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have fueled  
the dreams of  
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MILLION  
READERS."  
—Entertainment  
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**VORA  
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**HONEST  
ILLUSIONS**



# HONEST ILLUSIONS

NORA  
ROBERTS



JOVE BOOKS, NEW YORK

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## HONEST ILLUSIONS

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### PRINTING HISTORY

G. P. Putnam's Sons edition published July 1992  
Jove edition / August 1993

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The Berkley Publishing Group, 200 Madison Avenue,  
New York, New York 10016.

ISBN: 0-515-11097-3

Jove Books are published by The Berkley Publishing Group,  
200 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016.

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*To Bruce, Dan and Jason,  
the magic in my life*



# PART ONE

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O brave new world,  
That has such people in't!

—WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE



# PROLOGUE

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The Lady Vanishes. It was an old illusion, given a modern twist, and never failed to leave the audience gasping. The glittery crowd at Radio City was as eager to be duped as a group of slack-jawed rubes at a dog and pony show.

Even as Roxanne stepped onto the glass pedestal she could feel their anticipation—the silvery edge of it that was a merging of hope and doubt glued together with wonder. Those inching forward in their seats ranged from president to peon.

Magic made equals of them all.

Max had said that, she recalled. Many, many times.

Amid the swirl of mist and the flash of light, the pedestal slowly ascended, circling majestically to the tune of Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*. The gentle three-hundred-and-sixty-degree revolution showed the crowd all sides of the ice-clear pedestal and the slender woman atop it—and distracted them from the trickery at hand.

Presentation, she'd been taught, was often the slim difference between a charlatan and an artist.

In keeping with the theme of the music, Roxanne wore a sparkling gown of midnight blue that clung to her long, willowy form—clung so closely that no one studying her would believe there was anything under the spangled silk but her own flesh. Her hair, a waterfall of flame curling to her waist, twinkled with thousands of tiny iridescent stars.

Fire and ice. More than one man had wondered how one woman could be both at the same time.

As in sleep or a trance, her eyes were closed—or seemed to be—and her elegant face was lifted toward the star-pricked ceiling of the stage.

As she rose, she let her arms sway to the music, then held



them high above her head, for showmanship and for the practical necessity that underscores all magic.

It was a beautiful illusion, she knew. The mist, the lights, the music, the woman. She enjoyed the sheer drama of it and was not above being amused by the irony of using the age-old symbol of the lone, lovely woman placed on a pedestal, above the common worry and toils of man.

It was also a miserably complex bit of business, requiring a great deal of physical control and split-second timing. But not even those fortunate enough to be seated in the first row could detect the intense concentration in her serene face. None of them could know how many tedious hours she had put in, perfecting every aspect of the act on paper, then in practice. Unrelenting practice.

Slowly, again to Gershwin's rhythm, her body began to turn, dip, sway. A partnerless dance ten feet above stage, all color and fluid movement. There were murmurs from the audience, scattered applause.

They could see her—yes, they could see her through the blue-tinted mist and spinning lights. The glitter of the dark gown, the flow of flame-colored hair, the gleam of that alabaster skin.

Then, in a breath, in a gasp, they could not. In less time than it takes to blink an eye, she was gone. In her place was a sleek Bengal tiger who reared on his hind legs to paw the air and roar.

There was a pause, that most satisfying of pauses to an entertainer where an audience held its stunned collective breath before the applause thundered, echoing as the pedestal descended once more. The big cat leaped down to stalk stage right. He stopped by an ebony box, sent up another roar that had a woman in the front row giggling nervously. As one, the four sides of the box collapsed.

And there was Roxanne, dressed not in shimmery blue but in a silver cat suit. She took her bows as she'd been taught almost from birth. With a flourish.

As the sound of success continued to pound in her ears, she mounted the tiger and rode the beast offstage.

"Nice work, Oscar." With a little sigh, she bent forward to scratch the cat between the ears.



"You looked real pretty, Roxy." Her big, burly assistant clipped a leash to Oscar's spangled collar.

"Thanks, Mouse." Dismounting, she tossed her hair back. The backstage area was already hopping. Those trusted to do so would secure her equipment and guard it from prying eyes. Since she'd scheduled a press conference for the following day, she would see no reporters now. Roxanne had high hopes for a bottle of iced champagne and a stingingly hot whirlpool bath.

Alone.

Absently she rubbed her hands together—an old habit Mouse could have told her she'd picked up from her father.

"I've got the fidgets," she said with a half laugh. "Had them all damn night. It feels like someone's breathing down my neck."

"Well, ah . . ." Mouse stood where he was, letting Oscar rub against his knees. Never articulate under the best of circumstances, Mouse fumbled for the best way to phrase the news. "You got company, Roxy. In the dressing room."

"Oh?" Her brows drew together, forming the faint line of impatience between them. "Who?"

"Take another bow, honey." Lily, Roxanne's onstage assistant and surrogate mother, swept over to grab her arm. "You brought down the house." Lily dabbed a handkerchief around the false eyelashes she wore onstage and off. "Max would be so proud."

The quick twist in Roxanne's gut had her willing away her own tears. They didn't show. They were never permitted to show in public. She started forward, moving into the swell of applause. "Who's waiting for me?" she called over her shoulder, but Mouse was already leading the big cat away.

He'd been taught by the master that discretion was the better part of survival.

Ten minutes later, flushed with success, Roxanne opened the door of her dressing room. The scent hit her first—roses and greasepaint. That mix of fragrances had become so familiar she breathed it in like fresh air. But there was another scent here—the sting of rich tobacco. Elegant, ex-

otic, French. Her hand trembled once on the knob as she pushed the door fully open.

There was one man she would forever associate with that aroma. One man she knew who habitually smoked slim French cigars.

She said nothing when she saw him. Could say nothing as he rose from a chair where he'd been enjoying his cigar and her champagne. Oh, God, it was thrilling and horrible to watch that wonderful mouth quirk in that very familiar grin, to meet those impossibly blue eyes with her own.

His hair was still long, a mane of ebony waving back from his face. Even as a child he'd been gorgeous, an elegant gypsy with eyes that could freeze or burn. Age had only enhanced his looks, fining down that compelling face, the long bones and shadowy hollows, the faint cleft in the chin. Beyond the physical, there was a drama that shivered around him like an aura.

He was a man women shuddered over and wanted.

She had. Oh, she had.

Five years had passed since she'd seen that smile, since she'd run her hands through that thick hair or felt the searing pressure of that clever mouth. Five years to mourn, to weep and to hate.

Why wasn't he dead? she wondered as she forced herself to close the door at her back. Why hadn't he had the decency to succumb to any of the varied and gruesome tragedies she'd imagined for him?

And what in God's name was she going to do with this terrible yearning she felt just looking at him again?

"Roxanne." Training kept Luke's voice steady as he said her name. He'd watched her over the years. Tonight he'd studied her every move from the shadows of the wings. Judging, weighing. Wanting. But here, now, face to face, she was almost too beautiful to bear. "It was a good show. The finale was spectacular."

"Thank you."

His hand was steady as he poured her a flute of champagne, as hers was when she accepted it. They were, after all, showmen, cast in an odd way from the same mold. Max's mold.



"I'm sorry about Max."

Her eyes went flat. "Are you?"

Because Luke felt he deserved more than the slash of sarcasm, he merely nodded, then glanced down at his bubbling wine, remembering. His mouth curved when he looked back at her. "The Calais job, the rubies. Was that yours?"

She sipped, the silver sparkled on her shoulders as she moved them in a careless shrug. "Of course."

"Ah." He nodded again, pleased. He had to be sure she hadn't lost her touch—for magic or for larceny. "I heard rumors that a first edition of Poe's *House of Usher* was lifted from a vault in London."

"Your hearing was always good, Callahan."

He continued to smile, wondering when she'd learned to exude sex like breath. He remembered the clever child, the coltish adolescent, the irresistible bloom of the young woman. The bloom had blossomed seductively. And he could feel the pull that had always been between them. He would use it now, with regret, but he would use it to gain his own ends.

The end justifies everything. Another of Maximillian Nouvelle's maxims.

"I have a proposition for you, Rox."

"Really?" She took a last sip before setting her glass aside. The bubbles were bitter on her tongue.

"Business," he said lightly, tapping out the stub of his cigar. Taking her hand, he brought her fingers to his lips. "And personal. I've missed you, Roxanne." It was the truest statement he could make. One flash of sterling honesty in years of tricks, illusions and pretense. Caught up in his own feelings, he missed the warning flash in her eyes.

"Have you, Luke? Have you really?"

"More than I can tell you." Swamped by memories and needs, he drew her closer, felt his blood begin to pump as her body brushed his. She'd always been the one. No matter how many escapes he'd accomplished, he'd never freed himself from the trap in which Roxanne Nouvelle had caught him. "Come back to my hotel." His breath whispered over

her face as she went fluidly into his arms. "We'll have a late supper. Talk."

"Talk?" Her arms wound sinuously around him. Her rings flashed as she dipped her fingers into his hair. Beside them the makeup mirror over her dressing table reflected them in triplicate. As if showing them past, present, future. When she spoke, her voice was like the mist she'd vanished into. Dark and rich and mysterious. "Is that what you want to do with me, Luke?"

He forgot the importance of control, forgot everything but the fact that her mouth was an inch from his. The taste he'd once gorged on was a wish away. "No."

He dropped his head toward hers. Then his breath exploded as her knee shot up between his legs. Even as he was doubling over, she slammed her fist onto his chin.

His grunt of surprise, and the splintering of wood from the table he smashed on his way down gave Roxanne enormous satisfaction. Roses flew, water splashed. A few slender buds drifted over him as he lay on the dampening carpet.

"You . . ." Scowling, he dragged a rose from his hair. The brat had always been sneaky, he remembered. "You're quicker than you used to be, Rox."

Hands on her hips, she stood over him, a slim, silver warrior who'd never learned to sample her revenge cold. "I'm a lot of things I didn't used to be." Her knuckles hurt like fire, but she used that pain to block another, deeper ache. "Now, you lying Irish bastard, crawl back into whatever hole you dug for yourself five years ago. Come near me again, and I swear, I'll make you disappear for good."

Delighted with her exit line, she turned on her heel, then let out a shriek when Luke snagged her ankle. She went down hard on her rump and before she could put nails and teeth to use, he had her pinned. She'd forgotten how strong and how quick he was.

A miscalculation, Max would have said. And miscalculations were the root of all failures.

"Okay, Rox, we can talk here." Though he was breathless and still in pain, he grinned. "Your choice."



"I'll see you in hell—"

"Very likely." His grin faded. "Damn it, Roxy, I never could resist you." When he crushed his mouth to hers, he tossed them both back into the past.

# 1

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*1973, near Portland, Maine*

“Hur-ry, hur-ry, step right up. Be amazed, be astounded. Watch the Great Nouvelle defy the laws of nature. For one small dollar, see him make cards dance in midair. Before your eyes, right before your astonished eyes, see a beautiful woman sawed in two.”

While the barker ran through his spiel, Luke Callahan slithered through the carnival crowd, busily picking pockets. He had quick hands, agile fingers and that most important asset of a successful thief, a complete lack of conscience.

He was twelve.

For nearly six weeks he'd been on the road, on the run. Luke had big plans to head south before the steamy New England summer became a frigid New England winter.

He wasn't going to get very far with pickings like this, he thought and nipped a billfold from the sagging overalls pocket. There weren't many of those who had come to ride the Tilt-a-Whirl or challenge the Wheel of Fortune who had more than a few creased dollars on them.

Now, when he got to Miami, things would be different. In the shadows behind the milk bottle toss, he discarded the imitation leather wallet and counted his take for the evening.

Twenty-eight dollars. Pathetic.

But in Miami, that land of sun, fun and high rollers, he'd clean house. All he had to do was get there first, and so far he'd managed to squirrel away nearly two hundred dollars. A little more and he'd be able to afford to take the bus at least part of the way. A Greyhound, he thought with a quick grin. He'd leave the driving to them, all right, and



take a break from hitching rides with stoned-out hippies and fat-fingered perverts.

A runaway couldn't be choosy about his mode of transportation. Luke was already aware that a ride from an upstanding citizen could lead to a police report or—nearly as bad—a lecture on the dangers of a young boy leaving home.

It was no use telling anyone that home was much more dangerous than the perils of the road.

After flipping off two singles, Luke tucked the rest of his take into his battered chukkas. He needed food. The smell of hot grease had been tantalizing his stomach for nearly an hour. He'd reward himself with an overcooked burger and fries, and wash it all down with some fresh lemonade.

Like most twelve-year-old boys, Luke would have enjoyed a ride on the Whip, but if there was a longing in him toward the spinning lights, he covered it with a sneer. Jerks thought they were having an adventure, he mused while sour grapes stuck in his throat. They'd be tucked in their beds tonight while he slept under the stars and when they woke up Mommy and Daddy would tell them what to do and how to do it.

No one would tell him any of those things ever again.

Feeling superior in every way, he tucked his thumbs in the front pockets of his jeans and strutted toward the concession stands.

He passed the poster again—the larger-than-life-sized picture of the magician. The Great Nouvelle, with his sweep of black hair, flowing moustache, his hypnotic dark eyes. Every time Luke looked at the poster he felt himself being pulled toward something he couldn't understand.

The eyes in the picture seemed to look right into him, as if they could see and understand much too much about Luke Callahan, late of Bangor, Maine, by way of Burlington and Utica and Christ knew where because Luke had forgotten.

He almost expected the painted mouth to speak and the hand that held the fan of cards to shoot out, snatch him by the throat and pull him right inside that poster. He'd be trapped there forever, beating on the other side of that

pasteboard the way he'd beat on so many of the locked doors of his childhood.

Because the idea gave him the willies, Luke curled his lip. "Magic's bunk," he said, but he said it in a whisper. And his heart pounded hard as he dared the painted face to challenge him. "Big deal," he went on, gaining confidence. "Pulling stupid rabbits out of stupid hats and doing a few dumbass card tricks."

He wanted to see those dumbass tricks more than he wanted to ride on the Whip. More even than he wanted to stuff his mouth with ketchup-dripping fries. Luke wavered, fingering one of the dollars in his pocket.

It would be worth a buck, he decided, just to prove to himself that the magician was no big deal. It would be worth a buck to sit down. In the dark, he mused as he drew out the crumpled bill and paid the price. There were bound to be a few pockets he could slip his nimble fingers into.

The heavy canvas flap swung shut behind him and blocked out most of the light and air from the midway. Noise battered against it like rainfall. People were already crowded on the low wooden seats, murmuring among themselves, shifting and waving paper fans against the stifling heat.

He stood in the back a moment, scanning. With an instinct that had been honed sharp as a switchblade over the past six weeks he skipped over a huddle of kids, crossed off a few couples as being too poor to net him anything but his admission price and cagily chose his marks. The situation called for him to look to women, as most of the men would be sitting on their money.

"Excuse me," he said, polite as a Boy Scout, as he squeezed in behind a grandmotherly type who seemed distracted by the antics of the boy and girl on either side of her.

The moment he was settled, the Great Nouvelle took the stage. He was dressed in full formal gear. The black tux and starched white shirt looked exotic in the heat-drenched tent. His shoes gleamed with polish. On the pinkie of his left hand he wore a gold ring with a black center stone that winked in the stage lights.



The impression of greatness was set the moment he faced his audience.

The magician said nothing, yet the tent filled with his presence, swelled with it. He was every bit as dramatic as his poster, though the black hair was shot with glints of silver. The Great Nouvelle lifted his hands, held them palm out toward the audience. With a flick of his wrist, his spread, empty fingers held a coin. Another flick, another coin, and another, until the wide vee's of his fingers were filled with the gleam of gold.

Luke's attention was snagged enough for him to lean forward, eyes narrowed. He wanted to know how it was done. It was a trick, of course. He was all too aware the world was full of them. He'd already stopped wondering why, but he hadn't stopped wondering how.

The coins became colored balls that changed size and hue. They multiplied, subtracted, appeared and vanished while the audience applauded.

Pulling his eyes from the show was difficult. Lifting six dollars from Grandma's purse was easy. After tucking his take away, Luke slid out of his seat to move into position behind a blonde whose straw purse was sitting carelessly on the floor beside her.

As the sleight of hand warmed up the audience, Luke pocketed another four dollars. But he kept losing his concentration. Telling himself he'd wait before hitting the fat lady to his right, he settled down to watch.

For the next few moments, Luke was only a child, his eyes wide with amazement as the magician fanned the cards, passed his hand over their tops, and his other hand over the bottoms so that the spread deck hung suspended in the air. At a stylish movement of his hands, the cards swayed, dipped, turned. The audience cheered, wholly intent on the show. And Luke missed his chance to clean house.

"You there." Nouvelle's voice resounded. Luke froze as he felt those dark eyes pin him. "You're a likely-looking boy. I need a smart . . ." The eyes twinkled. "An honest boy to help me with my next trick. Up here." Nouvelle scooped up the hanging cards and gestured.