

# Magic at Work

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## Chapter One

*God*, his eyes were blue.

Lexi had never seen him before. He certainly wasn't there on Monday or Tuesday. She'd remember a pair of eyes blue so startling even from a distance and behind a pair of wire-rimmed glasses.

He was talking to Edmond but studied her as he passed by her desk. And his eyes were mesmerizing.

Maybe he was a client?

But no. Her stepdad patted him on the shoulder and continued to his office, while the guy turned left and parked his butt behind a desk that had been empty on Lexi's first two days at work.

She should stop staring now. He'd notice.

Oops. Too late. Their gazes met, and he arched an eyebrow in challenge. She blinked and looked away. Her gaze fell on the clock mounted on the wall across from her.

Eleven forty-three.

Only five hours and seventeen minutes to go.

*Only*.

Lexi crossed her arms and turned her yawn into a fake cough. She had color-coded the department folders, sharpened all her pencils, and reorganized the files on her PC for the tenth time that day and was ready to go home now, please.

She propped her elbows on the desk and rested her face in her palms. No. That looked less than professional. She squared her back and sighed. She was supposed to be working hard on the

latest instructions-for-use translation, which she'd already finished even though it wasn't due until Friday. It was her single work assignment this week.

And it was still Wednesday.

Proofreading and translating marketing materials for the Sales department wasn't what she'd signed up for. She told Edmund—owner and general manager of Pedelty Electronics—she felt underutilized, and asked for more to do, but he wanted to ease his little girl into things. His words, not hers. Lexi tried to get him to see people wouldn't appreciate the preferential treatment, but he would have none of that.

“They all know you're here because you deserve it, honey, not because you're my stepdaughter. You just have to become a part of the team first.”

She didn't tell him *honey* felt like a blow at her Business Economics degree from UCLA.

Lexi glanced at the paperwork supposed to help her grasp the nature of the products the company designed and sold. The formatting wasn't what she'd choose, and she didn't love the phrasing in some instances. And the charts could be clearer. She had access to the electronic files. She'd play with a couple of things and show her suggestions to Pedelty. She pulled up a folder marked INSTRUCTIONS FOR USE and opened the top file. A message window appeared in the center of the screen. *Insert Password*. She tried the access code she used for her PC, but the window buzzed. Angry red letters read, *Wrong Password. Access Denied*.

Great. So much for her having a say on things. Edmund didn't trust her not to mess things up on her first week.

She was grumbling to herself about parents who never realized their kids grew up, when she sensed someone watching her. It could be anyone. The first floor of the company offices housed the Sales and IT departments in an open L-shaped space, and the lack of cubicles—while great for enhancing teamwork—offered no privacy. In Sales, desks were placed in two parallel rows of five, one along the windowed outer wall, the other facing it. Lexi sat with her back to the foggy San Francisco sky.

She raised her gaze, but John, the guy opposite her, wasn't looking her way.

While she hated sales with a fiery passion, he was a born salesman. Just yesterday, Lexi saw him go from disinterested to mellow, to cheerful, to a customer's best buddy within a few seconds. Chilling to watch.

He wasn't on the phone now, so he was in off-mode, his face bland.

Next to John, Matt munched on chips, typing something with his free hand. He caught Lexi's gaze and flashed her a goofy grin. She returned the smile and kept scanning the room.

The rest of her department were out, pitching sales, but the glass pane that separated Sales from IT offered her an unobstructed view of most of the floor.

Everyone seemed fixated on their computer screens.

*The IT Crowd.*

Boredom made her easily amused. She almost chuckled, before she zoomed in on Mr. Blue-Eyes staring at her. She chanced a smile, but the guy's face seemed set in stone. He didn't even blink.

With a shrug, Lexi returned to her reading.

She smiled again when she passed by his desk on her way to the restroom. This time he acknowledged her with a nod that was nowhere near friendly. *Ouch*. Every workplace had to have at least one weirdo. Pity this one was so cute.

A couple hours later, she decided a coffee refill was necessary. Mug in hand, she walked the short distance to the fully stocked kitchenette, only to find the weirdo there, washing his own mug and humming some tune Lexi didn't recognize. He didn't seem to notice her, which allowed her to notice him. A few shoulder-length honey-blond curls had escaped his ponytail and hid part of his face, but not enough for her to miss those razor-sharp cheekbones. The company policy didn't insist on formal wear except for the salespeople who met clients, so his shaggy T-shirt wasn't against regulation. His faded blue jeans held a few rips and tears, and although baggy, gave a good hint of his toned butt as he leaned forward to scrub the cup with fervor.

And *that* brought her gaze to his muscled arms and long fingers. Lexi sucked in her lower lip. She knew better than to allow herself to be attracted to a coworker, but she couldn't help thinking how nice he'd clean up.

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Ric wasn't having a good day.

He should have taken Edmund's offer to take a day off, after flying back from Germany. And coming to work jetlagged wasn't the worst part of his Wednesday. That spot went to his morning meeting with Edmund, who more or less told him he'd hired the stepdaughter he'd been raving about for years, to do a job irrelevant to her studies and experience.

During the past two years, Ric listened to Edmund talk non-stop about the brilliant young woman he'd help bring up. Edmund couldn't have loved her more if she were his biological daughter, and was extremely proud of her, but instead of having her involved with the company's operations, he stuck her with paperwork.

When Ric argued she'd be buried in that position, Edmund insisted she needed the experience. *Plus she seemed content.*

How could she feel content with something she could do with her eyes closed?

Pedely Electronics started off as a single store. When Edmund decided to have a line of hair trimmers contracted under his brand, he didn't expect to one day be the owner of a company that designed anything from flash drives to toasters. Additions to workforce came as they were needed, and the result was a patchwork of people and skills. Edmund was an excellent leader, visionary and inspiring, but he led by trial and error. It worked at first, but at its current size, Pedely Electronics needed a manager with solid operational skills.

It pissed Ric off that Lexi didn't step up to the plate.

She seemed more interested in him when he walked in than on what was on her screen. Part of him was flattered, but that was the part that didn't realize Edmund's daughter was so far off limits, she wasn't even a blip on his radar. She might be beautiful, but she was Edmund's family, and Ric didn't mess with that after all Edmund had done for him.

She kept glancing his way, and it amped up his irritation. Was she flirting with him? He huffed.

His body begged for caffeine. He didn't enjoy drinking coffee when he couldn't have a smoke, but concessions had to be made. His I-heart-London mug wasn't in the drawer he usually

kept it. He went looking for it in the kitchen, and found it in the sink. *Dirty*. Pissed him off when people used his stuff without asking.

He was furiously washing the otherness off it, when Lexi walked in. He didn't have to look, to know it was her. She'd been clacking those heels all morning, making him glance at her long legs despite himself.

Ric was torn between being the polite man his mother raised, and showing Lexi what he thought of brats who let down people Ric cared about.

And that was harsh, coming from someone with his past. Edmund had given him a chance. Ric would show Lexi the same courtesy. He'd play it by ear. Wait to see how she'd introduce herself.

But she didn't.

Ric waited, but she stood there. When he turned to face her, he saw she was studying him. And not his face. Her gaze was trained to his arms. She licked her lips, and Ric arched an eyebrow.

"Do I get the seal of approval?" he asked.

She gave a tiny shake of her head, but it wasn't a no, judging from the brilliant smile that curved her plump lips and made her green eyes sparkle.

"You're British." She sounded pleasantly surprised.

"You're perceptive." And her voice was as sexy as the rest of her. Shit.

She held out her hand. "Hi, I'm—"

"The boss's daughter, who just moved back from New York. Yeah, I know." He left his mug on the drying block and grabbed a paper towel. Anything to keep from touching her. Her gaze felt like an electric jolt, and he was afraid if he took her hand he'd forget he was pissed, and fall under her spell.

"Yeah, that too, but I have a name. It's Lexi." Unfazed, she opened her palm wider.

He reached for it with a smirk, the shields he'd crafted for years coming up. It was about time his self-preservation instincts kicked in. "From Alexandra. Your mother calls you Xandra, and you're brilliant and not just another Californian bird."

Lexi stared at him, wide-eyed.

“I told you, I know,” Ric said. “Ed’s been talking about you like you’re the second coming or something. Make sure you don’t disappoint him.”

Her smile cracked. “Well, I’m not about to. Not that it’s any of your business, Mr....”

“Richard Ackart. Ric for short. Head of the IT department, and not about to make your life easy just because of your relationship to the big man. Got it?” So he went a little overboard. Blame it on the jetlag.

Lexi nodded.

“Good.” He brushed past her, and was at the door when he remembered he needed coffee.

“Got it, jerk,” Lexi muttered behind him.

He kept walking. Time he weaned himself off caffeine, anyway.

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The clock showed nine minutes past one.

Lexi’d been with the company for two working days, four hours, and nine minutes, and she was bored to death. Doing translations and typing other people’s business trip reports weren’t what she’d signed up for. She wanted more.

She wanted something that would require her to think and put her business degree to use. Sadly, Edmund had made it clear she wasn’t getting that anytime soon, which meant she was looking at more than two days of doing nothing and feeling uncomfortable about it.

Everyone else seemed pretty busy. She needed to find something to do.

Right on cue, her phone rang. Caller ID came up as Richard Ackart.

“Hello?”

“Come here for a sec, will you?”

“Huh? Here, where?” She’d know it was him even if it didn’t say so on the phone display. His voice and accent stood out... and made her skin flush with desire. Still, it was rude of him not to identify himself, and so she played dumb.

“To the desk of the Brit who *isn’t* your dad,” he said and hung up.

Great. Now she felt dumb. She took her time standing, smoothing her skirt in back, and walking to his desk in small steps. By the time she reached him, she'd managed to plaster a disinterested look on her face. "Want something, Richie?"

He clenched his jaw, which she considered a personal victory until he turned the tables on her. "It's Richard or Ric. If that is too much for your pretty little head, you can call me *hey, you*. Are we clear, Xandra?"

She nodded and tried not to stare when he folded his arms behind his head, stretching the white T against his muscled chest.

"Wanted to pick your brain about something," he said.

"You mean my pretty, little, blonde brain?"

"That one. Good ideas sometimes hide in the most improbable places." He seemed pleased with himself. "Ed wants me to upgrade the operating system of the PCs to the latest version that came out just three months ago. What do you think?"

She was astonished he'd ask her that. He was the head of the frigging IT department. It was his job to know these things. Still, it wasn't like she didn't have an opinion. "I think it'll be a waste of money. We could change to an open-source system. It's free and compatible with all other programs." She shrugged. "It may take a while for everyone to get used to it, but I don't see why we'd pay so much money for something I hear is harder to operate than the one we have now, without offering enough perks to make up for it."

"That's what I thought."

The way he looked at her didn't indicate whether he agreed with her or he meant her opinion proved as useless as he'd thought it would be. When he turned back to his twenty-three-inch monitor, she saw it as her cue to leave.

"You're welcome," she said in as sarcastic a tone as she could muster, and went back to her own desk.

Her short exchange with Richard brought her spirits even lower. So much for Edmund's reassurances that everyone knew she deserved to be there. Did she even want to be there? Once upon a time, she had plans about a career, but now she'd settle for doing a job she didn't hate and being recognized for it.

The computer screen tempted her. If people thought she was a slacker anyway—and right now, she was just that—maybe she could surf the web for a few minutes. Take her mind off how her life passed her by while she sat at her desk, doing things that didn't challenge her.

Yeah, that might help.

But what to surf for?

She'd always been into sultry romances. When she was younger, she read them and hoped the perfect guy would swoop into her life and open her eyes to the magical world of love. He would prove not all men were like her dad, who—true to the middle-age crisis stereotype—left her mom for his secretary when Lexi was four.

Lexi met her Prince Charming right after college and followed him across the country. He promised they'd build a life together.

He lied.

Sickeningly sweet love stories were now Lexi's secret little indulgence. They helped her escape the cynical outlook she'd forced on herself, and kept her company on long, lonely nights. Reading those improbable happily-ever-after stories was the only time she permitted herself to hope there was someone out there who could be her other half. Her soul mate.

Not that she'd ever admit it to anyone. As far as she was concerned, true love didn't exist in the real world. The rare exceptions were for the extremely fortunate, like her mom and stepdad, who still swooned at each other.

Lexi took a deep breath, placed the cursor in the browser's search bar, and typed, *Does true love exist?*

She gasped at the hundreds of thousands of pages reported as results, but it was the first entry that made her do a double take.

*Exotic Beast: the Saga of Xandra and Rex—a FREE Erotic Romance novel by Xopi Chilli*  
*Will Xandra allow herself to fall for Rex, despite the generations of hatred between them?*  
*Is she even capable of true love, and will she fight for it if she finds it?*



Maybe it was that her secret nickname was there, or perhaps the second question struck a chord, but Lexi clicked on the link and was directed to a page showing a man and woman in the shadows. A cornflower-blue mist lit up the darkness surrounding them and enhanced their features. The man was the hottest specimen of the male species she'd ever laid eyes on.

Of course it was true love. Everything about him looked loveable.

The jet-black hair and leather outfit made him look dangerous, and his blue eyes were familiar, as he stared at the woman in his arms with breathtaking intensity and adoration.

A bad boy with a soft side. "Yum," Lexi muttered under her breath.

From what she could see of the woman's face, Xandra looked a little like her. More than a little. The woman in the picture was her spitting image, except for the hair. Lexi's was a darker shade of blond.

Her name *and* her face on the page were too much of a coincidence. Her best friend, Angie—computer-wiz and self-proclaimed witch—had to be playing a practical joke at her expense. How did Angie know what Lexi would be browsing for, though? Lexi clicked on the *Next Chapter* button, and sure enough she was led to a new chapter. She did it again and again, until she was satisfied that what was on her screen was a real paranormal-romance novel. Angie couldn't have had the time to write one, just to mess with her.

The summary of the story read,

*Xandra Eves has been taught to look down at everyone but other shifters. She has no reason to doubt vampires are her natural enemies, until she meets Rex and is forced to work with him, to uncover a conspiracy that threatens to destroy both their species, as well as creation as she knows it.*

It didn't seem all that tempting, but a romance novel featuring her doppelganger was too hard to resist. Plus, *Xandra Eves* had a weird connection to *Alexandra Adams*.

She could see what other people thought of the book. Everything was searchable online. She entered the names *Xandra* and *Rex* into the search bar but came up with nothing. Odd. The novel's read count was in the thousands, according to the webpage's meter.

It was free, it was there, and it intrigued her. She would read a couple of pages, and then get back to... something work-related.

With a shrug, she clicked on the first chapter.

The two pages became several, and soon Lexi was entranced by the characters. Xandra was every bit as messed up as Lexi, and Rex oscillated between adorable and smoking hot—a perfect mixture of shy and cocky, sure to make any woman drool.

And he was British.

Lexi flickered her gaze to Richard, who was busy typing. He was hot and British too, but far from adorable.

She pretended to type and click for a couple of minutes, and then returned to reading.

Rex tied Xandra to a tree, to keep her from alerting her pack to his presence. He was washing himself in a lake, while she pretended to keep her eyes closed.

*He had to know she watched. Why else would he push out his chest, stretching his pectorals, just to wash his dark hair? Water gleamed on the well-defined abs that rippled under his skin. But what made Xandra's breath hitch in her throat were the twin arrows of corded muscle that ran at the lower sides of his abdomen, over his hipbones, pointing at his cock...*

*He could have been carved in marble.*

Lexi didn't know about that Xandra chick, but she craved the guy. And she had to get back to work. She could print the read-only versions of the manuals and jot her notes on them.

She would just read to the end of the chapter. No more than that. She glanced around, afraid someone might notice what she was reading. Just to be safe, she opened a couple more windows on her desktop and arranged them so the tab with *Exotic Beast* took up a small part of the screen.

Sparks flew, but it took a couple of chapters for Xandra to give into the vampire's charm. The sex was hot and tender at the same time—hotter and more tender than anything Lexi had ever done—and there would be more, because Rex wanted to know as much about Xandra's body as possible.

Lexi gulped.

“...now.”

She snapped up her head so hard, something clicked in her neck. Richard stood in front of her desk, looking at her expectantly.

“Huh? I mean, I didn’t catch what you said.” Did he know what she’d been doing?

“I said I think you should get off now.” He intoned each word separately, as if speaking to a child.

“Excuse me?” Her eyes felt wide as saucers.

“It’s five thirty. Shouldn’t you be going home?” he asked in a bored tone. “Or is that big, bad translation giving you trouble?”

“Ah.” He meant get off *work*. She was so flustered, she didn’t even return the sarcasm. “Um, no. No biggie. Yeah, I’ll go now. Thanks.”

He frowned, shrugged, and swaggered to the stairs, his laptop hanging from one shoulder and bouncing against his ass with every step.

Lexi packed up and left, but not before jotting down the web address of the site, as well as that of the particular page she’d been on before the interruption.