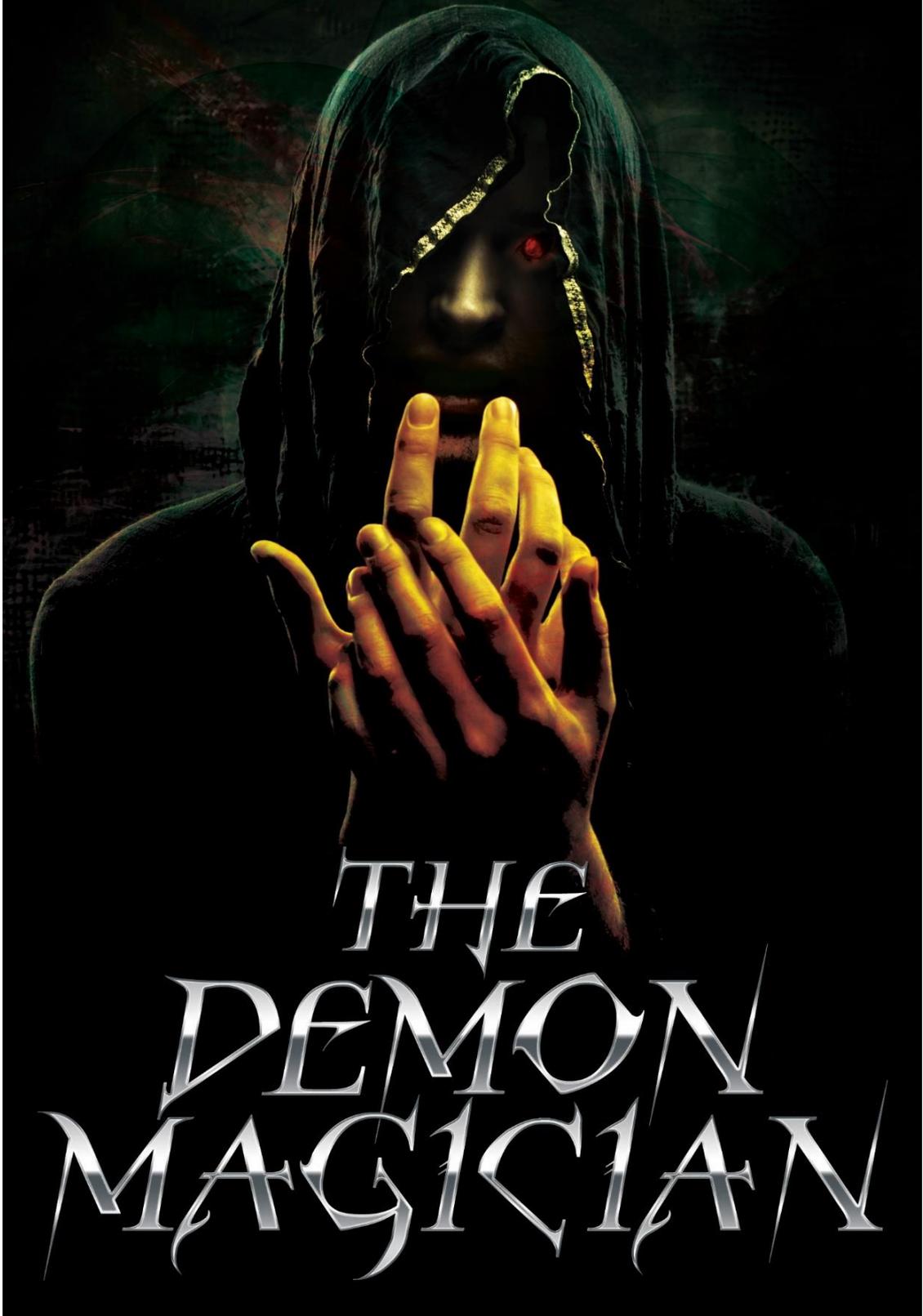


ALEX DUNN



THE
DEMON
MAGICIAN

Chapter 1

I take a deep breath, rise onto my tiptoes, and make sure my arm is fully extended. I point the stick at the gymnasium ceiling, careful to make sure that the scarlet ribbon is coiled loosely at my bare feet.

The music starts and, with a rush of drums, I leap to the right, drawing spirals above my head. I dance gracefully, entralling my audience and showing them just how good I am.

I'm not being judged anymore; really, it doesn't matter if I score a two or a ten for artistic interpretation. But I commit to each step, each turn, making sure that my toes are pointed and that each split is a perfect one-hundred-and-eighty degrees.

At fifteen, I was going to be the youngest member of the British Olympic team. Kyle, my coach, hardly changed a thing in my routine; he loved my scarlet costume, he thought my Cleopatra makeup and haircut were a work of art. Unfortunately, for me, my life is just as tragic as the ancient queen of Egypt, because six months ago Dad left to go and rescue some fisherman and never came back.

The music I'm hearing brings back memories of that night. The police said he was missing, presumed dead. I increase the speed of my spins, before leaping backwards into full splits to the enthusiastic applause of my best friend, Suzanne.

As I try to slow my breath, I realise there's another set of enthusiastic clapping, and getting to my feet I see that Jonathan Trent's been spying on me from behind the climbing frames.

"Ignore him Ella!" Suzanne tells me, handing me my water bottle. "We need to get going before the shop shuts. You promised you'd be there when I asked Dave for a job."

"Yes, yes, I know!" Considering Suzanne's gone all peace-and-love in her efforts to get Dave from the Wicca shop to ask her out, she's a right bossy cow. "I just need to get changed. I can hardly go out in a red leotard, yeah?"

"Okay," she agrees, her freckled face scowling. "Oh, great—what does he want?"

Twisting round, I feel an awkward surge of embarrassment wash over me as Jonathan skulks over.

“Hi Ella.” He towers over me, but he still manages to look small with his hands in his trouser pockets. “Can I talk to you?”

“You’re a dick brain!” Suzanne kindly tells him, giving her wavy brown hair a flick.

“Leave it out, Suzanne!” Just because Jonathan’s a bit...well, I don’t really know what it is about him; I mean, he’s not gross, but there’s something there that makes you want to avoid being seen with him.

“I’ll wait for you by the lockers,” she grumbles, her flowery maxi dress billowing out as she whirls around to leave. “And don’t you dare invite him along.”

As she stomps off through the gym doors, I turn back to Jonathan. “Sorry about that. She’s really nice when you get to know her.”

“I’ll take your word for that,” he says with a nervous smile.

“So...what do you want?” I ask after several seconds of silence.

“I’m eighteen soon,” he begins, scratching the back of his head and making his tangle of black hair even more of a mess.

“Happy birthday.” I really hope he isn’t going to ask me to come along to some lame party.

“Thanks, but the thing is...” Oh God, he’s going to ask me out. His brown eyes have got that kind of nervous-puppy dog look.

“You know I’m kind of...seeing Brent, right?” I got off with Brent last week at Sasha’s party, and even though he never called me back, I can’t have Jonathan think I’m available.

“Oh,” he says, now making eye contact. “Don’t worry, I’m not going to ask you out. I know you wouldn’t...”

Now I feel guilty as well as awkward. He's right—I'd rather date Steve Miller, who could easily qualify for *The Biggest Loser*, but that doesn't mean I want to make Jonathan feel bad. "Sorry, you were saying...?"

"You know I do magic?"

"Yes. That whole coin thing is pretty cool."

"Oh that's nothing," he says all dismissive like, and as if to prove he's not bragging, he weaves a ten pence coin through his long fingers before making it disappear into nothing. "I do big stuff, and there's this club I want to join—"

"The Magic Circle?"

"Like that," he says giving nothing away. "But it's more exclusive and you can't just flash a credit card to get in."

I'm not sure what to do with this, so I nod to fake interest as I think of an excuse to get away.

"I can do all the big tricks, but I can't make them look good," he explains, talking faster and faster. "And I got to thinking, you do tricks too and you make them look good, so perhaps you'd help me make my tricks look good."

Oh God, this is even worse than being asked out, and I'm cringing all over again remembering that show he did for Children in Need.

"I'll pay you," he adds. "I don't expect you to do me any favours."

Chewing on my bottom lip, I try to think of a really nice way to tell him no, but the truth is I could really do with the cash. Now that my plans of being a famous gymnast are over, I'm focusing on being a fashion designer, but I'm still two hundred quid short of getting my dream sewing machine.

"Okay, but you're not to tell anyone—this is our secret."

He nods, all happy now.

“And I’m not practising *here*, either!”

“I’ve got everything at home,” he assures me. “Can you come around on Saturday?”

“You’ll have to come to mine,” I tell him, pulling on my jeans because I’m already mega late for Suzanne. “I have to babysit my kid sister at the weekends.”

“No problem, bring her around.”

“She’s in a wheelchair,” I explain. “And she’s too big now for me to carry.”

“My house is wheelchair-friendly,” he replies, now sounding really sad. “I live with my grandparents and neither of them has walked in years.”

Now I feel really bad. Jenny’s tough work, but having two wheelchair-bound grandparents to look after—that’s got to suck. “Okay. Eleven o’clock, all right?”

“What did he want?” Suzanne asks me, as soon as we’re on the bus headed down to The White Witch magic shop.

“Nothing much,” I lie, because even though Suzanne’s my best friend, there’s no way I’m telling her, because she couldn’t keep a secret if her life depended on it. “I thought he was going to ask me out, so I just got in there quick—”

“Yuck!” she cries, sticking out her tongue and pretending to vomit. “Imagine making out with Jonathan.”

I laugh with her, but inside my stomach sinks. Poor Jonathan. He really doesn’t deserve it. Hoping that he gets into this club so he won’t be Billy-No-Mates any longer, I gaze out at the shop windows down the high street, looking for inspiration, but not one of them has the answers on how I can turn his lame act into something even the coolest kids would pay money to see.

Chapter 2

Mum dropped me and Jenny outside this house that looks just like the sort of house Dracula would buy if he got fed up with Transylvania. *I must be mad.* I push Jenny up the potholed driveway towards the huge wooden front doors, strangled by a web of white and green ivy. I press the cobwebby doorbell, and hope Jonathan answers quickly, just in case someone I know sees me here.

“Ella, is he your friend because he can do magic?” Jenny asks, as I text Suzanne from behind the stone pillar to hide myself from the road.

“No, we just go to the same school.” The last thing I need is Jenny making things a million times worse by telling Jonathan that I like him. “And he does different magic.”

“How’s it different?” At eight years old, everything’s a question to Jenny.

“It just is—his is ‘pretend magic’.”

“But your magic doesn’t work either,” she retorts.

“Were you spying on me last night?” But before she can answer, Jonathan opens the door, in these naff-looking beige cords, his black hair still looking like something a sparrow would lay its eggs in.

“Everything all right?” he asks, stepping aside to let us in.

“Fine.” I kick the door shut with the back of my heel. “This is Jenny.”

He crouches down and, smiling, shakes her hand. “Hi Jenny. You like chocolate?”

She giggles. “Yes. How did you know?”

“Because you’re hiding some...” He stops and, reaching behind her left ear, pulls out one of those chocolate eggs.

“Wow!” she cries, looking up at me with the biggest smile ever. “Ella, you were wrong, he really can do magic.”

“Thank you,” I say to him quietly, letting him take control of Jenny’s wheelchair.
“That’s really sweet of you.”

“Figured it might help if I bribed the audience,” he replies, the floorboards creaking as we follow the line of big, old-fashioned oil paintings towards the only open door at the end of a long, drab corridor.

“Should I go and say hi to your grandparents?”

“They’re sleeping,” he replies. “They sleep a lot.”

I smile, then almost jump out of my jeans when I nearly walk right into this big, black spider dangling down from the grubby OTT chandelier. “Your place is really...” I don’t want to say *a creepy, dusty horror movie*, so I settle for “...big.”

“It’s a tip,” he says, his shoulders relaxing. “I’m too busy looking after my grandparents to ever clean it, but it does have one cool room.”

“Which is?”

He lets me step inside first, and to my amazement, I find myself in a mega huge room that’s been converted into an old fashioned theatre, with red velvet curtains and everything. There are even twelve red cushioned foldaway seats set out in two neat rows—just like the ones in the theatre hall in town.

“It’s amazing,” says Jenny, voicing what I’m far too cool to say.

I line her chair up with the front row while Jonathan jumps on to the stage and opens up the heavy curtains to reveal all his precious magic tricks.

“Is that one of those cabinets for sawing people in half?” I ask, as he extends a hand down to help me up.

He nods, pulling me up. “Yes—I can saw people in half, make them float, disappear, and stick swords in them.”

“Then why didn’t you do any of this at the concert?” Running my fingers along the smooth, painted surface of the scary-looking guillotine, I gaze upwards at the array of lights nestled in the ceiling rafters.

“No assistant,” he replies, standing alongside me. “And before you start accusing me—I’m not asking you.”

Sitting next to Jenny, I don’t have to tell him his routine sucks; only two card tricks into his act, Jenny’s whining for my mobile, and after that Jonathan kind of gets the idea that we are already bored.

“So what am I doing wrong?” he demands, sitting down on the edge of the stage. “There aren’t many professional magicians who can pull off these kinds of illusions.”

“Maybe, but I can’t see anything clever in you shuffling a few cards.” I don’t see the point in being sweet about it.

“I’m doing a lot more than that!” he protests, slamming the pack of cards down. “Have you any idea how hard it is to conceal cards while doing in-your-face magic?”

“But it’s *not* in-my-face!” I point out, not prepared to stand a tantrum. “And if you’re not going to talk, we need some music. I bet even Harry Houdini escaped to a drumroll.”

“What do you know about Houdini?”

“I did some research on the web,” I say, giving Jenny my mobile to shut her up. “And Ricky Jay does loads of cool card tricks, but he tells funny jokes too!”

“I’m not a comic,” Jonathan says dully.

“Then you’re going to have to do something big. Do you think David Blaine’s electricity trick would have been half as magnificent if he’d done it in silence and you needed a microscope to see it? Or would Criss Angel be the top magician in the world today if he didn’t have the attitude and rock star music? You need to be funny, cool, awesome, or mysterious. You need a style, and it has to be big and OTT.”

“But *I’m* not OTT!”

“Then pretend!” I tell him. “That’s what I do when I put a routine together—I get into character. We just need to figure out a character for…” And that’s when I saw the answer, on the black-and-white framed poster, next to the door.

“Who’s he?” I ask, walking up to the faded portrait of a man in a black cape with slicked-back hair and two demons whispering in his ears.

“Howard Thurston,” he replies. “He was the greatest magician of his time. His show was so big it took eight train compartments to move all his equipment.”

I turn from the poster and look Jonathan up and down. I’m not entirely convinced, but I wasn’t entirely convinced when Suzanne said she was going hippie, and now I can’t imagine her any other way. “That’s your look!” I tell him. “Vampire.”

“I don’t think Howard Thurston was a vampire,”

“I know that—but he’s got that look about him. Now, what big tricks have you got that fit the whole vampire scene?”

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