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HOW TO SUCCEED IN WITCHCRAFT

AISLINN BROPHY

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G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

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For my parents.
This book wouldn't exist without you.



Chapter 1

Each year, T. K. Anderson Magical Magnet School brings together a class of highly motivated and magically talented students from Palm Beach County. Students are selectively admitted based upon prior school record, magic level, and a rigorous admissions test.

On our campus, we prepare students for the world of higher education by encouraging an atmosphere of healthy competition.

—T. K. Anderson promotional brochure

I STARE AT THE CURLICUES OF MAGIC SWIRLING THROUGH THE brown liquid in my Port-a-Cauldron. The stupid piece of equipment should be heating faster. This Flora-Grow potion is due tomorrow, so I have to finish enough to turn in, or my grade in AP Potions will take a serious hit. Probably not a good look for a girl trying to go to college for potionwork.

The numbers on my alarm clock glow from my bedside table—2:32 a.m. It's only two weeks after winter break,

and my sleep schedule is already shot. That's cool. Who needs rest anyway? I was stuck singing in a choir performance at our school's Salute to America concert until eight, so I probably shouldn't have decided to pick an extra-complicated brewing project for tonight's assignment. I could have just done a simple cold-curing potion instead, but I couldn't resist brewing something new.

I stick my temperature gauge into the liquid. It beeps loudly, the sound piercing the quiet of our apartment. I wince. Hopefully Mom is sleeping deeply enough to not have heard that. Sometimes she has insomnia, so she'll sit awake doing sudoku puzzles, but I checked before I started brewing, and the lights were off in my parents' room.

The temperature gauge shows that the potion is done heating, so I turn down the burner and focus on the liquid. I concentrate to activate my magic sight, which allows me to see the web of invisible magical energy that exists in every physical object. The thin, silvery filaments of magic come into view, twisting and turning within the liquid. The shape and movements of magic reflect an object's physical properties, and speed correlates to heat, so the magic in this heated potion moves quickly.

I mentally reach for the magic, bending it to my will. The strands vibrate, still holding to their natural patterning, then begin to weave themselves into the lattice framework I have in mind. Once the lattice is complete, the

liquid thickens and turns from brown to a brilliant emerald green.

I reach for the magic one last time to seal my intention into the potion. Growth. Life. Green, natural things. I hold those thoughts in mind and push them toward the potion. A thread of my magic wisps out of my head. In it, I see flashes of the images I held in my mind. Once it sinks into the cauldron, the liquid shivers, and then the potion is done.

Nice. Time to test this bad boy out. Thankfully, Dad approved me testing this Flora-Grow on one of his beloved plant babies yesterday.

Dad is a total herbology nerd. He works for Green Witch, that big eco-management company that hires herbologists to maintain Florida's natural landscape. Caring for plants isn't just a job for him, though. Our apartment is stuffed full of useful herbs, miniaturized trees, and flowers he's magically adjusted to smell stronger. He's even got a collection of magic-hybrid plants. There are ghost palms that are invisible except for a faint blue-green glow, midair plants that float through our apartment in search of patches of sun, frost ferns that emit tiny puffs of cold air to chill their surroundings, and several others that have come in handy for my more ambitious brewing projects.

I grab one of Dad's ghost palm seedlings from the corner in our kitchen and bring it back to my room. Okay. Moment of truth. I measure out ten milliliters of the Flora-Grow,

pour it into the palm's pot, and stand back. It shouldn't take too long for the potion to take effect.

The seedling vibrates slightly, then shoots upward at warp speed. It looks like one of those plant-growth time-lapse videos, except sped up a thousand times over. New fronds burst out at the top, and the trunk thickens to the size of my leg. Or at least I think that's how large it is. It's kind of hard to tell with a mostly invisible tree. By the time it stops growing, the tallest fronds hang more than a foot over my head. So this potion was definitely a success.

I can still turn out a quality potion while half-asleep. Awesome. My grin stretches so wide that my cheeks hurt, and I do a little happy dance. There's nothing better than brewing a potion that works just right.

I love potionworking. Potions let people do complicated things they might not be able to achieve with just their innate magic abilities. Which is *amazing*. Especially when you're a kid and your powers aren't that strong. I mean, would I be able to do complex transfiguration on this tree to change it into its adult form? Definitely not. But I don't need to, because I can brew a Flora-Grow potion.

A jaw-splitting yawn interrupts my train of thought. Right. Definitely time for bed. I cast one last satisfied look at the ghost palm before turning away to start cleaning up my supplies.

Then everything goes wrong. I grossly miscalculated how well this pot of dirt would hold up a seven-foot tree.

By the time I notice the pot tipping over, it's too late. The whole thing falls to the floor with a massive crash. I let out a startled yelp as dirt and pieces of glowing palm tree fly across my room. A chunk of bark hits me in the face, which feels like a personal eff-you.

Once the chaos subsides, I snatch up a bottle of cleaning potion from my shelf and sprinkle it liberally across my floor. Piles of dirt disintegrate as the liquid hits them, leaving behind a faint scent of lemon. Maybe I can get this cleaned up before Mom busts me.

It takes me a few tries, but I manage to hoist the ghost palm back upright. I prop it against the wall and pray that it won't tip over again. This would be way easier if I had some Light as a Feather potion on hand. I guess I *could* levitate the tree myself, but at my level, magically messing with living things without prior planning is a recipe for disaster.

The floorboards in the hallway creak, and I tense. Time's up.

"Shay? Shay, are you awake?" Mom calls. Her heavy steps echo through the apartment as she approaches my room.

Ooh, I'm dead. I am so incredibly deceased. I'm not actually supposed to brew potions in my room. Ugh, I should have done the easy potion and gone to bed on time.

Mom whips open the door and strides into the room. She's wearing her black bonnet—I definitely woke her up. Damn.

“You okay?” she says as she turns the lights on. “Did something happen?”

I freeze, one hand still resting guiltily on the stupid ghost palm. “Um. One of Dad’s trees fell over.”

“You good?” She comes over and looks me up and down. “It didn’t hit you?”

“I’m fine.”

She takes another few seconds to confirm that I’m actually all right. Then she turns her attention to the tree. “Why’d you have that in here?” she says, her eyes narrowing.

“He said I could test my Flora-Grow on it.”

She sniffs, catching the scent of my potion, and her eyes flick to the cauldron. “Were you brewing in here?” she says, her hands flying to her hips. “Shayna, you know better than that. While you live in my house, you follow my rules.”

I nod obediently, looking as apologetic as possible. “Yes, ma’am.”

“You don’t need to be working on your li’l potion projects in the middle of the night.”

“It’s homework. For AP Potions.”

Her expression softens, and I sense that I could get out of this without serious consequences. Maybe.

“I had to finish this tonight,” I continue. “It’s due tomorrow.”

“There is no reason to be up all hours doing home-

work,” she says, launching into the lecture I’ve heard a million times before. “You go to bed at a reasonable hour, and you wake up in the morning to finish things up. You need sleep to do your best work.”

“Sleep is for the weak,” I deadpan. She quirks an eyebrow at me, unamused.

“Brockton Scholars are well-rested,” she says. That, of course, is complete and utter Mom Nonsense. You have to be many things to win the Brockton Scholarship—magically brilliant, academically perfect, chronically overcommitted—but well-rested is not a required quality. She sighs, shaking her head. “Bed. Now.” She turns the lights off and leaves, as if I’m going to immediately throw myself into my bed smelling of potion with arrowroot residue all over my hands.

My mom’s parenting style is 25 percent “you stress yourself out too much” and 75 percent “be the best that ever was.” She doesn’t see the contradiction there and doesn’t appreciate when I’ve tried to point it out.

When I look at myself in the mirror the next morning, I want to crawl back into bed. The bags under my eyes could be checked as flight luggage. My brown hair looks greasy as hell too. I need to restraighten it soon.

I tie my hair up, slap on some Face Awake potion to shrink the bags under my eyes, and put on mascara. By the time I walk into the kitchen, I look a little tired instead of like a corpse.

“You okay there?” Dad says, eyeing me over his oatmeal. He’s dressed in his Green Witch work T-shirt, ready to head out after breakfast. He hunches in his seat, because he always sits in the chair under the low-hanging light, even though he’s so tall that he’s in real danger of whacking his pale, bald head on it.

“I’m tired,” I say, sitting across the table from him. Mom slides a bowl of oatmeal and a mug of coffee onto my place setting. “Thanks.”

Dad’s blue eyes twinkle. “Hi, Tired, I’m Dad.”

I boo him and make a face. “It’s too early for dad jokes.”

“It’s never too early for dad jokes,” he quips.

“Little miss was up at all hours of the night brewing a potion in her room,” Mom tells Dad. She purses her lips and aggressively refills his coffee cup.

“I had a lot of homework,” I mumble into my mug, breathing in the scent of Mom’s coffee. I swear she does something to the magic in it, because it’s way more effective than any other coffee, but I can’t get her to admit it.

“Oh, you think you’re grown now? You can just be up all hours?” Mom says.

There’s only one answer to that. “No, ma’am.” Now seems like the moment to change the subject. I take a sip of coffee and smile at Mom winningly. “You’re going to MarTech today, right?”

Mom works at a magitech factory that manufactures fancy televisions. It’s the best job in magical technology

she can get with her transfiguration degree, since she doesn't have a magical license. She spends her days troubleshooting problems with the magic encoded in the TVs and transfiguring broken machinery so it works.

"Yeah," Mom says. Her eyes slide over to Dad. "Did I tell you I'm training the new girl this afternoon?"

"Hm." Dad takes a long drink from his coffee cup and raises his eyebrows. "Sounds like manager work."

Mom lets out a little snort. "I know."

"They giving you a raise?"

"What do you think?" Mom says, and they both chuckle quietly.

Mom's job isn't the best. She makes half as much as her manager but does twice the work, because he has a magical license from an accredited university. He likes to remind her that, without him, the unlicensed members of their team wouldn't be legally allowed to do any transfiguration because it's higher-level work. Mom is literally better at transfiguration than him. And even though she basically does his job for him too, she'll never get to be a manager without a license.

"What time do you start work?" I ask.

"One," Mom says. She sinks into her seat at our kitchen table and starts in on her own breakfast. Before she takes a bite, I activate my magic sight and nudge at the magic in her oatmeal to warm it up for her. It's been sitting there awhile, if the slow magic flows in it are anything to go off of.

“Bus day?” I say sympathetically.

“Bus day.” She sighs.

Boca Raton is a driving town. Mostly rich retirees live here, and walking definitely isn’t their primary way of getting anywhere. The network of floating roads is basically the only way to get around, unless you have a broom and can fly off-road. We only have one car, and Dad drives it to work, so when Mom is scheduled for shifts in the middle of the day, she has to struggle through Boca’s depressing public transport situation.

“You know . . .” I drag out the words and grin at Mom mischievously. “If you got a broom, you wouldn’t have to take the bus anymore.”

“What would I look like on a broom?” She snorts. “Midlife-Crisis Mom? That’s what you want your mother to look like?”

“You would look very cool on a broom, honey,” Dad says, as cheesy as anything.

“I would look very dead on a broom,” she shoots back, which doesn’t even make sense. Like, okay, they’re slightly dangerous. But she’s not going to spontaneously die while riding one.

“I’m just saying it’s cheaper than a car,” I say.

“Nice try,” Mom says. “But nobody in this household is getting a broom anytime soon.”

“Better luck next time, kiddo,” Dad says.

I sigh and abandon my broom crusade for today. “Lex

said she could drive me to work, so you don't have to pick me up after school," I tell Dad. Lex is my best friend. She, thank god, has her own car.

"Are you two going to *hang out* after work?" Mom asks. She puts a weird emphasis on *hang out*.

"I don't know. We haven't made plans. I'll text you if we do."

Mom definitely thinks Lex and I are secretly dating. When I told her and Dad I was a lesbian, that was her second question after "Are you sure?" (I was sure.) She keeps dropping hints that it would be fine with her if I were dating Lex.

"How's Lex doing?" Mom asks, her face creased with concern.

From the way Mom talks about her, you would think Lex was dying or something. "She's fine. Studying to take the MATs again." I shrug. Plenty of people don't get into a licensing university their first time applying. I wish Lex was still in school with me, because sometimes it's lonely without my bestie, but she seems fine with her involuntary gap year.

"Another group of boys from Pompano ran off to some Midwest commune," Mom says, shaking her head. "They had only been trying to get into school for two years, you know."

I frown into my oatmeal. She's been watching too many news exposés about society dropouts. I think she's

secretly afraid I'm never going to get into a licensing college and will end up running away to one of those communes. Which is ridiculous. I would never abandon my parents like that.

"Lex isn't going to become some dropout witch," Dad says. Mom opens her mouth, but he continues before she can get a word in. "She works too hard. She'll get into a licensing college."

"Mm. I just worry." Mom turns her attention to me, tapping her lip thoughtfully. "The Brockton Scholarship info meeting is today, right?"

My stomach flips. It took longer than I thought it would for her to mention it. "Yeah."

She pauses, giving me a once-over. "Is that what you're wearing to school?"

"Yeah," I say sharply. I'm wearing my Willington University hoodie and jeans. I look fine. "It's not like an interview or something. I don't have to dress up."

She lifts her brown hands in surrender. "Okay. I'm just saying that you shouldn't give up the chance to make a good impression on Mr. B."

Now I'm second-guessing my outfit. Maybe I should change. Maybe it's too on the nose to wear a Willington hoodie to a meeting for a scholarship I'll use to go to Willington.

"You should do the chant," Mom says, smiling at me.

“Today is a day for affirmation. And a little extra magic won’t hurt.”

I visibly cringe. “No way.”

Her smile grows a hard edge. “Shayna, if you don’t believe in yourself, nobody else will.”

I can’t believe she won’t let go of this tradition. “I believe in myself. I just don’t want to do the chant. It’s embarrassing.”

“Embarrassing?” She shakes her head. “Child, the only people in this room are me, you, and your dad.”

“Can we just share magic like normal people?” I say. “Without the weird chanting?”

“What is this ‘normal people’ you’re talking about? You want to be like everybody else? If everybody starts huffing potion fumes, are you going to do that too?”

“Okay, let’s—” Dad starts to say, but Mom continues over him.

“Now we’re going to do the chant, and you’re going to go wow them in that scholarship meeting today. Okay?” The look in her eyes tells me I’m not getting out of this one. I nod grudgingly. “Shayna is a . . . ?”

“Winner,” I mumble. She gives me a look.

“Shayna is a . . . ?” she repeats, louder this time. Her magic emerges from her skin in tendrils and drifts toward me in a burgundy haze. It mixes midair with the rich brown of Dad’s magic.

“Winner!” I say just as the magical strands sink into my skin. My heartbeat immediately quickens, and a burst of energy hits me. I become more and more conscious of how they’re feeling—I can sense Dad’s gentle contentedness and Mom’s fierce pride and the slight undercurrent of exhaustion that’s always there whenever we share magic. Soon their emotions fill my body, as strong and real as my own.

Mom locks eyes with me, and her pride echoes between us. “Shayna is a . . . ?”

“WINNER!” I shout.

“SHAYNA IS A WINNER!” all three of us yell together. The sound reverberates through our apartment. No matter how corny that chant is, it does hype me up.

“Now go get that scholarship, baby,” Mom says, her brown face crinkling into a smile.



Chapter 2

The average high school senior has a magic level of 27. Our seniors have an average magic level of 38.

—T. K. Anderson website

T. K. ANDERSON MAGICAL MAGNET SCHOOL IS KNOWN FOR two things. First, it's ridiculously hard to get in. Even if you live in the school zone and get preferred application status, you only have a 10 percent chance of acceptance. If you live outside the zone, your chance of acceptance shrinks to 1 percent. Mom rerouted all our mail to my rich auntie's house for a few months so she could pretend we lived nearby. She would have moved us near the school,

but we couldn't afford any of the expensive properties in the area.

The other thing T. K. Anderson is known for is the Brockton Scholarship. The scholarship is awarded in junior year, and it gives one student a full ride to whatever licensing university they're accepted to. That's why most people are so desperate to get into T. K. Anderson.

Dad drives me to school, which is in West Palm Beach, a whole forty-five minutes away from our apartment. The opportunity is worth the commute. Sometimes it's hard to remember that when I have to wake up at the ass-crack of dawn to get there, but it is.

When I get to campus, I stop by the nurse's office for magic-level testing. T. K. Anderson is intense about tracking student progress, so we all get tested four times a year. I practice generating electricity at my fingertips while I wait in line. Any downtime is a good time to practice basic magic skills. Just as I get to the front, a group of other juniors joins the line. They clock me, then immediately turn in to discuss me. Typical. Their voices are quiet, but I can still hear most of what they're saying.

"Do you think she's going to win the scholarship?"

"It's either her or Ana. And Ana's grades are better."

Electricity crackles at my fingertips. Ana freaking Álvarez. She's not even here, and she's annoying me.

"But Shay's magic level is higher. If it went up any more—"

“Her magic level *can’t* go up anymore. It was already thirty-eight last time. Nobody gets over forty as a junior.”

“She has a big family, though, so it doesn’t really count.”

That is completely false. My family does share magic with me for these tests—everyone does that—but there are only three of us, so the effect isn’t huge. I could take more from my parents, I guess. Even now, I can feel the connection to their magic, and it would be easy enough to pull on that connection for more power. But I wouldn’t want to take anything they hadn’t planned to give me and exhaust them at work.

The other students’ voices dip, and I don’t hear the next part of their conversation. I concentrate on shooting out sparks of electricity from my palm. Maybe if they focused on practicing their magic in their free time instead of gossiping about me, these people would have a magic level like mine.

I make it to the front of the line and head into the office. One last bit of their conversation drifts my way before I’m out of earshot.

“Plus, she’s, like, part Black. They’re stronger.”

Just a little bit of casual racism to brighten up my morning. Love it. Black people literally have the same exact capacity for magic as anybody else. The only things that make you have a higher density of magic in your body are studying and practicing. Somebody made up this idea

that Black people are naturally magically stronger, but that we have less control. All brute magical force, no finesse. I wish that kind of no-thinking nonsense had been left behind in the Civil War era, but it very much was not.

I grimace to myself and keep walking. Part of me wants to give them a piece of my mind, but a larger part of me knows that I'll probably freeze up if I try to say anything.

It only takes a few minutes for the nurse to draw my blood. I cross my fingers for luck as she labels my sample. Hopefully, the density of magic in my blood has gone up since last time. When the test results come back in a few weeks, I want to beat everybody in my class by such a large margin that nobody can say it's because of a boost from my family. Success is the best way to spite racists.

Normally I work as a peer tutor before school, but today I head over to the arts building for the Brockton Scholarship meeting. It's the nicest building on campus, because the Brockton Foundation gave a bunch of money to redo it. The tall stone facade sticks out like a sore thumb from the squat stucco buildings around it.

The school ranking board sits smack in the center of campus because T. K. Anderson wants to make sure you never have to go too far out of your way to check which of your classmates have better GPAs than you. The info they have up is a little out-of-date right now—the results are all from before winter break—but I still can't resist looking at

it. I pause under the section of the board that lists the members of the junior class and stare up at the words that make my stomach churn.

1. Ana Álvarez—GPA: 4.78, Magic Level: 35
2. Shayna Johnson—GPA: 4.67, Magic Level: 38

Ugh. Stupid weighted GPAs. Her extra AP class really put her over the edge.

By the time I get to the auditorium, about fifteen people are already there. Everyone has crammed themselves into the first two rows. The room smells faintly of desperation—like fancy magical clothing trying to mask people’s sweat with floral scents.

I want to sit in the front row, but the only seat left is by Ana Álvarez. I would rather sit on a bed of needles than attend this meeting with her next to me. But I also want to be right in the front so Mr. B can see I’m here.

As if she can sense me thinking about her, Ana tosses her stupidly perfect curls behind her shoulders, making eye contact with me in the process. I realize I’ve been standing at the end of the aisle staring at her, and my face gets hot.

This is stupid. Ana Álvarez is not going to keep me from making a good impression at this meeting. Mustering up my most confident air, I plop myself down in the seat beside her.

She makes direct eye contact with me before she says anything, which is a weird habit of hers. “Nice hoodie,” she says. Her expression stays blank, so I can’t tell if she’s being sarcastic. “I hear obvious is the new subtle.”

Cool. Definitely sarcasm. “Whatever. At least I don’t look like I’m going for an interview at Ann Taylor.”

It’s a weak comeback. Actually, I’m not even sure it was an insult. She looks great. She’s wearing these fitted dress pants and a blue-and-white-striped button-down with suspenders. Even the black loafers she wears most days work with her androgynous business casual look. I look like a true plebian in my jeans and orange Willington hoodie next to her. Maybe Mom was right about dressing nicely for this meeting.

Ana Álvarez has been my nemesis since freshman year. People used to get us confused because we’re both smart brown girls in choir and the potions club. Sometimes they still make jokes that we’re the same person or that we’re related, which pisses me off. We don’t look alike. We’re not even the same type of brown. I’m half-Black, and she’s Cuban.

Our body types are different—she’s slender, while I’m on the stockier side. She also has long dark curls, which contrast with my stick-straight do, and thick eyebrows that she always raises condescendingly. She does that now. Then she smirks at me, which shows off the dimple on her

left cheek. That dimple always throws me off. It's totally at odds with her harsh attitude.

"There are freshmen at this meeting," Ana says, rolling her eyes. "I don't know why they bother coming."

She's right. There's a gaggle of girls filing in four rows behind us, and there are a few other fresh-faced people sprinkled throughout the crowd.

Ana eyes me critically, then shakes her head. "I bet you went when you were a freshman."

I totally did. I went to the meeting last year too. My face must make it obvious that she's right, because she laughs. "You did, didn't you?"

"So what?" I splutter.

"I bet you sat in the front row and wore that old sweatshirt," she says, her expression inexcusably smug.

I rub the hem of my sleeve between my thumb and forefinger, frowning. "There's nothing wrong with my sweatshirt."

"Of course not. You look good in it." She pauses, her brown eyes fixed on mine. For a moment, I almost believe she's going to leave the compliment there, intact. She licks her lips, amusement flickering in her eyes. "Like a little pumpkin."

My eyes narrow. "For the last time—"

"It's like Halloween came early."

"I did not pick the Willington school colors," I snap.

“I seriously hope you wouldn’t have picked orange and purple.”

She’s not wrong, but I’m still offended on Willington’s behalf. “If you hate the colors so much, I hope you never have to wear them,” I say, giving her a cloyingly sweet smile to punctuate the insult.

“Sick burn.” Her flat affect is comically at odds with the words coming out of her mouth. I almost laugh, but that would be what she wants.

“I’m very witty,” I say, imitating her tone.

She’s still staring me down. She must have missed the memo as a child that staring is rude. “If Willington doesn’t work,” she says, “you should try comedy.”

“Oh yeah?” I say. “What’s your backup plan? Since you’re not funny.”

She settles back in her seat and shrugs lazily. “I don’t need one.”

I harrumph, which isn’t the most intelligent response, but it’s the only thing I can come up with. Ugh. She’s really the worst. But whatever. I’m sure I can make it through this meeting without rage-throwing one of the potions in my backpack at her face.

Probably.

Chapter 3

T. K. Anderson boasts the highest rate of acceptance into magical-licensing colleges of any school in Florida. 30% of our students are accepted into a magical-licensing college during their senior year, and 68% are accepted within five years of graduating.

—T. K. Anderson promotional brochure

BRITTANY COHEN, THE BROCKTON SCHOLAR FROM LAST year, walks onto the auditorium stage, and everyone falls silent. She has that effect on a room. Maybe it's all the years she's spent starring in every show T. K. Anderson's drama department puts on. Or maybe it's because she's tall and has the bone structure of a Greek statue. She floats above the rest of us mere mortals because her future is certain. All she has to do now is spend her senior year doing charity

events for the Brockton Foundation before heading off to college, free of charge.

Brittany sits in an empty chair on the stage and stares off into the distance with a bored expression. A weird few minutes of silence pass. I pull out my magic practice cube, a common tool for doing exercises that work on basic magic skills. After placing it on my lap, I activate my magic sight and mentally reach for the threads of magic in the small metal cube. Okay. Weight drill one. I push on the magic strands with my mind, willing them to expand. As the strands grow larger, the cube grows heavier in my lap.

Out of the corner of my eye, I notice Ana tapping her toes rhythmically on the carpet. Electricity sparks at the tips of her fingers as she does this, each spark lining up with a toe tap. Eight taps with the right foot. Eight taps with the left. Four with the right. Four with the left. Two right. Two left. One. One. One. One. Then she starts over with her heels.

It's not an exercise I recognize. Maybe she has a tutor who is giving her practice drills you can't find in the MAT prep books? The idea of her having a tutor makes me sick with envy. Getting a good score on the standardized test requires hard-core magical training, which is much easier to get through if you have someone helping you.

"We really are nerds, huh," Ana says.

"What?" I say, pulling my gaze away from her feet.

She gestures at my practice cube. "We have five sec-

onds to ourselves, and we're both practicing," she says.
"What are you doing? Weight drills?"

"Yeah. Any downtime is good practice time."

Electricity crackles at her fingertips, and a little smirk tugs at the corner of her mouth. "Spoken like a true nerd."

"Whatever," I say, rolling my eyes. "You're a nerd too."

"Oh yeah." She nods solemnly. "A big one." Then she goes back to her foot-tapping exercise, whatever it is.

Finally, Mr. B walks onstage to start the meeting. He's a youngish white man with some light beard scruff in a checkered button-down. From a distance, you wouldn't be able to pick him out of a crowd. Yet every eye in the auditorium is laser-focused on him once he steps out of the wings. Everyone knows he holds the key to their future. Brittany breaks into a radiant smile when he appears. She's been one of his favorites since she was a freshman, so it wasn't a big shock when she won the scholarship last year.

He goes by Mr. B, as if anybody is going to forget the B is short for Brockton. His family of real-estate tycoons runs the foundation that gives the money for the scholarship. He's the head of the committee that picks the Brockton Scholars. He's also the drama teacher.

Mr. B places something small on the floor center stage, then gives it a little nod. The object grows in size, revealing a tall wooden podium. After the podium is set up, he pulls a green-and-black DictaFire ball from his pocket.

“Hi, everyone. Hope you’re all having a great day so far,” Mr. B says, flashing an easy smile out at the audience. The DictaFire flies through the air, leaving behind a trail of floating green fire that spells out the word *Welcome* in six-foot-tall letters. “Glad you were willing get to school early for this lame old meeting.”

I would do anything to win this scholarship. Showing up to school early is nothing. If I don’t win, my chances of getting into Willington will be slim to none. I might not get in anywhere I apply next year and have to apply again. And again. And again. If it takes too long for me to be admitted to a licensing college, I might have to consider a non-licensing one. Which means the chances of me making real money and paying back my parents for everything they’ve done for me are small. All their sacrifices will be for nothing.

I give myself a tiny shake. Stop spiraling, Shay. Pay attention.

“Every year the committee for the Brockton Scholarship gets together and selects one of T. K. Anderson’s most promising students to be the recipient of this incredible opportunity,” he says. “Now, we’re not looking for a candidate who just has good grades. We’re looking for a well-rounded candidate. One who truly exemplifies all that T. K. Anderson has to offer. One who embodies the pillars of the Brockton Scholarship.”

I could name all of these pillars in my sleep. It takes

true self-control for me to not mouth along with Mr. B as he lists them.

“Dedication, Academic Excellence—” The DictaFire spells out each of the pillars in the air as he says them. “Magical Excellence, Service, and Falcon Spirit.” Some joker cacaws from behind me, and Mr. B smiles in amusement. “Exactly,” he says. “That’s what we’re looking for right there.”

The falcon is T. K. Anderson’s mascot, so what he means is that they’re looking for someone who is involved in activities at school.

Even before this meeting started, I knew I wasn’t going to get much new information from my third time around, but as Mr. B continues talking, I realize that I could probably give the presentation myself. After I went to the meeting my freshman year, I brought home copious notes, and Mom sat me down to figure out a plan for the next three years. Everything I’ve done since then has been planned to make my application perfect.

Well, everything except my job at Pilar’s Potions, which Mom wasn’t a big fan of me spending my time on. But I wanted to save to get my own car sometime before I died, and I felt guilty always asking my parents for money for new potionworking supplies. That stuff is expensive.

Just when I’m about to give up on learning anything real from this meeting, Mr. B pauses, and his tone shifts. I

sit up straighter in my seat. This is something new, something he's never said before.

"This year, we want to stress the need for diversity in our applicant pool. Brockton Scholars should represent the true diversity of T. K. Anderson."

That almost pulls a laugh from me. The true diversity of T. K. Anderson has been fairly well represented by the series of middle-class white girls who have won the scholarship. There are about five non-white faces in the auditorium, including me and Ana. I watch as the DictaFire adds *Diversity* underneath the pillars of the Brockton Scholarship.

I just can't get over how people randomly started caring about race last year. There was a big article published in *The New York Times* about how, even counting the three HBCUs, only 4 percent of graduates from licensing colleges were Black. Which, you know, didn't surprise me at all. What did surprise me was how the article went viral. Then this anti-racism organization that I had only vaguely heard of—Don't Hate, Educate—blew up.

Suddenly, people who had never cared about racism were talking about going to local rallies. Students who had made jokes about me and Ana being identical posted Don't Hate, Educate slogans on their WizConnect profile pages. Schools were scared they would get protested, so they started saying things about reconsidering their affirmative action policies to be more effective. And now I guess that's trickled down to the Brockton Scholarship.

Mr. B gives us all a serious nod. “The committee would like to encourage a wide range of applicants to join the competition this year,” he finishes. Then he looks right at me.

I stop breathing.

Mr. B is otherwise pretty nondescript, but he has thick dark eyelashes and eerily blue eyes. When you’re as close to him as I am, they bore into your soul. I stare up at him, feeling the possibility of the scholarship hurtling toward me in his gaze. Then he starts talking about the due dates for the application materials, and the moment is gone.

Maybe it was all in my head. Mr. B could have been staring at nothing. Or maybe he was looking at Ana. Oh god, please don’t let him have been looking at Ana. I sneak a glance at her, and she’s sitting ramrod straight in her seat, as unperturbed as usual.

Part of me hates that I could be the “diversity” applicant they’re looking for. I’ve worked my butt off for this scholarship for years. I don’t want anybody to tell me I’m just in the running because I happen to be Black. On the other hand, I would sell my soul to have a better shot at the scholarship. I can swallow my pride and sell myself with my race as a bigger part of the package if that will help me get into a licensing college quickly and not have to burden my parents for another few years.

Onstage, Mr. B beams out at all of us. “I can’t wait to see which one of you heads off to Willington—or some

other college”—he winks, and everyone chuckles dutifully—“in two years.”

The Brockton family historically has gone to Willington University, which is the third-best licensing university in the country, so most students who get the scholarship end up going there. The scholarship doesn’t officially mean that you’re definitely going to get in, but every person who has ever gotten the scholarship has been admitted. Guaranteed admission to a licensing college *and* a free ride? That’s life changing.

Willington is my dream college. I mean, any licensing college would be fine, because I don’t want to be forced to work under people with magical licenses forever just so I can legally do higher-level magic work. But I’ve wanted to go to Willington since fifth grade. I wear this Willington hoodie so much that parts of the neckline are tragically starting to fray.

Mr. B claps decisively. “So let’s open this up to questions,” he says. “You can ask me or Brittany anything you want. And if you don’t feel comfortable asking something with me here, I totally get that. Brittany will be sticking around afterward to chat with people, so you can get all the dirty details from her then.” He grins.

Ana raises her hand, and I regret not having a question prepared with the fire of a thousand suns. He calls on her first because the universe hates me.

“How much value do out-of-school activities hold

compared to extracurriculars at school when you're making decisions?" she asks.

Damn, I wish I had asked that. I glare at her fiercely, then remember that Mr. B can still see me and rearrange my face into a pleasant smile.

"Good question," he says.

Rage burns quietly in my heart.

"There's no exact formula that we use to determine that. We do tend to more strongly consider candidates who are engaged with a variety of activities here on campus, but we also appreciate that you all have lives beyond this school." He frowns thoughtfully before continuing. "So we want to hear about your achievements outside of here in your application, but if it comes down to two similar candidates, we'll pick the one who is more involved on campus. It ends up being a tiebreaker category most of the time."

Ana's brow wrinkles and smoothens out so quickly that it's almost unnoticeable. Is she bothered by that answer? I think through what I know she does on campus. It's mostly the same as what I do. Potions club. Choir. National Honor Society. She's vice president of the Spanish club, which I'm not in. I'm the potions club vice president, though, so it's not like she's really one-upping me there. I also play terraball in the fall, and I've volunteered for the homecoming committee for the past two years. If we're comparing the two of us, I think I come out ahead in sheer

number of T. K. Anderson activities. Plus, I'm more well-rounded, because she doesn't do anything athletic as far as I know.

Still, it's not clear to me which one of us will win. For every achievement I have, she has a roughly equivalent one. I won the Most Magically Promising Student award last year, but she won the Student Philanthropist prize. Her GPA is better than mine—ugh—but my magic level is higher. Every time I think I'm pulling ahead, I learn about some new, infuriatingly amazing accomplishment of hers.

Brittany takes the next few questions, which tell me nothing I don't already know. I don't end up thinking of a question to ask. But some other witch asks a stupid, rambling one about the average SAT score for applicants, and I, like an asshole, feel better about myself.

Once the meeting wraps up, Ana stands and leans idly against the edge of the stage in front of us, staring directly into my eyes as she does so. I wait for the inevitable dig. She crosses her arms over her chest and cocks her head slowly to the side. "So you're the face of diversity at T. K. Anderson, huh?"

I guess that moment with Mr. B wasn't all in my head. "Jealous?" I shoot back.



"Maybe," she says noncommittally. She turns and saunters away, because she's too cool to end a conversation like a normal person.



Chapter 4

And that was the moment I knew—magic is the way to the American Dream!

—*We the People: Patriotic Monologues for High School Students*



THE MOMENT WHEN MR. B STARED AT ME KEEPS PLAYING IN my mind as I walk out of the auditorium. He's never paid me special attention before. I've tried to make a good impression by saying hi at arts performances and volunteering for any events he would be at, but I'm far from being one of his favorites. I didn't feel bad about it, though, because he doesn't have a clear favorite in my grade. It always felt weird to suck up to him too obviously for the scholarship. I would rather just be the best candidate. I

know that's naive, but I'm pulling it off so far. Besides, there's a whole scholarship committee, so Mr. B's opinion isn't the only one that matters.

It's just the one that matters most.

"Shay?"

I whip around, startled, and Mr. B stands behind me, as if my thoughts summoned him.

"Do you have a sec?" he asks.

"Um. Yeah," I say. Obviously, I have a second for him. Anybody with even a slight aspiration for the scholarship has a second for him.

"Great, thanks. Let's go in my classroom."

I follow him around the corner to the drama classroom, my heart beating wildly in my chest. What could he possibly want to talk to me about? I rack my brain but come up empty besides a fantasy scenario where he sings my praises and offers me the scholarship on the spot.

He holds the door to the classroom open for me to enter. "Nice hoodie," he says as I pass him.

"Thanks," I say, smiling self-consciously. "It's my dream school."

"It's a great place." He follows me in and leans against his desk. "Any particular reason you want to go there?"

I shrug as I sit on one of the black cubes strewn around the small room. "I mean, it's a great school." I pause. Mom's voice echoes in the back of my brain, telling me not to sell myself short, so I jump to explain further. "I want to

work in a magilab, and Willington has one of the best programs for getting into that.”

He nods slowly, looking impressed. “So you’re into transfiguration? Potionwork? Or . . . magical theory?”

“Potionwork. I want to develop new potions to help with magical diseases. But honestly any potion-development job would be good.”

“Oh yeah!” His face lights up with recognition. “You’re the potions genius. I had heard about that.”

My cheeks warm. I didn’t think Mr. B knew much about me. I’ve briefly spoken to him at fine arts events a few times, but I never got the impression that I particularly interested him before today. “I, um, I’ve just been super into potionworking since I was little. I was always begging my mom to let me make little kiddy potions in our kitchen.”

“Did you ever go to those apothecary summer camps?” Mr. B asks. “I know lots of T. K. Anderson kids went to those in middle school.”

“No.” I let out an awkward little laugh. “They’re kind of . . . expensive? I don’t know, I was pretty DIY as a kid.”

Great job, Shay. Way to be weird as hell about being poorer than other people at this school.

Mr. B, thank god, flashes me this super-genuine smile that makes me feel better. “That’s cool,” he says. “DIY all the way. What kinds of things did you like to make when you were younger?”

“I used to make a lot of joke potions. Like, Sonic

Sneeze, you know?” I say, laughing a little. “But eventually I got really into making stuff that my parents could use around the apartment. Cleaning potions, basic healing stuff. Honestly, I’m amazed my parents let me try so many recipes when I was that young. A lot of them didn’t work right, but it was still fun for me.”

Potionworking is an upper-level magic skill, but it’s definitely the most accessible one. Unlike transfiguration or herbology, if you stick to doing easy stuff, you probably won’t kill anybody or anything. Still, my parents let me try a lot of things most people wouldn’t let their child do.

“How old were you when you got started?” he asks. “Eleven? Twelve?”

“Seven,” I say sheepishly, and I brace myself for the inevitable response.

He goes a little slack-jawed. “Seven?” he repeats. “You started brewing potions when you were *seven*?”

“I had been obsessed with potions since I was, like, five,” I say. “I begged my parents nonstop to let me make them. I’m pretty sure I was really annoying.” I chuckle and send up a silent thank-you to my parents for encouraging my early potions fixation. “My mom vetted everything I did a lot when I started, so we only had a few disasters.”

I hadn’t mastered the basic magical skills—manipulating magic flows to adjust physical properties of objects like temperature, texture, weight, and density. I couldn’t generate electricity or fire, and my magic level was only around five.

But Mom and Dad helped me with anything I couldn't do yet, and it just made me more determined to figure out those skills for myself.

"No wonder your magic level is so high," he says. "I don't know anybody who started potionworking that early."

Oh my god. I've impressed him. I've impressed Mr. B. This is the best moment of my whole life. Ana Álvarez can suck it.

"Yeah," I say, trying to sound humble. I really hope he can't tell that I'm running victory laps in my mind. "It's been my thing for a long time."

"That's awesome. You've had it all figured out for a while." He shakes his head wryly. "I only stumbled into what I wanted to do after college, so you're way ahead of me."

I wonder briefly how he got into Willington. Did he just get in because of his family's money? Or was he an incredible student in high school?

"I was glad to see you at the meeting today," he says. A little thrill runs through me. "We need more people like you applying."

I smile uncertainly. Is he talking about me being Black? Or something else? I decide to go with a safe response. "I would be really honored to have such an amazing opportunity."

He laughs and pushes himself back to sit on his desk. A few wayward papers crinkle under his khakis. "You

don't have to be so formal, Shay. This isn't official Brockton Scholarship business. I promise I'm not judging you right now. Relax."

I force a laugh and swing my legs up to sit cross-legged on the block. Hopefully that makes me look more relaxed. God, there's nothing less relaxing than being told to relax.

"Congrats on the concert last night," he says. "Your solo was incredible."

"Thanks."

"Your technique is great," he continues. "Not many high schoolers have that kind of breath control."

"Thank you," I say again, beaming. "I had a good time at the concert. The stuff we sang last night was . . ." I pause, because I've dug myself into a hole. Our Salute to America concert is always pretty mediocre. It's so soon after winter break that we only have a week and a half to properly rehearse. "It was nice to sing 'America the Magical' again," I finish awkwardly.

Mr. B snorts quietly. "Ms. Mooney loves having you guys sing that."

Ms. Mooney, our choir director, whips that song out every time we have to do something on short notice. "All of us have sung it before except for the freshmen, so it's easy to put together."

He leans slightly toward me, lowering his voice. "Just between you and me, if I hear that song again, I'm going to rip off my own ears." A full-blown cackle escapes me in

my surprise at hearing him say that. He grins mischievously. "Just keeping it real."

"I mean, you're right." I shrug. "She has truly beaten that song to death."

"I shouldn't make fun of it too much, though. The drama club performances at that concert aren't much better," he says. "I have students perform those same monologues about the 'value of hard work' and how 'magic is the great American equalizer' every year." He does a spot-on impression of the painfully earnest student performances as he quotes the monologues. I laugh. Those monologues are just so cringe.

"All of that aside, though, it was good to hear you sing last night," he says. "I was wondering why you haven't done any theater yet."

Oh. Ohhhh. Is this what he wanted to talk about? "I used to do the musicals at my middle school," I say. "But I switched to choir once I started high school."

He lights up. "I knew it! You've got stage presence."

That is a blatant lie. Ms. Mooney is always telling me to stop looking pained whenever I feel like people are watching me. Which is, you know, what audiences do.

"This year I wanted to branch out a bit from our usual fare when I was picking a musical, and I think you would be perfect for the show!" he continues. "We're doing *Bronx-town Brooms*."

I don't know what that is, but I'll look it up it as soon

as I leave the room. “That sounds cool,” I say, pasting on a smile.

“I wanted to personally ask you to audition,” he says, dropping his voice into a more serious tone. He leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “I know you would be incredible as one of the leads, and it would look *really good* on your Brockton Scholarship application.” He stares at me meaningfully for a moment.

What? I swallow hard, meeting his stare. Is he saying what I think he’s saying? Oh my god. I’ve made it. Except . . . this is also kind of icky.

“The committee loves seeing candidates that are willing to jump into activities here at T. K. Anderson,” he continues, suddenly affecting such a light tone that it’s like the previous moment didn’t happen. He smiles. “So I hope you’ll come audition on Monday. I would love to have you.”

“Yeah, um,” I say, grasping for something coherent. “I’ll definitely think about it.”

“Cool,” he says. “I’m glad. I need more students like you.”

Still not sure if “like you” is code for “Black,” but I don’t think he’s going to say that outright anytime soon. It’s time for me to get out of here. “Okay, Mr. B, I’m going to go to class.” I’m already inching toward the door.

“Great,” he says, beaming a megawatt smile at me. “See you soon.”

Chapter 5

Analyze similarities and differences in the revolutionary roots of the following national slogans.

Liberté, égalité, fraternité

(The national motto of the French Empire)

Hard work, magical power, educational excellence

(The American Magical Way)

—AP World History exam sample question

AFTER SCHOOL, I STAND IN THE PICKUP AREA, WAITING FOR Lex to pick me up. I'm itching to talk to her about my conversation with Mr. B. I looked up the musical he mentioned—*Bronxtown Brooms*. It's a retelling of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* set in a mostly Latinx neighborhood in New York City in the nineties. Based on what I read about the show, I'm 98 percent sure now that Mr. B was trying to talk about race without talking about race.

Also, he might think I'm Latina. So that's a major factor in the Reasons Not to Audition for This Musical list.

On the other hand, there's the whole "*wink, wink, nudge, nudge*, audition for this show and I'll consider you for the scholarship" thing. Which, now that I've had some time to think about it, I'm not sure was as shady as I initially thought. It's not like he promised to give me the scholarship. This is just one more opportunity to impress him.

Lex's blue car flies up to the curb, then settles gracefully onto the ground. Her car is painfully nice compared to the one my family has. It has that new aerodynamic bullet shape, and the propulsion engines at the front and back are near silent. I ache with jealousy every time I see it.

"Hey girl hey!" Lex screams through the open passenger window. Her aggressive EDM blasts out into the parking lot, and she dances in her seat, waving her arms wildly toward me. The few people in the parking lot turn to see who this screaming Asian girl is, which is a common side effect of hanging out with Lex. "You look tired!"

I hit a pose with my hands framing my face. "I am."

"She is beauty, she is grace!" Lex yells. "She is late for work! Get in the car."

"You're the one who's late," I yell back. Once I'm settled in the passenger seat, I turn off her music so we can talk. "I've been waiting for you since I left potions club."

She hands me a Starbucks latte and steps on the

accelerator. The car glides away from the curb, lifting smoothly into the air as we go. “I stopped for coffee.”

“Of course you did.” I throw her a withering look before sipping my latte. *Mm*. Not as good as Mom’s, but still necessary to get me through the rest of this day.

“Hey, we deserve it today. We have to finish filling all the weekend orders before we leave tonight.” She stomps on the accelerator and sends the car flying onto the floating road. We glide upward, following the road over the swamp outside the school property.

Her car really is an incredibly fancy piece of magitech. It glides effortlessly through the air. My dream is to buy my parents a car this nice one day.

“How was your day, lady?” Lex asks.

“It was . . . a lot.”

“What did Ana do this time?”

“Plenty of annoying ish, but that’s not what I want to talk about.”

I’ve always been able to tell Lex anything. She was the first one I came out to—the only person at our school I bothered to tell I was a lesbian. She’s easy to talk to, but not because she’s the type who listens quietly. It’s because she’s aggressively supportive. Emphasis on *aggressively*.

“What the hell!” she yells once I finish filling her in on my day. “I knew that the Brockton Scholarship was kind of about favoritism a lot of the time, but that’s so shady.”

“I don’t think it was that bad,” I say.

“What?” she says. “You literally just described, like, some weird, backdoor bullshit.”

“No—I mean—” I sigh and fidget with my hands in my lap for a few seconds. “I was just saying that’s what I thought at first. I’m pretty sure I read too much into it. He didn’t actually say he would give me the scholarship if I auditioned for the show.”

“He doesn’t have to say that. He totally knows that everyone is desperate to do stuff for him.” Lex shakes her head, wrinkling up her nose like she smells something bad. “Plus, there’s no way he doesn’t know that you and Ana are the top picks for Brockton Scholar. You would be, like, the *most* desperate to do whatever he wants.”

“You’re making it seem super evil,” I say. My voice comes out louder than I meant it to. “This is a good thing! He finally noticed me, and he wants to get to know me better.”

Lex looks like she’s about to say something else, but she swallows it after giving me a sidelong glance. We lapse into silence. I lean toward my window and watch the landscape go by. You can see the cypress swamp beneath us through the floating network of roads. There’s a Green Witch van on the ground off to our right. I peer at it as we pass, wondering if it’s my dad’s crew. The Green Witch employees are tiny green and brown dots below us, barely distinguishable from the landscape around them. A tree bursts from

the ground beside their group and grows into a full-grown cypress before they disappear into the distance.

"Mr. B definitely thinks you're Latina," Lex says suddenly.

"Yeah, maybe," I say. "I mean, I think there's one part for a girl who's Black and not Latina? He could be thinking of me for that."

"I guess. So . . ." She pauses, frowning. "You're going to audition?"

"I feel like I have to," I say, shrugging. If I don't audition for the show, that might give him a bad impression of me, which would ruin my chance of getting the scholarship. I'm so close to being a Brockton Scholar. I can't blow it now.

"Girl, you can't act," she says, her eyebrows hovering up by her hairline.

"I'm . . . okay at acting."

She fully cackles at that, which is great for my self-esteem. "You look like you're being tortured when you're onstage. Seriously. Like, you're a beautiful singer. Facts." She smacks me lovingly on the shoulder.

"Thanks."

"But watching you act is painful."

Oh god. I hadn't considered that part of it. What if I suck so bad at my audition that Mr. B never wants to see my face again?

We drive into the parking lot of the strip mall where we work, chug the rest of our coffees, and run into Pilar's

Potions. The jangling bell on the door announces our presence. Pilar eyes us with amusement from where she stands at the counter.

“Aprons on, mijas,” she says.

Pilar is one of my favorite people in the whole world. She’s a short, middle-aged Afro-Cuban woman who’s always wearing the most colorful head wraps and outfits you’ve ever seen. I’ve never met anybody with such a calming presence. Just being around her makes me feel more relaxed. She’s also a master apothecary with a magical license, so as long as she’s in the building, Lex and I can legally make potions for the public.

Pilar’s place is one of the last few hole-in-the-wall potion stores left in town after the Super Walmart opened nearby. That Walmart sells ridiculously cheap potions, but they’re less effective than fresher-brewed ones. We brew all of our potions in-house at Pilar’s.

Lex and I tie on our brown aprons, take turns washing our hands in the big sink in the prep section, and then wait for Pilar’s instructions. I breathe in the scent of patchouli and smile, feeling calmer already.

“Lex, you’re on the counter today,” Pilar says. “Grind the sage and the fennel seeds when there aren’t customers. Shay, we’ll start the prep for tomorrow together.”

Lex swaps places with Pilar behind the counter. “Lucky,” she mouths at me over her shoulder.

“We’re going to need a big batch of Awakening potions

for this weekend, so you should get started on that,” Pilar says to me.

I smile. Making Awakening potions always feels special to me. It was the very first potion ever discovered. It lets people see and manipulate the magical currents in everything. We brew it all the time because every baby is given a dose soon after birth. But every time I brew it, I feel this connection to potions history that’s kind of cool.

“I have some specialty orders for Sunday and a few prescriptions to bottle,” Pilar continues. “So once you’ve set that to simmer, you can come help me.”

I nod, and we all set to work.

Pilar’s prep room is stuffed with every herb, spice, oil, and mineral you could think of. Huge dark wood shelves line the back of the room, each one covered in jars and baskets and cracked Tupperwares filled with supplies for potionworking. There’s a whole wall taken up by shelves of the beautiful curved glassware Pilar sells her potions in. When the light hits the glass, it throws kaleidoscopes of colors all over the piles of herbs waiting on the table that fills the center of the room.

I pull an extra-large cauldron from under the prep table, fill it with water, and set it up on one of the copper stoves lining the walls. While the water heats, I grab ingredients from around the room. Angelica roots. Fennel bulbs. Apple cider vinegar. A few magically charged crystals. Echinacea leaves.

Once the water in the cauldron begins to simmer, I pour in a cup of apple cider vinegar and focus on the liquid, activating my magic sight. The currents of magic in the vinegar and the water swirl around each other, each a slightly different shade of glowing amber. I will the magic to wind together, speeding up the process of the two liquids combining.

As I look at the potion, it occurs to me that if I end up doing the musical, I won't be able to work here as much this semester. My connection to the magic in the potion abruptly breaks as my concentration wavers.

"What's wrong, Shay?" Pilar asks, not looking up from the partridge feathers she's sorting at the center table.

I pull myself out of my thoughts and place the crystals I grabbed earlier in a circle around the cauldron. "Just stressed out with school and stuff."

"The drama teacher who runs the scholarship Shay wants is forcing her to audition for the musical," Lex calls into the pass-through window between the prep room and the main store.

"He's not forcing me!" I protest. Lex is making it seem way more terrible than it is.

"He held the scholarship over your head to get you to audition," Lex says. She purses her lips and aggressively grinds fennel seeds with the pestle in her hand. "That's forcing."

Lex and her big mouth. I shake my head and focus on

the magic in my crystals, pulling the magical currents into a latticework that amplifies their energy. Once the magical energy field glows a bright silver, I draw the lattice up and fold the extra magic deftly into the potion.

Pilar gives my work an approving nod as she breezes past me. "What are you going to do?"

"About the audition?" I ask, grabbing a knife and cutting board. "I'm going to do it, I guess. I'm not that good, so he'll probably just put me in the ensemble. Or he might not want me to be in the show at all."

"Is that what you want to do?" Pilar asks.

I line up my knife and cut the stalk away from a fennel bulb. "I mean, not really."

Lex makes a sound as if she's about to interject, but the bell on the door rings. "Hi, welcome to Pilar's," she calls, turning away to go to the counter.

"There are always more options in every choice than you first think," Pilar says to me. "Try to find all of them before you make your decision."

"I can audition for the show. Or I don't audition for the show, and I ruin my chances of getting the scholarship." I aggressively cut another fennel stalk. "That's basically it."

"You could tell someone what happened," Pilar says. "Another teacher? One that you trust?"

I shake my head. "That won't do anything. Nothing really happened anyway."

"It sounds like something happened."

“Lex is exaggerating.” What does Pilar expect me to do? Go to the principal to tell him that Mr. B looked at me during a meeting and then told me to audition for the musical? Yeah right. “Anyway, that scholarship is the whole point of me going to this school,” I say. “I’ve worked so hard for it. I don’t want everything to be ruined because some teacher decides he doesn’t like me.”

“Protect yourself, Shay,” Pilar says. “Men with power over you are dangerous.” She raises her eyebrows and gives me a knowing look.

I let out a short laugh. “It’s not like *that*.”

She hums quietly, tilting her head to the side. “You are a very powerful person,” she says eventually. “Never forget that.”

“Yeah,” I say, and then I turn my attention back to my potion.

Chapter 6

Young Americans fed up with the rat race are protesting by moving to large communes in Kansas and Nebraska, where residents engage in collective farming. This form of social protest is meant to express their disillusionment with the promises of the American Magical Way and reject the culture of overwork that pushes American youth to struggle for years in a grueling education system, often with little economic benefit.

—“Disenchanted American Youth Join a Mass Communal-Living Movement,” *The New York Times*

OVER THE WEEKEND, I WORK TWO SHIFTS AT PILAR’S AND practice for the audition. I have to sing a section from “My Soft Place to Land,” which is this song from *Bronxtown Brooms*. The song is sung by Valeria, one of the leads. She’s the second oldest in a family with five daughters, and her mom is obsessed with marrying off her daughters to rich men so they won’t have financial problems like she does. The family owns a struggling store called Bronxtown Brooms in a neighborhood that lots of people are leaving because the rent is going up. The song is about how much

she loves the neighborhood, and how devastated she is that all these rich white people are replacing the people who used to live there.

Because Lex is loyal as hell, she's been trying all weekend to coach me into not sucking even though she doesn't think I should audition. But after we finish working the Sunday shift at Pilar's, she puts her foot down.

"No more practicing," she says as she walks across the parking lot. "Your audition will be fine. You can sing. All you have to do is not look like you want to die while you're doing it."

"But that's so hard," I whine, trailing after her. "Because I do want to die."

She laughs. "You keep, like, staring sadly at the ground. Just stand still and look forward."

I sigh. Easier said than done.

Once we're both in the car, she sticks her thumb into a hole beside the steering wheel. Her car has one of those fancy magical thumbprint ignitions. "Do you want to go to the gym?" she asks as she starts the car.

I almost say no—I have some homework left to finish—but playing a game of terraball with Lex would be stress relieving. And I really need that right now. "Yeah, sure," I say.

"Yeeeeees!" Lex shouts, pounding her hands on the steering wheel. "Oh my god, we haven't played in forever. I'm going to kick your ass."

“No you’re not,” I say, giving her a withering look.
“Heh. Keep telling yourself that.”



Forty minutes later, I’m panting on the foam floor of the terraball court, clutching the rubber ball to my chest. Lex is, of course, kicking my ass.

“Suck on that!” she yells. “Don’t just lie there—gimme the ball!”

“Fuck you,” I say, slinging the ball her way. She’s so damn fast, it’s impossible to catch her. When we were on the T. K. Anderson terraball team together, she was always one of the faster players.

She snatches the ball out of the air, flashing me a cheeky grin. “I love you too.” Then she jumps on a foam cube, magically enlarges it, and uses it as a launch pad to get away from me.

Terraball is, at its core, a deeply silly game. You’re trying to run across a court littered with foam cubes and throw the ball into the opposite team’s goal. Except while you’re doing that, the other team is magically changing the size of the foam cubes in your way to mess with you. If you fall while holding the ball, you have to turn it over to the other team. So essentially, terraball is basketball, football, and those gymnastics foam pits fused into one ridiculous, awesome sport.

I pelt after Lex, shrinking the foam cubes in my way as

I go. Once she's about halfway across the court, I wrench at the magic in the red cube in front of her. It explodes outward, growing to be about six feet tall. Lex cuts left to avoid it, and then disappears around the obstacle so I can no longer see her.

"Nice try," she shouts back at me.

But that's not the end of my plan. I hurl several small blocks in Lex's direction, enlarging them once they're almost out of my sight. I'm rewarded with a small *oof* from Lex.

"Oh, you're the *worst*," she says as I come around the side of the red cube. She's on the floor, taken down by my now-giant projectiles.

"Thank you," I say, holding my hand out toward her. "Ball, please."

She tosses it to me and shimmies out from under the pile of foam. "Do you want to come over for cultural-dinner night after this?"

Lex's mom and dad cook Filipino food every Sunday to make Lex feel closer to her heritage. Lex is adopted, so her parents, who are both white, make a big effort to help her connect to her culture. It's a really sweet tradition. Plus, Filipino food is delicious.

I shake my head. "Not tonight. I'm volunteering, and then my mom and I are going to watch *Potion Wars*."

"Oh my god, that show is still running?" Lex says.

"Yeah, but we're just going to watch reruns."

“Okay. You have to come over soon, though.”

“I will,” I say, and then I take off running toward her goal. This time I manage to score, even though she pulls off an impressive maneuver where she rapidly shrinks and enlarges all the cubes in my path at random. That point takes the score to six for me, and eight for Lex.

On the next play, she immediately pays me back by side-slammng me with a block and sinking the ball into the goal from the two-point line. Then she flops onto the floor. “Okay, I need a break from kicking your ass,” she announces, splaying her limbs out like a starfish.

“You’re on a roll today,” I say as I come to sit next to her.

She flashes me double victory signs. “You know it.”

Honestly, Lex is always better than me at terraball. And any other athletic activity she convinces me to do. She’s the kind of person who kills it in sports based on her sheer athleticism. Terraball, soccer, cross-country, flame archery—she’s good at everything.

I snag a mangled piece of foam and lie down with it propped under my head as a pillow. We both rest there in silence for a minute, taking a moment to catch our breath.

“Do you have MAT prep this week?” I ask.

“No, I convinced the magimeds that I can prep on my own for the last week before the test,” Lex says, her expression clouding.

Lex’s parents are both magimeds. Seriously. I think

they met in medical school. Her mom helps older people whose magical abilities have started to degenerate, and her dad is a heart surgeon.

“My tutor was seriously stressing me out,” Lexi says after a pause.

My heart clenches when she talks about her private MAT tutor. I shouldn’t still feel this way, because Lex isn’t ever trying to throw it in my face that her family can afford stuff that mine can’t, but it doesn’t make me want that stuff any less.

“She acted like I was stupid every time we met,” Lex continues.

“You’re not stupid,” I say immediately. Lex is self-conscious about that. As far as schoolwork goes, Lex is incredible at things she’s passionate about and mediocre at doing work she’s not interested in, so her high school GPA wasn’t high enough for her parents’ standards.

“Thanks.”

“Do you want to do practice tests with me this week?”

She pulls a face. “No, thanks. I think I’ll be fine.”

“Come on,” I say, grinning at her. “You can come over to my place. My mom will feed you.”

“It’s fine, Shay. Don’t worry about it,” she snaps.

I stare at her, wondering what made her mad. Did she think I was being condescending?

She sits up and rubs a hand over her face, then pushes it back through her black hair. “Sorry. I’m just stressed.”

“About what?” I say, sitting up as well.

“My parents are on my back to do all this stuff so I can get into college. I’m already taking that online class, *and* working at Pilar’s, *and* doing extra volunteering, *and* studying to take the MATs and the SATs again.” She frowns. “It’s too late for this year anyway. I’ve already submitted most of my applications. It just feels like they’re planning for me to fail at this point.”

I didn’t think Lex was bothered by her gap year, but I guess I was wrong. She’s always so high energy that it can take a while to find out when something is upsetting her. Not my finest moment as her best friend. “I’m sorry, Lex,” I say. “I’m sure you’ll get into a great college this year, though. Then it’ll all be worth it.”

She purses her lips. “Yeah,” she says unenthusiastically. “My parents are just, like, convinced I’m going to become some dropout witch and move to a commune or something. They’ve been watching the news too much recently, and now they’re all freaked out.”

“Yeah, my mom’s been doing that too.”

“It’s kind of annoying. I’m just tired of people telling me that I need to work harder so things will work out for me. There’s this guy at the soup kitchen I’m volunteering at that really thinks I need to hear his opinions about how to be the right kind of hardworking American witch.” She rolls her eyes. “But he’s also convinced that I’m a Chinese spy here to steal American magical secrets and that Don’t

Hate, Educate is part of a big Chinese plot to ruin the American educational system, so . . .”

“Um.” I blink, taking a moment to absorb that. “Does he know you’re Filipino?”

“I mean, no, but I don’t think that really matters to him.”

“What the hell,” I say. “That guy is a straight-up conspiracy theorist.”

“I know!” Lex shouts. “And he’s young too! He’s not, like, some weird old wizard that’s stuck in the past. He’s just on his third gap year, and he’s decided that he’s not getting into a licensing college because people ‘hate white dudes now.’” She huffs loudly and shakes her shoulders. “Okay, I’m over this. You want to get Starbucks?”

I have no money. Don’t even have to check my wallet. “Um . . .” I say awkwardly.

“Pleease?” she wheedles. She leans over and puts her head on my shoulder. “My treat?”

“Ugh, no. I feel like such a bum making you pay for me.”

“No stress, lady. The magimeds are paying for it.”

Lex’s parents make so much money that Lex could buy the whole Starbucks menu on her credit card and they wouldn’t notice.

We end up going to the Starbucks drive-through on the way home, because Lex is persistent, and she buys me a latte against my will. “I already paid for it, so you have to drink it,” she says when she hands it to me.

“It’s not like I’m going to throw it away,” I say, rolling

my eyes. “Anyway, would you want some Night Vision potion? I made too much.”

“For what? My career as a spy?” Lex snickers.

“It’s useful! I’ve been taking it so my parents don’t realize how late I’m staying awake.”

Lex side-eyes me. “Are you using it to do homework?”

“. . . Maybe.”

The sound of her cackling fills the car. “I feel like other people would use it to, like, sneak out or something,” she manages to say.

“Well, I’m a huge dork, so . . .” I throw my hands in the air helplessly. “Do you want the potion or not?”

“I’ll take it,” she says, still shaking with laughter.

I transfer the vials of Night Vision from one of my wooden transport boxes into her spare leather pouch. I made a new batch of the tanning potion Lex likes last weekend, so I put a few vials of that in too.

We spend the rest of the drive bopping to her earth-shakingly loud EDM. When she drops me off at home, I hop out and lean against the open car door. “You really should come over this week to study. We can make it low stress! We can even practice drills.” I flash her a grin. “I know you love drills.”

She snickers, shaking her head. “Girl, you know I love a good drill.”

Lex is way better at the practical section of the MATs than the written one. She’s in the top percentile for all

the drills—temperature changes, change of state, texture adjustment, scentwork, electricity generation, weight and density changes. She doesn't need drill practice, but that might be the confidence boost she needs.

"And I'm sure you don't want to miss my mom's cooking." I dance away from the car, pointing at Lex with my free hand. "Or her weird comments implying that we're dating."

She pumps her shoulders, pointing back at me. "Mm, I can never skip Mama Johnson comments."

"Slightly insensitive, but meant with love." I shrug. "Okay, byeeeeeee!"

"Byeeeeeee!"

I close the door and head up to my apartment. Dad immediately shushes me from the kitchen as I run in the door.

"Mom's sleeping," he says when I enter the kitchen.

This early? Weird.

"MarTech was really tough today. They had her checking scentwork patches for eight hours straight," Dad says. He takes the open package of cookies in front of him and holds it out to me. I take two. "I'll drive you to the old folks later," he says, turning to fuss over one of his midair plants that has floated past the side of his head. "I need to pick up groceries at Publix, so I'll drop you off on my way."

"Okay." I sit at the kitchen table, sucking down the last of my latte. Volunteering at the retirement home will be

hard tonight, since my voice is tired from practicing so much this weekend. I go to the home during their Sunday dinners and sing jazz standards while one of the residents plays the piano. Thankfully, nobody pays much attention to me while I'm doing it.

Dad squints at his midair plant, his brow furrowing with concentration. One of the spiky leaves shakes, and then a brown spot near the tip slowly disappears. He turns his attention to me as the plant drifts away toward the kitchen window. "Kiddo, I know your mom asked you about this already, but if you want to take the SATs again in March, we can make that happen," he says, sitting in the seat across from me. "No pressure. We don't want you to feel like you shouldn't take it just because it costs money."

But it does cost money. Him reassuring me doesn't make that fact any less true. I already paid for my MAT registration out of my savings, which I only got away with because I secretly registered myself and hoped Mom wouldn't notice. So far she hasn't.

"Your mom said that taking the SATs again could help you with the Brockton Scholarship application. We just want to make sure that you have every opportunity, okay?"

"Thanks, Dad," I say. "But I don't want to do it because I'm probably going to be super busy this semester." Be a big girl, Shay. Spit it out. I take a small bite of cookie for fortitude. "I'm auditioning for the musical at school."

His eyebrows shoot up, and he blinks too much.
“You’re doing the musical?”

“Yeah.”

“But you . . .” He pauses. “Hate acting.”

I’m not a mind reader, but I’m pretty sure that wasn’t what he wanted to say originally. “You mean I’m bad, right?”

“You have many other talents, Shay,” he says tentatively. He runs a hand over his bald head.

“Oh my god, please just lie to me.”

“What’s this about a musical?” Mom walks into the kitchen, still wearing her sleep-rumpled work clothes. Dad rubs the small of her back when she joins us.

“You’re up already?” he asks.

She waves him off, keeping her attention on me. “I was only resting my eyes.” Dad snorts quietly at that.

“Mr. B asked me to audition for the spring musical,” I say hesitantly. I watch Mom closely for her reaction. This is going to be a big deviation from our plan, and it’ll be a lot harder if she’s not on board. “He heard my solo at the concert, and he really liked my singing,” I add. “He thinks I would be a good fit for the show.”

“Okay,” she says, nodding slowly. “This is good, right? You’ve said before that he has a lot of pull on the scholarship committee.”

“Yeah, he does. We actually had a great conversation

on Friday,” I say, grinning as I remember how I impressed him when I talked about myself. “I think he’s interested in getting to know me better before I apply.”

“Perfect,” Dad says. “If he gets to spend time with you, he’ll figure out pretty quick that there’s nobody else they could possibly give the scholarship to.”

As I look at my parents’ faces, any last doubts I have evaporate. Lex really was overreacting. If Mom and Dad don’t think this is weird, it definitely isn’t.

Mom’s expression is thoughtful. “This isn’t exactly the plan, but . . .” She shakes her head. “It’s too good an opportunity to pass up. You think you’ll be able to balance that with all the other stuff you have going on?”

“I’ll be fine,” I say. “Besides, I can’t exactly say no after Mr. B specifically asked me to audition.”

“He would understand,” Dad says confidently.

But what if he doesn’t? Then I’m just fucked. “Seriously, I’ll be fine. I’m not playing terraball right now, so I have plenty of time.”

“You’ll have to cut down on how much you’re working at Pilar’s,” Mom says.

“I know.”

“Okay,” she says. “Well, good luck at the audition.”

“They say ‘break a leg’ in the *theater*, honey,” Dad interjects. He puts a fancy accent on the word *theater*.

I kind of wish I would break my leg. Then I would

have a good excuse not to do this show. If I'm being honest, I don't want to be in a musical. Acting is pretty excruciating. But when I look at my parents, I'm reminded why I'm doing this. They've put so much work into me preparing to get this scholarship. This is the first step toward the life they want for me.

Maybe the American Magical Way didn't exactly work for them—they haven't gotten the perfect, American Dream lifestyle that it promises—but they've put everything they have into making sure it will work for me. I can't let them down now, even if it means doing something I don't want to do.

