
AMELIA



Soda bubbles fizzle on my tongue and french fry salt coats my fingertips. Vintage Mariah plays on the stereo and white lines fly by underneath the van. There's nothing around but steep mountains and open road and my three best friends in the whole world.

The next two weeks stretch ahead of us like a highway, the last two weeks before we all head off in different directions. The best two weeks of our lives, we promised. I can already feel how good it's going to be now, just two hours in, with junk food in my gut and a sugar rush buzzing in my veins. With my eyes set on the vivid blue sky and the dry green brush, on the puffed white clouds slung above the red hills.

Blue and green, white and red. The colors of the tarot. Or at least the colors of this tarot, our most prized possession. I really shouldn't be holding it with my fast-food fingers, but I want to keep it close. This tarot deck, well-worn and beloved, was the inspiration for our road trip. It contains multitudes: histories and memories, mysticism and mysteries—the exact kind we hope to solve on this trip.

“Amelia,” Chase says.

I know what he really means: *Don't touch the deck with grubby fingers.* I may have inherited the cards from my grandma, but they mean just as much to Chase.

“Is that thing really going to beep for the entire trip?” Logan asks from the driver's seat.

“That thing has a name,” Cleo answers from the front passenger side. “And Toky is our official trip mascot, so you should learn to love them now.”

Cleo dangles her keychain beside Logan’s face and the rainbow-glitter egg nearly brushes his cheek. She got that Tamagotchi back when we were freshmen, when she cracked it open and configured it to live forever. Cleo never met a rule she didn’t love to bend.

“You’d better give Toky a kiss before they throw a tantrum.”

“Now, now, I thought we agreed tantrums are only allowed in Charvan on Wednesdays,” I say, watching Chase bristle. His parents gifted him this ancient Volkswagen van when he turned sixteen, and he has since meticulously transformed it into our happy place. We both decided to name this mobile headquarters Charvan, after the tarot’s Chariot card. Chase would prefer we keep Charvan curbside forever, but I’m thrilled we finally get to take it out on this long-overdue adventure.

“Remind me why I agreed to come on this trip again?” Logan sighs.

To answer that, Chase leans forward and kisses him on the side of his neck. At first glance, it’d be easy to question how buttoned-up Chase and athleisure Logan go together, but they’ve been the perfect couple for years.

“Oh, right, my brainiac boyfriend has me under his spell,” Logan says.

Chase smiles, settling back into his seat. He then returns to his combination-lock journal, the little leather notebook that’s like his permanent appendage. No one, not even Logan, gets to read inside that locked journal, but I bet Chase is going over his plan for the front end of our trip. Personally, I’d rather see where the road takes us, but that’s why Chase and I work so well as best friends. He plans, I deviate. He thinks, I act. He writes, I talk:

“Okay, I think the next junction is coming up pretty soon. Which means you all know what time it is.”

Cleo groans from the front, but Chase snaps his journal closed.

“It’s tarot time.”

“I can’t believe we’re actually going through with this,” Cleo says, her short black hair swinging as she turns to face us. She sports a pair of sunglasses with green triangular lenses, one of my favorites in her legendary collection.

“This is a perfect idea and you know it,” I answer. “Chase plans our general route, but we let the tarot cards decide the specifics. It’s perfectly balanced.”

I reach my hand over and squeeze Chase’s. He is more like a brother to me than a best friend. Really, he is my NRLP: my nonromantic life partner. Plus, a

sometimes-maddening reminder of my complete lack of an actual romantic life partner. The two of us separating for college is still a thought I cannot process, so I focus instead on pulling the tarot cards out of their faded cardboard box. All these years later, they still have that fresh cardstock smell, with just a hint of lavender.

“I researched two occult shops on the way out to Joshua Tree,” Chase begins, flipping through his journal. “They’re on alternate routes, so we need to decide where to stop.”

“No, we need to let the cards decide,” I add. “Which reading configuration do you think we should use?”

Chase furrows his dark brows, his brain thrumming like an engine.

“Obviously we need one of the simpler configurations,” he begins. “I’d say the two-card Yin and Yang, but a classic One Card Pull will probably do.”

“Couldn’t agree more,” I answer, beginning to shuffle the cards.

As usual, I can feel our added homemade cards brushing my palms, their laminated edges slightly thicker than the rest. Grandma’s deck has always been missing four cards, ever since she bought it at a yard sale years ago. This deck is full of gorgeous, seemingly hand-painted images, so when Chase and I were kids we crafted our own far-inferior replacement cards. We’ve been obsessed with the tarot for as long as we can remember, likely because Grandma taught us everything we know about it.

One thing we’ve never learned, however, is where this deck really comes from. We haven’t been able to find any mention of anything like it online. Growing up, Grandma always said she’d take me and Chase on an adventure to find the missing cards once we were older, a kind of mystic road trip where the tarot would be our guide. Grandma might not be able to take that trip with us anymore, but when Chase and I were deciding how to spend the last two weeks before college, our answer was clear.

“Any key differences between the two shops?” I ask.

“The first is called Eastern Light Tarot and the second is Mother Earth Occult and Antiques. That gives us plenty to go off.”

“Perfect. Cut the deck and draw the first card?” I say, holding out the stack toward Chase. “Everyone ready to see where the tarot takes us first?”

“Am I the only one who finds this spooky?” Cleo asks, craning to watch.

“Spooky or not, that junction is coming up in a few miles,” Logan says, glancing at the GPS. “Please let the tarot proceed with some speed.”

Not wasting another moment, Chase pulls the top card from the freshly cut deck. He looks down at it and grins for a few seconds. When he finally lays the card down, I see why. I gasp out loud when I glimpse her green goddess eyes staring up at me.

The Empress.

“Well that couldn’t be clearer,” Chase says. “The Empress stands at a doorway to transformation, beckoning us to take action. But most importantly, The Empress is the Mother Nature figure. So, Mother Earth Occult it is?”

I sigh. Chase always reads the cards like an encyclopedia, analyzing their symbols historically and isolating their meanings from context. It’s not that he’s wrong. It’s more that, deep down, I’ve always felt the tarot is more personal than that.

Not to mention, it’s just like Chase to overlook the fact that The Empress is my personal tarot card expression.

“Since The Empress is my card representation,” I say, “I think I should be the one to decide where we go next. She is a **Queen** in charge, after all.”

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“I couldn’t agree more,” I say. “The Empress is **Mother Earth**. It’s the obvious direction based on the intention we set.”

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