



Since Mama died, my memories are slippery little things. They weave through my fingers. Snake away in the darkness.

It's created a giant problem. Disastrous, really.

As I stand behind the counter of our family-owned apothecary shop, I know I'm in trouble. Near my elbow sits a crate full of bottled ingredients I haven't labeled and shelved. I can't. Each one is an annoying little mystery.

I frown at the glass bottle in my hand. Inside, a dried herb leans against the glass. An herb I used to know, but I can't remember, no matter how hard I try.

"Lavender, can I order cough medicine?" Greta Anders, the baker's seven-year-old daughter, says to me as she approaches the shop counter. Her wide brown eyes are the color of syrup, and she lifts her chin to peer at me over the tall antique counter. "My mama gave

me money for it.” Her golden-brown fingers arrange coins in a row between us. Then she turns away to shield a cough.

The hacking sound makes fear strum inside me. Her cough isn’t as severe as the one Mama had before she died, but I can’t help the worry that sprouts inside me each time I hear a cough.

I swallow my nerves and pocket the mystery bottle. I’ll look up the herb later. For now, I need to focus on finding Greta the right medicine. “Yes, let me find something to help.”

Greta nods.

Tall shelves lined with apothecary bottles loom from the walls. I scan the labels on the nearest shelf, and I hope a remedy will stand out. Maybe with a conveniently printed label like *Cough remedy—for healing little kids who trust you (even when you’ve forgotten everything)*.

No such luck. Instead, the labels are marked with unhelpful, single-word clues: *rosemary, ginger, feverfew, laudanum*.

On my thirteenth birthday a few weeks ago, I officially became the new apothecary apprentice. From the time I was little, Papa has been training me to become his apprentice—the first girl apprentice *ever* at our family’s apothecary shop. Now that I’m old enough, now that I finally have the position I’ve worked toward for years, I worry it will slip through my fingers along with my memories.

As an apothecary’s apprentice, it’s my job to know which remedy will calm a cough. I’m supposed to know what will ease pain. It’s my job to interpret the labels for our patients.

And more than that, I want to help Greta. If only my brain worked as well as it used to before Mama died.

“Where’s your mother?” I ask Greta as I search.

“She’s at the cobbler’s next door. She told me to get a head start in case it takes you a while to make the medicine. She also said she might buy me a new button for doing all my chores this week. I love buttons. Especially shiny ones.”

“Buttons are nice.” I nod, half listening. The bottle I now hold has a label that reads *burdock*. The name is familiar, but I can’t remember what it does.

I adjust the large hat on my head, sitting over my long, wavy hair. The hat is supposed to be charmed with magic to help my disastrous memory problem. But it does nothing for my foggy mind.

Thanks a lot, hat.

"Is that new?" Greta asks, pointing to it. "It's nice. So colorful."

I frown. She must be the only person in Hattertown who likes this hideous hat. A wide pink brim dwarfs my head, and feathers sprawl every which way. Golden cats are embroidered along the faded brim. For two weeks, I've worn the ridiculous thing, even though it looks like an oversized, fluffy bird nesting in my hair.

"Maybe I'll let you wear it sometime," I tell her. Maybe the magic inside the hat will work better for her than it has for me.

Certainly, the magic should have worked by now. The peddler who sold it to me claimed it would lift the fog inside my head. That my mind would zoom in on memories, as if they were scenes through a spyglass.

I think the old peddler might be a liar. The idea makes me want to bite my nails, even though Papa says it's a nasty, terrible habit that I need to break.

Since I can't depend on the hat and its magic, I pull crumpled textbook pages from my dress pocket instead. I've torn them from Papa's copy of the *Encyclopedia of Medicinal Herbs and Their Functions*. I flatten out the wrinkled pages and trace the print with my finger. A cough remedy must be in here somewhere. I hope.

"What are those?" Greta asks.

"Nothing important." I wave her off. "I just need to look up something." I bite the nail on my pointer finger as I search.

Greta cranes her neck to stare at the pages, too, as if they hold an interesting secret. I'm tempted to ask her to help search the pages with me, but before I can, a door squeals upstairs.

Footsteps tread on creaky floorboards, the gait steady and sure. I know it's Papa coming down the stairs that connect our family apartment to the apothecary shop below.

I stuff the pages in my pockets as Papa rounds the corner, into the shop.

"Hi there." My voice comes out shrill and wrong. I hide my hands behind my back so he won't notice my bitten nail.

Greta laughs at me, but the laugh transforms into a cough.

"Ah," Papa says. "You need something for a cold, Miss Anders? You're in good hands with Lavender. She'll find the right remedy."

He retrieves his greatcoat and his black leather medical bag from the closet. Instead of leaving straightaway, he stands there, watching, as if he expects me to shoot off a textbook display of medical knowledge to make him proud.

My heart speeds up, but my hands and mind are frozen. I was afraid this might happen.

"Do you know what you'll give Greta for her cold?" Papa prompts. His eyes are puffy and red, as if he's been awake all night. Again.

"I ... uh ..." I walk toward the farthest shelf, buying time and giving the hat one last chance to work its magic. But my mind is blank. The only words that surface are ones I glanced on the encyclopedia page: *basil* and *cinnamon*.

I hesitate. "I don't think basil would work. But maybe cinnamon?" It sounds like I'm planning a dinner recipe, not a remedy. I glance toward Papa to gauge his reaction.

His brow furrows. He isn't impressed.

Heat creeps into my hairline and down my cheeks. "I'd love to know what your opinion is, Papa." I feel three inches tall. It didn't used to be like this. I used to be one of the smartest kids in our town's school—back when I used to attend.

But not anymore.

If only my memories were like herbs. If only I could bottle them up. Keep them safe. Uncork them when I needed them.

"Prescribe a horehound syrup," Papa says. "Look up the recipe if you can't remember it. Lavender ..."

I swallow. "Yes, Papa?"

"You should have known that answer. Remember, cinnamon helps with dizziness and blurred vision. We talked about it last week."

The disappointment in his voice makes me want to curl into a ball and slip between the cracks in the floorboards. "I'll remember next time," I promise.

I can't fail again.

"Anyway," Papa says as if he's oblivious to my embarrassment. "I need to make a few house calls. When you've finished here, there's a few ingredients I need you to pick up." He hands me a list.

"Yes, Papa."

If I can't remember how to help our customers, not only will I be a failure, but also Papa will have to give the apprenticeship to somebody else, whether he wants to or not.

Papa pats the top of my fluffy-feathered head as if I'm a three-year-old. If he knew this feathered hat is supposed to be magic, he'd probably pitch it in the hearth and watch it curl to ashes, even though I spent my entire savings on it. He'd remind me that magic is unscientific and a waste of money.

But I hope he's wrong.

Papa sweeps out the door, with his greatcoat fastened and his medical bag grasped in his hand.

I boil a syrup for Greta, and by the time it's ready, a plan has solidified in my mind.

"Thank you," Greta says, clutching the paper bag with her cough remedy inside. The shop bell dings as she leaves. Through the glass panels on the front door, I see her mother return. She gives Greta a quick hug.

Greta smiles. Even though she's sick, she looks happy. Carefree. I can't remember the last time I felt that way.

A strange twinge aches near my heart, but I do my best to ignore it. I pocket the list Papa gave me and shove the faulty hat beneath my arm.

"How do you like that, Faulty Hat?" I scold.

I'll run Papa's errands. But first, I have my own errand to run. It's time to visit the old peddler who sold me Faulty Hat.

