

THE
MAGIC
& SHOP
BY JUSTIN
SWAPP

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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 everybody 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.

ISSUES





Marcus 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 didn't seem to notice 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 anymore 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 didn't dare make fun of magic; not out loud, anyway.

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 gray 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 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 set 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 vainest. 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 took 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 glanced 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 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 sighed, “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.

Mr. Diddley shimmied out of his chair. “Enough.”

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

“At least my family can pay the bills.” The tears in Elizabeth's 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 pointed 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 aides 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 aides 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?”

Johnny grinned broadly. “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 rare 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 daydreaming, 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, and 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 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 collectible 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, the trash, or even homework 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.



Marcus woke to silence sometime later. He pushed

the power button on his phone, revealing the red battery icon. The device had shut itself off. He sat up, cranky, and yanked the cables from his sore ears. At that moment, he remembered where they were going and wished he could disappear.

Next to him, Ellie's head hung over her book, bobbing slightly. A drip of drool was starting to form on her lower

lip. Apparently she didn't last long. Their grandma didn't, either. She snored softly in the front passenger seat.

"Feeling any better?" Their grandpa's blue eyes glanced at him in the rearview mirror. They were the only ones awake.

Marcus grunted and leaned his head against the cold window again. "How much longer?"

"The drive wasn't that long," his grandpa said. "Don't worry, you slept through most of it. Maybe five more minutes."

Don't worry? For a while, Marcus had forgotten where they were going, and enjoyed that feeling. Thanks for the reminder, Marcus wanted to say. He knew they were visiting family, but now all Marcus could think about was how creepy Nevada State Hospital was.

"I've been thinking," his grandpa said, "about what your teacher said."

"Uh huh." Marcus rolled his eyes. He watched the thorny Yucca trees pass by and tried to listen to the soothing hum of the drive. He wasn't really in the mood to talk.

"Mr. Diddley said you needed more responsibility in your life, some discipline."

"Fine. I'll do more dishes then, or maybe even wash the windows." Marcus blew hot breath on the glass next to his head, leaving a fog ring, then rubbed it clean with the edge of his fist and smiled.

His grandpa snickered. "I was thinking of something more significant than that." Ellie began to stir.

"Than what, Grandpa?" Ellie asked, rubbing her eyes then turning her head to wipe her mouth quickly.

"Welcome back," their grandpa said with a chuckle. "I was just telling Marcus that I had some thoughts on how to address Mr. Diddley's concerns."

"Okaaayyy," she stretched out the pronunciation of the word.

"He said Marcus needed more discipline and that you needed to improve your interaction with people, right?"

"Right," Ellie said skeptically. Marcus empathized. Usually, when their grandpa came up with an idea, it was pretty grandiose.

"I have the perfect solution. Your grandma even agrees with me." Marcus and Ellie hung on his every word. "We've decided that you should start tending The Magic Shop."

"You're joking, right?" Marcus grabbed his grandpa's seat and peered around it.

"This isn't up for discussion right now. Think about it for tonight, and we'll talk about it over breakfast in the morning."

Marcus didn't want anything to do with The Magic Shop. It represented so many things that he hated or didn't believe in. Ellie wouldn't have a major problem with it because she was always reading that stuff.

Grandma's arms stretched out of her seat and she cleared her throat. "We're here already?"

The old station wagon slowed down as they pulled up to a large wrought-iron gate with the name: Nevada State Hospital forged along the top of its arch. Looming stone statues of an unnatural animal stood on both sides of the gate. They had scared Marcus since he was a young boy. The statues' heads had a bird's beak, their necks and tails were scaled like a serpent, but the bodies were that of a lion. The weirdest feature was that on top of their back were pairs of open wings. These creatures looked like they were ready to pounce on anything that approached, including Marcus.

Winston pulled the station wagon up to a security checkpoint where a large video screen and a green button could be used to interact with the hospital staff. He rolled down his window and pressed the green button.

"Nevada State," a female voice droned from the box.

"We are here to visit—"

"Winston Fith, is that you?" A gray-haired woman with a tight ponytail looked sideward through the camera as her face grew larger on the screen.

"How did you know?" Winston looked back at Marcus and Ellie with a big sarcastic grin.

"Is Charlotte with you?" She paused before continuing, "I finally found that soufflé recipe she's been asking for."

“You did?” Winston asked. Charlotte leaned over in her seat and waved at the camera. “Yes, Charlotte and the children are right here with me.”

Marcus heard the electronic buzzing sound and click that preceded the opening of the heavy metallic gate.

“See you in a minute,” Pat’s voice said.

The wrought-iron fence gave way to a long stretch of gravel driveway flanked by short, unkempt grass, and tall, rigid trees that during the day seemed to shadow everything, and at night swallow any ambient light. The road led up to what Marcus had always thought must have once been a large mansion, the face of which was enshrouded by thick, green vines except for the few patches that revealed the structure’s beautiful red brick. Protruding from the roof stood two towers that had always made Marcus wonder if some maiden was inside who was worth saving.

The driveway ended in a roundabout that finally curved in front of the hospital entrance. A man in a white uniform stood next to Pat, the older woman from the security kiosk. They dressed the same, down to the nametags. As Winston came to a stop in front of them, the breaks squealed.

“Winston.” Pat opened her arms to greet them as they got out of the car. “Charlotte.” She hugged each of them, one by one. When it was Charlotte’s turn, Pat slipped a piece of paper into her hand.

“Here you go, Charlotte. It’s tricky to make, so you’ll need to follow the directions precisely.” Charlotte nodded nervously. “It took some searching, but I’m relieved to have finally found it. These kind of recipes tend to get lost from one generation to the next.”

“Thank you, Pat,” Charlotte said, her voice cracking a little. If Marcus hadn’t known her so well, he would have thought she was getting a little emotional. “This means so much to our family.”

“You’re overselling it, Grandma,” Marcus said through the car window. Then he whispered to Ellie, “This had better be one good soufflé.”

Pat put her hand on Charlotte’s shoulder and lowered her voice. “Are you sure you should bring the children here like you do? It’s been a particularly rough night.”

“Family sticks together. Besides, we’re all they’ve got,” their grandma said. She knew they could hear them, Marcus was sure of it. His grandma stepped back and the children got out of the car.

Pat Lockhart was the warden of the hospital, and always greeted them during their visits. Marcus wondered if they received special treatment because they were the only people to visit, and they gave Pat something else to do for a while. If Marcus had to stay in that place all day, he’d go crazy.

“Well then,” Winston said, “shall we?”

“Can’t I just stay in the car, Grandpa?” Ellie asked.

Winston frowned and handed the station wagon keys to the man in white, who promptly drove off to park the car. Pat led the rest of them up the cracked stone steps and into the large entryway.

Marcus's skin prickled the minute they entered the old building. Ellie claimed it was how they kept the temperature, but Marcus knew better. They lived in Nevada, and it was almost always warm. Something was different; something was off about the place. The hospital lights were dimmer than normal lights. Pat had explained many times that some of the patients got anxious in too much light. The air smelled odd, too, with a sterile, manufactured odor intended to counter the stuffy smell of age.

They followed Pat down a wide corridor that opened up to the common area. They stopped at a lighted booth, a familiar check-in point where a beefy black man sat reading the latest James Patterson thriller. As the group approached, the man cracked his knuckles, grabbed something from under his small desk, and stepped around to greet them.

"State your names please," the black man said while he reviewed a clipboard.

"Come on, Roger," Charlotte complained. "Do we really have to go through this whole routine tonight?"

"Let him do his thing, dear." Winston nudged her softly. "My name is Winston Fith, and this is my wife,

Charlotte, and our two grandchildren, Marcus and Ellie. We called ahead and made an appointment.”

Roger lifted a tethered red pencil from the clipboard and marked off several items. “State your purpose, please.”

Charlotte said, “We are here to visit family.”

“Who are you here to visit?”

“Okay, Roger,” Pat said. “Enough. They are here to visit Caleb and Anabell, and you know it. Now get out your wand and move us along. We don’t have all night.”

“Well, I do,” Roger said anxiously. Pat didn’t respond. “Come on, I never get to go through my whole routine.”

Pat glared at him a moment and finally said, “well?”

Roger removed a black metal rod from a loop on his pants. “Stand there please,” he droned, and pointed to an outline of a pair of feet on the ground nearby.

Winston took his place as instructed.

“Lift your arms please,” Roger said. Winston did so. Roger’s wand made a crackling noise as he traced it around Winston’s arms, down his waist, and everywhere else.

When he had finished without alarm, Roger pushed a button and the gate behind him clanked opened.

“Next.” Roger motioned Winston through.

Charlotte put her hand on Marcus’s shoulder and guided him into position. He raised his arms like his grandpa had and followed the same process; only when Roger moved the wand around Marcus’s arms and down his waist, he laughed as if Roger was tickling him. Humor was Marcus’s way of dealing with his nerves.

“Do you think this a joke, young man?” Roger asked. “This is serious. My job is to protect—”

Suddenly, a sharp chirp emitted from the wand. Roger instinctively took a defensive stance, his right hand hovering over the Taser on his utility belt.

Pat walked over to Roger and slugged him on the shoulder. “Come on, Roger.”

He waved her off. “Not even you can interfere with protocol, ma’am,” Roger said with a crooked smile. “What do you have in there boy, a gun?”

At first Marcus wondered if this was a joke. Then again, Roger seemed like the type who just waited for something to happen.

“Uh, no sir.”

“What about needles or other harmful items in your possession?” Roger examined Marcus’s jacket like there might be a knife in there somewhere. Roger reached into his own pocket, pulled out a latex glove and slipped it on.

“Now, I’m going to reach into your pocket and extract whatever’s causing the wand to go off, okay?” Roger asked, approaching Marcus like he was about to disarm a bomb. Marcus swallowed hard.

Before reaching in, Roger carefully patted the outside of Marcus’s jacket, attempting to feel the hidden object. Finally, Roger put his hand in Marcus’s pocket and fished around for a moment.

“It’s square shaped..” Roger mumbled, “Could be a remote detonator. I read in the paper the other day that some terrorists used a kid to—ah ha!”

Roger removed his hand from the pocket, extracting Marcus’s cell phone.

“Roger!” Pat said furiously.

“Wait, there has to be something else. These aren’t supposed to set the wand off.” Roger scrutinized the phone in bewilderment before he turned on Marcus. “You know you are supposed to leave all your electronics in the car, right?”

“We’re done here,” Pat said before Marcus could answer.

“Go on, then.” Roger lifted up Marcus’s cell phone daintily as if it was the key to a murder investigation. “I’ll hold this until you are through.” Marcus joined his grandpa.

Ellie stepped forward and placed her two feet squarely on the spot indicated on the floor, but Roger put his hand on her back and led her through the gate.

“Just go.” Roger jerked his head at Charlotte, and Ellie joined the others.

They followed Pat through a series of corridors until they finally came to a large, dimly lit common room lined with heavily framed windows. The people in the room could be categorized into two types. There were the alert folks that dressed like Pat, in white uniforms and nametags, and then there were the others. They had

uniforms too, which looked more like pressed pajamas hanging loosely from their frail bodies.

Marcus noticed one woman sitting by herself, facing an empty wall. She was doodling something in the air with her finger. Another man took a few steps across the room, muttered to himself, and took two steps backward without turning around. He repeated the process again and again.

The people they always visited sat over by one of the large windows. They stayed in the same place every time and did the same things, with little variation. There was a man that their grandpa called Uncle Caleb, who gazed distantly out a tall window with his back to his wife, Anabell. She sat on the opposite side of the table, her face long, always watching the entrance to the common room.

The kids followed their grandpa as he gathered chairs from a nearby table and positioned them in the usual manner. Charlotte would sit next to Caleb, facing out the window, and Winston would sit next to Anabell, facing the entrance to the common room. Marcus and Ellie would sit, facing Caleb or Anabell respectively.

Winston took hold of Anabell's hand. "How are you, dear?"

Anabell slowly turned her head and gave Winston an absent smile.

Marcus saw Ellie gawk at Anabell from across the table. For some reason, Ellie had taken a curious interest in Anabell. She had told Marcus that Anabell could have

beautiful hair if she would only wash it and do something with it. Her honeycomb hair color was rich, and softened her intense brown eyes.

“I brought you a little something.” Winston reached inside his jacket pocket and removed a small package of black licorice, which Anabell took and promptly hid underneath her shirt.

“Thanks.” Anabell’s stare was still blank.

“Oh, you might be wondering why we’ve come again tonight.” Marcus wasn’t sure if she wondered much of anything. “Well, I have some good news. Pat was able to find the family recipe for the soufflé.”

“Yes?” Anabell grinned. “Finally.” Marcus concluded that this soufflé must contain bacon.

“And, even better, I received a special visit from an old friend.”

Marcus trembled a bit as he wondered if this could be the stranger at the school, or if his grandpa meant someone else.

“Who?” Anabell asked.

“The oldest friend we know.”

Anabell considered his comment a moment. Then, as if someone had just pinched her, she sat up a bit. “And?”

“She thinks she can help.”

Anabell covered her quivering lip. “I’m grateful.”

“Other than that, things at the shop are pretty normal,” Winston went on to say like he always did. He would give an accounting of what was going on with the family and in

the world around them. "The economy is taking its toll. We hardly get customers anymore, but I suppose that is partially because ours is a dying art."

"Have you sold any crafts? I like crafts."

Winston frowned. "No, I'm sorry."

"Your family?" Anabell asked.

"The upkeep at the shop keeps Charlotte busy," Winston replied, "and my hobbies keep me occupied." After a sigh, his tone became more cheery. "The children just had their year-end evaluations, and each got outstanding reviews. Top of their class."

Anabell smiled.

Marcus peeked over Anabell's shoulder and across the table to see if Ellie had heard. Their grandpa had just told a little white lie, very uncharacteristic of him.

"Do you have anything for me this week, Anabell?" Winston asked, lowering his voice. Marcus scooted closer. No matter how hard he tried, he always seemed to miss this exchange. With a nod, she reached into her shirt and pulled out a small metal strand of some kind, and covered it quickly with her hand.

"Thank you." Grandpa took it, and promptly put it in his jacket pocket. "I'll let you know if it sells."

Winston coughed loudly and his wife stood up, then they traded places. This was Ellie and Marcus's cue to do the same, so Marcus followed his grandpa to their new seats by Caleb. Of the two, Caleb was definitely worse off.

He never spoke, and had more challenges, mentally, than Anabell did.

“Caleb,” Winston said, “I have something for you.” He reached into his jacket and pulled out another small package of black licorice, which Caleb took readily without breaking his gaze out the window. Marcus wondered if he actually saw something out there.

“I’ve got some good news,” Winston started, and he continued to update Caleb in virtually the same way he had Anabell. He finished with how well the kids were doing in school.

Marcus watched Caleb’s face, and thought he saw an attempted smile, but it was so faint he couldn’t be sure. Caleb lifted his hand and motioned to write. Winston took a pencil and notepad from his jacket and handed them over.

Caleb slowly opened the notepad and flipped the pages until he found a blank one. Marcus noticed all the pages Caleb had written on from their previous visits. Grandpa hadn’t ripped out a single one.

“Thanks,” Caleb wrote at the top of the page.

“For what? The licorice?” Winston asked. “You’re welcome, Caleb. How are you holding up?”

This question always puzzled Marcus. They were in a mental ward, how did Grandpa think they were holding up? These folks were just shy of straightjackets.

Then, as if something had changed, Caleb's hand began to shake. He pressed the pencil lightly on the paper and began to make elaborate strokes and scribbles.

A few moments later Caleb handed the notepad to Winston, who held it up and away so he could see it better, then he brought it in again.

"Where did you see this?" His eyes locked on the drawing. He hesitated before handing the notepad back to Caleb. Marcus didn't get a good look, but he could tell that what Caleb had lost in his ability to speak, he apparently made up for in his ability to draw.

As Caleb set the notepad on his lap to write something else, Marcus caught a better look at the elaborate sketch. Caleb had drawn a detailed crystal sphere adorned with etchings of odd symbols lining its surface. Under the picture, Caleb wrote the word "dream."

"Did you see this in a dream?" Winston asked. Caleb nodded slightly, but raised a finger.

This is crazy, Marcus thought.

Caleb flipped the page and began to draw again. Marcus had no idea what to expect next. His sketch wasn't a place or a thing; rather, it was a face—a dark and shadowy face with deeply buried eyes and a narrow neck. Caleb had drawn an unnerving looking man.

"No," Winston said, "it's not possible." Standing abruptly, he ripped the paper off the notepad and crumpled it into a ball.

“Good night,” he said. “Charlotte, children, we’re leaving.”

Pat must have recognized something was amiss because she rushed over as Charlotte and Ellie stood to join the boys.

“Winston, what’s wrong?” Pat’s eyes darted back to Caleb and Anabell for some sign of alarm.

“Nothing,” he replied. “Something has come up and we need to be on our way.” Winston patted the children on their backs and they started toward the exit.

“Sure thing, Winston.” Pat looked confused as she reached for the walkie-talkie on her belt. “I’ll call ahead for your vehicle.” Marcus looked back at their family to see Anabell’s outstretched hand lowering.

The station wagon waited for them outside. Charlotte insisted on driving in order for her husband to have time to gather his thoughts. He took his place on the passenger’s side and flattened out Caleb’s crumpled drawing across his lap. As they pulled away from the hospital, he stared at the picture unbelievably.

“Grandpa,” Ellie said. “Are you okay?”

He didn’t respond.

Charlotte reached over and placed her hand on the back of his neck and tousled his hair. Winston was engrossed in the sketch and didn’t seem to notice much.

“Your granddaughter is speaking to you,” Charlotte said gently.

“Yes, dear,” Winston said. “It’s just that... I think I left the shop unlocked.”

Marcus raised his hand as if everybody could see him. “Okay, is it just me, or was that really weird?” He turned to Ellie for support. “And I mean, weirder than normal.”

Silence filled the car.

“Why do we have to go to the hospital anyway?” Marcus asked. “You know the place creeps us out. We respect that they’re family, but we,” Marcus pointed his thumb at Ellie and then back to himself like he was wagging a tail, “don’t even really know those folks. Can’t we just—”

“Enough,” his grandma said. “We’ve had this conversation many times, and tonight is not the night to rehash it.”

Marcus fell quiet. It was worth a try, he thought. What with the way his grandpa reacted at the end of their visit, he figured he could convince them to not make them visit the hospital anymore.

“What did Anabell give you, Grandpa?” Marcus asked. Winston turned in his seat and looked Marcus up and down.

“They do crafts during the week at the Hospital,” his grandpa replied. “One time Anabell asked us to try to sell their crafts at the shop, and with the money we could help pay their bills, and sometimes buy their favorite treats, like licorice. The Hospital won’t let them have treats. So we

visit them, collect their arts and crafts, and take them back to the shop.”

Marcus raised his eyebrows. This seemed like an odd explanation. “May I see what they made?”

His grandpa ignored the question. “You know, kids, I have been thinking about what Mr. Diddley said, and I agree that it’s time for you to take on greater responsibility.” Ellie and Marcus looked at each other in dismay. “Starting tomorrow, you will both manage the shop every day.”

“Every day?” Marcus asked. “For how long?”

“For eight hours a day,” Winston replied. “To be fair, we will pay you, but it will last the whole summer.”

“The whole summer?” Ellie repeated. “But—”

“Don’t worry,” their grandpa said. “We will give you a day off.” He counted on his fingers and thought for a minute. “Probably Sundays,” he added with a nod.

“But Grandpa,” Marcus said, “I don’t know anything about magic.”

“Don’t worry. We’ll teach you.”



A knock on Marcus's bedroom door at 6:00 A.M. the next morning jolted him into consciousness. He had been sitting up in bed with his dry eyes already open, wondering if he had slept at all. It was like he had been in a daze, not quite able to ward off the memory of the hospital, or of the prospect of tending The Magic Shop, at least until the knock jarred his attention.

"Come in," Marcus droned. Tofu, the family dog, lay at his feet and Marcus gently pushed Tofu off the bed with

his foot before Tofu could lick him. He grabbed the remote out of habit and turned on the TV.

Marcus and Ellie had moved from place to place all their life, but had always lived with their grandparents. Typically, they lived somewhere on the premises of the shop. It was less expensive that way. In this case, they stayed in a loft above the store. This shop wasn't as large as some of the others, but it was home.

His grandma wedged the door open and entered the room, stumbling slightly over a large pile of clothes that Marcus had left on the floor. Several large posters of the constellations hung on the wall next to his bed; gifts from his grandpa. What his dresser lacked in trophies, it made up for in stacks of movie and music discs, and any other gadgets he could afford online. The room's one single window overlooked the street in front of the shop.

Marcus sat on the floor at the foot of his bed, staring at the television blankly as the channel quacked about the rising price of gold.

'Send us your gold watches or rings and we will pay you twenty percent above the going rate! We even take the occasional tooth; see special handling instructions. You could be rich!'

"Come along, dear," his grandma said as she kicked a jacket off her foot. She tried to get an angle on Marcus's face. "It's time to wake up, young man."

Grandma powered down the TV.

"Hey," Marcus said, "I was watching that."

“You don’t even know what you were watching. If you ask me, you were doing more drooling than watching. Get going now.”

The door swung open a little more, and his grandpa and Ellie entered the room as well. Ellie rubbed her eyes until Tofu jumped into her arms and licked her face.

“For your information, Grandma,” Marcus said, “that commercial was about exchanging gold for money. Doesn’t that sound like something we should be listening to?”

“We don’t need a commercial to tell us that gold is worth money, Marcus,” his grandpa said, shaking his head. “We appreciate your concern, but no more TV for a while, huh?”

Marcus rolled over and stretched, exposing an ear bud he wore while he listened to music.

Ellie clicked her tongue. “You were listening to music and watching TV at the same time?” she asked. He glared back at her thanklessly. “Pathetic.”

“What’s the big deal anyway?” Marcus squinted at the clock on his chest of drawers. “It’s 6:00 A.M.” He reached under his bed and produced a handheld gaming system and fired it up.

“Did you think we were joking about you tending the shop?” his grandma reached down and snatched the gaming system out of Marcus’s hands.

“Hey!” Marcus swiped at it, but his grandma was too fast. “The shop doesn’t open for another three or four hours. Plus, hardly anyone comes.”

His grandpa coughed loudly by the door and gave Marcus the look. Despite not getting the look very often, Marcus knew it when he saw it, and it was not to be trifled with.

“You two get cleaned up and meet us downstairs in, say, twenty minutes.” Their grandma kicked a final article of clothing off her shoe as she followed the kids’ grandpa out of the room and down the stairs.

“This is all your fault,” Ellie said. “I keep my grades up and my things clean, yet somehow I get lumped in with you and your consequences.”

“For the record, my grades are fine. Your issue is that you never pull your nose out of your books. You have no friends, Ellie, so they probably figured some people skills might do you some good.”

Ellie stiffened her arms at her sides and balled her fists. “I hate you sometimes,” she said, “you know that?” She grunted before pivoting like a soldier and marching off down the hall. A moment later Ellie slammed her door.

Marcus smacked his lips and ran a hand through his hair before deciding to get ready. He wandered out of his room and across the hall to the bathroom. Normally, he would tread carefully to avoid bothering his grandparents or any customers that might be in the shop, but he figured Ellie had taken care of that. As Marcus began brushing his teeth he heard a thumping from the floor beneath him. This was his grandparents’ way to get their attention. He

stomped his foot a few times to let his grandma know that he heard her. Breakfast was ready.

As Marcus descended the stairs, he heard raised voices coming from the kitchen. Winston and Charlotte were apparently arguing. He wandered around the bottom floor behind the shop. On one wall Winston kept the products he used to restock the shop. On the other was a large, crimson tapestry that had been in the family for years. Marcus stood in front of the inventory shelf and tried to take it all in. There were things like packs of face cards, how-to books on magic tricks, disappearing coins and where to look for them, and sleight-of-hand manuals.

Marcus took a deep breath. He didn't like magic, and he wouldn't enjoy tending the shop. He knew some kids from school who were awed by the unexplained, and others aspired to be able to use magic's deception to their advantage and to take advantage of others. Marcus knew better. There was only reality, not magic. He had few memories of his real parents, but he knew that his father loved magic, and that made him hate it. His father was gone, and magic was fake.

Marcus reached into the shelves and pulled out a pair of magical rings. He tapped the hoops together to try to make them interlock. He couldn't do it. He knew he shouldn't fiddle with the products. His grandpa didn't like it when they got into the inventory. He was afraid things would go missing or broken, and they would be out even more money.

A loud thud came from behind him, and Marcus instinctively ducked, the magic rings still in hand. He peeked around a table behind him to see his grandpa leaving the kitchen, looking rather upset.

Winston slowed his pace for a moment and looked around the living room, almost as if he sensed something or someone. After a moment he seemed moderately satisfied, and he turned to the wall at his side with the large, crimson-colored tapestry and pushed it aside. Behind the tapestry was a bare wall, except for an ornate metal triangle that reminded Marcus of a hanger. He tried not to snigger as he wondered why behind the tapestry might be a great place to hang a shirt.

Winston looked over his shoulder again, but apparently feeling satisfied, he grabbed hold of the ring and knocked three times. Marcus had never seen his grandpa do anything so crazy before.

Then, his grandpa took hold of the ring knocker and pulled on it. A gasp came from the wall, and Marcus could see the light coming from behind the wall in the form of a crack. As his grandpa continued to pull, the crack took the shape of a doorframe.

“What the...?” Marcus said to himself. He wasn’t sure what he saw. Perhaps it was just his imagination. He hadn’t really slept, after all.

His grandpa finished pulling the door open wide enough just so he could fit through. He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out what Marcus thought he had

seen the night before, the object that Anabell had given him.

Marcus rose up a bit to get a better look. Behind the door seemed to be a well-lit room with shelves of stuff. Marcus couldn't exactly tell what, but he saw oddments and other things that looked like relics and antiques. Ceramics maybe?

A moment later, Winston came out of the blue-lit room. Marcus shrunk to the ground again, definitely not wanting to be seen. His grandpa sealed the wall and wiped his hands down his jacket. After a deep sigh, he yelled upstairs.

"Children, let's get going!" He started to walk away but paused and turned back to the tapestry to pull it back to its original place. Then he joined his wife in the kitchen.

The savory smell of bacon, sausage, and pancakes filled the air as Ellie came bounding down the stairs with her latest book in hand and headed straight for the kitchen. She passed Marcus without noticing him. Once she was gone, he popped up from behind the table and climbed the first few steps. He stomped his feet so it sounded like he was coming down the stairs for the first time, then he followed Ellie into the kitchen.

An array of colored glass bottles, pots, and pans, among other useful utensils hung from the kitchen ceiling. Marcus pushed a large plant out of his way as he entered. His grandma was setting plates on the old wooden table, and their grandpa was at the skillet, flipping flapjacks.

Marcus sat down across from Ellie and wondered whether or not he should tell her what he just saw. He tried to get her attention by staring at her, but she was engrossed in her novel.

“Where do you get all those books?” Marcus asked.

“From the shelves in the family room,” she said. “Grandpa has some great books in there.”

“Okay, you two, let’s talk shop,” their grandpa said, placing a plate stacked with large pancakes on the center of the table. He flopped down across from his wife, who busily nibbled a sausage, and grabbed a strip of bacon for himself.

“While you are out of school, you will tend the shop every day during the day, except Sundays. Your nights are yours.”

Marcus asked, “Even Saturdays?”

“Especially Saturdays,” their grandma answered. “That’s the busiest day of the week because kids don’t have school and adults usually aren’t working.”

Ellie bit her lip, and Marcus looked for something outside the window to distract him.

Their grandpa chuckled, clapping both kids on the back. “Come on, this could be fun if you want it to be. After all, we are talking about magic.” He raised an eyebrow.

Marcus rolled his eyes. “Cute, Grandpa.”

“It won’t be as bad as you think,” their grandma said. She put her plate in the sink and fingered a dream catcher hanging in the window. “You’ll see.”

They ate in silence for a few more minutes, and then Ellie joined their grandma at the sink. Marcus stood up quickly after he jammed a pancake-wrapped sausage into his mouth. The ladies got angry if he didn’t help.

“Okay, in order for you to run the store,” their grandpa said after they had tidied up in the kitchen, “we need to teach you the basics. Come on.” They entered the living room, the only room between the house portion of the building and the shop.

“On this far wall we keep a stock of inventory to replace the product in the shop when it runs out.” Marcus recognized his hiding place. He and Ellie both nodded mechanically.

“Okay, on to the shop itself then,” their grandma said.

They walked through a door on the wall directly across from the kitchen and into the shop.

The shop was clean and modern, but far from the glitz and glam that you’d see elsewhere in Nevada. There were no slot machines, no blinking lights, and certainly no live demonstrations.

In the middle of the shop, several aisles were stocked with face cards, disappearing coin kits, fake barf, and other classical gags and tricks. Along the walls were shelves of old books, how-to videos, and crystal balls stamped, “made in China” on their underside.

One by one, their grandma reviewed the pricing of each shop item with them, and then she taught them how to process a customer's payment.

Their grandpa took his turn by explaining the computer system in detail, but was interrupted when a knock came at the shop door, leaving the attached bell ringing faintly. This was odd because the shop didn't open for another hour.

Approaching the door, Winston peered through the peephole. When the shop was up for business they left the door open.

"Dear," he said as he came down off his toes, "I'll need a minute please. She's early."

Charlotte went on explaining the shop's various details while her husband removed the locks and chains that bound the door.

The moment Winston cracked open the door, a tall, Asian woman pushed it wide-open and stepped inside. "Winston," she said with a nod. She carefully wiped a long strand of jet-black hair out of her face and began examining the shop. Her skin was like brown pearls, a creamy color that complemented the traditional black and red Asian dress she wore.

"Where is it?" she asked. Her cloudy jade-colored eyes caught Marcus's attention. He braced himself for the unknown, for some kind of power to overcome him like at school, but nothing happened.

Perhaps he was mistaken.

“Not just yet,” Winston said, wagging a finger as he looked the woman up and down. “Did you bring what we had discussed?”

Marcus tried to pay attention to the instructions, but it was particularly difficult when his grandpa acted so mysterious. What confused him was that his grandma was trying to ignore the exchange entirely.

“Silly old man,” the woman said coyly. “Of course I did. Why else would I be here?”

“You can’t fault me for asking, Elba,” his grandpa said. “Not all transactions happen smoothly, as you know.” Winston glanced over at the children, who quickly looked away. Raising an eyebrow, he added, “I’m just taking precautions.”

“Well?” Elba asked a moment later.

Winston gave a slight bow, and with a sweep of his arm, said, “Right this way.” He glided giddily toward the back door of the shop, opened the door for Elba, and they both disappeared from sight, leaving Marcus to wonder what they were up to.

“Marcus.” His grandma put her hands on her hips, apparently noticing that he was no longer paying attention, but rather observing the door to the back of the shop which now had closed of its own accord. “How do you process someone’s credit card?”

“Um,” Marcus scratched his head, still watching the door. “I..”

“Marcus Winston Fith, you had better pay attention. Greater responsibility, remember?”

Marcus shook his head. “Sorry Grandma.”

It was sometime later, after Charlotte had gone on to explain various magic tricks and the duties of running the store, before Winston and Elba returned.

Elba appeared first, holding her handbag snugly against her body. Grandpa followed slowly, his expression hard to read. While he was smiling, he looked bewildered.

Elba patted her handbag. “Nice doing business with you,” she said when she opened the front door.

Winston nodded. “Thank you, Elba. This means a great deal to our family.”

“I hope it works,” she said, and then she was gone.

The kids’ grandma glanced up at her husband hopefully for the first time since Elba had arrived. He blinked hard and gave her a slight nod.

“Okay kids,” their grandma said, suddenly in a hurry. “Ellie, I want you and Marcus to practice processing transactions with this credit card like I showed you. I shouldn’t be long.” Charlotte rounded the checkout counter and headed off to the back room with Winston.

Ellie positioned herself behind the cash register where her grandma had been just a moment ago. “Get me that pack of face cards,” Ellie said, pointing at the first aisle.

Marcus wandered over to a nearby shelf on the first aisle, grabbed a pack of cards, and returned to Ellie.

She took the cards and began to repeat what their grandma had shown them. "What do you think that was all about?" Ellie asked curiously as she scanned the bar code on the back of the pack of cards with the scanner gun at the register. The system beeped, and displayed the cost. She responded by swiping the credit card.

"We need to talk," Marcus said, not taking his eyes off the back room. "I saw something this morning."

"Let me guess, spots? I wasn't going to say anything, but you look horrible. You didn't sleep well, did you?"

"Seriously." He looked her in the eyes. "I saw something super strange."

Ellie put the pack of cards and the price scanner down and considered Marcus. "What do you mean?"

"I saw Grandpa do something weird this morning before breakfast."

"But you didn't come downstairs until after me."

"Actually, I came down first, but when I saw Grandpa, I hid."

"Why?"

"You know how Grandpa hates when we mess with the shop inventory. Well, I was toying around with it when he walked into the room, so naturally I ducked behind the table. I had a good view of him when he started fiddling with the wall."

"What wall? What was he doing exactly?"

The clapping of footsteps preceded the shop's back door opening, and Winston and Charlotte entered the

room again. “Kids, we’re going out for a while,” Winston said. “We need you two to stay behind and watch the shop, okay?”

“But we’re not ready!” Marcus exclaimed. “You’ve barely told us anything.”

“This will be a good test to see who paid attention this morning,” their grandpa said.

Ellie sat down on the chair behind the counter. “Where are you going?”

“To run some errands.” Their grandpa hooked arms with their grandma. “We shouldn’t be more than a few hours.”

“Do your best,” their grandma reached the front door, “and it will all work out. No pressure.”

They left without another word.

Ellie wandered toward the bookshelf, fingered a few books, and pulled one off the shelf. She sat down at a nearby chair and began to read.

“So that’s it?” Marcus tossed his arms up in the air. “Grandma and Grandpa just leave, and you just flop down and start reading? I’m just stuck here.”

As if he had been cued, Tofu trotted into the room, his dog collar jingling lightly in stride. He stood at Marcus’s feet for a moment.

“Hey there, boy.” Marcus scratched Tofu behind the ears. “At least I have you to keep me company.”

Tofu turned around and went back into the living room behind the shop.

Marcus sighed. “You could have at least chewed on Ellie’s book.” He waved the dog off. Predictably, Ellie didn’t even look up from her book.

With nothing else to do, Marcus got up and followed the dog into the living room. “You’re a funny little creature, Tofu.” Marcus looked around, but saw no sign of Tofu. He whistled for him like he normally did, but got no response.

Marcus looked behind the couch, under the coffee table, and in some of the inventory, but couldn’t find him. Then he considered the tapestry, and Tofu virtually vanished from his mind.

When Marcus lifted the tapestry, he stared at the triangular knocker he had seen his grandpa manipulate earlier that morning. He couldn’t resist figuring out what his grandpa was up to. On the other side of that wall was some kind of secret.

Marcus looked over his shoulder—all clear.

His curiosity was peaked, and he couldn’t resist figuring out what was going on. What was it that grandpa had done?

He reached out for the knocker, but hesitated. If he got caught, he would be in a truckload of trouble. Their grandpa hadn’t told them about this, and he had obviously gone to quite a bit of trouble to conceal whatever was behind this wall.

An unexplainable feeling came over Marcus at that moment. Perhaps this wasn't just a secret—this might be dangerous.

He took a deep breath and grabbed hold of the knocker. As he touched it, his hand tingled. His arms prickled with goose bumps, and then, in an instant, zap! He felt a shock, and jerked his hand away.

Was this a security measure?

It felt like a warning. He and his grandpa had a good relationship—an understanding. This would violate his trust for sure. Marcus let go of the tapestry and stepped back.

“What are you doing?”

Marcus spun around to find Ellie standing behind him with her book at her side.

“Nothing. I... I was just looking for Tofu.”

As if he had finally heard his name, Tofu strolled in from the kitchen; a pancake dangled from his mouth. He dropped the pancake at the children's feet, and broke off a piece to eat.

“I guess we'll never have to worry about that one going hungry.” Ellie scrunched her nose. “It's like he comes equipped with food radar.”

Marcus wiggled Tofu's tail. “So, do you remember what I told you earlier?”

“About how you were bored and stuck here? Yeah.”

“No, about Grandpa acting differently.” Marcus pulled back the tapestry. “Can you explain this?” He pointed at the wall knocker.

“What about it?” Ellie asked, sounding slightly annoyed. “This is an old house, and sometimes old houses have quirks. Grandma and Grandpa have done the best that they could with it, you know. They just can’t afford to renovate it yet.”

When it came right down to explaining what he had seen, it was harder than he thought. Marcus felt his cheeks redden, and he knew he was acting sheepishly.

“Spit it out already,” Ellie said. After a moment, she turned around and started walking out of the room.

“Grandpa opened the wall, Ellie. I watched him,” Marcus said as if he had been holding his breath too long. “He’s hiding something important on the other side.”

Ellie turned around, chuckling. “You really didn’t sleep well last night, did you?”

“I mean it.”

“Prove it, then,” she said. With her arms crossed Marcus thought she resembled grandma. “Open it.”

Marcus considered the wall again and swallowed. It was a big, thick wall. He wasn’t even sure that he could open it, and now he had the added pressure of not looking like a fool. This is the kind of thing Ellie could get some serious mileage out of if he were wrong.

Marcus doubted himself. Maybe he had been seeing things after all.

“What’s the hold-up? Ellie asked. “If this is your idea of a joke—”

“I don’t want to break Grandpa’s trust.”

“Look, if Grandpa really was acting odd, he might need our help,” Ellie said as Tofu finished the last of the pancake. “We should at least check it out to see if there is anything to this. I’ll hold the tapestry.”

Marcus nodded and tried to remember what his grandpa did. Marcus took hold of the knocker, and felt that strange sensation in his arm again.

“My arm is prickling. It’s going to zap me.”

“Ignore it,” Ellie said.

“Easy for you to say.” Marcus tapped the knocker once and felt a surge through his arm. He recoiled.

Ellie reached out for him. “What happened?”

“I don’t know. It’s like I jammed butter knife in a wall outlet.”

“You’re right,” Ellie said. “Something strange is going on. We have to try again. If you want me to—”

Marcus grabbed the knocker again and swallowed hard as the hairs on his arm rose. He knocked again and felt a jolt run through his arm. He ignored it and knocked a third time.

The wall wheezed.

Ellie jumped back. “What was that?”

Without answering, Marcus tugged on the knocker with both hands. As he pulled, a line of light cracked, and then traced the shape of a door on the wall. Marcus kept

pulling, and soon a door-shaped slab gave way to a small room filled with a soft blue light.

“I don’t believe this,” Ellie said, squinting at first. Marcus stepped away.

It appeared to be a simple storage room, but smelled sterile, like a hospital. The cold light seemed to emanate from the walls, as if the room was buried behind a sheet of thick ice. Placed neatly on the shelves were objects and instruments of various shapes and sizes, but they all looked dated. Beside a basic-looking crystal ball, there was a wooden box with hieroglyphics painted on its sides, a sword with exotic symbols etched on the blade, and a feathered leather necklace with the most graceful golden plumage Marcus had ever seen. There were many other things as well, all of curious workmanship. While all the items were quite different, they had one thing in common. Strips of folded cardboard were neatly displayed in front of each object like small tents. The only markings they bore were beautifully hand-written numbers; all of them except for the crystal sphere.

“What is this place?” Ellie asked, eyes wide with wonder. She looked down at the misty floor. Marcus thought it looked like the smoke that came from the dry ice they used at Halloween.

“See,” Marcus said earnestly, “I told you Grandpa came in here this morning.”

Ellie rubbed her neck. “What did he do in here?”

“I think he put something in here. Maybe what he got from the hospital last night.”

“What do you mean? What did he get from the hospital last night?”

“Haven’t you noticed what he does at the hospital when we visit? He always talks to Caleb and Anabell, one-by-one, and gives them some of Grandma’s homemade licorice, and Anabell hands him something that he stuffs in his jacket.”

At that moment the shop’s front door rang out loudly, and Marcus froze up.

“Hurry and close this up,” Ellie said. She darted out of the room and headed for the shop, calling: “I’ll get the door.”

“Come on, Tofu,” Marcus said in a huff. Tofu was in the blue room, preoccupied with smelling something on the bottom shelf that looked like a knotty old stick. Marcus stepped outside the room and Tofu followed.

This time he easily pushed the slab of door into the wall, a slight hiss being the only sign of resistance until the door-shaped crack of light faded, and ultimately disappeared. With a sigh, Marcus replaced the tapestry, ran a hand through his hair, and returned to the shop.

Ellie was just finishing up with a customer. Marcus thought she looked like she had been doing this for years. She took the product, scanned it, and ran it through the computer without a problem.

“Thanks for coming by,” she said as the woman left. “And please tell your friends about The Magic Shop.”

“That was pretty good.” Marcus approached the checkout stand. “I couldn’t have done that.”

“You’re probably right. You didn’t exactly pay attention to Grandma when she was explaining it.”

“What did you think of the blue room?”

“I don’t know. It was strange, for sure, but there didn’t seem to be anything too weird in there, just a bunch of old stuff. What were those numbers, price tags or something?”

“Maybe they’re selling antiques on the side to support the family?” Marcus speculated.

Ellie grabbed her chin. “Do you think that’s where Grandpa took that lady this morning?”

“She did say ‘nice doing business with you,’” Marcus said.

After talking things out with Ellie a bit, Marcus felt better. At least, he didn’t feel as potentially crazy.

Ellie went on to show Marcus everything that their grandma had already shown them that morning. A few more customers came by the store, and they took turns handling each of them.

After a while Marcus began to bore, and took to staring out the window at the passersby across the street.

“How bad do you think things are for us,” Marcus asked, “financially I mean?”

“I don’t know, but it’s not good. I hear Grandma and Grandpa arguing all the time.”

“Maybe there’s something we could do to get more customers? We’ve only had a few,” Marcus said. “Have you seen that magic shop across the street? It seems like it’s always busy.”

“Yeah,” Ellie said, “but I’ve never been in it.”

“I want to go check it out,” Marcus shot up like he just sat on something sharp. “Will you watch the store?”

“I guess so, sure,” she cracked open her book again. “I’ve got this store thing down anyway. You better come back with some good ideas, though.”

Marcus bolted out of the shop without wasting another moment. Some distance down the street opposite them stood a tall, rectangular building with a large, horizontal marquee blinking the name: The Magic Box in different-colored lights. A line of people waiting to get inside overflowed out of the shop’s entrance and into the street.

What could possibly attract so many people to one place? Marcus couldn’t see a clear way around the line, so he found the end of it and took his place. He wondered what their competitor did differently than they did.

Marcus felt the phone in his pocket vibrate, so he pulled it out only to find a sarcastic text message from his sister.

Don’t get lost ;)

He sniggered just as he felt a tap on his shoulder. Marcus spun around.

“Are you here for the show?” A floppy, blond-haired boy about Marcus’s age stood before him, grinning from ear to ear. Apparently this boy was looking for some way to pass the time too.

“Hi, my name is Jason,” he said, extending a friendly hand. “Do you think you like magic more than I do?”

Marcus considered how blunt to be about this, and decided to just say it. Perhaps Jason would just let him be. “Uh, no, not so much,” Marcus said. “I don’t believe in magic. Actually, I don’t like it at all.”

For a moment, Jason looked confused. “Well, I bet I can change your mind. Watch this,” he said enthusiastically. He whipped out both arms theatrically and rubbed his fingers together. With the flick of his wrist he produced a gold coin in his left hand, apparently from nowhere.

“I had two gold coins before I met you,” Jason said. “Where did you put the other one?”

“Let me guess,” Marcus said, rolling his eyes, “behind one of my ears?” Then he realized that he had done exactly what Jason wanted. Just as Marcus began to speak, Jason waved his coinless hand in front of Marcus’s face and behind his ear. When his hand came back around to Marcus’s face again, it contained an identical gold coin.

“See, you had it in you all along,” Jason said. “Pretty neat, huh?”

“Uh, Sure,” Marcus said, really just wanting him to go away. Marcus looked over Jason’s shoulder. For the first time since he had arrived, he noticed that everybody in

line seemed to be practicing different magic tricks, not just Jason.

“What did you mean when you asked if I was here for the show?”

Jason laughed as if Marcus was being funny. It took a few moments, but Jason finally realized that Marcus was serious.

“Well, tonight is the annual Who’s got Magic Talent show,” Jason said. “They’ve been promoting this for several months now.” Jason pointed to a poster on the brick wall across the street, a few stores down from his family’s Magic Shop. “It doesn’t start until later tonight, but it’ll be worth the wait.” The poster showed a man in a black suit pulling a rabbit out of a hat.

A strong hand gripped Marcus’s shoulder, bringing his attention front and center. “Come with me, young man,” a familiar voice said. The voice was his grandpa’s, and he wasn’t happy.

“I just wanted to check out—”

“Don’t talk, just follow me.” He quickly pulled Marcus by the wrist through the crowd all the way back to The Magic Shop.

“We could have at least scalped my place in line,” Marcus said, earning him a severe scowl.

When they returned, Charlotte stood at the checkout counter with a hand on her hip.

“Where have you been?”

“I went to check out the competition across—”

“Not only did you prove your teacher right, but you’ve shown that you need an even greater amount of discipline. Do you realize you left your sister here all alone, Marcus?”

“This is Ellie we’re talking about, right?” Marcus asked. “She’s tougher than I am.”

“Enough,” Winston said. “These are dangerous times, and you need to act accordingly.”

Charlotte crossed her arms, fuming.

“For the time being, you’re grounded,” Winston said. “Go to your room.”

“But Grandpa,” Ellie said, “I encouraged him.”

They both shook their heads.

Marcus went up to his room and sat in the windowsill. What just happened was a lot to take in. He and his grandpa had a great relationship, and to his knowledge they had never had a run-in like this. He didn’t want to feel at odds. It was confusing.

Across the street, the crowd of people waiting to get into The Magic Box only grew. He wondered what it was like; what he might have seen had he been allowed to go. Really, he just wanted to help make his grandparents’ Magic Shop successful.

Just then Marcus heard Tofu’s jingle as he came trotting into the room. Marcus didn’t care. He was focused on the outside, on The Magic Box. The silence got Marcus’s attention, a pause in Tofu’s jingle. Marcus knew what was next. Instinctively he braced himself as Tofu leaped in the air, and landed on his lap.

“Funny little guy,” Marcus said, still staring out the window. He scratched Tofu behind the ears and then worked his way to the dog’s face, like always, when something scratched Marcus. He looked down at Tofu, who had something in his mouth.

“Open up, boy,” Marcus said as he tickled under Tofu’s throat.

Tofu loosened his grip, and Marcus wiggled a familiar-looking stick from the dog’s mouth. He spent a minute trying to remember. It’s not like it was the first time Tofu had played fetch with a stick. Then he remembered the last thing Tofu was sniffing at in that mysterious blue room; the knotty stick.



Night fell before Marcus saw his grandma and grandpa

again. He had sat in the windowsill with Tofu, watching the line outside The Magic Box, curious about the show.

When the knock came at his door, Marcus knew it was his grandparents.

“We brought you something,” Charlotte said, rubbing a thumb on her crystal locket; she did that when she got anxious. “I thought skipping dinner might teach you a

lesson, but this old softy here wouldn't have it. So we compromised."

Winston sat on the end of Marcus's bed holding a dinner tray.

"Here you go, Son," his grandpa said, extending the tray, which held a small plate with two slices of buttered bread and a glass of water. "At least—"

Marcus took the tray. "I'm not your son," he droned, still staring out the window and petting Tofu mindlessly.

Winston blinked hard and turned away.

Charlotte shook her fist. "What has gotten into you, Marcus? We're family, and your grandfather has only ever cared for you."

Winston turned back to Marcus. "We just want you to understand how serious your behavior is. You abandoned your own flesh and blood and our livelihood. What you did was irrational and undisciplined."

"It was dangerous," Charlotte added.

Marcus sat in silence for a while, gazing across the street. Someone cut in line, and a small fight broke out. "I'm sorry," Marcus said, finally. "I wasn't thinking. I'm not used to being stuck here every day."

Scratching Tofu under the chin, Marcus took the knotty stick from Tofu's mouth again with the other and tossed it across the room. "Fetch," he said.

Tofu's head shot up instinctively. He leaped off Marcus's lap and chased the stick, but skidded to a halt as it struck the wall.

Marcus thought he saw sparks shoot from the wall when his TV flickered on. He looked at his side to see if he had accidentally sat on the remote control or something. Without warning, the radio began playing his favorite rock station then a high-pitched buzz filled the room. Marcus heard an electrical snap. The TV screen cracked and blackened. The radio popped and fizzled into silence. Smoke rose from the speakers.

“My TV!” Marcus leaped to his feet and rushed to examine the television. “My radio!”

Winston stood up quickly, gave his wife a concerned look, and picked up the knotty stick. Marcus patrolled back and forth between his devices.

“Marcus,” Winston said after a deep breath, almost reverently, “where did you get this?”

“My stuff just mysteriously blew up, and you’re worried about a stick?”

“Just answer him,” Charlotte snapped.

“Tofu brought it in here a few hours ago. I was too irritated to play with him, so he just sat here and chewed on it.”

Charlotte pointed at the door. “You’ve been a very naughty dog, Tofu. Downstairs—right now.” Tofu lowered his head, drooped his ears, and he meandered out of the room.

“Ellie!” Charlotte yelled, “come up here please. Right away!”

A moment later Ellie came bounding up the stairs. “What’s going on?” she asked, breathing heavily.

“My stuff’s just randomly blowing up, that’s what’s going on,” Marcus said dejectedly.

Their grandpa lifted the stick gingerly. “Where have you seen this before?”

“Seriously?” Ellie raised an eyebrow and threw her arms up. “Okay, um... outside maybe? I don’t know, and unless Marcus has started collecting sticks, I bet he doesn’t either. Did you pat down the family pet? He might—”

“This is serious, Ellie,” Charlotte said.

“Okay, I really don’t know. What’s the big deal about a stick, anyway?” Ellie paused and glared at Marcus. “Wait, did you say your stuff blew up?”

“Enough,” their grandpa said. Silence filled the room. “It’s time you two level with us. It’s very important.”

Marcus looked at Ellie, and she promptly nodded.

“Okay,” Marcus said, “This morning I saw you enter a room behind the tapestry.”

Winston cleared his throat. “Oh, that?” he said matter-of-factly. Charlotte frowned.

“After you left to run errands, we went in there to check it out. We were only in there a few minutes, and we didn’t touch anything. Tofu wandered in too, but then we got a customer, and Ellie took care of her. I called for Tofu and we closed it up. That’s all.”

“No harm done, then,” their grandpa said. He put the stick in his shirt pocket, patted it, and made for the door.

“Hold on, Grandpa,” Marcus said. “What happened to all my stuff?”

“Nothing more than a queer coincidence, Marcus.” He gave Marcus a look of pity. “It may take some time, but we’ll save up and replace it for you, okay?”

“What’s that room for, Grandpa?” Ellie placed her hands on her hips.

Their grandpa coughed like he had just swallowed a dry drink. “That’s where we keep our other items for sale.”

“Like the one you got from the hospital?” Marcus asked curiously. “I’ve seen Anabell pass you things.”

Charlotte’s lips tightened, and then she sighed. “You are our grandchildren, aren’t you?”

“Well,” their grandpa said. “Your aunt and uncle are in a difficult situation. They make crafts and we try to sell them to help pay for their stay at the State Hospital. We made a promise to their parents that we would look after them. Family sticks together.”

“That’s it?” Marcus asked.

“That’s it,” his grandpa said. “We have a few other things in the blue room that we have collected over the years. When the opportunity to sell them to the right person for the right price presents itself, we usually take it. But those kinds of buyers are rare.”

“Why don’t you two get some rest,” their grandma suggested. “It’s been a busy day. You can sleep in tomorrow, how about that?”

“Thanks,” Marcus said as their grandparents left.

“What a day.” Ellie flopped down on Marcus’s bed.

“Do you think he’s lying?”

“Grandpa? He’s never lied to us, dork.”

“Yes, Grandpa, you nitwit,” Marcus said, “He’s just never acted like this.”

“And he’s never lied to us, Marcus. Can we talk about something else?”

“Fine, I’m going to go to The Magic Box tonight.”

“What?” Ellie asked. “Grandma almost hung you by your toenails today, and now you’re going to sneak out?”

“There’s something about that place, Ellie. I ran into a boy over there, and he told me that they are hosting a magic talent show tonight. A whole crowd was waiting to get in. We could learn a lesson or two from them on how to get more customers.”

“It’s a bad idea,” Ellie said. “You’ll get in all kinds of trouble.”

“I need you to cover for me, Ellie.” Marcus peered out the window and down the street at The Magic Box. The line was just as long, if not longer than it had been earlier that day.

“I’m not covering for you; I’m going with you.”

“Then hang the sign.” Marcus pointed toward the door.

Ellie removed a sign from the back of Marcus’s door. It read: Do not disturb. Violators will be shot, survivors will be shot again. She hung the sign outside his bedroom door,

placed her novel on his bed, and then joined him at the window.

The window screen came off easily for Marcus, and he crawled out onto the little roof that jutted out over the entrance to The Magic Shop.

“Come on,” he said, reaching out to Ellie. She followed out the window and they made their way gingerly across the roof. It creaked every few feet and they froze, pausing a moment to listen for their grandparents. They finally reached an old fire escape ladder on the side of the shop and carefully climbed down.

Marcus peeked around the corner of The Magic Shop window to make sure that their grandparents weren't within line of sight. He didn't see anyone.

“Last chance to change your mind,” he said.

“No way. I always read about other people's adventures. This is my chance.”

With the evening's breeze at their back, Marcus and Ellie hustled down the street to join the long line for the Who's got Magic Talent show.

“Hey!” came a voice from the crowd, somewhere down the line. “Over here.”

Marcus looked at Ellie who shrugged. They approached a boy trying to get their attention.

“Hi...” Marcus's voice trailed as he tried to remember the boy's name. “Jason, right?” It was the boy Marcus had met earlier.

Jason nodded. "I saved your place," he said, stepping aside and making room. "I knew you'd be back. No one walks away from this kind of show."

"Thanks," Marcus said as they took their place next to him. Marcus introduced Ellie, and Jason smiled widely.

"How long have you been doing magic?" Marcus asked, wanting to change subjects, "Tricks, I mean."

Jason looked at the ground so as to not be distracted while he was counting. "For a few years now. I'm going to win this thing, I just know it."

Over the next few minutes the line moved faster, and the talking of the crowd was reduced to a murmur. Marcus felt the anticipation from everybody rise, including Jason.

"That'll be the best \$5.00 you've ever spent, please," a redheaded man with a wide grin said from behind the thick glass of a ticket booth.

Marcus gaped under The Magic Box's large marquee. The ticket man's glass compartment blinked with rows of golden lights that reflected off his red uniform. It was like an old theater, where the rich spent their evenings watching sophisticated plays.

The ticket man cleared his throat loudly and Marcus dug into his pockets. He passed ten dollars under the window in exchange for a pair of passes, and the ticket man waved them on.

Ushers located throughout the store guided them toward the show. Marcus had wondered what The Magic Box would look like; its ambiance, its crowd appeal, its

products. The shop was darker than Marcus had expected. Blinking bulbs, the sole source of light, hung from everything. Flickering silhouettes faintly illuminated the whole place with an ominous, soft glow that left Marcus feeling like they were sneaking under the tree on Christmas morning.

The floors and the shelves were decked out in red velvet and gold trim, giving the store a sort of majestic quality. As they passed a row of exotic items, Ellie giggled at a magic sword that one could swallow without harm. Jason commented that he had used one a hundred times and he had survived. There were pouches of beans that would grow beanstalks if planted by moonlight, and pink love potions just in time for summer vacation. Jason did admit rather timidly that he had never gotten a love potion to produce more than a handshake for him.

As they progressed, the shop seemed to get more serious. Marcus saw ornate packs of tarot cards and sets of throwing bones engraved with runes. There were thick cauldrons, dream catchers, and glass cases displaying various weapons, complete with detailed descriptions of their magical powers and attribute. Ellie perked up when she saw a wall dedicated to spell books. Next to the books were shelves stocking colored jars containing odd things floating in them.

“This way, please,” the usher at the door directed Marcus’s attention toward the show and away from the shop. His voice sounded familiar, and as Marcus turned

around he knew what he was about to see. The redheaded ticket man motioned them to enter the theater, smiling broadly at Marcus as they exited the shop.

The guests wandered around amongst all the rows of black seats, trying to find their places. The rows descended toward a large stage; its thick crimson curtains hung with old-fashioned gold trim, just like in the movies.

“They converted this old movie theater into The Magic Box a few years back,” Jason said. “It’s been my favorite place to shop ever since. The old box office lobby is now the store, and they kept this one stage intact for the different shows and events they do during the year.”

They made their way to the last available seats, on the top row. When they sat, Marcus heard flutes and beating drums playing from behind the curtains.

A deep voice erupted over the speakers, echoing in the large room. “Welcome one and all to The Magic Box’s annual Who’s got Magic Talent show; the show in which you, the audience, get to showcase your magical talents for the chance to claim the next apprenticeship under our very own in-house magician.”

The audience clapped and cheered at the announcement, and some even stood. The anticipation in the air was palpable. Marcus leaned over to Ellie and asked, “So what did you think of that shop?”

“All I can say is, wow. They have everything from hand zappers to voodoo dolls. I don’t know how we are going to

compete with that, Marcus..." her voice trailed off. "At least we'll get some laughs out of this."

A pair of ushers bolted the entrance behind them and stood stiffly in front of the doors with their arms crossed. The voice returned. "For those of you unfamiliar with the contest, when we call your row number please follow the direction of the aisle ushers. You will have two minutes to perform the best magic of your life on the greatest stage in Nevada. Now, row one, please make your way backstage."

"Oh no," Marcus said, turning to Jason. Ushers appeared near the front row, waving the excited contestants on. "They're calling each row up one-by-one?"

"That's how they usually do it, yeah. Why? Did you forget your tricks at home or something?"

Right, like he had a closet full of props in his bedroom or something. Marcus couldn't believe what was happening, much less have an act prepared.

"What can we do, Ellie?" Marcus asked. "They think we want to go up there, and I definitely don't want to go up there."

"I don't know, Marcus. Jump those big ushers and bite their ankles?" Ellie said sarcastically. "There's nothing we can do, so let's just sit back and enjoy the show. If they call our row, we'll just explain the misunderstanding."

Marcus shook his head as the first row of people disappeared on the stage behind the thick curtains. A moment later the voice returned: "Audience, I give you your judges." Three dark figures stepped out onto a

balcony, high above the stage, which Marcus hadn't noticed before. They raised their hands, waved, and nodded, and then took their seats.

"Please hold your applause until the end of the show." The voice paused for dramatic effect. "And now, I give you, this year's Who's got Magic Talent show."

Trumpets blew majestically and the curtains pulled back to reveal a quivering man standing alone in the middle of the stage. His magic hoops quaked in his hands as he spoke. "I... I will show you the power of my... m... magic," he said as he pushed a thick pair of glasses up his nose. "I will force these two r... rings, each made of the most solid metal, to converge according to my will, without blemish."

"That's the oldest trick in the book," Marcus said, slouching in his seat. "What will they do next, pull a rabbit out of a hat?"

The man in the middle of the stage struck his rings together, not once, not twice, but three times. On the third attempt the man dropped to one knee and bowed his head. He extended his arms dramatically. The crowd gasped in anticipation of the joining of the two rings, but nothing happened. The man still held a ring in each hand, and the crowd murmured.

A second man, white-gloved and dressed in a black tuxedo with tails, came onstage and raised his hands to silence the crowd. "Shall we measure his magic?" he asked. The crowd quieted. The man with the rings stepped into

the background, still clashing his rings together feverishly, cursing to himself. He was obviously on a timeline.

“What kind of jerk embarrasses a contestant like that?” a woman’s voice from the crowd asked. “Can’t you see that he’s not finished yet?” The man onstage raised one ring high above the other and brought it down with great force.

“Must be the guy’s mom,” Marcus said. Jason smirked, but Ellie elbowed Marcus in the ribs.

“To the true practitioners of magic here tonight, I need no introduction,” the man said as he reached into his tuxedo pocket and pulled out a small glass ball. “I am the master magician of the house.” Microphone feedback echoed briefly throughout the theater as he spoke. When he held up the sphere in the palm of his gloved hand, the stage lights reflected off of what seemed like small bubbles swimming inside it.

Marcus nudged Jason. “Who’s that guy?”

“You heard him,” Jason said. “He needs no intro—”

“Just tell me.”

“The Great Faustino Forsyth,” Jason said pretentiously. “He’s why you’re here, isn’t he?”

Marcus had to think about that a moment. “Yeah, sure,” he lied.

Faustino mumbled something unintelligible and the ball began to glow. A faint, earthy color shimmered off Faustino’s greased-back hair, and a whispered murmuring rushed over the crowd. The man with the rings stopped

what he was doing and gaped at the ball. The bubbles within the ball turned orange.

One by one, the judges on the balcony lifted an ornate gold paddle with a glow-in-the-dark number painted on its face. In the blackened theater the numbers appeared to float in the air. All three judges raised the number one in unison, and the audience moaned.

Jason bounced his leg. "They're going to be tough tonight."

"I'm sorry," Faustino said, looking on the man with pity. Then he opened his arm theatrically toward the exit.

"But it worked," the contestant said indignantly as he held up one ring, the other dangling from it. Despite a few half-hearted claps surfacing from the crowd, he was promptly ushered off the stage anyway.

Next, a teenage boy wearing tan baggy pants, curly gold shoes, and a gold turban strode onto the stage. He unsheathed a sword from his golden sash and whirled around, swinging and stabbing the sword to a rhythm only he could hear.

"It's the human blender," Marcus announced. "I hope he doesn't cut The Great Faustino before you can get to him." Jason waved him off, zeroing in on the stage.

"I'm not worried," Jason said a moment later, as if just hearing Marcus's comment for the first time, "The Great Faustino cannot be killed."

"You're not serious," Marcus said when the boy onstage lit his sword on fire with a wave of his hand. After a few

more flaming twirls, he stopped, posed, and slid the sword down his throat.

“Many have tried to kill The Great Faustino over the years,” Jason said. The boy onstage slowly removed the sword from his mouth and took a bow, “but none have succeeded.” The crowd relaxed a little.

Ellie wiped her brow. Faustino lifted the glass ball again and the judges gave their score.

The varied performances that followed were dangerous, others were more like parlor tricks, and the rest were just plain laughable. After some time, Marcus lost interest. He couldn't get over how many people had shown up to this event. Their grandparents had a hard time getting even a handful of people in their shop, yet The Magic Box was able to bring out what looked to be the entire population of the city.

Marcus snapped back to attention when one of the ushers called on the row in front of them. “Okay, folks,” he whispered, “you're up next. Let's go.” The people stood and shuffled along the row, and then walked nervously down the aisle for their turn at the contest.

Once they cleared the way, Marcus saw a young blonde girl dressed as a magician's assistant sparkle her way to the front of the stage. He squinted to get a better look; she reminded him of someone.

She lifted a top hat from her head and twirled it as she bowed. When she straightened up again, she slowly waved

a hand above the hat and then below it. She flipped the hat over and showed the inside of the hat to the audience.

“Today I will perform a feat that you’ve never seen,” the blonde girl said. The crowd fell silent as if to egg her on. The girl’s voice sounded vaguely familiar to Marcus, but he couldn’t place it.

“This,” she said, placing the hat at her feet, “is my magic hat.” She stood up and slowly circled the hat. “You’ve each observed that my hat is quite normal. There are no holes or strings attached.”

The audience grumbled unbelievably, but settled down after a minute. Marcus leaned over to Jason and asked, “Who is that girl?”

Entranced by the girl’s act, Jason just shrugged. The hat looked normal enough.

“Are you ready?” the girl asked.

With a clap of her hands, the hat began to waddle and circle the girl on the stage. A single scream amongst gasps blurted out from the audience. The girl raised both of her arms in the air and the hat stopped in place. It still jerked randomly, however, as if something small underneath it tried to push its way out.

“Rise,” the girl said in a loud, dramatic voice, “and join me on stage.”

Ever so slowly, the hat began to rise up off the stage. Eyes grew wide and mouths gaped open as the whole audience leaned in and absorbed the scene. What was more, as the hat separated from the stage, something else

came into sight. Marcus couldn't believe his eyes; if he didn't know better, he would swear that a pair of fancy high-heels had appeared underneath the hat. Then the hat seemed to expand and contract as it continued to rise up off the ground. Before long, Marcus saw stockings and a skirt. The crowd seemed flustered.

Marcus turned to Jason. "There is a woman under the hat!"

"At least half of one," Ellie said.

"I've never seen anything like this," Jason said, sounding worried for the first time. "There's no way I can beat that."

A minute later, a full-grown woman stood in front of the girl in the magician's assistant outfit. It took a moment before the woman realized where she was and that she had a top hat on her head.

The woman patted herself down and spun around, disoriented. "Wha—" then she took a deep breath. "Where am I?"

"Everybody, give my volunteer a round of applause," the girl said and then bowed.

"I didn't volunteer for anything," the woman said. She felt for the hat on her head and then threw it to the ground. "You horrible little girl!"

"Mom?" echoed a voice from the crowd. A man shuffled his way out from his row, ran down the aisle, and climbed up on stage, embracing his mother.

He let her go and turned to move off the stage when music came over the theater speakers and sounded off TaDa! The woman and her son froze in place.

“Thank you, thank you,” the girl said majestically. She rolled her sparkling arms elegantly as she took another bow. “Please give another round of applause to this good lady.”

The crowd clapped excitedly and the man and his mother bowed reluctantly, still confused but soaking up the attention. When the man stood up, his glasses slid down a bit, and he pushed the thick, black frames back up his nose.

“Hey, that was the first contestant onstage,” Jason said, chuckling. The mother and son exited behind the curtains. “Poor sap.”

“Mommy!” Marcus mocked. This earned him another elbow in the rib from Ellie.

“Shall we measure her magic?” Faustino’s voice said over the speakers as he walked onto the stage with his glass ball in hand.

Eagerness took over the crowd when Faustino lifted the ball into the air. The anticipation was palpable to Marcus. This had clearly been the best performance of the night, but what would that mean for Faustino and his ball?

After a moment, color came into the ball. The color wasn’t the warm color of orange and red that they had seen all night, but rather a cool, bluish-green color. The judges shot up out of their seats and raised their score

paddles. A hush came over the crowd when the young girl received the highest score of the night.

“Well done, young lady,” Faustino said with a gentlemanly nod. “May I have your name, please?” This was the first time he had asked a contestant’s name.

“Elizabeth,” she said with her chin held high. “Elizabeth Stratton.”

“Well, Miss Stratton, if you will follow me, please.” Faustino took Elizabeth by the hand and escorted her behind the curtains. He returned a moment later.

“Let’s go,” a hushed voice said from the end of Marcus’s row, “You’re up.” Marcus turned to see an usher wave at them from the end of his row.

“Look, there’s been some kind of mistake,” Marcus said in a hushed voice. “We just came to watch the show, not participate in it.”

“Doesn’t matter, kid,” another voice said from the other side of Marcus. “We’re on a timeline. Now, get up.” Apparently one usher was pulling the row out into the aisle and the other was converging on the row from the other side.

“Come on,” Jason said.

They all stood and fell in-line as they made their way up the stage. Marcus couldn’t believe this was actually happening. Jason walked in front of them, almost skipping as he walked. Marcus felt quite the opposite.

“What are we going to do, Ellie?” Marcus asked as they walked up the steps to the stage. “For the record, I’m still in favor of biting the ushers’ ankles.”

One-by-one the ushers lined them up and spaced them out behind the curtains. “We’re together,” Marcus said to their usher to avoid getting split up from Ellie. By the looks of it, they were going last.

The ushers brought the first contestant from their group onto the stage. After a few minutes, she came back with her head hanging down, and the next went out. Marcus and Ellie were too nervous to watch the others; until Jason stepped onstage.

Jason was pretty good, but that didn’t make Marcus feel any better. Jason walked out onto the stage, took a string from his pocket and held it up high, letting it hang from his fingertips. Then he produced a lighter, which he thumbed once to produce a flame.

He waved the lighter underneath the tail of the string and it was consumed instantly by the flame, only to be replaced, at the flick of his wrist, by a silky red cloth.

Next, Jason took a dollar bill out from his pant pocket and snapped it tight between his two hands. Then, placing the dollar bill between his hands, he turned his hands over and pulled them away from the dollar bill, leaving it suspended. He moved his hands all around the bill without disturbing it. Then he clasped his hands around the bill again just as Faustino came from behind the curtains.

Marcus heard Faustino repeat his typical comment and he lifted his glass ball to measure Jason's magic. The ball turned orange; the bubbles inside glowed blue. The judges scored him well, but not as well as Elizabeth. Marcus heard the crowd murmur disapprovingly. Jason returned backstage with a disappointed look.

"You two, you're on," an eager usher said to Marcus and Ellie, "and make it quick. We all want to go home at a decent hour, and there's no way you'll beat that other girl."

"You can go home now," Marcus said. "We don't even have an act. We just came for the—"

"The Great Faustino expects you onstage, so you get out there and do some magic," the usher ordered. "You don't disappoint The Great Faustino."

Marcus and Ellie scanned the backstage area for props or other antics they might use. There was a stool with a pack of cards on it. Marcus grabbed the cards just as an usher pushed him and Ellie onto the stage.

The audience looked tired, but boy there were a lot of people staring at them. Marcus and Ellie exchanged an anxious look.

"What are you going to do?" Ellie asked.

"I don't know," Marcus said, "Put in a plug for The Magic Shop?" He sniggered, but when Ellie didn't respond in kind, he said, "Let's just lose and get out of here. With any luck, Faustino will immediately sense our lack of magic and kick us out."

Marcus opened the pack and slid the cards out onto his hand. He threw the card case onto the stage.

“You there,” Marcus said, pointing at a young lady on the front row. “Pick a card.”

Marcus met a young girl at the edge of the stage and fanned open the deck in front of her. She hesitated for a moment and then picked a card, pulling it close to her face. She held the card to her chest with both hands.

“Let me guess,” Marcus said half-heartedly, “it’s a queen of hearts.”

“No,” the girl said, holding the card up for the crowd to see. “It’s a joker.”

Fitting, Marcus thought as the crowd chuckled at him.

“The what?” Ellie asked. She ran to the edge of the stage, grabbed the card, and then showed it to Marcus.

Faustino’s slow clapping steps echoed in the theatre as he took the stage. He shook his head disapprovingly, reached out and took the card out of Ellie’s hand and examined it for a moment. “Curious,” he said, turning it around for the crowd to see.

It was a queen of hearts.

“Shall we measure his magic?”

The crowd cheered as Faustino lifted the glass ball like he had after each contestant that night. Unlike the other times, however, the ball didn’t fill with color. The crowd shifted in their seats, and a mumble filled the room. After some time, Marcus thought he saw a faint blue light emerge from the center of the glass. The light grew in

brightness until it washed out the bubbles; they couldn't be seen anymore in the ball. The unique color reminded Marcus of something.

"The room," whispered Ellie, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear, "it looks like that color from the blue room."

Faustino's eyes grew wider. The color burned brighter; so bright that members of the crowd squinted and turned their heads away.

"What," he seemed lost in thought for a moment, "what is your name, young man?" Faustino lowered the ball and covered the bright color with both hands until he could store it away gently into his jacket pocket.

Marcus looked at Ellie, unsure if he should give his real name. She just shrugged.

"Marcus," he said hesitantly. Elizabeth snarled at him from behind the curtains.

"Marcus..." Faustino said, letting his name linger.

"Marcus from across the street," replied Ellie quickly.

Faustino opened his mouth to say something more, but the judges stood on their feet and raised Marcus's scores. As he expected, they weren't very good. At least he could go home now. This had been a lot to take in.

Suddenly Marcus heard galloping footsteps behind him.

"I win," a high-pitched voice said, emerging from backstage. "I win, I win." Elizabeth ran toward Faustino,

her arms thrashing in the air. She was beside herself, but Faustino only had eyes for Marcus.

Faustino looked down as he opened his jacket with one hand. Marcus stepped back out of instinct. The unique blue glow still emitted from the pocket where the glass ball had been placed.

“Who are you?” Faustino asked in a lowered voice, a hint of suspicion slipped into his words.

Marcus didn’t have to answer as the TaDa sound played over the speakers and the crowd clapped. Elizabeth tugged on Faustino’s arm, still trying to get his attention.

Faustino stood up straight and gave Marcus one last look before he turned to Elizabeth and put on his stage smile.

“Let’s go, Marcus.” Ellie hooked his arm and walked him to the side of the stage.

“Let’s give a big round of applause to Elizabeth Stratton,” Faustino said mechanically, “your winner, and my new apprentice!”

With that, the audience stood and applauded vigorously. The ushers finally opened the exits. Marcus and Ellie promptly joined the multitude at the door.

Marcus looked back at the stage to see Elizabeth hugging Faustino, hopping up and down and clapping. Then, she hugged him again. But Faustino’s head was craned and his face was somber while he tracked Marcus through the multitude. It was as if Elizabeth and the crowd weren’t there. Marcus had the strange feeling that even if a

thick cement wall had been built between them, Faustino would still see him somehow.

Outside, Ellie pulled Marcus by the hand while they navigated between the people in the street. Even with some distance having been put between them, Marcus looked back at The Magic Box and couldn't shake the feeling that he was now being watched.



Thanks for reading the beginning of The Magic Shop, the first book in The Shadow Magic series. I hope you enjoyed it. Check out the full version here:

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