

The
**Bullet
Catch**

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Murder by
Misadventure



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Holiday House / New York

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For Michael,
who took me
to India—A.A.

For Jessica,
my Chinatown partner
in crime—D.A.

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In this book I have told of the methods of criminals,
and held them up to your gaze, not as heroes but as
malefactors; not as examples to be emulated, but as
corruptions to be shunned, as you would shun a plague.

—Harry Houdini, *The Right Way to Do Wrong*



CHAPTER 1

The Doctor Smells a Rat



A small crowd had formed in front of Pershing Wadlow's Wonder Museum. The stained and torn banner stretching the width of the building advertised the attractions. Amazing things were promised: a two-headed lady, a genuine mermaid from the far-flung coast of Fiji, a woman with a beard down to her waist, an alligator girl.

Without ever having seen the exhibit, Leo knew the mermaid was only a stuffed monkey stapled to a fish, the bearded lady was really a man in a dress and the alligator girl's skin was plastered with thick glue that had dried and cracked. Rattling cold steel bit at his back through his thin black coat. He glanced up and saw through the slats of the tracks the mechanical guts of the Third Avenue el train as it came to a stop.

The usual lot came filing down from the train: sailors in bell-bottom trousers practically running to the closest saloon, a few sad-looking men searching for a pawn shop to sell whatever gold they had for next to nothing. Some ordinary folks mixed in as well, just looking for a new hat or a cheap suit. The Bowery was no ritzy neighborhood, but Leo was most comfortable working there. It was easy for him to blend in.

The last person to descend to the gray pavement was Murph. Under his opened jacket he looked like a strip of jerky. His suspenders

hung loosely over a plain white shirt, holding up baggy pants hiding deep pockets. A newspaper carried by the wind whipped around his feet. He shook it away and passed by Leo, giving him a slight nod.

Leo left his post and crossed the street. He settled near the back of the crowd. A “talker” dressed in a shabby tuxedo rushed out of the doorway of the Wonder Museum. He stepped up onto a low platform, twisted the ends of his moustache into points and adjusted his bow tie.

“Start talking, already,” Leo shouted out.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the talker began.

“Louder!” Leo yelled.

“*Ladies and gentlemen,*” the talker said louder, “presenting Dolly Dimples!”

A woman in tight corkscrew curls, with rouged cheeks and a body like a rhinoceros, wobbled through the door and onto the platform. The wood creaked under her footsteps. She was dressed like a little girl, in a pinafore, and carried a doll. She pouted, then turned around and flipped her ruffled skirt to the audience.

The talker waved his hands like a symphony conductor. “Our Dolly Dimples was a beautiful baby. She’s now the great fat lady. Don’t make her mad or she’ll make you sad. Earn your worth, guess her girth. Free admission if you’re right.”

“Three hundred, easy,” someone called. “Bigger! Three-fifty!” another yelled.

A stagehand wheeled an industrial-size Detecto scale onto the platform. The talker cued Dolly Dimples, and she stepped up onto the scale. The needle swung across the face of the dial, but before it could register her weight, a man standing in front of Leo cupped his hand to his mouth, about to yell out an answer.

Murph and Leo had passed Pershing Wadlow’s dozens of times, and they had seen the man now standing in front of Leo guess Dolly Dimples’ weight every single time. The scale was fixed, like everything else at the Wonder Museum. The man was a shill planted in the crowd to get people warmed up and ready to fork over their dimes. Everyone likes a winner.

Just as the shill took a lungful of air, Leo kicked him hard in the back of the knee and he stumbled forward.

“Four hundred thirty-seven pounds and not one ounce more!” Leo yelled. The needle stopped and the talker pointed into the crowd.

“A winner, we have a winner! You there —the small gentleman in the brown cap. You, sir, must be a genuine clairvoyant! Come inside, come inside. Your admission to our curio hall of curiosities is free.”

Leo pushed through and went straight up to the platform. The talker dangled the ticket in front of Leo’s face.

“What’s the big idea?” the man said through his teeth.

“Idea?” Leo said loudly, watching Murph circle the crowd, whose eyes were all fixed on Leo. “No idea at all. I’m just a good guesser. Ask anyone between the Hudson and the East River and they’ll say that I’m the best guesser they’ve ever seen put up against a conundrum. The sphinx himself is no match. No riddle is too twisty or too tough. Really, it’s not your fault. My Aunt Gertie was one fat lady. She was from Rochester, never got out much. So you see, with all due respect and deference, et cetera, to what you’re doing here, mister talker, a good guess isn’t really a guess at all. It’s just putting two and two together.”

Leo swiped the ticket from the talker’s hand. The talker leaned down so close Leo could see the grease shine on his moustache.

“You are quite the talker yourself. After you come out the other end of the museum, I won’t see you around here again. Understand?”

Leo smirked and turned to go inside, waving the ticket high in the air.

With his free hand, he retrieved a small piece of soap from his pocket. Right before he got to the entrance of the museum, Leo stopped. He made a fake cough and popped the soap into his mouth, working it into a lather with his tongue. The bitter taste made him spit up a little. When his mouth was so foamy it was overflowing with bubbles, he turned back to the crowd, which was now lining up to pay for tickets. People began to stare.

“Oh, my. Are you all right, boy?”

“Poor thing is having a fit! Somebody get help!”

“Why, he’s convulsing! He’s gone mad!”

Leo started to shake and jerk as if he had been struck by lightning. He rolled his eyes and fell to the ground, kicking and moaning the whole time. A circle of concerned people formed around him. Through

their legs he could see Murph's shoes shuffling. It was working beautifully. Leo figured he would wriggle around for another minute or so. Plenty of time for Murph to dart his hands into pockets and drop whatever he found into his own.

Without warning, a hole opened up in the circle. A tall, bald man wearing wire-frame glasses pushed through. Leo opened his eyes wide as the man knelt down.

"Everyone back away. I'm a doctor. Give me room."

Leo shook his head and tried to say he was okay, but with the lather in his mouth, the words came out as a gurgle.

"Don't fight me, son. I'm here to help."

The doctor pinned Leo against the sidewalk. Panicked, Leo looked around for Murph's shoes, but they were gone. He was alone. Leo tried to get up but the doctor pushed him back down. The doctor leaned in. He smelled Leo's breath. Then he patted his back pocket. His eyes narrowed. "You dirty little . . ."

The doctor grabbed Leo by the shirt and hoisted him up off the ground. Leo's feet pedaled in search of concrete. "Everyone, check your pockets," the doctor yelled as he dragged Leo through the crowd. "Look in your purses, make sure your valuables are still on your wrists and around your necks. The kid is a thief!"

Leo spat the froth out of his mouth.

"Honest, I ain't!" Leo cried. "Let me go! I'm epileptic, apoplectic. I get the shakes. I have a condition, I need my pills. Where's my mother? Take me to my mother, she's waiting for me just 'round the corner. Please, doc, let go."

The doctor did not loosen his grip. They were only a few feet from the talker now. His face was red and puffy like a burned thumb. Leo heard the shrill of a police whistle.

Never before had he been so close to being caught. There was no mercy in New York City for street thieves, regardless of age. The inmates in the Tombs would not hesitate to stab you in the eye with a fork for an extra slice of bread. He knew that from the Mayor, and the Mayor's knowledge on such topics was as strong as his fear of going to jail.

Leo thought fast. There was only one thing to do. The idea made him sick, but he had no alternative. Leo shoved his hand into his pocket and grabbed all the money he'd stolen earlier that morning. The lump of bills and coins was heavy. He closed his eyes, said a short prayer and then cursed both Chapter Seven and Harry Houdini. *The Right Way to Do Wrong* promised this would happen to a thief eventually. It was the only part of the book Leo had chosen to ignore. Then he flung the money up into the air.

The people went wild, and in the confusion Leo wrestled his way loose and ran off through an alley, jumping over passed-out hobos and piled-high trash. He ran several blocks more, until the frigid air tore his insides to strips and he stopped to catch his breath.

CHAPTER 2

The Right Way to Do Wrong



On his way to the West Side, Leo paused on street corners, casually looking over his shoulder to make sure he wasn't being followed. He was in no rush to get back to Hell's Kitchen. Murph would explain to the Mayor and Boris what had happened. There was no way they could hold it against him. Still, he knew there would be some grumbling. Especially from Boris. The money Leo had thrown to the crowd was supposed to be for dinner, and if dinner wasn't plentiful, Boris turned sour. Leo hoped that whatever Murph managed to hold on to would be enough to feed them all for the next few days.

The clouds grew dark. A few early flurries drifted in front of him, the flakes disappearing as soon as they touched the ground. In his mind's eye he saw that frostbitten field upstate that he had left behind two years before.

He remembered the fire clawing at the stars dotting the night sky. The orphanage was already caving in on itself. The sound was like bones cracking. Tree branches blocked the light of the fire, creating shadows that looked like a spider web stretching across the Mayor's face.

That was when the Mayor pulled out the book and handed it to Leo: *The Right Way to Do Wrong: An Exposé of Successful Criminals* by Harry Houdini. Leo knew all about Harry Houdini. Who didn't?

Newspapers constantly blasted headlines of his latest amazing escape: from a jail cell, from a locked and shackled steamer trunk dropped to the bottom of a river, and even from a casket buried six feet under the ground.

Leo opened the book to the first page. An illustration of a demon dominated the top half. He flipped through the rest and found it was exactly what the title suggested—a book explaining how criminals executed their crimes.

“Well? Are we in this together, like always?” the Mayor asked.

Leo looked toward the burning building and thought over his future prospects. The nuns would ship three of them off to other orphanages by morning. But not the Mayor. He was almost sixteen. They would force him to become an apprentice carpenter or a baker’s trainee or something similar. And before long they would force Leo to do the same. Most of all, Leo knew that he did not want to be separated from his friends.

The Mayor, Boris and Murph had made life in the House of Providence tolerable. The Mayor looked out for his brother, Boris, and had taken Leo under his wing as well. He offered friendship and protection from bullies. When Murph arrived at the House of Providence, it was Leo who brought him into the fold and showed him the ropes. Sometimes he and Murph would fake sick and stay in bed all day while the others went to class. Leo would whisper-read dime novels. And Murph, sitting in the bed next to him, would act them out. Soon their bond became just as solid as the one shared by the Mayor and Boris, who were brothers bound by blood.

Leo gave the book back to the Mayor. He liked what the Mayor had in mind. He’d be with his friends, living an adventure. It would be exciting. It would be all the things they’d daydreamed about—being pirates, explorers, bandits. Hadn’t he and Murph stayed up many nights weaving stories of bank robberies and armored-car stickups that they’d pull one day? The timing was perfect.

“I’m in,” he said.

The four boys spat and shook on it. Then the Mayor led them through the field, away from the fire. They hitched a ride into town, and from there they hopped trains traveling down the east bank of the

Hudson River until they reached New York City, where they had been living ever since.

In two years, a lot had changed. But some things had not. Ahead, Leo could see the abandoned tenement they called home. The Mayor promised them all that once they had enough money, they would get a real place to stay. It would be heaven. Soft sheets and fluffy pillows, three hot meals a day, pretty maids to come and clean up their mess. But there never *was* enough, and Leo was beginning to understand that the Mayor's promises for a better life weren't necessarily promises the Mayor could keep.

The abandoned tenement had a large sign nailed to the front door: CONDEMNED. A chain and a broken padlock were draped around the handle, but it was all for show. The boys slipped in and out unnoticed, and the only ones who knew they were there were the rodents crawling along the rafters and the pigeons flapping from window to window.

Leo walked through the small foyer, which blocked the view of the inner entrance. The stairs leading to the upper floors were rotted through. Every apartment except the one they occupied was completely gutted. At least they had a closet-sized washroom with a faucet that spurted cold water. What the boys jokingly called the bedroom was in reality a hallway with four cots set up along the walls, left over from previous squatters.

At the door to apartment A5, Leo gave the knock—three hard raps, two quick pounds, three hard raps. There was just one key to the front door, and it never left the chain hanging around the Mayor's neck. When they'd first discovered the building, they'd found the set of keys for apartment A5 and its mailbox sticking comically out of the only intact door on the first floor, as if someone had left for work and forgotten them.

Leo was let into the apartment. The Mayor was screwing a rusty hot plate onto an exposed gas pipe. As he put his ear to the pipe to listen for the whoosh of gas, he looked up at Leo. "Got a match?"

Leo took one out of his pocket and struck it against the wall. He knelt down and touched the tip to the hot plate, and a crown of blue flames burst out. They all sat around it to warm themselves. Boris's

wooden leg was placed a safe distance away. There was a deep stillness in the room.

“Why’s everyone so glum?” the Mayor asked.

Silence.

“I’ve got a riddle. First person to get it gets a nickel.”

“This is stupid,” Boris said. “I’m starving. Let’s just get to the greasy spoon for the blue plate special, already. We already had to wait for Prince Leo’s return, and now we’re just sitting here like a bunch of idiots.”

“I want to go to Horn & Hardart,” Murph said. “How come I never get to choose?”

Boris gave him a shove.

“You can choose when you grow a brain.”

“This brain scored us six bucks today. And a pair of silver cuff links.”

“Six bucks barely covers Prince Leo’s *laundry* bill. You can’t eat cuff links, and ten-to-one they’re only silver plated.”

“Knock it off, the both of you,” the Mayor said. “Leo needs clean clothes. He can’t be a *good* crook if he’s walking around looking look a *rotten* crook, can he? Anyway, who wants to hear the riddle?”

Leo kept his mouth shut. He hated that the Mayor had to apologize for him. The way Boris said the word “laundry” made him gag. He *did* need those clean clothes. He had earned them. His work was hard. Harder than whatever Boris did all day, anyway.

Leo picked up the copy of *The Right Way to Do Wrong* from the floor next to the Mayor. They had all read it so many times the spine was cracked and the pages were loose.

The Mayor liked Chapter One, “Income of a Criminal.” He was fond of late-night stickups in dark downtown alleys. When an opportunity presented, he would jab an unsuspecting Wall Street banker in the back with the Louisville Slugger he had found. Nobody ever suspected that it was not a shotgun.

Murph, wiry and fast, was a natural for Chapter Two, “Professional Burglary.” He broke into people’s apartments while laundry was being hung on a line or while the woman of the house was out shopping.

Sometimes, when he was feeling especially impatient, he would take advantage of a distracted clerk and reach over the counter to empty the contents of a cash register.

When Boris was ten, he'd snuck out of the orphanage with some other boys and lost a game of chicken against the South Buffalo Railway. Since then he wore a wooden leg. But when he went out to work, he would leave it off and hobble with his crutch on crowded subway platforms. His best days were when he put on sunglasses and groped around the stations pretending to be blind. Chapter Eight, "Beggars and Dead Beats," suited him perfectly.

Leo, to his own surprise, turned out to be the most gifted of the four. Part of it was from studying Chapter Seven, "Pickpockets at Work," over and over. The other part was natural talent. While Murph was fast on his feet, Leo had invisible hands. The entire city was his oyster, from Sugar Hill to the Battery. Everywhere he went, people practically begged him to take their wallets and jewelry—on buses, in waiting rooms, in the park, standing in line for a bank teller so they could get more money which Leo would then take.

"What's put on a table, cut, but never eaten?" the Mayor asked.

Nobody answered.

"Anyone?"

"Whatever we rob?"

"Good guess, Murph. But no. A deck of cards. Get it?"

They all groaned. Leo was only half listening. He was still unsettled from the close call at Pershing Wadlow's Wonder Museum. But it wasn't only one close call that worried him. Lately he'd been wondering how much longer he could do this. There'd been a gnawing in his stomach that wouldn't quit. After two years, getting nowhere fast had become exhausting. He flipped to the back of Houdini's book and skimmed through the last few pages. These were the pages he'd ignored because Houdini's preaching sounded just the same as the nuns at the House of Providence. And he figured that if he didn't think about getting caught it would never happen. But this time certain words jumped off the page: "evil-doing", "sordid life", "disgrace", and "punishment". He slammed the book shut and set it on the floor.

"Leo!" the Mayor said.

Leo looked up.

“What?”

“Hey, cheer up. Today didn’t go quite as planned. So let’s just move on. Okay? Everybody happy now? You happy, Leo? You happy, Murph? You happy, Boris?”

“No, I’m not happy,” Boris said. “Leo messed up today.”

“You weren’t there, Boris. I’m telling you it wasn’t my fault,” Leo said.

“Really? Seems to me that Prince Leo has lost his magic touch.”

Leo stood up. He felt like grabbing Boris by the collar and shaking him. But the Mayor’s eyes told Leo to let it go and that he was still in charge of the gang. He didn’t know how much more he could take of Boris’s criticisms or of this life they were living. The rope that bound the four of them from their days at the House of Providence was steadily fraying. Something would have to give pretty soon.

“You go on to supper without me. I’ll catch up with you guys later,” Leo said.

He slipped out the door, leaving them behind. He just wanted to be alone.

Horn & Hardart was bustling, as usual. Leo went in, grabbed a tray and got in line. Leo liked the automat, with all the food selections right there for you to see in glass cases. When he came to the sandwich he wanted, Leo dropped his last nickel into the slot and opened the door of the case to grab it. He settled near the back at an empty table. A few minutes later he saw the Mayor walk in alone. The Mayor piled his tray with macaroni and cheese, beans, sliced steak, two types of pie and coffee. He found Leo in the back and sat across from him.

“Just a cheese sandwich isn’t enough. Eat some of this.”

Leo took a forkful of beans.

“Where are the others?”

“Boris won out. They went to get the blue plate special. I thought it would be best if everyone took some time and cooled down a little.”

Leo appreciated the Mayor coming in and treating him to a big dinner. He smiled. Even back in the orphanage, the Mayor used to save some of his food for Leo, and it had always lifted Leo’s spirits. By the

time they were mashing their forks in the pie crumbs, Leo felt like his old self again. “Thanks,” he said.

“Not a problem.”

The Mayor took a gulp of coffee and rolled up his sleeves. The two-inch tattoo of a cricket on his forearm seemed to jump as he did it. The Mayor pointed to it.

“Remember when I got this? At Coney Island?”

That was the day the gang took the Sea Beach Line Express to Surf Avenue. It was a day meant only for fun. They walked to the Dreamland Circus Sideshow and each paid a dime to get into the Congress of Curious People and Living Curiosities. There was Lionel, the Lion-Faced Boy, who had a thick mane of auburn hair growing on his face, and Baron Paucci, the world’s smallest man at twenty-four inches tall, and Rob Roy, the albino wonder. They were the real deal. Not like the trash exhibits at Pershing Wadlow’s Wonder Museum.

“Of course I remember,” Leo said. “Boris threw a fit in Luna Park because they wouldn’t let him ride the elephant. And that magic show at the Eden Musée. The guy chewed up sawdust and spat out fireballs. It was incredible. But the whole time you were complaining about how much your arm hurt!”

They laughed together.

“That’s right. I never told you guys why I picked the cricket. The tattoo artist told me it was a sign of good luck. I thought we would need it.”

He crumpled his napkin and dropped it on the tray. Leo got up to leave but the Mayor grabbed his arm.

“I need you to be working hard.”

“I *have* been working hard,” Leo said.

What Leo really wanted to say was that *he* was the only one of the gang who had been working hard. Boris was too old to keep on begging. No one sympathized with a grown-up cripple. And Murph was getting soft, losing his nerve, afraid to work solo. The only reason he’d scored some money and cuff links that day was because of Leo’s epileptic diversion. And the Mayor. He had stopped going out at night altogether, and when Leo questioned him about it, he grew surly. Now he just gave the orders and did the bookkeeping. The weight of everyone

depending upon him was making Leo's shoulders droop. And by the Mayor's accounting, there was never enough savings to make a move, because each week there were a few dollars less than the week before. It seemed more and more like a losing enterprise.

"I know that," the Mayor said. "And I know that Boris gets under your skin. I know him better than anyone. He's my own flesh and blood. He doesn't mean anything by what he says."

"So then what's the problem?"

"Leo, you're smart. Where do you see this heading? We can't stay in that tenement much longer. We'll die. I wake up so cold that I'm afraid my teeth will crack if I bite too hard. Believe me, I've got a plan to change things. The next step is up here," the Mayor said, tapping his head. "But we're not there yet. Soon. Any day."

"You keep saying that. But it's getting harder to swallow each time you say it. And the thing is, I've been thinking maybe there's something else we could do."

"What are you talking about?" the Mayor said.

"I don't know. Maybe we could get money some other way."

"You mean get jobs? No, Leo. My way is easier and faster. It's the best way. It just needs a little more time. I'll roll it out soon enough. But it's not for tonight. I told Boris and Murph we'd meet them at the Orpheum. There's a double screening of 20,000 *Leagues Under the Sea* and *Sherlock Holmes*. You're coming, right?"

To Leo, a flat screen was lifeless. And too much sitting still in a theater made him want to run, jump, kick the chair in front of him. The only exception was magic shows. Ever since that day at Coney Island he'd been hooked. But tonight he would go to smooth things over with his friends.

"Yeah, sure, of course I'm coming."

Outside, the newsies were screeching the headlines from the evening paper. Most of them were Leo's age, and some even younger. They hawked papers by day and slept on the sidewalk at night, waiting for the next delivery of bundled newspapers. One of them called out a headline that made Leo stop and turn.

"*Extra, extra! Houdini straitjacket escape in Times Square!*"

Leo grabbed the *New York Times* from the newsboy's hands.

“Hey!”

Leo shoved two pennies at the boy. He scanned the columns full of World War I news about the Western Front and German U-boat aggression. He found the notice about Houdini buried at the bottom of the first page.

Houdini to Perform in Times Square

Harry Houdini, who has several times been prevented by the police from attempting spectacular feats in public, will be strapped into a straitjacket and hauled aloft by the heels at Broadway and Forty-sixth Street at 12:30 o'clock on November 10th. Permission for the feat has been given by the Police Department, as the stunt will be done for the purpose of advertising a patriotic performance to be given at the Hippodrome next Sunday. Houdini will be hauled up by a derrick on the north end of the Times Square subway construction buildings. While in the air he will endeavor to escape from the straitjacket.

Leo imagined Houdini dangling upside down above thousands of people as he struggled his way out of the straitjacket to freedom. The scene in his head was much more exciting than any movie. Nothing would stop him from being there to see it.

CHAPTER 3

Mysteries of the Yogi



On the morning of the show Leo left the tenement while the others slept. The sun was just inching over the buildings. He walked to Times Square and waited by the platform that had been set up for Houdini's stunt. A sea of men in overcoats and felt fedoras swelled around him. Angry motorists blasted their horns in frustration over the gridlock. There was undeniable excitement in the air.

Leo waited for hours as more people packed Times Square. And then, exactly at 12:30, Houdini appeared. An escort of three policemen pushed a way through the throng and led Houdini up to the platform. The crowd cheered, but Leo felt a slight twinge of disappointment. The King of Handcuffs looked nothing like the posters of him outside of theaters. He was shorter and older, with thinning hair. Leo also noticed that he was bowlegged. His face was intense and his mouth drooped into a scowl.

Houdini was not wearing a coat. He removed his necktie, then unbuttoned the top button of his white dress shirt. Houdini presented his arms and two of the policemen slipped on the straitjacket. Leo watched closely as Houdini took several deep breaths, and held the last one until the policemen fastened the back buckles of the straitjacket. *Of course. Makes sense*, Leo thought. Houdini puffed up his chest with air so he'd have more room to wriggle out of the straitjacket when he exhaled.