



# FORCING THE ACE

Erin Thomas

ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS

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**Summary:** Alex wants to enter a magic competition, but first he'll have to learn to share the spotlight with a rival magician.



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*To the kids at magic camp,  
and in loving memory of Y.C.*

# One

**M**y hands are shaking. It's good that I'm not planning to see anyone in half.

I'm backstage, behind those crusty green velvet curtains in the school auditorium, listening to the audience cheer for the hip-hop dance routine that just finished. There's a cardboard heart on the floor, shiny red marked with dusty shoe treads, left over from Valentine's Day last week. I take a deep breath and wipe my hands on my lab coat.

It's not like it's my first show. I know what I'm doing—mostly. It's my Weird Science routine. The finale is new, but that's good, because it means Donna hasn't seen it before.

Mrs. Forsythe, my English teacher, is onstage, her Jamaican accent as warm as buttered toast.

“And now, to prove once and for all that Thornton’s Got Talent, Alex Eisen!”

Usually when she says my full name like that, it means another failed English quiz: *Alex Eisen, please see me after class.*

“That’s you! Go!” It’s one of the hip-hop dancers.

I grab the silver briefcase with my props inside and take another deep breath. The dancer shoves me, and I stumble onto the stage.

Spotlights warm my face. I blink into the light and set my case down on the little side table the stage crew set out for me. Straighten. Smile into the applause.

“Good evening, class,” I say as the applause fades. “Welcome to remedial science one-oh-one. That is, er...science for dummies.”

There’s laughter. Good.

I open the briefcase and pull out the textbook that’s sitting on top. When I open the book, a playing card pops up between the pages, like a bookmark. And when I pull it out, it appears to turn into a whole fan of cards. I stare at it, faking surprise, then shake my hand and drop the cards to the stage floor, but another fan of cards appears in my hand.

“The important thing to remember about science,” I say, shaking free of the second fan, “is that there’s a logical explanation for everything.”

More laughter. From the stage, I can see the first few audience rows past the spotlights. My friend Hakim sits in one of the four front-row seats I bought. Donna’s there too, wearing what might pass as a respectable suit if it weren’t made of hot-pink vinyl. I throw in an extra card flourish just for her. She’s the one I need to impress if I want her to sponsor me for the Silver Stage magic competition.

The other two seats, the ones for my parents, are empty. They didn’t promise to be here, only to stop by if they could get out of their charity dinner early.

It shouldn’t bother me.

Hakim waves, and I realize that I’m staring at the empty seats and my hands have gone still.

I clear my throat. “Let’s talk about Newton,” I say. “He discovered the law of gravity. Things fall down instead of up.” I dribble the cards from my upper hand to my lower hand. “But what if Newton was wrong?” I spring the cards from my lower hand to my upper hand in a kind of

reverse waterfall. “Newton wasn’t into cards though—he was into apples.” I pull one from my lab-coat pocket.

Apple on table. Red handkerchief over apple. Hidden under the handkerchief, the apple flies up off the table and around the stage. I pretend to chase it with my hands, trying to catch it, holding the back corners of the handkerchief. The audience’s laughter sits in my belly, a warm ball. Finally I let the apple land. I tug away the handkerchief and bite into the apple. “Not bad,” I say.

Applause. They’re on my side now. They want to believe, so I give them things to believe in. A card torn to pieces, then restored: conservation of matter. A coin that passes through a bottle: proof that atoms are mostly space. Some of these tricks aren’t great for such a large room, but Donna’s right in the front row.

Sooner than feels possible, it’s time for the finale. I swallow past a sudden tightness in my throat. This trick I haven’t tried in front of an audience before. I wanted something flashy, something to show Donna that I’m not afraid to take risks.

“For this final trick,” I say, “I’ll need a volunteer.”

Hakim waves his hands around like we planned. I scan the room, pretending to look for just the right person. And that's when I see her.

Zoe O'Neill is in the third row, and her hand is sliding up. Her smile just about takes me out at the knees.

"Zoe?" I'm not sure I've said her name out loud before. She's new this semester. I know, because the day she showed up in my chemistry class, I went home and scanned the old yearbooks to see why I'd never noticed her.

She starts to stand. Hakim's half out of his chair already, so I catch his eye and shake my head. He blinks a few times, then drops back to his seat.

I rub my thumb over the Band-Aid around the base of my middle finger, checking that the magnet is still hidden there—my backup plan. It'll be better this way, since Donna would know Hakim was a plant.

Zoe walks toward me. The spotlight finds her and turns her hair silver. To give her time to climb the steps to the stage, I pull out my cards again and play with them, except my hand stiffens and the cards fall. My face heats up.



I kneel to collect the cards. “I wanted to do that one last time, just in case. Extreme card manipulation. No tricks, just steady hands. And my hand”—I hold out my right hand, palm out, fingers spread—“is what’s at stake now.”

Zoe reaches the stage. She crouches across from me and picks up a couple of cards from the mess on the stage floor. She starts to pass them to me, but as I reach for them, she back-palms them. From the audience’s angle, it must look like they just disappeared.

Zoe’s a magician?

I take Zoe’s hand between mine and slip the cards into my lab-coat pocket. There’s applause as we stand, and I bow as if the disappearing cards were my doing. Inside, I’m reeling.

From my briefcase, I pull out four lumps of Plasticine and set them on the table, all in a row. Behind each one goes a tall Styrofoam cup. I hold up a stainless steel paring knife—a small one—and turn it so the spotlight glints off the blade.

“For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. I push down, the knife pushes up. Zoe will place the knife in one of these lumps of Plasticine, pointy end up. Then she’ll cover all

four lumps of Plasticine with the Styrofoam cups. I'm going to read her mind to figure out which one it is and then crush three cups with my hand. Hopefully, the right three."

Hakim was supposed to score the top of the knife cup with his fingernail. In case that didn't work, I had the magnet. It worked at home when I tested it—I could feel the tug of the knife, faintly, through the Styrofoam. But my hands are nervous now, my pulse heavy in my wrist.

I slice the apple with the knife to show that it's sharp, then hand the knife to Zoe. Her hands are steady as she takes it. Mine aren't.

I turn my back to the audience while she plants the knife.

"You can turn around now," she says.

The cups are lined up in a row. There's a small nick out of the top of the third cup, but I can't tell if Zoe did it on purpose.

"Use her hand," some jerk yells. Someone else picks up the shout.

My mouth is dry. I swallow. "That isn't—"

"It's all right," Zoe whispers. She reaches out her hand.

I'm sweating. "You don't want that," I tell the now-restless audience. "She could signal me where the knife is." I tug at my collar. This is the part where I'm supposed to look into Zoe's eyes and pretend to lift the memory from her mind.

Someone boos.

I take Zoe's hands. "Look at me." Her eyes are blue and very bright. "I think I see...yes. There it is."

She squeezes my hand three times.

I let go. Obliging, Zoe stumbles a bit, blinking as if she's been through something. There's a hush from the audience.

I move to the table and hold my hand flat over the first cup—the one on my right, the audience's left. There's no tug on the magnet. "One." I smash my hand down, crushing the cup.

They're quiet now. Waiting. If I read Zoe's signal right, the knife is under the third cup. But third from which side?

I smash the cup on the far side. "Two." Two gone, the two in the middle left. A fifty-fifty chance. I let my hand hover over each one in turn, but if the magnet's sending a hint, I'm not getting it.

“Use my hand,” Zoe says. Her voice is pinched.

Before she can move closer, before the audience can pick up on the idea again, I squeeze my eyes shut and crush my hand down on the cup on the left, the one with no mark on top.

The Styrofoam crumples. There’s no pain at first. And then it rushes in, hot and sharp, spiking up my arm.

There’s a gasp from the audience, and Zoe’s shriek rising above it. “Alex!”

I open my eyes. The cup is crushed beneath my palm. A line of blood spreads from where the knife has sliced into my ring finger. Zoe’s eyes are wide, her face pale as she stares at my hand.

I smile at the audience as if this were my plan all along. “Found it.”