



The Amazing Zoltar

By Richard Miller

Chapter 1

It's Saturday night.

Colored lights everywhere, everywhere you look. Wrapped around poles, climbing like ivy along the tent edges, crisscrossing over the midway like bizarre, electric spider webs...

And the smells. The wonderful, unmistakable smell of a carnival: peanuts roasting; candied apples cooling; cotton candy swirling; bratwurst links simmering on an open grill... Sweet, magic aromas that sweep you away and take you back in time to when you were a child. The smells every bit as enticing now as they were back then.

And then there are the sounds. The exhilarating, festive noise a carnival makes - the clamor of the crowd, music spilling from loudspeakers, calliope melodies drifting through the air like wisps of smoke...and the callers - men in green or red derbies, wearing white, collarless shirts underneath plaid vests. They beckon you into their tents, they do, luring you in with promises of the unbelievable and the amazing. Their canes sweep through the air as they usher the crowd through open tent flaps as if herding sheep into a pen.

And everywhere, from every direction, the sound of metal wheels clacking and banging against steel rails. It is the rides that once terrified you as a child and thrill you still as an adult.

And then there is the most important sound of all: the raucous screams and laughter of the people themselves. All of whom have come tonight for the same reason - to be entertained.

And entertained they are.

In all, the place is like a giant kaleidoscope of sensations, a surrealistic explosion of sights, sounds, and aromas of the most captivating and tantalizing type.

Allison and Muriel stroll down the carnival's midway in no certain hurry to get to nowhere in particular. They saunter through the crowd, enjoying their cotton candy, giggling the way girls do, and try to decide on the next ride or attraction.

Tough choice. They love them all. Despite the fact that they have done them all a thousand times over, they enjoy the attractions and rides no less tonight than they ever have. It may all be familiar territory by now, but it's still, to them, a cherished experience and one they look forward to every year.

Both are twenty-two, friends since childhood, and for ten years now, ever since the carnival began its annual stops here in their quaint town of Melsburg, the two young women have done what they are doing now - cruising the midway, watching the boys watch them, and occasionally ducking into an attraction or climbing aboard a ride. It's the same routine every year. Same rides, same attractions, same boy's ill-intended stares; the latter being the main reason they even come. For them, carnival time is synonymous with mating season, and the two of them are prime and ready for breeding.

And tonight, they've come dressed for the occasion: tight jeans, tube tops too small, high heels that exaggerate the sideways flick of their asses, and last but not least, no underwear. No bras, no panties. Standard procedure for these types of situations.

So, they walk the midway, the girls do, strutting along, showing off their wares, and casting their bait, so to speak, into the murky waters of male libido. And from what they can see, the fishing is fine.

They had just emerged from the mirror maze, passed on the fun house, and were en route to the Ferris wheel when Muriel spots it first. Something new. Something the carnival has never had before. She stops and turns to Allison...

"Hey, what's that over there?"

Allison looks...

"Over where?"

"Over there!"

Muriel points to the strange contraption standing somewhat separate and alone from the rest of the attractions. Allison stuffs another wad of candy in her mouth and shrugs...

"uhh aah oowwaahhh" (cotton candy speak for 'Fuck if I know!').

Whatever it is, it has piqued Muriel's curiosity. She's twelve-years-old again...

"Oooohhhh! Let's check it out!. C'mon! C'mon! Hurry! Let's see what it is!"

She says this while jumping up and down and jerking on Allison's arm as if it were a pump handle...

"Alright! Alright, already! Quit yanking on me, bitch! You're gonna pull my arm out its socket!"

But she doesn't. Muriel doesn't stop. She continues to tug and pull until finally, Allison gives in, and the two do it. They check out the carnival's new attraction.

Muriel's the first to get there with Allison in close tow behind her, still being dragged by her arm and doing her best to hang on to her cotton candy. The two girls stop just short of the - for lack of a better word - 'thing'. Neither of them has ever seen anything quite like it, so they stand side by side and, together, try to figure out what it is, exactly, they're looking at.

For sure, it's a machine of some sort. That, they're certain of. Like a robot thing, maybe. Whatever it is, it looks old, almost ancient. Like some kind of retro thing. Like some type of throwback to the forties or something. Definitely old school. Vveerry old school. And big, with the whole thing being roughly the same size and shape as an old phone booth. Or a refrigerator, even, only a little taller.

They move in for a closer look and give the strange contraption a good going over, cautiously touching it here and there and marveling at its authentic, antique appearance as if it were a rare collector's item. Which, for all they knew, it probably was.

The lower half of the machine is boxed in with sheet metal painted in bright carnival colors: yellows and oranges interspersed with greens and reds, all swirling together and around each other like some psychedelic album cover from the sixties. Then, painted across the front on top the colorful pattern, bold white lettering that reads...

THE AMAZING ZOLTAR

Teller of Futures, Reader of Fortunes

And then, under that, in much smaller letters...

Accurate fortunes guaranteed or your money back!

The upper half of the machine is a glass enclosure of sorts, encasing the figure of a strange, mysterious-looking man from the waist up. A robot of some kind. Some Ali Baba-looking thing wearing a yellow satin shirt with billowy sleeves and no buttons, one side simply wrapping around the other. Very Lawrence of Arabia.

The face is exotic but stiff and lifeless, with fixed eyes that stare out at nothing and painted lips that never move. He has a thin, Middle Eastern-style mustache that curls on each end and a goatee that comes to a point in front of his chin, the point of which curls upwards as well. And lastly, gold hoop earrings that dangle from each of his lifeless, robotic earlobes.

All very exotic and mystifying, but the thing that completes the whole look, the finishing touch, is the turban the fortune teller wears atop his head: shiny white satin with a large, gleaming green gemstone embedded on its front.

Overall, the thing looks like a genie, or half of one, anyway. Like what might have popped out of Aladdin's lamp.

The top of the machine—the roof, if you could call it that—is painted gold and shaped like a spire, like something you'd see in a photo of the Taj Mahal. All very exotic and, for sure, very, very cool.

On the lower part of the booth's front, just below the white lettering, is a smallish chrome plate that features a coin slot and a metal coin return button. Raised lettering near the slot reads 25¢.

Allison looks at Muriel, who's trying to remove a sizable gob of cotton candy from the tip of her nose but not having much luck. She pulls on the goopy wad, but it doesn't come off. Instead, it stretches like some long, rubbery booger, almost as if it were a piece of taffy being pulled from both ends.

Allison ignores the disgusting display, hoping no guys are watching, and asks...

"Whatcha think? Should I do it? I mean, it's only a quarter, right? What's the worst that can happen?"

She glances back at the white lettering on the front of the machine: 'Or your money back.'

Muriel just shrugs. At the moment, she's not overly concerned about Allison's fortune being told. Right now, she has problems of her own. Namely, the cotton candy booger she can't seem to get rid of. Every time she tries to pull it off, the goo just stretches further and further. The thing's at least two feet long now, and there seems to be no end to it. Making matters worse is the fact that fighting with the booger from hell has caused her eyes to cross.

And this is a problem. Her arms are only so long, and this fucking thing keeps stretching like some novelty shop prank. She'd ask Allison to help, but she knows that's never gonna happen. No way she'd be caught dead pulling on someone's cotton candy booger. Not even with a pair of those yellow dishwashing gloves. In Allison's mind, there are simply some things friends shouldn't ask other friends to do, and pulling on boogers, cotton candy, or otherwise, is near the top of that list.

Sorry, but Muriel's on her own with this one, stupid bitch.

Anyway, Allison gives her friend an agitated sneer and leaves the retard to her booger activities. She turns her attention to her handbag and begins digging through it in search of her coin purse. She finds the purse, fishes a quarter out, and quickly feeds it into the fortune teller's slot. Instantly, in a terrifying burst, the machine awakens. Inside, wheels begin to spin. Cogs start to rotate, and gears begin turning other gears. The entire machine begins to shudder and shake and tremble. Inside the glass enclosure, small light bulbs begin to blink in sequence like a theater marquee, and the robot man known as Zoltar comes to life.

Weird.

Too weird.

The contraption, with all its clamor, is starting to freak Allison out, thinking maybe the fucking thing's about to explode. She takes a step back just as the machine's shaking and rumbling grows even more intense, almost violent, even. Zoltar's eyes suddenly light up like red lasers, and he begins swiveling at the waist from side to side while his arms begin moving up and down as if beating an invisible drum.

And then, out of nowhere, an eerie, mechanical voice suddenly roars out with hair-raising volume...

"I AM THE AMAZING ZOLTAR! GREAT MYSTIC OF THE EAST, TELLER OF FORTUNES!"

The voice is immediately followed by an evil, equally mechanical, and equally loud laughter...

"BBBWWAAA. HHHHAAA HHHHAAAA HA HA HA HA!"

And finally, a blinding blue bolt of lightning shoots from the top of the spire, creating a bursting crack of thunder so loud and frightening it causes both girls to leap backward in stark terror. They drop their cotton candy and clutch onto each other for dear life.

The girls are terrified. The hairs on their arms are standing straight, and chills race up and down their spines. Their first inclination, both of them, is to bolt and run for their lives, but they soon come to their senses, and cooler heads prevail. They realize they're being silly about the whole thing. After all, it's only a machine, right? A robot? Besides, isn't that why they came to the carnival in the first place? For thrills and excitement?

Sure, it is.

And that's what they're getting. Thrills and excitement. Twenty-five cents worth, to be exact.

So, they don't run away. Instead, the two stay where they are, still clinging to one another, and wait to see what the robot will do next; both of them completely drawn in, at this point, by the machine's mysterious, almost hypnotic, allure.

In the meantime, Zoltar reaches under his card table and produces a stack of tarot cards. He lays the top five cards down, face up and side by side, on the table in front of him. His head begins to nod up and down, over and over, and again, the terrifying mechanical voice bellows...

"I AM THE AMAZING ZOLTAR, TELLER OF FUTURES! BEHOLD, I HAVE TOLD YOURS!"

Another terrifying lightning bolt, accompanied by yet another clap of deafening thunder.

And then...

Nothing.

Zoltar rests his hands on the card table and quits moving. His eyes turn dark, and his head tilts slightly downward. The lights inside the booth quit blinking as well, and the whole machine falls silent and still as if having turned itself off.

But then, suddenly, another noise. A clacking of sorts, like the sound of someone typing on an old typewriter. At the same time, a slender white piece of paper begins emerging from a slot in front of the machine, feeding out more and more as the clacking continues.

After a few moments, the typing sound stops, and the long, slender paper ejects. It flutters softly and silently to the ground like a bird's lost feather.

The two girls look at the paper and then look at each other, neither really knowing what to do, and neither really wanting to do anything. Least of all, getting close enough to the machine to pick the paper off the ground.

Again, Allison reminds herself that it's only a machine. A carnival attraction. She swallows hard and then releases her grip on Muriel. Cautiously, she approaches the now silent machine until she's standing a mere foot in front of it. She reaches down and picks the paper up from the ground, and notices there are words printed on it. No doubt her twenty-five-cent fortune. She stretches the paper out in front of her and reads the words out loud so that Muriel can hear...

You have less than two minutes left to live.

"What?"

Allison's face scrunches in confusion...

"What the fuck is this? My fortune? What kind of fortune is that?"

She's pissed, angry. She's just been had by a machine. No way she's about to die, which means this robot-scramming piece of shit has just robbed her of a quarter. Sure, it's only twenty-five cents, but it's not about the money. Principals are in play here. She's just been scammed by some swarmy, stupid-ass, two-thousand-year-old antique.

She becomes enraged. Her face knots in an angry scowl, and she begins kicking the robot machine as hard as her legs will let her...

"You phony piece of shit! You fraud! I want my fucking money back! Give me back my quarter, you...you ASSHOLE! I want a refund! You hear me? I want a refund, you piece of shit!"

But Zoltar remains dark and silent and quite unaffected by the girl's tantrum.

Zoltar's lack of response enrages Allison even more, so she kicks the machine even harder, while at the same time, begins banging on the front glass with her balled fists. Hard.

Zoltar wakes. He's seen this before. He is in danger of having his front glass broken, so he decides to take corrective measures. Again, his eyes glow red, and the lights inside blink once more. Likewise, the mechanical noise returns as well.

The girl ceases her assault for the moment and just looks at the insipid machine. She's confused. She's not quite sure why the robot suddenly decided to turn itself on again. Maybe it's seen the error of its ways. Maybe that's it. It sees that it has made a mistake and is going to refund her money after all. So, in light of this fact, Allison stands where she is, arms crossed, face scrunched, foot tapping, and waits for her twenty-five cents. But, like so many other events in Allison's life, tonight, things don't turn out quite the way she wants.

Not quite.

Zoltar, not being a complete idiot, has heard the girl's complaint and, as such, decides to address the matter accordingly. He reaches under the table and retrieves something he's sure will resolve the problem once and for all: a .38 revolver. He cocks the hammer, aims it at the irate bitch in front of him, and pulls the trigger. Instantly, two things happen: 1) A hole appears in the booth's front glass, one that happens to match the hole in the now-dead bitch's face. 2) She quits complaining.

KAPOW!

The back of Allison's head explodes, and she slumps limp and lifeless to the ground. Zoltar fans the smoke away with his hand and then returns the weapon to its previous spot. The matter settled, he then turns himself off again, his point clearly made - there will be **NO** refunds issued tonight.

Again, the clacking sound.

Another slip of paper emerges from the slot and floats downward, eventually coming to rest on the dead girl's body. It reads...

Told you so.

More clacking. Another slip of paper. It, too, floats down and lands next to the previous slip. This one simply reads...

Bitch.

Chapter 2

Two uniformed cops secure the crime scene with the standard yellow and black police tape while another four officers lift the fortune-telling machine from its bottom. Once off the ground, they carry it to a black and white PD pickup truck whose tailgate is lowered and waiting to receive the prisoner.

Somewhere nearby, a car door slams closed. The meat wagon. Its revolving top light turns on as it slowly drives away, its only passenger in no kind of hurry to get to her next destination. Detective Tanner stuffs another stick of Juicy Fruit in his mouth as he watches it leave the carnival grounds. His jaw is already sore from the constant workout, but he chews another stick anyway.

The gum is to help him stop smoking, but so far hasn't helped that much. Not the way he had hoped, anyway. True, he's down to five packs a day now, but the goal was for two. And one? Yeah, right. Ain't happening. Not in this line of work. He knows he should quit altogether, and would, but then what would he do with his hands at AA meetings?

But who's he fooling? Tanner spits the gum out and lights up.

He turns to his right and watches as the officers load the suspect into the truck bed. Off to his left, he sees the crime's only eyewitness. Still catatonic, still unresponsive. She's sitting upright on a gurney in the back of an ambulance, eyes still crossed, with a two-foot-long cotton candy booger still dangling from the end of her nose. Not a pretty sight. Two attendants work in unison as they finish buckling the white restraining jacket she's now wearing. No hospital for this one, just a nice, cozy rubber room. Doesn't matter. With her eyes bent like that, the detective doubts she would have made a credible witness anyway. A defense attorney would have had a field day with that one.

Next, he walks over to the chalk outline and notices that some Wisenheimer has drawn a twat and tits on it, both greatly exaggerated. Not bad, still, he's gonna have to have a talk with those boys.

Or not.

At least this way, you know what the gender was.

He removes his hat and runs a tired, overworked, and underpaid hand through the little hair he has left. This time last year, he could barely run a comb through it, it was so thick. And now? Well...

He replaces the hat, tilting it back on his head like some reporter from an old sixties movie. He then parks his fist on his hips and, once more, looks down at the bloody mess on the ground in front of him. The detective shakes his head and says to no one but himself...

"Now I've seen it all."

Fat chance a crime scene is going to spring any surprises on a ten-year veteran homicide detective in New York, but this one has. Oh sure, he's seen it dozens of times - a fortune-telling robot loses it and shoots a customer. But usually, it's an arm or shoulder, sometimes a leg, even, but always a wound. Always. Never a headshot. Never a homicide. Not like this.

Again, he shakes his head in disbelief and quickly comes to the conclusion that, yeah, it's gonna be a 'why me' kinda day. Just like the day before and the day before that one. He pulls a bottle of Roloids from his jacket, twists the top off, brings it to his mouth, and upends it as if he were finishing off a Budweiser.

A uniformed cop walks up...

"Got that Zoltar guy strapped down and ready to go. Where we taking him?"

"County", he tells the uniform, "Just like the rest of 'em. Let him sit in a cell and stew for a while."

The cop turns to leave, but the detective grabs his elbow and stops him...

"And Lou, see if you can round up that owner and send him over here, will ya? I gotta few questions for him. What's his name again?"

"Hindenburger? Iceburger? Franksandburger...I dunno. Some Nazi shit like that."

"Figures."

Lou leaves and heads toward the pickup. Meanwhile, the two back doors of the ambulance slam shut, and it, too, drives away with sirens wailing. Lou makes it to the pickup, slaps the roof twice, and the truck quickly falls in behind the ambulance.

About that time, the forensics team arrives. They quickly set up shop and begin combing the crime scene on hands and knees in search of evidence, large tweezers in one hand, a huge magnifying glass in the other; people who, for sure, watch way too much TV.

Way too much.

Detective Tanner flicks the current butt away and fishes another Lucky Strike from the rumpled, nearly empty pack. He stuffs the new smoke between his lips and snaps his Zippo to life. He takes a long, thoughtful drag, half watching the forensic guys do their NCIS thing while he tosses the sketchy facts of the case over and over in his mind like clothes in a Maytag.

Only, these clothes aren't drying.

Something about this whole thing smells, but he's not sure what. The robot dude is claiming self-defense, but what if it's something else? A cover-up, maybe. A love triangle gone bad. Something like that.

What if...

What if he loved her, but she loved something else? A claw machine, maybe. Yeah, a claw machine. That thing that always manages to lose its grip on your stuffed animal just when you're about to drop it in the prize basket. Fucking scammer. Seventy-eight dollars later, and you still got nothing to show for your money. OK, a cheesy key FOB, maybe, but that's not what the hottie hanging on your arm is pining for. She wants the Bullwinkle doll, and a key chain with Don Rickles' face on it ain't gonna cut the mustard. She's a dame, and like all dames with double D credentials, she wants what she wants.

And usually gets it.

But not that night.

A hundred and twelve dollars later, he's busted, and the Bullwinkle doll just smirks at him through the glass, his hands raised to his sides, palms up, as if to say, 'That's all you got? That's all you work'n wit, bitch?'

Bad memory, and one he's never gotten over. But anyway...

He shakes the memory from his head and refocuses his thoughts back to the claw machine theory.

Sure, it's a scamming piece of shit, but murder? No way. That's just stupid. Besides, a claw machine would never go for a two-bit carnie slut like... like...

He pulls a small, spiral-bound notebook from his shirt pocket and flips through the pages...

...Allison. Allison McGregor. In his mind, pure carnie trash. He's dated sluts like her all his life and knows the type - been there, fucked that, divorced it later. Repeat. So yeah, he knows the type.

So much so, it causes him to wonder...

He taps a thoughtful forefinger against his chin and thinks about it for a moment. What if he's wrong about the love triangle? What if the whole thing was a setup instead, a trap? She lures this Zoltar into a one-night fling and then later comes up pregnant. Or so she says. After that, she leans on him to keep her quiet. Says she wants a cut of his nightly take or else it's National Inquirer time...

"I'M PREGNANT WITH HIS CHILD!"

(close-up photo of a girl's hands planted on an exposed, pregnant belly)

CARNIVAL GOER CLAIMS ROBOT FORTUNE TELLER MOLESTED HER SINCE A TEENAGER AND NOW SHE'S PREGNANT WITH HIS CHILD!

(photo of Zoltar holding tarot cards in front of his face to thwart the paparazzi)

THE AMAZING ZOLTAR ARRESTED ON MULTIPLE COUNTS. OTHER WOMEN FINALLY COMING OUT OF CLOSET AND SPEAKING OUT! CLAIMS ZOLTAR'S THE BILL COSBY OF THE CARNIVAL CIRCUIT!

Yeah, that would work. He's being blackmailed, sees an opportunity, and jumps on it. No denying the evidence on this one. The carnival security footage clearly shows the girl attacking Zoltar in a fit of rage.

But did he have to shoot her? In the face?

Sure, he did; if he was being blackmailed, that is. It all fits. A perfect crime. Perfect, that is, until I came along.

He lets out an exasperated sigh and says to no one there...

"Yeah. One of those days."

He pulls the Roloids bottle back out to down another mouthful, but it's tapped out, so he tosses it. Instead, he searches his jacket for a leftover joint. You never know.

About that time, a wiry, withered old man dressed in black pants, black jacket, and collared white shirt walks up to him...

"You must be Detective Tanner. Heard you wanted to talk to me."

The old man in his seventies extends a hand to the detective. The detective simply stares at the hand with his best 'yeah, right' look, and the old man lowers his arm. Tanner asks the fossil...

"And just who the hell are you?"

"Name's Haissenburger."

"Oh, yeah. Owner, right?"

"Yes, sir."

Notebook still in hand, Tanner flips through the pages until he finds the correct one...

"OK, just a few questions, if you don't mind."

"Certainly."

"First of all, how is it a robot fortune teller came to be in possession of a firearm?"

"Yeah, that. Well, my fault, actually. See, detective, we always set up in decent areas, but a lot of times, those decent areas aren't that far from some really bad neighborhoods, even ghettos and barrios sometimes, and while the rest of us are able to sleep behind locked doors, poor Zoltar is left outside on his own to fend for himself. Several times, people have tried to break into his coin box or even carry him off. So, what I did was buy him a gun and a box of shells so that he'd at least have a fighting chance."

The detective purses his lips and jots a few more notes in his book. Without looking up as he writes, he tells the owner...

"I see. Perfectly understandable."

A few more notes, and he flips the notebook closed. He stuffs it in his top pocket and, at the same time, grabs a business card while he's there. He hands the card to the old man and tells him...

"I think that'll be all for now, Mr...Mr..."

"Haissenburger."

"Right. Haissenburger. That's Na (was about to say Nazi but catches himself)...er, German, right?"

The old man nods...

"That's correct. I'm a German immigrant."

"Yeah, well, anyway, you have my card. You think of something, you give me a ring."

"I'll do that, detective."

"Good."

And with that, the old man turns and lumbers his way back to wherever it is he came from. Detective Tanner crosses his arms and watches as the ancient fart slowly fades away into the scenery of the carnival.

Something's still bothering him, though. Tugging at him, nagging him. He can't quite put his finger on it, not yet, but the smell factor on this one is high.

High, indeed.

* * * * *

What's probably bothering the detective, but he doesn't know it, is this: this is nothing new for Zoltar. He's been killing carnival patrons he doesn't like for years now, something the old man could have told him, but didn't. He didn't lie about it, just didn't tell him. Would have told him had the detective asked, but he didn't. The detective never once bothered to ask if Zoltar had a history of killing people, and the way the old man sees it - no ask, no tell.

Still, the fact remains that Zoltar has left a string of dead bodies that stretches from here to Utah and beyond. All shot point blank in the face, and in every instance, always - ALWAYS - preceded by the same Zoltar printed fortune...

You have less than two minutes left to live.

And the thing is, he's been doing it all these years with impunity because, well, face it. Never in the history of law enforcement has a carnival robot ever been brought up on murder charges.

That is, until now.

Today, Zoltar's luck has finally run out. He's crossed paths with the wrong detective this time. And, not just any detective, mind you, but, rather, one with an attitude. A detective harboring a deep-rooted hate for carnival robots due to his bad experiences with claw machines as a dating adult. The bearer of deep, emotional scars that have never healed and, until now, had no outlet for revenge.

That is, until he met Zoltar.

* * * * *

Meanwhile, back at the county jail...

Zoltar sits in a dank, cold cell alone and busies himself with the latest issue of *Carnival Hotties*, something one of the guards was nice enough to bring him. They all like him, the guards do, because he reads their daily fortunes for them. Works out fine. They have their futures told, and Zoltar makes extra money for commissary stuff.

A guard walks up to the bars...

"Hey Zoltar, got a visitor here to see you."

A man wearing a plain, somewhat ill-fitting, gray J.C. Penny suit appears and stands beside the cell door. He's carrying a manila folder with the words 'State of New York vs The Amazing Zoltar' printed in black Sharpie across the front.

It's the public defender he's been waiting to see. Could have gone with a paid lawyer - he's got enough money in his coin box - but didn't. He needs that money for something else. Something that makes whatever attorney he uses a non-issue.

Under normal circumstances, Zoltar would have been put in an interrogation room to visit with his attorney, but, well, county jail guards are a lazy lot. It would take at least four of them to pick Zoltar up and carry him all the way to the interrogation room, and that just ain't happening. So instead, they gave the robot its own cell. Something of a luxury when you consider that there's standing room only in all the other cells.

The guard slips the heavy brass key in the lock, opens the door, and the state-paid-for mouthpiece enters the cell. The guard tells the lawyer...

"I'll just leave you two love birds alone and give you some privacy. Yell when you're done."

The guard leaves, and his footsteps quickly fade away down the corridor. The attorney turns to the machine and introduces himself...

"My name's Hamilton. I'm your court-appointed..."

But he's cut short by the clacking noise the machine begins to make. He watches as a slender length of white paper emerges from its fortune slot. He grabs the paper and reads the words printed on it...

"Call this man. He'll explain everything. 556-780-4921."

The attorney stares at the paper completely befuddled. Bewildered, even. Sounds fishy to him, but for the time being, he'll invest a little faith in his client and honor the request. Besides, without talking to the man belonging to the number first, a conversation with Zoltar at this point may be premature. He walks to the bars and yells for the guard.

Chapter 3

Four months later...

It's a packed house today with every available seat taken, just like everyone knew it would be. Always the case with these high-profile trials, and this one has just raised the bar. A lot. And, of course, the hype didn't help matters any, plastered on everything you can plaster hype on - newspapers, TV, radio, billboards, on the sides of buses, bus stop benches, blimps at football games, fat women's asses...*even* the cover of Time magazine itself (New York versus the robot. Zoltar goes to trial!).

There were even rumors of a new PlayStation game coming out soon, and that Johnny Depp had signed with Columbia Pictures for the upcoming Tim Burton movie.

Quite a stir.

As a result, every eye in the nation was now turned to the events that would soon transpire in this courtroom today - a fact that was not the least bit lost on the prosecutor, District Attorney Eric Dalton. The way he saw it was that his ship had finally rolled in. Today would be his day to shine, and shine he would. Like a diamond.

The case was a no-brainer, actually, open and shut. After all, there was the indisputable security camera footage that clearly showed the defendant shooting an unarmed woman in the face, and really, it just doesn't get better than that. Too, too easy.

Still, while the nation's spotlight was on him, Mr. Dalton's plans were to milk this thing for everything it was worth. He had every intention of twisting the drama dial all the way up on this one and turning it into a showcase, career-defining conviction. Had to. His political future depended on it. For him, the DA's office was just a stepping stone, just another rung on the ladder he was quickly climbing. The real brass rings would be the mayor's office next and, after that, the governor's mansion. And after that, who knows? The Senate? Attorney General? With his charm, his winning personality, his tenacious drive, and Matthew McConaughey's good looks, he knew one thing for sure: that with the Zoltar win behind him, he'd be on the fast track to fame and fortune, his destiny.

And it all starts today, here in this courtroom.

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The room itself is abuzz with excitement. You can feel it in the air, even. Murmurs and whispers, and low, muffled chatter flow through the courtroom as spectators sit and patiently wait for the trial to begin.

It's a who's who crowd gathered here today, with anybody who's a somebody—the rich, the famous, and the politically connected—in attendance and seated somewhere in the spectator's section, all of them are giddy with excitement and gripped in almost unbearable anticipation.

And why wouldn't they be?

Because, no matter how famous you may be, or hope to become, or how much money you may have, you simply can't buy entertainment the likes of which these folk were about to experience. Simply stated, it's the stuff pay-per-views are made of - a robot on trial for murder.

And make no mistake about it, today, in this courtroom, history will be made.

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A door behind the pulpit opens, and the bailiff orders everyone to rise.

Judge Rainey enters the courtroom and takes his usual seat behind the pulpit. He bangs the gavel and calls the court into session. He turns to the bailiff...

"You may proceed."

"Your Honor, today we have The State of New York vs. The Amazing Zoltar."

The judge nods...

"Very well."

He turns to the prosecutor...

"Mr. Dalton, is the prosecution prepared to proceed?"

The prosecutor stands and replies...

"We are, Your Honor."

The prosecutor returns to his seat, and the judge then turns his attention to the defense...

"And the defense?"

The public defender stands. He takes a quick glance at his client and then turns to the judge and replies...

"The defense is prepared as well, Your Honor."

The judge again nods his approval and returns his attention to the prosecutor...

"Mr. Dalton, you may proceed."

And so it was that the trial of the century, The State of New York vs. The Amazing Zoltar, began.

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The prosecutor wasted precious little time in launching his onslaught against the defense. He calls one witness after another, after another, all in dizzying succession: the detective in charge of the case; cops at the crime scene;

the medical examiner; forensic experts; ballistic experts; carnival employees; criminal psychiatrists, and even, as icing on the cake, fortune-telling robot profilers from the FBI.

And so it went.

The hands on the courtroom clock spun round and round as witness after witness gave one devastating testimony after another, with each one adding its own lethal nail to the defense's already doomed coffin.

And if the testimonies weren't damaging enough, then there was the deluge of evidence: security camera video on sixty-inch flatscreen monitors; poster-sized enlargements of crime scene photos; large, detailed ballistic graphs in vibrant colors; pie charts; aerial photos; a four-foot-tall mockup of the slug taken from the victim's head; crime reenactments performed by local drama club volunteers. It went on and on and on.

Dalton was relentless in his attack, firing one deadly salvo after another, and all of them scoring direct hits. It was obvious to anyone watching that the prosecutor had indeed done his homework well on this one, and that every 'i' had been dotted, every 't' crossed, and that no stone had been left unturned.

In little or no time, the trial had turned into a complete blood bath for the defense. A joke, really, and not even a funny one at that. It was becoming hard, if not impossible, not to feel sorry for the poor, hapless public defender who seemed to be able to do little more than take the complete shellacking he was getting, shrinking smaller and smaller in his seat with each new blow the prosecution dealt.

It was sad, really. Sad because the public defender wasn't a bad guy or anything, he wasn't. That simply wasn't the case. It's just that, well, he was a moron. Born that way. Not his fault, really.

Be that as it may, the prosecution had little sympathy for Hamilton's shortcomings, whatever they were, and continued its vicious beating. A beating which, by all accounts, was nothing short of a complete and total overkill.

But today, for Mr. Dalton, overkill would not be enough.

Not quite.

He wanted more.

He wanted nothing less than Zoltar's mechanical head on a platter, and to get it, the prosecutor would play his one final trump card.

The coup de gras.

* * * * *

The final death blow to the defense's case came in the form of the dead girl's parents, Mr. and Mrs. McGregor, with each parent taking the stand and giving his/her own heartbreaking, tearful testimony, heart-rending accounts of how the evil killer robot seated at the defense table had devastated their lives. Not only devastated them, but robbed the two of any hope for happiness they might have in the future by taking their cherished, beloved daughter, Allison, from them.

The testimony was crushing. Not only for the parents but for the spectators as well, as everyone listened on with pained expressions, their faces slightly turned away and cringed by the terrible emotional trauma of it all.

It got bad. Real bad. To the point that several times during the McGregor's testimony, Judge Rainey had to actually stop the proceedings and give the parent time to regain their composure, going so far, even, as to allow each one the option of returning at a later date to complete the testimony. But neither accepted the judge's compassionate offer. Both parents felt the same way - they wanted the trial over. They wanted justice done. They not only wanted Zoltar sentenced, they expected nothing less than front-row seats at the car crusher when he met his end.

And the sooner, the better.

So, as painful as it was, the mother and father dug down deep and found the fortitude necessary to struggle through the testimonies. Their only consolation for doing so being the idea that their daughter would finally rest in peace now, knowing that her killer had been brought to justice.

And then there was the veteran prosecutor himself, who, by this time, should have been hardened by this type of courtroom drama and immune to its emotional impact. But apparently, that wasn't the case. At least not today.

For the duration of the parent's testimony, Mr. Dalton stood in front of the witness stand, poised like a marathon runner who had just crossed the finish line, exhausted and desperately trying to recover. He stood leaning forward, braced by an extended hand gripping the witness stand railing, with his head lowered and his eyes shut tight as if listening to the testimony was almost more than even he could endure.

So, so melodramatic and cheesy, like a horribly overacted William Shatner scene from Star Trek, it was that bad.

But cheesy as it may have been, the prosecutor's performance was no less effective, and by the time the McGregors had finished testifying, there wasn't a single eye in the courtroom that didn't have a tissue wiping it dry. Even Judge Rainey himself pulled out a handkerchief to dry his own eyes and blow his nose.

Sad. So very sad.

And all this time, throughout the prosecutor's relentless, brutal attack, the defense attorney did little more than listen on while adding to his collection of doodles on his legal pad. Never once objecting, and when asked to cross-examine, always giving the same reply - 'We have no questions at this time, Your Honor'.

Which the prosecutor found odd. Normally, no matter how lame his defense may be, the opposing attorney would, at a minimum, usually object to something. If for no other reason than to make a good showing for his client.

But not this one.

To say that the public defender seemed disinterested in the proceedings would be an understatement. To say he was incompetent and clueless would be closer to the truth. So much so that the prosecutor began to have suspicions. Suspicious that maybe a lack of interest in the proceedings *was* his opponent's defense strategy. That, in giving a completely incompetent performance, the door would be open for a possible dismissal in the future based on a claim of ineffectual representation. An extreme courtroom tactic, maybe, but it's been known to happen. So

yeah, maybe this was the defense attorney's strategy - getting his client off at the expense of his own professional reputation.

But no. Dalton dismisses the notion simply because of the fact that it's a public defender he's talking about. Not exactly the sharpest knife in the litigation drawer, as everyone knows. A defense strategy like that would require - at a minimum - the use of a very clever, if not outright devious, legal mind. A quality not known to exist in public defender circles, as a general rule.

Still, he doesn't get it. He doesn't get it, but, whatever. A win is a win.

* * * * *

Eventually, the prosecution exhausts its witness list and rests its case.

Up to this point, Zoltar's trial had been an entirely one-sided effort - prosecution only. It became painfully obvious early on that the J.C. Penny suit had no defense to offer and that he was there simply to make sure his client's rights weren't violated. That, and to see that proper protocol was followed. Nothing more. It's what's known as a 'minimal presence', something defense attorneys do when they know there's no hope. Legally speaking, it's the equivalent of a turtle tucking itself into its shell.

Needless to say, it was a fairly foregone conclusion that, with the prosecution resting its case, the trial was essentially over, and it was now simply a matter of deciding the guilty Zoltar's sentence. And, as much as Judge Rainey would have liked to have done that - cut to the chase and gone straight to sentencing - he couldn't. Procedure had to be followed, and as such, three things had to happen before he could send Zoltar to the car crusher:

- 1) The defense must be given the chance to present its case (call witnesses, present evidence).
- 2) The attorneys must be given a chance to present closing arguments.
- 3) The jury must decide a verdict.

With this in mind, Judge Rainey turns his attention to the public defender...

"Mr. Hamilton, before the court moves to closing arguments, are there any witnesses you wish to call?"

At this point, most of the spectators have seen enough. The drama has played out, and the trial, for their purposes, was essentially over. The only thing remaining now was legal formalities, and was something the drama seekers had little or no interest in. That being the case, they begin gathering their handbags and coats in preparation to leave when something suddenly happens. Something completely unexpected. So unexpected that it causes everyone to freeze where they stand and look on with a renewed interest, wondering where this new development will lead.

It's Hamilton, the public defender. For the first time since the trial began, he responds to a Judge Rainey question with something other than the usual uninspired and minimal reply. The man looks up from his doodles, pen still in hand, and tells the judge...

"No, Your Honor. The defense..."

But he stops mid-sentence. He looks down at his legal pad, thinks for a moment, and then looks to his right at his client, The Amazing Zoltar. He looks at him, knowing that this 'thing', this robot, has placed not only his faith, but his well-being in the hands of his protector, his attorney. He has, in fact, entrusted his entire future to this man, confident beyond measure that he will do his utmost to help him and see that justice truly does prevail here today.

And Hamilton knows this. All too well, he understands what's at stake here. Again, he looks down at his legal pad and considers the moment, fully realizing the importance of his next words. He knows that if ever there was a time to rise to the occasion, to step up to the plate, this was it; that this is what his whole career - perhaps even his life - has come down to. This day, this moment. He takes a deep breath, looks up at the judge, and proceeds to give the man a most unanticipated reply...

"Well, Your Honor, there is this one person I would like to question, if it wouldn't be too much trouble."

Judge Rainey's eyebrows jerk upward in disbelief. He's surprised, if not outright shocked, by the attorney's response, as was the rest of the courtroom, with everyone returning to their seats, sitting on the edges, and leaning as far forward as possible to take in whatever drama was about to unfold.

Judge Rainey leaves a single curious eyebrow lifted and asks...

"Just one?"

"Yes, sir. If that's OK."

Hamilton pushes his nerdy glasses to the bridge of his nose and then diverts his gaze from the judge back to his legal pad as if embarrassed to even be making such a request - to question a witness.

The judge lets out a slight chuckle and responds by telling the attorney...

"Why, Mr. Hamilton, not only is it 'OK', but it is your right to call a witness, as you should well know. Please, sir, by all means, proceed."

And proceed, he did.

Hamilton gives his client another quick glance. Zoltar, sensing his attorney's attention, turns and looks at him. He gives Mr. Hamilton a nod of confidence and then winks at him. The kind of wink that says, 'You got this!' In response, the public defender returns the robot's nod and gives him a wink of his own. The kind that says, 'Yeah, I got this'.

A smile forms across the attorney's lips. Time for this phoenix to rise.

And with that, something amazing happens. A transformation takes place. The weak and completely unremarkable public defender known as Hamilton disappears and is replaced by something that can only be described as deadly courtroom piranha. And not just any piranha, mind you, but one with the cold, steely look that comes from knowing it has all the right moves. The winning moves.

Hamilton removes the fake Clark Kent glasses he's been wearing all this time and carefully sets them on the table next to the legal pad. He then clicks his pen closed and slips it into his top pocket. He stands, the attorney does, tall and erect, with his cheap, off-the-rack suit suddenly looking as if it were tailor-fitted by Armani himself. He adjusts his tie knot and then runs a palm down its length to smooth it. He sweeps his coat tail back and cradles his left hand on his waist while his right hand begins flipping through the pages of his legal pad. He flips past the endless pages of doodles until finally, he finds what he's looking for: all his notes pertaining to the case's defense, well hidden in the middle of the legal pad this entire time. He slightly bends at the waist and, using the tip of his index finger as a guide, traces through the pages until he finds the name of his first witness. And not just his first witness, but also his last. Just one. One single witness.

'And that's fine', he thinks, 'one is all I need'.

Hamilton's transformation is nothing short of amazing. In the briefest of moments, the man has managed to mutate from pathetic courtroom loser to the embodiment of Perry Mason himself. So incredible is the change that it causes every spectator's jaw to drop in disbelief, while at the same time, Dalton could be seen mouthing the words 'What the fuck?'.

In the meantime, the newly reinvented Hamilton, now ready for battle, wasted no time in launching his assault against the prosecution's case. He turns to the seated crowd and in a booming, commanding voice, announces...

"The defense now calls Mr. Heinrich Straussburg to the stand."

A collective gasp shudders through the courtroom. Excited chatter erupts throughout the crowd as heads swivel, desperate to find out who this unexpected mystery witness could possibly be.

The judge bangs his gavel...

"Order in the court! Order in the court, I say!"

But the excitement and clamor only get worse. The judge redoubles his effort and tries again...

"I said order in the court, DAMMIT!!!"

The gavel comes down hard...

Bang Bang Bang

Still no effect. He tries one last time...

"If I DON'T HAVE ORDER IN THIS COURTROOM IN 5 SECONDS, I WILL CLOSE THESE PROCEEDINGS TO THE PUBLIC!!!"

BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG!

And that did it. The judge's threat to kill the spectators' drama buzz was more than enough to calm them down. They fall silent, beating the 5 count by 2.

At about that time, a wiry, elderly man in his seventies dressed in black pants, black jacket, and collared white shirt stands up in the far back corner of the room. He works his way through the seated crowd to the main aisle and then makes his way to the witness stand. He takes a seat, and the bailiff swears him in.

The defense attorney lifts his briefcase from the floor and sets it on the table in front of him, but doesn't open it. Not yet. He then approaches the witness stand. Once there, Hamilton clasps his hands in front of him and directs his gaze to the floor. Without looking up, he addresses the witness...

"For the record, sir, would you please state your name?"

"Gladly. My name is Heinrich Straussburg."

Still gazing at the floor...

"Thank you, Mr. Straussburg. Now, if you would, please tell the court what it is you do for a living."

"Well, nothing, actually. I've been retired for some years now."

The attorney finally looks up at the old man...

"Of course, you have. My mistake. I'll rephrase the question."

Hamilton crosses his arms, turns to face the spectators as if to watch their reaction, and poses the slightly reworded question to the witness...

"When you were employed, Mr. Straussburg, what was your occupation?"

"I was a robotics engineer. I was employed by Telmar Entertainment Systems."

The attorney nods as he repeats the words slowly and deliberately...

"Telmar Entertainment Systems. I see."

Arms still crossed, the defense attorney turns to face the witness...

"Correct me if I'm wrong here, Mr. Straussburg. Telmar - they design and build robots, do they not? For entertainment?"

"Well, they did. That is, until they went out of business a few years back."

The attorney nods and continues...

"And how long were you employed at Telmar, if I may ask?"

"Certainly. Oh my gosh..."

The witness massages his chin with a thumb and forefinger as he considers the attorney's question...

"Seems like forever. Since the early fifties, at least. It was a long time ago, and my memory isn't what it used to be, but I would say from 1952 until I retired in 98."

Mr. Hamilton massages his own chin as he considers the witness's answer...

"Since 1952..."

He shakes his head a few times as if struggling to wrap his mind around the idea of it - that many years as a robotic engineer for a major manufacturer of entertainment systems. Quite a resume. He continues...

"That's a mighty long time, Mr. Straussburg. Mighty long time. Forty-six years."

"Yes, it was. I was only twenty-two when I was hired, and retired when I was sixty-eight. Would still be working for 'em, but like I said, the company went out of business so I moved on."

"And how old are you now?"

"Seventy-two. I'll be seventy-three in October."

Arms still crossed, head nodding as he digests the witness's testimony, Mr. Hamilton begins pacing back and forth in front of the witness stand as he continues the questioning...

"Forty-six years. Long time, indeed. And tell me, Mr. Straussburg, what exactly is it a robotic engineer does?"

"Oh, lots of things, actually. We design robots and machines, design their parts, machine the parts, assemble and test the machines...lots of things."

The attorney stops his pacing for a moment and turns toward the witness stand. He props his chin on a palm, looks up at the witness, and continues...

"Tell me, Mr. Straussburg, are you familiar with the Zoltar Fortune Telling robot model 28A?"

Mr. Straussburg chuckles as he replies to the question...

"28A? Why, I would hope so. I designed it."

"So it's a Telmar product, is it not?"

"Oh, yes. In fact, it was the company's first product of that kind."

Hamilton's eyebrows lift. His head turns to Straussburg...

"That kind?"

"Yes."

"And what kind would that be, if I may ask?"

"Well, basically, a mechanical man that could mimic a real person."

"But not a whole person, is that right?"

"Yes, that's correct. The whole body wasn't needed. Only the torso, from the waist up."

Again, the propped chin and the pacing as the attorney contemplates the old man's testimony.

At this point, the entire courtroom is consumed by the exchange taking place between Hamilton and his witness. Everyone is on the edge of their seat and gripped tight by the suspense unfolding before their very eyes.

Even the prosecutor himself, Mr. Dalton, is completely transfixed by it all. He leans forward in his chair, forearms planted on the table, and begins twirling his Mont Blanc pen by its ends between his hands as he tries to figure out where the defense is going with this line of questioning.

The suspense builds. At this point, it's thick, molasses thick, and about to get a whole lot thicker.

Hamilton continues to hold his chin as he paces. His head remains tilted downward, deep in thought, as he tries to connect the dots in his mind.

Finally, just as he reaches the front of the judge's pulpit, he stops abruptly and spins to face the witness. He places his hands on his hips in front of his jacket tails and, in that strong, commanding voice, tells the witness...

"I now ask you, Mr. Straussburg, to look around and tell me if you see a Zoltar Fortune Teller model 28A in the courtroom today."

The old man complies by craning his neck first this way, then that as he scans the courtroom. A few moments later, his head quits moving and remains fixed on a single spot within the courtroom. He tells the defense attorney...

"Why yes, I do. Over there, behind that table."

He points to the defendant, The Amazing Zoltar. Mr. Hamilton turns to the judge...

"Let the record show that Mr. Straussburg has indicated the defendant."

The judge replies...

"So noted."

Hamilton continues...

"Now, Mr. Straussburg, if you were indeed the designer of the model 28A, would it be a fair statement to say that you are, in fact, an expert on the subject?"

"Yes. I suppose so. After all, I designed and built the Zoltars. All twenty-three of them."

Hamilton turns to the judge...

"If it pleases the court, Your Honor, I'd like to establish Mr. Straussburg as an expert on the Zoltar Fortune Telling machine."

The judge turns to the prosecutor...

"Mr. Dalton?"

The prosecutor stands...

"No objections, Your Honor. The prosecution will recognize Mr. Straussburg as an expert witness."

The prosecutor sits. Hamilton continues...

"Thank you, Your Honor."

With that one critical fact now established - Straussburg as an expert witness - Hamilton continues his assault against the prosecution with cold, calculated precision. He is now the only shark in the water, and he's tired of circling the prey. It's time to move in for the kill.

And with that thought in mind, the attorney turns and rushes to the defense table. He spins his briefcase to face him, pops the latches, and reaches inside. From within the briefcase, he retrieves four clear plastic, sandwich-size bags, each one containing a mechanical component of some sort. Hamilton grabs the bags and rushes them to the pulpit, setting them in front of Judge Rainey for his inspection...

"Your Honor, these bags contain parts that were removed from my client this morning. I ask that they be entered into evidence."

The prosecutor leaps to his feet, an irate, objecting hand thrust hard above his head...

"I OBJECT, YOUR HONOR! The prosecution was not made aware of this evidence's existence."

Mr. Hamilton...

"Your Honor, I only came into possession of these items an hour before the court convened."

The judge puts his glasses on and briefly examines each of the bags. He turns to the prosecutor...

"I'm going to allow it. Having prior knowledge of the items, Mr. Dalton, would not change their potential value to the trial if they do, in fact, help to further establish the truth."

The judge lowers his head and peers over the top of his glasses at the prosecutor. In a somewhat agitated tone, he asks him...

"You **do** care about the truth, do you not, Mr. Dalton? Or, are you so concerned with simply winning that you would try to suppress valuable evidence?"

"Of course, I care about the truth, Your Honor. But I still object to the evidence."

"Fine. OVERRULED!"

"Exception."

"Noted. Bailiff, enter these items into the record as exhibits Q, R, S, and T." (The items are entered as Q, R, S, and T due to the fact that the prosecution has already used up letters A through P)

"Yes, Your Honor."

"You may proceed, Mr. Hamilton."

"Thank you, Your Honor."

The defense attorney grabs the new evidence and approaches the witness stand. He sets the four bags on the rail in front of Mr. Straussburg...

"Mr. Straussburg, as I've explained to the court, these are components that were removed from my client just this morning. I ask you to examine each one and give me your professional, expert opinion as to the condition of these items."

Like the judge, Mr. Straussburg retrieves a pair of glasses from his coat pocket and puts them on. He picks up the evidence bags and carefully begins examining them one at a time. One bag contained a cog, another, a rubber wheel of some sort, and the last two both contained a single gear each.

After a few moments of study, Straussburg finishes the examination and sets the bags down. He slowly, if not deliberately, removes his glasses and returns them to his jacket pocket. He clinches his lips and nods his head a few times as if to indicate that he has drawn his conclusions regarding the items. He takes a deep breath through his nose and looks at the attorney. He tells him...

"Well, the first thing you must understand is that Zoltar has been around for almost fifty years. The other notable fact here is that three of these items are made from brass, a relatively soft metal that's very susceptible to wear. The fourth component is made of rubber, which also wears considerably over time."

He pauses and glances at the four bags again and then continues...

"Overall, I'd say all four of these items are significantly worn and should have been replaced years ago."

Hamilton relaxes his posture somewhat. He rests a forearm on the witness stand's wooden railing, slightly leaning into it, and crosses his legs at the ankle. Along with his posture, he softens his approach as well. He continues the questioning but does so as if simply having a casual conversation with the witness...

"I see. Should have been replaced but wasn't."

He says this almost as if simply saying it to himself. He says it again, this time dragging the words out slowly as if thinking out loud...

"...should-have-been-replaced-but-wasn't."

Without prompting, the witness confirms his agreement...

"That's correct."

Hamilton begins shaking his head as if trying hard to believe his own words, choking on the idea that they could possibly be true. He uprights himself from the railing. He crosses his arms and begins the deep-in-thought pacing again, his gaze again directed at the floor...

"Then tell me, Mr. Straussburg, given the condition of these items - substantially worn - what effect would that have on the fortune-telling machine?"

"Well, obviously, it wouldn't work as well as it would had it been properly serviced. I would expect that the machine would exhibit occasional, if not continuous, problems."

Hamilton stops the pacing, plants his hands on his hips again, and turns in Straussburg's direction...

"In other words, it would be subject to erratic, and maybe unpredictable, behavior?"

"Yes, you could say that."

"And malfunctions and failures?"

"Oh yes, for sure. Frankly, I'm surprised the machine still works at all, to be honest."

Mr. Hamilton places one arm across his chest and then cradles his chin with the hand of the other arm. He stares at the floor, again lost in deep thought. He removes the hand from under his chin and uses it to hold up a gesturing forefinger...

"Would you say, Mr. Straussburg, in your expert opinion, that the events leading to the accidental shooting on..."

Again, the prosecutor leaps from his chair...

"I OBJECT, YOUR HONOR! That's pure speculation on the defense's part (referring to the word 'accidental'). Mr. Hamilton is trying to put words in the witness's mouth!"

Judge Rainey concurs with the objection...

"Sustained!"

He turns his attention to Mr. Hamilton...

"I'll rephrase the question, Your Honor."

But it's too late. The idea that the shooting was purely accidental has already been planted in the jurors' minds—an old but still clever and still effective courtroom tactic.

Hamilton returns his attention to the witness...

"Mr. Straussburg, in your expert opinion, could the events that led to the death of Allison McGregor on October 9 of last year have been caused by the faulty operation of my client as a result of these worn parts?"

"Oh, certainly. In fact, I'd go so far as to say that the worn components were to blame for the entire unfortunate malfunction that night."

The crowd erupts – no – EXPLODES! The judge bangs his gavel...

"ORDER! ORDER IN THE COURTROOM, I SAY! ORDER!"

But the clamor only intensifies.

No one can believe what just happened. What should have been an easy, slam dunk win for the prosecution, in the blink of an eye, turned into a win for the defense to end all wins, a brilliant, ingeniously executed victory. It was, without doubt, a courtroom moment that will live in legal journals for years and years to come--maybe forever.

Judge Rainey loses his patience. He bolts out of his chair and bangs the gavel so hard that it shatters its wooden base.

"ORDER! ORDER IN THIS COURTROOM! EITHER I WILL HAVE ORDER, OR I WILL CLEAR THIS ROOM OUT!"

BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG!

It takes a moment, and some more banging, but eventually the spectators calm down, and order is eventually restored.

Mr. Hamilton turns to the judge...

"I have no further questions for this witness, Your Honor. The defense rests."

Mr. Hamilton turns and makes his way to the defense table, today's victor, and he knows it. Everyone does. The judge turns to the prosecutor...

"Mr. Dalton, do you wish to cross-examine?"

The prosecutor is not only disgusted, but thoroughly beaten and defeated as well, and he knows it. The ship he had so counted on sailing in just sank before his eyes as if torpedoed by a U-boat. A bunch of them. He slams his pen down on his legal pad and throws his hands up...

"What would be the point?"

Dalton realizes his mistake - his lack of professional composure - and backpeddles. He lowers his hands...

"I apologize, Your Honor. No. I have no questions for the witness."

"Very well, then. The witness is excused."

With that, Straussburg leaves the witness stand and ambles his way back to his seat, with everyone tucking their legs in as best they can to make easy passage for the odd little man turned celebrity witness.

The judge makes a few notes on his own legal pad and, once finished, sets the pen down and looks up at the attorneys. He glances first at the prosecutor and then the public defender and asks...

"Do either of the attorneys wish to give a closing argument?"

Judge Rainey asks the question simply as a formality, an obligation to proper courtroom procedure. It's evident to everyone present that the trial has come to its conclusion, and no further arguments or evidence is going to change the obvious outcome in any way.

Both attorneys give the same reply...

"No, Your Honor."

The judge then turns to the jury box...

"Very well. The jury will now adjourn and consider the testimony presented in the trial. The court will remain in recess until such time that a verdict is reached."

The judge, having brushed the shattered base aside, bangs the gavel on his desk. The bailiff escorts the jurors from the courtroom.

But no one leaves.

Not even the judge.

Everyone's confident that a quick verdict will be reached, and ten minutes later, their suspicions are proven correct.

A side door opens, and the jurors re-enter the jury box, retaking their still-warm seats. The judge bangs the gavel and calls the court back in session. He turns to the jurors and asks...

"Has the jury reached a verdict?"

A nice-looking, well-dressed woman in her forties, the jury's spokesperson, stands and replies...

"We have, Your Honor."

"What say you?"

The spokesperson glances at the other jurors for one last confirmation and then looks directly at the defendant. She announces the verdict...

"In the case of the State of New York vs. The Amazing Zoltar, we the jury find the defendant..."

An overly dramatic pause, and then...

"NOT GUILTY!"

The courtroom ignites. Exuberant hoots, hollers, and shouts. A few whistles, even, and at least one air horn blasts. Party streamers fly, and confetti falls. Some hands shake while others pay off losing bets.

Other attorneys who have watched the entire trial rush up to the triumphant Hamilton, pumping his arm, slapping his back, and congratulating him on such a brilliant piece of defense litigation. Others stuff business cards in his pockets, pleading with him to call so that they can discuss employment opportunities and consulting contracts.

The prosecutor, still sitting in his chair, slumps as he watches the victory celebration taking place at the defense table. It could have been him. *Should* have been him.

(sigh)

He reaches down and collects his briefcase and then sheepishly sneaks out of the courtroom a completely defeated and broken man. No one notices him leave. No one even remembers his name.

* * * * *

Thirty minutes later...

The bailiff was nice enough to locate a hand truck and used it to deposit Zoltar at the curb in front of the courthouse. Mr. Hamilton stands next to his client as they wait for a carnival van to arrive and take the now-exonerated fortune teller home.

As they wait, an elderly man wearing black pants, a black jacket, and a collared white shirt walks up to Zoltar and stands looking at him through the front glass. A smile emerges from his aging lips. It's Mr. Straussburg.

A clacking sound, like an old typewriter, and a slender length of white paper emerges from the fortune slot. The old man grabs it and stretches it out. It reads...

Nice job. Thanks. Same fee?

The old man nods...

"That's right. You know how this works."

And indeed, he does. He's done it enough times by now to know the routine. They both have, and do. Zoltar returns the nod.

The old man produces a burlap sack and carefully positions it under the coin slot. Instantly, the machine begins to tremble and shudder. Cogs begin to turn. Wheels begin to rotate, and gears begin spinning to mesh with and turn

other gears. Suddenly, a loud metallic rumble rises from inside the machine, and quarters begin to pour out like a Vegas slot machine gone mad. In no time, the burlap bag fills to near bursting.

The old man gathers the top of the bag together and ties it closed with a piece of twine. He then heaves the bulging sack to his shoulder, touches a saluting finger to his forehead in farewell, then turns and walks away.

The attorney plants his hands on his hips and watches the old geezer as he disappears down the street. He shakes his head and blows a frustrated huff out. He turns to Zoltar, somewhat perturbed...

"What the hell was that all about?"

He points a finger at himself...

"Dude, I was your attorney! I got you off, not him! ME! So, where's my reward? How about showing ME a little gratitude?"

Silence.

Then, more clacking and another slip of white paper. The attorney grabs it...

To collect your reward, call this number: 1-800-YEAH-RIGHT.

The attorney's still staring at the fortune in disbelief when a white van pulls to the curb, and four husky carries jump out. They load Zoltar in the back, slam the doors closed, and squeal the van's tires as they speed away.

Hamilton's arms drop to his side as he watches the van grow smaller and smaller, and then disappears altogether. The fortune falls from his hand and flutters to the ground.

Chapter 4

Three days after the trial...

The front door of the DA's office slams shut behind him, viciously. Almost as if the door itself was repulsed by his very existence. He stands on the sidewalk alone, dejected, beaten, downtrodden, and, most importantly, unemployed.

Eric Dalton, now ex-District Attorney, turns his defeated gaze down at the only thing he has left to show for his years as a dedicated, hardworking servant to the public - a cardboard box containing his personal belongings. Personal belongings, in this case, meaning a stack of framed eight-by-ten photo ops: the mayor; the governor; movie stars; rock stars; famous authors; playmates of the month...and one, even, with Donald Trump himself, the president and onetime golf buddy. Mildly interesting trinkets to everyone else, maybe, but priceless, prized possessions to him.

He looks at the collection, shaking his head in disbelief, and thinks...'what a ride it's been'. Such a promising career and future, and all of it gone now, vanished before his very eyes like a puff of smoke in a stiff breeze.

But he understands.

The dismissal was predictable—inevitable, even. The Zoltar failure was way too monumental, too high-profile a case for someone's head not to roll, and with him being the DA, the person ultimately responsible, that writing was on the wall even before he left the courtroom that fateful day.

Simple math, my friends.

Simple math, indeed.

But yeah, he understands that part, the political fallout. That kind of shit happens all the time. Just comes with the territory, is all. Part of the landscape. But that's not what bothers him. What he can't wrap his mind around is the 'how' - how in the hell does a second-rate loser like David Hamilton get the best of someone like him, the exalted Eric Dalton, District Attorney and litigator extraordinaire? How? How in the hell does that happen?

He thinks about it for a moment, but no matter how he spins it in his head, it still doesn't make any sense. None. Still, there must be an answer. Has to be, so he thinks about it some more, and that's when it finally hits him. Hits him like a hammer blow to the forehead. Like an epiphany - a moment of clarity in which everything suddenly comes into focus. So, so crystal clear to him now.

He didn't. *That's* the answer. Hamilton didn't get the best of him. There is simply no way a completely uninspired, dim-witted lackey like Hamilton could have ever beaten him that way. Not in a million years. Not on your life. He's known the pathetic excuse of a lawyer for ten years now, and if he knows anything about him at all, he knows Hamilton was not the brain behind any of this. Not by a long shot.

But if not Hamilton, then who? A political enemy? A rival? A previous conviction out for revenge? Who? Who could it possibly be?

And then it suddenly comes to him.

Who indeed.

He clinches his lips tight and nods to himself. Zoltar. Zoltar's behind this. Of course. It all makes perfect sense now.

* * * * *

And he's right. Dalton's theory is actually spot on. Hamilton had nothing to do with the victory other than to provide a warm body, a figurehead, so to speak. The brain behind it all was Zoltar the entire time.

But he didn't act alone.

Even though Zoltar was the mastermind, he could never have pulled it off by himself. No. He needed a little help, and that help came to him in the form of his long-time accomplice and friend, Heinrich Straussburg, the onetime Broadway actor turned expert witness. Straussburg, of course, being the man Zoltar had Hamilton call that day they met, saying that he (meaning Straussburg) would explain everything.

And explain, he did.

Straussburg laid everything out for the public defender in a way that made it almost impossible for him to get wrong. Zoltar had made it all too easy. All Hamilton had to do was follow the instructions the robot had prepared for him, all typed out on lengths of white fortune paper and numbered in the order each instruction was to be followed:

1. The look—unkempt. Tie knot loose and crooked. Cheap, ill-fitting suit that looks as if it was slept in the night before. Fake Buddy Holly glasses that keep slipping down and need constant attention. No folders, briefcase, or documents on defense table, only a fresh, unused yellow legal pad. Cheap Bic ballpoint pen only.

2. The attitude - reserved and non-aggressive. Meek. Weak and passive, even. Easy prey.

3. The impression portrayed - incompetent and inept. A complete disinterest in the proceedings.

4. The performance - minimal. No cross-examinations, no objections. Speak only when spoken to. Minimal answers only to all questions.

5. After prosecution rests - call Straussburg to stand. Follow questioning script. Enter items into evidence at appropriate time.

Also, as mentioned, there was the script Hamilton would use to question the only witness the defense would call during the trial, Heinrich Straussburg. A script perfectly written in a screenplay-like format that even a child could follow. Everything completely choreographed and outlined, including how to deliver each line, what tone and inflection to use, when to look at the jurors and when not to, what dramatic poses to strike and when, facial

expressions to use and how—everything spelled out in complete detail. With this one, nothing would be left to chance.

Which is where Straussburg came into the picture - the 'nothing left to chance' part.

For months, while waiting for their day in court, Straussburg spent his evenings with the young attorney, coaching him night after night until he was confident enough in the public defender's acting skills to begin the real work - the relentless rehearsals that would follow.

And rehearsed, they did.

Day after long, tireless day, the two went over the courtroom drama in complete, minute detail from beginning to end. Every line, every facial expression, every gesture, every dramatic pose and pause—all of it rehearsed over and over and over again.

Straussburg, being the ever-attentive professional that he is, left absolutely nothing to chance. Nothing. So obsessive was his effort that the man went so far as to build a mockup of the defense table and witness stand to add an element of realism to the rehearsals. Excessive, maybe, but Zoltar's neck was on the line with this one, and it was simply a given that losing wasn't an option, meaning everything had to be made as perfect as he and his costar, the defense attorney, could possibly make it. To the point that if they were to somehow lose the trial, it would not have been for a lack of effort.

And this attitude applied to everything. Even the evidence, the worn parts the defense would use during the trial, took a dedicated effort to produce. Straussburg himself spent weeks on the phone scouring the entire country in search of an old, junked Zoltar machine he could scavenge parts from. And eventually, the effort paid off. He finally found one sitting in an alley, stacked alongside a lot of other junk, behind a small mom-and-pop pawn shop in Nebraska. The owner, a nice elderly gentleman, was only more than happy to part with the machine for no more than the cost of shipping and twenty dollars for his time.

Money well spent, as it would turn out. The parts Straussburg extracted from the junk machine proved ideal for the cause, with each one having just the right amount of wear.

Perfect.

And that was true of everything else - perfect. The planning, the rehearsing, the excellent script writing, and the fantastic effort Zoltar made in quarterbacking the whole thing. All of it done so very well, with everything having been executed with the smooth precision of a fine Swiss watch.

As a result, the incredible effort paid off in spades. When the time came, every piece fell perfectly in place, with everything happening exactly as planned.

And the payoff? Zoltar was vindicated and released.

Case won, history made, careers destroyed.

* * * * *

Dalton gets it. He finally gets it. It finally soaks through his thick, Neanderthal-like skull.

“Jesus! What an idiot. What a moron. What a completely brain-dead, mental defect douchebag I’ve been! How did I not see it coming? How? No defense attorney is *that* lame, public defender or not! How in the hell did I not put two and two together?”

And Dalton’s right. All the signs were there. All the subtle indications that a setup was in place were there in front of him the entire time, right under his nose. Only, he didn’t see it. He didn’t see it because he didn’t look. He didn’t look because, well, there wasn’t anything worth looking at. Not at the defense table, anyway.

But he was wrong.

As it turns out, there was plenty to look at. Dalton should have heeded his own suspicions and watched Hamilton a little closer. In other words, he should have done his job and studied the competition, one of the first things they teach you in courtroom litigation.

But he didn’t.

He didn’t pay attention, and he didn’t look.

He couldn’t. He was too busy. Too busy being perfect. Too busy smoothing his tie, picking lint off his suit, checking his breath with a cupped hand over his mouth, sneaking hair checks in the mirror he keeps in his briefcase, and giving babes in the audience the 'let’s hook up for drinks later’ eye. Too busy being self-absorbed to even notice the cold, calculated evil that lurked at the table to his right; too busy to notice that, in fact, he was being played like a violin. Zoltar’s violin.

"Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! **Fuck!** I’m such an idiot!"

And he’s right. He’s been had, big time. Completely played and made a fool of. Raked, as it were, over the proverbial legal coals. A complete and total humiliation.

And the worst part? It was done - not by some hotshot, high-dollar, hired legal gun, but, rather, by some swarmy, antique piece of shit from a sleazeball, two-bit carnival. Outgunned and out-maneuvered by some twenty-five-cents-a-pop throwback from the forties!

He pounds a balled fist against his wooden forehead. Anger quickly overcomes him, and the one-time DA explodes into a maddened rage. He lifts the cardboard box over his head and slams it down, hard, onto the concrete sidewalk. He begins jumping up and down, stomping the box until it’s completely shredded, and every picture frame bent, broken, or shattered, the celebrity faces now barely visible under the black sole prints of the madman’s shoes. He looks down at the obliterated photos and suddenly realizes that he’s just destroyed the only thing he had left in the world that meant anything to him.

And now he has nothing.

Nothing!

He covers his face with his hands and begins crying. He drops to his knees, sits on his heels, and hunches forward as he continues to bawl uncontrollably. He's finished. Ruined. There's nothing left for him now. No future, no purpose, and, for sure, no reason to continue a life not worth living. Not anymore.

He thinks about the Smith and Wesson he keeps tucked under the driver's seat in his Volvo and begins to feel better about things. He has options. He has a way to end this whole sordid nightmare. He drops his hands from his face and stops the crying. He snuffles a few times and thinks about what it is he needs to do. But first, before he makes that final plunge and checks out, there's something he must do.

Zoltar must be made to pay.

He uprights himself on his knees and turns his tormented, tear-stained face upward to the sky. He shakes an angry fist in the air and vows his revenge...

"I swear by everything unholy in this world, Zoltar, I will make you pay! Do you hear me? I will make you pay, I swear it! As God as my witness, you will pay for this!"

Suddenly, the sky turns an ominous black. Streetlights come on. A torrential wind begins to howl, blowing newspapers and other trash down the sidewalk. A deafening crack of thunder rips through the air just as an enormous, blinding bolt of lightning climbs down from the black clouds and strikes the DA's office as if it were Frankenstein's castle. The ex-District Attorney, his face eerily lit by the lightning bolt, breaks down into hysterical laughter as icy rain begins to pour down on the city.

* * * * *

Unfortunately, the ex-DA's effort at revenge was never realized. Oh, he gave it a good try, alright, but all he found once he arrived at the carnival site was a bunch of litter and some empty tent stake holes, the carnival having already packed up and left. He notices something off to his left, a sign of some sort. The kind you stick in the front yard announcing free kittens to good homes.

He walks to it.

It's a white poster board nailed to a stake. In hand-painted black lettering, it reads...

Thanks for having us.

See you again in '09!

Dalton's entire being deflates. '09. Three years from now.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, **FUCK!**

He returns to his car, closes the door, and begins beating his head against the Volvo's steering wheel.

And then he reaches under the front seat.

A muffled shot rings out.

Chapter 5

Three years later...

Saturday night.

Colored lights crisscross from one side of the midway to the other. Calliopes, music piped through loudspeakers, and a host of other carnival sounds fill the cool October night.

And the aroma...the wonderful smells of it all: a mixture of peanuts roasting, cotton candy swirling, candied apples cooling, and bratwurst cooking on an open grill.

And the people...the throngs and clusters of carnival goers, all drifting like a current, this way and that, as they make their way through the bustle of the midway.

It's been three long years since the carnival last stopped here in the sleepy little town of Melsburg, New York. An elderly man dressed in black pants, a black jacket, and collared white shirt sits smoking and gazes out at the sea of people drifting past. And he thinks...the more things change, the more they stay the same. Different faces, different names, but basically, the same people. Always the same.

His name is Heinrich Straussburg, a German immigrant having come to America at the age of ten. Most of his life has been spent on the stages of Broadway as a minor, never-gonna-make-the-big-time actor and sometimes playwright, but after thirty years of living off Vienna sausage and crackers, he walked away from the bright lights to join the carnival and has never once looked back.

Oh, he still acts every now, then, and again, posing as a carnival owner or an expert witness in a trial, but these days, he remains quite content to collect tickets and usher people in to see the two-headed bearded fat lady, one of the carnival's biggest draws. And one of the strangest. Mainly because of the fact that the beards aren't separate. It's actually the same beard growing from one face to the other. Two faces, like Siamese twins, attached to one another by hair. And on a woman, no less. A two-headed woman so fat that she never leaves the bed of the pickup truck she lives in. They simply back the dually into the tent come show time.

Real Ripley's Believe It or Not shit.

Weird, but that's carnival life for you.

He lights another Lucky Strike and continues to watch the people stroll past when he spots something. Something vaguely familiar, but he can't quite put his finger on it. It's a man in his mid-thirties, disheveled, and clumsily making his way through the crowd. Overall, he looks like your standard issue, off-the-shelf, homeless drunk or something. That, or a disaster that finally found a place to happen. Take your pick.

His dark blonde hair is a knotted nest on top of his head that hasn't seen a comb in some time, if ever. Likewise, his face is covered in a stubble that hasn't known a razor in at least four days. Maybe longer. His shirt is half tucked in, half hanging out of an ill-fitting pair of polyester slacks that haven't been in style since Saturday Night Fever--something Good Will no doubt gave him for free, saving them a trip to the dumpster.

And then there are his people skills, of which he has none.

He stumbles his way through the crowd, bumping into people as he does, causing them to spill their beers and soft drinks as he bullies his way through, and never once stopping to offer an apology.

The old man watches the staggering idiot, wishing he could place him, but he's drawing a blank. Still, he's certain he knows him. Somehow, somehow, from somewhere, he knows this guy.

In all actuality, the human disaster's name is David Hamilton. A one-time public defender now turned permanent loser. Hasn't been an attorney in two years, and in all probability, never will again, that door having closed forever.

These days, when he manages to show up, that is, he works as a port-o-potty service truck driver, making his unofficial job title 'shit sucker'. A title that, appropriately enough, pretty much sums up the rest of his life as well.

And that's a shame.

A shame because life for David wasn't always bad. There was a time - brief as it was - when he had made the big time, a rock star in his profession, even.

You see, not long after his star performance in the famous Zoltar trial, David left the public defender's office for a lucrative seven-figure offer from one of the largest and most prestigious law firms in New York, the Banks, Trevors, Riley, and Somhiemer firm. Best known for being the Vatican's legal counsel here in the U.S.

In other words, the major leagues. A dream job. The job of a lifetime with everything that comes with it - the stretch limos, high society parties, all-nighters at Studio 54, top-shelf booze only, golf on Saturdays with the governor, fast women, drug dealers, and prostitutes on speed dial...the works. He had it all. He was, in fact, seen by the local legal society as the firm's new golden boy. Midas himself with the ability to turn any case into legal gold, be it civil, criminal, or otherwise.

But, sadly enough, all that glitters is not always gold, and so it was with David Hamilton.

It took the senior partners a while to figure it out, but eventually, the writing on the wall became all too clear, and one thing became painfully apparent: the star performance in the Zoltar case had been a fluke, nothing more than a stroke of luck, and the firm soon came to realize it had made an epic mistake. It seems, as they found out, that you can take the lawyer out of the public defender's office, but you can't take the public defender's office out of the lawyer.

And so the day finally came when David Hamilton found himself standing on the sidewalk in front of the Manhattan skyscraper he once worked at, having been unceremoniously tossed out by security guards like yesterday's smelly garbage.

He stands there alone now, on the sidewalk, holding a cardboard box containing his personal belongings and wondering what the hell happened, completely bewildered as to how it all could have gone so horribly wrong.

But he knows what happened. All too well, he knows exactly why his house of cards came crashing down.

What happened is that David allowed his ego to write checks his legal skills simply couldn't cash. Simple as that. But that's not what he tells himself. No. In his mind, he sees it much, much differently. In his state of denial and

self-delusion, he comes to the conclusion that this is all Zoltar's doing. Somehow, somehow, that robot bastard's behind this, and as God as his witness, he will make the double-crossing box of junk pay. One day, Zoltar will be made to suffer.

In anguish, he throws the cardboard box down and drops to his knees. He looks up through blurry, tear-filled eyes and shakes an angry fist at the sky. Through gritted teeth, he yells...

"As God as my witness, Zoltar, you will pay! You hear me? You will pay, I tell you! I will have my revenge!"

The sky suddenly turns dark and ominous, and a torrential wind begins to howl, blowing newspapers and Styrofoam cups down the sidewalk as if they were confetti. A tremendous clap of thunder suddenly bursts through the air just as a massive bolt of white-hot lightning shoots down from the sky and strikes the skyscraper's roof as if it were a giant lightning rod. The blinding light illuminates David's twisted, insane scowl, and he begins laughing hysterically, like a madman, as a deluge of rain begins to pour down upon the city.

It all becomes crystal clear to him now what it is he must do, and a smile spreads across his twisted, deranged lips.

Evil now has a new name, and that name is David Hamilton.

Chapter 6

The fortune-telling machine stands near the end of the midway, somewhat alone and separate from the other attractions. Zoltar sits dormant in his glass booth as he patiently awaits the arrival of the next suck...er, customer.

This time, it's a sweet, elderly woman in her eighties, wrapped in a shawl, searching her coin purse for a quarter. She's certain she has one somewhere; it's just a matter of finding it.

Zoltar takes an instant liking to the dear old woman. No doubt she's someone's beloved grandmother who never fails to have bowls of homemade sweets and candies on hand when the grandchildren arrive.

The thought of it touches his heart since he, himself, has never known such a thing - a grandmother, or even a mother, for that matter, but he imagines it must be nice.

He wipes a mechanical tear from his eye.

Touched by this woman the way he was, Zoltar decides to reward the sweetheart with an extra special fortune tonight.

She continues to dig in the purse, and then after a while...

"Ah hah! Found it! A nice, shiny new quarter! I knew I had one somewhere!"

But the problem here is that it's her only one, her only quarter, so she hopes to goodness the machine works OK and doesn't rob her of the only chance she has at a fortune - you know, the way vending machines sometimes do? Takes your money and then the bag of chips gets stuck in that big metal corkscrew thing and doesn't fall? And then you have to break the glass with your walking cane and take what rightfully belongs to you? OK, and maybe a few other items as compensation?

But she's hoping she doesn't have to do that tonight. She's hoping the machine will simply work without a hitch and without any assistance from her cane. After all, having her fortune read is the only reason she came to the carnival tonight and is something she's been looking forward to all day.

She crosses her fingers, closes her eyes, and slips the coin into the slot.

And then grabs her walking cane, just in case.

Instantly, the machine begins to tremble and shudder. Lights begin to blink, and Zoltar, once again, comes to life. He grabs the tarot cards, lays five of them on the table in front of him face up, and then tells the gentle, elderly woman that he has indeed seen her future.

The typewriter clacks, and a slip of white paper spits out. The woman grabs it and reads her fortune...

Publisher's Clearing House will be visiting you soon with a six-foot check.

The old woman's face lights up. This is better than anything she could have possibly hoped for. A chance to actually meet Ed McMahon! She clutches the piece of paper to her chest and tells the robot over and over...

"Oh, thank you, my son! Thank you! Thank you so much!"

She sticks the fortune in her purse, kisses the front glass of the fortune-telling machine, and then wanders back to the midway, where she joins the other carnival goers as they flow past the attractions.

Zoltar watches the sweet old woman as she disappears into the crowd. A smile comes to his lips.

He's about to turn himself off and wait for the next customer when something catches his attention - an obnoxious drunk rudely pushing people out of his way. The intoxicated idiot finally breaks out of the crowd and begins craning his head left and right as he searches for the thing he has come here to find.

And he does. He finds what he's looking for.

He turns toward Zoltar and thrusts an angry, pointed finger in the robot's direction, his face red and twisted with rage...

"YOU!"

Arm still extended, angry finger still pointing, he rushes toward the fortune-telling machine while continuing the tirade...

"YOU! YOU'RE RESPONSIBLE FOR ALL OF THIS! THIS IS YOUR FAULT, YOU DOUBLE CROSSING PIECE OF SHIT!"

He reaches the machine and begins kicking it while continuing his rant...

"You owe me money, and I want it! YOU OWE ME!"

He grabs the sides of the machine and tries shaking it, thinking coins might start pouring out, but it doesn't happen. Too heavy. He can't budge the fucking thing, so he starts pounding the glass with his balled fists, while at the same time, begins to savagely kick the front panel of the machine...

"I want my money, you miserable, murdering box of junk. You owe me! Pay me, or I'll go to the media and tell them the truth about you! I'll spill the beans! I'll tell them everything! I will! I swear I will!"

Suddenly, the clacking sound. It catches the ex-attorney's attention, and he momentarily stops the pounding and kicking. He looks down at the fortune slot and watches as a slender, white strip of paper slowly emerges. After a moment or two, the clacking ceases, and David Hamilton grabs the newly printed fortune. He stretches the paper out and reads the words...

You have less than two minutes left to live.

"What? What is this?"

His face scrunches in confusion. He doesn't understand, so he looks up at the mechanical man behind the glass, at the robot known as Zoltar.

The barrel of a .38 revolver looks back.