# Love Spells

## And Other Non-Refundable Magic



MARIA RIGOU

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MARIA RIGOU

OceanofPDF.com

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# AUTHOR'S NOTE

While I am not a witch, ***Love Spells and Other Non-Refundable Magic*** is a work of fiction inspired by the world of online witches, spellwork, intention setting, and the people who practice and believe in them. Any spells, rituals, intentions, magical practices, or advice included in these pages are presented for entertainment purposes and should not be taken as instruction or expert guidance.

That said, I have a great deal of respect for the witches, spiritual practitioners, and creators who share their work online, including the many Etsy witches who helped inspire the world of The Third Fairy. I approach that world with affection and curiosity while taking plenty of creative liberties to serve Flora and Merry's story.

And, in the interest of full disclosure, I have ordered a few spells from Etsy myself.

The results of those spells shall not be made public.

Some things are between a woman, her Etsy witch, and the Universe.

***Love Spells*** is an open door romance novel. This means that it has on-page sexual content between two consenting adults. There is use of profanity and explicit language throughout the story. Mature readers only. **Please read with care.**

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*For anyone who has ever waited for a sign.*

*This is it.*
*Choose what you want.* ✨

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# CHAPTER 1
# MERRYWEATHER

"Hi," I whisper as I type, in case the universe is listening in on me right this second. I don't want to call much more attention to myself than I already have, and I don't want *the universe* to know that I know that it's conspiring against me. "I think I'm cursed, romantically."

I stare at the sentence for a second, then delete *romantically* and replace it with *generally.*

Then I change it back.

Because honestly? The romance part is currently the most alarming.

The cursor blinks patiently inside the custom order message box while I sit cross-legged on my couch with one shoe still on, my coat half falling off my shoulder, and a wine glass balanced dangerously on the armrest beside me.

This is not where I thought my Thursday night would end.

Although, to be fair, most of my Thursday evenings tend to end in strange emotional terrain.

"Just order a spell on Whisp," Veronica had said over after work happy hour margaritas. Her cousin's girlfriend had, allegedly, ordered one from a reputable witch to nail down a job interview and it worked better than she expected. "It worked out for Andrea. And, if all else fails, it'll be a funny story to tell later."

"Honestly, at this point, you have nothing to lose," Dani added.

Which was rude.

Absolutely true, but totally rude.

Now they're both probably asleep like the emotionally stable people they are, while I'm sitting in my apartment buying spells online after getting pseudo-dumped by a woman who once described me as "intense but, like, impressive intense."

What does that even mean? Impressive like an Olympic athlete? Or impressive like a small kitchen fire?

Frankly, the kitchen fire feels more accurate. Last week, I managed to get my scarf caught in the office shredder. Not the actual shredding part. Just one of the wheels, which is infinitely worse, in my opinion. And all of it happened while my hellish boss looked at the scene with a disapproving expression on her perfectly botoxed face from her corner office.

The week before that, I dropped an entire iced coffee directly into my tote bag while making eye contact with a very attractive woman on my way back from the bus stop, then had to go to the IT guys at work and explain to them what had happened and why I needed a new laptop.

At a certain point, I have to start considering supernatural interference.

I take another sip of wine.

Whisp's homepage glows softly in the dark living room. The Third Fairy—a highly rated shop within the online marketplace where independent makers sell everything from hand-thrown pottery to vintage finds and, apparently, spells—sits right at the top of the search results page, almost seventeen thousand sales and a suspicious amount of reviews claiming things like:

"This changed my life." In all caps.

One client swears she met her husband three weeks after buying the attraction spell. Another one says her ex came crawling back during the full moon.

Personally, if any of my exes crawled anywhere near me during a full moon, I'd call animal control.

I take another sip of wine and squint at the custom request box. The instructions are clear: *please describe what you need help with, and The Third Fairy will try to lead with intention as we manifest through the energy of nature and the powerful force of the Earth's crystals.*

I scroll farther down, and I catch the add-ons: attraction spell kit (bestseller), road opener candle (what even is that?), energetic cord cutting bath ritual (huh?), protection charm against emotionally unavailable people.

I pause.

It all feels a little targeted.

“Where is the option for removing weird energy following me around since 2021?” I say to the screen. “I’d definitely pay extra for that one.”

Aurora lifts her head from the armchair and watches me with visible concern.

“I’m being vulnerable right now,” I tell the cat. “Leave me alone.”

She immediately closes her eyes and curls into a tighter ball.

Unbelievable.

I glance back down at the message box. Maybe I should sound cooler.

More mysterious and less desperate.

People probably send elegant messages to online witches all the time.

Not things like *Hello, magical stranger. I’m thirty-four and I’ve somehow become everyone’s favorite almost-girlfriend. Every woman I’ve seriously liked over the last six years has eventually decided I’d make an excellent friend or emotional support clown. Different women, different jobs. Different cities, even. Same fucking ending. I’ve lost count of how many times I’ve convinced myself this one feels different, only to end up being told I’m thoughtful, funny, and such a great friend.*

I sigh dramatically enough that the cat lifts her head again and looks annoyed.

“You don’t get it, Aurora,” I tell her. “I have a pattern.”

A statistically significant pattern that should be unbelievable if it were anyone else but, alas, here we are.

She blinks slowly, then hops off the chair and scurries to my home office, which is, coincidentally, the farthest possible she can be from me at this time.

“I know this probably sounds ridiculous, but I think I might actually be cursed. Every single person I like either disappears, moves to another state, gets back together with her ex, or tells me they’re not ready for a relationship right before hard launching someone else on social media two weeks later.”

Too revealing?

I stop typing and delete the mention of a hard launch. For all I know, this online witch has no idea what I’m talking about.

But then I rewrite it because if I’m paying almost five hundred dollars with shipping for a spell and a natural gemstone bracelet, I should probably

be honest.

Rain taps softly against the windows. Somewhere outside, a car alarm starts going off. My house smells like the heavily industrial vanilla scent from the candle still burning on the kitchen countertop and the dumplings I picked up on the walk home from the bar, because sadness and sesame oil are deeply connected in my brain.

I reread the message.

It feels embarrassingly sincere. Maybe if I tack on a *lolz* at the end, she won't think I'm such a lost cause.

When we first started talking about hiring a witch at happy hour, we'd gone from making fun of Veronica's cousin's girlfriend to reading customer reviews between appetizers. Most of them sounded suspiciously reasonable. Less *I summoned my soulmate under a blood moon* and more *this gave me the confidence to ask someone out.* We laughed the whole time.

This was my intention: to be funny and detached, a woman lightly joking about purchasing mystical intervention after a few drinks.

Instead, I sound exactly like the millennial eldest daughter with severe people-pleasing tendencies that I am.

I type faster before I can stop myself.

"I don't think I'm asking for my soulmate exactly. I'd settle for a person who texts me back consistently and doesn't act weird after I tell them I like them. Maybe go on a few dates, have fun, you know?"

I stare at that sentence.

Then add *haha*, just to get that humor across.

God, it's devastatingly sad. I groan and drop my head back against the couch cushions.

"This," I tell the universe, "is exactly why I should not have access to the internet after ten p.m."

My phone buzzes.

VERONICA

did you order the witch yet

DANI

ask if there are refunds?

ME

I hate both of you deeply

VERONICA

you love us

DANI

screen record the process!!! send us a vlog.

Ohhhh maybe you'll go viral you know the girlies love the online witches babe

Absolutely not.

These two women already have enough material to psychoanalyze me for free. With the whole klutz girlie thing I have going for me.

Between the dating disasters, the chronic lateness, and the fact that I somehow miss the bus often enough that there's a group of middle schoolers who clap and cheer me on when I run by them every morning, they have years of material.

I don't need to start supplying visual aids, too.

I look back at the page again.

*Every ritual is crafted with intention, care, and the belief that love begins with openness*, it reads.

But I'm open! I really do believe that love begins with openness. So why does that word press strangely against my ribs?

I don't think magic is real, per se. But I do believe in rituals and habits and intentionality. And I also want to believe I'm being intentional, always. Perhaps that's why it feels like I'm trying too hard.

People cut their hair after breakups, they eat grapes under a table at the stroke of midnight on New Year's, they throw coins in fountains and close their eyes while making wishes.

My throat suddenly feels tight as I type one last thing before I lose my nerve.

"I'm starting to think that maybe I'm the problem? Or possibly the problem and a curse are working together."

I stare at the sentence. Then add: "I realize those are not mutually exclusive. And anyway, I don't know how to fix it."

Silence settles across the house after I finish typing. Even the car alarm from outside has finally stopped.

For a second, all I can hear is the pitter-patter of rain against my window.

This is insane. Like actually, certifiably insane.

I’m about to send a deeply personal confession to an online witch named The Third Fairy because two of my friends got tipsy on margaritas and decided I needed some sort of celestial customer support.

Reasonable people do yoga. Touch grass. Go to therapy.

I buy spells on the internet.

I hover over the submit button. Then, before I can reread anything and delete every word out of shame, I hit send.

The confirmation page loads instantly.

**ORDER CONFIRMED.**

I stare at it in horror.

“Oh my god,” I whisper.

Aurora, the ever patient cat she is, chirps from the office.

“I know.”

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# CHAPTER 2

# FLORA

The trees lining East Madison Street have finally started turning overnight, flashes of burnt orange and deep red caught between gray buildings and rain-slick Seattle traffic.

I unlock the coffee shop at six-thirty sharp, just like I do four times a week for my morning shifts at The Spindle Café and Bakery.

The bell above the door jingles as Luis follows me inside carrying two boxes of pastries balanced against his chest.

"You know," he says, nudging the door closed with his foot, "normal people sleep later than this."

"Then it's fortunate we're not normal people."

Luis gives me the same look he gives me every time we have the opening shift together, somewhere between fondness and concern that I might one day dissolve entirely into black turtlenecks and silence. Then he snorts. "Speak for yourself."

The shop is as quiet as it can be before sunrise, before commuters start trickling in and pretending coffee is a unique personality trait.

The scent of yesterday's coffee lingers faintly beneath lemon-scented cleaning products the early morning cleaning crew used a few hours ago to sanitize all surfaces and mop the floors.

Outside, the residential neighborhood is only beginning to wake up. Rain has left the sidewalks shining, and traffic slowly crawls outside the window, doing a delicate dance of moving and stopping at a predictable

pace. Our delivery truck is idling at the curb, the driver scrolling on his phone waiting for Luis to go out to get the rest of today's supplies.

I switch on the espresso machine while Luis starts stocking muffins and croissants into the display.

Routine settles over the morning slowly, heavily, like everyone is collectively agreeing to survive another dreary workday.

I wipe down tables and refill napkins and straighten one of the pictures hanging on the wall that doesn't need straightening.

By seven o'clock, the shop is ready. The first customers won't arrive for another few minutes, so I pull out my phone and open The Third Fairy dashboard to look at the orders that came in overnight. Six total—one reconciliation spell with a candle, two protection charms, one road opener ritual for someone looking to unlock their career, one attraction spell, and one custom message request.

Those are the most complicated ones, so I don't open it yet. Instead, I glance absently out the front window toward the bus stop across the street.

Right on cue.

There she is, running per usual. I don't know her name, but she catches the bus often enough that my brain has started arranging mornings around her arrival without asking my permission first. It also doesn't help that Luis started a tiny tally on the whiteboard in the back labeled *Little Miss Hurricane vs Public Transit*, and now half the staff has opinions.

It is, begrudgingly, the only thing I enjoy about opening shifts nowadays.

Today she's carrying a giant tote bag, what appears to be a laptop case with papers poking out, and a to-go coffee cup. Her camel-colored coat is falling halfway off one shoulder, and she has absolutely no sense of balance and she sprints full speed down the sidewalk.

It's such a familiar sight that Luis sighs dramatically beside me. "Ten she doesn't make it."

The bus slows down to a roll and finally pulls up at the curb at the exact moment she reaches the stop, though not before pointing aggressively to someone waiting as if asking them to personally hold the bus through sheer moral obligation.

"I should have taken you up on it," I say, even though I absolutely should not be encouraging my coworker at all.

“Wait, look,” he says, taking a step toward the windows, muffins be damned. “She might miss it, after all.”

Across the street, the woman is digging through her bag for her ORCA card. She nearly drops the coffee, somehow—impossibly—catches it at the last second, then knocks her own sunglasses onto the sidewalk instead.

An entire sequence of disasters in under ten seconds.

The driver seems to be looking at the woman, patiently waiting. I can see the woman’s mouth moving, maybe apologizing, maybe begging for an extra second.

“*Ay*, Little Miss Hurricane,” Luis tsks. “Pick up the sunglasses, babe.”

Finally, she gets on, sunglasses in hand, and disappears toward the back.

“Perfect,” Luis supplies helpfully.

The show is over, and I look away before she can disappear entirely from view. Then I look down at my phone again and open the custom request.

*“Hi,”* the message begins. *“I think I’m cursed, romantically.”*

My mouth twitches.

The message spirals gradually from joking to painfully sincere in a way I recognize immediately. The emotional equivalent of someone trying to laugh while actively bleeding.

I shift against the counter. Most customers fall into predictable categories, and after three years of running my store, I think I have it all down.

People either want their ex back, revenge, reassurance, or permission to hope.

Usually, I can tell within the first sentence or two what they actually need.

Most reconciliation spell requests are grief in disguise. Most attraction spells are generally loneliness, and sometimes the need for someone, anyone, to give them permission to hope and dream that their happily ever after is right around the corner.

The crystals, and the candles and the lighting of them are rarely the point. People come to me because they want certainty.

I don’t believe in magic. Not really.

I believe in timing, proximity, choice, and the dangerous things people will confess when they think the universe is listening. Love, in my experience, isn’t fate. It’s attention.

And most people are terrible at paying attention.

Magic would definitely be easier. Less work, for sure.

Instead, all I can offer is intention and a place to put all that *hoping*. A reason to take a step forward.

This one, though—

I skim part of the message, letting the general shape of it settle in my mind. She thinks she's the issue, and whatever curse she's picked up is only making things worse.

And I can read clearly how she's made love the measure of herself. Like finding the right person would answer a question she's been asking about her own worth. She sounds less like someone looking for love and more like someone convinced she can't be happy until she finds it.

Something tightens unexpectedly in my chest.

Outside, rainwater streaks across the windows.

Inside, the espresso machine hisses to life.

Luis is chatting with an early customer picking up a mobile order.

I look back at the window. The bus is long gone now. But I can still picture her expression every time something small goes wrong. That complete inability to disguise what she's feeling from the world around her.

I think she's become the best part of my mornings because she's open.

Meanwhile, I've built an entire side hustle around helping strangers articulate emotions indirectly through candles and rituals and carefully worded instructions, all because I don't want to articulate my own.

I look back down at the message.

Then reread it from the beginning before the rush starts.

Slowly this time.

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# CHAPTER 3
# MERRYWEATHER

By the time I make it through the revolving doors of Briarwood Confections, my right sleeve smells of coffee, my left shoe is making a suspicious squeaking sound, and I have exactly seventeen minutes to get a new cup of coffee before I have to be upstairs at my desk so that Helena can rip me a new one for no reason at all.

To be clear, I don't *dislike* my boss. No. I respect her, and fear her, and she makes me cry at least twice a week, but that's because she's a good boss.

Universe, I would never, ever say anything bad about my boss, okay?

The lobby is packed with the usual morning crowd, majority of them huddled around Marcy, the woman who runs the morning coffee cart. There is a group of high schoolers on a tour of the building, and two of them are taking selfies in front of the giant display of Briarwood's seasonal products like this is a tourist destination and not a corporate office where dreams go to get reformatted into yet another set of slides that no one will read in three weeks' time.

Above the reception desk, the massive digital screen cycles through the current ad campaigns.

PUMPKIN SPICE CANDY CORN: FALL IN EVERY BITE.

CINNAMON LICORICE CANDY CORN: A BOLD NEW HARVEST TRADITION.

I slow down for half a second, because no matter how many times I see that last one, my brain refuses to accept it as real.

Candy corn is Briarwood Confections' best-selling product, which means that sometime around July every year, it begins taking over everyone's professional lives. Forecasts, displays, seasonal promotions, endless conversations about whether consumers are ready for another flavor when consumers have repeatedly demonstrated that what they really want is the exact same three-colored triangle they've been eating since childhood.

Cinnamon and licorice and candy corn.

And yes, I realize candy corn pays my bills, but no. Gross. Even I have a limit.

Someone approved that. Several people, probably. I know there were taste tests. A full brand strategy, and maybe even consumer insight reports that said people wanted their Halloween candy to taste like a candle and a dumpster fire had a baby.

"Merryweather!"

I turn toward the lobby coffee bar and immediately regret it, because when I turn, my tote slides down my arm, knocks against my hip, and sends one folder halfway out of the bag.

Phillip Briarwood is standing near the pickup counter in a navy suit that probably costs more than my mortgage, holding two coffee cups like a man who has never once had to sprint to catch a bus to work.

He smiles when he sees me.

Not the polite smile he wears during the company's earning calls with shareholders.

The full, warm, stupidly adorable, founder's grandson-turned-CEO smile that makes people in the building start whispering even when he is only asking where the recycling bins are.

"Rough morning?" he asks.

I glance down at myself, knowing full well I look like a wet raccoon. Nothing against raccoons, but not really a pleasing image.

"No," I say with a smile. "This is my chosen aesthetic."

His smile deepens. "Then you're very committed to the concept."

"Thank you. I do believe in follow-through."

The barista calls his name, even though he is already holding his drinks. The people around him move to the side, leaving a clear trail to the counter almost as if this were choreographed, because this building is committed to making everyone feel special. Except the assistants, who are simply expected to teleport and know things.

Phillip lifts one cup slightly. “I was going to see if you wanted one, but I wasn’t sure how you took it.”

My brain stops. Not in the romantic way I’ve been asking—nay, *begging*—internet strangers for. More like a system error. A glitch. A buffer, if you will. Because I’m still consistently and (notoriously?) aggressively gay.

“Oh,” I say. And then because I am me and I can’t really control my mouth, not even in front of the CEO of the fucking company I work for, I add, “Hot and inside my body, usually.”

His eyebrows lift.

I close my eyes for one second.

*Perfect*.

A beautiful contribution to workplace conversation.

When I open them again, he looks amused.

“I mean cream, sugar, oat milk, ritual sacrifice, that sort of thing.”

“Right, yes, duh.” I adjust my tote on my shoulder, trying to regain some dignity. “Black coffee is fine. But I actually already have one.”

I lift the cup in my hand as proof, forgetting the lid is not fully secure.

A small line of coffee slides down the side and drips onto the floor between us.

Phillip looks at it. I look at it. Neither of us speaks.

I feel a blush creeping up my neck and into my cheeks, and I know for sure my ears are full-on red by now.

Then he reaches for a napkin from the counter and hands it to me.

“I admire your optimism,” he says with a small smile. His green-blue eyes are shining, and then he tilts his head in a way that should make him look cute and adorable, but I just simply cannot.

“It’s mostly denial, really.”

“Useful skill.”

“At this company? Essential.”

He laughs, and something about the sound feels a little too intimate for this particular lobby at eight-thirty in the morning. A few people walking

past glance over, and I become painfully aware of the fact that Phillip Briarwood knows my name and now my coffee order. I still don't know whether that means anything or whether he's simply one of those people who remembers everyone's name because his family is on plaques hanging on every other wall in this office.

I take the napkin.

"Thank you. I would stay and debate cinnamon licorice candy corn as a concept, but I'm late and Helena is going to make that everyone's problem."

His expression shifts at her name, almost too quickly to catch. "Helena has you on the Robin's packet today?"

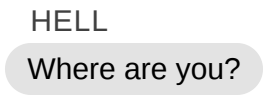
I frown. "The what now?"

He gestures vaguely toward the elevators. "Nothing. Probably nothing. Good luck, Merryweather."

That is not comforting. People, least of all the CEO of this company, should not say *good luck* when they know things.

They should say, "Here is the specific danger, Merryweather, and these are the three steps you need to take to mitigate that."

But before I can ask, my phone buzzes in my pocket.




The question mark appears calm. Professional and nonthreatening. Just a curious question from a supervisor who moves around the office a lot in between meetings, and just really wants to know where I'm sitting today.

I know better, though.

"I have to go," I say.

Phillip nods. "See you around, Merryweather."

Again with my name.

Like we're people who see each other around. Like I'm not a low-level executive admin with coffee on my coat sleeve and a browser history that now includes custom witch rituals.

"See you," I say, and immediately walk into the edge of a decorative pumpkin display.

Three tiny fake pumpkins wobble in place. One drops to the floor and rolls under a leather lobby chair.

Phillip, in his custom navy suit and his several thousand dollar watch, bends to grab it before I can.

I cannot live like this. Earth, swallow me whole, please.

“I’m fine,” I say, which no one asked.

His mouth twitches. “I know.”

“I— Okay, bye.”

The elevator doors are already closing when I reach them, and I stick my arm through the gap like a woman in an action movie, except the action movie is about a mid-thirties assistant being emotionally hunted by her boss before breakfast.

The doors bounce back open. Inside, several people stare at me, including one very put together woman with a french twist in her perfectly highlighted hair that definitely makes me feel like... I sigh.

“Morning,” I say to the elevator at large, because silence makes me panic.

Two people mumble something. The woman with the hair only gives me a small nod.

She looks like someone who has never once said something stupid to fill dead air. She probably lets silence exist, invites it in and offers it sparkling water.

I squeeze into the back corner, and the elevator rises.

Not a single person talks.

My phone buzzes again.

HELL

Now, Merryweather.

I type back with one thumb.

ME

In elevator!

Then I add a smiley face but promptly delete it. Then I add it again because without it, I sound angry. But then I delete it because with it, I sound afraid.

The elevator dings and everyone steps out, finally giving me a chance to catch my breath.

“Merryweather,” I whisper, “please pick a struggle.”

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# CHAPTER 4

# FLORA

THE RAIN HAS SETTLED INTO THE MOST PREDICTABLE PACIFIC NORTHWEST pattern by the time I make it home. Never enough for an umbrella, but just steady enough that my coat has soaked through the shoulders and my hair is starting to feel damp.

I unlock the front door and hear the television before the door has fully opened.

Someone is crying while someone else, presumably, yells at them. A dramatic swell of violins suggest at least one person has returned from the dead. Classic.

"I'm home," I call.

"In here," my mother answers back.

I slip my shoes off by the door and hang my coat on the hook beside hers. Her bag is ready to go, her comfy sneakers nearly sitting by the bag, with her badge and stethoscope draped over them.

The house smells like onions, garlic, and whatever cleaning product they use at the hospital. It's a smell that has followed my mother home for as long as I can remember. She swears she showers before she leaves work, and I swear the smell still emanates from her pores.

She's curled into one corner of the couch wearing navy blue scrubs, one leg tucked beneath her, folding laundry while a *telenovela* plays at a volume that would concern the neighbors if they weren't watching the same thing.

She glances up. "You're late."

“I was at work.”

She smiles without looking away from the television. “I made empanadas.”

“*Gracias*.”

“Eat before they go cold.”

I roll my eyes at her, because I think it doesn’t really matter how old I am, I’m always going to be her child. Even if I’m in my mid-thirties and we’re basically roommates who see each other a few minutes a day, right after I get home from work and before she leaves for her twelve-hour shift at the hospital.

She laughs. “Come here.”

I walk around the couch and kiss the top of her head.

She catches my hand before I can pull away.

“Cold.”

“Yes, it’s raining.”

“So wear gloves.”

“*Mamá*, I’m not going to be the *ridícula* who wears gloves in October. In Seattle.”

“*Te vas a enfermar*.”

“You say that every year and I haven’t even gotten a cold, so…”

I head toward the kitchen while she resumes folding towels. The covered plate waiting on the stove has my name written across the foil in black marker. There are only two people living here, and somehow my mother still labels the leftovers. Maybe it’s a force of habit, from having to label everything at her work.

Behind me, someone on the television slaps someone else, hard.

“She deserved it,” my mother announces.

“You always say that.”

“*Ay bueno, es que* it’s true.”

The house is small enough that we can have conversations from different rooms without raising our voices. We’ve been doing it for years, more often since she switched to nights a few years ago, just as I started my online witch shop.

“Busy today?” she asks.

“A little.”

“Coffee people or witch people?”

I smile. “Both.”

“When are you going to admit that’s your real job?”

“When it starts paying the mortgage.”

“It almost does.”

“Almost is carrying a lot of weight.”

She doesn’t answer immediately. I hear the rustle of more fabric, another towel being folded.

“I have a date tomorrow.”

I sigh, because I don’t want to hurt her feelings, but I already know where this is going. It’s a cycle that keeps repeating, over and over again. She gets interested in someone, then tries really hard, then she gets disappointed and hurt.

“He seems nice,” she adds, walking into the kitchen. I’m facing the counter, completely avoiding her. I know she’ll be able to see the disapproval on my face. “He’s a history teacher in Bellevue.”

My mother studies me for a moment.

“You know,” she finally says, dropping a tea bag into her to-go mug and turning on the kettle, “you’re the only person I know who sells love spells while sounding disillusioned by the entire concept.”

“Oh, so you know other online witches?”

“Flora.”

“I don’t sell love, Mom.”

“You know what I mean.”

“I sell rituals.”

She waves one hand. “Same thing.”

“They are not remotely the same thing—”

”They are to your customers,” she interrupts. “Who almost pay your mortgage.”

I grab an empanada and take an impossibly large bite, because I want to avoid speaking entirely. She waits, ever so patient, although I can tell she’s annoyed at my cynicism.

“The ritual isn’t the point,” I say finally, setting the food down and looking at her. “And you know that magic isn’t real.”

“Then what is?”

“People don’t usually know what they want,” I reply. “Besides, my store lets people believe whatever helps them become a little kinder to themselves.”

She is quiet for a long time, moving around the kitchen putting things that don't need to be moved into places they most definitely don't go, but it gives her something to do with her busy hands and her busy brain.

"You know what I think?" She turns to face me and leans against the counter, crossing her arms.

"You're going to tell me anyway."

"I think you're very good at helping strangers believe they deserve love."

I wonder if I'd believe it more if I weren't so determined to never become the type of woman waiting around for another person to complete her. And it's ironic, really, considering I've spent the past few years avoiding relationships with women before they have the chance to become the center of my universe.

I already did that with Alison. By the time our relationship imploded two years ago, I'd built so much of my life around her that losing her meant losing almost everything else along with it. Moving back in with *Mamá* was only part of it.

She reaches over and squeezes my arm. "I just wish you believed it about yourself, too."

Her words settle in the air between us, hanging heavy and with more tension that I'm willing to cut through.

"That's not me anymore, *Mamá*," I mutter, and then I do the same thing she's done for years—try to busy myself with anything that doesn't need doing so that I can avoid her judgy gaze. "I don't know why you keep trying."

My mother sighs, then turns around to pour hot water into her travel mug and steep the bag a few times. Steam curls upwards, and she watches it go, almost as if she's searching for the right words. "What else would I do?"

"I don't know?" It comes out as a question, even though it's not. I really don't know what else she would do. Ever since my dad left her—us—when Fausto was a baby and I was in my teens, she's been chasing this. Some sort of happy ending, as if she isn't enough for herself. As if she is so annoyed by her mere presence that she needs to always be with someone by her side.

"Neither do I, *hija*." She shrugs. "So I choose hope."

I lean back against the counter. "I don't think—"

"I guess I'm not as different as your customers, after all."

She reaches for my hand again, then tosses the used tea bag into the sink, tightens the lid, and heads toward the hallway. “Don’t stay up until two answering witch messages again, Flora.”

“I’m in my thirties!”

“Yeah, but you get cranky when you don’t sleep, and I’m not looking forward to that this weekend.” Her steps are quick as she grabs her things from the hallway. “I love you.”

I stand alone in the kitchen for another moment before carrying my food to the dining table. My laptop waits where I left it yesterday, in the corner closest to the wall with all my store paperwork—a pile of order slips for candles and crystals, and a few shipping labels for some of the orders I packed last night.

So do twenty-three unread messages. And the one custom request that, for reasons I still can’t explain, I’ve been thinking about all day.

Almost running on repeat since this morning.

I read the first paragraph again, then the whole thing twice for good measure.

I’ve noticed throughout the years since I’ve started with this shop that some people write exactly the way they speak. Others become entirely different people the moment they realize no one is looking at them.

The interesting ones exist somewhere in between, where vulnerability floats and expresses itself through self-deprecation or in humor.

This one in particular—she hides every single one of her feelings in broad daylight.

One says, *“I hope you laugh.”*

The other says, *“Please laugh before you realize how much this hurts.”*

I rest my elbow on the table and keep reading. Finally, I open the message box and type:

*“Hello, and thank you for trusting me with something that was probably much easier to joke about than to admit.”*

I pause. Read it once and decide to leave it. If she’s being vulnerable, then I can be vulnerable, too.

*“I don’t think you’re cursed,”* I continue. Simple. Almost a fact, if she chooses to believe me. *“And while I can’t promise what this ritual will or won’t bring into your life, I do think there’s value in creating space to notice what you’ve been telling yourself about love.”*

I hesitate before typing the next sentence, because it might feel too personal. Then again, that's why she ordered the custom request instead of the standard listing.

*"You speak to yourself much more harshly than you speak about anyone else in your story."*

I read the sentence three times before deciding not to soften it. Sometimes, kindness isn't making something gentler, easier to swallow. Sometimes it's refusing to let someone keep believing the cruelest version of themselves.

I lean back in my chair and glance at the stack of papers and the loose beads in the ceramic bowl on top of them. When customers imagine The Third Fairy, I suspect they picture incense, moonlight, and a mysterious person reciting even more mysterious incantations.

The reality is closer to a label printer that jams more times than it doesn't, a dining room littered with loose sheets of paper, and a desk in my room that hasn't been cleared in two years, covered in all sorts of crystals and beads and candles and flat shipping boxes.

The cursor continues blinking patiently on the reply screen.

*"I will be mailing you a custom bracelet, and my hope is you wear it consistently and with intention. The crystals—clear and rose quartz and moonstone—were specifically chosen as a reminder to move through this season with openness instead of fear."*

I smile.

"*The rose quartz represents compassion, especially toward yourself. The moonstone is for embracing new beginnings without needing every answer first. The clear quartz (in my opinion, the strongest stone on our wonderful Earth) is a reminder to return to your intentions whenever doubt gets loud. Dear Primavera1959, wear this bracelet while you practice asking for what you want with honesty and receiving what is offered with curiosity."*

There.

She's asking for permission to hope, and I think I can give that to her.

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# CHAPTER 5
# MERRYWEATHER

It's four-thirty on Friday afternoon, and I have opened the same spreadsheet more times than I'm willing to admit while absorbing zero percent of its content.

This is not entirely my fault. The Robin's Eggs forecast document has seventeen tabs, four color-coded scenarios, and enough formulas to power a small engine.

Helena sent it to me shortly after I arrived upstairs this morning, along with the very vague, extremely ambiguous instruction to "clean it up," which is the sort of direction my boss gives when she doesn't know what she wants but would like someone else to be responsible for reading her mind.

So far, I've made sure all fonts matched, fixed the date formatting, and spent twenty minutes wondering whether "clean it up" means removing the comments where Vanessa, the brand director, repeatedly wrote *WHAT IS THIS NUMBER* and *???* all over.

I suspect it does. Although I could be entirely wrong, because I'm not a mind reader.

The office has emptied out slowly around me as people leave for the weekend. From my desk outside Helena's office, I can hear the muted rise and fall of her voice through the closed door.

She has been on the phone for nearly an hour, and I'm both scared for what my Friday evening could look like but also feel infinitely sorry for the

person on the other end of the line. I have considered leaving twice, but unfortunately I enjoy receiving a paycheck a little too much.

My phone buzzes beside my keyboard.

I glance at the screen, expecting another message from Hell, despite the fact that she is currently sitting twelve feet away from me.

Instead, I see a Whisp notification.

**Your order has shipped.**

Directly beneath it:

**You have a new message from The Third Fairy.**

Every muscle in my body tightens.

*Nope. No thank you.*

I turn the phone face down. This is ridiculous. *It's simply an online order, Merryweather. You get these every day without assuming an unseen force has begun rearranging your romantic life. For all you know, it's your cat's food.*

The elevator dings at the end of the hall and voices approach.

I click back into the spreadsheet and arrange my face into what I hope looks like focused professionalism instead of a desperate woman actively avoiding correspondence from an internet witch.

"Hello, Merryweather," Veronica says from behind me.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath.

Dani appears on the other side of my desk carrying an iced coffee and a paper bag that looks suspiciously like she raided the chocolate cabinet on her floor. Veronica stands beside her, wearing a visitor badge from the product testing lab downstairs, even though she doesn't require one to go in since it's her job.

"What is that?"

"Focus," they both say at the same time.

"It makes you look like you got lost on a school tour."

Veronica smiles as Dani places both palms on my desk and leans closer. "Phillip Briarwood is in love with you."

I stare at her. There are many sentences I expect to hear during an average workday in Corporate America, but that exact combination of words is definitely not one of them.

“What’s happening to your face?” Veronica asks. “Stop doing that face!”

Dani pulls the empty chair away from the neighboring desk and sits. “We saw you with him this morning.”

“I mean, a lot of people probably saw,” I say, trying to dismiss them. “It’s the lobby of the company where we all work, right when the workday starts.”

“Well,” Veronica adds. “He was holding two coffees.”

“The man has two hands, Vero.”

“One was for you.”

I choke on my own spit. “Technically, he said it could have been for me.”

Dani slowly removes the straw from her mouth and makes a loud, obnoxious noise of satisfaction. “What does that mean?”

“It means he bought two coffees, and one of them was potentially available, depending on how I answered a question about oat milk, I think.”

Veronica looks at Dani, and Dani looks back. I hate when they communicate silently. It usually means they’ve reached a conclusion about me without allowing me to interfere. I imagine my face is doing some weird, horrific expression, which I’m working very hard to soften.

“He knew your order?” Veronica asks.

“Why would the CEO of the company know my coffee order, guys? Please.” I turn back to the screen and click around a few more times, double-checking formulas I very well know how to use, and selecting the whole thing to make the font smaller, then larger.

“But he wanted to,” Dani says before taking another large sip of her drink. She reaches into the bag and places a packet of this season’s message chocolates on my desk.

“Is this part of the interrogation?”

“You get defensive when your blood sugar drops.”

“I’m not defensive.”

Veronica drags the other empty chair closer and sits beside Dani. They look like a panel of poorly qualified experts convened to evaluate my—non-existent—romantic prospects.

“I’ve seen Phillip talk to employees, Merry,” Veronica says. “He does the CEO thing. Asks about your weekend, smiles politely when you answer, then moves on to someone else with a higher salary.”

“See? He’s friendly. A nice guy, some might even say.”

“That didn’t look friendly to me.” She tips her head sideways, as if studying me further. I’m sure she knows all my expressions by heart now, since we’ve been friends for such a long time. “He looked smitten.”

“Yes!” Dani says with a dramatic gasp.

I laugh, and it comes out louder than intended and carries across the mostly empty row of desks.

Hell’s voice stops behind the closed door, and all three of us freeze.

After a few seconds, the conversation inside resumes.

“He did not look smitten,” I whisper. “Ugh, Earth, swallow me whole, please.”

I unwrap one of Dani’s chocolates. Maybe she’s right about my blood sugar. I refuse to acknowledge that possibility out loud.

“He was just being polite.”

“He knows your name, Merry,” Dani says.

“I’m Helena’s assistant.”

Veronica and Dani exchange another look.

“What?”

“Merry,” Veronica says carefully, “the CEO of our company called me Vanessa at the fall planning meeting last week.”

“In his defense,” I say, although I have no idea what I’m still defending, “you were sitting next to Vanessa.”

“Vanessa is sixty-two.”

“Is she?” Dani interrupts, still sipping from that iced coffee. “She doesn’t look a day over forty-five. I’m going to ask her what her skincare routine is.”

I shrug. The Whisp notification remains face down beside my keyboard. I can feel the weight of it on my desk, which is a weird thing to think because cell phones should not be capable of making themselves feel heavier just because there’s a message waiting for me.

“What was that?” Dani follows my gaze and starts reaching out with her free hand.

“What was what?”

“Why is your phone buzzing?”

“Phones sometimes do that, Dani.”

Veronica reaches for it, but luckily I’m faster and grab it first.

“Why are you being weird?”

“I am always weird,” I reply, clutching my phone against my chest. “You need to be more specific.”

“Oh my god,” Dani says, leaning back against the chair. The force of the movement makes her roll back just a little, and she squeaks, getting back to where she was a few seconds later. “The witch replied.”

“No, it’s a notification.”

“Yes, from the witch,” Veronica says.

“The Third Fairy is technically an online retailer.”

Veronica holds out her hand. “Give me the phone.”

“No.”

“Merry.” Dani reaches across the desk. I twist away, nearly rolling my chair into the filing cabinet behind me.

“Stop it.”

I unlock the phone. Veronica makes a small sound that should not come from an adult woman in an office on a Friday afternoon.

“Nobody speaks.”

They both immediately move closer to me.

I open Whisp, and the message fills the screen. For one irrational second, I expect smoke to rise from the phone or for the office lights to flicker. Nothing happens, of course. My spreadsheet remains open, Hell is still on her call. A man from accounting walks past carrying a banana.

Normal. Absolutely and entirely normal.

*“I don’t think you’re cursed,”* it says after a few introductory and very normal customer service words about trusting their shop. It should be comforting, but instead it makes me think that she should not be ruling things out this quickly. She hardly knows me.

*“And while I can’t promise what this ritual will or won’t bring into your life,”* the message continues, *“I do think there’s value in creating space to notice what you’ve been telling yourself about love.”*

Veronica gasps, and I don’t know exactly which part she’s reacting to. Dani looks enthralled, nodding as her eyes scan the screen and move down the message.

I read slowly, and my first instinct is indignation. The more I read, the more I recognize that this online witch might be correct. I don’t appreciate

it at all.

“No,” I whisper.

Openness instead of fear. Compassion toward myself. New beginnings without needing to know exactly where they lead.

Dani blinks.

“No what?”

“Maybe the spell is already working,” Veronica whispers, her head so close to mine that she probably didn’t even need to make any sort of effort to expel those words.

“Immediately no.”

A horrible quiet settles around the three of us. I look at Dani. She looks at Veronica. And Veronica, who has always possessed the self-preservation instincts of a moth near a light bulb, bursts out into the loudest laughter I’ve heard all month.

“It’s possible,” she says. “The universe works in mysterious ways, babe.”

“It’s been less than twenty-four hours.”

“You paid for an attraction spell, so it’s entirely possible it’s working,” Dani replies, still sipping that stupid iced coffee.

“I selected attraction as a category. And I actually told her I was cursed. I just needed the curse broken.”

“Well,” Veronica says, standing up from her chair and tucking it back under the desk where it belongs, “someone is attracted.”

“A *man*,” I whine.

Dani shrugs. “The universe doesn’t believe in labels.”

“I do.”

Veronica presses her lips together, visibly trying not to laugh. “Merry—”

“I’m gay.”

“We know.”

“I have been gay this entire time.”

“Consistently, yes.” Dani nods seriously. “But maybe you should be open to what the universe sends.”

“The universe sent me compulsory heterosexuality. I’m going to return it.”

Veronica snorts. I turn back to the message. The words seem harmless. Kind, even. More thoughtful than I expected from someone selling spells

and candles to strangers online.

That might be the problem. Had The Third Fairy replied with instructions to bathe under the moon while chanting into a bowl of salt, I could dismiss the entire thing.

Instead, she has somehow read one drunken message and identified a habit I've spent years disguising as a personality trait.

*"You speak to yourself much more harshly than you speak about anyone else."*

My chest presses inward.

"I'm asking for a refund."

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# CHAPTER 6

# FLORA

Saturday mornings make The Spindle feel like a different café, every single week.

On weekdays, the shop belongs to commuters who order before they are fully awake. They come in damp from the rain, ask for the same drink they ordered the day before, then stand by the pickup counter looking at their phones while pretending not to watch the clock on the wall behind the pastry case.

Weekends stretch differently. People sit down, they ask questions about the menu. They bring books they may or may not read and dogs who collapse beneath the tables as though they have survived something significant by walking just a few blocks.

And the weather has helped.

The city has apparently decided that the middle of October deserves one day that feels borrowed from somewhere else. By seven-thirty, sunlight is pouring through the front windows, warming the old hardwood floors and catching on every glass jar arranged behind the counter. There is no rain in sight, and the temperature has climbed high enough that people keep peeling off sweaters as soon as they walk through the door.

Luis has mentioned the heat seven times since we opened thirty minutes ago.

“It’s unnatural,” he says now, standing in front of the pastry case with a tray of freshly baked almond croissants. “I do not trust it.”

“You don’t trust a lot of things.”

“It’s eighty-three degrees in October, Flora.” He huffs as he continues to arrange the pastries and later carries a stack of clean mugs toward the espresso machine. The Saturday morning rush hasn’t arrived quite yet, and there’s only a handful of people inside. A couple sits near the window sharing a cinnamon roll, and two college students have spread a bunch of textbooks and their laptops on two tables outside.

I should use the lull to restock milk, but instead, I reach into my apron pocket for my phone.

The Whisp notification has been sitting there for almost forty minutes.

**New message from *Primavera1959.***

*“Hi,”* the message begins, *“so I have a small issue.”*

The rest of the thread goes downhill quickly from there.

According to *Primavera*, someone she has absolutely no romantic interest in has suddenly started behaving in a way that can only be interpreted as attraction, and because this happened within twenty-four hours of her placing the order, she would like to know whether the spell can be considered defective.

I read the sentence twice before pressing my lips together. As if I mailed her a toaster and it burst up in flames the moment she plugged it in. *Defective*.

*“I’m not saying I don’t appreciate the efficiency,”* it continues, *“because obviously if this is your turnaround time, your reviews are very well deserved. But this is very much the wrong person, and I would like a full refund for the spell.”*

For a few seconds, I simply stare at my screen.

The morning around me continues without any concern for the crisis unfolding inside my phone. The first of the few regular Saturday customers have started trickling in, and Luis is moving with an unhurried cadence between the front and the back room, smiling at them like usual.

I should put my phone away.

Custom requests are never handled while I’m at work, especially because I need time to consider my words, and I also need to make sure no one is standing close enough to glance over my shoulder. I have been careful about that since I started The Third Fairy, partly because I don’t feel

like explaining it and partly because the shop has always felt like something that belongs entirely to me, separate from the version of myself that measures oat milk and wipes down tables and listens to Luis complain about how the manager changed the schedule that week again.

There are very few things in my life that no one else gets access to, and I like keeping this one that way.

Still, I find myself opening the reply box.

*"Hello, Primavera1959. I'm sorry the situation has become confusing, but the ritual you purchased does not compel a specific person to feel attraction toward you."*

I stop there and read it back. It's a little too clinical and most definitely not what she wants to hear.

I add: *"The intention behind an attraction ritual is to create openness and movement around connection, not to override anyone's choices."*

Better.

I glance toward the end of the counter.

Luis is crouched beside the under-counter refrigerator, rearranging cartons of milk with unnecessary aggression because the overnight delivery somehow managed to put whole milk where the oat milk belongs.

He looks up and catches me with my phone in my hand.

"You good?" Luis asks, straightening with two cartons of milk tucked against his chest.

I lock my phone and slip it into my apron pocket. "Yeah, just texting my brother."

"Why the hell is he awake at seven in the morning on a Saturday? That boy has his college priorities in the wrong order."

I give him a look, and he smiles before turning back to the refrigerator.

This is one of the things I like about Luis. He is curious about everything, constantly asking questions and offering opinions no one requested, but there are certain lines he seems to understand without being told where they are. I suspect he knows I have another job, but he's never asked any details or prodded further.

I grab my phone again and reopen the message.

At the bottom of *Primavera's* request is one final line.

*"Also, I checked the policy and I know it says custom orders are non-refundable, but surely there has to be an exception for when the magic goes rogue."*

A laugh escapes before I can stop it.

Luis looks over again.

I shake my head, moving to the side of the counter and pretending I'm going to do something now that I can see one customer beelining for the door.

"I'm starting drip. We're almost out," he says.

"Thank you, that would be great."

"See?" He stands up from his crouch and makes an exaggerated face when his knees groan, "Occasionally useful."

"Very occasionally."

I wait until he disappears into the back before typing again.

*"Because your order was customized and the spell has already been placed, I'm not able to issue a refund."*

The response doesn't come immediately, which is probably for the best, because the bell over the door rings and suddenly there are enough people coming into the café that I don't have time to worry about whether *Primavera1959* is somewhere composing a one-star, scathing review.

I slide my phone into my apron pocket again and look up.

Little Miss Hurricane is standing in the coffee shop. Except she isn't little from where I stand, and she isn't running, and I realize very quickly that watching someone through a window from across the street is an entirely different experience from having her standing ten feet away in a sleeveless pink top, sunglasses pushed into her blonde hair, looking flushed yet enamored by the heat.

She's gorgeous.

The thought arrives so cleanly that for a moment there isn't room for anything behind it.

I have always known she is attractive, obviously. I have eyes. But there is something comfortably theoretical about noticing a woman who existed mostly in flashes through the front windows, always moving toward somewhere else.

There is nothing theoretical about her now.

She steps up to the register, and I realize with some horror that I am the person currently standing behind it.

"Good morning," she says.

"Hi."

Excellent start. There is a beat in which I am reasonably certain one of us is supposed to do something next, and considering I am wearing an apron, I suspect that person is me.

“Flora?”

Luis’s voice pulls me back.

I look down and realize I’m still holding an empty cup and standing in the middle of the space, frozen.

*Is this what people refer to as gay panic?*

“What?”

Luis gives me a look, then steps closer to the register. “What can we get started for you?” he asks her.

“Iced caramel oat latte, please.”

“And the name?”

“Merryweather,” she says, a small smile on her face. “Or Merry, with two rs. Easier to spell.”

He looks at me for a moment, then turns back to her to finish the transaction.

I make the drink. That should be simple enough, right? Except I am suddenly hyperaware of her moving toward the pickup counter, and by the time I turn around with the latte in my hand, she is standing directly in front of me.

Up close is worse.

“Caramel oat latte?”

“That’s me.” She reaches for it, then glances at my apron. “Flora?”

I look down at my name tag before looking back at her. “Yeah.”

“Really?”

I choke out a clumsy laugh, partly because of her expression and partly because I’m not sure what else I’m supposed to do with the way she’s looking at me. Big blue eyes studying me intently.

“Is Flora that unbelievable?”

“No, it’s just—” She shakes her head, grinning now. “Wow. Between Flora, my cat Aurora, and me being Merryweather, we’re one woodland creature away from a copyright lawsuit.”

“Merryweather?”

“See? Exactly.”

“I don’t…”

Her smile widens, and there is something so open about it that I find myself smiling back before I can admit that I have no idea what the hell she's talking about.

"Most people call me Merry."

"That's cute."

She laughs, and another customer steps around her to reach for a drink that somehow has materialized on the counter, forcing Merry a little closer to me.

"Sorry." She moves aside, then looks toward the windows. "I've been meaning to come in here. And apparently Seattle has decided to give us one last day of summer, so I'm trying not to waste it."

I look outside, where the morning sun is hitting the ivy-clad building across the street. She's right. The unseasonably warm day is making everyone emerge from their homes at once because we all know we'll be punished for enjoying it soon enough.

"You picked a good day for it."

"I thought so, too." She takes a sip of her drink and then immediately coughs, pulling the cup away from her mouth. "Oh my god."

"Shit, is it bad?"

"Wrong pipe." She shakes her head, then clears her throat, eyes watering slightly. "Very dignified first impression."

"I wasn't going to say anything."

She smiles, her cheeks a little pinker now, and I have to look away because apparently there is a limit to how long I can maintain eye contact with this woman before I forget I'm at work.

"Enjoy your Saturday."

It comes out more abrupt than I mean it to, but she doesn't seem offended. If anything, her smile lingers as she picks up her drink and heads to one of the small tables out on the patio.

"You fumbled that so bad," Luis says after a while.

"Oh my god." This might be a problem.

"You are fucked."

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# CHAPTER 7
# MERRYWEATHER

"THE WITCH WON'T GIVE ME A REFUND."

Veronica looks up from the other end of my couch, where she has been systematically picking the mushrooms off the pizza we ordered an hour ago and depositing them onto my plate.

"Can she do that?"

"Apparently, she can do whatever she wants. She's a witch."

"That feels like exactly the kind of attitude that gets you cursed for real," Dani says.

I look down at my phone again, where The Third Fairy's response is still open on the screen.

"She says that my order was customized and that the spell has been cast, so she can't issue a refund."

It's impressively professional and corporate for *thanks for the five hundred dollars, good luck with the straight guy I accidentally manifested for you.*

"Four hundred and eighty-nine dollars," I remind them.

Dani winces from her spot on the rug. Aurora is stretched beside her with the complete bonelessness of a cat who has never had to contribute financially to anything and has zero worries beyond when her next meal will be.

"Jesus, Merry, every time you say the number, it gets a little worse."

“I know,” I say with a groan, and I feel a blush starting to form on my chest.

“I still don’t understand how you spent that much.”

“I’m desperate, okay?”

Veronica stops picking mushrooms. “Why? It’s not like you can’t—”

“I was a little drunk and emotionally vulnerable, okay? And you guys egged me on.”

Dani snorts, then follows it up with unintelligible baby talk directed at my cat.

I drop my phone onto the coffee table and reach for my wine. The windows are still open, even though it’s well into the afternoon, letting in the faint noise of a neighbor mowing a lawn a few houses over and a breeze that would probably feel nice it if weren’t carrying air that has no business being this warm this time of the year.

Under normal circumstances, I would be thrilled about it. Instead, I have spent an embarrassing percentage of the afternoon itching under my skin when I remember the woman from the café.

Specifically her eyes. And her smile. And the clumsy little laugh she made when I asked if Flora was actually her name.

Which is ridiculous, because I spoke to her for maybe fifty-nine seconds.

“There was a hot barista.”

I don’t realize I’ve said it out loud until both of them look at me.

Dani sits up straighter, hand still on my cat’s fur. “Where?”

“This morning.”

“No, where is she now?”

“I don’t know, Dani. Presumably at the coffee shop where she works? Maybe at her house where she goes after work?”

“Back the fuck up,” Veronica says. “You met someone?”

“I did not *meet* someone. I ordered a latte.”

“From someone hot,” Dani adds.

“And?”

“And nothing! The universe is delivering a man on a silver platter to me and I don’t want it, but also…”

I tell them about The Spindle, although there isn’t much to tell. I have passed it almost every morning for months without ever going inside, and

today, with nowhere I needed to be and the weather too beautiful to justify going straight home after my walk, I finally did.

"Her name is Flora?" Veronica asks.

Dani presses one hand dramatically against her chest. "Oh, you flirted."

"And then I choked on my coffee, and she looked disgusted, so…"

Before anyone can say anything else, the front door closes with a loud bang.

None of us reacts at first, which says a lot about how accustomed I've become to people apparently treating my little house like public property.

Then something hits the floor in the entryway, and Dani gasps.

"No."

I already know exactly what is happening. Rose appears around the corner wearing long flowy pants, a cropped tank top, approximately eleven necklaces, and a flawless tan that can only be obtained by never being indoors.

"Hi."

Veronica is off the couch immediately. "Rose."

"Oh my god, Vero."

They collide in the middle of my living room like they've been separated by war rather than whatever vaguely defined adventure my sister has been on for the last several months.

Dani abandons Aurora to join them. "When did you get back?"

"Like an hour ago."

"From Oregon?"

Rose makes a face. "Northern California."

I stare at her. "I thought you were in Oregon."

"Originally, yes." Rose finally looks at me. "Hi, Merry."

"Hi, Rose."

She comes over and kisses my cheek as though she did not just enter my locked house without knocking. She promptly drops onto the couch in the spot Veronica abandoned and immediately reaches for the pizza box.

"So," she says, pulling a slice onto a napkin. "Who is Flora?"

I look at Dani, and luckily she has the decency to look only slightly guilty.

"No one."

"She's a hot barista," Dani says at the same time.

“Traitor.” I try to glare, but the smile that forms on my face is inevitable.

“And Merry flirted with her.”

“I ordered coffee.”

“Yes, but she laughed.”

“She laughed *at* me,” I say, a little self-deprecatingly. “And I make people laugh all the time, need I remind you.”

Rose takes a bite of pizza, watching me while she chews. Unlike Veronica and Dani, she doesn’t immediately demand details, which is almost worse because I know that look. I have been on the receiving end of it since she was old enough to develop opinions.

Finally, she swallows.

“Do you want to see her again?”

“Yes.”

The answer comes so quickly that I wish I could reach out and grab it from the air.

“Yes, but I don’t know if she was actually flirty with me or if she was being nice because she was at work, and I don’t want to be that person who mistakes basic customer service for sexual interest, and then the spell delivered a *man*.”

Rose blinks at me. “Hold up. What spell?”

I look at Veronica. Veronica looks at Dani, and again it’s like they’re communicating telepathically, something about me being pathetic, I’m sure. Dani suddenly becomes very interested in the crust of her pizza.

“Merry?”

“It’s not important.”

“You just said a spell delivered a man. I feel like we have different definitions of important.”

“It didn’t really deliver him. He was already there.”

Rose sets her pizza down and turns toward me completely now, folding one long leg beneath herself. “What did you do?”

“Why do you immediately assume I did something?”

“Your girl paid five hundred dollars to an online witch to remove her—alleged—curse and to give her love,” Veronica blurts, but she’s looking everywhere except at me.

“Vero!”

“It’s the truth! What do you want me to do, lie to your sister?”

Rose's eyes widen. "You have a witch?"

"I don't *have* a witch."

"Where did you find her?" my sister asks.

"Online."

Rose looks genuinely offended. "And none of you told me about this?"

Of course that is her concern.

"Can we stay focused?"

"I am extremely focused."

So I tell her.

Not all of it at first, because there is something particularly humiliating about explaining to my younger, carefree sister that after several glasses of wine I paid a stranger on the internet to investigate the possibility that my romantic failures might have supernatural origins. Unfortunately, my friends are there to supply every detail I attempt to leave out, and within five minutes, Rose knows about The Third Fairy, the custom ritual, the bracelet that hasn't even arrived yet, and Phillip's sudden interest in me.

"I just can't believe you paid four hundred and eighty-nine dollars for a spell when you have a hot barista just down the street."

"That's not—"

"So why do you think it didn't work?" my sister asks. "I mean, obviously you are not going to date a man, but you met Flora."

That isn't at all what I expected from her.

"Those things are unrelated, Rose."

"Maybe." Rose reaches for her pizza again. "I'm just making sure I understand."

"Well, don't."

My phone buzzes against the coffee table before she can answer.

We all look down.

**The Third Fairy sent you a message.**

"Oh, shit," Dani says.

Rose immediately abandons her pizza again. "Is that her?"

"Yes."

"Open it."

"Okay, everyone calm down immediately."

Except my own pulse has picked up, too, which feels like a betrayal considering I'm still annoyed at this person. Somewhere between asking for my money back and arguing about whether the spell worked, I've become embarrassingly invested in what The Third Fairy has to say next.

"Merry."

I pick up the phone. The message is longer than the last one.

"I've given your request some thought," I read out, and Rose slides down her seat and sits on the floor, looking at me with her big, blue eyes. "I still can't refund a custom order once the work has begun, and I can't reverse another person's feelings because those were never mine—or yours—to control."

I glance up. "She's really holding the line on this refund."

"Keep reading," Veronica says, gesturing with her hand as to move the thing forward.

I scroll. "However, if you're still inclined to reverse the spell, I can work with you to attempt it. But this isn't something I can do for you. It will require you to take active steps yourself, and I need you to agree to follow them, even when they don't seem directly related to what you think you're trying to undo."

"That sounds fun," Rose says.

"Rose, you can't just live your life on vibes."

She laughs, then winks, and Dani and Veronica giggle.

Another message appears while I'm reading.

"If you want to proceed, your first task is simple. At the next full moon, go somewhere you've never been before. Walk without a destination. Don't rush. Don't look for signs or try to decide what anything means. Just pay attention to what catches your eye when you finally give yourself enough time to notice."

I stare at the screen.

"That's it?"

Rose leans closer. "What did you expect?"

"I don't know. Candles? Salt circles? Possibly chanting."

"You sound disappointed."

"I paid five hundred dollars, Rose. I want production value."

Veronica laughs, but I keep looking at the message.

There is one final line: "When you're done, tell me what you noticed. Then we'll move on to the next step."

“So,” Dani says, “the witch is sending you on a treasure hunt.”

I sink back against the couch. “A witch hunt sounds more accurate.”

Rose smiles. “I love her.”

“Of course.”

I read the instructions again, already trying to think of somewhere I’ve never been, and despite myself, something small and unfamiliar stirs beneath my annoyance.

Curiosity.

Fine. If The Third Fairy won’t give me my money back, I’m going to get every last cent of magic out of her instead.

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# CHAPTER 8

# FLORA

"YOU WANT TO GO TO THE JAPANESE GARDEN NEXT SATURDAY?"

I look up from the bracelet stretched across the dining room table in front of me, one end of the elastic looped around my finger so the beads don't scatter across the floor.

My mother is standing in the kitchen doorway holding two printed tickets.

"Why?"

She gives me a look. "Because it's the Japanese Garden and they have a cool moonlight exhibit featuring some fancy glass artist."

"I know what you're talking about."

"Then why did you ask?"

"Because you don't usually invite me, your thirtysomething-year-old daughter, to moonlight strolls."

The words *Moonlight Stroll* are printed across the top of both pieces of paper in delicate gold lettering beneath an illustration of a full moon reflected over water. Even from the other side of the room, I can make out the date and time.

My mother looks down at the tickets, and something in the way she does it answers my question before she says anything.

I let the bracelet fall carefully onto the velvet mat.

"What happened to the history teacher?"

She immediately busies herself tucking the tickets inside the black envelope they came from. “Nothing happened.”

“*Mamá.*”

“What?”

She sighs, the sound carrying all the way across the little space between the kitchen and dining room, then walks over and places the tickets beside my beads.

“He doesn’t want to see me anymore.”

My stomach tightens, even though this should not surprise me.

The only thing I know about this man is that he teaches history at a high school in the next town over, and that he makes his own bread, which my mother mentioned one time while I was scarfing down a piece of burnt toast right before I left for work.

“How many times did you even go out?”

My mother narrows her eyes. “That sounds judgmental already.”

“I’m asking.”

“Three.”

“Three dates.”

“Yes, Flora. I can count.”

“Mom.”

She leans one hip against the table and folds her arms. “I wasn’t putting him on the mortgage.”

“That’s not what I said.”

“But it’s exactly what your face said, *hija*.”

I look down at the bracelet again, even though there’s nothing wrong with it. A mix of citrine, green aventurine, pyrite, and clear quartz for abundance. I have made enough of these in the last few days that the sequence is lodged somewhere in my muscle memory and I can usually string them without thinking.

“What did he say?”

“He said he enjoyed spending time with me, but he didn’t think there was enough of a connection to keep seeing each other.”

I wait.

“That’s it.”

“At least he had the decency to tell you.”

My mother’s mouth quirks slightly. “The bar is on the ground, Flora.”

She reaches across the table and takes one of the loose pieces of quartz between two fingers, turning it toward the light from the window.

Outside, the entire neighborhood is glowing in a way that feels like summer. Yesterday's strange heat hasn't entirely broken, and even though it's cooler today, sunlight still fills the house with enough warmth that I left the back door cracked open earlier.

My mother puts the bead down.

"I liked him," she says. "A lot."

She sounds so disappointed. Which, for some reason, annoys me more than if she were sad, or devastated, or angry, even.

"You always do this."

Her hand stills. She straightens, and I can tell from the change in her expression and the way she flips her brown hair that she has stopped finding this conversation amusing. And I know, from years of experience, that I should leave it alone.

Instead, I hear myself continue. "You barely knew him."

"And?"

"And now you're disappointed for something that could have been but that was completely in your head, *Mamá*."

She stares at me for a moment, as if waiting for the rest. "Yes," she replies eventually.

That simple answer makes something uncomfortable shift beneath my ribs.

"That doesn't bother you?"

"Of course it bothers me. I liked him."

"But you keep doing this."

My mother lets out a quiet breath and glances toward the kitchen, probably calculating how much longer she has before she needs to start getting ready for work.

"You think that everything that ends is a mistake," she says, shifting in her position again. "But you have to remember that I have two grown children, and they are going to move on, so I'm trying to do the same."

"*Ma*."

"No, Flora. I honestly don't know where I went wrong with you," she adds, and I feel my cheeks flush. "I don't know why you are such a cynic about everything, especially love. Your brother is not this way."

I take a deep breath, then look into her eyes, so similar to mine. “I think people should be realistic.”

“Realistic about what, exactly?”

“About how much they give someone before they know what they’re getting back.”

That wipes the smile from her face. For a moment, neither of us says anything.

Fifty percent of the time I’m talking to my mother, I wish I could take the sentences back, or at least rearrange them into something that reveals less about me, and about her, too.

Instead, my mother looks at me with a particular expression she gets when I accidentally hand her more information than I meant to.

“Is that what you think I was doing?”

I focus on the bracelet again. “No.”

“Giving too much?”

“I was speaking generally.”

“Of course, yes.”

“*Mamá*.”

“*Hija*, why don’t you give yourself permission to hope?”

The words catch me strangely. I open my mouth, but she is already gathering her bag from the chair by the kitchen.

“Take the tickets. Bring someone.” She pulls her hair into a loose knot while she searches through her bag for her keys. “Call your brother, maybe he’ll take pity on you and join you.”

“I doubt a twenty-year-old frat boy in his college prime will want to give up a Saturday night to walk with his older sister through a garden, *Ma*.”

“Try him,” she says, heading into the kitchen to collect her water bottle. “Or maybe bring someone else, someone you like.”

There is no reason for a specific face to appear in my mind.

And yet there she is. Blonde hair caught in the sunlight. Big blue eyes fixed on me over an iced latte. A grin spreading across her face when she tells me her name is Merryweather, as if the entire situation is somehow my doing.

The thought is so immediate that I resent it. And it does not qualify as liking her. I spoke to her for maybe a couple of minutes.

Attraction, certainly.

Interest, unfortunately.

But not—

My mother is looking at me.

"What?"

"Nothing." Her eyes narrow slightly. Then her eyebrows lift. "Oh."

"No."

She smiles as she heads toward the hallway, which tells me everything I need to know, and everything I should immediately shut down.

"I love you! Wear sunscreen if you leave the house tomorrow," she yells over her shoulder. "And please try to leave the house."

The front door closes a few seconds later, leaving the space quiet again.

"I leave the house," I say to no one.

I go to work four days a week. I grocery shop and run errands. I occasionally have drinks with Luis after a shift, although admittedly the last time was sometime in August. And I see my friend Maggie sometimes, too. We're still figuring out how to be friends again after a few years of me not being particularly good at it, but we're trying.

There are people in the world who would consider all of those things leaving the house.

I pick up the elastic again and slide another piece of citrine into place, but the rhythm I had before is gone. Instead, my mother's question keeps circling back through my head.

*Why don't you give yourself permission to hope?*

Because hope is easy when you are a woman like my mother. She can meet a man three times, buy tickets for something weeks away, and somehow believe the three good dates were worth having even when the fourth never materializes. She doesn't seem to need any assurance that something will last before she allows herself to enjoy it while it's happening.

I have never understood how she does that, and maybe I don't want to.

My gaze drifts toward the black envelope on the table.

And, because my brain has apparently decided to betray me today, I think of Merryweather again.

*Someone you like*.

Absolutely not.

I don't know her. I know her coffee order and her name, and that she has a cat named Aurora. I know she's gorgeous in a way that apparently

causes me to forget basic motor functions, and that she smiled at me enough yesterday that I spent an embarrassing amount of time wondering whether she was flirting or simply being friendly.

That is attraction. And attraction is easy, and I'm not interested in anything else because attraction doesn't require me to do anything about it.

My mother would probably tell me that is exactly the problem.

I finish the bracelet, knot the elastic, and reach for the small intention card that goes into the order. ABUNDANCE, I write across the top before adding the rest, my hands settling back into the familiar routine of packaging something that will eventually make its way to a stranger.

This part I understand.

The people who choose to order from my online shop always want something. Love, money, confidence, closure, some assurance that the thing they're reaching toward is actually meant for them. Lately, I've been thinking more about how often they ask me to provide the answer before they've figured out the question.

My newest customer is a perfect example. She was so certain she wanted love that she spent what I would consider a small fortune trying to summon it, and now she's equally certain she wants me to reverse the whole thing because the first possibility that appeared wasn't the right one.

Somewhere between my mother's abandoned tickets and that ridiculous reversal request, I find myself thinking about how much time people spend trying to control what happens next.

By the time I finish packing the last order, the afternoon light has shifted across the table and the black envelope is still sitting beside my laptop.

I tuck the envelope into the drawer beneath my shipping supplies and close it before my brain decides to betray me yet again.

There. Problem solved.

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# CHAPTER 9
# MERRYWEATHER

THE FIRST THING I NOTICE IS THAT I AM, WITHOUT A SHADOW OF A DOUBT, going to fall down these stairs. Which, considering I am standing at the entrance of the Japanese Garden on a damp October night with a full moon above the trees and a witch's instructions to notice things I've been missing, feels a little too on the nose.

Not in, like, a classic Merryweather Hawthorne way, which is expected at this point.

No.

There are actual stone steps in front of me, softly illuminated by little lights tucked along the path, and I have somehow managed to catch the toe of my boot on the first one, despite the fact that I'm standing completely still.

I windmill one arm, grab the metal railing, and recover before the woman behind me has to witness my death at moonlight.

"Sorry," I say, moving aside.

She gives me the polite smile of someone who is definitely going to tell her friends about me later.

Excellent.

The reversal is off to an amazing start. Maybe dying would end the curse.

I step off the path and pull out my phone.

THINGS I NOTICED

I created the note seven minutes ago, because apparently when a witch tells me to wander around and notice things, my response is to introduce administrative oversight. Lest I forget what I'm noticing.

So far I have:

1. Red leaves (maybe, it's dark)

2. Koi fish (also maybe, it's dark)

3. Glass thing that looks like a sea creature (look into doing a glass blowing class? Ask Rose about it

4. The moon

I stare at the list. This cannot possibly be what The Third Fairy meant.

*You obviously noticed the moon, Merryweather. She specifically sent you out during it, you dum-dum.*

I delete number four.

Then add:

4. Stairs are dangerous

Much better.

I shove my phone back into my purse.

In my defense, the assignment sounded much more profound when she sent it, but I have come to realize since then that I have, quite literally, spent hundreds of dollars for a person to tell me to go for a fucking walk.

Which yes, I'm bitter about. But I also spent nearly an hour last night looking for somewhere to do it.

The Moonlight Stroll appeared somewhere around search number six, and it felt sufficiently witchy to qualify. Full moon, a garden, glass art illuminated after dark. I bought the ticket before I could talk myself out of it.

And now I'm here. Alone, walking, not looking for signs.

Definitely not wondering if what flies overhead occasionally is some sort of omen.

I pass beneath a Japanese maple and nearly walk directly into a low branch, but manage to duck at the last second.

"Jesus."

Maybe I *am* cursed generally. That would actually explain everything.

The garden is beautiful, even if I haven't yet figured out how I'm supposed to experience it without turning the whole thing into homework. The glass installations are tucked among the trees and beside the pond, some of them delicate enough that I don't see them until the light catches an edge. The air has finally cooled after last week's bizarre October heat, and everything smells damp and green, the way Seattle is supposed to smell this time of year.

I try putting my phone away for real and decide to simply *watch.*

I make it approximately three minutes.

Then I notice Flora.

At least, I think it's Flora.

She's standing farther down the path near the edge of the water, half turned away from me, and for a second all I can see is dark hair and the profile of a woman studying one of the glass installations.

It could be anyone, of course, since we're all doing the same thing. But my stomach does something stupid the moment she turns.

*Oh*.

Definitely Flora.

And apparently the universe has decided that seeing her behind a coffee counter wasn't enough, because now I have to deal with her beneath strings of minuscule lights with the moon hanging over her shoulder.

This feels totally targeted and like the universe is giving me the largest fuck you of all time.

I take one step toward her and immediately skid on a patch of damp leaves.

My arms fly out, again, but somehow I manage not to fall, again, only because my hand lands against the trunk of a tree with enough force to sting.

Flora looks over at the disaster that is happening right next to her, and I have the wherewithal to hide my face.

There are probably a hundred people in this garden, and naturally the one person who witnesses this is the woman I was hoping might someday find me a little bit attractive enough to maybe kiss or something.

Her eyes widen. “Merryweather?”

I straighten. “Hi.”

She looks at the tree, then at me. “Are you okay?”

“Perfect, yes. Thank you.” Flora’s gaze drops to the hand I still have braced against the tree, then moves slowly back to my face. I straighten and smooth the front of my coat, as if this might somehow restore the dignity I lost approximately five business years ago. “The ground is wet.”

“It is.”

“And dark.”

Flora nods.

“I feel like you’re judging me.”

She blinks, and her face does this thing where she looks surprised but immediately tries to correct it, almost like I caught her in the act. “I’m not.”

She is, a little. I can see it in the way she presses her lips together, and somehow that makes it better. Flora smiling at my expense is preferable to Flora watching me fracture my wrist under a Japanese maple tree under the full moon, so I decide to take the win.

It also gives me a second to properly look at her.

She’s dressed differently than she was a week ago, obviously, because she isn’t working, but seeing her outside The Spindle makes her feel different, too. Softer, maybe. Her dark hair is loose around her shoulders, and the light from one of the installations catches along the side of her face as she watches me. The other day there had been a counter between us and customers waiting behind me, and the safety of knowing our interaction had a natural ending.

There is no counter here, obviously.

Just Flora, standing a few feet away from me in a lush garden, because the universe loves to complicate things and show me exactly how cursed I am.

“What are you doing here?” I ask. And I immediately feel like an idiot because it’s obvious why she’s here.

She lifts the black envelope in her hand. “My mom had tickets.”

“Oh.”

I wait for more, but none comes. Of course it doesn’t.

Because Flora is probably one of those people that isn’t afflicted with my particular inability to leave empty conversational space alone. I have already spent an embarrassing amount of time replaying every second of

our conversation, and I know that my tendency to think *after* I speak the words out into the universe is definitely not normal. I understand the concept, theoretically, of thinking before speaking, but have yet to master it.

"I'm here because…" I stop.

Because my internet witch sent me on a full moon walk to reverse the fucking love spell I placed that accidentally manifested a man? I definitely should save this until at least the third conversation with someone I find attractive, before I scare them off. Again.

"I saw the event online," I finish. "I've never been here before, even though I've lived in Seattle for, like, a decade already."

Flora glances around the garden. "What do you think?"

"It's beautiful."

And it is. Now that I've stopped trying to document every leaf like I'm submitting evidence to The Third Fairy, I can actually see it. The path curves around the dark water behind Flora, illuminated just enough to catch the red and gold leaves along its edges, while pieces of blown glass emerge from the landscaping in unexpected places. Some glow beneath carefully positioned lights; others seem to disappear until I move and catch their reflections.

"I've almost fallen twice," I add, "but aesthetically, ten out of ten, no notes."

That gets another small smile.

And it's breathtaking.

The realization comes with enough force that I immediately look toward the pond instead, where the moon is reflected across the surface between the scattered lights from the exhibit.

"Anyway," I say, because yes I've—miraculously—run out of things to say to the gorgeous woman I've spent most of the week hoping I would see again. "I should probably keep moving before someone realizes I've been standing in the same spot for ten minutes, you know?"

"Probably."

"I think there are rules about loitering in gardens during a full moon."

Flora's mouth curves again. "I don't think so."

"Well, with my luck, I'm really not willing to risk it."

I start toward the path that loops around the pond, and Flora moves at almost the same time. Neither of us says anything about it, and for a few seconds I assume she's simply headed in the same direction, because there

are only so many directions to go in a garden and it would be deeply embarrassing to interpret basic pedestrian traffic as romantic interest.

It's happened to me twice, which is an alarming amount of times. I really am pathetic.

When I slow down to look at one of the glass pieces tucked between the trees, Flora slows down, too.

I start walking again, and she follows, only one or two seconds after me.

Maybe we are walking together, but I don't point that out. I'm a mess, but I do have a tiny bit of self-preservation instinct.

Instead, we fall into an easy rhythm along the edge of the water, and I discover quickly that Flora is different out here than she was across the counter at The Spindle. Or maybe I'm simply getting more of her now. She doesn't say much, at least not compared to me, but she listens while I talk and points out things occasionally, including a glass sculpture tucked between two tall grasses.

"It has tentacles," I say, tilting my head to see if I can make sense of the very unflattering sea monster currently in front of us.

"I think they are petals," she replies. "My mother loves flowers. I've gotten pretty good at identifying them, after an entire lifetime of her throwing random species names at me. Trust me."

Before I can continue arguing, she steps behind me and puts her hands on my waist. I suck in a breath at the surprise, and hope to god she can't really hear how strong of a reaction I'm having to her touch. She moves me barely a foot to the left, then leans closer, her shoulder brushing mine as she points to the aforementioned glass flower.

"Look."

The light catches the glass differently from here, illuminating the edges of the orange curved pieces until what looked like tentacles are unmistakably petals.

"Oh, wow."

Flora's hand leaves my waist, which I notice much more than I should.

"Flower," she says.

I look at her instead of the sculpture. "I remain unconvinced."

Her smile tells me she knows I'm lying.

We start walking again, following the path as it curves along the edge of the pond.

At the far end, the path splits in two, one side continuing around the water to the entrance, while the other leads deeper into the garden, through the section I'd already wandered through before running into her. Flora stops beside a small wooden sign, and I stop with her without really thinking about it.

"I'm going this way," she says, gesturing toward the second path.

I look in that direction, then back to the pond. Following her would mean walking through the same part of the garden twice, which feels a little too close to admitting that I would rather keep walking with her rather than finish what I came here to do.

"Oh. Yeah. I should probably finish my loop."

There's a beat where neither of us moves, and I become painfully aware that I don't know what the protocol is for saying goodbye to a woman I have now met twice, am definitively attracted to, and may or may not have just spent twenty minutes accidentally flirting with.

Luckily, Flora saves me from having to figure it out.

"I'll see you later?"

My stomach does a small, embarrassing flip.

She could have said *goodnight*. She could have said *nice seeing you*. Instead, there's just enough of a question at the end that I decide I'm allowed to take it for what it is.

"Yeah," I say with the automatic megawatt smile that forms on my face at her question. "You will."

Flora smiles, and this one is small enough that it looks like she's maybe a little shy. Apprehensive. "Goodnight, Merry."

"Goodnight."

She heads down the other path, and I turn back to the pond before I can do something even more humiliating like watch her walk away.

But because I'm me and of course embarrassing is my baseline, I make it three steps and look over my shoulder briefly.

Flora is already disappearing around the curve.

"Jesus, Merryweather," I whisper to myself. "Try to be a little more dignified."

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CHAPTER 10

# THE THIRD FAIRY

PRIMAVERA1959

I completed my first assignment

THE THIRD FAIRY

That is wonderful to hear

PRIMAVERA1959

I took this seriously

THE THIRD FAIRY

I can tell

PRIMAVERA1959

I also took notes

It was colder than I expected

Everything looks different at night

I could smell wet leaves pretty much the entire time, which is not something I'd ever considered before

Light reflects off more things than I ever realized

People are very loud when you actually pay attention to them

I am not coordinated enough for poorly lit outdoor activities

THE THIRD FAIRY

This is a very comprehensive list, and it seems to me it's mostly a compilation of things that happened, yes?

PRIMAVERA1959

Yes, that is traditionally how noticing works.

THE THIRD FAIRY

But these are also things you saw. Did you notice anything about yourself besides the fact that potentially you are uncoordinated?

Go back to your list. Which thing do you remember most clearly?

PRIMAVERA1959

The light, maybe

THE THIRD FAIRY

Why?

PRIMAVERA1959

I don’t know. Because it changed everything around it depending on where I was standing

THE THIRD FAIRY

Did you like that?

PRIMAVERA1959

The light?

THE THIRD FAIRY

The way it changed things

PRIMAVERA1959

I think so

There were things I probably wouldn't have looked at twice during the day, but at night I kept stopping to look at them

THE THIRD FAIRY

You noticed what was around you because I told you to look. I wanted you to notice what held your attention after you found it

PRIMAVERA1959

The things I liked

THE THIRD FAIRY

Yes. The things you wanted to stop for. The things you wanted more of. Even the things you didn’t like.

PRIMAVERA1959

That sounds suspiciously simple

THE THIRD FAIRY

It is

PRIMAVERA1959

Remind me again what any of this has to do with reversing a love spell?

THE THIRD FAIRY

You came to me because you believed the spell gave you something you didn’t want.

So before we can reverse it, you need to get better at recognizing what you do.

PRIMAVERA1959

What do I what?

THE THIRD FAIRY

Want

PRIMAVERA1959

I know what I want

THE THIRD FAIRY

Do you?

PRIMAVERA1959

Yes

THE THIRD FAIRY

Then why did you need a spell to find it?

The first step is simple, Primavera.

Before you can choose what you want, you have to notice what you’re already drawn to.

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# CHAPTER 11

# FLORA

MAGGIE IS ALREADY SITTING AT THE BAR WHEN I GET THERE, WHICH MEANS I'm late.

Not significantly. Four minutes, according to my phone, but there was a time when four minutes wouldn't have registered between us at all. Maggie would have ordered my drink, I would have complained about whatever happened on the way over, and neither of us would have known exactly what time we were supposed to meet in the first place.

Now we make reservations, plan things in advance.

Not tonight, obviously. Happy hour at a neighborhood bar on a Tuesday doesn't require that level of commitment, but the plans have been sitting in my calendar since last Thursday anyway.

My friend looks up from her phone as I approach and smiles. "Hey."

"Hi. Sorry."

"You're fine. I just got here."

There's already a glass of white wine in front of her, but I decide not to point that out.

I slide onto the chair in front of her and drape my purse on the back. The place is busier than I expected this early, filled mostly with people who look like they came directly from work, jackets folded over the backs of chairs and laptop bags beneath tables. Maggie still has her office clothes on, too, black slacks and a cream blouse beneath a cardigan she's already shrugged halfway out of.

I suddenly feel underdressed in jeans and the sweatshirt I've been wearing since this morning.

"You didn't work today?" she asks.

"No. Tuesdays are usually my day off."

"Nice."

"I mean, I worked. Just not at the café."

She glances at me. "Witch stuff?"

I nod.

The server stops by our table, and I order a beer and something involving fried potatoes that Maggie immediately says she'll share. By the time he moves away, she's taken her cardigan off completely and draped it over the chair beside her.

"How's that going?"

"The Third Fairy?"

"Yeah."

"Good. Busy."

"How busy?"

I think about my mother's dining room table, which I haven't actually seen the surface of since the spring. "Busy enough that I packed twenty-three orders today and still have eleven left."

Maggie's eyebrows rise. "Flora."

"What?"

She reaches for her wine. "That's a lot of orders."

"I had some left over from the weekend."

"That doesn't make twenty-three not a lot."

"It's not that many, really."

"Okay."

There was a time when Maggie would have argued with me. She would have told me I was ridiculous and laughed loudly at my easy dismissal. She would have asked me exactly how much money I'm making a day, then probably tried to calculate what that meant yearly while I told her to mind her business.

Instead, she takes a sip of wine and lets me have the metaphorical last word.

I don't like it as much as I thought I would. And the realization comes quietly enough that I almost miss it.

“I also spent an unreasonable amount of time messaging a customer,” I add.

Maggie looks at me again. “Problem customer?”

“Not exactly.”

My beer arrives, saving me from having to explain *Primavera1959*, which is good because I’m not entirely sure how to explain her.

A week ago, she was the woman demanding a refund for a spell that had apparently worked incredibly fast but incredibly wrong. Now, I’ve somehow created a multi-step reversal process that involves assignments and follow-up correspondence and considerably more of my attention than I normally give a single customer.

She’s…Interesting.

I take a sip. “Custom order, which I don’t get many of,” I say finally. “It’s complicated.”

“Those are your favorite.”

“No, I prefer the abundance ones.”

“Well, they used to be, then.”

I turn toward her.

Maggie is looking down at the menu, and I can’t tell whether she realizes what she said.

*Used to be*.

There are still pieces of me that exist more clearly in Maggie’s memory than they do in my current life. Because there was a time when my friend knew every single thing about me, before I got into an all-consuming relationship and slowly stopped making room for our friendship.

That’s the strange part about trying to become friends with someone again. We aren’t starting over, because there are too many things between us for that, but we also can’t simply pick up where we stopped. Too much happened in the middle.

“How was work?” I ask.

Maggie makes a face. “Fantastic transition.”

“I thought so,” I say with a smile.

“Work was work. I spent forty-five minutes in a meeting that should have been an email and then another twenty talking about why the meeting should have been an email.”

“That sounds productive.”

The potatoes arrive and, for a while, it gets easier.

This is the part of being with Maggie that I've missed. Not the big conversations or the history or even having someone who knows too much about me. Just this. Sitting somewhere after work and talking about nothing important.

She tells me about a woman in her office who has started bringing a different seasonal mug to every meeting. I tell her Luis has become convinced our espresso machine is making a noise that only he can hear. Maggie tells me about her neighbor's ongoing war with the HOA over a decorative porch goose.

By the time we order another round, I have stopped paying attention to the carefulness between us.

Mostly.

"So what else is new?" Maggie asks.

"Nothing." I shrug, trying for it to look casual. "I worked all weekend. Packed orders today. My mother is dating again. Or was. I can't keep up."

Maggie laughs. "Good for her."

"Oh god, no, please don't encourage her."

"I love your mom."

"Everyone loves my mom. I think that's a little bit of the problem?"

"And your brother?"

"Ugh, gross." I roll my eyes. "He's in a frat and being all of twenty years old."

"God, that's truly terrifying."

She smiles and takes another sip, and for a few minutes the conversation wanders somewhere else. Maggie tells me about a restaurant that opened near her office that we should try next. I steal another potato from the rapidly cooling pile between us, and behind her, the after-work crowd has started thinning enough that I can see empty spaces opening along the bar.

It feels good. Easier than it did when I first sat down.

"What are you doing for Halloween?" Maggie asks.

I look up from the napkin I've been absently folding into smaller and smaller squares. "Halloween?"

"Yes. October thirty-first. Costumes, candy, culturally sanctioned haunting. I thought you were a witch."

"I'm familiar with the concept, Mags."

"So?"

I narrow my eyes at her. "I don't know. Working, probably."

“At night?” She laughs, and the sound makes me smile.

“No, but I’ll be tired from working.”

Maggie gives me a look over the rim of her glass before taking another sip.

“What?”

“You always say that.”

“Because I’m always tired after working. I get up at four-thirty in the morning.”

“So take a nap.”

I laugh and lean back in my chair. “Okay. Is this going somewhere?”

“A friend from work is having a party.”

“Ah.”

“And I’m going.”

“Have fun.”

The corner of her mouth pulls upward, but she doesn’t immediately respond. Instead, she reaches for one of the potatoes, examines it as if only just realizing how cold they’ve gotten, then drops it back onto the plate.

“I was thinking you could come with me.”

My hand stills around my beer.

“Oh.”

It’s not the party that surprises me. Maggie and I have been doing things together for months now, but they’ve all looked more or less like this: coffee, happy hour, the occasional dinner. Things we put on a calendar several days in advance and do alone, sitting across from each other while we carefully figure out what parts of our old friendship are still relevant.

This feels totally different.

A party means other people. It means walking into a room together. Being introduced as Maggie’s friend instead of sitting safely in our own little bubble where neither of us has to define what we are now.

Maggie shifts in her chair. “You don’t have to.”

“No, I know.”

“I just thought it might be fun.”

I look at her, and there is enough casualness in her expression that I can tell she’s trying not to make the invitation heavier than it needs to be.

That makes me want to say yes more than I did five seconds ago.

“What kind of party?”

“A Halloween party.”

“Thank you, Maggie. Very informative.”

She laughs. “I don’t know, Flora. A normal party. Costumes, drinks, probably too many people crammed into a living room that was designed for twelve.”

“Whose house is it?”

“Bill’s. He works with me. You’ve never met him.”

I nod and take another sip of my beer.

There is no real reason not to go. I like Halloween, which should surprise absolutely no one given how much time I spend surrounded by crystals, candles, and sending out intentions into the universe in the form of online spells.

Still, my first instinct has been to find a reason I couldn’t.

I look at Maggie across the table.

There was a time when she wouldn’t have needed to formally invite me somewhere. If Maggie was going to a party, there was a reasonable chance I was going, too, and if one of us changed our mind, we’d decide that fifteen minutes before we were supposed to leave. We had other friends and separate lives, but there had been an ease between us that I hadn’t understood was something I could lose until I did.

For a long time afterward, I blamed my relationship.

It was easier to think falling in love with Alison had consumed me. That it had made me cancel plans, stop answering messages and turn every conversation into an update about her until there wasn’t much room for anyone else.

Except love hadn’t canceled dinner with Maggie three times in one month. I had.

And when my best friend of probably two decades stopped asking, I’d somehow managed to be hurt by that, too.

Now she is asking again.

“I’ll go,” I say, taking out my phone and adding it to my calendar, although I’m certain I won’t forget about it.

Maggie’s perfectly styled eyebrows lift. “Really?”

“Why do you sound surprised?”

“I don’t.” She smiles and reaches for her wine again. “Okay, maybe a little.”

“I’m not a complete hermit, you know.”

“I wasn’t thinking that at all, Flora,” she says, and I see some semblance of sadness in her eyes. “I was thinking I’m glad you said yes.”

Something about the simplicity of that makes me look down at my glass. “Don’t make it weird.”

“You’re weird.”

“You’re doing that stupid happy face!”

Maggie laughs. “God forbid.”

I smile, too, and some of the tightness that’s been sitting between my ribs since I arrived finally loosens.

“Do I have to wear a costume?”

“You can be dressed as a witch and bring your business cards,” she says, lifting one shoulder playfully. “You could write the whole night off.”

I laugh, shaking my head. “That’s a solid idea right there.”

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## CHAPTER 12

# MERRYWEATHER

There are seven folders on my chair when I get to work on Friday morning.

I count them twice, mostly because seven feels excessive even for Hell, who has never met a task she couldn't delegate or an emergency she couldn't make more urgent by writing it on a yellow sticky note.

There's a few of those on my monitor, too.

SEE ME ASAP, one of them reads.

I haven't taken my coat off yet.

It's seven fifty-three in the morning, my coffee is still hot enough to burn my tongue, and somewhere between the elevator and my desk, I've acquired a miniature packet of candy corn that I don't remember picking up. I turn it over in my hand, decide this is a problem for later and drop it into my purse.

My phone buzzes before I can sit down.

VERONICA

Lobby. Emergency

I stare at the message, then at Hell's closed office door. I can hear faint murmurs from inside, and I can't quite grasp if there's another person in there or if she's on speakerphone on some call that is not on her calendar.

ME

Define emergency

The response comes immediately.

VERONICA

Dani has information

ME

About?

Three dots appear. Disappear. Appear again.

VERONICA

Come downstairs

I should go into Hell's office.

The sticky note is very clear about that, and Friday mornings are usually when she realizes all the things she intended to accomplish during the week have somehow failed to accomplish themselves. By nine, I'll probably have three meetings to move, a deck to track down, and at least one person insisting Helena approved something she absolutely does not remember approving.

I look at the seven folders again.

Then at my phone.

ME

Five minutes

"Merryweather." I hear my boss's voice from her office, and quickly stand. So much for *as soon as possible* being open to interpretation.

"Good morning."

Hell has already disappeared back inside by the time I pick up my coffee and follow her.

Her office looks exactly the way it always does: aggressively clean, despite the amount of work generated from inside it. Nothing on the enormous desk except her laptop, phone, and a legal pad covered in handwriting so small and precise that I'm convinced she could fit the entire federal tax code onto a single sheet of paper.

She doesn't look up when I come in.

"Close the door."

I do.

"Did you see the folders?"

"Yes."

“I need those reconciled against the current holiday forecast before the ten o’clock.”

I take a sip of coffee and wait for the rest of the sentence, but nothing follows.

“All seven?”

“The first four are historical. You’ll need them for comparison.”

“Right.”

She turns her laptop toward me.

There is a spreadsheet open on the screen, several columns highlighted in yellow and a graph on the right that appears to have been created by someone who has absolutely no idea how the x- and y-axis work.

“Finance changed the assumptions again yesterday. I need to understand what it does to the holiday plan before the meeting.”

I move closer. This is not—technically—my job.

But a surprising amount of my job is not technically my job, so I keep my mouth shut.

“What happened to the forecast team?”

“They sent this.”

Her tone tells me exactly what she thinks of that, and, for how much I dislike her in general, I tend to agree with her general disdain for the forecasting team.

I lean over the desk and scroll through the spreadsheet. The problem becomes apparent almost immediately. Someone has changed the projected volume on three of the seasonal lines without adjusting the promotional assumptions underneath them, which makes the whole thing look significantly more catastrophic than it probably is.

“They’re using the old promotional calendar.”

Hell finally looks up. “What?”

“Here.” I point at the screen. “These weeks moved. Vanessa’s team pushed the fall transition back, remember? So this promotion isn’t happening until the following week, but the forecast is still pulling volume forward here.”

Hell leans closer.

I scroll down. “And I think they’re double counting the chocolate eggs.”

“Why?”

“Because this line is still including the carryover inventory from this year.”

She studies the numbers for a few seconds. Then she sits back.

"Fix it."

I straighten. "Me?"

"Jesus, Merryweather. You just told me what's wrong with it."

"Yes, but—"

"And I need a clean version by ten."

She turns the laptop back toward herself, which is usually how I know a conversation has ended.

I stand there another second. There is something incredibly irritating about being handed someone else's work at eight in the morning and expected to make sense of it before most people in the building have finished their first coffee.

There is also something considerably more irritating about the small spark of satisfaction I felt when I found the mistake.

I like—*love*—this part.

"Merryweather?"

I realize I'm still standing in my boss's office, staring blankly at the wall.

"Right. Ten o'clock."

I leave before she can give me an eighth folder and I have to sleep at the office on a Friday night.

My phone buzzes as I reach my desk.

VERONICA

Merryweather Marie

ME

I have an actual emergency

VERONICA

So do we

Just come downstairs

I should say no.

I have less than two hours to untangle a forecast that several people with absolutely higher salaries than mine apparently failed to notice was wrong.

---

“This is not information.”

“It absolutely is.”

“You made me come downstairs because they’re discontinuing the licorice candy corn?”

Dani looks offended. “I thought you liked them.”

“Dani, who in their sane mind likes candy corn that tastes like licorice? They’re gross and I have no idea how they got approved in the first place.”

I look at Veronica for support, but she’s busy stirring something into her coffee and making no effort to hide her amusement.

“You said emergency.”

“I said Dani had information,” Veronica replies. “Which, in our defense, she did.”

“Guys, Hell is fucking riding my ass with these forecasting issues,” I whine, turning my body in the direction of the bank of elevators on the far side of the lobby. “You made it sound important.”

“It is important to Dani.”

“Thank you,” Dani says, and slurps on whatever iced beverage she is drinking today.

“You’re both terrible. I shouldn’t trust you with anything. First the witch, now this.”

The lobby café is crowded enough that I have to move closer to them when someone squeezes behind me with a laptop bag. Friday mornings are always like this, the entire building collectively deciding that whatever coffee exists on our respective floors is inadequate and we all deserve seven-dollar lattes instead.

I check the time. “I’m going back upstairs.”

“But you just got here.” Veronica pouts, then takes a sip of her drink.

“Hell gave me a forecast to fix before ten.”

Dani’s expression changes. “The holiday forecast?”

Veronica looks up from her drink, brows pulling together. “Why are you fixing that?”

“Because apparently I have angered someone in a past life and a love curse is not enough, so I have to be cursed in every aspect of my life.”

“Okay, but why are *you* fixing it? Just send it back to Mike and he’ll fix it for you.”

I shrug. “I already know what’s wrong with it. It’s an easy fix.”

“And you know that because?”

“I looked at it?”

Dani stares at me for a second, then glances at Veronica. It’s one of those looks, the ones they use to communicate silently between each other.

“What?”

“Nothing,” Veronica says.

“That wasn’t nothing.”

Dani opens her mouth, but her eyes shift past my shoulder. Then her expression changes again. “Oh, no.”

I know that particular tone in her voice. I’ve heard it too many times this week, unfortunately for me.

“No.”

Veronica looks behind my shoulder, too, then snickers under her breath. The corner of her mouth lifts, then she starts taking a step back and away from me.

“Guys, please.”

“Merryweather.”

My shoulders tighten. Phillip Briarwood is walking toward us with a coffee in one hand and his phone in the other, looking irritatingly put together for someone who presumably also had to wake up this morning.

I turn to face him. “Good morning, sir.”

He smiles at me, and Dani suddenly becomes very interested in her phone. Veronica doesn’t even bother pretending, and instead is watching with rapt attention at whatever the fuck is about to happen.

I hate my friends.

“Do you have a minute?” Phillip asks.

There it is again.

I look at Dani, but she refuses to look up.

“Sure.”

“Great.”

Phillip steps slightly away from the café traffic, and I follow him because apparently this is something we do now.

I am working on reversing the spell, and I would like the universe to acknowledge it at some point, but in the meantime I have to follow the CEO of the company that employs me because, technically, he’s still somehow my boss, too.

Phillip glances toward the elevators. “How long have you been working with Helena?”

I blink. “Two and a half years.”

“Really?”

“Two years and seven months, technically.”

His eyebrows lift.

“Not that I’m counting.”

He laughs, and his perfectly styled hair doesn’t even move. “How’s that going?”

“With Hell?”

The word leaves my mouth before my brain has the opportunity to intervene. Phillip stares at me. Somewhere behind us, a cup hits the counter and the nice attendant calls a name.

“Helena,” I say. Earth, swallow me whole.

His mouth twitches.

“I only call her that in my head, sir. I apologize, that was very unprofessional.”

That gets an actual laugh out of him. I close my eyes for half a second.

I know there are people who manage to have normal conversations with senior executives every day. People who say intelligent things about business strategy and quarterly performance and never accidentally tell the CEO that they’ve nicknamed their villain boss after the underworld.

“Please don’t fire me.”

“I’m not going to fire you, Merryweather.”

“Good,” I say with a sigh of relief. “I’m very attached to my health insurance.”

He smiles, then glances toward the elevators again. “Actually, I wanted to ask you something. If things were different, would you ever consider a change?”

I stare at him. “A change?”

“Yes.”

“Well,” I start, trying to drag it out. What in the hell is he trying to ask me? Is there a way I could get out of this conversation without being more unprofessional than I’ve been so far? “I would have to know more details, I guess.”

“That’s fair.” He tucks his phone in his slacks pocket, then shifts his coffee cup to his other hand. “Let’s say something came up unexpectedly. Something you hadn’t necessarily been looking for.”

My stomach drops. *Oh, come on.*

“And you thought of me?”

“Of course.”

There is absolutely no ambiguity in that sentence. The spell is one hundred percent still active.

“Why?”

Phillip looks mildly surprised by the question. “Because I think you’d be great at it.”

“At this… hypothetical thing.”

“Very.”

I glance helplessly in the direction of my friends. Veronica’s eyes are so wide, I can see the whites from here.

“When would this hypothetical thing happen?”

“Soon, hopefully.” Phillip’s phone buzzes. He checks it and sighs. “I have to go, but we should have lunch soon.”

He walks away before I can say anything else, leaving me in the middle of the lobby with my mouth open and very confused thoughts running through my brain. Veronica and Dani appear on either side of me.

“Well,” Veronica says.

“I guess you’d be *good* at it,” Dani says.

I cover my face with both hands. “What does that even mean?”

“I don’t know,” Dani says. “But that man is flirting with you.”

“Oh, absolutely,” Veronica agrees.

I lower my hands and watch Phillip disappear into the elevator. The doors close behind him.

“The reversal is not working fast enough, babe.” Dani takes an enormous sip of her iced coffee. She pats my shoulder. “Thoughts and prayers, I guess.”

I glare at her, then look at the time.

“Shit. My forecast.”

And just like that, the universe goes back to ruining my life in multiple departments at once.

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CHAPTER 13

# THE THIRD FAIRY

11:31 PM
PRIMAVERA1959

I have an update

Actually I have several updates

First of all I would like to formally report that the reversal does not appear to be reversing

He approached me again

At work

Which, okay, I realize we both work there so perhaps that is not as significant as it sounds

But he specifically came over to talk to me

He asked if I would be interested “in something different”

Those were his words

Then when I asked what he meant he said he couldn’t tell me but really I’m not interested in dick! I don’t know how to professionally tell this man that I’m a solid fucking six on the Kinsey Scale and that I only like women

I’m flattered but the aforementioned dick is not something I find appealing in the least

So anyway it’s insane. Because you can’t ask someone if they are interested in something and then refuse to identify the something.

Ohhhhh unless the something really is a penis! OH GOD NO

Especially because he said that if something came UP unexpectedly, something I wasn't looking for, would I consider it? NOTHING SHOULD BE GETTING UP in my vicinity!

And he thought of me.

Specifically me, because apparently I would be "good at it" (his words)

???

I don't even know what it is.

My friends think he was flirting. For the record though, they think he was flirting BEFORE the spell too

So I don't know how much weight we should give their assessment.

But today was definitely worse.

I mean he's perfectly nice. Which is worse.

Is this how people get recruited into cults?

You know what I mean.

12:05 AM
PRIMAVERA1959

Unrelated question.

Does the reversal affect other areas of your life?

Because work was weird today too.

Not magically weird.

Regular work weird.

My boss gave me something that isn't technically my job because someone else screwed it up and I knew how to fix it

Which happens all the time but today I noticed I actually liked fixing it.

Not that I liked having to fix it.

I loved knowing how. There's a difference

I think

1:48 AM
PRIMAVERA1959

Anyway none of this is relevant

The relevant part is that the man is still appearing

Please advise

Preferably before he proposes marriage or puts me on a mysterious committee of lesbians trying something different?

Is that different thing that he’s trying to get me to try a penis? His penis?

GROSS.

I’m kidding.

Mostly.

Hello?

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# CHAPTER 14

# FLORA

By ten-thirty on Saturday morning, the line at The Spindle has finally stopped curling around the pastry case.

It isn't gone, exactly, but there are only three people waiting instead of fifteen, which means I can make a latte without Luis calling another order over the grinder before I've finished the first one. The rush has left its usual evidence behind: chairs pulled away from tables, abandoned napkins beside the trash instead of inside it, and enough sugar scattered across the condiment station that I can feel the grains when I'm walking back and forth from the counter.

I've been here since seven, and I'm beginning to feel it in the space between my shoulder blades and my lower back.

"You want to take five?" Luis asks as he comes back from clearing a table.

I shake my head and reach beneath the counter for another sleeve of lids. "I'm fine."

"You said that an hour ago," he replies, eyeing me up and down and shaking his head.

"And look at me," I say with a sarcastic flourish. "Still fine."

He makes a noncommittal sound as he walks past, and that reminds me that he is definitely my favorite coworker because he's the least nosy of the bunch..

I wedge the sleeve onto the shelf and check the clock.

There’s a lull coming. I can feel it in the way the room has settled, the noise no longer one continuous blur but individual conversations I can pick out if I pay attention. Once the last few orders are done, I can take a break, eat something and finally answer the dozens of messages that have been sitting on my phone since I read them this morning.

I haven’t figured out how I’m going to reply, and that bothers me more than it should.

Usually, I know what a customer needs from me before I answer.

But *Primavera* is harder.

I spent too much of my walk to work thinking about one sentence buried in the middle of everything she’d sent me, then caught myself doing it again while I was restocking the pastry case and deliberately redirected my attention to counting mass-produced croissants.

Whatever I send her next needs to get her out of her own way.

Unfortunately, I haven’t figured out how to do that without telling her exactly what I think she should find, which would defeat the entire point.

And also, that magic doesn’t exist.

“Flora?”

I look over to Luis, who is holding out a cup.

“Sorry.” I take it from him and read the order written along the side. “Just spaced out.”

“That sounds dangerous.”

I give him a look, and he smiles before turning back toward the register.

The bell above the door rings as I start the espresso.

I don’t pay attention at first. Someone comes in, Luis says good morning, and I’m reaching for the milk when I hear the scrape of something hitting the floor, followed almost immediately by a familiar voice.

“Oh, shit.”

Merry is crouched beside the display near the register, one hand wrapped around her phone while the other reaches for a bag of chocolate-covered espresso beans she has apparently knocked out of its freestanding basket.

There’s another woman standing behind her.

She’s around Merry’s age, maybe a little younger, with long, light brown hair pulled into a loose braid and enough layers on her body that I can’t immediately tell where one piece of clothing ends and the next begins. A canvas tote hangs from one shoulder, covered in faded patches, and she’s

holding two books against her chest while she watches Merry retrieve the bag from the floor.

"You know," she says, "most people put their phones away when they're walking."

"I was standing."

"And look what happened."

Merry puts the espresso beans back into the basket and straightens. "Whose side are you on?"

"The coffee shop's, duh."

The woman looks toward the counter as she says it.

Her eyes land on me. Then they move back to Merry. Then to me again.

Something in her expression changes.

Not enough that I could identify it if I didn't spend a large percentage of my working life watching people decide what they want before they order it, but enough that I know she's noticed something.

I don't know what.

Merry, meanwhile, has gone right back to her phone.

"Still nothing?" the woman asks.

"No."

"Maybe you should give her more than six minutes," the woman says. "She probably has a life."

"It's been way longer than six minutes, Rose."

"Since the last time you checked?"

Merry looks up. "That's not the same thing."

The woman smiles and steps forward when the line moves.

I glance at Luis, and his grin is so mischievous he reminds me of that cartoon cat from the animated movie.

"Hi," he says when they reach the register. "What can I get started for you?"

"Tea," the woman—Rose—says. "Whatever you have that's herbal. No lavender."

Luis nods. "We have a ginger turmeric or—"

"Flora."

I glance up to find Merry looking at me with a soft smile on her lips.

The change in her face is immediate enough that the woman beside her stops looking at the tea menu.

“Hi,” Merry says, and my stomach does that stupid swoopy thing, and my first instinct is to turn and hide in our walk-in refrigerator. “You’re here.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Still where I work.”

“I know.” Her cheeks turn slightly pink. “I meant—”

“This is Flora?” Rose asks.

Merry turns toward her so quickly that I almost laugh. There’s a small pause while she looks at Rose, then at me, as though she’s trying to work out which part of the last thirty seconds gave her away.

“I don’t think I said her nam—”

Rose gestures to me, and I follow the movement automatically before remembering the rectangular name tag pinned to the front of my apron.

Merry notices it at the same time.

“Oh.”

Her eyes close for a second, and when they open again, she looks genuinely annoyed with herself. It shouldn’t be as endearing as it is, but apparently I’ve developed a weakness for watching this woman arrive approximately two seconds behind whatever is happening around her.

Merry’s companion smiles. “I’m Rose, by the way. Her sister.”

“Flora.”

“I gathered.”

Merry makes a quiet sound beside her, and Rose’s smile widens.

“Can we please just order?”

“I already did.”

“Then can you stop enjoying this so much?”

Rose turns to her sister with an expression of exaggerated confusion, although the resemblance between them makes the innocence considerably less convincing. They have different coloring, but there’s something familiar in the shape of their smiles, and now that I know they’re sisters, I can see it in the way Rose watches Merry, too, with the ease of someone who has spent a lifetime knowing exactly which buttons to press.

“I’m not doing anything,” she says, hand on her heart.

“You’re judging me.”

Luis laughs under his breath as he reaches for a tea bag, and Merry turns toward him as if she expected at least one ally behind the counter.

“You too?”

“I’m just making tea, miss.”

“Unbelievable.”

I’m still smiling when I reach for a cup, and Merry catches me.

Her expression softens almost immediately, some of the embarrassment leaving her face now that her attention has returned to me, and I have the strange thought that I preferred having it there. For the last several minutes, she has barely gone five seconds without checking her phone, but now she seems to have forgotten she’s holding it.

“Same thing?” I ask.

Merry blinks. “Come again?”

“Your drink. Iced caramel oat latte?”

For a moment, she just looks at me.

“You remember?”

There’s enough surprise in her voice that I glance down at the cup in my hand, suddenly conscious of the fact that she has only ordered from me once. Remembering a customer’s drink isn’t unusual by any means, but remembering hers apparently feels different when she looks this pleased about it.

“You ordered it last time.”

“Once,” she says, and the smile that follows is slower than the one she’s been throwing around since she walked in. “I’ve ordered it once.”

I know, but I don’t say that. Because for some reason it feels more revealing than remembering the oat milk.

Instead, I turn toward the espresso machine and set the cup beside it. “Maybe you have a memorable order.”

“A caramel latte?”

“When you say it like that, no.”

“So maybe it wasn’t the order, then.”

I look back at her.

Merry is leaning lightly against the counter now, watching me with a kind of tentative confidence that seems completely at odds with the woman who nearly knocked over a tree just a handful of nights ago. There’s a question underneath what she said, although I don’t think either of us needs to make it explicit.

Rose has gone suspiciously quiet.

Luis, unfortunately, has too.

I could give Merry an easy answer and let both of us move on. Instead, I reach for the espresso and say, “Maybe not.”

The silence that follows is brief, but I feel it anyway.

When I glance back, Merry is still looking at me, and the color that was already in her cheeks has deepened enough that I have to look away before she catches me noticing.

“So,” Rose says eventually, drawing the word out as she picks up the tea Luis has set in front of her. “This place is cute.”

Merry turns to her sister again and closes her eyes in slow motion. “Please don’t.” She exhales loudly, then busies herself with her phone. “You’ve never described a coffee shop as cute in your entire life, Rosalyn.”

“I contain multitudes,” she says with a wink.

I laugh while I pour the espresso over ice, and when Merry looks at me again, there’s something almost accusatory in her expression.

“You’re encouraging her.”

“I just met her.”

“That has never once stopped Rose.”

Rose has already wandered a few feet away to inspect the pastry case, but there’s a faint smile on her face that tells me she’s still listening to every word. I don’t know what Merry has told her about me, if anything, and I tell myself I don’t particularly care, although the question arrives quickly enough to undermine the argument.

Has she mentioned the garden? Has she told Rose that we walked together? Has my name come up before Rose read it off my apron?

The thought is still sitting there when Merry’s phone vibrates against the counter.

Her attention drops immediately.

The change is so quick that it almost feels like watching a door close. She picks up the phone, unlocks it and scans the screen, her eyebrows drawing together before she lets out a quiet breath.

“Not them?” Rose asks from the other end of the counter.

Merry shakes her head and turns the phone face down again. “No.”

I finish the drink and press the lid into place, trying not to wonder who *them* is, even though the question has become considerably harder to ignore now that I know Rose is apparently familiar with the situation, too.

“Are you waiting for something?” I ask.

“Someone,” Merry says, then seems to realize how that sounds when my hand pauses against the cup. “Well, not *someone* someone. I’m waiting for someone to answer me.”

I slide the latte across the counter and smile at her. She takes it, but her hand slips at the last moment and a dash of the drink falls from the opening on the lid.

“I’m doing very well today.”

Rose comes back to stand beside her, and there’s something about the way she looks at her sister that tells me she understands exactly what Merry is talking about. Whatever this is, then, isn’t some random text she happens to be expecting.

“It’s important,” Merry adds, curling her fingers around the cup where the latte is still dripping.

“How important?”

She considers that for longer than the question probably requires. “Potentially life-altering.”

Rose makes a strangled sound into her tea.

Merry angles her body in the direction of her sister. “It is.”

“Jesus, Merryweather, I didn’t even say anything this time.”

I smile despite myself, but the answer has left me wondering what the hell could be so potentially life-altering that the girl is literally on pins and needles.

I want to know, desperately. But asking would make my curiosity visible, and I’m not ready to hand that over to her when I haven’t figured out what I intend to do with it myself.

So I nod toward her drink instead. “Try it before the ice melts while you’re waiting for your life to change.”

Merry laughs and takes a sip. For a second, she closes her eyes as she swallows, and when she opens them again, the phone has disappeared from her attention.

“Still good.”

“I’ve been practicing all week.”

“I knew it.”

“Just for you, obviously.”

That slips out more easily than it should, and I feel a slight blush creep up my neck and settle on my cheeks.

Merry lowers the cup, but her smile is wide and bright when she says, “Good. I was hoping you’d say that.”

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# CHAPTER 15
# MERRYWEATHER

"THIS IS A TERRIBLE ASSIGNMENT."

Rose doesn't look up from the basket of tomatoes she's examining. "You said the same about the last one."

"And look how that worked out for me, Rose," I reply, glaring at my sister as she continues to peruse the fresh produce at the local street market. "A man offered me his member."

I think about the assignment again while Rose picks up a bright orange squash, turns it over in her hand, and apparently finds whatever she's looking for because she adds it to the canvas bag hanging from her shoulder.

"She's basically asking me to fundamentally reconsider the way I make decisions."

"You're such a drama queen."

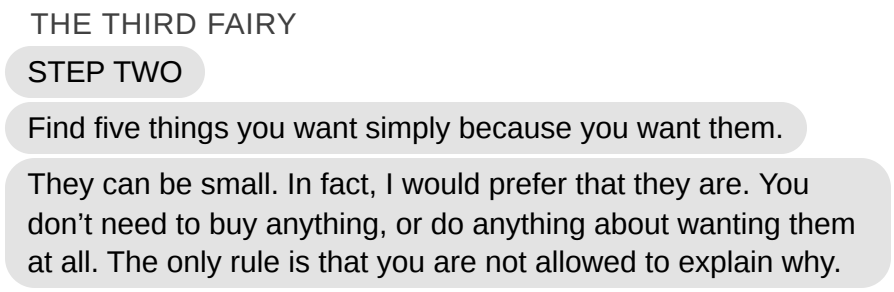
"I need to reverse a spell, Rose. It's supposed to be dramatic."

We've been at the farmers market for less than fifteen minutes, and somehow she has already acquired tomatoes, a loaf of bread, a bundle of dried lavender, and a tiny jar of honey that costs twelve dollars. None of these things were on a list because Rose does not believe in lists, which is one of the many fundamental differences between us as human beings.

My phone pinged while she was explaining why supermarket tomatoes are raised for thick skin and essentially bland, and I'd nearly dropped the apple I was holding trying to get it out of my purse.

It was worth it.

I look at the message again.




I frown. “See?”

Rose finally glances at my phone. “See what?”

“No explanations.”

“That makes sense, yes.”

“What does that even mean, Rose?”

“I think it means you’re not allowed to explain.”

I give her a look.

Around us, the market is crowded enough that we keep having to move slightly out of the way of other customers, and Rose catches my elbow before a woman pushing a stroller clips me from behind. The afternoon has turned gray since we left The Spindle, although the rain is still holding off, and strings of pumpkin-shaped bunting move overhead whenever the wind comes through the stalls.

I tuck my phone against my chest. “But how am I supposed to know if I actually want something if I don’t know why?”

Rose stares at me and blinks a few times. “I think that’s probably the saddest thing you’ve ever said.”

“Oh my god, you’re zero help.”

“I’m serious, Merry.”

“I know when I want things.”

“Apparently not,” she replies, turning back to look at some completely out of season peaches that look, quite frankly, sadder than the previous statement I uttered. “Or you wouldn’t have paid an internet witch to tell you.”

“She isn’t telling me what I want. She’s helping me reverse the spell that gave me the wrong thing.”

“Right.”

I narrow my eyes. “You don’t believe me.”

“I truly do believe that *you* believe you’re cursed.”

“That sounds so passive aggressive. I’m so impressed.”

Rose smiles and starts walking again, forcing me to follow her between a flower stall and a table covered in jars of preserves.

I don’t look at my phone. As a matter of fact, I tuck it deep into my purse, buzzing be damned.

Five things.

This shouldn’t be difficult. I want things constantly. I have an entire cart on three different online stores devoted to things I want, although most of those have been sitting there long enough that I clearly don’t want them very much.

“What do you want?” I ask.

“Right now?”

“Sure,” I say as I follow her to the next stall.

My sister doesn’t even slow down. “One of those.”

I follow her finger toward a table displaying handmade ceramics. There are mugs, bowls, little dishes shaped like leaves and, at the very end, several lamps with bases painted to look like mushrooms.

I wait for more, but Rose keeps walking.

“Why?”

She looks over her shoulder. “Why what?”

“Why do you want it?”

“Because I do.”

“But where would you put it?”

“I don’t know. It doesn’t really matter, does it? Just because I want it doesn’t mean I am buying it.”

That stops me.

Rose turns around and continues walking, and I stand there for another second before following her.

“You can want something and not buy it?”

She looks at me again. “Okay, now you’re fucking with me.”

“I know that conceptually,” I say, because obviously I understand that wanting something and acquiring it are two separate events. I have wanted a house in Tuscany since I was twenty-two and have so far managed not to accidentally purchase one. “I mean for the assignment. What’s the point of identifying something I want if I’m not going to do anything about it?”

Rose's expression changes slightly, the amusement fading as she considers me, and I recognize the moment she realizes I'm asking an actual question instead of continuing our argument about an eighty-five-dollar mushroom lamp.

"Maybe there isn't a point."

"That makes no sense."

"It makes perfect sense. You saw something, you liked it, you wanted it. Then you kept walking."

She says this as though it's the most obvious sequence of events in the world, then turns toward the next row of stalls while I remain where I am for another minute, looking back at the ceramic booth.

The mushroom lamp is actually adorable. It's also enormous, overpriced, and would look ridiculous in my house unless I put it in the little reading nook upstairs, where the warm light would actually—

No. Immediately no.

I catch up with Rose. "You do realize this philosophy of yours is how you ended up living in a commune."

"It wasn't a commune."

"There were, like, eleven of you living from the land."

"That doesn't make something a commune."

I laugh, and Rose smiles as we stop beside a jewelry stall where dozens of earrings hang from wooden displays, shifting gently whenever the wind comes through. Most of them aren't really my style, but a pair near the end catches my attention: small gold suns with minuscule pink stones inlaid on the rays.

"You made your own soap."

"It was good soap."

I reach for them before I've decided whether I'm interested.

"One," Rose says.

I turn the card over to check the price. "One what?"

"One thing you want."

"I don't know if I want them. I just think they're pretty."

Rose waits, which is deeply irritating because I know exactly what she's waiting for.

"I already own a lot of earrings," I add.

"Merryweather," she says with a groan, then keeps walking on to the next stall.

I look at her, then back at the little gold suns in my hand. She has a point, which I have no intention of acknowledging aloud.

The earrings are pretty. That was the first thing I thought when I saw them, before my brain started opening drawers at home and conducting an inventory of everything I already own.

I pull out my phone.

1. Gold sun earrings

Rose leans over my shoulder to read it.

“There. Was that painful?”

I roll my eyes. “Excruciating.”

“I’m proud of you.”

“Don’t be condescending,” I say, and I hear my sister chuckle behind me. “You’re starting to sound like Mom.”

“Mom is much nicer than I am,” she replies, without skipping a beat. “And I’m not. I think this is real growth.”

I put the earrings back on the display and follow her before she gets far enough ahead of me that I have to start weaving though people to catch up. Rose doesn’t ask if I’m going to buy them, which feels strangely unfinished. Veronica or Dani would have already offered an opinion about the price, and I would probably be holding them against my ear while explaining that I could wear them to work, or dinner, or one of the approximately negative three social engagements I attend every month.

Rose, in contrast, apparently considers the matter settled because I wanted them for thirty seconds.

“You really don’t do this?”

She glances at me as we pass a stall selling bread. “Do what?”

“Explain things to yourself.”

“I explain things.”

“Rose,” I say with a groan, and I know she’s absolutely fucking with me and enjoying every second of this. “You know what I mean.”

“Merryweather.” She shakes her head, then grabs one of the small samples of olive and rosemary sourdough that the vendor has on the display. “I really don’t.”

The crowd thins moderately as we reach the end of the row, and I move beside her instead of trailing behind. Rose has somehow added a bag of

apples to her collection since I last checked, and a bunch of carrots is sticking out of the top of her tote beside the lavender.

"You just decide you want something and that's it?"

"I think we've covered this."

"But then what?"

"Then nothing, sometimes."

I make another frustrated sound, and she laughs.

"I don't understand how you live like that."

"Pretty happily, generally."

I laugh, and she does, too, but there's something about the ease of her statement that makes the difference between us feel more obvious than usual. Rose has had objectively terrible romantic experiences. Possibly worse than mine. She has loved men who left, women who cheated, men who—allegedly—committed grand larceny, and somehow none of it has convinced her that the wanting itself was embarrassing.

"You don't regret things?"

She smiles, but it fades quickly as we step out of the way of a couple coming toward us.

"I regret some things," she says. "And I regret some of the things I let people get away with because I wanted things to work out. But no, I don't regret wanting and choosing to do the things I've done."

I'm quiet for a moment.

"Even now, knowing that things would come to an end?"

"How things end doesn't change how it felt before it ended, Merry."

She says it so simply that I almost argue on instinct.

Rose has always been the one we worry about. At least, that's how I've thought about it. Rose goes somewhere without a plan, Rose falls for someone too quickly, Rose quits something because it stops making her happy, Rose comes home again. Meanwhile, I bought a house. I stayed at the same job. I contribute to my retirement account like I'm expected to. I have spare batteries in a labeled container inside a drawer in the kitchen.

I am the person who makes sense.

At least, I've always assumed I am.

"You know," Rose says after a moment of us standing idly in the middle of the farmers market, "you weren't born forty-five."

"I'm thirty-four."

"Exactly my point."

“That makes no sense, Rose.”

“It does to me.” She shifts her bag higher onto her shoulder. “You’ve always been like this.”

“Responsible?”

“I was going to say something else, but I guess your fancy vocabulary works, too.”

I nudge her with my shoulder, and she laughs.

“You were packing my lunch when you were, what, twelve?”

“Mom had to work early and Dad was too focused on getting us all out of the house. What did you want me to do?”

She faintly smiles, but she doesn’t make the joke I expect. “They did expect more from you,” she says instead.

The admission catches me off guard.

“You were the oldest and you were almost required to help with me. You had hella more rules than I did, and by the time I was old enough to do anything interesting, they were tired.”

I laugh. “Finally, some acknowledgement.”

“I’ve always acknowledged it!”

“You absolutely have not.”

“Fine. Consider this my formal statement. Merryweather Marie Hawthorne suffered the profound injustice of having to remember to pack my lunch.”

“Thank you.”

She hooks her arm through mine as we start walking again. “But I also think you got really good at it.”

“At packing lunches?”

“At knowing exactly what you were supposed to do.”

Something in the way she says it makes me look at her. Rose keeps her eyes ahead.

“You loved being the one Mom didn’t have to worry about. You liked getting good grades. You liked having everything figured out.”

Around us, the market continues without waiting for me to decide what I think about my sister’s matter-of-fact statements.

“I think it made you feel safe.”

I don’t answer.

The uncomfortable thing is that she isn’t wrong. There has always been something reassuring about knowing what comes next, even with all my

chaotic, cursed self. About understanding the rules well enough that I can follow them and arrive more or less where I intended.

I like that when something goes wrong outside my own love life, I'm usually the person who knows what to do about it.

But I think about the list sitting unfinished in my phone, and the four empty spaces beneath a pair of gold earrings I don't need and will never buy.

Maybe that's why the assignment is bothering me so much. There's no correct answer, and nobody is going to tell me afterward that I chose well.

And without that validation, I'm not entirely sure how often I've let myself want something simply because it made me happy.

"Dumplings?" Rose asks, interrupting my thoughts.

I look at her. She's watching the food stall across the aisle, where someone is lifting the lid off a bamboo steamer and sending a cloud of steam into the crisp fall air.

"Do you want some?" I ask.

"Yes."

"Why?"

Rose pulls her arm out of mine."Oh, fuck off, Merry."

I laugh and follow her to the vendor, leaving the other four spaces on my list empty for now.

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# CHAPTER 16
# MERRYWEATHER

"WHY AM I GOING TO THIS?"

Hell doesn't look up from her laptop. "Because you fixed the forecast."

She calls me into her office ten minutes after lunch, and without explanation, forwards me a meeting invitation for later this afternoon. I'm still standing on the other side of her desk when it appears on my phone. I recognize most of the names immediately, all people several levels above mine, and I scroll through the list twice to make sure there hasn't been some kind of mistake.

"That feels more like a reason I shouldn't have to go."

She stops typing long enough to look at me over the top of the screen, and I immediately regret saying anything.

"I mean," I correct myself, clearing my throat for extra safety, "obviously I'm thrilled to be included."

"I need you there in case they have questions about the changes, Merryweather."

"Right."

"And print out the latest promotional calendar. Enough copies for the whole room."

"I already have it."

Her attention returns to her laptop, which I take as my dismissal, and I head back toward my desk to collect the folder I put together this morning.

I’m not entirely sure when knowing where everything is became the defining characteristic of my professional life, but at this point I suspect I could disappear for six months and Hell’s first question upon my return would be whether I remembered where someone saved the final version of a presentation from 2022.

The meeting is in forty-five minutes, which gives me enough time to answer two emails, move a call Hell has decided she no longer wants to attend, and find the charger I somehow managed to lose between my purse and my desk despite the fact that I have been sitting here for the last six hours.

Of course, it’s under my chair.

I bend to retrieve it, knock my forehead against the edge of my desk on the way back up and immediately sit very still, one hand pressed to the injured spot while I quietly reconsider every choice that led me here.

“Merry?”

I look over the divider. Dani is staring at me from the aisle, a bag of the chocolate drops in her hand.

“I’m fine.”

“I was going to ask if you wanted coffee after your meeting.”

“Oh.” I lower my hand, and Dani winces immediately. “Then yes.”

Her eyes move to my forehead, and I can hear her thoughts all the way from here.

“Everyone’s face is very loud lately.”

She laughs and disappears toward the elevators, and I collect my things before I can injure myself again.

The meeting is already half full when Hell and I arrive, which means I get to experience one of my least favorite corporate rituals: standing beside a conference table while everyone silently calculates which seats belong to whom.

Hell takes one near the middle, as usual, and I choose the chair against the wall behind her.

“Merryweather.”

I stop, and she points to the back of the room, where the other admins are standing, clipboards and manila folders in hand.

Nobody seems to find this significant, so I decide not to either.

The room fills quickly after that, and by the time Phillip’s chief of staff closes the door, there are twelve people around the table and a handful of us

standing at the back, in a room designed for eight people at capacity. I recognize everyone, although I don't regularly work with half of them. Finance and Sales. Marketing. Elizabeth from the seasonal team, who gives me a small smile when my eyes meet hers.

Phillip immediately starts asking questions, which at least means I don't have time to wonder whether he has noticed me.

I open my notebook, and for the first twenty minutes, everything happens exactly the way I expect these meetings to go.

I take notes. Hell says a bunch of corporate sounding words that don't have a ton of meaning. Someone from Finance talks for considerably longer than necessary—truly something that could have been a quick email after the meeting—and then my boss's eyes are suddenly on me to distribute the printouts.

"We're still soft here," Jefferey from Sales says, pointing to the middle of the chart as I pass around the copies.

I look up to see my numbers on the screen. Not literally. Just the corrections I made Friday morning. I feel an embarrassing pulse of satisfaction at how the enormous artificial spike that made everyone panic last week has disappeared.

Hell nods. "That's what we need to solve."

They start talking about pulling one of the promotions forward again, but I know that that won't work because another seasonal line follows on the tails of this one, so it would inflate the forecast again.

"Merryweather?"

I look up to see Hell tapping her perfectly black manicured nail on the tabletop, and Phillip's gaze on me.

"What do you think?" the CEO asks.

For one horrible second, I assume I missed a question.

"About what, sir?"

"The timing."

Everyone is looking at me, and I curse the day I became this dramatic, but it feels so embarrassing and my brain responds by immediately forgetting every intelligent thought I have ever had.

"If we pull it forward?"

Hell nods.

"I wouldn't."

The answer comes out before I can make it more diplomatic, and Jefferey from Sales shifts in his chair.

I clear my throat. “I mean, you can. Obviously.”

*Excellent contribution, Merryweather.*

“But?” Phillip says, and I think I see the corner of his lip quirk up, and his eyes suddenly start shining. And oh god, is he flirting with me?

I turn back to the screen, then take a step closer to make sure what I’m looking at is accurate.

“But we’re only fixing this week if we do that. The candy corn promotion was already moved, which is why the forecast was wrong in the first place. If we move this one forward, too, we’re stacking them.”

I reach for the promotional calendar in front of Jefferey from Sales and turn it so everyone can see, like a kindergarten teacher reading a picture book to her students.

“Here. We’d be asking the same retailers to support both within, what, ten days?”

Elizabeth leans forward. “Nine.”

“Right. So we might improve on this number, but we’re probably borrowing it from here.”

I point to the later week. And then the conversation moves on.

That’s it.

Nobody applauds. Phillip doesn’t stand on the table and announce that I’ve saved the chocolate industry. Within two minutes, Finance has put another slide on the screen and Hell is asking about something completely different.

I pick up my pen again and stand against the wall, then look around to see Phillip watching me. Something warm and restless has taken up residence beneath my ribs, and it stays there for the rest of the meeting. I keep looking at the screen instead of my notes, and I become so immersed in the conversation that I dare to answer a few questions without being asked.

By the time we leave an hour later, I have four pages of notes, six follow-ups for Jefferey from Sales, and the peculiar feeling that the hour went faster than most meetings half its length.

Hell gets intercepted outside the conference room so I continue to my desk alone, still thinking about something Elizabeth said near the end. I’m

halfway through wondering whether I should send her the historical numbers when I hear my name being called from behind me.

“Merryweather.”

I turn to see Phillip walking toward me, an iced Americano in hand. I immediately become aware that I’m holding my notebook, the promotional calendar, two folders and a pen, and my phone that won’t stop buzzing, probably from Dani texting me about coffee. And I wonder, not for the first or tenth time, if the universe has decided that every interaction I have with this man must occur when I’m carrying too many things and emotionally unprepared to say words.

“Hi.”

“Good meeting,” he says as he falls into step beside me. “You should do that more often.”

“My job?”

He laughs. “No. Talk.”

I nearly drop my things. I catch everything against my hip at the last second, which does absolutely nothing for the dignity of the moment.

“Sir, I talk.”

Phillip smiles. “Oh, I know.”

Then, before I can decide whether I’ve been complimented, insulted, or flirted with, he steps into an open elevator and winks at me as the door begins to close.

“Have a good afternoon, Merryweather.”

What the fuck does that mean?

---

It’s almost five when I remember the list.

Not because I’ve been thinking about it. Hell has spent the afternoon making sure I’m too busy to even hear my own thoughts.

I’m reaching into my purse for a piece of chocolate when my fingers close around the little card from the jewelry stand instead. I must have shoved it in there at some point this weekend without realizing it.

The gold earrings.

I pull out my phone. The note is exactly as I left it a few days ago.

1. Gold sun earrings.

And nothing underneath.

I look back at the open door to Hell's office. She's on a call, one hand moving as she talks, while the folders I finished revising an hour ago sit neatly stacked at the edge of her desk.

My own desk is covered in the remains of everyone else's days. Printouts. A few sticky notes with handwritten messages on them. An email overflowing with *URGENT* requests, even though I know they are not.

For most of the afternoon, though, I haven't been thinking about any of it.

I've been thinking about that meeting. On how it felt to be looked at and agreed with and encouraged, even when Hell has spent years making it clear that my job in those meetings is to listen, take notes, and keep my opinions to myself.

2. I want a promotion.

I stare at that. It should be true, and I've worked in this role long enough that I could easily shop around for a new role at this company, or even externally. A promotion, though, would mean more money, more responsibility, a better title, and presumably fewer folders mysteriously appearing on my chair before eight in the morning.

My thumb hovers over my phone screen. Then I delete it.

2. I want people to ask what I think.

My first instinct is to add *because*.

Because I know what I'm doing.

Because I understand more than people assume.

Because I am tired of being brought in after something goes wrong and being expected to know how to fix it.

I can hear Rose and The Third Fairy already.

*No explanations.*

I lock my phone before I can ruin it.

Two down.

And for some reason, the second one feels significantly more dangerous than the first.

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# CHAPTER 17

# FLORA

"I NEED YOU TO MAKE ME A BRACELET."

I look up from the shipping label I'm trying to coax out of the printer and find my brother standing in the doorway to the dining room with the refrigerator left open behind him.

"What happened to *hola*, *Flora*, *¿cómo estás?*"

"You sound like *Ma*."

Fausto looks at the dining room table, where thirty-two small padded envelopes are arranged in uneven rows around trays of beads, tissue paper, thank-you cards, and the remains of the sandwich I forgot to finish at lunch.

"No."

"You don't even know what I want."

"Didn't you just say you wanted a bracelet, Fausto?"

"Yeah. Just make me one, please," my brother says in his annoyingly nagging voice. He looks larger, taller, beefier than just a few weeks ago when I saw him last at dinner near his campus on the one day he had off from his fraternity duties. "You literally make bracelets."

"I literally sell bracelets."

"To strangers," he says, turning back to the fridge and grabbing a container of leftovers I'm pretty sure our mom was planning to take to work tomorrow. "*Dale*."

"Strangers who pay me, Fausto."

He closes the appliance with his hip, then walks over and sits at the head of the table, clearing a tiny square to set the food down.

“Put that back.”

“What?”

“That’s Mom’s lunch for tomorrow.”

“She said I could have it.”

“She did not.”

“She did.”

Fausto pulls out his phone, and a thick tendril of dark brown hair falls onto his forehead. He blows it out of his eyes, then smiles that stupid smile that I’m sure lets him get away with so much shit.

He taps the screen a few times, then holds it up.

MAMA

Si mi amor. Hay comida en la heladera. Come lo que quieras

“That woman is an enabler.”

“That woman loves me.”

“Have I told you I eat onions now?” he says as he stands up and carries the food to the microwave.

“You’re twenty. Congratulations on your bravery,” I say, rolling my eyes. But I can’t avoid the smile that forms on my face. “What does that have to do with bracelets?”

He looks back at me, and the expression he gives me makes him look so much like our father that it catches me off guard occasionally, usually in moments when I’m not expecting it. The same dark eyebrows, the same dimple on one side of his mouth, the same crooked front tooth.

There are almost fifteen years between us, enough that calling him my little brother has always felt more literal than it probably does for most people. I remember him as an infant. I remember warming bottles while *Mamá* showered before work and sitting on the kitchen floor doing homework while he threw Cheerios from his high chair.

He remembers none of that.

By the time Fausto was old enough to remember our family clearly, we were already different people.

“Who is the bracelet for?” I ask.

The microwave stops. Fausto is suspiciously quiet while he takes out the container and stirs whatever is inside.

“Oh my god.” My eyes widen, and he hangs his head, like a little kid being caught taking a cookie from the cookie jar. “It’s for a girl.”

He grabs a fork from the kitchen.

“Can you make it or not?”

“What girl?”

“A girl.”

He comes into the dining room and drops into the chair across from me, bringing *Mamá*’s entire lunch with him.

“Her name is Genevieve.”

I stare at him. Blink for good measure. Eventually, Fausto looks up from his food.

“Oh, she’s a white girl.”

He nearly chokes. “You’re being racist, Flora.”

“Against white people?”

“You’re profiling my girlfriend based on her name.”

I stop, and Fausto freezes with the fork halfway to his mouth. There is a beat of silence, then he closes his eyes.

“Fuck.”

I smile. “Genevieve is your girlfriend?”

My brother rolls his eyes, but he’s smiling now, which answers the question better than anything he could say.

“Okay, then,” I say, abandoning the stuck label and straightening in my seat. “What does she like?”

“Green.”

“What kind of green?”

“*No sé*, Flora. *Verde*. How many greens are there?”

Something about the simplicity of the answer makes me smile.

My phone pings beside my elbow, and I glance at it automatically. It’s become increasingly difficult to ignore every time I get a message, and the idea makes me itch, just a little.

**New message from *Primavera1959.***

I haven’t heard from her since I sent the second assignment. I wipe my fingers against my jeans before opening it.

PRIMAVERA1959

1. Gold sun earrings.

That’s all. I smile despite myself.

“Flora,” my brother singsongs, and I look up to find him studying my face. I hope I’m not smiling like the idiot these messages make me feel like. “Who got you smiling like that?”

“Customers occasionally make me happy.”

He ignores me and gets up to put his empty container in the sink.

I look at *Primavera*’s message once more before setting the phone down. Gold sun earrings. Simple enough, especially after the amount of resistance she put up over the first assignment. I’d expected a paragraph at minimum, probably some argument about whether earrings counted or an explanation for why she’d chosen them, despite my very specific instructions not to explain anything.

“Flora.”

Fausto is watching me from across the table, one arm folded beside the trays of beads while the other reaches for the aventurine nestled in between all the other green stones.

“Don’t touch those.”

“I was just looking, calm down.”

“We look with our eyes, Fausto Andrés.”

He ignores that and reaches for the little silver crescent charm instead, stopping just short of touching it when I give him a look. I pick it up for him and hold it against the aventurine.

“This?”

“Yeah. She’ll like that.” There’s no hesitation in his answer. “I pay attention when she talks, you know.”

As though it were that simple.

For no particular, useful reason, my mind supplies Merryweather.

Maybe because paying attention when Merry talks requires significantly less effort. She fills silence like she thinks it might become dangerous if left unattended too long, moving from one thought into the next with enough openness that I’ve learned more about her in three accidental encounters than I know about some people I’ve worked beside for months.

I find that charming.

More charming than I should, probably.

I set the moon charm beside the aventurine beads before that thought has anywhere else to go.

"You doing anything for Halloween?" Fausto asks.

"Maggie invited me to a party."

His head comes up immediately. "Maggie Maggie?"

"How many Maggies do you think I know?"

"You're hanging out with Maggie again?" I can quite literally see the puppy dog energy coursing through his body. "Since when?"

"A while."

His entire face brightens in a way I wasn't expecting. "That's awesome."

I glance at him as I measure a length of elastic against the ruler taped to the edge of my work tray. "Why are you so excited?"

"Because Maggie's a hoot."

"A hoot? Now who sounds like Mom?"

He ignores me. "The last time I saw her, she took me for ice cream. That time you and Mom were fighting."

My fingers slow over the elastic, because I remember that fight vividly.

It had been about Alison. Most of our fights back then were, even when they began somewhere else.

That particular one had started because I told our mom I wasn't coming to Fausto's birthday dinner that weekend. Alison and I already had plans. Plans I insisted we couldn't change, and *Mamá* had said something about how there was always a reason I couldn't make it lately.

I heard criticism. She'd probably meant concern.

Neither of us had been particularly good at making that distinction back then.

"You remember that?" I ask.

Fausto looks at me like I've asked something ridiculous. "I was seventeen, Flori."

Right.

Sometimes the fifteen years between us does strange things to my understanding of time. I remember Fausto with missing front teeth and soccer cleats he refused to take off inside the house, and some part of me has apparently decided everything that happened before he went to college belongs to a childhood he barely remembers.

“You guys were doing that thing where you both speak Spanish really fast and pretend it means you aren’t yelling.”

A laugh escapes me before I can stop it. “That is not a thing.”

“It absolutely is. Ask Maggie.”

I thread the first aventurine bead onto the elastic. “Well, I’m sorry you had to hear it.”

“I got ice cream.” He shrugs. “I was sad when you guys stopped hanging out, though.”

Alison had never asked me to stop seeing Maggie. She never told me to miss dinners here or turn down plans or stop being available to everyone else. If she had, maybe those years would be easier to understand now. I could point to something she did and tell myself that was where I went wrong.

Instead, there had been hundreds of choices that barely felt like choices at all. When she came around, I’d spent so many years helping my mother hold everything together that when I finally had something that felt entirely mine, I held on with both hands.

I just hadn’t noticed everything else I was letting go of.

“Anyway, I’m glad you’re hanging out with Maggie again,” Fausto says. “Maybe next time I can join you for drinks.”

I look across the table at him. “Me too. And we’ll see about the drinks.”

He nods toward the bracelet in my hands. “Genevieve would probably also be glad if you finished that sometime tonight.”

I shake my head and reach for another bead. “You were much cuter when you were seven.”

“I was probably a hoot.” He snickers, completely amused at himself.

“Get out.”

He doesn’t, obviously.

For the next few minutes, he stays exactly where he is while I work, occasionally offering opinions about a bracelet he has no idea how to make. He calls me a fake witch, then fills the silence with a story about how he told his fraternity brothers that spreading salt outside their bedroom doors during the full moon would attract women, only to wake up the next morning and discover the hallway lined with salt and several very hopeful twenty-year-old men. He tries—and fails—to argue that this is irrefutable proof that witchcraft is real and that he deserves a percentage of my profits.

By the time his flowery stories are done, so am I.

I hold the bracelet up between us, checking the spacing one last time before tying off the elastic and trimming the ends. The aventurine looks good with the silver, and the little crescent sits neatly at the center.

“Done.”

Fausto takes it from me carefully, turning it over in his hand before his face breaks into a smile. “She’s going to love it.”

He slides the bracelet into one of the small cotton bags I use for orders and he thanks me with a kiss to the top of my head that I tolerate only because he’s already walking away by the time I can complain.

“Tell Maggie about drinks!” he yells as he walks out into the hallway and to the front door. “I love you!”

His laugh carries down the hallways, followed by the sound of the front door slamming like it usually does when he’s around.

My phone pings beside me.

PRIMAVERA1959

2. I want people to ask what I think

Another message appears while I’m reading.

3. I want good sex again

And then, a few seconds later:

4. I want to stop feeling like I’m behind.

I’m stuck on five.

I look at the message for a moment, then turn my phone face down.

I still have fourteen orders to pack.

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# CHAPTER 18
# MERRYWEATHER

We arrive at the party after nearly four hours of me watching my friends get ready for it.

My costume only required approximately twelve minutes and a strong intake of air so that it would zip up. But Veronica had declared that getting ready together was half the point, which meant I spent most of my afternoon at her apartment drinking wine coolers while Dani sat cross-legged on the bathroom counter doing her eyeliner and Veronica rejected three different lipsticks before circling back to the first one.

Four hours.

And now we're standing in the living room of a house so aggressively bland that I am almost offended on behalf of all the effort we put in.

There are gray walls. A gray couch. A television large enough I'm sure people have to tilt their heads back to be able to watch the whole image on it. The framed poster above the couch looks like it could be art or also a map of a national park? The coffee table contains exactly three objects: a remote control—for said giant TV, I assume—a bottle opener, and a candle that has never been lit before.

"I guarantee you there's a mattress on the floor somewhere in this townhome," I say.

Veronica takes a slow look around. "Oh, absolutely."

"You don't know that," Dani says, rolling her eyes and walking farther into the party.

There are maybe twenty people spread between the living room and kitchen, music playing at a volume that still allows conversation, and a sliding glass door at the far end cracked open to a small patio that is decorated with straw bales and an assortment of pumpkins.

At least someone has made a genuine attempt at the Halloween decorations, although most of it appears to have come from one last-minute online shopping spree: fake cobwebs stretched across the island, less than a handful of bats taped to the walls, and tiny orange lights draped on the kitchen cabinets to act as mood lighting in the dark.

There is also an enormous bowl of candy corn on the kitchen island.

"Oh, thank god," Dani says.

I follow her gaze. "Are you kidding me?"

She turns to me. "What?"

"We work for a candy company."

"And?"

"And you come to a Halloween party and get excited about free candy corn? Which you get for *free* at work every day?"

"Candy corn is delicious."

Veronica makes a face. "That's a very strong statement."

"Thank you."

Dani points at me. "You don't get to participate in this conversation, Merryweather. Your opinion is compromised."

"My opinion is informed."

I pick up a single piece from the bowl and hold it between my fingers. "Do you know how many versions of this I have eaten in the last six months?"

"Not enough, apparently," Dani says, popping three pieces in her mouth and giving an obnoxious moan in response.

"Classic. Harvest mix. Chocolate bottom. Pumpkin spice. Apple cider. Caramel. Fucking licorice. That weird birthday cake test that thankfully never saw the light of day—"

"That one was bad," Veronica says.

Dani looks betrayed. "You people have no appreciation for innovation."

I drop the candy corn back into the bowl, which is disgusting but, honestly, this specific type of sugary confection deserves it.

"I think candy corn might actually be my villain origin story."

Veronica gasps.

“I’m pretty sure it’s Hell’s already, babe,” Dani says, popping yet another piece of candy in her mouth. “And besides, it pays for your house.”

“Her villain origin story is simply this,” I say as I gesture wildly in the air. “Existing. People breathing. And it didn’t pay for my house.”

Someone behind Dani reaches into the bowl and takes a handful. She smiles at him like he has personally validated her entire worldview. “See?”

“Daniela,” Veronica says, scanning the room for anyone we might know, “he’s dressed as Shrek.”

“And he has excellent taste.”

I leave her to defend the honor of seasonal confectionery and accept the plastic cup Veronica presses into my hand.

I know maybe five people here. That number includes the two women I arrived with.

The party is being hosted by someone Veronica knows through someone she used to work with, which is exactly the kind of social connection that usually ends with me spending three hours pretending I remember the name of a person I’ve met once. But I agreed to come because it is Halloween, and because Veronica said I needed to get out of my house and stop staring at my phone, and because Dani threatened to take said phone away if I tried to cancel.

Also, if I’m being completely honest, because The Third Fairy told me to stop treating wanting things like a problem to solve—and I guess I have decided this means I should start saying yes to parties hosted by men who don’t own bed frames.

I take a drink.

It’s stronger than I expected.

“Jesus.”

Veronica looks pleased. “Good?”

“I think it burned a layer off of my esophagus.”

“Drink slower.”

She walks away when someone calls her name, leaving me beside the kitchen island with Dani, who has moved on from eating candy corn individually to combining different colors from the harvest mix and insisting she can taste a difference.

I open my mouth to tell her she knows exactly what ingredients are in each and that she should find a hobby when I see Flora.

Every thought I’ve ever been able to conjure about candy corn immediately disappears.

She’s across the room near the patio door, turned partly away from me while she talks to a woman I don’t recognize.

For a moment, my brain does the strange little shuffle it always seems to do when I see someone somewhere they don’t belong.

Except Flora belongs here. Obviously.

She belongs wherever she wants to be.

It’s me who has apparently filed her under The Spindle, along with ceramic mugs and the smell of coffee and that little section of counter where I nearly concussed myself last time I saw her. And moonlight.

Seeing her without any of it around her feels oddly intimate.

Her hair is different tonight. Loose and wild instead of pulled back for work, falling over her shoulders as she leans toward the woman beside her to hear something over the music. She’s holding a drink in one hand. Her other hand moves when she talks, which I don’t think I’ve ever noticed before.

She’s laughing.

I have seen Flora smile, in our limited interactions, of course. But I don’t think I’ve seen her laugh.

Something about that distinction feels important.

“Merry.”

I don’t know who is calling my name, but I don’t answer.

“Merry.”

A finger snaps once in front of my face.

I blink and find Dani watching me, one meticulously groomed eyebrow raised.

“Sorry, what did you say?”

“Merryweather Hawthorne, were you staring?”

Heat creeps into my face before I can stop it, which is irritating because I could have convincingly denied it if my body hadn’t reacted so immediately to Flora’s presence.

I look back across the room anyway.

Flora is still near the patio door, although the woman next to her has moved closer to say something into her ear. Flora tips her head to listen, smiling as she does, and something inside me shrinks a little.

Maybe they’re here together.

Of course Flora could be here with someone.

I don't know why that possibility feels like information I should have been given in advance. I barely know her, and most of what I do know about her I could count on the fingers of one hand.

"Is that the coffee girl?" Dani asks.

I turn so quickly, I nearly slosh my drink over my hand. "I—"

Flora laughs again, and my attention slides back to her before I can help it.

The woman beside her is pretty. Dark hair, red lipstick, some kind of costume involving black lace and little horns. She looks comfortable beside Flora in the way people do when they've known each other long enough not to think about how close they're standing.

*Maybe she's a friend, Merryweather.*

I take another drink and immediately remember Veronica's warning when the alcohol burns all the way down.

Dani follows my gaze. "She's cute."

"I know."

The answer comes out before I have time to make it less revealing.

Dani makes a small sound beside me, but thankfully doesn't say anything else.

Across the room, Flora turns.

Her brown eyes find mine so quickly that for one ridiculous second I wonder if she'd already been looking for me. Recognition moves through her face, followed almost immediately by the widest smile I've seen from her yet.

There it is. That stupid little thing my stomach does around her.

I smile back and lift my hand. And she matches me.

The whole exchange lasts maybe two seconds, but afterwards I'm standing in a stranger's aggressively gray and bland living room feeling as though something has happened. Maybe the earth shifted under my feet.

But obviously, nothing has happened. Nothing went still, and my friends are still around here talking about who knows what, with people we—decidedly—don't know.

Except now Flora says something to the woman beside her, and the woman turns to look at me, too.

Oh, god.

I immediately become interested in my drink. And then, in the truest Merryweather Hawthorne fashion, I take too large of a sip and choke on the nastiest, strongest, most disgusting drink known to mankind.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” I mutter, and Dani chuckles, eyes filled with amusement.

“They’re both looking over here, babe.”

My throat is still burning, but I manage to choke out a “please stop providing updates,” and it comes out so hoarse maybe I need to run to the emergency room. The last thing I need right now is live commentary on whatever conversation Flora is having about me.

Maybe she’s explaining that I’m a customer from work. Maybe she’s telling the story about how I almost took out a tree at a public garden, or maybe she’s warning her date about the strange blonde who keeps appearing everywhere she goes.

I look over again, and I find Flora still looking at me.

This time, she doesn’t smile immediately. Her gaze catches mine and stays there for a beat longer than it needs to, something quieter passing between us before someone walks through my line of sight.

When they’re gone, Flora has turned back to whoever that woman is next to her.

Dani eventually wanders off to find Veronica, and for a while I let the party carry me with it. More people arrive, the music gets louder, and the house grows warm enough that the door to the patio is left open to let in the cold October air. I talk to people. I refill my drink. I watch Dani get into an increasingly heated debate about candy corn pumpkins with someone dressed as a hot dog. But every few minutes, my attention drifts somewhere else.

Flora near the door. Flora laughing. Flora pushing her hair behind her ear while she listens to a third person talk. I keep finding her without meaning to, until eventually I catch her doing the same thing.

“You know she keeps looking at you, too,” Dani says when she reappears beside me.

“I know.”

She gives me a look, probably because I answered too quickly, but I don’t care enough to take it back. Across the room, Flora catches my eye again, and this time neither of us looks away.

Something warm curls low in my belly as I smile at her. I know what attraction feels like. None of this should feel particularly new, not at my thirty-four years of age.

But standing in the middle of a crowded Halloween party, watching Flora look at me like maybe she wants something to happen between us too, it does.

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# CHAPTER 19

# FLORA

I THINK I MIGHT BE HAVING A PANIC ATTACK. NOT LITERALLY. MORE IN, like, the figurative sense of the word. Because by the fourth time I catch Merry looking at me, I know the previous ones weren't accidental.

I'm standing near the patio door with Maggie, holding the same drink she handed me twenty minutes ago, although I've barely touched it. The house has gotten progressively warmer as more people arrive, and someone finally opened the sliding door behind us, letting in a stream of cold air that feels good against the back of my neck.

Merryweather is across the room.

Again.

She looks away when our eyes meet, but not quickly enough to convince me she wasn't staring.

I take a large sip of my drink.

Maggie follows my gaze. "Okay, I think this is enough."

I don't look at her. "What?"

"That."

I should have known better than to do anything involving socializing with pretty women with someone who has known me long enough to recognize the difference between me attending a party and me attending a party while keeping track of one particular blonde woman on the other side of it.

Maggie had noticed Merry almost immediately.

I didn’t tell her much. Because there isn’t much to tell. She’s a woman I met at work who has somehow become a woman I keep running into. We’ve had three conversations that shouldn’t have accumulated into anything significant and yet have apparently been enough that I recognize the sound of her laugh from across the crowded room.

“She’s a total babe,” Maggie says as she bumps her shoulder against mine. “Go talk to her.”

“She’s with her friends.”

“So are you.” I glance at her. Maggie raises her glass. “And I’m very secure in our relationship.”

I laugh despite myself.

Across the room, Merry looks over again.

This time, I don’t look away.

Neither does she.

For a few seconds, the party seems to rearrange itself around the space between us. People move through my line of sight, someone brushes past me toward the patio, Maggie says something about the music, but Merry stays exactly where she is.

Then she smiles.

It’s small. Different from the easy, wide smile she gives people when she’s talking. This one feels almost tentative.

I smile back.

There is absolutely no reason for that to feel as intimate as it does.

“You’re doing it again,” Maggie says.

“I know.”

“Oh, good. We’ve reached acceptance.”

“Maggie,” I say with a groan, and I’m tempted to walk out onto the patio and stay there until every single soul has left this house to save me from the embarrassment I feel right now.

She leaves me a minute later under the pretense of getting another drink, although her glass is still half full. I don’t immediately cross the room, because apparently there are limits to this newfound acceptance.

Instead, I finish enough of my drink to justify putting the cup down and spend another minute pretending to be interested in a conversation happening next to me about mining for cryptocurrency. I manage to catch approximately none of it once I’ve deciphered it’s just two dude bros talking nonsense.

Then Merry is moving in my direction, but I'm confident not toward me. I'm sure she's heading to the patio, which happens to require passing close enough to me that when she gets to the sliding door, she slows.

"Hi."

"Hi."

For all the looking we've been doing, neither of us seems particularly prepared for the talking. Up close, I can see that her cheeks are a lovely shade of pink, whether from the heat in the space or whatever she's been drinking. There is glitter near one of her eyes that catches the light when she turns her head, and I have the absurd urge to reach up and touch it.

I wrap my fingers firmly around my dress instead.

"I didn't know you were coming," she says.

"I didn't know you were coming either."

"Good."

I raise an eyebrow.

She laughs. "No. Not good that I didn't know. Good that you're here."

Something in my chest shifts. "I'm glad you're here, too."

For once, Merry doesn't immediately fill the silence.

Her eyes stay on mine for a second before drifting over my shoulder. "Is that your friend?" she asks, almost absentmindedly. I don't know if she's trying to be casual or not, but I find it endearing regardless.

"Maggie?"

"The woman you were talking to."

"That's Maggie."

Merry nods, concentrating on this information with considerably more attention than the situation seems to require. She scans the room, then looks back at me. There's a tiny crease between her eyebrows.

I almost let her off the hook.

"Did you want to ask me something?"

"No."

I smile.

Merry exhales. "Okay, that sounded suspicious even to me."

"A little."

"I was just wondering if you came together."

"We did."

Her expression changes so subtly I might have missed it if I wasn't already watching her a little too closely.

“Oh.”

I could leave it there.

A month ago, I probably would have.

“Maggie’s my friend.”

Merry’s eyes return to mine.

“Just my friend. She’s straight.”

Understanding arrives a second later, followed by enough relief that she has no hope of hiding it. I shouldn’t be enjoying this as much as I am, but maybe the one lone drink I had was stronger than I thought and it’s making me brave. Uninhibited. Whatever.

“I didn’t ask,” she says.

A laugh slips out of me, and Merry smiles.

“Hmmm, okay, Merry.”

The noise of the party seems louder when we stop talking. Someone cheers from the kitchen just as a new song starts. Cold air rolls through the door behind me, lifting a strand of hair across my cheek.

Merry reaches toward me.

Then stops.

Her hand hovers between us for half a second before she pulls it back.

“You had—” She gestures vaguely to my face. “Hair.” She groans, then laughs and looks down. “I mean— Never mind.”

I don’t know if it’s the alcohol or the fact that we’ve spent half the night watching each other from opposite sides of this townhome, but suddenly I don’t want to let her retreat.

“What are you dressed as?”

She looks down at herself. “You can’t tell?”

“I have guesses, but I’m not super versed in the particular cinematic universe, so I don’t want to make a fool of myself.”

“I’m Aurora.”

“Your cat?” I say, and I think I’m trying to be funny and witty, but I’m not sure if it’s exactly coming across as that.

“How do you know my cat’s name?” Merryweather asks, and that crease between her eyebrows comes back again.

“You told me.”

“Oh, shit,” she replies, and then her cheeks get even pinker and more lovely, and she starts giggling nervously, biting her lower lip, and I— “I forgot about that. Fuck, I’m a mess.”

Merryweather is talking, and I'm trying to listen, but part of my attention remains fixed on the fact that she's moved closer without either of us acknowledging it. Close enough that I can smell something sweet on her when she talks. Close enough that I don't have to raise my voice over the music anymore.

We drift toward the patio naturally, mostly because two people squeeze past us on the way into the house, and Merry steps closer to make room. The backs of her fingers brush mine.

Neither of us moves away.

"So anyway," she finally says, sighing with some sort of defeat, "the princess in *Sleeping Beauty*."

"Oh." Something clicks into place. "Now I understand your woodland creature joke."

Merry's cheeks turn pink. "You remember that?"

I do. I remember more about that first conversation than I probably should considering how brief it was, but I keep that part to myself and look back at her costume instead.

"I've always been more partial to the fairies. Never cared for the prince, to be frank."

She turns to me so quickly that her shoulder bumps mine. "Really?"

"Really."

This seems to delight her far more than the statement deserves, and I'm beginning to suspect I would say increasingly stupid things tonight if she kept looking at me like that afterward.

"Well, obviously the fairies are the best part," she says. "They do all the work."

"Exactly."

I laugh, and Merry's face brightens as though making me laugh was something she'd been trying to accomplish. It's ridiculous how much I like her.

The realization comes so easily that I don't have time to defend myself against it.

I like the way her thoughts seem to arrive faster than she can organize them. I like that she swears when she's embarrassed and somehow only embarrasses herself more. I like the little crease between her eyebrows when she's confused, and the way she keeps getting distracted halfway through whatever she's saying. I even like that I apparently know enough

about her life to remember her cat's name when she doesn't remember telling me.

And right now, I especially like that she's standing close enough for our arms to touch and hasn't made any attempt to put space between us.

"You have strong feelings about children's movies?" I ask, and she smiles so big that her eyes crinkle at the corners.

"I have strong feelings about a bunch of stuff."

Her eyes meet mine, and there is something so openly pleased in them that a stupid, fizzy warmth spreads through my chest again. I'm not sure when I last felt like this around anyone. Not attracted. Attraction, I understand. This is something lighter and considerably more dangerous—the urge to keep saying things just to see what expression she'll make next.

Merry looks at the open patio door and then back at me.

"Do you want to go outside?"

I should probably say no.

Instead, I smile.

"Yeah."

And the way Merry smiles back makes me absurdly glad I did.

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# CHAPTER 20

# FLORA

IT ISN'T REALLY COLD OUTSIDE, NOT BY SEATTLE-IN-LATE-OCTOBER standards, but after an hour inside a house packed with too many people, the night air feels cool against my face and the bare skin of my arms. I breathe it in as the patio door slides shut behind us, taking most of the music with it.

For the longest moment, neither of us says anything. Which is strange, considering who I'm standing next to.

The patio has been decorated for Halloween with significantly more effort than anyone put into the inside of the house. Straw bales are stacked along one side, covered in an assortment of pumpkins in different sizes and colors, with pots of yellow and dark red mums tucked between them. Tiny orange lights run along the fence on the edge of the patio, and someone has wedged fake cobwebs into the shrubs bordering the right side of the property.

Merry takes all of this in as if she's been brought outside specifically to conduct an inspection.

"That's a lot of pumpkins."

I look at her.

She points toward them. "I mean, that's objectively a lot, right?"

"Are you nervous, Merry?"

Her head snaps toward me, and I swear I can see the faint pink of her cheeks from the other day—the one that showed up unexpectedly—creep

up to the tips of her ears. “No.”

I smile.

“Why are you doing that thing?”

“What thing?” I reply, lifting one shoulder as casually as I can.

“That thing where you look at me like you know something I don’t.”

I do know something she doesn’t, ostensibly, which is that Merryweather gets even more talkative and jittery when she’s nervous. I wouldn’t have thought that was possible before tonight, but she hasn’t stopped moving since we stepped outside. She rubs one hand over her opposite arm, looks around the yard, adjusts the little crown in her hair, then turns her attention back to the pumpkins as though one of them could potentially turn into a carriage and drive her away any moment.

It’s adorable. And I probably shouldn’t find it adorable. But the drink Maggie gave me is—allegedly—making me braver and not stopping my thoughts. At all.

“I just think you’re very interested in the pumpkins all of a sudden.”

“They’re interesting pumpkins.” She walks to the largest arrangement of them, and I follow because apparently this is what we’re doing now. “Look at this one.”

She points to a squat, pale green pumpkin nestled between two ordinary-looking orange ones.

“Have you ever seen a green pumpkin?”

“Yes,” I say with a laugh, and her responding grin is… electrifying.

“Okay, well, I haven’t.” She turns around again, looks around, gestures wildly. “So coming outside was definitely worthwhile."

Merryweather looks at me when she says that last part, and something about the way her voice changes on the last word makes the joke feel less like a joke.

The smile stays on my face. For a second, we’re just looking at each other.

Then she looks immediately back at the pumpkins.

Right. Nervous.

I bite the inside of my cheek so I don’t smile too obviously again.

“This one has warts,” she says.

“Merry.”

I laugh, and she covers her face with both hands.

“Oh my god.”

“No, don’t.” I catch one of her wrists without thinking and gently pull her hand away. “I like the pumpkin tour.”

“Let’s pretend you are laughing *with* me and not *at* me, okay, Flora?”

She lowers her other hand, and I’m still holding her wrist, her skin warm beneath my fingers. Merry looks down at my hand and then back at me, and whatever she was about to say disappears immediately.

The air between us changes so quickly that I can feel it in my chest, the swoop in my belly.

I let go, but slowly, my fingers sliding over the inside of her wrist before my hand falls back to my side.

Merry’s cheeks are pink again.

“Oh my god, this is horrifying.”

“I think it’s cute.”

Her eyes finally, finally come back to mine. For someone who has spent most of the night producing words at an impressive rate, Merry goes completely still when I flirt with her.

And I *am* flirting with her.

This realization should probably scare me more than it does. But instead, I’m watching the little crease between her eyebrows disappear as her expression softens, and wondering what else I could say to make her look at me like that.

“You think I’m cute?” she asks.

I can tell she’s trying to be funny again, but her voice has gone quieter. I let my eyes move over her face, slowly enough that she absolutely cannot confuse what I’m doing.

The glitter at her cheek. The little crown in her hair. Those blue eyes that have been finding mine from across the room all night.

And then her mouth.

When I look back up, Merry isn’t smiling anymore.

“Yes,” I say. “I think you’re cute.”

She breathes out.

“Okay.” Merryweather giggles, and then she covers her eyes, for a second, with her hand again. “I don’t know what I’m supposed to say to that.”

“You don’t have to say anything.”

“That seems unlikely. I usually have something to say.”

“I’ve noticed, yes.”

Her laugh is quieter this time, barely more than a breath. Then her eyes drop to my mouth, and there is nothing funny about the way she looks at me now.

Her eyes stay on that spot long enough that I feel it there, an awareness that starts at my lips and spreads lower, warming my chest despite the cool air against my skin.

When Merry looks up again, something has changed in her face. The nerves are still there. I can see them in the way she swallows and in the slight movement of her fingers at her side, curling into her palm and releasing again. But she doesn't look around or direct her attention to the pumpkins this time. She doesn't reach for another joke or start talking about the weather or find some other harmless thing to put between us.

She looks at me.

And I absolutely let her.

I don't know how long we stand there. Probably only a few seconds, but they stretch strangely long enough for me to notice the music vibrating faintly through the glass behind her, the flashes of colors from the dance floor reflecting on her smooth skin.

Merry takes a breath.

"Can I kiss you?" she asks.

So quiet I almost don't hear it, which feels impossible because the question seems to move through every part of me at once.

My heart gives one hard beat against my ribs.

"Yes."

Merry doesn't move. She simply looks at me, as if maybe she wasn't prepared for the possibility that I would consent.

I smile. "Merry."

"Right. Sorry." She closes her eyes slowly, then groans. "I just—"

I close the last few inches between us, and her words disappear.

The first touch of her mouth is so soft that for the strangest second, all I can think is that this is Merryweather not talking.

Then she recovers, and I feel the change.

Her hand finds my waist carefully, settling there like she's still waiting for permission, and I lift mine to her face. My fingertips catch in the loose hair beside her cheek before my palm settles against the warmth of her skin.

She makes the smallest, faintest sound against my mouth. And something in me gives.

I kiss her harder. Not rushed or messy. Just enough that Merry's fingers tighten against my waist, and she steps into me, closing the last bit of space between our bodies.

Her mouth is warm and soft, and tastes of cinnamon and cherry lipstick. I have the ridiculous thought that maybe it was the candy corn before I lose the ability to think about candy corn or pumpkins or anything else that exists beyond this patio.

I tilt my head and kiss her again, slower this time, feeling the shape of her smile before it disappears beneath my mouth.

Merry's other hand comes up to my arm, fingertips brushing over my skin before curling lightly around my elbow. There is something almost cautious about the way she touches me that doesn't match the way she kisses me at all.

Because Merry kisses like she talks. Once she starts, apparently, she has a lot to say.

The thought makes me smile against her mouth.

"Are you laughing at me again?"

Her lips brush mine when she says it.

"No."

"You are."

"I'm really not."

"Your mouth is—" She stops, realizing that explaining what my mouth is doing requires her to look directly at it. Her eyes drop, and I feel her breath hitch against my lips. "Hi," she whispers.

And I don't know why that nearly undoes me.

Maybe because it's so stupidly Merry. Because she has just kissed me within an inch of my life, and somehow she still looks a little amazed to find herself here.

"Hi."

Her smile starts slowly, and I'm enthralled. Absolutely enthralled by this woman who—

"Again" she says, interrupting my thoughts so abruptly, I'm forced to be the one who kisses her.

My hand lifts from her cheek into her hair, and Merry comes toward me immediately, like she was waiting for exactly that. The kiss is deeper now that neither of us has to wonder whether the other wants it, all the carefulness of the first one giving way to something warmer and hungrier.

Merry’s hand slides around my waist, and I feel the soft press of her body against mine.

*Dios*.

I like kissing her.

I like the little breath she takes through her nose when I pull her closer. I like the way she rises slightly onto her toes when my fingers move into her hair, even though she’s probably a few inches taller than me. I like that she seems incapable of doing anything halfway, including this.

Mostly, I like that I am not thinking about whether I should.

Merry kisses me, and I kiss her back, and for once in three years, wanting something doesn’t feel like the beginning of a problem waiting to happen.

It just feels good.

Eventually, I realize, we have to breathe.

She pulls back first, although her hand stays around my waist. Her eyes open slowly, blue and bright beneath the ridiculous little crown that is now noticeably crooked and very much slipping from her hair.

I reach up and straighten it.

She laughs, breathless.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

My hand starts to fall, but she catches it.

And then we’re kissing again.

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CHAPTER 21

# THE THIRD FAIRY

12:23 AM

THE THIRD FAIRY

I've been thinking about your number four.

You said you want to stop feeling like you're behind, and I think there's something strange about the way we measure that. We look around at everyone else and assume they're moving forward because their lives are changing in ways we can see, while standing still can look a lot like being careful. Or healing. Or waiting until you're certain you won't make the same mistake twice.

Sometimes people come out of relationships having lost more than the relationship itself.

Not because anyone asked them to give those things up, necessarily. Sometimes you can love someone so much that your life slowly rearranges itself around them, and you don't notice how much has moved until they're gone. Friends become people you'll call next week. Family dinners become things you'll make it to next time. The things you used to want become the things you used to want, and somehow that doesn't seem alarming while it's happening because you're happy.

Or you think you are happy.

Maybe you are happy.

I think that's what makes it complicated, don't you?

And afterward, it would be very easy to decide the safest thing is to make sure it never happens again. To hold on so tightly to yourself that nobody could possibly take up that much space in your life.

There are worse instincts.

But there's probably a point when protecting the life you rebuilt becomes another way of refusing to live it.

Anyway.

Your first three answers tell me you're better at this assignment than you think you are. You want something beautiful for no reason other than it caught your eye. You want to be heard. You want good sex, which I am choosing to address with the maturity and professionalism expected of someone you paid five hundred dollars to.

Number four is different.

I don't think you actually want to catch up.

I think you want to stop looking around and wondering whether everyone else knows something you don't.

And as for number five, you can leave it blank.

Don't choose something because an empty space makes you uncomfortable. Don't go looking for an answer just so you can say you finished the assignment.

If there's something you really want, I suspect it will be considerably more inconvenient than that.

You'll know.

Ready to move on to the next step in the reversal process?

12:59 AM
PRIMAVERA1959

Yes

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# CHAPTER 22
# MERRYWEATHER

"OKAY," I WHISPER TO MYSELF AS SOON AS MY EYES OPEN. "THAT certainly happened."

I stare at my ceiling. For several seconds, I don't move, because movement might disturb the very specific sequence of memories from last night currently replaying in my head.

Flora asking if I was nervous. Flora telling me she thought I was cute.

Me asking if I could kiss her.

And then—

"Oh my god."

This does absolutely nothing to stop me from remembering what Flora's mouth felt like, or the way her hand slid into my hair the second time she kissed me, or the fact that there was a second time.

And a third. And then a very hot and heavy fourth one against the siding of the house, while three people were outside smoking who knows what and I could hear Dani's voice somewhere talking about—you guessed it—candy corn.

Something heavy lands directly on my stomach.

"Ow."

I lift my head to find Aurora standing on top of me, staring at me with the particular expression of disappointment she reserves for morning when breakfast hasn't materialized quickly enough.

"Don't look at me like that."

She steps on my ribs.

“I had a very good night, thank you for asking.”

One paw lands dangerously close to my boob, and for a moment I think she’s going to slap me.

“I kissed someone.”

Aurora sits and tilts her head in confusion.

“She’s very pretty.”

She sniffs my chin.

“And before you get weird about it, she knows your name. I think you’d like her.”

I stop. Actually, maybe that’s weird.

I push myself up against the pillows while Aurora abandons me for the warmer patch of comforter beside my hip. I press my lips together as I watch my cat start washing one paw, and feel the stupid smile come back.

“Oh, this is bad.”

I close my eyes for a second, then listen as my cat gets off my bed and walks away entirely.

“You could at least pretend to care, Aurora,” I call after her as I reach for my phone, unplugging it from the charger and squinting at the screen until the brightness stops hurting my eyes. There are enough notifications waiting that I immediately decide none of them can possibly be urgent, but then I see a name I’ve never seen on my phone before.

Flora Ramos

The stupid smile comes back.

We exchanged numbers sometime after the kissing and before we finally went back inside. I don’t remember exactly how it came up, only that at some point I became aware of the fact that I had kissed this woman several times and still had no way of contacting her that didn’t involve showing up at her place of employment and ordering coffee until she happened to be working.

Which I apparently said out loud. Flora laughed, asked for my phone, and typed in her number.

I watched her do it while standing close enough that our arms were still touching, my brain operating at maybe thirty percent capacity because I’d

just discovered that Flora Ramos was, indeed, a very good kisser.

Then she handed me my phone, not without texting herself first.

"What's your last name?"

"Hawthorne."

"You truly sound like a fairy tale."

I laughed, and she looked at me with crinkles by her eyes and a scrunched up nose and a smile so big, I thought my heart was going to stop beating for a minute.

Now, in the considerably less flattering light of morning, her name is sitting beneath three messages from Dani, one from Veronica, an email from work I refuse to acknowledge on principle, and a notification from Whisp.

FLORA

Did you make it home okay?

I glance at the time and wince.

ME

I did! Sorry, I passed out. Hope you made it home okay too.

I send it before I can start editing myself and set the phone down.

Then I pick it back up, and I have to tell myself that it's not because I'm hoping or waiting for Flora to answer.

I'm absolutely not.

I have other notifications. Important ones.

I open the group chat long enough to discover that Dani's three messages consist of *HELLO*, *MERRY*, and a final string of question marks sent at two in the morning, which tells me everything I need to know about what she wants. I close it again without answering.

Veronica can deal with her later.

I put my phone down and finally drag myself out of bed, discovering in the process that I apparently slept in my tights and only managed to remove one earring before giving up on the rest of my clothes entirely. The other earring turns up somewhere near my hip after I shake out the comforter, along with two pieces of straw that land on the floor beside my feet.

I stare at them and think, immediately, that I have no idea how they got here.

Actually, I do know how they got here, and that sends me straight back to the patio.

The stupid smile again.

“This is so humiliating.”

Aurora meows from the hallway.

“I’m coming.”

Once she’s fed, I’ve washed the remnants of last night’s makeup off my face, and found a sweatshirt that doesn’t make my skin overheat, my phone buzzes on the kitchen counter.

FLORA

I did. :)

That’s all.

I look at the smiley face longer than any reasonable person should, and my silly little reverie is interrupted by the sound of a cabinet closing, and the beep of the electric kettle quickly following.

Rose is standing behind me in the kitchen in pajama pants and one of my old college sweatshirts, pouring water into the mug she has decided belongs to her for the duration of her stay. Her hair is piled on top of her head, and there is an open container of yogurt beside her on the counter.

She glances at me.

“Good morning, Sleeping Beauty.”

Something about the way she sounds, the tone she’s using, makes me immediately suspicious. It’s way too normal.

“Why did you say it like that?”

Rose pauses with the kettle halfway back to its base. “Like what?”

I squint at her, and the corner of her mouth quirks up, just a little bit, and I absolutely know she’s about to fuck with me. “Rose.”

“I said good morning.”

“Yes, suspiciously.”

She looks at me for another second, then puts her mug down on the counter. “You’re going to have to give me more to work with here.”

I narrow my eyes as I cross the kitchen, phone in hand like a paranoid lovesick fool.

“Who spilled?”

She turns back to her yogurt and starts humming, completely unperturbed.

“Was it Dani?” Rose looks up to me, and her forehead creases. “Or Veronica? Actually, Veronica is more likely to tell you something without making it obvious that she’s telling you something, so I’m going with Veronica.”

“Merryweather, I have no idea what you are talking about.”

I study her face. Rose has never been particularly good at lying to me, mostly because she starts smiling when she thinks she’s getting away with something. There is no smile now. Just increasing confusion and, underneath it, the beginning of curiosity.

Which means—

I turn to the coffee machine and suddenly hear a squeal of what can only be described as joy come from deep inside my sister’s chest cavity, and immediately feel myself flush, head to toe.

She clears her throat.

“Merryweather,” she says, very calmly despite the outburst of whatever that was just a few seconds ago. “Did you kiss the coffee girl?”

I turn around so fast, I nearly slosh my coffee onto my hand.

And it starts slowly, the wolfish smile. Pulling at one corner of her mouth before spreading across her entire face, and I realize with a sinking feeling that she hadn't known a single thing. I have walked into my own kitchen and voluntarily provided my sister with information she didn’t have because, again, I’m a fool.

“You’re horrible,” I say as I turn back to the coffee machine.

“I’m excited!”

I close my eyes.

Behind me, Rose laughs softly, and the sound is so pleased I briefly consider taking my coffee back upstairs and locking my bedroom door. Except that would only confirm everything more thoroughly, and I have already done enough damage for one morning.

I stir my coffee longer than necessary, watching the bubbles disappear while my face slowly returns to a temperature compatible with human life.

The ridiculous thing is that I’m embarrassed when there isn’t anything to be embarrassed about.

I kissed Flora, just like I’ve kissed other people before.

I *wanted* to kiss Flora, she very clearly wanted to kiss me back, and unless I’ve fundamentally misunderstood several important things about human behavior, we both had a very good time doing it.

Still, when I finally turn around, Rose is waiting for me with her eyebrows raised.

"Yes," I say. "I kissed the coffee girl."

Her entire face lights up again.

"And that's all the information you're getting."

"I didn't even ask for anything."

"Well, Rose, I know you, and I know you *love* the details."

"Okay, yes." She smiles. "But I was going to ask if you're happy."

That takes some of the wind out of me.

Rose has already turned back to the counter, slicing a few strawberries and adding them to her yogurt, as if she hasn't just reached across the kitchen and poked me somewhere soft.

I take a sip of coffee.

"Yeah," I say after a moment. "I am."

"Good."

And because she is still Rose and still my sister, and we were raised by the same people, she lets exactly three seconds pass before adding, "But if you decide you want to volunteer additional information—"

My phone vibrates in my hand.

I look down, hoping it's another message from Flora.

**The Third Fairy sent you a message.**

I open it.

THE THIRD FAIRY

Good morning, Primavera. Ready for step three?

I smile into my coffee.

PRIMAVERA1959

Depends. Is step three going to emotionally devastate me before breakfast?

The response comes quickly.

THE THIRD FAIRY

Have you had breakfast?

I glance toward Rose's yogurt, then at my coffee, which is currently the only thing standing between me and metaphorical starvation.

PRIMAVERA1959

No

THE THIRD FAIRY

Then yes.

A laugh escapes me before I can stop it.

Rose looks over my shoulder, but I wave her away and lean against the counter, attention dropping back to my phone.

PRIMAVERA1959

Great. I love that for me.

THE THIRD FAIRY

You asked for the full experience

PRIMAVERA1959

I asked for a love spell, actually

THE THIRD FAIRY

And look how well that turned out for you.

I actually gasp. "Oh, she's mean today."

"Who?"

"The witch."

Rose makes a small sound of acknowledgment and goes back to her breakfast. Apparently, this is a normal enough answer in my life now that she, a person who famously loves details, required no further investigation or details..

PRIMAVERA1959

I feel like mocking the customer is probably bad business practice.

THE THIRD FAIRY

You're still here

I bite back a smile.

PRIMAVERA1959

Because you refuse to give me my money back.

THE THIRD FAIRY

Whatever you need to tell yourself.

I stare at the message. There's something different about her this morning.

Nothing dramatic. She's always had a serious tone, and we've been talking long enough now that neither of us bothers with the polite customer-service version of ourselves anymore.

But this feels—

I read it again.

No, of course not. I'm projecting.

I kissed a woman last night, and why would I now believe everyone is flirting with me? It can't really go from zero to one hundred in a matter of weeks, can it?

THE THIRD FAIRY

Step three is ask.

PRIMAVERA1959

Ask what?

THE THIRD FAIRY

Something you want.

PRIMAVERA1959

This seems suspiciously similar to the last assignment

THE THIRD FAIRY

Last time you had to admit you wanted it. This time you have to let someone else know, open yourself up to the universe and manifest what you want, but loudly.

I stop smiling, because it suddenly feels considerably less fun.

PRIMAVERA1959

Can I go back to noticing leaves? That was easier.

THE THIRD FAIRY

No

PRIMAVERA1959

Bossy

There’s a long pause before her answer comes through.

THE THIRD FAIRY

You like me bossy

I choke on my coffee, and it’s not a delicate, feminine one either. It’s a full-on Merryweather Hawthorne cough, where the hot liquid goes down the wrong pipe so violently that I have to put the mug on the counter before I drop it, one hand pressed to my chest while my eyes water.

“What the hell?” Rose asks.

I hold up a finger. I’m fine.

Probably.

My throat burns, my eyes are watering, and when I finally manage to breathe normally again, I can feel heat spreading all the way up my neck and into my cheeks.

Which is ridiculous. It’s a message about the reversal of a spell that is, admittedly, working too well on me.

Four words on a screen from a woman whose actual name I don’t even know.

I wipe beneath one eye and look at the phone again.

“Are you blushing?” My sister chirps from beside me. “Oh my god, Merryweather, you are bright red! What’s happening?”

“I just inhaled coffee.”

Rose gives me a look, but I barely register it because I’m still staring at the message. There are normal ways to interpret it. She’s teasing me. She’s learning more about me—she absolutely knows that I will complain about the homework, but then follow through regardless—and that’s all she means.

Except…

I press my lips together. “Rose?”

“Hmm?”

“Do you think my witch is flirting with me?”

The spoon stops halfway to her mouth. “What?”

I finally look up from my phone. “My witch.” I lift it slightly. “I think she might be flirting with me.”

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# CHAPTER 23

# FLORA

MAGGIE LASTS THROUGH FOUR FULL OUTFIT CHANGES BEFORE SHE STARTS making fun of me.

She's sitting cross-legged on one side of my bed with her back against the headboard, holding the glass of wine she brought with her because apparently getting ready for a date at thirty-five requires refreshments and supervision.

I pull the black sweater over my head, tug my hair from the collar, and look at myself in the mirror.

"No."

"Why?"

"I've worn this in front of her before," I say, and I feel it. The jittery energy coursing through my veins. The restless movements that are threatening to take over my fingers, uninvited. "At work."

Maggie takes a sip of wine and hums into her drink.

I turn away from the mirror and reach for the maroon dress I discarded ten minutes ago. Maggie watches me pick it up, then watches me put it back down.

She arrived twenty minutes ago under the pretense of returning a pair of earrings I left at her apartment sometime during the summer. She could have returned them at any point in the intervening three months. But she chose tonight, forty-five minutes before I was supposed to leave for dinner with Merry.

I know exactly what she's doing. She knows exactly what she's doing. And we both know the other one knows, too.

But neither of us has acknowledged it because that would mean acknowledging Alison, and I want her out of my head, especially right now.

It's nice, though. Having Maggie back in my space like this.

Especially because there was a time when she would have been here without the excuse of earrings. She would have let herself into the house, said hello to my mother on her way through, come upstairs and started opening my closet before I had the chance to tell her I didn't need help.

I turn back to the mirror and smooth my hands over the black sweater.

"Wear the dress," she says, scrolling through her phone. She is, again, doing this on purpose.

I narrow my eyes at her, but there's no bite behind it. I'm too aware of the time glowing on my phone beside her. Six twenty-three.

Not that I'm counting, of course.

I take off my sweater and swap it for the short dress, and I instantly know what she means.

"You really like her."

There's no teasing in her voice now. I can hear the faint sound of her moving the wineglass against her knee, the hum of the old ceiling fan above us, Fausto talking somewhere downstairs. *Mamá* answers him, too muffled through the floor for me to understand any of the words.

I meet her eyes in the mirror. "I barely know her."

"I didn't say you knew her."

That is, annoyingly, a very Maggie answer. I look back at myself in the mirror and reach to my desk to grab the small gold hoop earrings I purchased last week on a whim.

I push the hoop through my ear and fasten it. "I like what I do know."

"Okay."

"And I'm attracted to her."

"Obviously."

I give her a look in the mirror.

She raises her wineglass. "You kissed her against the side of somebody's house, Flora. I haven't witnessed you doing that in the two decades I've known you."

"It was a patio."

"Oh, Your Fucking Highness, my apologies for the lack of detail."

“And she kissed me first.”

Maggie’s mouth twitches.

I reach for the other earring.

“And then I kissed her.”

“Hmmm,” she says, and I see her smile hiding behind the glass.

I laugh, and some of the nervous energy that’s been sitting underneath my ribs since Merry texted me on Saturday loosens.

It had been such a simple message.

*Would you like to have dinner with me this week? Like an actual date?*

Then, less than a minute later, and in what I now recognize is a total Merry move: *I realize “actual date” makes it sound like… I don’t even know. I just mean a date. With me, obviously.*

I’d been packing an order at the dining room table when it came through, and I’d smiled so quickly that Fausto had looked up from across the room and asked me what was wrong with me.

I hadn’t made Merry wait.

*I knew what you meant.*

Then: *Yes.*

It had felt strangely good to send it without adding anything else. No joke to make the yes smaller. No qualification about my schedule. And definitely no pretending I needed to think about it when I didn’t.

I wanted to go on a date with her. So I’m going on a date with her.

It should be that simple. And maybe it is, I guess.

“I forgot you do this,” Maggie says, unexpectedly.

I glance at her reflection in the mirror. “Do what?”

She gestures vaguely toward me. “This. The shirts. The earrings. You’ve checked your phone four times since I got here, and I know she’s not coming here to pick you up.”

“I have not checked it four times.”

“Five, then.” Maggie smiles, and I wait for whatever comes next.

But nothing does. It’s that unspoken thing between us now, where we know exactly what we mean but we don’t say it out loud. She reaches for the green sweater beside her—an early contender that was quickly discarded—and starts folding it.

And, in all honestly, I’m grateful. For the lack of questioning on her part—whether I’m ready or not for whatever *this* is.

Perhaps Maggie understands that I have asked myself enough questions already. And maybe she just knows me.

I look at the time again.

“Stop looking at me.”

“I didn't say anything, Flora.”

“You really don’t have to. I can hear you thinking from all the way over here.”

“That sounds like a you problem, girl.”

I grab my coat.

———

Merry is already there when I arrive.

I see her through the front window before she sees me, sitting at a small table near the back of the restaurant with one hand wrapped around a water glass and the other resting beside her phone.

For a moment, I stay outside covered from the rain under the restaurant’s awning.

Not at all because I’m reconsidering any part of this, but because I like looking at her.

She’s wearing a cornflower blue sweater that makes her hair look even lighter under the warm pendant lights, and she’s watching something happening near the bar with a faint crease between her eyebrows. Then someone passes the table, and she shifts her chair automatically to give them more room.

It’s such an ordinary thing, and it makes me smile.

I pull open the door.

The restaurant is very warm, and I can see that the windows are lightly fogged around the edges from the difference in temperature. It smells like garlic and bread and something buttery coming from the kitchen. Conversations are overlapping around the room, not loud enough that anyone has to compete with them, but enough that there’s a constant cadence of murmurs.

Merry looks to where I’m standing, and the first thing I notice is how her entire face changes.

The second is that mine probably does, too.

She stands before I reach the table.

“Hi.”

“Hi.”

For one awkward second, neither of us seems to know what the appropriate greeting is for someone you’ve already had your tongue in the mouth of but have never actually gone to dinner with.

Merry solves it by leaning in and kissing my cheek.

Her hand touches my arm as she does, warm even through my sleeves. When she pulls back, she’s blushing. “I wasn’t sure what we were doing.”

I smile. “That worked.”

“Good,” she says, and a small, nervous giggle escapes her mouth. “I considered a handshake.”

“Yes, that would have been weird.”

I take off my coat and hang it over the back of my chair.

“I know. That’s why I didn’t do it.”

“Well,” I say as I sit down, a smile on my face. “I appreciate your restraint.”

“You should.”

For the first few minutes, it’s oddly formal. We talk about the restaurant, which Merry hasn’t been to before but I have, once, years ago. She asks what I usually order, and I tell her I don’t remember. She says I’m terribly unhelpful and then groans, as if the filter between her brain and her mouth is actively betraying her.

And I think that is what finally does it, because she visibly relaxes, her shoulders let loose and her hands start moving more freely when she talks.

Eventually, the server comes and we order drinks, and by the time we’re deciding whether to split an appetizer, whatever invisible boundary we’d been trying not to trip over has disappeared.

“I don’t eat olives,” Merry tells me.

I look up from the menu. “At all?”

“Correct.” She shakes her head. “Green, black, stuffed with things. None. Gross.”

I smile as I look back down at the menu. “Good to know.”

“Is it?”

“I don’t know,” I say with a small, casual shrug. “I’m assuming this is the part of the date where I’m supposed to collect important information about you.”

Merry laughs, and when I look up, she’s watching me over the top of her menu.

There’s something nice about being able to do that now. Look at her without pretending I’m checking if she needs something or waiting for her to finish talking. At the café, even after I started hoping she'd come in, there was always something between us: a counter, a line of customers, a nosy coworker.

The server comes back and we order, and somewhere between the appetizer and our entrées, I learn that Merry’s job at Briarwood involves far more spreadsheets than I would have expected from a company whose bestselling product is candy corn.

She tells me about forecasting and seasonal sales, and I understand maybe sixty percent of it, but I know that she’s good at it. That’s the part I like listening to. Merry changes when she talks about something she knows well. Her thoughts stop tripping over each other. She still talks with her hands and wanders occasionally into details I didn’t ask for, but there’s a confidence underneath it I haven’t seen before.

“You like it?” I ask.

She pauses with her glass halfway to her mouth.

“I like figuring things out,” she says after a moment. “I could do without most of the things surrounding the figuring out.”

That makes sense to me.

When she asks about the café, I tell her I like it for almost the opposite reason. My workday ends when I walk out the door. I know what I’m doing there. I like making something with my hands and handing it to someone and knowing the job is finished.

It leads, somehow, to the jewelry aspect of my online shop.

Merry’s whole expression changes when I mention it.

“You make jewelry?”

“Sometimes.”

“What kind?”

And because she asks like she actually wants the answer, I show her.

She moves to the chair next to me instead of taking my phone, her shoulder settling against mine as I scroll through photos of things I’ve done recently. I show her bracelets I’ve sold for the shop and a few pieces I’ve kept, explaining some of the stones when she asks. She stops on one picture longer than the others, enlarging it with two fingers.

“Oh, Flora. These are beautiful.”

The compliment shouldn’t make me as self-conscious as it does. I’ve sold jewelry to thousands of strangers in the past three years. I’ve made custom pieces and generic ones, all with the purpose of helping said strangers achieve something for themselves.

But Merry’s words…

“Thanks.”

“No, really.” She looks at me. “You’re good at this. You have a really good eye.”

I lock my phone and set it beside my plate before she can see how much I like hearing that from her.

From there, the conversation wanders.

I tell her about Fausto because I’d recently made a bracelet for his girlfriend. Merry tells me more about Rose, and we discover we’re both eldest daughters, that she bought her house two years ago and the list of things she wants to do to it gets longer by the day. I tell her how *Mamá* gardens with more optimism than skill and that Fausto is in a fraternity I pretend not to judge him for.

None of it is particularly important.

That’s what I like about it.

There isn’t a single moment where I think, *This is when I learn something significant and earth-shattering about Merry*.

I just keep learning things.

The way she picks the mushrooms out of one side of her risotto but insists she doesn’t dislike mushrooms enough to have mentioned them alongside the olives or to even order something that is not, perhaps, a mushroom dish. The fact that she asks me questions and remembers my answers. That when I tell her a story about Fausto, she doesn’t immediately use it as an opening to tell one of her own. She listens first.

And somewhere along the way, I stop noticing how long we’ve been sitting there.

Our plates disappear. Then the glasses are refilled. When the server asks whether we’d like dessert, Merry looks at me before she answers, and I know immediately what she’s asking.

*More time?*

I glance at the dessert menu.

“Sure.”

Her smile is immediate.
By the time we finally step outside, the rain has stopped.

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# CHAPTER 24

# MERRYWEATHER

YOU KNOW WHAT'S UNREASONABLE ABOUT DATING? MAYBE UNREASONABLE about love, too.

Dates ending.

Specifically this date with Flora.

Because she is standing beside me under the narrow awning outside the restaurant, pulling her hair free from the collar of her coat, and I have spent the last two hours discovering several new things about her that are making my situation infinitely worse.

She makes jewelry.

She talks about her brother with the particular combination of affection and irritation I recognize immediately as an older sister.

She enjoys her work at The Spindle, which I'd never even considered because I have, allegedly, internalized the idea that everyone working anywhere must secretly be trying to escape their hellish boss.

She also listened to me explain the intricacies of seasonal candy forecasting for what had to be at least ten minutes and at most fifty without her eyes glazing over once.

And she laughs with her whole fucking face when something really gets her.

I suspected that last one, and I can confirm I like it.

The restaurant door closes behind us, cutting off the warmth and conversation from inside, and I tuck my hands into my coat pockets.

It rained while we were eating; enough that the sidewalks shine beneath the streetlights and the air has that damp, clean smell that comes after it. Water droplets hang from the bare branches above the curb, catching the light whenever the wind moves them.

Flora looks down the street. “Where did you park?”

I point to my right. “About three blocks that way.”

Her mouth pulls lightly to one side.

“What?”

“I’m parked that way.”

She points left.

I look in the direction of her car, then mine, as if the city could, magically, rearrange itself if I give it a second. Maybe a minute.

“Well.”

Flora smiles. “Well.”

This is the moment. Where one of us says, *I had a good time*, even though we already said that inside. Then we hug, or kiss, presumably, because we’ve definitely progressed beyond hugging. Then I walk to my car and Flora walks to hers, and I spend the entire drive home wondering how soon I’m allowed to ask her out again.

I don’t want to do any of that yet.

“Do you want to walk for a little while?”

Flora looks at me, and I resist with my whole body the urge to add anything.

This is something I’ve discovered about myself: I’m incapable of asking a question and allowing it to exist independently in the world. Normally, I would chase after it with qualifications and justifications until I’ve made whatever I asked for so small and convenient that saying no would be almost impressive.

But I asked.

So I wait.

“Yeah,” Flora says. “I’d like that.”

The relief is embarrassingly immediate.

“Okay.”

We head left, then take a right at a corner where there’s a line outside a restaurant, and I know for a fact that neither of our cars is in the direction we’re walking in now, and I suddenly like this decision even more.

For a while, we don’t say much.

It’s not uncomfortable, and it amazes me enough that I notice, because, and as a surprise to no one, I’m not usually great with silences.

It gives me too much time to wonder whether the other person is bored or tired or waiting for me to say something interesting, which inevitably makes me say something significantly less interesting than whatever might have happened if I’d left the silence alone.

With Flora, it feels different.

She walks beside me with her hands tucked into her coat pockets, close enough that our sleeves occasionally touch. She doesn’t seem to be waiting for me to entertain her.

She’s just here.

We pass a restaurant with fogged windows and tiny lamps glowing in every table, and I notice, as we keep walking and talking, that there’s water gathered in the uneven places in the pavement, reflecting pieces of neon signs and headlights and apartment windows above us.

I notice all of it.

A few months ago—hell, even a few weeks ago—I probably wouldn’t have noticed any of it.

Or maybe I would have noticed and immediately moved on to the next thing in my head.

Tonight, I notice because there isn’t anywhere else I particularly want my attention to be.

Flora’s shoulder brushes mine when we step around a puddle, and neither of us moves away afterward. Her hand comes out of her pocket and hangs loosely beside her as she walks, only a few inches from mine.

I could wait. There’s a version of me that probably would—should. Wait to see whether she reaches first. Wait for another brush of our fingers that I can pretend happened accidentally. Wait until I’m certain enough that taking her hand doesn’t feel like asking for something.

Instead, I let my fingers touch hers.

Flora glances down, then her eyes are on mine.

For one terrible, dramatic second, I become acutely aware that I have somehow made hand holding feel more terrifying than asking this woman if I could kiss her after eye-fucking her all night.

Then Flora turns her hand over, and I take that as a sign to slide my fingers between hers.

She closes them around mine and…

Oh.

This is—

I don’t know why this feels like such a big deal.

We’ve kissed. A lot.

I’ve had my hands on her waist and in her hair. I know what she tastes like. I know the way she moves closer when I touch the side of her neck. None of that should make holding her hand feel more intimate somehow, and yet it does.

The city goes quieter as we move farther from the restaurant. There are fewer people on this block, mostly dark storefronts beneath apartments, their upper windows glowing against the night. Fallen leaves have gathered in wet clumps along the curb. Somewhere nearby, someone has a wood-burning fireplace going, the faint smoky smell mixing with the damp air.

We walk and talk until Flora finally points out that we’ve managed to get farther away from both of our cars.

“I thought you knew where we were going,” I say.

She gives me a sideways look. “Why would you think that?”

“You seemed confident.”

“I was following you.”

I stop. Flora takes another step before our joined hands pull her gently back toward me.

We look at each other, neither of us saying anything, until Flora laughs.

It starts quietly, but I join her, and suddenly we’re standing in the middle of a damp sidewalk laughing because two grown women have walked nearly twenty minutes without either one having the slightest idea where they were going.

“We’re idiots,” I say.

“I thought you had a plan.”

A giggle escapes me, and the smile that lights up Flora’s face is something out of my wildest dreams, I think. “Why would you ever assume I have a plan?”

She laughs again, and I decide this is sufficient evidence that the evening has been a success.

We turn around eventually, although neither of us seems particularly motivated to get back. Flora keeps her hand in mine, and without the question of where we’re going hanging over us, I stop paying much attention to the route. We retrace our steps through the same wet blocks,

past the restaurants beginning to empty and the darkened storefronts, talking when something occurs to one of us and letting the conversation disappear when it doesn't.

It feels totally different from dinner.

There, I'd been aware that we were on a date. Not nervously, exactly, but enough that every so often I'd remember it. I'd look across the table at Flora and think, *Wow, I'm on a date with this stunning woman*. I'd wonder what she thought of me, whether I was talking too much, whether the fact that we'd already kissed should make this less nerve-racking than it was.

Out here, somewhere between getting lost and finding our way back, I stop thinking about any of that.

Flora's thumb moves absently over the side of my hand. And I notice that most of all.

Except when the restaurant appears at the end of the block, and with it comes the unfortunate reminder that our cars are waiting for us in opposite directions.

I slow down without meaning to, and she follows my lead. For a few more steps, neither of us acknowledges it.

She smiles, but when we reach the corner where I know we need to part ways, she doesn't turn toward it.

There are things I could do here. Sensible, normal date-ending things. Tell her again that I had a good time. Ask when she's working next. Kiss her goodnight and walk to my car while feeling appropriately pleased with myself for having successfully completed a date with a woman I very much want to date again.

But instead, my whole body is screaming at me to do a very Merryweather thing.

"I just don't really want to go home yet."

There.

But it comes out quieter than most things I say, and without the joke I probably would have attached to it a few weeks ago, so that the disappointment isn't immediately palpable.

Flora's expression softens.

"Neither do I."

Her answer settles warmly somewhere beneath my ribs, and I step closer.

I don’t have to ask this time, because Flora meets me before I’ve quite finished closing the space between us, her free hand coming up to my face as she kisses me.

The first touch of her mouth right at the corner of my lips is soft enough that I smile against it.

Then she kisses me again, and there is something almost unfair about how quickly my body remembers her. The cold air and the wet street, and the people moving in and out of establishments around us all recede when Flora’s fingers slip into my hair. I move closer, my hand finding her waist beneath the open edge of her coat.

Flora makes a quiet sound when I kiss her again, and whatever intention I had of keeping this appropriate for a public sidewalk disappears.

Her hand slides from my hair to the back of my neck. I can feel the heat of her palm there despite the cold, and when she presses closer, I forget for several seconds that we were supposed to be saying goodbye.

I can feel my pulse beneath her fingers.

Flora smiles.

“I like kissing you,” I say, somewhat clumsily and in my classic Merryweather fashion.

She brushes her thumb beneath my ear, and for a fraction of frozen time, I think she’s going to step back and thank me and say, “Goodbye, Merryweather,” and I’ll never see her again.

“Me too—”

“Do you want to come home with me?” I almost yell. Immediately, the urge to justify myself rises in my throat.

*We can just hang out. We don’t have to do anything. Unless you’re tired. You probably have work early.*

But I don’t, for a change. I asked her what I wanted to ask, and whatever she says gets to be an answer.

Flora looks at me, and I’m suddenly very aware of how close we’re still standing.

Then her mouth curves.

“Yeah,” she says. “I want to.”

I don’t know why those last three words affect me more than the yes.

Maybe because there’s nothing ambiguous in them. No accommodation. No *if you want me to.*

She wants to, and that is that.

“Okay,” I say, and despite my best efforts, I can feel my own smile spreading. “Good.”

Flora laughs softly. “Good?”

“I’m trying really hard to be normal about this.”

“And how is that going?”

She kisses me once more, quick enough that I barely have time to respond before she pulls away. But I feel it—the butterflies in my stomach and the flush creeping up my cheeks and into my ears, and the smile that doesn’t want to leave my face.

“Come on.”

We finally separate, and the cold immediately finds all the places she’s been warm against me.

Flora’s car is in the opposite direction, so we agree she’ll follow me. I watch her walk away for longer than is strictly necessary before forcing myself into my own car, and the entire time there’s a strange, buoyant feeling in my chest that I don’t bother trying to reason myself out of.

A few minutes later, I pull away from the curb.

At the next light, a pair of headlights settles into place behind me.

I smile at Flora in the rear view mirror, even though she can’t possibly see it.

Then the light turns green, and I lead her home.

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# CHAPTER 25

# FLORA

"Careful with that step."

I look down just in time to see the uneven edge of the second concrete step leading up to Merry's porch, then back at her as she reaches the top.

"Good to know."

"I keep meaning to fix it, but, you know…"

She makes a face and gestures with her hands, as if that somehow explains the chaos that follows her. I laugh, and Merry turns to unlock the red front door, hiding a smile I can still see from the side.

The street behind us has gone quiet again.

I know this part of the neighborhood well enough that I barely paid attention to the drive over. The Spindle is only a few minutes away, and my own house isn't much farther in the opposite direction. I've driven these streets early in the morning when most of the houses were still dark and again after closing shifts, when every restaurant along the busier blocks seemed to be spilling people onto the sidewalk at once.

This part of it is quieter, and I don't know if it matches Merry's personality. Mostly small houses pressed close together beneath old trees, porches with wet railings and narrow strips of yard that reflect the barely-there streetlights.

I've probably driven through the intersection of Merry's street dozens of times without knowing she was here.

I look at the back of her head while she fights briefly with the lock.

That feels strange now. Not strange in a cosmic way, because I'm not about to assign meaning to Seattle geography because a woman I like happens to live near the place where I work.

It's just that Merry has existed this close to me for years, and the thought sends a slow awareness through me that has very little to do with the cold.

Merry finally gets the lock. "There."

"Do you fight with your front door every night?"

"Only when someone is watching," she replies as she turns toward me, and for the first time since we got out of our cars, neither of us immediately looks away.

The porch light is directly above her, the warm glow catching the damp strands of blonde hair around her face and the pink still lingering in her cheeks from the cold—or from what we were doing out in public before we came here.

Maybe both.

For a moment, the neighborhood seems especially quiet.

Merry's hand is still wrapped around the doorknob.

I know why I'm here. Or, rather, I know why I agreed to be here. I wanted more time with her and to keep kissing her somewhere that wasn't a sidewalk.

Beyond that, we didn't negotiate anything. Merry didn't attach an explanation when she asked me to come home with her, and I didn't ask for one before I said yes.

I like that more than I expected to, I think.

"Okay," she says as she opens the door. It bangs softly against the wall behind it, and she makes a gesture for me to go in first. "I should warn you about something."

I raise my eyebrows. "Are you a serial killer?"

Merry giggles, and my stomach swoops.

"No, but she might look like she wants to kill you."

It's obvious she's talking about the cat, but I don't have time to ask.

Aurora sits several feet inside the entryway, perfectly still with her tail curled neatly around her paws, looking at me as though she's been expecting someone and is disappointed to discover it's me.

I smile. "Oh."

Merry follows my gaze. "Yeah."

The cat doesn’t move.

“She looks exactly like I thought she would.”

Merry turns to me. “What does that mean?”

“Absolutely gorgeous, but judgmental as fuck.”

“Yes.” Merry nods and takes off her shoes and coat, hanging it neatly on a free-standing coat rack by the door. “That’s fair.”

I take a step farther into the house, and Merry closes the door behind me.

The warmth hits first, carrying the faint smell of whatever candle she’s burned recently and something sweeter underneath it. I take off my coat while Merry flicks on the lamp beside the couch, and the room comes into view slowly around her.

“Aurora, this is Flora,” she says to the cat.

I stop with one arm still caught in my sleeve.

“Are you introducing us?”

Merry freezes halfway though whatever she was doing. “Yes?”

“That’s cute.”

“It’s not cute. She needs to know who you are. She’s heard about you.”

That catches me, and the corner of my mouth lifts.

Merry seems to hear it a second after I do. “I mean—” She turns around. “Not in a weird way.”

I bite the inside of my cheek. “What would the weird way be?”

“Like I come home from the coffee shop and immediately brief my cat on your activities.”

“Do you?”

Merry looks at Aurora, then at me. “Not immediately.”

I laugh, and some small tension I hadn’t realized I’d carried through the front door loosens with it. Merry shakes her head and walks farther into the house.

“Come in before I tell you anything else.”

I follow her into the living room, and immediately understand why I could never have pictured Merry living anywhere else. It’s small and cozy, softened by warm lamps and an overstuffed pink velvet couch with a blanket thrown over one arm, books and framed photographs sharing space on the shelves with half-burned candles and little things that look collected rather than decorated. Nothing is particularly coordinated, but everything

feels warm and comfortable and slightly whimsical in the most perfectly Merry way.

Aurora follows me in, winding once around my ankles before wandering to the couch.

“Wow,” Merry says. “Okay. So we’re just trusting strangers now?”

“I’m not a stranger.”

The words are out before I think about them, and Merry looks at me, blinking with what I think is confusion.

“No,” she says after a moment. “You’re not.”

Something shifts.

It’s subtle enough that I might have missed it if I wasn’t already so aware of her.

The quiet of the house settles around us, making the rain against the windows suddenly noticeable. Merry is only a few feet away, her feet bare, her hair damp around her face, most of her lipstick gone because I’ve spent a considerable portion of the last hour removing it with my lips.

“Oh, hello, my sweet child,” she murmurs to the cat once it settles on the couch, bending to scratch beneath Aurora’s chin in a voice so soft and ridiculous that I almost don’t recognize it. “Were you all alone for four whole hours? Did you think I’d abandoned you forever?”

I stare at the image in front of me. Merry kisses the top of Aurora’s head.

Something inside me breaks.

Maybe it’s because she’s still wearing the clothes she wore on our date, looking flushed and beautiful and thoroughly kissed while speaking to a cat like it’s a newborn child. Maybe it’s because I’ve spent the entire evening slowly collecting different versions of Merry—the competent woman talking about work across the table, the nervous one who reached for my hand, the woman who kissed me on the sidewalk like she was expecting me to evaporate off the face of the earth and she was singlehandedly responsible for that not happening—and apparently this is the thing that finished me off.

I want to squeeze her. And bite her. But mostly, I want her mouth back on mine.

Merry straightens and catches me staring.

“What?”

I cross the room.

Her expression changes before I reach her, the question disappearing when she realizes what I'm doing. I catch her face between my hands and kiss her hard enough that she takes a startled step backward, her hands finding my waist on instinct.

She laughs into my mouth.

"What—"

I kiss her again before she can finish.

Whatever had been simmering between us since we stepped inside catches all at once.

Merry's fingers tighten at my waist and pull me against her, and the little sound that escapes her when our bodies meet goes through me so quickly that any thought of slowing down vanishes. I slide one hand into her hair and feel the damp strands curl around my fingers as I angle her mouth beneath mine.

She tastes like wine and the mint she'd taken from the bowl at the restaurant as we were leaving.

Merry's hands move up my back, and I press closer without breaking the kiss, impatient with even the small amount of space between us.

"Flora," she manages when I move my mouth along her jaw.

There is laughter still caught in her voice, but less of it now.

I pull back just far enough to look at her.

Her breathing has changed.

So has mine.

"What was that for?"

I brush my thumb over her cheek. "You were being too cute."

For half a second, she only stares at me. Then the corner of her mouth starts to lift.

"I didn't realize my relationship with a cat would be such a turn-on for you."

I groan and kiss her again, mostly to shut her up.

Merry laughs, but the sound fades when my hand settles at her waist and slips beneath the hem of her sweater. Her skin is warm against my palm, warmer than I expect after being outside, and she goes still for the smallest fraction of a second before leaning into the touch.

That does something entirely different to me.

The humor drains out of the moment without taking the warmth with it.

Merry’s eyes open when I pull back, and suddenly we’re close enough that I can see the faint smudge of mascara beneath one of them and the shimmer of her blush high on her cheekbones.

Neither of us pretends we don’t know where this is going.

I run my thumb slowly over the bare skin at her side, and her breath catches.

Merry’s eyes drop to my mouth, and when she kisses me this time, there’s nothing playful about it.

She pushes into me with enough force that I take a step backward. Then another.

The backs of my knees hit something soft, and I barely register the couch before I lose my balance. Merry makes a startled sound as we go down together, and I land against the cushions with her half on top of me, one of my arms still wrapped around her waist.

I use that moment, that suspended second, to stare at her.

Her hair has fallen forward around her face. Her lips are swollen from kissing me. One of her hands is braced beside my head, and her thigh has landed between mine in a way that makes it suddenly difficult to remember what was funny just a minute ago.

Merry’s eyes move over my face. “You okay?”

I nod, sliding my hand slowly along her back. “Come here.”

She does.

There are things you can learn about someone without asking.

I do it all day long. At the café with our regulars and at home with my mother, and in my online shop with my customers.

I’ve gotten good at finding the thing underneath the thing. At noticing what people repeat, what they avoid, what they bury beneath too many explanations because saying it plainly would make it real.

But I don’t want to do that with Merry.

I kiss her until the thought disappears, until there is nothing underneath anything and I stop trying to understand what this moment might mean beyond the fact that I want her and she wants me back.

Merry’s hands slide beneath my dress, and the feeling of her palms against the bare skin of my inner thigh pulls a sound from me before I can stop it. She notices immediately, and her touch slows, then follows the same path again, and when I shiver this time, I feel her smile against my mouth.

“You like that?” Her voice is breathy and raw and gravelly, and I kiss her before I do something stupid like—

It gets messy quickly after that, and the kissing makes it impossible to remember where my hands started or when Merry moved fully into my lap. Her hair keeps falling between us. And my dress has ridden so far up, it’s probably easier if I take it off.

The couch isn’t remotely deep enough for what we’re trying to do on it, and when Merry shifts against me, I grip her hips automatically.

I can feel her breathing. I can feel everything.

She moves again, slower this time, my leg in between hers, and I can feel the warmth of her core, radiating even through the layers of clothing. Heat rolls through me so sharply that my fingers tighten against her hips, and she moans.

“Merry.”

Her mouth finds mine. For a while, there isn’t much room for words.

There are only small questions asked against skin and answers given just as quietly. *Here?* A nod. *Like this?* Yes. Merry pulling me close when she wants me closer, my hands learning the places that make her breath hitch, hers doing the same to me.

“My bedroom is upstairs.”

This time, I hear exactly what she’s saying.

“Show me.”

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# CHAPTER 26

# FLORA

MERRY'S BEDROOM IS AT THE END OF THE HALL.

She keeps hold of my hand the entire way there, which is somehow the thing I notice most. The warmth of her palm against mine and the way her fingers stay threaded through mine, even though there's no reason for them to.

At the door, she looks back.

The confidence she had downstairs hasn't disappeared, but something has shifted beneath it. I can see it in the way she studies my face for a second before pushing the door open, giving me one more opportunity to change my mind without actually asking if I have.

"Okay?" I ask.

The room beyond her is dark except for the soft amber light of a lamp Merry reaches in to turn on, and I register it only in pieces as I follow her inside: an unmade bed, books stacked on the nightstand, clothes folded over the back of a chair, and a window streaked with rain. It feels like the rest of the house—warm and lived in, unmistakably hers—but I don't have much time to look.

"Yes," she says, turning around and pulling me in with her. This kiss is slower than the ones downstairs, but there's nothing tentative about it. Her hands settle at my waist as they pull my dress upward.

Trying to remove clothing while refusing to stop kissing someone is far from graceful. My dress gets briefly caught around one wrist, and Merry

laughs when I nearly elbow the lamp next to us and I have to catch it before it falls.

"This is going really well," she whispers.

"Shut up."

"I'm serious." She moves to kiss my neck. "Extremely seductive."

I stare at her for a second, her hair mussed and her lips swollen and red, and my breath hitches.

I run my hands slowly along her sides, watching her face as I do it, and the intimacy of being allowed to look at her like this hits me almost as hard as the wanting.

I have spent years becoming good at figuring out what people don't say. And Merry… Merry isn't asking me to guess.

When I touch her and pause, she leans into my hand. When I kiss the place beneath her ear and feel her shiver, she whispers, "Again."

There is something almost startling about the simplicity of it.

Merry's arms circle my neck, and I pull her closer until there isn't room left between us, until the warmth of her fully-clothed body and the faint hum of the house around us and the cool air against my naked back become the only things I can hold on to.

Then Merry starts backing toward the bed.

She sits first, looking up at me, and something about the sight of her there sends another rush of heat through me.

Merry reaches for my hand and pulls me closer until I'm standing between her knees, then presses a kiss against my stomach. My breath falters, and I feel heat course through my body so fast, I have to ground myself with my hands on her shoulders, holding on to her so I don't fall.

A tiny flash of satisfaction in her eyes tells me she noticed how my knees went weak, and I feel her smile against my hip, one kiss trailing after the other.

I touch her face, brushing my thumb over her cheek, and she turns her mouth into my palm.

The urgency of downstairs softens, and somehow everything feels more intimate.

Merry reaches for me again, and I go willingly, bending until she can kiss me.

The angle is different with her sitting on the edge of the bed, enough that I have to brace one hand beside her while the other settles against the

back of her neck. She draws me closer between her knees, and the kiss deepens gradually, without the frantic collision that brought us to the couch just an hour ago. There is urgency still, but there's also time, and I feel the difference in the way she touches me.

Her hands aren't searching anymore.

Neither are mine.

I know exactly how to recognize the little intake of breath when my mouth moves along her jaw, the way her fingers tighten against me when I find the place beneath her ear that she liked downstairs. When I kiss the spot again, Merry tips her head to give me more room.

"Again," she whispers.

The word moves through me almost as sharply as her hands do.

I oblige, slower this time, and her eyes fall closed.

There is something intoxicating about watching Merry become less self-conscious. She spends so much of her time filling the air around her, turning nerves into jokes and uncertainty into words, but here she doesn't seem interested in making any of this easier to laugh at. When she likes something, she lets herself like it. When she wants me closer, she pulls me closer.

And when she opens her eyes again, there is nothing uncertain there.

"Come here."

I smile against her skin. "I'm already here."

"Closer."

That I can do.

She moves backward on the bed and I follow, and somewhere in the process the rest of her clothes become increasingly inconvenient.

Merry catches her foot in something and has to grab my arm to keep from tipping sideways, which makes us both laugh until she manages to free herself and immediately pushes me onto the mattress in retaliation.

"Oh, so this is my fault?"

"You distracted me."

I reach for her, and she comes down beside me, and for a long moment, all we do is look at each other.

There is enough light from the lamp to see her clearly, and I let myself. The very subtle dusting of freckles I hadn't noticed until just now. The faint tan line across her collarbone. The way her hair has gone completely wild and curly around her face.

Merry's gaze moves over me with the same unhurried attention.

Normally, being looked at for this long would make me want to do something. Say something. Break the moment before I become too aware of myself inside it.

Her fingers skim gently along my arm. "You're beautiful."

My first instinct is to deflect it. I feel the response waiting somewhere behind my teeth, something easy that would turn the attention back toward her.

"Thank you," I say instead.

Merry smiles, and I kiss her, and after that, time becomes harder to measure. Whatever tenderness had slowed us down lasts only until her hand slides over my bare stomach and pulls me closer.

Her mouth opens beneath mine, and I move over her as she sinks farther into the mattress, her hands running over my back with confidence. There is so much bare skin between us now that every shift creates another point of contact, another warm slide of her body against mine, and I can't seem to get close enough.

I kiss her throat, her shoulder. The place just beneath her collarbone that makes her fingers tighten in my hair.

"Flora."

I lift my head. Merry's cheeks are flushed, her chest rising quickly beneath me. She looks different like this, more like herself. Every reaction crosses her face before she can organize it into something funny or dismiss it as too much.

I love watching it happen.

"What?"

Her hand slides along my side. "I want you."

The words hit me with enough force that I stop breathing for a second, and heat moves through me, low and immediate.

I lower my mouth to her again. "You have me."

Merry makes a sound against my lips that nearly destroys whatever patience I have left.

My hands move over her more deliberately now, and I let myself watch her as I touch her, learning what makes her arch toward me and what makes her breathing go shallow. When I start moving my hand lower, I pause long enough to meet her eyes.

Merry nods. "Fuck, please."

“Like this?”

“Yes.”

I move my fingers, finding her clit. She’s so fucking warm and wet, and the contact makes her arch off the bed. The moan that follows is delicious and breathy and everything that is right about sex.

“Oh,” Merry moans. Her eyes are closed and her head sinks deeper into the bed. One hand reaches for me and finds my wrist, not to stop me but to keep me there. “This. Just this. More of this.”

I smile against her nipple, and Merry opens one eye.

“Don’t look so pleased with yourself.”

“Maybe I like knowing what you like, *linda*.”

Her expression changes. The humor doesn’t disappear entirely, but something warmer moves beneath it. “Then keep doing that.”

So I do.

The room becomes very quiet except for the rain and our breathing.

I take my time with her, partly because I want to learn her and partly because I discover very quickly that Merry has almost no ability to hide when something feels good. Every time I touch her clit, her reaction gives her away—the sudden tension in her body, the way she reaches for me, the small sounds she tries and fails to swallow.

And every one of them makes me want more.

“Can I taste you?” I ask, and now it’s my turn to sound breathless. I want more. More of her and more of this, and more of the way she looks when she’s under me and aroused and letting go.

I kiss her again, and Merry pulls me down against her until I can feel how fast her heart is beating.

“Me too, please,” she whispers.

Whatever restraint remains between us dissolves after that. I trail kisses down her stomach and stop at her hips, licking the bone that juts out slightly. I bite—because I can—the soft flesh of her thigh, and Merry’s hand immediately tangles into my hair, pulling me up until I can see her.

“Oh, god,” Merry mumbles, and her right forearm lands over her eyes, covering her face. “Jesus, I think I might die.”

I shake my head, still smiling, and kiss the inside of her thigh again. Merry exhales shakily, and as soon as my tongue is on her, the laughter dissolves.

Then I turn my attention back to her pussy, my tongue pressing against her clit. Merryweather's breath stutters, and her hand flies to my hair, pulling through the strands in a way that both seems to want to move me out of the way but also keep me there for a while.

I take my time with my tongue first, exploring her and what makes her squirm underneath me. Time seems to stop as I work my mouth on her, sucking on her clit, licking at her entrance, the taste of her arousal so addictive I never want to stop.

Merry's back arches off the mattress, and I have to use my hand to flatten her down against it, keeping her there. She moans, and it's deep and guttural and nothing like I've ever heard before. She moves her legs, placing one over my shoulder and tightening it against my head, and I can feel her orgasm building, her body shaking.

Her hand is gripping my head tighter—not painfully—and her hips are following the rhythm of my tongue on her.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck, Flora," she's chanting through gasps, and I lift my head to see her, eyes shut and hair spread messily across the pillow, completely undone. "That feels so good."

"Do you want fingers?" I ask, then immediately return my face to her pussy, unable to stop tasting her.

"No, no, I'm almost—"

Merryweather pushes my head, and I suck at her clit, moving my tongue exactly as I'd been doing, all while she grinds against my mouth. And then she lets out an unexpectedly deep moan before going still underneath me.

"Oh," she croaks, and her grip releases my hair.

I give her a second to breathe before I start making my way back up her body, pressing soft kisses against her stomach, then higher, following the rise and fall of her chest as it slowly begins to settle. I just want to touch her, to feel the warmth of her skin beneath my lips and the little movements she makes as I get closer to her mouth.

"Flora," she interrupts, and I can see she's breathing hard, and there's something so pleased about the expression on her face, I immediately become suspicious. "Sit on my face."

For one long second, I can only stare at her.

Merry's confidence wavers almost immediately. "Unless you don't want to. Obviously. I probably should have led with that instead of just—"

"Yes. *Yes*."

The smile that spreads across her face is so thoroughly delighted that I laugh. She kisses me again, and this time there’s nothing hesitant about the way she reaches for me.

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# CHAPTER 27

# MERRYWEATHER

"OH MY GOD, YOU DIRTY GIRL."

I stop with my coffee halfway to my mouth.

Dani is standing on the other side of my desk with a small cardboard box tucked beneath one arm and an expression on her face that makes me worried she has somehow obtained security footage from my house.

I lower the cup slowly. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh, please."

"Literally just got here."

"Exactly. You just got here looking like that."

I glance down at myself. I'm wearing black pants and a sweater. My hair is clean and styled, for once. I put on mascara on the bus this morning, which isn't my proudest moment as an adult, but I don't think the results are visibly criminal.

"Like what?"

Dani drops the box onto the corner of my desk, then leans against the partition to get a better look at me.

"Thoroughly fucked."

My eyes dart automatically toward Helena's office. "Jesus Christ, Dani," I whisper, checking that my boss's door is still closed. "We're at work."

Her grin widens. "I knew it."

I take a drink of coffee, mostly because it gives me something to do with my mouth besides confess. Unfortunately for me, my body has decided to betray me independently of my intentions, because I can feel heat crawling up my neck.

Dani's eyes widen. "You slept with the coffee girl?"

She looks so delighted that I briefly consider throwing my coffee at her, except I paid almost seven dollars for it and there are limits to what I'm willing to sacrifice for my dignity, love spell notwithstanding.

Besides, she's right. Very right. Extremely, thoroughly—

No.

We're at work.

I turn to my monitor and wake it up, although the Briarwood sales dashboard does very little to erase the image that immediately appears in my head instead.

Flora in my bed, hair spread across my pillow. Flora leaning over me at dawn, already dressed in the previous night's clothes, kissing me awake before she left.

I woke up properly a few minutes after the front door closed and spent an embarrassing amount of time staring at the empty side of the bed with a smile I could actually feel on my face. Then I'd found one of Flora's earrings tangled in the sheets, which started the stupid smile all over again.

Apparently, there are limits to how many times a person can relive the same twelve hours before she becomes completely useless at her job, and I am rapidly approaching mine.

Dani taps one fingernail against the box.

The sound pulls me back.

"Anyway, before you disappear into whatever memory you were just having—and please know I want absolutely no details—Stephan from the mail room gave me this downstairs for you."

I look at the package, then at her. The name of the company is written across the label, and my last name just below it. "Oh, thank you."

I grab the box and pull it closer before she can inspect it any further.

"Why are you sending packages to the office, Merryweather?"

She lifts her eyebrows and stares at me for a second.

I don't answer. Dani gets two steps away from my work area before stopping.

"Wait. Is that from the witch?"

Apparently, my face answers for me.

“Merryweather, please.”

“Keep your voice down.”

“Why is your witch sending things to Briarwood?”

“She isn’t sending things to Briarwood, Dani. She’s sending things to me. I wasn’t about to give a stranger on the internet my home address,” I blurt, and that finally seems to satisfy her, or at least it replaces the amusement on her face with something closer to approval. “She’s already cosmically intervening with my future, I don’t want to take any other risks.”

“That’s actually smart.”

“Thank you.”

“Although I’d argue the smarter option would have been not ordering mysterious objects from an internet witch in the first place.”

“Oh my god! You told me to order a spell from Whisp!”

“And look at where it’s brought you.”

The corner of her mouth tips upward. I hate that she has a point.

“So what is it?”

“Just a bracelet.” I slide my thumb beneath the edge of the tape and lift the bracelet out of the box. “Oh, wow.”

I expected some sort of pink stone, obviously. The Third Fairy told me as much when she sent out that first message. What I didn’t expect was to look at it and immediately think that it looks like me.

I couldn’t begin to explain why one stone belongs beside another or why the colors feel right when I’m not even sure I would have thought to put them together myself. But I know instantly that if I’d passed a table covered in bracelets, this is the one I would have picked up.

Something flutters beneath my ribs at how easily this woman I’ve never met seems to know me.

“Oh, that’s pretty,” Dani says.

“Don’t sound so surprised.”

“I’m not surprised. I just wasn’t sure what custom witch jewelry looked like.”

I smile and slip the bracelet onto my wrist. It settles against my skin so naturally that I turn my hand once, watching the stones move—

“Merry?”

I look up. Phillip is standing on the other side of my desk.

My gaze drops immediately back to the bracelet. *Oh, for fuck’s sake.*

No, this cannot be a sign.

This is a man who works in, and possibly owns, this building. Running into him here is probably not statistically remarkable. There are mathematical models capable of proving that, I'm sure.

"Merry." Phillip smiles as he says my name again. "Good morning."

"Hi."

Beside me, Dani has gone suspiciously quiet. I catch her taking a step backward and narrow my eyes. She gives me a tiny, apologetic shrug and points in the general direction of her desk, as though some urgent corporate matter has suddenly materialized there and requires her immediate attention.

Coward.

"Sorry to interrupt," Phillip says. "Do you have a few minutes?"

"Sure."

Dani is already gone by the time I look back. I hope she chokes on a piece of that disgusting licorice candy corn she loves so much.

Phillip gestures toward the conference rooms. "Would you mind walking with me?"

I stand, and my fingers brush the bracelet again as I follow him.

No. We're not doing this.

The reversal isn't a summoning spell. The Third Fairy has been very clear that I am supposed to be doing things, not waiting around for the universe to rearrange itself on my behalf.

Still, the timing is objectively suspicious.

Phillip slows when I catch up to him. "How are you?"

"Good."

"Just good?"

There's a smile pulling at one corner of his mouth, and for a moment I wonder if I'm supposed to hear something in the question that isn't technically there.

"Actually, really good. I had a great weekend." I fail spectacularly at keeping the stupid smile off my face. "And I'm excited for fall."

Phillip glances toward the windows at the end of the hallway. The sky outside is the same miserable gray it has been since I woke up, and the rain has been alternating all morning between a drizzle and the kind that comes down sideways.

"Really? In Seattle? We haven't seen the sun in at least ten days."

“I like fall.”

He laughs softly. “I like your commitment.”

Admittedly, my enthusiasm may have less to do with the given atmospheric conditions of our geographical location and more to do with the fact that fall has recently included kissing Flora at a Halloween party, holding Flora’s hand through wet Capitol Hill streets, and waking up on Sunday morning with her warm beside me.

So.

Fall is doing very well for itself.

And maybe that’s the part I keep forgetting whenever Phillip appears, and my brain immediately reaches for the spell and the inevitable reversal that I’m working so hard on.

I’ve been doing what The Third Fairy asked. I figured out some of the things I wanted and, more importantly, started asking for them. And the universe has responded with an extremely hot barista who likes me enough to spend the night in my bed and a witch who may or may not be flirting with me.

Honestly, I’m doing great.

Phillip showing up now feels less like evidence that the reversal is malfunctioning and more like the universe has developed a slightly excessive commitment to the bit.

I glance at him, and he catches me looking. “Yes?”

“Nothing,” I say incredibly fast, and I fear that my cheeks are starting to flush. And now I definitely need to throw a curse up into the universe because what if—

He laughs, and I have to admit that doesn’t help.

Because this is still Phillip. He is still a kind, nice, wonderful man. He is still the CEO of the company where I work, and he is still walking next to me when he could have sent an email or asked Helena to call me upstairs to his royal palace.

The fact that I spent Saturday night very enthusiastically wanting someone else doesn't make me incapable of recognizing when someone is paying attention to me.

It just makes the attention feel different than it did a few weeks ago. Less like an answer to my hopes and dreams. And more like a question I haven’t figured out yet.

Phillip opens the door to one of the smaller meeting rooms and waits for me to go first. “I promise you’re not in trouble,” he says, then adds, “You looked a little worried there.”

“I always look a little worried, I’m afraid.”

“I’ve noticed.”

There it is again. This noticing thing.

Not because *I’ve noticed* is inherently flirtatious. Obviously it isn’t. People notice their employees, I think. That’s probably one of the things they cover in CEO school. But there is something about the way Phillip looks at me when he says things like that that makes it very difficult to dismiss Veronica and Dani entirely.

I sit across from him.

“So,” I say, finally. “Should I be worried now?”

“No.” He settles into his chair, still smiling. “I wanted to talk to you before this afternoon’s planning meeting. I’ve been paying closer attention to some of the work your group has been doing, and your name keeps coming up.”

“My name?” I know that I sound incredulous, surprised even. I’m sure it’s showing on my face right this second. “I’m a little surprised, sir.”

“Phillip, please. And why?”

I consider giving him the safe answer, mostly because he’s Phillip and I am me, and this entire conversation is happening several levels above where I usually operate. But he’s watching me with the same attention he always seems to give me, waiting rather than filling the silence himself.

So I tell him the truth.

“Because there isn’t much reason for my name to come up with the CEO, sir. I’m just an assistant.”

“Maybe there should be.”

My stomach does that inconvenient thing again. What the hell am I supposed to do with *maybe there should be*? Is this another of his flirting things?

Phillip doesn’t seem to notice the effect, or if he does, he’s kind enough not to acknowledge it. He leans back slightly and asks, “Do you like what you’re doing?”

I blink at the change in direction. “My job?”

“Your job. Your role. Where you are.”

I open my mouth to say *yes* because that's the answer. Or at least, it has always been the answer.

I have a good job, and I'm relatively good at it, which isn't quite the same thing but has always felt close enough. I know what is expected of me, I know how to deliver it, and every couple of weeks Helena finds some new and inventive way to make me fantasize about quitting abruptly, but I suspect that's less a career crisis and more the natural consequence of having a hell of a boss.

Except Phillip didn't ask whether my job is good.

He asked whether I like where I am.

And unfortunately, I've recently spent five hundred dollars on a witch who has made it very difficult to pretend I don't understand the distinction.

"I like what I do," I say finally. "I don't know if I like where I am."

He waits, and somehow that makes it easier to keep going.

"I think I've gotten comfortable being useful. People know they can give me something complicated and I'll figure it out. I like being that person." I run my thumb over one of the stones on my bracelet. "But sometimes I feel like I've gotten so good at doing the work that nobody thinks to ask what I think we should do with it."

Something shifts in Phillip's expression, and suddenly I remember sitting on my couch with a list in front of me, trying to come up with things I wanted without attaching a defense to every single one.

*I want people to ask what I think.*

At the time, it seemed almost embarrassingly small compared to the grand scheme of things. Not a promotion or a different job. Not more money or a corner office or some grand declaration that I was meant for something bigger.

I just wanted to be asked. And maybe that's why I notice now how rarely I am.

Philip is quiet for a moment. Then he says, "What do you think?"

A laugh slips out before I can stop it.

His eyebrows lift. "What?"

"Nothing. Sorry." I shake my head, still smiling. "You just have no idea how weirdly specific that question is."

He looks curious, but thankfully doesn’t ask, and I’m not about to explain that an internet witch made me write a list of my deepest desires and he has just accidentally quoted one back to me.

So I answer him. I tell him I want more ownership, and that I want to be closer to the decisions instead of always preparing the information someone else uses to make them. I don’t know what that looks like exactly, and admitting that feels strangely vulnerable, but Phillip listens without interrupting until I eventually run out of things to say.

When I do, he nods.

“Good.”

“Good?”

“That’s what I was hoping you’d say.”

My pulse jumps.

He leans back in his chair. “There may be an opportunity opening up here soon. Nothing has been decided yet, so I can’t give you details.”

“What kind of opportunity?”

“I just said I can’t give you details.”

“You can give me one.”

His smile returns. “You really don’t like not knowing things, do you?”

“We work in forecasting, sir. Not knowing things is basically my professional enemy.”

Phillip laughs, then stands. “Soon, Merry. I promise. But I will tell you that you’ll definitely be closer to me.”

I’m halfway out of my chair when I stop.

Professionally. Right? Obviously professionally.

Phillip is smiling at me, and I look back at him hoping for any extra clarification.

“That’s all you’re getting out of me today.”

Right. Great.

Perfectly normal thing for my possibly-flirting-but-perhaps-also-professionally-interested CEO to say to me while I’m wearing a bracelet made by my possibly-flirting witch less than forty-eight hours after having mind-blowing sex with the woman I am very definitely interested in.

Maybe I was wrong about the reversal and instead of reversing anything, I accidentally activated the unlimited plan.

Phillip reaches the door, then looks back at me. “One thing, though. At the meeting this afternoon, if I ask you something, don’t look at Helena

first.”

The humor drains out of the moment just enough that I straighten.

“I want to hear what you think, Merry. I mean it.”

I look down at the bracelet around my wrist, then back at him.

For weeks, I’ve been asking the universe to show me what the hell it’s doing to me. Maybe I should have been paying more attention to what it’s been asking me to do.

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# CHAPTER 28

# FLORA

SIX UNFINISHED BRACELETS HAVE TAKEN OVER THE DINING ROOM TABLE, and I'm supposed to be paying attention to at least one of them when my phone lights up with a message from Merryweather.

MERRY

She found it first

There's a picture attached of my earring sitting in the middle of a rumpled white sheet, with Aurora's light gray paw reaching into the frame from the top right corner.

MERRY

I think legally that means it belongs to her now because cats 100% believe in finders keepers

I'm willing to negotiate on your behalf but she drives a hard bargain

I smile at my phone.

Across the table, my mother makes a small sound that I choose to ignore with my whole body.

I'm halfway through typing a response when she makes it again, louder this time.

"*¿Qué?*"

"*Nada*, don't be so paranoid."

She’s sitting at the other end with her reading glasses low on her nose and her tablet propped in front of her, although she is very clearly not looking at it.

“Stop judging me.”

“*Ay Flora, por favor*. I cleared my throat. I have a little itch. Maybe I’m getting sick.”

She smiles and returns her attention to her tablet.

I look back at my phone.

ME

Please inform Aurora that I would like my property returned

The typing bubble appears almost immediately.

MERRY

She says no

Sorry. I tried

Another picture arrives, this one of Aurora lying directly on top of the earring.

I laugh before I can stop myself, and immediately look at my mother, who doesn’t say anything, and it makes it much worse.

I put my phone face down on the table and reach for the bracelet I was working on before Merry distracted me.

The dining room has slowly been overtaken by my supplies over the last hour. Small containers of stones sit open beside coils of wire and elastic, the overhead light catching on faceted surfaces every time I move. I have four orders that need to go out tomorrow and another two I’d like to finish if my eyes hold out, which means I should not be looking at my phone every thirty seconds to see if Merry has sent me another picture of her cat.

So I don’t.

For almost three full minutes.

It helps that Fausto comes into the house and walks straight to the kitchen, where he stands staring into the open refrigerator as though a meal might spontaneously assemble itself if he gives it enough time.

“There’s chicken,” our mother says without having to glance in his direction.

“I know.”

“Then why are you still looking?” I ask.

"*Mamá*," he whines, turning around with a little dramatic pout. "She's bullying me."

Our mother huffs, and he pulls a plate from the cabinet and starts serving himself, talking to our mom about something happening on campus later in the week. I only half listen while I finish the bracelet in my hands, tying it off and setting it with the others.

My phone remains face down beside me.

And I know Merry is still there in the missing earring and the silly pictures on my phone, in the memory of waking up in her bed yesterday and needing several seconds to remember where I was. In the way I catch myself wondering whether she'll come into The Spindle tomorrow or whether I should ask when I can see her again.

And somehow, everything else is still here, too.

My mother and brother arguing about his eating habits. Maggie's unread message about plans later this week. Luis's endless thread of memes that remind him of things that happened at work.

My life, exactly where I left it.

The realization comes and goes so quietly I almost miss it.

I reach for the next order.

It's a custom piece, which always takes longer than I plan for. The woman who ordered it gave me a handful of colors she likes and a few words about what she wants it to represent, but left the rest to me. I start sorting through stones, putting combinations together and taking them apart again until something feels right.

It's nearly nine by the time I finish.

Fausto has all but disappeared, and Mamá has migrated to the couch, where the television is playing loudly enough that I can hear every single word from over here. Maggie and I have exchanged three messages about Thursday and settled absolutely nothing.

And Merry sent me one final message.

MERRY

Please tell me you're not emotionally attached to this earring because your chances of seeing it alive again are decreasing by the minute.

I type back before I can overthink it.

FLORA

Maybe I'll have to come get it myself

I stare at the message for half a second before sending it. Then I put the phone down.

Merry isn't the only person who can ask for things, I guess.

I start cleaning up the table, putting the finished pieces into bags and returning the loose stones to their containers. When I open my laptop to print shipping labels, the Whisp tab is still sitting in the corner of my browser, and a notification waits beside it.

PRIMAVERA1959

I think your stupid assignment is working

I smile.

THE THIRD FAIRY

My stupid assignment?

The answer comes quickly.

PRIMAVERA1959

Affectionate stupid. Not derogatory.

I would never.

Someone asked me what I wanted today and I actually told them

Which doesn't sound particularly impressive now that I'm typing this out, but apparently I've spent most of my adult life believing that wants require supporting documentation

I lean back in my chair.

What she is identifying is not magic.

I've never believed a stone can make someone brave or a candle can bring love through someone's front door. The moon doesn't care whether you take a walk beneath it, and the universe has better things to do than rearrange itself because someone wrote a name on a piece of paper and burned it at midnight.

But people care. People pay attention when you give them a reason to.

Tell someone to take a walk beneath a full moon and suddenly they're looking at things they pass every day. Tell them to write down five things

they want without explaining any of them, and eventually they have to confront how difficult it is to want something without defending it. Tell someone to ask clearly and they start noticing all the ways they've spent their life avoiding exactly that.

The ritual isn't the magic.

It's the attention.

That's what I've always believed, even if I don't phrase it quite so bluntly on Whisp.

And *Primavera* has been paying attention.

THE THIRD FAIRY

How did it feel?

PRIMAVERA1959

Horrifying

Then good.

Now maybe horrifying again because I have to live with the consequences of having opinions

I laugh softly.

THE THIRD FAIRY

Tragic

PRIMAVERA1959

Thank you for your compassion during this difficult time.

I should leave it there. Instead, I find myself asking another question.

THE THIRD FAIRY

What did you ask for?

It takes her a moment, but eventually she replies.

PRIMAVERA1959

Technically that wasn't the asking part. Someone asked me what I wanted and I answered honestly.

But I did the actual assignment, too. The asking thing you said.

I wait, but she doesn't elaborate.

And normally, under very regular witch circumstances, I wouldn't care, and this shouldn't bother me. But this customer has crawled under my skin

already and is making me curious, and I just can’t control myself.

THE THIRD FAIRY

And?

Another pause.

PRIMAVERA1959

There’s someone

My fingers stop over the keyboard.

I read the sentence again, although there are only two words and neither of them is particularly complicated.

Good for her. Obviously.

That’s good.

I have spent weeks encouraging this woman to stop waiting for love to descend upon her like some kind of celestial package delivery and instead sent her outside, made her examine what she wanted, and told her to ask for it.

This is, quite literally, the desired outcome.

So the small, unpleasant dip somewhere behind my ribs is ridiculous.

PRIMAVERA1959

I asked her for something I wanted this weekend.

And she said yes.

Jesus, wow. I am—allegedly, of course—deeply committed to my clients experiencing transformative personal growth right up until that growth results in them developing fulfilling romantic lives that have nothing to do with me.

I’m not entirely sure what to do with knowing that.

I flex my fingers once before typing.

THE THIRD FAIRY

And did you get what you wanted?

The pause is shorter.

PRIMAVERA1959

Yes.

Very much yes.

Yes.

I make a face at the laptop. “Good for you,” I mutter.
From the living room, *Mamá* calls, “*¿Qué dijiste?*”
“*Nada*.”
I turn back to the screen.

PRIMAVERA1959

I think that’s the weird part.

Not that she said yes.

That I knew I wanted her to.

I spend so much time trying to figure out if people like me that I think sometimes I forget to ask whether I actually like them.

But I didn’t have to figure it out with her. I knew.

The ridiculous little ache behind my ribs returns, and I ignore it. Because this is exactly what I wanted *Primavera* to understand in the first place.

Wanting to be wanted isn’t the same thing as wanting someone. One turns another person’s attention into proof that you’re desirable. The other requires you to pay attention to yourself.

And she is. She’s noticing.

THE THIRD FAIRY

That’s progress

PRIMAVERA1959

Wow

Glowing review. Five stars

I smile.

THE THIRD FAIRY

You hired a witch, not a cheerleader.

PRIMAVERA1959

I paid you like half of my mortgage payment. I think a pom-pom would be reasonable.

A laugh escapes me, and this time my mother doesn’t even bother pretending she isn’t listening from the other room.

I start to answer, but my hand pauses over the keyboard.

Because suddenly and unexpectedly, I'm thinking about Merry.

Not because *Primavera* said anything that reminds me of her.

I'm thinking about the way Merry looked at me Saturday night when she asked if I wanted to come home with her. How nervous she'd been despite the fact that we'd already kissed enough times for neither of us to misunderstand what was happening.

And how certain she'd sounded anyway.

I think about her gold earrings. The coffee she orders. The way she talks faster when she's embarrassed, as though enough words might get her safely to the other side of whatever she's feeling. The way she reaches for something when she's nervous—a glass, the edge of a table, my hand.

I know more than I remember ever deciding to learn.

Maybe that's the part I leave out when I tell people that magic is attention.

You notice something once. Then again.

And eventually, without realizing when it happened, you start looking for it.

My phone lights up beside the laptop.

MERRY

Update: I have secured the hostage

Your earring is safe

I assume you'll need to retrieve it personally

I stare at the message, then I laugh.

FLORA

I assume so.

I'm still smiling when another notification appears on my laptop. I look at it for a moment, wondering what else *Primavera* has to say.

Then my phone lights up in my hand, and I leave the Whisp notification unopened.

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## CHAPTER 29

# MERRYWEATHER

THE EARRING IS SITTING ON MY KITCHEN COUNTER WHEN FLORA KNOCKS ON the door.

I put it there specifically so I wouldn't forget it, which means I've spent the last twenty minutes walking past it pretending I didn't invite a woman over with the excuse of retrieving an object small enough to fit in an envelope.

I could have brought it to The Spindle.

We could have waited until the next time we saw each other in a more formal capacity.

I could have put it in the mail, although that would have been deeply stupid considering she lives close enough to walk here.

Instead, at six forty-three on a Tuesday evening, Flora is standing on my front porch.

"Hi."

She has changed since work, or at least I assume she has, because she's wearing jeans and a soft-looking dark green sweater instead of the all-black outfit I've seen her wear behind the counter. Her hair is loose, and the sight of her standing beneath my porch light does something warm and immediate to the center of my chest.

"Hello."

"You came for your earring," I say, and I sound like an idiot and robotic, and I want to slap myself across the face because how is it possible that at

my age I'm this awkward still.

"I did," she replies, lifting one shoulder casually. The corner of her mouth tips up ever so slightly, and I can see the amusement in her eyes.

"Yes. I have it."

"That's good. Thank you."

Neither of us moves.

Then Flora fully smiles, and whatever pretense we were maintaining dissolves completely.

I reach for her, and she meets me halfway, one hand sliding around my waist as I kiss her. It's supposed to be a hello kiss, which I think should have some kind of natural expiration point, but neither Flora nor I have any respect for established greeting protocols, it seems. Her mouth stays against mine, warm and unhurried, until I forget entirely that we're standing in an open doorway.

When we finally separate, she looks past me into the house. "Are you going to let me in?"

"Oh. Right." I step aside. "Come in."

Flora does, and for some reason, watching her cross the threshold makes me approximately seventeen times more nervous than kissing her on the porch did.

Which is, of course, incredibly ridiculous, because again, I'm at a certain age. And also this woman has been inside my house before. Flora has been considerably more inside several other things that belong to me, and apparently *that* I can handle, but watching her toe off her shoes in my hallway on a Tuesday evening has my heart beating like we're about to meet each other's parents.

"You can… Um, yes. You can put that there," I say, pointing uselessly to the space where she has, in fact, placed her shoes.

Flora looks at the shoes, then at me. "Thank you."

"Sorry. I don't know why I'm giving you a tour of basic household infrastructure."

Her mouth twitches. "I mean…"

"I know, okay? I'm nervous."

The admission escapes before I can stop it.

Flora's expression softens. "Why?"

"Because you're here."

"You invited me. And I've been here before."

“I know. That was the exciting part. Now we’re dealing with the consequences of my filter-less mouth and my….” I take a deep breath. “Sorry.”

She laughs, and some of the tension in my shoulders releases with the sound. “I thought I came for an earring.”

“Yes, yes. Very important earring exchange. Extremely legitimate reason for you to drive all the way over here.”

“I walked,” she says, and she tilts her head just so, and I finally, finally after three decades of simply existing on this planet, understand the term *cuteness aggression*.

“Please don’t undermine the elaborate justification I’ve created for this.”

Flora smiles and comes closer, close enough that her fingers brush mine. “Okay.”

“Thank you. I’ve put a lot of work into it.”

I kiss her again because apparently that’s an option now. That might be my favorite development of the week.

“Are you hungry?” I ask when I remember I had another reason for inviting her inside. It’s more abrupt than I intended, but Flora follows me into the kitchen anyway.

“I could eat.”

“Good. I made pasta.”

I say it casually, as though this is something I do all the time. Invite women I’ve recently had mind-blowing sex with to my house under false pretenses and have dinner conveniently waiting when they arrive.

Flora stops beside the stove and looks into the pot. I watch her face.

“You look surprised.”

“I didn’t take you for a person who cooks.”

“Are you judging me?”

That gets a laugh out of her, but she doesn't defend herself. She reaches inside the purse still hanging from her shoulder and retrieves a bottle of wine, turning it in her hands until she finds the label. “I brought this. I didn’t want to assume, you know.”

“That’s okay. You can be nervous, too.”

She smiles, then drops her tote on the island. Flora somehow navigates my kitchen like a seasoned pro and finds the wine opener, and I go back to the stove as she uncorks the bottle. For a little while, that’s all we’re doing.

She opens the wine while I drain the pasta, then moves aside when I reach past her for two glasses. I nearly knock one against the cabinet, recover before disaster, and pretend neither of us noticed.

Flora notices, but doesn't say anything.

Which makes me giggle nervously, a chill of anticipation coursing through my body.

"You're making a face."

She pours the wine. "I'm letting you have this one."

"That's very generous of you. Thank you."

And then she's smiling, and I'm smiling, and I have the strange awareness that I'm not nervous anymore.

Or not in the same way.

Saturday night, every second between us seemed to be moving in the direction of something. A kiss, another kiss, my house, my bedroom. Tonight, there isn't anywhere we're supposed to get to. Flora is standing in my kitchen pouring wine while I attempt to impress her with my subpar cooking skills, and somehow that feels more significant than anything else.

Her hand brushes my back when she moves behind me. It's barely a touch, but it makes me realize that I like her here.

I carry our bowls to the living room while Flora brings the wine, and the conversation finds its own way there with us. She tells me about her brother (she calls him little brother, but really once she shows me the pictures I see that he's a massive over-six-foot young man), about her mom, and about some of the coffee shop regulars and their many antics (apparently, I'm not the only chaotic diva out there.)

By the time we start eating, we are back to talking about work, and that leads, inevitably, to Phillip.

"Oh, wait. The weirdest thing happened to me at work yesterday."

Flora looks up. I have to figure out where to start, because there is more context required than I realized.

"So, Phillip is our CEO. Technically, his family owns Briarwood, or most of it, I think. His grandparents started the company, and now he runs it."

"Okay."

"And for some reason, he knows who I am."

Flora's eyebrows lift slightly, but she keeps eating.

“Which I realize doesn’t sound noteworthy, except there are thousands of people who work at Briarwood and I’m absolutely not important enough for the freaking president of the company to know my name. But he does. He has for a while.”

I take another bite, buying myself a second before I add the part that makes the whole thing more embarrassing.

“My friends think he’s gearing up to ask me on a date.”

That gets Flora’s attention.

Not dramatically. She doesn't freeze with her fork halfway to her mouth or choke on her food like I potentially would. She just looks at me for a moment longer than she had before.

“Do you?”

“I don’t know, honestly.”

And that’s the irritating part, and it sums up my life perfectly.

I explain the weird lobby conversations and the offers of coffee. The fact that Phillip seems to find reasons to stop and talk to me when he sees me. There had been a time when I was nearly convinced they were right, mostly because I couldn’t come up with another explanation for why the CEO of Briarwood Confections kept remembering details about my life.

“Yesterday, he came downstairs specifically looking for me.” I recount his cryptic way of talking and how the entire conversation had been so obviously professional that I’d started feeling delusional for ever wondering if there was something else happening. “And then, right when I finally decided that this is clearly, *clearly* about work, he tells me the new position would put me closer to him.”

Flora’s mouth twitches.

“Exactly!” I lift my hands up in exasperation.

“I didn’t say anything.”

“You don’t have to. That’s what I mean. He keeps doing that.” I reach for my wine and take a sip. “And honestly, I don’t even know if he’s doing anything. Maybe he’s just naturally charming and nice, and I’ve been walking around assigning meaning to it because my friends got in my head. Which would be humiliating, but certainly not unprecedented.”

Flora is quiet for a second.

“Do you want him to be flirting with you?”

“What? No!”

The answer comes out so quickly—and loudly—that Flora blinks a few times.

I do, too, but I'm too stunned to say anything else. Because apparently that was not a question requiring the careful consideration I thought it might.

"No," I repeat, quieter this time. "I mean… No."

Flora's mouth twitches. "That sounded pretty certain."

"Yes, very." Flora is studying my face, and her eyebrows are doing something funny, like she's trying to decipher exactly what is going on in my brain. "For the record," I add, "I am very gay."

"I know."

"Good. Just making sure we've established the relevant facts."

Flora's mouth twitches again, but she doesn't rescue me from the rest of the question, which is unfortunate, because now that she's asked it, I can see there is something I haven't been particularly interested in examining.

"I definitely liked the attention," I admit.

That feels more accurate.

"I've been at Briarwood for a few years now. And I've worked my ass off there, and most of the time I'm still just somebody's assistant. I make the spreadsheets and fix everyone else's fuckups, and then someone else walks into a meeting and talks about it." I push a piece of pasta around my bowl. "So when the CEO suddenly knew my name? Of course I got a little giddy about it."

Maybe I'd confused that with something else because I hadn't had a better explanation for it, and I was one hundred percent in my head with the spell and what my friends were saying.

"But yesterday, he told me my name has been coming up in conversations about work." I look at Flora. "And I think that's what I wanted it to be all along."

Not Phillip wanting me, god no. Someone up there noticing me.

"Anyway, enough work talk."

I reach for Flora's bowl before she's completely finished.

"Hey."

"You stopped eating."

"I was thinking."

"Well, now you can think without dirty dishes in front of you."

I stack our bowls and carry them to the sink before she can point out that this logic makes no sense. Flora follows me with the wineglasses anyway.

For the next few minutes, we clean up together in the strange, inefficient way two people do when only one of them knows where anything belongs. I rinse, Flora loads the dishwasher, and every few dishes she has to hold something up to ask whether it can go in before I wave her toward the top rack or tell her to leave it in the sink. At some point, she opens the drawer by the stove looking for a place to put the serving spoon and finds the collection of takeout menus, batteries, two screwdrivers, a birthday candle, and approximately eleven pens instead.

She looks at me, and I feel my cheeks heat immediately. I make it almost ten seconds before she starts laughing.

“It’s a useful drawer,” I say, and Flora’s smile turns into the most breathtaking grin I’ve ever seen in my life. “Everyone has a junk drawer in their kitchen.”

I bump my hip against her on the way to the sink, and she catches me around the waist before I can move away.

It happens so naturally that I don’t even realize what she’s doing until I’m standing between her knees where she’s leaning against the counter, her hands resting loosely at my hips.

“Hi,” I say.

“Hi.”

I put my arms around her neck, and this kiss is different from the ones on the porch. Different from Saturday night, too. There’s nowhere for it to go, no adrenaline beneath it, no moment we’re trying to reach. Flora kisses me once, then again, slower, and when I pull back, I don’t go far.

Her nose brushes mine.

I could stay here for a while.

So I do.

Later, we end up on the couch with the television on, although neither of us pays enough attention to know what’s happening. Flora has tucked one leg beneath herself, and mine is stretched across the cushion until our knees overlap somewhere in the middle.

We talk about nothing important.

Or nothing that should be important, anyway.

Somehow we get on to food, which turns into Flora telling me her mother refuses to accept that anything sold as an empanada in Seattle deserves the name.

“She’s from Argentina,” Flora explains. “She has very strong opinions.”

“About empanadas?”

“About everything. But especially food.”

I laugh, and Flora tells me that most of her family is still in Argentina, that she grew up going back whenever they could afford it, usually for long enough that she would settle into being there right before it was time to leave again.

She speaks Spanish with her mother. With Fausto, too, although apparently the two of them have reached the point where neither notices which language they’re speaking anymore.

“If we’re fighting, definitely Spanish.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. Better vocabulary? Expletives sound better in Spanish, I guess.”

I laugh hard enough that I snort. The sound is unmistakable, and I immediately stop laughing.

“Oh my god.” I cover my face with one hand. “No.”

Her laughter gets worse, and when I peek at her through my fingers, her nose is scrunched up with the force of her smile.

Which is—

Well.

“You have a cute nose,” I tell her.

Flora’s laughter softens. “I have a what?”

“Nothing.”

I should probably leave it there. Instead, because humiliation has most likely destroyed whatever remains of my self-preservation, I reach over and touch the tip of her nose with one finger.

“This. When you laugh really hard, you do this little scrunchy thing.”

Her eyes stay on mine. “Do I?”

“Yeah.”

I don’t know who moves first. One second my finger is still near her face, and the next Flora is kissing me.

I sink into it almost immediately.

Her hand comes up to the side of my neck, mine slides into her hair, and the conversation disappears as easily as if we'd never been having one. I shift closer until there's no longer an unnecessary stretch of couch between us, and Flora leans back against the cushions, pulling me with her.

We're just kissing because we can, because her mouth is warm and familiar now, because I like the little sound she makes when I kiss the corner of it and the way her fingers tighten briefly at my waist when I settle closer.

Eventually, I pull back just far enough to look at her.

Her hair is mussed from my hands, her cheeks are pink, and when she smiles at me, her nose does the thing again.

I kiss it.

Flora groans and shoves at my shoulder, laughing.

"Sorry," I say, not remotely sorry, and kiss her again.

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CHAPTER 30

# THE THIRD FAIRY

PRIMAVERA1959

I forgot to tell you something

The bracelet came

I love it.

Like an unreasonable amount

Unreasonable seems dramatic, I now realize

But we have corresponded long enough for you to know that dramatic is the baseline

THE THIRD FAIRY

Fair

PRIMAVERA1959

I thought it would be mostly pink because that's what you mentioned in your first message, but I love all the other stones you picked

It looks like something I would have chosen for myself

THE THIRD FAIRY

I'm glad you liked it

PRIMAVERA1959

That's all I get?

THE THIRD FAIRY

What else would you like?

PRIMAVERA1959

I don’t know. Maybe some insight into your mysterious mystical process

THE THIRD FAIRY

I picked stones I thought suited you and were aligned to your goals as stated in your initial spell request

PRIMAVERA1959

See, you can’t just say things like that

THETHIRDFAIRY

Why not?

PRIMAVERA1959

Because now I need to know what that means

THETHIRDFAIRY

It means I picked stones I thought suited you

PRIMAVERA1959

Infuriating

THETHIRDFAIRY

I think you like it

PRIMAVERA1959

Maybe a little

Okay, but seriously. How do you pick something for a person you’ve never met?

THETHIRDFAIRY

You’ve told me a lot about yourself

PRIMAVERA1959

Have I?

THETHIRDFAIRY

You hired me to fix your love life

You’ve told me what you notice and what you want. What you are afraid of. What you avoid What you think you should want

That’s more than most people tell strangers

PRIMAVERA1959

Well when you put it that way this suddenly feels alarmingly intimate

THETHIRDFAIRY

You’re the one who keeps messaging me

PRIMAVERA1959

Because you keep answering

THETHIRDFAIRY

Occupational hazard

PRIMAVERA1959

Wait

Do you ever do spells for yourself?

THE THIRD FAIRY

Sometimes

PRIMAVERA1959

SOMETIMES?

You have had me wandering around outside in the dark, writing lists of my deepest desires and asking people for things like I’m in magical therapy, and you only sometimes take your own medicine?

THETHIRD FAIRY

I don’t remember prescribing medicine

PRIMAVERA1959

You know what I mean

THETHIRDFAIRY

It’s different when it’s yourself

PRIMAVERA1959

How convenient

THETHIRDFAIRY

Very

PRIMAVERA1959

Okay, then when was the last time

You did a spell for yourself

THETHIRDFAIRY

I’d have to think about it

PRIMAVERA1959

Oh my god

You’re a fraud

But seriously if you were going to do a spell for yourself tonight, what would it be for?

THETHIRDFAIRY

You really want to know?

PRIMAVERA1959

I really do

THETHIRDFAIRY

Maybe courage

PRIMAVERA1959

For what?

THETHIRDFAIRY

To stop treating the things that make me happy like they’re the things I should be most afraid of losing. To make myself be happy about someone without immediately imagining all the ways I could lose them

PRIMAVERA1959

Oh.

That was not what I expected you to say

THETHIRDFAIRY

You asked

PRIMAVERA1959

I know

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# CHAPTER 31

# MERRYWEATHER

"I READ SOMETHING REALLY CONCERNING ON REDDIT."

Dani keeps eating her salad. Across the table, Veronica unwraps the second half of her sandwich without looking notably alarmed either, which is insulting considering I specifically chose the word *concerning*.

"I'm serious."

"You read things on the internet after midnight all the time," Dani says. "That's generally how you end up concerned."

It was not technically after midnight. It was eleven forty-seven, and I had been in bed doing completely reasonable research after The Third Fairy told me to go to sleep.

I obviously don't mention that part.

"Apparently, sometimes when you try to reverse a spell, it can backfire."

That gets Veronica to look up.

Not with any concern aimed at me or about me. But with this wild expression I can only describe as resignation.

"There were at least three different posts on the witchcraft forum talking about it," I continue. They're doing their silent communication thing, looking at each other with, well, concern. "Sometimes when you're trying to reverse romantic energy, you can accidentally amplify it instead. Like the energy has nowhere to go, so it rebounds."

Dani's fork stops halfway to her mouth. "Rebounds?"

“That’s what the woman called it.”

“What woman?”

“I don’t know, Dani. *MoonChild333*. That’s not the point.”

Veronica closes her eyes.

“The point is, I think I might have accidentally turned myself into some kind of magnet.”

“For what?”

I lean closer across the table, even though nobody around us is listening. It’s prime lunchtime at a corporate office and there is chili on the menu today, so everyone is busy eating their food and enjoying their very corporate conversations.

“Lesbians, apparently.”

For a moment, neither of them says anything. Then Dani puts her fork down.

“Pardon me,” she says. She crosses her arms over her chest and turns her body slightly in my direction. Her whole attention is now on me, and I should be intimidated by her posture, but I can see the amusement all over her face. “What the fuck are you talking about, Merryweather?”

“Nothing happened, not really,” I try to defend.

They both stare at me.

“Okay, nothing *new* happened,” I amend. “Things with Flora are good.”

Veronica waits. And they still say nothing.

I hate when they do this.

“She came over Tuesday.”

That finally gets a reaction from Dani, although only because she knows enough about Tuesday to know Flora had supposedly been coming over to pick up her forgotten property.

“And?”

“And we had dinner.”

“And?” Veronica says, gesturing with your hand as if saying, *Get on with it.*

The Briarwood cafeteria is too bright, too loud, and always smells faintly of whatever the least appealing hot entrée is that day. I usually eat at my desk or with them in one of the little break rooms upstairs. Today, I needed neutral territory.

“I think I have a tiny crush on the witch.”

Silence, and then they look at each other again.

“Stop communicating silently about me while I’m sitting here, please!”

Dani leans back in her chair. “The witch.”

“Yes.”

“The online witch.”

“Oh my god, please help me.”

“Merry,” Dani says, flattening her hands on the table right next to me. “How do you even have a crush on a person whose name you don’t know and whose face you’ve never seen?”

“Well, when you say it like that, it sounds bad.”

“And might I remind you,” Veronica adds, taking a huge bite of her sandwich and still choosing to speak with her mouth full, “that you have a fucking smokeshow going to your house every few days!”

“I like talking to her,” I say. “The witch, I mean. That’s all.”

Veronica laughs, tilting her head back and almost choking on the food she is still chewing on. I give myself several seconds to reconsider telling them anything else.

“She knows a lot about me at this point. Probably too much, honestly. And usually it’s very one-sided because that’s literally what I paid her for, but lately…” I look down at the bracelet on my wrist and turn it once. “I don’t know. It’s different.”

Veronica reaches across the table and catches my wrist before I can pull it away, looking at the bracelet.

“But I don’t get it,” she says as she drops my wrist and goes back to her food. “Wasn’t the whole goal of the spell to help you find love? Why is this a problem?”

“I don’t know. We were talking the other night, and I asked whether she ever does spells for herself.”

“You asked your witch if she witches herself?”

“Essentially.”

“And what did she say?” Dani takes a sip of her soda, then places the cup very gently on the table, studying my face with a serious expression.

I hesitate. I don’t know why I’m reluctant to tell them anything. Maybe because it felt so personal when The Third Fairy said it. Less like one of our usual conversations about my mess of a life and more like I’d accidentally opened a door I hadn't known was there.

“She said she wanted the courage to let herself be happy about someone without immediately imagining all the ways she could lose them.”

Veronica gasps, and her expression changes.

"Yeah," I say. "That's what I did, too. That face."

She ignores me. "And you liked that?"

"I understood it."

Which isn't quite the same thing. Except I keep thinking about it.

About how strange it was to discover that the woman who has spent weeks calmly dissecting every stupid thing happening inside my head maybe has stupid things happening inside hers, too.

I liked knowing that. Perhaps more than I should have.

Dani abandons her salad completely. "So you like Flora."

"A lot."

"And you like the witch," she adds.

"A tiny amount."

Veronica's eyes ping-pong between us, following this obnoxious back-and-forth.

"And you stay up late talking to her, and she makes you feel enough things that you have to go to Reddit and figure out what's happening?"

"I only stay up late a tiny amount."

Veronica laughs, but I'm already shaking my head.

"This is why I looked up the stupid spell thing. Because this is not normal, guys. A month ago, I had no one. Now I have Flora, I have some sort of weird irrational interest in a witch I've never met, and Phillip keeps—"

Veronica looks at Dani, and Dani's eyes immediately close.

"What?"

Neither of them answers, and they do that again with the silent talking through their brainwaves.

"What was that?" I ask, and I really feel my skin start to itch now. Because this is absolutely ridiculous. My life is a fucking rom-com that has spun out of control and I have, effectively and officially, turned into a fucking emotional support clown.

Dani exhales through her nose and straightens her back. "Okay."

Veronica shakes her head. "Don't."

"We have to tell her, Vero."

A horrible feeling crawls into my stomach. "Tell me what?"

Dani turns to look at me, and it's almost like the whole cafeteria has gone silent. I swear I can hear her swallow.

“Phillip isn’t flirting with you.”

I stare at her. “Duh, I know.”

“No.” She glances at Veronica. “We know.”

My eyes move between them. “What does that mean?”

Veronica winces. “At first, we genuinely thought maybe he was flirting with you. He knew your name, he kept stopping to talk to you, like, every single time he saw you, and there was absolutely no obvious reason why he should be paying so much attention to an assistant he doesn’t work with.”

“Thank you!”

“But then there was an obvious reason.”

Dani picks up her soda and takes a large sip through the straw.

“How long have you known?”

“You know,” Veronica says, looking down at her half-eaten sandwich, “*know* is a strong word.”

“Guys.”

“A couple weeks?”

“A couple—”

Several people at the next table turn.

I lower my voice. “You assholes.”

“We weren’t trying to be assholes, Merry,” Veronica says, although she is visibly fighting a smile. “You were so convinced it was connected to the spell.”

“Because you kept telling me he was flirting!”

I drop my face into my hands. This is humiliating at extreme levels. Not even Merryweather levels.

Not because I thought Phillip was flirting with me. I never wanted anything from him beyond the little thrill of being noticed by someone who could walk through our entire floor without ever needing to lift a finger and do anything.

But I had made him part of the spell. I had made everything part of the spell.

All these little things I’d been collecting and arranging until they resembled an answer I was desperately looking for.

“Merry.”

I lower my hands to see Veronica watching me.

“We weren’t fucking with you the whole time.”

“Gee guys, that’s super comforting. Thanks.”

“At first, it was really weird. That whole coffee thing? You have to agree,” Dani says. “Then it became pretty obvious he was interested in your work, and you were so deep in the spell thing that every time something happened, you made it fit.”

I open my mouth, but nothing comes out. Because that is annoyingly difficult to argue with.

“Okay,” I say finally. “But there is objectively some weird shit happening.”

“Oh, yeah, there is,” Dani agrees. “You’re dating someone you really like and by the sounds of it, she really likes you back.”

“And also maybe developing some emotional codependence to your online witch?”

Veronica stares at me. I don’t know what to do, what to say, how to react.

Before I can answer, a shadow falls across the table.

“Merryweather.”

Every muscle in my body recognizes Helena’s voice before I look up.

She’s standing beside us with her phone in one hand, gaze moving briefly over Veronica and Dani before returning to me.

“Phillip moved the seasonal review up. He wants you upstairs for it. We start in ten minutes.”

Me? *Me*? Not us? I look at my boss, but her expression gives absolutely nothing away.

“I—” I clear my throat. “Okay. I’ll be there.”

She nods once and walks away. For a moment, the three of us watch her disappear into the cafeteria crowd.

Dani clears her throat. “Magnet.”

“Oh, fuck off.”

“I’m just saying, babe. The evidence continues to mount.”

“The evidence is that I have to go back to work.”

Veronica is still looking in the direction Helena disappeared, but when she turns back to me, the amusement has faded from her face.

“Actually, the evidence is pretty obvious.” Veronica leans forward in her seat. “We fucked with you about the flirting because it was funny and you made it so easy. But not this part, Merry. You’re really fucking good at your job.”

“I mean, you have your own boss coming to fetch you, Merry.” Dani nods animatedly, and the smile on her face grows. “You’ve been doing half the work in those meetings for years.”

I know that. Or I think I do. I look down at the bracelet on my wrist, turning it once with my thumb.

“So go,” Veronica says. “You can’t keep Hell waiting.”

I gather the remains of my lunch and shove them into the paper bag.

“Fine. But if I come back down here with another lesbian and not a promotion, I’m suing both of you.”

Dani picks up her drink again. “That’s fair.”

I start toward the elevators before either of them can say anything else. Ten minutes from now, I’ll be sitting in a room I wasn’t supposed to be in.

And if someone asks me what I think, I’m going to tell them.

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# CHAPTER 32

# FLORA

MERRY COMES INTO THE SPINDLE TWICE THE FOLLOWING WEEK FOR COFFEE she does not need.

I know she doesn't need it because on Tuesday she arrives at seven forty in the morning already carrying a paper cup from somewhere else, sees me notice it, and throws it into the trash before she reaches the counter.

"Traitor."

"It was an emergency," she says, but I see how the smile on her face reaches her eyes and makes them crinkle at the corners. "I panicked."

Luis looks up from the espresso machine. "You panicked so you bought coffee?"

"No, I panicked when Flora saw the coffee. It was absolutely a rational decision made several blocks ago."

I bite the inside of my cheek, and Merry smiles at me.

It's been a little over a week since I went to her house for an earring, and stayed for pasta and wine and several hours on her couch. We've seen each other since then, although I'm starting to lose track of which times count as dates.

There was dinner Saturday, which definitely counted.

Sunday morning probably counted, too, considering I didn't leave her house until almost noon.

Monday, she came into The Spindle on her lunch break while she worked from home and stayed for exactly eleven minutes because she had a

meeting.

Yesterday, I saw her through the front windows, running toward the bus stop with her coat open and her bag bouncing against her hip. She didn't come inside that time. She didn't even see me.

I watched her anyway, and Luis caught me smiling and very generously said nothing.

Merry leans against the counter now while I make the latte she absolutely could have survived without.

"I can't stay," she says with a tiny pout on her lips.

"I assumed."

"I have a meeting at eight thirty."

I glance at the clock. "The bus is in four minutes."

Her head whips to the windows. "Fuck."

I laugh as I put the lid on her cup and slide it across the counter.

She catches it, but instead of leaving, she looks at me. "You're still good for tonight?"

"Yeah."

"Eight?"

I nod, and she stands there, smiling at me. Merryweather doesn't move, and neither do I. I feel Luis very deliberately pretending to do something with a stack of to-go cups behind me.

Merry lowers her voice. "I want to kiss you."

My eyes flick to the handful of customers scattered around the café.

"Then kiss me."

The grin starts before she can stop it. She leans over the counter and kisses me quickly, warm mouth and cold nose, one hand resting beside the coffee machine.

It's barely a kiss. It still changes the temperature of my entire body.

When she pulls back, her cheeks are pink. "Okay. Bye."

"Your bus."

"Oh, fuck."

She grabs her coffee and runs.

I watch her through the windows as she hurries down the sidewalk, weaving around a man with a dog and nearly colliding with someone coming the other direction.

But she makes the bus.

The doors close behind her, and a few seconds later, it pulls away from the curb.

When I turn around, Luis is looking at me.

“You know, funny thing,” he says as he passes behind me. “It sure looks like you two are dating.”

I pick up a towel and throw it at him. He catches it against his chest.

The statement is cheeky enough that it takes me a second to realize I’ve never actually said it. Merry and I haven’t said it either.

We’ve talked about when we’re seeing each other next. We’ve kissed goodbye and good morning. We’ve had dinner and drinks and sex and coffee. I’ve learned that she steals the blankets but complains if the room is too warm, and that she sets three alarms because she does not trust the first two versions of herself to make good decisions.

Dating seems like the obvious word for all of that.

“Yeah,” I say.

Luis nods, like I’ve confirmed something he figured out weeks ago. “She’s hilarious.”

“She is.”

Then someone walks up to the register, and that’s the end of it.

Which I like.

I especially like that I can say I’m dating Merryweather and the world doesn’t tilt.

I just go back to work.

The rest of the shift passes the way shifts usually do.

There is a rush around nine, another around lunch, and a woman who sends back an oat milk cappuccino because she says she can sense dairy through ceramic, even when there isn’t any in the drink.

*Mamá* texts to ask if I can pick up tomatoes on the way home.

Fausto sends a picture to our tiny family group chat of something horrifying he claims to have cooked, and Maggie asks whether I’m still free Sunday.

I tell her yes.

And sometime between steaming milk and restocking the pastry case, my phone vibrates in my apron.

I don’t look immediately. I’ve gotten better at that.

But when I finally have a second, I pull it out to see the Whisp notification.

**Primavera1959 sent you a message.**

The little lift in my chest is familiar now. Different from what happens to my whole body when Merry walks through the door. Not smaller, exactly. Simply different.

But I put my phone away and decide to reply when I have time.

The strange thing is that I find myself thinking about *Primavera* even when she hasn't messaged me.

It's not constant, and it's never in a way that interrupts my life.

But she appears.

I'll hear someone complain about something they very clearly want but refuse to ask for, and I'll wonder what *Primavera* would say about it now. I'll see a woman wearing gold earrings on the bus and remember the first item on that ridiculous list she struggled so hard to make. I'll notice the moon and think about a woman I've never met walking around in the dark because I told her to pay attention.

She took that assignment so seriously. She's taken all of them seriously, even while complaining about every single one.

That's what I like most, I think.

*Primavera* can turn anything into a joke, but she keeps doing the work.

She went looking for what she'd been missing and made herself name things she wanted without explaining why she was allowed to want them.

She asked.

And every time I give her another reason to look at her own life, she comes back having noticed something new and exciting.

I've spent years giving people something to look for, and suddenly they see what has been sitting in front of them all along.

*Primavera* is paying attention now. And I find the way she does it almost unbearably charming. She overthinks and argues, and sends me four messages when one would have accomplished the same thing. She complains about everything but follows instructions to the tee.

Sometimes I catch myself waiting to see what she'll notice next.

Which is its own kind of attention, I suppose.

"Flora."

I blink. Luis is standing next to me with his apron already off.

"Sorry, what?"

"I asked if you're coming."

“Coming where?”

He gives me a look. “Drinks.”

Right.

He mentioned it yesterday. A few people from The Spindle are going somewhere a couple of blocks away after work. I hadn’t given him an answer.

My immediate thought is Merry, because I’m seeing her tonight.

But my second thought is that I’m not seeing Merry until eight.

“What time?”

“Now.”

I look at the clock. Four twelve.

“I can stay for one.”

Luis grins. “Look at you.”

“Please don’t make me regret this.”

“I was going to say that it’s nice that you're joining us!” He laughs, and his whole body shakes as he walks to the back to grab his things.

---

One drink becomes two.

We sit around a table that’s slightly too small for six people, and complain endlessly and in circles about the same customers, our schedules, and the new blender everyone hates. The girl who does most of the closing shifts, Meredith, orders fries for the table. Luis tells a story I’ve heard at least thrice before and somehow makes it longer and more embellished this time.

At seven, I realize I haven’t thought about the time in almost an hour.

The realization comes with an old instinct beneath it, something that tells me that I should feel guilty.

Because I have plans and someone is waiting for me.

Except Merry isn’t waiting for me, not yet at least.

I pick up my phone anyway.

ME

Went for drinks with some people from work. I might be a little late tonight.

Her response comes while I’m putting the phone down.

MERRY

Take your time

Then:

MERRY

I’m currently losing a fight with eyeliner so this benefits everyone.

I smile.

FLORA

Should I be worried?

MERRY

Deeply

I put my phone face down on the table and steal another fry.

At eight twenty, Merry is outside the bar where trivia night has happened every Thursday for the past six years without an ounce of my knowledge.

Her eyeliner looks perfect. She looks flawless.

“You survived.”

“Barely.” She steps toward me and kisses me hello. “I almost blinded myself.”

“Well, you look beautiful.” The words come out before I think about them, and Merryweather’s smile that follows is one of those ones I have seen only a few times, blinding and breathtaking and perfect.

She takes my hand and pulls me inside the bar. “Come on. I need you.”

“For trivia?”

“I have weaknesses, believe it or not.”

Something warm moves through me.

“You don’t know all of them yet,” she says as she looks back at me for a second. “Give me time.”

Then her smile falters, some of the playfulness disappearing from her expression.

“Okay.”

Inside, the bar is loud and crowded, and Merry has decided that our two-person trivia team will take the grand prize, despite having no idea what the prize is.

We are terrible at sports. Merry is inexplicably good at eighties movies.

I know some geography, science, and an embarrassing amount about nineteenth-century literature because *Mamá* went through a period where she believed reading the classics would make Fausto and me more cultured.

It did not work on my brother. I tell Merry this, and she laughs so loudly she snorts again, then covers her mouth with her hand and blushes the most adorable pink I've seen yet.

Halfway through the second round, Merry becomes convinced that the capital of Australia is Sydney.

"I just feel like it's Sydney," she says, and she reaches her hand to tuck an errant lock of my hair behind my ear. "Sydney is giving me capital vibes."

"That's not how capitals work, *linda.*"

She giggles, and I am almost one hundred percent certain she's putting up a fucking act and flirting shamelessly. I love it.

"It's Canberra," I tell her.

When the answer is announced, she turns slowly in her chair. "I find competence extremely attractive, you know?" She kisses my cheek and reaches for the next answer sheet.

At some point, without asking, she shifts her chair closer to mine because the bar is loud, and her knee stays pressed against my thigh for the rest of the game.

She does all these little things that normally I wouldn't have thought mattered. Except that I'm starting to think that's all knowing someone is.

Consistent attention, over time.

*Primavera* comes into my mind then, unexpectedly. All those conversations and all those small observations she's been collecting because I told her to look. Pay attention, I've been telling her. Look closely at your own life instead of wanting for the universe to hand you an answer.

I wonder when I decided that advice only applied to other people.

Merry bumps her knee against mine. "I'm so glad the universe put us on the same path," she says, almost absentmindedly. She looks at my mouth, then leans in to give me a chaste, innocent kiss.

Her hair is falling out of whatever updo she'd tried to do with it earlier, and there's a faint pink mark on her cheek from where she rested her face in her hand. She's smiling at me like she expects me to know something she doesn't.

"Huh," I reply. Merry leans closer until her shoulder presses against mine. "I was thinking the same thing."

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# CHAPTER 33

# FLORA

I'M THE ONE WHO TEXTS MAGGIE ON FRIDAY AFTERNOON TO ASK IF SHE wants to get brunch the next day, even though we already have plans for Sunday. It isn't until she responds almost immediately that I realize how long it's been since I was the one who asked to see her first.

Not that we haven't seen each other. We have.

Things have been better between us for months now, slowly enough that I couldn't point to the moment when seeing Maggie stopped feeling like something we were both carefully tending and started feeling like friendship again.

She texts me about work and sends me pictures of dogs she sees on the street. I complain to her about customers at The Spindle. And we make plans, and most of the time now, neither of us has to say that we're glad we did.

Still, when I look back through our conversations while I'm waiting for her answer, I can see how often she's the one who starts them.

That understanding is uncomfortable in a way I don't entirely understand.

Then her response appears.

MAGGIE

Depends. Are you asking me on a date?

I smile.

ME

No

MAGGIE

Then unfortunately yes, I'm free

ME

Brunch?

There's a longer pause before she answers this time.

MAGGIE

Look at you making plans.

I stare at the screen until it goes black, wondering if she means it the way I've taken it or if I'm finding significance in something that isn't supposed to have any.

Probably the latter.

ME

Eleven?

She sends me the name of a place in Fremont and tells me she'll meet me there.

---

The next morning, Maggie is already sitting outside on the covered patio when I get there, wearing sunglasses despite the heavy gray sky and drinking coffee from a mug large enough that she has to use both hands to lift it.

"You're late," she says as I approach.

I check the time automatically. "It's ten fifty-eight."

"I've been here for nine minutes."

"That sounds like a personal decision, Mags."

She smiles and stands to hug me.

We've been doing that again, too.

There was a stretch of time when I couldn't remember whether Maggie and I had ever been people who hugged hello, or whether that was something I'd invented because I missed how uncomplicated our friendship

used to be. Now I don’t think about it until her arms are already around me, and by the time we sit down, she’s complaining about her coworker Kevin as if there hadn’t been a time when we had to search for safe things to talk about.

I listen while we order, and then she tells me about another coworker—also named Kevin—who has decided that every meeting requires a pre-meeting and every pre-meeting requires a document no one will read.

Somewhere between coffee and food, she asks about The Spindle.

I tell her Luis has started hiding the good pastries behind the counter before the afternoon rush because he claims the staff deserves “first right of refusal since we’re being exploited for the benefit of humanity’s good mood.”

Maggie laughs. “You seem good.”

The comment is quiet enough that I almost miss it.

“I am.”

She takes another drink of coffee, and for a few seconds I think that’s all she’s going to say. Then she adds, “You’ve been around more.”

I look at her. “I’ve always been around.”

“Flora.” She takes a deep breath. We haven’t talked about it. And in the past few months since we’ve started working through this repair, we’ve only skirted around the topic. “I don’t mean physically.”

There’s no accusation in it, which somehow makes me more aware of what she’s saying. Maggie traces one finger through the condensation on her water glass.

“I love that you text me first sometimes.” The corner of Maggie’s mouth lifts, and I wonder if she’s remembering the multiple consecutive messages I sent her last week about the lady who wanted a cappuccino with no foam, but insisted a latte was not what she ordered. “It’s nice. That’s all.”

I look down at my plate.

There are a dozen responses available to me, most of them designed to make the observation smaller than it feels. I could tell her she’s being dramatic, or I could point out that asking someone to brunch is hardly evidence of profound personal growth.

Instead, I let the comment stay where she put it. “It’s nice for me, too.”

Something softens in her expression. Then she steals a potato from my plate, and the moment passes.

After brunch, we walk without deciding where we're going. The temperature has dropped enough that Seattle is feeling more like winter than fall, and the sidewalks are slick with leaves that have gone dark from the rain. Maggie keeps stopping to look through closed boutique windows, so what should be a ten-minute walk stretches into half an hour.

"Oh," Maggie says, stopping beside me.

I turn.

Merry is coming out of a bookstore across the street with Rose next to her. I recognize her before I register anything else, which has started happening often enough that it doesn't surprise me anymore.

She's wearing a pale coat and carrying a paper bag against her chest while she talks to Rose, and even from across the street I can see that she's in the middle of a story because her free hand keeps moving as she speaks.

Then she looks up, and her entire expression changes.

It's subtle enough that I might not have noticed it a few weeks ago. Her eyes widen slightly before her mouth curves, like recognizing me happens first and the smile follows a second later.

I notice things like that now.

Maggie makes a quiet sound beside me. "Sleeping Beauty looks happy to see you."

I give her a look, but Merry is already crossing toward us with Rose following a few steps behind.

"Hi."

The word comes with the same smile.

"Hi."

Merry leans in and kisses me. It's brief, the type of kiss that would barely qualify as anything if I hadn't become familiar enough with her mouth to feel the difference between this one and the kisses she gives me when we're alone.

Her hand touches my arm for only one second before she steps back.

There's something strange about how natural it feels. How two of my worlds are colliding, but it's almost like a merger. Merry doesn't become a separate part of my life simply because someone from another part is here to see her.

Rose smiles when she reaches us. "Hi, Flora."

"Hi."

Merry glances between us. "Right. You've met."

Maggie introduces herself before Merry can continue. Everyone shakes hands, and then Maggie turns toward Merry.

“We’ve technically met, too.”

Merry studies her for a second before recognition arrives. “Halloween.”

“Yes.” Maggie glances at me, and I recognize that look immediately. “I was there when Flora spent half the party pretending she wasn’t staring at you.”

Merry turns toward me so quickly, I almost laugh. “You were staring at me?”

“I wasn’t pretending, that’s for sure.”

Maggie nods. “That’s actually true.”

“Oh my god,” Merry says as her smile spreads, and there’s no point trying to stop whatever she’s going to do with this information. “Were you eye-fucking me?”

Rose looks between us and shakes her head. “I’m going back inside.”

“You can’t,” Merry says. “You already bought your books.”

“Well, I’ll buy more if it takes me out of this misery.”

The conversation settles after that, losing the strange quality of an introduction and becoming something easier. The three women talk about books, complain about the weather, and compare plans for the rest of the weekend. Merry blushes when Rose pulls out the cookbook they bought and giggles when her sister claims she’s trying to learn how to make something that is not pasta.

There isn’t anything extraordinary about it.

For so long, I’ve thought about relationships as things that occupy space. They require time, attention, compromise, pieces of oneself that have to be moved around to make room for another person. I know that’s not inherently bad because loving someone is supposed to require something from you.

But standing here, watching Maggie laugh at something Merry says while Rose rolls her eyes beside her, I don’t feel anything being displaced.

My life isn’t rearranging itself around Merry.

She’s simply standing inside it.

The thought is still with me when Merry eventually checks the time and tells us they have to go.

“I’ll call you later?” she asks.

“Yeah.”

She kisses me again, just as casually as she did when she arrived, then leaves with Rose.

I watch them until Merry disappears into the foot traffic.

“I like her,” my friend says. We make it another few steps before she adds, more quietly, “I like you with her.”

There are things that Maggie could mean by that, and once upon a time I would have needed her to explain exactly which one. I would have wanted to know what she saw, whether she thought I was behaving differently, whether there was some warning hidden inside the compliment that I was supposed to understand.

Instead, I let her say it.

And because she is, after all, my oldest friend, she lets me leave it there.

---

That night, I’m sitting on the couch with *Mamá* when *Primavera* messages me.

Fausto is yet again at the house and has spent the better part of twenty minutes moving between the kitchen and the living room looking for a charger that *Mamá* insists he left at his own house. The television is on, although none of us are paying enough attention to know what’s happening, and I’m scrolling through my phone when the Whisp notification appears.

I don’t need to open it immediately.

I know that. There are messages I leave unanswered for hours. Customers who can wait until morning. People whose problems belong to the part of my life I deliberately keep contained inside a screen.

*Primavera* hasn’t felt much like a customer lately, and it’s fucking with my brain.

PRIMAVERA1959

I think something is happening to me

There is something about the way this person moves through the world that I’ve become increasingly fond of, even though the only evidence I have of that world is whatever she chooses to put into words. It makes me smile immediately.

THE THIRD FAIRY

What kind of something?

Her answer comes in pieces.

PRIMAVERA1959

I keep doing things before I can talk myself out of them!

Nothing dangerous

Just things I normally would have spent three business days overthinking

I settle deeper into the couch.

THE THIRD FAIRY

Like what?

There’s a long pause before the next message.

PRIMAVERA1959

It doesn’t really matter, I guess.

Can I ask you something that’s not about me?

My first instinct is to redirect her.

THETHIRDFAIRY

You can ask

PRIMAVERA1959

How do you know when being careful stops being smart and starts being rooted in fear?

The question changes something in me so quietly that, at first, I only notice because I stop breathing normally.

My mother shifts on the couch beside me, tucking the blanket more securely around her legs. From the kitchen, Fausto announces that someone has stolen his charger, and she tells him, without looking away from the soap opera on the television, that no one wants his broken charger badly enough to steal it.

Their voices move around me while I keep staring at *Primavera*’s question.

THE THIRD FAIRY

I think maybe it's when being careful starts making the decision for you

I send it before I can improve it. Then I sit there looking at my own words.

Because I know exactly what they mean. After Alison, being careful had felt like wisdom. I needed boundaries and my own life again.

So I became careful: with my time, about the people let close enough to disrupt my routines, about wanting anything that could grow large enough to demand something from me. It worked because my life became mine again, but the problem is that I never decided when I would stop protecting it.

PRIMAVERA1959

Gosh, that's annoyingly good.

I smile, although the feeling sitting in my chest, tucked under my ribs, isn't amusement.

THE THIRD FAIRY

Occupational hazard

PRIMAVERA1959

Does that apply to you?

At this point, a question like this one shouldn't surprise me. Somewhere in the last couple of months since she first ordered the spell, something has started changing.

I look at my mom, who is still watching television, then back at my phone.

THE THIRD FAIRY

Yes

She doesn't immediately respond.

When she does, though, the question is charged.

PRIMAVERA1959

So what do you do when you know fear is making the decision?

I look at the words and realize I don’t have one of my usual answers ready.

It’s easy to tell someone to notice what they want. Harder to tell them what comes after that, when wanting doesn’t make the risk disappear.

THE THIRD FAIRY

I suppose you decide whether the thing you want is worth doing afraid.

PRIMAVERA1959

That’s a terrible system

I chuckle.

THE THIRD FAIRY

You paid five hundred bucks for it

PRIMAVERA1959

I knew you’d find a way to make this my fault.

I expect another joke, but the next message is different.

PRIMAVERA1959

I think I’ve spent a lot of time believing that if I wait long enough, eventually the right choice will become obvious.

But the strange thing about it too is that I keep trying and failing and at what point is that considered just craziness?

So I just get very good at waiting

Do you think not choosing is a choice?

My answer comes easily. I’ve spent years thinking of myself as decisive. I know what I will and won’t tolerate. I know how much of myself I’m willing to give away. I rebuilt my life deliberately after Alison, one boundary at a time.

But boundaries tell me where to stop. They don’t tell me where I want to go.

THETHIRD FAIRY

Of course it is.

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# CHAPTER 34

# MERRYWEATHER

"UNBELIEVABLE," I SAY ONCE I HANG MY COAT AND LEAVE MY SHOES BY the door. Rose is stretched across my couch with Aurora asleep on her chest, both of them looking so comfortable in my house that for a moment I resent every decision I've made that required me to leave it.

"Don't move," Rose says when I reach the living room.

"I wasn't planning to tackle you."

Aurora's eyes open at the sound of my voice, but the rest of her doesn't move. She looks at me from her position beneath Rose's chin with the sleepy indifference of a cat who has transferred her primary allegiance to my guest during my workday.

"She chose me."

"Please. She doesn't choose anyone. She chooses heat sources."

I drop my bag beside the stairs, then stand there for a second longer than necessary, trying to decide whether I have enough energy to change before finding food.

"Whatever helps you sleep at night, Merry." My sister shifts on the couch, and Aurora swishes her tail in response. "How was work?"

"Interesting."

Her hand, which has been moving slowly over the cat's back, stops. "Good interesting or someone-needs-to-be-fired interesting?"

"I don't know yet."

That gets her attention enough that she drops her phone between the cushions and her body, and slowly lifts her torso to see me more clearly.

I walk into the kitchen instead of answering, mostly because I've been answering questions all day and would like thirty seconds in which nobody expects me to have another one ready. There is half a bottle of wine in the refrigerator from sometime last week. I consider it, decide I'm too hungry, and pour myself water instead.

Phillip offered me a job today.

Not officially. Apparently people at his level don't do anything reassuringly straightforward like sliding a piece of paper across a desk and saying, *Here's the job, Merryweather. Would you like it?*

Instead, he asked me to come upstairs at ten thirty, closed the door to one of the smaller conference rooms on his floor, and spent forty-five minutes talking *at* me about restructuring and responsibilities and how the company has grown faster than some of its internal systems.

Then he told me they were considering creating a new planning position.

Then he spent another ten minutes gently describing a job that sounded suspiciously like several of the things I already do, except with more authority, more access, and presumably, more money.

And finally, with five minutes left of our planned one-hour meeting, he asked whether I'd be interested.

And I said yes.

Which is why I don't understand why I've been thinking about the question ever since.

Rose appears in the kitchen doorway with Aurora now draped over one shoulder. "You look weird."

"Thank you," I reply, and open the fridge again to see if something has magically materialized in there. Maybe I should order another spell, but this time to make sure my refrigerator is always stocked with food so I don't have to do anything. "It's so nice to have a sister, honestly."

She adjusts the cat, and I hear the traitor start purring at the highest volume possible. I take another drink of water.

"I got the promotion."

Rose's mouth falls open. "A promotion promotion?"

"No, Rose, a ceremonial promotion. I get a sash and a bouquet of flowers, and hopefully a nice tiara out of it."

Aurora decides she's had enough of us and jumps down, disappearing toward the hallway. Rose comes farther into the kitchen.

"That's huge."

"It isn't technically a promotion yet. The position doesn't actually exist. They're creating it for me, I think."

My sister's eyes widen. "And you want it?"

"Yes."

The answer comes quickly enough that Rose nods, apparently satisfied.

I wish I were.

I open the refrigerator again, stare inside without seeing anything, then close it again.

Rose is still watching me. "Why do you look constipated?"

"Oh my god, what is wrong with you?"

My sister smirks. "I'm just a better version of you, Merry."She finds this—torturing me—highly amusing, I suppose.

I smile, because it's somewhat true. She's the evolved version of me. Maybe what I would look and sound like if I weren't riddled by anxiety and the consequences of being a people pleaser eldest daughter.

Rose's forehead creases. "Isn't this good?"

"I don't know."

Phillip had barely finished asking whether the position sounded like something I might want before I told him it did. I didn't ask anything about the role, I didn't even ask who I would be reporting to. And in a very unMerry way, I didn't make a joke about how I was a mere mortal at this company, just to placate the uncomfortable feeling that was lingering in the air.

I open the refrigerator again and take out the leftover pasta from last night. It was an attempt at making a more evolved version than the buttered noodles with salt and pepper I exclusively cook for myself. It tastes okay, I guess.

Rose gets two bowls without me asking whether she's eating some, too, which I suppose answers that question.

"I think I always thought wanting something was the easy part," I say while I scrape pasta into the bowls. "Like you want something, and then the difficult part is figuring out how to get it."

"That seems normal."

“Right? Except apparently I have an entire process set up by myself before I’m allowed to want anything.”

Rose laughs.

“I’m serious.”

“I know. That’s why it’s funny.” My sister leans against the opposite counter. “I don’t see you as a person who doesn’t know what she wants,” she says, looking at one of the bowls of pasta moving in circles inside my tiny microwave. “I really think you know, but you don’t trust yourself until you have all the supporting evidence, and sometimes it’s too late and the moment passes.”

The microwave hums, and I look at her. She shrugs, suddenly interested in a loose thread on her sleeve.

“You’ve always been like that and, yes, it’s safe. You own a house and you have a successful career. But at what cost, Merry?”

I want to argue with her. Instead, I think about how much time I’ve spent over the past two months collecting evidence. I kept gathering it, turning every coincidence around in my hands, trying to determine what it meant and whether the universe was attempting to tell me something.

The ridiculous thing is that the clearest moments haven’t required any interpretation at all.

I wanted Flora to kiss me. I wanted to see her again. I wanted her in my house.

Today, I wanted the job Phillip described.

Every time I’ve known what I wanted, the knowing itself has been almost embarrassingly quiet.

The microwave beeps.

“So what happens if the evidence is wrong?” I ask.

Rose looks at me. “What evidence?”

“Any of it. What if you decide you want something and then it turns out to be a terrible idea?”

“Then it was a terrible idea. I’ve had my share of those.”

“And it doesn’t bother you?”

“Of course it bothers me.”

She says it so simply that I almost laugh.

“You make decisions like you’re not afraid of anything.”

“No,” she says as she takes out her bowl of food from the microwave. “I make decisions knowing I might regret them.”

There’s a difference there that I don’t particularly enjoy.

“I don’t know, Merry,” she continues. “You act like there’s some version of your life where you make all the correct choices and then nothing bad happens to you.”

“That would be ideal.”

“Sure. Let me know when you find it.”

She takes a fork from the drawer and heads back to the living room. I follow with my own dinner.

Aurora has reclaimed the center cushion of the couch, which forces both of us to sit around her. Rose turns the television on, and for a while we eat without talking.

I think about Flora, of course.

She has started appearing in my thoughts at times that have nothing to do with her, which feels unfair considering how frequently she already appears when I have a legitimate reason to be thinking about her.

I wonder what she’s doing tonight. Whether she’s at home or still at The Spindle. Whether she has eaten.

The thought of texting her comes easily to my mind. So does the impulse to do it. And I have learned enough in the past couple of weeks that I do not need a reason anymore.

I put my bowl on the coffee table and reach for my phone. There is already a notification waiting for me.

THE THIRD FAIRY

I’ve been thinking about something you asked me

I sit a little straighter and Rose glances over, then back at the television.

PRIMAVERA1959

Should I be concerned?

The answer takes a minute.

THE THIRD FAIRY

Probably

PRIMAVERA1959

Great. Love that for me

As if I need any more drama in my life, honestly

Another pause.
Then:

THE THIRD FAIRY

I think you're ready for the next step

I stare at the message, and my smile disappears.

PRIMAVERA1959

Actually, I think I'm good!

I think the reversal worked because *reasons* and I'm good.

Really good

I get up from the couch and head to the kitchen with the stupid excuse to grab some water. Rose glances at me suspiciously, but she's too enthralled by my cat's fur to give a shit.

PRIMAVERA1959

Work is going well and I've been asking for what I want and I'm not making lists anymore. And I met someone I really like and they like me too, I think.

There. If anything, continuing to interfere with this situation seems irresponsible.

PRIMAVERA1959

So I think we can call it.

Successful reversal. Five stars. No further magic required.

Something warm and complicated settles behind my ribs.

PRIMAVERA1959

So we agree.

No next step.

THE THIRD FAIRY

I don't think this is how it works, unfortunately.

For a spell to be reversed, you have to get to the end.

PRIMAVERA1959

So like a 10-day course of antibiotics?

THE THIRD FAIRY

That’s funny.

And yes.

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CHAPTER 35

# THE THIRD FAIRY

2:09 PM

THE THIRD FAIRY

You know what you want now.

You've known for a while, I think.

So this time, there is no list.

No walking under the moonlight.

Nothing to find.

Choose the thing you keep returning to.

The thing you look for when something good happens because you want to tell someone.

The person whose attention has started to matter more than it should.

The one you want to know you back.

Don't choose them because they appeared at the right time, or because you think they want you.

Or because you think the universe put them in your path.

Choose them because, out of everyone you could reach for, they're the person you keep reaching for anyway.

And don't ask me how you'll know.

You already do.

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## CHAPTER 36

# MERRYWEATHER

THE PROBLEM WITH BEING TOLD TO CHOOSE SOMETHING YOU ALREADY know you want is that it makes me, at least, immediately suspicious.

I read The Third Fairy's message again Wednesday morning on the bus, one hand wrapped around the overhead rail while somebody's backpack repeatedly bumps against my hip.

*Choose the thing you keep returning to.*

Flora.

Easy.

*The thing you look for when something good happens because you want to tell someone.*

Also Flora.

Yesterday, after Phillip sent me the preliminary description for the new role, she was the first person I texted.

*The person whose attention has started to matter more than it should.*

Flora. Obviously.

I scroll down.

*The one you want to know you back.*

My thumb stops.

The bus lurches around a corner, forcing me to tighten my grip.

It's still Flora. But that one requires a deeper explanation.

Flora knows me. More of me every time I see her. She knows the version who can look at twelve months of sales data and find the problem

everyone else has been discussing for thirty-three minutes, and the one who needs three alarms in the morning. She knows how I take my coffee and how I like to be touched. She's seen me naked and asleep, and laughing hard enough to snort.

There are things she doesn't know yet.

And I assume that's normal. That's how getting to know someone works.

Still, my mind supplies another screen. Another conversation. Another woman who knows things about me Flora doesn't.

Things I've told her because she asked.

Things I've told her because, increasingly, I wanted her to know.

I lock my phone.

---

The bus drops me across from The Spindle a little after six. Normally, I cross the street and turn toward home.

Tonight, I cross the street and go inside.

I don't stop to invent or consider a reason first.

The café is nearly empty, the pastry case reduced to a handful of items nobody wanted badly enough during the day, chairs already turned upside down on two of the tables near the back.

Flora is wiping down the espresso machine.

She looks up when the bell rings, and I get my answer immediately.

It happens before she smiles, although the smile certainly doesn't hurt. It's the small, immediate shift inside me when I see her, like my attention has been waiting all day for somewhere to safely land.

Her hair is pulled back, a few shorter pieces loose around her face, and she's wearing a black cardigan that drapes off one shoulder beneath her apron. She puts down the cloth.

"Hi."

One word that makes me feel absolutely ridiculous. I walk up to the counter, her eyes trailing me the whole way.

"I wanted to see you."

Something in her expression softens.

I keep going before I can decide I need to explain myself.

“I know we’re seeing each other Friday. And technically, I should be going home right now, considering my house is in that direction and I have been thinking about taking my bra off since approximately three thirty. But I got off the bus, and I could see the café, and I wanted to see you more than I wanted to go home.”

Flora watches me through the entire explanation, her smile slowly growing. Then she reaches across the counter and hooks two fingers around mine. “I’m done in, like, ten minutes.”

So I stay.

I take one of the tables near the window while she finishes closing. I reply to two emails, send Veronica a picture of something horrifying Rose has added to our shared grocery list, and occasionally look up to find Flora moving around behind the counter.

Once, she catches me, but I don’t look away.

Eventually, Luis passes Flora with a stack of cups and says something I can’t hear. Flora answers without taking her eyes off me.

Luis follows her gaze. He sees me, shakes his head, and keeps walking.

This is easy. Maybe that’s what’s been bothering me about the assignment.

I expected *choosing* to feel bigger. The spell has made everything sound enormous so far. *Notice. Want. Ask. Choose.* Words that belong carved into rocks or whispered by mysterious women in forests.

But maybe choosing Flora is just this. Getting off the bus, crossing the street and staying.

When Flora finally comes out, she’s traded the apron for her coat and has her canvas bag over one shoulder.

I stand, and she walks directly to me, one hand finding my waist before she kisses me. There’s no discussion about what we’re doing after that. We leave The Spindle together, cross at the light, and head to my house as naturally as if we’d made the plan hours ago.

It takes me almost half a block to notice.

I smile, and Flora catches it immediately.

“What?”

“Nothing. I’m just having a very good day.”

She looks at me, waiting for whatever will inevitably follow. Because she’s learned me well enough to know that much already.

“I stood up to my boss today.”

“Oh, shit, to Hell?”

“Former Hell, potentially? I don’t know, her status is currently unclear.”

That makes Flora laugh, and I slip my hand into hers.

“I don’t have an official start date yet because HR needs to clear it. Whatever.” I gesture with my free hand. “Helena *did* steal my work in a meeting this afternoon, though.”

Flora’s head turns. “Again?”

“Sort of. She presented my forecast adjustment without saying it was mine, and normally I would’ve sat there getting progressively angrier while also convincing myself there was no graceful way to correct her but also that we are a team and it doesn’t matter who does the actual job, you know?”

“But you did.”

“I did.” I can feel myself smiling again. “I said, ‘That’s the adjustment I sent over Friday.’ Just like that. In front of everybody.”

Flora’s eyes widen, and I feel her hand squeeze mine where our fingers are intertwined. “Good girl.”

Oh.

I turn my head toward her.

Flora keeps walking for another step before the resistance of my hand stops her. She looks back at me, then at our joined hands, and finally at my face.

“What happened?” She bites her lip and cocks her head in confusion, and I watch the realization arrive.

A flush starts high on her cheeks, which is particularly satisfying considering she’s the one who just made my brain glitch in the middle of a perfectly wholesome conversation about workplace boundaries.

“I was being supportive,” she says, darting her eyes.

“And you were doing an excellent job.” I step closer, enough that the space between us disappears and she has to tip her face up slightly to look at me. “Do you think you could be even more supportive later?”

“Merry.”

I love the way she says my name when she’s trying not to smile.

“What? I had a big day.”

She shakes her head, but her free hand finds my waist, settling there easily beneath the open edge of my coat. “We should probably keep walking, then.”

Flora kisses me instead.

It's brief, more promise than anything else, but when she pulls away her hand stays right at the waistline of my pants where my sweater has lifted a little for another second before she takes mine again.

We keep walking to my house, but we make it perhaps twenty feet. Then we pass the narrow gap between two buildings, and I stop.

"What—"

"Come here."

I tug her around the corner with me. It's barely an alley, more like an architectural oversight between a restaurant and whatever is next to it, shadowed from the sidewalk but still close enough that I can hear people passing a few feet away.

Flora looks from me to the street. Then I feel her gaze burning into my face.

"Merryweather."

I love when she uses my entire name like I've done something she intends to hold against me.

"What?" I ask, pulling her slowly to me. The wall behind my back gets momentarily illuminated by a car passing by, but after a few moments, we are back in partial darkness. "Am I not being a good girl?"

Her mouth curves, but I don't give her time to answer before I catch the front of her coat and pull her into me.

Flora makes a surprised sound against my mouth, and then her hands are at my waist once more, pulling me closer. My back finds the brick wall, and her body follows, fitting against mine until there's absolutely no room left between us.

The cold of the building presses through my coat, but everything else is warm.

Her mouth, especially.

I kiss her harder, catching her lower lip between mine, and Flora answers by sliding her hands under the hem of my shirt. Her palms settle against my bare skin, warm enough to make me shiver, her thumbs moving slowly over my skin.

Someone definitely passes on the sidewalk, because I hear footsteps and a voice.

We are approximately six feet from respectable society, and somehow that makes the fact that Flora has her hands under my clothes feel more

scandalous than it probably is.

Then her mouth leaves mine.

She kisses the corner of my jaw first, then beneath it, and my head tips back against the wall before I consciously decide to give her more room. Her lips trail down the side of my neck, slow enough that I feel each peck separately, until she reaches the place where my sweater has slipped away from my shoulder.

She bites me there. Just the brief pressure of her teeth followed by the warmth of her breath against the same spot.

My fingers tighten around the front of her coat.

“Jesus.”

Flora smiles against my skin.

I feel it. Which might be the sexiest part.

“You cannot call me a good girl in public, Flora,” I say with a gasp. Her mouth moves back up my neck. “I can’t think clearly.”

“No?”

Flora lifts her head. Her cheeks are flushed, her lipstick slightly smudged at one corner, and she’s looking at me with an expression that sends another wave of heat through me.

“I never expected you to like it this much,” she says.

I stare at her.

“Okay. We’re going home.”

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# CHAPTER 37

# MERRYWEATHER

WE BARELY MAKE IT THROUGH THE FRONT DOOR.

Flora gets one hand on it long enough to push it closed behind us before I'm kissing her again, and this time there is no sidewalk a few feet away, no possibility of someone turning the corner, no cold Seattle air reminding us that we are technically supposed to be behaving like fully functioning members of society.

Just Flora.

Her coat is still half on when I push it from her shoulders. It falls with a loud thump on the floor, and she smiles against my lips.

"You seem impatient."

I open my mouth to defend myself and then decide there is absolutely no defense available to me, considering the things I just did to this woman out in public a mere ten minutes ago.

She smiles again, and it's not the big one I can occasionally coax out of her when I catch her off guard. This one is smaller. Knowing.

Naughty.

It does terrible things to me.

I reach for her again, but she catches my wrist.

Before I can ask what she's doing, Flora turns us, and my back hits the wall.

"Ow." I twist, trying to look behind myself, even though there is absolutely no angle from which a human neck is designed to accomplish

this. “Something is stabbing me.”

Her eyes widen. “Oh, fuck, sorry.”

“I think your seduction has become hazardous to my health.”

The corner of her mouth tilts up, and in the same breath, she catches my face and kisses me again. The laugh caught in my chest disappears immediately, and the interruption hasn’t done a single thing to derail her.

Flora presses closer, one hand at my waist and the other sliding into my hair, and I let myself have it for a while. The weight of her against me. Her mouth and the quiet confidence with which she touches me now that we’ve had enough time together to stop treating every movement like unexplored territory.

But as her mouth moves to my neck…

I take hold of her waist, and Flora barely has any time to look at me before I turn us again.

I walk her backward to the little bench beside the door.

“Merry,” she pants. Her eyes are heavy-lidded when they meet mine, dark with an unmistakable kind of want.

“Sit.”

There’s a beat where she just looks at me, and my stomach does that little swoop it loves to do every time Flora is close by. When she sits, something about the fact that she does it without argument sends a rush of satisfaction through me.

I step between her knees, and Flora’s hands settle automatically at my hips, but I catch them and guide them around my waist instead before sinking to my knees.

Her eyes widen as understanding crosses her face, and I can’t help the smile that spreads across mine.

“Hi.”

“Hi,” she says back, and her eyes are searching now.

I run my hands along her thighs and part them without even thinking.

Flora’s breathing grows heavier, each inhale a little less controlled than the last, and there’s something intoxicating about knowing I’m the reason for it. I trail kisses over her jeans, taking my time because the way Flora shifts on the bench makes me want to drag this out as much as possible.

My hands eventually find the waistband of her pants, my fingers lingering there while I look up at her and watch anticipation settle across

her face. A small whine escapes her lips, and she flushes, a dark pink settling on her cheeks and down her chest.

“Please,” she mumbles as one of her hands finds my hair.

“Tsk, tsk,” I say, unable to keep the smile from my lips. “And here I thought you were the patient one.”

Flora’s eyes narrow, although the effect is somewhat diminished by the flush covering every inch of visible skin and the way her fingers tighten in my hair.

“Merry.”

There’s a warning in my name this time, but it only makes the satisfaction spreading through me worse.

I like this.

I like seeing her like this, with some of that careful composure stripped away. I like knowing I did it. That the woman who can silence me with a look and make my brain stop working with two perfectly chosen words is sitting in my entryway asking me for something.

For more.

So I let my fingers linger a little longer, my mouth hovering right above her pussy.

She’s so warm, I can feel it against my lips, and when I look up, Flora is watching me with her breath caught somewhere in her chest.

“Hands on the bench,” I tell her.

Flora’s fingers still.

“Both of them.”

Her eyes stay on mine as she slowly pulls her hand from my hair and places it beside her thigh, then does the same with the other.

“And no touching.”

Her lips part slightly, and I swear I can feel half a moan rising from deep in her chest.

“Good.”

I let my hands drift down to her waistband, taking my time with the button and zipper, while Flora keeps both palms planted exactly where I told her to. The restraint is almost more distracting than if she were touching me, especially when her hips shift restlessly beneath my hands.

I work her pants down, Flora lifting herself from the bench just enough to help me. A moment later, they’re abandoned on the floor beside us.

“Fuck,” I say the moment I notice how the fabric of her panties is completely soaked through. “You are perfect.”

A broken little sound catches in Flora’s throat, somewhere between a whimper and a moan, and her fingers curl around the edge of her seat.

“*Por favor*, Merry.”

There’s absolutely no composure left in it this time. Just want.

I trace the tip of my tongue right over her clit, and Flora shivers. She mutters something that could be a curse word or my name or who even cares, and the sound shoots straight through my core.

I lift my body and tug her sweater up, and she lets me—arms raised, obliging. And then it’s tossed behind me in my small entryway and Flora is all but naked in my home, and all I want to do is devour her.

“Jesus fuck, you’re so hot.”

Flora laughs, but the sound is cut short the moment I drag the back of my hand over her hard nipples. And then her mouth is on me, our tongues meeting in a messy, clumsy kiss that feels more desperate than coordinated.

She catches my lower lip between hers, and I lose track of whatever I was about to do, my hands finding her waist as I pull her closer.

My fingers finally resume their slow path down her body, following the curve of her waist until her breath catches again. She arches into me, and I know it’s not deliberate because the motion is followed by a whimper that seems to surprise her as much as it does me.

I hook my finger at the edge of the soft fabric of her panties and ease it aside, breath warm over her soaking pussy. The first slow stroke of my tongue against her clit pulls a sharp gasp from Flora, her entire body going taut beneath my hands. Flora’s hand finds my hair, fingers tangling, holding my head exactly where it is.

“Hands on the bench, baby,” I say, blowing air over where she’s so hot.

She shivers immediately, and her hand goes back to where it was. Flora’s eyes are closed shut, and her breathing is fast and labored, and I know she’s close.

I could drag it out. I *should* drag it out. But unfortunately for me and fortunately for her, I’ve never been known for my patience.

“Open your eyes,” I murmur against her, and feel her clit pulse on my tongue. “I want you to watch me.”

Flora’s eyes open, pupils blown wide and eyes dark as she steadily holds my gaze. And fuck, if that isn’t the hottest thing that’s happened to me

in a long time.

Something about the way she looks at me makes everything else fall away for a minute. Flora is so often the one watching, the one quietly looking at things, while I fill every available inch of silence, but right now she's letting me see her without trying to rearrange the expression on her face into something more controlled. There's trust in that, I realize, in letting someone witness exactly how much they affect you, and the thought sends a different kind of warmth through me.

I want to keep her looking at me. I want to remember this version of her, undone and open and trusting me enough not to hide it.

I go back to her pussy, licking greedily at her entrance, collecting the arousal that's all for me before sucking on her clit. She hisses out another unintelligible word, and I press my legs together instinctively, the sound of her pleasure sending a rush of heat through me.

I lift one of Flora's legs and hook it over my shoulder, then pull her closer until she's perched at the very edge of the bench, pressing my face between her thighs, losing myself in her.

"Yes," Flora says with a pant. I can feel her eyes on me, the heat of her gaze right where my tongue is working her up. "Just like that."

Flora rolls her hips against my mouth, and I know she's close—so, so close—because her legs start to shake and she's rocking her whole body against me. Her hands are gripping the edge of my little entryway bench so hard that they're white, and it can't possibly be comfortable, her ass halfway off her seat.

"Let me see your tits," I say, and I feel almost feral.

I want her completely undone. I want every careful, controlled piece of Flora to fall away until there's nothing left for me to wonder about, until I can see exactly what wanting me does to her.

Her gaze catches mine, dazed and heavy with pleasure, and for a second she only stares at me. Then her hands finally release their death grip on the bench and move toward her breasts. She slides the thin fabric of her bra aside, and the sight of her, flushed and completely unguarded, makes my mouth go dry.

"Fuck, baby," I groan, and then I bury my face against her again.

I lick and suck until I feel the shift in Flora. Her breathing hiccups, the leg still planted on the floor starts to shake, and her fingers roll her nipple as

her eyes fall closed. She's right there, and I can feel it in every increasingly unsteady part of her.

"I'm coming," she says through gritted teeth, and then she tips right over the edge, her whole body going taut as her head thumps loudly against the wall behind her.

The sound makes me look up immediately.

Flora doesn't seem to notice.

Her eyes stay closed, her head resting against the wall where it landed, lips parted as she tries to catch her breath. There's a moment there where she doesn't move at all, except for the uneven rise and fall of her chest.

"Flora?"

"Mmm."

Smiling, I sit back and give her a second, absurdly pleased with myself as I watch her slowly come back to me.

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# CHAPTER 38

# FLORA

HOURS LATER, WE LIE TANGLED TOGETHER IN MERRY'S BED WITHOUT talking.

I'm on my back, Merry curled into my side with one leg thrown over mine, her head resting somewhere between my shoulder and my chest. My fingers move lazily along her spine, tracing the same path up and down without any real purpose, and every few passes I feel her fingertips skim across my stomach in return.

Downstairs, there's a loud thump, and I assume it's the cat playing loudly with the many toys in her collection.

Neither of us seems particularly interested in moving. Or talking.

It takes me several minutes to realize how unusual that is.

But Merry's silence doesn't feel like mine.

Mine has always been easy. A place I know how to occupy without wondering what should go inside it. Merry seems to approach silence as if somebody has handed her an empty room and asked her to decorate it immediately. She fills it with observations and questions and stories that begin somewhere in the middle. Sometimes she fills it simply by telling me what she's thinking as she's thinking it.

Tonight, she lets it stay empty.

I listen to her breathing instead.

Her hair is spread across the pillow beneath us, and every once in a while she shifts, not enough to move away, only enough to get comfortable.

Her fingers find the ends of my hair and play with them absently.

I close my eyes.

“I have an intrusive thought,” she says, and I smile against her head. “I need to ask you something.”

I move her hair out of her face, and she tips her head back, finding my eyes. She diverts her gaze and looks at the ceiling with a deeply concerned expression.

“Do I want to know?”

She turns her face toward mine.“Why were you single when I met you?”

I wasn’t expecting that. My head settles back against the pillow while I think. Merry doesn’t rush to fill the silence, and that surprises me even more than the question.

“There was someone before,” I say eventually. “Alison.”

I trace the edge of the sheet between two fingers.

The name doesn’t hurt anymore and hasn’t for a long time.

“I was really bad at being in love with her.”

Merry moves her body so her head is on the pillow and faces me. One of her legs stays tangled with mine, but the space helps.

“Bad how?” she asks, and her fingers find mine. She squeezes my hand in reassurance.

“Not at loving her.” I stare at the ceiling for a few seconds. “I was probably too good at that.”

There isn’t resentment in my voice, I don’t think. If anything, I sound a little embarrassed, although I’m not sure that's quite right either.

“I let everything else get smaller. My family, Maggie. Things that were mine before Alison was there. And she didn’t ask me to do that, which was the part that took me a long time to admit after. I did it because I thought loving someone that much meant they were supposed to become the center of everything.”

Merry takes a deep breath, and I can feel the concern on her face.

“I didn’t like who I was when it ended. Or maybe I didn’t like realizing how little of myself I’d kept.”

Sometimes, when I tell people pieces of that relationship, I can see them constructing the rest for me. Alison becomes controlling, selfish. Someone who demanded too much until there was nothing left.

My throat tightens unexpectedly. Not because of Alison, but because I remember very vividly that version of myself.

"And I didn't trust myself after that."

Merry's fingers begin moving against my arm, slowly. "With someone else?"

"With myself."

This is the part I haven't said to anyone. This is what my mother has tried to pry out of me for years, her asking me to try again and me not being able to tell her I couldn't do it.

"I knew I could fall in love. I wasn't sure I knew how to do it without disappearing."

Merry is quiet for so long that I eventually look up and find her watching me.

There's no pity in her expression, and I'm grateful for that, too. No immediate reassurance either. She doesn't tell me that I won't do that with her, or that she's different, or that whatever happened before has nothing to do with us.

Instead, she brushes her thumb over my belly button.

Eventually, she sighs. "I think mine was different."

I lift my head enough to look at her. Merry is staring at the ceiling.

"I always felt like I was missing something."

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"With dating. Relationships. All of it." She makes a small movement with her free hand, as if *all of it* might be hovering somewhere above us. "I could meet someone and think she was great, and we'd go out a few times, and then it would just… not go anywhere. Which is normal. I know that's normal. Not everybody you have drinks with is going to become the love of your life."

She goes quiet again, and I decide to wait it out.

"But then every once in a while, I would really like someone. Not *she seems nice, let's see where this goes.* Actually like her. I'd get excited when she texted. I'd rearrange things so I could see her. I'd think about her when she wasn't there. And those were always the ones that seemed to go wrong."

There's no humor in her voice now.

"They'd pull away?"

“Eventually.” Merry’s hand stops on my stomach. “And I never understood what happened. Because I thought I was doing everything right. I was showing up and interested. I was giving it everything I had, sometimes probably way too much of everything I had, and somehow there was always this point where I could feel them stepping back.”

I study her face.

“I started wondering if there was something about me that only worked from a distance.”

The words hurt more than I expect them to. I shift closer without thinking, my hand settling over her ribs. She covers it with hers.

“Like maybe I’m fun when you first meet me,” she continues. “I’m good at first dates. I can talk to virtually anybody. I can make people laugh. But then eventually they get enough of me to realize that maybe I’m…” She trails off.

“Maybe you’re what?”

“I don’t know. Too much?”

She says it quietly. But it doesn’t sound like one of her punchlines.

I don’t tell her she isn’t too much. The instinct is there, immediate and almost painful, but it would be too easy. And I don’t think that’s what she’s asking of me.

Merry looks down at our hands instead.

“So I started treating dating like there was some piece of information everybody else had that I didn’t. Like if I could just figure out what I kept doing wrong, I could fix it.”

Something about that sounds familiar. The belief that there must be an answer somewhere outside yourself if you look hard enough.

“Did you ever figure out why?” I ask.

Merry is quiet for a moment.

“No. Not really.” Her fingers shift beneath mine. “I have theories. Some of them are very unflattering.”

I wait, and eventually she continues without me having to ask.

“I think I try too hard. Not in a creepy way,” she adds quickly. “At least I hope not. God.”

A laugh slips out of me.

“You know what I mean. I liked someone, and suddenly I was so aware that I liked them. I wanted it to work, so I would start thinking about whether I was being too intense or too available. And then I’d decide I was

being ridiculous and should just be myself, except now I was thinking about whether I was being myself correctly."

I can picture it too easily. Merry turning something she wanted into a problem she could solve if she gathered enough information.

"Either that, or I'm cursed romantically."

Merryweather laughs, but something in me stills.

I'm struck by the strange sensation that I've heard this before, except I can't place where. The familiarity comes first, a little tug somewhere in the back of my mind, followed almost immediately by the image of a conversation on a screen. This is how so many of my clients talk, humanizing the bad luck in their lives until it becomes something with intention, something that has singled them out specifically. A curse. The universe. Fate with a personal vendetta.

It's easier, sometimes, to believe something is working against you than to accept that you can do everything right and still not get the thing you want.

I look at Merry. She's still staring at the ceiling, apparently unaware that anything about what she said was unusual.

Even then, what she says doesn't really matter. It's the general feeling. The certainty that there must be some larger explanation for why love hasn't worked the way it was supposed to. The instinct to turn disappointment into evidence of something bigger. A pattern. A force. Something happening *to* her that could explain why trying harder hadn't fixed it.

I've spent weeks trying to teach *Primavera* to stop doing exactly that.

Merry's eyebrows pull together.

"What?" She smiles, and the corners of her eyes crinkle. "I don't mean I literally think there's some ancient lesbian curse on my bloodline."

I laugh, and the odd little thread in my mind loosens.

Still, when I settle against her again, the phrase stays with me a little longer than it should.

*Cursed romantically*.

I tuck it away without knowing why.

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# CHAPTER 39

# FLORA

THE MESSAGE COMES IN WHILE I'M BRUSHING MY TEETH.

I hear the notification from the bedroom and almost ignore it. It's late enough that I'm already in pajamas, my hair twisted on top of my head, the counter covered in the usual evidence that two women share one tiny bathroom. I spit, rinse my mouth, and stare at myself in the mirror for a second.

Then my phone makes the sound again.

There are other Whisp notifications. New orders, questions from existing clients, the occasional person who sends three messages in four minutes because the effectiveness of an intention ritual depends on whether I reply before midnight.

My phone is on the bed where I left it, and I sit beside it before picking it up.

PRIMAVERA1959

I know what I'm choosing

I read the message once.

THE THIRD FAIRY

That sounds very decisive

PRIMAVERA1959

I know. Horrible

I barely recognize myself

I smile.

THETHIRDFAIRY

So?

There’s a long pause in between messages, and I expect her to be offline, to not come back with an answer. But after two more minutes of waiting, she replies.

PRIMAVERA1959

Me.

I straighten a little, and another message arrives before I can answer.

PRIMAVERA1959

And I know this sounds like something you’d put in one of those aspirational posters at doctor’s offices, but stay with me for a moment

A laugh escapes me.
This time, she takes longer.

PRIMAVERA1959

I think I’ve spent a lot of time choosing whatever seemed most likely to turn out okay

I stop smiling. I hear the front door open and shut, and Fausto screams from the bottom of the stairs something about getting food and running back out to a party. To not wait up, even though he no longer lives full-time at our house.

PRIMAVERA1959

Or whatever I could justify

A job because it was stable. A person because they liked me. Not saying something because I couldn’t prove saying it would make anything better

And then when things didn’t work out, I could tell myself I’d made the reasonable choice

I draw one knee toward my chest.

There is something different about the way she's writing tonight. Less like she's trying to arrive at the answer she thinks I expect from her and more like she already has one.

PRIMAVERA1959

I don't want to do that anymore

My thumb rests against the edge of the phone.

THETHIRDFAIRY

Do what?

PRIMAVERA1959

Keep treating my life like I need to defend it to somebody

I'm going to accept a new job, and not because someone noticed me or I noticed something about my capabilities.

I do want it, and if the offer is favorable, I want to make sure it's a job I want to have

And I want her, the person I met

She's my number five on my list of wants

Not because she likes me. I mean, thank god she likes me.

That would make this significantly more embarrassing

I laugh softly.

PRIMAVERA1959

But I wanted her before I knew she wanted me

I stare at that one.

PRIMAVERA1959

And I think that's the difference

For a while, neither of us says anything.

This customer has spent weeks asking me how she'll know.

How she'll know what she wants. How she'll know whether she's asking for too much. How she'll know whether something is a sign or a coincidence or evidence that she's moving in the right direction.

Tonight, she hasn't asked me a single question.

PRIMAVERA1959

I think I’m choosing to stop trying so hard to make everything make sense before I let myself want it.

Something shifts inside me. Small and unmistakeable. Because this is what I wanted for her, even though I have no idea who she is.

Not the relationship or her new job or any particular outcome.

This.

The moment when she stops looking at me to tell her what comes next.

THE THIRD FAIRY

That sounds like a choice

PRIMAVERA1959

Yes

It does

I should probably leave it here. Sign off and go to sleep.

Instead, I type:

THETHIRDFAIRY

How does it feel?

The answer comes almost immediately.

PRIMAVERA1959

Honestly?

Quiet.

I thought it would feel like finally figuring something out

But I think it’s more like deciding I don’t have to.

I’m not entirely sure when her answers started feeling like advice meant for me, too. For weeks, I have been teaching this woman how to trust herself. Somewhere along the way, she has gotten frighteningly good at teaching me back.

PRIMAVERA1959

What about you?

THE THIRD FAIRY

What about me?

PRIMAVERA1959

What are you choosing?

Just a few minutes ago, I was thinking how she wasn't asking any questions. Yet here we are. This is what she does now. She takes the questions I give her, turns them over for a while, then hands them back when I'm least prepared to answer them.

I could remind her this is her custom spell. I could make a joke about professional boundaries, although those have become increasingly theoretical where *Primavera* is concerned.

I set the phone on my knee and look toward the open door.

The hallway outside is dark. *Mamá*'s door is closed, although a thin line of light beneath it confirms my suspicion that she is nowhere near asleep.

My life is all around me.

The same house and the same family. The same job waiting for me tomorrow morning. Maggie, who I have plans with next week. A basket of clean laundry on the chair that has needed folding for two days. Merry's earrings on my dresser because she took them off at the café the other day and left them on the counter.

I look at them.

I should text her about those.

I pick up my phone again.

THE THIRD FAIRY

Courage

The word sits there for a moment before the little check appears beside it.

PRIMAVERA1959

Courage to do what?

I run my thumb along the edge of my phone again.

THE THIRD FAIRY

I think that's the part I'm still figuring out.

PRIMAVERA1959

If I may say something…

THE THIRD FAIRY

Needing my permission has historically not stopped you

PRIMAVERA1959

I was going to say something insightful

I think maybe you don't really need courage until you know what you want.

Before that, you can just call it being careful

But once you know, you have to decide whether you're going to do something about it and trust yourself with that decision, you know?

My eyes drift to the earrings on the dresser again.

Little gold hoops.

Those words are wrapped in certainty and enough self-deprecation that it feels familiar. It tugs at my chest, makes my heart beat a little faster.

I love her. I'm in love with her.

PRIMAVERA1959

Which is deeply unfortunate because personally I preferred not knowing things.

A laugh slips out of me, and whatever thread I'd almost caught disappears with it.

THE THIRD FAIRY

You did seem happy to blame the universe and the curse

PRIMAVERA1959

THANK YOU

Finally someone acknowledges how much personal growth has cost me

I shake my head, smiling at the screen. But my attention returns to the message above it.

*Once you know, you have to decide whether you're going to do something about it.*

For all the questions *Primavera* has asked me, all the times she's wanted me to tell her what something means or what she should do next, she isn't asking now.

She's telling me.

And she’s absolutely right.
I know what I want.
Maybe courage is what comes after.

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CHAPTER 40

# THE THIRD FAIRY

10:27 AM

THE THIRD FAIRY

Step Five: ACT

You know what you want. Now do something about it.

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# CHAPTER 41

# MERRYWEATHER

"YOU ARE LOOKING AT THE NEW ASSOCIATE MANAGER OF SALES PLANNING for Briarwood Confections," I say as I close my laptop after signing a million different documents that would effectively transfer me out of Hell's grip and onto Elizabeth's team. Finally.

There's a beat of silence. Then Dani screams, and it's one hundred percent unwarranted because she already knew about the conversations I've been having with Phillip for the past two weeks.

And also, it's not an excited little squeal that could be reasonably expected when your friend announces a promotion. She screams loudly enough that Aurora launches herself off the back of the couch and disappears down the hallway, and Veronica nearly drops the wine bottle she's holding.

"Jesus Christ," I say.

"You got it!"

Dani is already crossing the living room toward me at the kitchen island, and I barely have time to put down my glass before she throws both arms around my neck.

"I knew you were going to get it."

"Yeah, no shit, Sherlock. You just watched me sign the paperwork."

"This is all because we manifested it."

"Oh, for fuck's sake, Dani," I grumble, and she giggles in my ear.

She releases me just in time for Veronica to reach us and pull me into a much more reasonable hug.

“Congratulations.”

“Thank you.”

“I’m so proud of you.”

That one gets me more than Dani’s screaming did. I squeeze her harder for a second before letting go.

Rose is sitting cross-legged on the floor in front of the coffee table, surrounded by three piles of clothes and an open duffel bag she has been pretending to pack for the past forty minutes. She raises her wineglass toward me.

“I also manifested it.”

“You didn’t even know about the job until Monday,” I reply, walking to the living room and stepping over whatever explosion Rose has going on in the center of my house. “You are both banned from using that word in my presence ever again.”

“Interesting stance for someone currently employing a witch,” Veronica says.

“I don’t employ her.” Three faces turn to me, and I feel a slight flush creep up my cheeks. I reconsider. “I have contracted her services.”

“That sounds naughty,” Dani says, making a show of licking a stray drop of wine from the side of her glass.

“It does,” Rose agrees, giving me her most obnoxious wink.

I pick up my wine again. This is why I should have celebrated with Flora first.

I did manage to tell her, calling her approximately twelve seconds after leaving Phillip’s office, before I even made it back to the elevator. She answered me before I reached the lobby, and I tried to start the conversation with a very professional hello, only to hear her say, “You got it,” like she already knew from the fact that I was calling.

Then she made me tell her everything: the title, the responsibilities, who I would report to, what happened when I asked about compensation.

Especially that part.

I hadn’t planned to negotiate at all.

Or, more accurately, I had planned to negotiate in the theoretical way I plan many things that terrify me. I had researched salary ranges. I had written down a number. I had even practiced saying it on the bus that

morning, which was humiliating because I caught a man across the aisle watching me mumble to myself about industry comps and benchmarking.

Then Phillip extended me the offer—literally on a piece of paper across his desk—and I asked for more.

And he agreed, immediately.

And the strangest part was that after I walked out of his office, I didn't feel like I'd gotten away with something but rather I'd participated in a conversation about the value of my own work.

I felt like I'd gotten the job I wanted.

"Tell us again what you said," Dani says.

"No," I deny. She pouts. "You've heard it twice."

"I like the part where Philip said that Hell had been apprised," she says, shimmying her shoulders in celebration. "I would have loved to be a fly on the wall in that conversation."

"Do you think she cried?" Veronica plops her body on the couch next to mine, then takes a sip of her drink. "I've been waiting years for someone to professionally tell that woman to fuck off."

"Unfortunately, I don't think that's the terminology he used." I settle back against the couch, stretching my legs beneath the coffee table as much as I can without messing up Rose's pile of clothes. "But I do hope she cried."

Dani raises her glass to that, and Veronica reaches over to clink hers against it.

I should probably feel worse about the small rush of satisfaction that gives me, but I don't. Helena will still have a job and will continue to terrorize her assistants, and I will have mine, many levels and divisions away from her.

"I almost threw up after," I admit.

Veronica laughs. "That sounds more like you."

"Thank you. I don't want to seem too well-adjusted."

From the floor, Rose makes an approving noise without looking up from the sweater she has been folding and unfolding for the better part of five minutes.

The three piles around her have changed sizes and content multiple times, although I have yet to determine what differentiates them.

I watch her as she moves the sweater again, then puts it back where it was at first.

“What are the piles?”

Rose looks around as if she has also only just noticed them.

“Taking, leaving, and undecided.”

“That sweater has been in all three.”

“I’m still deciding.”

“You’re leaving tomorrow.”

She gives me the patient look of someone who thinks *I’m* being unreasonable. “Which is why I’m packing tonight.”

Veronica reaches for the bottle and tops off her glass. “I think you’re going to have to accept that this is Rose’s process.”

“I have accepted many things about Rose’s process. That’s why I bought a house with a finished basement so she could live here when she’s not in a process.”

Rose smiles and goes back to her sweater.

The packing itself doesn’t bother me. Rose has moved in and out of my house several times. She’s never been someone who stays anywhere simply because it’s where she already is.

This particular departure, however, is a little more abrupt and dramatic than I would like.

“I just want to clarify something,” I say as I straighten in my seat. I pull my legs up on the cushion and cross them. “When you say you’re working on a boat, you mean an actual boat.”

Rose looks up again. “We’ve been over this.”

“I know, but every time we go over it, I expect additional information to emerge that makes it sound less like you’re joining the cast of that show about fishing.”

Dani laughs, but Rose is unfazed.

“It’s a small coastal crew. They do research, seasonal fishing, crabbing. I’ll help with meals, deck work, whatever needs doing. It’s only for a few months, and I’ll be back before you have time to miss me.”

“I will miss you immediately. That is unrelated to my belief that this is a deeply questionable employment decision.”

That makes her smile.

She puts the sweater into the taking pile this time and leaves it there.

“I want to do it, Merry.”

The words are so simple coming out of her mouth. I have so many questions and still part of me wants her to list every single reason for why

she’s doing this.

For years, Rose’s ability to identify her needs so easily has baffled me. She wants to do something, so she does it. Sometimes it works, sometimes she comes home six weeks later with no money and a story involving a man named Cricket. But she never seems to need the decision to prove itself sensible before she’s allowed to make it.

I used to think that meant Rose had some certainty I didn’t. I’m starting to suspect she just has a higher tolerance for finding out.

“All right,” I say.

She studies me, apparently waiting for the rest. When it doesn’t come, her eyebrows rise. “That’s it?”

“That’s it. I reserve the right to worry about you, because I’m your older sister and it’s one of the few hobbies I’ve maintained consistently since childhood. But I know you want to go.”

Rose’s expression changes, softening in a way that immediately makes me suspicious she’s about to make this emotional.

“Oh, no,” I say the moment my sister gets up from the floor.

“I haven’t done anything.”

“You’re coming over here with feelings!”

She wraps her arms around my shoulders while I’m still sitting on the couch, and I laugh as I hug her back.

For all the years I’ve spent looking at Rose and wondering what she understood about life that I didn’t, maybe the answer is nothing.

Maybe neither of us knows what we’re doing.

She’s simply been more willing to make a choice and live inside it.

When she pulls away, she kisses the top of my head and returns to the floor, where she immediately takes the sweater back out of the taking pile.

I decide loving someone means knowing when to stop asking questions.

For approximately thirty seconds.

“So Flora knows about the job?” Veronica asks, once Rose has moved on to deciding whether she needs four nearly identical tank tops for several months on the Washington coast.

I nod. “I called her when I left Phillip’s office.”

Dani looks mildly wounded. “Before us?”

“You got a group text from the elevator.”

“One thing is not like the other, babe.”

“No, because Flora asks useful questions and you usually respond to every text message with a handful of exclamation points and a GIF of a celebrity mom saying, *you’re doing amazing, sweetie*.”

“It communicated my feelings very effectively.”

It did, actually.

I smile, remembering Flora’s call. And after a few minutes of silence, I realize I’ve stopped talking and my two friends and my sister are watching me.

“What?”

Veronica takes a sip of wine. “Nothing at all.”

Across from the coffee table, Dani smiles but seems to decide, for once in her life, not to contribute.

“Guys, what?”

Veronica shakes her head. “You were talking about Flora.”

“I talk about Flora.”

“Okay, keep going.”

Rose moves on to socks now. “So,” she says after a while, holding up one of a pair and frowning at it, “are you two girlfriends yet?”

I nearly choke on my wine.

Veronica reaches over and pats my knee once, entirely without sympathy.

“We’re dating.”

“We know you’re dating!” the three women in my living room say at the same time. It’s a little loud for my taste, and I hear a thump coming from somewhere around the house, likely Aurora’s dramatic reaction to the scene unfolding here.

“Then why did you ask?”

“Because dating and being someone’s girlfriend aren’t necessarily the same thing?”

I stare at my sister. She waits, still holding the lone sock.

She’s right, of course, in the pesky way pesky little sisters humble older sisters all the time with their wisdom. Flora and I see each other a lot. We make plans several days ahead instead of pretending everything is spontaneous. I know her schedule. She knows mine. She leaves things here.

There is a sweatshirt folded on my bed because she left it here, and I’ve moved it exactly once in three days because seeing it does something embarrassingly domestic to my brain.

But we've never said what this is.

And maybe it, in part, has to do with the fact that I haven't felt the same urgency I usually do to pin everything down before it can change.

I've been enjoying this. Her. Us.

Which is perhaps why Rose's question doesn't make me anxious so much as thoughtful.

"No," I say finally. "We're not."

I do want Flora to be my girlfriend, though. And that thought brings another one with it: the message waiting on my Whisp account.

*You know what you want. Now do something about it.*

I'd thought about the job when I first read it, because that was the obvious thing in front of me, the more tangible thing, even though the spell had nothing to do with it. Well… I stopped treating Phillip's interest as something mysterious that had happened to me and admitted that I wanted what he was offering.

"I hate that you bitches were right about the spell," I say.

That gets everyone's attention.

"I was so convinced it had brought me Phillip because he started showing up right after I ordered it. But Phillip was never about love. He noticed my work, and somehow I turned that into another thing I needed to decode instead of just paying attention to what was actually happening."

Veronica smiles a little. "In our defense, we did try to tell you."

"Oh, please," I reply, but I concede with a small lift of my glass.

"And Flora?"

I look at her, and I feel like the answer to that question is easy.

"I don't think the spell brought me Flora either."

I would have hated admitting that a few weeks ago. I wanted the spell to mean something then. I wanted proof that the universe was moving things into place for me, because that meant I couldn't get it wrong.

Now I think about Flora walking into my life without any guarantees attached to her.

"I think it just made me pay attention."

The room goes quiet, and the only sounds are those of the rain outside, falling steadily against the glass.

"Oh," I say.

Rose glances over. "What?"

I look at the three of them, and the realization feels so obvious once it's there that I almost laugh.

"I love her."

Nobody reacts quickly enough for me to miss the fact that none of them looks particularly surprised.

Dani smiles. "Did you want us to be shocked?"

"A little."

"Sorry, boo," she says, scrunching her nose. "No can do."

I laugh and look down at my glass.

I wait for myself to start picking the realization apart, but there's surprisingly little to examine. I love Flora. I want to be her girlfriend. I want her in the life I'm finally getting better at choosing for myself.

"I'm going to tell her."

This time, nobody teases me.

Veronica only smiles. "Good."

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# CHAPTER 42

# FLORA

MERRY HAS BEEN TRYING TO TELL ME SOMETHING ALL EVENING.

I noticed it not long after I arrived, although at first I assumed it had something to do with work. She is still carrying the excitement of the promotion around with her, smiling every time the new title comes up, even as she pretends she's already gotten used to it.

I like watching her be proud of herself.

She told me about the final conversation with Phillip yesterday, but tonight I get the longer version, delivered over takeout at her kitchen island with enough additional detail that I suspect she has replayed the meeting several times since. She tells me about the salary negotiation again, including the part where she managed to say the number she wanted without apologizing for it, and I listen even though I already know how the story ends.

I don't think she realizes what she's doing. But I don't dare to point it out. I only sit there with my beer and let myself feel proud of her.

Later, when the food has gone cold between us and Merry has abandoned any pretense that we're going to finish it, she reaches across the island and touches my wrist.

"Come here."

I let her pull me between her knees.

She's sitting on one of the stools, which puts us almost at the same height, and her hands settle loosely around my hips.

“You’ve been staring at me all night,” I tell her.

“Can you blame me?”

That makes me smile.

Usually, I would leave it there. Merry looks at me often enough that I’ve learned not to assign meaning to every glance, but tonight there has been a kind of anticipation beneath it. She has gone quiet several times in the middle of conversations she started, watching me as though waiting for the right moment to say whatever comes next.

I touch the side of her face. “What is it?”

For once, she doesn’t pretend not to know what I mean.

Her hands tighten slightly against me. “I wanted to tell you something.”

There is enough nervousness in her voice that my attention sharpens, but not enough to frighten me.

“All right.”

Merry looks down for a moment. When she looks back at me, something in her expression has changed.

“I’ve been thinking about us.”

A small sound comes from somewhere behind me, followed by the unmistakable scrape of Aurora’s claws against the floor.

Merry closes her eyes. “No.”

I turn in time to see the cat disappear behind the kitchen island. Something skitters across the hardwood after her.

Merry sighs and lets her forehead fall briefly against my shoulder.

“She does this on purpose.”

I laugh, running my hand over the back of her neck. “I’m sure a cat carefully planned the interruption.”

“You don’t live with her, baby. You don’t know what she’s capable of.”

Aurora emerges again before Merry can continue, batting something across the floor and chasing after it with the absolute concentration of an animal who has never been given a toy in her life.

Whatever she’s found slides up to my socked foot, and I bend to pick it up.

It’s a bracelet.

For a moment, that’s all it is.

Then I turn it over in my hand.

The beads are small enough that the pattern isn’t immediately obvious unless you know what you’re looking for. I do. I remember choosing them

one at a time at the dining room table, changing the arrangement until the colors sat together the way I wanted them to. There is a tiny difference in the pattern near the knot where I replaced one of the original stones at the last minute.

I run my thumb over it.

And the room around me seems to recede.

I made this bracelet.

“Where did you get this?”

Merry has climbed down from the stool. “What?”

I hold it out between us. Her eyes drop to my hand.

“Oh,” she says, stretching to grab it. “My bracelet.”

Something in my chest tightens.

“Where did you get it, Merry?”

She looks at me more carefully then, hearing the way my tone has changed. “From Whisp.”

I already know that. I wish, for one irrational second, that she would give me some other answer anyway. A string of explanations immediately following those two words. Anything. Nothing. I don’t know.

“Which shop?” I ask, finally.

Merry’s forehead creases.

I look back at the bracelet because looking at Merry suddenly feels impossible.

I remember the order, of course I do.

*Primavera* had already spent enough money with me that adding a bracelet to the whole ridiculous ordeal had seemed almost funny at the time. I had made it specifically for her. Choosing each piece with more care than the order required because, somewhere along the way, her request had felt almost personal, intimate.

“It’s just a silly—” she starts, then immediately closes her mouth. Her cheeks are pink, and I don’t know if she’s understanding the magnitude of this or if she’s embarrassed about ordering an online spell.

She’s watching me, studying me, her brows furrowed in confusion because, honestly, I would be confused, too.

*Either that, or I’m cursed romantically*.

The familiarity I’d felt then returns so strongly that I wonder how I managed to dismiss it. Her voice, those words from the other night, soft in the dark beside me.

Other things follow: her conviction that the universe had sent her the wrong person, the sudden attention from someone at work, the way *Primavera* described the woman she met.

The bracelet is warm from my hand.

"Flora?"

I look at her. "You bought this from The Third Fairy."

It isn't a question, and Merry's expression changes slowly.

"Yes." Neither of us moves. I don't know what she sees in my face, but something makes the confusion in hers deepen. "How do you know that?"

I should answer.

Instead, I stand there looking at the woman whose bed I've slept in, holding a piece of jewelry I made for a woman I've never met.

Except I have met her. I've known her for weeks.

Just not like this.

Merry takes a small step toward me. "Flora."

There is no way to explain how I know without giving her the answer. I think she understands that before I say anything.

Her eyes move from my face to the bracelet and back again. "No."

I swallow, and she goes very still.

And suddenly, I know that she knows, too.

"Primavera?"

Her lips part, and all the color drains from her face. She's seen a ghost, for sure. Or rather, a witch, I guess. "The Third Fairy?"

For a few seconds, neither of us says anything. There should be some difference in her now that I know. I look for that without meaning to. Primavera has existed in my head without a face for so long that I expect the knowledge to transform Merry somehow, to reveal some part of her that has been hidden from me.

It doesn't. She's still Merry.

Blonde hair falling forward because she hasn't bothered to push it back. One hand resting against the edge of the island. The small crease between her eyebrows that appears when she's trying to understand something faster than it can be understood.

And now I can hear *Primavera* in her, too.

I don't know how I missed it.

"Oh my god," Merry says.

I put the bracelet on the island because I don't want to hold it anymore.

“You’re my witch.”

I wince.

Merry doesn’t seem to notice. She takes two steps away from the island, stops, then turns around as though she’s forgotten where she intended to go. Her hands go into her hair, pushing it back from her face, and stay there.

“Oh my fucking god,” she says again, quieter this time. “You’re actually my witch.”

I watch her pace toward the sink.

She doesn’t make it all the way there either.

There is something almost comical about seeing Merry run out of places to put all her energy. Usually, it comes out in words, but there are, perhaps, too many of those competing for her attention now. She turns back to me, opens her mouth, closes it again, and looks at the bracelet on the island.

“You made that.”

Her eyes close when I nod.

I know immediately that I’ve made something worse, although I don’t know which part, until she reaches for the bracelet and holds it up between two fingers.

“I—” She cuts herself off, then takes a big breath in and continues, “You have spent weeks giving me increasingly cryptic instructions about my romantic life, and this entire time I’ve been—”

She stops talking, and immediately her eyes find mine.

I can almost see the next thought arrive.

“Dating you.”

The words settle into the kitchen.

Aurora jumps onto one of the stools and begins washing a paw. I look at her for a second because she is easier to look at than Merryweather. If I look at Merry, I might have to see the moment she understands how much of me she has already held in her hands.

“I didn’t know, I swear.”

“I know, Flora.” Merry sets the bracelet down again. Carefully this time. “I know you didn’t know. I’m not saying you knew.” She exhales and presses the heels of her hands against her eyes. “I don’t even know what I’m saying. I feel like someone just dumped two separate filing cabinets of information onto the floor of my brain.”

Despite myself, I smile.

That sounds so much like *Primavera* that the curve of my mouth disappears almost immediately. The recognition lands with a strange intimacy. I have spent weeks learning the shape of Merry's thoughts without knowing I was learning hers.

How did I not hear it? Perhaps because I wasn't listening for Merry when I talked to *Primavera*. I wasn't looking for anyone. The anonymity was part of what made the conversations possible in the first place. Behind it, I could say things without watching them reach someone's face.

Merry drops her hands.

"Wait."

I brace myself.

Her face has changed again. She doesn't look upset but rather… horrified.

"The list."

A flush starts beneath my shirt and climbs my neck anyway. The words had felt private and intimate when she wrote them, but private in the abstract, addressed to a stranger who could never connect them to the body standing across from her now. The protection is gone.

Merry walks backward until her hips hit the opposite counter, then leans against it as though she needs the support.

"Flora."

I press my lips together.

"Please don't sit there looking calm while I remember every humiliating thing I have ever told you."

"I'm not calm," I reply instinctively.

"You look so fucking calm."

"I've had a lot of practice keeping things on the inside."

She considers that, decides it's true, and looks away. But until this moment, those words belonged to *Primavera*. They existed inside the narrow boundaries of Whisp, separate from the woman whose body I know and whose earrings are still sitting on my dresser.

Now there is no boundary. No carefully constructed wall to protect anyone's feelings.

My stomach tightens.

Her messages weren't casual confessions. They were pieces of herself she had placed somewhere she believed was safe. I had received them as

The Third Fairy, with the distance and authority of a stranger. Now I'm holding them as Flora, and the weight is different.

Merry pushes away from the counter and starts walking again.

"You didn't tell me," she says, shaking her head as she moves. It takes me a moment to understand. "About the shop and the spells? The fact that you have an entire secret internet life where people pay you to tell them to wander around Seattle under a full moon."

"No," I say. "I never told you."

"Why?"

The question isn't accusatory. I look toward the dark window above the sink. Our reflections float faintly against the glass, separated by most of the kitchen now.

"I don't tell many people."

Merry knows enough about me by now that I don't have to explain everything underneath that. The shop is mine. Private in a way that The Spindle isn't. What began as something small became income and ritual, and a strange collection of strangers who trusted me with things they couldn't say anywhere else.

Until one of those strangers stopped being a stranger.

"I never thought it would matter to you," I say. The exact combination of words coming out of my mouth sounds disingenuous, and it makes my skin itch. It's a lie that is too small to survive this room. It mattered to me. I had simply convinced myself that keeping it separate meant I could keep myself separate, too.

Merry lets out a breath and tilts her head back, eyes planted on the ceiling above her.

"Why would I not care about what makes you *you*?" She rubs the back of her neck, then lets her hand fall. "But then again, I never told you about the witch either."

I look at her.

"I mean, what was I supposed to say? *Just so you know, right before we met, I spent five hundred dollars on a love spell and then tried to get a refund because I thought it had accidentally sent me my male CEO?*"

The laugh escapes me before I can stop it.

She turns away, but she's smiling, too. It's absurd, of course it is.

And for a minute or so, the absurdity gives us somewhere to stand. Eventually, Merryweather goes still. Her shoulders lower and her smile

disappears, and she puts both hands on the edge of the counter and looks down between them.

When she speaks again, her voice is quieter.

“I told you about you.”

The kitchen seems to contract around us.

And I feel the weight sink in my stomach. Because it’s the same for me: the things I could admit from behind The Third Fairy that I wasn’t sure how to admit to her—to anyone—as Flora.

And Merry knows those things.

The knowledge moves through me slowly, touching places I’ve kept guarded even from myself. She knows what I want and what frightens me. She knows the private logic I used to make wanting someone feel less dangerous. And she knew it all before I had decided whether she was allowed to.

My face must change, because her eyes narrow slightly.

“What did you just figure out?”

I shake my head and lean back against the island.

I look at her for a long moment before I can make myself say it. At how she’s standing tall in front of me, her eyes going wild searching for the answers we might not have in between us. At how her breathing is stilted and ragged and almost desperate to catch up to her mind.

“You know things about me, too.”

And there it is. The part neither of us has been able to reach while we’ve been busy being shocked by bracelets and five hundred dollars and the statistical improbability of apparently dating our own anonymous internet confidante.

We both know too much.

Things we might have shared eventually, but not yet. Not like this. We told each other the truth when we thought it was going somewhere else.

“I think I’m going to go home,” I say.

Merry’s eyes move to mine. She doesn’t react immediately, and then she nods slowly. “Okay.”

I walk to the front, get my coat from the hooks by the door. We stop there awkwardly, close enough that under any other circumstances I would kiss her goodbye. I can tell she feels it, too. Her hand lifts slightly before falling back to her side.

“Goodnight, Merry.”

“Goodnight.”

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# CHAPTER 43

# FLORA

"HAVE YOU SPOKEN TO MERRY YET?" MAGGIE ASKS AS SHE SITS DOWN AT the table.

*Mamá* pauses with the refrigerator door open.

It isn't dramatic. She doesn't turn around immediately or demand to know who Merry is. She simply stops moving for long enough that I notice, one hand still wrapped around the container she was reaching for. And, for all she knows, Merry could be a coworker. A client at the café. A witch customer. An infinite combination of roles.

But Fausto notices, too, and with enough attention that his phone lowers a few inches across the table from me.

I look at Maggie and shake my head as surreptitiously as possible. She has been in my house for approximately four minutes and is already causing all sorts of chaos.

There was a reason I asked her to come here instead of meeting somewhere after work. Three days have passed since I left Merry standing in her kitchen, and while that has been enough time for the initial shock to settle into something I can examine without wanting to crawl out of my own skin, it has not made me particularly good company.

I didn't want a bar. I didn't want to sit across from Maggie at some restaurant and recount the most bizarre romantic development of my life—of anyone's life!—while a server periodically appeared to ask whether we needed anything else.

I wanted my house. My mother making too much food. Fausto ignoring us at the table. Maggie sitting beside me with a glass of wine while I tried to cryptically explain why I still hadn't spoken to Merry.

Maggie's eyes flick to my mother. "Oh," she says.

I stare at her until she understands exactly how much I hate her.

"Who is Merry?" My mother clears her throat and closes the refrigerator. When she turns around, her hands are holding an old carryout container from the Mexican restaurant down the block that she's reused hundreds of times, a very curious expression on her face. She looks almost… hopeful.

"No one—"

"Her girlfriend," Maggie interrupts, and the only reaction I can muster is a very loud groan and a slap to my forehead.

Fausto looks up properly now.

I should have known this was coming eventually. I've spent weeks carefully keeping Merry in one part of my life while everyone else stayed in another, which was easy enough when I could tell myself we were only seeing each other. There was nothing defined enough to bring home and place in the middle of the dining room table for everyone to examine.

Except three days ago, before everything went to hell, I had realized I wanted her to be my girlfriend.

That feels monumental now.

"We've been seeing each other," I say. I clear my throat and try very hard to avoid everyone's gaze on me.

*Mamá*'s expression changes first, immediately followed by Fausto sitting back in his chair.

"How long have you been dating someone?" he asks. His tone carries enough offense that I almost smile.

"Not that long," I reply quickly. It really hasn't been that long, I don't think. "A few months."

"Months?" he says, and his eyes bug out of their sockets like a cartoon character. "It wounds me that you told Maggie and not me."

Maggie snickers as she takes a long pull of the bottle of beer in her hand. "Maggie isn't a *chismosa* like you are."

He accepts this without argument, which is wise.

*Mamá* has abandoned whatever she was doing with the container and begins moving things around at the island, although I know her well enough

to recognize that she is no longer accomplishing anything. She wants to hear the conversion without looking like she's waiting for it.

"What's her name?" Fausto asks.

"Merryweather."

He looks at me for a moment. "Shut the fuck up."

"Fausto!" our mother hisses from the kitchen, but I can see the remains of a smile on her lips. "Please, *hijo*, language."

"*Perdón*." He doesn't sound apologetic at all. He is still staring at me, waiting for me to admit this is some kind of…. joke? Prank? "Merryweather is her legal name?"

"As opposed to what? Her stage name?"

"I don't know. Maybe she's a Disney princess."

Maggie laughs into her beer, which only encourages him.

I don't mind. For the first time in three days, the situation has become funny again, and I had almost forgotten that it was. Somewhere beneath the embarrassment and the intimacy, and the fact that Merry and I now know things about each other we hadn't intended to share, there is still the objectively ridiculous reality that I managed to date a customer.

*My favorite customer.*

Not that anyone at this table knows that part yet.

"She's white, isn't she?" Fausto asks, with enough satisfaction that I immediately know what he's doing. "And not a *Latina*?" He uses that specific mocking tone. Classic younger sibling.

*Mamá* makes a quiet sound from the island that could be a laugh, although she keeps her back to us.

"Anyway," he says, settling farther into his chair now that he has finally been presented with an opportunity for revenge, "I just think it's interesting that after all the flack you gave me for Genevieve, you're secretly dating a white woman named after a fairy."

"I wasn't intentionally keeping her a secret." It's not true, but maybe it'll buy me some time.

My mother finally gives up pretending she has anything left to do in the kitchen. She wipes her hands on a dish towel and comes to the table, taking the empty chair across from me.

"So," she says, folding the towel over her lap. Her expression is no longer of casual curiosity. "Tell me about her."

I don't know where to begin.

I could tell her Merry is funny, although that seems inadequate. That she's smart in ways that people around her have spent years overlooking. That she owns a house in this neighborhood. That she also has a younger sibling. That Merry talks enough for both of us and somehow, instead of exhausting me, makes silence feel like something I can choose rather than something I have to protect.

There are a ton of small things I could offer as proof that I know her.

And now, after three days, there are many more.

"She works for a candy company," I say finally.

Maggie turns toward me. "That's where you're starting?"

I shrug. "I need somewhere to start."

*Mamá* smiles. "Okay."

"She just got promoted."

The pride comes through before I can stop it, and I know my mother notices. I can tell from the slight change in her expression, the way her eyes soften as she studies my face.

I tell them about The Spindle. How Merry started coming in. How we kept running into each other after that, including at the Japanese Garden. My mother sighs dreamily when I say that, mumbling "I knew it" under her breath as if she were solely responsible for us meeting.

It feels strange to talk about her here, in this room, where she has never existed before except as a pair of earrings upstairs and a collection of excuses I've made to myself about why there was no reason to mention her yet. It feels especially strange to talk about her in a room where everyone witnessed Alison.

But the more I tell them, the more ridiculous everything I've kept guarded becomes.

Merry has been real for a while, spreading slowly through the edges of my life without pushing anything else out.

Nothing disappeared.

I hadn't really thought about that until now. And I know it's because I've spent so much time watching out for the moment when it would.

"So what happened?" *Mamá* asks eventually.

I look at Maggie. She already knows the answer, or at least the version I've managed to give her over the last three days.

"We found out something about each other that neither of us was expecting," I say.

It’s vague enough that Fausto immediately looks suspicious, but my mother only waits.

“And now you’re fighting?”

“No.”

“Did she do something?” she presses.

Maggie clears her throat, and I don’t know what she’s trying to tell me with that sound effect.

“No,” I finally say, blinking a few times, trying to understand where this line of questioning is going.

“Did you do something?”

“Also no.”

*Mamá*’s eyebrows draw together. “Then I’m confused.”

“Welcome to the club, Estela,” Maggie says, and the corner of her mouth tips up just a tiny bit.

“It’s just…” I cross my arms, then uncross them. I straighten in my seat. I feel interrogated, and all my instincts tell me to put up that damn wall again. “We both knew things about each other that we didn’t realize we knew. Personal things. Things we probably would have told each other eventually, but we hadn’t yet. And finding out all at once was…” I search for the word and give up. “A lot.”

“And you miss her,” my mother says, getting off her seat and walking to the kitchen. “Three days is a long time.”

“It really isn’t, Ma. But I do miss her,” I admit, because denying it at this point would be stupid when I’ve spent the last three days feeling her absence everywhere.

I miss Merry. I miss her so much, I’ve started noticing all the places in my day where I expect her to appear. The café door opening. My phone lighting up. The empty space beside me in bed when I wake up.

And I miss *Primavera*, too.

That’s the part I haven’t known what to do with. Whisp has been quiet for three days. No new messages and no jokes and no notifications that make me wonder what she’ll say this time. For weeks, I thought I was becoming attached to two women in two entirely different ways, and now both of them are gone at once.

“Then talk to her,” Fausto says, with the emotional maturity of, well, an emotionally mature man.

I look over at him. He has returned to his phone, as though this is obvious enough that it doesn't require his full attention.

"It's complicated."

"Why?" he asks, still scrolling, eyes glued to his screen. "Does complicated mean you don't want to talk to her?"

"No."

"So then what does it mean?"

I open my mouth and not a single word comes out.

Fausto shrugs and looks back at his phone, satisfied that he has contributed all he intends to contribute to my emotional crisis.

He has a point, and I hate that he has a point.

Maggie is watching me now.

"You know what I was worried about when you told me about Merry?" she asks. *Mamá* stops what she's doing in the kitchen again and turns to face us. Maggie purses her lips, and I feel a weight land in my chest, pressing on me and making it hard to breathe. "I was worried I was going to lose you again."

There are sentences that don't need clarification in this house, and this one is a perfect example.

*Mamá* and Fausto look at each other.

"I know," I say.

"No, I don't think you do." Maggie holds my gaze. "I didn't want to make your relationship with Alison about me, Flora. It wasn't. But losing you while you were still technically my best friend really fucking sucked."

I look down at the table. There is nothing I can say to that, because she's absolutely right, and because I've already spent enough time picking through everything that happened back then to know exactly where I went wrong.

"That's what I'm trying to tell you." She says after a moment. "You're still here."

The words settle, nice and warm somewhere inside me.

I look around, at the table set for dinner and Maggie's half-empty beer, at Fausto in our house even though he has a whole separate life away from here, at *Mamá* standing in the kitchen and smiling at me.

"I love her," I say. "I really love her."

"Yes," *Mamá* says, blinking rapidly, and *oh god*, my mother is crying. "So what are you doing here?"

I laugh, because of course she would make falling in love sound like I've simply remembered I'm late for an appointment.

"Okay."

I push my chair back.

Maggie looks up at me. "What are you— We haven't had dinner yet!"

"Be right back."

I leave the three of them and take the stairs up to my room two at a time, suddenly afraid that if I slow down, I'll find another reason to think about this when I've already done enough thinking.

My laptop is on my desk.

For three days, there has been nothing beneath *Primavera*'s name.

I open her original order. The five hundred dollars has been sitting there between us since the beginning, attached to a spell I don't believe in and a woman I do.

**Issue Refund.**

I stare at it. Yes, this feels exactly right.

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CHAPTER 44

# THE THIRD FAIRY

7:52 PM

THE THIRD FAIRY

Ready for the next step?

You started beneath the moon’s silver light, searching for something just out of sight.

So under the moon, you’ll return once more, to see what all this searching was for.

Climb Queen Anne where the city lies low, and the Needle stands tall in the evening glow.

You’ve noticed. You’ve wanted. You’ve chosen what’s true.

Now believe in the love that’s been waiting for you.

And when you find her, there’s one thing to do:

A true love’s kiss,

and the spell will break, too.

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# CHAPTER 45
# MERRYWEATHER

"YOU HAVE GOT TO BE FUCKING KIDDING ME."

I hold my phone closer to my face, as if the additional three inches might reveal that I have misunderstood what is very clearly written on the screen.

The refund arrives at 7:37 on a Thursday night, while I'm sitting on the couch pretending to watch television with Aurora pressed against my thigh.

I know I'm pretending because I have no idea what the show is about, despite having already rewound it numerous times, and because every few minutes I reach for my phone with the vague expectation that something might have changed since the last time I looked.

For three days, nothing has.

And now there's a refund on my Whisp account.

"What the fuck?"

Aurora's ears flatten in protest as I straighten in my seat.

I read the notification again, because I have now become the kind of person who can spend months demanding hundreds of dollars back and then be personally offended when someone actually gives it to me.

The money is back. The order is still there, but its status has changed, and for some reason the sight of that singular word—*refunded*—makes my stomach drop.

"No," I say to the universe once more, although at this point it doesn't really matter, does it? "I don't want it anymore."

I open the message, already composing several extremely persuasive arguments about why Flora needs to take my money again.

But another message appears before I can send one. The final step.

I read the little rhymes slowly, then once more from the beginning. She's hinting at moonlight and somewhere in Queen Anne, where love is waiting for me.

PRIMAVERA1959

Do you mean Kerry Park?

The question looks perfectly reasonable on the screen. Three days ago, I would have sent it.

Hell, two months ago I probably would have followed it with three additional questions, just to make absolutely certain I hadn't somehow misunderstood the very obvious instructions and accidentally ended up on the wrong hill waiting for true love while Flora stood somewhere else wondering whether I had wandered off and gotten hopelessly lost.

But tonight, I look at my own question and I know exactly where she is and what my assignment is.

I disturb Aurora for the second time in five minutes when I get up, and she gives me an irritated little chirp before immediately occupying the warm spot I leave behind.

"Don't wait up."

She starts washing her paw.

"Yes, okay."

I grab my coat and keys, and almost make it to the door before remembering that the shoes on my feet are slippers. And it all feels less like a curse and more like the universe making sure I don't get too impressed with my emotional development.

Two minutes later, I'm finally outside.

The night is cold and damp, and the air smells faintly like rain, even though it stopped raining in the early afternoon. But the pavement catches the streetlights in long broken reflections regardless, and I pull my coat together as I hurry to my car.

Kerry Park is busy enough that for one terrible second, I think I've gotten it wrong.

There are people along the railing despite the cold, phones held toward the skyline. The Space Needle rises beyond them, bright against the dark, with the city spread out around it and a thin haze softening the lights around downtown.

Above it all, the moon hangs pale behind a veil of clouds, just visible enough to make me think of the message again.

I step onto the overlook and immediately see Flora standing close to the railing, both hands tucked into the pockets of her coat.

My stomach flutters the moment I realize she's looking for me. And once she finds me, something changes in her face, subtle enough that I might have missed it once. Her shoulders loosen, her mouth curves, and whatever uncertainty survived the drive here disappears so completely that I almost laugh.

I start walking toward her. I want to run, but I also don't want to be *that girl.*

The cold wind pushes my hair across my face, and I have to shove it away twice before I reach her. Flora watches me do it with the beginning of a smile.

I stop in front of her.

I have thought about her constantly for three days. I have imagined this conversation in several different locations and with wildly varying levels of emotional dignity. I have wondered whether seeing her would make everything feel strange again.

But even with those eloquent thoughts swirling in my brain, the words don't come out of my mouth.

So naturally, I say, "You refunded me."

Flora's smile finally breaks through. "Turns out this was refundable after all."

"I don't want it."

Flora's face falls.

"No, I mean… Obviously I spent months chasing the value out of it, but now it feels…" I look down at the phone in my hand, at the open Whisp messaging center. "I don't know. Wrong."

Flora watches me for a moment before she looks out to the city. "I refunded it because the spell is over."

Something in my chest tightens.

“You don’t need it anymore. You never did.” Flora breathes in slowly, and for maybe the first time since I met her, she looks nervous. “I don’t believe in magic.”

A startled sound catches between my throat and my chest, half laugh and half choke. Of course this is where she starts.

“Sorry.” I press my lips together and make a small motion across them, as if physically sealing them might help. “Go on.”

“I don’t believe that lighting a candle changes what happens to you, or that the moon decides who you’re supposed to love. I don’t think the universe puts people in our path because there’s some plan we’re supposed to figure out.” She pauses, and I can see her gathering the next thought before she says it. “But I do believe in attention. I think I always have, even before I knew how to explain it.”

Her gaze drifts past me to the lit up city again.

“That is what the spells I sell are supposed to do. Not change anyone’s life. Just make people stop long enough to look at it. To notice what was already there, what they wanted, what they kept reaching for. Because I think sometimes we know those things long before we’re willing to admit that we know them.”

She looks at me again.

“And then you showed up and made me realize I was very good at giving that advice to other people and absolutely shit at taking it myself.”

I smile, but I don’t say anything this time.

Mostly because I don’t trust myself.

“I’ve been paying attention to you for months, Merry. At first because you were impossible not to notice.” My mouth opens, but Flora raises one eyebrow before I can get anything out. “You came into the café and talked to me like we’d known each other for years, and you were funny and beautiful, and you made me nervous. I went home thinking about you when I had absolutely no intention of thinking about anyone.”

My heart gives one hard, painful beat.

“And then you kept coming back. You kept talking to me and telling me little things about your life, and then suddenly everything that you were doing or saying started to deeply matter to me.”

She takes a breath.

“And somewhere else, without knowing it was you, I was paying attention to you there, too.”

Oh.

Her eyes hold mine now.

“I knew the way you thought before I knew it belonged to you. I knew what scared you. I knew what you wanted even when you were still trying to figure it out. I knew how seriously you took everything underneath all the jokes, and how much you wanted to get things right.” A small smile touches her mouth, and it’s infuriating how breathtaking this woman is.

Flora’s smile lingers for a second before it fades.

“When I found out you were my customer, I thought that was the problem. That suddenly I knew too much and you knew too much, and there was no way to put any of it back where it had been. I went home and kept trying to separate everything again because that’s what I know how to do when something scares me. I put it somewhere contained. Somewhere I can understand it.”

She looks down at her hands.

“And then I realized that’s what I’ve been doing with my whole life.”

The humor leaves me completely.

Flora is quiet for several seconds. Someone passes behind us, talking loudly enough that I catch a few words before the wind takes the rest, and I wait until their voices disappear.

“I spent a long time thinking I was afraid of falling in love again because of what happened with Alison. But she wasn’t the thing I was afraid of. I was.” Flora’s voice gets quieter. “I was afraid I would do it again. That I would love someone so much that suddenly, one day, I was going to look up and realize there was nothing left that didn’t belong to the relationship.”

I want to tell her she doesn’t have to explain this to me. I open my mouth, but she continues.

“I told myself I was being careful, because *careful* sounds much better than *afraid.”*

My throat tightens. I look down for a moment because my eyes have started burning, and I refuse to begin crying before Flora finishes whatever she’s doing to me.

“But then you came along, and I wasn’t careful at all.” Her voice catches lightly, and she steps toward me. She reaches out both of her hands

and holds mine, thumbs moving across in a very soothing motion. “I kept thinking the answer was figuring out how to make love safe enough that I could choose it. But I don’t think that’s possible.”

When I look up again, she’s watching me.

“But not choosing you because I’m afraid I could lose you someday means I don’t get to have you now.”

Fuck.

“So maybe I was wrong,” she says.

“About what?”

“Magic.”

That is not what I expect her to say. A tiny smile pulls at one corner of her mouth.

“I still don’t think the universe sent you to me.” Her thumbs move over my hands again. “But I think there has to be a little bit of magic in finding someone you weren’t looking for and somehow making room for them without even realizing you’re doing it.”

My throat closes.

She takes a breath, and her smile wobbles softly. “And maybe there’s some in being seen completely by someone and finding out they still want to stay.”

Flora takes one more step in my direction, and now there’s barely any space between us. If there are people still around us, I don’t know, because all I can focus on is her deep brown eyes and her focused face.

“I love you.”

Every clever thing I have ever said in my life abandons me at once.

Flora’s fingers tighten around mine, and I realize that for all the certainty in everything she just said, she’s nervous. I can feel it in the slight tremble of her hands.

“I love you, Merry,” she says again, softer this time. “And I’m done being afraid of what that means.”

“Oh, fuck you,” I blurt out. Flora starts laughing, and it’s not polite and not like I’ve charmed her. No. Her head drops and her shoulders shake, and because she’s still holding both of my hands, I can feel it all the way through her. “I wanted to say it first.”

Her smile falters. “What?”

“That night. Before the thing. With the secret identities.” My voice comes out rougher than I expect, so I clear my throat. “That was what I was

trying to tell you. I already knew, Flora. Before I knew you were The Third Fairy. Before I knew you were the person I'd been talking to all those weeks. I knew when you were just you."

Flora goes very still.

She only looks at me, and I watch the meaning of what I've said move slowly across her face. Her lips part, but nothing comes out. The shine in her eyes gets worse, and she blinks hard enough that I know she's trying to stop herself from crying.

It's strange, after everything we know about each other now, to realize there are still things I can tell her that she isn't prepared for.

"I was standing in my kitchen trying to tell you I loved you, and then the fucking cat came in with that stupid bracelet and ruined what was shaping up to be a really excellent moment."

A watery laugh slips out of her, but a tear escapes at the same time. I watch it move down her cheek.

"Although," I add, "in retrospect, I probably would've talked for another ten minutes before actually getting to the point."

Flora smiles, but she still looks a little stunned. There is something almost vulnerable about the way she's looking at me now that makes my chest ache, because this woman just stood here and told me she was done being afraid of loving me, and somehow hearing that I got there first is the thing that has knocked all the air out of her.

I free one of my hands and brush the tear from her cheek.

"I love you so fucking much," I tell her.

And then I kiss her.

I don't think about the spell or the moon, or whether this technically qualifies as the final step. I don't think about anything, because Flora makes this small, broken sound against my mouth and reaches for me at the same time, one hand catching the front of my coat while the other slides around my neck.

I pull her closer.

A gust of wind rushes across the overlook, catching our coats and sending our hair everywhere. Somewhere in the vicinity, there's a whistle, followed by a few claps.

Flora breaks the kiss with a startled laugh as a small cheer rises from the people gathered along the railing.

"Oh my god," I whisper, immediately hiding my face in her neck.

She’s still laughing when I look at her again, her hair wild from the wind, the moon bright behind her and the whole city glittering below.

For one ridiculous, perfect second, she looks like magic.

Flora brushes my hair away from my face. “True love’s kiss.”

I smile against her mouth. “True love’s kiss, indeed.”

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# CHAPTER 46

# FLORA

"Okay," Merry says from the kitchen, phone in hand, "how does this sound?"

I stop typing the reply to a new spell that came in this morning. This time, it's a more basic one—a request for abundance after the customer was laid off a few months ago.

"Five stars."

I push my chair away from the desk and get up. "Merry."

She looks up at me with her eyes shining and a sneaky smile on her lips. She's wearing the new pajama pants Rose shipped to her from wherever she is now and one of my old sweatshirts, even though she has at least three perfectly new ones in the bottom of her dresser drawer. Her hair is still messy from sleep, and there's a mug of coffee cooling on the counter beside her.

It's Saturday morning. Neither of us has anywhere to be until later, and Merry has decided that this is how she wants to spend our morning together.

"What?" she asks, and she tilts her head to the side and gives me the most innocent smile I've yet seen from her. "I'm leaving you a review, baby. Is that okay?"

I walk toward the kitchen. "Why?"

"Because I received a service and Whisp has been asking me to review it for months. Frankly, I've been negligent."

My lips quirk involuntarily. She catches the movement, and her smile widens.

“You received a refund, *linda*.”

“That doesn’t erase the customer experience.”

“Merry.”

She lifts the phone high up above her head the moment she sees me take a step. It’s well out of my reach before I’ve even tried to take it.

“Would you like to hear the rest?”

“No.”

“Great.” She clears her throat. “Don’t be fooled by her non-refundable policy. She absolutely does refunds if she falls in love with you.”

I stare at her, and god, I fucking love her.

“Spell took significantly longer than advertised, but results exceeded expectations. Five stars.”

“You cannot post that.”

“I think it’s charming.” She winks at me. “Just like me.”

I reach for the phone. Merry dodges me, laughing as she backs away from the counter.

“Give me that.”

“Absolutely not,” she squeals, then rounds the island in the other direction. I can see the laughter threatening to escape in how she’s carrying herself, wide grin and crinkled eyes and giddiness coursing through her veins. “I’m supporting a small business.”

“You got all your money back!”

“And yet I’m still giving you five stars. That’s how satisfied I am.”

I catch her wrist, but instead of surrendering the phone, she uses my momentum to pull me against her.

I should have anticipated this.

“You’re ridiculous.”

“You love me.”

“I do.”

The answer comes easily now.

A few weeks ago, those words would have caught somewhere inside me. Now they settle there, warm and certain. I can say it confidently while standing in my girlfriend’s kitchen, arguing over a review. I can say it without needing the moment to become anything bigger than it is.

Merry kisses the corner of my mouth. “Can I post it?”

“No.”

“What if I remove the part about falling in love?” She pouts, and she’s so cute I want to eat her alive.

“Yes.”

Her eyebrows lift. “I already posted the original,” she says.

I shove her away, and she dissolves into laughter. She licks her lips, and I know for sure she’s joking.

Then she starts running.

“Oh, you little shit.”

Merry shrieks and takes off around the island, nearly bumping into the floor lamp in the hallway in the process. I go after her, and whatever chance either of us had of behaving like women in our thirties disappears completely.

She makes it into the living room before I catch her.

We tumble onto the couch together, Merry laughing so hard she can barely breathe as I wrestle the phone out of her hand and hold it against my chest.

“Delete it.”

“I can’t breathe,” she wheezes. “You’re crushing me.”

“I’m barely touching you!”

“You are very strong.” She kisses my jaw, then places another soft kiss on my neck. “I have a very strong girlfriend.”

“You’re such a liar.”

“But I gave you five stars!”

I try not to laugh. I genuinely do. But Merry is underneath me with her hair all over her face and tears gathering in the corners of her eyes, and suddenly I’m laughing hard enough that I have to drop my head against her shoulder.

She wraps both arms around me, and neither of us says anything for a while.

We just lie there tangled together on her couch, trying to recover, my face tucked into her neck while Merry occasionally starts laughing again for no apparent reason and sets me off, too.

Eventually, she takes a long breath.

“Worth it.”

“I’m reporting your account.”

“You wouldn’t,” she replies, and then slides on the couch so that she’s lying across it. The movement pulls me with her, my knee slipping between hers as I catch myself with one hand against the cushion beside her head.

“I know the shop owner,” I whisper in her ear.

“She sounds hot.”

I lift my head, and Merry smiles up at me.

And there it is again, that strange little feeling I’ve been having lately. Although strange and little aren’t really worthy descriptors anymore.

Maybe it’s the opposite.

Everything about this feels normal and regular-sized.

Not boring or small. Just normal in a way I once didn’t think love could be.

There was a time when I thought falling in love meant rearranging everything around another person until there was no way to tell where they ended and I began. Then I spent years making sure nobody could ever get close enough for that to happen again.

I didn’t know there was another option.

Merry’s fingers move lazily beneath the hem of my sweatshirt, tracing the warm skin at the small of my back. My laptop is still open in the office. I have orders to finish. Later, I’m meeting Maggie for lunch, and Merry has plans with Veronica and Dani tonight. *Mamá* expects us both for dinner tomorrow because I guess falling in love with someone also means my mother starts texting them independently about what they want to eat.

Nothing has vanished, even six months in.

Neither have I.

Merry brushes a piece of hair away from my face. “You’re doing the thing.”

“What thing?” I scrunch my nose at the question, and her eyes light up immediately.

“Where you go quiet and stare at me like I’m about to disappear.”

I settle more comfortably against her, one leg sliding between hers. “I was just thinking that I really like this.”

Her expression softens. “This?”

I gesture vaguely between us, which is difficult considering I’m mostly lying on top of her.

There are things I could say to explain what I mean. But instead, I rest my chin against her chest.

“I like it, too.”

I lift my body so that I can kiss her, and Merry makes a pleased little sound. She pulls me closer, and for the next few minutes the abundance spell waiting in the other room gets absolutely none of my attention. It can wait.

That might be another thing I’m learning.

Not everything I love has to receive all of me at once.

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# EPILOGUE

## MERRYWEATHER

ONE YEAR LATER

"Hi," I whisper as I type, in case the universe is listening.

Then I smile and shake my head.

Some habits are apparently harder to break than curses.

Across the room, Flora is sitting cross-legged on the couch with Aurora curled against her thigh, completely unaware that I have been staring at the same Whisp message box for the past ten minutes.

Well.

Probably unaware.

Flora has gotten disturbingly good at knowing when I'm up to something.

I glance at her, and she's already looking at me. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing," I say way too quickly.

"You've been very quiet."

"I can be quiet."

Flora looks at me for several seconds. "No."

I turn my attention back to my phone before my face gives me away. The Third Fairy's shop looks almost exactly the same as it did the first time I found it, although there are more reviews now.

One of them is excellent, even though it's borderline inappropriate. It is also one of her most-liked reviews, so history will vindicate me.

At the top of the page is the button I've been waiting a year to press again.

## Request Custom Spell

My heart starts beating faster, which is an insane response to what's about to happen because I have a pretty good idea of what she's going to say.

Probably.

I mean, we've discussed marriage.

Not discussed in the sense of *Hello, baby, if I produced a ring on a random Saturday afternoon, what would your answer be?*

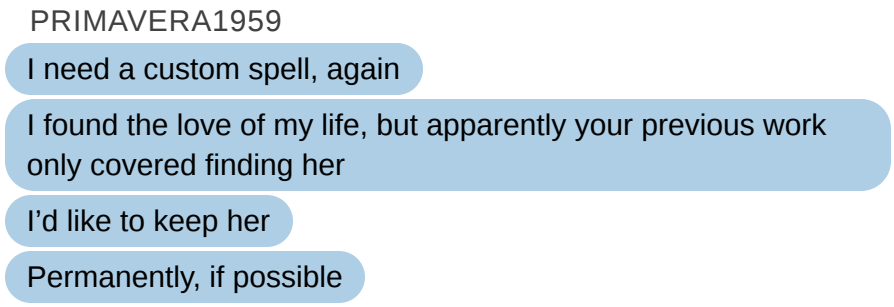
That would have ruined this.

But we've talked about the future. We've talked about money and work and families, and what we want the next few years to look like. We've talked about whether we should eventually move somewhere with a yard and a little more space, and maybe getting another cat to keep Aurora company.

We've talked about someday.

I just haven't really told her that someday is today.

I look down at the screen, then I type.




Once I'm done writing, I read the message twice, then I press send.

My entire body immediately fills with adrenaline.

"Oh, fuck."

Flora looks up. "What's wrong?"

"Oh, just a work thing."

Her eyebrows pull together. "Merry, I—"

At exactly the same moment, Flora's phone buzzes on the coffee table. She looks at the screen for a beat, then at me. Then back at the screen. Her expression changes so slowly that I get to watch every piece of it happen. Confusion first. Then recognition. Then whatever it is that makes her lips part.

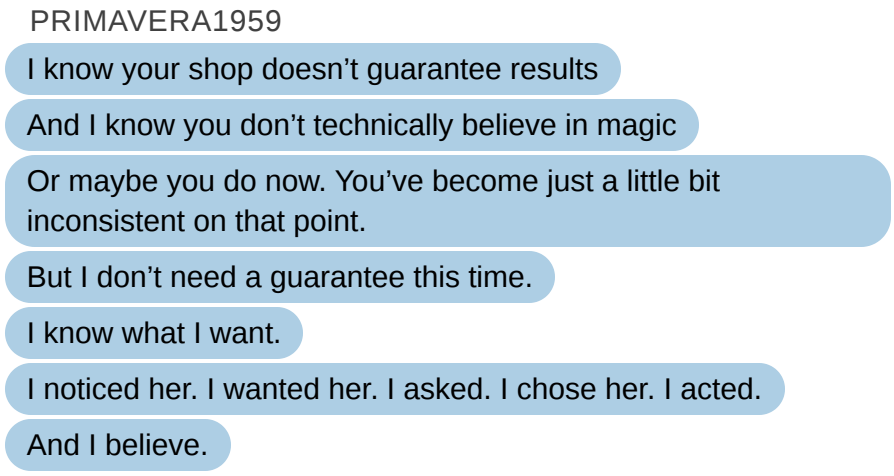
"Merry." I smile, and she looks at her phone again. "Oh my god."

“Please continue reading before you form an opinion.”

Her eyes lift to mine.

“Read.”

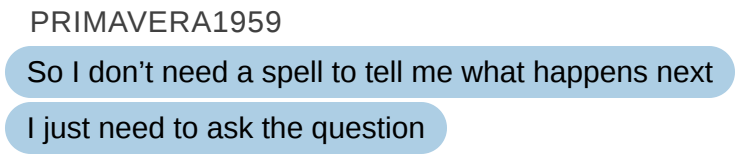
She does. Her eyes move across the screen, and I am able to tell exactly where she is when her hand comes up to cover her mouth.




Flora makes a sound that lands somewhere between a laugh and a sob, and my own eyes start burning.

Shit.

I was hoping to make it at least another thirty seconds.




Her head comes up.

I stand from the chair, and Flora straightens in her seat. Aurora immediately objects to the disruption and jumps off the couch, but neither of us pays attention to her.

Flora watches me reach into my pocket. “Merry.”

Her voice breaks on my name.

I cross the room and stop in front of her, pulling her up to standing. There are a thousand things I could say. I know because I have written most of them down at some point during the past month.

There was an entire speech in my notes app until Veronica told me it sounded like I was accepting an award. Dani suggested something shorter. Rose sent me a voice memo from somewhere in Oregon that began with “Don’t fuck this up” and then continued for seven minutes.

In the end, none of those words feel right.

Flora is standing in front of me with tears already slipping down her cheeks, and suddenly this feels very simple.

I take her hand.

“I spent a really long time waiting for something to tell me what I was supposed to do,” I say. “A sign. A spell. The universe. Other people. Anything that meant I couldn’t possibly choose wrong.”

Flora squeezes my fingers.

“And then this extremely stubborn witch charged me five hundred dollars to figure out that I could just *choose*.”

A watery laugh escapes her mouth.

“So I’m choosing.”

I lower myself to one knee, and Flora immediately starts crying harder. “Oh my god.”

“That’s encouraging.”

“Merry.” She has a soft smile on her lips, and there’s tears streaming down her cheeks.

“Sorry.”

I pull the ring from my pocket.

Her eyes drop to it, and the look on her face makes every rehearsed sentence disappear. I don’t need them anyway, because I know exactly what I want.

“Flora Ramos, will you marry me?”

She laughs through her tears. Then she looks at me for one long, impossible second and smiles.

“Yes.”

My hands are shaking badly enough that it takes me two attempts to slide the ring onto her finger. I get to my feet, and Flora catches my face between her hands before I can say anything else.

“I love you.”

She kisses me like she’s trying to close the distance between every version of us that ever doubted this moment would come. Like the answer is not only yes, but also yes to every impossible thing ahead, yes to choosing each other until choosing becomes as natural as breathing, yes to believing.

I wrap my arms around her and kiss her back with everything I have. It is deep and urgent, and permanent in a way no spell could ever make it. The

ring presses between us, bright and solid, and for once I don't feel the need to question what it means.

Somewhere near our feet, Aurora lets out an offended little noise, and Flora laughs against my mouth.

When we finally pull apart, I look down at the ring on her finger.

“So,” I say, “just to clarify, is this spell also non-refundable?”

Flora laughs, tipping her head back and closing her eyes. She kisses me again, her arms tightening around my neck as I pull her closer.

And now, standing in my living room with the love of my life in my arms, it feels exactly like how I once thought magic was supposed to feel.

Which, after everything, is probably the closest to magic I’ve ever believed in.

FIN

✨

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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I never quite know how to write the acknowledgements, because writing a book is technically a very solitary activity, and yet somehow by the time you reach the end of one, there are fingerprints everywhere.

So first: thank you to everyone who left theirs on this one.

The ladies at The Enchanted Raven Bookshop for being the best hype girls and cheerleaders an indie author can have. Ashley especially, because if it weren't for you this little non-spooky, non-paranormal witch romance would have never existed. You truly were the catalyst for this story!

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And of course, to every reader who has picked up one of my books—and especially those of you who keep coming back for the next one—thank you. There are more books in the world that any of us could possibly read in a lifetime, and I will never take for granted that you choose to spend some of your time with mine.

I don't know if I believe in magic any more than Flora does. But I believe there is something a little magical about finding people who see you clearly and choose to stay. I believe in paying attention to the things that make our lives bigger. And I believe in wanting things without apologizing for wanting them.

I hope you find the things you want. And I hope you choose them.

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Maria Rigou is a US-based author hailing from Argentina. She writes love stories full of longing, tenderness, and the exact amount of ache right before the happily ever after.

She lives in South Florida with her husband and two daughters and loves to read.

*Love Spells* is her eighth book.

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