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## A Perfect Tragedy



When June Sparrow's eyes popped open that morning, there were eight words ringing in her head: *Today is the best day of the year!* Better than Christmas and better than fireworks. June was turning twelve! She stretched her legs out under the covers and noticed with annoyance that they were the same length as they had been the night before. Then her legs hit a lump followed by a tumble and squeal as something hit the floor. She had forgotten that Indigo Bunting was sleeping at the end of her bed.

Indigo Bunting was June's pet pig. And not just any pig, a miniature pig. He was not only the cutest but also the most intelligent animal on the face of the earth according to June, and Indigo Bunting was far too clever to disagree. He couldn't help being cute because of his diminutive size (he was about the length of June's forearm and weighed four pounds, three and one-half ounces) and extreme cleanliness (some might even call him fussy). Plus, as June liked to point out, everyone knows that pigs are smarter than dogs.

Indigo shook himself, jumped right back up, ran the length of the bed to June's pillow, and gave her a big, snuffling kiss. He hadn't forgotten her birthday.

"Thank you, Indigo," June said, kissing him on the tip of his little pink snout. She picked up the framed photo of her parents on her bedside table and gave them a kiss as well. She always kissed their photo first thing in the morning and last thing before bed. It seemed the least she could do, as they had left her in possession of a very large fortune.

June missed her parents, but they had died when June was only three years old, so she didn't remember them all that well, and June and Indigo were doing just fine on their own.

June Sparrow had no idea that everything was about to change.

That night, June and Indigo had tickets to the opera for her birthday. June did not just enjoy the opera; she adored it. Her mother and father had adored the opera as well, and since they lived in New York City, they were able to go to one of the best opera houses in the world, the Metropolitan Opera, or the Met, as everyone called it. One of June's only memories of her mother was dancing around the living room in her arms before her parents went out. June could remember the feeling of silk against her bare feet as she wrapped her legs around her mother's waist, and the smell of jasmine perfume. Jasmine had been her mother's signature scent, and there was still one small bottle in a velvet box tucked inside the top drawer of her mother's dressing table.

June used a drop or two every now and then for special occasions.

This was certainly a special occasion. For the first time this year, Shirley Rosenbloom, June's housekeeper, allowed June to go alone, or rather, with only Indigo Bunting as her date. Despite what many adults assume, there are some pets that enjoy getting dressed up in miniature versions of human clothes. Indigo Bunting didn't just enjoy getting dressed up—he adored it.

June picked out a silk dress with pink lace along the sleeves and matching pink tulle flaring out below like a petticoat. She pulled it over her head and twirled. Indigo Bunting covered his eyes with his trotters, which was his way of telling her that she looked like she was wearing a Halloween costume.

“You're one to talk,” June said, as she fastened the rhinestone clasp on his velvet opera cape and tucked the elastic band for his tiny silk top hat under his chin. June picked up Indigo so that they could admire themselves in the huge mirror by the front door.

“Perfect!” she said. Indigo wriggled in anticipation and made sure that his top hat peeked out proudly from under her arm.

They were headed to their favorite juice bar, Gray’s Papaya, for a quick stop on the way to the opera. June weaved her way expertly through the glamorous couples on the street. It was early evening, and the sidewalks were so busy that June pretended that she and Indigo were white-water rafting, leaning into the stream of bodies and breaking through when there was an opening in the crowd, always on the lookout for those annoying people who stopped dead in their tracks to look at their cell phones, creating unexpected boulders in the stream.

“Good evening, Miss June,” said the man at the juice bar when they arrived. “The usual?”

“Yes, please!” June settled herself onto one of the tall stools at the counter, put Indigo on the stool next to her, and gave his seat a quick spin. Indigo loved to spin, and he insisted she keep it up until June’s tall, frothy papaya juice arrived with a hot

dog on the side. (All beef, of course—for obvious reasons, June never ate pork.)

“And this is for your date.” The Juice Man cut some papaya into bite-size pieces and put them into a Dixie cup for Indigo Bunting. June gave him a big grin as Indigo tipped his nose into the cup. The Juice Man was not very particular about the “no pets allowed” rule, and after all, the counter was open to the sidewalk. June took a bite of hot dog and sighed happily. Indigo paused in his own gobbling to smile at her. Yes, she thought, taking a sip of juice, this was living.

“Miss Sparrow?” A familiar voice interrupted June just as she slurped (rather loudly) the last of her drink through a bright pink straw.

“Mr. Mendax?” June was shocked to see a slightly built and extremely well dressed man standing at her shoulder. Mr. Mendax was the Chief Financial Officer for her parents’ company, and she saw him only once a year, on Christmas Day, when he dropped off a gift basket for June

and had a glass of sherry with Shirley Rosenbloom. June wiped a gob of ketchup from the corner of her mouth.

Mr. Mendax looked extremely uncomfortable. In fact, he looked so uncomfortable that June wondered if he was about to throw up. Maybe it was the sight of Indigo Bunting at the counter, eating his meal right beside her, that was making him turn green. Some people had a hard time understanding pigs as pets.

“Happy birthday, Miss Sparrow,” said Mr. Mendax, looking even more pale.

“Thank you.” June exchanged a glance with Indigo. This was getting weirder and weirder.

“The fact is, Miss Sparrow . . .” He pulled on his shirt cuffs with their tasteful gold cufflinks and looked down at the floor, which was layered with dropped straws and crumpled napkins in a filthy collage of pink and white. “You have no money.”

“What?” June spun around on her tall stool. “Of course I do!”

“Do you know much you have?” Mr. Mendax asked.

“Not really,” June said, surprised. “You’re the one who’s supposed to know that, Mr. Mendax.”

“No, I mean, how much do you have on you right now?”

June wondered if Mr. Mendax was there because he needed money, despite his fancy suit and gold cufflinks.

“I have”—June opened her purse and unzipped the inside pocket, where she kept a roll of bills—“about a hundred and fifty dollars, but we haven’t paid for our snacks yet.”

“It will have to do,” Mr. Mendax said hurriedly. He pulled out a piece of paper from his breast pocket and handed it to June. It was an airplane ticket in her name to Red Bank, South Dakota. June stared.

“What is this?” she asked.

“A boarding pass.” He pressed a large ziplock bag into her hands as well. “And here are some of your mother’s personal possessions, from the safe

in my office. Nothing of real value. No cash, I'm afraid. Just a few mementos, but I thought you'd like to have them."

June stared at the ziplock bag and the boarding pass.

"What's going on, Mr. Mendax?"

This was the moment when Mr. Mendax burst into tears.

"It was a Ponzi scheme," Mr. Mendax said as he dabbed his cheeks with a paper napkin.

"Ponzi what?" asked June. Mr. Mendax began a very confusing explanation, frequently interrupting himself to sniffle as he wept. He had invested all her money—here, June stopped him: "*All* the money?"

"All of it." He nodded tearfully. "I was going to make you rich."

"But I was *already* rich!"

"I was conned," Mr. Mendax sobbed. "Listen to me, Miss Sparrow. I have only a few minutes before I have to turn myself over to the authorities."

(June had always thought that Mr. Mendax *was* The Authorities.)

“I have spoken to your aunt Bridget, in South Dakota—”

“Aunt Bridget!” June had never met her aunt, though she received a Christmas card every year.

“Your mother’s sister is named in the will, should anything happen to me, and now, I’m afraid—something has.” Mr. Mendax began to weep copiously. “I will be taken to prison, and you will go to your aunt in South Dakota.”

“I will do no such thing!”

“I am so sorry—it’s all I can do for you. Please, go directly to the airport.” Mr. Mendax glanced out at the street. “You’ll have to get a cab there. I—I haven’t any money to give you—everything will be sold—even their coin collection—priceless!”

Just then two police officers walked over and took Mr. Mendax rather roughly by the arm. They had been standing at the other end of the counter

for quite a while, but June hadn't paid any attention to them.

"Time's up," one of them said, while the other put a pair of handcuffs on Mr. Mendax's slender white wrists.

The first officer finished his shake and left a few bills on the counter. "Tough break, kid," he said to June, and they marched Mr. Mendax out onto the street and into the back of a squad car.

"Don't go home!" Mr. Mendax called out as they were taking him away. "Go straight to the airport. Nothing I can do! Ruin! Bankruptcy! Catastrophe!" He was still sobbing when the policemen shut the door and turned on the siren, speeding away into the night with Mr. Mendax's tearstained face pressed against the window.