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The Klezmer King's Last Matinee

MOVE ALONG, FOLKS!" cried the manager of the Hippodrome. "There's nothing to see here!"

As he spoke, he tried to hide the Klezmer King's corpse with his own body—which was almost wide enough to do the job, Sacha reflected.

Maurice Goldfaden was a short man, but not a small one. Not that he was fat, exactly. There just seemed to be more of him than there was of most people. His big belly seemed to have a life of its own. It strained his shirt buttons to bursting and thrust out from under the bottom of his waistcoat, jutting over the top of his trousers so that it reminded Sacha of a tenement fire escape. In fact, everything about Maurice Goldfaden seemed to overflow normal bounds and limits. His hair stood up from his head in every direction, defying combs and brilliantine to break out into wild and frizzy curls with every shake of his head. He talked big too. His whisper reached the back row of the theater, and his hands gestured

so dramatically that Sacha wondered if he'd been watching actors onstage so long he'd forgotten how real people talked in ordinary life.

The only thing about Goldfaden that wasn't bigger than life were his eyes. They were small and black and very bright, and they nestled in his jowly face like the poppy-seed filling in hamantaschen. Looking at those eyes, Sacha had a feeling that very little happened at the Hippodrome that Maurice Goldfaden didn't know about.

"Nothing to see!" Goldfaden repeated to the world at large. And then he turned to Maximillian Wolf and added in a quieter voice, "And certainly nothing that need concern you, Inquisitor!"

Frankly, Sacha was inclined to agree with Goldfaden. The cause of death was certainly clear enough. The Klezmer King lay sprawled across the stage of the Hippodrome with one long-fingered hand still clutching his clarinet. He had died onstage during the Friday afternoon matinee. He'd been in full song, right in the middle of a dazzling high E-flat solo riff, when his electric tuxedo had sputtered, flickered, and flared up in a blinding flash. He was still wearing the tuxedo that was billed on the marquee outside as his "world-famous electric tuxedo." No one had mustered up the nerve to turn it off. So now the Klezmer King lay at Wolf's feet, flashing and twinkling like a flurry of falling stars.

Wolf looked down at the dead klezmer player for a long moment without speaking. Then he walked backstage, fol-

lowing the wires that snaked away from the body into the shadows, and kicked the plug out of the wall.

"Oh," Goldfaden said sheepishly. "I guess I should have thought of that."

They walked back to the body and stared down at it. Wolf wore his usual bland and disheveled expression, but Goldfaden looked completely undone by the presence of a corpse on his stage.

"Pathetic," Goldfaden said. "Asher was a genius, an absolute musical genius, one of the all-time klezmer greats—even if his box office wasn't exactly to die for. And now look at him! Fried to death by a couple of strings of cheap Christmas tree lights!" Goldfaden shook his head mournfully. "That's not just tragic. It's worse than tragic. It's *bad showmanship*."

Lily giggled, and Wolf let out a strangled sort of cough. But Goldfaden wasn't laughing.

"And to have it happen at the Hippodrome," he went on. "Terrible, just terrible! The poor old girl doesn't deserve this indignity. Why, the Death-Defying Dershowitzes defied death right here on this very stage! And that rascal Harry Heller practically invented smoke and mirrors here. I even had Houdini headline his disappearing elephant act—no illegal magic, mind you, just honest fakery, all totally kosher. But in all these years, I never imagined the Hippodrome would come to this!" He frowned at the spot where Asher had died, his mouth tightening in a way that confirmed Sacha's suspicion that Goldfaden—and maybe a lot of other people

too—hadn't much liked Asher. "But isn't that Naftali Asher for you? Electrocuted by his own tuxedo because of some stupid publicity stunt that—mind you, I saw the nightly take, and I know for certain—didn't do a thing at the box office. What a *shlimazel*! If he ever makes it into heaven, everything will go wrong from the minute he gets there. The neighborhood will start going to pot, and the angels will move to hell to get away from Asher's Yiddish luck."

"Sounds like he wasn't the sort of fellow who ought to have been messing about with electricity," Wolf hazarded.

"Yeah, well, thank God he had Sam to do that for him, or he probably would have fried himself months ago."

"Sam?" Wolf echoed, scrounging in his baggy pants pockets for his ever-elusive pencil stub.

Suddenly Goldfaden looked like he could have bitten his tongue off for having mentioned the name. "Asher's dresser. A good kid. The best."

"And what's Sam's last name?" Wolf had finally scared up a disgracefully chewed pencil stub. Another search produced a dog-eared scrap of paper that looked like it might once have been a laundry ticket.

Goldfaden's eyes shifted around nervously. "I'm sure Sam'll turn up sometime. He's probably just too upset about the whole thing to—er—and anyway, Sam wouldn't hurt a fly!" Goldfaden glared fiercely at Wolf, as if daring the Inquisitor to contradict him.

"Ah," Wolf said in a soft voice that made Sacha's ears prick up. He looked sideways at Lily and saw that she had caught

it too. Wherever Sam was—and whatever his name was—Sacha wouldn't have changed places with him for all the tea in China.

"Well, this certainly is an unpleasant business," Goldfaden said, as if eager to change the subject. "Pathetic, really. It's enough to make you wonder if all that crazy talk people made about him was true."

"What kind of crazy talk?" Wolf asked in a very quiet voice.

Sacha held his breath. Next to him he could feel Lily practically buzzing with anticipation. Something was definitely up. There might not be any magical crime involved in Naftali Asher's death. But there was a secret. And if Sacha had learned anything so far in his apprenticeship, it was that one way or another, Wolf would know what it was by the time they walked out of the Hippodrome.

"Oh, well, you know," Goldfaden said. "People always talk. Especially theater people. Can't believe everything you hear, can you?"

Wolf seemed willing to go along with Goldfaden's changes of subject—for now anyway, though Sacha had watched him at work long enough to know that he would eventually meander back to every dangling hint and unanswered question. "I understand that it was a lady who called in the Inquisitors?" he said.

"A lady!" Goldfaden cried, as if in all her storied history, the Hippodrome had never seen such a creature. "Oh, you mean Pearl! Well, I don't see why you need to talk to *her*."

Wolf fished out his pencil stub again. "Pearl—?"

"Pearl Schneiderman, a.k.a. Madame Eelinda the Electrifying Eel Maiden."

"What?" Wolf sounded perplexed. "Did she dress up in light bulbs too?"

"Nah, she's a contortionist." Goldfaden twisted his arms up like pudgy pretzels. "But not the usual contortion shtick. Veeeery artistic is our Madame Eelinda! Anyway, the point is you don't need to know. This isn't a magical crime. It's barely a crime at all. More of a—a—an unfortunate hap-
penstance. No need whatsoever for the Inquisitors to involve themselves."

Sacha looked at Wolf to see what he thought of this, but it was impossible to tell. Wolf stood stock-still, his handsome bony face impassive, and his dishwater gray eyes blinking mildly at Goldfaden through spectacles still fogged with cold. The only moving thing anywhere on Wolf's person was the icy rainwater dripping from his coat and pooling around his sodden shoes.

Sacha glanced at Lily Astral, who stood beside him. But his fellow apprentice just widened her bright blue eyes at him as if to say, *Don't ask me. I have no more idea than you do what goes on inside Wolf's head!* Then she reached into the pocket of her heavy winter cloak, fished out a delicate little lace handkerchief, and blew her aristocratic nose with a resounding honk.

It was February, in the middle of the worst New York winter anyone could remember, and if there was one small satisfaction that made up for Sacha's raw fingers and frozen

toes, it was the sight of prim and perfect Lily Astral with her nose running all over the place.

Not that he wanted her to be *too* miserable. He liked her. And if she were just a little less rich and a little less of a know-it-all—and if she weren't a girl, obviously—she would have been the best friend a fellow could ever have. But still, it was nice to know that even Lily Astral was human enough to catch a cold.

"Seriously," Goldfaden insisted. "The guy was hopping around onstage strung up like a Christmas tree, sweating like a hog, and spitting into his clarinet. You think he needed *help* killing himself?"

"I do see your point, of course," Wolf said mildly. "But all the same, Miss Schneiderman did report a magical crime."

"Well, she was upset. People say all sorts of things when they're upset."

"And people say all sorts of things when they aren't upset too. But I've generally found that the things people say when they're upset turn out to be a good deal closer to the truth."

Goldfaden pursed his lips and narrowed his prune-colored eyes. "I could kill Pearl for making that phone call," he muttered. "I really could!"

"I hope you won't," Wolf said earnestly.

Suddenly Goldfaden seemed to remember the body lying at his feet. He turned a little green and tugged at his shirt collar as if he felt in need of air. "Pearl overreacted a little, that's all. Because Asher was involved . . . and . . . well . . . *you know*."

"Actually, I *don't* know."

"Well, I'm not one to repeat malicious rumors. And Asher was a—well, okay, not exactly a *friend* of mine. Asher wasn't the kind of guy who *had* friends. But I felt sorry for him. He was tormented. Even for a genius. Which he certainly was, whatever people might say about how he got his talent."

"All the same," Wolf said, circling back to their earlier disagreement, "I would like to talk to Madame Eelinda—er—Miss Schneiderman. And of course Asher's dresser, Sam—what did you say his name was?"

"Oh—er—I didn't," Goldfaden blurted out. "I mean, I sent Pearl home. The strain of it all, you know."

"Shall I send an officer to her house to assist her?" Wolf asked solicitously.

"I'm sure that won't be necessary. I'll just ring her up."

"And what about Sam?"

"I . . . um . . . don't know where he lives, actually."

Wolf gave Goldfaden a blank stare that Sacha wouldn't have wanted to be on the sharp end of for love or money.

"No, I swear, really I don't! He was living with his family on Henry Street last I knew, right over the kosher butcher. But those Schloskys move around like gypsies. You know how it is in the tenements. Every month come rent day, there's kids whose home address is a pile of furniture on the sidewalk. That's the Schlosky boys for you: sent unshod into this sorry world with nothing to their name but red hair and empty bellies. So how's a man supposed to keep track of a

family like that? I paid Sam in cash under the table, and we were both happier that way. And if you want to report me for *that*, go suck on an egg!"

But Wolf just laughed and told Goldfaden to call Pearl Schneiderman.

"For you, anything," Goldfaden proclaimed with a wink. "And in the meantime, you can always talk to the other eye-witnesses—all three hundred of them!"

For the next hour, while a Black Maria trundled Asher's body down to the Tombs, they heard from a parade of eyewitnesses. They talked to matinee-goers from every walk of life: Hester Street shopkeepers and Orthodox cantors, Wiccanist revolutionaries and sweatshop seamstresses. They talked to the sellers of seltzer water and candy and roasted chestnuts. And finally they talked to the vaudeville performers themselves—the contortionists and chorus girls and song-and-dance men who had watched from the wings in what turned out to have been the best seats in the house for the Klezmer King's final, fatal performance. But they all said the same thing—so much so that Sacha started to wonder if they'd all rehearsed it together before the Inquisitors showed up.

The Klezmer King had just embarked on his most famous solo—the great *Terkish*, with all the high notes—when the electric tuxedo sputtered and flared, sending out a shower of blue sparks. Asher staggered and cried out. And then he collapsed, stone dead before he hit the ground.

Or that was the story, anyway. And everybody who worked at the Hippodrome seemed pretty determined to stick to it.

Wolf was a subtle and delicate questioner. So subtle and so delicate, in fact, that he could usually interview witnesses—or even suspects—without them ever noticing when he moved from casual questions to the really important stuff. But Sacha had watched Wolf at work many times by now, and he could see that there were two burning questions on his mind: Where was Sam Schlosky? And what were Naftali Asher's dying words?

Sooner or later, more or less discreetly, Wolf asked every single witness those two questions. And one after another, from the fat lady to the midget boy, every single witness lied to him.

No one had heard Asher's last words. No one was even willing to guess what they had been. No one had seen Sam Schlosky after Asher died. And no one had the faintest, foggiest clue as to his whereabouts.

"This is absurd," Wolf said at last, sounding as close to annoyed as he ever got. "How can a man shout his dying words onstage in front of three hundred eyewitnesses without a single one of them hearing him?"

"Acoustics," Goldfaden intoned with a lugubrious shake of his jowls. "I always say acoustics is more art than science. Why, I worked at a theater in Moscow once where— But whaddaya know! Here's Pearl! Pearl can tell you everything!"

Despite Goldfaden's obvious doubts about her status as a lady, Pearl Schneiderman looked nothing like the "painted women" Sacha's mother was always accusing Uncle Mordechai of consorting with at the Yiddish People's Theater. She

wore no makeup, and her prim shirtwaist and heavy wool skirt covered her from neck to ankle. In fact, Sacha couldn't see the slightest difference between her and any other nice Jewish girl on the Lower East Side—except for an odd nervous tic she had of cracking her knuckles by bending the fingers so far backward that they all but touched the backs of her alarmingly flexible hands.

"So," Wolf said when he had worked his way around to the subject at hand. "You are the young lady who called the Inquisitors. And Mr. Goldfaden here seems to think that you did so because of some rumors you'd heard about Naftali Asher."

"All nonsense!" Goldfaden interrupted. "What good can come of passing on such crazy talk?"

Wolf turned his dishwater gray eyes on Goldfaden. There was nothing threatening or intimidating about Wolf's stare. In fact, it was so absent-minded that you couldn't really call it a stare at all. But Sacha had been on the receiving end of that absent-minded gaze often enough to know just how uncomfortable it could make a person.

Goldfaden squirmed and swallowed nervously, but he was made of tougher stuff than most people. He clamped his jaws shut and glared at Wolf like a dog defending a bone.

It was Pearl who cracked first. "They said he'd sold his soul to the devil," she whispered. "They said he met the devil at the crossroads and sold his soul for a bunch of klezmer songs."

"See?" Goldfaden said. "Utter nonsense! People have

been saying things like that about great musicians ever since there *was* music. How many klezmer players were supposed to have traveled with gypsies and played with the devil in the Old Country? And how many times have we all heard about some blues man down south who met the devil at the crossroads and sold his soul for the magic in his fingers? But the very idea of such a thing happening in New York is ridiculous. I mean, honestly, how many crossroads are there in Manhattan?"

"Two thousand four hundred and sixty-seven," Wolf answered promptly. "If you count Five Points and Mulberry Bend."

Goldfaden shuddered—though whether it was at the idea of all those hitherto unsuspected crossroads or at the mere mention of the two foulest slums in Manhattan, Sacha couldn't guess.

"I still don't believe it!" he said stoutly.

Wolf turned to Pearl. "But you believed it," he said softly. "At least enough to call in the Inquisitors. And don't think I'm unaware of how very reluctant anyone who works here would have been to do that. So why did you?"

Pearl seemed to collapse into herself. She glanced desperately toward Goldfaden. But he was looking resolutely the other way, as if now that he'd failed to keep Pearl away from the Inquisitors, he was determined to show Wolf that he wasn't going to interfere with her telling her story.

"I—I heard Sam and Asher fighting," she whispered at last. "While Sam was dressing Asher for the show last night."



"What were they fighting about?" Wolf asked.

"I couldn't tell, really. I couldn't hear them all that well. And what I did hear didn't make any sense. Sam said something about Pentacle, which seemed strange, since Asher stopped working there years ago. Asher tried to laugh it off, and Sam said, 'Don't lie to me, Asher. I know where you go. I followed you.' And then Asher got really angry, but I couldn't hear anything much of what he said. He wasn't a shouter—he always got bitter and quiet when he was angry. He could say terrible things, things people never got over, in the quietest whisper." She put her hands to her mouth, and her eyes filled with tears. "I'm sorry! It's horrible to talk that way about him when he's—"

"Never mind," Wolf said gently. "You can't help it if that's the way he was. And people don't become angels when they're murdered. What else did they say? You'll feel better once you've told me."

"Not if it gets Sam in trouble," Pearl said darkly. "Anyway, the next thing I heard, Asher was telling Sam it was none of his business, and besides, he'd already quit. 'It's all settled,' Asher said. 'Tomorrow's my last day. They've found my replacement.'"

"And then?" Wolf prompted.

"And then—Sam laughed. You can't imagine that laugh. It was so *old* and world-weary. And he said, 'Don't tell me pretty stories, Asher. I *saw* that creature. I saw the watcher in the shadows. Do you think that *thing* will go quietly back to wherever it came from? Do you think you can sell your soul

to the devil and not pay the bill when it comes due?’ And then . . . and then it was time to go onstage. They didn’t say another word to each other. But I saw Sam’s face when Asher died. And one thing I can tell you for certain: Sam didn’t think it was an accident.”

Wolf looked from her to Goldfaden. “Is that what you’ve all been hiding from me? Why?”

Goldfaden looked sheepish but still defiant. But Pearl clasped her hands together with a pleading look on her face and almost seemed about to drop to her knees before Wolf.

“Because of Sam!” she cried.

“What about Sam?” Wolf seemed genuinely mystified.

“We were all terrified of getting him in trouble.” Pearl grasped at Wolf’s coat sleeve. “He’s a good boy. He never hurt anyone. Whatever Asher was mixed up in, Sam couldn’t possibly have been part of it! Can’t you just . . . just forget we ever mentioned him?”

“Do you really think I can do that?” Wolf asked sadly.

Pearl dropped her head into her hands and sobbed. “Then it’s all over! As soon as the newspapers get word of this, it’ll all be ‘Anarcho-Wiccanists’ and ‘subversive magical elements.’ And that’ll be the end of any justice for poor Sam.”

Wolf frowned. “What on earth does this have to do with politics?”

“But—but don’t you understand who Sam Schlosky is?”

Pearl stammered. “He’s Moishe Schlosky’s little brother!”

Sacha’s heart sank. Pearl was right, no matter how much

he hated to admit it. Moishe Schlosky had spent the last year trying to organize the workers at J. P. Morgaunt's Pentacle Shirtwaist Factory. If any reporter sniffed out the faintest hint that Moishe's own brother was mixed up in a magical crime, every paper in town would declare it an Anarcho-Wiccanist conspiracy. Sacha knew that as surely as he knew the sun would rise tomorrow. And he knew something else too—something that made the sinking feeling in his stomach even worse. Moishe was in love with Sacha's sister. And—though he couldn't fathom how his plump, pretty sister could possibly even look twice at a redheaded klutz who was skinnier than a starving chicken—Sacha was starting to have a sneaking suspicion that Bekah was sweet on Moishe, too.

At that moment, the door at the back of the theater burst open. Light footsteps tripped down the aisle, and a voice Sacha would have known anywhere called out, "Good golly, who canceled the second matinee? And what's all this about Inquisiduh?"

He turned to look up the aisle—and sure enough, there was Rosie DiMaggio, a.k.a. Rosalind Darling, in all her gorgeous, auburn-haired glory.

Halfway down the aisle, she caught sight of Wolf and his apprentices. "Hey, whaddaya know!" she cried. "Sawshah! Lily! Inquisiduh Wolf!"

"Sounds like the elocution lessons are coming along swimmingly," Lily whispered in Sacha's ear.

Sacha tried not to laugh, but he had to agree. The purpose of Rosie's mother's life was to backstage-mother her

dazzlingly beautiful daughter into fame, fortune, and a high-society marriage. But honestly, Sacha thought she ought to just give up and let Rosie follow her dream of becoming a famous inventor. Rosie had as good a head for business as any Wall Street Wizard. And Lily had a point about the elocution lessons too. Rosie might be a thousand times prettier than any of the society beauties who flocked to Maleficia Astral's dinner parties . . . but Sacha still doubted there was a speech coach or elocution spell in the world strong enough to conquer Rosie's New York accent.

"Well, well," Inquisitor Wolf said with the friendly smile that he always had for Rosie. "If it isn't Miss Little Cairo!"

"Nah, I got a new act this year. My mother decided I needed something more artistic if I was gonna break into high society. Now I'm doing 'Miss Rosalind Darling's Living Statue Exhibition.' A one-girl museum, complete with depictions of illuminated miniatures from Mr. Morgaunt's world-famous magical manuscript collection. Very classy. But the white paint's hard to get out of my hair. And I get the cramp somethin' awful havin' to stand still so long. Honestly, I preferred the belly-dancing."

Lily made a sound that Sacha would have called a snort if anyone but the heir to the Astral family millions had made it.

"Anyway," Rosie said, oblivious as always, "what are you guys doing here?"

Wolf stepped aside so she could see the chalk outline on the stage.

"Oh, no!" Rosie gasped and covered her mouth with her hands. "Who was it?"

"Naftali Asher."

Was it Sacha's imagination, or did Rosie suddenly look a lot less sorry? But all she said was "Ooh. Nasty. How'd it happen?"

"The electric tuxedo."

Rosie shook her head, tossing her auburn curls. "I never thought that claptrap thing was safe."

"See?" Goldfaden insisted. "Of course it was an accident!"

"Oh, sure, sure," Rosie replied absent-mindedly. "Wouldn't want to speak ill of the dead. Still . . . if there was one guy in vaudeville I *wouldn't* be surprised to see turn up murdered, it'd have to be Naftali Asher."

"Why's that?" Wolf asked quietly.

Rosie gave him a meaningful look. "I guess you never met the guy. Still, Mr. Goldfaden's probably right. Sam's a good kid, but he's no genius. I tried to tell Asher they needed to ground the thing properly, but he practically bit my head off. He shoulda listened to me, huh? After all, I got exploded and set fire to enough times back when I worked for Mr. Edison to know a thing or two about electricity."

"You're not working for Edison anymore?" Lily asked.

"Nah. After the fire at the Elephant Hotel, my picture got in the paper, and Mrs. Edison saw it and decided to take Mr. Edison on a long trip to California to promote 'his' motion-picture camera. As if! He can barely run the thing with-

out my help! But two can play at that game. And the way I see it, since I already invented one motion-picture camera for Mr. Edison, there's nothing to stop me from inventing another one for myself!" She gasped again. "Oh, golly! If the camera was working right today, the whole thing must be on film!"

Suddenly Rosie was off and running. She dashed back up the aisle toward the exit. Wolf followed close at her heels, with Goldfaden waddling behind him and the two apprentices bringing up the rear. They made it into the lobby just in time to see the muddy tails of Wolf's overcoat vanishing through a green baize door that led to a steep flight of stairs.

As soon as Sacha stepped into the stairwell, he was surrounded by the soft whirring and clicking of some piece of machinery running overhead. It was a familiar sound—and not in a good way. It reminded him of Edison's etherograph. Morgaunt had used that machine to steal Sacha's soul and make a dybbuk of it. And then Sacha had played into Morgaunt's hands by recklessly summoning the dybbuk—a blasphemy that still made him cringe with guilt every time he thought of it.

He'd never seen the dybbuk again after that night; it had vanished into the flames of the Elephant Hotel, and he fervently hoped it was gone forever. But he still knew he wasn't finished with J. P. Morgaunt. Morgaunt had told Sacha that he had the makings of a Mage. He'd said that Maximillian Wolf had caused him so much trouble that he

wouldn't tolerate another Mage-Inquisitor in the city. Then he'd offered Sacha a job—and laughed in his face when he refused it.

Ever since that night, Sacha had tried to forget Morgaunt's mocking laughter. And he'd tried almost as hard to avoid Wolf's efforts to get him to learn magic. He couldn't give up his apprenticeship, because his family needed the money too badly, but he was still determined not to become a magician. The one time he had worked magic—to summon his dybbuk—he had felt with every fiber of his being that he was doing wrong. And the magic that Wolf had used to defeat Morgaunt in the burning hotel had been even more terrifying than the summoning of the dybbuk. If that was magic, then Sacha wanted nothing to do with it.

Sacha had stopped on the stairs as the memories came to him, overwhelmed by the weak, sick feeling that always overtook him when he thought about that night. But now he realized that the others had gone on before him, and he forced himself to follow. At the top of the stairs hung a heavy red velvet curtain. Sacha pushed it aside—and stepped out into what felt, in that first instant, like midair.

They were in a private box: a little balcony that hung just to the side of the Hippodrome's stage, close enough that the actors could have stood onstage and struck up a conversation with the uptown ladies and gentlemen who could afford these seats.

But there were no audience members in the box now.

Instead, a spindly-legged steel spider crouched over the plush-upholstered seats—it was cobbled together from about five regular camera tripods. On top of the thicket of spindly legs, like a clockwork daddy longlegs, was the strangest camera Sacha had ever seen.

Or at least he thought it was a camera. It seemed to have all the parts and pieces cameras had. But it also had other parts: an extra-long adjustable lens, a speaker trumpet just like the one on Edison's etherograph, and a strange figure-eight contraption on one side that seemed to be doing nothing at all except rolling a long strand of shiny tape from one bobbin to another bobbin.

It was this part of the machine that was making the whirring and clicking noise. And now that Sacha stood beside it, he could hear a sort of scritchety sound as well: the sound of the shiny strand of tape catching in the little cogs and gears that sent it snaking through the belly of the machine.

Rosie flicked a hidden switch, and the machine sighed and wheezed and shuddered to a stop.

"What is it?" Lily asked in the soft silence that followed.

"It's my walking, talking motion-picture camera," Rosie said proudly. "The only one in existence—but not for long! This invention's gonna make me the toast of Hollywood!"

"Why I let her talk me into allowing the thing in my theater, I really couldn't tell you," Goldfaden kvetched. "It's unfair competition, the worst threat to real theater since the phonograph! The actors' union would kill me if they knew

I was aiding and abetting the enemy this way. But that girl could charm a stone into getting up and walking!"

"And you think you filmed Naftali Asher's death with it?" Wolf asked Rosie. "Sound included?"

"Hopefully. I'm still having a heck of a time making the sound match up to the pictures—there's a trick I used for Edison, but he's got the patent on it now, so it's back to square one on *that* little problem. Still, you can usually hear everything pretty good, even if it looks a little funny."

"Can we see it?"

"Well, not yet. You gotta develop the film just like with a regular camera, you know? I could do it for you. Let's see now . . . if I rushed it a bit, I could probably have it ready for you day after tomorrow." Then her face fell. "But wouldn't that be a conflict of something or other? I mean, I work at the Hippodrome. Ain't I a suspect?"

Wolf's eyebrows shot up in surprise. Then he smiled, a little ruefully. "You forget, Rosie. I know you. And out of all the millions of people in New York, you're about the last one I'd ever suspect of killing anybody."

"Oh!" Rosie seemed flattered and even a little flustered by the compliment, though Sacha couldn't figure out why. "Uh . . . I'll bring it to the Inquisitors Division on Monday. I always wanted to see where Sacha and Lily work. I heard so much about it, I got a real curiosity for the place."

"Anyone else I should talk to?" Wolf asked Goldfaden. "Besides Sam Schlosky, I mean."

"Well, you'll need to talk to Asher's wife, of course. And Ki—erm—" Goldfaden fidgeted for a moment, once again unable to meet Wolf's eyes. "Ahem, that is to say—no. Nobody who comes to mind, strictly speaking."

Wolf gave Goldfaden one of his blandest looks. "Everyone has enemies, Mr. Goldfaden, or at least people who don't like them very much. If you're worried that I'll jump to unwarranted conclusions just because you mention, say, a rival or a professional competitor—"

"Oh, heck!" Goldfaden erupted. "I guess you'll hear it sooner or later, so it might as well be from me and not the rumor mill. Asher had it in for the Kid. Thought he was trying to put him out of business. You know who I mean, don't you? Hottest klezmer clarinet in New York."

Wolf looked blank.

"That guy was the Klezmer King," Goldfaden said, pointing at the wavering chalk outline where Asher had lain. "And in my humble opinion, he was the greatest klezmer player who ever lived. But genius or not, he was finished. No one wanted to hear him anymore. They were all too hot for the new sensation that's sweeping the nation: Kid Klezmer."

"Oh!" Sacha gasped before he could stop himself. "*Him!*"

"You know about this person?" Lily asked, as if the mere idea were too absurd to be believed.

"Sure—um—my mother sort of has a thing for him."

Goldfaden snorted. "Your mother and every other live female on the Lower East Side between the ages of nine and

ninety. If you ask me, he doesn't have a tenth of the talent poor Asher had. But the women are almost as crazy for him as they are for that talentless hack, Mordechai Kessler. I should be so handsome. I woulda been a millionaire!"

Sacha started guiltily at the sound of his uncle's name, but Wolf was too busy asking where he could find Kid Klezmer to even notice.

"We-ell," Goldfaden said doubtfully, "he spends a lot of time at the Essex Street Candy Shop."

"Oh," Wolf said, in a very different tone of voice. "I see."

Lily looked mystified, but Sacha knew exactly what Goldfaden meant—and why Wolf suddenly sounded as wary as a mouse who'd just caught wind of a new cat in the neighborhood.

Everyone on the Lower East Side knew that the Kid was Meyer Minsky's favorite klezmer player. He was practically the official clarinetist for Magic, Inc. And he hung out with all of New York's most notorious Jewish gangsters in the back room of the Essex Street Candy Shop. Mrs. Kessler wouldn't let Sacha or Bekah set foot in that store, even though it had the best candy in town and was only a mouthwatering block and a half from their apartment on Hester Street. But Meyer Minsky had once visited Benny Fein's mother in the apartment upstairs from theirs, arriving in his canary yellow limousine with his pockets full of candy for all the neighborhood kids—and the taste of that candy was one of the sweetest memories of Sacha's life.

"But I guess you wouldn't want to be seen walking into the candy store," Goldfaden said hesitantly. "It'd give people the wrong idea."

"Quite," Wolf agreed.

"But . . . uh . . . Meyer likes to have lunch at the Café Metropole. And it is almost twelve. And that might be . . . ah . . . neutral territory, so to speak."

"A very astute suggestion," Wolf agreed in his blandest voice. "And now we really should be going. Rosie? We'll see you Monday?"

"You betcha!" she called from the bowels of her walking, talking motion-picture camera.

A minute later, Goldfaden was hustling Wolf and the apprentices out onto the street under the blinking, flashing Greco-Roman awning of the Hippodrome. The weather was still appalling, and they hurried to button coats, twine mufflers around chilly necks, turn up their collars, and prepare for the freezing slush of the New York sidewalks in February.

But before stepping into the icy rain, Wolf turned back to Goldfaden for one last question. "You mentioned Harry Houdini earlier," he asked the theater manager. "Just out of curiosity, would you still hire him now?"

Sacha and Lily both knew what Wolf was asking: Would the Hippodrome still hire a magician who'd been unofficially blacklisted by ACCUSE, the Advisory Committee to Congress on Un-American Sorcery? Maurice Goldfaden knew what Wolf meant too. And from the look of things, he didn't

like it much. His eyes narrowed, and his already flushed face turned a purpler shade of red.

"What kinda question is that? This is the Hippodrome, not just some garden-variety vaudeville joint. We started out in Yiddish theater way back when. We've had all the greats here: Adler, Thomashefsky, Kessler. I mean *David* Kessler, of course, not Mordechai the Meatball!"

Sacha jumped again at the sound of his Uncle Mordechai's name—and Goldfaden's poppy-seed eyes flicked his way with a twinkle in them that made Sacha suddenly suspect Goldfaden knew exactly who he was and was taking active pleasure in insulting Mordechai to his face. Sacha had seen his uncle Mordechai in several Yiddish People's Theater musicals—you had to catch them fast, since almost every show that opened at the Yiddish People's Theater folded before the actors even got their first paycheck. Still, he couldn't help feeling that Goldfaden was being a little unfair. But he wasn't going to argue the point, so he tried to copy Wolf's blandest expression, forcing out of his mind the very idea that he even knew anyone named Mordechai Kessler.

Wolf knew about Sacha's family, of course—though Sacha hadn't exactly gone out of his way to tell him more than was strictly necessary about his scapegrace Uncle Mordechai. But Lily still thought Sacha was a respectable middle-class boy who lived in the sedate row house near Gramercy Park, where the Astral family limousine dropped him off every day after work. And she'd go on thinking that as long as Sacha had

anything to say about it. He'd die of shame if she ever found out that he lived in the tenements.

"Anyway," Goldfaden went on, "the point is the Hippodrome's got history. She's got soul. And the Hippodrome is not gonna stiff Harry Houdini just because a bunch of congressmen from states with square corners think being a rabbi's son makes him un-American!"

Goldfaden was shaking a finger in Wolf's face now, his big potbelly pushing the taller man backward step by step. Soon both were standing in the rain, Goldfaden in nothing but his suit jacket and waistcoat. But he was too angry to notice—and the finger that had been waving in Wolf's face was now jabbing at his chest.

"And you know what else, Mr. Fancypants Inquisitor? If you think you're going to lean on me to report my friends and neighbors for Wiccanist activities—"

"Actually," Wolf said mildly, "I'm quite a fan of Mr. Houdini myself. And he seems to be having a little trouble finding work lately. So I thought I might mention that if he did appear at the Hippodrome, I'd be happy to buy a ticket."

"—you've got another think—oh!" Goldfaden stopped short. "Really? You'd come see Harry? And the Inquisitors wouldn't shut us down if we had him back? D'you think we could get away with doing the elephant trick again? No, wait . . . that elephant's on tour in Saskatchewan. And trust me, you don't want to try that trick with the wrong elephant! So I suppose we'd have to come up with something new. A séance?

A death-defying escape? Something underwater, perhaps?" His eyes sparkled, and he rubbed his hands together excitedly. "Harry'd have to get back in training, of course. Nothing makes a good magician go to seed faster than testifying in front of Congress."