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## The Cliff Dwellers

Stop. Whatever you're doing, I want you to stop and, just for a jiffy, pretend that it's Christmas Day, 1912.

Cool, white sunlight is streaming through the windows of your tenement home, and it's icy, unforgiving, but you don't have to feel any of it. You're curled up next to the fireside, and your dad's tossed a thick, wooly blanket over you. Your ma's cooking up her stew; gee, the mutton, the potatoes, the cabbage leaves smell fresher than they ever did before. And just as the phonograph whirls around to play *Silent Night* once more, your kid sister's tearing the first present to shreds and leaving sparkling paper all over the floor. And you ain't gotta worry about cleaning up or nothing either, 'cause it's Christmas, and everything else comes after.

Can you picture it?

'Cause I can't picture a goddamn thing. Not when I'm trapped on the sidewalks of New York's Financial District, listening to some namby-pamby newsboy screeching about another Italian murder, and I'm real sore that I ain't even got a cup of hot cocoa to warm my frozen fingers.

Even under his cap and ear-muffs, the newsie's face is red as cherries, kinda flushed while he waves his newspaper in the air, hoping that any passerby might be curious about the news he's peddling, that his break will come already and he can go home. I know the kid; Marcello something-or-other, and he lives at 97 Orchard Street like me. But the clip-clopping of horse hooves, the sputtering of motor cars rumbling about, drowns out most of what he's saying. It's the kids like us that are easy to ignore, plentiful as the snowflakes under the winter sun, and just as easily brushed aside. 'Cause us street rats, we're invisible; have that in common, at least.

Only we ain't the same. He's a newsie, and I deliver telegrams. Sure, I'm the youngest messenger in the whole Western Union office, just eleven, but I've still seen twice as much of New York as he has; so any news I'm hearing from him is something I've probably seen, or heard, or felt before. Even when it comes to these stories about Italians being chopped up and stuffed in barrels.

"Want a paper, Nate?" Marcello's hollering has gotten all quiet and low, as he glances up at me. His eyelashes are dusted by the snow, so he's blinking a lot. "Only two pennies today."

"What am I, Mister Moneybags? Maybe if you lowered the price again."

"Even if I could, I ain't gonna, 'cause today's paper is special. It's about one of those barrel murders." His eyes flash mischievously. "I bet it was the Black Hand. Spooky, huh?"

When we hear stories about shops on the Lower East Side being blown up, or kids disappearing and never being found, or dead people being found in barrels, there's one name that comes to mind: the Black Hand. I try to play it tough when I hear about those stories, pretend that they don't bother me even if they do, because I'm probably gonna hear something worse soon enough. But as I turn on my tough-guy voice, I hear a little quaver as I speak. "The Black Hand ain't real. If there was really some Italian gang stealing and killing their own people to make money, we'd be hearing a lot more about it than in a few newspapers."

"Only you ain't Italian, so I don't see how you'd know," he says. "I'd watch out if I was you. *Anyone* could be a Hand mobster. Hell, even your neighbor."

I smirk like it's no big deal. "I'll keep my eyes peeled. You got any smokes on you?"

Marcello rolls his eyes and hands me a pack of cigs. Only three or so left, but I take it anyway. "Yeah, but you better pay me back next time, and I mean it. Or we ain't friends or nothing anymore."

“I get the idea, pal.” I glance down to check my cheap watch, and I realize that it’s four forty-three already; not much time left on my shift. “Gotta get back to it. Try not to freeze your balls off.”

“You too. And buy a swell present for Ava, would you?”

As if that’s not one of many reasons I’m out here in the first place; I gotta have some dough in my pocket, sure, but even more important, my sister Ava Gallagher’s gotta have a proper Christmas. But I nod at him before I head inside to the warmth of the office for just a moment, just to pick up the day’s last telegram for delivery. I wheel my bike off the street corner and into the alleyway just behind the Western Union office, where the buildings cut out the orange sky and the shadows swell over the glow of distant streetlamps. More importantly, where there’s no one around to interrupt my brief smoking break.

Anyways, that’s what I was doing. Sitting, smoking, and slowing down, just for a little bit before my last delivery of the day. I can hear the streets starting to get quieter, the klaxons of cars blaring less and less, as the sun sinks down. I can even hear one of those barbershop quartets, singing *Hark The Hairy Angels Sing* or whatever the hell that Christmas song is called. I bet the kids who don’t have to work are out there, trying to sing along. Then they’d get bored, and go shoot craps on the sidewalk just to win a Tootsie Roll or some other penny candy. It’d be real nice to be one of those kids.

Too bad I got my work to do. And it’s getting dark soon, so I know I have to hurry on this last delivery. I can do a lotta things, but I *hate* biking at night, and I ain’t ever letting that happen ever again. But my thoughts are all interrupted as I hear a new sound, further back in the alley. This one’s like wood scraping against the ground maybe, and something else too, like gravelly grunts and mutters.

I'm not afraid. Yeah, I don't get scared by nothing these days. So, being the fella of few fears that I am, I squash the cigarette beneath my shoe and peek out into the alley, like a self-respecting grown-up would do. It's dark down there, like the real nasty pit of a concrete jungle. But I can see something, or someone. A dark, hulking mass, shrouded in shadows and secrets, wearing a derby hat over a long black topcoat. Is he real?

I can't help but try to get a better look at him. And then, my heart drops, right outta my chest nearly. Because I see the man dragging a barrel, where the burnt, nasty smell is coming from. More particularly, I see the shiny redness of the man's rough hands, almost black under the shadows, and now, the glint of his warm, brown eyes. Staring back, from across the alley, dark peering into light.

It's as if he's waiting for me to say something, expecting me to cry out. But I can't even manage a word. I'm frozen.

Still snared in the dark of the alley, the shadows and outlines of his clothes seem to shift, as he comes forward, just close enough for the light of the streetlamps to evade him. And, warmly patient eyes placed over me, he raises his bloody hands and says, "Would you believe it if I told you this was paint?"

My throat's turned all dry, outta nowhere, and I hate how my stupid vocal pipes never work when I need 'em too, but I manage to choke out a small, "N-no."

He shrugged. "Shame." He raises his hand, finger moving in a twitch. I only just noticed the shotgun he's got stowed away beneath the thick black coat. "Over here, kid. Come on."

In a better city, I'd run for the cops and tell them that the Black Hand really is real. But this ain't a better city; it's New York, and the only cops who care about Italians are dead. So I stay still.

The harsh lamps outside the door seem to dim in the same way that the man's eyes did, and his long, terrible stare goes on as he observes me. And then, he shrugs again. Even if the rest of him is doused in shadow, it's clear that he's smiling, from the way the shadows dance over his skin. Vague amusement, at least. "You've seen a lot, haven't you, kid? I can see it in your eyeballs. Been to a few places you shouldn't have?"

I clear my throat again, hoping I sound a lot tougher than I feel. "If I have, it ain't your business, mister." I wag my last telegram in the air, the one addressed to a Gino Rossi. "I gotta go. Mr. Rossi's telegram's a-calling."

"Wait." There's something about his voice that I can't turn my back to, so I only make a distance of three feet before I pause and face the man again. "I've got a job what needs doing."

No way. Could he really? I come forward, still just as hesitant as I need to be. "What sort-a job?"

"Nothing but your usual." He reaches into the folds of his coat, and my life flashes before my eyes for a second, but his hand comes out holding a yellowed slip of paper. Looks like it's written in Italian, so I couldn't even begin to read it. "I happen to be acquainted with Mr. Gino Rossi. Bring him this letter, and leave before he can remember what you look like."

"Why me? Could-a used one of your mobsters."

"No one thinks twice about a streetrat and his bike. I've got other business to tend to anyhow."

Fair enough. People like us, like the immigrants and the coloreds and the sick and homeless, the downtrodden and the ignored, are the ones no one likes to think about. "How much you plan to pay?"

"How much you make a week?"

“Five dollars, plus tip sometimes.”

“I’ll give you twenty five dollars. Just deliver the message, and we’re aces, kid.”

My jaw nearly drops at that. *Twenty five dollars?* I could buy three bikes with that kind-a money. And, more to the point, I could buy the gift that my sister deserves, give her a real Christmas for once.

But I’d have to deliver a letter. A letter that almost certainly threatens murders, and extortions, and all of the other terrible things that an underworld gang of criminals would do to someone they can take money from.

“Well?” The man-from-the-alley begins tapping his finger against the barrel’s rim. “This one here isn’t gonna drop himself off in the Hudson, and I gotta go. I could use a little Santa’s helper.”

“You’re not Santa.” Sometimes, I wonder if my tongue gets the better of me, because I instantly wish I hadn’t said that. Thankfully, he seems more amused than irritated.

“Yeah, well still. I got presents, and I got coal. This fella—” he knocks on the barrel twice and, much as I hate to admit it, I jump a little, “— he got coal. Plenty of coal.”

I bet he’s only trying to give me a scare. The Black Hand only goes after Italians. Or, I thought they did. But even that doesn’t matter, because he could pay me. And even if I tried to run away, I would still be as poor as ever. Nothing would change.

I step forward. “I’ll do the job.”

He hands me the new telegram, but keeps his fingers clenched to it. “One condition.”

Ain’t there always. “Which is...?”

“Deliver that message before the clock strikes five.” He takes the time to speak his next words slowly, so the point comes across all crystal clear. “Any later than that, and we’re done. Get me?”

I imagine a map of the city streets in my mind for a second. “The address is some dive bar in NoHo. That’s a... what, a seventeen minute bike ride from here?”

“Yup.”

“There’s no *way* I could make that before five.”

“You’re the messenger. If you can do your job, I’ll reward you. If you can’t, then, well, then I’ll be real sore about it. And you don’t want Santa to be sore, do you?”

I cross my arms, figuring it’ll hide my shaking fingers. “You still aren’t Santa.”

His tone turns sour, and I step away as he speaks. “Get it done, kid.” Then, the man-from-the-alley recedes back into the encroaching night. Even as he’s leaving, I can see the gleam in his eyes. “I’d get moving, I was you.”

I’m on my bike before he even finishes the sentence.

. . .

When I was a little kid, and I still lived in Ireland, I remember hearing stories about the *sidhe*; the fairies. The ones who live beneath Irish hills, beneath crumbling monoliths and dusty cairns, and steal human children whenever they feel like it. *And they’ll get you if you don’t wash those dishes before bed*, Mom used to tease. It didn’t scare me then, and it doesn’t scare me now, not even a little.

But still, it made me superstitious. I mean, I believe in Santa, ‘cause me and him are one-of-a-kind. I’d make a hit with that guy, I just know it: we both like delivering stuff around, spreading mostly joy across the world, and throwing coal at people who rub us the wrong way.



Only now, as I'm weaving my little bike between horse-drawn carriages and automobiles and the mouth-breathing assholes who cross the street without looking, I can feel myself getting more and more distracted, thinking about the stupid fairies, and now the stupid Black Hand.

They seem like two sides of the same coin, really. Thieving figures in the shadows, trying to steal whatever or whoever they want, and facing no consequences for it. Except one is a myth, and the other is real. Very, very real.

Except no one wants to think they're real. All of these high-hatters walking the streets and motoring along the road, the rich dandies with their canes and boaters, and the snobby ladies with pompadours and even bigger hats than the guys. Everyone wants to shove their heads in the snow, like we're a bunch-a dummy ostriches or something. And I guess that's easier, but it doesn't make me any less mad about it. But that isn't even all I'm worried about.

I've been biking for long enough that I can finally feel it sinking in: winter. My fingers are starting to tremble from the sheer cold, or the fear, or maybe just all of it at the same time. Crap! I clench them against the handlebars. Wish I had another cigarette or something. Maybe Mom'll buy me some new gloves and a scarf that isn't falling apart—

Wait, what was that? I glance up, looking left towards the back of my bike, and that's when I see it, and realize I looked up too late. A car, its passenger and mustached motorist shouting up a storm as the automobile comes barreling in from out of nowhere, but I don't have enough space to move because he's right the hell there, so I can't even—

*BANG.*

I can feel myself literally fly through the air as the car hits somewhere near the back of my bike, metal bending and groaning against something. *My bike*, that's my first thought, but the thought leaves my head as I crash into the snow-streaked road and shit, that really hurts. Put my

arms up, sure, but now they're aching real bad, and my heart's beating so fast it might as well be up in my ears. It could be a hell of a lot worse, though, and I'm alive. Still. That was way too close.

"Crap," I mumble, face still buried over my arms. My arms tremble, trying to rise back up so I can at least go curse out whoever the hell was driving that car, but then I remember. My bike! "Crap!"

I'm up in seconds, only to feel that awful sensation of your heart breaking in two, the second my eyes fall over my trusty, Western Union-issued bike, and it's utterly busted tire.

The tire is gone, that much is clear. The entire back section of the bike is dented, chain dislocated and the cassette too battered to function, let alone take me fifteen more minutes all the way to Mr. Rossi. Maybe, just *maybe*, I could get it fixed, but... but it's a 1909 Peerless Bicycle! Straight from the Sears catalog, for fifteen dollars, and now the tire is squeaking pathetically against my knees.

"You knocked him off his bike, Papa!" I hear one of the car's passengers cry out, from somewhere behind me. I keep moping over the loss of my bike as they have a quick discussion.

"Good God. Stay here, I'll check on him."

The shadow over me grows. "Boy. Boy!"

I look over sullenly, though my vision's sorta wet and blurry. His hat's shadow is covering most of his face, but he looks how I'd expect; thick mustache, derby hat, that rich-people-smell of woody cologne with some French name I can't pronounce. "Are you in a state of shock? Hysteria, perhaps?"

I wipe my eyes with my sleeve. Then I grunt as I grab my ruined bike by the handles, to wheel it along with me. "I'm fine."

“Fine? But you just got hit by—”

“—a tin lizzie going two miles an hour, I think I’ll live to tell the tale. Gotta run.”

There’s an alley ahead, just between a confectionery and a closed flower shop, so I wheel my bike down there, where I know some rich, automobile-driving fella wouldn’t bother following me into. Soon enough, I’m in the relative quiet of an alleyway, where brown, slushy snow lines the garbage bins, and there isn’t nearly as much frozen horse crap on the ground. Fine enough now. And I know I’ll make it, even if my watch says four forty-seven. I have to make it.

Too bad I’m only streets away from the worst neighborhood in New York.

. . .

I’ve heard people call the old Five Points neighborhood the modern-day ‘Sodom.’ These days, it’s more of a park, only people like to forget that it didn’t used to be; you ask me, New York City is just a big, itchy sweater made outta threads that barely fit together, like the sort your ma might make for you. Old, and it always smells a bit funny, but no matter how many threads you replace, it’s still the same sweater your ma made all those years ago. And this park is a real good example of that.

Right now, under the cover of dusk, it looks sad, and empty, and I can feel every inch of how it used to be, instead of what it is now.

I gotta say, it’d be a perfect place for ice-skating if I had any. The pavilion is fully lit, like Thomas Edison himself did the honors of fixing them up, only no one in their right mind would be out in the cold like this. The benches and concrete curves that form sidewalks are covered in untouched sheets of snow, and so are the trees, icicles hanging off of them. I can see apartments

from across the street glare down at me, windows green and red from Christmas lights inside, like my being here is an affront to the Spirit of Christmas.

And that “glaring” part isn’t figurative either. In some of the windows, I can see people, eying me with shaded faces from far above. Some windows don’t even have people; I see the silhouette of a Victor phonograph in one of them, the record rumbling in endless circles to play what sounds like an Enrico Caruso tune. I’m no musician, but the song feels mournful and hopeful and lost at the same time.

Doesn’t change the fact that the whole park gives me the creeps. But I’ll be home in no time, and with a Christmas present for good measure, so I think warm thoughts of sugarplums and Mom’s stew. I pick up my pace as I move through the snow, my bike’s back tire leaving a wide and distorted track as it goes. The clinking of the loose chain almost matches up with the movement of the music, and I focus on that. Somehow, it makes me feel safer hearing that repetitive noise.

That’s when a new sound cuts in. Or, maybe it was always there, but I hear jeering laughter, and a buncha name calling too, even if it all sounds like friendly banter. I look up towards the playgrounds ahead, where three boys in winter coats are lurking about the snow-drowned playground, packing the balls of snow into their hands and tossing it at each other.

“Aw, gee, the snow’s all loose,” one of them whines, the smallest one. He’s a funny looking kid, face flushed red, in a wooly sweater that looks a little too big for him. And he’s the only one of them who looks close to my age, because the other boys are clearly older.

“Snow’s fine,” another says, gray eyes flashing as he grins. The gray-eyed boy is sitting at the bottom of the slide. Heavyset, but I get the sense that he could beat me up without hesitating if he wanted. “You’re just shitty at packing it.”

“Lay off it, Al.” The last kid is building what looks like the bottom of a snowman, patting the sides of his snow boulder carefully, as his red scarf seeps out of his coat for a moment. He has to be fourteen at least, with how gangly he is, and the tiny bit of fuzz over his lip. “I’m trying to...”

Suddenly, the red-scarf boy looks up, a question piercing his gaze as he notices me coming forward. “Who’re you?”

The wind is gone, so his voice cuts through the air so sharply that I can’t even pretend I didn’t hear him. I tell the boy with the scarf, “No one important.”

The other boys have noticed me too, the snowball game entirely forgotten by this point. Al hasn’t said anything; the guy sure acts tough for a kid who looks hardly three years older than me, but he’s giving me a real nasty look, so I try to ignore him as much as possible. Then the red-scarf boy stands up. “Rude, huh? I’m only trying to look out for you.”

“Look, I’d like to join you boys,” I admit. I’m nearly jealous that they can look at all this snow and have *fun* with it. “But I got business to—”

“Hold it, buster.” Red-scarf boy seems to be the leader of the group. The fact’s made clear as he steps forward, his friends watching his movements, and his hands in his pockets like he doesn’t expect me to try anything. Cool, and a little too confident. “I know it’s Christmas and all, but these streets get rowdy. Adults, they get hopped up on eggnog and such, and well... accidents happen, eh? Tough going for kids like us.”

“That’s why we’re here,” the sweater boy says. “We protect our own.”

“Your own, huh? Who are you to say what’s yours and what ain’t?”

“Salvatore Luciana, that’s who,” the red-scarf boy says, and jabs a thumb at his two pals.

“Short one’s Meyer Lansky—”

“—I ain’t short, so lay off it, you.”

“—and the big kid’s Al.”

I raise an eyebrow. “*Al* what?”

“*I’ll* sock you in the goddamn face if you keep asking stupid questions,” Al grumbles.

“Can we get this over with? Too cold out here.”

“Got the right idea, Al.” Salvatore turns to face me. “Now, who are you?”

They’re standing around me in a way that’ll make it hard to run away. Might as well answer by this point. “Nate Gallagher.”

He snickers. “‘Gallagher,’ huh? Well, we’re with the Five Points Gang, so what we say, goes, Paddy. And you’re in a rough part of town. Fella like you could use protection from fellas like us. So how’s about you fork over a... tax, of sorts?”

“No taxes,” Al snarls. “There ain’t a soul who’s ever gonna make me do taxes.”

“Calm down, Al, we’re the ones doing the taxing here.” Sal glances at me. “We’re waiting, Nate. Pay up.”

“I’m not paying *nothing*,” I hiss. “Now screw outta the way and let me pass.”

Meyer’s face sours into an irritated frown immediately and, the second he turns to the other two, I realize I probably should’ve run around the park instead of going right through it.

“Al?”

Al doesn’t hesitate. The second Meyer finishes speaking, Al does exactly as he promised before, and his fist flashes out before I can even *move*, and my whole face lights up in a flaring

pain; not sure where, but it all hurts, and I leap back with a yelp, falling into the snow with my hands clenched over my nose.

“Punched him back to Ireland, nearly,” Al snickers.

My head is spinning now, can barely think straight. Crap, how’d I let these chuckleheads get the better of me? Have to do something, but each breath stings, and now the air seems so sharp, and cold, like a butter knife creeping up through my nostrils. Before I can so much as move a finger, the three boys surround me on each side and loom over me, faces dark and hard to read. Except for Sal.

He’s not grinning, like Al, and he isn’t annoyed by my existence, like Meyer. His face is still, actually, and it’s his eyes that give him away; irises set into a terrible, tawny fire, as he leers down at me.

“What’re you looking around for, Nate?” he asks, before striking a match to light the cigarette he’s just placed in his hand. “Cops, maybe?” He glances at Al. “They usually try to scream for cops, Al. When you make it big, make sure the cops aren’t listening, eh?”

“They never are, Sal.”

Sal leans forward, one hand in his pocket. “Is that what you’re gonna do? Huh? Squeal for the pigs? Or maybe your old lady first?”

I hate how fast blood slips from your nose when you get a nosebleed. Like a river, dribbling right over your lips, and painting the snow a blackish shade of red. I try to respond, anything witty, anything that’ll get me out of this park, and out of the snow, and back to the tenement at 97 Orchard Street, where this will all seem like a bad dream.

Only it ain’t a bad dream. It’s just America. And my real home is all the way across the ocean, on the Emerald Isle. Lost to me, way beyond the sea mist.

“Nothing? I figured you’d be a real kidder, but, eh, guess you aren’t too mouthy right now. I wouldn’t be either.” He shrugs, and takes a long gasp of smoke in from his cigarette. “We’re relieving you of your shitty bike. Any other valuable accoutrements you might have on you, Nate?”

“You aren’t taking —” I spit into the snow before I finish. “—you ain’t taking crap.”

It’s a chore to even stand up, but that’s what I do, and the other boys are too surprised to stop me as I reach into my jacket pockets and retrieve the little yellowed paper, the one with the Black Hand on it. Then, since he’s taller than me, I hold the paper right up in Sal’s face.

I can’t help but smile a little. “Know what this is?”

I can see that terrible fire leaving Sal’s eyes, as he scans the paper; I haven’t got a clue what it says, but I know what it means all the same, and, judging from the look on his face, he does too. He glances at the letter, and then back at me.

The silence ends as quickly as it began, and Sal flicks his cigarette into the snow as he turns from me. “Kid’s off the hook.”

Meyer blinks a few times. “Why?”

“Lemme see the goddamn thing.” Al grabs the paper, eyes narrowed as he reads it, but then his eyes shrink in the same way that Sal’s did, and he glances back up at me in disbelief.

“What the— who gave you this?”

“The Black Hand did.” I step forward, and Al steps back. “I’m their messenger for tonight. And you boys are making it real hard to deliver. I’m not so sure they’d like that.”

Al doesn’t say anything, and neither do the other two. I can’t help but savor this short moment of advantage, so I wag the paper in the air, like I’m shaking my finger at them. “Course, I can tell them all about you fellas if that’s any—”



“He’s lying,” Meyer says. Doesn’t seem like he really knows what’s happening, but he at least knows he doesn’t have the upper hand, and that scares him more than any Black Hand letter could. “Let’s just take his stuff anyways and—”

“What’re you, off your nut?” Al says. “I don’t fuck with the Black Hand. No one does.”

“Seems like Nate did.”

“And that’s his own problem.” Sal comes back in at once, taking control of the situation. “Let’s get outta here. Meyer, isn’t your ma having some kinda Jew dinner at five?”

“It’s for Hanukkah, assface!”

“Yeah, well I’m hungry, so shut the fuck up. You boys go ahead of me.”

First, Al leaves, not even giving me a parting glare as he stomps through the snow and away from me. Then, Meyer follows, tossing a poorly-packed snowball at Sal’s shoulder, and then only Sal is left, gazing at me from something of a distance now.

“You know something, Nate? We ain’t Americans. And we ain’t gonna be. You’re never gonna be nothing more than a mick to them. The real Americans, the Limey-loving fucks with all the money and power, they live right ontop of the mountain. But kids like me, and you, and all of us? We’re the cliff-dwellers. We only get the scraps, so we take what we can get. That, Nate, *that’s* how we get to the top: we do whatever it takes.”

“I got places to be, Sal.”

“I guess you do.” Then, he shrugs. “Prolly shouldn’t keep you much longer, so, eh, good luck with that message of yours. Don’t bite the Hand that feeds you, huh?”

I stay silent, keeping my eyes on him until the park is really empty, and the footprints in the snow are the only sign that they were ever here. Once I’m sure I’m safe, I let out a huge, shaky breath, rushing to check my watch.

Four-fifty-two.

*Shit.*

. . .

I've made it to the streets of SoHo, where the skyscrapers rise tall and proud in a haze of marble and casted iron. And all my frozen brain can think about is the Coney Island babies.

Sorry. Let me explain.

If you go to the right spot on Coney Island, past Luna Park and just before the water meets the docks, you'd probably see a sideshow of babies in heavy, metal machines; "incubator babies," is what they are. And it's almost funny to me; the life bound to a steel womb, against the death bound to the crinkled yellow paper I carry in my hands. I wonder if those babies know that a big chunk of metal is what keeps them alive. I also wonder if Mr. Rossi knows that a simple piece of paper might just leave him broke, dead, or worse.

Those thoughts are less than fully formed. Just delirious imaginings, that give me focus as I move from street to street like a ghost. Better than nothing, but not by much. Then, finally, I feel myself let go of my bike, and it crunches right into the snow, and I follow suit, forming a half-dead snow angel. Sprawled out on the sidewalk.

I can't bike. Now I can barely walk, since I've been at it for so long. Worst of all, I failed my kid sister, Ava. And I'm a sorry excuse for a brother because of it.

Then, I hear a voice, a slightly familiar one.

"What have we here?"

“Papa, I think he’s...” the second voice is higher pitched, the words less eloquently placed. Then the noise of snow shifting around. Sounds like she stepped off of something to take a closer look at me.

“... he *is!*” the girl exclaims, and I feel a hand fall over my shoulder, dusting snow off my side and tugging to turn me over. “It’s the boy from before!”

“Is it really?” He sounds troubled. I’d be too, if I hit someone’s bike and didn’t even pay for the damages or nothing. “Wake him, Yolande.”

“I’m... I’m awake enough, mister,” I mumble, and force myself to sit up, taking a closer look at the people standing in front of me, their automobile beside them.

Night has almost fully fallen over the sky by this point, but the pale glow of the streetlights is enough for me to make out their appearances. And I’m a little surprised, because the two of them are negroes. There’s the driver, the fella with the mustache and goatee, stroking his beard while he frowns at me. He’s got a thick motoring coat on, made-a real mink fur from the look of it. His daughter, the girl named Yolande who woke me up, is wearing a velveteen coat over a simple frock. She’s staring at me like I’m a ghost, or some stinking roadkill they peeled off the car tires. Guess I kind of am.

“I’ve been looking for you,” the driver says finally, still stroking his goatee. “That accident earlier could’ve gone much worse, and... well, I’m glad to see you’re alive, at the very least. What’s your name?”

“Nathan Gallagher, mister.” I’m too tired to make any kind of argument or comment. I just wanna finish my task, so I reach down for my bike once again, but Yolande steps in front of me. “No you don’t,” she says, and real serious-like too. “You can’t go on like this. Where do you live?”

“97 Orchard Street, in the Lower East Side.”

“Then that’s where we’re going to take you.” She glances at her father. “Right, Papa?”

“Of course.” He holds his hand out to shake mine, so I shake it, sort of reluctantly.

“William Dubois. This is m—”

“No,” I interrupt, dropping my hand quickly and checking my watch. Less than a few minutes left. “I have to be somewhere by five, or I’m— I’m done for, mister. I’m really done for.”

“Goodness.” He furrows his brow. “Where?”

“A bar on Spring and Broadway. I deliver telegrams.”

Mr. Dubois pauses, probably considering the distance between the addresses I mentioned. After a contained sigh, he nods his head up-and-down. “Then I suppose we’d better make haste.” He circles back around to the right side of the car to get into the driver’s seat. After exchanging a glance with Yolande, we go to the backseat at once, and we’re off with a roar of the engine.

I’ve been on a boat before, but never an automobile. I bet Ava would love this: I can imagine it already, the tyke putting her hands out of the windows and pretending that she’s whirling along in a flying machine. And this is a fancy Oldsmobile, too; just like that song she likes, *In My Merry Oldsmobile* I think. Too bad I don’t have time enough to appreciate it the way I should.

My gaze falls away from the streets and returns to the inside of the car, just in time for me to catch Yolande turning her eyes away from me like she was staring again. Gee, I kinda look a mess, don’t I? I wipe my mouth with my sleeve, and my jacket turns dark red, but I think it only smeared my face, because she’s still staring.

“Um, your nose looks—” She clears her throat. “You have something on your...” she gives a vague gesture that’s generally placed around the mouth and chin, and I feel a queer pang of embarrassment.

“I had an, uh, candy apple. The candy stuff got on my face.”

“Did the candy apple break your nose too?”

“Uh. Yeah. I, uh, ate it too hard.”

“...right.” She still seems unsure of my answer. “But the stuff on your face looks like blood. Your blood.”

“Eh...” I shrug, giving up my little fib. “Fine. I had a long day. Work was hard.”

“Work? You’re hardly in middle school.”

“I have to.”

“Oh. Well, I’m sorry that you don’t have any choice.”

“Yeah, well, it ain’t your fault.” I take out a cigarette, trying to see if I haven’t lost my old lighter. “Want a smoke?”

“My daughter does not smoke,” Mr. Dubois says from the driver’s seat. “It’s improper.”

“Whatever you say, mister.” But Yolande’s giving my cigarette pack a curious, and partially jealous kind-a look, so I take it as a cue to set what’s left of the pack on the middle car seat. She flashes a smile, and slides the box towards her.

“So, maybe you had a bad day at work. Was your Christmas any good?” she asks, glancing back up at me.

It’s sorta funny, and sorta cruel that today is Christmas. I nearly forgot, until she’d brought it up. And to hear her remind me of that, that today’s a day of gift getting and gift giving? It’s enough to make me chuckle, for the first time in what feels like ages.

“No,” I admit, and her eyes go down a bit, probably only just noticing how ragged my clothes are and how dirty my face is. “Oh.”

“But I’m gonna get twenty dollars. Maybe Santa’ll gimme some extra.”

“Awwww,” she coos suddenly, “You still believe in Santa!”

“Yeah, what of it? Did he give you anything good?”

She smiles a little bit. “*He* didn’t, no. But it was a good day anyway. I got some magazines, and some books. Then Papa gave a speech, to a colored orphanage on Fifth Avenue.” She glances at her dad, who’s swiftly and silently maneuvering through the snowy roads. “I think he’s tired, and not entirely in a sociable mood, so you should excuse him. But he likes to help folk. Colored, or otherwise.”

“For *fun*?” I snort. “Wish I could say the same.”

“Not for fun. It’s just right, don’t you think so?” Her gaze becomes unfocused for a moment. “It can be boring. And hard. And when he goes on trips and doesn’t come back for weeks, I wish he wasn’t doing anything at all. But he says it’s all for a greater purpose.”

“A greater purpose, huh?” I cross my arms, staring out the window. “If I were you, and I had all that money, I’d just leave. I bet you could buy a flying machine, go anywhere you want. But you’re still here. Using the colored bathrooms, drinking colored water off the colored fountains. Why?”

“Because we’re rich,” Yolande says blankly. Judging by the look on her dad’s face, he disagrees.

“We are blessed, not rich. And money hasn’t got a thing to do with it,” Mr. Dubois says before he gives a contemplative sigh. “I believe that this country is new, and difficult, and unlike any other. But I believe in what this country *could* be. So I work to turn that future into our

present. If I cannot manage to achieve that goal, then..." he shrugs. "I will gather my family, and return to my roots in Africa."

Yolande's brow creases. "*Africa?*"

"Yes, and it would do you some good, Yolande."

"Pah! I like it well enough here."

"I don't," I mutter. All I can think of is Salvatore's face, staring down at me like I'm a speck of dirt on the fringe of his boot. But Mr. Dubois seems to notice the look on my face.

"I understand more than you know, young man," he says. "There's opportunity here, and it can bring out the worst in people. But there's hope as well. Hope for the negro race, for white folk—"

"— What about Italians?" I ask.

"Hope, for anyone willing to work for it. And, further down the line, equality." He strokes his beard before continuing. "Though it may take some time. *How* we get there is the question."

Pretty enough words, I guess. I wonder how many books this guy's read before, since he sounds more verbose than I'll ever get. But for now, in my own lifetime, I hope I can deliver this telegram before it's too late, because it's four-fifty-nine, and the clock hands ain't moving any slower.

But then, right when I need it to, the car begins slowing down to a stop.

"Here we are," Mr. Dubois says, as he pulls the car to the curb beside a bar with a snow-covered sign. This is it: Mr. Rossi waits for his telegram just inside. And soon, I'll be able to go back home. Sure, maybe I can't go back to my *real* home, but maybe I can get Ava what

she deserves, and give her the real Christmas that I didn't get. That'd be home enough for me, I guess.

"Uh, mister Dubois, I—" Gee, I'm not too used to saying it. "Thanks. Even though you, you know, hit my bike and whatnot."

"No time, Nathan." He turns back to make eye contact with me. I notice something clutched between his fingers. "You'd better hurry."

His fingers open as he passes me a – a *twenty dollar bill*. Who just carries that much money around? "For your damaged bicycle."

I stare up at him. This is enough to buy a new bike entirely. "I... I don't know what to—"

"No time," Yolande says, her eyes serious and wide. She reaches behind me to throw the car door wide open. "Go! You're going to be late!"

Crap, they're right. I throw the car door open and jump out of the car as fast as humanly possible, and as I go, I holler, "Nice meeting you two!" With that, I run out of the cold, and into the relative warmth of the nameless bar.

. . .

Once I'm in, I can tell that the bar might be a little more than just a bar. In fact, I've got my lurking suspicions that it's really a... well, the boss calls them 'houses of ill fame.' The other delivery boys call them "cathouses," so that's what I call them too. And that's what I think this place really is.

There isn't any funny business happening in the parlor that I'm standing in thankfully; just looks like another bar, only with more ladies than usual, and a pianist who looks way too



excited to be playing even the simplest rag, and a lot more giggling and such. Everyone's giving me dirty looks like I don't belong here, which I don't, so I hurry it up and find Mr. Rossi.

That's the easy part. I reach up to poke some lady's arm and, trying to deal with me as little as possible, she wordlessly points me to the bar. There, I see a smarmy looking fella is talking with a group of even smarmier-looking fellas, all of them bearing thick mustaches and floral puff ties. The infamous Gino Rossi. And that's when it comes: the decision.

For all I know, I could be holding this Rossi guy's death sentence in my hands. That's the worst part about the Black Hand: they're unpredictable. They might burn his shop, or blow up his house, or steal his kid just to make him cave in and give them God knows how much money. And if he doesn't cave, then they'd probably just kill him, and stuff what's left of him in a barrel, like they did to countless others.

And then, a nagging little voice in the back of my head tells me that I'm no better than the Black Hand. That I'd be just like Salvatore, and Al, and even little Meyer. Doing whatever it takes, to get whatever I want. And no one likes a hypocrite.

If I do this, then I'll be a hypocrite, and on the wrong path. But just for once, I won't have to be struggling to live. I'll have enough money to keep my parents from working themselves into a shallow grave. Enough to see a moving picture in real life, enough to get those tins of Ghirardelli chocolate powder, and collect *baseball cards*, the ones with Joe Tinker and Ty Cobb and the greatest baseball players of the age – no, better yet, I could buy a ticket to a game *myself*.

If I don't do this, I'll be poor again.

I take a deep breath, and step forward, the pervasive stench of Turkish cigars and brandy growing stronger. "Mr. Rossi?"

His gaggle of sycophants are all laughing up a storm, probably about taxes or whatever old people laugh about, but the second they hear the pre-pubesence of my voice, the laughter cuts off, as they turn to face me, and the entire room seems to grow quiet, made fully aware of my presence. They seem sort of like giants, standing there ominously beneath the smoky light.

Mr. Rossi, a man with a black mustache, is the first to react. He smiles at me, pearly whites almost sparkly. Not to sound, uh, funny, but his features are sharp and easy to look at, eyes strong and confident. Looks like a fella you'd see in the pictures. "That would be me, young sir."

"Telegram for you, mister." Are my hands *shaking*? My fingers keep fumbling, and it's getting on my nerves, so I grip the papers, and I look down at them.

Where everything seemed so simple, now it seems all fractured, and complex. Like each decision could create a million different others, in an endless spiderweb of choices and consequences. Even though all I did before was deliver telegrams, and that's all I'm doing now.

And I just don't know what's right or what's wrong.

I give him the telegrams. Both of them, with the Black Hand one beneath the other so he takes longer to notice it. "I was told it's sensitive information," I say, tipping my peaked hat down over my face so he won't remember what I look like. "Might not want to read it straight away."

Mr. Rossi hardly seems bothered, and chuckles, exchanging a glance with his friends. Now that he's amused, they're all mirroring his reactions and movements. "Sensitive? Why, that sounds just grand." He reaches into his pant-pocket to grasp a handful of coins. "Looks like you went through hell to get here, huh?"

My throat is dry. I swallow before mumbling, "Maybe I did."

“Mysterious, eh? That’s swell. You’re swell, kid!” He fishes out a dime and slaps the tip money into my hand. “Soda, dear boy. Go to the druggist the next street over, and buy yourself a chocolate soda. Have a gay Christmas on my behalf, will you?”

It’s getting hard to keep looking at this guy. I stow the coins away, and leave in a hurry, straight into the cold of night, and sit down on the curb, even though it feels like the snow is burning right through my pants. I did it.

And here I am, feeling like a real piece of work.

“Good, good work kid.”

I whirl around to see a man standing beneath the false light of a streetlamp, face still shadowed by his hat. It’s him. The man-from-the-alley. Judging by the lift in his voice, it sounds like he’s smiling.

I hear him saunter over to me, but I don’t care to look. I can hear shotgun shells clinking around inside of the barrel as he moves, and then the noise stops, once he’s standing somewhere behind me to the left. Some rustling, and then: “Your payment.”

I stand up, and take the money from his calloused fingers. It really is twenty five dollars. I’ve never held that much money in my entire life.

“Long fifteen minutes, was it?” Then, he chuckles. “Don’t mope, kid. You’re just the messenger, right? All you did was your job. And you did it well.”

I stand up. “I have some things to buy before I head home. ‘Scuse me, mister.”

“Whatever you say.” He laughs again, turning away from me, as he returns to the night: a mystery, as unknowable and strange as when I first saw him. “You have yourself a merry Christmas, Nathan Gallagher.”

Then, the rattling of the shotgun shells fades into the night, and he's gone. I can barely even see the footprints in the snow. I'm free. I mean, I still have one last thing to do before I get back, and maybe hail a cab home now that I have the money for it.

But I'm free.

Now, to give my sister the best Christmas she ever coulda had.

. . .

"Nate, where're we going?" Ava asks as I lead her out of our room and into the hallway.

"Ssssh. You're gonna wake Mom and Pop. And keep your eyes shut."

"Uh-uh."

"Hey, I mean it. No peeksies." I take my hands away from Ava's eyes, my cheeks already forming the biggest, anticipatory grin that's ever been on my face. "Alright, alright. Open."

Her eyelashes flutter while she opens her eyes, surprisingly wide awake even though it's five in the morning, December 26th. And then, the very second she sees what I bought her, she gasps, her hands flying over her mouth, and her pale green eyes go big as saucers. "No. WAY!"

Placed in our family living room, all shiny and freshly bought from straight outta the FAO Schwarz catalog, there sits a drivable toy automobile, with a honk-able horn and an oak finish and torpedo lamps for headlights. Hell, even the seat's upholstered with Fabrikoid leather. Santa would be proud; I really outdid myself on this one. Ava can tell, because she lets out a squeal of pure delight before she rushes over to the big toy and her eyes soak up every little detail of the thing.

*“Come away with me Lucille, in my merry Oldsmobile,”* she starts to sing, and I laugh as I put a finger over my mouth to quiet her down, but she’s so excited that it doesn’t even bother me that much, ‘cause it was worth it. Then, she stands up, turns away from the car, and runs headfirst into my stomach, throwing her arms around my waist. “This was the best Christmas ever, Nate.”

And, queer as it is, my eyes water up a little bit when she says that. “Sure thing, Ava.”

Then, she glances up at me, a question in her gaze. She’s only asking to be nice, but I can see she’s bubbling with excitement, wanting to drive the little car around outside and show it off to the Cohens next door. “Did you have the best Christmas ever, Nate?”

The first thing I think to do is let my eyes wander to a newspaper sprawled across the counter; it’s today’s paper, and I picked it up when I heard the newsboy drop it off at the door, because I couldn’t sleep a wink the whole night. On a tiny section on the left corner of the paper just above the funnies, I see a headline, that reads as follows:

*RETURN OF THE BLACK HAND: ITALIAN BAKER GINO ROSSI FOUND—*

My eyes stop there. I pry Ava’s hands off of me for a second, to pick up the newspaper. I glance back at her, the paper frozen in my hand, my hand hovering over the trash can. Then, I force a smile.

“You did. That’s enough for me.”

And I toss the newspaper in the trash.

