

27  
Magic Words



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Sharelle Byars Moranville

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*To my husband, Barry*

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ONE  
(San Francisco)

ONE September morning when Kobi was new to kindergarten, her dad, the Great Alighieri, came to their classroom and did magic. He pulled Dante out of a flowerpot. He made daisies grow from a girl's head. And he drew miles and miles of colorful silk scarves out of a tiny gold box. At the end, when he called Kobi up to take a bow with him, she had never felt more important.

And then he dropped her and Dante off at home and went to his office.

Their house had never seemed so dull. The soup bowls were a boring brown, the table was a boring brown, the floor was a boring brown.

"Why don't *you* do magic?" she said to her mother as

they ate their boring lunch of ramen noodles. “Like the Great Alighieri.”

“Pfh!” her mother said. “He does razzmatazz. I do serious magic.”

Kobi stared. Her mother never did anything exciting.

“Every day, I make people fall in love.” Her mother snapped her fingers the way the Great Alighieri did when a Ping-Pong ball popped out of an ear. “I make annoying people wander into poison ivy.” She flicked her finger as if it were a wand.

Kobi looked around the room, the hair rising on her arms. “Where?”

Her mother took a book off the shelf. “They live in here.”

Kobi held the book in her lap and looked at her mother’s picture on the back. She opened it. The words were long and close together. There were no pictures.

“Does Brook know about your magic?” Kobi asked.

Her mother shook her head. “Let’s keep it our secret.”

The younger daughter of the Great Alighieri knew something the older daughter didn’t. Kobi smiled.

They sat with the window open, listening to the trolley clatter down the hill.

“You have to let me work now,” Kobi’s mom said after a while. She kissed Kobi and winked at her. “Remember. Serious magic. Our secret.” She rolled her chair to her desk and opened her laptop.

Kobi found her pillow, as she did every afternoon. She crawled into the hideaway behind her mother’s desk, the hideaway that the Great Alighieri had made when Brook went off to kindergarten last year. No one but he could find her when she was in the secret pocket lined with pink velvet.

Kobi listened to her mother’s fingers flying across the keyboard. Her mother’s toes were not very far from Kobi’s face. They were wiggling as if something exciting were happening somewhere.

“Give me one of your magic words,” Kobi said.

The toes stopped moving. “Please?”

“Please,” Kobi said.

Her mother’s hand, holding a yellow Post-it note, appeared in front of Kobi’s face. Kobi pulled the Post-it off her mother’s finger and looked at it. “I can’t read long words.”

Her mother cleared her throat, which meant Kobi should try. There were a lot of zs. Kobi made a buzzing noise.

Her mother gave her a hint. “Razz?”

“Razzmatazz!”

The house began to tremble, the windows began to rattle, and the glasses in the china cupboard began to jingle. Kobi gripped the bit of paper, wondering if she was strong enough to hold such magic. She wanted to give it back, but she also wanted to keep it.

She stuck the word on her shirt right over her heart. “Another!” she cried, wondering if her mother would do

such a bold thing. “Please.”

A Post-it appeared in front of her nose. “What does it say?” Kobi asked.

“*Squelch*,” her mother said.

“*Squelch*?” Kobi repeated. It made her laugh.

“What?” her mom asked.

“It feels funny in my mouth.”

“You’re silly,” her mother said. But she said “*Squelch*” and giggled.

“*Squelch*,” Kobi said.

Gradually the tinkle of the glasses in the china cupboard faded away. The words were very powerful.

“May I have another?”

She took it off her mother’s finger. “*Phyllo bundle*,” her mother said. “Now let me work, please. It’s time for your nap.”

Kobi looked at the words *Phyllo bundle* as she lay back on her pillow, beginning to get cozy. She tucked the Post-its under her pillow and rolled up in her blanket.



In the quiet afternoons, her mother gave her more words. Most were written on yellow Post-its, some were written on orange, and a few were written on neon green. Her mother gave Kobi twenty-seven magic words before she and the Great Alighieri disappeared.



## TWO

(Paris, almost five years later)

THE breeze ruffled Kobi's growing-out bangs. Grandmamma said cups should have saucers and girls should have bangs, but Kobi planned to grow her hair to all one length like her mother's.

From the balcony, the sky was a soft blue. Over the old Parisian apartment buildings with their copper roofs, enormous clouds billowed. They made Kobi think of the sails on their parents' boat.

When the doorbell sounded, she sighed and went in. The word to ward off annoying people was *fiddlesticks*. It made the concierge stop talking Grandmamma's ear off when Grandmamma's feet were tired, for example. But magic words didn't work when they were used selfishly. So Kobi

didn't bother trying, because Brook *loved* Mademoiselle—as did Grandmamma and Madame Louise.

Brook stopped scribbling in her diary and swung her legs over the edge of the tall bed, which required a ladder for ladylike egress.

“Let’s hide from Mademoiselle,” Kobi suggested.

“That might hurt her feelings,” Brook said.

Mademoiselle LeBlanc came with worksheets and lesson plans every Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday. Kobi preferred the other two days of the week. Sometimes they had educational outings with other kids on those days. Sometimes they hung out with Grandmamma or Madame Louise, their housekeeper. This morning, Grandmamma was out somewhere with her friend Mr. Gyver.



The voices of Mademoiselle and Madame Louise grew soft as the women drifted to the back of the apartment. Maybe they would gossip over tea and forget about lessons.

Kobi glanced into the foggy antique mirror that stood in the corner of their bedroom. Would her parents even recognize her when they got home? Her dad wouldn't be able to pull her onto his lap and call her his little bunny anymore. Would he call her his big rabbit?

“Do you suppose Daddy took Dante with him on the trip?” she asked Brook. “And forgot to tell us?”

When they were little, the sweet white rabbit had let Kobi and Brook dress him in doll clothes and wrap him in

napkins. He had his own chair at the table in the kitchen of their San Francisco house. He liked to sleep on their mother's bare feet. He belonged to their dad, the Great Alighieri.

"You shouldn't still be thinking about Dante," Brook said, her lips set.

"A person can't help their thoughts. They pop up."

After their parents had left on their sailing trip, Kobi and Brook had looked everywhere for Dante. Grandmamma helped them search the big blue house that overlooked the bay. Sometimes Dante hid in crannies.

But the weeks passed and they never saw Dante again. When Grandmamma closed the San Francisco house so they could move to Paris, Kobi taped a picture of him on the kitchen cupboard along with a note explaining what he liked to eat and where she could be reached. She whispered, "*Temporarily*," as she kissed his picture. That magic word helped things get better for unfortunate people, and surely it would work for bunnies, too.

In front of the mirror, Brook smoothed her bangs and tidied the ribbon that held her hair back. Recently she had started rubbing lotion on her hands and using a second mirror to see her back.

"I wish we could have an adventure," Kobi said. Outside, there would be things to do on the boulevard. Shop-windows to peer into, dogs on leashes to pet, ducks to feed in the park.

“Mademoiselle doesn’t like adventures,” Brook said.

Mademoiselle liked multiple-choice questions, tidy writing, correct French, aspirational reading, and little gold stars. Grandmamma said often how grateful she was for Mademoiselle. Grandmamma said someday, someday *way in the future*, Kobi and Brook would be going back to the U.S. and they would be able to segue into the American school system.

Brook had carried the word *segue* as proudly as the concierge’s cat with a water bug. She dropped it at the feet of Mademoiselle. Mademoiselle buttered Brook on both sides with praise. Kobi had been tempted to tell them about *her* words, the twenty-seven that she had brought to Paris in her footlocker, the magic words, some of which were much finer than *segue*. But she didn’t because her mother had said they were secret.

Kobi flung herself into an easy chair and swiveled to stare at the sky. “I’ll be *so* glad when they’re home.”

The bathroom door closed quietly. Kobi heard water running.

“Brook?” she said, her hand on the doorknob. After a bit, she tapped on the door. “May I come in?”

The water went off. Brook opened the door, drying her hands on the little linen towel with an *M* for Mallory, Grandmamma’s last name, embroidered in one corner.

“Let’s go find Mademoiselle,” Kobi said.

Brook nodded, but before they were ten steps away from the bathroom, she turned back. “I have to check . . .”

Kobi knew Brook was making sure the faucet was turned off.

The fourth time, they got partway down the hall before Brook went back. It was Kobi's fault, talking about Dante and their parents.

"There you are!" Mademoiselle called. "Time for lessons."

"Wait," Brook said, turning around. "I have to . . ."

Mademoiselle raised her eyebrows at Kobi.

Kobi nodded.

When Brook returned from the bathroom, Mademoiselle put her arms around Brook's shoulders and said, "I have a basket of cherries from my morning walk. Perhaps we should do something interesting with them."

Brook's face brightened. "We could follow a recipe."

"I'm sure Madame Louise has a recipe for cherry something or other."

"If you follow the recipe exactly," Brook told Kobi, as if Kobi hadn't heard it a thousand times, "everything turns out right at the end."

In the kitchen, the sun threw squares of light over the counters. Mademoiselle uncovered the small basket of cherries.

"The cherries aren't very big," Brook said.

"They're wild. I foraged them along the alley," Mademoiselle said. "I was very lucky to get them before the birds did."

Since there weren't very many, and they weren't very big,

Madame Louise got out little white ramekins and suggested they make mini clafoutis.

Kobi had no idea that pitting the tiny, sour cherries would be so interesting. Her hands ended up as stained as if she'd butchered a pig, not that she would do such a thing. She loved to pet Mr. Gyver's pigs when they went to his farm. Mr. Gyver was from the U.S. like Kobi, Brook, and Grandmamma, but he was an expert in world food supplies and had lived in France for years. Kobi sniffed her red fingers. They smelled like almonds, which Mademoiselle said was from the cherry pits.

Once the mini clafoutis were in the oven and they were washing dishes, Mademoiselle set a math problem involving the grams of pitted cherries, the volume of each ramekin, and some fraction or other. Kobi could hear Brook's brain clicking happily away. She herself did not find math interesting.

She slipped into the pantry and out the window onto the fire escape, which Grandmamma said they weren't to do. But Kobi loved spying on the alley. Today, after several minutes, nothing was happening except two squirrels chasing each other. And the cherry juice on her hands was attracting bees.

Someone grabbed her arm. "Kobi Alighieri!"

Grandmamma hauled her over the windowsill into the pantry. "What if you fell? You would splat on the bricks in the alley. . . ." She hugged Kobi close, enveloping her. "Oh my. I'm too old for this." Grandmamma sat on the window-

sill, fanning her face with her hand. She pulled Kobi onto her lap though Kobi was too big. “What would I do if something happened to you?”

Grandmamma was truly scared, and Kobi said sorry. She looked at her feet because she couldn’t bear to look at Grandmamma’s face.

Grandmamma sighed, released Kobi’s hands, and said, “*Do not* go out this window again.”

Later, after the warm clafoutis were eaten, Kobi and Brook went to the schoolroom to take turns reading from the *Le Petit Nicolas* series. Kobi read in French, and Brook translated into English, and then they switched. Mademoiselle used the story to drill them in sentence structure and French idioms.

After lunch, Mademoiselle placed a yellow gentian in a vase on the drawing table. She pronounced it a miracle, since it was a Pyrenees wildflower and had no business growing in her alley, where she had found it. She suggested the girls make a botanical drawing of the plant.

Since it was only a suggestion, Kobi didn’t take it. Botanical drawings were stiff and boring. Kobi wanted to paint something that Grandmamma would pronounce *interesting!*

One of Kobi’s creations that Grandmamma found *interesting* hung on the dining room wall beside the Louis XV mirror. It looked important there. Her parents would admire it when they came to get her and Brook. Kobi would pretend at first not to care much that they were back or liked

her painting. It would be what they deserved for going off and leaving them in the first place.

Brook and Mademoiselle were slicing the poor gentian open from top to bottom and asked Kobi to come look.

“Eew,” Kobi said. She had seen flower private parts before.

The best use of flowers was their names. *Honeysuckle*, *trillium*, and *veronica* were great for finding things like Mr. Gyver’s umbrella, Grandmamma’s reading glasses, and Madame Louise’s shopping list.

Brook called Grandmamma to come and look at the gentian. Grandmamma said she had liked it better in the vase.

“What should I paint?” Kobi asked Grandmamma.

Grandmamma stood behind Kobi and looked at the canvas on the easel. Kobi leaned back, feeling Grandmamma’s softness and breathing in her *Freesia* perfume. That was one of the words her mother had given her. Grandmamma began to massage Kobi’s scalp. If Kobi had been a cat, she would have arched her back and twined between Grandmamma’s ankles, purring. *Freesia* was a purring word.

“I have a million things to do,” Grandmamma said finally, kissing Kobi’s head. “I’ll be in my study.”

“But what shall I paint?”

“Paint a story about something important.”

Kobi liked stories. And Grandmamma was important. She had traveled from Paris to San Francisco to stay with them while their parents went on their sailing trip. She had

helped Brook and Kobi make madeleine cakes and set up a lemonade stand after Brook got home from school. She had showed them how to weave a cat's cradle with their fingers and purple yarn. She had taught them to eat fig preserves. She hugged and kissed them a trillion times.

For the first three weeks their parents were gone, they called every night at bedtime. Their dad had purchased an extra copy of *Mr. Popper's Penguins* to take on the trip, and he read to them while Brook and Kobi followed along in their book.

Then one Saturday their parents called in the morning and sounded far away. A whistling sound in the background scared Kobi. She asked the Great Alighieri to please come home. He said it wasn't that simple. He called her little bunny.

Afterward, Grandmamma rocked her and reminded her their parents were going to be gone for a whole month longer, so they had to be patient. She kissed Kobi's head and said not to worry. She drove them to Monterey to watch the silly sea lions.

Their parents didn't call again.

Grandmamma said they'd run into bad weather, but it wouldn't amount to much because October wasn't storm season around Fiji and American Samoa. But in a few days, Kobi and Brook eavesdropped on a conversation Grandmamma was having with their half uncle. Grandmamma was crying and using words they didn't understand. That night, when Brook was snoring beside her, Kobi slipped out of bed.

A strip of light gleamed under the guest room door. Kobi heard Grandmamma's voice on the phone as she tiptoed past.

She made her way down the hall and slipped under her mother's desk into the hideaway. Using her flashlight, she found the magic words in the drawstring bag where she'd put them. She smoothed out the wrinkled ones and put the words written on yellow Post-its in two columns:

<i>carillon</i>	<i>fiddlesticks</i>
<i>snapdragon</i>	<i>razzmatazz</i>
<i>squelch</i>	<i>mayfly</i>
<i>temporarily</i>	<i>caribou</i>
<i>honeysuckle</i>	<i>freesia</i>
<i>trillium</i>	<i>phyllo bundle</i>
<i>buoy</i>	<i>dilettante</i>
<i>veronica</i>	<i>pantaloons</i>

She couldn't read most of them because she was only five, but they tingled with magic as she ran her fingers over them. She studied them. Why did one of the Post-its have two words? Did it mean *phyllo bundle* was extra powerful and to be used for the most important things, like bringing her parents home?

Kobi pressed her thumb against *phyllo bundle* and shut her eyes. She wanted the Great Alighieri to pull her close as they read *Mr. Popper's Penguins* together. She told them to

come home. She *ordered* them to come home.

She waited. She didn't hear the key in the lock or hear the Great Alighieri call, "Where is everybody?"

She made two rows of orange Post-its. She touched each word and told her parents to come home.

<i>iridescence</i>	<i>Montpellier</i>
<i>dimpling</i>	<i>malleable</i>
<i>scrambled</i>	<i>frippery</i>
<i>hogwash</i>	<i>parsimonious</i>
	<i>ragout</i>

She spread out the last few Post-its—the ones written on neon green—and studied them.

*lingua franca*  
*Avanti!*  
*buoy*

Her parents were not home and it was getting stuffy in the hideaway.

She didn't know how to make the words work. She rearranged them. She put long words in one group, middle-sized words in another group. She tried saying some of the words, but they were hard.

She yanked her hair. *Why* hadn't her mother explained how to unleash the magic power?

Only one word had an exclamation point beside it. She ran her finger over the letters, sounding them out in her mind.

*A-van-ti!*

At that moment, that night almost five years ago, in the hideaway under her mother's desk in the San Francisco house, Kobi heard a rumbling sound as if stones were falling away from an opening. And there they were.



The sailboat listed in the sand, a jagged hole in its side. Bright stars. A bonfire. Her parents' shapes moving around the firelight.

"Hey!" she called.

Her dad turned the spit where a chicken-like thing was roasting. Her mother tried to open a can of beans. Kobi slipped her hand into her dad's, but he moved it to poke the roasting thing with a sharp stick.

Her mother stood up and walked toward the surf. Kobi followed. At the edge of the water, her mother stood gazing into the distance as if she had turned to petrified wood. Her face glistened with tears.



Kobi wiped tears off her own face, hoping Mademoiselle hadn't noticed. But Mademoiselle was admiring the detail of Brook's drawing of the poor gentian. Sometimes Kobi wondered if she and Brook were really sisters. But of course they were. Sisters and best friends.



After discovering that her parents were okay, she wanted to wake Brook and tell her. Brook would have been so happy. But Brook and Grandmamma didn't know her mother had given her magic words before she disappeared. Grandmamma might not believe Kobi. The magic might stop working if she told, because her mother had said it was a secret.



Kobi stood back and looked at her painting. There was their house in San Francisco in the upper right corner. And Grandmamma walking from Paris on what looked like a hanging bridge but was really the cat's cradle, and of course Grandmamma hadn't really walked, but she had come. And she had stayed. And she kept them close and brought them back to Paris with her to wait. The storm and the boat with a gaping hole in its side took up a lot of space on the canvas. But something was missing from the canvas. Something to bind all the parts together.

Mademoiselle had taught them calligraphy, so Kobi decorated the left border of the painting with *iridescence*. That looked quite nice lettered vertically down the edge,

and Mademoiselle would admire it because it was so Latinate. Kobi was half Latinate, in a way. Her Italian grandfather, whom she had visited when she was four, was handsome like the Great Alighieri. They hadn't been able to talk to each other very well, but Kobi loved the smell of the linen shop where her Italian grandparents flung out wide swaths of fabric on the cutting table for customers to see. That was how *iridescence* worked. It made a moment come alive. When she said *iridescence*, everything glowed around the edges. She could smell things, like the bolts of linen. She could hear and feel the *thunk* of the heavy bolt of fabric on the cutting board. *Iridescence* made a perfect left margin for her picture. She balanced it on the other side with *lingua franca*, which she had not yet learned how to use.



## THREE

*T*HAT evening, Mr. Gyver came to dinner. Grandmamma arranged seven cobalt-blue vases on the mantel below the Louis XV mirror. She began filling them with freesia. She filled the first one for her first husband, Kobi and Brook's grandfather, whom they never knew. She filled the next one for their mother and the Great Alighieri. The next one for Grandmamma's second husband, Mr. Mallory. The next for Grandmamma and Mr. Mallory's son, Wimbledon, their half uncle.

"We've never met him," Kobi said.

"Yes, we have," Brook said.

"No, we haven't."

"Yes, we have."

"Girls," Grandmamma said.

One freesia bouquet was for Brook. One was for Kobi.

“Who is the last one for?” Brook asked.

“For Leonard.” Grandmamma smiled at Mr. Gyver, who smiled back.

“I’m entering a new phase of my life, girls,” Grandmamma announced, looking both happy and anxious as she put the flowers in the last vase. “Leonard and I aren’t getting any younger and we’ve decided to marry.”

“Can we be bridesmaids?” Brook said.

Grandmamma laughed. “We’re too old for all that. We’ll be married at city hall in a few weeks while you girls are with your uncle Wim in Des Moines.”

The last time Kobi had been separated from people she loved, it hadn’t turned out well. “But we don’t know him! Why can’t we stay here?”

“Because Leonard and I are going to Beijing, where he is to receive an award, and then we will travel around the Far East for a while. It will be a honeymoon.” Grandma’s cheeks pinked up and she said, “Won’t that be nice?”

“We could stay here with Madame Louise and Mademoiselle,” Brook said. “This is our home.”

Grandmamma kissed Brook’s head. “Yes, it is. When we all return from our travels, Leonard will move here because this is your home. Going to the US will be an adventure. You’ll get to know Wim. You’ll experience an American school again after all these years.”

Kobi remembered nothing about kindergarten except the time the Great Alighieri came to visit.