

MAGICAL INTELLIGENCE

MAGICAL INTELLIGENCE

M. K. WISEMAN

Copyright © 2020 by M. K. Wiseman

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author.

ISBN: 978-1-952458-01-9 (paperback)

ISBN: 978-1-952458-02-6 (ePub)

ISBN: 978-1-952458-03-3 (Mobi)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2020905011

This is a work of fiction. Any references to real people, places, or historical events are used fictitiously. Other names, characters, places, descriptions, and events are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblances to actual places or events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Edited by Tanya Gold and MeriLyn Oblad

Cover Illustration by Egle Zioma

Interior design created with Vellum

Published in the United States of America

1st edition: May 05, 2020

mkwisemanauthor.com

Chapter One

My name is James James, and I do not exist.

The words, written in an untidy scrawl, flashed across Myra's mind. Indigo on crème but deeply felt. The stark sentence faded as quickly as it had come. Hair tumbling from nerveless fingers, she sat on the edge of her bed and watched as the bedtime candles of half a dozen tittering girls swam back into focus.

Another of her “dreams”? Or was she merely suffering from an overactive imagination? Again.

Myra looked around, half-hoping, half-dreading that someone, anyone, had witnessed her falling into the vision. But no, the rest of the girls were too busy soaking up their last few moments of wakefulness with gossip, book reading, and braids.

She pondered what she had seen—albeit briefly. Rich ink on fancy paper, a sensitive yet masculine hand driving the pen. Anger had drawn the words haphazard.

She had felt it, radiating outward like heat from a fire. Anger and something else.

Desperation.

Were men-who-did-not-exist desperate? Myra wanted to know. She had to know. The emotional state of the writer, this insubstantial James James, had felt too clear inside Myra's heart. It had hurt to read the words, like watching a man pen his own suicide note. It had felt real.

But then, so had all of her previous daydreams. The ones that had gotten her into such trouble as to land her here, in an indifferent orphanage eight hundred miles from home.

Quickly picking up where her own bedtime braid had fallen to shambles, Myra worked her fingers through the thick tangle, setting the plait quickly, sloppily, before lying on her bed with eyes closed. She was now distinctly worried about this James James fellow. She must find him. She must.

Myra concentrated on not concentrating and calmed her breath.

A ship slipping from its mooring, her mind had little trouble drifting away into the stream of light that lived on the edge of Myra's subconscious. Subconscious. The term that doctor had used to describe her "problem." It was all the rage in certain circles. It was the sort of thing that set fourteen-year-old young women running halfway across the country to escape. The hospital—the asylum—was the next logical step under such a diagnosis.

Shuddering, Myra wondered what Doctor Subconscious would say about what she had seen just now, a vision that pointedly denied its own existence.

And with that she was thinking again. At this rate, she would never reach the light that lived at the edge of thought, a brightness it seemed only she could see. Perhaps that was why such visions so often came to her as dreams. In the waking world, she simply clamped down too hard on reality.

Reality? Myra was not the right person to judge what was real and what was not. Save for the orphanage bed. That was real. And soft. And a welcome change from empty railcars and barn floors. Most of the girls at the home were not happy to be there. But Myra? Myra felt safe. Safe from life. Safe from herself.

Safe from visions and the things she could do with her mind. Things that could get a girl in trouble. Things that could hurt those whom she loved.

Myra turned over to her side, curling into a ball.
And then her world exploded.

“Steve! Stephen Tomlinson!”

“Here! Aidan, I’m here—” I choked on smoke and bile, absently wondering which would kill me first. Probably neither, if the pain in my arm was any indication.

Rocking my weight left, then right, then left again, I struggled to upend the heavy wooden chair to which I was tied—a difficult enough maneuver without first having endured torture and poison. The added feature of the world being afire, well, that was just a bonus. Another perk of our line of work.

“Stephen!”

The cry came at my ears from further away. Frantic, I tested my bonds again. The ropes were unbreakable, the chair too heavy. Or perhaps I was simply too weak.

A new explosion rocked the building—probably another pile of munitions erupting into flame. I closed my eyes, trying to decide if the heat I could feel was coming from the inferno on the other end of the warehouse or from whatever Dr. Addair’s agent had injected into my arm. I looked to the livid and bloody wound, itself a likely death sentence. I considered my final words. “Ai? Tell Laur—”

“Tell her yourself, I’m not a telegraph operator,” a voice sounded close behind—female and therefore not Aidan’s. I strained to get a glimpse of my rescuer, espying rouged lips and a shock of deep-red hair. Kady. She smiled crookedly, leaning close. “Gotcha. And . . . duck!”

I hunched down as best I could, wincing as a blast of magefire erupted over my head. Through the din of ash and flame, I could see a black-hooded enemy fall.

“Good shot. Didn’t know any of them had stuck around.” The words came out slurred. The room did a dizzy turn. My magic was gone. The light had been snuffed out. I was numb. I was dead. Dead and dying.

No. There was feeling. Kady cut the bonds pinioning my wrists, and with cruel and painful efficiency, blood rushed back into my fingers. Motion by my ankles informed me that my feet were, too, about to be freed. Not that I could do anything with them. I felt heavy as stone. For with returning circulation, the poison coursed through my veins, screaming its hateful song with every beat of my heart.

“Leave me.”

“Not a chance.” Kady’s curt rejoinder came equally short of breath. The compact woman lifted and swung me heavily over her shoulder. The world turned upside

down and began to bounce rhythmically in time with her lilting run. Regret settled back into my poisoned heart. If only we could have made it back to England. Aidan's team would have been good allies for M.I. A tad young, perhaps. Every one of them inexperienced and too quick to act. But then so was Benjamin. And James, he would have—

Everything blew sideways. Myself. Kady. The splintering wood and shattering brickwork of walls. Fragments of barrels and incendiary material—flotsam of the very stuff that had caused said explosion. Flames, blue and green, engulfed everything. Everything save for the pain. Twenty odd years of training abandoned me as I opened my mouth to scream.

Myra's screaming had woken her roommates. No less than eight pairs of anxious, glittering eyes stared down at her where she lay on the floor, entangled in her stifling quilt.

I did it again. Gulping back fear, the dream was slow to leave Myra. In the close-pressing darkness, the girls' silhouettes—loose, billowing nightgowns and coiffed-for-sleep hair—begged unfavorable comparisons to cloaked, hooded men with syringes full of burning poison.

With a shudder, Myra forced the thought away. Wakefulness pressed upon her, rendering the vision implausible, a nightmare and nothing more. Sheepishly, she climbed back into her bed, wondering what it was within her that drew such bleak pictures as she slept. What darkness did she carry within that demanded such violent release? Non-existent James' desperation could well be her own.

Excitement subsiding, the girls retreated one by one, leaving Myra to turn over in her bed, eager to escape their silent, prying questions and distant judgment. The bed shifted, and Myra felt gentle arms close about her. Emily.

Smiling into the dark, Myra leaned into the sisterly embrace, unsurprised to feel the familiar itch of tears tickling her cheeks. She closed her eyes and lost herself in memories of home as Emily, the closest thing she had to a friend these days, caressed her fevered cheek with a cool hand.

“Hush, dear. It’s a ways off,” Emily crooned.

“What is?” Eyes snapping open, Myra stared into the darkness, a cold sliver of fear slicing through her calm.

“Why, the warehouse fire out towards Chadron.” Myra could feel Emily pull away, imagined her searching look. “Miss Rivera came by to check on us. Not everyone was asleep when it broke out and—”

“Where?” Myra tried to bite back the word, but it was too late. The half-strangled sentence betrayed her, and she felt Emily’s tight camaraderie retreat under the frenetic urgency. Both girls sat up, Emily’s arm dropping from around Myra’s shoulder to point to the window at the far end of the long dormitory room.

“Right out towards Chadron. Said it’s probably the munitions warehouse. We were all of us watching the glow when you screamed. Thought it the series of explosions that woke you—”

Myra was back out of the bed and halfway to the window before Emily’s words had reached her ears. Even from here, she could see it—framed by the low

hills, the distant fire a dull red stain on the clouds above. No, not clouds . . . smoke.

“Stephen?” Myra breathed the name, trying to calm herself, searching for the thread that would lead her out of the dark of her mind and back towards the light. She caught it faster than she had any right to expect. Or rather, she caught something.

Chapter Two

Myra stepped outside of herself.

Through the window and surrounding orphanage wall, she passed as might a ghost. And yet, within the unknown Something which pulled at her, Myra, for once, felt as though she was well and truly alive, not a shade or spirit. This last was confirmed by the searing heat and suffocating smoke that assaulted her senses but an instant later. A fire. An inferno. Hell itself come calling. Or rather, she to it.

Myra screamed, the reaction automatic in spite of its futile stupidity. The blaze took this opportunity to stuff Myra's lungs with smothering rags of smoke.

Wake up!—though she knew she would not, this being somehow more real than any fantastic vision. She did not ask how or why, insisting—*Myra, you fool! It's all in your silly, broken head!* The thought was no consolation with the bright flame-filled room going dark by inches and what little strength she had fallen to ash.

"I've got you," a masculine voice spoke within her ear, lightly accented and reedy, yet deep. An arm snaked

about Myra's waist. Another arm slipped behind her shaking knees to hoist her up against the broad chest of he who had just uttered sweet words of rescue.

Rescue. Myra's soul breathed the word even as her head strove to clear itself. She was carried efficiently and without fuss out into the dark night and away from the conflagration.

"Stay here." The murmured command came half-hidden in the turn of his head. Myra's rescuer intended re-entry into the warehouse.

No, please. Myra could not understand her sudden reluctance to be left alone outside the circle of light and heat. She was safe. How dare she deny aid to those left inside? Still she protested, "Wait—"

A deep rumbling sounded from within the burning building. With this last defiant growl, the warehouse cowed to the rising flames, collapsing in on itself and sending out an exhalation of heat and ash.

The silhouette of her rescuer stood dark against the searing ball of flame rushing outward from the explosion. Myra threw herself at him, and together, they landed in an ungainly heap.

And just like that, he was swearing at her, writhing to gain the advantage. But it was the thrust of his emotion that had Myra darting sideways, seeking distance, equal footing under the sudden assault. Did he not realize she had just saved him?

Apparently he did not. Her opponent gained his feet and adopted an imposing glare all in one smooth motion. Or he would have been imposing were he not pointing a stick at Myra as though his life depended upon it.

His words were funny, too. All garbled and rushed.

Myra couldn't make out if any of it were English. Were it not for the distinct lack of fear in his eyes, she would have suspected shock. She moved to reassure him that she was as out of her depth as he and found she could not. Immobilized, as though she had been turned to stone.

With the sudden racing of her heart, Myra confirmed that not all of her was frozen in place. Just the important bits. Arms and legs and the like. Anger overrode terror—hadn't she experienced more than enough tonight to be past fear?—and she glowered her displeasure, happy to discover she still could.

The brief standoff afforded Myra her first leisurely inspection of the man who had just saved her life. His youth surprised her. He appeared to be two, perhaps three, years her senior. Dark unruly hair. Honest eyes. Forbidding mouth. This last somehow seemed displeased with its current task in frowning, and Myra instinctively knew that smiles were more commonly found there. His whole face, in fact, begged bright expression.

A stick? He pulls me from a burning building to threaten me with a stick? Her eyes wavered to her opponent's hand, skeptical. And yet Myra quailed. The flames flickered angry frescoes across the man's tense features. For all that he cut a strange figure, he seemed serious. Deadly serious.

Slowly, the man lowered his stick, crossing his arms and looking a bit pleased with himself. Pleased and puzzled. He circled his victim, saying nothing—though with the introduction he had given, she doubted she would have understood much of anything he had to say.

Myra continued her glare, daring him to make a move.

“Not one of them, then, are you?” Embarrassment replaced smug victory in the man’s face. It rendered him unexpectedly handsome. The man drew his strange wooden weapon back out and waved it casually in the air.

Control returned to Myra, if not grace. She dropped like a stone to the hard-packed dirt. “Ouch! Watch it!”

A hand thrust itself into her vision, and she grasped it gratefully. With a lurch, the strange man had hauled Myra back to her feet. His free hand fluttered his hair with the butt end of his stick. His reddish mane stood on end, mussed and uneven. Somehow the gesture and its effect made him even more good-looking.

Frazzled as she was, Myra felt a heat build in her cheeks, and she looked away, as embarrassed as he. Her in soot-stained nightshift and slippers.

Hesitation. Confusion. Unbelievable sorrow. Newly freed, Myra’s mind was caught in the emotions pouring off the stranger, and she struggled to stand her ground. Dream it may be, she was still fearful of what might happen if she were to fall unbidden into the consciousness of he who had rescued—then threatened—her. Manically she wondered if she oughtn’t hunt about for a stick of her own. Just in case.

Muted, muttered conversation drifted lazily through the night, the drawling sort of calm that only Midwesterners seemed capable of when facing a crisis. Myra imagined she heard the soft crunch of dirt underfoot—impossible, of course, under the dull roar of the nearby fire. But she was aware of the men coming their way

and was certain that the subsequent alarm was written all over her countenance.

The warning was mirrored in the face of her strange new acquaintance. "Come. We must go. Can you do it again, the trick what got you here?"

Myra shook her head, the gesture automatic in its honesty. *I'm not even sure I am here.*

But she was wise enough not to say as much. She had had her fill of people telling her she was crazy, thank you very much. No, the best course of action was to simply let this whole thing play out. She would make her escape to the real world as soon as she might.

"Nightgown or not, you're not dreaming, you know."

Again, Myra found herself transfixed by those bright eyes and so was barely conscious of his hand slipping into hers. A gentle tug drew her farther out of the inferno's reach. Together they hurried away, out of sight from the men who had arrived to address the problem of a munitions warehouse afire.

He reads minds? Turning her gaze inward, Myra pondered her new predicament. Too much. It was all too much. Striving to maintain her sanity, her subconscious gave a smirk. *Of course, if he does read minds, then he knows that you know simply for your having thought it, silly.*

And he would know that she found him handsome. *Oh, bother.*

Stumbling alongside, Myra calculated how long her thin slippers would last on the unforgiving hard stone and dust of the open plains. Various hurts now made themselves known, bruises and knocks that would trouble her before the night was through.

And with that, they stopped moving. Myra looked

up to find that the offensive stick was back out, a half-raised threat.

“You stopped me,” came his accented complaint. The flat, simple reprimand belied the emotions beneath which it labored.

Again, Myra had to steel herself against the volley of anguish and despair. Inclining her chin, she challenged him right back. “You would have died in there like the rest.”

Immediately she regretted her words. Her opponent crumpled, drowning Myra in a wave of sorrow. Defeated, dejected, and despairing, his broken gaze held hers. “Who are you?”

“Myra.” A declaration. A defense. She used her own identity to maintain her independence of mind. “Who’re you?”

He ignored Myra’s question. “You’re . . . you’re a mage.”

Frank disbelief mingled with surprise—*his or mine?*²—sweetening the bouquet of emotion threading through Myra’s consciousness. Suddenly the stick made sense.

A wand? He’s as crazy as me.

“Are they dead?”

“I’m sorry, but I—”

“You were in the building. I can read the imprint of my friends upon your heart. ARE THEY DEAD?”

“I—” Memories of the vision that had woken her pressed upon Myra. She faced down the undeniable if absurd truth of the man’s words. Stephen? Kady? They existed? The realization, tangible and strangely relieving in spite of the tragedy, stole what little strength she had left. Her confirmation came out a near whisper, “I think so.”

Another sharp wave of despair swept through her and left Myra holding even more pain. Instinct took over, and she sent her heart to his, drawing off the man's sorrow and making it her own. She had first realized her ability to alter and absorb emotions at the age of eight. In the subsequent six years, she had become adept at it. For a time, it had gone far in helping her sidestep much of her parents' interest in fixing whatever was wrong with her. After all, they could not pursue what they, themselves, could not easily remember. It had also served to bring her ever closer to her younger sister. But that had all been before . . . *Before I ran away and left Alice on her own.*

Myra waded through despondency. The side effects of her strange power—in this case, a conversion of this Aidan's pain to one she could understand within herself—were something she was all too familiar with.

A new shuddering seized Myra. Aidan. Where had she gotten his name from? She wanted to think it the vision of Stephen's last moments. In fact, she could almost feel the shouted name, ripped hoarsely from Stephen's own throat. But a sickening drop in her stomach told Myra she had somehow stolen the knowledge of it right from Aidan's soul. Had he felt the incursion?

"Stop." Aidan's flashing gaze met Myra's, bright sparks of fire that burned her heart.

"I can't." Myra's shuddering became sobs. Aidan's soot-smudged features blurred into the surrounding darkness, and she shut her eyes to the tears. The realization that she was never to wake up from this nightmare finally sank in. She could not have explained why, but she knew that Aidan spoke the truth when he said she

was not dreaming. And atop that, she had gotten people killed. Indirectly. But still, people had died.

No, not people. Mages. Myra caught this last and hung on for dear life. Another truth Aidan had spoken, nonsensical as it seemed. Still she asked, “What do you mean, saying I’m a mage?”

“Just that.”

Myra opened her eyes to Aidan’s puzzlement. He had managed to place her at arms’ length, a cool and careful distance. It helped. His emotional turmoil no longer rioted her own.

“By all the powers above, you don’t actually know how you’re doing it, do you? How you came to be here, even?” This time it was a hand that rifled through his hair, a brief exhalation clearing the palette of pain and sorrow and leaving Myra room to breathe freely at last. Aidan’s eyes would not leave her alone. It served as a stunning reminder of how beautiful he really was. Not that Myra needed one, especially as he now reached for her hands. “Out with it, Myra. Tell me about yourself.”

Chapter Three

Aidan's accent had the delicious effect of warping Myra's name just so. Moira.

It had her wishing he would speak it again. Perhaps he might, provided her answers proved sufficient.

Because Aidan had incensed her curiosity. Because, for the first time since leaving home, Myra remembered what hope felt like. Mage, he had called her. If that—fantastical as it seemed—were possible, then perhaps she could learn to control that thing inside her which would not let her be.

Also there was the already-concluded unlikelihood of her shoddy footwear taking her away to safety.

"How do I know I can trust you?" Myra's past had taught her caution, and the words came automatically.

Aidan's smile grew lopsided, and Myra's heart flipped in her chest.

Oh, he most definitely knew the effect he had upon her. But for all his apparent rakishness, his undeniably strange demeanor, Myra could feel a trustworthiness that she simply knew to be right. For it came from the

same place as her visions. It was a force all its own, a thing not to be denied. This man, too, had a power in him that set him apart. Myra wondered what it was, wondered if it were the same as her own.

"I'm from the orphanage up the valley." Myra indicated her flimsy shift and careworn slippers. "And when I was woken by the fire, I—" She hesitated, not entirely certain as to the "how" of her arrival in the midst of the flames. "I suppose I just leaped here from there. By . . . magic," she tested the word, half-fearing correction.

Aidan nodded, his gaze narrowing. He wanted to contradict her. She could feel it.

Don't worry, I find my story equally impossible. Myra quirked a smile.

"Was this the first . . . inexplicable happening . . . with which you've been involved, Moira?"

There it was. The trap. Myra thought quickly, arriving at a near-truth. "Yes and no. I mean, sure there have been things. It's how I ended up at the orphanage. But nothing of this magnitude. Normally, I just . . . feel what everyone around me feels."

She hadn't meant to have her words fall to ill-concealed melancholy. Emotions made her vulnerable.

"I must ask you"—Aidan's wand trained itself back on Myra, regret coloring his words—"have you heard of a Professor Silas Addair?"

Myra began to shake her head no, stopping short as she realized that, yes, she had heard the name. Recently.

"Doctor." She whispered the word and felt Aidan's anxious shift. She flinched and continued, "Not professor. Not as Stephen saw him, anyhow."

Now there was little chance of her hiding the truth

from Aidan, not as transparent as she felt. And why should she? *Because Aidan's wand is pointed at your heart, that's why, Myra. Truthful though he may be, you don't know he's not the enemy.*

The enemy. Had such a word ever entered Myra's mind before this evening? Was the thought, and the emotions attached, even hers?

The feeling of being in Stephen's mind pressed at Myra anew. A memory and nothing more; it could not hurt her, could not effect change. And yet . . . The sensation was novel and rather like walking around inside someone's head as though it were a room.

Myra cocked her head to the side, listening, probing, so engrossed that even Aidan's guarded lowering of his wand did not take her out of the moment. She narrated for his benefit, "Doctor Addair. Silas. He was not in the warehouse. Two—there were two—of his . . . wizards? And they poisoned m— They poisoned Stephen. Just before the explosion. But no Addair."

She shook her head in an attempt to clear her mind of the pain and the heat, terrified at the prospect of reliving Stephen's violent end. Returned to the present, Myra now saw that Aidan's gaze had removed itself from her and that his wand was now held in a shaking line back toward the infernal glow of the dying munitions warehouse, a divining wand of pure rage. She, once again, found herself lost in the labyrinth of emotion pouring off the man, leaving her little time to register relief over his clearly having not heard her slip-up with regards to her firsthand experience of the mage's torture.

"You have no direct memory of the Professor. No

connection that you can recall before the orphanage, before—”

“I don’t know him!” Myra hadn’t intended her protest to sound as sharply as it did. But there it was. Aidan would now know that he had hit upon a nerve. She could have listed every doctor she had ever been subject to—alphabetically, chronologically, by specialty . . .

Aidan interrupted further thought, “Then we must away to M.I.”

“Em eye?”

“Stands for Magical Intelligence. Stephen’s team of wizard spies. Offices are in London, England. Whereas mine are—were—” Aidan’s voice wavered, threatening to crack under the pressure of emotion. His eyes . . . he still hadn’t looked back to Myra. It was as if he was stuck, as though he had left something of himself behind in the fire and was seeking desperately to reconnect with it so that they could leave.

“England!” Myra whispered her surprise, fearful of disturbing Aidan but unable to contain herself. New dismay shook her. Leave America? Impossible. What with the expense and the time involved and her in naught but—

Magic, Myra. You’re with a wizard, remember? Still, she had to ask. “How?”

This brought Aidan back to the present. His piercing gaze returned to Myra’s face, setting her heart flip-flopping anew. Follow him halfway across the world? Perhaps. The hard grief in his face cracked, and he gifted her with a half-smile, undoing her completely. “TurnKey system. Fast. Private. Mages only, you know.”

Myra knew better than to respond. Mage? Addair?

TurnKey? She wasn't going to repeat everything in one word bursts like a child. She could afford to wait for an explanation. It was not as though life was verdant with other options for her at present. And besides, him being a wizard meant, too, that he would likely be able to withstand the force of Myra's own terrifying ability.

In silence they picked their way through the low brush and shallow sandy rise and fall of the cold ground, distancing themselves from the disaster they had left behind them. It was in gingerly avoiding stubbed toes and jabbed heels that it took Myra several long minutes to realize their trajectory. Aidan was taking her straight back to the orphanage! Mind reader, indeed.

Myra slowed, testing the wizard's motives. Fear prickled her shoulders and arms, and she tensed, ready to run. Aidan slowed as well, endeavoring to stay alongside Myra. His sideways glance came tinged with empathy. "Almost there, love."

Myra's companion further curbed his pace, now shrugging his shoulders violently. In three short jerks, he had his jacket down around his elbows and in one smooth motion, he swept it off and up around Myra's quivering shoulders.

"Shoulda thought of that sooner," Aidan apologized, eyes back on the horizon. "I don't have a spell for the feet though, and train's probably going to be by pretty soon. Can you manage?"

"The train? I thought it was the Key Turning we were going to take?"

"TurnKey. Yes," Aidan confirmed with a curt nod of the head, now speeding the pace a touch. "But there are not a lot of Apex points around these parts. Closest one, I'm afraid, was that warehouse. And until we can get

M.I. to sort out your apparent kinesis abilities, we must take the train like other mortals. Least until we reach the nearest Apex.”

“Kinesis?” There it was. She was parroting again.

“The gift of mages who can jump from place to place instantaneously. Such a wizard is known as a Kinetic.”

“Oh, I’m no kinetic.” Emboldened, Myra tried to dispel Aidan of his assumption. “Perhaps I simply fell through the TurnKey system by accident?”

Aidan chuckled, shaking his head.

“No, really. We are heading directly towards the orphanage.” Myra realized, with a shock, that Aidan was looking straight at, straight through, her dissembling. She had let her guard down. Had he been waiting for her to confirm their destination? No, he was trustworthy. Something inside of her refused to believe otherwise.

This time, Aidan’s responding laugh came freer, more indulgent. “No, no, Moira. If I say you’ve magic, then you have it. With my gift it is exceptionally rare for me to be wrong about such things. Particularly with what yours seems to do to it.”

“Your gift?”

“I am—was—my agency’s truth-teller.”

There it was again, the past tense wording and sharp snap of Aidan’s agony running up against Myra’s own pain. This alongside the comforting hum of absolute truth. Suddenly, Myra found herself quite envious of Aidan’s particular gift. It would make life so much easier to know the truth of things.

He continued, “By no means would we ever allow an orphanage to be placed over an Apex. Too danger-

ous. Can't have just any old ords getting in and mucking about."

"Ord?"

"Non-magic folk. Non-mages. Short for ordinary."

How rude. Myra took a moment to be indignant on behalf of her fellow man. But then she was a mage, wasn't she? "But you just said it's only for mage use. So how would any . . . ord . . . get in?"

"There are always exceptions." Aidan raised his hand for silence, stopping short his next footfall.

Exceptions. Despair began its creep upon Myra's heart, but a sudden jolt removed her from its path. She heard it before she saw it, a strange whirring sound she couldn't quite place. She turned.

"Down!" Aidan leapt between her and the streak of light that flew at them out of the darkness. A second, a third followed, blinding in their brilliance. Like shooting stars thrown sideways and from far too close, all reds and blues and greens. The wooden stick in Aidan's hand now proved its worth. It zipped sparks, countering the strange attack and offering fire of its own.

"Run, Myra!" He pointed.

Myra shook her head, too terrified to move. For once in her life, she was firmly locked within herself and her own emotions. The fear in her shouted out any feelings from others nearby. No, wait. There was Aidan's calm composure. His resolve, too. And then a sharp spike of angst.

Aidan went down on one knee, hissing. He held his wand arm tight against his side and complained through gritted teeth, "Stands to reason that if I could escape, so could they."

"Who?"

“Them.”

Myra followed Aidan’s gaze. She spotted two figures, their dark clothing rendering them nigh invisible against the nighttime landscape. Cloaked and hooded.

Memories chloroformed her mind. Memories of calloused and cruel fingers prodding her arm, inserting a needle in just the right place . . . Not Myra’s memories, of course, but Stephen’s.

Thus transfixed, Myra only distantly noted Aidan’s free hand reaching into his vest and pulling out a pistol. Aiming, he pulled the trigger. An eerie red spark darted through the air and buried itself in one of the cloaked men. The other whipped one parting arc of fire at them before seeming to disappear into nothingness.

“Now, we go. Run.” Aidan grabbed at Myra’s hand.

“What was that?”

Aidan ignored her wide-eyed surprise, and together they took off at a sprint. Myra could feel the ugly tang of foreign anger touch her soul. It followed them, slowly falling behind and eventually fading into the soft breeze of the open fields.

Yet still, they ran.

“Hold tight,” Aidan cautioned.

Together they hurried down the hill towards the approaching train.

“How are we—?”

Myra’s question was answered before the words were fully out of her mouth. Leaping? Flying? Together she and Aidan gained sufficient speed and air to catch the steaming, swaying train as it rushed by. Through the open doors of a stock car—blessedly empty—and onto the floor, she and Aidan landed together in an untidy heap for the second time in the space of an evening.

Not exactly the way Myra had train-hopped in her exodus from home to orphanage. Then she had caught trains on their slow hastening from the station. This, this was madness. Or magic.

“Phew.”

Myra glanced up to see Aidan wrinkle his nose in disgust. Apparently he had gotten the worse end of their ungraceful entrance.

A not entirely empty stock car, then. Sitting upright, Myra picked several sodden pieces of straw out of her hair. She concluded once more that the events of that evening were most definitely not a dream. Dreams didn’t smell like a barnyard stall. A low chuckle rent the air, cutting the odor of cattle in twain with its brightness. For all that he had landed in stale cow dung, Aidan was taking the trip in good spirits.

“Moir, you gem. Look at what you’ve done to me.” The mage lay on his back, fully spent, his chest rising in cadence with the laughter. “If I hadn’t thought you one of ours before, I certainly do now.”

He rolled over onto his side, growing stern. “Not hurt are you?”

Myra quickly shook her head. No, she was not hurt. Just . . . stunned. So far in her short acquaintance with Aidan, she had come to conclude that he used magic in the most unpleasant of ways. She remembered the way he’d hissed in pain and held his hand to his side and returned his question to him. “Are you?”

“Yes. But ’tis easily mended. Perils of the profession.” Aidan grinned, showering Myra with a rush of relief. A part of her wondered if he was doing it deliberately, that he’d come to suspect that the collision of their emotional states went both ways for her. Still, Myra

watched as Aidan flexed his hand gingerly but couldn't feel any evasion in his claim. And he was right. From what she had seen thus far, magic did appear to be a dangerous business. The sort of thing nice young ladies should stay far, far away from.

Her last conclusion, a gentle scolding in the back of Myra's mind, came at her in motherly tones, and she blanched. Myra, of all people, was not a nice young lady, now was she? She set aside her guilt and blurted, "England or Ireland?"

"Sorry?" This confounded him. Aidan sat up, attentive.

"Are you from England, like Stephen and his M.I. people? Or Ireland?" She had a right to know, and it certainly seemed a logical question. His accent was as Irish as Myra had ever heard, after all.

"Neither. New York. But my parents were from Donegal."

"Oh."

"Stephen was—" Here a sharp intake of breath, another reminder that Aidan was newly speaking of his friend in past tense. Myra lowered her gaze, feeling the man's grief anew. "Stephen had come to my team having given chase to a rumor."

Glad that she was not looking at Aidan, Myra found she had to press shut her eyes, lest they leak their threatening tears. What had she cost this man with her wayward, uncontrolled magic? His friends. Kady who'd tried to rescue Stephen, whom Myra had seen through her vision.

Or perhaps they were dead in any case. Perhaps Myra's incursion truly had saved Aidan from much the same fate as his team. And gave her answers she hardly

dare hope for: a chance at knowing what was really wrong with her.

Magic. Not mania. Could she, might she, return home armed with this knowledge? Disturbed by the thought that she had benefited thus from Aidan's pain, Myra waited in silence for him to continue.

"You're doing it again, Moira."

"What?" Myra locked eyes with Aidan, surprised that he might have noted her soothing touch on his mind.

"I—" Aidan blanked his face. Careful. Clinical. His gaze searched hers. He seemed unsettled, hunting for the right words and finding nothing.

You and me both, wizard. I can't figure me out either. In fact, Myra would be astonished if anyone could. And with that bleak thought, their halting conversation died to silence. And, in the silence, Myra discovered that the sleep she had so far eluded, found her at last in the gentle rhythmic sway of the train car.

"Now, the TurnKey system of travel is, as I said, only available to mages."

Myra jumped. Amplified by proximity, Aidan's voice startled her out of a shallow slumber.

"The same spell that helped us aboard, I will use to aid us in disembarking." Aidan stood with his back to her, his eyes on the lightening sky. Apparently, he had no idea he had woken her. He turned to Myra, and she saw that the wand was back out, lying flat over the palms of his hands. "But first, we need to do something."

The crisp pre-dawn air cut through the stale cattle odor of the train car, and Myra rose, stretching stiff

muscles as she did so. She eyed the wand in Aidan's hands, morbidly curious.

"Take it," he urged. "I want to test you."

Myra reached out shyly, then hesitated. "What do I—?"

"Oh!" Aidan's smile grew brilliant. "Just take it like this"—he held it as one might hold a knitting needle, relaxed yet firm—"but don't wave it about or anything."

The wand held thus for demonstration purposes, Myra's fingers brushed Aidan's as she reached for it, earning her a new blush. Moira. The heat of her reddening cheeks was quickly lost in a rush of something rather unusual. It was as though her soul had been freed, empowered. For the first time in her short life, she felt in control over the external forces that pressed upon her subconscious. She could hold true within herself and not fall prey to the emotional needs of others. And yet nothing had changed. Not visibly. Not internally. She was simply . . . whole. And without understanding why.

Aidan gently took back his wand. "How do you feel?"

"Horrible," Myra croaked, feeling empty, dizzy, lost yet again. She was back inside herself, trapped and broken. "I mean, that wand . . . It did something to me, didn't it?"

Smiling crookedly, Aidan turned from her, pocketing his wand. "Luckily, leaving the train is easier than getting onto it, as we will need quite a bit of magic at the Apex. Provided I am correct in my assumption that you have no knowledge of how to even call your power, yes?"

Myra hoped her blank look was answer enough. Was

wizardry going to be completely about her feeling dumb and out of place?

Aidan turned long enough to see that the non-response was meant to be a response to his query. "No matter. Provided nobody else has charged the system on us and no local municipality has been so stupid as to erect a telegraph line near the ley. And, if it doesn't work, we'll just pop out and walk from there."

Again, Myra had no answer. Was any of this supposed to make sense to her? He did know she knew nothing, right? Her mind still buzzed with how the wand had felt in her hand. The world shining so right, so true, and so suddenly. But now everything felt all wrong again.

"Kidding about the walking bit. Mostly." Aidan was now leaning from the car, precarious and nerve-wracking. In the dawning light, it rendered him even more attractive. The rake.

"You'll have to hold tight to me, regardless. And if you get lost for any reason, any at all, I will send Laurel looking for you—she is M.I.'s Ways-walker." He turned, his hand outstretched. "Do you trust me?"

"Yes." *I think so.* No amount of instinctive sureness could stop the tremor of anxiety that pulsed through Myra as she clasped hands with the mage. Perhaps that was proof enough of her sanity.

"Good. Good girl. Now hold tight, Moira. The Apex placement is . . . quite remarkable . . . when compared to the train's trajectory. And to save on my own tired magic, we're going to leap straight to the TurnKey from here. Don't let go." He turned to the door and then back again. "Oh, and hold your breath!"

Together they dropped like a stone. Right out of the

train and off the trestle to the waiting river below. Myra's heart squeezed, and she shut her eyes in horrid anticipation.

But the magic had them, and to Myra, it felt like falling into a well of butterflies.

End of sample
