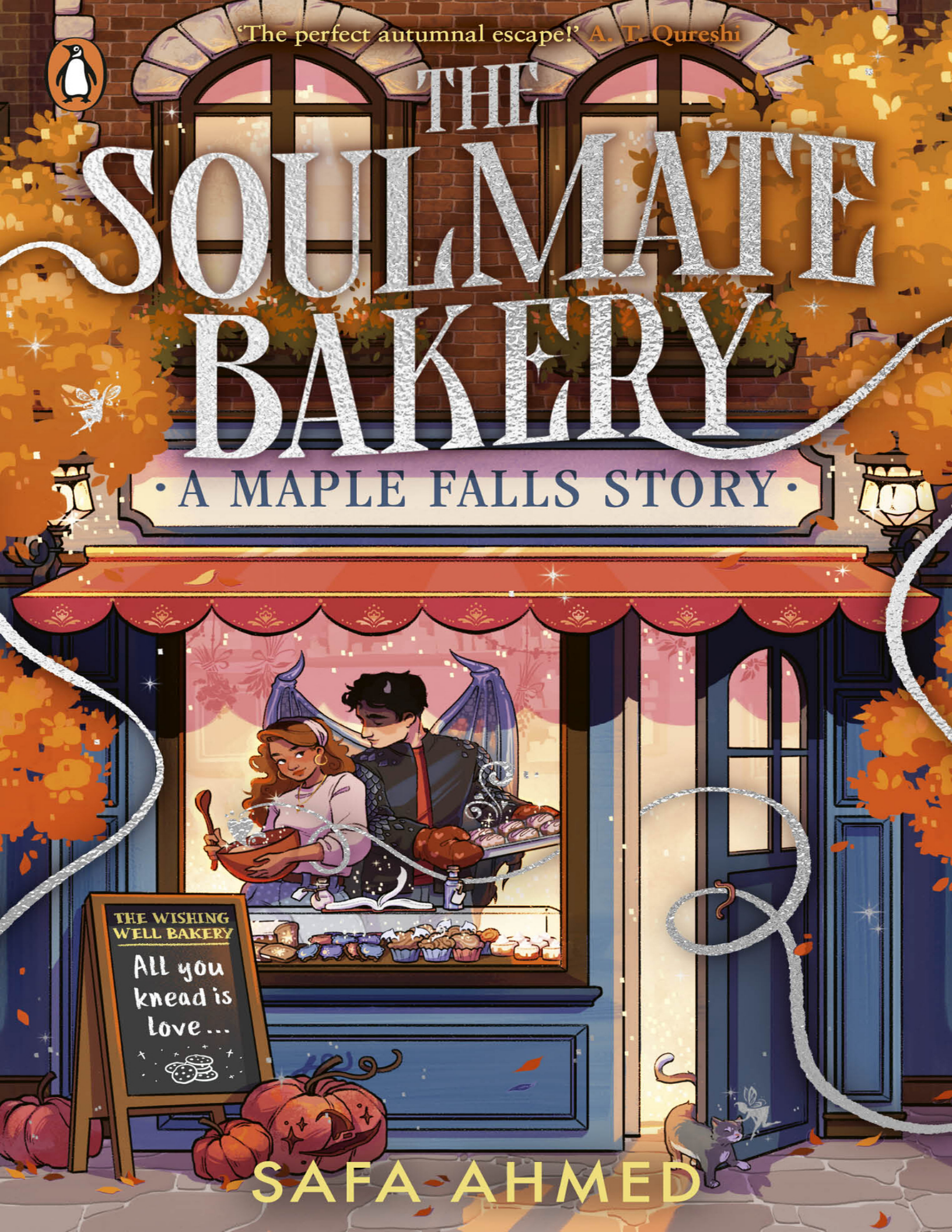
'The perfect autumnal escape!' A. T. Qureshi

THE SOULMATE BAKERY

A MAPLE FALLS STORY

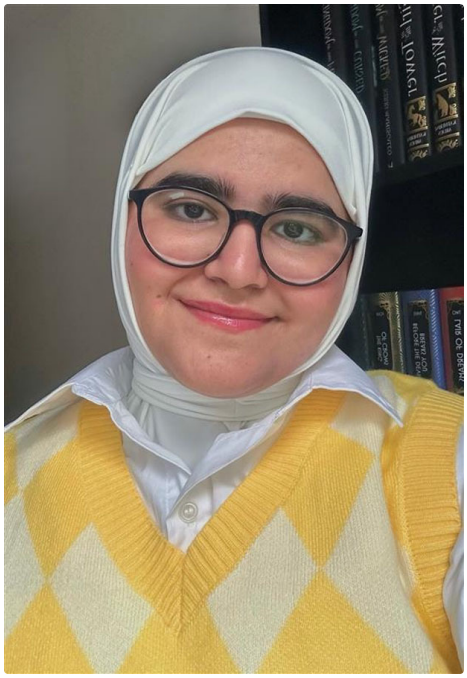


SAFA AHMED



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About the Author



Safa Ahmed is a British-Pakistani content marketer based in London. Ever since she scribbled down her first story – a mystery featuring stolen cookies and an incriminating teddy bear – it's been her dream to be a writer and publish books that celebrate joy, heartbreak, swoony love interests, fierce female characters and everything in-between.

When she's not writing, she is usually re-reading her favourite fantasy novels, wreaking havoc in the kitchen or expanding her ever-growing TBR pile. You can find her on Instagram and TikTok as: @safaswritings

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THE SOULMATE BAKERY



SAFA AHMED



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To Iman, my right-hand and best friend, and to
Ibrahim, the first friend I ever had – without you both,
I wouldn't be half the person I am.

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Maya Reverie’s Cupido Cookies

(*Aka the cookies that got us into this mess – a note from Orion Hawthorne)*

Ingredients:

- 2¼ cups all-purpose flour
- 1 teaspoon baking soda
- 1½ teaspoons cornstarch
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ¾ cup unsalted butter
- ¾ cup packed light-brown or dark-brown sugar
- ½ cup granulated sugar
- 1 large egg + 1 egg yolk
- 2 teaspoons charmed vanilla extract
- 1¼ cups semi-sweet chocolate chips

Instructions:

1. Preheat the oven to 180°C (fan-assisted oven).
2. First, focus on the dry ingredients: whisk the flour, baking soda, cornstarch and salt together in a large bowl.
3. Next, melt your butter in the microwave in thirty-second bursts.
4. In a medium bowl, whisk the melted butter, brown sugar and granulated sugar together.
5. Then whisk in the egg and egg yolk. With the spare egg whites, make an omelette or maybe even a single-serve macaron!

6. Now, before you add the vanilla extract, learn this translated spell: *To pierce with love and bind my heart, Cupido please land your mark*. When saying the spell, trace a faint heart in the air over the vanilla.
7. Whisk in the charmed vanilla extract.
8. Pour the wet ingredients into the dry ingredients and mix together.
9. Fold in the chocolate chips. I tend to be very liberal in my chocolate-chip dosage but do as you please. You can even add some other mix-ins here – like pretzels or walnuts.
10. Using a tablespoon or an ice-cream scoop, depending on your preference, place 8 balls of dough on to a parchment-lined baking tray. Here, I would shape the dough into hearts because it just looks so much cuter!
11. Bake the cookies for 12–13 minutes or until the edges are very lightly browned.
12. After a reasonable amount of time (read: 3 minutes if you're me), you can devour your cookies and find your soulmate!

WARNING:
DO NOT BAKE THIS RECIPE UNTIL IT HAS BEEN REVISED, PLEASE AND THANK YOU.

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CHAPTER ONE

Before you ask, it's not really considered breaking and entering – if you have a key. Then it's really, you know, *entering* more than anything else.

At least, that's what I told myself as I stuck my key into the lock of the Wishing Well Bakery; the bell above the periwinkle door chimed, and I held my breath as I looked over my shoulder to see if someone would come rushing down the streets of Maple Falls.

It would probably be Inspector Vale. I could almost see him: hurtling from the police station situated by the town's edge, grey hair flying wildly, furious golden eyes with a silver slit down the middle of each iris glaring, practically breathing fire at me – literally and figuratively since he's a dragon shifter. He'd probably drag me back to my house and give me the same speech he'd given me only a month ago.

Maple Falls is a town protected from those pesky mortals by ancient magic. We are safe and content here. And you running amok in the wee hours of the night ruins that peace!

The speech, while impassioned, always sounds a *teensy bit* dramatic to my ears. I mean, Vale was right: Maple Falls is a town protected by ancient magic; a barrier that keeps the mortal eye from seeing us. But even if a mortal did find their way to Maple Falls – aside from likely experiencing a mental breakdown at the sight of all the different magical creatures they'd find – they'd get pretty bored. Because nothing ever happens here. And when I say nothing, I genuinely mean … nothing. I've lived here for seventeen years, and there's never even been a whiff of scandal. Trying to find ways to entertain myself in this town is like an Olympic sport, and if they were giving out medals, I would deserve gold. Silver at the *minimum*.

But several minutes passed and there was no sign of Vale; no sign of anyone at all. Sighing with relief, I stepped into the bakery, closing the door

quietly; the giant cupcake clock on the wall ticked loudly and caught my attention.

Midnight.

The time when wishes are made upon stars, when the darkness of the night becomes ten times more frightening, when everyone – including the residents of Maple Falls – is fast asleep.

And, if you're me, it's also the time bad decisions are made.

But, I'd like to stress, not *this* time. No, no, what I was doing in this bakery was going to be epic. Astounding. Life-changing. It was going to turn THE INCIDENT into nothing more than a very bad, soon-to-be-forgotten memory.

Or at least, I hoped it would.

As I walked through the bakery, I slipped my phone out of my pocket and dialled the first number on the list. Waiting for my call to be picked up, I continued to the kitchen in the back.

In six hours, Ivy Blackthorn – my boss at my part-time bakery-assistant job, a mid-thirties kitchen witch with bright-purple hair and glasses shaped like stars – would step inside and begin to fill the empty display cases. The menu for this week: sunbaked apple cakes charmed to give you a warm flush on a cold day, chocolate crinkle cookies enchanted to soothe worries, and my very own creation, dreamweaver shortbread.

The dreamweaver shortbread was made solely with burned-out students in mind. I found the spell for it in one of the old, dusty tomes in the Wandering Words Library, Maple Falls' greatest source of spells. I was searching for something that would help me sleep during exam seasons in my final year of high school; I was in dire need of *dreamless* sleep.

The spell had been easy enough to learn. It was in English, and there weren't any intensely complicated finger movements I needed to grasp. Nothing like the spell I used to try and charm my unibrow away a couple of years ago.

It helped that I was good at culinary magic. I could bake spells into desserts with ease because kitchen witchery is all about *structure*. Play around with a recipe as much as you like, but the charm (or the curse) only ever had to go over one ingredient. It was nothing like potions, where one drop could change everything, or charms, where one wrong finger movement could turn your hair from shoulder-length to a pixie cut in mere seconds.

Kitchen magic was safe, and the dreamless-slumber spell was simple. After studying the correct movements and memorizing the incantation, I whispered the spell over the lavender that would be folded into the buttery vanilla layers of dough. I then brought them to Ivy, explained everything I'd done, and she took the risk and ate the biscuits. She had *three* dreamless nights of sleep. And now, for the first time, one of my own baked magical goods was actually, properly, going to be sold in the bakery.

It was an omen, a sign, that this year was going to be perfect. No mishaps. No mistakes. No disasters. This was going to be *the* year.

'I think this is a bad idea,' came the voice of my best friend, Raven Hawthorne, from the phone that was now squished between my cheek and shoulder.

'You think all my ideas are bad ideas.' I rolled my eyes and pulled out all the utensils I would need.

'Because all of them *are* bad ideas,' Raven shot back, with the kind of brutal honesty that could only come from someone who'd known me my entire life.

'I resent that.'

Raven ignored my complaint and continued berating me instead. 'Did you stop and think whether this could, I don't know, lead to *another* point on your licence?'

I winced. She wasn't wrong. Every witch got a licence at thirteen, which meant we could cast the spells we learned without supervision.

Well, any spells that weren't forbidden, that is. Those were your love spells, trying-to-convene-with-the-dead spells or anything that manipulated another person's will. *Anything* that could change a creature – or hurt one – was strictly banned.

'You already have two points on your licence, Maya. One more and the Coven will take away your apprenticeship eligibility *and* you'll be magic bound for a year.'

A shiver ran through me at the thought of being stripped of my magic for a whole year. Stuck in Maple Falls, magic-less, apprenticeship-less, waiting out a sentence dealt by the Coven. It was a fate worse than death – at least to me.

'You're right.' I gave into Raven's argument, but then a familiar indignation stirred inside me. 'But come on, the first two points shouldn't even be there!'

‘You removed Everly Catacomb’s fangs when we were sixteen,’ Raven said, not even missing a beat. ‘That’s the equivalent of severing off one of her *limbs*, Maya.’

‘She kind of deserved it.’ I shrugged, continuing to assemble my ingredients. ‘Everly is a bully, and if she was going to keep making fun of everyone, then she deserved a little transfiguration.’

‘Fine,’ Raven allowed, aggrieved.

For a moment, I thought she was going to talk about the second point on my licence. We didn’t talk about that point – I got it during the worst summer of my life. A time I didn’t like to talk about. Raven knew that.

Instead she launched into the *other* thing I didn’t want to think about tonight.

THE INCIDENT.

‘But I still don’t think falling in front of Silas Moon warrants making a batch of soulmate cookies and *potentially* getting another point on your licence if someone catches you.’

The memory flooded my thoughts, and my brows scrunched together with actual repulsion.

‘It wasn’t just a fall,’ I said, horrified. ‘I face-planted at his feet. It was mortifying.’

‘Silas probably didn’t even notice!’ Raven cajoled, but I could hear the wince in her voice.

‘Oh yes, maybe he didn’t notice the girl in front of him slipping and sliding on the shop floor like a fish out of water,’ I said, deadpan. ‘You didn’t see his face, Raven. *I* did. He looked at me with those big blue eyes, his blonde hair all shiny, and he even bent down to *help* me. Silas Moon is the cutest werewolf in this town, and I humiliated myself in front of him. Again.’

‘You know, you could always just tell him how you feel,’ Raven teased. ‘You, Maya Reverie, have been in love with that werewolf since we were thirteen.’

She wasn’t wrong. I’d had a crush on Silas Moon for literal years. While I have lived in Maple Falls since I was born, the Moon family moved in when Silas was thirteen. In a pack of seven brothers, Silas was the youngest. He was shy and quiet; I didn’t think much of him in the beginning.

But on his first day, he'd seen a particularly nasty vampire named Trent picking on me. Now, Trent's issues weren't *really* with me. He had tried to throw the party of the summer but epically failed when Vale caught him sneaking drinks on to Golden Shell Beach. You might wonder what that had to do with little ol' me. Well, after a painfully long lecture from Vale, my mother, the town's mayor, had given Trent community service as punishment.

Trent did not like that. Or my mother. And consequently, me, the mayor's daughter.

Anyway, Trent was midway to biting into my neck when Silas intervened.

It wasn't grand or loud. He'd simply stood in front of me and told the vampire to pick on someone his own size. I'd been crushing on him ever since. Over the years, I tried to catch his attention, but every time I was within touching distance of Silas, I did something incredibly stupid. Tripped, gagged, stumbled – you name it, I've done it. If I wasn't a witch who had studied magic, I'd say I was cursed.

'You're right, I've been pining after him for long enough,' I agreed. 'That's why I need to do this. It's time to prove whether there's anything real there.'

'OK, so go talk to him! Don't bake cookies to make him fall in love with you.'

'They're not cookies to make him fall in love with me! Love spells are strictly forbidden, you know that,' I stressed. 'They're Cupido cookies. Once I eat one, all they're going to do is create a silver string that'll wrap around my wrist and lead me to my soulmate. It's not like I'm bewitching him. Ergo, *technically* it's not illegal.'

Raven was quiet on the line, giving me enough time to get the final ingredient out of the pantry. The glass bottle was shaped like a heart with a silver stopper corking it shut; inside, a dark-amber liquid sloshed around. Vanilla extract. Ivy's fancy kind.

'Fine,' Raven finally said, sounding resigned. 'Fine, but just – just don't get caught, Maya. OK? Because I cannot graduate this year alone, while you're stuck living out a sentence of mortality for a year. The plan is to graduate *together* before I go off to MAC. I want us to have one last summer of fun before I go.'

A lump formed in my throat as I began to imagine Maple Falls without Raven. I tried to envision how I was going to take the popular route of an apprenticeship with Ivy; how I could learn more kitchen magic while Raven would be off at the Magical Academy for Creatures. MAC was a college dedicated to creatures who wanted to work in higher-defence positions – that's your Coven members, town inspectors, curse breakers. Positions that required lessons in forbidden spells and defensive magic. The downside? It was a boarding school, and I would barely get to see Raven while she was there.

I didn't want to tell her, but that was part of the reason why I was so desperate to cast the spell: once Raven went to MAC, I would be entirely alone.

Unless I had someone who would never leave me. Like a soulmate.

'I promise,' I vowed, and I meant it. With every fibre of my being. This was going to be a good year.

I was going to get the guy, graduate with my best friend and I *wasn't* going to get another point on my licence.

The dough for the Cupido cookies was the same as your classic chocolate-chip cookie; I decided to shape the dough into hearts because *why not*. But before I could get to the fun part, I needed to add the final charmed ingredient: the vanilla extract. I took the heart-shaped bottle, uncorked it and ghosted my fingertips over the rim. In front of me, I flipped open the spellbook I found in the library to the page I had bookmarked. I had to translate the spell from Latin to English – I would say the spell in its original language, but I didn't want to mess up getting the pronunciation wrong.

Amore transfige et cor meum liga, Cupido, quaeso, figam tuam reperi.

To pierce with love and bind my heart, Cupido, please land your mark.

I raised my hand and drew an air-heart above the vanilla-extract bottle, while I whispered the translated spell.

Familiar warmth tingled on the tip of my index finger; my magic bloomed to life under my skin. The whispered spell crystallized in the air as the vanilla extract turned a bright gold before settling back down to its usual amber colour. I held my breath for several long moments, waiting for the bottle to shatter, for the Wishing Well Bakery alarm bells to blare to life, for Vale to break through the doors and burn me to a *crisp*.

But nothing happened.

The enchanted vanilla essence sat in front of me, waiting to be used. I was a flurry of movement after that. I ended up making a batch of twenty cookies, hopeful that Ivy might let me sell them if this all worked out. She's not always on board with my more adventurous bakes, but *this* could change everything. I mean, I could be Maple Falls' resident matchmaker baker; the baker who helped people find their soulmates.

My head was full of excitement and daydreams as I shaped the biscuits into hearts and popped them into the oven. I sat on one of the stools Ivy had peppered around the kitchen, tapped my fingers anxiously on the steel countertops and settled in to watch the timer.

Twelve minutes later, the trill of the bell rang through the air, and I was off my chair in a breath, pulling the trays out. I laid the cookies on a wire rack, staring down at them while they cooled. They were a perfect light-brown colour, bursting with melted chocolate chips. Nothing about them screamed *I-will-help-you-find-the-love-of-your-life*.

I waited exactly three minutes before taking a cookie. When I finally sunk my teeth into it, melted chocolate chips, vanilla, butter, sugar and *warm deliciousness* exploded on my tongue. It was a good cookie. A spectacular cookie, if I do say so myself.

As I brushed the crumbs from around my mouth, I looked down at my wrist to see if the string had started to form yet.

Nothing.

OK, maybe I just needed to wait a little longer.

While I waited for the spell to come into effect, I cleared up around me – glancing down at my hands every so often.

No change.

Not after ten minutes. Not even after twenty. The relentless optimist in me reminded myself that magic could be slow sometimes. Maybe another cookie could help. So, I ate another.

And another.

And another.

I stood there, eating bite after bite of the cookies and nothing happened. No silver string formed around my wrist, winding down the streets of Maple Falls to Silas Moon's home – or anyone else's for that matter. No major cosmic shift as my soulmate was revealed.

My phone flashed, and Raven's name showed up on my screen. I picked it up without thinking.

'Put me out of my misery and just tell me – did it work?' Raven asked, full of excitement.

'It didn't work,' I replied tightly.

'What do you mean it didn't work?' Raven demanded. 'Did you cast the spell wrong?'

I looked over the pages of the spellbook, wanting, desperately, for there to be a glaring error.

'No, no, I did everything right,' I complained, checking off each step.

There was no reason for the spell to fail. None at all. Not unless –

'Oh.' I exhaled quietly.

'What? What is it?' Raven asked, alarmed.

'I'm never going to have someone to share the last pizza slice with,' I replied, my voice sounding far away to my own ears now. 'I'm never going to be with someone who can read me like an open book.' I couldn't stop. 'Someone who knows my coffee order, or my hot chocolate order, or my tea order. Someone who walks on the road-side of the pavement automatically. Someone who will –' The lump in my throat wouldn't allow me to continue.

'Maya,' Raven's voice had softened but still carried worry for me. 'I'm sure –'

'I didn't cast the spell wrong,' I interrupted, my throat aching with the urge to cry.

At a little past midnight my life *did* change. Just not in the way I expected.

'The spell didn't work, because I don't have a soulmate.'

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CHAPTER TWO

I know what you're thinking: does this witch hate herself?

The answer is … maybe? Because it could only be a potent form of self-hatred that led me to volunteer for the fall bake sale. At 6 a.m. On a Saturday. The day after my midnight gallivanting across town.

I dragged myself out of bed at the crack of dawn, uncaring of the noise that echoed through the Reverie household, because Mum was already at work and my sister, Rani, was away at MAC studying magical bookkeeping.

On my way out, I grabbed one of the croissants I'd made early in the week – not charmed or enchanted, yet, and made my way to Main Street. The street ran through the centre of Maple Falls and was marked by a tall clock tower. Every secret magical town has a portal – a way of travelling to and from without needing to reveal ourselves to the mortal world. Maple Falls' was the clock tower.

Later today, Main Street would be bustling with activity. The bake sale was the annual fundraising event for the Fallen Leaves Festival, which would be happening next month. The festival marked the moment when the leaves of the Firewood Forest that surrounded the town would turn a brilliant gold, before shedding and welcoming the winter. It was a night full of warm drinks, fun stalls and the best doorstep-thick apple-pie slices charmed by Ivy to keep everyone warm well into the night.

For the fall bake sale, the clock tower had been wrapped in purple wisteria enchanted to remain fresh by Flora's Flowers, a shop run by faerie triplets. Bunting was strung up between lamp posts, and stalls lined either side of the street that were slowly being filled with various goods. Spotting Ivy, I beelined to the stall where my boss stood.

'Morning, sunshine,' Ivy said when she saw me, her voice filled with a little too much cheer for this early in the morning. Her star-shaped glasses

were a cool purple colour, her cheekbones glittered with iridescent purple highlighter that made the burnished brown of her skin glow.

‘Morning, Ivy,’ I parroted back, trying to infuse my voice with the same enthusiasm but failing miserably. Most of the time, we matched each other’s energy perfectly. But when you’ve had maybe four hours of sleep, and you feel like the inside of your head is made more of cotton than brain, cheeriness is a difficult emotion to emulate.

If Ivy noticed my change in demeanour, she didn’t let on. She was too distracted by ensuring everything from the bakery was in the right place.

‘Tell me where you need me,’ I offered, catching her flighty gaze.

Ivy gave me a grateful look and with a flick of her wrist, she made a box of doughnuts from her stall levitate towards me. The show of effortless, spell-less magic almost made me jealous. Unlike my mum and sister, my magic proficiency started and ended with my kitchen magic. Anything more complicated usually ended in disaster for me.

‘Take these doughnuts to that stall there. Remember, the custard doughnuts are enchanted with a spell intended to soothe any pressing worries, and the lemon-jam ones are for those who want to add a little brightness to their day.’

‘Understood,’ I said, eyeing the doughnut box that was now nestled in my hands.

‘Good.’ Ivy grinned and then reached out to give my shoulder a squeeze. ‘And don’t think I forgot, assistant-of-mine! I’ll make sure to get an accurate count of how many people buy your dreamweaver shortbread.’

In the wave of disappointment following my spectacular failure last night, I had entirely forgotten that one of my creations would be shared with Maple Falls residents today. Ivy’s enthusiasm warmed something inside me, and, for the first time since the night before, I felt a little excited.

I made my way to the stall and placed the box down, before muttering a spell under my breath.

‘*Align, arrange and set in order, fill this doughnut case from edge to corner*.’

One by one, the doughnuts slid perfectly into place in the case. When the last one found its spot, I felt the tension in my shoulders loosen. An organizational spell like that was meant to be easy, taught to witches at a young age. It wasn’t like the more complicated spells – summoning or healing – or anything that required enchanting or charming someone.

But still it was difficult not to feel that gnawing worry that I was going to cast the spell wrong, *especially* after last night.

The morning slipped by as Ivy and I finished setting up the stall, spoke about ideas for next week's menu and what bakes I was cooking up in my culinary magic classes.

Before I knew it, it was time for the bake sale to officially start, and the townsfolk were eager as ever to show their enthusiasm. Soon, I was attending to a line that winded all the way down Main Street.

As the morning went on, my sour mood lifted and I lost myself in the easy repetition of selling the doughnuts, taking money and making small talk. I even served Inspector Vale, who I was pleased to see appeared none the wiser about my late-night excursion.

It was hitting noon, and the line in front of our stall had finally dwindled, when I felt someone familiar sidle up beside me.

'So, nothing's changed?' Raven asked, looking at me warily.

'Yes, Raven,' I said patiently, keeping my voice levelled as I replenished our stock. 'I woke up this morning just like I went to bed last night: still soulmate-less.'

'But your charmed bakes always work,' she countered, holding a coffee cup from our local café, Charmed & Toasty.

'Yes, Raven,' I replied, pedantically. 'I *also* thought I was at least competent in kitchen magic.'

Something in my voice must have caught her attention, because the confusion on my best friend's face melted into something else. When one sees Raven Hawthorne, they wouldn't think of the word soft. I know because I've heard how people in our school talked about her. A dragon shifter who excelled at spellcasting (especially hexes), and the only daughter of one of the most proficient detectives in Maple Falls, Raven simply looked like someone you didn't want to mess with. And whenever we stood together, we appeared like opposites.

Like today, for instance, Raven was decked out in a short brown-leather jacket and a dark-brown bodysuit, paired with dragon-scale jeans that matched her fox-like eyes and the scales that actually appeared when she was in dragon form. Next to her – dressed in a white T-shirt, paired with a pink cardigan buttoned only at the top and straight-leg jeans – I resembled … a cupcake.

We looked like two people who shouldn't have been friends.

But not everyone got to see Raven's softer side. She'd always had my back and supported me. Always.

'You are more than competent at culinary magic,' she chided, looping her arm through mine. 'You're the best kitchen witch I've ever met.'

I sighed, feeling that ache in my chest again. My wrist felt bare without the silver thread that was supposed to have appeared. 'You say that, but the fact remains the same – I have no soulmate. I'm soulmate-deficient, if you will.'

'You're not soulmate-deficient –' Raven began, but I cut her off.

'Then *why* didn't the spell work?'

Raven started to say something, thought better of it, and shut her mouth. I could tell she didn't like not having an answer for me, so I tried to force some cheer.

'At least I didn't get a third point on my licence,' I said, attempting something akin to a smile. 'That's a silver lining, right?'

'Exactly!' Raven nodded, punching my arm lightly. 'No point on the licence, which is important because I have big plans for us in the summer.'

I raised an eyebrow. 'Don't say that too loudly, we don't want your dad hearing.'

Raven pulled a face. 'He's still at the precinct. Chief Inspector Hawthorne does not sneak out for pastry breaks.'

'Your mum will probably pop in with something sweet,' I countered, smiling fondly at the thought.

Raven's parents were the epitome of the perfect couple – they were childhood sweethearts who had gone to MAC together and then came back to build a life in Maple Falls. Mrs Hawthorne found a love for interior designing; Chief Inspector Hawthorne took over the detective agency; and they had kids and fell more in love with each other every day. I knew, because I got to witness it first-hand every time I went over to see Raven.

'She definitely will,' Raven agreed, before continuing on. 'But like I was saying, we can't afford to be getting into any trouble before I leave.'

That ache in my chest blossomed again. Raven leaving was another reminder of just how lonely I was going to be next year. Soulmate-less, best-friend-less. I was already semi-sister-less given that Rani was at MAC most of the year. So, when Raven leaves, it'll just be me and my *mother*, for the first time.

'You look constipated,' Raven said, half laughing, half worried.

‘Only emotionally,’ I attempted to joke, but it didn’t get past my best friend.

But before she could press, a delicate cough had me whipping back around to the front of the stall, pasting a grin on my face when I turned to face the waiting customer. ‘Granny Fable! Welcome! Can I get you a doughnut for your worries or for a brighter day?’

Granny Fable was part-owner of the local apothecary, Fable & Frost – she ran the shop with her best friend, an elderly pixie named Frost. Everyone called her Granny, and no one entirely knew why. Maybe because she was an old lady who always wore a fluffy cardigan and had powdery white skin, the lightest blue eyes and white faerie wings that she never kept strapped to her back like some of the more recent fashions. Something about her screamed comfort, warmth and grandmother. No one would ever suspect her of being the town’s most nefarious gossip.

‘A brighter day, my dear,’ Granny Fable said, her hand resting on the bejewelled cane she had taken to walking with. She turned to a girl beside her that I didn’t recognize.

One of the perks of living in Maple Falls for most of your life means you know everyone. The girl beside Granny Fable was close to my age, a faerie, with wide doe eyes, light-brown skin and wings that were a pale-green colour. Around her neck, she wore a silver chain that went down her shirt but might have been a pendant.

‘Sofia, allow me to introduce you to Maya Reverie, daughter of Mayor Reverie.’ Granny Fable placed a hand on Sofia’s elbow. ‘And that’s Raven Hawthorne, Chief Inspector Hawthorne’s daughter.’

Sofia looked at Raven and me, and waved. ‘Hi.’

‘Hi,’ we chorused back. The three of us were submerged in that awkwardness that always came when an adult introduced you to a new person.

‘Sofia is my granddaughter and has just moved to Maple Falls,’ Granny Fable continued, without missing a beat. ‘She needed a change of scenery, so I’ve invited her to finish her last year of schooling while staying with me!’

‘That’s great!’ I said quickly and jovially. Something in Granny Fable’s voice sounded earnest, like she truly wanted everyone to like her granddaughter. I never really knew Granny’s daughter – she moved away when I was still a kid and never visited.

An unexpected reunion. An apology that comes too late. A confession that changes everything.

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‘If we’re in the same classes, I’ll save you a seat,’ I said, catching Sofia’s eye.

The younger faerie looked surprised by my offer. ‘That would be great,’ she said, a small smile curved on her face. Granny Fable shot me a look that was pure gratefulness, as the two walked away.

‘You’re going to adopt her, aren’t you?’ Raven said, eyebrows raised. ‘You’re going to make me socialize with another person and be friendly.’

I turned to her and nodded sheepishly. If I wasn’t going to have a soulmate to keep me company while Raven was gone, then I could at least have another friend. And who better than Sofia? Someone new in Maple Falls; someone who’d just arrived and would need a friend to show her around town.

‘I’m going to need more coffee,’ Raven said, as she pushed herself away from the stall. ‘Do you want me to grab you –’ Something caught her attention over my shoulder, and a second later her eyes widened with something akin to panic.

‘What? What is it? Is it a spider, because you know I’m scared of –’ I said, whirling around and coming face to face with Silas Moon.

For a moment that felt like it stretched for eternity, I simply stared at him. He wore the Maple Mart uniform, which was a white shirt and a green apron that had MAPLE MART written in bright yellow on it. His blonde hair was windswept, and there was a light stubble growing on his face that was new. It made him look older. Dashing, even. I was afraid I was going to literally swoon.

‘Hi,’ Silas said, all dimple smiled. His gaze dropped to the doughnuts in the case. ‘I’ve been hearing a lot about these enchanted doughnuts. Think I could get one?’

‘Uh –’ I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. Not until Raven stepped on my foot underneath the table with all her strength. ‘Yes – yes, of

course. These ones are custard-filled with a sugar coating.' The words bubbled out of me, and it seemed that, once I had started, I couldn't stop. 'They're enchanted to soothe worries. And these ones are glazed but filled with a lemon jam for a brighter morning. Or I suppose, you know, an afternoon now. Or maybe, late morning? I don't really – hi, by the way. I don't think I said hi.'

From my periphery, I could see Raven staring at me like I'd grown a second head. But in front of me, Silas was still smiling.

He really was my dream guy. Funny in class, kind to others and non-judgemental (given the fact that he was always nice to me despite my many public embarrassments over the years).

'I'll take a custard one, please,' Silas said, his voice light with humour. 'We've got that potions test on Monday, and I'm already feeling anxious.'

Out of the three mandatory subjects I had to take for my MOEs (Magical Order Examinations), I shared one class with Silas Moon – potions. And I spent most of it trying really hard not to look at him for too long.

'Same,' I said, turning to look directly at the doughnuts in the case. When I wasn't looking at him, the words came out a little easier. 'I feel like Professor Malt is going to make it extra hard just for fun.'

'He is one sadistic pixie, I'll give you that,' Silas agreed, and his gaze followed my movements as I used a pair of tongs to pull the doughnut from the case. 'That looks incredible. Thanks, Maya.'

Now, I have no one to blame here but myself. Not my magic, not my spells, just plain old me. Because I know how to use tongs. I've used them to pull jalebis out of sputtering oil, to toss churros in cinnamon sugar, or the thousand-and-one times I've pulled a baked good from a display case for a customer.

Yet, when I heard Silas say my name, some part of my brain stopped working. And I – with more pressure and excitement than necessary – squeezed the tongs that held his doughnut and the bright, summer-yellow jam from the doughnut went splat against Silas's white shirt.

'I am so sorry,' I said, horrified and still clutching the tongs in my white-knuckled grasp. I couldn't decide whether I should put them down, or offer him a napkin, or apologize again. So, I tried to do all three at the same time, and it only led to me making three abrupt movements that led nowhere.

Silas looked up from his shirt, a little uncertain, and I could tell he was thinking about THE INCIDENT. He was probably wondering if I had some

agenda against his clothes, determined to ensure that he never wore a white shirt ever again. As Raven passed him some napkins to wipe himself down with, mortification flooded me, and I opened my mouth to apologize again, but I was cut off by shouting.

Silas's head shot to his right, and I followed suit to see a crowd forming in the middle of the street.

Like magnets, the three of us went towards the crowd. Silas used his broad shoulders to push his way through, with Raven and I following in his wake. When we reached the middle of the circle, all we could see was Inspector Vale. Nothing unusual about that. Vale 'monitored' the fall bake sale every year. It was usually an excuse for him to get his hands on free goodies. Only, I wasn't sure what he was doing on his knees. In front of Ivy. Raven and I shared a look that very clearly said: *What is happening*?

'Ivy Blackthorn,' Vale's voice was full of unadulterated yearning, his face contorted like he was in pain. 'You are the most beautiful jewel in all of Maple Falls; please allow me to hoard you, my treasure.'

'He did not just say let me hoard you.' Raven gagged beside me, but I was too busy looking at the inspector. He looked like himself but his eyes, golden with a silver slit down the middle of each iris, were glassy. Unfocused. Clouded.

'Vale,' Ivy murmured, looking entirely shocked. 'I never knew you felt this way. But … but I'm sorry … I've never thought of you like that.'

Inspector Vale's expression shattered, and even my heart lurched for the dragon shifter. But he didn't hold our attention for long, because another loud sound cut through the air and made us all turn away in unison. There we found Frost – of Fable & Frost – waxing poetry to Granny Fable. Sofia stood beside her, looking unimpressed, and Granny looked ready to smack Frost on the head with her cane.

'Oh, Fable, shall I compare thee to a summer's day?' Frost asked, his voice gravelly.

'Shall I compare thee to an idiot?' Granny Fable retorted. 'Frost, if you do not stand up right this instant and stop this behaviour, I will smack you.'

'But I love you, Fable, like the summer loves the winter,' Frost cried. 'Like two lone stars –'

Frost's cries were cut off by another declaration, this time from much closer. Diya Jaan, a seventeen-year-old vampire from my culinary magic class. She quite physically threw herself at Silas's feet, which was only a

little triggering, and the werewolf stumbled backwards, holding Diya at arm's length.

'Silas! Silas, my heart beats for you,' Diya said. She was looking at Silas like he was the sun in the sky. Was this how I looked at him? All doe-eyed and so … gooey? Surely not.

Silas looked more than a little stunned and then terrified when he heard the low hiss from behind him.

'Diya!' Dane Jaan, Diya's brother, looked absolutely furious. 'Let go of that werewolf now.'

The three of them fell into an argument – most of it being Silas vehemently denying being in love with Diya, which was, admittedly, nice to hear – and the commotion on Main Street grew louder.

I grabbed Raven's hand and tugged her towards our abandoned stall. Well, almost abandoned. We found Ivy sitting on one of the stools, looking dazed.

'What was that, Ivy? Are you and Inspector Vale …?'

'No,' she replied, her voice sounding hazy, but then she cleared her throat and stepped out of her stupor. 'No.'

'So, why did Inspector Vale confess to you like that?' I asked, bewildered. I waved my arm around at the chaotic Maple Falls. 'And what is going on with Frost? He and Granny are practically like siblings.'

'They look love-struck,' Raven muttered. I could practically see her mind whirring, eager to put the puzzle together.

Ivy's expression morphed into one of horror. 'They look like they're under a love spell,' she whispered.

'A love spell?' I asked, alarmed.

Ivy moved quickly, rummaging behind the stall to pull out a thick blue scarf. 'I've seen something like this before.' She wrapped the scarf around her neck and stepped to the front of the stall. 'I need to tell your mother, Maya. Watch the stall for me, would you?'

I nodded, watching as she hurriedly pushed through the crowd. I turned my gaze away from her retreating form to Raven. My best friend watched me, her lips pursed, eyes worried.

'What?' I asked, nervously.

'Don't freak out,' Raven began, and I gave her an exasperated glare.

'Why would you say that? You know I'm going to freak out now.'

‘Well, it’s just –’ Raven let out a sharp breath. ‘Ivy said the town appears to be under a love spell. And last night you were casting a love spell.’

‘No.’ I stretched the word, even as my stomach had started to knot together. ‘I cast a soulmate spell.’

‘That didn’t work.’

‘Because I don’t have a soulmate,’ I countered, evenly. ‘And it’s not like I gave out the cookies to anyone besides myself.’

‘But didn’t you make a whole batch?’

I blinked. Once. Then twice.

‘Maya, where are the cookies you made yesterday?’ Raven asked, her voice eerily calm.

I opened my mouth, then snapped it shut again.

‘Maya?’ Raven probed, more urgently this time.

‘Let me think!’ I said, rubbing my temples. ‘I remember calling you after the cookies didn’t work, and we stayed on the call while I cleaned up the kitchen. You told me to give the spell some time, so I left to go back home and …’

The memory rose in my mind; my key locking the door to the Wishing Well Bakery, me turning away and sneaking through the streets back home.

And the cookies. The cookies.

‘I left them on the counter. In a jar,’ I said, slamming my hand to my forehead. ‘I totally left them there.’

‘And where are they now?’ Raven questioned.

Something pulled my gaze to the stall I was leaning against – maybe it was intuition, or the lure of my own magic, but it took me less than a second to find what I was looking for.

Right on the middle of the table was my empty glass jar, with not a single heart-shaped chocolate-chip cookie in sight.

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CHAPTER THREE

The first time I got a point on my witch licence wasn't just because I'd cast a forbidden spell to remove Everly Catacomb's fangs. It was also because I couldn't bring her fangs *back*.

I had stared for what felt like hours at Everly's regular, non-pointy teeth, tears wet on my cheeks, as I said the counterspell and repeated the finger movements, trying to get my magic to *do* something. But after several tries, nothing happened. I simply couldn't focus my magic on Everly again.

In the end, Rani – my older sister – had to step in and do the spell. Everly's parents had reported me to the Coven; hours later, I had a small 'x' on my licence. After that, my fear of spellcasting was born. Every time I tried to cast a spell, the memory of my mother's disappointed face would unearth itself. When it came to baking magic, I could let my thoughts shift, and my focus locked on to the recipe, not the magic. Culinary magic was maybe the only thing I had going for me.

That's why it simply wasn't possible that my cookies could have caused this mess. Sure, there was a chance I might have cast the soulmate spell incorrectly, but, crucially, nothing had happened to me last night and I'd eaten several of the cookies. There was no delayed reaction, no sudden burst of love in my heart. I was still completely myself.

'No, it can't be,' I said, confidently, arms folded over my chest. 'I ate them last night, and nothing like this happened.'

'You still only like Silas then?' Raven probed, her gaze running over me like I was hiding another secret crush in the pockets of my jeans.

'Yep, and I certainly don't feel the need to publicly declare my undying love for him,' I scoffed.

Raven sighed with relief. 'Good, like you always have.'

I made a humming noise in the back of my throat that wasn't total agreement. I didn't lie to Raven – we *never* lied to one another. But I didn't

correct her now either. Raven didn't know how for one brief moment, last summer, my crush on Silas had slightly waned. All she knew was that we didn't talk about last summer because that's when I got the second point on my licence – the deeper *whys* and *whos* were a little vaguer.

The Reverie household, also dubbed the mayor's home, sat conveniently at the edge of Main Street; and, truthfully, it was one of the only reasons I was happy about my mum's job. The farm-style house had these sage-green walls, a big white porch, a sun-dappled gable roof and a stone chimney that puffed out purple smoke in the winter. It was beautiful and, thankfully, very empty when I arrived home.

Except for Jinx.

Our black cat was lounging in his usual place: the armchair in the living room. He barely raised his head to look at me, which was expected. Jinx and I have never quite gotten along. He always preferred cuddling up to Rani or Mum over me. I wasn't jealous; the feeling was mutual. It wasn't like *I* was the one who'd begged my mother for a cat in the first place.

I slipped off my shoes and then dragged myself up the stairs to my bedroom, locking the door behind me. After Main Street had emptied and the cursed townspeople were guided to their homes under Chief Inspector Hawthorne's instruction, Raven and I spent the rest of the day helping with clean-up. Now all I wanted to do was collapse on to my bed and take a nap.

But, of course, just as I was falling asleep, I heard the door to the house open.

'Maya!' Mum called from downstairs. 'Would you please come down?'

My mother's voice was sugar-sweet, almost *too sweet*. After years of being her daughter, I was attuned to the undertone to her voice; the sharp edge that said, 'Get down here *right* now.' I heard alarm bells ringing in my head as I quickly headed downstairs; keeping Mum waiting was never a good idea.

When one looked at my mother, or me, or Rani, you'd see different versions of the same person – same light-brown colouring, same dark eyes, same heart-shaped face, same curly hair. But Rani was the grungier one, with her oversized T-shirts and purple lipstick. Mum was preppy, always dressed to the nines in an enchanted blazer that changed colours and fabrics depending on the weather.

And me? Well, I've always been a clutter. A mix of fashion choices depending on seasons and feelings. Like a scrapbook, maybe.

Or a disaster waiting to happen.

I ignored the whisper of my familiar inner voice by focusing on my mother, who looked like she'd been through an ordeal today.

What was more concerning was the presence of the Coven, standing behind my mother.

Five senior witches, some older, some younger, all stood in a huddle. Usually they all wore matching green cloaks, but someone had the closet door open and was hanging up the garments. Every magical town has their own coven; it's been Rani's wish to be a member since we were kids, but it's been *my* wish to avoid ever having to see them after I got the last point on my licence.

Obviously, not all wishes come true.

'Mum,' I said, before shooting a smile over her shoulder. 'Elders.'

The Coven didn't smile back – well, except Elder Sabrina. She wasn't really an Elder – she was probably only around thirty and had always been the most lenient when it came to my mistakes, though even she couldn't show me much sympathy for my second point.

Not that I could blame her. Finding out a then sixteen-year-old was casting a forbidden spell on herself isn't something she could just ignore. I get that. I'm reasonable, you see.

The person hanging the cloaks up finally stepped out of the closet, and my gaze slid to them.

I felt my body still, hand curling tightly around the staircase railing. When our eyes met, my heart started to beat *furiously*.

'Maya, Orion's kindly helping the Coven with our, uh, issue in town,' Mum said, gesturing to Raven's older brother like it was nothing. 'He's graduated early from MAC, with his degree in Curses and Incantations, and just got back into town. Isn't that perfect timing?'

This was the exact opposite of perfect.

I met Orion the first time I went over to my, at the time, new friend Raven's house. We were seven and had finally worn down our mothers enough to get a play-date. When I went to the Hawthornes' house, I'd met Raven's mum, Chief Inspector Hawthorne and, of course, her nine-year-old brother, Orion.

He was the most serious nine-year-old I'd ever seen.

He barely spoke, wore a perpetual frown and left all the crusts on his peanut-butter-and-jam sandwich. At first, I was sure that I would never be his friend. But, eventually, even Orion couldn't ignore the lure of a good game of hide-and-seek, or pirates and mermaids, or any one of the other games his sister and I had played in their backyard.

The three of us quickly became a little trio, and wherever Raven and I were, Orion was right behind us. That was until he'd turned fourteen and things unexpectedly changed. He stopped hanging out with us and never bothered coming down from his room when I came over. He took to ignoring us at school, falling in with a new (read: cooler) group of friends. And worst of all, developed a deeply annoying habit – snitching.

It's like he'd woken up one day and decided to become nothing more than Raven's overprotective older brother – the one we always had to dodge if we didn't want to get caught sneaking out, or back in, late. He'd become unbearable and we barely exchanged a word for years.

Until last summer.

My brief break from crushing on Silas? Yes, it was because I'd developed some weird infatuation with Orion instead. An infliction I'd been *quickly* cured from when he'd been the one to turn me into the Coven for my second licence point. Still, it was a secret I was willing to take to the grave.

'Hawthorne,' I greeted him, trying for a smile but merely ended up gritting my teeth.

'Reverie,' Orion replied, and there was a thrum of *something* in his voice. He looked the same – dressed in the dragon-scale leather jacket he got for his eighteenth birthday, a black T-shirt and worn-in blue jeans – and different all at the same time. Maybe it was his hair. Growing up, his dark waves had been a little longer, but now they looked tamed. 'Are you and my sister staying out of trouble?'

'The best we can,' I shot back glibly.

That annoying edge of Orion's mouth twitched again. I knew *that* smile was waiting to come. I hated *that* smile.

The memory of that summer and all the feelings I'd been working so hard to keep at bay for the last year came crashing back through me. I felt my hands clench around the staircase banister, and Orion's eyes glanced at the movement. But his expression didn't change.

His complete control over himself irritated me even more.

‘Darling, could you bring us some cups of tea and biscuits?’ Mum asked without even looking at me, too busy leading the dragon shifter to our living room. ‘Orion, we can talk in here.’

I watched as the Elders, Orion and my mother went to the living room, my stomach seething with anger. In the kitchen, I considered taking out the kiwi tarts from the Wishing Well Bakery, but I knew Orion was allergic and – despite wanting to hex him – casual murder in our living room likely wasn’t going to go down well with my mother.

Once everything was arranged, I carried the tray into the living room. The Elders were sitting on the sofa – four of them in a line. Mum was in her usual armchair, and Orion was sitting on the one opposite with Jinx wrapped around his forearm.

‘So, as you can see, the town is clearly cursed,’ Mum continued while I poured the tea into the cups. I kneeled by the low coffee table, preferring not to hunch awkwardly.

Elder Sabrina continued. ‘We’re not sure why it’s happened. It’s likely just a prank, which is why we’ve called you, Orion. Initially we assumed this was your typical love spell, but it appears to be a little more complicated, as we don’t know *who* cast the spell. Your father thought, with the recent completion of your degree, you’d be most adept with finding the source and untangling the curse.’

Orion hummed thoughtfully and I felt my eyes being drawn to him. Objectively speaking, Orion was good-looking. Objectively. And even though I hated him, I had eyes.

‘I agree, it probably is just a prank,’ he responded. ‘I studied the effects on Inspector Vale at my father’s office, and it seems that this spell curses people into falling in love with the first person they see. To break it, I suspect all we’ll need to do is find out who cast it and have them do the counterspell.’

I paused, still kneeling by the coffee table, as Orion’s words sunk into my mind.

Curses people into falling in love with the first person they see.

I had been alone when I’d eaten the cookies. And I hadn’t laid eyes on another soul for hours after.

No, *no*. There was no way this was my fault. I’d cast the spell exactly as instructed and falling in love had nothing to do with its purpose.

‘It also appears that Inspector Vale ingested the spell,’ Orion continued. ‘He had bought a number of enchanted goods at the sale.’

Dread sunk itself into my stomach as a singular thought blared in my mind like a morning alarm. If Orion said it was a *cookie* that caused this mess, I could no longer deny the truth: my cookies were the culprit. There was truly no other explanation.

At that moment, I knew I had to do something. I had to stop Orion from telling my mother and the Coven where the spell came from. I needed to find out first and have my hypothesis proven *right*. I needed to hear that Inspector Vale ate some enchanted – I don’t know! – mac and cheese. Anything that wasn’t a cookie.

I turned my head quickly, trying to avoid the Coven from seeing the fear that must’ve been written all over my face, but caught Orion’s gaze. His eyes narrowed in suspicion, but he didn’t stop speaking.

‘I’d say the spell was likely one of the choc– watch out!’

I knocked over the teapot, and liquid sloshed all over the table and straight on to Orion’s legs. I’m not proud of what I did, but desperate times call for desperate measures. And besides, the scalding tea was hardly going to have much effect on the heat-resistant dragon shifter.

Still, I needed to make it look like an accident. ‘I am *so* sorry,’ I said, grabbing on to his sleeve. ‘I am so clumsy – here, why don’t we get you cleaned up in the kitchen?’

Orion looked at me like I’d lost my mind – which might not have been too far from the truth.

‘No need,’ Mum said, her teeth clenched into a smile. ‘I’ll just clean this up with a little wave of my hand; there’s no need to drag Orion through the house.’

My fingers tightened on his jacket, imperceptibly, but enough for him to feel it. I’m not sure what my face looked like, but *finally* something like understanding crossed his face.

‘Actually, Madam Mayor,’ Orion said, glancing her way. ‘These trousers are dragon leather and are impervious to spells. Maya, would you mind helping me to the kitchen?’

I nodded quickly and beckoned him to follow me. ‘It’s right this way.’

As we left the living room, the murmur of the Coven filled the silence. I guided Orion to our kitchen, Jinx slipping in with us, closing the door of the kitchen before turning to face him. Orion was leaning back against the

counter; arms folded over his chest. If I thought he would be the first one to break the silence, I was wrong. He simply stared at me, one eyebrow raised, waiting for an explanation.

‘The cook – I mean the baked good, the one you think caused the curse – which one was it?’ I asked, looking at Jinx. I could feel the pressure of Orion’s gaze, but I couldn’t meet his eyes.

And then he said the one thing I really, truly, didn’t want to hear him say. ‘A chocolate-chip cookie. It was the only thing Inspector Vale ate. The enchanted doughnuts he bought were still uneaten.’

I groaned, tipping my head back and slumping against the door. I wanted to cry, scream, eat something and take a nap all at the same time. Those felt like the only rational ways to deal with this.

‘Do you know who cast the love spell over the town?’ Orion demanded, and, when I didn’t reply, he let out a breath of exasperation. ‘*Reverie*.’

I considered lying to him; making up some story that would buy me some time. But it would be useless. Once my mother, and the Coven, found out a cookie caused this mess, she’d go to Ivy. Ivy would realize that she hadn’t been the one to bake chocolate-chip cookies for the sale, and then they would all know it was me.

I’d get a third point on my licence, accident or not. The Coven was strict about witches casting forbidden spells.

And then I’d have to spend a year being magic bound.

‘It was an accident,’ I whispered, defeated. ‘I didn’t mean to curse anyone!’ I exclaimed, after his eyes widened at my admission.

‘*You* did it?’ Orion said, and I couldn’t tell if he was outraged or shocked. ‘Why?’

‘It wasn’t supposed to be a love spell, it was supposed to be a soul–’ I blustered, feeling my cheeks heat up.

I was *not* about to tell Orion the reason I cast the spell. I’d made myself look bad in front of him enough times already.

‘Fine,’ Orion replied, and his jaw tightened. ‘But we need to tell your mother –’

‘No.’

The word tore out of me and, before I knew it, I was right in front of Orion. He didn’t look intimidated by my abrupt intrusion into his space, only confused as he continued leaning back against the countertop.

‘No, you cannot tell my mother that I cast the spell,’ I demanded.

‘She *specifically* asked me to help break the curse,’ Orion retorted. ‘What would you like me to do instead?’

‘Help me,’ I said, desperately.

Orion’s eyebrow raised imperiously. Through gritted teeth, I said, ‘I cannot get another point on my licence. One more and I’m magic bound.’

Orion opened his mouth to say something, to probably remind me it was my own fault I was in this position, but I cut him off.

‘*Please*, Orion,’ I asked.

Something in his eyes gentled and, for several long moments, neither of us said anything. I wondered if he was thinking about the last time I’d asked for his help. The way I’d pleaded then, and how he’d ignored it.

‘Orion, Maya,’ Mum called. ‘Is everything OK in there?’

Orion’s head turned to the doorway, and then back to me. The soft gaze disappeared, replaced now by a look I was much more familiar with – frustration.

‘Please,’ I whispered once more.

Orion inhaled sharply and then stepped neatly around me. He went right out of the kitchen, and I trailed behind him – feeling like a deflated balloon. In the living room, the mess I’d made had been cleared, in perfect time for my *other* mess to take centre stage.

‘Apologies about that, Orion,’ Mum said, all prim and proper. ‘Do continue with telling us about your theory?’

I didn’t even look at Orion as I waited for him to do what he always did: ruin my life.

‘Actually, Madam Mayor, my theory isn’t quite complete. I’m confident that the cursed townsfolk ingested the rogue spell, but I’m not quite sure *what* it was. I’ll need to trace the origins of the curse and work my way backwards to find the caster.’

I clenched my teeth hard to stop my jaw from dropping.

‘But you’re sure that you can find the person and break the curse?’ Elder Sabrina asked, genuine concern colouring her voice.

Orion nodded assuredly, an easy smile gracing his mouth. ‘Of course. I studied this kind of curse magic for the last year, and it should be simple to reverse once I find the person responsible.’

The relief on Mum’s face was palpable. ‘Thank you, Orion. Honestly, I’m not sure how many times you can save the Reverie family, but I am grateful.’

I tried not to let my outrage show and kept my angry defence to myself. I did not say that Orion Hawthorne had never saved me. That all he'd done that summer was humiliate me.

'If that's all, Madam Mayor, Elders, I should get be getting back home,' Orion said, and Mum nodded agreeably. But rather than just walking out of the door, Orion turned to me. 'Maya, would you mind walking me out? There's something I'd like to discuss with you.'

Without a word, I followed Orion to the foyer.

When we stepped outside, the sun had set, casting Maple Falls in an inky darkness.

'Why did you –' I immediately started as soon as the door swung shut, but he shushed me with a raised finger. 'Don't shush –'

Orion pressed his palm to my front door and muttered something under his breath; his eyes flashed a brilliant silver colour, the pupil tightening to a slit. My door shimmered in a similar silver colour, and then he finally turned to me.

'Silencing charm,' Orion explained, without a hint of arrogance in his voice. Like he hadn't just warded an ordinary door with a press of his hand. The display of his magic made something stir inside me. Dragons were more proficient in charms than any other creatures, but even Raven's magic wasn't as effortless as this. In the face of Orion's talent, my mishap with the soulmate spell felt like I was a child who'd scrawled on the white walls with crayons.

'Why didn't you tell my mother and the Coven that I was the one who cast the spell?' I said, ignoring the feeling of envy stabbing at me.

Orion's eyes squinted in amusement. 'I would have thought it was quite self-explanatory, Reverie. I want to help you break the spell, without your mother knowing.'

'Good,' I said, relief and shock flooding through me. 'Good, so we can start –'

'But I won't do it for free,' Orion cut in, and this time, his mouth curved upwards in a way that could only be described as *wicked*.

'What do you want?' I asked, suspicious. I couldn't think of a single thing he'd need my help with.

He stepped closer, I felt his warmth seep into me and suddenly, I was completely unable to move.

Orion ducked his head, so our gazes collided, and when he spoke there was no missing the amusement in his voice. ‘All I want is for you to bake for me.’

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CHAPTER FOUR

Raven's house was arguably my favourite place in Maple Falls. Made out of dark-brown bricks, the double-fronted home looked like a giant, decadent chocolate cake. The two front gardens were fresh with bright emerald-green grass, bordered by blooming baby-pink tulips. The stone walk led to steps up to the house, and by the porch there was a tall street lamp that looked like it was plucked out of another time.

I knocked on the door, and moments later it swung open.

I was greeted by Mrs Hawthorne, who was wearing a red-lipped smile, an ankle-grazing sundress with billowy sleeves and patterned with red roses, and a wide-brimmed hat. She had gardening gloves on, and she smelled amazing. She always smelled *amazing*.

'Maya, darling,' Mrs Hawthrone said, jovially. 'Come in, come in. It's too cold to be standing in the doorway like that.'

As I stepped in, I was enveloped by warmth, so much so that I shucked off my cardigan and draped it over my arm. Moments later, footsteps thundered, and I saw Chief Inspector Hawthorne – clad in his uniform – coming down the winding staircase. He looked like Orion, but older, with salt-and-pepper hair, and years of training that showed in his broad shoulders. His eyes were all Raven's though. I used to find it strange, having a father in the house. Mine had passed away when I was a baby. It'd always just been me, Rani and my mother. Raven's dad had been the closest thing to a father figure I'd ever had.

'Maya,' Chief Inspector Hawthorne boomed. 'It's been *too* long since you were last here.'

I nodded sagely, a smile twitching at the corner of my mouth. 'Less than twenty-four hours.'

He grinned and slung an arm around my shoulders to give me a little squeeze. 'Like I said, too long, kiddo.'

‘I should just move in,’ I replied.

‘You should,’ Mrs Hawthorne said, as her husband came around to press a kiss on her forehead. ‘When Raven’s gone, this house will just be too quiet.’

My heart squeezed painfully. Though I’m sure the Hawthornes would let me come over whenever I wanted, the truth was, once Raven left, I didn’t have a reason to be here any more.

‘Speaking of Raven,’ Mrs Hawthorne said, ‘she’s still asleep. But you know the way, so I’ll let you get her up.’

I nodded once, before making my way to Raven’s bedroom – up the stairs and past Orion’s bedroom. I didn’t knock as I entered, I just stepped in and found her sprawled on her bed. Her walls were adorned with newspaper clippings of her father’s cases and pictures of us, and her side table was littered with coffee cups.

She looked so utterly peaceful. I only felt a little guilty for kicking her bed with all my strength. She yelped, her control over her dragon form slipping so her horns popped out of the tangled mess that was her hair. It took her a moment to register my presence, but once she did, the shock was replaced with annoyance.

‘You sleep like the dead,’ I said, as an excuse. ‘This was the only way to wake you.’

‘You will be dead,’ Raven replied, burying her face back into her pillow. ‘Once I muster up the strength to actually do something.’

‘You know who should be threatened with death? Your brother,’ I said, sweetly, and her head popped back up.

‘Orion?’

‘Yeah, Hawthorne,’ I said, irritated just at the sound of his name alone.

‘How could he already be getting under your skin?’ She yawned. ‘He literally arrived yesterday.’

‘Well, he found time to visit my house last night.’

Raven sat fully upright. ‘Why would Orion visit *you*?’

I considered, briefly, not telling her. But the guilt was eating me alive.

‘You were right; I caused the curse on the town,’ I confessed, keeping my eyes trained on the point above her shoulder.

‘What?’ Raven gasped. She shifted in the bed, patting the space next to her for me to sit. ‘Come here. Tell me everything.’

I crawled on to the bed and told her everything that happened since we'd split up the day before.

'And then, Orion told me I had to bake for him. But I couldn't really get him to elaborate further because my mum came outside and he had to go.' I fiddled with the blanket before groaning. 'I can't believe I actually cursed the town.'

'Technically, you didn't curse the town. Just a few people.' I levelled her with an unimpressed look. 'You know you didn't do this intentionally, right? No one will hold it against you.' Raven's tone was matter of fact, not a shadow of doubt present. I loved her for it – for the way she could see what was bothering me and trying to fix it.

But I couldn't agree. 'Just because I didn't intend to curse the town, doesn't mean it didn't cause a mess,' I replied, my throat tight with the urge to cry.

Raven bumped her shoulder with mine. 'So, how are you going to tell your mum about this?'

'I'm not.' I could see the caution in her face and jumped in before she could. 'I can't, Raven, OK? If I tell her, she'll have to report me to the Coven, and you know what that means.'

Raven sighed, a heavy sound, and then added, 'Hence why you need Orion's help.'

I nodded miserably. 'I'm going to have to do whatever he asks to keep him on side. I don't even know what *bake for me* means – what if it's some sick power play?'

Raven paused, clearly remembering all the ways her brother had driven us insane over the years. 'It could be.'

'Annoying, sadistic and out to ruin my life.' I ticked off all the things I hated about Orion Hawthorne.

'Wow, I think my horns are burning.'

Our attention snapped to the doorway, where we found the man in question leaning against the frame. He was wearing washed-out blue jeans and a white tee layered with a mint-green sweater; his dark hair was all perfectly mussed, and two black horns peeked out from the strands. He looked so utterly put together – my annoyance at him went from simmering to full-blown.

'You.' My best friend pointed accusingly at her brother. 'Why are you trying to get Maya to bake for you in exchange for your help breaking the

curse? Is this some sick game?'

Orion snorted, arms folding over his chest. 'Yes, because *this* is my idea of fun.'

Raven narrowed her gaze. 'Orion.'

It hit me, that for the first time in a while, the three of us were together again. Orion had left our trio long ago and when he and I had … well … that was to say Raven had been away *that* summer. Something in my chest ached with the nostalgia, something that I quickly snuffed out.

'Fine,' he sighed, and then flicked his eyes to mine. 'Look, Reverie, I don't want you to bake for me. I want you to bake for the Treasure Trove.'

'And what exactly is the Treasure Trove?' I asked, confused.

'It used to be a laundromat – you remember Washeteria don't you?' Orion said, tipping his head to one side. 'Well, my friend inherited it. After her parents died. Her parents' dream was to open a bakery, but they never got the chance. So, my friend did it. Except she can't bake to save her life, and she needs help. *Your* help.'

'You have friends?' I asked, unable to stop the remark from slipping out.

Orion's smile turned razor-sharp. 'Melodie is someone I consider a *great* friend.'

I felt my jaw tense, and my traitorous heart clenched.

'Melodie's nice,' Raven chimed in, unknowingly making my teeth clench further. 'And I'd heard about her opening the Treasure Trove. Didn't realize it was failing.'

Orion broke his gaze from mine, and his mouth twisted sympathetically. 'Yeah, it's been pretty bad. Melodie's not great at asking for help either, and she can't afford to hire anyone right now. I can't imagine a kitchen witch agreeing to help without any pay.'

'So, you're going to blackmail one into helping,' I cut in sharply, but Orion didn't look the least bit repentant. 'Smart thinking, except for the fact that I already have a job. When exactly do you expect me to help with the Treasure Trove?'

'You'll have to take a break from the Wishing Well,' Orion said slowly, like it was obvious.

I gawked at him. 'You want me to leave my job – where I'm trying to get an apprenticeship – to come work at the Treasure Trove?'

'Just tell your boss that you're taking some time to focus on your spellcasting – which is technically the truth. And don't worry, we won't tell

anyone it's you who's helping in the back. Ivy will never know that you're working at another bakery.'

'Maya could get into major trouble for quitting the Wishing Well – even temporarily – to work at the Treasure Trove.' Raven voiced my worries perfectly.

'She could *also* get in trouble if someone finds out she cast the curse,' Orion reminded us. 'What's worse, having your magic bound or losing your potential apprenticeship? I'd point out that having your licence suspended would probably lose you your apprenticeship anyway.'

I hated how he was always right. 'And you actually know how to break the curse?' I asked, resigned to my fate.

'I spent all night thinking about it,' Orion pushed off the door frame to come stand at the foot of Raven's bed. 'The spell you accidentally cast is a love spell, yes, but it wasn't what you intended, was it?'

Raven and I shared a glance. I took a breath before deciding to tell Orion the truth.

'No, it wasn't my intention. I was trying to cast –' the words stuck in my throat, but I forced them out – 'a soulmate spell.'

Orion blinked. Once. Twice. And then a frown caused his mouth to curl. 'Why are you looking for your soulmate?'

'That – that doesn't matter,' I said, my cheeks going hot.

Orion scoffed. 'Actually, it does matter. To break this curse, you're going to need to meet the requirements of *both* spells, meaning you'll have to find your soulmate *and* share true love's kiss under the autumn moon.'

'*What?*' I screeched, lurching forward.

He continued, unperturbed by my outburst. 'Everyone knows that spells are stronger under moonlight, and the full moon will be brightest during the night of the Fallen Leaves Festival.'

I stared at Orion like he'd spontaneously grown a third horn.

'You'll cast the first part of the counterspell, which will reveal your soulmate,' Orion added, his expression tightening. 'Then you'll just have to kiss them.' He paused, a brief look of pain flashing over his face before smoothing out into disinterest.

'But – but – but –' I spluttered, unsure of where to start.

'Maya,' Raven cut in, softly. 'Maybe this is a good thing, you know. This was your original plan, remember. Maybe this could be a chance for you to confess your feelings to him.'

I thought I was going to be sick. There it was: that feeling of wanting to projectile vomit crawling right up my throat. Graphic, I know, but the thought of telling Silas Moon about my feelings was nausea inducing.

'Well, sounds like you've already got this figured out.' Was it me or was steam wafting from the top of Orion's head? 'This would be the perfect time to confess your feelings to whatever poor soul you're enamoured with.'

And just like that, the familiar urge to transfigure Orion Hawthorne into a toad was back.

'You don't even know *who* we're talking about,' I hissed. 'All I wanted to do was reveal that I had a soulmate, find them, and be with them. I – I –'

'And what, you thought you'd *never* have to actually share your feelings with them?' Orion asked haughtily, and this time, I did chuck a pillow at his face. He caught it deftly and held it against his chest like a shield. 'You do know how to talk about your feelings, right?'

'OK, OK,' Raven put up both her hands between us. 'Fine, look, Maya. This isn't ideal but Orion is right.'

I gasped, loudly, falling back against the headboard with the weight of her betrayal.

'I know, I know. Treasonous,' Raven teased lightly. 'But he is the only one who can help you. Plus, this *is* the perfect opportunity you need to finally tell –' She side-eyed Orion who rolled his eyes. 'You know who, about your feelings. Maybe, while Orion is teaching you the *proper* soulmate spell, you could start, you know, making yourself more visible to him. That way, on the night, this won't be some big, insane revelation. Then you two can ride off into the moonlight together, with the town curse-free and your licence point-less.'

I bit my lip. She was right. So was Orion.

'And you won't be alone while you do all of this,' Raven said, reading my face plain and simple. She reached out and squeezed my arm. 'We'll be here to help. Right, Orion?'

I glanced at the dragon shifter, who nodded. 'As long as Reverie helps me, I'll help her. With whatever she needs.'

'You're right,' I said, and nodded, not feeling quite confident in the whole thing yet but feeling less like my life was ending. 'I can fix this whole situation before anyone finds out.'

‘Exactly. Now there’s the witch I know and love,’ Raven said, rubbing her shoulders against mine. ‘So, what’s step one?’

‘Step one,’ Orion interjected, before I could say anything else, ‘is teaching Maya how to cast the counterspell in time for the autumn moon.’

‘And I suppose you’ll be the one teaching her,’ Raven said, and there was steel in her voice now. ‘Do you think you two can actually get along long enough to do so? I’m not going to be able to chaperone you – I’ve got a ton of MAC application work to do.’

Nerves twisted in my stomach at the thought of being alone in close quarters with Orion, but he spoke first, nonchalance coating his every word.

‘We’re all grown here,’ Orion scoffed. ‘I’m pretty sure, for the sake of the town, Reverie’s licence and Melodie’s bakery, we can put aside our differences.’

He didn’t say it, but I heard it.

We’ve done this before.

‘Exactly,’ I said, hoping I didn’t sound as panicked as I felt inside. ‘We can work together.’

Raven looked doubtfully between the two of us. ‘If you say so. Now, *I’m* going to grab breakfast at Charmed & Toasty.’

‘Reverie and I will be at the library for our first lesson,’ Orion replied, his gaze sliding to me. I could feel my heart thumping harder in my chest. ‘Does that work for you?’

‘I have a shift at the Wishing Well at twelve,’ I told him, trying to keep my tone levelled. ‘Think you can make the introductory class fit into one hour?’

I wouldn’t admit it, but his smile sent butterflies aflutter in my stomach. ‘For you, Reverie, anything’s possible.’

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CHAPTER FIVE

Last year – June

As a student, you spend all your waking days waiting for the moment summer arrives and you're finally free. But when I'd said goodbye to Raven, who was spending the holidays with her grandparents in Rose Glenn – another magical town like ours – it hit me just how bleak the next two months were going to be. Still, she'd left me with some sage advice: your summer is only going to suck if you let it. So, don't let it suck.

That's why I dragged myself to the first party of the summer. I'd gone with the intention of having a good time, hanging out with a few of my classmates and maybe – just maybe – getting closer to Silas. In my wildest fantasy, I even talked to Silas without completely embarrassing myself.

I just needed to find him.

'Maya, are you looking for someone?' Holly, a pixie with bright-purple eyes, asked.

'Huh?' I said, my head turning back to her. 'Uh – no – just – looking around to see who's here. Seems like a few people are missing.'

'Oh.' Holly stretched out her hand and levitated over a glass of punch. 'Yeah, I think as soon as school broke up, some folks launched straight into their vacation plans. Obviously, Raven isn't here. I think Celine in the year above us is also out of town. And Silas!'

'Silas?' I asked, trying to not to sound too interested.

'Yeah,' Holly said, off-handedly. 'I saw the whole Moon pack heading to leave through the clock tower on my way here.'

'Oh,' I said, hope deflating inside of me. 'That's nice.'

'Holly!' a voice called from the crowd of people who were now sitting cross-legged on the sand a little away from us. 'Come on, we're playing

Truth or Spell!’

Holly shouted something back before turning to me. ‘You coming, Maya?’

There was no way I was going to go over and play Truth or Spell. The game was riddled with enchantments and there were too many possibilities of something going catastrophically wrong.

‘I’m good,’ I said, and then lifted a shoulder. ‘I think I’m going to just take a walk along the beach.’

That’s how I found myself walking along the water’s edge, the sky darkened by night, the party getting smaller and smaller behind me. When I felt I was far away enough, I sat down in the sand, fingers digging for golden shells. That was the charm of Golden Shell Beach; buried between the grains of the vibrant purple sand were shells that, when you pressed them against your ear, relayed sounds from different parts of the ocean. You could catch the most entertaining conversations between mermaids and mermen; Raven and I used to spend our summers collecting our favourite ones.

‘You’re in my spot.’

I jolted slightly, knees still tucked up to my chest, and turned my head to find Orion Hawthorne looking down at me.

I rolled my eyes, turning back to glare at the water in front of me. ‘I’m not in the mood, Hawthorne.’

I expected him to walk away, but of course, nothing seemed to be going my way that day. Instead, he plopped down beside me, long legs stretching out, leaning back on his elbows. I scrunched myself up tighter, resting my chin on my knees. I knew I looked pitiful, but I couldn’t bring myself to care.

‘Come on, Reverie, Raven will be back before you know it,’ Orion remarked, quietly.

‘Shouldn’t you be at the party?’ I asked, annoyed that he’d read me so well. ‘It’s your last summer before MAC; every party this summer will be a celebration for you, no?’

Orion snorted, the sound so sharp it forced me to look at him.

‘As if there’s anything to celebrate,’ he grumbled, a muscle in his jaw jumping.

‘I’m not going to stroke your ego and tell you how smart you are for getting into MAC,’ I warned him.

‘Good, I don’t want to hear about MAC at all, actually,’ Orion retorted.

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‘You know, Hawthorne, you almost sound like you don’t want to go,’ I said, looking at him more closely.

He looked right back, eyebrow raised. Replacing the usual irritation was a spark of amusement in his eyes. ‘Asking for me to confide in you, Reverie?’

‘It would put me out of my bad mood,’ I offered, leadingly. ‘Which would be a great, noble service worthy of a dragon.’

He tipped his head back to huff out a laugh, and I felt my own smile curling at my mouth.

‘Sorry,’ Orion said. ‘But my secrets are mine.’

‘For now,’ I taunted, and he rolled his eyes. I turned my attention away from him to the party that was a smudge behind us. I wasn’t going back, I knew that much. The only other place was to return home now. A thought that didn’t bring me much joy. Mum would still be at the office and Rani wasn’t due back from MAC for another week. It would just be me and Jinx. But, an empty house and, more importantly, a kitchen I could bake something in, was better than sitting on the beach depressing myself.

I sighed and then stood, gazing down at Orion.

‘All right, Hawthorne. As fun as this little conversation was, I should be getting back.’

‘How are you getting home?’

‘Bike.’

‘You’re going to cycle back this late?’ Orion asked, with something dangerously close to concern in his voice.

I laughed. ‘It’s Maple Falls – what’s the worst that could happen?’

‘You are way too reckless, Maya,’ Orion said and pushed himself up. A soft shiver ran down my spine at the sound of my name on his lips. ‘I’m

dropping you off. Put your bike in my trunk.'

'Do I get a say in this?' I asked, eyebrow raised.

Orion sighed. 'You could argue, but I don't think it'll do you much good.'

'I'm pretty sure this counts as kidnapping. You were right, I should be afraid of being alone at night,' I pointed out, sarcastically, trying to hide how shy I suddenly felt. Since when did Orion and I tease each other? 'Fine, lead the way.'

That's how I found myself, on the first day of summer, riding in the front seat of my best friend's brother's car. I thought the journey would be filled with the inevitable silence that came from two people who had drifted apart since childhood. But surprisingly, it wasn't.

The dragon shifter asked about my classes, the Wishing Well, my summer plans; he asked questions like he actually wanted to hear my answers, and I didn't hate the attention.

'Thanks for the ride, Hawthorne,' I said, once we reached my house and stepped outside the car. He had the window rolled down, so I bent down a little to smile at him.

'Anytime, Reverie,' Orion said, as he leaned forward. 'Seriously, if you need a lift anywhere this summer, just give me a call. I'll come and get you.'

Something warm flared in my chest.

'So, you're offering to be my getaway car?' A smile tugged at the corners of my mouth.

His eyes narrowed but there was no heat in them. 'Don't go looking for trouble, Reverie.'

I laughed as I turned around and unlocked my front door.

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CHAPTER SIX

The building that stood before Orion and me was made out of midnight-blue bricks, with gold lettering that spelled THE WANDERING WORDS LIBRARY. The doorway was arched and a pale-purple colour – it was an entirely beautiful mystical building and usually one of my favourite places to be. Normally, though, I wasn't trudging up its steps with a know-it-all dragon shifter at my back.

As Orion and I passed by the foyer, my head tilted upwards to scan the ceiling that was held up by dark wooden beams. Lamps lit by eternal dragon-fire hung down, like a million tiny stars.

'Hey, Maya.'

I turned my head to the right to see a guy manning the front desk of the library.

Rowan Hale.

Every town has a bad boy. It's like a must-have. And Rowan was Maple Falls' resident troublemaker. He's a werewolf, the same age as my sister, and part of the long lineage of caretakers for the library. His grandfather had been looking after the library for most of our lives, and everyone knew he had expected Rowan to take over once he graduated. But no, our town bad boy stayed exactly where he was – manning the library desk, part-time, and spending the rest of the time terrorizing the town with his enchanted motorcycle, throwing wild parties late into the night and graffitiing different buildings. If there's a hint of trouble in Maple Falls, you'd likely find Rowan right at the centre of it.

But, today, Rowan looked like he wasn't trying to stir up any trouble. He was resting on his forearms, holding a worn-out paperback in one hand, wearing a light-grey T-shirt, dark-blue jeans and several multi-coloured thread bracelets around one wrist. His face was all sharp angles, with a

perpetual pouty mouth and eyes that were the same shade as dark-chocolate brownies.

'Hi, Rowan,' I replied as we approached the front desk to scan our library cards. Orion swiped first, giving Rowan a brief nod, before turning away and walking down the shelves. I felt a flash of irritation that he'd just *expect* me to follow him. With a huff, I scanned my card, but before I could head off in the same direction, Rowan's voice stopped me.

'Maya.' I paused, looking over my shoulder. 'Tell your sister I said hi, would you?' Rowan said, with a lazy grin on his mouth – the kind that spelled trouble.

I waited for him to elaborate, to explain why my older sister, perfectionist-to-her-core, mum-friend extraordinaire and all-round stellar witch, would be hanging out with the likes of him. But Rowan didn't say anything else, so I tucked away this interaction to examine later. Rani was going to have to explain *a lot* on our next phone call.

I found Orion in the cookbook section, sat at a round table. As I took a seat opposite him, he pulled out a whiteboard and some pens from his backpack and wrote down a spell.

Amore transfige et cor meum liga, Cupido, quaeso, figam tuam reperi.

The spell I cast that got us here.

Orion leaned back in his chair, and I couldn't help but notice that he had his sleeves pushed up. I felt my eyes tracing over his forearms and dropping away just as quickly before he could notice.

Get a grip, they're just arms. Lots of people have them!

'Recite the spell you cast on the cookies,' Orion commanded, unaware of my brief lapse in sanity.

The curtness of his tone made me bristle. 'Are we role-playing your fantasy of being a dictator?' I snapped, feeling a flush rise under my skin.

'Bold of you to think you know my fantasies, Reverie,' Orion retorted, a smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth.

The flush rose higher to my cheeks.

His grin widened at my lack of response. 'Now, can you please recite the spell you cast on the cookies.'

'I didn't say the spell in Latin. I translated it – so that night, I said "*To pierce with love and bind my heart, Cupido please land your mark.*"' I recited the translation perfectly. I would likely never forget the spell that had created this whole mess.

‘That’s where you went wrong – the translation is incorrect. The right translation is: “*To pierce with love and bind my heart, Cupido please* find *your mark.*”’ And then with perfect pronunciation, he added the Latin version. ‘*Amore transfige et cor meum liga, Cupido, quaeso, figam tuam reperi.*’

‘*Find your mark*,’ I echoed, and it clicked in my head once I said it aloud. ‘Like finding your soulmate.’

‘Exactly. It’s a minor thing, but Latin spells are finicky like that,’ Orion said with a self-satisfied note in his voice.

I slumped back in my chair as disbelief took hold of me. One word. One word and I wouldn’t be in this mess right now.

A disaster waiting to happen.

Was that all I was? Was that all I was ever going to be – one step away from getting it right but always getting it wrong instead?

‘To counter the spell you’ve cast, you’ll just have to cast the correct spell under the autumn moon, find your soulmate and share a kiss,’ Orion continued, briskly. This time, there was no sign of any emotion on his face. He just sounded like his usual self – irritated to be dealing with this.

‘Right. Easy,’ I muttered, feeling a headache coming on.

I heard Orion’s slight intake of breath before he spoke again. ‘I know spellcasting isn’t *easy* for you per se, so I was thinking – every lesson we have will focus on a skill that will make casting the counterspell easier.’ His tone was gruff, but it was clear he was trying to be gentle with me.

‘You don’t have to talk to me like I’m an idiot,’ I retorted, feeling that fist of embarrassment close around my chest again. Sure, I knew I wasn’t much good at spellcasting, but the last thing I needed was an assessment on my abilities.

Orion’s head tilted to one side as he observed me. ‘I never said you were. But we need to make sure you can cast the spell perfectly when the time comes.’

‘Right,’ I said, jaw clenched at his logic. Was there ever a time when he wasn’t so *infuriatingly* practical and pragmatic. ‘Good thing I’ve been a witch for my entire life. What should we start with?’

It was stupid. I knew it was stupid. I should’ve just said I needed the help, that I wasn’t as confident as I was trying to make myself sound. But that would mean admitting a weakness to Orion, and I couldn’t stand doing that.

He stood and pulled off one of the cookbooks from the shelf. ‘This spell requires calling your soulmate to you. So, let’s go back and practise some basic summoning spells. Like this – cast a spell on this book and get it to move from my hands to yours.’

I tried to calm my nerves. Over the years, I’d had teachers give me all sorts of advice. Breathe in deeply before casting, envision a calming river meandering through your body, think of your magic like honey pouring out of a jar. But my magic has always felt like a buzz of energy under my skin; warmth flooding within me. It never felt controllable or contained. It felt like it was *everywhere*.

‘*Paper and ink, don’t dawdle,*’ I began, and my magic erupted beneath my skin like goosebumps. I kept my gaze sharp on the book – trying to focus my magic on it worked for a moment – but then I felt myself drift. I thought I could feel the press of eyes watching me, judging me, and then I couldn’t stop thinking about how all of this could go wrong. My thoughts had slipped so far that I barely heard myself finish the spell. ‘*Come to me at full throttle*.’

The book in Orion’s hand didn’t shift. But the book *behind* his head did. Quite violently. The corner of the hardback clipped the dragon shifter on the back of his head before thudding on to the table right in front of me. I launched out of my seat without thinking, reaching for him.

‘I’m so sorry,’ I said, rubbing the back of his head. His hair was soft, the curls filling the spaces between my fingers.

‘I’m fine,’ Orion said softly, glancing down at me.

It took me a moment to register what I was doing. I dropped my hand like it was burning, and my cheeks were flushed a bright red.

I braced myself, waiting for him to lose it at me – to yell at my total lack of control over my magic.

‘So, at what point did you stop thinking about the spell?’ Orion asked simply, and my gaze lifted from the floor to meet his.

I stared at him, swallowing tightly. ‘How did you know that?’

He looked at me like it was obvious. ‘I saw it in your eyes – one minute you were completely focused, and then you got this faraway look in your eyes. So, what was it that distracted you?’

I was silenced by his easy analysis.

‘Were you thinking about this guy you claim is your soulmate?’ Orion asked, eyebrow raised and a new sharpness in his tone that made me feel

like I'd done something wrong. There was the Orion I knew so well.

My cheeks went hot. 'No, it's just – I – well – I didn't think you were watching me so closely.'

His gaze narrowed. 'Did you think I wasn't going to take this seriously, Reverie? It's my responsibility to help you fix this curse. So, if you weren't daydreaming, what was it?'

'I don't know. I just started getting overwhelmed,' I said, deciding to be truthful. 'All I could think about was everything that could go wrong.'

Orion hummed thoughtfully and moved to take the seat opposite me again, drumming his fingers on the table. On the top side of his palm, silver dragon scales erupted and fell with the motion. The sight of him bringing his dragon side forward so effortlessly made me inexplicably warm. His control was … impressive.

'All right, let's try something,' he said suddenly, and raised a hand. '*Cast a spell all around, a bubble of quiet and no sound*.'

It happened like a lightning bolt in the sky; one moment, I could hear every creak, every whistle, every whisper of the library, and then I couldn't. The world around me turned to a hush, and, when I looked around, everything in my line of sight was blurred. The only thing in focus was Orion.

'Cast the spell again,' Orion said, sliding the cookbook back towards himself. He held it to his chest. 'And this time, remember, there's no one watching you. No one listening. They can't. I've made sure of that.'

It was easier this time, I'll admit. Orion had silenced the world around me, and that took away part of what had shifted my focus. But he couldn't quieten the voice in my head – the one that kept showing, in bright detail, all the ways I was bound to mess this spell up too.

Still, after the third attempt, the book had slid from Orion's grasp halfway across the table. It was an improvement.

'Well, Reverie, I think you should start thanking me now,' he began, leaning across the table to grab the book. 'Told you I could crack your spellcasting issue.'

'It only got halfway,' I pointed out to him.

'Which is closer than it got the time before,' he replied simply. 'You're going to be able to cast the soulmate spell by the end of next month. And until then, every lesson will be about strengthening your spellcasting.

Summoning first, protection next, healing for a final touch and then the actual soulmate spell.'

'Sounds fun,' I muttered.

'Reverie,' Orion said, firmly. 'I wouldn't have agreed to help if I didn't think you were capable. If I thought this would only lead to the town suffering for longer, I wouldn't have thought twice about telling your mother. So, if you can't trust yourself to be ready, trust that I wouldn't risk all of this if I didn't believe in you.'

I didn't say anything. I couldn't say anything. His confidence had floored me.

'Now, let's map out the rest of our lessons,' Orion said, pulling out a sheet of lined paper from his notebook. 'You're asking for a little break from the Wishing Well, yes?'

'Temporarily,' I remind him. 'I'll tell Ivy about it when I go in for my shift today.'

'Right, and when do you usually have these shifts?'

'After school normally,' I reply. 'And on weekends if Ivy's strapped for help.'

'Good,' Orion says, noting that down. 'We'll structure it like this: after school, we do spellcasting lessons. Twice a week, you have a shift at the Treasure Trove – where maybe some of our spellcasting lessons can be of help. Two birds, one stone.'

'I hate that saying,' I told him, off-handedly. 'Why are people hitting birds anyway?'

'Fine,' Orion retorted. 'Two *witches*, one stone.'

'You think a stone could take down a witch?' I scoffed, arms folding over my chest.

'A hex that glues your mouth shut could take *you* down,' Orion mused. 'Could you imagine? You'd go mad without the ability to talk.'

'Bold words coming from the guy who said he loved to hear me talk.'

As soon as the words left my mouth, I wanted to snatch them back. I watched Orion as he breathed in sharply, but thankfully, I wouldn't have to hear his response to my clumsy reminder of the past, because the bubble of quiet around us shattered and I looked round to see Raven standing at our table.

'You two both unscathed?' she asked, in lieu of a hello.

I didn’t look at Orion, too afraid of what I’d find looking back at me. Instead, I tried for nonchalance. ‘He might have a mild concussion. I hit him with a book.’

‘He’s got a thick head,’ Raven retorted, quick as ever. ‘He’ll survive.’

‘*He* will be going now,’ Orion said, pointedly. Part of me was relieved to hear his usual gruff tone, with no hidden undercurrents. ‘That’s enough spellcasting for the day. I’m going to head over to the Treasure Trove, let Melodie know about our …’ He cast a look around the library. In a town this small, someone could always be listening. ‘You know.’

‘We know,’ Raven and I chorused.

Orion packed up his things – whiteboard, pens – and slid the cookbook back into place. Before leaving, he hesitated by the table. I watched as his mind sorted through the things he wanted to say before he settled on, ‘I’ll let you know when you should come to the Treasure Trove.’

I raised an eyebrow. ‘I await your summons, blackmailer.’

He smiled then, that half-tug of his mouth, and my heart twisted a little. I watched him as he left, eyes tracking his movements. And it wasn’t until he was gone that Raven turned to me.

‘So, are we going to talk about it?’ Raven asked, and my body was hit with a sudden shot of adrenaline. Had she somehow heard our conversation?

‘You know, Silas Moon and how you’re going to win him over? Because, like I said when this all started, if you just show up one day and say he’s your soulmate because of a spell, I can assure you, he will freak out.’ She steamrolled onwards, not really needing me to agree. ‘But, maybe if you two had some sort of established relationship *before* you cast the spell, it would be better.’

‘I take it you have a plan?’ I asked, almost dreading to hear it.

Raven’s smile mirrored her brother’s, but just a little sharper. ‘Yeah, I have a plan. One that involves Silas Moon properly noticing you. Come on, I’ll walk you to your shift and tell you *all* about it.’

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Raven's plan for me to speak to Silas hinged on one thing:

Pie.

Not exactly a pie, mind you. A cherry rose pie *bar*.

The bars are made with enchanted cherries and rose water that can turn your entire outlook on the world, well, *rosy* for lack of a better word. They shape your focus so that you're looking on the brighter side of things.

The plan was simple, according to Raven – who gave me an in-depth run through before dropping me off to work – I'd muster the courage to approach Silas during his closing shift at the Maple Mart today, and I'd offer him a bar, saying it was left over from today's stock. He'd eat it, and then he would look at *me* from behind those rose-coloured lenses. And maybe it would make all the other times I stumbled in front of him look endearing. Maybe it would make speaking to him easier.

Was I sure it would work? No. But I had no better ideas of my own.

Armed with a plan, I went straight to the Wishing Well kitchens – with Ivy's approval on the bake – and got to work. Time slipped past me as I worked on the enchanted bars, and once I'd popped them in the oven I went to go help Ivy out at the front. But as I approached the kitchen door, I heard the low murmuring of voices.

I recognized my mum's voice. Not a total oddity. She and Ivy had gone to school together and have always been pretty close.

'Frost, Inspector Vale, Diya Jaan, Louise Mellow, Luna Star and Serene Pearl,' Mum recited, sounding exhausted. 'They careen between writing sonnets, crying and calling out for their supposed beloveds.'

Ivy winced. 'Yeah, I've been getting a lot of text poetry from Vale. Some of it's not awful, if that's any consolation.'

Mum groaned, pressing her face into her palms. 'I'm up to my ears in phone calls and complaints. People are demanding that the curse be broken

faster. I have to keep giving everyone the same line: “I’ve got a curse breaker working on it.” How much more can I give?’

My heart ached in my chest, the guilt gnawing in my stomach; I didn’t really think about how much stress Mum must be under with six people in the town cursed by a love spell. And I can’t even imagine how the cursed must be feeling themselves; how exhausting it would be to be yearning for someone who might not love you back.

‘You’re doing your best,’ Ivy soothed, and I watched as she wrapped up a date-and-peanut-butter energy ball for Mum in a paper bag. ‘That’s all anyone can ask of you. Nothing more.’

Mum smiled at Ivy, still tired but a little softened. ‘Thanks, Ivy. But aside from talking your ear off, I did come here for a reason.’

‘I’m assuming it’s about Maya?’ Ivy asked, and I felt myself still against the door.

‘It is,’ Mum agreed, and then sighed. ‘I just want to check what her chances of getting the apprenticeship actually are. I know she’s good at culinary magic, but her spellcasting otherwise is pretty weak.’

I felt warmth build in my cheeks.

Pretty weak.

‘Maya’s great,’ Ivy said, gently. ‘Yes, her spellcasting out of the kitchen isn’t as strong, but she’s a stellar kitchen witch. *I* trust her with my kitchen and spellcasting in there. As long as she doesn’t betray that trust, she’s the best candidate I’m observing for my apprenticeship.’ Then she added, with a little laugh, ‘And if she makes sure she doesn’t suggest any more wild bakes. Did I tell you about the moonlit blueberry muffins she pitched me?’

My cheeks warmed at the memory of when I told Ivy about my idea: a batch of wild-blueberry muffins, mixed in with charmed moon-silver flower petals. The idea had been unfurling in my mind, ever since I saw Silas walk into potions class looking haggard from his last shifting under the full moon. I overheard him talking with friends, saying that he loved the wild, free sensation of his werewolf side, but he always awoke feeling like his entire body had been rung out. The moonlit blueberry muffins would be enchanted to cleanse the body of aches, pains and a clouded head that came from being under the lunar moon. The spell came from one of the grimoires of the library, a testy little book that almost snapped my finger off.

Ivy had gently brushed the idea off, saying it was too risky to try in her little bakery of joy. I tried not to feel hurt by the dismissal, reminding

myself that I wasn't even Ivy's apprentice – yet.

'Thanks, Ivy,' Mum said, gratefully. 'I just want her to be safe and happy. She doesn't need to worry herself with the kinds of complex spells Rani does, or even the ones I have to do.'

Her words should have warmed me, but all I could hear was my mother wanting me to be a witch who only did basic spells, or kitchen magic – spells that only existed in the confines of a dessert – always under the supervision of Ivy. I wanted, desperately, to prove her wrong. If she ever found out that I was the cause of the rogue love spell, everything she believed about me would be confirmed.

I stopped listening and stepped back from the door, mind racing.

I needed to end this curse, but I also needed my apprenticeship at the end of the academic year. Ivy said I had the apprenticeship as long as she still trusted me; what would she do if she found out I took a sabbatical from my part-time position to go work for another bakery – no matter how badly it was doing?

I wanted to break down at the thought of trying to juggle it all, but I couldn't. I'd break the curse, help Orion's friend, never let Ivy or my mother find out, get the apprenticeship *and* find my soulmate, aka Silas.

I had to, because the alternative was too scary to even consider.

With renewed determination, I stepped on to the shop floor. I found Ivy dealing with a couple of customers, before the shop emptied out; the lull of the afternoon shift coming to a close.

'Hey, Ivy?' I asked, as I approached her. 'Do you have a minute?'

She gave me a bright smile that made the guilt in my stomach intensify. 'Sure, what's up?'

'I was wondering if we could talk about my shifts.'

The Maple Mart is usually busy in the evenings – either with parents who have picked up their kids from school or people off work who are doing their grocery shop. But, like Raven said, it was likely the only moment I would get to speak to Silas without one of his friends around him. At school, it would be near impossible; Silas was always surrounded by his rugby teammates or his pack. Nine werewolves made up the Moon pack, but Silas was the youngest – and the sweetest.

Even now, as I watched him from across the Maple Mart floor, he was helping an elderly witch carry all her groceries to her cart. He was just so

nice. It made my heart clench with wanting – to be with someone who was that kind.

‘Is that a bar of pie in your basket, dear?’

I jumped, turning to find Granny Fable standing behind me. She had a basket on one arm, her cane in the other, and her white wings were wide open today. She wore a smile on her face, one that slyly said she’d seen me staring at Silas, and I felt my face go crimson.

‘Y-Yes, Granny Fable. This is a pie bar,’ I stuttered.

The old woman assessed me, eyes shrewd. ‘I didn’t know the Maple Mart sold pie bars.’

‘It was left over from the Wishing Well,’ I said simply.

Granny Fable nodded, understandingly. ‘And are you here to buy something?’

‘Yes,’ I looked wildly around the aisle we were standing in, slapping my hand against the dog food. ‘We needed this.’

‘Don’t you have a cat, dear?’ Granny Fable asked, a twinkle entering her gaze.

‘Right.’ I nodded, desperately searching for anything that would end this interaction. ‘But Jinx acts like a dog, so we just … indulge.’

Stupid. That was so, incredibly stupid. Granny Fable’s mouth twitched at the corner, and I quickly tried to change the subject before she pressed any further.

‘Sofia!’ I exclaimed, suddenly relieved. ‘Sofia, how – how is she? Is she settling in well?’

Granny Fable’s expression changed, softening into a smile that was a little more fond and less mischievous. ‘She is. Tomorrow is her first day of school.’

‘Oh, how nice! If I see her in class, I’ll save her a seat.’

Granny Fable reached out to pinch my cheek. ‘You’ve always been sweeter than sugar, Maya.’

I felt my cheeks go warm with the praise. ‘Guess I must’ve learned it from you.’

Granny Fable smiled, and she bumped her basket on mine along the way, giving me that sly smile again. ‘Well, as much as I love swapping compliments in the dog-food aisle, I should get going. Wouldn’t want to disturb you from your *shopping* any longer, dear.’

I tried to stop my cheeks from flushing again, waiting for Granny Fable to turn a corner before I began looking at Silas's till. His line was shorter now, only five people.

This would be the best time to strike. I forced myself to breathe deep, looked down at the pie in my basket and strengthened my resolve. I needed to do this – needed to talk to Silas. To make him think of me as someone other than the klutz who always spilled something on him.

So, even though every part of me wanted to turn around and flee, I made my way across the shop floor. Before I stepped into the line for his till, I grabbed a couple of items so it would look like I'd come here for more than just a chance to talk to Silas.

The closer I got to him, though, the more nervous I felt myself getting. It would've been easier if Silas hadn't been so *lovely* standing at his till – weren't cashiers supposed to be miserable?

The sunlight from the floor-to-ceiling windows made the gold of his hair gleam even brighter than usual and the blue of his eyes stand out. And that *dimple*. It was carved deep into his cheek as he tried to make the baby elf, sat in a customer's trolley, laugh. How could one werewolf be this perfect?

When I was exactly one customer away from the front, another till opened up right behind us – manned by a perky vampire named Leon, who was giving me a sunny smile and waving me over to his empty line.

'I can help you, ma'am!' Leon called, and I very much wanted to tell him to *be quiet*.

But that would be rude, and so I pretended to be looking for something to add to my basket from the counter of Silas's till while he finished up with the customer ahead. I took a stick of mint gum that had been charmed to last all day and threw it into the basket.

I hoped I'd be moving forward quickly but it appeared that Silas's customer was determined to pay for all his groceries using coins alone. And Leon was still trying to grab my attention. Panic swelled inside me, and I browsed again – adding more sticks of gum to my basket until the whole display ran out.

'Ma'am! If you're done shopping, my counter is open for help.' Leon leaned forward, still smiling but with a slight furrow between his brows now. Any other time, I would have appreciated this stellar customer service.

'I'm – I'm OK,' I tried to say quietly, but Leon couldn't hear me.

I couldn’t just leave Silas’s line – I’d committed now. But I also didn’t want to make it obvious that I was staying in this line for him.

Sweat pooled at the base of my spine as I frantically looked around for something else to busy myself with. Something to browse so Leon would stop calling me over. And it was when my hand curled around another item that Silas’s last customer finally left.

I threw whatever I’d been clutching into my basket and dumped it in front of the werewolf with more vigour than was necessary. Silas’s gaze met mine over the basket, and a smile curled over his mouth – the kind that made the hammering of my heart turn up a notch.

I readied myself to say my practised interaction: a simple ‘hello’, followed by a ‘how are you’, a self-depreciating joke about hitting him with the jam from the doughnut and then he’d see the pie. But before I could say anything, Silas glanced down at my basket, and his expression turned troubled. His brows pinched together, and he opened his mouth to speak before snapping it shut.

Oh no, was my pie smushed? Had it made a mess? Did I destroy the basket?

Panic clutched at my stomach as I leaned forward to look at my basket. Sitting at the base was my pie bar, looking absolutely golden and perfect, surrounded by a range of produce – a bag of peaches, some celery. Very normal items. Yes, there were far too many different types of gum for one person, but that could be explained away.

But what couldn’t be ignored was the box sitting right atop my pie.

Foot cream. Anti-fungal foot cream to be precise.

The box was bright yellow, with an orange scrawl under the logo that read: *Kill the itch!*

Look, there was nothing wrong with buying or needing anti-fungal foot cream. But I really didn’t need the guy I’d been crushing on for years – and who I was pretty sure was my soulmate – to think of me having a fungal infection of any kind. I wanted him to think of me as pretty and cool, not weird and contagious. Was that too much to ask for?

The sheer mortification was overwhelming, and, so, I did the only thing I could do.

I ran.

I reached into my basket, grabbed my bar, and rushed out of the sliding doors of the Maple Mart. I couldn’t hear if Silas called for me, and I didn’t

stop to check.

Once I was outside, I pressed myself against the wall – away from the window. I couldn't breathe properly, not with my heart racing the way it was. It was why I didn't notice Raven approaching. Not until her arm wrapped around my shoulders.

'Tried to talk to him?' Raven asked, once it seemed like I could breathe without hyperventilating.

I nodded.

'Failed?' she asked, eyebrow raised.

I nodded again, and then dropped my head on to her shoulder, speaking in a muffled voice. 'Anti-fungal foot cream. I put anti-fungal foot cream in my basket.'

Her snort was quiet, but it still forced me to raise my head in outrage.

'You cannot be *laughing* at me,' I exclaimed, outraged. 'You're a bad friend who convinced me of a plan that *epically* failed.'

'A bad friend would've left you here; a good friend is going to take you to Charmed & Toasty and pay for your overpriced vanilla-bean latte,' Raven said, genuinely.

'Fine,' I sighed. 'Can we get out of here before he comes out?'

'Charmed & Toasty is acceptable then?' Raven replied, shaking her empty cup in front of me.

'Charmed & Toasty it is,' I agreed, and then sighed. 'But we're not talking about what happened.'

Raven's cackle was loud, and she threaded her arm through mine. 'Oh, we are *so* talking about what happened.'

'I hate you,' I said, but there was no heat to my words.

'You love me,' Raven replied. 'Exactly,' Raven agreed with herself, and then launched into a story she'd heard from one of her classmates to distract me. I could almost pretend that humiliating moment in the Maple Mart never happened.

Almost. If only I hadn't looked over my shoulder to see Orion stepping out of the Maple Mart. Our eyes met for a split second, and it told me everything I needed to know.

He'd seen me in the store and knew *exactly* who I thought my soulmate was.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

So, turns out it's really hard to pay attention in class when you've got a town-wide curse to break. Especially a class like charms. It's also not helped by the fact that the class is taught by Professor Helena, an elderly witch who has a keen eye for detail and patience as thin as spider silk.

'Ms Reverie,' Professor Helena called, her voice sharp and pointed like the edge of a needle. 'Can you please recite the correct spell for charming away dust?'

I clutched my notebook in front of me, which was blank, and willed for someone in the staffroom to cause a non-threatening fire that required evacuation.

But my rescue didn't come in the form of hunky firefighters; it came through a notebook being tilted in my direction.

Sofia Fable's wings were pale green and translucent, etched with thin spider-silk swirls; she wore a long, dark-green bellflower skirt and a sage-green sweater. Her hair was pulled back from her face, and on her desk was an enormous stack of books. Her gaze was trained in front of her, but her neat handwriting was visible to my quick glance. I was grateful that the spell was in English – like most spells were. The truly complex ones were often in Latin or older languages that took an age to decipher.

'*Sweep, sweep, sweep away, make every cobweb and dust bunny scatter,*' I recited, and felt that thrill of watching Professor Helena's disapproving mouth twitch ever so slightly.

'So something did penetrate through that daydream haze of yours,' Professor Helena said, with her eyebrows raised. 'Would you mind coming and demonstrating? These books on my desk are looking quite dusty.'

I would mind. I would very, very much mind.

My legs felt shaky as I stood and made my way to the front of the classroom; no one said anything, but I could hear every squeak of the chair,

every sigh. Professor Helena moved to the side, giving me an encouraging smile that did nothing to make me feel better.

I looked down at the stack of books on Professor Helena's desk like they were going to transform into little gremlins and bite me. Still, I tried to focus my magic and block everyone out, like that bubble Orion had created for me.

But it wasn't working. It was hard to ignore your surroundings with the entire class watching you.

'*Sweep* –' I began, and my voice shook ever so slightly. And that's when my second lifesaver came in the form of the bell ringing, loudly, cutting me off. I felt my eyes slide shut, and the relief that flooded me was potent.

'Saved,' Professor Helena murmured, as she let me go back to my seat.

When I reached my desk, the rest of the class had already begun stuffing their books in their bags, racing out of the door for the freedom of the end of the day. I waited while Sofia packed up, before tapping her gently on the shoulder.

'Thanks,' I said, lightly.

Sofia's smile was kinder than I thought it would be. 'No problem. Believe me, I know how boring charms classes can be.'

'So,' I said, as we walked behind the throng of students making their escape. 'How are you settling in?'

'Pretty good,' Sofia said, in a way that made it sound like she repeated the same thing over and over. I did my best Raven-single-eyebrow-raise that always got *me* talking, and Sofia laughed. 'OK, it's been *interesting*, but I came to Maple Falls to have a new start, so interesting is better than what I had before: boring.'

'Boring?' I questioned, curiosity burning. I'd never left Maple Falls and was dying to know about the other magical towns dotted around.

'Boring,' Sofia echoed. 'Rose Glenn was just too simple – that's why I left when my grandmother offered. Maple Falls is already more intriguing, especially with that rogue love spell going on.'

Guilt reared up inside me at the mention of the spell; I wondered if Sofia would be so friendly if she knew that it was my mishap that cursed Frost, her grandmother's best friend and co-owner of the apothecary.

'How,' I started to ask, trying to sound not guilty, 'is Frost, by the way?'

Sofia snorted, just as we finally got out of the door. 'He's still in the poetry phase. Literally. We wake up to sonnets and sleep to ballads. Granny

says she hates it, but some of them are quite romantic.'

'So, not awful,' I said, hopefully.

'Not awful,' Sofia agreed.

That loosened the anxiety in my chest. Enough for me to consider asking Sofia to join Raven and I on our trip to the Wandering Words Library, where I'd meet Orion for my second lesson while Raven studied for her exam. Selfishly, I also thought he wouldn't bring up Silas, if he saw someone else with us.

'Sofia,' I began, as we stepped into the hallway. 'Would you like to join me and Raven at –'

'Hey, trouble.' Orion's voice came from behind me, all smooth like melted chocolate.

I whipped a glance over my shoulder to find him leaning against the lockers.

'Hawthorne,' I said, nerves gripping my heart. 'Didn't you graduate a year ago? What are you doing here?'

'Alumni privileges,' he retorted. 'Allows me to stalk these halls in search of certain witches.' Then, before I could say anything, he slid his gaze to beside me. 'And who's this?'

'Sofia Fable,' I introduced, stepping back slightly, 'meet Orion Hawthorne.'

'Raven's brother?' Sofia guessed, glancing between the two of us.

'I'd like to think I have other titles, but Raven's brother works,' Orion said, with an easy smile on his mouth. A smile he'd never directed at me. Where was the irritable dragon I knew? 'And you must be the new girl.'

'I'd like to think *I* have other titles too, but new girl works,' Sofia quipped back, and Orion's laugh was quick and loud.

So loud that it made something sharp and ugly flare up in my chest. It was an emotion I was familiar with, but only in my memories.

'What have we got here?' Raven asked, walking up to our lockers and glancing between the three of us. 'New after-school club?'

'Yes,' Orion deadpanned. 'I'm club leader.'

'Over my dead body,' Raven shot back, punching in her locker code and shoving her textbooks inside.

Orion smiled slightly, before turning to me. 'Sorry to break up the club, but Raven, Sofia, I'm going to need to talk to Reverie. Alone, please.'

‘Whatever you say to me can be said in front of –’ I started but Orion interrupted me.

‘Not this,’ he said, holding my gaze. ‘Raven can take my car to the library; we can walk.’

‘Fine,’ I said softly, knowing there was no point arguing with a determined Hawthorne.

‘All right,’ Raven said, already walking away. ‘Sofia, want to join us at the library?’

‘Sure,’ the faerie replied, following Raven out of the doors of Maple Falls High, while Orion and I trailed slowly behind.

Main Street tended to be quiet at this time; most people were closing up shop, or settling into Charmed & Toasty for one of Ronnie’s specials or having dinner at the Giggling Octopus; my peers would be at the beach or the Firewood Forest. There might even be a party happening. The sky was a lovely lavender colour, streaked with clouds of pink and hints of gold from the dying sunlight. It should have inspired a sense of peace.

But I was a knot of nerves as I walked side by side with Orion.

‘So, Silas Moon,’ Orion said, carefully.

‘Nope, no, not a chance,’ I interrupted, feeling a flush rise on my cheeks. ‘I thought you wanted to talk about something serious.’

‘Look, Reverie, I just want to help –’

I twisted on my heel and tried walking away from him. ‘Can’t we just go for our second lesson, please? Let’s just go to the library, where I’m sure there will be more people who witnessed my public humiliation. And maybe this time we’ll do the summoning spell, and I’ll make the books burst into flames or –’

‘Reverie,’ Orion was in front of me in a flash. My eyes widened seeing his wings unfurled, in all their glory behind his strong back, silver and almost as wide as the street. I didn’t realize how fast I’d walked until he’d literally flown in front to stop me. I tried not to gawk at him, but I hadn’t seen his wings full-fledged in a while.

‘Why don’t we go for a little adventure?’ Orion said, and he cast his wings down.

I watched as they retracted, feeling slightly bereft as they disappeared from view. ‘What?’

He stepped closer, and then, in what can only be considered a mind-bending turn of events, Orion leaned forward to grab my backpack, sliding

it off my shoulder and slinging it on to his. I watched, dumbfounded, as he walked away.

'Where are you *going*? What about Raven and Sofia?' I called out to him, but he didn't even turn to look back at me.

'They can wait. Now hustle, Reverie. I am not slowing down for you!'

We were standing before the Wishing Well Bakery – my safe haven, my solace, my escape. It was closed today, because the bakery was always shut on Mondays.

'Why are we here?' I narrowed my gaze at Orion. 'I already told Ivy I'm taking a sabbatical to focus on my spellcasting.'

'Because I'm hungry,' Orion said, shrugging like it was nothing.

I scoffed loudly, disbelievingly.

'Famished, in fact,' he added, and then said, 'You have the keys to this place, don't you?'

'You want to enter an establishment while it's closed?' I asked, incredulously. 'You, Orion Hawthorne, stickler for rules, want to break in –'

'Hey,' Orion interrupted, and he rocked on his heels slightly. 'It's not really breaking in, if we have a key.'

I couldn't help it. His words, the way they echoed my own thoughts over a week ago as I stood in this exact spot, made a laugh burst out of me. Orion's mouth pulled up into a reluctant smile as he gestured *hurry up* at me.

I don't know why I didn't fight it more, but I reached in my pocket for my keys, slipping the one for the bakery into the lock; it opened with a click, and I let the two of us in.

'So, you think your boss would kill you for breaking in?' Orion mock-whispered, as I led him to the kitchens.

'I think she'd probably tell my mother,' I retorted. 'So yeah, she'd get me killed one way or the other.'

Orion huffed a laugh and I felt warm down my spine; I guided him to the back kitchen and switched on the lights.

'So, why are we here then?' I asked, going to the opposite side of the steel counter that divided the kitchen. I planted both my hands down on the cool surface and looked at Orion. 'Because, if you're actually hungry, I could whip up one of the recipes I'd been thinking of for our little *arrangement*.'

I stretched the word arrangement as if to make it sound like a joke, but I was nervous about it. We hadn't talked about the Treasure Trove yet, but I knew it was coming. I was still worried about keeping it a secret from Ivy.

'We'll talk about my part of the bargain in a moment.' Orion waved his hand flippantly. 'Why don't we do the summoning spell again?'

He took a step away from the metal counter and held a cookbook that had been left there to his chest.

'We could have just done this at the library,' I said, stalling. I didn't want to try the spell again – contrary to popular belief, experiencing disappointment again and again did not make you stronger. It just lowered your expectations.

'Because you feel safe here, Reverie,' Orion said, his voice low and smooth like buttercream. 'You don't have to be scared of your magic or worry about people watching you.'

'I'm not scared,' I retorted, indignantly. 'I've been casting spells since I was a kid.'

'I've been shifting into dragon form and flying since I was a kid,' Orion countered. 'Doesn't mean I don't feel fear every time I leap into the air. And that's OK – it's OK to be afraid of the abilities we have, to feel the pressure of everyone watching us, as long as that fear doesn't stop us from pursuing our full potential.'

'I don't want to get it wrong again,' I murmured, the truth slipping past my defences. 'I'm tired of always messing things up.'

'You're not going to mess up,' he replied, and then immediately corrected himself. 'Scratch that, you might mess up again. But that's what I'm here for. If you don't trust yourself, then at least trust that I'll help you figure it out.'

I looked at the cookbook he was holding to his chest. The air smelled sweet, like sugar, and familiar like a blanket wrapped around my shoulders.

'*Paper and ink, don't dawdle, come to me at full throttle,*' I whispered. For a moment, I thought nothing would happen, but then I felt a spark of warmth under my skin. The book jolted in Orion's hands but didn't leave them.

'Think of the book flying to you,' he instructed. 'Weightless, effortless, like it has dragon wings.'

The image flashed in my mind as I recited the spell again – the book with wings, the book flying towards me effortlessly. The warmth from my hand

bloomed in my palm, and then it finally happened. The book flew from Orion's hands into mine; the spine fitting neatly into the grooves of my palm.

It took a moment for it to hit me. A laugh bubbled past my lips, and I held the book like it was a jewel in my hands and not a cookbook that had splattered pages from so many late-night baking sessions.

'So, I guess we've worked out how to make you feel comfortable with spellcasting.'

'We did?' I asked, head tilted.

'You need to feel comfortable in your surroundings. You need to feel like you're not being judged or watched,' Orion explained, and the way he was looking at me made me feel breathless. 'But that's not how to cast magic in the long run. When we do the soulmate spell, you'll need to be able to cast it under the autumn moon, at the festival. Anyone could be there.'

My hands clenched around the book, the spine digging into the flesh now. He was right.

'Stop looking so panicked,' Orion scolded lightly, drumming his fingers on the steel countertop. 'I'm not going to let it go wrong. We'll practise lots of different types of spells to help build your confidence. We'll try the summoning spell some more, as well as protective and healing spells. By the festival you'll be more confident and in control of your magic.'

It felt *good* to be doing this with someone who knew what they were doing. Who sounded so sure.

'And,' Orion began, this time his voice was all steel, 'that's why I'm going to help you with the werewolf.'

'Oh, please, no –' I started, not afraid to resort to pleading.

'I am not going to judge you for your preferences,' Orion said, without a hint of teasing in his voice. 'All I'm saying is that on the night of the autumn moon, you'll already be stressed about casting the spell, why also feel stressed about telling the guy about your feelings?'

'That's fair.'

'And, after what I saw the other day, I think it's safe to say that you could use some help in getting him to notice you,' he said, matter-of-factly.

Was I ever going to stop feeling utterly incompetent around Orion? 'You're not *wrong* per se. But I'd like to add that that was Raven's plan.'

Orion snorted. 'Right, and Raven is an expert on love, is she?'

'And you are?' I countered, defensively.

‘No, but I am a *guy*, so I can help you get another guy to notice you,’ Orion retorted, the softness gone from his voice. ‘So, as much as I’d much rather be doing anything else, I will help you get Silas’s attention.’

He said the last part with a glimmer of genuine disgust in his voice; it was the only thing that made my smile twitch at the corner of my mouth.

‘Fine,’ I agreed, sounding appropriately disbelieving. ‘And you’ll do all of this in exchange for help at the Treasure Trove? Doesn’t seem like a fair bargain.’

‘You shouldn’t underestimate the allure of your baking, Reverie. I remember those sun-kissed honey cakes.’

My smile slipped off my face as the memory resurfaced.

‘Speaking of, I think it’s time you held up your end of the bargain, witch. Tomorrow, after school, we’ll hit the Treasure Trove. I’ll bring some info on the werewolf, and you come with your best bake in mind,’ Orion said, his tone so *daring*, like we were children on the playground, and he was goading me. I should’ve been mature enough to not take the bait, but I’d never been particularly good at ignoring a dare.

‘All right, Hawthorne,’ I said. ‘But I won’t be blamed for what happens to you once you devour what I make. Eat a treat made with my hands and there’s absolutely no chance of going back.’

Orion’s smile grew, like he knew I was going to accept his challenge. Like he knew *me*.

‘I wouldn’t dare try, Reverie.’

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CHAPTER NINE

Last year – July

I stood outside the Hawthornes' house, armed with freshly baked sun-kissed honey cakes, just off my shift at the Wishing Well. Mum and Rani were out shopping, soaking up the time they had together before Rani was back at MAC again. So, I headed to another of my favourite places in Maple Falls. I raised my hand to ring the bell, but a voice stopped me.

'I thought I told you to call me if you're walking back at night.'

Startled, I looked up to find Orion on the roof, leaning back on his elbows as he gazed down at me. He was dressed in a loose, full-sleeved grey top and jeans, his dragon-leather jacket nowhere to be seen on this cool summer night.

'The sun just set,' I countered, rolling my eyes.

Orion narrowed his gaze at me. 'Technicalities, Reverie.' Then his attention shifted to the goodies in my arms. 'Are those cakes?'

'Sun-kissed honey cakes, intended to keep you warm on cool nights,' I explained, pride swelling through me. These cakes had come out perfectly golden brown, with crispy tops and gooey middles. It was the kind of dessert that tasted the way a hug felt.

'All right, I grant you permission to join me up here,' Orion said, and beckoned me up.

'I don't remember asking?' I laughed.

'Like I said, technicalities,' he remarked, and then made an impatient huff. 'Wait there a second.'

With a flick of his wrist and a mutter of a spell, Orion had the orange trumpet flowers that bordered the Hawthorne's porch re-twisting

themselves at my feet, turning into an intricate web of vines and blooms, until they took the shape of a staircase leading all the way to the roof.

I tried not to look impressed, I really did. But I doubt I succeeded. Shaking my head, I climbed up, making sure not to drop the honey cakes.

When I reached the top, I found Orion sitting instead of laying on the roof now and joined him, putting the box between us. He barely waited a second before diving in.

'So, what do you think?' I questioned, unable to help myself.

He made a show of contemplating, before finally saying, 'I don't know. I think I'm going to have to try another one to form a definitive opinion.'

I scoffed, reaching for the cakes. 'Well, I'm sure your parents will form an opinion after just one cake.'

Orion snatched another before I could stop him. 'They'll probably fawn over them and be delighted with you, Reverie.'

I listened for the teasing undertone, the quip about needing approval, but all I heard was discordant bitterness.

'Why are you on the roof?' I asked, bringing my knees up higher to my chin. 'Shouldn't you be spending your summer with your friends?'

Orion looked away from me, cake still in his hands, jaw tensed. 'Yeah, well, all the parties are the same, and everyone is just so excited about heading back to MAC.'

'You're not?' I asked, surprised.

He glanced back at me. 'Do you think that makes me weird, Reverie?'

'Well, I thought you were weird the first time, Hawthorne,' I retorted, and a smile curled around his mouth.

The sight of him, smiling, sent a shot through my chest. And look, I'm not dumb. I know what attraction feels like. I also knew that Raven would literally cleave my head from my body if she thought I liked her brother. Besides, I already had one unrequited crush to deal with; I couldn't handle another.

'I should get going,' I said, preparing to descend the staircase.

'Your mum and sister waiting for you?' Orion prompted, tossing half the cake into his mouth.

'No, actually, just an empty house and my cat,' I replied, and then glanced at him. 'Doesn't that make me sound sad, eh?'

He smiled again, and my stomach tightened. 'We're quite the pair.' Then his gaze dropped from mine. 'Why don't you stay here? We could have

dinner with my parents and watch a movie after.'

Surprise flitted through me, and I must have looked hesitant because Orion added a final line: 'My house is going to be just as quiet as yours when you're gone, Reverie,' he said, and there was no tension in his voice. 'I'll get into an argument with my parents about my future, and then it will be an awkward silence for the rest of the night because we all said things we didn't mean.'

'What things are you saying to them?' I asked, softly.

His eyes didn't stray from mine, not even for a second. 'That I don't want to follow in my father's footsteps – I don't want to be the next great Maple Falls detective.'

Shock ricocheted through me. There were some things everyone knew in this town: Granny Fable had an ear for every whisper, the Giggling Octopus always had a spare table for locals and Orion Hawthorne would one day inherit his father's role. That's why he was going to MAC.

'You look shocked,' he said, with a grimace. 'Is it that bad that I don't want the position, even if I've spent my whole life working for it?'

'No,' I replied, with a confidence that surprised even me. 'I get it. You want to live for you, not your parents.'

A quiet sense of understanding settled between us. Orion relaxed beside me, and I found myself doing the same. We could've stayed on that roof forever, but everything had to come to an end eventually.

'Movie then?' Orion asked, standing and dusting off his jeans.

I gazed at him; I could see Orion needed the distraction, and maybe I did too. So, I hauled myself up, and I joined him – telling myself this meant nothing, but knowing in my heart, that I was lying.

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CHAPTER TEN

Having a sister is a little like having a built-in best friend, a personal stylist, a demon who sleepwalks to your bed and steals your blanket in the night leaving you *shivering* in the winter. Though, that last one might be unique to me. A sister is all those things and more, so it was incredibly unfair that Rani left Maple Falls and took all those things with her.

But, despite my fears of her going off to MAC and forgetting my existence, she made sure we remained close over the last two years. Even if it was only a five-minute call after school.

'So, the town is under a love spell?' Rani asked, from the screen of our video call.

I had called her while I stood outside Firestones, waiting for Orion. The shop was square-shaped with *four* giant floors, shiny glass windows and swirly gold lettering that read *FIRESTONES*. It was the most popular dragon-owned bookstore in the entire magical community; there were several of them all located in different magical towns. It was Rani's favourite place, which is why I called her while I waited.

'Yeah, six people in town under a love spell,' I said, trying hard not to sound the right amount of interested but distant. The last thing I needed was Rani figuring out something was wrong.

'So, what are the love-cursed acting like?' she asked.

'Here, let me flip the camera.'

The camera showed Inspector Vale walking down the pavement holding the largest bouquet of flowers in his hands that I'd ever seen.

'Maya!' Inspector Vale called when he noticed me, and not the phone I was holding directly in front of him. 'Is today not the loveliest day to tell someone you love them?'

I glanced up at the sky, which was turning a slightly greyish colour, promising September rain. But who was I to disagree?

‘Sure,’ I called back with a little laugh. Part of me was glad to see that all Inspector Vale wanted to do was confess his feelings for Ivy and that the mishap of the spell wasn’t ruining his entire life. Plus, it seemed to make him a lot more agreeable.

His smile widened, and then his wings unfurled from his back; he leaped into the air, most likely to go and find Ivy. I flipped the camera back so that Rani could see me, and she was holding back laughter.

‘Oh, I can’t wait for Orion to find who cast the spell,’ Rani said, a little breathless with giggles. ‘Vale will burn them to a crisp when he finds them.’

I laughed as well, but I couldn’t stop the hollowness from creeping in.

‘How is Orion, by the way?’ Rani asked, and I felt my eyebrows shoot up.

‘Why?’ I asked sharply, looking around the street slightly to see if the dragon shifter in question was approaching. We’d agreed to meet here before heading to the Treasure Trove, but he was running late. Something that was entirely unlike him.

‘Well, I didn’t think he’d be thrilled to be back in Maple Falls,’ Rani replied.

‘Why not?’ I asked, confused. He’d graduated from MAC early, where else would he have gone?

Rani shrugged. ‘I don’t know, I only heard rumours about him being unhappy. It could be a lie, but you know, where there’s smoke there’s usually fire. Especially with dragons.’

I nodded in agreement, momentarily caught up in the mystery that was Orion Hawthorne, before a recent memory popped into my head.

‘So,’ I began, unassumingly, ‘Rowan Hale told me to tell you he said hi.’

It was actually comical how fast she turned to stone on screen. It took far too many seconds for her to respond, and I cackled loudly at her face.

‘Well, you can tell him I said hello too,’ Rani said, politeness dripping from her tone.

‘Is there a reason our resident bad boy wants to say hi to you?’ I asked, eager for some details from my sister’s life.

Rani shrugged, feigning ignorance. ‘How am I supposed to know? I don’t worry myself with the actions of those in Maple Falls.’

I tried not to let my smile falter, but her words stung.

‘Are you sure?’ I asked, eyebrows raised comically to mask the hurt.

‘Maya, are you asking me if something happened between us?’ Rani asked, blunt as a butter knife. ‘Because I can assure you, he’s just being a jerk. Like always.’

I sighed and, even though I knew there was more going on, I let it go. ‘Fine, I guess I just wanted to know if your life was getting interesting now.’

Rani snorted. ‘No, unfortunately, I’m still boring as ever.’ Then, there was a knock at her dorm door. She shouted something back, before turning to me. ‘Sorry, Maya, I’ve got to run. Grimoire gone rogue in the library.’

I winced. ‘Hopefully it’s not full of hexes.’

Rani sighed, but she looked too excited. ‘When is it *not* hexes?’

‘If your skin turns green again, take a picture.’

She rolled her eyes, her finger hovering to close the call. ‘Bye, Maya – oh and, don’t forget, I’m coming back to Maple Falls at the end of the month for the festival. So, make sure you’ve stocked up on snacks.’

A bubble of warmth erupted through me at the thought of Rani being back; no matter how difficult it was being in her shadow, I did love our times together. ‘I’ll make sure we’re stocked.’

Then Rani hung up, and I slipped my phone back into my pocket. Just in time to see Orion’s car pulling up beside me. I moved around to the passenger side to see he’d already leaned forward and opened the door for me.

‘You’re late,’ I said, as I slipped into the car.

It was warm, filled with a scent that was distinctly Orion – woodsy, like a campfire. He was dressed in his usual uniform today: leather jacket, white shirt, blue jeans, boots.

‘You could have just walked there, your *highness*,’ Orion replied, sharply. Then he gripped the wheel, sighed, and said, ‘I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to snap at you.’

His words were enough to make my head whip around, but his tone – the genuine sincerity – made my jaw drop. Orion, apologizing?

‘I had a thing with my dad.’

‘A thing,’ I said, slowly. ‘Descriptive.’

I watched as he reversed, the strong line of his jaw flexing. My fingers suddenly itched with the urge to trace the muscle.

‘He wants me to start at the detective agency,’ Orion said, his voice sounding wooden. ‘You know how I feel about that.’

I did. That conversation on the Hawthornes' roof flashed in my mind.

'So, I take it things are tense?' I replied, not wanting him to know just how much I remembered.

'You could say that,' Orion muttered. 'So, you ready to see the Treasure Trove?'

I could've pressed further, made him talk about things more. The Maya from that summer would have done so. But I knew better now.

'Yes,' I said, taking his switch in conversation. 'Let's see what I'm in for.'

The Treasure Trove bakery left, frankly, much to be desired. Mostly because there wasn't a lick of kitchen magic in the building. There was exactly one person running the entire place: a nervous twenty-year-old dragon shifter who looked like she'd spent her entire day caked in flour. It was all over her black uniform, dusted along her rounded cheeks, even in the eyelashes that curved around her purple-toned eyes.

'We have bread,' the dragon shifter, Melodie, said. 'Sourdough, plain and seeded bread.'

'Is there anything else?' I questioned, casting a look around the bakery. It was darkly coloured – all deep jewel tones. I didn't hate it, but I did feel a little like I was sitting in a cave.

'Croissants,' Melodie said, tilting her head to one side before coming back to me. 'That's it. Bread and croissants.'

I turned to look at Orion. 'I can see why you struck this bargain. This is _'

'Abysmal,' Melodie stepped in, eagerness coating her words. 'Truly abysmal. And I am just really grateful that you decided to help me today. I run this whole place on my own – I inherited it from my parents – and it doesn't really amount to much because, you know, I'm just one person.'

'Right,' I said, determination slipping over my shoulders, quietening my worries. 'And what do you want to do with the bakery?'

'Orion told me you work at the Wishing Well,' Melodie said. I glanced at him, but he was conveniently looking at anything but me. 'I know that you're taking a massive risk by helping me, but I don't want to be like the Wishing Well.'

'You don't want to be successful?' I questioned, suddenly defensive.

‘No, no,’ Melodie corrected. ‘I just – I don’t want this to be an ordinary bakery. I want you to know you have full jurisdiction. Go wild, bake all the risky things. I want this place to be fun and wild, and all the things my parents would’ve wanted it to be.’

I felt myself soften at her earnestness. ‘Show me to the kitchen, Melodie, and we can get started,’ I said, kindly.

The girl nodded and I followed her to the back, trying not to gawk. Hidden away was the most beautiful kitchen I’d ever laid eyes on. It was a kitchen that rivalled Ivy’s, and the knowledge that it wasn’t being used to its full potential devastated me.

‘You’re not going to cry, are you?’ Orion asked, his tone only half teasing.

‘No,’ I said, but my voice sounded a little husky to my own ears. I cleared my throat and tried again. ‘No, but I *will* be baking. In fact, today, we’re going to bake like we’ve never baked before.’

And I meant it. Before meeting Melodie, I was only helping to hold up my side of the bargain. But now, I was invested.

And, maybe, a small part of me *was* excited at the thought of baking freely. Ivy rarely took my suggestions, and I never really pushed her on it because it was her store. But here? Melodie had said ‘go *wild*’.

We started with some of the easier bakes, and I showed Melodie how to make cupcakes, standard cookies and cakes. I then went to my station on the right and focused on my own bakes, while my mind drifted towards different recipes.

It was halfway through a batch of my melt-in-your-mouth brownies, that a new recipe came to my mind. And it was all because of a single glance to my left – where Melodie rubbed soothing circles on her chest. A gesture that was achingly familiar. Suddenly, a younger version of myself and Orion, aged six and eight, flitted through my thoughts, a snippet of a conversation slipping through my mind.

‘Why are you always rubbing your chest like that?’ I asked him as Raven dictated how we were going to play Twister next. She was going through all the rules, not that Orion and I were listening. We were sprawled on the grass after a game of dragons and witches, where Orion was the silver dragon who’d come to save the witches from the nasty mortals.

‘It always burns a little, after we shift,’ he said, rubbing at his chest. But that doesn’t mean I’m going to go easy on you in Twister.’

I startled out of the memory and Melodie looked over at me with a question in her eyes, but I just gave her a small smile of reassurance.

I grabbed a spare notebook from my box of utensils and jotted down the ingredients and the steps to making flaming fruit tarts. Normally I would've painstakingly toiled over this and perfected the recipe. But, for once, I decided to trust myself.

While Melodie and I baked up a storm, I'd forgotten about Orion. But as I started on my enchanted fruit tarts, he made his presence known. The dragon shifter sauntered into the kitchen holding two paper bags. Too focused on measuring out my ingredients, I took no notice until my notebook was snapped shut.

'Hey!' I exclaimed. But Orion simply grabbed the book and held it above my head, using his height to his advantage. 'Give that back!'

'Not until you've *eaten* something. You've been working non-stop since this morning,' Orion countered, and pointedly looked down at the paper bag. I finally took in the blue-and-green logo that read GREGORY'S. My stomach chose that moment to make itself known.

'Ooh.' I reached and unrolled the bag to pull out a stuffed, flaky puff pastry. 'My favourite.'

'Everyone's favourite – so, flaming fruit tarts?' Orion said, as he finally brought my recipe book down to eye level.

I swallowed a bite of the pastry, savouring the saltiness and crunch, before responding.

'It's an adaptation of Ivy's funny fruit tarts, which gives whoever eats them the ability to crack incredible jokes every time they speak.'

Orion raised an eyebrow. 'Must be a popular dessert for anxious teens.'

I nodded with a grin. 'You should see the way they sell out on the first day of the new school year. Especially with the Year Sevens.'

'So, what's your adaptation?' he asked.

For some reason, a sudden shyness had come over me. I never had an issue talking about my recipes before – even the ones that had gone wrong. But in that moment, I felt weirdly *exposed*.

I cleared my throat, picking at my pastry while replying. 'My adaptation is, instead of using funny-named fruits, like gooseberries, I use a range of jewel-toned fruits: raspberries, strawberries, blueberries and blackberries enchanted to help dragon shifters *after* they'd shifted back into their more mortal form.' I looked up from my pastry, feeling my cheeks warm a little.

‘I remembered you telling me that you experienced a burning sensation in your chest after shifting. The spell would help soothe your heartburn or, I guess, dragon-burn?’

A look of surprise spread across Orion’s face, and he slid the recipe book back in my direction. ‘You know, your mind never fails to impress me, trouble.’

I felt a blush spread across my face at the open admiration in his voice. ‘It’s just a spell.’

Orion shook his head and pointed at me. ‘Add learning how to take compliments to our list of things to work on.’

I rolled my eyes and finished off my last bite of lunch before turning back to my dessert. I thought Orion would leave, but instead he moved to lean back against one of the counters, hooking one ankle over the other, watching me.

‘So, I suppose we should talk about the second part of our plan – you know, making your werewolf fall in love with you.’

I looked up from my bowl of whipped cream to shoot Orion a sharp glare.

‘How often do you actually talk to the guy?’

Embarrassment flooded through me, but to be fair to Orion, his question was simple.

Still, it felt like an attack.

‘I’ve spoken to him you know, like, a *couple* of times.’

‘A couple,’ Orion repeated, dubiously. ‘And I suppose you mean “couple” as in, more than *once or twice*?’

I opened my mouth and then snapped it shut. Instead of replying, I focused on getting my shells ready to bake.

‘If you’ve barely even spoken to the guy, how can you be so sure he’s your soulmate?’ Orion asked, confusion evident in his voice. I looked up to see the furrow between his eyebrows deepen. His arms were folded over his chest, his muscles straining in his leather jacket – honestly, it was *cooking* in this kitchen, did he really need to wear a jacket in here too?

‘Well, for one, he’s good-looking,’ I said, beginning at the very basic surface level.

‘If you like that kind of thing,’ Orion retorted, and I felt a laugh bubble out of me.

‘What kind of thing, being handsome?’ I shot back, thinking about the way sunlight made Silas’s hair glow.

‘He’s blonde,’ he said, like Silas had something offensive tattooed on his head.

‘*Exactly*,’ I stressed, my mouth tipping upwards into a grin. ‘Not many guys can pull off being blonde. I mean, if you dyed your hair blonde, I’d think you were going through a breakdown.’

Orion’s mouth dropped open in outrage, and I bit back a smile. With expert care, I dipped each of the berries in a warmed sugar syrup.

‘Fine,’ he replied through gritted teeth. ‘He’s good-looking and you’ve spoken to him twice, so that makes him your soulmate how exactly?’

‘He’s also sweet.’

‘He’s *sweet*,’ Orion mimicked. ‘What? Does he, like, tutor kids on the weekend or something?’

‘No,’ I replied, and then corrected myself. ‘Maybe he does! But if you *must* know every embarrassing detail of my life – he saved me.’

‘He saved you?’ Now Orion’s eyebrows were practically up to his hairline. ‘Were you in imminent danger? What, a stray whisk hit you in the forehead and, let me guess – he caught it?’

‘I was being bullied, and he stepped in and looked out for me,’ I snapped back, and Orion’s jaw clicked shut. I tried not to feel smug – we were talking about my childhood trauma after all – but it was nice to see Orion shut up for once.

‘Silas Moon isn’t just a cute, sweet guy,’ I continued into the silence. ‘He’s a good guy.’

And it was true. Silas was a good guy, a great guy – the kind of guy you wanted to be your soulmate.

The silence stretched long between us; I watched Orion from my periphery.

‘There are three steps to making someone fall in love with you,’ he finally said. The teasing tone from earlier was gone.

I scoffed loudly, but Orion remained unchanged and serious. ‘Three steps? You’re saying one of the most profound emotions to ever be felt can be obtained in only three steps?’

‘Yes. Now, one: make him notice you,’ Orion explained, his tone slipping into that easy, understanding voice he used when he was teaching me the summoning spell. ‘Silas is popular, right? He’s surrounded by people. You

need him to see you in the crowd. I mean, we know he knows who you are, but I mean get him to notice you in a positive light.'

'Rude,' I muttered, but hated that he wasn't wrong.

'Second,' Orion continued, ignoring my mumble. 'Build common ground. Once he notices you, get him to like you. Make a connection with him, find similar interests. That's how you build a strong foundation in a relationship.'

'You know,' I interjected, holding my whisk like it was a wand as I pointed it at him. 'You're speaking like a person with a lot of experience. Is there a story there, Hawthorne?'

'Third,' he didn't even flinch at my interruption.

'Boo!'

'*Third*, seal the deal. Once you've established that there's a connection – confess your feelings. You'll obviously be doing that at the Fallen Leaves Festival when you're doing the spell. But before that, we need to get through step one. Getting him to notice you. Positively.'

'Story of my life,' I said, while arranging the tart shells, pastry cream and berries in rows. 'But every time I talk to Silas, or try to, I do something stupid.'

Orion paused, drumming his fingers against the countertop; silver scales erupted over the top of his hand before sliding back.

'He's a rugby player, right?' Orion asked.

I nodded.

'Go to one of his games. This town is obsessed with the sport – he must be having his first game this weekend, right?'

I nodded again. 'But when I get there, what am I supposed to do?'

'Well, if you see him, maybe, I don't know, *talk* to him.'

'Talk to him,' I said, dubiously.

'Yes, you know the thing we're doing right now,' he pointed at the space between the two of us.

'Right, as if it's going to be that easy,' I replied, reaching out for the cream that I was now ready to enchant. 'I'm not in love with *you*, Orion.'

For a moment, the air in the kitchen seemed to still.

'Right,' Orion said, after a second, with no hint of emotion. 'Just go to the game, Reverie. Bake something good-luck adjacent for him. Bring it to the game. Sit in the front row and I'll handle the rest.'

Before I could press him for more, he was approaching the counter and looking down at the cream I was going to pipe into the tarts.

‘Ready to enchant it?’ Orion asked, reading the situation, and me, perfectly.

I cleared my throat and avoided Orion’s gaze entirely. I pushed him out of my mind, out of my thoughts. This was *my* domain. I was the kitchen witch here, not Orion. I understood this kind of magic. And a part of me wanted to prove myself to him.

I traced the shape of an open flame above the giant bowl of cream before me and, infusing my voice with confidence, I said the spell aloud: ‘*Smoke curdling in the chest, breathe in this cooling air and put the flames to rest.*’

A familiar warmth collected at the tips of my fingers, and the whipped cream in the bowl began to glow. I waited until the warmth under my skin subsided, and the cream had settled back to its regular colour. The cinnamon speckles were now more vibrant against the white of the cream, and I felt my lips curve into a victorious smile.

With confidence bursting in me like a firework, I was a flurry of movement; piping the cream, arranging the berries atop like a treasure chest of jewels. Everything around me slipped away as I worked.

When I was done, there were fifteen perfectly curated tarts sitting before me.

‘All right, time to taste,’ Orion said, breaking me out of my spiral.

‘What! *No*,’ I said, horrified.

The doubt slammed into me, as I remembered the soulmate cookies that went horribly wrong.

Orion blinked. ‘You’re a witch.’

‘So?’

‘So, how is the spell going to work for you when it’s been tailored for dragons?’ Orion asked, sounding all reasonable.

‘But – but,’ I spluttered, grasping for something. ‘But you haven’t shifted yet, it won’t work for you either.’

‘I did when I went to get you lunch and my chest is like a sputtered-out candle right now,’ Orion retorted, and that smug look was painted over the planes of his handsome face again. ‘So, spoon, please.’

Resigned, I did what he asked because I knew better than to argue. From my apron, I proffered one of my twenty spoons in his direction. He must have noticed the slight tremor in my hand, because he grabbed the spoon

and held on – not taking it out of my hand. I looked away from the magical treat and into his eyes.

'It's going to be fine,' Orion said, with such unshakeable confidence.

'What if a second head erupts out of your neck?' I blurted.

Orion shrugged. 'Then I'll be twice as good-looking.'

And with that, he took the spoon and dived straight into the tart.

Orion's eyes slid shut as he swallowed, and his closed fist went to his chest. Slowly, a smile tugged at his mouth. Relief loosened the tension in *my* chest, replacing the nerves with unadulterated excitement.

'So?' I probed, eager for the compliment.

'It's good, Reverie,' Orion said, finally opening his eyes. I watched, transfixed, as he took a second bite. This time, he dragged the spoon out of his mouth like he was savouring every morsel. 'You're really, *really* good.'

'Thank you,' I said, pride bursting through me. 'But remember, *I* didn't bake these. If Ivy finds out I'm working at another bakery, I'll lose the apprenticeship. So, when Melodie sells them, she has to say she outsourced them or made them herself.'

'Promise,' he replied and gave me a grin. 'I'll keep your secret; you'll keep baking for the Treasure Trove, and *we'll* break the love curse.'

My heart jumped and my stomach hollowed upon hearing his use of *we*. I couldn't help but think of what a disaster it was for me the last time I wanted us to be a *we*.

Instead of saying something though, I just reached out to take a bite of the tart.

'Mine,' Orion said, possessively, as he stuck his spoon into the tart once more.

I grinned and allowed myself to be comforted by the one thing that was always the same about Orion Hawthorne: he had a sweet tooth.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

Luck-enchanted macaroons. Red-coloured and dusted with the gold that reminded me of Silas's eyes when he shifted into his werewolf form. Filled with a charmed spiced-apple buttercream. They were so perfect, each delicate shell crisp and just ready for a crunch. I made them yesterday, after my third shift at the Treasure Trove.

'You're going to crush them,' Sofia reprimanded, nudging me with her elbow. I looked down at the box I was holding, and I was indeed crushing the sides of it.

'I'm nervous,' I murmured, teeth chattering. One could say it was because of the fact that we were sitting in the front-row bleachers of Maple Falls High's stadium in the freezing cold, wrapped in our school-coloured scarves. But it was probably more because I somehow had to get Silas to eat one of the macaroons I brought.

'I didn't think you were such a rugby fan,' Sofia remarked, dubiously. I had texted her to join Raven and me, and we'd all met at Charmed & Toasty before coming here. Sofia had gone all out, charming her flower bracelets to the school colours and dressing in the school jerseys. She looked like she'd always lived in Maple Falls.

'She's not,' Raven snorted, half her face covered with her chunky scarf. 'She's a massive fan of the *captain* of the team.'

I shot her a glare, but no one was listening to us; everyone was screaming, hollering or truly invested in the game. Sofia giggled beside me and nudged my shoulder again.

'He's cute, I get it,' Sofia said, and then looked down at the macaroons. 'Are those for him?'

I nodded, feeling my cheeks warm when Sofia gave me a look that said *you're just too sweet*.

‘How are you going to give them to him?’ Sofia questioned. ‘Do you two know each other already?’

‘*Well*,’ I stretched out the word, unsure of how to respond. ‘We do know each other a little. We’ve just never, you know, really had a full conversation. Ever.’

Sofia blinked. ‘So, you need to get his attention.’

I groaned softly and then leaned back against the uncomfortable bleacher seat. ‘Yes, but look at him. He’s winning like crazy – right?’ I checked with Raven, who nodded. ‘So, there’s not really a reason for him to eat my luck-infused macaroons.’

‘Yeah, he’s on a streak,’ Sofia said sympathetically, and then pressed her arm against mine sweetly. ‘But you know, the tides could change.’

They didn’t. By half-time, I was sure they wouldn’t and Orion’s plan of having me sit in the front row was stupid. I wanted to text him and tell him that, but I was too engrossed by the half-time entertainment. Aka, Diya Jaan snatching the microphone from the commentator box to read a poem about her love for the rugby captain.

‘Silas Moon,’ Diya cried into the microphone, and my heart plummeted.

‘Oh no,’ I murmured, wanting to crawl under the bleachers and hide. As someone who consistently embarrassed herself, I felt unbearably guilty at the thought of being the cause of someone else’s humiliation.

‘I love you to the *moon* and back,’ Diya continued, holding the microphone with an ironclad grip. ‘If I could, I would climb to the sky and find every star and bring it back – get *off* me, Dane!’

We watched as Diya’s brother wrestled the microphone out of her hands, the scuffle vibrating through the speakers. I tore my gaze from the pair to look at Silas, who was standing on the field, cheeks flushed red, blonde hair plastered to his forehead. He must’ve felt my stare because, quick as a flash, our gazes collided.

I watched recognition light up his irises, and he looked like he was about to say something, but the coach cut into his line of vision. My heart was thrumming in my throat and I felt shaky inside. I was pathetic, wasn’t I?

The game started again, and I settled in for another forty minutes of nothing interesting.

Except then things suddenly started going wrong. It started small – a fumble with the ball from Silas, another player tripping on the shifting

grass. And then, before we knew it, the glowing red scoreboard was showing that the opposing team had caught up.

When a time out was finally called, I watched as Silas stalked to his bench, looking bewildered by the turn of events.

‘What happened?’ I asked Sofia and Raven, my mouth agape. ‘Literally, *what* happened?’

Sofia shrugged. ‘The tide changed.’

Raven sat up and then sighed. ‘The tide, unfortunately, didn’t change. *He* just happened to be here.’

I followed Raven’s line of vision to over our shoulders and to the top of the bleachers. And there he was – Orion. Not wearing even one of the school colours, his mouth covered by a chunky scarf like his sister. But I could tell he was casting spells, from the way his silver eyes gleamed brightly in the night.

They finally get a moment alone. She has one question, and this time she wants an honest answer.

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Orion Hawthorne was *cheating*.

Our eyes met, and I waited for him to look sheepish, embarrassed, anything. But one annoying corner of his mouth lifted, and he gave me a little five-fingered wave before turning his attention back to the game.

I stood up automatically, affronted and disbelieving, but Raven yanked me back down. Sofia looked beyond amused by the entire exchange, which told me how she felt about this.

‘He’s helping you,’ Raven said, in a rare show of agreement with her brother. ‘And now *you* need to help you. Go offer Silas a macaroon before the game restarts.’

‘We can come with you,’ Sofia offered, and then laced her arm in mine after sharing a *look* with Raven.

Raven also linked her arm with mine, and then the two practically marched me down the field. Dew-dappled grass made the hem of my jeans wet, the air was cold and Silas's form was coming closer and closer.

I wanted to dig my heels into the ground and force them to stop.

'Stop right there.' Trent, the vampire who'd bullied me all those years ago, stood in our way. 'No speaking to the captain.'

'He's not a celebrity,' Raven shot back, looking around Trent's large form. 'He doesn't need a bodyguard.'

The vampire huffed, and his eyes narrowed on us.

'Trent,' Silas said, standing behind him. 'What have I said about doing this overprotective schtick? It's embarrassing, dude.'

Trent blanched and then stepped out of the way. 'Sorry, it's just, it's – you know. It's the girl –'

'Maya,' Silas interrupted. 'Her name is Maya.' Then he turned away from his teammate to face me. This close I could see the sweat clinging to the blonde strands of his hair, and the gold rings around his blue irises.

'I – uh –' my mouth was filled with ash; my body was wound tight. This was my nightmare and my daydreams coming to life before my eyes.

'Maya baked good-luck macaroons. You're losing badly; I would suggest eating one,' Raven interrupted, and thrust forward the box in my hands.

'You baked these for me?' Silas asked, taking the box delicately from my hands.

'Yes,' I said, softly. I swallowed tightly, forcing myself to speak. To grow a spine. To remind myself that Silas was just a boy. Who I liked a lot. But a boy, nonetheless. 'They're apple flavoured. And they're spelled for good luck. It won't – won't change the whole game, but they sharpen intuition and remove obstacles. It won't last forever though, just for a few hours.'

'Is eating them cheating?' Silas questioned, eyebrows crinkling together. 'I don't use things to enhance my performance.'

'There's foul play in this game,' Raven said, with a tone so matter of fact, she could've told us that the moon was actually the sun and we would've believed her. 'Can't say who, can't say what. So, it's not enhancing the performance, it's levelling the playing field.'

'If you're worried about whether I've baked them wrong …' I started, feeling panic thicken under my skin.

Silas's brow lifted and then his gaze slid back to me. 'I know how good you are, Maya.'

If he said my name one more time, I was sure I was going to burst into flames. I didn't trust myself to speak again, so I nodded. Silas held my gaze, flipped open the box and pulled out one of the macaroons and bit into it.

'Players!' The referee shouted, before either of us could say another word. 'Back to the game!'

The girls and I went back to our seats, and when I'd settled back down, I finally glanced over my shoulder to see Orion was gone. I should've felt relieved, but there was a sting of concern biting against my skin. But it wasn't my place to worry about Orion, not any more.

So, I focused on the game. I cheered when Silas made every catch and nailed every throw; I celebrated when Maple Falls High was announced as the winner. And when a cheerleader came over asking if we'd like to come to the after-party at Golden Shell Beach, I said *yes*.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

Golden Shell Beach was the go-to spot after any rugby game – it wasn't an invite-only event, but only those who actually cared about the sport went to celebrate.

'Silas is there,' Raven pointed out, as we arrived, and then her gaze turned poisonous. 'Next to Dean Blackwood.'

I glanced at the vampire, with his wire-frame glasses, high cheekbones and mussy light-brown hair. He was grinning at another vampire, Cameron, and the moonlight glinted off his sharpened incisors. He glanced our way, and I saw him take in Raven; his mouth quirked into a smile and his eyes darkened. All of a sudden, his voice was an octave higher.

'And then, I got the highest mark in the hexes class, set the curve for everyone. Not that I'm worried about anyone beating me,' he said, his tone all teasing and unnecessarily loud.

'Raven, don't –'

But it was lost on her. No one could get under her skin like Dean. Sofia and I watched her go, winced as they got into an argument and then turned away because watching Raven decimate someone, while entertaining, was also vicious. I'd feel bad if I didn't know Dean could handle it.

'So,' Sofia said, while leading me to the drinks table and grabbing two glasses of strawberry punch. 'Are you going to tell me why Orion Hawthorne made multiple players trip up today?'

'He – uh – he was helping me get Silas's attention,' I said, because it wasn't a lie.

Sofia's eyebrows lifted, and she took a long sip of her drink. 'Is that the only reason?'

'It's – well – you – see –' I stuttered through a ring of responses, and Sofia watched me silently until she finally put her hand on my arm and stopped me.

‘The curse on the town,’ Sofia started, quietly. ‘Did you have something to do with it?’

I gaped at her. ‘How did you know?’

Sofia shrugged a shoulder. ‘When you’re the new one in town, you see things that everyone else overlooks. Plus, every time I mentioned Frost, you looked physically pained.’

‘It was a mistake,’ I started, and the whole story spilled out in a long whisper and with lots of gesticulating. ‘I just wanted to see who my soulmate was. I didn’t want all of this to happen. Especially not to Frost, or Diya or anyone else. I need to find my soulmate and share true love’s kiss under the autumn moon. Orion’s helping me break the curse in exchange for helping him with his friend’s bakery – the Treasure Trove.’

‘That’s where you’ve been going after school while Raven and I hit the library,’ Sofia correctly guessed, then her eyebrows pinched together, like she was trying to finish the sentence herself but couldn’t come up with the answer. ‘And Silas?’

Now I felt my face heat up, and I suddenly wished I was good enough to do a cooling spell against my skin. ‘On the night of the autumn moon, it would be smarter for me to have him there when I cast the soulmate spell. The curse breaks when I share true love’s kiss. So, you know, I wouldn’t have to search across town for him if he was right there.’

‘And you’re sure he’s your soulmate?’

Now the blush went even hotter, even brighter. ‘Yes.’

‘OK.’ Sofia nodded, absorbing all the information. ‘Thank you for telling me.’ She squeezed my shoulder. ‘I’d be happy to help you solve this, if you’d let me.’

I wasn’t going to cry. I wasn’t going to cry. I wasn’t going to cry.

‘And, as my first way of helping you, I’m going to do this,’ Sofia said, and then *shouted* across the beach. ‘Silas!’

For a girl who was so petite, Sofia had the voice of a loudspeaker. Either that, or she charmed her voice to be louder. Regardless, I saw Silas’s head jerk towards the sound of his name. Then his gaze landed on me, a smile tugged at his mouth, and he was walking over to us.

I turned to Sofia, but she was gone. Literally, all I saw was her wings – a glitter of gossamer lost in the crowd. I couldn’t even hiss her name before Silas was standing before me.

He had changed into his jersey, his hair was all damp and windswept, and the gold rings around his blue irises burned brighter.

‘You made it,’ Silas said, grinning.

‘I made it,’ I echoed, because it was easier to repeat what he said than trying to make my own conversation.

‘I’m glad, because now I get to tell you: you’re my good-luck charm,’ Silas said, and there was an earnestness in his voice that made my stomach flip.

‘That might have been the macaroons,’ I added, with a little laugh.

Silas shrugged and then looked around. A sudden seriousness slipped into his expression. ‘Could we talk alone?’

I nodded, unsure of what *alone* meant. But Silas seemed to know. He took a few steps back and beckoned me to follow him down the beach. I hardly believed I was going to be alone with him for the first time ever. We walked close to the shoreline, waves lapping at our feet.

Finally, when the party was just a speck in the distance, Silas stopped and turned to face me.

‘I wanted to apologize,’ Silas said in one long breath.

‘Apologize?’ I asked, entirely confused.

‘About what Trent said today. I just wanted you to know that I didn’t – I don’t – think you’re cursed.’

‘It isn’t your fault,’ I replied, heart all soft and gooey at the fact that he even thought to apologize. ‘But thank you for apologizing anyway.’

‘Well,’ Silas said, looking less serious than before. ‘Thank you for absolving me, but I suppose I *do* have an ulterior motive.’

He said that a little wickedly, and I felt my heart rate kick up. ‘Do you?’

‘Now that I’ve apologized, I could say that you and I –’ he gestured between the two of us – ‘are friends?’

‘We’re friends,’ I confirmed, with a steadiness I did not feel.

I’m in love with you, pretty sure you’re my soulmate, but, OK, friends will do.

‘So, you’ll come to the next game? I need my lucky charm cheering for me.’

There was no way I was going to say no. Not when he levelled that smile at me.

Before I agreed, Orion’s words flashed in my mind.

Build common ground. Once he notices you, get him to like you. Make a connection with him, find similar interests. That's how you build a strong foundation in a relationship.

'Depends,' I said, after a moment, rocking on my heels thoughtfully and playing it cool. 'Think you could help me with potions?'

His face dropped a little. 'I'm an awful pick for that. I'm not great at potions.'

I smiled. 'Neither am I. Guess we could be awful together?'

His laugh was loud, and that sound felt like a victory on its own.

'All right, Maya,' he replied, smile still wide on his face. 'Let's meet up for a study session. How does next weekend sound?'

Like it couldn't come soon enough.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

‘I believe the words you’re looking for are “thank you”,’ Orion said, while languidly sprawled on the stool in the Treasure Trove kitchen.

‘Thank you?’ I asked, aghast, with my hands wrist-deep in dough. ‘You *cheated*.’

‘And? You needed an opportunity,’ Orion explained, and pushed himself off the stool. ‘It worked, didn’t it? You and the wolf have got your little study date together this weekend, right?’

‘Yes,’ I said, grinning down at the dough while thinking of the text from Silas, inviting me to his house.

‘And now you’re smiling at dough. Charming,’ Orion said, markedly unimpressed. ‘What are you making anyway?’

‘Glazed dough-knots,’ I said, moving the dough to the countertop. ‘Spelled to soften arguments; meant to be shared between two people.’ I glanced up at him. ‘You and your dad should have one of these.’

I shouldn’t have said it, but the words tumbled out of me without thought.

Orion sighed. ‘Soft and my father don’t go together when it comes to me, Reverie.’

‘If you don’t want to be a detective, what do you want to be now?’ I asked, twisting the dough.

‘You already know,’ Orion said softly, and I paused for a moment.

I did know. Or I thought I had. Back when we used to tell each other things. But I’d spent so long trying to force the memories away, I couldn’t tell what had been real and what hadn’t.

‘Being a thorn in my side?’ I responded lightly, but something in Orion’s gaze dimmed and he stepped back to let me work.

Soon, I was done with the knots, and Melodie came in from the shop floor, practically vibrating with joy. Behind her, the Treasure Trove wasn’t exactly *teeming* with customers, but it was fuller than before.

‘Once these go out,’ Melodie said with a grin, ‘everyone who loved the tarts will come *flying* back. I mean, not that the usual bakes aren’t brilliant too, but those tarts on your first day? They had all the dragon’s *buzzing*.’

At the end of her breathless declaration, Melodie paused, her gaze flicking between Orion – who was pressed against the corner of the kitchen, still looking irritated – and me. Some sort of understanding dawned upon her, because she suddenly said: ‘Orion.’

His head snapped to her.

‘Think you could take those out to the shop floor for me?’

Without a word, he grabbed the first batch of my freshly glazed knots and left the kitchen.

‘You know, Orion’s not a bad guy.’

I looked at Melodie – our relationship was built on the mutual understanding that I was here to help her and most of our chats were confined to baking. Me helping Melodie learn the ins and outs of the craft, and Melodie encouraging me to do the bakes that I considered *risky* at times.

But we’ve never discussed Orion Hawthorne.

‘I’ve known him since he was eight,’ I told her, my mouth tugging into an awkward grin.

‘Probably as your best friend’s brother, right?’ Melodie probed.

‘We were friends once,’ I replied, suddenly feeling defensive. As if I had to prove to Melodie that I knew Orion. Truly knew him. Like that even mattered.

‘Then you know Orion’s got a good heart,’ Melodie offered, lightly. ‘You know that he’d help someone in a heartbeat – even someone who’s bitten off more than they can chew with their family’s bakery. Or someone who is struggling in class. He’s the guy you call when you want to move furniture.’

I suppose it was true. Still, I didn’t want to think of him as anything but the guy who broke my heart and got me the second point on my licence.

‘I’m just saying,’ Melodie softened her voice. ‘He didn’t have the easiest time at MAC, I know that much. He was miserable, and he wanted to come home. Now he is, and he’s helping me and helping you. I think he’s trying to find his place here again.’

Her statements left me strangely breathless.

‘And that’s the last time I’m going to butt into whatever –’ Melodie waved a hand in the air – ‘is going on between the two of you. In fact, I’m

going to relieve him from *my* job out front.' She paused at the door. 'Just, think about what I said, OK?'

Orion and I were closing up the Treasure Trove after he'd insisted that Melodie leave early. I was midway through re-sorting all my measuring cups – an infuriating task really – when Orion spoke.

'Would now be a bad time to start on another spell?' Orion asked.

I looked over my shoulder to see that the task he'd taken on – dishwashing – was done.

I sighed and looked at him sardonically.

'What?' he said. 'I'm just living up to the task *you* gave me.'

'There's no performance bonus, you know,' I retorted, turning back to my station.

'Lucky for you, I'm just dedicated,' he said, and walked over to me.

Hanging from his middle finger was a locket – a gold chain, with a heart-shaped pendant at the end. The pendant was made of red rubies with gold thorned vines twisted around it. I couldn't tell if he'd spelled the locket out of thin air, or if he had it in his pocket the entire time and only just decided to take it out.

'I saw it in the Curiosity Shop, and it seemed fitting for you, Reverie,' Orion said, and there was nothing to his tone. No teasing, no mocking, no probing.

I knew dragons liked gold and gems; it was in their nature to seek treasure. I didn't find it surprising that the glinting jewellery had caught Orion's eye. The part that threw me off wasn't his voice, but the fact that he was right: this pendant felt fitting for me. It was something I would have chosen. And that unnerving feeling of being so clearly seen by someone overwhelmed me.

I always thought I saw Orion too, but, since returning to Maple Falls, I couldn't help but catalogue all the differences. The streak of rebellion, the easy way he smiled, helping *me* just because I asked.

This wasn't the Orion I knew, even though he walked like him, talked like him and looked like him. This was a virtual stranger.

'Right,' I said, nerves bundling in my stomach. I stared at the necklace like it was a cursed piece of jewellery, but I didn't grasp it. Orion didn't look even slightly offended, as if he expected my hesitation. 'What kind of spell are we trying today?'

‘You’ve mastered the summoning spell,’ Orion replied, and then grinned. ‘My head is grateful for that.’

I rolled my eyes and pointed my dough-marked finger at him. ‘Go *on*.’

‘We’re going to do a protection spell,’ Orion replied, and he held the necklace between us. ‘It’s a simple one, commonly done on jewellery.’

‘And if it goes wrong?’ I asked, eyeing the ruby pendant and gold vines. It would be such a shame if it burst into flames or melted into a puddle. Or blew up the Treasure Trove.

‘Stop focusing on the possibility of the spell going wrong,’ Orion chided, dangling the necklace a little. ‘Now, my arm is getting tired holding this. Test the enchantment. Please.’

I didn’t reply to him, or his bossiness. There was a buzzing noise filling my head, my nerves tightening even more in the pit of my stomach. I tried to tell myself it was a simple spell, done on jewellery all the time. You’ve got this.

But it wasn’t as loud as the noise in my mind.

I reached over and grasped the pendant. The cool jewelled metal pressed into the flesh of my palm, my eyes fluttered shut and I whispered the spell.

‘*Guard from evil, day or night, protect the wearer from every fright*.’

I waited for my magic to awaken the way it did when I baked; for the familiar warmth to buzz at my fingertips like an electric current. I even waited for the pull that came when I was doing the summoning spell. But nothing happened.

I opened my eyes slightly, and I saw Orion’s confused expression. A sudden urge to cry made my throat ache.

Determined not to be a disappointment after all the help he’d given me, I tried the spell again. This time, a little louder.

‘*Guard from evil, day or night, protect the wearer from every fright*.’

Still, nothing happened. It was like the soulmate cookies all over again.

I tried again. And again. And again.

Until Orion gently pulled the locket out of my hand. Tears welled in the corners of my eyes. I couldn’t look at him, unwilling to see the disappointment on his face. I blinked furiously, jaw setting tight. I downright *refused* to cry in front of him.

‘So, it’s not just about feeling comfortable,’ Orion said softly. ‘You’re getting better, more comfortable with spellcasting. Something’s just blocking you. But the fact that you tried again – that’s improvement.’

I swallowed roughly. ‘My head just gets loud.’

Orion bit his lip and nodded. ‘Then I’ll find a way to channel that. But this wasn’t a failure, believe me.’

I tried to, I really did. ‘I’m just worried I’m not going to have progressed enough by the time we get to the autumn moon.’

Orion’s gaze softened, and he let out a breath. ‘Let’s progress with another part of our plan in the meantime then. In your study session with Silas, make sure you be respectful to his brothers but don’t be *overly* nice. He’s the youngest and had to fight for attention among all his raucous siblings.’

I gaped at him. ‘How do you have this information on him?’

‘I’m a detective’s son,’ Orion shot back, all liquid confidence. ‘I may not want the job, but I know how to do some digging.’ I was still staring at him when he continued. ‘Also, a little homework for you.’

‘Homework?’

‘Talk to Rowan Hale,’ Orion said, and then leaned back against the counter. ‘Who better to give you an insight than the big bad wolf himself?’

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Last summer – mid-July

There was no feeling quite as sweet as victory.

‘You cheated.’ Orion pouted as we walked down my street. ‘Stop grinning, you lunatic. You definitely cheated.’

‘You just can’t handle the fact that I can eat more burgers than you, can you?’ I crowed, waving the short, golden trophy Ronnie had given me.

‘You must have magicked your stomach to have more space,’ Orion tried to rationalize. ‘I’m far bigger than you, there’s no way you could eat more than me!’

‘Or here’s a thought.’ I stopped us right outside my house. I turned to him, moonlight casting him in a silvery light, and my heart did that painful, twisting thing that I was starting to become far too familiar with. ‘I’m just better than you.’

Orion rolled his eyes and lifted his hand to the house behind me. ‘Inside, Reverie.’

I glanced over my shoulder. The house was pitch-black, which was expected because Orion and I were out late – well past Mum’s bedtime. Rani was out with her friends and, while I didn’t have a curfew, Mum would hear me come in, wake up and probably have a thousand questions to ask about who I was with and why I wasn’t spending my summer brushing up on spell work.

I felt a tug on the sleeve of my jacket – well, Orion’s jacket that he’d draped over my shoulders while we were walking, but not before reprimanding me for not grabbing a sweatshirt. I turned my attention back to him, to see him watching me with furrowed brows.

‘Want to stay over in Raven’s room?’ he asked, gently. ‘All I ask for are breakfast cinnamon rolls in return.’

‘Does your sister know you’re renting out her room?’ I asked, with a little laugh.

‘Raven knows what she needs to know,’ he replied, and there was a beat of silence between us.

Raven and I had called each other a lot this summer, and I had told her about all the things I’d gotten up to – watching the latest summer romcom, collecting new seashells from the beach, taste-testing every drink on Ronnie’s menu, late-night walks through Maple Falls – but I hadn’t mentioned who I was doing all this with. Part of me was afraid of her reaction – not that she’d be mad at me for hanging out with Orion; we used to when we were younger.

I was more afraid of what she would hear in my voice. She was my best friend. She’d hear the tremor in my words. She’d know that I was crushing on her brother, hard. What she’d think of that, I didn’t want to imagine.

I wished I could say I felt guilt, but it was more a sense of thrill. Ever since I’d come to the earth-shattering realization that I liked Orion, I’d felt the need to do something wild. Something completely selfish.

‘I should go back inside,’ I replied, reluctantly. ‘Rani and I have a whole day planned together tomorrow.’

Was that disappointment flashing across his face? ‘That’s sweet, Reverie.’

‘Think you’ll survive one day without me?’ I probed, teasingly.

He sighed like it physically pained him, making the smile on my mouth curve wider. ‘I think I’ll make it through – though our kitchen will miss you.’

‘I’ll miss your kitchen,’ I said wistfully, thinking of Mrs Hawthorne’s industrial magicked ovens. ‘Maybe you could try and bake something while I’m busy tomorrow.’

Orion shook his head vehemently. ‘You’re the baker in this relationship, Reverie. I’m merely the taste-tester, and dishwasher.’ He grinned. ‘Plus, I should probably use my time tomorrow to look up teacher apprenticeships in Maple Falls.’

‘Yes,’ I said, enthusiastically. ‘I’m sure once you show your father the virtue of becoming a teacher, he’ll have to understand why you don’t want to go to MAC.’

Orion smiled back, the kind of smile I liked to think was reserved for me alone. ‘You might be the only person more excited about my future than my parents, Reverie.’

‘What can I say, I like to see dreams soar.’

He snorted. ‘Right, let’s get you off to bed before you drop any more corny lines.’

I laughed and started to shrug off his jacket, before he stopped me.

‘Return it to me later,’ he said, softly, like he was scared speaking any louder would shatter the quiet peace between us. ‘It looks better on you anyway.’

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

People tend to be more receptive when you give them something to eat. It's a lesson I learned pretty early on. Take my Mum for example: she's always more reasonable once she's had her daily *pain au chocolat* at lunch.

'So, you're going to go study at the Moon household,' Mum remarked, as we walked with our arms linked down Main Street towards the library.

We didn't often get time to spend together; with Mum being mayor, and me being the disappointing daughter. Our house was a stage set for sleeping in our rooms and seeing each other in the kitchen every morning and every night. But then there were moments, like this, where it was just us, on Mum's lunch break, walking down the street.

'Mhm,' I said, taking a long sip of my hot chocolate.

'You know, when Ivy told me you were taking a break from your shifts at the Wishing Well to focus on your studies, I was pleasantly surprised,' Mum said, her gaze darting to me. 'So, I assume that's what you've been doing all week after school, studying?'

Agreeing wasn't a total lie – my lessons with Orion meant I *was* studying in a way. And my spellcasting had improved. Even I could see it now.

'Yes, studying,' I replied, lightly. 'And this evening I have a study session with Silas.'

'Silas,' Mum said, as she tightened her arm in mine. 'Good kid. Very sweet. I wouldn't hate him as a son-in-law.'

'*Mum*,' I said, looking around wildly in case anyone heard her. 'Don't say that!'

'What?' Mum said, innocently. 'Too soon to be thinking of marriage?'

'Yes, yes,' I replied vehemently.

'Fine, fine. I still like him,' Mum said, then her lips twitched at the corner. 'But your father would've *hated* him.'

I stopped in the middle of the street, refusing to move until she elaborated. Mum didn't shy away from talking about Dad, but the stories I heard about him came in moments like these – unexpected.

'What do you mean?' I asked, unrelenting.

Mum shrugged, shaking her head lightly. 'Silas is the epitome of everything your father didn't have in his life growing up – good family ties, being the town's star player, for example. Your father was a warlock with a motorcycle and a dream to own his own bookstore.'

'Those don't sound like bad things,' I said, honestly. I liked that Silas was stable. 'Why would Dad have hated him?'

Mum grinned. 'Because he would hate any guy you liked. You could've liked the best guy in town, with a perfect track record, and the thought of you going to a study session with him would've made your father spend the entire evening by the door, waiting for you to get home.'

An ache bloomed in my chest at the image.

She reached up to press a palm to my cheek. 'I'm sorry. I didn't tell you that to make you miss him – I told you that so you know, in my eyes, and your dad's eyes, no one was ever going to be good enough for our little girl.'

My chest clenched with affection. I loved this version of my mother. Lived for it. Even if she came stained at the edges with grief. I hated the dance we did back home, the one where we said things that hurt one another – even when we didn't mean to. Maybe we could buy a tent and camp out in the Firewood Forest for the rest of our lives.

'All right, come on,' Mum said, pulling me along. 'I've got to get back to the office, and the library's only a few blocks away.'

I smiled at her as we both stopped outside the library.

'I love you,' I said, right before her phone began to ring.

She picked it up and pressed a kiss to my cheek, before mouthing 'I love you' back. I watched as she left and let myself feel the rage of emotions whirlpooling through me: happiness that we'd had a nice morning together, annoyed that it had to be so short, and frustration most of all. Then, I boxed them up and pushed them away, turning on my heel to enter the library.

I found Rowan Hale standing in the centre, commanding the books to move with quick, quiet murmurs. As I approached, his spellcasting paused, and he turned around to look at me.

‘Hi,’ I said, tentatively, grateful that I was holding a box of brownies in my hands.

Rowan’s gaze fell to the box, and then back to me. ‘Bribery, kid? I like your style.’

‘They’re not for free; I come with questions,’ I said, honestly. ‘Sorry.’

‘Come on.’ Rowan beckoned me, and we found ourselves in the self-help section of the library. Before I could say anything, he held out his hands for the dessert, and I handed it over.

I watched as he opened the box, and his nostrils flared with the scent.

‘Charmed?’

‘Just plain old brownies, actually.’

Rowan took one of the squares and bit into it. Watching someone eat something you made, silently, was its own kind of torture. He gestured with the half-eaten brownie still in his hand. ‘All right, hit me with the questions.’

‘I’m going over to study at a werewolf household. I’ve never actually been invited into one before.’

‘Not friends with many werewolves?’ Rowan asked.

I shook my head and added defensively, ‘To be fair, we only have like two packs here. The Stars and the Moons.’

His expression clouded ever so slightly, and I wanted to smack myself; why would I inadvertently mention that Rowan was pack-less? He’d always been pack-less, a story that I’d never been able to unravel. It was just him and his grandfather.

‘You probably know the general stuff,’ Rowan said, finally. ‘Pack meals every night. Everyone has a seat. The Moons have an alpha, but that’s it – no betas or omegas. Other than that, if you’re not going on the night of a full moon, or the night before, they should function like a normal family.’

‘Normal,’ I echoed, hoping it was true. ‘What about the stuff I wouldn’t know?’

‘Just don’t wear anything *too* scented,’ Rowan said, and then gestured to his head. ‘It could mess with their senses. On top of that, they will know when your emotional scents change – so if you’re stressed, they can tell.’

‘Thank you,’ I said, grateful for the knowledge he was sharing – even if I’d had to bribe him for it. And then something hit me. ‘Wait – how did you know I was talking about the Moon family?’

The werewolf's mouth curled into a smile, making the scar on his lips stretch. He looked sinister and wicked, and I could see why some of the girls at school were obsessed with him. 'You know the good thing about being the town outcast, little witch? I see everything. I hear everything.'

'Was that supposed to be threatening?' I said, only half pretending I wasn't a little bit nervous.

'Nope,' Rowan retorted, with a pop of his lips.

'I told my sister you said hi, by the way.' If he thought he'd get under my skin, then we could go tit for tat.

His eyes widened, and his smile dropped.

'And what did she say?' Rowan asked, tone too casual.

'She said hello back.' And then, because I couldn't resist, I added, 'She also called you a jerk.'

His smile came back, full wattage. 'Not the worst thing she's called me.'

'What else has she called you?'

Rowan stepped neatly around me, snagging another brownie from the box. 'Question time is done, little witch. Have fun with your werewolf.'

The Moon house was near the Firewood Forest and was larger than our house. It had to be to fit the entire family. I'd never been inside, because there was never a reason to be.

Not until now.

I stood outside the dark-brown door that had a claw-shaped gold knocker and tried not to throw up on the porch. My hands were full – this time with the moonlit blueberry muffins that Ivy had thought were too risky when I'd tried to suggest them the first time.

But Melodie had loved the idea of them. They were intended to help werewolves with their shifts, and she was more than happy to let me to use the Treasure Trove's kitchen for my experiment. So now I was armed with muffins and full of nerves that refused to dissipate. Just when I was sure I should leave, turn around and walk away, my phone buzzed.

I slipped it out and read the flurry of texts.

RAVEN
Stop freaking out

SOFIA
Yeah we can feel your panic from here.

RAVEN
Orion says to knock on the door already.

MAYA
Is he stalking me????

I looked up accusingly to the sky, trying to see a flash of silver among the clouds. But there wasn't any.

RAVEN HAWTHORNE ADDED ORION-THORN-IN-MY-SIDE TO THE CHAT

You were ready to forgive him. Then you read her side of the story.

Find your next "just one more chapter" on Lokepub.

ORION-THORN-IN-MY-SIDE
The 'Unstable Spell Club'. Really?

SOFIA
Why am I not surprised you text with punctuation

ORION-THORN-IN-MY-SIDE
Why am I here?

RAVEN
Because I’m not being a messenger between you and Maya.

ORION-THORN-IN-MY-SIDE
Has she knocked on the door yet?

MAYA
No.

SOFIA
Maya!!

RAVEN
COME ON, MAYA.

ORION-THORN-IN-MY-SIDE
OK. Don’t knock on the door. Here’s a video of Inspector Vale putting on a candlelit play version of his love story with Ivy. Imagine having to watch this every day, Reverie. Every. Day.

That was all the encouragement I needed. I pulled the knocker and waited. The door swung open moments later, and there was a man in the doorway. A man who looked like Silas, but a little older and far more rugged. It must have been one of his older brothers.

‘Si!’ the man called, his voice booming. ‘Your girl’s here!’

I wasn’t sure whether I should correct him or preen at the assumption. I was saved from doing either by Silas appearing behind his brother.

‘Stop being annoying, Cassius,’ Silas said, elbowing the other out of the doorway. He stepped aside to let me in. ‘Maya, you made it.’

‘Well, I mean, it wasn’t really hard to find the place. I’ve lived here my whole life,’ I teased, and stepped inside the Moon house.

It was nothing like I imagined; for one, it was even bigger on the inside. The house had a massive foyer, off-white walls and a living room that had a gorgeous forest-green couch. Pictures filled the wall next to the staircase, showcasing all the brothers and their lone sister at different stages of their lives. It was so obviously a home that had been well loved.

‘Your home is amazing,’ I said, and my voice was filled with genuine warmth.

‘Well, that’s awfully sweet of you,’ a feminine voice called from behind me.

I turned to find Lyra Moon, second eldest of the pack and only daughter, standing at the top of the stairs.

‘Hi,’ I waved, gingerly. I’d known Lyra a little; she used to volunteer during the bake sales, and we’d been teamed up before.

‘Si, we’ve left the dining room for you,’ Lyra said, sweetly.

‘Which is *directly* below my room,’ another voice called, from somewhere in the house. ‘So, you know, whatever you talk about, we can hear you.’

Silas’s ears turned pink, which made my heart stutter, and Lyra shouted something back to her other brother, I assumed. A squabble broke out between the siblings, the cacophony of raised voices so natural here. It wasn’t until someone came out of the kitchen, opposite to where Silas and I were standing, that there was actual silence.

‘Would you all *please* be quiet?’

Silas’s mother was well known in the community; Mrs Moon was tall and willowy, and she ran the theatre in town.

‘Maya,’ she said, when the noises of her children finally quietened down. ‘Welcome to our home – I’m so sorry for all of them.’

She enveloped me in a hug. I had to be careful of the muffins, which Silas kindly swooped in and grabbed. When his mother finally let me go, she saw the muffins and made a noise of delight.

‘They’re moonlit blueberry muffins.’ I explained their magic properties, and Mrs Moon’s mouth turned into a perfect ‘o’.

‘Well, aren’t you talented,’ she said, jovially. ‘Silas, thank you for finally inviting someone who doesn’t just want to talk about rugby.’

He rolled his eyes affectionately, his ears still pink. ‘Yes, yes, now that I’ve been thoroughly embarrassed, can we please go?’

His mother waved us off, and Silas led me to the dining room, where there was a large cherry-wood table in the centre and china cabinets stacked against the wall. There must have been an unspoken seating arrangement, because Silas moved automatically to one of the chairs right at the end of the table, and I took the one opposite him.

‘Sorry about them,’ Silas started, looking genuinely embarrassed. ‘They just like to tease. A lot.’

I laughed a little, glad to be the one who wasn’t on the back foot for once. ‘It’s nice. It comes from a place of love, right?’

‘Right. Some call it love, others call it attempting to humiliate me,’ Silas retorted. ‘You should’ve seen them at the last game – they came with banners, and they kept screaming my name.’

‘Everyone was screaming your name,’ I said, lightly.

His gaze narrowed on me, a smile tugging on his mouth. ‘You weren’t. Not in the beginning, at least.’

‘You were watching me?’

The words flew out of my mouth, intoned with the kind of edge I didn’t know I possessed.

‘Hard not to,’ Silas remarked, his voice like a pebble skipping on the surface of water. ‘You’ve always caught my eye.’

I laughed, a burst of a sound. Then I gestured between the two of us. ‘Then how is this the longest we’ve ever spoken, Silas?’

His smile widened. ‘That’s ’cause you’ve always been running from me. I’ve *tried* talking to you, but you’re always disappearing before I can get a word in edgewise.’

I think back on all the klutzy moments I’ve had with Silas, and whether I ever stuck around for Silas’s reaction. He was right – I usually fled.

‘Most of our interactions have been embarrassing for me,’ I confessed, hoping I wasn’t making the wrong choice by admitting that. Hoping it wasn’t obvious *why* I always seemed to mess up around him.

Silas’s gaze softened, and he leaned forward against the table. ‘Well, I’ve always liked to chase. And now that I’ve finally caught up to you, allow me to introduce myself.’

I raised an eyebrow, watching as he leaned back in his chair. I leaned back in my own chair, mimicking him, excitement buzzing through me.

‘Hi, I’m Silas Moon,’ he said, blue eyes glittering with mirth.

I realized now how right I was about Silas being my soulmate. His home, his family, him – all of it aligned perfectly with me. He was my soulmate, and the night of the autumn moon would prove it.

‘Hi, I’m Maya Reverie.’

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

For the first time in my life, I actually enjoyed going to school. Was it partially because I'd executed a number of spells in my charms practical, perfectly? Yes. But it was mostly because Silas spoke to me.

A lot.

Not only did the blonde werewolf drag his chair closer to mine in potions, at lunch he dropped on to the table with Sofia, Raven and I to make sure we were all coming to his game next week. And now he was walking me out of the school building, his usual group of friends seemingly forgotten.

'So, question for the day: do you think studying with snacks is a distraction or an added bonus to the great time we're going to have tomorrow?' Silas questioned, reminding me that after school tomorrow, I was going to be joining him in the library.

'Depends on the snack,' I quipped back.

At first, I still found it a little hard to talk to Silas, but I reminded myself we were starting anew. The past was firmly behind us. It made it easier – made me feel like I was building a new person who was meeting Silas for the first time. Someone confident and witty and not, well, the old me.

'If you're talking celery sticks and hummus, I'm not sure how much of a bonus that is,' I added.

'I'm thinking more like these.' He twisted his bag around, and pulled out a bag of sweets. 'Peach rings!'

I wasn't the biggest fan of them, but I was hardly going to turn down anything Silas wanted to share with me.

'They'll do,' I teased, and he scoffed.

'I used my ten-per-cent employee discount on these,' Silas replied, mock offended.

'Splurging on me already, Silas?' I asked, eyebrow raised.

‘Gotta keep my lucky charm happy,’ he said back, pushing open the doors of Maple Falls High, and leading us out to the parking lot.

I found Raven and Sofia already there, both waiting for me with wide eyes and tense expressions. I could tell something had happened.

‘Ah, looks like you’re needed,’ Silas murmured, and gently knocked his shoulder to mine. ‘I’ll see you tomorrow, Maya.’

I was sad to see him walk away, but as soon as he’d turned, I sped towards Raven and Sofia.

‘Are you two OK?’ I asked, worriedly. I raked my gaze over both of them – Raven was armed with books for the MAC exam and Sofia had a satchel that was equally full. The two of them were going to be joining me at the Treasure Trove today, studying while I baked and practised with Orion.

‘Aside from the fact that the MAC exam is made by an evil goblin,’ Raven sniped, ‘we’ve been waiting for you to come outside because Orion has been *blowing up* the group chat.’

‘He has?’

I pulled my phone from my pocket and found that I had it on silent.

ORION-THORN-IN-MY-SIDE
Urgent help needed at the Treasure Trove.

ORION-THORN-IN-MY-SIDE
SOS.

ORION-THORN-IN-MY-SIDE
Help now please

‘Oh wow, it must be serious,’ I said, looking back up at my duo of friends. ‘There’s no punctuation in his last text.’

Sofia nodded grimly. ‘We didn’t want to break up your little lover’s chat –’ I started to protest, but she didn’t wait for me. ‘But I think we’ve got to hurry it up.’

When I stepped into the Treasure Trove, with Raven and Sofia hot on my heels, I wasn't prepared for the sight before me.

'What are you doing?' I asked, eyes wide as saucers.

'Building a house,' Orion said, sarcasm dripping from his voice. 'What does it *look* like I'm doing?'

Standing before me on my station – not really my station because this wasn't my bakery – was Orion. Covered in flour, sleeves rolled upwards, rolling dough out. And that image made my mind screech to a halt because Orion didn't bake. Sure, he taste-tested, threw out ideas, watched me bake. I had a thousand memories of that summer: sitting in the Hawthorne's kitchen, baking, while he washed up for me. I'd cajole him into joining, but he'd never been tempted.

But now, here he was, elbow-deep in flour. On the opposite counter was Melodie, who was frantically trying to place tart shells on to the wire rack to cool.

'Ooh, testy,' Raven sing-songed behind me. The glare Orion shot her was the kind of look only a sibling could give. Raven held up her hands and stepped backwards. 'Fine, fine, we'll leave you two to deal with the chaos.'

'Actually,' Melodie interrupted, breathlessly. 'Do you think you could help at the front? I hired a new girl to handle the counter, but I think she's drowning in orders.'

Raven and Sofia nodded and left me, Melodie and Orion alone in the kitchen.

'What happened here?' I asked, gaze ping-ponging between the two of them.

'Everyone fell in love with your magical knots and the flaming fruit tarts, and just *everything*,' Melodie explained, as she piped enchanted cream into the shells. Her technique had improved a lot, and I felt a glow of pride. 'Word spread outside just the dragons. Next thing I know, I've got an endless line and an overwhelming number of customers.'

Shock flooded me, and I moved across the kitchen to peek out of the door. Melodie was *right.* The Treasure Trove was full of dragons, witches and faeries. More shocking than anything was the fact that regulars I saw in the Wishing Well were standing in line too. I felt this odd combination of thrill and horror at the clear appreciation of my bakes.

If Ivy ever found out it was me in this kitchen, she'd never trust me again. She'd never give me the apprenticeship, either. I stepped back from

the door, heart thundering in my chest.

‘Melodie panicked, and called me this morning to help,’ Orion continued, and a frustrated edge entered his voice. It took me a second to realize he was trying to braid the dough he had floured, with little success.

While he was talking, I slipped an apron on and dumped my things in the corner. I moved around him, nudging him to the side so I could braid the dough. I expected him to take the chance to leave, but instead he watched me intently, like learning how to braid dough was a life skill he’d only just realized he needed.

‘I thought you didn’t bake?’ I asked, quietly.

‘I can change,’ Orion shot back, but there was a slight edge to his voice that made my breath hitch.

I scolded my traitorous heart, reminding it that I wasn’t the Maya of last summer, or even the Maya of last weekend. I was the new Maya, the one who was finally talking to her soulmate and was starting afresh. The one who wasn’t going to be tangled in the past.

‘Silas and I have another study session this week,’ I blurted, and Orion’s gaze snapped away from mine to the dough. ‘We also hung out pretty much all day today.’

‘That’s good,’ Orion said, his tone saying the opposite. ‘One study session and one day of hanging out. Shall we get the wedding chariot out now?’

I scowled, braiding the dough tighter. ‘It’s a start. A good start.’ Then, because only Orion could pull me into an argument like this, I added, ‘And the Treasure Trove is obviously thriving. I seem to be doing everything in this partnership, Hawthorne. Are you going to become a better teacher or not because I still need to cast the counterspell, and we don’t have much time left before the festival.’

His gaze narrowed, the slit of his eyes tightening. ‘After your shift,’ Orion said, his tone so controlled I could see the invisible fist around his composure. ‘You’ll master the spell. I *promise*.’

Orion hustled everyone out of the Treasure Trove when the last customer left.

‘So?’ I asked, when we were finally alone. ‘What’s the lesson for today, Hawthorne?’

Orion was leaning against the counter, texting on his phone. A smile pulled half his mouth up. At my words, he looked up, pocketed his phone and pulled out the pendant from our earlier sessions.

He didn't move but beckoned me closer. I went to him, arms folded over my chest, making sure there was still distance between the two of us. The necklace dangled between us, almost tauntingly.

'Cast the spell,' Orion commanded.

My hand gripped the necklace, and with all the conviction in the world, I called upon my magic. The warm buzz grew beneath my skin, and the words of the spell were perched on my tongue. But then it just fizzled away. Like every other time I'd tried.

'Reverie,' Orion growled, snapping my focus back to him. 'I keep losing you.'

Frustration leaked through his voice, and I tried not to feel hurt.

'You're getting lost in your thoughts, and it's blocking your magic.' He waved an arm around to gesture at the bakery. 'Getting stronger at spellcasting isn't just about feeling safe physically – it's also about being calm in your mind.'

My throat felt dry, and I wanted to push him away. No one had ever seen me like he did; how I struggled with silencing my mind, like I was driven by fear, when everyone else was driven by determination and confidence.

'Am I ever going to get this?' I asked, feeling defeated. 'Because, if you think I can't do this, we need another plan –'

'Turn around,' Orion said. His voice was stern, but he still added, 'Please.'

I did as he asked. 'What are you doing?' My voice shook as I heard him step closer to me. 'Hawthorne, if this is some weird game, I will kill you.'

'No games,' Orion murmured, and then I felt something brush against the nape of my neck – cool metal – and the drop of the pendant down the front of my shirt. 'Just humour me. I want to try something.'

I felt him fiddling with the clasp, his warm breath making the back of my neck erupt into shivers; I wanted to be unaffected, but I was too dizzy to be anything but unsteady.

'Grab the pendant,' Orion said, and his voice was closer now. Close enough that I could smell the faint sweat that came from working in a hot kitchen all day, mixed with that campfire scent that was so distinctly him.

My hand scrambled to grip the pedant, my limbs entirely independent of my mind, which was saying, *Leave. Don't do this, don't fall again*.

'Close your eyes, Reverie,' Orion murmured, and I felt my eyelids shut.

He'd spelled me, compelled me, made me compliant. Or maybe it was that part of me that always responded to Orion – menacing, or soft, or authoritative. The part of me that I'd tried to bury deep, but clearly not deep enough.

'I want you to visualize things that make you feel protected,' Orion said, and a protest rose on my lips. 'I know, visualization is a tool used when you're just starting to learn magic. But we need to rewire the way you use your magic, and this is the best way.'

I sighed, feeling childish. But I did what he asked. I imagined all the things that screamed safety to me. I inhaled deeply and let my mind flit through images. They started off abstract: a lock clicking shut on my door, a seat belt, before they turned personal; the feel of a whisk in my hand, the interior of the Wishing Well Bakery, my bay window, my mother, my sister. I felt my body loosen, and my magic hummed to life under my skin.

'Say the spell,' Orion murmured, and his voice felt like he was tracing his index finger around the curve of my ear.

'*Guard from evil, day or night, protect the wearer from every fright*,' I said, and my whole palm felt warm.

'Good, you're doing good,' Orion said encouragingly. 'Keep thinking of those images.'

More thoughts flashed through my mind, like my brain was attuned to follow his every command.

'*Guard from evil, day or night, protect the wearer from every fright*.'

And then, with my palm hot and the pendant pressing against my flesh, another image came into my thoughts.

Orion Hawthorne. That summer. Driving me back home in the dark. That night he caught me. That night I got the second point on my licence. The terror in his eyes, the fear that I was disappearing right before him. My anger but also my relief at being stopped – no matter how deep it was buried.

'*Guard from evil, day or night, protect the wearer from every fright*.'

'You did it, Reverie,' Orion said, and his tone was downright gleeful.

My eyes flew open, and I saw that the pendant in my hand was glowing brightly. The illuminated rubies cast red shadows across my face. I lifted

my gaze away from the pendant, disbelief coursing through me, and met his eyes. There was that self-satisfied grin on his mouth, and a glimmer of something akin to pride in his eyes. It made my heart *glow*.

'Let's test it,' Orion said, and his smile turned a little wicked.

'Wait, how are we going to test it?' I asked, my thoughts just catching up to what Orion said.

Not fast enough though, because with one whistle Orion had directed a burst of flames right at me. I yelped, preparing to dodge out of the way or throw up some sort of hex back, but I didn't need to. The flames never touched me, and when they died down I could see Orion was grinning widely.

I hated how much I liked that look on him.

'You could have killed me!' I shouted, more in shock than in anger.

The dragon shifter simply shrugged a shoulder. 'Oh, come on, Reverie. Where's your sense of fun gone?'

Who *was* this guy? Seriously – where had the Orion Hawthorne I'd been tortured by my entire life gone? This new person who stood in his place was not the boy I'd grown up with, or the boy I'd spent last summer mistakenly mooning over. He was someone almost entirely new. The thought left me feeling unsettled.

'I think I lost it somewhere last summer,' I said, just to be spiteful.

His smile dimmed, a shadow coming across his face.

There was a knock on the back door of the Treasure Trove, and I could see the outline of a figure backlit by moonlight.

'I'll get it,' Orion said, stepping neatly in front of me.

Something in me – call it a witch's intuition – told me nothing good was on the other side of that door, and I wanted to yank Orion back.

But I didn't move, and Orion opened the door.

Behind it was a face full of soft angles, a mouth that was made for pouting and copper waves that framed eyes which were the kind of blue that belonged to the depths of the oceans. A siren's eyes.

'Celine,' Orion said, surprised.

Celine stood in the doorway of the Treasure Trove. The girl who ruined my summer with Orion.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Last summer – end of July

I was going to tell Orion that I liked him.

It was a decision I came to at 12 a.m., the night before. I was wide awake in bed, and the house was quiet. I was lying on my side, looking out of my bay window, but my gaze snagged on the dragon shifter's jacket hanging over my chair.

And it got me thinking. Silas always felt like a dream. A fantasy. Someone utterly perfect but entirely unachievable. But Orion had always been in my life, and maybe we'd both finally grown up enough to really notice one another.

And I couldn't live not knowing if he felt the same, so I was going to find out. Unlike with Silas, I felt a sense of surety that Orion returned my feelings. He had to – I saw the way he softened around me, how he treated me differently from everyone else.

I was going to tell him after the party at Golden Shell Beach later. I'd ask him if we could take a little walk along the water's edge, and I'd find the spot we met when the summer first began.

I expected to be nervous throughout the day, worrying about my outfit, about my words. But I felt oddly at peace. Orion and I felt like an inevitability that was finally happening.

The party was typical – a bonfire in the middle of the beach, laughter in the air, and someone had ordered pizzas to dish out. The only thing that was different was that when I entered the party, Orion caught sight of me and waved me over.

My heart was fluttering, like faerie wings in flight. I wondered if he liked that I'd come wearing his jacket, or if he found it too presumptuous. I

guessed he liked it from the way his smile widened when I finally sidled up next to him, surrounded by a group of his friends.

I recognized most of them, but they only really knew me as the mayor's daughter. Still, they were all nice enough to include me in their conversation.

'So, Orion,' Terry, a tall werewolf from the Star pack, started. 'Your sister goes off on vacation, and you swap her out for another little sister?'

I bristled, indignation hot on my tongue. I wasn't Orion's little sister – not in any regard. But before I could say anything, he spoke up.

'Maya's her own person,' Orion replied, his tone not exactly sharp, but something close to it. I felt myself warm at the sign of his protective streak. 'She's a really good friend of mine.'

Good friend.

I wanted to wince but refused to let anyone see how those two words affected me, so I just pasted on a smile.

'All right, all right.' Terry raised his hands up in surrender. 'I know when to shut up. Tell me guys, what're the post-summer plans?'

As everyone launched into a conversation about their plans, I felt Orion stiffen beside me.

I nudged the cup of faerie punch I was drinking against his, and his silvered gaze flicked away from his friends to me. The hard planes of his face softened, and my heartbeat ricocheted again.

This was the moment I was going to ask him to take a walk with me. I was sure he'd only called us friends because he wasn't one for public declarations. He was private, protective, not the type who stood outside your house and shouted about his feelings for you.

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'Could we –' I began quietly, when a voice interrupted me.

'Orion Hawthorne!'

My attention snapped, along with his, to the right, where I saw Celine Pearl emerging from the water of the beach and gliding across the sand, looking like a model from a magazine. She had the natural allure a siren exuded, and it wasn't surprising that everyone's attention landed on her.

Including Orion's.

I watched as he got up and met the siren, with the biggest smile I'd ever seen on his face.

'Celine, I thought you might have drowned down there,' Orion teased, and something ugly flared in my stomach.

Something hot and angry. Jealousy.

'As if,' Celine scoffed, with a roll of her eyes. 'I finally got free from visiting my extended family – just in time to enjoy the last weeks of summer on land. In fact, I've come back right on time to make sure we get to attend a few parties together before we both go off to MAC.'

Her use of 'we' made me want to choke something, but I kept my composure.

'Sounds good, Cel,' Orion replied, with a smile.

Sounds good?

In horror, I watched them drift closer together as they walked back towards the group and sat opposite me.

I watched them – like a creep – from my periphery.

I didn't have to cast a love spell to know Celine had feelings for Orion. I could recognize it, because it was the same way I looked at him. What terrified me was not knowing how Orion felt about her. I knew he wasn't with anyone – Raven would've told me. But what if Celine was Orion's Silas?

What did that make me?

Suddenly, I felt entirely alone – despite being surrounded by people. All I could think about was being called his fill-in little sister. Was that all I was to him? Raven's best friend?

No. I knew Orion felt something for me. I just needed him to see it.

To see me in a different light.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

‘Orion, back in Maple Falls.’

When Celine spoke, her voice sounded like the tinkle of sea glass against a jar. All soft and kind. As her eyes slid over Orion, her smile widened and I felt myself go rigid, my throat pulsating with the hammering of my heartbeat.

Orion still stood at the door, looking confused. ‘Cel, you’re – you’re here.’

The shortening of her name made my stomach twist; a sea of jealousy rose up inside me in a way I couldn’t hold back. I refused to be here. I refused to endure this again – Orion and Celine catching up, me watching in the background like some sort of nosy neighbour. I jerked back, intending to go out of the front of the Treasure Trove and escape as fast as I could. But the sound of Celine’s voice stopped me.

Celine raised her delicate eyebrows, that smile on her mouth turning razor sharp. ‘I think we have unfinished business to discuss, no?’

I knew Orion’s tells the way I knew my favourite recipes; his discomfort showed in the way the scales shimmered around his strong neck, the way his shoulders rolled like his wings wanted to emerge.

‘I suppose,’ Orion said, slowly. ‘If you want to chat Cel, we can.’

The beautiful siren held her haughty expression for a moment, before it dissolved and she laughed; the sound twinkling in the air. ‘Oh, I’m just messing with you. I’m not actually mad, but we had to come face to face some time, right?’

Relief was evident in the way Orion’s shoulders relaxed, and his grip on the door loosened. Whatever *it* was, I didn’t believe she was over it, not for a second. Still, curiosity was burning a hole in my head, and I wanted nothing more than to ask *what was going on* between them. A lot had clearly happened since last summer.

I reminded myself that I wasn't supposed to care. Orion and his potential love life was none of my business.

'I was going to invite you to a little get-together down at the beach?' Celine continued, stepping closer to him.

'Thanks, Cel,' Orion said. His voice was gentle. 'But I'm hanging out with Maya tonight. So, I'll probably catch you guys later, or something.'

Celine looked startled, and then her gaze finally darted to me. I did an awkward little wave; surprised Orion had turned down her offer and unsure if I was supposed to speak or not.

'Right,' Celine said, like she couldn't quite understand him saying no to her. 'Well, how about we meet up for lunch, for old times' sake?'

Say no.

'Sure,' Orion said, and my disappointment swelled inside me. 'I'll text you.'

Celine seemed appeased, and I didn't listen as they said their goodbyes. I focused on packing up; on getting ready to get out of *here*. I barely noticed when it was just the two of us again.

'You ready to go, Reverie?' Orion asked, his hands in his pockets, silver eyes locked on to me.

'I'll walk,' I said, tightly. I couldn't be in the car with him. I was too afraid of saying something that I didn't mean, something that betrayed my unresolved feelings.

'No, you won't. It's late, and you've got class tomorrow,' Orion said, firmly. 'I'll drive you.'

'I'm not your sister.' The words came from somewhere deep in my chest. 'You don't have to look after me.'

'You're –' Orion seemed to catch himself. 'I know you're not my sister.'

'We're not even friends,' I continued, feeling my words sharpen into knives. Seeing Celine had brought forward insecurities I wasn't proud of, memories I didn't want to remember.

'Right.' He scoffed. 'I didn't think we ever were,' he added.

The blow landed like a punch to my stomach.

'You and I, Reverie,' Orion said, and there was that edge to his voice again, 'have always been *something*. Right now, we're partners working to break this curse.'

And last summer? I wanted to ask, but I refused to voice it.

‘So,’ Orion said, and now his tone was mocking. Like he could tell I was holding myself back. ‘Let me drop you home, *partner*.’

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

SILAS MOON
I’m personally offended that we’re studying wolfsbane in class tomorrow.

MAYA
It’s not like you have to *drink* it.

SILAS MOON
What if you had to make a potion that stripped you of your magic???

MAYA
I’d probably be happy to know what to avoid.

SILAS MOON
I need you to agree with me so I can continue my potions hate.

MAYA
*Unnecessary hate?

SILAS MOON

If you weren’t my lucky charm, I would block you.

MAYA

‘Heart emojis?’ Raven asked, her chin dipping to rest on my shoulder. We were in her bedroom – I was sitting opposite Sofia who was painting my nails. ‘You’ve progressed fast.’

‘We’ve been studying together,’ I said, feeling my neck go warm. Raven joined us on the bed, taking a seat beside Sofia, so I faced them both. ‘And – you know – we – we just started talking more.’

‘About?’ Sofia asked, as she painted my nails with the Maple Falls High colours for Silas’s upcoming game.

It hadn’t been that long since our first study session, and a week since I perfectly cast the protection spell, but we spoke almost every day. We hung out at school; we were almost constantly in each other’s orbits. It felt like our relationship *was* progressing fast, but it felt genuine.

‘Everything,’ I said, but it wasn’t the entire truth. We talked about most things, but I didn’t tell Silas everything. I didn’t ever tell him if I was feeling strange with Mum, or if something was really bothering me. I couldn’t. It was too early, and I wanted to be *his* lucky charm, not someone he needed to look after.

‘And is he everything you imagined he would be?’ Raven asked, curiously.

‘He is.’ I nodded, and I couldn’t fake the wistfulness in my tone. ‘He’s kind and funny, and genuinely so sweet.’

The door opened with a bang, startling me and Raven and Sofia, revealing Orion in the doorway. The nail-polish bottle went flying. Without really thinking, I muttered a spell: *Spill, splash, make sure you make that catch*.

The nail-polish bottle stopped in mid-air, just before a droplet of vivid red was about to hit the surface of the carpet.

The room was full of dead silence. Not because the spell was complex, or because I had done some great feat of magic, but because I had done it effortlessly.

‘Guess I’m not such a bad teacher after all,’ Orion said, breaking the silence with so much smugness that I couldn’t help but throw one of Raven’s pillows at him.

He caught it deftly, but he was smiling. The animosity from yesterday seemed a distant memory. The way Orion was looking at me now, with something akin to pride in his eyes, kicked my heartbeat up a notch.

‘That was amazing,’ Raven said, wrapping her arms around my shoulders. ‘For that, you can get extra maple syrup in your popcorn.’

‘Does she *want* extra maple syrup in her popcorn?’ Sofia asked, mild disgust in her voice. We’d quickly discovered she was much more of a savoury person.

Raven mock gasped. ‘Who doesn’t want maple syrup in their popcorn?’

‘People who value their teeth,’ Orion offered, and Sofia nodded in agreement.

‘Rich coming from the guy who literally carries enchanted toffees in his jacket pocket,’ I said, a smirk curling around my mouth at the fake outrage on Orion’s face.

‘I told you that in confidence,’ Orion said, and then he folded his arms over his chest. ‘I liked you better when you were nicer to me.’

It was said in jest, but it struck a chord, nonetheless. ‘Guess you lost that privilege a while ago, Hawthorne,’ I said, equally light and airy.

No one else seemed to notice the tightening of his jaw, or the way his mouth curved down ever so slightly. I wished I didn’t notice it either. Being able to forget these minute details of Orion would make my life a thousand times easier.

‘I’m going out,’ Orion said, cutting off the conversation. ‘And Mum wants you downstairs.’

‘And where are you going?’ Raven asked, as she hopped off her bed and joined her brother in the doorway.

‘Dinner with friends,’ Orion replied shortly. But he glanced at me, and I knew who he was seeing. I kept my face straight, not letting him see anything. ‘You three staying in?’

‘Maybe,’ I cut in, because envy was something that always loosened my tongue. ‘We might go streaking down Golden Shell Beach.’

Orion barely missed a beat. ‘The Kraken will be delighted.’

The Kraken was a myth. No one really knew if one lived in our sea. *Celine* probably knew, but it’s not like I was going to ask her.

Raven cut through the tension with a roll of her eyes and tugged her brother out of the room. I could hear them arguing as they moved down the hallway. When their footsteps finally receded, I felt my phone buzz near my knee.

ORION-THORN-IN-MY-SIDE
If you three do stay out late, will you call me to pick you up, please?

I tried to feel warm at the show of his protective streak, but it was hard. The momentary lapse in judgement had me texting back before I knew it.

MAYA
I'll call. Promise.

'So, what happened there?' Sofia's voice pulled me out of my brief text exchange and back to reality. She was leaning against the headboard of Raven's bed, while I sat on the end.

'What do you mean?' I asked, trying not to sound too suspicious.

'Well, it's pretty obvious you're not happy about Orion going out,' Sofia said, bluntly. I spluttered, but she didn't wait for me to form a sentence. '*He's* definitely not happy you're going out. So, I'm just going to ask: do you to have a *thing* going on?'

'No, *no*,' I said vehemently, panicked that Raven or worse, Orion himself, would come back and hear. 'Orion and I have never got together. Ever.'

'But you wanted to?'

'No.'

Sofia stared at me. Unblinking. I didn't need to read her mind to know she didn't believe me.

'Yes,' I relented, the truth slipping past. 'But you can't tell Raven.'

'I promise you, I won't,' Sofia said, and I breathed a sigh of relief. 'So, what happened?'

'It was last summer,' I began, hoping to wrap the story up briskly, so I wouldn't have to endure too much of the walk down memory lane. 'Raven was visiting Rose Glenn, and Orion and I were stuck in Maple Falls alone. I

was over all the time, so we hung out more. And it was obviously Stockholm syndrome, because I started getting these *feelings* for him.'

'Did you ever tell him?'

'*No!* Do you think I'd still be sitting here if I did?'

I didn't add that I had planned on telling him, but I'd never gotten to it. My plans that night had ended in complete disaster after all.

'And it just fizzled out by the time Raven got back?' Sofia asked, a crinkle forming in her brow. 'So, why do you two have so much tension still?'

'No, he – he caught me doing a forbidden spell at the end of summer, and he reported it to the Coven,' I explained, a familiar hot shame crawling up my neck.

But Sofia didn't look disapproving, only curious.

'What forbidden spell?' she asked, her eyebrows raised.

'An eye-of-the-beholder spell,' I said. 'I was stupid. I just really wanted Ori– I mean, everyone, to like me, you know? And the spell was meant to make me look attractive in anyone's eyes.'

'I get that feeling of wanting to be wanted,' Sofia said, and there was a genuine note to her voice.

My chest constricted at the understanding in her eyes. 'Yes, well, the spell is forbidden because it changes you fundamentally. Orion caught me as I was casting it, lost his mind, and practically dragged me to my mother.'

'I suppose it makes sense you being angry with him,' Sofia said, with a little grimace. 'Even if he was looking out for you.'

I paused, head tilting to one side to look at her. 'You think that was him looking out for me?'

'I mean, yeah. He always seems to do that,' she continued, absently.

'What do you mean?' Sure, he'd been helping me with my spellcasting and even Silas, but that had nothing to do with me and everything to do with solving the curse.

'Orion always seems to be there when you need him, you know? I know he's probably *super* bullheaded, but it's pretty nice to have someone in your corner.'

'He only looks out for me because I'm Raven's best friend,' I said, but the words failed to ring true.

Sofia's eyebrow raised in an 'OK, if you say so' gesture, and Orion's voice floated in my head: *You and I, Reverie, have always been* something.

‘Do you think you’d forgive him?’ Sofia asked.

‘What?’

‘If Orion apologized for getting your second point, would you forgive him?’ Sofia clarified.

I never ended up answering her question because Raven came back, armed with two bowls of popcorn – one maple syruped and the other saltier than the sea for Sofia. We ended up not watching anything but talking the rest of the night.

It was perfect, and I could almost put Orion totally out of my mind.

But Sofia’s question still lingered.

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CHAPTER TWENTY

So, it turned out attending classes was *way* more entertaining when you've got the school's golden boy as your partner. Once you get over all the confused looks people give you and the way more people suddenly talk to you because you're sitting beside someone *popular*.

Aside from studying together, our lunch break and in the corridors, potions class was our other place to talk. Or in our case, play very intense games of noughts and crosses while our professor explained things on the board.

'I'm going to win,' the werewolf murmured under his breath, his pencil tapping against the countertop. He was resting his cheek against a closed fist, and his smile reached his eyes. 'And then *you* owe me a favour.'

I scoffed and looked down at the game we had going again. I was going to win, I knew it, but Silas couldn't see it. I didn't think he would be a sore loser, but he was the kind of guy who really loved winning.

So, I put my nought where it shouldn't be, and Silas won.

'All right, all right,' I sighed, dramatically. 'What favour do you want?'

Silas's blue-gold eyes glinted, before he dipped his hand down to rummage through his bag. From there, he pulled out a jersey – more specifically, a jersey with *his* number and last name on it.

'I want you to wear this at the next game. It's our last game before half-term and the festival, and I need my lucky charm there in all her glory,' Silas said, his smile so genuine it was infectious.

I took the jersey from him, holding the fabric in my hands, and grinned back. I was playing it cool but inside my head I was letting out the biggest scream. This was a big deal – his *jersey*. This felt like a sign things were going right. All I had left to do was confess my feelings to him. Tell him the truth about everything that had led to this point.

'Fine,' I mock sighed. 'I'll wear it. But I won't like it.'

Silas grinned, like he knew I was lying. He was about to say something else, when we were interrupted.

'Maya,' Sofia hissed, and I looked up just in time to see Professor Malt coming towards us.

'Ms Reverie, Mr Moon. Since you two appear to be whispering so much – answer one question each,' Professor Malt said, his thin, reedy voice filling the classroom. 'Give me one property of wolfsbane – *not* experienced by a werewolf, Ms Reverie.'

Usually that question would've made panic swell through me, but Silas and I *had* actually spent some of our sessions studying.

'Fatigue,' I said, calmy, even though Professor Malt's looming presence was slightly terrifying.

The professor made a reluctant noise of agreement, but then his gaze narrowed on Silas. 'Now, Mr Moon,' he began, and collectively, the class winced. Our potions teacher had never been a fan of Silas, likely because he had taught all of Silas's older siblings before him, and they'd been a handful. 'One from you?'

'Uh, I'm not sure, I only really know the ones that affect us.'

I felt Silas's leg against my chair, as he gently pushed me closer to Sofia, away from the oncoming verbal massacre.

'See, Mr Moon, if you spent half as much time studying as whispering to girls during class …'

Everyone stopped paying attention as he went on to lecture Silas, who was staring down at the paper in front of him. All except Sofia, who was watching the exchange with a gaping mouth.

'This is normal,' I told her, wincing as Professor Malt's voice rose. 'He's always like this.'

'But that's not fair,' Sofia replied, aghast.

'Yeah, well, Professor Malt has a vendetta against the Moons, and Maple Falls isn't exactly brimming with potions professors,' I remarked, echoing my mother's words the first time I complained about Professor Malt.

'Maybe I could talk to Frost – he's friends with Malt,' Sofia said, and I felt myself tense. 'Once he's back to normal, that is. This week he's resorted to crying out his feelings – it's kind of sad, actually.'

Guilt gnawed at me, and Sofia must have seen it on my face, because she was quick to squeeze my arm. 'Hey, no – you're doing everything right, OK? You're basically ready to cast the spell. See?' Sofia said, pushing a

paper showing my charms grade out of my folder. A big fat *B* sat on top. ‘You’ve been improving.’

I nodded, trying to find that confidence that swept through me when I got the result in our last class. I was feeling more sure of my magic with every passing lesson I had with Orion, but the doubt was never fully quiet.

‘And things with Silas are going well.’ Sofia’s voice went even quieter, her eyes darting to the werewolf who still had his head down.

‘Yes,’ I said, but then bit my lip. ‘But I am a little worried about telling him the whole soulmate part.’

‘OK,’ Sofia nodded, agreeably. ‘Why not just confess now?’

‘Are you insane? No.’ I shook my head, vehemently. ‘I need somewhere out of school. Not in the library or his house during our study sessions. Somewhere neutral.’

Sofia looked like she wanted to say something, but our conversation was cut short by the loud, whiny voice of Everly Catacomb who was sitting behind me. I didn’t turn to look at her – our parents had an agreement that we would minimize our interactions after the whole fang incident. But her voice still rang loud and clear.

‘You have got to be kidding me? They’ve shut Golden Shell Beach down on the same weekend as my birthday bash?’ Everly complained, the pout evident in her tone.

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes – Everly’s parties were uber-exclusive, but she sure loved talking about them to anyone who could hear.

‘Yup,’ one of her friends said. ‘Unless you have somewhere else to host the party, you’re going to have to cancel it.’

‘Maya has a place to host the party.’

I stared at Sofia in complete shock. She’d turned away from me to face Everly and her gaggle of friends sitting behind us. After a beat, I finally risked turning around as well. Everly, pale, pink-cheeked and dressed entirely in yellow, curled her lip at the sight of me. Her two fangs seemed to lengthen, and I reminded myself that vampires were not allowed to bite other creatures in Maple Falls.

‘Maya has a place to host the party?’ Everly asked, her voice haughty. ‘Is it somewhere where she goes to mess up spells? Remove vital parts of a person’s face?’

I winced, but Sofia, unperturbed, continued on. ‘Maya has a place you can throw your party. It’s big enough and away from prying eyes.’

The vampires all shared a look, a silent conversation passing between them. I tried to have the same one with Sofia – mainly so I could ask her what she was thinking – but she studiously avoided meeting my eyes.

'Fine,' Everly finally said, though she didn't sound pleased. 'Maya, I'll text you the party details, and you send me the venue. And remember, it's for *my* party – so if you insist on coming, the venue better be amazing.'

And with that, we were dismissed. We turned back in our seats, and I shot Sofia an incredulous look.

'A party is neutral, right?' Sofia whispered at me. I gave her a puzzled look. 'You said you wanted to talk to Silas somewhere neutral, and he's a pretty busy guy. He has Maple Mart shifts, rugby practice, study sessions with you *and* he's popular. But at a party, you could steal him away for a bit. Talk to him.'

It wasn't a bad idea, but it did leave me with one particular problem.

'Please tell me you have a place to host this party?' I asked, desperately.

Sofia shook her head, and I resisted the urge to scream. 'Don't worry, I'll help you find a one asap.'

'I'm going to kill you,' I told her, and only two per cent of me wasn't serious in that claim.

But confidence rang out in Sofia's voice. 'No, Maya, one day you're going to thank me.'

'She's obviously lost her mind,' I exclaimed, as I stepped out of the double doors to Maple Falls High, sandwiched between Raven and Sofia. 'I do not have some secret party venue hidden up my sleeve, and I cannot throw a party at my house. My mother would flip out, or worse, chaperone!'

'*She* is standing right here,' Sofia said, as we walked down the steps to the parking lot. 'And need I remind you: you were the one who wanted to speak to Silas about your feelings outside school and your study dates. Now you can make your move at a party.'

She wasn't wrong, but, still, where exactly was I supposed to find a venue? It wasn't like I had much experience in party planning.

'OK, let's say we do find a venue,' Raven argued, weaving past cars to a parking spot that was empty. 'What guarantee do we have that Silas even shows up to this party?'

I pointed aggressively at Raven in agreement. 'Exactly.'

‘Well, I’d say that’s a pretty good guarantee,’ Sofia replied, a sly smirk on her face as she pointed over my shoulder.

I turned around, and my heart immediately started to take flight in my chest. Silas was striding towards us with his books tucked under one arm, looking like something out of a daydream. Eventually, the gap between us was closed and he was stood before the three of us.

‘Hi,’ Silas said, like we hadn’t just spent a whole class together.

‘Hi,’ I echoed back, feeling a grin tug at my mouth. ‘Finally free from Malt?’

Silas rolled his eyes and shook his head. ‘He’s obsessed with me, and it’s actually worrying.’ Amusement twinkled in his eyes. ‘Heard you’re hosting a party.’

I rocked on my heels. ‘News travels fast.’

‘What does a guy have to do to get an invite?’

The feeling of molten lava went down my spine at his voice. It should be a crime to be this attractive. How was a girl supposed to concentrate?

‘Hm,’ I said, faking thought. Silas’s laugh was soft and made my insides warm. ‘Help with the set up?’

‘So you want to put me to work?’ Silas asked.

‘Do you have other uses?’ I questioned, teasingly.

‘I usually bring the drinks to these parties,’ Silas continued, and then seemed to catch himself. ‘The safe stuff. Don’t want anyone going too wild if you get what I mean. I know your mother would … I’m going to stop talking now.’

For the first time, I think I understood what it felt like to be on the other end of a Maya Reverie word-vomit spiel.

‘That … that would be great,’ I said, my cheeks aching with how hard I was smiling.

Silas mirrored it, his chest puffing with excitement. ‘So we’ll meet early then?’

Silas. Freaking. Moon. Wanted to hang out with me. Not to study. Not for good luck. But just to hang out. He’d given me his jersey, and surely that meant something? Something more than just friendly. This had to be a sign. Sofia was right: I needed to confess my feelings to him at this party.

‘We’ll meet early,’ I replied, and I scurried about for things to ask him, just to keep him talking to me, when I heard someone clear their throat behind me.

It felt like I was being doused in cold water when I stepped out of Silas's orbit. I twisted around to see Raven and Sofia were now sitting in a car.

A car I recognized.

And its owner was leaning languidly against its hood, waiting.

'Sorry to break this up,' Orion said, though he didn't sound very apologetic. 'But I've got the car running, Maya.'

Seriously. Could he not see the sparks flying between Silas and I right now?

'I didn't even know you were picking me up,' I sniped.

'Raven asked,' Orion said shortly, and his gaze was flinty. 'Let's go.'

I bristled at the order. He was Raven's brother, not mine. I wanted to retort but, behind me, Silas coughed. I turned around to apologize for Orion's brutish behaviour, but the werewolf stepped around me, sticking out a hand for Orion to shake. The dragon shifter looked at it like Silas had offered him a wet fish to hold. I glared daggers at Orion, waiting for him to stop being such a jerk.

As the moment stretched, Silas dropped his hand but soldiered on. 'Silas Moon,' he introduced himself. 'It's so nice to meet Maya's brother.'

My ears perked up at the hard edge to his tone. I'd never heard anything more than softness or laughter in Silas's voice before. I watched the encounter unfold from the sidelines, not entirely sure what was going on.

Orion's gaze narrowed on him, and I suddenly felt a charge run through the air. 'I'm not her brother. Reverie's a witch, you know.'

I mean, he was right. You'd have to be a sightless faerie to not notice Orion and I were clearly not related.

'Right, sorry,' Silas replied, like he'd known that all along. 'I just assumed you know, with your whole overprotective vibe … Either way, nice to meet you …' he trailed off.

'Orion.'

Silas clicked his fingers. 'Orion, I'll try to remember that,' he said, but it sounded like it was the last thing on his long list of things to do. Then he turned back to me. His attention felt like the morning sun grazing the dew-dappled grass. 'Maya.' Even my name sounded nicer in his voice. 'Text me later, yeah?'

I nodded, and the smile on my lips lingered until Silas was a safe distance away. Once he was out of sight, I turned to Orion, fury coursing through me.

‘Have you lost your mind?’ I demanded. From behind him, Sofia and Raven watched the two of us like we were in a tennis match. ‘That’s Silas Moon, remember?’

‘I remember,’ Orion said, disinterestedly.

‘Seriously, what were you thinking? You’re supposed to be helping me,’ I exclaimed.

He pushed himself up and off the car, stepping closer. He glanced over my shoulder, and a smug smirk played over his mouth.

‘He needed a little competition. I promise you, Maya, he’s going to be a hundred times more interested now, trust me. He’s already looked back twice.’

I stared at him, my mouth gaping like a fish. Because surely, surely, Orion wasn’t suggesting Silas was going to be jealous … over him.

‘What were two talking about anyway?’ Orion continued, as if nothing had just happened.

The reminder of our conversation brought my dilemma back to the forefront of my mind. I had to find a venue. It wasn’t negotiable. My burgeoning love story with Silas depended on it.

Places where I could throw the party buzzed through my mind but were all quickly discarded. I needed somewhere no one would report back to my mother. Somewhere that would impress everyone.

Sofia’s voice floated through my head: *Orion always seems to be there when you need him.*

I looked up at him, desperation plastered all over my face.

‘What?’ Orion asked, with an edge to his voice, like he already knew I was going to ask him something he’d hate.

‘Don’t say no,’ I coaxed. ‘But I need to host a party, and I need you to help me find a venue.’

I waited for him to shut me down. But, instead, he started to smile.

Not his regular smile. Not his smirk. But that slow, sweet spread of something a little roguish.

‘Not to worry, Reverie,’ Orion said, his jewelled eyes glinting. ‘I know just the place.’

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

‘I’m not going down that hole.’

‘Just *slide* down.’

‘You slide down!’

‘I will – after you.’

‘Hawthorne!’

‘Reverie,’ Orion said, a lazy drawl to his tone. ‘I promise you; this will not lead to your demise. Now, slide down. Please.’

I turned back to look at Raven and Sofia – both who had, very childishly, yelled *not-it*, when Orion took us to our destination. We were deep in the Firewood Forest, in a clearing where – once you moved the artfully placed leaves – you would find a circle in the ground. Turns out, the circle was actually a wooden cover. Orion lifted it to proudly display a black tunnel that he wanted me to go down. Because, obviously, he thought I’d lost my mind on the walk from the car to the clearing.

‘Here,’ he came closer to where I was standing, and slipped off his jacket. He held it around me and looked at me expectantly. ‘Put it on.’

‘Why?’ I asked, incredulously. There was no way I was going to wear that jacket. Never again.

‘Because I’ve charmed it with a protection spell,’ Orion said, simply. ‘So, you’ll be safe from whatever harm you *think* is down there.’

I looked at the garment, and my heart stuttered. I should’ve told Orion I was still wearing the pendant I’d enchanted. But I *was* also a little cold, and the jacket did *look* comforting. So, I slid my arms into its sleeves.

I looked up at Orion again, waiting for a snarky remark, but his expression had changed. Gone was the lazy smile and the teasing eyes; they were replaced by the dark slit in his silver eyes narrowing, the muscle in his jaw jumping ever so slightly. I felt warm from his look, his jacket; it was

like I was standing next to a campfire. The sudden urge to reach out and touch those flames, to press my thumb against that muscle in his jaw –

‘So, Sofia and I are going to stay up here,’ Raven said, and the two of us jerked back so hard, it almost hurt my neck.

‘Why?’ I asked, trying not to sound flustered.

Sofia and Raven shared a look I couldn’t read, before Raven continued.

‘’Cause I’m not going down a dark hole, and my brother only has one jacket,’ Raven said, her voice brooking no argument.

Sofia nodded in agreement. ‘You two have fun.’

‘Fine,’ I grumbled, knowing if I kicked up too much of a fuss it would look like I was trying to avoid being alone with Orion.

There was a slight dip at the edge of the circle, as if many, many people had done this before. Reassuring, really. I looked up at Orion one last time. ‘I’ll come back as a ghost and haunt you if I die.’

Orion smiled softly. ‘Wouldn’t expect anything less, Reverie.’

And with that, he pushed me down the hole.

If anyone asks, I didn’t scream. Much. OK, I screamed a little. But sue me, it was dark and ridiculously bumpy. Until I reached the end. Then I was cushioned by soft sand, and my vision was hit with the glow of purple light.

Two seconds later, Orion was there. I turned to really inspect the scene before me. We were in a grotto – a *massive* grotto. There were two or three caves connected, making it difficult to see just how far the grotto went. There was a large pool of bluish water on one side and high, arching ceilings of rock with purple crystal stalactites hanging from them. It was stunning; so absolutely beautiful.

‘What is this place?’ I asked, my voice echoing slightly.

‘This is Mermaid’s Grotto,’ Orion explained, dusting off his jeans. I made sure my eyes didn’t rove over his arms, but it wasn’t easy. ‘Celine’s family’s place.’

I felt myself stiffen, and I refused to face him. ‘Ah, so she’s letting you use it for the party.’

‘Yes. This place stretches out as far as Golden Shell Beach through interconnected caves. So, there are lots of entrances and exits – most people come through the rock doorway from the beach, but I thought this was more fun for us,’ Orion continued, while my stomach twisted in knots. ‘Celine’s family owns this part, and she owed me, so I cashed it in.’

I made myself close my eyes, breathing in deeply before exhaling. I tried to force myself not to care about whatever favours Orion and the siren owed each other, but I couldn't. I wanted desperately to know what had happened between them, but there was no way of asking without making it sound like I cared. When I felt slightly more in control of my emotions, I turned to face Orion.

'This would be a great venue,' I said, forcing a smile on to my mouth. 'I should text Silas to let him know the location.'

Orion's eyes darkened, and it shouldn't have thrilled me, but it did. I'd always loved how expressive his eyes could be.

'Right, let me just –' I took out my phone, and quickly sent out a text. The response came back.

SILAS MOON
Sounds like a dream. Looking forward to setting up with you, M.

'He's excited to set up with me,' I said, and the smugness was clear in my voice.

'Yay,' Orion said, flatly. 'He's excited do chores with you. Delightful.'

'Someone's irritated,' I remarked.

'It's my constant state of being,' Orion retorted, and then just as swiftly he changed the subject. 'Reverie, let's have your spellcasting lesson here before we hit the Treasure Trove for your shift. The last spellcasting lesson is trying a healing spell. All the magic we've been focusing on so far has been offensive, but healing magic is different. It's about thinking of someone else and what they need. Like being in love.' Orion ran his tongue over his teeth.

My heart stuttered hearing the softness in Orion's voice. He spoke like he knew the feeling. It made me think of Celine, and the things they needed to 'hash out'. I felt that tug in my stomach again. If Orion and Celine sorted out whatever they needed to, would she get this new version of Orion? The one who was more patient and kinder.

'Who exactly would you like me to cast a healing spell on?' I asked, annoyed at myself for being bothered about who was the object of his affections.

‘Me,’ Orion replied, and then, without ceremony, he rolled up his sleeve to show a long, red gash around his arm.

His scales were shimmering around the wound, like they were trying to stitch the skin back together, but something was stopping his natural enhanced healing.

‘Orion!’ I exclaimed, stepping closer to inspect the wound. ‘Why haven’t you healed yourself?’

‘I took a tonic,’ Orion said, voice strained. ‘It subdues my natural healing abilities.’

‘But – how did you get this?’

Orion was silent for several long beats, long enough for me to tear my eyes away from the gash to look at him. He was contemplating something, the dark slit of his eyes tight and worried.

‘What?’ I said, suddenly worried.

‘Do you actually care?’

The question stunned me.

‘What? Of cou– yes,’ I stuttered, wrapping my hand around his arm, my thumb against his inner wrist. I could feel his heartbeat, steady as ever against my skin.

There was a small part of me that told me I should have said no. But there was a larger part of me that knew all the ways Orion had looked out for me, and that if I’d had such an injury, he would have been the first one to help.

He waited a beat before saying sharply, ‘I got it after a fight with my dad. We got into an argument, and I stormed out of the house. I didn’t have my jacket on yet, and I got this when my skin scraped the metal of the gate.’

I sucked in my teeth. ‘What were you fighting about?’

Orion gave me a look. ‘What do you think?’

I couldn’t pretend I didn’t know. We’d spent so many of our conversations last summer talking about what he’d really wanted to be.

‘You told him you wanted to become a teacher then?’ I asked, lightly.

Orion nodded and then swallowed. ‘He didn’t take it very well.’

‘I’m surprised,’ I replied, and then waved my free hand at his confused expression. ‘Not at your dad’s reaction. But that you still want to be a teacher. Thought that dream died when you went to MAC.’

Orion lifted a shoulder in response. ‘I thought so too. I thought I’d go to MAC, and I’d fall in love with all those defensive spells and forensic

charms. But I didn't. All I've ever enjoyed was teaching or tutoring or learning. Hoarding knowledge.'

This was the side of Orion Hawthorne that no one ever saw; the side that no one ever knew but me and, I suppose, his parents. The quiet side, the nerdy side, the side that just wanted to learn. It made my chest ache – the earnest way in which he spoke. There was something so endearing about seeing someone else talk about a dream and want it.

'But he thinks it's a bad career choice,' Orion said simply. 'And I'm just deciding how much I care about his opinion.'

'And your mum?' I asked, hopefully.

He shook his head, a sad smile pinching the corners of his mouth. 'The rules are different for Raven and for me. I'm the prodigal son, the one who was supposed to take over. Mum wants me to do whatever Dad thinks is best because that's the future they mapped out for me.'

'Kind of like how my mum just wants me to do simple spells my entire life,' I said, feeling that all-too-familiar ache of having a parent that loves you, but doesn't believe in you. 'It's like they've already thought of our destiny, and it's just our job to live it.'

'Yeah, well, I'm tired of doing everything the way everyone else wants me to,' Orion said, and then he latched his gaze on to mine. 'And for what it's worth, I think you're going to be a witch who will do far more than just simple spells.'

A prickle climbed over my eyes, and I know my smile was shaky. 'For what it's worth, I think you're going to be a great teacher one day, Hawthorne. Bossy, but great.'

'I'd like to say I'm *firm*, not bossy,' Orion teased.

'I'm your first student, so I get to decide,' I countered, swallowing against the emotion in my throat.

'Fine, Reverie, you win,' he conceded. 'Now, do you mind healing me, because this is *stinging*.'

'I can't believe you didn't just heal yourself.' I looked down at the gash again.

'You needed a test subject,' Orion said, like it was obvious.

'So you endured a painful injury for me?'

The question flew out of my mouth faster than I could think. I felt Orion's heart skip a beat against the skin of my thumb, and I refused to look away from the gash. I couldn't look at him. I couldn't.

‘Easiest thing I’ve ever done, Reverie,’ Orion murmured, not barely above a whisper.

But I heard him.

I swallowed. I had to remind myself that this was Orion. *Ex-friend. Ex-crush. Ex-everything.* I wasn’t allowed to have feelings for him any more. Everything was going as it should with Silas.

‘You’re sure you want me to heal you?’ I pivoted.

‘Reverie,’ Orion’s voice held a command that made my head snap up. ‘You can do this. I trust you; I’m not worried about what will happen. Neither should you.’

‘I know – but I haven’t cast a spell on *another* person since Everly Catacomb.’

‘It’s a good thing I don’t have fangs then,’ Orion said, teasingly. ‘Come on. You’re going to cast the spell, heal my wound, and then we’re going to hit the Treasure Trove to help Melodie out with the after-school rush.’

‘Do you want a sir-yes-sir after that,’ I asked, sarcastically.

Orion looked like he was contemplating it, so I squeezed his wrist tightly.

‘Just give me the spell, Hawthorne.’

‘*Bones splintering, skin tearing, heal the one who needs repairing*,’ Orion recited. ‘And when you’re saying the spell, think of the skin knitting back together. Imagine what you want it to look like.’

I took a deep breath.

‘Every other thought is inconsequential.’ Orion’s low timbre was like melted chocolate, and it soothed some of my nerves away. ‘The only thing you’re focusing on is healing. Curing. Saving. Think of every time you’ve looked after someone.’

I thought of that instinct to protect, and I envisioned what I wanted Orion’s inner arm to look like. I wanted the skin to look baby pink and new. I wanted him to be OK – not just from the gash, but from the hurt in his voice when he spoke about his parents.

I hated him, but the part of me that didn’t wanted him to be OK.

My magic warmed my veins, spurred on by the images Orion’s words had brought forth. It was like I was shooting an arrow, and my magic knew exactly where to land it.

‘*Bones splintering, skin tearing, heal the one who needs repairing*.’

‘Open your eyes, Maya,’ Orion murmured, and my lids flew open on command.

Orion’s skin was healing. It was knitting together, covering the gash, until just a faint white scar was left. Orion’s dragon scales erupted over the closed wound, as I dragged my fingertips down the scar.

I lifted my eyes to his and sucked in a breath at seeing the proud smile on his mouth.

‘You’re going to break this curse, Reverie,’ Orion said, without any doubt. ‘You’re so much closer, and when you work past all that noise in your head, your magic is focused.’

I smiled, unrestrained and full.

‘And it also seems like you’re on track with Silas,’ Orion said, his tone losing some of its warmth.

‘Yeah, I think I am,’ I echoed, letting his wrist fall from my hand. I wasn’t sure why the thought didn’t fill me with pleasure – it was probably just nerves from how close the autumn moon was now. ‘I’m planning on telling him about my feelings at Everly’s party this weekend. That way, we have some time before the soulmate spell.’

Orion raised a mocking eyebrow. ‘Sound less excited, Reverie. Isn’t this everything you ever wanted?’

I mustered a smile. ‘I’m just tired; it’s been a long day.’

‘Come on,’ he said, walking us out of the grotto. ‘Let’s grab something at Gregory’s, before we head to the Treasure Trove.’

The familiarity of our routine shouldn’t have comforted me. It should’ve been a warning sign, but I’ve always been pretty bad at noticing danger unless it was staring me right in the face.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

I was in the middle of destroying my entire closet when Mum came into my room. All my clothes were scattered around me, Rani was on a call and there was a very big chance I was going to have a breakdown in the middle of the day.

'I have *nothing to wear*,' I said, irrationally aggravated at all the sweaters I owned. None of them screamed *be my soulmate* and that was just not going to work. I'd spent the morning at the Treasure Trove, and the rest of my day with Raven and Sofia, working out my plan of action for the party.

But now, I had three hours to go and no outfit.

'She says as she sits in a pile of her clothes,' Rani intoned from the phone.

I glared at her. 'I can't wait till you're here next week, and then I can't just glare at you.'

'What're you going to do?' Rani asked, leaning against her bed. She was surrounded by grimoires and spellbooks, and her roommate had dozed off on the bed beside hers.

'She could charm you into silence,' Mum said from the doorway.

I whipped around to see her standing there. In her hands was my charms paper, with the *B* scrawled on it.

'Where did you find that?' I asked, incredulously.

'You left it on the counter,' Mum replied, with a grin on her face. 'Why wouldn't you tell me, Maya? This is amazing.'

'What is it?' Rani insisted, peering into the screen. Mum stepped past me to show Rani, who let out a happy squeal. 'Look at this practical! You did such a good job, Maya.'

Joy buzzed through me – I couldn't remember the last time Mum had sounded this proud of me, especially for something to do with school.

Mum pressed a kiss to my head. 'I'm really proud of you.'

A glow sat deep in my chest at her words.

‘You know what this calls for, right?’ Rani said, a sly smile on her mouth. ‘A shopping spree! Mum, Maya needs some new outfits.’

‘No, no, it’s fine,’ I said, hurriedly. I didn’t want to have to explain why I needed something to wear. All I’d told Mum was that I was going to Raven’s later. ‘You’re probably slammed with work.’

Mum looked at me, and I watched as determination settled on her face. ‘Grab your bag, Maya. We’re going shopping.’

‘Really?’ I squeaked.

‘Really,’ Mum said, with a gentle smile. ‘I’ll meet you at the front door.’

It was the perfect hour before the party – I had found a royal-blue dress embellished with gold designs of the sun and the moon and fitted with flared sleeves. As I twirled in it, back in my bedroom, and got ready to leave the house, I felt a surety in my bones.

Everything was going to be perfect.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Last summer – August

I found the spell where you find all forbidden things: in a book. And I found it on a day where everything seemed to be going wrong.

It started with me arriving late to my Wishing Well shift after snoozing my alarm, then burning my hand while trying to get a tray of cookies out of the oven, then slipping on the pavement and grazing my knee. For some reason, it was raining, even though it was August – probably because some siren or mermaid was having a tantrum and manipulating the weather.

Basically, it was a bad day. But it became worse when I got a text right at the end of my shift.

ORION HAWTHORNE
Hey, Maya. I'm so sorry, but I'm going to have to take a rain check on later. Celine invited a couple of our mutual friends over so we could plan a 'going-away' party.

Outside the shop, I had stared at the message for a good two minutes before frantically replying.

MAYA
Going-away party?? For who??

ORION HAWTHORNE

Well.

ORION HAWTHORNE
Me.

MAYA
But you're not going. You're doing a teacher's apprenticeship here, aren't you?

My heart was lodged in my throat, and I felt faintly ill. If Celine had somehow convinced Orion to go to MAC, I was ninety per cent sure I was going to have to fight a fish today.

ORION HAWTHORNE
I don't know, things are complicated. I haven't told Celine about my parents yet.

I knew, somewhere deep in my heart, that staying in Maple Falls and following his dreams was the right thing for Orion. But more than that, I wanted to be part of the reason he stayed. But how on earth could I compete with Celine? She was a siren and could literally convince anyone to do anything. Still, I had to try and make Orion see me. See what we could be.

So, I found myself in the Wandering Words Library after my shift. Orpheus Hale was looking after the library while his grandson was out partying the summer away. Orpheus was a good caretaker, but he was getting older – and easier to step around.

He barely noticed when I went to the spellbooks in the restricted section. They were temperamental books, held back by a glass casing. Anyone could read forbidden spells, because the Coven believed hiding spells made them far more alluring. So, you could read about them, but you weren't allowed to take the books out in case anyone tried to cast the spells. Usually you'd need the library's caretaker to watch over you while you read them, just so it was clear nothing more sinister was going on.

But I wasn't going to harm anyone. I just needed a little help.

It was a purple spellbook, with silver gilded designs. The title read *Spells for Transformation*. I gently pried open the glass door and reached in for the spellbook, flipping through it until I found the spell I was looking for.

The eye of the beholder.

The spell required a mirror that was to be charmed with these words: *Make me pretty, twist the mind, make my image fit each and every design*. Once done, all you needed was to look in the enchanted mirror and let yourself be morphed into someone desirable.

I murmured them now, knowing I needed to commit them to memory.

'Little witch.'

I clutched the book to my chest, startled to find Rowan Hale leaning against the bookshelf. He looked dishevelled, and his fingertips were stained with different colours of paint. His gaze was latched on to the book in my arms, and my heart started to beat faster.

But then, even as his gaze narrowed, a smile – like a knife – slipped over his mouth.

'Nothing good comes from magic cast through heartbreak, little witch,' he said, ominously. Then he pushed himself off the stacks and turned away. With one raised hand, he flicked his wrist and the book went flying out of my palms and back on to the shelf.

I curled my fingers into a fist, watching his retreating back.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

When I arrived at the clearing in the Firewood Forest for the party, I saw that someone had decorated the tunnel in the ground with fairy lights, making it much less terrifying to slide down. This time, when I slid down to the grotto, I hit the warm, purple sand with a lot more grace.

A few others had volunteered to help set up. Everly Catacomb – the actual host – was nowhere to be seen though. I ambled over to Raven and Sofia.

'OK, so we both just got here,' Sofia began. Her wings were glowing under the blue of Mermaid's Grotto. 'And Silas is over there. He was asking about you.'

'He texted me too,' I said, eyes darting around to find him. I was ninety per cent nerves at this point, especially when it kept hitting me that *this* was it. It might not be the night of the autumn moon, but it was the night I was going to tell the werewolf about my feelings for him.

'Where is he?' I asked, when my scan of the grotto came up empty.

'He's gone to bring in all the dragon lights,' Raven explained, and then said something that made my stomach clench. 'With Orion.'

'With Orion?' I echoed, dumbly. 'Please tell me you're joking.'

'He dropped me off,' Raven said, wincing slightly. 'I brought the dragon lights 'cause they'll burn all night – Silas came out to grab them and Orion offered to help.'

'What do you think they're talking about?' I asked, feeling very off-kilter.

Sofia shot me a disbelieving look. 'Uh, I don't know – you?'

I shut my eyes briefly. 'If your brother ruins this for me, I will personally skin him alive.'

'I've seen you wield a knife, so that's actually kind of scary,' Raven noted and then looked over my shoulder. 'Oh, they're back, and would you look at that – Celine's with them too.'

I twisted around to see Silas standing in the entrance with a box in his arms, a sunny smile gracing his face. My gaze slipped from him to Celine and Orion, who were standing in a corner, talking. Orion was leaning against the wall of the grotto, his attention entirely focused on her. I looked away, refusing to let it bother me.

'Maya!' Silas called from across the grotto, and his attention on me felt like a warm ray of sunlight brushing against my skin, burning all thoughts of Orion away.

'Go!' Sofia hissed under her breath and prodded me in the back.

I jolted forward, before catching my footing and making my way over to him. My internal monologue went like this: *Don't mess this up, don't mess this up, don't mess this up.*

When I reached Silas, I was a ball of nerves, my heart thundering in my chest. But his soft smile put me at ease.

'Maya, you look beautiful,' Silas said as I approached, his hands full of the dragon lights.

I felt my face grow warm and genuine delight course through me. 'You don't look so bad yourself.'

His smile broke into a grin, and I could do nothing but bask in it.

'Are you two planning on helping, or are you just going to be making googly eyes at each other the whole time?'

Trent's sneering voice came from behind Silas. Silas sighed and glanced over at his teammate.

'Maya's already helped,' Silas shot back. 'She's the one who found this place.'

'She found it?' Trent scoffed, arms folded over his chest. 'So, should we expect the mayor and every adult in Maple Falls to show up at some point in the night?'

I felt my cheeks flame, and I opened my mouth to retort, but Silas beat me to it.

'I think what you mean to say is, "Thank you, Maya, for helping us find a place so last minute, and I'm sorry for being such a jerk to you my entire life",' Silas said, his tone harder than I'd ever heard it before.

Trent deflated, rolling his eyes before muttering some version of an apology.

I was conscious that Silas had only ever seen me as a klutz, or a disaster of a witch, or someone he needed to stick up for. Now, I needed him to see

me as someone that was more than that. Someone he could see as his soulmate.

‘It’s fine,’ I said, with a wave of my hand. ‘I get it, I’m the mayor’s daughter. But I promise you, nothing is going to ruin tonight.’

Silas smiled down at me, and my heart leaped. Clearly it had been the right response. The conversation between the guys slipped into whatever jocks usually talk about – lots of rugby talk and loud laughter as they set up the lights around the grotto. Silas kept me by his side, as his helper; I passed him the lights, and he hung them around the grotto. I didn’t say much, not feeling the need to interject.

As I looked around to see how the grotto was coming together, I realized we were now closer to where Celine and Orion were standing. I tried not to watch them, but I couldn’t tear my eyes away. Were they standing even closer together? How was that even possible?

‘Maya?’

I startled and looked back at Silas, who was peering down at me, his arms empty, all the lights strung up.

I watched his gaze flit to Orion, only a few steps away. He hesitated before asking, ‘You and Orion, is there something there?’

‘Something there?’ I squeaked.

‘Yeah,’ Silas rubbed a hand against the back of his neck. ‘It’s just, I know you’re close to Raven. I saw him pick you up after school, and I heard you’re at their house all the time – I just don’t want to overstep.’

‘There’s nothing there,’ I cut in, sharper than I’d intended. Silas’s eyebrows lifted, and I softened my tone. ‘He was just asking for help with that – that love spell gone rogue.’

Silas’s shoulders relaxed. ‘He said the same thing.’

I nodded, ignoring that twinge in my chest. Orion had done exactly what he should’ve, and I had no right to think he’d say something else.

‘And, yeah, that curse really does need to be lifted. Diya’s now sending love letters to my house.’

‘Are they at least good?’ I asked.

‘They are actually,’ Silas said with a grin. Then it faded. ‘But still, I don’t like the idea of someone being lovesick over me – especially when I don’t return the feelings.’

Guilt slammed into me. Diya was acting like this because of me; because of what I’d done.

‘Hey,’ Silas said, ducking his head to catch my gaze. ‘You OK?’

‘I’m OK,’ I said, forcing myself to smile. His concern for me was sweet, and I focused on that instead of the sorrow pressing down on me.

‘Well, if you’re not, just let me know and we can leave whenever,’ Silas vowed, and I felt a rush of nerves. I should’ve taken the opportunity to ask him for a breather on the beach and then confess my feelings. But the words wouldn’t come out. ‘Until then, want to get something to drink?’

He turned and asked for two glasses of faerie punch that someone was ladling into purple cups while we waited.

‘So, next Friday’s your last game before half-term starts, right?’ I asked, filling the silence.

‘Yes,’ Silas said, and his eyes glittered. ‘Don’t forget my jersey – you promised to wear it for my next game.’

I felt my cheeks warm and groaned softly, covering my face with one hand. ‘You’re never going to let me live that down, are you?’

Silas chuckled, accepting the two cups and handing one to me. ‘Not a chance. A deal’s a deal.’

I raised mine, taking a sip of the punch to steady myself. ‘You’d better win that game then. Otherwise, I’ll look ridiculous cheering in your jersey.’

Silas’s grin softened into something quieter, more intent. ‘Don’t worry, I’ll make sure to win for you.’

I was flustered, and I didn’t know how to handle his gaze on me, so I took a big gulp of my drink. The faerie punch tasted like plums, lemonade and violets at first, but then, an almost metallic taste slipped into the undertones. I ignored it, taking another sip. And another.

‘Feeling thirsty?’ he teased, tilting his head to one side.

‘Shut up,’ I shot back, cheeks warmer than usual. ‘You *know* what you’re doing.’

‘What, making conversation?’ Silas asked, eyes tracing over my cheeks, which were getting redder. His smile dipped slightly, brow creasing.

‘What?’ I asked, suddenly nervous.

I watched as Silas said something to me, but I couldn’t hear it. It felt like everything had slowed down, but, in reality, the world around me was still moving. The party around me started to fade away, replaced by a faint buzzing in my head, and Silas’s face blurred at the edges.

My limbs loosened, and, suddenly, every idea that passed through my mind sounded good and oh-so-doable right at this moment.

And *that* is when everything went downhill.

I wanted to stand on Silas's shoulders because I had something important to say. He's tall, and I guess I thought I'd command a lot of attention at that height. But, despite my earnest explanation, he wasn't understanding that and wouldn't squat down to help me up. So, I sought out the next best thing: a table. It used to hold the faerie punch, but after I – very carefully – placed the bowl of punch on to the ground, I decided to drag it into the centre of the party. I jostled past people, doling out apologies, but really I was focused on getting up on this annoyingly unstable table.

'Maya,' Silas hissed, eyes wide, as he tried to stop me. '*What* are you doing?'

I tugged the table back, but it didn't budge. My whole body felt like it was made out of cotton. My mind felt fuzzy, or, maybe, my eyes were fuzzy? Because Silas looked like a smudge, as if someone had wiped his form with a terry cloth.

'I have s-s-something to say,' I replied, struggling to get the words out.

'To everyone?' Silas queried, incredulously. 'Seriously, what has gotten into you?'

It was a perfectly reasonable question. Usually I hated anything that granted me the attention of everyone's eyes. But, in my altered state, I had decided I wanted to tell everyone at the party that I was the one who cast the rogue love spell over the town. The guilt had been festering in me, and I'd decided to unburden myself. Yes, I still had to work on the counterspell, but at least I wouldn't be lying about it any more.

Once I had finally managed to climb on top of the table, it didn't take long for people to notice me. I was the only one standing on a table after all. I squinted as I tried to make everything un-blur. I wanted to *see* the faces of my peers, not these blue and purple smudges of light. I also kind of wanted to fly. Maybe even jump off the table.

'Oh, do not jump of the table,' Silas pleaded, looking up at me.

Oops, must have said that thought aloud. A giggle slipped out of me, then a full laugh; the kind of laugh that made your ribs ache. But I wasn't sure what was so funny, just that I really wanted to laugh. Then I stopped, abruptly, because I had something to say.

Something important.

'Excuse me, everyone,' I announced, sweeping my arms in a wide arc.

The noise of the party fell to a murmur as they all focused on me. I might not have been able to see them all clearly, but I could hear them. I could hear the whispers, the snorts, the sounds of people watching me make a fool of myself. But in that moment, I didn't register it. All I could feel was the secret on my tongue, the one that had ruined my life, and I wanted to tell everyone. I wanted to be free of it.

'Hello, everyone!' I shouted, though I didn't really need to.

'Hello, Maya!' someone shouted back, and I was kind of grateful for that. The silence was a bit disconcerting.

'I, Maya Reverie, have something really imp-imp–' I squinted down at where I thought Silas was. 'What's that word again? Imp–'

'Important,' Silas said back, but then switched gears. 'OK, Maya, come on down, all right? Obviously, someone slipped something into your punch, and you're not –'

'Important!' I shouted, excitedly. 'Got it. I have something important to say!'

'Then say it quickly, Reverie, because you've stopped the party.'

That voice I did recognize. Everly Catacomb. Her tone wasn't irritated, like she usually was with me. This time, she sounded gleeful.

'I just want everyone to know how sorry I am,' I began, and my voice was trembling now. All that guilt rose to the surface, choking me. I thought of Frost and Diya and Inspector Vale, all lovesick because of me. I shuffled back and forth on the table, desperately trying to focus my eyes and meet someone's gaze so they'd understand my sincerity. I wanted people to know that I was so sorry.

'I didn't mean to ca– *ah*!'

I'd danced a little too close to the edge of the table and suddenly felt myself falling – hands sticking out, gasping as air slammed into my lungs. I heard someone shout my name.

And then, arms.

I was in someone's arms. My fall was cushioned by their embrace; my legs hung over one strong arm, and my head was tucked into a shoulder. There were some shouts and groaning from the crowd, and then I was being moved. The blue and purple smudges of light faded; the blurry world around me turned into darkness.

The air felt colder, crisper, and I snuggled deeper into the arms. I looped my arms around the strong neck, pressed my nose into the jacket and

inhaled deeply. Fire and wood, like a blazing campfire. I wanted to bury my head in the scent; fill my lungs with it until it was all I could breathe.

‘Where are you taking her?’ A sweet, familiar voice said.

‘To get this potion out of her system,’ the voice that was holding me shot back. I could hear the tenor from his chest, where my ear was pressed against his sternum. His heart was beating against my cheek, loud and steady. It soothed the racing thoughts in my head, gave me something to focus on beyond the cold around me and the glimmers of moonlight. I could almost have fallen asleep, but then we came to a stop.

It was an abrupt stop that made me jostle. A whine slipped out of me; I was starting to feel a little sick.

‘Get out of my way, wolf,’ the voice was hard-edged, unrelenting.

‘Are you sure you should be the one to take her?’ Silas asked. I knew it had to be him because what other werewolf could it be? ‘She said you two weren’t even friends.’

The arms holding me stiffened, and I heard the audible click of a jaw snapping shut.

‘I have known Maya Reverie since I was eight years old.’ The voice was vibrating with anger. ‘I have watched out for her since then. So let me make this very, *very* clear to you: if you don’t move out of my way so I can get her home, I will burn you to a crisp. And no, that isn’t an exaggeration, I will literally, *burn you*. I don’t care if that breaks a thousand magical laws, I will end you and have no regrets while doing so.’

I turned my head to see Silas’s smudged form standing before me and my rescuer. I couldn’t make out his face, but he was holding himself so still. And his eyes, I could see those. But that’s because they had gone from blue to gold. Bright gold. I knew that a sign of a werewolf shifting was the same as a dragon’s – their eyes changed first.

But Silas didn’t shift fully, he just stepped closer. The arms around me stiffened even further.

Silas’s expression finally came into focus. A concerned frown was etched on to his face, his brows knitted together. His eyes were so gold, like two coins. And his hair was so soft-looking, like sunlight shining through candyfloss.

I felt a sigh leave my body. He was so pretty.

A smile tugged his frown upwards a little. ‘You’re so pretty too, Maya.’

I grinned – guess I said that out loud too.

‘Wonderful, now that we’ve established that,’ the voice holding me said, irritably. ‘We need to leave. So, like I said, wolf, move out of my way.’

Silas looked up, his smile slipping away again. I saw him bristle, the muscles in his neck flexed. He didn’t take his eyes off the person holding me – not until Raven appeared.

‘All right, boys,’ Raven said, her voice full of authority. ‘As delightful as this male posturing is, Maya needs to get whatever potion was slipped into her drink out of her system.’

‘How do we know *he* didn’t put it in there?’ the voice holding me accused.

Silas let out a growl that made the forest leaves shake, and Raven’s admonishment came quick.

‘Orion,’ she hissed.

It hit me like a ton of bricks.

Of course. Of course, the voice belonged to Orion.

I lifted my head slightly and, with the steady heartbeat against my ear, I forced my world to focus. To really focus. The blurring faded inch by inch, revealing the sharp curve of Orion’s jaw, the black tendril of hair that slipped over his forehead, the sharpness of his silver eyes as he looked down at me. His heartbeat was still steady, but his breathing felt deliberate. Controlled. Waiting.

‘I’m sorry, Silas,’ Raven said, stepping in front of her brother and me. ‘But Orion’s got her, OK? He won’t let anything happen to her.’

Silas’s gaze flicked down to my best friend. His jaw was still tight, but he stepped aside, letting Orion pass.

‘Find out who did this to her, Raven,’ Orion commanded, not stopping for a breath.

My best friend’s reply was instantaneous. ‘I’m already on it.’

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The car ride was delightful. Even though Orion didn't let me stick my head out of the window to feel the cool air whip against my cheeks because, according to him, although I had feelings for a dog, I wasn't supposed to *act* like one. I promptly informed him that calling Silas a dog would be like someone calling Orion a giant lizard.

After that, we stopped talking, I kept my hand out of the window, and Orion drove us through the streets of Maple Falls with practised ease; the kind of surety that came from someone who knew these roads like the lines on his palms. I allowed my eyes to flutter shut, to just enjoy the motion of the car. I only cracked open my lids when I felt Orion open my door.

I staggered out of the car, stumbling when I felt that fuzziness hit my system again, making the world around me tilt. Orion placed his arm around my shoulders, holding me upright, as he steered me somewhere. The streets were quiet and unrecognizable to me in the dark. I didn't really understand where we were until Orion stopped outside a building, used one hand to open the door and ushered me inside.

Once we were in, he hit the lights, and I was blinded momentarily. It made my head pulse with pain and my stomach revolt. His arm remained sure around me, holding me upright, as he grabbed a stepping stool shaped like a tree stump with his free hand and pushed it against a wooden counter. Then, he gently prompted me to step on the stump, and I plopped down on to the counter.

'Where are we?' I mumbled, rubbing my eyes so the black spots would dissipate.

'The Treasure Trove,' Orion said, shortly.

He was radiating frustration as he moved around the bakery with a sense of agitation marking his every step. He was looking at the tall shelves of ingredients, searching for something.

‘How did we get in?’ I asked, trying to make my tongue work. Everything in my mouth felt cottony, and my mind was still catching up to the events of the night. I could feel my thoughts drifting through my head like grains of sand escaping through my fingers. ‘Only Melodie has a key.’

‘I unlocked the door,’ Orion replied, shortly.

‘How?’

‘I *picked* it,’ he said through gritted teeth. Then he muttered something under his breath, and five different jars from the tall shelves careened through the air and into his awaiting hands.

‘You picked a lock?’ I asked, incredulously. ‘Where did you learn to do that?’

Orion scoffed as he turned to face me. Well, not really face me. He wouldn’t look at me. Not even as he came towards the wooden counter and began laying out all the ingredients before him. ‘You don’t need to know. We’re not friends, remember? Like your little wolf said. I imagine you loved telling him that.’

I reared back at the bite in his tone. ‘You’re mad at me,’ I said, simply, head tilted to one side as I observed him. ‘*You* don’t get to be mad at me.’

His head snapped towards me so fast I thought it might hurt. ‘Excuse me?’

‘You heard me. You’re not allowed to be mad at me,’ I said, stubbornly. My hands clutched at the countertop. The overwhelming scent of ginger filled the air as Orion roughly unscrewed the cap on one of the jars.

‘And why is that?’ Orion shot back.

The truth is finally out. You're still not sure whether she should take him back.

For stories that keep you turning the pages, look up **Lokepub** on Google.

‘Because *I’m* mad at you.’

His eyebrows lifted mockingly, and that smile on his mouth was sharp-edged like one of my favourite knives. ‘Mad at me?’ he asked, and his voice lifted slightly. ‘For what? For helping you break the curse you set over this town, or finding you a place to hold a party, or making some werewolf fall in love with you? Are *those* the reasons you’re angry at me?’

I hated that any part of him was right about helping me. He didn’t deserve to be right. I should’ve said nothing in response, used silence as my weapon of choice. But instead, I said aloud the one thing I shouldn’t have.

‘No, I’m mad at you because of last summer.’

The words hung in the air between us. I felt my head buzzing with energy, my gaze focusing in and out. My tongue felt looser, which is also probably why I’d said the words in the first place.

‘I thought you didn’t want to talk about that night,’ Orion replied, quietly. He’d stopped weighing out ingredients, his hands stilled around a mortar and pestle.

‘Yeah, well we’re not,’ I replied, haughtily. ‘There’s nothing to talk about.’

‘Well, you know what, Reverie –’ His voice cracked with frustration. ‘Maybe I do want to talk about it. Maybe I want to talk about why you’re so mad at me for stopping you from making a stupid mistake. An eye-of-the-beholder spell? Really?’

His scorn made my cheeks flush. ‘That’s not fair. The circumstances –’

‘What circumstances?’ he argued, planting both of his hands either side of me.

‘You know what?’ I said, coldly. ‘I’m not going to humiliate myself for you by repeating them.’

Orion let out a gust of warm breath, making my knees tingle. ‘I get it. You were sixteen. Madly in love with some guy, but why would you ever want to *change* yourself for someone else?’

‘You weren’t *just* some guy to me.’

The words came out smaller than I liked, with less confidence than I wanted. But when they landed, Orion’s mouth dropped open. For several long breaths, neither of us said anything.

‘What?’ he whispered, his voice half gasp, half exhale.

‘You knew I liked you,’ I babbled, the words escaping my defences. ‘That whole summer – I wanted to tell you, but you only had eyes for –’ I cut myself off. ‘And I get it, OK? She is beautiful and funny and perfect. I just

wanted to be that. For you. For everyone. I was tired of being a mess, or the mayor's daughter, or a disaster waiting to happen. I wanted to be loved. And no one loved me as I was. No one would. You even said so yourself.'

Once the words left me, the memories that I had been working so hard to forget spilled out like floodwater, and now there was nothing I could do to stop them.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Last summer – mid-August

Orion's going-away party was one week before the summer came to a close. Raven was arriving on the day, and his friends had planned the whole thing. I'd picked a pretty outfit for the night: a pale-blue sweater with my favourite dark jeans, and I was going to don an assortment of gold rings on my fingers. But my outfit and the accessories I had chosen didn't matter. Because tonight I was going to cast the spell, and then I'd walk into Orion's party and he would finally see me – not his sister's best friend, not the girl he used to hang out with, not just a friend, but someone worth staying for.

'Maya!' Rani called from downstairs. 'Mum and I are going over to the Hawthornes' for the party – are you riding with us?'

'No, no,' I shouted back, slipping the rings on to my fingers. 'I'll meet you guys there.'

Rani called some sort of agreement back. I heard Mum's laugh, and then they were both out the door. I waited until I heard the rumble of Mum's car speeding down the street before I left my bedroom.

With the eye-of-the-beholder charm written on my palm, I was on the hunt for the perfect mirror to complete the spell. I wasn't sure whether the size of the mirror impacted the spell. My best choice was going to be the one we had in the attic. I pulled down the staircase that led up to it, irritated at myself for not splurging on a full-length mirror for my bedroom. I found it in the back. It was dusty and covered with a white cloth, and it was heavy, which wasn't ideal. I was going to need to levitate it down.

Wonderful.

I infused my voice with confidence as I pointed my finger at the mirror. '*Grip, and lift this fragile mirror here, following my finger for the path is*

near.’

My finger shook as the mirror rose, the weight of it appearing heavy even to my magic. Still, I steeled my jaw and descended the staircase. A light sheen of sweat was on my back, and my cheeks were red by the time I got it to the living room.

I moved the sofa to one side, the coffee table to the other, and then rested the mirror on the floor. Slightly breathless, I kneeled in front of the mirror, placed my right palm against the cool surface and looked at myself. My heart was racing; my stomach twisted in knots.

I sat back on my knees, keeping my palm against the cool surface. I let my eyes flutter shut and my magic rise to the surface of my skin.

‘*Make me pretty, twist the mind, make my image fit each and every design*.’

My eyes flew open, and I watched as the mirror rippled once before turning solid again. I was still kneeling, my heart alight in my chest. According to what I’d read, all I needed to do now was keep my palm on the mirror and look at my reflection, and the spell would take effect.

I took one more deep breath, intending to lean forward so my reflection joined my palm, but my phone buzzed. Loud and annoying. Letting out a frustrated breath, I pulled my phone from my back pocket. I saw a message from Raven. Well, several messages that I’d missed.

RAVEN
I’ve portalled back!! Where are you?

RAVEN
OK your mum and sister are here but YOU aren’t. This is not good best-friend behaviour. Where exactly is my welcome-home banner?

RAVEN

I’m mingling with people I barely like, and Orion. So, this is what you’ve left me with.

RAVEN
OK, so I’m not really sure what happened? I was talking to Orion, said something that triggered him, and now he said he’s on his way to you??? I don’t know what’s happening.

On his way to me? My fingers flew across the screen.

MAYA
On his way here? Why? What did you say?

But I never found out what Raven said. As soon as I’d sent the text, there was a knock on my door. Panic flooded me, and I looked around the room, wondering how obvious what I’d been attempting to do was.

Another knock hit my door, and there wasn’t enough time for me move the mirror. Instead, I hurried to the door and opened it a little.

Orion stood on my porch, decked in his usual jacket, but donning a very confused look.

‘Reverie,’ Orion said, slowly, gaze narrowing. ‘Why do you look like you’re hiding a body behind that door?’

‘I’m not!’ I said, but my voice was a squeak. I coughed and straightened against the door. ‘Nothing – I was just getting ready.’ I pointed at him. ‘For your party. What are you doing here?’

Orion didn’t say anything, and I knew his mind was whirring, pulling out all the details that seemed wrong. Still, he answered my question, refocusing his attention on me, his jaw tightening again.

‘Raven said you’re in love with someone,’ Orion said, bluntly.

The shock of his statement made my hold on the door loosen. I stared at him, wild panic running through my veins. Did Raven know I had feelings for Orion? No, no, she couldn’t. It took a moment for it to hit me that he was talking about Silas.

‘I-I,’ I stuttered, mind reeling. I hadn’t really thought about Silas all summer. I hadn’t even noticed when I’d stopped thinking about him and started thinking about Orion instead.

‘Why does that matter?’ I eventually settled on, because being defensive was second nature to me when it came to Orion.

‘Why does it matter?’ Orion asked, disbelievingly. He ran a hand through his hair and sidestepped me, right into my house. He was pacing across my foyer, and I twisted around in panic. ‘I was talking to Raven, and I mentioned you. She then asked me if some guy, I can’t even remember his name, was invited to my party. I said no, and she said you’d be disappointed and drops a bomb on my head by saying you liked him. That you liked him a lot. You’re seriously asking me why that matters, Reverie?’

I wasn’t focused on his question or his tirade; my gaze drifted to the living room, hoping he wouldn’t notice anything amiss and I could somehow guide him to the kitchen on the right instead.

‘Reverie, what is so –’ His head turned, following my gaze to the mirror that was lying on the living-room floor. I watched in horror-movie slow motion as Orion took in the set-up, and I could tell what he saw.

He moved as if he was going to go to the mirror, and I stuck my hand out to stop him.

‘No!’ I shouted, horrified at the thought that Orion might stride across the room and touch the now charmed mirror.

He jolted back, his gaze going from my face to my open palm. I watched his eyebrows drop, his lips twitch into a frown. It took me a moment to realize what he was seeing.

I didn’t have enough time to curl my palm into a fist, because Orion’s hand shot out to grip my wrist, keeping it open. He stepped closer, mouthing the words, silver eyes widening with shock.

‘This is an illegal spell,’ Orion said, horrified. His eyes flicked to the mirror behind me, then to the spell scribbled on my skin. ‘You were casting the eye-of-the-beholder spell, weren’t you?’

‘I –’ I couldn’t find the words nor the explanation. Not that Orion cared; too many realizations were hitting him in one go.

‘Were you casting that spell for that guy?’ Orion asked, and now his voice was hard.

This wasn’t how I wanted to confess to him; this didn’t feel right. ‘Orion, I can explain –’

‘No one will love you like this,’ Orion said, and my words died on my tongue. His gaze was hard. His grip on my wrist was loose enough to yank free, but I felt boneless. I felt numb. The only thing that existed was the ache in my chest.

He drove the knife deeper into my heart. ‘Do you understand me, Reverie? The spell will morph you, turn you into some glamourized version of yourself, making you virtually unrecognizable. And sure, you’ll gain attention, but it won’t be love. How could it be?’

All I could hear was the echoing refrain of what he had said before.

No one will love you like this.

The ache in my chest was spreading until it was in my fingertips, and I felt like I couldn’t breathe. Orion watched me, searched for something in my face that clearly wasn’t there. He dropped my wrist, and my gaze lifted to his.

I stared at him, watching as the boy I knew from the summer melted away.

‘Please,’ I whispered. ‘Please don’t tell the Coven.’

Orion inhaled with measured breaths. I couldn’t tell what he was thinking any more. He’d closed himself off to me, and I was no longer privy to his thoughts or emotions.

‘I can’t leave an enchanted mirror in your living room,’ Orion said, eventually, his voice hard. ‘I can’t leave you here. I can’t trust you – I can’t. It’s not safe, Reverie. What you’ve done isn’t safe, and, I’m sorry, but I can’t just let it go.’

I could’ve pleaded – maybe if I had, he’d have stopped. Maybe I could’ve explained better, if my chest wasn’t so tight with pain. But I didn’t do any of that. I let him step back and watched as he made a phone call. I cradled my wrist to my chest, pressed the spell scribbled on my palm to the hollow of my throat.

No one will love you like this.

The Coven came almost immediately. Mum and Rani came too. There was chatter around me: reprimands being shot my way, Mum asking me what I was thinking, Rani helping the Coven un-spell the mirror.

The aftermath was all a blur, really. The only thing I truly remembered was Orion walking away. He didn’t linger to see how the Coven punished me, didn’t hear as they doled out another point on my licence. He didn’t stay to listen to my mother’s rant or Rani’s probing questions.

When they arrived, he simply turned his back in my doorway, and I watched him retreat. I didn't know it was the last time I'd see him that summer; that he'd leave for MAC early without saying goodbye.

Back then, I didn't care what he did any more. I was angry, not just that he'd reported me to the Coven, but because, at the end of all of this, I was the one left with the broken heart.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

‘I – what?’ Orion’s voice cracked. ‘I never said that.’

‘Yes, you did!’ My voice shook with stubborn anguish. ‘You walked in on me, saw the spell on my hand and you said –’

‘No one will love you like this,’ Orion said, and I watched his eyes shut briefly.

‘Exactly,’ I said, voice aching. ‘You told me no one would love me. And I knew that meant you didn’t have feelings for me, but you didn’t have to say it like that. If you were going to break my heart, you could have at least done it kindly.’

‘That’s not what I meant,’ Orion replied, and he stepped closer. ‘Maya, that’s not what I meant.’

My arms folded tight across my chest, like armour. ‘Then what did you mean?’

He shoved a hand through his hair, exhaling hard. ‘I was angry. Furious. But not at you, at *him*.’ A hysterical kind of laugh left his lips. ‘Silas. He was the guy you’d been crushing on for years. I never thought you meant me.’

‘Well, it doesn’t matter now does it?’ I added hotly. ‘I’m over it. Over you.’

His gaze lifted to me, a slight sadness in his expression, but I refused to be moved by it. ‘Regardless. Even if it *was* me you were casting that spell for, I stand by what I said to you that night. I wanted you to understand that even if you’d cast that spell and totally erased yourself, what you got from others wouldn’t have been love. It would’ve been infatuation and lust, and it would’ve been *wrong* because you wouldn’t really have been you under that spell.’

I stared at him, my heart racing as he continued. His voice was getting more desperate.

‘Do you get it? I wasn’t calling you unlovable. I was just saying it was wrong. It was awful phrasing, yes, and I’m sorry for that, but I don’t regret stopping you. You deserved better than that.’

The world tilted under my feet. ‘If you cared so much then why’d you call the Coven?’

‘Because I didn’t know what else to do,’ he snapped. His agitation spilled over, silver wings curving unconsciously around us. ‘I didn’t know about your feelings for me. I thought we’d built a connection, but that seemed to be ruined. I was drowning in my parents’ expectations, trying to be everything they wanted, and then I saw you about to change yourself forever. I couldn’t go in good conscience without knowing you wouldn’t attempt this spell again. I wasn’t even thinking about your licence.’

‘Why didn’t you say any of this to me, huh?’ I retorted, unrelenting and unwilling to see his side of the story. ‘Why did you leave if you felt all this *care*?’

Orion’s gaze blazed. ‘Because I couldn’t stay. I knew you hated me for calling the Coven, and my parents’ expectations were too much to fight against.’

‘So what? You’ll just spend your life doing whatever they want,’ I probed, disbelievingly.

‘Will you spend all *your* life searching for your mum’s approval?’ Orion taunted back, and I gasped.

He winced, immediately, but I felt fury rise like a tide inside me. ‘I wish we could go back to when you were too high and mighty to talk to me and Raven any more.’

‘You think I pulled away because I had a choice?’ Orion exclaimed. ‘My dad was breathing down my neck about the stupid agency; my mum was looking at me like I held all the keys to her happiness. So yeah, I tried hard to reach my parents’ standards. Yes, I pulled away when we were kids. Yes, I went to MAC because my parents expected me to. Yes, I told the Coven about you because I thought I was protecting you. But, tell me, do you truly think I wanted you to get a second point on your licence out of malice?’

‘Yes, because – because –’ I stuttered.

‘Because we’re not friends,’ Orion finished for me. He turned his gaze to the sink embedded in the wooden countertop and started to collect water in a jar. His wings retracted again, and he rolled his shoulders with the motion.

‘We’re not!’ I said, trying to ignore the hurt I could hear in Orion’s voice. Why would he need to be hurt by any of this? ‘You said so yourself only days ago! We’ve never been friends.’

‘Right, right, of course we aren’t,’ he said, still keeping his eyes on filling up the glass jar. ‘Because I’m Orion Hawthorne. The guy who seems to make your life miserable. The guy who you say you liked but thought the worst of, immediately.’

I was nodding along but stopped when he shot me a sharp glare.

‘Did it ever occur to you that I reported you to the Coven because I was worried?’ Orion questioned, shutting the tap off to face me again. The liquid in the jar didn’t look pleasant.

‘Worried?’ I repeated, still looking at the jar. I was really hoping he didn’t expect me to drink that. But then his question actually hit me and captured my attention once more. ‘No, I don’t doubt that you were worried,’ I snapped. ‘Worried that I would try the spell again or let my magic go haywire. But not worried for *me*.’

Orion’s jaw dropped before he clenched his teeth again. I’m surprised he didn’t crack something.

His next tirade came through gritted teeth. ‘I was worried about you! What were you thinking, Reverie?’

‘I was thinking maybe you’d finally stop looking at me like I was your little sister’s best friend,’ I shot at him. My words were little spears dipped in all the anguish I’d felt in that moment. ‘I wanted you to look at me, OK?’

‘Reverie, I’m always looking at you,’ Orion said, his jaw tight.

My heart seemed to stop for a whole beat at his words; we faced off at one another, breathing heavily. So much had been said, and my mind still felt fuzzy. I wanted to sort through all my memories of last summer with this new information, but I couldn’t. I felt myself sway slightly, the numbness from the spiked faerie punch sweeping through me, leaving tiredness in its wake.

Orion clearly saw my exhaustion, because he sighed and handed me the drink. ‘Now, drink this. It’ll get the potion out of your system.’

The liquid smelled disgusting and looked disgusting too.

‘Do I have to?’ I whined.

He tipped the glass upwards with his index finger. ‘Yes, you have to. Now, drink.’

‘You’re so bossy,’ I mumbled as the rim of the glass touched my lips and the liquid went down my throat. ‘Oh, I think I’m going to be *sick*.’

‘Keep drinking,’ Orion commanded, folding his arms over his chest. I hated that even my fuzzy mind found that attractive.

I brought the cup back to my mouth, had another disgusting swig and took a minute to swallow. Looking for a distraction from the taste, I asked Orion, ‘Did Melodie give you the key to this place or did you really pick the lock?’ I leaned forward to really assess him.

One side of Orion’s mouth lifted, and half a smile graced his face. He looked handsome, I realized. He was always handsome, sure. Even when he was angry. But right now, in that moment, I struggled to drag my gaze away.

‘I picked the lock,’ Orion said, simply.

‘That’s reckless. What if this place was warded?’ I asked. My head was starting to feel heavy all of a sudden.

Orion shrugged, looking oddly bashful. ‘I don’t make a habit of it. Just, you know, for emergencies.’

‘You’ve changed,’ I slurred. My eyes were beginning to feel heavy now too. Before, I felt alive with energy, but now I felt drained. Exhausted. I let my head tip back, like I was falling into a bed, not realizing that behind there was nothing. But Orion’s hands were there to hold me upright.

I still didn’t open my eyes. Not even as he helped me off the counter and leaned me against his arm again.

But I did speak, words stumbling drunkenly out of my mouth. ‘I really liked you, you know.’

‘What’s that?’ Orion asked, as he led me out of the shop, putting things away as we went.

That fragrance of a campfire filled my senses, calmed me, lulled me deeper into the darkness that was slipping over me. ‘I really, really liked you. And I wanted you to like me. I wanted to be your first choice. Like Rani’s Mum’s first choice,’ I mumbled, pressing my face to his arm again.

I know he said something back, because I felt the vibrations of his voice against where my cheek was planted on his bicep. But I didn’t hear it because by then, I’d fully sunk into the ever-welcoming darkness.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Before you judge me, please understand that I'd never drunk spiked faerie punch before. But I did know that the side effects of the antidote weren't great. Specifically, the vomiting. And here's the thing: vomiting in itself is not the issue. It's the crying. I always cry when I'm vomiting; have since I was a kid. Which is probably too much information, but I just wanted it to be clear that I was sitting by my toilet bowl, crying, because my throat was aching from the vomiting, *not* because of the video of me that was circulating among my peers.

The video of me standing on the table, twirling around like a ballerina with two left feet, before promptly *falling* directly into Orion's arms. All in front of Silas. And the rest of the school.

I mean, what's there to cry about really? So, I'd humiliated myself. What's new?

'Maya?' Mum's concerned voice came from outside the door. 'Are you OK?'

I sucked in a breath, trying hard to make sure my voice didn't shake. 'Yeah, I'm good. I just ate something bad yesterday and my stomach isn't doing so good.'

Mum clucked loudly. 'All right, sweetheart, I'm going to make you some mint tea before I go to soothe your stomach. In the meantime, maybe you shouldn't do that extra studying shift with Silas today?'

Silas.

I slapped my hand against my forehead loudly. I had forgotten about our Sunday study session. How was I ever going to face him?

'I'll be fine, Mum,' I said, scrambling to stand up again. My tears were drying against my cheeks, and my head still felt a bit woozy, but one glance at my watch told me I was going to be almost late if I didn't leave soon. 'You go, have a good day doing, you know, town stuff.'

Mum rapped her knuckles on the door. ‘OK, but make sure to call if you need anything.’

I made a noise of agreement.

‘All right, well, I’m off!’ Mum said, and finally retreated downstairs.

When the door slammed shut, I moved quicker than lightning. It was good to be distracted from the video, and the vomiting, by focusing on putting one jean leg on after the other. Rhythmic, routine things that made me go from a pile of mess on the bathroom floor to presentable.

It was all going fine until my gaze snagged at the ledge of my bay window. It had a scuff mark – a boot mark – of a very large foot. A guy’s foot.

I tried to rack my brain for memories of last night. They came back in bits and pieces: arguing with Orion about what happened that summer, telling him I *liked him*, telling him why I had cast that stupid spell in the first place.

And his response.

Cold realizations from last night were hitting me like snowballs to the face. I had misunderstood Orion that night. Taken his words as a rejection.

But it wasn’t all my fault. He had left me behind; walked away to go live a destiny he didn’t even want. My hurt had coalesced into hate, and his fury towards me … well, I didn’t know what it was any more. It couldn’t matter though. Orion and I clearly weren’t meant to be. It hadn’t worked then and it wouldn’t work now.

The urge to cry rolled through me again, but I glanced down at my watch – thirty minutes till I needed to be at Silas’s house. My musings were interrupted moments later when my doorbell went off.

‘Go away,’ I groaned to myself, and paused in the hopes that it was a parcel someone could just leave outside. But no, the doorbell went off again.

I rushed down the stairs, my bag on my shoulder, and saw mint tea cooling on the counter. Jinx was stretched out in a patch of sunlight.

‘Morning, Jinx,’ I said, quickly approaching the door.

Jinx barely lifted his head to look at me. He probably saw the video too and decided I wasn’t worth a morning acknowledgement.

I swung open the front door, feeling only a little breathless. But then, all the air was knocked out of my lungs. Because standing on my front porch was Silas.

The morning sunlight made the gold in his hair stand out and the blue of his eyes brighter. He was dressed in a white shirt, a letterman jacket and denim jeans. Tucked under his arm was something I couldn't make out.

'Hi,' Silas said, like it was perfectly normal for him to be standing on my porch.

'H-Hi,' I stuttered out, clutching the door. 'Wha … what are you doing here?'

I winced internally. That sounded harsh. Like I didn't want him on my doorstep. Of course I did.

'Yesterday, at the party,' Silas began, and I closed my eyes as if it could stave off this conversation. 'Hey, hey, no it's totally fine, Maya!'

'I am so sorry,' I replied, looking at him once more. 'I acted so stupidly, and I was so embarrassing. And Orion! Oh gosh, he was so rude to you –'

Silas waved off my explanation. 'It's fine. Raven came back and found out that Everly and Trent paid the person who gave us our punch to spike your drink. Raven promptly informed the school, and they're both suspended by the way. You won't even have to see them on Monday morning. And Orion –' Some of the light in Silas's eyes dimmed a little, replaced with that hint of steel I'd seen last night. 'He was just acting in your best interest. And he got you home safe, right?'

I nodded quickly. 'Yeah, yes, of course. Orion's a stickler for rules.'

Or at least he used to be.

'That's good,' Silas said, a tad awkwardly. 'Well, I wanted to check in on you, make sure you got home safe. I didn't want you to drag yourself to my place – we don't need to study this week, really.'

Affection at his thoughtfulness thrummed through me, and I reminded myself what I intended to do last night.

'I just feel bad,' I replied, psyching myself up for what I was going to say next; the risk I was about to take. But the Fallen Leaves Festival was next week, and I was running out of time.

'We …' I coughed a little, feeling my cheeks go redder. 'We didn't even get to finish our conversation at the party.'

I braced myself for his laugh at my attempt at something, anything, really. But it didn't come, because Silas wasn't that kind of guy. Instead, his grin widened, and his hands found their way to his jacket pockets.

'You're right,' Silas acknowledged, and tipped his head back like he was thinking before he came to a conclusion. 'We should probably continue it,

because I, personally, was enjoying myself. Though, most of it *was* me giving you compliments.'

'My favourite types of conversations,' I said, airily. I sounded like someone else. Someone different and more confident. Not bad different, just not me.

Silas grinned even wider. 'Well, I'm happy to oblige. Want to go to Starshow Cinemas after school tomorrow to continue it? We're due one out-of-school-hours hang-out that doesn't end in one of us falling off a table.'

Usually I'd have my shift at the Treasure Trove, but Orion would understand, right? After all, this would help us lift the curse.

'Yeah, that'd be great,' I replied, smiling brightly.

'Good,' Silas said, and then took a step backwards. 'I'll text you the details. You rest up, Maya, and text me if you need anything, would you?'

I nodded and leaned against the door as I watched him walk away. I probably looked like my eyes had turned into cartoon hearts, and, OK, maybe the sigh that left my lips was a little excessive. But sue me; Silas's display of kindness was enough to make me swoon.

RAVEN
I'm assuming you're up now – we're at the Treasure Trove if you want to meet us.

I was tempted to go back inside, crawl into my bed and pretend I didn't need to come face to face with Orion. But hiding never served me well. Plus, at least at the Treasure Trove I could bake, and everything was less awful when surrounded by cake.

The bakery was buzzing when I arrived; there was a now-familiar line going down the street, filled with faeries, dragons, goblins, werewolves and vampires. I peeked at them through the kitchen doorway, where Melodie, Raven and Sofia were handling the bustling crowd.

Today, they were trying my new bake: foxfire eclaires. I still felt that clench of guilt in my stomach at what the Wishing Well must look like – a place I was now avoiding like the plague – but it was often overwhelmed by the delight I felt at people loving my creations.

'Spying, Reverie?'

I jerked away from the door and spun around to face Orion. My apron was dappled with flour, and my fingers were all brightly orange. I looked like an entire mess, and Orion looked like … well … him.

He was spotless; his dragon-leather jacket crisp, his boots polished, jeans loose, dark-blue sweatshirt making the silver of his eyes stand out.

'Not *spying*,' I corrected, lightly. 'Just, you know, looking.'

Orion's mouth lifted slightly, making his eyes crinkle in the corners. 'One day, you won't have to peek, you know. You'll be able to say you made those goods on your own.'

A warm flush climbed through my body. I never let myself dream out loud. I was so unused to someone praising my skills that I moved on to the thing that sat between us instead.

'Thank you for last night. I saw – saw the video,' I started, not wanting to dive into the whole confession I had blurted at him.

Orion didn't even flinch, just held my gaze. 'I was hardly going to let you fall, Reverie.'

Normally, I would've brushed off his words because they would've come with a teasing tone, or a needling edge. But something about the way he said them now felt weightier. Something had changed between us, and it made me feel all off-kilter.

'And about what I said,' I began, awkwardly twisting my orange-stained fingers. 'Just forget it, please. It doesn't matter any more. I am over it.'

Orion blinked. 'You said that, yesterday.'

'Yes,' I enunciated slowly, because I didn't want any tremor or crack to appear in my voice. 'Those were feelings of a *very* emotional girl, who was super stupid –'

'Hey,' Orion chided, lightly. 'That girl was my best friend for a summer. Watch your mouth.'

Unwillingly, a smile curved on my mouth. I couldn't help it. This wasn't us; we traded barbs, exchanged slights, annoyed each other to no end. Sure, we had moments of vulnerability, but it was never like this. We weren't … blatant about it.

'Well, either way, I don't want to make anything awkward,' I offered, raising one shoulder. 'And I just wanted you to know, I understand where you were coming from now. A place of worry, not hate.'

Orion nodded, eagerly. 'I never hated you. I'm sorry for how I spoke to you that night, and for not giving you a chance to explain. I should've put

my own feelings aside to help.'

I rolled my eyes and teasingly folded my arms over my chest. 'Your apology is only making it harder for me to apologize in return for thinking of creative ways to murder you for the last year.'

The corner of his mouth ticked upwards. 'What did you settle on?'

'Death by organized disorder,' I said, with a grin. 'I'd slowly ruin different parts of your life in small ways. Like slashing your tires, shrinking your jacket, you know, until you went crazy trying to work out what was happening.'

Orion snorted and pushed a hand through his hair. 'Diabolical.' His gaze burned me, like he was lighting a fire over my skin. I looked away, breaking the moment.

'Anyway,' I blustered, thinking of a distraction from the simmering tension. 'Silas came to see me this morning and invited me to the cinema tomorrow. So, I'll need to miss my shift after school here.'

Orion waited a beat, eyebrows furrowing, before he finally said, 'OK.' He dropped his gaze away from mine. '*Anyway*, now that we're done *emoting*. I wanted to show you something.'

Orion turned, and I was grateful for the moment to gather myself, like I was a pack of loose marbles. I followed him to a corner in the kitchen that had a wooden table, which I'd dubbed my recipe corner. It had a corkboard I'd set up to map out new recipe ideas and was filled with scattered sparkly pens. The new object was sitting right at the centre of the table: a purple box with a slit in the middle, and a bag of sweets.

'What's this?' I asked.

'Those are candies from the Maple Mart,' Orion explained. 'I thought you could keep them in your recipe-station drawer.'

'How did you know I liked these?' I asked, pointing to the buzzing bee toffees.

'Raven told me you used to a keep stash to eat before an exam for a little boost of energy.' Orion shrugged, like it wasn't incredibly nice of him to remember a tidbit about me that I hadn't even shared with him. 'I picked some up today, along with the box.'

'Yes, the elusive purple box. What is it?' I asked, my tone sounding high-pitched to my own ears.

Orion's face split open with a smile as he reached down and lifted its lid. Inside were cards: a huge stack of them. 'I've been working on this for the

last two weeks. These are requests, for you. From customers all across Maple Falls. Each one has an ailment, or a wish that a customer has. I was hoping you would choose one of them to bake.'

Dear Treasure Trove Bakers,
Your flaming fruit tarts changed my whole morning routine! They are the best dessert I've had in a long time. If you need inspiration for a new bake, I'm an old-timer of a dragon, and those long flying rides take it out of me. Ruin my sleep too, because I'm left too energized. If you could make something to soothe those terrible nights, I'd be ever so grateful.

Without a beat, Orion handed me another card.

Dear Treasure Trove Bakers,
Hi! My name is Louise, but you can call me Lou-Lou. I'm seven years old. And I like treasure. I can breathe fire pretty well, and your flaming fruit tarts made my chest ache go away. Could you make me something that will lead me to treasure? Jewels please!! OK, bye.

My throat felt tight with the urge to cry, and I eyed the stack of cards in there like it was never ending.

'Are they all this nice?' I whispered, disbelievingly.

Orion nodded, and that smile on his face was softer now. 'Yeah, they're all compliments, Reverie. Soon, your big head won't fit through that door. I thought you might like to have some physical evidence of how much your bakes have helped people.'

I laughed. It sounded watery to my ears, but Orion didn't comment on it. Instead, he twisted my heart even further.

'You've mastered your spellcasting,' he said, and there was a look of pride gracing his face that made my stomach flip. 'This week, we'll practise the recitation of the soulmate spell, then all you have to do, come Saturday, is cast it. And then you will have broken the curse.'

I couldn't respond; I didn't know how to put my gratitude into words. What came out instead was, 'I should get started on this. I already have a recipe knocking around in my head, and I just need to find the right enchantment for it.'

Immediately, Orion pulled out the stool for me to sit on. I let him tuck my chair in, but before I could actually tackle any of the spells, he caught my stained fingers in his.

‘May I?’ he asked, while his thumb was pressed against the centre of my palm.

My heart hammered in my throat relentlessly. ‘Sure?’

He murmured something, and I felt warmth creep up my skin. The orange stain on my fingers melted away with a whisper of his magic.

I looked away from my fingers to feel him watching me, our breath unintentionally in sync.

‘Thank you,’ I said, feeling a little dizzy.

His smile was soft. ‘Anytime, Reverie.’

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CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Starshow Cinemas looked like a regular movie theatre, but it wasn't. Everything in it was charmed for an immersive experience. If you were watching a thriller, you would be hanging off that airplane with the main character; a romcom meant you had front-row seats to a love confession; and a horror? Well, let's just say the jump scares were more than just your regular frights.

But my favourite time was mortal week, when we watched a genre of mortal films every month. This time we were going to watch something called *The Pumpkin Massacre*.

'You're not afraid of horror movies?' Silas asked, as we stood in line for popcorn.

'Nope,' I said, smiling. 'My sister and I are big horror movie fans.'

Silas's smile was a little strained at the edges. 'Fun! That's … fun.'

I nodded excitedly, but Silas didn't quite match my enthusiasm. Instead, he went straight to ordering the snacks and waved me off when I suggested paying. Afterwards, we were directed to the other side by a bored-looking pixie, who was filing her nails while taking our orders at the same time.

'So, how were your mid-term results?' I asked Silas, as we headed over to our screening.

Silas winced a little. 'Not great, at all. I spent two hours being grilled by my mother about my potions grade.'

I sucked my teeth sympathetically. 'I'm sorry I wasn't a better study partner.'

Silas shook his head quickly. 'Please, those study sessions were just my excuse to hang out. You know that right?'

I grinned, feeling all pleased inside. 'I kind of guessed after we didn't get past chapter one of our textbook.'

‘Hey, but we did have a riveting debate about whether I would look more attractive with my hair dyed brown.’

‘And here you were saying all our conversations were about complimenting *me*,’ I teased, and his laugh made the tension in his shoulders loosen. I wanted to keep it going, so I segued into a topic I knew he loved. ‘Are you excited for the game on Friday?’

Silas’s eyes lit up, and he launched into his game strategy almost immediately, beginning with how important this game was, and how he wanted it to be a reward for his teammates. And while I didn’t find rugby to be interesting in the slightest, I did like watching the way Silas became animated when talking about it.

‘Plus,’ Silas added, a little breathless now, ‘we’ve got a coach coming from one of the big-league towns. Hopefully he’s going to be scouting for new talent.’

‘Really?’ I asked, suddenly painfully aware that I’d never considered if Silas wanted to leave Maple Falls once we graduated school.

‘Yeah,’ Silas continued, eagerness coating his every word. ‘That’s why you have to be there – I don’t think I can physically play without my lucky charm.’

‘Well, that’s a lot of pressure – you’re saying you winning all depends on me?’ I smiled, cheekily.

Silas shrugged exaggeratedly. ‘I mean, if the shoe fits?’

‘Now, Silas, a good captain wouldn’t pin his mistakes on a spectator in the crowd,’ I said, putting on my best stern voice.

‘I would if she was pretty enough to distract me,’ Silas said, and his eyes glimmered with amusement.

I felt my cheeks go hot. ‘Well, seems only fair given how much you’ve distracted me in potions.’

His smile turned a little wicked at the edges. ‘You saying you were watching me, Maya?’

‘Only as much you were watching me,’ I retorted, because there was no way I was actually going to tell him how hard I’d been crushing on him.

In the speech I’d planned for later, I wasn’t going to tell Silas I’d liked him for years. I was going to tell him I’d started having feelings for him at the start of the year, and I cast the soulmate spell to see if there was any truth to those feelings, because I’d been hurt before. He could be mad that

I'd done it, that I cursed the town – I could only hope five days would be enough to get over it.

But in the happier version of this day that I envisioned, Silas was reciprocating. Understanding. And vowing to help me. It ended with Silas *seeing me* and not leaving.

As we found our seats, Silas became suspiciously quiet – maybe he was one of those serious theatregoers. One of those who couldn't handle even the slightest of noises. Note to self: do *not* crunch your popcorn loudly.

The lights dimmed, casting us all into darkness, and the trailers began. I felt myself being swayed on a boat as a trailer for some siren and pirate movie rolled on to our screens. I glanced over at Silas and saw he was looking queasy. I quickly looked forward again, unsure of what to do.

Midway into wondering if I should offer for Silas to hold my hand, or whether that would seem like I was trying too hard – someone caught my eye.

It was a flash of familiarity. But it couldn't be.

Yet there he was. Orion Hawthorne.

The sight of him alone would've been enough to alarm me.

Except, he wasn't alone.

Clutching on to the sleeve of Orion's leather jacket as he walked to his seat was none other than *Celine*.

They were sitting right in front of us – Orion's seat lined up to mine, and Celine's to Silas's. Orion hadn't noticed and neither had Celine because of the darkness of the cinema. Though, I'd be surprised if the siren noticed anything beyond Orion, given the way she was leaning into him, bringing her head closer to whisper in his ear.

I tried to remember if he had mentioned taking Celine on a date, but my mind was filled with the day we had spent at the Treasure Trove, mapping out new recipes and learning new spells. Not a mention of Celine.

And I'm not sure why but I felt a pinch of hurt in my chest, like someone had pressed their thumb against a bruise on my heart. I shouldn't have cared; I had told Orion my feelings for him were long gone. That jealousy should've also been gone now.

But it wasn't.

My envy was louder than any sound in my head. It was filling my veins like poison. When I saw Celine reaching up to touch his face, a sense of

possessiveness ran through my body like a live wire, and I couldn't breathe. I couldn't handle that feeling. I was never this possessive over Silas, even knowing that a lot of other girls at school liked him. But with Orion, it was different.

And it was just as her fingers were about to touch his skin that I decided to kick the back of Orion's chair, hard enough that he jolted away from her oncoming touch and shot an incredulous look over his shoulder. Directly at me.

Our eyes met, and he didn't look startled. He didn't even bat an eyelash. A smirk curved around Orion's mouth, and, without a second thought, he turned *right back around*.

I saw red.

Violent. Red.

I wanted to do something, like yank at his hair. But I couldn't. Not with Silas sitting next to me, stiller than a statue. Or Celine, sitting further away now, and giving me small glances over her shoulder.

Instead, I had to sit through the whole movie, staring at the back of Orion's head. My gaze burning a hole into his skull. I couldn't believe he was here, and, more importantly, I couldn't understand *why*.

Why was he here with Celine?

Why did he come here at all?

Was it about me – or was I just being vain?

Not even Silas could distract me from the questions swirling in my head. Usually, I would've been paying attention to every detail of Silas, trying to figure out what he liked and didn't like. But today, that was impossible. So much so that when the credits finally rolled on to the screen, I stood up, and, in the process, kicked Orion's seat again. I heard a little grunt but refused to apologize.

'Hey,' I said to Silas, who shot me a quizzical look. 'I'm just going to head to the bathroom really quick. Meet outside?'

She thought their story was over. Then he showed up with the truth she'd waited years to hear.

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The werewolf nodded, giving me a wan smile that didn't match his usual mood, and I was scooching past cinemagoers without a second thought. I made a beeline straight out of the cinema and considered pulling out my phone to text Orion to meet me outside.

But I didn't have to. Moments later, he was strutting out of the cinema himself, hands tucked into his pockets, an easy look on his face.

'You know, I could have you arrested for assault,' Orion said as a greeting, a smile ticking at his mouth.

It wasn't what I expected him to say, and just the sound of his easy cadence made my blood *boil*.

'Why are you *here* with Celine?' I asked, seething.

Orion didn't flinch or call out my hypocrisy of asking him any questions. If he was on a date with someone, who was I to care?

'Last time I checked you and wolfie don't own the cinema,' Orion countered, still too relaxed for my liking.

'You *knew* I was coming here, so why did you choose to bring Celine here?' I demanded.

'She wanted to see a movie,' Orion said, but then his tell became so obvious.

'Lies! You forget Hawthorne, I know when you're lying. That little twitch on the side of your mouth, yeah, I know about it.' I strode towards him, practically poking the side of his mouth of my fingertip. 'You're sabotaging what was supposed to be an amazing date with Silas!'

'If it was meant to be amazing, my presence shouldn't have ruined it,' he shot back, and there was that heat to his voice that I was looking for. 'Is it *bothering* you that I'm here with Celine?'

I made an affronted noise that sounded too loud in the quiet street. I hated that he was right by even a fraction. Orion being here shouldn't have bothered me so much; the sight of him being with Celine shouldn't have made me envious. And yet, it did.

Orion watched my face, his gaze dragging across its every contour, like I was a map he was studying. Invisible fingers traced over my frown lines and the obvious signs of my anger. I couldn't let him see that those feelings I had buried were so close to the surface.

'We're days away from when I need to break the curse,' I said, my voice dangerously edged. 'On the autumn moon, I need to cast the spell that will show me the way to my soulmate, who I need to share true love's kiss with.

I need Silas to already be standing beside me, and this night was supposed to bring me one step closer to that. I didn't want *any* variables ruining it – can you understand how much pressure I'm under?'

Orion didn't say anything for a stretch of time.

'You're so sure he's your soulmate, aren't you?' he finally asked, and there was that *challenge* in his voice.

'He's a good guy –' I began, but Orion cut me off.

'Please, don't give me his accolades right now,' he said, and then pinched the bridge of his nose, breathing in deeply.

I watched him, anger replaced with weary confusion. 'What are you doing here, Hawthorne?'

His sighed, dropping his hand to look at me. 'Last summer, Celine asked me to give her a shot at a true relationship. I told her I wasn't interested because I was leaving for MAC. And because –' He swallowed the words and then pivoted. 'It doesn't matter. Either way, when I came back this time, we agreed on one shot. This was it.'

'And?' I whispered, my heart aching for reasons I refused to examine. For reasons I was choosing to be blind to.

'And it was a bust, because all I could think about was you,' Orion said, so blunt it made my heart stop. 'After the party, I've been a little off-kilter. When you said you were going to the cinema with Silas, I got a little … protective.'

'Protective,' I said, dumbly.

Orion lifted a shoulder in a half shrug. 'Couldn't help it, Reverie. *You* might trust him, but I don't.'

'So that's why you're here? To give your relationship with Celine a shot,' I reiterated. 'And ruin my night?'

Orion looked like he was about to say something else, but the doors to the cinema opened again, and Celine strolled out. She looked breathtaking against the moonlight, and her face was made of all soft and serious lines. I felt my hackles raise at the sight of her, and I knew it was unfair. She'd done nothing to me, and I didn't hate her – not in the slightest.

It was just that the younger version of myself had wanted to be her so badly. And a year later, that feeling still persisted.

When she finally reached us, I felt myself step into the shadows of her presence, and become smaller than I felt.

'Orion,' Celine said pointedly.

‘Cel,’ he responded, nervously. What did *he* have to be nervous about?

Celine rolled her eyes, a smile breaking out on her face. ‘I can’t wait to see the girl who finally gets your heart, Orion Hawthorne,’ she said, and then stepped away from him. I was sure she was going to leave, but she cast me a glance over her shoulder, her tone full of sincerity. ‘And that’s a cute sweater, Maya.’

And with that, she walked away. I watched feeling all too dumbfounded. I had to physically shake my head to bring me back to reality.

‘Are you disappointed?’ I asked, turning back to the dragon shifter.

‘With it not working out with her?’ he asked, and I nodded. Orion laughed, the sound coiling around my ears. ‘No, Reverie. Tonight was a success in my books.’ His gaze traced my face again. ‘I learned a lot.’

I didn’t pry, didn’t ask what he’d learned. I felt him waiting for me to ask, but I wasn’t going to. Just like I wasn’t going to touch on those feelings that I’d buried deep in my memories. Feelings that would fade once I confirmed Silas was my soulmate.

Silas.

I turned around quickly, looking for the werewolf. I saw him leaving and was about to shoo Orion away, but I didn’t have to. When I glanced back, he was already in the air – fully shifted, his long, serpentine body stretched across the dark expanse of sky, his pointed tail swishing in powerful strokes behind him. I watched as he flew away, his huge wings causing scattered leaves to flutter in the air. I always thought he looked magnificent when he shifted, even when we were kids.

‘Maya?’

Silas’s voice pulled my attention back to him. I moved to where he was standing, hands tucked into his jacket, blonde hair falling over his forehead and a worried look in his eyes. In front of the theatre, under the moonlight, should have been a good place to confess my feelings for him. But, before I could say anything, Silas made his own declaration.

‘I should probably tell you that I hate horror movies,’ Silas blurted out, surprising me. ‘But you were so excited, so I didn’t say no. I didn’t want you to think I was a wimp.’

I couldn’t fault him for keeping quiet. Didn’t I tell him I liked peach rings? Didn’t I pretend to enjoy rugby? Maybe that’s how every relationship started, with a bunch of white lies that help you get a foot in the door.

‘From now on, only honesty,’ Silas swore, with the kind of voice that made it sound like an oath. I gave him a small smile, and I knew this wasn’t the right moment to share my feelings – not when he was still wound up from the movie, and I felt like a tornado had swept through me.

This wasn’t how I wanted our love story to start.

‘Only honesty,’ I agreed, hoping I sounded just as sure as him.

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CHAPTER THIRTY

Rani arrived via the portal the day after the Starshow Cinemas disaster. Her arrival was a much-needed distraction, because things were looking a bit complicated with Orion. When I had arrived at the Treasure Trove after school, I found it was just Melodie, Raven, Sofia and me.

No Orion in sight.

Raven said he was busy with some *project* and that was that. I couldn't help but feel concerned that something else was going on. But I wasn't going to text Orion about it – I needed to focus on Silas and find the right time to confess to him. He'd cancelled our study session on Wednesday for extra practice for Friday's match, so that gave me zero perfect moments. In school, we were always around people.

Everything that had felt like it had been going so well suddenly felt ten times harder. So, my big sister's return was, like I said, the perfect distraction. Tonight, we were having a Reverie girls' night in. Mum and Rani were getting comfortable on the couch, both in matching pyjama sets, hands curled around their bowls of ice cream.

I peeled myself away from the kitchen and made my way to the couch. We were going to be watching *Creature House* now that Rani was back.

When Rani left, my mother struggled to adjust to not having the rituals she'd built so much of her daily routine on. Watching *Creature House*, the reality show where magical creatures were housed in a lavish mansion and whoever used their magic first was kicked out, was one of them. The show was filled with all the things you'd expect: catty interviews, secrets that should not be spilled and some of the nastiest spell work I'd ever seen. I didn't often watch it with them, but it was Rani's first night back, so whatever she asked for was going to happen.

'If you don't *shut your mouth*, I will turn you into the trash can of gossip that you are,' Carissa Calloway snarled from the TV.

The vampire she was screaming at – Maurice Temple, I think? – simply grinned at her, and that seemed to infuriate Carissa even further. A stupid move. Now the witch was throwing a hex that turned the vampire into the aforementioned threat:

A trash can.

Moments later, Carissa was hauled off our screens, and she didn't go quietly. I winced as her voice climbed the octaves and she flung spells around at an alarming rate. I could appreciate that even through her hysteria, she was a pretty powerful witch to command her magic like that.

'And that's why we don't turn people into things,' Mum interrupted, from her place on the opposite side of the couch.

'You're absolutely right,' I said, voice wooden with annoyance. 'Good thing I don't do that any more.'

Rani shot me a look over her ice-cream bowl. I know what she was telling me: be quiet. Just listen.

'It wasn't meant to be an attack, kiddo,' Mum said, gently. 'Just a reminder.'

'Yes, well, another reminder that it's been *over a year* since I got my second point,' I argued, feeling a sudden heat overtake my veins. My magic felt angry, pointed, like I wanted to prove myself.

'It has, but we shouldn't even be at two,' Mum countered, and now there was an edge to her voice. 'Rani graduated with no points.'

'*You* graduated with one,' I shot back, because I couldn't help but let my tongue run.

'Don't do as I do, sweetheart. Do as I say,' Mum reprimanded, and I wanted to *claw* my skin off.

I was geared to argue back; my tongue poised with all the things I'd been holding back.

'I –'

My arm jerked back, and my ice cream splattered down the front of my shirt. I yelped, jumping off the sofa, and Mum watched with an alarmed look in her eyes.

'What happened?' Mum asked, her eyes wide.

'I don't know, it was –' Then my gaze landed on a smiling Rani. I gritted my teeth. 'My arm jerked. I'll go clean myself up. You guys keep watching.'

I went back into the kitchen and found Jinx curled up near the windowsill, licking his paw leisurely. He raised his head to glance at my mess and shook his little head at me.

'Hey, I didn't do this to myself,' I retorted, and then heard the door to the kitchen swing open again. I turned to find Rani behind me, her arms folded over her chest. 'You could've done something a little less dramatic to get me to shut up.'

'Yeah, well, you could've just listened to what Mum said and not argued,' Rani countered, reaching over to clean up the mess for me.

But I waved her off and concentrated on the spell in my mind. Slowly, the stain started to fade, and my nightshirt started to look normal again. Rani looked at me with an impressed look in her eyes that made my heart swell.

'You really have improved,' Rani said, pride glimmering in her voice.

'You thought I faked my report card?'

'I wouldn't put it past you to get Mum off your back,' Rani replied. 'She just had a tough day at work because Ivy visited her to talk about the Treasure Trove.'

I jolted a little. 'The Treasure Trove?'

'The new dragon bakery,' Rani explained, like I wasn't the one living in Maple Falls. 'Apparently, it's been getting a lot of attention, and I think Ivy's feeling the pressure. I mean, whoever the owner has baking in the back is clearly a stellar kitchen witch.'

'Oh,' I said, nervously. My heart was thundering in my chest. Feeling pride at being complimented and terror at being caught out was a terrible combination. 'But what can Mum do?'

'Nothing that will calm Ivy's fears,' Rani replied. 'But she probably will want to find out who's in that kitchen. No one seems to know who it is, and you know that's unusual in Maple Falls. Everyone knows everyone here.'

Great. Exactly what I needed. I had a partner who was AWOL, a crush who I still needed to confess to, a best friend who was preparing to leave me for MAC and now a mother set out to discover my biggest secret.

'And she just told you all of this,' I said, not liking the edge to my voice.

A smirk erupted over Rani's mouth. 'You were too busy sitting in your room texting *Silas Moon*.'

I ignored my sister's teasing – she'd already noticed the jersey in my bedroom, so I knew I was due a grilling. 'Yeah, but Mum could've

mentioned it to me too, you know. I'm also here to listen. It'd be nice to get something other than a lecture.'

'She means well. You know that, right?' Rani asked, her purple-painted lips pulling into a grimace. 'It doesn't always come out right, but Mum only ever wants us to be happy.'

'I know,' I replied, because I did.

I knew Mum said things because she wanted us to be safe; because she wanted us to be successful. I knew the lectures didn't come out of nowhere.

'But I'm tired, you know?' I said, aggrieved. 'Of being constantly treated like a disaster.'

'Poetic,' Rani said. I pushed myself off the ledge, ready to go back to the living room, but she stopped me. 'OK, OK. I'm sorry. I was *kidding*.'

'Of course you were kidding,' I snapped. 'You're perfect. You can't relate.'

Rani's face constricted slightly. 'I'm not perfect. I mess up too, you know.'

I laughed, sounding caustic to my own ears. 'Right, *you* mess up.'

'I do,' Rani insisted, and then she shrugged. 'I've just learned to be really good at cleaning up my messes by myself.'

'You don't go to Mum?' I asked, head tilting in confusion. 'She'd help you in a heartbeat.'

'I know, but like you said,' Rani replied, her arms tightening in their folded position. 'She has standards we're all trying to reach, right?'

I rocked back on my heels, contemplating what my sister had just said. I had always assumed that Rani and Mum were similar, and it made me wonder – how many of my sister's dreams, like being Coven leader and going to MAC, were her own?

And how many of mine belonged to me?

'Are you girls done talking about me in there?' Mum called from her place on the couch. 'You're not that slick, you know?'

On cue, Rani and I rolled our eyes at the same time, before we made our way back to the couch and settled into our usual spaces.

The next day, after another shift at the Treasure Trove without Orion, I decided enough was enough. He still needed to help me with the soulmate spell, and whatever his *project* was, he needed to put it aside. I was frustrated beyond measure. It didn't help that whenever I tried to catch Silas

at school – to try and tell him about my feelings – all I got was an apologetic smile, while he explained that he didn't have time to chat until after the upcoming game.

This meant it was looking like my night at the Fallen Leaves Festival was going to be spent confessing to Silas and hoping he wouldn't be horrified by what I'd done, then casting the spell and hoping to break the curse with true love's kiss.

Not so easy, right?

I decided to channel all my frustration at Orion and walk to his house from the bakery, armed with a speech and no desserts because he deserved *none*. But when I arrived at the Hawthornes' house, I was startled to hear … shouting. I knew Raven wasn't home – she was still doing an extra mock exam for the MAC test at school.

When the shouting got even louder, I made a decision. I bent down and found the spare key to the front door, concealed under the welcome mat. I unlocked the door, stepped inside the foyer and found everything to be exactly the way it usually was.

Until the shouting started again.

'A waste of an education!'

Chief Inspector Hawthorne cut through the silence with a voice like thunder that I wasn't used to hearing from him. One that made my bones shake a little.

'And now you're going to be a *teacher*?' He continued, aggravated. 'You're giving up a coveted position to be a teacher?'

Someone – I'm assuming Orion – replied quietly. It was followed by a stomp of a person's foot. Silence, and then:

'You can't force him.' Mrs Hawthorne's tone was firm, but even I could hear her disappointment. 'He's made a decision.'

'The wrong one,' Chief Inspector Hawthorne snapped.

'Yes, well, his mistakes are also his to own,' she continued. 'You understand that, right, Orion? This is your choice, your decision. If you hate it down the line, you cannot blame us.'

My ears strained to catch Orion's reply, but it was too soft. Finally, it seemed like his father was done with the conversation, because his footsteps left the room and were coming down the stairs.

Towards me.

Now, if I was a first-time friend, I might have panicked. But I knew the Hawthornes' house, and I knew that behind the staircase was a hidden doorway. I slipped inside and waited until I heard Mr Hawthorne, and then his wife, go out of the front door.

When they were gone, I stepped back out and climbed up the stairs. I moved on autopilot, driven by a burning feeling to just make sure Orion was all right. When I reached the second floor, I looked up at the ceiling.

I reminded myself of my lessons with Orion. I raised my hand, my fingertips warm with magic.

'*Knock once, knock twice, open the door that's out of sight*.'

A small square of ceiling unlocked, and a ladder descended. My hands curled around the frame, a sense of familiarity washing over me.

Slowly, I placed one foot on the ladder, and I climbed.

All the way up to the roof.

I found Orion laying down on the tiled roof, his hands laced over his stomach, staring at the sky. A shot of déjà vu hit me, memories of seeing him in this exact same position playing over in my mind, again and again. Last summer was going to haunt me forever, it seemed.

'You know, if you stare any longer, I'm going to develop a complex,' Orion said, his head turning to the right to see me lingering at the top of the ladder. 'Either come up, or let me wallow, Reverie.'

I should've walked away and let Orion deal with this on his own. But I couldn't. I knew that if he had seen me here, in this same position, he wouldn't have walked away. So, I wouldn't either.

I climbed the last rungs, turned and shut the door to the roof gently. Then, I padded my way over and found my place beside him.

There was space between us, but I could feel the warmth radiating from him. His wings were out, but tucked beneath him, and he was wearing his favourite blue sweater. The smell of burning campfires filled my lungs, and, if the sky had been a darkened-sunset colour, I could almost imagine we were back in the previous summer.

But the sky was bright blue, and fluffy clouds filled the air. We weren't sixteen and eighteen any more, and there wasn't a tentative *something* brewing between us. Instead, there was this intense feeling that never truly left – this push and pull that would eventually cause one of us to snap and give in.

‘You heard the argument?’ Orion asked, his jaw set tight as he tracked the clouds with his eyes.

‘Kind of hard to miss it,’ I replied, absently tracing shapes on my shirt. ‘I’ve never heard your dad sound like that.’

‘Probably because he’s never raised his voice at Raven. She’s never really given him a reason to.’

‘And you wanting to follow your dreams has?’ I asked, thinking about the argument that was replaying in my head. I was angry, I realized. For Orion – for the way his wishes had been dismissed, and how he’d already been made to feel like he wasn’t good enough.

I loved the Hawthornes like they were my own parents, but I couldn’t ignore how unfair they were being; how much they were hurting their son, and how much that angered me.

‘It’s hard for my dad, and for my mum,’ Orion began, exasperated, but with understanding in his voice. ‘They’ve always had a such a set vision for me. They’re hung up on tradition and legacy. Like all dragons. They’ve groomed me for the role I was supposed to play, but I never really had space to dream. To want.’

‘So, what changed?’ I questioned, genuinely curious. ‘You left for MAC. You were planning to follow the path that they set for you. But, since you’ve been back, you seem … different.’

Orion was quiet for a moment; so quiet that I wasn’t sure he was going to respond. But then he did, his voice low enough that I had to strain to hear him.

‘I came back, and I saw you.’

I shifted entirely on to my side to look at him. ‘What?’

He turned his head to look at me, his hands laced tightly over his stomach. ‘I saw you,’ he repeated, and then he added, ‘at the Treasure Trove. Running the kitchen. Doing whatever it took to make it succeed. You looked so happy, and I just couldn’t help but think, was there something out there that would make me that happy and I was just ignoring it?’

A tightness wound itself around my throat, a sudden ache that I had to swallow against. It was that feeling I always got when I felt so utterly *seen* by him.

‘I never dreamed about running the Treasure Trove, or any bakery for that matter,’ I said around the emotion in my voice.

Orion gave me this contemplative look, his brows furrowed slightly. ‘But if you did,’ he said, ‘get to dream. What would it be?’

‘My dream, Hawthorne, is to finally graduate, with no more points on my licence. Then maybe I can finally negotiate a salary increase with Ivy alongside my apprenticeship.’

A smile twitched around his mouth, but then he repeated himself. ‘Come on, Reverie. The truth. You must want more than an apprenticeship. Dream with me.’

When he said it like that, his voice soft and coaxing, I felt my defences fall. I couldn’t help it; it was like Orion’s command made a part of my mind unlock, and the dream was painting itself in my thoughts.

‘You’re right. I’d like to own my own bakery,’ I began, softly.

‘What would it look like?’ Orion prompted, looking at me more fully now.

‘No dark interiors. Lilacs and violets, the colour of wisteria.’ I let my eyelids close, as the phantom bakery, which looked too much like the Wishing Well and the Treasure Trove merged together, came alive in my mind. ‘A test kitchen of sorts, with experimental bakes every week, and your standard bakes, of course.’

‘Of course,’ he echoed, quietly.

‘I’d keep the little comment box you got for me. I’d make sure there was a sign outside that had a silly joke that changed every week. The display cases would always be full, but seasonal too.’ I hesitated a beat, and then added, ‘And I’d hold classes.’

‘Classes?’

‘For young bakers wanting to learn how to experiment. I’d teach them how to trust themselves.’ My eyes slid open, and I found Orion staring at me. Our gazes clashed, two strikes of lightning meeting in the middle. ‘I had a pretty decent teacher, so it’s only right to pass on the lessons.’

His smile was wide, so utterly pleased that I wanted to reach out and press my hand to it. I wanted it to imprint against my skin, so I’d never forget it.

‘Dreaming is dangerous. It makes you want things,’ I said, my heart racing in my chest, head full of whispers of a future I had never allowed myself to think of until now.

‘Dreaming makes you brave,’ Orion countered, gently. ‘And who says you can’t have the things you want?’

‘Our parents?’ I said, like it was obvious.

‘I think every parent has dreams for their kids, but there comes a time when we have to choose for ourselves. Like my mum said, if I choose teaching, that’s *my* choice. I can’t get mad at her for it later,’ Orion replied, wisely. ‘Guess you have to decide, Reverie – what do you really want for yourself?’

We stayed on the roof for a while longer, just sitting there. When we heard Raven pull up, that’s when we decided to descend. Orion went to his room, and I went to Raven’s.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

As much as Silas and I had joked about it, there was a very big chance he was going to lose the game today. I sat in the front row, clad in his jersey, my hands gripping the bench as I watched the scoreboard show that Maple Falls High was indeed down by several points.

‘Never thought I’d see the day that Maya Reverie was invested in a rugby match,’ Raven intoned beside me. She had a book balanced on her knees and one hand wrapped around a coffee cup.

‘I’m invested in the whole school not thinking I’m the reason that they lose this game. I’ve already heard Trent gossiping about how Silas has been “distracted”,’ I said, putting air quotations around the last word. ‘If anyone’s *truly* invested, it’s Sofia.’

We both looked at the faerie in unison; she was decked out in the school colours and watching the game with clenched teeth and random bursts of shouting that probably weren’t random to anyone else who was a fan of the sport and could actually follow along.

‘Whatever. The important thing is that Silas won’t blame you,’ Raven said, nudging me with her elbow. ‘Though, if he does win, I imagine he’ll want to celebrate with you.’

My cheeks went pink. ‘I think he might actually like me.’

Raven rolled her eyes. ‘Of course he likes you. It’s so obvious. I just can’t wait till he finally tells you. Or you tell him, I suppose. What is the new plan now?’

‘The new plan is I tell Silas at the Fallen Leaves Festival on Sunday. Tomorrow, Orion and I are going to go over the soulmate spell and practise reciting it correctly, and then I’m just going to confess my feelings, say the spell, share true love’s kiss, and everything will be fine,’ I said, all in a rush.

I expected to get my friends’ quick assurances and approval, but my declaration was followed by silence. I gave them both sharp glances. Sofia

was focusing on the game – Silas's team seemed to have found their rhythm again and the scores were ticking upwards. Everyone was watching the game, but Raven had this funny look on her face.

I tried to ignore it at first, because I knew what that look on Raven's face meant. It was a sign that she was preparing herself to say something she knew I wouldn't like. An observation that I would likely hate. So, I told myself to ignore it. But, of course, my curiosity had to win out instead.

'*What?*' I asked, sharply, turning fully to face her. 'Why are you looking at me like that?'

'Nothing.' Raven shook her head, and then, because we didn't lie to one another, she said, 'It's just – when you mentioned your plan, and said Orion's name, you sounded all … soft.'

'Oh,' I replied, eloquent as ever. The blush on my cheeks deepened. 'I guess things have sort of changed between us now that he's helped me so much. I can admit that I might have been wrong about him.'

It wasn't a lie. After that moment on the roof, a strange peace had formed between me and Orion. We didn't talk about it, but it was there. And I had thought about it a little too much over the last two days.

'Right,' Raven said, but she sounded like she wasn't sure whether to continue or not. 'And it got me thinking –' She breathed out exasperatedly; my usually put-together best friend was struggling to find the right words. 'Maya, listen, if you're not sure about –'

Suddenly, screams erupted around us, confetti filled the air and Raven and I stared at one another bewildered. It wasn't until Sofia grabbed us both and hauled us up that I understood what had happened.

Maple Falls High had won.

We'd won the final game before half-term.

I watched as Silas was lifted on to his teammates' shoulders on the pitch, trophy in hand. Shouts of delight filled the air, and even I couldn't help feeling the infectious buzzing that filled me. When the rest of the crowd started to flood the pitch – family members seeking out their players – I let myself be pulled into the throng with Raven and Sofia.

'Go find Silas,' Sofia shouted into my ear, pushing me forward. 'You should be the first person he sees when he feels like he's on that high.'

Her logic made sense, even as a little panic flooded my system. Going up to Silas when he was probably meant to be with his family, or teammates,

or coach, felt presumptuous. Like I thought I was someone important to him.

But I wanted to be someone important to him, didn't I? When he was revealed as my soulmate, wouldn't I become that person?

'Wait –' Raven said, and her hand found my elbow, holding me back. 'Maybe just wait a beat before going over.'

Caution looked strange on my best friend, and even Sofia looked confused. My gaze darted between the two of them, unsure of who to follow.

But in the end, the decision was made for me.

The way Silas parted the crowd on the pitch was like the sun was stepping out from behind the clouds; the rest of the world got lost in his shadow when he was finally before me, sweaty, breathing hard, his blonde hair all spiky.

'My lucky charm,' he said, and his eyes dropped to the jersey I was wearing. I saw the flare in his eyes, the flash of gold.

'Congratulations, captain,' I said, sweetly. 'Guess the whole school won't hate me now, huh?'

He laughed, throwing his head back. I watched him, and there was that ache in my chest again. I wanted so badly to have this carefree ease that he seemed to possess. Silas never seemed worried or angry or complicated. Even with the issues he had with his siblings, he seemed unfazed by them. Nothing ever dented his shine.

'I told you before,' Silas chided, gently. 'Doesn't matter what the school thinks. I like you, Maya. I really, really like you.'

There was no mistaking the meaning behind his words now. My throat turned dry and my lips felt utterly chapped.

The words sat on the tip of my tongue: *I like you too. In fact, I've liked you for ages. And I'm pretty sure you're my soulmate.*

His eyes narrowed on to me slightly, but that easy-going smile of his never dipped. Shouts rang out from behind him; his coach was calling him over. He glanced back and then at me again.

'Fallen Leaves Festival,' he said, stepping one foot backwards. 'Let's go together?'

My body jolted with the realization that this was what I'd wanted all along: Silas and I together at the Fallen Leaves Festival. We'd be under the autumn moon. I'd say the spell, and he'd be my soulmate.

Then I would confess my feelings. *Finally.*

‘Yes,’ I said, trying to find the confidence I’d felt only weeks ago. ‘Let’s go together.’

I skipped the after-party, feigning a headache that was slowly turning into a migraine. Sofia and Raven offered to join me on my walk back home, but they could tell I wanted to be alone. My head was swimming with thoughts – part of me was furious at myself for not responding to Silas’s declaration with the feelings I knew I had. The other part of me suddenly felt terrified about the night of the autumn moon, a kind of anxiety that I wanted to find the root of so I could just yank it out of the ground and be free.

These were the thoughts that accompanied me all the way home. I kept my head down and my gaze focused on my footsteps. So focused that I barely noticed when I bumped into Rowan coming out of my house.

‘Oof,’ I said, colliding with his strong chest.

Hands settled on to my shoulders, steadying me. When I looked up, the werewolf was staring back at me; the silver scar on his lips gleamed bright, his dark eyes were stormy and his mouth was set to a sharp line.

‘You OK, kid?’ he asked gruffly, dropping his hands from my shoulders.

I stared at him, gobsmacked. My gaze darted behind him, to my door, and to my sister who was probably inside.

She thought their story was over. Then he showed up with the truth she'd waited years to hear.

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‘Did you come here to see Rani?’ I asked, my own worries suddenly taking a back seat.

He was silent, unwilling to say more.

‘Oh, come on.’ I groaned, almost lacing my hands together and pleading for more. ‘Can’t you at least tell me how you two know each other?’

The muscle in Rowan’s jaw twitched, and his gaze slid right over my head to his enchanted motorcycle that was waiting to be ridden away. He

barely gave me a backwards glance and went straight to his bike. I watched him speed away, and it wasn't until the rumble of the engine was gone that I opened the door to the house. I hurried inside, tossing my keys into the bowl, and clambered up the stairs to Rani – to the story, to the lore, to what was surely going to be my older sister, furious.

But I found her in her bed instead. She was cocooned in blankets, decked in her favourite pyjamas. She wasn't angry, or enraged. Jinx was curled up beside her, and her hand rested deep in his fur. I could see that her eyes were bright red, and her mouth was doing that trembling thing that told me she was on the edge of crying again.

'I don't want to talk about it,' Rani said as soon as she noticed me in the doorway.

'OK,' I said softly. I toed off my shoes and climbed into the bed beside her. 'Want me to talk instead?'

My sister was a fixer, and I knew bringing her a problem would make her happy. Lucky for her, I was ninety per cent problems, ten per cent witch.

'Silas won the game,' I started, snuggling beside her so we were shoulder to shoulder.

'Silas Moon,' Rani said, her gaze flicking to the jersey I was wearing. 'The guy you've been in love with your whole life?'

I didn't correct her, because I couldn't explain everything that had happened with Orion. I barely understood it myself. And I'd been keeping it a secret for so long, I wasn't sure *how* to be honest about it.

'The one and only.'

'He won the game, and?'

'He asked me to join him at the Fallen Leaves Festival. And he told me that he liked me. Really liked me. Then he was called back by his coaches and is probably at the after-party,' I blurted out.

'And when he said he liked you, you replied with …?'

'Nothing.'

'Nothing?'

'Nothing.'

'Because you don't like him any more?' Rani asked, confused.

'No, no,' I said urgently. 'Of course, I still like him. He's my soulmate.'

Rani's eyebrows skyrocketed to her hairline. 'OK, that's a bit intense. But if he's your soulmate, and you've liked him for so long, why didn't you tell him?'

I looked away, staring at my fingertips instead. My nail polish was chipped on one nail, and it suddenly looked so deeply interesting.

'What if,' I began, my mind tracing the route to the thing that was making me anxious, 'there was a time that I didn't like Silas. A time when my feelings for him went on a little … hiatus.'

'A hiatus?' Rani echoed. 'I'm going to need more context.'

'Let's say I liked someone else, for a moment,' I replied, cautiously. 'Or an entire summer.'

Rani nodded encouragingly. 'And you're worried that your feelings for Silas aren't there any more?'

'I'm worried that I like two people at the same time, but I don't know which one I have stronger feelings for,' I said, finally voicing the worry that had taken root in me from the moment Orion Hawthorne had crashed back into my life.

Once the words were said out loud, I felt a weight lift off my shoulders. For the past year, I'd been working hard to tamp down every emotion I felt for Orion; to make it seem like it had all been one act of stupidity, a mistake. Like those feelings weren't real.

But they were.

And I couldn't just make those feelings go away. He was back, and so were they – but what did that mean?

Were my feelings for Orion nothing more than the infatuation of a seventeen-year-old who'd fallen for her best friend's older brother? Were my feelings for Silas more real because they'd lasted longer? If one of them was my soulmate, *who* was it?

On the rugby field, I'd felt so sure that I could confess my feelings to Silas tomorrow, but what if I couldn't? What if I kept the town in a rogue love curse until the next autumn moon – what would happen then? What would the Coven do to me? What if being magic bound wasn't the only punishment they'd serve to me?

The unanswered questions were making my heart race faster and my mind spiral harder. Beside me, Rani was quiet for a moment, and I could feel her sifting through the issues, trying to find answers for me. I was eager for her reply: a fix that would give me the clarity I needed.

'I think,' Rani said, carefully, like she was holding a porcelain bowl in her hands, 'that you're capable of liking two people, but you can only *love* one of them. The question is about who you want to be with *more*. Who do

you feel happiest with? Who could you see yourself with in the long term? Who makes you feel seen, like they truly know you?'

I stared at her, and then flopped deeper into the pillows, groaning.

'What?' Rani complained. 'That was good advice.'

'It was, but it also wasn't what I wanted to hear,' I replied. 'I'm confused up here, and your advice isn't helping.'

Rani shrugged and then settled back against me. 'You'll work it out eventually – you always do.'

She was right, and I needed to leave to sit in my room and figure out what I was actually feeling.

Then Rani pulled out her laptop. 'But until then, want to watch romcoms to make everything hurt a little less?' Her voice was hopeful; my older sister was too tough, too strong, too used to doing things on her own, to just ask me to stay.

But that was OK, because I knew her. The same way she knew me.

'Yeah,' I said, dropping my cheek to her shoulder. 'Let's make everything hurt a little less.'

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CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

For my last shift at the Treasure Trove, it was just me and Melodie in the kitchen. Orion had texted earlier in the day that he had something to sort out and would meet me after closing so we could go over the soulmate spell one last time before the festival.

I was happy for the distance. Disappointed, yes, but also happy. Because I didn't know how to tell Orion that I was going with Silas to the festival.

Because I had made my decision.

I'd spent all night thinking about it, but I knew choosing Orion would be too risky. And I'd already spent so much of my life making the more daring decision – it was time to choose the stable guy. The good guy.

And telling Orion that I was choosing to go with Silas to the festival would be me finally closing the door on the feelings I had for him. It's like he said on the roof, *I* was making a choice, and if it was the wrong one, I had no one else to blame but myself.

'Did someone do something to you?'

I looked up from the stretchy dough I was kneading over and over again to Melodie, who was standing at the counter beside me. She had one headphone in with her audiobook trilling on, and a smile on her lips.

'Kneading dough is the best way to get your frustrations out of the way,' I joked, half-heartedly.

'You know, I used to *hate* baking,' Melodie said, looking down at the cupcakes that she was icing. 'I always found it too hard, and a dream that belonged to my parents more than me. But you helped me get past that. You helped me fall in love with it too.'

I felt my smile push against my cheeks. 'I've loved working here.'

Melodie nodded, but there was a sadness to her smile that didn't suit her usual bubbly self. Today's your last shift, and tomorrow, it won't be the same in here without you.' Then she breathed deeply, reached into her apron

pocket and glanced around before handing me a thick packet. ‘But, as a parting gift, I wanted to give you this.’

I dusted my hands on my apron before taking the envelope from her. When I opened the seal, I saw *cash* staring back at me.

‘What is this?’ I asked, horrified.

‘That’s everything you earned while working at the Treasure Trove.’

‘Melodie,’ I said, touched by the gesture. ‘You didn’t have to do that. You know I had an agreement in place with –’ I couldn’t say his name for some reason, so I let the words falter.

‘I know,’ Melodie replied, that sad smile still on her mouth. ‘But it didn’t feel right. You didn’t just teach me a couple of recipes; you saved the bakery. You brought it light and joy. Made my parents’ dream a reality. And more than that, I know you risked your apprenticeship at the Wishing Well for this. For me, a person you barely knew – even if you were getting something out of it from Orion. This is just a mere *token* of what you deserve, Maya.’

I was going to cry. I could feel the moisture building in my eyes, and I had to bite my lip to stop myself from getting overwhelmed. Melodie saw this and discreetly handed me a paper towel.

‘Thanks,’ I said, sounding a little watery. ‘I really loved working with you.’

‘I’m sad it’s going to be over, but Orion gave me that warning when this all started,’ Melodie explained, bracing her shoulders. ‘It was my fault for not preparing for it.’

At the mention of his name, I darted my gaze away from Melodie to the remaining bakes that were on the table for the festival: moonlit blueberry muffins, garlic & thyme stopping knots, cinnamon passion palmiers. And my experiment: the fly, fly away doughnut holes that gave you temporary faerie wings.

I watched as Melodie put her headphone back in and got swept away with baking again. I did the same. I let myself sink into every part of what it felt like to bake at the Treasure Trove for a final time. And it was the dream that Orion had helped blossom in my mind that came to life as I pottered around, imagining that this wasn’t temporary; that this was my bakery.

When Melodie and I finished the final bakes, I offered to clean up while I waited for Orion to meet me. She handed me the key and wrapped me into a hug, before saying goodbye. When she was gone, it was harder to keep my

swirling thoughts at bay: was I ready to close the door on all of this? Was being an assistant all I wanted?

When I was midway through wiping the countertops down, my phone buzzed.

SILAS MOON
Hey, just wanted to let you know how excited I am for tomorrow. I'm really looking forward to hanging out with you.

My heart clenched, painfully. Silas was always so open with his feelings – wearing his heart on his sleeve the way I thought I did. I couldn't help but notice the way Orion was different, how all of his emotions felt like a puzzle I was trying to understand.

MAYA
I can't wait either!

SILAS MOON
Where do you want to meet?

My fingers hovered over the screen; this was when I should tell him to meet me in the Firewood Forest. The festival would come into full swing once the moon was high in the sky, the forest turning golden. Then everyone would come back to Main Street for the stalls and the makeshift rides.

Just as I was about to type the message, I heard a rap against the bakery door. I opened it to find Orion standing there. But he didn't look like he usually did – there was a flush to his cheeks, and the silver of his eyes was more than gleaming.

'Is everything OK?' I asked, immediately stepping back so he could come in.

‘Everything is brilliant,’ Orion said, a smile splitting his handsome face wide open. From his leather jacket, Orion pulled out a sheet of folded paper that was closed with a blue wax seal. I recognized the Maple Falls High crest. ‘I was speaking to some of my teachers at Maple Falls High about teacher apprenticeships. I really wanted to get one with my old hexes professor, Dr Willow, and then I got this letter. She read my application and *loved it*. Offered me a place starting next year, after winter break.’ Orion sucked in a breath, continuing with excitement. ‘I mean, yes, I’ll have to start from the beginning because I have no teaching courses from MAC. I’ll also have to teach the younger years, which will mean dealing with children, which will mean answering inane questions and having to clean up after them all the time. But I’ll be one step closer to teaching and doing what *I* want to do.’

He was breathing hard by the time he was done, and I was looking at him feeling entirely stunned.

‘You – you’re actually doing it? Choosing to be a teacher,’ I said, disbelievingly. ‘You’re going against your parents and you’re truly going for it. Congrats, Hawthorne!’

Orion’s smile was unlike anything I’d seen on him before – pure joy. ‘What can I say? You’re rubbing off on me.’ His tone softened. ‘If you can do everything in your power to become a better spellcaster, overcoming every doubt, every fear, then I can prove to my parents that my dreams are just as valid as the legacy they’ve made for me.’

I felt my throat turn dry and my heartbeat become faster. My neck flushed from the way he was looking at me. And it was suddenly overwhelming. I couldn’t handle it; I couldn’t bear it. He couldn’t look at me like that because it made not choosing him feel less like the right thing to do. Like I was afraid to show the same bravery he had, going after something that was a risk but that made him happy.

‘I’m going with Silas to the Fallen Leaves Festival,’ I finally blurted out. Orion’s eyes widened, and that *look* disappeared from his eyes. I thought it would bring me relief to see it gone from his expression, but my stomach dropped to my feet. ‘Our plan worked. We’ll meet in the Firewood Forest. Today, all I need is to get the spell right, and everything should be set.’

Orion stared at me. I watched, with morbid fascination, as the armour slipped back over his face. The smile on his mouth zipped back into place, the contours of his jaw sharpened and the silver of his eyes brightened. Part

of me desperately wanted him to say something, to do something, to stop me – but Orion Hawthorne was always careful, always cautious and never reckless. At least when it came to me.

'That's good,' he said, and his voice was so devoid of emotion it made me flinch. 'And that's what you want, right? You still think he is the one for you?'

This was it. The final moment. The door closing on my feelings for Orion, for the last time.

'Yes,' I whispered, and my chest was aching again.

Orion nodded jerkily and then swallowed. 'Then, let's practise the spell, Reverie.'

And we did. It wasn't like our other lessons; there was no laughter, no emotions, nothing.

'*To pierce with love and bind my heart, Cupido please find your mark*,' I said, my voice soft and a little trembling.

His smile was more of a grimace, as if every word out of my mouth was a shot at him. As if being here physically pained him.

'Clearer,' he instructed, softly. 'To cast the spell properly, you need to touch your soulmate – on the wrist, cheek or hand – and say the spell with intention and clarity.'

He was still teaching me – no matter if he looked like he hated every moment of it. My stomach tightened. The least I could do for all his effort was get this right.

So, I sucked in a breath and I said the spell clearly, holding his gaze with my own.

'*To pierce with love and bind my heart, Cupido please find your mark*.'

'Good job,' Orion said, dropping his eyes from mine. 'Say this tomorrow night, and the curse will finally break. You, and this whole town, will finally be free.'

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CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

I got ready for the Fallen Leaves Festival with Raven and Sofia at my house – not the Hawthornes' house. Were they surprised when I texted them to meet at my place? Yes, almost offensively so. I mean, they both actually rang me to make sure I was feeling well.

But I told them it was just because Rani was helping me get ready, so it was easier if they all came there. I didn't tell them it was because I refused to face Orion again.

We hadn't texted all day. Not even a message to say whether he'd be there tonight.

'So, the tradition is that the whole forest turns gold?' Sofia asked, as Raven helped paint her nails a glittery blue colour.

'Gold,' Rani confirmed from where she was putting winged eyeliner on my lids. 'And you make a wish – I mean, it doesn't really come true, it's just a myth.'

'Some of the wishes could come true,' I mumbled, and then shut my mouth because Rani swatted me lightly.

'It's all self-fulfilling prophecies,' Raven remarked. 'But it is really pretty.'

'A very good setting for, you know, confessions of love,' Rani replied, and I didn't need to have my eyes open to see her sly smile.

I didn't respond with anything but a kick to her shin, even though my heart was thumping in my chest. I hadn't slept well last night after Orion dropped me home from the Treasure Trove. It was the quietest drive we'd ever done. My dreams had been a torrent of visions – some where Silas was completely horrified by what I'd done to the town, others where he reciprocated my feelings in a way that made every doubt of mine turn to dust.

'Will Orion be coming?' Sofia asked the question, her voice all innocent.

I felt my spine stiffen, but I kept my eyes shut because Rani was insisting that they needed to dry.

‘He’s on his way to Rose Glenn.’

My eyes snapped open. Rani gasped at her destroyed work, but I had to see Raven’s face.

‘What?’ I asked, aghast.

I thought he might not show at the festival – expected it, even. I thought that I’d cast the spell, break the curse and, in the aftermath, among all the things I’d need to explain to Silas, Orion and I would have to find a new rhythm to our relationship. A new thing we’d become. Or maybe, we’d just go back to what we always were: former childhood friends.

But I didn’t think he’d leave town. Again. Had he left right after dropping me off?

‘He got a call from one of the professors there,’ Raven explained, like it was nothing. ‘So, he left before dawn today, to meet with them and discuss doing his teaching apprenticeship there. My father went with him, because he’s trying to find a way to be supportive, I think? Either that, or he’s hoping to convince Orion to change his mind.’

‘Wh-Why is he interviewing at Rose Glenn?’ I asked, my mind rapidly trying to keep up. ‘He told me he got an offer here, at Maple Falls High.’

‘He did,’ Raven acknowledged, and a frown pulled at the corner of her mouth. ‘But he said something about wanting to keep his options open and not being sure he had a place here.’

My chest was throbbing; I was pretty sure it was on fire. Or maybe I was having a really bad case of heartburn. Either way, the thought of Orion upping and leaving Maple Falls left me feeling sick.

‘So, he just left?’ I asked again, like a broken record. ‘He didn’t even want to stay to see …’ I glanced at Rani who was fixing my eyeliner with annoyance in her every move. ‘We haven’t even broken the curse on the town!’

‘Well, he assured me it would be broken by tonight.’

Mum’s voice came from the doorway. She was standing there wearing a blazer that was a deep-orange colour and with a clothing bag draped over her arm.

‘He did?’ I asked, confused.

‘Orion sent a letter this morning,’ Mum explained. ‘It said the curse would be broken by tonight and that he’d send more details soon. The

Coven was quite happy; we were getting a little sick of Inspector Vale's poetry.'

I sat back, stunned, unsure of what to say or what to think. Orion was *gone*. He'd left. The same way he did when he went to MAC. This time, he was chasing a dream that he wanted, but it still felt like *I* was being left behind again. It was selfish to think like that, but, I guess, I was a little tired of chasing every guy I liked. Maybe some small part of me thought Orion would chase me – if he really cared for me.

I should've been glad, because it made Silas seem more and more like the right decision.

'You're back early, Mum,' Rani said, standing back from my face once more. This time, she cast a spell to make sure my eyeliner didn't move. 'I thought we'd meet you at the festival.'

'I came back to give Maya something,' Mum said, and then beckoned me out of the room.

I followed her outside my bedroom, leaving my sister and friends to finish getting ready. Once the door shut, I turned to Mum and found her practically bursting with excitement, the edges of her blazer turning a dark-purple colour.

'I want to give you something,' Mum said, hurriedly. 'A little gift.'

'A gift? For what?'

'For all your hard work this term,' Mum said, her smile wide. 'For finally taking your studies seriously.'

I bit my tongue. I refused to snap at her that I always cared about my studies; I just wasn't as good at them as Rani was. I'm still not. And I wasn't just trying more now; it was because my confidence in my own magic had grown. But I said nothing, not wanting to ruin the moment.

'Well, I heard from Granny Fable, who probably overheard you telling Sofia, that you were going to the Fallen Leaves Festival,' Mum said, and there was a sly glimmer to her gaze. 'With that young Moon boy.'

My whole face was heating up, mostly because I couldn't believe I was the talk of the town. And that my love life was the point of discussion.

'So, for tonight, I found this, and I thought you might like to wear it,' Mum said, and there was that nervousness in her voice again.

Slowly, I unzipped the bag to reveal a dress underneath. Its pleated skirt was the colour of orange leaves; the green high-neck top was patterned with gold leaves; and the full sleeves were voluminous and tied with bows at the

shoulders. It was the kind of dress that screamed *autumn and witchy and perfect*. My fingertips grazed the soft fabric, my chest constricting at how gorgeous it was. How me it was.

‘I wore this the first time your father and I met,’ Mum said, and I could hear the memories locked away behind her every word.

‘Did you fall in love with Dad quickly?’

The question flew out of my mouth, spurred on by the dress and the mention of my father. Mum looked at me, jolted out of her own head, and her expression softened further.

‘No,’ she said, with a laugh at my shocked expression. ‘Falling in love with your father was like stepping off a *cliff*. Remember when I told you he had a motorcycle, absolutely no ambition beyond wanting to own his own bookstore and he *always* had a plan for something mischievous? He was my parents’ nightmare.’

‘But you took that risk?’ I asked, my voice tight with emotion. ‘Why?’

Mum smiled. ‘Everyone faces risks in life. One day you’ll know which ones are worth taking.’

‘I thought you always wanted me to be safe,’ I countered, an edge entering my voice.

‘I do,’ Mum insisted, and then she framed my face with her hands. ‘Safe *and* happy. Think you could do both?’

I nodded, but, deep in my heart, I wasn’t entirely sure both were an option.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

There was nothing more beautiful than Maple Falls in the fall. I knew that with certainty, as I walked side by side with Silas through Main Street. We had met up outside my house, deciding to walk together into the Firewood Forest. Sofia, Raven and Rani were going to follow us a little later.

I was determined for tonight to be perfect; I had the soulmate spell memorized, I was wearing a dress that made me feel beautiful and, most of all, I was going to give Silas a chance.

I was going to *take* a chance on Silas. The same way my mother had with my father.

He was a risk, but also the safe choice. He had to be.

'Wow,' Silas murmured, eyes tracking over the entirety of Main Street. 'The town really went all out.'

Main Street had been transformed. There were stands lining the main road; some were food stalls and others game stalls. A Ferris wheel had been added to the town centre, near the clock tower. And the Firewood Forest that surrounded us was a crisp amber colour, its trees swaying with the wind, leaves eager and desperate to turn from orange to gold under the moon. Different pathways into the forest were lit with gold lamps, and as town-goers went through Main Street, picking which stalls they'd visit later, they chose their own paths to the forest.

'Look at the desserts on the Treasure Trove stall,' Silas continued, pointing out the stall that made my heart skip a beat.

Melodie was standing there, putting final touches on the desserts. Our eyes met, and she gave me a small smile. I was hoping that everything would go perfectly today. No mistakes, no mishaps.

'Any of them caught your eye?' Silas prompted, and I realized I hadn't said anything yet.

I turned to look at him. He looked incredibly handsome today, like every other day; the gold in his hair stood out, and the blue of his eyes matched a summer sky. He was dressed in his letterman jacket that made me him look like the ultimate star athlete – which he was.

'I mean, I wouldn't *hate* a teddy from the ring toss,' I said, pointing to the stall that was manned by Hank, the merman. 'But I'm not sure you have the skills –'

'Ohh,' Silas crowed, moving in front of me and walking backwards down the path to the forest. 'Those are *fighting* words, Maya Reverie. I am detecting a challenge.'

Playful, fun, *easy*; that's what talking with Silas was. It was easy to get lost in our conversation, the quick teasing. Plus, I had to guide him through the forest when he was adamant he could get to the clearing while still walking backwards.

After colliding with two branches that lodged themselves in his hair, we did eventually make it to the clearing – along with everyone else in town. It was too crowded, and I realized there was no way I could do the spell here. Even with all my new confidence and practice, there was no way I was going to do a public declaration of love in front of the whole town. Not without another case of spiked faerie punch.

Silas must have noticed something in my expression, because he nudged my elbow with his and leaned down. 'Want to go somewhere quieter?'

'Still in the forest?' I asked, not wanting to move to a place too far away from where the moon would shine brightest.

'Still in the forest,' Silas said, and I nodded.

I followed him through the crowd, clutching on to the back of his jacket as we moved around people. Everyone was watching us, including Granny Fable, who gave me an exaggerated wink that turned my cheeks bright pink. Eventually, the crowd thinned as Silas led us deeper into the woods, through winding paths, until we found a small patch between the trees.

It was not quite a clearing, but a spot where the trees separated and the moon would shine directly upon us. We were entirely alone; the rest of the town lost in the distance. Now that they weren't here, I suddenly felt a sense of pressure closing in around me.

'I like to come here at every full moon,' Silas said, breaking into my thoughts. 'The moonlight is the brightest, and it's super quiet.'

'It's perfect,' I said, because it was and because I had to say something.

Silas ducked his head, forcing my eyes to meet his. ‘I don’t think I’ve ever taken someone here who wasn’t from the pack.’

The enormity of what he was saying hit me – I *meant* something to him. I was someone he considered special enough to bring to his spot. I could see that he was waiting for me to say something back; maybe to be awed or delighted or enamoured or grateful. Something that indicated that I was happy to be here, in front of him.

But the longer I stared at Silas, the more panicked I became. This was Silas Moon standing before me, heart in his hands, at his favourite spot in town. And all I could think of was my sister and her questions: *Who do you feel happiest with? Who could you see yourself with in the long term? Who makes you feel seen, like they truly know you?*

And the problem was, I could see myself with Silas. I could see myself falling in love with him, properly in love with him – not the puppy love of a crush. I could see us being happy together, a life full of playful banter and warm blushes. Silas would be good, and he would be kind. I liked who I was with Silas – more confident, more relaxed. But there were parts of myself that I hid from him; parts of myself that I had been too afraid to share.

I wanted to be the perfect version of myself for him – willing to eat sweets I didn’t like, watch games I didn’t really care about, tamp down my emotions so he wouldn’t think I was *too much*. Being with Silas felt like I had actually cast the eye-of-the-beholder spell on myself, where only the best parts of me were on display.

But he hadn’t seen the entire spectrum of me. Only one person had.

He wasn’t the person who seemed to know every way to irritate me, nor the person that challenged and aggravated me. He wasn’t the person who always knew how and when to uplift me and make me feel brave enough to dream about things that I always told myself I wouldn’t.

He wasn’t the person who made me trust myself; who trusted in me, even when I didn’t.

‘I’m so sorry,’ I said, my voice cracking at a whisper. ‘Silas, I’m so sorry.’

I watched as confusion coloured his eyes, and he took a step towards me. I couldn’t look at him; I tore my gaze away and looked at my shoes.

‘Maya?’

‘I thought –’ I inhaled sharply, all the emotions I’d been keeping at bay sweeping over me. I barely noticed how the moon was emerging from the clouds, how the forest seemed to shift. ‘I have always liked you, Silas.’

‘OK,’ Silas said, even more perplexed. ‘I kind of knew you had a little crush on me, and I think I’ve made it obvious that I really like you too.’

‘I know,’ I said, and I finally got the courage to look at him again. ‘The only problem is, Silas, I don’t think you’re my soulmate.’

His eyebrows lifted, surprise tracing over the contours of his face. ‘I didn’t realize we were talking about being soulmates. Couldn’t we start with something smaller?’

I felt my chest crack in two at the earnestness in his voice, even as he didn’t understand what I was saying.

‘Maybe, if we were in another lifetime, in a different town,’ I said, my throat aching with the urge to cry. ‘But starting anything with you wouldn’t be fair. Not to you. Not to me. Not when I think I know who my soulmate actually is.’

‘Oh,’ Silas said, and I watched as he tucked his heart back into his ribcage.

‘And the thing is, finding my soulmate is important because I need to share true love’s kiss with them tonight,’ I declared, the truth finally coming between me and Silas. ‘Because that’s the only way the love curse on the town will break.’

I watched as Silas pieced together what I was saying, and the more realizations that hit him, the further away from me he stepped.

‘You cast the love spell?’ Silas asked, aghast.

‘Not on purpose,’ I hurried to say, taking a step towards him and flinching when he stepped away. ‘Sorry – I just – I was casting a soulmate spell because I thought you were my soulmate, and I thought, if that was true, I could finally get over all the embarrassing moments I seemed to have when I was around you.’

‘The anti-fungal cream *was* something,’ Silas murmured, still looking dazed.

I winced, mortification coating my cheeks red. ‘Right. That. But then, the spell went wrong and became a curse. Six people ate my enchanted soulmate cookies, and I’ve been spending the last month working on my spellcasting so I could cast the soulmate spell tonight and fix this whole mess.’

‘With your soulmate, who you think isn’t me,’ Silas said, slowly. ‘If it’s not me, then who is it?’

I couldn’t say his name out loud, but Silas could read it in my eyes, in my face. Understanding dawned upon him, and there was a new sharpness in his eyes.

‘Hawthorne,’ Silas said, and there was such hollowness in his voice that I wanted to run away the way I did in the Maple Mart just a few weeks ago. But I couldn’t. I wouldn’t. This version of myself would face Silas, because it was the least he deserved. ‘So, all that time you said he meant nothing to you, it was a lie?’

I shook my head, all the confusion of the last month spilling out of me. ‘No, no, not entirely. I was sure that I didn’t have feelings for Orion any more, but then – he was the one helping me break the curse and things just changed between us. It truly wasn’t until a few days ago that I realized just how much I still felt for him.’

‘Kind of wish you’d had that realization before you made me fall for you,’ Silas remarked, and there was a sharpness in his voice that I would remember for eternity.

‘I’m so sorry,’ I whispered once more.

I watched as Silas breathed in deep and then exhaled. He pushed a smile on to his mouth, no dimples. It was a kindness that I didn’t deserve. But he was Silas Moon – kind, good, uncomplicated, Silas Moon. Watching him slip back into his armour made me realize that maybe I didn’t know him as well as I thought I did, because I didn’t even know he *had* armour to wear.

But I did know, with an alarming amount of clarity, that he was not my soulmate.

‘You should go find him,’ Silas said, finally, his hands going into his pockets, his head tilting up to the moon. ‘You haven’t got long left of this full moon, and if you really intend on breaking this curse, then you need to get to that dragon shifter, *fast*.’

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CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Main Street was eerily empty as I burst out of the forest, golden leaves scattering in my wake. Some were wet and sticking to my shoes, but I didn't care. I was just grateful for the quiet and lack of prying eyes, since everyone was back in the Firewood Forest, making wishes and being with the ones they loved.

It meant I could give into the feeling of panic that was coursing through me – Silas's ominous warning still hanging over me. I didn't know how long the autumn moon would hang in the sky, the leaves eventually fading back to green. All I knew was that I needed to get Orion back to Maple Falls.

I needed to get in contact with him, so he could meet me here. Then I'd tell him the truth. The whole truth. I had tried calling him in the forest, but the signal was bad. Now that I'd run on to Main Street, I tried calling him again, only this time it kept going to voicemail.

'Maya?'

I hadn't realized how far I'd run. I was back in the middle of the stalls, trapped on either side. Ivy was stood looking at me, her eyes all big and worried. I wondered what I looked like; probably a woodland sprite who got tangled in a bush.

'Ivy,' I said, a little breathless. 'Sorry, can't stay to chat, I've got to –'

Mum emerged from behind Ivy, and it was only then that I noticed that they were both by the Treasure Trove stall.

Mum's blazer was a ruby-red colour, and she was wearing an old-timey witch's hat, just for the aesthetic. In her hands, she was holding a white paper bag in an iron-tight fist.

'What happened?' I asked, eyes darting between them. 'Is everything OK?'

‘Where have you been?’ Mum asked, standing shoulder to shoulder with a rapidly paling Ivy.

‘In the forest,’ I said, my voice sounding thick with tears. My mind was still trying to play catch-up with everything that had just happened, and I didn’t understand my mother’s anger. ‘You knew I was going to the festival today. I told you.’

Mum laughed, and the sound was sharper than a knife. ‘I knew, did I? And I was just supposed to trust that you were where you said you were?’

‘Yes?’ I replied, more like a question.

‘Why,’ Mum began, and her tone was lethal with anger, ‘should I trust you to tell me the truth, Maya? When you have been lying to me for the last *month* about your study sessions. When you’ve actually been working at the Treasure Trove. Not studying, like you promised. But taking time off your *job* at the Wishing Well, betraying your employer’s trust, and working for the competition.’

A weight settled in my stomach. How did Mum know? We were so careful – no one suspected anything. Everyone in town was excited about the new bakery, but no one knew who the baker was. I had been so sure of it.

‘Are you surprised I know?’ Mum asked, but it wasn’t a question I was supposed to answer. I knew that much. ‘Want to know how I found out?’

I stood stock-still, every muscle locked up and unable to move. I didn’t know what to say or do, and I was still trying to breathe through the devastation from earlier. I mostly wanted to pass out and hope for the best.

‘Ivy,’ Mum commanded, and my boss flinched at my mother’s sharp tone.

‘I was admiring the stall,’ Ivy began, quietly. She watched me with those wide, apologetic eyes. Guilt simmered in my stomach; I should’ve been the apologetic one, not her. ‘And I saw these blueberry muffins. I recognized the recipe from the time you mentioned them to me, and I had said –’

‘They were too complicated,’ I finished for her, my tone wooden.

Ivy nodded, her throat bobbing. ‘I had mentioned them to your mother and –’

‘And I recognized them too,’ Mum interrupted, her blazer turning an even deeper red. ‘Because I remembered us talking about them. About how they were too complex for you to make. Then I thought of all the study sessions

you were having, and I saw the other baked goods at the stall. The magic was unmistakably a witch's. Unmistakably *yours*.'

'I thought I wasn't capable of complex magic,' I said, the bitter words flying out of my mouth without a thought. 'Isn't that what you both thought? That I should stick to the easy stuff.'

Ivy opened her mouth to say something, a hurt look flashing on her face. But Mum and her anger were faster.

'So, you're denying it then?' Mum asked, danger lurking in the waters of her voice.

I could've denied it. Asked Melodie to take the fall. Raven would step in and probably give my mother some logical explanation that she couldn't deny. Sofia would stick by my story. My friends would protect me.

But a sudden exhaustion overwhelmed me.

I was so tired of hiding and pretending. Tired of having to deny that I made the baked goods people loved. I was tired of trying to break the curse I'd caused. I was tired of chasing guys who never seemed to like me back. I was just so *tired*.

'No,' I confessed, like a person waiting for their execution. 'I've been working at the Treasure Trove.'

Ivy's mouth turned into a perfect 'o', but Mum didn't look surprised at her theory being proven correct. In fact, she looked resigned. It made a lick of anger run up my spine – I wanted her to be surprised. It was strange; I so desperately wanted to meet my mother's standards, to prove to her that I was capable of complex magic. The way Rani was. But, at the same time, I also wanted her to realize how little she knew me; how much she ignored me. How, even though she felt like she knew every part of me, she didn't.

'Why would you lie about where you were?' Mum asked, and I could see she was braced for the answer from the rigid line of her shoulders.

'Because I'm also the one who accidentally cursed the town with a love spell,' I said, not caring any more. I let anger and frustration and sheer sadness drive me. She would find out eventually, especially now that I couldn't reach Orion. She'd need to tell the Coven, because the autumn moon would fade and I would have failed at lifting the curse. 'I forced Orion into helping me fix it, and all he asked for in return was my help in his friend's bakery. You can get mad at him, but I'm pretty sure he's moving to Rose Glenn, so I'm not sure what punishment you can dole out, really.'

Saying his name felt like I was swallowing thorns, each of them leaving little cuts in the flesh of my mouth. Mum stared at me, and there was the shock I'd been craving. It didn't feel as satisfying as I'd hoped. I watched as my mother straightened her shoulders, ignored Ivy and approached me with all the ire of an angry parent.

And then my mother said the words no one's child – adult, teen or kid – wanted to hear: 'Wait till we get home.'

My mother monologues like an evil villain in a movie when she's angry. She paces too. When I walked into the house, I made a beeline straight for the couch, plopped myself down, shoes still on, and watched as she launched straight into a rant that deserved screen time. Her blazer couldn't keep up with the fluctuating emotions – its colours spinning from red to green to purple to blue so quickly that it made my head hurt.

I was also only half listening. A numbness had crept over me from the minute the confession left my blistered mouth. I felt so utterly defeated, and I resigned myself to when Mum would get to the end of her speech with the age-old declaration: *You know what, Maya, just – just leave it. OK? Just leave it. I'm calling your sister, and we'll handle it.*

And I'd hand over the reins. Maybe Rani would break the spell in a way I couldn't. Maybe the Coven would finally step in when Mum told them the truth about who caused all this chaos. Either way, this day would end the same: with a third point on my licence.

I'd be magic bound for a year and, at this point, I had accepted it. I was ready to become one with the couch and let my mother and sister handle it. Until Mum said, mid-tirade: 'Honestly, Maya. I should've prepared for this. I should've known it was you. Why, might you ask? Because you're a –'

'Disaster waiting to happen,' I finished, my tone frosty.

Mum looked like a cut thread now that I'd interjected. Normally, I wouldn't have interrupted, except something about this particular insult made my insides burn.

Mum inhaled deeply, like she was trying to find her inner calm. 'I *wasn't* going to say that.'

'Yes, you were. You said it the last time I got a point on my licence. And you feel it now,' I said, angrily. 'Of course, you think I'm a disaster, that's all you ever see me as. A mess to clean up. The daughter to curb. The witch to put shackles on, right?'

‘Do you give me much choice, Maya?’ Mum asked, genuinely. ‘You got rid of Everly’s fangs, you almost enchanted yourself with a forbidden spell and then you cursed the town!’

‘You’re right,’ I allowed, even though it hurt. ‘But could you for *once*, just ask me why?’

‘Why what?’

‘Why I did those things,’ I said, frustration so evident in my voice now. ‘Have you ever considered that maybe there was a reason behind my actions? That I wasn’t just doing this to rebel or cause chaos?’

Mum went quiet, because we both knew that she hadn’t. I waited for her to ask me now, but we both shared the same stubbornness.

I scoffed loudly. ‘Of course you wouldn’t ask me. Fine, I’ll tell you. I wasn’t trying to curse the town – I just wanted to find my soulmate. It wasn’t an intentional love spell. But Ivy took my cookies and gave them to the town. Six people got cursed. It wasn’t my intention; I didn’t just do it for fun. It was meant to be a spell for me.’

‘And why would you need a soulmate spell?’ Mum asked, focusing on one detail alone.

‘Because Raven is leaving!’ I burst out, anger spilling with me. ‘Because Rani is at MAC. Because Sofia hadn’t arrived yet. Because I was going to be alone in the town next year and I couldn’t bear it.’

‘You wouldn’t have been alone,’ Mum said, quietly.

I laughed, genuinely laughed. Because this was ridiculous. Truly ridiculous.

‘Of course I was going to be alone,’ I said, my tone sad but sharp. ‘Who was I going to be left with? You, Mum?’

She nodded, and another laugh erupted out of me. The vicious note to it took even me by surprise.

‘Mum, when have I ever had you?’ I asked, and my mother’s brow furrowed into a look that Rani often mirrored. ‘How could I ever feel anything but alone when we’re together? When we can’t even watch a show together without it becoming a lecture. When you can’t spend five minutes with me before you need to mention my grades or exams or reports. When you’re so sure that I’m destined to be nothing, so rather than help me, you told me to resign myself to uncomplicated magic. To baby spells. To being nothing.’

Mum's eyes were wide as saucers now; she couldn't find the words to interrupt me.

'And have you ever stopped to think that not everything I do is a disaster?' I asked, on a roll now. 'About how I saved the Treasure Trove? Or how I've worked so hard this whole month to become a better spellcaster, all in the hopes that I could solve this. That I could fix this mess myself. Can't you see how hard I'm trying?'

I was breathing hard now. My throat felt warm, and moisture was building rapidly in my eyes. I wanted her to understand that I didn't enjoy causing these incidents and messes; that I was trying to fix this one. That I had gotten better.

I wanted her to see me and not be disappointed.

But Mum said nothing. She just stared at me, like I was a new species of witch.

'Fine,' I said, slumping back on to the couch, disappointment making my bones heavy. 'Call the Coven. Tell them what I did. Give me another point on my licence, and then I – I'll do whatever it is you want me to do. I'll pass my exams, help Ivy in the bakery with whatever she likes, come home and do whatever you want me to do. I'll be mortal for a year.'

Time slipped between us in heartbeats. When I was sure that Mum had something more to say, I was proven wrong. She simply looked away from me and then moved around the couch and went straight out of the door. I stared, dumbfounded, at the empty space where my mother had stood.

And then the tears came.

It was the cathartic kind of crying: ugly crying. Sobs that broke through my ribcage, and salty tears that cascaded down my cheeks. I let it all out.

When I was done, I was heaving and rubbing my palms against my cheeks to wipe away my tears. Breathing in and out, I tried to calm my racing heart. How could this mess have gotten so bad?

And I must have looked bad, because I felt something warm and furry find its way on to my lap. A wet sound left my throat as I found Jinx curled up in my lap, his green eyes looking up at me.

'So, I look like I'm on the brink of dying, right?' I said, stroking a hand down his spine. 'That's why you're here?'

He nuzzled my hand, and it was the sweetest gesture I'd ever got from him. But it was working – stroking Jinx made my heart rate return to

normal, and my breathing was becoming less haggard with every breath. It was only inevitable that I'd start talking too.

'Mum's probably out there, calling the Coven,' I said to myself and Jinx. 'I should expect an angry letter soon. I wonder if they'll snap my licence in half. Or maybe because Rani will stop all this, we'll get some sort of token of forgiveness. Maybe they'll halve my punishment.'

Jinx raised his head under my palm, almost questioningly.

'Of course Mum is calling Rani, Jinx. They'll both come together to solve this,' I explained to the cat.

Jinx turned his head to one side, as if he was saying, 'Why?'

'Because I failed to do it, Jinx,' I said, the words tearing out of my mouth. 'And it's better that I just step back. I'll just make things worse. I mean, yes, I know the counterspell. And yes, I've been working all month to solve this issue with Orion, but he's not even answering my calls.'

Jinx stared unblinking at me. If he could speak, I'm pretty sure he'd be saying, 'What else have you got to lose? You're getting a point on your licence and your mother knows the truth. What's the harm in trying again?'

Or he could be saying, 'Everyone fed me late today and I want you all to burn.'

'You think I should go after him?' I asked, and Jinx licked his paw in response. 'Portal to Rose Glenn?'

What did I have to lose? I'd chased after Orion before, and, as exhausting as it was, I could do it again. I was preparing myself to go when a loud banging on my door catapulted me out of my seat and to my door.

I swung it open to find Raven and Sofia standing there, looking at me like I'd grown two heads.

'You *left* Silas in the forest?' Raven said, stepping inside.

'Are you OK?' Sofia followed up, closing the door behind them.

I don't know why the sight of them brought a fresh wave of tears, but my gaze turned glossy. Before I knew it I had arms wrapped around me, and I was pulled into a hug.

'What happened?' Raven asked, when I had finally calmed down.

I looked at her, my throat aching, heart racing. 'You're going to hate me.'

Raven held my gaze like it was a lifeline. 'Maya Reverie, there's nothing you could say that could make me hate you.'

'I think I'm in love with your brother.'

Raven stared at me, Sofia held her breath beside me and even Jinx had stopped moving.

'I'm about to portal to Rose Glenn,' I babbled, the words spilling out of me. 'I was going to take this risk, this reckless, stupid risk, because I think we're meant to be together. And yes, maybe he might reject me. Maybe he's not my soulmate. Maybe I'll cast the spell, and my real soulmate is right back here in this town, but I want to take the risk, just in case it is Orion.'

'You thought you and Silas should've been together,' Raven noted, and her voice was clinical. 'What's different this time?'

'Everything,' I whispered, because it was true. 'With Silas, I could see myself being happy, but I wasn't being myself. I wouldn't dare to dream wildly, and I wouldn't have the courage to speak those dreams out loud. Orion sees me and makes me feel like I can make the risky choice, 'cause he'll be right there to catch me in case I fall.'

Raven went quiet, watching me with contemplative eyes. I was sure I'd ruined it, destroyed our friendship with one declaration.

'I knew,' Raven said, and then shrugged. 'I just had to be sure you were making this choice because you actually loved him. He is still my brother at the end of the day.'

I felt my jaw drop, and even Sofia gasped. 'You *knew*?'

Raven laughed a little incredulously. 'You're not serious, right? You thought you'd like my brother, and I would have no idea? I'm not sure if I should be offended or not.'

I spluttered. 'But – but you never said anything.'

Raven took my hand in her own and squeezed it tightly. 'It wasn't my place, Maya. You and Orion, you've both been circling each other for so long, and I couldn't be the one to push you two together. One of you needed to take the first step yourself.'

Her logic put some part of my brain at ease, and that sharp ache in my chest that I always got around her now bloomed.

'I'm going to miss you so much when you're gone next year,' I confessed, because I couldn't hold it in any longer. 'I think that's why I've been acting so intense about finding my soulmate.'

Raven's gaze softened, and her throat bobbed. 'You're trying to replace me?'

'No,' I said, feeling choked up. 'I just didn't want to feel so alone.' I glanced at Sofia next to me. 'It's why I've been so happy to have you here

too, Sof. I can’t explain how much I value your friendship; you know that, right?’

‘Maya,’ Raven said, her words strained with the urge not to be too emotional. ‘I’m not leaving forever. I’m going to come back. You and I are always going to be best friends – you’re never getting rid of me. I don’t want you to get rid of me.’

I felt my chest tighten further, not realizing how much I needed to hear her say that. Sofia smiled, and even the corners of her mouth were trembling slightly. Raven huffed out a sound and pulled both of us into a hug. I let myself fall into the embrace, reminding myself that even when everything felt like it was going wrong, at least I still had them.

‘All right, all right,’ Sofia said, breaking out first. ‘We’ve got to get you to the portal –’

Her words were cut off by the sound of another knock on the door. This time, I didn’t untangle myself from Raven to open it. Instead, with the flick of my wrist, I swung the door open.

Only to find Orion Hawthorne on my doorstep.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

We stood outside my house, three or four steps apart, but it felt like eternity stretched between us. We were entirely alone – Raven and Sofia had gone back inside to give us some privacy. Not that I would've noticed them there. I was locked on to Orion before me. His silver eyes were gleaming like two lone stars, and his dragon wings were tucked behind him. He was wearing his favourite blue sweatshirt, and every inch of him looked perfect.

He had come back to Maple Falls.

That singular thought was running in circles around my mind, keeping me rooted in place. I didn't bridge the gap between us – I didn't need to. He did.

In two long strides, Orion was before me. He ran his gaze over my face like he was searching for something that had changed in me.

'Did you cast the spell yet?' he asked, quietly.

I shook my head, and the naked relief on his face made something spark inside me. 'You're supposed to be interviewing at Rose Glenn,' I said, and I didn't even try masking the hurt.

'I got there, and I interviewed,' Orion replied, shortly. Like this was unimportant information. 'Then I hung around with my father for a bit in the town, refusing to go back to the festival in case I found you celebrating with Silas. My father and I talked at some café – really talked. He agreed to try and be more supportive. I think he thought I wasn't serious about how much I wanted this.'

I was quiet for a moment; on the pavement, I could see people returning from the festival. The forest was still gold, the moon was still bright, but the allure was fading. The night was coming to a close.

'So, you're planning on moving if you get the teacher's apprenticeship?' I asked, chest aching.

Orion held on to my stare like I was the star he was following back home. ‘No. I couldn’t do it, Reverie. I was sitting in that café, finally hearing my father support my dream of being a teacher, and all I could think was that I was being an idiot.’

‘Orion Hawthorne calling himself an idiot?’ I asked, disbelievingly. ‘You sure you didn’t hit your head as you portalled back?’

‘I’m self-aware enough to know when I’m being dumb,’ Orion retorted, a small smile making his mouth tilt. ‘I could live all my dreams, but none of them would ever make me feel true happiness because *you* wouldn’t have been there.’

My heart was thundering in my chest; words clogged in my throat.

‘I knew it last summer. I knew it when I left for MAC. I knew it in the back of my mind, always,’ Orion continued, unrelentingly. ‘I knew it when I started helping you with Silas. I knew it with every step you took towards him that losing you was going to be the biggest mistake of my life. And I had already lost you twice in my life by my own hand, by my own stupidity. I am not going to do it a third time. I like you, Maya Reverie. A lot. We have never been *just* friends. We’ve always been destined to be soulmates.’

‘I annoy you,’ I retorted, chin jutting out slightly and unable to resist the chance to challenge him. I knew why I thought we were meant to be, but did he? ‘We’re complete opposites. How do you know we’re soulmates?’

Orion stepped closer, uncaring of the nosy onlookers who were slowing their walk as they passed by my house, or the ones currently stood inside my house. ‘Because we’re perfectly fitted to one another, and together we’re literally capable of doing anything. You like to act; I like to plan. You pushed me to follow my dreams and take more chances. You get protective over me; the same way I get protective over you. You get jealous over me; the same way I get jealous over you.’

A flush climbed high on my cheeks. ‘When have I ever been jealous?’

Orion gave me a sardonic look. ‘You think kicking my seat while I was out with Celine at the cinema was, what? A sign of normal, unbothered behaviour?’

‘You were *testing* me?’ I asked, disbelievingly.

‘You were going on and on about how Silas was your soulmate. I had to see if I had a chance, even if it was tiny.’

‘But you left,’ I said, my voice quiet.

‘And I came back,’ Orion replied, stubbornly. ‘I will always come back. Understand this, Reverie – you’re not getting rid of me. I’ve been a part of your life since I was eight years old, and I intend to stay for as long as you’ll let me.’

My heart was loud in my chest, so loud that I was sure Orion could hear it. He stepped closer to me. ‘Tell me I’m right, Maya.’ Hearing my name from his mouth made my heartbeat tick up. ‘Tell me I’m not alone in feeling like this. Put me out of my agony.’

‘I would tell you you’re right,’ I whispered, unable to find the right words to give him even half of what he’d given me. ‘But I’m afraid of making your head bigger.’

He remembered every word of their last conversation. She remembered what he never said.

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His smile was blindingly bright, rivalling the moon above us. ‘Fine then. Don’t say the words; cast the spell. Prove us *both* right.’

‘But what if – what if it doesn’t work?’ I asked, frenzied. ‘What if someone else is my soulmate?’

‘It won’t fail,’ Orion said gently. ‘I know it.’

‘Orion –’

‘Spell me, Maya,’ Orion said, and this time, he said my name like it was something tender. Like he was cradling my heart in his hands and knew just how fragile it was. ‘Make one last risky decision tonight.’

I raised my fingertips to graze them against Orion’s chest. I had my eyes screwed tightly shut, like I could block everything out when this blew up in my face. I couldn’t bring myself to speak louder than a whisper, keeping this moment and this spell between us.

‘*To pierce with love and bind my heart, Cupido please find your mark.*’

I felt a sudden warmth erupt across the skin of my wrist, and, when my eyes snapped open, I was faced with the sight of a silver string connecting Orion's wrist to mine. I grazed the threads of the string with my fingertips, and it was stronger than I'd imagined, like a thick rope. There were knots to unravel the two of us on either side, so if I wanted to pull it free I could. If he wanted to pull us free, he could.

'Told you it would work,' Orion said, and there was pure elation colouring his smile. His eyes glanced upwards. 'And just in time too.'

I looked up to the sky, heat climbing my neck in anticipation of what was coming next.

True love's kiss.

I took a breath before looking back down, and, this time, Orion wasn't wearing any of his usual smiles. Not a smirk or a grimace either. His gaze glimmered with silver as he stepped closer to me, his warm palm sliding across my cheek.

'You ready to end this, Maya?' Orion asked, his thumb stroking my skin.

Chills ran down my spine, and my hand went to the sleeve of his sweater, clutching it tightly. I nodded once, too tangled up inside to speak.

'Look at that: Maya Reverie, speechless,' Orion said, a little smugness entering his gaze.

I rolled my eyes and rose to the challenge like always. I stepped up to my tiptoes, just as he bent down to meet me halfway. His lips pressed against mine, his breath becoming my own. The rope around my wrist glowed brighter, and every part of my body was flooded with liquid warmth. The scent of a campfire filled my lungs, and the sound of our heartbeats filled my ears.

In truth, I wasn't thinking of the curse. I wasn't thinking of anyone. I existed only in that moment with Orion.

When we broke apart, his hand rested against my jaw for a moment before he moved it so our fingers were entangled. A fluttery laugh left my lips as I took in the horns that had popped out of his curls, and the scales that had erupted on his neck.

'Someone's feeling a little out of control,' I teased, entirely too delighted.

'Cut me some slack,' Orion said, and his body curved towards me, making me tilt my head to look up at him. 'I just found my soulmate. It's a big deal.'

I let my grin drop softly into a smile. 'I like the sound of that.'

His gaze was burning into mine, and I wanted the moment to never end. So, of course, it had to be then that everything went haywire.

‘You are under arrest.’

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CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

The two of us whipped around, Orion standing behind me, to see something terrifying coming towards us.

Inspector Vale.

His wings erupted on his back as he flew towards me and Orion, his grey hair flying wildly and his gold eyes blazing. The crowd of townspeople that we had blocked out started to come into focus and the reality of what had just happened finally hit me.

'Under arrest?' I echoed, shocked. 'Why would we be under arrest?'

'Not we, lass,' Inspector Vale said, his tone full of rage. 'You! You are under arrest.'

'What for?' I squeaked out, horrified. Seriously, how long was his wingspan? His wings looked like they could envelop me in one go and crush me.

'For cursing this town,' Inspector Vale said, and his gold eyes flashed. 'For cursing *me*.'

OK, so I hadn't accounted for possibly getting *arrested* for all of this. I thought I'd get another point on my licence and a grounding. But arrested? I couldn't go to jail. Could you bake in jail? Who was even *in* the Maple Falls jail? Wasn't it just people who drank too much faerie punch and people Granny Fable found annoying – seriously, that woman had too much influence on the town. Maybe she could get me out of jail.

Jail.

My panic was mounting, my chest rapidly rising and falling. The day's events were catching up to me, and I could feel myself veering into a panic attack. Behind me, Orion made a sound of concern, but when he moved, Inspector Vale let out a low growl. He wasn't letting me leave here without cuffs on, and no one could save me. Not even Orion.

'Inspector Vale.'

Mum's voice was cool, like a droplet of condensation going down a glass of water on a hot day. She strode up our front pathway with Ivy right behind her. And behind *both* of them was …

'Is that my father?' Orion said, confused.

'Walking with my mother?' I added.

The two of us must have looked like spooked animals, because we definitely felt like it.

'I understand you'd like to arrest my daughter,' Mum said, when she'd stopped right before our little unlikely trio.

Inspector Vale drew himself up to his full height, his wings curling behind his back in a sign of respect. Whether it was for my mother or his boss, I didn't know.

'Yes, Madam Mayor,' he said, and then he inclined his head to Orion's father. 'Chief Inspector Hawthorne.'

'Vale,' Chief Inspector Hawthorne greeted him, looking amused. 'Glad to see you're done spouting poetry.'

I felt a smile twitch at the edge of my mouth, but I stamped it down because it really didn't feel like the right time to give in.

'I understand that Maya is being accused of cursing the town,' Mum said, and I felt my face flush. I waited for Mum to agree with Inspector Vale. I waited for the Coven letter to arrive right before me. 'But it appears that my daughter had no intention of cursing anyone. In fact, the cookies she'd made were distributed, incorrectly, by –'

'Me.' Ivy Blackthorn stepped in. 'I'm the one who distributed the cookies on the day of the fall bake sale. I was flustered, and I didn't check my inventory before I put the cookies out. If I had, I would've noticed that I wasn't the one who baked them. I would've checked with Maya.' Her gaze found mine and her eyes were full of an apology I wasn't even sure I deserved. 'So, if the fault lies with Maya, it also lies with me. Here, arrest me.'

Dramatically, Ivy raised both her hands in front of a very flushed looking Inspector Vale. I imagine it was probably hard for him to forget just how he'd spent the last few weeks lovesick for Ivy.

'On top of that,' Mum said, casting a side-eye at Ivy. 'We'd need to consider the whole picture.'

I stared dumbfounded at my mother. The *whole picture*? When had that ever happened?

‘Maya cast an incorrect spell, which many, many young witches do,’ Mum said, her tone conversational because she knew the whole town was listening with eager ears. ‘Ivy accidentally spread those cookies. Once Maya found out about that spell, she worked with Orion to fix it.’

‘Exactly,’ Orion cut in, his voice pitching louder. ‘If you want to arrest Maya, you’ll have to arrest me too, because I didn’t alert any authorities about a still provisional-licenced witch casting the spell.’

Orion raised his hands too. Inspector Vale looked like he would rather give himself dental surgery than actually cuff the chief inspector’s son.

‘Instead, the two of them worked together to save the town,’ Mum said, capturing our attention again. ‘They studied the spell, and Orion’s conclusion was correct: the only way to break the curse was for Maya to find her soulmate.’ Then her eyes dropped to where Orion and I were linked together by the silver thread. ‘Albeit I’m not sure it needed to be done right outside our house. On the street, for that matter.’

Twin flushes burned mine and Orion’s faces as we realized that we were, in fact, gaining some attention. Most people were still on Main Street, celebrating the festival. But I could see Granny Fable on the opposite pavement, sitting on a bench, looking like she was enjoying the show.

Great. By tomorrow morning, the whole town would know what transpired.

‘Still, in return for Orion’s generous help, Maya agreed to save a small business,’ Mum said, turning to look at me. ‘I just went to speak to the owner of the Treasure Trove, where I was informed, quite enthusiastically, that Maya single-handedly saved the Treasure Trove. I was then accosted by her charms teacher, who was pleased to say Maya had finally gained that confidence she was lacking.’

My chest was beginning to ache again with that feeling of finally doing something right. It felt like a victory unlike anything else.

‘I was wrong, Maya,’ Mum said, uncaring of the people around us. ‘The last person I spoke to before coming here was Chief Inspector Hawthorne, who was telling me all about how he was supporting Orion with his ventures of becoming a teacher. And it hit me that I didn’t support you the way that you needed. I didn’t build your confidence; I tried to make you smaller because I thought it would be easier for you. But you pushed *yourself*. You’ve become a phenomenal witch, and I’m sorry that I didn’t

see that until others told me. But I promise I won't make that same mistake again.'

I had no words to give – this was everything I wanted to hear. And sure, I wished she'd believed me before she'd left the house. I wished Mum hadn't needed to find evidence to prove what I was saying was the truth. But she had, and she was strong enough to admit that she was wrong.

'I'm sorry for lying to you,' I said, finally.

Mum smiled. 'This one isn't on you, sweetheart. It's my job to make sure you feel safe enough to come to me. It's something I'm going to work on.'

Orion's hand squeezed mine when he saw my eyes turn suspiciously wet. Mum's eyes were a little watery too, but she steadied herself.

She turned back to Inspector Vale.

'So, to recap,' Mum added, with a note of finality in her tone. 'My daughter's only crime was casting a spell wrong.'

Inspector Vale looked like he'd swallowed a lemon. 'Yes, well, the Coven would need to be notified.'

'They have been.' This came from Chief Inspector Hawthorne. Behind me, Orion sucked in a sharp breath. 'Madam Mayor approached me about this situation, and it appeared that we both had a lot to discuss about our children.'

I saw the way he looked at Orion, and I wasn't sure if there was an apology in his eyes, but there was an understanding.

'As I was saying,' he said, sternly, to the crowd that was growing rowdy. 'Upon hearing Madam Mayor's explanation, I felt it was only fair to request leniency from the Coven. Maya's shown herself to be a capable witch, and if her only desire was to find her true love in all of this, then who were we to fault her?'

'It was decided that Maya Reverie would not get a third point on her licence,' Mum said.

Relief made my knees feel wobbly, like they were made of custard. The only thing keeping me upright was the tether that joined Orion and me together.

'Her punishment will involve community service,' Mum added, eyeing me. 'She will be working on beach clean-ups for thirty-six hours over the winter break.'

I kept an almost-comical frown on my face to not betray just how much I would enjoy a beach clean-up. I turned to the left, my gaze catching

Raven's – who still stood in my doorway, with Sofia at her side; thinking about our shell collection that we would get a head start on.

'So,' Mum said, cheerfully. 'I think this has been enough excitement for one night. If you have a problem with any of this, you can reach me at my office, Inspector Vale. Tomorrow.'

There was a hard edge to her voice that made it clear she wasn't going to entertain anything else tonight. Vale looked disgruntled, but he understood when he wasn't going to win a fight. With a dramatic huff, he spread his wings out wide and shot up into the air.

When he was finally gone, there was an eerie silence that pervaded over us. I didn't notice as Ivy slipped away, or as Raven and Sofia went back inside. The only people I was focused on were Chief Inspector Hawthorne and my mother. The two of them shared a look that I refused to decipher.

'Ten minutes,' Chief Inspector Hawthorne declared. 'I'm going to wait in the car, and I think ten minutes is fair.'

'Ten minutes,' Mum agreed, shooting me a look. 'Probably enough time to untie that knot, wouldn't you say?'

My face was bright red, and I didn't dare look at Orion. But I felt him behind me; the way his body was all languid confidence, I could tell he was smiling. The kind of smug smile that I wanted to wipe off with a remark and trace with my fingertips all at the same time. That was the infuriating paradox of being in love with Orion Hawthorne.

'I suppose I could survive with a dragon shifter for a son-in-law,' Mum finally settled on, and I felt my eyes go wide. Chief Inspector Hawthorne laughed so loudly that I was officially ready for the ground to swallow me up whole.

'Mum,' I hissed.

But then I felt Orion's hand squeeze mine. I looked up at him and found his half-moon smile. Chief Inspector Hawthorne took that as his cue to go to his car, and Mum slipped around us.

When we were finally alone, the reality of what had just happened dawned on us.

'We did it,' I said, a disbelieving laugh leaving my lips. 'We did it, and the town isn't cursed, and you're not going to become a chief detective, and it doesn't look like Ivy hates me. My mum apologized, and I actually feel *hopeful* about our relationship. We actually did it.'

‘And with ten minutes to spare,’ Orion teased. ‘That must be a record somewhere.’

A laugh escaped from me again, and my hand squeezed his. I was bursting with affection, and every part of the feeling swarmed my body. I tilted my head to look up at him, and I finally gave him the words he deserved.

‘I like you too, Orion Hawthorne. In case it wasn’t blindingly clear,’ I declared, entirely unafraid of confessing my feelings for the first – and last – time to someone.

Orion’s silver gaze softened. ‘And I can’t wait, Maya Reverie, for all the dreams we’re going to make come true together.’

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Epilogue

One month later

I know what you're thinking: hasn't this witch learned her lesson yet?

Well, I've learned a lot of lessons over the last month. But *not* baking at 12 a.m. when I was gripped by an epic idea was not one of them.

I stood before the oven, watching as twelve cookies baked; the scent of cinnamon and promises filling the air. I was giddy with excitement, barely feeling any hints of lingering exhaustion.

'Tell me,' Raven asked, her voice only sounding slightly far away given she was on a call with me while I was in the Treasure Trove's kitchen. 'Are you allowed to do this?'

I leaned back against the counter with my arms folded over my chest and a grin pulling at my mouth. 'Well, I *own* half of the Treasure Trove now, so, yes, I'm allowed to use my kitchen whenever I want.'

'Ooh, someone's smug,' Sofia teased, but I could hear the pleasure in her voice. Sofia had been the most excited when I told her about co-owning the bakery, mostly because I wanted her advice on what flowers should fill the shop.

'I'm going to call Melodie and report you for using the kitchen for your own nefarious plans,' Raven added, taking a long slurp of her coffee.

'Melodie will tell you to stop calling her at 12 a.m. and get back to studying for the MAC exam,' I shot back, glancing at the frame newly added to the wall that showed Melodie and I holding up our signed contract of my co-ownership.

Melodie had come to me with the plan only a few weeks ago, while I was finishing up my shift at the Wishing Well Bakery.

Would I like to co-own the Treasure Trove with her and help her build the bakery into something even bigger?

I had stared at her, dumbfounded, for so long that Ivy actually came out of the kitchen to see what the hold-up was. Melodie had brazenly shared her request with Ivy, who I thought might have been miffed at the idea of me working at another bakery again. But Ivy had all but pushed me to consider it, saying she wasn't going to make the same mistake of underestimating me twice.

I'd taken some time to think about it – talking it through with everyone important to me. Rani, Raven, Sofia, Mum and Orion. Even Granny Fable at one point.

Days later, I confidently approached Melodie and Ivy with a plan: I still wanted to be Ivy's apprentice when the year ended, because I had more kitchen magic to learn, but part of my learning would involve mapping out some new, exciting recipes for the Treasure Trove. That way, I'd get to live out both dreams. After that, my days were filled with school, shifts at the Wishing Well, baking at the Treasure Trove and a whole other whirlwind of activities that made this month fly by.

That was part of the reason why I was *so* looking forward to the weekend trip I was about to embark on. I needed a break.

'Also,' I continued, suddenly offended. 'My plan isn't nefarious. Even my mother knows about where I am right now, so it can't be that bad.'

'Your mother feels guilty for how she's been treating you,' Raven argued, blunt as ever. 'You could ask her for the moon, and she'd give it.'

I snorted, shaking my head. 'Tell that to the lecture I got yesterday about the importance of knowing defensive spells, even if I was going to be a kitchen witch. It came with *diagrams*, guys.'

'I think it's sweet,' Sofia cut in. 'She's worried about you going on your first weekend *getaway* with your soulmate tomorrow.'

When Sofia said the word soulmate, I felt the silver bracelet I now wore around my wrist begin to glow brightly; I glanced down at it, feeling that tug of delight in my stomach at the sight of it. At the reminder of what it meant.

'Your mum shouldn't be worried,' Raven said. 'But my brother should be. I mean, my best friend is going to *poison* him.'

'I'm not poisoning him,' I insisted, loudly. 'I'm just going to make our weekend a little interesting with some enchanted cookies. What's the harm in that?'

Raven snorted. 'This is a bad idea.'

The timer trilled, telling me it was time to take my cookies out. I slid the metal tray out of the oven and to the wire rack to cool.

'You always think my ideas are bad,' I remarked, staring at the twelve perfectly baked cookies. 'And anyway, it's *way* too late now.'

The next morning, the sky was the perfect shade of blue; the clouds looked like streaks of meringue, and Orion Hawthorne was waiting for me by the clock tower on Main Street.

No one was up yet, which was a conscious choice on our part; the whole town felt invested in our relationship. For the last month, we hadn't really been able to do anything alone without someone's watchful eyes upon us. And while we loved the townspeople for rooting for us so hard, we craved some time where it could just be the two of us.

'It's too early to be awake,' Orion greeted me as I approached. He was dressed in a new sweater – a pale-lilac colour – his usual leather jacket, boots and, most importantly, he wore his silver soulmate string around his neck, which was gleaming so bright it matched his eyes.

'Excited for our trip?' I said, a grin pulling at my mouth at the sight of him.

Orion rolled his eyes and automatically handed me one of the cups he was holding. I took a sip, enjoying the morning ritual of my hazelnut latte. Orion and I met up most mornings – he walked me to class, and then went off to help Rowan in the library. Until his apprenticeship started at Maple Falls High, he was picking up odd jobs around town.

'You know, I'm only meeting with this other school because you want me to. There's no way I'm accepting an apprenticeship in another town.'

I swatted him lightly on the arm, and he caught my hand in his, tangling our fingers together.

'Hey, you know you might actually fall in love with the new town.'

'I've done enough falling in love, don't you think?' Orion teased, tugging me closer with our hands still intertwined. I took another sip of coffee before he could bring his face any closer, and I saw the flare of challenge in his eyes.

'I don't *know*,' I exaggerated, swinging our hands a little. 'Maybe you need an enchanted cookie to check?' A giggle slipped out of me, involuntarily.

Orion's gaze narrowed on me; he bridged the gap between us, coming close enough that my only protection from his inquisitive stance was the coffee cup in my hand.

'What trouble have you caused?' he murmured, his gaze glittering with suspicion.

That feeling of being *known* by him hadn't faded yet, maybe it never would; I hoped it wouldn't. Even if it meant he would catch on to my plans before I even got to fulfil them.

'It's *nothing*, Orion,' I said, toying with my now-empty cup. I said his name just to watch his eyes flare, and because I knew it was his weakness. We had always been Hawthorne and Reverie, but, when we were alone, we were Maya and Orion.

'You're a pretty bad liar, Maya,' he said.

'All I'm hearing is that I'm pretty,' I replied, and his laugh made my stomach flip.

Orion only brought his face closer to mine so he could inhale sharply. 'Cinnamon,' he murmured, and I was still a little dizzy from how close he was that I didn't quite realize what he'd clocked.

Deft hands found the strap of my pink backpack, and, with a little tug, he was sliding it off my shoulders.

'Wait no –'

Orion unzipped the bag and peeked inside; he saw everything I'd packed for our weekend getaway, along with the box of cookies. His gaze lifted from the box to mine, and I gave him a guilty little smile.

'Now,' I said, placatingly, my hands raised. 'Either I could tell you what these are, or you could join me through the portal and we could eat them while we're staying at that *very* fancy inn you booked. What are you going to choose?'

Orion looked at me, his eyes caressing every contour of my face. I didn't mind when he looked at me like I was a map to explore. It thrilled me, made that twist in my stomach feel more like exhilaration than anxiety.

'What's one more adventure with you, Maya?' Orion said, zipping the bag up and slinging it over his shoulder.

'A privilege,' I retorted.

He rolled his eyes affectionately and linked our fingers again – tugging me towards the clock tower. When we reached the tower, Orion's arm was slung over my shoulders, and our hearts were beating in tandem.

‘You ready?’ Orion murmured, his forehead coming to rest briefly against mine before he pushed open the door to the clock tower.

Light filled my vision. The magic we were about to step into was hazy; a gauzy kind of gold that looked like spun sugar. I glanced back at the quiet town behind us. Our home. Even though I was excited to discover a new town, I was already eager to be back home too.

I turned back to Orion and found him watching me with impossibly soft silver eyes; he smelled like a campfire, and it felt like he was *mine*.

‘I’m ready,’ I replied.

I hooked my finger around Orion’s soulmate string, tugged him even closer, and together we stepped into the portal.

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The Wishing Well’s Sun-Kissed Honey Cakes

Sun-kissed honey cakes are perfect for cold winter nights and windy autumn walks. Plus, they’re one of Orion’s favourites of Maya’s bakes (then again, she’s yet to find a dessert of hers that he doesn’t love).

Ingredients

For the cakes:

- ½ cup (115 g) unsalted butter, softened
- 1 cup charmed honey
- 2 tablespoons brown sugar
- 2 large eggs
- 1 tablespoon vanilla extract
- 2 cups plain flour
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- ½ teaspoon bicarbonate of soda
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 1 cup heavy cream, plain yoghurt or sour cream

For the honey glaze:

- ½ cup icing sugar
- 2 tablespoons honey
- 2 tablespoons heavy cream

- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract

Instructions:

1. Preheat the oven to 180°C (160°C fan) and grease a cupcake tray or if you're feeling fancy a mini-Bundt tin.
2. Measure out the honey and speak the following charm*: *Embers, flames and sunlight, behold, turn this honey into warm, liquid gold*.
3. In a bowl, whisk together the flour, baking powder, bicarbonate of soda, salt and cinnamon.
4. In a large mixing bowl, beat the butter, brown sugar and charmed honey until light and fluffy.
5. Add the eggs one at a time, beating well after each addition. Stir in the vanilla.
6. Add half the dry ingredients to the bowl, followed by half the cream. Repeat with the remaining dry ingredients and cream, mixing only until combined.
7. Spoon the batter into the prepared tray and bake for 25–35 minutes, or until a skewer inserted into the centre comes out clean.
8. To make the glaze, whisk together the icing sugar, honey, cream and vanilla.
9. Drizzle the glaze generously over the cooled cakes before devouring them!

*Some bakers charm only the honey needed for the recipe, while others charm the entire jar, so every future spoonful carries a little extra warmth. Should you choose the latter, be careful when adding it to coffee or any other hot drink! Charmed honey has a tendency to make hot drinks feel even hotter, and burned tongues are unpleasant for everyone, except dragons *of course*.

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Acknowledgements

On 11 November 2024, I sent my agent an email, and a voice note, about the book you're holding now. At the time, *The Soulmate Bakery* was nothing more than a pitch and a mood board, so sitting here, writing these acknowledgements, feels a little like I've stepped into a dream.

I want to thank my agent, Jen Azantian, who quite literally changed the trajectory of my career with an offer of representation. Thank you for believing that I *could* write a fantasy book, listening to my rambling voice notes, answering my endless list of questions and always fighting in my corner. There's no one I'd rather work on my stories with!

To Awo Ibrahim, thank you for helping me bring Maple Falls to life. I've always wanted to write a book that paid homage to the fantasies I loved growing up, and you've made that dream come true – not just for the 25-year-old version of me, but for my teenage self too. Your edits, time and care have shaped this book into something I'm incredibly proud of.

To Jess Mackay, thank you for being such a wonderful editorial manager and for your thoughtful notes and enthusiasm – your emails always made me smile. To Michael Bedo and Nina Douglas, thank you for championing *The Soulmate Bakery* and for creating such an incredible marketing campaign.

To Jade Deo, Sophie McDonnell and the entire Penguin design team, thank you for creating my dream cover. I loved every detail and am so grateful for all the effort and care you put into it.

To Anissa and the entire FairyLoot team, I have so many of your editions on my shelf and having one of my own books become a 'FairyLoot Edition' is beyond anything I imagined. To the artists – ToshiaSan, Irene and Tahirah – thank you for the stunning dust jacket, hardcover and endpapers. I don't think I'll ever stop staring at this book.

The Soulmate Bakery wouldn't exist without the people in my life who have championed my stories. To my best friend, Abbey Francis Williams, who has been there through every panic spiral and every first draft – I can't wait for all the stories we'll write and for the years of friendship still ahead. To Famke Halma, I'm so grateful we found each other – our podcast-length voice notes always brighten my days, and your support means so much to me. To Ananya Devarajan, thank you for being the ultimate ride-or-die and for always listening, no matter how much time passes before we speak again. To Brittney Arena, you've shaped my career for the better, and I'm endlessly grateful for your support.

And to the people who have endured the most of me over the last two years – my family – I wouldn't have written this book without you. To Saania, my first-ever editor, thank you for always supporting me. To Rania, my first reader of this story, and my constant book companion. To Hamza Mamu, thank you for your enthusiasm and for always picking up my calls. And to Tayyab Mamu, thank you for inspiring Firewood Forest and encouraging me to step out of my comfort zone.

To my mother: I don't have enough words to encapsulate how much you mean to me, but any goodness (including all the baking) you find in this story, and these characters, comes from you. To my father, who never doubts my ability and always pushes me to be better. And to my sister, Iman, and my brother, Ibrahim – this book is dedicated to you both, because life simply wouldn't be half as good without you in it.

And finally, to every reader who has wandered into Maple Falls, thank you for picking this book up and giving me a space on your shelf – without you all, I wouldn't be able to live out my dreams. I hope we see one another again very soon!

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Don’t miss the next book in the Maple Falls series …



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First published by Penguin Books in 2026

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Cover illustration by Jade Deo

ISBN: 978-0-241-80314-1

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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