



THE FIRST PIECE OF THE PUZZLE

No-one will miss it...

Professor Albert Mallory felt no guilt about taking the puzzle box. He'd worked nearly a month in that dirt-water town, trying to pull history from the flotsam and jetsam of a place that didn't have any history worth saving. As far as he was concerned, it was a town best forgotten. He shouldn't have accepted the contract, sight unseen, but desperation makes men do foolish things. One month. Each day spent digging through the garbage of other people's lives, and each night playing poker with the four ghouls in the back room of the Nevermore pub. By the time he'd been paid, he barely broke even.

Albert stared at the small metal box sitting on his desk and tried not to think of the backroom of the Nevermore and the four smiling men at the poker table, taking him for every hard earned penny with never a thought for the life they were ruining. Every night. Plenty of history in *that* room — even if it was his own.

That's why he'd taken the box. He had expenses.

He stretched, reached for the half-empty bottle of Jim Beam and poured himself a drink. He swallowed and grimaced at the familiar burn, then poured another. Fortification for the phone calls he had to make. One bad, and one with the potential for good. A lot of good, if he played his cards right.

"So which one?" Albert whispered, putting the bottle aside. "Good or bad?"

He fumbled in his pocket for a coin and flipped it in the air. "Heads," he said, then shook his head when it landed tails.

"Just my luck."

Albert finished the bottle and then called Morley Van Rosen, the local loan shark to whom he owed money. A lot of money. He'd have to do some fast talking, buy himself a little time, then make that second phone call and set up the sale of the box.

Once he sold the box, everything would be all right.

"Albert, you scamp," Morley hissed. "You are late. Do you have my money?" And then he mentioned a sum that almost forced Albert's heart to stillness.

"I — I," he stuttered.

"That won't do it, Albert. I need to hear the words: 'I have your money, Mr. Van Rosen.'"

"Tomorrow," Albert whispered. "You'll have it tomorrow night."

Silence. Then, "Rosemont and Claireborne will be at your door at 7:30 p.m."

The line went dead and Albert dropped the receiver on the desk as though it were diseased. Not Rosemont.

After several futile minutes tearing apart his tiny kitchen in search of another bottle, Albert sat back down. He had one more phone call to make. The good one.

Albert had almost pulled himself together by the time Julian Gabareaux, his best and only customer, answered.

"Julian!" he said, but the cheer in his voice sounded cracked and ridiculous as he pushed back his hair, greasing it with the sweat from his forehead. "I'm back! And I have an amazing find for you."

"I was beginning to think you'd decided to return to academia full time, Albert. So, what do you have for me? Something Egyptian, I hope. I'm beginning to collect some divine—"

"Yes, Egyptian. Absolutely!" Albert cried, looking at the small box on the corner of his desk and hoping that the tiny marks etched into the sides were close enough. "It's a beautiful gold-alloy metal box. Nothing as ordinary as a jewelry box. This is a secret lock box, with religious and magical significance. Used in rituals. Very rare. A fantastic find. And in perfect condition."

"Not too perfect now," Julian laughed. "You know I want—"

"The patina of age. Yes." Albert pulled the phone away, afraid he would scream into the receiver and frighten off his best customer. He sucked in a quick breath and put the receiver back to his ear. "It's perfect."

"Wonderful," Julian said. "Bring it over as soon as you are able. I'll be leaving the country at the end of the week, and I do want to have my people look it over. Verification, you know."

"Julian, you can trust me," Albert said. "You know that."

"Albert. This is just business."

"Business."

"Of course. Now get some rest. You sound tired."

What Albert felt was exhausted. "I'll see you tomorrow, early," he said.

"And you will show me how it opens," Julian said. "We can't have another embarrassment, now can we?"

"No." Julian had been unable to make one of Albert's last finds work, a mechanical caged bird, quite possibly a Jaquet-Droz original from the 1850's. The silly prat had embarrassed himself in front of his highbrow friends when he couldn't figure out how to start it. He'd acted as though his failure had been Albert's fault. "It will work perfectly. Trust me."

Albert put down the phone and stared at the box. He had no idea how to open it. Lord knows he'd *tried* to open the thing, but had only succeeded in getting one small piece to move. It stuck out woefully from one side of the box, like a crippled wing. He hadn't even been able to put it back in place.

I'm a dead man.

He picked up the box and carefully waggled the one piece. His hands shook with frustration. He considered trying to pry it open so he could examine the inner workings then reassemble it. But if he did that and it broke, he'd have nothing left.

"Bloody hell." A doctorate from Boston College and he couldn't open a simple child's toy. It was infuriating.

Albert mentally went through the meager list of people who owed him favors, hoping one of them would have the expertise to open the box. But even as he did so, his hands kept working the wing. He wanted to solve this particular riddle on his own. Wasn't that what had sent him into archaeology in the first place? The desire to solve puzzles and riddles from the past?

Even as he lost himself in the puzzle, he knew he didn't have time for this. In a few short hours he would need to deliver it to Julian, the secret to opening the box in hand. If he failed, Rosemont would hammer on the door, and Albert's legs — or life — could be irreparably damaged.

The pounding on the door startled him so fiercely that he fumbled the puzzle, nearly dropping it. *Rosemont!* It's too soon.

Van Rosen, while ruthless, was a businessman first. He would want to collect his money over breaking Albert's legs.

He tucked the box on a hat shelf with shaking fingers then stared at his hands, willing them to calm before opening the door.

The man standing in the rain looked as if he'd stepped off a Victorian steamer. The rain ran off his yellow hat and slicker in torrents. His circular glasses were fogged and he carried a wooden suitcase covered with labels from around the world.

"Ah, just the person I wanted to see," the man said.

Albert gripped the door frame to keep his hand from shaking. Perhaps Rosemont had a new sidekick. This one did not look dangerous, but psychopaths come in all stripes. "Do I know you?" Albert asked.

"No, I expect you don't," said the man with a hint of sadness. "Will you invite me in so I can warm myself by your fire? Perhaps offer me some tea? I am soaked to the bone."

"What?" Albert asked, taken aback. "No. I don't think so."

"I'm sorry, but we do not have time for niceties," the man said, pushing himself past Albert, his footsteps leaving puddles on the worn wooden floor. "We have much work to do tonight, Albert." He placed his drenched case on a chair and began unfastening his jacket buttons.

Albert watched his unwanted visitor fuss with his jacket, carefully straightening it before placing it on the chair next to the dripping suitcase, and decided the little man did not look dangerous. Just irritating. "How do you know my name?"

"How about that tea?" the visitor asked.

"Listen—"

"And where is the puzzle box?"

"Box?" A new fear this time. Of being discovered. Albert's mind cycled through possibilities. Spies? Hidden cameras in the warehouse? Had the senile old security guard seen him? Did the police know? His brain whirled. He needed time to think. More than that, he needed his drink.

"Yes. The box. I know you have it, Albert. Now where is it? It has much to show you."

Albert opened his mouth hoping to defend his name but instead made a sound like he had lost his tongue.

"You *are* going to attempt to sell it, yes?"

"Are you with Julian?" Albert whispered.

"Julian is your buyer?" The old man clucked his tongue and shook his head. "The box does not belong to him. You understand

that, don't you? He could no more buy the box than you could buy the borough of Manhattan in New York." He slammed his hand down on the table.

Albert jumped at the sound. "Leave!" Albert demanded, pointing at the door.

The visitor pursed his lips, unimpressed by Albert's false bravado. He removed his glasses and wiped the fog away with a clean white handkerchief he pulled from his trouser pocket. "If you sell the box to Julian, how much will he give you?"

"I'm donating it. Leave. Now."

"This won't work, Albert, unless you're honest with me."

"Who *are* you?"

"Someone trying to help you. Let me ask you one more question: once you've got your money, how long do you reckon it will be before you end up back here?"

"I'm moving at the end of the month." Albert glanced around the small room that served as his library and his office. Dingy books competed for space with dust-covered artifacts on cheap book cases, the shelves bending from the weight. The fire he'd started to chase away the chill guttered and smoked sullenly. God, he hated this place.

"I don't mean the physical here, Albert. In how many backwater towns do you find yourself? How many times do you end up a victim in the local gambling dens? The scene may change but the tale is always the same."

Albert's knees weakened. He slumped in a chair at the table and eyed the bottle of Jim Beam.

"What do you want from me?" he asked, his voice a weak whisper.

"I'm here to tell you a story — though I'm not much of a story teller, truth be told. I'm more of a chronicler."

"A writer?"

"No, no, no, nothing as banal as that. I collect truths. Would you like to see?"

Albert struggled to fit the pieces of this strange conversation together, but couldn't make them connect in any meaningful way. He shrugged.

"Sometimes, Albert, the story is about what you need, not what you want." Though Albert did not see the old man move, suddenly his left hand held the puzzle box. Albert started and glanced at the hat shelf. Empty. *What the hell?*

Returning his gaze to the box, he asked, "What are you doing with that?"

The visitor ignored his question, turning the box this way and that, as though admiring it. "How long have you blamed the faceless men for taking your money? Night after night. You in those sinful dens. Losing your money. And your soul, chipped away piece by piece."

"I don't always lose," Albert said.

"You sound like a child." The old man glared, and Albert slumped deeper in his chair. "You *do* always lose. How long will you wait for the good life to fall into your lap? Face it, you want the rewards without the investment. A dangerous path. But you already know that, don't you?"

The visitor held the box in both hands. "What would you say is the greatest gift I could give you?"

A way out of this jam.

"Untrue," the visitor said and Albert blinked. Had he spoken aloud? Too much Jim Beam. Or not enough.

"*This* is the greatest gift," the visitor said, holding the box out to Albert. "This."

"I don't know how to open it," Albert said.

"Open it? It's not your task to open it. It's your task to observe."

"It's a box. What's there to—"

Albert's voice stopped as he looked at the box and realized it had *changed*. It was still a metal box, but he could see new letters and symbols stamped into the bronzed surface. The visitor manipulated the letters by sliding the side pieces of the box around to the back.

"How did you do that?" Albert whispered, and blinked again. A dim blue light began to glow through the cracks in the box, and what at first looked like a trick of Chiaroscuro quickly became a pulsating yellow glow. Then it became as bright as a halogen lamp. White hot light lanced through the loosened seams of the puzzle box.

"Look, Albert." The old man held it out on his outstretched palm. It vibrated with energy.

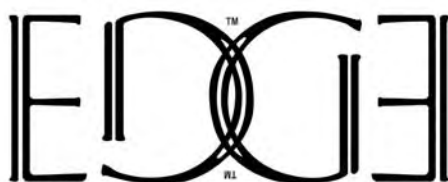
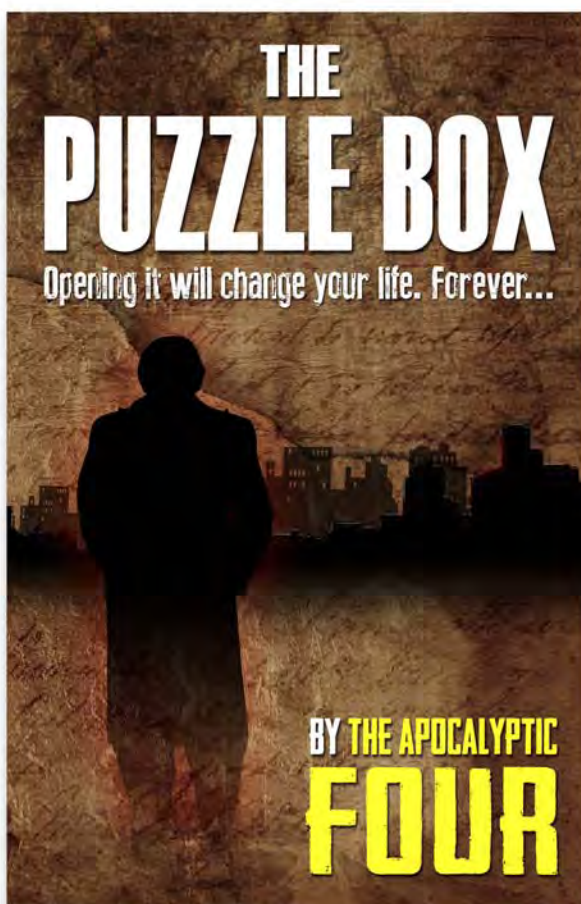
Albert gasped, but before he could lean forward, the white light exploded into a dazzling rainbow of colors so intense they blinded him. He threw a hand before his face.

"Open your eyes, Albert," commented the stranger. "And observe. Your life shall nevermore be the same."

The next Piece of the Puzzle will be revealed after "The Awakening of Master March."

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