THE ILLUSIONS

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Liz Hyder has been making up stories for as long she can remember. *Bearmouth*, her debut young adult novel, won a Waterstones Children's Book Prize, the Branford Boase Award and was chosen as the Children's Book of the Year by *The Times*. *The Gifts*, her acclaimed debut novel for grown-ups, was published in 2022. She has a BA in drama from the University of Bristol and was, once upon a time, a member of the National Youth Theatre. Originally from London, she has lived in Shropshire for over a decade.

THE ILLUSIONS

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For in and out, above, about, below,
'Tis nothing but a Magic Shadow-show,
Play'd in a Box whose Candle is the Sun,
Round which we Phantom Figures come and go.

The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam
translated by Edward Fitzgerald

Any budding conjuror must start at the beginning.

I have learned, through my own experience and years of practice, that, in essence, all magical effects come under one of only six headings.

I should say, whilst I have chosen six, there may be others who might argue for seven or ten. Perhaps you yourself may even invent a new one for, however much one knows, I assure you, one can never learn all there is to know about magic.

The first of my six headings is 'Production'.

Examples for an amateur conjuror might include producing an endless number of articles from a hat, catching money from mid-air, or plucking a string of coloured handkerchiefs from an apparently 'empty' hand.

Through the use of palming, sleight-of-hand and employing some item that serves as a 'cover,' the conjuror may secretly produce the article he wants to show. This must be already concealed, and attention should not be drawn to it until the grand 'reveal'.

Extract from *The Secrets of Magic* by George Perris
(published by Saxon Press, 1895)

PRODUCTION

March 1896
BRISTOL



A storm is coming. It lingers in the air, dances in the trees, and blows at the roof tiles, trying to prise them from their holds. The rusting weathervane at the top of St Andrew's rattles, swinging in circles at the sudden gusts and gales that make the church's resident barn owls hide in the bell tower, huddled together for warmth.

Beneath them, a small crowd of men and women gather in the midst of the graveyard, holding tightly onto their hats and bonnets as the wind tries to cast them off into the black of the night. Arter Evans, an ageing con-artist with a knack for the theatrical, tries his best to hold both their attention and his lantern, a battle he is in danger of losing. The deep and often empty pockets of Arter's frayed woollen coat carry a smattering of coins from his audience, and they clink faintly as he picks up a small bell from the top of an old headstone.

His accomplice, sixteen-year-old Cecily Marsden, barely hears the bell ring from where she hides, crouched behind a large, moss-covered gravestone in the far corner of the dank churchyard. The wind is doing its best to steal the sound away, but Cec, as she prefers to be called, is focused entirely on something else. *Something impossible . . .*

The wind blows around her as her mouth falls open. Her left palm faces outward, empty. Leaves and white petals from early blossom circle her like a tiny tornado in the dark. In front of her, about a foot away, and stubbornly resisting the wind's power, a playing card is held up without her even touching it.

The four of diamonds, freshly plucked from her pack, hangs suspended in mid-air. Held up with – well, she is not entirely sure.

Over the past eight months or so, ever since a chance encounter in a room above a tavern in a grubby corner of London, Cec has developed a serious interest in card tricks – an obsession, almost. Since then, she has practised, secretly, at every spare moment, sewing hidden pockets into her dresses so her two dog-eared packs are accessible whenever she chooses. She has practised in narrow beds in empty rooms, when Arter was out on drunken sprees, lost to the bottom of the bottle in the darkest alleyways of whichever town they found themselves in. She has practised, as she does tonight, whilst waiting for a show to start. She has even, although she would never admit it, practised in rare, quiet moments whilst sitting on the privy, dress hitched up above her knees.

She had swiftly mastered the basics – switching cards, marking a deck, fanning and shuffling – and is confident now in all manner of tricks, begging and borrowing from card sharps in the many taverns they passed through on their way to Bristol. But she has never dared share it, not with Arter, nor anyone else. It's the only thing she has that is *all hers.*

And never before has young Cecily Marsden achieved *this*.

It is impossible. Just as she witnessed that night in London, months ago. A wrong turn into an empty room with a stage. An awkward young magician still learning his craft, a rehearsal

without witnesses – until Cec silently stepped in. Gossamer threads, thin as a spider's web, strung high across the stage. Concealed paper hooks on the back of the cards floating in mid-air. Nothing but a clever trick.

Tonight though, there is no thread, no hidden hooks; nothing, except Cec and her impossible card . . .

Cec gasps and the card falls to the ground like a dead weight. She pounces on it, tucking it back into her hidden pocket. Her mind whirls, full of questions, as she tries to steady herself for her performance, wrestling her thoughts back to Arter.

'Ladies and gentlemen!' he bellows throatily as the audience shiver, nudging each other. 'Prepare yourselves! For tonight, you will witness a genuine spectre - the famed ghost of St Andrew's! The Lady in White herself! Tonight, ladies and gentlemen, at the stroke of midnight . . .' He pauses for effect. '*She will walk again!*'

There is a collective intake of breath from the audience and Arter nods, pleased, before continuing in his booming voice. 'Hers is a story of tragedy. An echo from the past of an exquisite young beauty who fell in love with a handsome, dangerous—'

The wind steals Arter's words away and Cec struggles to focus. She puts a hand to the pocket of her stiffly starched dress, feeling the cards underneath. It must have been her imagination. A vision caused by an empty stomach. But it wasn't. She *knows* it wasn't . . .

'The Lady in White, now abandoned by her lover, lost and alone,' Arter annunciates, as clearly as any actor in the West End. 'She came to this very church, in the heart of Clifton, to pray for her soul. She knelt on the cold flagstones, hands clasped together, and when she was done, she rose, and entered the

tower. She climbed every one of the stone steps to the very top and looked out upon her last night on earth.'

The first chime for midnight rings out – Cec's cue to begin her part in tonight's charade – and the barn owls take flight from the bell tower, scattering across the graveyard, before disappearing into the dark.

'Hark!' cries Arter theatrically, a hand cupped to his ear. 'The Lady in White will soon appear!'

Cec concentrates, trying to wipe the impossible card from her mind. Candles are no good in weather such as this, so she must make do with a small oil lamp. The wind snatches the flame away as she tries to light it and she curses quietly, adjusting a veil over her face before trying again.

The fifth chime already echoes around the graveyard by the time the Lady in White finally emerges. Her ghostly lamp reflects the luminous paint of her costume as Cec glides smoothly, silently, around the front of the church to gasps of astonishment.

'Three times she will encircle the church! Three times she will search for her lost lover!' Arter cries, trying to make himself heard above the clanging bells.

Cec walks slowly, each foot placed purposefully on the uneven path in front. The starched veil draped over her bonnet hides her intricate makeup: a semi-skeletal face, carefully drawn on with a stick of charcoal to her own design. After her final circuit of the church, she is to remove her veil and reveal her face. She has been hoping someone might faint tonight when they see it– by far her favourite reaction – but as she disappears into the darkness on the far side of the church, her mind slips back to her impossible four of diamonds . . .

'Here she comes again!' cries Arter, moments later, as the Lady in White re-emerges, somewhat out of breath, for Cec has pelted around the back of the church as fast as she can. 'See how she *glides*!'

Cec focuses on her feet, as she once more reaches the far end of the church. She turns the corner, lifts her skirts, and starts to run around the back of St Andrew's – but her haste makes her careless.

She trips, crying out as her ankle twists beneath her. A large branch from a nearby oak, loosened by the wind, has caught her off-guard. Crumpled on the ground, Cec feels her foot to check no bones are broken. She forces herself to stand, but her smooth glide, practised to perfection, is impossible without just a little rest. She leans on the cold stone walls of the church, knowing both Arter and the audience will be impatient for the Lady in White's third and final appearance.

Cec grimaces, grinding her teeth and trying not to hobble, as she comes back into view. Thunder rumbles above and the wind picks up speed. In full sight of the audience, it snatches her ghostly bonnet and loosens it, carrying it away, the veil trailing in its wake.

'Her head! The Lady in White's head!' screams one woman before she flees, certain for the rest of her days that she saw the decapitated head of a spirit flying over the church. The hysteria spreads and the crowd scatters. One man spies Cec as she turns towards him, and all *he* sees is a rotting, skeletal face. He shrieks as he pelts off, his wife running to catch up with him.

Arter holds his hands out, begs for money from those who haven't already paid – but it is too late. The entire audience, like the owls of St Andrew's, have vanished into the night.

'What on earth happened?' Arter snaps, cuffing Cec around the ear, too fast for her to dodge.

'*Ow!*' she cries, glaring at him. 'It wasn't my fault! I *told* you the storm was coming but *you* were the one who still insisted we do it tonight.'

'Ah, well . . .' He grumbles at the reprimand. 'Sorry, Cec. Shouldn't 'a hit you.'

She purses her lips and he shrugs, holding out his hand to show that half the coins he collected were simply buttons and badges. The perils of collecting money in the dark. He slips the few coins into his coat pocket.

'Not enough for a decent meal,' he says, sorrowfully. 'Not for both of us, anyway. Ah, I'm getting too old for this.' He sighs mournfully. 'I coulda been one of the greats of the stage, Cec. And instead, here we are . . .'

Cec rolls her eyes for she's heard this a hundred times and more.

'I tell you Cec, I coulda been!' Arter says insistently. 'And I tell you somethin' else for nothin' too, if an opportunity comes your way, grab it with both hands, girl! Don't end up like me . . .'

'What now?' Cec asks wearily as her stomach rumbles, drowned out by the thunder echoing around the churchyard.

'Home,' he replies. 'Sleep it off. Hope tomorrow brings better luck.' He sighs and shuffles his feet. 'Come on then,' he says. ''fore the rain comes.' And with that he marches off in great loping strides, his coat flapping out behind him.

For a fleeting moment, Cec hates him. Loathes him with every inch of her being. Five years since this old trickster with his grey-streaked hair and sallow cheeks plucked her from the

streets, the small girl with a loud voice and a knack for fast learning. Five years of Arter's broken promises. Of scratching a living, of half-empty bellies, of famines rather than feasts. She forgets for a moment how much fun he can be, how generous and silly, how he can transform himself in the blink of an eye. She forgets how much she's learned from him, how he's used more and more of her ideas in their little shows over the years, how she'd be lost without him. All she can think of is her hunger, her resentment and fury. She *knows* he'll drink it. The money. That once again she'll fall asleep, blanket wrapped tightly around, only to wake and find Arter gone or already half-cut in his bed, a stench of beer and gin hovering above him like a cloud.

Cec reluctantly follows him onto Clifton Hill as Arter disappears ahead, underneath a tower of scaffolding. She lags behind, her ankle still niggling her. Another house being painted and preened. All these grand terraced houses, filled with folk who never know what it is to go hungry. Cec hates them too. She clenches her fists as she thinks of it.

'Come on!' Arter bellows over his shoulder, not bothering to look behind, and Cec growls, glaring daggers at him, fingernails digging hard into her palms as she struggles to contain her temper.

She sees it happen almost before it does. A sense of inevitability like a cup too close to the edge of a table. Time seems to stretch and expand as the wind roars across the whole of the city. The house's wooden scaffolding turns towards her. A twist in its legs. A lean to one side as if all three storeys of it are curious to see her.

She sees Arter, underneath, the scaffolding forming a tunnel around him, the moon peeping out from the clouds above, bright

for a moment. His distinctive silhouette, the top hat that had seen better days, his long coat fanning out behind him. A glimpse, in black and white, before the scaffolding groans and splinters, collapsing in on itself like a tower of cards, swallowing him up.

Cec stands, frozen to the spot in horror, as the storm whips away the cloud of dust and she sees the damage left behind. Huge planks of wood snapped like matchsticks, piled up like a small mountain. And there is Arter. Trapped in the midst like a broken bird. One corner of his coat flapping, black and useless, like a snapped wing.

"Arter!"

Cec runs to him, forgetting the pain in her ankle, forgetting everything. Her breath comes hard and fast as she clambers over the broken timbers to reach him, splinters of wood digging into her hands and knees, sharp as needles. But it's too late. Arter stares into nothingness, a puzzled look on his face, a frown of bewilderment.

Arter.

The wind whistles triumphantly as rain starts to patter down, light at first and then heavier, harder. Cec's hair comes loose from its pins, whipping across her face as she stares at Arter. His crushed hat. His torn coat. In the outstretched palm of his right hand lie the buttons from earlier; after a moment, Cec reaches out and takes them. She rolls them in her own hand like rosary beads before putting them in her pocket, next to her beloved cards.

She is all alone now.

Soaking wet and shivering, Cec pummels with her fists at the front door of the house on Dowry Square, her face still streaked

with makeup despite both the rain and her tears. Her feet had developed a mind of their own, taking her to the one person in all of Bristol that might be able to help, to a house that, if you had asked her earlier, she would have denied she could even have found again.

The door opens and she stands, dripping pools of water in a dark hallway. Then there is light and warmth, soft carpet underfoot, and a panelled room with large sash windows. Unfamiliar faces are sat around a table - half-drunk glasses of port, plates with scatterings of crumbs - and there, in the heart of the gathering, is Mr Roderick Skarratt himself. A fire crackles in the hearth and a clock ticks.

Skarratt stands. He is shorter and yet more imposing than she remembers. 'What is the meaning of this?' he asks, sharply. He comes closer, his face fuzzy at the edges somehow, black ink bleeding around her vision. 'You're Arter's girl? That's right, isn't it?'

He glances back at his companions as Cec nods, trying to remain steady on her feet as the shock of it finally hits her. Arter's staring eye, his outstretched palm . . .

She nods as a sob starts to rise up. 'It's Arter, sir. It's about Arter—' She feels Skarratt's hand on her arm, fingers tight, holding her up as her legs start to feel less solid. 'It's . . . he's . . .' The words elude her for a moment before she howls them out, a wail of disbelief. 'He's dead, sir. *Arter's dead!*'

The blackness around Skarratt's face spreads slowly inwards and all Cec can think about is her impossible four of diamonds, suspended in mid-air. Her searing anger with Arter moments before his death. Her fists tight with rage. The way time had stretched. The scaffolding turning towards her, as if it were

looking at her, before collapsing, crushing both Arter and her whole world in a moment.

Her last thought as she feels herself falling into darkness, her vision vanishing to a pinhole, is that somehow *she* did it. The scaffolding. Her fury. Her clenched fists . . .

I killed him, Cec thinks. *I killed him.*

And the words dance inside her head, pattering like the rain on the window outside.



Eadie Carleton picks, nervously, at a loose thread on her dress. This is the first séance she has ever attended and, if all goes to plan, will almost certainly be her last. She shivers, reassuring herself it is just the chill of last night's storm still lingering in the air.

Mrs Carnesky's drawing room feels oppressive, with its maroon flock wallpaper and dark furniture. A plaster bust of a bearded man sits on a plinth in the far corner and Eadie wonders who it might be of, before her foot, tapping impatiently, nudges against the Gladstone bag that used to belong to her brother, Louis. The touch of it reminds her of why she is really there. Inside is a small mechanism, an item brought to the Carletons' shop for repair, and which she had puzzled over for some time before realising its true purpose.

Eadie glances around at the four other women seated at the circular table: mother and daughter, Mrs and Miss McDonald, the elder a tall woman with a shelf-like bosom, the younger pinch-faced with sadness; Mrs Beattie, a silent lady with hair as white as snow; and finally, Miss Everett, a nervous young woman with dark circles under her eyes. Only two seats remain as their

host closes the heavy velvet curtains with a flourish and the doorbell rings.

'Our last member for tonight's proceedings,' Mrs Carnesky announces in her husky voice, as she gently places a large pillar candle in the centre of the table.

Moments later, a young man bursts in, followed closely by Mrs Carnesky's maid. Grey-haired despite a youthful face, he is of medium height with a boyish, eager energy and a neat little moustache. *Perhaps grief has made him prematurely grey*, thinks Eadie, noting that, unlike the other attendees, he is not dressed in mourning but is instead in a well-cut pinstripe.

'Terribly sorry I'm late,' he says, breathlessly, smiling apologetically and catching Eadie's eye. Mrs Carnesky indicates for him to take a seat, and he nods as the maid leaves, closing the door behind her.

'You are just in time, Mr—?'

'Er, Ferris. George Ferris,' says the man, pausing for a moment as Eadie racks her brain. *Ferris* . . . She's sure she's heard that name before.

'Ferris? Like the American engineer? Of the great wheel?' Eadie finds herself asking, and Mr Ferris smiles.

'That's it, exactly!' he replies, not taking his eyes off her as he pulls out the empty chair opposite. 'Alas, I am not him, though. Engineering's not *quite* my forte.'

He grins as he sits, and she smiles back, puzzled for a moment. She cannot quite place him; the faint London lilt, the grey moustache on a young man's face, his confident charm strangely at odds with the sombre air of expectation in the room.

Mrs Carnesky leans forward to light the large candle on the table before slowly circling the drawing room, extinguishing the

gas lamps and plunging them into darkness. Shadows dance around the walls as the candlelight flickers.

Eadie swallows. She firmly believes those that have passed can no more communicate from the 'other side' than a pig can fly – particularly as she now knows the truth behind at least one of their host's secrets. Still, she cannot help but give a quiver of anticipation as Mrs Carnesky joins them at the table. Eadie's beloved Papa died well over a year ago and she misses him dreadfully. Then her brother Louis disappeared just three months after that. Even though Eadie doesn't believe in the spirit realm, she can see the appeal for those, like her, left behind.

'Now that we are all present, we may begin,' Mrs Carnesky says, her voice full of warmth and honey. 'I have communicated with the spirits since I was a small child, as my mother and grandmother did before me. This evening, I will act as a bridge between this world and the spirit realm. I assure you, whatever happens tonight, whatever you witness, you are perfectly safe. There is nothing to fear.' She nods reassuringly. 'It is time. Please, may I ask each of you to take the hands of the person either side? We must form an unbroken circle for the spirits to come.'

Eadie glances at Mr Ferris across the table as she reaches out to the women either side of her. The golden light of the candle flickers across his face and she is sure she sees the side of his mouth twitch.

'I ask now that you close your eyes,' Mrs Carnesky says, soothingly. 'Do not be concerned if you find yourself breathing more deeply. It's perfectly natural.'

Eadie listens to her own breath, feels her chest moving up and down. She opens her right eye a crack and, to her surprise,

Mr Ferris is looking directly at her. Caught out, he gives a slight murmur, screwing his eyes up as Eadie, puzzled, once again closes hers.

'Tonight, we gather, oh spirits, to seek guidance from your world,' intones Mrs Carnesky. 'Come, spirits! We invite you into this house, to join us. Come, spirits! *Come!'*

She pauses and the candle splutters. Eadie sneaks another peek as shadows flicker around the room, wisps of darkness that form inky shapes of figures and forms in the corners and curtains.

It's only my imagination, Eadie tells herself, forcing her eyes closed as her heart and breath quicken.

'Come, spirits! Give us a sign that you are here!' Mrs Carnesky cries.

A loud knock comes from somewhere indeterminate, as if emanating from both within the table and inside the walls themselves. Once, twice, three times. Eadie jumps. Murmurings of disquiet rumble around the room as everyone opens their eyes, faces full of alarm and surprise.

'Do not be afraid, friends!' Mrs Carnesky implores. 'I ask that you keep hold of each other's hands. The circle *must* be complete if the spirits are to remain. And they are here! I feel them! Speak spirits, speak! Use me as your vessel!'

Ridiculous, thinks Eadie, reassuring herself as her heart continues to race. She glances at Mr Ferris, who frowns at Mrs Carnesky.

Mrs McDonald, to Eadie's left, lets out a sob, and their host leans her head back, her body spasming. Just as Eadie thinks perhaps Mrs Carnesky really is having a fit, she stops, motionless, before turning towards Mrs McDonald.

'My darling wife,' says Mrs Carnesky in a strange, low voice with a hint of Glaswegian. '*How I have missed you!*'

Mrs McDonald gasps. 'Jeremy . . .?'

'Cora!' Mrs Carnesky continues in the same, low voice. 'And Bettina! My dearest daughter!'

'Oh, Jeremy! We miss you so very much!'

'My darlings! Know that I miss you in return; know, too, the other side is as *wonderful* as anyone might wish.'

'Oh, Jeremy! Is Mother there with you? And Father? And Aunt Joan?'

'I cannot stay, Cora; I am fading already but we are *all* here, I promise you. Farewell, my darlings! Until we meet again! Until . . .'

The voice fades as Mrs Carnesky's head falls onto her chest. The McDonalds sob as the rest of those in the room hold their breath.

After a while, Mrs Carnesky raises her head, speaking again in her normal voice, although she seems drained by her experience. 'The spirits are with us this evening, friends. One has already spoken but there are others who wish to converse with you. Show yourselves, spirits! *Show yourselves!*'

The candle goes out – to a gasp of surprise – throwing them into darkness. Eadie squints, trying to see, as an icy finger of fear rolls down her spine.

A faint, pale face appears in the dark, floating in space. As it climbs higher, towards the ceiling, a christening robe rises beneath it. 'Mama . . .?' says a small child's flute-like voice. 'Mama . . .?'

To her right, Eadie hears Miss Everett draw a sharp breath, and she finds her own hand suddenly gripped tighter by the young woman.

'Mama?' the little voice asks. 'Do you miss me, Mama? I'm here, on the other side. Waiting for you to join me . . .'

There is a scrape of a chair and the scratch of a match as George Ferris's furious face is illuminated, his eyes blazing.

'*No!* This goes no further! This woman is a fraud and an imposter!' he proclaims loudly. 'And I'll prove it!' He brings the lit match towards the child's head to illuminate a chalky, crude face that looks nothing like a real human – and far more like the balloon it actually is. There's barely a second for Eadie to try and process this startling revelation before the child's face explodes in a loud bang.

Screams of shock reverberate around the room as little pieces of glowing rubber float down, settling onto the hair and hands of those present.

George Ferris marches around the room, lighting the gas lamps and bringing the world back into view. 'It's nothing but a balloon on a rod!' he says, angrily. 'Japanese silk, luminous paint . . . nothing but tricks and lies!'

Eadie, stunned into silence, looks around her, at the tearstains on the pale cheeks of the McDonalds, at the distress on Miss Everett's face.

Mrs Carnesky's eyes are wide with surprise.

'The knocking sounds were easily done,' George continues. 'An inflatable bulb concealed in one of the table legs or a hidden pole, operated by Mrs Carnesky's foot. Perhaps even a false hand hidden in plain sight as her real hand raps sharply beneath the table. And the voices – I'm sorry, ladies, believe me, but it's nothing more than a ventriloquist's trick. Mrs Carnesky would be better onstage than deceiving the innocent people of Bristol!'

'Enough!' says Eadie, finding her voice as she stands. 'Enough, Mr Ferris. Please. You have made your point. Everyone, perhaps it's time we took our leave?'

'The spirits did come,' says Mrs Carnesky softly but defiantly. 'They did . . .'

'Then why the balloon?' asks George, sharply. 'Why the rod and the christening robe? If the spirits *were* here, what need have you of a conjuror's tricks?'

He reaches forward, grabs the christening robe, and shakes out the metal rod underneath. Mrs Carnesky sits motionless and diminished, unable to defend herself, as George leans toward her right hand and grabs it, pulling it until it comes loose.

He holds up the disembodied hand and raps it on the centre of the table. 'Nothing but painted wood!' he says, with disgust.

'Mr Ferris!' says Eadie. '*Please* . . .' She motions around the room to the shocked faces as Miss Everett rises, clutching a handkerchief to her mouth. Mrs Beattie follows her, an arm around the young woman, as they quietly exit.

'Mrs McDonald?' Eadie ventures, softly. 'Miss McDonald?'

The mother and daughter slowly stand, their grief writ large upon their fallen faces as they lean upon each other.

'I'm sorry. Truly,' George says, as the McDonalds make their way toward the door. He offers his arm, but Miss McDonald shakes her head.

'No, Mr Ferris. You have done *quite* enough,' she replies, as she and her mother leave.

Eadie moves to follow them, to help in some way, but instead remembers her Gladstone bag. She lifts it up onto the table and opens it, extracting the strange-looking instrument, all metal rods and leather straps, which she places next to the false hand.

'Not a surgical device at all,' she says, quietly. 'Is it, Mrs Carnesky?'

'You were in this with him then, Miss Carleton?' Mrs Carnesky glares at her.

'No!' Eadie replies, bemused, for she has never even seen Mr Ferris before.

'I know who you are now,' Mrs Carnesky continues, sourly, turning towards George. 'I know *exactly* who you are, Mr Perris!' She emphasises the 'P' in his surname. 'George *Perris*. I should have seen through you right away. The upstart magician, scouring the land to crush people's dreams!'

George gives a slight nod of acknowledgement before reaching up to his moustache, pulling it off in a single swift move. He ruffles his hair and white powder falls out of it in a faint cloud, revealing his true, dark hair underneath.

He is not prematurely aged at all, thinks Eadie, her mouth agape, as George reveals himself to be roughly the same age as herself, no older than his mid-twenties.

'I don't *crush* people's dreams, Mrs Carnesky!' says George, sharply. 'I don't give them false hope or lie to them as you do. You use the same tricks as any stage conjuror but when we magicians perform, our audience *knows* it's an illusion. You pretend it is *spirits*, the ghosts of those who are gone. You're a fraud and an imposter preying on the bereaved and vulnerable. Offering false hope, destroying lives, and all in the name of profit.'

He looks at Eadie and she cannot, in truth, disagree with anything he has said, but is still fuming at him for what she sees as his extraordinary lack of tact.

He reaches out his hand. 'Miss Carleton?'

'I shall see myself out, thank you, Mr Ferris. Perris. Whatever your name *really* is.' She nods at Mrs Carnesky before leaving, hand clasped tightly around Louis's now empty bag.

The wind is picking up again and the temperature has dropped but Eadie's anger is more than enough to keep her warm as she

stamps westwards. The streets are quiet this late at night being, as they are, some distance from the city centre, and the sound of footsteps behind her makes her turn as George Perris rushes to catch up with her.

'Forgive me, Miss Carleton, I have offended you and—'

'It is not *me* who you should be worried about Mr Ferris, Perris,' snaps Eadie as she marches along, George keeping pace alongside. 'The poor McDonalds – did you not stop to think how hurt they would be? And, worst of all, someone in that room had undoubtedly *lost a child*! Can you imagine how dreadful that must be? And you exploded it! Blew up its face in front of us!'

'Yes, well, I hadn't intended the flame to get that close . . .' he says, sheepishly. 'But Carnesky was preying on you all! You don't know what hold people like her can have over someone, what damage they can do. I've seen it, Miss Carleton. Witnessed frauds like her drive the vulnerable and grieving to acts of desperation.'

Eadie stops and faces him. 'Mr Perris, I cannot deny your *intentions* were worthy, but really! In a single swoop, you upset every single person in the room, writing yourself in as the hero before thinking through the consequences. Could you *truly* not think of a better way to have achieved the same end?'

George looks crestfallen. He frowns to himself, deep in thought, before looking back at her. 'I understand now, Miss Carleton,' he says, slowly. 'I see why you're so furious with me. You are, perhaps, right to reprimand me for being somewhat insensitive to the situation—'

'Yes!' she says, firmly. 'I am.'

'But *you* had her table-rapping device, did you not? Perhaps *you* wished to expose her? Perhaps, Miss Carleton, you are so

very angry with me not because, in revealing the truth, I caused undeniable upset, but because I stole your thunder?'

Eadie boils over. 'How dare you, Mr Perris? Good Lord, how *dare* you?'

She glares at him furiously as he raises a questioning eyebrow, a faint smile lifting the corners of his mouth. She trembles with anger, lost for words.

A horse-drawn tram rattles up the incline towards them and Eadie dashes to it, George following, before she turns. 'You're allergic to moustache glue, by the way, Mr Perris,' she says, eyes glinting, as George reaches up to the faint red mark on his upper lip. 'I hope it gives you a *terrible* rash.'

To Eadie's surprise, he laughs, which only serves to infuriate her more. She swings herself up onto the tram, determined not to look back, yet something makes her do so.

George Perris, conjuror extraordinaire, exposer of mediums, and undeniably one of the most handsome men she's ever seen, doffs his hat, bows elegantly and gives her a wave before the tram rattles around the corner, removing him from view.

When Eadie finally arrives home to 5 Regent Street, a handsome Georgian terrace deep in the lofty environs of Clifton, her anger has cooled. She peers in through the window of E. D. Carleton Photographic to check all is well before heading through the door to the left of the shop that leads straight upstairs to her rooms above. They are quiet and still as Jenny, her young maid-of-all-work, has long since left and Eadie has lived alone since her brother vanished.

Slipping off her coat, Eadie puts the kettle on the range for a warming cup of tea but when she heads into the sitting room,

she's surprised to see a huge bouquet on the side table. No one sends her flowers these days. *Not since Max . . .* she swallows at the thought of his name - the man who broke her heart - even as she picks up the envelope beside the vase.

A note from Bill, her second cousin, and co-owner of E. D. Carleton Photographic since the death of Eadie's father.

Dearest Eadie,

I could not resist sending you these and I hope they serve as a form of apology too. An incredibly exciting opportunity has arisen. I'll explain all in due course but I'm afraid I'll be away for two days. I'm sure, as always, you will manage admirably. The future looks bright, Eadie, very bright, and I cannot wait to reveal all – I'm certain you will be as enthusiastic as I!

Yours truly,

Bill

Eadie groans. They're already short-staffed, having lost their last assistant to the bright lights of London some months ago. Bill's absence means she'll have to man the shop on her own *and* try to finish work on her latest living pictures projector.

What on earth is he up to? Bill has never given her flowers before. Why didn't he warn her he was going away? Questions bubble up in Eadie's head, a rash of irritation that somehow leads her thoughts straight back to Mr George Perris.