

Chapter Seven

There are many, many types of books in the world, which makes good sense, because there are many, many types of people, and everybody wants to read something different. For instance, people who hate stories in which terrible things happen to small children should put this book down immediately. But one type of book that practically no one likes to read is a book about the law. Books about the law are notorious for being very long, very dull, and very difficult to read. This is one reason many lawyers make heaps of money. The money is an incentive-the word “incentive” here means “an offered reward to persuade you to do something you don’t want to do”-to read long, dull, and difficult books.

The Baudelaire children had a slightly different incentive for reading these books, of course. Their incentive was not heaps of money, but preventing Count Olaf from doing something horrible to them in order to get heaps of money. But even with this incentive, getting through the law books in Justice Strauss’s private library was a very, very, very hard task.

“Goodness,” Justice Strauss said, when she came into the library and saw what they were reading. She had let them in the house but immediately went into the backyard to do her gardening, leaving the Baudelaire orphans alone in her glorious library. “I thought you were interested in mechanical engineering, animals of North America, and teeth. Are you sure you want to read those enormous law books? Even I don’t like reading them, and I work in law.”

“Yes,” Violet lied, “I find them very interesting, Justice Strauss.”

“So do I,” Klaus said. “Violet and I are considering a career in law, so we are fascinated by these books.”

“Well,” Justice Strauss said, “Sunny can’t possibly be interested. Maybe she’d like to come help me with the gardening.”

“Wipi!” Sunny shrieked, which meant “I’d much prefer gardening to sitting around watching my siblings struggle through law books.”

“Well, make sure she doesn’t eat any dirt,” Klaus said, bringing Sunny over to the judge.

“Of course,” said Justice Strauss. “We wouldn’t want her to be sick for the big performance.”

Violet and Klaus exchanged a look. “Are you excited about the play?” Violet asked hesitantly.

Justice Strauss’s face lit up. “Oh yes,” she said. “I’ve always wanted to perform on stage, ever since I was a little girl. And now Count Olaf has given me the opportunity to live my lifelong dream. Aren’t you thrilled to be a part of the theatre?”

“I guess so,” Violet said.

“Of course you are,” Judge Strauss said, stars in her eyes and Sunny in her hands. She left the library and Klaus and Violet looked at each other and sighed.

“She’s stagestruck,” Klaus said. “She won’t believe that Count Olaf is up to something, no matter what.”

“She wouldn’t help us anyway,” Violet pointed out glumly. “She’s a judge, and she’d just start babbling about in loco parentis like Mr. Poe.”

“That’s why we’ve got to find a legal reason to stop the performance,” Klaus said firmly. “Have you found anything in your book yet?”

“Nothing helpful,” Violet said, glancing down at a piece of scrap paper on which she had been taking notes. “Fifty years ago there was a woman who left an enormous sum of money to her pet weasel, and none to her three sons. The three sons tried to prove that the woman was insane so the money would go to them.”

“What happened?” Klaus asked.

“I think the weasel died,” Violet replied, “but I’m not sure. I have to look up some of the words.”

“I don’t think it’s going to help us anyway,” Klaus said.

“Maybe Count Olaf is trying to prove that we’re insane, so he’d get the money,” Violet said.

“But why would making us be in *The Marvellous Marriage* prove we were insane?” Klaus asked.

“I don’t know,” Violet admitted. “I’m stuck. Have you found anything?”

“Around the time of your weasel lady,” Klaus said, flipping through the enormous book he had been reading, “a group of actors put on a production of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, and none of them wore any clothing.”

Violet blushed. “You mean they were all naked, onstage?”

“Only briefly,” Klaus said, smiling. “The police came and shut down the production. I don’t think that’s very helpful, either. It was just pretty interesting to read about.”

Violet sighed. “Maybe Count Olaf isn’t up to anything,” she said. “I’m not interested in performing in his play, but perhaps we’re all worked up about nothing. Maybe Count Olaf really is just trying to welcome us into the family.”

“How can you say that?” Klaus cried. “He struck me across the face.”

“But there’s no way he can get hold of our fortune just by putting us in a play,” Violet said. “My eyes are tired from reading these books, Klaus, and they aren’t helping us. I’m going to go out and help Justice Strauss in the garden.”

Klaus watched his sister leave the library and felt a wave of hopelessness wash over him. The day of the performance was not far off, and he hadn’t even figured out what Count Olaf was

up to, let alone how to stop him. All his life, Klaus had believed that if you read enough books you could solve any problem, but now he wasn't so sure.

"You there!" A voice coming from the doorway startled Klaus out of his thoughts. "Count Olaf sent me to look for you. You are to return to the house immediately."

Klaus turned and saw one of the members of Count Olaf's theatre troupe, the one with hooks for hands, standing in the doorway. "What are you doing in this musty old room, anyway?" he asked in his croak of a voice, walking over to where Klaus was sitting. Narrowing his beady eyes, he read the title of one of the books. "Inheritance Law and Its Implications?" he said sharply. "Why are you reading that?"

"Why do you think I'm reading it?" Klaus said.

"I'll tell you what I think." The man put one of his terrible hooks on Klaus's shoulder. "I think you should never be allowed inside this library again, at least until Friday. We don't want a little boy getting big ideas. Now, where is your sister and that hideous baby?"

"In the garden," Klaus said, shrugging the hook off of his shoulder. "Why don't you go and get them?"

The man leaned over until his face was just inches from Klaus's, so close that the man's features flickered into a blur. "Listen to me very carefully, little boy," he said, breathing out foul steam with every word. "The only reason Count Olaf hasn't torn you limb from limb is that he hasn't gotten hold of your money. He allows you to live while he works out his plans. But ask yourself this, you little bookworm: What reason will he have to keep you alive after he has your money? What do you think will happen to you then?"

Klaus felt an icy chill go through him as the horrible man spoke. He had never been so terrified in all his life. He found that his arms and legs were shaking uncontrollably, as if he were having some sort of fit. His mouth was making strange sounds, like Sunny always did, as he struggled to find something to say. "Ah-"

Klaus heard himself choke out. "Ah-"

"When the time comes," the hook-handed man said smoothly, ignoring Klaus's noises, "I believe Count Olaf just might leave you to me. So if I were you, I'd start acting a little nicer."

The man stood up again and put both his hooks in front of Klaus's face, letting the light from the reading lamps reflect off the wicked-looking devices.

"Now, if you will excuse me, I have to fetch your poor orphan siblings."

Klaus felt his body go limp as the hook-handed man left the room, and he wanted to sit there for a moment and catch his breath. But his mind wouldn't let him. This was his last moment in the library, and perhaps his last opportunity to foil Count Olaf's plan. But what to do? Hearing the faint sounds of the hook-handed man talking to Justice Strauss in the garden, Klaus looked frantically around the library for something that could be helpful.

Then, just as he heard the man's footsteps heading back his way, Klaus spied one book, and quickly grabbed it. He untucked his shirt and put the book inside, hastily retucking it just as the hook-handed man re-entered the library, escorting Violet and carrying Sunny, who was trying without success to bite the man's hooks.

"I'm ready to go," Klaus said quickly, and walked out the door before the man could get a good look at him. He walked quickly ahead of his siblings, hoping that nobody would notice the book-shaped lump in his shirt. Maybe, just maybe, the book Klaus was smuggling could save their lives.