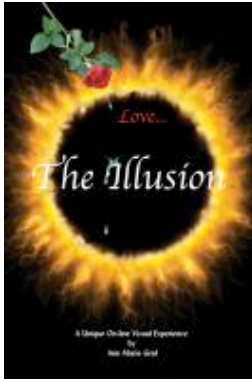




Love...

The Illusion

A Unique On-line Visual Experience
by
Ann Marie Graf



*Love...**The Illusion** - A romance novel with unique on-line visual content. What is Maggie wearing on her first date and who is the guy she can't wait to have dinner with? You can see her and you can see him. And, when things heat up. You can see that, too. So, what are you waiting for? It won't take long to get addicted. Grab your kindle, laptop or smartphone and enjoy a whole new world of reading.*

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LOVE... THE ILLUSION

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Ann Marie Graf



www.lovetheillusion.com/01.htm

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First Edition

LOVE... THE ILLUSION

To everyone that made this book possible...

Thank you

Ann Marie Graf

PREFACE

Naked he stood...the one I loved...a complete disgrace, unlike any other. At the door of the bedroom, I made my grand entrance, unannounced. Jasmine clutched the scarlet sheets, a portrait of deceit I pain to envision, alarming my inner senses that everything I once thought true was now revealed to be a lie.

Agony spread, like wildfire, my perception of love left in ashes, leaving me alone to wonder... Is love worth the risk of getting burned?

Maggie



www.lovetheillusion.com/00.htm

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Chapter 1

TWENTY-ONE stories high, fashion designer Maggie White overlooked the busy streets of Manhattan from her hotel suite. It seemed only yesterday when she was just a small girl and first took hold of the sewing scissors to cut that favorite piece of rose printed fabric. “Don’t cut yourself,” her mother had warned.

Maggie now knew that no physical pain could compare to a wounded heart. Six years had passed since her mother’s death, and she would always remember that dress. She wore it on her first day of school. It was special and one of a kind—both the dress and the love they shared. And with the last thread sewn, her mother spoke the words that she would never forget: “Someday, Maggie dear, you will design clothes for other people to wear.”

Her biggest fan had always been her mother, even when others had their doubts. “What is that?” her father would ask when Maggie would sew something. But her mother would always defend her, proudly announcing *her* belief that one day Maggie would be a fashion designer.

After losing her mother, Maggie understood heartache. But she had no experience on how to handle her latest grief—the loss of her fiancé whom she thought was her very soul mate. And losing him was not only painful, it was humiliating as well. How did Phillip think he could pull off a one night stand with Jasmine while engaged to her? And how could such a friend betray her trust? Could she ever forgive them? At least she found out. But now she could no longer say, “I do.”

Staring out into the big city, she suddenly felt small—too small to deal with her latest rival, Jasmine. It seemed only prudent to find her life’s fulfillment in her career. She adjusted her watch to the new hour while gazing upon a stone clock embedded within her view. Soon she would meet with her new boss, the highly acclaimed Francis Louis, to prepare for the flaunting of Magnetic Threads, his latest dress line.

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It had been a long day—a seven hour flight from London, misplaced luggage guaranteed to “arrive shortly,” a pair of red swollen feet in a pair of tan patent stilettos, and a stomach that wondered why she had not eaten for hours.

With briefcase in hand, she entered the elevator while adjusting her pencil skirt which, after the long flight, felt glued to her buttocks. Sharply dressed in her charcoal grey suit and starchy baby blue blouse, she had just enough time to find something to eat. A caterer, tending to a cart of food, nodded with a friendly smile.

“Hello, madam.”

“Could you please tell me where the closest restaurant is?” The pleasant aroma of braised beef and potatoes filled the air.

“Uh, that would be Atrium Cafe, next to the main entrance on the first floor,” he informed.

“Thanks!” Maggie smiled while fixing her chignon.

The elevator came to the first floor where hotel guests were swarming the premises, a child in a stroller was screaming, and bellboys scurried about.

“Excuse me!” She flagged down another member of the hotel staff. “I’m looking for Atrium Cafe.”

“Oh... no...” he said apologetically, speaking broken English, “No here, that in *north* wing.”

“Oh,” Maggie deliberated, exhausted. “Then where’s the closest restaurant? I’m completely famished.”

“Long trip?” He showed concern.

“Yes, from England—here for the spring fashion show.”

“Ah, you European, I show you Biagio’s! You like, eccellente Italiano.”

Where she ate was not a concern. She followed him down a hall to a secluded back entrance where he opened the door and motioned for her to go into the bar area. Immediately, the stress from the day’s events melted away as she stepped into the dim, cozy atmosphere. Classy, inviting, but where was everyone?

The bartender peered over his shoulder, aware of her entrance. He wore heavy black rimmed glasses. She took a seat when he asked, "What can I get for you?" His playful demeanor suggested that he needed a drink to pour.

Why not, Maggie decided.

"I'll have red wine. What do you recommend?"

He spoke quickly. "We have Antinori Solaia Cabernet, beautifully crafted from Italy—bold, richer, and darker than the Tignanello with textural richness to match an expressive core of blackberry jam, smoke, scorched earth, crushed rocks and cassis, and notably intense fruit driven aromas of ripe cherries and blackberries without excessive hints of—"

"That sounds great." Maggie thought he was quite the salesman. "And can I get a burger and fries?" she requested without even a menu. She decided to pass on her typical weight watching salad while hoping to have the energy to make it through her longwinded meeting with Francis and his associates.

The bartender acknowledged her request. "We aren't open for lunch, but I'll have it sent from The Atrium." He picked up the phone to place her order. Maggie was grateful for the exceptional service.

Peering over her glass of red wine, she suddenly noticed the other patron, an attractive man, sitting to her right. She wondered who he was. He was now speaking to the bartender, and they seemed to know each other quite well. Strangely, it was just the three of them. The bartender glanced over at her, and then their conversation continued. Were they discussing her? *The lack of tact!* Maggie swerved her barstool in their direction while crossing her legs and kicking her heel into the side of the bar. "So...Where is everyone today?" she asked with her eyes curiously fixed on the other patron.

"Not sure," he spoke confidently, betraying a slight accent. Hearing him speak, she could not help but take further notice. Dressed in a fitted black shirt and a pair of belted, black tailored dress pants, he wore his jet dark hair with a bit of wave, at a

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carefree, medium length, accentuating his dark eyes and tan complexion. He appeared smug and aware of his appeal. Then he leaned back in his barstool to make eye contact with her, and when he did, she blushed and felt her stomach drop.

Well, look at that! Maggie assessed. *A hot, ego-immersed bad-boy from top to bottom!*

The bartender disrupted her thoughts. "We open for dinner in two hours—right now, just happy hour."

"Not a lot of happy people in New York?" she asked the bartender, while the man in black gave a short laugh as his glass of what appeared to be water hit the counter with a soft clank. She instantly fell captive to his energetic smile while contemplating her first assumption. She quickly turned away to watch the bartender methodically rearranging the liquor stationed in an elaborate display on mirrored shelving above the marble countertop. Without even realizing, she soon held an empty glass as the bartender moved to pour her more wine.

"Oh, no," Maggie declared, raising her eyebrows to meet his. "I didn't purchase the bottle."

"It's on the house!" He waved his hand to indicate the insignificance.

Maggie considered his generosity.

"Oh! Don't tell me! I'm the only woman in the house, so you're trying to get me drunk?" she teased.

"Don't be silly." He chuckled. "Your food's just going to take a bit longer than we thought. By the way, I'm Stanley...Stanley Watson and this is... ah..."

"Chad." The man in black gave her a flirtatious smile and then sent a message on his cell phone.

"Well, nice to meet the both of you. I'm Maggie...Maggie White." She stared at Chad, eager to determine what promoted his confidence. "So, Chad..." she humorously probed, hoping to get another glimpse of his engaging smile, "What brings you to this lonely pub for happy hour?"

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"I'm...working," he spoke mysteriously, making brief eye contact. "Just on a quick break."

"Me too..." She studied him. "I have a meeting pretty soon, with Francis Louis. We're here for the fashion show." She wondered what sort of women he dated.

"You work for Francis?" Chad sounded alert. "That's interesting." He turned over his undivided attention. "Are you from the UK?" His eyes circled her face, acknowledging her beauty.

"Yes, all the way from London." She stared back at him, wondering how he knew Francis.

"That's a long flight!" He grinned, assuming she was intrigued by him.

"Feels like a day and a half!" She grinned back, absorbed by his interest in her.

"Well, welcome to New York!" He spoke carefree.

Now a man, dressed in a black tuxedo, arrived to speak with Chad, and after a private conversation—much too vague for Maggie to pick up on—left the room on a mission.

"Don't worry, your food will be here soon," Stanley explained.

Shortly afterwards, the man in the tuxedo returned, set Maggie's food in front of Chad, tapped him on the shoulder, and left. Maggie stood, realizing he mistakenly received her food. Watching to see her next move, he pushed the dinner plate a couple spaces over, inviting her to sit next to him. She hesitated, but then decided to accept his offer.

Now up close, his dark eyes and brow seemed to pull her in to his very soul, and although she found him attractive, she remained cautious of his intentions.



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"So, are you a waiter...here early?" she asked him.

His eyes immediately shifted as his mouth curled on one side in a grin. He appeared deep in thought while processing her assumption and then gave a quick nod. "Yeah." He looked at her, and she blushed again. Then he smiled. His confidence was intimidating. She decided to keep the conversation minimal. She did not need another man taking advantage of her.

"You better order something before you have to spend the whole night watching everyone else eat," she told him, feeling a bit nervous.

He seemed amused. "Is it good?"

"You should know. You work here." She hoped he couldn't sense her attraction.

Chad signaled to Stanley, as his face broke out in a smile. "Yeah, can I get what she's having?"

Stanley and Chad exchanged a smirk, and then Stanley issued his guarantee. "Coming right up...*Chad*." He shook his head, letting out a snicker of laughter.

"Oh..." Maggie alleged, "So, not your real name? *That's* really charming." She rolled her eyes. Now it was obvious; he belonged on a list with all the others! Chad bit his bottom lip, shifting his eyes in her direction, indicating he was guilty as charged.

Maggie lowered her eyebrows in disgust while letting out a huff. "So typical," she said in a repulsed tone. "What exactly *are* you doing here anyways? Oh, let me guess! You're a waiter, arrived

early for lack of better things to do, waiting for the crowds to come pouring through the door, but meanwhile you just can't help but satisfy your childish sense of humor!"

"Ouch! That was mean!" Chad let out a laugh under his breath as he addressed Stanley, hoping for condolences. Maggie glanced over Chad, wondering why she still found him so intriguing.

Then he announced her worst nightmare. "You got ketchup on your collar!" He wore a grin. Immediately grabbing for her napkin, she tried to wipe it clean, but it smeared into a bigger mess. "That's not going to look good for your appointment," he reminded her.

Maggie stood up in a panic, looking at her half eaten food and grabbing her briefcase, when she felt Chad's hand on her arm. Her eyes followed his hand to his face. "Aren't you going to eat with me?" he asked with his eyes staring into hers. And in an instant, she watched his sweet side emerge from the egotistical bad-boy image that he flaunted about. Her next assumption? He knew how to seduce any woman before she would ever know what happened!

Maggie recomposed herself.

"Well, in the fashion world, a stain is a dreadful sight and a huge embarrassment, so..." She paused, landing her forehead in the palm of her hand. "Crap! I can't even—my luggage isn't here yet. It got...Shit, shit, shit!" She paced about, flustered.

"They got one hour dry cleaning at the front desk," Chad said lightheartedly.

"That's cutting it too close! Francis is expecting me in exactly one hour! And he *hates* my tardiness!" She shrugged off his deliberate attempt to minimize her disaster.

Maggie saw that Chad was looking at her.

"I bet Stanley could get your blouse back in...less than an hour!" Chad volunteered. "He's got connections."

She looked to Stanley, awaiting his reply.

"Uh, yeah, sure," Stanley said comically, as if told to bungee jump from the first floor. Then he changed his demeanor. "Seriously, we can, but I need your blouse!"

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Maggie opened her mouth in shock to calculate, then looking at her watch, pursed her lips, lowering her brow to debate a quick shopping trip versus their ridiculous hospitalities. Her feet were in too much pain for shopping. Were these jokers trustworthy for a favor? Her face transformed to an excruciated state.

"Where's the ladies' room?" She finally capitulated.

Stanley nodded straight ahead, and Maggie turned around to where he looked, ready to face her next dilemma.

Having removed her blouse, she put her blazer back on, glad to see a modest covering over her black bra. Facing the mirror, she shifted about, removing a hint of ketchup that left a smear on her cheek as well. Her soft brown eyes and small rounded features stared back at her, while the vanity lighting captured the golden highlights in her dark brown hair. *I am such an awful mess*, she thought, while attempting to fix her hair back to its original.

On her way back into the bar, Chad seemed to be eagerly awaiting her return as he eyed up her revised ensemble, but she no longer wished to speak to him.



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Stanley grabbed the blouse from across the bar.

"So, I'm in charge of this disaster?"

"Sure...and thank you." She sat down as she watched his stroll as he made his way out from behind the bar, with her blouse in tow. *Hopefully, it would be considered a priority.*

When Stanley returned, he happened to bring Chad's food and Maggie took notice, checking her watch.

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"Are you timing the one hour service?" Chad asked her.

"Should I be?" She looked at him, concerned.

"Stanley, pour the lady some more wine." He sat amused.

"That's quite alright. I already had two glasses. I can't afford to be sloshed on the job." She laughed off his suggestion. "I would have coffee?"

"So demanding!" Chad teased her.

Maggie dropped her jaw while absorbing his presentation. *Attractive, witty, and bored!* She let out a huff, refusing to satisfy him with a reply.

"Coffee..." Stanley verified her request.

"Yes, please, what I should have had in the first place...cream and sugar too, please."

"Cream and sugar...coming right up!" Stanley set down the cup of coffee and rummaged through a drawer on a mission to find a couple of creamers and packets of sugar. "Not too many people drinking coffee at a bar." He laughed quietly.

"Thanks." She inhaled the refreshing aroma as she took a sip of her coffee.

"You better not spill that." Chad enjoyed teasing her again.

"Aren't you funny." She praised his humor while glaring at him. She hated to admit, she still found him appealing.

Maggie sipped her coffee, trying not to look at Chad. She focused on her upcoming meeting with Francis. He was probably already waiting for her, and she could already predict their meeting—a mind-numbing overview of the upcoming event. Today was Friday, and he insisted that everyone arrive nearly a week before the scheduled fashion show. And spending time in New York City would surely bring back memories of a family vacation taken when her mother was still alive. If only her mother could share in the excitement of her new job.

"Did you know that wine that you drank is from Italy?" Chad disrupted her daydream.

"It was good."

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She couldn't help but feel flattered by his friendly attempts. But why did it matter that the wine was from Italy?

Then he told her. "The Americans can't make food and wine like the Italians, but the coffee's okay here, as long as it keeps you awake."

"You must be...Italian?" She laughed.

"Of course!" He grinned.

She managed to exchange several glances with him, and while he kept a steady grin, she hesitated but then finally let go of a smile.

And in less than a half hour, her blouse arrived on a hanger in a clear plastic bag, delivered by the same man in the tuxedo.

"Thank you so much!" Maggie's face lit up as she reached for her blouse.

After returning from another trip to the ladies' room, she reached inside her briefcase and pulled out her wallet, realizing she forgot to pay for the blouse.

"That's okay. We'll take care of the blouse. It's on Stanley," Chad grinned in amusement while Maggie's eyes jettied back and forth at the two of them—both very strange, as was the bar that no one else hung out in.

She held out her hand in Stanley's direction.

"Check please, for the food."

"Oh..." He turned and faced the both of them. "*That* is on Chad!" He seemed anxious for her response.

"It's a company write-off, really, but I need the bill," Maggie insisted.

"Too bad, you won't get one," Chad insisted.

She had to smile and take one last look at him.

"Fine, I don't have time for debates, so, thank you, that's awfully sweet of the both of you and...thanks for a fun afternoon."

What would they entertain themselves with next, after she left? Next for her, of course, was the meeting.

Maggie had finally gotten her big break. A graduate of Istituto Marangoni, she now worked for Francis Louis, a prominent

designer in Europe. Fresh out of school, it was a struggle to make ends meet, but now she felt fortunate to receive a decent salary. Her mother, who encouraged her dream from the time that she designed her own clothing at a young age, had passed away from cancer only a week before Maggie had graduated high school, requesting on her deathbed that Maggie use the insurance money to go to school in London. She had been living there since, and wanted to make her mother proud.

Sitting in a taxi on her way to see Francis, Maggie remorsefully recalled her latest tragedy—terminating her engagement to a guy that she thought she knew. How could she have been so blind to misinterpret his character? And they had not spoken since, although he wished to offer an explanation. Certainly, there was none worthy of reconciliation. And although she missed him, she also despised him, and tried to let go of any sweet lingering memories.

Her mind drifted onto Chad...*another liar...couldn't even get his name right.* She knew his type, always a thrill ride to a huge disappointment. *And hot guys with an ego? ...Always a problem.* Surely, he was waiting tables by now and busy charming all of his customers. Now she contemplated his mystery. Was he even a waiter? She wondered. Who lies about their name? Unless, maybe, he was undercover with the CIA, in which case it would be boring for him to run into her. There was not even a speeding ticket on her record. Or, was he with the Mafia? He was Italian. In which case, he had a list she would not want to read. All would remain a mystery, because absolutely no way would she see him again, in such a big city.

The meeting adjourned—well, almost. *He's been talking for over two hours!* Maggie sat on the edge of her chair, listening to Francis tediously ramble out the details of his latest dress lines as he deliberated from the photos which models presented the best. The fashion show was Thursday, and the models would soon be adorned in all the latest eye-popping threads that she and Francis “co-designed.” *Interpretation:* He designed it, she praised his new creation, and on a rare occasion he would incorporate one of her

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ideas. Frustration lingered. However, Maggie capitalized on every opportunity to step ahead in the industry and appreciated her mini moments of creative success.

Early the next morning, Maggie enjoyed a leisurely jog through Central Park, when her cell phone went off. It was her roommate from London.

"Hey! Dana! What's up?"

"Where are you?"

"I'm in New York, remember?"

"You're there now? That's brill. Sorry to bother you. I thought that was next week." There was a long pause. "We got engaged! Shane proposed last night at dinner and guess where my ring was? In the bottom of my glass of white wine! Good thing I didn't swallow it because it is a huge rock!"

"That's great! Congratulations! Ha! I was drinking wine too yesterday, but no ring in my glass! Well, the two of you are definitely meant to be. I knew the first time I saw you together, and I'm so happy for you!"

"Will you be my maid of honor, and design my wedding dress and the bridesmaid dresses, and when you get back, we can talk all about it, in detail!?"

"Yes, yes and yes!" Maggie accepted.

"It's in eight months, so I'll be moving out then."

Maggie realized Dana was now getting married before her.

"No!" Maggie pretended to cry. "I'm just thinking how you are the sister I never had, and now I'm going to miss you like crazy, and I'm not going to get a better flat mate!"

"Well, then you need to find your Prince Charming, and then you will!"

"Yeah, right...You know all too well that all my princes have turned into toads."

"Right, but I bet your prince is sitting right under your nose, and you just haven't figured it out yet."

Maggie thought about how disgusted she was with men.

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“Okay, Dana, just keep reminding me how I live off your optimism. I really should go, but I will see you Friday?”

“Friday, see you then, and did I tell you to try to have fun while you are there? Why land in New York and be a stick in the mud!?”

After her jog, Maggie sat in a café, with a coffee roll and mocha, thinking about Dana’s latest revelation. She felt happiness for her, but sadness overwhelmed her as she wondered whether or not she would ever follow in Dana’s shoes and walk down the aisle. She feared love and with good reason.

Now on the way back to her room, she had a strange suspicion that she was being followed. A big, polished, Mike Tyson-type figure, also sitting in the café, now stood a foot behind her. She recognized his familiar black patent wing-tipped Prada’s. She sure seemed to be running into all of the weirdoes in New York City.

Maggie entered her hotel room, relieved to be back safe in her own headquarters. But then she stood startled. She gazed at a bottle of red wine sitting on a table next to the chair where she had left her suit. *How did that get in here?* She could not help but feel a bit creepy. She walked over to it, picked it up, and ran her thumb across the label. It appeared to be the same wine that she drank at the bar, yesterday.

It was time to call the front desk.

“Hello? I’m in room 2116, and there’s a bottle of red wine in here, possibly by mistake.”

“Can you hold on? I will check.”

Maggie waited. Surely this would not be a business write-off.

“No, we don’t know anything about that.”

“Has there been anything charged to my room?”

“Just a minute.” The lady put her on hold, again. Seconds later, she informed, “No. No charges.”

Certainly, it came as a gift? What an unusual display of interest, but from Chad or Stanley? Maggie felt those well-known butterflies, thinking it could be from Chad. It was time to visit the bar and find out.

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Is it even open?

She pushed on the door to the bar, but it was locked. Perhaps it was too early. She didn't really know him. *What if he's a creep?* Best to let it go! There was no point in adding to her list of life's greatest regrets.

Now on the way back to her room, a wine display in the gift shop caught her attention, as it took up the entire back wall. Her curiosity led her to enter the shop, and she soon found the wine with its familiar label. She reached up to remove it from the rack, when a grey-haired gentleman with a Dutch accent said, "You like that Italian wine? You are an expensive lady!"

Overcome with embarrassment, Maggie wished he would mind his own business. But then she saw the price—297 dollars? ...*Really?* Quite the romantic stunt and she had seen plenty.

Later that afternoon, on an early dinner break away from Francis, Maggie contemplated her independence from the male species. As much as she wanted to find love, she now feared reliving its painful ending. While her friends found love at the drop of a hat, she seemed to be her own pilot, magnetizing to the guys that were nothing but trouble. First crush, at age twelve, over the boy that every other girl liked—*not worth the bother*. First love at age thirteen, a cute fifteen year old boy on the soccer team hung out with her for two months and then wanted her to lose her virginity on the soccer field one night. And when she refused, he told her, *he had needs!* Junior year of high school, her to-be prom date videotaped the girls' volleyball team showering after a game. *Don't ask how*. College guys came and went faster than the last, until her recent engagement to Phillip. That ended last month, after he slept with her friend Jasmine, *end of story*. The last dinner date, coming to her aid after the break-up, was with a client that bashfully admitted he was married. She may as well have a sign on her back reading, "I love assholes."

After she finished her spaghetti, Maggie observed the other clientele seated nearby. There were several other people dining alone. And of course, there were the couples that appeared madly in

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love. She contemplated her dilemma, once again, but then reached for the bill, sandwiched between the covers of a black book.

She opened the book to find there was no bill at all, but rather a note. Maggie felt her eyes bulge almost out of their sockets. *No Way!*



www.lovetheillusion.com/18.htm

A rush of heat left her feeling flush. Her eyes wandered around the room to make sense of where the note had descended from. She motioned for the waiter who immediately attended to her table.

“Uh, yeah,” Maggie panicked, “I need the bill, and I seem to have gotten this note instead, maybe by accident.”

“Oh, no, that’s not an accident,” the waiter said, shaking his head. “Your bill is on the house,” he explained and then walked away.

“Wait! Come back!” Maggie raised her voice, holding the black book in the air.

Now, she had caught the attention of a few people at the tables next to her. She cupped her other hand over her face to hide her embarrassment, while watching the waiter return, only to instruct, “Now, please leave quietly, and do not make a scene.”

Maggie got up, baffled, leaving the note on the table.

“Make a scene?” She chuckled quietly to herself. “You can’t be serious.”

She stepped outside the restaurant, in haste, but then bumped into a familiar looking guy wearing the black patent wing-tipped Prada’s. She darted off quickly, believing it was no longer a

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coincidence. As for Chad, she could not visit his room—talk about mistakes. *He would be trouble!*

Maggie rummaged through her purse for her cell phone, while keeping a quick step back to the safe headquarters—her hotel room. She needed to call Dana.



www.lovetheillusion.com/19.htm

“Maggie! You are calling me back, already?”

Maggie was glad to hear her voice.

“I hope I’m not calling you too late, London time, but I’m just freakin’ out over here! Yesterday, I chat in a bar with a couple of men who I’m not even sure if they are using their real names! They tell me my food, wine, dry cleaning—never mind—are all on the house. And then you know what shows up in my hotel room?”

“Both of them, naked?” Dana teased with hysterical laugh.

“No, Dana. Save the humor. A bottle of red wine that I was drinking at the bar that, get this, costs nearly three hundred dollars!”

“I’m so excited! You have my wedding present already?” Dana joked again.

“Dana! How can you be funny at a time like this? I am a nervous wreck. Now, let me finish. So, I go to dinner, right? And after I’m done eating, someone has paid my bill, and I get a note saying that Chad—if that’s even really his name—wants to see me, and he’s in room 460! He just happens to be the Italian waiter I sat next to, at the bar! Now there’s a man who’s been following me and...Who is he? No idea.”

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"Right, you are having a blindin' time! All the men in New York City noticing the beautiful fashion queen from London!"

"Are you joking?" Maggie challenged. "I should be cautious of any man, especially here!"

"Maggie, you sound completely paranoid. I think you should look them up. They're probably just a couple of chaps that want to drink that wine with you," Dana suggested calmly.

"Seriously, Dana, why don't you fly out here and join them."

"I'm sure they're harmless," Dana reassured her. "Maybe, the chap following you isn't even related. I'd be more worried about him than that wine. That wine is awesome! It's sweet whoever sent it."

"You think?"

"Yes, Maggie! If you're so worried, just call the front desk and change rooms. By the time they figure it out, you'll be gone!" Dana concluded.

"Yeah, maybe..." Maggie thought it over. "Actually, that's a good idea—almost genius! Thanks." She sighed. "So, what are you doing tonight?"

"Shane and I just sat down in the lounge to watch a film. We're staying in, so that we can save money for the wedding. Ah, and don't be angry, but Shane ate your last biscuit! You know he eats anything sweet."

Maggie chuckled. "Well, you can just tell him, he owes me a jaffa cake."

"I will. And about your situation, how do you think they even know what room you're in?" Dana inquired.

"Because, when I introduced myself, I gave my last name," Maggie said, completely aggravated. "But why would the front desk give out room information? Isn't it confidential?"

"I don't know, but Shane's nudging me now, so I have to go. But if you need any more advice from a blonde, give me a ring, alright? Bye."

Maggie stood at the front desk.

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"May I help you?"

"Uh, yeah, I'm in room 2116, and I'm having a problem sleeping, due to some disturbances in the room next door, and I was just wondering if I can move to a different room?"

"Oh, I'm really sorry, but we are booked solid for the weekend, but we might be able to arrange it for Monday."

"Monday, um, well, alright," she reluctantly agreed.

"We will give you a call when something becomes available," the hotel desk clerk assured her.

The next morning, the phone rang during Maggie's shower. She hurried out of the stall, nearly slipping on the tile, while holding her towel and dripping wet as she picked up the phone.

"Hello?"

"This is guest services at the front desk. We were able to find a room for you, if you still wanted a switch."

"That was quick! I'll come at four, after—"

"Actually, we need your room ready for a twelve o'clock check-in. Can you come to the front lobby, now?"

"Sure," Maggie decided, trying to sound grateful.

She would now be late for her meeting. Yes, Francis had everyone busy on a Sunday! She looked at the bed where she had just started to assemble her outfit of the day. Various mismatched pieces lay, and she wished that she had not packed in such a hurry, at the last minute. What would she wear? *That would have to wait!*

She rushed back into the bathroom and quickly threw on her t-shirt and pajama pants, now wet from the bathroom floor, and hurried to gather her belongings back into her suitcase. Her hair still dripping wet, she had only twenty minutes before her meeting with the fashion show coordinators. Francis would have to cover for her until she got there. His extreme punctuality always made up for her tardiness.

The elevator took her to the main lobby entrance where people appeared well-suited for a work day, despite the fact that it was the weekend. She quickly paced over to the check-in counter.

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"I'm here to change rooms...Maggie White."

"Oh, sorry, we're booked solid. It's a busy weekend. We've got that magic show and the Broadway musical," the clerk explained.

"But someone just called and said—" Maggie stopped, as another clerk from just several feet away started to approach them.

"No, she's right, everything's ready to go!" The woman placed a receipt and new room card on the desk in front of her.

"Thank you, so much!"

Maggie took off, new room card in hand, and dragged her luggage behind at a fast speed when she noticed one of the wheels was now broken.

"Would you like some help with that miss?" she heard a bellboy call out.

"No, I'm fine," she called back while managing to maneuver her luggage into the crowded elevator.

She waited until it came to the fourth floor and then stepped off in haste, dragging her luggage down the hall to her new room. She made a quick dart around the corner and scanned the room numbers in order as she passed.

She stopped.

Standing in front of her new room, it only took moments to draw her conclusion.

"Just my luck," Maggie muttered under her breath, her eyes on the number: 468.

Suddenly, she heard someone calling out her name.

And the voice came from down the hall.

Chapter 2

"Maggie! Is that you?"

Is that him?

Standing in a self-conscious display of wet hair and pajamas, she wanted to wave a wand and disappear. But instead, she stood in a state of shock as she stared down the hall at Chad, the guy from the bar, dressed in a shirt and tie.

"You're on my floor!" he called out.

His... floor...? She pondered. How strange.



www.lovetheillusion.com/24.htm

"Hey..." She suddenly felt irritated as she saw him approaching and decided to meet him halfway. "So! You think you're clever ...leaving wine in my room, having me stalked, delivering notes to my table, and telling me to meet you in your room? I finally decide to switch rooms, to avoid your plague, and now I am—Ha! Right next to you, on *your* floor! Well, to what do I owe this great honor, *Chad?*" Her eyes were piercing through his as he just stood there with his hands in his pockets.

There was a long pause as he stared back until he finally opened his mouth slowly to speak. "Are you done?"

He tried not to smile.

"No! The question is...Are *you* done?" Maggie sneered. "This whole thing...it is...just freaking me out!"

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Chad grabbed the back of his neck and shifted his eyes to the floor as if he acknowledged her embarrassment, as she stood in her pajamas.

"Gee, I'm really sorry. It's not...what you think." He spoke in a relaxed, quiet tone, and then let go of a grin.

Maggie suddenly felt foolish. Perhaps he was harmless.

She tried to back up her words. "No, I'm sorry, I mean...the wine...you shouldn't have."

"I just...wanted to see you again?" Chad raised his eyebrows and tilted his head to one side, revealing his sweetness.

"Mmm, well, I guess you did," Maggie said, raising her eyebrows in return.

"My apologies?" Chad reached out for a handshake. He wore a soft smile. Maggie moved her hand slowly into his.

He's not only harmless...He's really cute.

"Hey!" A shout came from down the hall. "Bob's on the phone and said the shipment didn't come in yet, and he left two messages on your voicemail."

"Yep, be right there." Chad let go of her hand. "Talk to you later," he spoke in his accent. And it seemed that his mind had completely switched gears.

"When?" She heard herself speak—a shot into her ears— as if someone had spoken it for her, and she could no longer retrieve the question, or her desire to see him again.

"When what?" he asked.

"When will I see you?" She felt stupid. But there was something about him that left her curious.

He paused, looking at her for a few moments, as if he was thinking.

"Meet me for coffee...or dinner...at Bouley," he decided, as he took a few steps backwards. "Six, tomorrow night," he finalized the details.

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Maggie sat in her room on her laptop, researching Bouley. It was an elegant five-star French restaurant located twenty minutes away from the hotel. What would she wear there?

The multi-colored rhinestone Louboutin shoes—worth nearly a thousand pounds—were a perfect match! They went with the light blue shimmering dress with the shoulder strap and brooch. It was one of the dresses that she designed for the teen formal events line that Francis graciously put her in charge of. He had told her to bring a few of her designs along to show one of the buyers that sold formal wear for teens. The dress and the shoes were supposed to be displayed on a mannequin at the fashion show. But now she needed to wear them!

Maggie stared into the full length mirror, after finally deciding to wear the stunning ensemble. She could not believe that she was going out with him. She hoped that she did not look like she was going to prom. Tonight, she would put an end to her *crazy* intrigue with Chad. After peeling the layers, she would lose interest and have a clear head when returning to London.



www.lovetheillusion.com/27.htm

A taxi was waiting.

“Hello, I need to go to Bouley.”

“Bouley? Okay...” the driver restated, “We’re goin’ to Bouley. Must be a special occasion?”

“Ah, just dinner, you know.”

Maggie’s mind raced back to her last dinner date with the man that ended up being married. Who knew the frightful course of

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events that tonight would bring? Hopefully, her simple curiosity would end her ridiculous infatuation, and she would discover why she was right about Chad in the first place. Then with every emotional nerve in her body, she would pronounce her well-thought conclusion about men—*such a painful addition to the earth!*

Noticing her stomach tied in knots, she wondered how she would eat as the cab pulled up to the elegant French restaurant.

“Bill us,” she heard someone speak as she stepped out of the cab. And with that, the cab drove away and someone familiar approached. “You are Maggie White?”

She felt a chill run through her as he spoke.

“Yes,” she said timidly.

“You’re very pretty. Follow me.”

She walked alongside him, peering down at his wing-tipped Prada’s. He wore a tailored suit and seemed friendly.

“By the way, I’m Bradley Davis, and I’m flattered to meet you, Maggie.”

“You know, you look *so* familiar!” Her words spilled out. “And, I can’t imagine why I keep running into you!”

“Well, I’m security,” he told her. “You know, it can be very dangerous for a lady like yourself to be just wandering around, alone in a big city.”

“Well, I’m not afraid,” she lied. “What can happen in a big crowd of people, anyways?”

Bradley let out a bit of laughter under his breath.

“Well, let me at least get you safely to your table.”

“You mean, to Chad?”

“Chad?” he repeated. “Oh, okay, yes, to Chad.” He wore a strange look on his face, as he opened the door. “After you.”

Maggie stepped inside, feeling like a princess arriving at a castle. A crystal chandelier hung at the entrance, over velvety green carpeting surrounding the hostess station. As they entered the dining room, she noticed that it was busy for a Monday night, everyone in elegant attire. Crystal wine glasses and white china placed on yellow chargers adorned the tables draped with white

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linens, and bright yellow and white tulips sat in Lenox vases made for centerpieces.

She followed Bradley's lead into a private room, away from the crowds. Then she saw him. Chad stood, wearing a European cut suit, a purple shirt, no tie.



www.lovetheillusion.com/28.htm

"Bonsoir." He greeted her. "Have a seat."

Bradley had disappeared. They sat in a room off of the main dining area and had it all to themselves. The room was traditionally exquisite with a fireplace and windows that reached from the ceiling to the floor. Outside, there was a patio with a fountain and village style street lights. They were seated next to one of the tall windows, but all she wanted to do was look at Chad. Their eyes met, and she knew she was in trouble.

"You look good," he said.

Maggie repositioned herself on her chair as the lead brick in her stomach got replaced with a Mayan pyramid. Chad watched her as she shifted about.

"Are you nervous?" he asked with an involuntary smile.

Unbelievable!

"Are you the king of awkward moments?" She shot back in defense, ready to shatter his attempt to make her feel even more uncomfortable.

"So, that would be a 'yes'?" He wore a grin.

"Sorry I was late." She changed the subject, passing him a stern look.

Chad was leaned back in his chair just enough to indicate that he was not the least bit nervous.

"So, will we have service out here, or do we need to move to a table in there?" she asked, loosening up just a bit.

"Don't worry, I got us covered," he said, reaching down to gather up a couple menus which were lodged between the window and his chair. When he handed one to her, he looked into her eyes until she blushed.

"Thanks." Maggie took the menu from him, trying to shake the effects he had on her. She opened it up, only to realize it was in French. Her eyes scanned the entrees, trying to recall the bit of French she knew—not a lot. Over the top of her menu, she could see Chad tapping a pen against the back of his. She wondered what he was up to as he seemed to be enjoying every minute.

"So, Chad, do you read French?"

"Um, just enough...So, do you know what you want?" He passed her a sweet look.

She tried to avoid eye contact. He was definitely getting to her. She gave an exasperated sigh.

"Well, that would be 'no,' because I can't read a thing on this menu!" She started to laugh.

"That's too bad." He offered sarcastic apologies.

She studied his face that seemed to depict an agenda. It left her puzzled.

"I'll just have what you're having." She set her menu down, hoping it was not a mistake to be having dinner with him.

"So, you trust me?" He wore a curious grin.

Maggie was startled by his question.

"Well, if I organize all the facts, there are definitely some things that don't add up, but then again, you haven't done anything to make me think that you'd be someone I should be afraid of, either. Am I right?"

"You would be," he informed, "but I was only talking about the food." He tried not to smile.

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"Oh." She felt embarrassed, breaking their eye contact again. She found his humor intimidating. "Well, then just order something, and I'll have the same, provided there are no eyeballs on my plate staring up at me."

Chad laughed quietly to himself, tucked the menus aside, and picked up his phone to send a text.

Now she had to wonder.

"Are you seriously texting people while you eat with me?" She gave him a dirty look.

Chad sounded defensive. "I just ordered coffee!" He grinned in amusement.

Before she could ask questions, Bradley arrived with two cups of coffee and a carafe. He set it down and then gave Chad a wink. She watched him leave and then looked at Chad.

"What makes you think I want coffee? Are you trying to keep me up all night?" She stared at him, inquisitively.

"You said you'd have whatever I was having, and if I would have ordered wine, you might accuse me of trying to get you drunk and..." He gave her an inviting look. "I don't *need* to get my women drunk."

Maggie felt her stomach curl into a frenzy. He was quite the smooth one. She decided to put him in his place.

"Nice ego! Exactly how old are you that you have all this experience on how to entangle women?" She spoke in a hostile tone.

"Twenty-eight... And what are you? Like eighteen?" he teased. "Just kidding, I won't ask."

"Twenty-four." She gave him a curt look, realizing she wore the teen dress.

"So, how long are you here?" he asked defensively, yet leaving her enticed by his eyes on her.

"Just until Friday...The fashion show is Thursday, but we are here early to set up. Francis is a meticulous perfectionist! And working for him? He never stops short of keeping me busy." She let go of a smile.

"That doesn't sound very exciting."

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He chuckled, wearing a grin.

"It beats waiting tables!" Maggie returned his look. "How was your shift last night?"

"I'm not a waiter. Sorry to disappoint you. I work for AD Enterprises—an entertainment industry—so I'm in New York a lot, but travel everywhere. I'm from Italy," he vaguely explained.

She contemplated his mystery and then revealed, "I grew up here, in Boston, but went to London for fashion design school, and have been there since. I live in Greenwich."

His cell phone went off, interrupting their conversation. He reached for his phone and took the call.

"Yep, okay...tell them, there's still one more load coming. No, he's so... not in charge. Tell him I said he's done for the night!"

She listened to him give orders as if he controlled the world he lived in. He then excused himself from the table, signaling to her that he would be right back.

Maggie watched him having his private conversation. He was quite the package. She considered whether or not he could be tamed. *Probably not. That would be a hopeless chase for any woman!*

"Sorry about that." Chad returned to the table.

"So, Chad, can I ask how you got a bottle of wine into my room?" She decided to play the game and send him a flirtatious look.

"Why is that so fascinating?" He laughed. "You're Maggie White...Stanley delivered it to the front desk and said to drop it off in your room next time they were cleaning."

"Really?" Maggie thought about it. "And speaking of rooms..." she asked, "Do you want to tell me how, in a hotel with so many rooms, I end up next to you?"

He seemed deep in thought, and then finally admitted, "Well, that was an entertainment for all of us. You claimed a disturbance, so Bradley had to investigate. There wasn't anyone but an elderly lady next to you, by the way, with a hearing aid, who claimed she hadn't fallen or anything and had no idea what the disturbance was about!"

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Maggie felt embarrassed as he went on to explain, "Bradley noticed your name on the complaint list and asked me if he should tell the front desk to put you on my company floor, because we had several rooms unoccupied and everything else was booked. I said they could."

"Your company takes up an entire floor?"

She thought it strange.

"Yes, I'm here working, like I said," he reminded her, as he showed off his smile.

Maggie realized that she was not losing interest.

"So, this Bradley dude, you know him?"

"Of course, I know Bradley."

Chad found her questions amusing.

"So..." She tried to uncover more mystery. "You had him following me, the night that you had a note delivered to my table and paid for my food?" she asked, as he leaned back in his chair.

"I just wanted to see you again. Is that a crime?" He issued back a flirtatious stare. "Bradley works for hotel security, but when we stay here, the company hires him on the side. Trust me. He's completely harmless. We have that in common...Anything else?" His voice carried concern, hoping to have answered all her questions.

A waitress brought over some bread and soup.

"Baguette and bouillabaisse," she informed.

Maggie made an immediate approval of the bread, but the soup had a strange smell. She leaned over her bowl, trying not to signal any hesitation.

"It's fish," Chad explained.

"Oh, that's what it is?" She picked through it with her spoon.

"If you don't like it, don't eat it. It won't bother me. I didn't cook it." He laughed under his breath.

"No, I'm in for the adventure of whatever you ordered us." Maggie picked up her coffee cup to toast and Chad met his cup halfway, and when his eyes and smile met hers, she felt herself blush, again.

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"Not so bad?" Chad wanted to know.

"It's good. I'm just not a risk taker, especially when it comes to food," she explained.

"I'd say you are a huge risk taker, just because you're sitting here, eating dinner with me."

He waited anxiously for her response.

She wondered what he meant to imply.

"So, are you saying I'm going to regret this evening?"

She lowered her brow.

"Well," he chuckled quietly, "I don't know, but I hope not. I'm having fun."

She wondered who else he dated.

"So, is that what you do for fun, Chad? Entertain ladies that you barely know?" She sounded skeptical.

"I'm trying to change that."

"Which would be...entertaining strangers or...?" She wanted to know his intentions!

"No, what I mean is that I'm trying to get to know you."

"So, why me?" She raised her brow.

"Now, why would you ask me *that*?" He gave her a sweet look.

Her heart melted, and she knew better than to continue that conversation. She had properly assessed his sweet side.

"Ratatouille," Chad explained when the main dish arrived.

While eating her dinner, she had to wonder. Why did Chad want to date her? What was the point? Did he like random adventures, random women? *One night stands*? Surely his "list" ran a mile long. And could the English language even rightfully define his ego? Yet, something about him made her crazy. She should know better than to sit here, getting emotionally tattered by all his clever maneuvers.

"Excuse me, I'll be right back," Maggie told Chad.

She got up from the table and darted off to the nearest ladies' room, closing herself into a stall, where she could think.

This date was a disaster. She had not lost interest in him. On the contrary, the chemistry between them sent her head spinning out of

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control, entertaining the thought of what it would be like to be alone with him! She needed to leave. *A one night stand with him? No way!* She could never shake that off after returning to London. A streak of bad luck with men led her to conclude that surely he would be no exception. And although he was a dynamite distraction from her self-pity after her failed engagement, mingling with him definitely carried a huge risk. He lived here...she lived there...and she was bleeding from a broken heart already, and he looked like a major heartbreaker. *Surely he must date a ton of women. Who wouldn't want to date him?* She reached her decision. Her date with him was done!

Maggie quickly left the stall, approaching the table without sitting back down.

"I'm sorry, Chad. I appreciate your invitation to dinner, but I leave Friday and there's no point to this. I have to go."

The surprised look in his eyes told her that perhaps she bruised his ego for the first time. But then he spoke confidently. "I just ordered dessert. I think you'll like it."

"What is it?"

"Chocolate mousse!"

She hesitated, but then sat back down.

"And now you're glad to stay?" he assumed.

"Aren't you manipulative," she told him.

"No, but I'm not sure why you want to leave. Let me guess. You hate adventure, you don't like taking chances, and you're afraid to step out of your *box*?"

Maggie held her breath as he diagnosed her love stricken soul. She missed his smile that had been replaced by a more serious look. And she could not shake her intrigue.

After the chocolate mousse arrived, Chad sent a text on his phone while explaining, "You can leave right after the mousse. Your ride will be here in just ten minutes."

Maggie tried to fight her disappointment.

"Thanks for dinner, Chad." She did not wish to be rude. "We could wait by the waterfall fountain for my ride."

"Sure, whatever you want," he agreed.

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After finishing dessert, Chad took the lead and went out the back door to the stone walkway that encircled the waterfall. He sat down on the stone ledge, and she decided to sit a comfortable distance from where he was.

"Those are some interesting shoes," Chad pointed out, looking down at her feet.

"Christian Louboutin, a bit tight, but they are worth the fashion statement," she admitted, reaching for the back straps to remove the shoes. She placed them neatly, side by side, next to her, on the stone ledge.

"Can I see you tomorrow?"

His suggestion sent a shock of excitement through her veins. But despite her crazy interest in him, she knew it was a bad idea.

"I don't know." Maggie reached behind her, placing her hands on the ledge. She immediately heard the sound that could only mean one thing. Yep! One of the rhinestone Louboutins had fallen into the pool of water, surrounding the waterfall. She could feel the weight of her jaw drop, as she tried to see Chad's response out of the corner of her eye.

It was a terrible sight!



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"Oh no..." Chad laughed. "...Say good-bye to that!"

Maggie stared into the water.

"I think you should get it, just... I need that shoe!"

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"Ehhh, I think it might be more fun watching you try to get it." He sounded amused. "Come on! The water looks so warm and inviting."

She stood, thinking... *That shoe is supposed to be exhibited at the fashion show! And NOW look at it!*

"Pleeease...! You get it!" She grabbed hold of his arm to convince him.

"If I do, you will see me tomorrow night?" He looked into her eyes.

Maggie felt her insides tighten as she stood in front of him. She gave him a blank stare, letting go of his arm. She watched as he pushed up his sleeve in a hopeless effort to stay dry. Then he leaned over the edge as far as he could. But when he reached in to get the shoe, his sleeve got drenched.

He pulled the wet shoe out of the water and set it onto the ledge.

"Thanks!" Maggie smiled, thinking that she should have gotten it since she wore a sleeveless dress. But now reaching into his coat pocket, Chad handed her a ticket and said,

"Meet me at the magic show, tomorrow night." He spoke, assuming that she would.

"You like magic?" She tried to fight her feelings.

Chad's eyes sparkled and his face lit up. "I love magic!"

Maggie looked down to the bottom of her glass, after drinking a Long Island Iced Tea within five minutes of her arrival. She needed to drink *something* before her next date with Chad. The bartender raised his brow, indicating his shock, but she did not notice. Her eyes were glued to the flat screen, behind the bar. "...AND LIVE, TONIGHT, IN NEW YORK CITY, LIKE YOU HAVE NEVER SEEN HIM BEFORE! ARE THE FANS READY? THE SHOW IS SOLD OUT ONCE AGAIN AND RADIO CITY HAS ANNOUNCED AN AFTER PARTY FOR THE FIRST HUNDRED PEOPLE THROUGH THE DOORS. MEET, IN PERSON, THE ALL AMAZING, WORLD-RENOWNED MAGICIAN, ANTONIO DELUCA, HIMSELF! AND

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HE WON'T BE WEARING HIS MASK! GET READY LADIES, 'CUZ WE KNOW YOU ARE JUST *DYING TO MEET HIM...*"

Maggie heard her phone go off.

"Dana, what's up?"

"I should be asking you! Did you lose the Chaps?"

"Actually, I'm going to the Antonio DeLuca magic show."

"Really? It's wicked!" Dana sounded excited. "I saw it in Canada. I hope you have front row seats. That Antonio is really fit! So, is Francis splurging for a big night, or what?"

Maggie tried not to think about Francis.

"I'm going with Chad. We had dinner last night and unfortunately I like him. Now I leave Friday and—it's a huge mistake—I'm going out with him again, tonight."

"You worry too much! Just have fun. You're in New York City!"

"Right, easy for you to say. At least we'll just be watching a show. I won't have him staring in my eyes, making me crazy, or talking to me in his sensual way with that accent of his. And if I don't want, I don't even have to look at him!"

"You know, Maggie, you might as well become a nun."

"That's mean! You should be proud of me. I know his type, and I'm *not* going to let him mess with me. He knows just what he's doing and could care less that I leave in a few days. It's so depressing. I have to go."

Maggie put her phone away. Hopefully, after tonight, she could walk away with no regrets.

Unfamiliar with the theater, Maggie was grateful when an usher offered to assist her in finding her seat. He handed her a program. On it, Antonio wore a black and white facemask and stood holding a ring of fire, his arms up in the air, his cape blowing behind him.

Maggie sat behind a row of kids with their gift shop gadgets already flying dangerously through the air. She could bet this would intensify once the show started.

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The place was packed. It was a huge event as people crowded to get in their seats. She combed the isles with her eyes. Where was Chad? *Did he find a better opportunity?*

The lights went out completely. The red curtain lifted off the stage floor, and smoke replaced its view. The crowd went wild, screaming and shouting, and as the smoke cleared, she could see Antonio, low to the stage, tucked under his black cape. A fan blew the cape as he rose to his feet while the lights changed his appearance from blue, to red, to purple, and suddenly to bright white. And then she could see his black and white face mask. Pop music played while large pieces of gold glitter blew in the air before descending to the stage floor.

Maggie watched the show, deciding it was unlike anything she had ever seen before. Music, dancers, and circus performers accompanied the stage, while Antonio shocked the audience with his magic acts.

A cheetah stood center stage. She watched as Antonio jumped onto its back and then rode it up a staircase leading to a balcony above the dancers and acrobatic performers. The lights flashed out. When they came back on, everyone was gone except for the cheetah that stood center stage. She wondered where Antonio and his crew went and how the cheetah got back down onto the stage from the balcony. Suddenly, Antonio popped up from behind the cheetah, as fire shot up in blazes around the stage floor. The crowd started screaming, as confetti flew into the audience. The lights went out again, and when they came back on, the cheetah was gone, and Antonio was standing with his arms folded, facing the audience.

The color purple popped out everywhere on fans that wore their souvenir shirts decorated in white confetti from the last stunt. And for a moment, she forgot about Chad's absence until she got elbowed by a goofy girl dancing to the music.

Antonio came to the front of the stage and stared into his sea of fans. "I need someone from the audience that would like to learn a magic trick that they can show to all their friends."

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The row of kids, in front of her, went bananas and Maggie covered her head for protection as a couple plastic swords jetted aimlessly about.

A young boy beamed in the spotlight, as he stood next to Antonio who was shuffling the cards onto the stage floor and instantaneously back into his hand. Now the crowd whistled and hollered for Jimmy who tried to duplicate the trick, but with little success. Then Antonio grabbed onto his hand, and in an instant, all the cards flew up from the stage floor and back into the boy's hand. The boy wore a huge smile as he left the stage with the magical cards.

Afterwards, Antonio threw the deck he had in his own hand out to the audience. Everyone scuffled to pick up the cards when Maggie noticed that one had landed right next to her boot. She stooped down to pick it up. It was an ace of hearts.

Several acts later, Antonio came to the front of the stage, holding a ring of fire.

"I need a pretty lady from the audience that's not afraid of fire!"

Maggie's eyes focused on the flames that burned around the ring while the girl next to her screamed in a loud shrill, "This is where he takes his mask off! And he's so hot!"

Maggie observed the multitude of volunteers. Suddenly, she felt someone grab her arm. Her eyes followed the stranger's hand up to his face. He wore a white, screen printed t-shirt with "security" in large blue block letters.

"You, miss, come with me."

She immediately felt her stage fright kick in.

He brought her over to the bottom of the steps by the stage.

I hate being in front of crowds.

"I didn't volunteer!" she yelled up at him. A full head taller, he did not hear her over the noise. An exit sign caught her view, but the security guard issued her up on stage.

Maggie stepped carefully onto each step that led up to the stage, but she did not see Antonio anywhere. Just about the time she

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wondered how to keep the audience busy, he descended from the air.

The mask now gone, he wore a gold tie and a white satin shirt tucked into a pair of black pants. The lights were extremely bright, causing her to squint.

"What's your name?" he asked, holding the ring of fire.

"Maggie?" She seemed to have forgotten.

He approached her, and as he reached for her hand, she recognized a familiar smile. *Chad?! She thought her knees were going to completely buckle, landing her face down onto the stage. But instead, she stood in shock and disbelief.*

"It's Maggie!" he announced, facing the audience, before turning to her. "So you're not afraid of fire, but are you afraid of heights?" he asked as she stared back at him, lost in confusion. "I think Maggie's afraid to talk to me!" He faced the audience again, with a big smile. The crowd laughed, and she heard Antonio repeating the question of whether or not she was afraid of heights.

"I think so." She finally responded. A dead expression covered her face, but Antonio shined in the spotlight.

"Okay, Maggie. We have not lost a pretty lady yet, so...I'm going to make you float... inside the ring of fire!"

She could feel the heat from the flame as Antonio turned to face the crowd.

"Do you think she should trust me?"

The crowd started screaming.

Holding hands, he led her to a table where he positioned her horizontally. The lights became dim, and the table ascended in the air. She wanted to scream but held onto the sides of the platform, instead. The hoop, blazing with fire, passed over her. She closed her eyes and waited for it to be over.

Soon the table returned to the floor, and when Antonio reached for her hand to help her off the table, the audience cheered while he wore a big smile. He led her to the front of the stage, brought their hands up in the air, and then took a bow. She drove her thumb nail into the palm of his hand, indicating her disapproval of his stunt,

Ann Marie Graf

but he remained completely oblivious to her gesture. He brought her back to the security guard who then helped her down the steps and back to her seat.

Two girls, in red satin dresses, danced out onto the stage. She wondered how close he was to his crew as she focused in on one of the dancers, admiring her rhythm.



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Antonio stood center stage as they danced around him, removing his cape. She felt a shiver of jealousy. They handcuffed him behind his back, and a skinny, clown-like figure appeared with a string of white fabric, which he gave to the girls. The clown proceeded to do acrobatics while the girls wrapped Antonio up like a mummy. The lights went out, and seconds later when they came back on, he was out of the mummy tape and facing the audience in a victorious stance.

Maggie knew she would be a complete idiot to pursue him, even before this, and now? More risk...more strange. More complicated...*more tempting.*

After the final curtain closed, Maggie followed into the crowded aisle as people were trying to make their exit when she felt someone tap her on the shoulder.

"Maggie...Right?"

She turned around to the familiar t-shirt which spelled out "security."

"Yeah, that's right." She looked up at him.

"I've got something for you."

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What could that possibly be...a souvenir photo from the most embarrassing moment of my life?

"Follow me." He made a request.

She followed him in the opposite direction of the crowd. When they got to a secluded area, he explained, "Look! Antonio told me to get an after the show party pass for you, but they get handed out to the first hundred people through the door, and when I went to get one, they were gone. You can't get in without one. They rented out Night Owls, just a few blocks from here, and he wants you there. He told me to give you this, and the security people outside the bar would let you in. Oh, and don't lose it!" He placed it in her hand. "Make sure you go!" And with that, he turned around and walked away.

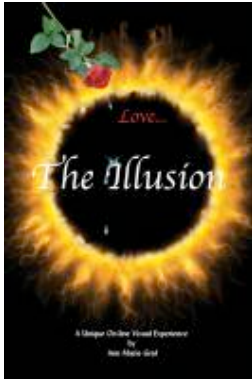
Maggie opened up her hand and stared down onto a gold ring that had letters, formed from diamonds, in the shape of a rectangle. "DELUCA," it read. She beheld all the diamonds and immediately realized the shocking value. *This is insane! What next?*



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"Now I suppose I will *have* to meet him to give this...this *thing* back to him!" she mumbled quietly to herself. It was definitely expensive, and she thought back to the words, "Don't lose it!" Certainly, it could not be left at the hotel lobby desk for him to pick up. He would be worried sick if she did not make an appearance with it soon. Of course, she wanted to see him again. But first, she needed to go back to her room to change. She had not perspired this much in her entire life!

Ann Marie Graf



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