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PB ISBN 978-1-912626-30-4 eISBN 978-1-912626-36-6 To Mum, thank you for starting my journey with books, and in fond memory of my very lovely Dad. You are much missed. Those known to be present at the Snakesmouth

Lighthouse on the night of the murder

SETH SEPPI - kitchen boy

NIGHTSHADE

INSPECTOR SAGACIOUS PEWTER (MagiCon)

MINA MINTENCRESS -

owner of the Snakesmouth Lighthouse

LARK SUNRISE - friend of Mina Mintencress

ALFIE MINTENCRESS -

brother to Mina Mintencress

HARI BROCKLER - lawyer for Mina Mintencress

ZACHARY RENDLETON - manager of the

Snakesmouth Lighthouse Hotel

CELESTE CRACKLING - maid to

Mina Mintencress

## PART ONE

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## 1. THE PROSPECT OF MAGIC

In the Last Chance Hotel, Seth Seppi was listening anxiously to the sounds of Mr and Mrs Bunn handing over ham and egg sandwiches to two hairy walkers who had been staying. They were offering cheery wishes for the next part of their journey.

Seth used to listen for the sounds of guests departing, just waiting for the chance to sneak into the quiet kitchen and secretly practise cooking. Cooking was his great love, learnt from his father, before his father had disappeared. But his recent discovery that he didn't work for Mr and Mrs Bunn at all, that they had been lying to him his whole life – and that the Last Chance Hotel belonged to him – had been astonishing. Seth could still hardly take in. It had changed everything.

But then he'd lately learnt so many astonishing truths that there was no part of Seth's life that he felt he truly understood any more.

The hairy and unexpected guests had stumbled gratefully upon the remote hotel, located in the sleepy depths of the Last Hope Forest. They had joyfully rested their blistered feet on the furniture, cheerfully left a skim of beard trimmings in the sink (accompanied by much singing), snored loudly and hadn't stopped eating everything put in front of them, including a very smelly goat's cheese everyone else had rejected and a Christmas pudding Seth had been trying to get rid of since last December.

And now they were gone. As he finally heard Horatio and Norrie Bunn slam the front door, Seth reached to the highest shelf to do what he *now* did in secret. Among the sacks of flour he had tucked a book, one with a bright pink jacket, covered in silly doodles and decorated with fluorescent lettering.

A Beginner's Guide to Really Easy-Peasy Magic.

It was only a few weeks ago that the arrival of a group of sorcerers had turned Seth's whole world upside down, not least because he'd narrowly avoided being arrested for murder.

Seth had discovered that magic was real, and the sorcerers had brought the tantalizing promise that he might actually be one of them – someone born with just a spark of magic. But just a spark was enough, Inspector Pewter of the magical police, MagiCon, had explained. Since then, Seth had been awaiting his promised visit, but so far the only contact he'd had from the inspector was the arrival of a small package. He'd unwrapped it eagerly to find it contained the *Easy-Peasy* book and a breezy note saying the inspector was unavoidably delayed and encouraging Seth to give the book a try.

Seth's shoulders slumped and his hands were shaking as he turned the pages.

Easy-peasy magic? Really?

The terrible smell of burnt, sour milk still hung about the kitchen as a constant reminder that his magic was an utter disaster.

Putting a very small wart on the end of a nose. After trying that one his nose had swelled to the size of an onion and had taken three days to return to normal, giving Horatio Bunn the best laugh of his life every single time he saw him.

He couldn't do this. He was never going to be able to do magic.

At least he now knew a little of his true history. The Last Chance Hotel had been passed down to him from his mother's family, and his mother had been a sorcerer.

Unfortunately, Seth had also had to stomach the seriously bad news that she had been a notoriously sinister sorcerer. And that she was wanted in connection with a grave event that had resulted in the deaths of countless magical people.

Now, as Seth stared at the book, he knew he was going to have to confront the most difficult truth of all. He was never going to be able to master a spell and be admitted into the magical world. He was never going to grow up to be a great and learned sorcerer.

And that meant he was never going to be able to discover if all they said about his mother was true, or look into a couple of other things that were troubling him.

To do all that he just needed to be able to perfect one spell. Just one. He pushed the book away. If there was easy magic, this was not it. He put his head in his hands and groaned. Neither Inspector Pewter, nor his other new friend in the magical world, secret magical agent Angelique Squerr, had bothered to come and help. He felt all the powerlessness of being miles from anywhere, in the worst possible position of tantalizingly knowing about the magical world, but facing up to never being part of it.

He was growing desperate. Today, he had reached the last page. He was never going to get a spell right. Had he inherited any of his mother's magic at all?

And as he stood there alone, facing nothing but his failure, he found himself thinking something he'd promised himself he never would . . . was it possible that there might be magic he could do? Could it be that the only magic he would ever be able to master would be of the 'wrong' kind?

With a quick and guilty glance over his shoulder, Seth reached into a handy inside pocket of the bright-blue tunic he wore and took out a small black book. It was so old that the pages were held together with a scarlet thread. As he turned the cracked and stiff pages Seth felt, as he always did, that he was meant to use this book.

It was crammed with simple family recipes, mostly. There were weird instructions for creating perfectly innocent home-made boot polish and oven cleaner. OK, so it *was* sprinkled with the odd spell, and Pewter and Angelique had wanted to take this book away from him because *some* of it was 'disturbing' magic. Sure, there were banned spells in here and details of dark devices and sinister ideas. Yet it felt so right, so comfortable in his hand – reading it was like being close to a trusted friend.

Just looking at the book didn't make him some sort of sinister sorcerer, did it?

He turned to a well-worn page and found himself staring at the picture of the firefly cage, a dangerous and powerful device that terrified sorcerers.

Uncertainty and fear mixed together and crept into his stomach.

He knew he shouldn't even be looking at this book. But it had been his mother's notebook and the magic in it seemed to whisper to him in a reassuring voice, telling him he could rely on it. Here was a picture of someone stretching out their arms, as if beckoning something to them. *For capturing*, read the text alongside it. You said the words *Yma nam-well*. That one looked all right. That couldn't possibly harm anyone.

The magic seemed to whisper more insistently, it seemed to be saying that in a corner of the Last Chance Hotel, in the middle of the Last Hope Forest, all alone, you may have no one to help, but there was also no one to see or care if you dabbled in just a little dark magic. Seth stretched out his fingers to give it a try.

There was a rush of cold air and a slinky black shape slunk in and wound herself around his legs, bringing in the dank and furtive smell of the forest.

Seth's black cat, Nightshade, was shimmying in from troubling the local wildlife. Seth hurriedly shoved the forbidden book back under his brightblue tunic and tried to look at Nightshade with innocent eyes

'Can't leave you alone for a minute!' she cried, nudging at him with her pink nose. It was the only part of her that wasn't a glossy black. 'Let's see you do some tricks. Clean ones.' She leapt onto the worktop and clawed the bright cover of *Easy-Peasy Magic* closer.

Not for the first time, Seth wondered if it was really such a great thing that he had discovered his cat could talk. Most of the time she relayed stories of the bloodthirsty battles she had with her sworn enemies – the crows that circled endlessly above the hotel – but now and again she would break off from those to scold him. She fixed him challengingly with her big green eyes.

'I need a spell, Nightshade. Angelique explained it all to me. To join the magical world – the Elysee – you have to pass the Prospect. And to do that, you have to prove that you have the spark of magic inside you by demonstrating one spell done well. That's all I need. Then I've got a chance to find things out.'

Nightshade moved so close her green eyes bored straight into his. 'This isn't the way, Seth.'

'But—'

'What about spoons?' Nightshade clawed her way to the last page of the bright-pink volume. 'I mean, spoons – what can possibly go wrong?'

'You said that about boiling milk,' muttered Seth darkly.

'Well, show me something. Otherwise I've got a date with a particularly evil crow called Eric, who has a foul beak dirtier than a hare's behind. He needs teaching a lesson or two. Come on. You can do it.'

'It does look like a simple incantation,' muttered Seth.

They both took a shifty glance at the door to the hotel lobby, which was buckled and blistered and burnt around the edges, a relentless reminder of how every simple spell Seth tried not only failed, but led to disaster.

Nightshade took a step backwards, looking as if she wanted to put on safety goggles and a crash helmet. 'There won't be any blood this time, will there?'