



***Lesson One: Introduction to the
concept of stealing secrets...
which is very, very bad, and should
NEVER be done.***

A VERY, VERY LONG TIME AGO THERE LIVED A MAGICIAN who became obsessed with secrets.

He wasn't a very good magician - at least, not a very versatile one anyway. That is to say, he could only do one thing. But that one thing he did very well, and with a vengeance.

When he looked into a person's eyes he could see their secrets - each and every one of them. And when night-time came (a person is most vulnerable in sleep) he could reach into their minds and take possession of any secret that he chose. In doing so, this magician became the only person in the world who could speak of that secret. It became his, to conceal or reveal at his own whim.

You see, this magician - Louis was his name, Louis d'Arlend - had had an epiphany: that information is the key to power. And so for years he amassed hundreds, thousands, hundreds of thousands of secrets - both delightful and devilish. And it is true that every single one of us has a secret or two (or more); whether it be that you like the girl next door, or that you killed your own father to acquire your inheritance. But one thing is true of all secrets, whether innocent or damning: a secret is only a secret because you wish to keep it from everybody else, at all costs.

And so Louis d'Arlend realised that he could become the most powerful man in the world (despite his shortcomings as a magician). If he could gather but a single secret from every person, he could control them, and make them do as he wished. For a person will go to extraordinary lengths to keep their deepest secrets concealed.

In theory it was a brilliant plan, and very well executed for some years. Louis d'Arlend became quite well-to-do (having blackmailed an extremely wealthy lord for his silence on certain matters), lived in a very fine house (which was rather more like a large manor than a house, and belonged to the very same lord), had servants he needn't pay (because he had searched out servants with damning secrets), and was invited to all the finest parties (because he knew the host's most devilish vices).

In short, Louis d'Arlend was having a fine time, making thousands of enemies, drinking as much wine and eating as much food as he liked, and feeling very smug and secure in the knowledge that none of his enemies would dare to cross him, lest he make their secrets known.

But one night, at a party for the King and his friends (which Louis had wheedled his way into by discovering certain facts about the King's appetites), Louis d'Arlend saw the most delightful secret he had yet encountered. Upon looking into a certain man's eyes, Louis saw this secret: *I, too, am a magician.*

If being a magician was this man's deepest secret, Louis d'Arlend began to reason, then he must not wish for anyone else to know this. Perhaps he was a very powerful magician, Louis began to think. Perhaps this man, too, could be controlled, if Louis could but steal his secret.

But it was here that Louis d'Arlend made his fatal miscalculation: if this man truly was a powerful magician, were his deepest secret to be stolen he would surely use some art or another to seek revenge, or to steal his secret back. But such reasoning did not enter Louis d'Arlend's mind, so enamoured was he with this scheme.

So, having discovered this wonderful secret in the eyes of the man - Chrysander Noble was his name - Louis d'Arlend waited impatiently for the King's party to draw to a close. He began to imagine what great things he could accomplish with a *real* magician under his thumb, his anticipation growing with each passing minute.

After what seemed an eternity of revelry - fine wine, food and company - The Magician left; and Louis d'Arlend followed.

He felt a stab of disappointment as he observed the house of The Magician, for it was a mere cottage. Any normal person

would have thought it a delightful place – a pleasing little stone house at the crest of a small hill, with charming windows and a smattering of ivy on its eastern face. Beds of flowers bordered it on all sides: roses and fuchsia and carnations and bluebells and more. Had Louis seen the house in the daytime (for now it was nearly two in the morning) he might have seen a sweet, clumsy wash of colour. Yet all these features were beneath Louis' notice – he had grown accustomed to the grandeur and opulence afforded him by his blackmailees.

In all his years of stealing secrets, Louis d'Arlend had gathered many non-magical skills (for these were the only skills he *could* acquire), including how to move swiftly and silently through dim shadows in a house that was not his own, how to pick a lock, and how to open doors and windows with minimal noise. The secret-stealing process required his potential victim to be asleep, thus Louis had to wait for the night hours to carry out his work. It also required him to be within arm's reach of his victim – and so he grew very adept in the art of moving from outside to bedside, and bedside to outside, without rousing his target.

In his early days of secret-stealing (immediately after he'd discovered his skill) there had been many... incidents... due to his inability to move in anything but a clumsy manner. Many times Louis' targets had awoken, and Louis, being now completely powerless (and the equivalent of your average bungling burglar) had been forced to flee, usually dodging household objects such as pans, shoes and hammers – sometimes all at once. He never *quite* learned how to dodge hammers. It was his servants' favourite time of the week, when Louis stupidly demanded an hour of hammer-dodging practice. It was perhaps due to these practices, and the resulting blows to the skull, that Louis now found himself completely out of his depth, without even an inkling of the rubbish pile of trouble that was about to (metaphorically speaking, of course) fall directly onto his head.

Louis deduced that the most effective route to Chrysander Noble's bedside was through the open kitchen window, along the corridor and through the doorway into his bedroom. It sounded logical enough at the time.

Once inside the window, Louis really should have recognised that the place was drenched in magic – and not just any magic, but complex, structural magic. He should have put one foot through the window, recognised that his plan was horribly flawed, and run for his life. Unfortunately for Louis d’Arlend, however, Louis d’Arlend was criminally stupid.

The window through which Louis entered was one of many lining a balcony that encircled and looked down upon a magnificent hall (which greatly resembled some kind of throne room³). The ‘cottage’, it appeared, was a mere visage, and in fact housed an entire mansion.

Every step Louis took through the dimly lit, white-marble corridor sent tiny ripples about his feet, as if he were walking upon water, rather than stone. But rather than vanishing with distance, as ordinary ripples do, these ripples continued to travel, ricocheting along the balcony, spreading under doorways and finally reaching one grand door that was just out of sight. The ripples squeezed under the doorway and wriggled up a bedside table, and a strangely-shaped vase began to fill with a deep, angry light.

Oblivious to this silent ruckus, Louis continued to tip-toe forward, towards the grand door at the end of the balcony. With each step, more ripples radiated along the floor, and more crimson, liquidy light gathered in that strange vase.

The Magician awoke. He smiled. Red light indicated a thief in the mansion. And, in all likelihood, a stupid one.

Chrysander Noble ruffled up his bed to make it appear as if he were still asleep, and moved to the corner of his room, behind the doorway. Glancing down to the floor, he saw the ripples tightening with each new set that appeared. The intruder was approaching.

3 In actual fact, The Magician had recently visited the home of a wondrously rich French dignitary, and, upon being grievously insulted by his host, had performed a rather fantastic feat. He stole the interior of the dignitary’s mansion and squeezed it into his own cottage, at the same time placing the interior of the cottage inside the Frenchman’s walls. Believe it or not, magic often *does* make a popping noise – like the liquidy plink of a bubble as it disintegrates – and with one such ‘pop’ the Frenchman found himself on a rug before a hearth-fire in a disgustingly small room. At the same moment Chrysander Noble found himself in the centre of a very large hall (the very one Louis looked down upon at present).

He began to formulate a curse within his mind. Whatever it was that this intellectually challenged dunce wished to steal, The Magician would make completely certain that it could not be taken from *him*. And not only that. From this night forward, the thief would be completely invisible to all, and the only thing he could touch would be the very thing he had come here to steal.

Henceforth, the thief must live as a ghost; invisible, untouchable, and doomed to steal whatever was on his mind to steal, for all eternity. Never able to spend his riches, on himself or anyone else, never to have any human contact again. Chrysander smiled to himself. Yes, it seemed just the right level of brutality⁴.

Meanwhile, Louis had reached the doorway. It was His room, he could tell. After so many years, he had developed a knack for discovering with very little fuss the main bedroom in a large household.

At the moment Louis reached the doorway, the Magician remembered that the vase was still filled with light; no one would believe anyone capable of sleep with such a brightness beside their bed. Angry with himself for such an amateur oversight, he quickly reached over to tap the rim of the vase, and immediately the collection of ripples became black and slow-moving, like tar.

Alas, this move gave The Magician little time to finish the curse in his mind, and as a result it was an incomplete and slightly weaker version that hit Louis square on the back of the head as he entered the room.

Sufficiently shocked by this attack, Louis d'Arlend squealed in a rather undignified manner and fled the house.

Fleeing turned out to be rather problematic in itself for Louis. He made his escape via the nearest window (different

4 Most magicians develop some kind of complex, after having discovered their powers. Louis d'Arlend developed a Superiority Complex, whereby he thought himself greater than everybody else in the world. Chrysander Noble, having many talents and being one of the most skilled magicians that ever was, developed a Teacher Complex. This involved a compulsion to punish almost anyone he caught being naughty – by placing a curse on them that would give them time to think over and ultimately regret their actions, thus being taught a vital life lesson.

from the one through which he had entered) and found himself (as far as he could tell) in southern France, outside an enormous palace.

Over the next few months Louis discovered the true nature of the curse that had been placed upon him. He could not touch anything. He could speak and see, yet no one seemed to see or hear him.

The only positive was that he could still steal secrets – only they were of literally no use to him anymore, as he could not use them against anyone (being perpetually ignored).

One day he came home to find an auction being conducted: his house and all his belongings were being categorically sold off to the highest bidder. His servants split the profits amongst themselves whilst Louis raged and shouted futilely at them. Once in a while he almost seemed to get through to them, but felt reduced to a smouldering pile of ashes as one servant would then say to another: “Did you hear something?” and then themselves say: “Huh?” and forget all about it.

And so Louis d’Arlend wandered about for months, and then years, stealing secrets, delighting in them yet never being able to use them. But one day, years later, as Louis d’Arlend sat atop a carriage on his way to visit the King, he noticed something incredible.

There was a boy, decked out in an anorak and puddle-boots, wearing a flat-cap, and grinning. The incredible part was that the boy was grinning *at him*. The boy, one hand held by his mother as they prepared to cross the busy, cobbled street, now pointed *directly at Louis* with his other hand. The boy held Louis’ gaze as he and his mother passed before the now-stationary carriage. The child evidently found it hilarious to see a fully grown man riding on a carriage roof as if he weighed nothing. His mother, of course, had seen no such thing and appeared perplexed and embarrassed by her son’s behaviour. She gave him a smart slap on the buttocks as they entered the door of a nearby terrace house.

Louis was not about to let this opportunity pass him by. He decided that he must steal this boy’s Secret (which had something to do with a pineapple and a grave – Louis had only seen him for an instant and so had only managed to see a small snippet of it).

And so Louis d’Arlend floated amongst deep shadows once more, and silently came to stand beside the bed of Peter Hargraves, a six-year-old schoolboy with deep brown eyes, chubby cheeks, a quick smile and a quick temper. He began his business of secret-stealing, and struggled desperately not to laugh at the poor child as he discovered that the boy had thrown a rather large pineapple at the family dog⁵, accidentally killing it⁶.

Children’s secrets are rarely very damning (even though they certainly feel that way to a child), and Louis was amused by it, nothing more.

But he got much more than he bargained for, that night. The moment he had finished stealing the poor boy’s secret, Peter Hargraves seemed to vanish from his bed. Louis stepped back with a start. As he looked closer, however, he realised that Peter was still there, just looking rather translucent. Confused and shaken by this turn of events, Louis thought it best to leave as quickly as possible.

At that moment something very strange happened at The Magician’s mansion-in-a-cottage. In a special room, the Lesson Room, The Magician kept a record of the people he had punished; their names were etched with strangely glowing silver letters on all available surfaces – even the furniture. But one name was no longer silver like the others. The name ‘Louis d’Arlend’ glowed red upon the wall, and a new name appeared below it, in an even deeper and angrier shade: *Peter Hargraves*.

Chrysander Noble was angry. In fact, he was livid. Not only had Louis d’Arlend (albeit unintentionally) placed his curse upon someone else, he had placed it on a six-year-old child! Louis d’Arlend, he feared, had not learnt his lesson. This would not do, he thought to himself, this would not do at all.

Louis d’Arlend must learn his lesson!

5 Because it had bitten him the day before.

6 It was a very old dog, and had lost several contests of Male Supremacy (even dogs develop Complexes within their lifetimes) and was already in very bad shape. A blow to the head from a pineapple was enough to cause the poor beast to literally keel over and die. Or perhaps it was die and *then* keel over. Not that it matters, as the ultimate result of a pineapple to the head was DEATH (and, eventually, the grave).

The story from here is actually quite painful. Not in the sense of loss or grief – no, not at all – but in the sense of frustration and time-wasting. For example, from the time Peter Hargraves' name appeared on Chrysander Noble's wall to notify him of the problem, it took a grand total of 383 days to rectify the situation.

It took The Great Magician, Chrysander Noble, 18 days to track down the recently vanished Peter Hargraves, three days to make the boy stop his appalling crying (why anyone should ever wish to procreate was a complete and utter mystery to Chrysander Noble), a further five days to deduce that the curse had only been partially transferred to Peter, yet another four days to realise that Chrysander himself could not use his powers to transfer the curse⁷, and a further 353 days to track down the elusive Louis d'Arlend and assist Peter in placing the whole of the curse back upon d'Arlend's shoulders.

One of the reasons that this was such a lengthy and tedious process was that the curse which Chrysander had released was incomplete, and, rather like a story book with a hundred pages missing here and there, it took quite a while to make sense of. There was an amusing incident on day 286 of this saga, but it would need to be told in the context of the previous 285 days and would therefore not be worth the effort.

And so we shall summarise those 383 days to this: Chrysander Noble at last discovered a method of transferring the curse back to its rightful owner, and, being not immortal, established the Protectors, a long and illustrious line of magicians who sought to ensure that the Secret Stealer curse remained only on the shoulders of those who deserved it. Louis d'Arlend, meanwhile, was soon fortunate enough to find another magician much like himself – that is, essentially selfish, though not particularly evil. This magician could see Louis, but possessed enough skill to prevent his own secrets from being stolen. And so a partnership was formed, for their mutual enrichment.

Louis' partner, mostly to inflate his own sense of self-importance, dubbed himself the very first Deceiver, declaring it his intention to assist the Secret Stealer in his quest for gratuitous wealth⁸, and further, to trick whatever Potential they could find (such as poor

7 One of the rules of the curse stipulated that it could not be removed by anyone but the Accursee, a fact that Chrysander (very inconveniently) forgot. This particular rule was designed to ensure that Louis did not simply find another magician and have *them* lift the curse.

8 For the ever-so-reasonable fee of 50% on all profits from all attempts at bribery, blackmail and extortion.

Peter Hargraves) into assuming the Secret Stealer mantle, so that the previous Secret Stealer might at last enjoy his accumulated wealth. Chrysender Noble, as you might imagine, was somewhat less than thrilled when he learned of this new development...

Thus began the grand history of the Secret Stealer: the Curse and its Accursees, and of the ever-waging war between the Protectors and the Deceivers, between the Secret Stealer and the Potential, between good... and evil. And between the ever-so-slightly less consequential lines of sausage-dogs bred by Protectors and Deceivers as a front to their exploits. And I warn you, do not knock the business of sausage-dog breeding – for those sausage-dogs are ever-watching, ever-calculating, and know more than they let on...