



Money is the
family business.

Magic is the
family curse.

GIFTED & TALENTED

New York Times
Bestselling Author of
The Atlas Six

OLIVIE BLAKE

GIFTED & TALENTED

Olivie Blake



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For my family
(lol)

Meredith Honora Liang Wren

The Ainsworth Academy

HONORS: Class Valedictorian, 2007 National Women's Class A Singles Tennis
Champion, Most Likely to Succeed

"What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to
what lies within us."

Arthur Everett Liang Wren

Canongate Hall

HONORS: First-team All-American, Scholar Athlete with Distinction, Most
Likely to Be in Movies

"Be the change you wish to see in the world."

Eilidh Olympia Liang Wren

Manhattan Academy of Ballet

HONORS: youngest first soloist, youngest principal dancer, Manhattan
Academy Prima Ballerina Assoluta two consecutive years

"Oh, the places you'll go!"

MONDAY
(Before).

1

Meredith Wren, a fucking asshole, not that it matters at this stage of the narrative but it's worth pointing out, sat blinded by the overhead lights from the stage, squinting unflatteringly into the brand-new, state-of-the-art auditorium that had just been completed on Tyche's unethically verdant campus. Too large a venue for an event of this nature, which would reasonably be attended by only the most ardent of nerds. Well, them, and anyone who stood to gain from her success financially. A forum for dorks and despots.

As her eyes adjusted to the masses bearing witness to her greatness, Meredith saw nothing but the pockets of empty seats. Jesus Christ, she thought, and wondered if the squinting was worsening her burgeoning crow's feet. Blinking, she made a concerted effort to simply go blind. She became aware of something, a styer most likely, oh god, a styer, she hadn't had one of those since her early college days, back when she'd still had the balls to fall into bed with makeup on, recklessly. She was meticulous now with her skincare ritual, how was it possible she could accumulate grime at this stage of her life? At this *great age*, how could she succumb to something so pedestrian as a styer? She blinked and wanted desperately to lie down, to eat a whole sleeve of pistachio macarons. To gorge herself from bed and never rise again. Just kidding. Ha ha.

From the crowd she became aware of notable faces. Ward, obviously. He was her business partner, like it or not. Cass, too, that was nice. Expected to

some extent, as he was something-something operations at Tyche (she and Cass had had to disclose their personal relationship when Tyche's partnership with Birdsong first went public, a relationship that was then only hazy at best—she'd been surprised Cass had managed to come up with a term that wasn't "fucking sometimes"), but still, nice. Foster was smiling benevolently at her, the cunt. She'd taken the money, what did that make her? A traitor, fine, shut up. (She always heard unwelcome commentary in Lou's voice.) Don't bite the hand that feeds, Meredith thought for the eight millionth time. One of her father's pet wisdoms—you can have money or you can have pride, and guess which one changes the world? Then there was a row of normal-looking people, suitably showered, probably journalists. Press badges, yep, journalists. Someone from *Wired*, a few from *Magitek*, someone who looked a lot like the boy she'd nearly cut and run for, but that was par for the course—she saw Jamie Ammar at least five times a week, usually in line at the grocery store. At Demeter, specifically. It was always some other absurdly handsome man in the ill-fitting jeans of the aughts.

God, but this one really looked like Jamie.

"Please welcome to the Tyche stage Meredith Wren, the CEO of Birdsong!" called the disembodied voice overhead as Meredith froze a smile on her face, bracing for the unbearable cringe of listening to her own insufferable bio. "Once the most highly sought-after biomancy prodigy of her age, Meredith began her career by dropping out of Harvard and hightailing it to sunny SoCal to pursue an interest in treating mental illness that would become one of the most significant, world-altering technomantic advances in the growing science of neuromancy—"

Meredith's phone buzzed in her pocket. She ignored it. A missed call popped up on the face of her watch: ugh, her father's personal assistant, what was her name. Jenny something. Or had that been the last one? Meredith so rarely bothered to check in, and certainly nobody from her father's office had reached out to her in the last nine months, maybe longer. It was never anything beyond the ceremonial—invitations to the annual

company party, or the usual scheduling song and dance for meals or calls that would never take place.

Meredith blinked, a sudden blur to her vision—it was definitely a stye, god damn it. The stage lights remained arduously bright, but the journalist sitting in the second row really looked like Jamie. Which—there was no way it *was* Jamie, obviously. Although Jamie was indeed a journalist. Not that Meredith was keeping tabs. (In her head, Lou gave an unsolicited laugh.) The journalist who was definitely, absolutely not Jamie slid his phone out of his jacket pocket, typing something into it. Rude.

“—more than ten billion dollars, one of the largest biomantic valuations in history, larger even than the initial investment into Wrenfare Magitech. After extensive hype, Chirp was finally made available to the public last year, with hundreds of thousands of people—and growing by the day!—now able to find the one thing we all so desperately want: *happiness*. Yes, that’s right, we said it: This woman will make you happy. Please give a warm welcome to the incomparable Meredith Wren!”

Her phone buzzed in her pocket. Another call from Jenny or something. She glanced at her watch screen, which showed a message from—

Holy fuck. Holy fuck. Holy fuck.

Jamie Ammar.

Some producer on stage gestured wildly from Meredith’s periphery and she jumped. Her mic was now hot. Her talk was now live. It was time to get up and give a rousing speech about saving the world, which she could do. Which she had done.

What could the message say? Not that it mattered! She did not need to know what a man receding invisibly into the previous decade of her life could possibly have to say to her. They’d both said as much as they’d needed to when she left Boston twelve years ago, which on his end had been “fuck you” or something lightly of that equivalent. They’d spoken three, maybe four times since then? Once when she’d called him drunk to say things she wished she couldn’t remember, another time to say that the previous night had been a mistake, a third time when she’d been in Manhattan for work, a

call that went unanswered. A fourth to congratulate him on his engagement, five years ago, to a very nice girl. A really, really nice girl.

Meredith Wren, CEO of Birdsong, daughter of Thayer Wren and Persephone Liang, erstwhile cover star of Forbes 30 Under 30, rose to her feet and glanced surreptitiously at the message from her ex, because of course she did. I think we all knew she was going to. Then she looked into the crowd and felt her heart cascade into her vagina.

I know what you did.

And I'm going to publish it.

2

The ads blinking along Tottenham Court Road all read the same thing, like a deranged echo or a Greek chorus. **THIS APP WILL MAKE YOU HAPPY! :)**

By now, Arthur Wren paid no attention to the hallmarks of his family's success, having come to regard them as a sort of monotony, almost a drudgery. Like watching the trailer of a film too many times or hearing an overplayed song on the radio. He took no notice of Wrenfare's towering London offices as he sped past them, just as he had done five years ago when walking past the perennial billboards of his younger sister, Eilidh—all things that faded unremarkably to the background, like the constancy of white noise.

The first time Arthur had seen a Chirp ad on the subway in DC—**THIS APP WILL MAKE YOU HAPPY! :)**—he'd snapped an ironic selfie with it for Meredith, throwing up an infantile peace sign and praying he wouldn't be caught by the *Post*. (Imagine the headline! Arthur could and often did; too often, if you ask me. This one would go something like CONGRESSMAN WREN TOO BUSY TAKING SELFIES, BUYING AVOCADO TOAST TO VIRTUE SIGNAL OPPRESSIVE TERRORISM FUNDED BY ACTIONS OF OWN GOVERNMENT. Or, you know, something translatable to that effect, which Arthur usually heard in Lou's melodic drawl.)

In the accompanying message, Arthur had typed: **Sister Insufferable, savior of the people!**

Brother Unbearable, Meredith had replied, **shut, and I can't emphasize this enough, up.**

At the moment, Meredith was giving some sort of tech talk about the future of neuromancy, going on about the state of collective human ennui as if it were something from which to bravely opt out. Arthur, meanwhile, was very busy transporting himself among the fray, relishing some spare hours of hard-fought anonymity despite the infinite scroll of ledes about his failures as a politician and a man. He had forgone the usual navy suit for the occasion (Gillian said black was too harsh on him and Gillian was always right) and instead dressed casually, itself a sort of disguise. From his pocket his phone buzzed, and he pulled it out to check the screen. His father's office line.

Interesting.

Unusual.

Nearly unusual enough to compel him back to the real world, what with its enigmatic authority figures and unguessable personal matters. Of course, there was no chance Thayer had picked up the phone himself—Arthur was an Important Person, too, mind you, but never so important that his own team of underlings became relevant to Thayer Wren's fleeting whims—so it was likely Thayer's personal assistant, Julie. In all likelihood serving an underwhelming reveal such as hello Arthur, can you hold the first weekend in December open for the holiday party or do you intend to throw your career away before then?

Hm. Failing Arthur, Gillian would be the next best point of contact. Whatever it was, Gillian would handle it painlessly, in a mere thirty seconds or less.

Under the circumstances, it could wait.

Arthur felt a renewed thrill of excitement at the thought of the evening and swept away the missed call from his screen, choosing instead a more secure messaging app and a contact labeled with the image of a mouse. **Can't wait to see you**, he typed.

No reply, but that was fine. Give or take some city traffic, he'd be there soon enough.

He meant to tuck his phone back into his pocket but paused, checking the more public-facing messaging app to see if there was anything from Gillian. Nothing, aside from his text that he had landed, to which she had given a demure thumbs-up. He supposed she was enjoying her time off as well, presumably with military tactics and rugby, or some alternate hobby du jour that Gillian found appropriate for that evening's relaxation, usually strategy games and bloodshed.

Just then, Arthur's relentless news app pinged with a headline: CONGRESSMAN ARTHUR WREN (D-CA) TO ADDRESS THE WAYS AND MEANS ...

It trailed off and Arthur successfully ignored it, as he often did. (This is a lie. Arthur has something of a chronic nosiness as to the nature of his public perception. Call it a vocational hazard or casual narcissism; either will apply.) There was no purpose to wading into the obvious, though Arthur anticipated the usual comments. Something-something nepo baby—*that* never got old, never mind that nearly every sitting congressman came from some sort of wealth, and for fuck's sake, where would they prefer he got the money? Big Tobacco? The NRA? Wasn't it sort of *relaxing* to know that Arthur Wren's campaign funding came from somewhere banally ambivalent—in fact, so uninterested in his political agenda that it could not be persuaded to call him personally, only reaching out by virtue of an assistant whose name Arthur wasn't entirely sure he'd gotten right?

Not that this was the time to think about his father, a surefire erection killer if ever a thing existed. The point is, voters were more likely to connect Arthur to his father or sisters than to his grandparents, who weren't railway tycoons anyway, so contextually, "nepo baby" felt a bit unfair. Arthur's theoretical value was mostly unrealized—generational via his father, i.e., not strictly Arthur's—and even with the inheritance from his mother, he was normal rich, not blood-money rich. Not *Philippa* rich, which was presumably his appeal to her.

Ah, there it was again, the thrill he so unfailingly associated with Philippa. Arthur caught on to it and shivered in the sensation, familiarly electric. His normal life, outside of this one escape, had become increasingly untenable. He was on the campaign trail again, facing down a hung Congress and a looming presidential election whose end results he doubted he could bear. The bills he proposed, which came from a place of forward-leaning—nay, radical!—progressivism were functionally toothless by the time they came before committee, rendering him a sort of new-age jester who'd accomplished nothing but the turntable warp of a sitcom laugh track. Social media itself, the thing that had first positioned Arthur for greatness like the rise of a cutting-edge trend, had brutally turned on him. What, the echo chamber hive mind demanded to know, had come of Arthur's promises to end American-sponsored colonialism? To replenish the resources of the planet? To do away with his generation's mounting debts? To revitalize critical social programs and increase the availability of affordable housing, for which money had been redirected over the course of their lifetimes to warmongering, genocide, and lining the very congressional pockets that he, Arthur Wren, now counted among?

What he could *not* say aloud (because it was undignified and whiny) was the obvious: that it wasn't as if he wasn't trying! Arthur's rosy-eyed attempt at a straightforward bill to increase environmental jobs wound up with an unintended rider cutting educational budgets for nutritional resources to low-income schools. And *that* fiasco, horrifically enough, was all he had to claim as an accomplishment! His impassioned speech on the congressional floor calling for intervention in the Congo had been a mere afterthought in media coverage, mentioned only *after* Arthur and a mining-sponsored congressman had been photographed walking together—a result of poor timing, the enmity of the fates, and the limited radius of good coffee spots open past three around the Capitol. (Arthur could have just sent an aide like all his contemporaries did, but *noooooooo*, he had to believe in fetching his own coffee, inviting the ire of public opinion like Odysseus taunting the Cyclops.)

Serious question—what was the appropriate alternative? It was this that left Arthur's mind reeling, his thumb scrolling until it went numb. Should he have instead shoved the other congressman into traffic and screamed, *Death to the industrial complex, literally*? Maybe so! That seemed to be the consensus online, but instead Arthur had simply walked and smiled tersely and committed the violence of silence, and for his crimes, he had been featured being handsomely duplicitous on the landing page of every liberal digital imprint, read to filth by the very demographic from whence he'd progressively come.

In sum: To everyone actually *in* Congress, Arthur was far too liberal to be taken seriously. To everyone who had put him there, Arthur wasn't liberal enough. The constancy of his failures—the mythology of his individualized, sinister hypocrisy rather than the darker institutional truth, which was that sociopolitical compromise meant the lesser of two evils was often not letting things get immeasurably worse—was enough to make Arthur want to get swallowed up by quicksand.

Or, better yet, disappear into an orgy, never to emerge.

Finally! The car slowed to a stop and it was all Arthur could do not to jump out and perform an outsized musical number about the street where Philippa ... well, not lived, but where she had a house, and where she and Yves occasionally spent their time when they were not otherwise absconding to a country estate or touring Europe or generously debauching Arthur on his home turf.

Lady Philippa Villiers-DeMagnon (Pippa, Lady Philippa, or PVDM to the press; Pipsqueak or Mouse to Yves and, when appropriate, to Arthur) was of course fashionably unemployed, being an heiress and an aristocrat who generally made her living by flitting from one charitable cause to the next. Her current project was the publication of a cookbook by a refugee shelter in central London. Philippa didn't cook herself, obviously, not because of luxury (partially because of luxury) but because it was utterly domestic, though she considered herself to have a particularly interesting palate due to her childhood in Barbados.

Whether this allegedly cosmopolitan taste of hers was real or not was of no pressing concern to Arthur, whose attraction to Philippa granted him a certain blessed blindness. Her generosity, her fundamental strangeness, her almost pathological contrariness, her enthusiastic embrace of his ... occasional technical malfunctions—these were the things he loved about her, the oddities, the sort of howling-at-the-moon quality she seemed to preternaturally possess, so as a rule he did not ask himself too many questions about the nature of her class. Arthur chose to focus on Philippa's well-meaning attempts to empower women and devote her brilliant mind to such universally worthy causes.

If Arthur did *not* focus on this aspect of Philippa, then of course his mind would wander elsewhere: to the frothing symbiosis of Philippa's tabloid coverage; to what her fondness for Barbados (and, at times, a suspiciously unspecific adoration for "Africa") might actually suggest; to whether Arthur's own mantle of hypocrisy was dismally fitting, however itchy it happened to be. But it was easy not to ponder such things while being *near* Philippa, who was one of those wealthy people whose wealth seems to make them effortlessly generous, not only with money but with time, and whose disposition was occasionally so sweet it wounded Arthur's heart—just properly *melted* it, soldering parts of it to his rib cage and leaving a sticky-toffee residue of unfading, unfaltering affection.

Arthur had first met Philippa at a charity exhibition of her family's private collection in the National Gallery, where he was drawn to her because she spoke so lovingly and animatedly about each of the pieces. So invested was she in their style and history and the inherently sexual nature of the baroque that Arthur initially mistook her for a scholar of art history. That was the thing with Philippa, who was so dazzlingly bright and quick-witted and cultured and refined that at times it nearly hurt to look at her. She was very beautiful, but more importantly she was incredibly weird, a buffet of idiosyncrasies. It created this mystique about her, this sense that she was not exactly for everyone. Arthur stayed up the whole night with her, never imagining her to take any interest in him, already aware that she was

famously dating Yves Reza, a Formula Magitech racecar driver who was not a musician and yet was, somehow, the only man of their generation whom Arthur felt could properly be called a rock star. But Philippa must have sniffed out the weird in Arthur, too, and so now, well, here they were.

The door was open even before Arthur reached for the knocker, his hand still typing something in his phone. “Finally, you’re here!” proclaimed a voice that Arthur recognized as Yves’s, though he wasn’t entirely sure at first it *was* Yves, because the latter was wearing an ornate golden mask and the entryway was so packed with slick, squirming bodies in elaborate masquerade that Arthur was instantly overwhelmed.

“Arthur, open your mouth,” said Yves, who was definitely Yves, because other people did not usually say things like that to Arthur.

“What is it this time?” asked Arthur gaily, or as gaily as it was possible to be after a seven-hour flight. Which was surprisingly gay indeed, because Congressman Arthur Wren of the twelfth district of California was about to be (for once) the good kind of fucked.

“Just something to liven you up, you know, for the jet lag!” added Yves, lifting his mask and leaning in to greet Arthur with a kiss that was at once very wet and very dry. Arthur coughed, choking on the chalkiness of whatever had just been passed to him by Yves’s tongue.

“Darling, go easy on him, he’s only just arrived.” From the undulating crowd came Philippa in a heady swirl of orchids, effulgent purplish-black robes swelling out from around her hips like a bruise-colored Georgia O’Keeffe. She adjusted her matching Venetian mask with one hand, pressing a still-sizzling flute of champagne into Arthur’s with the other as he leaned in to brush his lips to her cheek.

“Beloved.” Present company made Arthur hopelessly pretentious, more so than usual. (That’s my take on the matter, not his.) In any case, Arthur downed the pill, swishing the drink around in his mouth until it fizzed, happily domesticated, on his tongue, and Yves shifted to sling an arm around his waist. “Can’t thank you enough for your hospitality, as ever,” said Arthur.

“Well, I’m sure you’ll get the opportunity to try,” Philippa purred fondly, reaching out to cup Arthur’s cheek with her palm. “Now stand up straight and let me look at you.”

Standing there in the doorway of a party—where, for once, Arthur could feel properly accepted, not an underachieving product of nepotism (for who here wasn’t that?) but simply a man with a very fine cock and the heartily won know-how to back it up—Arthur felt his heart flood with elation. It reached him like a heady onslaught of tears, a sudden pent-up release that caused the foyer’s chandelier to flicker, individual bulbs ebbing and flaring as if to fanatically perform the wave.

It was an oddity that hadn’t gone unnoticed, particularly where it had occurred right above Arthur’s head. “Who’s this?” asked another masked member of the crowd, materializing to squint accusingly at Arthur, the only person in the foyer not concealing his face. Belatedly, Arthur reached into the inner pocket of his jacket, producing a simple black leather mask in a wordless gesture of apology.

“He’s our boyfriend,” said Yves, “so fuck off, Felix.”

“Yes,” agreed Philippa, “fuck off, Felix!”

There was a near-instantaneous booing akin to a medieval mob, and Felix made a gesture that was meant to either wash his hands of them or vigorously masturbate, and then he disappeared again into the maelstrom of the crowd.

“Felix?” echoed Arthur, recalling vaguely that Felix was the name of a foreign prince Philippa sort of knew, but by then she was pulling his hand. The chandelier flickered again, then began to spark dangerously, releasing a meteor shower in miniature as the room dimmed to black. This time, the juxtaposition of Arthur with his backdrop of fiber-optic electrical failure attracted the undivided attention of the madding crowd, who pressed in around their trio to catch a closer glimpse of apparent pyrotechnics.

“Christ,” said Arthur, looking over the backs of his hands. Every hair stood on end, and the malfunctioning chandelier that reached for him with greedy tendrils suddenly exploded in a frantic spray of dissipating fairy

lights, a final flare of power outage like a ray of dying sun. “What did you give me?”

Unbeknownst to the various partygoers, all oohing and ahing in unison as the very stoned were wont to do, what they were currently witnessing was the confidential source of Arthur’s ongoing ... not *hiatus*, exactly, but the careful, anxiety-inducing, borderline-obsessive concealment of an adolescent glitch he’d thought he’d outgrown, like wet dreams and voice cracks; the lovely reminder that Arthur Wren, supposed harbinger of a new era, was basically just an almost-thirty teenage boy.

Given Arthur’s string of political disappointments, his recent withdrawal from the public eye had seemed more than coincidental—optically, it amounted to laziness, cuckoldry, or insidious ambivalence, such that Arthur had always been a traitor after all. Oh, so the poor little rich boy turned out to have thin skin? PRIVILEGE! screeched user @FuckThePatriarchy420. It could really weigh a person down!

Of course, Arthur would have liked to believe the sudden cancellation of his last four public appearances could be understandably forgiven had They (the ominous, media-dwelling They) only known the truth, which was the spontaneous release of tiny rockets in flight from any overeager technical system Arthur encountered whenever he was—as he nearly always was—at work. Wi-Fi routinely went out. Cameras always failed. Apps consistently crashed. Most recently, broadcast signals had malfunctioned via an electrical surge so infernal that a terrified journalist had been concussed by a boom and fallen briefly into a coma. It was as if Arthur was some kind of still-living (arguably half-alive) poltergeist, haunting every highbrow political venue with the occult situationship between himself and every electrical current.

Surely the uptick in mishaps wouldn’t last—it simply *couldn’t* last; that was an unimaginable scenario involving all sorts of horrors—so his decision to withdraw, deal with the problem, and heal in private was actually quite a reasonable one—if, that is, such a thing as accidental electrokinesis could reasonably be (1) said, (2) believed, or (3) understood.