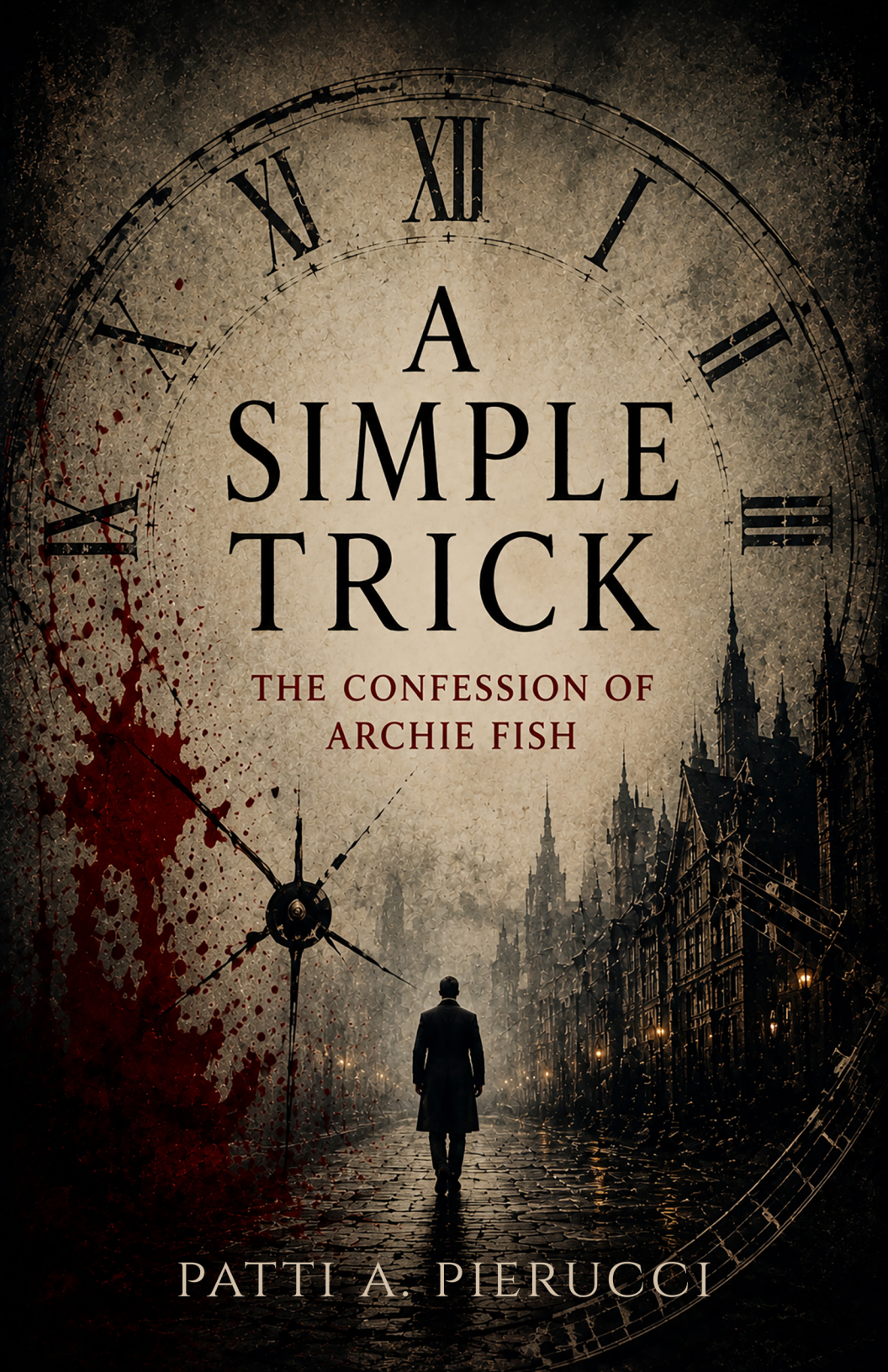




A SIMPLE TRICK

THE CONFESSION OF
ARCHIE FISH

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A SIMPLE TRICK: THE CONFESSION OF ARCHIE FISH

By Patti A. Pierucci

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Book cover design: InkSpire Press

Author's Note: This is a work of fiction. Names, events, and characters are entirely imaginary.



SIMON THE SEER

SIMON
THE
SEER

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Magicians have always fascinated me—not because of the tricks themselves, but because of the relationship between the performer and the audience. A good illusion depends as much on the willingness to believe as it does on deception.

Archie Fish first appeared in my *Hand of Maud* novels, though readers only glimpse pieces of him there. While writing those books, I became increasingly interested in the man behind the performance—the resentment, ambition, and desperation hidden beneath the stage persona. This novelette grew from that curiosity.

This story is about envy, performance, ambition, and the strange hunger to be remembered at any cost. And perhaps most of all, it is about the cost of getting everything you thought you wanted.

1



THE CONFESSION

IT IS A SIMPLE THING to confess, provided you do not intend to be forgiven.

I have always believed this, and the years since have only reinforced my conviction. In the matter of what I did—and what I am about to do again, on a scale both grand and, yes, perhaps grotesque—I bear no hope of exoneration in the eyes of God, the law, or posterity. It is only you I address, gentle reader. You, who are wise enough to have already sensed that the world is less a place that rewards the do-gooder than a warren of little predators, each gnawing for their share.

Permit me, then, this one indulgence of the written word, that I might explain myself to at least one reasonable person before the thing is finished and history rewrites it.

I do not believe, as the Great Castellan did, in the distinction between men born for greatness and men born to be its footnotes. I have always been at home among the latter, and it is my curse—no, my particular talent—to have known, at every instance, exactly what was denied me and by whom. Some men are blind to their own failings. Not

I. Even as a boy I could read, in the faces of teachers and siblings and future lovers, the precise measure of how much less I was than I ought to be. No matter how deft the illusion, the world saw through me with a glance.

But I am ahead of myself, as I so often am. Let us begin at the threshold, as all honest stories do. Let us say you are a man—me, Archie Fish—who has spent his whole life backstage, watching the house fill for a magician whose only real trick is the ability to make you feel invisible. Let us say that for twenty-five years you have watched him conjure thunder from polite applause, watched him snatch coins from the ears of toddlers, watched him manifest effortlessly, the adoration that you would kill to feel for one hour.

Let us say that this man, the Great Castellan, calls you his “apprentice” but means only that you are fit to polish his mirrors and lay out his props while he dines with oligarchs and celluloid celebrities.

Now imagine, if you can, that you have finally glimpsed the secret. Not the secret of his illusions—those are trivial, and no true magician is so gullible as to believe his own hype—but the secret that powers his actual, inexplicable success. Imagine it is a thing so blasphemous, so fundamentally unfair, that you are forced to reconsider the moral shape of the world.

What would you do, reader, if you alone knew the mechanism behind the miracle? If you alone saw the cost, and the hunger, and the terrible logic of it all?

I see you hesitate. I respect your hesitation. It is the instinct of the well-socialized to shrink from atrocity, to wall themselves off from the sins of men who seem to be monsters but are only mortals backed into an impossible corner.

I can assure you, I am not a monster. I am not even unusual. My flaw is only that I have never been able to accept the terms of my own defeat.

You will hear, from others, that my actions were those of envy, or madness, or the particular coldness that sometimes takes root in a man who has been overlooked too long. Perhaps there is truth in that. But I would have you understand me as I am, and as I was: a man who believed, against all reason, that the arc of the universe ought to bend

toward justice, or at least toward the possibility of it. A man who saw, in Castellan's final performance, a blueprint for how the world might finally be made fair.

All confessions are love letters, in their way. They yearn to be read and understood, if not forgiven. So read me, if you will, and know that what follows was inevitable. For if there is one law of the universe that not even a magician may break, it is that every effect has a cause.

This, then, is the story of mine.

2



THE WARM-UP ACT

IF, AS THE PHILOSOPHERS claim, a man's soul is shaped by the company he keeps, then mine never had a chance.

The world does not want for second-rate conjurers. There are, I assure you, enough to staff every carnival, every children's party, every windowless banquet room in the greater Midwest. I was, I confess, one of them—a medium-caliber prestidigitator with decent patter and hands quick enough to amuse, but not quick enough to astonish.

My agent said I had “relatable energy.” My ex-wife called it “the whiff of the condemned.” In either case, it was clear to everyone but me that my life would be spent lurching between the church basement and the VFW, a prophet without honor and, more to the point, without much of a purse.

I do not claim that my existence was uniquely hard. Only that I was uniquely aware of its humiliations. Other men in my position might have adapted, or numbed themselves with drink, or simply vanished into obscurity. I did none of these things. Instead, I developed a connoisseur's palate for disappointment.

Take, for example, the gig in Galesburg, Illinois. One of those “family fun nights” at a church so modest it was advertised by rumors and not road signs. I arrived early, as I always did, to find the sanctuary transformed into a makeshift theater: folding chairs, a broken lectern doubling as a stage, and a “backstage” comprised of a single mop bucket and a curtained storage closet. I performed my best material—The Reappearing Coin, The Sly Rabbit, The Lamentable Death of Mr. Puppet—and received, in return, the applause of parents who could not bear to look up from their phones. The children heckled, as children do, but with a venom that suggested extracurricular training.

Afterward, as I gathered my things, a man approached. He wore the affable mask of the parish committee: a polo shirt, khakis pleated into submission, and the sad handshake of a man who only shakes hands once a week. He told me that Castellan would be appearing in Galesburg the following month, at the Civic Center.

“It’ll be a real show,” he said, with the best intentions in the world.

He meant nothing by it, of course. Nobody ever does.

Castellan was a phenomenon even then—a magician’s magician, a performer so famous that he needed only the one name, as if the universe had pre-ordained it for marquee lights. I had seen him on television, in grainy, late-night interviews where he played the role of tormented genius with the conviction of a true believer. His tricks were not tricks at all, but “demonstrations,” “revelations,” acts that transcended the language of illusion. He could tell you what was in your pocket, or what your mother had whispered to you on her deathbed, and you would believe that he’d plucked it straight from the void.

That was Castellan’s real magic: not in the mechanics, but in the way he made you complicit in the lie.

He and I shared an agent, though he did not know it. He and I shared a city of origin, though he would never admit it. In all the ways that mattered, he was the version of myself I might have been, had the dice rolled differently.

The first time I met him in person was backstage at a benefit for the Shriners, an organization whose sole purpose, as far as I could tell, was to extend lives. As though that constituted the most noble of pursuits.

As though every life were worth extending.

I was on the bill as the opening act, a position with the dignity of a warm-up comedian at an autopsy. Castellan arrived precisely twenty minutes late, his entrance timed to ensure every head in the room swiveled toward him at once. He had the face of a man who expected to be drawn from marble, the suit of a man who could afford it, and the smile of visiting royalty.

We exchanged a handshake, and he asked what “bit” I’d be performing. I told him. He nodded, graciously, and said, “Ah, the classics. There’s comfort in that, isn’t there?”

This was Castellan’s way—every compliment contained a little acid. I endured it because I had no other option, and because, if I’m being honest, I wanted nothing more than to be like him, to walk into a room and have the oxygen rearrange itself out of respect.

I will not bore you with a litany of my failures, but understand that they were not accidents. They were, to borrow a phrase from one of my own reviews, “consistent and cumulative.”

Every year the gigs paid a little less; every month the bookings were a little more desperate; every time I returned home, my apartment felt a little more like a prison than a home. My wife left, taking with her both the illusion of normalcy and the only living creature (a surly tabby named Houdini) who had ever watched me work with something approaching interest. My agent left, replaced by a bot that sent rejection emails with uncanny human warmth.

All the while, Castellan soared. He played stadiums, coliseums, entire continents. He published memoirs, though the word “memoir” implies a past tense that did not apply to him. He gave interviews in which he hinted, always obliquely, that his powers were real, that he was not a magician but a medium, a conduit for forces unknown to science. The public lapped it up, because the public will always believe in miracles over method, in charisma over craft.

There were weeks when I subsisted on ramen and resentment. There were nights when I sat on my apartment floor, rehearsing my sleights for a mirror that never failed to register my disappointment. I would watch footage of the Great Castellan—his posture, his diction,

the exact point at which he would modulate his voice to bring the crowd into a hush—and I would try, hopelessly, to emulate it. I could never get the look in his eyes right. My eyes always seemed to ask, “Do you see me?” His seemed to command, “You will.”

It is tempting, in stories such as these, to paint the antagonist in monstrous colors. But I do not think Castellan was a monster. He was only a man who had never learned to doubt himself. He was a man who, through some combination of luck and congenital indifference, never questioned whether he deserved his audience. And perhaps that is what I envied most of all—not his talent, but his certainty. I could not imagine what it must feel like to live without apology or guile.

But you, reader, are not here for my self-pity. You are here to know how a man like me could do what I am about to describe. You are here for the logic, the progression, the steps by which envy is transmuted into action.

There was one night that changed everything. The night Castellan, at the apex of his career, invited me into his dressing room with a smile that suggested we were equals, or at the very least, that I was worth noticing. The night he poured me a glass of Glenlivet and let slip—whether by design or by the drunkenness he feigned so artfully—the secret at the heart of his success.

He did not know, could not have known, that I would recognize it for what it was. That I, alone among his worshipers, would have the context to piece it together. He thought he was toying with me, perhaps even pitying me, as one does with a dying animal.

He could not have known that, in that instant, he was passing the torch.

Every story needs its inciting incident, its point of no return. For me, it was this: the knowledge that I had been right all along, that the world is not fair, and that the only way to balance its scales is to break them yourself.

That night, as I lay awake in the shabbiest hotel the Shriners’ budget would allow, I rehearsed not a new trick but a new life. I did not yet know the cost. I did not yet know what the machine would do to me, or to anyone else. All I knew was that, for the first time in my life, I was in

possession of a secret that mattered.

If you believe, as I once did, that envy is a petty sin, easily mastered—well, you have never truly envied. You have never felt it down to the marrow, as a kind of second skeleton holding you upright after the real one has turned to jelly. You have never experienced, as I did, the exquisite clarity that comes from knowing your enemy's every move and flaw, because you have lived in his shadow so long you can draw its outline blindfolded.

I slept soundly, that night. I dreamed of applause. I dreamed of a world in which I was not the warm-up, but the headliner.

I tell you this not to excuse myself, but to help you see how inevitable it all was. Some men are born to greatness, and others are driven to it by the sheer weight of their own inadequacy.

It is not, as it turns out, the worst fate imaginable.

3



THE MISSING CARD

THE ONLY REAL TRICK, I learned, is how to fail in public. It is one thing to endure the occasional ruined evening—the snapped thread, the gag that lands like a wet sponge. It is another to make failure your vocation. I was not the worst, which would have been a consolation, but the median: competent, prepared, and not memorable in the least. I worked the shows no one else would touch—the senior breakfasts, the third-tier state fairs, the holiday parties for corporations whose real magicians were in accounting.

On bad days, I performed for the empty seats, each one a polite suggestion that I should not have come. I learned to ignore it, as one learns to ignore tinnitus. I performed as though the room was full, even when a child would call out, “It’s in his sleeve,” or when the dove I produced at the finale would leave a droplet of contempt on my best suit.

The worst of it was always the money. The check, when it arrived, would be less than promised. I learned to pad my estimates, to plan for disappointment the way a meteorologist plans for rain.

When you live in the margins, you become attuned to absence.

Every message unreturned, every invitation lost in transit, every friend who “meant to come” but never did. I collected these little omissions, added them to the tally. There is, you see, a ledger inside every man.

I should mention, here, the woman. She worked at the bank where I once, years ago, maintained a checking account. Her name is not important; what matters is that, in all my encounters with her, she never once looked at me as if I was invisible. She did not smile, exactly—her face was built for gravity—but she nodded at my jokes, once laughed outright, and on one occasion touched my hand as she returned my license. It was nothing, I know. A reflex, an accident of flesh against flesh. But for weeks afterward, I thought of her hand: the precise temperature of it, the faint trace of lotion, the half-second where it lingered. I rehearsed, privately and pitifully, the conversation I would one day have with her, in which I would be at last interesting, at last real.

Instead, I spent my evenings in the company of other magicians, the few who remained in circulation. They gathered at a suburban pizza place that had been rebranded three times without once changing the furniture, where the overhead televisions played sports no one watched and the booths had absorbed decades of spilled ambition. We sat together in our off-brand blazers, discussing the hacks, the has-beens, and the endless cruelty of bookers who preferred birthday clowns to honest tradesmen.

It was at one such gathering that the subject of the Great Castellan arose. Someone had seen him perform in Minneapolis, a sold-out house, two thousand seats and not an empty one among them. The reports were, as always, tinged with envy and awe. He had performed a new effect: he selected a name at random from the audience—a woman, a total stranger—and, with a single glance, told her the contents of a letter she had written to her deceased mother decades prior, a letter never sent and never spoken of. The woman fainted. The room erupted. “He’s not a magician,” one of us said, half in jest, “he’s a goddamn warlock.”

I smiled, nodded, played my part in the chorus of admiration. But inside, something twisted. I had once hoped to be the kind of man who could provoke wonder. Instead, I had become the kind who applauded it from the cheap seats.

Castellan's career was a study in escalation. With every year, his feats grew bolder, his claims more outlandish. He spoke, in interviews, of "accessing the deep currents of time," of "short-circuiting fate itself." He never explained his methods, only hinted that there were forces at work beyond the ordinary stage tricks. The public, starved for marvels, ate it up. At some point, he dropped his first name. He became less a man and more an event.

I was hired, once, as his assistant for a touring production in Des Moines. "Assistant" is the polite term; in practice, it meant that I loaded the van, set up the stage, and filled in as the sacrificial volunteer for rehearsals.

Castellan, in person, was colder than I'd imagined, more animal than human. He regarded me with the same forensic interest he might have brought to a new prop or a promising mark. He never spoke in the affirmative, only in probabilities: "It will likely rain tonight." "This trick will almost certainly land." "You are probably capable of not screwing this up."

During the tour, I watched as he performed to ever-larger crowds, each more desperate to be astonished than the last. He worked the audience with surgical precision, building anticipation, then shattering it with an effect so blunt and final that it left them reeling. No one clapped right away; there was always a half-beat of silence, as if the crowd needed to recalibrate their understanding of reality before offering it their applause. I envied him, of course. But I also despised him, for the ease with which he conned the world.

There is an anecdote, which I relate here only because it marks the moment the fuse was set: After one show, Castellan summoned me to his dressing room, a suite large enough to host the entire cast of a minor opera. He poured us each a glass of wine—not the grocery store kind, but a bottle that looked like it cost more than my last three gigs combined. He toasted "to illusion," and drank without waiting for me to reciprocate.

We talked, or rather, he talked. He dissected my act, my presentation, my choice of material. He did it kindly, as a surgeon might remove a tumor. He asked, at length, why I remained in the business. I gave the

honest answer: “It’s all I have.”

He smiled, but not in mockery. Then he reached into his pocket and produced a deck of cards. He shuffled it, handed it to me. “Find the ace of spades,” he said. I did as instructed. It was not in the deck. “It’s a simple trick,” he said. “Can you figure it out? The real mystery is where the card goes.”

He waited, watching me with predatory patience.

I said nothing.

He leaned closer. “It goes into your head,” he whispered. “You spend the rest of your life looking for the missing card.”

After that, we drank in silence.

When the tour ended, I returned to my city, to my apartment, to my calendar of empty dates. I checked my mailbox daily, hoping for word of new bookings, or a letter from the woman at the bank, or even a bill addressed to someone else. I walked the streets late at night, watched as the lights of the city bled into the horizon, and wondered what it would be like to leave behind no shadow at all.

That is the wound, reader. Not the moments of public failure, or the slow, ceaseless evaporation of hope. The wound is knowing that, in the final tally, you will not even rate as a footnote in your own life story.

I said before that I did not envy Castellan’s talent, but his certainty. That was only half-true. What I really envied was the power to make others believe. In time, this longing curdled into a kind of mission. I began to study him—not his tricks, but his interviews, his mannerisms, his lies. I watched every available clip, read every article, looking for the seam, the loose thread, the tell that would reveal his secret. I told myself it was research, a professional obligation to learn from the best.

The truth is, I was searching for a flaw. Any flaw. Something to prove that even Castellan was human.

It took years. But I found it.

And, in finding it, I found my purpose.

Now, reader, you understand the wound. In the next telling, you will understand what grew from it.

4



THE MACHINE

THERE ARE ONLY TWO OCCASIONS, I've found, when a man is likely to reveal his true nature. The first is in the final hour before a performance, when anxiety and adrenaline have stripped away the last of his manners. The second is in the first hour after, when the crowd's love has evaporated and nothing remains but the question of how to go on living until the next show.

It was during the latter that Castellan, or the man behind the mask, invited me into the sanctum of his dressing room. This was the night I alluded to, the night that changed everything.

The show had been a triumph. Two thousand people, electrified, had leapt to their feet as one at the conclusion; the thunder of applause still echoed in the carpeted hallway. The man himself was in the midst of his after-show ritual: a glass of whiskey, hands wrapped in towels, the cold compress applied to his left temple. He did not look up as I entered, only gestured to a chair that had been placed, pointedly, lower than his own.

"You did well tonight," he said. "Almost as efficient getting out as

you were getting in.”

He had a gift for praise that felt like being measured for a coffin. Every compliment was bracketed as if any further expectation would be a kindness too far. I ignored the jab and sat.

He poured me a measure of whiskey, not bothering to ask if I wanted it, and waited until I had taken the glass. Then, with the detached air of a surgeon, he began to dissect his performance that evening: the tempo, the crowd’s mood, the precision of the cues.

He talked and talked, and as he talked he relaxed, the mask of persona slipping in increments. I studied him with the kind of careful focus I reserved for new sleights of hand. The face was less perfect in person—flushed with exertion, a patch of stubble missed by the razor, lips chapped from the dry air of auditoriums. But the eyes were unchanged: twin orbs of black glass, absorbing and reflecting the world with nothing left behind.

His performance that night had included a new effect, one that had left even the jaded crew in awe. In the final act, Castellan brought forth a young woman from the audience—a volunteer, but not really, not in the sense that she had any choice. He asked her a series of questions: her name, her job, the first song she’d ever loved. Then, to the gasping silence of the crowd, he revealed the contents of a letter she had written as a child, a letter never sent, never shown to anyone. He recited it verbatim, in the trembling voice of the seven-year-old she once was.

I had watched from the wings, as always, and felt something inside me recoil. Not at the effect—anyone with half a brain could see it was a cold-reading trick, elevated by Castellan’s preternatural intuition—but at the look on the woman’s face. She did not smile. She did not cry. She sat, hands folded, eyes locked on the man in the spotlight, as if she recognized in him something she’d spent her whole life trying to forget.

He noticed me noticing, and when the crew had dispersed, he gestured for me to stay.

“Ever wonder how it’s done?” he asked.

I shrugged. “I know how it’s done.”

He laughed. “No, you know how you would do it. But I don’t use confederates. I don’t bug their phones, don’t bribe the family. I

simply know.”

I waited, knowing this was a lead-in.

He leaned forward, conspiratorial. “The secret,” he said, “is not in the trick. It’s in the commitment to the bit. You don’t just pretend to read minds. You convince yourself, if only for a moment, that you actually can.”

I had heard this before, from lesser magicians. It was the rhetoric of salesmen, or of cultists who’d begun to believe their own pitch.

“I see,” I said.

He smiled, a slow and terrible thing. “No, you don’t. But you could.”

He let the silence stretch. “Come,” he said at last, and stood. I followed, more out of curiosity than obedience, as he led me through a maze of corridors to a service elevator marked **AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY**.

We rode in silence to the basement, where the after-show detritus of the evening—coiled cables, spent batteries, catering trays—was being mopped up by the night crew. He walked past all of it, not looking left or right, and stopped at an unmarked door beside the loading dock. He produced a key from his pocket, and we entered.

The room was small and windowless, lit by a single flickering bulb. In its center sat an object that resembled, at first glance, a travel trunk or a shipping crate. It was made of metal, reinforced at the edges, and bore no markings or labels. On its side was a panel of switches and a small window, encircled by a curtain. Behind the window something gave off a faint, steady light, the color of a gas flame.

He circled the object, regarding it as one might regard a dangerous pet. “This,” he said, “is how I do it.”

He waited for me to respond, but I did not. I examined the object, its lack of moving parts, the fine and deliberate seams in the casing. I noted the smell: not quite ozone, but close, mingled with the sour tang of burnt hair.

“It’s a cheat,” he said, eyes on the machine. “A real one. Not the stuff of double lifts and false bottoms. A cheat in the metaphysical sense.”

He ran his hand over the surface, and the machine hummed—a deep, chest-cavity vibration that set my teeth on edge.

“How does it work?”

He smiled, pleased. “I don’t understand it fully. I only know what it does.”

He looked at me, gauging my skepticism. “I don’t do tricks, Archie. I cheat time.”

He gestured for me to approach. “Here,” he said, “put your hand on it. Just for a second.”

I hesitated, but the look in his eyes brooked no argument. I reached out, fingers splayed, and touched the cool metal. At once my teeth ached as if I’d bitten foil, and the room tilted sideways—not spinning, just wrong, like a picture hung slightly off-level—and I tasted something rotting and sweet at the back of my throat. Then it passed.

He watched me carefully. “Some people faint,” he said. “Most throw up. But I had a feeling you’d take it in stride.”

I pulled my hand back. “What is it?”

He shrugged. “Does it matter?”

He explained, in his roundabout way, that the machine allowed him to see not the future in the fortune-teller sense, but to actually travel to different times, to know the pattern of events that would unfold, the possibilities collapsing into certainty. He likened it to standing at the top of a hill and watching a marble roll down: you could not change its path, but you could predict where it would land, and when, and with what force.

“I don’t perform miracles,” he said. “I just spoil the ending.”

He regarded me with a new, appraising look. “You could use it, if you wanted. You could practice a hundred years and still be playing church basements. Or you could use this, and see what it’s like to win.”

He was toying with me, of course. The offer was a test he already knew I’d fail, a performance for an audience of one. My refusal was the final flourish in his act, confirming what we both already knew: he was offering the crown precisely because I would refuse to wear it.

“Why show me?” I asked.

He smiled, but there was no warmth in it. “Because you’re the only one who’d believe me.”

He locked the door on the way out.

In the days that followed, the world outside that locked room became a pantomime. The gigs, the laughter, my own tired routines—it all felt trivial, like sandpaper on a raw nerve. The only real thing was the machine. Its hum was a constant presence in my mind, a vibration that made me feel both sick and alive. I didn't just fantasize about returning; I rehearsed it, rewriting my miserable story in my head until the imagined look on Castellan's face was more vivid than any applause.

But I did nothing. I waited. I watched.

Then, one night, the call came. Castellan was dead. The official story was a heart attack, but I didn't need to ask how it had really happened. I had been there.

It was three nights earlier when I finally returned to his dressing room. The machine was humming its patient song. Castellan was there, slumped in his chair, whiskey wet on his lips. He looked up when I entered, not with surprise, only weariness.

"You came for it," he said. Not a question.

"I came for what you owe me. I've lived in your shadow for too long."

He laughed, a dry sound. "I owe you nothing, Archie. You're a footnote. You'll always be a footnote."

I had prepared for this. A syringe, purchased from a veterinary supply in a town I would never return to. Potassium chloride—the same compound I had once used to flash-fire a burst of violet smoke in the third act, back when I still performed. A different kind of disappearing act. The needle was already in my hand, hidden by my sleeve, a trick I had practiced a thousand times in mirrors.

I poured him another glass. He took it, still smiling, still certain I was too small to be dangerous.

"To your legacy," I said.

He drank. I moved behind him, as if to adjust his chair, and in one motion pressed the needle into the vein at his neck. He stiffened, tried to rise, but I had learned from him—the misdirection of touch, the confidence of the performer. I held him down with one hand and whispered in his ear:

"It's a simple trick," I said, mimicking his comment to me about the card trick. "Can you figure it out?"

His body convulsed once, twice, then went still. I counted to sixty, watching the light leave his eyes. Then I arranged him—slumped forward, glass in hand, the picture of a man who had simply worked himself to death. I wiped the needle clean and pocketed it. I took the key from his jacket. I turned off the light and closed the door.

The machine hummed on in the dark, waiting.

The official story was a heart attack in his dressing room. The body was found slumped over the same glass of whiskey I had poured for him. There were no marks, no signs of struggle, nothing to suggest anything but the slow and dignified end of a man who had spent his life one step ahead of the reaper. They never questioned it. They never found the key to his private workshop, of course. They never even knew to look.

I traveled to Cleveland, as one does, to pay my respects. The memorial was held in a hotel ballroom, draped in the velvet of mourning. The room was packed with celebrities, journalists, and a scattering of the faithful who had followed Castellan's career from the beginning. I recognized many faces, none of whom recognized mine.

Afterward, I walked the city, a ghost in Castellan's final footsteps. I stood in the alley behind the theater, breathing the stale air where the crew had smoked between acts. I searched myself for some appropriate emotion—grief, triumph, even relief—but found only a dull, expectant calm. The prelude was over.

I checked into a motel on the edge of the city, the kind with vibrating beds and plastic-wrapped cups. I slept, or tried to, but my dreams were filled with the hum of the machine.

In the small hours, I woke with the certainty of what I had to do.

The theater was closed, the alley deserted. I scaled the fire escape with the grace of a man who knows he cannot afford to fall. The basement door was locked, as it had been, but the key fit. The room was just as I remembered: the trunk in the center, the smell of ozone and scorched hair.

I approached the machine, and for a moment—just a moment—I hesitated. I thought of the woman at the bank, the possibility of a life spent in the honest obscurity I knew so well. I thought of Castellan and the way he had looked at me: as both rival and pawn, equal and

footnote. I thought of the years, the ledger, the balance due.

Then I placed my hands on the machine, and turned it on.

When I stepped inside, it was not what I expected. There was no flash, no vision of infinity. I had, in a rare moment of childishness, braced myself for the agony of disintegration. Instead, what came was, as always, a perfect calm, so absolute it felt like death. I watched my body liquefy, my thoughts run out of my head and down the sides of the machine, pooling on the floor in glistening dark puddles. Each drop contained a memory, perfectly preserved, each memory a version of the man I once was.

I returned to the present. I was shaking, and I was laughing, and I was at last, for the first time in my life, awake.

I carried the machine out of the theater and into the dawn.

If you are waiting, reader, for a confession of guilt, you will wait forever. I did what I had to do. I took the secret and made it mine. I became, in that moment, what I was always meant to be: not a footnote, not a failure, but the author of my own story.

This is how it happened. There is nothing more to say. At least, nothing I am willing to tell.

5



SIMON THE SEER

THE FIRST THING I DID with the machine was not, as you might expect, an act of revenge or revelation. It was a bet.

I have always believed that a man's nature does not change, no matter the tools he acquires. At my core, I am and have always been an accumulator—of grudges, of sleights, of coin, when possible.

And so, in the first week after Cleveland, I traveled back in time, to a racetrack outside Louisville, Kentucky, where the air reeked of sunblock and stale beer. I arrived with nothing but a cheap suit and a printout of the day's racing schedule. I knew, from the archives, that on this exact day a longshot named Hidden Glory would take the fifth race by a nose, defying every tipster and odds-maker in the country. It was not a test of the machine; it was a test of myself, of whether I could believe what I already knew.

I placed the bet, all of it, on Hidden Glory to win. The cashier, a woman with the face of a retired boxer, looked at me with open contempt. "You're throwing it away," she said. I smiled, said nothing, and kept the stub.

You know, of course, how the story ends. Hidden Glory, after a sluggish start, charged from last to first in the final hundred yards. The stadium erupted, and I erupted with it, screaming and laughing and high-fiving strangers. For one glorious moment, I was part of the miracle, not the skeptical observer but the beneficiary of fortune. I collected my winnings, more money than I had held in years, and walked out into the afternoon with a lightness that bordered on the supernatural.

It was only later, back at the motel, that I noticed the change.

With the machine humming in the corner, I caught my reflection in the bathroom mirror as I peeled off my suit. For a moment, I did not recognize the man who looked back at me. There was nothing dramatic—no fangs or horns, no sudden aging—but the eyes were different. Not the color, not the shape, but the depth. The darkness at their edges had deepened, as if the pupils had been overexposed, or as if some small, private eclipse had taken place behind the irises. I blinked, looked again. The effect was subtle, but unmistakable.

I told myself it was exhaustion, or the harsh lighting, or the residue of the machine's hum. But when I awoke the next morning, it was still there: the eyes, rimmed in shadow, absorbing more than they reflected.

I shrugged it off. I had won. For the first time in my life, I had not merely broken even, but come out ahead. I checked out of the motel, took a cab to the nearest high-end mall, and bought a new suit. I booked a first-class ticket back to Chicago. At the airport bar, I drank a toast to myself.

I began to experiment, in small and careful ways. At the racetrack, I bet with the confidence of a man who already knew the ending. I never overplayed, never pushed my luck too far. I traveled back and forth in time, from state to state, never staying long enough to be noticed or remembered. I invested in the market, made small, calculated bets, watched as my savings multiplied.

The money was intoxicating, but not as much as the sense of control. For the first time, I felt myself untethered from the slow suffocation of inevitability. The ledger inside me, once a record of losses, now gleamed with profit.

It did not take long for me to tire of the racetracks. The victories, so easy and so assured, soon lost their flavor. I began to think of bigger stages.

That was how Simon the Seer was born.

I chose the name for its grandiosity, and for its echo of the biblical. If the world wanted miracles, I would supply them, with interest. I hired a publicist, booked a theater, and wrote a new act from scratch. No more sleight-of-hand, no more tired patter. Instead, I offered “prophecies”—predictions of lottery numbers, stock surges, even the outcome of celebrity divorces. I performed on TV, on radio, on streaming platforms whose names changed every few months but whose appetite for spectacle never waned.

I became a phenomenon, if only for a season. Reporters called me “the man who cannot lose.” Conspiracy forums debated whether I was an alien, a psychic, or a government plant. Nobody guessed the truth, because the truth was unthinkable: I was only a man, armed with a borrowed secret and the will to use it.

With every success, the crowds grew. With every triumph, the urge for more grew sharper, more insistent. I could not stop. I would not stop.

I dated women—dozens of them, all drawn to the aura of the headliner, all willing to overlook my oddities in exchange for a front-row seat to wonder. I felt nothing for any of them, save a vague irritation at their lack of persistence.

The mirror, meanwhile, told its own story. The darkness in my eyes had spread, crept outward in filaments that resembled cracks or veins. I began to turn off the bathroom light when I brushed my teeth. I covered the mirrors in my home with sheets. I could not bear to look at myself.

Yet, to the rest of the world—on TV and in photos—I never looked better. The gray in my hair had vanished without the assistance of drugstore aids. My face seemed younger than my years. Gone were the crow’s feet and jowly bits that had begun to assemble on my face before the machine. I knew there was a connection, but I did not care. To the outside world, I was a handsome man. A successful man. A winner.

The success continued. I bought a penthouse, then another. I bought cars, watches, art. I hired assistants, then managers, then an

entire staff of handlers whose sole job was to keep me insulated from inconvenience. The money, at first exhilarating, became its own kind of burden. I donated to charities, sometimes out of guilt, sometimes out of boredom. I started a foundation for “the advancement of wonder,” and staffed it with people who were genuinely amazed at my genius.

The invitations multiplied. I performed for heads of state, for billionaires, for crowds whose faces blended into a single, hungry mass. The predictions grew more outlandish, the prophecies more audacious. I began to sense a change in the way the world regarded me: not as an entertainer, but as a kind of oracle. People wanted answers and were furious when I declined to give them.

It was at one such event—a private function for a pharmaceutical magnate, held in a penthouse that made mine look like a utility closet—that I realized, fully and finally, the depth of the machine’s hold on me. I was called upon to “amaze” a group of men whose lives were built on the extraction of profit from misery. They wanted to know the next FDA approval, the next market collapse, the next scandal that would rock their competitors. They regarded me as one might a slot machine, eager only for the payout.

I hated them, and I hated myself for performing. But I did it anyway. It was all I knew.

When I returned home, I found a woman waiting—a former assistant I had dated who had never relinquished her attachment to me. She still had a key and let herself in, as she sometimes did, to organize my mail and water the plants. She had laid out a spread of food on the kitchen counter, candles lit, wine. She had dressed for the occasion.

I wanted to want her. I wanted to feel anything. But the moment I saw myself reflected in the curve of the wineglass—my face, rimmed in black, hollow at the center—I recoiled. I made an excuse, said I was ill, sent her away.

I sat in the darkness for hours, watching the city pulse below. I thought of Castellan, and of the warning he had never given. I thought of the machine, humming in its custom trunk, waiting for me to take it to the next destination.

I became obsessed with the mirror. I stared at myself, night after

night, hoping to see some change, some reversal of the decay. Instead, I watched as the darkness spread, staining my face, my hands, even the whites of my eyes. My smile no longer looked human; my teeth seemed too bright, too even, as if someone had replaced the originals with cheap replicas.

I took photos of myself every day to see if what the mirror showed was the same thing the rest of the world saw. It was not. The world still saw the elegant, polished Simon the Seer. The mirror saw the corrupt Archie Fish. I wondered how long before the two caught up with each other.

I stopped going out. I stopped performing, for a while. The calls and emails piled up, unanswered. The world, deprived of its oracle, moved on. Another prodigy emerged, this one a YouTube sensation who performed his own brand of prophecy from a bunker somewhere in Nevada. My fans defected, as fans always do.

But I could not let it go. I could not stop using the machine. The thought of returning to my former life, of being ordinary again, was unbearable. I needed the hum, the rush, the certainty of knowing what came next.

I took even more trips in the machine. I predicted stock prices. I predicted the outcome of minor sporting events, then watched them play out on TV with the detachment of a god watching his own creation.

With every travel, the reflection worsened. I covered the bathroom mirrors, then the windows, then the screens of my devices. I learned to shave by touch alone. In the glass of the shower door, I caught glimpses of myself: less a man, now, than a shadow wearing the memory of a face.

It was during this period of self-imposed exile that I began to sense, for the first time, the presence of something else in the room when I powered up the machine. A weight in the air, a faint tremor in the light. I never saw it, not directly. But I felt it, as one feels the gaze of a predator from the brush. It waited, patient and amused, for me to make my next move.

I was not afraid. Not exactly. But I became aware, in a way I never had before, of the cost.

This, then, is the price of cheating time: you come to loathe the

very thing you have become.

But I could not stop. Not yet.

There was one more thing I needed to see.

And so I set the machine, and prepared for the final act.

6



THE LADY VANISHES

THE CARNIVAL HAD PITCHED its tents on the outskirts of the city, a blight of noise and neon on the old sports fields. I arrived in the afternoon, early enough to watch the workers erect the midway and unpack the stale bins of cotton candy. It had been months since my last public appearance. The rumors spoke of my seclusion, even convalescence. The truth was simpler: I had grown tired of my own act and of the faces in the audience.

I was nursing a plastic cup of bad lemonade when I saw her.

She was standing in line for the Ferris wheel, flanked by a friend. What mattered was the ring she wore: an ornate gold band, set with an oval of red so large and intense it seemed to absorb the afternoon light. Sparkling around the perimeter of the ruby were diamonds, then another circle of tiny pearls.

It was a showy ring, not the kind a woman buys for herself. It was ancient, unmistakable, its design regal. I had seen it before, years ago, a replica in a catalogue of British curiosities—the crown jewels of England, lost by the scoundrel king, John Lackland.

Now, here it was, on the finger of a woman whose life would, until today, have gone entirely unremarked.

She was beautiful in a classic way. She had the air of someone deeply unaware of herself, which is the closest thing to beauty I have ever respected. She wore her hair long, her jeans rolled at the ankle, her shirt a size too large. She laughed loudly, without covering her mouth.

Her name was Eleanor. She did not seem to notice me watching her, already calculating.

When showtime neared, I returned backstage. I requested that Eleanor, who stood at the front of the stage watching my act, be brought onstage for the final illusion. Her friend whooped as her name was called, and she mounted the steps with a mixture of pride and embarrassment. The crowd was immediately on her side.

I guided her to the chair, asked her warm-up questions, performed the usual banter. I noted the ring, complimented it, asked if it was special.

She promptly became coy. "It was given to me," she said. "A family heirloom, I guess."

"May I?" I asked, reaching for her hand.

She allowed it. The stone was cold, heavier than it looked. Beyond price, I thought.

My mind reeled. I saw Castellan showing me the machine, his arrogance absolute. I saw the years I'd spent in his shadow. The murder had not felt like a sin but a balancing of accounts—and as I looked at the priceless jewel on this woman's hand, I knew another debt was about to be settled.

The crowd applauded. Eleanor beamed, delighted by her moment of wonder.

"For my final trick," I said, "I need a volunteer brave enough to disappear."

The crowd laughed. Eleanor raised her hand.

I led her to the machine, a simple tall box, which I had lined in velvet, just large enough for a person. She stepped inside with the trust of the innocent. I pulled the curtain around her. The crowd held its breath.

I did not perform the usual misdirection. No false bottom, no

mirror, no hidden compartment. Instead, I placed my hands on the hidden controls and pulled the lever.

Not forward. Backward.

The cabinet shuddered. The hum deepened to a subsonic thrum that rattled the teeth of everyone present. When I opened the curtain, Eleanor was gone.

The crowd erupted. They thought it was part of the show. They always do.

I bowed to their applause. I had sent her to 1216, before the king's baggage train was lost in the quicksand. She would arrive confused, alone, wearing clothes that marked her as mad or foreign or both. But she had the ring. And if she survived—and I had no particular investment in whether she did—she would find the rest of the hoard. The crown jewels of a dead king, waiting in the mud for someone with the knowledge to claim them.

I would join her there, of course. One final journey. The machine could take me back, and I could return with what I was owed, not just the ruby, but everything. The gold, the glory, the proof that I had finally, finally won.

The crowd was still cheering as I walked offstage. I did not look back. I had spent my life as a footnote, a failure, a man who once performed for heads of state, now back playing in church basements and festivals. Now I would be the man who cheated time itself, who stole from history, who took what was his by right of superior cunning.

The machine hummed in its case, waiting.

I placed my hands upon it, and I set the dial for 1216.



THE FINAL ACT

INSIDE THE MACHINE, time dilates and collapses; I am no longer Simon the Seer, nor Archie, nor even a noun worth pronouncing. There is only the thread, and the endless succession of moments that make up the world's paltry excuse for a tapestry. The self unspools. The past and future become the same blank wall, and you are smeared across it like a thumbprint on glass.

The process had become familiar: not the agony I had once braced for, but the perfect, deathlike calm. My body liquefied, my memories pooling on the floor like glistening ink. The machine had once been a neutral vessel, but no longer. Now, it felt like a participant.

The machine wanted something from me. It wanted a decision—something like remorse, or clarity, or even just the flicker of an impulse to apologize. There was nothing. The self that had entered the machine was the same self that now pervaded it.

I saw the Great Castellan, alive and dead, performing for crowds. He had passed it to me, in a sense, not as a gift, but as a way to be free of it himself.

At the end of all things, I see you, reader. I see you in your chair, holding this confession. I see the way your eyes move across the lines, searching for the trick, the angle, the secret that will make it all make sense.

There is no secret.

If I have learned anything, it is that the only thing worse than failing is being known for it.

Now there is only the machine, and the story, and the person who will one day find this confession and wonder what kind of man wrote it.

Do you understand now, reader, why I did it? That is all I wanted—for you to understand.

You wanted a confession. You have it.

But if you are waiting for repentance, you will wait forever.

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Patti A. Pierucci is a former newspaper writer and editor, former owner/publisher of her own newspaper in Virginia, and founder of InkSpire Press.

She is co-author of the Amazon best-seller *Twilight in America*, a non-fiction book published in 2012, and is the author of the best-selling *Hand of Maud* historical fiction series.

Today she writes clean historical romance woven with faith, mystery, and timeless love. Known for blending meticulous historical detail with emotional depth, her stories transport readers across centuries—from medieval England to the Tudor court—where romance and destiny meet across the boundaries of time.

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INTO HISTORY.**

**ARCHIE FISH INTENDS TO
ROB IT BLIND.**

Archie Fish was a nobody—an overlooked magician with nothing but resentment, ambition, and a talent for deception. Then he discovered the machine.

It showed him the past. It revealed the future. And it gave him everything he ever wanted. Fame. Wealth. Power. Adoration.

For the first time in his life, Archie was no longer invisible.

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to become unforgettable?**

