

The 52

Inside Magic's Most Coveted Secret Society

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“Deceiving others. That is what the world calls a great romance.”

— Oscar Wilde

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OVERVIEW

Chris Ramsay never touched the girl's drink, I swear it. I saw it with my own eyes.

He sidled up next to her at the bar and leaned in to spark a conversation. She brushed a ribbon of chestnut hair off her face, cheeks pinched as a grin crept up towards her ears. She was intrigued. Ramsay—32 years old and one of the world's premier underground magicians—had drawn her in. A sturdy six-foot-three, he wore a full beard under ice-blue eyes, a flat-brimmed cap perched backwards on his head. Tattoos spilled onto his wrists from beneath the sleeves of his crew-neck sweatshirt.

Ramsay raised his hands, palms out, as if proving their innocence, and slowly brought them towards her cocktail. Six inches away from the glass, he slowly began to drift his hands back and forth. Her straw started to move. It whooshed left, and then right, thrashing more and more violently as Ramsay waved faster and faster. The girl brought her hands towards her face but stopped halfway, frozen in mid-air, fingers splayed. Her mouth hung open and her glasses slipped down her nose. Ramsay threw his arms upwards and the straw launched out of the glass, landing on her lap, droplets of the drink leaving small spots on her jeans. She screamed and jumped out of her chair. "What!" she yelled. "How did you do that?!" Ramsay didn't say anything. He didn't even pick up the straw, which fell to the floor. He just sat back, smiled, and took another sip of his drink.

We hadn't planned to fool anyone. But, then again, a magician can rarely help himself.

Daniel Madison, also in his thirties, and another member of magic's underground elite, let out a soft laugh as he watched Ramsay perform. He was decked-out in his usual all black attire, and the wide-cut collar of his t-shirt revealed tattoos running along the underside of his

collarbones. They carried over onto his arms and down to his hands, with the faces of his knuckles and the sides of his fingers scrawled in ink. His hair was messy and his thick eyebrows pinched down towards his nose. The grey strip threading his beard, running from lip to chin, caught the overhead light falling from above the bar.

As *Is*, the Hell's Kitchen watering hole we found ourselves in, has emerged as the go-to hangout for young magicians in New York City. Many people who come here are just having drinks after a regular workweek, and probably don't realize that a number of illusionists are among them. And they certainly don't realize that Ramsay and Madison are founding members of the 52, the most secret underground society of magicians in the world.

The guys were in New York—Ramsay from Montreal, and Madison from Leeds in central England—to film some street-magic projects beginning the next day, but their first order of business was to down some whiskey and catch up with other magicians.

"Hey, I know you," a tall, gangly blonde kid with glasses said, leaning towards Madison and me. His face was flushed, his expressions animated; he'd clearly already had a few drinks. "Daniel Madison, right?" Madison nodded in response. The kid introduced himself as Jeff, a local magician. He had just come from a gig, "some boring corporate thing," he explained, fanning and fiddling with the deck of cards he held in his hands, the muffled sound of shuffling cradled underneath the thump of hip-hop music. "So, what are you guys doing in New York City?" he asked.

"Just here to film a few things," Madison said in his growling British accent, all throat and sandpaper. "See some friends."

Jeff nodded sarcastically, as if we were keeping something from him. He threw a look at me. "Are you working with these guys, too?"

"Nah," I told him, taking a sip from my glass. "I'm just hanging around." That animated

nod again—he was sure we were hiding something. The life of a magician is built around deceit, and we were no different—the sentiment ingrained in Madison and Ramsay’s blood, me guilty by association.

He continued to look at me as we stood in silence for a moment. “So…” the kid started, trying to lift the conversation out of its awkward lull, “which one of you is going to show me a magic trick?” Madison slowly sipped his drink.

“I don’t even have a deck of cards on me,” Madison told him. After a pause and another swig of whiskey, he said, “But how about you just name a card.” Jeff rubbed his chin, as if deep in thought.

“The Jack of…Hearts,” he said, adjusting his glasses.

Two Jokers sat atop a stack of napkins on the bar (from someone else’s deck, removed from a fresh pack) and Madison reached out to grab them, putting down his drink in the process. “I guess we’ll just have to use these,” he said, picking them up. “Jack of Hearts, right?”

Jeff nodded. Madison pinched the Jokers between his thumb and forefinger. He swayed the two cards gently from left to right, as if fanning a Polaroid, and held them for a moment, arm outstretched. He separated the cards and revealed, between the two Jokers, a Jack of Hearts.

“Like you said,” Madison started, handing him the three cards, “the Jack of Hearts.”

Jeff stood there, frozen in place, speechless. He grabbed the cards from Madison and just looked at them. “But…” he started, unable to complete his sentence. He glanced up at me, as if looking for help—trying to find a clue, anything to make sense of what had just happened. Madison, the king of the underground, had just lived up to the hype. Even to a fellow magician, whose mind is keen to the ways in which tricks are done, the effect—or trick, in lay-speak—seemed impossible. It was as if the card appeared out of thin air. It was a beautiful moment, the epitome of what magic should be, and why these guys dedicate themselves to such an

enigmatic craft.

After a minute, the guy looked back over at Madison and said: “How?”

Madison just smiled.

My strange and unlikely journey into the underbelly of magic began in the summer of 2015. I had been browsing Netflix on a lazy Sunday, eager for something new to watch, when I came across the 2012 documentary *Deceptive Practice: The Mysteries and Mentors of Ricky Jay*. I knew Jay was a magician, but not much else, and I decided to give it a shot. In one scene, Fred, a friend of Jay’s from Los Angeles who tutored him in the martial art aikido, recalled a dinner where Jay took two \$1 bills and, after folding them into one another, transformed them into a single \$2 bill. The man was flummoxed. The trick wouldn’t leave his mind. Three months later, after an aikido session, Jay got undressed and hopped in the locker room shower. Fred barged in.

“Do it now!” Fred demanded, handing Jay two \$1 bills.

Jay, stark-naked and soaking wet, reluctantly took the money. As he began to fold the bills together he said, “Aw, Fred, I wish you wouldn’t have done this. I’m not prepared...” And then—*snap!* Jay pulled his hands apart. He was holding a \$2 bill.

“I’ve kept this all these years,” Fred told the camera, pulling the tattered note from his pocket. Jay was always ready to fool someone, no matter the situation. For him, magic wasn’t just a thing he did, it was a way of life. I was enthralled.

After watching the documentary, I realized that magic was coming back into the mainstream. All of a sudden, it seemed to be everywhere: the *Now You See Me* movie franchise, Penn & Teller’s competition show *Fool Us*, Justin Willman’s 2015 Comedy Central special *Sleight of Mouth*, the acclaimed Broadway touring ensemble *The Illusionists*, and

magicians winning *America's Got Talent* and making appearances on late-night talk shows. Most of the new performers I was seeing were young, and I got curious: *What the hell was going on with magic?*

I did some Googling, YouTube-ing, and social media searching, and eventually stumbled across Chris Ramsay on Instagram. He was kind of a big guy, like he had played lacrosse in high school, with a bushy beard, chunky leather boots, a plethora of tattoos, and close-cropped hair. The photography he presented on his feed was modern and tasteful, and he was, more or less, a hipster in the least nerdy way possible. His profiles said he was from Quebec, but he could've been anyone I saw walking down the streets of Brooklyn. And all I could think was: *This dude does not look like a magician.*

He had over 50,000 Instagram followers (now over 70,000), and his Facebook page and YouTube channel were equally impressive, with loads of wildly enthusiastic subscribers (his YouTube recently hit the 250,000 mark). Transfixed, I kept digging, gorging myself on his extraordinary street-magic performances. He turned a deck of cards—sandwiched between a spectator's hands—into a block of glass, guessed the passcode of any iPhone handed to him, made a creased card jump from the center of the deck to the top, levitated a dollar bill off a table, retrieved signed cards from the pockets of men and women, burned the index symbol of a chosen card into his fingertips, read people's minds cold, and had a female spectator pull out a mishmash of coins from his pocket that added up to the exact figure she was thinking of in her head. People yelped and screamed during his tricks. They ran in circles, hands over their mouths, when he executed his reveal. *Get out! No way! This...this can't be real. OK, OK, that's crazy. Man! How did you do that?!* His demeanor was slick and confident, and his command of a crowd was palpable. He was young, he was cool, he was smart, and he was utterly unlike any magician I had ever seen.

I reached out to him, saying that I wanted to know more about contemporary magic. He responded, simply, “I’ve always thought of giving people a glimpse into the hidden parts of what makes the magic industry go-round...”

That’s when it all started.

The 52 will be a first-person narrative detailing my fascinating journey into this secret world: stumbling upon the new guard during their formative period, falling under their spell as they hone their singular artform and take it in new directions, and becoming so immersed in it all that I eventually became a trusted member of their inner-circle. This book will explode the preconceived notions of what a magician is, illuminate the rich community surrounding the craft, and pull back the curtain on the lives of these illusionists. It will show, in vivid detail, the industry’s most influential characters in action, and detail my journey as I learn the intricacies of magic and deception firsthand. *The 52* will present the public with a kind of magic they never knew existed, and will give context to something that has provided endless entertainment to spectators for hundreds of years.

With *The 52*, my models are participatory journalism successes like Neil Strauss’ *The Game* and Joshua Foer’s *Moonwalking with Einstein*. Whereas Strauss and Foer documented subcultures with which many people were unfamiliar (pickup artists and memory athletes, respectively), I am tapping into something that has been of interest to regular people for centuries: magic.

I’ll take the reader with me as I tumble headfirst into this hidden world full of extraordinary characters and highly guarded secrets. I’ll take them to magic conventions from Las Vegas to England to Italy, meeting some of the most talented magicians working today, and learning some of the best tricks of the trade. I’ll show them David Blaine, a close friend of Daniel

Madison's, on the streets of Manhattan; Penn Jillette backstage at his theater on the Vegas strip; and Dynamo, the U.K.'s most famous magician, in East London. They'll be alongside me as I detail magic's rich history, its relationship with card-cheating, and how it has changed in the Internet age. I'll take the reader to The Magic Castle in Los Angeles and The Magic Circle in London, two elite members-only clubs, and show them how the younger generation has respect for these old-school institutions, but is also moving away from their antiquated take on the craft. The reader will see the cities the guys travel to, the bars they hang out at, and the globetrotting lives they lead. I will explore the widespread fascination humans have with deception, and learn magic tricks and perform them to friends and other magicians. And, amidst all this, we will see how members of the52 are changing the game, revolutionizing magic, and putting their own stamp on this ancient artform. *The 52* will be the book that reveals what the young guns have planned for its future.

"I had to ask permission to tell you this," Ramsay said during a phone call in December 2015, a few months after we first began chatting.

"Tell me what?" I responded.

"Well, I'm a member of the52."

I was silent for a few beats. "What's the the52?" I finally asked. He began to laugh. Then he stopped and said, "We've got a lot of ground to cover. I think it'd be a good idea if you came to England with me in February."

The story of the52, I learned, all started with Daniel Madison. Growing up in a broken home in Bradford, England, Madison fell into a life of crime: stealing cars, shoplifting, and cheating at underground poker games. After getting both his legs and a handful of ribs broken in a poker scam gone wrong, Madison started using his skills for good: magic. He has since

become one of the most respected sleight of hand artists in the world, and one of the most elusive. A cult figure, he rarely makes appearances in public, and his presence on social media, too, is sparse. He cloaks himself in an alter ego—an edgy, gravel-voiced, irreverent vagabond. His entire persona is highly calculated and steeped in mystery. He wants to keep everyone guessing, treating his career as a piece of performance art. In many respects, he doesn't even consider himself a magician, but rather someone dedicated to the art of deception, whatever form it may take. In magic, he is the epitome of the underground.

In 2013, Madison started to seek out other young illusionists who he felt were trying to redefine the notion of what a magician could be. "I wanted change, so I went looking for people who could be part of the movement," he told me. Madison had an idea: If he could round up the world's best talent into one cohesive group, he might be able to influence how people approached the craft.

He decided to create the52, a secret society of the most innovative performers and creators of illusion, deception, and mystery, and quickly found a handful that he was mesmerized by. They performed difficult maneuvers in new or unique ways, and were savvy with how they marketed their brand of magic—slick videos posted on Instagram or YouTube, an enticing element of character embedded in their persona, and the chops to back it all up in person. They were paving their own path.

The52 became known as the new generation, the ones beginning to shake things up in the world of magic, taking the antiquated image of a magician and flipping it on its head. They've vowed to no longer live within the confines of the stereotype associated with top hats and scarves, rabbits and doves. To them, magic is a revered art form.

But Madison wanted membership to be a lifelong allegiance. As in *Fight Club* (one of his favorite films), where wearing a black eye to work and coughing up blood demonstrated your

dedication to the group's ethos, Madison needed his inductees to prove their commitment to the52. As he began asking other magicians to join, assigning each member a corresponding playing card—their identity within the group—he tacked on another induction requirement: For it to be official, you had to get your card's index symbol tattooed on the inside of your middle finger. Madison became the Nine of Clubs, and Ramsay the Four of Spades. The other members also obliged, steadfast in his vision.

When it went public shortly after this first round of inductions, the52 was unveiled with a simple but provocative mantra: MAGIC IS DEAD.

By the time I learned about it, in late 2015, nearly 40 members had been inducted. At its onset, Madison teamed up with fellow British magician Laura London to help recruit new members and launch the now-infamous club. A petite woman in her 30s, Laura has a large smile framed by scarlet red lips and an asymmetrical bob dyed a rich crimson. A master of sleight of hand card magic who books hundreds of gigs per year, she is one of the U.K.'s most prominent and successful magicians. Laura has been on television multiple times, and even performed for the Queen of England. "Every single person in the52 has something special about them," she told me.

Since its launch, the club has been shrouded in mystery. Madison and Laura have built a website for the52, but it's merely a landing page showcasing a single disclaimer: *by invite only*. For the hundreds of thousands of amateur magicians that follow the members on social media platforms like Instagram—where the inclusionary finger tattoos are shown off and the hashtag #the52 is a signal to member activity—there was very little to feed off of in terms of what it all meant. But that, of course, just added to its appeal.

Within comment threads on Instagram, some followers refer to the group as The Illuminati of Magic, others try to figure out what it takes to become a member, and many ask

pointedly what the club is all about. Some fans have even gotten their own tattoos, thinking that it qualifies them for automatic membership. It does not. While the mystery and exclusivity have sparked curiosity, it has also heightened members' influence over their fans and followers, especially on social media, which is a crucial tool for these.

Their take on magic has garnered nods of approval from the industry's most legendary performers, including Penn Jillette of Penn & Teller, who told me, ".I've seen the best magicians of my generation and none of them can touch the younger generation." He appreciates the ideology behind the52 and how it differs from flashy, mainstream magic. "Criss Angel wants to be seen as something supernatural," Penn said. "These guys in the52 want to be seen as artists."

I've always had an appreciation for magic, but my own relationship with deception began at the other end of the spectrum: poker. When my mother was in her early 20s, she toured the country in an RV, gambling in backroom card games and hustling men at pool. After meeting my father and starting a family, she left that world behind for a more sedate life. But, when he unexpectedly passed away in 2001, two weeks before my 14th birthday, she started playing again.

"The biggest draw for me with this game was that I could go out there and be blatantly deceptive, which is very unlike me," she told me once. "But, with poker, the entire premise is to sit down and lie to other people." Cards became her primary coping mechanism, but the game also became a way for us to bond, as over the years I myself began to play competitively.

We were always a family with a few decks of cards lying around—playing five-card draw with play-money, dealing to an invisible series of players to see what hands would come out, learning about strategy and tells. I first learned to shuffle a deck of cards when I was six years old. My mother even taught me how to cheat, showing me simple tracking maneuvers and

methods to peek at cards (tactics that would prove useful when I first began learning magic). She also showed me a few tricks based off of those cheating techniques, which I would perform for my younger sister, withholding their secrets with an air of principal and pride. These days, we take regular trips to Foxwoods Casino in Connecticut. I hop on a bus from Brooklyn and she drives down from our hometown in Massachusetts—just a mother and son becoming a couple of liars for the weekend.

Despite my longstanding history with trickery and deceit, I never understood how truly universal magic was until I fell in with these magicians. In the months after finding Ramsay, it dawned on me that, throughout our lives, we are continually searching for a sense of mystery and an aspect of wonder. Whether anyone realizes it or not, magic's inherent properties are ingrained in the human psyche. This explains why children are naturally drawn towards magic (David Foster Wallace once wrote for *The New Yorker*, reflecting on childhood through the mind of a fictitious character, "If I had ever been successful in outsmarting the magic, I would have been crushed"). Sit down with any parent and bring up the topic and I'm sure you'll get similar anecdotes of their kids going through a "magician phase"—the magic kit they begged for, the nightly living room shows, the scarves and top hats, the awkward-but-loveable card tricks, the glimmer in their eye when performances were executed correctly. And, sure, maybe it was just a summer-long fad, but maybe it was also a gateway into other interests, like a fervent obsession with Harry Potter, because, let's face it, who wouldn't choose a school that taught magic and wizardry over algebra and U.S. history? And who, even as an adult, doesn't want a break from reality once in awhile? Magic—the romanticism of the inexplicable, the awe and admiration of the unexpected—is an underlying force in how we view the world and its myriad possibilities. We are all on an instinctive search for the extraordinary. It's a universal truth: All humans want to be amazed.

But the most important facet of magic is this: A magic trick cannot exist, even in its most basic form, without someone on which to perform it. Its existence is contingent upon someone willing to be deceived. Magic is exceptional because a performer isn't merely trying to create a fantasy for a spectator (like movies or novels, which are also illusions of truth), but striving to alter their sense of objective reality. People instill a profound element of trust in the magician—they want that person to lie to them in a way they have never been lied to before.

All humans understand the value of deception at an early age, too, with children learning to lie before the age of three. This mindset doesn't disappear with adolescence; the power of deception is a psychological tool that we carry with us throughout our entire lives. We see it everywhere: politics, sports, romance, advertising. Our natural fascination with it is a part of what makes us human, and it's no wonder, then, that people naturally gravitate towards magic. It is the only situation where people willingly say, without hesitation, *Yes, please trick me, please lie to me—and don't tell me how you did it.*

After telling me about the52, Ramsay—who got into magic from his grandfather and, with his father in the Army, used it to make new friends at the myriad schools he attended—invited me to join him in England for the Blackpool Magic Festival. Held every February, it is the largest convention for magicians in the world. Thousands of attendees flock to Blackpool, a seaside town north of Liverpool, to hang with friends, party, and see what's new in the world of magic. Over a dozen members of the52 were slated to be there for the 2016 event, the most ever in one place up until then, so I booked a flight.

During our first day in Blackpool, Ramsay told me, to my great excitement, that Madison and Laura wanted to meet me. "They're down in Manchester," he said. "We can't tell anyone that we are going to go see them, but we should leave soon." We made the hour-long drive

south, and after arriving in central Manchester, we pulled into a tiny side street, parked, and got out.

The alley was narrow and dark, and a sharp wind cut down its center. Ramsay thrust his hands into the front pockets of his jeans, his untied leather boots licking the pavement as he trudged through the darkness. I walked behind him towards our rendezvous point. “The Liar’s Club,” he said, smiling, looking up at the sign of the bar. “How fitting.” We entered and walked down the stairs.

Laura and Madison sat in a dark corner at the rear of the bar. They stood up and took turns embracing Ramsay. “It’s been too long, my friend,” Madison said, his hand resting on Ramsay’s shoulder. They were clearly delighted to see one another, and we ordered a round of whiskey, clinked glasses, and drank up.

Madison and Ramsay each took out a deck of cards and began doing sleight of hand maneuvers—card tracking, a series of complicated shuffles, hiding cards in their hands by palming them. They only get to see each other a few times a year and were excited to jam a little and show each other some new moves. I watched as the cards fluttered between their fingertips, moving effortlessly around one another, flourishing, nearly escaping their grip. It was not only an incredible display of dexterity, as if each of their fingers had a mind of its own, but of dedication. It takes *years* to handle a deck of cards with such grace. After another round of drinks, we all went outside to have a cigarette, and Laura pulled a deck of cards from her purse.

“Pick a card,” she told me, fanning the deck. As she held the cards, her identity within the deck—the King of Diamonds—revealed itself on the inside of her middle finger. I pulled the Ten of Spades from the deck, and she handed me a marker and had me sign it.

“There’s no card like this card because it has your name, right?”

I nodded.

“If I take the Ten and I place it in the middle, would you be amazed if I made it jump from there”—she touched the card, its edge protruding from the deck—“to there,” she said, moving her finger to the top of the deck.

I nodded again. She slid the card into the middle of the deck, shook it, picked up the top card and turned it over. It wasn't my card. She laughed. “I can't do that. I wish I could! But maybe you can help me.”

She turned the top card back over. “Just click your fingers for me.”

I snapped my fingers. She turned over the top card. It was the Ten of Spades, with my signature. “Oh, wow. You're good,” she said. She took my card and placed it back into the middle and had me push the card back in until it was flush with the rest of the deck.

She asked that I snap my fingers again. *Snap.*

She turned over the top card: Ten of Spades. “Ah, come on!” I exclaimed, laughing.

“Now,” she said, “I am a sleight of hand artist. And because of that I am able to control this card.” She spun my Ten of Spades on the tip of her middle finger like a basketball. “I'll give you an example. If I flick through the cards, I can count very quickly. So, if I do this”—she dragged her thumb along the corner of the deck and stopped halfway through—“this is the 26th card, which makes your card”—she slid it into the deck—“in 27th position. Now I know exactly where your card is. I can control it to where I like.”

She cut the deck twice, shuffled it, and cut it again. “And the reason I can shuffle these like this is because your card is no longer inside the deck.” She fanned the cards out, face-up, in front of me. The Ten of Spades was gone.

“Which means, if your card's not here, where is it?”

Laura took a step to her right and looked down at the pavement. Three feet behind her, tucked within a shadow that ran alongside the alley's brick wall, laid the deck's box. She

crouched down and picked it up, a grin creeping from behind her jagged bangs—that same sly smirk from before. She stood and gave the box a shake. Something knocked around inside.

She handed me the box. I opened it and pulled out a card that had been folded twice onto itself. I flattened out the card. In my hand rested the Ten of Spades, with my name, in black ink, on its face. I froze, the card still face-up in my hand. I was at a loss for words.

Laura broke the silence, whispering, with that grin still spread across her face, “That’s yours to keep—something to remember this by.” I folded the card back up and slid it into my front pocket. We stood out in the cold for a little longer before parting ways. Ramsay and I headed back to Blackpool, the city’s lights fading behind us as we pushed north along the highway. We sat in silence for most of the way, tired from a day of traveling, my mind still spinning from Laura’s trick. The conflict that arises after seeing a mind-blowing magic effect sat in my gut like a rock. One on hand, I wanted to know the method—to understand how I was so thoroughly deceived. But on the other, I loved the feeling of being tricked by someone so supremely talented. It’s a strangely delicious pill to swallow: I enjoyed being the fool. It was almost liberating.

As I dropped Ramsay off and watched him saunter towards the entrance of his hotel, I couldn’t help but feel that I had fallen in more with a gang of thieves or a touring rock band than a group of magicians, and that this was something much bigger than a magazine story. It had to be told in its entirety. It had to be a book.

The 52 will give readers a front-row seat into the lives of magic’s newest crop of iconic creators and performers, and the inner-workings of its most coveted secret society. We’ll see Chris Ramsay fight for his place among magic’s hierarchy, and come to understand the complex mind of Daniel Madison, the devious poker rat, as he tries to find equilibrium in a community

where he is immensely famous but feels equally out of place. We'll see Laura London—the queen of the 52—who, against all odds, has carved out her place in a male-dominated craft. The narrative will also intersect with other members of the 52: Xavier Spade, a card-junkie from Queens who is trying to get his own magic company off the ground; and Jeremy Griffith, a sleight of hand master who used magic as a coping mechanism after his father's death.

I will also detail my own foray into understanding deception as I build up the confidence to perform for other magicians, friends, and strangers—even, once, for Anthony Bourdain. Additionally, I will use my newfound understanding to invent my own magic tricks—and, by the end of the book, release them to the public. One of the benchmarks for proving yourself in magic's underground is being known as a creator of magical effects. Our main characters have risen through the ranks by inventing their own illusions, and with them as my mentors, I'll do the same.

But there are even grander schemes in the works, including a secret, members-only rendezvous in London at the end of this year. After the last members are inducted into the club over the next few months, the deck will be complete and details of the group will finally be revealed to the public. Madison's vision of handpicking the best-of-the-best for magic's most coveted secret society will finally come to life. But, more than anything, he needs everyone to come together. Madison has spent the last four years of his life gathering the most talented magicians in the world, and he wants to be able to have everyone in the same room. He wants to *feel* what he created. It will be the most hush-hush, underground gathering the magic community has ever seen. Secrets will be shared and plans for the future laid—all rooted in illusion, deception, and mystery.

And I am only aware of this clandestine conclave because my place in magic has been forever cemented, rendered in ink on the inside of my middle finger. It was in the dead of August

that I went from just a friend of Madison and Ramsay to a life-long insider of their world. This was much more serious than merely tagging along—it was permanent. Madison’s words sounded off in my head as the tattoo artist in Las Vegas fired up his gun: *You’ll be a monster of a member. Your role in telling this story is bigger than you think.* With his acceptance and trust, I became a part of the52. As the needle touched my skin, I heard Ramsay from over my shoulder. He was filming my induction. “This is it, man. There’s no turning back,” he said, holding the camera, a smile spread across his face. I looked up and our eyes met. “It’s official. You’re the Two of Clubs now.”

But here’s the kicker: This isn’t just a gathering. It’s where Madison will reveal his biggest secret of all. “Everything I do is so deceptive, why not have the end of the performance piece be a deception in and of itself?” he told me, when he revealed his scheme. Only three people in the world know of his decade-long plan: Laura London, David Blaine—and me. Each of us will help, in our own way, to make Madison’s masterpiece come alive, which will be revealed when the52 is complete. And all along, while I thought I was pursuing him, vying for his trust, he was actually drawing me in—turning my writing this book into a crucial element of his lifelong deception. “Someone has to tell my story, to reveal my secrets,” he said. “And I’ve decided that person is you.”

I have been sworn to secrecy—only the book will reveal Madison’s master plan. Are you in, or are you out?

AUTHOR BIO AND MARKETING

I've built a reputation as an engaging long-form feature writer, and my work has been published in *The New Yorker*, *Bloomberg Businessweek*, *The New York Times*, *Playboy*, *Vice*, *Wired*, and more.

I have investigated Wall Street's influence on the middle class and corruption in the female bodybuilding industry; profiled NASCAR pit crews, world-champion memory athletes, female monster truck drivers, and transgender teenagers; and embedded with the likes of Shaquille O'Neal, BDSM dungeon masters, and fishermen living on Iceland's northernmost inhabited island.

My investigation into WWE's business empire for *Vice Sports* was shortlisted for the 2016 Associated Press Sports Editors Explanatory Award. I have also been featured on Bloomberg TV and Radio several times, and I speak regularly at universities about both writing and entrepreneurship.

Despite these myriad experiences, magic and the story of the52 has captivated me like no subject has before. On top of my own personal connection to deception, and my appreciation for magic as an artform, what I saw when I first stumbled into this world was not just a handful of extraordinary characters, but rather an entire subculture inching closer and closer toward a massive tipping point.

With the next generation taking control of the industry, we are in the midst of a huge cultural shift when it comes to what people think of when they visualize a magician. In the years to come, magic—and the modern conjurer—is slated to continue its resurgence into the mainstream. There are more television programs—both reality and fiction—focused on

magicians than ever before. Magic tricks have recently been featured in commercials for Frosted Flakes, Oreos, Samsung, and AT&T. In December, actor Chris Pratt performed card magic for Jennifer Lawrence and will.i.am on *The Graham Norton Show*. In March, *The New Yorker* used their weekly newsletter to present their best magic-related reporting (“The thrill of mystery meets the promise of mastery,” wrote editor David Remnick). The same month, *The New York Times Magazine* profiled close-up magician Derek DelGaudio, *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* hosted young-gun magician Dan White for the fourth time, and the tawdry tabloid *Star Magazine* declared, “Magic is becoming cool again!”

The 52 will fit perfectly into magic’s newfound peak of popularity—something not seen since the reign of David Blaine and Criss Angel a decade or so ago. Magic is a worldwide phenomenon, and the potential for a book that sheds light on the secret lives of young, modern magicians as they approach peak popularity is extraordinarily high.

And within this incredibly timely opportunity to document this subculture, I have emerged as the only journalist in the world with access to its central movers and shakers.

Moreover, the magic community spends a ton of money on compelling products, especially from magicians they admire. When guys like Madison and Ramsay (or other members of the52) release an effect that they have invented, fans clamor to purchase the product. These tricks, which are sold online and in magic shops, range from simple moves for \$10 to more complex routines for upwards of \$25. Physical books, exclusive gimmicks, and other products can fetch upwards of \$100. On top of inventing tricks, famous magicians like Ramsay and Madison also release their own namesake playing card decks, accompanied by custom designs and personal logos. Like Michael Jordan with Nike, magicians use custom cards as an extension of their brand, the decks also being a central money-maker for the retail industry. A custom deck by Ramsay or Madison costs \$10 each, and they normally sell over

10,000 decks within days of release. Some rare, out-of-print decks can even reach over \$100 on eBay. In all, the retail market is a multi-million-dollar industry. The United States is the top market for magic in general, followed closely by the United Kingdom. France, Germany, Australia, Spain, Italy, China, Japan, Indonesia, and Korea have dedicated and burgeoning communities, as well.

With a book like *The 52*, I am confident that we can sell tens of thousands of copies *just to magicians alone*. In addition, my journey through this secret world peopled by fascinating characters will transfix general readers.

Because of these magicians' high-profile online presence, social media will be a huge tool for *The 52* upon its release. Collectively, members of the club (and their friends, who will also promote the book) have enormous influence online—a reach of over one million people across multiple platforms (Ramsay alone has 250,000 YouTube subscribers, 75,000 Instagram followers, and 27,000 Facebook likes).

Ramsay believes he will get Penn Jillette to promote the book to his 2 million Twitter followers. Additionally, I recently interviewed and spent time with Dynamo—the U.K.'s most famous magician, who boasts over 2.3 million Twitter followers; whose television series, *Magician Impossible*, grabbed 20 million viewers over four seasons; and whose 2016 stage-show tour sold 500,000 tickets. A close friend of Madison and Laura, he said he would also read an advanced copy of the book and help with publicity. David Blaine and Derren Brown (from the U.K.), both close friends of Madison, have over 3 million Twitter followers combined, and will also likely promote the book. Ramsay has also befriended two famous magic YouTubers from Italy whose combined reach is over 750,000 people in their home country.

Adding these extremely high-profile advocates, our promotional reach on social media is over 9 million people from all over the world, the majority of whom live within the two largest

markets for books: the United States and the U.K. And everyone's following is growing exponentially over time. It's not a stretch to say that when this book comes out, their collective following will be well over *10 million people*.

Famed Hollywood cinematographer and magician Larry Fong is a member of the 52. Larry is a longtime friend of JJ Abrams (another magic geek), and was director of photography for *Lost*, *300*, *Now You See Me*, *Batman v Superman*, and *Kong: Skull Island*. Larry was on set in Canada filming 2018's *The Predator* when Madison and Laura called him with the invitation. Larry's support for the book will no doubt create buzz in the film and television industry.

Many of my main characters are also charismatic and well-spoken on camera, and are ready and willing to do anything to help advocate for the book, including appearing—and performing!—on television and at events and book readings, on top of harnessing their huge online followings and collaborating on ideas for marketing. They trust me to document their legacy, and they will be indefatigable evangelists for *The 52*.

This book will be a bestseller—no sleight of hand needed.

SAMPLE CHAPTER

Our time in Las Vegas was coming to an end and my big reveal was crumbling. I needed to improvise—to do something, *anything*, to pull off my plan. I had been setting it up for weeks. I couldn't let myself fail.

Madison and I had been in touch after hanging out in Blackpool, and we jumped on Skype-chats every few weeks to catch up. These calls usually veered into discussions of magic as an artform, and Madison's opinions on deception and other magicians, many lasting well over an hour—him talking, weaving from subject to subject; me listening, trying to understand

his sentiments and articulate my own points of view.

“I try my best to stay away from magicians,” he told me during one call. “There’s no set qualifications. As long as the spectator *believes* that you are a magician, even if you’re bad, it’s enough. It’s a strange craft. I stay away from magicians, to keep it pure. I only hang with Ramsay and Blaine and a few others. That’s it.”

He always came back to trying to find his own role in a world in which he feels out of place. Madison is obsessed with deception, but not necessarily magic. To him, they are two different things. “At one time, I had 400 to 500 tricks that I could do, that I had mastered,” he told me. “But at the end of the day there were only six of them that meant anything. I found my way to those six, and now I know, if I meet someone, those are the only six I will ever need to show them.”

But then he began to talk about me. “You just turned up and started asking questions,” he said, adding that he always respects relationships that sprout organically. It was the way in which he hoped to mold those chosen for the52. “It’s just one of those natural things.”

Madison drew in a breath and let out a puff of laughter. He was thinking of something, but I couldn’t tell what. A moment passed and then he said, “What I have enjoyed seeing most, though, is your connection to it and what you get from it—and what we get from you. That feels *real*.”

A few days after this talk, I traveled to Portsmouth, New Hampshire, a seaside town where a handful of my friends had moved after college. It’s a place I try to visit every summer—a break from New York City, where escape can be an infrequent luxury.

I thought about our conversation a lot while I was there. Madison’s words hung in the air around me, and at times, I could feel their weight in my chest. What did he mean, *get from you*? Where would this all go? I felt like swimming every day—just to shock my system. I’d drop down

to my knees in the shallows of the coast, the sun beating down on my back, and close my eyes. The undertow would pull the water out, its surface falling from my chest to my thighs just before the wave came crashing down, sending me under, throwing me to the ground.

I never brought my phone to the beach—just a book and a towel. I'd leave everything else in the car. One day, I stayed out on the sand for longer than normal, reading and sleeping. When I got back to my car, I checked my phone. Madison had sent me a text message.

"We have the 52 deck in the works, but I don't want to print it until we have a full deck, with everyone in, so that we can get each person's name on their related card. I'd love for you to be in. Would you join, and get the tattoo?"

"Holy shit," I said to myself. I didn't know how to respond. My heart raced. My fingers began to move—faster, in hindsight, than my brain could keep up.

Wow.

I don't know what to say.

Of course I'll join. It would be an honor.

I'm a little speechless, to be honest. Haha.

So, what's my new identity? Which card?

Madison responded a few minutes later: "Ha, don't think too much. Let me list the cards that aren't taken, and we can choose one. You'll be a monster of a member, thank you for being a part of it."

It was settled the next day: I would be the Two of Clubs. Madison told me that no one else, aside from Laura, knew that I was now a member. "Keep it to yourself," he said over the phone, adding that, once I got the tattoo, he would make the announcement by posting a photograph on Instagram.

But I didn't want to just get inked at a local shop in Brooklyn and reveal my induction on

social media. It didn't seem dramatic enough for what was, to me, a monumental occasion, nor did I want to waste a great opportunity to demonstrate to other members of the52 that I was worthy of the invitation—that, at my own pace, I was beginning to understand. Moreover, this was an opportunity to play off the fact that my induction was a secret, and to construct my own magic moment. My trip to Las Vegas with Jeremy and Ramsay was less than a month away, and it would be the perfect setting to showcase my reveal, and to give something back to Ramsay, who was the person who brought me into this world in the first place.

When we first met, Ramsay didn't try to impress me by drowning me in magic. In fact, he only did a few tricks for me. To him, magic shouldn't necessarily be flaunted; overdoing it could diminish the impact, but I'll never forget one instance in Blackpool where Ramsay did a trick just for me.

It was the last night of the convention and we had just eaten dinner. We made our way back to The Ruskin, a local bar that had become our de-facto hangout. By 11 p.m., some members of our group started heading back to their hotels. Many of them, including Ramsay and myself, had flights early the next morning.

After Ramsay finished the last of his beer, we stood up and headed for the stairs. Before we went up, he pulled me aside and brought out a deck of cards from his back pocket. He shuffled and started to speak.

"I want you to imagine that we are in a room much like this. There is a table in front of us and on this table is a deck of cards. We are going to select a card together." He fanned the deck. I chose a card. He motioned for me to hold it facedown in my palm—and told me to not look at it. He put the rest of the deck back into his pocket. "If you had the choice to remove red or black from the deck of cards, which would you choose?"

"Black."

“Leaving us only with?”

“Red.”

“I want you to imagine that we are going to put all the diamonds here”—he motioned to his right hand—“and the hearts here”—he motioned to his left—“and I am going to drop one of these two piles on the table. Either diamonds or hearts. You choose.”

“Diamonds.”

“Leaving us only with?”

“Hearts.”

“In the heart cards, there are number cards and picture cards. You’re going to imagine that the number cards are here”—he again gestured to his right—“and the picture cards are here”—to his left—“and you are going to toss one of these piles up into the air. Which would you choose? Numbers or pictures?”

“Pictures.”

“Imagine the picture cards leaving and, right here”—he looked up into the space above our heads—“stopping in mid-air. You have the Jack, Queen, and King levitating right in front of you, right here.” He raised his hand into the space between us. “I am going to grab two of them. Which two did I grab?”

“Jack and King.”

“Leaving only the...?”

“The Queen of Hearts.”

He nodded to the card in my hand. I turned it over. I held the Queen of Hearts. I stared at the card and smiled. He was grinning too, modestly shoving his hands into his pockets. We stood there in silence for a bit and then he said, “Let’s go,” and that was the end of it.

This moment—something that was shared between *us*, with no one else around—came

back to me when Madison and I were talking about my tattoo and the subsequent announcement. I wanted what Ramsay had shared with me to be reciprocated.

“Actually,” I told Madison over the phone, “I have something else planned—for Vegas.”

“What is it?” he asked. I could hear the amusement in his voice.

“I’m sure you’ll be the first one to hear about it as soon as it goes down,” I responded.

“But, for now, let’s keep the fact that I’m in a secret.” He didn’t say anything back, just snickered into the phone, his laugh fading into muffled static on the other end of the line.

Ramsay, Jeremy, and I were in Las Vegas for MAGIC Live, the largest magic convention in the United States. Each August, thousands of professional and amateur magicians flock to The Orleans, a fading and depressing casino a mile south of the main strip. It’s a bland and distant cousin to the flashy centerpieces of Las Vegas proper. Bits and pieces of its central theme—that of New Orleans, or at least the lifestyle associated with the slouchy wetness of the Gulf states—peppered its game-room floor, and all the magicians invariably gathered at The Alligator Bar for drinks and chatter. The true convention, however, was upstairs in the event hall—endless tables of gimmicks and props and how-to manuals, vendors shouting for your attention, hawking their latest release. *Have you seen this one? Come close! I’ll show you something! It kills!*

But none of us had bought tickets. Ramsay and the guys treated the convention like a social event, not a magical flea market. Surrounded by an army of slot machines and horseshoe-shaped blackjack tables, with corset-clad waitresses waiting at the bar to pick up a fresh round of drinks, the little reptile-themed lounge would more or less be our home for the duration of the trip. We were scheduled to be there for four days, so I figured that I had plenty of time to pull off my scheme.

My plan was to lure Ramsay to the nearest tattoo shop, under the pretense of touching up some ink I already had. Once in the shop, I would perform a trick for the tattoo artist and, after fooling the shopkeeper, turn to Ramsay and divulge that Madison had made me a member of the 52. The trick would use cards, integrating the Two of Clubs, and the reveal would not really be about the shopkeeper at all—but about Ramsay and what we now shared.

I had planned to perform Angle Zero (known widely as Angle Z), an effect that Madison had invented. It was his claim to fame—a trick that has been touted as one of the most influential card routines of the past decade, something that solidified Madison's place in the hierarchy of magic's elite creators and further proved that he really was a mad genius when it came to deception, illusion, and mystery. Shortly after its release in 2007, David Blaine started performing it on television.

The trick itself was relatively simple—no intense sleight of hand needed—but the impact it had on spectators was extraordinary. I felt it necessary, for such a special moment, to pay homage to Madison's influence—the trick he invented, the group he created, and the acceptance he had bestowed upon me. From there—*buzz, buzz*—I would get my ink and it would be official. Simple enough, right?

It was a shoddy plan, though. For one, the tattoos I already had didn't need touching up (I had only three, the latest being the one I had gotten with Ramsay in Blackpool), and, moreover, it was deathly hot outside. August in Las Vegas, with its claustrophobic bubble of flickering lights, and concrete, steel and glass, was suffocating. No one wanted to leave the casino unless they absolutely had to.

I had spent the past few days subtly dropping hints to Ramsay that we should hit up a nearby tattoo parlor. *It'll be fun....Just like Blackpool...Got anything in mind?...It's Vegas!* But he wasn't biting. He didn't have anything he wanted to get done and, moreover, he had promised

his girlfriend he would be a good boy while in Sin City: no tattoos, no gambling.

And it wasn't like we hadn't been busy. The past couple of days had been a whirlwind of activity: hitting different spots on the strip to film some projects (which included getting kicked out of the Wynn), linking up with other magicians from around the world, and finalizing the imagery for Ramsay's new signature deck.

We also hung out with Penn Jillette of Penn & Teller, who is a friend of Ramsay's. They have a residency at the Rio—within their namesake theater—and perform five days a week. He invited us to visit him before a performance, and secured us VIP seats on for that night's show.

Penn is a tall man, well over six feet, but no longer the long-haired, chubby loud-mouth that had been at the center of his brand for the past four decades. He recently lost over 100 pounds and his hair, freshly dyed a crow's black, is cut short. He is still boisterous, though, talking with an unmistakable bark and a gravelly chuckle, always at a high decibel level.

We headed towards The Monkey Room, Penn's private backstage lounge. We sat on chairs wrapped in zebra-print, and promotional posters and backstage photographs from the 1980s and 90s lined the walls. A monkey sculpture in a checkered vest and feather-stuck hat held the guest book. Little monkeys, too, acted as legs for the glass table at the center of the room, lying on their backs, using their hands and feet as supports.

Penn talked the entire time—I may have said six words during the hour we were with him—telling stories about different types of performance art that inspired him, including Billy the Mime, who is known for his socio-political themes, as well as Johnny Thompson, a legendary Polish stage magician. Penn also confided in us that he is not allowed into The Magic Circle, England's old-school (and rather out-of-date) magicians club, which was founded in 1905. To the good ol' boys, it encompasses the elite of their craft. What's strange, Penn told us, was that the Circle contacted him requesting props from some of his most famous illusions to be

showcased in their museum.

“Of course I said yes,” Penn explained. But when he asked for membership in return, they refused to let him in because, in the past, he had broken the fourth wall and revealed secrets to how some of his tricks were done. “Penn and Teller take the mystery out of magic,” said David Berglas, president of The Magic Circle, when the duo first came to prominence in the 1980s.

“I don’t give a fuck,” Penn said plainly, raising his arms in the air, shrugging. “But that shows you how convoluted and backwards some of these old-school clubs can be.”

“That’s kind of how these groups have always been, though—not moving forward with the times,” Ramsay said.

“I don’t fucking know, man. But with young guys like you,” Penn answered, “I am hoping that will change—that we can move beyond this bullshit.”

Before every show, Penn plays jazz for the crowd—he’s a skilled musician—and he had to prep for the performance. We bid him farewell, grabbed a bite to eat, and took our seats in the theater, waiting for the show to begin.

Throughout all of this non-stop action, I didn’t even come close to getting Ramsay to a tattoo shop. Now it was our last day in Vegas, and time was running out. I decided to try one last time.

“Xavier and I are going to hit up the tattoo shop in a bit,” I said to Ramsay, who had just come down from his room and grabbed a drink from the bar. “Do you want to come?”

“I don’t think I’ll have time,” he said. “I think we are going to go back to the Wynn to do some more filming—we need some more shots.”

“Oh, yeah, no problem. Let me know when you want to head out. I’ll come with you.” I tried to play it off, but inside I was panicking. At this point, my plan was on the verge of collapse.

In the month since Madison had asked me to be in the 52, I had practiced Angle Z incessantly. I would corner my roommates nearly every day, forcing them to endure the same trick over and over, gathering feedback, watching their reaction, trying to figure out ways to improve my approach and execution.

I crashed and burned more than once, but over time my performance became smoother, more refined. I started adding my own personal spin—the verbal patter, the way the spectator chooses the card, trying to heighten its impact by using a brand new, sealed deck. As I dove deeper into perfecting the trick, I gained an element of confidence amidst the intense vulnerability that goes into performing. I learned quickly that, when you're creating magic for an audience, they expect perfection—they want it to be real. After successfully doing the trick to my friend Eric at a birthday party in Brooklyn a week before my trip, I finally felt sure of myself. I knew I could pull it off.

But here I was, stewing in the stale air of a casino bar, crumpled cigarette butts piled in the ashtray in front of me, watching my plan fall apart. I started to regret my decision to make a mini-spectacle in sharing the news with Ramsay.

I realized what I needed to do: Perform the trick to Ramsay himself. The only other option was to wimp out and just share the news straight-up—no surprise, no big reveal, no magic moment. To me, that would be more devastating than flubbing an attempt at the trick. It was now or never, so I took a deep breath and got out of my chair.

“Ramsay,” I called. He was chatting with Xavier. “Come over here. I want to show you something that I've been working on.”

He walked over and I pulled a new pack of cards out of my backpack. My heart raced and my hands shook as I fumbled with the deck's cellophane wrapper, my fingers effectively turning to useless nubs. I couldn't get the thing open.

Ramsay chuckled sarcastically. “Let me know when you get that figured out, bud,” he said, turning to walk away.

“You open it, then,” I said. He took the deck from me, tore the wrapper off, and sliced through the adhesive seal with his finger. He handed the deck back to me and I took the cards out of the box. Jeremy watched from behind Ramsay, hands on his hips, a smile curling on his face.

Ramsay hiked up the sagging waist of his jeans, adjusted his baseball cap, and waited for me to begin. My heart lodged itself in my throat, and I wasn’t sure words could make it past its dense pulse.

I did a quick false shuffle while I tried to gain composure—a maneuver where you cut the deck twice, which looks genuine, but really reorganizes the deck back to its original order. This was a crucial element of my variation of Angle Z going off without a hitch.

“So, what I’m going to have you do is just point to a card,” I said, fanning out the deck face down in a straight line, horizontally, stretching them out like a ribbon as my hands moved apart. Ramsay pointed to one near the middle.

“That one?” I said, dropping the left half of the deck. The card he pointed to jutted out from the stack still in my right hand, its edge visibly protruding from the rest of the cards. Ramsay nodded.

“Let’s have a look,” I said. I squared up the stack in my right hand and turned it over to reveal the card Ramsay had chosen.

“The Two of Clubs,” I said. “Good choice. Now, let’s take the card you chose”—I pulled it from the deck, held it in my right hand, its face in Ramsay’s direction, and placed the rest of the cards on a table next to us—“and just....” I trailed off as I ripped the top-right corner off the card, a foot away from Ramsay’s face. He smiled as I did it. He knew that I was performing Angle Z,

but he seemed thrilled—he had never seen it done with a sealed deck before.

Before I tore the corner completely off, having it pinched between my thumb and forefinger, the larger chunk dangling below, I had Ramsay tug on the card, ripping the last portion himself. This added detail, a way for the spectator to be physically involved in the trick, was a necessity by Madison's standards. If a spectator can participate in such a distinct way, the trick becomes that much more impossible. Now he was holding the larger portion of the card, with the torn piece still in my hand.

"Watch," I said, slowly opening my right hand, which held the torn piece. I went from pinkie to index, lifting each finger slowly, one by one. But when my hand was completely open, there was nothing in there. The piece had disappeared.

"Check your back pocket," I said.

"No!" Ramsay shouted, smiling, reaching into his pocket. He pulled out the ripped corner. "Ah, man," he said laughing.

"Check it," I told him. "Make sure it fits—that it's from the same card." He brought the two pieces together. The edges from the tear lined up perfectly.

"That was really good, man," he said. "You got me. I'm impressed."

"But here's the thing," I said, holding my hand out. "Let me see the piece." He placed it into my hand, face-up, the Two and the Club symbol, the card's index, visible to us. "This is a special card." I paused and looked up at him. "Because this is *me* now. I'm the Two of Clubs. I'm in."

His eyes widened and he threw his right hand over his open mouth. "No way! You're in?!"

I smiled and nodded. "Yeah, man. Madison asked me to be in about a month ago. It's been hard, holding on so long to tell you." He opened his arms and I walked into him. We embraced each other for a moment and then he pulled away. "I'm really glad you're in. I can't

believe it! Ian—in the52! This is going to be great!”

It didn't matter that Ramsay knew how the trick is done. It was more so my ability to execute it in a new and interesting way—using a sealed deck—that made it my own, and to do so with the explicit purpose of revealing I was in the52. Like all the other members, I had showcased and tried to continually prove that I, too, could bring magic forward in a new way, even if that moment was only shared by two people. The purpose of magic is not to be the biggest or the best or the most technical all the time, but rather the most fitting for the situation at hand. It is here that a magic moment is found. And, in some way, the spontaneity of my performance—doing the trick to Ramsay directly rather than the tattoo artist—gave more weight to the emotional connection that I wanted to build at this pivotal moment.

As we sat down at a nearby table, I thought back to what Ramsay and Madison and all the guys had been trying to explain to me for the past year. I finally understood the gravity of a magic moment—one of astonishment, an experience layered in psychological and emotional revelations. The purpose of a trick isn't merely to fool the spectator, but to make them feel something they have not yet felt, and to give them a memory and an experience they can carry around with them. It was a turning point in our friendship and my place in the magic community. As I looked over at Ramsay, who was still grinning, I knew that this would be something he would never forget.

“So, let's hit up that tattoo shop,” I said. Ramsay laughed. He realized what I had been trying to get at the past few days.

“Well, looks like we have to go now, right?”

We grabbed Jeremy and walked towards the exit. We fell into the blistering heat and headed for the nearest tattoo parlor. It was about to happen. It was going to be official—me, the newest member of the52.

CHAPTER SUMMARIES

1. Blackpool Problems

The club roared as we entered. The dance floor swelled with women in miniskirts and men in slim-cut jeans. Neon lights cut through the crowd and techno music boomed from the speakers. I followed Chris Ramsay through the pool of club-goers to the VIP section in the back of the bar. Bottles of whiskey sat in ice-buckets and decks of playing cards were stacked on the surrounding tables. Magicians were everywhere.

A once-bustling seaside tourist destination, Blackpool, England, has, over the years, fallen into despair—a bad-dream Las Vegas with multilevel casinos and flickering arcades next to boarded-up ice cream stands, abandoned fish and chip shops, and decrepit motels coated in grime and seagull shit. Despite its tawdry appearance, it has hosted the Blackpool Magic Festival for over 60 years, and, at least to me, still showcased a raucous nightlife scene. We danced, drank, and members of the 52 and other hangers-on performed magic on club-goers. I stood by and watched in amazement as they fooled the bartenders with simple illusions—garnering free shots in the process.

Just after 2 a.m., Ramsay gathered up the group and ushered us outside to move to the next bar. Ryan Tricks, a London-based magician, stumbled out with us. He wore a three-piece suit and, while chatting drunkenly with a passerby, Ramsay secretly snatched the pocket square from his suit-jacket and, surprisingly, handed it to me. It felt as if Ramsay had forced my hand—a way for him to see, with very little lead-up, what I kind of magic moment I could create with a

piece of fabric and an unwitting rube. I was the first outsider they had ever let into their world, and I needed to make a lasting first impression.

I looked around, trying to find a place to hide the handkerchief. But then what? There's nothing special about stashing a stolen pocket square somewhere random on the street. Where was the magic in that? I wasn't sure what to do. I saw a poster frame hanging on the brick wall outside of the club, next to the entrance. I walked over to it casually, trying not to arouse suspicion—looking over my shoulder as if I was about to steal something or sell drugs to a stranger. The frame was broken at one corner, cracks spidering towards its center. I tugged on its edge and slipped the handkerchief behind the glass.

As the group starting moving down the sidewalk, I stopped Ryan, put my hand on his chest where the handkerchief would've been, and pretended to throw the piece of fabric at the poster frame. He looked up and saw it behind the glass. His jaw dropped and his eyes went wide. The group started screaming and hollering, grabbing me by the shoulders and jerking me from side to side. Ryan slapped his hands to his forehead and turned around to look at Ramsay. As Ryan faced in the opposite direction, I quickly removed the handkerchief from inside the frame and balled it up in my palm.

"Ryan!" I yelled as he turned back. "Look!" I placed my hand on the glass and "pulled" the handkerchief back through to the outside. My hands jumped quickly—*pop!*—and there I was, holding Ryan's pocket square between my thumb and forefinger, the fabric swaying gently in the seaside breeze.

The riot continued.

Ramsay threw his arm around my shoulder. "Now you're thinking like a magician," he said, as we walked to the next bar.

The thing about magic conventions is that, despite their popularity with amateurs and

hobbyists, most of the dealers sell junky, stereotypical effects and props—attracting cringe-worthy customers in the process. Magicians milled about the convention, many of whom embodied the clichés associated with the profession: black polyester button-up shirts with tribal graphics on the sleeves, two sizes too big; wide-legged cargo shorts with tchotchkes and chains hanging from the belt loops; ugly haircuts and hideous necklaces. I don't think I have ever seen so many fedoras in one room in my entire life. This is the stuff, Ramsay said as we walked through the convention hall together, that the52 is trying to leave behind.

In addition to showcasing what the cool-kids of magic think is wrong with the subculture, this chapter will also explain how the business of magic works in the present day, including the booming retail industry where you can buy magic tricks online—which are invented and marketed by big-shots like Ramsay and Madison.

In magic, you can make a living not just as a performer, but as an inventor of magical effects. Jim Collins, a master carpenter and metal-worker, was Houdini's secret inventor, engineer, and right-hand-man. He helped develop his most famous illusions, including the infamous Water Torture Cell. What Jim Collins did 100 years ago is what Madison and Ramsay and several other members of the52 are doing now. All magicians, famous or not, constantly need new tricks and, if they can't invent the effects themselves, they need a place from which to purchase them. Not everyone has money or connections for a private consultant like Jim Collins (or Ramsay and Madison), which is why there are wildly profitable online retail shops that sell magic tricks.

Madison and Ramsay, and a few other members of the52, work for Ellusionist, arguably the most successful online magic retail shop in the world. Their main duty is to invent new effects for the online store, to be sold to the public (working magicians or hobbyists) either as a how-to digital download or hard-copy DVD. There are only a handful of people in the world that

hold the position of a full-time magic creator at one of the industry's top companies. These guys are two of them.

When a magician goes on Ellusionist or another online store to buy a trick, it is presented to them as a trailer video—careful not to give away the method. It's all a big tease, and many of them have high production value; quality video has become a necessity in the world of magic, both for selling products and building a personal brand online. For PYRO, a fireball-shooting device invented by Adam Wilber, general manager of Ellusionist and the guys' boss, the trailer shows him standing on a cliff at the edge of the desert. Dramatic music and graphics weave into the footage. Wilber wears aviator sunglasses and an Audi R8 roars by. "You want to be a superhero?" he says, pointing to the camera. "This is PYRO." That trailer racked up more than 1.5 million views in its first six months, and the product posted nearly \$4 million in sales.

During a weekend chock-full of shenanigans and extraordinary tricks, mostly performed for one another's benefit, I get a tattoo with the guys, meet Madison and Laura for the first time, and witness Shin Lim, winner of the 2015 FISM World Championships of Magic (basically the Olympics for magicians), get inducted into the52—ink and all.

2. The Invitation

"Magic is a vessel for something bigger, in a way," Daniel Madison told me over the phone. Spring had just hit New York City, and this was the first time Madison and I had spoken since my trip to Blackpool. Our conversation veered into how he sometimes feels out of place in the context of magic. "I've always been trying to be a performance artist, more than anything else," he told me. "David Blaine did it. I think that's why he and I get each other, because of that

one thing.” I knew that he and Blaine were close, but hearing him speak about one of magic’s most iconic figures made me feel like I was in on a secret. “He did the street magic specials to make enough money so he could do the performance art,” he continued. “*Frozen in Time* and *Vertigo*. To get to that level he had to do the magic thing.”

I became obsessed with magic after going to Blackpool. I read everything I could about the artform, and also started learning sleight of hand moves and other tricks, practicing them on my roommates and friends. By midsummer I was becoming fluid with a deck of cards, and I understood more thoroughly the psychology of effects and the nuances of magic. I was now able to reverse-engineer tricks, see how methods could be applied, and began to hold a stronger grasp of deception overall. After watching Madison’s instructional videos, I would prop my laptop up on my desk, film myself and critique my movements.

Over the proceeding months, I kept in regular touch with Ramsay and Madison, and came to meet another member of the52, Xavier Spade, who lives in Queens. He became a mentor of mine, giving me homework assignments to kick-start my performance ability, and meeting up with me on occasion. In this chapter, I will give the reader more background on our main characters, dive into the logistics of magic itself (including secrets behind a few simple sleight of hand moves), and show how deception is unexpectedly seen in many areas of life.

Magic’s history will be peppered throughout, giving the reader some introductory background on the craft. I will also present unique bits that show magic’s intersection with many other areas of culture, including a top-secret CIA operation during the Cold War where the government hired a magician to develop a manual for undercover agents.

David Livingstone Smith, author of *Why We Lie*, probably said it best: *Humans are natural-born liars*. Deception—the heart and soul of magic—is *everywhere*.

During this time, word started to spread that I was getting deeper into magic. Different

members of the52 would send me messages on Instagram or Facebook, inquiring about my progress. I was starting to build a reputation—the guy who stumbled upon this world, and who couldn't keep himself from going deeper. I was becoming an accepted member of the clan, and actual *friends* with these dudes.

That's when the invitation from Madison came. No one else in the52, aside from Laura London, was aware I'd been asked to become a member. Not even Ramsay knew. It was our little secret, Madison said—for now. But I had a plan. I wanted my induction to be something special. I wanted to enter with a bang. I began plotting my scheme: practicing a difficult trick in private, using my friends and family as dummy spectators, doing my best to get my plan dialed. I was going to Vegas with Ramsay in less than a month, and it would be there that I would reveal, through magic, that I had been inducted into the52.

Not only did it have to be special, but it had to be perfect.

3. *Welcome to the Magic Castle*

"Absolutely no cameras!" bellowed the bouncer standing at the entrance of the Magic Castle in Hollywood. "No selfies, food porn, cocktail porn, belfies, Pokémon Go, Periscope, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, or anything that involves taking pictures with your phone! If you take photographs inside the Castle, we will show you the door!"

I was in Los Angeles with Jeremy Griffith, a high-ranking member of the52 who, after we met in Blackpool, invited me to check out the west coast magic scene and, afterwards, drive through the desert to Las Vegas for MAGIC Live, the largest annual convention in the United States. Ramsay was slated to join, and I was still preparing for my big reveal.

But, before heading to Sin City, our first order of business was to check out the Magic

Castle, a cornerstone of magic history in the United States. You have to wear a suit to enter, and, as I waited to get in, tightening the tie knotted around my neck, the evening sun burned through the smog hovering over downtown Los Angeles. Inside the Castle, men and women congregated around the main bar, which, dimly lit and lined in brass stools, anchored the main room. On the far side of the room was a small, two-person sofa. A painting of Dai Vernon, the godfather of modern magic (who famously fooled Houdini with a devastatingly deceptive card trick), hung above it. He was a mainstay at the Castle up until his death in 1992, at age 96.

“I grew up here,” Jeremy told me as we walked around the venue, adding that he was a member of the junior club in the late 90s. Over time he let his passion slide, but, in 2013, his father suddenly passed away. After finding out his dad used to practice magic but had kept it a secret, he got back into the craft as part of his grieving process, inventing his own sleight of hand effects and posting videos on Instagram. Jeremy has since become one of the most well-known figures of the52 (he has nearly 50,000 followers on Instagram), due primarily to his skill with a deck of cards. A purist, he does not officially perform and refuses to accept money in exchange for consultation.

Two men who lost their fathers, Jeremy and I formed a bond around this shared experience as well as my continued journey into magic. He lives with his fiancé, Kari, and he and his twin brother now run their father’s software company. In their small office in Irvine, stacks of playing cards sit atop Jeremy’s desk and, when not in meetings or on calls with clients, he can be found sitting in his chair, practicing.

Despite no longer being an official member, Jeremy (and many other young magicians) have a soft spot for the Castle and what it stands for in the world of magic. It was the place where the best minds sat down and advanced their craft, and it had supreme clout. It has since, however, become more of a tourist attraction. Membership can be paid for, and it has lost much

of its mystic appeal of yesteryear. “It’s very Disney-ish now, the way it presents magic,” Jeremy told me. Despite its old-school feel, the Castle still, however, hosts some fairly impressive shows—and courts some top-notch celebrities, including the actor Neil Patrick Harris, a lifelong magic enthusiast who is also on the board of directors.

In this chapter, I will take readers inside the establishment, showcasing a close-up performance by Paul Gertner (whose finale duped Penn and Teller on *Fool Us*), and an encounter with Howard Hamburg, one of the last faces of the old-school era. The artform’s cultural renaissance in the United States started with Harry Houdini in the early 1890s, morphed into the vaudeville era shortly thereafter, and by the 1960s solidified itself within the walls of The Magic Castle. And then came stars like Penn & Teller and David Copperfield, David Blaine and Criss Angel, standing on the shoulders of generations past. And now the52 is taking the torch.

4. *A Cheater’s Guide to the Galaxy*

The middle-aged man wore a charcoal blazer and stood in the back of the room, watching the younger magicians mingle about. He didn’t speak to anyone, just hung around with his hands in his pockets, quietly observing.

Jeremy hosts a weekly magician meetup in Los Angeles called *Monday Night Jams*, held in the backroom of Mimi’s, a local restaurant. They give up the space to emerging conjurers for the evening, allowing them to meet-and-greet and show each other new moves they have been working on. Many young magic geeks show up just to meet Jeremy—a celebrity in their subculture—but on rare occasion, a true legend makes an appearance.

“That’s David Malek,” Jeremy whispered, pointing to the back of the room. Malek was well-dressed, with tailored jeans and leather shoes, his brown hair combed back, hands still in

his pockets. He gazed around with wide, sharp eyes and a hooked nose, tapered canines creeping from behind his thin lips. After a brief introduction, Malek sat me down at a booth in an adjoining room and took out a deck of cards.

“I spent the majority of my life as a cheat,” he said, gazing up at me, smiling. Those teeth. He reminded me of a comic book villain—a man always looking for an edge, trying to find a way to deceive the guy across from him, reveling in some sort of evil plan. A legendary hustler, Malek has since fallen into the world of gambling protection, working for casinos across the country. Because of his history in illicit trades, he has, like Daniel Madison, found himself idolized in the world of magic.

“Let me show you something,” Malek said. He began to shuffle the cards in casino fashion, riffle-style, which prevents the bottom card from being seen by players. He dealt a nine-handed Texas Hold ‘Em game and punched out the flop: seven, deuce, deuce. He turned over his two hole cards: pocket Aces. He nodded for me to turn over mine: a seven and a two. I had a full house—a monster hand.

“What do you think the turn and river are going to be?” he asked, beaming that sly grin again. I just smiled at him.

“You’re right,” he said, raising his eyebrows. He dealt the remaining cards: two Aces. That gave him four of a kind, crushing my full house. He smiled again and said, “I never lose.”

In this chapter, I will take the reader through the history of magic’s overlap with card cheating and my own interactions with some of the country’s formidable gambling experts. I will talk about a range of cheating techniques, including marked decks, which have become staples in the magic community.

I will also dive into the sordid history of the book that has stood as the unlikely bible of magicians for over 100 years: *The Expert at the Card Table*. Published in 1902 under the

pseudonym S.W. Erdnase, it is one of the earliest and most thorough accounts of card table artifice, and the go-to text for almost all sleight of hand magicians (Daniel Madison has the year in which it was published tattooed on his knuckles). If you can perform all the moves in the book flawlessly, you're considered a master.

Additionally, I will tell the story of Walter Irving Scott, an elusive card cheat who once sat down with the best magicians in the world and dealt a royal flush blindfolded—and then disappeared. This stunt garnered him the title “The Phantom at the Card Table.” Madison idolizes Scott, and even dedicated his 2011 performance on *Penn and Teller: Fool Us* to the cheat, dealing a Royal Flush from a shuffled deck—blindfolded—as an homage to him. In this chapter I'll also explore my own fascination with deception and how, to the surprise of someone who grew up playing poker with my mother, much of magic is rooted in the obsession of swindlers and conmen.

5. *Angle Zero*

Jeremy started the rumor—I had nothing to do with it.

During our visit to the Magic Castle, fellow magicians asked me to perform. I told them I wasn't a magician, and that I didn't know any effects. One amateur, Lauren, was sure I was just being modest and asked Jeremy, in private, what my deal was.

“Oh, Ian? He doesn't like to show people stuff, but he's incredible,” he told her. “Maybe one day he'll show you his diagonal palm shift.” He was talking about a sleight where the performer can seamlessly remove a card from the center of the deck and either palm it (keep it in-hand but hidden from the spectator), or move it to the bottom of the deck for easy access. It's one of the more difficult sleight of hand maneuvers that magicians use. The seed he planted in

Lauren's brain continued to grow and, by the time we got to Las Vegas a week later, had solidified its roots.

"Ian, when are you going to show me your DPS?" she asked, as we hung by the bar in the casino. This was the third time she had asked me in the past two days.

"Okay, fine," I told her, pulling a deck from my pocket. "Come over here. I'll show you."

She sat on a bar stool in front of me. I took the top card off the deck with my right hand and showed it to her: the Ten of Spades. I threaded it into the middle of the deck and moved my left hand down the edge of the pack—this is where the move is supposed to happen—and then, after a moment, showed her the bottom card: the Ten of Spades.

"Wow," she said. "So smooth! You can't even tell anything is happening!"

And, in a way, she was right: Nothing was happening. Jeremy and I had set up the deck that morning. I had placed a duplicate card on the bottom, and the top card was still in the middle of the deck. I had found my own way to deceive other magicians—not through technical skill, but by using my own reputation against them. I was now viewed as something special in the industry, and I had to keep up the act.

"Do it again?" she asked. I paused, rolling my eyes slightly.

"OK, fine." I took the top card—the Eight of Hearts—and slid it into the middle of the deck. After squaring up the cards, I showed her the bottom. It was the Eight of Hearts.

"This is the only time I'm going to show you," I said to her, getting up to walk away, knowing she would never guess that I set up *two* duplicate cards in the deck. "Never again."

The night before MAGIC Live kicked off at the Orleans Hotel in Las Vegas, Jeremy and I picked up Ramsay, who had flown in from Canada, and drove through the desert from San Diego to Sin City. In this chapter we get to see more behind the scenes action. Ramsay and I hang out with Penn Jillette of Penn & Teller backstage before his show, and go to David

Copperfield's executive producer (and right-hand man) Chris Kenner's mansion for a huge party. I also reveal to Ramsay—through the performance of a magic trick called Angle Zero—that I am now a member of the52, and he takes me to a local ink shop for my tattoo. I have gone from being an observer to a member of the52's hierarchy.

"We'll need your help in finishing the deck, inducting the last few members, and planning the big event," Madison told me after I got my tattoo. "We have a lot of work to do."

6. When Young Meets Old in Buffalo

The man was shocked at Xavier's skill. He couldn't believe what he was seeing. It was as if the card just *floated* to the top of the deck.

Every October in Buffalo, New York, there is an exclusive, invite-only meet-up for advanced sleight of hand card magicians. Industry veterans come from all over the country to lecture on card deception and other sleight-based manipulations. Traditionally reserved for the good ol' boys, select young-guns are invited, including Xavier Spade. (This private gathering is an offshoot of the famed Fechter's Finger Flicking Frolic convention, known as the 4F, another hyper-exclusive meet-up founded by Eddie Fechter in 1971).

Many of the old-school guys brush off the younger set, staying true to their vision of how to perform magic, but when Alfonso, a magician in his 60s who has been performing for 40 years, saw Xavier handle a deck of cards, he stopped in his tracks. Xavier was performing Raise Rise, one of the most difficult card effects ever invented. A spectator picks a card and places it back into the deck, towards the bottom, with the card protruding out from the deck's edge. As the performer gently moves the deck upwards, the card somehow jumps up the deck until, at the end, it's sitting on top. Only very few magicians can perform this trick seamlessly,

Xavier being one of them.

“That’s...that’s amazing,” Alfonso told him, mouth agape, hands on his hips. “You young bloods are really taking things to another level, aren’t you?”

Xavier smiled and said, “Something like that, yeah.”

This chapter will further showcase the ways in which the new generation is taking the practices of their predecessors and adapting them for magic in the 21st century—and, in the process, garnering their respect. Emerging minds in magic are hot commodities for private lectures around the world, and in this chapter, I will show how many members of the 52 live jet-setting lives—with some, like Alex Pandrea, dedicating themselves to it full time. “I’m technically homeless,” he told me. “A gypsy.” In 2015, he gave lectures on sleight of hand maneuvers in more than three-dozen countries, becoming one of the most in-demand speakers in the world. Last summer, he toured Australia, New Zealand, and China. I recently went on a three-city jaunt with Pandrea in Spain, which I will dive into here. Ramsay also speaks at high-profile events, and I joined him for his lecture at the 2017 Masters of Magic, Italy’s largest magic convention.

This chapter will also give me an opportunity to further develop Xavier’s character, and dive deeper into his complex backstory: A teenage gang-member who cared for his dying mother, he says that magic saved him from a life on the streets, and helps in his continuing fight with depression.

We will also see my own presence in the magic industry evolving, as people begin to recognize me in person (even signing a few autographs and taking selfies with fans). Many are convinced that I am a talented magician. When I pointedly tell them that I only know very basic things, they are sure I am lying to them. My reputation as a member of the underground elite continues to intensify—fans now recognize me at events and ask for selfies and autographs—and this heightened visibility puts more pressure on me to try and make my own personal

impact on the magic industry. I need to start putting my knowledge of deception to *real* use.

7. The Countdown

The trick I invented is simple, but it will fool you every time.

In November, my roommate Tom briefly dated a girl named Lauren. I'd met her a few times in passing, and when Tom mentioned to her that I was learning magic and hanging out with skilled magicians, she asked if I would do some magic for her. I had been developing a trick of my own, constructed from scratch, and I thought, *Well, I guess I have to perform it sooner or later.*

We sat at the dining-room table in my Brooklyn loft and I told Lauren to pick a card—not in the traditional way where you grab one randomly, but as I fan the deck in her direction. I turned my head away, closed my eyes, pointed the cards toward her, and started fanning the deck, flashing each card's face as we ran through the stack. "Tell me when to stop," I told her.

"Stop!" Lauren called out about halfway through.

"You happy with your choice?"

"Yup!" she said, excitedly.

"Okay, great," I said, turning back, squaring up the cards and handing her the deck.

"Now shuffle for me." She mixed the cards up, cut them a few times, and handed the deck back. I turned the cards face-up and spread them out onto the table, so each card was slightly visible, tucked underneath the one that preceded it.

"Now, magic is something that relies almost exclusively on the spectator," I told her. "It's kind of hard to do a magic trick without someone on which to perform it, right?" She nodded, smiling. "And, to me, the best magic tricks try to involve the spectator as much as possible. You've already shuffled the cards, but you're going to need to do a lot more in order for me to

find your card. So,” I continued, “let me see your hand.” She held it out, palm-down, and I gently grasped onto her wrist. “Let’s see if I can get a read here—if I can find your card. It’s not something you are aware of, but people give off subconscious clues all the time.” I slowly began to move her hand over the outstretched cards.

“Um,” I said, letting go of her hand, “I couldn’t get an exact location, but I think your card is somewhere in this area.” I separated a selection of cards, just under half the deck, and discarded the rest. “Now,” I said, turning the cards face-down and spreading them out on the table, “we’re really going to find your card. But, like I said before, I need *you* to help me find it. So, I want you to pick one end to start from—we’re going to start from the edges and work our way inward to find your card.”

“That one,” she said pointing to the far end.

“OK, great. But we obviously need a way to count down so we can find your card. We’re going to need a set of numbers to help guide us—but it has to be something completely specific to you. It has to be something that only pertains to you and no one else. So, what could that be?” A calculated pause. “How about your birthday?”

“OK, yeah, my birthday,” she said. “August 5th.”

“Perfect. So, August is the eighth month,” I said, putting my finger on the card furthest to the left—the end she chose beforehand. “One, two, three,” I counted, removing eight cards in total. “And the fifth day,” I continued, removing, one at a time, five cards from the opposite end.

When I was done counting, only one card remained.

“And we have one card left,” I said. “We’ve gotten this far all because of you—nothing else.” A dramatic pause, letting the possibility of this being her card sink in. “So, for the first time, what was your card?”

A smile spread across her face. “The Eight of Hearts,” she said.

I turned over the card. “As you said, the Eight of Hearts.”

“Oh my God,” she gasped, her mouth hanging open in astonishment. “That was amazing.”

I gave her a nonchalant thank you, but in my head all I could think was, *Damn, this is good.*

I spent a few weeks trying to come up with a concept that, with my low-level of skill in the sleight of hand department, could be performed effectively, but also have a lasting impact on the spectator. It was a daunting task, and much went into the creation of this effect: the layering of spectator interaction, the risk involved in its accuracy, the pacing, the structure. Honestly, it was a lot of work for such a simple trick. But the end result was, to me, pretty incredible.

In this chapter, I will show how (with help) I invented my own effect. I will also talk about other tricks that have been invented from scratch by members of the52, especially Ramsay and Madison—focusing on the process of creating a powerful effect and the neurological details of what makes the brain susceptible to being deceived. “Magic tricks work because humans have a hardwired process of attention and awareness that is hackable,” according to neuroscientists Stephen L. Macknik and Susana Martinez-Conde. “When we understand how magic works in the mind of the spectator, we will have unveiled the neural basis of consciousness itself.”

In addition, I will dive into some of magic’s most dumbfounding effects, trick-stealing in the magic industry, and the convoluted system of intellectual property. (A huge milestone for the craft, Congress is currently debating on whether magic is a “rare and valuable artform and national treasure,” and therefore eligible for copyright protection.) But, more than anything, this chapter will act as the catalyst for one of my long-term goals: To not only invent my own trick, but release it to the public as something that can be bought—and performed—by other magicians.

8. Hello, Hollywood!

Ramsay got stuck in the middle seat. On a recent work trip to Los Angeles for an Ellusionist release, trying to make the best of his sub-par travel arrangements, he started doing some magic to the passenger sitting next to him. For one effect, he had the dude, a good-looking guy in his 30s, pick a card from the deck and sign it.

“Now, I want you to take the whole deck,” Ramsay said, handing him the cards. “And squeeze it between your hands,” he added, sandwiching them around the deck. “I’m going to try and pull your card out.” Ramsay stuck his forefinger and thumb between the guy’s palms and fished around for the card. He pulled one out. It wasn’t his card. “Oh man,” Ramsay said. “Let’s try again.” He went in again and pulled out another card. He turned it over, revealing the man’s signature.

“It took me two tries, but that was pretty slick, right?” he said. “But, do you know what would be better? If, on top of finding your card, I made the entire deck disappear.” Ramsay nodded for the guy to separate his hands. He lifted his hand off the top of the deck, revealing, instead of a pile of cards, a rectangular block of glass.

Unbeknownst to Ramsay, he had just performed for Patrick Adams, a Hollywood actor best known for his role in the television series *Suits*. The guys exchanged numbers and ended up hanging out while they were both in LA. Ramsay took him to The Magic Castle, made quick friends with him, and at the end of his trip, Patrick asked Ramsay for a favor. He wanted Ramsay to help him learn some magic and throw a talent show for his upcoming wedding with *Pretty Little Liars* actress Troian Bellisario. Patrick flew him out to LA in early December for the three-day affair, introducing him to several celebrities who have become fans.

Many young magicians are being tapped to consult for big-budget Hollywood films (Madison was recently asked to consult for *Now You See Me 3*—in classic Madison style, he declined).

"The mandate was for the executives and creatives to come up with other clever ways that heroes could escape situations or save the day, " David Kwong, who has consulted for films like *Now You See Me* and *Mission Impossible: Rogue Nation*, told me. "And that's when magicians get the call. We see things from different angles. We know how to be one, two, or three steps ahead in any situation."

When Ramsay 250,000 subscribers on YouTube, he got hit up by an American production company to develop a television show, and was raking in thousands of dollars a week in revenue from the platform, and he knew it was time to make the jump: to go out on his own. With his huge online reach, he could now also release tricks on his website, with no middle-man like Ellusionist necessary.

The first week of April, he uploaded a video on YouTube: *I Quit My Job to Make YouTube Videos*. He spoke simply about his decision—from the heart. "Today I am venturing off onto my own path, and it is with a heavy heart that I am leaving Ellusionist. I am very thankful for the opportunity they have given me. But today is the day that I work for myself. And what an incredible feeling. I am terrified, but at the same time I have never been happier."

He called me the same day. "I did it," he said. "I'm finally following my dreams."

9. Finding Madison

Madison knew the project would be provocative, but he wasn't expecting death threats.

"You'll be sorry you acted like an arrogant prick mate. Too big for your boots. Something

is coming for you, I swear. TWAT!” one text message read, coming from an unknown number. “You got a deathwish bro? People down here talking about having you killed, no joke watch your back bro,” another anonymous magic vigilante wrote.

Back in late fall, Madison went off the map. Even though I had just been inducted into the52, I barely heard from him throughout the winter. He removed himself completely from social media—his main vessel to communicate with friends and fans—and rumors circulated within the52 that he was going through some emotional turmoil. By now, I had come to realize that Madison can unexpectedly go through bouts of depression, and they came to a height in November and December, immediately after he took a short trip to New York with Ramsay. We hung out every day while he was here, and he even introduced me to David Blaine, who he has been friends with for years, and has helped consult on numerous private performances and television specials—sometimes being paid over \$50,000 in cash for his services (“He just handed me a paper bag full of money,” Madison mused, recalling one instance in Miami). But I could tell he was becoming more withdrawn, more disillusioned with the magic industry and culture.

He always found it difficult to find his place in the world of magic, and reconcile with the fact that people saw him as a magician. And with the the52—a project four years in the making—he was losing motivation. This movement he was creating weighed on him like a burden, something he was beholden to finish and oversee like some sort of king. People were looking to him to lead the way, but he was getting lost in his own head.

“What the fuck is all of this for?” he asked me over the phone around Christmas. “I don’t know, Ian. I’m just so sick of magic. What am I getting from it, anyways? I’m not a magician—I hate magicians. Is the52 even worth it? I almost want to step down and let someone else take the reins.”

I assured him that what he had created was something truly special—it was what had drawn me into this world in the first place. But he was overwhelmed. He needed to find a way to funnel his energy back into his alter ego, to get his blood pumping again.

“I’ll find a way to get back into it,” he confessed to me. “I just need time.”

Madison confided in me, and with our charismatic leader in the throngs of an existential crisis, it would be up to me to convince him to hold on, to keep his head up and to keep moving toward his vision.

He had been working on a project related to *The Expert at the Card Table*, the famed sleight of hand manual published in 1902. Despite being written under the pseudonym S.W. Erdnase, the book has since been labeled, literally, as the bible for magicians.

But Madison was never one to pray to false idols. Despite his admiration for the text, he wanted to question people’s devotion to the book. The ethos of the52 had always been to shake things up—to propel magic forward—and he wanted to shoot an arrow through the heart of the industry.

The project dropped in early March with a simple tagline: *I am Daniel Madison. And I am better than Erdnase*. That’s when the death threats came. Released through Ellusionist, it was an eight-hour-long video of Madison’s thoughts on the moves depicted in the legendary book, and how he had improved on them over the years. The backlash—even apart from the physical threats—was swift and fierce. Card-handling legends like Jason England and Derek DelGaudio (the magician profiled recently in *The New York Times Magazine*) lambasted Madison on Facebook, with DelGaudio calling him “the Milo Yiannopoulos of magic.” Memes were created, jokes were made, and Madison reveled in every second of it—using it as fuel for his fire.

As the old saying goes, any press is good press. The \$100 project, delivered in a high-quality custom box with exclusive playing cards, an annotated book, and a download code for

the eight-hour video tutorial, sold out in two days. People who bought the product raved about it. They loved Madison's take on the historic book, and the company raked in hundreds of thousands of dollars from the stunt. Even David Blaine sent his praise.

"It's better to be loved or hated than anything in the middle," Madison told me. "I was in a lull for a while, and I needed to put some fire under my ass. I needed to get back into my character and really push the envelope. What better way to do that than attack magic's bible?"

10. Origins

Madison confided in me that he was ready to tap the next round of magicians for the 52. He gave me an order: Induct the newest member myself. Nicolas, a young sleight of hand aficionado from France, was slated to be in New York City in early April. "Bring him to get the tattoo," Madison told me. I called Xavier and the three of us went to a small shop in Manhattan. Nicolas, square-jawed and well-dressed, beamed at the opportunity. "This is the best day of my life," he told us in his French accent, holding up his freshly-inked finger: the Ten of Clubs.

I sent Madison and Laura London a photograph of our exploits. She responded right away with a simple smiley-face emoji, eyes pinched to signify excitement. Madison didn't even acknowledge the message at first, but responded a day later. "Perfect. I'll see you in England soon my friend."

In this chapter, I travel to England to report on Madison's personal life in more detail: how he rose through the ranks and became a god in the underground world of magic, his mastery of sleight of hand, and his internal struggle to make his life a piece of performance art. I also meet up with Laura, tagging along to watch her perform at gigs in England's capital and get a guided tour of the Magic Circle—the U.K.'s version of the Magic Castle.

I will delve into the long and engrossing history of magic in England, including its roots in

medieval times, its fervent competition with New York City during the vaudeville era, and its current fascination with young, modern magicians. Many British members of the52—Laura included—have been stars on recent U.K.-based television shows. Last year, she even landed her first headlining theater performance, *CHEAT*, based on the story of a fictitious 19th century female card hustler.

I will also go deeper into Laura's backstory, including how she was born to a millionaire mother who squandered her fortune and left Laura a homeless high school dropout. During her teenage years, like Madison, she fell into a life of crime. She became a drug dealer, partying every night and practicing magic on the side. At 18, she found her mentor, Fay Presto, a fellow female magician, who taught her the ropes of performance. She left the life of a drug dealer behind and dedicated herself to becoming a professional magician. "Magic was the only thing that got me through it all," she told me. It would be a decade, though, before she met Daniel Madison. They become close very quickly, and he revealed his lifelong plan to her: to vanish forever, and what needed to be done to accomplish his goal — create the52. She immediately signed on.

11. The Summit

Last year's spring trip was to a sprawling villa atop the rolling hills of Hollywood. The summer jaunt was held in a massive top-floor condo in Toronto. This next adventure, though, will be on my stomping grounds: New York City.

Three times a year, the staff of Ellusionist, the majority of whom are members of the52, congregate in one city for an intense brainstorming session. All of the employees fly in from their respective corners of the globe: Boston, Canada, California, and England. In this chapter, I will

showcase the team in a close-knit private setting—something that has never before been revealed in the world of magic. The goings-on of these meetings are notoriously secretive, as they are planning the next round of illusions they'll be selling. I will show the reader the inner-workings of magic's most creative minds in action.

I'll introduce Brad Christian, owner and founder of Ellusionist, who built the company from the ground-up, piggybacking on David Blaine's early fame with how-to street magic VHS tapes. I will also dive into the backstories of other retail outlets, including theory11 and Dan & Dave (also known as the Buck Twins), which are owned and operated by young influencers in the magic community.

One emerging subset of the artform that these retail outlets have championed—specifically Dan & Dave—is cardistry. It's categorized by flourishes, flickers, riffles, and complicated shuffles—balancing kaleidoscopic shapes of cards with the fingertips, flipping cards into the air and having them fall seamlessly back into the stack, handling a deck with such ease it's as if the cards are dancing in their hands. They are hypnotizing feats of dexterity that take years of dedication and creativity to master. *Wired* wrote a feature on cardistry in 2015, calling it “the elegant, mesmerizing subculture of card juggling.” The practice has become so popular that cardistry-only meet-ups have blossomed into annual events, where the next wave of magicians are pushing the craft into new and exciting territory—the flagship of which is hosted by Dan & Dave in Los Angeles every July. Specialty decks are also produced specifically for the genre, highlighted by their colorful, zany, and symmetrical patterns.

Although this will be my first summit, it will be here that I plan to show my magic trick to the team, in hopes of them agreeing to showcase it in their online store. Inventing an effect and getting it published is a huge milestone for young magicians. I have been refining my trick for months—the moves, the presentation, the verbal patter—and this is where all my hard work

learning magic and understanding deception will matter most. This gathering will also give Madison and me time to further develop plans for the 52. By late summer, the last few members will have been added to the group, and our secret meeting—and Madison’s greatest trick—will be fast approaching.

“I’d like to start leaving a few clues, a few breadcrumbs,” Madison told me during my trip to England in early May. “I’ll leave those for summer, but I’ll need your help as we get closer and closer to the end of all this.”

12. *The Gathering*

Everyone will be there: Madison (in his own way), Ramsay, and Laura—my mentors and closest confidants during my two-year journey into this world. The rest of the deck will make their way to the capital of England, wrangled and lured by the king of the magic underground: Daniel Madison.

We’ll all come together, the best in the world—and me: Peter Turner, the mentalist who once hypnotized a roulette dealer at a British casino and scammed him for nearly £40,000; Billy Kidd, a petite Canadian female escape artist with a vintage, newsboy style, one of few women magicians to be featured on American television; Alan Rorrison, the quick-talking Scotsman, master inventor, and prop designer; Dee Christopher, a paranormalist from outside London who brought the hard-rocking goth image to the British mainstream; Troy Von Scheibner, the slick, pretty-boy of the bunch, decked out in designer clothes and expensive jewelry, probably off the set of his next British television special; Chris Dickson, the master forger who has replicated original printings of *The Expert at the Card Table* for David Blaine and Teller; Shin Lim, the FISM winner; and many more of the world’s most iconic and groundbreaking minds of magic.

When we all arrive at the gathering, whose location will be disclosed only to the52, Laura will play a video message from Madison, meant only for those in the room. They won't know it's coming. He told me it'll begin with: "If you are watching this, then it's already happened, what I've been planning all these years..." He will then reveal that he created the52 not for himself, but for the members he has curated over the years—his greatest gift to the world of magic.

It will be the most secret rendezvous that magic has ever seen, where everyone comes together as pieces of a larger whole, the cards of a now-completed deck. And it'll be where our enigmatic leader produces his greatest reveal—his last and final trick.

And now everyone will truly understand why I'm there. Me, the outsider Madison enlisted to help bring it all together, and to tell the story of how it all came to be—the Two of Clubs.