



# The Unicorn Heist

Book 18

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**\*PREVIEW\***

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## Chapter I

Monday, May 18, 1931

**H**heavy shackles weighed down Magnus Blackwell's wrists and ankles. The jail transport wagon bounced over potholes, the engine rumbling. Only one small, grated window in the rear door provided light. Gray light from a gray sky did nothing to brighten the black interior. He shifted his position, uncomfortable on the hard bench along the wall.

Two guards faced him from the opposite bench. They both stared at him, curious about the distinctive three-pronged scar on his cheek, and about the men he'd killed. He moved slightly, and they reached for their guns. Their eyes showed panic in the shadows. Blackwell sneered. He chose the younger guard and made eye contact, steady and unblinking. His sneer slowly turned into a vicious grin. The guard sweated, then looked away, whining slightly.

"No tricks," the other scolded.

"What tricks? All I did was look at him."

"Don't."

Blackwell fixed his glare on the second guard. The shackles chafed. The rumpled coat, complete with the

unwashed stench of a previous prisoner, only added to his indignity. They would pay for this. Maintaining eye contact, he deliberately shifted his position again. So far, neither had noticed the pen he'd palmed from a desk on the way out of the jail.

"Sit still," the second guard scolded. "And quit looking at me."

"Or else, you'll what?"

The guard swore fluently and motioned with his gun. Neither threat impressed Blackwell. He held his glare, refusing to look away. Finally, the guard squared his shoulders and stood, crouching under the low ceiling. The wagon turned a corner, and the guard faltered. Traffic slowed. A streetcar clanged somewhere nearby.

"I said, quit looking at me!" The guard leaned over him, intruding on his personal space.

Blackwell waited for another bounce to compromise the guard's balance. Then, he lunged upward, driving the sharp point of the pen into the guard's neck. Blood spurted. The guard flopped sideways, writhing and making pathetic blubbling noises. Blackwell leapt over him, his heavy shackles rattling.

The other guard yelped and fumbled with his revolver. Blackwell whirled both hands together, putting the entire force of his upper body into the swing. The iron shackles smacked the guard in the face with a satisfying crunch. The guard stumbled and flailed. Blackwell twisted the gun away, snatching it before it fell to the floor. He clubbed the guard's head with it until the struggling and whining stopped.

The engine hummed and revved in the background, while Blackwell caught his breath.

The first guard still twitched. Nothing more than fading reflexes. Blackwell rummaged through his pockets until he

found the key. He unlocked the shackles, freed his ankles, and took a moment to rub his sore wrists. He wiped his sticky hands on his coat, grabbed the gun, and faced the door. The wagon's engine rumbled. So far, he hadn't made enough noise to alert the driver.

The vehicle slowed, approaching an intersection. Blackwell faced the little window, looking out into the traffic. Blood made the floor slippery.

Cars flowed past. Pedestrians gathered at a bus stop, tugging on their hats and coats and turning their backs to the wind. The wagon stopped. Blackwell fired at the door lock. Sparks flashed. He kicked once, then again, slipping on the wet floor. The door burst open. He leapt out.

Brakes squealed. Horns honked. The crowd screeched and scattered like frightened sheep. Blackwell ran through them. At this point, a hostage would only slow him down. He sprinted into an alley and cut through to the next street, down the block, and around another corner. Sirens wailed.

Blackwell ran harder. Ahead of him, a door opened. A man stepped out—too close to avoid. He crashed into him and they both went down in a tangle of arms and legs, slamming into the cement. Blackwell rolled away and sprang back to his feet.

The other man lay stunned, breathing hard and finding his feet slowly. He couldn't have been much more than twenty. Tall, and with the clean-cut, extra-polished look of a young man on his way to meet a lady. His eyes fixed on the blood that covered Blackwell's hands and stained his prison jacket. His mouth fell open. "You . . ."

"Quiet!" Blackwell threatened him with the guard's revolver, forcing him back through the doorway. It led to a shadowy corridor. He stepped in after him and pushed the door shut. "Take off your clothes."

“What?” His objection rose into a squeak and he hugged himself, as if to keep his clothes from falling off on their own.

“Take off your clothes, or I’ll shoot you and take them.” He stepped forward, giving the man a hard glare. “Jacket, shirt, and pants. And your wallet. I’ll let you keep your own underwear. Now.”

Reluctantly, the man stripped out of his clothes. Blackwell took off his own, standing out of tackling reach, but close enough to shoot. He tossed his dirty clothes over and grabbed the new ones, putting them on quickly. The wallet barely had five dollars in it. A pathetic amount, but enough for some food and a place to stay. The man watched him, indignantly shivering in his shorts.

“Put that on.” Blackwell kicked the bloodstained jail uniform toward him.

He picked up the jacket, but held it at an arm’s length and wrinkled his nose. Sirens shrieked closer.

“Hurry up!” Blackwell waved the gun and stepped closer. “If you’re not dressed by the time I count to ten . . .”

The young man pulled the clothes on quickly. Blackwell stepped around him, poking the gun in his face and driving him back toward the door. A police car drove past.

“Get outside.”

“Dressed like this?” The young man’s voice squeaked again. “But—”

“Out!” Blackwell wanted to beat the whininess out of him. He settled for a quick kick to the shin that left the young man hopping. “You’re going outside, and you’re going to run toward the police. I’d have no trouble shooting you in the back.”

“Dressed like this, they’d shoot me in the front.”

“That’s the idea. Front or back, it’s your choice.” He shoved the man outside.

He took off at a shaky jog. The police car screeched to a stop. The doors opened. Men shouted, aiming revolvers—no idle threat. The decoy threw himself to the ground and covered his head. Instantly, a dozen uniformed officers swarmed over him, pinning him flat.

Blackwell strolled away in the opposite direction.



## Chapter II

A few limp rays of light angled through the little window, a dingy pane that overlooked little more than the gray sky and the roof of the building next door. Wind pushed the clouds around, blocking the sun in mangy patches. A draft whistled through the cracks around the frame.

Lowan watched the moving patterns of light on the wooden floor. Dust gathered in the corners. For late May, the weather seemed unusually brisk. Bold sunlight and a fresh, gentle breeze would have brightened his mood. Instead, the frigid draft made him want to retreat homeward, drink tea, and take a nap. The past week had been tremendously busy, and despite having the previous day off, exhaustion flooded his bones with a dull ache.

Across the room, Rita flitted between her desk and the metal cabinets, filing case notes and humming as she worked. Drawers slid open and closed, metallic scraping, dull clunks, light footsteps. The intermittent sunlight played across her brunette hair, and the cotton fabric of her light spring dress swished with each step. She closed another drawer, plopped lightly into her chair, and looked across at

him. "If you're not feeling well, you could go home. I can call you if anything comes up."

"I . . ." He sat up straighter and squared his shoulders, trying not to appear ill. Coming to the office had been a habit, an attempt at normalcy. Self-employed, he could set his own hours and break them when he wished. Absence would have created a bad precedent. "I might leave early, later."

"Alright." She didn't sound fully approving of his decision. After another pitying stare, she rummaged in her bottom desk drawer and took out a cheap mystery novel.

Lowan pushed himself out of his chair, moving slowly and testing his balance before stepping away from the desk. He'd mostly recovered from the chloral hydrate he'd been tricked into drinking in his tea on Saturday night, but still felt an occasional twinge in his hands and feet. The ribs he'd broken the previous month didn't bother him much anymore, apart from heavy lifting or sudden, forceful movements. He was grateful for that. At least his color vision had fully returned.

He stepped toward the door at the back of the room. His workshop was his inner sanctum and the private workspace for his radio engineering experiments. Patents and contracts with a local radio manufacturer brought him far more income than his detective work.

Too exhausted to think creatively, he could at least sit in his workshop privately, without Rita's sympathetic glances. He stepped inside, but left the door slightly ajar. His tracking device, a box approximately the size of a milk crate, lay in pieces on the table, having been damaged in a car accident on a previous case. He still needed to rebuild it and replace the small homing component that hadn't been retrieved from the wreckage. Not today. On the opposite side of the

worktable, he sank into his chair, stretched out his legs, leaned back, closed his eyes, and let his breath out slowly. The ticking clock faded.

Tapping on the door jolted him upright. He rubbed his eyes, barely sensing Rita in the doorway. Reflexively, he reached for the nearest papers, hoping to appear as if he'd been working rather than napping.

Rita pushed the door open farther, smirked slightly, and motioned toward the main office. "There's a potential client. A Dr. Musgrove to see you about a matter at the museum."

"Yes, of course." Frowning, Lowan realized he was holding the papers upside down. He shoved them aside and stood. Using rigid muscles made him groan involuntarily. By the time he reached the doorway, he'd worked out enough of the stiffness to appear to be walking normally.

Rita retreated to her own desk at the front of the room. Near Lowan's desk at the back, a man in a charcoal suit waited, checking his silver pocket watch. Later fifties, somewhat tall, and carrying more weight than he likely had in his youth, he still projected a dignified air. When he noticed Lowan, he removed his hat and offered a polite smile. "Mr. Lowan, the detective?"

"Just Lowan." He motioned for Musgrove to take one of the chairs in front of the desk, then settled into his own behind it. "Dr. Musgrove?"

"Yes, Dr. Bertram Musgrove, museum director. The historical museum downtown, not that snobby little art museum on the north side." He snorted and reached across the desk, offering to shake hands.

Lowan accepted his firm grip and focused, using the moment of contact to form a stronger telepathic connection. Despite Musgrove's somewhat flabby exterior, Lowan sensed a man who would do whatever was necessary to

achieve his goals. At the moment, those goals required outside help. “Why does the museum need a detective?”

“I’ll be direct.” Musgrove sat stiffly and fidgeted with his watch chain. His eyes flicked toward the moving shadows on the floor. “We’re preparing to display a rather . . . exceptional artifact. One which, according to the newspapers, you’ve dealt with before.”

“The unicorn staff.” From Lowan’s perspective, the image was clear enough in Musgrove’s mind. Jewel-encrusted gold and twisted, yellowed ivory, worth as much as a million dollars. Its bloodstained history extended into untraceable antiquity. “Less than two weeks have passed since I recovered it from an illegal auction aboard a criminal’s yacht. Has it become the museum’s property so quickly?”

“Only temporarily, I’m afraid. It’s to be turned over to the British Museum. But until their representatives arrive, we’ve been given permission to house it in our collection.” He leaned forward, taking on a determined glint. “I intend to make the most of that time. It’s by far the most valuable artifact we’ve ever handled.”

“And the possibility of theft concerns you.”

“Everything concerns me. Theft, sabotage, finances, reputation. If anything happens to that staff while it’s in our care, the museum’s credibility, our entire future, could collapse. Being on the hook for something that valuable would ruin the museum—and me personally. It *can’t* be stolen. And I’m taking every possible precaution to keep that from happening.”

“I understand your concern.” Lowan sensed Musgrove’s nervous stress increase. The tension spread to his own shoulders. He tried to block out the interference, feeling something more. “This is only part of the problem. For such

a spectacular object, you must have plans for a special event.”

“Yes. A gala to celebrate the unveiling. Our guest of honor is Dr. Alistair Penrose, the famous British archeologist. It’s the biggest event I’ve ever organized, and on beastly short notice. If it goes well, it could take care of our fundraising needs through the end of the year. It *must* go smoothly. I’d like to hire you to augment our security.”

“Private security is not a service that I usually offer.” Lowan pushed Musgrove’s tension out of his mind, trying to put his thoughts in order. “Guard duty is a job for younger men, especially for a task as potentially dangerous as this. Covering the entire museum would take a large team, which I cannot provide.”

“I have armed watchmen, and I can get more. That’s no problem. What I’d like you to do is take a look at the museum, go over the security plans, and point out if anything more needs to be addressed. And I’d like you to attend the gala and mix with the crowd, quietly, and notify us of any suspicious guests. Anything that slips past the normal watchmen.”

Lowan sighed. He hadn’t wanted a case this big while still recovering from the last several. “When is the gala?”

“Tonight.”

“That does not give me much time to make arrangements.” He pushed himself out of his chair.

“I’d also like you onsite throughout the week, until the staff is transferred to the British Museum.”

“I usually charge a hundred dollars a day. But for overtime or anything outside of normal business hours, you can double that.” For once, he wouldn’t mind a paying client. The last several cases had been lacking in that department, though he hoped to collect a sizable police consulting fee and

a reward for bringing down a three-member, large-scale insurance fraud racket. He lifted his hat and coat off the rack in the corner.

“There are two names on the door . . .” Musgrove glanced at the frosted glass, lettered backwards on this side.

“Sen is only a field agent. He has a very specific set of skills and completely lacks others. He is extremely antisocial, and he does not tolerate crowds. I will call him if I think he is needed, but I would prefer to leave him out of it.” Lowan pulled the door open. Footsteps pounded down the hallway. He barely had time to register the familiar presence hurtling toward him.

Detective Lieutenant Marx skidded across the floor and stopped in front of him, his ragged raincoat hanging loosely on him and his brown fedora crooked. Wild-eyed, he panted and leaned on the doorframe. His hands shook. “I thought you’d want to know right away. Magnus Blackwell just escaped from police custody on the way to the courthouse for a pretrial hearing. He killed one guard and put the other in the hospital, in a bad way.”

“Blackwell?” Lowan struggled to place the unfamiliar name, despite Marx’s impression of its significance.

“Poseidon!”



## Chapter III

**T**he black Model A's brakes squeaked. Marx pulled to the curb and shifted into park. Traffic flowed past, providing an unending stream of background noise. He glanced sideways at Rita in the seat beside him, then turned away quickly.

From the back seat, Lowan sensed the depths of Marx's feelings, and the overwhelming shyness that prevented him from speaking to her. It wasn't his place to interfere. He stepped onto the sidewalk. Musgrove exited on the opposite side. In the front, Marx hopped out and dashed around to open Rita's door. They faced the museum and looked up.

The museum rose from the city's heart like a monument to a vanished civilization. Morning sunlight glared off the weathered limestone façade, pitted with age and streaked with soot. Towering Corinthian columns flanked the entrance. Long shadows reached away from the light, stripping the limestone beyond. Gargoyles perched along the roofline, though decades of rain had washed their stone faces smooth. Blind eyes watched the street below with eternal vigilance.

Banners hung from iron bars between the columns, cracking whiplike as the fabric thrashed in the wind. Dried leaves and pieces of litter swirled across the steps, collecting in corners. Above the arched doorway, a frieze depicted mythic beasts was carved in bas-relief, allowing the design to stand out from the surface. Weather had erased the finer details, and shadows obscured others, but the forms came into view as Lowan climbed the steps. Griffens, dragons, heroes of old. At the center, a unicorn reared.

Lowan climbed the steps slowly and paused for breath, his coat buttoned tightly against the spring chill. The solid stone architecture conveyed a heavy and oppressive sensation, crushing him under the weight of a thousand years of culture and civilization.

Rita's heels clicked softly across the stone. Marx stepped ahead to open the heavy oak door. She passed him and smiled, clutching her purse. Lowan and Musgrove stepped inside after her. The air felt cool and dry, tinged with the scent of old paper, polished wood, and something more. Lowan rubbed his nose. Preservation chemicals.

A large poster inside the entryway moved in the breeze from the open door. UNICORN STAFF: MYTH & MAJESTY—GALA EXHIBITION MONDAY.

“Welcome to the museum.” Musgrove motioned to the next archway, beyond the poster. The interior was lost in colored lights and shadows, but even a glimpse conveyed a sense of unending depth. “The building is a bit of a relic, but we like it that way.” He strode away.

Rita stepped through the archway, with Marx beside her. Lowan followed, not close enough to intrude, though Rita remained largely oblivious to Marx's attention. Lowan had invited her along under the guise of a free trip to the museum, but with another purpose in mind. Hostile adversaries

carrying grudges had targeted her to reach him. Poseidon, the most vicious murderer he'd ever encountered, also had grounds for revenge. Lowan wanted Rita safe.

The echo of their footsteps rang against the smooth flooring—marble veined with onyx, swirling in irregular patterns. Ribbed arches supported the vaulted ceiling. Incandescent bulbs flickered in iron chandeliers, a vague imitation of gothic candlelight. Stained glass windows high above depicted classical scenes in muted jewel tones. Gray daylight fractured into amber, sapphire, ruby, and emerald spots dancing across the marble floor.

“It’s beautiful.” Rita spoke in a hushed whisper, pausing to study the windows. “It’s like a church.”

“Or a tomb.” Marx shivered and tugged on his raincoat. “Big and drafty and full of dead people’s stuff. Never much saw the point.”

“Much of history remains relevant to the present,” Lowan said. “The lessons of our past triumphs and mistakes. The significance of ordinary people who persevered and overcame, who rose above adversity and shaped the world that we live in. Successful civilizations honor the heroes of their past.”

Marx shrugged and looked around. “Sure.”

“This way.” Musgrove led them deeper into the museum, their footsteps sounding through vaulted corridors. The air grew cooler. The lighting changed from stained-glass rainbows to the muted glow of brass sconces. Inlaid floor mosaics depicted ancient maps and constellations.

Display cases lined the walls, each a miniature shrine to specific historical periods or ethnic groups. Ceremonial costumes, fossils, scrolls, faded tapestries. Rita paused at each one, her eyebrows arching as she studied the artifacts. Marx stepped back and glanced down the corridor, both

ways, repeatedly. Security threats concerned him far more than ancient relics or grand architecture.

“There is no one nearby,” Lowan assured. Within the ranges of his senses, he felt only Rita, Marx, and Musgrove.

“There should be guards.” Marx’s words echoed off of stone. After Rita finished squinting at another display, the three of them hurried to catch up with Musgrove. Marx looked sideways at a case of Colonial-era coins, jewelry, and silverware. “Even this old junk is probably worth money.”

Musgrove led the way beneath a series of archways carved with Latin inscriptions, muttering translations as they passed. “The west wing.” He pushed open another heavy door. “Welcome to the Hall of Arms. It doubles as our largest conference room, and it seemed a fitting location to display the staff.”

The rectangular room featured high ceilings and a cloudy skylight veiled by iron latticework. Velvet-lined display cases were arranged around the edges of the room. Brass plaques gleamed beneath each artifact.

Lowan stepped farther inside, inhaling the scent of wax, old leather, and the metallic tang of iron and rust. Spotlights gleamed over various collections spanning centuries of warfare and ceremony, arranged by geographical origin, era, and type.

A suit of German plate armor stood sentinel near the entrance, its gauntlets resting on the hilt of a longsword. Nearby, a round Viking shield and a Renaissance buckler hung on the wall, their surfaces scarred and faded. Rows of 16th-century rapiers and broadswords were arranged across the wall beside the armor, their hilts ornately filigreed, some with basket guards or jeweled pommels.

A pair of swords stood out, their style notably different from the others. The mounting brackets also didn’t quite

match, as if the installation might be new. A pair of Edo-period katana and wakizashi, mounted horizontally with lacquered scabbards and silk cords. A hand-written paper tag was displayed instead of the usual brass plaque.

“Ah.” Musgrove stepped closer. “You’ve noticed our most recent acquisition. “These were recently gifted to us by the Japanese Minister of Cultural Affairs.”

“How . . . interesting.” Lowan gave the pieces a closer look. Steel shimmered under the spotlight, and the edge of one bore a ripple of folded metal—evidence of masterful forging.

Rita stepped past him, moving down the line of displays. Flintlock pistols, matchlocks, and early revolvers rested in velvet-lined trays covered in glass. A pair of dueling pistols from 1812 sat side by side, their barrels engraved with ivy scrollwork.

Marx pointed at the guns. “Not loaded, I hope.”

“Of course not,” Musgrove said. “Considering their age, most of them would explode in your face if you tried to fire them. These are only for display.” He pointed to a collection of medieval halberds, boar spears, and ceremonial pikes. Their shafts were aged oak, their heads sharp. Some were etched with family crests or religious symbols. “Those, however, are still operational. As well as the swords, of course.”

“Ha.” Marx snorted, but eyed them with respect, mindful of the damage that such weapons could inflict.

At the center of the hall, spotlights focused on an empty glass case supported by a pedestal, positioned on a raised platform surrounded by velvet ropes. Musgrove led them to it, puffed out his chest, squared his shoulders, and grinned. “The staff will be displayed here, under reinforced glass. The

case is locked with a double-pin mechanism. Only the Chief Watchman and I have keys.”

Marx crossed his arms. “No alarm?”

“No. We’ve never installed one. The building is too old, and the wiring would be disruptive.”

“Robberies are also disruptive.”

“So,” Rita said, “the only alert would be the noise of breaking glass?”

“It would take some strength to break this glass.” Musgrove tapped his fingers on it. “It’s quite thick. And we’ll have two guards stationed here during the gala. One at each entrance.” He motioned to the front and back of the room. “The staff will be supervised at all times.”

Lowan glanced up at the skylight. The exterior iron lattice appeared sturdy, though somewhat rusted. The glass looked clouded with age and soiled with bird droppings. “Could a thief enter from above?”

“Only the pigeons have ever tried coming in that way.” Musgrove laughed. “I can post a man on the roof, if that would make you feel better.”

“It would.” He pointed to another side doorway which Musgrove hadn’t mentioned. “Where does that lead?”

“Service hallway, used by the staff. Storage for tables and chairs, other event supplies. Plus access to the basement.” Musgrove led the way into a wide space lined with cabinets on one side, stacked tables and chairs on the other. A mangy taxidermized wolf stood guard in the corner, and a slight hum came from the boiler room below.

“No locks?” Lowan touched the simple swinging door and frowned. “Is there another exit from this corridor?”

“Yes.” Musgrove hesitated. “This place is a maze.”

“And no visibility from the main exits,” Marx added. “If someone slipped in here during the gala . . .”

Musgrove fidgeted with his watch. "I'll post a guard here, also."



## Chapter IV

Lowan followed Musgrove down the narrow service corridor. Dim lighting only accentuated the shadows. Scuffed and aging plaster walls bore the damp scent of mold and linseed oil. Pipes ran overhead, some sweating with condensation that left rust marks on the floor beneath. Others clanged as the boiler kicked in.

Marx stayed close to Rita, his shoulder occasionally brushing hers. For the moment, she made no effort to put more space between them.

While Musgrove strode ahead, Lowan paused to study each door they passed. Most were unlabeled, some ajar and revealing storage closets cluttered with crates and mothballed display cases. Others were locked. They descended a flight of narrow stairs.

“I’d hate to have to chase somebody through here,” Marx said. “Too many places to hide.”

“Too many access points and no oversight.” Lowan glanced through another open doorway, seeing nothing but vague shapes and shadows inside.

Their footsteps clattered sharply against the stone floor, echoes multiplying. Musgrove waited for them to catch up.

“The museum was built in stages. The original structure dates to 1863. Additions were made in ’06 and ’24. The result is . . . less than elegant behind the scenes, though great care was made to preserve the unity of the architecture in public areas.”

“Still a maze.” Marx glanced behind them again, staring into the darkness. They reached a heavy oak door reinforced with iron bands. A brass plaque read *Authorized Personnel Only*. Marx’s hand automatically checked for his gun. “What’s this? The dungeon?”

“Almost.” Musgrove knocked once, then opened it. The smell of tobacco and oiled metal drifted out. Inside, the room was stark and utilitarian. A single bulb overhead cast a yellow glow across rough stone walls, desks, a rack of keys, and a large steel safe set into the far wall like a vault.

A man sat in a swivel chair, broad-shouldered and wearing a gray uniform with brass buttons and a peaked cap. A shotgun rested on the desk in front of him. He put his hand on it.

“Mr. Hinn, may I introduce Mr. Lowan, Detective Lieutenant Marx, and Miss Rita.” Musgrove motioned between them. “They’ll be assisting with security during the gala. Mr. Hinn is our Chief Watchman.”

Hinn nodded, but didn’t stand. Lowan stepped forward to shake his hand. Cold fingers and a solid grip. Hinn was ex-army and knew his business, but Lowan sensed more than a little professional jealousy.

“I am only here as an extra pair of eyes.” Lowan extracted himself from Hinn’s vice-like grasp. “Not to take your place.”

“You’re the one who recovered the staff from that yacht two weeks ago?” Hinn evaluated Lowan, moving his eyes slowly from top to bottom. He frowned.

“Yes, while working with the police.” Lowan motioned to Marx, then pointed to the small vault at the back of the room. “The staff is currently in the safe?”

“Yeah. Double-locked. Combination and a key. I’m the only one with full access.”

Lowan glanced back at Musgrove.

“I prefer to delegate such tasks,” Musgrove explained. Not just tasks, but also responsibilities. If anything went wrong, he could blame Hinn.

The safe was a solid steel beast bolted to the floor, with a numbered dial the size of a dinner plate. Lowan stepped closer. “When will the staff be moved?”

“The gala begins at seven, but the doors open at six-thirty. We’ll bring the staff to the display case at six.”

“I’ll have at least two men watching it every minute.” Hinn pointed to a sketch of the museum’s floor plan, pinned to the wall above the desk. “We usually only have two watchmen per shift, but tonight, I’ve hired an additional ten from a temp agency. There will be a man at every exterior exit, every door to the display room, and the roof. The rest will patrol the corridors.”

“Discreetly,” Musgrove insisted. “I don’t want this to look like a prison.”

“Considering the consequences if anything goes wrong . . .” Hinn ended with a snarl. “Better safe than sorry.”

“It sounds as if you already have a plan,” Lowan said. “And as long as the extra watchmen are properly vetted, I can find no fault with it. Hopefully, I will have very little to do this evening.” He stepped back and waited by the door.

Musgrove brought them back into the corridor. They retraced their steps through the maze of halls and stairways, echoes and shadows. Lowan stored their path as a mental map, confident that he could find his way again. The

mildewed passageways reduced his opinion of the museum. This was far less of a grand cathedral now. It felt older, and haunted. Rita strode briskly beside him, occasionally glancing sideways. Marx, ever watchful, brought up the rear.

“My office.” Musgrove unlocked a door on the second floor and ushered them inside. He switched on a brass lamp, casting a warm glow over the desk while leaving the edges of the room in the shadows. Mahogany shelves were lined with rare volumes, a globe stood on a pedestal in the corner, and a framed sketch of the museum’s original architecture hung on the back wall. Stacks of boxes and old crates overflowed with papers and unidentifiable objects. An African ceremonial mask peered from the crate at the top of the stack. “Would you like to see the floor plan again?” He reached for a roll of paper.

“I believe Hinn will cover the exits adequately.” Lowan helped himself to one of the chairs in front of Musgrove’s desk. “What about the guest list?”

Rita settled into the second chair. Marx remained standing behind them. Musgrove set the floor plan aside and reached for a separate stack of typed papers. “Trustees, donors, a few local officials . . .”

Lowan took the papers and scanned the names, many of them familiar. The Parkers, the Joneses, the Lincolns, and others of similar social status, he knew from the Twenty-Nine Pines, an upscale country club which he had been invited to join several years earlier. They were typical members of the upper class. “Mayor Lamb, his mother, and . . . Tully Brannigan and his wife and son.”

Marx made grumbling and choking noises in the background. He had his own reasons to hate Tully Brannigan.

“Tully Brannigan is one of our biggest supporters,” Musgrove said. “Considering how much he contributes on a regular basis, we might eventually have to name a wing after him. An exhibit room, at the very least.”

Marx’s grumbling increased.

“Do you need a glass of water, Lieutenant?” Musgrove asked.

“I’m fine.” Marx brushed himself off and crossed his arms, looking away while keeping his posture rigid.

“Alright. As I was going to say, the guest of honor is Dr. Alistair Penrose. He’ll speak briefly about the staff’s cultural significance, dispelling any misconception that it might be from an actual unicorn. It’s a narwhal tusk, and not exactly rare. The museums of Europe are full of them, but this is one of the finest examples known.”

“I’ve seen it.” Rita clutched her purse tightly, wrapping the strap around her fingers. “It’s beautiful.”

“Which is why the gala has attracted such attention, even on short notice. Once word got around, I was surprised by the support. In fact, we’ve even had foreign interest. The Japanese Minister of Cultural Affairs happened to be visiting to assess cultural exchange opportunities and strengthen ties with Western institutions—”

“Was his name Mori?” Marx interrupted. “Kazuo Mori?”

“No.” Musgrove’s eyebrows wrinkled. “His name was Kenji Takamura. He arrived less than a week ago, evaluating the potential for artifact loans and scholarly collaboration, gave us the katana as a display of goodwill, and made a financial donation even bigger than Tully Brannigan’s. I could hardly believe it. Of course, I already gave him a full tour of the museum, and he’ll be here this evening.”

“I would not like to make assumptions based solely on a person’s country of origin,” Lowan said, “but there was a

Japanese man interested in acquiring the staff—by any means necessary. He escaped from Poseidon’s yacht. The staff is worth an astronomical amount of money on Asian black markets, and the prestige of owning it would be incalculable.”

“He was surprised when I told him about the staff. Interested, naturally, but he—”

A sharp knock sounded on the door. It creaked open, and a watchman leaned inside. “Sorry to interrupt, but there’s been an incident. Mr. Hinn said to notify you right away.”

Musgrove gripped the edge of his desk. “An incident?”

“We caught a prowler in the back corridor near the archive. He’s downstairs in the security room.”



## Chapter V

**B**lackwell stepped out of a cab and glanced up at the patchy sky. A line of taxis waited at the curb, the sidewalk thick with pedestrians hauling luggage. Despite the wind, exhaust fumes formed an artificial fog that momentarily stung his eyes. A traveler signaled and shouted, sliding into the back of the cab he had just vacated. It zipped into traffic. Whistles shrieked in the distance.

The central train station was a whirl of activity. Steam hissed from iron grates. Sweating porters hauled carts of luggage across the platform. Wheels clattered, people yelled and waved, footsteps pounded across creaky boards. Blackwell adjusted his cap and clutched a clipboard and a newspaper under his arm, the disguise of a nondescript clerk or secretary. If questioned, the clipboard signaled official business. None of the other travelers looked twice.

He wove through the crowd, trying not to inhale the smell of coal smoke and wet wool, the metallic tang of rails and rust. Too many bodies packed tightly into a small space. People jostled against him. He shouldered past and brushed himself off, disgusted by the contact. A brass sign overhead read, *Private Arrivals—Platform 6*.

The morning paper had given him everything he needed. Dr. Alistair Penrose would arrive by private railcar. This evening, he would give a speech at the museum, at a gala unveiling the unicorn staff. His staff. After all the trouble he'd already gone through to acquire it, no one would take it from him. No one.

Platform 6 was deserted. Penrose's car sat at the end of the train, like a royal carriage, mismatched from the others. Voices babbled in the background, the crowd too close. A steward, a young man in a blue vest, fussed over a large cart stacked with leather trunks. He checked the manifest and muttered. Blackwell strode past, straight toward the train car.

"Hey!" The steward caught him by the arm. "Are you lost? Dr. Penrose is the only one in there, and he isn't supposed to be disturbed."

Blackwell stiffened and glared at the steward's hand. Then, he smiled. He showed his clipboard, as if that was a full explanation. "I'm with the museum. Dr. Musgrove sent me to meet Dr. Penrose, to go over the plans for the gala tonight."

The steward hesitated, then relented. "He's expecting you?"

"Of course. Where do I find him?"

"Compartment B, at the end of the car. The rest of the car is empty."

"Thank you. This will only take a moment." Blackwell grabbed the railing and pulled himself up the steep, narrow stairs.

The interior felt cool and dim, a refuge detached from the noise and grime of the station. Polished mahogany panels, brass fixtures, etched glass windows. The door clicked shut behind him, cutting off the outside world. The narrow corridor, carpeted in burgundy, matched the burgundy

curtains edged in gold fringes that covered the windows. Gas lamps flickered overhead. He passed a small lounge featuring comfortable furniture—more burgundy and gold—and a writing desk with carved legs. A washroom. Then, Compartment B.

He knocked. A muffled answer came from inside, so he pushed the door open.

Dr. Penrose sat by the window, spectacles perched on his nose, a cup of tea cooling beside him. Over fifty, but broad-shouldered and long-legged. He would have been formidable in his youth, and the active lifestyle of an explorer had endowed him with impressive musculature. He looked up. “Yes?”

“Dr. Musgrove sent me, from the museum.” Blackwell flashed the clipboard. “He asked me to deliver your itinerary.”

“Of course.” Penrose sat up straighter. The suspicious expression faded. He reached for the tea and took a sip. “Nothing has changed, has it?”

“Nothing much. You have your speech prepared?” He offered a folded piece of paper.

“Yes. The notes are in my briefcase.” He took the paper and began to unfold it.

Blackwell stepped beside him and leaned down, acting as if he intended to point at the paper and explain the contents. He slipped his hand into his pocket, his fingers wrapping around coiled wire with wooden handles. Quick, quiet, simple, relatively clean. Not his favorite method, but he couldn’t afford a disturbance in the middle of the central train station.

“This paper is blank.” Penrose turned it over to check the other side. “Did you give me the wrong—”

The wire slid from Blackwell's pocket and looped around Penrose's throat. The professor gasped silently and kicked, clawing at Blackwell's hands. Seated, he had no leverage. All the leverage in the world wouldn't have made any difference. His struggles weakened, then his arms went limp. Blackwell held him for another minute, then toppled him from the chair. He coiled the wire and put it back into his pocket.

Working quickly, he removed Penrose's glasses, jacket, wallet, and silver pocket watch. He hefted the body into the wardrobe, laid the jacket across the chair, and started to remove his own. Luckily, Penrose was nearly the same size.

Knocking sounded at the compartment door.

Blackwell let his breath out, straightened his jacket, and answered. The steward faced him.

"Where's Dr. Penrose?" The steward looked past him. "There was a trunk he wanted shipped to the museum."

"Yes." Blackwell stepped back. His eyes shot around the room, involuntarily settling on the wardrobe. A large trunk waited near the door. "This trunk. You can go ahead and take it. Here, I'll help you carry it out."

"Sure, thanks." They hefted the trunk together, navigating the narrow corridor to the steps. "Where's Dr. Penrose?"

"He went to the washroom to freshen up. He'll be back in a few minutes, but there's no need to wait for him. He'd rather not be disturbed while he's preparing for his speech."

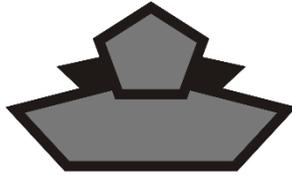
"Is there anything else he wants delivered?"

"No, just the trunk." Blackwell helped the steward add the trunk to the cart on the platform. He watched until the steward pushed the cart away, then returned to Compartment B.

Penrose's tweed jacket wasn't much different from the one he had been wearing, but he switched them anyway, transferring the contents of his pockets. He added the silver watch and spectacles, then opened the wallet to check the identification. The picture looked somewhat grainy, hard to identify. Plus, sixty dollars. More than taxi fare. He shoved it into his pocket.

The briefcase rested beside the chair. He snapped it open and rifled through the contents. Academic papers, personal letters, leatherbound books, and a checkbook. Near the bottom, he found the typewritten speech, annotated with a few afterthoughts.

Following one more glance around the compartment, Blackwell snapped the briefcase shut and carried it with him. Outside, Platform 6 was deserted. Noises from the crowd drifted from the next platform. Another train whistle screeched. He carried the briefcase farther along and disappeared into the tight knot of travelers heading for the exit.



## Chapter VI

Lowan, Rita, and Marx followed Musgrove through the maze of shadowy corridors, returning to the basement security room. Quick strides, no conversation. Tense expectation set Lowan's nerves on edge. Not his own stress, but amplified sensations emanating from both Musgrove and Marx. Their footsteps echoed.

Musgrove pushed the reinforced door open. The single bulb cast long shadows across the walls. Hinn still occupied his chair, resting his shotgun across his lap. He faced the corner, where a young man perched on the edge of a wooden bench. The prowler wore a press card tucked in his hatband.

Rita let out a squeak. "Tom!"

"Hey, sis." Tom gripped his notebook. He started to stand, but Hin motioned him back.

"You know this man?" Musgrove asked.

"We know him," Marx said. "He's alright."

"Just alright?" Rita spun toward Marx. "He's my brother."

Marx shrugged and faced Tom again. "You have a talent for bad timing." Not long ago, he'd had to arrest Tom at a

murder scene. Tom still carried a slight grudge. Perhaps Rita did, too.

“I was after a story.” Tom stood, defying Hinn’s warning. “I wanted to find out more about the gala—”

“You were trespassing.” Hinn’s grip on his weapon never relaxed. “You’re lucky you didn’t get shot.”

“I knocked. Nobody answered, so I walked in. The museum’s open to the public, isn’t it?”

“Not the back corridors,” Musgrove said. “I gave a press conference when the staff was transferred to us. Everything you needed to know—”

“There’s always more. What else is going on here?”

While Tom continued prying, Lowan stood in the background. Tom was the first person he’d met on Earth, and their relationship hadn’t always been smooth. Recent attempts at reconciliation were tentative at best.

“I want him out of here.” Musgrove’s voice rose above the others. “I won’t allow a reporter to get in the way or disrupt the event.”

“He can be an asset,” Lowan said. “He is highly observant and analytical, and good at mingling with crowds.”

The others spun toward him, except for Hinn, who still kept watch. Rita smiled, but Tom’s expression showed a surge of panic.

“He’ll bother the other guests,” Musgrove objected. “I don’t mind publicity, to an extent, but not when it’s disruptive.”

“He will be on his best behavior.” Lowan faced Tom and made eye contact.

Tom stepped back, his posture tense. “Is that a threat?”

“The alternative is for you to be removed from the premises and barred from the event.” Lowan spoke firmly,

not raising his voice, but putting a deeper emphasis behind his words. “Is that what you would prefer?”

“No.” Tom looked away and shivered. Lowan saw his reasoning. Tom knew Lowan’s secret—and feared him. Working together was never a comfortable prospect. More than that, Tom wanted the story. Failing wouldn’t just hurt his career. It would cause personal embarrassment if another reporter learned the juicy details before he did. As competitive as reporters were, both from other newspapers and his own, he’d face vicious taunting for weeks.

“I want him supervised.” Musgrove eyed Tom, frowning. “If you’re caught snooping in a restricted area again . . .”

“I’m not a child.” Tom grumbled, but stepped closer to Rita, signaling his intention to stay with the group.

“We’ve engaged an extra ten watchmen from an agency, just for tonight.” Musgrove looked at his watch. “They should be here any minute—”

The door opened. The same watchman who had reported Tom’s intrusion leaned inside. “The others just arrived.”

Hinn stood and set his shotgun aside. “Right on time. Send them in.”

Footsteps and murmuring voices echoed from the hall. A dozen men filed in, uniformed, clean-shaven, and with little variation to set them apart. Each man wore a revolver on his hip. Hinn looked them over, clipboard in hand. Tom, Rita, and Marx stepped back, giving the others more space to gather. The crowd condensed as the last few stragglers pressed inside.

“You, north entrance. You, west wing. You, on the roof near the skylight.” Hinn pointed to various men, checked names against the list on his clipboard, and indicated locations on the floor plan above the desk. “Stay sharp, no wandering, and no chatting with guests.”

Lowan edged around the group, focusing on each man. The dense crowd grated on his senses, making it difficult for him to pinpoint the origin of jumbled thoughts and feelings emanating from the group. Some, particularly the younger members, churned with excitement at the prospect of seeing a million-dollar staff. Others projected impatience and boredom. They were here to do a job and collect a paycheck. Nothing more.

“Dr. Musgrove will show you to your places upstairs,” Hinn said. “The staff is currently in the safe, and I’m not leaving this room as long as it’s here. At six, we’ll move it to the display case. The doors open at six-thirty, and the gala begins at seven.”

Something felt wrong. More than a twinge of greed. Lowan wove through the group again, bumping elbows and quietly apologizing. He studied the men’s faces. Each looked about the same, and each gave Hinn their full attention.

Except one.

One man stood at the side of the room and followed Hinn’s speech, but his eyes darted to the safe a little too frequently. Each glance resulted in a slight smile. The sensation of greed thickened.

He caught Lowan staring. “Something about my face bothers you?”

“We might have met before. What is your name?”

“Alfred Jones.” His smile didn’t convey sincerity. “I don’t think I know you.”

Lowan sensed the lie. Simultaneously, the truth formed at the front of the watchman’s mind. Clyde Varnett. His plan to steal the staff didn’t extend very far beyond infiltrating the security team and hoping for a moment alone. “We have never met. You resemble someone else.” He moved away, shivering from the confrontation. Stepping into a criminal’s

mind was never a pleasant experience. He touched Marx's sleeve and motioned him aside.

While Hinn's instructions continued, Lowan stepped into the corridor. Marx followed and pulled the door shut. "What's wrong?"

Lowan whispered. "Does the name Clyde Varnett mean anything?"

"Not offhand. Why?"

"I recognized him among the watchmen, but he gave his name as Alfred Jones. I believe he is an imposter. Would you mind calling the police station and asking about him?"

Marx frowned. He'd worked with Lowan too frequently to disregard his suggestions. "Let's find a phone."

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## **Book 1: Lowan's Checkmate**

Lowan, a private detective and telepathic alien, teams up with Detective Lieutenant Marx, an introverted underdog, to catch a clever jewel thief terrorizing Milford Falls.

## **Book 2: Shamrock Hunt**

When a famous Celtic medallion—the prize for a charity raffle—is stolen, Lowan competes with a rival private detective to find it in time for the St. Patrick's Day parade. Meanwhile, Marx investigates the murder of a history professor and faces off with a lifelong enemy.

## **Book 3: Murder on Harrisonville Road**

After writing a newspaper story about the crimeless village of Harrisonville, Tom Nanning is ambushed and left for dead. When Lowan investigates, he finds himself trapped in a small town with a murderer hidden among its quirky residents.

## **Book 4: Orchid Hunter**

While Marx investigates a murder committed via April Fool's prank, which renders alibis useless, Lowan dives into the black market orchid trade to recover the main attraction stolen before the Easter flower show. Both investigations lead to a thirty-five-year-old tiger attack in the jungles of Borneo.

## **Book 5: The Great Flamingo Robbery**

When the mangiest flamingo is stolen from the zoo, Lowan is called in to investigate. He never expected to get mixed up with a beautiful ruby thief or a South American dictator.

**Book 6: The Unicorn Staff**

The murder of an archeologist and the theft of a staff made from a unicorn's horn lead Lowan and Marx on a wild quest for answers.

**Book 7: Lowan's Circus Tricks**

Lowan's search for Eloise Meer leads him to a traveling circus in dusty Dry Creek, Kansas. But the only Eloise at the circus is a ring-tailed monkey. Hunting for clues, he joins the circus and promptly finds himself framed for murder.

**Book 8: The Starmaster**

The Starmaster is hunting for aliens—and he's after Lowan.

**Book 9: Murder in the Script**

A movie is being filmed in Milford Falls. The script might solve an old crime for which an innocent man was framed, if the real murderer doesn't stop the production first.

**Book 10: Murder at Woodward Retreat**

Lowan and Marx take a vacation at a cabin in the woods. But their plans are disrupted when the woman in the next cabin claims that she saw her husband kill a man.

**Book 11: The Pigeon Wing Murders**

A wounded carrier pigeon with a coded message, a train robbery, and a stolen racehorse add up to one of Lowan's strangest cases yet.

### **Book 12: The Mattison Matter**

When Tom Nenning is framed for murder, Lowan must work quickly to clear his name. He finds himself enmeshed in a case of corporate espionage involving the radio company he works for, and misused city funds linked to the mayor's office.

### **Book 13: The Unicorn Curse**

When a madman starts killing the remaining members of the *Bearance* crew with a harpoon, Lowan and Marx begin to suspect that Teddy Bear hadn't been aboard the ship when it sank. To find the truth, Lowan goes undercover at a secret million-dollar auction aboard the killer's luxury yacht.

### **Book 14: Emerald Deception**

After an attempted purse-snatching, a frightened woman goes to Lowan for help. Two men are following her, and she wants to know why. The strange emerald found in her purse might provide a clue—until it's appraised as fake. Why does everyone want it so badly?

### **Book 15: The First Chase**

The three members of the insurance racket are still at large, and the last case ended with three new leads. Tracking down the first one brings Lowan and Marx to an illegal greyhound track outside of the city limits, race fixing, and murder.

### **Book 16: The Second Course**

Lowan and Marx track down the second member of the insurance racket, and he's nothing like they expected. Caught between a case of mistaken identity and a prestigious banquet at his restaurant, he agrees to tell them everything he knows—if the killer doesn't get to him first.

### **Book 17: The Third Conspirator**

The third and final member of the insurance racket proves to be the most elusive and dangerous of them all.

### **Book 18: The Unicorn Heist**

The unicorn staff is going on display at the museum, and Lowan is hired to guard it. When Poseidon escapes and Mori returns, both intent on stealing the staff, the fundraiser gala turns deadly.

### **Book 19: Murder at Battle Rock Lighthouse**

Lowan is hired to pick up a historic ship's bell from the Battle Rock Lighthouse and return it to the museum. But when the lighthouse keeper is found murdered, the bell turns out to be counterfeit, and Marx disappears, the problem becomes far more dangerous than he expected.

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