

THE CIRCUS OF THE MIND

The two men in the black limousine had already circled the theatre once. Now they pulled in on the other side of the road, opposite the main door. Outside, the temperature was well into the eighties. But they had turned the air-conditioning on full and the car was like a refrigerator. They sat in silence. The two of them had worked together for many years and despised each other. They had nothing to say.

The theatre was at the northern end of Reno, Nevada. It was a square red-brick building with a single door and no windows and could have been a bank or possibly a chapel but for the neon sign over the front door. It was supposed to read THE RENO PLAYHOUSE, but half the letters had fused so that, as the two men watched it from where they were parked in Virginia Street, just two words flashed at them through the fading light: HERE LOSE.

It wasn't exactly the most attractive invitation in a city that was dedicated to gambling, where every other building seemed to be a casino and where the hotels, the bars, even the launderettes, were stuffed with slot machines. Despite its

name, the Reno Playhouse hadn't actually put on a play from the day it had been built. Instead, it provided a temporary home to a long line of second-rate performers: singers and dancers, conjurors and comedians who had all been famous, briefly, a very long time ago but who had never really been heard of since. These were the sort of people who performed night after night, trying to entertain audiences who were only thinking of the money they had come to win or, worse, the money they had already lost.

The next performance was due to begin in an hour's time. The two men had already bought their tickets – but there was something they wanted to see before they went in. They only had to wait a few minutes to be rewarded. The man in the driving seat suddenly stiffened.

"Here they are," he said.

Two boys had just got off a bus. They were walking down the pavement, dressed casually in baggy jeans and T-shirts, one of them carrying a backpack. It was obvious immediately that they were twins, about fourteen years old. They were both very slim – in fact they looked malnourished. Their hair was black and dead straight, hanging down to the neck, and both had dark brown eyes. One was a couple of centimetres taller and a few kilos heavier than the other. He said something and the other boy laughed. Then they turned the corner and a moment later were gone.

"That was them?" the passenger asked.

"That was them," the driver confirmed.

The first man shrugged. "They don't look that special to me."

"That's what you always say, Mr Hovey. But you never know. Maybe these kids will be the ones..."

"Let's get a drink."

The men had an hour to kill but there were plenty of bars in Reno and they might throw a few coins into a machine too. It had been a long day. The driver glanced one last time at the theatre and nodded. He had a good feeling. This time they were going to find what they were looking for.

He shoved the car into gear and they moved off.

The show that was currently at the Reno Playhouse – it had been there for the past six months – was called *The Circus of the Mind*. There was a glass panel next to the front door, and behind it a black and white poster showing the eyes and forehead of what might have been a hypnotist or a magician. His hands, disembodied, floated above him, the fingers pointing towards the viewer. It read:

DON WHITE PRESENTS
THE CIRCUS
of THE MIND

**There are many things in life that
cannot be explained. Powers that exist
on the edge of our consciousness.**

**Do you dare journey into the
world of the paranormal?
Be amazed! Be mystified!**

This is a show you will never forget.

 **FEATURING** 

**Swami Louvishni - world-famous
Indian fakir**

Bobby Bruce - hypnotist to the stars

Mr Marvano - master illusionist

Zorro - escapist

Scott & Jamie Tyler - telepathic twins

Performance times: 7.30 p.m. & 9.30 p.m.

Tickets: \$35 - \$55 (Senior citizens half price)

By twenty past seven that evening, a small crowd had gathered on the pavement, waiting for the door to open. There were about fifty people. Most of them had been attracted to the theatre by leaflets given to them by the receptionists in the hotels where they were staying. The leaflets promised "Five dollars off – this week only." In fact, there was five dollars off every week. The same leaflets had been handed out for the entire time that *The Circus of the Mind* had been playing. And

the receptionists were only recommending it because they had been paid to do so. They would receive five dollars for every ticket they sold.

The audience was already beginning to wonder if the show really was going to amaze or mystify them in the slightest. The dusty brickwork, the broken sign and the single, amateurish poster were hardly promising. On the other hand, there wasn't much else in Reno that they could do for thirty dollars and it was probably too late to ask for a refund. There was a loud rattle and the doors swung open, pushed from inside. As one, the crowd moved forward. There were a few drinks and boxes of sweets on sale in the foyer but they were overpriced and no one bought anything. Almost unwillingly, they produced their tickets and passed through a narrow archway into the main auditorium.

The theatre contained two hundred seats and was shaped like a horseshoe around an elevated wooden stage. A red curtain – tatty and faded – hung down. At exactly half past seven, the sound system blasted out a burst of pop music and the curtain rose to reveal a dark, bearded man wearing sunglasses and a turban.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen," he announced. "My name is Swami Louvishni and it is my great pleasure to be here all the way from Calcutta."

None of this was true. It was just the first of many lies.

The Indian fakir was, of course, a fake. His real name was Frank Kirby and he hadn't been further east than New York.