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Young Houdini: The Demon Curse

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Chapter One

Harry woke up. Or, at least, he thought he did.

Blackness, everywhere. He closed his eyes, and then forced them open, but it made no difference. Only the flutter of muscles in his face told him that he was opening and closing his eyes at all. He tried to move, but his legs, arms, and head were jammed. He fought, but his body stayed trapped, and the effort made him gasp as he tried to suck in air.

Breathe. His heart pounded, blood throbbing in his veins. The air around him was hot and stale, and when he drew it in, his body just ached for more. His head spun, and he felt a prickling sensation in his fingers, spreading into his hands. *Desperate for oxygen.* He sucked in another useless breath, but the sensation kept spreading. *Concentrate. Stay calm.*

His left hand swivelled slightly at the end of its wrist. His prickling fingers roamed about, exploring.

He was in some sort of box. Its sides were rigid, holding his body, but his fingertips detected a thin lining. *Silk, perhaps?* Harry's heart beat harder and his breathing sped up, pain jabbing in his lungs like a knife. He gathered his mouth into a tiny hole, and forced himself to breathe through that. *Make the oxygen last.* Angling his hand, he let his fingertips creep along the lining of the box, until they found something hard, square, and metal.

The inside of a lock.

Harry forced the remaining air out of his lungs. His body fought, trying to cling on to every wisp of breath, but he pushed it all out so that his shoulders sunk and his ribs caved. In that tiny released space, he managed to swivel a leg upward just slightly, until the boot was braced against the box's inside. He breathed back in, and felt the box tighten around him. But his boot was in position, his leg hinged at the knee. His lungs ached, his head spun from lack of air, but he managed to kick, hard, and the box gave, just a little. Two cracks of light flashed briefly on either side of its lock. Harry's hand angled in a new direction, his fingers pushing through the lining's stitching, searching for what he needed.

He found it, just a couple of inches away. A sturdy metal staple, fastening the lining in place. He wriggled

his fingernail beneath it, levered it up, and spun it in his fingers, straightening it. Harry braced his leg again, and kicked even harder. The cracks of light widened, and Harry's leg held the lid like that, muscles shaking. He squeezed two fingers through the gap, the staple gripped between them, as the edges of the crack bit into his flesh.

The edges bit deeper. The muscles of his leg were giving way, and the darkness of the box filled with hissing as his breathing grew even faster. He realized that his fingers and hands were no longer prickling, that a cold numbness was taking hold instead. *Need air* . . . His head spun again, and he saw visions dance in the blackness—a locked suitcase with two fingers prodding out of it, pale and weak, a little straightened-out staple falling away from them onto the ground . . .

A last shudder of strength in his leg. The gap widened, and his fingers wriggled out further. Through the numbness, he could just feel the shape of the staple, gripped between a finger and thumb. It was there, he knew it, and he angled it towards where the keyhole would be.

He thrust the staple in. He felt it bump against the lock's innards. He pushed an ear against the inside of the box, and listened to the noises: a spring stretching,

a latch grinding. He could feel nothing at all in his fingers now as he moved them about, but he could hear the sounds, allowing him to go about his work.

Click. A latch fell into place. *Click*. Another one. Harry's boot pushed even harder, widening the crack, allowing his hand to reach further, his fingers to re-angle the staple one more time . . .

Click.

The box sprang open and the cracks became a blaze of light. Harry toppled out, and fell onto a shuddering wooden floor. Everything was shaking—the cushioned seat next to him, the wood-panelled walls. Harry blinked in the brightness, and looked up at a trembling iron rack, on which was a torn-open silk-lined packing case. *A railway carriage compartment*. He took in the sliding door, the fan rotating on the ceiling. Then he saw the window and flung himself at it, pulling up the lacework blind, pushing down the sash, and sucking in deep draughts of air.

A river blurred past, followed by a tangle of palm trees. The air felt warm and moist. His gasps slowed, his head stopped spinning, the feeling crept back into his skin. Harry looked down at his hand and saw, still gripped between his fingers, the straightened-out staple. The corners of his mouth curved slightly upwards. Turning away from the window, he pocketed the staple,

and couldn't help putting a foot forward to perform a small bow. *Sheer habit*, he thought.

But then he heard the voices. He snapped upright again.

'Mmmpf . . .'

'Get me out . . .'

For the first time Harry noticed the iron rack on the *other* side of the compartment. He saw what was stacked on it—two more suitcases. He was up on the cushioned seat, his heart pounding again. Struggling noises drifted from the suitcases, along with muffled voices, getting weaker. Harry's hands shook as he fumbled in his pocket for the staple. *Hurry.* Pulling the staple out, he forced it into the first suitcase's lock.

'Hang on!' His voice cracked. 'It's me! I'll get you out—'

'Harry?' a voice cried out. The case on the left jolted. 'Is that you?'

'Quick . . .' The voice from the other case was faint. 'Help me . . .'

The first lock sprung, Harry threw open the lid, and a girl toppled out. She had dark skin and tightly curled hair, and was wearing a scruffy factory smock. Harry managed to grab her as she fell, so that she bounced safely onto the cushioned seat below.

'Artie . . .' She sprawled there, gasping. "You've got to get Artie out too . . .'

Harry went to work on the second lock. A few seconds later a boy in a tweed suit fell out, thudding onto the cushioned seat next to Billie. Harry collapsed down between them and, for the second time, tried to get his breath back.

'What's going on?' the girl spluttered.

'Don't worry about that for now, Billie.' Harry grabbed her arm. 'Are you all right?'

'I think so . . . Good thing you rescued us. Reminds me of the time I was locked in a cupboard by the head chef of that hotel kitchen I worked in, back in Chattanooga—did I ever tell you about that?' Billie managed a smile, and then stared up at the suitcase on the opposite rack. 'How did you get yourself out, anyway? Tricky stuff, even by your standards.'

'I'll tell you later.' Harry turned to his other friend. 'Hang in there, Artie, you'll feel better soon.'

'I know . . . I could breathe in there but only just . . . It'll take a while for my blood to re-oxygenate completely . . .' Arthur loosened his tie, and pulled in another deep breath. 'But where are we? I think it's safe to say we're not in New York anymore.'

He stumbled over to the window. Harry and Billie joined him, gripping the windowsill and taking in the

scene. Palm trees blurred past under a hot grey sky. The train curved and raced alongside a huge river, with a rippling brown surface that glittered in the sun.

'Definitely not New York,' Billie muttered. 'Palm trees, that's the big clue.'

'I'd say we must be two hundred miles south at least, given the palms and the high temperature.' Arthur's voice had steadied, his English tones neat and precise. 'I can't make head or tail of this. Last thing I properly remember, we were back in the theatre in New York helping Harry with his spectacular escape act and—'

'And then that letter was delivered, and we opened it.' Billie's eyes narrowed. 'That letter we read, all three of us—and a few seconds later we were flat on the floor, all three of us, collapsing in some kind of drugged sleep.' Her eyes narrowed even more, and she pointed. 'That letter, which is still in your pocket, Harry, RIGHT THERE.'

Harry looked down and flinched. There it was, a folded piece of pale green paper, poking out of his jacket pocket. Arthur was already holding out a handkerchief, and Harry used it to gingerly pull the letter out. He too thought back to that moment, the three of them sitting in the theatre office. He remembered the act the three of them had just performed, full of the usual tricks involving razor-sharp knives, handcuffs

and fire, and finishing with the most spectacular stunt of all, which involved him escaping from a small iron cage that had been plunged deep into a vat of water. *Thrilling stuff,* Harry thought, with another smile. Then he focused on the letter again.

'There was some sort of dust on the paper, which came away on our fingertips—now I think of it, I remember that too.' Arthur had taken a magnifying glass from his pocket, and was peering through it at the letter. 'Gone now, by the looks of it. Still, it certainly was powerful—knocked us out cold.'

'It's not just the paper we need to think about—what the letter actually says. That's pretty odd too,' muttered Harry, reading it one more time.



'The Order of the White Crow . . .' Arthur frowned. 'Anyone got the faintest idea what that might be?'

'Nope—in fact, there's not a single bit of that letter that makes much sense, if you ask me,' Billie said. 'This sure is a mystery . . . Reminds me of the time I woke up and discovered I was tied up in the hold of a shrimp-boat off South Carolina, been press-ganged into another crummy job obviously, but it didn't take me long to escape and—WATCH OUT!'

Billie flung herself back against the compartment wall, and Arthur did the same. Harry took care to hold his breath, and extended his arm, so that he was staring at the letter from as far away as possible. Beneath the handwriting, whitish wisps floated from the page and more words appeared. Harry carried the letter to the window, where the breeze snatched the wisps away, leaving only the words.

P.S. Congratulations. If you are reading these additional remarks, then you are successfully launched on your mission, and it is safe to reveal more. Regarding the suitcases, we apologize, but secrecy is vital, and so we had to smuggle you out of New York entirely

unseen. Concealed air holes were drilled, a convenient staple was left near Harry's hand for when the drugs wore off—we expected you managed the rest. Now, you no doubt wish to be told about our organization and its purpose? Perhaps it is simplest to say this: that it exists to unmask and defeat evil-doing wherever it may lie, and that it seeks to recruit those capable of helping that noble cause. Prepare yourselves for your first investigation . . .



'That's some letter,' Arthur said, peering over Harry's shoulder as the last few wisps drifted away. 'Not only coated with knock-out chemical dust, but it's got some kind of light-activated invisible ink on it too.'

'Sure—but what's it actually saying?' Billie pointed out. 'It says it's revealing more, but it's just making things even more confusing if you ask me.'

'It's right about the staple.' Harry held the piece of metal up in his other hand. 'I'd have found something else to pick the lock anyway, but it was handy bumping into this straight away.'

'And guess what; here are the air holes. Rather small, but they're there.' Arthur tore back the lining in one of the open suitcases, revealing a row of drilled holes. 'Still, *defeat evil-doing*—what's the meaning of that? As for wanting us to carry out some kind of investigation . . .' He put his head on one side. 'Actually, maybe that bit *does* make sense.'

It does, thought Harry. He closed his eyes, and his thoughts travelled back again, not just to their time at the theatre, but to the rather unusual events that had taken place shortly before. The whole of New York had been baffled by it—the mysterious disappearance of an elderly stage magician from his dressing room in an inferno of purple fire and smoke. No one had been able to solve it, but he, Billie, and Arthur had investigated the business and, after various adventures including a break-in at a hotel, a terrifying tightrope walk between two ten-storey buildings, the discovery of an ingenious secret doorway and a showdown with one of Manhattan's most ruthless villains, they had uncovered everything. And all the time, he reminded himself, someone had been watching them, following them . . .

'I saw him,' Harry muttered, opening his eyes.

'Saw who?' Billie asked.

'The man who sent us this letter.'

'What?'

'I remember seeing a man watching us from the street, when the letter was delivered. About fifty years old, wearing a pale suit . . .'

'How do you know it was him who sent it?' Arthur frowned. 'Just because he was nearby when it arrived—doesn't mean anything.'

'I'd seen him before. When we were carrying out our investigation back in New York, he was following us, I'm sure of it.' He closed his eyes and saw him again. *Those piercing grey eyes.*

'Maybe he was just interested?' Billie pointed out.

'It's a bit of a coincidence,' Harry mused.

'BREAKFAST IS SERVED!'

The compartment door rattled open and an attendant wheeled in a trolley, crowded with silver-domed platters. Elderly, plump, and wearing a uniform that had gone a little mouldy in the heat, he positioned the trolley in front of Harry and his friends, and bowed. Harry folded up the letter hastily, and glanced back through the window. The train was still rattling alongside the river, but he could make out some broken-down buildings on its far side and, peering ahead, he saw more buildings still.

'Did everything your friend requested!' The attendant rose from his bow. 'Every particular!'

'Our friend?' Billie asked.

'Why yes, young missie. You must know him? Tall fellow, wearing a pale suit, and with an ever-so-neatly trimmed white beard.' The attendant pointed back into the corridor. 'I met him out there last night. Standing outside the door, he was—the curtain was down and he showed me your tickets and said you weren't to be disturbed until ten minutes before the train arrived. And that's now!' He lifted the dome from a platter, revealing bacon, eggs, and sweet-smelling plumes of steam. 'Tipped handsome too, your friend.'

'Hmmm.' Arthur lifted a silver fork, and gave the bacon a careful prod. 'So, in ten minutes, this train is going to arrive—where exactly?'

'This is the Crescent Express!' The attendant lifted another dome, revealing pastries. 'Only one place it can be heading! The great southern city of New Orleans!'

'New Orleans?' Billie gasped.

Harry saw her reflection, curved out of shape on a silver dome, and then looked at Billie herself, and thought that she was a little altered too. Various expressions were flashing across her face: interest, puzzlement, and even a flicker of sadness, and Harry was about to ask her about it when he saw something else out of the corner of his eye, and swung towards the window.

Another train was hurtling along beside them, on tracks about twelve feet away. Hovering in one of its windows, a face.

'Say . . .' The attendant stared at the other train too. 'Isn't that your friend? Right . . . there?'

A pale suit. A neatly trimmed beard.

It was the man Harry remembered from New York.

'Harry!' Billie yelled.

But Harry had already pushed down the handle of the door. He threw it open, the billowing wind slamming it against the carriage's side. Pushing away the breakfast trolley, Harry took two steps back from the open door, four steps, five. He crouched down, and felt his whole body tense as he prepared to run, and leap across to the other train, just twelve feet away.

'Harry, don't do it!'

Arthur's voice shouted in his ear. At the same time, he could feel hands grabbing him, pulling him back, hands that belonged to the orderly, and to Artie and Billie too.

They've got a point, Harry thought, as he stared out at the other train.

It was curving away. It wasn't twelve feet away anymore, it was fifteen feet, twenty feet. *Too far*, he thought. *Even for me.* But he kept his gaze fixed on the other train, and at the man staring right back at him.

He was exactly as Harry remembered him. His pale suit was immaculately tailored, his beard neatly trimmed. But it was the stare that Harry recognized most, even though the man was some distance away. *Two piercing grey eyes . . .*

The other train curved off to the west, and the face drew away until it became a dot, a tiny pale smudge.

Harry kept watching.

But then the train hurtled behind some buildings, and the man in the pale suit vanished from view.