

## *Prologue*

The witch looked at the blond girl cowering on the ground, her eyes wide with fear.

“Don’t look at me that way. I told you, I don’t want to do this,” the witch said as she drew the circle, lit the candles, and checked the cauldron. The knife, already sharpened, glinted on the altar next to her offering.

The girl moaned in response, tears streaking down her face. Her mouth was bound, but her words sounded crystal-clear in the witch’s head.

*Remember who I am. Remember who you are. Remember the Ravens.*

The witch hardened her heart. No doubt the girl thought she saw an opportunity in her captor’s apologetic tone. A chance to convince her to stop. A chance to hope. A chance to live.

It was too late for that. Magic didn’t preach. It gave and took. This was the gift. This was the cost.

The witch knelt beside the girl and tested the bonds one last time. Tight, though not enough to cut off her circulation. She wasn’t a monster.

The girl’s screams began again, piercing through the gag stuffed in her mouth.

The witch gritted her teeth. She’d much prefer the girl to be unconscious. But the rite she’d dug up had been very specific. If this was going to work, she needed to do it perfectly. If it didn’t . . .

She shut her eyes. She couldn’t think about that possibility. It *had* to work. There was no other way.

She picked up the knife and began to chant.

In the end, she was surprised at how easy it was. A slash and a shower of red, followed by the unmistakable electric crackle of magic bleeding into the air . . .

Magic that was now all hers.

# Chapter One

## *Vivi*

“Vivian.” Daphne Devereaux stood in her daughter’s doorway, her face twisted in exaggerated anguish. Even in the unforgiving Reno heat, she wore a floor-length black housecoat edged in gold tassels and a velvet scarf around her dark, unruly hair. “You can’t go. I’ve had a premonition.”

Vivi glanced at her mother, suppressed a sigh, and returned to her packing. She was leaving for Westerly College in Savannah that afternoon and was trying to fit her entire life into two suitcases and a backpack. Luckily, Vivi had had a lifetime of practice. Whenever Daphne Devereaux got one of her “premonitions,” they tended to leave the next morning, unpaid rent and unpacked belongings be damned. “It’s healthy to start fresh, sugar snap,” Daphne said once when eight-year-old Vivi begged to go back for her stuffed hippo, Philip. “You don’t want to carry that bad energy with you.”

“Let me guess,” Vivi said now, shoving several books in her backpack. Daphne was moving, too, trading Reno for Louisville, and Vivi hadn’t trusted her to take Vivi’s library. “You’ve seen a powerful darkness headed my way.”

“It’s not safe for you at that . . . *place*.”

Vivi closed her eyes and took what she hoped would be a calming breath. Her mother hadn’t been able to bring herself to say the word *college* for months. “It’s called Westerly. It’s not a curse word.”

Far from it. Westerly was Vivi’s lifeline. She’d been shocked when she received a full scholarship to Westerly, a school she’d considered to be way out of her league. Vivi had always been a strong student, but she’d attended three different high schools—two of which she’d started midyear—and her transcript contained nearly as many incompletes as it did As.

Daphne, however, had been adamantly against it. “You’ll hate Westerly,” she’d said with surprising conviction. “I’d never set foot on that campus.”

That’s what sealed the deal for Vivi. If her mom hated it that much, it was clearly the perfect place for Vivi to start a brand-new life.

As Daphne stood mournfully in the doorway, Vivi looked at the Westerly calendar she’d tacked to the yellowing wall, the only decoration she’d bothered with this time around. Of all the places they’d lived over the years, this apartment was her least favorite. It was a stucco-filled two-bedroom above a pawnshop in Reno, and the whole place reeked of cigarettes and desperation. Much like the whole dusty state of Nevada. The calendar’s photos, glossy odes to ivy-covered buildings and mossy live oaks, had become a beacon of hope. They were a reminder of something better, a future she could carve out for herself—away from her mother and her portents of darkness.

But then she saw the tears in her mother’s eyes and Vivi felt her frustration relent, just a little. Although Daphne was a supremely accomplished actress—a necessity when your livelihood depended on parting strangers from their money—she’d never been able to fake tears.

Vivi abandoned her packing and took a few steps across her cramped bedroom toward her mother. “It’s going to be okay, Mom,” Vivi said. “I won’t be gone long. Thanksgiving will be here before you know it.”

Her mother sniffed and extended her pale arm. Vivi shared her mother’s coloring and was fairly sure they were the two palest people in all of Nevada. “Look what I drew as your cross card.”

It was a tarot card. Daphne made a living “reading the fortunes” of all the sad, wretched people who sought her out and forked over good money in exchange for bullshit platitudes: *Yes, your lazy husband will find work soon; no, your deadbeat dad doesn’t hate you—in fact, he’s trying to find you too . . .*

As a child, Vivi had loved watching her beautiful mother dazzle the customers with her wisdom and glamour. But as she grew older, seeing her mother profiting from their pain began to set Vivi’s teeth on edge. She couldn’t bear to watch people being taken advantage of, yet there was nothing she could do about it. Daphne’s readings were their one source of income, the only way to pay for their shitty apartments and discount groceries.

But not anymore. Vivi had finally found a way out. A new beginning, far from her mother's impulsive behaviors. The kind that had led them to uproot their whole lives time and again based on nothing more than Daphne's "premonitions."

"Let me guess," Vivi said, raising an eyebrow at the tarot card in her mother's hand. "Death?"

Her mother's face darkened, and when Daphne spoke, her normally melodic voice was chillingly sharp and quiet. "Vivi, I know you don't believe in tarot, but for once, just listen to me."

Vivi took the card and turned it over. Sure enough, a skeleton carrying a scythe glared up from the card. Its eyes were black, hollowed-out gouges. Its mouth curved up in an almost gleeful leer. Disembodied hands and feet pushed up from the loamy earth as the sun sank in a blood-red sky. Vivi felt an odd tremor of vertigo, like she was standing at the edge of a great precipice and looking down into a vast nothingness instead of standing in her bedroom where the only view was the neon-yellow [WE BUY GOLD](#) sign across the street.

"I told you. Westerly isn't a safe place, not for people like you," Daphne whispered. "You have an ability to see beyond the veil. It makes you a target for dark forces."

"Beyond the veil?" Vivi repeated wearily. "I thought you weren't going to say stuff like that anymore." Throughout Vivi's childhood, Daphne had tried to draw her into her world of tarot and séances and crystals, claiming that Vivi had "special powers" waiting to be unlocked. She'd even trained Vivi to do simple readings for clients, who'd been mesmerized by the sight of a small child communing with the spirits. But eventually, Vivi had realized the truth—she didn't have any power; she was just another pawn in her mother's game.

"I can't control which card I draw. It's foolish to ignore a warning like this."

A horn honked outside and someone yelled an expletive. Vivi sighed and shook her head. "But you taught me yourself that Death is a symbol of transformation—the end of one part of my life and a rebirth into the next." Vivi tried to hand the card back to her mother, but Daphne's arms remained resolutely at her sides. "Obviously that's what it means. College is my fresh start."

No more random midnight moves to new cities; no uprooting themselves every time Vivi was about to finally form a real friendship. For the next four years, she could reinvent herself as a normal college student. She'd make friends, have a social life, maybe sign up for

a few extracurricular activities—or, at the very least, figure out what activities she enjoyed. They'd moved around so much that she hadn't had the chance to get good at anything. She'd been forced to quit the flute after three months and abandon softball midseason, and she'd given up Intro to French so many times that all she knew how to reliably say was *Bonjour, je m'appelle Vivian. Je suis nouveau.*

Her mother shook her head. "In the reading, Death was accompanied by the Ten of Swords and the Tower. Betrayal and sudden violence. Vivian, I have a terrible feeling—"

Vivi gave up and tucked the card into her suitcase, then reached up and took Daphne's hands in hers. "This is a big change for both of us. It's okay to be upset. Just tell me you're going to miss me, like a normal parent would, instead of turning this into some sign from the spirit world."

Her mother squeezed her hands tightly. "I know I can't make this decision for you—"

"Then stop trying to. Please." Vivi laced her fingers through her mother's the way she used to when she was little. "I don't want to spend our last day fighting."

Daphne's shoulders slumped as if she'd finally realized this was a losing battle. "Promise me you'll be careful. Remember, things aren't always as they appear. Even something that seems good can be dangerous."

"Is this your way of telling me I'm secretly evil?"

Her mother gave her a withering look. "Just be smart, Viv."

"That I can definitely do." Vivi's smile widened enough to make Daphne roll her eyes.

"I've raised an egomaniac." But her mother leaned in to hug her all the same.

"I blame you for all the 'you're magic and you can do anything' talks," Vivi said, letting go of her hands to finish zipping the suitcase shut. "I'll be careful, I promise."

And she would be. She knew bad things could happen in college. Bad things happened everywhere, but Daphne was fooling herself if she thought some silly tarot reading meant anything. There was no such thing as magic.

Or so Vivi thought.

# Chapter Two

## *Scarlett*

*You don't choose your sisters. The magic does,* Scarlett Winter's nanny, Minnie, had told her years before Scarlett joined Kappa Rho Nu. The words came back to Scarlett now as her mother drove through the wrought-iron gates of Westerly College's campus, passing clusters of girls. Some clutched suitcases, looking nervous and young; others gazed at the campus with a hungry look, as if they were ready to conquer it. Somewhere in this sea of girls was the new class of Kappa recruits. A new class of Ravens, as the sisters called themselves, who, if everything went according to her plan—and if the magic was willing—would look up to Scarlett as their leader in just one year's time.

Once they passed through the gates, she felt freer and stronger. As if she were stepping out of her family's shadow and into the light. It made no sense, really, because Marjorie, her mother, and Eugenie, her older sister, were everywhere in Kappa House. Their pictures were in the group photos on the wall. Their names were on the lips of the older sorority sisters. They had made their mark here before her. But as much as the expectation weighed on her, Scarlett was determined to show everyone that the best Winter was yet to come. She would be president, as they had, but she would be better, brighter, stronger, and more unforgettable than they had been. That was the beauty of coming after: She could still exceed them. Or so she told herself.

"You really should have worn the red dress," Marjorie said, frowning at her daughter in the rearview mirror. "It's more presidential. You need to convey power, taste, leadership capability . . ."

Scarlett caught her reflection behind her mother's in the rearview mirror. Scarlett, Eugenie, and Marjorie were all different shades of brown. They were all objectively striking, but Eugenie was the spitting image of their mother while Scarlett's look was all her own,

distinguished by a sharp nose and wide-set eyes. Growing up, Scarlett had always envied her mother and Eugenie for sharing so much, right down to their perfect noses.

Scarlett smoothed down her green A-line dress. “Mama, I doubt Dahlia is going to name the next Kappa president based on her dress the first day of school. And wearing red when your name is Scarlett is a little on-the-nose.”

Marjorie’s expression went deadly serious. “Scarlett, *everything* goes into consideration.”

“She’s right, you know,” Eugenie put in from the front seat.

“Listen to your sister. She was president two years in a row,” Marjorie said proudly. “And now it’s your turn to carry on the family tradition.”

Eugenie smirked. “Unless, of course, you’re content with just sitting on the sidelines.”

“Of course not. I’m a Winter, aren’t I?” Scarlett straightened her spine and glared at her sister. She wasn’t sure why Eugenie had insisted on coming to drop her off at Westerly; she was always going on about how busy she was as a junior associate at their mother’s law firm. Then again, Eugenie took every opportunity she could to put Scarlett in her place. Including managing to ride shotgun on Scarlett’s first day back while Scarlett herself was relegated to the back seat.

Her mother nodded sharply. “Don’t ever forget it, my dear.”

She shifted to look back at Scarlett, and Scarlett caught a whiff of her perfume, a light jasmine scent that reminded Scarlett of the way her mother used to sneak into her room after a long night at the firm and plant a kiss on Scarlett’s forehead. Scarlett always pretended to be sleeping, because her mother tried so hard not to wake her. But she didn’t mind being woken. It reminded her how much her mother cared, something that Scarlett didn’t always feel during her waking hours.

And what her mother cared most about was each of her two daughters following in her footsteps and becoming president of Kappa. Scarlett grew up hearing, “A Kappa president cannot be just one thing, Scarlett. She must be everything. Smart, stylish, kind. The type of girl who inspires envy and respect in equal measure. The type of girl who puts her sisters first—and is powerful enough to change the world.”

Scarlett had known for as long as she could remember that she was a witch and that Kappa was her destiny. To be accepted into its ranks was a necessity; to become president

in her own right was the most basic expectation. Which was why Minnie, who had been Scarlett's mother's nanny before she was hers, had spent the better part of her golden years training Scarlett in the ways of their magic, just as she had her sister and mother before her.

Every witch was born with her own magic: Cups, the Water sign; Pentacles, the Earth sign; Swords, the Air sign; and Wands, the Fire sign. Each sign was aligned with a suit in the tarot cards, which always amused Scarlett. Naysayers dismissed tarot as the tool of charlatans and fakes, but, really, they had no idea how close to the truth tarot came.

Scarlett was a Cups, which meant she was strongest working with water elements. She'd learned from Minnie that if she held the right symbol and said the right words, she could perform magic that made the world a bigger and brighter place.

Minnie hadn't been a Raven herself; her family had come to witchcraft on its own, with secrets and spells passed down through the generations. But she'd known the Winters her entire life and she understood the pressure Scarlett's family put on her better than anyone did. Minnie was the one who had always believed in her—who'd reassured her when she felt her mother's disappointment or Eugenie's disdain. Minnie was the one who told Scarlett she could be the most powerful witch in the world if she believed in herself and trusted the magic.

When Minnie died of old age last spring, Scarlett had cried so hard that all around her, it began to rain. She still felt an emptiness in her heart when she thought of Minnie, but Scarlett knew what Minnie wanted more than anything was for Scarlett to be happy, which was why Scarlett was more determined than ever to prove to her family—and all the Ravens—that she was powerful enough to be the sorority's next president.

Failure was not an option.

Marjorie pulled up in front of Kappa House, and Scarlett's heart skipped a beat. The sorority house was a beautiful, dove-gray French revival, complete with wrought-iron balconies on every level and a widow's walk on the roof where the sisters sometimes did their spell-casting. Sisters were streaming into the house, carrying suitcases and lamps and hugging each other after a long summer away. There was Hazel Kim, a sophomore who was a star on the school's track team; Juliet, a senior who was a brilliant chemist and potion-maker; and Mei Okada, a fellow junior who could change her looks as easily as she could change her outfits.



Marjorie turned off the engine and surveyed the scene like a commanding officer might survey a battlefield. “Where’s Mason? I wanted to hear all about his travels.”

“He’s not getting in until tomorrow,” Scarlett said, trying to contain her giddy smile.

She hadn’t seen Mason in almost two months. It was the longest they’d been apart since they’d started dating two years ago. On a whim, Mason had decided to backpack through Europe after attending a family friend’s wedding in Italy. He’d skipped out on his internship at his father’s law firm—and all the plans Scarlett had made for them. While Scarlett interned at her mother’s firm, toiling over briefs and planning the Ravens’ social calendar with her sorority sisters, she’d waited for his short, sporadic texts and pictures filling her in on his travels—*Just swam in Lake Como—wish you were here; You have to see the water in Capri—I’m taking you here after you graduate.* It wasn’t like Mason to shirk his family duties or keep her waiting all summer to see him. As a general rule, Scarlett didn’t wait for anything or anyone, but Mason was worth it.

“Bring him by the house as soon as you can,” Marjorie urged, her voice as warm as it ever got. Eugenie shifted in her seat and began to aggressively scroll through her work e-mails.

Scarlett hid a smug smile. Mason was the one place Scarlett had Eugenie beat. Mason was a *complement*. That was the word the sisters used to describe those worthy of a Raven. And there was an incredibly high bar for who qualified as a complementary. Only the best would do, and Mason was the best. He not only had the right past—he was the son of Georgia’s second-most-prominent lawyer, after Marjorie, of course, and the president of their brother frat—he also had a future. He was at the top of his class, athletic, dead sexy—and all hers. The icing on top: her mother absolutely loved him.

“Thanks for the ride, Mama,” Scarlett said, her hand on the door of the car.

“Oh, here,” her mother said as if she were remembering something suddenly. She handed a wrapped box over the back seat.

Scarlett felt herself brighten as she took the box—she didn’t remember her mother giving Eugenie a back-to-school present on her first day of junior year—and she had to stop herself from ripping the paper as she opened it.

It was a deck of tarot cards, beautifully rendered. A woman with a knowing smile wearing a dress made of feathers practically winked out at her on the back of each card.

“Were these yours?” Scarlett asked, wondering if these were the cards her mother and Eugenie had used when they’d been voted in as president and, if so, touched to be included in the family tradition.

“They’re brand-new. I ordered them from a powerful Cups who is very high up in the Senate. She painted them herself,” she boasted.

Disappointment tightened Scarlett’s chest. As much as Scarlett loved political royalty, how could her mother give her these now? “These are lovely, Mother, but I already have Minnie’s cards.” Scarlett didn’t understand how her mother could know so little about her. She would never replace Minnie’s deck with a shiny new set of cards.

“New year, new start,” her mother said. “I know Minnie meant the world to you; she meant the world to me too. But I can see that you’re still grieving, and Minnie wouldn’t want you carrying that sadness into the new year. You being a Raven—you becoming president—that meant the world to her.”

*You mean it means the world to you.* Scarlett pocketed the cards, bent over the seat, and gave her mother a kiss on the cheek. “Of course, Mama. Thank you,” she murmured, though she had no intention of ever using them.

After a dutiful kiss for Eugenie and another for her mother, Scarlett popped the trunk and grabbed her two bags, which she’d spelled earlier to feel light as air. When she took a step back onto the sidewalk, she collided with a solid, muscular body. “Hey. Watch it!” she huffed.

An indignant voice sounded behind her. “You’re the one who ran into me.”

Scarlett turned to see Jackson Carter, who’d been in her philosophy class last year, slightly out of breath and wearing jogging shorts and headphones. Sweat beaded on his dark brown skin, and a soaked shirt stuck to his muscular frame. His lips turned down in a frown. “But I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised. You Kappas act like you own this place.”

“We *do* own it,” Scarlett said without missing a beat. This was their first exchange that had nothing to do with dead philosophers and it seemed like downright bad manners for him to begin the conversation with an insult. “You’re standing in front of our house.”

Jackson wasn’t from Savannah. Not even close. She could tell by his lack of manners and basic lack of deference—not to mention his lack of a drawl. His consonants just sat there stubbornly, unlike hers, which she stretched out for effect. A gentleman would offer to

take the suitcases from her. Then again, a gentleman wouldn't have reprimanded her for standing on her own sidewalk in the first place.

Jackson leaned closer to her. "So, do Kappas lose their souls a little bit at a time or does it happen all at once, like ripping off a Band-Aid?"

Scarlett's hackles rose. She knew how he saw her, and she knew why. There were a million movies that depicted sorority girls as vapid, exclusive witches, and she didn't mean the magical kind. And unfortunately, there were way too many real videos and stories that backed up that image. Scarlett cringed thinking about a YouTube video that had recently gone viral about a sorority girl who wrote an open letter to her sisters detailing every single thing she hated about them. But Scarlett was sure that for every one of those awful stories, there were dozens more about sorority girls who were there for good reasons, who were in it for the sisterhood. And Kappa offered more than just sisterhood; the house provided protection, a safe place where the coven could learn and practice their magic. Not that she could explain that to Jackson.

"All at once," Scarlett said. "I'm surprised that you couldn't see that from your position looking down at us poor, morally bereft sorority girls."

"At least we agree on one thing." Jackson crossed his arms, his brown eyes flashing.

"If you have such a problem with us," Scarlett said, picking up steam, "maybe you should be a little more careful where you go running."

"Is that a threat?" He arched a single eyebrow, seeming to consider her anew. "Because from what I hear—"

Suddenly, his gaze went fuzzy and blank, and his eyes fixed on something slightly above her. It was like she'd just vanished from his world. His head snapped to the side, and without another word, he resumed his jog.

Scarlett turned back to Kappa. Coming up the front walk of the house were Dahlia Everly, the Kappa president, and Tiffany Beckett, Scarlett's best friend. They walked arm in arm, Dahlia's blond ponytail a shade darker than Tiffany's platinum one. Dahlia winked, making it clear who had just enchanted the boy.

"Thanks for that." Scarlett dropped her suitcases and shot one last glare at Jackson's retreating form. She had no idea what was wrong with him or why he seemed to hate Kappas so much. A sister had probably rejected him last spring. Guys could be so fragile and

petty.

“What’s with the drama? You looked like you were this close to whipping up a category three,” Dahlia said.

“Hardly. A boy like that certainly isn’t worth getting soaked over.”

“Why were you even talking to him in the first place?” Dahlia’s nose wrinkled. Dahlia was the consummate imperious sorority president; anyone who wasn’t part of the Greek system wasn’t worth her time.

“I wasn’t. He ran into me—literally.”

Tiffany just laughed and held out her arms.

Scarlett sank into her best friend’s hug, squeezing her hard—though not hard enough to wrinkle the silk blouse Tiff was wearing. “I missed you.”

“Same.” Tiffany turned to give her a peck on the cheek. Her dark red lipstick hadn’t left a single mark. Ravens’ makeup never smudged.

“How’s your mom?” Scarlett asked.

A shadow crossed Tiffany’s face. Dahlia shifted uncomfortably. “We’re trying a new treatment. We’ll know more soon.”

Scarlett gave Tiffany another hug. Her friend had spent the summer in Charleston with her mom, who was battling cancer. Last year Tiffany had asked Dahlia to do an all-hands healing spell for her mom; every Raven was a witch in her own right, but together, the coven was far stronger than any individual. As president, Dahlia chose what spells the group would take on, a role she unabashedly relished. A Houston debutante, Dahlia loved being in charge, being the one whom all the other sisters looked to. Her confidence made her a great president, but there were times that Scarlett felt Dahlia prioritized her authority or her legacy over the needs of other girls in the house. And according to Dahlia, Kappa’s history was riddled with failed healing rituals of this magnitude. “Some things just aren’t within our power,” Dahlia had said.

Tiffany had never forgiven Dahlia for shutting her down, suspecting that Dahlia was more worried about the optics of such a spell and its possible risks than about Tiffany’s mom. Scarlett, who’d seen the fear in her usually fearless bestie’s blue eyes, wasn’t satisfied with Dahlia’s ruling either and had asked Minnie about it. What she didn’t know at the time was that Minnie was close to death herself.

“If there were a cure for dying, we wouldn’t be witches, we’d be immortal . . . the only spells that touch death touch back in equal measure,” Minnie had warned with a sad smile.

Now, Tiffany pulled back from the hug with a bright smile Scarlett knew was fake. She blinked fast, clearly willing away the tears Scarlett sensed were always just beneath the surface, even though Tiffany was a Swords, not a Cups.

“How are preparations for rush going?” Scarlett pivoted, letting Tiffany off the emotional hook and looking up at the house.

“Hazel and Jess are glamouring the house right now,” Tiffany said, clearly grateful to have all eyes off her.

Scarlett nodded. Tradition dictated that the sophomore sisters decorated the house for recruitment. This year was speakeasy-themed; she couldn’t wait to see what her sisters had come up with.

“Did you bring the sparklers?” Dahlia asked.

“They’re right here,” Scarlett said, tapping one of her suitcases. “I enchanted them last night.”

Minnie always said that the magic did the real choosing, and she was right—mostly. All girls grew up with magic in them whether they knew it or not. The strength of the magic was what mattered. While magic was only a whisper in some, barely present, others could summon winds with the force of a tornado. The sparklers the Kappas gave out at their recruitment party showed who had the baseline of power required to be a Raven. But it wasn’t *just* about ability. The Ravens had to be exemplary. It was about personality, pedigree, intelligence, and sophistication. And above all, it was about being a good sister.

“I can’t wait to meet our latest round of potentials,” Tiffany said, tapping her fingers together with a smile.

“Only the best will do, of course,” Scarlett said. Finding powerful witches among Westerly’s froshlings was like searching for diamonds in a sea of cubic zirconias. She didn’t want an unruly sophomore crop when she became president.

“Of course,” Dahlia echoed, a frown marring her perfect features. “We have to protect Kappa. The last thing we want is another Harper situation.”

Scarlett’s stomach twisted and she carefully avoided Tiffany’s eyes. *Another Harper situation.* Something dark and unspoken passed between Scarlett and Tiffany. Something

Scarlett never let herself think about.

Something that could ruin everything she'd worked so hard to get.

