

THE ILLUSIONIST

A NOVEL

Dinitia Smith

SCRIBNER

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1230 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10020

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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For David, always.

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Olivia: Are you a comedian?

Viola: No, my profound heart; And yet
(by the very fangs of malice I
swear) I am not that I play.

—*Twelfth Night*

PART I

THE MAGICIAN

CHAPTER 1

CHRISSIE

I first saw him one wild October night at the Wooden Nickel bar high up on the headland overlooking the river on Old Route 27. In Sparta in late October the wind sweeps in off the river, it can make your eyes tear, it can make you weep. Across the river, the sky over the palisades was dense with cumulus clouds, thick and silvery and shot through with light, and the leaves in the trees sang and rustled and shook in the wind. Down below, the great river glided by, like a sheet of gleaming metal two miles wide.

When I walked out of the cold into the Wooden Nickel that night, I spotted a young man I'd never seen before, sitting at a table in the big room adjoining the bar. A cone of golden light shone down on him from the ceiling, tiny specks of dust whirling about in it. He was surrounded by a small crowd and he was doing magic tricks—pulling quarters from behind people's ears, making his playing cards seem to leap from deck to deck and then magically rearrange themselves into groups of blacks and reds and aces and hearts. And as he worked, his hands moved as quick as water.

There was something about him that just struck you right away, that made your eyes rest upon him and made you puzzle. I know now that I wondered what he was, the question passed through my mind without being formed into words. I guess you always remember your first sight of someone who will become important

in your life, even though you can't know it at the time. It stays a picture in your mind forever.

He was small and thin. He wore a black cowboy hat perched on the back of his head, and an old deerskin jacket with a fringe on it, even though it was hot inside and the wood stove was going full blast. Yes, he was beautiful. He had high cheekbones, reddened with wind, big green eyes, slightly prominent, shining like globes in his head, as if he had just been running. His mouth was full, with well-shaped lips drawing to two points under his nose. He had a little bit of an overbite, and long white healthy teeth.

His brown hair was short, but shaggy. And I noticed that he was wearing two flannel shirts, one on top of the other.

Brian Perez was his victim. Brian was sitting opposite him, watching him intently through his long, curly, light blond hair the color of burnt ashes that hung over his face, his mouth set in a thin smirk.

The atmosphere in the bar was thick with smoke, and you could smell the salty smell of wood burned over the generations, embedded in the walls of the place. Behind the dark wood-paneled bar, a mottled deer head hung, strands of tinsel dangling from its nose. Carl, the owner, liked to decorate. He made the place a home for us, and for himself. The old paneled walls of the bar were covered with calendars and clocks and neon signs for Genny and Michelob and give-aways from liquor companies, calendars with their pages stuck at 1954, and 1976, and black-and-white photographs of bowling teams, brittle and cracked and curled with age.

Aerosmith was playing on the jukebox. The Bills and the Giants were on the TV above the bar, but for a few minutes at least, no one was watching it. Even Carl had come out from behind the bar to watch the magician. Carl, white-haired, bright blue eyes, old boxer's body, stood holding his towel, and slowly wiping a glass. "Hey Chrissie," Carl said when he saw me. And then his eyes went back to the new person.