

Overlap

I. The Lake

The biggest surprise had been the heat.

Sure, Carmen had told Seth that it got hot in California, that it regularly got up to 110 degrees Fahrenheit in El Dorado Hills, and that she used to go to bed in a wet swim-suit in order to keep cool but still, it was hot.

And the Magliano family had seemed so calm about it, greeting them out on the front driveway in the blazing sun, all in tank tops and shorts. Adrianna had looked Seth up and down and smirked, commenting under her breath that he needed a new T-shirt how could he still wear things from college?

“Don’t worry,” Carmen whispered to Seth as Miriam scolded her younger daughter. “That means she likes you.”

“It does?” asked Seth, trying to sound nonchalant.

Carmen nodded, trying not to smile too obviously. “She only teases people if she likes them. If she were super polite, then we would know that she didn’t like you.”

“If you say so,” muttered Seth. He looked around the living room as Ernesto somehow whisked the suitcases away from them and Adrianna disappeared into her room and Miriam began to walk to the kitchen, chattering about martinis. The living and kitchen were one large room, with pictures on every available wall space but, somehow, it didn’t seem crowded. There were two samurai swords in a glass case in the corner, over the baby-grand piano. Carmen’s room was painted blue-and-grey, and Adrianna’s purple-and-pink. It would have been obvious who lived in which, even if he hadn’t been told. And the martinis were good.

So that was all good.

Kate showed up a few minutes into the first round of martinis. Giving Carmen such a strong hug that Seth’s petite girlfriend was lifted off her feet and Seth was afraid that a rib or two would be broken. He wasn’t too surprised when Kate gave him a similar hug, and instantly began peppering him with questions that he tried to answer in order and then gave up.

“The real question,” said Adrianna, making herself another martini, “Is why you turned Carmen down sophomore year?”

“Because I was a dumbass,” Seth said, without thinking about the answer too hard.

Everyone laughed, and Carmen beamed. So that was also all good.

It wasn't until an hour later, when they went down to Folsom Lake to ride in the speedboat, that things got weird.

“So, you're Seth!”

Carmen's next-door neighbors, Sarah and Emma, were both tall, blonde and gorgeous. Even if Seth hadn't been prepped, he would have known that Sarah was the instagram-influencer friend and Emma was Adrianna's dancer friend. Emma was taking photos of everything with a very expensive looking camera, and Sarah – despite wearing a swimsuit that probably cost an arm and a leg that she'd gotten for free from some isnta ad she did – was deftly unmooring the speedboat and urging everyone to get on board.

The only other man beside Seth, this guy called Alex who had also grown up with the Magliano clan, came running up at the last moment, hauling a backpack full of cheap beers and complaining that there was no parking around Folsom Lake in August.

It was easy to see why Carmen called them all her “American family.” The conversation flowed like the beer, and all of the twenty-something-year-olds talked to Seth as if they'd known him forever. Alex was the grouchiest about Seth's presence, but even he loosened up when Seth had the presence of mind to mention his sleep science research when Alex commented that he was working in a biomedical engineering lab. Then the two men had a lengthy conversation about the importance of science to the advancement of culture, with frequent interruptions by Carmen, even while the women chatted about work (Kate, Carmen and Sarah) and boys (Adrianna and Emma).

They were approaching a promising looking beach, with large beech trees whose roots were completely underwater and provided plenty of shade, when the boat suddenly rocked violently. Alex flipped backwards off the boat, beer flying high in the air before plopping into the water unceremoniously. Seth slammed into the railing, all the wind getting knocked out of him. He gasped for air in a startled way as he practically performed the Heimlich maneuver on himself as he struggled to stay on the boat.

Adrianna and Emma, who'd been sitting on the prow, had also fallen off. And Seth could hear them yelling angrily. It sounded as if they were shouting, “Roz!” Whatever that meant.

Sarah cut the motor. “Emma?!”

“We're fine!” Emma yelled back.

“FUCK THIS,” Adrianna shouted. “I was still dressed!”

“What happened?” Seth gasped once he had air. He looked over the side, and added, “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine!” Alex spluttered. He looked furious, floating on his back in the water with his Sac State t-shirt billowing around him. “I can swim.”

“I can’t believe this,” complained Adrianna. She was already swimming towards the back of the ship, struggling to take her shirt off so that it wouldn’t hinder her. “I really can’t believe this.”

“Did we hit a tree?” Seth asked.

“I don’t think so,” muttered Sarah.

Carmen looked over the side of the boat. “Doesn’t look like it,” she agreed. “It must just be a *choppy day*.”

Seth frowned. Something about Carmen’s tone seemed off. “Sweetie? Is everything okay? You didn’t get hurt, right?”

“Just bruised my leg,” Carmen assured him.

Kate had dropped the ladder down the back of the ship and was now standing on the diving platform. “You never know what’s going to happen on this la…” And she, absurdly, fell off the diving platform, as if something invisible had grabbed her around the ankle and pulled.

Seth stared.

Carmen burst into laughter, trying to smother it with one hand and failing miserably.

“That’s fine!” Came Kate’s voice. “I was too hot anyway.”

“Can we please just go to the beach?” complained Sarah. “I want to start drinking now! Someone else can be designated driver.”

About half the group laughed and they all got back on the boat (except for Emma, who just decided to swim straight to the beach). They pulled closer to the beach, dropped anchor, ferried everything to the shore on inflatable mattresses, and started passing out sandwiches.

It was then that Seth realized that Emma hadn’t actually joined them on the beach. She was standing in the shallow water near the beech trees, staring intently at something by the trunk of the tree.

“Emma?” Seth called, holding up another sandwich. “Are you hungry?”

There was a brief moment of silence on a trip that had so far been filled with non-stop chatter.

Emma looked around at him and smiled. "Yeah, save me one."

"What are you doing?" He asked. He was acutely aware that everyone was staring at him and too worried to turn around and look at their expressions.

"I'm peeing," Emma said brightly.

Seth flushed and Kate howled with laughter.

"That's *disgusting*," complained a voice Seth could not hear, and the others were trying to ignore.

"Oh, shut up," Emma hissed at the owner of that voice, a creature that looked (to those that could see him) more-or-less human, except for the kelp-like hair and green skin. "Why'd you have to rock the boat? Leave us alone; you know we have an outsider with us."

The creature, whose name was Roz, sulked.

Seth didn't say anything for at least twenty minutes, drinking his beer morosely until Carmen lay her head in his lap and smiled up at him. "Hey, babe?"

"Hm?"

"They all like you."

"You sure?"

"Yes, I am."

"I do like him," Roz insisted, his green eyes wide. His kelp-like hair flopped back and forth as he looked around, trying to keep eye contact with a bunch of people who were trying desperately not to look at him. Despite Emma's insistence, he was now sitting on the beach with the group, keeping up non-stop chatter that was extremely distracting. "I really do. That's why I was trying to knock him into the water. Knocking everyone else in was an accident."

Carmen ignored Roz, just as she had tried to do when he rocked the boat. (Adrianna had, out of Seth's sight, tried to give Roz a good punch after falling into the water fully dressed.)

Alex got up and stretched, hitting Roz across the head with his elbow to get him to shut up.

It is just as well that Seth can't see the nymph, Alex thought to himself. Those abs would make anyone feel insecure. They sure make me feel insecure. It's why everyone is so damn athletic in this town.

It's time for a bit of an explanation.

You see, there are some places, rarer now in the age of technology, that are on this weird area of overlap with another world. For simplicity, let's call this world Imagination Isle. Has a nice ring to it.

And Imagination Isle is the world of magic and monsters, of pixies and fairies. But not fairies that live in flowers (those are the pixies) but Fairies that build cities from living trees and perform odd magic and inspired authors through the ages. There are mermaids and dragons and sphinx and gods and goddesses of rivers and the stars.

El Dorado Hills, for some absurd reason, is in an area of overlap with Imagination Isle. Which means that, the Magliano girls and their American family, grew up surrounded by all sorts of strange magic. The type of magic that doesn't exist in Washington, D.C. or New York City, New York.

Which meant that Seth, for all he knew about Carmen Magliano, did not know about the Fairies and the magic and the dragons.

But Carmen's friends from Imagination Isle couldn't let her move to the East Coast and get a romantic partner without saying something about it.

"I'm just saying," Roz complained, as the group packed up at sunset and Alex convinced Sarah that she was still too tipsy to drive the boat and took the keys from her. "If Seth could see me, the party would have really been good."

"Roz," muttered Adrianna under her breath. "Shut up before one of us says something and he thinks we're crazy."

"I thought men liked crazy?"

"I think you misunderstood the plot of Crazy Ex-girlfriend..."

"Sissy!" Carmen waved at Adrianna from the boat. "Come on!"

"Come back *without* him so I can talk to you!" Roz yelled as Carmen.

Carmen rolled her eyes.

Seth saw, but thought it was aimed at Adrianna. He absentmindedly scratched at a bug bite on his leg, which he'd gotten while swimming back to the boat, and grinned. It had been a good day.

II. The House

Carmen had once told Seth that the first time she'd ever seen a firefly was during graduate school in the Midwest. So, he was quite confused when he saw lights flickering in the backyard that night, as they sat on the Magliano' back porch and shared a glass of wine at around 10 pm.

"I thought you said there weren't fireflies here," Seth said, looking over Carmen's shoulder at the yard.

"They aren't," Carmen insisted. She also turned around. And stared.

Around the pond in the backyard, nestled in the wild roses they kept for exactly this reason, were pixies. About forty of them, darting about and playing tag with the mosquito-eaters and teasing the spiders in their webs.

Pixies. Which Seth shouldn't have been able to see.

"You do see them," Seth said, when Carmen was silent a moment too long.

"That's...very strange," Carmen managed.

"I wonder if it's because of global warming," commented Seth thoughtfully. "Invasive bugs...like invasive plants?"

"That doesn't sound too crazy," agreed Carmen. She was freaking out. This wasn't normal. Usually, only those who had been born in El Dorado Hills could see the inhabitants of Imagination Isle. Even Kate's older sister, who had been born in LA, couldn't see them. And none of the parents of her friends (or her own) could see them. And high school friends who had been born in Sacramento and friends from college from around the world, none of them could see them. *And* Seth hadn't seen Roz.

So why could he see the pixies?

"I think we should go inside before we get bit by too many mosquitoes," Carmen said aloud.

"Good idea," said Seth. He stood up, reaching for the wine. "I think I got bit by a huge one at the Lake."

Carmen paused. "Huh...can I see?"

Seth pulled up one of the legs of his shorts and showed her. The welt was sizable, almost as large as a penny. "Look at that," he said. "It's weird, I thought it would itch more."

Carmen grunted, her heart hammering wildly.

She texted Kate when Seth was in the bathroom. *"I need you to ask Roz if he saw anything magical with a stinger today."*

Kate's response lit the screen a few moments later. *"Did you forget that the Fairies don't do text? You want me to go to Folsom Lake, NOW?"*

Carmen typed back. *"Seth has a purple welt on his leg the size of a coin. AND HE CAN SEE THE PIXIES IN MY YARD."*

Kate jumped out of bed and began to pull on her sneakers. *"Okay, I'm going now. Don't fall asleep until I get back to you."*

It took almost half an hour to find Roz and it was quite dark by then. But that was okay. The first spell Kate had ever learned was how to see in the dark. That, and how to perfectly recall something she had read the day before. It made cramming for tests much easier, even in first grade.

Kate messaged Carmen as soon as she'd talked to Roz. *"Apparently one of the nymphs let a water-spider get loose. You know, those giant-ass spiders that can make you breath underwater?"*

"Crap. Can those make someone see magic?"

"I don't know. But the poison can make you breathe UNDERWATER. They def have magic."

"Does it wear off?"

Kate looked at Roz, who was reading over her shoulder. The lean youth with green hair shrugged. "I don't know," he said honestly. "I've never heard of a non-seer getting stung before. Normally they avoid regular mortals."

"Roz is being useless and full of trivia," Kate responded to Carmen, knowing full well that it would annoy Roz.

"Tell him thanks for nothing and that I'm going to bed," Carmen typed back. *"Thanks, Kate."*

"That's what friends are for."

“Hey.”

Carmen jumped and dropped her phone. “Don’t sneak up on me,” she complained, glaring at Seth.

He grinned. His teeth shone weirdly in the light from the single lamppost outside the front window. “Why haven’t you come to bed?” He asked her.

“Kate,” said Carmen, holding up the phone. Kate’s last message was on the locked screen. “I’m a little worried about that bite. I was asking her if she thought there was anything at the lake that could leave a mark like that.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

Seth sat next to her and stretched, putting one arm around her shoulders. Carmen marveled that he really seemed taller in the half-light of her childhood home. “It’s nice of you to worry.”

She grinned. “I want you to enjoy your time here, and that includes not getting bit by something nasty. Besides, we’ll probably go to Florida more than California in the future, so having good memories here would be nice.”

“What does Florida have that California doesn’t?” asked Seth.

Carmen frowned. “My grandparents...?”

“Well, besides that,” said Seth. “It’s not like your house is there.”

Carmen stared. Seth knew full well that her parents had a time-share in Florida. As did Seth’s own grandparents.

Seth stared back with a half-smile on his face. His eyes glinted strangely.

“You’re not Seth,” said Carmen.

“Don’t you think that’s a tad rude...”

“*Hell*, who are you,” Carmen muttered. She’d tensed, aware that this stranger’s leg was pressed against hers and that his arm was over her shoulders. She balled the hand that was next to his leg, the right one, into a tight fist.

“I’m your boyfriend,” the Thing insisted.

“*Revele illuminati*,” Carmen hissed, and she threw all of her weight into her right elbow as she pressed it into the Thing’s sternum.

The Thing yelped and gasped for air, clutching its stomach and the features shifted and melted into blank grayness. It still looked vaguely humanoid, but like something that had seen a stick-finger of a human and then done its best, rather than a real human.

Carmen had jumped up and soon as it had recoiled from her, and was now standing in a passable ready-position from her (very short-lived) karate days. And, more importantly, having snatched up a long wooden stick that was on the coffee table. A wand that she had carved herself from one of the pine trees in the backyard, the one that had held the tree house. Her mom kept it on the coffee-table because it was a beautiful piece of carving. Carmen had about five of them hidden about the house, and had never been able to convince herself not to have a couple at college, too. There was another wand inside of her desk at work, too. Old habits, especially the safety kind, die hard.

"Dormini absolute," she muttered, pointing the wand over her shoulder at her parent's room.

"Don't bother," the Thing gasped. "Mortals never hear a thing."

"Considering that I'm a mortal, that's hardly a true statement," Carmen growled. She pointed the wand at the Thing again. "Where. Is. Seth."

"Probably enjoying the night with my partner," muttered the Thing. "We just wanted a bit of fun."

"How did you get in the house?" Demanded Carmen.

The Thing looked at her.

Carmen groaned and yelled, "SISSY?!"

Adrianna came running out of her room, wearing only a tank-top and hot-pink panties and holding a wand made of sterling silver. Adrianna's wand had been a gift from Carmen who, knowing that her sister liked a bit of glitz, had gotten it specially made at a local jeweler's. (The Jeweler was also a local, born and bred in El Dorado Hills, and specialized in 'mystic gifts' that were great for the limited tourist trade and even better for those locals who were Seers and didn't feel like learning how to carve. Some trees could be really nasty when young Seers asked to make a wand from a bit of them. It's even more insulting than treehouses. The treehouses can be a badge of honor, you know?)

"FUCK!" Adrianna yelled, and pointed her wand at the Thing. "How did you get in the house!?"

"If you forget to renew the spells on your house," the Thing said, a little insulted. "How can it be my fault?"

Carmen looked at Adrianna.

Adrianna looked murderous. "SHUT UP," she snapped. Though it was unclear if it was aimed at Carmen or the Thing. "I did renew the spells on the house! I do it every time I'm home, I'm not stupid."

"You forgot the chimney," said the Thing helpfully.

Adrianna opened her mouth, then paused. She turned towards said chimney and pointed her wand at it. There was a purple glow inside the chimney and she muttered, "Fuck."

Carmen groaned.

"You didn't help!" Adrianna snapped at her.

"Seth was with me! What would it look like, if I started waving around a wand?"

Adrianna didn't have an answer.

"Look," Carmen looked at the Thing again. "How about you tell me what you did with Seth and we won't banish you somewhere nasty."

"Not much of a threat," muttered the Thing.

"I'll banish you to the middle of Folsom Lake and let the water dragon eat you," Carmen threatened.

The Thing looked more worried. "I think my Partner just took him to Waterford. Nothing too scary. He thinks its you."

Carmen groaned. "Fuck."

III. **Waterford**

It had taken Seth about ten seconds to realize that the Thing was not Carmen. Carmen had stepped out of the room, staring at her phone and then stepped back in without the phone. She had laid down next to Seth on the bed and smiled at him, her teeth glinting weirdly and Seth had looked and just *known*.

But what do you say when you think the Thing lying next to you that looks and sounds like your girlfriend isn't your girlfriend? So, he'd tried to get up, muttering something about peeing and it had grabbed him from behind and now...

...had the Thing dragged him out of the house through a window? Because they were certainly not in Carmen's house anymore.

In fact, they weren't in a house at all, but in the woods. Seth didn't recall there being any woods on the drive to Carmen's house. And, to make matters worse, he was tied to a tree.

And the Thing that wasn't Carmen didn't even look human anymore, but as if someone had tried to shape lumpy clay into a human-ish shape.

"How did you know?" the Thing asked as Seth stared at it in horror and wondered if that brownie Kate had given him had been a normal brownie.

"You didn't smell like her," Seth blurted out.

The Thing groaned. "Smell," it complained. "I hate smell."

"What are you?" Seth demanded.

"I'm a Shapeshifter, and shapeshift is what I do," the Thing responded in a sing-song voice. "We were here when the world was new and we will be here when humans tear it down again. We..."

"Love to say nonsense," a deep voice rumbled. It rumbled through Seth's back, through his bones. The air vibrated from the strength of it.

To Seth's horror, the dirt at his feet began to pulse and writhe and two of the roots of the oak tree to which he was tied rose to the surface. "Shapeshifters love to say nonsense, and cause mischief for no more reason than the joy of causing others stress."

"The tree is talking," Seth said. He wasn't really saying it to someone, just needed to state it aloud in order to try to salvage what was left of his sanity. He had the sneaking suspicion that, somehow, he wasn't high.

"Of course, the tree is talking," rumbled the tree. Some part of Seth's shocked mind realized that it wasn't his ears that were hearing the words. He was *feeling* them. Feeling the very vibrations in his bones. "We only speak when we have things to say, and I have things to say. You, shapeshifter, should know better."

"Just a bit of harmless fun," complained the Thing.

"This mortal is with Carmen Magliano," the tree insisted.

"Yeah?" The Thing sniffed. "So?"

"Relevare!"

The Thing was hoisted into the air by its ankle. It shrieked, kicking wildly, and flashing between several faces before settling on one of a blonde, eight-year-old boy which started to bawl. "MOMMMMMMAAAAAA!"

"*Silencio!*" Carmen pointed her wand again and the Thing could only gulp frantically, like a fish out of water.

"I told you," the tree said smugly.

"Oh my god, oh my god," Carmen slashed the wand through the air and the ropes tying Seth to the tree fell away. "Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god..."

"That feels much better," the tree rumbled happily. "Much obliged, little Seer."

"Seth, I'm so, so sorry," Carmen said frantically and Seth instinctively grabbed her shoulders.

"I'm fine," he said, his voice coming out surprisingly calm. "I knew it wasn't you."

"You...you did?"

"Of course," said Seth brightly. "It didn't smell like you."

They looked at each other. Carmen started crying from relief and Seth sat down as his legs gave out from under him. Carmen sat next to him, and tried to explain something about magic borders and being born in overlap regions. All Seth could think was that he had to be high, and the Thing was still kicking frantically at thin air and the tree was mercifully silent.

"Sissy? Did you find him?" Adrianna came running up and groaned. "You're crying?!" She demanded.

Carmen glared at her.

Adrianna rolled her eyes and pointed a silver wand at the struggling Thing. "*Viajaero ultimo banishmento!*" With a last silent scream, the Thing disappeared.

"Where did it go?" asked Seth.

"Not quite sure, I think to the area around Folsom prison where all the giant snake-people are," said Adrianna with a shrug. "Banishment spells are hard. Emma is better at them – you usually need chalk and a dance circle to get any real control."

Seth opened his mouth and nothing came out. He looked at Carmen. She looked at him with huge, beseeching eyes.

"I think we should make another martini," Seth said. "And then I think I'd like an explanation."

"Okay," said Carmen in a small voice.

A little spot of light flew through the air and landed on her shoulder. The pixie looked at Seth with large eyes the color of the dawn sky.

“Hello,” said Seth, looking at the pixie. “You’re not a firefly are you?”

The pixie chittered something and Carmen sighed.

“Pixies,” said Adrianna with amazement. “Where do you think they learn all those bad words?”

Needless to say, when you start a vacation to your girlfriend’s childhood home by meeting her younger sister and end it by meeting her best friend’s dragon, you know that no trip will ever be boring again.

“She likes you,” Kate said as Seth stared, open-mouthed, up at the river dragon.

“Oh?” Seth managed.

The dragon made a wuffing noise that Seth figured was laughter. Carmen beamed.

So, at the end of it all, it was all good.