

GURSE
OF
THORN

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR
MICHELLE AREAUX

Curse of Thorns

Michelle Areaux

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Curse of Thorns: A NOVEL

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Prologue:

A guttural roar so loud it shook me down to my bones, reverberating through the terrifying forest. The menacing sound was deep and caused my heart to race like a racehorse. As I ran, my feet loudly pounding the soil beneath me, I felt like I was running through quicksand. Splashes of water drenched my legs, as I realized I was in a swamp. A huge, dark shape closed in on me as I ran through the forest. I twisted around a low hanging branch; my clothes snagged on the rough bark. The night was black, but even so, I could make out the clearing that marked one end of the woods. How I had ended up inside of here, I have no idea, but I had to escape.

I had to survive.

Another growl echoed around me, and suddenly, piercing yellow eyes glowed near a body of water. The trees stretched out before me and then disappeared into another shadow.

Something called to me—beckoning me to go toward the creature with yellow eyes. I knew it was dangerous, but it was

as though my body and mind were no longer in my control. It was as though I was under some ancient spell or compulsion.

“Who are you?” I finally managed to cry out. My small voice blended into the vastness of the forest.

Something moved behind me, causing me to turn so swiftly on my heel, that I lost my balance and almost fell onto the dew-soaked ground below.

“Run,” the creature before me roared out.

Was the animal hunting or helping me? I had no idea, but I did know that I needed to get out of here. This place was going to destroy me.

Scared, I was trapped inside a circle of towering cypress trees with shadows dancing around me. The shadow-beasts that lived in the lightless places inside of this forest were waiting to devour me. My nightmare was threatening to consume me – to take everything I have left...

I jolted awake, my sheets drenched with a cold sweat, and a searing pain coursing through my throat. Gasping for air, I inhaled a sharp breath of air that radiated pain throughout my entire body. Aching muscles screamed at me to get up, but I just couldn't. Struggling to keep my breathing steady, I struggled out of bed, feeling dizzy and unsteady on my feet.

This was how it was every time I woke up from one of my nightmares.

I glanced at the bedside table next to my bed. Red numbers blurred as I saw that it was well after one in the morning. I laid

back down on the bed, sighong.

Closing my eyes, I willed myself to go back to sleep, but I knew it was a lost cause now. Once my nightmares appeared, it took days for them to disappear. I could only hope that this one wouldn't plague me any longer than it already had.

Chapter 1

I felt my heart plummet to the pits of my stomach as I neared the vast, southern estate that would now become my home. As the interstate rolled on, I couldn't help but stare at the blur of asphalt.

“Calm down,” Mom said, as she gripped the steering wheel.

My knees were shaking as I sat beside her in our family vehicle. Chewing on my nails, I turned and gave her a half smirk.

The SUV turned off the main highway and onto a small two lane road. We were moving further into the countryside and away from the main city of Charleston, South Carolina.

“Easy for you to say,” I grumbled, as I continued staring out the window. There was a nervous, bitter edge to my voice that I didn't bother to hide.

I hated that I was being sent away— hated that this was a choice that I never got to make.

As mom turned onto a small drive, a strange mist seemed to fill the air. Mom slowed the car as we neared a massive building that towered before us, seeming almost alive with a malicious energy. Thoughts of fear and regret raced through my mind; why had I agreed to stay here for the semester? Why had I agreed to give this place a chance?

As we pulled up to the expansive southern estate, a wave of horror surged through me. The sky had grown ominously dark and the building exuded an aura of dread. Sinister spires on a large, iron fence soared toward the heavens. A heavy fog climbs from the ground and seems to overtake the car as we move past a large forest. My gaze focuses on the expansive trees and overbrush. Blood red roses and violet flowers dot the treeline of the forest, and I feel this strong compulsion come over me like a rogue wave. My heart rate increases and something calls to me, telling me to run into the forest. Shaking my head, I try to ignore the strange sensation that has overtaken me, but the strength of the urge is almost too much.

Suddenly, the car slows to a stop and the large gates open almost as if by magic. I'm struck in awe as I watch them open and I don't know what sight to look at first. As mom drives through the gate, the urge to look back at the forest pulls at me again. I feel like a puppet and invisible strings are pulling me in different directions.

"Farrah, look," mom announces, as a smile spreads across her face.

She's peering out the front window and I see a spark of happiness in her eyes. Mom always talked fondly of her time at the school, but I wasn't sure I had the same excitement she had expected of me.

The school was three-stories high and constructed of a dark red brick and each level had its own large balcony that overlooked the driveway. Steep stairs led up to a large, stone porch with a massive black door. I stared at the strange building until the slamming of mom's car door startled me. She was out of the SUV and standing, waiting for me to join her. Her lips pursed as she crossed her arms across her chest and waited for me to get out. Sighing, I got out of my seat and made my way around the SUV to her.

Large oak trees lined the drive and the heavy Spanish Moss that hung from the gnarly branches almost looked like ghosts swaying in a slight breeze. Beyond the grounds, I could see more of the massive forest that seemed to go on forever. We began walking up the expansive drive and toward Shadow Legacy Academy, a place where I would be forced to live and go to school until I reached eighteen-years-old. Just like my mother and her mother had done before. It was part of my legacy, but not one that I was excited to explore.

I traced my hand along the cool metal of a black iron fence that lined the drive and felt a shot of electricity course through me.

I wondered what secrets lurked beyond the walls of this place. With each step I took, fear clawed its way inside me,

threatening to consume me before I even stepped to the front door.

“Don’t act so afraid, it’s just a school,” Mom said, almost laughing at my worry.

“Sure, if you are a vampire,” I scoffed. “Seriously. This is the exclusive, amazing, and fancy school that you have waited all of my life to send me to?” I asked, still aghast that I had to leave my family and friends behind.

“Farrah, you haven’t even given it a chance yet. You have no idea how lucky you are to have this experience. Especially...” her words were cut off as she turned away from me.

I opened my mouth to protest, but I quickly clamped it shut again. Attending Shadow Legacy Academy was always in the plan for me. Well, my parent’s plan for me, anyway. As far back as I could remember, my family had always talked about the magic that flowed through the halls of the academy. Coming from a long line of powerful witches, I would listen to the stories and grow excited about my own future. However, as I neared my teenage years, and my own powers never showed, the thought of attending the academy began to diminish until it was nothing more than a dreaded plague I would have to endure.

“Easy for you to say,” I mumbled. “We don’t even know if I will have any magic at all.”

Giving me a stern look, mom grabbed my suitcase and stood next to me. “Farrah, your time at Shadow Legacy Academy

will only be what you make of it. Your powers will come; and if they don't, we will still love you," she assured me.

I just wish that her words made me feel better. Instead, they only drugged up more painful thoughts that seemed to consume all of my thoughts. While I didn't seem to have any magic, I had been experiencing terrifying dreams that kept me up at night.

I had been afraid to tell my parents; and yet, I couldn't fully explain to humans what I was going through. This prompted my human school to set me up with a counselor. My friends had supported me, but even they didn't know the full extent of what I was going through. It was a secret I had locked away and feared would never go away.

Despite my parents' constant support, I couldn't bring myself to tell them about the nightmares and images that haunted me daily. . How could I explain to them that I was afraid of the darkness, that I couldn't sleep because I was terrified of what I might see in my dreams? I was sure they would think I was crazy. I mean, witches had the power to erase memories and create spells— but I hadn't proven that I was even a witch yet. So, what I was experiencing couldn't be cured within the supernatural community. That thought alone terrified me. We were supposed to be powerful witches, and here I was with no magic and now scared of the dark like a little kid.

Now, I was standing in front of my new home and school and I had no idea what lay in store for me.

Shadow Legacy Academy wasn't just any school. No, this was a school for supernatural creatures who were descendants of powerful beings. Only those from strong and influential supernatural families could attend. We were literally their legacies.

"Farrah, just give it a chance. Maybe you will find the answers you seek," she said, her wise words only causing more stress. She placed a hand on my shoulder, and I felt myself leaning in to her touch.

"Sure, mom. Hopefully," I replied.

We made our way up to the large entry porch. Two massive gargoyle statues sat on either side of the stairs and they seemed to watch my every move. But, that couldn't be the case, they were statues. Not real. Right?

The massive wooden doors opened on their own and I had to stifle a gasp at the sight. Even though I grew up knowing about magic and was born from a Witch, I had very limited knowledge and experience with real magic. In the human world, we were not allowed to practice magic. Only when you were placed under a ward or at a place like Shadow Legacy Academy, could we utilize our magic and powers. My mother had rarely used magic in front of me, so it was all very surreal to me.

Huffing, my mom stepped up to the large wooden doors and pushed her way inside. She had attended this school when she was my age and knew her way around like a pro. Me? I was

reluctant to move, but found the courage to walk inside behind her.

I stepped inside the large academy. Ivory columns decorated with swirls of gold and crimson reached to a vaulted ceiling. The building was once an old plantation. It could fit three football fields side-by-side. The floor was made of white marble, and the various staircases and halls were wide enough to allow the students and staff to walk in groups. All of them were painted a rich cream color, and the doors and windows were framed with a rich, dark mahogany. Ornate molding traced around windows and doors. Upon looking closely, I made out dragons, wolves, and large, black crows carved into the woodwork. The ceiling was high, and dozens of chandeliers dangled from it between small buds of lights that hung down like stars.

A group of students walked past me, laptops in their arms. They all looked at me with bored expressions as they passed. **They all wore white uniforms with blue trim and gold lace detailing.**

“Don’t stare,” mom scolded me, as I watched the students walk by.

I was lost in a trance when her voice took me out of my own thoughts.

“It’s not like you prepared me for this place,” I grumbled back.

I knew it was rude, but I couldn’t help but stare. They all appeared so regal and powerful. I was a stark contrast to them

and I knew it.

Loud, laughter made me turn my head just in time to see the headmaster approach us, her long purple robes trailing on the ground. She held out a hand and gave me a warm smile. “Welcome, my dear. My name is Headmaster Patricia. We have been anticipating your arrival,” she said.

“Thank you,” I greeted her.

“I hope your journey to Charleston was pleasant,” she says, her silver eyes staring right at me.

Gulping, I did my best to smile back. “Yes, it only took us a few hours to get here,” I explained.

Leaving my home in Asheville, North Carolina, had been difficult. I had friends and a life, but none of that mattered when your true legacy and heritage was on the line. Now, living right outside of Charleston, South Carolina, I had an entirely new life that I would have to acclimate to.

“We are just so grateful that you accepted Farrah,” my mom cuts in.

It was true; without showing any signs of magic or powers, I shouldn’t really be here right now. Most students who enroll have already experienced their powers and come to the academy to learn how to utilize their skills while living in the human world. Me, however, I’m going to have a long road ahead of me.

Nodding, **Headmaster Patricia** pursed her lips as she stared at me. “Well, it is true that we have made an exception

with Farrah. With the long line of descendants from your family attending the academy, we have high hopes she won't disappoint," she said, her eyes narrowing in on me like a hawk.

I felt the weight of her words as I struggled to maintain a calm voice. I had no idea what would happen to me if my powers didn't show soon, but I couldn't worry about that right now. I needed to keep the faith that things would work out because, honestly, they just had to.

"We know she will be fine," mom added, her smile way too optimistic.

Suddenly, a girl with long, lavender colored hair walked into the foyer and stopped beside the headmaster. Her silver eyes were mesmerizing and I couldn't seem to look away from her.

"Welcome, **Candi**. I want to introduce you to Farrah. She is new this semester and will be taking over Lilly's spot in your room. You girls will be roommates." As the headmaster spoke, I saw Candi's eyes take on an ominous coldness.

Candi glanced my way, but didn't smile. Instead, she stood silent.

"Candi will show you to your new room and then around the campus. Your class schedule, uniform, and materials are all located in your room. If you have any questions, reach out to Candi first," Headmaster Patricia stated, her smile boring into my soul.

Turning to me, my mom pulled me in for a warm hug and whispered in my ear, “Please, Farrah. Just give this place a chance. You will learn to love it here.”

As I pulled away, I offered her a smile that was fake and cold. It was the best I could do.

I swallow and then turn my attention to the headmaster and Candi. If I look at my mom again, I may break down and cry. She is all I have left and now she’s leaving me here. My father passed away when I was two-years-old and it’s been the two of us ever since.

Out of the corner of my eye, I notice tears welling in mom’s blue eyes as she nods one last time at me.

I offer her one last smile before grabbing my suitcase and stepping up to Candi. “Alright, let’s get this started.”

I practically have to run to keep up with Candi. Her long legs move swiftly like a gazelle and she doesn’t bother to slow for me. There’s a large group of students gathered around a wide door opening and they all turn and stare as we pass.

“What’s that?” I ask, pointing toward the students.

“That’s the dining hall. You will have all of your meals there. It’s almost time for dinner, so the wolves like to show up early,” Candi states, never bothering to slow down.

“I ate on my way here,” I tell her, though I get the feeling she doesn’t really care. Her silence confirms my suspicion.

I had never met any wolf shifters before. Growing up, my mom primarily spent time around other witches. I had always felt inadequate around them because I could never contribute to conversations about magic, spells, and potions. Now, as I see another supernatural race, I've never felt more alone and out of place.

We continue walking down the halls and I marvel at the wall sconces that are blazing with glowing fires that provide light through the dimly lit space. I'm taken aback by the ever-changing labyrinth of hallways, doors, and staircases that wind through the school. I try to make a mental map of this place, but I feel like I am going to get lost here— a lot. Each hallway shows off floors made from stones of every color.

“The library is to your left through those French doors and the hall where all classrooms are located is to your right,” Candi states flatly.

I was so lost in the structure that I didn't notice we had found our way to one of my favorite places. The library at my old school was one of my favorite places. It had become my refuge when I needed to slip away from the mindless chatter around me. This library seemed to be more of a rich and expansive palace, rather than a room that housed books. I tried to look through the glass french doors, but Candi just kept on walking.

Hanging from the enormous ceiling, I spotted several banners that had symbols painted on the fabric. Each banner

was the same navy blue as the colors of the uniform, but the symbols on each one were different.

Noticing my staring, Candi stops and points up to the banners. “Those are the symbols of each type of supernatural that has or does attend the academy. The claws represent shifters, the wings represent the fairies, the wand represents wizards, vile potion witches, and fire is the dragons.”

I took in the different groups the banners symbolized. I had heard about all of those in fairy tales, but never had I met any of them.

“What about Vampires?” I asked, suddenly curious.

My mind drifted to one of my favorite books, *Twilight*. Edward was dreamy and the type of Vampire I would want to meet.

Shaking her head, Candi bit her lip. “Long ago, Vampires used to attend the school, but it became too problematic. No matter how hard they tried, they just couldn’t fight the urge to not drink from us, they just couldn’t. We agreed to split schools and now they attend the exclusive Shadowveil Academy only for vampires.”

I do my best to follow where she is pointing all while trying not to get behind. We stop when we reach a winding staircase that leads to a second story. As we begin climbing, my suitcase feels heavier as it bangs against each wooden step.

Once to the top of the stairs, we take a sharp right and then Candi stops abruptly, causing me to knock right into her back.

She turns to face me, annoyance glowing in her eyes. “This is my—uh, I mean, our room,” she announces, turning the silver knob to a single door. I see her jaw tense and her body stiffen. She is clearly uncomfortable with sharing a room with me and I feel very awkward standing here with her.

I follow her inside the spacious room that contains two single beds, two white desks, a large closet, and en suite bathroom.

“You will sleep there,” Candi states, pointing to a single bed by the window.

I place my suitcase near a large window overlooking the back of the house. Green covers the world for miles and large, oak trees sway in a soft breeze. The sun has just slid behind the horizon and darkness is vastly approaching. Stars blanket the sky and I am in awe of the beauty of this place. Regardless of the circumstances around my arrival, I can’t help but admit this place is utterly breathtaking.

Clearing her throat, Candi watches me as I admire the beauty of the landscape.

“Listen, I don’t really know anything about you, but you do need to know that this room is important,” she states. “There are rules you will need to follow,” she finishes, crossing her arms across her chest.

“Ok,” I say, watching as her eyes dance around the room. I am starting to not like this girl. Who does she think she is anyway? We are roommates, she shouldn’t act like I am impeding on her space.

There's something tragic in the way she takes in every corner of the space; almost like she has a personal connection to every surface. .

“The girl who used to stay in this room—my old room mate—she was my friend,” Candi admits, her voice cracking.

A pang of sadness washes over me. Her face falls and I can feel the pain radiating off of her. My eyes dance to the empty bed and the lack of any personal belongings. On the other side of the room I spot a cotton candy pink bed spread, a mountain of fluffy pillows piled onto the bed, and fun, colorful posters and pictures on the dresser and walls.

“Did she move rooms?” I ask.

Shaking her head, Candi furrows her brow in worry. Her hands fidget at her sides and for the first time since meeting her, I see her walls crumble. “Not necessarily. She went missing two weeks ago. After the investigation concluded, Lilly's parents came and retrieved all of her personal items.” She stops talking and shakes her head. I see her quickly wipe away a lone tear trailing down her soft cheek. “I apologize, this is very rude of me.”

I take a step toward her and then pause. “It's ok. I'm sorry about your friend,” I add.

Candi offers a forced smile. “Everyone thinks she's dead, but I still have hope that they will find her.”

“What happened?” I ask. I have no idea why Candi is sharing this information with me, but it almost feels like she

needs to shed the weight of her loss and I am willing to listen.

As quickly as she began sharing, Candi stopped. “Nothing. I don’t really know. All you need to know is that if Lilly returns, you will be assigned a new room. This is still her room, so don’t get too comfortable,” she snaps.

I almost get whiplash from how quickly she turned on me. I open my mouth to say something, but think better of it.

“Breakfast is from seven to eight. Your class schedule is on the desk along with your laptop. Be sure to have your uniform looking immaculate when you arrive tomorrow. It’s hanging in the closet.” Candi goes to leave, but as she passes back through the doorway, she stops and turns back to me one last time. “Farrah, stay away from the thorn forest,” she states flatly.

She takes a step to leave, but I can’t have her go just yet.

“Wait, why are you telling me that?” I practically yell out.

I see her body stiffen as her back is still to me. “The thorn forest is a dark and mysterious woodland filled with strange plants, twisted trees that murmur secrets, and animals that prowl through the shadows. It’s not a place for you— a human with no magic,” she snarls and then disappears through the doorway.

As I stand there, staring at the empty space where Candi once stood, I feel like my head is spinning. What just happened?

Chapter 2

C hapter 2

I awoke the next morning, unsure of where I was.

I tossed and turned most of the night, trying to find rest when my mind was moving a hundred miles an hour.

The sun shone through my window, bathing me in warm light. The smell of fresh bread and the sound of laughter wafted through the air. Climbing stairs to greet me. I stared out the window and for a brief lapse in time, a moment of clarity, I remembered back to a time when I was happy and loved. A young child who didn't worry about magical powers or missing girls who once slept in my very bed.

I check the time on my phone and realize it's nearly seven in the morning. Glancing over at Candi's bed, I see that it is empty and neatly made.

My phone chimes with a text from my mom.

Mom: Good morning. I hope you slept well last night. Remember to have an open mind today. Good luck with

your classes.

I wish I was as optimistic as my mom.

Me: Morning. I will let you know how things go today.

Mom: Have you had any more nightmares?

I hate how the thought of one of my nightmares causes my stomach to drop and waves of nausea to roll over me.

Me: No. Maybe being here will make them go away?

Even as I typed the words, I knew it was wishful thinking. My nightmares had plagued me for the last year and each time one occurred, they grew worse. There was really no rhyme or reason to them, and mom never seemed too concerned, but they terrified me to my very core.

Mom: Possibly. I'm excited for you to start your classes.

Me: Yeah, me, too.

I was totally lying.

Me: By the way, do you know anything about a missing girl?

I wait as I see the bubbles appear on my screen.

Mom: Missing girl?

I decided not to share what Candi told me last night. Maybe she was hazing me— trying to scare the new girl. I mean, wouldn't my mom have been alerted to the fact that I was taking over a missing girls room?

Me: Just something I heard on the news. Must not be serious. Anyway, I will text later. Got to get ready.

I throw my phone onto the bed and sigh.

Sounds from our shared bathroom alert me that Candi must be getting ready. I wait for her to exit the bathroom and when she does, she barely acknowledges me.

“Good morning,” I say, trying to relieve some of the tension filling our room.

“Morning,” Candi grumbles, not even looking at me as she gathers her uniform and disappears into the closet.

Rolling my eyes, I ignore her attitude and just hope she isn't a morning person and, hopefully, this isn't her typical behavior. This could be a long year if she's going to be grumpy every time we talk.

Throwing my covers off of me, I climb out of bed and head to the bathroom. I need to shower and get dressed so I can begin my day. Moving into the small bathroom, I quickly shower in the white tile shower and style my long, auburn hair in a high ponytail. My suitcase still sits below the window, unpacked as though I am prepared to make a quick exit from this place. For some reason, that thought sends a chill racing down my spine. The closet is beside the bathroom; and when I open the double doors, I am shocked by the rows of uniforms hanging in front of me. Honestly, I only expected one or two, but there are at least fifteen lined up in front of me.

I quickly put on the white, button down shirt, royal blue skirt, and black leather shoes. The white shirt has a gold emblem on the front, the school crest and it seems to glitter as I stare at myself in the bathroom mirror.

I don't even look like myself anymore. My emerald green eyes seem to be brighter with the gold hews reflecting in them.

When I emerge again from the bathroom, the room is empty. A tick of pain hits me as I realize she left me and couldn't even bother to wait for me. I guess Candi and I weren't going to be friends.

Sighing, I gather my laptop and class schedule from the desk and then walk out into the hallway. Even in the morning, the halls are dimly lit with the sconces burning small light.

A few girls watch me as I pass them down the hall. I try to offer a smile, but they all seem to turn away from me. Looks like I won't be getting any welcoming parties soon. I surely hope everyone here isn't as moody as Candi, but I'm not getting my hopes up. I hear whispers follow me as I move further down the hallway. When I spot the staircase, I sigh in relief. Last night, I tried my best to pay attention to the route Candi took me on; but she moved so fast, I could hardly focus.

A girl with midnight black hair and yellow eyes, shoulders past me as I stand next to the staircase.

"Move," she quips, almost knocking me over.

"Hey," I yell, but instantly regret it.

The girl turns and those yellow eyes captivate me into silence. Her sharp jaw and strong facial features are striking. She hisses and throws a hand up, sharp nails extend in my direction. She's only a few inches taller than my five-foot frame, but her toned arms and legs make her appear stronger and more agile than myself. Taking a step back, I almost let out a cry when another girl, this time one with bright red hair, moves next to me and laughs.

"Give it a rest, **Stella,**" she muses.

"Mind your own business, **Kindle,**" Stella hisses again.

I'm at a loss as I watch the two girls have a stand-off.

Stella rolls her eyes and then skips down the stairs. My legs feel like jelly as I struggle to calm my growing nerves. I haven't even been here twenty-four hours and already I've seen enough drama to last me a while.

"Ignore Stella," Kindle tells me. "She's a Dragon Shifter and always in a mood," she adds.

"Oh, well, that sucks," I say. I cringe at my own words.

Laughing, Kindle turns to look at me. Her eyes are almost black. "You are the new girl, right?" she asks. Her tall figure is nicely filled out with luscious curves and I'm instantly jealous of her frame. She towers over me and I can't help but shake under her presence.

"Yeah, that's me," I say, shrugging.

"Well, I'm Kindle. You seem a little— on edge," she clarifies.

That's the understatement of the century right now. Everyone has been intimidating or down right rude to me since I arrived. Of course, I'm on edge.

"Just a little. I got here last night and it's been interesting, to say the least," I explain. "My tour guide wasn't very welcoming either," I add.

She purses her lips and nods. "Candi, right?" she asks. "Look, Candi is alright. What you need to know is that Candi isn't bad, she's just sad right now. She will come around."

I don't bother responding, because honestly, I don't know what to say. Candi hasn't been very welcoming to me and our rooming situation is odd at best.

Thankfully, Kindle changes the topic. "I have heard rumors about you. What's the truth?"

"What do you mean?" I ask, my stomach seeming to drop.

"I'm a Feline Shifter. Basically, I can shift into any form of cat; domesticated house cat, lion, tiger— you name it. So, what about you?" she asks, placing a hand on her hip. "I've heard you aren't sure yet."

Dragon Shifter? First a cat and now a dragon? This supernatural world is going to be very complicated. I'm instantly envious that they know what they are. Their identities are clear.

"Well, I come from a long line of Halliwell Witches and my dad was a warlock— I think, but I'm not exactly sure what I am yet." As the words slip past my lips, I regret them.

Kindle's eyes go wide and her mouth drops down to the floor. "You don't know yet? I mean, you haven't shifted or experienced any sort of magic or powers?" she questions, aghast.

She leans in to hear my response. Part of me wants to tell her to get lost, but I guess this is a normal question around here.

"I am supposed to be a witch, but I think it's still up in the air," I tell her. I don't dare add in that I have insane nightmares and crazy images flashing through my mind.

This is what I absolutely hate about the supernatural world. Everyone expects you to know who and what you are by the time you are sixteen. For me, my fate is still up in the air. Not knowing more information about my dad only makes this all even more complicated.

Sensing my unease, Kindle seems to calm and her face softens a little.

"I didn't mean to upset you. It's just, most students who enroll here already know what they are. What did you say your last name was?" she asks.

"Halliwell. When my dad died, my mom had me use her last name."

Eyes going wide, Kindle smiles at me. "Seriously, you are a Halliwell? I'm sure your powers will emerge soon," she says, like this is common knowledge. "Hey, just to be safe, maybe don't start off by telling people you are a Halliwell," she notes.

“Why not?” I ask, feeling a slight hint of anger rumble inside of me.

“Look, you seem nice enough and I hate that you already have a target on your back, but if you want people to leave you alone here, just keep to yourself. Halliwell’s have a certain... reputation here. It’s not my history to tell, so you might want to ask your mom or do some research, but for now, just try and survive your first few days,” she tells me.

Offering a wave, Kindle bounces down the stairs leaving me once again alone and wondering how in the world I got myself into this mess.

Taking a deep, steady breath, I stop in front of my first class of the day. I had mere minutes to review my course schedule as I walked downstairs and to breakfast. I sat alone in a corner, picking at the scrambled eggs and toast I grabbed from the kitchen line. I was in a sort of daze as I ate and looked over my schedule. My classes consisted of the basic courses you would find in a human high school: **English, Math, Science, and World History. However, the added History of Magic, Defense Tactics, and Supernatural Creatures Alchemy.** I had no idea what the later was, but I knew I would figure it out soon enough.

Walking into the classroom of my English class, I notice that most of the students are already in their seats and chatting quietly with friends. For most, this is their second year at the

academy. As a sophomore, I am late to everything these students have already experienced— including relationships and friendships.

Finding a seat in the back of the room, I slide into the chair and busy myself with finding the perfect spot on my desk for my chromebook. It's mindless, but I need something to keep myself from freaking out right now.

An older man with graying hair and wrinkles around his eyes walks into the room. Those students who were standing, now fall quickly into their seats. Everyone seems to be preoccupied with gathering their materials and quieting down, so I find myself slowly relaxing.

Suddenly, something feels off. Wary, I scan the area around me just as a large figure looms in the classroom doorway. The air grows thick and heavy and I find beads of sweat lining my forehead. As my heart begins beating in my chest, the boy saunters through the classroom. Piercing yellow eyes almost glow as they stare intently my way. There's something mysterious, ominous, and yet, strangely familiar about those eyes. For a second, I find myself lost in his gaze. Heart pounding, I divert my eyes away from him, and struggle to calm my growing nerves. Why am I freaking out right now?

“Hey, you're Farrah, right?” A tall frame looms over the desk and I meet his dark eyes. It's the boy— the one who seemed to suck all of the air out of the room with just his larger-than-life presence.

“Um...yes.”

This guy is the first person to approach me willingly and, suddenly, my hopes for a bright spot in my day grows... but the feeling is short lived.

“Great. Well, Farrah, I need you to get out of my seat.” His tone is menacing and I don’t miss the way his sharp eyes narrowed into slits as he stares down at me. A low growl erupts from his chest and I am stunned once again. Why do I feel like I’ve seen him before?

Gulping, I glance around as a few students turn to stare at me.

“**Mr. Bardulf**, is there a reason why you are not seated?” the professor asks, moving his glasses further up his nose.

“Yes, **Professor Hagen**, this new student seems to be lost and found herself in my chair,” the boy states, glaring daggers at me.

“**Anson**, just find another seat,” Kindle snaps, a low growl escaping from her lips. I swear— I see steam come out of her ears and I can’t help but stare.

Still staring at me, Anson speaks. “No, I like my seat.”

As much as I hate to admit it, he is gorgeous with a golden tan and long muscular legs. His long, brown hair hangs gently over his brown eyes.

I roll my eyes at the spectacle he is creating. Even though I was caught in a trance, I realize that he is nothing more than a bully. Moving to stand, I have to slide out of the chair as Anson refuses to take a step away from me. I may not want to

cause any trouble for myself, but I'm also not going to stand here like I don't have any self-respect. I won't let this guy belittle me. Regardless of how adorable he is. As my body brushes his rock-hard chest, I swear, goosebumps appear over my arms.

“Nervous, are we?” Anson asks, a sly grin over his chiseled face.

Seeing him taunt me only enrages me more. Pausing, I stop moving, and find myself face-to-face with Anson. His warm breaths brush against my cheeks and I can see his chest rising and falling rapidly. Is he the nervous one here?

“I'm not nervous at all. In fact, I was just going to help you find a new seat,” I say, pasting on a brave face that I definitely don't feel. Refusing to cower down, I know that I may regret this later, especially as Kindle's voice plays over in my mind. But, I'm stubborn and not one to let someone pick on me.

His eyes flash and I see a tick in his jaw as he watches me with careful eyes. Clearly, he wasn't expecting my response. With a huff, he stomps off to the other side of the room and slumps into a chair. Clapping his hands, Professor Hagen begins class and instead of focusing on his words like I should be, I'm on high alert to Anson. I try my best to ignore him and the constant stares of the other students. Being the new kid wasn't going to be easy, but I never expected it would be like this. Part of me wants to call my mom and beg her to take me home. I don't because I'm not a quitter.

“One group that we rely heavily on is the Gullah, but they never send their young to our academy,” Professor Hagen explains.

My attention snaps back to the lesson. What is he talking about?

As he continues, I lean forward, doing my best to pay attention, but also keep my guard up about Ason. “Many of us have learned about the Gullah culture as we derive from the South. States like South Carolina, Virginia, and Georgia have large groups of Gullah who reside among the low countries while others opening live amongst the humans. Some work at plantations, telling the stories of their culture, while others may own magic shops. Then, there are the very limited few who remain in the low country, hidden among the swamps, that use magic to heal and help Supernaturals like us. The Gullah believe in witchcraft, which they call *lwudu* or *juju*. They say that witches, just like many of you, can cast spells easily using the herbs and other items they provide. There are special individuals called “Root Doctor” or “Doctor Buzzard” who can provide protection against evil witchcraft or withdraw the effects of a curse. The Gullah also believe in dangerous spirits capable of enslaving a person by controlling his will.”

Several students begin nervously looking around the room. A few whispers and I can feel the tension rising. Was it a dangerous spirit that took the students from the academy?

“Why can’t we just ask the Gullah to stop the evil witchcraft or help us break the curses?” a student in front of me asks.

Nodding, the professor purses his lips. “Well, it does sound easy, but not all Gullah’s are open to helping us. They are very aware of the dangers that lurk around our kind. It takes someone very important to work with a Gullah. For now, you just need to know that these people are our allies, and are important to understanding the history and culture of our kind.”

I see a few more students raise their hands, but our professor changes the subject and focuses on the legacies of the school. Clearly, he is done with this topic for now.

Once class is over, I quickly flee from the room and somehow manage to get through the rest of my classes without any other incidents from Anson. While I’m not welcomed, at least people leave me alone. I just hope that tomorrow brings a better day.

Chapter 3

When I return back to my dorm room later that evening, I am mentally and physically exhausted. Thankfully, Candi isn't there, so I can enjoy the peace and quiet. Collapsing on the bed, I allow my eyes to roam around the blank canvas that is my new room. There's no personal touch or resemblance that a teenager lives here. At home, my bedroom walls were painted a soft baby blue and lined with posters of my favorite bands and Netflix shows. Even though I just want to curl up in a ball and sleep away the day, I know that I need to unpack my suitcase and make this room somehow mine. It's eerily quiet here. Loneliness sweeps over me like a tidal wave.

Sitting up, I go to reach for my suitcase when whispers outside of my room cause me to pause.

“Do you really think she hasn't gotten her magic yet?” a voice asks.

My heart freezes as I know they must be talking about me.

“That’s what I heard. I mean, what a disgrace! To think that someone from her family not having their magic. She is a failure,” another voice grits out.

Tears sting my eyes, but I quickly wipe them away. I knew coming here would be difficult. I guess I just thought the mean-girl vibes wouldn’t affect me like they are.

“Well, she’s already upset Anson, so I guess her time here will be short. Especially with... you know who... missing. That room is bad luck,” the first girl states.

“Yeah, I can’t believe Candi stayed in there after what happened,” a girl cries.

“Sshh, you know we aren’t supposed to talk about that,” one girl chastises.

“Well, I just hope that nothing else bad happens. This place is starting to feel cursed.”

Their voices fade away as they move further down the hall. For a long moment, I didn’t dare to move. It’s getting close to dinner and my stomach growls, but the unease rolling like waves inside of me keeps me from leaving to go eat. I don’t want to face anyone right now.

Stomping over to my desk, I slam Chromebookmy chromebook onto the desk with a reverberating crash, and take a deep breath.

“Get it together, Farrah,” I mumble to myself.

My rage over the unfairness of the situation boils as I yank open my suitcase and begin pulling out my clothes. Like a

fury, I hang up my jeans and shirts and then toss all of my cosmetic items on the bathroom counter. Before, I had planned to at least tidy up the space and make it mine; but now, I just don't care. Moving around the desk, my hip bumps the corner and I yell out in pain. My chromebook slides onto the floor, a loud bang reverberating as it hits the hardwood. This day just keeps getting worse.

Kneeling down, I reach for my chromebook and spot something white wedged under the desk leg. As I place my hand in the small space, I grab a torn piece of paper. Sitting, I unravel the disheveled paper and my eyes go wide as I read the words written in red.

Stay out of the forest

Or you will die, too

As I sit there, staring down at the words, I can't help but wonder if this is a trick being played on me. I mean, girls are talking about me, Anson clearly didn't want me in his seat, Candi hasn't welcomed me with open arms into our room, and now this.

My mind travels back to what Kindle had said about the girl who went missing. The girl who once shared this very same room. The room that those whispering girls called bad luck. Why was someone telling me— or anyone else— to stay out of the forest? The words on this page were taunting me with its secrets, but I had no one on my side to ask for help.

A rustle just outside my bedroom window causes me to stir again. At first, I didn't even bother looking.— considering that

it could just be the wind, I continued staring up at the ceiling as I lay on the bed. But when the sound grows more intense, I can't help but sit up and look outside the window.

The trees of the forest sway back and forth as though they are dancing to a fast-paced melody. This normally wouldn't be strange, but since there doesn't seem to be any wind anywhere else, I find myself intrigued.

A howl echoes through the night, but the sound comes from somewhere inside of the forest. Chills race down my spine as a feeling overtakes me— compelling me to want to escape into the night and race toward the forbidden forest.

More movement draws my eyes away from the treeline as I spot a figure running swiftly around the perimeter. I can barely make out its form, but whatever it is, it's running on all fours.

Panic takes over as I realize there is someone outside near the forest. I struggle with my emotions.

Should I tell someone?

Should I look away?

I have no idea what to do, but when Candi suddenly opens the door and enters our room, I jump back as if I had just been caught with my hand in a candy jar.

Candi eyes me suspiciously as she closes the door behind her.

As soon as my eyes locked onto Candi's, I knew that I had to tell her what I had seen. The woods were forbidden to students and faculty alike, but what I witnessed was real. Even

if I didn't have any tangible proof to back up my claims, the image was seared into my mind with a clarity that made it impossible to ignore. As I spoke, my words tumbled out in a frantic jumble of syllables, desperate to convey the intensity of what I had experienced.

“What is wrong with you?” Candi snaps, moving over to her side of the room.

Her tone grates heavily on my nerves and my need to share what I just saw, dissolves.

“Nothing, I guess I just got spooked,” I lie, as I turn away from her and do my best to fall asleep.

I awake the next morning feeling more exhausted than ever.

I barely slept as my mind raced over all of the things I had heard. To make matters worse, I had lurched out of bed around two in the morning—vomiting and sweating.

Another nightmare had attacked me, and this time, I felt like I wouldn't wake from the experience.

My body plunged into dark and murky water, swallowing me whole. The water thrashed in waves, like the beating of dragons' wings against my skin, cutting me like a knife. I fought against the current, but something heavy pressed me under the surface and made it hard for my head to break free above water.

My arms ached as I thrashed against the water. I didn't dare to open my mouth to scream this time, but something nudged my leg and fear wracked over me. This was it. I was going to die...

When I had finally awoken from the nightmare, I swore my body was still wet— almost as though I had truly been placed in water. I hated these dreams and how I never understood what they meant. Sometimes, I could swear that my dreams were glimpses into things that would happen later on— almost like broken puzzle pieces that flew through my mind at random times.

Once, I had a dream where I saw a teenage girl bleeding and trapped inside of a fiery car. I couldn't get to her, even though she was screaming and begging for me to save her. Two weeks later, I saw a car accident near my house. My mom had slowed down due to the reduced traffic. I spotted a girl that looked eerily similar to the one from my dream and I had been shocked. Staring at her, she tried to run back to the now blazing vehicle. Police and EMT workers struggled to get to her, but she was too fast and rushed past them. In a moment of panic, I reached across the car and slammed my fist on the steering wheel, honking the loud car horn.

Everyone turned, and this allowed one police officer to reach the frantic girl before she could get inside her car again.

Later, I had learned that the girl had wanted to go back for her sister, who she never saw crawl out the passenger side

window. Their story was featured on the nightly news. As my mom and I sat and watched the story, Mom stared at me with a strange look. We never talked about how I honked the horn for no reason. I couldn't even really explain it myself. I just had this strong urge to do it. Like I couldn't function if I didn't.

I never spoke of my dreams.

Candi didn't come back to our room until well after I was asleep and I was happy about it. After grabbing a muffin from the cafeteria, I double-checked my schedule again. I barely have an appetite this morning, so picking at a blueberry muffin will just have to do. Thankfully, they have amazing coffee or I would be a walking zombie today. Wait, are there zombies really here? I may have to reword my metaphors now.

I descended the spiral staircase, my heart thudding with anticipation. The long hallway causes me to pause as I find myself getting lost as I try to follow the map on the back of my schedule. I didn't want to be late on my first day of class; especially for my first period of the day, a class I had been eagerly awaiting and dreading at the same time: History of Magic. I tried to make myself invisible as I navigated through the halls. I was totally the newbie here and the last thing I needed was more attention drawn to me. After triple checking to ensure I was at the right place, I stopped in the doorway of a large room. Sucking in a deep breath, I take the first step into the room and know that without a doubt there is no going back now. Once I am in this room, I know there is no turning back.

The air in the class hums with anticipation and my heart races as I take my seat among a sea of Witches and Wizards, some born to their magic while others are newly discovering it. All around me people already know what to expect; they chatter excitedly and exchange knowing glances, while I can only feel unsure of what lies ahead. The air is thick with an unknown power. I feel utterly overwhelmed and insignificant in comparison - to know nothing of my own magic feels like an insurmountable task, but yet here I am ready to start my journey into the magical history that surrounds us. I am dwarfed by the sheer power that exudes from everyone else in the room— by the thought of learning something so unfamiliar. How do I catch up? How will I ever understand what has come before me? I have no idea what to expect in this history of magic course. The large lecture hall is filled with students all buzzing with excitement and exhilaration as they wait for the start of their studies in magic. Some know that they are a Witch or Wizard by birth, while others have only just discovered that they possess magical powers. I can't help but feel lost.

“Class, everyone sit down. I am **Professor Lane** and this is History of Magic. I assume that if you are in this class, you are ready to explore the magic that courses through each one of you,” she paused, her lips pursing as our eyes met. “Though, some of you may still be navigating your way through uncovering magic at all. I know that most of you want to get to the exciting part— discovering who and what you truly are. In the coming days, we will conduct research of each of your

heritage, and then through the Unveiling Ceremony, each of you will get a glimpse into your magic.”

Everyone around me began to chatter with excitement. I seemed to be the only one without a friend to cling to and share my happiness with.

I wanted to curl up in a ball and seriously die. While Professor Lane didn't call me out by name, everyone seemed to know it was me who they were talking about. I hated that my legacy and secrets followed me here; especially when this was supposed to be the one place in the world where I would feel accepted and normal. Instead, I was being made to feel even more like an outsider. Great, I would always be a freak.

Suddenly, a bell chimed and everyone grew quiet.

“Professor Flitwick, will you please send Farrah to my office?” Headmaster Patricia announces over the intercom.

Everyone's eyes land on me and I hate being the subject of attention once again.

As I stand, I glance around nervously. “Where is her office?” I ask sheepishly.

A few people chuckle but when Professor Lane gives them dirty looks, they all quiet down.

“Go up the main stairs and turn to your left. You will see a sign for the administration offices,” Professor Lane tells me.

Nodding, I grab my items and rush out of the door. I do my best to keep my head down as I travel the short distance to where the offices are located. Thankfully, I didn't get lost.

When I reach the Headmaster's door, it opens before I even get a chance to knock. As I stepped into the Headmaster's office, I'm overwhelmed by the intricate designs on the walls and wood carvings running along the ceiling. A rich mahogany desk stands at the center of the room with a large, red leather chair behind it. Intricate gold and blue tapestries outlined the large windows and shelves of books were arranged with various glass decorations.

"Welcome, please have a seat," she announces, gesturing to a chair in front of the massive desk.

I do as I'm told and nervously tuck my hands under my legs.

"How has your first day of classes been?" she asks, her silver eyes watching me carefully.

Gulping, I grow nervous and feel as though I am in some type of trouble. "They were ok," I say.

"Please don't be nervous. I can feel your energy radiating off of you in waves," she laughs, easing some of the tension that threatens to suffocate me.

I smile, but still feel nervous.

"You can feel my energy? Does that mean you are a..."

"Yes, I am a compilation of many elements that make up our covens. However, one of my specialties is being an Aura Witch, which means that I have the ability to read and see the auras of others. My father was a Warlock and my mother was a Witch. Both had very powerful magic. Your aura right now

is a charcoal gray. You are nervous, scared, and a bit angry.” Her head tilts to the side, as though she is examining me. “What makes you so conflicted?” she questions.

At first, I’m not sure if I should even answer the question. However, after another minute of being stared at, I realize I need to say something. “Well, I guess being here at Shadow Legacy Academy is a little overwhelming. This is my first real experience with magic or other Supernaturals. My mom kept magic secluded from me most of the time.”

Headmaster Patricia nods, but her lips purse. “I see. Well, that can be a little tricky. Anything bothering you?” From the way she asks, I have a strong suspicion that she already knows. That doesn’t sit well with me.

“I guess I am bothered that I don’t know who or what I am. I mean, everyone else around here seems to already know their powers. Shifters, Fae, Witches— I know that I am a descendant from Witches, but nothing has shown me what I possess,” I say, heat flushing my cheeks.

It’s so embarrassing saying my fears out loud. I feel so weak and useless.

“Well, I think that you need to search deeper within yourself. We all have powers, you just need to tap into yours, but something tells me that you already have.”

This time, it was my turn to look at her inquisitively.

“What do you mean? I can’t cast any spells or do anything even close to magic,” I sighed.

Winking, Headmaster Patricia gave me a sly grin. “I think you can and are doing more than you know. At times, Witches use their magic in ways that doesn’t feel like it’s really magic.”

Her twisted words were only confusing me more. I wish she would just come right out and say exactly what she was thinking.

Chuckling, she held her hands together. “I see you are now agitated.”

“Yes. I don’t mean any disrespect, but I don’t understand anything that is happening.”

“It will all become very clear in due time. Here, let me give you this,” she said, snapping her fingers.

A book that was housed on the shelves to the right of us lifted into the air, floating as it made its way over to us. The book landed gently in front of the Headmaster and opened on its own accord. She began reading and then lifted her eyes to meet mine. I was in awe of how easily she had made the book come to her.

“I want you to look at this page very closely. The lineage of Witches details each of our powers. You may find something useful here,” she said, sliding the book across her desk.

I took the leather-bound book and began reviewing the worn, yellow pages. As I began to read, my eyes grew as wide as saucers.

In the Supernatural world, many lineages can be combined to create more powerful and unique types of beings.

Elemental Witches are the most common type of Witches known. Centuries of stories and texts depict these powerful beings as having the ability to call on natural elements such as: Earth, Wind, Emotions, and Water. Other creatures like Wizards contain many of these powers, but their abilities typically remain in creating and using magic and spells.

Supernatural creatures that have grown more powerful over the years are shifters. The evolution of shifters has been an amazing experience and we are still learning their roles as they take on other supernaturals, too. Wolf, Dragon, and Bird shifters are the most common. Some of the lesser powerful shifters are domesticated cats and other pets. These are perceived as lower in the Supernatural world.

I stopped reading for a moment and almost laughed at that. Kindle was a cat shifter. Maybe that explained why she was so cruel; she knew she was lesser than most other students here. As I continued reading, I could feel the weight of the Headmaster's gaze locked on me. Still, I was intrigued by the reading and had to delve further into the text.

More powerful creatures that are still evolving and emerging into our society include Shadowsingers, which are descendants of Elemental Witches and are able to sense and experience things of humans and other creatures. They are best seen at night when they thrive in the darkness of the night. In folklore, they like to remain shielded in the shadows and not

seen by others. They have the ability to strike people blind or in some cases— cause death.

Pixies and Fae can either be an ally or foes of Witches and other Supernatural creatures. These creatures are beautiful and always small and petite as they like to spend most of their time near wooded areas. Pixies and Fae have magical powers associated with Demons and Fallen Angels. In many stories, they are capable of bewitchment and Possession, making their beauty also a deceiving quality that can cause harm to others. They are shape shifters who can assume whatever form they wish, especially to deceive or manipulate people. However, many of the shapes they take on are not animals, but humans.

*Finally, one of the most exciting creatures is the Seer. Seers are descendants from two powerful species. Seers are a rare type of faerie or Witch that is able to **predict the future through visions**. Similar to Shadowsingers, they are able to sense and experience things that others can feel, too. Many Seers note that their visions come through in dreams or in moments when their bodies grow paralyzed by the vision. Many Seers use their visions to help those around them in danger. Seers can, at times, predict visions before they happen. This skill can be utilized in many instances. However, some Seers can use their visions for harm.*

Glancing up, I locked eyes with Headmaster Patricia. Her knowing eyes were softer now, almost kind with understanding.

“Do you understand now?” she asked me.

My head filled with all of the words I had just read. Was I part Seer? The visions– nightmares that had begun plaguing me could that be a sign that I was a Seer? If so, that meant my mom was a Witch and my father’s side was part Fae? It was almost too much to handle.

“Am I a Seer?” I asked aloud.

Headmaster Patricia smiled. “We won’t know for sure until the Unveiling Ceremony at the end of the week. However, if you feel that you have experienced– moments that sound like visions– then possibly that is your power,” she explained.

I hated how elusive she was being, but I understood that we couldn’t know for sure until the ceremony. For now, I would lock this information into my mind and hope that maybe, just maybe, I would finally understand who I truly was.

Chapter 4

After I had met with the Headmaster, I had been sent back to my classes. It was nearly lunch time and I had met up with Candi. I told her about my meeting, but didn't go into much detail. I didn't want to get my hopes up in case I was wrong. The rest of the afternoon was uneventful as I flitted to each class. When my last class arrived,

I made my way down the hallway, my heart thudding with anticipation. It was my last period of the day, a class I had been eagerly awaiting: History of Magic. I tried to make myself invisible as I navigated through the preoccupied students to my seat and settled in with my quill and parchment. I had just come from Charms, where Professor Lane lectured on the correct way to levitate a bird feather across two desks ten feet away.

“One must visualize the feather as light as air,” he said, and then give it a little nudge for direction. “Visualize the feather gliding through the air like steam from a kettle behind a plucked chicken; feel its position as though you were holding

it between your fingers. Though, in actuality a student can't see a magical object unless it's enchanted, but if you don't picture it well enough then you won't be able to perform magic accurately enough to charm or transfigure anything.”

His words had unsettled me, but I had to just push that worry into the back of my mind. I had enough right now to stress over.

Now, I sat through this last course watching others display their powers as the professor talked about the history of magic. A group of girls: Stella and a girl I had learned was named Lara, was among them. They looked at me from their seats behind me with mouths partially opened in laughter.

Suddenly, the scent of smoke filled the air around me and my legs grew hot— as though they were on fire. Shooting out of my seat, I screamed in panic and from pain as my legs were singed red and the smoke was coming from me.

Seriously? Someone had caught the floor around my feet on fire!

“Wow, looks like it's getting hot in here,” Kindle snickered.

Turning on my heel, I fanned my legs as I glared daggers her way. She was evil incarnate and I knew that she would be trouble for me.

“What is going on?” Professor Lane barked.

“Farrah seems to have had some trouble,” Lara added, her malice smile slicing through me.

I turned to the professor, willing myself not to cry. Her eyes turned down when she looked at me and the stern glare transformed to one of pity. I almost hated that look even more than her anger at being interrupted.

“Settle down everyone!” Professor Lane yelled.

She threw her hands in the air and mumbled something I didn’t recognize as English, and my legs began to cool down and the fire was put out by a strong gust of wind.

I knew she had used magic on me and I hated that I wasn’t able to protect myself. I should have my powers– why was fate playing such a cruel joke on me?

“Anyone care to explain how this happened? Everyone knows the rules at Shadow Legacy Academy is that we never harm other students– or play vile tricks on them with our powers. As Witches, we must utilize our magic and find ways to use it for good, not evil,” she stated, glancing at Kindle and Lara who were now sulking in their seats

Of course, neither one of them wanted to admit they had done this. They were the worst kind of bullies; ready to cause harm but never willing to admit their wrongdoings.

I should have spoken up and told everyone I knew it was them, but I didn’t.

“It’s ok. I’m fine really. Besides, I don’t let weak people bother me,” I said, before sliding back into my chair.

Nodding, Professor Lane winked at me as she moved back to the front of the classroom and continued on with her lecture.

Before long, my incident was forgotten and everyone was engrossed in hands-on group work where they shared magic. I was paired with two girls: Sheena and Alice, who had been using spells for years.

“Hey, is this class only for witches?” I asked Alice.

When I had first met Stella, Candi had informed me that she was a dragon shifter.

Shaking her head, Alice paused her incantation. “No. All students are required to take this course, but only Witches can practice spells. We have shifters and fairies in here, too,” she explained.

That caused me to look around the room once more. It was almost funny how everyone looked so normal and human, but hidden behind their human form was a supernatural creature just ready to emerge.

The girls went back to work sharing their skills with magic.

As I glanced around the room at my peers, I was painfully aware of how far behind I was. Everyone around me seemed to have mastered their spells, each one more intricate and powerful than the last. Lara and Stella, who I had seen at gatherings before, were sitting behind me, watching me with strange expressions on their faces.

Every now and then, I could see Lara and Kindle with mouths partially open in laughter, and I would quickly avert my gaze, hoping they hadn’t noticed me looking. I knew they

thought I was inadequate in comparison to everyone at this school, and I felt my cheeks burning in embarrassment. But every time I looked up, they were still there, watching me with amused expressions.

I turned back to my notebook, trying to ignore their presence and focus on the task at hand. I took a deep breath, determined to push away my insecurities and prove myself to them. I had worked hard to get to this point, and I wasn't going to let anyone stand in my way.

I spent the rest of the lesson focused on learning the intricacies of the day's spell, and by the time the bell rang, I was ready to get out of the room. The class was interesting, but I hated that Kindle and Lara were in there with me.

By the time dinner rolled around, I was exhausted and overstimulated from all of the information I had learned. I had found Candi as I walked into the cafeteria and she took me to a table near a large set of windows. I could tell that she wasn't thrilled to have me join her, but at least she had made an attempt to be kind. Stella joined us and we sat mostly silent, which I was grateful for. A few more students joined us, but none seemed to pay me any attention.

I allowed myself to smile, something that had felt so foreign for so long. The note was folded in my pocket. I had no idea why I had felt the need to keep the note, but I was afraid to just leave it out in the open.

Part of me wanted to show it to Candi, but I was afraid of what her reaction might be. She's been very open about not wanting to share a room with me. Could this note solidify her annoyance with me? Would I be assigned to a different room? Not wanting to cause any unnecessary drama, I stuff my hand in my pocket and crumble the note further into my pocket, when someone turns up the volume on one of the large televisions mounted in the front of the cafeteria. As people begin to notice the sound, a silence sweeps over the room.

A reporter drones on about unusually cool temperatures for August in Charleston. A woman with platinum blonde hair appears on the screen, a serious look on her perfectly made-up face. Her tone turns serious as she begins reporting on local teenagers who have mysteriously gone missing without a trace. She talks about two runaway teens who haven't been seen in over three weeks and then an image of Shadow Legacy Academy fills the screen.

A wave of gasps echoes throughout the space, and I glance around to gauge the students' reactions. Some are glued to the television while others are angrily talking to those around them. Something about this story is sparking waves of anger and my curiosity is piqued.

My heart begins to race and adrenaline fills me, providing me with enough fuel to listen to the news.

"People in Mount Pleasant have reported hearing sounds of howling late into the night. Some wonder if we have a deadly beast on the loose, or worse, a serial killer." She pauses for

dramatic effect and it works as my eyes can't seem to look away from her. "Even the local Shadow Legacy Academy has lost one of their very own students."

A gasp erupts from Candi and my heart breaks for her. She covers her mouth with her hands and tears fill her eyes. People look at her and I can see the pity in their expressions. I hate this for her, having to relive the loss of her friend once again. Someone turns off the television, and for a brief moment, no one dares to speak. A heaviness fills the room and it almost becomes difficult to breathe.

"I need to go do homework," Candi mutters, as she jumps out of her seat and scrambles out of the cafeteria.

I move to go after her, but then think better of it. Maybe she needs time to just be alone.

"She will be fine," Stella assures me.

We finish our dinner and while the rest of the kids head to the school's movie theater, I decide to go to my room and look for Candi. Moving out into the hallway, movement across the way catches my eye. I see Candi darting out a set of glass doors and I can tell that she is crying. I follow after her and out to a courtyard surrounded by the walls of the academy. A tall clump of giant trees surrounded by a ring of shrubbery and flowers create a canopy that shields the ground from the sky above. Black iron benches surround a stone water fountain, and I spot Candi sitting on one of the benches. She is hunched over, her head in her hands as her shoulders shake. Slowly, I make my way to her. Just over the horizon, the sun settles in

the evening sky, creating a magnificent splatter of oranges, reds, and purples across the sky.

“I don’t want to bother you, but if you need anything, let me know,” I quietly say.

For a moment, Candi doesn’t move and I wonder if she even heard me at all.

“None of this makes any sense,” she whimpers, her voice barely audible.

I move closer to the bench and decide to sit next to her. I’m typically not very good with comforting others; but right now, my heart aches to help Candi. She is clearly upset and I can’t leave her right now.

“I wish I could say something that would make you feel better, but honestly, I still don’t understand what is going on myself,” I tell her.

Candi slowly lifts her head and her eyes are red and puffy from crying.

A light chuckle leaves her, but there is nothing funny about this situation. “There isn’t anything to say. My best friend is missing and everyone around here wants to act like she never existed. I mean, I get it because...” she pauses, and I am frustrated. I want her to finish her thought.

I give her a minute before I finally speak again. “You know, I have secrets, too. Sometimes, it sucks knowing that no one else knows how you feel,” I explain.

I have no idea if my words are comforting her or not, but I feel like she needs someone to be kind and emphasize with her.

Candi looks at me and it appears as though she is trying to study me— to read my mind to see if I am sincere or not. I don't know what her power is, but I suspect it may have something to do with mind reading.

“I just don't know how this could have happened. There was no sign of struggle, no blood, and no witnesses. She literally vanished, but I know that's not the case.” Pausing, Candi huffs and I wait on baited breath for her to continue. “I think she went into the forest,” she says quietly, glancing around to ensure we are still alone.

“Can you tell me about the forest? All I know is that it is forbidden.”

Candi looks around again. Her face is conflicted and for a moment, I fear that she will stop talking and I may never understand the dangers of the cursed forest.

“Look, it isn't safe for us to really be having this conversation, but I think you mean well,” Candi begins. “I'm sorry if I was mean to you. I miss my friend and your taking over her bed just solidifies the fact that she's gone and no one thinks she will be back. I'm going to tell you something, but you can't push me for more answers than I am giving you.”

Nodding, I silently let her know that I will appreciate any information that she provides.

“The Cursed Forest; that’s what we all call it– is a vast, ancient forest filled with creatures of myth and horror, where one wrong step can lead to unspeakable terror. At least, that’s the textbook version we all learn in our History of Magic courses. You will soon learn about it, but what you really need to know is that the forest wasn’t always cursed. Years and years ago, students at the academy would utilize the forest as a safe place. Shifters could run inside the woods without fear of being seen by humans. Fae and Witches could practice magic and not worry about harming others. It was a magical and wonderful place, but then a few students began tampering with black magic, which is forbidden at the academy. The creatures that were once our friends inside of the forest, quickly became our enemies. The thorns of the roses that line the forest tree line possess a deadly magical spell that will draw you into the forest. Once inside, you are trapped. We don’t have the magical spells or skills to end the curse just yet.”

She stops and I realize that I was leaning in as I listened to her.

“Do you think Lily is inside there?” I ask.

Candi only shakes her head, yes.

“I need to tell you something,” I start. I want to share with Candi that I have felt a pull toward the forest; but before I can tell her this, a loud motion startles us both.

Jumping over the stone wall of the courtyard, Ason rushes toward us with intense speeds. His clothes are torn and his hair

is in disarray. While I've never seen a wolf shift, I can only assume that's what he had done.

“What do you think you are doing?” Ason roars out.

His chest is heaving as his eyes glow a fiery red that disturbs me.

Candi jumps from her seat, clearly agitated by Ason's dramatics.

“Go away,” Candi screams, but Ason is clearly not affected by her outburst.

“Why are you talking to her?” Ason shouts, almost as though I'm not even here. How dare he!

Anger boils deep inside of me and I realize I've had enough of his attitude. Ever since I met Ason, he has been nothing but rude to me. I stand, doing my best to pretend as though I am calm, cool, and collected.

“We are having a conversation. You need to leave,” I instruct.

Not bothering to even look at me, Ason puffs his chest out. “Candi, you know that you can't be talking about things new students have no business hearing outside of the classroom,” he states, his fangs showing.

“You can't tell me what to do, so just go away,” Candi yells again.

Ason seems to calm for a moment as he rubs the bridge of his nose.

“Look, Candi. I get that you are upset, but we have to accept that the police and our professors are handling this case, so it’s best if we stay out of it,” he spat out.

“You can’t be serious,” I yelled. Even though I was still new here, I at least knew enough that nothing was being done. Hushed voices talked about the missing student, but everyone else seemed to want to pretend like it never happened.

“The human police can’t help us here, even I know that!” Candi cries out.

My hand falls to hers and I squeeze, letting her know that I am here for her— as a friend.

“We need to remember that we are here to learn, not to solve mysteries. Candi, you know as a second semester student that getting involved in things will only cause trouble,” he says, his expression softer now that he has calmed down.

“Of course, you would say that. I wouldn’t expect you to care about anyone else other than yourself,” I cried out. “You just ran out here and interrupted our private conversation to insult me and hurt Candi.”

Stepping closer to me, I could feel his warm breath caressing my cheek. “First, you have no idea what you are talking about. Secondly, your private little conversation took place in a public setting. I am a shifter and was out running when I heard you talking. Don’t act like I’m wrong to tell you all to stop talking about something that is forbidden,” he said, his jaw tight and his fists jammed to his sides.

“We can’t pretend like this isn’t happening, but we can hold on to hope,” Candi intervened, breaking the tension. I was glad for her support.

Ason seemed to be startled by her words. His eyes danced over to Candi before returning back to me. “Look, I will leave you all alone, but please, just let it go. Let those that are trained to help, do their jobs,” he pleaded.

For some strange reason, I almost felt sympathy for Ason. Sure, he was a jerk and liked to butt into conversations, but something deep inside of me told me that he was trying to be helpful. He clearly didn’t know how to express himself.

Nodding, Candi offered a slight smile. “Ok, we won’t talk about it anymore here,” she told him.

Before I could open my mouth to say anything else, Ason turned on his heel and sprinted toward the doors Candi and I had come through earlier. I had no idea what had happened, but it was insane and had me wanting to know more about the forest.

“What’s his problem?” I asked Candi, who had been silent during his departure.

“Really? You don’t see it?” she asked, smirking.

“See what?” I asked, aghast.

“He is so into you,” she giggled.

Ok, clearly Candi has lost her mind.

“You are joking, right?” I asked, staring at the doors that Ason had gone through.

“I’ve known Ason since we were little kids. We grew up in the same town outside of Savannah, Georgia. He never gets involved in anything, nor does he ever pay attention to anyone else. However, since you arrived, he can’t seem to keep his eyes off of you. Plus, don’t you think it’s odd that he got so upset about us talking about here?” Candi asked.

Her words jumbled in my mind and it took me a moment to clearly comprehend what she was saying.

“Sure, Ason looks at me, but it is with disgust and anger. I have no idea why he hates me so much, but I definitely don’t believe he’s into me. Anyway, he clearly just doesn’t want anyone getting involved in the investigation. Which I hate to admit it, I kind of see his point. It must be dangerous and against the rules.”

“Whatever,” Candi giggled. Her face turned serious and she let out a heavy breath. “Thank you for coming out here to check on me. We can talk more later, but you really were kind to me. I’m sorry for how I treated you,” she said.

“It’s ok. How about we just have a reset. We can start over,” I suggested.

“I would like that,” Candi agreed.

Together, we walked back into the academy; and for the first time since I had arrived, I felt a sense of peace and acceptance.

Chapter 5

“So, what’s the Unveiling Ceremony?” I asked. “I mean, I understand that we learn our powers, but is there more to it than that?”

Candi was sitting in front of her dresser, carefully applying her makeup as she glanced at me through her mirror.

Yesterday, Candi and I had a sort of breakthrough. After our conversation in the courtyard and run-in with Ason, we had spent the rest of our evening talking and sharing stories about our lives before arriving at Shadow Legacy Academy. I knew very little about my heritage or about magic at all– which made me feel so inadequate being around students who were far more advanced than I was.

The only good thing that had come out of this was that I didn’t have a nightmare last night. I slept well and woke up well-rested.

“You will find out all about it on Friday,” she said, winking at me as she placed mascara on her long lashes.

“Come on, you can give me more than that?” I whined.

I sat on my bed— Lily’s old bed— and held a soft, plush purple pillow to my chest. Unlike Candi, I had woken up earlier and dressed in our assigned uniform, threw my hair up into a high ponytail, and placed a small amount of makeup on my face. Candi, however, was busy primping like she was preparing for a fashion show instead of a long day of classes. The note I had found is tucked safely away in my desk, and hidden under a pile of notebooks. I’m still conflicted on whether or not to show it to Candi. Maybe later I will muster the courage to show her.

Giving me a Cheshire cat grin Candi puts her mascara down and turns in her seat to face me. “The Unveiling Ceremony always happens at the end of the first week of school. Those that are new to Shadow Legacy Academy will partake in the ceremony to learn what powers they hold. Headmaster Patricia will ask you to hold a crystal ball, and she will place a spell that allows her to draw out your magic. Your true self will be revealed in the crystal ball. Mine was last year and it was nerve-wracking but exciting,” she said, sighing.

My mind drifted back to my meeting with the Headmaster yesterday. The book she had shown me told me the abilities I may have. I couldn’t stop thinking about the idea of being a Seer. In a way, I hoped that was what it was— if not for anything more than to explain why I have these terrible nightmares.

“What was your true power?” I ask, feeling a twinge of guilt at the thought that I barely know my roommate and new friend.

“I am from one of the Elemental Witch Covens. My true power is healing and calling on people’s emotions. After more classes and lessons, I will be able to create spells and potions that can heal others. Healers can work in the human world and end up being doctors and nurses. Some go on to be firemen or policemen, but we always find jobs in careers where our true goal is to help others. We can hide our powers while still performing them.”

I’m envious that Candi already knows what power she holds. Thinking back to yesterday, it makes sense that Candi is a healer. It must be killing her that she can’t heal Lily...

“I’m so jealous,” I admit.

“Don’t be. You will get your answers soon enough,” Candi assures me, though I’m not fully convinced.

Standing, Candi adjusts her skirt and takes one last look in the mirror, before grabbing her bag and heading toward the door. I follow suit and we leave our room and prepare for a long day of classes.

After breakfast, Candi and I head toward class. I’m excited about my History of Magic class. There are so many questions I want to ask, but I find myself absorbed in the other conversations that take place around us.

When we step into the room, I spot Ason sitting across the room. A heavy scowl is plastered across his features, and I internally laugh at Candi's words yesterday about Ason being into me. The look he is giving me now is not one of adoration. This is intense, like he could spark a fire and burn me to ashes if he wanted.

Our professor walks in and we all quickly settle into our seats.

“Good morning, students. Today, we will begin researching our individual heritages and gaining more insight into magic.”

Everyone quietly awaits his next words and I feel myself leaning forward in my seat.

As he continues, all eyes are faced to the front. “Before we get into our research, we do need to understand that the forest that surrounds our school, the one that used to act as a shield and ally for the academy, is now forbidden to any and all students.”

I feel my hands shake in my lap as I listen to the ominous words. This is what I had wanted to learn more about and, knew I couldn't ask again.

“Long ago, the forest had been spelled to act as a magical shield for the Shadow Legacy Academy. It was a wonderful place where we were welcomed by all creatures that inhabited the forest. Now, you all must understand that dark magic is strictly forbidden at the school. Any student caught using dark magic will be expelled and have their magic removed immediately.”

I heard a few gasps around me as students were intensely listening. I couldn't help myself and when I turned to look out the window facing the back of the forest, I caught Ason looking at me again. What was with this guy? He clearly had a problem and needed to figure it out soon. I'm not the type of girl who will ever let someone— especially a guy— intimidate me.

“A group of Witches went against the rules and began practicing dark magic inside the forest. At first, they kept their wrongdoings a secret, but quickly word spread as the mermaids who lived in the lagoons began to call to students like sirens, luring them into the waters and then drowning them. It became all too clear that these Witches were using their magic for evil. They wanted to control all supernatural creatures and believed that they were creating an army of sorts. However, a group of students discovered this plan and tried to stop them. The Witches performing dark magic were from the Cunningham heritage— a group of powerful Witches who were strong and all held elemental magic.” Candi winced next to me and I offered her a comforting smile as we continued listening. “One of the Witches who tried to stop the Cunninghams was a Halliwell. This particular being was filled with Elemental powers as well as the ability to find her enemies before anyone else could. She died in the forest, but her surviving sister told the story of what had happened. Once the academy learned of what had happened, they placed a warding spell around the forest. We couldn't remove the dangerous curse that was placed on our once beloved forest,

but we could prevent any more students from being killed. The forest, unfortunately, took ten of our students. Nothing like that has happened since..." His words were muffled by the sound of my own heart beating like a wild drum inside of my chest.

One of my ancestors, a Halliwell, had been killed inside of the forest. My mother had never told me this before. Honestly, she had withheld all information about our family from me. I understood that she wanted me to have my own journey of discovery- blah, blah, bah- but this would have been good to know.

I could feel the eyes of my classmates boring into me.

Without thinking, I raised my hand.

"Yes, Farrah. Do you have a question?"

"With a new student now missing, should we worry that the magical ward isn't working?" I asked.

I did my best to ignore the stares and whispers around me. Candi watched me carefully and I hoped I hadn't upset her with my question.

Nodding, I was granted my information. "We have the human police looking for all missing teens- both human and supernatural, but we can't be certain of anything yet. We are leading our own investigation into the disappearances... but yes, we do fear that the curse of the thorns and forest may be alive again. The trees in the forest whisper to each other, sharing evil secrets. Listening very carefully, you can hear

snatches of conversations from long ago, of spells cast and ancient secrets found in the hollows of the giant trees. The allure of the forest can be strong, but you must do your best to ignore the call. Stay away from the forest,” he advised.

I saw another student raise their hand; but before he could ask a question, a loud siren blared through the school.

“What is that?” I asked, muffling my ears with my hands.

Candi’s grim expression had me wishing I had never asked. The sound had interrupted an interesting lesson on the forest, but something told me that I was about to get another lesson.

“That is the warning siren. Something bad must have happened,” Candi said, her voice trembling in fear.

Great, just what I needed, something else to go wrong.

Chapter 6

A heavy dose of reality descends on us as we enter the large auditorium.

When the loud sirens began, I had no idea what was happening. Panic had ensued and students began shrieking as they scurried toward the auditorium. I was somewhat relieved to find other students who were new like I was, just as lost as I was in the moment. Thankfully I had Candi and she had led me to where we needed to go.

“Silence,” Headmaster Patricia roared, as she stood on the large stage in front of us. Her long, golden robes seemed to sway as she moved to stand in front of a sleek podium.

Everyone sat still as statues as we waited for her announcement. My heart was racing and I felt a strange urge to cry. Nothing at Shadow Legacy Academy had gone right since I had arrived. Maybe I should just call my mom and beg her to come and get me?

“Last night something terrible happened,” Headmaster Patricia stated, wringing her hands as she spoke.

The rest of the professors lined the stage behind her. Their stoic expressions made me even more nervous about the moment.

“This isn’t good,” Candi whispered, as she leaned into me.

Shaking my head, I agreed with her.

“I regretfully stand here to tell you all that another student went missing early into the morning hours. Second-year student, Lara went missing. Her roommate and friend, Stella, reported her missing before breakfast. We fear she, too, may have succumbed to the cursed forest.”

Anguish filled Headmaster Patricia’s face and everyone around us began gasping and crying out in shock. I found Stella in the crowd and she was sobbing, her face buried in her hands. Tears streamed down her face as a few students near her tried to comfort her. I could see a billow of smoke surrounding her and a part of me felt bad for her. Sure, Stella had been terrible to me, but I wasn’t a cold-hearted monster. She was clearly upset over her missing friend.

I had no idea what to do. Students were missing and I had never felt more turmoil in my life. As she continued, I saw the professors lining behind her give students empathetic and somber expressions. “Until further notice, the academy will be on lockdown. No student is allowed outside of these walls unless accompanied by a professor. This is a dire situation and one that I won’t take lightly. I can assure you that we have a

team who are doing everything in their power to find out why the curse is being tampered with,” she stated.

More gasps and cries of anguish rang out around me. Still new to this world, I had no clue about curses, but I could hear the pain in her voice. “From what we have learned so far, the protection spell that was placed on the academy many, many years ago, is slowly being lifted. The forest is more alive than ever before—teaming to steal our students and allow the curse of the thorns to destroy everything we have built. I understand you all must have questions, and we will do our best to respond to those, but please, be patient with us as we navigate through this. All courses today are canceled. We ask that you remain vigilant and let us know if you see or hear anything that could potentially be dangerous.”

At the nod of her head, the unassessably was over and a few students began to stand, glancing around nervously as they were unsure of what to do next.

Without classes, I knew that there was only one thing I could do—head to the library and research everything I could about spells, supernatural creatures, the forest, and more importantly—my family name.

Candi was busy talking to another student who I recognized from one of my English classes. While she was busy, I felt a strange sensation tear through me. As I turned in my seat, I caught a glimpse of Ason sitting in the far back corner of the auditorium, shrouded in darkness like a plague. His steely gaze made me uncomfortable. When our eyes met, he quickly

turned his attention to outside of the room as he jumped out of his seat and made a mad dash for the exit.

Huffing, I stood, refusing to allow Anson once again to put me in a bad mood. I couldn't let him affect me

“Hey, I want to go to the library. I haven't been inside yet and I think I need to study up on a few things. I have no idea what's going on,” I said to Candi, as she knelt down and began picking up her items.

Most of the students had filed out of the auditorium and those that remained were either nervously talking with professors or quietly chatting in friend groups.

Sensing my unease, Candi offered a smile. “Sure, let's go. I think it could do both of us some good to be in a quiet place.”

As we left the auditorium, I couldn't help but wonder what else would happen before the curse of the thorns was lifted.

Chapter 7

Candi opened the large, wooden door that led inside of the expansive library. I couldn't believe that I hadn't been inside this place before now. I mean— I've been busy, but back home, I practically lived in libraries. It was where I hid out during lunch while in school and the place I went to on the weekends when I just needed to escape into another world.

“Wow, this place is incredible,” I mused, my eyes taking in my surroundings.

Sharp lines and a high ceiling welcomed me inside, and I gasped as I saw a large mosaic that was painted on the ceiling. It appeared to be of the academy and contained the school colors and what looked like all of the supernatural creatures that inhabited its walls.

We made our way down stone-carved steps that led deeper into the library. Shelves lined the walls and rows upon rows expanded as far as the eye could see through the center of the space. Each one appeared to be made of oak and reached high

into the air above our heads. Candles are placed sporadically throughout the library letting off a dim, flickering light that provides a warm and inviting atmosphere. Desperately, I wanted to grab a mystery or adventure book and curl up onto one of the plush, velvet couches near the windows, but I knew I needed to find books that contained information about this place. I guess I was on a search for an entirely different type of adventure.

Candi led me over to a space where large tables sat in a circle. I could feel the abundant knowledge that filled the books and bled into the bricks and stone of this place.

“What did you have in mind?” Candi asks, taking a seat in a leather chair she pulled out from the table.

“Honestly, I have no idea. I think that first I want to research my family– the Halliwell Witches. I learned in class yesterday that one of my ancestors helped save a student here many years ago. However, I still need to uncover the magic and what all of this could mean for me.”

As I rambled on, Candi placed her finger to her lips and began looking around. “I think I have some ideas,” she said, snapping her fingers.

Without warning, a soft green smoke swirled in front of me as two books appeared out of thin air.

“What just happened?” I asked, clearly in shock.

Giggling, Candi grabbed the books and placed them on the table in front of me. I had seen my mom do magic only a

handful of times in my life. It was strictly forbidden for Witches to perform magic in front of others who were not supernaturals. Since I hadn't gained my powers yet, she rarely exposed her skills to me. Watching Candi create magic was amazing.

“Well, I learned how to call on items in my Elements of Magic course last year. Since I am a second-year student, my magic is a little bit more...advanced,” she said.

“Why didn't you tell me?” I asked, placing my hand on the leather-bound cover of the book closest to me.

The title of the book read: Casting Magic and the History of Powers.

“Well, you are new to the academy. I didn't want to startle or overwhelm you. I can only do a few things right now, but my magic will grow. I think these books might help you. The one you have right now,” she said, indicating to the book I was currently looking at, “offers information about families who have gone to the academy. You can read through the powers they hold.” I admired the book as she explained. Next, she reached for the other book that was still levitating in the air. “This one talks about the Curse of the Thorns and provides the timeline of how and when the curse was created.”

Opening the books, I was met with yellow pages and thin material, old and worn from years of use. As I began reading, my eyes grew wide. Reading aloud, I shared the information with Candi. “Over a hundred years ago, a rogue witch began practicing dark magic. She wanted to lead a new coven and no

one would follow her. She made a potion,” I stated, turning to the page to where an illustration of a strange looking bottle appeared. It had a large bottom half and a thin tube at the top. A dark blue liquid seemed to fill the inside. “The potion created a spell that locked all of the evil creatures the witch spelled inside the forest, curing the thorns so that anyone who dared enter the woods would be cursed to remain there forever.” I stopped reading, shock filling me. Candi stood next to me, reading over the page along with me. “The curse is said to only last one hundred years. In order to end the curse, someone must find the potion that is hidden inside the forest. The potion has to be destroyed in a fire.”

On the next page, a map of the forest laid out the land that no one had dared to enter for a very long time. Examining the area, I noticed that inside the forest there was a large area of trees that had the words shifter territory written in black script. Beyond the trees, there was a large body of water that seemed to flow into a marsh area with swamps. Something inside of me sparked to life and beads of sweat formed along my brow.

I had seen this forest before.

I had been inside this forest before.

Gasping, I threw my hands over my mouth to stifle the scream I wanted to unleash. This was the same forest I had seen in my nightmares. The very one that I had been trapped inside of.

Everything began to click like an old lock as I realized my nightmare may have been a vision...

This flowed to the edge of the forest where the cursed forest ended and the rest of Charleston began. Near the water was a cave and a large red X was placed there.

“I bet that is where the potion is,” Candi said, a bright smile appearing over her face.

“If it’s so easy to find, why hasn’t anyone gotten it yet?” I asked.

Candi let out a loud laugh and then quickly covered her mouth. In a whisper she said, “The problem is, the forest isn’t just cursed– it’s deadly. Look at what has happened so far. People are being lured inside, never to be found again. Not even our magic can save us right now.”

“We have to find a way,” I said, even though I felt defeated. It seemed too simple, yet it was anything but easy. And, what in the world was I thinking? I didn’t even have magic yet, I was a lost cause.

As I began searching through the book again, a heaviness seemed to fill the air around me. A shadow was cast over the table, blocking the ambient lighting of the space. Turning my head, I spotted Ason stalking toward me.

With a heavy scowl plastered over his face, he seemed to be coming straight toward us.

“What now?” I asked, more of myself, but Candi turned to see who or what I was talking about.

When Ason stopped, I noticed that his chest was rising and falling rapidly, like he had been on a wild mission and was

now out of breath.

“What are you doing in here?” Ason asked, sounding alarmed.

“Uh, Sherlock. We are looking for books,” I snapped, not bothering to hide my annoyance.

Rolling his eyes, Ason dismissed my attitude. “You should be in your dorm room. It’s not safe to be alone,” he shouted, causing me to shrink into my chair.

Candi leaped into action, ready to fight Ason. “Man, you need to chill. We are following the rules; we are still in the academy,” Candi shouted at him.

Shaking his head, Ason’s brown shaggy hair fell over his eyes. Taking his hand, he swiped the hair out of his face and scowled. “You have no idea what you are doing. Go back to your room,” he said again, this time more tense and severe.

Opening my mouth to argue, a powerful roar filled the entire room, shaking the ground and causing me to tumble out of my chair.

Was this an earthquake?

Ason leaped over the table, pulling me up in one, swift motion. He took my hand and began running. Candi barely had time to register what was happening before she began sprinting after us.

“What are you doing?” I shouted, as Ason ran us through the library.

Out in the main hall, I could hear screams as students ran frantically for their lives. The ground shook again as a large beast raced toward us.

It was a dragon and not just any dragon. This was an angry, fire-breathing, beast with a deadly look in its red, blazing eyes.

“What is that?” I asked, my voice shaking as I stood close to Ason.

“It’s Stella,” Candi answered for him.

“Stella became enraged when the school told her they couldn’t go look in the forest for her friend. I came looking for you...” Ason stated, but his words were cut off by an ear-piercing roar that caused my body to go stiff.

I stared in awe, petrified and mesmerized, as Stella lunged forward, her body twisting and contorting into something much larger and more frightening than the tall, thin girl I had known disappearing before my very eyes. She was being replaced by an enormous creature with leathery scales that glittered like jewels in the moonlight. Her wings stretched for what felt like miles and they beat the air with such ferocity, that it kicked up gusts of wind in the hallway that threatened to pull me off of my feet. A sickening crackle of bone breaking had my stomach dropping. Her skin rippled and twisted as hunter-green scales erupted across her entire being, each one glinting in the light like polished obsidian. Her eyes blazed with an ancient fire that seemed to have been sleeping for eons, waiting for this exact moment to awaken. A low growl

rose from deep within her throat and echoed off the walls. The ground shook beneath me as she emerged fully from her once-human form—a massive dragon now stood before me, stretching out its wings in triumph. It was the most terrifying and amazing thing I'd ever witnessed. A chill ran down my spine as I realized this was not just any dragon, but it was Stella and her wrath and anger mixed together to create the perfect time for this dragon to go on a rampage.

I couldn't even think about the fact that Ason had come looking for me. Why? To feed me to the beast to keep her away from the rest of the students?

The dragon— I mean Stella, stomped toward me, her mouth opening and allowing a flow of hot fire to spread. The heat from the blaze almost burned my skin as I tried to take a step back.

“Stella, you need to stop,” Ason shouted, but Stella didn't falter.

She was on a deadly mission and I happened to be in her way.

“What is she doing?” I asked through clenched teeth.

“Her Dragon emerged when she must have become upset. Stella is only a second-year student, she is still learning how to control her shift,” Candi explained quietly. Her voice shook with each word she spoke. “She doesn't even know what she's doing.”

Pushing me behind him, Ason moved quickly, jumping into the air. Before my eyes, his body shifted and contracted as his wolf emerged. His black fur, with wickedly sharp claws on his front paws and teeth like shards of glass, should have terrified me, but it didn't. At that moment, I was relieved and grateful that he was there. A wild growl escaped from between pointed fangs as he looked up at me with piercing golden eyes.

“Go, Farrah. Candi, take Farrah to your dorm, and don't leave until I come to get you,” Ason shouted, his voice echoing through the halls.

Paralyzed by shock and fear, I couldn't seem to find a way to get my legs to move. It wasn't until Candi shook me, that I came out of my trance and allowed her to drag me down the hall and away from where Ason stood against Stella in dragon form.

Everyone else had already found safety and it appeared as though it was just me and Candi that were left in the halls.

When we finally reached our dorm, we went inside and locked the door behind us. Out of breath, I collapsed on my bed.

What in the world had just happened?

“How will they stop her?” I asked, after what felt like forever sitting in silence.

“More than likely, one of the professors will have to stun her with magic until they can get her to shift back. Sort of like

tranquilizing an animal,” she explained. “I almost feel bad for her.”

I sat up, staring at Candi in disbelief. “How can you feel bad for her? Stella is terrible to people and she just went on a rampage,” I cried out.

Candi’s face softened as she ran her hands through her hair. “I know Stella can be a brat, but what happened really wasn’t her fault. She lost a friend and couldn’t control her dragon. I’m sure once she shifts back she will feel awful about this,” Candi intoned.

I let that sink in. Maybe Candi was right. Regardless, my mind was spinning after my near-death experience, and Ason—well, what had Ason done?

Chapter 8

“Students, the threat is now removed. Please go about your evening as normal.”

Seriously, this couldn't be right; could it?

The announcement blared throughout the academy as Candi and I sat quietly in our room. I had tried to look over schoolwork, but I couldn't keep my focus on anything. In a matter of hours, I had learned of a mysterious potion that was the answer to the end of the curse of the thorns, and was almost attacked by a dragon.

My stomach growled from hunger and I hugged my middle. “Do you really think it's safe to leave our room now?” I asked.

Candi didn't seem upset or phased by what had gone on. “Sure,” she said, shrugging her shoulders. “They must have calmed Stella down and have her sedated.”

I wanted to argue that Ason had told us to wait for him, but I decided against it. Why was I even caring about what he

said? An inner turmoil spun around like a raging tornado. Ason had been kind— which had been unexpected for sure— but something inside of me wanted to listen to him. I almost felt like he was worried about me. That he had intentionally sought me out to make sure I was safe. But why would he do that?

None of this made any sense.

We opened our door to leave, and I spotted a few girls from our hallway walking toward the stairs, chatting as though an anger-fueled dragon hadn't been on the loose hours earlier.

When we made it to the cafeteria, we went through the line, each of us grabbing a plate of lasagna with fresh garlic bread, and found seats next to large windows that overlooked the courtyard.

As I sat down, I began to pick at my food. I was hungry, but I couldn't seem to force myself to eat more than a few bites of my food.

Candi sparked a conversation amongst a few other students who joined our table. I tried to be polite and listen, nodding when I felt it was necessary for a response, but I didn't offer anything else. When I finished my dinner, I decided to head back to the library. I wanted to find the books I had been researching before the entire world had been flipped upside down.

Leaving the cafeteria, the eerie silence of the halls made me shudder. I was almost to the library doors when I heard my name being called.

Turning, I spotted Ason prowling my way. Sighing, I suddenly grew very anxious. Was he going to yell at me for not listening to him? Did I even care?

“Farrah, why are you out here alone?” he asked, a red flare sparking in his dark eyes.

Huffing, I stomped my foot. “Last I checked, you aren’t my boss.”

Ok, maybe that sounded juvenile, but I was tired of his back-and-forth behavior.

His eyes grew wide as he stared back at me, almost as if he hadn’t expected me to lash out at him.

“It’s not safe. You saw Stella earlier...” his words were muffled by the pounding of my own heart.

“Why do you even care?” I asked, my own fury taking over.

“I...uh...I was out looking for the missing students. I heard you were researching and didn’t want you to get into any trouble,” he stated.

“Why not?” I asked.

“Let’s not make this about something it’s not. Let’s focus on finding the missing students. For a moment, I was worried, but it’s over now.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked, crossing my arms across my chest.

He narrowed his eyes on me. “Nothing. It means nothing. I reacted without thinking and stopped Stella from coming after you.”

For a moment, guilt crept over me, making me regret being so harsh with Ason. I just didn’t understand him most of the time.

“Thank you for being there,” I stuttered.

Ason shook his head, anger seeming to seep back over his features again. “You need to leave here. It’s not safe and you don’t even have any magic yet...”

I cut him off before he could finish that sentence. “Don’t you dare say anything,” I shrieked. “I may have a power that could save us all,” I blasted.

While I know my words sounded more promising than I felt, I did know that my dreams were feeling more and more like visions. Maybe I could help find the missing students. Ason had no idea what I was capable of and I wasn’t going to let him belittle me.

Shaking his head in anger, Ason ran off before I could say anything else.

Chapter 9

Frustration rolled through me as I sat on my bed.

A rack of dresses hung in front of the bathroom and Candi was excitedly searching through each gown.

I was still reeling from my argument with Ason and, now, I had to find a gown to wear to the Unveiling Ceremony. I wasn't the type of girl who dressed up often. Thinking about it, I don't think I had even worn a dress since I was a little girl.

"These are all gorgeous," Candi clapped, as she trailed her hand down a white satin dress.

"I don't understand why we have to dress up like we are going to prom or a fancy ball," I scowled.

Candi waved her hand in the air, muttering an enchantment I didn't understand, and then the gowns were all released from their hangers, and floated out in front of me. Each one twirled revealing all sides. I had to admit; they were beautiful.

I just didn't know if any of them were for me.

“This one would look amazing with your hair color,” Candi said, pushing the air and causing a sleek, red gown to hang in front of me.

My hand reached out, taking the silky fabric between my fingers. The neckline was cross-crossed and a slit ran up one side. Silver jewels lined the fabric near the neckline and when the jewels caught the light, they sparkled like tiny diamonds dancing around the room.

“Go try it on,” Candi urged.

I wanted to reply with a sarcastic comment, but decided against it. Candi and I had grown to be friends, and I really didn’t want to upset her— even if she was way too perky for my liking right now.

The dress twirled around, and I had no choice but to stand, grab the gown, and walk into the bathroom. When I emerged wearing the gown, Candi gasped.

Crap, did I look that bad?

“Farrah, you look fantastic,” she said, clapping her hands.

I moved to where I could see myself in the full-length mirror. Startled, I had to do a double take. I hardly recognized myself. The gown hugged my hips nicely and fell to the floor at the perfect length.

“It doesn’t look too bad, I guess,” I said, feeling my cheeks blush with embarrassment.

A knock on the door had both Candi and me turning. Alice and Kindle stood at the threshold.

“We are done going through our rack. Can we look at yours?” Alice asked, peeking into the room.

When they spotted me in the red dress, they both smiled—yes, even Kindle.

“That dress was made for you,” Alice cheered.

Ok, I needed to change. This was way too much attention.

“Hey, the designer is here, are you all finished with...”

Ason appears at the door, but stops at the threshold and stares at me.

His face is flushed with redness and his fists are clenched at his sides.

“What do you want?” Candi asks, standing next to me.

Clearing his throat, Ason takes a step back into the hallway. He is clearly uncomfortable and for some strange reason, I worry that my presence, or the sight of me in this dress, upsets him.

“The designer is finished dressing the boys. She wants to know if you are done selecting your dresses,” he rushes out.

Alice looks between me and Ason, as Ason’s eyes are still glued to me. “Farrah, are you done? Is that the dress you want to wear?” she asked me.

I’m torn because I don’t really know. The idea of wearing a fancy gown makes me uncomfortable, but it’s apparently a requirement.

“I guess so. Do you all think this one will be ok?” I ask, allowing my hands to glide down the smooth fabric.

“Of course, that dress was made for you!” Alice exclaims.

“Yes, I think we are ready for you to take the rack back,” Candi tells Ason.

For a moment, he doesn't budge, but when Candi shoves the rack his way, he startles and catches it before it hits him square in the face.

Taking the rack, Ason rushes down the hallway leaving all of us stunned and unsure of what has happened.

I scurry to the bathroom to change out of the dress and back into my uniform. When I return to the room, the dress is hung by magic on my closet door.

The girls are all giggling and I feel as though I missed out on some type of joke.

“What's going on?” I ask, raising my brows.

“You are just so clueless. It's cute,” Candi states.

Frowning, I almost feel insulted. “Um, did I miss something?”

Alice moves toward me while Kindle leans against the wall.

“Ason clearly likes you. I mean, Ason doesn't like anyone—not even other wolf shifters,” Alice explains.

“As much as I hate to admit it, I kind of agree with Alice,” Kindle interjects. “Ason is odd and always up to something,

but...” her words trail off as Alice gives her a glare.

They exchange glances and it appears as though a silent conversation is taking place between them.

“Don’t start rumors,” Candi snaps. She turns to face me and I can tell that she is unsure of what she is about to say. “Look, Ason isn’t that bad. He tends to stick to himself, so don’t feel bad if he’s a jerk to you,” she half laughs. “Some people think that Ason is strange because he is so anti-social, but he’s alright. Anyway,” she says, waving her hands in front of her, “I totally think he is into you. He was looking at you like you were his next meal, and I don’t mean that in a bad way,” she giggles.

Scoffing, I drop my head. “You all have no idea what you are talking about. Besides, Ason may stare at me, but when we do talk, it usually ends in an argument. I don’t like that he never wants to tell me what he means. He has secrets and I don’t like it.”

“Sadly, we all have secrets,” Kindle mumbles.

The air turns heavy and I don’t like the way we are all feeling right now. Everything was fine until Ason showed up.

“Anyway, let’s change this topic,” Candi says, clapping her hands. “We all have amazing dresses for Friday’s ceremony and, hopefully, the school will find the missing students.”

While I appreciate Candi’s enthusiasm and hopefulness, part of me wonders if things will ever get better around here.

Chapter 10

Tomorrow is the Unveiling Ceremony and the school is abuzz with energy.

Girls giggle and talk about their gowns and the huge ball that will take place after the ceremony. Apparently, that's why we all get dressed up.

Guys talk with friends, planning on asking dates to attend the ball with them.

Every time I pass by my closet, I can't help but admire the red gown that I chose. It's beautiful and unlike anything I have ever worn before. I'm giddy with anticipation at the thought of finally uncovering what powers I possess, but at the same time, I'm excited about wearing the dress. Even if I refuse to admit it aloud.

After classes, I decided to go back to my room while Candi and a few other girls head to the school's cafe to grab coffee and desserts before they go get manicures. All of the girls have scheduled hair appointments for the morning, and most of the

professors are allowing girls to skip classes to prepare. None of that appealed to me.

I was in the mood for some alone time, plus I wanted to read more out of the textbooks I had checked out from the library.

Moving to the desk by the window, I begin to settle in for a long evening of research.

I glance out the window as the night sky blankets the earth. The garden below shows a tall clump of giant trees that are surrounded by a ring of shrubbery and beautiful blue and purple flowers.

My heart raced as I peered out of my window, expecting to see nothing. However, a menacing figure emerged from the shadows and trudged determinedly toward the treeline. I gasped and rubbed my eyes; but when I looked again, the figure had vanished like a ghost in the night.

Closing my eyes, I opened them slowly again, hoping that what I had just seen was a figment of my imagination. When my eyes are opened again, I dare a glance out the window again.

Out of the corner of my eye, I catch a glimpse of something racing across the grounds of the academy. The figure stopped and turned, looking straight up at my window. Golden eyes glowed against the black backdrop of the night.

At first, I feel like my eyes are playing tricks on me, but when I look again, I see something move once again.

Fear clenches my heart as I peer out of my window again and see a figure skulking closer in the dim light of the torches that line the walls of the academy. My eyes widened, but just as quickly as they had appeared, they melted back into the darkness. A chill crept through me as I knew that something sinister was afoot.

We aren't supposed to leave the interior of the academy.

We all know that.

Jumping out of the chair, I place my hands against the cool glass and stare out into the abyss.

When the door to my room bursts open, I scream out in a wild, frantic panic.

Candi jumps from my screech and she bumps into the door.

“What is wrong?” she asks, once she catches her breath.

I hadn't meant to scare her, but I was already spooked.

“I... uh...saw something,” I stutter.

“What are you talking about?” Candi asks, slowly moving into the room. She closes the door behind her, taking great care with her freshly painted nails— a soft pink to match the color of her gown for tomorrow night.

“Outside. I was sitting at the desk and I saw something move outside. Maybe it could be—”

Candi stopped me when she held up her hand. “Stop. Slow down and tell me what is going on,” she urged.

Despite the strict warnings and forbiddance from the school officials, I was certain of my sighting. The darkness of the woods had only added to the ominous air surrounding my discovery. A chill ran down my spine as I remembered the way its eyes had glinted in the moonlight, like two tiny stars peering out from the depths of the forest. Nevertheless, even if I didn't have any proof, I felt it was important that someone else knew, too.

Candi walked over to me, watching me carefully. As she approached, her gaze curious, I took a deep breath and began to speak.

She looked into my eyes, her face a mask of terror and concern.

“You must never speak of what you saw,” she warned.

“Why?” I asked desperately. “We have missing students. I need to tell someone,” I insisted.

“The forest is cursed and forbidden. If anyone finds out about the figure you saw, they might become its next victim,” she declared in a hushed voice.

I gulped, understanding her fear and holding it close to my heart. However, I couldn't just ignore what I had seen.

“I understand that, but what if what I saw was who or what is taking the students?”

Candi bit her lip and something told me that she knew more than what she was willing to share with me.

“What do you know?” I asked, narrowing my gaze at her.

Tears formed in her eyes and she looked away from me. “Farrah, there are secrets here that aren’t mine to share. I can promise you that what you saw– it wasn’t what is taking the students,” she persisted.

My heart practically leaped out of my chest at her omission. How much did Candi know? Why wasn’t she willing to share this information with me?

I give her a knowing look, taking a deep breath. “Candi, I don’t like being lied to. I really don’t like what is going on here at the academy. People are going missing. Secrets are ringing out everywhere, and I feel lost in it all.”

I struggled to keep my composure, but my voice shook with every word spoken.

Candi’s face softened. I could see how conflicted she was, so I didn’t push it anymore. Instead, I just turned back to the desk, giving her my back.

“I need to finish studying,” I said.

“Ok, well I just came in here to grab my cell phone. I won’t be back until later,” Candi said, before grabbing the device and leaving.

Once I was alone again, I didn’t even bother opening the textbook that lay on the desk. Instead, I inched closer to the window once again.

For a while, nothing happened. Just when I was about to give up and go back to studying, something moved under the shadow of the stone wall near the garden. Running fast, a

figure jumped over the wall, racing toward the treeline of the cursed forest.

Gasping, I stared. Maybe Candi didn't want to talk about this, but I knew I needed to figure out what was going on.

Standing, I watch as the figure slows, and just as it had before, it turns, though this time its body is bathed in the silver glow of the moonlight. Like a bright spotlight, I fall to my chair as I realize the figure is Ason.

A large wolf stares up at me, yellow eyes boring into me.

I should look away.

I should scream and race to get help.

I should do a lot of things, but what I decide to do, isn't going to end well.

Racing out of my room, I tear down the hallway and toward the stairs. Taking each step two at a time, I leap onto the main floor. The halls are empty as most of the students are preparing for the Unveiling Ceremony tomorrow.

Professors are either helping to decorate the grand ballroom or are working on the case of the missing students.

Moving toward the back doors that lead out to the garden, I hesitate as my hand lands on the door knob. We have been strictly forbidden from leaving the school.

It's dangerous.

There is a predator taking students.

It all feels so very wrong, but yet, I am compelled to discover why Ason is outside.

I need to know why he is racing toward the treeline.

I need to understand why my heart, body, and mind reels when he looks my way and why I can't leave anything in regard to him alone.

Just as I move to open the door, something grabs me around the waist and pulls me back. Panic engulfs me as I realize I have just been caught.

Chapter 11

Hear racing, I struggle against the arms that tighten around my waist.

My stifled screams only cause more panic to rise inside of me.

Fingers dig into my sides as I'm pulled back with such ease, it's as though I'm as weightless as a feather.

My feet dig into the tile floor as I find myself in a dark alcove away from the main hallway. Swiftly, I'm turned around and come face-to-face with my captor...

Ason.

Fear ignites inside of me like a wild flame.

"Hey, stop fighting me," Ason whispers, through clenched teeth.

He holds me against him tightly, his heaving chest rising and falling in sync with my own ragged breaths.

His hand slowly slips from my mouth, and I let out a breath.

“Why are you attacking me?” I ask, keeping my voice low.

I have no idea why I am being quiet. I should be shouting to the heavens that Ason just grabbed me and pulled me into a dark corner of the academy.

“I’m not attacking you,” Ason declares, releasing his hold on me.

I stumble back and allow my back to land against the cool, stone walls.

“Seriously? You just grabbed me and pulled me away from where anyone could find and save me,” I lash out.

Running a hand through his wild hair, Ason looks at war with himself. His white shirt is torn and his jeans have holes and shredded material. He had clearly shifted back to human form, but why?

Narrowing his eyes at me, Ason chuckled, as though I amused him.

That only sent more anger through me.

“No, what I was doing was saving your life. If you remember, students are strictly forbidden from leaving the school,” he reminded me.

The irony of his chastising doesn’t sit well with me.

“You have to be kidding me. I just saw you outside, running toward the tree line,” I threw at him.

Ason doesn't seem phased by me and when he smirks, my anger only intensifies.

"You don't even know what you are talking about," he mocks.

"Ok, then explain it to me. You are right; I have no idea what is going on around here. I show up to this strange academy, students go missing, and no one wants to talk about it. I just need some answers," I cry out.

I hate how my emotions are brimming at the surface. More than anything, I hate how Ason sees that I am upset.

"I know this all must be terrifying for you, but there are just some things that you need to stay out of. Right now, all you need to know is that something is taking the students. I am..." Ason pauses, and I lean forward, desperately waiting for him to keep talking. His face softens and for a moment, he appears kind. I know it will be short-lived, so I need him to finish talking. Running a hand through his messy hair, he continues. "Only one person here knows what I am doing. I wasn't running toward the treeline tonight, I was patrolling the border of the ward that was placed around the school. I know things that are going on, but I am sworn to not speak of them."

"But who is taking all those students? Do you know?" I gasped desperately.

Shaking his head, Ason closed his eyes as his jaw tensed and a low growl escaped his lips.

"I know what you know," he says slyly.

Shock registered with me instantly.

“What...” I couldn’t seem to form words.

Letting out a low laugh, Ason stalked even closer to me. Our noses were almost touching and his warm breath caressed my cheek. “Don’t act so shocked. I see and hear everything that goes on in this school. I know that you are aware of the spell in the forest. You’ve seen the map and you know that the forest is luring the students inside,” he spoke, his eyes boring into mine.

“If you are aware of this, then why are you keeping secrets? Do you know if anyone else is involved? Where is the dark Witch who caused all of this?” I questioned.

I could see the waves of unease washing over him. It was like he was at war with himself.

Sighing, he looked down and then back up at me again. “The witch is still inside of the forest. I patrol the area to ensure she doesn’t leave the forest and no one else enters. You aren’t going to leave this alone, are you?” he asked, already knowing my answer.

“No way. I have to tell you something, but...” My words were instantly cut off by the sounds of people walking our way.

Ason pulled me back into the shadows again so that we were hidden.

Leaning into my ear, Ason whispered, “We will talk again tomorrow at the ceremony. Go back to your room and wait for

me.”

Once again, I’m left in limbo and unsure of where I stand with Ason. Once the people we heard coming down the hall pass by us, Ason pushes me out of the shadows and then takes off running the opposite way.

I’m fuming when I get back to my room later that night. Candi is lying in her bed, scrolling through her phone when I barge inside.

My mouth starts running as I begin telling her the events of the night. When she sits up and scowls, I collapse onto my bed, exhausted from everything I had endured.

“You can never speak of what you saw,” her voice quivered in fear, as she rushed across the room and grabbed me by the arms.

“Why, what could be so bad?” I asked, trying to pull away from her vice-like grip.

“The forest is cursed and forbidden. If anyone finds out what you saw, they will come for us,” she said gravely.

I shake my head in disagreement. “No, Ason is patrolling the area. We can’t tell anyone else,” I say, making sure she knows this is a secret.

I worry for a moment that I have broken Ason’s trust.

“I’m not going to talk to anyone about this and please, don’t as well. I really think we can work together to figure this out. I just need to see if I can trust Ason,” I stated.

Candi loosens her grip on me and stands back, a smile appearing over her face.

“Wow, are you starting to come around to Ason now?” she asks.

“I mean, he may not be as terrible as I once thought,” I grumble.

Candi laughs and sits down next to me on my bed. “I know he seems like a jerk, but he really isn’t that bad. Whatever he is doing to help the school, well maybe he will let us help, too. Now that we know about the map and potion, we should all work together.”

I consider her words as I lay back on my pillows. Regardless if Ason helps us or not, I know that I have to figure out what is going on.

“Candi, I don’t want to just stop the curse, but I want to lift the curse and see if we can help the missing kids. Maybe they are still alive. Maybe my nightmares are visions,” I consider, biting my lip in a nervous move.

While I hadn’t verbally considered it, the thought that I could be a Seer was starting to grow on me. It made sense and I hoped more than anything that I was getting closer to understanding my powers.

“That’s great! I would do anything to bring my friend back,” Candi says, her voice dropping. “I really am glad that you came here and are my roommate, but still...” her words drift away.

“It’s ok,” I console her. “You lost your friend. I want to help bring her back, and the other missing students. Now, we just need to figure out who we can trust to help us,” I say, closing my eyes.

Chapter 12

The day of the Unveiling Ceremony was finally here.

The day of the Unveiling Ceremony was finally here. My stomach felt like a gang of butterflies had just been set loose. A team of stylists had shown up and all of the girls who were attending the ceremony had their hair and make-up done and then we were dressed in our gowns.

All classes had been canceled and from what Candi had explained, we would have the ceremony and then a dance would ensue afterward.

Candi and I walked to the ballroom together, our heels clicking against the marble floor.

When we made our way into the perfectly polished ballroom, yellow lights gleamed as a thousand candles burned brightly all around us, floating in the air by magic. I was feeling nervous and overwhelmed. The air was filled with the scent of flowers and there were decorations in every corner of the room

Draperies of rich blues, purples, and reds accentuated the room as they hung from the ceiling and lined the tables where students were to be seated. A large stage sat ahead and a podium was stationed. Candi and I made our way to our table where our names were lit up in glass place cards.

Sitting down, I glanced around the room and spotted Ason walking in with a group of guys I had recognized from my English class. He looked dapper in a charcoal gray suit and a burgundy red tie. The color almost matched the red of my dress and I tried my best not to think too much into that detail. Ason sat at a table near ours and when our eyes locked, he offered a small smile. Quickly looking away, I fiddled with my hands in my lap while everyone else piled into the room.

The headmaster ascended the stage wearing a long, black robe that made her look like a looming figure. In her hands was an ornate crystal ball—it gave off a faint light and smoke swirled around within it.

Silence fell over the room. The music stopped and the candles seemed to glow even brighter than before.

“Welcome to the Unveiling Ceremony. For some, you have waited a very long time to uncover the true meaning of your powers. Tonight, your search for your identity will end. As I call your name, please step forward and await your destiny,” she announced proudly.

Everyone began clapping and the rest of the professors bound onto the stage, standing behind the Headmaster.

As she began to call out the names of each student, I felt my heart thumping in my chest and my palms became slick with sweat.

When she calls upon Antonio, a boy who is in all of my classes, my hands grow clammy and my heart races. Antonio walks up to the stage and stands before the Headmaster. She smiles warmly his way as he looks nervously at her.

Holding out a large crystal ball in her hands, The Headmaster begins chanting something I don't recognize. The blurry image inside of the ball changes and before we know it, a claw mark cuts through the haze and then a wolf appears in the center of the ball.

Cheers erupt from behind me where Ason and the wolf shifters are seated. They jump and howl as Antonio turns to them.

“Wonderful. Antonio, you have shown that your legacy belongs to the Wolf Shifters. Please, go join your family,” Headmaster Patricia exclaims, as Antonio races toward the back table.

Pride reflects over his face and I hope and pray that I will feel the same enlightenment when it is my turn.

I sit through more names being called, but when it's finally my turn, I feel almost like I am going to be sick from my own anxiety.

“Farrah, please come and meet your destiny,” Headmaster Patricia announces.

When I heard my name echo through the auditorium, my heart raced as I slowly made my way up to the front of the stage. The Headmaster smiled at me, before raising the mysterious crystal ball in the palms of her hands. She cupped it gently and with a steady gaze towards the ceiling, started to hum an ancient tune. Raising it in front of me, she smiled. The crystal ball glowed brighter as she brought it closer to me; and when I closed my eyes, I could feel its energy pulsing through my veins, waiting for me to unlock my power.

My eyes were glued to it, as if expecting something magical to happen—and then, tiny sparks of purples and blues erupted from its depths and shimmered around me.

Mesmerized, I couldn't look away from the lights shining in front of me. A snap of light and then flashing images racing a million miles an hour flew through the crystal ball at speeds too fast; I couldn't make out the images. Then, there was another blast of colorful lights before a set of wings fluttered and then disappeared.

Headmaster Patricia pulled the crystal ball close to her body and her large eyes were lifted in what appeared to be shock.

The room was silent; no one even dared to breathe heavily.

“Farrah, this is incredible. I haven't seen this in many, many years,” Headmaster Patricia whispers in awe.

My drumming heart threatens to beat right out of my chest. I have no idea if this is a good or bad sign, but I need to know something.

Now!

“Everyone, we have an exciting announcement. For the first time in almost fifty years, we have a powerful being in our presence. Not since your Great Aunt Piper, has there been a Seer and Fae united in blood and power. Farrah, meet your destiny as a Fae Seer,” Headmaster Patricia announces.

At first, I almost didn’t believe that I had heard her correctly. I had hoped that my nightmares would turn out to be something more profound, and my wishes actually came true.

A cheer erupted from the crowd, seeming to come from all directions. I blushed with pride, basking in the warmth of their approval. The sounds all around me drew me out of my stupor and I turned to see Candi and my table of friends smiling and cheering for me.

“I am a Seer and Fae?” I ask.

Nodding, Headmaster Patricia smiles warmly at me. “Yes, you are very powerful and I know that you will do great things with this knowledge,” she explains.

I make my way back to my table where I am embraced with a warm hug from Candi.

“This is incredible,” Candi whispers in my ear. “This is what we thought all along.”

I take my seat, my heart swelling with pride and love. I feel a heated gaze on me; and I know that when I turn my head, I am going to find Ason staring at me.

His proud smile causes butterflies to flutter deep in my belly. I have no idea what to make of this, but I can't worry about that now. I just discovered that I have true powers and I can't wait to share this with my mom.

The rest of the ceremony flew by in a blur — there were speeches, performances, and dancing. As I sat watching everyone enjoy the evening, I felt a heaviness take over me.

Sensing him even before he made his way to me, I saw Ason standing beside me.

“It looks like you actually do have powers,” he says, reminding me of my fears from earlier.

Nodding, all I can do is smile. “Yes, I sort of had a feeling I may be a Seer. I've been researching.”

“I'm aware,” Ason says.

His eyes dance around the room and I wonder what he is up to.

Ason offered me his hand and I just stared down.

“Look, everyone is dancing. Maybe we should, too,” he says.

Is he asking me to dance? I hate how elusive Ason is, but I don't have the heart to turn him down.

Placing my hand in his, a spark tears through me, and my eyes shoot up to look into Ason's.

He leads us to the dance floor where the candlelight glows all around us. For a moment I felt beautiful.

The music wrapped around us as Ason placed one hand on my waist and the other, taking my hand in his again. I did not need to know him to follow his lead, as if we were one body dancing across the floor. Ason, tall and handsome and so different than anyone else I knew, held me tightly like he was never going to let me go. I could feel the stares of those around us, but I didn't care. At this moment, it was just the two of us.

“Why did you ask me to dance?” I blurt out.

Cringing, I hope that I didn't ruin the mood, but I desperately needed to know.

Ason doesn't loosen his hold on me, but sighs deeply. “I'm proud of you and wanted to dance.”

“Proud of me?” I question.

“I thought you hated me,” I almost laughed.

Ason looks deeply into my eyes, all hints of anger long gone.

“Trust me, what I feel for you isn't hate,” he says, through clenched teeth.

I stop for a moment, but Ason continues to twirl me around the dance floor. I don't know how to respond to what he just said, so I just keep my mouth clamped shut.

“I know we're supposed to be rivals, but I think I've been wrong about you all along.” Ason's words ring loudly in my ears.

Stifling a laugh, I had to smile at him. “Rivals, huh? Is that what we are?” I asked.

He chuckled and it was the sweetest sound I had ever heard. I have no idea how this shift between us happened, but something has changed.

“To be honest, I have no idea what we are. You are so hot and cold at times,” I admit.

Ason shakes his head, his shaggy brown hair falling over his eyes. I want to reach out and swipe the loose hair out of his eyes, but I don’t dare take my hand out of his right now.

I’m almost afraid that if I move, this moment will disappear.

“If only I had the courage to let you know how much I truly care for you,” he whispered so low, I almost wondered if he had truly said the words aloud.

“Tell me,” I challenged him.

Ason stopped us, and we stood in the middle of dancing couples, just staring at one another.

“From the moment you came here, I knew you were special. I didn’t want to get close to you– I feared you,” he stated.

“Why would you fear me?” I asked. I needed more than anything for him to keep talking. To keep sharing his thoughts and feelings with me.

“I sensed something powerful inside of you. I could feel your power building, just waiting to erupt, but I wasn’t sure if

you would stay here. The last thing I wanted to do was get close to you and then watch you leave,” he admitted.

I gripped his suit coat in my hand. Why was I so afraid that he was going to run off?

The music shifted to something more dark and somber. The lights dimmed even more and everything around us seemed to fall into the darkness. All I saw was Ason and me.

“Why would I leave?” I questioned him.

His jaw tensed and a fiery red glowed deep in his eyes.

“The dangers that lurk here can destroy people. I wanted to push you away, to keep you from getting hurt, but it didn’t work.”

My thoughts raced to the note I had found in my desk.

“Did you leave me a note?” I asked.

Ason growled, but it didn’t scare me. “I wasn’t thinking. I put the note on the desk, hoping that maybe you would leave, and be untouched from the dangers here. However, the longer I watched you, I realized you weren’t going to let the threat push you away. That’s when I realized that I couldn’t stay away from you. I know I should stay away, but I just can’t help myself,” Anson growled. It was as though he was having some inner war within himself.

His words shocked me more than learning that I was both a Seer and a Fae.

“What are you saying?” I asked, my voice low and shaking.

“I should stay away from you, but I can’t,” he says, gripping my hand even tighter.

Our eyes locked, a strong need blazing through both of us almost like we were one.

He pulled me tighter against his chest, my hand now resting against his chiseled frame. Leaning in, I felt as though he was about to kiss me. Closing my eyes, I waited for his lips to land on mine. However, as I anticipated a kiss, the world around me blew up as chaos took over.

Chapter 13

Sirens and lights flash all around me.
What is happening?

Ason lifts me off the ground and my eyes shoot open.

Sirens are blaring and I watch in shock as the Headmaster and our professors race toward the exits.

“What’s going on?” I ask, the blazing sound rocking through me.

“Those are the warning sirens. Something has breached the ward that the school cast,” Ason shouts.

Students begin racing around the room, some asking what’s going while others cry in panic.

Ason and I race out of the ballroom and follow the hordes of people as they run down the halls. My gown flows behind me and my heels scrape against the marble floor. My eyes search for Candi, but I can’t stop moving right now.

We reach the doors that lead to the back of the property, and I spot the professors and Headmaster standing in the damp grass, the moonlight and stars casting a spotlight down on each of them. Their terror filled faces cause tears to form in my eyes. They all stare out into the abyss of the night. At first, I struggle to see what they are looking at, but then I see it and I am almost knocked off my feet.

A group of students are walking slowly toward the treeline. Their faces are contorted and eyes are foggy. They are in some zombie-like state, as though they are possessed— or cursed.

“What are they doing?” I ask Ason.

“I have no idea, but it appears like they are in a trance,” he mutters.

“Everyone get back inside the academy at once,” the Headmaster shouts, but no one moves.

We are all in shock at what we are seeing. I recognize a few of the zombie students from my classes. They all appear to be first year students like myself. I can’t even fathom what is happening to them right now.

I go to open my mouth, but my vision begins to blur and I know that this isn’t a nightmare, but one of my Seer visions taking over.

Shadows and darkness consume me as I am placed in the cursed forest. The forest is alive with movement and sound— every leaf rustled like footsteps in the night, every bird cry echoed like danger waiting around the next bend. And at the

center of it all was a creature, towering above us all with its inhuman grace and otherworldly presence. It stared straight through me with eyes that seemed to glow with an inner fire, daring me to challenge it or look away in fear. But even as my heart hammered wildly in my chest, I refused to back down from the truth. Because what I saw wasn't just some hallucination or fever dream—it was a glimpse into a world beyond our own, where magic and wonder still thrived despite our best efforts to suppress them.

This was the Dark Magic Witch. She was chanting a spell, her ink black hair flowing all around her pale face. The bottle with the potion inside hovered in the air, floating over a deep swamp, but it didn't budge. She was calling the students toward the forest.

“Come to me, children. Your youth and essence will give me the power I crave to build my strength. I need your essence to finish the spell and stop the ward. I will control this forest and the rest of the supernatural world,” she cackles, her shrieking voice sending chills down my spine.

I stand back, watching her in terror.

My body begins to shake and, suddenly, I no longer see the Forest of the Witch, but Ason's panicked face staring at me.

“Farrah!” he shouts.

My vision disappears and I am back in the present moment.

“I saw it!” I cry out.

Ason's hands are still on my shoulders, but he is no longer shaking me.

Worry laces his features and now, the Headmaster is heading toward us.

“What did you see?” Ason asks me.

“I saw the Dark Magic Witch. I saw the potion that we need to get to stop all of this. She wants the students to grow her own power. To give her strength,” I cry.

“Farrah, did you have a vision?” the Headmaster asks, as she approaches us.

I tell her what all I saw and her lips purse.

“We have to stop the students,” I state.

“Everyone, stop them from reaching the treeline,” the Headmaster shouts to the crowd.

In one frenzied move, everyone leaps into action, racing toward the students.

Ason gives me a pained look.

“Go, help them,” I tell him.

He is torn as I push his hands off of my shoulder. I'm weak right now, but I know that in a few minutes, I will have my strength back.

“I will come back and we will finish our conversation from later,” Ason says, before tearing away from me and leaping toward the others.

I watch him move in awe, but all I can think about is finishing that conversation and hopefully, the possible— maybe kiss we could have shared.

“Farrah!” I hear my name being called behind me, and when I turn, Candi crashes into me, pulling me for a hug.

“What happened?” she cried, as she held me closely. “One second I was watching you and Ason almost hook-up in front of the entire school and the next, everyone was running around. “

I pull away from her embrace and almost laugh. I am relieved to have Candi next to me as the Headmaster still watches me with an awed expression.

“The forest is calling to the students. I had a vision. They,” I say, pointing toward the students trying to stop the others, “are trying to get the zombie-like students back,” I explain.

Ason’s wolf is barring his fanged teeth as he moves in front of the students. They try to bypass him, but his strong form prevents them from moving. A few of the Fae’s fly around, lifting the students and flying them back to the academy.

“Farrah, we will talk soon, but right now, I must help save the students,” Headmaster Patricia announces, as she races toward the others.

She begins chanting and white light flows from her fingertips. The students are momentarily frozen and a flash of green light creates a wall in front of them. The rest of the

professors and helping students are now able to grab the students and they begin filing back into the academy.

Ason runs past me and slows just long enough to say, “We are taking them all to the infirmary to have them checked over.”

Grabbing my hand, Candi pulls me toward the school. “Come on, let’s get back inside.”

I allow Candi to lead me back to our room. I walk in a trance-like state as a sudden wave of exhaustion washes over me. My eyes grow heavy and all I can think is sleep.

When we reach our room, I quickly undress, and collapse onto my bed. As my eyes close, visions of the evening dance behind my eyes. This time though, I’m not filled with dread and terror, but of soft music, smiles, and Ason’s hands on mine.

Chapter 14

The next morning, I woke up bright and early.

Candi is soundly sleeping in her bed, but I am too wired and anxious to lay still any longer.

Sitting up, I see my red gown hanging on the closet door. At first I smile but then I am reminded that my evening was ruined due to an insane dark magic witch and a spell that I need to help destroy.

My phone vibrates next to me in the bed.

Mom: What is going on? Do I need to come and get you?

Her panicked text causes me to quickly type out a reply. A few days ago, I would have begged for her to come and get me. Now, I want to stay here.

Me: No! I just discovered that I am a Seer. Mom, I have true powers, and my nightmares are just visions.

Mom: Honey, that is great, but I am worried about your safety.

Me: I am fine. Please. I will call you later, but let me stay.

Mom: I have called you several times, but you never answer. The school sent out an email to parents notifying us of the missing students and the threat against the school. When I was a student there, we heard stories about our legacy– your legacy– and the spell that was ruined. I never thought in a million years that you would have to worry about that spell.

Guilt wracks my heart. I haven't kept up with my phone and I've been so preoccupied with myself, that I hadn't even thought about calling home. To be honest, I didn't have a lot of close friends, so when I left, it hadn't been a huge deal to keep up with my calls or social media. Mom said she would give me space to, as she put it, 'find my way' but it looks like she didn't mean that.

Me: I am sorry that I haven't been answering my phone. I am working on something with some friends here, but I promise, I will call you soon.

Mom: Ok, but if I don't hear from you next week, I am coming back to the school and bringing you home.

Throwing my phone on my bedside table, I scurry into the bathroom and shower, then dress in plain clothes. It's Saturday and we aren't required to wear our uniforms on the weekends.

Dressing in a pair of skinny jeans and a black crop top, I pull my hair into a high ponytail and leave my room.

Walking down the hallway, I revel in the silence. Most students are probably still asleep or holed up in their rooms.

“Farrah,” a whisper sounds ahead and I spot Ason walking toward me.

My heart skips a beat and a silly grin grows over my face.

“Hey,” I say awkwardly. My stomach growls and I place my hands over my stomach. “I was heading to get breakfast.”

Stopping in front of me, he shoves his hands in his loose-fitting jeans. They hug his hips nicely and the black t-shirt clings to his toned frame.

“I will walk with you,” Ason says.

Together, we walk down the hallway and make our way to the cafeteria. Scents of crisp bacon, sizzling sausage, and sweet pastries fill the air.

Ason walks with me as I go through the line and grab a cinnamon swirl bacon, a bowl of fresh fruit, and a large hazelnut coffee.

He sits silently while I eat.

“Aren’t you hungry?” I ask, around a bite of my bagel.

Ason laughs. “No, I went hunting around the property this morning. I’m full,” he says, rubbing his stomach.

My cheeks blush as I do my best to look anywhere but his fantastic body.

After I finish eating, Ason stands. “I came to find you this morning because the Headmaster wants to meet with us this morning,” he calmly says.

“You let me come down here and stuff my face before telling me our Headmaster wants to meet with us?” I shriek.

Ason chuckles and offers me his hand. “I heard your stomach growling all the way down the hall. I didn’t want to be mean and not let you eat,” he tells me.

His kind, sweet gesture comforts me, but still, I wish he had told me.

“Well, let’s go see what she wants,” I say, taking his hand.

The door to the Headmaster’s office is open when we arrive.

“I’ve been waiting for you,” Headmaster Patricia announces.

Ason and I walk inside and sit down in the chairs facing her desk.

“I won’t waste your time on the weekend,” she begins, as we settle into our seats. “As I am sure you know now, Ason has been working with me to help patrol the academy. I enlisted Ason and his Wolf Shifter clan when the first student went missing. Since I have been the headmaster of this school, we haven’t had any threats or dangers. Now, I have students missing and I know the source lurks inside the cursed forest,”

she pauses, and looks away, her eyes traveling outside of the window.

“Why hasn’t anyone tried to stop the evil Witch?” I ask.

Normally, I wouldn’t be so forward, but this isn’t a time for holding back.

Sighing, the Headmaster looks back at us again. “I would give anything to stop her, but I’m afraid that isn’t possible. Once I became the Headmaster, I was warded to not leave the confines of the academy. It helps me remain safe. Headmasters are highly sought after by evil beings. Our jobs are to protect the students we educate and train. To those who wish us harm, I am their biggest enemy and rival. Killing me would leave the entire academy at risk and in danger. So, I have to remain here. The wards keep evil away, but me inside. Now, I have to reach out to those students who have proven their loyalty to the school and to me and ask that they help keep us safe.”

I smile to Ason. Pride swells inside of me. He is so strong and brave to risk his life to help those at the school.

“Farrah, you must understand that your power as a Seer is very important. We haven’t had a Seer at the academy since your great aunt...” she pauses, because we both know the story of how my great aunt died protecting the school. “To have someone as powerful as you, can help protect us even more.”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“Your level of magic has reached a power that can help defeat the Dark Magic Witch. She has been taking students for her own, evil purposes.”

“I can feel the Seer magic inside of me. It has always been there, I think. At first, I thought these terrible nightmares I had were just bad luck. Now, I know it’s my power and I can feel it pulsing through my veins, surging with power and possibilities,” I explain.

“This is so exciting to hear,” Headmaster Patricia states. “We can use your visions to help protect the school. Once you graduate, we can offer you a job here,” she finishes.

While I love the sound of hearing that my powers can be useful, I have no idea if I want to work at the academy. To be honest, I hadn’t even thought about what I would do for a career after I graduated.

“We could work here together,” Ason whispers, leaning closer to me.

My body tingles from his nearness and the soft caress of his words.

Clearing her throat, the Headmaster draws our attention back to her.

“Farrah, it is vital that you tell us all of your visions. Anything you see could help us protect the students and find the Dark Magic Witch,” she goes on to explain.

“Well, I think I know where she is,” I say.

As her eyes widen, I go on to explain my research, the map, and the visions I've had leading up to coming here. When I finish, I realize that Ason is gripping my hand tightly in his and staring deeply at me.

"This is exciting and concerning. I wish you had alerted myself or other staff members to this," she chastises me.

I brush off the comment and say the one thing I have been building up to say. "I want to help Ason patrol the school. I want to find a way to get into the forest to stop all of this," I almost shouted.

"No!" they both shout in unison.

Anger coils around my throat, threatening to strangle me if I don't speak up again.

"Why not? I can help! I can bring back the missing students. We have to help them."

"It's too dangerous," Ason says, violently shaking his head.

"You are far too young with your skills," Headmaster Patricia scolds me.

"I can help. If it gets to be too dangerous, I will stop. Please, just tell us what we need to do to stop this evil Witch," I plead.

"It's too dangerous. Besides, they're gone and we can't do anything about it. What I am doing is helping to stop her from taking any more students," Ason adds in.

“How can you say that? They deserve for someone to look for them. If no one else will, then I guess I will go at it alone,” I cried.

Ason leaps from his chair and stands in front of me, causing me to gasp from his sudden movement.

“Farrah, I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if something happened to you. I know you want to help but—”

This time I jumped up, forcing him to take a step back. His back hits the Headmaster’s desk and items on the surface rattle from the bump.

“I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if I didn’t use my visions for good. Let me go with you or I will go alone!” I command.

“Stop!” Headmaster Patricia shouts, causing both Ason and I to stop our argument.

“I am unsure of what is going on between the two of you,” she starts, adding a sly smirk, “but arguing isn’t going to help. Now, I know that I shouldn’t agree to this, but we are in desperate times. Farrah, I will allow you and Ason to have one night to follow the orders I give. If you are unsuccessful in locating the spell and potion needed to get you inside of the cursed forest— safely— then I will pull you from the plan. Ason will have to continue alone,” she says.

“He can’t possibly fight all of this alone,” I counter.

“No, not alone. He has a team assembled that hasn’t been given the opportunity to begin. Tonight, they will get that

chance,” she finishes.

“A team? Why are there so many secrets when there is so much at stake?” I ask. Ason and Headmaster Patricia share a knowing glance that only fuels my anger even more. “What aren’t you telling me?” I shout.

“Students who have shown great strength and knowledge in their powers were brought to secret meetings where they were asked to be part of the elite and elusive team to help our academy. They were sworn to secrecy and not allowed to share their part in the team.”

My mind reels over all of the students who I have sat in classes with, passed in the halls, and— shared a room with.

I look at Ason and see recognition in his eyes. “Is Candi part of your team?”

“Only she can answer that, but if you aren’t going to let this go, then I think we don’t have any other choice but to let you come with us,” Ason says, speaking mainly to Headmaster Patricia.

She nods, but I see her purse her lips in a grim expression. She isn’t happy about this, but what other choice do we have?

Releasing a heavy breath, she rubs the bridge of her nose before allowing her eyes to cast to mine. “Farrah, I am giving you one chance. Don’t make me regret it.”

A smile forms on my face, but deep inside of me, worry builds. If I don’t succeed, what will that mean for the academy?

What will that mean for me?

Chapter 15

A son and I race toward the library after leaving the Headmaster's office.

I'm still in disbelief that she is allowing me to be part of the secret mission to help save the students and the school.

Before we left, Headmaster Patricia handed us a paper that listed everything we needed to do to stop the curse. Without wasting any more time, Ason had taken my hand and we fled the office.

He had taken out his cell phone and texted something, but I didn't ask what he was doing. I knew that in time, I would find out.

When we reached the library, we found a table in the very back of the room.

"What are we doing in here?" I ask, breathlessly.

"The rest of the team will be here shortly. I sent them a text in our group chat. We need to go over this list," Ason explains.

The yellowed page sits in front of us. It is worn and ripped and appears to be hundreds of years old. The words are written in a faded black script that is difficult to decipher.

In a frenzy of excitement, I watch in awe as Candi, Kindle, Stella, and a guy named Leo enter the library. As they approach, their eyes grow large when they see me.

I can tell that the last thing they expected was to see me here, too.

“Wait, what is she doing here?” Stella asks, her fiery red eyes glowing in anger at me.

Ason stands moving so that he is between me and the rest of the group.

When I look at Candi, she glances away in shame. Even though I know now that she was sworn not to tell me, I hate that she held such a big secret from me.

“Farrah is a Seer, as you all now know. Her visions can lead us to where the potion is that we need to stop the Dark Magic Witch and end the curse over the forest. We need her help,” he explains.

I am grateful that he excludes the part about my demanding to be part of this plan or how he didn't want to include me at first.

“She's joining us?” Candi asks, slowly walking over to us. She sits in a chair next to me and I smile her way.

I don't want any bad blood between us. We are friends and we will find a way to get through this.

Stella is fuming. I hadn't seen her since the attack, and she doesn't look any happier now than she did when she was storming toward me in dragon form.

"Does the Headmaster know about this?" Kindle asks, though her tone isn't as nasty as Stella's was.

Ason quickly explains everything to the group. They all nod and stare at me as he gets them updated.

"Why would you want to help us?" Stella asks, turning back to me again. "I mean, I get there is something going on between you two," she says, gesturing between me and Ason, "but why would you want to risk your life? You didn't know Lara or Lily."

I hear sadness dripping from her words and I calm down, trying to find empathy for Stella. Even though she has been a raging, nasty monster to me, she, too, has lost a friend. Loss can tear us down and make us do and say things that we never once imagined.

Leo steps up next. His blonde hair is short and buzzed and his baby blue eyes sparkle as he goes to talk. "I'm not going to turn down any help. As a wizard, I know that my magic can help protect us, but we do need a Seer. The last group that had a successful Seer were the ones who saved the academy."

I smile his way, happy to have someone else on my side.

Crossing her arms across her chest, Stella narrows her eyes at me. "Fine, I guess she can be useful. So, let's get started,"

she states, moving around me to sit in one of the chairs situated around the large table.

Everyone else follows suit and Ason sits close to me. He holds my hand while we all look over the page that the Headmaster gave us.

Ason reads it aloud, and we all listen intently. “To expel a potion created by evil, you must follow the instructions listed below. Only a handful of Witches and other Supernatural creatures have succeeded in stopping curses and wards meant to harm other Supernaturals. To gather the ingredients needed, you must visit a Gullah who will provide you with what you need. Next, you need the magic of good, and the skills of those who can quickly enter the woods.”

When he stops reading, I wait for others to interject.

“We know that the thorns on the flowers at the treeline are poisonous. Once we get the items needed to get inside of the forest, we have to know where to go,” Leo says.

“I’ve seen inside the forest. In my visions, I’ve been there. I know where to go,” I say quietly.

All heads snap my way.

“How do you know this?” Stella asks.

“I did research and found a map. And, in my visions, I’ve seen that the potion is in a cave near a large swamp. The Dark Magic Witch is there, too, but she can’t seem to get the potion. It’s like she doesn’t have the strength to pull her magic. That’s

why she is calling the students to her. She is stealing their powers to gain strength to perform her magic,” I explain.

“Are the missing students still alive?” Candi asks, tears pooling in her eyes.

“I can’t be sure, but in my vision, I saw them. They were in a zombie-like trance. Just like the students who were moving toward the treeline the night of the Unveiling Ceremony,” I explain.

Stella almost jumps across the table, her hand grabbing mine and forcing me to look at her. “You aren’t joking? You really saw them?” she asks, desperation dripping from her words.

“I would never joke about something like this. I want to help,” I tell her, hoping they hear the sincerity in my voice.

“We need to get started and I know just how to start,” Stella says, squeezing my hand.

“You have got to be kidding me,” I yell, as I stare at the massive dragon before me.

“We need to get a better glimpse of the land while it’s still light out,” Kindle says, staring at Stella in her dragon form.

When the group had led me outside, I didn’t expect Stella to automatically shift into her dragon. At first, I had been startled and ran straight into Ason’s arms. Then when she told me her plan, I thought that I was being punked. This had to be a joke. Right?

“I think it’s a good idea,” Candi chimes in.

Stella snorts and I watch as a big cloud of white smoke spills from her nostrils. She is clearly annoyed by my hesitation. Can she really blame me?

Ason stands next to me, his presence calming my growing nerves. “Just let her fly you over the forest. This way, you can determine if the map and your vision truly matches inside the forest. Once we get confirmation, we can move on to find the Galah,” Ason states.

“You think this is a good idea?” I ask him.

I can see the tension building in his features, but I also know that we are limited in our choices right now. I need to be brave. I begged to be part of this plan and now that I am, I need to remember to fight all of my fears.

“I don’t like any of this; you know that, Farrah. This was why I didn’t want you involved. Everything we do is dangerous, but I think this may be the least dangerous part. At this point, Stella wants to save her friend; she won’t hurt you in the process,” he explains.

I believe him.

“Ok, I will do it,” I say to the group.

Stella nods her head— I mean her dragon head. I slowly move closer to her.

Her dragon’s breathing carries an echo of a cracking campfire, its deep inhales a vortex of wind that causes my hair to fly all around my face.

Ason and Candi help me onto the dragon, and I wrap my legs around her thick, leathery scales. When she unfurls her wings, I am sure I will fall off a huge frame. Suddenly, there was a whoosh of air filled with the scent of sulfur as we headed toward the heavens.

She begins to sail over the large trees of the cursed forest. Part of me wants to close my eyes and just wait for this flight to end, but I know that I need to be vigilant and keep my eyes wide open. She turns, cutting through the air like a knife, and I hold onto her sharp scales with all my might.

Right now, I'm not just riding a dragon or searching for a missing potion. No, I am fighting my own inner demons and fears so that I can save the academy. I never once dreamed that when I first stepped foot inside of Shadow Legacy Academy that I would embark on a journey to save myself and my new friends.

She dips down closer to the large trees that reach up to the sky that gnarl and twist around each other in an attempt to avoid sunlight. Each one extends its branches, casting long shadows all over the forest floor.

My eyes scan the landscape. I spotted the large body of water that I saw in the map and my vision. The water cascades and twists toward a narrow creek then turns into a marsh area with swamps. A strange urgency comes over me. I've been here before. Not just through textbooks, but in my dreams. If I am able to get inside, I will know exactly how to reach the potion.

Stella shifts her body and we turn away from the forest and make our way back toward the ground. When we finally land, everyone runs over to us.

“What did you see?” Candi asks.

“It was just like the map described and what I saw in my vision,” I proclaim as Ason helps me off the dragon.

“Next time, I will give you a wand that extracts light. You will be able to use it like a flashlight,” Leo tells me.

“Thank you, that should help,” I say, grateful for his help.

It’s funny how far we have all come. In just a few days, I went from being the target of their tricks and games to being part of their team to save the academy.

“Now that you have seen the inside of the forest, we need to tackle step two of our plan,” Ason begins.

“Ok, what’s that?” Leo asks.

“We go find the Gullah,” Ason states flatly.

Chapter 16

“I can’t believe the Headmaster let you borrow her car,” I exclaim, as we all jump inside the large SUV.

The midnight black exterior allows the vehicle to seamlessly blend into the night. The cool leather interior is plush and comfortable against my warm skin.

“Technically, it’s the school’s vehicle, but she didn’t really have a choice. We have to get to the Gullah and I’m not walking,” Leo responds.

“So, what exactly is a Gullah?” I ask, unsure if I should speak up or not. I only learned what a Gullah was briefly in my class, but our professor hadn’t spent a great deal of time on the topic.

Kindle sits next to me in the back seat and answers. “The Gullah are a group of people first introduced to people in North America in the 1700’s. Many were enslaved on plantations right here in Charleston, South Carolina. They began telling stories and delving into healing. Now, they share

their stories and healing powers with those that seek them out. Many go to plantations to do presentations, while others prefer to remain in the low country, hidden among the swamps and undisturbed.”

Nodding, I recall some of that information.

“What exactly are we going to ask the Gullah to do?” I question.

Times like this make me feel useless. Everyone here knows so much more than I do, even Leo who is a second-year like myself.

Candi turns around from the front seat and provides me with a sympathetic smile. “First, we have to explain that we are with the Academy. This particular Gullah is familiar with the Headmaster and the Supernaturals at this school. Not just any human can pull up to the home of a Gullah and expect them to talk to you. Some Gullah’s have stores in downtown Charleston where they sell Voodoo items, books of magic and herbs, and other items that people purchase to ward off Boo Hags, like alligator teeth,” she explains.

“A Boo hag?” I almost laughed.

“That is not something to laugh about,” Stella snaps from behind me. “A Boo hag is what the Gullah call bad spirits or demons. Dark Magic Witches rely on these to conjure the evilness needed to create their evil spells. The Dark Magic Witch that we are about to battle has used Boo Hag’s to conjure the students into the forest.”

Nodding, I close my mouth and decide not to ask any more questions. There is so much I have yet to learn and the Gullah is another culture I need to learn.

As I sit and listen, Ason scoots over and sits next to me, putting me in the middle of him and Kindle. Leo hops in the driver's side and Candi sits in the front passenger seat. Stella takes the third-row seats, stretching out her legs. Apparently, shifting back into human form from her Dragon causes aches and pains in her legs and arms.

“Don't worry, you will learn all of this in time. It takes a great deal of research and courses to gain all of this insight,” Ason reassures me. Taking my hand in his, he squeezes and I feel comfort.

As Leo pulls away from the academy, I hold my breath as we head out of the countryside and toward the main City of Charleston. I have never really taken the time to admire the city. As we pass through the city, I spot the Charleston City Market and the sign for Rainbow Row. I make a mental note to do some sightseeing once this is all over. Well, if I make it out alive that is.

With the windows rolled down, I can smell the salty air of water. We are near the harbor and a large bridge comes into view. The Arthur Ravenel Jr. Bridge is upon us. This famous bridge will take us to Mt. Pleasant and into the area where we will find the Gullah.

I stare out the window while others in the car chat. As the SUV continues, I spot an older model car pull up next to us.

The people inside the car are dressed in what appears to be older clothing. Their faces appear gray and eyes are somber.

“Don’t stare too hard, they will notice,” Ason whispers next to me.

“What?” I ask, tearing my eyes away from the strange looking car.

“That car isn’t really there. I mean, yes you see it, but the people inside of that car are dead,” Ason explains.

“What are you talking about?” I gasp, turning my head so that I can observe the car once again. The faded green Oldsmobile keeps up with our SUV, the five people inside staring blankly straight ahead.

“She really is clueless about everything around here and her own world,” Stella gripes.

I want to turn around and tell her to shut up, but I think better of it. Even though Stella can be terrible, she has been helpful. I remind myself of how she flew me over the forest today. I just don’t know how someone can be so hot and cold all of the time.

“Stop being so mean, Stella,” Candi snaps.

“Anyway,” Ason continues, waving his hand to block my view of Stella, “The car was driving one night when a cargo ship hit the bridge— causing the bridge to collapse into the water below. The car dropped into the water and killed all five people inside. At the time, the bridge was known as the John P. Grace Memorial Bridge. However, since it has been repaired,

it is now known as the Arthur Ravenel Jr. Bridge. Anytime you see the car, the people inside seem to be staring straight ahead, with lifeless eyes. You can wave and scream, but they won't look at you."

"Wow, that's insane," I gasp, staring at the car.

For a moment, I wonder if they may turn and acknowledge me, but they never do.

As we continue across the bridge, I sit back and think about everything I have yet to learn about this place. Charleston is one of the most haunted cities in the United States, and I never thought to dive into the history behind it all.

Once in Mt. Pleasant, we travel off the main roads and then begin taking small, windy roads that lead deeper into the heart of the low country. Massive Oak Trees lined the roads, houses now long gone or hidden behind groves of wooded areas.

Gravel crunches under the SUV's tires as we turn off the paved road. The sun starts to settle beyond the horizon and crickets chirp and frogs call as the night begins to arrive.

A small cabin comes into view. It is stacked high above the marshy ground. When Leo shuts off the vehicle, we all sit in silence for a moment. A heavy weight falls upon us as we all know that if this Gullah turns us away, we may never get the knowledge we need to stop the curse of the forest.

"Alright, it's now or never," Leo states, taking the lead and getting out of the vehicle first. We all follow his directions and emerge into the evening.

My feet splash on the saturated ground, and I cringe as murky water and overgrowth fall into my red Converse sneakers.

“Gross,” I whine.

Ason chuckles beside me. “Do you want to hop onto my back?”

“No, I can walk. I just forgot that we were walking into the swamps,” I say.

We have come to the Charleston swamps with a purpose, but I couldn't help but marvel at the beauty of this strange, otherworldly landscape. The water was murky and still, and the air was thick with the smell of moss and rot. The cabin seemed to sit on a lone island surrounded by swamps. The trees were tall and dark, their branches reaching out across the sky like bony fingers.

We all walked along a stone path that led to the front porch of the cabin that was tucked away inside the trees. It looked old and worn, with weathered siding and brown, peeling paint. Even though the outside appeared ominous, there was something inside of me stirring, telling me not to fear this place. We walked up to the house and stepped onto the creaking porch. A white porch swing sways back and forth in a light breeze that flows from the waters surrounding the area. Two burning scones provide a yellow glow onto the porch. My eyes travel up to the ceiling of the porch and I notice the ceiling is painted a robin egg blue.

“Wow, that's pretty,” I admire.

“The color is magnificent,” Candi intunes. “Most people in Charleston and Savannah paint the ceilings of their porches this blue. It is supposed to ward off evil spirits and deter them from entering a home. It’s a long-running Gullah tradition.”

“That’s so cool,” I reply, stepping further onto the porch.

The door opens further and a voice beckons us. “Hello, I’ve been waiting for you,” a hoarse voice called, as the front door of the house opened as if on its own accord.

We all stopped moving, our own heart beats drumming loudly.

“We have been sent here by Headmaster Patricia of the Shadow Legacy Academy,” Ason calls out.

He reaches for my hand and pulls me close beside him. I’m not sure if he’s nervous or if it’s just an instinct he has grown to have, but I allow him to protect me nonetheless.

“I know who you are. I’ve been told you were coming this way. Children, come inside before any other spirits find ya,” the old woman says, beckoning for us to enter.

Hesitantly, we all stumble inside the small house, making sure to stay close to one another.

A woman with dark skin and even darker hair stood before us, a warm smile on her wrinkled face. Her colorful skirt swept across the wooden floor as she made her way to a brown leather couch near a stone fireplace. Even though it was humid outside, a raging fire was burning in the hearth.

She motioned for us all to sit on a large, leather couch facing her. Scents of lavender, sage, and fresh burning wood filled the room and it was heavenly.

Still holding my hand, Ason sat close to me as we stared at the woman before us.

“My name is Ceceila. I hear ya have a troublemaker on yer hands,” the woman spoke, her southern accent strong.

“Yes, the Dark Magic Witch who cursed the forest many years ago is drawing in students to gain power. We need to find a way to stop her,” Ason explains, taking the lead of the group.

The woman nods, placing one crooked finger on her dry lips. “I see. Are you prepared to battle this evil source? Do you know what all lies within the Curse of Thorns? That forest not only envelops the academy in darkness and fear, but is filled with mysterious plants and creatures that can destroy anyone who dares to enter. I can only provide ya with what ya need, nothing else. I don’t mess with the evil spirits. Those Boo Hags and Plat-eye’s must not be tampered with,” Ceceila announces.

“We have to do something. Students from our academy have gone missing. Several were almost lured into the Cursed Forest the other night. Even a human teenager went missing. If we don’t reverse the hex and spell, we won’t be able to stop the curse or save the academy,” Ason states firmly.

I glance at him out of the corner of my eye. His steely gaze locked on Ceceila. He is strong in his conviction, and I see

why the Headmaster selected him to lead the patrol team. Ason is strong and smart and one of the bravest souls I've ever met.

I'm gushing, I know, but it's all true.

"I can offer you an amulet filled with herbs and a spell that will protect you. Now listen closely. The herbs and roots sewn into this necklace have been spelled for protection and safety. They will ward off anything evil that comes your way, but only for a short time. The haints that the Dark Magic Witch has conjured will try everything to stop you. This will protect you for eight hours. Use it at your own will and be cautious."

She hands Ason a necklace made of worn leather with a blue gem in the center. Roots and purple lavender are entwined around the base of the blue gem. Ason lets it dangle in front of him, and we all scoot closer to get a better look at the necklace.

"Thank you," I say, taking the necklace from Ason and placing it around my neck. "We will make you proud."

Nodding, Cecilia purses her lips. "The ward will only be effective for the time I gave you. The Dark Magic Witch isn't the only haint or form of evil that you need to worry about. That forest is filled with demons and spirits that could destroy you all, but if you focus on your end goal and use your powers, you should succeed." We all go to leave, standing and making our way to the front door. We thank Cecilia once again and just as we exit the house, she calls to us one last time.

“Good luck in the swamps. If the flowers don’t get you, the gators will.”

The door slams closed and we all jump as we stare where Cecila once stood.

“Ok, we go to a Supernatural academy and all, but that was just creepy,” Ason says, shaking his head.

He leads us off the porch and we all climb back into the SUV. Once inside, Ason leans in close to me. “I don’t know if I like that you put the necklace around your neck,” he warns.

“Farrah, why are you wearing the necklace?” Candi and Kindle both ask at the same time.

Stella glares at me from the third row and Leo stares at me from the rearview mirror. Ason’s heated gaze is locked on me, but I can’t seem to make eye contact with any of them.

“I don’t know. After I had the visions, I just knew that I needed to be the one to go into the forest,” I explain.

Ason tenses next to me, but he doesn’t argue. We all know that I am going into the forest one way or another.

“Well, no sense in arguing now. We need to get back to the academy and get Farrah inside the forest before it’s too late for us all,” Leo says, pulling away from the cabin.

We drive back to the academy in an eerie silence. All I can do is hope and pray that no matter what happens tonight, I make it out alive.

Chapter 17

The Shadow Legacy Academy looms ahead as we pull through the large gates.

Gulping, my hand plays with the gem of the necklace around my neck.

Leo parks the SUV and Headmaster Patricia emerges from the academy. I spot Professor Hagen watching us through the windows, and I sense that the rest of the academy is watching, too.

I'm sure we have an audience, but we can't worry about that now. Time is of the essence now and every second means life or death.

"We have the gem and an overview of the forest," Ason states proudly, as the Headmaster watches us all approach.

Her eyes dance when they see the necklace and gem hanging around my neck. I see pride and trepidation mixing over her features.

“We don’t have time to waste. We have to get inside the forest,” I say, urging Ason to listen to me now.

I start to walk toward the treeline, but Ason stops me. “Farrah, you don’t have to do this. Another member can go inside. I can go alone,” he offers, standing bravely next to me.

Exhaling a deep breath, I turn to Ason. For a moment, I forget that the rest of the world exists. I don’t care about the prying eyes of the students and professors watching us.

“Ason, from the moment I came to Shadow Legacy Academy, I knew that my destiny would be awakened. I have fought pranks, missing students, and fears that I would never live up to my family’s expectations or the legacy that brought me here. My visions are a gift and a true power. I have to use them to save this place— my new home. I want to be part of your team,” I say, hoping that he hears what I am truly saying.

I don’t want to just attend Shadow Legacy Academy, I want to be part of every entity that it conveys.

Ason pulls me into a strong embrace and before I know what is happening, his lips crash onto mine. The kiss is sweet and urgent and filled with hope and a new beginning. Breathless, I allow myself to fall into the abyss of Ason’s hold.

When we finally part, my eyes find his and I see the glowing of pride and admiration looking back at me.

“I won’t let you go inside alone. You and me– we are a team now. I will protect you,” Ason declares.

I can feel the urgency in his words and they give me strength to continue on.

“We are all a team. Each one of us will help and guide you along the way. We are a family now, and we protect our family,” Candi tells me.

I had almost forgotten that everyone else was watching us. I giggle as I smile at Ason. He smiles smugly back at me and then takes my hand.

“We need to devise the last step of our plan,” he announces, as the rest of our group assembles around us.

I stare at the faces of my new team– my new family. Each of them has powers and strengths and combined, we can be an unbeatable force. It’s still crazy to think that just a few short days ago, none of us were really friends. Now, we are joined together by a force stronger than any of us. However, that force won’t stop us nor will it tear us apart.

Leo steps up first. Waving his hand in the air, a green and blue light flashes from Leo’s hands. A silver wand appears out of thin air. The tip glows brightly like a shining diamond. “Here, take this and use it as a sort of flashlight. If you face any dangerous animals, the light can be used to blind and freeze them,” Leo tells me.

I graciously accept the wand and admire the glowing light in my hands.

“I will fly over the forest while you all are inside. I can observe any threats and alert you with a loud growl and shoot fire down if needed,” Stella says, looking down at the ground as she speaks.

Even though I can tell it pains her to be kind, I am beyond appreciative of her support. We all have the same end goal.

“If you get hurt, I can heal you quickly. I will remain close to the treeline so that I can keep tabs on your emotions,” Candi tells me and Ason. “If one of you is in despair, I can alert the others.”

“I will stalk the perimeter of the treeline in my feline form. If I need to alert others or cause a stir, I can do that swiftly,” Kindle adds.

“I will go in as my wolf form. Farrah, you can hop on my back and I can get us through the forest faster on all fours,” Ason shares.

With a plan in place, I watch as Stella, Kindle, and Ason shift. Once we are all prepared, I move over next to Ason. Grabbing hold of his strong shoulders, I climb onto his back, holding the wand in my hand.

“We have to do this for Lara and Lily and everyone else who has been affected by this evil being,” I say, looking back at my team.

Everyone nods and before anyone can say another word, Ason takes off into a full sprint toward the treeline. It’s now or

never and like it or not, the fate of our world rests in our hands.

No pressure at all.

Not!

Chapter 18

Blues, purples, and deep reds beckon me as we near the treeline.

Large, deadly thorns slither along the flowers like snakes.

There's a strong magnetic pull calling me to enter, but I know that I have to resist the temptation. When Ason and I enter the woods, it has to be of our own free will. We have to remain in control of this situation.

"Are you ready?" Ason asks, as we both stare at the trees.

"Yes," I lied.

With the necklace firmly around my neck, I glance up to spot Stella flying above us. Her dragon looks regal in the sky as it soars to great heights.

Slowly, Ason takes a step toward the trees. The thorns seem to sway, as though they are trying to reach us. I suck in a breath as Ason bends and moves to fight from being touched by one of the poisonous tips.

“Hold on tightly and don’t move,” Ason says, as we begin slipping through the thick groves of trees.

As we glide through the underbrush, I don’t breathe again until we are on the other side of the trees and in the heart of the forest. Massive oaks with heavy branches blotted out any chance of the moon or stars being able to shine through their tops and provide light for us to see. Removing the wand from my side, I allowed the bright light to glow and offer us a way to see through the darkness.

The forest was alive with movement and sound; every leaf rustled like footsteps in the night, every bird cry echoed like danger waiting around the next bend. And, at the center of it, all was an otherworldly presence. My heart hammered wildly in my chest as I realized we had just willingly entered the lair of dark magic. I refused to worry about that now. I needed to rely on my visions, because what I saw wasn’t just some hallucination or fever dream—it was a glimpse into a world beyond our own, where magic and wonder still thrived despite our best efforts to suppress them.

Closing my eyes, I willed my visions to speak to me now. I needed to recall the maps, the view from the sky when I flew with Stella’s Dragon, and my vision. I could see the direction, so I just needed to explain it to Ason.

“We need to follow that path,” I stated, pointing to my right. “We will find a large pond and then we need to follow it to the swamps. The cave will be near the swamps,” I tell Ason.

“Ok, we need to keep our eyes out for any dangers. The Dark Magic Witch isn’t the only threat in here,” he said, causing a shiver to race down my spine.

“What should we worry about?” I ask, my voice shaking.

Ason continues walking as we push limbs away from our faces. In some areas, the brush is thick and difficult to get through. Large trees with Spanish moss hung low, draping the landscape, almost like a shield to protect the dark and eerie world inside. Moving the brush aside, we began walking through the underbrush. The crunching sounds of dead leaves added to the eerie sensations around us.

“Stay away from the water. The sirens love to swim up to the edge of the water and lure people into the water. Once they get you in, they will drown you,” he explains. Noted, stay away from the water. As he continues, I watch the forest as it buzzes with energy. “

“Come on, it’s only a little bit further until we reach the edge of the swamps on this side of the Parrish,” I began, as I turned right.

The wand glows as I allow it to lead the way.

A squawk resigned above and a black crow soared around, crying out to alert those inside the forest of our presence.

“We need to hurry, something doesn’t feel right,” Ason says, running faster along the path.

A howl to my left had Ason running even faster. I didn’t dare to ask what kind of monster that could be. As we passed

by the large pond, I spotted a mermaid with a turquoise tail and light pink hair sitting on a rock, sunning herself. She smiled, ferocious fangs glinting in the moonlight as she waved us on.

“Don’t listen when she speaks,” Ason says, running past the stunning beauty.

I close my eyes until I think we are far enough away. Ason slows a little and I can hear his paws splashing against water. My eyes shoot open and I realize we are now in the swamp area. Tall trees are scattered throughout the area and the murky water has a sulfur odor that causes my stomach to rumble.

A splash was heard just ahead of us and Ason jumped. “What was that?” I ask.

“Probably an alligator or one of the hellhounds searching for its dinner.” Ason stops and I can tell that his wolf is listening to the sounds around us. “I need to shift back to human form,” Ason says.

I watch in a strange fascination as he stands on his hind legs, his body stretching tall and towering over me. Cracking and pulling sounds have me wincing as his body morphs back into the boy who I have grown to be extremely fond of.

His shirt and jeans are torn and tattered, but otherwise, he looks perfect.

“Which way is the cave?” he whispers.

“From what I recall, it is just a little ways around that bend,” I say, pointing ahead where the swamp water is deeper

and covered in a hunter-green layer. Heavy Spanish Moss hangs low from the trees, brushing against our faces and causing tears to form in my eyes.

A thunderous roar resounds up ahead and Ason and I stop moving. My heart is drumming wildly in my chest as I hold onto Ason. We are both trembling. The blue gem around my neck buzzes and grows so warm, it almost burns my skin. The ground shakes beneath me and I stumble, but Ason catches me before I fall.

A loud, cackling echoes in the air and a voice fills my mind with dread.

“Come children. Let me show you the way.”

Ason and I exchange nervous glances as we stand together. The Dark Magic Witch is close by and as we start to slowly wade through thick water, I can see the stone formation of a cave up ahead. Something brushes against my leg and I cry out in fear.

Ason reaches for me, but as he does, something wraps around my leg and pulls me down into the cold water. I go to scream, but my voice is drowned out by the thrashing of water that takes place. I plunge down into the abyss, my arms flailing about as I struggle to break through the surface and find air.

The thing around my leg cuts into my skin and the pain sears me. Kicking, I hit something hard and solid and in my mind, I know that it must be an alligator. It is dragging me down to the bottom of the swamp. This can't be how it ends for me. I

didn't come into the cursed forest to fight a Dark Magic Witch, to only die from an alligator attack. I refuse to let this be how my story ends.

A strong pair of hands grab hold of my arms and start pulling me back toward the surface. I feel like I'm being torn in half as the monster in the water continues to fight, trying to pull me back. The wand in my hand feels heavy and I know that I need to fight.

My lungs burn and I know that I only have seconds left before I fall into the heavyweight that is pressing down on me. I shake the wand, and press it down and just as I feel like I can't hold another thought, I am released from the coil around my legs and I shoot up to the surface of the water.

A gasp screams out of me as air reaches my lungs. Ason pulls me onto a broken tree stump, and I cry out as I struggle to get out of the water.

"Farrah, look at me. Are you ok?" Ason takes my face in his hands and forces me to look at him.

Panic glows from his face and I can't help but allow tears to pour down my cheeks. Above us, Stella lets out a loud growl that rivals thunder. Fire bellows into the night sky as her heavy wings flap, causing a large gust of wind to descend over us.

Wild roars and calls build in and out of the forest.

"I'm ok. We can't stop," I say, my voice hoarse and trembling.

“Maybe we should wait, let you rest a second,” Ason argues, trying to hold me still.

Shaking my head, water splashes from my locks. “No. We don’t have time. Help me up and let’s keep moving,” I say, wincing as I go to stand on the leg that the beast had held me. Far off, I spot a large alligator swimming through the water. That must have been the one that had attacked me. I guess the light from my wand really helped.

Glancing down, I smile at the wand as it still glows brightly by my side. Soaked, exhausted, and in pain, I allow Ason to help me as we walk toward the cave.

As we near the cave, more sounds begin to stir, and as my eyes struggle to make out what I am seeing, I almost yell out and give us away.

“Ason, look,” I cry, pointing to the cave.

Standing outside of the cave, I spot five teenagers. Their eyes are glazed and foggy and they stand still, as though they are statues frozen in place. A green light glows all around them like a barrier.

“That’s Lily and Lara,” Ason whispers, looking ahead.

Excitement builds inside of me at the prospect of knowing that we found the missing students alive.

“What’s wrong with them?” I ask.

“They must be spelled. We need to get them out of here,” Ason says through clenched teeth. “First, we need the potion,” he adds.

We trek through the water; and once we get to the students, I realize just how creepy this is. None of them seem to notice us. It's like Ason and I are ghosts and can't be seen.

"Children, I hear your movements and feel your power," the raspy voice shouts again. Her voice echoes off the cave walls now in front of us.

Stepping out of the darkness, a woman with long black hair and silver eyes smiles a wicked, evil smile our way.

Her wrinkled skin hangs off her bone-thin frame.

Ason and I stand in front of her. This is the moment we had waited for. The moment that will determine the fate of not only our lives, but the lives of those at the academy.

"Do you want to remain here with me?" the Dark Magic Witch purrs, her voice grating over my nerves like nails down a chalkboard.

"Sorry, but we aren't here to stay. We just need something that you took," Ason says, his voice strong and powerful.

I can't help but glance up at him with pride. He's being so brave in the face of danger.

The woman cackles, her head falling back as her long hair sways all around her body. "Many like you have tried, but none have made it out of here alive," she says.

"I'm sure they have, but none have had the power like we do," I say, speaking up for the first time.

Her head snaps my way and I see the smirk that grows across her face. She clearly thinks I am just a weak student, but she doesn't know the power I possess. As her eyes scan over me, they stop on the gem around my neck.

“What are you?” she asks me, cocking her head to the side.

“I'm a Seer and a descendant from the Halliwell Witches,” I proudly say.

Her eyes grow wide and for a second, I think I see true fear hiding behind her evil glare. “I am familiar with your kind,” she begins.

As she talks to me, Ason begins to move away and toward the cave. Not wanting to draw attention to him, I keep her focused on me.

“Maybe, but I have something the others didn't,” I argue.

“I highly doubt that. You are nothing more than a young, weak girl. You can't possibly have the power needed to stop me,” she laughs.

“I may be young, but I am not weak. I have a team behind me and visions that let me see what is really happening,” I explain.

She goes to speak once again, but then stops and tilts her head to the side. Ason has crossed into the cave and she now knows. Like a blur, she races toward the cave.

“Ason, she's coming!” I yell, as I struggle to keep up with her.

My leg aches and I wince with each movement. I have to shove Lily out of my way and then feel guilty after.

When I get inside the cool, damp cave, I spot Ason standing with his hand only inches away from the potion. The glass bottle is exactly as it appeared in the textbook and in my vision. The Dark Magic Witch stands before him, a white light sparking in the air toward him.

“One shot and this will stop his heart for good. He may be strong and a shifter, but he can’t survive an electrical shock,” she sings out.

“Maybe not, but I can,” I yell.

Leaping forward, I shove Ason back as I move in front of him. In a whirlwind of movement and screams, the jolt of light and electricity races toward me. I feel the heat sizzle as it strikes my chest and the gem around my neck. The pain from the shot is so severe and intense, it knocks me off my feet and I slam onto the sharp rocks of the cave walls. As the world around me goes black, all I can think about is making sure Ason is ok.

Chapter 19

“Hey, I think she’s starting to open her eyes.”

A dull ache throbs in my head as I struggle to open my eyes.

I’m dry and warm and no longer in the cursed forest. Panic rises and I go to move, but something is holding me down.

“Hold on, don’t move,” a voice says to my right.

I turn my head, but then wince from the pain.

“Where am I?” I manage to croak out.

“You are in the infirmary,” the voice says.

I recognize that voice. It’s the Headmaster.

“Where is Ason? The others?” I ask, tears burning my eyes.

“I’m right here,” Ason says, his voice carrying to me from my left. His hand takes mine and he squeezes.

I can't hold back my emotions any longer. Tears race down my cheeks and a sob erupts from my chest.

"Did we make it? Am I alive?" I ask, groggily.

Ason laughs and it's the sweetest thing I've ever heard. "Yes, you are alive. You save me," he says, placing my hand to his lips.

"What are you talking about?" I ask, as I notice Ason is shaking.

"When we were in the cave, the Dark Magic Witch was going to kill me. You stopped her and let the volts of electricity hit you and the gem. The light bounced off your gem and killed the Witch."

It takes a moment for his words to register with me.

The Dark Magic Witch is dead?

"What about the others?" I ask.

"Stella swooped down and flew them back to the academy. They are in the next room recovering. Everyone is safe and we were able to bring the potion back. The Headmaster was able to create a new spell that broke the curse. It's over," he says, his voice breaking as he stares at me.

Beeping machines and the clattering of a tray dropping cause me to stir again. I'm in the infirmary and out of the dreaded forest. I managed to survive and save Ason and my friends, too.

"I can't believe this," I say, allowing a smile to break free.

“I will give you two a minute. Farrah, once you are back to your dorm and rested, we need to discuss a few important things,” Headmaster Patricia shares, as she smiles and leaves the room.

“Everyone is dying to come and see you, but I just needed to have a few minutes alone,” Ason tells me, scooting closer to the bed.

“I think I need a minute to clear my head,” I admit.

Ason nods, still holding my hand close to his lips.

“I was so angry at you for jumping in front of me, but I’m glad you did. Farrah, you are so brave and powerful,” he sighed.

“I didn’t really think at that moment. If I’m being honest, I just acted on instinct. I couldn’t let anything happen to you, so I just took a risk,” I say.

“I am willing to risk everything for us to be together, even if it means breaking the rules,” Ason declares softly.

“Me, too,” I whispered. “I don’t know what’s happening. I just know that I’m feeling something different when I’m around you.”

“It’s like I told you from the beginning. I was drawn to you in ways that I can’t even explain. Even when I tried to fight the urge to be near you– I just couldn’t. I don’t want to fight that anymore, Farrah. I think we both proved that we are a great team. Let’s see how far we can take it,” he said, grinning.

At that moment, Candi and the rest of our friends burst through the door and I was suddenly attacked by hugs, crying, and cheers.

“You did it! You saved us all,” Candi shouts, as she jumps onto the bed next to me.

I struggle to breathe and ignore the pain as I am bombarded with love.

“Be careful, Farrah just woke up,” Ason scolds, but no one seems to listen to him.

Kindle steps up next to the bed and stares at me. She leans down and hugs me, whispering in my ear, “Thank you for bringing my friend back.”

I nod to her in understanding. While it may take Stella and I a while to become great friends, we now have a connection that can never be destroyed.

Leo and Kindle walk over and I spot a few people behind them. It’s the students I saw in the forest– the ones I saved.

“We want to thank you for saving us,” Lily says, as she brushes a tear away from her cheek. “I didn’t think we would ever make it out there.”

Candi hugs her friend warmly.

“I know I don’t know you very well, but I’m glad you were brave,” Lara says, moving next to Stella.

It warms my heart to see everyone together.

A thought strikes me, but I’m not sure how to ask.

“Don’t worry. I’ve asked for us to be moved to a larger room with three beds,” Candi says, waving her hand in front of herself.

“Wait...How did you know...”

Laughing, Candi smiles. “Remember I can read emotions. I would never just leave you, especially not after you helped save my friend. We are all going to be best friends and share a room.”

“I’m so glad I met you. I don’t know what I’d do without you.” I was so grateful for my friendship with Candi. She understood me like no one else ever had. And now, I could create a new friendship with Lara, too.

A sigh of relief escapes me.

We all sat around chatting for a while, until it was time for me to get some more rest. As everyone piled out of the room, Ason lingered behind them all.

“I will be back in the morning. I am going to stay in the hall tonight in case you need me,” he stated.

“Ason, you don’t have to do that,” I argued.

“Of course, I do. I almost lost you. I won’t risk it again,” he stated, before leaving me alone in the room.

As I lay my head back on the pillow and closed my eyes, I smiled to myself. For the first time in a very long time, I was excited to sleep

Chapter 20

“Are you ready?” Ason asked, as he took my hand in his.

It had been three weeks since we had saved Shadow Legacy Academy.

Three long weeks of recovering from being hit by the Dark Magic Witch’s magic.

My classes had resumed and for the most part, I was feeling much better. The hardest part had been convincing my mom to let me stay at the school. While she had been excited to hear that I was a powerful Seet and had helped destroy the curse, she didn’t like knowing the danger that I had put myself in.

With the help of Ason, my friends, and of course, the Headmaster, we talked her into letting me remain.

Now, as I walk into the ballroom with Ason, my mind recalls an evening not too long ago that sparked the debacle we had just survived.

On the night of the Unveiling Ceremony, I had enjoyed dancing with Ason, but our time together had been quickly ruined. Thankfully, the academy decided to host another dance to make up for the ball after the ceremony being ruined, and to celebrate the end of the long-running curse.

Candi had found me a gold dress that hugged my hips and sparkled against the lights. It was beautiful and made me feel like a princess.

Staring at Ason, I wondered how I had gotten so lucky to have found him. Sure, our start had been rough, but I was happy where we were now.

“I’m ready,” I say, walking into the ballroom.

Like last time, the space is decorated immaculately, but they changed the decor.

We danced a few slow songs, holding tightly onto one another while we pretended as though the rest of the world didn’t exist.

Spinning me, Ason pulls me back closer so that his warm breath is caressing my cheek.

“I don’t know what it is, but there’s something about you that I can’t resist,” he whispers into my ear.

My cheeks flush and my heart flutters. I love how he can be so sweet and kind that my head spins.

“Then don’t fight it,” I say, my voice barely above a whisper.

While I was in the infirmary, Ason had told me that he wanted us to be a team, but ever since then, we haven't really talked about what that meant. I guess he wanted to have the conversation here.

On the dance floor.

"I don't know if you feel the same way, but I'm starting to fall for you," he declared, stopping his movements and staring deeply into my eyes.

"I've never felt this way before. I'm falling for you, too," I replied.

It felt so natural being in his arms.

"Let's go outside into the courtyard," Ason said, taking my hand and leading us away from the rest of the world and into our own little sanctuary.

Outside, the sky was blanketed by bright, shining stars. We stood side-by-side, my body resting against his as we stared up at the peaceful sky.

"I could stay here with you forever," Anson said, squeezing my hand. A soft breeze blew through the air. I felt like it was just me and Anson in the world right now.

"Me, too," I sighed into him.

So much had happened between us in a very short period of time. All I wanted was to continue learning and growing at Shadow Legacy Academy and discover where my relationship with Ason would go.

With the curse lifted, we could all rest easy now and finally live our lives at the academy the way we were supposed to.

I knew in time, something else could go wrong, but for now, I just wanted to enjoy being a Seer and the power and beauty that came with my life.

The End

Also By

Michelle Areaux resides in a small Kentucky town and enjoys writing tales of romance that includes the bitter and sometimes ugly truth of love, angst, heartache, and desire that all come with falling in love.

Visit www.michelleareaux.com to learn more about her upcoming projects and releases. If you enjoyed this story and want to support an author by leaving a review, I would greatly appreciate the support.

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