

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 laundrettes, 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 - escapologist

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.

He had taken his stage name from a Tintin story and his tricks from a library book he had stolen when he was nineteen. Bobby Bruce was an out-of-work actor and had never been anywhere near the stars. Mr Marvano, the illusionist, was Frank Kirby again but without the beard and the glasses and using another voice. Zorro was a drunk.

The audience tonight was hardly enthusiastic. The summer had already arrived in full force, the hot breezes rolling in across the desert, and the air-conditioning in the building was only working at half-strength. They were falling asleep in their seats. They clapped politely when the fakir lay down on his bed of nails and when the escapologist leapt out of a locked-up chest. But they barely acknowledged the illusionist, even when he suddenly produced – in an empty cage – a large, panting dog. Perhaps they knew that in Las Vegas, only a few hundred miles away, there were magicians who had done the same thing with elephants and white tigers.

By the time the last act walked onto the stage, the audience had clearly had enough. Some of them had already left. But as the music changed and the lights dimmed and then rose for the last time, something changed inside the Reno Playhouse. It happened every night. It was as if people sensed, without being told, that they were finally going to be given a little of what the poster had promised.

The twins had appeared, now dressed in dark trousers and black shirts, open at the neck. The taller one was gazing out into the glare of lights with undisguised hostility. He had the

look of a street fighter and, indeed, there was a large bruise on one of his cheekbones. His brother was somehow friendlier, more welcoming. It was just possible that he enjoyed being here. He was the one who spoke.

“Good evening,” he began. “My name is Jamie Tyler.” He gestured at the other boy, who didn’t move. “And this is my brother, Scott. For as long as I can remember, we’ve known what’s been going on inside each other’s heads. That doesn’t make it easy when one of us is trying to pick up girls...”

They weren’t his words. They were the words he had been taught to say and he didn’t think the joke was even slightly funny. But he forced himself to smile. The audience was listening to him with a bit more attention. They had seen the poster. Telepathic twins. But nobody had said they were going to be so young.

“It was only recently that we discovered the truth,” Jamie went on. “It’s not just that we know what we’re both thinking. We’re true telepaths, connected to each other in a way that science cannot understand or explain. And that’s what we’re going to demonstrate for you tonight. Starting with this.”

While he had been talking, a stage hand had carried in a table with a pile of newspapers. There were twenty different papers from all around America. There were other props too. He would come to those later.

Jamie scooped up the newspapers and walked down to the front row. He stopped in front of a large, frizzy-haired woman who was wearing pink leggings and an “I ♥ Reno” T-shirt.

"Would you like to pick one of these newspapers?" he asked.
"You can choose any one."

The woman was with her husband. He nudged her and she pulled one out of the middle of the pile. It was a copy of the *Los Angeles Times*.

"Thank you," Jamie said. "Now this paper has several sections. Will you please choose any one of them and pass it to your husband."

The woman did as she was asked. She chose the Calendar section. Her husband took it.

"Will you please tear one page out of the section and pass it to the person behind you," Jamie instructed.

He was fortunate that there was someone in the row behind. On bad nights, he knew, he might have to travel three or four rows to find a third spectator.

The page was being held by a Korean tourist who had come with his wife and daughter. Jamie hoped that he would be able to understand English. He took out a pen. "You have a page with more than a thousand words on each side," he said. "That means you have at least two thousand words to choose from. Could you please circle one of those words. It can be a headline or an advertisement. It doesn't matter. The choice is entirely yours."

The Korean man smiled and muttered something to his wife. He took the pen and ringed something, then handed the newspaper back to Jamie. Jamie looked down. Without speaking the words, he read:

The latest trend in Los Angeles is the eco-friendly funeral. Celebs are lining up to make sure they go green when they go.

One word had a ring around it. He looked at it. On the stage, Scott spoke for the first time.

“Funeral,” he said.

Jamie held the newspaper in front of the Korean man. “Is that the word?” he asked.

“Yes... Yes!” The man was astonished.

For the first time that evening, the applause was loud and genuine. It had to be a trick, of course. Everything that the audience had seen had been a trick. But how had it been done? Both the frizzy-haired woman and her husband had been given a free choice. The man behind her could have chosen any word. Perhaps the two boys had secret microphones. They could be in radio contact. But how would that help? Jamie hadn’t said anything. He’d barely glanced at the page.

Jamie had already returned to the stage by the time the applause died down.

“I’d like to invite someone to join me,” he said. He pointed to the husband who had already taken part. “Would you mind, sir?”

The man climbed onto the stage. Scott didn’t move. Apart from the moment when he had spoken, he could have been a statue. A boy carved out of wood. But Jamie was moving around, collecting the next prop, welcoming the man.

“I’m going to blindfold my brother,” he explained. “And I want you to make sure that he really can’t see. While you’re here, I’d also like you to check that there are no hidden microphones. Nothing in either of his ears.”

The man went over to Scott and ran a finger behind each of his ears. For just a second, something flared in the boy’s eyes. It was a humiliation he had to endure twice a night, every night – and he could never forgive it. But the man didn’t notice.

“He’s clean!” he announced.

A few people laughed. They were enjoying this. They wanted to see what would happen next.

Under Jamie’s guidance, the man placed two coins against Scott’s eyes. They were old English pennies, larger than modern coins. Next, he was blindfolded, and then, to finish, a black hood was placed over his head. It was like an executioner’s hood. It completely covered his eyes, his nose and his hair, but it left his mouth free.

Jamie went into the audience. He stopped beside a blonde woman in a tight-fitting dress. Her boyfriend was sitting next to her. He had his hand on her thigh.

“Can you give me something from your handbag?” Jamie asked.

“You want something from my handbag?” The woman giggled, then glanced at her boyfriend. He nodded, giving her permission, and she pulled out a small silver object. Jamie took it and held it in the palm of his hand.

"It's a key ring," Scott said.

Jamie held the key ring up so that everyone could see. The audience applauded again. Several of them were talking now, whispering to each other, shaking their heads in disbelief.

"Let's make this more difficult," Jamie called out. "I wonder if anyone here has a business card. How about you, sir?"

He had stopped in front of two men sitting next to each other. All he had noticed so far was that they were both wearing brown linen suits, which in itself was strange because nobody in Reno ever dressed very smartly. On the other hand, he always tried to look for someone in a jacket when he reached this part of the act. From his experience, a man was more likely to have a wallet and, in the wallet, a business card. Women took longer, searching in their handbags. The act was supposed to last eighteen minutes. If he went over, he'd get slapped. Or worse.

Jamie waited for the man to reach into his jacket pocket, and when that didn't happen, he looked down. That was when he knew he had made a mistake. At that moment he wished he had gone to any row but this. Jamie had been struggling to get through the act in the damp, sluggish heat of the theatre. The air-conditioning was failing as usual. But the very sight of this man was like cold water thrown into his face.

It wasn't just that he was ugly. Jamie had met many unpleasant-looking people when he was doing his act –

indeed he sometimes wondered if there wasn't something about the Reno Playhouse that actually attracted them. But this man was beyond ugly. There was something almost inhuman about him, about the way he was gazing at Jamie with eyes that were a very faint shade of blue: so faint as to be almost colourless. The man was quite bald but he hadn't lost his hair with age – nor had he decided to shave it off. The polished skull was unblemished, as if there had never been anything there to begin with. His face was the same. He had no eyebrows. There was no stubble on his cheeks or chin. His whole face looked like a mask stretched tight over a bone structure that kept it in shape but allowed it to express no emotion at all. He had very small, very white teeth. They looked false.

“He wants your card,” the man next to him said. He spoke with a soft, rasping voice and a Southern accent.

This man had hair, tangled and black, tied in a ponytail, as well as a wispy little beard, sprouting in a triangle just under his lower lip. He was wearing plastic sunglasses that offered mirror reflections instead of his eyes. He smelled of cheap aftershave, which was failing to hide the truth. He needed to change his clothes more. He needed to wash. It was impossible to say if he was younger or older than his companion. Both of them were ageless.

Jamie realized that several seconds had gone by and nothing had happened. He swallowed. “A business card,” he repeated.

The silence stretched on. Jamie was about to move away. Surely he could find someone else who would co-operate? But then the bald man shrugged and reached into his jacket. "Sure," he said. "I've got a card."

He took out a wallet, opened it and removed a white card, balancing it for a moment between soiled, cracked fingernails, as if considering. Then he handed it to Jamie. Jamie held it in front of him. There was a name and, below it, a company:

Colton Banes
NIGHTRISE CORPORATION

Beneath that was an address and a telephone number. The letters were too small for Jamie to see in the half-light.

The man was looking at him curiously, almost as if he were trying to see into him. With difficulty, Jamie turned back to the stage. He tried to speak but his mouth was too dry. He swallowed, then tried again.

"Scott, can you tell me who this man works for?" he called out.

Silence from the stage. What was happening now?

Then Scott spoke. "Sure, Jamie. He works for the Nightrise Corporation."

The man smiled. "That's absolutely right," he said loudly, so the whole theatre could hear. But his voice was almost taunting Jamie, as if he didn't care one way or another if the trick had worked. "The boy got it in one."

There was even more applause this time. There were only forty-five people left in the theatre but they were genuinely absorbed. It was the only real mystery they had seen all evening. Days later, they would still be wondering how it was done.

And none of them had guessed the simple truth, even though it was the only possible explanation and was staring them in the face. There were no microphones. There were no hidden signals. There were no codes or messages being sent from off-stage. The trick was that there was no trick. The two boys could genuinely read each other's minds.

But the Nightrise Corporation knew. That was why they had sent these men here tonight. To see for themselves.

It was time for Scott and Jamie Tyler to disappear.