Somehow Harry doubted that the museum could be convinced that a hidden Hungarian teenager was a standard feature of Egyptian urns.

Harry waited several long seconds as someone poked around at the packing materials.

"Well, all right, then," the guard said at last. "You'll find storage on the third floor, northeast corner. I'll show you the way. We're closing, so we'll have to be quick about it."

Harry breathed a sigh of relief as the crate was closed and the dolly began moving again. They bumped their way to the storage room on the third floor. To try to distract himself from the painful jostling, Harry counted each of Bjorn's footsteps and each turn they made. He called up an image of the floor plan of the museum, trying to track where they were headed. After eight turns, he started to lose certainty, but he still had a good enough idea to know which direction to head when he got out.

Finally, the crate was moved off of the dolly and placed on the ground. "Okay, let's get out of here," the guard said. "I need to lock up."

Harry heard two pairs of footsteps leave the room. A door closed and a key turned in the lock. As the sounds faded away, he could just make out the guard suggesting what landmarks Bjorn should visit while he was visiting New York City on his "delivery from Hungary."

Harry breathed deeply, waiting until he was sure they were completely gone. He listened, straining his ears for any signs that someone else was in the room with him. For a minute, he heard nothing, but then he heard the scratching of a pen piercing the silence.

Someone was in the room with him.

Harry waited. It could be a curator or restorer out there, finishing up some work. The museum might be closing, but the employees could easily stay for hours afterward. From time to time the employee

would stand up, or move an object from one area to another. Harry was pretty sure his feet were asleep and his legs and arms with them, but there was nothing for it. He simply waited.

After what seemed like an hour, the man finished his work. Harry exhaled as the door opened and closed, and the key turned in the lock once again. He waited another ten minutes for good measure, then flexed his muscles and pushed out with his arms and legs. The cheap plaster holding the fake urn together cracked open inside the packing crate.

Careful not to harm the replica in the bag, Harry reached up and used his penknife to unhook the latch. After fumbling for a moment, it gave, and he was able to push the lid off and stand up.

He swayed as he stood, nearly falling over. He stood in place, balancing on the edges of the crate as he stamped his feet to restore feeling. Finally, he was able to gingerly climb out of the box. He cleaned up the materials that had fallen on the floor and closed the lid so that no one who happened in would notice something amiss.

The storeroom was filled with crates and tables covered with pieces of artifacts in the process of classification. There were sculptures, bowls, and even another urn. On one table lay a suit of armor, completely disassembled, surrounded by notes detailing plans to fit it back together. Soft light

filtered in from high windows. Glancing up, Harry could see early evening stars.

Harry padded over to the door to see what he was up against. He had spent the last ten minutes planning how to pick this lock, trying to guess the type from the sound of the key the employees were using. But there was no obstacle. All he had to do was turn a small knob and he was ready to go.

It was almost a pity that he had to wait another hour until the last workers left and he could put the plan into action. Harry retired to a dark corner of the storeroom, hiding behind some empty crates and taking the opportunity to massage feeling back into his limbs.

Sitting in silence, he tried to shut out the worries that crowded his mind. What if he couldn't get to the Greek and Roman exhibit to take the artifact? He clutched the bag with the fake as images of Bjorn rigging his house with explosives hovered at the edge of his thoughts.

When he was confident enough time had passed, Harry exited the room and ghosted down the corridors, past the other storage areas and out into the Asian art exhibit. Occasionally he would hear or glimpse a guard, but he managed to slip into the Greek and Roman gallery unnoticed. In the darkness, the statues looked like silhouettes that might come to life at any moment to throw out the intruder stalking through their midst.

Harry found the water jug in its glass case, but that was no challenge. A lock pick hidden in Harry's belt made short work of it. He had just lifted the case open when he heard footsteps coming down the hallway outside. He laid the lid down delicately and slipped behind the case, crouching as low as he could. Had a guard heard him, or was it just a routine check?

As the guard came closer, the footsteps sounded like a clock ticking down the moments until Harry would doom his family to an early grave. Harry held his breath as the guard paused in the center of the room. The light from the guard's lantern played across the statues, casting the shadows of ancient heroes on the walls.

As the guard turned and headed out of the room, Harry exhaled. Working quickly, he opened the case and removed the jar. He opened the padded bag and pulled out the fake. Harry paused a moment, comparing the two side by side. Both bore the inscription of the Greek name, *Theudotos*.

It was staggering to Harry — two thousand years ago a Greek man had handled this same jar, likely even drank from it.

Harry couldn't imagine what Zoltan wanted with a simple terra-cotta jar. If it was money, there were famous paintings and sculptures in the museum that would sell for titanic sums on the black market. Harry examined the two objects more closely. They

had handles on each side and faded black decorations painted around the tops.

The only difference between the two jars was that the real one had very faint scratches on the base. Was it an etching of a diagram of some sort? In the low light, he couldn't make anything out. The forger wouldn't have been able to see the base when he copied the vessel. Maybe it was just sloppy counterfeiting. Or was this what Zoltan was after?

Harry shook his head. Were the scratches on the urn a map to treasure, or to some more valuable artifact? It would just give the Vespers more resources to fuel their criminal enterprises. Whatever they were planning, all Harry could know for sure was that it would be something horrifying — and now he was their accomplice.

He cautiously placed the fake jar in the glass case and gently nested the real one in his padded bag. He used his lock pick to relock the case, and a moment later, he was gliding through the hallways of the museum.

As he passed by the Roman sarcophagus, light played over it from the opposite side. Harry crouched down and flattened himself against its base. He had been too distracted thinking about his escape, and hadn't noticed the guard returning. The sides of the sarcophagus were covered with figures of ancient Romans, either writhing in pain or dancing. He didn't have time to look close enough to be sure — all he

could tell was that their tiny limbs were uncomfortably jabbing him in the back.

The footsteps advanced and light spun around the shadow of the sarcophagus. The guard turned the corner, and Harry flattened against the marble, holding his breath and watching the guard stop and yawn. The lantern's light shined on the statues and urns — and Harry's blood froze as it turned toward him. Before he could move, the light landed squarely on Harry, and he heard the guard gasp.

Harry leaped up, and the guard lunged at him. The man's right hand brushed his shirt, but Harry danced away and the guard lost his balance for a moment and fell to the floor. Harry sprinted away as the man yelled.

"Intruder! Help! Intruder!" The guard's voice echoed through the empty hallways. Harry dodged a Roman chariot and darted out into the hallway. He could hear thudding footsteps and see lights coming from the Egyptian exhibit, so he charged into the Asian wing.

Woodcuts, paintings, pottery, and calligraphy blurred as he ran past. Twice he saw lights ahead of himself and changed course, scrambling down a different hallway. He could outdistance each individual guard, but they just kept coming. As he ran, he called up the map of the museum in his mind, trying to plot out a course that would avoid the known guards and get him where he needed to go.

Harry led the pursuit on a long loop around the building, dashing past massive paintings and what a sign said were Peruvian antiquities. Finally, when he was far enough ahead, he darted toward the curators' offices. He could hear the guards yelling behind him, but he skidded to a stop in front of the head curator's office. He tried the doorknob just in case, but he wasn't going to be so lucky. Pulling out his lock picks, he knelt and started on the knob.

He rotated the tumblers until he nearly had it, but his hands were shaking, and he accidentally pushed the locking mechanism back into place. The beating of his heart and the sound of advancing footsteps mingled in a terrifying drumbeat.

As the lock finally clicked open, he could hear guards turn the corner and advance down the hallway. Harry dashed inside and locked the door behind himself just as one of them slammed into it. With the exception of the fireplace, every wall of the office was lined with bookcases, and the large desk in the middle was covered with papers and even more books.

The guards started to pound on the entrance, and Harry could hear the jingle of keys on the outside as he pushed the curator's desk in front of the door. Just as it slid into place, he saw the knob turn.

The guards tried to open the door, but the heavy desk held it shut. Harry judged that it would keep them only for a minute. He stepped to the fireplace,

nervously watching as the desk skid back and the door inched open.

Harry pulled a loop of thin rope out of his pocket and tied it around his waist, then to the straps of the bag, and set it just outside the fireplace, leaving a few feet of slack. Taking a deep breath, he jumped up and wedged himself into the chimney. He could barely make out a shaft of moonlight and stars at the top of the chimney.

Harry climbed up, pressing his back against one side of the chimney and his feet against the other. With his feet holding him steady, he put his hands back against the wall and pushed himself up. Then he worked his way up a few inches with his feet. Alternating back and forth, he made his way up the chimney. The rope pulled the bag up, and the artifact hung a few feet below him in the chimney. He could feel soot and ashes rubbing off all over his clothing and hair, with a sizeable portion sliding down the back of his shirt collar to his neck and back.

Below, he could hear the guards finally wrenching the door open. Harry just kept pushing himself higher, praying that if any of them looked up he would see only darkness. Finally, he reached the top and swung himself out onto the roof of the museum. He pulled the rope up, making sure not to knock the artifact in the bag. Once he had retrieved it, Harry slung the bag over his shoulders and headed for the front of the museum.

Harry coughed, trying to clear out the ashes choking his lungs. The cool night air on the top of the museum was a relief from the sooty chimney. The roof was broad and open, with spires lining the edges before the shingles sloped down and met with the walls.

He looked out at the starlit street, watching a horse-drawn carriage carrying a laughing couple pass by. He hitched his rope to one of the spires and then climbed over the edge.

Harry braced his feet against the bricks, then jumped back and let out rope as he fell down. He grimaced as he swung back into the wall and his legs took the brunt of the impact. It would have been nice to rappel down slowly and easily, but he didn't have time. He pushed off again, bounding down the wall as quickly as he could.

Once down, he laid the rope against the wall and ducked down into the shadows of the building. Inside, he could hear guards shouting and could see lights playing on the windows, but no one seemed to have come outside yet.

While he waited for a horsecar carrying a load of workers home, Harry pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and used it to wipe most of the soot from his face and hair. Once the street was clear again, he set off, sticking to the shadows until he was several blocks away from the museum. Stepping into the

light and quickening his pace, he headed for the docks.



An early morning fog was rolling in as Harry reached the East River. Most of the ships were tied up, dark, and silent, but the Vespers' steamship was a flurry of activity as three men used a winch and pulley system to load crates onto the ship.

Harry's heart was trying to claw its way out of his chest as he approached the three familiar figures standing on the pier. Zoltan's slick black hair gleamed in the light of the lanterns.

"It looks like the urchin may not be entirely worthless," Zoltan said with the grin of a predator. Harry felt a sudden urge to punch it off his face, but his looming accomplices made Harry think better.

"I've got it," Harry said. "That was my part of the deal. Will you leave my family alone?"

"I will — if it is genuine. Let me see it."

Harry felt every muscle in his body tighten. He was moments away from saving his family — if this criminal mastermind could be trusted. He pulled the bag off and handed it to Zoltan.

The Vesper gently extracted the Greek jar and held it out admiringly. "This will be perfect for my collection. Perhaps for holding water, or the ashes of an enemy. You know, I haven't cremated anyone

alive yet… . Istvan, keep that in mind. I'm sure Bjorn can rig something up. "

"Is the map still —" Zoltan shot Istvan a glance and he trailed off.

Harry wasn't sure who Theudotos was or what had been inscribed on the jar, but he wished he could apologize to him for letting a Vesper handle his legacy. He hoped the Greeks would have understood why he did it and forgiven him.

Zoltan was nearly beaming as he walked over to the last crate on the pier. "Bjorn, help me open this. Istvan, please make sure that the boy doesn't leave us just yet."

Istvan's heavy hand fell on Harry's shoulder. He wanted to shove it off and run, but he simply stood silently and watched them pack the artifact away. The interior of the crate was constructed to hold this object — it was full of padding material but included a special spot for the artifact. Harry could barely imagine what would make this inscription so valuable, but the thought of the Vespers controlling it made his stomach twist.

Zoltan snapped his fingers at Bjorn. "This is to go at the very bottom of the hold. Put a guard on it at all times," he instructed. "No one opens it until it reaches Vesper One. We can't afford to disappoint him." There was that same flicker of uncertainty, momentarily breaking through Zoltan's poised exterior.

Harry looked into the distance, catching a glimpse of movement in the fog.

“There’s no one coming to help you,” Istvan growled.

Zoltan turned and shouted to the men on board the ship. A few seconds later, two appeared on the rails and began hauling. They pulled the crate into the air and deftly landed it on the deck.

With the ship loaded, Zoltan spun and focused his attention on Harry. “You’ve put on a good show. But the audience demands the finale it was promised. You’re coming with us.”

Harry’s insides twisted. Istvan tried to pull him forward, but he jerked back. For a moment, Istvan’s grip was broken, and Harry made to run. But he only managed to take two steps before Zoltan slammed into him, and Harry was on the ground with a blade at his throat.

“You’re coming, or your family pays the price. Understand?”

The urge to fight evaporated. Harry nodded slightly, the steel at his throat leaving him unable to speak.

Zoltan stood, with a satisfied smirk on his face.

Istvan and Bjorn hauled Harry to his feet. Despite their grips on his arms, Harry drew himself up to his full height — even if it was half a foot shorter than the men around him.

“If it means my family lives, I’ll come with you.”

Zoltan smiled with satisfaction and turned to head up the gangway. Istvan and Bjorn kept a tight grip on Harry’s arms as he followed.

The three men on the deck smirked at Harry as he was dragged on board. Zoltan beckoned for Istvan to follow him below deck, leaving Harry with Bjorn and his only slightly less menacing companions.

Their backs were facing the crate they were meant to be guarding, and Harry whispered a silent word of thanks before taking a deep breath and shouting, “Police!”

His stage training paid off. The Vespers all dashed toward the railing before turning back to Harry with cold fury in their eyes. “There’s no one there,” Bjorn snapped, grabbing hold of Harry’s arm again.

And there wasn’t. The only sounds were the grunts of the Vesper crewmen as they moved the crate toward the hold, and the thud of Harry’s rapidly beating heart.



Harry stood at the back of the ship, watching the city recede. He tried to fix the skyline in his memory. This might be the last time he saw it.

The deck creaked as Zoltan approached. Harry turned to face the Vesper, standing straight and looking him in the eye.

“I killed you before,” Zoltan began. He leaned back against the rail, utterly at ease.

Harry waited, trying to match the Vesper’s deadly calm. But he could feel his chest fluttering with every breath he pulled in.

“… but you’re not dead,” the Vesper added.

“Your powers of observation are impressive,” Harry said, thankful that his voice didn’t betray the fear welling up inside of him. “I got you the artifact,” he continued. “I expect you to uphold your end of the deal.”

Zoltan shook his head. “You did well, for a gutter-trash trickster. But I’m afraid I sent a telegram saying that you drowned. I don’t lie to Vesper One, so I have to remedy this … inconsistency.” He sighed. “And you know far too much about our mission here. Did you really think we’d let you go, with what you’ve seen?” Zoltan stood up from the rail. “The audience needs the ending that they were promised. The show must go on.”

Although every muscle in his body twitched with the need to run, Harry remained still as Istvan and Bjorn advanced on him. Within moments, his hands were chained behind his back.

“This time he’ll stay down there,” Istvan grunted.

“Should we attach a little dynamite for good measure? Maybe throw a hand grenade after him?”

Bjorn asked eagerly as he fastened cuffs on Harry's legs, attached to a heavy metal ball.

Zoltan tilted his head to the side as if considering the proposal. "No, it's not necessary. We should save the explosives in case the coast guard decides to pay us a call. Just stick with the original plan."

Harry looked out across the water. The steamship was gliding along the water, and the docks were starting to disappear in the distance. The lights of Manhattan gleamed in the early-morning darkness as the night shift returned home and workers kissed their families good-bye and headed to their jobs.

Bjorn shoved Harry to the ground and he groaned as they stuffed him — manacles, chains, ball, and all — into a burlap sack. The cold of the metal on his arms and legs felt like the grip of death itself, ready to pull him down to a forgotten grave on the bottom of the bay.

"You promised you wouldn't hurt my family," Harry said, fixing Zoltan with a glare. The Vesper had gone back on his word once already — his promise was worthless. Harry tried to banish the thought of his feeble father being thrown to the ground, but the terrible image only grew more vivid.

"I did. And since you got us the artifact, they're no longer worth my concern. They'll live out their insignificant little lives," Zoltan said as the sack closed and the sliver of starlit sky narrowed. Harry's breathing was quick and shallow, and he clenched

his fists, digging his nails into his palms in a futile attempt to keep panic at bay.

The men started to drag him to the railing. He struggled, trying to slow them down as best he could. He needed to buy time while his hands frantically felt for the lock on the chain that bound him. He started yelling as they hoisted him up to the rail. The weight of the ball chained to his feet nearly broke his ankle before someone grabbed it and pulled it up.

His stomach lurched as he spun in freefall.

Harry took a huge breath as he fell, filling his lungs with precious air. His earlier stuggle paid off and the lock on his hands gave way just as he was hitting the water. He'd bought himself just enough time to pick the lock on his handcuffs. But the heavy weight was still attached to his legs, and he was sinking straight down.

Harry struggled in the water, his movements slowed by chains, burlap sackcloth, and the cold all around him. His penknife slashed at the burlap fabric, but to his horror, it didn't seem to give. Finally, he pierced the sack and managed to claw his way out. He dropped the knife and grabbed for the shredded fabric. If the material floated to the surface, the Vespers would know he was trying to escape.

Harry looked up through the murky water, trying to stay calm as his air supply rapidly diminished. He could still see the hull of Zoltan's ship, its steam-powered paddle pushing it forward with considerable

speed. It was already too far away for him to catch. There would be no hiding on the other side of the ship this time.

With a dull thump, the ball landed on the floor of the harbor. Harry reached down and quickly picked the lock on the manacles around his ankles. His body floated upward, but by holding the ball and chain he stayed at the bottom.

His lungs were burning, but he had to stay down a little longer. He watched as the hull of the Vesper ship moved farther out into the harbor. His brother Theo had once timed him at two minutes and fifty seconds with his head underwater, but at this depth it felt like he was being crushed.

Harry watched bubbles escape his nose and float to the surface, his vision beginning to blur. He needed to head for the surface, but he also needed to stay down until the ship was far enough away. If they saw he was alive, the trick would be up. This was the show. He had to fool them completely, or they would come back and take revenge on his family.

Harry clenched his fists around the chain, willing himself to stay calm. He was the King of Cards, the Prince of the Air, and a master escape artist. He could hold his breath for a few more precious seconds.

Finally, he started to see red behind his eyelids. Harry let the chain slip out of his grasp and kicked off, struggling for the surface. As he reached the top, he slowed, letting only the front of his face break

through. The ship was far away now, but it was possible that they were still looking back for him. Harry breathed in, pulling in as much air as he could. He panted for a moment, letting his vision return to normal, and then he kicked his legs and dove back underwater.

With powerful strokes, he swam in the opposite direction of the ship, staying underwater as much as possible. An observer would have to look at just the right moment to see a mouth and nose emerge above the surface for a quick breath, then disappear again.

Harry glanced back at the ship and saw it rounding the shoreline before finally disappearing. He treaded water for a moment to catch his breath, and then set off for the shore at a more leisurely pace.



Harry met Jacob at the pier, just as they had planned. Harry pulled himself out of the water and stood up, shaking the water out of his hair. “How did it go?” he asked, struggling to catch his breath.

Jacob was grinning like a maniac. “Your plan worked perfectly.” He handed Harry the parcel.

Harry took the artifact, hardly believing he was holding it once again. After the events of the past few days, it seemed miraculous that he’d managed to fool the Vespers. But Jacob had managed to climb up from underneath the docks, and as they’d discussed, swap

the urns while Harry created a distraction. They knew it was a long shot, but it had actually worked.

“I owe you,” Harry said, smiling. He knew from his reading that no great magician, not even the great Robert-Houdin, had pulled off his act alone. It paid to have a best friend who was skilled in his own right.

Jacob raised an eyebrow. “That’s not all. While I was up there, I … got a little greedy.” He passed Harry a second parcel, this one a simple leather case. Harry opened it and gasped.

“How did you … ?”

“This was next to the artifact I switched. It must be their blackmail money, or something.”

Harry laughed. It was a good thing Zoltan wouldn’t discover that anything was missing until he was in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. Inside the case was more money than Harry made in a year. He knew immediately what they would use it for. It was enough to take care of his family while he and Jacob finally created the act they had dreamed of. As soon as he returned the artifact to the museum — an anonymous parcel mysteriously appearing in the night watchmen’s room would do the trick — he could start planning.

Harry shivered, this time more with excitement than with cold. His real life was about to start.

The audience clapped as Harry leaped onstage and took a bow. The large tent was packed for the third show in a row. Their statewide tour, word of mouth, and the posters touting their stage name, “The Brothers Houdini,” had brought the Harlem hometown crowd out in force. Harry and Jacob had showcased their best illusions, from simple card and scarf tricks to an elaborate “mind reading” act. Now it was time for the finale.

Tonight wasn’t just any show. In the front row, Harry could see his mother, his brothers, and his sister. Even his father, who could barely walk, had been wheeled down so that he could watch. Mayer Samuel’s face was thin and taut, but Harry could detect a slight smile on it. His father still didn’t entirely approve of his son’s new venture, but Harry had caught him looking around at the crowd in wonder more than once.

As Jacob invited the local constable onstage, Harry looked down at the orchestra, a four-piece band that he had recently hired. What a difference it made having music to build tension! Together Jacob and the constable put Harry in handcuffs and leg irons, and tied a generous portion of rope around him. Just before they pulled a bag over his head, Harry flashed the crowd his most winning smile.

They led Harry to the crate and he crouched down, letting them guide him inside. The audience clapped as the front slammed shut and Jacob snapped a heavy padlock into place.

Harry couldn't see a thing, but he knew what was happening outside. The orchestra was starting up, high fast notes building the excitement — and masking the sounds that Harry was making. Jacob would be joking with the crowd and making sure they knew that the constable wasn't a plant. The cuffs and leg irons were the real deal.

Next, Jacob would produce a sheet and wave it about. He would climb onto the top of the box and hold it out with both hands, shielding himself from the audience. The orchestra would reach a crescendo as he lowered it down just enough to show his head one last time. Then in one smooth motion he would fling the sheet aside.

Only it wasn't Jacob anymore. The metamorphosis appeared instantaneous, and Harry stood in his place, grinning at the audience once again. The money they'd taken from the Vespers had allowed them to design the most impressive trick anyone in Coney Island had ever seen.

The crowd erupted in applause, and Harry jumped down on the stage, taking a bow. With the constable's help, he unlocked the front of the box and helped out Jacob, who was wearing the cuffs, leg irons, rope, and a sack over his head. The audience roared its appreciation and the constable smiled in amazement and shook his head as he used his key to let Jacob free.

Harry and Jacob clasped hands, walked to the front of the stage, and took a bow as the audience applauded. After another bow, they backed up and the curtain drew shut.

But the crowd wasn't done. "HOU-DI-NI, HOU-DI-NI," they chanted. Harry peered through the side of the curtain. Even his father was shouting it.

He locked eyes with Jacob and shrugged. They could do one more trick, couldn't they? After a quick discussion, they settled on a new illusion that Harry had invented a few weeks ago, and they had been practicing ever since. Jacob grabbed their props from stage left and Harry signaled for the stagehand to raise the curtain again.

The stagehand yanked the rope and the curtain slid open. Harry Houdini stepped into the light, ready to amaze his audience one more time.

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