

# THE DEADLY TRICK



A Leo Katz Mystery  
**NIK GRYBASKI**

# THE DEADLY TRICK



A Leo Katz Mystery  
**NIK GRYBASKI**

# **The Deadly Trick**

A Leo Katz Mystery Novella

By

**Nik Grybaski**

*This novella is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and events portrayed are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any character resemblance to actual persons living or dead is entirely coincidental or written in a purely fictitious manner.*

*No part of this work may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical without written permission from the author.*

*Copyright © 2022 Nik Grybaski All rights reserved.*

*Cover design by Daphne deMuir*

*To Martin, for his advice and encouragement.*

## The Deadly Trick

Parties are things I rarely attend. Being face-to-face with drunken strangers is not appealing. I am always alert to the possibility someone will recognise me despite my disguise. Which is why I avoid such whimsy. Yet, here I was standing outside the Vienna University of Medicine, dressed in my finest top hat and tails, my aunt hanging onto my arm, giggling like a love-struck adolescent. 'Ketzele, lose that look of solemnity. Klaus will admonish you for it, and I will not blame him. Tonight is a special occasion for you both.'

'I know. I am here to support Klaus and his efforts to procure funding for the Vienna Free Hospital.'

'A project you are part of. Both you and he helped to establish the infirmary, where those without the means can be treated without having to pay. A noble cause.' She slapped my shoulder. 'Therefore, smile and enjoy yourself.'

'Isn't it enough I am here?'

Miriam snorted and shook her head. 'No, it is not. We are already two hours late. I can't imagine what wonders I have missed because of your dawdling. So, I command you to have fun.' She grinned and righted the turquoise hat with the peacock feathers that had slipped from her piled-up auburn curls during our walk along Türkenstrasse to this grand baroque style building.

'I will try, for you. But don't leave me alone. You know how nervous I get around people I don't know.'

Miriam patted my hand. 'You are getting better at fitting in. You work as a journalist and police photographer, you meet all sorts of people.'

I shifted position and loosened my bow tie. 'That is different. Clients aren't...'

My aunt raised her eyebrows and fixed my undone neck adornment. 'People? Oh Ketzele, do not pout and sigh. Come, let us go in. I hear a band play a cheerful tune.' Miriam clapped and, without waiting for me to follow, walked past the two gendarmes who slapped their sabres and nodded when she approached.

I almost turned around and went home but knew if I did, I would incur the wrath not only of my aunt but my best friend too. With a shrug and a gulp, I headed towards the brightly lit room and paused at the entrance. The police officers standing guard saluted me. I

responded by tipping my hat.

A vulgar show of wealth greeted me when I looked in at the grand ballroom of the university. The walls, laden with garlands of flowers that should not be in bloom at this time of year, could not dispel the sickly smell of expensive perfume and greasy hair pomade. I wondered how many hours it took to twist and turn the rich women's hair into intricate knots that sat upon their wobbling heads like tortured snakes.

The high-pitched shrieks and booming guffaws of stiff-collared men punched me in the chest like a rock thrown by an angry monkey. I took a long breath. Smoking chandeliers hanging low from the ceiling gently swayed above the hectic throng of guests, who tottered excitedly from food-laden tables to seated prestidigitators. The conjurers dealt cards and summoned coins from behind the ears of wide-eyed ladies, who wafted their faces with ornate lace fans. The scene reminded me of Bruegel the Elder's painting 'The Fight Between Carnival and Lent.' A mass of revellers clawing to see the next garish trick.

I fingered my fob watch that doubled as a spy camera and lifted it from my waistcoat pocket. Pretending to check the time, I clicked the shutter, in the shape of the winder, and caught forever the show of wealth and pomp.

A tap on my shoulder and a familiar voice, 'Herr Katz, isn't it?'

I turned and looked into the dark eyes of my colleague on the Deutsches Volksblatt newspaper. 'Ah, Otto, good to see you again.'

The big man with straight black hair and a thin moustache looked me up and down, then smirked. 'Don't you look nice? All dressed up for this ridiculous charity ball.'

I reddened. 'It is for a good cause despite the display of gaudiness and excess.'

Otto Krüger laughed. 'I've seen far more lavishness than this. Some of the parties I've attended make this little function look like a garden fete.' He took a swig of champagne, burped, and continued, 'Some fools have paid over one thousand Kronen to come along. I expect all this sumptuous food, fine wine, and the magic show drew them in. The paper wants to run a front page on the generosity of the good folk of Vienna.' Otto snickered, drained his glass, took another from a passing waiter carrying a tray full of drinks, and emptied it in one swig. 'Do you see the fat man leering at the pretty woman in the green dress? He was honking like a goose a few minutes earlier. Put under by

Marcus the Mesmeriser. He raised the glass. 'The truth is, I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for the continuous flow of booze.' Otto smacked his lips and rubbed his ample belly. 'Well, I'm off to sample some of the delicacies. Can I get a quote before I go?'

My heart raced. I did not want to be mentioned in the newspaper. 'From me? Why?'

'Because you and that pathologist mate of yours are the angels of the working classes. Good title, eh?'

I shook my head. 'I am not eloquent. I take photographs remember. Talk to Herr Rosenbloom. He is the force behind all of this.'

Krüger wrinkled his nose. 'Ah, thought I could get away without chatting to that long-winded toff. Sure you won't give me an interview?'

'No, I assure you Klaus will give you a vivid account of our work.'

With a belch smelling of raw fish and pure alcohol, Otto Krüger walked unsteadily through the partygoers, not caring who he knocked into on his way to find my friend.

Grateful to be free of his bullishness, I diverted my attention to the many performers. Some did tricks, some acrobatics, and some, like Otto mentioned, hypnotised people to carry out strange movements, much to the amusements of the onlookers.

'Will you leave your hat, Sir?' A young woman dressed in black with white sleeve protectors held out her hand. I noticed she had a thick welt running down her arm to the tip of her index finger. She saw my gaze, quickly pulled down her sleeve, and stared at me. 'Nasty scars you have. Who did that to you?'

I touched my pock-marked face. 'No one. Scarlet fever as a child.'

'Must have been a bad case. Did your voice in too. I recognise the huskiness, heard it before.' She narrowed her eyes. 'Nah, some of those healed wounds don't look so old.' I broke her intense gaze by staring at the floor. 'None of my business, is it? Still, you look troubled, if I may say so? As though you are afraid, or am I wrong?'

My face went red, then white. I must have stood out as if dressed for prayer, wearing a tallit across my shoulders and tefillin on my forehead and arm. I quickly gave her my hat, bowing when she handed me a green piece of paper with the number two hundred and sixty-eight printed in black ink. She curtseyed and left me to search for Klaus among the excited guests.

A raucous belly laugh, followed by a heartfelt apology, alerted me to his location. I swiftly walked to where he stood, surrounded by

women adorned in glittering necklaces, earrings, and fur stoles. I tapped him on the shoulder. He turned to me with a grin so large I thought his mouth would split. Klaus bowed to the ladies, and with arms open wide, pulled me to his breast.

‘Leo, you came, you came. Quite a turnout, eh? We should receive a cornucopia of pledges from these rich partygoers. I think I have secured quite a sum from those women bursting out of their frocks. Someone should tell them that with age comes a responsibility to dress accordingly. You’d think they were debutants instead of grandmothers. Still, I shmooze, they cough up.’

‘Did you speak with Otto Krüger?’

‘I did, briefly. He wrote something down, then followed the drinks waiter. I do hope we won’t have to scrape him off the floor at the end of the night.’ He looked over my shoulder. ‘Is Miriam with you?’

‘She was, but when I hesitated by the door, she saw the men performing their tricks and ran off like a child in a toy store.’

Klaus laughed. ‘I expect she is wooing these gentlemen into revealing their most coveted secrets. Shall we flush her out?’ I nodded and followed my friend through the high-spirited people to where a large crowd, including Miriam, gathered around a seated man.

Clean-shaven, with a thick mass of black hair and piercing blue eyes, he held onto a wooden puppet dressed like a soldier complete with a handlebar moustache and pointed tin helmet. He opened his lips slightly, and the puppet spoke through a hinged jaw, ‘I see a lot of influential people here tonight. I hope I won’t be needed if a brawl occurs.’ The puppet waved his arms around, or should I say, the puppeteer moved the marionette’s jointed limbs. ‘I know how you lot get when you’ve had a few drinks.’

The crowd howled with laughter. The ventriloquist looked up and stared at Klaus. ‘I only drink when there’s a moon in the sky.’ Klaus put his hands to his mouth, but his voice boomed out from between his tightly shut lips, ‘Or when the sun sets or rises. Other than that, I never touch a drop.’

My friend blushed and shook his head before saying, ‘Very clever, my dear fellow. You have my voice exactly. Give him a round of applause. Such talent.’ Klaus bent towards the ventriloquist and whispered, ‘Pick on someone else, eh?’

The man nodded, and a shrill woman’s voice rose above the clapping. ‘Really, such a show of decadence in these troubled times is appalling.’ A thick-set man with a bushy beard opened his mouth wide

and looked around the room as if he was being hunted by a wolf. 'I am quite distraught at the show of needless luxury. I may faint, I really may.' The man's shoulders shook at the female voice coming from his lips. He wagged his finger and guffawed.

The ventriloquist stood and bowed. 'Thank you, dear friends. Be sure to watch tonight's thrilling finale, where I attempt to catch not one, not two, not three, but six bullets in my hand. A trick only attempted by the famous Adelaide Herrmann. Remember me, The Astounding Solomonar.'

The enraptured audience gasped and clapped louder. Klaus waved to Miriam. She, all smiles, hurried over to us and pressed her gloved hands to her bosom. 'That performer is quite an entertainer, is he not? He did some wonderful card tricks, then impersonated Klaus perfectly. I look forward to his finale. You too?' I nodded. Miriam frowned, then looked at Klaus.

He cleared his throat and slapped his thigh. 'Yes, the devil, he did sound like me. Splendid, eh Leo?' When I did not respond verbally, Klaus groaned. 'Cheer up, little friend, you'll put people off.'

'I am sorry. I promise I will endeavour to enjoy myself.'

'Good. Have some punch. I've had three, I think. It is very pleasant.' Miriam hiccuped and giggled.

'Come, my red-haired beauty. Let us go and get a glass for your nephew.' Klaus put his arm out, and Miriam took his elbow. 'Perhaps you should have some water?'

'Yes, I think I should. I'm feeling rather wobbly.'

They headed towards a table laden with cakes and large metal bowls filled with colourful liquid. I sighed and hung my head. 'You don't seem to be having fun.' I looked up at the bright-eyed face of the ventriloquist. 'Perhaps I can fix that.'

'No. I am not overly keen on trickery.' A lie. I was myself a trickster. This disguise, my false persona, was nothing more than an illusion. I frowned, not wanting to make eye contact with the perky entertainer.

'Ah, this will never do.' He pulled out a deck of cards and splayed them out in front of me. 'Pick a card. I will not look.' He turned his head away, and I chose one from the middle. 'Now put it back.' I did. 'Shuffle the pack.' I gave the cards a long shuffle and handed them to him. He closed his eyes, hovered his right hand over the deck, then fanned them out. To my surprise, a card moved upwards. 'Take it. I believe it is yours.' I plucked it from the pack and stared at the ace of hearts. 'Is it yours?'

'It is. How splendid.' I forgot my ill-humor and said, 'Another! Will you show me more magic?'

'I'm afraid I cannot, as I'm about to perform a most extraordinary act. Please excuse me. I must prepare.' With a flourish of his hand, the magician bowed.

'Hey Leo, here is your punch.' I turned. Klaus beckoned me and The Astounding Solomonar to where he stood with Miriam. 'Here, my fine fellow, drink up.'

Miriam, sipping a glass of water, wrinkled her nose. 'I'd rather be drinking that than this.'

'I think you have imbibed too much already. Sober up a bit, then later you can have champagne.'

Miriam grinned. 'I like you Klaus.'

'So it would seem, aunty.'

Klaus scratched his chin and stared at me and The Astounding Solomonar. 'I see you have made a friend already? Good for you, Leo. Yes. Excellent.'

'Ah, Rosenbloom, is this Herr Katz?'

'It is.'

'Klaus told me about you.' He held out his hand, and I took it. 'Stefan Hoffman. Delighted to make your acquaintance. Now, I must get ready for my performance.'

'Splendid. Come, Miriam, we shall escort Leo and witness some wondrous magic.' He bowed to The Astounding Solomonar. 'Lead on.'

The magician walked ahead and stopped by a raised stage area in the middle of the room, where several entertainers performed magic tricks and contortionist movements. Miriam and I walked around the square platform. 'Such wonderful acts of illusion and suppleness, don't you think?' I nodded. Miriam let out a high yelp and pointed to a slender young man juggling eight sabres at once. 'Good thing there is at least one doctor here tonight in case he injures himself.'

We turned our attention to a sword swallower. Miriam looked away, but I moved closer, fascinated how the man, dressed in a clown's ruffled collared outfit, could widen his oesophagus so much as to allow the large blade to pass down without gagging.

'It's not a trick, you know.' Klaus lifted Miriam's chin and turned her to face the performer. 'Ah, now he is ramming a curved sabre down his throat. That takes talent and a lot of practice.' Miriam shuddered. 'Don't be put off my squeamish one. These entertainers are fascinating. I read a study from 1868 penned by Doctor Keller from

Freiburg, who examined the throat of a sword swallower using a laryngeal mirror. He was amazed at how the man could relax his upper oesophageal sphincter muscle to such an extent as to ram objects down it without retching. Then there was Doctor Adolph Kusmaul. He actually performed an oesophagoscopy using a straight tube, mirrors, and a gas lamp. Results weren't good. Nevertheless, what an achievement.'

Miriam grimaced. 'I came here for entertainment, not a medical lecture. Kindly cease speaking to me about such unpleasant matters. Oh, now he is swallowing a snake. Horrible.' She put her hands over her eyes and turned away. Klaus pouted and shrugged his shoulders.

'I found your speech very enlightening, Klaus.'

'Thank you. It is amazing what the human body can achieve when put to the test.'

My aunt shook her head. 'Well, my body, or rather eyes, have been tested enough for one night. Are there any less gruesome acts to watch?'

With a low bow, The Astounding Solomonar stood straight and announced, 'Indeed there are. In fact, right now. Please do not leave yet, for there are wonders to be witnessed that do not involve distortion of vital organs. Yes, I admire these men for their skill, but it is not magic. Fraü, allow me to thrill you without repulsing you, yes?'

'Please do. Really Klaus, did you have to hire such people?'

Klaus widened his eyes. 'I cater for all. Look at those fat fools shrieking and squirming every time the knife goes deeper. Yet they do not look away.' He leaned into my aunt and whispered, 'Solomonar is also a doctor. A reputable one, so don't be so quick to judge.' He stood straight. 'Besides, I and Leo think these acts are fascinating. Back me up, little friend.'

'What? Oh, yes indeed. It is amazing, in its own way. There, the entertainers have finished and are leaving.'

'My cue. I must go and prepare.' The Astounding Solomonar bowed again and walked briskly towards the stage.

A plump woman wearing a red taffeta dress with an ostrich feathered wide-brimmed hat bumped into my aunt. Miriam stumbled forward into the sweaty hands of a grey-haired man with livered cheeks, moist handlebar moustache, and a belly so round he could have been with child. He sniggered, yanked Miriam to his flabby chest, and said, 'Well, my clumsy wife has her uses after all. See what she has pushed into my bosom.' My aunt struggled to free herself, but he

clung on. 'Quite a beauty even though she's on the ripe side. I'll take this ageing totty over my stinky wife, for certain. Don't look so horrified, my sweet one. Grete doesn't mind my little transgressions. Do you, my stodgy dumpling?'

I held Klaus back and pulled my aunt away from the horrible man. He yanked me close. I gagged at the stench of stale wine he breathed into my face and could almost taste the pungent cheese he'd eaten earlier. He held me at arm's length. 'What have we here? A small man with a big attitude. Ugly-looking fellow, too. See those hideous scars?' Several people surrounded us, snickering and pointing at me as if I were an animal in a zoo. 'Should be in a freak show, not hobnobbing with decent folk.'

The man's wife put her hand on his, waved a lace handkerchief in front of her mouth, and blinked rapidly. 'There, there, my dear Karl, leave the poor boy alone now. Let us enjoy the show, yes?'

He brushed her fingers away with a sneer. 'Leave me be you, fat old witch.'

Klaus shook his head and confronted the drunk. 'Really, Karl, this will not do. Release my friend. I am asking you nicely.' Klaus loomed over the slobbering male, who grudgingly let me go. 'Kindly be polite and respect your wife. This is a happy event to raise money for the Free Hospital, not a place to showcase your marital disharmony.'

Karl snarled and spat. He wiped his mouth and clicked his fingers. Like a dog being summoned, Grete ran to him. He grabbed her wrist so hard she cried out. Klaus jostled the couple away, prying the husband's fingers from his wife's reddened skin. He turned to the onlookers, 'There are more entertaining things to see, my friends. Please go to the stage and wait for the next performance.'

A waitress with the same uniform as the coat attendant brushed past me. She stopped and held out a metal tray with several glasses on. She wore her hair in a strange fashion. Instead of it being bundled up in a bun, loose curls flowed down her left cheek and across her shoulder. Through the auburn tresses, I saw a raw-looking wound. She pulled her locks over her chest and said, 'Champagne?' I shook my head. She smiled, and glanced over my shoulder at Klaus and the nasty male. She looked away but remained standing close to my aunt and me.

Miriam touched my hand. 'Did that dreadful man hurt you?'

'No, not at all. Are you unharmed after being mauled?'

My aunt straightened her hat that had slipped during her tussle with Karl and snorted. 'It would take more than being groped by a

filthy philanderer to upset me.'

'You called him a philanderer. Do you know him?'

Miriam took a deep breath. 'Not personally, but by reputation. He is Herr Scholz.' On hearing his name, the waitress coughed. 'A calligrapher by trade. He married Grete, his employer's daughter. When she inherited her father's money some ten years ago, he retired, despite being only forty-four, and has spent his worthless life spending her money on gambling and loose women. His four daughters have disowned him. Good thing they are all married and living elsewhere, otherwise their lives would be miserable. He has a terrible reputation. Poor Grete is a laughing stock. I don't know why she puts up with him.'

The waitress tutted. 'Huh! Men and their ways.'

I raised my eyebrows. 'I'm sorry?'

The waitress sniffed. 'No offence, you look nice. I mean, you're talking to your lady friend as if she were an equal, but most of the males in this room are like Scholz. Treat us like dirt, or worse. They need to be taught a lesson.'

I was about to engage the young woman in a deep conversation about the behaviour of men and their attitudes toward women when a crash of symbols and a loud trumpet sounded. I jumped, and Miriam laughed. Klaus came towards us, rubbing his hands. 'I've sat Scholz down with a glass of water and given him strict instructions to behave. I hope he does. Ah, look, the show is about to begin. How exciting! It's been twenty years since I've seen a good magic trick.'

The waitress snickered. 'Oh, this is an excellent act.'

'You have seen it?'

She shook her head. 'Not exactly, but I know what to expect.' Before I could quiz her further, the waitress winked and walked away.

'What did she mean?'

'I have no idea, Klaus. But she isn't the only menial worker to say and behave strangely. The coat attendant was most curious about my scars. Not at all the behaviour of a servant. Who hired the help?'

'Bridget, she's the magician's assistant. She waited tables before Stefan employed her. I think they were amorously connected at one time. Now she is engaged to Stefan's fellow conjuror Walter Huber, otherwise known as 'The Great Splendini.'

'Why must they have such silly names?'

A waft of alcohol swept over us, and a familiar voice boomed out, 'Because, dear lady, they have a false sense of their own importance.'

Allow me to introduce myself since Leo here won't. Otto Krüger.'

'Leo, who is this man?'

'My colleague from the newspaper.' I leaned in close to my aunt's ear and whispered, 'I hardly know him. This is the first time he's spoken to me.'

Miriam smiled and shook his hand. He kissed hers. 'And you are?'

Klaus swiped Otto's hand away. 'She is Leo's aunt and my special guest.'

Otto held his hands up. 'I understand, Doctor Rosenbloom. Shall we join the other guests for the finale?'

Klaus nodded, and we gathered at the foot of the stage. Grete and her husband waddled over and stood behind us. She tried to link him, but he punched her in the forearm. Grete winced but did not utter a sound. Otto bent his head and said in a low voice, 'Scholz is a prize ass. Ho, the things I could tell you about him.'

My aunt widened her eyes. 'Really? Do tell.'

Otto licked his lips. 'Rumour has it, I say rumour, but it's a fact. I know the girl. Anyway, it turns out Karl has been on a spree. Over the last six months, he's been living it up and going to all sorts of parties and gatherings. He's been luring young women with promises of money and good connections. Once he's got them, well, you know, they have to do things in return.' He tapped the side of his nose. 'Then he casts them aside for another one. But not before he's given them a little keepsake.'

'Such as?'

'Such as dear lady, a scar to remember him by.'

The wounds on the waitress and the coat attendant sprang to mind. 'He is despicable indeed.'

'He is, little friend. I treated a poor young thing a few months ago. I had to stitch up a razor cut from the side of her ear down to her shoulder. It was deep. When I asked her what happened, she said Scholz did it to her after she refused to comply with his sordid wishes.'

Miriam furrowed her brow. 'And to think such a beast is standing right behind us.'

A young woman dressed in little more than a bodice and boots, with feathers attached to her head, walked onto the stage. Her right arm was bandaged from the wrist to the elbow. She put her hand on her hips, fluttered her long eyelashes, and said, 'Gather round, my friends. Everyone, here, here!' Her voice blasted around the hall like an owl screeching at night. 'Come, that's right.'

## The Deadly Trick

As if in a trance, the guests approached from all corners of the room and stood looking up at the stage. They jumped at a loud clashing of cymbals. Klaus stood tall. 'Ah, at last. The evening's entertainment is about to end with a bang. Quite literally.'

A man, head bowed, wearing a black shroud, entered the stage, beating a drum slowly. He stood to the side and lifted his head. We gasped at his face painted like a skull. He opened his mouth and bellowed, 'Behold a trick that could kill. Tonight, for the first time, a feat of prestidigitation never before seen in Vienna. A trick so deadly no one has dared to try it. It will be executed, pardon the pun, right here this very evening.' He stopped pounding the drum and stared all hollow-eyed at the eager crowd below him. 'I insist everyone gather at the front of the stage. Remember, this is a dangerous stunt, and we do not want anyone getting injured. Huddle closer. I beg silence and stillness. All hush now for The Astounding Solomonar.'

Stefan Hoffman, sporting a red waistcoat and shirt sleeves rolled up to his elbows, walked boldly onto the stage. One of the conjurers I'd seen when I entered followed him and stood slightly behind. The short man with red hair and a full beard cradled a large revolver in both his hands. The Astounding Solomonar closed his eyes, flared his nostrils, then stared at the audience, who I swear had stopped breathing so quiet the room became in his mesmerising presence. 'Ladies and gentlemen, tonight I will do the impossible. I will catch six bullets in my hand without sustaining any injury. No, do not gasp. I am confident I will succeed. A fellow magician, The Great Splendini, will shoot me, so to speak. To ensure there is no foul play, the bullets have been marked.'

Hot breath tickled the back of my neck, then the slurred voice of Scholz, 'How do we know they are marked. I don't have my glasses with me, and even if I did, I can't see that far. Fakery.'

Stefan smiled and peered into the crowd. 'I take your point, Sir. I need a witness. One of our guests, perhaps?'

Klaus nudged me forward with the words, 'Here, Leo would be delighted. Up you go.'

'What? No, no, I cannot.'

Miriam clapped. 'But you must, little ketzele. It will be thrilling.'

I shook my head and stepped back. Klaus leaned towards me. 'Don't be shy, little friend. I assure you, no one will pay attention to you. Not when there is such an attractive woman walking up and down the stage, eh? So go, go.' He pushed me forward. 'Here he is.'

The death-head drummer escorted me up onto the stage. My legs trembled, and my stomach churned. The Astounding Solomonar bowed. 'Thank you, my good sir. Friends, please pay attention to Leo Katz.' The audience applauded. I blushed. Solomonar put his hand on my shoulder. 'Would you be so kind as to inspect the bullets my colleague will load into his gun?' The Great Splendini held the weapon high for a few moments, then lowered his arm. 'Describe what you see etched onto them.' The Astounding Solomonar dug his hand into his right trouser pocket, pulled out six bullets, and folded his fingers around them. 'Hold out your hand, young sir. Thank you.' He dropped the rounds into my palms. 'What do you see?'

I inspected each one. 'I see on every bullet a small 'V' shape carved into the tip.'

'You are sure?'

'Absolutely. It is quite defined.'

The Astounding Solomonar addressed the audience. 'Do you believe Herr Katz?'

A mumbling swept around the room, then Scholz shouted, 'Rubbish. Lies and deception. I don't believe the bullets are real.'

'But they are, Sir, they are. Not sure? Won't take my word or this honourable man's for it? Then maybe you will trust someone else? Herr Katz, if you please, go to the foot of the stage and show these sceptics what you have in your hand.'

I stepped cautiously to the edge of the platform, and held out the ammunition for all to see. Solomonar called out, 'Here, someone else witness what he holds. I do not lie.'

To my amazement, Grete Scholz, all bosom and jewels and somewhat tipsy, judging by the wobble in her stride, stepped forward. She stood on tiptoe, steadied herself by leaning on the edge of the stage, picked up one bullet from my hand, and scrutinised it for several seconds. She put it back and did the same with the other five, then shouted in a high voice, 'He is telling the truth. They are marked exactly as he said.'

The audience gasped then broke into a spontaneous applause. Karl Scholz elbowed his way to the front, seized his wife by the arm and dragged her away. 'Stupid woman. Making a spectacle of yourself. Drunken old hag. Come here, stand with me and sober up.' She twisted her neck and tried to free herself, but he was too strong. She hung her head when Herr Scholz led her to the side of the stage. The crowd jeered and slow clapped.

## The Deadly Trick

Bridget waited for the crowd to settle, then turned to me. 'Thank you once again. You have been most accommodating. May I have the rounds?' I coughed and handed over the ammunition. 'Please, go and join your friends. The show is about to begin.' She took my hand and led me to the top step. I bowed, and joined Klaus and my aunt.

Bridget walked seductively over to Stefan. She swayed her hips, glanced over her shoulder at the crowd, and blew them a kiss. She continued to pout and wiggle as she brushed past Stefan. Whilst everyone else soaked up Bridget's coquettish performance, I turned my attention to the rather furtive actions of Stefan and Bridget as they passed each other, and noticed they touched hands briefly. He put his right hand inside his trouser pocket, pulled it out, and pressed his palm against hers, much the same as they did but a short time earlier.

The Great Splendini, or rather, Walter, twirled the revolver around his finger several times. Then he opened the barrel and showed the crowd it was empty. The Astounding Solomonar waved his hands in the air. 'Now, ladies and gentleman, pay attention. We are about to begin.' He turned to Walter. 'The Great Splendini, would you load the gun? Watch carefully folks to make sure there is no sleight of hand. Slowly Splendini, make sure everyone sees there is no trickery involved.'

The Great Splendini clicked his fingers, and Bridget walked towards him. She held up each bullet before giving them to him. He placed each round into the revolver's cylinder. When Bridget held up the last bullet, she sneezed and dropped it. 'Oops, sorry.' She grinned, bent down, and picked it up. She blew on the round, and handed it to Splendini, who put it carefully in the last chamber before snapping it shut. Bridget curtsied and stood behind Splendini.

The Astounding Solomonar walked to the back of the stage and stood straight. He took a deep breath, squared his shoulders, then clenched and unclenched his hands. The Great Splendini lifted the gun. The drummer beat a low rhythm and stopped.

A hush filled the room. My heart thumped against my ribcage. Miriam's hand clasped mine. The Great Splendini fired once. A gasp from the crowd as The Astounding Solomonar snatched the air, grimaced, and fell backward as if he'd been kicked in the stomach. He rose quickly, shook his hand, and held up a bullet. A roar erupted from the crowd. He silenced them with a, 'I need absolute quiet to concentrate.' Then bellowed, 'Again!' The Great Splendini shot four times more. The Astounding Solomonar caught each round falling and

standing, puffing out his cheeks as though in pain but always smiling. The audience erupted in cheers. The Astounding Solomonar paused, blew onto his fingers, and said, 'They're hot, I can tell you.'

'I don't believe any of it. My dear Karl, do you?' Fraü Scholz plucked her husband's hand from around her wrist, and pointed at Solomonar. 'Such a thing is impossible. No one could withstand being shot. Besides, those magicians are up on a platform far away from us. Who knows what goes on when we cannot see clearly. Don't you agree, Karl?'

'I do, for once. My wife is right. Rubbish! Fake. All trickery, like I said before.' We all turned to see Karl Scholz stumble forward. 'I tell you, this jester is hoodwinking us all.'

Cries of 'Quiet,' and 'Go home, you're drunk,' surrounded the inebriated man.

'Do something, Karl. Get up there. See if these charlatans are deceiving us.'

More cries and boos were directed towards Herr Scholz. He growled at the crowd, shook his fist at them, waddled onto the stage, and pushed the Great Splendini to one side. The magician lost his footing, fell, and dropped the gun. It bounced onto the floor, and the crowd stepped back in alarm. Bridget, all smiles, bent down and picked it up. 'That was close, eh?' She pointed it at the audience, who backed further away. She giggled, turned, and stepped onto the stage where Solomonar squatted, helping his colleague to rise.

'Charlatans the lot of you.' Scholz waved his arms in the air. Solomonar approached the tottering man.

'Sir, we are not fakers. We are professionals trying to work. So if you would be so good as to leave the stage, I can continue.'

Scholz folded his arms over his ample belly and said, 'No. Prove to me what you are doing isn't just some cheap trick.'

Solomonar brushed back his thick hair and took a deep breath. 'I implore you, Sir, for your own safety, please go to your wife and watch from a safe distance.'

Karl Scholz brushed the magician's hand away from his elbow. 'No. She wants me to sound you out, and I will. Besides, I paid to be here and demand to get my monies worth.' He folded his arms and stuck out his chin.

Solomonar shrugged and looked at his assistants. Bridget nodded and said, 'Very well, Sir. If you stand by The Great Splendini, then you will observe the act up close and see there is no trickery involved. Will

that do?’

Scholz ogled Bridget, let out a low guffaw, and put his arms around her waist. She stiffened, but did not pull away. ‘Yes, I suppose so. But I’ll be watching very closely.’

Solomonar held his head high. ‘So be it. But be aware you do so at your own risk.’

‘What risk? This is all bunkum.’ He pulled Bridget closer and rested his head on her chest.

She pushed him away with the words, ‘You will see better if you stand by Splendini.’ Scholz grumbled and tottered towards Walter. Bridget joined him and stood to the left of the hiccupping male.

Solomonar peered into the crowd. ‘Now for the last bullet. But to make it more difficult, I will catch it blindfolded.’ Even I let out a gasp of wonder at his words. Miriam clutched my arm as Solomonar took a dark cloth from his coat pocket, placed it across his eyes, and tied it tightly.

‘Ah, now that could be a fix.’ A young man with a pointed beard and moustache waxed into a curl at each end clambered onto the stage. ‘I am a student of law and, like the old gent over there, am not convinced of this so-called feat. Now, this mask,’ he pointed at Stefan’s eye covering. ‘Could be of a material that allows the wearer to see through it.’ He addressed the crowd as if in a court of law. Hands clasping the lapels of his jacket, he walked up and down the front of the stage area. ‘I’ve witnessed such a fraudulent act before, so I know what I am talking about. Kindly remove your veil.’ With a shrug, Stefan untied his mask. ‘Thank you. Now...’

Someone shouted, ‘Get off. I want to see the show.’

The trainee lawyer lifted his chin in defiance. ‘So you shall, but not before I blindfold the magician myself with my thick scarf.’ He pulled a coarsely woven cravat from his trouser pockets and held it up. ‘May I?’

‘If it pleases you and allows me to continue with my show, yes.’

The annoying male stepped behind Stefan and tied his scarf tight around the magician’s eyes. He waved his hands in front of Stefan, and when satisfied he could not see, said, ‘Yes, better. You may continue the show.’

Bridget called to him, ‘Sir, please leave the stage. This is a very dangerous act. You may be hurt.’

‘I shall stay, for I am convinced, like the elderly man, that this is merely a trick. I shall come to no harm.’

'Sir, please.' He shook his head.

The crowd jeered and called out, 'Get on with it! Come on!'

Stefan held up his hands. 'Silence! If the young gentleman will stand by Splendini, then we will commence.' With a huff and a sneer, the young man stood to the right of Karl Scholz, pushing Walter slightly away. 'Is he clear?'

'He is.'

'Thank you, Bridget. Then let us begin.'

Klaus ran his fingers around his stiff collar. 'Now, this is what I call entertainment. I do hope Stefan pulls it off successfully.'

A deathly hush filled the hall, and despite my disbelief in all things magic, I became absorbed in the thrill of the spectacle about to occur. I clasped Miriam's hand tight. The Astounding Solomonar raised his chin. 'I must insist on absolute quiet for this.'

Silence engulfed us. Even Scholz stood stiffly and clamped his lips shut. Bridget turned to the expectant crowd and said, 'Focus your attention on the Great Splendini. Watch him and only him as he puts the life of his friend and fellow magician in his hopefully steady hands.' She winked, put her finger to her lips, and turned back to the drama unfolding before us. 'If you are ready, Solomonar?'

'I am.'

'I will count to three so you can prepare yourself.'

Bridget took a deep breath, then shouted out loud and clear, 'After three.' All eyes fixed on Walter as he raised the pistol and aimed it at Stefan. 'One, two, now Splendini, fire!' I took out my spy camera and clicked. As the magician pulled the trigger, I thought I saw Bridget nudge Scholz. Karl lurched forward and tripped over the outstretched leg of the trainee lawyer. I clicked again, blinked, and watched Scholz jump in front of the loaded gun, arch his back, then fall forward.

Stefan also fell, then quickly stood. He fumbled in his trouser pocket, dragged off his mask, and stared at his empty hand. Grete Scholz screamed and ran to the stage. Bridget bit her knuckles and stood over the prone man. Splendini stiffened. Grete Scholz staggered towards her husband and fell across his motionless body. She rose, turned to the crowd, and with blood staining her bodice, wailed, 'He is dead. Shot in the back.'

Bridget shrieked. The Astounding Solomonar went as pale as a path of snow. The Great Splendini stared open-mouthed at his smoking gun. He dropped it and sank to the floor. Grete Scholz whimpered like an injured puppy before falling to her knees at the side of her husband.

Women in the audience shrieked. Men yelled and puffed out their chests. I tugged on Klaus's sleeve, he bent his head, and I whispered, 'You must go to the man he may yet live.'

'Indeed. Are you both well? Not traumatised by the incident?'

Miriam wiped her brow and nodded. 'I am strangely unaffected. I feel nothing more than pity for that poor woman before us.'

Klaus smiled. 'You have a heart as big as all of Germany.'

A smell of sour meat and stale alcohol wafted across our faces. Otto Krüger leaned over our shoulders, a glass of champagne in his left hand. With his right, he snapped his fingers at the audience, who backed away from the stage as though it were on fire. 'Maybe you do, dear lady. They don't. They give to charity to ease their conscience, but when faced with trouble, they retreat like scavenging rats. See? Not one of them is going to the aid of the sobbing woman.' He hiccupped and downed his drink in one gulp.

I brushed his hands away from Miriam's and my shoulders. 'Herr Krüger, I am not sure this is the time to debate about wealth and poverty.'

'You are correct.' He chuckled and rubbed his hands together, then took out a notebook from his waistcoat pocket. 'It is the time to get a real front-page story, eh? Ho! What a piece this will be. I need to sober up.' He slapped his face, shook his head, and with a shrug, headed towards the stage. Klaus tugged his sleeve.

'Sir, I must ask you to wait until I have assessed the situation. Would you be so kind as to fetch one of those gendarmes guarding the door?'

Otto narrowed his eyes. 'I'm not your servant.'

'No, but an officer of the law must be in attendance, don't you agree?'

'Yes, I do. All right. I'll find someone. But I get the story first.'

'Naturally. I can count on you?' Otto nodded, and grumbling, departed.

Klaus raised his eyebrows. 'Shall we attend to Herr Scholz and his wife?' He led the way, and we followed, Miriam sighing as we walked. 'Leo and I will look to the injured man. Miriam, would you see to his wife?'

'Of course.' My aunt went to Grete Sholz and gently pulled her up and away from the stricken man. She led her to a seat by a table with huge red and yellow ribbons stuck to the edges. Both women sat. Miriam held Grete Sholz's hand as she shuddered and moaned.

Klaus and I went to the static body of Herr Scholz. The Astounding

Solomonar stood stiff, with Bridget hanging from his arm like the puppet he used for his ventriloquist act. The Great Splendini sat rocking, cradling the gun as if it were a newborn. The young lawyer fled the stage to the waitress and the ticket girl. They moved away from the other guests. I thought it odd he would go to them and, even stranger, that he'd strike up a conversation.

After they spoke, behind their hands, the waitress nodded, picked up a tray and loaded it with drinks, then handed them out to the distraught men and women. The guests surrounded the stage, drinking and talking in low voices. Their nervous chatter sounded as though a hive of wasps had made their nest in the room.

'Hey, Leo over here.' I went to where Klaus squatted by Scholz. My friend put his fingers against his neck. 'I feel no pulse. Leo, would you help me turn him over?' I knelt by Scholz's right side, then placed my hands under his ribcage. Klaus put his under Scholz's legs. 'After three, roll him over. One, two, three.' We pushed, and rolled Scholz onto his back. Klaus put his cheek to the man's mouth. 'Dead.' He stood and narrowed his eyes. 'It would seem The Great Splendini accidentally shot the man. A tragic accident. At least he won't have to go too far to the morgue.'

'I wonder what possessed him to leap in front of a loaded gun?'

The Great Splendini stood. He dropped the revolver and approached us. His legs shook, and he gulped back tears as he spoke, 'It was exactly that, an accident. I aimed, then this fool threw himself in front of me. There was nothing I could do, nothing. But he shouldn't be dead. You see, the bullets are...'

The Astounding Solomonar stopped Splendini with a loud, 'Enough! Don't say another word. People are listening.'

Solomonar disengaged himself from Bridget's grip and walked forward. He spoke in a low whisper, 'Loathe as I am to say this, I must, under the circumstances. We magicians have a confidentiality agreement. We cannot disclose how we perform our stunts. But a man is dead because of my show.' Stefan closed his eyes and rubbed them before opening them again and continuing, 'It makes no sense.' He beckoned us closer. 'The bullets are blanks and made of hard wax. They cannot possibly do any harm as they melt on firing. The case is metal and contains a little gunpowder to make the bang sound, but not enough to project it very far. Bridget palmed the bullets you verified as real to me. I gave the fake ones to her during the swap. I put the real ammunition into my pocket. When the gun is fired, I pretend to catch

them. But I do not. I merely pluck the bullet from my pocket.'

'I thought I saw you two engage in hand movements of a most contrived manner.'

Stefan frowned. 'Really? Damn. I must practice the move to make it less obvious.'

Klaus scratched the back of his neck. 'Is that all you care about?'

'What? No, it's just, well, I take my performances very seriously and...'

'If you used blanks, how did a live one get loaded?'

Stefan wiped his sweaty brow. 'I cannot answer that. The thing is, after the last shot, there was no bullet in my pocket like there should have been. Ah, no, what if I failed to take one of the real ones? This is a terrible business, terrible.' He turned to where Bridget stood trembling, put his hand over his eyes, and groaned.

Klaus raised his eyebrows. 'I'm finding it difficult to understand why you want to be a professional magician when you treat patients with disorders of the mind?'

Stefan let out a long breath. 'Yes, I am a neurologist. However, I have always been fascinated with illusions and practiced magic since a boy. A man can be more than one thing in his lifetime, Klaus.'

That I knew only too well.

My friend shrugged. 'Indeed.'

Stefan stared at the dead body. 'It was an accident. What else could it be?'

Klaus clenched his jaw and pulled me to one side. 'Despite what Stefan says about his prowess in trickery, he is a man of medicine first and a magician second. Leading me to believe he may have made a mistake. Therefore, the incident is not a premeditated crime, merely dreadful bad luck.' I sighed and nodded. I could not correct him. Klaus chewed his bottom lip and squared his shoulders. 'I can't say performing a post-mortem will shed any light on the matter.'

The low murmurings from the guests turned into yells as two police officers pushed through the crowd and marched up onto the stage. They stood by the body, hands behind their backs. A loud male voice blasted through the angry yells. 'Remain where you are, please. Let me through.' The crowd parted, and a slim man wearing a tailcoat and clumsily tied bow tie walked towards us. He spoke to the gendarmes, 'Stay with him until someone can take his body to the morgue. I've sent word. Porters should arrive soon.' He turned his attention to Klaus and myself. 'Good evening gentlemen, I am Detective Rudolph

Schmidt. Good thing I was here, it would seem. Well, this is an unfortunate affair. I spoke to, Otto Krüger, a journalist, or so he called himself. He filled me in on the details. At least he gave me a story that I assume will appear in the morning newspaper. You witnessed the scene?' We nodded. 'Was it murder? Or an accident?'

Klaus puffed out his cheeks. 'Did Herr Krüger suggest foul play?'

'He would like it to be, makes for a better headline, no doubt. Well?'

'I am assuming it was an unfortunate accident. The magician will explain all to you.'

Schmidt peered at the distressed performers huddled together at the side of the stage. The detective rolled his shoulders and walked towards them, muttering, 'Now, who is Splendini, and who is Solomonar? I keep getting them confused.'

Klaus sniffed and let out a long breath. 'Shall we rescue Miriam? She looks exhausted.'

'No wonder. Fraü Scholz does not want to calm down. My aunt is doing her best, but the woman is fraught. See how she keeps trying to stand. Poor Miriam will be out of breath trying to hold her still.'

Klaus shook his head. 'What a mess. I'll go and try to soothe her.'

'She keeps looking up here. Perhaps she believes her husband is still alive?'

'Or making sure he is dead.'

'What do you mean?'

Klaus pulled on his beard and leaned in close. 'My belly is churning uncharacteristically. Meaning, I harbour the notion that somehow this shooting was no accident and perhaps Fraü Scholz knows something about it.'

I raised my eyebrows and tilted my head to get a better look at the lady in question. I felt sure she was attempting to catch the eye of Bridget. 'Perhaps she does.' I bit my lip. 'Are we imagining wrongdoing where none exists?'

'I hope so. Come, let us have a chat with Fraü Scholz.'

We left Schmidt talking to Solomonar, Splendini, and Bridget. She clung to Walter, her lips pulled tight across her teeth, and merely nodded or shook her head when the detective spoke directly to her. Klaus and I pushed our way through the excited crowd to where my aunt and Fraü Scholz sat uncomfortably on the edge of their seats. On seeing us, Miriam waved. 'Thank goodness you are here. I cannot get Fraü Scholz to sit still.'

The woman, pulling on a lace handkerchief, stood and dabbed her

eyes and mouth with the damp cloth. Beads of moisture popped out on her forehead and her upper lip. She wiped the sweat away, turned to Klaus, grasped his lapel, and said in a quavering voice, 'He is dead, isn't he?' Klaus nodded. 'You are certain? Yes, yes. Oh, oh, dear. Now what?' She sat with a thump on a cushioned chair and began to sob.

'Finally. A good cry can do wonders for the nerves.' Miriam sat next to Grete and patted her trembling hand. 'What a dreadful way to end an evening's entertainment. You poor woman.' Grete Scholz leaped from her chair and clenched her fingers. 'Ah, I think my kind words have set her off again. Please, sit down.'

Klaus held the woman gently by the forearms. She stopped blubbering and stared into his brown eyes. When she was more composed, my friend said in a soothing voice, 'There now, that's better. Dear Fraü Scholz, I implore you to sit. Yes?' Fraü Scholz nodded, and Klaus led her to the chair. She sat with a thump and put her head in her hands.

Otto Krüger, a smirk on his face, holding a notebook, licked his pencil and swaggered towards us. 'A juicy piece this and no mistake.'

'Please, Herr Krüger, choose your words more carefully in front of the deceased's wife.'

'Oh, yes, quite. Pardon me. Call me Otto, Leo. After all, we are colleagues.' He sniffed, pocketed his notebook, and put his arms around mine and Klaus's shoulder. He steered us away from the seated women and said in a whisper, 'It seems the detective wants this case over quickly. He said he was unsure if any crime had been committed, but Solomonar, Splendini, and that attractive assistant of theirs are to be questioned further. Which is where you come in, doctor. Your findings after the post-mortem will be used as evidence in their case.'

Klaus looked at me and widened his eyes. 'I'll need a big scalpel for Herr Scholz. That belly of his will prove a challenge to cut through. Now, if the bullet had gone into his stomach fat, well, he may still be alive. I'm still not convinced cutting him open will prove he was murdered, but it's my job. I should tend to the widow, yes?' I nodded, and my friend returned to my aunt and Fraü Scholz.

Otto rubbed his abdomen and belched. 'Shame you don't have your camera with you, isn't it?'

I touched my fob watch. A fluttering in my belly stayed my hand, and I did not pull my spy camera out to show my colleague. instead, I simply said, 'Indeed.'

'Any good at sketching?' I shook my head. 'Pity could have used a

drawing to go with my article. Ho, I'm due a front-page headline for sure.' He frowned and gave me a glowering look. 'I bet you can doodle a bit. Yes. Go on. I'll give you my notebook. Get up there and draw the scene. You know, the body on the floor, the suspects, hovering over him all upset and afraid.' He tried to shove his pad into my hands, but I backed away.

'No, I truly am not an artist.'

Otto snarled. 'Fine. I don't need a drawing. I saw it all anyway. I need a drink.' He walked briskly away and bumped into the waitress from earlier. With a flick of his wrist, he knocked her tray and glasses onto the floor, then crunched over the broken glass to the table where the alcohol sat.

I thought it bad manners not to help her, so quickly went to her aid. 'Please allow me to help.' I squatted down and picked up the shards of glass.

She touched my arm and said tenderly, 'That's very kind of you. But you are a guest. I am here to serve.'

'But not to be treated with such contempt. That man was rude, and I am happy to be of assistance. You look flushed, if I may say so.'

She brushed the back of her hand across her forehead. 'Do I betray myself so easily?'

'Betray?'

The waitress stood abruptly. 'I mean, I am out of sorts. You are correct. The incident has made me most upset. Thank you for your concern. I can manage.'

The hat attendant came swiftly over. 'Berta? Are you all right? Is this man hurting you?'

'No, Adele, quite the opposite.'

Adele narrowed her eyes and stared at me. 'Ah, the young man with the scars. Sorry, I misjudged you.'

'I hope so. Too many men pester females. It is no wonder you are on your guard.'

Berta sighed. 'I wish all males were like you.' I coughed. 'Our lives would be less fraught for sure.'

Adele smirked. 'Yah! Nearly all of them are like that fat piece of filth, Scholz. I hope he is dead. Dead and good riddance.'

'I am guessing you knew him?'

Berta blinked rapidly and shook her head. 'Thank you for helping. We must clear up this mess.' She and Adele bent down and picked up the broken glass. Placing the pieces in their aprons they stood and

hurried away.

Four porters arrived with a trolley. But the hall was so packed they found it difficult to push it through the crowd. They called out, 'Make room!' to the backs of the guests, who either did not hear them or ignored their pleas. The men shook the cart to make it clatter. 'Excuse us. Make room.'

I prodded a woman who stood next to me. She let out a shriek, then moved sideways to let the porters pass. They nodded in gratitude and trundled the metal table up onto the stage. With the help of two policemen, they lifted Herr Scholz onto the gurney and, bumping his heavy corpse down the three steps of the platform, wheeled him away.

Otto ambled towards me, draining a glass of wine. 'Well, now that the old bastard has gone, I'd best be off to the office. They'll have to hold the front page for this, eh? I wonder if I should, you know, suggest he was murdered? After all, he had a lot of enemies.'

'He did?' I glanced at Adele and Berta. Both women stood deep in conversation, all the while turning their heads in the direction of the stage.

'I'll say he did. Wouldn't be surprised if there was a queue waiting to bump him off. Accidental shooting? Pah! I tell you, he had it coming.'

'From whom?'

Otto tapped the side of his nose. 'Ah, that would be telling. Read all about it in tomorrow's news.' He rubbed his hands together. 'Not every day you get a scoop like this. Do you think I'll get a promotion?'

'I'm sure you will.'

Otto stood straight. He slapped me on the back and steered me towards Miriam and Fraü Scholz. 'Just want to say good night to the widow.' He swaggered over to where Miriam, Klaus, and Grete Scholz sat. 'Good evening, Ladies, oh and gentlemen.'

Miriam rose from her seat, ignored Otto's outstretched hand, pushed past him, and took me by the elbow. 'There you are, Ketzele. Oh, what does that annoying man want now?' She pointed at Otto, who bowed low.

'Nothing, dear lady, not a thing. I merely want to wish you all a goodnight.' He peered at Grete. 'You look very anxious, Fraü Scholz. Don't be alarmed. At this point, the detective does not suspect foul play.'

'Oh, really?' Fraü Scholz stood. She screwed up the handkerchief she clutched, pushed it up into her sleeve, then sat down again. 'So it

was an accident? Of course it was. Who would want to kill my dear one?’

‘Ha! I can think of at least two dancers that would. I was sure I saw them earlier. Yes, disguised as waitresses they are. As for the young bloke, I know him as well. Calls himself a lawyer. Pah! He’s nothing of the sort. He’s a bartender at one of the fine establishments I often frequent.’ He pointed at Adele and Berta, who stood together with the student of law, or whoever he claimed to be. ‘They know each other all right. As to who would want to kill Herr Scholz, my dear lady, I think you’ll find there’s a queue.’

‘Hush, Otto. The poor woman is distressed. Do not add to it.’ I shooed him away, and he withdrew chuckling.

‘What did that man mean? Tell me?’ Fraü Scholz stiffened and began to snivel.

Miriam let out a husky gasp. ‘Now look at the poor woman. She was almost quiet before that unpleasant newspaper man said such a damning thing. Pay no attention.’ Grete made a high-pitched whining noise and wrung her hands. ‘Please, do calm yourself.’

Fraü Scholz, her eyes wide, her mouth gaping open, gasped, then fell to the floor with a thud.

Klaus knelt beside her and put his face to her mouth. ‘She’s breathing, barely though.’

A crowd gathered around the prone body of Fraü Scholz. They watched with narrowed eyes as Klaus felt her neck with his fingers. ‘Her pulse is weak.’ He gently slapped her cheek, and her limbs twitched as if she were a broken automaton jerking in mechanical death throes.

Miriam leaned in close and whispered, ‘Would it help if I gave you some smelling salts to revive her? I have some in my purse. I’ve kept them ever since I married Max. He was prone to a faint when he became too agitated or hot.’ She reached into her blue beaded purse and pulled out a small green ribbed bottle.

‘Thank you. This should bring her round.’ Klaus took the vial, pulled out the small stopper, and held the potion under Fraü Scholz’s nose.

She gasped, fluttered her eyelids, and slowly sat up. She stared ahead at the muttering throng and threw her arms across her face. ‘Please, tell them to go away. Oh, what a terrible night, terrible.’

Klaus and I helped Fraü Scholz to sit in a chair. She put her head in her hands and shook. The crowd closed in. Miriam frowned, turned to

the people gawping at the stricken woman, and said, 'You can see how distressed Fraü Scholz is. Kindly leave her in peace. Go and give your statements to the police.' When they did not move, she raised her voice and boomed, 'Desist from haranguing a woman in grief. Be gone and stop your idle gossiping.' I almost joined them in retreating away, so forcefully did she speak. Her face stern and dark, she put her hands on her hips, tilted her head back, and growled, 'Leave this instant.'

Blinking and coughing, the nosy onlookers walked away and stood in several lines in front of the police officers, who held notepads and pencils. Miriam raised her eyebrows and fanned herself with her hand. 'My goodness, I didn't know I had such passion inside of me.'

'I'm glad you do. It may have saved Fraü Scholz. I thought the guests were going to crush her.'

The widow gasped, opened her eyes, and gazed wildly around the room. 'Karl! Where is my husband?' Klaus took her hand. She blinked and pulled her fingers from his grasp. 'Oh yes, now I remember. Shot in an accident.' She clamped her mouth shut and held her hands over her trembling lips. I looked to where she directed her gaze.

Adele, Berta, and the fake trainee lawyer walked slowly to the foot of the stage. Bridget edged her way nearer to them. They exchanged furtive glances before turning to stare at Fraü Scholz. She rose from her seat, bit her fingernails, and gulped back tears. Before we could stop her, she hurried to the performing platform and called to Schmidt. 'Tell me, detective, do you suspect foul play?' He turned to her and walked down the steps. She gripped the lapels of his coat. 'I must know.'

He gently eased away her fingers. 'There is no evidence to suggest your husband was murdered. It would seem, at this point, that he was involved in a tragic accident. My job is to discover how it occurred and why.'

Fraü Scholz relaxed and fanned her face with the lace handkerchief she pulled from inside the sleeve of her gown. She continued to waft, waving the cloth higher and higher as she spoke shrilly, 'I see detective, so you believe that my husband's death is a tragic accident, nothing more? What a relief. I would be devastated if someone harboured ill thoughts towards him.'

Berta, Adele, and the young man shuffled back a little, tittering behind their fingers. Bridget lost her stiffness and un-furrowed her brow. I may have been mistaken, but I thought she winked at them.

Schmidt walked towards Klaus, Miriam, and myself. He licked his teeth and sucked in a huge breath. 'I have taken several statements.

They seem to match. You saw what happened?' We nodded. 'Can you shed any light on the matter?'

Klaus puffed out his cheeks. 'I do not know what anyone else told you, but all I saw was a gun fired, a man jump in front of it and fall to the floor.'

The detective nodded to me. 'Do you have the same story?'

'Yes, and well, no. I mean. Yes.'

'I sense you have more to say on the matter, continue.'

'Something Otto said earlier about Scholz and his misdemeanours. Are you are aware of them?' Schmidt nodded. 'Well, Otto said he saw some women Scholz dishonoured here tonight serving the guests.'

'So?'

'So. I'm not sure.'

'Look, many young women without the means to provide for themselves end up with men like Scholz. They also have more than one job to make ends meet. Are you suggesting their presence is suspicious?'

I felt my heart race. 'I have no idea.'

The detective tutted. 'Clearly. Now, shall I get on with doing my job?'

I nodded. Miriam straightened her hat. 'Wait a moment detective. Come closer.' My aunt lowered her voice. 'Don't you think Bridget and Fraü Scholz seem less distraught since you told her that her husband was not murdered? Did you notice Grete's handkerchief waving?'

Schmidt sighed and rubbed his nose. 'I did. Most false. I also saw the reaction of Bridget, those two Fraüleins, and that would-be lawyer grouped together like school children waiting for their teacher to take them on an outing. Curious indeed.'

Behind us, Fraü Scholz coughed loudly and stamped her foot on the ground. 'Excuse me, but since no crime has been committed, may I leave?'

Schmidt flared his nostrils, raised an eyebrow, and turned to her. 'Not yet. Will you accompany me to the stage?'

Fraü Scholz backed away and pulled on her handkerchief. 'Why?'

'I wish to ask you and the performers some more questions.'

Fraü Scholz began to shake. 'Why not question me here? Must I visit the place of my husband's demise? It will cause me no end of anguish.'

Schmidt walked towards her. Grete continued to back away. 'It will only take a few minutes. You seemed well a moment ago. In complete control of your emotions. I see no reason why you should experience

the distress you mention.’ He reached to take her hand. She swiped his fingers away. ‘Come now, Fraü Scholz, why so agitated?’

‘Because of what I said earlier. Let me be.’

‘Now, do not resist and draw attention to yourself. You have attracted the interest of a few people already.’

Adele, Berta, and the young man edged forward, a look of fear on their faces. Bridget stepped down, and all four walked towards a trembling Fraü Scholz who fanned her face before saying to the detective, ‘I do not know what good you think it will do to question me or anyone else when you have told me my husband’s death was an accident and nothing more.’

The Fraüleins fidgeted and muttered. Bridget glared at them, and they stopped. The young man trembled. His face went red, then a deathly white. I was more than curious about their reaction and went to them. ‘May I speak with you?’

Adele nodded. ‘Over by the big table. There’s very little food or drink left on it, and everyone has deserted it for those that have.’

I followed, along with her two other friends. Behind me, I heard Fraü Scholz and the detective argue. We stopped by the table, which looked as if a hoard of hungry rats had stripped it clean. ‘Pigs, the lot of them. They have money coming out of their arses yet stuff their faces when there is a free meal. I know they paid handsomely to come here, but all this food and wine would cost much more in one of the fancy restaurants they frequent. When I think of all the kids that go hungry every day, it makes me sick.’ Adele took a deep breath. ‘Sorry, you wanted to speak with us?’

‘I do. I tell you this in secrecy. I’m not sure why, but I feel the need to, to protect you somehow.’

Adele smirked. ‘You do? From whom?’

‘From me.’

‘And why is that?’

I turned. Bridget stood before me with narrowed eyes. ‘Bridget, erhm.’

She folded her arms and raised an eyebrow. ‘Speak.’

I lowered my head. Unsure of what to say without sounding as if I thought they murdered Herr Scholz, I stammered out, ‘I am not condemning you, but I believe Herr Scholz’s death was not an accident. I may have evidence.’

The young man put his hand to his mouth. ‘What? No, say it isn’t so.’

Bridget grabbed his arm. 'Quiet now, Peter. This man has no proof. He is bluffing.'

I held up my fob watch. 'This is a hidden camera. With it, I took several photographs of the thrilling finale when Herr Scholz appeared to throw himself in front of the gun. The thing is, I believe I witnessed Bridget push Karl and Peter trip him up. Were my eyes deceiving me?'

Peter pulled free of Bridget's grasp and stumbled toward me. 'If you are not sure, then perhaps you did not see what you thought you did. Yes?'

I shrugged. 'Possibly. I do not trust eyewitness accounts in situations that are fraught and tense. Which is why I choose to capture events such as these with my camera.'

Peter grimaced and continued in a shaky voice, 'Herr Scholz was a bad man. Very bad.'

'So it would seem.'

Berta shook her head. 'Seem? No, he was an evil, nasty man.' She spat on the ground.

Bridget closed one eye and pointed at my fob. 'So, you think you have captured exactly what happened when Walter pulled the trigger?'

I nodded. 'I do. I am certain the images will either prove or disprove a crime was committed.'

Peter screwed up his eyes. 'We are doomed.'

Bridget snorted. 'Don't be so dramatic. You heard what he said. This man doesn't know anything for certain.' Peter whimpered. 'Hush, Peter. Everything is fine. The detective is happy Herr Scholz died in an unlucky accident.'

'At the moment, but don't forget I have the photographs.'

Peter twisted his mouth and put his hands against his forehead. 'Everything is wrong, all wrong. Things will never be fine, Bridget. You bear the scars, Grete, Adele, Berta, and many other women. I do too.' He opened his collar, pulled open his shirt, and revealed a raised scar running across his hairless chest. 'He did that to me when I was eleven years old. Drunk as usual, he was visiting my mother when I burst into the room they were using. He snatched me up, threw me onto the bed, and slashed my throat. Or so he thought. Left me for dead. Is that the way a father treats his son?'

I gasped. 'I had no idea.'

Berta stood in front of me. She slowly pulled up the sleeve of her blouse, exposing a series of healed lacerations that ran down her forearm. 'As Peter said, Scholz was a bad man. He sought out girls like

us, maids, dancers, seamstresses, all in low-paid work. He befriended us, promised us money for certain services. At first, all he wanted was our company. Maybe at the end of the evening, a small kiss. But it was not enough for him. He wanted more. If we objected, he hurt us.' She looked at Adele, who pulled her locks away from her face and shoulders to reveal a deep raised scar. 'You see, he beat us and slashed us with his razor. It was Bridget who found us out and brought us together. She saw my injuries when I made some alterations to her costume. I let it out, for obvious reasons. Adele is my friend who I, to my shame, introduced to Herr Scholz at the start of our association.'

Bridget hung her head. She swallowed, stared at us, then said, 'I could try to explain everything by saying it was all my fault. I made a mistake and gave Walter a live round instead of a blank. All by mistake. Would that be enough to make this matter go away? Would the detective look no further and believe me? Would he send us away and not investigate further?'

'Perhaps. But my images...'

'Bridget. My love.' We turned to see Stefan and Walter walk towards us. Walter, lips quivering, took Bridget's fingers in his and said, 'We overheard your conversation. Why didn't you tell me?' He held her hand to his chest. 'If I had known, I would have helped you.'

Stefan shook his head. 'I had no idea. I am so very sorry.'

Bridget smiled at Walter, then pulled away. She faced us and unwrapped the bandage on her arm. 'Scholz did this to me four days ago after I told him I was with child. His child.' Walter stepped back. Bridget straightened. 'If you would gather close. I will tell you everything. Whatever happens, the truth must be heard. I owe you that, Walter, and you too Stefan.'

We gathered around Bridget. She took a deep breath. 'I was serving at the annual works party Fraü Scholz's father set up for the workers. Karl wanted it banned, but he failed. Fraü Scholz caught him trying to force himself on me again. He ran off. Fraü Scholz questioned me further, and I told her he had abused me a few months earlier and that I was now with child. I also told her many other young women had fallen that way because of him. Grete believed me. Of course she did. I saw the bruises and cuts on her face and arms. She was kind. She offered me some money, but it was not enough. So I tried to blackmail Herr Scholz. But it didn't work.'

As she spoke, Adele, Peter, and Berta grasped each other's hands. Tears fell down their cheeks, and I almost wept with them as she

continued her sad story. 'He told me he knew of a man who would get rid of the child, and that was all he would do for me. What choice did I have? An unmarried woman with a baby? How could I feed and clothe it and myself? Do you think this work pays well? It does not. How could I continue with a growing belly? I went to the man. He did indeed rid me of the child I carried but at a price. I was sent away moments after having the procedure and become ill through loss of blood. If it were not for Peter helping me, I would have died. He promised me and the other women Herr Scholz would be stopped. So we talked with Fraü Scholz and told her of our plan to stage the accidental shooting.'

'But could you not go to the police?'

Berta laughed. 'And say what? That a rich man with influential friends paid off one of his lovers? The police do not listen to women like us. We are considered worthless. They judge us. They think the awful things that happen to us are our own fault, and we deserve it. How do I know? Because I tried. I went to the police to give a statement. They laughed at me, threw me a coin, and told me to clear off.' She sniffed back tears and clutched Peter's hand. With Adele, they went to Bridget, took her hand, and stood before us in defiance.

Bridget lifted her chin and spoke in a harsh whisper. 'There is no punishment for men like Herr Scholz. No one will convict them of harming those they prey on. They abuse and ruin the lives of vulnerable men and women because they can. Because no one thinks of us as important or deserving of kindness and equal rights. But we are valuable. We are important. We will have rights.'

I gripped my fob watch tight. 'You have given me much to think about. Especially how you managed to execute your plan so efficiently. Surely there was room for error.'

Peter snorted. 'We rehearsed. Adele acted the part of Scholz. Bridget and I stood on either side, exactly as we did tonight. Berta became Walter for our practice, and we performed the actions until we were certain we could execute the move perfectly.'

I squeezed my eyes shut and brought back the image of the shooting, as best as I could remember it. I opened my lids. 'Yes, now I think on it, I did see Bridget give Herr Scholz a shove, and you trip him with your foot.'

Peter put his hands on either side of his head. 'I thought I was more subtle than that, Bridget, too. If you noticed, then how many others did?' He sucked in a stuttered breath and gulped back tears. 'We are

found out.'

A shrill, 'Enough. No! I have told you everything.' Fraü Scholz's voice pierced the air. 'Please, let me go home and grieve in peace.'

Klaus marched towards us. 'There you are. Your aunt was anxious about you.' He bowed to Stefan and the others. 'Fraü Scholz is getting fraught. I expect she is suffering from shock. I told the detective as much.'

'What has he decided to do?' Stefan stared at Bridget.

Klaus shrugged. 'Nothing, at least not right now. No one saw anything suspicious. I believe he is happy it was an accident.'

'Are we free to go?' Peter bit his bottom lip. 'Are we?'

'Not for me to say, but as you can see,' he gestured to the mass exit of the guests, 'people are leaving and quickly too.' Klaus waved to Schmidt, who, along with Fraü Scholz and my aunt, headed our way. 'Detective, anything new?'

Schmidt scratched his nose and put his notebook into his trouser pocket. 'No, doctor. Nothing new. I cannot, at this time, say if a crime has been committed. Therefore, you are all free to leave. Addresses and statements have been taken. If we need to call you in again,' he stared at Bridget, 'rest assured, we will.' He gazed at Fraü Scholz and the others, shook his head, and walked away.

Klaus whistled through his teeth. 'What a night. Fraü Scholz, I believe you must rest. I shall procure a cab for you. I need some fresh air.'

My aunt tugged his sleeve. 'May I join you? I am done with this place. Look after Grete, Ketzle, until we return.'

'Happily.'

Miriam took Klaus's arm, and they walked briskly out of the building. Bridget went to Fraü Scholz and put her arm around her shoulders. 'Herr Katz knows our story. Now do not tense and look so fearful. I think he is on our side. Yes, Herr Katz.' I nodded.

Fraü Scholz fell against Bridget's arm. 'I hope the detective believes us. Herr Katz, do you condemn us for what we did?'

'How can I after what I heard? I witnessed your husband treating you badly. I understand what it is like to fear the one who is supposed to love you.' I touched my scarred cheek.

Grete broke free of Bridget's embrace and came to me. She ran her finger across my healed wounds and put her hand on my shoulder. 'I believe you understand. My husband is, was, a scoundrel. I put up with his affairs, his drinking, his bouts of anger, leaving me bruised

and broken for the sake of our children. Now they are grown, and away from his temper, I thought I could leave him, but he would not let me. I could endure no more. When I heard of the other women and then of Peter, I willingly went along with their plan.'

Stefan furrowed his brow and inhaled deeply. 'Quite a plan. But how did you know Herr Scholz would go up onto the stage?'

'My husband was a man who thought he knew everything. He would want to expose the trickery behind this act to prove he was right. Especially if I made some kind of fuss. I was prepared to go up onto the stage if he did not. I assure you, he would have taken my place to spite me.'

'The bullet?'

Bridget sighed. 'I kept one back when Stefan and I palmed the real for the fake ones. Stefan and Walter didn't know. Herr Katz, our fate depends on you.'

My stomach clenched, my body became heavy, my arms like lead. The burden of their confession weighed me down as if I'd been tied to a log and thrown into the Danube. Fraü Scholz and the others stared at me with fear and hope. Was it down to me to save them? My mind became a swirl of thoughts darting around like dragonflies in search of food. I opened and closed my eyes, swallowed, and said, 'I cannot blame you for what you have done. Men like him deserve all they get.'

Stefan sighed. 'As a neurologist, I am in no doubt you acted out of terror and exhaustion. When people are pushed to the limits of endurance, they react instinctively to end what is causing their distress. You did what you did to save yourselves and many others. I do not condone murder, but in this case, I regard Herr Scholz's death as a mercy killing. Not for him, but for all those he abused.'

Klaus and Miriam entered all smiles. 'We have two cabs at our disposal. Fraü Scholz, you may go home. Is anyone to accompany you?'

'I will, and perhaps Bridget and Walter?' Stefan bowed and offered Fraü Scholz his arm. She took it. 'It was a pleasure to meet you, Herr Katz, and your charming aunt. Rosenbloom, I'm sure we'll meet again soon.' With one last look at Adele, Berta and Peter, Fraü Scholz, Bridget, Walter, and Stefan departed the building.

Peter wiped his brow. 'Shall we leave too?'

Adele and Berta nodded and together they left with Herr Scholz's son.

Miriam narrowed her eyes and pointed at my right hand. 'What are

## The Deadly Trick

you gripping onto so tightly, Ketzele?’

‘Nothing.’ I uncurled my fingers and looked down at my fob watch camera. ‘I was merely checking the time.’

‘Which is late. Shall we go?’ With Klaus following her like a puppy, my aunt and best friend headed for the exit.

I held up my watch, opened the back, took out the small circular disc of photographic plates, and crushed them under my foot.

The End.

Nik Grybaski

**Books in The Leo Katz Mysteries Series:**

**Prequel Novella:**

**Poisoned Lily A Leo Katz Mystery**

In a room above a tavern, on the hedonistic streets of Praterstrasse Vienna, is the dead body of a kept woman. A man exits the premises through the back door, while a youth, clutching a bottle of poison, stumbles down the stairs.

Did Lily take her own life? Or was she murdered?  
It's up to photographer Leo Katz and his new friend Klaus Rosenbloom to solve the mystery.

**Book 1:**

***Black Danube***

Corruption, murder, and forbidden love set in the sordid world of Vienna's ghettos in 1899.

A young dissident is murdered - his fiancée, the prime suspect. Crime photographer Leo Katz's images expose the true killers. But to save the innocent woman from the gallows, he risks revealing that he is a fraud and on the run.

<http://getbook.at/blackdanube>

**Book 2:**

***Lightning Tattoo.***

Who is the mysterious woman with the strange scars on her face that turns up with a travelling Freak Show?

Why are there so many rats in Vienna?

What are the men from The Galvanisers Association of Vienna doing in their secret laboratory?

Where can Leo hide when people from his past arrive in the city?

When will Lucy discover Leo's true identity?

<http://mybook.to/Lightningtattoo>

## The Deadly Trick



Nik Grybaski is neither real nor imaginary, existing solely in the shadows of the worlds Nik creates.

Nik is responsible for creating Leo Katz and the things that Leo gets up to when Nik is asleep.

You can follow Nik on:

Facebook:

<http://www.facebook.com/Nik-Grybaski-113307900385860>

Twitter:

@Nikgrybaski <http://twitter.com/nikgrybaski>

Instagram:

<http://www.instagram.com/thenikgrybaski>

Amazon Author Central:

<http://https://www.amazon.com/author/nikgryba><https://www.amazon.com/author/nikgrybaski>  
ski

Email: [nik.grybaski@gmail.com](mailto:nik.grybaski@gmail.com)