

THE NOTE HUNTER



Case of the Haunted Swamp

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The Note Hunter

“The Case of the Haunted Swamp”

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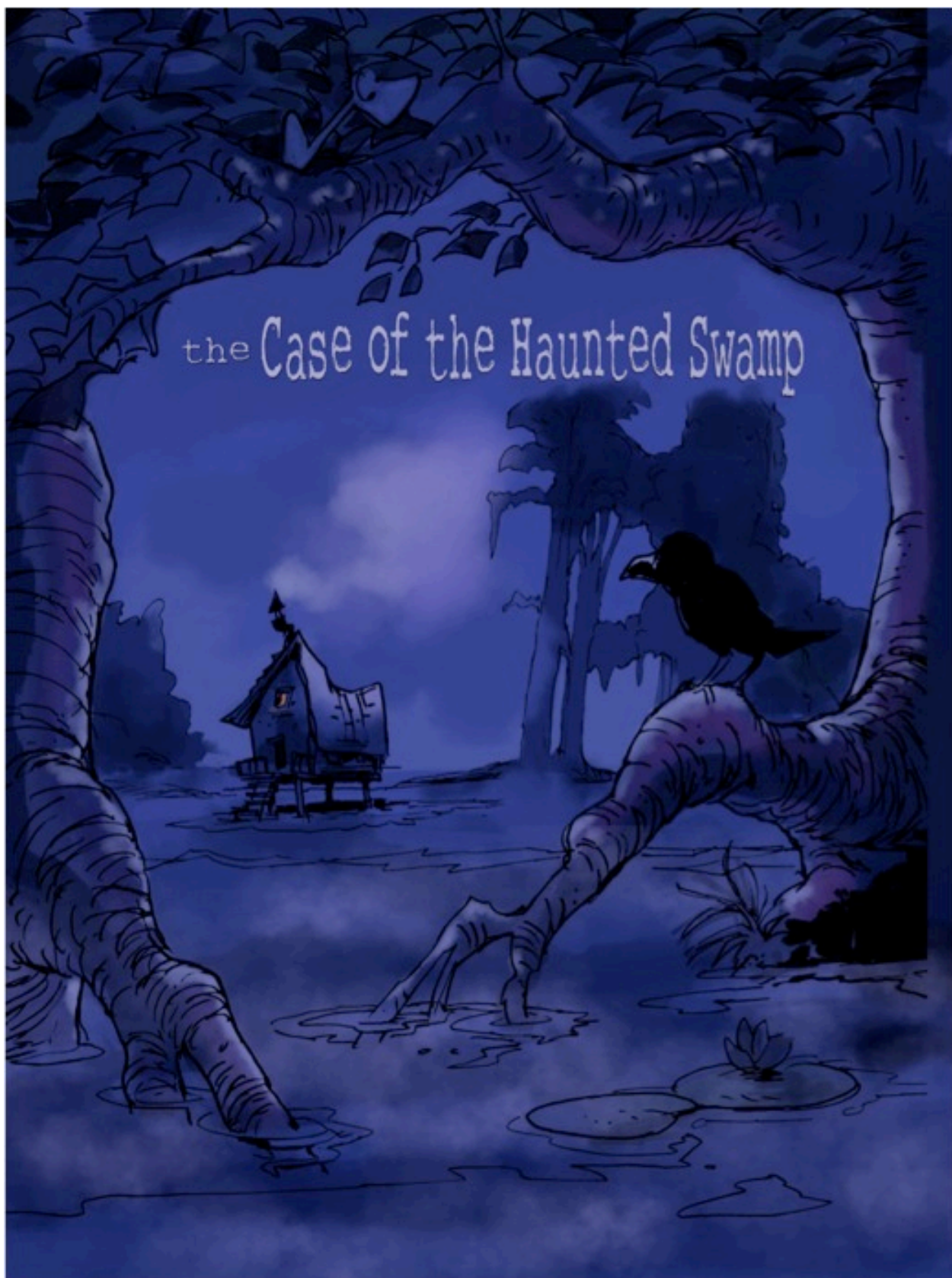
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This book is dedicated to anyone who enjoys a mystery – and everyone who enjoys music, whether as a listener, a player, a composer, a singer or whistler.

the Case of the Haunted Swamp



Chapter 1



Getting Behind the Elephant



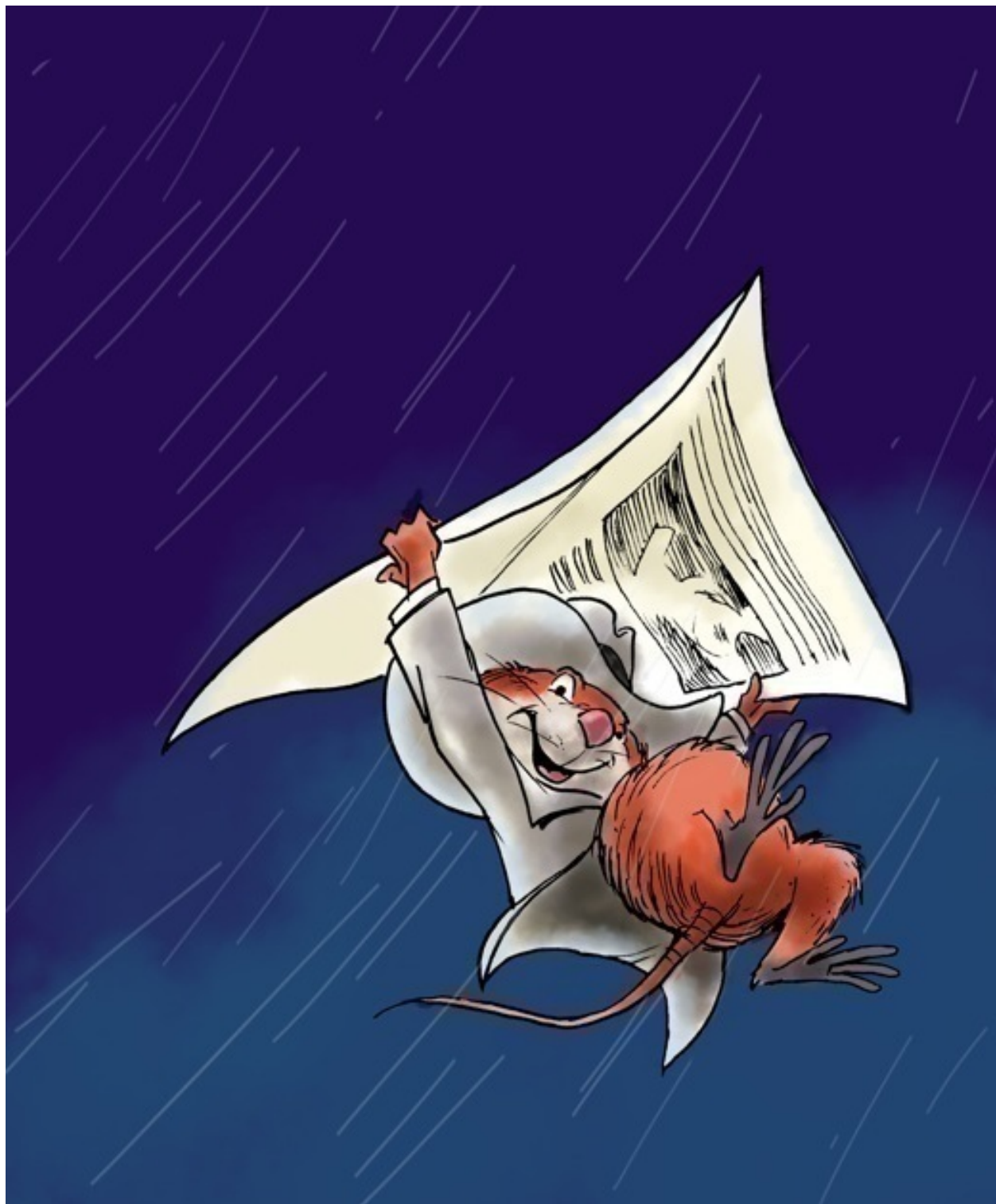
IT WAS A LONG DROP to the street from where the little mouse stood, buffeted by the winds rolling off the Hudson River. He wasn't up on the waterfront warehouse roof to marvel at the cars that looked like toys or the pedestrians that looked like bugs. Nor was he there to enjoy the dazzling moonrise that bathed lower Manhattan's buildings in silver light, or savor the salty harbor's storm-sweetened breezes. He was in a bind. He had somewhere to be. And he was ten minutes overdue!

It wasn't like him to be late. He ordered his life with the clockwork precision of a metronome – one of those nifty devices piano players use to keep time when they practice their music. He knew the device well, for music was his business. Well, music and investigations. Little though he was, this particular mouse was a private eye. A snoop. A gumshoe. And of all the rotten luck, a false lead on a case had led him to this windy rooftop where the trail had gone colder than Camembert on cracked ice.

Peering out from beneath the brim of a soft felt fedora, his eyes darted about, taking in the entire scene. A sudden gust of wind caught the hat and nearly lifted it off his head. He tugged it down snugly over his ears. I gotta get uptown, *presto*, he thought to himself. What's the

quickest way off this roof? Another bluster ruffled his double-breasted trench coat as it blew a scrap of newspaper up and over the ledge of the building. It was the society page, featuring a picture of Lionel T. Hollingsworth, wealthy owner of Bearnegi Hall, the finest concert auditorium in the world. That's the ticket, thought the little mouse. He grabbed the newspaper with both hands.

Then, he jumped.



As he plummeted toward the pavement below he held tightly to the newspaper, lifting it above his head. There was a sharp tug as the onrushing air filled the page and slowed the speed of his descent. Then, pulling first with one arm and then with the other, the crafty mouse steered his makeshift paraglider toward an approaching bus. Swooping down in wide, graceful circles, he recognized the 8th Avenue Express, the bus that went straight up through midtown. He was in

luck!

T.W. Strouse – that was the intrepid mouse’s name – smiled smugly as he breezed past a pigeon that had to look twice to be sure of what she was seeing.

Strouse glided toward the 8th Avenue Express, intending to land on it and hitch a ride. Suddenly, the blare of a horn filled the air, and a huge truck roared past in the opposite direction, churning up a small cyclone. Spun about in the whirlwind, Strouse pulled desperately on the newspaper airfoil, trying to get back on course. But the newspaper ripped and Strouse dropped like a rock, hitting the side of the bus with a thump!

He bounced off the bus and landed in the back of a small red pickup truck driven by an easygoing sheep dog. Amazingly, he was unhurt – except for the ringing in his ears that sounded like church bells.

Shaking his head and looking about, Strouse breathed a sigh of relief. He was going in the right direction! With a satisfied nod, he straightened his hat and settled in on the little truck’s wheel well to study the road ahead.

Several blocks later, as they neared his destination, the plucky little mouse silently urged the truck’s driver to keep going straight. But the driver signaled to turn left, and Strouse knew his ride was coming to an end. Thinking quickly, he grabbed a long bungee cord and a pair of bottle caps from a pile of rubbish in the bed of the pickup. Hopping back onto the wheel well, he spotted his way off the truck.

Just ahead, a porcupine paperboy was pedaling his bike up the street. Swinging the bungee cord overhead like a lasso, Strouse tossed it with expert precision. It was right on target, cinching tightly around the reflector on the paperboy’s bicycle fender. As the bungee grew taut, Strouse adjusted his feet, onto which he had attached the pair of bottle caps. With expert timing, he boldly leapt off the back of the truck, and swung around behind the bicycle.

His bottle-capped feet hit a torrent of water in the rain-swollen gutter, sending up a plume of spray.



As the paperboy pedaled away, tossing out the Evening Times, T.W. Strouse water-skied behind him, using the bungee as his towrope, dipping expertly in and out of the rushing torrent, avoiding sticks, leaves and other debris.

With the paper boy pedaling furiously, Strouse saw his destination looming closer. As he drew nearer the curb, the mouse released his hold on the bungee cord and went airborne. Flipping twice in the air, he gracefully kicked off his bottle-cap skis and landed at the door of *La Chanson*, the swankiest nightclub in town.



“A spectacular entrance, *Monsieur* Strouse,” remarked Charles, the stork doorman, as he took the mouse detective’s fedora and trench coat.

“I’ve never kept her waiting before. How upset is she, Charlie?” asked Strouse.

The doorman closed his eyes and gave an exaggerated wince.

“That bad? What are my chances of getting out of here tonight without getting squashed?” Strouse pressed.

“I would say *assez bons*, *Monsieur* Strouse. Rather good. The chanteuse, she will forgive you anything. You are the best piano player in all Manhattan, no?”

“Do me a favor, pal, and keep reminding her,” said Strouse, as he tipped the lanky bird a five-dollar bill.

“But of course,” Charles replied, deftly slipping the tip into his pocket.

They shared a wink, and Strouse dashed into the establishment.

Upstairs, Bertha Walker, a majestic African elephant in a satin gown and feather boa, filled the cabaret stage, betraying not a hint of concern at having her show delayed. She was regaling her admiring crowd with an amusing anecdote as Strouse snuck into the room and quietly took his seat at the piano.

When there was a break in the laughter, Strouse announced his presence with a jazzy

arpeggio, scampering across the full-sized piano keys like a circus tumbler. Bertha caught her breath in surprise and delight, turning to direct a beaming smile at her diminutive accompanist. The well-heeled crowd registered its approval with a smattering of applause and excited whispers all around.

“Sorry, I’m late,” said Strouse sincerely.

“Let the show begin,” Bertha smoothly intoned. Then, to the delight of her fans, she and Strouse launched into her signature song, “Lemon Drop Smile.”



Even as he was accompanying her, Strouse couldn't help but get swept up in Bertha's performance. People might argue whether or not he was the best piano player in Manhattan. But everyone agreed, Bertha Walker was a singer without peer. Nobody could sing like her. That was one of the reasons they got along so well. They both loved music.

When their show was over, Bertha and Strouse took seats at one of the tables.

“If you weren’t such a good piano player, I’d be upset with you for being so late tonight, T.W.” Bertha gently scolded.

She was the only person Strouse could think of who didn’t call him by his last name. And she was the only one whom he would let get away with it, too.

“I was worried,” she continued. “Where were you?”

“Stuck in a detective’s nightmare, Sweetheart,” he replied. “I got suckered into chasing down a bum steer. You know how it is in the snoop game. The stone that’s left unturned is the one that...”

“Monsieur Strouse,” interrupted the Maitre D’, a tuxedoed otter, “there’s a phone call for you.”

Strouse never took his eyes off of Bertha. “Tell ‘em I’m busy,” he replied, curtly.

“It’s Lionel T. Hollingsworth, the philanthropist,” the Maitre D’ pressed, holding out the phone insistently.

Strouse perked up at the mention of the name. Hollingsworth was the one client in the world for whom he would put everything else on hold. He reached for the phone...

Chapter 2



Prelude to a Mystery

“IT’S HIM. THE TYCOON. The Head Honcho,” Strouse whispered to Bertha. He grabbed the phone.

Bertha pretended not to listen as Strouse cleared his throat and spoke into the receiver.

“Strouse here. I’m all ears.”

Strouse listened to a torrent of gibble-gabble on the other end of the line, and then finally nodded and said, “You got it, Boss.” He handed the receiver back to the Maitre D’, who hung it up and departed.

“You have to leave,” said Bertha, knowingly.

Looking at Bertha, Strouse felt like a lout. Stranding her on stage tonight wasn’t the only transgression he’d committed lately. For the past few weeks, Bertha had been after him to rehearse songs for their act, but he could never find the time. They’d planned several lunch dates to discuss her new recording contract, but he’d get too busy with his private eye business, and poof – lunch would get cancelled. So tonight, Strouse had no intention of cutting the evening short, and to prove it, he asked: “Would you like to dance?”

Bertha cooed with delight as she swept him up and headed toward the dance floor. But halfway there, she changed direction and carried him over to the bar.

“Hey, what’s going on?” he protested.

“I know how important your detective work is to you,” she replied. “I’ll be here when you get back. You’re worth the wait.”

Bertha set Strouse down on the bar beneath a strange-looking tube. The detective mouse shook his head in wonder. What a dame, he thought to himself.

Charles, the club’s doorman appeared. “Your items, sir,” he said, handing Strouse his fedora and trench coat.

There was nothing more to say. Strouse put on his hat and coat. Bertha playfully nudged him with her trunk as he stepped onto an outline of a circle directly beneath the vacuum tube.

“What a sap I was to agree to tube travel,” Strouse muttered to himself.

Bertha pressed a button on the bar.

Strouse could feel the pull of the vacuum, the rush of the air. He had just enough time to hold onto his hat and set his jaw before being whisked away into the darkness!

