

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 else gave “prepare for arrival” instructions. Oakland to LAX wasn't a long flight, but late-night travelers still needed a moment to rouse. Tyler had no more luck with sleep than he had with delaying the landing—or the inevitable.

The cabin was still dim. Cramped passengers fussed in their seats with belongings and seat belts. The mother in the center seat beside Tyler woke her little boy, half-asleep against the bulkhead and 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 can afford that kind of attention at that level. Nobody cares.*

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

He didn't tell her any of that. They'd been through it already. *Mom* didn't care. *They kicked you out of school*, she'd said. *That's enough. “Nursing student” is a good way to show we're just 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 like overspending right now, but it was worth the effort to secure a ride from the airport... right until the 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 \$830.47 must be paid within 30 days..."

"Fuuuck," Tyler groaned quietly. He didn't even have a quarter of that to his name. Then he remembered the little boy in his row, who stared 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 wasn't in the same rush, but bodies instantly blocked him anyway. He waited through the family of four, the tour group in Disney swag, 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 the unfriendly scowl on his face 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 like she was amused by her companion's attitude. The other two guys in the group may as well have been bodyguards.

Model? Movie star? Tyler thought. Maybe his gloomy mood tilted his judgment, and maybe he only wanted something more pleasant to fixate on, but... *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 didn't want to hang on through his upheaval or for something long-distance. 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 on his way up out of the seat. 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—all 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 late-night runway provided any sort of guidance, and even some lights right outside the terminal had gone out. On immediate memory alone, Tyler gave up on his path and took a right toward the row of chairs. *Mass shooter? No, more than one. Shooter against cops? Terrorists? What the fuck?* As quickly as the labels came to mind, they 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 in the darkness only 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.

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

Gunfire and frightened cries continued. With the barest adjustment to the shadows, Tyler had the outlines of the fallen men. He 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 thought, sweeping it off his shoulders. His first classes had taught him to check the scene before applying aid, but fuck it, he was already here.

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 actually 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 to you in your own language.” Text burned into Tyler’s brain faster than he actually read. A list on the left page caught his attention, too. Letters burned into gold at the bottom of a set of names.

Elizabeth Rolfe

Nicolas Du Bois

Aisha al-Amiriya

Li Shujing

Diego de Aguirre

Diana Alice Stewart

Tyler Bonham

The last appeared as he read it, 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 good deal of blood that already pooled around them both—one shot three times through the chest, the other with a knife deep in the center of 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 without general freak-out. Both of these guys were hurt far 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 had already pulled the door shut. Others were stuck behind pillars, terminal counters, or shitty chairs that wouldn’t stop a bullet. Tyler’s hoodie and jeans wouldn’t protect him, nor would the contents of his backpack.

“Out of the—aagh! Crawford, help, she’s—hurrrk!” 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 leaped 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.

As soon as he spun and looked for his next move, he realized his night vision would be shot all over again—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. She’d spoken Korean over Facetime at the departure gate. Now she clutched her ankle as if she’d been knocked down in the rush to escape.

The gunfire paused. The hall and places to hide weren’t far. Tyler could make it on his own 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.

Tyler didn’t look back. Running with another person in his arms took all his 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 all the way out of the entire scene. 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.”

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

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

“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 looked back down the hall and considered, if only for a second, going back for someone else. It was a silly thought, of course. 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 hit him across the head and 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. Just a 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 assailant keeled over beside Tyler 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 backward as 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’d said it, but he didn’t know what else to tell a lunatic with a sword... or the next figure in the parade of assholes coming up from the gate area. With so little light, Tyler saw 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?” The Frenchman didn’t stop Tyler from getting to his feet. It wasn’t like Tyler would get anywhere before he got stabbed, anyway, but the answer had sparked interest.

“He opened it.” The woman behind the Frenchman sounded more like a local, with a cool control unshaken by all this chaos. Darkness obscured her face, but he 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 back at the gate where it all began—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 fit, 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.

“Not as badly as I’ve shot him.” Nicole tilted her head. “Less than others would shoot you, too. I’d rather not hurt you at all. But I am on a job, and I’m in a hurry. 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 back the way he’d come, but it apparently wasn’t for him. The bagel shop was as dark and deserted as everywhere else in the terminal, but at

least its doors were open. 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 and lacking for windows and exterior light. Tyler couldn't see a damn thing. "Left," Nicole directed firmly. "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. I wondered where that came 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 seemed to hold 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, and had her gun pointed right at him. Tyler pulled the wallet from inside his jacket and the phone from his back pocket. 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 quick 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 one of the others on our team sold us out to some other 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 the ambush in the terminal. 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, and they’re bound to be looking for us.” 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’re less bad than they are, but you don’t know who they are?”

“I’d never have started a fight in a whole fucking airport. This isn’t even my gun. Like I said, somebody panicked, or they’re psychotic. Anyway, the other guys seem like a mixed team. The one you dusted is definitely a vampire, and also a raging asshole. No reason to feel bad about him. You did the world a favor.”

They passed a few doors, mostly storage and facilities rooms and a couple offices. The latter appeared along one side of the corridor as 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. The office had to belong to some supervisor type. 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.

"You've got keys to the airport offices?" 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."

Tyler couldn't fault her there. He didn't want to deal with cops, either—especially after the last month. He also noted the 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." He'd scanned the plane for her when they boarded, too, entirely out of casual appreciation for her looks. Now he wasn't excited about meeting her.

"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 in a way it didn't for 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, right? 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 knows what's up and didn't try to hurt you. I didn't hurt anyone else 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 outside, 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 limited 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 had more to say, but as if guiding him, some lines dimmed while others at the bottom shined brighter. “Open your hand toward each entrance and pull away as your fingers close as if grasping air. ‘Shh’ for three seconds. Focus.”

Tyler turned from the book and 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 this 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 out loud, keeping his voice down: “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, raising a finger. They waited as heavy footsteps approached, and then heard 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 “Hang In There” 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 murmured. He 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. Without the book making its own decisions, the page he wanted wasn’t hard to find. “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. That’s what I mean. He paid like this was San Francisco real estate rather than doing anything really dirty. I don’t know how Ashton 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 the path of 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 of themselves. 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 point it out. “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. Her eyes met Tyler’s. “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, either. She listened at the door again.

Tyler bit back his own sentiments on the subject. 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. All he had was this book.

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 juicy details—later,* he thought, and meant both parts of that. 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, saying 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—because 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. Any of this.” 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. *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?”

Nicole blinked and shook her head. “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 or figure it out. 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. Too many puffed-up speeches, too much snobbery. Not one guest worth my time, but 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 really tempted to keep them. They sure seem up for it. Those two mauled me in that closet like—”

He turned the page. Again, he’d have been happy 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.

“I’ve got friends to crash with, 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 still 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, and then we couldn't stop grinning at each other across the help desk. He got an even 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 other entry.

“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. This 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 to her. 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. She devoured more. 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 him up until that moment. Now the

strongest erection of his life was free—until 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 just became as much about me as you.” She kissed him one more time, 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, stroking him while she settled in. Her eyes held his as she brought him toward her mouth... and inside. Like their first kiss, she readied him with a wet, feather-light touch 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-*hmm*,” 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?” 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. The rhythm and motion between them 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 the affection and intimacy were strong, and entirely returned.

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 left the office. Tyler used magic to clean themselves and the office—not a particularly visible effect, but he and Nicole both 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 as he and Nicole approached.

“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 guards didn’t look their way on the 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, just—*

As they reached the tape, one guard 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 guard. 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? Yes.” 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 score—extra-heavy security and police presence aside—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 created by the closed doors of 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. His breath deepened. 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 would still be at work. He figured nobody would know about the airport fight yet. Reflexively, he 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 well 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 or while in passing. He’d never been a guest before.

“Okay, gimme a second,” the clerk murmured as he 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. “Honestly, I’m just 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, though. 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 immediately.

“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?”

“Don’t know what I’d want besides food. Your kitchen would be closed now, right?” he asked.

“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 turned to the cabinets behind him, 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. Two in the morning and probably still in bed, and 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 this late. 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 now, but...” His eyes met Nicole’s in brief, 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: “Kinda taken care of. 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.

Nicole grinned again. The elevator doors opened. She entered and stayed facing the window that would overlook the atrium as the elevator rose. Then 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 knew he was done from his reflection against the glass. She 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 that nearly went deep, 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 some of 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 in one hand, 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. Even if you just learned it, 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 already had great sex once already. She couldn’t be clearer about what she wanted now. “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. That good?”

“Sure.” Tyler saw the sense in that. Regardless of how he yearned and 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 huffed out 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 took the lead, and 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 hoodie and tugging lightly on the t-shirt beneath, Nicole murmured, “Open up.” In a single move, she swept both garments 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 that before,” Nicole scoffed.

“Oh, I’m never turning you down for that. 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. Nnf!" 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 on the bed just past Nicole's face as if he'd set it open right there rather than on the dresser out of reach. Text faintly glowed with another helpful touch, yet he realized he didn't need it. Tyler reached out toward the door on memory and instinct. 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.

"Mmmrrmhl!" 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 took another moment to savor this. He felt incredible. Nicole kept writhing, kept meeting and encouraging the grind of his hips and the thrust of his cock, and 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 wasn't impersonal, either. 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. Sex became intimacy 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 breeze of the Hudson River. 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. Somehow, 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 his right, where 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 thinking about it, 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, turning 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.

All of the night’s events stuck with him: the airport, the fight, Nicole. All the baggage of the past few weeks and months remained near his thoughts, too. Despite the wild night, the new calm brought back the rest of his young, 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?”

“Like that, but deeper, and more natural here,” she answered. “Might be coming on too strong, but 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 reached up to stroke 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.

“Well, in the sense that you see. 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.” Tyler looked to the crowd again. 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.

“Most of what you see is real, but limited. If you move past my memories, most doors will only open up to something abstract and simple. 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.”

“Where are the real people, then? The rest from the book, and... you said others?”

“A few. Dozens, not hundreds. All of them close to us. Right now it’s 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.”

“You’re not alone. 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.

“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. *Schroedinger’s Cat, except it’s Schroedinger’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. “For you and for us. It’s not 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 smiled and 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.”

“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 longer 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. We both 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. Even then, magic doesn’t scale up much. 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 grinned in good humor—and 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. Put another pin in all that. We’ll get back to it, but you did everything right.” 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. 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 that or accepts this focus on joy. There are other forms of magic out there, and some 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?” asked Tyler. “Is that who we ran into tonight?”

“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 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, and 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. 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.

“Then you were on the plane. We could sense you. 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 time 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 shivered. He 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 handled it. 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 love that, too. You *really* love that. More than anything. 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, Nicolas and Diego included, but they know you aren’t into men. They still saw you’re worthy and that this will work. They’re not worried. I’m their lover, too, Tyler. Really theirs.” The stroke in his hair remained. “And 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 even be in the way? 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 them later to the same result.

“What do I need to do?” he asked.

“Mostly, live your life,” said Diana. “We don’t have orders or a quest. No hoops to jump through, though we might come back to some advice later. 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 along with all the lore in there. 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. We want you to know you can live just like us. No harms, no fouls. No accidental kids or disease. You won’t hurt anyone, and we’ll cheer you on. Good times for all.”

He didn’t need to ask what she meant by that.

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 new thrills through his whole body and deeper within. A 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 knew this would happen.”

“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.”