

Better Magic
Chapter One
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I've gotta be the only guy on the plane who doesn't want to land. The thought hit Tyler each time someone gave “prepare for arrival” instructions. Oakland to LAX was a short flight, but late-night travelers still needed time to rouse. Tyler had no more luck at napping than he had with delaying the landing—or the inevitable.

Cramped passengers fussed with belongings and seat belts. The mother in the center seat beside Tyler woke her little boy, half-asleep against the shuttered window. The boy grumbled, pulling on Tyler's sympathy. He had issues with family right now, too.

“I just want to make sure you aren't coming to the apartment, or Julie's apartment,” read the text from Mom. “Everyone loves you but she's got a real shot at this election. People are watching. She can't have your trouble attached to her.”

Tyler winced and pushed his head harder against his seat. *It's a suburban city council election. Nobody invests that kind of attention. Nobody cares.*

The prosecutor never charged me. They had nothing on me because I didn't do anything.

They'd been through that already. Mom didn't care. *They kicked you out of school*, she'd said. *That's enough. “Nursing student brother” shows we're a working-class family. “Expelled from university” isn't helpful. Don't bring that to your sister's door. It's best if nobody remembers you at all.*

Expelled. He still wore his Sonoma State hoodie over his jeans. *Fuck it. Only a hoodie.* Tyler pushed the thought aside and swiped from Mom's day-old message to his Discord group.

In-flight Wi-Fi seemed worth the expense to secure a ride from the airport until that effort fell short. The late hour and the pressures of early adult life meant none of his friends from high school and after could come get him. They cared, at least. More than one offered help. José offered space to crash. Dani had talked to her boss about openings in their catering gigs. Christine was all the way down at UC San Diego, but she was ready to hook him up with an Uber to José's.

Kicked out of school, career plans shot, unemployed, and technically homeless, thought Tyler, *but I've got friends.*

Touchdown felt like a door closing on his life. The thought sent his eyes rolling—he'd felt that way a dozen times in the last few weeks. The plane rolled from the runway to the terminal without delay. He figured the doors opened in record time.

His phone buzzed with an email from Sonoma State. *Now? This late?* He opened it in hopes of good news, but instead: "Dear Tyler Bonham, your appeal of outstanding housing charges has been reviewed and denied. Financial aid does not cover the charges. The remaining balance of \$1030.47 must be paid within 30 days..."

"Fuuuck," Tyler groaned. He had less than a quarter of that to his name. Then he remembered the little boy in his row, staring at him with wide eyes while his mother grimaced. "Sorry. My bad."

"Shit happens," said the kid. His mother couldn't even be mad at that one.

Passengers rose as the plane came to a stop. Tyler waited through the passing family of four, the tour group covered in Disney swag before they even got to Disneyland, and the grandmotherly woman who'd been next to him in the waiting area. She had chatted in Korean over Facetime through the wait, clearly excited about her trip.

Then came the bald, thick-shouldered guy in the rugged grey coat from the departure gate. The black satchel clutched to his chest and his unfriendly scowl might have caught attention, but Tyler mainly remembered him for the company he kept. A knockout blonde in a leather coat followed the bald guy. Her lush, casually perfect hair hung past her shoulders, while her green eyes and a grin danced with playful confidence. She seemed amused by the grump's attitude. The other two guys in the group may as well have been bodyguards.

Model? Movie star? Tyler thought. *Nah, not seated in the back. Unless that's a way to lie low.* Maybe his gloomy mood tilted his judgment, or maybe he only wanted something more pleasant to fixate on. *Damn, you're beautiful.* Then his phone hummed again.

"I'm free Friday if you're still interested. Or Saturday. Or both." The text from Carol could've meant anything if not for the winky emoji.

What the fuck? On our message thread? Tyler blinked. They hadn't been official, let alone committed. "Seeing each other," not "serious (yet)." He wasn't mad when she passed on his general upheaval or a long-distance connection. She had every right to move on. *But sending me this on accident?*

Confirmation blinked to life in another message bubble with sad emojis. "Oh no. Accident! I'm so sorry!"

"Fuck my life," Tyler grumbled. He tugged the small backpack with his laptop and overnight clothes from the overhead, ready to shuffle out into the next stupid thing, but then he remembered

the mother and kid. Neither of them could reach the overhead. He paused to help them, and then the next struggling passenger.

The jetway was more of the same: shuffling bodies, brief pauses, a few people fussing with bags they probably should've checked. Tyler weaved through the slowest traffic. The crowd thinned near the exit into the terminal.

Then the lights went out—except for the flashes of gunfire from left and right.

People screamed. Bodies rushed past. Tyler was no different from the rest, blinded by the sudden darkness and turmoil. He dove low and pushed toward the check-in desk as the only cover he'd noticed before everything went black. More than one person had that same thought, turning his instincts into bumps and more shouts.

The sudden blackout went beyond overhead lights. Nothing but the windows over the runway provided any sort of guidance, and even the terminal's exterior lights had gone out. The runway and the next terminal over might as well have been stars. On immediate memory, Tyler took a right toward the row of chairs. *Mass shooter? No, more than one. Shooter against cops? Terrorists? What the fuck?* Labels and explanations took a backseat to urgency and safety.

The gunfire continued, sporadic and mostly single shots, but someone had an automatic of some kind. Tyler only knew guns from media, gaming, and a couple curious trips to the range with friends. Mostly he understood his ignorance.

As soon as he hit the floor, he understood his mistake, too.

"Oof! Ngh! Son of a bitch," growled some struggling man inches away. A second man grunted with him, while tearing and thumping sounds warned of a struggle. The fight had to be almost on top of Tyler. Shadows in the dark and raw instinct warned that he might get stomped on if he didn't pull back, or worse.

"Uurghk! Nyet!" one man gurgled and strained. Gunshots rocked the air over Tyler on the floor, three in quick succession. Though his ears rang, Tyler heard and felt bodies collapse beside him.

Gunfire and frightened cries continued. With the barest adjustment to the shadows, Tyler took the risk of rising to his hands and knees and found a bald man in a rugged jacket lying on his side. Blood poured from three holes in his chest, probably worse beneath the jacket. *Hemorrhaging. Gotta staunch it. Hoodie.* Tyler swept it off his shoulders. School administration may have screwed him, but his instructors had been excellent.

Then the light flashed in front of his eyes—golden light, straight from letters on the page of a large book in the fallen man's hands.

“By virtue of reading this page, you are now the sole and rightful owner of this tome. It shall open only for you.” Tyler hadn’t touched the book, nor had he meant to read any of it. The book apparently decided that all on its own.

“The knowledge and wisdom of your predecessors will come in your own language.” Text burned into Tyler’s brain faster than he actually read. A list on the left page caught his attention. Letters burned in gold at the bottom of a set of names.

Elizabeth Rolfe

Nicolas Du Bois

Aisha al-Amiriyah

Li Shujing

Diego de Aguirre

Diana Alice Stewart

Tyler Bonham

The last appeared as he read, one letter after another. His own name.

Gunshots continued. The glowing book made for a big gold beacon amid the shadows and cheap imitation leather chairs. That same light at least gave Tyler a look at the two men and the blood pooling around them both. One had been shot three times through the chest. The other had a knife embedded in his throat.

No, not a knife, Tyler realized. A dagger. Like at the RenFaire, except real. Really real. Holy shit.

Tyler put that thought aside. Both of these guys beyond his ability to help. He could go back to thinking about himself.

“Find him! Go!” someone shouted. Gunfire rattled through the terminal again. People screamed and fled down the main hall. Someone at the jetway to Tyler’s plane pulled the door shut. Others hid behind pillars, terminal counters, or shitty chairs that wouldn’t stop a bullet. Tyler’s grey t-shirt and jeans wouldn’t protect him, nor would the contents of his backpack.

“Out of the—aagh! Crawford, help, she’s—hurrk!” The battle continued, with Tyler right beside the only bright light in the terminal.

Tyler reached out to shut the book and hopefully hide. More words leapt into his mind.

This book contains the secrets of magic, real and true, with all the power and pleasures it can bring. Claim these secrets without hesitation or doubt, Tyler Bonham. They are yours.

“Dope.” Tyler had no time to argue with a glowing book. He slammed it shut.

Turning away, Tyler expected his night vision would be shot—except, no, he saw without glare. He didn’t see *well*, but the book should’ve made things worse. Instead, it was like his eyes had kept right on adjusting. Tyler spotted a woman crouched behind a broad support column: small, older, frightened. The grandmother at the departure gate. She clutched her ankle as if she’d been knocked down in the rush to escape.

“Help. Someone help,” she called out. She was hardly the only one.

The gunfire paused. Tyler could make it to somewhere safer if he hauled ass. Instead, he forgot the book and darted straight for the grandmother. Luckily, her stance made her easy to scoop up. “I’ve got you,” he huffed, and then growled with the effort of lifting her. Though healthy and young, Tyler didn’t work out regularly, let alone pick up entire human beings as a habit. Adrenaline made up the difference. She had the wits to hold on to him and lift her legs.

“Shit! Get that—ack!” Gunfire rang out again, ended with another shriek.

Running with another person in his arms took all of Tyler’s focus. He expected to faceplant with every step. The hall had fewer windows and therefore even less light than the gates, but at least it was open space. He could navigate by grades of shadow.

His passenger pointed, urging him left as they reached the next waiting area. “There! There!”

Tyler saw a corner with figures ducked in wait. Most people continued down the hall. The presence of others made sense once he could make out an airline uniform and a jumpsuit.

“Here! We’ve got an emergency exit here.” A gate agent and her companion reached out to help the grandmother. “We’ve got a wheelchair. Let’s go.”

“Thank you,” said the grandmother. “Thank you.”

“How many others are back there?” asked the guy with the reflective vest and radio.

“I dunno, a bunch. Where are the other cops?” asked Tyler.

“Fuck if I know. I’m a custodian. I’m waiting on the cops, too. My radio’s dead, phone’s dead, everything is dead!”

The world outside the windows seemed fine, though terribly lacking for vehicles with flashing blue lights. In the corner of his eye, Tyler saw the gate agent wheel the grandmother through the door of a jetway. Others must have taken the same route.

“Shit.” Tyler considered, if only for a second, going back for someone else. It was a silly thought. He hadn’t grown more muscles in the last twenty seconds, let alone body armor. He was a bystander in someone else’s action movie.

“Yo, we gotta head out,” said the custodian, and then something slammed him against the wall. The custodian let out an “Oof!” before another blow across the head sent him the floor. A strong hand snatched Tyler by the strap of his backpack and flung him onto his back.

Someone in dark clothes stepped over him. Tyler made out a pale face, long white hair, a long dark coat, and a submachinegun. “You have the book,” he said with a heavy European accent. “Give it to me. Now.”

“What the...? Oh shit.” Tyler remembered the book. “I don’t have it.”

“I saw you take it,” said the gunman. “You’re young. I don’t know you. Stupid mortal. No one will miss you when you are dead. Where is it?”

“Pierre, no! Help—arrgh!” shouted someone back at the gate. The gunman looked over his shoulder.

Tyler swatted the gun out of the way and kicked hard at the gunman’s knee. He had no plan besides fighting for his life and reached out for a weapon on pure instinct. Solid, heavy weight filled Tyler’s hand. He slammed the big book into the gunman’s head with a golden flash.

The gunman keeled over like so much sudden dead weight. Tyler thought the gun would go off in the man’s collapse, but that terror passed with no such disaster. His opponent dropped without a fight—and without a head.

“Oh, what the *fuck*?” Tyler scrambled back. The gunman crumbled to ashes within his long coat.

“That is a new trick to me, too,” said another newcomer, this one with a distinctly French accent. His suit bore the slick sheen of bloodstains, and so did his sword—an actual, Renaissance-style dueling blade with a fancy basket hilt, pointed at Tyler’s face. “Magic is magic, I suppose. That book has a great deal of magic. And it doesn’t belong to you.”

“That’s not what the book says.” Tyler regretted it as soon as he spoke, but he didn’t know what else to tell a lunatic with a sword... or the next figure behind him in the parade of assholes. With so little light, Tyler saw only a silhouette of flat hair, a coat, and both hands up and together with the glint of metal at chest level.

“What do you mean?” asked the Frenchman.

“He opened it.” The woman behind the Frenchman sounded more like a local, mostly unshaken by all this chaos. Darkness obscured her face, but Tyler saw the pistol in her hands... pointed at the Frenchman. “You were busy with Haruko when the runner went down, and then you ran.”

The guy kept his sword up toward Tyler, but he looked over his shoulder. “Nicole, wait. It’s not what it looks like!”

“Sure, Pierre.” She shot him in both legs. Pierre went down with a cry of pain, defenseless as Nicole stomped on his sword hard enough to bend the blade against the floor. “How much better is your side deal? Do you have a back-up team nearby, too?” She snapped the gun up toward Tyler without taking her eyes off Pierre and said, “Don’t move.”

More gunshots went off at the gate—fewer than before, but someone still fought someone. Tyler wanted to dive for cover or flee. The gun pointed right at him precluded those ideas.

“Agh, fuck,” Pierre hissed. “You idiot. I could cut you in.”

“If you were going to do that, you’d have said something before you stabbed us in the back,” said Nicole. “You know I wouldn’t go back on a job, and you know I’d never work for Sorrentino and his fucking vampires.”

“Nicole.” Pierre raised one hand in a gesture to stop. She put a bullet through that, too. He twisted and curled away from her in pain.

“You’re lucky I owe your aunt a favor,” said Nicole. “Now we’re even. You should crawl out of LA while you’re still able.” Then she turned her attention to Tyler. He still couldn’t see well enough to remember her face after this if he got out alive, but she was blonde and serious. “Come with me and you might live through this. Run off on your own and you’re definitely dead before dawn. How’s that sound?”

“Sounds like you’d probably shoot me if I turned you down,” said Tyler.

“Less than others would shoot you,” said Nicole. “I’d rather not hurt you at all. You just got off a flight, right? Anyone waiting on you? Have you got a car here?”

Frustration put a rumble in Tyler’s breath. He couldn’t think of a useful lie. “Neither.”

Another gunshot boomed from the gate, answered by a three-round burst. Nicole pointed across the terminal. “That way. The access door by the bagel shop. Go.”

Tyler obeyed. He cringed at the next burst of gunfire, but it apparently wasn’t for him. The bagel shop was as dark and deserted as everywhere else in the terminal. He didn’t expect Nicole’s chosen door to budge until she twisted the handle with a faint silver glow around her wrist and the words, “Open up,” under her breath. He heard tumblers turn.

Their new hallway was much thinner than the terminal, without windows and exterior light. Tyler couldn’t see a damn thing. “Left,” Nicole directed. “Straight ahead. You’ll be fine.”

“How can you see?” he asked.

“Magic.” Sarcasm and sincerity seemed equally likely. “You military? Sports?”

“No. Why?”

“You’re keeping your cool. You move like you’ve got some sense. Where’s that come from?”

Tyler snorted. “Nursing.” He didn’t add the more accurate “*almost*” to that.

“Good to know.”

They continued another dozen yards, perhaps two. “Turn right. It’s another hallway. Office spaces.” They came to one open window, though it only looked out over lined-up planes and lights meant for the runway. The other side of the hallway held the offices Nicole identified. No one occupied them at this hour, with or without a bunch of crazies shooting up the terminal.

Nicole still had her gun pointed at Tyler, but kept it close to her body. It had the look of real training rather than movie poses. “Keep your voice down. Wallet and phone. Hold them out together. No stunts.”

“So now you’re mugging me?” Tyler asked.

“It’s only insurance. I don’t want you running off or getting stupid. I’m not interested in shooting you, or I’d have done it already.”

Obviously, she still could. Tyler pulled the wallet and phone from his back pockets. She made him hold both out with his arm fully extended, deterring stunts he wasn’t about to try. Nicole pocketed the phone and flipped his wallet open for a glance. “Nice to meet you, Tyler Bonham.”

“Uh-huh.”

“What’s in the backpack?”

“My laptop and a couple days’ clothes in case they lose my luggage.”

“Smart. Got a girlfriend? Family?” She tucked his wallet and phone in her jacket and lowered the gun, but didn’t put it away.

“Why would I tell you that?”

“It’s to remind you of more reasons not to get stupid.” That made some sense to Tyler, but he only glanced away. She noticed. “Oh. Huh. You *seem* like the friends-and-family type.”

“It’s been a bad month and a bad week.” He glanced at her gun. “Bad night, too.”

“Then let’s focus on here and now. That’s a magic book you’re carrying and people have died over it. You understand all that, right? Have you gotten over any denial?”

“The book opened on its own and it glows, and I slapped a guy’s head into dust with it. I caught on,” he answered.

“It glowed?” She let that drop. “You’ve never had any experience with magic before? No witches in the family, never met a werewolf or seen a ghost? Didn’t think magic was real until today?”

“I never even took horoscopes seriously.”

“They’re kinda dumb,” Nicole conceded. “I was hired with Pierre back there and a couple others to deliver that book to someone. Pierre and another on our team sold us out to a different buyer, and I think there was a whole separate set of competition waiting for us here, too. That makes it a three-way mess at least. The one non-traitor on my team spotted trouble. I don’t know who panicked, but nobody left standing is on my side. Whoever else wants that book will kill you for it. Understand?”

“Uh-huh. So does that make you the good guy here?” asked Tyler.

“No good guys. Maybe you, since you saved that lady from the gunfight. But I’m less bad than they are.” She turned her head back, drawing his attention to a new detail: the shooting had stopped. Then she gestured onward down the hallway. “We need to get out of here.”

“You don’t know who they are, but you’re less bad?”

“I’d never start a fight in a fucking airport. This isn’t even my gun. Like I said, somebody panicked, or they’re psychotic. The other sides seems like mixed teams. The one you dusted is definitely a vampire, and also a raging asshole. No reason to feel bad about him. The Pope would high-five you for that. You did the world a favor.”

They passed a few doors. Tyler’s night vision got a little better; he could almost make out labels. As they came to an office, they heard a rattle and saw moving shadows farther ahead. Someone fought to open up sliding glass doors left dead with the power outage.

“Shit. If that’s not bad guys, it’s cops. Still bad.” Nicole turned to the nearest office door. Again, she murmured, “Open up,” before twisting the knob as if she’d inserted a key. She nodded Tyler inside and then pulled the door closed behind them, careful not to make noise. The gun stayed in her other hand while she listened for trouble, but at least she didn’t point it at him.

The dark office held a nice desk with a computer, chairs to either side, and art on the walls. A framed motivational poster of a cat in a tree encouraged him to Hang In There. A single window looked out onto the runway. No flights were coming or going with such trouble in the terminal, but at least the runway and the buildings on the other side were all lit up.

“How are you getting through these doors? Shouldn’t they be locked?” Tyler whispered.

“My key opens most doors. Problem is, they won’t lock again.”

“They’re bound to search in here.”

“Yeah. I don’t want to go out the window, but I don’t like our chances of talking our way through this. Fighting seems even dumber.”

Tyler couldn’t fault her there. He didn’t want to deal with cops, either—especially after the last month. The only other exit was a two-story drop onto the tarmac below. They were still up on the

concourse level of the airport. Though dim and distant, the light from the window illuminated just enough of Nicole's face for recognition.

"Okay, level with me. Have you—what?" she asked.

"We were on the same flight," he told the knockout from the plane. "Oakland to LA. I saw you in the terminal, and getting off again." Now that they'd met, he was slightly less enamored.

"Yeah, I guess so," she said. "Have you got any weird family superstitions or legends? Distant relatives with a castle in Europe? Fortune-teller godmother? Anything like that?"

"No. Is that how magic works?"

"Not really. The book reacted to you but not any of us. You saw it glow. I didn't. I'm trying to figure out why. You said you're a stranger to this. Could you have any connection like family?"

"I'm nobody."

"Why were you on that flight?"

"Why would I tell you about my life?"

"Because I'm the one person in this mess who didn't try to hurt you. I didn't hurt anyone except the bad guys. Worse guys," she corrected. "I don't blame you, but we don't have many options."

"I was a couple months from finishing my nursing degree and my roommate got caught dealing drugs," said Tyler. "Cops and the prosecutor wanted to pin it on me, too, but they couldn't. Campus admins threw me out of school. Now even my family wants me at arm's length."

"Fuck." Nicole blinked in something near common sympathy—and again in frustration. "That doesn't tell me anything. Fuck."

"Before, with your backstabber guy, you said I opened the book," said Tyler. "I hadn't actually touched it. You didn't see it glow, but you saw it open. Is that weird? Did it not open for you?"

"It did, but it was blank." Nicole waved at it. "We got hired to pick that thing up from a fancy estate auction in New York two weeks ago—two weeks, four fights, a car chase, and a police manhunt in Illinois ago, actually. We knew it might be magical and maybe hot, but not like this."

"Hired by who?" asked Tyler.

Nicole considered her words. "He's an occult collector. I've worked for him before. He claims he didn't know the job would get this rough, but he hired a retrieval team in the first place, so that's already a question." A crash echoed down the hallway, turning her toward the door. Shouts followed. Police—or someone—seemed intent on coming through. "Shit. Okay. You looked like you could read it. What's it say?"

Tyler set the book on the desk to open to the first page. Many more pages flipped all on their own.

The heading read, “Do Not Disturb” in dimly-glowing red letters. Beneath the glow, Tyler could make out other words in black as if written in earlier script: “Privacidad,” and characters in Chinese. His fluencies stopped at English and middling high school Spanish, but he felt sure the older headings shared the same general sentiment.

Once again, he read *fast*.

“Establishes a ward of privacy within a defined space. Every door and window must be closed or covered. Those outside will ignore and even forget the space while this spell is active.” The text went on, but as if guiding him, some lines dimmed while others at the bottom shined brighter. “Open your hand toward each entrance, then pull away as your fingers close as if grasping air. ‘Shh’ for three seconds. Focus.”

Tyler followed the instructions. Faintly glowing red runes appeared along the corners of the walls, floor, and ceiling.

“Shit.” Nicole stepped back from the door and raised her gun, but caught on within the next breath. “Oh. What are you doing?”

“It’s privacy magic. The book opened right to this page. It says anyone outside will ignore the door and the room.”

Her eyes widened, but not in doubt or second-guessing. “Does it say how long? Or how strong the spell is?”

“I haven’t even...” The glow shifted from one paragraph to another. Tyler read in a low voice: “At its simplest, this effect lasts no more than ten minutes. Investment will naturally extend the effect to sunrise or sunset. Intensity will likewise—”

“Hush,” Nicole interrupted. Heavy footsteps approached, and then another crash. Seconds later, the sounds repeated, this time close enough to rattle the motivational painting on the wall.

“Clear,” someone announced curtly.

“Go. Next.”

The two-dimensional cat hung on as the footsteps came closer... and moved past. The next crash came from the other side of their office.

“Clear.”

“Okay. Keep going. Main terminal, let’s go!” Stomping boots followed.

“That happened?” Tyler looked from Nicole to the book. “Any of this happened?”

“Take the win. It’s only for the moment.” Nicole turned back to Tyler and the book. “It opened to that page on its own?”

“Yeah. It opened on its own the first time, too.”

“What did it say then?”

Tyler closed the book and opened it again to the very front. This time, the book cooperated. “By virtue of reading this page,” he read out loud, “you are now—”

“—the sole owner of this tome,” Nicole joined him, staring at the page. “It shall open only for...? Shit. I can read this part now.”

“Can you read the names, too?”

“Yeah. That last name, Stewart—we got this from her estate sale. Fancy private event in New York. She owned a couple blocks of Harlem.” Nicole frowned. “You never had time to write in it, either. I saw you. Okay, close it.”

“Okay?” He did. Nicole glanced at him as if to ask permission, but she didn’t wait. The tug of her fingers did no good. She couldn’t open the book. “Wow. Alright. Guess that settles that. Damn.”

“Settles what?”

“The book. You. I guess, anyway.” Nicole shook her head. “If the book says you’re the owner, I guess that’s between you and Ashton—my client,” she corrected.

“Is that better?” Tyler asked dubiously.

“We were hired to *buy* this thing at that auction, not steal it or kill for it. Ashton paid like this was San Francisco real estate rather than taking a dirtier option. I don’t know how he’ll will take this, but he won’t hurt you. Everyone else is a different story.”

“Great,” Tyler muttered.

“I’m saying we can work together,” said Nicole. “I don’t think you’re trying to steal this book, and you don’t have to worry about me hurting or robbing you.”

“Uh-huh.”

“It’s what I’ve got. What else does the book say?”

“I haven’t read much. Everything shows up in English, though I can see print in other languages beneath that. If it’s translating for me... maybe that’s why it flips pages on its own? Maybe it goes beyond translation?”

“What, like a search function? Can you find a spell to teleport us out of here?”

“Hrm.” Tyler knew enough geek discourse to think of all the ways that could go wrong. He also didn’t have a better idea, and the book did respond to him. He reached for a page and said, “Teleport? Escape?”

Nothing happened.

“Okay. Can we sneak out of here?” he asked the book. “What do I need to know?”

Pages flew once again, bringing him closer to the front of the book—though not the start. In the flash of pages, Tyler saw a mix of full paragraphs, lines in verse, doodles, and a couple maps. All of it had been done by hand, and clearly not the same one. The flutter stopped at pages of neat script like journal entries.

“19 January: Guiscard wants my help against the Aumonts,” read the first text to catch his eye. “A battle seems certain. He knows my magic is stronger than his. I told him that is because I follow comfort and joy, not conquest and power. I reminded him that all of my great feats were consensual and private. I would feed all the hungry and cure every sickness if I could work such blatant wonders, but I cannot. I told him magic is similarly not meant for calamity and battle. He scoffed and asked if the pleasure of harming his enemies was not good enough. I believe he will try to take the book. We must leave.”

“28 January: We escaped into the mountains with Guiscard’s men and a blizzard upon us. Robert found an abandoned hovel for shelter as the snows set in. He and William made love to me for four days and nights, sometimes together, sometimes in turns.” Tyler blinked. That seemed like a wild turn, but he *knew* Elizabeth—a detail he also simply knew—told the truth without exaggeration. Some echo of her pleasure stirred within him.

“My magic sustained our bodies and their virility. Their passion sustained my magic. They ravished and fucked me to such pleasure that I fear I was a poor lover in return, but they only thanked me and pleased me more. They gave selflessly and loved the giving. My spells preserved us through the storm without food or natural warmth. The spell even sustained our animals. William and Robert are stronger now, happier and even more appealing. We are more bonded than ever. It was wonderful. I almost wish the blizzard had lasted longer, but the snows have broken. We must go.”

She had more to say about Robert, William, and their blizzard later in the book. Much more. Somehow, Tyler knew that. “Um.”

“Anything?” asked Nicole.

Tyler blinked out of it. “No escape spell. Sorry, it’s—this part is more like a journal than instructions. It talks about magic being private and, um, personal. Says it’s not about fighting or crazy displays.”

“Huh. Could’ve fooled me, given the things I’ve seen.”

“I guess it’s a matter of scale?” Tyler considered, looking at the lead entry again. “Someone wanted the writer’s help in a fight. She said magic wasn’t meant for that. I don’t get an impression of pacifism, just... priority, I guess. Purpose.”

His eye fell across a random sentence of a later entry: “Magic is safety and practical aid, but it *thrives* in pleasure, beauty, and intimacy. That is why it attracts such things.”

Tyler glanced at Nicole again and then mindfully looked back to the book.

If she noticed, she didn’t react. “Keep looking, I guess.” She put her ear to the door to listen—and then looked back as devices chirped and the AC blew. The office lights didn’t turn on, but clearly power was back. “Not sure that’s an improvement. It might be harder to get out now.”

They heard the hum of cell phones in her pocket. Nicole pulled her own for a glance. “Yep. Reception’s back, too. Not that it helps.”

“Nobody you can call, huh?” asked Tyler.

“Right now, I can’t trust anyone.” Her frown didn’t seem meant to specify Tyler, but she didn’t exactly exclude him—or return his phone. She listened at the door again.

Tyler bit back his own sentiments about trust. Her argument still held: other people in this mix seemed more likely to hurt him, and it wasn’t like he knew what he was doing.

Right. All I’ve got is this book of literal magic. Come on, come on, there’s gotta be something in here that helps. He turned another page—or, as it turned out, a couple hundred pages after they were done flapping right to left. Characters turned to Chinese, though the book translated Li Shujing’s words in his mind.

“The storm rages, but my spell keeps the ship safe... with the captain’s head between my thighs as I write.” Delicious, naughty thrills came through the text, but also an underlying warmth. This was illicit, yet harmless—in fact, something good. Tyler understood other context, too: the ship was strained, the storm more like a typhoon... but this was her focus.

“He favors me with hot lips and a feather tongue. He is good at this, and grateful. I think of my first days of magic, of doubt and guilt and shame... and why? They have all been willing. All have been grateful. I am tempted to indulge most of the crew before we reach the mainland.”

She did. Tyler knew she did.

“Oh my god,” he muttered. *Yes, I’m totally down with horny journals and spicy details—later,* he thought. Tyler threw another wary, increasingly self-conscious glance at the dangerous stranger with the gun and hoped he could find something more useful in this book.

Pages flew. He came to clear, organized text in English written with a modern hand. Diana Stewart. American. Confident, wise, warm, Black, beautiful, encouraging—as if he heard her boosting him, telling him he had this... when her hand only left him simple, straightforward instructions.

“Honest Charm: As long as we’re playing it straight, there’s nothing wrong with hitting fast-forward. This spell projects a sincere impression of your character and intent toward the subject. You’ll burn through the standoffs and side-eyes of a first meeting. You may even turn an enemy into a friend—as long as you actually want to be friends! Do not use this if you intend harm or deception! They’ll know, and then you’re just being a louder and clearer asshole.

“This is one of the simplest and subtlest spells in the book. Clear your throat three times in quick succession (mhm mhm mhm!), look at your subject, and throw them a smile. Just a normal smile. Intent will do the rest. Honesty is all the follow-through you need.”

“*Mhm mhm mhm.*” Tyler cleared his throat as if the suggestion was a subconscious prompt, not even thinking about it until he did it—and offered Nicole a soft smile on reflex, as if to say he meant nothing by the noise.

She blinked. Then he blinked, too. “Wait,” he began.

“You’re really who you say you are,” she said. “No bullshit.”

“How would—wait, hold on. I used magic. Again. Accident this time, I think.”

“Yeah, you did.” She kept scrutinizing him. “That’s... strange. It doesn’t feel like anything, but now that you say it, I can tell.”

“I don’t...” Tyler frowned at the book. *How much good is “charm” magic if you tell someone you’re charming them, and how honest are you if you don’t?*

Diana Stewart’s block of text conveyed a vague implication of “trust me.” It seemed sincere, too... even if that was one more spiral path to Tyler. That sense of reassurance still held.

“No, it’s fine. I get it.” Nicole seemed more interested in Tyler and what he’d done than the implications. She didn’t seem upset, either.

Instead, for the first time, she seemed relatable. Maybe not normal, but understandable. Violence could be part of her job and her life, but that wasn’t the appeal. She fell into this years ago when one thing led to another. Ordinary life wasn’t the same after that. Running in the night was exciting. She stuck around for the benefits and the thrills.

Tyler knew all that about her now... and she knew him better, too. *Wait, did that spell work both ways?*

“You’re a good guy,” she seemed to consider out loud. “Didn’t mean anything with that magic. It’s fine.”

“It’s not fine. I’m messing with something I don’t understand and a stranger holding a gun on...” Tyler didn’t need to finish. His alarm on that point diminished. He saw her point of view: betrayed, swamped with chaos, faced with a stranger showing magical ability. She didn’t *want* to pull the gun on him. It was a desperation move. He didn’t like it, but he understood...

...and apparently so did she. Nicole clicked the safety on the pistol and put it on the desk. She pulled his wallet and phone from her coat pocket and offered them together. “I’m sorry. It’s not how I wanted things to go.” She didn’t plead, didn’t crack, but she meant it. Tyler knew that.

He claimed his wallet and phone. “This is magic.” He gestured between himself and Nicole. “The book says it’s honest, but it’s magic.”

“It’s okay. I believe you. Magic or not, it all lines up. And I did pull a gun on you. Gotta get through that however you can, right?”

They stared at one another.

He wanted to be friends with her. *Damn, you’re beautiful*, thought Tyler. *Fun. Bright. Maybe I wish we could be more than fr—stop it. Danger. Guys with guns. Think.*

“Almost finished with nursing school? What’s that, an undergrad? You’re twenty-two?”

“Twenty-five soon. Didn’t decide on it right away and I hit some delays.”

“Oh. Twenty-five works better.”

“Huh?”

“Nothing. We’re not that far apart, is all.” She looked back to the door as if to listen for activity outside.

Tyler reached in the same direction, pulled his hand back into a slowly closing fist, and repeated, “Shhh.”

“You’re casting it again?”

“Yeah. I think it worked. Maybe that resets the clock? I don’t know how long I can keep doing it. Maybe over and over, but it doesn’t seem like a solution.”

“It gives us time to find one. Keep looking?” Nicole nodded to the book.

Pages turned normally. The next heading read, “Cleanup: Still an all-time favorite. Purges dirt, sweat, grime, blood, mud... fluids. *All* the fluids.” Tyler could *hear* the sultry wink in Diana’s script. “Make three quick wiping motions with one hand. Any motion will do, even tiny ones. Whistle as softly as you like.”

“Nice. Not helpful now,” Tyler murmured. He turned another page.

“March 3rd, 1989: The gala started out fine but turned dull fast. Puffed-up speeches, snobbery, not one guest worth my time. The servers were another story. Marta and Shauna gave me lots of fun in a little store room until we could sneak out. I haven’t felt this worshipped in a while... okay, that’s a lie, but I’m tempted to keep them. They seem up for it. Those two mauled me in that closet like—”

He turned the page. Again, wanted to read the details. He felt a faint, admiring crush on this woman he’d never met, too, but he needed solutions, not daydreams.

“You said family doesn’t want to see you?” asked Nicole.

“Gonna crash with friends, but they couldn’t pick me up tonight. Family is strained.”

“And you left college. Got a girlfriend back there?”

“I was sort of steady with someone, but she didn’t want anything long-distance. Guess I can’t blame her.” Carol knew he was innocent of his roommate’s crimes, too. She never actually said, “more trouble than it’s worth,” but her interest dwindled over his month of turmoil. In the end, he meant what he said: they had never gotten serious, and he didn’t blame her. It still sucked.

He turned another page.

“March 28th, 1989: Okay, I know I said I’d focus on research, but can I help it if the librarian is hung like a horse? I felt a spark even before I hit him with Honest Charm. We couldn’t stop grinning at each other across the help desk. He got a much bigger grin once we found a private corner and I sank down to my knees and tugged those slacks—”

“Oh my god,” Tyler grumbled.

“What’s it say?” asked Nicole.

“It’s—” He paused. The honest answer was ridiculous... *Except, no, you’re going with honesty here, right? Besides, it’s not your fault.* “This book has magic spells, but it’s also full of journals... like a dirty diary. It’s more than one writer over time, and I keep finding the same theme. Lots of hookup stories. And hey, good for them, but it doesn’t help us. Seems like a crazy thing to put in here.”

“No, that makes sense. That makes a lot of sense, actually.” Nicole licked her lip. It didn’t seem like a conscious choice, but it fit the cagey look in her eyes. “The nightside can be kinda horny. In fact, it’s usually horny.”

The “horny” stopped him, along with the way her voice fell and her eyes held his, but those weren’t the only things. That’s not where he reached when he thought of how to break out of this stare, at least. “Nightside?”

“Not my word. Seems a little edgy. But it’s the broader word for the spooky life. Wizards, vampires, faerie folk, stuff in between. People have their own agendas and styles, and it’s as diverse as anything else, but they tend to be hot and... horny. Generally in a good way.”

“A good way?”

“I like it.” Her eyes still held his. Perhaps she searched for judgment, or maybe something else. “I’ve hooked up a lot.”

“Cool,” said Tyler.

“Is it?”

“What, cool? Sure. If you’re having a good time, good for you, I guess.”

“Good.”

He turned his eyes to the book. He tried to turn his attention away from the raging hard-on her answers and her stare gave him, too... and not because he disliked any of it. *Get real. She’s not looking for a hookup. We need an escape.*

“What else does it say?” asked Nicole.

Tyler turned a page backward—and smoothly, without any flapping or noise, he was near the start of the book again. *Elizabeth*, he understood. Early in her life, years before the blizzard story.

“21 September: The bend of my magic becomes clearer with each day and every wonder. I find lovers and trysts with ease. Every spell is easier and stronger when cast in pleasure and delight. The church has this all wrong. Magic is not a power of corruption or greed. Magic does not *want* that. It wants joy—mutual joy. The deeper I walk into this, the stronger I become.”

“Wow. That would explain a lot,” Nicole murmured.

Tyler blinked at her—and then realized he’d just read that out loud. “It would?”

“It would explain all the horny in the nightside,” she answered... but that seemed like an aside. Nicole’s eyes locked on his. She stepped closer. “What do you think? You wanna give it a try?”

Hell yes, answered Tyler’s body, and his eyes, and his deepest urges. The rest of him decided she couldn’t mean that. He considered the door again... the door he kept hidden with magic, for perhaps ten minutes at a time. “You want to hide in here?”

“If we can make it fun, sure.” Her fingers traced his belt and the waistband of his jeans. “Makes sense to me. I told you the magic life is kinda horny. That’s one of the reasons I like it.”

Whoa. She did mean that. Tyler swallowed. “We’re under a spell.”

“Are we? I’m thinking clearly. Seems like you are, too. If you don’t want to...?”

She asked like she damn well knew better. Obviously, she knew better. “I don’t want to take advantage.”

That made her grin. “You’re only in this mess because you stopped to help people. I kidnapped you at gunpoint. If anyone’s taking advantage, it’s me... although I’d rather see it as making this up to you.”

Nicole curled her fingers around his belt buckle and the fabric and fasteners beneath it. She kissed his lips, softly at first touch—and then opened her mouth with his in sudden hunger and passion. “Mmh!” Nicole whimpered as their tongues slid together. Her scent and her taste thrilled Tyler, too, but the sudden vibration of her body thrilled them both even more. “*Mmh!*”

Their kiss parted. She gasped, looking at him with starry eyes, and then a grin pulled at the corners of her mouth. “Open up,” she said, and twisted her wrist at his waist.

Tyler’s belt and jeans came undone. They dropped as if suddenly several sizes too big, along with his black underwear... though they had in fact strained to hold the strongest erection of his life before they fell. Nicole wrapped one hand around it. “Mmhm,” she hummed in approval, and then kissed him again while stroking him.

He kissed back. God, he wanted her. Wanted this. Their situation bothered him much less beneath her touch and her scent and her kiss. Tyler pulled the leather coat off of her shoulders and cast it onto the desk. “As long as you’re sure,” he grinned back at her.

“Oh, this is as much about me as you.” She kissed him once more and then pushed him away—into the office chair he hadn’t realized was behind him. In a flash, Tyler was seated and entirely naked from the waist down. Nicole’s “unlock” trick had run all the way down to his shoes and socks.

Despite her assertive pace, Tyler didn’t expect Nicole’s shameless drop to her knees between his legs. Her hand returned to his shaft. Her eyes held his as she brought him toward her mouth... and inside. Like their first kiss, she readied his cock with wet, feather-light touches of her lips before sliding deeper and firmer down his shaft.

Tyler groaned. His eyes fluttered with that first ecstasy of her mouth, and again when her lips pulled back along his length and descended again. “Mmh!” Nicole repeated, also much like their first kiss. And again.

Nicole alternated between closing her eyes to moan and opening them to claim his stare. Tyler softly panted with pleasure. Nicole seemed just as affected.

“Oh my god,” Tyler murmured as she sucked. “That feels amazing.”

“Mm-*mmm*,” Nicole agreed with a shudder. She pulled back. “Yeah, this definitely explains a lot. Oh my god, this feels so *good*.” She claimed him with her mouth once again. Pleasure surged through her kiss, through his cock... through his body.

Maybe more than pleasure. His eye drifted over the book as his head swam, and found his own fingers touching a glowing page of text. He didn’t have the mental bandwidth to read. Not with Nicole doing this to him.

Nicole loosened her shirt and her pants. She kept sucking.

Tyler reached past her toward the door. He pulled his hand back, closing his fingers in a fist and whispered, “Ssshhh.” This time, he felt new strength to the spell. The effect would run deeper and longer, hiding them from just about anything... all so Nicole could keep sucking his cock. That part of this mattered to the magic, too. He understood that. Felt it. That part mattered a lot.

Then her eyes and her mouth had all his attention.

She devoured, stroked, and moaned. Sometimes they moaned together. Like the “charm” spell, everything became deeply mutual. Tyler could hardly think about anything else. He was ready for this to go on forever... though he wanted other things, too.

“Nicole. I want you,” he told her softly.

“Yeah.” Her lips barely released him to speak. “Me, too.”

“Is...?” His mind was just clear enough to ask. “I’m safe, but are you?”

“Yeah.” Her eyes lit up. “I’m protected. No worries. God, yes.” She rose to her feet over Tyler and crossed her arms to lift her shirt. He had the same idea, pulling at his own, but stopped as hers came up first. The black bra over her breasts was more function than fashion, but it still looked good. More to the point, the sight confirmed all his thoughts about her body matching her face.

Then she unclasped the front and thrilled him all over again... and grinned. “Go ahead and say it.”

“Damn, you’re beautiful.”

“Wasn’t always. A lot of this is payment. Like I said, magic gets horny.” Nicole shed her pants with the same grip, twist, and magic words of, “Open up,” and then swung one toned and athletic leg over Tyler’s waist, then the other.

This was rushed. Abrupt. Lacking for foreplay, let alone romance... but something about that felt uninhibited and good to Tyler, and clearly Nicole, too. The blonde strip of hair between her legs caught his eye as she settled over his groin and they both guided his cock into place.

“Ohh! Aaah!” Nicole cried out with his first thrust—or really hers, given her position. Tyler filled his hands with her ass and pulled her close. The pleasure of her chest against his was a gift unto itself, but the intimacy of fucking her possessed most of his thoughts.

The noise wasn’t a threat. They wouldn’t be disturbed. He knew that... like he knew how to grind her onto his hips. Nicole leaned into him in the tilting office chair, letting her breasts crush against him as she moaned and fucked.

“Tyler... mmh!” She squeezed with her thighs and claimed another kiss. The need from her hips made it all clumsy—and hungry, and real. She shuddered with a near-orgasm and slowed long enough to look him in the eyes, still fucking him. “You’re amazing. Fuck. It’s magic, and it’s fucking amazing.”

“Yeah,” he breathed into another kiss. He couldn’t stop, either. “Nicole.”

“Friends now?” she whimpered. “Sexy friends?”

The primal pleasure between them made that answer obvious: “Hell, yes.”

They kissed again. This time, Nicole’s moans heralded something more. She kept grinding, kept panting. Rhythm and motion held steady as she built, bringing Tyler to the edge, too... and then she came, shaking hard with her deepest moan yet. Tremors wracked her body, tightening her around Tyler’s groin and indulging the rest of him with an intimate, visceral ride.

Amid the physical rush, he felt other carnal pleasures. Something exceeded satisfaction. Perhaps accomplishment? Delicious, naughty accomplishment. He felt bonded with Nicole, too. Not love, exactly. This was far too soon. But their affection and intimacy were strong, and entirely mutual.

They wanted more of each other. More of this.

His head and heart swam with all those thoughts. He didn’t have time or focus to give any of them. This all felt too good to do more than *feel*.

He was still fucking her in his lap when she started coming down from orgasm. She grunted, panted, and kissed his neck. “Oh my god,” she breathed. “You didn’t finish?”

“Close. So close.”

“Give it to me,” she whispered in his ear. “Fuck me. Fill me. *Please...* aaahh!”

Her moans of renewed orgasm blended with his. They erupted together, with Tyler pumping away and Nicole riding his cock as a helpless passenger. She had less breath for her cries, but that didn’t seem to signal a less intense climax than her first.

He stayed hard within her as they calmed. She still felt incredible. Her weary smile was incredible, too. “Oh god, I love magic sex,” said Nicole. “But that was... that was a lot, Tyler. Wow. Did you know?”

“More like I felt it. All of this. It feels right.”

“Yeah, it does.” Nicole leaned back on him a bit to check the door and laughed. “Okay, if they didn’t hear that, I think we’re safe?”

“We’re safe,” Tyler assured. “That spell’s gonna last for hours if we want.”

“Oh?” Her grin broadened. “So we’re not in a hurry?”

“No.”

“Think you’re up for staying a while?”

On instinct, Tyler reached for the book. Touching it was enough. He felt a rush of vitality and desire. Nicole’s eyes danced like she felt it, too.

“Yes.” Tyler picked her up only to lay her on the desk and thrust into her again. Nicole tilted her head back and moaned with new delight as his hands claimed her breasts and their lust renewed.

* * *

“Don’t Worry About Me: Invisibility is good, but being ignored works better. Tilt your head down and to the side. Mumble, “Outis, outis, outis,” (that’s “Nobody” in Greek, like Odysseus!) and then walk the walk. Move like you belong and you’re boring, or just sit still and quiet.

“This effect can be shared with an intimate partner. Stays in effect on film and video if you’ve got the energy to put into it, too!”

Tyler had both the energy and the intimate partner.

Dawn was still many hours away when they moved out. Tyler used magic to clean themselves and the office—not a particularly visible effect, but he and Nicole felt the difference as sweat and more lifted from their bodies. Even their hair looked washed and their clothes appeared freshly clean and free of wrinkles.

Sex and magic combined to boost Tyler’s confidence. He felt good until he saw the cops and the yellow line of tape at the end of the hallway. His heartbeat picked up.

“Be cool,” she murmured. “One thing at a time, like we agreed.” She even put her hand in his.

She’d been around magic like this before.

The cops didn’t look their way during their long walk to the exit, but Tyler chalked that up to luck and silence. All the movement was outside the little hall of offices and store rooms.

Don't make eye contact, Tyler told himself. He wasn't entirely shaking; in fact, he still felt that boost of confidence, right down to a rather physical sense of confidence at his groin. That didn't make him take anything for granted. *Don't look up. Don't engage. Don't worry about it. If they say anything...*

As they reached the tape, one cop turned away to look down the concourse. The other pulled out his cell phone. Nicole casually lifted the yellow tape and stepped under it, with Tyler right beside her. They kept walking without a "stop" or "hey you" from either cop. Easy steps and steady breath took them farther away, and then into the small trickle of arriving travelers from whatever redeye had just landed... and then they were out of the scene.

"That worked?" asked Tyler.

"That worked," said Nicole. "I mean, you can twist yourself in knots over this sort of thing. Maybe you just haven't spotted the bad guy tailing you, maybe your cover isn't as good as you think. You can't prove a negative, right? But it's been a couple hours and things are calm. I've got faith in your magic. If the cops aren't stopping us, we're good."

"Faith in the magic I've had for two or three whole hours, huh?"

"After the ride you gave me?" Nicole grinned. "Listen, I've had hookups with magical types. You're as good as any of them, and that was rushed and clumsy back there." Their walk brought them closer to baggage claim and signs to ground transportation. "I want to know what you're like when we can take our time. Maybe with a real bed, too. And after you've had some time with that book."

Tyler glanced at her with a new set of uncomfortable thoughts. They couldn't make any plans until they got out of the office and saw the situation, and thus his focus had gone from hiding and sex to escape from the airport. With things looking up on the latter issue, his next set of concerns came to the fore. "Don't you have someone waiting for this book?" he asked warily. "People died over it."

"Yeah," she exhaled soberly. "Only one worth a damn."

"I'm sorry."

"We weren't close. It is what it is."

"Okay. So what is it?"

Nicole steered him to a corner around a service desk. Foot traffic was sparse and Tyler's spell mitigated any worry about eavesdroppers or onlookers, but the sense of privacy mattered.

"I like you. A lot. I'm not talking romance and nothing exclusive. I mean that. But maybe... friends with slutty benefits, at least?" A grin played at her lips. "Maybe lots of slutty benefits?"

Thoughts of the office and her body strengthened his heartbeat. They had just left their tryst, and he still felt like a million bucks... and he wanted her all over again. "I... yes. I'd like that, too. More

than 'like,' really." The spark between them felt stronger as he agreed and she grinned. He'd never felt like this with anyone. They couldn't wait to fuck again, and that mutual urge was wonderful. It also didn't fix their problems. "What about the rest?"

"My client is waiting on that book. I need to get in contact with him to resolve that, and in the meantime other people have killed over this whole thing. You're new in this scene, and it sounds like you don't have much in the way of plans, right?"

"Yeah," Tyler huffed. Thoughts of his broken life and tattered personal connections joined the rest of his stresses. "I've got friends, but I don't want to bring this mess to their door. Or to family. But I've got nothing else to work with."

"You've got a book of magic, and that's a lot. You've also got me, at least until you figure things out... and it's way past midnight at LAX. Lots of hotels nearby. Wanna get a room?"

Chapter Two

“Hey, is this you? Are you okay?” Three dots appeared under Dani’s text message by the time Tyler had his phone out of his pocket, turning into a linked article on local news: “Shooting at LAX Terminal Kills Two, Injures Several. Terminal Closed.” Another message followed: “Woke up randomly and looked at my phone.”

Tyler winced. Given the late hour and his circumstances, he hadn’t thought of checking in with anyone online. Getting to the crash pad was up to him and José worked until the bar closed. Reflexively, Tyler thought of replying, but the small backpack over his shoulder and the thick tome tucked under his other arm would make typing difficult. They weren’t his only distractions.

“I’ve got rooms with one king-sized bed or two queen sized,” said the hotel clerk. “All the same amenities either way.”

“We’ll take the single king.” Nicole threw a sideways glance and a raised eyebrow to check with Tyler. Her lip twitched with a grin.

Tyler nodded. *What, like I’m gonna say no to you?* his face asked in silence.

The hottest and most dangerous woman he’d ever met winked back at him.

The broad, upscale hotel lobby was all but deserted, apart from the three of them at the desk and a custodian out of earshot. A spacious atrium dominated much of the bottom floor, with the elevators built to allow an interior view as they rose. Indoor plants and small modern sculptures decorated the seating areas. The adjoining restaurants and bar were all closed, but they looked nice.

Tyler had only been through such places in school activities. He’d never been a guest before.

“Okay, gimme a second.” The clerk typed and clicked. “We have to charge the whole night, of course. It’s yours until *tomorrow* morning, not this morning.”

“That’s fine,” said Nicole. “I’m glad you have rooms available at all. And surprised.”

“Oh, we had a rush after the airport shut down, but it wasn’t too bad. They were on the last round of flights anyway. That must have been scary. Are you alright?”

“We’re fine. Never heard a thing. Only got caught up in the mess after it was over.”

The words snuck into Tyler’s finger as he texted a reply: “Yes. I’m okay. Caught in the mess. Got out a bit ago. I’m good.”

Dani started a reply.

“Stupid thing. The computer is thinking really hard,” the clerk explained. “Slow network lately. Do you need anything extra?”

“No, we should be fine.” Nicole’s raised eyebrow now held more question for Tyler than taunt. “You? Anything?”

“Your kitchen would be closed now, right?” asked Tyler.

“Our little Bistro shop is the only thing open, but the staffer just went on their break. Should be back in about twenty minutes.”

“Oh. Wow. I didn’t even notice I’m hungry,” said Nicole.

“You know what, let me—” The clerk opened a cabinet, revealing a small refrigerator and an insulated slide-out drawer. “We’re haven’t restocked. Hold on.” He stepped away.

Dani’s text appeared: “Do you want to come here? We’re closer than José’s place. Should I come get you?”

Tyler’s heart tripped over the words. At two in the morning and probably still in bed, his high school theater friend was ready to come get him. Others in his online groups might’ve offered the same if they were awake. People cared about him.

“What’s up?” Nicole nodded to his phone.

“Friend saw the news,” he answered. “She’s asking if I’m okay. Offered a place to crash. I didn’t think anyone would be up, but...” His eyes met Nicole’s in mutual understanding. Though his confidence didn’t match hers, they shared the same bottom line. Tyler typed out an essential truth and then held it out to Nicole for her approval: “That means a lot, but no, I’m good. Believe it or not, I met someone from the plane.”

Nicole grinned and nodded. Tyler hit “send.”

“Here we go.” The hotel clerk returned with a pair of chilled water bottles and two bags of hotel kitchen cookies. “Normally these are for reward club members, but you’ve been through enough tonight. Hell with it.”

“Oh wow, thank you so much,” said Tyler. Nicole echoed his thanks with her hands already on her bottle.

“No problem. Okay, now we’re moving.” The clerk turned back to his computer.

Tyler’s phone buzzed with a reply. “LOL WHAT? After that? Pics or it didn’t happen.”

He snorted, noticed Nicole’s interest, and showed her. She shrugged. “Go ahead. Doesn’t bother me.”

“Serious?” he asked.

“Maybe not my face,” she suggested, and then tilted her head back the way they’d come. That made sense, given their need for a low profile.

The clerk took Nicole's credit card and tapped away at his computer. Nicole stayed turned toward him and the desk, pulling a little of her blonde hair over her shoulder to obstruct her face. Tyler snapped and sent the picture.

"You're all set. Nine-twenty-three. The elevators are right over there. Take a right on the ninth floor and you'll find your room."

"Thanks. You're a lifesaver." With keycards in hand, Nicole and Tyler moved on.

His phone buzzed. Tyler glanced and rolled his eyes.

"What'd she say?" Nicole asked, clicking the elevator button.

"She says that's not real proof. I could just be in line behind you," he answered truthfully.

The elevator doors opened. Nicole entered and stayed facing the window toward the atrium. Grinning, she brushed aside her leather coat and slid the top of her pants down to reveal her shapely, flawless ass.

Tyler's heart stopped. Her panties were down, too. No tan lines. Nothing but toned skin.

The elevator moved, snapping him out of his hesitation. She volunteered this. He snapped another picture with a silent rush of excitement, but he didn't send. Not yet.

Nicole tugged everything back into place and turned to face him with sparkling green eyes and a naughty grin. "Up to you," she said before he asked. "Not the wildest thing I've done." She stepped closer, putting a hand on his chest. "You're intoxicating. My brain is sober. I'm in control. My *body* is still riding high."

"That's gotta be magic," he said.

"Absolutely, but that's a feature, not a bug. I've had good sex and magic sex before. You're better." She tugged him in with a kiss, favoring him with lips and a probing tongue. The elevator stopped before their talk of intoxication began to feel literal... again.

Their room lacked the décor and effort of the lobby, but it was still nice. Tyler caught glances at a balcony behind a sliding glass door, a flatscreen over the dresser, and a bathroom with a spacious tub... and then Nicole turned and shrugged off her coat, letting it fall to the floor. She looked at him, seeming as pleased as ever, but opened her bottle and drank it down before speaking.

Right. Water, thought Tyler. He still held his bottle, with the book tucked under his arm and backpack over his shoulder. His other hand held his phone. *I should... I'm not thirsty, but... wow.*

Nicole set the empty bottle down on the dresser, exhaled and perhaps burped in silence, and held his stare with hers. "Normally, I'd have grabbed some tea packets from downstairs to do a stealthy magic trick on the door and windows, but I think I like your trick better," she said. Grinning.

“Tea packets?” he asked.

“Throws off a scent. It’s a symbolic thing. Not sure how reliable it is, but it’s better than nothing. I’ve got more faith in your magic. You completely hid our whole room from a serious search. If I was really worried, I’d have stopped you from texting your friend downstairs. Also I really like your methods.” She kept watching—and kept grinning.

God, you’re hot, Tyler thought. *Gorgeous. Fun. Tough and smart and completely out of my league...* except they’d had great sex once already. She couldn’t be clearer about wanting more. “Yeah. I like it, too,” he said. At least that didn’t come out nervously or shyly.

“We’re not rushing. Not exclusive. I like you, but this isn’t commitment or straight to monogamy and moving in. Horny, slutty friends for starters. That good?”

“Sure.” Tyler saw the sense in that. Regardless of how he yearned and how his heart pounded while looking at her, she was right to set some boundary. It attested to her sobriety, too. That made him feel a little better about the rest.

“This isn’t just tonight, either,” she elaborated, still grinning. “But not exclusive. Cool?”

“Cool.”

“You’re still holding all that stuff.”

Tyler exhaled a laugh and put everything down on the dresser. The dream-come-true of it all leveled up again as he turned back. Straight out of an old fantasy, Nicole stepped up to him with clear intent and desire in her eyes—and in the way she peeled her shirt off.

He’d seen her naked already. Fucked her. That made the reveal no less breathtaking the second time around. Maybe it enhanced the moment. The athletic figure and Playboy-perfect breasts behind her bra felt as good as it all looked. Nicole tugged him closer by his hoodie, tilted her face up to kiss him, and soon had her body against his as that kiss deepened.

The old fantasy wasn’t particularly about her beauty. It was her initiative. She brushed aside all the pressure and guessing. Tyler didn’t need a line or a smooth move that would feel fake. He didn’t have to worry about pushing too fast or too far. She wanted him and acted on it.

With her hands under his t-shirt, Nicole murmured, “Open up.” Without lifting his arms, she swept the shirt over his head and shoulders, tossing them to the floor.

“That’s a wild trick,” said Tyler.

“Magic bracelet.” Her grin was close enough to his mouth to taste her breath. “It was made for locks and doors, but here we are. Privacy spell?”

“Right. Um.” He grimaced. “Only my second time for that.”

“Sure. I seem to recall something about magic being easier when you feel good.” She stared at him in unabashed confidence. “Open up,” she murmured again. This time, she tugged him closer. Tyler stepped right out of the rest of his clothes down to his socks.

“I did cast that one before we got this friendly,” he admitted.

“Honesty will get you everywhere,” Nicole said into a long, hot kiss on his neck, elevated by the lack of fabric around his waist. “Now I really want to help.”

One cool, smooth, perfect hand slid down his shaft. Her touch made him feel needful and potent all at once. Nicole’s every touch and move showed real, natural skill, but something he couldn’t name made it all feel *genuine*, too. Tyler groaned and tilted his head to find her lips for a deep kiss of her mouth. Her touch became a stroke.

“Spell?” she reminded. “Do you need to face the door?”

Hell, I don’t know, he thought. “Maybe? Makes sense.”

“We already know one thing that works.” Grinning, Nicole pulled him toward the bed.

She was about to turn him around when he gently stopped her. “Try something else first?”

“Never been turned down for this before,” Nicole scoffed.

“Oh, I’m never turning you down. But the book said some stuff about mutual pleasure being better. Stronger, I guess.”

“Tyler, going down on you is mutual pleasure. I like giving it, anyway, but you make it feel good. That’s obviously magic. I’m almost annoyed,” she teased. “But it works, so why not?”

“I’m glad.” He kissed her again, mouth and then neck, hands gliding down her mostly bare sides. Tyler had never lacked confidence with a partner once the ice was broken and interest was clear. He’d always focused so much on his partner that confidence was never even a question... but magical enhancement certainly didn’t hurt. His touch drifted to her groin and then between her legs, pulling a moan and a shiver from her core. “Still want to try something else.”

“Open up,” she whispered hoarsely. The hand shoving her pants and panties down nearly struck his, but as soon as the fabric was gone he touched damp hair and yearning skin.

He didn’t need to ask anything more. Tyler pulled Nicole around the bed and laid her down. The angle had him facing the door across the room before he crouched over her, joining Nicole in another embrace and another kiss. Her body against his amazed him once again, but she was already past foreplay. The hand around his cock made that clear along with the slide of her leg at his hip.

“C’mere,” she hissed against his lips. “Fuck me. Now. Nnn!” she grunted in delight with the first stroke of his cock against her sex. Hardened with both magic and deep desire, Tyler pushed into her in a single, slow thrust. Nicole tightened and writhed with delight.

She was smart. Dangerous. Gorgeous. Still out of his league. And she shivered and clung to him while he fucked her.

“Cast your spell,” she breathed. “Take your time. Get it done, but... mmh!”

His mind needed a moment to cope. Nicole’s cunt felt incredible, along with the rest of her body. Tyler gasped, savored, and steadied himself with more thought for her pleasure than magic, but the reminder helped. With his senses swimming, Tyler looked to the door and thought of the spell that would prevent any interruptions.

The book waited beside them on the bed as if he’d set it open there rather than on the dresser out of reach. Text faintly glowed with another helpful touch, yet he remembered this spell. Tyler reached out toward the door. Riding this pleasure through the casting of magic made both sensations feel better. “Sshhh,” he whispered, withdrawing his hand and closing his fingers in a long, three-second motion, still buried within his partner.

“Mmmrrmh!” Nicole moaned and clung to him. The casting of magic sent new thrills through her body. He *knew* that without explanation. Felt it within her.

The faint red glow of runes lined the doorframe along with every corner of the room. The spell covered the window, too. Even the phone.

Complete privacy, that you might enjoy this, murmured a thought in the back of Tyler’s pleasure-struck mind. *Both of you.*

Again, Tyler savored everything. He felt incredible. Nicole writhed, meeting and encouraging the grind of his hips and the thrust of his cock. She kissed his neck. Their eyes finally met ahead of another kiss, connecting thoughts and urges.

Instinct took hold. He claimed a fistful of her hair at the scalp, holding her in place and looking deep in her eyes as he fucked her. Nicole nodded breathlessly before her eyes rolled back and fluttered closed... and instinct gave way to empathy. That flood of certainty from his first charm spell returned. Tyler *felt* and *understood* from Nicole without need for words.

We are more bonded than ever, Elizabeth had written of her long tryst with William and Robert. *It was wonderful.*

The words came along with his rush of feelings and understanding. This wasn’t exclusive, but it still deeply intimate. He didn’t need to guard his feelings. Nicole’s walls crumbled with every delicious

thrust and hungry kiss. Yes, she wanted her freedom, wanted to keep things she already had and some sense of independence. That made this no less bonding. Her conditions had hung in the back of his mind like a warning not to get too close or feel too much, but now it brought a sense of freedom to Tyler, too. They bonded without obligation.

Nicole wanted more than another good tumble. She wanted *him*. Wanted *this*.

The flood of affection and desire thrilled him as much as her body.

They were exhausted. Stressed. They needed sleep. Though Nicole was more athletic, more conditioned than Tyler, magic he couldn't name kept him at her level. Maybe more.

At some point in their tryst, he noticed his book on the nightstand. He didn't remember moving it. He was also a bit distracted, and stayed so until climax, soft afterplay, and sleep overtook Tyler and Nicole together.

* * *

"It's a good way to live, don't you think?"

"Yeah, it is." They walked hand in hand, taking in summer air tempered by the Hudson River breeze. Across the water, New Jersey looked nicer than it had any right to appear. The park held playing kids, adults running a frisbee tournament, and street carts with a variety of food. Mary J Blige sang from some speaker nearby. Despite the glorious day, it wasn't crowded. Busy, but spacious. Nice. Tyler squeezed his wife's hand and felt grateful for everything.

Then he blinked. He'd never been to New York, let alone Hudson River Park. He'd never heard of Hudson River Park.

He didn't have a wife.

Tyler turned to her. His heart stopped with a sudden ache and yearning. She was tall and warm, Black and older than him, the rare kind of gorgeous that grew more beautiful as she approached middle age. Long and lush black hair ended in loose curls. Purple highlights to gentle makeup matched the purple sweater over her black and white... no, not a top. The black and white lace peeking over her sweater was a lacy and ornate bra around a chest every bit as beautiful as the rest of her.

She looked back at him with warmth and patience. Her beauty felt like a gift, deeply sexual yet fit for public and even *kind* to him somehow. Casually confident. Inviting. Embracing. With that same instant context that told him they were married, he knew her intelligence and her strength ran just as

deep as her looks. Way out of his league—perhaps a different league than Nicole’s but still way out of his reach... and holding his hand.

He’d never *wanted* to be in love with someone so much in his life.

“Tyler,” she said, “I’m Diana.”

“Hi.” He held his cool without conscious effort despite a sense of surprise down to his soul. Everything felt real: the air, the scents, the tread of his shoes, the soft grip of her hand. A trick from an article came to mind. He turned his eyes to the menu on a food cart, then away, and then back again. The words on the signs didn’t change. Nothing here changed. He had full peripheral vision, too, rather than the subtle tunnel vision of his dreams.

All of the night’s events stuck with him: the airport, the fight, Nicole. All the baggage of the past few weeks and months was in reach, too. Despite the wild night, the new calm brought back the rest of his unaccomplished, disappointing, humble life... while he held the hand of an absolute goddess. His wife, somehow.

“This... has to be a dream, but isn’t,” he said.

“Yes and no.” Diana smiled with something more than patience. “I knew you were smart. Time doesn’t work the same here as in the waking and living world. I had time to really look into you when you grabbed the book. I’m sorry if this is coming on too strong, but I wanted to start with a place of comfort. And honesty.”

His breath ran deep. His heart beat harder. She held his hand and didn’t let go. “Honesty.”

“The magical sort, yes.”

“This is that spell again?” he wondered. “Honest Charm?”

“It’s deeper and more natural here. I wanted you to know you’re safe. More than safe.”

That seemed like a loaded statement, but it brought out the difference between the dream and his actual feelings. He’d felt that difference all along. It was why he could question and doubt. It was also why he still yearned. “You’re Diana Alice Stewart. From the book.”

“Yes. Seemed important to sign with my full name at the time, but I don’t really use Alice.”

“They... your book was sold because people think you’re dead.”

Diana turned closer to take his other hand. Her smile softened, but never diminished. “I am dead, Tyler. I suppose I’m a ghost, or something like that. I’m not sure anyone is the final authority on the labels. This is much more lucid and coherent than we understand ghosts in the living world, but I died. You could call this is the afterlife. *An* afterlife, for myself and others. We built it over centuries with that book, one owner after another.

“You’re asleep in the living world. This is another world, not a dream, but your consciousness can only enter here while you sleep. Here, you’re as real and solid as everything else.” She stroked his cheek. He smelled her perfume. His body thrilled at her touch. Her eyes told him she knew it, too. “You’ll remember all of this when you wake up as if you were conscious the whole time. No blurring or fading in your memory.”

“You made this world?” Almost requiring an act of wits and will, Tyler glanced away to the people in the park behind her.

“This world or dimension existed before we did, but it didn’t take this shape. Nobody else was here. It’s physical, solid, all that, but also malleable for the... inhabitants, I guess? Souls, for lack of a better word, now here as real, physical people.” She tilted her head back to the park-goers. “*These* people are illusions, taken from my memories to fill out this scene. It happens a lot. You and I are alone here. The real people of this world are the sorcerers who held that book and the people who came with us from our lives. Dozens, not hundreds. The other sorcerers brought other places from their times, too—Beth, and Shujing, and the rest. We travel between a lot.”

“That’s... wild,” said Tyler. The frisbee tournament continued with a score written on a whiteboard. People laughed. The nearest vendor served one customer, then the next. He half-expected a loop like a background in a video game, but instead, he saw progress, at least for the moment he watched. That speaker by the frisbee group moved from the end of *Family Affair* to *September* by Earth, Wind, and Fire. “How... what did you make all this out of?”

“Memory, like I said. Also magic, and this world is sort of made-to-be-made. Everything is practically free here. Kind of like *Star Trek* and that whole ‘post-scarcity’ idea.” She caught his surprise and winked. “I wasn’t the kind of fantasy and sci-fi type you are, but I liked some stuff.

“The people and animals are illusions. The rest is real, but limited. If you move past my memories, you find simple abstracts of the same setting. The illusory people hold up longer than you might think, but they’ll talk and interact only so far. They aren’t meant to be real. We can move from one memory to the next whenever we want a change of scenery. I can show you how later.”

“Is that where the real people are? The rest from the book, and... you said others?”

“Yeah. Every one of those people were close to one of us, and wanted to stay with us. Here and now is just you and me. The conduit between you and this world is still forming, and we didn’t want to overwhelm you.”

“Okay...” Tyler shook his head. That made some sense. “I don’t know where to begin. This probably isn’t even the right topic.”

“I admit, I’m not sure where to begin, either. It’s all a lot.”

“This is the afterlife?”

“It’s *an* afterlife,” Diana repeated. “That’s an important point. Is it *the* afterlife? We don’t know. We don’t know if there’s an afterlife beyond this, or if Heaven is real, or Hell, or anywhere else. Maybe we’re cheating the way life and death are supposed to work. Maybe we’re only cheating ourselves. We don’t know. I should add, the others here all wanted to be here and chose this. Not everyone we loved took that chance. A couple have left of their own accord. We can believe this is better, but we don’t *know*. That’s not so different from any faith.

“This all starts with Beth—Elizabeth Rolfe, over a thousand years ago. She lived a *very* long time. Magic let her start this, and the book enabled Nicolas Du Bois to expand it as the next sorcerer. There are other sorcerers and other styles of magic out there. This style and that book was ours, and now yours... if you want to keep it.”

That turned the topic and Tyler’s attention from their surroundings and back to Diana. *His wife*. Unspoken cues of the dream or a spell or both kept him grounded in that context, and that context felt *good*. Everything about her dazzled with intimacy and affection, just out of reach and already his at the same time. *Schrödinger’s Cat*, except it’s *Schrödinger’s Couple*, he thought.

His feelings didn’t cloud his wits. “I thought that was already decided?”

“Under life-or-death pressure, with nowhere else to turn, yes,” said Diana. “It wasn’t exactly fair. We all knew it. That fight was what it was. We sensed a worthy, compatible soul nearby, so we reached for you, but... now I’m getting ahead of myself.” Diana tugged his hand lightly toward a nearby bench. They sat together, turned to face one another.

“Beth started that book in England before the Normans invaded. She lived way beyond the normal human lifespan, but she knew that didn’t make her immortal. She sought out a worthy successor who could take it up when she passed. That was Nicolas, and he followed the pattern. Every owner of the book lived a long life and traveled broadly. They each got to pick a successor. I didn’t. My death came suddenly—car accident, as it turns out. Magic protected me from bullets and fire and even other magic. I didn’t have to worry about disease or illness, either. Turns out the speeding truck you don’t see coming is still a speeding truck, with or without magic.

“I had a will prepared and all that, just in case. I didn’t have chosen successor. Met a few prospects over the years, but it was still too soon. The book was supposed to be handled differently than most of my other things, but I guess that got mixed up in the shuffle.”

“I’m sorry,” said Tyler.

“Oh, I lived almost two hundred and fifty years.” Diana smiled. “Nearly as old as the States. My life could’ve gone on longer, but I had far more than most people, and most of it was way better. I can’t call this a tragedy. Not from the day I got that book, and not today, either.” Her soft grip on his hand tightened.

God damn I want to be in love with you, shouted Tyler’s inner voice. His wits held steady, but they also didn’t doubt. “Two hundred and... where are you from?”

“Born in Georgia. And yes, that means exactly what you think.” Old pain loomed in her words like a scar mostly faded, but never forgotten. “Diego had the book before me. He felt his time coming, and he wanted to pass the book on where it would do the greatest good. That was me. Magic lifted me out of slavery and misery. Magic and Diego’s compassion.

“Now, you’re wondering: *only you?*” she predicted. “Magic has limits. Lots of limits. Diego and I freed and helped who we could, and our predecessors did other good work, but magic can’t fix all the evil in the world. You’ll have to learn about that if you want to hold onto all this. It’s good to help where you can, but the magic will pull you in a different direction. You have to follow that pull to grow your power. Magic doesn’t change systems; people do that. You help a person or a few people at a time. It’s the way it is.”

“That makes some sense,” said Tyler. “What I’ve read in that book so far is, um...”

“Horny and hot? Almost obsessively?” Diana laughed without a shred of embarrassment. That sense of intimacy and warmth drove ever deeper. “I know what you read, Tyler. I saw you all night. I know about Nicole. You did everything right. Put another pin in all that.” Her wink was smooth and subtle. “I cheered you on the whole time. It was hot.

“Magic comes from many places,” she went on. “The self is the easiest and readiest source, and that source is strongest in joy—excitement, satisfaction, happiness. Pleasure. And it’s doubly powerful when it’s shared.” Another grin. Another stroke, this time along his leg. “Access to magic isn’t entirely free of charge. You won’t have children. Magic needs all that life energy for other things. That has some obvious upsides to our lifestyle. Kind of why nobody passed the book down within family. That didn’t seem like a drawback for you.”

Tyler shook his head. He had never wanted children.

“Not everyone understands or accepts this focus on joy. There are other forms of magic, drawing power from nature or elements or rituals. Some forms are damn ugly. It works, but it isn’t *stronger*. The creeps and the monsters only see it as strength because they think power is all about pushing people around, or smashing and taking whatever they want.”

“Is that who’s after the book? That’s who we ran into tonight?” asked Tyler.

“Probably. One sort or another. I don’t know,” said Diana.

“So if they’re all about smashing and taking, and we’re on the other side of it... no, I fought them, too. I killed a guy with the book. A vampire, Nicole said.”

“Sure. You did, and that’s a good thing. We’re not pacifists—the line of us holding to that book, I mean. The book has ways to toughen you up and a few spells about fighting and doing harm. You might learn more. But the *path* has to be *away* from violence and harm. Even when it’s justified, fighting and hurting people hurts you, too. Being around that pain diminishes your magic. Inflicting it gets worse. Fight when you’ve gotta. If there’s a better way through a problem, take it.”

“Is there a purpose to all this?” Tyler asked. “If magic isn’t about helping people, and it’s not some good versus bad thing... then what?”

“It’s life, Tyler. Same as everything else. You can do good and help people with magic, and you should. I wanted you to know there are limits so you don’t go crazy with ambition or a sense of obligation. Magic is what it is, and the best magic pulls us in that other direction. Magic is strongest when it comes from pleasure and joy, especially when that’s shared. Those are good things, too. Making someone else happy *is* a way of doing good.”

“Is that enough?” he asked, and then stopped. “Why the smile?”

“Because I knew this would be your first thought. Magic falls into your lap, and your first and biggest concerns are how you can use it to do good and what your responsibilities are. We’ve gone off in a tangent again. Back to the start now.

“I died, and the book had no successor. That led to everything that happened tonight with Nicole and her people and you. We could sense things happening through the book—all of us, Beth and the other sorcerers. We looked for a good successor while the book passed from one set of hands to the next. We needed someone good and kind, someone smart... and someone compatible with this way of magic and living. There’s nothing wrong with being a monogamous married-with-kids type, or asexual, or anything else, but that’s not really our path or our style.

“We sensed you on the plane. First, it was just sentiments and broad strokes. We sensed you were troubled, but also kind and sensible. When things went wrong and we had the chance, we nudged the book your way. Like I said, time flows differently here. In the moment you reached out and fumbled with that book, we had the chance to really examine.

“I fell for you in a hot minute. Body and soul.”

All those thoughts in the back of Tyler's mind hit him again: her beauty, her warmth, her strength. An absolute goddess. "Why do I feel like we're married?"

"Because I want you to know how deep this could go," said Diana. "This isn't a proposal, and it's not a trap. The label won't hold up to the definition. We're not talking monogamy here. I've got other lovers, both men and women. You're bound to have other lovers, too. None of that will make *us* any less intimate. Maybe I'm wrong and your feelings will turn in a different direction," she conceded, reaching up to stroke her fingers through his hair, "but I doubt that."

Tyler doubted that, too. This dream brought context, but his thoughts and emotions were his own. He wanted this. He wanted it enough to feel like he couldn't have it. "I'm nobody. I'm a mess. I'm barely an adult."

"Nobody is really a nobody, Tyler," said Diana. "You're young, but everybody's young for me. I'm a ghost and this is magic and you're adult in every way that matters. You took some hard knocks lately. The world did you wrong, but you didn't go cold or mean. You're kind and bright and gutsy. They sat you next to a mom with a grumpy kid on that plane and you helped them both. People shot up that airport terminal and turned out the lights, and what did you do? You tried to help the fallen, no questions asked. You carried out some grandma you never met. Not obligation. Nothing to gain. That was all compassion.

"And when you had the chance to turn an enemy into a friend, you took it. Took it all the way, and it was hot." Diana's fingers kept stroking. "It brings out the other thing I love about you, Tyler. You love women. Friends or more than friends, platonic or flirty, young or old. No one's ever less than an equal to you. It doesn't have to be anything near sexual... but you *really* love sex. You love sex and love more than anything, separately or together. You rocked Nicole's world, for her *and* for yourself."

Her eyes had his locked in, soft and knowing. "I wanted to do what Diego did when it was time to pass the book. I wanted to find some poor soul beneath the bottom. You've taken hits lately, but not like that. And we also wanted to find someone open to more than just women," she admitted. "The book fell into a tight spot, and we had to work fast, and there you were. I fell hard, Tyler. All that desire and longing you feel is how I feel about you, too."

"You're..." His voice cracked in a whisper. Her touch felt so good, and the moment was heavy... and he was safe. Probably safer than he'd ever been with anyone. "You're that sure?"

"Two hundred fifty years of experience and a window into your soul. I know what I want." Her eyes shined. "We all want you."

Tyler blinked. "What?"

“Group decision. Has to be unanimous, or none of this works. We wanted to find someone for all of us, but Nicolas and Diego know you aren’t into men. They put your worthiness above their desires and voted to include you. They may joke about taking a pass for the greater good, but they’re fine. I’m their lover, too, Tyler. Really theirs, along with a few others from my past who are here now.” The stroke in his hair remained. “And I want you, too. God, I want you.”

It fit somehow. At some point, something in this had to be at least a bit of a wrinkle. Death apparently wasn’t too tough to get around, but this qualified... except she was up front about it, and honest, and his body was in bed with another amazing woman right now. *Of course, she’s got other guys. Why wouldn’t she? But they won’t be in the way? It’s cool here? Fine. Whatever. Not even bothered.* His feelings took a fast-forward through new territory, but the end felt right. Like he could catch up and unpack those feelings later to the same result.

“What do I need to do?” he asked.

“Mostly, live your life,” said Diana. “We don’t have commands or a quest. No hoops to jump through, though we might have advice and requests. What you do and how you live is up to you, but you need to keep two priorities.

“First, stay safe and take care of that book,” said Diana. “Everything else comes naturally from there. I’d say keep it out of the wrong hands, because that’s important, but the only right hands are yours. It’s your book now, Tyler. We all want you to have it. Read it. We all bared our souls in all of that lore. That’s all for you.”

Tyler nodded. “Second?”

“We want and need you to have a good time, baby. A real good time. It’s all in the book. By living, you add to this world. Your memories and places you go become part of this. It’s how our world keeps growing... and if we’re really here for eternity, we kinda need that growth.

“We want you to live the same kind of horny fun lifestyle we had. No harms, no fouls. No accidental kids or disease. You won’t hurt anyone, and we’ll cheer you on. Good times for all.” Diana’s fingers curled around the back of his neck. “Tonight, you’ve got all that magic settling into your body and spirit. Next time, we’ll have more control and more time. Lots more time.”

Her lips claimed his with equal measures of confidence and need. The sweet, electric taste of her tongue along his sent deep, shaking pleasure through his whole body. Her soft whimper told him all his vulnerability was mutual—bringing one more thrill. Though shaken and swept away by this older, powerful woman, Tyler knew he would rock her world, too.

“You’re about to wake up,” she warned against his lips.

“How do I stop?” he murmured back.

“You can’t. It’s too much energy running through you. That’s how it works.”

“I don’t want to go.”

“I know. I’ll be with you in the book. You’ll be back when you sleep again, and there are other ways here. This place is yours now, too. I’ll be here for you. Me, or one of the others who fell for you tonight.”

Tyler blinked. “Wait, what?”

She kissed him again. “Be safe. And have fun.”

Better Magic
Chapter Three
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Intimate Harmony. Nearly all the text was Shujing's, except for the note at the top from Diana: *Lastful Learning*, with a naughty smiley face.

Trust opens us. Pleasure binds us. Scent and taste bring memory. Intimacy teaches more.

Breathe deeply and embrace your desires. Touch your lover's senses. Kiss their body from neck to groin and then taste your lover's sex. Invest your every sense in their pleasure. The magic brings deeper learning, deeper understanding. You will adopt your lover's pleasures in sex and more. You will learn to move with them naturally, their boundaries, and habits. One tryst forms years of understanding, yet the joys of discovery remain new.

An open lover may teach much more.

Tyler read the page twice, imagining Shujing's voice. Then he opened his eyes to hotel sheets, blonde hair, and Nicole's head on her pillow facing him. Morning light slipped past the edges of their balcony door curtains. Perhaps late morning light, for all he knew.

Wait, thought Tyler. *I read that...?* Nothing had moved in his sleep, including the big magical book on his nightstand. He remembered literal hours of sex with Nicole, then Diana—*Wow. Diana*—and then the page? As with the other spells and journals, there was more to read, but he remembered what stood out.

The words intrigued more than his imagination. His body stirred.

Turning back, he found Nicole's green eyes and grin. "Hey. Sorry if I woke you," he said.

"Mn-nh," she murmured. "Been awake. Thinking."

"About?" he asked, but her grin already answered before the question left his mouth. Tyler leaned over her, planting a soft kiss on her lips, and then he dragged the sheet downward along her naked body. Full, fantastic breasts held his attention, along with a taut belly and athletic figure. She seemed to look at herself, too, given the way their eyes met in a shared upward turn.

He knew she wanted more. Knowing that was as amazing as seeing her naked body.

"Try some magic from the book?" That still seemed worth asking even if he knew the rest.

"Did you sneak a peek when I was asleep?" she asked. Her interest was plain.

"More like it snuck into my brain. Starts with a little goofy move, but it seems fun."

Her mouth quirked with amusement. "I trust you."

He expected her to ask for an explanation. Instead, she wanted no delays. Nicole kept thrilling him. It made him want to do this more. Tyler kissed her softly, then withdrew slightly to close his eyes and breathe deeply as the page instructed. Centering seemed like the obvious purpose.

“Whoa, so this is *serious* sex magic?” Nicole teased.

“God damn it,” Tyler laughed. “We don’t have to.”

“No, no, I want to,” said Nicole. “Couldn’t help it. Sorry. I want the sex magic. Let’s go.”

“I don’t think it’s a ‘let’s go’ sort of thing, either.”

“Okay. I’m sorry. Seriously. I want to.” She still grinned back at him. “I want you.”

A sigh helped him transition out of their laughs. She didn’t mess with him for it, or when he tried again: closed eyes, deep breath, and then another kiss. It seemed like the natural place to start. That made him think this wasn’t meant to be such a ritual at all, apart from the sequence of targets. Nicole opened her mouth to welcome his tongue, and gladly accepted the kiss to her left ear. She’d liked that every time he did it last night, too. Tyler brushed back her hair to kiss the other ear—unexpected, but not odd.

“Close your eyes,” he murmured, and then kissed one eyelid, then the other. The brush of his nose against hers was at least a natural part of that.

“Okay. Little weird,” she softly laughed, but then his mouth claimed hers for a deeper, longer kiss. His tongue slid against hers. Nicole’s breath caught. A shiver ran through her. Regardless of play, she’d been this responsive to him all along. They both loved it. The kisses to her neck left her writhing. Her hands caressed his naked back and sides and ass.

Already, each kiss felt deeper and more meaningful. Tyler gave it all the attention it deserved, and then moved to her neck, lingering for more gasps and tremors from his partner. Likewise, his trail of kisses down her chest drew wordless delight, particularly for his attention to her breasts—not mentioned in the spell, but it felt right. Nicole clearly loved it. Tyler loved it, too. He carried on.

Nicole read the cues of those kisses and spread her legs. As if from another page of his book, though, Tyler knew that hope was tentative. Most guys only wanted to impress with this pleasure and then quit all too soon. Others merely pretended to like it. Some were good, of course, but she never knew until they tried.

She trembled harder as his tongue ran through her thin strip of blonde hair to reach her lips. The first taste of her thrilled him. Their night simply hadn’t played out in this direction, but Tyler never had any problem going down on a partner. Nicole was better than any from the start. He immediately liked her scent and taste. He liked her. A lot.

Soft, almost teasing licks and kisses had her panting and almost pleading with each breath. Tyler escalated with a longer, wetter downward lick, and then a kiss. Ideas came in a rush that he *felt* before he thought them: Nicole wanted this badly, knew this was magic and wanted to explore, and trusted him deeply. She'd had great sex with other guys. She hadn't been able to really *trust* those others and let herself go. He was different.

Their trust came from first impressions and then the wild rush of his "Honest Charm," but it *was* honest. Every notion she had about Tyler was entirely true. Her sentiments were fair. He knew both sides of that now. It was almost an afterthought amid her rush of desire.

"More," she moaned. Her fingers ran through his hair along her scalp. "More!"

The slow buildup turned to a full make-out between her legs. Nicole moaned in wild approval. Tyler covered her with his full mouth, kissing and probing and loving every second almost as much as she did. His breath deepened with her scent and her taste. He focused on her pleasure, but found his own. Without trying, he learned.

Rather than sliding his fingers into the action, Tyler found a way to support himself and spread his hands along the sides of her ass, then up her hips. He felt her desires guide him. He felt her wants. Tyler's hands found her breasts and spread to claim and cover them in a mutual thrill.

Gorgeous. Thoughts of her beauty filled his mind. Her thoughts. Not read from her mind, more emotions and ideas than words, but just as clear. *Sexy. Hot slutty porn star gorgeous.*

"Yes. Oh yes," she hissed as she enjoyed him. Nicole wasn't conscious of the magic's effects, but she opened to him willingly. More than willingly.

Kiss me. Fuck me with that tongue. Worship me. Make me feel hot.

Nicole knew her beauty. She valued it. She'd worked for her looks, trading services for magic in one of the best deals she'd ever made. It started with trepidation like many of her early steps into the night side, but she never regretted it. The deal involved someone intimidating, sketchy, but alluring, and ultimately worthy of trust. She still owed, in a way, and didn't mind. She enjoyed this bargain.

None of that held details. Some of it remained entirely private. Kissing, probing, and groping his partner, Tyler gave it all little thought at the time. It only settled in the back of his mind. But he learned how Shujing's spell respected boundaries and privacy. Tyler learned only what Nicole was *willing* to share, whether she consciously thought of it or not.

She wanted Tyler to know a lot.

More more fuck me kiss me yes. Like that. Yes! Her eyes opened wide and rolled back. Her body soared with the tongue penetrating and exploring her. *Hands on my tits feel so good. Yes.*

Nicole wanted this all along. Not just tonight, but from her first steps. She'd invested in her beauty because she wanted it and the pleasures it could bring. She wanted sex, wanted to get fucked and worshipped... and wanted her freedom and independence respected. All the caveats. All the rest. She'd gotten most of that, but not without bumps along the way. Tonight felt like an unequivocal victory, even with Tyler's inexperience with magic and intrigue. They could fix that. She wanted to help, because she wanted more of him. More of this. *God, more of this.*

Focus required no effort. Tyler had a great time, drinking in her beauty through every sense other than sight. The first hint of a crick in his neck meant nothing in light of this. Nicole moaned and shivered, building from hope to inevitability. *Yes*, she pleaded silently. *Yes yes* "Yes! Yes!"

Tyler eased, but held on as the taste of her pleaded. Nicole thrashed and moaned through her orgasm—her first orgasm. Only the precursor to more. He felt and tasted her potential, sensed the greater pleasure that awaited if he hung on and pleased her as she wanted. Tyler let her shudder, let her ease, her breath relaxing... and kissed her cunt deeply again.

"Oh fuck," Nicole moaned in surrender. Her body wound up. Her spirit pleaded.

Though Tyler never thought he had a particularly long or gifted tongue, he probed and hooked into exactly the right spot. Three beckoning strokes set her off. Harder this time.

Images and wordless context flashed through the back of his mind as he enjoyed her ride: a pickup truck, a clumsy date, flirtation that turned out to be half joking and half settling for less. A funeral. Dreary work at a register. Classes. A trip to the city. A stairway at night to a basement bar. Smiles. Thrills. An offer, a run through dark hallways among silhouettes, a pile of cash and a few favors. Someone sneaks her into a police shooting range for lessons. More work. More excitement. Rooms with powerful people. A fancy spa. Sex. A yacht at night on a glittering coast.

The terminal last night. A warning. Imposing men at all the wrong angles to be coincidence, with eyes and hands in the wrong place to be friendly.

A new, actual friend. Glorious pleasure.

Nicole moaned and gasped through it all. Tyler held steady and coaxed her along to make it last, and she knew it.

One other thrill ran through Tyler as Nicole convulsed and moaned: deep, intimate confidence with her. He took nothing for granted, but he knew that confidence was entirely valid. And welcome.

* * *

“The first benefit I learned was mutual vitality,” Tyler read out loud. The text was Elizabeth’s. “My first lovers awoke healthier, stronger, and no worse for lack of sleep. So did I. We found new stamina and even resilience. Eventually, I realized I had not been sick in years. Before learning magic, I was taught much about ‘man’s seed’ creating new life. I thought perhaps the magic turned that life to something else. Then I laid with women and found no difference. Perhaps it is not about creation at all.”

Upright against the pillows beside Tyler, Nicole looked at herself, then Tyler, then herself again. “Well, I feel fucking fantastic, so I guess that checks out. The book just flipped right to that?”

“Yeah,” said Tyler. His eye had gone straight to that passage near the middle of the right-side page, too. Others added margin notes. Nicolas said the vitality lasted a day without renewal and general health a little longer. Aisha drew an icon for a page filled with her delightful experiments on the matter.

Diana added a shorter line: *The plumbing doesn’t change results, but we all sure seem to feel like our plumbing is the best possible.* He didn’t read that out loud.

“That’s not really the question you asked, though.” Tyler put his fingers to the pages.

“Nah. It’s fine. I asked how you’re so good, and...” Nicole gestured to the book.

“I like to think it’s a *little* natural,” he only half-joked.

“Oh, it’s obviously natural in part. I’ve been with ‘all endowment, no skill’ before. But c’mon.” Her mouth turned to a smirk and her eyes tilted toward his lap, covered by the book and the sheet. “Unless you’re saying it was little before tonight?”

“Hah! No. No, that’s all me. Performance is boosted. Can’t deny that. Nothing new to the equipment, though.” He couldn’t resist her humor or his own joke: “Okay, maybe ten or twenty percent new but don’t tell anyone.”

Nicole laughed. He liked her laugh. She liked a little self-deprecation, or maybe just humility.

“The spell I tried this morning was like a getting-to-know-you thing.” He turned the pages to find it.

“Nah, don’t,” said Nicole. “Don’t spoil it. Maybe I’ll change my mind later. I think I don’t want to know right now.”

Tyler shrugged. “Whenever you want.”

“Okay. It’s almost ten. We can’t stay here all day,” she said, though she plainly considered it. “We should talk to my client and get this straightened out, and then we can get on with our lives. Think I want a shower even if you can clean us up with magic. You can get our clothes, right?”

“Sure. That seemed easy.” Tyler got out of bed, meaning to gather the clothes spread halfway across their floor. On a hunch, he tried the spell first: three wiping motions of his hand with a soft, low whistle. Neither of them had gotten particularly dirty and he cleansed them before they’d left the airport, but the garments on the floor relaxed and lost their wrinkles. It all seemed straight out of the laundry. “Wow, that’s convenient.”

“It really is. I might have to borrow you for domestic reasons.” Nicole picked up her phone, walked around the foot of the bed fully nude—and grinned. “Caught you looking.”

“Yes, because god damn,” said Tyler.

“You’re not too bad, either. Even relaxed,” she said with an obvious downward glance. “Ten or twenty percent, huh?”

He let that go. “My body is all early-twenties metabolism. Nothing to be proud of.”

“There’s nothing to criticize, either. Big muscles are more power fantasy than sex. You aren’t shy, even naked. That’s hotter than big gains.”

“Thanks” It was easy to take the compliment—first because of the night they’d shared, but then he realized how natural it felt. He knew not to make a big deal out of it. He knew Nicole liked attention, but not too much, and not gushing. Given how much he liked her, his natural impulses would have pushed toward some romantic move to make this serious. Everything he’d learned told him otherwise. More than that, the correction felt natural. *Play it cool. She’ll like that way better than getting sappy or serious.*

“You’re proud, though,” he observed. “Your looks. Nothing wrong with it. You said they were a payment?”

“Yeah. What I did for it was a better deed than some other jobs. More fun, too. I can’t tell you the story without permission. But yes, I’m proud. I wanted Hollywood A-list and I got it.” She passed him for the bathroom with a caress along his ass. “I like being naked. I like it better with the right audience.”

He watched, which is how he caught her pause at the bathroom door. She frowned mildly. “I don’t think we can share that shower even with magic.”

“Go ahead. We’re good.”

“Cool. Hey, are you hungry? I’m thinking maybe we get room service rather than the restaurant. Less potential eyes on us that way. I’m not worried, but it’s worth being careful.”

“Sure. That sounds—uh, are you still buying?”

“Yes, dork,” she laughed. “You’re broke. I get it. This isn’t money on the nightstand, either.”

“We’re good, just being clear. Er, wait.” Tyler nodded to the door. He could still see lines and designs in faint light along the doorframe and the corners from their privacy spell. “With the magic I put on the room, I dunno if room service will find us.”

“Hah! Yeah, I guess that’s true. Okay. I doubt anyone wants to start a mess in the hotel restaurant. Cops around here are bound to be jumpy after last night. I’ll be quick.” She moved into the bathroom and closed the door.

“God *damn*,” Tyler repeated softly. Sudden magic, people trying to kill him, and his life in shambles could all take a back seat to someone like her. *Can I just make her happy for a living? Can that be my career?*

They’d only met last night, and already had much more sex than conversation.

Play it cool, he thought again. *She needs to know you’ll be chill and walk away if this doesn’t work out. She’ll be more interested once she sees that. Don’t get mushy yet.*

And if it doesn’t work out, you’re practically married in someone else’s afterlife. To a goddamn sorcerer-queen... who’s cheering you on.

One thing at a time, Tyler decided. He picked his clothes up off the floor and set them on the bed, then Nicole’s. He stopped when Nicole’s jacket released something with a thump to the floor. The Sig Sauer P365 landed on the carpet turned safely away from him.

Small, simple, easily concealed. The extended magazine brought the capacity to twelve rounds.

Tyler had handled a couple guns under supervision at the range. He’d played video games. None of that taught him manufacturers or models. His expertise stopped at the difference between revolvers and semi-autos... except now it didn’t.

He picked up the gun with natural confidence. The manual safety was on. He kept his finger off the trigger, weapon pointed away from the walls and potential guests on the other side. Tyler pressed the mag release, pulled the magazine, and then pulled the slide back to make sure nothing was in the chamber. It all worked like so many other pistols of the same style.

The gun was almost new. Nicole had said she’d taken it from one of the ambushers. Now she was in the shower.

Tyler aimed the empty weapon at a few things in the room: the nightstand, the phone, the pitcher on the counter across from the bed. The Sig didn’t feel completely familiar, but he’d do fine if he needed.

An open lover may teach much more, he remembered from Shujing’s spell.

With that thought came another: he doubted Nicole had simply forgotten the loaded gun. She took her phone into the shower, probably to check messages while the water warmed up. But she trusted him with the gun in the room.

Every note about this new understanding carried a serious and sober undertone. Tyler felt competent with handling a weapon, not casual. Getting casual was stupid. That had to come from Nicole. He reloaded, wiped the gun for prints with his shirt, and put it back in the pocket of her leather coat. He felt no urge to snoop through her wallet or other pockets. He knew more than he deserved already.

* * *

“I’m from central California. We’ll leave it at that so you can’t point and laugh at a town,” Nicole said over her omelet.

“Wouldn’t have said anything. People are from where they’re from.” Tyler had reached the booth first, but let her have the seat with the best view of their surroundings as she preferred. It felt natural—as did their casual-but-aware exit from their room, and the extra step of space he gave her. She wasn’t paranoid and didn’t live like this. She was on a job. Still, half of these habits were more comfortable than the gun-handling. It was almost casual for her.

Even more than her gun-handling skills, Tyler seemed to have picked up Nicole’s vigilance. His eyes moved more. He looked down less. And he knew right where his backpack was beside him in the booth. The book was big and thick like an old encyclopedia and bound in thicker leather, but it barely showed within the backpack and seemed to weigh nothing. Then again, it had seemingly teleported into his hand more than once now. He stayed aware, but he didn’t need to think much of it.

He’d ordered the full eggs, bacon, and pancake combo partly at Nicole’s prodding. She was right. He was hungry.

“Half of my family has a chip on their shoulder about coastal elites and all that shit,” said Nicole. “The others are normal. Family nonsense isn’t why I moved away, but it’s on the list.”

“You wanted Hollywood A-list looks. Did you want the life, too?” asked Tyler.

“No,” she laughed. “I like being appreciated, but I never wanted to be famous. LA was the nearest big city—that, or San Francisco, but I knew a couple people here. Feels like ages ago.”

“Okay,” said Tyler. “Central California, only been in this nonsense for a few years. College before that? Jobs?”

“Eh. I wasn’t sure what I wanted to do, so I went the community college route. But even when I was ready to transfer, I just didn’t know. I didn’t want to waste time and tuition on something I wasn’t sure about. I did retail, bar service, reception...” Nicole shrugged. “Nothing with a direction. No calling. Not like nursing.”

“That might not have been my calling, either,” Tyler admitted. “I like helping people. Nursing fit, and it’s got career benefit stuff, so I went for it. Then every step of my training came with a lot of warnings about the system. All that burnout people talk about is real. I felt like I was getting it before I really started. I figured I could stick with it until I found something else, but then this stupid shit with my roommate happened. Now I’m not even sure another school will take me to finish my degree and my certs at all.”

“And now you’ve got this.” Nicole’s eyes tilted toward the pack at his side.

“I guess. For whatever ‘this’ means. Still don’t know. I guess it depends how your client and his competition take that, too.”

“I’m not worried about him, at least,” said Nicole. “For what it’s worth, I’ve been told most people *can* just walk away. Maybe not the vampires or anyone whose whole bodies are changed, but somebody said the nightside is a little like show biz—speaking of Hollywood,” she grinned. “If you let it go and start living like a normie, it’ll probably fade. Or maybe it lets *you* fade. Unless you’re wrapped up in circumstances or commitments, you kinda have to want to be here.”

“Circumstances like people trying to kill me over a book?” asked Tyler.

“Yeah. Exactly that, and things like that can spiral on and on. But if you can settle the external stuff, the rest is up to you. Maybe you can go back to nursing and you’re just the guy who ran into magic once. Or maybe you’re the sorcerer who also went to nursing school. Everybody came from somewhere.”

Thoughts of the night they’d shared stirred within him, along with the simple rush of sitting here with her. Thoughts of Diana and the lifestyles described in the book stirred him more. Yesterday, he barely knew how to handle tomorrow; now he knew some things he wanted intensely, and felt a low tremor of excitement to go get them.

Assuming that worked out, of course. “So if we’re meeting this client, can you tell me about him? You stopped using his name. I figured that meant something.”

“It’s my own rule, and not even that firm. Seems appropriate. You obviously haven’t forgotten. He’s a collector, like I said. I’m sure he uses at least some magic, but I couldn’t say how much or how strong he is. He’s got money. We’re headed for Bel Air. We tell him what happened, let him know the

book says you're the owner now and he's out of luck. We need to settle that before either of us can get on with our lives."

"You don't think he'll want to put me on the hook for all that money he's losing on this?" asked Tyler.

"I think he was certain enough about that book to pay big money, but there was always a chance it would turn out to be a nothingburger and he knew it. None of this is my fault or yours. Shit happens. He's a big boy. He'll get that. Also, two of the people he hired for this stabbed him in the back, and another one he hired died over it. This guy can stand up for himself, but he doesn't go looking for smoke."

"He just collects magic? Or magical stuff?"

"Obviously that leaves him with some tricks and options. He's just as interested in plain old money and privilege, too. And he's not a psycho."

"Okay. How do we do this? Do we need an appointment? I, uh. Don't have a car. I imagine you didn't park yours here at the airport, either."

"Hah. No. But I've got the same second ID I used for the room, and we're at an airport. We can rent a car. I'll call ahead, but we don't need an appointment. He's waiting for this." Nicole paused. "Remember how I told you the horny vibe from your book made sense? Lots of the nightside is like that."

"Yeah," said Tyler—this time warily. Her tone seemed to merit it.

"I wouldn't expect it. I wouldn't be surprised, either."

* * *

The well-manicured hedge and black privacy gate set Ashton's white, two-story contemporary "home" apart from the others along his lane. They were all big and fancy, but LA mansions could crowd each other thicker than humbler suburban homes. This one had some breathing space. About the humblest note of Ashton's mansion was that it sat at the base of the hillside rather than looming at the top.

The driveway inside the gate featured a few white statues, fountains, and two busy gardeners. Tyler missed the real feature at first glance. He simply wasn't the right audience.

Another clue came as soon as the front door opened. "Hello. Welcome. It's Nicole, correct?" asked a thirtysomething man of mixed heritage. "I'm Gary. We only met in passing. Hi." His bright smile

showed off perfect teeth—matching his perfect hair and perfectly-kept short beard. His white office shirt fit just tightly enough to show some brawn to his at-least-six-two frame, but rather than imposing, he offered a gentle, both-hands handshake. “I heard things got rough. Are you alright?”

“We are. Thank you,” answered Nicole.

“It’s only the two of you? Is anyone else coming?” Gary asked with a politely quick up-and-down look at Tyler. His soft warmth seemed natural, but the man also showed the sort of vigilance Tyler had picked up from Nicole.

“It’s only us. This is Tyler,” said Nicole.

“Pleasure.” Gary’s handshake turned to the second guest. He had a grip, but he didn’t test or try to impress Tyler.

“Nice to meet you. It’s, um. Impressive here,” said Tyler. It seemed like the polite thing. At Nicole’s suggestion, he brought the backpack, wearing it over one shoulder to hopefully seem casual.

“Oh, isn’t it? Love the first impression out here. The guys are doing such good work.” Gary nodded to the gardeners, but didn’t linger. “If I can show you inside, Ashton is finishing up a call. He’ll be right down. He doesn’t want to keep you waiting.”

The reference turned Tyler’s glance back to the gardeners. He almost noticed, but Nicole followed Gary. Tyler walked alongside her into a tall entrance with sweeping dual staircases and art on the walls... and then he started to get it.

Some of the art showed landscapes. The other frames held expert photography of nearly-nude and fully nude models. Male models.

Oh. Hub. Tyler had no interest in guys, but he’d have to be blindfolded to miss how fully *caked* Gary was from behind. Then the image of the two very fit and similarly endowed gardeners in their short shorts hit him again. *Remember how I told you the horny vibe from your book made sense?* Nicole had asked. Tyler pressed his lips together to hold back a laugh—entirely at himself rather than anyone else. *Okay, then. Bound to apply in all the other directions, too.*

Gary brought them to a spacious living room of plush furniture and similar art. Tall windows looked out to the pool deck. If the hallway art hadn’t pushed Tyler’s brain into understanding, the handful of athletic and very well-groomed men around the pool likely would have done the trick.

“Have a seat wherever you like,” said Gary, still the picture of hospitality. “Ashton doesn’t seem to have a favorite. Can I offer you any drinks?”

“I’m fine, thanks.” Nicole claimed a seat on the couch with a side-view of the pool.

“Same. Thank you, though.” Tyler took the spot beside her. He set the backpack at his feet.

“Great. Like I said, Ashton is—”

“Here, actually,” said a newcomer from an adjoining hallway. Though presentable, Ashton didn’t quite measure up to the grooming and magazine-ready business casual of Gary or the young East Asian man walking with him. Charcoal grey jeans, a broken-in black Bauhaus t-shirt, black stubble, and long-ish black hair struck a different image. He was at once of the same age yet older than his companions. In charge, thought Tyler.

None of them gave any affectations. No one played a stereotype. If not for the art and the other scenery, Tyler might have thought nothing of it, but he did have those clues along with Nicole’s hints. With all of that, he saw the connections.

“Nicole, I want to say it’s good to see you, but I’ve already had warnings besides your own,” said Ashton. “Who’s this?”

“Ashton, this is Tyler,” she answered. “He’s new, and he’s relevant. Nobody else is coming—I hope,” she added with a stern note.

“I’ve gotten a couple bitchy calls and a story that smells like bullshit.” Ashton took the chair opposite Nicole and Tyler with the ornate glass coffee table between them. Smoothly, Gary and Ashton’s other companion took his sides just behind the seat. “Nobody’s here waiting for you, and nobody’s coming as far as I know. I’m not worried about it. Uh. Tyler, hi. Not to be rude, but Nicole, should I assume we speak freely with Tyler here? He’s that kind of relevant?”

“Yeah,” said Nicole.

“Okay. Gary, Michael, could you make sure none of the others wander in here? I’m not worried, but it should be a private conversation.”

“I already gave the heads-up. I can watch out if you like,” said Gary.

“I don’t think we should leave you alone.” Michael put a hand on Ashton’s shoulder, but his eyes stayed on Nicole. “She’s got a gun.”

At that, Gary flashed one affectation: his head turned, his chin tilted downward, and he gave Michael a look that said, *Seriously?*

Ashton’s eyelids fluttered in mild annoyance. “We know, Michael. It’s fine.”

Nicole smirked. “I’ve had a busy week.”

“It really is fine,” Ashton told her. “Whatever. You’re back, and you’re okay, I hope? What happened at the airport? And do you have it?”

“I’m fine, but everything else is a mess, including *it*,” said Nicole. “Pierre, Dragos, Ming, and I made it to the airport as planned, but Pierre and Dragos sold us out to someone. I’m assuming it’s

Sorrentino and his vampires. Someone *else* was at the airport to jump us, too. Ming spotted trouble only a few steps off the plane and I think the two sides panicked and ambushed each other. The lights went out and it was chaos. We had a three-way fight, and our team was half traitors.”

“Jesus.” Ashton scratched his hairline with obvious irritation. “Pierre called me. Told me you had all been jumped, but he also said *you* shot him and took the book.”

“I did, *after* I saw him and Dragos kill Ming,” said Nicole. “And after one of the others killed Dragos. The other guy died with him. I took out one or two more. Maybe. At least one other guy on the opposition got ashed, which is how I’m sure some were vampires. The body language said Pierre was on their team.”

“Fine. Fuck,” Ashton exhaled. “Look, I don’t want to be insensitive, and I’m listening, but what about the book? How is that a mess?”

“It’s here,” said Nicole, “but it decided it belongs to Tyler now.” Her eyes turned to her companion.

“It decided...?” asked Ashton.

“I wasn’t involved in any of this until it all happened,” said Tyler. “No magic, no guns or crime, nothing. I got off a plane, lights went out and people started shooting, and then a glowing book flies open in front of me with my name inside it. Then a guy tackles me, I hit him with the book, and his head explodes in ashes.”

He reached for the backpack and its zipper, but paused for a look to Michael still standing at Ashton’s shoulder. “It’s in here. I don’t have a weapon.” The comment drew a raised brow from Michael and a silent snort from Gary. Tyler pulled the book from his backpack, again noticing the difference in size only as it came into the open. He set it down on the coffee table between himself and the hosts.

Ashton thought better of reaching for it. “Would you mind opening it?”

Tyler complied. He felt more confident about this than in his first discussion with Nicole. The book opened to a page filled with hand-written text and a simple triangular diagram of concept. Nothing glowed, nor did any pages flip on their own.

The growing frown on Ashton’s face seemed to validate Tyler’s confidence. Again hesitating and showing frustration, Ashton asked, “May I?”

“As far as I know,” said Tyler. He shrugged at Ashton’s continued frown. “I’m new at this. I haven’t had a chance to read more than a few little bits.”

Ashton dared a light touch, turning one page, then another. Then several. He fanned through more pages. “Where is your name?”

“The inside cover,” said Tyler.

Ashton turned to the cover, and then the first page in case Tyler meant something different. He seethed. “You saw your name? It’s there now? You see text?”

“Yeah. You don’t, huh?”

“No, I—!” Ashton bit back something rude. He straightened in his seat, controlling his breath and looking away. Then his gaze returned to Nicole.

“Tyler managed some stealthy magic from the book,” Nicole explained. “I got us out of the fight. He got us out of the airport and the police dragnet. We laid low until I contacted you.” That left out more than one bit Tyler remembered, including how she’d at least seen some text within the book. He knew Ashton had been up to date about the book’s status from the point of sale until the airport incident.

“You’re pretty cool about this for someone who’s never been involved in anything like it before last night,” Ashton said to Tyler.

“Um. Thanks?” Tyler shrugged.

“What else?” asked Ashton. “It just fell open and had your name in it? You found some stealth magic? That’s not all.”

“It’s a journal of the, um, previous owner’s experiences and some magic,” said Tyler. “I don’t think they wanted that shared with everyone. But yes, the book fell open in front of me with my name on it and some text that said it belonged to me now. Also, I literally forgot the thing to run for my life. It jumped into my hand all on its own when I hit that vampire. I had to be thirty yards away. Maybe more.”

Fuming, then twitching, Ashton looked away. It didn’t help. “I’m sorry. This is gonna be rude. Babes, it’s immature, but I need to throw something.”

Without a second look, Gary pulled a little bronze statue of a man on a horse from the nearest bookshelf and put it in Ashton’s hand. Ashton stood and flung it out of the room, where it crashed into the glass-covered frame of one of his semi-nude pictures. After a moment to run his fingers through his scalp and breathe angrily, he claimed a slight measure of calm. “Sorry,” he grunted. “Don’t let anyone else clean up after me. I’ll do it. God *damn it*! I paid a fortune for—” He spun to face Tyler. “Do you know how much I paid for that book? Did she tell you?”

“Yeah,” said Tyler.

“So now you know magic. Stealth magic, and whatever else you’re not telling me. You’re new to this? No connections?”

Tyler took his cues from Nicole's unbroken calm. "None that I know. Is that weird?"

"Is that—?" Ashton stopped himself, but twitched through several aborted gestures.

"Is it weird?" asked Nicole. "I wasn't connected, either."

"Neither of you are out millions of..." Ashton fumed. "No and yes. I've seen lots of family and other connections. I didn't have any."

"How'd this start for you?" asked Tyler.

"Hah! You want that story? You're playing all this close to the chest for a novice. What have you told me? What have I gotten here?"

Tyler couldn't fault him there. He considered what he'd learned. "The book says magic is strongest in comfort and joy," said Tyler. "It says magic isn't about power or conquest. It's better in private, and better in happiness."

"Hff. Uh-huh," Ashton muttered. "Comfort and joy aren't so easy when people trash you and kick when you're down for who you are. Or for no reason at all. It's a nice thought, but some people have bigger struggles."

"We're talking about a journal written by a black woman in America," Tyler said tactfully. "I figure she had that part in mind, too. In fact, I'm sure she did."

Ashton grunted, folded his arms, looked away... and found the pool and the collection of guys. Another glance took in Gary and Michael, watching and waiting patiently at his back.

"I was a poor white trash 1970s Indiana kid. Everyone was afraid of the creepy neighbor house bordering the trailer park. The other kids said they'd stop picking on me if I snuck in to see what's what, so I did. The bottomless hole in the basement whispered to me and taught me things—like stealth magic." Ashton tugged on his shirt as if to cool off. Gary and Michael looked surprised, as did Nicole, but he shrugged. "The hole stopped talking before I finished high school. The planets went out of alignment. After that, I was on my own, piecing together whatever I could. I think I did a pretty good job, but..." He waved at the book. "I'm out millions this time. Fuck."

Silence fell. Gary and Michael obviously had their own thoughts, but kept quiet to presumably share them in private. Tyler wasn't sure what to say. Nicole spoke up: "You knew this was a gamble from the start."

"Yeah, I did," Ashton grumbled, "but it was a reasonable gamble. I knew she was connected. I knew she had to be tuned in, if not a whole sorcerer like she clearly was. I was right about all that. So what do I get for it?" he asked Tyler.

"I never agreed to anything with you," said Tyler. "I don't see how I owe you anything."

“I just covered your tuition to magic school, sport. I think I’m entitled to something in return.”

Tyler frowned. “I’m unemployed and I have two hundred and fifty bucks to my name.”

“Fuck. Figures. I mean, what can you do now?”

“Besides stealth magic?” asked Nicole. “He stumbled into this. He’s a normal guy.”

“You can do a lot with just stealth magic. It’s all I had at first.” Ashton made a dismissive wave.

“Look, I’m not talking about breaking your kneecaps like some loan shark, but I think you owe me something in all this.”

“I don’t,” said Nicole. “You gambled and lost, but at least you got answers. Tyler didn’t ask for any of this. People tried to kill him. They still might. We don’t know who else is after this book, unless you’ve figured that out yet?”

“You’re quick to defend him,” Michael pointed out quietly.

“People tried to kill me, too,” said Nicole. “This was supposed to be a simple retrieval job, remember, Ashton? Now I’m wrapped up in any fallout to come. I did my job when the rest of my team either betrayed you or died. I expect to be paid.”

“Yeah, I’ll pay what I promised, that’s fine,” Ashton sighed. “*Your* share, not everyone else’s. I’ll put Ming’s toward funeral expenses or cleanup or whatever. If he’s got family, I can pass it on. No sense burning that bridge. Pierre can go to hell. Maybe Dragos is already there. I don’t know who the other parties are yet, though Sorrentino seems likely. He does shit like this.

“You’re unemployed?” Ashton asked, his attention returning to Tyler. “Fine. Figure out what you can do for me and we can talk. You’re in this side of life now. You’re gonna want friends.”