

Chapter 1 - The Book of Spells

“Forty-eight, forty-nine, fifty. Ready or not, here I come. Anyone ‘round my base is It.”

Julie uncovered her eyes. The only sounds were thunder rumbling in the distance and the thumping of her heart.

She tiptoed from the hallway into the bathroom. Was he behind the door? Her brother probably wouldn't pick such an obvious hiding place, but she checked just in case. Nope, not there.

Julie hesitated, then pulled back the shower curtain. No Michael. Just an empty bathtub. She scowled. What was she so scared of? She was eleven. Too old to be playing hide and seek anyway.

Back in the hall, she bluffed. “I know where you are.” Of course, Michael was even worse than her. The “big middle schooler.” He thought he was so sophisticated just because he was a year older than her, but he still played kids' games. Of course, it was usually so he could scare her.

Something scuffled overhead. Julie climbed a steep set of steps to the door of the attic. “No fair. The attic's out of bounds.”

Silence.

“Mom said we're never supposed to go up there.”

No response.

“Michael?”

She waited a few more moments. “I'm going downstairs.” But she didn't go downstairs. She stayed and listened. Finally, she sighed. “You're always getting us into trouble.”

She opened the door. The only light came from the downstairs landing behind her. Everything in front of her was shadowy and dim. Goosebumps rose on her arms as she maneuvered around boxes, and knocked cobwebs from her hair. She knew he was up here somewhere.

Julie rounded a pillar and gasped. Right in front of her stood a being that was definitely not human. Julie's stomach clenched as she stared at its expressionless face. Its vacant eyes bored through her.

What a moron she was. It was only a tailor's dummy. She chuckled a little. She was glad Michael didn't see how scared she was. He'd tease her about it for the next month.

Suddenly, the mannequin lurched straight towards her!

Julie screamed. She turned and took a step, but something wrapped itself around her feet. She tumbled to the floor, scraping her knee.

The mannequin fell on top of her. Its cold and clammy plastic hand landed on her cheek. The hand of death!

Thrashing with her legs, she kicked off whatever was tangled around her legs. She shoved the mannequin away, and it fell back with a crash. She scrambled to her feet.

Looming above her was a dark figure wearing a tall black hat and pointing a wand directly at her heart.

"Aaaaah!" Julie staggered backwards.

A clap of thunder echoed through the dark room.

Julie opened her mouth to scream again. Wait a second. Jeez. It was just Michael.

Her brother swept the wand through the air and laughed. "*Abracadabra*. I turn you into a chicken."

“I’m going to kill you,” Julie hissed.

“Oh, I forgot. You already are a chicken.”

“No I’m not.”

“No? Then why are you afraid of everything? Going to sleep, waking up, going to school, talking to grown ups, talking to kids, going out of the house--”

“I’m not afraid of everything. Anyway, where’d you find that?”

He pointed to a corner of the attic. “Over there. It must’ve belonged to Grandpa. Look at this. It was hidden under some boxes.” He picked up a book and handed it to Julie. Michael took a small flashlight from his pocket and shone it on the book.

It was five inches thick, ten inches wide, eighteen inches long, and heavy. Its brown leather cover was cracked with age. The book gave off a strange odor, a musty combination of soil and cigar smoke and leather that reminded Julie of her grandfather. She sighed. She missed the old man.

Julie read the title. “‘The Book of Spells.’ Wow.”

“Grandpa was crazy about magic,” Michael said.

“Mom says he was crazy, period.”

“She didn’t always say that. She once told me--”

At that moment, their mother called from downstairs. “Julie. Michael. Time for supper.”

“She once told me the whole world is magic,” Michael continued. “We just can’t see it.”

“She doesn’t talk like that anymore,” Julie said with a sigh. “Not since Daddy’s been gone... and Art the Fart showed up.”

Michael shrugged. “She came to her senses, that’s all.”

“You used to believe in magic, too,” Julie said.

“I grew up.”

Yeah, right. Was that why he still played hide and seek? It’s true, though, that after their father disappeared, Michael had become more and more cynical and sarcastic. Mostly what he did was hole up in his room, read gloomy books, play dumb video games with his only friend, Dylan, and criticize and make fun of everything and everybody, especially Julie. If that’s “growing up,” forget it.

Julie glanced at the attic door. “We better go down.”

“I’m going to try a spell first.”

“I thought you didn’t believe in magic.”

“I’m only messing around, Nitwit.” Michael grabbed the book from Julie, and opened it at random. “Here’s one. ‘Light from Darkness.’”

Their mother called again, “Kids?”

Michael propped the book on a pile of boxes in order to read from it with his hands free. “You wave the wand like this.” He traced a jagged line in the air with the magic wand. “And you say, ‘Wand of darkness, wand of light, out of dimness, make things bright.’”

“That’s all?”

Michael nodded. He closed the book and turned off the flashlight.

They stood quietly in the darkness, waiting. Julie tried but couldn’t stop her left foot from jiggling.

She knew without looking that despite her brother’s brave front, his nose was twitching the way it did when he was nervous. Maybe he wasn’t as cynical, or as brave, as he tried to pretend.

After a few tense moments, she asked, “How long does it take?”

Michael laughed. "You are so naive. It's all just make-belie--"

A flash of lightning lit up the room as clear as day, followed immediately by a huge crash of thunder that rattled the walls.

"It worked! The spell worked!" Julie yelled. Her hair tingled.

"It was just lightning." Michael's voice sounded quavery.

Their mother called again. "Where are you?"

"Let's go," Michael said. "We'll come back up later."

As they shut the attic door on their way out, Julie looked back. *The Book of Spells*, still propped on the cardboard boxes, seemed to be glowing very faintly.