



Buck Baxter and the Disappearing Divas (The Buck Baxter Detective Agency Book 2)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Hard-boiled 1920s private detective Buck Baxter has a new romance to kindle with playboy Holden Hart while at the same time trying to solve a new murder mystery at a seemingly cursed theater on Broadville. But if he doesn't solve this case in time, Buck and Holden might be taking their final bows.

Something sinister is occurring at the Maharaja Majestic Theatre on Broadville Boulevard. The domineering actress, Dominique Duprey, has vanished without a trace, the opening night of the theatre's new production of *The Snake Charmer's Slave* is now in jeopardy, and six suspects are about to have the pleasure of meeting Buck Baxter, Private Detective, as he investigates whether there's a killer on the loose... or a phantom at the opera?

Could it be the handsome leading man, Errol Hemingway, who's responsible for the disappearance of his leading lady... or perhaps it's that sweet, doe-eyed understudy Olivia Overton? Is it the theatre owner himself, the tall and mysterious Raja Khan who has committed the crime... or the show's investor, the autocratic aristocrat Serafina Somerset? Or is it possible that the meek and mild stage manager Stanley Small, or the flamboyant and frustrated director Barnabas Blake, is guilty? And what of Buck's romance with playboy millionaire Holden Hart? Will Buck get a backstage pass to access all areas of his one true love... or will this be the final curtain for Buck and Holden? Follow the clues, and you might just solve... the mystery of the disappearing divas!

Buck Baxter and the Disappearing Divas is the second adventure in the Buck Baxter Mysteries. It is a campy, noir, 28k-word detective mystery featuring a tough and troubled leading man, a heartthrob love interest with secrets of his own and a hilarious cast of supporting characters. Enter a world of prohibition, gangsters, speakeasies, jazz clubs, star-crossed romance, brooding heroes and a mystery with a twist.

Total Pages (Source): 16

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:50 pm

Picture this—

A beautiful woman stumbles out through the backstage door of a theater and into the dark, deserted alley behind the building, a black feather boa around her neck, her hat a little off-kilter on her perfectly sculpted blonde bob, and an unsteady sway in her step. Is she drunk? Is she tired? Or has she been poisoned?

It's late. A fog that has rolled in, shrouds the light from the streetlamps. The woman wraps the boa a little tighter around her neck and shoulders. Her footsteps echo on the cobblestones, it's all she can hear apart from her own breathing as she uses the wall of the theater to steady herself, the sway in her step growing worse. That's when she hears more than just her own footsteps. Behind her is another person.

Startled, she spins about, almost losing her balance completely. She stumbles back against the wall to keep herself upright and looks behind her.

Far down the alley, near the exit through which she had emerged, a man appears. She squints to see him, her vision now becoming a blur... or is it the mist that's making it hard to see? Her heart beats faster at the silhouette of the man who begins to approach before calling, "Are you alright, Miss Duprey?"

She knows him. She knows his voice. It's Stanley Small, the stage manager. She breathes a sigh of relief and calls back. "Yes, I'm fine. A few too many bubbles after rehearsal, that's all."

He stops a short distance away and adds, "Would you like me to call you a cab?"

“No, no. The night air will do me good.”

“Just don’t stay out too long,” Stanley says. “You don’t want this chill to ruin your voice a week before opening night.”

“I know how to look after myself. You fuss too much, Stanley. You’ll never find yourself a girlfriend if you go around smothering women like that.”

Stanley nods humbly and turns away, returning to the side door of the theater.

Miss Duprey pushes herself away from the wall and continues along the alley. Unfortunately, she only makes it another three steps before a figure appears directly in front of her, cloaked in a cape and hood. Miss Duprey gasps, her heart pounding faster than ever. She staggers backwards, but the figure reaches for her with both hands, seizes the ends of her boa and stops her retreat before yanking on the boa.

A moment before the boa tightens around her throat, Miss Duprey manages to scream, “Stanley! Help!” before her cries turn to a sickly choking sound. Her eyes widen in terror. She clutches at the boa, tearing away feathers as her feet stagger back and forth on the spot. But the cloaked figure tightens the stranglehold even more. Miss Duprey lets go of the boa and reaches instead for her attacker. Her fingers clutch the hood covering his head and pull it away from his face.

The last thing Miss Duprey ever sees is the gold mask covering her assailant’s face. It is a theater mask, two faces joined in the middle. On the left side, the face is laughing, almost mocking her in her dying moments. The right side of the face is a look of doom and tragedy, a glittering tear frozen on that golden cheek.

That’s when a door slams far down the alley behind Miss Duprey. The voice of Stanley Small rings through the night. “Hey you! Let her go!”

The masked face looks up to see the stage manager running towards him. As his victim collapses into his arms, the cloaked attacker lets go of the boa, sweeps the body of Miss Duprey into his arms and races into the mist.

When Stanley Small reaches the end of the alley, he looks around to find no sign of the attacker nor Miss Duprey. There is nothing but a handful of black feathers still drifting gently to the cobblestones.

“Wake up, toots! Time to solve a mystery.”

Stella Darling unceremoniously yanked the two cushions out from under my head. In a bleary daze, I rolled to one side and fell off the sofa in my office apartment, realizing quickly I was completely naked. Somehow, I managed to keep the tangled sheet from uncovering my vital parts. I clambered to my feet, holding on to the sheet with one hand and rubbing my sore, bloodshot eyes with the other. At the same time I cursed the fact that I had offered Stella a job as my personal assistant... and given her a key to my office.... and told her that if she wanted to earn her keep she'd better be willing to work into the early hours of the morning. I glanced at the window now and saw it was still dark outside.

“Jesus, Stella! Did you have to do that? I was having a terrific dream!”

It wasn't a lie. I was dreaming about Harry. Again. I'm sure it showed from under the sheet.

Stella simply shrugged. “Don't get your knickerbockers in a knot. You know what they say about dreams.”

“What's that?”

“If ever you wake up, just close your eyes and an even better one will come along.

But not right now! We got work to do!”

“Now? What time is it?”

The three-foot-nothing Stella had tossed the cushions onto the chair at my desk and was scaling her way to the top, plonking her confident little frame at the peak of her climb before tossing a newspaper on the desk.

“It’s four a.m.” she said, reaching for my pipe and matches which sat in the silver dragon ashtray on my desk. “Skip the news-kid is already out workin’, why ain’t you, toots? Check out the front page.”

I ignored that instruction as she lit up. “Hey, don’t smoke my pipe.”

“Get me one of my own and I won’t.”

“I’m serious. That’s the last of my pot. That’s expensive stuff.”

Stella inhaled and coughed. “You ain’t kiddin’! That’s good shit. Now read the damn newspaper before I start treatin’ you like a four-year-old and read it to you.”

I sat on the edge of my desk with the sheet wrapped around my waist while Stella made herself comfortable and put her feet up. I picked up the paper and took the pipe off her. On the front page was the headline “WOMAN SNATCHED BY MASKED MAN.” I took a puff and let the pot swirl through my lungs for a moment before letting it escape in a plume of smoky sweetness. I shrugged. “So what’s the big deal? Some dame disappeared outside a theater. People vanish all the time in this town.”

“It wasn’t just any dame, you jughead. It was Dominique Duprey, star of the new opera opening next week at the Maharaja Majestic.”

I shrugged again.

Stella rolled her eyes and snapped, “Gimme back that pipe.”

“No.”

“Do you want me to help you solve this case or not?”

“Isn’t this a matter for the cops?”

“No, it ain’t!” She waved angrily for me to hand back the pipe. I gave it to her as she announced, “I’ve already spoken to Raja Khan, the owner of the theater. He’s worried about all the bad press this is gonna bring him. He thinks having the cops involved will shut down the show. He’s told them that Miss Duprey has a habit of blowing town when she gets a case of stage fright and she’s probably flown the coop. At least that’s what he’s tellin’ them. The fact of the matter is the stage manager Stanley Small says he saw the whole—”

“Wait, wait, wait! How do you know all this?”

“I told you, I’ve already spoken to Raja.”

“What, you just knocked on his front door for a chat and some tea?”

“He used to be a client of mine, I use the servant’s entrance. And no, it wasn’t tea. He has a mighty fine selection of gin from Bombay. You’d like him.”

Just the mention of it made me want one now. I let Stella keep the pipe and grabbed the bottle of gin and glass from last night off my desk. I poured a healthy dose.

“That for me too, toots?” Stella asked.

“Don’t push it. Now tell me more about your old client. And get your feet off my desk, would ya?”

Stella chose to ignore that last request. “Whaddaya wanna know about him? Came over on a steamer from India with a dozen trunks full of money and built a damn opera house here in Wilde City. He’s loaded and loves a show tune! I’m surprised he don’t swing the same way you do, the man’s just crazy about those Pirates of Penzance! But don’t get your hopes up. Lemme tell ya, Raja Khan is a real ladykiller. If there’s one thing he loves more than his music, it’s a dame in his bed. In fact, word has it he’s got six wives back home. Dirty devil!” Stella giggled mischievously... and somewhat approvingly.

I was intrigued, I had to admit. I decided it was time for trousers. I got off the desk and found yesterday’s pants and suspenders on the floor by the sofa. “Close your eyes,” I told Stella.

“Why?”

“Because I wanna put my pants on.”

She shrugged. “Like I said... Why?”

“Just do it.”

She covered her eyes with her hand. I turned away from the desk and dropped the sheet. “I said shut your eyes.”

“They’re shut,” she insisted.

“No they’re not. I can see your reflection in the window.”

Caught ogling my ass, Stella quickly covered her eyes again. I pulled on my trousers and snapped the suspenders over my shoulders. When I turned around, Stella's elbows were propped on my desk, her chin in both hands. "You know one day you're gonna give in to my charms and drop those pants for me."

"You know one day you're gonna give in to the fact that I like men. And not just any men. Him." I was talking about Holden Hart—my Harry—of course, and Stella knew it.

She sighed as though she was bored. "Such a waste."

Suddenly there came a knock at the door. "Jesus, who's that? Do they know what time it is?"

"Oh that'll be Raja," Stella said. "I told him you don't sleep and to drop by any time."

"But I do sleep! I was sleeping quite happily till you arrived."

"And lucky I did, huh? Otherwise it woulda been Raja you were dropping your pants in front of." Stella had already jumped off the chair and was heading for the door.

As she reached for the handle I whispered, "Jesus, Stella. Can you give me one more second?"

She paused.

I drained the gin in my glass. "Okay, I'm ready now."

Stella opened the door and smiled. "Well hey, you cutie little thing! Come on in handsome!"

“Little” was not a word I would have used to describe Raja Khan. The man stood almost seven feet tall, eight if you added the jewel-encrusted turban on his head. At less than half his height, Stella gave him her hand and led him into the office, adding at the last second, “Duck that big old head, honey. Some doors ain’t as tall as you.”

I walked over to Raja Khan and shook his hand as Stella introduced us. “Raja, meet Buck Baxter, the best gumshoe in town. Buck, meet Raja Khan, the best... Oh, I guess that’s privileged information.”

Raja blushed. “That’s why I have six wives.”

“Want another one?” Stella asked a little too enthusiastically.

I intercepted the forced marriage proposal by changing the subject. “Mr. Khan, it’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Thank you for seeing me at such short notice,” he said, speaking in a crisp British accent, the influences of the colony showing. He had a beard and a thick moustache, which he twirled nervously as we spoke. “I’m sure Stella has mentioned why I’m here.”

I picked up the newspaper. “Seems you have a disappearance on your hands.”

Raja Khan nodded gravely. “We have a new opera opening in six days. The Snake Charmer’s Slave. It’s a classic, I’m sure you’re familiar with it.”

I shook my head. “I gotta admit I’ve charmed a few snakes in my time, but this one don’t ring a bell. Sorry.”

“No need to apologize. But the sad fact is many are expecting a show to open next week. Miss Dominique Duprey was our leading lady, the star of the show, the title

character upon whom the entire opera rests. Yes, she could be somewhat of a diva at times, but she had the voice of an angel. Mr. Baxter, I have six days to replace my prima donna. The last thing I need is the police or the press snooping around my theater. If there is a phantom at my opera, I need someone with a little discretion to find the culprit.”

I smiled, pulled my suspenders out in a gesture of self-assurance and let them snap back against my chest. Unfortunately, it gave my ass a start and a fart escaped me. I tried to cover it up with some confidence, even as Stella giggled behind her hand. “Mr. Khan, you’ve come to the right man.”

“Thank you, Mr. Baxter. If you can solve this case, you will surely save my show... and my beloved theater, the Maharaja Majestic.”

“Do you have any suspicions, any inkling at all as to who might be responsible for the disappearance of Miss Duprey?”

“Oh Mr. Baxter, I have an entire cast—quite literally—of suspects. Perhaps you might be able to make yourself available at our eleven a.m. rehearsal to meet them?”

Truth be known, I was plannin’ on meeting Harry for breakfast, then a trip to see Madame Chang now that Stella had polished off my pot. But I needed the money... and the case. “Eleven a.m. it is,” I said.

Raja Khan smiled and bowed. “Thank you, Mr. Baxter. I look forward to seeing you... both... then.”

He winked at Stella.

I saw her wink back.

As Raja Khan left, I turned to Stella. “The game is afoot.”

“The game is a-what?” Stella asked.

“Nothin’. Just something I picked up somewhere. The important thing is, we got a mystery to solve and that man is hiding more than he’s letting on.”

“How do you know?”

“Past experience. Never trust the person who gives you a case to solve.”

“I agree,” Stella said with a teacher-like shake of her finger. “And if he’s as crooked as his wiener, we’re in trouble. Of course, if this mystery is as long as his wiener, it could take a while to solve.”

“We’ve only got six days.”

“Then we better jump to it.”

“And you better gimme back my pipe.”

“And you better buy me one of my own.”

“Is this relationship really gonna work?”

Stella smiled sweetly and hugged my leg. “Of course it will, toots. Do whatever I tell ya and everything will work out just fine.”

I took a deep breath. Luckily, there was enough pot smoke still lingering in the air for me to believe her.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:50 pm

I postponed my plans to visit The Peking Empress that morning... but not my plans to see Harry.

“God I’ve missed you,” he said as he opened the door to his Upper Wilde Side penthouse apartment overlooking the park. He was wearing nothing but a white bathrobe with a monogram of his initials on the lapel.

“You’ve missed me? God you’re sweet. We only saw each other last night. We made love on your balcony.”

He grinned. “Jog my memory.”

With that he planted his lips on mine, kissing me as he dragged me into an apartment that gave luxury a new meaning. He had a crystal chandelier in the dining room, a grand piano with a silver candelabra perched on top of it in the living room, and one of those brand new electric pop-up toasters in the kitchen. He’d been planning to use it for breakfast that morning, but I guess time got away from us.

Pushing open the glass doors that led out onto his enormous sun-drenched balcony with its twelve-seater outdoor setting and potted conifer trees, Harry dragged me outside by the tie that wasn’t destined to stay on for long. I was already twisting the buttons on my shirt and popping them open. There were no other buildings in sight from where we stood; Harry’s penthouse sat atop the tallest apartment building overlooking the park. Nobody could see us unless they happened to be flying overhead, which pretty much meant that out here we were free to make love in the warm, open air without the eyes of the world on us.

So we did.

This was not the first time we'd made love. That night on the rooftop of Hart's nightclub—our bodies beaten and battered after that final encounter with Winnipeg Whitmore at Hell's Bells—we crossed the threshold. We were gentle with each other that night, like two schoolboys exploring each other's bodies for the first time. When we came, he breathed my name over and over into my ear. It was as though he was breathing new life into me.

Since that night, we had barely been able to keep our hands off each other. Our sex got rougher, more passionate, more daring. I worked out the places he liked me to touch him the most—his nipples, his earlobes, his balls—and he worked out there was nothing Buck Baxter loved more than a perfect piece of ass like his. When I wasn't groping, licking, or filling that ass, I was dreaming about it. There on his balcony, I wanted it so badly my dick ached.

Within moments my tie, shirt, shoes and trousers were off. The morning sun melted into my skin as Harry's lips made their way down my chin, my throat, and over the hair on my chest. I lifted my face to the sky and shut my eyes, groaning as his tongue left a cool, wet trail from my navel to my yearning cock. He took my dick in his mouth, sucking on it gently at first before his fist joined in the fun. As his head bobbed up and down on my cock, gaining speed in its rhythm with every suck, his fist squeezed and twisted the base of my thick shaft, winding me up into a horny frenzy.

I dropped my head and opened my eyes to watch.

I took his head in my hands and ran my fingers through his soft blond hair.

My stomach trembled and my groans turned to gasps as I felt my balls ascending, getting ready to blow. When the eruption came, I threw my head back again and thrust my dick as far down Harry's throat as it would go. I felt him suck as hard as he

could, his lips forming a tight suction around the base of my cock while he drained the juice from my balls and drank the jets of cum down in three, four, five ravenous gulps.

I let out a loud, spent moan that sent pigeons flapping into the sky from the building's corner turrets.

Slowly Harry released my slicked, still-hard dick. He stood with his own cock—hard, thick and beautiful, with a slight upward tilt in its shaft—jutting out from under his robe, as though announcing its presence from between two curtains.

“How was that?” he asked, wiping his cum-glistening smile with his fingers and licking them clean. The sight of it made me harder than ever.

“I’d call it a good start.”

Without a moment’s hesitation, I slid my hands beneath the robe and threw it off his bare shoulders, revealing a body that belonged in the Ancient Sculptures wing of the Wilde Metropolitan Museum. I plunged my tongue deep into his mouth. I clasped the back of his neck with my right hand, my thumb and middle finger pressing hard against the bone just behind his right and left earlobes. I took his hip in my left hand, and moving forward I steered him one step at a time back toward the balcony wall, till his naked ass hit the brickwork.

The wall was just above waist height.

I kissed Harry one more time, then pulled my lips from his and spun him about. He gripped the top of the balcony wall with his hands and pushed his perfect ass out toward me. I slicked my fingers with saliva. I parted his cheeks and wet his passage, loosening him up nice and slow as he moaned contentedly. When I finally entered him, I felt his entire body tense, at least to start with, before he relaxed into me,

moving his body back and forth in opposite thrusts to mine, my hips and his ass meeting, then parting, then meeting again. And again. Faster and faster.

I squeezed his shoulders as I fucked him.

I looked from the tousled hair on his head to the vast green park we overlooked. His back muscles tensed and his shining, perspiring flesh caught my eye again. I saw a bead of sweat run down his spine. I leaned forward and licked it up, and once again felt my loins about to burst.

At the same time, I heard him whisper, "I'm coming. Buck, I'm coming."

He wasn't even spanking his junk, not even touching it, and yet his unattended cock shot a wad of cum so huge it splashed against the bricks and smacked against the balcony pavers. A moment later I grunted and blew another load of my own, this time into his hot, wet ass, the muscles clenching tight around my dick as his own cock pumped out the last spurts of cum.

We groaned and panted in unison.

I gently slid from his body.

He turned around and we kissed again, breathing hard and heavy into each other's mouths.

We were still kissing when a giant shadow unexpectedly blocked the morning sun and the deafening drone of propellers filled the sky. Harry looked up first and I followed his gaze just in time to see one of the mighty airships in Howard Hart's Zephyr fleet rise in front of the balcony, flying so close to the building that we could see into the window of the cockpit.

“Shit,” Harry whispered, grabbing my hand and hauling me back toward the penthouse doors as I gazed at what looked like Lucy Logan—or perhaps it was Lois—behind the wheel of the airship, with Howard Hart himself looking over her shoulder. Lois—or Lucy—winked at our naked asses as the airship flew beside the building. Mr. Hart, however, didn’t look quite as amused.

As the ship passed, Harry pulled me inside and shut the door. Instantly he began pacing back and forth, angry and annoyed. “Goddammit,” he cursed to himself. “I knew we shouldn’t have done it out there. I knew my father was taking Lois out for a flying lesson today. He thinks it’ll make for a great story, having a beautiful woman as one of his pilots. I’m so stupid to think they wouldn’t fly over this morning.”

“Relax,” I told him, adding with a shrug, “So what if they saw us getting up to some hanky panky. Who cares? Trust me, you got nothin’ to be ashamed of.”

I tried to kiss him but he turned away. “That was my father up there. You don’t know him like I do. You don’t know him at all. Shame was his favorite form of punishment.”

I tried to kiss him again, to ease his tension, relax him a little.

He turned again.

I didn’t know what to say. I fetched my clothes from the balcony, returned to the living room and started dressing. I felt as though I’d been pushed away, and maybe even made to share a little of that shame myself. I didn’t buy it. “If you wanna let your old man make you feel like shit, then suit yourself. I got a meeting to get to. Maybe I’ll see you later.”

Harry didn’t answer. I buttoned up my shirt and threw my tie over my shoulders, then headed for the door. Before I walked out, he called back to me.

“Buck. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to...”

I stood there for a moment as his words trailed away to nothing. “You and me had enough shame to deal with at the orphanage,” I said to him. “Let’s leave it behind. Let it go. Deal?”

Harry smiled at me and nodded. “Deal.”

He came to the door and gave me a kiss. But it felt somehow different to the way he normally kissed me. It felt distant. Disconnected. Tainted with guilt.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:50 pm

Just beyond the skyscrapers of Wilde City, at the lower end of Broadville Boulevard, the Maharaja Majestic Theater stood like a towering temple from some exotic, faraway land. Its facade was lined by two dozen thick, marble columns, adorned with sculptures of snakes and sirens, while gigantic cast-iron lanterns hung from the architraves of the entranceway. The building rose maybe five stories high, every cornice and cranny crammed with angels and devils, gods and ghosts, all housed under one colossal glass dome. It was a cultural melting pot, the timeless tales of both east and west converging on a single shrine of storytelling, a mosque of music... and now perhaps, an opera house of horror.

I met Stella on the corner opposite the theater a few minutes after eleven.

“Glad you could make it.” She tapped her toe impatiently.

“I got a little caught up in something.”

“Or someone, more like it,” she said, crossing her arms. “Next time, tell your cutesy blond boyfriend to take a number, toots. We got a mystery to solve, capiche?”

“Please don’t say capiche again.”

“Why not? I’m half-Italian, you know.”

“No you’re not.”

Stella shrugged. “Okay, so maybe I dated a guy once who was half-Italian. That counts, don’t it?”

“Dated?”

“Okay, so maybe he paid me to date him. Money can sometimes buy some poor schmuck true love, ya know. Capiche?”

I took a deep breath and changed the subject. “Let’s go crack this case.”

The auditorium of the Maharaja Majestic was ritzy to say the least. Plush, red velvet curtains covered the walls on all sides. The seats were ornate, each with a sculpted finish and velvet armrests. Tiered theater balcony boxes lined both sides of the theater for patrons with enough money to pay for such exclusive seating.

On the massive stage—in front of the elaborately painted set of an Indian palace—a handful of people stood, including Raja Khan. He saw Stella and me and called out to us.

“Ah, Mr. Baxter, Miss Darling, please come and meet the key members of my cast and crew. At least those of them who have arrived so far.”

Stella and I made our way up the stairs at the side of the stage beside the orchestra pit. Stella’s eyes were wide and full of wonder as she gazed all around, taking in every little detail of the dream-like world surrounding us.

“Wow, I always wanted to be on the stage,” she whispered to me as we walked the boards toward the others.

“Now’s your big chance,” I whispered back. “Act smooth. Observe every move these people make. Every stutter. Every sneeze. Every sideways glance. Take in everything.”

“Will do, toots.”

“And don’t call me toots in front of them. We’re supposed to be professionals.”

“Will do, t—” She stopped herself and whispered, “Well heck, if I can’t call you toots, what should I call you?”

“How about boss?”

Stella started laughing out loud. “No, I’m serious. What should I call you?”

“Buck will do fine,” I answered through clenched teeth.

We stopped at the small group gathered on the stage, comprised of one woman and three men, including Raja Khan. The woman was young, thin and pretty, with large doe eyes and ruby-red lips. Her hair was crimped and curled in the latest fashion. Her eyelashes were long, her nose small and her teeth white; she had the unmistakable look of a starlet waiting to be discovered. The man on Raja’s left looked humble and homely, not the kind of theatrical gentleman anyone would expect to find on a stage. He wore small, round spectacles. His coat was oversized, possibly to make up for his modest frame. His hair was thin and slicked across his scalp to cover his baldness. By contrast, the man on Raja’s right stood tall with pride and a definite arrogance. He wore a black scarf, bow tie and black top hat as though it were already opening night. His moustache was so pencil-thin it looked painted on. In his hand he held a long black cigarette holder with a cigarette alight at the end, sending more wisps of smoke into the air than into his lungs, giving me the impression this man—whoever he was—liked his props both on and off the stage.

“Everybody,” Raja began, “I’d like you to meet Mr. Buck Baxter and his assistant Miss Stella Darling. As you all know, last night after rehearsal, our beloved leading lady Miss Dominique Duprey vanished, allegedly kidnapped... or worse.”

“She was a star who shone brighter than no other,” said the man with the top hat in a

crisp British accent. All sense of sincerity was lost instantly as he followed his comment with a suck on his cigarette holder.

“We couldn’t agree more, Barnabas,” nodded Raja.

“Yet the show must go on!” Barnabas, the man in the top hat, added rather theatrically.

Raja nodded again. “We couldn’t agree more with that, as well. And so it is why I’ve asked Mr. Baxter here to investigate Miss Duprey’s disappearance as, well, discreetly as possible, while we continue with rehearsals.”

Barnabas stepped in again, even more dramatically than before. “Opening night is only six days away. Rest assured the curtain will rise. The stage will light up. The audience will stand in ovation!”

Stella leaned toward me and whispered behind her hand, “Sheesh, someone hand that chowderhead Yorick’s skull. He sure loves a monologue!”

If Raja heard her, he ignored it. “Mr. Baxter, Miss Darling, let me introduce you to Barnabas Blake, the director of our show.”

Barnabas eyed us both with one eyebrow raised in suspicion. “I’m sure you’re pleased to make our acquaintance, but do either of you have any experience in the theater?”

“With all due respect, what’s that got to do with anything?” I asked.

Barnabas cleared his throat, as though he had been asked to cough up the obvious. “The men and women of the theater are a special breed. Creative. Talented. Sophisticated. Unique. A higher class. There is nothing common about us. We exist

above the great unwashed. If you are familiar with our kind, we may consider co-operating with your investigations. So I'll ask again, do either of you have any experience in the theater?"

"No offense, sir," I answered. "But we're here to solve a crime, not audition."

"And if you don't co-operate," Stella piped up. "The next stage you walk on might have a noose hangin' from the rafters and a trapdoor in the floor. You catch my drift?"

"Are you threatening me, little girl?"

"I will if you call me a little girl again, you pompous putz!"

"Settle down," I said, holding Stella back before she raced over and kicked Barnabas in the shin. I realized then that the second victim in this mystery was going to be my patience. I decided a hit of nicotine was in order. "Mind if I smoke?" I asked Raja.

"Go ahead," Raja answered. "Our humble director hasn't stopped smoking since the day he was hired. If fate wanted to shut down this show by burning the place to the ground, it would have done so by now."

Barnabas' eyebrows launched up his forehead while his nose twitched and his pencil-thin moustache did an angry little dance. "Oh pah-lease! You're the one who insisted on real candles for the iron chandelier dangling above the stage in The Dance of the Cobra scene. If that's not a fire hazard I don't know what is."

"Besides, it appears fate already has other plans for this show." The words seemed ominous and came from the meekest voice among us. We all turned to the pretty girl with the huge doe eyes. "I'm referring to the disappearance of Miss Duprey. It seems rather... foreboding."

Nobody said anything for a moment until Raja took the opportunity to introduce her. “Mr. Baxter, Miss Darling, this is Olivia Overton, Miss Duprey’s understudy.”

The woman held out her hand rather timidly and dipped her chin demurely. “Pleased to meet you both. I don’t expect I’ll ever be anything but an understudy—I’m currently playing ‘Slave Girl in Blue’ in The Veils of Midnight dance—but perhaps someday I’ll see my name in lights. Well, a girl can dream.”

“Some people are willing to do anything to make their dream come true,” I commented.

Miss Overton caught my meaning and immediately pleaded her innocence. In fact, she almost begged for it.

“Oh, Mr. Baxter. I had nothing to do with Miss Duprey’s disappearance, I swear to you. Besides, I’m hardly strong enough to carry away someone like Miss Duprey and just disappear into the night like that.”

She had a point.

She also had a motive.

I needed that smoke right about now.

I reached into my jacket pocket and pulled out my pipe and matches. Oddly enough, I saw out of the corner of my eye Stella reaching into her clutch bag and pulling out her own pipe and matches. As I lit mine, she lit hers. I noticed everyone looking at us oddly. I shot her a look and pulled her aside, whispering, “What are you doing?”

“Lightin’ a smoke,” Stella shrugged. “You heard Raja. If twinkle-toes in the top hat can light one up, so can I.”

“Since when did you own a pipe?” I whispered a little more harshly.

“Since I bought one at the drugstore on my way here. You didn’t like me smokin’ yours so I got my own. If anyone’s to blame here, it’s you. I was happy to share.”

She puffed and I took a sniff. “Is that pot? My pot?”

“Just a teensy bit. It was all that was left.”

“We’re on a case. You’re supposed to smoke tobacco at a time like this. Plain old tobacco. You can’t smoke pot now!”

“You smoke it all the time.”

“Not in front of clients.”

Stella put one hand on her hip and held her pipe in the other, talking between puffs. “See, this is where you need to communicate more. You’re not very good at communicating things, Buck Baxter.”

“That’s because I never had a personal assistant before. And I’m beginning to wonder why I’ve got one now!”

“Because ya love me. Whaddaya need a memo, toots?”

“And don’t call me toots! It’s—”

“Mr. Baxter, is everything alright?” I spun about to see Raja Khan, and the others, staring at us both.

“We’re fine. Just comparing notes.” I quickly made my way back to the group,

dragging Stella along behind me. “We’d of course like to talk to everyone individually, but to begin with, we’d like to have a word with the witness to Miss Duprey’s disappearance.”

The homely-looking man in the oversized coat and spectacles stepped forward. “That would be me. Stanley Small’s the name. I’m the stage manager here at the Maharaja Majestic.”

“Stanley has worked with us for over ten years,” Raja said. “He’s managed all the staging, lighting, props and sets for every show we’ve produced since 1914. I assure you, he’s no killer.”

“With all due respect, Mr. Khan, we’re investigating a disappearance. Nobody said anything about killing,” I said.

“With all due respect, Mr. Baxter,” Stanley interjected in a grave voice. “I saw what happened that night. I saw the attacker strangling Miss Duprey with her feather boa. I saw her body fall into his arms before he vanished. I don’t wanna scare nobody, but she sure looked dead to me. I know Mr. Khan told the police that she’s left town, but wherever Miss Duprey is right now, she ain’t coming back.”

“Bravo!” exclaimed a loud, brash voice from the back of the auditorium. “That’s the best news I’ve heard all week!”

All eyes turned to a tall figure standing at the back of the theater in the center aisle. Confidently the figure stepped forward into the light, revealing itself to be an immaculately dressed woman in her early fifties with a silver streak in her raven-black hair. She grinned from ear to diamond-studded ear as she strutted down the aisle waving a piece of paper in one hand.

Stepping up onto the stage she announced, “I have here in my hand a telegram direct

from Europe, from the one and only Signora Aria Valentina. She has agreed to take the next airship from Berlin to Wilde City to take over Miss Duprey's role and star in our production of The Snake Charmer's Slave!"

"But I thought..." Miss Overton muttered in defeat and disappointment, her words quickly fading to silence.

The woman with the telegram in her hand laughed. "Oh my dear, I know life can be a little overrated and underwhelming sometimes for someone like you. However, the truth is you are nothing but an understudy, Miss Overton. So live up to your name and get over it."

"Wow, what a bitch," Stella muttered loud enough for everyone to hear.

The woman with the telegram spun on her heel and glared at Stella. "And who, may I ask, are you?"

Stella took a breath to say something no doubt offensive, but I jumped in before she could stir the pot anymore. "This is Miss Darling, my assistant. And my name is Buck. Buck Baxter. Private Detective."

"Serafina Somerset." The woman introduced herself, apparently with no need—or wish—for a handshake. "Without me, none of us would be standing here right now. I'm the show's investor. I've plunged a small fortune into this play."

"Opera," Barnabas corrected.

"I'll call it what I like. I'm the money and don't you forget it."

Barnabas grumbled something under his breath. I was beginning to wonder who was gonna win the biggest asshole award in this place, with Barnabas Blake and Serafina

Somerset clear front runners at this stage. Then in barreled the last of our suspects.

“Sorry I’m late! I’m always late. I know, I know, I was supposed to be here half an hour ago. But hey, I’m the leading man. It’s not like you can start rehearsals without me.”

Like a handsome steed on show, a tall man with black, slicked-back hair and a chiseled jaw leapt up onto the stage. I glanced around at the reactions to his arrival, all of them varied. Olivia Overton sighed adoringly. Barnabas crossed his arms and drummed his fingers against his forearms. Stanley looked down, obviously intimidated, and drew invisible circles on the floorboards with the toe of his worn-out shoe. Raja checked his fob watch. Serafina clamped her hands on her hips and muttered, “Oh for Pete’s sake. I wonder if Signora Valentina knows a good Signore for hire.”

As the man peacocked his way toward us, smoothing his hair and tightening his tie, Raja made the final introduction. “Mr. Baxter, Miss Darling, please meet Errol Hemingway, the male lead in our show.”

Errol dived into a handshake, firm and vigorous. Yes, he was handsome, there was no denying it. Piercing green eyes. A smile so bright I had to blink. It almost distracted me from the fresh lip-print on his shirt. “Pleased to meet you,” he said. “Are you the guy who’s gonna be my new understudy?”

“No,” I said, reclaiming my hand before he shook it clean off. “I’m the guy who’s gonna find out who attacked Miss Duprey last night.”

Errol gasped, his shocked expression more than just a little exaggerated. “Someone attacked Dominique? Is she alright?”

“Oh please,” Stella groaned. “You call yourself an actor?”

“Actually,” Barnabas said, “he’s more of an opera singer than an actor. Voice of an angel. Acting skills of a mule.”

“Hey, you wanna take that backstage?” Errol started rolling up his sleeves.

Barnabas just rolled his eyes. “No, not particularly.”

Errol didn’t quite know where to go from there, seemingly disarmed by his director’s lack of interest in a fight. He rolled his sleeves back down and turned to me with a change of subject. “If you think I had anything to do with Miss Duprey’s disappearance—”

“We’ll be talking to everyone individually.” I stopped him point blank. “In the meantime, with Mr. Khan’s permission of course, we’d like to stay for rehearsal and take a look around the theater. Then ask you all a few questions.”

“Of course,” Raja answered before any of his associates could respond. “Please enjoy the rehearsal. Miss Overton will be singing the lead role of Sahla the Snake Charmer’s Slave.”

Olivia’s eyes lit up.

“Only until Signora Valentina arrives,” Serafina added curtly.

Olivia’s demure look returned.

“We’ll enjoy watching,” I said. “Watching everything... and everyone.”

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:50 pm

Picture this—

The story of a slave girl living within the palace walls of a tyrannical king. One day the king spots the beautiful young slave picking flowers in his garden, flowers to be laid at the foot of his bed that night. He decides then and there that the slave girl must become his flower. He announces that she will become his next bride. But the slave girl has her eyes on another, a poor snake charmer who lives in the village beyond the palace walls. One night, under the veil of midnight with the help of the other slave girls, she escapes into the arms of her poor snake charmer. She dances The Dance of the Cobra, and the two promise to be with each other for all eternity. When they hear word that the king and his guards have come to hunt them down and kill them, the lovers lay together one last time, unleashing a king cobra into their bed. When the king arrives, he finds the dead lovers wrapped in each other's arms. They have found happiness in their eternity, whereas the king will find only loneliness in his.

“What a loada crap!” Stella moaned at the end of the rehearsal. We were sitting far enough back in the auditorium so that nobody could hear her, thankfully. “What kinda ending do you call that? Everyone died except the bad guy!”

“It’s a tragedy,” I told her, my sensitive side making a rare appearance as thoughts of Harry floated through my head. I might have even shed a secret tear during the climax without Stella noticing. “It’s a metaphor for true love, a love that can never die.”

“Whaddaya mean, never die? They went to bed with a snake! You call that true love? I call it a dumpable offense! Besides, that cobra looked totally fake. I could see the strings when it was doin’ its dance.”

“You don’t seriously expect them to use a real snake. It’s supposed to be art.”

“Art schmart. That opera just killed my dreams of showbiz with a blunt shovel.”

“What did you think of the play?” asked Raja Khan as he approached us.

Stella blew a raspberry, and then added by way of compensation, “But hey, I’m just one opinion. He liked it,” she said pointing a thumb at me. “Although he is kinda in love at the moment, so that’s probably clouding his judgment when it comes to all things mushy.”

Raja coughed politely, trying not to splutter on Stella’s not-so-stellar review, then changed the subject. “Shall I take you to see Mr. Small now so you can question him?”

“Why not,” said Stella. “Let’s get this mystery solved before it bores me to death.”

Raja led us through the dark, labyrinthine network of curtain-lined corridors and prop-crowded passageways that made up the backstage area before we reached the costume department, a small room packed with rows and rows of costume racks. Stanley was hanging—or rather stuffing—several costumes in place, shuffling them about so that they were in the correct order for the actors to pluck off the hanger and slip into. Raja left us, while Stanley continued working.

“Normally the costume girl takes care of this,” he started telling Stella and me. “But we don’t need her till we do the full production dress rehearsal later this week. Until then, it’s easy enough for me to look after the costumes.”

“We won’t take up much of your time,” I told him.

“Oh I don’t mind,” he said courteously. “So long as you don’t mind following me

around so's I can get my jobs done. Busy work, bein' stage manager. Especially in a theater like this."

"Oh? Why's that?"

Stanley took a step closer to me and lowered his voice, as though he were about to share a secret. "Tell me, Mr. Baxter. Do you believe in ghosts?"

I shook my head. "Call me cynical, but no, Mr. Small, I don't. I believe in cold hard facts. I believe there's an answer to every mystery. You just gotta look in the right places."

Stanley nervously adjusted the spectacles on his face. "Perhaps this place will change your views." He turned and exited the costume department. "Please follow me. I have to check that all the props have been returned."

The props room was even more cramped than the costume department. Packed shelves lined the walls and open boxes stuffed with everything from candlesticks to headless dummies filled almost every inch of floor space. As Stanley inched his way across the room, rearranging the props on the most accessible shelf in the room, I asked, "So it's true you were the last person to see Miss Duprey? Are you absolutely positive of that?"

"Yes," he answered, sliding the fake swords of the king's guards back into their sheaths. "It was late. We'd just finished a long, difficult rehearsal. Mr. Hemingway wasn't himself, he kept forgetting his lines. Perhaps he was tired. It was getting on Miss Duprey's nerves. Actually, it was getting on everyone's nerves. The closer we get to opening night, the longer the days and the more grueling the rehearsals become. Everyone's patience begins to fray." He looked around distractedly and asked himself, "Now where the heck is that cobra?"

“You mean the fakest snake I ever seen?” asked Stella. “You’re standin’ on its stupid head.”

Stanley looked down and saw the snake puppet under his feet. He quickly jumped off it, picked it up and dusted it down before placing it on a shelf and continuing his story. “That night when we were done with rehearsal, Mr. Blake decided to calm everyone’s nerves with a glass of champagne. I guess the bubbles went straight to Miss Duprey’s head. When she left, I was concerned for her safety. As it turned out I was right.”

“You knew someone was going to attack her?”

“Lord no. But a gentleman doesn’t let a lady walk home alone, especially after one or two nightcaps.”

“You walked her home?”

Stanley finished fussing with his props and left the room with Stella and me in tow. “I offered to call her a cab. She didn’t want me to. She said she was fine.”

“Where exactly did this conversation take place?”

“In the side alley of the theater.” He pulled open a curtain that led across the wings of the stage before stopping and turning to face us, a look of worry on his uptight face. Stella and I both stopped where we stood as he asked, “You don’t suppose people think it was me, do you?”

“You were the last one to see her. That makes you a prime suspect.”

Stanley scrunched up his fists anxiously before saying out of the blue. “I wouldn’t stand there if I were you.”

“Stand where?” I asked.

“Beneath that sandbag,” he said, pointing up. “As stage manager, I pride myself on my work. Everything must happen precisely on cue. When the timing is right, everything is perfect. Yet there are some things in this place that appear to be out of my control. I tighten that rope every night, but it has a habit of constantly slipping loose.”

Stella and I both looked up to see a large sandbag hanging directly above our heads. We glanced back at each other and both decided to err on the side of caution, taking a few steps forward. The moment we did so, the sandbag came plummeting to the floor, crashing onto the boards where we had been standing a second ago with an almighty THUD!

“What the hell?” Stella shrieked as she and I turned from the crumpled sandbag to Stanley.

“I suppose you’re gonna tell me that was a ghost?” I asked skeptically.

He simply shrugged innocently. “You tell me. I’m not the one who thinks there’s an answer to every mystery.” He turned and walked out through the wing and onto the stage. We continued to follow him until he stopped once again—this time just to the left of center stage—with an anxious look on his face. “If I’m the prime suspect, will the police arrest me? I didn’t do anything, I swear. I’m just a simple stage manager.”

“Slow down, nobody’s suggesting you call a lawyer—”

“Yet,” Stella added. She liked keepin’ ’em on their toes.

“—but what I would like to know is exactly what you saw the night Miss Duprey vanished.”

Stanley took a deep breath. “The first time I went outside, asking if Miss Duprey was alright, I saw nothing. Nothing but her, stumbling down the alley.”

“Stumbling?”

“Like I said, I think the bubbles went straight to her head.”

“You say that was the first time you went outside?”

Stanley nodded. “That’s right. I asked if she wanted me to call her a cab and she said the night air would do her good. The night was still and cold, a fog had drifted in. I told her not to get a chill this close to opening night.”

“What’d she say?”

“She told me she knew how to look after herself. That I fuss too much. And that I’d never get a girlfriend if I smothered women like that.”

“You smother women, huh?” Stella asked suspiciously. “Sounds to me like you’re guilty, guilty, guilty!”

“No, she didn’t mean it literally,” Stanley said. He drew in a deep, regretful sigh. “I guess she was just stating the obvious. Maybe I care too much. That’s why I’ll always be alone.”

Stella groaned. “Oh pah-lease! If you wanted sympathy I’d have brought my violin along!”

“Let’s get back to the night in question, shall we?” I asked, givin’ Stella a glare. “So, Mr. Small, what happened after Miss Duprey turned down your offer to call a cab?”

“I returned inside, took a few steps, then heard her scream. I raced back out into the alley to see a man in a hood and mask trying to strangle Miss Duprey.”

“Strangle her? Using what?”

“Her boa. I remember seeing black feathers blowing through the air.”

“Blowing?” I asked. “I thought you said the night was still and cold.”

Stanley shrugged. “I guess a breeze blew in.”

I took a mental note of that twitch on his face again. “You said the attacker wore a mask?”

“Yes. It was gold,” he answered. “It was the two masks of the theater combined, one side tragedy, one side comedy. I’ll never forget it. He looked at me for a fleeting moment... then before I knew it, he simply vanished. And Miss Duprey vanished with him.”

“He?”

Stanley looked at me. He had only one answer. “The ghost. I know it was the ghost who took her. I’ve been working in this theater for over ten years now, Mr. Baxter. I’ve heard footsteps on the stage when nobody was there. I’ve seen shadows pass when I’ve been the only person in the building. I’ve felt chills in the air and watched candles blow out when not a door or window is open. It was the ghost that took Miss Duprey. I know it.” He spoke with such conviction it was difficult not to feel a slight tingle down my spine.

Stella obviously didn’t feel the same tingle. “What a load of baloney!”

Stanley simply turned to her and said, “I wouldn’t stand there if I were you.”

“Stand where?” she asked, looking up for another sandbag.

“On that trapdoor,” he answered. “The latch is loose.”

“What trap—”

Before Stella could even see the outline of the trapdoor, the door’s hatch swung open and Stella screamed as she plunged into the darkness below followed by a heavy THUNK!

I dropped to my stomach beside the open trapdoor, shouting into the blackness, “Stella?”

The reply I got from down below was a loud groan, followed by, “Jesus, Mary and Joseph with a staff up his ass! This place is a goddamn deathtrap!”

Stanley was already scurrying for a nearby ladder. He lowered it into the hole and Stella emerged up its rungs, adjusting her blonde bob wig as she clambered back onto the stage, her stumpy legs a little wobbly on account of one broken shoe heel.

“God, are you okay?” I asked, helping her with one skew-whiff shoulder strap.

“I’m okay, but it beats me how there’s anyone left alive at all in this joint!”

“I sometimes ask myself the same question,” Stanley said. “I have to climb up to the lighting rig now, if you’d like to follow me this way.”

“Lighting rig!” Stella practically screeched. “Are you kidding?”

“I think we’re done with our questions for now,” I said. “We’ll be talking with the others. I’m sure we’ll have more questions for you later.”

“Till then, have fun up on your death rig,” Stella added. “See you at your funeral, sucker!”

As I guided Stella away, I muttered to her, “We need to talk about your bedside manner.”

“Whaddaya mean! I’m one of the best hookers in Wilde City. Ain’t had no complaints so far.”

“I ain’t talkin’ about that bedside manner.”

“Ahh, build a bridge and get over it, toots. Now, who’s next on our interrogation list? I feel like makin’ that pretty little gal with the big brown eyes cry. She looks like a crier to me.”

Olivia Overton’s eyes welled up and the tears started to flow. “It wasn’t me. I’m just a simple farm girl in a big city trying to make her dreams come true.”

“Oh quit with the crocodile tears or I’ll give you a purple nurple,” Stella threatened.

Olivia sobbed even louder. “I don’t even know what that means.”

I pulled Stella back. “Easy, tiger.”

We were in the ladies dressing room, a room shared by all the women of the supporting cast, although there was nobody here now except the three of us. Olivia sat in front of one of a dozen mirrors framed by burning light bulbs. She wiped her eyes with a handkerchief and looked at us through the mirror. “I know what you’re

thinking, that Miss Duprey was the one thing standing between me and a promising career. But don't you think that motive is a little too simple? I'd be a fool to be that obvious, wouldn't you agree?"

"Perhaps," Stella said. "Or maybe you're smart enough to admit you'd be a fool to do that, hoping to throw us off the scent."

"I'm too dumb to be smart enough to admit to being a fool," Miss Overton replied, batting her eyelids a little more.

"Oh how stupid do you think we are to buy that you're too dumb to be smart enough to admit to being a fool?" Stella piped up. "We're way too clever for that."

"I know you're clever enough not to be stupid to buy that I'm too dumb to be smart enough to—"

"Oh stop it, both of you!" I interrupted. The conversation was making my head spin. "Can we just get back to the events of last night?"

Miss Overton nodded.

Stella rolled her eyes. "I was just gettin' somewhere with that."

"Put a clamp on it," I said.

"Fine," Stella grumbled. "I'm gonna go look for clues someplace else in this creepy joint. I'll leave you to deal with Miss Googly Eyes by yourself."

"Googly Eyes?" Miss Overton asked, more shocked than offended.

"You heard me," Stella said. "You could poke someone else's eye out with those

peepers.”

“Go!” I ordered.

Stella gave a grumpy “Humph!” then turned and walked away.

I held back my sigh of relief in an attempt to remain professional in front of the suspect then began asking questions.

“Assuming you are innocent—since I highly doubt anybody is ready to put their hand up and plead guilty at this stage—do you have any reason to believe anyone else in the theater may have had plans for Miss Duprey?”

“No!” Miss Overton said emphatically. Then after a moment’s hesitation, and something of a dramatic tilt of her chin, she said, “Well... perhaps...”

“Perhaps what? Or should I ask who?”

“Oh, I don’t want to put any ideas in your head. It’s really nothing.”

“What’s nothing?”

Miss Overton paused a moment longer, made sure there was nobody within earshot, then said quietly, “I suspect Mr. Hemingway has... feelings for me. He’s practically admitted his undying love for me. Once.”

“Was he drunk?”

“A little.”

“Men will do that. They’re assholes sometimes.”

“You sound like you speak from experience, Mr. Baxter.” Miss Overton fluttered her eyelids at me again. “You know, you’re a very handsome man. I dare say you’ve broken a few hearts yourself.”

My thoughts flashed back to my morning with Harry, and how things had ended on such a note of uncertainty. I quickly deflected the subject back to the matter at hand. “Why do you think Mr. Hemingway’s supposed affection for you has anything to do with Miss Duprey’s disappearance?”

“Goodness, I hope it doesn’t. And as I said before, I don’t want to put ideas in anyone’s head, or get anyone into trouble.” She leaned forward and whispered even more quietly, “But once, he told me I was destined to be a star. He told me he’d do anything to help my career. Anything!”

At that moment, a piercing screech echoed through the entire theater, making Miss Overton jump with fright. I turned quickly, knowing exactly who that nasally scream belonged to. “Stella!”

I followed not only the sound of the scream, but also the stampede of footsteps that rattled the floorboards of the theater as myself and the six suspects arrived in the open doorway of Errol Hemingway’s private dressing room.

“What’s going on?” Errol said, putting away a hipflask and pushing his way to the front of the small gathering of stunned onlookers peering into his dressing room.

“It looks pretty obvious to me, pal,” I said, looking into the room to see Stella standing beside an open trunk, inside which was the dead body of one Dominique Duprey.

Sitting on top of the body was a gold mask, one side comedy, the other side tragedy.

Barnabas Blake gasped melodramatically.

Miss Overton buried her face in Raja Khan's chest and began crying again.

Stanley Small crossed himself.

Serafina Somerset groaned and rolled her eyes as though someone had just told her a bad joke.

Errol Hemingway took his hipflask back out and took a long swig.

Meanwhile, Stella announced, "Well Buck, I'd say we got ourselves a stiff." Unceremoniously she picked up the dead woman's limp arm and let it flop over the side of the trunk before noticing the ring on the corpse's hand and adding excitedly, "Ooh, nice rock!"

"Stella, leave it alone," I ordered.

"But that baby's worth at least—"

"—six months in the cooler. Stealing from a dead person is illegal. We're here to solve a crime, not commit one."

"Killjoy."

I ignored my assistant and turned to Raja. "Mr. Khan, I hate to be the one to tell ya this... but I think it's time to get the cops involved."

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:50 pm

I've always been of the opinion that the cops in Wilde City are about as useful as a dick on a nun. Remember those slapstick Keystone Kops moving pictures starring Charlie Chaplin and Fatty Arbuckle that were the bee's knees with audiences last decade, back in 1914? Well I'm pretty sure the motion picture producers used the Wilde City Police Department as their inspiration. Watching them try to master the new fingerprint identification processes that had recently been introduced was like watching a bunch of monkeys trying to finger-paint the Mona Lisa. Ink and white powder everywhere. They ended up fingerprinting everyone in the cast and crew, along with me and Stella who had been present when the body was found, before dusting the body from head to toe. They also went through everything in Errol's dressing room, item by item, including the gifts and cards his fans had sent him.

"Take a look at this one," said one cop to another, laughing as he read from a card in a melodramatic voice. "To my dearest Errol. It won't be long now until we'll be together forever. Things will happen on cue, and when the timing is right, everything between us will be perfect. Your secret admirer."

The cops laughed, ate a few candies from the box accompanying the card, then kept searching. They went through Errol's fancy collection of colognes and tried some on. They ogled a box filled with dirty pictures of dames hitchin' their skirts way above the knee. Heck, they even found his secret stash of moonshine hidden in a suitcase in his dressing room closet.

In the end, they took him in for questioning over the death of Miss Duprey. But he wasn't the only one they hauled off that day. After one final examination of the trunk in which Miss Duprey's body was found, a police officer discovered a pair of small, round spectacles.

“And who might these belong to?” asked the officer.

All eyes turned to Stanley Small, who was also arrested on the suspicion that his glasses had fallen into the trunk while he was trying to hide the body.

“It wasn’t me,” Stanley Small protested as they carted him away. “Somebody must have stolen my glasses. I’ve been framed. It wasn’t me! It was the phantom!”

Ignoring his cries of innocence, the cops put both Stanley and Errol in the back of a paddy wagon and drove away.

“For Christ’s sake,” cursed Serafina Somerset. “Now we’ve lost our damn leading man.” She turned to Raja Khan and pointed a finger. “This is all your fault.”

“Why’s it his fault?” I asked, her accusatory tone catching my attention.

“Ask him about his secret insurance bond. In the meantime, I’m going to get that idiot Errol out of jail and make sure nothing stops Signora Aria Valentina from arriving safely. God forbid any more stars come crashing down to Earth.”

With that, Serafina stormed off.

I turned to Raja Khan, but he was already shaking off her aspersions with a wave of his hand. “There is no bond, she’s delusional. That much wealth tends to make one quite eccentric. Might I suggest we all call it a day? This has been somewhat straining on all of us.”

“Of course,” I agreed, knowing my chances of getting anything useful out of anyone at this stage were pretty much zilch. “But if you don’t mind, we’ll continue our interviews with each of you in private.”

“But why?” asked Miss Overton. “They’ve just arrested Errol and Stanley. Surely, one of them is the killer. Isn’t this a closed case?”

“With all due respect, Miss Overton,” I replied. “The case ain’t closed till the fat lady sings.”

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:50 pm

The operatic voice coming from the gramophone filled Serafina Somerset's palatial penthouse apartment. It was the day after the arrests, and the woman singing on the recording hit a note so powerful that the ice in my glass of gin began quivering. Stella covered her ears and winced in pain, while Serafina swanned across her parlor room in a silk gown, a cigarette alight at the end of a ridiculously long black cigarette holder.

"Isn't Signora Valentina's voice simply exquisite? This is the point in the opera where the lovelorn heroine clutches the dagger in her hand and plunges it into her heart."

"I wish I had a dagger to plunge into my face right about now," Stella groaned. "Is she singin' opera or givin' birth?"

I didn't open my trap on the subject, but I had to agree with Stella. I'd heard prettier noises from alley cats having anal sex. But we weren't here to critique opera. We were here for answers.

"I'm sure opera fans will love it when they see her perform," I said to Miss Somerset. "But if you don't mind, we didn't come to listen to Signora Valentina sing."

As though somehow offended by my remark, the gramophone record hit a scratch in the vinyl and repeated the same groove several times before Miss Somerset lifted the arm of the needle and turned the player off.

"I suppose you'll have your chance to see her perform in person soon enough. Howard Hart's Zephyr airship from Berlin arrives the day after tomorrow, and to

mark the occasion Signora Valentina has agreed to sing at her welcoming reception at the Rainbow Palace atop Wilde City Tower.”

“I know, I can’t wait!” blurted out Stella excitedly. “Free booze!”

I turned to Stella, confused and feeling distinctly out of the loop. “There’s a reception at the Rainbow Palace?”

“Sure there is,” Stella replied. “Old man Hart and your boyfriend Harry are putting on a fancy-pants soiree to celebrate Signora Squealin’ Pig’s arrival. The Logan twins invited me. What... you don’t know about it? Harry didn’t invite you?”

“No,” I answered vaguely. “I haven’t seen him since...”

The truth was, I hadn’t seen him since we parted ways after Howard had spotted us making love on the terrace of Harry’s penthouse. My head was suddenly filled with questions, doubts, paranoia. Why had Harry not telephoned in the last day or so to tell me about the reception? How did Stella get an invitation and not me? Was this Harry’s way of saying he didn’t want me there? That he was embarrassed to have me at the same social event as his father?

As my voice trailed off into silence, Stella gave a wide-eyed grimace as though she’d just stepped in dog shit and trudged it across the carpet. “Oh, I see. This is a little awkward, huh?” She turned quickly to Miss Somerset in an effort to change the subject. “Hey lady, let’s hear more from the dame with the dagger stickin’ outta her heart. Probably less painful than talkin’ about the Rainbow reception right now.”

Serafina Somerset sighed with annoyance and impatience. “Oh, enough distractions. You two came here to question me about the night Miss Duprey was murdered. Let’s just get it over with, shall we?”

“Of course,” I said, pulling myself out of my sudden and stupid state of insecurity and getting back to the job at hand. I took out a notebook and licked the end of a pencil. “In your opinion, is there anyone in the cast and crew who you think might have killed Miss Duprey?”

Miss Somerset laughed unrestrainedly. “Take your pick! It could have been any one of them. Anyone but me, of course! Stanley Small was the last one to see her alive, not to mention the fact that the police found his glasses inside the trunk along with the dead body. Errol Hemingway has had eyes on that silly little understudy, Miss Overton, promising to make her a star the moment he got his filthy paws up her skirt; God knows, the two of them could have committed murder together. Barnabas Blake has been jealous of all his performers since this entire production went into rehearsal, insisting his name should appear at the top of the playbill. While Raja Khan has secretly arranged an insurance policy that, if you ask me, makes him the number one suspect in Miss Duprey’s murder. As for me, I’m the only one among them who doesn’t have a single motive. So the mystery within the mystery is... what the hell are you doing here questioning me when you should be out there tracking down the real killer? I’ve got a show to finance so I would greatly appreciate it if you’d stop wasting my time and let me get on with my job.”

Stella whispered to me from behind her hand. “She’s soooo guilty.”

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“Not every suspect is guilty,” I explained to Stella as we made our way up the elevator to Barnabas Blake’s apartment on the Upper Wilde Side.

Stella plonked her hands firmly on her hips like the annoying, tantrum-throwing, three-foot-small kid I never wanted. “You know what they say, Buck. Guilty until proven innocent.”

“It’s supposed to be the other way around.”

“Says the guy who pokes men’s bottoms. Everything’s bent in your head. It’s a good thing you got me to help you straighten things out, toots.”

The elevator doors opened and we knocked on Blake’s apartment door. It took him a while to answer, and when he did he was wearing a bathrobe and looking distinctly put out by our presence.

“I’m sorry, this is not a good time,” he said firmly.

“A-ha! Guilty!” Stella shouted with a pointing finger.

I slapped Stella’s finger down and said, “Mr. Blake, there’s no point avoiding this. If you’re innocent, you have nothing to hide. The sooner you answer our questions and tell your side of the story, the better.”

Blake let out a sigh of annoyance. “Very well. But make it short.” He glanced down at Stella with disdain and added, “And yes, I’m looking at you when I say that!”

As he turned to leave, Stella simmered. “Damn he rubs me the wrong way! I mean like a dog rubs your leg the wrong way. You catch my drift?”

I said nothing. It was hard not to disagree.

Blake took us into the living room and offered us a seat on his sofa, but that was all. No drink. No cigarette, although he lit one for himself. Playbill posters of the productions he’d directed over the years hung in frames on the walls. A few feet behind him was a closed door.

I flipped open my notebook but before I could open my mouth, Stella piped up.

“So, Mr. Blake. What was your motivation for stalkin’ Miss Duprey down the back alley of the theater, stranglin’ her with a feather boa and crammin’ her body into a trunk like stuffin’ in a turkey for Thanksgiving?”

Barnabas Blake let out an impatient groan and looked me square in the eyes. “Mr. Baxter, if you don’t mind, I’d rather answer your questions. Otherwise you can pack up your ventriloquist’s dummy here and leave.”

Stella glanced at me, outraged. “Dog. Leg. Rub,” was all she muttered.

“Let me take it from here,” I suggested diplomatically to all involved. I wet the tip of my pencil with my tongue. “Mr. Blake, tell us about your relationship with Miss Duprey.”

Blake looked as though he wasn’t exactly sure where I was coming from. “In what respect?” he asked.

“How was your professional relationship? Did you ever argue? Was there anything personal going on between the two of you?”

At that moment, the door behind Blake opened and a handsome young man stumbled out, trying to pull on one shoe and button up his shirt at the same time. Blake, Stella and I all turned to the man, eyebrows raised. The man froze on the spot as soon as he realized he was the center of attention.

“Oh, I thought I heard voices,” was all he said, before looking at us nervously. “Are you guys cops?”

“Detectives,” I said.

Panic turned the young man’s face white. “I’m so sorry, Barnabas, but I have to go. I’ve got to...” His eyes looked left and right, as though he were trying to find a tactful excuse scrawled on the walls. Suddenly one dawned on him. “I’ve got to feed my neighbor’s cat. Before it starves to death.” He laughed anxiously, “That darn cat, it’ll be howling the whole apartment building down by now. Gotta go! Bye!”

With that, he hightailed it outta there like a pussy being chased by a hungry hound.

As the front door slammed shut, Blake composed himself as though nothing had just happened. “I’m sorry, Mr. Baxter. Where were we?”

“I was asking if you and Miss Duprey may perhaps have had a personal...”

Before I could finish my sentence, the door behind Blake opened again and another handsome young man came stumbling out, pulling his socks on and tucking in his shirt. He stopped in his tracks when he saw me and Stella sitting on the sofa.

Blake simply sighed. “No, they’re not the police.”

“Oh, that’s a good thing,” the young man laughed nervously. “I was just in there checking on... pests! Mr. Blake hired me to rid his place of pests! Termites,

cockroaches... darn things will eat you out of house and home. But I'm happy to see you got no pests, Mr. Blake. You're clean as a whistle!"

Stella shot a sarcastic look at Blake. "Is he talkin' about what's in your room, or what's up your ass?"

With that one remark the young man scampered out of Blake's apartment faster than a cockroach escaping a shoe trying to squish it.

Stella asked Blake flatly, "What's next? A goat?"

Blake eyed Stella with a squint of scorn. "How did a little thing like you end up with a trap so big?"

"I guess I just got lucky," Stella snipped back. "Now answer the question. Were you and Miss Duprey catchin' the Chattanooga Choo-Choo to Hoo-Hoo Town or not?"

I whispered to Stella behind my hand. "I hate to break it to ya, but I don't think the Chattanooga Choo-Choo has been invented yet."

Stella trumped up and said, "Don't blame me, toots! Blame the hack who's writin' this story! Now back to the question. Mr. Blake, did you or did you not murder Miss Dominique Duprey?"

Blake had already started filing his nails. "Actually, I don't think that was the question at all. I think the question was whether Miss Duprey and I were having an affair. To which the answer is..."

Barnabas Blake twisted his palm as if to present something. On cue, a third young handsome man exited the door behind Blake. "I promise, he's the last one," Blake muttered.

I instantly recognized the third guy. It was Finnian, the new kid behind the bar at the Velvet Viper. He instantly recognized me too. “Hey, Buck! How you doin’?” he asked with an easygoing smile. He wasn’t ready to flee like the other two guys. Finnian was way too relaxed for that.

“I’m good,” I replied. “Workin’ a case.”

“I won’t hold you up then,” Finnian said casually. “Say, it’s been a while since we saw you at the Viper. You comin’ back anytime soon?”

Was I? It was a good question. I was beginning to feel like Harry was starting to slip from my tobacco and pot-stained fingertips. Was I losing him? Would I one day be walking again through the dimly lit corridors of the Velvet Viper in search of cheap sex and the delusion that someone—anyone—might be able to fill the void that I thought Harry had filled inside me?

When my silence lingered a little too long, Stella answered for me. “He’s taken, you flea-bitten floozy! Can’t you see the stupid look on his face? He’s in love. Now beat it!”

Finnian chuckled, not in the least bit offended by Stella’s tone, and winked at me on his way out the door. “Good for you, lover boy. Can’t say I’m not jealous.”

I might have been in love, but I couldn’t help question right now whether I was being loved right back. Or why I was being so damn paranoid!

Stella clicked her fingers in front of my face. “Mind on the job, lover boy! You keep gettin’ a faraway look in your eye like you’ve suddenly gone blind. You can see, can’t you? How many fingers am I holding up?”

Stella was giving me the bird. I pushed her hand out of the way as Barnabas sighed

then groaned with impatience.

“This really is becoming quite excruciating on a number of levels,” he said. “Are you quite through interrogating me yet?”

“Snap it shut, twinkle toes!” ordered Stella.

“I’d be happy to,” Barnabas said, getting up off the sofa and heading for the door. He opened it and held it open, gesturing for the two of us to leave. “Quite frankly this whole murder business has left me exhausted. If you don’t mind, I’d rather do this some other time.”

I stood, knowing we weren’t going to get a dime outta Barnabas Blake this evening. “We appreciate your time,” I said as I met him at the door. “You’ll be hearing from us.”

“I can’t wait,” he replied in a droll tone.

With that, Stella and I left... but not before Stella managed to whisper loudly once more before the door closed—“He’s sooo guilty!”

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There was one more suspect to see before we could close off our initial questioning, but it was well beyond midnight and I decided that our visit to Raja Kahn could wait until morning. I walked Stella back to our office, but I didn't go in. I needed to clear my head and walk off the strange mix of emotions stirring inside me like a sour cocktail.

There was only one place I wanted to go.

There was only one person I wanted to see.

Hart's Nightclub was alive with beautiful swingers and booze-slingers. The place was jumping and jiving, despite the fact that it was almost two in the morning by the time I arrived. I made my way past the slappers and dappers on the dance floor, past the jazz band with their blasting trumpets and dancing drumsticks, and headed up the private stairs to Harry's office.

I knocked.

He answered.

For a moment, we stood staring at one another. I didn't know what to say and neither did he, so instead I took his face in my hands and planted a kiss on him—so desperate, so in need of him, I could have bitten off his lip with all the passion and love exploding inside me.

In that moment, I wanted Harry Hart more than I had ever wanted him before.

My insecurities had made me hungry.

My paranoia had made me powerful.

My fears had made me certain of how much I needed him.

I pushed him backward, forcing him into his office as I kicked the door shut with my heel. I held his face tightly in my hands as our tongues fought for dominance in each other's mouths. He grunted and groaned until I backed him into the sofa and pushed him down onto his back.

He was wearing a tux, one that would not stay on for long.

I seized his bow tie and pulled at it, yanking it undone before snapping open the buttons on his shirt.

I tugged at my own tie and threw off my jacket, my shirt. My chest was heaving, my heart beating so hard on the inside I thought it was about to set itself free. My cock felt harder than it had ever been before.

I pulled off my belt, unbuttoned my trousers, and unleashed the thick, hard dick that wanted him so badly my whole body ached.

"We need to talk," I said, so hungry for him that I had to wipe the spit from my lips with the back of my hand. "But not before I fuck you so hard you'll be staining your suits till next Tuesday."

And so it was, Harry and I fucked like we had never fucked before. I threw his trousers across the room, took his perfect, firm ass in my fists and drove my cock into him so hard he had to bite something. I offered him my hand, thrusting it into his mouth, and he bit down so hard on the web of flesh between my thumb and forefinger

that he drew blood.

I cried out in ecstasy.

I pushed my way inside him even harder, faster.

He came before I did, his cock erupting and shooting cum all over the sofa. I squeezed his hair with the hand that wasn't being drained of blood. I pulled back with a fistful of hair, like a rider pulling up a horse, and thrust my cock so deep inside him I thought he was going to taste my cum in his throat.

The sweat from my forehead fell onto his bare back.

My hips quivered as my cum gushed into his body.

His back hunched then arched.

When I was done, I pulled myself from him more tenderly than I entered him.

My spent dick was slicked with my cum and the juices of his ass.

He rolled over onto his back on the sofa and I laid myself on top of him.

Our heartbeats thumped in time, our panting chests rising and falling as one.

I looked at the tooth marks and blood on my hand. "You really made a meal of me."

He raised his eyebrows. "So did you."

"I guess I..." I wasn't sure what to say. Having a conversation after sex was still something new to me. It's easy to stand in front of another man with your clothes on

the floor and your dick pointing to the ceiling; it's another thing to talk after you've filled him with your sweat and seed. It was something that I wanted to perfect, but maybe it was going to take more practice than I thought. "I guess I needed to get it out of my system," was what I finally managed to say.

Harry looked at me curiously, his face so close to mine that I felt the need to sit up on the sofa. "What do you mean? Get what out of your system?"

Harry sat up too, the both of us naked on the sofa.

I shrugged. "I dunno. The fact that I was confused. Maybe angry. Last time I saw you, I felt like you didn't want me there. And then I find out about the reception at the Rainbow Palace for Aria Valentina—the one you didn't invite me to—and I guess I felt... well, pissed."

Harry let out an incredulous laugh. "And the way you deal with that is to come in here unannounced and fuck me? Claim your stake in me? Is that how you feel about me?"

"I don't know how I'm supposed to feel about you," I said, getting up, naked, from the sofa. "The last time I left your place, you gave me a look like I might never see you again. How am I supposed to take that?"

"Take it as me feeling awkward and embarrassed that my father just saw your cock up my ass on my apartment patio," Harry said frankly, getting up, naked, from the sofa as well. "Take it as me not wanting to be disowned by the only family I've ever known, whether I get along with my father or not. Take it as me wanting a little space while I try to run a business and step in line to take over my father's empire."

I staggered back from him. I felt like I'd just been punched in the nose, yet Harry hadn't so much as raised a finger. He didn't have to.

I picked up my trousers. “Maybe you should take this as me leaving,” I said, dressing myself badly. And madly.

“Oh come on,” Harry said, himself infuriated. “You know who I am. You know what I’m going to inherit. I can’t be seen fucking around.”

“Is that what we’re doing?” I asked, throwing on my shirt without buttoning it up. “Fucking around? Is that what you think this is? I love you, Harry! I’ve never said that to anyone in my life! I’ve never felt that goddamn lucky to say it!”

Harry threw his hands up and raised his voice. “And I... I feel trapped right now. Do you want me to say I love you too? Fine, I love you. And if it means so much to you that I invite you to the reception at the Rainbow Palace, then fine, you’re invited.”

“With all due respect,” I shouted back, “I not-so-regretfully decline your goddamn invitation. You can go to your reception and drink your champagne on your own! I hope you don’t choke on that silver spoon in your mouth!”

With my jacket and tie in hand, I stormed for the door.

From behind me I heard Harry call. “Buck... wait!”

But as I opened the door, the sound of the jazz band and the noise of the clubbers on the dance floor drowned out Harry’s voice.

I left his office and slammed the door behind me.

I pushed my way through the crowd and hurried outside.

As I did so, I thanked whoever-it-is above that a storm had rolled in and the rain came crashing down. It was cold but I didn’t give a damn because as I raised my collar and

headed into the downpour, I knew nobody could see my tears.

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Raja Kahn's house was like a puzzle that hadn't quite been put together properly. It was full of ornaments from both east and west. Statues of Indian gods with more arms than an octopus stood alongside props and trinkets from the many productions that had played within the Maharaja Majestic over the years.

Stella stood staring at the statue of a goddess with an elephant's trunk. "Reminds me of Esmeralda down on Elm and Twenty-ninth. The kind of nose you wanna reach out and honk, but by God that woman knows how to blow... if you catch my drift."

Stella laughed.

I wasn't in the mood for jokes.

Raja Kahn walked into the room at that moment and said, "My apologies, I had to take a telephone call. Good news, it seems Serafina has managed to get Errol released from police custody so that he can begin rehearsals with Signora Valentina when she arrives."

"What about Stanley Small?" I asked, curious.

"He's still in jail," Raja replied. "Serafina has her priorities. It's easier to find a replacement stage manager than it is to find a replacement leading man. Please, take a seat."

"Speaking of Serafina," I said as I sat myself down on Raja's sofa, which was covered in silk cushions and Pashmina throws. "Let's talk about the insurance policy she mentioned back at the theater... and again when we interviewed her."

Raja tried to feign laughter. “As I told you before, I don’t know what she’s talking about. Would you like me to make you some tea? Ceylon’s finest. My cousin imports a lot of exotic things into this fine country.”

“Well, you’ll never replace the leading man,” Stella groaned. “That was the worst acting I’ve ever seen. Come on, Raja, let the cat outta the bag. What’s the insurance policy all about?”

Raja sighed and sat in a large armchair opposite the sofa. “It’s nothing I’m proud of,” he said, his face drawn, his expression one of concern and regret. “I love my theater. I live for the productions we put on, I’m so proud of every single show that has ever graced that stage. It has been my one true passion to own a theater like the Maharaja Majestic, ever since I was a little boy in Delhi dreaming of the bright lights, the adoring audience, the performers in their colorful costumes. However, in business, there are good days... and there are bad days. And so I invested in an insurance policy that some might consider rather... unorthodox.”

“Unorthodox... or illegal?” I asked.

“Well,” Raja admitted reluctantly. “Both.”

I leaned forward. “Who exactly is the broker of this policy?”

Raja took a deep breath and looked around his own living room as though someone might suddenly appear from behind his armchair and stick a knife in his ribs. “Bugsy Brown,” he eventually answered. “I can’t say any more, except for the fact that Bugsy is the only person in Wilde City who would insure the theater and prevent me from going into bankruptcy... in case the Maharaja Majestic ever loses its appeal.”

“Or loses its leading actress!” Stella said accusingly.

For once, I agreed with her. It seemed suspicious that Raja Kahn had a policy from the gangster Bugsy Brown that would ensure he'd never be out of pocket if the theater went down the drain. Perhaps the quickest and easiest way to claim that policy would be to get rid of his own leading actress, Miss Dominique Duprey.

Raja Kahn leaned forward in his armchair. "Please believe me when I say, I would never do anything to jeopardize my theater."

"You can understand that this appears extremely suspicious," I said. "It gives you the greatest motive of them all... Money."

Raja Kahn looked at me curiously. "I beg to differ, Mr. Baxter. I've staged enough tales of pain and passion to know what the greatest motive of them all is."

"And what's that?" I asked.

Raja simply smiled. "Love, Mr. Baxter. The greatest motive of them all... is love."

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Perhaps Raja Kahn was right; perhaps love was the greatest motive of them all. Wilde City was full of fellas that had bumped off their broad just for looking sideways at the wrong guy, or gals that had topped their double-crossing daddies for turning some flapper into a slapper.

Speaking of killer dames, if I was going to get to the bottom of Raja Kahn's dodgy deal with Bugsy Brown, the one person who could give me the lowdown was Bugsy's ex-missus and archrival Mamma Marlow.

The next day I made my way to Mamma's place. I decided to leave Stella behind, knowing that last time we'd seen Mamma we kinda blew up her bootlegging headquarters. I didn't exactly expect her to greet me with open arms... more like a pair of cement boots to try on for size. But to my surprise, Mamma Marlow not only opened her doors for me, she opened her best bottle of single malt whiskey as well.

"I've been saving this for a special occasion," she said as she poured two generous glasses.

We were sitting in the library of her lavish mansion, a house built out of booze, broads and bribes.

"This is a special occasion?" I asked, trying to contain my puzzlement.

"Indeed it is, Mr. Baxter," she said, handing me a glass and clinking her glass against mine. "It's not often you get to thank the man who saved the life of your son's lover."

She was, of course, referring to Stu Whitmore, the kid I saved from his screw-loose

sister and nun-with-a-gun, Peggy Whitmore. Mamma Marlow's gratitude was not only unexpected, it seemed completely out of character for the hardened queen of crime. Then again, I knew Mamma Marlow by reputation more than anything. How was I to know what made the woman tick? I barely knew what made myself tick these days, let alone someone else.

"I was happy to help," was all I said in reply. "Your son seems like a good kid."

"Perhaps you'll get to know him better someday."

"Thanks, but I'm sorta taken at the moment." The words came out of my mouth before I even knew it.

Mamma laughed. "I didn't exactly mean it that way... but good for you. I hope you're happy."

"I am," I said so unconvincingly that Mamma picked up on my tone.

"Going through a rough patch?" she delved.

"You could say that."

"Stick it out," she said with a wink. "The only thing tougher than getting through the hard times, is living with the regret that you shoulda stuck together in the first place."

"Does that advice come from experience?"

Mamma shrugged. "Who knows? If you're askin' whether I'm still in love with Bugsy Brown, hell, me and him got more chance of killing each other before we kiss and make up. But crazier things have happened."

She lit a cigar and offered me one. I took it. It had been some time since my last puff of the dragon thanks to Stella smoking the last of my pot, which reminded me I was overdue for my visit to Madame Chang on The Peking Empress. I made a mental note before focusing the conversation squarely on Bugsy.

“While we’re on the subject of your ex-husband, I wanted to ask if you knew anything about a certain arrangement between him and Raja Kahn.”

Mamma blew a plume of smoke up to the ceiling. “You mean the insurance policy on the Majestic? It’s not exactly a one-off deal. Bugsy’s managed to negotiate several little financial agreements around town. The Cinema Paradise on the corner of Elm and Main, Ginger’s Gin Mill, hell, he even tried to stitch up a deal with Holden Hart over his nightclub, but apparently Holden told Bugsy he wouldn’t touch that policy with someone else’s dick. That takes balls, let me tell ya!”

Just the mention of Harry’s name made my heart stumble like a drunk in the gutter. Harry had never once mentioned Bugsy Brown to me. How many other secrets was he keeping from me?

“What kinda policy are we talkin’ about?” I asked. It wasn’t the only question rushing through my head.

“Bugsy approaches popular venues that may have a rocky financial road ahead and cuts them a deal. If things get tough, Bugsy will burn the business to the ground and hand the owner a cash payout, in return for one little favor.”

“What’s that?”

Mamma drew on her cigar and the embers sizzled. “Bugsy hides a bunch of stiffes in the venue just before dowsing the place in gasoline and torching it. The bodies of his enemies are burned beyond recognition, none of the corpses can be identified, and

everyone walks away happy.”

“You think Raja Kahn is planning on burning his theater down to save himself from bankruptcy?”

Mamma shook her head. “I’m not so sure. If I know one thing about Raja Kahn, he loves that theater. He may have signed a deal with the devil, but it’d take a lot for him to go through with it.”

“Wait a minute,” I backtracked. “Why would Bugsy approach Holden Hart? Hart’s Nightclub is the hottest ticket in town.”

Mamma smiled knowingly. “If there’s one person with an uncertain future in this town, it’s Holden Hart. You have no idea what’s going on with Holden’s father, Howard, do you?”

I shook my head.

“My dear boy, Howard Hart is making deals with the Germans that will either turn him into Wilde City’s first billionaire or seal the fate of the Hart family forever.” Mamma took one last puff on her cigar before stubbing it out and saying, “Hart Industries is either going to take over the world... or cause the next world war.”

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Picture this—

A schmuck who thought he knew it all, suddenly discovers he knows nothing.

A poor fool staggers down the street, reeling with the realization that everything he had so recently learned about life and love has just caved in around him.

A detective who has absolutely no idea of the hidden truths that surround him.

I reached my office in a daze, my perceptions of Harry changing—becoming more and more distorted—with every unsteady step I took from Mamma Marlow's. It was a journey I had taken in broad daylight, and yet clouds of darkness seemed to envelope me the entire way.

I opened the door to the office and saw Stella standing there in a glitzy silver number, heels that boosted her over the four-foot mark, and a feather boa so fluffy she couldn't stop spitting out feathers.

I was confused. "Stella?"

She grinned and announced. "I'm beautiful, I know! Keep it in your pants, toots!"

I shook my head. "What's going on? Why are you dressed like a shiny hood ornament?"

Stella looked at me like I was still dripping with yesterday's placenta. "It's the Rainbow Palace reception for Aria Valentina's arrival, you knucklehead. You know,

the one you're not invited to."

I decided in that moment. "Actually, I am invited. And I'm going!"

With a suspicious tilt of her eyebrow and one hand on her hip, Stella asked, "Oh really?"

"Yes really. Harry told me if I wanted to come, it was fine with him."

"That doesn't sound like much of an invitation to me. That sounds like someone with a twisted arm. Did you break a bone to get into this party? Was it some dirty sex game? Do I even wanna know?"

"No, you don't! Now where's my tuxedo?"

From the highest peak in the city, the sun shone—uninterrupted by any other skyscrapers—into the Rainbow Palace atop Wilde City Tower, making the crystal champagne flutes and teardrop chandeliers sparkle and glitter. Wilde City's elite filled the room, with socialites and celebrities, tycoons and talent, millionaires and megastars—

—and then there was me and Stella.

"Act fancy," she said, elbowing me in the knee. "This kind of crowd always tips. I might pick up a few extra clients here, you know. And I ain't talkin' about working in the hospitality industry."

My eyes were already scanning the room for Harry but there was no sign of him. I spotted Serafina Somerset talking with a bunch of jewelry-laden biddies across the room. She spotted me and her face soured instantly before she turned her back, making it clear she didn't want me going anywhere near her.

From another direction approached one of the Logan twins, who handed Stella and me a glass of champagne each. She leaned down and kissed Stella on the cheek, at which point Stella's eyelids fluttered like butterfly wings.

"Thanks, sweetie," Stella gushed.

"It's nice to see you, Lois," I said... without the gush.

Stella stamped on the toe of my shoe with her heel. "This is Lucy, stupid. Lois is flying the airship in today."

Lucy smiled politely at me. "That's right. The Zephyr from Berlin landed at Lassiter's Lake just outside town this morning. That's where Lois will take over as pilot and dock the airship here at Wilde City Tower. It's all rather showy, adds to the glamor of the event, but you know what we women say... anything a man can do, a woman can do better." Lucy winked down at Stella. "Right, Stella?"

I thought Stella's knees were about to buckle and send her crashing twelve inches to the ground. Thankfully she managed to stay on her feet and wink back at Lucy with a gaspy, "You betcha, toots!"

"Where's Holden?" I asked, trying not to sound like he was the only thing on my mind.

"He's on the airship with Howard and Signora Valentina." Lucy spotted something through the window behind me. "Oh look, here it comes now."

I turned as the entire crowd in the Rainbow Palace were all drawn to the floor-to-ceiling window overlooking the city, a murmur of excitement rippling through the room. The Zephyr soared over the cityscape like a magical ship sailing through the air, its shadow ducking and weaving through the streets and over the tops of buildings

below. It was a sight to behold as the mighty airship cruised towards Wilde City Tower.

As it neared, I could make out Lois at the helm, steering with confidence as the airship eventually blotted out the sun, hovering over the spire of the tower while a busy maintenance crew secured lines to the outside of the building and winched the gangplank out to the passenger cabin attached to the belly of the Zephyr.

The gangplank was fastened into place and the door to the cabin opened, and the entire room applauded as Signora Valentina stepped out of the airship, waved like royalty, then made her way down the gangplank to the viewing deck of Wilde City Tower. She was followed closely by Howard Hart, and in his shadow walked his son, Harry.

As the three made their way from the viewing deck into the Rainbow Palace, the applause became rapturous. Signora Valentina emerged wearing so many furs I'd bet my last drop of gin she featured prominently on the animal kingdom's Most Wanted list. Howard and Harry both nodded and waved to the crowd, both of them shaking hands with society's elite and smiling with charm.

My eyes were fixed on Harry, my heart aching for him.

There and then, I wanted to kiss him, bend him over and fuck him, and tell him that I loved him. Yep, I was turning into a goddamn mess over the man.

As though he suddenly picked up on the thoughts in my head, Harry turned and from across the room he spotted me straight away. His smile faded. A serious look turned his face stern and cold. He made a beeline for me.

"Oh look who's comin'," Stella said to me, like I hadn't noticed. "It's Mr. Moneybags who likes playin' with your fun-bags."

But before any of us could so much as greet Harry, he firmly grabbed me by the elbow and hauled me away from Stella and Lucy, muttering through gritted teeth, “Why Buck, how nice to see you. May I have a word in private?”

His grip on me was so tight it turned me on, despite the fact that I knew this discussion was not gonna be a pretty one. He dragged me through the room, smiling like a fake to people he knew left and right, before shoving me through the door into the stairwell.

“What the hell are you doing here?” he demanded. “I thought you not-so-regretfully declined my invitation.”

“I changed my mind.”

“Well change it back. I don’t know what the hell is with you, Buck. Last time I saw you, you stormed out of my office. Now you just waltz on in to the Rainbow Palace like everything’s dandy?”

“Trust me, things are far from ‘dandy’.”

“Then what are they?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. Try ‘confusing’. Or ‘questionable’. Or how about ‘completely fucked up’ for an apt description. Why? Because the more I learn about you, Harry, the more I realize I don’t know you at all.”

“What are you talking about? What do you mean the more you learn about me?” A thought dawned over his face. “Are you investigating me?”

“No! But maybe I should.”

He looked me up and down with a stunned and furious glint in his eye, then turned to go. This time I was the one to seize him by the arm. I spun him about to face me, his body so close to mine I could feel the heat of his anger.

“Harry, this world is full of too many people with too many secrets. I don’t want you to be one of them.”

He stood facing me for an eternal moment, his nostrils flaring, his jaw clenched. Eventually he simmered. “The reason I didn’t invite you here in the first place is because I don’t want my father to see the two of us together. Is that what you wanted to hear? Is that what this is all about?”

“There’s more to it than that.”

Harry shook his head. “No, Buck. There isn’t. There’s my personal life, and then there’s my business life. You belong in one, my father belongs in the other. There are things I don’t want him knowing about us, and there are things you don’t want to know about him.”

“Why not?”

“Because it could get you killed,” he answered, clearly and coldly. He seized my face in his hands then laid a long, deep kiss on me. When he was done he simply said, “Stay away from Hart Industries, Buck. Don’t make me choose between you and my father.”

With that, he left the stairwell, returning to the reception inside the Rainbow Palace and the strains of Aria Valentina singing to her adoring audience.

The sound of her voice echoed down the stairwell.

I decided to follow it, descending the stairs of Wilde City Tower all the way to the bottom, my heart jolting in my chest with every downward step I took.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:50 pm

We sat in the back of the large auditorium of the Maharaja Majestic, trying to observe the latest rehearsal of *The Snake Charmer's Slave* with the new addition of Aria Valentina in the title role. As Raja Kahn had mentioned at his house the other night, Serafina had indeed managed to get Errol Hemingway released from police custody due to lack of evidence, arguing that anybody could have planted the body of Miss Duprey in Errol's dressing room. Stanley Small, however, remained behind bars for the time being. A disgruntled Miss Overton had been given the task of taking over Stanley's job while he was detained. She may have been an actress, but she was doing a lousy job of hiding her contempt for the fact that she hadn't been offered the lead role following the murder of Miss Duprey. Now, to rub salt into the wound, she was hauling pulleys, fetching props, and opening and closing curtains for the actors on stage. It didn't take a genius to figure out a job as menial as stage manager made the aspiring starlet feel overlooked, humiliated and downright angry.

On stage, Aria Valentina was belting out a song that made no sense to me, and even less sense to Stella who had shoved a blob of chewed gum in each ear to shut out the noise.

My head was still drowning in thoughts and fears over my relationship with Harry, and the song was starting to get on my nerves. "Jesus," I muttered to Stella, slouching in my seat. "I don't think I can stand any more."

Stella looked at me and shouted at the top of her already-loud voice. "I can't hear you! I have gum in my ears! Did you say you think she's a whore?"

Signora Valentina came to an abrupt halt as though someone just kicked over a gramophone, and everyone at the front of the theater—including Barnabas, Raja,

Errol and Serafina, who were all sitting in the front row—turned to glare at us.

“If you don’t mind, we have an opera opening tomorrow night,” blasted Barnabas Blake. He turned back to Aria on stage. “My sincerest apologies, Signora. I assure you that as soon as the police have enough evidence to convict Stanley Small, Mr. Baxter will no longer be required to continue his investigation. In the meantime, would you like a break?”

“Perhaps a short rest,” Signora Valentina said, patting her cheeks with a lace handkerchief. “This opera is exhausting, and my talent is clearly unappreciated,” she added, shooting a look of death at me and Stella. “If anyone needs me, I’ll be in my dressing room for the next ten minutes.”

“Very well,” Barnabas declared, clapping his hands for attention, “Everyone, take a short break and be back here in ten minutes to rehearse The Dance of the Cobra scene.”

As Signora Valentina left the stage, Barnabas, Errol and Raja all dispersed, as did Miss Overton who appeared briefly from the backstage curtains, wiping her brow, before disappearing in the wings.

It was Serafina Somerset who came storming up to the back row. With both hands on her hips, she stood over Stella and me like an angry schoolmistress. “What the hell do you think you’re doing? It was difficult enough for me to convince Signora Valentina to fly halfway across the world to appear in a production that’s already getting bad press before the damn show even opens. She doesn’t need imbeciles like you two giving her any reason to pack her bags and—”

Suddenly an ear-piercing scream echoed throughout the whole auditorium. Even Stella heard it through her gum. We all turned in the direction of backstage, before I leapt to my feet and started running, with Stella hot on my heels, pulling the sticky

gum from her ears.

“Stay here,” I told Serafina as we dashed away.

Stella and I raced backstage. There was nobody else in sight. Was everybody out having a cigarette? Or had they vanished for more sinister reasons?

“It must have come from over there,” Stella said, pointing to the open door to Signora Valentina’s dressing room.

We rushed to the door and stopped in our tracks when we saw the motionless body of Signora Valentina splayed on the floor. I rushed to kneel by her side and saw the blank, wide-eyed stare on her face. Stella was looking over my shoulder.

“Jeepers, that’s one dead diva!” Stella said. “I guess now we can finally get some peace and quiet around here!”

“Stella, quick. Look for clues,” I told her. “Before anyone else gets a chance to mess up this crime scene... including the damn cops!”

“What kinda clues?”

“Anything. A weapon. Signs of a struggle. Anything that looks out of place.”

“You mean like this?” Stella asked. I turned around to see her standing behind me, holding the cobra prop by the tail. “Shouldn’t the stupid fake snake be in the props room?”

Suddenly my eyes bulged wider than the dead opera singer’s. “Stella! That snake ain’t a fake!”

As Stella looked down with a gasp, the head of the cobra she was holding twirled upward to come face-to-face with the horrified little person. The scream that came from Stella was almost loud enough to wake Signora Valentina from the dead.

Stella panicked—

—and hurled the live snake straight at me!

The cobra wrapped itself around my neck and I screamed too. I flapped my arms madly, hooking the serpent off me and throwing it to the floor before turning for the door.

It was closed.

“What the hell did you shut the door for?” I asked, grabbing the handle.

“I didn’t!”

I rattled the door handle in my fist. “Someone’s locked it from the outside!”

I turned back to look where the snake was, only to see it chasing Stella straight toward me. Stella crashed into my legs... then started climbing. Like a cat up a tree she clawed her way up the entire length of my torso until her arms and legs reached my head and shoulders, her paws and heels digging into my face to try and get as high as possible.

“What the hell are you doin’?”

“Savin’ my ass!” she shrieked.

I pushed her hands out of the way of my eyes and looked down to see the cobra

slither directly towards us. I jumped to the left and began climbing furniture as fast as I could. I clambered onto Signora Valentina's dressing-room table. The bright bulbs framing the mirror blinded me momentarily.

"Buck! Behind you!" Stella squealed.

I blinked the starriness out of my eyes to see the cobra slithering up over the edge of the table, hissing at us.

I looked around, desperate for something to use in defense. I caught my reflection in the mirror and quickly raised my fist to smash the glass with the intention of arming myself with the sharpest shard I could find. But Stella, still perched awkwardly on my shoulders, seized my hand.

"Are you crazy? You wanna begin seven years of bad luck face-to-face with a cobra!"

At that moment, the serpent raised its head, fanned its neck and made a jab at me, its fangs missing my leg by an inch. I stumbled backwards and fell off the table.

Stella and I tumbled across the floor.

The snake practically launched itself off the table at us. That cobra sure as hell had a mean streak.

I grabbed Stella. "Quick, get in the closet."

"I always thought you hated being in the closet!"

"Not today!" I shoved her into the freestanding wardrobe and jumped inside with her, empty coat hangers jangling in my face, before I closed the doors shut behind us.

I leaned forward to peer through the gap between the two doors and the wardrobe rocked slightly. I could see the snake circling the floor in front of the wardrobe, as though it were trying to figure out a way in. I had an idea.

“Hold on to something,” I told Stella.

She clung to my leg.

I pushed my weight to the rear of the wardrobe, and then lurched forward. The closet teetered. I did it again and the wardrobe pitched even more. With one last thrust of my weight backward, then forward, the wardrobe rocked on its legs and began to fall facedown. I held the doors shut as best I could just before the wardrobe hit the floor with a thud and a loud squish!

Snake blood began to ooze up from the now cracked doors beneath us.

“Nice work!” Stella cheered. “Just one question—how do we get out of here with the doors facing the floor?”

I answered it by kicking my foot clean through the back of the wardrobe, sending splinters of wood into the air.

As I climbed out and helped Stella up, Errol shouldered open the locked door to the dressing room and stumbled inside, followed by Serafina, Barnabas, Raja and Miss Overton.

Miss Overton saw the snake half-squashed beneath the toppled wardrobe and screamed.

Serafina saw the dead body of Signora Valentina on the floor and groaned. “Oh that’s just terrific. Another dead actress. Who the hell are we going to get to play the title

role now?”

All heads turned to the doe-eyed Miss Overton... including mine as I gazed suspiciously at the one person who was now clearly suspect number one.

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The cops spent the rest of the day and night collecting evidence and questioning suspects. Serafina spent the rest of the day convincing them not to close down the theater as the show's opening night was now less than twenty-four hours away. A little money into the hands of Wilde City's police chief didn't go astray, but Serafina was warned that as soon as opening night was over, a full investigation would begin.

It was also agreed that Stanley Small would be released from jail immediately, given that he was clearly no longer a suspect, and that Miss Overton now had a bigger role to play other than that of rope-wrangler.

"At least we'll have our stage manager back," Serafina muttered, glaring at Miss Overton. "I hope you're better at The Dance of the Cobra than you were at ropes and sandbags."

"Just watch me," Miss Overton said with more confidence than I had ever seen her display. "I'm ready to shine like a star!"

"You'd better be," warned Serafina. "Otherwise I'll make sure you spend the rest of your life waiting tables and washing dishes."

When Stella and I left the theater, it was well past midnight.

"If you ask me, it was the whole damn lot of them!" Stella announced flippantly. "Miss Overton did it so she could have the lead. Errol did it so he could get into Miss Overton's happy pants. Barnabas probably got paid to do it so he could afford his gigolo addiction. Raja probably arranged for his cousin to ship the snake in from India. And Serafina did it because... well, just because that bitch hates everybody!"

I stopped walking. “What did you just say?”

“What’s the matter, you got a little gum still stuck in your ears too?” Stella shouted, “That bitch hates—”

“No, before that. You mentioned something about the snake being shipped in.”

“Are you kidding me? Of course it did. That weren’t no cottonmouth from the Louisiana swamps. Raja already admitted his cousin imports lots of exotic things in from India. Who’s to say he didn’t hide a snake in his crate of Ceylon tea?”

For once, she was right. I crouched down to her level. “Stella, go home, get some sleep, then first thing in the morning find out what kinda snake that was.”

“It was a cobra, stupid.”

“I know that. But what kinda of cobra? Where is it from? Why would a cobra like that be here in Wilde City? And who could have brought it into the country if not Raja Kahn or his cousin?”

Stella looked at me with excitement. “You mean you want me to dig up some dirt? Talk to some lowlifes? Rummage through people’s trash if I have to?”

“It’s called investigating.”

“Who needs sleep, I’m on the case! At last I can get my hands filthy!”

With that, Stella raced away into the night on her short but fast-moving legs.

As for me, I knew we were getting closer and closer to cracking this case. But first, I needed to clear my head, search my soul, and seek out the only true wisdom I knew

of in Wilde City.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:50 pm

The Peking Empress materialized through the fog drifting on the canals of the West River district. I boarded the giant red barge and stepped into the smoke-veiled belly of that floating opium den, walking through the swirling, lingering shroud of mystic mist. The moment I saw Madame Chang, she sensed my presence and turned to face me with her completely white, blind eyes.

She smiled. “Why if it isn’t Buck Baxter, I can see your light the minute you walk into the room.”

The scent of the barge and the smoke in the den were already sending me into a transcendental state. My eyelids were feeling heavy, yet every step I took was like walking on clouds as I made my way towards her through the haze.

“Come,” she said, floating down to her knees, the sleeves of her ethereal white gown like the fins of a fish as it settles on a riverbed. She rearranged the cushions on the floor in front of her. “Come and relax.”

Before I knew it, I had discarded my clothes and was lying naked on the cushions before Madame Chang, my head in her lap. Every pore in my body had opened to release the sweat and drink in the poisonous pleasure of the opium that filled the room.

“What’s troubling you, Mr. Baxter?” she asked, slowly waving her hands over my face and ears as though conjuring up some phantom inside my head. “You are like a person who has lost a key. Something bothers you.”

“I’m working on a case. I feel like I’m so close to solving it, and yet—”

“Yet something else is clouding your sense of clarity.”

I said nothing. She knew she was right.

“The clues you need to solve the case are all in your head, Mr. Baxter. I can see what you’ve seen. I can hear what you’ve heard. I already know who the killer is... and so do you.”

“No, I don’t. Tell me, who is it? Tell me why I can’t figure it out. I just can’t put the pieces together.”

“That’s because your heart is confused, and the head is just a shadow puppet of the heart. It dances when the heart finds happiness, but collapses upon an empty stage when the heart is lost.”

“What does that mean?”

Madame Chang smiled and touched her fingers to my temples, massaging them gently. “You are my favorite box of curiosities, Mr. Baxter. However, you are not the only box of curiosities in this city. If you’ve found one... be warned not to open it, until it’s ready to be opened.”

I left The Peking Empress with a pouch of pot and a head full of riddles. Dawn was breaking over the city and the shadows from the skyscrapers were like the claws of night slowly retracting as the sun rose.

I had to rest.

I had to sleep.

When I got back to the office, there was no sign of Stella. I figured she was still out

getting the dirt on the snake that almost sent us both to an early grave. I hit the sofa and fell asleep almost immediately.

When I woke, the afternoon light was dying and those shadowy claws were stretching across the city once more. It was time to get ready for the opening night performance of The Snake Charmer's Slave.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:50 pm

Pillars of lightswept the night, shooting up into the sky from two enormous spotlights positioned on either side of the entrance to the Maharaja Majestic, as one Lincoln Limousine after another pulled up at the red carpet leading to the entrance of the busy theater lobby. Despite the rumors of a phantom inhabiting the place—or perhaps because of them—the who’s who of Wilde City had turned out in droves to see the opening night of *The Snake Charmer’s Slave*.

Raja Kahn and Serafina Somerset greeted everyone personally at the grand entrance leading into the lobby, smiling, shaking hands and air kissing the A-list of celebrities lining up on the carpet.

I snuck in through the side entrance, avoiding the limelight and trying my best to be invisible in the crowded lobby until—

“Buck?”

I knew that voice. It was the voice from the box of curiosities I’d found. I turned around.

“Harry,” I said, my tone as muddled as my head and heart, and just as impossible to read.

He stood a short distance from me, taking two glasses of champagne from a waiter milling through the crowd with a tray of drinks. Harry stepped forward and handed me one of the glasses.

“I owe you an apology,” he said, his eyes not straying from mine for a single

moment. “I didn’t mean it when I told you not to make me choose between you and my father. I will always choose you. I’m the one who came back for you after all those years.”

“Then why did you say it?”

“Because some things frighten me, and my father is one of them. Losing you, however, scares me to death. I said I owe you an apology...but not an explanation. At least not yet. Just promise me something. Don’t go looking for secrets about me and my father. Don’t go hunting for clues. Don’t do anything to get his attention. Can you promise me that?”

“So I guess that means no Thanksgiving dinner at the Hart’s residence this year.”

“If you think I’m trying to hide you from my family, I’m doing it for a very good reason. I need to take over Hart Industries someday, and it’s not for fame or fortune. It’s something bigger than that.”

I sighed, out of both frustration and a reluctance to make that promise. But Madame Chang’s words circled my mind like a feather caught in a swirl of wind.

“Promise me, Buck. Promise you won’t go looking for secrets you shouldn’t know.”

Eventually I nodded. “I promise.”

He finished his drink and glanced behind him. Across the crowded lobby he spotted his father and mother, dressed to the nines and ready for the performance. “I have to go,” he said.

He turned to leave and I called after him.

“Hey Harry. I know a great nightclub downtown. Maybe I can buy you a drink after the show.”

Harry smiled. “Maybe I’d like that.”

As Harry headed away, I felt the weight on my shoulders ease. I felt the puppet my heart was controlling begin to dance a little. I decided to head backstage for one last routine check before show time, just to make sure there were no snakes on the loose or phantoms ready to strangle someone with a feather boa.

I passed the dressing room of the leading lady, now Olivia Overton, whose seamstress was helping her on with an ornate headpiece covered in fake jewels.

“Ready for your first lead role, Miss Overton?” I asked.

She beamed at me. “Absolutely. This will be a performance to die for!”

Interesting choice of words, I thought, as I made my way further backstage, passing Stanley Small who was tying two ropes to the rigging.

“Welcome back, Mr. Small. How was your time in the cooler?”

Stanley took a deep breath. “Spending three nights in a cell with a guy named Bubba Brutus really gives you a new perspective on freedom. I think I’ve been to hell and back.”

“I can imagine,” I said... not wanting to imagine anything that happened between Bubba Brutus and Stanley Small.

A short distance away I literally bumped straight into Errol Hemingway, flipping through loose pages of script and rehearsing last minute lines under his breath. As we

collided, papers flew into the air while Errol glared at me and shouted, “Why don’t you watch where you’re going? What are you trying to do, kill me?”

I apologized and kept moving, hoping that someone wasn’t about to do just that... kill him.

A few feet on I pulled open a curtain and scared the living daylights out of Barnabas Blake who was trying to reposition the wig on his bald head in privacy. He plopped his mop in place, somewhat skew-whiff to say the least, and sneered at me. “Good grief, Mr. Baxter. You almost gave me a heart attack! Do you want to scare me to death?”

For a production that already had a body count even before the curtains had opened, I once again found the cast and crew’s choice of words rather disconcerting if not downright ominous.

I stepped out onto the stage and looked over the empty auditorium, its seats soon to be filled with the crowd of A-listers cramming the packed lobby. I could see nothing suspicious onstage. The markers had been chalked onto the boards so the actors knew where to stand. The gaslights lining the stage were already burning, ready to be dimmed for the opening and brightened for the performance. Even the huge iron chandelier dangling over center stage was aglow with candles and ready to be lowered for The Dance of the Cobra.

At that moment, someone seized me from behind.

I gasped and spun about, ready to fight for my life, only to see Stanley Small standing there.

“Mr. Baxter, the doors are about to open. You need to leave the stage.”

Just as he finished his sentence, the doors at the back of the auditorium opened and the throng of theatergoers poured in. I quickly disappeared offstage and made my way to the two seats all the way up the back of the auditorium that Serafina had so graciously offered me and Stella. “I’m only giving you these tickets on one condition,” she had said at the time. “No snoring and no causing a scene. Hopefully nobody will notice you all the way up the back. They’re the cheapest seats I’ve got. Be careful not to die from a nosebleed.”

As I took my seat, I could see Harry and his parents taking their seats in the private balcony box right at the front of the auditorium, mere feet from the stage. I saw him use a pair of opera glasses to look through the crowd below. I knew he was looking for me, and eventually he found me, all the way up the back. I was about to smile, perhaps even wave, but at that moment his father tapped him on the shoulder and took his attention away.

A moment later, the lights dimmed, the orchestra began to play, and the audience applauded as the red curtains rose to reveal the two lead performers: Errol Hemingway and Miss Olivia Overton.

I looked at the empty seat beside me and wondered where the hell Stella was. As if to answer my question, I heard a loud “Psst!” from the end of my row. While the opera began, I looked—as did the whole row—to see Stella urgently waving me out of my seat.

I quickly stood and began apologizing my way to the end of the row where Stella grabbed me by the hand and hauled me out of the auditorium and into the brightly lit lobby.

Stella was panting, she looked like she’d just run half the length of the city to get here.

“Stella, what is it?”

“The snake...” she said, gasping for air. “I found out what kinda snake it is. The damn thing is rarer than teeth on a chicken. It’d be worth a fortune if you hadn’t squished it under a wardrobe!”

“Get to the point.”

“It’s called the Diamond-Masked Cobra of Calcutta. Fancy name, deadly venom, and totally illegal. You’d have to smuggle that thing in and really know what you were doing.”

“It comes from Calcutta? You think Raja Kahn did it?”

“That’s a rather racist assumption,” Stella frowned at me, before adding, “And one that I made too. But I did my homework on him. He has zero connections in the snake-smugglin’ world. There’s only one man in Wilde City who could have bootlegged that bad boy into town and he’s already in jail. A man by the name of Bubba Brutus.”

Suddenly I saw in my mind everything that Madame Chang had somehow been able to see. It all became as clear as day.

“It’s Stanley Small,” I breathed, my brain sifting quickly through the clues. “When we first interviewed him he said everything in his job had to happen on cue, precisely when the timing is right. That’s exactly what Errol’s secret admirer wrote on the card the cop read out when they were searching through Errol’s dressing room.”

“Buck, you’re not makin’ any sense! Stanley’s been in jail.”

“Which is exactly where he wanted to be. He made himself look as guilty as hell for

the murder of Dominique Duprey, intentionally leaving his glasses in the trunk and even planting her body in Errol's dressing room as some sort of trophy. But he did it all just so he would be put away while the second murder happened, in order to clear his name. Only he timed everything perfectly, right on cue, so that he'd land behind bars with the one man who could arrange for a snake to be smuggled into the theater by one of his henchmen on the outside. It's the perfect murder. Not only was Stanley Small not here to commit it, it got him let outta jail so he could finish the job. It's clear as day. Stanley Small is the killer."

"But why?" Stella asked, desperately trying to keep up.

"Don't you see? Raja Kahn was right. Love is the greatest motive of them all."

Stella took a stab in the dark. "You think Stanley Small is killing the divas because he's in love with them?"

"No... he's killing them because he's in love with Errol! He wants Errol all to himself and can't stand to see him with his leading ladies."

At that moment, the strains of Miss Overton's Dance of the Cobra filled the entire building, from the auditorium to the lobby.

"Oh God." Stella and I realized at the same time. "Miss Overton's next!"

That's when I broke into a sprint, heading not for the auditorium, but for the side entrance, which was the fastest way to the backstage of the theater. I ran so fast I left Stella far behind as she tried hard to keep up. I burst through the side door of the theater and raced through the backstage area. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught sight of Miss Overton between the curtains of the theater wing, singing and dancing on center stage with veils twirling all around her.

Then I stopped dead in my tracks when I saw Stanley Small standing at a rope tied to the rigging. But he wasn't securing the line... he was cutting it with a six-inch knife.

My gaze quickly ran up the length of the rope... to the candle-lit chandelier suspended from the rigging... hanging directly above Miss Overton onstage.

I saw the blade cut through the twine and knew there was no stopping it from breaking now. The rope was fraying fast.

All I could do now was try to save Miss Overton.

I sprinted onto the stage.

I heard the rope snap.

I caught sight of the giant chandelier as it shuddered then began to fall.

The spotlights blinded me as I threw myself across the stage at Miss Overton.

The audience gasped.

Miss Overton's notes turned to a scream as I caught her and tumbled across the stage with her in my arms.

A fraction of a second later the chandelier crashed to the stage, launching candles and wax into the air.

Several candles rolled across the stage and hit the curtains, and in the next moment—

Fooooomp!

The curtains on both sides of the stage ignited in flames.

Screams filled the auditorium.

I pulled myself to my feet and Miss Overton along with me. She was more doe-eyed than ever, her face full of confusion and panic. From behind her Errol Hemingway suddenly appeared.

“Get out of here,” I told them both. “Now!”

As the flames began to lick their way up the wings of the theater, the shrieking, screaming audience spilled out of the auditorium through every exit possible. I spotted Serafina, Raja and Barnabas all clamoring to escape. Errol and Miss Overton leapt from the stage and joined the terrified exodus.

Stella finally caught up and came rushing toward me. “Buck! Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. Just get outta here,” I told her. “And get some help.”

Stella was already clambering off the stage. “Help? What kinda help?”

“I dunno! The cops! The fire department! Whoever you can find! Just do it!”

A billowing curtain shot flames across the auditorium and several gas lamps exploded. Ash began to rain down as though a volcano was erupting. I glanced up to the box where Harry and his parents had been sitting. Harry was shoving his parents out through the exit behind the box before turning back to look at me onstage.

Before I could shout to him to get out, he was climbing onto the balcony of the box and leaping onto the stage. He came hurrying toward me, shouting, “Buck? Are you all—”

But before he could reach me, Stanley Small appeared from behind him. He seized Harry by the shoulder and pressed the six-inch blade against his throat.

Harry froze.

More gas lamps exploded all around us as the last of the audience fled the burning theater.

I raised my hands, as if to try and calm the crazy look in Stanley's eye. "Stanley, put down the knife. You don't wanna hurt him. Just let him go and put down the weapon."

"Buck, get outta here," Harry told me. "Save yourself while you can."

"Shut up, Harry," I told him. "I'm not leaving without you."

Stanley snarled over the increasing roar of the blaze. "His name's Harry, is it? You two sound very familiar with each other. What is he to you, Mr. Baxter? Your boyfriend?"

I took a deep breath and answered, "He's everything. That's what he is to me. And if you hurt him, I will kill you. Now let him go."

Stanley laughed at me. "You're in love? How poetic... yet so tragic given the circumstances! But isn't that the way true love is supposed to be? At least according to the stage. Romeo and Juliet. Antony and Cleopatra. Buck and Harry. True love always ends in tragedy. Do you know why?"

He jammed the tip of the knife harder into Harry's throat and drew a drop of blood. "Why?" I was forced to ask.

“Because the ones who find true love are the ones who never deserve it. Unlike me and Errol. We deserve to be together forever.”

The fire started to climb the entire left wall of the theater and dozens of seats burst into flames.

“Stanley, if you don’t put down that knife, you’ll never see Errol again. None of us will ever get out of here alive.”

With a sneer, Stanley said, “So be it.”

Dragging Harry along with him, Stanley swiftly headed backstage between two burning curtains.

The last of the gas lamps exploded and the flames devoured the balcony boxes on both sides of the auditorium as I bolted backstage after Stanley and Harry.

The smoke hit me instantly. I coughed and staggered, my eyes stinging as I looked up to see Stanley already clanging along a metal-grated walkway of the rigging, pushing Harry in front of him, poking the knife into Harry’s back to keep him moving.

I spotted a ladder nearby and started climbing, the hot metal burning my hands. All around me the flames rose, engulfing the set backdrops and racing up ropes and curtains. As I reached the walkway, I heard a thunderous crash and saw the mezzanine balcony of the auditorium collapsed in a fiery eruption.

I didn’t know how the hell we were going to get out of this blazing inferno.

But I didn’t care. All I knew was, I had to get to Harry.

I looked around but couldn’t see them, then above me, I heard more clanging and

realized Stanley had taken them even higher into the framework of rigs above the stage.

I looked up and saw their shapes moving across another walkway, just as the flames jumped and climbed higher still, consuming ropes, sending sandbags crashing to the now burning stage far below and in turn sending blazing backdrops shooting up toward me, showering me in hot embers and tattered pieces of burning scenery.

I found the next ladder and climbed even higher.

When I reached the walkway, Stanley was waiting for me, still holding the knife to Harry's throat.

"It's the end of the line, Mr. Baxter," Stanley announced.

I saw that behind them there was nowhere left to go. Far above us was the colossal glass dome of the theater. A web of ladders, gangplanks and walkways weaved their way to the top, but there was no access from where we stood. To reach the dome from here seemed more than just futile... it was impossible. While far below—climbing higher and more ferocious by the second—raged a blaze that none of us could possibly survive.

Everything was gone now.

The stage.

The auditorium.

Nothing left but an inferno ready to destroy the entire building and raze it to the ground.

“Are you ready to die for your love, Mr. Baxter?” Stanley hissed. “I am. It’s time to let your blood roast and let the flames of love consume us all.”

He took a step to the edge of the walkway with Harry still at knifepoint.

“Not just yet!” I gasped through the smoke. “Let me go with him. If we’re all going to die anyway, let Harry go with me.”

Metal groaned and began to warp all around us.

Ladders broke from the rigging and plunged into fires below.

Several panes of glass in the dome ceiling above us shattered and shards showered down into the all-consuming fire rising fast.

The metal beneath our feet began to glow orange.

Stanley lifted a shoe and saw the sole was melting.

He laughed, then lowered the knife and pushed Harry toward me.

Harry stumbled forward and I caught him, his clothes drenched with sweat, his body hot... but at last, he was in my arms.

I glanced back at Stanley.

He held the knife out to me.

I took it and he smiled.

“I have a feeling none of us are going to need that now. I know I’ll see Errol in

heaven someday.”

And with that, Stanley Small stepped off the edge of the walkway and plummeted into the fires of hell below.

Another explosion rocked the building and I heard a crash as somewhere amid the blaze another section of the building collapsed.

Harry looked at me, his face wet with sweat, his eyes furious. “Why did you come for me?”

“After all those years, you came back for me,” I said. “You’re not getting rid of me now. Anywhere you go, let me go too. That’s all I ask.”

Harry cried a tear of joy and laughed. “It’s a little late, don’t you think?”

I shook my head. “Not yet.”

I glanced beside me and saw a smoldering rope leading up to a pulley dangling over the network of walkways and gangplanks leading to the top of the dome. I grabbed the rope in one hand and the knife in the other.

“Hold on tight,” I told Harry.

He wrapped his arms around my shoulders.

I slashed the rope just below the point where I was holding it.

A giant cluster of sandbags dropped from above—

—as Harry and I soared upward to the dome.

As the sandbags exploded on the burning stage below, Harry and I landed on a walkway above, with a jolt.

But the flames had chased us.

More panes of glass cracked in the heat and shattered above our heads.

I grabbed Harry and pulled him along behind me, clambering upward along a crisscross of walkways and gangplanks until we reached the very top of the dome. The flames lapped against the glass ceiling now, cracking pane after pane until almost all of them had smashed and splintered.

I jumped from the top of the highest walkway and managed to pull myself up onto the roof of the dome. Smoke billowed up into the night from the shattered panes. I reached down and pulled Harry up after me, the heat from below almost intense enough to melt the metal structure of the dome.

Together we stood on the very pinnacle of the blazing Maharaja Majestic, the fire aglow beneath us as the theater collapsed piece by piece. From the streets below, I could hear the wail of sirens. The police, fire department and ambulances were all gathered, amid a crowd of people eager to witness the last show ever performed at the Majestic.

Spotlights had been turned toward us, singling out the two men stranded atop the dome of the burning building.

But there was no hope of anyone reaching us in time.

The blaze inside the Maharaja Majestic was melting the theater into the ground, and with it, Harry and I would soon go.

“What do we do?” Harry asked calmly. He already knew the answer.

“There’s nothing we can do,” I said, looking into his smoky blue eyes.

That’s when he wrapped his arms around me and held me more tightly than anyone had ever held me... more than anyone could ever hope to be held.

“That’s okay,” he whispered into my ash-smudged ear. “If I’m going to die, there’s no place else I’d rather be than in your arms.”

Metal beams snapped.

Pillars of fire burst through glass and jetted high into the sky.

The entire building rocked and quivered on its foundations.

I drew Harry’s face into my hands, looked him in the eye and said, “There’s no place else I’d rather be too. I love you, Harry.”

“I love you too, Buck. I always have. I always will.”

We closed our eyes.

We kissed.

We held each other in that final moment and waited for heaven or hell to take us.

I felt the soles of my shoes melt—

—and yet I had never been happier in all my life.

I held the man of my dreams in my arms... and he held me.

As the fire rose from beneath us, I waited for a chorus of angels from above.

Strangely enough, what I heard instead was Stella's shrieking voice—

“Hey jugheads! Get a room or grab the ladder!”

Harry broke our heavenly, eternal kiss. “Did someone just call us jugheads?”

I opened my eyes.

That's when we heard the drone of the airship.

That's when Harry and I both looked up to see the enormous shape of the Zephyr dive between the skyscrapers of Wilde City, heading straight for us with Lois at the helm. The door of the passenger cabin under the belly of the ship was open. Stella was leaning out, holding on to a rolled-up rope ladder, with Lucy holding her by the heels.

With a mighty groan, half of the Maharaja Majestic lurched, the fangs of the fire pulling it into the ground.

Harry teetered, almost falling into the inferno below before I grabbed him with both arms.

The airship veered towards us.

Stella let go of the rope ladder.

It unfurled into the night, dangling behind the airship and flapping through the air as

the Zephyr sped towards us.

I knew we only had one shot.

The drone of the airship became louder and louder.

The fire beneath rose all around us.

As the ladder passed over the dome, the end of it caught fire.

I looked at Harry and told him, “Don’t let go. Ever!”

He smiled and held me. “I won’t.”

The ladder swept towards us.

The airship blotted out the stars above us.

The flames ascended beneath us.

That’s when I grabbed the ladder as tight as I could.

It lifted us off the dome of the building, just as the whole of the Maharaja Majestic collapsed into a colossal pit of fire below.

An explosion rose from the crumbling building and Harry and I held on to each other—and the ladder—as tight as we could.

The giant burst of heat pushed the airship upwards, lifting us away from the flames of the burning building as Lois veered the ship left and right through the maze of Wilde City, eventually taking us up into the night, away from the sirens and streetlights and

skyscrapers—

—and towards the stars.

Holding on to that ladder... with Harry in my arms... well, maybe I had just died and gone to heaven. Because if this was heaven, I was happy.

As the lights of Wilde City disappeared in the clouds below us, Harry kissed me.

We said nothing as the stars passed by.

We didn't need to.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:50 pm

A week later, I stood before the still smoldering wreck that was once the Maharaja Majestic. I didn't even realize there was somebody behind me until he spoke.

"It was my dream," the voice said.

I turned to see Raja Kahn standing behind me. He looked lost. Mournful.

I wasn't sure what to say except. "A wise woman once asked me—you know what they say about dreams?"

"What's that?"

"If ever you wake up, just close your eyes and an even better dream will come along."

Raja Kahn smiled. "I like you, Mr. Baxter. Perhaps we'll meet again someday."

And with that, he turned and walked away.

I watched him go, then decided it was time for me to leave too. I walked with a limp on account of the fact that the soles of my feet were still blistered from the fire. It was enough reason to take a shortcut home through the nearest alleyway.

I got halfway along the cobblestones before a large figure in a trench coat approached me.

I stopped as the shadow of the man stood over me, lingering in the dark for a moment

until he stepped into the light. Instantly I recognized him by his mugshot in the papers. It was Wilde City's most notorious gangster, Bugsy Brown, sworn enemy and ex-husband of Mamma Marlow.

I gulped, realizing he was here to get me square for destroying one of his most valuable insurance payouts, the Maharaja Majestic.

Did he have a gun tucked in his belt?

Did he have a bat behind his back?

As he stood facing me, he reached into his inside coat pocket.

I took a step back, ready to run—

—but instead of a weapon, he pulled out a pipe, much like my own, and lit it.

I could smell the sweet scent of pot drift from it.

Bugsy blew out a puff of smoke so long, a guy could write his name in it.

“Are you here to kill me?” I asked, intoxicated by the smell of pot yet somewhat terrified given the fact that my burnt feet made it really hard to run right now.

Bugsy simply grinned. “No, I ain't gonna kill ya, kid. I wanna talk to you.”

“About what?” I asked.

Bugsy gave a smirk from under his hat. “Don't you think it's time you and me finally had ourselves a little father-to-son chat?”

My jaw didn't just drop.

It clattered on the cobblestones.

“That’s right, Buck,” Bugsy Brown laughed, taking another puff of his pipe. “I’m your dear old dad.”

Holy shit!

Picture that!