



## CHAPTER 1

**O**n a cold spring morning in Boston in 1908, thousands of people waited patiently outside a fancy hotel. The crowd was mostly quiet, except for occasional murmurings: “How will he do it?” “Surely he’ll die this time.” “He must be crazy.” Four policemen, frowning and looking at their watches, stood on the front steps of the hotel. One of the officers held two pairs of handcuffs, and another had two heavy chains slung over his shoulder. As the minutes ticked by, the officers just looked at one another and shook their heads.

Suddenly, the front door of the hotel flew open. A short man with curly hair and a wide smile waved with both arms to the crowd. “I am The Great Houdini!” he shouted dramatically as the crowd burst into cheers and whistles. Flashbulbs popped, and newspaper

reporters pushed and shoved their way through the crowd in an effort to get to this little man who called himself “Houdini.” But the police were already surrounding him in a tight circle. They gripped Houdini’s shoulders and led him quickly through the admiring crowd. Men tried to slap Houdini on the back and shake his hand. Children stared in awe and tried to touch his long black coat as he moved past them. A few women fainted.

Down the street and toward the Charles River, the whole procession moved like a strange parade. Those who had not been able to join the party watched from windows or shivered on rooftops with spyglasses. Somewhere near the river, a band was playing lively music. When Houdini heard the music, he smiled even more broadly and tapped his gold-tipped cane in time with the songs.

“But aren’t you even afraid, Mr. Houdini?” one of the reporters shouted to him.

“Afraid?” Houdini asked with a loud laugh. “What do I have to fear? I am the King of Handcuffs. Nothing can hold me!”

“But the freezing temperatures, sir. The iron chains . . . how . . . ?”

Houdini just grinned and kept walking. The policeman next to Houdini leaned close to him and said in a low voice, “Don’t be a fool. This is suicide! There’s still time to change your mind.”

“Never,” Houdini replied with the slightest frown and continued toward the river.

Eventually, Houdini and the crowd, which had now grown to nearly 10,000 people, reached the stone bridge that crossed the Charles River. Below the bridge, many more people had gathered in rowboats, canoes, and even rafts. The police escorted Houdini to the top of the bridge near the railing and cleared a small space around him. Hopping on top of a wooden crate, Houdini raised his hands. Immediately, the crowd was silent.

“Ladies and gentlemen! I have examined the handcuffs that Sergeant Fields is about to place on me. I can assure you that these are strong regulation handcuffs made to restrain criminals and dangerous men. If there is any one of you today that does not believe that these are real handcuffs, please feel free to come forward and examine them for yourself.”

Houdini waited calmly for any doubting member of the crowd to come forward, but no one did. The sergeant raised the heavy cuffs high into the air for all to see. Another officer raised the chains and shook them a bit for effect.

“All right, then,” Houdini finally shouted. “Let us proceed.”

With that, Houdini whipped off his hat with a flourish and sent it sailing out over the water. Next, he slipped out of his long black coat. Then

he leaned down to untie his shoes. Off came both shoes and then his socks. Next, his tie and crisp white shirt were tossed into the growing pile of clothes next to him. When Houdini reached for his belt buckle, laughter erupted from some in the crowd, as whistles and cheers egged Houdini on. Mothers covered their children's eyes. Finally, Houdini stood before the thousands of spectators, wearing nothing but a tiny pair of swimming trunks.

“Gentlemen, if you will,” Houdini said, bowing to the policemen. This was his invitation to be searched. For several minutes the officers searched every inch of Houdini for anything he might use to unlock the handcuffs—a small key or even a tiny piece of wire. They pulled and prodded his hair, looked in his mouth and poked at his teeth with a small metal stick, and even checked the soles of his feet and between his toes. In the end, the police shrugged their shoulders, scratched their heads, and admitted that they could find nothing.

And then Houdini was shackled.

As the crowd watched in nervous silence, Sergeant Fields pulled Houdini's arms tightly behind his back and snapped together the two sets of handcuffs—one on his wrists and another on his forearms. Then another officer stepped forward to attach heavy chains from Houdini's wrists to thick irons on his ankles. In all, the

weight of the chains and cuffs was nearly thirty pounds.

“And now, ladies and gentlemen,” Houdini cried out with great emotion, “the moment has come! It is the time for me to risk everything. But first . . .”

Houdini looked into the crowd and locked eyes with a pretty woman who smiled back at him. But there were also tears of worry in her eyes. It was Houdini’s wife, Bess. Quickly, she came forward and put her arms around her husband, giving him a kiss for good luck. The crowd cheered and whistled as the kiss lingered. Then Houdini nodded confidently toward the crowd and turned toward the river. For only a moment, he looked down at the cold, dark water rushing by sixty feet below. Then, as 10,000 onlookers gasped in fear, Houdini jumped off the bridge.

Down, down through freezing darkness, the weight of the chains and cuffs dragged Houdini to the bottom of the river in seconds. As he landed with a soundless thud on the rocks of the river’s floor, all Houdini could hear was his own heart beating. Far above him, he could barely make out the dim greenish light of the water’s surface. The river’s current was stronger than he had expected—it was already beginning to pull him away. *One hundred and seventy-five seconds*, Houdini thought to himself. This was as long as

he could hold his breath. There was no time to waste.

Along the riverbanks and on the bridge, the crowd seemed to be holding its breath too. The band played a cheery tune, but as the seconds ticked by, the faces of the spectators grew more and more worried. After one minute, a man in the crowd yelled, “For God’s sake, someone help him! He’s drowning!” Thirty seconds later, a policeman shouted, “Something’s gone wrong—go after him!” to one of Houdini’s assistants who waited in a small boat beneath the bridge. But the assistant just smiled calmly and shook his head.

But when two minutes and fifteen seconds had passed, even the assistant began to look pale. Houdini’s wife sat on the wooden crate with her head in her hands. And the shouts and screams from the crowd were louder than the band as men shook their fists and children burst into tears.

Suddenly, the sun came out from behind the clouds and shone brilliantly, like a spotlight, on the water. And at that very moment, Houdini exploded through the surface with a huge exhalation of air. For a second, the crowd was so stunned and relieved that they couldn’t make a sound. Then, grinning widely, Houdini raised two sets of opened handcuffs over his head, and the crowd went wild. Thunderous cheering and

clapping filled the air. Total strangers hugged each other, and several more women fainted. Houdini had done it again—he had escaped certain death.

How *had* Houdini done it? No one has ever known for certain. However, in his day, and even one hundred years later, there were and are many theories. Some people believed that Houdini understood locks and handcuffs so well that he knew exactly how to tap them against a hard surface (like the rocks at the bottom of a river) to open them. Others believed that Bess's kiss was not just for good luck. In her mouth, perhaps, was a small key that she passed to Houdini during their long kiss “goodbye.” Still others believed something else entirely. They believed that Houdini knew something that no one else knew, that he had been given a most unusual gift—the gift of magic.

The evening following Houdini's handcuffed jump from the Charles River Bridge, his show at the largest theater in Boston was completely sold out. Over the course of many years, Houdini had become a superstar. Everyone, even worldwide, wanted to see the man who could escape from chains, walk through walls, swallow needles, and even make an elephant disappear.

Houdini, dressed in a fine silk suit and wearing gold cufflinks, walked onstage to deafening

applause and took a deep bow. As he straightened up, his gaze traveled across the cheering audience until his eyes fell upon a young boy. The boy was dressed poorly and was sitting next to his father in the cheapest seats. But on the boy's face was an expression of utter awe and wonderment. Before the lights dimmed and the show began, Houdini's and the boy's eyes met for a brief moment. And in that moment, Houdini was taken back to a different time—a time long before silk suits, packed theaters, and fame and fortune.