

THE METROPOLITAN TIMES

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At nine o'clock yesterday morning, following ninety days of fruitless searching, billionaire industrialist and businessman Lyndon Surway was officially pronounced dead. Mr. Surway was last seen by members of his staff departing from the main airplane hangar of his estate a few minutes past eight in the morning, flying alone aboard one of his aircraft. His last recorded words to the command center crew of his hangar were: "Clear skies and mild winds. Perfect visibility, or as perfect as I could hope, for as long as I can tell. Gentlemen, I wish you a thorough enjoyment of this fine day." Nothing unusual was noted in his language or behavior.

The late Mr. Surway often took his plane out with no stated destination. But this time, he failed to return at the customary hour of six in the evening. As no word had been received from him, the kitchens were advised that he would likely dine outside. At ten o'clock on the following morning, when there was still no news of Mr. Surway or his aircraft, the Steward of the House alerted the municipal, state, and federal authorities, and a search began for the missing magnate. But no airport, hotel, hospital or inn within fuel's range of the estate could provide any information. Dozens of interviews bore no result. Countless journalists and detectives rushed in from every corner of the country, but none of them could unearth a single clue regarding Mr. Surway's whereabouts.

Not even the Steward could guess where Mr. Surway had gone. On the morning of his disappearance, Mr. Surway had only told him: "My day is free and so am I."

Fifteen infantry troops were dispatched, with over a hundred hound dogs, across more than two hundred miles of hills and valleys surrounding the town of Spring Forge, where Mr. Surway lived. The infantry and the dogs found nothing. The Air Force then loaned eighteen jet-powered aircraft to continue the search. The Navy joined the effort with five ships, sixteen helicopters, and four submarines to scour the coastal regions, islands, and ocean floor within flying range of the Eastern Seaboard. Again nothing was found. Finally then, a large-scale search was conducted through the grounds and the buildings of Surway House itself, led by seven hundred volunteers from Spring Forge and other towns throughout the valley. Still they found nothing. Yesterday marked three months since Mr. Surway's disappearance. The aircraft was legally declared lost, and its owner deceased. Mr. Surway, estimated for each of the past twelve years to be the wealthiest man in the Western Hemisphere, leaves behind no known relatives.

At three o'clock yesterday afternoon, Mr. Surway's attorney arrived from the City to disclose his late client's last will and testament. The following lays down the words of the will, as written by the late Mr. Surway himself, and as read before the main representatives of his estate and business interests in the Great Hall of the House:

"[...] As I would find it particularly offensive not to be invited to my own reception, I ask that you kindly refrain from organizing a funeral ceremony for me. If you insist on honoring my memory, you may quietly toss a sip of your drink into a plant at the next party you attend (assuming the wine is decent, forgive me for saying so). I promise to do my very best to drink it and to thank you.

Having settled what I ask of you, now to the matter of what I shall give. From a designated trust, opened at the Metropolitan Savings Bank in the City exclusively for this purpose, I hereby grant every member of my House and business staff, including every person working for an entity of the Surway Corporation and its subsidiaries, an annual gift equal to twice the amount of the individual's current yearly salary, to be paid out in full on January 1 of each year from now until the end of the individual's life. In addition, to every member of my House and business staff, for every child born before this day, I leave an incremental yearly sum equal to the individual's current salary, to be paid out in full on January 1 of each year until the end of the child's life. There isn't a single person, among the many men and women whom I have had the privilege of living and working with, who doesn't deserve these sums and much more. And if there is, then I deserve at least this penalty for my poor judgment of character.

As for the remainder of my assets, I leave the entirety of my holdings, my property, and all my interests to my dear friend Lucian Baker, with the sincerest expression of my gratitude and best wishes. To him I bequeath my stake in every business across the Surway Corporation and its subsidiaries, as well as my ownership stakes across all other investments domestically and overseas, including but not limited to farms, factories, lands, corporations, and trusts. To Lucian Baker I also leave the estate at Surway House, along with all the possessions held therein, including but not limited to the main buildings and gardens, along with the numerous collections housed therein, including but not limited to the paintings, sculptures, statuary, weaponry, jewelry, gems, silverware, glassware, porcelain, precious metals, historical artifacts, aircraft, boats, cars, stables, rare books and manuscripts, common books and manuscripts, wine cellars, wardrobes, musical instruments, and maps. Finally, to Lucian

Baker I leave the entirety of my financial assets, excluding the trust set up for the members of my House and business staff as described above. To him will accrue any income from my stock and bond portfolios, my commodity holdings, and my real estate investments held domestically and around the world, along with any and all other funds held under my name or any business that I own. Most importantly, Lucian Baker will be the sole beneficiary of all my cash assets, whether held at hand in Surway House or in any financial account held in my name. It is my privilege to leave this inheritance to Mr. Baker as a token of my genuine friendship and heartfelt thanks."

Since the reading of the will yesterday afternoon, the desperate search for Mr. Surway has turned into a frantic one for Mr. Baker. As of the writing of this article, several individuals named Lucian Baker have been officially identified within the greater population, but none among the late Mr. Surway's personal and business relations. Inevitably, the news has begun to spread among the public. Conmen and imposters keep every telephone ringing across the editorial floor as I write. Certainly the search for the legitimate Lucian Baker will put an end to all their claims before the week is over.

The fortune to which Mr. Baker is entitled is almost as difficult to grasp as Mr. Baker himself. Indeed, by our independent calculations as well as official accounting records, the magnificently generous trust that the late Mr. Surway left for his staff members and colleagues amounts to pennies in comparison with the remainder of the legacy. After all taxes and duties are paid, Mr. Baker will remain the largest single inheritor of a fortune in the history of financial recording. And yet, to the bafflement of all accountants, bankers, and advisers currently engaged in the Surway estate, and even the late Mr. Surway's attorney, the entirety of the cash assets left by the deceased appears to have vanished with Mr. Surway himself. Aside from some pocket change left in a

drawer of the desk in his bedroom, no money at all can be found either in the House or in any bank account. It has come to light that no single individual or professional firm has had access to the full amount of the fortune in at least a dozen years. As most of our readers know, this is not an uncommon or alarming practice among managers of tremendous wealth. But as a result, none of the distinguished lawyers and financiers who have built their careers upon the Surway fortune can now explain where his personal cash holdings have gone. Taken on their own, these holdings are estimated to be worth as much as the fifth largest bank in the country. But the only certainty as of the writing of this feature, according to every reliable source, is that none of this money can be located. While the search for this fortune continues, the remainder of the late Mr. Surway's assets, including his property and all investment holdings, are now safely held in trust for Mr. Baker.

In accordance with the wishes laid out in the will, no funeral ceremony has been planned, although the people of Spring Forge joined members of Mr. Surway's staff and various businesses across the Surway Corporation in a candlelight vigil last night before the main gates of the estate. As of this morning, the servants remaining on the premises are busy closing down the House. They have decided to do so in memory of their honored master, until the hour, undoubtedly near, when his heir will appear. We will be certain to report any developments in this story as soon as they arise. Until then, our thoughts and prayers are with the late Mr. Surway, and the many men and women in whose remembrance he lives on.

PROLOGUE

On the ground floor of the House, in a corner of a courtyard where cows and chickens had once lived, there was a round, empty room. No one had ever used it as a room. No one, even at the time when its bricks were scrubbed clean twice a week, had ever entered it in the middle of the night, because the room was an oven—a wood-fired oven. This oven, like the House, had been abandoned decades ago. In the darkness and the cold, no trace remained of the blazes that had once burned there, or the loaves, baguettes, muffins, scones, buns, croissants, and pies that had once puffed and turned golden brown there. The floor of the oven was slatted with iron bars. There was a space underneath the slats, hardly tall enough to crawl in, to clean out spills from the oven through a grate in the wall of the House. The shape of a man, outside the House, dropped over this grate. The oven that had been still for decades screeched with the grinding of screws. The man pulled the grate free and crept out of the night into the deeper blackness of the House.

He crawled through the space underneath the oven, seeing nothing, until the air felt thin and close. He then pressed up his back against the slats of the oven floor above him. He felt his spine crunch, and his lungs threatened to burst, but he continued

to push upward. The metal over his back gave way and a square of slatted floor slid aside. He raised himself to his full height. He groaned and the echo jarred him. It was the only sound in the House. He glanced up at the ceiling, his eyes adjusting to the paler shade of darkness above him, and he found the tunnel of silvery light that he was looking for.

There it is. He smiled. *Other ovens have hoods. The Surway House oven has a chimney.* Suddenly he was struck by a coincidence he hadn't thought of. He cocked his head. It was both startling and funny. *Could this oven have anything to do with Surway's will? The name's Lucian Baker after all.* He wondered and grinned. Then he steadied himself again and carried on with his task.

He reached into the pouch sown into his jacket for the wire rope he had used to climb over the fence of the estate. He twirled it at his side to gather force and cast it up into the chimney as far as he could. He felt the grapple scratch against the stone and slip down. The rope slackened in his fist. *Catch, catch, catch,* he muttered to himself. Just as he was about to jump aside to dodge the grapple, the wire tautened again. He felt its tightness through the warmth of his glove. He chuckled out loud.

"Bet you didn't expect anyone to find this passage, did you?" he whispered. There was nobody to hear him. How long since anyone could have heard him in the House in the middle of the night? Forty years? Fifty years? He tried to recall the history. He thought of Surway's disappearance, but he waved the thought away. He began climbing the rope.

Slowly he pulled himself up the oven chimney, towards the white, gleaming circle of the moon in the sky above. Then he noticed another gleaming circle above him, much closer and much dimmer. It drew nearer with every tug on his rope, slipping off the surface of the sky. He recognized it before he reached the grapple of his rope—a mirror tilted against the wall. It was

murky with decades of soot, but it could still reflect the moonlight down a second passage that broke off diagonally from the chimney. His grapple was hooked into the opening. It wasn't a secret passage, but its existence was a secret—it was the light well of a secret passage.

"If there's room for light, there's room for me," he said. "Good thing I've been staying away from bagels."

He reached his grapple, gathered his rope, flung it down the light well, and skidded down to the bottom. This time, he allowed himself a moment's contemplation.

He was standing in the middle of one of the many secret passages that ran through Surway House, hidden tunnels that were rumored to riddle the entire estate. The stories of these passageways, of hidden chambers and trapdoors, had gone from hearsay to myth in the long years since architects had first designed the estate. During the construction of the House, the whole town had buzzed with the rumor of confidential maps that no two workers could share. People had spoken of a small army of engineers who talked to no one, and whom other workers sometimes saw at the entrance of the site, but never inside. These engineers had come and gone, and no one knew their names. During the four years of construction, even the builders hired from the town had signed endless clauses of secrecy; "as complicated as a Surway House labor contract" became a classic saying in Spring Forge. Many of these builders could still captivate their grandchildren around the fireplace by talking about the time they had spent toiling on the construction site, "when your dad was a little boy and you could still see the markings for half the roads that were torn down to build the House." "What about the secret passages?" grandchildren inevitably asked. And the reply came just as inevitably, with a smile: "Your grandmother would kill me if I told you anything." But lethal grandmothers weren't the only reason grandfathers

gave no answers. Nobody knew the answers, or knew anyone who still did.

But decades can break men's secrets before they wear down walls. The man in the tunnel had memorized every detail in the secret plans, at least for the part of the main building that rose around the kitchens. Still, he could hardly believe that he had actually penetrated the legendary hidden network inside the House. He looked right and left, and he saw the tunnel disappearing past other light wells in both directions. *Left*, he remembered, and he set off down the passage.

He walked past rays of moonlight and gable windows through which he could look out over the gardens. He walked down little stairwells, through crossroads, under terraces and over bridges, each time recording his progress against the plans he had memorized. It was of utmost importance that no map, no blueprint, not even a written set of notes ever be found on his person. But his memory didn't fail him. On and on he went past all the signs he had anticipated. He could glimpse into the House all around him through openings in the secret passages. He could peer into courtyards, galleries, ballrooms, and corridors, over staircases and balconies where kings and queens would have felt small. He could look through the holes of missing eyes in painted ceilings, through two-way mirrors and hollow statues, and across the branches of chandeliers as big as elephants. But nothing stopped him on his way.

He reached a gap that looked down into the entrance hall of the House. He gazed into the famous room below him, and when he saw the moonlight pool into the fountain that he had seen in so many pictures, now empty and dry, he couldn't hold back a sigh. On the central landing of the double staircase at the end of the room, there was a white marble table. He could almost see the day's mail on top of it, just waiting to be picked up by the Master.

"Now there's a proper entrance hall—no hidden passage required," he said wistfully. But immediately he shook himself. "There's no right or wrong way into this House, as long as you find what you came for."

He shut the curtain over the window and continued on his way.

Finally he reached a wall. He had known that he would come up against it, and he knew it wasn't a wall. He placed his fingers over it and felt the reassuring scrape of canvas.

The painting.

Lightly, gently, almost quivering from the softness of his effort, he pressed the fingers of his right hand against the tight wall of fabric that formed the back of the painting. The painting didn't move. He tried again, clenching his fingers into claws, but still the canvas resisted. Then, suddenly angry at the back of the painting, at the secret passageways, and at his own deferential silence in the enormous House where no one lived anymore, he let out a cry and shoved both of his palms into the canvas. Immediately the painting swiveled and he tumbled into the room on the other side.

He got up. The darkness in the room was softer than the blackness of the passages. At first, he could see nothing. Then his eyes adjusted. Unlike the gloom of bread ovens, chimneys and tunnels, it was a darkness he knew already. It was the comforting, familiar darkness of nighttime in a house. Moonlight trickled in from a gap in the heavy drapes over the windows. He looked around him. Objects were solemnly displayed against the walls, some more curious than others, an old cap, a cane, a foreign-looking steering wheel, a handful of coins. On a stand by itself, he noticed the leather frame and plastic casings of a restaurant menu. He vaguely remembered the name of this room from the plans he had learned. He mouthed it in silence. *The Memory Room.*

For a moment, he was almost interested in its mysteries, in the life whose story it told. But all of a sudden he jumped. His eyes had fallen across something infinitely more precious than all the knickknacks around him. On a table in the middle of the room, resting on a silver square of moonlight, was a small white letter, folded in half. He could hardly breathe. He stepped over to the table.

Etched in golden script on the top fold of the letter were the initials *LS*. He picked it up with a trembling hand. There was a single line written inside:

A few steps more to the end of your journey.

He stared at the words, unable to let go of them. He felt the goal in his hands. Then, unhurriedly, lowering the letter, he lifted his eyes beyond the table. He saw a painting at the back of the room. He didn't even realize that he hadn't noticed it, the painting of a man in royal armor astride a horse. The man's outstretched hand pointed to the drawing of an elaborate structure, some fantastical city or fortress, held by two smiling women on the other side of the painting. Like the man on the horse, the two women stared back at the viewer.

"A few steps more," the man repeated, and he took a few steps towards the painting. Did the man on the horse look like Lyndon Surway? In the darkness and his excitement, he neither knew nor cared. The structure in the drawing was shown from above as an intricate maze, in which tangling pathways all led to a small square in the middle. The entire painting seemed to converge upon this point. The man's eyes focused on it. Was it possible? Was he only imagining? He wondered. Slowly, irresistibly, he raised his hand and trailed the edge of his thumb against the surface of the painting, circling around the little square at the center.

He let his finger graze the square, and he felt hundreds of minuscule hairs bristling down the curve of his neck. He was right. He hadn't imagined it. The square stood in relief from the rest of the canvas. It was a button hidden in the middle of the painting.

"...to the end of your journey," he whispered.

He took one long, soundless breath, looked one last time at the smiling man on the horse, and pushed his thumb down on the button. As the painting lifted over him, he felt his mind puffing out of his head. He even thought he saw one of the women widen her grin as her face swooshed past.

A new room opened before him, an octagonal stone room. It was only big enough for one person. There was a table in the middle, with another letter on top of it. He picked up the letter. There was no trembling left in his fingers. On the top fold in golden script, he saw the initials *LS* once again. He read the words inside. His chest tightened with joy.

And now you reach your journey's end.

Instantly a metal barrier shot down from the ceiling behind him. Blinding white lights began to flicker down the length of the room. The canvas that opened into the secret passageway swiveled shut. The flicker of white lights spread down the stairwells, through the hallways, across the ballrooms and over the balconies, flashing their alert to the gardens outside and the night beyond. And the man's screams of terror and anger were silenced by the blare of alarms throughout the House.