

In the end, it was four words that changed the course of our lives and the history of the world. Perhaps it wasn't really so surprising. They were, after all, the most important words in any language.

“What are you reading?”

At first I didn't think the words were addressed to me. To begin with, in those days people didn't speak to me without reason. In the week since I had come to Camford, I could count on one hand the number of conversations I'd had with the other students; if I counted only those unprompted by myself, I was down to one finger. That had been on the first day, when somebody had asked who I was. After that, everyone knew, and there had been no more questions. They all pretended not to understand my accent anyway.

For another thing, I was tucked away in a corner of the library where nobody ever came, in the depths of one of the oldest stack rooms, where the shafts of sunlight were clogged with dust and the air had the sweet, stale smell of old paper. The library was the heart of Camford, a great sprawling structure so labyrinthine it was rumoured to be larger inside than out. Some of the students preferred to steer clear of it entirely, not only for the usual reasons students avoided libraries but because they claimed that if the library took a dislike to you it would swallow you up and you would never be seen again. But I never felt the library disliked me—on the contrary, it was the only place among the crooked towers of Camford where I felt instantly embraced. It gave me the books I'd yearned to read since I had first learned of the magical world, and it did so readily, as if they were nothing. It hid me from unfriendly eyes, and admittedly from friendly ones as well. I could hear only the occasional murmur of student voices in the corridors, and I had been confident none would come near.

Most important of all, the voice that had asked the question belonged to Alden Lennox-Fontaine.

Back then, I knew very little of the aristocratic magical Families whose sons inhabited Camford. They blurred into an endless parade of pale faces and well-cut grey suits, smooth accents and smooth haircuts, motorcars and cigarettes and showy spells. I used to tell myself I didn't care about them, when really of course they didn't care about me. Still, I couldn't help knowing, against my will, about Alden. He was the golden child of our year: heir to some vast estate up in Yorkshire, blue-eyed and blond-curlled, well-dressed and well-shaped and effortlessly charming. I couldn't even

pretend he wasn't clever, because he was. I would hear him behind me before class started, halfway up the stadium seating: laughing with his friends, quick and disarming, the kind of verbal thrust-and-parry the magical Families seemed trained in from infancy. And yet once the lecture began, he would stop laughing and listen; if he spoke at all, it was to ask sensible questions, all trace of irony bled from his voice. A deft, supple intellect, unafraid to want to learn from his teachers yet too full of wit and mischief to be teased by his peers. I had never expected to see him up close, much less to speak to him.

But here he was, so close I could see each strand of artistically tousled golden hair, and he had in fact, despite all logical reasons to the contrary, spoken to me.

He must have thought I hadn't heard him, because he repeated his question again, in exactly the same tone, with exactly the same important words. "What are you reading?"

I found my voice at last. "A book," I said. These were important words too, but in context they were a little lacking in specificity.

Alden laughed his easy laugh. "I didn't think you were reading a map. What book?"

If my cheeks hadn't flushed already, they certainly had now. "Cornelius Agrippa."

"Interesting," he said. "You must have gone quite deep into the library for that."

I couldn't tell if he was teasing, so I chose not to reply. I looked at him and waited for him to move away.

Instead, he looked back readily. I couldn't help noticing, as if it were important, that his eyes had little amber flecks in them.

"I've seen you in here before," he said after a while. I wondered if he was telling the truth: Certainly he had been in the library at the same time as me, but he never had any reason to notice my existence. "What's your name?"

I wished, not for the first time, that I had a name I didn't have to steel myself before declaring. My father had chosen it, liking plant names for girls in general and thinking it would bring me luck. I loved my father, from whom I had inherited my mousy hair and my talent for drawing (my stubbornness came from my mother, according to him). He had died in the Spanish flu outbreak two years ago, and I missed him more than I could say. But honestly.

“Clover,” I said. “Clover Hill.”

His mouth quirked, as I had feared. “The scholarship witch. I should have guessed.”

“What does that mean?” I asked before I could stop myself. “You should have guessed?”

“What do you think it means?”

“It could mean a lot of things.” My voice was tight. Tears had pricked my eyes, unexpected and mortifying. I wouldn’t normally be so sensitive. The truth was I had been sitting at the desk aching with homesickness. It didn’t help that Alden’s vast estate was really not so very far from my Lancashire farm. His public school upbringing had smoothed away most traces of an accent, but the vowels held just enough touches of the north to reach my heart. “It could mean that my clothes aren’t fashionable enough for me to come from money. It could mean that the work I’m studying is obviously outdated, and that indicates I’m not Family. It could mean that I’m in a library on a Sunday afternoon, and that means I need to study to keep my place here.”

“You give far too much credit to my powers of observation,” Alden said. “I just meant that you looked clever. I don’t even know why I thought that. Probably it was the glasses.”

I took them off, and managed to wipe my eyes discreetly in the process.

“As I thought,” Alden said with a satisfied nod. “Positively thick-headed now. I’d have taken you for a duchess.”

I smiled, shamefaced. God, what was wrong with me? I’d been lonely for days and pretending not to be; I’d been aching for the sound of a friendly voice or a kind word. And the moment someone had stopped to give me one, I’d bitten his head off.

“I’m sorry.”

“Not at all. I should apologise. I was being thoughtless.” He slid his long limbs into the seat opposite me. I felt his proximity like heat on my skin; suddenly, it became a little harder to breathe. It wasn’t purely attraction—though he was undeniably attractive. It was the world he represented. Wealth, breeding, and glamour radiated from him. He was like a burning sun. In my experience, you sneak looks at the sun, careful not to get blinded; you don’t expect the sun to look back at you. You certainly

don't expect it to pull up a chair, reach across the table, and take up your book with long white fingers. "I *won't* apologise, of course. I was raised badly, and it's far too late to reform now. Still, I'll certainly concede that I should. I'm Alden Lennox-Fontaine."

"I know," I said, and wondered if I should have admitted it. It might have been better to pretend I had no idea who he was. Then again, that might have made me look unsophisticated. The Families tended to know one another.

He smiled, as though he saw full well both halves of my mind. "What do you think of Agrippa?"

It could have been polite conversation. But Alden Lennox-Fontaine had no need to be polite to me. More importantly, I recognised in his face a gleam of real interest, not in me, but in what I was studying. It set me at ease. I couldn't talk about myself; I could certainly talk about Agrippa.

"His theories are terribly old-fashioned," I said. "I know that. They're inaccurate too, which is worse. I think he might be on to something with his binding rituals, though."

"Yes," he said. "Yes, I think exactly the same."

"You've read Agrippa?" I flushed again, realising how that sounded.

He laughed. "We do learn to read at public school, you know. We don't leave all the intellectual activity to those far from the madding crowd."

"I didn't mean that. I just meant—as I said, he's terribly old-fashioned. I know he isn't taught anymore. I only know him because I was taught out of a lot of books that were—well, out-of-date. I grew up in a small village in Lancashire. Even when I found out magic existed, there wasn't a lot of new scholarship."

"He's not on the curriculum," he conceded. "But old houses, like small villages in Lancashire, tend to accumulate old books. I read Agrippa when I was fifteen. Until I met you five minutes ago, I was the only person I knew who had. I came to the same conclusion you just did."

"What conclusion?"

"That he might be on to something with his binding rituals. Now, I've just said that you look very intelligent, and I'm sure you are, but I at fifteen was a relative clod. And

yet we both saw that there was something worth pursuing in Agrippa. Why, then, do you think there hasn't been any work on it?"

"Nobody works on faerie magic anymore." My heart was beating fast, and I didn't quite know why. "It's illegal."

"Perhaps. Still, it's interesting, isn't it?" He checked his watch before I could answer and made a face. "I knew it. I have to go to a luncheon. Whenever I start an interesting conversation, I have to go to a luncheon. It's an eternal curse."

I had never been to a luncheon—not a real one, the kind he was talking about. I hadn't thought I wanted to. But I wanted to keep talking to him about Agrippa, so I felt a pang of disappointment.

"Perhaps that curse is Agrippa's influence from beyond the grave." It was my best attempt at Camford student banter. "And that's why nobody's followed his work."

"Hm. But you clearly had no distractions until I came and provided them. The luncheon curse has no power over you. Unless you'd like to join me, of course. Or would that make *me* the curse?"

I blinked. "I'm sorry?"

"You're welcome to join us, if you're not busy." He sounded casual. Surely he could not be. Surely he knew that scholarship students, particularly the only one from an unmagical family, did not attend the same parties as Alden Lennox-Fontaine. "It's just a few of us—a tiresome crowd, for the most part, but one or two good sorts. Hero will be there, if you're worried about being in a room with too many men."

"Hero Hartley?" I asked, trying to match his careless tone. There were few female scholars at Camford, even by the low standards set by Oxford and Cambridge. Of the three hundred undergraduates, only ten were women, and in our entire year there were only two: myself and Hero. I had tried to get up the courage to introduce myself to her more than once that first week, only to lose my nerve and slip away before there was any chance of us being introduced. I had seen her in lectures, always at Alden's side. The two of them were cut of the same cloth: moneyed, powerful, impossibly elegant, with an intellect that cut like a whip.

"Do you know her? I'll introduce you. We grew up together, more or less. Our houses are the only human habitations for miles where we live, so it was the two of us every summer. Oh, and Eddie Gaskell, of course. The Gaskells' land is a few miles north.

Eddie might be at the luncheon too, actually, if Hero can persuade him to leave his room.” He stood and stretched. “God, I’m still stiff from last night. I wonder what I did. Do say you’ll come. I’d much rather keep talking about Agrippa than get drunk on Corbett’s mediocre wine at two in the afternoon, although of course we could do both.”

“I’d love to come,” I said, before either of us could change our minds. I was finding it hard to breathe, as if the air was suddenly thin or I was very high in the sky. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me. You’re doing me a favour, and probably Hero and Eddie too.”

I didn’t, at that point, recognise the gleam in his eye as dangerous. It was the echo of the gleam in my own, and I hadn’t yet learned that mine was dangerous too.

That was how it started, the four of us. We never meant any harm.