

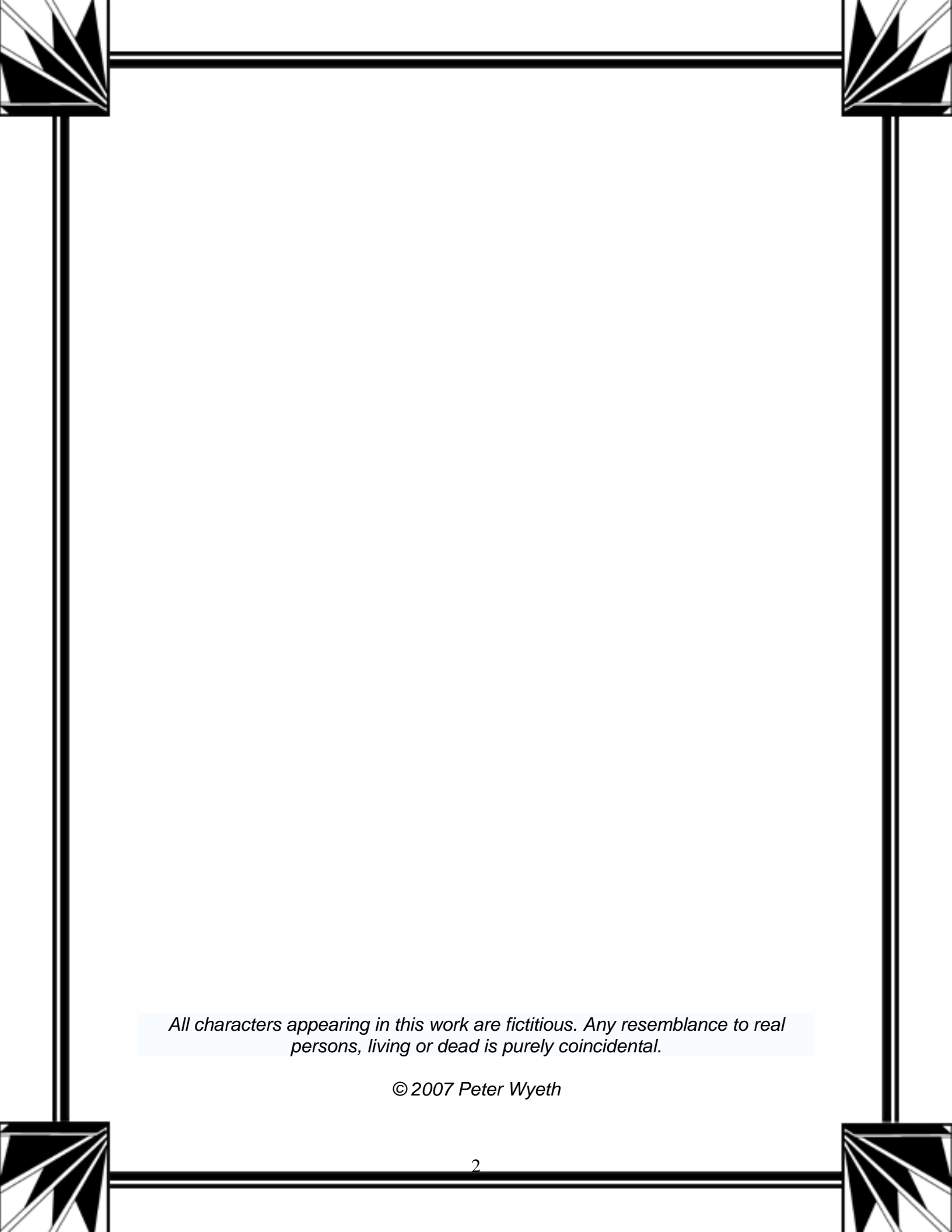
THE IMPROBABLE ADVENTURES

\$2.00 OF ETHAN DUPRE II

THE MYSTERIOUS PACKAGE





WRITTEN BY
PETE WYETH



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Autumn had come early to Mile High City, the wind from the North Atlantic was cold and biting, rain spit down upon the city, making it wet and depressing. The sleek, art deco buildings of Mile High City reached toward the heavens, there was precious little space on the city's levitating platform for yards, so most people lived in the skyscrapers that dominated the city. It wasn't the kind of night for honest people to be outside. But then, no one had ever accused Ethan Dupreii of being honest. Dupreii was convinced it wasn't his fault, more of the people whose company he was at times forced to keep since coming to the city of dreams late last year. The bank had foreclosed on his parents' farm in the Midwest, forcing him to seek out his fortune in the big city however, the depression that the world was in had hit everyone hard, some more than others.

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Ethan Dupreii braced himself against the cold, wet wind as he exited the speakeasy on Lindbergh Boulevard; the street crossed the city's south side through the roughest part of Mile High City. The dark night spread before him and he walked at a brisk pace along Hope Avenue, his fedora low over his eyes and the collar of his coat high, protecting him from the pelting rain. Dupreii turned and walked north, along Rockefeller Drive; the buildings loomed over him as he hurried along the desolate street toward the Brummel University of Technology and Innovation, where he was fortunate enough to have been employed as a custodian for the past several months. As he neared the university's campus, Dupreii noticed a pair of suspicious individuals standing in a recessed doorway across the street from Tesla Hall watching him intently as he angled toward the locked doors of the building. Despite the cold, wet weather a flight of four members of the Rocket Corps flew along Rockefeller Drive while on patrol. Dupreii couldn't help but feel a twinge of envy for the daring RocketPack wearing police of Mile High City, they were well paid and highly respected by the city's more honest citizenry and feared by the criminal element.

As he slowly pulled his keys out of his pocket, feeling the cool metal flask that was in the pocket of his overcoat as well, Dupreii could feel his watchers' eyes boring into the back of his head. He pulled the keys from his pocket, unlocked the elegant metal and glass doors, opening them and quickly stepping inside before pulling them shut behind him. When Ethan Dupreii turned around to lock the doors, he noticed the two men were nowhere to be seen on the street, sighing deeply he made his way into the bowels of the building to begin this night's shift but first, he had a package to drop off with one of the tenured faculty of the university.

Dupreii nearly jumped out of his skin when he felt a firm tap on his shoulder, turning around quickly, Dupreii found himself standing face to face with a humanoid figure, it was around five feet ten inches in height, made of highly reflective chrome, and its art deco lines and ornate decoration belied the strength that was contained within The robot's metal skin. The robot's glowing eyes cast a red glow across Dupreii's face as it gazed at him.



“Please insert identification card into the slot on my chest!” the robot loudly proclaimed. Dupreii fumbled about the inner pocket of his beat-up overcoat until he found his wallet and produced a thin card that contained nothing but a bar code on one side and slid it into the thin opening on the robot’s chest.

The Robot’s eyes flashed on and off and it made beeping sounds for about 15 seconds before the card was spit back out and Dupreii took it, sliding it back into his wallet.

“Greetings, Ethan Dupreii! It is nice to see you once again.” The Robot stepped aside to allow Dupreii entrance into the building.

“What’s the latest news?” Dupreii inquired of the robot as the pair walked across the huge lobby of Tesla Hall, their footsteps echoing through the massive room. Light from the streetlamps and lightning flashes was the only illumination. Dupreii and the robot walked toward the large angular desk that sat in the middle of the vast room, Dupreii took the seat while the robot stood off to one side.

“Well Sir, Professor Higgenbottom has discovered more ruins on Venus.” The robot began as Dupreii took a pull from the flask he had produced from the pocket of his overcoat, fedora pulled low over his eyes.

“He’s a nut.” Dupreii merely stated.

“Of course, sir.”

“Anything else?”

“Two men attempted to break into the building tonight.” The Robot said. **“They left shortly before you arrived.”**

“Do you know who they were?” Dupreii inquired as he returned the flask to his overcoat’s deep pocket.

“Negative.” The robot said. Dupreii nodded and turned to leave.

“Well, keep fighting the good fight.” Dupreii stated as he walked over to the elevator bank to the left of the massive angular desk that he had been sitting at.

“I have not been programmed to fight. I am a reception robot.”

“Of course, you are.” Dupreii stated as he continued walking toward the elevators. Dupreii stopped, and pressed the up button and it illuminated. “I really need to get a newspaper later.” Dupreii muttered under his breath.

“In news, Professor Higgenbottom has discovered more ruins on Venus.” The robot began to repeat itself. The doors to the elevator slid open and with a thankful sigh, Dupreii stepped into it as the doors closed behind him, leaving the robot to talk to itself, and Dupreii was sure that it would until someone else came along.

The interior of the elevator was paneled in a rich black oak that was stained dark while the railings were made of polished brass. The button panel next to the elevator’s door was made of bronze, Dupreii’s finger stabbed the button for the 12th floor, the highest one in the building, and the elevator began to ascend with a hiss of air. The elevator’s floor was covered with a deep burgundy carpet. Dupreii almost felt bad as his shoes were still wet from the rain-slicked streets outside.

Dupreii mused while the elevator climbed its shaft on a bed of air about the state of the robots in the university. Not alive, nor aware. Did they have any

wants or desires? How hard would it be to program them to want or desire stuff anyway? And what would the benefits of doing so be? Then, Dupreii's mind wandered a bit further. How did he know for sure that he wanted or desired? It seemed that all he did was drudge work day in and day out, cleaning after borderline insane scientists and the young students that they were teaching.

If the money was there, Dupreii mused, he could have been one of those students, blindly blowing up random test tubes or trashcans as he invented the future. How was he any different from the robot in the lobby? Like the robot, he only did as he was told by his superiors.

With a loud 'ding', the elevator doors hissed open, and Dupreii stepped into the long, dark hallway, like the lobby, it was lit by the ambient light from outside, though it was darker as he was now on the twelfth floor of Tesla Hall, well above the street lights of Mile High City.

Ethan Dupreii's footsteps echoed through the empty corridors of Tesla Hall as he walked to the office of a Professor E.M. Happenstance, a physics professor and the university's longest tenured instructor. As he neared the professor's office, Dupreii sensed that something was wrong; the hallway was flooded with light where his door stood wide open, something that in his year of working at the university he had never seen, especially this late at night. Dupreii quickly backtracked toward a utility closet that he had passed along the way, keyed open the door and grabbed the closest thing in the utility closet and turned back toward the professor's office. Dupreii walked slowly toward Happenstance's office, and was gripping the mop handle so tight that his knuckles were turning white.

As Dupreii slowly approached the open door, light spilling out into the hallway, he could hear movement in the office beyond. Skewing up his courage, Dupreii edged to the door and peered around the doorframe into the lit office, it was a mess, messier than he was used to, papers were scattered all over the floor, drawers pulled out of file cabinets and the large oak desk, chair cushions were cut open and the insides ripped out and scattered around the room.

The office's tall narrow windows stood open, the curtains blowing in due to the wind, the cold rain making the polished granite floor slick with water and soaking countless pages. On top of a tall bookshelf that had all the books pulled from it sat a particularly ugly stuffed monkey with an eye patch. Dupreii couldn't recall seeing it in his many visits to Professor Happenstance's office in the past year. Dupreii leaned his mop against the wall near the door and righted the wooden desk chair that had been knocked upside down and he settled in, putting his feet on the top of the desk and pulling a metal flask from one of the oversized pockets in his overcoat, opened the stopper and took a deep drink of the hooch.

As Dupreii drank deeply of the alcohol in the flask, a flurry of motion erupted as something small and furry leapt from the top of the bookshelf and out the door of the office; Dupreii was startled and almost tipped over in shock and surprise.

When he regained his composure, Dupreii leapt to his feet and ran out the door, realizing that the source of the disturbance was long out of sight. Dupreii

returned to the messy office and looked for any sign of the professor; all that he could find was under the desk in the form of a small pool of blood and the professor's incredibly thick eye glasses. Sensing foul play, Dupreii picked up the black bakelite hand set of the telephone and dialed the operator.

"Get me the police; there's been a break-in at the university." Dupreii started when the operator on the other end answered. "And, I suspect, a kidnapping."

"Sir, where in the university was the break-in? And who was abducted?" the operator on the other end inquired.

"Tesla Hall, Professor. Happenstance's office!" Dupreii shouted.

"We'll send some cars right over sir." Dupreii slammed the phone's hand set down and waited. A few minutes later, several uniformed policemen arrived with a few security officers from the university. Dupreii stood in the middle of the messy office, afraid to touch anything, including the flask that was on the floor where he had been sitting.

"What's your name?" one of the officers began grilling Dupreii as the others began going over the room looking for clues. "And how did you come to discover the break-in?"

"E-Ethan Dupreii, I work as a custodian at the university...I was scheduled to work and I noticed that the professor's door was standing wide open...Something which is...highly unusual for the professor." The police officer looked toward one of the security guards, an older fellow around fifty years of age who nodded once. Satisfied, the police officer turned back toward Dupreii.

"What was your relationship with Professor Happenstance?"

"The professor took a liking to Mr. Dupreii right after he was hired." The security guard stated. "I often found the two of them deep in conversation in this very office while I was on my rounds."

"Is this true Mister Dupreii?" Dupreii nodded in reply. "You may go, though it seems as if the professor had been drinking...You wouldn't know anything about this, would you young man?" The officer stated after being shown the flask and sampling some of the liquid that was still in it.

Dupreii looked toward the older security guard nervously who nodded at him. "He-He sometimes asked me to bring him a small nip; he said to keep the chill from his bones..." Dupreii looked at the police officer who was taking notes in a small notebook. "I did it because he disliked going out in public from what I gathered."

"Well, don't leave town, young man. But, in the meantime, you can return home for the evening, we'll take care of things here. Do you have transportation?" Dupreii shook his head no as he turned to leave.

"I can take him home." The security guard volunteered. The police officer nodded before Dupreii and the security guard, Bob Willings, walked from Professor Happenstance's office.

As the two men walked toward the parking garage below Tesla Hall, Willings looked Dupreii up and down. Something seems to be bothering you, mind telling me what it was?"

"I was just wondering, do you remember Professor Happenstance ever owning a stuffed monkey?"

"Not that I can recall. Why do you ask?" Willings thoughtfully replied.

"It's just that, I can swear that there was one on top of the bookshelf in the office when I entered the room, but now it's gone..." Dupreii slowly said. "Furthermore, there were a couple of men watching the front of the building when I let myself in. I would have told the police, but I had forgotten about it until now."

The pair of men climbed into an older sedan with the university's logo painted on the front doors. "I'll let them know when I return Ethan." Dupreii grimly smiled at the security guard as he settled into the passenger seat of the car, closing the door behind him.

Willings pulled away from Tesla Hall and slowly motored his way toward the southern end of Mile High City. Pretty soon, the two men found themselves in a slum, the buildings were tall and looming, the streets poorly lit. Eventually the car pulled in front of a particularly destitute looking building and Dupreii reached for the door handle to open it, but the security guard put his hand on Dupreii's shoulder stopping him.

"Whatever's going on, watch yourself son." Dupreii nodded and turned to leave, but the strong hand retained its grip. "If anything else comes up in regards to this, call me before you do the police. Understand?" Dupreii nodded slowly. Willings released his grip on Dupreii. "Get a good night's sleep; I'm sure that Chancellor Burroughs will want to speak with you in the morning." Dupreii nodded again and when Willings' grip on him was released, Dupreii opened the door and climbed out of the sedan. Dupreii watched as the car slowly drove away in the pouring rain before crossing the street to the decrepit building in which he lived.

As Dupreii walked into the building, he noticed that the lights in the hall had gone out again and he cursed lightly as his shin made contact with a small table that had been left in front of the door for some reason that he couldn't fathom. The hall of the building smelled like cheap hooch and stale cigarettes, dripping water could be heard from further down the hall. Dupreii felt his way to the stairs and slowly felt his way up them in the dark, until he reached the fourth floor of the building.

He turned down another hallway and felt his way along it, counting the doors as he passed them, until he reached the fifth door on the left. Dupreii unlocked his door and pushed it open, reaching around into the room and hitting a button that was hard to push in, The light illuminated his shabby apartment and the hallway that Dupreii stood in, he noticed then that there was a beat up manila envelope leaning against his door, Dupreii picked it up and he found that it had no return address, only his address and a postal mark that showed it had been mailed from within Mile High City.

Closing the door behind him, Dupreii walked into the cramped apartment and sat on an old chair that was worn from use, he turned the package over in his hands, there seemed to be a thick book that was somewhat flexible inside. It was addressed to him in a small, cramped handwriting, he felt that he should know who the handwriting belonged to, but couldn't place it.

Dupreii stood, walked over to a cupboard and pulled a bottle with a light brown liquid in it and poured a measure of it into a dirty glass that was on the counter before returning to his chair and sitting down again and turning the unopened package around in his hands while intently staring at it. Dupreii cautiously opened the package and dumped its contents on a small table that was piled high with dirty dishes and within his reach.

Dupreii silently stared at the note and thick notebook that he had dumped out of the wet manila envelope before picking up the notebook. The notebook was full of complex diagrams, mathematical formulae, and extensive notes that made his head swim as he attempted to make heads or tails of them.

Thinking about the diamagnetic technology that allowed Mile High City to levitate about a mile above the central New Jersey coast also made Dupreii's head swim, all he could figure out was that a magnetic field was generated within the bowels of the city itself and repelled the city against the one created by the Earth. It was usually at this point that his understanding of it began to breakdown and forced him to wish that he had more education in such matters. Professor Happenstance had offered to take Dupreii on a tour of the city's bowels many times, an offer that Dupreii had never taken the professor up on, though now that the professor was missing, Dupreii wished that he had. The notes in the notebook however, while for something highly technical looked like it was for something different; some kind of electro-emitter was all he could puzzle together.

In frustration, Dupreii put the notebook down and picked up the note, which was written in the same cramped handwriting and signed at the bottom by the professor.

Ethan, you're my only friend these days, and I'm fearful that my days are numbered. I have been working on furthering Nikolaï Tesla's work in transmitting power from one place to another without having to use wires, this could revolutionize any society that uses such a thing. However, I have also discovered that it could be turned into a weapon by unscrupulous individuals for nefarious purposes and I suspect that such people are out to steal my notes. So, as a precaution I have mailed you my notes to you, I need you to deliver them to a James Lanahan in Cleveland, since if you've received this letter and the notebook, then it means that I am either dead or missing. Please don't let these plans fall into the wrong hands, the fate of the world may depend on you now, Ethan.

Sincerely, Professor E.M. Happenstance

After reading the letter, Dupreii picked the envelope back up to put the notebook back into it when he noticed that there were still contents within the envelope, so he looked in and found a couple of large bundles of cash within it. Dupreii counted the money and found that he had a little over \$5,000 in cash. What have you gotten me involved in, Professor? Dupreii wondered as he took a large swallow of his drink. After he finished his drink, Dupreii stood and returned the notebook, letter, and money to the envelope, then hid it under the pillow on his bed, turned the lights off and then settled in for the remainder of the night.

Dupreii was awakened in the middle of the night when his door was kicked in with a crashing sound; he bolted upright and sat in the darkness listening as several men speaking in a foreign language searched the living room and kitchen of his shabby apartment. Quietly, Dupreii reached under his pillow for the package, finding it quickly with his hand and then eased himself out of the bed, smiling widely at the good fortune that he had neglected to even take off his coat and grabbed the fedora that lay on the night table next to his bed, Dupreii eased his way to the narrow window and opened it slowly, stepping out onto the fire-escape, Dupreii closed the window quietly behind himself before climbing down the metal ladder toward the ground four stories below.

Dupreii had made it down three stories when he heard a shout from above, which was quickly followed by several bursts of automatic weapon fire, he could hear the bullets whiz past his head as he crouched for cover against the wet brick wall of the building. When the gunfire stopped, Dupreii leapt to the fire escape's ladder and, before climbing down it, looked up to see three men quickly descending after him, a fourth was leaning out his apartment's window shouting orders at the men in pursuit.

Dupreii quickly slid down the ladder to the pavement in the alley and started to run toward the street when a machine gun once again fired in his direction, missing him by mere inches, he took cover in a doorway, until the gunfire once again ceased. When he looked again, Dupreii saw the trio of men rapidly closing the gap between them. Dupreii reached into a nearby pile of garbage and old crates. Dupreii pulled out a piece of wood that was about the length of a baseball bat and had a cluster of bent and rusty nails at one end, by the time he stood up, the men were down and charging him with long, curved bladed daggers drawn.

Dupreii stepped forward, keeping his weapon defensively between himself and his potential attackers as he slowly edged along the wall of the building opposite his own toward the street some one hundred yards to the east. The three men charged him without a sound and Dupreii closed his eyes as he wildly swung the board. Dupreii felt the improvised weapon make contact and then he nearly lost his grip when the nails on the end ripped into his assailant's flesh, ripping it away in the process. Ethan could hear a scream of pain and then someone stumbling away from the fight. When Ethan opened his eyes again, he could see bits of flesh hanging from the nails on his board, one of his attackers stumbling away, cradling his head in his hands with blood pouring from where his cheek was ripped open leaving a gaping hole in the right side of his face. The other two exchanged glances before pressing their attack.

As they closed in to attack Dupreii, he could see that they were of swarthy complexion with black hair and eyes, they glared at him with malevolence as they circled around him looking for an opening, their expensive suits were spattered with blood.

“Give us the notebook, American pig.” The attacker on Dupreii’s right ordered in a foreign accent that he wasn’t accustomed to.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Dupreii replied through gritted teeth as he tried to watch both men.

“We know that is a lie. Give us the notebook or you will die.” Dupreii took a swing at the attacker who had thus far remained quiet, missing him by quite a bit.

“I’m afraid that I can’t give it to you, it was entrusted to me.” Dupreii stumbled on some boxes as he continued to back toward the street at the end of the alley, but he quickly regained his footing before his attackers could seize the opportunity the brief distraction gave them.

“Then, you will have to die.” The attacker on Dupreii’s right stated and thrust forward with his wicked looking dagger, Dupreii barely moved aside in time as the dagger was plunged low to where his abdomen had been mere seconds before, slicing into his overcoat instead. In a panic, Dupreii swung his weapon, narrowly missing the attacker who grabbed his wrist in a strong grasp.

The attacker tightened his grip on Dupreii, causing pain to shoot up and down his arm as Dupreii struggled with him in an attempt to break free. Desperately, Dupreii brought his knee up quickly and connected with his attacker’s groin.

Dupreii’s attacker groaned in pain and loosened his grip on his wrist before slowly sinking to the alley’s wet pavement, the dagger clattering to the ground. Dupreii turned toward the other man who paused to reconsider his options, then turned and ran toward the other end of the alley. Dupreii kicked the attacker that he had just kneed in the groin and punched him violently in the face, knocking the man unconscious. Dupreii then dropped the board with the bloody nails in it and fled the alley toward the comparative safety of the street.

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Ethan Dupreii found himself on the north-side of Mile High City, this was where the affluent and faculty of BUTI lived, the streets were tree lined and the skyscrapers towered high above them. Unlike where Dupreii lived, there were doormen that guarded the entrances to the high tech building, there were also more robots found as the wealthy could afford to purchase such an extravagance, as Dupreii watched Professor Happenstance’s building from the shadows of the street, one robot approached the building carrying a pair of over-stuffed canvas bags in its arms, the doorman opened the door for the machine and the robot entered the building without pausing.

Dupreii waited a little longer and began to cross the street when a long, black sedan pulled up to the building, a man in a tan suit stepped out and opened the back door, from which a tall, slim man emerged, he was wearing a long black overcoat and dark fedora, a scarf encircled his neck and face, making it

impossible for Dupreii to make out any facial features. As the two men approached the building, the long black sedan eased away from the curb and drove down the street, the man in the tan suit turned and his eyes met with Dupreii's for a brief second, then the man in the black overcoat ascended the steps to the building, said something to the doorman who's face went pale and he covered away from the door, the pair of men swept past him and into the building. Dupreii shook his head in confusion and headed back toward Mile High City's downtown.

As dawn approached, Ethan Dupreii found himself seeking shelter at the speakeasy that he had left earlier that night. Dupreii took a table near the rear of the smoke-filled room, ordered some rotgut and took out the money and the notebook, Dupreii quickly hid the money in the deep pockets of his coat before any of the dangerous people in the room could see it and began to closely examine the notebook.

The notebook was bound in brown leather; it appeared as if it were heavily stained with unknown liquids. The pages were made of heavy, lined paper and were filled with complex diagrams, mathematical formulae, and lengthy notes, it seemed to Dupreii as if they were instructions on how to build what seemed to him to be a power plant of some sort. At the rear of the notebook, he noticed that several dozen pages had been ripped from the binding.

Dupreii looked about the dingy, poorly-lit, and smoke-filled room at the individuals that usually inhabited such an establishment at this early hour; they were most likely alcoholics and other dregs of society. Quietly, Dupreii hid the thick notebook in an inner pocket of his overcoat and nursed his drink while he thought about what he should do next.

Professor Happenstance had requested that he, Ethan Dupreii, was to drop the notebook off with a former student in Cleveland, Ohio. Of course, there was the matter of the foreigners attacking him outside of his apartment only two hours earlier, and the mysterious man outside of Happenstance's apartment building, perhaps I should go to the police Dupreii mused, they'll know what to do, and could most likely protect these plans from the people that the professor mentioned in his letter. Unless, he continued thinking, the government getting a hold of the plans was what Happenstance was worried about in his letter. The police and campus security were the only ones that knew Dupreii had been in the professor's office last night, when he had discovered the break-in, perhaps the police were in on it, and there were rumors of mob connection in the police department, after all. Of course, Dupreii contemplated, he could be said to have mob connections just because he frequented the city's speakeasies. With an uneasy feeling, Dupreii looked around the bar once more, then stood to leave.

Dupreii quickly strode across the bar toward the exit, just as he got there, the door opened and in stepped Robert Willings, the security guard who had taken him home earlier in the night. Willings seemed momentarily surprised to see Dupreii, and then quickly regained his composure.

"Ethan m'boy, good to see you, though I thought you were going to be getting some sleep when I dropped your off earlier. Everything alright?" Dupreii nodded curtly, grabbed Willings' elbow and led him to a nearby table.

"I need to talk to you Bob, how are the police doing on the break-in?" Dupreii hurriedly whispered as they sat at a small round table.

"Not a lot to go on, I told them what you remembered in the car, but they didn't think it was at all connected." Willings looked at Dupreii's bedraggled appearance. "Something wrong, son? You seem... distracted."

"Tonight, when I got home, there was a package from Professor Happenstance in front of my apartment's door. In it were a notebook and letter." Dupreii produced the crumpled letter from one of his pockets and handed it over to Willings, who scanned the page.

"Do you have the notebook on you right now?" Dupreii nodded as he pulled it from the inner pocket of his overcoat. Willings took it when Dupreii offered it to him and thumbed through it quickly. "There seems to be a few pages missing from the book, did you rip them out?" Willings inquired as he handed the notebook back to Dupreii who shook his head in reply.

"They were already gone when I got the book. I've been trying to figure out what to do next."

"What are you thinking of doing?"

"Well, I could do what the professor requests in his letter; go to Ohio and try to find this Lanahan guy, or take everything to the police, and let them take care of it. Something I haven't told you, I was attacked by some foreigners at my apartment after I received the notebook, barely got away with my life. In the process, I think I hurt one pretty badly." Dupreii noticed the look of shock that briefly crossed Willings' face which was quickly replaced with an expression of relief.

"I think, were I in your situation, I'd try to find this Lanahan guy. He might know what to do with the notebook or at least where the missing pages are, or have an idea of their location." Willings replied. "I'm glad that I'm not in your shoes, Ethan, sounds dangerous, especially if those foreigners continue to hound you, and I have a feeling that they're up to no good. If you are going to track down Lanahan, I suggest you leave Mile High City as soon as you can; no sense in sticking around here if you're a target... And watch your back son." Dupreii nodded.

"Guess I should head to the aerodome then and catch the first airship to Ohio. Dupreii said as Willings nodded solemnly.

"I'll cover for you at the University until you get back."

"I'd appreciate it. I don't know that I could find another job, even here in the City of Dreams." Dupreii stood to leave, quickly hiding the letter and the notebook in the inner pocket of his overcoat once again before leaving the dingy, smoke-filled dryness and warmth of the speakeasy.

The rain continued to fall and the cold wind to blow as Dupreii made his way toward the Mile High City Aerodrome on the western side of the city as it levitated high in the air above the New Jersey coast.

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"No, that's fine. A ticket to Chicago will work I suppose. I'll try to get a train to Cleveland from there I guess." Dupreii sighed. The pretty lady at the ticket counter smiled widely at him as she handed him his ticket.

"Enjoy your flight today, Mr. Dupreii." Dupreii grunted in reply as he quickly made his way to the boarding gate for his flight, which was to leave in the next fifteen minutes. As he made his way to the gate, Dupreii had the uneasy feeling that he was being followed, which made him quicken his pace toward the waiting zeppelin. Dupreii boarded without any problems and took his seat by the window, looking down at fog, below which were the windswept waves of the Atlantic Ocean and then a couple of miles to the west, the shoreline and New Jersey farmland.

The cabin of the zeppelin was plush with teak paneling and bronze safety railings and switches. The floor was carpeted with a deep, plush green carpet and curtains hung in front of the windows should the passengers desire to sleep on their trip. Dupreii settled in, put his hat down over his face, and drifted into troubled sleep as the Zeppelin slowly made its way toward Chicago. When he awoke, Dupreii noticed that the seat next to his was occupied by a lovely young lady who was quietly reading a book. She was tall and slim with her dark hair in a stylish bob. She wore a navy suit with a cream colored silk blouse underneath the jacket; the cuffs and collar were lace. She appeared to be a woman of some wealth. Dupreii suddenly became extremely self-conscious about his own rumpled and disheveled appearance in contrast to her clean and proper look.

"He awakens." She said simply as she smiled at Dupreii.

"What? Who?" Dupreii groggily stammered while rubbing his eyes.

"The name's Rose Sheffield." She extended her right hand in greeting, and Dupreii gingerly grabbed it in reply. Her touch was cool in his hand and he couldn't help but stare into her bright blue eyes. "And you are..." she prompted. Dupreii became well aware that he still held her hand in his.

"Ethan...Dupreii." He quickly stammered. She smiled warmly at him.

"Pleased to meet you. What do you do Mister Dupreii?"

"Huh? Oh. Uh, I work at the university in the city." Dupreii quickly released his grasp of her hand when he realized that he was still holding on to it, he blushed and turned back toward the window.

"Really? Are you a professor there?" Dupreii shook his head. "No, I suppose not. Not very talkative, are you?"

"Sorry, I've had a rough night. I'm, I'm just a custodian at the university, going to be visiting my uncle in Cleveland for a little while." Dupreii turned back toward her and smiled.

"Oh? I'm from Cleveland, what is your uncle's name? I may know him."

"Oh, I doubt it. He's only lived there for a short while." He replied.

"Try me." She smiled warmly at Dupreii and he felt his knees melt.

"Lanahan, Jim Lanahan." Dupreii haltingly stated. "Do you know him?" Rose shook her head and Dupreii let out a deep breath when he realized that he'd been holding it. Dupreii stood quickly. Uh, I uh, I'll be right back..." and he climbed from his seat over her. As he made his way to the head, he noticed a

pair of square-jawed men watching him; they had chiseled features and were dressed in nondescript tan suits.

When Dupreii returned from the head, he noticed that the pair of men was still watching him from behind the newspapers they held up. He returned to his seat and found Rose still there, gazing intently out the window at the darkening farmland below as the sun descended past the horizon. The zeppelin's cabin was now well-lit and the crew was serving dinner as he sat in his seat again.

"What do you do for a living Rose?" Dupreii inquired. She looked at him then smiled.

"I travel." She simply said.

"I see." Dupreii turned his attention back to the window and the darkening sky and he felt himself nodding off once again.

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A few hours later, Dupreii disembarked, still ruffled and disheveled, but at least he was rested and went off in search of transportation from Chicago's downtown to a train station in search of passage to Cleveland from there. As he was waiting on the sidewalk trying to flag down a taxi, Dupreii spied Rose Sheffield doing the same down the sidewalk a little bit. He walked over to her just as a taxi stopped in front of her.

"Excuse me, Miss Sheffield; may I be so bold as to ask if you're going to Grand Central Station?" Her eyes lit up when she recognized him.

"Why yes, I am. Would you like to share a cab?" She slid over on the seat and patted it in invitation.

"If it's not any trouble at all, Miss."

"Oh, for you, it's none what-so-ever. I enjoy a handsome man's company when I travel, to be honest. Where's your luggage Mr. Dupreii?"

Dupreii blushed a deep shade of crimson. "I don't have any, I fear. I left in a bit of a hurry without time to pack."

"You do travel light, don't you Mr. Dupreii?" Rose stated with a bemused smirk on her face and a raised eyebrow.

"Yes Ma'am, it seems to be that's the case." Dupreii thought back to when he'd first arrived in Mile High City with nothing but what he wore and a small knapsack with a change of clothes and a couple of dented cans of vegetables in it.

"We have some time before I need to catch my train." Rose leaned forward. "Driver, take us to Marshall Field's before Grand Central." The taxi driver nodded and he pulled away from the curb.

"I have one question for you, Ethan Dupreii."

"Yes?"

"How does a simple custodian afford to travel halfway across the United States on what I assume is a low-salary?"

"I've come into some money recently." Was all he said in reply.

"And your uncle knows that you're coming?"

“Well, it’s actually more of a surprise than anything. He keeps saying, ‘Ethan m’boy, get on over to Cleveland sometime! I’ll show you the sights, take you ‘round town.’ So, I decided to take him up on that offer late last night.”

“And didn’t have time to pack?”

“Well, I wanted to get on the first flight to the Midwest before I came to my senses.”

Rose nodded understandingly. Shortly, they found themselves in front of Marshall Field’s Department Store, she paid the taxi driver and instructed him to wait for them and there’d be a little something extra in it for him. The driver nodded.

An hour later, they emerged from Marshall Fields with bags and boxes under their arms as well as a luggage set for Dupreii. He was now a couple hundred dollars lighter, but at least he had nice clothes to change into on the train and didn’t look quite so much like the vagrant that he felt himself to be.

Minutes later, they were walking into Grand Central Station with their bags, boxes, and luggage on a couple of trolleys and were wheeling their way into the massive building.

“I assume you still need to get your ticket. I’ll see you on the train.” Rose smiled at him.

“Huh? Yeah. On the train...”

“We’re both going to Cleveland, you realize I hope as I am from there.”

“Oh yeah. Yeah, I forgot. See you on the train.” Dupreii wheeled his way toward the ticket counter where he was able to purchase a ticket. Dupreii then got directions to the nearest restroom, where he changed into a clean suit from his coveralls. However, Dupreii did keep his beat up fedora and rumpled overcoat, the rest of the news clothes he packed into the two suitcases that he had purchased and was about to leave the restroom after freshening himself up when he realized that the rest room was empty, save for himself and a pair of square-jawed men in nondescript tan suits who approached him.

“Mister Dupreii?” They asked in unison. Dupreii looked them up and down and decided that he didn’t like their looks as he could see the bulge of something beneath their jackets, probably guns in shoulder holsters he decided.

“I’m sorry. You must be mistaken.” Dupreii tried to push past the pair of men, but found them to be unyielding.

“No, you are mistaken. You are Ethan Dupreii of 2456 Prosperity Lane, Apartment 42 in Mile High City. You work at the Brummel University of Technology and Innovation, and you have a notebook that belongs to Professor E.M. Happenstance.”

“OK, so you know who I am. What do you want?”

“Mister Dupreii, we are with the FBI, and we’d like to talk to you about the disappearance of Professor. Happenstance two nights ago.”

“I’m sorry, I’ve told the police everything I know about the incident.”

“Everything except for the notebook, yah?” Dupreii looked at the two men curiously.

“And how do *you* know about this notebook that I’m supposed to have?”

"We've been watching you ever since you became acquainted with the professor late last year."

"And why is that?"

"We believe that he was a spy for the Germans, trafficking state secrets to them."

"I doubt that. He was very loyal to the US."

"The two of you talked about such things? A Professor and a mere custodian?"

"I don't know why he took a liking to me. But he was fun to chat with and since he was often still in his office when I reached it on my rounds, we'd often sit and chat. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a train to catch."

"Yes, you're going to Cleveland suddenly, why was that again?"

"Visiting my uncle. For a couple of weeks."

"You will give us the notebook as well?"

"I'm sorry, but I don't know what you're talking about." Dupreii forcefully pushed his way past the two men and hurried along the platform, he climbed aboard the train just as it was pulling from the station and made his way to the Pullman car where he found Rose Sheffield sitting alone with a couple of soft drinks in front of her.

"I was beginning to wonder if you'd make it." Rose beamed as he approached her seat.

"I was a bit... delayed. I'm sorry." Dupreii stated as he sat opposite of Rose, she lightly pushed one of the drinks toward him. Dupreii reached into one of his oversized pockets and produced a flask and offered it to her. "Would you care for something a little stronger?" he asked in a whisper.

"My, Mister Dupreii, you do know how to travel it seems. Don't mind if I do..." Rose pushed her glass closer to Dupreii, who reached over and poured a small amount into her glass. Rose reached over and stirred it with her finger, then placed it to her mouth and licked the liquid off of it while staring directly into Dupreii's eyes.

Dupreii raised an eyebrow.

"Tell me, Mister Dupreii, who are the men in the tan suits that have been following us all afternoon? And, are they the reason that you were late for the train?"

"They claim to be FBI. But, I doubt it."

"And why would the FBI be interested in a simple custodian?"

Dupreii shrugged. "They think a colleague from the university might have been selling secrets to the Germans. They took an interest in me when I left suddenly."

"Should they be interested in you, Mister Dupreii?"

"Not in the least. I'm just a simple man on a well deserved vacation."

"I hope, for your sake, Mister Dupreii that you're telling the truth." Dupreii and Rose fell silent as they sipped their drinks and looked out the window of the train at the countryside racing past.

Early the next day, the pair met for breakfast, Rose recommended the Eggs Benedict which Dupreii ended up ordering. "Where are you from, Mister Dupreii?" Rose inquired when they were nearly finished with their breakfast.

"Oh, uh, I'm from Wisconsin." Dupreii stated. "I came from a long line of dairy farmers west of Milwaukee."

"What brought a small town boy to Mile High City then?" Rose pushed.

"Money, the chance to start again after the family farm was lost."

"And how did that turn out for you?" Rose asked.

"Well, I'm just a custodian." Dupreii laughed.

"Have you ever thought of going to University? You seem very bright."

Rose inquired, Dupreii shrugged noncommittally.

"It's not something that's been in the cards for the past couple of years, a university education is expensive and with today's economy, there's no guarantee that I'll be any better off job-wise."

"I see your point; you farmers are a practical lot, aren't you?" Rose asked.

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A couple of days later, they arrived in Cleveland and went their separate ways. Dupreii's first stop was a phone booth to track down Lanahan's address and when he located it, flagged a taxi and was there within an hour.

Ethan Dupreii stood on the street outside of a white bungalow in a quiet, tree-lined neighborhood, the house seemed deserted. Screwing up his courage, Dupreii cautiously approached the house, not sure of what to expect.

As he stepped up onto the porch, Dupreii noticed that the front door was ajar and he lightly pushed it open, the house's interior was in a shambles, as if the place had been ransacked.

"Mister Lanahan?" Dupreii shouted into the apparently empty house, when no reply was forthcoming he slowly entered, keeping an eye out for anyone he could see in the building. The living room was completely ransacked, the cushions on the furniture were cut open and the stuffing pulled out, pictures cut from their frames, house plants over turned, even the large radio in the corner of the room was pulled apart.

Dupreii heard movement toward the back of the house and slowly edged down the hallway, until he arrived at a door that was slightly open, he tried to peer in but couldn't see anything, though he could hear someone walking about in the room and it sounded as if he were going through desk drawers. Dupreii returned to the living room and upon finding a lead candlestick slowly returned, just as he was about to leap into the room, the door was yanked open and he stood face to face with Rose Sheffield pointing a loaded revolver at him.

"What's going on Mister Dupreii, if that is who you really are?" Dupreii was speechless and stood mouth agape at the sight of Rose Sheffield standing in the house that belonged to Lanahan. "I'm only going to ask you once more Dupreii, what's going on? What is your connection with Jim Lanahan?"

"I, I could ask the same of you, Ms. Sheffield." Dupreii was finally able to stammer.

“You could. But, I’m the one with the gun, Mister Dupreii.”

“Point taken.” Dupreii walked to the living room and Rose followed, not lowering the revolver. “My name *is* Ethan Dupreii and I *am* a custodian at the Brummel University of Technology and Innovation.”

“And what is your connection with Lanahan, Mister Dupreii?”

“I’m acquainted with a professor of his from the university. Now, what’s *your* connection with Lanahan Ms. Sheffield?”

“He’s my older brother, Mister Dupreii.”

“You said you didn’t know who he was...”

“And you said he was your uncle. Both were clearly lies. Now, what do you want with my brother, Dupreii?” Rose waved the revolver to remind Dupreii that she still had the upper hand.

“Alright, this professor of his, Professor Happenstance, was either killed or abducted a couple of nights ago; his office was also broken into, which I discovered while working. When I arrived home after making the discovery,” Dupreii slowly reached into his overcoat and produced the notebook, “I found that this was delivered to my apartment.” Rose carefully took the offered notebook while she kept the revolver leveled in his direction. Cradling the revolver in her arm, Rose carefully opened the notebook and thumbed through it quickly.

“What is it? It looks like schematics of some sort.”

“Your guess is as good as mine.”

“What does this have to do with my brother?”

“There was a note included with the notebook.” Dupreii produced the letter from the professor; Rose took the letter and carefully read it.

“I don’t get it. Happenstance was precisely the reason that my brother flunked out of the university...” Dupreii could only shake his head in dismay.

“If you look toward the back of the book, there seems to be a number of pages missing.” Dupreii stated, flipping through the book to the back of it and showing it to Rose, who had lowered the revolver by this time and took hold of the notebook to examine it closer.

“You know, Jim said that he had received a package from Happenstance the last time I spoke with him, it’s why I happened to be returning to Cleveland, and he asked me to watch his house while he was gone.”

“Do you know where he went?”

“San Francisco. But he didn’t say why he was going there.” At that moment, Dupreii and Rose heard several car doors closing outside, the pair rose and peered out the bay window that overlooked the street in front of Lanahan’s house, six swarthy men in suits and overcoats were walking toward the house, five of them seemed to be carrying large weapons hidden under their coats, the sixth one had a small monkey with an eye patch sitting on his shoulder.

“These guys were at Happenstance’s office and some of them attacked me in the alley below my apartment later that night.” Dupreii hissed. “We’d better get out of here.” The men spread out, three split off and went around the house toward the backdoor while the other three paused in the yard, they lit cigarettes while they waited, discarding the spent matches on the ground.

“I think they’re Turks, they look wealthy judging by the expensive suits and the car. We’re also surrounded, the only way out is through the cellar.” Rose whispered quickly. “Follow me.” And the pair crept through the house down the hallway toward the bedrooms.

When they got to the backmost bedroom, they could hear the Turks breaking down the doors in their rush into the house, Rose quickly lifted a section of the rug in the corner and pulled open a trapdoor in the floor, she ushered Ethan Dupreii down it, handing him the revolver as he quickly descended into the dark cellar. Rose was on his heels, but she paused long enough to close the trapdoor behind them.

They could hear the Turks stomping through the house and shouting in Turkish.

“Definitely Turks.” Rose smiled grimly. “Come on, she grabbed Dupreii’s hand and they crept cautiously through the darkened cellar until they found a small door in the back corner, which she opened and they stepped into a narrow, low passage, Rose closed that door behind them and they followed the passage until they reached a rickety, wooden ladder which went up.

Rose climbed the ladder first and opened a trapdoor above her head and lifted herself out of it, Dupreii followed closely behind and found that they were in an old, dusty garage; there was an older Model T inside it. Dupreii went to the garage door and peered out the windows in it, he saw that a couple of the Turks stood in the backyard between the garage and the street surveying the area as if they were keeping an eye out for someone.

Rose clambered into the front seat of the old car and waved at Dupreii to get in as well, when he had, she hit a button in the dashboard and the automobile’s engine roared to life. Rose quickly shifted the car into gear and stepped on the accelerator, the car lurched forward crashing through the wooden garage doors, the Turks were taken by surprise as the car raced toward them, and they jumped out of the path of the idly careening automobile. Rose and Dupreii quickly reached the street and she cranked the wheel hard, nearly causing the vehicle to roll as they tore down the street with a roar. Dupreii looked back and could see the Turks running out of the house toward their car in pursuit.

“We’re going to have company!” Dupreii shouted at Rose who nodded grimly in response. Rose shifted the car into second speed and continued to accelerate. “They’re gaining on us!” Dupreii shouted from the back seat of the model-T.

“Then shoot at them!” Rose shouted in reply.

“Are you crazy?! They haven’t done anythi—“ he was interrupted with a spray of bullets from a Turk leaning out the window of the pursuit car trying to get a bead on them with his Tommy Gun. Dupreii leaned out the window of the Model-T and fired a couple of shots, missing by a large margin.

The back of the Model-T was sprayed with bullets. Dupreii took cover in the backseat, and then popped up to squeeze off his final 4 rounds which didn’t even come close to hitting the car or the Turks pursuing them.

“You got anymore bullets Rose?”

“What? Why?” Rose quickly turned to look, then turned back, narrowly missing another car as they careened down the now busy street.

“I’m out!”

“They’re still chasing us!”

“I’m aware of this! Be that as it may, I am out of bullets! So, unless you have more, there is nothing that I can do about them chasing us!” The car was sprayed with bullets again.

“Hold on then!” Rose shouted as she flipped down a panel on the dashboard of the Model-T and flipped a toggle switch. At first, nothing happened then the car suddenly shot forward and Rose struggled to keep control of the car as they rocketed down the street. Suddenly, Rose cranked the steering wheel to the right and they barely made the turn, the Turks sped past.

The Model-T slowed back down to 20 miles per hour and they found an alley between a pair of large brick buildings where they could hide for the time being.

They sat for several minutes in silence. “So, what now?” Dupreii asked, breaking the silence.

“We find my brother.” Rose said.

“Whoa, what’s with this ‘we’ business? I have a job and a life to get back to.”

“Yeah, some job... Cleaning up after other people...”

“It’s honest pay for honest work. It’s a hell of a lot more than some people have these days. And a lot more than some people deserve. So what if I’m not flying around the world at the drop of a hat, at least I have my dignity.” Dupreii paused then caught the hurt look in Rose’s eyes. “Besides, my parents depend on the money that I send them every month.”

“What if I pay you?”

“I don’t know... What would I be doing?”

“Acting as my bodyguard and traveling companion. There are places where both will be needed for various reasons.”

“How much are you talking?” Dupreii inquired.

“Three times what you make now, plus my constant company.” Rose smiled.

“You make a hard bargain to pass up. Where are we headed to first? And how do you want to handle payment?”



“Jim had flown to San Francisco, we should start there. And, as for payment, I can have the money wired into your account each month, or one for your parents’ if you’d prefer. I’ll also be covering the travel and living expenses.”

“San Francisco it is. I’ll need to quit my job first, however.”

“Alright, while you call the university, I’ll set up the money transfers.” Rose stated as the pair climbed out of the shot-up Model-T.

“I just have to ask about the car...” Dupreii started as they walked toward the First National Bank.

“After failing out of school, he fell in with the wrong crowd and began to smuggle alcohol in for various bars. He bought that car and had it modified, it’s



armored and has an 8-Cylinder engine crammed beneath the hood. There's also a fuel additive for when he needs that extra boost of power..."

The pair parted ways; Dupreii found a corner diner and used the pay phone, while Rose went to the bank with his information for wiring the money into his account. Dupreii dialed a number and the phone on the other end rang, it was soon answered by a tired sounding voice.

The pair parted ways; Ethan found a corner diner and used the pay phone, while Rose went to the bank with Ethan's information for wiring the money into his account. Ethan dialed a number and the phone on the other end rang, it was soon answered by a tired sounding voice.

"Bob? It's Ethan. Ethan. Dupreii! Listen, I'm not going to be coming back, can you let the University know? Thanks! No, there was a problem, Lanahan wasn't there, but I met up with his sister. Yeah, she's a stone fox alright. Listen, she's hired me to help her find her brother, we're heading to San Francisco next. Oh, and Bob, thanks for your help." Dupreii hung up the phone, sat at the counter, and ordered a coffee while he waited for Rose to arrive from the bank.