A FAR WILDER MAGIC

ALSO BY ALLISON SAFT

Down Comes the Night

A FAR WILDER MAGIC

ALLISON SAFT



WEDNESDAY BOOKS
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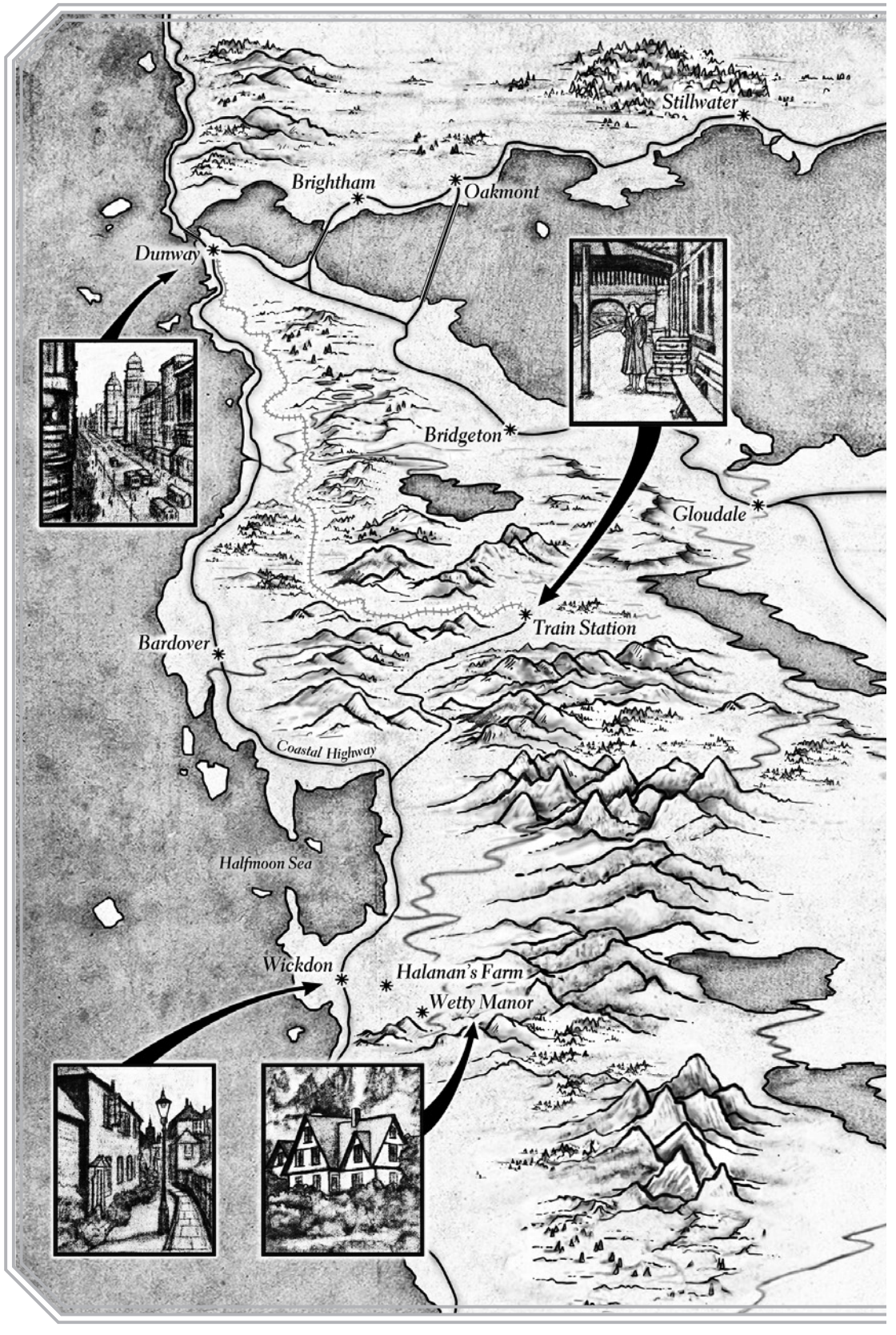
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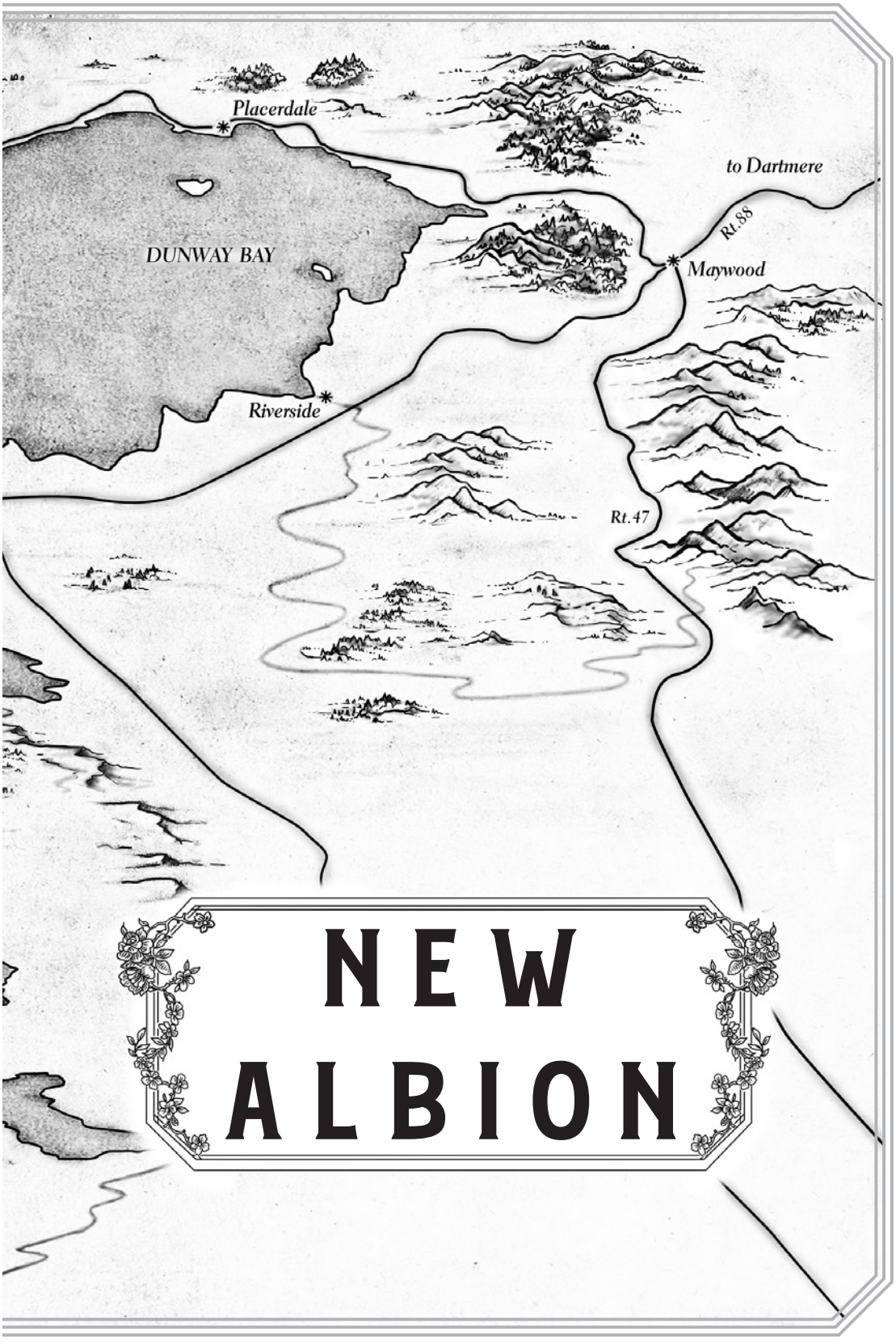


For those with impossible dreams
and for those who feel dreaming is impossible.

There is so much waiting for you on the horizon.




Stillwater
Brightham
Oakmont
Dunway
Bridgeton
Gloudale
Train Station
Bardover
Coastal Highway
Halfmoon Sea
Wickdon
Halanan's Farm
Wetty Manor


Placerdale
to Dartmere
Rt.88
DUNWAY BAY
Maywood
Riverside
Rt.47
NEW
ALBION

1

Margaret shouldn't be outside tonight.

It's too cold for mid-autumn—the kind of cold that catches even the trees out. Just yesterday morning, the leaves outside her window burned in the sunlight, red as blood and gold as honey. Now, half of them have gone brittle and dropped like stones, and all she sees are the hours and hours of work ahead of her. A sea of dead things.

That's exactly the kind of thought Mrs. Wreford would scold her for. Margaret can almost hear her now: *You're only seventeen once, Maggie. There are far better ways to waste it than keeping that damn house, believe me.*

Fact is, not everybody can afford to fritter away seventeen. Not everybody *wants* to be like Jaime Harrington and his friends, cliff diving and drinking cheap moonshine after work. Margaret has too many responsibilities for nonsense like that—and more importantly, no firewood. Since it ran dry two days ago, the cold has made itself comfortable at Welty Manor. It waits for her out there in the night, and it waits for her inside, leering from a hearth full of white ashes. As much as she dreads splitting wood right now, she hasn't got any good prospects. It's freeze now, or freeze later.

The last of the day is bleeding out over the mountains, dribbling gutted-red light onto the yard. Once the sun sets completely, it'll only

get colder. She shivered herself sleepless for hours last night, and now everything aches like she's been folded up in a shoebox. Procrastinating on her least favorite chore isn't worth feeling like this again tomorrow.

Freeze now it is.

Tugging her mother's old cloche hat over her ears, Margaret steps off the porch and trudges through the fallen leaves to the backyard, where the woodpile hunches beside a rusted wheelbarrow. The rainwater pooled in its basin is silvered with too-early frost and reflects a hazy glimmer of the bruised-dusk sky. As she reaches up to take a log from the pile, she catches a glimpse of her own drawn face. She looks as exhausted as she feels.

Margaret sets the log on the chopping block and grabs her maul. When she was young and wiry, she had to throw all her weight behind every downswing. Now, letting the blade fall is easy as breathing. It whistles through the air and sinks into the wood with a *crack* that sends a pair of crows fluttering from their perch. She adjusts her grip—then hisses through her teeth as a splinter digs into her hand.

She inspects the blood welling in the creases of her palm before licking it off. Cold settles into her wound, and the dull taste of copper coats her tongue. She knows she ought to sand the handle down before it takes another bite out of her, but there's no time. There's never enough time.

Normally she would've prepared better for the winter, but her mother's been gone for three months now and the chores have piled up. There are windows to caulk, shingles to replace, pelts to prepare. It'd be far easier if she learned alchemy like her mother always wanted, but no matter how hungry or desperate she gets, it will never come to that.

People say alchemy is many things. To the most pragmatic of scientists, it's the process of distilling matter into its essence, a means to understand the world. God-fearing Katharists claim it can purify anything, even men. But Margaret knows the truth. Alchemy is neither progress nor salvation. It's the stench of sulfur she can't scrub

out of her hair. It's packed suitcases and locked doors. It's blood and ink on the floorboards.

She'll survive without it until her mother comes home—*if* she comes home. Margaret smothers that thought as quickly as it arises. Evelyn travels often for her research, and she's always returned. She's just taking a little longer than usual, is all.

Where are you now?

Years ago, when she still had the heart for it, she'd climb to the roof and try to imagine she could see for a thousand miles, straight into all the fantastical places that called Evelyn away from her. But no matter how hard she tried, nothing ever materialized. All she ever saw was this: the worn, dirt road down the mountainside; the sleepy town glowing as faint as a firefly's belly in the distance; and past the golden fields of rye and bentgrass, the Halfmoon Sea that glitters black as a star-filled night. The gift of imagination skipped her over, and Wickdon is all she knows. She still can't envision a world beyond it.

On a night like this, everyone will be huddled against the cold, simmering chowder and tearing open loaves of brown bread. The image stings, just barely. Being alone suits her fine—better than fine. It's only the grim prospect of boiled potatoes for dinner that invites jealousy. Her stomach rumbles just as the wind sighs against the back of her neck. The still-living leaves sway overhead, hissing like the roll of the tide.

Hush, they seem to say. *Listen.*

The air goes terribly, eerily still. Gooseflesh ripples down her arms. Seventeen years in these woods, and they've never frightened her before, but right now, the dark sits thick and wrong on her skin like a sheen of cold sweat.

A branch snaps at the tree line, loud as gunfire. Margaret whirls toward the sound, maul raised and teeth bared.

But it's only Trouble, her coonhound, standing there. He looks both majestic and ridiculous with his oversized ears pricked and his fur shining copper-bright. Margaret lowers her weapon, the blade

thudding against the frozen earth. He must've slipped out the front door when she wasn't paying attention.

"What're you doing out here?" she says, feeling foolish. "You scared me."

Trouble wags his tail absently, but he's still straining toward the woods and quivering with focus. He must feel it, too—the crackling in the air like a brewing storm. It makes her crave the weight of a rifle in her hands, not a maul.

"Leave it, Trouble."

He hardly spares her a second glance. Margaret sighs with exasperation, her breath steaming in the air. It figures she can't compete with a scent. Once he grabs ahold of one, he won't let it go for anything. He's as good a hunting dog as ever, even if he's stubborn as an ass half the time.

It strikes her then how out of practice they both are—and how much she misses the thrill of the hunt. Mrs. Wreford is right, in her way. There *is* more to life than preserving this crumbling manor, more to waste her seventeenth year on than surviving. But what Mrs. Wreford will never understand is that she's not keeping this house for herself; it's for Evelyn.

Before she leaves for a trip, she always says the same thing. *As soon I get what I need for my research, we'll be a family again.* There's no sweeter promise in the world. Their family will never truly be whole again, but Margaret cherishes those memories from *before* more than anything. Before her brother died and her father left and alchemy burned up all her mother's tenderness. She holds them close like worry stones, turning them over and over in her mind until they're worn smooth and warm and familiar.

Every week, the four of them would go into Wickdon to buy their groceries, and without fail, Margaret would ask her mother to carry her home. Even when she'd grown too old for it to be reasonable, Evelyn would scoop her up and say, "Now who let you get so big, Miss Maggie," and kiss her until she shrieked with laughter. The world would go hazy and dappled with sunlight as she drowsed in

her mother's arms, and although the walk home was five miles, Evelyn never once complained and never set her down.

Once Evelyn finishes her research, things will be different. They'll be together, and they'll be happy again. *That* is something worth putting her life on hold for. So she hefts her maul and splits the log again. As she bends over to collect the kindling, a chill slithers down her collar.

Look there, says the wind. *Look.*

Slowly, Margaret lifts her gaze to the woods. There's nothing but darkness past the windblown tangle of her hair. Nothing but the whispering of the leaves overhead, louder and louder.

And then she sees it.

At first, it's barely anything. A wisp, drifting boatlike through the underbrush. A trick of her addled mind. Then, a set of round, unblinking eyes shine out of the darkness. A tapered snout follows, the shadows sliding off it like water. Like the creep of fog over the sea, a white fox as big as Trouble stalks into the scant moonlight. Margaret has never seen a fox like this before, but she knows exactly what it is. An ancient being, far older than even the redwoods that tower above her.

The hala.

Every child in Wickdon is raised on legends of the hala, but the first time she heard one outside her home was the moment she realized her family was different. The Katharist church paints the hala and its ilk—the demiurges—as demons. But her father told her that nothing God made could be evil. To the Yu'adir, the hala is sacred, a carrier of divine knowledge.

It won't hurt you if you show it respect. Margaret goes perfectly still.

The hala's gaze is solid white, pupilless, and she feels the weight of it like a blade at the back of her neck. Its jaw stretches open, a warning gape that makes something small and animal within Margaret cry out. Trouble's hackles rise and a snarl rumbles out of him.

If he attacks it, it will tear his throat out.

"Trouble, no!" Desperation roughens her voice, enough to break

the spell on him. He rounds on her, ears flying and clearly bewildered.

And before she can process it, before she can even blink, the fox is gone.

Her breath shudders out of her. The wind echoes her as it combs through the leaves with a brittle, shimmering sound. Margaret staggers to Trouble, drops to her knees in front of him, and flings her arms around his neck. He smells disgusting—the yeasty stench of wet dog—but he's unhurt and that's all that matters. His heart beats in time with hers, the most beautiful thing she's ever heard.

"Good boy," she whispers, hating the hitch in her voice. "I'm sorry for yelling. I'm so sorry."

What just *happened*? As her thoughts clear, relief melts into a single, terrible realization. If that beast is here in Wickdon, the Halfmoon Hunt will soon follow.

Every autumn, the hala emerges somewhere in the coastal wood. And there it stays for five weeks, terrorizing its chosen territory until it vanishes again on the morning after the Cold Moon. No one knows exactly why it lingers, or where it goes, or why its power grows stronger with the waxing of the moon, but the wealthiest people of New Albion have made a national sport of its appearance.

Tourists pour in for the weeks of fanfare leading up to the hunt. Hunters register alongside alchemists in hopes of becoming the hero who slays the last living demiurge. And on the night of the Cold Moon, they set out on horseback to pursue the beast. There's alchemical power in circles, and legend has it that a demiurge can only be killed beneath the light of a full moon. Anticipation makes the hunt all the sweeter. Participants and spectators alike are more than willing to pay in blood for the honor of hunting the hala at its peak. The more destructive it is that season, the more thrilling the chase.

The hunt hasn't come to Wickdon in nearly twenty years, but Margaret has heard fragments of stories traded at the docks. The baying of hounds driven mad by its magic, the crack of gunfire, the

scream of horses torn open but still alive. Since her childhood, the hunt has been nothing but a blood-soaked myth. The fare of true New Albian heroes, not country girls with Yu'adir fathers. It's never been *real.* But now it's here.

Close enough to register. Close enough to win.

The thought of disappointing her father pricks at her, but what does she owe him now? Being half-Yu'adir gives her no claim to kinship with the hala. Besides, maybe killing it for a noble cause is the most respect she could pay it. Margaret has no interest in hearing her name sung in pubs; she's never craved anyone's recognition but her mother's.

When she closes her eyes, an image of Evelyn silhouetted against the sun fills the darkness. Her back to the manor, suitcases in hand, her hair a golden ribbon unfurling in the breeze. Leaving. Always leaving.

But if Margaret wins, maybe it'll be enough to make her stay.

The grand prize is money, glory, and the hala's carcass. Most hunters would treat it as a trophy, a thing to be stuffed and mounted. But Evelyn needs it for her research on the alchemical magnum opus. According to her mother, long-dead mystics theorized that if alchemical fire were to incinerate a demiurge's bones, the prima materia—the base substance of all matter—would remain. From that divine ether, an alchemist could forge the philosopher's stone, which grants immortality and the ability to make matter from nothing.

The Katharist church considers any attempt to distill the prima materia heretical, so hardly any New Albian alchemists but Evelyn conduct research on it. Creating the stone is her singular, solitary ambition. She's spent years hunting down the few manuscripts that explain how to do it, and three months ago, she left the country to pursue another lead. But now the hala—one of the last missing pieces of her research—is here.

Trouble wrenches out of her grip, startling Margaret from her thoughts.

"Oh no you don't." She grabs greedy fistfuls of his ears, then places

a kiss on the top of his head. He cringes. Margaret can't help smiling. Tormenting him is one of her few pleasures in life.

Trouble shakes his ears out indignantly when she finally releases him, then dances out of her reach. He stands there, regal head lifted, tongue lolling, one pink ear turned inside-out. For the first time in days, she laughs. He does love her; he just hides it well, the proud, dramatic thing. But Margaret loves him plainly and far more than anything else in the world.

The thought sobers her. Trouble is a brilliant hunting dog, but he's not young anymore. Risking his safety for some foolish notion like joining the hunt isn't something she's willing to do. She's got no time to prepare, hardly enough money to pay the entry fee, and no connections to any alchemists she can trust, not that any of them can be trusted. Only two-person teams—one marksman and one alchemist—can participate.

Besides, there's only one surefire way to kill a demiurge that she knows of. The alchemy it requires . . . She'd sooner die than see someone try it again.

Even if there was another method, it wouldn't matter. If anyone found out a Yu'adir girl entered the hunt, they'd make her life a living nightmare. She's only survived this long by keeping her head down. *It's better this way,* she thinks. Better to quickly cut the throat of this fragile hope instead of letting it languish like a wolf in a snare. Margaret knows, deep as marrow, how this story ends. What happens to people who crave things beyond their reach. Maybe in another life, she could dream. But not this one.

Chasing after that fox will bring her nothing but ruin.