

The Magician

—Andrew Grimes

THE WOMAN RAN ONTO THE STAGE, BLOOD trickling from her thigh. She stared out at the audience, her eyes frozen in the stage lights. "Please, help me!" she screamed, her voice quivering with fear. The audience laughed in response.

She froze when she heard the curtain rustle behind her. Slowly she turned her head, feet frozen to the stage. Behind her stood a man wearing a black cape, his face covered by a white mask. He took a step forward, offering his hand.

"Get away from me!" She screamed, swinging her arms at him. The audience erupted in laughter and applause.

He retracted his hand and walked past her to the center of the stage. He stood there for a moment, his head turning side to side.

"Good evening ladies and gentleman!" A harsh voice erupted from behind the mask. "How are we this fine evening?" He was answered with more applause and a couple of drunken slurs. He waited for the room to get quiet. He turned back toward the girl. She stood transfixed on the stage, her face frozen with a look of pure horror.

"And how are you my darling?" He asked her, his voice cutting into the air. She stared at him, her arms wrapped around her torso, and her knees shaking uncontrollably.

"Please don't do this," she begged, her voice drowned out by tears.

The man in the cape took a step closer and placed his hand upon her cheek. "Oh, but I have to Miss. Svenson, you see the audience came here to see magic, not a slut beg on stage." The audience yelled in agreement. "Now what to do with you?" He circled her, his arm slowly caressing her

body. She quivered and tried to push him away, but he grabbed her around the neck and shook her violently.

"How about we cut her in half?" He turned to the audience, his teeth gritted into a sneer. "Or maybe a dunk in water is more to your pleasure?" The audience cheered and booed. "No, I know what to do with a pretty thing like you."

He released her and she stumbled to the floor, her body shaking as she cried out to the audience. "Please, help me!" The audience responded with angry chants and ferocious roars.

The man in the black cape walked over to a stool and held out a small bag to the audience. "Tonight ladies and gentlemen, you shall see this woman turned into that which lies between her sweet, sweet legs!" Cheers and laughter echoed through out the small auditorium. He smiled to them and bowed. The girl sat still. Her makeup smeared across her face, silent tears rolling down her pale cheeks.

He walked toward her and held out the bag. "Fear what is unknown!" He threw the bag onto the ground. The stage exploded into a giant smoke screen. Rainbow colored smoke swept across the stage and into the audience. The man in the black cape pulled out a re-

mote from his pocket, took one last look at the girl, and pressed the switch. The floor dropped out from underneath her and she disappeared with a scream.

When the smoke finally cleared, there he stood, and in his hands was a cat. The auditorium erupted in applause. He smiled, holding the cat high in the air. Coins and dollar bills littered the stage. He kissed the cat on top of its head and threw it into the audience. "Ladies and gentleman, the show will now take a fifteen minute recess. Please, use the bathrooms and other necessities at this time. Thank you." He walked off the stage and disappeared behind the curtain.

Backstage was filled with noises of heavy machinery, and the drunken laughter of entertainers. The man in the black cape took off his mask and handed it to a frail blonde woman leaning against the wall. She took the mask and walked away. He walked around a trolley full of expensive, colorful clothes, and walked down a flight of stairs. At the end of the stairs was a bench. Ten girls sat on the bench, heavy makeup covering their faces. He stopped in front of them. His head tilted to the side.

"Which one will it be?" he asked, aloud. The girls gig-

gled in response. Some pulling up there dresses and skirt, others whispering promises of enjoyment. He smiled and kissed their hands. His eyes froze on a girl who sat at the end of the bench. She had dark blonde hair that hung loosely across her face, her pale skin covered by red-shiny lipstick and dark mascara. She wore a tight white t-shirt that hung just above the bellybutton. Her skirt clenched tightly to her thigh.

He held out his hand to her. She looked up at him, her eyes examining him from head to toe. Finally, she reached out her hand, and he escorted her down the hallway. The chaotic noise soon subsided into the quiet tapping of their shoes against the cold concrete. He pushed the door open at the end of the hall.

"After you, my lady." He urged.

She walked past him, her perfuming arousing his nostrils. He offered her a chair and walked over to a small desk that stood in the corner of the room.

"Drink?"

She turned to him. "No, thank you."

He shrugged. "More for me." He poured a bottle of whiskey and sat in the chair across from her. They sat there for a moment. He sipped quietly on

his drink, his eyes scanning her. He set the glass down on the table. "Do you know what it is I do, Miss.."

"Rose," she said quietly, her eyes on the glass bottle.

He looked over, "Are you sure you don't want any?"

"Yes," she said. "I'm not a drinker. I just like the color of it."

He laughed out loud. "Too bad, you'd make a good drunk." He shuffled in his seat, rubbing his face with his palm. "Now then, Miss. Rose, do you know where you are?"

She sat quietly as if pondering the question, a smile spread across her face. "Yes, I'm sitting on a couch and listening to a man ask me if I know where I am."

He chuckled. "Very clever, Miss. Rose, but we have very little time for joke telling this evening. Since you are either blatantly ignorant of your where a bouts, or you cannot control that sass of yours, then I'll tell you." He leaned forward in the chair, his eyes locked on hers. "Your at your funeral, Miss. Rose."

The woman let out a laugh. "And how am I going to die?" she asked.

He leaned back into the chair, and took another drink. "I'm going to kill you Miss.

Rose." He pointed toward the door. "And they are going to watch you die, and cheer for it, beg for me to do it again and again."

She watched the honey color liquid splash against the inside of the bottle. "Is that what happened to her?"

"I assume by her you mean the girl on stage?" She nodded. "Yes, that's exactly what happened. Poor girl fell a good ways onto the concrete floor. Made quiet a mess. But nothing that a barrel and some gasoline can't fix." He paused and sniffed loudly. "I do believe you can smell her burning."

The girl smiled. "I do believe you can." She gave another small laugh. "Is that what your going to do with me?"

The man in the black cape sighed heavily. "No, Miss. Rose, how special do you think you are? Each of my assistants earn their deaths. I do not give them. I think you can understand this considering your profession."

She looked down at herself, pulling her skirt further down her thigh. She looked back up, her face expressionless. "So this is not a joke? You really intend to murder me?"

He stared at her blankly. "Yes, Miss Rose, I will murder you, and then I shall murder the rest of the neighborly prostitutes

that are sitting on that bench so eager to die."

"But why?" she asked. Her voice teasing with curiosity.

The man took another drink and set the glass down heavily upon the table. "Is it not obvious? Because I can. It is that simple Miss. Rose. There is no big meaning, no grand plan. Prostitutes will do anything for money. If that includes dying then so be it. No cops are going to sniff around for a couple of whores that went missing."

She stared at him for a moment and then looked toward the door. "But what about them? They must realize what you do."

He smiled. "Oh, yes they do. They may deny it. They may turned blindly away. But they know perfectly well. And you know what, Miss. Rose? They love it. They love the feeling of watching someone die. The anticipation of hearing that last scream. Oh, god they will pretend they don't understand. Cry out their innocence but when that blood escapes into the air." He paused and stared across the room. "They need more. We are animals, Miss. Rose. Don't forgot that."

He sipped the last of the drink and glanced down at his watch. "I am sorry dear, but we are out of time for the evening."

He looked at her with a frown on his face. "Unfortunately you are not near frightened enough." He stood up from the chair, staggered a bit, and then clenched the back of the chair for support. His eyes were glazed, he licked his lips feverishly. "You see Miss. Rose," his voice slurred with each word. "When my performers go on stage they must be frightened. That is the key to my business. Without fear then this is nothing more than a play, a lie, and that is not how a successful business man operates."

She stood erect in the chair, her eyes frozen on him. "You don't scare me."

He laughed and began to step away from the chair, his arms swaying to his side. "Oh, but I will. I have my methods. Cutting, beating, chocking, and for the more attractive types," he glanced down at her legs and smiled. "More biological ways."

He took a step toward her and fell. The glass falling from his hands and shattering on the floor. She watched as the crystal beads spread across the floor, their jagged points dripping with the toxic liquid. Her eyes crossed the room and fell upon him. He lay there, his body rigid and his eyes shut.

She sat listening to his heavy breathing, watching his

chest rise and fall. She stood up and walked toward him. "Oh, but you don't understand." she said, her voice was cold and low. "The woman you killed was my sister, and tonight I'm going to kill you."

The man in the black cape woke up the noise of applause. Each clap echoing crushing against his skull, sending tremors through out his body. He squinted at the bright light above his head, and then he saw the dark figure. His mouth hung open, his eyes frozen on her. She stared down at him, a smile spread across her thin face. She raised her hands to the audience. "Tonight ladies and gentleman, for the first time ever, a man will be cut in half."