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Opening extract from
**A Series of Unfortunate
Events 12: The
Penultimate Peril**

Written by
Lemony Snicket

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A Series of Unfortunate Events



BOOK THE TWELFTH

THE PENULTIMATE PERIL

by

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**For Beatrice -
No one could extinguish my love,
or your house.**



C H A P T E R

One

Certain people have said that the world is like a calm pond, and that anytime a person does even the smallest thing, it is as if a stone has dropped into the pond, spreading circles of ripples further and further out, until the entire world has been changed by one tiny action. If this is true, then the book you are reading now is the perfect thing to drop into a pond. The ripples will spread across the surface of the pond and the world will change for the better, with one less dreadful story for people to read and one more secret hidden at the bottom of a pond, where most people never think of looking. The miserable tale of the Baudelaire orphans will be safe

in the pond's murky depths, and you will be happier not to read the grim story I have written, but instead to gaze at the rippling scum that rises to the top of the world.

The Baudelaires themselves, as they rode in the back of a taxi driven by a woman they scarcely knew, might have been happy to jump into a pond themselves, had they known what sort of story lay ahead of them as the automobile made its way among the twisting streets of the city where the orphans had once lived. Violet, Klaus, and Sunny Baudelaire gazed out of the windows of the car, marveling at how little the city had changed since a fire destroyed their home, took the lives of their parents, and created ripples in the Baudelaires' lives that would probably never become calm. As the taxi turned a corner, Violet saw the market where she and her siblings had shopped for ingredients to make dinner for Count Olaf, the notorious villain who had become their guardian after the fire. Even after all this time, with Olaf trying

scheme after scheme to get his hands on the enormous fortune the Baudelaire parents had left behind, the market looked the same as the day Justice Strauss, a kindly neighbor and a judge in the High Court, had first taken them there. Towering over the market was an enormous, shiny building that Klaus recognized as 667 Dark Avenue, where the Baudelaires had spent some time under the care of Jerome and Esmé Squalor in an enormous penthouse apartment. It seemed to the middle Baudelaire that the building had not changed one bit since the siblings had first discovered Esmé's treacherous and romantic attachment to Count Olaf. And Sunny Baudelaire, who was still small enough that her view out the window was somewhat restricted, heard the rattle of a manhole cover as the taxi drove over it, and remembered the underground passageway she and her siblings had discovered, which led from the basement of 667 Dark Avenue to the ashen remains of their own home. Like the market and the penthouse,

the mystery of this passageway had not changed, even though the Baudelaires had discovered a secret organization known as V.F.D. that the children believed had constructed many such passageways. Each mystery the Baudelaires discovered only revealed another mystery, and another, and another, and several more, and another, as if the three siblings were diving deeper and deeper into a pond, and all the while the city lay calm on the surface, unaware of all the unfortunate events in the orphans' lives. Even now, returning to the city that was once their home, the Baudelaire orphans had solved few of the mysteries overshadowing them. They didn't know where they were headed, for instance, and they scarcely knew anything about the woman driving the automobile except her name.

"You must have thousands of questions, Baudelaires," said Kit Snicket, spinning the steering wheel with her white-gloved hands. Violet, who had adroit technical faculties—a

phrase which here means “a knack for inventing mechanical devices”—admired the automobile’s purring machinery as the taxi made a sharp turn through a large metal gate and proceeded down a curvy, narrow street lined with shrubbery. “I wish we had more time to talk, but it’s already Tuesday. As it is you scarcely have time to eat your important brunch before getting into your concierge disguises and beginning your observations as flaneurs.”

“Concierge?” Violet asked.

“Flaneurs?” Klaus asked.

“Brunch?” Sunny asked.

Kit smiled, and maneuvered the taxi through another sharp turn. Two books of poetry skittered off the passenger seat to the floor of the automobile—*The Walrus and the Carpenter, and Other Poems* by Lewis Carroll, and *The Waste Land* by T. S. Eliot. The Baudelaires had recently received a message in code, and had used the poetry of Mr. Carroll and Mr. Eliot in order to decode the message and meet Kit

Snicket on Briny Beach, and now it seemed that perhaps Kit was still talking in riddles. “A great man once said that right, temporarily defeated, is stronger than evil triumphant. Do you understand what that means?”

Violet and Sunny turned to their brother, who was the literary expert in the family. Klaus Baudelaire had read so many books he was practically a walking library, and had recently taken to writing important and interesting facts in a dark blue commonplace book. “I think so,” the middle Baudelaire said. “He thinks that good people are more powerful than evil people, even if evil people appear to be winning. Is he a member of V.F.D.?”

“You might say that,” Kit said. “Certainly his message applies to our current situation. As you know, our organization split apart some time ago, with much bitterness on both sides.”

“The schism,” Violet said.

“Yes,” Kit agreed with a sigh. “The schism. V.F.D. was once a united group of volunteers,

trying to extinguish fires—both literally and figuratively. But now there are two groups of bitter enemies. Some of us continue to extinguish fires, but others have turned to much less noble schemes.”

“Olaf,” Sunny said. The language skills of the youngest Baudelaire were still developing, but everyone in the taxi knew what Sunny meant when she uttered the name of the notorious villain.

“Count Olaf is one of our enemies,” Kit agreed, peering into her rearview mirror and frowning, “but there are many, many more who are equally wicked, or perhaps even more so. If I’m not mistaken, you met two of them in the mountains—a man with a beard, but no hair, and a woman with hair, but no beard. There are plenty more, with all sorts of hairstyles and facial ornaments. A long time ago, of course, you could spot members of V.F.D. by the tattoos on their ankles. But now there are so many wicked people it is impossible to keep track of all our

enemies—and all the while they are keeping track of us. In fact, we may have some enemies behind us at this very moment.”

The Baudelaires turned to look out of the rear window, and saw another taxi driving behind them at quite a distance. Like Kit Snicket’s automobile, the windows of this taxi were tinted, and so the children could not see anything through the darkened glass.

“Why do you think there are enemies in that taxi?” Violet asked.

“A taxi will pick up anyone who signals for one,” Kit said. “There are countless wicked people in the world, so it follows that sooner or later a taxi will pick up a wicked person.”

“Or a noble one,” Klaus pointed out. “Our parents took a taxi to the opera one evening when their car wouldn’t start.”

“I remember that evening well,” Kit replied with a faint smile. “It was a performance of *La Forza del Destino*. Your mother was wearing a red shawl, with long feathers along the edges.

During intermission I followed them to the snack bar and slipped them a box of poison darts before Esmé Squalor could catch me. It was difficult, but as one of my comrades likes to say, ‘To be daunted by no difficulty; to keep heart when all have lost it; to go through intrigue spotless; to forgo even ambition when the end is gained—who can say this is not greatness?’ And speaking of greatness, please hold on. We can’t allow a potential enemy to follow us to our important brunch.”

When someone says that their head is spinning, they are usually using an expression which means that they are very confused. Certainly the Baudelaires had occasion to use the expression in this way, after listening to a person hurriedly summarizing the troubles of a splintered secret organization and quoting various historical figures on the subject of wickedness while driving a taxi hurriedly toward some mysterious, unexplained errands. But there are rare moments when the expression “My head is

spinning” refers to a time when one’s head is actually spinning, and when Kit uttered the word “brunch,” one of these moments arrived. The steering wheel clasped firmly in her gloves, Kit turned the taxi so sharply that it spun off the road. The children’s heads—along with the rest of their bodies—spun along with the automobile as it veered into the dense, green shrubbery on the side of the road. When the taxi hit the shrubbery it kept spinning, and for a few seconds the siblings saw nothing but a green blur as the car spun through the shrubbery, and heard nothing but the crackle of branches as they scraped along the sides of the car, and felt nothing but relief that they had remembered to wear their seat belts, and then all of a sudden the Baudelaire heads stopped spinning, and they found themselves shaky but safe in a sloping lawn on the other side of the shrubbery, where the taxi had come to a stop. Kit turned off the engine and sighed deeply, leaning her head against the steering wheel.

“I probably shouldn’t do that,” she said, “in my condition.”

“Condition?” Sunny asked.

Kit lifted her head, and turned to fully face the Baudelaires for the first time since they had entered the car. She had a kind face, but there were lines of worry across her brow, and it looked like she hadn’t slept properly for quite some time. Her hair was long and messy, and she had two pencils stuck into it at odd angles. She was wearing a very elegant black coat, buttoned up all the way to her chin, but tucked into the lapel was a flower that had seen better days, a phrase which here means “had lost most of its petals and wilted considerably.” If the Baudelaires had been asked to guess Kit’s condition, they would have said she looked like a woman who had been through much hardship, and the Baudelaires wondered if their own hardships were equally clear in their faces and clothes. “I’m distraught,” Kit said, using a word which here means “sad and upset.” She opened the

door of the taxi and sighed once more. “That’s my condition. I’m distraught, and I’m pregnant.”

She unhooked her seat belt and stepped out of the car, and the Baudelaires saw she had spoken the truth. Beneath her coat, her belly had a slight but definite curve, as happens when women are expecting children. When a woman is in such a condition, it is best to avoid strain, a word which here means “physical activity that might endanger either the woman or her future offspring.” Violet and Klaus could remember when their mother was pregnant with Sunny, and spent her free time lounging on the largest sofa in the Baudelaire library, with their father fetching lemonade and pumpernickel toast, or adjusting the pillows beneath her so she was comfortable. Occasionally, he would play one of their mother’s favorite pieces of music on the phonograph, and she would rise from the sofa and dance awkwardly, holding her growing belly and making funny faces at Violet and Klaus as they watched from the doorway, but for the

most part the third Baudelaire pregnancy was spent in quiet relaxation. The Baudelaires felt certain their mother had never spun a taxicab through shrubbery during her pregnancy, and were sorry that Kit Snicket's condition did not allow her to avoid the strain of such activities.

“Gather all of your things, Baudelaires,” Kit said, “and if you don't mind, I'm going to ask you to carry my things, too—just some books and papers in the front seat. One should never leave any belongings in a taxi, because you can never be sure if you'll see them again. Please be quick about it. Our enemies are likely to turn their taxi around and find us.”

Kit turned away from the Baudelaires and began to walk quickly down the sloping lawn, while the Baudelaires looked at one another in bewilderment.

“When we arrived at Briny Beach,” Violet said, “and saw the taxi waiting for us, just like the message said, I thought we were finally going to find answers to all of our questions. But

I have more questions now than I ever did.”

“Me too,” Klaus said. “What does Kit Snicket want with us?”

“What did she mean by concierge disguises?” Violet said.

“What did she mean by observations as flâneurs?” Klaus asked.

“What’s so important about brunch?” Violet asked.

“How did she know we met those villains in the mountains?” Klaus asked.

“Where is Quigley Quagmire?” Violet asked, referring to a young man of whom the eldest Baudelaire was particularly fond, who had sent the coded message to the three children.

“Trust?” Sunny said quietly, and this was the most important question of all. By “trust,” the youngest Baudelaire meant something along the lines of, “Does Kit Snicket seem like a reliable person, and should we follow her?” and this is often a tricky question to ask about someone. Deciding whether or not to trust a person is like

deciding whether or not to climb a tree, because you might get a wonderful view from the highest branch, or you might simply get covered in sap, and for this reason many people choose to spend their time alone and indoors, where it is harder to get a splinter. The Baudelaires did not know very much about Kit Snicket, and so it was difficult to know what their future would be if they followed her down the sloping lawn toward the mysterious errands she had mentioned.

“In the few minutes we’ve known her,” Violet said, “Kit Snicket has driven a taxicab into a mass of shrubbery. Normally I would be unwilling to trust such a person, but . . .”

“The poster,” Klaus said, as his sister’s voice trailed off. “I remember it, too. Mother said she purchased it during intermission, as a souvenir. She said it was the most interesting time she’d ever had at the opera, and she never wanted to forget it.”

“The poster had a picture of a gun,” Violet

remembered, “with a trail of smoke forming the words of the title.”

Sunny nodded her head. “*La Forza del Destino*,” she said.

The three children gazed out at the sloping lawn. Kit Snicket had already walked quite some distance, without looking back to see if the children were following her. Without another word, the siblings reached into the passenger seat and gathered up Kit’s things—the two books of poetry they had spotted earlier, and a cardboard folder brimming with papers. Then they turned and began walking across the lawn. From behind the hedges came a faint sound, but the children could not tell if it was a taxicab turning around, or just the wind rustling in the shrubbery.

“*La forza del destino*” is an Italian phrase meaning “the force of destiny,” and “destiny” is a word that tends to cause arguments among the people who use it. Some people think destiny is something you cannot escape, such as

death, or a cheesecake that has curdled, both of which always turn up sooner or later. Other people think destiny is a time in one's life, such as the moment one becomes an adult, or the instant it becomes necessary to construct a hiding place out of sofa cushions. And still other people think that destiny is an invisible force, like gravity, or a fear of paper cuts, that guides everyone throughout their lives, whether they are embarking on a mysterious errand, doing a treacherous deed, or deciding that a book they have begun reading is too dreadful to finish. In the opera *La Forza del Destino*, various characters argue, fall in love, get married in secret, run away to monasteries, go to war, announce that they will get revenge, engage in duels, and drop a gun on the floor, where it goes off accidentally and kills someone in an incident eerily similar to one that happens in chapter nine of this very book, and all the while they are trying to figure out if any of these troubles are the result of destiny. They wonder and wonder at all the perils

in their lives, and when the final curtain is brought down even the audience cannot be sure what all these unfortunate events may mean. The Baudelaire orphans did not know what perils lay ahead of them, as they followed Kit Snicket down the lawn, but they wondered—just as I wondered, on that fateful evening long ago, as I hurried out of the opera house before a certain woman could spot me—if it was the force of destiny that was guiding their story, or something even more mysterious, even more dangerous, and even more unfortunate.