

The Magic  
Shop



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Justin Swapp

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A JUSTIN SWAPP NOVEL

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*For my children, who started all this.*



“Families are messy. Immortal families are eternally messy. Sometimes the best we can do is to remind each other that we're related for better or for worse...and try to keep the maiming and killing to a minimum.”

— Rick Riordan, *The Sea of Monsters*





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I'd like to thank all those people that made this book possible. To my wife, for her enduring patience, and to all my beta readers at TNBW for their scathing feedback. The book is better because of it. Finally, to Cat, Clain, Tim, Jared, and Brian for your part in getting me unstuck.









**M**arcus Fith sat at his desk trying not to notice a pair of narrow eyes staring at him from outside his classroom through a slat in one of the windows.

All around him twelve-year-olds and their parents shuffled into the cramped classroom for Exodus Middle School's last day before summer vacation, fanning the Nevada heat from their faces. His sister, Ellie, sat across from him, lost in the latest *Helena Hex, Witch Hunter* novel, or whatever

new fantasy book she had managed to scrounge up. Her book choices didn't do much to stop the rumors about their family.

The two chairs to either side of Marcus and Ellie remained empty.

Marcus slouched over his desk, pulled out his cell phone, and started thumbing a text message. Ellie was clearly zoned out to the commotion in the room, or the stranger watching them. She scowled over her book's spine, however, when her phone vibrated twice in the bag on her lap.

"What?" Ellie asked. "You realize I'm sitting across from you, right?"

"How do you even know that was me?"

"Because you're the only one that ever texts me."

Marcus lowered his voice. "Read it."

Ellie grabbed her phone and scanned the message. Her head darted toward the window.

"Could you be any more obvious?" Marcus hissed.

"Very funny. You made me look for some make-believe weirdo." Ellie kicked him under the table before returning to her book. "Happy?"



Marcus glanced up at the window and sighed. Sure enough, the stranger had vanished. Marcus wanted to explain himself, to let Ellie know that it wasn't a prank. But when he tried to remember exactly what he saw, how to describe it, his head began to hurt, and his mind felt cloudy. All he could picture was the stranger's penetrating, jade eyes.

He felt like an idiot. He would need more detail than that if he were to alert an adult.

*The jade eyes had disappeared... like magic.* That was all Marcus could think to say. He chuckled. Of course, he couldn't word it that way. Marcus and Ellie weren't allowed to make fun of magic.

Despite trying to distract himself, Marcus found himself observing the other kids leading their parents to their seats. He had hoped to avoid this. Now he couldn't help but imagine what they were feeling, or what they were thinking. He didn't want to care.

Mr. Diddley, Marcus and Ellie's teacher, had just walked up to their cluster of desks. He was a wide, squatty man with grey hair and a thick mustache. Underneath his tweed sports coat his girth tested

the blue and red suspenders that held up his worn khaki pants. He squinted at the empty desks next to Marcus and Ellie. "Marcus," Mr. Diddley said, the whininess draining any authority from his voice. He removed a pen and notepad from behind his shirt pocket protector and examined a checklist. Marcus was busy sending another text message. "You told your grandparents about the year-end Review tonight, didn't you?"

"Huh?" Marcus tilted his head, his eyes never leaving his cell phone. Ellie nudged him sharply, drawing his attention to Diddley's growing impatience. "Uh, yeah, Mr. Diddley," Marcus said mechanically. "I'm sure they'll be here soon. They're probably just closing up the shop." That last word hung in the air, leaving the room a little quieter.

"Good. I have a number of things I'd like to address with them." Mr. Diddley's eyes fell on Marcus's phone. Marcus had moved on to Alec Slider's latest app recommendation, so he didn't notice Mr. Diddley's disapproving glare.

“You should be more careful, Marcus,” Ellie said, setting her book on the desk. “You know how Mr. Diddley gets when you ignore him.”

“But I paid attention,” Marcus said. “Besides, he didn’t do any—”

Before he could finish, Mr. Diddley yanked the phone from his hand with surprising quickness, his arm striking like a fat snake in a tweed sleeve.

“What the—” Marcus shot up out of his chair and spun around, fists clenched. Before he realized who had actually taken his phone, Marcus was sure it was John Rackham. Marcus wasn’t the most popular kid in school. His family situation had been the cause of more than a little teasing. His grandparents weird shop didn’t help his reputation much either. *Typical bully behavior*, Marcus thought. He wasn’t sure what had happened, but he was sure of one thing—no one was stealing his phone.

Anger boiled to rage as Marcus realized who the real thief was. It infuriated him, but there was nothing he could do. Marcus watched Mr. Diddley strut away, cell phone wagging in his hand. He set it on his desk with a single mocking pat before sitting

in his desk chair, an old recliner that he had brought from home.

Still on his feet, knuckles white, Marcus oozed resentment. He glared at Mr. Diddley's yellow-toothed smile, and thought how he'd like to shove a toothbrush in his mouth and teach him how to use it.

"Sit down," Ellie tugged on his arm. "I'm sure he'll give it back after our meeting."

Marcus sunk back into his chair and slapped his desk. If Diddley noticed, he showed no sign of it. Evidently, when he set up the classroom projector, he put all his focus into it.

"Psst," a short, blond girl said from behind him. When Marcus turned around, she eyed the empty chairs near Marcus and Ellie. "Run out of family to bring to these things?" Marcus heard a smattering of snickers from the other kids and felt the heat rising to his face.

"Shut it, Elizabeth," whispered Marcus, and then he glanced over at the folks across from her. "Your 'good looks' must have scared my family away." Elizabeth Stratton was the most popular girl in

school, and the most vain. He knew that raising any question about her unfailing beauty would send her into a rage. He hoped so, anyway.

Instantly, Elizabeth bolted to her feet. The sudden movement startled Marcus. "When I'm done with you, meathead, you'll wish you had my family's good looks." Elizabeth raised her arms, her cat-like claws at the ready.

Elizabeth's father whirled around. "What's wrong, Lizzy?" Even with the man sitting, Marcus could tell he was tall and athletic, like he had more time to spend in the gym than the average working man.

Marcus didn't care how big her father was and left his seat anyway.

"That'll be quite enough, Marcus," a gentle, metered voice said. An older gentleman had just walked in wearing dark jeans, a collared shirt, and a sports coat around his portly frame. His blue eyes fixed on Elizabeth's father. Marcus made no argument, nor did he turn around before he sat down at his desk and mumbled a half-hearted apology to Elizabeth.

“Very good,” the man said, taking his place next to Marcus. A pleasant-looking woman of approximately the same age accompanied him. She wore a long, rust-colored dress accented by bulky, turquoise jewelry. Her bracelets and necklace clattered softly as she sat in the chair next to Ellie.

“There's no issue here,” the older man said to Elizabeth's father. Something about his words or his cold blue eyes seemed to have a calming effect on him, and he slowly settled back into his chair, almost bewildered, without another word.

“Grandma and Grandpa,” Ellie said, looking up from her book. “Glad you could finally make it.” She smiled broadly.

“Sorry we're late, dear, but we had to balance the till at the shop, you know,” Charlotte Fith explained to her grandchildren.

“Then it shouldn't have taken that long,” Marcus said under his breath. His grandpa's eyes narrowed as Marcus pointed at Mr. Diddley. “Grandpa, Mr. Diddley took my cell phone.”

“Were you using it?” his grandpa asked.

“Well, yes, but—”

“Were you supposed to be using it?” his grandpa asked.

“Technically, no, but—”

“Then why are you complaining? You should have seen that coming.” He winked.

“Precisely,” Mr. Diddley said, his whiny voice still grating even from some distance behind them. “Thanks for your support,” he added. Apparently eavesdropping wasn’t against his scruples.

“Now that we’re all here, we’ll commence with the year-end Review,” Mr. Diddley announced to the class. “But before we begin, I wanted to turn some time over to Elizabeth Stratton. She informed me several days ago that there was a tie for top points earned in the class this year. She had, what I think you’ll agree was a brilliant idea for an extra credit tiebreaker. She and a few others from Exodus’ own newspaper committee have since reviewed the activity archive for the year and put together a collection of pictures and anecdotes as a primer for our meeting tonight, and as a farewell to the school year.” Elizabeth gave Marcus a sly smile. “Now, I’ll turn the time over to Elizabeth, after which we will

meet for parent-teacher reviews, then issue your final grades to you and your parents,” he paused to look down on Marcus’s and Ellie’s grandparents, “or guardians.”

“Miss Stratton.” Mr. Diddley clapped his hands once and made his way to the light switch. Elizabeth walked to the front of the class, picking up the projector remote en route, and nodded to Mr. Diddley. The room went dark, revealing a projected picture of a shiny cartoon trophy with embossed block letters that read *The X Awards*.

Elizabeth cleared her throat. The class rustled, and a few kids giggled with anticipation. “A few weeks ago I sent each of you a short survey. Based on your votes, we have put together the following presentation.” She pressed a button on the projector remote.

The screen blinked and the class roared with laughter at a picture of a round, red-faced boy with his ketchup-smearred cheeks bulging with food. The camera had caught his eyes wide with surprise. Marcus thought it looked more like he was choking.



“To Greg Gorgio goes the *Most Likely to Abuse Free Samples* award,” Elizabeth said with a shaky voice, trying to keep her composure. In the back of the room Greg buried his face in his mother's arms.

“Mr. Diddley!” Mrs. Gorgio started, surprised.

“My apologies, ma'am. There won't be anymore more slides like that,” Mr. Diddley said as he gave Elizabeth a foreboding look, “will there Miss—”

Elizabeth quickly clicked the button and the screen winked again. The projector revealed a picture of a girl wearing thick glasses with #2 pencils tucked snugly behind both ears. Just under her thick sweatband, the girl's eyes were intent on an exam she was completing. Her tongue was sticking out.

“To Bertie Braxton goes the *Mathlete* award for being the fastest student to complete timed math tests.” When she heard her name, Bertie raised one of the pencils she always kept behind her ears and then quickly replaced it.

“See,” Mr. Diddley said with a sigh, “that one was much better.”

The room began to buzz with nervous energy, and Elizabeth clicked the remote a little harder. The next sequence of slides seemed a blur to Marcus: *The bargain catch, Most likely to end up in jail, Most likely to become a nun, Most likely to win the lottery but lose the Ticket*, and many others. The group laughed at each other's expense, but the parents began to grumble.

Finally, Elizabeth arrived at a blank slide—a placeholder—and the students seemed relieved.

“Now, in my opinion, this last slide is the most important,” she said enthusiastically. Marcus rolled his eyes. He couldn't wait to see this. “Remember, the class has voted on each of the categories without any influence by me or the newspaper committee.”

Except for the sound of shuffling feet, a hush fell over the students.

“And now I give you,” she paused a moment for dramatic effect, “*The Most Likely to End Up a Supermodel* award. The picture to her left wasn't like the others at all. It wasn't an impromptu photo. It wasn't taken in the wild while some unsuspecting student did some embarrassing thing. No, this

picture was a studio photograph of Elizabeth Stratton posing for the camera, and the real counterpart stood next to it displaying the same smile and standing in an identical pose—one hand on a hip, the other doing the princess wave.

“Cheater,” Marcus blurted out, shaking his head. Elizabeth stopped smiling as the students reacted.

Ellie punched his arm. “Don't get yourself in trouble,” she whispered.

“This thing was rigged,” a girl from the back of the room called out. “You're no model.”

“She should win the *Most likely to have her makeup tattooed on* award, a boy by the entrance said. Marcus laughed loudly, and Mr. Diddley shimmied out of his chair and turned on the lights.

“Enough,” Mr. Diddley said.

“Or *Most likely to work in the cafeteria*,” Marcus added.

“At least my family can pay the bills,” Elizabeth said, the tears in her eyes sparkled from the projector's light. “You have to hope that your Magic Shop can make money appear out of thin air.” She ran out of the room. Her father, still looking

puzzled, made a motion to get up, but then sat back in his seat as if he had expended all of his energy.

“That's enough from all of you.” Mr. Diddley said, pointing directly at Marcus.

“Johnny, the lights please,” Mr. Diddley said with a deep breath, turning to a frail-looking boy by the wall.

After the lights came on, Mr. Diddley continued. “Now then, why don't we all take a minute to prepare for our year-end evaluations while I go look for Elizabeth.” He stared at Elizabeth's father who continued to look dazed. “Please give your attention to the student aids as they explain the process.”

Johnny turned off the projector as he approached the front of the room. “Tonight you'll review your performance for this year with your parents. We've organized you into clusters to allow for privacy, but to still make it relatively easy to process each group. To get through tonight in a timely manner, Mr. Diddley asked his student aids to help him review the summary evaluation form he prepared for each of you. My name is Johnny,

and,” he pointed at a few other of the older students in the room, “this is Candice and Robert.” They each raised a hand in turn. “We will be reviewing Mr. Diddley’s observations with you. Let’s get started.”

Candice and Robert each collected a pile of papers from Mr. Diddley’s desk.

“Fith?” Candice called, looking up from her pile of evaluations. Marcus and Ellie’s hands shot up. Marcus was excited, but raised an eyebrow, surprised Candice called their name. If they hurried, perhaps they could finish before Mr. Diddley returned.

At hearing the name “Fith,” Johnny peeked over Candice’s shoulder. Then he reached around her and tapped on a post-it note stuck to the form. They had a whispered conversation, and Candice replaced the paper on Mr. Diddley’s desk before calling out, “Christensen?”

Marcus raised his hand. “Johnny?”

“Ha-ha, Marcus,” Johnny said, “We all know you aren’t a Christensen.”

“That's not what I meant.” Marcus wondered if Johnny was a complete idiot. “Why did you put our paper back?”

“Oh,” Johnny said with a wide grin, “because Mr. Diddley wanted to conduct your review *personally*.”

Marcus looked at Ellie. “Great.”

Marcus's grandpa, Winston, put a hand on Marcus's shoulder. “What's wrong, young man?”

“Nothing,” Marcus lied. He sighed, wondering how embarrassing Mr. Diddley would make their meeting.

Mr. Diddley returned a few minutes later, awkwardly patting her shoulder in consolation. She looked as if nothing had happened. Her makeup wasn't even smeared and Marcus wondered if it really was tattooed to her face.

“Oh, Mr. Fith,” Mr. Diddley motioned toward the doorway. “You have a visitor in the hall.”

From their grandpa's expression, it was clear that he wasn't expecting anyone. More troubling, however, was that Marcus also detected a hint of alarm, a seldom occurrence with their grandfather.

A sick feeling began to stir in Marcus's stomach, making him irritable. He squinted at the classroom door and thought he saw, through the narrow opening, the jade, almond-shaped eyes again, only this time they didn't disappear, but rather focused on Marcus. In an instant, the room seemed to shrink in on him, and fade around the mysterious eyes as if they were the only source of illumination in the room— a misty green light. The effect was mesmerizing; leaving Marcus lost, and locked in the intense gaze for some time.

"Hey." Their grandma snapped her fingers and waved in front of Marcus's face. He blinked hard.

"Are you okay?" When Marcus didn't answer, their grandma exchanged a concerned look with their grandpa.

For a time all Marcus could do was nod, and their grandma continued to observe him. If he could have found the words, he would have thanked her for drawing attention to him in front of the whole class.

Their grandpa passed Elizabeth as he made his way to the hall. Elizabeth's father, still day

dreaming, barely noticed that she returned to her seat.

Ellie grabbed her book, and sat in their grandpa's seat before putting her arm around Marcus.

"Are you going to make it, buddy?"

Marcus swallowed slowly. "See, I told you," he rasped, and pointed at the door.

"Told me what?" Ellie grimaced, and turned to see what was the matter.

"The eyes." That was all that Marcus would say. He didn't understand what had happened to him, nor could he describe it. He decided he would keep it close, though. He already felt like a freak, and didn't want to make a public matter of it.

"What's going on, grandma?" Ellie asked. "Who's this visitor?"

Charlotte was silent, and still. She watched Winston's purposeful march to the door. His hand was open at his side like he was ready to pull a gun from a holster that he wasn't wearing. Then he vanished into the hall.



Mr. Diddley shuffled through the forms at his desk for several minutes as if searching for something specific, something important.

“Should we check on grandpa?” Marcus asked. He shuddered to think what was in the hall, what could make him feel so angry and disoriented.

Their grandma smirked. “Your grandpa is very capable of handling himself. He’ll be fine.”

She said that, but she watched the door intently anyway.

Finally, Mr. Diddley picked up one of the evaluations, scanned it carefully, and raised a bushy eyebrow at Marcus.

“Crap, he’s coming,” Marcus said.

“I’m not surprised.” Ellie flipped another page in her book. “You know how he is.”

Mr. Diddley grabbed an empty chair near the Fith family cluster and scooted in as far as his large frame would allow. After a deep breath he asked their grandma, “shall we wait for Mr. Fith, or may we proceed without him?”

“Coming.” As if it had been rehearsed, their grandpa rushed back into the classroom, almost gliding, a bit of a skip in his first step.

Their grandpa’s return confused Marcus, but he was glad to see that their grandpa was okay. What’s more, he seemed in even better spirits than before.

“Grandpa, who was—?” Marcus started.

“Not now.”

“All right then,” Mr. Diddley sighed, and shifted toward Ellie, “let’s begin with the easiest affair.” Ellie marked her place with a frayed bookmark and closed her novel.

Their grandma ignored Mr. Diddley and made a desperate face at their grandpa as if to ask what the whole visitor business was about. He simply grinned broadly, and waved it off like they’d discuss it later.

“I’m sure you know Ellie is one of the top students at Exodus Middle School.” Mr. Diddley looked down at her summary and scanned his notes, and then he chuckled. “She loves to read, I guess you could say,” he paused, “and read, and read.

My only real concern for her is that she is a bit of a social caterpillar.”

Grandma and Grandpa Fith looked confused. “Excuse me,” Charlotte said. “Social caterpillar?”

“Yes, sorry, that is to say, not yet a social butterfly.” He snickered at his own joke as if it would clarify things sufficiently. He was met with blank stares.

“She needs to engage with people more, Mr. and Mrs. Fith. She must vary her activities and make friends. Of course, there are many worse things she could be dealing with. She is a fine student. Just help her come out of her shell a bit.”

“Thank you,” their grandpa said, still beaming. “We’ll give that some thought.”

The way their grandpa sounded, Marcus figured someone could have told him the shop had exploded, and he would suggest laying out a blanket for the fireworks.

“Now,” Mr. Diddley said, turning to Marcus. “We have the matter of this one.”

“His name is Marcus,” Charlotte said. “I’m sure it’s on the paper there somewhere.”

Mr. Diddley let out a hearty guffaw and winked at their grandma. “This little firecracker has a sense of humor.”

Marcus held back a smile at that last comment.

“Marcus,” Mr. Diddley said, dabbing the sweat from his forehead with a handkerchief, “if I recall from our last meeting, you were going to address your behavior issues. I’m concerned about your lack of progress.” He addressed Marcus’s grandparents: “he still struggles concentrating in class, or showing discipline in general. While his grades meet the minimum standards, it’s by a narrow margin. If he were to turn in his assignments on time, and actually complete them, he would have much higher scores. When he actually shows up to class he seems more interested in his phone than in school.”

“Speaking of which,” Marcus interjected, “may I have it back please?”

“That’s up to your par—” Mr. Diddley corrected himself. “Grandparents.”

“I’ll take it,” Winston said, extending his hand, “and we’ll discuss the consequences of his behavior on his summer vacation.”

“But Gramps—” Marcus started.

“Later, Marcus,” his grandpa said.

“Good.” Mr. Diddley returned the phone. “Ellie is a great kid, and a wonderful student. She shouldn't be hard to work with. She just needs some social coaching. Marcus, on the other hand, needs greater focus and discipline in order to stay productive and to complete his assignments.”

“We appreciate your candor, Mr. Diddley,” Charlotte said. “We'll discuss this as a family and come up with a way to remedy the situation.”

“I hope so,” Mr. Diddley said, clapping a hand to each of his knees and pushing off. “I've got to meet with the other families now. Hopefully we see real results next year.”

The Fiths stood up and each shook Mr. Diddley's hand before he moved on.

“Now children,” their grandpa began excitedly, “I know this makes for a long day, but we need to visit the *Nevada State Hospital* tonight. We've just received some great news, and—.”

“Weren't we just there a few weeks ago?” Ellie asked.

Charlotte put her arms around her husband.  
“Great news?”

Winston gazed into Charlotte’s eyes. “The best kind.” She hugged him even tighter.

Marcus shouldered his backpack. “What, did we win the lottery?”

Ellie scowled at Marcus, but he didn't make eye contact with her. Marcus looked at the ground, cursing under his breath.

“Come on, kids,” their grandpa said, pointing toward the exit. “You can cool off on the way.” He clapped his free hand on their backs one-by-one as they passed.

Their mint green station wagon awaited them in the parking lot. Considered a collectable by some, their grandpa had picked it up at auction in like-new condition. It even had the wooden side panels, which this model was known for. Marcus was glad he wouldn't see the school or his classmates again for a few months. He needed the time away, and this old car was going to get him there.

Marcus sat in the back seat and slammed the door shut. No one said anything, but Marcus caught

the disapproving look that his grandfather gave him in the rearview mirror as he started the car. It wasn't uncommon for him or Ellie to act out a little whenever they started their drive to the *Nevada State Hospital*. It was usually Marcus, though. His grandpa's look shut it down before he started.

The one thing that Marcus hated even more than parent-teacher meetings were their visits to *Nevada State Hospital*. No matter what they said, they couldn't talk their grandparents out of it.

Their grandma and grandpa were pretty fair, and they could usually be negotiated with. Household chores like the dishes, or the trash, or even when homework had to be completed could be haggled, but for some reason this was different. They could even fake sick and their grandparents would not let them stay behind, so this time Marcus didn't even try.

"Don't work yourself up, Marcus," Ellie whispered, "It only makes it worse. Maybe catch a nap on the way."

“No sleep for you,” their grandma said, clicking her tongue. “We need to discuss how you’ll change your behavior. At this point, it’s a bit much.”

Marcus shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“Then I suggest you take the car ride and think about it,” their grandpa said. “This won’t go away until you fix it.”

Ellie winked. “Maybe Caleb and Anabell can give you some suggestions.”

“Very funny.” Marcus watched out the window. “From what I’ve seen, Caleb and Anabell can’t do much of anything. May I have my phone back please?”

His grandpa hesitated a moment, then pulled the phone out of his shirt pocket. “Give it some thought,” he said, and then handed the phone over. “This conversation isn’t over.”

Marcus reached into his pant’s pocket, pulled out his ear buds, and plugged them into his phone. With a couple of thumb flicks he was listening to his favorite playlist. He wanted to think of anything but the creepy hospital and what awaited them there.



He folded his arms and settled in against the window. It had been a long, strange day. In the darkness, Marcus easily tracked the city lights. They had an entrancing effect on him as they whizzed by, especially as the whites, yellows, and greens reflected off his window. His eyelids grew heavy. He thought of the jade eyes and how they too glowed in the dark. A shiver ran down his back. It was unnerving to consider the power the eyes seemed to have over him, but that didn't stop the sleep from taking over.



That concludes the first chapter of The Magic Shop.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Justin was born with an active imagination on a U.S. naval base in Spain, but has spent most of his life in the shadows of the Rocky Mountains of Utah. He is bilingual, and has lived all over the world. He has four children; two boys, and two girls, and an enduring wife. He doesn't have any pets that he's aware of, but his children have been known to hide things under his bed.

In his free time Justin loves to read, write, and play games. He enjoys his close friends, and loves to make people laugh. To learn more about Justin, or his work, you can visit him at [www.justinswapp.com](http://www.justinswapp.com).

Justin is the author of *The Magic Shop*. He has also been published in several anthologies, including *The Crimson Pact* (Volumes 1, 2, and 5), *The Memory Eater*, and *Short Sips: Coffee House Flash Fiction Collection 2*.

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