

# **Mandolin**

by

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Smashwords Edition

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**MANDOLIN**

Murder is the most compelling magic.

Certainly, sleights of hand, levitation, and acts of disappearance have their place. But violent devices surpass all else. Modified guillotines, water tanks, man-sized ovens: they depend on the spectators' belief that if the performer does what he says he is going to do, someone may die horrifically. A beauty sawn in half. A willing assistant suffocated. Still, as the spectators look on, they know that they are witnessing a trick. The magician, who appears insane and yet in control, is amusing them with the performance of murder.

Over the many years that I have been a magician, hundreds of my audiences have cheered for the performance of murder. The same is true for Cyrus Randow, my former apprentice. And now I know: Cyrus is the reason I was called to this police station.

My inquisitor, Detective Herron, has just rejoined me in the interview room adjacent to the bullpen where the officers have their desks and computers. The interview room isn't much, just a beige-walled space with filing cabinets, a trio of chairs, and the steel-frame table at which I have been waiting. Herron closes the door to give us privacy.

The detective takes a seat and looks across the table at me. I try to imagine what he sees. My long black overcoat and red silk tie. My curls of grey hair. The fine lines etched along my face. Herron scratches his temple just above his glasses, which I take it as a nervous tick. Windwood, Massachusetts is a small town, and I sense that Herron knows this case is different from anything he has seen before.

"Sorry for the interruption, Mr. Scarlet," Herron begins. "Waiting for that fax from New York City. Might help resolve this."

"I hope so."

"And thanks for coming," he adds. "I know you're on tour."

I'm impressed with his pleasantries. If I weren't observing him closely, I wouldn't see the truth. How his eyes follow me. How his body seems to hum with violent energy.

"I was nearby when you called to say he was missing," I tell Herron.

He picks up a file folder marked "Massachusetts Office of Public Safety". He had left the folder behind when he went to check the fax machine, and I had looked through it. I'm still reeling from what is inside.

"So," the detective says, "you're the head of the group that goes up our mountain every year. To the hotel. The Coledrew House."

"No."

Herron looks up from the folder. My tone was sharper than intended, but I'm nettled by the way he said *our mountain*. Windwood's police might serve Coledrew House and the surrounding areas, but it's been our mountain, the performers' mountain, long before Windwood was even incorporated.

I explain to Herron, "What I mean is, I'm not the 'head' of the group because there is no 'head'. I am, or was, the Partisan."

"Partisan?"

I nod. "Years ago, I took responsibility for organizing our performances at Coledrew."

"You know Cyrus Randow? He owns the hotel."

Herron already knows the answer. It is in the folder. I say, "Cyrus' father, Daniel, used to be the Partisan of our group. Daniel was my mentor. When he passed, Cyrus and I performed together, and I looked after him. For a time."

"What do you mean, 'for a time'?"

"I hadn't seen Cyrus or Coledrew House for five years. Not until last week."

"Then I guess I've got bad news," Herron replies. "Coledrew's burned up and buried."

The detective withdraws photographs from the folder and pushes them to me. The shock of moments ago, when I had stolen through them in Herron's absence, returns like prickling along my skin. Herron asks me more questions. Some are cajoling: *You believe we just want to find out what happened, right?* Some are threatening: *Since you people were there, you should know where he is, shouldn't you?* I respond truthfully. That is the rule. But though I want to say more, to volunteer my suspicions, I can't. Herron must find out for himself.

My eyes keep going to the photos. Mounds of rubble. Splintered trees. Soot sullyng freshly-fallen snow. The ashen remains of Coledrew House, home of the greatest theater ever for true performers.

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Cyrus' grandfather, Bostwick Randow, built Coledrew House. However, it was Daniel, Cyrus' father, who designed its secret auditorium. This was years before I apprenticed with him and long before Cyrus was born. Daniel organized us all, once eighty in number, and started the tradition of the private magic performances. One winter night each year, we all would go up the mountain. The clock in the hotel's lobby would strike midnight. And the performers staying at Coledrew would drift through the building's hive of wood and stone and make their way to the hidden theater in the basement.

The magicians would put on their shows for one another and, occasionally, for guests permitted by the Partisan. Afterwards, each performer would remain onstage, and an inquisition would take place in which the audience would propose ways that the act had been accomplished. If a theory was correct, the performer had to admit to it.

When Daniel passed away, I continued to train Cyrus in his place. We began performing together outside of Coledrew, and soon, I could not accurately call him my apprentice; he excelled me. On the nights we returned

for the yearly gatherings at Coledrew, I served as Partisan and took pleasure in watching Cyrus onstage, earning the esteem of his peers for his lineage, his presence, and his skill.

Most of our troupe thought the inquisitions were just an opportunity to entertain, and if their art was discovered, they could separate it from their abilities as performers. I never could, not when I was part of the inquisitions and not after I became Partisan. Rather than be stranded in some anemic modern existence, an entertainer playing a role as magician, I strived for something mystical and sublime, and I guarded my work and myself with grand import.

And Cyrus took his calling even more seriously than I. Occasionally, I doubted whether any of it mattered—our performances, our art, our secrecy—but Cyrus never wavered. He made me believe with the way he conducted himself. The way he prepared for his shows. It was because of that faith, as much as his perfectionism and passion, that I fell in love with him.

I never made advances towards Cyrus. He would never have felt the same way. But we magicians understand that one can only hide a thing, not make it disappear; eventually, I had to leave him and our act. And I would have stayed away had I not learned that Cyrus was selling Coledrew House. I couldn't understand it or believe it. That was why, last week, after five long years, I went up the mountain one last time.

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