One Hundred Top Hats

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Prologue: The Monroe Magician Rules

There are seven illusions that a Monroe magician must master in order to be successful. There are other rules and effects that other magicians have to master but to become a Monroe magician, a skilled professional, a man or woman, must be able master these seven effects.

One, a magician must make items vanish at will. Not only you must make an item vanish, you must conjure it back. Keep in mind that the reward is not in the disappearance but the return.

Two, a magician must produce something from nothing-rabbits from empty top hats and playing cards from empty hands.

Three, a Monroe magician must transform themselves or another thing from one state of being to the other. You can turn your assistant into a goldfish even into an elephant but make sure to return them back into their true self before the night is through.

Four, a magician must learn to move one object- a ball or a hat from one place to another without touching it.

Five, the magician must destroy an item and restore it back to its original state it was found in. Six, the magician must be placed in a dangerous trap and escape to safety.
Finally, a magician must be able to defy gravity. This, the ability to levitate, of course is one of the most amazing and breath-taking of all these illusions.

-L.E. Monroe
Chapter One:

Good Teeth

No performer should attempt to bite off red-hot iron unless he has a good set of teeth.

-Harry Houdini

My Grandfather once told me the city of Asbury Park is a gift from the ocean. He also swore my great-great uncle Louis once shook the hand of Harry Houdini after a show, and Grandma Winnie was related to Cleopatra’s favorite astrologist. When he told me about Asbury, this time, I believed him. The city rose from the bottom of the sea, rolled from the waves like seaweed until it settled here on land. Asbury was delivered as is, with everything, from the green iron coated carousel decorated with hissing Medusa heads, to the Paramount Theatre painted with seahorses and schooner ships that pointed towards the horizon. Mermaids and mermen hand crafted every inch of the boardwalk and for just a glimpse of our town, people traveled by buses, trains even luxury ships, to parade the wooden planks in their Sunday best.

Now all signs of the town’s Atlantis ancestry have faded into half-filled luxury apartments and half empty homes. Sometimes, you can feel it, when you’re on the boardwalk, the slow pulse of the sea goddess’ magic that willed our town into existence. The magic pulses underneath the wooden planks like a hidden heartbeat that keeps the town alive for a moment.
Asbury is divided evenly by train tracks that run north and south. The North Side has fancy homes with wide porches decorated with seashell chimes. The South Side, where my family has lived for the last one hundred years, isn’t as glamorous. Early in the morning, a train horn blares through deserted streets. The slick silver train sweeps past the techno-color graffiti walls and shuttered buildings closed for winter season.

Five more minutes, I just need five more minutes. I press my face against the cold glass and try to remember how everything looks but I cannot. The echo of the train horn wakes me from my dream of being on that train, of heading out someplace up North. My friend’s voice, light and sweet like candy, pulls me off the dream train. I pull my head off the bus window. When I look outside, brick and steel buildings streak by the window until the bus breaks at the corner Springwood and Memorial Drive. Fellow students fumble on the bus with a blast of talking and music. I wipe drool from my mouth.

“Did you hear me, Eddie? We’re getting a new kid in class.”

I raise a brow at Gwendolyn McGregor. Wendy, everyone calls her, is sitting next to me. Her white polo shirt is pressed within an inch of its life and her khakis are so sharp you could cut yourself on them. With her black flats and school pin, she looks like a model student until you see her hair. Discarded ribbons and craft supplies are woven into her thick brown hair that has been twisted into twin buns. She is the image of a cartoon character come to life with her almond colored eyes and candy colored lips painted with discount lipstick. The red lips bring out the tan shade of her skin. The next issue of her
*Shojo Beat* magazine is poking out her messenger bag. Wendy checks her reflection while she talks.

“So who is he?” I ask.

“Why do you think it’s a boy?”

“You wouldn’t care it was a girl.”

Wendy rolls her eyes. She continues to speak, “We need something new to look at. We’ve been around the same boys for years. I overheard my mother complaining about having to get his papers from his old school. Some fancy place in the city called St Francis, or something on the East Side.”

“New York City? He must have really screwed up if he’s coming to Adams.”

“Good morning to you too, sunshine.”

“Why is he coming to our school?”

“I didn’t hear that part. Mom yelled at me to get off the phone. What’s the point of having her work as the secretary if I can’t get the good stuff?”

“Now, I see why you’re on the bus.”

“The yellow cheese bus is for knuckleheads not ladies like us. Mom knows this and she still made me take the bus in spite of it.”

“I’ll alert the *Asbury Park Press* at the injustice.”

“Eddie, it’s our freshman year. We’re high school students now, we’re not with the little kids anymore. We have to make the upperclassman notice us.”
“I’d rather stay invisible, thank you very much.”

Wendy flips her hand at me, dismissively.

“What do you think he looks like?” she asks.

“Who?”

“ The new kid.”

I dig out my copy of Frankenstein book from my bag. I show Wendy the cover of the infamous bolt-necked, scarred faced monster.

“As long as the new kid doesn’t look like this, then I’m sure he’ll win Prom King.”

Wendy twists her face then says, “If he did look like that, he’d still be in the running.”

I catch my reflection in the mirror and for once force myself to look back. I am not a prom queen myself but I do okay. I wear the lip gloss Wendy gave me for my birthday. The strawberry colored gloss makes my lips stand out against the ebony of my face. I finger comb my thick, soot-black hair. The breeze from the open window blows it out of place. As the bus speeds up, my eyes travel down to my wide-hipped build. I turn away from my reflection to look at the ribbons in to Wendy’s hair.

“I saw your Dad on television last night.” Wendy checks herself in the mirror, “I can’t believe he’s really going for the world record.”

“He’s been practicing for months. He’s going to do it.”
Wendy nods her head, stays silent.

The bus finally pulls up in front of Adams Charter High School. The school is a three story building on the corner of Main and Seventeenth Avenue. The principal’s husband Mr. Troung painted the school exterior royal blue and egg shell white. If you drive too fast, the school blends into the sea-themed souvenir businesses and wind chime decorated porches. Our first day of school, the bus driver couldn’t tell our school from the other buildings in the block. We were twenty minutes late.

When the bus finally arrives at its destination, student bodies funnel into the building, the image matching the sight of Ellis Island immigrants being massed into the famous dome building, an entry to a better world. We were temporary immigrants from Asbury Park, the town where strangers locked their car doors when they drive through. The town where you wouldn’t want to get lost in is the place we call home. Two hundred students are randomly picked from a local lottery attend this special school three towns removed from our own place. When friends and neighbors found out that I, from all the others, had been picked to attend Adams Charter School, I received handshakes and head nods. I saw the hope in each and every one of their eyes.

The school hallway is lined with blue lockers and various laminated posters of students smiling high-fiving teachers with the words, “TOGETHER EVERYONE ACHIEVES MORE!” floating above their heads. By the end of the week, someone with a Sharpie will blacken the teeth of the pictured teenager and give the teachers, male and female, their own handlebar mustache. As I walk, bits and pieces of conversations about
the new kid float around. Wendy stands in a corner as she tells what she knows about the new kid to a small crowd of students. The students, mostly female, clutch their binders to their chest as Wendy holds their devoted attention. Arielle Miller, the third person of our trio comes up next to me.

Arielle says, “She loves the attention.”

“You’re surprised by that?”

“No, not at all. So, how was your weekend? Conjure up any hot guys from your top hats?”

“I wish. Instead, I went with my family to the Palace Amusements for their final weekend before they close for the season.”

I turn to Arielle. Within the past few years, Arielle shot up about a half a foot, making her one of the tallest girls in our class. Her hair is a reddish brown tuff. Her eyes are deep-set in her round face; they are the same green color of the Atlantic. Arielle’s skin reminds me of a tree bark, a lovely brown shade. She’s solid, thick like mud; she has a bit weight on her. Like everyone else, Arielle wears the school uniform, but with her “life is good” thumbs up attitude, she stands out. If it was warm enough, she would be digging her toes in the sand and collecting driftwood for her necklaces. Arielle and I walk over to our lockers, which of course are next to each other. As I empty my book bag, the Magicians’ envelope comes out. Arielle’s hands are on it before I can snatch it up. I reach for the letter, but she jerks away. With her long arm she holds me back as she peers at the letter. She asks,
“What’s The Society of Young Magicians?”

“I thought I took that out my bag!”

I twist from her arm and snatch the letter back. Together, we stare at the letter while Arielle pokes my shoulder.

“Open it.” she says, “There might be a rabbit inside.”

Every illusionist and magician in my family has applied to the Society of Young Magicians after their fourteenth birthdays for membership. I had made my birthday wishes several months ago but only until now had I received an answer. The intercom system beeps twice. The beeps signal the start of the day. I open my locker and stuff everything including the letter inside. I pull out my binder and slam the locker close.

“We’re going to be late for class.”

I pull Wendy away from her admirers as Arielle follows us. The hallway clears out.
Chapter Two

The New Kid

I have Science with Mr. Carey on Tuesday mornings. Mr. Carey is a tall, thin main who lives in his argyle patterned sweater and corduroy pants. When Mr. Carey sits at his desk, he reminds me of a resting dragonfly with his gray, glassy eyes that keep watch over us. As hard as he tries he cannot grow a beard. He ends up with patches of dark red hair across his cheeks. Today, we have been given a chemistry pop quiz. Mr. Carey is a nice guy so he lets us use our notes. Too bad that no one really cares about the elements and barely take notes. I do.

When Grand wasn’t touring the country pulling rabbits out of hats, he studied science and physics from textbooks. He didn’t have enough money to go to college but he learned as much as he could from library books and night classes. When I asked him why he loved science, Grand answered, “Science and magic are related, one is believed in more than the other. It’s important to know about both.”

By the time I was eleven; I knew every element by name and cold recognize the important ones.

I glance over to the other side of the room. Nina, the queen bee of the class, is busy checking her nails for chips and scratches. Her paper looks blank from where I can see. With her long lean build, she looks like a runway model who found herself in the middle of Chemistry class. We used to be cool a few years back. After the talent show fiasco, which I’d rather not think about, she started to ignore me. Over the last year, Nina,
begged her mom for contacts, lost her glasses and got a new attitude. Now, Nina has a bag only big enough for a phone and tubes of lip gloss. She wears so much lip gloss she looks as if she is constantly eating greasy strawberry flavored food.

Nina’s partners in crime are the twins Deidre and Diana, or as Wendy call them, TweedleDee and Tweedle DiDi. Deidre loves to wear pink so much she looks like a walking tuff of cotton candy while Diana wears black just so people know she doesn’t like pink. They don’t speak to me much unless Nina decides to speak to me.

Opposite from the trio is Joshua Boar Tran. He is bent over the book and keeps to himself most of the time his nose is down in the book. I glance over. His spiky hair bobs around as he is going over his paper for any mistakes. Wendy sits next to me flips back and forth in her spiral note book. I finished a few minutes ago with my quiz and am now scribbling in my journal. Whenever I get finished with my work, I take time to write any ideas for any effects or possible illusions. Instead, I end up drawing giraffes drinking from pools of ice cream. Let’s just say, I have a very active imagination.

“Where the hell is the sign for iron?” Wendy huffs.

I slide over my science notebook to her. She copies the answer from my notes.

“I saw your Dad on the news,” Arielle says as she continues filling out her own paper. “He’s going for another world record huh?”

I nod, “He’s been practicing for the last few months.”

“You should have gone to overseas with him.”
“And done what?”

“You could have shown off some of your magic tricks!” Wendy laughs as she furiously scribbles down anything that might be a right answer.

“Nah, I’ll leave the illusions to my Dad.”

Nina says out loud, to the twins, “I guess, in some families, talent and look skip a generation.”

TweedleDee and Tweedle DiDi giggle on cue at her joke.

“I’m sure Gregor Mendel would be so happy to hear that his theory is being used wisely.” I answer her.

“Who’s that? The school counselor.” Dee asks.

Joshua laughs into his hand but when Nina turns to him he looks down into his science book.

The door to the science room opens. The mobile of the molecules spins around from a gust of wind the door brings into the room. Principal Troung with her pink button down blouse and black pencil skirt comes into the room. Her shoes clack on the floor. Her black hair is up into a bun, highlighting her small nose and lips. Her brown eyes are hidden behind her green shell glasses. She waves him in from the doorway.

“Come in, young man.”

Wendy glances at the door, her eyebrows perk up.

“Hello there, cutie.” she whispered.
I look up from my notebook. The new kid stands in between Mrs. Troung and Mr. Carey, in his maroon sweater vest covered in grey lint balls that he has forgotten to remove. New Kid stands in his navy blue sweater. His skin is the color of honey. He has dark brown hair smooth and short with a bit of blonde streaked in. He’s a little bit shorter than Robert, Arielle’s brother, but he’s lean. He has pretty eyes, a hazel with flecks of grey, and these eyes scan the room until they settle on me. When our eyes met, the air in the room feels heavy. There’s something about him that reminds me summer afternoons spent turning through old magazines and eating chewy fish-shaped candy that tasted like ripe cherries. I continue to stare at him until he turns away to face Mr. Carey.

Mr. Carey says to the New Kid, “You should try smiling.”

When New Kid attempts a smile, there is hint of his cheekbones.

“Good enough. Find a seat.”

New Kid sits down to the seat closest to the window. The sun is behind him. I cannot see his face as clearly. Wendy focuses on him while I return my attention back to Mrs. Troung. I wait for her to introduce the New Kid, but she pulls Carey into the corner instead. Mrs. Troung and Mr. Carey turn their backs to us. I make out a few sentences between them.

“Is that the same kid? I thought that he was a rumor.” Mr. Carey asks.

“I’ll forgive you for that comment because you’re new to Adams.” She says sharply, in a low voice. Mrs. Troung smoothes out her tweed skirt. “Make him feel welcome, now.”
Mrs. Troung is out of the room before she can hear Mr. Carey’s concern. I turn back to the new kid. Even though, I cannot see his face, I know those pretty eyes are looking at me. Wendy wiggles her fingers at him. He gives her a small wave but I know he is looking at me. Wendy turns back to me, a smile on her face. I am not smiling.

“Wendy, I think I know him.”

“Well if you know him, go over and say hello. You could give him a tour of the school.” She wiggles her eyebrows.

“I said, I think I know him. I don’t want to be wrong and make a fool out of myself.”

“You can be right and still be a fool.” Wendy gives him a cool look over her shoulder, “Besides, he likes me.”

“How can you tell? Did you become telepathic and didn’t tell me about it?”

Wendy twirls a piece of lace with her finger as she looks at me.

“It’s like a certain spark, a moment just between just the two of you. You’ll know when it happens.”

The lunch bell dings twice. Wendy bolts out before anyone else has a chance to leave or Mr. Carey can hand out homework sheets to the class. She loves to get the best table in lunch room. My classmates all leave as I linger around. I get an extra homework sheet for Wendy.

“Edwina, stay a moment.”
Mr. Carey motions to the new kid to join us. New Kid and I are left in the room standing in front of Mr. Carey.

“Edwina, I’d like you to meet our new student, Benjamen.”

I blink. There was a time after the magic trick went wrong, after Bobo left when hearing the name Benjamen would pitch my stomach and squeeze my heart. Once when I heard that name being called in a laundromat, I turned around hoping to see him. All I saw was my face in the reflection of the dryer. I looked lost.

“Benjamen, this is Edwina Monroe. One of Adams best, stick close to her, she’ll take care of you.”

Benjamen does not blink. His eyes scan my face searching as if there is someone else hiding underneath my skin. He watches me as if I will peel my face away to reveal whoever he is searching for. I’m sorry to disappoint him. There is only me here, no one else.

“Ms. Monroe, show him to the cafeteria.”

I motion for Benjamen to come become along. He follows. His sweater sleeves are stretched out to the point that they look like pulled clay.

We walk down the hall for a few moments when he says, “Hey what’s good here?”

“Everything is okay. But I’d avoid the fish.”

“What’s wrong with the fish?”
“The fish tastes like chicken.”

“What does the chicken taste like?”

“It tastes like feet.”

“You’re funny.”

“I try to be.”

We continue down the hallways of cheap linoleum floors, flat paint and humming fluorescent lights that flicker and blink above. We slow as we pass the yellow and blue glitter posters recruiting for the Sunshine Committee and sports posters for the Adams High Dolphins basketball team. The feeling that hit me in Science doesn’t leave but instead gets throbs inside like a sore tooth. It’s not a pain but a nagging that won’t let me think straight. Benjamen pulls up his stretched out sweater sleeves high enough that I can see his forearms.

“So, I should eat the hamburgers.”

“The hamburgers are your best bet.”

We finally arrive at the cafeteria entrance. The scent of smoky grilled meat and spilled milk pours from the open door into the hallway. There is a line of four people waiting to get into the cafeteria.

“Here we are. I hope you enjoyed the tour.”

“You make a good host.”

“I’ll be sure to tell my mother.”
Benjamen laughs, as if he has been whispered a joke by an invisible comedian.

“Is there something funny?”

“You still don’t know who I am?”

“Should I?”

We stop at the cafeteria’s entrance.

“I’ll give you a hint. It’s behind your ear.”

I touch my ear and try to feel any dried paint that might have gotten on my ear. Yesterday Reese, my little sister and future cartoonist, decided to paint my portrait and most of the paint got on me. Benjamen reaches behind my ear. His fingers graze my skin. The touch of his fingertips causes a spark that hits me and finds its way down to my stomach. I feel as if a jolt of electricity has been bottled inside my body and bounces around with no way to get out. The electricity threatens to stop my heart when Benjamen presents me with a quarter.

“Ta-dah.” he whispers.

He drops the quarter in my hand. It’s still warm from his pocket. I stare at him, then the quarter.

“Bobo.” I call him.

His smile wavers when he hears me. Once the line has moved, he strolls into the cafeteria. I am torn between hugging him and kicking his ass.
Chapter Three
Don’t Bother to Remember

Benjamen Bobo Dawes.

If you mentioned his name to any student at Adams Charter High School, you would get one of the following responses:

Dawes, you mean the skinny kid who nearly torched the seventh grade class and sent the old principal’s car into the lake? I remember him. How is he?

I thought he had a sex change.

My sister told me he had to have his wrists removed. He has a robot write for him now.

If you mentioned the name Benjamen Bobo Dawes to me, I would tell you about someone who I thought I could call my friend. For a time we were the best friends, or as Gran would say he was mint to my chocolate chip. Only a few people knew the truth of where Bobo went after his illusion went wrong. I was not one of them. It wasn’t until two weeks later that our seventh grade homeroom teacher told us after Social Studies class:

“I’m afraid that Benjamen Dawes, our “Bobo”, has gone to another school and won’t be coming back.”

Every time Mom drove past Bobo’s house, I looked at the door and hoped that he’d jump out and surprise me with his red nose plastered on his face. He never did. I heard rumors about what had happened to him, but nothing from Mr. and Mrs. Dawes.
Whenever Mom and I saw Mrs. Dawes in the local supermarket, she shrugged her shoulders at me. In her tailored suit, she turned back to the glowing meat display and with one glance from her I felt invisible.

As we head into the lunch room, Benjamen grabs two lunch trays. He hands one to me and keeps the other for himself. They have been washed and there is a light layer of water on the tray. I rub the remaining drops of water with my fingertips trying to figure out to say to Benjamen. He looks different, much lot taller and has lost the fullness in his cheeks that made his face a face his relatives loved to pinch and kiss. His eyes haven’t changed, which I am glad to find out.

The lunch room is teeming with freshman students. The girls who ignore their lunches and stare into their pocket mirrors are planted next to the boys who fling pieces of paper shaped like footballs at each other. The artists drum out rhythms and beats on the table while others scribble down lyrics in their marble notebooks. Some students do nothing but pick at their lunches with plastic spoons and forks while others have loud conversations about their plans outside of school. I overhear Nina and her friends plan to head down to the nearest amusement park to soak in the bits of summer.

Now, in this lunch same room, I stand behind Benjamen Bobo Dawes, who balances a lunch tray in his hands. He scans the choices before him. I bounce on my heels gaining the nerve to say his stage name.

“Bobo.”

“Yes, Eddie,” he says over his shoulder.
“When did you get back? Where were you? It’s been awhile.”

“I’m here now. What does it matter where I’ve been? Call me Benjamen.”

“All right, sorry… Benjamen.”

Benjamen turns around, “Don’t say it like that.”

“You told me say your name. I said your name: Benjamen.”

“You say it the way you said Mr. Butterfingers back in fourth grade, with your nose all turned up. Poor rabbit couldn’t change his name just like I can’t change mine. I’m sorry that it’s not it the name that you like, Ms. Monroe, but it’s my name. You shouldn’t be so fussy about names.”

I thumb the corner of my plastic lunch tray. I hate how happy I feel that he remembers. All those afternoons we spent over opened cans of root beer and bowls of popcorn, making lists of all names I’d change my name to when I got old enough. I was named Edwina for a reason and that reason had not been made clear to me. On lined paper, I wrote down every name that wished was mine. As I wrote, I thought in envy of all the Jessicas, Carolines and Isabellas who could have their names plastered on souvenir mugs, shirts and license plates. I wanted that. He remembered that. Benjamen picks up a plate that holds a hamburger and fries. I do the same. We pay for lunch at the cashier and stand together.

Wendy waves to us to come over where Robert and a few other people have sat down. As we snake through the tables, he says, “Hey, you still do magic don’t you?”
Before I can answer, we have made it to the table. Wendy is on the prowl. I wave to the other two people who round out the group. Robert our local audiophile, with his black binder covered with band stickers black-purple streaked hair gives me a head nod. He is wearing a uniform outfit two sizes too big for him. Half the time he looks as if he is drowning in all that fabric.

Felix with his slicked back ebony hair and folded collar sits next to her. He’s not skinny; he’s got a bit of meat on him especially when it comes to his chest. He lives on the other side of the tracks, next to my house. For a time last year he took the bus in the morning. When the bus rolled up last September, he was nowhere to be found. Somehow, Felix shows up to school in time for first bell and leaves the moment the front door opens. We have all debated whether he gets to school by unicorn or magic carpet. The thought of Felix riding bareback on a unicorn has gotten me through many Ms. Harrison’s eye-rolling Social Living class.

Wendy scoots her chair closer to Benjamen.

“It took you guys long enough, I thought you got lost. I’ve see you’ve met Eddie. I’m Wendy and you are…”

“Benjamen.”

“Benjamen, nice name you have there. I’d like you to meet Robert. Over there is Arielle. The fellow over there is Felix.”

Everyone waves, but Robert is slow to wave to Benjamen. He continues to stare at him. Arielle opens her mouth to speak. Wendy is quicker.
“So what brings you to our school?”

“I can’t really tell you. My folks said that I was coming here and here I am.”

“Where were you before?”

“It’s a private school called Saint Ignatius in the city.”

“Isn’t on that on East Side?” Wendy asks leaning in.

I snort at Wendy. She is busy swimming in Benjamen’s eyes.

“Yes it is. You know the city well.”

“How did you like it?”

“It was alright. I went to school and lived with my uncle when I was there. It was a good time.”

“Your friends, especially your girlfriend, must have been sorry to see you go.”

“I do have a lot of friends, but no girlfriend.”

Wendy places a hand to her chest and sighs, “I’m so sorry to hear that.”

I am about to throw up my burger. Robert stares at Benjamen harder. I scoot over to Robert.

“You know, it’s rude to stare,” I tell him.

“He’s looks a lot like Bobo. Should I ask?”

“Leave him alone. What if you’re wrong?”

“Did you already ask him? I saw you two chatting on the lunch line.”
“I was being nice.”

“If he is Bobo, then you shouldn’t be nice to him, after what he did.”

Robert turns away from me. He focuses on Benjamen.

“How do you like Adams Charter High School?”

“I’ll tell you tomorrow, I’ve only been here a day.”

I give Robert’s forearm a strong squeeze, he ignores it.

“You’re last name is Dawes.”

Benjamen plays with the paper napkin on his plate, “Maybe.”

“Then that would make you Bobo.”

Arielle peeks up from her binder.

“Bobo, Benjamen Dawes, you don’t mean the car kid. Are you him?”

Benjamen doesn’t meet my eyes when he says, “Not anymore.”

“But you’re him, aren’t you?”

Everyone stops. They stare at Benjamen. They wait for him to disappear. It wouldn’t be the first time.

“I am.”

Robert smacks the table. He shouts, “I knew it!”

He says this with so much glee you thought that he’d won a bear at the state fair.

Benjamen moves in to me and says
“People in this damn town don’t forget shit do they?”

I mouth the words “No way”. Benjamen laughs while Wendy squints at us. She places her hand on Benjamen’s shoulder and asks, “So since you’re back, are you and Edwina getting the act back together?”

Benjamen gives a smile, which looks as real as rhinestones. I cast my eyes down to my lunch before Benjamen sees my face. I start to count the seeds on my hamburger bun. I feel stupid for thinking he would want talk about magic. I feel angry for the happiness that I felt for a moment. What stings more? I close my eyes. There are some memories that I shouldn’t bother to remember.

Felix, like usual, has remained quiet. He clears his throat, “Can I ask you something, Benjamen?”

“Shoot.”

“How did you make the principal’s car disappear?”
Chapter Four

History Lessons

In order to understand how Benjamen made the principal’s car disappear several years ago and how I fit into the trick, you have to know something about me. Until he met me, Ben hadn’t heard anything about hidden coins or Houdini’s Great Escapes. I invited him into the world of invisible rabbits, floating candlesticks and four Ace Tricks because it was the world I was brought into. There are usually two ways a person can learn the craft. You are either brought into the brotherhood or you, like me, are lucky enough to be born into it.

I remember the first time my Grandfather Charles told my cousins and me the story of Edward Monroe. I had just started first grade and it was Halloween Eve. We were gathered together in my Grandfather’s living room, surrounded by glowing pumpkins, flickering candles of all sizes and bowls filled with goodies and treats. Grandfather wore his stage costume, a white tuxedo with black trim and his top hat. It was the white one, my favorite one, with a scarlet ribbon and two big red feathers. His salt and pepper beard was cut short and close. His face was illuminated from the candles lit around the room.

“Edward Charles Monroe was born this every day one hundred and sixty years ago. He was left on the steps of an orphanage when he was no bigger than any of you. His parents died. He had no place to call home.”
I listened wide eyed at the story. There wasn’t a time in my life when I wasn’t surrounded by my family of Monroes, whether heading to a birthday or coming home from a graduation. It was hard to imagine a time where we, as a family, didn’t exist.

“Edward learned he had a special talent. He had the ability to conjure items from out of the air.”

Grandfather took off his top hat and tipped it towards my cousin Juniper. She looked inside and shrugged her shoulders.

“There’s nothing there.” she said.

Grandfather winked at her. He put his hand inside and felt around the black satin. He pulled out an orange and black flower that glittered under the candle light. He gave it to Juniper.

“One evening, Edward heard that the great illusionist Henri Huston was in town. Edward traveled the streets until he found his way backstage at a vaudeville show.”

“Grand, what’s vaudeville?” I asked.

Grandfather did a double take and laughed, “What’s vaudeville? What isn’t vaudeville? Before there were televisions to take up our time, people wanted something special. They wanted to see magic. Vaudeville was a big show that people watched when they wanted to have fun. It was better because it was right there, as real as you or me.”

“Edward must have really liked it!”
“He loved it. That same night he found vaudeville, Edward became the assistant to illusionist Henri Huston. Henri saw the magic in Edward and the next day, Henri took him away from the orphanage. Over the years, they were more than just illusionist and helper, they were best friends. Henri shared everything he knew with Edward and on the nights when Henri became too ill, Edward went on stage in his honor. Before he was nineteen, Edward had seen many countries and ports. He was performing for people who did not care about the shade of his skin or where he was from. They called him Entertain’ Eddie and how did he entertain. The wealthiest people watched him perform and legends dined with him. He walked around with his head held high.”

“Did he have pictures?”

“He didn’t have any pictures of his travels but he did have this.”

Grandfather went to the closest closet. He brought out a brown and black leather streamer truck covered in peeling and fading stickers. I touched the smooth leather and the peeling stickers.

“What is it?”

“It’s Edward’s trunk. It held all his props and crafts. It was a gift from Henri himself.”

“It’s old and smelly,” I said.
“This trunk is the reason why we are all here. Edward saw a young lady, an artist like himself, who didn’t have a safe place to put any of her things. Her name was Jessie and she was a fortune teller. He was a gentleman so he offered her a space in his trunk. He even shared the key to his trunk. One evening, Jessie asked Edward, ‘What made you trust me?’ He said as clear as day, “It was your eyes. I can trust someone with kind eyes like yours.”

“What happened then?”

“They fell in love. They had their first date on the boardwalk. They married the day after a wise woman told them that their union would bring much love into the world.”

“Was it true?”

“Yes. They had seven sons. Their names were Adam, Bert, Charles, David, Edward, Fredrick and Gregory. Each of those sons had several sons. Those sons had kids of their own.”

“That’s a lot people.”

“It’s a lot of Monroes.”

“Were they all magicians like Edward?”

“All this sons were magicians at some time or another, each of them could perform all the illusions, but each of them had a favorite illusion. Adam made items
vanish before people’s noses, Bert transformed his body into beautiful things, and Charles produced doves and rabbits from every pocket and hat he laid his hands on. David moved objects around the room without touching them; Edward Junior escaped from every locked room, nailed box and every trap his rivals placed him in. Fredrick destroyed everything that he had his hands on, but he restored them back to how they used to be.”

I counted off the brothers on my fingers, “What did the last brother do?”

“My dear, Gregory defied gravity.”

“What happened to the brothers? Did they all stay magicians?”

“Some Monroes stayed magicians. Their children became escape artists, opera singers, fire eaters, artists, clowns and jugglers.”

“Did Jessie learn magic, too?”

“Of course, she learned.” Grandfather straightened his top hat, “Edward taught his wife his all tricks. She became almost as good as him.”

“Can you teach us some magic tricks?”

He smiled down at me. He pulled out a coin from his pocket.

“I’d love to.”
It was at that moment when he pulled out the coin, I sat at my grandfather’s feet as he made the coin disappear behind his hand and made it reappear behind my ear, I learned that magic was meant to be shared. The same way I could break off a piece of my cookie for my little sister, I could share my magic.

Afterwards, my cousins weren’t interested; they weren’t as devoted as I was. Every day when I was dropped off by the bus, I made my way over to my Grand’s house. After Reese was born Grand moved the across street into a small home that once belonged to a relative who retired down South. He taught me how to create smoke without fire, how to read people’s minds in a moment and how to conjure coin and paper money out of the thinnest of air. One spring morning when the sky seemed so close to the ground I could touch the clouds, Grand Charles brought me to the attic. The attic space was divided in two, by a dusty red curtain. The space, Grand and I stood in, was covered with different magical props and items. Grand positioned himself by the curtain.

“We don’t keep a family tree. We have something really special.”

Grand pulled back the curtain. He beckoned me inside.

Behind the curtain was a collection of top hats, high hats, silk hats, cylinder hats, and chimney stove pipe hats. Some were tall, some were short, others were broad brimmed and others were flat crowned. There were a few with white ribbon around the bases; others were larger with smooth black ribbon tied in a neat bow.

“They’re all top hats.” I said to Grand, “How many top hats?”
“Exactly nine-ninety top hats.”

He picked up one top hat and handed it to me. I looked on the inside and read the name

“Howdy, Gregory Edward Monroe.”

“That was my grandfather’s top hat. His sister bought it for him the night he first performed in front of an audience.”

“Do they all have names on the inside?”

“Each and every top hat of has the name of every stage performer who ever took the stage. The collection started with Edward, and was handed given down to my grandfather until it has been passed all the way down to me. When you perform for your first audience, you’ll get your top hat. You’ll be number one hundred.”

“One hundred top hats.”

Grand nodded, “I think it’s time you learned the Magician’s Oath.”

I held Charles’ top hat in my hands as I repeated the oath to my grandfather. I promised him that I would honor, protect and practice our family’s magic. I’d do what I could keep the secrets safe. I promised to become a magician my family would be proud to call their own. Once the oath was finished, Grand took me downstairs where we had lunch at the kitchen table. After we cleaned our hands, Grand brought out his a small black hardback book with pages had been yellowed with age.
“What is that?”

“This is my illusion book. Every magician in our family has one. When you’re ready then you’ll see what illusions are in the book.”

I went to touch the book but could only bring myself to poke at the cover as Grand chuckled. He returned the book back underneath the cookie jar.

“Eddie, do you remember the story. I told you about the seven sons and what each one could do?”

“Yes.”

“There are seven effects that a magician must master. These effects are very important to every illusion performed. Do you remember what they are?”

“Adam disappears, Bert transforms, Charles…he…”

“Charles produces, David transports, Eddie escapes, Fredrick restores and Gregory…

“He defies gravity.”

“Very good! There are other rules and other effects you will master when you are older, but for now you will learn these seven effects.”

“Did Dad have to learn?”
“Of course, he did. So did I, so did my grandfather.”

“But Dad only escapes now.”

“Your Dad learned how to do all seven, but he’s great at escape. You don’t know what illusion you’ll like until you try it them all.”

“Grand, were there any girl magicians in the family, before me?”

Grand placed his book behind the cookie jar and handed me a cookie.

“It doesn’t matter if there was because you are here.”

“Okay. What do we do now?”

Grand pulled out a coin from his pocket,

“We practice. Remember Eddie: practice is a magician’s bread and butter, without it, you can’t perform.”

I went home and dreamt of the day I would be bestowed with my top hat. I believed magic existed everywhere. Magic was sunshine flittered through green leaves and cotton white clouds that transformed into circus animals on display. If I took enough air inside my lungs, I’d breathe the in magic and let it spread from my chest until it reached the tips of my fingers and toes. I thought I could find pieces of magic and safe keep them, my own collection of tangible magic as the seashells that lined my mother’s garden.

Asbury Park was my enchanted city by the sea.
Chapter Five

Wishes

After we finish lunch, a few Adams students are allowed to have fifteen minutes in the Serenity Garden. There, a few stone benches, a square patch of dirt and empty bird basin make up the small garden behind the school. Usually the popular kids are back here, doing nothing; fortunately, told the chilly air has kept them inside. The cold isn’t enough to keep everybody inside. Curious girls, with bubblegum lips and eyelashes that flutter like hungry butterflies, come over to introduce themselves to Benjamen. I watch as one girl, one with a big forehead, ignore me and up “welcome” Benjamen to the school.

“I could show you around if you want.” Big Forehead offers.

“Thank you, but I’ve already been given a tour.”

“Well, maybe next time.” The girl sighs and sashays away with her huge forehead in tow.

“I don’t remember people being so friendly around here,” Benjamen says as he smoothes out his sweater.

“I think there must be something in the water.” I say.

“I see you still haven’t lost your humor.”

“It’s my bread and butter.”

Bobo laughs, “I haven’t heard that in a minute. How is Grand?”
“He’s doing well.”

“What about your magic act?”

“That’s another story. What about your magic act?”

“I have a few gigs here and there. I’m working on something big.”

“I remember the last time you were working on something big.”

Benjamen leans back against the picnic table and sighs, “You seemed happy to see me before.”

“I’ve had time to think and remember.” I lean forward and lace my fingers together.

“It’s been two years and you still haven’t forgotten.”

“Who can forget that? It’s not every day the Asbury Police Force come to your school.”

“It was exciting.”

I pick with one of the buttons on my polo shirt, “Maybe for you but for some of us, it wasn’t so exciting.”

“Ah, you know we could forgive and forget the past if you want.” Benjamen says.

“The past should be remembered, it’s important.”

Benjamen stands up in front of me and his body blocks out the sun.

“Hold out your hand.”
I shake my head. He stares me down.

“Come on Eddie. I want to show you something.”

“No, I will not hold out my hand, close my eyes or do anything else. If you want to show off your magic, you’ll have to pick out some other victim.”

Benjamen looks at me for a moment before he steps back.

“If you worked up your act, you’d be as good as you were.”

“What do you know about my act?”

“You’re slipping Eddie. You didn’t even notice the quarter behind your ear.”

“It wasn’t there when I woke up this morning.”

“You taught me that trick but now you fell for it.”

“What do you know?” I narrow my eyes at him but he does not move.

“If you fall for someone else’s magic, then you’ve given up on your own. I know that much.”

There’s mumbling from other students around us as Mr. Carey is herding everyone from out of the Serenity Garden.

“It’s time to get back inside.” I say to him but I do not move. Benjamen winks at me before he walks toward the door. My head is as clear as a fishbowl, he saw everything inside. Of course, he with the movie star smile and pretty eyes would be able see instead my head, to read me. I get up and follow everyone else inside. I stare at the back of Benjamen’s head.
When Benjamen isn’t Bobo, he is Benjamen Dawes the son of one of the well known and respected families in Monmouth County. His father Mr. David Dawes works in City Hall as a councilman and city leader. Benjamen’s mother Mary Andrews-Dawes is the center of the social scene of the Shore area. They are Asbury royalty, despite the fact that his family has only been in town for twenty years or so. When Benjamen had his first big birthday party, it was written up in the local newspaper as “Asbury’s Native Son Celebrates Big Day.”

Bobo and I started our magic act the night of that same birthday.

The balloons had hardly lost their helium as we planned our show business future together. We were both in Ms. Fletcher’s third grade class at Bradley Elementary but first spoke to each other at his party. On the drive to his house, the car wheels bumped over the train tracks as we headed towards the party. He lived on the side of town with blooming tulips in the front yards. I lived on the other side of town where the only flowers that grew in front of our house were dandelions and honeysuckle plants that had wrapped around the side of our house. The house was big with a nice blue door and a porch decorated with bunches of balloons. When, I and the other party guests entered his home, we were greeted by Benjamen wearing a red foam nose. He wore a fitted ringmaster suit that was snug around his stomach. His glittery bowtie spun on its own.

He said with a flourish, “Welcome to the Dawes Family circus.”

Mr. Dawes, with his chocolate hued skin, tall and big body, reminded me of John
Henry. Grand showed me a picture of him once from one of his story books. Here, that image stood in front of us not with a hammer in his hand, but a balloon pump.

Every pastel bed sheet and starry blanket had been propped up as a homemade tent. Small castles had been made inside his home. The blankets spread over nearly the length of the living room. On the other side of the canopy, the dining room table was covered with clown paper plates, goodie bags and a full spread of treats. Even though the food was covered up, we could smell the deliciousness hidden beneath.

Mrs. Dawes had big red circles painted on her cheeks, making her skin seem pale. She hovered around the house, making sure that we didn’t have too much candy or leave a cup on her nice table. She wore a line of bracelets that covered both her wrists; they made music when she moved. You could hear where ever she was in the house because of her bracelets. We played through the canopy, playing tag to the sound of small bells and laughter. I caught Ben outside the tent getting a drink out of a paper cup with a smiling clown.

He took a big sip and said, “Hi.”

Red juice dripped down his chin.

“Hi.”

“I’m having a lot fun.”

“Me too. But…”

“What?”
“What’s that behind your ear?”

He put his cup on the table and touched his ear. Once he dropped his hand by his side, I reached behind his ear, pulling out a silver dollar from behind it. His eyes grew wide as I handed it to him.

“Keep it that was there all along.”

I walked away excited that I had finally pulled off a trick. Grand had spent two weeks teaching me. After we ate and played a little more, Ms. Dawes gathered us around the kitchen table. The lights were lowered and the candles on his birthday cake glowed. The Dawes led us into a chorus of “For He’s A Jolly Good Fellow”. None of us knew the words, but mumbled what words would could to sound like the song. The birthday candles made small shadows on his small face as Ben thought about his wish. He nodded his head in silence, took a deep breath then blew. The dimmed room was made darker, applause bounced off the walls. As we had our cake and ice cream, Ben glanced at all his guests but he didn’t look at me. We were all sent home with a tri-colored goodie bag, red foam noses and an extra slice of cake. As the other guests were picked up and whisked off home, I sat on the porch steps. I jumped at every car that passed down the street only to stump back down in the chair. I heard the jingle of bracelets

“Edwina?”

Mrs. Dawes poked out her head out the door, “Your dad called. He’s on his way.”
I nodded. Ben came out on the porch. He flipped the silver dollar in his hand. He changed into a sweater and jeans. He still wears the nose. The nose makes him speak in an odd way.

“You wanna hear a joke? Why did the man run around his bed?”

I didn’t know. I shrugged my shoulders.

“He wanted to catch up on his sleep.”

I laughed.

“What’s your name again?”

“Edwina.”

Ben scanned me slowly. He was making up his mind about whether or not he liked me or my name.

“I’m gonna call you, Eddie.”

“That’s a boy name.”

“Not when I say it. Edwina is…not you.”

“What about you? I’ve never heard of any clowns called Ben.”

“There’s one called Ronald.”

“Every clown has to have a silly name.”

“Well I don’t.”

“Yes you do, I just thought of one.”
“When?”

“Right now.”

“What is it, then?”

“Bobo.”

Benjamen mouthed his new name.

“I like it. Let’s think of yours.”

“No need. Don’t want to be a clown.”

His jaw went slack but he shook it off.

“If you didn’t come here to be a clown, why are you here?”

Ben was right about that fact but I had to come over. He didn’t know it but his circus needed me.

“I’m a magician, every circus has one. You have a circus right.”

“Yes.”

“No magician right?”

“Right. They’re all boys.”

“Yes? So…”

“There aren’t any girl magicians I know of.”

“I’m going to be the first. My mom says so.”
Bobo tapped his nose a few times. He raised a brow.

“I could use a magician.”

“Yes, you could.”

“Are you any good?”

“I made that coin appear, didn’t I?”

“You did.”

“There.”

“But my little sister can do that. She’s three. Show me something new.”

I blinked. It was the sweetest thing I could have heard. Show me something new.

Dad always his own magic project to deal, Mom gave whatever time she could when she wasn’t working. My reflection was the only person I was brave enough to perform for all my tricks for. A car slowed down in front of the porch, it honked twice. I gathered my things.

“Thanks for the party and the joke.”

I headed off the porch as Ben scurried after me, silver dollar in his hand. The silver coin glittered caught the street light that started to flicker on.

“Will you teach me?”

“Sure. But you’ll have to take the oath,”

I took the silver dollar back as a temporary promise.
“Bye Bobo.”

“Bye Eddie.”

I was nervous getting ready for school on Monday. Friendships were fragile. The weekend could be cruel. All the best friends I once traded half heart necklaces with on Tuesday could refuse eat lunch with me on Thursday. What if Frankie, Grace or even Xavier had been picked up last? Would Ben have told his joke?

The same thought repeated in my head: I shouldn’t have called him Bobo.

That Monday morning, I brought the silver dollar to school in my back pocket. When I walked in the classroom, I didn’t wave or even look at Ben. That Monday, in the milk sour scented lunch room, Ben came with his blue lunch bag. He glanced over my open lunch bag.

“I’lI trade you my fruit snacks for your cookies.”

I pulled out my cookies. He handed me his fruit snacks.

“What will we be called?”

“We?”

“What will our act silly.”

“The Amazing Eddie and Bobo.”
Wendy snaps her fingers in front of my face and I stare at her. I’m still in the hallway even as it has started to clear up.

“Eddie? What the hell? I’ve been calling you. The bell rang like five minutes ago.”

“Sorry, I spaced out for a moment.”

Wendy follows my line of vision until she realizes who I’m looking at. Benjamen is surrounded by a few people. He’s shaking hands with a few people and smiling at adoring fans. He produces a silk rose from out of nowhere much to the surprise of one fan, who grips the rose for dear life.

“It looks like he hasn’t given up his magic act after all.

“You got it bad for Bobo.”

“No, just...no.”

“I don’t blame you. He’s pretty to look at. He’s nothing like the monster you thought he would be.”

I can’t bring myself to agree with her.
Chapter Six

How to Win At Carnival Games

Once we became the Amazing Eddie and Bobo, we were together every day even after school. That afternoon, years ago Bobo sat with me at lunch the whole time. We traded snacks and talked about our favorite sneakers. The next day after lunch, I lead Bobo out to the back corner of the playground. We went around behind the truck of the tree. Bobo cleared the stones and twigs away so that we could have a clear space to talk. We sat legs crossed on the grass.

“Before I can teach you any of my tricks, you must take the oath!”

“What oath?”

“The Magician’s oath.”

I took a small piece of paper from out of my pocket. I smoothed it out all the folds.

“Cool.”

“Hold up your right hand.”

“Repeat after me word for word.”

“Okay.”

“I, your name.”

“I Benjamen Ayden Dawes.”
I cleared my throat.

“I Benjamen Bobo Ayden Dawes.”

“I promise never, ever to reveal the secret of any trick to a non-magician.”

He took a breath then smiled. Sunshine fell through the tree leaves; shadows played on the ground around us.

“Unless that one person swears to uphold the Magician's Oath.”

“This last part I looked straight into his eyes. I held his stare so that he knew.

“I promise never to perform any trick for anybody else without first practicing until I can perform it well enough to maintain my magic.”

He stared back, he understood.

“And I promise never to perform any trick for anybody else without first practicing until I can perform it well enough to maintain my magic.”

“Cross your heart.”

He made an X across his chest. I returned the paper back into my pocket.

“You are now Bobo, the magician.”

We shook hands. He smiled as if he had won something special. I pulled out my coin, waved it in front on his face,
“It’s all in the wrist.”

Every recess we practiced; ants were our audience while the tree base was our backstage. With us there together was more sun in the sky, few extra minutes before the bell. I drew drawings in the dirt to show him how to move his hands and hide coins. There would be days when Mr. and Mrs. Dawes were busy with running Asbury Park, that Bobo would come home and hang out with me. Grand juggled whatever items he could find around the house or tell us stories about act. Other afternoons my older cooler cousin, Phoebe babysat us and practiced her paper puppet show. Most of the time, Bobo and I ran around the house waving plastic wands screaming *alakazam*, or *presto chango* at chairs and couches and willing them to disappear by the mere power of our words. It wasn’t unusual for Phoebe say while she was watching us to yell from the living room.

“You know, I can hear you half way across the neighborhood. Y’all are at it again. Do me a favor and make the noise disappear. ”

Bobo’s parents would come to collect him before the streets light came on and other times we had an extra plate at the dinner table for him. If my house was off limits, we’d explore the maze of the Asbury Arcade uncovering playing cards with pin-up girls and black and white entertainment magazines with curling corners and missing pages. The glamorous vaudeville stars with their side profiles and dazzling smiles mesmerized us.

Aunt Lydia, my father’s youngest sister, has kept the shop Asbury Arcade open over the last twenty five years. Lydia stared out as a professional ventriloquist, who used to make her dolls talk and scare her older brothers. Over time, Aunt Lydia became a
professor of History at the local college. Aunt Lydia collected all the family props and items that were mailed to her from family members from all over the state and even all over the world. Over time, the history of the Monroe family has become intertwined with the history of Asbury Park. Soon she had enough items to open her own shop. Grandpa gave her the loan to first open Asbury Arcade and Aunt Lydia made Grandpa the co-owner.

Whenever my parents had a magic gig out of town, she’d babysit me and Bobo always tagged along. We spent hours exploring the magic items and products that lined the shelves of her store. When it was raining, Aunt Lydia let us go through her unwanted back box filled with opened and half used magic illusions. To us, that box was an abandoned treasure chest stuffed with untold goodies. Confetti tubes capped with pretty paper that in the right magician’s hands produced silver goblets, delicious candy and other beautiful things. Wooden boxes that if you had good hands could produce whatever you wished and what needed.

“You would anyone get rid of any of these?” Bobo asked he held an unopened effect, a green and brown painted Genjji Box, in his hand.

“People couldn’t figure out the illusion so they gave it back to the store.” Aunt Lydia told us.

“Whatever illusion you two figure out, I’ll let you keep.”

I picked up a sliver tube and held it out to Bobo.

“This will be the first trick you’ll learn.”
The first illusion I taught Bobo was the confetti tubes. I used old oatmeal and coffee tins for practice. We ended up getting so much confetti on ourselves we looked parade floats. He never gave up and by the end of the week he learned the confetti tube trick and was pulling out silk scarves from the shower of confetti.

We were allowed to go anywhere within the Asbury Arcade as long as we put everything back where we found it. The red door in the back of the door was one place where we were never allowed to go no matter how much we asked or promised to be careful. Only Aunt Lydia and Grand went into the back door. Once, when Aunt Lydia disappeared behind the door and into the room, we asked Phoebe about it.

“What’s behind that door?”

“That’s where the dangerous and trickiest illusions are. There are illusions for the master magicians.”

Bobo asked with wide eyes, “What kind of dangerous tricks are back there?”

“I don’t know but they must be really dangerous because the door is always locked.” Phoebe whispered as the door knob started to turn, “Only Grand and Aunt Lydia have a key.”

When Aunt Lydia came through the door, we turned away and busied ourselves with anything and everything in the shop. Asbury Arcade was our hideaway from the word that failed to understand magic and our friendship. Whatever Grand taught me, I passed on to Bobo.

“Remember never pick a rabbit up by his ears.”

“Why?”
“Would you like to be picked up by your ears?”

“Oh no, okay.”

“Remember, your wand should be light enough to levitate on stage.”

“Yes Eddie.”

It might seem unfair that I taught Bobo all these things and he didn’t share anything with me. When I look back now, he taught me how to blow soap bubbles bigger than my head and the best places to hide my money. My favorite thing he taught me how to win at carnival games.

Whenever the Ferris Wheel was rolled into town, the electric lights illuminated Sunset Park, and the white and red stripped booths were propped up, Bobo and I broke out our piggy bank. He knew most the games were gaffed or rigged but that didn’t stop him from wanting to win. We stood back with our allowance crushed in our sweaty hands and watched other people fail over and over.

With the Milk Can, Bobo aimed the ball not at the can but at the back rim of. The ball dropped inside every time he threw it. Bobo burst balloons with a steady hand and sharp eye; he always went for the smallest balloons which were easier to pop. Every time, we went home with our arms unable to hold all the prizes that we had won but he always gave me the teddy bear.
Chapter Seven

Mouse and Toad

The door swings open on Social Living class to reveal Ms. Harrison. Ms. Harrison has droopy brown eyes that have a look of wise lunatic about them. I believe in one glance she can see your future and determine your worth.

“Good afternoon class.” she trills happily.

We all respond, “Good afternoon Ms. Harrison.”

Her silky chestnut hair is worn in the style of a lion’s mane. She is short with a medium sized build. Her skin is coffee cream-colored. Her wardrobe is plain; it appears that every item that she wears is in some shade of red. I believe today she is wearing a dress the shade of apple and bangles the color of cherries.

“What the hell is Social Living Class?” Benjamen asks us while Ms. Harrison starts writing on the board. Wendy leans over the table to answer him.

“Principal Tran made up this class Adams’s Academy students get a taste of the “real world” and help us learn about how to save money instead of spend it.”

“What would she know about money?” Nina whispers, “The way Ms. Harrison dresses in her cheap clothes, nothing she owns is over twenty dollars.”

“What’s wrong with that?” I turn to Nina.

“Of course, you wouldn’t see a problem with that.” Nina’s perfectly arched eyebrow lifts at me, like evil boomerangs, “Are you wearing your cousin’s hand me downs, again?”

Benjamen points his pen “Hey, the assignment is on the board.”
I look up to see in Ms. Harrison’s neat hand writing

*What did you want to be when you were a child? Has your dream changed?*

“She’s going to make this hard.” Nina whines but she starts scribbling in her notebook.

I give Benjamen a look and I start to write in my notebook.

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It wasn’t before long before Ben and I were performing during Show and Tell.

Our first performance together, I learned three things.

*One: Make them laugh.* If you wanted to make chocolate milk come out Bobby Miller’s nose, have Benjamen pull out his rubber chicken while Bobby has started drinking. Bobby laughed so hard that he started coughing and sputtering milk. Even through his coughing, he continued to giggle in small fits.

*Two: You always keep their attention.* I followed up his rubber chicken by not only pulling two silver dollars from behind our substitute teacher’s ear, but I also read the minds of three of my classmates. They looked at me as if I was magic, as if I was somebody special. When I got up there with Benjamen, I knew we were. With every playing card and gag joke, we had them spellbound.

*Three: Always take a bow.* At the end of the performance, Ben took my hand and we bowed together as one. The cheers and applause felt great because we knew that we had earned it. From then on, we were known as Eddie and Ben. When we weren’t
practicing or performing magic we dug up every show and magic kit, every book where we could to find inspiration. This meant flipping through magic magazines that fell apart underneath our fingers and watching clips of Penn and Teller with their sleight of hand magic.

Grand loved having Bobo and I over his house on the days it was raining or too hot to play outside. We liked going up through Grand’s attic to find goofy outfits and oversized shirts to wear. Things were easier to hide when there was room in our clothes to keep them. We’d race around Grand’s house through the kitchen and various rooms hoping to make dressers, cookie jars and cabinets disappear with a touch of our wands. Ben and I were such lucky folk who carried magic around with us. We never went anywhere without a joke or a hand trick ready. Together we saw magic in the world. We recognized magic in each other.

I couldn’t explain how we were friends. Like my Grand says when he sees something strange, he says “You would expect a mouse to ride the back of the toad during a storm before you’d see something like that.” The “something like that” for me was our friendship. Bobo wore the best clothes from the shiny expensive store at the mall, while I was given shirts and skirts from numerous female cousins who tired of their clothes quickly. He lived on the good side of town closer to the water and I lived in a house that was almost as old as the town itself.

Bobo and I were brought together by an internal pull, the same way magnets connect when forced apart. Magic made us partners, but love of magic, love the craft made us friends. Within hours, we lived lifetimes, as entertainers and performers.
Whenever we had a free afternoon, Benjamen and I headed the library to find old joke books and Magic for Kids workbooks. We weren’t afraid to show our friends and family what magic existed before them. Rabbits were pulled from empty hats and scarves out of sleeves.

I nicknamed him Bobo because Benjamen, his “real” name, didn’t capture the joy that appeared on his face when pulled endless scarves from his sleeves. Benjamen was the trusted hall monitor but Bobo was the recess magician who entertained to the schoolyard. I taught him how to shrink pennies until they disappeared. I showed him how to make a paper hummingbird fly. I gave him my best spot, the tree stump next the swings, to perform his first solo act. In the beginning, my heart quickened at the sight of him doing all the tricks I passed on to. My applause was the loudest of anyone.

Soon, I noticed that Bobo was quicker with his hands than I. He brought in bigger crowds on the blacktop. I squirmed in my high top sneakers whenever people would say “You’re almost as good as him; you should ask him to teach you tricks.”

One day after lunch, when everyone rushed outside to see him, I stayed in the cafeteria. Alone, with my lunch bag and magic handbook, I watched the lunch ladies clear the tables of empty plastic bags and candy wrappers. I focused my magic, teaching myself tricks that were advanced at least high class magician. Rather than watch Benjamen, I read the magic instructions while looking over my shoulder. I searched for the next, trick the better trick that would make them see who had the real magic, who was the real magician.
By seventh grade, Benjamen was getting itchy. Small crowds weren’t doing it for him. He dragged scarves from his sleeve and let the rubber chicken flop. One day at the lockers he came up to me. I remember this day because it was the first time I noticed the color of his eyes. They were so bright, I had to look away from his face.

“Eddie, we have to go big time Bigger shows, bigger tricks.”

When he said this, his eyes went big like half sliver dollars.

“We killed at your cousin’s birthday party.” I reminded him. I turned away so I wouldn’t have to see his eyes. “I get chills just thinking about it. When we visit to see Grand, he agreed.”

Benjamen moved in close to me. The scent of root beer and dirt rose off from his clothes.

“I’m not talking about parties.”

I looked at him.

“What are we talking about? You want to perform at old people’s homes. I have people at the Asbury Towers Retirement Center.”

He shook his head, “I’m talking about the big stuff.”

He pulled out a blue flyer that was decorated by stars.

“Coming to a school near you,

The Paramount Theatre Talent Show Auditions!”

“Look there, they are having open auditions right here at school. A guy from the Theatre is coming to be at the Winter Festival looking for acts.”
“Really?”

I remembered the oath I made to my Grandfather. I had promised that I wouldn’t premiere any tricks until I had practiced them to perfection. I couldn’t take a risk like and mess up.

“That’s only two weeks away. We’re nowhere near that good, not yet.”

He took the paper back from me, jammed it in his jean pocket. He looked straight on when he said

“Well I am. I’ve been working on something big.”

“How big? David Blaine?”

“David Copperfield.”

My eyes widened. I asked, “Do you want to show me?”

Ben stepped back. “I want you to be as surprised as everyone else.”

“You afraid I might steal your trick?” I joked.

His face paled when he said, very slowly as if I was a baby, “I am afraid you’ll do it better than me.”

The bell rang. Ben went away.

Earlier that awful same day, in science class, we learned about the moments of impact in the wild. The moment of impact takes mere seconds, its moment when animals come into contact with each other. This moment of impact applies to people as well. These moments are too fast for us to recognize right then, right there but later on, when
we are lying in bed unable to sleep, the memory will replay over and over again. Later, you will hate yourself for not preparing yourself for the blow, the hit that comes and stuns you. This moment, here by the lockers, replays on the nights when I can’t sleep. That afternoon was the end of us, of our partnership; it took me much later to feel the impact.

“Alright everyone, please hand in your short answers.” Ms. Harrison says as she erases the question off the board. I glance at my notebook. The words aren’t much but for now they’ll do.
Chapter Eight

There Has Always Been Monroe Castle

I walk off the school bus and cross the street to our house. The Monroe Castle, as my little sister Reese likes to call it, our Victorian home with three stories and a wooden porch. The first Monroes, Edward and Jessie, known by their friends, as “Those Amazing Monroes!” in their act, used the money they earned touring around the world to buy what is now the place where we lay our heads. Edward and Jessie raised seven sons here and one of those sons, my direct ancestor Charles Edward Monroe, held on to the Monroe Castle when they left on their world tour.

My Grand Charles was raised in the castle and left Monroe Castle to my father, Hector when he retired to a smaller house across the street. We have always lived in the castle. I have never known another place. Every fall, we get a big eyed and open mouthed architecture student from Brookdale, the local community college, at our door. The students always ask if she or he can take a few pictures and explain that our house is an architectural marvel. Apparently Edward and Jessie had performed for the son of a famous architect and were so great that not only had the architect paid them he had drawn the designs for their home.

Okay sure, I still want the architectural marvel we live in not to be so chilly in the winter and so miserable in the summer. Dad loves the visitors from Brookdale College. He invites the person, usually a college student, inside Monroe Castle. Dad gives history lessons about the house and if he feels in a good mood, he will show off a
few illusions. If Mom is around, she might send our visitor off with a caramel candy or warm goodbye.

I walk into the living room. The curtains, once the scraps of an abandoned circus tent, are faded white and red stripes that make the white walls stand out even more. My book bag bounces on the plum colored couch that is so purple that in the wrong light it looks black. There are various bookshelves filled with training manuals, passed on books and knickknacks from all over the globe.

Glass cabinets are filled with many pictures, some sepia toned, black and white and full color of many family members whose names have been lost, but their faces remain familiar to us. There is so much history in that room; it makes my head spin. I hear soft bumping from the closet in the corner. I open the door to see my eight year old sister, Reese, tied up in knots.

“Hiya sis!”

I notice the ropes and groan, “How did you get into my performing ropes?!”

“They were just lying there underneath your bed! How could I not use them?”

“Easy, you don’t use them!”

Reese must have been a sailor in another time because of her skill with ropes and knots. By the time she was four, Reese learned how to tie and untie the ribbons in her hair and loop the laces in her shoes. As Reese looks at me with her bright eyes, I feel less
angry. She gets into my ropes but she always untangles them and put them back where they belong.

“Next time just ask for the ropes.”

“Okay, Eddie.”

“What kind of knot is that?”

“Butterfly knot, but I think I got it wrong.”

I lean down to study her work.

“Are you stuck?”

“Yes.”

“Then I think you have it right.”

Reese nods excitedly. “Good. That was my goal!”

“I hear you have a birthday coming up. What does the birthday girl want for her day?”

“Pink cupcakes, purple milk and Max the Magical Clown.”

I smile to keep from screaming when Reese mentions him. For the last six months, whenever the commercial for Max the Magical Clown came on Reese froze like a dear, stopped what she was doing and glare at the screen. The commercial started out in
black and white, with kids in party hats looking bored. Their heads in their hands they looked as if they are at a dentist office rather than a birthday party. The hostess of the party, one of the children’s mothers look on the party scene with fear.

A sad trombone plays throughout the scene. Frustrated, the mother looks toward the screen with big eyes in a big stage whisper says “Can anyone help me save this party?”

In his glittery two piece suit, Max slides down a rainbow and lands in the middle of the party and brings everyone to life. Max wears a mask and cape, which he sweeps over the party scene. The children are bouncing up and down. The mother looks at Max as if he has invented grilled cheese. What can only be described as funky dance music, Max starts pulling rabbits out of the cake.

A sign flashes on the screen:

MAX THE

MAGIC CLOWN:

POPULAR

IN THE TRI-STATE AREA

The commercial is Reese’s siren song. Once, she heard the commercial music from the bathtub and yelled at me to turn it up so she could hear it through the door. I
return from my thoughts of Max the Magic Clown. Reese continues to look up at me covered in rope. Reese smiles as I say.

“I will see what I can do.”

She heads off into the kitchen as she untwists the ropes from her hands. It dangles after her as she goes off, humming her song.

“Mom.” I call.

“I’m upstairs.”

I ramble up the stairs; the stairway is decorated with family photos, aged daguerreotype pictures over a hundred years old, performance posters from the last one hundred years of Monroe Magicians and other talented performers and framed fortune telling cards that belonged to my Grandma Winnie. I stop in front of my favorite card, the one with the woman whose hands are holding open the jaws of a lion. My fingers grace the outline of her serene face. I knock on the door of my parents’ bedroom.

“Come in.”

Costumes of tulle, silk and glitter cover the bed the closet door in wide open. Mom comes out into the bedroom a glittery costume. With her high cheekbones, her skin the shade of cocoa powder and her long neck, she should be on the cover of an old issue of Ebony. Even when she’s checking the news in the Asbury Park Press for local gigs or cleaning her performing knives, she is always a bowing ballerina.
“You look fancy.”

“Thanks, Eddie. There’s an Entertainment Gala down in Eatontown. They’ve hired me to throw knives at the guest of honor. Will you hand me my kit?”

I reach over at the knife kit hanging from the door jam. I take the kit into my hands and study the handles, which are studded with jewels and funny looking designs. My mother inherited the knives from her Aunt Charlotte who lives out West. We always send Aunt Charlotte a picture of us around the holidays, but I haven’t seen her since the last family gathering a few years ago.

“What happened to ice cream cakes at a party?”

“He’ll remember this much longer.”

“What about Reese’s birthday party? Is Max the Magical Clown coming by?”

“Yes, I booked him.”

“Why can’t Dad perform for Reese’s party? What about Uncle Greg?”

“Your father is trying to break the world record. The International Brotherhood of Magic isn’t so impressed with the Monroe name anymore.”

“They should be. We’ve been around for a very long time.”

“I agree. It’s all about flash now.”
“When he breaks the record, he’ll still have time to perform for Reese’s party.”

“Reese has watched every one of Dad’s performances since she was a baby. Uncle Greg can’t promise that he’ll be there. Max the Magician is something new.”

“He’s something all right.”

Mom turns away from the mirror.

“If you feel so strong about it, why don’t you perform for the party?”

Mom’s right. I hate it when she’s right. I have terrible stage fright.

“Did anything happen at school?”

The lipstick tube pops as Mom undoes the cover. She stars to outline her lips. I consider telling Mom about Benjamen. Not yet, I want to keep him a secret from her for a little while longer. She caps the lipstick. She looks at my reflection in the mirror.

“Do you have anything to after school this week?”

“The captain of the football team was taking me out for a milk shake. I’m sure he’ll cancel. What do you need me to do?”

“Head by the Asbury Arcade. Check on Grand for me sometime this week. He’s been feeling under the weather.”

I lean against the bed and ask, “He seemed fine last week.”
“Well he’s been pushing himself a little too hard for the family reunion.”

The Monroe Family Reunion takes place every five years, going back to the first family reunion in 1895. By then Edward and Jessie’s several sons were grown and had families of their own. They originally gathered together to celebrate Edward’s birthday. They had such a good time that they stayed for three days. From then on, every year that ends with a zero or five we gather together for Edward’s birthday.

The last reunion lasted for several days with people telling family jokes, singing songs, porcelain plates being spun on sticks and the magic, all the magic that you could stand. You choose where you’re going look, either to the uncle who was conjuring fire from his hands, or the aunt bottled and sold for a few dollars her own personal love potion. This Halloween Eve would have been the anniversary of Edward’s one hundred and sixtieth birthday.

“You know how Grand is. He won’t rest until the last Monroe has been fed.”

I stare up at the ceiling. The day after the last reunion, Grand was so tired that he didn’t get out of bed for days afterwards. When he was sick, Reese left her teddy bear with him to keep him company.

“I can check up on him.”

“He’s been trying to clean up the store on the boardwalk. This tourist season left the shop such a mess.” He said he’ll have to get the Arcade ready for the Zombie Walk and Halloween Parade.”

“I can help out in the shop, now.”
Mom takes her knife throwing kit away from me. She places it into her canvas bag along with her performing props.

“I’ll have to ask Uncle Greg about letting you come and help out around the shop.”

“Mom…” I start but she holds up her hand.

“Dad and I want to wait to a few more years before you started helping out around the Asbury Arcade. You’ll get your chance but when you are older.”

She places a hand on my shoulder to quiet my protest. I try to come up with a reason why but instead I say,

“I’ll be in my room.”

I walk down the hall down away from Mom’s humming and her perfume drifting in the air. I push open my bedroom door. The sea green walls surround me like a still wave. I feel easy. My bed is how I left it, as if a hurricane had came by for breakfast and kicked up all the blankets and covers all over. Next to my bed are several piles of books borrowed from the library and given to me by family. My cousin Phoebe lent me Thirteen Steps for Reading Minds from the Asbury Arcade, while Mom found me a next to new copy of Billie Ballard’s Beauty Tips for Young Ladies from the local thrift shop. I have yet to open either since I have history and science homework every night.

The white and red fortune teller fish wrappers are scattered all over the carpet floor in between pieces of my school uniform. I reach out to touch the peeling glow in the dark stickers that have been up on my wall. I remember how I begged my mother for glow and the dark stickers a few years ago when Grand started teaching me about the stars. She
helped me paste up stars on my ceilings and when the lights went out, it was as if the ceiling disappeared and the night sky came into my room.

In the corner on top of my dresser are my polished magic wands, silk and cloth change bags and a band of magician’s rope that has been unraveled by Reese. On the walls in between the glow dark stars are pictures of Harry Houdini, bent over in his bathing suit, heavy with chains. Next to him, is another picture of Dorothy Dietrich, one of the most well known lady magician in magic history. She looks like a fashion model with her camera ready blonde hair and bright eyes but instead of fancy clothes, she is draped in sliver chains and a laced up straightjacket. The black and white photo highlights the determination and dedication in her face.

I hear my phone trill. I answer.

“What should I wear tomorrow?” Wendy asks.

“Try wearing clothes.”

“I’m thinking I should wear something really cute. What’s Benjamen’s favorite color?”

I flop on the bed.

“Grey.”

“You’re kidding me. Are you sure his favorite color is grey?”

“Ask him yourself.”

“I can’t, you two were thick as thieves. You’d know him better than anyone in that school.”
My stomach lurches when she says this. Too bad this knowledge went both ways. I think back to our talk in the Serenity Garden while Wendy mumbles on about what she can wear.

“Let me see if I have any brown in my closet. Maybe I can borrow….”

“Would you let him settle in first?”

“Eddie, you don’t understand. It’s only a matter of time before those witches at school start breaking out their own charms on him.”

“And you’re just casting out your own spell?”

“Of course, why shouldn’t I?”

“No reason.”

“Are you sure he likes grey?”

“I’m sure that he likes grey.”

“Thanks. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

I mutter a goodbye and slam the phone down. Wendy’s teasing echoes in my head. You know him better than anyone in that school

There was a time when I thought I did. Staring up at the fake plastic stars on the ceiling, my mind wonders back to the Middle School Talent Show. The sight of Benjamen on the makeshift stage alone without me next to him plays as clear as any movie screen. I’m sitting in the first row again of the assembly outside on the blacktop. He wears a tuxedo and cape. His top hat is decorated with a silk brown ribbon and grey owl feathers we found together in the woods one day. He scans the crowd until he finds me. He meets my eyes. He does not smile.
He points his wand towards Principal’s car.

One

He turns attention to the car, the audience follows his direction. Their heads flick over to the car. I keep my eyes on him.

Two

He flicks the wand.

Three

The crowd gasps and applause. I don’t watch as the car disappears, I watch Bobo. I sit there my hands folded in my lap, promising myself I won’t fall for his magic. I can’t.

This afternoon was a fluke. He caught me off guard but not again. I didn’t fall for his magic then; I’m not going to allow myself to fall for his magic, not now or ever.
Chapter Nine
Escape Secrets

I do my best to keep my promise over the next week. Whenever Ben passes me the ketchup at lunch, hands me a worksheet or ask a question in class, I give him either “Yes” “No” or “Thank you”. I worry that if I say more than a sentence to him, he’ll be pulling silk scarves and metal rings out of his pocket before you can Shazam! There are so many classmates who want to speak to him and see his sleight of hand magic, I’m sure he doesn’t notice me at all. When Benjamen comes up to my table in Humanities class, ten minutes before the school bell rings, with something sliver around his wrist, my heart starts to ache. I glance around to call Wendy over but she had managed to get what appears to be sliver glitter all over herself. She is shaking off whatever extra sparkle she can over the garbage can.

“I have something to show you,” he says.

No, thank you.”

“It’s not anything bad. I think you would like it.”

“If it’s another trick, I don’t care.”

“Eddie.”

“Benjamen, I have to get ready to go home.”

I put my hand out to grab for my binder; he puts his hand over mine and click. There is a cuff around my wrist and it is connected to an identical cuff around his wrist. I juggle
my hand but the cuff still remains there. It feels real enough. I pull my wrist down underneath the table, as panic starts to tickle down the back of my neck.

“Aren’t they cool? I bought them at one of those magic shops in the city. These aren’t trick handcuffs these are the real deal, the kind they use on -“

“Where is the key?” I whisper as blood rushes to my ears, making the chatter of our classmates sound like whale noises.

“The guy told me that Houdini used a pair just like these. Of course they aren’t the cuffs he used, but he managed to get him to knock off a few dollars-“

“ Where. is. the. key!?” I snap.

“Here I am trying to show you something cool and you are being really rude.”

“I’m sorry. Where is the key, sir?”

Benjamen slumps down in the seat.

“Fine.”

He reaches into his pocket with his free hand. He feels around, but his hand turns up empty.

“Oops.” he mumbles.

I close my eyes to keep the blind fury from taking over.

“That better be a good oops or we’re going to have a problem. Did it fall out on the floor?”

“I don’t know.”

The dismissal bell rings. Students start to file out of the room.

“I have to go.”
“If the teacher sees us then, we’re not going to get out of here anytime soon.” I say as Mr. Hauel stands by the doorway.

“Can you slip your wrist out?”

“No, or else I would have I left already.”

I lean down and scope out the cuffs. A quick glance tells me that we’re going to be cuff together for awhile.

“Damn, I was afraid of this. The cuff has a double lock.”

“That means what again?”

“You bought them, you should know.”

“I thought they looked really professional.”

“Cuffs with a double lock are harder to pick. If you struggle against them, they will get tighter. We can’t go off into separate directions or the cuffs are going to hurt. A lot. I have to go.”

“Do you really have to go, right this second? Or do you hate me that much?”

I look at him head on. Do I? Or does Ben being near remind me of what I failed to do? I can’t answer that now because we are not alone. Nina comes up to Benjamen, while the twins hover behind her like two mismatched back-up singers.

“Ben, do want to join us for pizza?”

He goes to stand up but I pull him back down.

“Benjamen, can you help me pack up, please?” I says sweetly, “My hands are a little tied up.”
Benjamen turns to Nina with a smile. “Thanks, Nina. I can’t today but maybe another time.”

Nina’s eyes shoot daggers at me but her smile remains perfect.

“Eddie has a hard time letting him go,” Diana laughs as the trio walks away.

I narrow my eyes at them. Maybe there’s a brain behind there. Maybe.

Once Mr. Hauel’s back is turned, Ben and I start stuffing my things into my bag.

“Where’s your books and things?” I ask I zip up the bag and swing it around my shoulder.

“I don’t need them. Everything I need is on me.”

“Not everything, Bobo, not everything.”

“Ha-Ha, Eddie.”

Soon, Benjamen and I are the only students left in the classroom. Mr. Hauel gives us an odd look, but he continues to clean up the classroom of crumbled paper balls and broken pencils.

“Give me your hand.”

“Are we trying to make Nina jealous already?”

“If you give me your hand, then we’re not yanking each other around like some bad comedy show,” he explains. Ben leans in close as Mr. Hauel is near us, “It’s more comfortable that way and if I squeeze your hand, that a signal to stand up.”

“Alright, alright.”

I give him my hand. He squeezes it gently and we stand up as one.
We walk out together with a jingle of handcuffs. We take the back stairs downstairs and make our escape just in time to see the school buses honk and leave us. Ben hangs his head.

“Do you have the bus transit schedule?”

“It’s in my book bag.”

Since I was old enough to walk, I have always heard my father say proudly:

“There isn’t one way to escape from handcuffs. There are many.”

If Grand Charles is the illusionist of the Monroe Family, then my Dad Hector is the Escape Artist. When Dad was growing up, there wasn’t a locked cabinet or bedroom door that he couldn’t get into or out of. This special talent made itself known when Grandma Winnie noticed that the cookies she left in the locked panty closet had been eaten by the little artist.

As he got older, Dad went to work in a locksmith’s shop and gained knowledge of different locks. He knew about padlocks, knob locks deadbolts, lever handle, rim and furniture locks. Dad proved security snobs wrong when he managed to undo and unlock every lock he got his hands on. It was only natural that Dad gravitated to handcuffs and found his true calling in being an escape artist.

Dad’s words echo in my mind, as Benjamen and I are riding on the public bus going towards Asbury Park. Since we take separate buses to Adams High and live on opposite sides of the track, Benjamen and I decide to take the public bus that will deliver on Main Street, which runs through the middle of town.

“Where are we going?”
“We’re going to my house. The man gave me two sets of keys. I must have lost one in school. The other one is in my dresser.”

I jingle the cuffs and say “What are you going to tell your parents?”

“I’ll tell them we were playing cop and robbers, and things got a little out of hand.”

“Seriously, what are your parents going to say?”

“You think my parents are going to be home? The streetlights haven’t come on yet, they’ll be home maybe another in two hours.”

Benjamen goes to reach for his cell phone, but my hand jerks with his. He huffs.

“Why couldn’t you just break out of these things?”

“I don’t do escape magic. I’m an illusionist.”

“You have the Handcuff Heir living in your house, and you’re telling me you can’t get out of these.”

“Being locked up in handcuffs would really help my stage fright. The last thing I want to feel when I’m performing is trapped; it’s bad enough I have to go to high school. I should be happy just performing not trying to escape.”

Benjamen nods his head, “When was the last time you performed?”

“What’s it to you, copper?”

“I’m just asking.”

“When did you last perform, Bobo?”

“This summer, I entertained my aunt’s book club. They were reading something about magicians and she asked me to show her friends a few tricks.”
“Look at you, entertaining the ladies.” I poke him in the ribs with my elbow playfully. He catches my elbow, hooks his arm around mine so that we are linked arm in arm.

“Don’t laugh; I booked a birthday party from that. You remember birthday parties, the place with cakes and food, sometimes balloons. You were the best at birthday parties.”

“I remember.”

Then I remember that he isn’t my partner anymore. Disappointment must show on my face because Benjamen’s mouth is facing down.

“What’s going on Eddie? You’ve got that look on your face.”

“It’s nothing.”

“Sure, when it is something, you can tell me.”

He winks at me and then looks forward, paying attention to where the bus is going.

“Where you have been all this time?” I ask.

“I’ve been to the rings of Saturn and the mountains of Mars.”

“You mean you’ve been back and forth on the subway.”

“Trust me; Saturn smells much better than the subway.”

“You do know that Saturn is made out of various gases like propane and ammonia?”

Benjamen gives me a look then smiles.

“Like I said, it still smells better.”

I chuckle.

“I never said I was sorry.”

“You never….For what?”
He stares at me as he considers his words.

“The last time I saw you..I shouldn’t have…I just shouldn’t have said anything.”

We ride in silence until we get where we are headed.

After Bobo made the car disappeared and failed to make the car return, we were both taken to the main office. His parents had been called from work and Grand had to come fetch me. Both Mr. and Mrs. Dawes and Grand were currently inside with the principal and the vice principal talking about whatever had happened at the talent show. Marion Anderson Middle School was excited over the illusion and teachers couldn’t get the students to shut up about it. Since everybody kept asking Ben how he made the car disappear, the school secretary Ms. Cross with her zebra print scarf and shock of bottle blond hair locked us inside the main office. Students pressed their noses against the office’s glass window and looked at us as if we were koalas at the zoo. Bobo and I sat next to each other in the cushy office chairs. The clock ticked in the silence.

Finally, Bobo said, “Hey wasn’t that cool?”

It wasn’t cool. It was far from cool as cool could get.

“You can’t make something disappear without bring it back?!”

“Whatever.”

“You can’t do that! You have to bring it back. That’s the rule.”

“That’s your rule, not mine.”

“You messed up! The car is still gone!”
Bobo crossed his arms across his chest, he held up his head high, proud as if he had a crown on his head.

“It didn’t sound like I messed up. Everyone was clapping. Everyone loved it.”

“I didn’t.”

“Come on, Eddie you liked it. Admit you were amazed.”

“It was a stupid little trick.”

Bobo’s face tightened as if he had swallowed a half a lemon and his shoulders slummed down as he leaned back in his chair.

“Go ahead, be like that. You’re just jealous.”

“No way.”

“I did it! I made the car disappear and you were too scared to do anything like great that.”

“Shut up.”

“I’m going to be famous and you’ll still be sacred.”

He stuck out his tongue at me. I went to grab his tongue, but my hand missed. By mistake, I punched him in the nose. He yelled out loud and reached out to pull my braid but yanked my ear instead. We tumbled to the floor in a mess as everyone outside the office started chanting,

“Fight! Fight! Fight!”

“Children! Stop it!” Ms. Cross shouted as she came from her desk. She pulled Bobo from off of me and separated us by her hands. We tried to get around Ms. Cross but she managed to keep us away from each other.
“Benjamen Dawes, we do not hit other people, especially young ladies.” Ms. Cross told him.

“She’s not a lady!” he snapped at me, “She’s a chicken!”

“Shut up!” I scream at him.

“Edwina Bailey Monroe.” a sharp voice comes from behind me. I didn’t bother turning around as Grand placed a heavy hand on my shoulder and squeezed it gently. He led me out the office. I looked over my shoulder at Bobo as Grand and I started to leave. Bobo stared at me with narrowed eyes and mouthed the word, “Chicken.”

I turned around and walked outside away from him. The drive home was quiet and Grand kept his eyes on the road, and never spoke once to me. Once we were home, Grand sat me down in the living room. His eyes, fixed on me, shined like pennies.

“How much magic did you teach Ben?”

“Only a little bit, but I made him take the oath. Bobo promised me he’d practice.”

“Edwina, he’s different. He’s not like us.”

“I made him one of us; he said the oath like I did.”

Grand took my hand in his. His hand felt like cotton, soft and light.

“It takes more than special words to become a magician.”

“But...he...promised me he’d practice.”

“He didn’t keep his promise.” Grand said quietly, “From now on, Edwina whatever illusions I teach you, says between the two of us.”

Bobo was the first person outside of my family I trusted. He knew that whenever I went to the beach, I crawled underneath the boardwalk and watched the shadows of the
people pass overhead. He knew that I had bought romance novels from the library sale
table and that they were hidden underneath my Vocab worksheet. He knew that the oath,
these rules handed down from magician to magician were special and he ignored them
like bubblegum on his shoe.

“He promised...me.”

Tears came down my face and pooled under my chin. Grand held me as I cried.

The Dawes House is the type of home featured in *Home and Gardens*. Everything is
in its place from the cutest welcome mat at the door to the umbrella stand ready and
waiting to serve. No item is crooked or on an angle. The couch, the table, the rugs are all
some shade of beige. The house with its beige, white and brown tones, looks set up to for
a photo shoot. I feel, with my pink fuzzy sweater and purple high top sneakers, like I am
the most colorful thing there.

I close to the door quietly and saddle myself next to Benjamen. It’s been years since
I’ve been inside. I was banned after I made Mrs. Dawes brooch disappear - into a sink of
dirty dish water. We found the brooch after a lot of fishing, but I from then on, Benjamen
came to visit me or my Grand’s house.

“You go get the key, I’ll stay here.” I tell to him.

Benjamen holds up his wrist, the cuffs clink against my wrist and slam my palm into my
face. He takes my hand and leads me upstairs. We walk down the hallway until we reach
his room.
He slams on the overhead light and the room is aglow. His room walls are the same color of shells. His orange and navy blue bed sheets have been tucked under and folded. There is no hint of messiness. I look for anything that hints to the hurricane that Bobo used to be, but there is only Benjamen. We walk over to his dresser. After fumbling with socks and what I think is pairs of underwear for a moment, Benjamen pulls out a small key that glitters in the light.

“Will you do the honors?”

I take the key and twist the lock. The cuffs fall to the floor with a clinking and land on the beige carpet without a bounce. I rub my wrist as Benjamen scoops the cuffs up from the floor.

“The next time you buy cuffs, please don’t try them out on me.”

Benjamen tosses the cuffs into his dresser drawer.

“If it gets you to talk to me, then I’ll do it again.”

I study Benjamen. Over the last week, I’ve overheard the girls in the locker talk about what they would give up in order to get five minutes alone with him. He has become the popular fantasy of the freshman and sophomore class. Earlier after gym, the twins and Nina started playing the game.

Dee offered, “For five minutes, I’d give up my spa days.”

Diana countered, “For five minutes I wouldn’t get my hair done for six months.”

Nina eyes them both, “I’d give away my makeup and my brand new phone.”

“Nina, what about you? What would you do in those five minutes?” Dee asks as she ties her sneakers. Nina turns away from her twins friends and looks to the mirror.
“I’d make him fall in love.” Nina puckers up her lips and kisses her reflection, “One kiss, he’ll be hooked. With those lips, his kisses must be so good. ”

Now that I am so close to Benjamen standing here in his room, I see his lips. That spark that I felt before when we touched earlier has started fizzling inside my stomach. I wish I was flirty enough to press my fingertips against his lips. I wonder if they are soft or rough. I want to touch him to see if he is real. There was a time when I would have willingly tethered myself to him. All because of that car illusion, so much had changed between us.

Even though those stunt cuffs are off, I haven’t escaped.

“I’ll talk to you but I can’t make any promises.” I say, “I’m sure Nina is going to stuff me into a locker if I don’t stay away from you.”

“I’ll handle Nina.”

“I’ll see you at school tomorrow.”
Chapter Ten

Partners

A little time later in Social Living class, the door swings open to reveal Ms. Harrison. Her cheeks are rosy red and she looks pleased with whatever she is thinking.

“Good afternoon class,” she trills happily as she takes her seat.

We mumble a polite Good Morning as she continues humming.

“Call the nurse.” Wendy says.

“Are you feeling okay, Ms. H?” Arielle asks her.

“I feel great. I feel excited. You should be excited to as well. You’re getting partnered together for an assignment. You will learn how to run a household and learn what it takes to be successful to together as a unit.”

As Ms. Harrison continues to pair people up there is a collective groan and sounds of protest from the class, which Ms. Harrison stifles with her hand.

“Can we choose who we get partnered with?”

“I will be choosing your partner at random.”

She pulls two baskets from underneath her desk. I look at Benjamen, who happens to be looking at me. I look away to my sneakers as Ms. Harrison starts reading names, first the girls and then the boys.

“Arielle and…Felix…”

“Benjamen Dawes and…..”
I close my eyes and hope that maybe, just maybe

“Nina Shaw.”

Damn, that would have been too easy. I continue to look down at my sneakers. Ms. Harrison continues to trill off partners for everyone else until I hear my name.

“Edwina …… Joshua Boar.”

Joshua looks up from his book then at me.

“It’s match made in geek heaven,” Nina says. There are a few giggles.

As Ms. Harrison continues to pair people up there is a collective groan and sounds of protest from the class, which Ms. Harrison stifles with her hand. The class continues to titter as she pulls out a pile of folders. Once Ms. Harrison is finished paring us up, she starts to hand us each color coded folders with our names on it.

“You will get a budget and you have to share expenses with your partner.”

“Expenses, like what?”

“I’m taking about expenses such as food, shelter, clothes and other items. You will be starting out with nothing. You will get an apartment. You each get a job.”

“Do we get to choose our job?”

“No, I have randomly chosen your jobs based on the career profiles you created last week. Ben since you just joined us, I have chosen for you.”

“What does that mean?”
When I get my folder I look inside. There a sheet of paper with my name and job info.

“By the end of your partnership, you must have more money than you started out with. The goal of this project is to not go broke by the end.”

“This is going to be a piece of cake.” Felix says as he high fives Arielle. “A all the way!”

“No so fast, kiddo. I can’t make it too easy.” Ms. Harrison pulls out a deck of cards from the basket “Every week, you will draw life cards.”

“Life cards?”

“Life is unpredictable. Depending on what type of life card you get it, I might make a good change or a bad change.”

Nina looks up from her nails, her face twists when she hears this, “What type of change?

Ms. Harrison sings, cheerfully, “You’ll see.”

Joshua raises his hand. “How much is this project going to be worth?”

There a few fake coughs as some students call Josh a nerd under their hands. He’s not a nerd, I want to know this to.

“This project will be thirty percent of your grade. You succeed as team or you fail as a team. Trade career and contact information with each other. At the end of the project, you must write a two page paper about your partnership.

The classroom erupts in groans and moans throughout the classroom. Many students are saying, “Come on, Ms. Harrison how are you to do that to us?!”
“I can make the paper five pages, you want.” she tells us and the collective groaning has now become a small grumble. “I see we have agreed to the two page paper. Good luck!”

Joshua moves next to me. He says nothing as he hands me his career folder. Joshua takes the career folder from my hand. Wendy would be jealous of me. Joshua Boar Tran, is a dozen anime fantasies come to life, with his chocolate brown eyes, spiky cropped hair and an odd smile. He smiles as if he has his own private joke that none of us have the ability to understand. His skin reminds me of tea tinted rice paper; it looks smooth and fragile with brown freckles on his arm. He’s tall and thick, like he lifts boxes or crates. There a bridge of brown freckles across of his slightly crooked nose. He is, of course dressed, the school uniform of white polo shirt and khaki.

“I don’t know what you’re getting, but I am getting an A on this project. I know who you are,” he says “You’re the magic girl.”

“I know you, too. You’re the boy who discovers galaxies.”

I am not joking. The last year of middle school, Joshua discovered a minor galaxy. He was written up in the paper and was given a membership to some astronomer’s club for his find. Other than having the best story to tell when he applies to college, Joshua is a good student. During monthly assemblies, he always is standing next to me when we are called for honor roll. My Uncle Greg, part time clown and full time science teacher, has the clipping of Joshua holding a picture of his galaxy on the wall. The headline said
“Local Student is Out of This World.” Of course, this earned him the nickname, Galaxy Guy, from our classmates. Most people have forgotten about this. I haven’t. He looks stunned when I say the thing about the galaxy. Josh says nothing back. He starts to copy down my career information.

“So you used to do magic?” I overhear in a whisper.

Nina and Ben are two seats behind us. Out of the corner of my eye, I can see that she’s leaning into him.

“I still do magic once and a while for birthday parties.”

“You don’t do magic like that…Eddie Monroe.”

“I wish. She brought me into the magic act.”

“Don’t wish too hard. She hasn’t been pulling out any rabbits out of her hats for a while now. The last time she tried…well…it was interesting. Are you as good as her?”

“No, I’m dedicated.”

“You’re a real magician.”

Benjamen laughs so softly, I almost miss it “You could say that.”

“You should tell me more about it at lunch.”

He’s dedicated! Benjamen’s dedicated! He’s a real magician!
When we were in elementary school, everyone wanted to be ballerinas, firefighters, they wanted to be beautiful and strong. I wanted to be magical. My dream was to be the world’s best magician, but apparently Benjamen is the real magician. Joshua clears his throat and points to his career folder which I have not even opened.

“Are you finished?”

“No, not yet.”

Joshua takes the folder from my hand and hands me a slip of paper. He has written on the paper his phone number, email and even blog page for me to contact him with have been written on it. He holds out his hand. I quickly scribble my own phone number and email. The lunch bell rings twice. I stand up while Joshua remains in his seat. He continues to stay still while I gather my books.

“Aren’t you going to lunch?”

“I never go to lunch. I go to the library.”

“We’re not allowed in the library during lunch.”

“I actually go there to study.”

He brushes pass me without a smile or a wave.
After school, I take the bus down to the boardwalk. A few years ago, Asbury was voted the sixth best beach in New Jersey. During the summer our small town is overwhelmed with tourists and visitors. The increase of visitors is nothing that Asbury Park hasn’t seen or been witness to before. The town was created with the idea of leisure in mind; our founder believed that Asbury Park was going to be the prime residential resort for city folk who want a slice of seaside life.

Within of ten years time, the boardwalk was transformed from a few wooden planks to an amusement wonderland that drew over a half a million people on vacation during the summer season. All those people needed to be entertained, so freak shows, carousel and shopping malls popped up. The world changed while Asbury Park remained frozen in resin, always the sunny seaside community.

The all seeing-eye painted on the side of Madame Marie booth stares over the splintered boardwalk and closed buildings. The building walls by the beach are covered with thick lines of colorful graffiti and old signs of dead business. These buildings, some made of concrete, others of wood have seen decades of dirty arcade games, police raids and hurricane winds. They have stood strong and are often empty. Business owners crawl into the empty shells of these places like hermit crabs finding temporary homes on the oceanfront.

Some places are closed for the winter season while shops will never see another summer. What businesses’ have remained are the following: The Stone Pony, the local rock place The Asbury Lanes, our local bowling alley and, of course, Asbury Arcade the family magic and curiosity shop. I walk up to the storefront of Asbury Arcade. The lights
are turned off and there is no one inside. Phoebe, Aunt Lydia’s daughter and my cool cousin, works for the local urban legend magazine called *Nocturne*.

Aunt Lydia went overseas to study overseas a year ago. Instead of closing the shop all together, Grand promised to keep it open from the first day of the beach season to the last week of the October. Over the summer, I’d visit the store with Grand, explain to visitors and shoppers the difference between an escape artist and illusionists and point them to the right souvenir. I would like to work there, but Mom and Dad are worried that I’d become too caught up in the shop. How do I tell them that magic doesn’t seem to love me anymore?
Chapter Eleven

Crystal Ball

The house Grand lives is small but does its job. He’s safe. I have a key to his house but I always make sure to knock whenever I open the door. The front door opens up right in front of the stairs.

“Hello? Grand.”

A voice comes from above

“Edwina? Come on in, I’ll be right down.”

I close the door and move into the living room. On the mantle there are pictures of vanity photos of Grandma Winnie in her performance outfits. There are many photos and snapshots of Dad with his brothers and sisters, my cousins all smiling at the camera. Every grandchild has their own frame, which means the mantle overcrowded is filled to the brim with smiling faces and missing teeth. The stairs creak underneath until my Grand comes into view.

“Edwina, my darling.”

Grand Charles has eyes that are the color of honey. His thick, cotton-white hair is combed back away from his face. He's got a wispy moustache. He is tall, slightly tan and has a stocky build. He has a crooked nose and a round chin that make him look more like a kind wizard than a retired magician. His wardrobe is bizarre. He always wears brown with occasionally pops of purple and orange in his outfit.
Grand pulls up his pants so I can see his ankle socks, “It’s got cold enough, I finally get to wear the socks Reese got me! What do you think Edwina do you think yellow is my color?”

“I think you can pull it off, Grand.”

Grand is the only person who only calls me Edwina. Family members assume that I was named after Edward Monroe, the families’ first magician. I like to believe I am my grandmother’s Winnie Ethel Lewis Monroe namesake and Grand’s wife of forty-seven years.

Even though she married into the family, Grandma Winnie Monroe was one of the best members. A full time housekeeper and part time fortune teller, she helped run the magic and curiosity shop during the tourist season. She passed away when I was little, making my memories of her a pleasant fog of coconut candy bars, soapy lavender oil and pieces of crystal scattered on an oak table. From the black and white photos on the mantle, Grandma was a thick woman who was so pretty that according, Grand she made any a man walk with an extra skip in his step all the way home. Whatever that means, I’m sure that she was great.

Grand gives me a kiss on the cheek.

“Is it cold outside? You look flushed.”

“No, it was just a long day at school.”

“Come in, make yourself comfortable. I’ll get you some green tea.”

I sit in the living room. I see a pair of green eyes peek around the corner. Norbert Grand’s black cat, gives me a soft meow. Grand and I found him in an alley cornered by
three school boys with sticks. Norbert stood his ground and did not back down even when he was in danger. Grand chased the boys away, while I went to Norbert.

Norbert comes over to me and purrs around my feet, as Grand comes in with a t-shirt draping over his arm and a glass of tea in his hand. He hands me the tea cup. As I take a sip, he holds up a black and red t-shirt decorated with a top hat surrounded by stars and a plastic wand.

“I ordered them for the family reunion.”

“They look great.”

“I thought you would like them. The top hat image is the best.”

Grand leaves the shirt on the couch.

“Have you been practicing? Have you been studying?”

“Yes.”

“Then tell me again what the several illusions are?”

“They are vanish, transform, produce, transport, escape, restore and . . .

“Levitate! Good, good.”

“Shouldn’t I be doing bigger and flashier things? I should be able to levitate cars or people. Grand, I don’t think I can make any more cards appear from my hand. ”

“Have you tried from your nose?”

Grand pull an ace of diamonds from underneath the underside of his nose. He hands it to me.
“If I could take a look at your illusion book, maybe I’d figure out what’s right for me to do .”

“Eddie you need to take your time and develop your craft. Okay? ”

“Okay. I trust you.”

Grand pinches my cheek. He waves me towards the hallway where I join him at the closet door. I look up at the top of the closet where I see a cardboard box. I can’t keep from looking.

“What’s in those boxes?”

“These were your Grandma’s things. I haven’t had the heart to take them out.”

He goes to get the box from the back closet.

“I’ll do that.”

I pull the box from out of the dust of the closet corner. The box is filled to the brim with crystals, cloths and other items.

“Do you know your Grandma Winnie was one of the greatest psychics this side of Main Street?”

“You’ve only told me once or several times. What about Madame Marie?”

“Heck if my Winnie could have afforded it, she would have had a booth right next to Madame Marie. I had a name for her, the All Knowing Winnie.”

“It has a nice ring to it. Why didn’t she open her own booth?”
“She did for some time, down on the boardwalk in Atlantic City. Her mother got ill and she came back up to Asbury Park to take care of her. Then she met me in the grocery store and as they say it is how the story goes.”

“How did she know she was special?”

“How does the ocean know it’s the ocean? It is just is. She knew, just like I knew I was to be a performer of magical arts. Winnie, may she rest in peace, was going to do what she wanted to do. She was great at it. If was going to practice her craft then she was going to be safe from the zealots and judging strangers. When the kids were at school or napping, she told fortunes in the house. Every single person who left he left with a little bit of hope in their pocket.”

“Do you know there was once a law in Asbury that kept your grandmother from telling fortunes?”

“Who was she hurting?”

The police started getting involved and raided the arcades and stores over the boardwalk. When the police came to the house to ask questions, she had to hide everything. She hid the crystals underneath the couch cushions, I even sat on one.

I laugh. Grand leans in close.

“We need people like you, Eddie. You made a mistake when you stopped performing.”

I don’t look at him.

“I stopped because I passed out in front of the entire school assembly.”

“That was last year! What have you done today?”
“I got married.”

“Edwina.”

“How do you know I’m even a real magician? What if it skipped a generation or something?”

“Is your name Monroe?”

“Yes, the last time I checked.”

“Then you are halfway there. You get back on stage. You belong there. Don’t close your door just yet. Take what you need from your Grandmother’s things. We’ll see what happens.”

The phone rings. Grand goes to answer it, leaving me alone with the cardboard box.

I shift through her box; I find her a crystal ball. Norbert comes to my side and bonks his noses against the clear ball. It is clear green color that matches the same hue as the Caribbean sea.

I stare into the crystal, which invokes a memory that I had long buried inside. Bobo and I are hiding underneath the shade of the trees, writing our names in the dirt. Sunshine filters down from the trees and the warmth of it falls upon my skin. I look to Bobo as he turns his face, with eyes closed, he worships the sun’s warmth. I followed him and together, in reverence we shared the sun. As I remember this moment of absolute peace, I wish that can get to that place again where I can close my eyes and feel safe. The crystal starts to warm under my touch I am holding so it tightly.

“Did find something you like?”
I hold out the crystal ball to Grand. He blinks a few times before reaching out to touch it.

“I bought that for your Grandma when I was traveling overseas. The woman I bought it from said that if you trust in the crystal, it’ll help find what you seek. When Winnie opened the gift it she smiled. You’d thought that I had bought her a sapphire or ruby.”

He glazes into the crystal ball and by the brightness in his eyes, he is back in that moment with her. Grandfather pulls his hand away from the crystal as if it has burned him. I busy myself with wrapping up the crystal ball while he fumbles. Grand places a hand on my cheek.

“Edwina, it’s not doing anyone any good gathering dust. Take it home; just promise me you’ll take real good care of it.”

Using one of old Grand’s thick sweaters, I wrap the crystal ball up. As I stuff the gift into my book bag, Grand hovers around me. He does this whenever he has something bad to tell me. He hovered for days when he accidently broke my little red chair when I was little.

“That was your Mother on the phone. Your father just got home.”

“Did he do it? Did he break the record?”

Grand smoothes out the wrinkles in his pants rather than meet my glare. He helps me into my new coat without saying a word.

“Grand, did he do it?”

Grand looks at me without smiling

“You should head on home.”
Chapter Twelve

For A Few Minutes More

I walk in the front door and into the living room where Reese, Mom and Dad are sharing a pizza and half empty bottle of root beer soda on the table. He is on the couch with his arm around Mom. When Dad hears me walk in, his deep brown eyes, that gleam tiger-eye gems, focus on me. His once wavy, black hair has a few streaks of grey that strengthen the back of his neck. He's got five o'clock shadow that have traces of even gray coming in. His legs are stretched out and his shoes are off.

“Hey, is that my girl Eddie?”

“It’s me.”

He stands up and bear hugs me into his arms. He kisses me twice on the forehead.

“Hi Dad.”

“Come on and get something to eat.”

Dad looks at me in for a moment before he sits back down. I take a seat at the living room table as Mom serves me a slice of pizza.

“I heard you went to visit Grand. How is he?”

I swallow down a bite before I answer,” He’s good. He showed me the t-shirts for the family reunion.”

“Did he get the shirt with the rabbits?”

“No, Grand got the one with the top hats.”

“Good, good.”
We continue on for a moment not talking about what I really want to talk about, whether or not Dad has broken the record. It’s been at five years since Dad last attempted a public magic illusion or even to break another record. The effect he pulled off nicknamed The Rocking Chair was and it considered the most thrilling illusion that the magic world had seen in the last twenty five years. It was so dangerous that Mom refused to take us to see him perform and waited until Grand called us and told us he was safe. When she heard that everything was okay and the illusion was a success, she cried.

“What is this I hear about you wanting to work at the Arcade?”

“I could help out, sweep up.”

“Uncle Greg could use a little help until Aunt Lydia comes home. I’ll give him a call.”

Once I finish the crust off my pizza, I push the plate away.

“So, Dad…”

“You’re not getting a raise in your allowance,” he jokes with me before takes another bite.

I shake my head.

“Did you break the record?”

Dad looks at Mom instead of looking at me.

“Eddie, don’t be rude.” Mom twists off the cap from the soda bottle. She pours us more soda so that the bottle is empty. “Your father just got home.”

“I’m sorry, I really want to know. Everyone at school has been asking about it. I’d really like to tell them that you…”
“I missed the record by one minute.”

I blink.

“You only missed it by one! You can do it again, right?”

Dad glances at Mom then back at me.

“I think it’s time that I take a break from the rabbits, kid.”

I trace the rim of my plate with my fingertips. The ridges of the paper plate feel funny.

“I have a job offer down in Atlantic City.”

“Doing what? Working on stage and training other magicians.”

“I’m going to be a talent scout. Looking out for talent and hiring acts like…”

“You’ll be doing this only until next season or so. You’ll be performing on stage.”

“I’ve decided to work behind the scenes. I’m leaving the stage.”

I am suddenly thirsty and cannot open my soda fast enough. I fumble with the glass, until I taste the fizzy drink against my lips. I gulp down it. The soda burns the sides of my throat as I empty the glass. I place the glass back. Dad isn’t going to be on stage anymore.

“What does this mean?”

“I’m retiring my act, kiddo”

“What about next year?”

“I’ll be back later, but for now the act is over.”

There have always been magicians in every generation of Monroes. Someone always kept the act going and made a career out of it, while others flirted with magic before moving on to various careers. My father Hector Charles Monroe, known as the Prince of
Escape, was the person made the Monroe name known all over the world, and our family name forever linked with magic. Now I, the illusionist, with stage fright so terrible that makes me see purple spots, was going to be the next magician of the Monroe Dynasty. The idea of me standing on a stage, all alone sets the room spinning around I look Reese who stares back at me.

“Eddie you don’t look so good.”
I run into the bathroom.
There goes dinner.

I go to my room without saying good night to my parents. I count the cracks in the ceiling and try to forget about the embarrassment of dinner. I think back to the time before Bobo. My mind wonders to my seventh birthday party, the one after the Grand’s Halloween story. Mom let me invite classmates from my second grade class. I barely could ask the boy next to me for the glue during art class. If I asked anyone to my birthday party, I’d probably end up in the nurse’s office with a wet washcloth on my forehead. When Mom handed me eight invitations, I stuffed them into the bottom of my book bag, where they could do little harm.

When the birthday came, it turned out to be a strictly family affair with my nearby relatives making up the guests. Uncles and aunts sat in a half circle in the living room, murmuring to each other while we cousins eyed the food table. I remembered the way the paper plates bent under the weight of all the food Mom piled on for everyone to eat.
Purple and white balloons tied to sparkly paperweights filled the ceiling and the air smelled of sugar.

While the adults talked, my cousins and I decided to play hide and seek. As I counted and closed my eyes, the sound of their sneakers and shoes skipping and running around the hard floor surrounded me. Once I counted to twenty, my eyes opened. I was alone.

*Here I come* I warned in a sing-song voice.

I searched under the bed, in cabinets and closets. There was one gift that had been wrapped up in a plain brown paper; it was in the corner away from sight. It had no bow or tag, but written on the front in elegant writing was the simple phrase: *For Edwina.*

I lifted the box into my hands. I removed the paper to reveal the red and black white box. I saw in bold sliver words THOMPSON & COMPANY MAGIC KIT. I sat down on the floor, brought the box into my lap. It read:

*From ages eight to one hundred and eight, the Thompson Magic Kit is made for THE KID MAGICIAN. Practice your magic and perform for your friends. Dazzle and delight them with the forty tricks featured in this brand new magic kit.*

I studied the items behind the cellophane. My fingers poked at the plastic cup and metal rings. My mind kept going back one part: *Perform for your friends.* Who would watch me? Grandpa had taught me a few tricks, nothing big like forty tricks. When Dad found me, he saw me with the magic kit in my lap. He was amused.

“That was supposed to be a surprise.”

“I didn’t mean to open it.”
“You can play later. Your guests are waiting, Birthday girl.”

As we walked down stairs, the lights dimmed and the birthday candles illuminated the room with a soft glow. Mom held the cake in front of me.

*Make a wish*

I scanned the faces of the people standing around me. There in the moment with everyone around me, I knew. I knew I was going to be a magician just like my father and his father before him. On my seventh birthday, I wished to be a magician.

I throw off my covers. I crawl out of bed. I unzip my book bag and pull out the envelope from the Society of Magicians. I tear the envelope open and pull out the letter.

*Dear Ms. Monroe…. Due to the overwhelming response… cannot accept all our talented magicians. apply next summer…We wish you the best of luck in your future endeavors.*

Once again, my wish has yet to come true.

The next day in Social Living Class Ms. Harrison allows us to work independently and develop our partnership portfolio. By the end of the project, Josh and I have a packet filled with information about our house and our partnership. Some students use the time to work together to come up with our imagined life together and the fake careers we don’t have. Josh is busy making a money chart while I map out our monthly budget with pie charts and crayons.

“It’s kind of funny mapping out money we don’t have.”

Joshua grunts to my response. He’s too busy on getting his numbers just right.
“Edwina, can you get the *Money Honey* book from the shelf? I don’t know if we’ve covered six or eight months for an emergency fund.”

“You do know that this isn’t real?”

Joshua puts down his pencil.

“You know what is real? The real bad grade that we will get if we don’t get this done. Please get the book; I want to get this right.”

I go over to the bookshelf where I start looking at the textbooks

“I heard about your father. It must hurt to miss the record, by one minute.”

I turn to see Benjamen and say, “There’s always next year.”

“What about your magic act?”

“I’ve got better things to do than that.”

“Are you sure about?”

He pulls out blue flyer from his pocket.

“The Annual Paramount Theater Talent Showcase, Auditions are being held all month January. I’m sure that there’s only going to be room in the showcase for one magician.”

When he says one, I feel a pricking on the back of my neck that feels like ants crawling in my skin. I give my attention back to the book shelf.

“Is that magician going to be you?”

“I plan on it. Are you going to try out?”

My mind considers the rejection letter when I tell him, “What I’m working on, the act isn’t ready yet.”

Benjamen, in a whisper that I can barely hear says.
“That sounds familiar.”

. He knows I haven’t been able to stand on a stage without him. He knows.

“We can’t all be dedicated like you.”

Benjamen smiles

“You were listening before.”

“I overheard a few things.”

“When did you stop doing magic?”

“I’ve never stopped; I just don’t get on stage.”

“Why?”

“Why do you want to know? Are you writing a book?”

“I’m just surprised that you’d let a little thing like fear stop you.”

“Only someone who’s never been scared would say something like that.”

Benjamen laughs to himself when he says, “I’ve been scared but it didn’t stop me.”

How can I explain to him that the fear doesn’t hit you, it sneaks and creeps in? I lean into Benjamen

“Can you imagine a tickling on your neck that feels like a price tag or a piece of hair?”

“I can.”

“You ignore it but the tickling continues and even gets stronger. You reach back to grab whatever is bothering you and when you bring your hand back, there on your fingers is a spider all body and legs wriggling in your hand. You realize your fear until it’s too late. The spider has already touched your skin. The fright has touched you.”
Benjamen winces slightly as he rubs the back on his neck.

“It’s that how it feels?”

“Yes…” I lie. I can’t let him to know that my fright is worst. When I’m on stage, it’s as if I every inch of my skin in covered in spiders. It only happens when I am on stage, but now the fear has started whenever I have to speak in front of class. My fright was the greatest in eighth grade when I went to perform in front of the entire sixth, seventh and eighth grade. All I remember is that, the lights were on and that I was up there all alone on stage. The room didn’t spin, but I felt like I was thrown into a whirlpool. I woke up a half an hour later in the nurse’s office with a hall monitor watching over me.

Benjamen nods.

Benjamen pulls a business card from behind my ear as he says, “Take my card.”

“Why?”

“You might need it.”

The card is in the shape of a top hat and written in silver ink is his name and contact information. I take it from him and out the card by my fingertips. Benjamen returns to his seat where Nina coloring in her pie chart. I return to seat. Joshua looks at me, annoyed.

“Where’s the book?”

“I forgot it.”

Joshua mumbles something as he continues to write. I hold the small paper top hat in my hands.

I was never scared when Bobo was on stage with me.
Chapter Thirteen

The Sale of White Elephants

For my birthday, my Gran gave me a book called *Hooters and Troopers: Tales of Vaudeville*.

My favorite tale was about the White Elephant. P.T. Barnum the man who created “the greatest show on earth” paid hundreds of thousands of dollars to buy a fabled white elephant from overseas for his circus. When, after much trouble, Barnum finally saw the elephant that he had spent a small fortune getting, he was disappointed that the elephant was not completely white, but was covered with pink patches. Barnum was embarrassed by his mistake. He hid the elephant away from view. The expression “white elephant” is now used to describe an item that is valuable but, by no fault of the item, useless. When Mrs. Troung announces the sale in Chemistry class, I think back to the story. The school is having a White Elephant sale for the Asbury Park Fire Department Annual Fundraiser.

“The school is still asking for donations, for the sale which will take place this coming Saturday.” Mrs. Troung says. “Make sure to clean out your closets. We are taking books, puzzles, glassware, jewelry, kitchen appliances and other items that can be used.”

Wendy flips open to her date book as I write down the items needed for the white elephant sale. Mom’s been looking to clear out the basement lately.

“We should volunteer. They may pay us in jewelry!!” Wendy whispers to me as Mrs. Troung continues to go on about the items.

“Another person’s trash is another person’s fashion statement.” I mumble.
“Leave to you, to see the beauty in trash,” Arielle says as she draws what looks like a unicorn getting a tan in her notebook.

“Hey,” Wendy snaps at her “It’s not trash, its vintage.”

I giggle into my notebook which draws Mrs. Troung’s attention to me.

“Ladies, do you have a question?”

“Yes. Do you need volunteers because we would love to help out getting everything together for the sale?”

“We who?” I ask Wendy.

“Myself, Arielle and Eddie want to volunteer for the sale.”

“That is so sweet of you!” Mrs. Troung says cheerfully, “We’d love if you ladies would help sort today after school. We’ll have sandwiches!”

As soon as the school bell rings at the end of the day, we three are hustled out of the hallway and into the gym. We are not alone as there are at least several parents and community helpers to sort all the things that we have been given for donations. We’ve been given plastic gloves that make our hands sweaty. Mrs. Troung before she hustled back to the office to get the school ready for the sale, she gave us a few rules to help us get done.

“Make sure the items are valuable but useless If you find anything dirty, throw away and don’t look back.” Mrs. Troung says as her voice echoes over the space of the gym. “If you see anything you like, you can pay for it later before you leave.”
We’ve spend the last hour or so uncovering boxes and discovering various valuable junk. Woven peasant tops, yellowing lacy dollies and other items are being sorted into labeled bids for the sale.

Wendy pulls up a pair of sneakers caked with dirt and drops them into a trash bag, with a yell

“I got another pair of nasty-ass sneakers! Why would you buy someone else’s sneakers!”

“No idea.”

I lean down into front of a cardboard box that has been overstuffed with rolled up posters. There the small bunch of posters that have been golden with age have been fastened with rubber bands and pieces of tape. I unroll one of the posters to see a man in a top hat and coat tails with a mesmerizing smile and eyes that sparkle with kindness. His hands wave around a sliver ball that levitates without any help. On the poster in bold exotic looking words are:

BOYS AND GIRLS

DREAMERS AND DOUBTERS

OF ALL AGES,

COME ONE, COME ALL TO WITNESS

THE MYSTIFYING
AMAZING

L.E. MONROE

PERFORMS FEATS OF DARING

AND AMAZING ILLUSIONS

AT

THE WORLD FAMOUS

PARAMOUNT THEATER

IN ASBURY PARK,

COME BE THRILLED!!

I stare at the poster until Arielle comes up to me.

“L.E. Monroe?” Arielle reads the poster headline, “Is he a relative of yours or what?”

I continue to look at the drawing of L.E. Monroe and my attention is drawn to his eyes.

“I don’t know, I’ve never heard an L.E. Monroe. There are so many of us, I’m sure that Grand would know who he is.”

I roll up the poster as Arielle nods her head at me. I walk over to the wall where my book bag is slumped over. I unzip the back and place the poster carefully inside. A half
an hour later, Mrs. Troung comes back into the gym with Mr. Troung following after his wife with a cardboard box overstuffed with half sandwiches and cans of soda in his arm.

“Break time!” she sings. Everyone encircles Mr. Troung as he starts to hand everyone a soda and sandwich each.

“Mrs. Troung.” I call over. I wave her over to my book bag and show her the poster that I have found. As I roll the poster back up, I ask her how much do I owe for the poster. Mrs. Troung waves her hand at me when I go to reach for my wallet.

“Consider it a thank you for your time.”

“Thank you.”

All the volunteers take a free space on the floor and free their sandwiches from their deli paper and pop open their soda cans. Arielle, Wendy and I sit down in the corner together. Arielle fumbles in her book bag for her binder

“Hey, ladies do you like music?”

“I like good music.”

“Close enough.”

Arielle hands Wendy and me a pink and black flyer that has been photocopied at least several times over.

“You got the band back together.”

“Riley bought another guitar after he threw his first one into the ocean. We’re playing the Stone Pony for the New and Local Talent Showcase.”

The flyer is covered with drawn ladybugs that appear as if they have invaded the piece of paper. I read the title of the band on the sheet.
“The Marzipan Ladybugs?”

“The name just came to me when I was in the bakery.” Arielle says, “It was a lightning strike of creative genius.”

“When is the showcase and how much is it?”

“Early December or so, its few bucks to get but I can get you guys on the guest list.”

“Put us down for two tickets.”

Arielle gives me thumbs up as she writes down our names.

“Make that four,” Wendy says. I turn to Wendy whispers to me.

“You ask Ben. I’ll ask one of my track star cuties. We can help each other out.”

“I don’t know. Arielle, is that a problem?”

“The more, the merrier, the more money we get for the prize at the end of the night.”

“Fine.” I say as I stuff my sandwich into my mouth. Wendy claps as she goes on to Arielle about how cute Ben is and how he’ll love her new outfit. As I continue to munch and avoid the conversation, there’s a feeling guilt inside that tickles the back of my throat. I never got around to telling Wendy about our adventure on the bus. There are some memories that I want to keep all for myself.

When it comes to the New and Local Talent Showcase, I am worried that Ben will say no. I’m worried that he will say yes.
Grand came over to Monroe Castle wearing his favorite outfit, a grey and brown cardigan and his corduroy pants.

“I was on my way to bingo and wanted to stop in.” Grand kisses my cheek and walks into the living room. He glances around the house. Grand scans the sitting room and then turns his attention back to me.

“Where’s everybody?”

“Mom took Reese out to the thrift shop, Dad’s down in Atlantic City and I’m here.”

“You should get out. There won’t be many sunny days left.”

“Well, I’ll see. I’m glad you came by. I have something cool I wanted to show you.”

Grand watches me with a curious eye as I unzip my book bag. I unroll the poster and present it to Grand. Every time, I open it and look at the poster I notice something new.

“It’s that cool! I found it yesterday at school.”

I look at Grand. There isn’t a smile, a frown or anything else on his face. His face is blank. I can’t tell how he is feeling.

“Do you know who he is?”

“No, I don’t know who he is.”

“He might be a cousin or someone we don’t know about.”

“I’m sorry; my dear, not every person named Monroe is related to us,” Grand continues to look at the poster.

“He performed in Asbury Park I’m sure if I asked around at the reunion I’d know I’d be able to find out who he is.”
“Edwina.” Grand says in a sharp tone that startles me, “Leave it alone. He’s not one of us and I don’t want you poking around about it. The reunion helps us celebrate the future not the past.”

“Didn’t you tell me that there are hidden branches of a family tree?” I hold the poster to my chest, gently. “That’s it’s up to us to take care of every branch.”

I watch line around his eyes and on his forehead in Grand’s face deepens when closes his eyes. Grand whispers to me a quiet plea, that takes my breath away when I hear the pain in his voice, “Respect my wishes. Leave it alone.”

Without any another word or glance, I roll up the poster and leave it in the corner. He says nothing for a moment or two as the grandfather clock in the corner bongs the start of a new hour.

His eyes open. The warmth and kindness that I am used to seeing there in his eyes reflected at me, has returned and the shadows are gone.

“Thank you.”

“Anytime.”

Grand fiddles with his cardigan.

“I’m worried about you hanging here all by yourself.”

“I like being alone.”

“Come on. Make an old man happy. Be my date for afternoon bingo. Its family day and I’d like to have the prettiest girl sitting next to me.”

“You’re not old.”

Despite his joke, there a sadness that lingers around Grand. I can’t leave him, not yet.
“Throw in a root beer and you have a deal.”

“Let’s skedaddle, Edwina.”
Chapter Fourteen
The Birthday Redemption

Our living floor is covered with red, blue and yellow balloons that bounce at the smallest movement. The sound of the balloon stretching fills the living room as I huff and puff into another balloon. Over my own breath, I can hear the phone ring. I’m sure that Reese is calling again to find out whether Grand can bring her back over for her birthday party. I’ve blown up balloons without hearing the phone ring and her bombast voice coming through the receiver. Mom answers the phone while I tie off the balloon.

“Hello Monroe Residence. Yes,? What…that’s not possible… but…you can’t! I have a deposit! Okay, but what about my daughter’s birthday? Do you think I can pull a clown from underneath the bed? Why are you laughing ?!”

There is a metal slam and Mom is silent. Mom comes in the living room with daggers in her eyes, “Max the Magical Clown just cancelled."

The balloon pops in my hands. Max the Magical Clown you glittery bastard! I never wanted to punch a clown more than I did right then. I wanted to knock that clown off of that damn rainbow.

“Apparently there’s a gig in Neptune he couldn’t pass up.”

“The party’s in two hours!”

“We’ll just have to tell Reese. I know Dad’s going to be very upset. If he wasn’t at work, then he’d perform.”

“What about Uncle Greg?”

“He has a job.”
I want my little sister to have a happy birthday. I consider the business card that has been in my pocket for the past week. I could call Benjamen, but then he’d know. I can’t let him know. I took the phone from Mom as soon as Grand picks up.

“Hi Grand, can I borrow your cape?”

After Mom and I have covered the house with rainbow colored streamers and tape up balloons, we turn our backyard into a private stage. Mom helps set up a mock curtain in the backyard by stretching a metal rod and using our red curtains to cover my entrance. Mom is busy answering the phone calls while I calm my nerves. I am fight to keep from passing out. When the urge to pass out becomes strong, I think of my little sister.

While Mom continues to decorate the backyard, I ramble up to the attic. I pull out the box from the attic’s hiding space to find all my tricks and an old hand painted sign. On a huge piece of painted plywood, in red letters is written *The Amazing Bobo and Eddie*.

Next to our names, we placed our handprints. I trace my own small hand print with my finger.

“Eddie! I need you.”

Mom’s yelling downstairs forces me out from my daydream. I carry the sign down to the backyard. When I set the sign up, I manage to cover the Benjamen’s name with a piece of paper. I stay hidden behind the curtain when Grandfather brings Reese. I peer through a crack in the curtain to see Reese. She looks around the backyard. She comes close to the curtain.
“Is he here!? Is he here?”

Reese, go and get cleaned up.” Mom orders her. “I’m sure you don’t want sticky hands when the performance begins.”

Reese bolts back in house. I continue to set up my magic tray of tricks when there is a voice behind the curtain.

“Eddie.” A voice whispers from the other side of the curtain.

“Back here, Grand.”

Grandfather comes through with his cape and top hat draped over his forearm.

“I only asked for your cape.”

He places the top hat on my head and taps it three times.

“The hat completes the outfit.”

“I’ll take good care of them.”

“Are you staying for the show or coming back for cake?”

“And miss the show? Of course I’ll be in the back row.”

Grandfather recognizes the old sign.

“This brings back memories. Is Bobo coming by?”

I shake my head, “This is a private performance.”

“What are you doing for your final trick?”

I tell him about the old trick the Hocus Pocus. We have a big wrapped box and someone sits inside. We get Reese up on stage to say her magic words and when she says the magic word for the third time, her surprise guest pops out.

“Who’s going to sit in the box?”
“Uncle Greg says he’ll be in soon. He’s coming back early from his job to be here.”

Grandpa nods his head when I tell him this news

“Can you distract the birthday girl so I can get ready?”

“I can do and will do, Edwina.”

He places a kiss on my cheek and says. “That’s for luck.”

Grand goes back behind the curtain. While Reese is showing Grandpa her latest dance move in the kitchen, I sneak upstairs. I borrow one of Dad’s suits in order to create the illusion of being a real magician. I pick out one of his ties, the nice robin red one and his jet black pinstripe that happens to fit me quick well. I run red lip-stick across my mouth and pull my hair up away from my face.

I say to my reflection, “Showtime!”

The magician in the mirror agrees with me.

I return back to the yard. I see the box in the backyard wiggle a bit. Uncle Greg must be already in there. I rap on the box three times and I get three raps back from the inside.

“Don’t worry, I’ll be quick.”

Mom gathers the party guest into the living room. I press the button on the recording

*Ladies and Gentleman! Boys and Girls! Cats and Dogs! I present you the maven of the mind, the great illusionist, the Amazing Eddie!*

I pop through the red curtain to find several pairs of eyes blinking up at me. There is no applause, but plenty of angry stares and confused looks from all the party guests.
Reese looks surprised, but she watches me. I fight the urge to keep from falling down as the backyard starts spinning around. I focus on a face in the audience, any face and I see Grand. A little boy with a crooked paper hat on his head takes off the hat.

“You’re not Max!? Where’s Max?” he demands.

I look down at him.

“Max sent me.”

“Who are you?”

“Did you hear the recording!? I’m the Amazing Eddie.”

I pull out a spoon from my pocket. I toss the spoon to a girl with pig tails and freckles.

She catches it.

“What is that?”

“It’s a spoon.”

“Are you sure?”

She looks at me if I’ve asked her if the sky is blue. With that look, I know that she doesn’t believe in me or my magic. She doesn’t believe, yet. I take the spoon from her and press down on it on the table with my hands. I grasp the spoon and grunt in effort. It starts to bend and go soft like taffy under my hands. All the children in the audience gasp and shout.

“It’s fake.”

“No, it’s real! I felt it!”
Another little boy rushes towards me as I pick up the spoon off of the table with my hands before he can take it into his hands. The spoon is unbent once more. The boy narrows his eyes at me

“How did you do that!?”

“Magic!”

He sits back in the front row. I’m a little rusty, but I continue with my magic. I pull items after items out of my top hat that never seems to end. I conjure out everything and even Oreo is pulled out of my hat. He wiggles his nose at the audience and they giggle. I pull the curtain open to reveal the cardboard box with a mock bow on it. There is an amazed gasp at the sheer size of the box.

“Now, for my final trick!”

“A mystery guest is going to come out of this box. They are going wish Reese a very happy birthday!”

“Who is it?”

“In order to bring out guest here we’re going to have to say the magic words three times. I’m going to need the birthday girl up here right now.”

I place the top hat on Reese’s head and pop it three times. She laughs.

“Alright, Reese, what do you want the magic word to be?”

She taps her chin for a few seconds then says, “Abacba-Dacbacaba!”

“That sounds very magical!”

I turn back to the crowd, whose enchanted eyes dart back from me to the box.
“Alright everybody we have to say Abacba-Dacbacaba as loud as we can together three times to help our guest appear.”

“Abacba-Dacbacaba!”

The box shakes a bit.

“Abacba-Dacbacaba!”

The box rumbles. There are a few shrieks and shouts from the crowd.

“Alright, we’re almost there guys!” I shout out loud. “Don’t stop now! He’s almost free!”

The boy who had rolled his eyes during the show, now grips my leg for dear life.

“Abacba-Dacbacaba!”

The box pops open and a shower of confetti comes out at us. A clown dressed in a bright apple red outfit appears. The coat and pants are trimmed in blue with white stars. He wears a blue wig of curly hair that sticks out as if he was been electrocuted. Out of the box comes Uncle Gregory, known as Gergio the Great Giggler, the best clown in the tri-state.

“Did someone call for magic! Am I fashionably late!?”

The crowd applauds and Reese cheers as he comes out.

“Can we give a hand for the Amazing Eddie? Without here help I’d still in that box.”

The audience cheers and my dream seem closer than they were yesterday.
Uncle Greg and I watch from the corner of the kitchen Reese inhale and blow out the candles on her cake. The air is filled with excitement as everyone applauds her. The smell of half lit candles and sugar hangs around as everyone applauds. Reese, with Mom’s help, cuts cake slices for her guests who are hold out their hands.

“Uncle Greg, I thought you weren’t available.”

“I wasn’t until my party canceled. It was a gig in Neptune. Max the Magical Clown came in and offered to do it for half price.”

“He canceled on us for that stupid party.”

“It happens.”

“You’re better than him.”

“It doesn’t matter. He was what they wanted. Besides, I was happy to save the day. Aren’t you?”

I look at my little sister. She’s all smiles and laughter with her friends surrounding her. Her birthday crown is crooked, there is icing all over her mouth and there are grass stains all over her dress. She doesn’t care.

“I am.”

“I didn’t see any stage fright in that backyard.”

“I was scared, but I was too busy trying to get the illusion right.”

“If you can do it here, why can’t you do it on stage?”

I consider Uncle Greg’s comment. I know the reason why, but I can’t say it out loud. Not yet. Reese comes up to him with a piece of her birthday cake.

“This is for you Uncle Greg!”
“Why thank you my dear!”

“What about me?” I tease tugging her birthday hat “Where’s my cake?”

“Oh, yeah!” Reese says as fetches my slice of cake. When she hands it to me, Reese looks down at her feet.

“You were really good, Eddie.”

“Mom will be happy to hear that. What did you wish for?”

“I can’t say. It won’t come true.”

“Maybe, it will come true if you whispered it.”

Reese motions Uncle Greg to lean down. He does. She whispers in his ear. Uncle Greg looks at me as a grin comes across his face.

“Is it a good wish, Uncle Greg?”

“If you have to wish for anything, I think that’s the best thing that you could wish for,” Uncle Greg nods to her. Reese skips off. Uncle Greg takes another bite of the cake then says, “So, what is this I hear about Chemistry Honors.”

“I can’t believe Mom told you,too.”

“Of course she did. We’re proud of you.”

Uncle Greg finishes off his cake with a bite.

“What did Reese wish for?”

“She wants to everyone to see your magic.”
Chapter Fifteen

Borrowed Magic

Soon after Reese’s birthday party, word gets around that I’m doing magic again; I head to the school’s library for a moment of privacy. I forgot how exhausting performing could be. Everyone is asking me to do a trick. I haven’t proved myself to my classmates, to my friends enough to start making mistakes. I head to the library instead of going to lunch.

There’s a book I want to check out about magicians that might be there. I haven’t found much about L.E. Monroe since I made a promise to Grand to keep my nose out of it. It bothers me not to know who he is and if he is one of the one hundred top hats of our family.

Coughs and bored sighs fill the silence of the library. If someone has a conversation louder than a whisper, a sharp warning and death stare from the librarian stops any talk between patrons. Of course, the book that I need is on the top shelf. I stretch to try to get the book. My fingertips brush the books spine just another hand, a male pulls the book from the shelf. I turn to see Ben. He flips through the book ignoring my outstretched hand. A few grunts and murmurs escapes from his lips as he scans the pages. I huff at him; the sound gets his attention, our eyes meet. I hold out my hand

“What’s the magic word?”

“Abracadabra.”
He hands the book over to me without question. I take the book to check out desk. Without having to look, I know that Ben is standing behind me with a book of his own to read.

“I heard about your performance last weekend."

“It must be a slow day if people are talking about me.”

“People talk about you, but you don’t listen. Arielle keeps calling you a witch.”

“She needs to stop saying that.”

“What should she call you?”

“I’m a magician.”

Ben points to the book in my hands, “Most magicians don’t check out books about performance or wear rainbow knee socks.”

I glance down at my rainbow socks that have been pulled up to my knees.

“I have a lot to learn from the masters of magic.” I poke him in his chest with my free hand, “If I’m going to be great, I have to study those who came before me, to learn from them. I have to get right what they got wrong. Besides, the socks were a gift from Grand. Do you have a problem with my socks?

Ben holds up his hands in defeat

“No, not at all.”

“What are you doing here?”

“I was looking at a few ideas for my costume.”

I raise my eyebrow at him.
“Nina is having a costume party this weekend.” I’m thinking of going as Harry Houdini.”

“Why doesn’t that surprise me?”

“What you have a thing against Houdini?”

“I think that he’s great. He’s my second favorite escape artist.”

“Who’s the first? Your father.”

“He already has a fan club. It’s a tie between my Uncle Mo and Dorothy Dietrich. Dietrich caught a bullet in a metal cup on stage in front of a room of magicians. It was the same trick Houdini refused to do.”

“Great! I can go as Houdini and you can go as Ms. Dietrich. So, we’ll be a pair of magicians together at the party.”

It’s been years since we were “we”, Bobo and Eddie the partnership. Benjamen is sweet to think that Nina would invite me to the party but he hasn’t been heard her in the girls locker room after gym early that day. The twins, especially Deidre, have been pestering her about the details while Diana gets dressed.

“Have you gotten your costume?”

“Yes, I am going to be a princess.”

“Is Ben going to be your prince?”

Nina checks her toothpaste whit perfect smile in the mirror for anything in her teeth.

“There’s a few guys who could be my prince.”
“I can only invite a small amount of people,” Nina tells us as she started to refresh her lip gloss. She smirks at herself in the mirror as she thinks of ways to not invite me.

“Diana, how many magicians does it take to put in a light bulb?”

“How many?”

“None, because they can’t afford light, they’re too poor.”

Their collective laughter bounces off the walls and echo in the lockers.

Benjamen pulls from my thoughts with a simple question, “So, are you going?”

I blink and stare at Benjamen.

“I can’t. It’s the Monroe Family Reunion.”

“The reunion is here already?

“There’s no way I could miss my uncle juggling my mother’s crystals and my cousin making her cowboy cookies.”

“I wouldn’t either. Maybe afterwards, you could stop by Nina’s party.”

The school bell rings. The day is done.
Chapter Sixteen
The Family Monroe

I am excited not because it’s Friday but the reunion finally has arrived. My ancestors used the money earned to settle in the newly established town of Asbury Park over one hundred and fifteen years old. Edward and Jessie had several sons, and those sons had several children each. Like their father, each one of their children had been bitten by the entertainment bug. Three sons, one being my great- great grandfather, become traditional magicians and illusionists, but the other brothers saw the magic in other acts became mentalists, escapes artists, jugglers, fire throwers, playwrights and actors.

Mom is in the kitchen slicing up pieces of lemons and limes, the scent of citrus hangs heavy.

I rush to help Mom whose hands are filled with skins of lemon and lime. As we fill the punch bowl with sweet pineapple and orange juice, the slices of lemon and limes swim amongst the ice cubes. Dad and Reese come home from their shopping trip; Dad’s arms are heavy with bags and bags of items Reese waddles into the kitchen with a grocery bag. The family will be here soon. We start popping kettle popcorn on the stove.

An hour or two later the doorbell starts ringing so much that we leave the door unlocked.

Strangers embrace as family and the house that Edward and Jessie bought is filled once again with love. The last reunion lasted for three days with people telling family jokes, singing songs, porcelain plates being spun on sticks and the magic, all the magic
that you can stand. You have to decide where if your interest was going to go to the uncle who was conjuring fire from his hands or the aunt who had bottled and sold for a few dollars her own personal love potion. I scurry around getting cheek kisses and long hugs from family members who hardly can believe how old and how big I’ve gotten. Uncle Mo is the most amusing one

“How old are you now? Ten?”

“I’m fourteen.”

“A teenager, look at you. Are you in fifth grade?”

“I’m in ninth!”

“Good for you!”

Mom taps me on the shoulder and asks me, “Eddie, please put more ice into the punch bowl?”

I nod my head and do as she requests.

“Is that my not so little cousin?”

I look up from pouring more ice into the punch bowl to see brown eyes that are wide open like windows. Phoebe’s curly, long hair has been dyed the color of ripe apricots, and is worn in a practical braid. She is short and has the family build. Her skin is tan and she has a wide forehead. Her wardrobe is unusual for everyday but normal for the Monroe with pops colorful, bright jewelry. She wears a collection of crystals and beaded jewelry around her neck. When she speaks, her voice comes out as a smoky whisper. I place the ice down and come around the table. I hug her.

“I can’t believe I used to change your diapers”
She steps back and looks me over

“When did you get back from Brazil?”

“A few days ago, I wanted to surprise you. How goes the magic act?”

“It’s getting better by the day.”

“Uncle Greg told me you were great at Reese’s birthday party.”

“Have you heard from Aunt Lydia?”

Phoebe pulls a postcard from out of her pocket. She hands it to me.

“She’s found her first pottery shard.”

“Cool.”

Phoebe serves herself a cup of punch, making sure to get as many slice of limes as possible.

“How’s the ghost hunt going?”

“I’m waiting for a call. I’m sure that they’ll be something coming up soon.”

Phoebe and I make our way through the house. We walk past my comedian cousins, offbeat opera singers, the plastic and porcelain plate-spinners. We search amongst the ventriloquists who make dummies sing operettas, dancers who spin and twirl to unheard music. We slow down to watch the musicians play metal saws and bicycle tires as if they are playing priceless cellos and violins. Aunt Dorothy is heading down to the basement stairs when she stops the two of us. Her earrings two sliver dollars jangle against her neck when she turns her head towards our direction. She has two candles in her hands.

“Are you coming down stairs to the basement? We need two more people to complete the circle.”
My eyes widen when I remember what Aunt Dorothy is talking about.

“I thought we weren’t doing that until tomorrow.”

“No, your Grand wanted to have it done tonight.”

Aunt Dorothy stands at the stairs.

“Do you know any good ghost stories?” I ask Phoebe

“I have a good one.”

We walk down into the basement where there are a hundred candles set up around in a circle. Some people are in costume and other in regular dress gather around the candles. A man who reminds me of a dangerous beast stands in the middle of the room. He has small eyes the color of tangerines in the middle of his round chubby face. His silky neck-length hair is the color of cigarette ash, and is slicked back style. He is tall and with a heavy build. His wardrobe is tattered with a few well place patches on his knees and elbows. He hands us both big white candle which flickers.

“Welcome one and all, brothers and sisters, kin and cousins and friends to A Gathering of One Hundred Tales. My name is Cousin Marcellus.” he says in a deep baritone that rumbles the room like a passing train

“This is a very old game going back many hundreds of years. In a room as big as this one, one hundred candles were lit. Guests gather around the candles, and every takes a turn telling ghost stories. For every story told, a candle blown out. The room will grow darker as we invite the spirits to come and play our game. Once the final candle is blown, we will see what spirits have come to say hello.”
“You will be the first. Please share with us your story.”

I hold the candle and consider what story to tell. I start my tale

“The ocean gets angry when something it taken from it. Once there was a man of science who found after a storm a mermaid in a wading pool. She was small as big as his thumb, as fragile as a seahorse and as beautiful as any shell or sea glass on the beach. He took his mermaid home in a mason jar where he kept her by his nightstand. She was the last thing she saw when he went to sleep and the first thing he saw when he woke up. The ocean knew that one of his loveliest creatures had been taken from him. The sky was opened upon the town. It rained for weeks and weeks. The water came from everywhere from underneath the street, from the buildings from underneath the skins of the people. The water was furious.

There was no dry land; there was only water and ocean. People stopped wearing clothes and wore nothing but bathing suits because they could never stay dry. The man knew that the ocean was angry and he wanted his mermaid back.”

“It was too late. He cared for her too much and she for him. They loved each other and were willing to give up their lives for each other. The ocean knew this and knew that he couldn’t hurt the lovers, for the mermaid’s magic was strong enough to protect them. He could hurt everyone else. Days and days, inch by inch mermaid and the man of science looked away from each other long enough to see the misery their love had brought. Cars had become boats, people and pets swam like champion swimmers to home and work. The ocean had threatened to swallow the town if the mermaid was not given back right there and then.”
Everyone grips their candles their hands

“The science man took the mermaid’s jar and smashed it against the jetty. The jar cracked open and the mermaid sprang out and leaped down into the ocean. Greedily, the ocean took back was his and never release the mermaid from his grasp. When the mermaid left, she didn’t leave without anything. She had his heart; she kept it safe with her underneath the sea. That day, the day he returned his mermaid, science man never left the beach and stayed there until he closed his eyes and didn’t open them again.

Sometimes on clear nights when the moon shines like a sliver dollars, you can see the ghost of the man. He walks the beach watching for a flash of her tail, for a friendly smile or to have his heart returned to him.”

I blow out the candle. The person, a Monroe cousin from Down South starts to speak about sweethearts and ghosts from over a hundred years ago. The stories continue to be collected as the room becomes darker and darker. It’s nearly an hour later until Phoebe’s candle is the last candle left flickering. We gather close around she starts to the last story of the night.

“People say it was a moonless night when Captain William “Kidd” Kincaid buried his treasure in the heart of Sandy Hook. Captain had stolen his biggest treasure yet over five thousand coins taken from the hull of his enemies’ ship. The law had had enough of Kidd so they sent their most ruthless and eager law men after them. He knew that the law was catching up and closing. He had enough time to stash his goods so sailed his ship The *Merry Merchant* along the Jersey shore until he found himself in the safe harbor. Captain had a brave crew who pledged their lives and loyalty to the arrogant head
strong leader who stood the tallest out of anyone on the ship. Together the Captain and his men unloaded *Merry Merchant* and headed off into the pinelands. They buried the treasure deep, deep so deep that only those who had been there could find the treasure.”

Some say that Captain Kincaid left the treasure to be protected by the beasts and creatures of the pinelands. After the crew completed their task they had a drink and dance to their success for a night or two. They returned to the *Merry Merchant* and sailed off, never to claim their treasure again. Those who saw the pirates, the villagers of Sandy Hook, tried find the treasure themselves but no man; woman or child has been able to find the treasure.

Sometimes the pirate ship can be seen sailing soundlessly up the shore and on a moonless night the ghost crew of the *Merry Merchant* comes to shore. They have their drink, they dance and dance and they remember. They remember of the adventures that they once had when their hearts were still beating in their chests. Before the sun rises, they gather their ghostly bodies and return to their ship. In the light of the morning the ships disappears like mist on a summer dawn.

Phoebe blows out her candle. Light leaves the room. We are left in darkness. A gust of cold air caresses my face. I stare at the darkness. I can make out the image of a woman in front of me. She looks as if she made of incense smoke. Her eyes lock on mine as I continue to stare at her. The lights flicker on and we see Phoebe standing at the light switch. I turn back around. The figure is gone.
“Dinner’s ready.”

I look at Phoebe.

“Did you see that? Did you see her?”

Phoebe stares straight ahead to the empty space.

“I did.”
Chapter Seventeen

The Legend of L.E. Monroe

Phoebe and I start to head up the stairs when we run into Cousin Marcellus the man who has small eyes look like tangerines. He stands at the top of the stairs as if he had been waiting for us.

“I see that our game worked a little too well.” he says with a smile.

“You saw her.”

“Everyone did, but only you two believe that it wasn’t an illusion.”

“It wasn’t an illusion because no one took credit for it.”

“Grand was right about you, you’re smart.”

“Do you know who she is?”

“Come along cousins, let’s go out back.”

Once we are outside underneath the setting sun, Marcellus invites us to take a seat.

“Her name was Lucie Monroe and she was one of the best and talented magicians born into our family. She was the seventh child born to the seventh son of the seventh son. To say that she was talented would be an insult.”

“Then what was she?

“She was divine. Lucie could conjure apples and pineapples wearing nothing but a bathing suit. She’d transform roses into pieces of paper and then transform those roses back before your eyes. Lucie could levitate so high she could have plucked the leaves off of that tree. By the time she was sixteen; Lucie had mastered the seven illusions and was
sought after by many talent agents. When the agents saw her and finally met her, they turned away without another word.”

“Why?”

“Some agents said it was because she was a woman. Some said she wasn’t the right shade and others wanted her to stay where she belonged.”

“What do you think?”

“I think it was because she was different. People who are different we always have a hard time trying to fit in. I think it’s funny that someone who could transform herself into anything at all couldn’t be what they wanted.”

“Then what did she do?”

“She got to as close to normal as she was going to be. Lucie changed her name to L.E. Monroe, borrowed her brothers’ clothes and drew a soot mustache on her face. She traveled around and there wasn’t a house that wasn’t packed or theater whose seats were overflowed.”

“What happened to her?”

“No one knows. She performed one last time at the Paramount Theatre and after that no one knows about her. I’ve only known about her because my mother was her niece.”

“Why haven’t I heard about her?”

“You should. You were named after her.”

“What?”

“Her full name was Lucie Edwina Monroe.”

“Why would I be named after her?”
“She was Grand’s little sister. They were born a year apart but you could have mistaken them for twins. Come to think of it, you and Lucie could have been sisters. You have her eyes.”

I run back into the house and into the living room. I look for the poster in the corner but it is gone.

“Has anyone seen my poster? Where is my poster?”

Mom glances in the corner, “Ask Grand, I saw him with something rolled up in his hand. He went back over to his house.”

I take off out the front door. I run across the street and bolt towards his house. I’ve forgotten my key to the front door and slam my hand repeatedly against the doorbell. The door opens and Grand stands in the doorway.

“Hello Edwina how can I help you?”

“Grand, did you take my poster?”

His mouth twitches and looks away from me.

“There’s no reason for you to have it. I took care of it. Forget about L.E. Monroe and go on home.”

He goes to close the door but I shout

“Grand, I know who she is. Her name and what she could do.”

The door opens again and there are tears around the edge of my Grand’s eyes.

“What are you trying to protect me from?”

Grand closes his eyes as the tears run down his cheeks.

“Everything, my love everything.”
Without another word or a good night, Grand closes the door. The porch light turns off. I am left in the dark.
Chapter Eighteen

The Sweetness of Marzipan Ladybugs

As I walk into the Stony Pony, the smell of smoke, heat and sweat blast in my face as we enter from chilliness outside. The club walls are painted black and white and decorated with mounted colorful concert posters. The walls closest to the bathrooms are covered with promotion stickers for bands who have passed through The Stone Pony or played the stage. Wendy comes in with Benjamen and behind them is Raymond who Wendy has invited along to keep me company. Before we came to the Pony, the four of us had a snack at the Mermaid Café which happened to be a few blocks away. We shared plates of mozzarella sticks, fries and other foods that we eat with our fingers. Raymond, with his lopsided dyed red hair and track star smile, is what I call nice. Nothing’s wrong with nice but Raymond looks at me with the same interest a person would give a nice pair of pants they like but would not buy. He doesn’t buy me. Raymond doesn’t push his plate away or towards me but Benjamen inches his plate towards me throughout our meal.

The stage is illuminated by pink and white lights that make black painted floor appear like an elevated platform. Whoever stands up on stage will appear like superheroes to us in the audience. We weave in and out together as the crowd moves and the announcer bellows over the sound system

“Up to the stage is Asbury’s own Marzipan Ladybugs!”

The other three members wearing white shirts covered in a trail of ladybugs scramble over the stage to get ready for their performance. Arielle with her shirt, blue jeans and her hair held back by her head band red and black. She connects her bass to whatever wires
she needs to be hooked up with. She looks up and notices me in the audience. I get a head
nod and a smile from her before she goes back to fixing up her guitar. My ears ache. I
should have brought earplugs as the twang of guitar notes come from speakers on either
side of the stage.

“This is great!” Wendy exclaims as she hooks her hand through Benjamen’s arm.

“Yeah, I know.” Benjamen looks around the club.

“It’s hot in here.” Wendy waves her hand.

“Would you like something to drink?” Raymond asks.

“Yes please, I’d something sweet, just like me.”

Raymond leaves without asking if I want anything. Benjamen follows after him. Wendy
comes close to me.

“Would you please try to talk to Raymond? He’s a nice guy and if you’d stop talking
that frizzle dazzle to Benjamen then maybe he’d start talking to me.”

“Ben told me that there’s no way a rabbit could fit inside of a…."

Wendy waves her hand at my words.

“Whatever, just try for tonight not to talk about magic and just try to be…you
know….normal. Don’t be a magician, be my friend.”

Raymond and Benjamen come back with plastic cups filled with pineapple juice and
bright cherries floating around in the sides of the cup. It takes another ten minutes before
Arielle trills a few notes. She clears her throat into the mike to quiet down the talking.

“Hello, ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls. We are the Marzipan Ladybugs. Get
ready for sugar and spice.”
Arielle hisses the word spice as the band starts to play a mid-tempo tune. People pick up the beat and start to sway back and forth. When she sings, Arielle becomes a stranger bathed in pink light. The words hit like arrows as Arielle growls, hiss and sing her words. She holds her notes steady and strong. I open my eyes and see that Benjamen looks at me while Wendy bops her body to the song making moving to notes that don’t exist. The rest of the song continues on. The Marzipan Ladybugs continues to play several more songs and then close out with slow ballad. Raymond extends his hand out to Wendy. She gives me her empty cup and takes his hand. The two join other couples out to the floor.

“Shall we?” Benjamen asks.

I throw away our cups and go out to the dance floor. Benjamen places his hands on my hips and pulls me close. My mind spins over and over like a pinwheel on a windy day when his hands hold on to me. I drape my hands on his shoulders as we sway.

“The talent show auditions are coming up soon.”

I go to tell Benjamen about how excited I am but I see Wendy out the corner of my eye. I have to try to be normal for her.

“I know.”

“We should go together you know it’d be nice. You know size each other up and see each other’s act.”

“Okay.”

“When did you get so quiet when it comes to magic?”

“We’re on a date.” I blurt out. My face feels hot when Benjamen eyes’ pop out of his head at these words. “I don’t mean you and me. I mean…never mind.”
“So, are you enjoying your date?”

“Yes, I am. It’s going great.”

Benjamen spins me around in a circle as he says, “Stop being sweet. Be honest.”

“When he isn’t staring at Wendy, Ray’s a nice guy. He doesn’t like me. Is that honest enough for you? Why don’t you be honest with me?”

I close my eyes and listen to the lyrics. Arielle’s voice rings out sharp and clear like a bell that has been rung as she sings:

\[
\text{let me be your sweet spot} \\
\text{I will be your favorite taste} \\
\text{you will lose train of thought} \\
\text{please don’t let me go to waste}
\]

I open my eyes to face the hard stare that Benjamen gives me.

“You want me to be honest. I’ll tell you my greatest secret.”

Benjamen pulls me close enough so he doesn’t have to fight against the music. He whispers in my ear.

“I’ll tell you how I made the car disappear.”

My hands grip his shoulders. I want to push him away but the part of me that wonders, the part that loves magic holds on to him. Benjamen begins to tell me about his illusion, of polished glasses, sliver mirrors and hidden angles. The stage helped him hide the action and the small moments of excitement aided his plan to wow the crowd. He tells me about the help he had moving the car and how he couldn’t get the car back in place in time. Once he finishes explaining the trick, I shake my head at him.
“Why did you bring the car back?”

“I thought it would be enough just to make it disappear. Everyone was watching.”

Benjamen smiles when he says, “Well almost everyone was watching.”

“Someone could have seen your cousin move the car.”

He breathes, “The audience sees what they want to see. They don’t see what’s there.”

The final notes of the song play. We sway one last time before we step away from each other. Wendy steps into between us.

“Eddie, I have to go to the bathroom. Come with me!”

Benjamen and I lose each other in the applause. Wendy takes me by the wrist and pulls me to the bathroom. She pushes me into the bathroom.

“Raymond told me that he likes me! I didn’t see this!”

“You have to be headless not to see that.”

Wendy scans my face

“Hasn’t Ben asked about me at all?”

“He sees what I see.”

Wendy glances in the mirror when she says

“Or Benjamen sees what you tell him.”

“There are some illusions I cannot make, Wendy.” I say. I refuse to look in the mirror, but I continue to talk. “Raymond liking you is not smoke and mirrors. It’s real.”

“He is cute, but I was hoping that Ben would open his eyes.”

“Boys, what can you do?”

Wendy winks at me.
“We’d better get back. We don’t want to keep them waiting.”

She rushes out the bathroom, leaving me behind.
Chapter Nineteen

The Audition

The inside of the Paramount Theatre is decorated by gold leaf painted statues and angels, red plush seats, and purple blubs that shine a lilac light upon the stage. A giant golden rosette on the ceiling stage make the theatre looks regal. The Theatre is filled with various acts. Benjamen and I walk up and down the aisle as people continue to practice. Those who are audition are assigned a number and brought into the theatre to wait until they are called backstage. As we pass people who have auditioned, they whisper about the committee. The whispers get angrier as we walk towards the stage for seats.

“They waited thirty seconds before they told me to leave.”

“They didn’t even let my sister open her mouth before they said No.”

“If you make past five minutes with the committee then they want you.”

A woman wearing a large snake around her neck like a feather boa and red headdress comes up to Benjamen and I. Once I realize it’s a snake, I take a step back. Her boa constrictor gives us a lazy look before looking at something more interesting than us. She has an elegant build. Her skin is china-white and everything about her from her nails to her black dress looks expensive and elegant. Her thin lips pout out.

“Who do you belong to?”

“We’re here for the audition. What does your snake eat…things?”

“Betsy eats many things, but don’t worry. She’s friendly. Do you want to pet her?”
Benjamen nods his head but I back up away from them. The woman leans down so she can easily pet Betsy who flicks her tongue in response. As he gently pets Betsy, he says in a small voice

“Cool.”

Benjamen says to me, “Edwina, you have to try this.”

“I’m fine.”

Benjamen has a smile on his face when I say this.

“What’s so funny? Did the snake tell you a joke?”

“I can’t believe you’re afraid of snakes.”

“I’m not afraid; I just don’t see the big deal about them.”

The woman brings Betsy closer and now Besty has now gained an interest in me. I stand behind Benjamen.

“A long time ago, snakes were seen as symbols of the earth. They were earth bound beings. She doesn’t look so scary. Does she?”

I can’t answer but I shake my head. The room seems to be getting smaller the closer I am to this snake. I struggle to catch my breath. I don’t say anything as she walks away. Benjamen looks at me and it’s clear from the look of fear on my face.

“Are you okay?”

I manage to squeak out something close to a yes, but he doesn’t believe it. When I saw the snake, it’s the same way I feel whenever I consider getting up on stage. The air
feels like its being squeezed from my lungs and the room starts spinning around like a runway merry-go-around. Benjamen sits next to me. His hand is close but he doesn’t touch me. He feels good to have him near. I try to push the away the thought. As I watch the fire eaters pull flames from their mouths and the snake woman wears Betsy like an expensive piece of jewelry, I don’t want to watch anymore. I want to be on stage rather than in the audience. The fear is prickling the back of my neck but the desire to be up there is great. I want to be up there. The director comes up to the both of us and spots the numbers pinned to on our shirts.

“Hello there Number seventy-five and seventy-six. You two must be here for our young talent auditions.”

“We are.”

He smiles as he looks back and forth between Benjamen and me.

“Are you two together or performing separately?”

Benjamen takes a step forward, away from me towards the man, “I have my own act.”

“Are you ready?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Then please come with me.”

As Benjamen follows the man with the clipboard behind the stage, my mind races: How will he perform? Does he make things disappear or levitate items? Does he have doves or rabbits falling out of his hats and pockets? He probably does not. Benjamen
never liked rabbits very much and birds always gave him the creeps. Then I ask the questions that scares me more than the snake: Will he be better than me?

A fifteen minutes later Benjamen comes out. He strolls down the aisle past me. The man with the clipboard comes out behind him.

“Hello again, please fellow me.”

He leads me up on the stage and behind the velvet curtain. I now stand in front of the committee table where three people two men and a woman sit. On the fold out table are a pitcher of water and a bowl of oranges sitting in front of them.

“State your name and audition number.”

“My name is Eddie and my audition number is seventy-six.”

They all write this information

“Alright, you have five minutes. Show us your act.”

“Can one of you please hand me an orange?”

I nod and take out my magic wand from my pocket. They all stare at me but the woman takes an orange from the bowl

“Mark it with a marker please.”

She makes a neat clean black X with her marker. She hands the orange to me. As I pass my magic wand over the orange

“In Greek mythology, when the gods and goddesses married each other they feasted on apples and oranges.”
I tap the peel with my wand. I place the wand in my back pocket.

“When Hera married Zeus she gave him oranges and wore ribbons in her hair.”

I pull yards and yards of white ribbon from the orange. I pull out so much ribbon that it pools at my feet. Once all the ribbon is gone, I hand the orange back to the woman. She places the orange back without another glance. Everyone continues to watch me perform. I take out wand and wave it over the unspooled ribbon. As I spin and wave my wand, the ribbons twist and turns until it has balled it’s self up. I take the ribbon in my hand. I glance at the clock. My five minutes are up.

The woman judge is the first to speak, “Please show us another illusion.”
Chapter Twenty

Awkward Valentines

I stop in front of the dance poster hung up above the water fountain. The poster is covered in glittery pink and red hearts flying over the words.

Valentine’s Day Dance

Friday the 10th

I have overheard the girls in the bathroom going on about what they whether will be getting lacy cards and sweet candy. During Gym, Nina went on about all the stuffed teddy bears that she was being given by all the boys interested in her.

“Valentine’s Day,” Wendy says “could be another night or something really awful.”

“As Grand says It is okay to reach for the stars!”

‘The Valentine’s Day Dance is next week! Make sure to wear hearts on your sleeves!” Mrs. Troung sings as she walks past the both of us. Wendy looks the poster before she sucks her teeth, and turns away from it.

“Let’s boycott the dance. Are you with me Eddie? You, me and Arielle. We’ll order a pizza, have too much ice cream and watch foreign horror films. If we get really crazy, we can dare each other to call our crushes.”

“Raymond has a thing he has to do and Benjamen’s hanging around Nina now. The project was last year; he has no reason to be hanging around her.”

“Maybe he really likes her lip gloss.”
“Don’t put that image in my head. What do you say? I’m sure Arielle isn’t going to go.”

“Why do say that?”

“She can’t dance.”

How do I tell Wendy that I’d really like to go to the dance? She’d probably start squealing up and down and go on about dress and skirts and shoes.

“Let me think about it.”

“Okay, then.”

The air inside Asbury Arcade is smoky with incenses and hushed conversation between customers. I breathe in the peppermint scented air as I scan the west wall is covered in clear glass containers are filled to the brim with dried herbs, leaves and plants. Magic props old wands and card desks are behind the glass display panel. There are various soaps and oil that are made to attract love, bring and prosperity, cast of jealousy and whatever you wish have happen in your life. When Reese has a bad cough, Mom comes for her lemon verbena and dried chamomile tea bags to make her homemade tea. By the next morning Reese could breathe better and the house smelled of sweet herbs.

Phoebe has opened the Asbury Arcade for the winter season. Behind the counter, next to Phoebe who is pouring oil into various bottles, a small white television is on.

“Eddie! Long time, no see little cousin.”

“I know we started a new school term, I’ve been busy.”
“How did you do last year?”

“I did pretty good and got some great grades.”

“Great. I was wondering have you seen Grand. I haven’t seen him since the holidays and I…I wanted to see him.”

“Stay right here.”

Phoebe motions towards the back towards the red door. She knocks on the door. There is a rustling behind the door and it opens a crack

“Phoebe, I thought I told you not to bother me when I’m in here.”

“You have a visitor.”

There is silence. The door close then the door opens again. Grand comes out in his usual green sweater and brown pants. He sees me and comes over.

“Hello, Edwina.”

“Hi Grand.”

He looks me over carefully.

“Come on, let’s go for a walk.”

Grand and I step outside the Arcade and start walking toward the boardwalk. The sound seagull screams and the distant lull of the ocean draws us forward
“I hate the ocean during the summer.” he sighs as we walk, “The ocean is the most beautiful when it’s bare, when there’s nothing, no people no beach balls or plastic pails to distract you.”

Once we are on the boardwalk, we walk together step in step.

“Your father told me that you’re going to be in the Talent Show at the end of the year.”

“They called me the other day. I’m going to be performing at the Paramount Theatre.”

“You must be excited.”

“I’m terrified.”

Grand places his hand on my arm, “When Lucie told me she was going to perform onstage at the Paramount, she was so excited; she just couldn’t stop thinking about it. She had these posters printed up and couldn’t wait for everyone to see her onstage.”

“Did she ever get stage fright?”

“She shook like a leaf every time she went up there.”

“Then why did Lucie get up there?”

“It was where she belonged. She was scared but she was so happy. Lucie was always up for trying new things no matter how much it scared her. She used to say to me “Charlie, do you know what life is without fear? Life without fear isn’t life at all, it’s called sleep!” Grand smile fades as he looks at me. “What have you been told about her?”
“I was told she was the seventh child of the seventh son, she could perform the seven illusions and she dressed like a man in order to perform on stage.” I tell him leaning on the wooden railing on the boardwalk. The cold wind comes in and chills my face.

“Lucie was my little sister and my best friend. We promised to look out for each other. She was hard-headed and brave. You’re her namesake.”

“I never knew.”

“You never knew because I never told you.” Grand said, “I told you all the good things, the pretty things, about magic because I always wanted you to enjoy magic.”

“I always have.”

“There’s a danger to magic that wanted to protect you from, a danger that Lucie faced. I never wanted our family’s magic to be a burden or trouble.”

“What trouble has our magic been for you?”

“It’s time you learned.”

Grand holds out two keys to me. I hold out my hand and he closes my hand around the keys. I run my hand over one of keys and feel out the teeth with my fingers. The key still feels warm from Grand’s pocket and the metal is smooth.

“The answer is in the Arcade behind the red door. You must know this Edwina, when you look behind the red door, you can’t unlearn what you learn.”

I nod my head to him. He looks pale.
“How are you feeling Grand? We should get you back into the shop.”

“I’m doing alright, the cold air’s good for me. Valentine’s Day is coming up. Isn’t there a dance at school? Don’t they have to something for you young folks?”

“It’s just a stupid dance.”

“Your Grandma and I used cut a rug back in our early days. My Winnie could move with the best of them. How come you don’t want to go?”

I play with the loose string on my sweater. To my Grand, I am one the most beautiful girls in the world but at school I am the girl who makes magic. I am too different to be beautiful.

“I just don’t want to go. I’d rather stay home; hang out with a few friends.”

“Promise me that you’ll try, just try. No matter what my love, just try.”

I look at Grand. I wonder whether it’s just a dance he’s was talking about.

“I will Grand.”

“Let’s get back inside.”

The dance floor is covered with pink and red balloons. The snack tables are covered with red plastic tablecloths that have white hearts decorated on the edge. Wendy comes over wearing a bright red dress with a red bow in her hair. Her small heels click on the floor as she does a little twirl.

“I thought you weren’t coming.”

“Raymond asked me to go with him!”

“You look so cute Eddie! Are you wearing lipstick?”
I cover my mouth with my hand

“Only a little.”

Wendy does a little twirl for me.

“How do I look?”

“You look really pretty.”

“Thanks. Raymond thinks so!”

I look towards Arielle and Joshua who are standing in a corner whispering to each other. Joshua is holding both of their red cups while she talks on. Her hair has been streaked pink and white. Arielle looks over at me and then back to looking at Joshua. I wonder what they talking about. Wendy notices me watching them. She leans in

“Are you upset?”

“Why would I be upset? I am not upset.”

“I mean Arielle asked Josh to the dance. You guys were partners in Ms. Harrison class, you know. I would be upset.”

I’m not upset but I’d like do want to find out what they are talking about.

“I mean, I would not be okay.”

“I’m okay.”

Wendy shuts up.

“I’d better go and find Raymond.”

Wendy walks off. I take a seat while everybody else is talking. Benjamen is wearing a suit. He pulls a bouquet of daises from out of his sleeve pocket and presents them to me. I clap for him.
“My great grandfather invented that trick.”

“He also shook the hand of Houdini.”

“That’s what Grand told me and he never lies.”

“Sure, he just sees the truth and bends it a bit.”

“Whatever. Where’s your date? I’m sure that she’ll love her flowers.”

Benjamen takes the seat next to me.

“She’s not here yet. Who did you come with?”

“He’s…sitting right next to me. Can’t you see him?”

I turn to the empty seat, “Ian Visible, meet Benjamen.”

Benjamen nods, “Real cute, Eddie.”

“Ms. Harrison didn’t think so.”

Nina comes through the door wearing a glittery red bow in her hair that matches the fire engine red dress that she is wearing.

“Your date’s here.”

Benjamen waves and then walks away to present Nina with a plastic bouquet. She gives him a smile as real as those flowers and pushes the flowers back to him. The music starts as everyone gets up from their seats. There are at least three girls who ask me to watch their purses as they are asked to dance by boys. Arielle comes over to me with Joshua in tow. There is an annoyed look on her face and a huge punch stain all over her white pants. Felix has joined us.

“Eddie, dance with Joshua.”

“What’s happened?”
“Felix can’t dance and drink juice at the same time!”

“I said I was sorry!”

“Your sorry doesn’t clean pants!”

Arielle presses Joshua’s hand into mine. She huffs off to the bathroom with Wendy behind her. Joshua looks at my hand in his but he does not let go.

“I like this song.”

“Me too.”

We head out onto the dance floor, kicking a few balloons that are in our way. He places his hands in where they are supposed to be when you pretending to be polite. His hands are lightly on my waist. I place my hands on his shoulders. We continue to sway to the music being played by Mr. Carter. I look over Joshua’s shoulder as I watch the girls’ bathroom for Arielle. I bring my attention back to Joshua’s face. I blink a few more to focus on what he is talking about.

“Eddie, are you wearing lipstick?”

“How is it that everyone notices my lips today of all days.”

“It’s a pretty color.”

We both laugh at what he has just said. The music takes up the space where words should be. Ms. Harrison comes up to the both of us.

“Edwina come with me please.”

I follow Ms. Harrison into the office. She hands me the phone. My father’s voice comes over strong but quiet from the phone.

“Eddie, I’m coming to pick you up.”
“Dad what’s wrong?”

“Eddie.”

There’s silence from the other end of the line. I hear crying.
Chapter Twenty-One

Shark River

It’s been three days since Grand’s funeral. Today is my first day back at school. Everyone has either ignored me or be really, really sorry since I’ve come back from school. Students who have whose names I don’t know come up to me and hug me. They rock me in their arms and they’d then say in the least sympathetic voice.

*I’m SO sorry for your loss Eddie*

Everyone says with big eyes blotted with tears and half hearted headshakes. The sympathy doesn’t bother me. I haven’t cried. It’s been three days since he’s been buried.

I haven’t cried.

The day I have returned Principal Troung has scheduled a field trip to the local county park, Shark River Park. Best known for sudden family reunions, quickie kids’ birthday parties and the occasional teenager smoking and make out sessions in the woods Shark River Park is the best that our school can do.

Nina sits practically on Bobo’s lap all the way to the park, with her body pressed up against him and when we leave the bus, they are the first to get “lost in the woods”. A few boys have started an impromptu game of tackle football in the open field, while the glamour girls have claimed the jungle gym and swings for their personal grooming use. Arielle and Wendy sit with me at the picnic pavilion. Neither of them have said anything but the silence of the park has left them scrambling to fill in the space.

“You have to remember the good times.”

“Wendy’s right! You have you remember him as he was.”
Don’t they know? The memories hurt the most. I can’t be around them right now. I have to go.

“Excuse me.”

I make a beeline down to the path that leads towards the pond, out of sight.

I turn towards the water. I envy the pond before me, the surface is still and calm while I feel as if a storm has been placed inside me. The surface is so clear you could confuse it with glass. Shadows of fish and underwater creatures flutter and skim under the water. I hear the sound of footsteps on the pebbles behind me.

“I’ve always wondered why call it Shark River Park.”

My back stays turned on Joshua. I focus on the pond. His footsteps get closer as he continues to talk.

“I haven’t seen any sharks walking around here.”

“Millions of years ago this all used to be ocean. They named the park after all the fossils. You can find shark teeth and fish remains on the river banks.”

“How did you find that out?”

“Grand took Reese and me here a lot.”

The smile that he always wears is gone. His eyes looks focused.

“I heard about Grand. I’m…”

I shake my head but say nothing. If Joshua apologizes I am going to throw him into the pond.
“My uncle came to Asbury Park knowing he wanted to learn was how to cook, how to make good food for hungry people. He did that and looked after his family. Whenever I was really sick, he made me this broth just breathing in the scent of it, made me feel better.”

“How did it taste?”

“He used to say if I didn’t feel better in three spoonfuls, then I needed to have three more spoonfuls. Before you know it, I reached the bottom of the bowl. He taught me how to make the broth for myself. All the things he taught me, how to dance and how laugh, I remember the broth the most.”

I meet his eyes. I notice the rim of tears around the edge of them.

“Every time I make that broth, my uncle’s with me. Every time you perform, he’ll be there.”

I blink a few times until the tears fall from my eyes. The more I try to stop; the tears continue to fall. Within two steps he’s in front of me. Joshua scans my face. He is close. Close enough that I can smell him. He smells as good like sweet lemons and lemongrass. He takes his hand in mine and squeezes in gently. He brings me into his arms. I close my eyes and imagine that I am in another world. I imagine another world where my Grand survived his night in the hospital; he got better and came home. A world where magic was welcomed and I could conjure up as many illusions as we needed to be happy. A world where Asbury Park is a memory I am no longer defined by others but by my own dreams. I open my eyes and the world I have dreamt up vanishes. All that’s left are my
tears. Joshua looks down at me. He opens his mouth to speak when a voice beyond us teases.

“Are we interrupting something?”

I step out of Joshua’s arms to see Benjamen and Nina standing together. I wipe away a tear with my free hand. Bobo glances from Joshua to me with narrowed eyes.

Nina has a smirk on her face when she tells us.” Mr. Carey wanted you to know they’re passing out lunch up in the picnic area,…”

Juniper stares at my hand in Jonathan’s. Slowly, Jonathan removes his hand from mine, jams it into his jacket pocket. He says

“I’d better save us a few turkey sandwiches. They’re always the first to be eaten on field trips.”

Jonathan nods towards me as he passes the three of us. I walk after him when Juniper says me

“You should be embarrassed using your Grand to get attention.”

“Forbid we shouldn’t pay attention to Nina.”

Nina narrows her eyes at me

“Stop mumbling Eddie we can’t hear you.”

I repeat in a loud voice

“I said Forbid the world goes one second recognizing you exist.”

“I like to be seen. Normal girls like be seen by boys. You do know what boys are Eddie? They’re the people with more body hair.”

“If the rumors are true, you know about some boys and their body hair.”
As soon as I say this, my hand goes to my mouth. Benjamen raises his eyebrows. Nina face flushes. She turns and runs up the hill towards the picnic pavilion Benjamen and I are left standing by the pond.

“You say these things Eddie but you don’t think. She’s a person.”

“So am I. Have you forgotten?”

Benjamen doesn’t look me in the eye. His eyes are focused down on his sneakers.

“Oh that’s right, I only matter when I stand next to or better… behind you.”

A chilly breath of escapes his mouth when he asks

“Does Joshua Tran think you matter?”

“He’s just my friend.”

“Does he know that?”

“Benjamen, just keep hanging out with Nina. Leave just leave me alone.”

I go to leave when Benjamen tells me.

“I’m doing the levitating heart illusion at the Talent Showcase.”

I can’t move anymore.

“That’s Grand’s trick.”

“I wanted to tell you before anyone else could. I’m doing the trick, the trick he taught us when we were little. I’m not going to be nice to you because Grand is gone. I’m not going to let you win to make you feel better. I am going to do my best, because that is what he’d want.”

I feel as if my heart picks up speed and my insides have been jolted.

“Ben, how do you know what Grand would want!”
“He was a magician, like me.”

“Oh, I can see it now the Famous Benjamen Dawes, you’ll have money from your top hat to tip your maids with. All the cameras are going’ on you for your big show. You’ll have your glamorous assistant named Fifi, you’ll say to her “Hey guess who I used to know back in school! That loser Edwina Monroe!” And you’ll laugh, and laugh. And you’ll barely remember me because you’ll be around people as talented as you are.”

“Is that right?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Are you done yet?!”

“Yes!”

“I’d like to say something.”

“What?”

Benjamen pulls me to him and presses his lips against mine. It’s a full five seconds before I realize that Benjamen “Bobo” Monroe is kissing me. While his lips stay on mine, my mind thinks of all the times after a show that we take any pocket money that we have and buy strawberry sodas from Lee’s Market. We’d drink the whole bottle until insides of our mouths and our lips turned red. I press my lips to his and for an instant I can taste the strawberry sugar from days ago. Anger and odd emotions swell inside me as I squirm under his kiss. Before I can move, he moves away from me.

“Ben.” I sigh.

Benjamen mumbles a sorry before he brushes pass me.
Chapter Twenty-Two

Rumors and Ruminations

After the trip rumors go around the school that Nina found Joshua and I “making magic” by the pond during the school trip. I get side looks from girls. Wendy shakes her head at me all throughout Science class.

“I thought we were friends! Why did you tell me about Joshua! No wonder you didn’t like Ray!”

“I didn’t like Ray because he likes you.”

“Whatever, I see it now! You are a little minx.”

Of all the things I have been called, a minx is not one of them. When I go to change for gym class, the girls snicker and laugh behind their hands. Gym class passes like a blur. The last ten minutes of class, I decide to run a few laps to keep my mind off of the moment by the pond. I’m angry that he kissed me, angry that I didn’t slap or push him away. I’m upset at the emotions that are so strong I can’t breathe. It’s barely been two weeks since Grand passed away. I haven’t had the courage to use the key that Grand gave me or look behind the door in the Asbury Arcade. The talent show is three months away and I am lost. As I try to remember how many laps I’ve run, a few boys yell at me from the bleachers during gym class.

“Hey, Eddie would you like to show me a few of your tricks?”

“I should have looked inside your top hat a long time ago.”
Mr. Bates yells at them from the other side of the gym,

“Duncan, Shawn, shut your trap or do some laps.”

I keep running around the gym, as the taunts start to die down. Wendy stands over in the corner while Nina watches me with narrowed eyes while I continue to run. I manage to hide behind a stack of gym mats across the way from the bleachers. Joshua comes up next to me. He has sweat stains across his chest.

“Don’t let them get to you.”

“You shouldn’t stand next me, you’ll just make it worse.”

“Can’t I talk to a friend?”

I raise my eyebrow at him.

“So we’re friends now.”

“Anyone who knows her gold from her iron, she’s friend of mine.”

“You should see my cell division,” I joke.

Duncan and Shawn find us near the mats. Shawn is skinny enough he could double as a scarecrow in Kansas.

“Aw look, he’s talking to his girlfriend,” Shawn sneers at me.

“Shouldn’t you be in a field somewhere scaring crows?” I ask him.

“Maybe we should leave them alone,” the other one mocks. “He can saw her in half.”

I turn to say something. Joshua beats me to it.
“Hey dummy! She’s the magician. If there’s any sawing going on, she’ll going to be doing it.”

Duncan who is a full foot taller than Joshua, stands up to him. He has a big chest and he has a dangerous look about him.

“Did you call me dummy?”

“I know I did.”

“Joshua.” I place my hand on his arm. I feel his arm flex underneath my fingers, “Don’t.”

“Listen to your freaky bitch and go away. Go back behind your dumpster and cry. Take her with you.”

Joshua pushes Duncan hard enough that he stumbles back. Duncan punches Joshua. There’s blood and all of a sudden Joshua charges for Duncan’s stomach. A whistle is blown. Joshua and Duncan continue to kick and fight on the ground.

“It’s a nerd attack!” Nina yells as the gym teacher, Mr. Bates, and Felix pulls Joshua off of Duncan. Duncan’s face is flushed as he jumps up from the gym floor and gets up to his feet.

“Duncan! Joshua! Go to the principal office now!” the gym teacher orders.

“He started it!” Duncan yells.

“Both of you leave now,” Bates growls.
Joshua glances at me before he walks out the gym. Duncan sulks as he walks as well; he keeps his distance away from Joshua. Mr. Bates blows the whistle and orders everyone to get changed. I go up to Mr. Bates.

“Mr. Bates, it was my fault.”

“Why Ms. Monroe, did you throw the first punch?”

“Joshua was only looking out for me.”

Mr. Bates shakes his head.

“Go, get changed.”

Adams Charter High has a no tolerance when it comes to fighting, which can lead to three day suspension and a mark on your report card. This isn’t the first time Duncan has caused trouble; he’s been known to start a few fights during a heated game or on the bus ride home. Duncan has made many girls cry with his words and hand obscene gestures that’d make a sailor blush. Joshua barely raises his voice let alone a fist and it’s a shock to everyone who finds out that he managed to flatten Duncan.

We find out later that Duncan is suspended for the remainder of the week, while Joshua has been send home “sick” for the next few days. Everyone keeps asking me what in the world would make Joshua attack Duncan. I don’t bother to tell them that he was defending me because I don’t believe it either. He called me not only his friend, but a magician. I don’t mind being called a friend; I could use more of them, but being called a magician. Right now, I can’t handle that. When I go to stuff my gym clothes in my locker, a note written on the back of a takeout menu falls out. I read it.
“Dear Edwina,

Please collect any worksheets and homework I might miss while I am at home.

Shine on,

Joshua

At the bottom of the note, there is an address written.
Chapter Twenty-Three

Behind The Looking Glass

I go over to Lucky Family Restaurant Friday afternoon. There isn’t a visible buzzer for the apartment upstairs where Joshua and his family live so I head inside the restaurant. There are a few waiters wearing black dress shirts and pants who walk around checking on customers who are munching happily and slurping up brown noodles.

I walk to the back of the restaurant to watch the noodle maker in the back. He looks well-dressed in a nice suit, underneath the flour covered apron that he is wearing. There are a few smudges of flour on his forehead that are near the edge of his hairline. His luxuriant hair is black with thick streaks of grey. His eyes sparkle like two chunks of jade behind clear glasses that look as if they are a hundred years old. His hands are in a pile of crumbly, pebbly dough. He looks up at me.

“Hello, how I can help you?”

“Hi, I was wondering if you know the family that lives above. I’m uh friends with one of kids up there.”

“Hello, hello! Please come in.”

He cleans his hand of dough and wipes his hand on the front of his apron. His extends his hand to me. I shake it.
“You must be Edwina. I’m Boar’s father. It’s lovely to meet you. Go back outside and to the brown door, it’s unlocked. Go up the stairs to the apartment with the green door. I’ll be right up to meet you.”

I do as Mr. Tran tells me and walk outside until I find the unlocked brown door. I walk up the long staircase where at the top is a painted green door. I knock on the door which is slightly open. There is light flute music playing that sounds like singing birds and bubbly of water.

I hear heavy footsteps behind me and see Mr. Tran following.

“Go in,” he urges me gently.

There in the living room on the red couch is a woman who is wearing a grey shirt and blue jeans pattered with different colors of paint. She is humming along to the flute music while flipping through a large magazine. When she turns around, I see that her eyes are the color of blueberries and she has a stout body. She leaps up from the couch in her painted cover smock to greet the both of us.

“Huy, why didn’t you tell me we had a guest?”

“I’d figure I’d surprise you.” Mr. Tran squeezes her shoulder lightly.

“Welcome Edwina. I’ve heard so much about you from Boar!” she takes my hand and shakes it a lot.

“I hope it’s all good.”
“Well, you can go in and see Boar. I know he’s been waiting for you. He’s down the hallway.”

I head down to the hallway to the door at the end of the hall. I knock on the door and say in a sing-song voice.

“Special delivery.”

The door inches open so that I can see only one eye appear in the space. I swing my book bag around and unzip it. I hand out him a folder. He doesn’t take it. He stares at the folder as if it is some mysterious new item.

“I promise you it’s not dangerous.”

His eyes narrow, his voice drops low as he says, “Can you promise the same for you?”

“How hard did Duncan hit you?”

He leaves the door open. I walk in. There are star maps and constellation posters plastered on his bedroom wall. His pillowcases and bed sheets are patterned with the periodic table of elements. Above his bed, there is molecule mobile swinging around. His desk is covered in papers and his computer screen glows.

On his cork board, there are various articles about the sciences, photographs of planets and pencil sketches of floating houses and flying machines. There is a postcard picture of Einstein with his electrocuted styled hair and tongue sticking out. I turn to Josh, who is wearing a shirt with the message “COPERNICUS WAS RIGHT!”

“He was.” I say about his shirt. “Grand was this close to naming my Dad after him.”
“There are worse people you could be named after.”

Joshua half smiles as he settles on the bed. The sheets crumble underneath him.

The best thing that science and magic have in common is having a pair of good eyes. You have to keep your eyes open because you never know what you’ll miss. You need to be open. I can tell Joshua, he understands this idea. That’s why he keeps his eyes always open. That’s way his eyes are on me. He’s waiting to see the science in me as much I am waiting to see the magic in him. My eyes go to his lip which is still red and swollen from the other day.

“How is your lip?”

“It’s okay. What have I missed at school?”

I hand him the folder and settle into his desk chair.

“You’ve been branded a hero by the freshman class for standing up to Duncan. You are my knight in sweaty gym shorts.”

“It’s not like I fought any dragons for you.”

“Are you sure about that? Not all dragons breathe fire.”

I shrug my book bag off my shoulder.

“Duncan shouldn’t have called you that.”

“I’m more worried about what you called me.”

“I meant it Madame Monroe, you are a magician. How is the talent show practice coming along?”
When Joshua asks this question, I totter back and forth on the chair. It creaks underneath me as I shift.

“The chair isn’t going to go on stage for you.”

“I’m sure the chair could do a better job than I would.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“Joshua, what are you doing tomorrow?”

He holds up the folder of homework for me to see.

“Can you come with me somewhere? I want to show you something.”

“Sure. Where do you need me?”

“Meet me at the Asbury Arcade, at noon.”

Joshua nods his head. There is a knock at the door. Mrs. Tran pokes her head in.

“Hi, Boar. Is Eddie staying for dinner?”

Joshua looks at me.

“I’d like to,” I answer.

The key feels heavy in my hand as Joshua and I stand before the red door. Phoebe is busy in the front with customers while we consider the door before us.

“I’ve end up passing by this shop so many times. I have pressed my nose against the window a few times but I always walked away.” Joshua looks around the items, jars and
bottles on the Arcade. He stares at the shelves and walls with wide eyes and a big smile.

“I never knew there was so much here.”

“Why didn’t you come inside?”

“I never had the courage.”

Joshua sees the key in my hand.

“You’re lucky, Eddie. That door can’t drive you crazy because you have the key, you can look inside.”

I place the key in the lock and turn until the door clicks open. I push the door open and walk in the room. The walls of the room are covered with newspaper clips, pinned and taped to the wall, many notebooks stuffed with various pieces of paper. There are cardboard boxes scattered, unopened and gathered on the floor. Broken cuffs and broken illusions take up room in a corner. Rather than successes and achievements on the walls there are setbacks, mishaps, failures. Hidden in this room are the mistakes of the Monroe Magician family. Joshua reads the headlines in a small voice to me.

“Magician injured, trick failed”

“Delays keep illusionist ground.”

“Local Entertainer L.E. Monroe Dies.”

I look at the article that Joshua has found. He takes the article off the wall and reads the first few lines. When Joshua read, he whispers the words as if he is invoking a ghost:
“Hometown celebrity and world famous illusionist L.E. Monroe died yesterday night from injuries sustained after a performance earlier this year. There is a risk with every illusion that is performed.” says Charles Monroe, the stage manager for Monroe Illusions and the brother of L.E. Monroe. He was present backstage when the performance took a turn for the tragic. “L.E. knew these risks but went on stage regardless. That was the type of person L.E. was.”

He returns the article back to its space. Out the corner of my eye, I see a black gift box wrapped with a white ribbon on the desk. Next to the box is my Grand’s illusion book scratched and worn with age. I walk over to the desk and untie the box. I open the lid. Through my tears I take out Grand’s gift. The black wool top hat is slightly flared and has high crown. The pink ribbon banded around the base ends in a simple side bow; there is a cluster of sparkly jewels in the center of the bow. Underneath the brim of the hat my initials E.B.M are stitched in pink thread. Joshua cocks his head to the side.

“What is that for?”

I explain to Joshua my family’s tradition of bestowing top hats to family members the night of their debut performance.

“Grand bought me this top hat for the talent show. This is my top hat.”

Grand believed I was a success before I stepped on the stage. I look down in the box where there is an envelope addressed to me. On the front of the envelope it is written, “Take her words and fly.” I open the envelope to see a letter creased and re-creased with age.
My dear Charles,

When you receive this letter, you will have learned that I have gone against your wishes and returned to the stage. Brother, I do not fear the future, but I fear that those who come to after us will not remember or not care to remember who we are.

Why should I be the lovely assistant when I have the skill and talent to be the magician? There is nothing wrong with being an assistant, but I want to be center stage rather than to the side. There are certain sacrifices I must make for my dream to come true and I am prepared to make them. Every Monroe son and daughter will be and can be whatever they dream without question and without fear. My dream is that I am no longer defined by others, but by my own dreams. Remember, in the end there will always be magic. Raise those wonderful children of yours and grow old, be happy. I hope that over time you will forgive me.

Sincerely,

Lucie Edwina Monroe

I press the letter against my chest and hold the top hat to my side. Lucie was scared but she went on. She belonged there on stage. So do I. The fear hasn’t gone away; the thought of standing on stage still terrifies me. In all my nightmares, I was never in the audience I was always on stage. The thought of me never being up there again frightens me so much I can barely breathe. I can choose the present fear or future horror. I choose the fear that haunts me now.

“Don’t you want to wear the top hat?”

I return the top hat to the box along with the letter.
“No, I won’t wear until after my debut. It’s tradition. I have a lot of lost time to make up for.”

I take Grand’s illusion notebook and the gift box in my hands. Joshua opens the door for me.

“Indeed you do, Madame Monroe.”
Chapter Twenty-Four

Dream On

One morning on the bus ride to school, Wendy plops down next to me; her hair is wrapped up and decorated with sparkly dragonfly clips and green silk leaves. She is smiling so much that I can see all of her teeth even the ones in the back.

“I’m going to be Ben’s assistant.” Wendy tells me.

Lucie’s letter and her words remind me of how Benjamen and I used to perform back when we were younger. He always spoke to the crowd while I stood off to the side happy to just to be there. I wonder if Wendy knows that Ben doesn’t do assistants, he only has people who stand on the stage next to him.

“When did this happen?”

“Last night we were on the phone. I asked if he needed any help for the talent show and he said sure! Try and be a little happy for me!” Wendy chirps applies lipstick to her face.

“Isn’t he dating Nina or something?”

“No, they just hang out together a lot because their parents all went to college together. There’s no spark there at all.”

It’s been weeks since Ben and I moment by the pond. There are moments when I can feel him close to me, even though he hasn’t spoken to me in the last few weeks.

“Well, that’s great for you.”
“Right. You are a terrible liar.”

“How can I be happy about this? He steals my Grand’s illusions and now my best friend.”

“He didn’t steal me! I want to see what’s so special about this magic thing that only you and Ben get to understand.” Wendy stares at me hard. Anger shines from her eyes when she speaks,

“Every time, you two get together it’s like you exist in your own little bubble that no one else can get into. When we were at the Stone Pony, I saw how you talked to each other.”

“It was nothing.”

“It’s nothing until it becomes something. Eddie, you can’t keep him all to yourself. You tell me don’t like him but then you act all strange when I get near him.”

“You can’t trust him, Wendy.”

“No, Eddie you can’t trust him, but I can. I will.”

Wendy collects her book bag without looking at me.

“I’m going to find another seat.”

She leaves me to sit by myself. Wendy sits next to Benjamen during Social Living and Science Class. They share a workbook for a class room assignment. Wendy flips her hair and smiles while Benjamen gives her shy grins. She can just sit with him and not worry about whether her words will be used later on. Why can’t I do that?
The kids at school have started making bets on who is going to win the Talent Show. Wendy seems to have more in common with Nina than me. They adore Benjamen. Wendy and Nina decide to faun over Benjamen during lunch and in the Serenity Garden, as he explains his outfit and his music.

“He never mentions his act to Wendy.” Arielle says as she watches the trio talk together in the corner. We turn their backs on them. Felix and Robert are at wood shop so we have the lunch table.

“How do you know?”

“Wendy calls me up. She won’t shut up about him about his hair is so nice, his eyes sparkle or his smiles shines like the sun but she doesn’t know a thing about his act. I asked her and she couldn’t say what he wasn’t.”

“He’s has something up his sleeve.”

“Why can’t you have an assistant of your own?” Arielle shimmies her shoulders, “Maybe you could a hire a cutie to trot around in a Speedo and hand you your wands.”

“I work alone.”

“You didn’t always work alone. Ask Joshua!”

“No way, he wouldn’t do it.

“I bet he’d jump into the ocean if you asked him to. I still can’t believe Wendy’s going to be on stage with him. How can she not know his act? It’s like my drummer not knowing my bass line.”
“Maybe he wants everyone to be surprised,” a voice says.

Joshua sits down next to me with his brown bag lunch in hand. After the craziness in the gym, Joshua without a word started sitting at our table. By then, Benjamen had moved over to Nina’s table. Even so, I would have made room for Joshua.

“You’re late.”

“I had to finish something up in computer class.” Joshua says as he unwraps his lunch.

Joshua breaks off half his spring roll and hands it over to me. I chew on it while he speaks.

“Are you coming over after school?”

I swallow my bite and answer, “I can. Reese is going to be with my cousin so I can come over.”

“Great.”

Arielle looks from Joshua and then to me, “What’s happening after school?”

“Eddie and I are working a graphic image for the talent show,” Joshua says, “Since Benjamen wants the element of surprise when he gets on stage, we have to match that.”

“It doesn’t make sense why he would pick Wendy as an assistant? She doesn’t do surprise.”

“She makes the illusion real.” I say finishing off the spring roll, “It says something if a magician can surprise his lovely assistant.”
“He’s a genius.”

“He’s a good entertainer.” I look him wondering whether I should be proud or scared.

Nina notices me looking at them. She mumbles something to Benjamen who says words back to her. She shakes her head and then walks over to our table.

“What the hell are you looking at?” she snaps at me.

“You were standing in front of the soda machine. I wanted to see if there was any root beer left,” I say.

Nina leans in close enough that I can smell the nail polish coming off her hands, “I feel sorry for you, Eddie. He doesn’t talk or think about you at all. You mean nothing to him. Save yourself some embarrassment and quit the talent show so that a real magician can win. Do us a favor and disappear.”

I stand up so that Nina has to back up away from me.

“You don’t tell me what to do.”

“I wasn’t, I was just passing along a message.”

Benjamen looks at us with who has an unreadable face.

“Pass this message back to him. I am more magic than he knows. I’ll be ready.”
Invading the Castle

When I get back from Joshua’s, I find Benjamen sitting on the front stairs of Monroe Castle. Benjamen flips through a book looking peaceful; I take the book away from him.

“I was reading that.”

“I heard that you hired an assistant.”

“Word gets out fast. I heard that your boyfriend is assisting you with your act.”

“He’s not my boyfriend.”

“So, he’s your assistant.” Ben says a little delightful.

I toss the book back to Ben as I walk up the stairs.

“The next time you have something to say to me, say it. Don’t send your carrier pigeon to deliver your messages.”

I head inside the house. Benjamen slips inside and stands in the living room with me.

“I never told Nina to say anything.” Benjamen says. I stare back at him. “You don’t believe me. Have I ever given you a reason not to trust me?”

“The Talent Show in Seventh grade.”

“You’re still upset about that car illusion.”

He doesn’t get it. I don’t think he ever will.

“You’ve never had an assistant before. Why now?”
“She’s just helping. It’s nothing special.”

“She doesn’t think it’s nothing.” I tell him, “Don’t lead her on, Ben. Wendy’s a great person and she doesn’t deserve being mislead.”

Benjamen comes close towards me. His shoulders are squared back.

“Where do you get off telling me about Wendy? She asked me if she could help and I said sure. I’ll hire anyone I want. I’ll hire you.”

“There’s isn’t enough salt in the sea,” I snap, “When I’m on stage, I’m going to be the one sawing the box in half not the one inside of it.”

“When will you do this, before or after you pee in your pants? Or pass out on stage?”

I go to pinch him. He grabs my arm and pulls me in. My chest is pressed up against his and I can feel him pressed back against me. He runs his arms up the sides of my arms and rests them on my shoulders. The touch of his hands leaves me unable to speak or snap back at Ben. This is the first time he has touched me since our kiss by the pond. This touch is filled with anticipation for something I cannot name.

“Let me go.” I say.

“Why? Are you going to run off and tell Wendy?”

“I don’t want her to get hurt.” I look at Ben, “She likes you.”

“What about you?”
I don’t know how I feel. I can’t explain to him about the Monroe Rules because he never followed them. I can’t tell him about my bruised heart because he never knew he once had it.

“How I feel doesn’t matter? Everything that needs to be said we can say it on the stage.”

I step away from his arms and try to focus away from how it felt. Benjamen rubs the inside of his palms with his fingertips.

“Is that’s how it’s going to be?”

“It has to be this way. There can only be one winner.”

“I can’t let you win, Eddie.”

“You’re not letting me do anything Benjamen. I am going to earn it.”

“You should know making the car disappear wasn’t my greatest illusion.”

“What was?”

“My greatest illusion was by the pond. I took your breath away.”

I take a slow and steady breath when he says this unable to snap back at him. I close my eyes tightly and will him to disappear. I hear his footsteps pound on the floor and my door slams hard enough that windows rattle.

Every other day when Joshua isn’t busy with helping around comes over to Monroe Castle to watch me perform my act for the talent show. Where Ben would tell me
everything was fine and trusted me figure out what worked and didn’t work, Joshua tells me what works and what doesn’t. We usually practice in the living room with the shades drawn shut over the windows.

“You have to drop the bit with the rabbit in the hat.” he tells me one afternoon after I finish my routine.

“No way. Everybody knows the rabbit in the hat.”

“Exactly, everyone knows how it is done. They know the illusion.” Josh points out, “Save the rabbit in the hat for a birthday party. This is the Paramount Theatre.”

“Alright, then what should I replace it with?”

“I don’t know, there should be a finale that will make them shout.”

“Well, that doesn’t sound too hard.” I flop down on the couch next to Joshua.

“I’m not helping am I?”

“You’re helping, Josh. You’re seeing things that I can’t.”

Joshua lays his head on the couch.

“How does it feel to be there on stage?”

“I’ve only be up there once and all I remember is the fear.”

“You should pretend that everyone in the audience is in their underwear.”

I giggle to myself thinking about it.

“I’ll be too busy laughing my head off.”
“Then pretend that the theater is filled with people that you love.”

Joshua eyes Grand’s notebook on the table.

“Maybe you could see if there’s anything in the notebook you could use. I’m sure that Grand had a few ideas under his hat.

I hesitate to open the notebook. There’s a part of me that feels like the milk stained cookie loving little girl scared to look in her Grand’s magical notebook. Then again he left me the key to the red door and left me the notebook for a reason. I open it. The front page of the illusion book is written in elegant script are the words: *There are seven illusions that a Monroe magician must master in order to be successful.*

I know them from memory. There are drawings and sketches on the pages. My hand stops on the page. I smile at the name of the illusion written before me.

“What do you see?”

“I think I found it.”
Chapter Twenty-Six

Seagulls and French Fries

It is already May.

It’s warm enough with the sunshine and cloudless blue sky that Mom, Dad, Reese and I stroll our boardwalk before the day trippers and big city folks start. On days like this, we walk like royalty down the planks taking in screams of the sea gulls and the scent of salt in the air.

Locals walk their dogs, both big and small, along shore while bicycle riders cruise down, their wheels thump and squeal on the wooden planks. There are one or two food stands open where we can share French fries. Reese grabs a few fries and shimmies through the railing and down onto the beach. Reese pokes the beak of a lazy seagull with a limp fry.

“Reese, don’t feed the seagulls!” Mom calls out.

“Why?” she asks as she continues to poke him.

Mom huffs as she joins Reese on the beach.

“You’ll give them upset stomachs,” Dad says as Mom pulls her away from the gathering group of seagulls. Dad asks me

“How’s the act going?”

“It’s going okay. I’ll run a few more rehearsals with Joshua but I think that we have it.”
“The talent show is next week.”

“Trust me; I’m nervous enough as it is.”

“You’re going to do great.”

“What if Benjamen does better?”

“What makes you say that?”

I hear what they say about me at school. *Where are you going to hide your rabbits, in your bra?* They don’t say things like that to Benjamen, just to me.

“You know what Grand would say?”

“Chin-up kid, just do your best.”

“He’d say don’t worry about being a girl magician, worry about being a great magician. If you are great and perform great then they won’t care about what or who you are. They’ll be too excited to see the next trick to care.”

“You think?”

“I know.”

Mom and Reese return from the beach smelling like crushed French fries and sand. Reese has what looks like a handful of sand in her hair.

“They ate my French fries.” Reese says with glee.

“I think we should head on home.”
Chapter Twenty-Seven
Backstage Broken Hearts

The backstage of the Paramount Theatre is teeming with artists in flashy costumes flexing their arms and legs upward towards the stage lights, performers practicing their steps over and over from memory. Everyone, despite whether they have performed or haven’t yet, watches whoever is on stage from behind the wings or from behind the blue and red curtains. Through the crowd of people running around for make-up and stretching out in any available space, Joshua comes up to me.

“How did you get backstage?”

“I have my ways. When will you be going on?”

“I’ll be going on after the pony act, dancing cats with tutus and hula hoop sisters. What are you doing over here? Shouldn’t you be getting ready?”

“I’m watching Ben.”

“You really shouldn’t.”

I don’t answer Joshua as I continue to watch. Benjamen show a empty bag to the audience. Wendy watches him with bright eyes. He reaches in and removes an orange silk scarf that shimmers underneath the spot light. Benjamen pulls out a crystal clear box that contains two big pink daises from the out of the same bag. The audience gasps in amazement and all eyes are on him. He shows his empty bag to Wendy for a third time. She shakes her head and Benjamen pulls the bag away from her and reaches in to pull out a sliever scarf that billows out across the stage like a parachute. It blankets the stage.
Wendy stumbles a little bit when the blanket unrolls on the stage. She manages to keep up with him as she helps blanket the stage with the silver material.

“I’ve never seen his act."

I turn back to Joshua who has stepped closer to me.

“What do you think?”

“He’s gotten better.”

I wave to Joshua to follow me past through the controlled crazy and back towards the dressing rooms.

“Are you doing to watch his finale?”

“I’d rather hang out with you. You don’t make me nervous.”

“Is that a good thing?”

“It’s a great thing. Besides, Arielle is coming backstage to do my makeup.”

“Where’s your family? Shouldn’t they be here?”

“No, they’d just make me nervous.”

“They’re in the front row. Reese has a bouquet of roses in her lap and my parents are next to her. Why are you asking so many questions, Joshua?”

“I ask a lot of questions when I get nervous. I keep thinking back to all those articles in Grand’s office.”

“It’s going to be okay. Whatever you saw in Grand’s office, you have to know that’s my history to keep not yours. Don’t be nervous.”

Joshua’s brown eyes shine bright with concern.

“Where are you sitting?”
“Your parents are saving me a seat right next to them.”

“You should get to your seat.”

There is thunderous applause as Benjamen and Wendy brush past us exiting from the stage. They are shiny with sweat as they head off to the back.

“I’ll see you after the show.”

Joshua squeezes my hand before he leaves. A few moments later, Arielle comes through the thicket of people, her dyed pinked hair looks like a helmet on her head. She has a pink plastic makeup case in her hand.

“I saw Joshua go. Did he give you a kiss for good luck?”

“No, come on. I need to you to make me pretty.”

“Make-up won’t do that, you already have it.”

Arielle and I head into one of the dressing room. We find a space behind a metal rack of clothes where there is a small stage mirror leaned up against the wall. Arielle starts applying make-up to my eyelids when the door slams close.

“Would you please…please get away from me?! I’m going home.”

“The talent show isn’t over yet. I wasn’t done talking.”

Arielle places a finger to my lips as they continue fussing at each other. The first voice filled with anger is Wendy. The second has to be….

“Benjamin, take the wand out your ear and relax!”

“Were you out there? I told you not to cross on my left. You crossed on my left three times. I nearly messed up the illusions.”
“You didn’t and it worked out fine! Everyone was applauding, why are you getting so mad?”

There is a sound of shuffling around the room as who I think is Wendy is looking around for her things.

“I told you my rules. You broke everyone of them.”

“It’s no big deal.”

“It’s big deal to me. If we’re going to work together, you have to follow my rules.”

“If we’re going to work together…Ben, those are your rules not mine.”

“Maybe…let’s take a break and see how things at the end of the night.”

“Benjamen at the end of the night, I’m still not her. Call me when you figure it that out.”

The door opens then closes. I peek around the clothes rack that Arielle and I been hiding behind to see Benjamen staring at himself in the mirror. His red bow-tie is crooked and his matching cummerbund has been pulled out from the waist. He takes off his jacket and throws it at the mirror.

He doesn’t move for a while but then he says, “You sure as hell aren’t her.”

He snatches up his jacket and leaves the dressing room. I look back at Arielle who doesn’t look at me. She is busy with her makeup case.

“Come on. I have to finish your makeup.”

“Did you hear that?”

“We’ll talk about it later. You are going to be on soon. I have to finish your makeup and you have to get your cape on.”
Arielle holds my face she pulls a brush out of her makeup kit and starts putting powder on my cheeks.
Chapter Twenty-Eight

Invisible

I stand center stage behind the curtain as the voice of the announce booms from above.

*Now for our final performer for the evening, coming to the stage is a local performer* 

*Madame Monroe.*

I take a deep breath as the red curtain opens before me. My heart beats so hard it feels as if it’s going to bounce out of my chest. The faces of the audience shift and melt away as I stand on stage. Rather than strangers, the faces Grand, Lucie and every Monroe aunt, uncle, cousin, brother, sister and all my family members are out there. They watch me with kind eyes. The panic falls and melts away. There are no more spiders on my skin there are only excitement.

I throw up my cape up in air and out flies my wand, black with a white tip, which I catch with my hand. I place my cape of the table. I wave my wand over my palm and pull a white mask from between my fingertips. I move my wand over the mask, which becomes painted with red and black stripes. I shake the mask and feathers appear on the rim. I toss the mask into the audience and it disappears into feathers. There is an outburst of applause as someone catches the feathers without outreached hands. I continue to conjure pulling rainbow colored scarves and pops of colors from out of nowhere. Everyone watches me illusion after illusion. I build on illusion after illusion until I reach the last several minutes of my performance.
“And now for my finale for the night, I need a volunteer from the audience.”

There is a hand in the front row that is higher than everyone else.

“You come on up here.”

As the person rambles up to the stage stairs, I pull a chair up to the center stage. As I unroll my sleeves, I face the audience to speak.

“My grandfather Charles Monroe was one of the best illusionists in the world. He taught me many things, but there’s one rule that he held up above others. If you make something disappear whether it’s a penny or an elephant, you must bring it back. Tonight I’m going to show you what he meant.”

I see my volunteer on the stage. He is a few years older and is wearing a t-shirt, jeans and a college baseball cap.

“Please tell the audience your name.”

“Larry.”

“Welcome to the stage, Larry.” I shake his hand as there is a smattering of applause for him.

“Are you going to make me disappear?” Larry asks. There is nervous tittering when he asks this question.

“No, that’s my job.”

I loosen my bow tie and pull out my shirt from out of my pants. The shirt tail pokes out from behind me like a dove tail.

“Do you mind if I borrow your hat? I’ll take good care of it.”
Larry hesitates then he hands it me. I place the hat firmly on my head and sit in the chair.

“Please bring over wooden box on the side of the stage. Set it around the chair so that surrounds me and the chair.”

Larry does as I have asked as and I surrounded by the wooden box. It is the same wooden box that I used to perform at Reese’s birthday, the same box that Grand built for me. I stand up for that my head pokes out the top of the box.

“Now, I want you to think of a magic word, a word that has power and a word that has meaning.”

There is a moment

“Abracadabraz.”

“Everyone when I sit down in the box, we’re going to say Larry’s magic word three times. Say the word clear and strong. Once we’re finished Larry please make sure to remove the box. Let’s see if we can’t make some magic.”

I wink and sit back down surrounded by the box.

“Now, Larry.”

_Abracadabraz_

One

_Abracadabraz_

Two

_Abracadabraz_

Three
I can’t tell you where I am, but I can see everything. Larry pulls the box away. All the air in the room disappears as the audience takes in a collective breath. All that is left in the seat is Larry’s hat, which I have left. Larry pokes at the hat while he looks for me. I allow myself not to think, not force the illusion but to let myself be. I have disappeared. I will return. I have to come back. I pull myself deeper into the trick and I continue to suspend myself. In that moment, everyone believes and on their silent wishes and hopes I am made completely of magic. Larry looks around the stage and then looks into the audience. He looks down into his seat and his eyes widen.

“There she is! Over there.” Larry yells happily as he points to his seat.

The house lights come on as everyone turns to look at me sitting his seat. The audience is on their feet. There are whistles and applause and everyone cheers so long and so loud that it roars like waves crashing onto the beach.
Chapter Twenty-Nine

Winners

Everyone who has performed in the Asbury Park Talent Show is ushered us back onto the stage for the awards of the night. A woman in sparkly blue dress and feathers in her hand come on stage up with three envelopes in her hand.

“The judges have tallied their votes and this has been the most talented group we have had in several years!”

“Best in show goes to Dawes and MacGregor for their magic duo.” Wendy cheers to herself. Benjamen doesn’t smile. He takes the statue from the presenter without shaking her hand.

“Third place goes to Daisy’s Dancing Cat Trio!”

Daisy runs forward to claim her prize. The woman fumbles with her envelope and opens it

“Second place goes to Madame Monroe for her magic act.”

The words that come out of her mouth make my face burn. I pinch the inside of my hand to make sure that I am here on stage and not in bed dreaming this. I thought I had a chance to win. It seems not. There are a few boos from the audience. Someone, who sounds a lot like Arielle yells “Recount!!”

Even the presenter sends me a kind smile she rips open the last envelope.

“The winner of the Paramount Theater Talent Show is…..Neptune’s Addiction.”

Neptune’s Addiction is the local dance crew who did aerial cartwheels and freeze frames all over the stage tonight. The four teenagers dressed in matching blue and white
suits group comes forward to claim the trophy from her. They look as surprised as everyone else to have the trophy in their hands.

One of the band members, the one with cute dimples, comes up to me to shake my hand, “I thought that you were going to get it.” he says as he smiles at me.

I shrug my shoulder and smile back at him.

There are more jeers from the audience, then a few shouts protest. Some people are asking for an encore. It’s wonderful to know that they want to see more of my magic. I don’t want the first place trophy but I want freeze this moment and put it on the shelf. I wave everyone before I go backstage to clean the makeup off. I find my book bag and start to get changed.

I reach into my book bag to get my change of clothes when I find a note folded up on lined paper. I open the paper to see written in neat handwriting, a small poem written on the back of a takeout menu. I laugh into the back of my hand, press the poem to my heart. There is a knock at the door. I stuff the note in my pocket as Reese runs into the dressing room. She squeezes my waist as she goes on and on about how great I was and how cool my trick was. Mom, Dad, Arielle and Joshua follow her. Joshua stands off to the side.

Arielle comes up to me as she says, “You should have won! You were robbed.”

“Arielle it’s okay!”

“I’m writing a letter to The Press. They are not going to get away with his.”

Mom kisses me on the cheek. Dad places a hand on either of my shoulders.
“Grand would have been so…proud,” he says, “We have to celebrate your performance! We’re going have a great dinner and maybe we’ll get some ice cream on the Boardwalk. Joshua, Arielle you’re welcome to join us.”

“Sure!” Arielle says.

“I should start getting back home,” Joshua says.

“Alright, then we’ll take a rain check. Eddie when you are dressed, ready meet us outside by the statue.”

Everyone but Joshua leaves me to clean up and change. I pull out the poem for him to see. His face pales but he manages a weak smile. Joshua smiles but there is something else in his eyes.

“You were supposed to see that until I was far, far away from here.”

“Timing is everything like Grand would say.”

“The carnival is coming next month after school ends. Do you want to go with me?”

“Yes, I’d like that.”

“Great,” Joshua says as sighs with relief. He bobs his head a few times before he leaves. I finish getting out of my performing outfit and into my t-shirt and jeans. I open the door to see Benjamen standing against the backstage brick wall.

“How long have you been hiding that illusion?” he says not to me but to the air.

“It wasn’t my illusion, it was Grand’s.”

I close the door behind me. I walk away as Benjamen follows behind me.

“It’s your fault I didn’t win.”

I stop and turn back around.
“Why did you have to be so good? Next to you, I looked like a beginner. If you hadn’t confused the judges with your razzle dazzle, I would have made the top three.”

Benjamen says.

I shake my head to clear the nonsense from my ears.

“What are you on? Crazy pills? If you’re going to blame anyone blame yourself. You shouldn’t have brought Wendy so late into the game. It wasn’t fair to her or you.”

“I needed someone on stage.”

“She had no real experience with magic.” I say, “It’s like asking a mermaid to wash your dishes because she lives in water. You picked Wendy because she was pretty to look at, not because she could help you. That’s why you lost.”

“She didn’t follow my rules.”

“Did you tell her how important the rules were to you or did you hope she’d figure it out?”

“I thought…that it was clear.”

“No, you should have told Wendy. The things that we see, isn’t clear to other people.”

I want to tell Benjamen so much more as we stand here back stage behind the curtains. I want him to know that this world is filled with magic, but not everybody wants to or can see it. Our ability to produce illusions and hold attention is a gift we have to use. We can’t tell people about magic, we have to show them magic.

“You should have been up there with me.”

“Would I be your partner or assistant?”
Benjamen huffs at me, “Why does it matter what you would be? We’d be up there together. Isn’t that enough for you?”

I shake my head at him “Why should I be the assistant when I can be the magician? Would that be enough you?”

Benjamen says nothing but he glares.

“That’s what I thought. If I we were to ever perform together, it would be as partners. I want nothing less than that.”

“That deal doesn’t work for me. There must be a first person and second person, nothing else. A Dawes doesn’t do second place.”

“Well a Monroe doesn’t worry about numbers, we’re concerned with talent.”

Even though it hurts me to do so, I turn my back on Benjamen and leave behind what we could have been.
Chapter Thirty

The Hooves of Carousel Horses

The carousel lights up and spins around as cheerful bright music plays. The blubs illuminates the night air as the carousel horses race around and around unable to break away from the track. I watch the horses, with their glass eyes glinting, arched necks that show off styled manes and their loose saddles. Joshua dressed for the warm night, offers me a piece of his cotton candy tuff. I take a piece and stuff the sweetness into my mouth. The sugar dissolves. I give him a smile.

“Did you want to go for a ride?” he asks as he points to the carousel.

“No, I just like to watch the horses.”

I look out to the carnival as all of Asbury is out to celebrate the start of summer. The excited shouts and screams from the riders on the Ferris wheel and Bumper Cars. People are talking while carnival callers call out to us as we walk by.

“Step right up, ladies and gentlemen.”

Joshua and I walk past a backboard made out of plywood decorated with inflated balloons held up with pins.

“Come on up and try your luck!”

We continue pass the rubber ducky pond, our arms occasionally bump into each other.

“Try your hand and win a prize.”

Joshua motions over to the ping pong ball toss. There are other people standing around trying to dunk their ping-pons into the empty and filled fishbowls. Some are colored pink, blue and green while the others look like normal and are colorless.
“You get three ping-pongs for a dollar. If you want you can have twenty ping-pongs for five dollars.” the carnival caller with his straw hat and striped shirt says to us. “If you get a pink bowl, you get a keychain. If you get a blue bowl, you get a stuffed fishy. If you get a green bowl, you get take home a real live goldfish to take home.

“I’m going to get you a green,” Joshua says. He goes off to get some change for the game while I wait for him to return.

“Eddie!”

Wendy comes up to me from over the popcorn stand with Raymond coming up behind her. He is munching popcorn while keeping an eye on me.

“What are you doing here?”

“I’m here for the popcorn,” she says to me with a sly smile before giving Raymond a not so private wink.

“What about Ben?”

“After we got off stage, he acted like a big baby. He blamed me for messing up his act. Then a few days later, he called me up and said that he was wrong to yell. I thought I saw Ben around here eating a funnel cake.”

“Are you going to be his assistant again?”

“He can hire someone else. We’re going to be just friends, nothing more. What are you doing here? Did you have to bring Reese?”

“No.”

“Are your parents performing?”

“No.”
Wendy stares at me with a side eye while Raymond comes up to the both of us.

“She’s on a date,” he whispers to Wendy. I am happy that Raymond gets it. Her eyes almost pop out of her head when he tells her this.

“Oh this is going to be so awkward.” Wendy covers her forehead with her hand, “Me with Raymond and you with…”

Joshua waves as he comes back from the ticket booth.

“I’m sorry that took so long.” Joshua says My heart jolts a bit when he brushes my hand with his. Wendy narrows her eyes at him.

“Were you expecting someone else?” Joshua asks playfully.

Wendy doesn’t say anything. Her face falls for a moment, but she recovers. She was expecting someone else to be here. I open my mouth to ask who but I cannot ask, not right now. I ask Wendy and Raymond if they want to join us at the ping-pong fishbowl game. Wendy shakes her head while Raymond wants to see all of Asbury Park from the top of the Ferris Wheel.

Raymond pulls her way towards the ride as Wendy continues to stare at Joshua and I. Joshua and I start throwing ping-pong balls at the colorful fishbowls. We laugh as they bounce and fly off of the rim and go flying off into the booth. We continue on and on until our hands are empty and we left with nothing but laughs.

“I’ll be right back and then we’ll play some more,” Joshua says. He leaves. Minutes after he has left, the carnival caller yells, “WINNER! We have a WINNER. Ladies and gentlemen we a have winner of a brand spanking new goldfish.”
There is Benjamen standing there holding a plastic bag in which a goldfish is swimming around. I walk over to him.

“You must have a golden arm,” the carnival caller says as he hands Benjamen a plastic bag containing a swimming goldfish.

“I don’t have a golden arm, I just like to win.”

Benjamen holds out the bag to me. The goldfish looks up at me with kissy lips and big eyes.

“What’s that?” I ask him.

“People call it a goldfish, but you might want to call him Neptune or Bob.” Benjamen holds out the bag even more to me. I don’t take it. I step back a little.

“Why are you giving me a goldfish?”

“He’s a gift since your date can’t hit the ocean if he fell into it.”

My mouth drops at this news.

“You’ve been watching us?”

Benjamen shrugs his shoulders, “I’ve been walking around. I see things; can’t I look around Madame Monroe? I wanted to make sure Josh acted like a gentleman. He wasn’t going to win you anything so I did, like I used to.”

I cross my arms across my chest, “We weren’t playing to win; we were playing to have a good time.”

“Well, now you can have a goldfish with your good time.”

“I’m not going to name him Bob. What’s if it’s a girl?”

“Name the fish whatever you want but it’s yours.”
I take the goldfish from Benjamen. I stare inside the bag at the goldfish swimming around.

“His name is going to be Poseidon.”

“Good name.”

I take my eye off of Poseidon to see Benjamen grinning at me “Does this mean that we’re friends?”

“It means that we’re not enemies.”

“Well we’re okay until next year or until the talent show.”

“We can forget the past and start new.” Benjamen says his face bright with small hope. I don’t want to forget the sunny afternoons we spent making couches and curtains disappear, or the rainy days when we opened our mouths and caught cold raindrops on our tongues. I can’t forget the hurt or pain because it made me more careful with myself and my heart.

“The past is what makes us. We just keep going from here.”

“What about the magic?”

“The magic will be there, it always will be. Thanks for Poseidon, Benjamen.”

“You’re welcome.”

Benjamen sighs before he looks around. He scans the crowds.

“Are you looking for your date? She must be missing you.”

“I’m here alone,” he answers quickly but continues looking around, “Where’s Joshua? He needs to get you and Poseidon home.”

“He probably got caught up in the food line.”
“Let’s go get him.”

Benjamen and I start walking through the growing crowd of carnival people. A few people start to push me around back and forth so much that I cannot get through. I lose Benjamen in all the noise, but then his hand comes through the crowd and finds mine. Benjamen takes my hand firmly in his and pulls me forward with him. He smells of fresh lemons and salt, which makes me want to breathe him in. My heart beats so much that I thought I could hear hooves of carnival horses race around the track. He holds me close and together we walk through the blinking lights, popping balloons and sweetness of popcorn.