

Chapter One

Little blue sparks of electricity gathered at my fingertips. That should have scared me, or at least aroused my curiosity. But the scene playing out before me pushed away all other emotions except anger. Intense, red-hot anger.

I recognized the three boys from school—future serial killers, to be sure. The trio had Sadie tied to a tree. Her usually silky black coat was covered in dirt and pine needles.

One of the boys—Justin was his name; we had History together—looked up at me. “Hey, look. It’s the preacher’s daughter. Maybe we can try it on her next.” He hocked a loogy and spit it at my whimpering dog. They all laughed.

Sadie yelped as one boy held her tail up while a greasy haired boy knelt behind her holding a flaming lighter. He moved it closer to the firecracker they’d shoved in her behind. I could smell the singe of her fur. A fresh flurry of electric anger pushed its way out through my fingertips. My hair flew about my head, gathering more of the little blue bolts.

Then, I lost it. *Completely* lost it. I pointed at the boy with the lighter and let loose all of my anger and fear.

“Get Away!” I screamed, and with those two simple words, that fear and anger formed into something tangible and strong. An unseen force rammed into that sadistic boy with the power of an NFL linebacker. He flew into the tree directly behind him. The breath was knocked clean out of him. His brave, dog-torturing friends looked at him, then at me, then they high-tailed it out of there, leaving their fallen friend in a moaning, gasping heap on the forest floor.

I ran to Sadie. My hands shook as I removed the offending explosive device from her butt. I untied her, all the while keeping an eye on the remaining enemy. I needn’t have worried, though. As soon as he was able to breathe again, he crawled away from the little clearing, mumbling something about “a witch.”

Sadie rained slobbering dog kisses all over my face as I slumped the rest of the way to the ground. The contents of my stomach exploded from my mouth. When I finished puking, I held my hands in front of me, turning them, examining them. The blue sparks were gone. *Maybe I just imagined it.* I shook my head. No, I know I did something to throw that sick creep away from my dog.

What just happened?

The sun slipped behind the trees and the drop in temperature finally forced me to move. I rubbed my arms as my Lab and I walked along the darkened path leading to the back yard of my house.

“Paige, you’re late,” my sweet mom said when I entered through the back door into the kitchen. “You know your dad’s rule, we all have to be home in time to eat dinner together.”

“Sorry,” I mumbled.

She lowered her head to look into my eyes. “Are you okay, honey? You’re pale as a ghost.” She felt my forehead with the back of her hand.

“Yeah,” I looked at the floor. “I’m just tired. What’s for dinner?” I wasn’t lying. I was tired. Exhausted, actually.

She turned her head and scrunched up her brow. “Hmm. Chicken casserole. I hope you aren’t coming down with something. Go wash up so we can eat.”

Dad said Grace and the three of us dug in. I gulped down my dinner then asked to be excused. “I have some homework I need to get done.”

“Okay, sweetheart, go ahead. Love you,” my dad said.

“Love you, too.” I kissed them each on the cheek and hurried to my room, Sadie at my heels.

The only homework I planned on doing that night was to try to figure out what had happened in the clearing. And, to see if I could do it again.

The first thing I did was flip open my laptop and hit the power button, thinking maybe the internet would have some answers. It powered on for a brief moment before emitting a sick sounding series of beeps followed by a *pop*. The screen went black, the power light turned off, and that was it. It wouldn’t power back on.

“What . . . no, no, no.” I growled as I pushed buttons and checked the cord. My dad was not going to be happy. After much begging on my part and studious research on his, he’d finally caved in and bought the laptop for my sixteenth birthday just a few weeks earlier.

I wanted to cry but forced the tears away. I needed some answers, but had no one to go to for them. *Who would believe me? Well, except for those stupid boys . . .*

Maybe it was all just a fluke. A freak incident where all things in the universe aligned for just a single moment. I picked up a pencil from my desk and balanced it on the palm of my hand. I concentrated on the pencil and imagined it floating. I thought I felt a twitch, but decided it could have just been my overactive imagination.

Flashing back to the earlier events, I remembered saying something out loud when I blasted the boy.

Concentrating on the pencil again, I imagined what I wanted it to do, then I added a word.

“Rise.”

The pencil lifted a couple of inches. My heart jumped into my throat and I jerked my hand back. The pencil dropped to the hardwood floor with a rattle. *So much for it being a onetime thing.*

Sadie looked up from where she lay on my bed. She whined, low and brief, before laying her head back down. I picked the pencil up. My heart raced as I concentrated once again.

“Rise.”

The pencil rose just inches from my outstretched hand. It hung in the air. I continued to concentrate and lowered my hand down to my side. The pencil stayed suspended in air.

“Are you seeing this, Sadie?” I whispered. She raised her ears at the sound of her name.

A gentle flow of energy formed deep inside my chest. It reached forward and wrapped around the pencil. When I cut the flow with a conscious effort, the pencil dropped to the floor.

Bending to pick it up, I shook my head. I twirled the pencil in one hand, sat on my bed and scratched Sadie behind the ears with my other hand. I laid down and thought about what could have caused my newfound, frightening talents.

Hmm. I don't remember being bit by a radioactive spider. No exposure to gamma rays. I'm pretty sure my parents didn't find me in a field surrounded by the remains of a spaceship. I ran through all I knew about magic and super-human abilities. Which wasn't much—just the comic book stuff. Which wasn't real. Maybe an alien life force implanted a chip in my brain.

I drifted off to sleep as chaotic thoughts bounced around my head.

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Things were a little weird at school. The three creepy boys avoided me like I was a Leper. I was completely fine with that, even a little proud of it. The weird part was more related to things that kept happening around me. Like in the computer lab, when my computer and the one on each side of me sparked and went dead. Lights flickered when I drew too close. My friend's cell phone started on fire when she handed it to me to look at a picture she'd taken. The effect I seemed to have on electronics now made school life difficult.

When not in school, every spare moment I had was spent holed up in my room or out in the clearing where the strangeness all began. I pushed myself to see what else I could do. I was scared and thrilled with each new discovery. Being the daughter of a pastor, the thought crossed my mind on more than one occasion that these newfound abilities might be something evil. I talked myself out of believing that with the promise I would use my powers only for good.

One of my favorite spells—I didn't really have another name for them—was uncovered one evening when I was in the clearing. Darkness had set in early. Black clouds rolled above, threatening

to drop their heavy load. My favorite ring had fallen in the pine needles blanketing the ground and it was useless to search for it in the rapidly declining light.

Concentrating on what I wanted, I held my hand in front of me in a cupping motion and said, "Light." What looked like a miniature blue star appeared there, hovering an inch above my palm. It emitted as much light as a flashlight and I found I could increase or decrease the brightness with my thoughts.

Since I was treading in uncharted territory, I knew no names for the spells I uncovered. I named them as I went along. My first thought at seeing the little blue star was the childhood poem, "Star light, star bright, first star I see tonight." So, I called it *star-bright*.

The thrill of discovery was like a drug to me. And, as was the way of drugs, the crash was hard and painful. Of course my parents had noticed the change in my routine and what, to them, probably seemed like ominous signs. I would run in after school, full of energy and excitement, and go directly to my room or out to the woods. After spending hours practicing, I would show up in the kitchen for dinner, exhausted and blurry eyed.

Friday, after school, I set out for the clearing, thoughts of having all of Saturday to myself running through my head. I reached my destination, and with a rush of excitement, I set straight to work. I'd just figured out levitation using the reluctant Sadie as the levitatee.

"Paige! What . . . what are you—?"

At the sound of my dad's astonished voice, the spell broke and Sadie dropped to the ground. I whirled around. "Dad, I can explain." I don't know why I said that. I couldn't explain.

"Paige, what are you doing? How did you do that?"

The anger in his voice scared me.

"I . . . umm . . . I'm not sure, Dad. I'm just, magical. I guess."

"No. No." His voice cracked. "This is of the Devil. This is a Dark Art."

"Dad—"

"We're going back to the house right now and you're going to explain to your mother and me what kind of evil you've gotten mixed up in."

Back at the house, my mom cried silently while my dad worked himself into a fit of rage the likes of which I'd never seen. He was convinced I'd made a deal with the Devil or gotten involved in the Dark Arts.

"Dad, I don't even know what 'Dark Arts' are."

"Liar! My daughter is a liar," his voice broke. "There is no other explanation, Paige."

“Dad—”

“No more. No more lies tonight. Go to your room while your mother and I decide what to do.”

Before dawn broke the next morning, I learned what decision they’d come to.

I awoke to two burly men in black uniforms beside my bed. The sound of my mom’s exhausted sobs drifted down the hall. Sadie stood in the doorway, muscles taught, hind legs bunched up, ready to spring. Lips curled back in a snarl, her teeth white daggers dripping with saliva. My dad grabbed at her collar and held her there as she growled at the strangers near my bed.

“Paige, these gentlemen are here to take you somewhere to get some help. Your mom and I will visit when we can. We love you.” He turned and dragged the furious Sadie from the room.

“I’m Dan. Get dressed. You won’t be taking anything with you,” said the muscle man on my left.

I made no move to rise. “Where are you taking me?”

“Somewhere safe. No more questions. Get dressed.”

My mind raced. I couldn’t go with them.

“Could you please wait in the hallway while I get dressed?” I asked.

“I’m afraid not,” Dan answered. “We’ll turn around while you change.”

“No. No way. Dad!” I yelled toward the open door. “Dad! Please! You can’t do this. Please! Mom, don’t let him do this!”

My mom’s sobs increased, tearing at my heart. But, she didn’t come to my rescue. Her anguished cries grew softer as she moved further from my room.

“Paige,” Dan took a step closer to me, his voice gentle but firm. “We can do this the hard way or we can do this the easy way. It’s entirely up to you.”

I pushed my back up against the headboard in an effort to put distance between us. I shook my head. “Dad!” I screamed. “Don’t do this! Let me explain!”

“Your dad isn’t going to change his mind. Get dressed Paige.”

Not knowing what else to do, I climbed out of bed on the opposite side from where the men stood. My legs nearly collapsed beneath me when my feet hit the floor. My mind raced, trying to figure a way out of there.

“Turn your backs, please.” My voice shook.

I changed in record time.

“You’ll want your jacket, it’s chilly outside,” Dan said.

I grabbed my pea coat from the hook by my door. The men stood on either side of me. Taking no chances, they grabbed my upper arms, one on each side, and escorted me out the front door.

There was no way I was going to let them force me into the black car parked in the driveway. I had only a few feet to make my move, if I was going to escape. I turned and stared back at the only home I'd ever known. I could hear Sadie's hysterical barking and scratching at the door. The blinds in the living room window twitched and I caught a brief glimpse of my mom's tear-streaked face.

I hadn't practiced any defensive spells—I hadn't thought there would be a need to. But there was one such spell I was pretty sure I could pull off because I'd used it before. We drew within one step of the car. I planted my feet, balled my hands into fists and growled, "Get away." Borne of fear and anguish, the will with which I infused the spell was strong. The hands that held me tore free of my arms. The large men soared through the air in opposite directions. I didn't know or care how far they flew or where they landed. As soon as I felt the release of their grips, I started running for the thick trees bordering our property.

I didn't stop running for what seemed like hours.

Unsure of where to go, something unseen pulled me. I walked and ran the entire day, never stopping to rest. I tried to stay hidden—not a difficult thing to do in the Pacific Northwest where there are thickly-packed trees everywhere. At nightfall, I found myself boarding the last ferry of the night headed to Seattle—lucky for me it was free for walk-ons going that direction. I curled up on a bench and slept for most of the hour long ride.