

**M A G I C**

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**M A G I C**

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**S A R A H   G A I L E Y**

**A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK**



**NEW YORK**

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

MAGIC FOR LIARS

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*For the people who knew before I did*

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# PROLOGUE

THE LIBRARY AT OSTHORNE ACADEMY for Young Mages was silent save for the whisper of the books in the Theoretical Magic section. Honeyed sun poured through two tall windows onto rows of empty study tables, which still gleamed with the freshness of summer cleaning. It was a small library—each section took up only a row or two of tall metal shelves—but it was big enough to hide in. Sunlight from the windows along one wall of the library spilled between the shelves, casting long shadows. None of the students had come to linger, not in the first week of school—they'd dashed in and then out again, looking for friends or for classes they'd never been to before. Now they were all downstairs at the welcome-back dinner, an all-staff-all-students meal that marked the end of the first week of classes. They'd joke there about house-elves and pumpkin juice—or at least the freshmen would. By the time they were sophomores, that vein of humor was worn beyond use.

Mrs. Webb was not at the welcome-back dinner, and neither was Dylan DeCambray. One was hunting the other, a familiar

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pastime for both of them. Dylan was hiding in the stacks—specifically, in the Poison and Theoretical Poison section. He had tucked himself into the shadow of a returns cart, his legs cramping as he listened to Mrs. Webb’s measured footfalls in the next section over: Electricity, Theoretical Electricity, Electrical Manipulations.

“Mr. DeCambray, let’s not have another year like this. You’re a senior now. I’d have expected you to be more mature than you were as a freshman.” Her voice was thick with age. The condemnation of *immaturity* might have moved another student to self-immolation, but Dylan had a higher purpose. He would never let an authority figure stand in the way of that purpose, no matter the depths of their misunderstanding.

*The Prophecy.*

Mrs. Webb rounded the shelves into the Poison section. She moved slowly, deliberately—she’d often told students that hurrying was a fool’s errand. *If you need to hurry*, her oft-repeated saying went, *you’re already too late*. The early-evening shadows cast by the drooping sun should have deepened Mrs. Webb’s wrinkles, but, as she turned, the golden haze that made it into the stacks hit her profile just right, illuminating the young woman she once had been. In that moment, only white hair, sculpted as always into a perfect bouffant, belied her eighty-six years. A few more steps, and her face was in shadow once more. Mrs. Webb was just a short distance from the returns cart, close enough for Dylan to inhale the faint powdery smell of her perfume.

Dylan took a deep breath, then cupped his hands and blew into them. He waved them in front of himself, a mime smearing grease across the inside of his invisible box. Mrs. Webb walked a few

feet in front of him. Her sensible black clogs brushed across the industrial gray carpet tiles with a steady, rhythmic *shush-shush-shush*. She peered around the returns cart over the top of her red horn-rimmed glasses, looking straight into Dylan's face. He could have counted the black freckles that dotted her dark brown skin. She hardly had to stoop to be at eye level with seventeen-year-old Dylan; when he stood at his full six-foot height, he towered over the tiny woman.

He held his breath as she straightened and continued stalking between the shelves of the Poison section. His concealment charm had held. Mrs. Webb had looked right at Dylan, and she had not seen a pale, stretched-out seventeen-year-old with unruly brown hair and the hollow, hungry face of summer growth spurts. She had seen nothing but a few cobwebs and a row of books about the uses of arsenic.

"Mr. DeCambray, honestly," she called out again, her voice weary with exasperation. "I don't know what you're thinking you're going to find in here, but I can assure you that there are no mysteries to be solved, no conspiracies to be unraveled. Whether or not you're the—oh, *hush*," she snapped at the books in the restricted Theoretical Magic section. But their whispering didn't stop—if anything, it increased, the books murmuring to each other like a scandalized congregation of origami Presbyterians.

Mrs. Webb paused at the end of the Poison section, looking toward the Theoretical Magic section again. "Mr. DeCambray, please. Just come down to dinner. This is foolishness." She rounded the end of the shelves, and the murmurs of the books grew loud enough that Dylan couldn't quite make out what she

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was saying anymore. But that didn't matter. The only thing that mattered was that she was no longer between him and the library exit.

Dylan rose and made for the door, victorious: he had dodged her. He could make his way back to the dinner, and when she came to the dining hall to admit defeat, he could say he'd been there all along. It was a good way to start the year. This was going to be *his* year, Dylan thought. He eased the library door open, slipping his narrow frame through and closing it without so much as a silencing charm to cover the *snuck* sound of the latch. *Triumph.*

Dylan's shoes squeaked on the linoleum of the hallway as he ran. His too-long legs tangled, and he was about to catch himself midstride, about to make it to the end of the hall and the stairs that led down to the mess—but he skidded to a stop.

A scream echoed through the corridor.

*Crap.* His heart was pounding wildly—was this it? Was it finally time? Dylan DeCambray was torn between terror and elation. *It's happening, it's really happening*—he pelted back toward the library, toward the sound of Mrs. Webb screaming over and over again. He knocked over a chair or two on his way to the section where the screaming was coming from—the chairs weren't really in his way, but the moment felt so urgent that it seemed wrong to leave things undisturbed. A small voice inside him whispered, *Now, now, it's happening now.*

He pulled up short at the Theoretical Magic section, gasping for breath, his hands braced on the shelves at the end of the row. His foot crunched a sheet of copy paper that read "Reorganization in Progress: Do Not Enter Without Protective Equipment." The wards were down. The books, which had been whispering so

insistently when Dylan left the library, had gone silent. They seemed to stare at the tableau in the center of the section.

Dylan stared too. Then his brain caught up to what his eyes were seeing. He turned, still clutching one of the shelves, and vomited. When he thought he could stand it, he tried to straighten—but then he saw what was in the aisle, and his empty stomach clenched, and he heaved again.

In the middle of the section, Mrs. Webb stood with the sun at her back. One hand clutched her cardigan closed over her throat; the other held an old, crooked birch wand high over her head, amplifying the sound of her screams to an inhuman volume. Her voice didn't break or cease—the screaming filled the school like a strobing siren.

She took a step backward, mouth open, still screaming, when she saw Dylan. Her shoes sank with a sick sucking sound into the soaked industrial carpet, which had turned so red as to look nearly black. Every time Dylan allowed his eyes to fall below her knees, he tasted fear-bitter bile rising in the back of his throat.

It was next to her feet.

At first Dylan had taken it to be two very slim bodies, facing away from each other. There were two fanning sprays of white-blond hair; there were two wide, pale green eyes staring up at the shelves out of two familiar profiles. But, as Dylan had noticed just before his stomach had twisted for the second time, there were only two long-fingered hands. Two *total*.

The woman on the floor had been cut in half, right down the middle, and laid out like a book with a broken spine. Her blood had soaked into the carpet and spread far enough to touch both bookshelves, a moat between Mrs. Webb and Dylan DeCambray.

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As Mrs. Webb's voice finally began to crack with the strain of screaming, the books in the middle of the Theoretical Magic section of the library at Osthorne Academy for Young Mages began to whisper once more.

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## CHAPTER

# ONE

IT MIGHT TAKE A LITTLE while to get there, but I'll tell you everything, and I'll tell you the truth. As best I can. I used to lie, but when I tell you the story, you'll understand why I had to lie. You'll understand that I didn't have a choice.

I just wanted to do my job.

No, I said I would tell you the truth. Of course I had a choice. We all have choices, don't we? And if I tell myself that I didn't have a choice, I'm no better than an adulterer who misses his daughter's dance recital because he's shacking up in some shitty hotel with his wife's sister. He tells himself that he doesn't have a choice too. But we know better than that. He has choices. He chooses to tell the first lie, and then he chooses to tell every other lie that comes after that. He chooses to buy a burner phone to send pictures of his cock to his mistress, and he chooses to tell his wife that he has a business trip, and he chooses to pull cash out of an ATM to pay for the room. He tells himself that all of his choices are inevitable, and he tells himself that he isn't lying.

But when I hand his wife an envelope full of photographs and

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an invoice for services rendered, her world is turned upside down, because he chose. If I try to pretend I didn't have a choice, I'm not any different from the liars whose lives I ruin, and that's not who I am. I'm nothing like them. My job is to pursue the truth.

So, the truth: it's not that I didn't have a choice. I did. I had a thousand choices.

I was so close to making the right one.



The man who stood between me and the door to my office was trembling-thin, his restless eyes sunken with desperation, holding a knife out like an offering. It was warm for January, but he was shaking in the morning air. He wasn't going to follow through, I thought. Too scared. But then he licked his dry lips with a dry tongue, and I knew that his fear and my fear were not the same kind of fear. He'd do what he thought he needed to do.

Nobody decides to become the kind of person who will stab a stranger in order to get at what's inside her pockets. That's a choice life makes for you.

"Okay," I said, reaching into my tote. I hated my hand for shaking. "Alright, I'll give you what I've got." I rummaged past my wallet, past my camera, past the telephoto lens in its padded case. I pulled out a slim money clip, peeled off the cash, handed it to him.

He could have demanded more. He could have taken my whole bag. But instead, he took the cash, finally looking me in the eyes.

"Sorry," he said, and then he made to run past me, up the stairs that led from my basement-level office to the sidewalk. He was



close enough that I could smell his breath. It was oddly sweet, fruity. Like the gum me and my sister Tabitha used to steal from the drugstore when we were kids—the kind that always lost its flavor after ten seconds of chewing. Looking back, I can't figure out why we ever thought it was even worth taking.

The man pelted up the stairs. One of his feet kicked out behind him, and he slipped. "Shit shit shit," I said, rearing back, trying to dodge him before he fell into me. He flailed and caught himself on my shoulder with a closed fist, knocking the wind out of me.

"Jesus fucking Christ, just go." I said it with more fear than venom, but it worked. He bolted, dropping his knife behind him with a clatter. I listened to him running down the sidewalk upstairs, his irregular footfalls echoing between the warehouses. I listened until I was sure that he was gone.

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## C H A P T E R

# TWO

**B**AD THINGS JUST HAPPEN SOMETIMES. That's what I've always told myself, and it's what I told myself then: I could have bled out right there in the stairs leading down to my office, and not a soul would have known why it happened because there was no "why." No use dwelling on it: it would have been the end of me, sudden and senseless. I clenched my jaw and pushed away the thought of how long it would have taken before someone found me—before someone wondered what had happened to me. I pushed away the question of who would have noticed I was gone.

I didn't have time for an existential crisis. It didn't have to be a big deal. People get mugged all the time. I wasn't special just because it was my morning to lose some cash. I didn't have time to be freaked out about it. I had shit to do.

I just wanted to go to work.

I made my way down the remainder of the steps toward the door that hid in the shadowy alcove at the bottom of the stairs. I nudged a Gatorade bottle with my toe. The man had been sleeping in my doorway. He couldn't have seen it by the dim light of

the streetlamps at night, but my name was written across the solid metal of the door in flaking black letters:

IVY GAMBLE, PRIVATE INVESTIGATOR

MEETINGS BY APPOINTMENT ONLY

I hadn't gotten the words touched up since I'd first rented the place. I always figured I'd let them fall away until nothing was left but a shadow of the letters. I didn't think I needed to be easy to find—if someone didn't know where my office was, that meant they weren't a client yet. Besides, walk-ins weren't exactly my bread and butter then. The dead bolt locked automatically when the reinforced steel swung shut. That door was made to withstand even the most determined of visitors.

I didn't run my fingers across the letters. If I'd known what would change before the next time I walked down those stairs, though? Well, I wouldn't have run my fingers across the letters then, either. I probably wouldn't have given them a second glance. I've never been good at recognizing what moments are important. What things I should hang on to while I've got them.

I stood on my toes to tap at the lightbulb that hung above the door with a still-shaking hand. The filaments rattled. Dead. On nights when that bulb was lit, nobody slept outside the door, which meant that nobody got surprised coming down the stairs in the morning.

I bit my lip and tapped at the lightbulb again. I took a deep breath, tried to find something in me to focus on. *Imagine you're a candle, and your wick is made of glass.* I gave the bulb a hard stare. I tapped it one more time.

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It flickered to life. My heart skipped a beat—but then the bulb died again with a sound like a fly smacking into a set of venetian blinds and went dead, a trace of smoke graying the inside of the glass.

I shook my head, angry at myself for hoping. It hadn't been worth a shot. I thought I had outgrown kid stuff like that. Stupid. I stooped to pick up the little knife from where it lay just in front of the door, squinting at what looked like blood on the blade.

"Shit," I said for the fourth time in as many minutes. As I opened the heavy steel door, a white arc of pain lanced through my shoulder. I looked down, letting the door swing shut behind me. There was a fresh vent in my sleeve. Blood was welling up under it fast—he must have had the knife in his hand when he caught himself on me. I pulled off my ruined jacket, dropping it—and the bloodstained knife—on the empty desk in the waiting area of the office. It fell with a heavy thump, and I remembered my phone in the pocket, the call I was already late for. Sure enough, there were already two pissy texts from the client. I dialed his number with one hand, leaving streaks of stairway grime on the screen, then clamped the phone between my ear and my good shoulder as I headed for the bathroom.

I listened to the ringing on the other end of the line and turned on the hot water tap as far as it would go, attempting to scald the god-knows-what off my palms, trying not to think about the water bill. Or any of the other bills. The cheap pink liquid soap I stocked in the office wasn't doing anything to cut the shit on my hands, which was somehow slippery and sticky at the same time. My shoulder bled freely as I lathered again and again.

"Sorry I'm late, Glen," I said when he picked up. My voice prob-

ably shook with leftover adrenaline, probably betrayed how much my shoulder was starting to hurt. Fortunately, Glen wasn't the kind of person who would give a shit whether or not I was okay. He immediately started railing about his brother, who he was sure was stealing from their aunt and who I had found was, in fact, just visiting her on the regular like a good nephew. I put Glen on speaker so he could rant while I peeled off my shirt with wet hands, wincing at the burning in my shoulder. I stood there in my camisole, wadded up the shirt and pressed it to the wound. The bleeding was slow but the pain was a steady strobe.

"I hope you don't think I'm going to pay for this shit," Glen was saying, and I closed my eyes for a couple of seconds. I allowed myself just a few heartbeats of bitterness at how unfair it was, that I had to deal with Glen and look for my long-neglected first aid kit at the same time. I was going to take just a moment of self-pity before going into my patient *I've provided you a service and you were well aware of my fee schedule* routine—but then I heard the unmistakable sound of the front door to my office opening.

I froze for a gut-clenched second before hanging up on Glen. I let my blood-soaked shirt drop to the floor, shoved my phone into my bra so it wouldn't vibrate against the sink when he called back. I heard the office door close, and a fresh flood of adrenaline burned through me.

Someone was in the office with me.

No one had an appointment. No one should have been able to get inside at all. That door locked automatically when it closed, and I knew it had closed. I *knew* it, I had heard it click shut behind me. This wouldn't be the first break-in attempt, but it was the first time someone had tried it while I was in the office. I pressed my

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ear to the door, carefully gripped the knob without letting it rattle in my fingers. The lock on the door was busted, but at least I could try to hold it shut if they decided to look around.

"I'm here to see Ms. Gamble." A woman's voice, clear and steady. *What the fuck?* I could hear her footsteps as she walked across the little waiting area. I winced, remembering my jacket and the bloodstained knife on the abandoned admin desk. She murmured something that sounded like "Oh dear." My phone buzzed against my armpit, but Glen and his yelling would just have to wait.

"Once you've finished treating your wound, you can come out of the bathroom, Ms. Gamble. I don't care that you're in your cam-  
isole. We have business to discuss."

I straightened so fast that something in my back gave a pop. My head throbbed. I stared at the white-painted wood of the door as I realized who was waiting for me out there. This was not good.

This was not good at all.

The shitty waiting-room couch creaked. She was serious—she was going to wait for me. I rushed through cleaning up the slice in my shoulder, wadding up wet paper towels and scrubbing blood off my arm, half ignoring and half savoring how much it hurt. The bandage I hastily taped over the wound soaked through with blood within a few seconds. I would say I considered getting stitches, but it'd be a lie. I'd let my arm fall off before setting foot inside a fucking hospital.

I checked myself in the mirror—not a welcome sight. I pulled my phone out of my bra, ran a hand through my hair. There was only so much I could do to make myself look less like a wreck,

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and I kept the once-over as brief as possible. I like mirrors about as much as I like hospitals.

I opened the door and strode out with much more confidence than a person who has just been caught hiding in a bathroom should have been able to muster. I've always been good at faking that much, at least. The short, dark-haired woman standing in the front office regarded me coolly.

"Good morning, Ms. Gamble."

"You can call me Ivy, Miss . . . ?" The woman's handshake was firm, but not crushing. It was the handshake of a woman who felt no need to prove herself.

"Marion Torres," she replied. The woman peered at my face, then nodded, having seen there whatever it was she was searching for. I could guess what it was. It was a face I couldn't seem to get away from. *Shit.*

"Ms. Torres," I replied in my most authoritative, this-is-my-house voice. "Would you like to step into my office?" I led Torres to the narrow door just beyond the empty admin desk, flipping the light on as I entered. I opened a top drawer of my desk, sweeping a stack of photographs into it—fresh shots of a client's wife and her tennis instructor making choices together. Nothing anyone should see, especially not as a first impression. Although, I thought, if this woman was who I thought she was, I didn't want to impress her anyway.

Torres sat straight-backed in the client chair. It was a battered green armchair with a low back, chosen to make clients feel comfortable but not in charge. I remember being proud of myself for the strategy I put into picking that chair. That was a big thing

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I solved, the question of what kind of chair I should make desperate people sit in before they asked for my help.

Light streamed into the office through a narrow, wire-reinforced casement window behind my desk. The sunlight caught the threads of silver in Torres's pin-straight black bob. I felt the sliver of camaraderie that I always experienced in the presence of other salt-and-pepper women, but it evaporated fast enough. Torres stared intently at the fine motes of dust that danced in the sunlight. As I watched, the dust motes shifted to form a face that was an awful lot like mine.

I swallowed around rising irritation. I would not yell at this woman.

"You don't look exactly like her," Torres said. "I thought you would. The face is the same, but—"

"We're not that kind of twins," I replied. I crossed behind my desk and pulled the shutters over the window closed, rendering the dust motes—and the familiar face—invisible. "Is she okay?"

"She's fine," Torres said. "She's one of our best teachers, you know."

I settled into my swivel chair, folding my hands on top of my desk blotter. *All business.* "So you're from the academy."

Torres smiled, a warm, toothy grin that immediately made me feel welcome. *Damn, she's good,* I thought—*making me feel welcome in my own office.* I pushed the comfort away and held it at arm's length. No thanks, not interested.

"I am indeed," she said. "I'm the headmaster at Osthorne Academy."

"Not headmistress?" I asked before I could stop myself. I cringed internally as Torres's smile cooled by a few degrees.



“Yes. Please do not attempt to be cute about my title. There are more interesting things to be done with words. We spend most of our students’ freshman year teaching them that words have power, and we don’t waste that power if we can help it.”

I felt a familiar principal’s-office twist in my stomach, and had to remind myself again that this was *my* office. “Understood.”

We sat in silence for a moment; Torres seemed content to wait for me to ask why she was there. I couldn’t think of a good way to ask without being rude, and this woman didn’t strike me as someone who would brook poor manners. Distant shouts sounded from outside—friendly but loud, almost certainly kids skipping school to smoke weed behind the warehouses. They’d sit with their backs against the cement walls, scraping out the insides of cheap cigars and leaving behind piles of tobacco and Tootsie Pop wrappers.

Torres cleared her throat. I decided to accept defeat.

“What can I do for you, Ms. Torres?”

Torres reached into her handbag and pulled out a photograph. It was a staff photo, taken in front of a mottled blue backdrop; the kind of photo I might have seen in the front few pages of my own high school yearbook. A twenty-five-cent word sprang unbidden into my mind: “noctilucent.” The word described the glow of a cat’s eyes at night, but it also seemed right for the woman in the photograph. She was a moonbeam turned flesh, pale with white-blond hair and wide-set light green eyes. Beautiful was not an appropriate word; she looked otherworldly. She looked impossible.

“That,” Torres said after allowing me to stare for an embarrassingly long time, “is Sylvia Capley. She taught health and

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wellness at Osthorne. Five months ago, she was murdered in the library. I need you to find out who killed her.”

Direct. More direct than I was prepared for. I blinked down at the photo. “I’m so sorry for your loss.” The words came automatically. “But isn’t this a matter for the police? You—um. Mages. Don’t you have police?”

Torres pursed her lips, looking up at the shuttered window. “We do. But they—hm.” She hesitated.

I didn’t push her for more. I knew from experience that it was far more effective to let a client sit with the silence—to let them decide for themselves to fill it. I’ve always been good at letting silence put down roots.

“I don’t agree with their findings,” Torres finally finished. “I’d like a second opinion.”

“My opinion?” I said, flashing Torres the skepticals. “I don’t do murder investigations.” I said it as if it were a choice, rather than a simple fact of the law and my poor marketing. I was sure that there were some people out there who were still hiring PIs to solve murders, but none of them had ever come knocking at my basement door. I wanted her to think it was a choice, though.

“You come highly recommended,” Torres replied, dry as kindling. “And you know about us. You’ve got the right eye, to see the things that the investigators missed because they were too busy looking for obvious answers to see this for what it was. This was murder.”

“And what are the obvious answers?”

Torres pulled a business card from the space between naught and nothing. I bit back annoyance again. She wasn’t doing it to antagonize me. Probably. She handed me the card, and, to my

credit, I only hesitated for a couple of seconds before letting the paper touch my skin. A breathtakingly high number was written on the back in a headmaster's irreproachable penmanship. "That's the amount of retainer I'm willing to pay. Up front, in cash."

It's not that there was a catch in her voice, not exactly. But I could hear her keeping herself steady. I kept my eyes on her business card, counting zeroes. "Why are you so invested in this? If the magic-cops said it wasn't murder—"

"It was murder," she interrupted, her voice clapping the conversation shut like a jewelry box I wasn't supposed to reach for. I looked up at her, startled, and she pursed her lips before continuing in a calmer tone. "Sylvia was a dear friend of mine. I knew her well, and I am *certain* that she didn't die the way they say she did. Courier a contract to the address on the front of the card if you're willing to take the job. I'd like to see you in my office on Friday morning."

And before I could ask anything else—before I could come up with the next question or the sly rebuttal or the little joke that would keep her there, talking, explaining everything, telling me what the "obvious answers" were supposed to be—Marion Torres had vanished. I sat heavily in my chair, staring at the place where she had been, trying to swallow the old anger. It was just like these people to drop a line like that and then *poof*. If they would only stay vanished, my life would be a hell of a lot simpler.

I reread the number Torres had written down. I ran my thumb over the grooves her pen had left in the thick paper. I listened to my cell phone vibrating—Glen calling again to yell at me. I breathed deep, tasting the dust in the air. The dust that Torres had rearranged into the shape of my sister's face. It was the first time

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I'd seen that face in years. It was a face I hadn't thought I'd ever see again.

I pressed one corner of the business card into the meat of my palm, deciding whether or not to take the case. I stared at the way the paper dented my skin, and I pretended that I had a choice.

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## C H A P T E R

# THREE

NEVER WANTED TO BE magic.

That was Tabitha's thing, not mine, and sometimes you just have to be fine with things the way they are. And I was fine with it.

"Liquid lunch?" The bartender cocked an eyebrow at me as he placed a dark, sweating bottle in front of me next to a chilled glass.

"Part of a balanced breakfast," I replied mildly, decanting my beer into the glass. He gave me an easy smile, a you're-funny smile that he probably used on everyone. Affirmation and illusion, bound up tighter than two snakes in the same egg.

But then, maybe he didn't give that smile to everyone. Maybe he actually thought I was okay, for a lunchtime customer. Maybe I was just being a cynical asshole.

"I'm actually having kind of a terrible day, if I'm honest." I said it quietly, half hoping he wouldn't hear. Giving him a chance to ignore me. I leaned my elbows against the long reclaimed-wood bar. This wasn't my usual bar—the place was new in the neighborhood, eminently forgettable in the grand

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scheme of gentrification. This bartender didn't know my face, wouldn't recognize me. Didn't have to be nice to me now, or ever again. I'd come here telling myself I just wanted to exist while I drank my breakfast and digested everything that had come with the morning. I'd wanted to hide. But then the bartender gave me that you're-clever smile, and I realized I had to tell someone. Just to have it all out in the world, somewhere other than my own head.

The bartender didn't say anything. Maybe he hadn't heard me at all. I studied the decor as if I didn't care either way. Tiny pots with tinier succulents, weird art accents hanging above the bottles behind the bar. I couldn't tell if I'd been there for happy hour before, or if I'd just been to a thousand places exactly like it. Places like that were springing up around Oakland by the score back then, every one a marker of the way the city was changing. It felt all-at-once, even though it had been brewing for years. Decades. Across the bay, San Francisco bled money like an unzipped artery. Those who had been privileged enough to have their buckets out to catch the spray drove back over the water to Oakland—from The City to The Town. They bumped aside people who had been living in these neighborhoods for generations, and they tore down storefronts, and they built brunch pubs with wood reclaimed from the houses they were remodeling.

It was shitty and it was destructive and it was perfect, because I could slip onto a barstool and pretend I had a place to go. Just for a few hours at a time. Something familiar. Bars with driftwood behind the bottles instead of mirrors.

"Tell me about it?" The bartender was in front of me again, holding a bucket of limes. He started slicing them, looking back and forth between me and the knife.

"Shouldn't your barback be doing that?" I asked, watching him slowly quarter a lime.

"He's too hungover to function," the bartender said, rolling his eyes. "So what's up with your day?"

I took a pull of my stout—it was thick as a milkshake, and it hit my belly like a hug. "Well," I said. "I got mugged."

"Sucks," he replied, and I tipped my drink toward him in a cheers-to-sucks gesture.

"And then this woman came into my office. She wants to hire me for a case. A big one. It'll mean hiring someone to handle all the other active cases I've got going." The other active cases were small potatoes—two disability claims, three cheating spouses, one spouse who wasn't cheating after all but whose husband couldn't believe that she had really taken up pottery. She was pretty good at it, too. This wouldn't be the first time I'd had to hire help; when the workload got too intense, I occasionally subcontracted to other, less-established outfits in the area. I'd return the favor for them someday, if they ever needed someone to do a little heavy lifting. My remote assistant would arrange the logistics—the subcontractors, the paperwork, the payments, the letters to clients. No problem.

"Sure," the bartender said, and bless him, he didn't care enough to ask a single clarifying question. He didn't want to know who I was, where I worked. He just wanted some noise to make the limes less boring. It was perfect.

"So, the woman who was in the office this morning. She's the headmaster at the school where my sister teaches."

"Headmaster? Shit."

"It's a private school. Some kids board there, some don't. It's

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down by Sunol, in the hills. The Osthorne Academy for Young Mages.”

He nodded, didn’t flinch at the word “mages.” I tapped my fingers on the table, one-two-three-four. This guy wasn’t half listening to me. I wasn’t anybody to him—just some freelancer drinking beer in the middle of the day and watching him cut a few dozen limes.

So I told him. I told him everything that I knew about the case, and about Osthorne. Halfway through the story, he looked up at me, opened his mouth to say something. Closed it again and went back to the limes, but a stillness had entered his movements—he was listening now, trying to decide if I was crazy. I took a long, slow sip of my beer, made a project of setting my glass down exactly within the condensation ring it’d left on the table.

“But magic isn’t *real*,” he said after a moment.

“Isn’t it?”

“It—of course not. I would have heard of it. Everyone would have heard of it.” His eyes were laughing now, waiting for the punch line. He had paused with the tip of the knife in the rind of a runty lime, and he waited for me to answer before pushing it the rest of the way through.

I tried to feel like I was talking to a friend, like this was a real conversation that wouldn’t just turn into a weird story he told at the end of his shift. I tried not to feel temporary. Just for a few seconds. But trying not to feel something isn’t the same as not feeling it, and I knew it was just a matter of time before I was alone again.

That’s how life goes. People don’t stick.

“*Haven’t* you heard of it, though?”



He shook his head, used the knife's edge to scrape lime pulp off the edge of his cutting board. "But that's different. That's like . . . fiction. Or magicians. Illusionists. Or whatever."

"It's not quite like that." I needed him to believe me. Not that it mattered. I would never see him again. Let him think I was crazy. It didn't matter. "But it is *real*. There are people—a lot of people—who can do magic. Real magic. My sister is one of them. So's that woman who was in my office this morning. They're mages. They do magic." I looked at him, tried to beam understanding into his brain. "They *are* magic." I wasn't sure what I was saying anymore—the look on his face was making me lose track of things. He didn't believe me. This was it: he was going to give me a tight smile and walk away and later he would tell his friends about the lunatic who came into his bar to talk about magic.

But then he didn't walk away. He looked at me, and he didn't say anything, and I realized that he was waiting.

I took another drink, tried to get my thoughts in order. *Forward*. "So. There was a death on campus, in the school library."

"Your sister's school."

"Yeah. It's—she works there. We don't talk."

He nodded, and I couldn't tell if he believed me or had decided to just go with it. I couldn't tell which would be better. "And she's a . . . a witch?"

"A mage," I answered. "We don't call them witches. Or wizards—they hate that."

"Are you one too?"

"Nope. Not me."

"Why not?"

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It wasn't like a punch to the gut, not anymore. Not after so many years. More like a sneeze the day after too many sit-ups, or the seat belt tightening after a too-fast stop, or a sudden wave of nausea at the tail end of a hangover.

I shrugged. "Who knows?" I took a long, hard pull of my drink. When I set the glass down it clinked against the table too loudly. "I'm not magic. I'm just . . . not. And she is. She went to a magic school and I went to . . . to regular school."

He wiped his hands on a towel—he was already halfway through the limes—and opened a fresh beer, the same one I'd been drinking. He set it in front of me, and I didn't pretend to hesitate before taking a sip right from the bottle. "She went to Oxthorne?"

"Osthorne, and no," I answered, grateful to get away from the why-not-you. "She went to a place called Headley. It was a boarding school up near Portland. Prestigious as hell. I think she was glad to get away from home." Home had been Woodland, near Sacramento, small and hot and stucco, strip malls and air-conditioned minivans. We had both hated it in that way some kids are just required to hate their hometowns, spent all of our time fantasizing about how we'd get out of there. And then she did. And then, a couple of years later, so did I.

"So you guys aren't close?"

I frowned. "I don't talk to her if I can help it. And most of the time I can help it."

"Okay," he said, and I could see him deciding to give me a reprieve. "So how does it work? Magic."

I shook my head, relieved. "Fuck if I know. I guess you have to be magic to understand it. Every time I tried to ask Tabitha when

we were kids, she would make an analogy that's like . . . 'imagine if your heartbeat was a cloud and you could make it rain whenever you had a nightmare,' or 'imagine you're a candle, and your wick is made of glass,' or something. I'm no good at koans."

"Well, what's it look like?" He was in a groove, having fun, getting me to spin him a story. He wanted me to tell him about this. Not that it mattered if a bartender wanted to talk to me—just, it was nice, realizing that he might be disappointed if I left.

"Anything." I pointed at one of the lime slices. "If I was a mage, I could probably make that blossom, or like . . . turn orange, or grow a fish tail."

"Who's magic?"

"What do you mean? Lots of people are—"

"Who that I've heard of? Who's the most famous magic person in history?"

"Winston Churchill." I didn't miss a beat, and felt oddly proud of myself for it.

"No, really."

"Really," I answered over the top of my beer bottle. "He was a racist murderous fuck, but he was magic as all get-out."

The bartender gave me a skeptical eyebrow. "But if he was magic, why didn't he—I don't know. Strike Hitler with lightning or something?"

"Reasons, probably?" I shrugged. "Tabitha could tell you, but the explanation would involve a whole set of theories and committees and treaties you've never heard of, and by the end of the explanation you'd be so bored you'd be gouging your own eyes out to stay awake. Trust me, it's not interesting."

"Okay." He chewed on his lip. He was trying to think of a way

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to keep this thing from losing steam. “Okay. So. How do you know if you’re magic, then?”

I thought about it, picking at the label on my beer bottle. “I guess you just . . . you do magic, and then you know. Lots of kids keep their magic a secret, because they know they’re not *supposed* to be able to do things. Like, Tabitha found out when she was little, because she kept changing another girl’s markers into butter.”

He squinted at the lime in his hand. “What?”

“Yeah,” I laughed. “I mean, there were other things too, but this was the first obvious one. She didn’t like this other girl because I guess the other girl wouldn’t share stickers? So she turned all the girl’s markers into *butter*.” I shook my head. “The teacher figured out what was going on and sent a note home, and my parents came into the school, and the teacher said that Tabitha was magic. She said that Tabby had probably been doing stuff like this for years, but that most magic kids don’t get caught until they have a mage for a teacher. So anyway, she gave my mom and dad a pamphlet and the number of a special tutor who could help Tabitha out. And then . . .” I fluttered my fingers. “That was that. So I guess that’s how you find out. You just do magic, and then someone tells you that you’re magic.”

“So your parents know about it.”

Again, that little snag in my gut. “Dad does. Mom did, before she died. It’s okay,” I said, preemptively answering the oh-god-what-land-mine-have-I-stepped-on panic in his face. “I mean, it’s not okay, but it’s fine. It was a long time ago.”

The bartender looked at me with way too much sincerity. “I’m

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sorry,” he said, and I wanted to spit because I hate that. I hate it when people say that.

“It’s fine, really. It happened when I was in high school. Tabitha was at Headley and I was at home.” I anticipated the questions he was waiting to ask, the questions everyone always asks. The questions that I stopped wanting to answer the moment they became questions I *could* answer. The questions that made me into a person who didn’t ever talk about my past. “It was cancer. In her stomach. Or at least, I guess that’s where it started.”

That’s all he needed to know.

He didn’t need to know about how we hadn’t realized anything was wrong for a while, when she was just tired. And then she started to have pain in her neck, and she went to the doctor and they found cancer. It was everywhere by then. It was fast. She was sick for a month, and then she stopped treatment, and then she died a month later. He didn’t need to know that part. “It was sad, or whatever. But it was a long time ago. I’m okay. Everyone’s okay.”

Well. Sort of okay. I had almost failed out of high school—graduated by the grace of an iron-fisted guidance counselor who just wanted to get a diploma in my hands and get me *out*, for Mom’s sake. For the sake of her memory. The day top-of-her-class Tabitha had come home from Headley for the funeral, her eyes de-puffed with the help of some charm she’d learned in the dorms there, I’d said hello without hugging her. After that, the only time I hugged her was for Dad and his camera, and even then, the camera hadn’t been pointed at us for five years or so. And Dad didn’t notice the time passing because he’d lost the person he had planned his entire life around.

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But other than that, everyone was okay.

The bartender sliced the last lime, grabbed the empty bucket. “I’ll be right back, okay?” He pointed at me and smiled. “I’ve got lemons to do, too.”

I smiled back and gave him a thumbs-up. As soon as he was out of sight, I downed what was left of my beer and slid off the barstool. I slid a few bills under the empty bottle—enough to cover the bill, plus a decent tip. I walked out fast, furious at myself. I’d said too much. He’d gotten that look on his face, that pity look. I was supposed to disappear in that bar. Another round, and he’d be asking my name, giving me advice. Acting like he knew me.

I walked back to my office, just off the edge of sober and just past angry. Just drunk enough to dig into my pocket for my phone, open a social media app I never used. In my dad’s profile picture, he was standing on a beach with his arm around a woman I didn’t recognize.

I scrolled back through his pictures, through a few rounds of barbecues and birthday dinners with friends I’d never met. I kept going, back through years of posts until I found a photo with Tabitha and me both in it. In the photo, Tabitha had her arms wrapped around me. We were smiling in front of a Christmas tree—it was a for-the-camera smile, a for-Dad smile. He took a picture of us every year, because when we were little Mom had taken a picture every year. Until one year she wasn’t there anymore, and we were all looking at each other in front of the Christmas tree, wondering how we were supposed to celebrate her favorite holiday.

In the picture we wore coordinating sweaters, reindeer and

snowflakes and little knit *x*'s. It was from a few years before we stopped talking altogether—Tabitha's bangs attested to that—but in the shot, my short black hair was already threaded with premature strands of gray. My scattering of freckles was cut through with the first few fine lines, laughter around the eyes and frown between the brows. We shared a sharp nose—nothing you'd call "aquiline," but certainly nothing you'd call "pert," either. She was a little slimmer than me. You could already see the wages of a PI's life on my body and in the lines of my face: too much booze, too many late-night stakeouts with fast-food wrappers littering the floor of the car. No cigarettes—I'd quit the second I left home, since I'd only been smoking them to piss Dad off—but I looked like a smoker. I looked tired.

Tabitha shone in the photo, like she did in every photo. Her long hair—used to be plain old "dark brown," but after she came back from school it was something else, something richer like chestnut or umber or ocher—hung in soft waves, and her large brown eyes were the same as mine but *more* somehow, more sparkling, more alive. Better. Not a freckle on her, and the only lines were laugh lines, and there were exactly the right amount of them. She was using all the tricks that used to drive me to it's-not-fair shouting back when we were teenagers. Back when the worst thing in my life was Tabitha, and the fact that she had come home from magic school knowing how to erase the hated freckles—but wouldn't do mine

And now I was going to try to solve a murder at a place that was full of kids like that. Kids who were just like the person my sister had become while she was gone. I was going to take the case—I'd been trying to tell myself that I was conflicted about it,

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but really I was just getting ready to swallow a lot of bad medicine in order to do the job.

Because I had to do this job. It was good money, but more than that, it was a murder case. It was *real* detective work, something more than just some paunchy forty-nine-year-old accountant revving his secretary's engine in the Ramada near the freeway. I'd been following paunchy accountants for the better part of fourteen years. It's what I was good at.

But this? A real murder case? This was the kind of thing that private detectives didn't do anymore. It was what had made me get my PI license in the first place—the possibility that I might get to do something big and real, something nobody else could do. I didn't know the first thing about solving a murder, but this was my chance to find out if I could really do it. If I could be a *real* detective, instead of a halfway-there failure. If this part of my life could be different from all the other parts, all the parts where I was only ever *almost* enough.

I won't try to pinpoint the first lie I told myself over the course of this case. That's not a useful thread to pull on. The point is, I really thought I was going to do things right this time. I wasn't going to fuck it up and lose everything. That's what I told myself as I stared at the old picture of me and Tabitha.

This time was going to be different. This time was going to be better. This time, I was going to be enough.



## C H A P T E R

# FOUR

THE DRIVE THROUGH THE SUNOL hills was as beautiful as the novocaine that comes before the drill. Once I got off the high-walled freeways, the pockmarked city streets gave way to land that screamed *green*. Tall, gnarled oaks leaned over the narrow, winding road, casting it into dappled shade and obscuring signage that warned me to watch out for leaping deer. Tiny offshoots from the road appeared at intervals, marked with signs for Hollow Stone Ranch or Crystalbrook Farm. I'd gotten intentionally lost down there a few times before, and knew that if I followed any of those signs in search of roaming horses with warm-velvet noses I could stroke, I'd quickly encounter gates informing me that I was on private property and would be shot should I choose to venture any farther.

Osthorne was no different—the sign by the road read OSTHORNE ACADEMY in dark debossed wood with white edging, and after I turned off the road, I started to see signs warning me of the dangers of trespassing. After nearly a mile of driveway featuring increasingly threatening signage, the rooftop of oaks thinned,

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then parted. The campus spread before me like a dream. As I pulled into a parking space, I peeked in my rearview at the wall of ancient, sprawling oaks behind me. Their branches twisted together, completely obscuring the school from view of the road. I wondered if the school had chosen this location for the camouflage, or if the mages who built the school had engineered the Sunol hills to suit their need for privacy.

I wove through the cars in the tiny visitors' parking lot, trying to look around without being too obvious a tourist. The mist was just thin enough for me to see the grounds in soft-focus. The drought-impossible velvety green lawn that surrounded the school looked like frosting waiting to have a finger run through it. The school itself was a long, low spread of brick and glass windows. It struck me as out of place, unfamiliar: there's not a lot of brick in Northern California, not for a little more than a century. Lots of brick facades in San Francisco, but they're different—glossy, and too even in color, and somehow thin-looking. It's not too hard to tell when a building is trying to pretend that it survived the 1908 quake. Not Osthorne, though. This place was the real deal, pocked and resealed dozens of times. Even from the parking lot, I could see the waver in each windowpane, a testament to the age and survival of the glass. There was no flagpole, no clock tower, no football field with blazing white lights. It was a dignified building, a serious place.

I had a moment of double vision. If things had been different for me—if I'd been born with whatever thing Tabitha had that I never got any of—I might have walked across that grass as a kid, with friends and a future all laid out for me. I might have been handed a totally different life. This place might have been the set-

ting for my teen memories. Not the bleachers at my underfunded public school, not the parking lot at the abandoned bowling alley in the wee hours of the morning. Not the hospice bed in my parents' living room.

I shook it off. That wasn't the way things happened. There had never been any profit in wondering what might have been. People like me didn't get to want things like Osthorne. And besides, I *didn't* want it.

I didn't want it.

I rolled my neck, stretched just enough to let the wound on my shoulder hit my brain with a bright flash of clarifying pain. I had a job to do.

It was time to go to work.



"Ms. Torres should only be a few more minutes," the school secretary rasped. Her voice was a sharp, painful wheeze. The nameplate on her desk read MRS. WEBB. I had a sense that I should not ask for a first name. She was one of those tiny, ancient women whose papery skin is stretched over steel scaffolding. She watched me with the cool eyes of the unimpressed. I tried not to fidget. I tried to summon the courage I imagined I'd have if this was a place I belonged. It didn't help.

The door to Torres's office opened with a bang, and a tall boy with wild, dark-brown hair stormed out. His dark-blue school uniform was ill-fitting in the way of so many teenage boys—too short in the wrists, baggy through the shoulders. His blazer was wrinkled, and the angle of his gray-striped tie spoke to constant

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tugging. The teen paused, his eyes landing on me. He hit me with a long, intense stare, his protruding adam's apple working up and down. I was startled by the frankness of his gaze. Then he heaved an enormous, head-shaking sigh before continuing on his way out of the office, leaving me feeling like Ophelia in her closet.

It was totally beyond me, how a kid who's been handed a winning lottery ticket could look so damn broke. I watched him through the safety-glass window that separated the office from the main hallway. He'd already pulled out his phone. His fingers moved over the screen with unnatural speed, and they didn't slow down when he looked up from his phone to throw me a brooding look.

"Is that a spell?" I asked. From just over my shoulder came a deep laugh.

"Is what a spell? The texting? No—they're all that fast."

I turned around to find Marion Torres smiling at me. She was wearing jeans and a nice-but-not-too-nice blouse, and I felt simultaneously over- and underdressed. I'd spent hours over the weekend figuring out what to wear to a place like Osthorne. What would establish me as a professional, as someone who could solve a murder? What would keep me from sticking out like a splinter? I'd wound up digging out the clothes I'd worn to the only court case I'd ever been asked to testify in—an adultery job where the husband had followed up my findings by stabbing the wife with an ice pick. He'd cried more when I told him she was cheating than he did at the sentencing.

Next to Torres, in my court clothes, I felt like a kid playing dress-up. A great start.

We greeted each other: did-you-find-the-place-okay, so-glad-

you-can-help-us, did-you-get-the-contract. She handed me a satisfyingly fat envelope of cash, which I didn't count, so she'd feel like we had a good relationship from the start. I glanced back at Mrs. Webb. She was watching us with the same flat, unimpressed stare with which she'd greeted me. I was already dreading interviewing her.

"I'm going to show Ivy the Theoretical Magic section," Torres said. "Would you like to accompany us?"

Mrs. Webb shook her head with a look of regret that did not extend to the uneasy creases around her mouth. "I'm afraid I've just got far too much to do here," she said in that grating voice. "Perhaps another time."

Torres led the way out of the office. Her heels clicked on the gray linoleum tiles that floored the hallway. As we passed, I glanced back into the office through the safety-glass window. Mrs. Webb didn't see me—her eyes were on the blank pages of a ruled notebook. She stared at the paper intently. As I watched, she lifted two fingers and pinched herself hard on the arm, hard enough to bruise. Hard enough that I winced to watch her. The older woman's face remained still as sea glass as she squeezed at her skin. I shivered, and a whisper twined its way through my thoughts. *Wake up.*

"Is she ill?" I asked, jogging to catch up with Torres's brisk pace.

"Hm?"

"Mrs. Webb, your secretary," I said. "I just noticed that her voice is kind of . . . ?"

"Oh," Torres said with a grimace. "No, she's not ill. She used a spell to alert the school of an emergency, when she found the body

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in the library. That spell is . . .” She paused. “It’s fallen out of favor. The impact it has on the caster’s body is significant.”

“And permanent?” I asked.

“Yes and no,” she said. “For many people, it is. But Mrs. Webb is working on it. She already sounds much better than she did in November. In a few more months, she’ll probably sound normal again.” She stooped to pick up a crumpled ball of notebook paper, then tossed it into a big gray trash can that stood watch over the hallway. It looked like every trash can I’d ever tipped over at Andrew Jackson Memorial during my reign of apathy.

The trash cans weren’t the only thing about Osthorne that were familiar: it all felt like a place I’d seen a thousand times before. There were the scuffed gray linoleum floors lined with lockers, and the walls were frosted with paint that went on fresh every other summer. “Assthorne Asscademy” was scratched into several surfaces with what I’d bet was ballpoint pen. Bulletin boards hung thick with notices—auditions for *The Tempest*, lacrosse tryouts rescheduled due to weather, take-a-number to call Brea Teymourni for tutoring in math/economics/magic theory, lost my phone \$50 reward call Arthur PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE.

There it was again. That feeling like maybe, in another life, I could have fit in here. I could have auditioned for *The Tempest*. I could have tried out for lacrosse. It was a feeling like nostalgia, but for something I’d never done. Something I’d never had.

“Ms. Gamble?” I looked up. Torres was halfway down the hall in front of me, waiting. Her face was set to “patient,” but something in her posture made me hurry to catch up.

Classes were in session, and I swiveled my head like a small-

town tourist in the big city for the first time. I don't know what I expected to see—mostly, I was shocked by how familiar it all seemed. How *recent*. The sights of posters hanging on classroom walls took me back to my own note-passing, sneaking-chips-in-my-backpack days. Most of the classrooms featured wide windows into the hallway, the glass crisscrossed with wire, and I peeked in at each one to look at the students doodling in their margins. I lingered just long enough to be seen: let the students wonder who the visitor was, let them whisper at lunch, let the word spread that someone was asking questions about the murder. I had never investigated a murder before, but this part was no different from any other case—let people know that there are questions being asked, and they'll line up to give you their version of answers.

"They look so young," I murmured, staring in at a classroom full of baby-faced teenagers hunched over tests. The sea of dark-blue blazers and crisp white dress shirts was broken up by crests of brightly dyed hair and islands of eyeliner. The kids were filling in Scantron bubbles with number-two pencils and flipping back and forth between the pages of a packet.

"Freshmen," Torres intoned with crisp amusement in her voice. "They're always younger than you remember. It's easy to forget that fourteen is so close to twelve, isn't it?"

I fell into step next to Torres for a few paces, but stopped short before we rounded the corner. I was frozen in place, hypnotized by the lurid orange graffiti that sprawled across a row of sky-blue lockers: SAMANTHA IS A SLUT. The letters didn't look sprayed on—someone had been at this with a fine brush and a steady hand.

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Torres paused next to me, regarding the graffiti. “It’s more ordinary here than you expected.”

It wasn’t a question, but it hung in the air between us all the same. “I’m not sure. I guess I thought there would be more . . . I don’t know. I thought it would be different.”

“More cobblestones and gabled windows and moving stairways?” Torres’s laugh said she had caught my embarrassed grimace. “I know. I get it. But at the end of the day, we’re just a high school, Ms. Gamble. We’re a very *nice* high school”—she gestured out a nearby window to the velvety green of the grounds—“but we’re still a high school. That means gum, graffiti, cell phones, sex-ed, stupid pranks, students smoking weed behind the bleachers.” She tipped me a wink. “If it makes you feel any better, here, I’ll show you something magical.” She pulled an impressive folding knife from the pocket of her jeans. “I confiscated this from a student earlier today. It’s not the magical thing, it’s just a knife. But watch this.”

Torres flicked it open—the blade was long, with a wicked curve at the tip. She dragged it across poor Samantha’s name. Paint peeled from the locker in little blue curls. Torres flicked the knife closed. I ran my fingers across the locker—I could feel the groove in the blue paint, but the screaming orange letters remained unscathed.

My jaw clenched. “How?”

“I’m not sure. Our graffiti artist used a spell that I’ve never encountered before. It’s probably something they came up with themselves. Our groundskeeper—Frances Snead,” she added as I took out my notebook. “He’s tried a hundred different ways to remove it or paint over it, but nothing’s worked so far. He’s been



working with the head of the Physical Magic department for weeks now.”

“Can I talk to him? Snead?”

“Of course,” she said. “He’s the one who’ll set you up in staff housing.”

I blinked at her. “In what?”

The headmaster cocked her head at me as though I were posing a riddle. “Staff housing. We have a small apartment available for you to stay in while you’re here. Unless you wanted to make the drive down from Oakland every day . . . ?”

It made perfect sense; there was no reason to say no. I aimed those thoughts at the twist in my gut, willing it to listen to logic: there was no reason not to stay here. Just for a little while. Just for the case.

“Thank you,” I said. “Thanks, yes. I really appreciate that.”

“Ivy—I can call you Ivy, right? I want you to have unfettered access to whatever you need.” A tendon stood out in her neck as she spoke in a low, urgent voice. “Nowhere on this campus is off-limits to you, so long as you don’t endanger any students. Talk to whomever you want to talk to. Talk to students, teachers, staff—I don’t care.” Torres’s eyes shone hard and bright as she stared at me like I had the answers. She took a long, deep breath and let it out slow. “I have a responsibility here, to make sure that things get set right. The investigators who said that this was a suicide—they let Sylvia down. Do you understand? One of my staff members died on my watch, and those investigators barely lifted a finger to get her justice.”

“I’ll do my best,” I said, and I tried to make her hear the thing I couldn’t say because it’s the kind of thing you just can’t say:

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*I can't bring her back.* I failed, though. I could see it in her face: she thought I was nervous, thought I was uncertain. But she didn't understand yet that I couldn't give her the thing she really wanted. I can never give any of them what they really want: I can't fix a marriage, and I can't undo a lie, and I can't raise the dead.

And I can never tell them, because they think they just want answers.

"Yes, you will," Torres said. "You will do better than they did." She took another deep breath, and this time I counted—five seconds in, eight seconds out. It was a familiar exercise. I took a mental note: Torres had been through anger management. "Anyway, yes, you can talk to our groundskeeper after he gives you the key to your apartment. And you should also talk to the head of the Physical Magic department. His name is Rahul Chaudhary. I'm sure he'll be able to answer any questions you might have about this particular incident." She waved her hands at the word "SLUT," which was still glowing radioactive on the lockers.

I ran my fingers over the orange paint again. I had never seen magic done by anyone but my sister. Something in me ached at the knowledge that a child had used their incredible, impossible magic for this: to make sure that after the world had ended, when alien archaeologists were digging up the thing that Earth used to be, they'd know that Samantha had been a slut. It hurt even more than the idea that someone had used their magic to murder Sylvia Capley. The idea of some teenager getting stoned and then etching the word "SLUT" into history—it burned in my throat like a swallowed sword.

*Why them? Why do they get the opportunity to waste this?*

I let my fingers linger on Samantha's name a moment too long,

and something under my fingers popped, stinging. I snapped my hand away, startled.

“Ah, yes—I should have warned you about that,” Torres said. “Sorry.”

I stuck my sore finger in my mouth, glaring at Samantha’s name. *Samantha*, I thought with unexpected venom. Then I realized: that was the whole point. Even if you didn’t think Samantha was a slut, you’d remember that she’d stung you.

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